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## From the Annals of the World History

### Christopher Columbus (31 October 1451 - 20 May 1506)



Explorer and navigator Christopher Columbus was born in 1451 in the Republic of Genoa, Italy. His first voyage into the Atlantic Ocean in 1476 nearly cost him his life. Columbus participated in several other expeditions to Africa. 1492, Columbus left Spain in the Santa Maria, with the Pinta and the Niña along side. He has been credited for opening up the Americas to European colonization.

Explorer and navigator Columbus was born in 1451, in the Republic of Genoa (Italy) to the son of a weaver. Columbus first went to sea as a teenager, participating in several trading voyages in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas. One such voyage, to the island of Khios, in modern day Greece, brought him the closest he would come to Asia. His first voyage into the Atlantic Ocean in 1476 nearly cost him his life as the commercial fleet he was sailing with was attacked by French privateers off the coast of Portugal. His ship was burned and Columbus had to swim to the Portuguese shore and make his way to Lisbon, Portugal, where he eventually settled and married Felipa Perestrelo. The couple had one son, Diego in about 1480. His wife died soon after and Columbus moved to Spain. He had a second son Fernando who was born out of wedlock in 1488 with Beatriz Enriquez de Arana.

Columbus participated in several other expeditions to Africa gaining knowledge of the Atlantic currents flowing east and west from the Canary Islands. Muslim domination of the trade routes through the Middle East makes travel to India and China difficult. Believing a route sailing west across the Atlantic would be quicker and safer, Columbus devised a plan to sail west to get reach the East. He estimated the earth to be a sphere approximately 63% its actual size and the distance between the Canary Islands and Japan to be about 2,300 miles. Many contemporary nautical experts disagreed, adhering to the second century BC estimate of the earth's circumference at 25,000 miles. This made the distance between the Canary Islands and Japan about 12,200 statute miles. While experts disagreed with Columbus on matters of distance, they concurred that a westward voyage from Europe would be an uninterrupted water route.

### First voyage to the new world



**Columbus on the ship Santa Maria in 1492**

Rejected by the Portuguese king for a three-ship voyage of discovery, Columbus took his plan first to Genoa and then to Venice but was rejected there too. He then went to the Spanish monarchy of Isabella of Castille and Ferdinand of Aragon, in 1486. Their nautical experts too were skeptical and initially, Columbus was rejected. The idea however, must have intrigued the monarchs, for they kept Columbus on a retainer. But

- [History](#)
- [Aims](#)
- [Concept](#)
- [Parenting](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Training Programmes](#)
  - [October 11](#)
  - [December 09](#)
- [Expansion](#)
- [Development](#)
- [Syllabus](#)
- [Bal Vikas Administration](#)
- [Past Students](#)
  - [June 2010](#)
  - [September](#)
- [Home](#)

[Activities from States](#)

[At the Lotus Feet](#)

[Gurus Corner](#)

[Children's Corner](#)

[From the Annals of the World History](#)

[Special Page](#)

[Glory of Bharath](#)

their focus was on a war with the Muslims and Columbus would have to wait. Columbus continued to lobby the royal court and soon after the Spanish army captured the last Muslim stronghold in Granada in January of 1492, the monarchs agreed to finance his expedition. In August of 1492, Columbus left Spain in the Santa Maria, with the Pinta and the Niña along side.

After 36 days of sailing, Columbus and several crewmen set foot on an island in the present day Bahamas, claiming it for Spain. There he encountered a timid but friendly group of natives who were open to trade with the sailors exchanging glass beads, cotton balls, parrots and spears. The Europeans also noticed bits of gold the natives wore for adornment. Columbus and his men continued their journey, visiting the islands of Cuba and Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and meeting with the leaders of the native population.



**Columbus with the natives**

During this time, the Santa Maria was wrecked on a reef off the coast of Hispaniola. With the help of some islanders, Columbus' men salvaged what they could and built the settlement Villa de la Navidad ("Christmas Town") with lumber from the ship. Thirty-nine men stayed behind to occupy the settlement. Convinced his exploration had reached Asia, he set sail for home with the two remaining ships.

### **Subsequent Voyages**

Returning to Spain in 1493, Columbus gave a glowing, somewhat exaggerated report and was warmly received by the royal court. That same year he took to the seas on his second expedition and explored more islands in the Caribbean Ocean. Upon arrival at Hispaniola, Columbus and his crew discovered the Navidad settlement had been destroyed with all the sailors massacred. Spurning the wishes of the queen, who found slavery offensive, Columbus established a forced labor policy over the native population to rebuild the settlement and explore for gold, believing it would prove to be profitable. His efforts produced small amounts of gold and great hatred among the native population. Before returning to Spain, Columbus left his brothers Bartholomew and Diego to govern the settlement on Hispaniola and sailed briefly around the larger Caribbean islands further convincing himself he had discovered the outer islands of China.

It wasn't until his third voyage that Columbus actually reached the mainland exploring the Orinoco River in present-day Venezuela. Unfortunately, conditions at the Hispaniola settlement had deteriorated to the point of near-mutiny with settlers claiming they had been misled by Columbus' claims of riches and complaining about the poor management of his brothers. The Spanish Crown sent a royal official who arrested Columbus and stripped him of his authority. He returned to Spain in chains to face the royal court. The charges were later dropped but Columbus lost his titles as governor of the Indies and for a time, much of the riches made during his voyages.

Convincing King Ferdinand that one more voyage would bring the abundant riches promised, Columbus went on what would be his last voyage in 1502, traveling along the eastern coast of Central America in an unsuccessful search for a route to the Indian Ocean. A storm wrecked one of his ships stranding the captain and his sailors on the island of Cuba. During this time, local islanders, tired of the Spaniards poor treatment and obsession with gold, refused to give them food. In a spark of inspiration, Columbus consulted an almanac and devised a plan to "punish" the islanders by taking away the moon. On February 29, 1504, a lunar eclipse alarmed the natives enough to re-established trade with the Spaniards. A rescue party finally arrived, sent by the royal governor of Hispaniola in July and Columbus and his men were taken back to Spain in November of 1504.

### **Mixed legacy**

In the two remaining years of his life, Columbus struggled to recover his lost titles and in May of 1505 did regain some of his riches, but his titles were never returned. He died May 20, 1506 still believing he had discovered a shorter route to Asia.

Columbus' legacy is a mixed one. He has been credited for opening up the Americas to European colonization as well as blamed for the destruction of the native peoples of the islands he explored. On the one hand, he failed to find that what he set out for - a new route to Asia and the riches it promised. However, in what is known as the Columbian Exchange, his expeditions set in motion the wide-spread transfer of people, plants, animals, diseases, and cultures that greatly affected nearly every society on the planet.

The horse from Europe allowed Native American tribes in the Great Plains of North America to shift from a nomadic to a hunting lifestyle. Foods from the Americas such as potatoes, tomatoes and corn became staples of Europeans and helped increase their populations. Wheat from Europe and the Old World fast became a main food source for people in the Americas. Coffee from Africa and sugar cane from Asia became major cash crops for Latin American countries. The Exchange also brought new diseases to both hemispheres, though the effects were greatest in the Americas. Small pox from the Old World decimated millions of the Native American population to mere fractions of their original numbers. This more than any

other factor made for European domination of the Americas. The overwhelming benefits of the Exchange went to the Europeans initially and eventually to the rest of the world. The Americas were forever altered and the once vibrant and rich cultures of the Native American civilizations were not only changed, but lost, denying the world any complete understanding of their existence.