

Christopher Columbus

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Christopher Columbus



Posthumous portrait of Christopher Columbus by Ridolfo Ghirlandaio. There are no known authentic portraits of Columbus.

Born	c.1451 Genoa, Liguria, Northern Italy
Died	20 May 1506 (aged c. 55) Valladolid, Castile
Nationality	Genoese (though disputed)
Other names	Genoese: Christoffa Corombo Italian: Cristoforo Colombo Catalan: Cristòfor Colom Spanish: Cristóbal Colón Portuguese: Cristóvão Colombo Latin: Christophorus Columbus
Occupation	Maritime explorer for the Crown of Castile
Title	Admiral of the Ocean Sea; Viceroy and Governor of the Indies
Religion	Roman Catholic

Spouse(s) Filipa Moniz (c. 1476-1485)

Children Diego
Fernando

Relatives Giovanni Pellegrino, Giacomo and Bartolomeo Columbus (brothers)

Signature



Christopher Columbus (c. 1451 – 20 May 1506) was a navigator, colonizer, and explorer whose voyages across the Atlantic Ocean led to general European awareness of the American continents in the Western Hemisphere. With his four voyages of exploration and several attempts at establishing a settlement on the island of Hispaniola, all funded by Isabella I of Castile, he initiated the process of Spanish colonization which foreshadowed general European colonization of the "New World".

Although not the first to reach the Americas from Europe—he was preceded by at least one other group, the Norse, led by Leif Ericson, who built a temporary settlement 500 years earlier at L'Anse aux Meadows^[1]—Columbus initiated widespread contact between Europeans and indigenous Americans.

The term "pre-Columbian" is usually used to refer to the peoples and cultures of the Americas before the arrival of Columbus and his European successors.

The name *Christopher Columbus* is the Anglicisation of the Latin *Christophorus Columbus*. The original name in 15th century Genoese language was *Christoffa*^[2] *Corombo*^[3] (pronounced [kriˈɔʃtɔffa kuˈɔɹɒmbu]). The name is rendered in modern Italian as *Cristoforo Colombo*, in Portuguese as *Cristóvão Colombo* (formerly

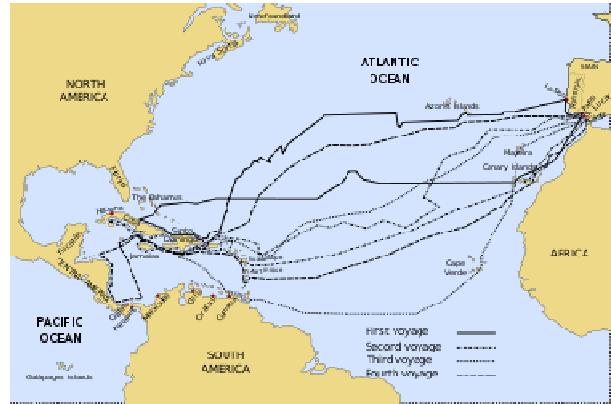
Christovam Colom), in Catalan as *Cristòfor Colom*, and in Spanish as *Cristóbal Colón*.

Columbus's initial 1492 voyage came at a critical time of growing national imperialism and economic competition between developing nation states seeking wealth from the establishment of trade routes and colonies. In this sociopolitical climate, Columbus's far-fetched scheme won the attention of Isabella I of Castile. Severely underestimating the circumference of the Earth, he estimated that a westward route from Iberia to the Indies would be shorter than the overland trade route through Arabia. If true, this would allow Spain entry into the lucrative spice trade — heretofore commanded by the Arabs and Italians. Following his plotted course, he instead landed within the Bahamas Archipelago at a locale he named *San Salvador*. Mistaking North America for the East Asian mainland, he referred to its inhabitants as "Indios".

The anniversary of Columbus's 1492 landing in the Americas is usually observed as Columbus Day on October 12 in Spain and throughout the Americas, except Canada. In the United States it is observed annually on the second Monday in October.

Voyages

Navigation plans



Voyages of Christopher Columbus



"Columbus map", drawn ca. 1490 in Lisbon workshop of Bartolomeo and Christopher Columbus^[7]



Columbus's geographical concepts

Europe had long enjoyed a safe land passage to China and India— sources of valued goods such as silk, spices, and opiates— under the hegemony of the Mongol Empire (the Pax Mongolica, or *Mongol peace*). With the Fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, the land route to Asia became more difficult. In response to this the Columbus brothers had, by the 1480s, developed a plan to travel to the Indies, then

construed roughly as all of south and east Asia, by sailing directly west across the "Ocean Sea," *i.e.*, the Atlantic.

Washington Irving's 1828 biography of Columbus popularized the idea that Columbus had difficulty obtaining support for his plan because Europeans thought the Earth was flat.^[8] In fact, the primitive maritime navigation of the time relied on the stars and the curvature of the spherical Earth. The knowledge that the Earth was spherical was widespread, and the means of calculating its diameter using an astrolabe was known to both scholars and navigators.^[9] A spherical Earth had been the general opinion of Ancient Greek science, and this view continued through the Middle Ages (for example, Bede mentions it in *The Reckoning of Time*). In fact Eratosthenes had measured the diameter of the Earth with good precision in the second century BC.^[10] Where Columbus did differ from the generally accepted view of his time is his (incorrect) arguments that assumed a significantly smaller diameter for the Earth, claiming that Asia could be easily reached by sailing west across the Atlantic. Most scholars accepted Ptolemy's correct assessment that the terrestrial landmass (for Europeans of the time, comprising Eurasia and Africa) occupied 180 degrees of the terrestrial sphere, and dismissed Columbus's claim that the Earth was much smaller, and that Asia was only a few thousand nautical miles to the west of Europe. Columbus's error was put down to his lack of experience in navigation at sea.^[11]

Columbus believed the (incorrect) calculations of Marinus of Tyre, putting the landmass at 225 degrees, leaving only 135 degrees of water. Moreover, Columbus believed that one degree represented a shorter distance on the Earth's surface than was actually the case. Finally, he read maps as if the distances were calculated in Italian miles (1,238 meters). Accepting the length of a degree to be $56\frac{2}{3}$ miles, from the writings of Alfraganus, he therefore

calculated the circumference of the Earth as 25,255 kilometers at most, and the distance from the Canary Islands to Japan as 3,000 Italian miles (3,700 km, or 2,300 statute miles). Columbus did not realize Alfraganus used the much longer Arabic mile (about 1,830 m).



Columbus's notes in Latin edition of *The Travels of Marco Polo*

The true circumference of the Earth is about 40,000 km (25,000 mi), a figure established by Eratosthenes in the second century BC,^[10] and the distance from the Canary Islands to Japan 19,600 km (12,200 mi). No ship that was readily available in the 15th century could carry enough food and fresh water for such a journey. Most European sailors and navigators concluded, probably correctly, that sailors undertaking a westward voyage from Europe to Asia non-stop would die of thirst or starvation long before reaching their destination. Catholic Monarchs, however, having completed an expensive war in the Iberian Peninsula, were desperate for a competitive edge over other European countries in trade with the East Indies. Columbus promised such an advantage.

While Columbus's calculations underestimated the circumference of the Earth and the distance from the Canary Islands to Japan by the standards of his peers as well as in fact, Europeans generally assumed that the aquatic expanse between Europe and Asia was uninterrupted.^[citation needed]

There was a further element of key importance in the plans of Columbus, a closely held fact discovered, or otherwise learned, by Columbus: the trade winds. A brisk wind from the east, commonly called an "easterly", propelled *Santa María*, *La Niña*, and *La Pinta* for five weeks from the Canaries. To return to Spain eastward against this prevailing wind would have required several months of an arduous sailing technique, called beating, during which food and drinkable water would have been utterly exhausted. Columbus returned home by following prevailing winds northeastward from the southern zone of the North Atlantic to the middle latitudes of the North Atlantic, where prevailing winds are eastward (westerly) to the coastlines of Western Europe, where the winds curve southward towards the Iberian Peninsula.^[12] In fact, Columbus was wrong about degrees of longitude to be traversed and wrong about distance per degree, but he was right about a more vital fact: how to use the North Atlantic's great circular wind pattern, clockwise in direction, to get home.^{[13][14]}

Funding campaign

In 1485, Columbus presented his plans to John II, King of Portugal. He proposed the king equip three sturdy ships and grant Columbus one year's time to sail out into the Atlantic, search for a western route to the Orient, and return. Columbus also requested he be made "Great Admiral of the Ocean", appointed governor of any and all lands he discovered, and given one-tenth of all revenue from those lands. The king submitted the proposal to his experts, who rejected it. It was their considered opinion that Columbus's estimation of a travel distance of 2,400 miles (3,860 km) was, in fact, far too short.^[11]



Arms of Columbus

In 1488 Columbus appealed to the court of Portugal once again, and once again John invited him to an audience. It also proved unsuccessful, in part because not long afterwards Bartholomeu Dias returned to Portugal following a successful rounding of the southern tip of Africa. With an eastern sea route now under its control, Portugal was no longer interested in trailblazing a western route to Asia.

Columbus travelled from Portugal to both Genoa and Venice, but he received encouragement from neither. Previously he had his brother sound out Henry VII of England, to see if the English monarch might not be more amenable to Columbus's proposal. After much carefully considered hesitation Henry's invitation came, too late. Columbus had already committed himself to Spain.

He had sought an audience from the monarchs Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile, who had united many kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula by marrying, and were ruling together. On 1 May 1486, permission having been granted, Columbus presented his plans to Queen Isabella, who, in turn, referred it to a committee. After the passing of much time, these savants of Spain, like their counterparts in Portugal, reported back that Columbus had judged the distance to Asia much too short. They pronounced the idea

impractical, and advised their Royal Highnesses to pass on the proposed venture.



 Columbus and Queen Isabella. Detail of the Columbus monument in Madrid (1885).

However, to keep Columbus from taking his ideas elsewhere, and perhaps to keep their options open, the Catholic Monarchs gave him an annual allowance of 12,000 *maravedis* and in 1489 furnished him with a letter ordering all cities and towns under their domain to provide him food and lodging at no cost.^[15]

After continually lobbying at the Spanish court and two years of negotiations, he finally had success in 1492. Ferdinand and Isabella had just conquered Granada, the last Muslim stronghold on the Iberian peninsula, and they received Columbus in Córdoba, in the *Alcázar* castle. Isabella turned Columbus down on the advice of her confessor, and he was leaving town by mule in despair, when Ferdinand intervened. Isabella then sent a royal guard to fetch him and Ferdinand later claimed credit for being "the principal cause why those islands were discovered".

About half of the financing was to come from private Italian investors, whom Columbus had already lined up. Financially broke after the Granada campaign, the monarchs left it to the royal treasurer to shift funds among various royal accounts on behalf of the enterprise. Columbus was to be made "Admiral of the Seas" and would receive a portion of all profits. The terms

were unusually generous, but as his son later wrote, the monarchs did not really expect him to return.

According to the contract that Columbus made with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, if Columbus discovered any new islands or mainland, he would receive many high rewards. In terms of power, he would be given the rank of Admiral of the Ocean Sea and appointed Viceroy and Governor of all the new lands. He had the right to nominate three persons, from whom the sovereigns would choose one, for any office in the new lands. He would be entitled to 10% of all the revenues from the new lands in perpetuity; this part was denied to him in the contract, although it was one of his demands. Additionally, he would also have the option of buying one-eighth interest in any commercial venture with the new lands and receive one-eighth of the profits.

Columbus was later arrested in 1500 and supplanted from these posts. After his death, Columbus's sons, Diego and Fernando, took legal action to enforce their father's contract. Many of the smears against Columbus were initiated by the Castilian crown during these lengthy court cases, known as the *pleitos colombinos*. The family had some success in their first litigation, as a judgment of 1511 confirmed Diego's position as Viceroy, but reduced his powers. Diego resumed litigation in 1512, which lasted until 1536, and further disputes continued until 1790.^[16]

First voyage

First voyage



Departure of the first voyage from the port of Palos, by *Evaristo Dominguez*, in the



Replica of *Santa Maria*

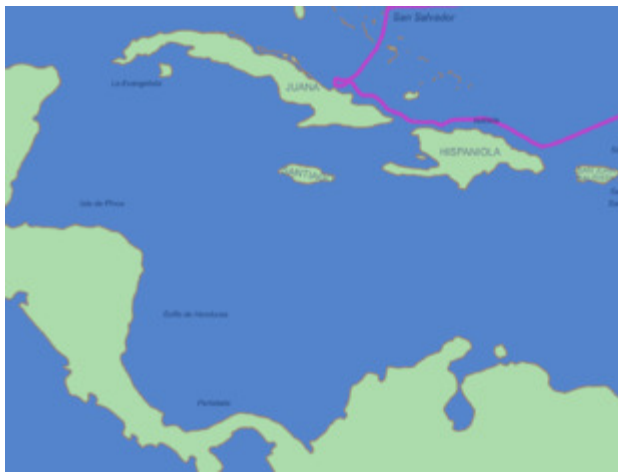
municipality of Palos de la Frontera.




Columbus claims the New World in a chromolithograph by the Prang Education Company, 1893



Captain's Ensign of Columbus's Ships



 First voyage

On the evening of 3 August 1492, Columbus departed from Palos de la Frontera with three ships; one larger carrack, *Santa María*, nicknamed *Gallega (the Galician)*, and two smaller caravels, *Pinta (the Painted)* and *Santa Clara*, nicknamed *Niña* after her owner Juan Niño of Moguer.^[17] They were property of Juan de la Cosa and the Pinzón brothers (Martín Alonso and Vicente Yáñez), but the monarchs forced the Palos inhabitants to contribute to the expedition. Columbus first sailed to the Canary Islands, which were owned by Castile, where he restocked the provisions and made repairs. On 6 September he departed San Sebastián de la Gomera for what turned out to be a five-week voyage across the ocean.

Land was sighted at 2 a.m. on 12 October 1492, by a sailor named Rodrigo de Triana (also known as Juan Rodríguez Bermejo)


aboard *Pinta*.^[18] Columbus called the island (in what is now The Bahamas) *San Salvador*; the natives called it Guanahani. Exactly which island in the Bahamas this corresponds to is an unresolved topic; prime candidates are Samana Cay, Plana Cays, or San Salvador Island (so named in 1925 in the belief that it was Columbus's San Salvador). The indigenous people he encountered, the Lucayan, Taíno or Arawak, were peaceful and friendly. From the 12 October 1492 entry in his journal he wrote of them, "Many of the men I have seen have scars on their bodies, and when I made signs to them to find out how this happened, they indicated that people from other nearby islands come to San Salvador to capture them; they defend themselves the best they can. I believe that people from the mainland come here to take them as slaves. They ought to make good and skilled servants, for they repeat very quickly whatever we say to them. I think they can very easily be made Christians, for they seem to have no religion. If it pleases our Lord, I will take six of them to Your Highnesses when I depart, in order that they may learn our language."^[19] He remarked that their lack of modern weaponry and even metal-forged swords or pikes was a tactical vulnerability, writing, "I could conquer the whole of them with 50 men, and govern them as I pleased."^[20] Columbus also explored the northeast coast of Cuba (landed on 28 October) and the northern coast of Hispaniola, by 5 December. Here, the *Santa María* ran aground on Christmas morning 1492 and had to be abandoned. He was received by the native cacique Guacanagari, who gave him permission to leave some of his men behind. Columbus left 39 men and founded the settlement of *La Navidad* in what is now present-day Haiti.^[21] Before returning to Spain, Columbus also kidnapped some ten to twenty-five natives and took them back with him. Only seven or eight of the native *Indians* arrived in Spain alive, but they made quite an impression on Seville.^[18]

Columbus headed for Spain, but another storm forced him into Lisbon. He anchored next to the King's harbor patrol ship on 4 March 1493 in Portugal. After spending more than one week in Portugal, he set sail for Spain. He crossed the bar of Saltes and entered the harbour of Palos on 15 March 1493. Word of his finding new lands rapidly spread throughout Europe.

There is increasing modern scientific evidence that this voyage also brought syphilis back from the New World. Many of the crew members who served on this voyage later joined the army of King Charles VIII in his invasion of Italy in 1495 resulting in the spreading of the disease across Europe and as many as 5 million deaths.^{[22][23]}

Legacy

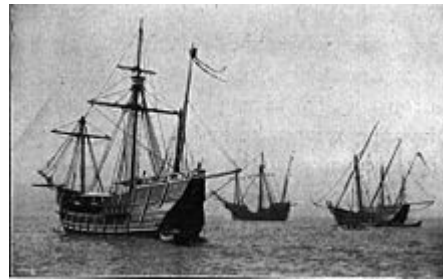



 Columbus Lighthouse (*Faro a Colón*), Santo Domingo

Although among non-Native Americans Christopher Columbus is traditionally considered the discoverer of America, Columbus was preceded by the various cultures and civilizations of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, as well as the Western world's Vikings at L'Anse aux Meadows. He is regarded more accurately as the person who brought the Americas into the forefront of Western attention.

"Columbus's claim to fame isn't that he got there first," explains historian Martin Dugard, "it's that he stayed."^[42] The popular idea that he was first person to envision a

rounded earth is false. The rounded shape of the earth has already been known in ancient times. Jeffrey Burton Russell states that the modern view that people of the Middle Ages believed that the Earth was flat is said to have entered the popular imagination in the 19th century, thanks largely to the publication of Washington Irving's fantasy *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* in 1828.^[43] By Columbus's time, educated men were in agreement as to its spherical shape, even if many people believed otherwise. More contentious was the size of the earth, and whether it was possible in practical terms to cross such a vast body of water.

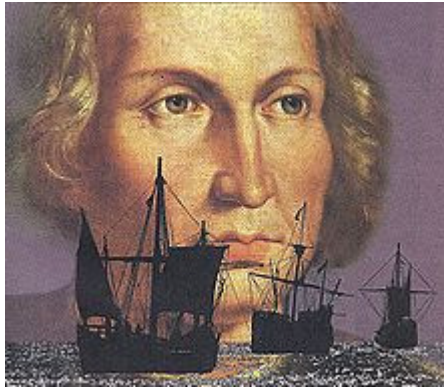


 Replicas of *Niña*, *Pinta* and *Santa Maria* sailed from Spain to the Chicago Columbian Exposition

Amerigo Vespucci's travel journals, published 1502-4, convinced Martin Waldseemüller that the discovered place was not India, as Columbus always believed, but a new continent, and in 1507, a year after Columbus's death, Waldseemüller published a world map calling the new continent *America* from Vespucci's Latinized name "Americus".

Historically the British had downplayed Columbus and emphasized the role of the Venetian John Cabot as a pioneer explorer; but for the emerging United States, Cabot made a poor national hero. Veneration of Columbus in America dates back to colonial times. The name Columbia for "America" first appeared in a 1738 weekly publication of the debates of the British Parliament.^[44] The use of Columbus as a founding figure of

New World nations and the use of the word 'Columbia', or simply the name 'Columbus', spread rapidly after the American Revolution. In 1812, the name 'Columbus' was given to the newly founded capitol of Ohio. During the last two decades of the 18th century the name "Columbia" was given to the federal capital District of Columbia, South Carolina's new capital city Columbia, the Columbia River, and numerous other places. Outside the United States the name was used in 1819 for the Gran Colombia, a precursor of the modern Republic of Colombia. The main plaza in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico is called Plaza Colón in honor of the Admiral.^{[45][46]}



Portrait of Christopher Columbus together with portrait of his three Spaniard Ships across the Atlantic Ocean

A candidate for sainthood in the Catholic Church in 1866, Celebration of Columbus's legacy perhaps reached a zenith in 1892 when the 400th anniversary of his first arrival in the Americas occurred. Monuments to Columbus like the Columbian Exposition in Chicago were erected throughout the United States and Latin America extolling him. Numerous cities, towns, counties, and streets have been named after him, including the capital cities of two U.S. states, Ohio and South Carolina.

In 1909, descendants of Columbus undertook to dismantle the Columbus family chapel in Spain and move it to a site near State College, Pennsylvania, where it may

now be visited by the public. At the museum associated with the chapel, there are a number of Columbus relics worthy of note, including the armchair which the "Admiral of the Ocean Sea" used at his chart table.

More recent views of Columbus, particularly those of Native Americans, have tended to be much more critical.^{[47][48][49]} This is because the native Taino of Hispaniola, where Columbus began a rudimentary tribute system for gold and cotton, disappeared so rapidly after contact with the Spanish, due to overwork and especially, after 1519, when the first pandemic struck Hispaniola,^[50] due to European diseases. The native Taino people of the island were systematically enslaved via the encomienda system. The pre-Columbian population is estimated to have been perhaps 250,000-300,000. According to the historian Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdes by 1548, 56 years after Columbus landed, less than five hundred Taino were left on the island.^[51] In another hundred years, perhaps only a handful remained. However, some analyses of the question of Columbus's legacy for Native Americans do not clearly distinguish between the actions of Columbus himself, who died well before the first pandemic to hit Hispaniola or the height of the encomienda system, and those of later European governors and colonists on Hispaniola.