

The Truth about Columbus

Millions of people around the world celebrate Columbus Day every October 12. The tale of Christopher Columbus, the legendary Genoese explorer and navigator, has been retold and rewritten many times. To some, he was an intrepid explorer, following his instincts to a New World. To others, he was a monster, a slave trader who unleashed the horrors of the conquest on unsuspecting natives. What are the facts about Christopher Columbus?

The Myth of Christopher Columbus

Schoolchildren are taught that Christopher Columbus wanted to find America, or in some cases that he wanted to prove that the world was round. He convinced Queen Isabella of Spain to finance the journey, and she sold her personal jewelry to do so. He bravely headed west and found the Americas and Caribbean, making friends with natives along the way. He returned to Spain in glory, having discovered the New World. What's wrong with this story? Quite a bit, actually.

Myth #1: Columbus wanted to prove the world was not flat.

The theory that the earth was flat and that it was therefore possible to sail off the edge of it was common in the middle ages, but had been discredited by Columbus' time. His first New World journey did help fix one common mistake, however: it proved that the earth was much larger than people had previously thought.

Columbus, basing his calculations on incorrect assumptions about the size of the earth, assumed that it would be possible to reach the rich markets of eastern Asia by sailing west. Had he succeeded in finding a new trade route, it would have made him a very wealthy man. Instead he found the Caribbean, then inhabited by cultures with little in the way of gold, silver or trade goods. Unwilling to completely abandon his calculations, Columbus made a laughingstock of himself back in Europe by claiming that the Earth was not round, but shaped like a pear. He had not found Asia, he said, because of the bulging part of the pear near the stalk.

Myth #2: Columbus persuaded Queen Isabela to sell her jewels to finance the trip.

He didn't need to. Isabella and her husband Ferdinand, fresh from the conquest of Moorish kingdoms in the south of Spain (Granada), had more than enough money to send a crackpot like Columbus sailing off to the west in three second-rate ships. He had tried to get financing from other kingdoms like England and Portugal, with no success. Strung along on vague promises, Columbus hung around the Spanish court for years. In fact, he had just given up and was headed to France to try his luck there when word reached him that the Spanish King and Queen had decided to finance his 1492 voyage.

Myth #3: He made friends with the natives he met.

This one is partially true. The Europeans, with ships, guns, fancy clothes and shiny trinkets, made quite an impression on the tribes of the Caribbean, whose technology was far behind that of Europe. Columbus made a good impression when he wanted to: for example, he made friends with a local chieftain on the Island of Hispaniola named Guacanagari because he needed to leave some of his men behind.

But Columbus also captured other natives for use as slaves. The practice of slavery was common and legal in Europe at the time, and the slave trade was very lucrative. Columbus never forgot that his voyage was not one of exploration, but of economics. His financing came from the hope that he would find a lucrative new trade route. He did nothing of the sort: the people he met had little to trade. An opportunist, he captured some natives to show that they would make good slaves. Years later, he would be devastated to learn that Queen Isabella had decided to declare the New World off-limits to slavers.

Myth #4: He returned to Spain in glory, having discovered the Americas.

Again, this one is half-true. At first, most observers in Spain considered his first voyage a total fiasco: he had not found a new trade route and the most valuable of his three ships, the Santa Maria, had sunk. Later, when people began to realize that the lands he had found were previously unknown, his stature grew and he was able to get funding for a second, much larger voyage of exploration and colonization.

As for discovering the Americas, many people have pointed out over the years that for something to be discovered it must first be “lost,” and the millions of people already living in the New World certainly didn’t need to be “discovered.” But more than that, Columbus stubbornly stuck to his guns for the rest of his life. He always believed that the lands he found were the easternmost fringe of Asia and that the rich markets of Japan and India were just a little further away. He even put forth his absurd pear-shaped Earth theory in order to make the facts fit his assumptions. It wasn’t long before everyone around him figured out that the New World was something previously unseen by Europeans, but Columbus himself went to the grave without admitting that they were right.

Christopher Columbus: Hero or Villain?

Since his death in 1506, Columbus’ life story has undergone many revisions. He is vilified by indigenous rights groups, yet was once seriously considered for sainthood. What’s the real scoop?

Columbus was neither a monster nor a saint. He had some admirable qualities and some very negative ones. He was not a bad or evil man, simply a skilled sailor and navigator who was also an opportunist and a product of his time.

On the positive side, Columbus was a very talented sailor, navigator and ship captain. He bravely went west without a map, trusting his instincts and calculations. He was very loyal to his patrons, the King and Queen of Spain, and they rewarded him by sending him to the New World a total of four times. He took slaves from those tribes that fought him and his men: he seems to have dealt relatively fairly with those tribes that he befriended, such as that of Chief Guacanagari.

But there are many stains on his legacy as well. Ironically, the Columbus-bashers blame him for some things that were not under his control and ignore some of his most glaring actual defects. He and his crew brought awful diseases, such as smallpox, to which the men and women of the New World had no defenses, and millions died. This is undeniable, but it was also unintentional and would have happened eventually anyway. His discovery opened the doors to the conquistadors who looted the mighty Aztec and Inca Empires and slaughtered natives by the thousands, but this, too, would likely have happened when someone else inevitably discovered the New World.

If one must hate Columbus, it is far more reasonable to do so for other reasons. He was a slave trader who heartlessly took men and women away from their families in order to lessen his failure to find a new trade route. His contemporaries despised him. As governor of Santo Domingo on Hispaniola, he was a despot who kept all profits for himself and his brothers, and was loathed by the colonists whose lives he controlled. Attempts were made on his life and he was actually sent back to Spain in chains at one point after his third voyage. During his fourth voyage, he and his men were stranded on Jamaica for a year when his ships rotted: no one wanted to travel there from Hispaniola to save him. He was also a cheapskate: after promising a reward to whomever spotted land first on his 1492 voyage, he refused to pay up when sailor Rodrigo de Triana did so, giving the reward to himself instead because he had seen a “glow” the night before.

Previously, elevation of Columbus to a hero caused people to name cities (and a country, Colombia) after him and many places still celebrate Columbus Day, but nowadays people tend to see Columbus for what he really was: a brave, but very flawed, human being.

Sources:

Herring, Hubert. *A History of Latin America From the Beginnings to the Present.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962

Thomas, Hugh. *Rivers of Gold: The Rise of the Spanish Empire, from Columbus to Magellan.* New York: Random House, 2005.

The Truth about Columbus: Use the reading 'The Truth about Columbus' and the space provided to answer these questions.

1. Where was Christopher Columbus from?
2. Columbus didn't prove the world wasn't flat- what did he really prove?
3. What did Columbus think the Earth was shaped like?
4. How do people think Isabella and Ferdinand financed Columbus's trip?
5. How did Isabella and Ferdinand finance Columbus's trip?
6. Fill in the blank: Columbus captured natives to use as slaves. This was because his voyage was one of _____ not one of exploration.
7. What did Columbus "stick to his guns" about for the rest of his life?
8. How many times did Columbus travel to the New World?
9. Fill in the blank: Columbus was neither a _____ nor a saint. He had some admirable qualities and some very negative ones. He was not a bad or _____ man, simply a skilled sailor and navigator who was also an _____ and a product of his time.
10. What are **two** of the many reasons the author lists in the second to last paragraph for disliking Columbus?