

TERMS & NAMES

- Christopher Columbus
- Taino
- colonization
- Treaty of Tordesillas
- Columbian Exchange

LEARN ABOUT Columbus's transatlantic voyages and early interaction with Native Americans
TO UNDERSTAND how these encounters permanently changed Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the world.

ONE EUROPEAN'S STORY

In January 1492, the Genoese sailor **Christopher Columbus** stood before the Spanish court with what was at the time an unthinkable plan: he would find a route to Asia by sailing west across the Atlantic Ocean. While Queen Isabella was intrigued by Columbus's idea, her advisors were less enthusiastic. In the end, she dismissed the 41-year-old captain.

As a dejected Columbus plotted his next move, influential people in the Spanish court spoke on his behalf. Priests talked of the chance to spread Christianity. Financiers listed the names of merchants eager to invest in overseas trade.

The arguments won the crown's support. After more than a decade of appealing to royal courts throughout Europe, Columbus finally had found a monarch to finance his voyage. On August 3, 1492, he embarked on a journey destined to change the course of world history. A seeker of fame and fortune, he began his journal by restating the deal he had struck with Spain.

A PERSONAL VOICE

[B]ased on the information that I had given Your Highnesses about the land of India and about a Prince who is called the Great Khan [of China], which in our language means "King of Kings," Your Highnesses decided to send me . . . to the regions of India, to see . . . the peoples and the lands, and to learn of . . . the measures that could be taken for their conversion to our Holy Faith. . . . Your Highnesses . . . ordered that I shall go to the east, but not by land as is customary. I was to go by way of the west, whence until today we do not know with certainty that anyone has gone. . . .

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, *The Log of Christopher Columbus*



Christopher Columbus

Columbus did not find a route to Asia. Instead, he stepped onto an island in the Caribbean Sea and set in motion a process that brought together the American, European, and African worlds. These worlds would clash as they created new societies.

Columbus Crosses the Atlantic

Nobody paid much attention as the *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria* slid out of a Spanish port in the predawn hours of August 3, 1492. Although they were setting out into the unknown, their crews included no soldiers, priests, or ambassadors—only sailors and cabin boys with a taste for the sea. In a matter of months, however, Columbus's fleet would make history as it reached the sandy shores of what was to Europeans an astonishing new world.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS At about 2 A.M. on October 12, 1492, the long-awaited cry came. Juan Rodriguez Bermejo, a lookout aboard the *Pinta*, caught sight of two white sand dunes sparkling in the moonlight. In between lay a mass of dark rocks. "Tierra! Tierra!" he shouted. "Land! Land!"

At dawn Columbus went ashore. His eyes fastened on a group of people who called themselves the **Taino**, or "noble ones." In this glance, two worlds collided. As Columbus stepped ashore, he planted, along with flowing Spanish banners, the first seeds of conquest. In words the Taino did not understand, he renamed their island San Salvador, or "Holy Savior," and claimed it for Spain.



HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT

THE VIKINGS

The first Europeans to reach North America were probably Vikings. About 985, the Norwegian Viking Eric the Red crossed the Atlantic in an open boat and set up two colonies on Greenland. Some fifteen years later, his son Leif voyaged farther to a place he called Vinland the Good because of its abundant grapes. Historians now believe that present-day Newfoundland is Leif Ericson's Vinland. In 1963, archaeologists discovered there the foundations of several homes of Norse design that date to about the year 1000.

According to Norwegian sagas, or tales of great deeds, another Norwegian expedition followed Leif Ericson and stayed in Vinland for three years. Then the Skraelings, as the saga calls the native peoples, drove away the colonists, and the Vikings never returned.

On the first day of their encounter, the generosity of the Taino startled Columbus. "They are friendly and well-dispositioned people who bear no arms," he wrote in his log. "They traded and gave everything they had with good will." But after only two days, Columbus offered an assessment in his journal that had dark overtones for the future. In an entry addressed to Isabella and Ferdinand, he wrote:

A PERSONAL VOICE

[I]t would be unnecessary to build . . . [a fort here] because these people are so simple in deeds of arms. . . . If Your Highnesses order either to bring all of them to Castile or to hold them as captivos [slaves] on their own island it could easily be done, because with about fifty men, you could control and subjugate them, making them do whatever you want.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, quoted in *Columbus: The Great Adventure*

GOLD, LAND, AND RELIGION On his second day in the Americas, Columbus expressed one of the main reasons he had embarked on his journey. "I have been very attentive," he wrote, "and have tried very hard to find out if there is any gold here." When he did not find gold on San Salvador, he left to look elsewhere. Columbus spent a total of 96 days exploring four coral islands in the present-day Bahamas and the coastlines of two larger Caribbean islands, known today as Cuba and Hispaniola. All along the way, he claimed lands and bestowed names. "It was my wish to bypass no island without taking possession," wrote the captain. Nor did he wish to neglect his promise to assert Christian domination. "In every place I have entered, islands or lands, I have always planted a cross," he noted on November 16. Less than two weeks later, he predicted, "Your Highnesses will order a city . . . built in these regions [for] these countries will be easily converted."

SPANISH Footholds In early January 1493, Columbus began the trip back to Spain. Convinced that he had landed on islands off Asia known to Europeans as the Indies, Columbus called the people he met *los indios*. The term translated into "Indian," a word mistakenly applied to all the diverse peoples of the Americas.

The reports Columbus relayed of his journey thrilled the Spanish monarchs, who funded three more voyages. When he departed again for the Americas in September 1493, Columbus was no longer an explorer, but an empire builder. He commanded a fleet of some 17 ships and several hundred soldiers armed with cannons, crossbows, and swords. He also oversaw five priests and more than 1,000 colonists ready to settle the land. Among the colonists were *hidalgos*, or members of the minor nobility, mostly those who could not inherit land in Spain because of an elder brother's claim. Like Columbus, they came to the Americas to win fame and fortune.

These soldiers, priests, and colonists, and the many others that followed, would take first the Caribbean and then much of the Americas away from the Native Americans. Their arrival on Hispaniola, the island presently shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic, signaled the start of a cultural clash that would continue for the next five centuries.

The Impact on Native Americans

The Taino who greeted Columbus in 1492 could not have known what would soon follow. The Europeans would bring with them colonization. While the Taino

THINK THROUGH HISTORY
A. Summarizing
What were the main activities that Columbus undertook after arriving in the Americas?

resisted their attempts at control, there was little they could do against the diseases that also accompanied the new settlers.

METHODS OF COLONIZATION By the time Columbus had set sail for Hispaniola, Europeans had already developed a pattern for **colonization**—the establishment of outlying settlements that are controlled by the parent country. During the Crusades, Italians from Venice had taken over Arab sugar farms in what is now Lebanon. By the late 1400s, the Portuguese had established plantation colonies on islands off the coast of West Africa, and Spain had conquered the Canary Islands.

From this experience, Europeans learned the value of the plantation system to produce popular crops such as sugar. They also realized the economic benefits of using forced labor. Finally, they learned to use European weapons to dominate a people with less sophisticated weapons. These tactics would be used in full against the peoples that the Europeans called Indians.

RESISTANCE AND CONQUEST The natives of the Caribbean, however, did not succumb to Columbus and the Spaniards without fighting. In November of 1493, Columbus attempted to conquer the present-day island of St. Croix. Instead of surrendering, the inhabitants defended themselves by firing rounds of poisoned arrows. The Spaniards won easily, but the struggle proved that Native Americans would not yield in the easy conquest predicted by Columbus.

Efforts to control the Taino who inhabited Hispaniola were even more difficult. After several rebellions, the Taino submitted to Columbus for several years but revolted again in 1495. The Spanish response was swift and strong. They tracked down the rebels with the cry “¡Tómalos!” (“Get them!”) A later settler, the missionary Bartolomé de Las Casas criticized the Spaniards’ brutal response to the natives.

A PERSONAL VOICE

This tactic, begun here . . . , spread throughout these Indies and will end when there is no more land nor people to subjugate and destroy in this part of the world.

BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS, quoted in *Columbus: The Great Adventure*

DISEASE RAVAGES THE NATIVE AMERICANS The diseases Europeans unknowingly brought with them devastated the Native Americans. Measles, mumps, chickenpox, and typhus were just some of the diseases that traveled to the Americas with the European settlers. Native Americans, who had not developed any natural immunity to these diseases, died by the thousands. According to one estimate, nearly one-third of Hispaniola’s estimated 300,000 inhabitants died during Columbus’s time there. By 1508, fewer than 60,000 were alive on the island. Sixty years later, only two villages were left.

These illnesses would soon spread to the rest of the Americas. More surely than any army, disease conquered region after region.

A medicine man ministers to an Aztec with smallpox, a deadly disease brought to the Americas by Europeans.



THINK THROUGH HISTORY
B. Recognizing Effects What impact did Columbus’s arrival have upon the inhabitants of the Caribbean?