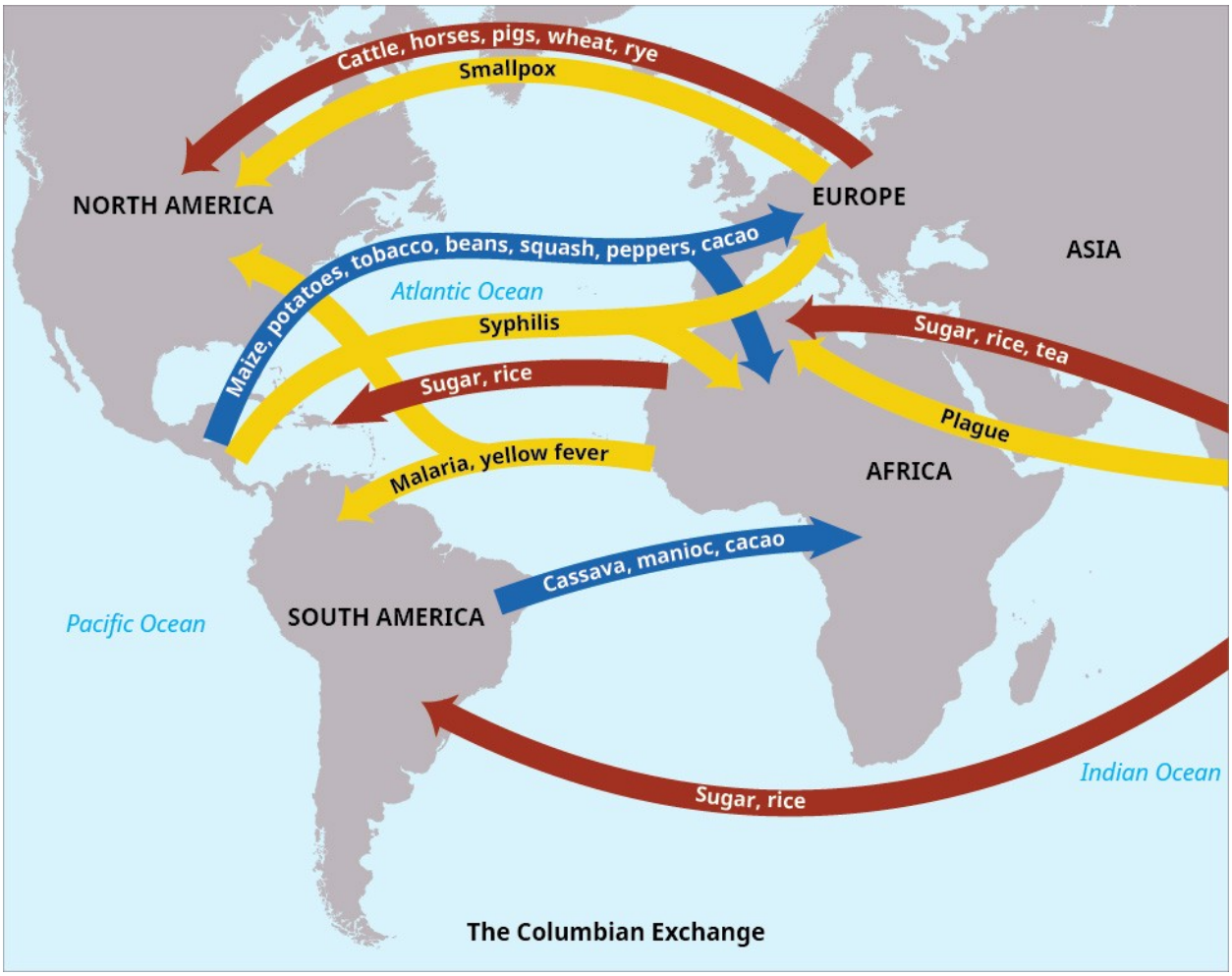
The Columbian Exchange: Rice

Late Agrarian Era

Student Name: Freshta Zarabi



The Columbian exchange, also known as the Columbian interchange, was the widespread transfer of plants, animals, precious metals, commodities, culture, human populations, technology, diseases, and ideas between the New World (the Americas) in the Western Hemisphere, and the Old World (Afro-Eurasia) in the Eastern Hemisphere, in the late 15th and following centuries. It is named after the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus and is related to the European colonization and global trade following his 1492 voyage. Some of the exchanges were purposeful; some were accidental or unintended. Communicable diseases of Old-World origin resulted in an 80 to 95 percent reduction in the number of Indigenous peoples of the Americas from the 15th century onwards, most severely in the Caribbean. The cultures of both hemispheres were significantly impacted by the migration of people (both free and enslaved) from the Old World to the New. European colonists and African slaves replaced Indigenous populations across the Americas, to varying degrees.

The number of Africans taken to the New World was far greater than the number of Europeans moving to the New World in the first three centuries after Columbus. The new contacts among the global population resulted in the interchange of a wide variety of crops and livestock, which supported increases in food production and population in the Old World. American crops such as maize, potatoes, tomatoes, tobacco, cassava, sweet potatoes, and chili peppers became important crops around the world. Old World rice, wheat, sugar cane, and livestock, among other crops, became important in the New World. American-produced silver flooded the world and became the standard metal used in coinage, especially in Imperial China.

Rice Origin & Spread

IT was another crop that became widely cultivated during the Columbian exchange. As the demand in the New World grew, so did the knowledge of how to cultivate it. The two primary species used were Oryza glaberrima and Oryza sativa, originating from West Africa and Southeast Asia, respectively.

1. Asia

Rice originated in East Asia, specifically China, roughly 10,000 years ago. Asian rice and African rice, the two species of rice that are commonly produced today, are thought to have first been domesticated thousands of years ago. African rice is estimated to have been originally domesticated 3,000 years ago in west Africa. Asian rice, being the elder of the two species, is theorized to have been domesticated 13,500 years ago in the Yangtze River basin.

Rice originated in Southeast Asia, China (eastern hemisphere) and spread southwards and northwards through river trade towards Japan and Korea. Primarily through trade from the Indian subcontinent, it arrived in the Middle East later than the rest of Asia.

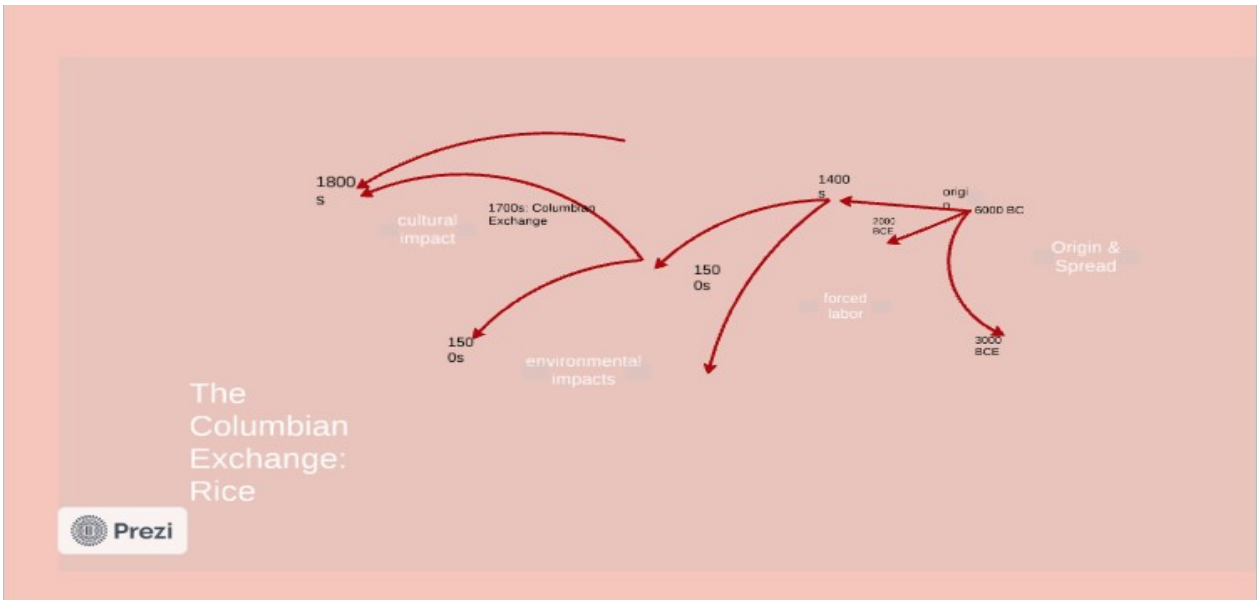
2. Into Europe

It is theorized that rice was first introduced to Europe through Alexander the Great's journeys into Asia around 320 B.C. Much later, during the 8th century A.D., the Arabs brought rice into Europe through the Iberian Peninsula. While initially being introduced into Portugal, rice spread across the Mediterranean into Italy. Rice was traded in 1685 through the Columbian Exchange to Southern Europe and to some of North Africa.

3. America

It spread along rivers and eventually reached Europe and Africa. The Portuguese and Spanish brought the rice to Brazil, Central America, and South America, while Europe brought it to the Americas with West African Slaves in the mid-1700s. Studies have shown that the earliest evidence of rice dates to 7000-5000 BCE.

In the late agrarian era, it first came to the West in present-day South Carolina and spread throughout the new world. Rice had already spread from the east westward and was present in Europe, Asia, and most of Africa prior to its arrival to the America.



In South Carolina because of the environment, rice fields were implemented with the knowledge African slaves, who were forced to tend to the crops. The Africans brought malaria with them, and rice fields bred that malaria. The Europeans died from malaria, but the slaves were immune, so more slaves were needed, increasing the amount of slave trade. European planters in the New World relied upon the skills of African slaves to cultivate both species. Georgia, South Carolina, Cuba and Puerto Rico were major centers of rice production during the colonial era. Enslaved Africans brought their knowledge of water control, milling, winnowing, and other agrarian practices to the fields. This widespread knowledge among African slaves eventually led to rice becoming a staple dietary item in the New World. (WIKIPEDIA, 2023).

1. **Caribbean and Latin America**

Most of the rice used today in the cuisine of the Americas is not native but was introduced to Latin America and the Caribbean by European colonizers at an early date. However, there are at least two native (endemic) species of rice present in the Amazon region of South America, and one or both were used by the indigenous inhabitants of the region to create the domesticated form Oryza sp., some 4000 years ago.

Spanish colonizers introduced Asian rice to Mexico in the 1520s at Veracruz, and the Portuguese and their African slaves introduced it at about the same time to colonial Brazil. Recent scholarship suggests that enslaved Africans played an active role in the establishment of rice in the New World and that African rice was an important crop from an early period.[69] Varieties of rice and bean dishes that were a staple dish along the peoples of West Africa remained a staple among their descendants subjected to slavery in the Spanish New World colonies, Brazil and elsewhere in the Americas.

2. **North America**

Historians have argued that the African slaves brought with them the knowledge of how to cultivate the rice, and were responsible for the growth of such a large agricultural industry in the United States south that fed an entire population.

In 1694, rice arrived in South Carolina, probably originating from Madagascar. Tradition (possibly apocryphal) has it that pirate John Thurber was returning from a slave-trading voyage to Madagascar when he was blown off course and put into Charleston for repairs. While there he gave a bag of seed rice to explorer Dr. Henry Woodward, who planted the rice and experimented with it until finding that it grew exceptionally well in the wet Carolina soil. The mastery of rice farming was a challenge for the English and other European settlers who were unfamiliar with the crop. Native Americans, who mostly gathered wild rice, were also inexperienced with rice cultivation. However, within the first fifty years of settlement rice became the dominant crop in South Carolina.

In the United States, colonial South Carolina and Georgia grew and amassed great wealth from the slave labor obtained from the Senegambia area of West Africa and from coastal Sierra Leone. At the port of Charleston, through which 40% of all American slave imports passed, slaves from this region of Africa brought the highest prices due to their prior knowledge of rice culture, which was put to use on the many rice plantations around Georgetown, Charleston, and Savannah.

From the enslaved Africans, plantation owners learned how to dyke the marshes and periodically flood the fields. At first the rice was laboriously milled by hand using large mortars and pestles made of wood, then winnowed in sweetgrass baskets (the making of which was another skill brought by slaves from Africa). The invention of the rice mill increased profitability of the crop, and the addition of waterpower for the mills in 1787 by millwright Jonathan Lucas was another step forward.

Rice culture in the southeastern U.S. became less profitable with the loss of slave labor after the American Civil War, and it finally died out just after the turn of the 20th century. Today, people can visit the only remaining rice plantation in South Carolina that still has the original winnowing barn and rice mill from the mid-19th century at the historic Mansfield Plantation in Georgetown, South Carolina. The predominant strain of rice in the Carolinas was from Africa and was known as 'Carolina Gold'. The cultivar has been preserved and there are current attempts to reintroduce it as a commercially grown crop (Wikipedia, 2022).

Rice Trade Impacts

1. **Human Resource Impact: Forced labor**

In order to increase rice profits, slaves were forced to work the rice fields, which led to a greater demand for slaves. Rice seeds were planted in the spring, the fields were then flooded to allow the rice to sprout. This process was repeated 4 or 5 times. Slaves owners demanded intense labor to plant, and significant labor for harvesting (Montoya,2023).

2. **Environmental impacts**

Rice was a useful food source that became the staple of a lot of Asian, African, and European countries, it was abundant and was able to feed the people. Although it is still an essential item, it causes emissions of methane which are released into the atmosphere and produce climate change.

3. **Cultural impacts**

Rice had a strong influence on many cultures that contributed to the world's cultural history, and it even helped with the development of several countries. African slaves that were traded to grow and harvest

the rice gained experience and knowledge of rice cultivation. Rice was also consumed by these slaves. China in the Song dynasty developed new methods to cultivate rice after its discovery. They remade landscapes and most of the population remain farmers to feed all the people and cultivate all the rice (Montoya,2023).

Conclusion

The global biological exchange that started in 1492 continues today. The networks and technology that let us travel faster and farther than ever before continue to bring new plants to new places, often with harmful effects on indigenous species. Of course, we also benefit from these exchanges. Go to the nearest grocery store, and you're certain to find food made from plants that started on a different continent and today rice is easily the most culturally significant food in the entire world.

Sources:

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