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Columbus and the New World

While other European monarchs listened to Columbus's dream of reaching the East by sailing west into the Atlantic Ocean, they did not offer him support. Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain decided to underwrite his voyage, however. Why did they decide to support Columbus when others did not?

Their decision was partially based on the success of the Portuguese and their continuing explorations of the western African coast. By 1488, Bartolomew Dias had sailed all the way to the southern tip of Africa, proving ships could make the journey all the way to the East. The Spanish king and queen were certain the Portuguese would dominate the African route to the Orient. Looking for an alternative, they found it in Columbus.

Ferdinand and Isabella provided Columbus with three of the most famous ships in history—the flagship Santa Maria, the Pinta, and the Santa Clara, which was nicknamed the Niña because of its small size. The vessels were manned by a crew of approximately 90 experienced sailors who set sail in August of 1492.

Columbus's agreement with the Spanish crown was to claim Spanish sovereignty over all lands and peoples he discovered, sharing any profits made from his voyage.

Columbus estimated the journey across the Atlantic to the Orient to be about 4500 miles (it was closer to 12,000). After landing at the Canary Islands and getting provisions, Columbus pointed his ships to the west into waters unknown.

The ships soon fell into a strong westward current. Crewmen wondered how they would get back home if the winds blew incessantly west. After covering 3000 miles of open ocean, with no land in sight, they grew anxious and fearful.

On October 10, the weary sailors began to mutiny. Columbus promised to turn back if they failed to discover land in three days. Two days later, by the light of the moon, a crew member caught sight of the shore.

It was the island that Columbus later named San Salvador, in the Bahamas. Within ten hours of the sighting, Columbus stood on the shores at Fernandez Bay and claimed possession of the land in the name of Spain.

After spending a few days on the island, the fleet sailed on, landing off Cuba on October 28. There they encountered natives Columbus named Indians, since he was certain he had landed in the East Indies of the Orient. Excited men went



ashore, looking for the fabled riches and gold of Marco Polo's book. Disappointed, they found only poor natives smoking a strange plant unknown to the Europeans—tobacco.

Over the next few months, Columbus continued his search for evidence of Oriental wealth. He found little. On Christmas Eve, the Santa Maria met with tragedy, wrecked off the coast of modern-day Haiti. By January 1493, Columbus decided to return home with his two remaining ships, taking with him several Indians. He left a small garrison of Spanish soldiers on the island of Hispaniola, where they erected a fort.

Other voyages followed. His second trip, in September 1493, included 17 ships and nearly 1500 men. On their arrival in the New World, they still found little gold or other quick riches. Instead, to turn a profit, they began enslaving the native peoples. Although Columbus continued to be discouraged, he never gave up hope of finding the riches of the East. He commanded two additional voyages in 1498 and 1502, exploring the mainland of South and Central America. By his death in 1506, he was still certain he had discovered the Orient. He never admitted he had found a whole other place—the Americas.

Review and Write

1. In your opinion, did Columbus discover America? Why or why not?
2. After Columbus landed in the New World, what disappointments did he face?

The Voyages of Columbus

As Portugal sponsored exploratory voyages along the western regions of Africa in the late 1400s, Spain looked on with envy. As with any other European power, Spain longed for direct access to the Oriental markets of the East.

In the 1490s, a middle-aged seaman named Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) arrived in the court of Spain offering a unique opportunity to the co-rulers, Ferdinand and Isabella. The voyages he sailed on behalf of Spain changed the history of the Western world.

Columbus is perhaps one of the most famous men in the history of Western civilization. As a young man, he gained much experience sailing on Mediterranean trading ships (he was an Italian from Genoa). He spent years living in Portugal, where he married a Portuguese noblewoman and made regular voyages along the west coast of Africa on Portuguese ships. After his wife died in 1485, he moved to Spain with a dream.

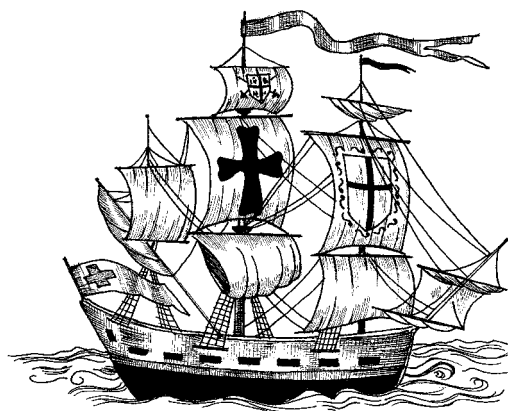
Through his travels, Columbus had heard many stories about the mysterious Orient. Tales of great Eastern riches filled his nights on board Portuguese ships. He heard stories of an earlier Italian explorer and writer named Marco Polo.

Polo's book *Description of the World* had fascinated Europeans for over a century prior to Columbus. Polo visited China during the late 1200s. He spent many years in China during the rule of the great Kublai Khan. Polo filled his book with tales of the Khan's great wealth, including gold, ivory, jade, silks, and spices.

Polo's book was considered fraudulent by some skeptics. After all, he included fantastic tales about exotic animals and birds, and black stones which the Chinese burned as fuel. (He was describing the use of coal, which was not used in medieval Europe.)

Columbus read such books over and over and longed to sail to the East. He became obsessed with reaching the Orient by ship. More specifically, he decided he wanted to reach the riches of China and Japan by sailing west across the Atlantic, rather than south and east around Africa.

This idea was not a new one. Two hundred years before Columbus made his first voyage across the



Atlantic in 1492, two Genoese brothers known as the Vivaldis had the idea of sailing into the western ocean to reach the Orient. In 1291, they began their journey to the west and were never heard from again.

For the next two centuries, the eastern Atlantic became well known to Europeans. By the 1420s, Portuguese sailors were traveling into the Atlantic as far as the Azores Islands, one-third the ocean distance between Portugal and the Americas.

Few people in the 15th century believed the world was flat. They knew the earth was a globe and some, like Columbus, believed that sailing across the Atlantic would be a shorter, more direct route to the treasures of China. According to his calculations, the distance across the Atlantic from western Europe to the Orient was approximately 3000 miles of sailing in a straight line.

As Columbus tried to gain royal sponsorship for his proposed Atlantic voyage, he met with rejection. The king of Portugal turned him down, as did the French monarchy. Their royal advisors and map-makers knew that Columbus's theory of sailing west to reach the East had a serious flaw. They knew the distance across the Atlantic to China was much greater than Columbus had estimated. Instead of 3000 miles, it was closer to 12,000!

Yet Columbus pressed on until, in 1492, he found support from the king and queen of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella. They outfitted his expedition with three small ships. Columbus's dream of Eastern wealth became their dream. Little did they or Columbus know that an immense land mass—the Western Hemisphere—lay directly in his path. For Columbus, another discovery lay ahead.

Europeans in the New World

Although Columbus sought a western route to the Orient, he found instead two continents unknown to Europeans: North and South America. Many Spanish, and later Portuguese, heard the news and followed in the path of the famous Genoese explorer.

Ironically, Columbus was eventually edged out of the colonizing of the New World. Although he was made Viceroy of the Indies following his first voyage in 1492, many of those who went as colonists grew malcontent in Columbus's colonies. They found little gold and hated the Native American diet of corn and cassava root bread.

Many returned home to Spain. Columbus was so unpopular that his own sons, who were pages in the court of the king and queen, were hounded by street gangs who followed them all over Madrid shouting, "There go the sons of the Admiral of the Mosquitoes, of him who discovered lands of vanity and delusion, the grave and ruin of Spanish gentlemen."

Over the decades following Columbus's voyages, the Spanish established permanent colonies in the New World, and some of their explorations yielded great riches. Two Spanish explorers, Hernando Cortes (1485–1547) and Francisco Pizarro (1470–1541) took men into Central and South America and discovered civilizations where gold existed in great quantities.

Cortes ventured into modern-day Mexico in 1519, encountering the advanced civilization of the Aztecs. By 1521, his soldiers—called *conquistadores*—defeated the Aztecs, enslaved them, and began siphoning off their golden treasures.

A few years later, Pizarro conquered the Indians liv-

ing in the Andean Mountains of modern-day Peru. He, too, plundered the great wealth of these Native Americans. In 1536, the city of Lima became a Spanish capital in the New World. By the 1550s, the Spanish had built a great empire which stretched from Mexico to Chile. The gold and silver mines were manned by native slaves who worked for the Spanish.

The Spanish put the natives to work through a system of labor known as the *encomienda*. Under this structure, the Spanish monarchs, through their appointed representatives in the New World, granted control of Indian lands to various Spanish landlords. In exchange for converting the natives to Christianity and educating them, the landlords—called *encomenderos*—expected the local Indians to work for them in the fields and in the gold and silver mines. It was a harsh system which exploited the natives.

But the New World was not to be Spain's alone. As early as 1500, just eight years after Columbus's first voyage, the Portuguese, under the command of Pedro Alvares Cabral, landed off the coast of Brazil. However, they did not establish a permanent colony until 1532.

In North America, the French continued their search for a western water route—called the Northwest Passage—through the Americas. By 1504, they had established fishing settlements in Newfoundland in modern-day Canada.

By the 1530s, the French explorer, Jacques Cartier, mounted three voyages to Canada, exploring the St. Lawrence River south to the site of today's Montreal. Attempts to establish a permanent colony failed because of hostile Indians.

By the 1600s, other European powers, including the French, English, Swedes, and Dutch, took steps to establish permanent colonies in the New World, changing life in the Western Hemisphere forever.

Review and Write

What problems did the coming of Europeans to the New World cause the Native Americans living there? (You may want to include problems not given on this page.)

