

Letter on the First Voyage (1493)

Christopher Columbus

Historical Background

Christopher Columbus (known as Cristoforo Colombo in his native Genoa, and as Cristóbal Colón in Spain, for whom he sailed) had hopes of finding a water route from Europe to the rich supply of spices and other commodities found in India and the rest of Asia. After the king of Portugal turned down his request for support, Columbus approached the king and queen of Spain, who agreed to fund his voyage. He and his crew set sail in August of 1492, with three ships, and in October, landed on an island in the Caribbean. Incorrectly believing that he was in India, Columbus claimed the island in the name of Spain, and proceeded to explore and claim many other islands nearby. Although many have referred to Columbus as the “discoverer” of America, he encountered a native population of Arawak and Tainos, who had settled the land thousands of years earlier. In the spring of 1493, he returned to Spain, bringing gold, animals, plants, and a number of indigenous Taino people whom he had kidnapped through force. Upon his return, he issued a letter to his Spanish benefactors, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. In the letter, Columbus recounted his journey, gave his impressions of the lands and people he encountered, and confirmed that he had taking possession of the islands in the name of Spain.

Historical Significance

Columbus’s journey marks the point at which Europe began its active imperial colonization of the Americas. The impressions Columbus had of the native Americans were influential, as were his claims to have found sources of great wealth. Spain, in particular, began a robust program of expansion, sending explorers and conquistadores to enlarge the Spanish Empire throughout North and South America, as well as the Caribbean. Many other European empires followed suit, including Portugal, France, the Netherlands, and, much later, England. In addition to initiating European conquest of The Americas—lands upon which civilizations developed over millennia before European arrival—Columbus’s journey opened the Atlantic as a thoroughfare of travel and trade. Through a process now known as the “Columbian Exchange,” the next decades saw an unprecedented movement of native plants, animals, food, religion, culture and disease between Europe and the Americas.

Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: divine rights of kings; noble savage; European supremacy.

On completion of this lesson, students will be able to

- identify the belief that the King, Queen, and Columbus shared about the source of royal authority and its rightful extension to newly conquered lands and peoples;
- identify the features of European civilization that Columbus thought made Europeans superior to the native Americans;
- describe the mixture of moral virtues and moral, spiritual, and intellectual limitations that Columbus attributed to the native Americans;
- outline the plans for colonization proposed by Columbus.

Questions to Explore

What was the purpose of Columbus's journey? Does he consider himself to have been a ruler, an explorer, a conqueror, or a missionary?

What is Columbus' tone in the letter? Do you think he considers his journey a success? What does he seem especially proud of? Does he seem in any way disappointed or defensive?

What implicit and explicit judgments about justice is Columbus making in this letter? What does he assume gives one man or people the right to rule another? What does he seem to think fair trade consists in?

How does Columbus describe the native Americans? What virtues does he attribute to them? What vices or weaknesses does he attribute to them? What does he hope will happen to them as a result of contact with Europeans? How might each of his judgments, both positive and negative, have helped justify the subsequent military, commercial, and religious policies of the Europeans in America?