

ALLA CORRENTE CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

In Honor of Columbus Day, October 11, 2010

Christopher Columbus was born in Genoa in 1451 to Domenico Colombo, a middle class wool-weaver, and Susanna Fontanarossa. Though little is known about his childhood, it is apparent that he was well-educated since he was able to speak several languages as an adult and had considerable knowledge of classical literature. In addition, he studied the works of geographers Ptolemy and Marinus, to name a few. Columbus first went to sea when he was 14 years old and continued sailing throughout his younger life. During the 1470s, he went on numerous trading trips that took him to the Aegean Sea, Northern Europe, and possibly Iceland. In 1479, he met his brother Bartolomeo, a mapmaker, in Lisbon. He later married Filipa Moniz Perestrello and in 1480, his son Diego was born. The family stayed in Lisbon until 1485, when Filipa died. Afterwards, Columbus, with Diego, moved to Spain where he began trying to obtain a grant to explore western trade routes. He believed that because the earth was a sphere, a ship could reach the Far East and set up trading routes in Asia by sailing west. This to offset loss of trade access to the eastern Mediterranean after the final battle between the Ottoman Turks and the Byzantine Greeks in 1453 which had resulted in the destruction of Constantinople and collapse of the Byzantine Greek empire.

For years, Columbus proposed his plans to the Portuguese and Spanish kings, but he was turned down each time. Finally, after the Moors were expelled from Spain in 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella reconsidered his requests. Columbus promised to bring back gold, spices, and silk from Asia, spread Christianity, and explore China. He then asked to be made admiral of the seas and governor of discovered lands.

Columbus' First Voyage

After receiving significant funding from the Spanish monarchs, Columbus set sail on August 3, 1492 with three ships, the Pinta, Nina, and Santa Maria, and 104 men. After a short stop at the Canary Islands to resupply and make minor repairs, the ships set out across the Atlantic. This voyage took five weeks -- much longer than Columbus expected, as he thought the world was smaller than it actually is. During this time, many of the crew members contracted diseases and died, or died from hunger and thirst.

Finally, at 2 a.m. on October 12, 1492, Rodrigo de Triana sighted land in the area of the present-day Bahamas. When Columbus reached the land, he believed it was an Asian island and named it San Salvador. Because he did not find riches, Columbus decided to continue sailing in search of China. Instead, he ended up visiting what is today known as Cuba and Hispaniola.

On November 21, 1492, the Pinta and its crew left to explore on its own. Then on Christmas Day, Columbus' Santa Maria wrecked off the coast of Hispaniola. Because there was limited space on the lone Nina, Columbus had to leave about 40 men behind at a fort they named Navidad. Soon after, Columbus set sail for Spain, where he arrived on March 15, 1493, completing his first voyage west.

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Columbus' Second Voyage

After the success of finding this new land, Columbus set sail westward again on September 23, 1493 with 17 ships and 1,200 men. The purpose of this journey was to establish colonies in the name of Spain, check on the crew earlier left behind at Navidad, and continue his search for riches in what he still thought was the Far East.

On November 3, the crew members sighted land and found three more islands, Dominica, Guadeloupe, and Jamaica, which Columbus thought were islands off of Japan. Because there were still no riches there, they went on to Hispaniola, only to discover that the fort at Navidad had been destroyed and his crew killed after they had mistreated the indigenous population. At the site of the fort Columbus established the colony of Santo Domingo and after a battle in 1495, he conquered the entire island of Hispaniola. He then set sail for Spain in March 1496, and, four months later, arrived in Cadiz on July 31.

Columbus' Third Voyage

Columbus's third voyage began on May 30, 1498 and took a more southern route than the previous two. Still looking for China, he found Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, and Margarita two months later. He also reached the mainland of South America. On August 31, he returned to Hispaniola and found the colony of Santo Domingo there in shambles. After a government representative was sent to investigate the problems in 1500, Columbus was arrested and sent back to Spain. He arrived in October and was able to defend himself successfully against the charges of treating both the locals and Spaniards poorly.

Columbus' Fourth and Final Voyage and Death

Columbus' final voyage began on May 9, 1502 and he arrived in Hispaniola in June. Once there, he was forbidden from entering the colony so he continued to explore further. On July 4, he set sail again and later arrived in what is now Central America. In January 1503, he reached Panama and found a small amount of gold but was forced out of the area by native inhabitants. After numerous difficulties and a year of waiting on Jamaica after his ships had problems, Columbus set sail for Spain on November 7, 1504. When he arrived there, he settled with his son in Seville.

After Queen Isabella died on November 26, 1504, Columbus tried to regain his governorship of Hispaniola. In 1505, the king allowed him to petition but did nothing. One year later, on May 20, 1506, Columbus became ill and died.

Columbus' Legacy

Because of his discoveries, Columbus is often venerated in areas around the world, but notably in the Americas with his name on places (such as the District of Columbia) and the celebration of Columbus Day every year on the second Monday in October. Despite this fame however, Columbus was not the first to visit the Americas. (Long before Columbus, various indigenous peoples had

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settled and explored different areas of the Americas. In addition, Norse explorers visited portions of North America. Leif Ericson is believed to have been the first European to visit the area and set up a settlement in the northern portion of Canada's Newfoundland some 500 years before the arrival of Columbus.) However, Columbus' major contribution was that he was the first to visit, settle, and stay in these new lands, effectively bringing a new area of the world into the forefront of the geographic thought of the time.

-Dr. James J. Boitano
(Adapted from Amanda Briney's piece in About.com: Geography)