

Reading 1: Columbus in Context

Christopher Columbus was born in Genoa, Italy, around 1451. The Middle Ages (500 C.E.-1400-1500 C.E.) were ending, along with the system of feudalism. A new system based on trade was developing, which would become capitalism. Social mobility was increasing, at least somewhat (that is, people did not have to do what their parents did). Art and literature were flourishing; the printing press was invented in 1445. Explorers and merchants were bringing back new ideas and riches from Asia and Africa. This period of commerce and growth became known as the Renaissance (rebirth).

However, there was unrest throughout Europe. Labor shortages caused by the Black Death (bubonic plague, which killed 10-25 million people) led peasants to demand better working conditions. Jews had been forcibly driven from Spain and Italy, causing much bloodshed.

Italy was just beginning to become a financial powerhouse, and its rich merchants and nobles often used their money to pay for beautiful works of art. Columbus was a weaver's son, but did not go into his father's occupation. He went to sea at age 14.

The young Columbus was shipwrecked off of Portugal in 1476. He ended up in the capital, Lisbon. Portuguese explorers had found a sea route to Asia and were bringing home ships full of silk and spices and some gold. Columbus wanted to find gold. Using maps and calculations that were wrong, Columbus was convinced there was a shorter route to the Indies (south and southwest Asia) by going west.

Every educated person at the time knew that the earth was round. But they didn't know there was a land mass to the west. They thought that no ship could carry enough supplies to make a western voyage.

Once King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella had unified Spain through their marriage and by defeating the Moors at Granada, they agreed to pay for Columbus to make the westward trip. He had three ships, the *Nina*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria*. That first voyage found land – the Bahamas and Cuba. Later, Columbus made three more trips, bringing more ships, more people, and more misery to the land in his search for gold.

The people who met Columbus's ships were peaceful and welcoming. They were no match for the Europeans, who killed them for sport and in pursuit of gold and brought diseases for which they had no immunity. Disease and attacks reduced the population of Latin America by as much as 90%. Meanwhile, Columbus took back grains and plants that would greatly benefit to Europe. His men also unknowingly brought back syphilis, which would kill some five million Europeans in the next four hundred years.

Sources:

All About Christopher Columbus: <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/all-about-christopher-columbus-1451-1506>

Teaching about Columbus Day: Mythbusters: <http://teachinghistory.org/nhec-blog/22951>

Columbus : His Enterprise, Exploding the Myth, by Hans Koning (revised 1991)

Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong, by James w. Loewen, revised edition, 2007