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## CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

1451 - 1506



Columbus, by attempting to find a westward route from Europe to the Orient, inadvertently discovered the Americas, and thereby had a greater influence on world history than he could possibly have anticipated. His discovery, which inaugurated the age of exploration and colonization in the New World, was one of the critical turning points in history. It opened to the people of Europe two new continents for the settlement of their expanding populations, and provided a source of mineral wealth and raw materials that altered the economy of Europe. His discovery led to the destruction of the civilizations of the American Indians. In the long run, it also led to the formation of a new set of nations in the western hemisphere, vastly different from the Indian nations which had once inhabited the region, and greatly affecting the nations of the Old World.

The main outlines of Columbus's story are well known. He was born in Genoa, Italy, in 1451. When he grew up, he became a ship's captain and a skilled navigator. He eventually became convinced that it was possible to find a practical route to East Asia by sailing due west across the Atlantic Ocean, and he pur-



*"Columbus before Isabella," by Vacslav Brozik.*

sued this idea with great tenacity. Eventually, he persuaded Queen Isabella I of Castile to finance his voyage of exploration.

His ships left Spain on August 3, 1492. Their first stop was at the Canary Islands, off the coast of Africa. They left the Canaries on September 6 and sailed due west. It was a long voyage, and his sailors became frightened and wished to turn back. Columbus, however, insisted upon continuing, and on October 12, 1492, land was sighted.

Columbus arrived back in Spain the following March, and the triumphant explorer was received with the highest honors. He made three subsequent voyages across the Atlantic in the vain hope of making direct contact with China or Japan. Columbus clung to the idea that he had found a route to East Asia long after most other people realized that he had not.

Isabella had promised Columbus that he would become

governor of any lands which he discovered. However, he was so unsuccessful as an administrator that he was eventually relieved of his duties, and sent back to Spain in chains. There, he was promptly set free, but he was never again given an administrative position. However, the common rumor that he died in poverty is without foundation. At the time of his death, in 1506, he was fairly wealthy.

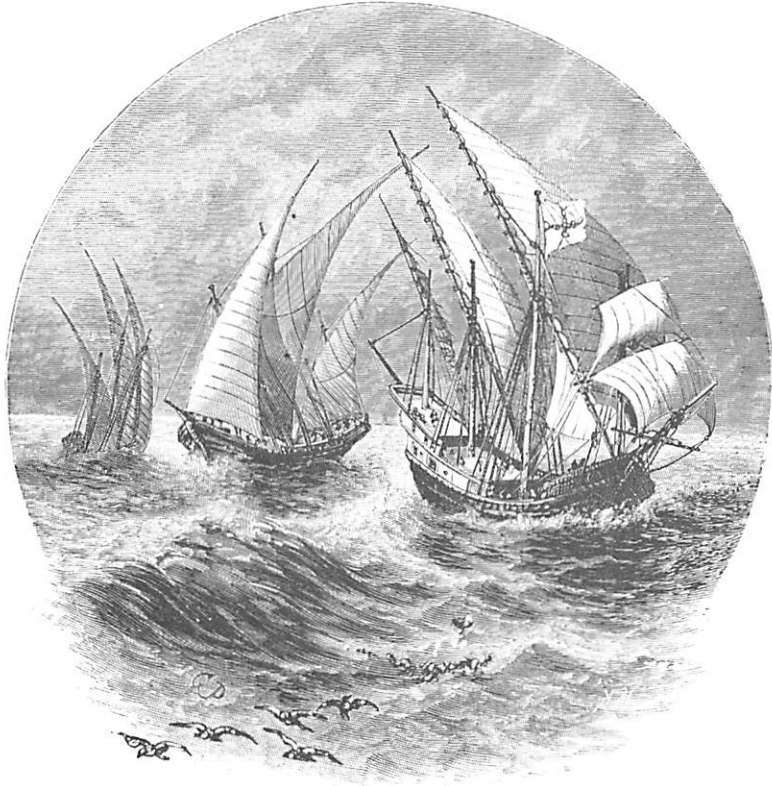
It is obvious that Columbus's first trip had a revolutionary impact upon European history, and an even greater effect on the Americas. The one date that every schoolchild knows is 1492. Still, there are several possible objections to ranking Columbus so high upon this list.

One objection is that Columbus was not the first European to discover the New World. Leif Ericson, the Viking sailor, had reached America several centuries before him, and it is plausible that several other Europeans crossed the Atlantic in the interval between the Viking and Columbus. Historically, however, Leif Ericson is a relatively unimportant figure. Knowledge of his discoveries never became widespread, nor did they trigger any large changes in either Europe or America. News of Columbus's discoveries, on the other hand, spread very rapidly throughout Europe. Within a few years of his return, and as a direct consequence of his discoveries, many additional expeditions to the New World were made and the conquest and colonization of the new territories began.

Like other figures in this book, Columbus is vulnerable to the argument that what he did would have been accomplished even if he had never lived. Fifteenth-century Europe was already in a ferment: commerce was expanding, and exploration was inevitable. The Portuguese, in fact, had actively been searching for a new route to the Indies for a considerable time before Columbus.

It indeed seems probable that America would sooner or later have been discovered by the Europeans; it is even possible that the delay would not have been very great. But subsequent developments would have been quite different if America had

originally been discovered in 1510, say, by a French or English expedition, instead of in 1492 by Columbus. In any event, Columbus was the man who actually *did* discover America.



*The Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria sail to the New World.*

A third possible objection is that even before Columbus's voyages, many fifteenth-century Europeans already knew that the world was round. That theory had been suggested by Greek philosophers many centuries earlier, and the firm endorsement of the hypothesis by Aristotle was enough to cause its acceptance by educated Europeans in the 1400s. However, Columbus is not famous for showing that the earth was round. (As a matter of fact, he didn't really succeed in doing that.) He is famous for

discovering the New World, and neither fifteenth-century Europeans nor Aristotle had had any knowledge of the existence of the American continents.

Columbus's character was not entirely admirable. He was exceptionally avaricious; in fact, one important reason that Columbus encountered difficulties in persuading Isabella to finance him was that he drove an extremely greedy bargain. Also, though it may not be fair to judge him by today's ethical standards, he treated the Indians with shocking cruelty. This is not, however, a list of the noblest characters in history, but rather of the most influential ones, and by that criterion Columbus deserves a place near the top of the list.



*"The Landing of Columbus," by John Vanderlyn.*