**Christopher Columbus Outline**

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| *Christopher Columbus* examined the mostly southward voyages of the Portuguese into the Atlantic and Africa and thought that one could also sail westward and ultimately reach India. In 1484, Columbus attempted to convince King John II of Portugal to sponsor a voyage west to the Orient, but unfortunately for Columbus, Portugal was committed to discovering the sea-route to India via Africa. Portuguese exploration along the African coast alone demonstrated enough potential to Portugal's leaders that there was no need to explore what had previously been a disappointing Atlantic. Having his plan rejected by King John II, Columbus then turned to Spain in 1486. His first attempt to enlist the support of the Spanish Crown was unsuccessful, but after a lengthy search for support in France and England, Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand finally agreed to sponsor Columbus in 1492. This change of heart by the Spanish monarchy was due largely to Isabella's desire to spread Christianity, to compete with Portugal for new sources of wealth, and to funnel resources that were previously tied up in the *reconquista* of Iberia.  Sailing west from the previously insignificant port of Palos on the Gulf of Cadiz, Columbus' fleet consisted of two small caravels, one square-rigged and the other lateen-rigged, and a 100-ton vessel from Galacia. Compared to previous Portuguese endeavours, Columbus' expedition was remarkably cavalier, and many of the sailors displayed little enthusiasm for the long voyage. But so certain was Columbus that he was going to arrive in Asia that he carried a letter to present to the grand khan and he brought along an Arabic interpreter. Setting sail for the Canaries, Columbus intended to find a favourable wind that would bring him to Japan. After little over a month at sea, Columbus' ships sighted land in what is now known as the Bahamas. The ship's recorder entered in his journal on Thursday, October 11, 1492, the following: |

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| *At two hours after midnight the land was sighted at a distance of two leagues. They shortened sail, and lay by under the mainsail without the bonnets. The vessels were hove to, waiting for daylight; and on Friday they arrived at a small island of the Lucayos, called, in the language of the Indians, Guanahani. Presently they saw naked people. The Admiral [Columbus] went on shore in the armed boat, and Martin Alonso Pinzon, and Vicente Yañez, his brother, who was captain of the Niña. The Admiral took the royal standard, and the captains went with two banners of the green cross, which the Admiral took in all the ships as a sign, with an F and a Y and a crown over each letter, one on one side of the cross and the other on the other. Having landed, they saw trees very green, and much water, and fruits of divers kinds. The Admiral called to the two captains, and to the others who leaped on shore, and to Rodrigo Escovedo, secretary of the whole fleet, and to Rodrigo Sanchez of Segovia, and said that they should bear faithful testimony that he, in presence of all, had taken, as he now took, possession of the said island for the king and for the queen, his Lords, making the declarations that are required, as is more largely set forth in the testimonies which were then made in writing.*  *Presently many inhabitants of the island assembled. What follows is in the actual words of the Admiral in his book of the first navigation and discovery of the Indies. "I," he says, "that we might form great friendship, for I knew that they were a people who could be more easily freed and converted to our holy faith by love than by force, gave to some of them red caps, and glass beads to put round their necks, and many other things of little value, which gave them great pleasure, and made them so much our friends that it was a marvel to see. They afterward came to the ship's boats where we were, swimming and bringing us parrots, cotton threads in skeins, darts, and many other things; and we exchanged them for other things that we gave them, such as glass beads and small bells. In fine, they took all, and gave what they had with good will. It appeared to me to be a race of people very poor in everything. They go as naked as when their mothers bore them, and so do the women, although I did not see more than one young girl. All I saw were youths, none more than thirty years of age. They are very well made, with very handsome bodies, and very good countenances. Their hair is short and coarse, almost like the hairs of a horse's tail. They wear the hairs brought down to the eyebrows, except a few locks behind, which they wear long and never cut. They paint themselves black, and they are the color of the Canarians, neither black nor white. Some paint themselves white, others red, and others of what color they find. Some paint their faces, others the whole body, some only round the eyes, others only on the nose. They neither carry nor know anything of arms, for I showed them swords, and they took them by the blade and cut themselves through ignorance. They have no iron, their darts being wands without iron, some of them having a fish's tooth at the end, and others being pointed in various ways. They are all of fair stature and size, with good faces, and well made. I saw some with marks of wounds on their bodies, and I made signs to ask what it was, and they gave me to understand that people from other adjacent islands came with the intention of seizing them, and that they defended themselves. I believed, and still believe, that they come here from the mainland to take them prisoners. They should be good servants and intelligent, for I observed that they quickly took in what was said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, as it appeared to me that they had no religion. I, our Lord being pleased, will take hence, at the time of my departure six natives for your Highnesses, that they may learn to speak. I saw no beast of any kind except parrots, on this island."* |

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| In light of the monumental importance of Columbus' journey, it is worthwhile to pause for a moment and consider Columbus' actions. The fundamental difference between Columbus' voyage in 1492 and those of Bartolomeu Dias and Vasco da Gama is that the Portuguese explorers *had* *knowledge* that the areas they were travelling to existed; there was a history of contact, however nebulous and sporadic, between Europe and Africa or Europe and Asia. But when Columbus walked onshore in the Bahamas, he encountered the beginnings of a continent that Europe had no idea existed. There were no nautical folk tales or rumours of a landmass in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, nor was there a history of vague contact between the populations of these two continents. Quite simply, the Americas were not supposed to be there.  The first thing Columbus did after arriving on shore was to take possession of this new land in the name of the Spanish throne, imposing a European bureaucratic order and intellectual structure over a region that did not practice these particular customs. Care was taken to mention that a royal standard had been brought ashore and that the ceremony had been performed "in presence of all", including presumably members of the indigenous population who had been sighted before Columbus even made his way ashore. Witnesses are formally noted in a parchment to verify that Columbus did claim the island in the name of the Spanish throne so that, if need be, they could testify at a later date that no one objected to the ceremony or its ultimate purpose. Perhaps it was with an eye towards eventual protests that he took advantage of the indigenous population by performing a strange ceremony in an equally strange language that Columbus takes time to mention later in the passage that "I observed that they quickly took in what was said to them".  As Stephen Greenblatt points out, according to medieval concepts of natural law, only those territories that are uninhabited can become the property of the first person to discover them. Clearly then, there is the problem presented by the presence of members of the indigenous population, and Greenblatt suggests that the ceremony performed by Columbus was designed to take possession of the territory even though it was inhabited. Indeed, as Greenblatt points out, the obsession with maintaining the appearance of legality is taken one step further. Columbus issues his statement in the presence of the ship's recorder so that the ceremony will not be rendered void the minute the words fall away. This parchment is notarised, sealed and returned thousands of leagues across the ocean to stand as an official symbol that the land encountered by Columbus has been claimed. Thus, the first contact between European and non-European worlds was not accomplished through the amalgamation of two separate and distinct cultures. Rather, in the absence of common traditions and customs, the process was carried out through a decidedly European prism and Greenblatt concludes that this is done to enable the Spaniards to lay claim to the islands of the Americas.  Still in pursuit of China, the fleet set sail again, and instead found Cuba and then Hispaniola (modern Haiti and the Dominican Republic) where Columbus founded the first European colony. After exhausting their supplies, the vessels began their trek home on January 8, 1493. Using dead reckoning, Columbus steered his ships north to the appropriate latitude for Spain and then set an easterly course. In Barcelona, Columbus continued to claim that he had found an alternate route to Asia. Cuba, he claimed, was actually Japan, and Columbus dutifully reported that he had sent an emissary to negotiate with a local chief optimistically identified as the "grand khan". Others were not as convinced as Columbus. The Portuguese believed that Columbus had merely explored further along the African coast before finally concluding that Columbus had probably explored previously uncharted islands in the Atlantic. Even the Spanish entertained their share of doubts before settling on the cautious conclusion that Columbus had found a route to "distant lands in the west". Regardless of what these lands were exactly, Isabella and Ferdinand wanted sovereignty over them and petition Pope Alexander VI who granted them exclusive title in the papal bull of 1493.  Despite these lingering doubts, Columbus' voyage succeeded in demonstrating the range and endurance of European ships and sailors - it took 224 days to complete a round-trip - and the potential of European navigational techniques. In a backhanded manner, the voyage also illustrated Columbus' own strengths and predilections. Although Columbus was able to record his thoughts and impressions of the areas he encountered, he did this with a perceptive but Eurocentric eye. He did not waiver in his belief that he had found an alternate route to Asia and this is clearly demonstrated by the fact that Columbus called the indigenous populations he encountered "Indians".  The second voyage he undertook in 1493 would not be as casual or relaxed as the first. Commissioned as Admiral of the Ocean Sea and Viceroy of the Indies, Columbus was instructed to convert indigenous populations to Christianity, expand his colony in Hispaniola, build a trading post, and - almost as an afterthought - continue his search for the Orient. Columbus was also granted a monopoly on exploration of the region. Seventeen ships bearing 1,500 men were assembled at Cadiz and would make one of the fastest passages achieved by a convoy. Returning to Hispaniola in November 1493, the crew discovered that their earlier contact prompted members of a warring faction to destroy the original Spanish settlement and slaughter its inhabitants. A new colony was hastily founded and the Spanish soon inaugurated the practice of sending regular military expeditions inland to subdue the increasingly hostile indigenous population. Faced with the prospect of colonising an inhospitable area, the object of Columbus' desire radically changed from exploration and trade to conquest and subjugation. Members of the local population were captured and treated as slaves to support the fledgling colony. Others were captured with the promise that they would be released once a tribute was paid to Columbus in gold.  Returning to Spain in 1496, Columbus found that his achievements inspired little confidence or excitement. **Nevertheless, Columbus had gathered enough evidence to suggest that future exploration could yield a healthy profit in gold and salvageable souls to make subsequent voyages feasible.** In fact, fearing that the concessions granted to Columbus in the afterglow of his successful return from Hispaniola in 1492 may have been too generous, the Spanish Crown revoked Columbus' monopoly and began to license other expeditions.  Considering the setbacks encountered on the second voyage to Hispaniola, it was inevitable that Columbus would find it difficult to raise enough ships and sailors for a third voyage. Nevertheless, Columbus was able to recruit a sufficient crew and vessels in order to put to sea again in 1498. Upon reaching the Canaries, the fleet separated into two, the first half taking the now well-worn route to Hispaniola, and the second, under the direction of Columbus, continuing further south. It is possible that Columbus continued on the southern route because he learned of British finds in North America, but it was also part of contemporary thinking to believe that a landmass to counterbalance Africa must exist. Regardless, the prediction held true, and Columbus encountered an island off the northern coast of South America, which he called Trinidad, before passing through the Gulf of Paria and encountering the future Venezuela. Sailing further along the coast, the convoy was soon carried along by the massive flow from the Orinoco River, an experience which led Columbus to conclude that the Terrestrial Paradise must be nearby.  Columbus followed the coast for as far as he could, then he turned his ships toward Hispaniola. Upon his arrival in Hispaniola, Columbus found the Spanish colony in disarray and seething with discontent. Not only was there not enough gold to make everyone in the colony rich inside a year, but the colonists claimed that they could not eat "Indian food" like corn and cassava. Large numbers returned to Spain where they demanded back pay for their efforts and complained of Columbus' mismanagement of the colony.  Columbus' behaviour had become increasingly erratic over the years, and there is no question that his presence in Hispaniola made an already volatile situation in Hispaniola worse. Reports from the colony finally convinced King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to dispatch Francisco de Bobadilla to Hispaniola to "accompany" Columbus home - Columbus was brought back in chains - in 1500. It was not until the spectre of Portuguese success in Asia loomed large that King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella decided to allow Columbus to undertake another expedition. Columbus believed that China lay a short distance to the northwest of South America and that there should be a passage to the Indian Ocean between Cuba and the "Other World" he encountered years before, but the voyage along the northern coast of South America did not reveal another route to the Indian Ocean. On Christmas day, 1502, Columbus found himself at what is now the entrance to the Panama Canal. Without any sign along the coastline to indicate that it was possible to sail westward into the Pacific Ocean and with the morale of his crew quickly disappearing, Columbus turned back. He established a post at Belén despite the fact that he had neither the men nor the materials to set up and sustain a settlement, and soon made his way to Jamaica before returning to Spain. Columbus' death in 1506 passed almost entirely without notice. |