

Christopher Columbus (Italian: Cristoforo Colombo; Spanish: Cristóbal Colón; Portuguese: Cristóvão Colombo; before 31 October 1451 – 20 May 1506) was an explorer, navigator, and colonizer, born in the Republic of Genoa, in what is today northwestern Italy.[2][3][4][5] Under the auspices of the Catholic Monarchs of Spain, he completed four voyages across the Atlantic Ocean that led to general European awareness of the American continents. Those voyages, and his efforts to establish permanent settlements on the island of Hispaniola, initiated the Spanish colonization of the New World.

In the context of emerging western imperialism and economic competition between European kingdoms seeking wealth through the establishment of trade routes and colonies, Columbus's speculative proposal, to reach the East Indies by sailing westward, eventually received the support of the Spanish crown, which saw in it a promise, however remote, of gaining the upper hand over rival powers in the contest for the lucrative spice trade with Asia. During his first voyage in 1492, instead of reaching Japan as he had intended, Columbus landed in the Bahamas archipelago, at a locale he named San Salvador. Over the course of three more voyages, Columbus visited the Greater and Lesser Antilles, as well as the Caribbean coast of Venezuela and Central America, claiming them for the Spanish Empire.

Though Columbus was not the first European explorer to reach the Americas (having been preceded by the Norse expedition led by Leif Ericson in the 11th century[6]), Columbus's voyages led to the first lasting European contact with the Americas, inaugurating a period of European exploration, conquest, and colonization that lasted for several centuries. They had, therefore, an enormous impact in the historical development of the modern Western world. Columbus himself saw his accomplishments primarily in the light of the spreading of the Christian religion.

Never admitting that he had reached a continent previously unknown to Europeans, rather than the East Indies he had set out for, Columbus called the inhabitants of the lands he visited indios (Spanish for "Indians"). Columbus's strained relationship with the Spanish crown and its appointed colonial administrators in America led to his arrest and dismissal as governor of the settlements on the island of Hispaniola in 1500, and later to protracted litigation over the benefits which Columbus and his heirs claimed were owed to them by the crown.

Quest for Asia



"Columbus map", drawn ca. 1490 in the Lisbon workshop of Bartolomeo and Christopher Columbus

Background

Under the Mongol Empire's hegemony over Asia (the so-called Pax Mongolica, or Mongol peace), Europeans had long enjoyed a safe land passage, the so-called "Silk Road", to China and India, which were sources of valuable goods such as silk, spices, and opiates. With the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, the land route to Asia became much more difficult and dangerous. Portuguese navigators, under the leadership of King John II, sought to reach Asia by sailing around Africa. Major progress in this quest was achieved in 1488, when Bartolomeu Dias reached the Cape of Good Hope, in what is now South Africa. Meanwhile, in the 1480s, the Columbus brothers had developed a different plan to reach the Indies (then construed roughly as all of south and east Asia) by sailing west across the "Ocean Sea", i.e., the Atlantic.

Quest for support

In 1485, Columbus presented his plans to John II, King of Portugal. He proposed that the king equip three sturdy ships and grant Columbus one year's time to sail out into the Atlantic, search for a western route to the Orient, and return.



Columbus and Queen Isabella. Detail of the Columbus monument in Madrid (1885).

Columbus also requested he be made "Great Admiral of the Ocean", appointed governor of any and all lands he discovered, and given one-tenth of all revenue from those lands.

The king submitted Columbus's proposal to his experts, who rejected it. It was their considered opinion that Columbus's estimation of a travel distance of 2,400 miles (3,860 km) was, in fact, far too low.

In 1488, Columbus appealed to the court of Portugal once again, and once again, John II invited him to an audience. That meeting also proved unsuccessful, in part because not long afterwards Bartolomeu Dias returned to Portugal with news of his successful rounding of the southern tip of Africa (near the Cape of Good Hope). With an eastern sea route to Asia apparently at hand, King John was no longer interested in Columbus's far-fetched project.

Columbus traveled from Portugal to both Genoa and Venice, but he received encouragement from

neither. Columbus had also dispatched his brother Bartholomew to the court of Henry VII of England, to inquire whether the English crown might sponsor his expedition, but also without success.

Columbus had sought an audience from the monarchs Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile, who had united many kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula by marrying, and were ruling together. On 1 May 1486, permission having been granted, Columbus presented his plans to Queen Isabella, who, in turn, referred it to a committee. After the passing of much time, the savants of Spain, like their counterparts in Portugal, replied that Columbus had grossly underestimated the distance to Asia. They pronounced the idea impractical and advised their Royal Highnesses to pass on the proposed venture.

However, to keep Columbus from taking his ideas elsewhere, and perhaps to keep their options open, the Catholic Monarchs gave him an annual allowance of 12,000 maravedis and, in 1489, furnished him with a letter ordering all cities and towns under their domain to provide him food and lodging at no cost.

Agreement with the Spanish crown

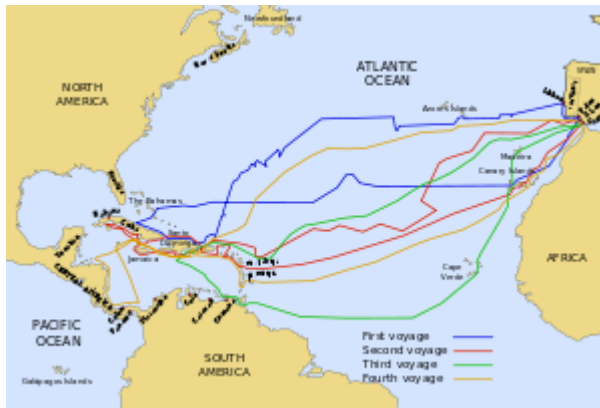
After continually lobbying at the Spanish court and two years of negotiations, he finally had success in 1492. Ferdinand and Isabella had just conquered Granada, the last Muslim stronghold on the Iberian Peninsula, and they received Columbus in Córdoba, in the Alcázar castle. Isabella turned Columbus down on the advice of her confessor, and he was leaving town by mule in despair, when Ferdinand intervened. Isabella then sent a royal guard to fetch him, and Ferdinand later claimed credit for being "the principal cause why those islands were discovered".

About half of the financing was to come from private Italian investors, whom Columbus had already lined up. Financially broke after the Granada campaign, the monarchs left it to the royal treasurer to shift funds among various royal accounts on behalf of the enterprise. Columbus was to be made "Admiral of the Seas" and would receive a portion of all profits. The terms were unusually generous, but as his son Diego later wrote,[citation needed] the monarchs did not really expect him to return.

In the "Capitulations of Santa Fe", King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella promised Columbus that if he succeeded he would be given the rank of Admiral of the Ocean Sea and appointed Viceroy and Governor of all the new lands he could claim for Spain. He had the right to nominate three persons, from whom the sovereigns would choose one, for any office in the new lands. He would be entitled to 10% of all the revenues from the new lands in perpetuity. Additionally, he would also have the option of buying one-eighth interest in any commercial venture with the new lands and receive one-eighth of the profits.

Columbus was later arrested in 1500 and dismissed from his posts. He and his sons, Diego and Fernando, then conducted a lengthy series of court cases against the Castilian crown, known as the pleitos colombinos, alleging that the Crown had illegally reneged on its contractual obligations to Columbus and his heirs. The Columbus family had some success in their first litigation, as a judgment of 1511 confirmed Diego's position as Viceroy, but reduced his powers. Diego resumed litigation in 1512, which lasted until 1536, and further disputes continued until 1790.

Voyages



Voyages of Christopher Columbus

Between 1492 and 1503, Columbus completed four round-trip voyages between Spain and the Americas, all of them under the sponsorship of the Crown of Castile. These voyages marked the beginning of the European exploration and colonization of the American continents, and are thus of enormous significance in Western history. Columbus always insisted, in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary, that the lands that he visited during those voyages were part of the Asian continent, as previously described by Marco Polo and other European travelers. Columbus's refusal to accept that the lands he had visited and claimed for Spain were not part of Asia might explain, in part, why the American continent was named after the Florentine explorer Amerigo Vespucci and not after Columbus.