

Transatlantic Encounters

MAIN IDEA

Columbus's voyages set off a chain of events that brought together the peoples of Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The interactions among the people of these three continents laid the foundations for modern multicultural America.

Terms & Names

- Christopher Columbus
- Columbian Exchange
- Taino
- Treaty of Tordesillas
- colonization

One European's Story

In January 1492, the Genoese sailor Christopher Columbus stood before the Spanish court with a daring plan: he would find a route to Asia by sailing west across the Atlantic Ocean. The plan was accepted, and on August 3, 1492, Columbus embarked on a voyage that changed the course of history. He began his journal by restating the deal he had struck with Spain.

A PERSONAL VOICE CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

" Based on the information that I had given Your Highnesses about the land of India and about a Prince who is called the Great Khan [of China], which in our language means 'King of Kings,' Your Highnesses decided to send me . . . to the regions of India, to see . . . the peoples and the lands, and to learn of . . . the measures which could be taken for their conversion to our Holy Faith. . . . Your Highnesses . . . ordered that I shall go to the east, but not by land as is customary. I was to go by way of the west, whence until today we do not know with certainty that anyone has gone. . . . "

—*The Log of Christopher Columbus*

Although Columbus did not find a route to Asia, his voyage set in motion a process that brought together the American, European, and African worlds.

Columbus Crosses the Atlantic

The Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria slid quietly out of a Spanish port in the predawn hours of August 3, 1492. Although they were setting out into the unknown, their crews included no soldiers, priests, or ambassadors—only sailors and cabin boys with a taste for the sea. In a matter of months, Columbus's fleet would reach the sandy shores of what was to Europeans an astonishing new world.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS At about 2 A.M. on October 12, 1492, a lookout aboard the Pinta caught sight of two white sand dunes sparkling in the moonlight. In between lay a mass of dark rocks. "Tierra! Tierra!" he shouted. "Land! Land!"

At dawn Columbus went ashore and caught sight of a group of people who called themselves the **Taino** (tá'no), or "noble ones." He renamed their island San Salvador, or "Holy Savior," and claimed it for Spain.

On the first day of their encounter, the generosity of the Taino startled Columbus. "They are friendly and well-dispositioned people who bear no arms," he wrote in his log. "They traded and gave everything they had with good will." But after only two days, Columbus offered an assessment of the Taino that had dark implications for the future.

A PERSONAL VOICE CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

" It would be unnecessary to build . . . [a fort here] because these people are so simple in deeds of arms. . . . If Your Highnesses order either to bring all of them to Castile or to hold them as captivos [slaves] on their own island it could easily be done, because with about fifty men you could control and subjugate them all, making them do whatever you want. "

—quoted in *Columbus: The Great Adventure*

GOLD, LAND, AND RELIGION The search for gold was one of the main reasons for Columbus's journey. On his second day in the Americas, Columbus expressed one of the main reasons he had embarked on his journey. "I have been very attentive," he wrote, "and have tried very hard to find out if there is any gold here." When he did not find gold on San Salvador, he left to look elsewhere. Columbus spent 96 days exploring some small islands in what is now the Bahamas and the coastlines of two other Caribbean islands, known today as Cuba and Hispaniola. All along the way, he bestowed Spanish names on territory he claimed for Spain. "It was my wish to bypass no island without taking possession," he wrote. Columbus also honored his promise to assert Christian domination. "In every place I have entered, islands and lands, I have always planted a cross," he noted on November 16. Less than two weeks later, he predicted, "Your Highnesses will order a city . . . built in these regions [for] these countries will be easily converted." 🇦

SPANISH FOOTHOLDS In early January 1493, Columbus began his trip back to Spain. Convinced that he had landed on islands off Asia known to Europeans as the Indies, Columbus called the people he met los indios. The term translated into "Indian," a word mistakenly applied to all the diverse peoples of the Americas.

Columbus's reports thrilled the Spanish monarchs, who funded three more voyages. When he set sail for the Americas in September 1493, Columbus was no longer an explorer but an empire builder. He commanded a fleet of some 17 ships and several hundred armed soldiers. He also brought five priests and more than 1,000 colonists, including hidalgos, or members of the minor nobility.

These European soldiers, priests, and colonists, and the many others that followed, would occupy first the Caribbean and then most of the Americas, and impose their will on the Native Americans who lived there. Their arrival on Hispaniola, the island presently divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, signaled the start of a cultural clash that would continue for the next five centuries.

THE VIKINGS

The first Europeans to reach North America were probably Vikings. About 982, the Norwegian Viking Eric the Red crossed the Atlantic in an open boat and set up two colonies on Greenland. Some fifteen years later, his son, Leif, voyaged farther to a place he called Vinland the Good because of its abundant grapes. Historians now believe that present-day Newfoundland is Leif Ericson's Vinland. In 1963, archaeologists discovered there a half-burned timbered house of Norse design that dates to about the year 1000.

According to Norwegian sagas, or tales of great deeds, another Norwegian expedition followed

Leif Ericson's and stayed in Newfoundland for three years. Then the Skraelings, as the saga calls the native peoples, drove away the colonists, and the Vikings never returned.

The Impact on Native Americans

The Taino who greeted Columbus in 1492 could not have imagined the colonization and outbreaks of disease that would soon follow. While the Taino resisted Spanish control, there was little they could do against the viruses and diseases that accompanied the new settlers.

METHODS OF COLONIZATION The European system of [colonization](#) —the establishment of distant settlements controlled by the parent country—was established long before Columbus set sail for Hispaniola. During the Crusades, Italians from Venice had taken over Arab sugar farms in what is now Lebanon. By the late 1400s, the Portuguese had established plantation colonies on islands off the coast of West Africa, and Spain had colonized the Canary Islands.

From this experience, Europeans learned the advantages of using the plantation system. They also realized the economic benefits of using forced labor. Finally, they learned to use European weapons to dominate a people who had less sophisticated weapons. These tactics would be used in full against the peoples that the Europeans called Indians. **B**

RESISTANCE AND CONQUEST The natives of the Caribbean, however, did not succumb to Columbus and the Spaniards without fighting. In November of 1493, Columbus attempted to conquer the present-day island of St. Croix. Instead of surrendering, the inhabitants defended themselves by firing rounds of poisoned arrows. The Spaniards won easily, but the struggle proved that Native Americans would not yield in the easy conquest predicted by Columbus.

Controlling the Taino who inhabited Hispaniola was even more difficult. After several rebellions, the Taino submitted to Columbus for several years but revolted again in 1495. The Spanish response was swift and cruel. A later settler, the missionary Bartolomé de Las Casas, criticized the Spaniards' brutal response.

A PERSONAL VOICE BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS
" This tactic begun here . . . [will soon] spread throughout these Indies and will end when there is no more land nor people to subjugate and destroy in this part of the world. "

—quoted in *Columbus: The Great Adventure*



▲ In this series of drawings from an Aztec codex, or book (c. 1575), a medicine man

DISEASE RAVAGES THE NATIVE

AMERICANS European settlers brought deadly diseases such as measles, mumps, chicken pox, smallpox, and typhus, which devastated Native Americans, who had not developed any natural immunity to these diseases. They died by the thousands. According to one estimate, nearly one-third of Hispaniola's estimated 300,000 inhabitants died during Columbus's time there. By 1508, fewer than 100,000 survivors lived on the island. Sixty years later, only two villages were left. These illnesses would soon spread to the rest of the Americas. More surely than any army, disease conquered region after region. **C**

takes care of an Aztec with smallpox, a deadly disease brought to the Americas by Europeans.

The Slave Trade Begins

With disease reducing the native work force, European settlers turned to Africa for slaves. In the coming years, European slave ships would haul hundreds of thousands of Africans across the Atlantic to toil in the Americas.

A NEW SLAVE LABOR FORCE The enslavement of Native Americans was a controversial issue among the Spaniards. Unfortunately, the Spanish saw the use of Africans as a possible solution to the colonies' labor shortage. Advised Las Casas, "The labor of one . . . [African] . . . [is] more valuable than that of four Indians; every effort should be made to bring many . . . [Africans] from Guinea."

As more natives died of disease, the demand for Africans grew. The price of enslaved Africans rose, and more Europeans joined the slave trade. African slavery was becoming an essential part of the European-American economic system. 🍌

AFRICAN LOSSES The Atlantic slave trade would devastate many African societies, which lost many of their fittest members. Before the slave trade ended in the 1800s, it would drain Africa of at least 12 million people.

The Impact on Europeans

Columbus's voyages had profound effects on Europe as well. Merchants and monarchs saw an opportunity to increase their wealth and influence. Ordinary people saw a chance to live in a new world, relatively free of social and economic constraints. Within a century, thousands of Europeans began crossing the Atlantic in what became one of the biggest voluntary migrations in history.

THE COLUMBIAN EXCHANGE The voyages of Columbus and others led to the introduction of new plants and animals to Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Ships took plants and animals from the Americas back to Europe and to Africa and brought items from the Eastern Hemisphere to the Western Hemisphere. This global transfer of living things, called the [Columbian Exchange](#), began with Columbus's first voyage and continues today.



GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER
Human-Environment Interaction
How do you think the Columbian Exchange has enriched each hemisphere?

NATIONAL RIVALRIES Overseas expansion inflamed European rivalries. Portugal, the pioneer in navigation and exploration, deeply resented Spain's sudden conquests. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI, a Spaniard, stepped in to avoid war between the two nations. In the [Treaty of Tordesillas](#) (tôr'də-sĕ'əs), signed in 1494, Spain and Portugal agreed to divide the Western Hemisphere between them. Lands to the west of an imaginary vertical line drawn in the Atlantic, including most of the Americas, belonged to Spain. Lands to the east of this line, including Brazil, belonged to Portugal.

The plan proved impossible to enforce. Its only long-lasting effect was to give Portugal a colony—Brazil—in a South America that was largely Spanish. Otherwise, the agreement had no effect on the English, Dutch, or French, all of whom began colonizing the Americas during the early 1600s. **E**

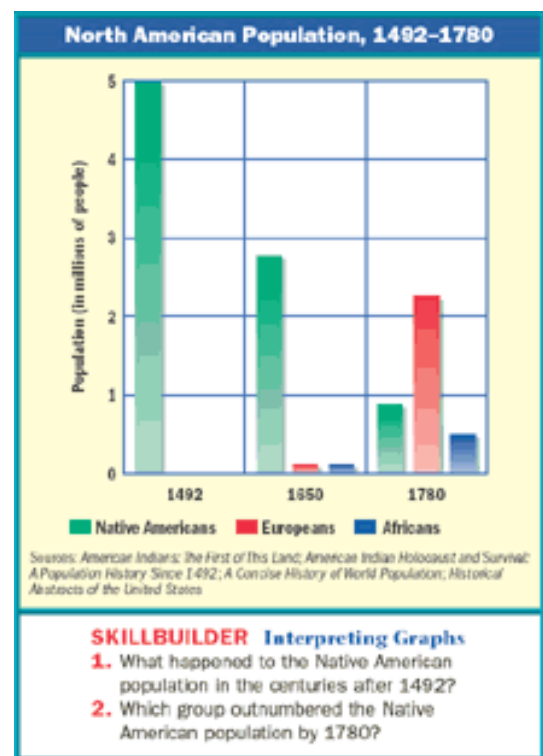
A New Society Is Born

Christopher Columbus lived on Hispaniola until 1500. That year, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, dissatisfied with the explorer's inability to maintain order on the island, ordered him to leave. After further travels throughout the Caribbean, Columbus reluctantly returned

to Spain in 1504, where he died two years later. The daring sea captain went to his grave disappointed that he had not reached China.

Neither Columbus nor anyone else could have foreseen the long chain of events that his voyages set in motion. In time, settlers from England would transplant their cultures to colonies in North America. From within these colonies would emerge a new society—and a new nation—based on ideas of representative government and religious tolerance.

The story of the United States of America thus begins with a meeting of North American, African, and European peoples and cultures that radically transformed all three worlds. The upheaval threw unfamiliar peoples and customs together on a grand scale. Although the Europeans tried to impose their ways on Native Americans and Africans, they never completely succeeded. Their need to borrow from the peoples they sought to dominate proved too strong. Furthermore, the Native Americans and Africans resisted giving up their cultural identities. The new nation that emerged would blend elements of these three worlds, as well as others, in a distinctly multicultural society. Throughout the history of the United States, this multiculturalism would be one of its greatest challenges and also one of its greatest assets.



POINT

"Columbus's achievements were historic and heroic."

Many historians argue that Columbus's fateful voyages produced many long-term benefits. As the journalist Paul Gray notes, "Columbus's journey was the first step in a long process that eventually produced the United States of America, . . . a symbol and a haven of individual liberty for people throughout the world."

Other historians suggest that respect is due Columbus for the sheer dimension of the change he caused.

"The Columbian discovery was of greater magnitude than any other discovery or invention in human history. . . both because of the . . . development of the New World and because of the numerous other discoveries that have stemmed from it," asserts the historian Paolo Emilio Taviani.

Some historians contend that, although millions of Native Americans were enslaved or killed by Europeans and the diseases they brought with them, this does not detract from Columbus's achievements. They argue that sacrifice is often necessary for the sake of progress. Further, they claim that, like any historical figure, Columbus was a man of his time and ought not to be condemned for acting according to the values of the age in which he lived.

COUNTERPOINT

"The legacy of Columbus is primarily one of 'genocide, cruelty, and slavery.'"

Some historians have questioned the traditional view of Columbus as a hero. The historian Hans Konig argues that Columbus's legacy should be deplored rather than celebrated: "The year 1492 opened an era of genocide, cruelty, and slavery on a larger scale than had ever been seen before." Speaking to the experience of Native Americans in particular, the activist Suzan Shown Harjo insists that "this half millennium of land grabs and one-cent treaty sales has been no bargain [for Native Americans]."

Historian Howard Zinn argues that the actions of the European conquistadors and settlers were unnecessarily cruel and plainly immoral. Zinn questions whether the suffering of Native Americans can be justified by European gains: "If there *are* necessary sacrifices to be made for human progress, is it not essential to hold to the principle that those to be sacrificed must make the decision [to be sacrificed] themselves?"

In any event, Konig claims, the balance does not favor Columbus: "all the gold and silver stolen and shipped to Spain did not make the Spanish people richer. . . . They ended up [with] . . . a deadly inflation, a starving population, the rich richer, the poor poorer, and a ruined peasant class."

DEVELOPING HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Why did European explorers believe they could simply claim lands for their home countries, even though these lands were already populated?

SUMMARIZING

In the centuries before Columbus's voyages, where had Europeans gained experience in colonization?

ANALYZING EFFECTS

What do you think were three of the most important long-term consequences of Columbus's encounters in the Americas?

Think About:

- conquering and claiming land
- forced labor of Native Americans and Africans
- the Columbian Exchange