

Christopher Columbus

Introduction



Figure 1: Christopher Columbus, oil painting, said to be the most-accurate likeness of the explorer, attributed to Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio, c. 1525.

(1451–1506). On the morning of Oct. 12, 1492, Christopher Columbus stepped ashore on an island in what has since become known as the Americas. The arrival of his ships in the Western Hemisphere was one of the pivotal events in world history. It opened up a new world for Europeans and initiated the spread of Western civilization to a new hemisphere. But if these lands were a new world for Europeans, they were a very old world for the inhabitants Columbus and his successors encountered. Cultures dating back perhaps 20,000 years already existed on the two “new” continents and neighboring islands. These native cultures ranged from Stone Age societies of hunters and gatherers to highly developed, settled agricultural communities with central cities and imposing monuments. Under the effects of the European explorers and, later, colonists, these native cultures suffered nearly total annihilation.

Ironically, Columbus had landed in the New World by accident. He was seeking a western sea route from Europe to Asia. When he sighted land, he believed that he had reached his goal. And to the day he died he still believed that he had reached Asia. Although Columbus was mistaken, he still ranks as a great discoverer. Few other navigators of his time would have dared to sail westward into the unknown.

Early Life of Columbus

The father of Columbus was Domenico Colombo, a wool weaver. He had his own business in the port city of Genoa, Italy. Cristoforo was born in the late summer or early autumn of 1451, probably in Genoa. (English-speaking peoples have since changed the Italian form of his name to Christopher Columbus.) The boy had little or no schooling. He and his younger brother Bartholomew helped their father by carding raw wool.

Christopher grew up to be a tall, strongly built young man with red hair and a ruddy complexion. He was quiet and deeply religious; and he was quick to learn from experience. He worked for his father until he was 22. He probably went out with the sardine fishing fleets, as other Genoese boys did, and he may have sailed along the coast or over to Corsica on business for his father. Genoese traders often owned their own coastal schooners, and Columbus’ father may have had one of

these. He made at least one trip to the North African coast. On these longer voyages he learned the elements of seamanship.

Portugal and a New Life

In 1476 Columbus sailed as a common seaman aboard a Genoese merchantman bound for Lisbon, Portugal; England; and Flanders. Since many Mediterranean nations were at war, the ship traveled in convoy. Off the south coast of Portugal the convoy was attacked, and the ship went down. He swam to shore and made his way to Lisbon. Genoese friends took him in and later found him a berth on an Iceland-bound ship. On his return he settled in Lisbon.

At this time Portugal was the world's greatest seafaring nation. A half century before, Portuguese mariners began making important voyages of discovery under the sponsorship of Prince Henry the Navigator. Many Genoese had prospered in Lisbon, and Columbus saw his chance to become a sea captain under the Portuguese flag.

First, however, he had to educate himself. He learned to speak and read Portuguese and Castilian (the official language of Spain) and mastered Latin so he could read scholarly books on geography.

To earn his living, he became a chart maker. He also made at least one voyage as agent for a Genoese merchant in Lisbon. In 1479 he married Felipa Perestrello, whose father had been one of Prince Henry's captains. They had one son, Diego. Felipa's high social rank enabled Columbus to meet important officials. She gave him her father's collection of charts and documents. From these Columbus gained more knowledge of Portuguese discoveries and plans. In 1481 he entered the service of King John II of Portugal and voyaged to the Gold Coast of Africa.

Lands to the West

The wealth of Asia had been trickling into Europe for more than 200 years, and Europeans were eager for more of it. Asian goods had to come by a perilous overland route, which made them scarce and expensive. Ships could carry them more cheaply and in greater quantity. To reach India, China, Japan, and the East Indies, the Portuguese were already probing for an eastern sea route around Africa. Another possibility was a western sea route across the Atlantic and beyond. All educated men knew that the world was spherical, and that Asia lay west of Europe. The question was, how far?

Columbus' studies led him to believe that Earth's circumference was much smaller than it is and that the landmass of Asia extended much farther than it does. He drew his calculations from scraps of evidence in such sources as the Bible, the

writings of Marco Polo, and Pierre d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi* (Picture of the World). He accepted the information that supported his belief and rejected everything else. Other men had made similar calculations, but none had figured so optimistically. Supporting Columbus' views were a number of sailors' yarns about lands sighted in the Atlantic Ocean. Floating debris from beyond the Azores seemed to confirm their accounts. Columbus was determined to prove that by sailing 3,000 miles west he would reach Asia.

Columbus Seeks a Backer

In 1484 Columbus applied for ships and men from King John II of Portugal. The king's committee decided that his plan was unsound, and the application was refused. Meanwhile, Columbus' wife had died. Taking his son, Diego, he journeyed to Spain to seek backers. He left Diego in the care of the Franciscan friars at the monastery of La Rábida.



Figure 2: Christopher Columbus requests support for his explorations in the New World from Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain.

In Spain Columbus made a number of influential friends who helped him present his plan to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Although they were then busy conducting a war against the Moors in Granada, they appointed a commission to examine Columbus' proposal. The commission postponed making a decision, and Columbus was left waiting. In Córdoba, Columbus took Beatriz Enríquez de Harana as his common-law wife. They later had one son, Ferdinand (Fernando).

King John invited Columbus to return to Portugal. During the second review of Columbus' expedition plan, Bartolomeu Dias returned from discovering the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa. This meant that an eastern sea route to India was open; the Portuguese were no longer interested in an unproved western route. Columbus returned to Spain. Finally, after the fall of Granada in January 1492, the Spanish sovereigns agreed to finance the expedition. They promised that if he succeeded they would make him admiral of the Ocean Sea and viceroy of all the islands and continents he discovered.

The harbor town of Palos had offended the Spanish rulers, and as a penalty they ordered the town to furnish two ships for the expedition. These were the *Niña* and the *Pinta*. A third ship, the *Santa María*, was chartered. Columbus commanded this vessel himself and selected two Palos captains to lead the other ships. The crews were recruited in Palos.

The Momentous First Voyage

At dawn on Aug. 3, 1492, the three ships hoisted anchor in the Palos harbor and got under way. Only three days out of Palos, the *Pinta* lost its rudder and the *Niña's* lateen rig (with triangular sails) proved unsuitable. Columbus had planned to stop at the Canary Islands only long enough to load fresh provisions and water, but he extended his stay to install a new rudder on the *Pinta* and square rigging on the *Niña*. On September 9 the three ships left the Canaries and spread their sails. Steady trade winds from the northeast drove them on their course due west.

As they sailed westward, Columbus kept two records of progress. One was the distance he thought they had actually traveled. The other was a much shorter estimate that he showed the crew to quiet their fears at being so far from home. The false record was nearer to the actual mileage than the secret one. Columbus' mistakes were common to the times. His navigation instruments were crude, and, like most captains, he had little practice in their use.

For the most part the passage was smooth, and the winds were steady. As the days passed, however, the men could not see how they could sail home against winds that had blown them steadily west. About midway in the voyage the seamen noted that the compass varied to the west of true north. They were familiar with the easterly variation in the Mediterranean, but this change was new and fearful. A falling meteor and the thick-growing plants of the Sargasso Sea increased their fears. On October 8 and 9 the men were ready to rebel. Columbus had to agree to turn back if land was not sighted within three days.

On October 11 the *Pinta* fished up a piece of bamboo, a pole, a board, and a stick that seemed to have been shaped by tools. At 10 pm Columbus himself thought he saw lights. At 2 am on October 12, Rodrigo de Triana, a seaman aboard the *Pinta*, cried loudly the first sight of the New World. The voyage from the Canaries had taken 33 days.

Landfall in the New World

The little Spanish fleet had sailed among the Bahama Islands. Columbus named the first land sighted San Salvador (probably now Watling Island). Its Indian name was Guanahani. The ships' boats were put over the side and Columbus, accompanied by officers and crewmen, landed. With them they carried the royal banners of Ferdinand and Isabella. They were met by a band of curious but peaceful

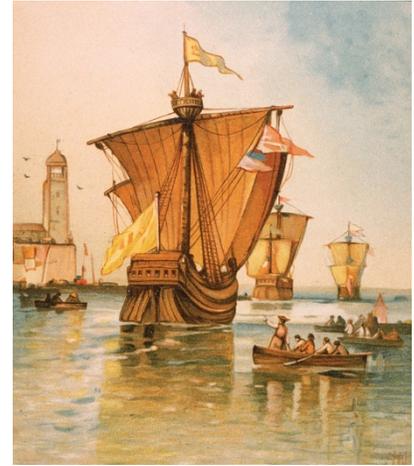


Figure 3: Christopher Columbus's fleet of three ships sets sail from Spain in 1492.

natives. The Spaniards knelt on the sand and gave thanks to God for the safe and successful voyage. Then, while the natives watched, Columbus took possession of the island in the name of the rulers of Spain. The crewmen, delighted with the rich and unexpected discovery of this island, begged Columbus' forgiveness for their disobedience.

The natives were friendly and helpful. Columbus, believing San Salvador to be an island of Asia's Indies, called them Indians. At once the men began trading with the Indians, offering hawks' bells and glass beads for the Indians' ornaments.

Sailing on, Columbus stopped at islands he named Santa María de la Concepción (now Rum Cay), Fernandina (Long Island), and Isabela (Crooked Island). He then sailed south to the north coast of Cuba. He named this island Juana.

Everywhere he asked the Indians where gold could be found. On Dec. 6, 1492, he reached the north coast of Hispaniola. Previously he had found small trinkets of gold, but here the natives told of a gold mine in the interior of the island. Early Christmas morning the *Santa María* went aground off Cap Haitien. Before it could be worked off, its bottom was so badly torn that the ship had to be abandoned. From its timber Columbus built a small fort, La Navidad. The sailors, excited by stories of gold, begged to be left as colonists. Columbus selected 39 to stay.



Figure 4: A monument honoring Christopher Columbus stands before Government House in Nassau, Bahamas.

Triumphant Return to Spain



Figure 5: King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella greet Italian explorer Christopher Columbus on his return from the New World in 1493.

On Jan. 16, 1493, the *Niña* and the *Pinta* began the return voyage. They carried gold, bright-feathered, colored parrots, other strange animals and plants, some Indian cloth and ornaments, and several Indians. A stormy eastward passage separated the two ships and did much damage. Columbus, on the *Niña*, put in at Lisbon for refitting. The *Pinta* made port at the Spanish town of Bayona, to the north of Portugal. In Lisbon, Columbus was welcomed by King John. With repairs completed,

Columbus sailed. At midday of March 15, 1493, the *Niña* dropped anchor in Palos harbor. The *Pinta* made port later the same day.

The court was at Barcelona, and the Spanish king and queen welcomed Columbus there. To the court Columbus took six of the Indians, the gold, and some of the plants and animals. The sovereigns rose to greet Columbus and seated him at their right. All honors and titles promised him were confirmed. This was the height of Columbus' glory.

The admiral made three more trips to the New World: 1493 to 1496, 1498 to 1500, and 1502 to 1504. On the first return voyage he had 17 ships and about 1,200 men. At Hispaniola, Columbus found that La Navidad had been burned and the 39 seamen slain. A new colony was started. Columbus explored the coasts of Jamaica, Cuba, and Hispaniola.

On the next voyage he first sighted Trinidad. He also explored some of the northeastern shore of South America and the Leeward Islands. Meanwhile, dissatisfied colonists had returned to Spain and complained at court. A new governor was sent to replace Columbus. He arrested Columbus and shipped him back in chains. The monarchs released him and restored his titles. On the final voyage Columbus tried vainly to find a passage to India. He explored the east coast of Central America but lost two ships. The two remaining ships, in poor condition, ran aground on Jamaica in June 1503. Messengers sent by canoe to Hispaniola finally brought rescue ships in June 1504.

The admiral returned to Spain broken in health and spirit. He was not received at court. The king refused to restore his privileges and honors. He was, however, far from poor. He had brought back gold, and he shared in the gold mined in Hispaniola. He died in Valladolid, Spain, on May 20, 1506.

In 1513 Columbus' remains were transferred to a monastery in Seville, where his son Diego had been buried. Their bodies were taken to the Cathedral of Santo Domingo at Hispaniola in 1542. In 1795 a box believed to contain the bones of the father was taken to Havana, then removed to Seville in 1899. In 1877, however, another casket bearing the admiral's name had been found entombed in the Cathedral of Santo Domingo.

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