

II. Life in Europe's Major Countries c.1492

A. As usual, kings rule.

1. For all of European history until the time of the American Revolution in 1776 AD, which set off great changes in Europe, monarchy (the rule of kings) was the norm.
2. From the start of European history c.476 AD, when tribes conquered other tribes, the conquerors would become a group of rulers called the “lords,” or the “nobility,” with their leader as the king.
3. Every country in Europe was a kingdom.

B. France and England: “Worst Enemies Forever”

1. When Columbus sailed in 1492, France and England were two important countries in Europe that were long-time enemies.
2. Their people were of different tribes—France was conquered by the Franks and England was ruled by the Angles and Saxons, but their hatred was made much greater by the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453) between them.
3. Wishing to be rulers of France as well as England, the kings of England had tried to conquer France in a long series of wars lasting 116 years, which together historians have called the “Hundred Years’ War.”
4. France won in the end, and the French and English people had come to hate each other.

C. Spain and Portugal: Born and Raised in the “Reconquista”

1. Nearly Eight Hundred Years of Religious War
 - a) Around the time of the fall of Rome, a European tribe called the Visigoths had conquered Spain.
 - b) c.711 AD, however, Spain was taken from them by invaders representing the new religion of Islam.
 - c) This set off a war between the European Christians and the invading Muslims (followers of Islam) that lasted all the way until 1492—the very year Columbus sailed, of course!
 - d) By 1492, the Christians had reconquered Spain. The Spanish word for “reconquest” is “reconquista.”
2. *Two* Separate Countries
 - a) Along the way, the small country of Portugal became independent.
 - b) Although the Portuguese and the Spanish had a common enemy in the Muslims, they could not live together as one people themselves. By the time of Columbus’s voyage, Spain and Portugal were enemies like France and England.

D. The Disputed Center of the European World

1. The final major piece of the European puzzle in the time of Columbus was the “Holy Roman Empire,” which included Germany and most of Italy.
2. It had been formed when the kings of Germany had made a bargain with the leaders of Christianity, the popes, who had lived in Rome ever since Roman times.
3. The popes needed protection during the Dark Ages, and the German kings needed help to keep their rebellious dukes under control.
4. The kings promised to protect the popes, so the popes gave them the title of “Holy Roman Emperor.”
5. The popes expected the Holy Roman Emperors to follow their orders as leaders of Christianity. The emperors, for their part, believed that they were the greatest champions of Christianity, and need not take orders from anyone.
6. Because of a centuries-long argument between the two sides, both Germany and Italy remained quite a mess in 1492.
7. A new family of emperors called the Hapsburgs had begun to grow in power like never before however. Soon after Columbus had discovered America, they would strive to unite Europe as it had never been united.