

BATTLE ROYAL FOR SPAIN'S AMERICAN EMPIRE

"An age will come after many years when the Ocean will loose the chains of things, and a huge land lie revealed." The ancient prophecy of Seneca, sage of Rome, fascinated Columbus. He touched the threshold of such a vision in 1492: new continents, new riches, a new world. Spain claimed it all, bolstered by a papal decree that split the globe between herself and Portugal. For three centuries the barred other competitors—chiefly England, France, and the Netherlands—to settle the Americas, reap their wealth, and sow religion.

Into the West Indies swept the conquistadors, then on to Florida, Mexico, Central and South America. Here were Aztec and Inca treasures to seize, Indian souls to save, and gold and silver to mine. From a nexus of colonial ports, trade exploded. Fleets of Spanish warships and merchant vessels scoured the Caribbean for precious metals and jewels. Coins struck from New World bullion revolutionized the economy of the Old, while tantalizing new foods and raw materials spiced its way of life.

Other budding imperialists scoffed at Spain's dream of monopoly. English, French, and Dutch vessels invaded her Caribbean stronghold, smuggling African slaves and manufactured goods to Spanish colonists, who eagerly bought what their mother country could not adequately supply. Privateers and freebooters plundered Spain's redoubts and harassed her convoys. At the same time, England and France thrust their flags into Canada, and Holland and Sweden dogged English footsteps along the Atlantic coast; French explorers annexed a vast swath astride the Mississippi. Scattered across the seafloor from Nova Scotia to South America, shipwrecks catalog the collisions of nations and the treacheries of wind and water.

By 1750 Spain's New World heyday had passed. When she ceded Florida to the United States in 1819, her subjects in Mexico and South America were already on their course toward successful revolt. Five years later only Cuba and Puerto Rico remained as fragments of the legacy Columbus had left to Spain. The rest had been nullified by European competitors and by the spirit of independence.

This map is a composite based on charts drawn about 1720 by cartographer Herman Muller, a Dutchman who lived in London. Spellings and styles are contemporary with that period. Map colors reflect the claims of rival nations: France—green, Spain—orange, Britain—yellow.



COLONIZATION AND TRADE IN THE NEW WORLD

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PARTS UNKNOWN
GREAT TEGUAIO
TAOS

SPANISH NEW MEXICO
The fabled treasures of the Seven Cities of Cibola lured Coronado from Mexico into unknown northern wilds in 1540. Coronado never found the gold, but some of his men discovered the Grand Canyon. Franciscan friars and Spanish colonists came to stay in New Mexico in 1598 and founded Santa Fe 12 years later.

LOUISIANA
French echoed from the lower banks of the Mississippi after 1682, when La Salle claimed from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. There his countrymen spread along the coast of the huge area he named for King Louis XIV.

THE AZTEC RUIN
A civilization crumbled as Cortes put the Aztecs to the sword. In 1520 his men melted much of Montezuma's treasure into bars of bullion, a year later the Aztec capital fell. The Indians' doom was sealed by a more insidious invader trailing the Spanish: smallpox.

VERACRUZ
The New Spain fleet sailed from here with Mexican silver and Far East finery. In 1568 one such armada devastated John Hawkins's vessels, crippled by a storm during a slave-trading foray. "The Spaniards... slew all our men a short while without mercy," the English captain reported.

"NUESTRA SEÑORA DE ATOCHA"
Crammed to the gunwales with South American gold and silver and other goods, the eastbound galleon went to the bottom in a raging hurricane in 1622. Salvagers have raised treasure estimated at six million dollars, perhaps less than a tenth of the total.

HAVANA
"It is here that the galleons and fleets come and unite, both from the Spanish Main and New Spain," wrote an observer.

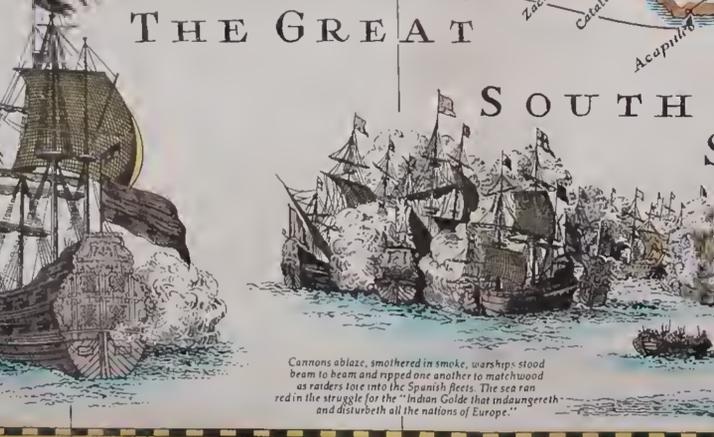
PORT ROYAL
"The world's wickedest town" earned that label when it became a pirates' den after English seized Spanish Jamaica in 1655.

"SANTA MARIA"
The famous flagship of Columbus's first voyage ran aground near Cap Haitien. Explorers have recovered artifacts from a ship-shaped coral mound and from another site, but nothing has been confirmed.

SANTO DOMINGO
Spain's first permanent New World settlement was built on the order of Columbus in 1496.

MARGARITA'S PEARLS
To work this island's rich oyster beds, the Spanish conscripted skilled Indian divers from the Bahamas. When they were expended, African slaves took over.

CARIBBEAN CLAIM JUMPERS
Europe's craving for tobacco and sugar sent rival colonists to islands in the "Spanish lake" during the 17th century. France worked her way from Guadeloupe and Martinique to Hispaniola. England took a string of prizes, from Barbados north through the Lesser Antilles and west to Jamaica. The Netherlands' holdings were minor, but her role as a trader and naval power was major.



Cannons ablaze, smothered in smoke, warships stood beam to beam and raged one another to matchwood as raiders tore into the Spanish fleets. The sea ran red in the struggle for the "Indian Golde that endangered and disturbed all the nations of Europe."

THE INCA PIPELINE
A tide of bullion flowed from South America's west coast after Pizarro seized the Inca Empire in 1532. Bolivia's silver mountain of Potosi poured out its heart and joined the river of gold. The Spanish freighted the bullion into Panama and packed it across the isthmus for transshipment.

CARTAGENA
A primary port of call for the Terra Firma ships, this stronghold funneled gold, emeralds, and pearls from New Granada (now Colombia) into their holds. Portobelo's trade mart was another stop for the fleet, which would then regroup and head north for Havana.

THE SPANISH CONVOY SYSTEM
Each year Spain normally sent two fleets of merchant ships, guarded by armed vessels, across the Atlantic. One, the Terra Firma fleet, sailed for the South American coast to siphon fortune from its outlets—Cartagena and Portobelo. The other, the New Spain fleet, took on Mexico's contribution at Veracruz. The two tried to rendezvous at Havana and return together, but they often missed connections.

History Salvaged From the Sea

THE GLINT OF GOLD on the ocean floor lures scores of fortune hunters to New World shipwrecks. Yet that glitter can blind the eye to precious knowledge hidden amid worm-eaten timbers. Like time capsules, the ill-fated vessels of Spain and her foes yield tons of more modest artifacts that bring to life an age of discovery and mayhem.

Treasure itself transcends the dollar sign. Coins often bear dates to help fix the age of a wreck. Assayers who took too big a bite from bars of bullion may have given us the word "choker." Gold chains worn by rich colonists were made of detachable links for easy spending.

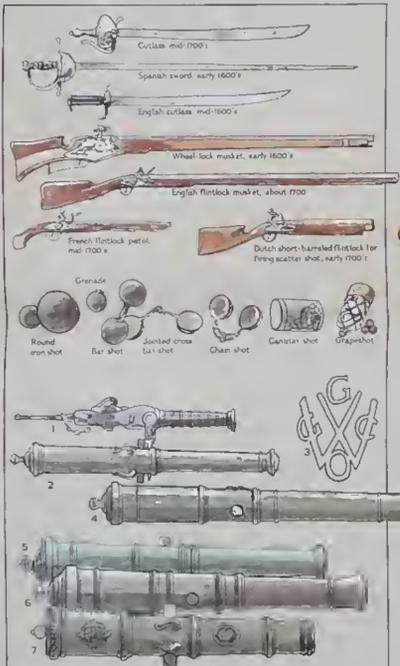
Darker pictures also emerge. Cannons and other weapons recall deadly clashes with pirates and privateers—and by their date or period of manufacture help

identify ships. Seemingly innocent trinkets such as beads delivered Africans into slavery. Bits of wood bear tooth marks of the rats that turned some voyages into nightmares.

How many wrecks have yet to tell their tales? Modern diving equipment is less than 35 years old, and the Atlantic waters Europeans sailed to the Americas cover millions of square miles. We have barely scratched the undersea surface.

The ships

To defend her fleets, Spain came to rely on the rugged, heavily armed galleon. This portrait of a 140-foot-long warship from around 1600 (right) depicts her as westbound, laden with manufactured goods and stores. Galleons were ideally suited for the rigors of the transatlantic trade, light caravels favored by early explorers were too small, lumbering carracks used as freighters were too unwieldy.



1. Port piece or rammer gun, 1600's
2. Spanish semibreche, 1575
3. Queen's mark of Groningen, a chamber of the Dutch West India Company, found on a small 17th-century gun
4. English long 84-pounder, early 1700's
5. German 12-pounder, late 1600's
6. Dutch "Finken" 12-pounder, mid-1600's
7. Spanish gun, early 1600's

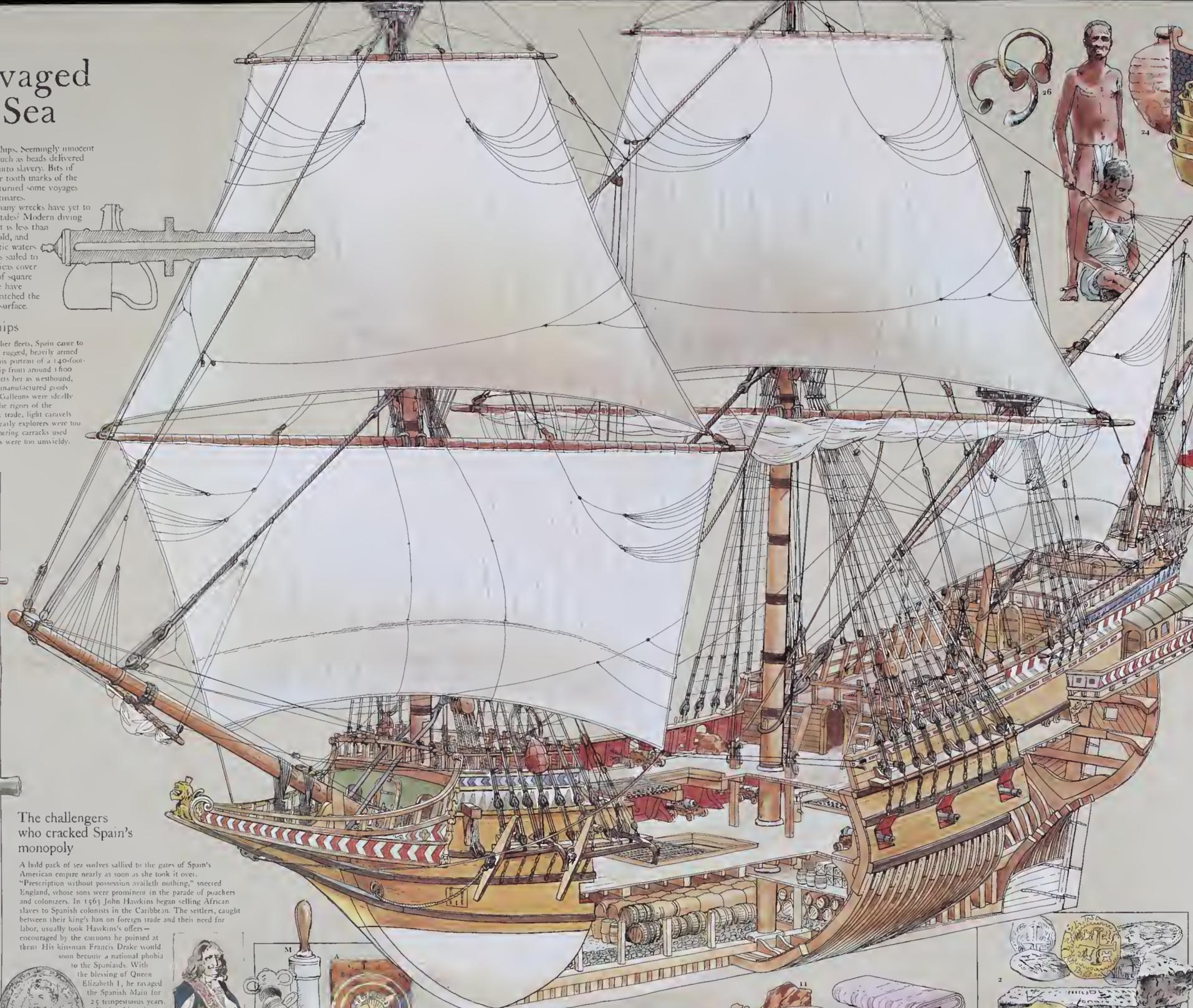
Cannons and cutlasses

other types—fired balls of iron, stone, or lead, some joined in pairs by bars or chains to whipwag through men and rigging. They could also rain grapeshot and canister shot onto decks.

As the range closed, the Spanish unleashed smaller swivel guns in pepper the enemy with round shot, bits of iron, even pelbles. Surviving attackers leaped aboard as muskets, pistols, and edged weapons came into play.

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The challengers who cracked Spain's monopoly

A bald pack of sea wolves sallied to the gates of Spain's American empire nearly as soon as she took it over. "Prescription without possession availeth nothing," sneered England, whose sons were prominent in the parade of poachers and colonizers. In 1563 John Hawkins began selling African slaves to Spanish colonists in the Caribbean. The settlers, caught between their king's ban on foreign trade and their need for labor, usually took Hawkins's offers—encouraged by the cannons he pointed at them. His kinsman Francis Drake would soon become a national phobia to the Spaniards. With the blessing of Queen Elizabeth I, he ravaged the Spanish Main for 25 tempestuous years. During his epic round-the-world voyage in 1577-80, he harassed the west coast of the Americas as well.

A century later, after England captured Spanish Jamaica, Charles II turned a blind eye to Henry Morgan's bloodthirsty buccaneers who nested in Port Royal. From there they sacked Spain's Caribbean strongholds, torturing women and children, slaughtering prisoners, and wallowing in debauchery.

France's corsairs wreaked their share of havoc on Spanish shipping, but the Spanish Roman Catholics took fearful revenge on French Protestant Huguenots who settled in Florida. There, in 1565, Huguenot leader Jean Ribault, whose fleet had just arrived from France, surrendered with several hundred sailors and settlers to a Spanish governor. "I caught their hands to be tied behind them, and put them to the knife," the governor wrote. "The Protestant Dutch, long riled by Spain, hated the Spaniards with unparalleled fervor. The Netherlands gained a folk hero in 1628 when Pieter Heyn hijacked virtually an entire Spanish treasure fleet off the coast of Cuba.



Echoes of shipboard life

Like entries in a log, salvaged tools and personal effects re-create long days at sea. A pocket-size sundial (A) and brass dividers (B) aided pilots and navigators. During storms, a religious medallion (C) gave solace, in times of illness sailors cast dice (D) and sought rum with the tap and its key (E). A lime juicer (F) helped prevent scurvy. Crewmen hauled lines over lignum vitae sheaves in oak blocks (G). Perhaps a slacker, punished by a flogging, literally "bit the bullet" (H). Passengers tended to letters and accounts with a penknife once sheathed by a silver handle (I) and with a sand stinker (J) to dry ink. An ivory knife (K) was probably used to cut paper. A pewter vial (L) diffused perfume against rank odors, and a clyster pump (M) gave enemas.



Cargo bound for the Americas

Brae-a-brac of empire building (above) sailed and sank with New World colonists. Many brought clay pipes (12) for the novelty of tobacco smoking. Mortars and pestles (14) were used to grind drugs and herbs, brass candlesticks to light evening hours (15), religious artifacts (16) to convert Indians. Buckles, buttons, packets of needles, scissors, and linen and woolen cloth (17) helped dress settlers. Trade trinkets included glass medallions, beads, and jewelry (18). Kegs of gunpowder (19) fueled warfare. Leather flasks (20) contained mercury to extract silver from ore. Tables were set with brass and pewter spoons, pewter plates, and bone-handled steel knives (21). Spirits, wine, and olives filled bottles and jars (22, 23, 24). Valuables were kept under lock and key (25).

Slave ships bore leftover copper arm bracelets called manillas—and the Africans they bought (26). Vessels bound for Canada carried supplies for French soldiers and colonists (27): an earthenware jug, nested brass cooking pots, and glassware. Traps, axes, knives, ice chisels, and cheap muskets bought Indian furs. English colonists sipped from slipware mugs (28).



Cargo bound for Europe

Spoils of conquest (below and left) poured like rain into the Old World—mainly into Spain. Some precious metal was magnificently worked, such as a gold cross studded with emeralds, a pendant linked to a gold chain, and gold Indian artifacts (1). Other silver and gold was coined or shipped in bulk as bars, wedges, and ingots, usually bearing seals to show the royal tax had been paid (2). A ship's captain might have dined with a silver plate, spoon, and forks, and a gold-plated charger (3)—or perhaps they were intended for a Spanish nobleman. Elegance shone in a gilded pitcher, a gold manicule set, and a silver pax that held the Blessed Sacrament (4). Fine Oriental porcelain and bolts of silk (5) had been shipped from the Philippines and hauled across Mexico.

New tastes tempted Europe's palate: vanilla beans, seeds and seedlings of corn, squashes, potatoes, and tomatoes. Transplanted citrus fruits nourished sailors; raw sugar from cane (ode as cargo (6). Shown next to a ceramic water jug for the crew, a wooden "frother" stirred chocolate (7). Casks stored bundles of tobacco, prized by traders as "freighting smoke." Jars of new-dyed red cochineal, chests of indigo balls, and seed pods of the annatto plant (8) added dyes to color the Old World's life. Wood—lignum vitae (9) and malmogony (10)—served carpenters, cumbs from tortoiseshell (11), raw and tanned cowhides, and heaver pelts from French Canada (12) kept pace with changing fashion.

