As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the consequences of the rise of the Ottoman Empire and the end of the Byzantine Empire was that traditional trade routes by land from Europe to India and China were blocked, leading to attempts to reach these areas by sea, and a period in world history was begun which would see Europe and Europeans come to dominate the globe. Leading the way were Portuguese, Spaniards and Italians, to be followed by Frenchmen, Englishmen and Dutchmen.

The route to India and beyond was opened by the Portuguese. In 1487 Bartholomew Diaz reached the Cape of Good Hope. In 1498 Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape and went on to India, arriving at the town of Calicut. From thence the Portuguese sailed on further east, reaching Malaya in 1509, the Moluccas (New Guinea, Borneo, Timor) in 1513 and at last China in 1514.

The search for a route to the east via the west was begun in 1492 by Christopher Columbus, a Genoese working for the King and Queen of Spain. In his first voyage he discovered only some Caribbean islands, but in later voyages he reached the central American mainland. For a long time Columbus was credited with having discovered the New World, although today it is generally believed that the Vikings were the first to do so, landing in Labrador, Newfoundland and even further south towards the end of the tenth century.¹ Newfoundland was re-discovered in 1497 by the Florentine Giovanni Caboto (John Cabot), working for Henry VII of England.

In the first half of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese Pedro Cabral discovered Brazil; the Florentine Amerigo Vespucci discovered the mouth of the Amazon and Uruguay, and the Spaniard Juan de Solis the River Plate.

In the years 1519–22 a Spanish expedition led by a Portuguese, Ferdinand Magellan, was the first to circumnavigate the world. In doing so it rounded Cape Horn, penetrating the Pacific from the west. Amongst its territorial discoveries was the Philippines.
The Expansion of Europe

The Expansion of Europe

111

(so named after the heir to the throne); its other importance was confirmation that the world was, indeed, round.

During the years of that voyage the Spaniard Hernando Cortez entered and, with a very small force of horse and firearms, overthrew the Aztec Empire of central Mexico, annexing it to Spain, and beginning the Spanish conquest of Central and the rest of South America. 1534 saw the conquest by the Spaniard Francisco Pizarro of the Inca Empire of Peru. In 1538 Gonzalo Quesada conquered Columbia, and in the 1540s Chile was discovered and explored.

These years also saw Europeans arrive in North America. Giovanni da Verrazano, a Florentine in the service of King Francis I of France discovered the Atlantic coast of today's United States. In 1534 the Breton Jacques Cartier sailed down the St. Lawrence river. In the 1540s Fernando de Soto penetrated Florida and Francisco Coronado New Mexico.

These voyages of discovery soon extended to trying to reach India and China by the north-east and north-west. The Englishman Richard Chancellor, searching for a north-east passage, reached Archangel in 1553, opening up a trade route with Muscovite Russia. In the 1590's the Dutchman Willem Barents discovered Spitzbergen and Novya Zemlya. Seeking a north-west passage John Frobisher reached Baffin Island in 1574 and Henry Hudson entered the bay that bears his name in 1610.

It was also in the 1540s that Europeans made contact for the first time with the legendary Zipangu, Japan, so that the only areas of the world not known to the Europeans by the end of the sixteenth century were Australia and New Zealand. They would be reached by the Dutchman Abel Tasman in the 1640s.

At the time that Europe began to expand overseas the most populous and advanced state in the world technologically was China. Chinese fleets had already penetrated the Indian Ocean. So why did Europe take over the world rather than China?

The reason was that China simply took the decision to turn its back on the world. Overseas trade was halted – indeed in 1521 it was made illegal for Chinese nationals – and the Chinese spirit of improvisation and enquiry was stunted by a static defence of the past, complacency about the superiority of Chinese culture, and rejection of the worth of anything foreign. Until 1840 European trade with China was restricted to Canton only, and only with licensed Chinese merchants.2