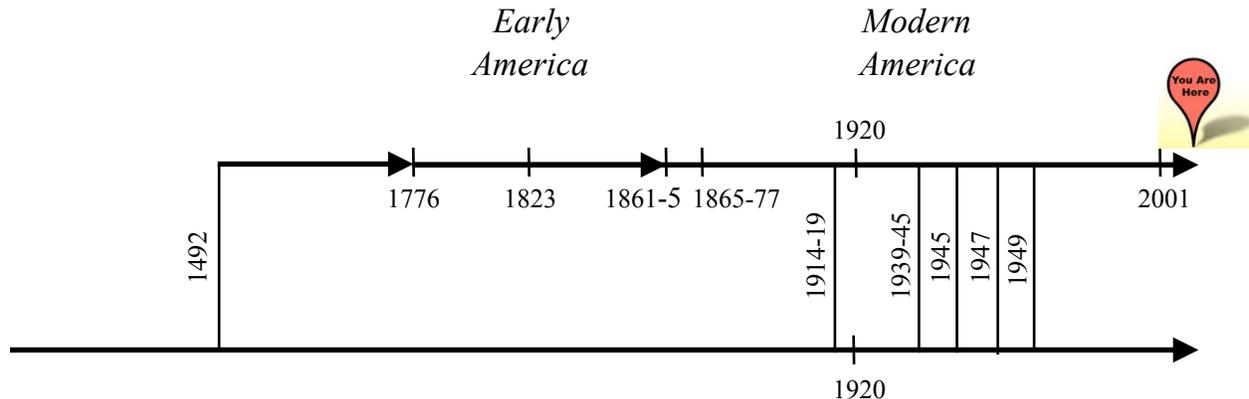


## D. The European Discovery of America (1492)

1. We know that early America maintained its political separation from Europe, and that following World War I, despite the delay of the “return to normalcy,” eventually became politically interconnected with it.
2. The fact that American and European culture have so many connections between them, including modern-day political/military connections is no accident. This degree of connectivity stems from the fact that American civilization is a branch of Western civilization, of which Europe is the trunk. (Review section III - C, above.)
3. The reason for this connection is straightforward. America was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492, leading to the conquest and colonization of both North and South America by various European cultures. This basic fact can be symbolized by drawing a connection between European history and American history on our combined timeline.



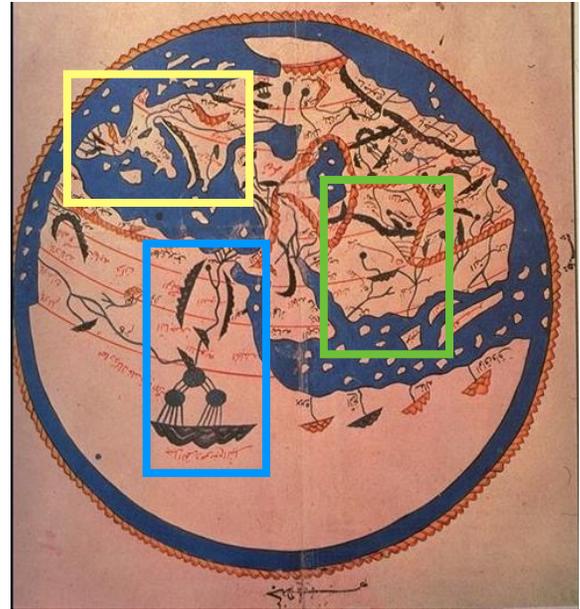
4. It is common for modern-day writers to reject the notion that Christopher Columbus discovered America or otherwise seek to de-emphasize his accomplishments as an explorer.
  - a) One reason for downplaying Columbus’s voyage of 1492 is that archeologists have confirmed that Vikings from northern Europe led by Leif Erickson made a prior voyage to Newfoundland (part of Canada) c.1000 BC. Given that a prior confirmed European voyage to America took place, some believe that this disqualifies Columbus’s voyage from being designated as anything but a later “re-discovery.”
  - b) A different reason from downgrading Columbus’s voyage of 1492 is that peoples —“native Americans”—were already present in the Americas before Columbus arrived. Some believe that this disqualifies any European expedition as a “discovery” of any significance, because, quite simply others were already there.
  - c) A final, though separate motivation of modern writers in their preference for dismissing Columbus as a historical figure is that neither he nor the Spanish conquistadors who followed him were respectful of the primitive natives they found. This runs counter to modern-day sensibilities, whereby it is generally deemed

important to uphold the value of any less developed or subordinated culture. (This motive is known as “multiculturalism,” which is a variant of “egalitarianism.” These are complex modern ideologies that vilify any person or view that seems to contradict the core value of “equality.” We may not have the time to dissect them in this year’s class, but students should be familiar with the names nonetheless, and be tuned to their presence in modern culture.)

5. Given the distinctive HistoryAtOurHouse view of history—that *its purpose is to reveal and explain the world we live in*—it follows that the question of whether to designate any event as “*the discovery of America*” revolves around its objective historical significance.
  - a) The voyages of Leif Erickson were completely barren of any consequence. He and his companions came and went from the Americas, and nothing changed. It is fair to say that he discovered Newfoundland—what he called “Vinland”—*for himself*. There is no significance to his voyages beyond that. Thus, were one to designate his travails as “*the discovery of America*,” one would strip that expression of any meaning. It would be a phrase that serves no purpose except to mark a fact that is a dead end. (It is common for historians to study things that are meaningless today. That is not the HistoryAtOurHouse approach.)
  - b) With regard to the prior presence of primitive peoples in the Americas before Columbus arrived, the designation of Columbus’s voyage as “*the discovery of America*” does nothing to deny that fact. It is not a judgement of their worth as individuals or embryonic cultures. It is, however, an acknowledgment that the peoples in question *were* primitive, and that they *were* swept aside, and that history’s outcome—the world we live in—*was not* determined by their presence. The same can be said of the countless hundred of millions of victims of the aggression of their fellow human beings throughout history. There are surely aspects of this reality to lament and even denounce. That is not, however, the fundamental issue at hand.
  - c) The issue—as always—is how did world we live in come to be what it is? There is only one answer in this context: it came to be, because America was discovered by Christopher Columbus in **1492**.

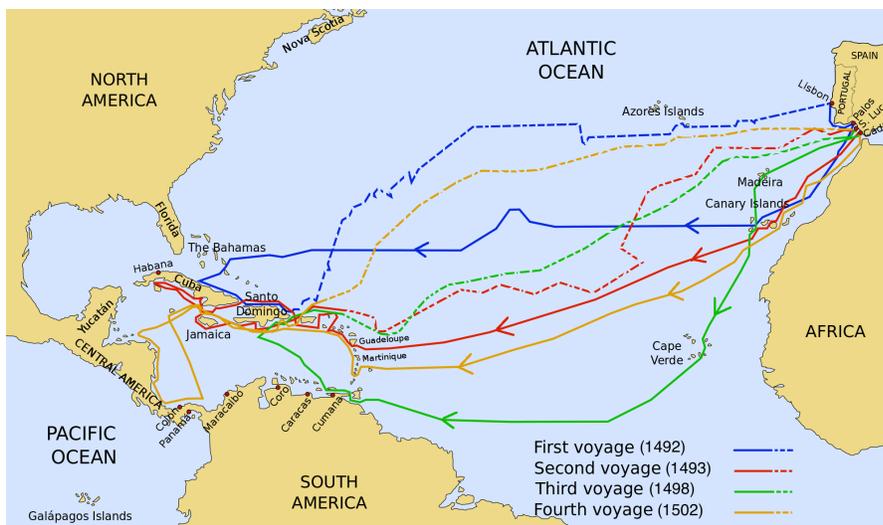
#### E. The Basics of Columbus’s Discovery

1. Prior to 1492, even the most educated men in the world had no conception of the Americas in relation to any other part of the world. The most advanced maps of the world relied on the work of the ancient Greek geographer Ptolemy, and consisted of Europe, Asia, and Africa only.
2. Because of this conception of the world, European explorers first set out to reach China and the rest of Asia by circumnavigating (sailing around) Africa.
3. Why seek out Asia? An Italian merchant named Marco Polo had traveled there by land, and had written a book called “*The Travels of Marco Polo*” that detailed the wonders of China as a vast, unified civilization.
4. Why travel around Africa? In between Europe and Asia was Islamic civilization, which since its advent had been an enemy of European Christendom.



An ancient Greek map by Ptolemy shows Europe (highlighted in yellow), the Nile river (highlighted in blue), and India (highlighted in Green). A medieval map by the Muslim geographer Al-Idrisi over a thousand years later shows the same basic outlook. One difference is the hint that Africa may be surrounded by water. Ptolemy's map suggests instead that the land wraps around to Asia. The key, of course, is that neither even hints at the existence of America. Regardless of whether theorists were convinced that the Earth was spherical, no one until Columbus had the will and the conviction to prove it once and for all. But as of 1492, all previous conceptions of the world were shattered, and the story of civilization would never be the same.

5. By 1492, Portuguese explorers had discovered the southernmost tip of Africa, and were soon to make their way to India for the first time.
6. Columbus made his proposal to Isabella, the Queen of Castile (a part of Spain), and received permission to make the attempt to find a western passage to Asia.
7. Of course, that was impossible, given what we know. Columbus reached the Bahamas and sailed around the Caribbean, thinking he had reached the "Indies" (near Japan), and only came to realize that his discovery involved an entirely other, "New World" after making multiple return voyages, as other explorers also contributed to the growing awareness of what America represented.



Columbus's four voyages to the Americas revealed more and more. The third voyage, in particular, when Columbus sighted the mouth of the Orinoco river in Venezuela, led to his own personal realization that his discoveries were of *continental* proportions. (The size of such a river, he knew, could only be accounted for by the huge extent of its "watershed.")