Columbus described his impressions of the people and the land in his journal:

... [T]his people has no religion nor are they idolaters, but very mild and without knowing what evil is, nor how to kill others, nor how to take them, and without arms, and so timorous that from one of our men ten of them fly, although they do sport with them, and ready to believe and knowing that there is a God in heaven, and sure that we have come from heaven; and very ready at any prayer which we tell them to repeat, and they make the sign of the cross.

So your Highness should determine to make them Christians, for I believe that if they begin, in a short time they will have accomplished converting to our holy faith a multitude of towns. Without doubt there are in these lands the greatest quantities of gold, for not without cause do these Indians whom I am bringing say that there are places in these isles where they dig out gold and wear it on their necks, in their ears and on their arms and legs, and the bracelets are very thick.

In December of that year, on an island that Columbus renamed Hispaniola, the Taino helped his crew build a fort, La Navidad, from the lumber of the wrecked Santa Maria. Expecting to return with more ships, supplies, and colonists, Columbus left some of his crewmen on Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and sailed back to Spain. When he returned to La Navidad a year later, Columbus found that the Taino had killed the sailors in retaliation for the sailors’ demands for food, gold, and labor.

These killings, combined with attacks on the Spanish by small groups of Taino and other native peoples on other Caribbean islands, provoked Columbus to use force. As the newly appointed governor of all lands he discovered, Columbus built a second fort on Hispaniola and assigned to it the soldiers who had come on the expedition with him. The soldiers, with their metal armor, guns, and horses, easily subdued the Taino. Columbus then demanded gold from the Taino and ordered that 550 Taino be sent to Spain as slaves.

After two more voyages Columbus was relieved of his post as governor of the new lands because of mismanagement and sent back to Spain. However, the brutal precedent he set in regard to the treatment of native peoples was followed by his successors, who enslaved them by the thousands.

**Bartolomé de las Casas Speaks Out**

In fewer than ten years, the Spanish had established the encomienda system on the islands in the Caribbean. Under encomienda, Spanish colonists were granted a certain amount of land and the labor of the people who lived on it. The system was later transported to Spanish settlements on the mainland. Supposedly, the colonists would pay the native people for their labor and convert them to Christianity. In reality, the natives were either forced to accept Christianity or were given little or no religious instruction, were cruelly treated, and in effect reduced to slaves.

One of those who spoke out against the encomienda system was Bartolomé de las Casas. Las Casas had been a conquistador and owner of an encomienda himself, but he eventually became a Roman Catholic priest. As a missionary in Cuba and South and Central America, and later bishop in Mexico, las Casas sought to protect his native charges by preaching against the encomienda and shaming the consciences of the landowners.
In his *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1542), the angry priest denounced the Spanish for mistreating the native peoples:

Their reason for killing and destroying such an infinite number of souls is that Christians have an ultimate aim, which is to acquire gold, and to swell themselves with riches in a very brief time and thus rise to a high estate disproportionate to their merits. It should be kept in mind that their insatiable greed and ambition, the greatest ever seen in the world, is the cause of their villainies. And also, those lands are so rich and felicitous, the native peoples so meek and patient, so easy to subject, that our Spaniards have no more consideration for them than beasts. And I say this from my own knowledge of the acts I witnessed. But I should not say “than beasts” for, thanks be to God, they have treated beasts with some respect; I should say instead like excrement on the public squares. And thus they have deprived the Indians of their lives and souls, for the millions I mentioned have died without the Faith and without the benefit of sacraments. This is a well-known and proven fact which even the tyrant Governors, themselves killers, know and admit. And never have the Indians in all the Indies committed any act against the Spanish Christians, until those Christians have first and many times committed countless cruel aggressions against them or against neighboring nations. For in the beginning the Indians regarded the Spaniards as angels from Heaven. Only after the Spaniards had used violence against them, killing, robbing, torturing, did the Indians ever rise up against them.

**Treaty of Tordesillas**

Portugal and Spain took the lead in the exploration of the Americas, and since the two nations were rivals, there was a possibility that they would come into conflict over colonies. To avoid this, in 1493, the pope had established a line of demarcation roughly down the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, dividing the non-European world between Spain and Portugal. Spain was to have the Americas to colonize and Portugal would control Africa and Asia. The following year, the two nations negotiated the Treaty of Tordesillas, which shifted the line of demarcation west. This movement in the imaginary line secured Portugal’s claim to Brazil. Essentially, the Spanish and the Portuguese divided up a large portion of the world between them. No consideration was given to the other nations of the world or to the wishes of the native peoples themselves.

**Vasco Núñez de Balboa Reaches the Pacific**

Vasco Núñez de Balboa was a conquistador who explored Central America. He sailed to the New World from Spain in the early 1500s and spent some time as a planter on the island of Hispaniola. However, he fell into debt and had to sneak off the island, stowing away on a ship along with his dog.

In 1510, in what is today Panama, he founded Santa María de la Antigua del Darién, the first successful settlement on the American mainland. While in Darién, he heard stories about a great sea and a fabulously wealthy kingdom to the south. (This last was probably the Inca empire). Balboa began exploring, hacking his way through jungles and plodding through swamps, occasionally doing battle with native peoples, whom he terrorized with his trained attack dogs. During his explorations in 1513, he became the first European to see the Pacific
Ocean from the Western Hemisphere. He claimed the ocean and its entire coastline for Spain.

**Magellan and the Circumnavigation of the Globe**

The Portuguese sea captain Ferdinand Magellan, sailing under the Spanish flag, gave the Pacific Ocean its European name. Magellan’s expedition became the first to circumnavigate the globe.

Magellan was Portuguese and originally sailed for his native land. He followed the Portuguese trade routes around Africa to the Indies. However, he eventually fell out of favor with the Portuguese king and began to sail for Spain. He convinced the Spanish king that he could reach the Indies by sailing west and then through or around South America.

In September 1519, five ships under his command sailed southwest from Spain. They reached the South American coast in December and sailed south, looking for a passage through South America to the Pacific Ocean. They spent the winter in a settlement along the coast. Magellan had to put down a mutiny by some of his ship captains. He executed one leader and left another to survive on an island. One of his ships was lost in a wreck at sea. When the winter ended in August (remember that the seasons are reversed in the Southern Hemisphere), he sailed on, still searching for a passage.

In October 1520, they at last found a passage—the passage that is now known as the Strait of Magellan. The roughly 350 miles through the passage were extremely difficult, and one of his ships abandoned him and sailed back to Spain. But Magellan pressed on. It is said that he cried for joy when he finally reached the ocean. On entering the Pacific Ocean, Magellan gave it that name because he found it very calm compared to the icy waters he had just crossed.

With three ships out of his original five, Magellan sailed into the Pacific Ocean. He thought it would not take long to reach Asia, but he had no idea of the vastness of the ocean before him. It took six months to reach the Philippines. He and his men barely survived. The ship ran out of water and food. Sailors suffered from scurvy and were reduced to eating rats and pieces of leather. Some men starved to death.

Once Magellan’s party reached the Philippines, they began to convert some of the local leaders to Christianity. On the island of Mactan, Magellan was killed in a battle by Chief Lapulapu, the leader of a tribe that resisted the European explorers. Antonio Pigaletta, one of the men on board described the encounter:

> When morning came forty-nine of us leaped into the water up to our thighs, and walked through water for more than two crossbow flights before we could reach the shore. . . . When we reached land, those men [the natives] had formed in three divisions to the number of more than one thousand five hundred persons. When they saw us, they charged down upon us with exceeding loud cries. . . . Recognizing the captain, so many turned upon him that they knocked his helmet off his head twice. . . . An Indian hurled a bamboo spear into the captain’s face, but the latter immediately killed him with his lance, which he left in the Indian’s body. Then, trying to lay hand on sword, he could draw it out but halfway because he had been wounded in the arm with a bamboo spear. When the natives saw that, they all hurled themselves upon him. One of