



# THIS DAY IN HISTORY

## STUDY GUIDE



### **OCT. 14, 1492: COLUMBUS REACHES THE NEW WORLD**

*Biographies, discussion questions, suggested activities and more*



# THE NEW WORLD

## Setting the Stage

Like other European explorers, Columbus encountered many indigenous people during his voyages. Focused on finding riches and conquering new lands, Columbus and his men treated the indigenous groups they came across as obstacles to their greater mission. There are three main sources of anger and controversy involving Columbus's interactions with indigenous peoples: the use of violence and slavery; forced conversions to Christianity; and the introduction of new diseases.

In an era in which the slave trade was starting to grow, Columbus and his men enslaved many native peoples in the West Indies and subjected them to extreme violence. On his first voyage in 1492, Columbus landed on an unknown Caribbean island after an arduous three-month journey. On his first day in the New World, he ordered six natives to be seized, writing that he believed they would be good servants. Throughout his years in the New World, Columbus enacted policies of forced labor in which natives were put to work for the sake of profits. Later, Columbus sent thousands of peaceful Taíno "Indians" from the island of Hispaniola to Spain to be sold. Many died en route. Those left behind were forced to search for gold in mines and on plantations. Within 60 years of Columbus's arrival, only a few hundred of what may have been 250,000 Taino were left on their island.

As governor and viceroy of the Indies, Columbus imposed iron discipline on what is now the Dominican Republic, according to documents discovered by Spanish historians in 2005. In response to native unrest and revolt, Columbus ordered a brutal crackdown in which many natives were killed; in an attempt to deter further rebellion, Columbus ordered their dismembered bodies to be paraded through the streets.

In addition to enslavement and violence, Columbus' expeditions also introduced new diseases to the New World which, over time, devastated many native populations. In the broader sense, historians have used the phrase "Columbian exchange" to describe the exchange of goods between the East and West that his voyages sparked. Though the effects were widespread and cannot all be dismissed as negative, critics assert that the worst aspects of this exchange added up to biological warfare.

Cover photo: "The First Voyage" chromolithograph by L. Prang & Co., published by The Prang Educational Co., Boston, 1893.

# OCT. 14, 1492

# COLUMBUS REACHES

# THE NEW WORLD



Primer desembarco de Cristóbal Colón en América. Painting by Dióscoro Puebla, 1862.

On October 14, 1492, after sailing across the Atlantic Ocean, Italian explorer Christopher Columbus sighted a Bahamian island, believing he had reached East Asia. His expedition went ashore the same day and claimed the land for Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain, who sponsored his attempt to find a western ocean route to China, India and the fabled gold and spice islands of Asia.

Columbus was born in Genoa, Italy, in 1451. Little is known of his early life, but he worked as a seaman and then a maritime entrepreneur. He became obsessed with the possibility of pioneering a western sea route to Cathay

(China), India and the gold and spice islands of Asia. At the time, Europeans knew no direct sea route to southern Asia, and the route via Egypt and the Red Sea was closed to Europeans by the Ottoman Empire, as were many land routes. Contrary to popular legend, educated Europeans of Columbus's day did believe that the world was round, as argued by St. Isidore in the 7th century. However, Columbus and most others underestimated the world's size, calculating that East Asia must lie approximately where North America sits on the globe (they did not yet know that the Pacific Ocean existed).

With only the Atlantic Ocean, he thought, lying between

Europe and the riches of the East Indies, Columbus met with King John II of Portugal and tried to persuade him to back his "Enterprise of the Indies," as he called his plan. He was rebuffed and went to Spain, where he also was rejected at least twice by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. However, after the Spanish conquest of the Moorish kingdom of Granada in January 1492, the Spanish monarchs, flush with victory, agreed to support his voyage.

On August 3, 1492, Columbus set sail from Palos, Spain, with three small ships, the Santa Maria, the Pinta and the Nina. On October 12, the expedition reached land, probably Watling Island in the Bahamas. Later that month, Columbus sighted Cuba, which he thought was mainland China, and in December the expedition landed on Hispaniola, which Columbus thought might be Japan. He established a small colony there with 39 of his men. The explorer returned to Spain with gold, spices and "Indian" captives in March 1493 and was received with the highest honors by the Spanish court.

He was the first European to explore the Americas since the Vikings set up colonies in Greenland and Newfoundland in the 10th century.

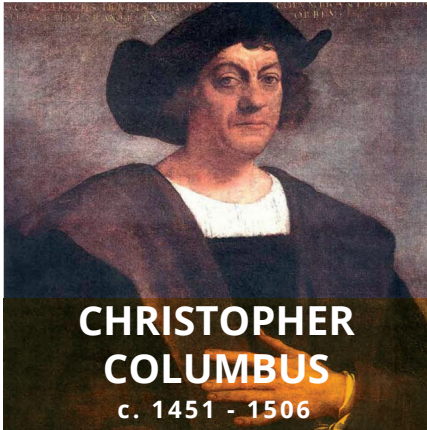
During his lifetime, Columbus led a total of four expeditions to the New World, encountering various Caribbean islands, the Gulf of Mexico and the South and Central American mainlands, but he never accomplished his original goal—a western ocean route to the great cities of Asia. Columbus died in Spain in 1506 without realizing the great scope of what his journeys set into motion: He had opened the New World to European colonization and conquest, and the riches from these lands over the next century would help make Spain the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth. □

## **DID YOU KNOW?**

**In January 1493, while sailing near the present-day Dominican Republic, Columbus reported seeing three mermaids, which he described in his journal as being "not half as beautiful as they are painted." It is believed what Columbus actually sighted were three manatees. Manatees are slow-moving aquatic mammals with human-like eyes, bulbous faces and paddle-like tails.**



# PEOPLE TO KNOW



The explorer Christopher Columbus made four trips across the Atlantic Ocean from Spain: in 1492, 1493, 1498 and 1502. He was determined to find a direct water route west from Europe to Asia, but he never did. Instead, he accidentally stumbled upon the Americas. Though he did not really “discover” the New World—millions of people already lived there—his journeys marked the beginning of centuries of trans-Atlantic conquest and colonization. Today, Columbus has a mixed legacy—he is remembered as a daring and path-breaking explorer who transformed the New World, yet his actions also unleashed changes that would eventually devastate the native populations he and his fellow explorers encountered.



The Portuguese nobleman Vasco da Gama sailed from Lisbon in 1497 on a mission to reach India and open a sea route from Europe to the East. After sailing down the western coast of Africa and rounding the Cape of Good Hope, his expedition made numerous stops in Africa before reaching the trading post of Calicut, India, in May 1498. Da Gama received a hero’s welcome back in Portugal, and was sent on a second expedition to India in 1502, during which he brutally clashed with Muslim traders in the region. Two decades later, da Gama again returned to India, this time as Portuguese viceroy; he died there of an illness in late 1524.



In search of fame and fortune, Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan set out from Spain in 1519 with a fleet of five ships to discover a western sea route to the Spice Islands. En route he discovered what is now known as the Strait of Magellan and became the first European to cross the Pacific Ocean. The voyage was long and dangerous, and only one ship returned home three years later. Although it was laden with valuable spices from the East, only 18 of the fleet’s original crew of 270 returned with the ship. Magellan himself was killed in battle on the voyage, but his ambitious expedition proved that the globe could be circled by sea and that the world was much larger than previously had been imagined.



# SEE IT



Map of Columbus' First Voyage, by Keith Pickering



Christopher Columbus arrives in America, By L. Prang & Co.

# CONCURRENT EVENTS



## AGE OF EXPLORATION

Lasting from the early 1400s into the 1700s, the Age of Exploration (also known as the Age of Discovery) was characterized by European nations sending ships out to explore the oceans and hunt for new trading routes and partners and sources of riches and resources. In the process, they contributed greatly to the world's knowledge of navigation and world geography. In addition to Columbus' famed journeys, Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama sailed around Africa's southern tip to open up a new route from Europe to modern-day India in 1497; John Cabot explored what is now Newfoundland, Canada, that same year; and Amerigo Vespucci reached the mouth of the Amazon River in modern-day northern Brazil in 1499. In 1522, an expedition led by Ferdinand Magellan, who died on the journey, completed the first circumnavigation of the globe.



## MICHELANGELO'S DAVID

In 1504, Michelangelo completed his David statue, regarded as one of his greatest works and one of the most beautiful sculptures in art history. Michelangelo (1475-1564) was a sculptor, painter and architect widely considered to be one of the greatest artists of the Italian Renaissance period—and arguably of all time. His work demonstrated a blend of psychological insight, physical realism and intensity never before seen. His contemporaries recognized his extraordinary talent, and Michelangelo received commissions from some of the most wealthy and powerful men of his day, including popes and others affiliated with the Catholic Church. His resulting work, including, most notably, David; his Pietà sculpture (1498-99); and the Sistine Chapel ceiling paintings (1505-12) have been carefully tended to and preserved, ensuring that future generations will be able to view and appreciate Michelangelo's genius.



## HENRY VIII

Henry VIII (1491-1547) ascended the British throne in 1509, beginning a 36-year reign during which he presided over sweeping changes that brought his nation into the Protestant Reformation. He famously married a series of six wives in his search for political alliance, marital bliss and a healthy male heir. His desire to annul his first marriage in the face of papal disapproval led to the creation of a separate Church of England. Of his marriages, two ended in annulment, two in natural deaths and two with his wives being beheaded for adultery and treason. Henry VIII's children Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I would each go on to take a turn as British monarch.



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



U.S. postage stamp commemorating 400th anniversary of Columbus' first voyage.

- 1 Christopher Columbus left behind a controversial legacy. What words would you use to describe him?
- 2 During the Age of Exploration, spending long periods of time at sea was difficult and uncomfortable. Why do you think captains and sailors decided to go to sea?
- 3 What do you think is the best way to commemorate this day in history?



# SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES



Columbus and the Indian Maiden. Painting by Constantino Brumidi, c. 1875.

## LIFE OF A SAILOR

Ask students to review the Age of Exploration: Life on the Seas infographic (see Resources section) and research how sailors lived during the Age of Exploration. Then, have them write a journal entry as if they were a sailor on one of Columbus' expeditions. Why did he/she join the expedition? What are the living conditions like? What has he/she seen so far? What does he/she hope to see?

## POETRY IN MOTION

Many students are familiar with the rhyme "In fourteen hundred and ninety two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." Ask students to create their own short rhyme that takes his accomplishments as well as the darker side of Columbus' legacy into account.

## BEFORE THE ENCOUNTER

Ask students to research the history of the Arawak and Taíno indigenous groups who were among the first native peoples that Columbus encountered. As a class, discuss how the Arawaks and/or Taíno might have experienced Columbus' arrival, and what happened to these groups in the years that followed. Then, ask students to reimagine and rewrite today's This Day in History story as if it were written entirely from the point of view of the Taíno or Arawak people.

# RESOURCES

**Test: Transcript of Columbus' journal**

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/columbus1.asp>

**Text: Letter from Columbus to Luis De Sant Angel announcing discovery, 1493**

<http://www.ushistory.org/documents/columbus.htm>

**Video: Did Columbus really discover America?**

<http://www.history.com/topics/exploration/christopher-columbus/videos/columbus-day>

**Video: Christopher Columbus Sets Sail**

<http://www.history.com/topics/exploration/christopher-columbus/videos/christopher-columbus-sets-sail>

**Video: Columbus Uses the Skies to Survive**

<http://www.history.com/topics/exploration/christopher-columbus/videos/columbus-uses-the-skies-to-survive>

**Video: Columbus' Last Voyage**

<http://www.history.com/topics/exploration/christopher-columbus/videos/christopher-columbus-last-voyage>

**Video: Christopher Columbus' Bone Voyage**

<http://www.history.com/topics/exploration/christopher-columbus/videos/bone-voyage>

**Infographic: Age of Exploration: Life on the Seas**

<http://www.history.com/shows/mankind-the-story-of-all-of-us/infographics/age-of-exploration>