

A. 1492: The Year *Everything* Changed

1. Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas in 1492, but not everyone agrees that he “discovered” America.
 - a) Some people say that because Indians (or “Native Americans”) were living here, it could not be “discovered.”
 - b) Others prefer to give credit for the discovery of America to a Viking named Leif Ericsson, who found part of North America around the year 1000.
2. In the end, however, it does not really matter who the *first* person to come to America was. The important story of America – the story of how the United States *of America*, and other modern countries came to exist, and how globalization occurred – only begins in 1492, with the arrival of Columbus and Europeans in America. This discovery is by far the most important. Christopher Columbus deserves the credit for changing life on Earth by being known as *the* discoverer of America, among all the other far less important candidates.

B. The Story of Christopher Columbus

1. Columbus’s Early Life
 - a) Christopher Columbus was one of many young men in Europe inspired by the story of Marco Polo.
 - b) As a young boy, living in Genoa, Italy, he began to travel on trading vessels in the Mediterranean.
 - c) On a trading expedition to northern Europe, his ship was attacked and destroyed off the coast of Portugal. He barely made it ashore alive, but he was fortunate to join his brother Bartholomeu at Lisbon and he began working in the merchant community.
2. Columbus’s New Idea
 - a) Columbus taught himself to read Latin, extensively studied the works of classical and modern geographers, and became a noted map-maker.
 - b) By studying the works of scientific geographers, he came to believe that the earth was round, and furthermore, that it was small enough that it could be possible to sail west to get to Asia.
 - c) In fact, based on the work of the Italian geographer Toscanelli, he believed that a route to Cipango from the Portuguese Canary islands could be as little as 2500 miles – thus shorter than any potential route around Africa.
3. Convincing the World
 - a) Columbus first presented his idea for a westward voyage to Asia to the King of Portugal, but he refused to try it. He was busy fighting his crusade of conquest against the Muslims in Africa, and he was still hoping that his explorers would find a way around Africa.
 - b) Columbus next turned to Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. (Spain was just becoming one country, thanks to their marriage.)
 - c) Isabella insisted that her advisors be allowed to judge Columbus’s plan. She asked a Spanish archbishop named Hernando de Talavera to call a Council at Salamanca to debate the idea of sailing west.
 - d) Meanwhile, he returned to Portugal to try one more time, however while he waited for the King’s decision, a Portuguese explorer named Bartholomeu Dias returned in 1488 with the news that he had sailed around the bottom of Africa. Portugal was no longer interested in Columbus’s idea.
 - e) When he returned to Spain, Columbus learned that the Council of Salamanca had judged that sailing west to Asia was impossible, so they rejected Columbus’s plan.

- f) Just then, however, Isabella and Ferdinand completed the Reconquista, and she decided that it was worth the risk of losing a few ships to let Columbus try.
- g) Columbus insisted on being granted the title of “Admiral” if he succeeded, to be made the ruler of lands he found, and to get 10% of all treasures collected.
- h) Isabella agreed, and gave him three vessels for the journey: the Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria.

4. The First Voyage

- a) Columbus left Spain on August 2, 1492, and arrived in the Canary Islands (off of Africa) on September 6 to replenish his supplies.
- b) From there he sailed directly west, using the “trade winds” that blow westward to propel his ships towards what he thought would be Asia.
- c) As the weeks passed, the men grew mutinous. No one had ever sailed for an entire month without sighting land, let alone in one direction continuously. If they did not reach new land, a return trip would likely take much longer.
- d) Columbus tried to calm the men by telling them they had not sailed as far as they actually had, and he kept them motivated to continue on by offering a cash prize to the first man who sighted land.
- e) In the early morning of October 12, 1492, lights were seen in the distance. Later that day, Columbus set foot for the first time in the Americas. He had reached a group of islands now called the Bahamas.

5. The Indies?

- a) Columbus believed that he had found an island that was a part of the Indies (eastern Asia), so he called the people “Indians.”
- b) He was surprised to find them naked and with painted bodies, like the primitive people of Africa. He was expecting to make contact with the wealthy and powerful empires of Asia.
- c) The native tribe that populated the northern islands of the Caribbean at the time are known as the “Taino.” They were friendly and Columbus believed that they might be taught European religion and culture.
- d) This was not his main purpose, of course, so he sailed on in search of gold and contact with China, which brought him to Cuba, and then Hispaniola (the two largest islands of the Caribbean), but still no great empire, and very little gold.

6. The Triumphant Return

- a) One of his ships was destroyed on a reef, and Columbus left forty men behind to create a settlement. He told the men to find gold, but to treat the natives kindly.
- b) Returning to Spain, he became a celebrity. Ferdinand and Isabella were impressed with the Indians, the gold, strange foods such as corn and potatoes, tobacco, and animals he had brought back.
- c) Columbus was made “Admiral of the Ocean Sea” and governor of the new lands he had found. He was also authorized to lead a second, larger expedition.

7. The Second Voyage

- a) Columbus was now sent with 17 ships and 1200 men. Many of these men were young adventurers and noblemen who had fought in the Reconquista.
- b) The purposes of this trip were:
 - i) to find the empires of Asia and set up a trading post
 - ii) to find gold
 - iii) to convert the natives to Christianity
- c) When Columbus returned to the Caribbean, he encountered an aggressive tribe of cannibals known as the “Caribs.” The Spanish were horrified by the sight of human limbs being cooked.

- d) Later, when his expedition returned to Hispaniola, they found that the 40 sailors he had left behind had been killed. They had mistreated the natives, despite Columbus's orders, and the natives had retaliated. The Spanish adventurers, now more than ever, expected to fight the natives, rather than live peacefully with them.
- e) Though he wished them no particular harm, the treatment of the natives was not Columbus's main concern. His greatest desire was to find Asia, so he left his brother in charge of Hispaniola and continued to sail westward. He explored Cuba and found Jamaica, but there was still no sign of Asia.
- f) Columbus had hoped to avoid conflict with the natives, but when he could not control the men of his expedition, and as conflicts with the natives increased, he agreed to let them enslave the Indians and conquer the island of Hispaniola outright.
- g) The challenge of creating and managing a colony was proving to be too much for Columbus, who returned to Spain to report on the disappointing results of his efforts.
- h) Ferdinand and Isabella were, above all else, concerned that Asia had not yet been reached. England was sending John Cabot to reach Asia and Portugal was sending Vasco da Gama. If Spain did not succeed soon it might fall behind. Columbus was permitted to prepare another expedition.

8. The Third Voyage

- a) Columbus continued to believe that Asia was just around the corner and finding the continental empires of Asia remained his top priority.
- b) On his third voyage to America, he discovered the mouth of a major river, the Orinoco. He reasoned that such a large river could only be found on a continent, since a large land area was needed to collect enough rain to create it.
- c) In his journal he recorded, "I believe that this is a very great continent, until today unknown."
- d) It was indeed the mainland of South America.
- e) Columbus's intellectual identification of a new continent represents the first record of a scientific awareness in history of the existence of the continental mass of the Americas whose environs Columbus had discovered on his first westward voyage in 1492.
- f) Because Asia had not yet been found, and Ferdinand and Isabella were disappointed with the results of the Hispaniola settlement, they sent an investigator to find out the cause of the problems.
- g) The investigator blamed Columbus for the settlement's problems and had him shipped back to Spain as a prisoner.

9. The Fourth Voyage

- a) Ferdinand and Isabella were sorry Columbus had been treated so roughly, and then still believed he could lead Spain to Asia, so they gave him one last chance.
- b) On this voyage, Columbus sailed as far west as one could in the Atlantic Ocean – as far as Central America. He was within 30 miles of discovering the Pacific Ocean when he landed in Panama, but, sadly, he never learned of it.
- c) He returned to Spain to find that Isabella had died and that Ferdinand would not honor their promises to him concerning the wealth and titles he had earned.