



Christopher Columbus

1451? - 1506

**Italian Explorer Who Was the First European
to Discover the New World
Opened North and South America to European
Exploration and Colonization**

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS WAS BORN in Genoa, Italy. Many facts about this famous explorer are not known, including exactly when he was born. Most historians think it was in 1451. His name is written as “Cristoforo Colombo” in Italian, the language of the country he was born in. It is written as “Cristobal Colon” in Spanish, the

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language of the country who sponsored his voyages of exploration. He is known to us as “Christopher Columbus,” the English form of his name.

Columbus’s father, Domenico Colombo, was a wool worker and merchant. His mother, Susanna Fontanarossa, was a homemaker. Columbus had a brother, Bartholomew.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS GREW UP in Genoa, helping his father in his wool business. Little is known for sure about Columbus’s education. He knew Italian, Spanish, and Latin. He also had to learn mathematics and astronomy to become a navigator. He’d read the maps of **Ptolemy** (TOLL-eh-mee.). The writings of **Marco Polo** had also inspired the young man who would become the most famous explorer in history.

GOING TO SEA: Columbus claimed that he had gone to sea at the age of 14. As in much of Columbus’s life, it is hard to know what is true and what is legend. Part of the legend says that he was shipwrecked off the coast of Portugal. His ship had been in a battle, and he had to swim to shore.

Columbus lived in Portugal for the next several years. He sailed on Portuguese ships for about 10 years, from around 1475 to 1485. He sailed to England and Ireland. He sailed around the Mediterranean, and to the islands along the west coast of Africa.

In 1479, Columbus met and married Dona Felipa Perestrello e Moniz. She was a widow from a prominent Portuguese family. The couple lived on the Madeira Islands, off the coast of Africa. They had one son, Diego. Dona Felipa died shortly after Diego’s birth.



The title page of History of the United States, Vol. I, showing Columbus holding a sword and banner, with soldiers, priest, and Indian woman kneeling before him.

Columbus and Diego moved to Lisbon, Portugal. Around this time, Columbus began to plan for the journeys that would make him famous.

Portugal was a powerful nation that controlled the sea routes to the East. Under **Prince Henry the Navigator**, men like **Bartholomew Dias** explored the west coast of Africa. They found a sea way around southern Africa so that Portugal could trade with Asian countries. China, India, and other Asian nations had many goods — silk, spices, precious metals, and foods — highly valued in Europe. Trade was a way to make a country rich.

Columbus was convinced that he could sail *west*, across the Atlantic Ocean, and reach Asia. What he didn't know was that two continents — North America and South America — stood in the way.

Columbus presented his idea to King John of Portugal. He was Henry the Navigator's nephew and supported Portugal's sea expeditions. But after the success of Dias and others, King John wasn't interested in Columbus's plan. He was content to use the route around Africa to reach Asia.

Columbus left Portugal for Spain. It was in Spain that Columbus finally found the support he was looking for.

FERDINAND AND ISABELLA: Ferdinand and Isabella were the King and Queen of Spain. Columbus went to their court and outlined his plan. He asked them to provide the money for his journey to the “Indies.” People often called the lands of Asia the “Indies,” taking the name from the country of India.

It took Columbus several years, but finally, in 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella agreed to fund his voyage. They provided most of the



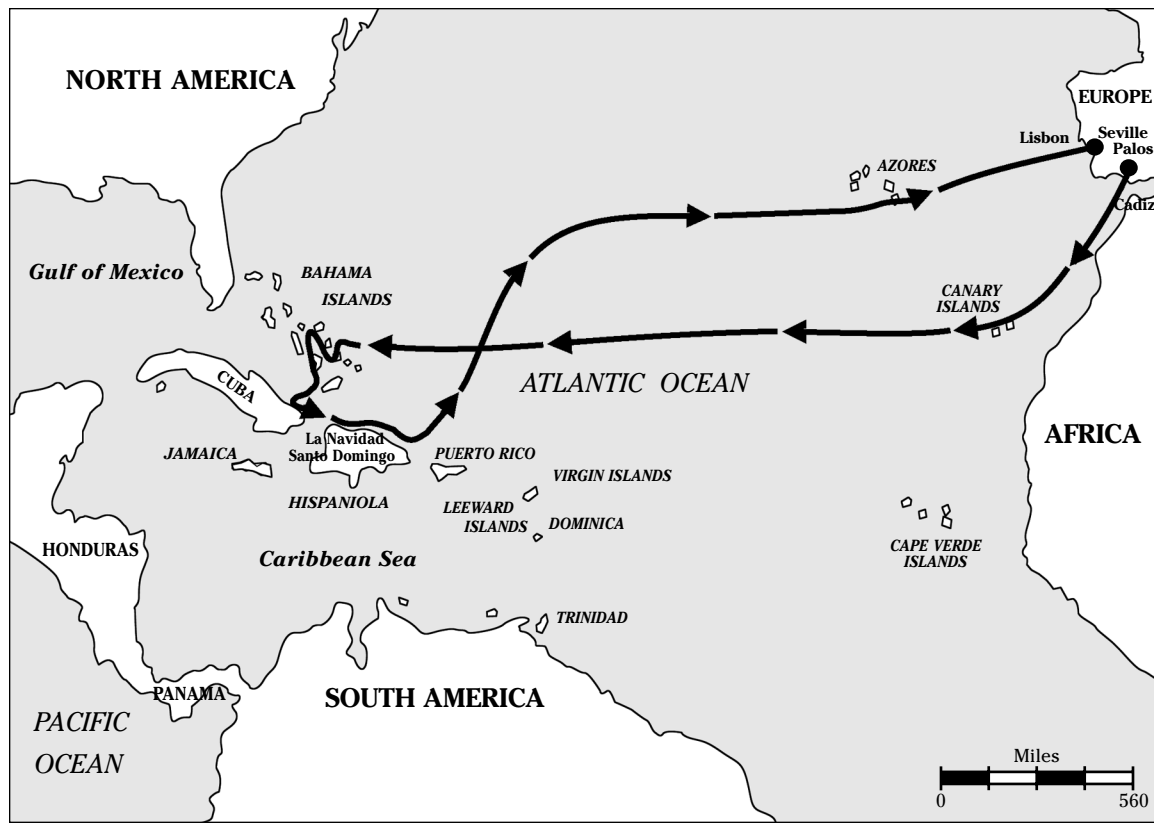
Columbus kneeling before Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain.

money for his ships and crew. They also agreed that Columbus would be called “Admiral of the Ocean Seas.” He would be governor of all the land he discovered, and he would receive 10% of all the wealth he brought back. Ferdinand and Isabella, and Columbus, too, were devout Christians. So as part of his mission he agreed to spread the word of Christianity to all the people he met on his journey.

It was a journey that would truly change the world, but not in the way anyone could have imagined in 1492.

FIRST VOYAGE: On August 2, 1492, Columbus set off from Palos, Spain with a fleet of three ships and a crew of 90 men. The three ships were the *Santa Maria*, the *Pinta*, and the *Niña*. Columbus was the captain of the *Santa Maria*. It was a large ship, called a nao in

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Columbus's first voyage, 1492-1493.

Spanish. The *Pinta* and the *Niña* were **caravels**. The caravels were smaller and easier to navigate, but the *Santa Maria* could hold more cargo.

Columbus sailed south to the Canary Islands off the coast of Africa. He waited for good sailing weather. Then, they departed to the west to cross the Atlantic Ocean. He was able to take advantage of the “trade winds.” Those are winds that blow in a westerly direction in that part of the ocean.

Columbus the Navigator: Columbus was considered one of the finest navigators of his time. He piloted his ships using a method called “**dead reckoning**.” Dead reckoning requires careful measur-

ing of distance and speed. The navigator measured the course and distance. To measure the course, the navigator used a **compass**. To measure distance, he kept track of time and the speed of the ship.

It is hard to imagine how they measured time and speed, because they didn't have our modern inventions. There were no speedometers to measure speed. Instead, a ship's speed was measured by throwing overboard a log attached to a line of rope with knots at specific distances between them. The sailors would count how many knots would pass by in the time it took the sands to empty from an hourglass. They used an hourglass because there were no clocks that could measure time accurately.

Columbus had predicted that it would take 21 days to reach the Indies. He also calculated that the trip would cover about 2,600 miles.

Instead, the trip took 34 days. Many of the sailors were frightened. Although Columbus knew the world was round, many of his crew believed the world was flat. They thought that after so many days at sea, they would soon fall off the edge of the world.

But then, on the 33rd day at sea, branches began to appear in the water. That was a sign that land was near. Finally, on October



Even though we say that Columbus “discovered America,” he never got to the continental United States. Instead, his journeys took him to several spots in the Caribbean, Central, and South America.

12, 1492, shortly after midnight, a sailor named Roderigo de Triana spotted land.

LANDFALL IN THE NEW WORLD: Columbus and his crew went ashore in what is now the Bahamas in the Caribbean. He, of course, thought he'd reached the Indies. He called the land "San Salvador," meaning Holy Savior. He placed a cross, a symbol of Christianity, on the island. Today, no one knows exactly where Columbus and his crew landed. Most historians believe it was on Watling Island in the Bahamas.

The native people of the island were of the Arawak tribe. They were friendly with Columbus. He called them "Indians," because he thought he'd reached the Indies. In fact, Columbus remained convinced for the rest of his life that he'd reached the East. He never claimed that he had discovered new lands unknown to Europeans.

Columbus explored other islands in the area. He was in search of gold, too, and headed for what is now Cuba. There, he explored the coast and met the Carib tribe. They were unfriendly and warlike. Columbus took several of them as slaves.

While Columbus was still exploring the islands, one of his ships deserted the expedition. The *Pinta*, captained by Martin Alonso Pinzon, left Columbus's group and headed out looking for gold. He and his crew were gone on their own for several months.

Columbus next reached what he named "Hispaniola," an island that is now Haiti and the Dominican Republic. He met a native chief with gold to trade. Columbus invited several natives to a Christmas



Photo Selected by ProQuest Staff

Landing of Christopher Columbus in the New World.

Evening feast aboard the *Santa Maria*. But that night, the ship hit a reef and sank.

Columbus and his crew reached the shore of Hispaniola safely, but their ship was lost. There, on Christmas day of 1492, Columbus decided to build a settlement, which he called “La Navidad.” (That means “Christmas” in Spanish.) Columbus left 40 of his men at La Navidad and planned to return to Spain.

In January 1493, Columbus left for Spain aboard the *Niña*. Soon after, they ran into Pinzon and the *Pinta*. They returned to Spain

together. But they encountered a bad storm near the Azores Islands. They finally reached Portugal in March 1493. Columbus actually made the first report of his journey to King John, then returned to Spain.

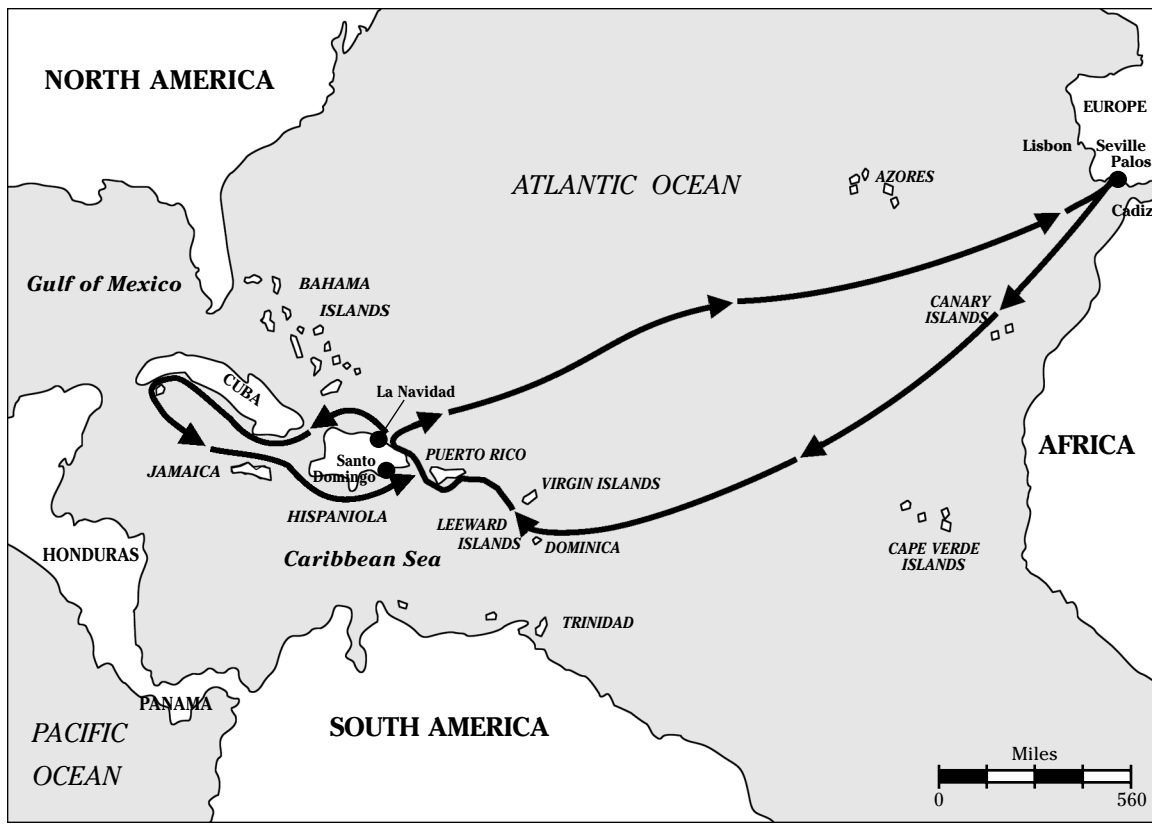
A FAMOUS EXPLORER: Columbus returned to Ferdinand and Isabella in glory. They were delighted with his successes. They wanted to pay for another voyage. Word of Columbus's bravery and accomplishment spread all over Europe. He was a famous explorer.

Columbus brought back many things that Europeans had never seen before. Pineapples, corn, sweet potatoes, and tobacco were exotic items to Europeans. And the Indians he brought back with him, many as slaves, were also unlike any people that Europeans had ever seen.

SECOND VOYAGE: Columbus left Spain for his second voyage in September 1493. This time, he headed a group of 17 ships and a crew of more than 1,400 men. Again, he headed south to the Canary Islands. From there, the expedition headed west across the Atlantic.

They made the crossing in just 21 days. They saw land in November, an island Columbus called "Dominica" in the Caribbean. Columbus went ashore on the island of Guadeloupe. There, he again encountered the warlike Caribs. The Caribs fought with the Spanish, and people were killed on both sides. Columbus again took several Caribs as slaves.

Columbus sailed on, sighting the Leeward Islands, the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. But when he arrived at Hispaniola, he found that the settlement at La Navidad had been destroyed. All the Spanish settlers were dead. No one is sure what happened to them.



Columbus's second voyage, 1493-1496.

The local Indians claimed that the Spanish had fought among themselves and with the Indians.

Columbus had brought a large group of people and supplies to expand the colony. Now, he found a new site on Hispaniola. He called it Isabella, in honor of the Spanish Queen. There, he left people and provisions. He'd also brought with him the first horses, cattle, and sheep to the **New World**. (That is what the Europeans began to call the newly discovered lands in North and South America).

The explorers also found gold. Columbus sent much of it home to Spain. He continued to explore Cuba, Jamaica, and parts of

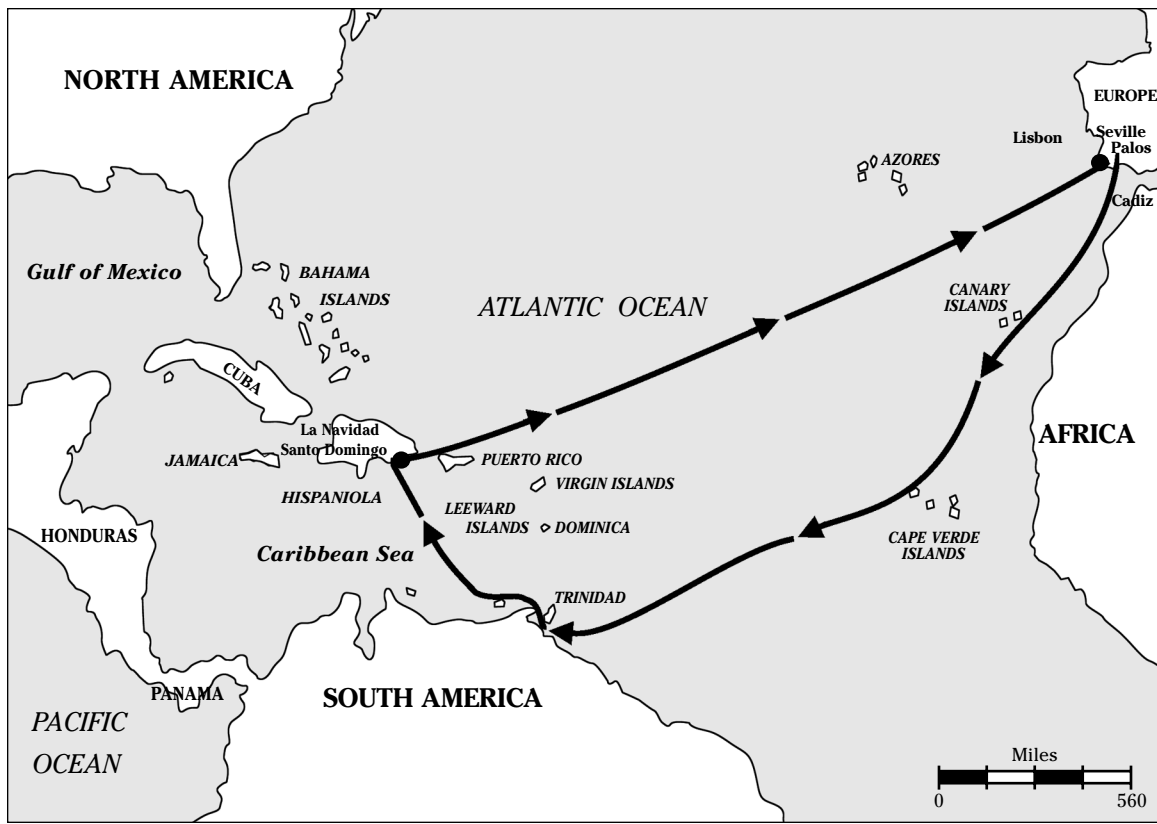
Hispaniola. When he returned to Isabella, he found that the Indians were in revolt against the Spanish. The settlers had enslaved the Indians and forced them to work in the mines. The Spanish and the Indians fought, and the Spanish won.

Columbus built a new colony called Santo Domingo. He moved the settlement from Isabella there. His brother Bartholomew arrived to help. But Columbus was ill and returned to Spain in 1496. This time Ferdinand and Isabella were not as pleased with Columbus. They had heard about the problems with the settlers. They thought that perhaps Columbus was not an able leader. He tried to convince them that his enemies had spread lies about him. He wanted to go on another voyage to prove himself.

THIRD VOYAGE: It took two years for Ferdinand and Isabella to agree to send Columbus on a third voyage. He left Spain in May 1498, with six ships. This time, he sailed further to the south as he crossed the Atlantic. He landed on what is now Trinidad. From Trinidad, he sailed to what is now Venezuela. He and his crew were the first Europeans ever to reach South America.

Next, Columbus sailed north for Hispaniola. Once again, he found trouble in the colony. Ferdinand and Isabella had received more bad reports about Columbus's leadership. They had sent a new governor to Santo Domingo named Francisco Bobadilla. In July 1500, Bobadilla arrested Columbus. He sent him and his brother Bartholomew back to Spain in chains as prisoners.

Columbus remained in prison, humiliated, for months. Finally, Ferdinand and Isabella sent for him. He pled with them to believe that he had done nothing wrong. He was cleared of all charges.



Columbus's third voyage, 1498

Columbus asked again to be sent across the Atlantic. He was sure he'd reached the Indies, and he wanted to prove it.

FOURTH VOYAGE: In May 1502, Columbus made this fourth and final voyage. He left Spain with 4 ships and 140 men. They arrived in Santo Domingo in June 1502. But the new governor would not let them land.

So Columbus and his crew traveled on across the Caribbean. He landed on what is now Honduras, in Central America. He was still seeking a route west to the Indies. Traveling south to Panama, he met Indians who told him that a vast ocean was just a short distance away. They were talking about the Pacific Ocean, but Columbus was convinced that they meant the Indian Ocean.



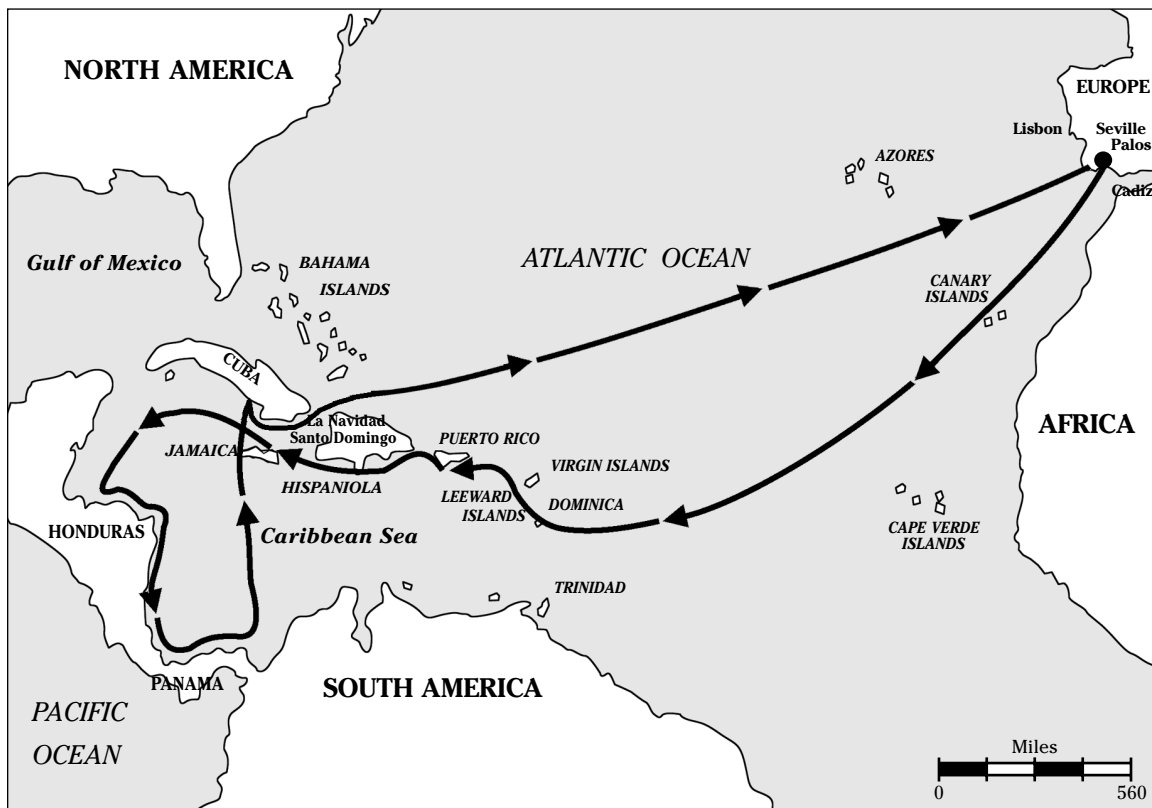
Columbus returning to Spain in chains.

Columbus tried to build a colony in Panama. But the Indians were hostile and fought with the sailors. He and his crew left Panama, and on the voyage back across the Caribbean the expedition ran into bad weather. Their ships were damaged and they ran aground in Jamaica in June 1503.

They were marooned on Jamaica for one year. Columbus sent men in a canoe to ask for help from the settlement at Santo Domingo. But help didn't arrive for a long time. Columbus faced a mutiny. Some sailors wanted to abandon him and sail for home on their own. Others were loyal to Columbus.

Finally, in June 1504, they were rescued. They returned to Spain in November 1504. By this time, Columbus was old and ill. His patron, Queen Isabella, died in late 1504. King Ferdinand called him to his court in 1505. Old as he was, Columbus tried again to raise money for another voyage. But that was not to be.

DEATH: Christopher Columbus died in May 1506, in the Spanish city of Valladolid. At the time of his death, there were many other explorers who had traveled to the **New World**. But in the past 500 years, it is Columbus who has been considered the most important explorer of them all.



Columbus's fourth voyage, 1502-1504.

WHY IS CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS SO IMPORTANT? When Columbus left Spain in 1492, most people in the world thought there were only three large land masses: Europe, Asia, and Africa. Although he didn't realize it, it was Columbus who proved that idea wrong.

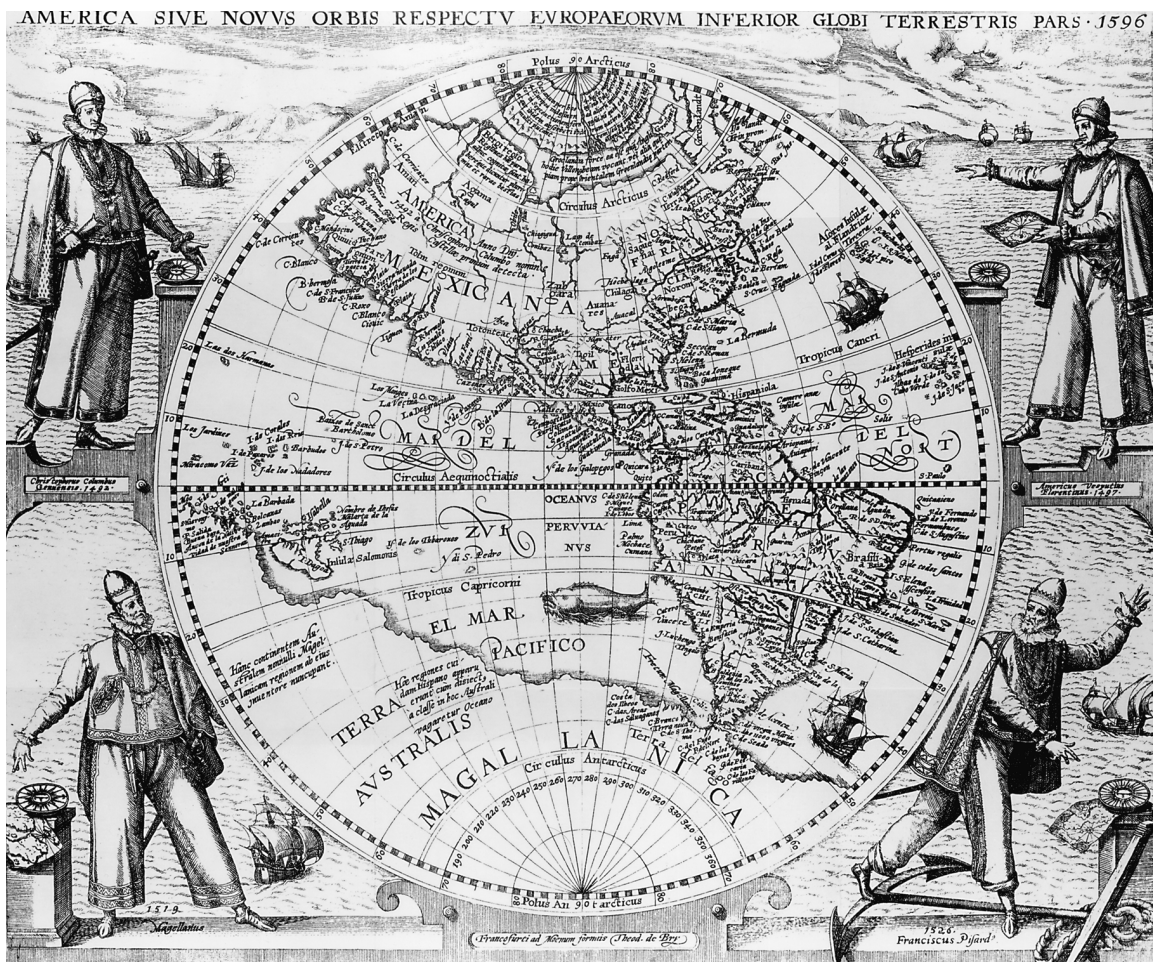
Even though he thought he'd reached Asia, he'd opened up the **New World** to Europe. More importantly, unlike other explorers who only wanted to trade or travel, Columbus built settlements in the New World. The settlements were created with the intention of having a continuing relationship with the peoples of the New World.

Columbus's explorations, discoveries, and settlements led to enormous changes in the world. These changes brought wealth and the possibilities of a new life in a New World to some individuals. These same changes brought disaster to others.

WHY IS CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS SO CONTROVERSIAL? Even today, more than 500 years after his first voyage, Columbus is praised by some and condemned by others. His explorations made it possible for Europeans to begin a new life in the colonies of the New World. His discoveries started the migration of Europeans and their ways of life to the New World.

The native peoples of the Caribbean, as well as those of North, South, and Central America had their lives changed forever, too. The Europeans could be brutal and destructive. They fought with and enslaved the native populations. Later explorers, like **Cortes**, conquered native populations and destroyed them.

The Europeans also brought diseases to which the natives had no resistance. Diseases like smallpox and measles were unknown in the New World. These diseases killed entire tribes.



Map of the Americas from 1596 with portraits of Columbus (upper left), Vesputti (upper right), Magellan (lower left), and Pizarro (lower right).

Europeans claimed lands for themselves and their countries. They treated the natural wealth of the lands — the gold especially — as their own. In Columbus's time and later, they forced the Indians to work for them as slaves, and enriched themselves.

While Columbus was not responsible for all of the bad things that happened to the native populations, his discoveries made it possible for Europeans to use and abuse the native populations and their lands. That is why people continue to debate what he did. But

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regardless of whether he is considered a hero or a villain, Columbus was a brave and able navigator and explorer. He was a man whose actions truly changed the world.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS'S FAMILY: In 1479 Columbus married a widow named Dona Felipa Perestrello e Moniz. They had one son, Diego. Dona Felipa died soon after Diego was born. After Columbus moved to Spain, he had a relationship with a woman named Beatriz Enrique de Arana. She and Columbus had a son named Fernando. She and Columbus never married. Fernando wrote a book about his famous father after Columbus died.

WORLD WIDE WEB SITES:

<http://www.mariner.org/age/columbus.html>

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/1492>

<http://quest.classroom.com/columbus2002/>