

History

1492 - Lesson 1 of 4

The story of Christopher Columbus

Why have historians described 1492 as a 'turning point' in world history?

Mr Wallace



Across the Atlantic Ocean

Columbus left the Canary Islands on the 6th September 1492 and sailed west. He was the commander of the mission, and they had three ships. They expected that, if they headed west, they would eventually land at the Chinese port of Guangzhou. Columbus was overconfident, and told Ferdinand and Isabella that they would reach 'India' (Asia) within days. After several weeks, hope was beginning to run low and some of the sailors were losing faith in Columbus. Every so often he thought they might have seen land, but it was false hope. As the three ships continued across the ocean, they hoped to spot signs that land was near, such as flocks of birds. Columbus and his crew were seriously low on hope and beginning to doubt their entire mission.



Landfall

Then, at 2am on the 12th October, land was spotted and there was widespread joy. Columbus claimed he had spotted it the night before. The first island he landed on was small, flat and covered in pools. He named it San Salvador. He believed he had arrived on one of the islands of the 'Indies', near China or Japan. On the island there was little of value. But Columbus was especially interested in the **native** population who lived there. Mistakenly they became known as "Indians". Columbus was interested in these people as he believed they could either be **enslaved**, or converted to Christianity.



The West Indies

San Salvador offered little to Columbus, and the native population had few resources or wealth to trade. So Columbus and his sailors began exploring other islands. They often captured natives and forced them to guide them around. Eventually, Columbus reached an island that the native population called **Ayiti**, meaning 'land of high mountains'. Columbus named it Hispaniola, and it would be the most important island he would ever visit. The island had a large amount of gold. Columbus could use this gold to take back to Spain and to convince Ferdinand and Isabella to continue paying for more voyages. The native population, known as the **Taíno**, were also more advanced than others he had met. The Taíno had elaborate statues, thrones and jewellery. To Columbus, this suggested they were a cultured people.



Return to Spain

For Columbus, Hispaniola provided the best location for Spain to create a permanent settlement. This settlement would be built with the aim of **colonising** the land, and conquering and **converting** the Taíno to Christianity. Columbus wanted to be to be the ruler of this **colony** himself. He began planning a return to Spain to present Ferdinand and Isabella with his 'discoveries', and left behind enough men to create a settlement on the island. He returned to Spain with gold, chilli, and captured Taíno who had been enslaved. He also brought back new discoveries such as the Pineapple, tobacco and the canoe.



Governor Columbus

When Columbus returned to Spain, no-one was convinced by his claim to have reached the Indies (Asia). They thought he had just landed on more islands in the Atlantic. However, Columbus was granted more voyages to explore the region and see what it could offer. In total, he made 4 trips to the 'West Indies', and was named Governor. Then in 1499 reports of his cruelty and brutality made it back to Spain. Hispaniola did not contain as much gold as he had claimed, so Columbus had forced the Taíno to gather gold every three months, and any who did not gather enough had their hands chopped off. This was not the only brutal way that the native people in the region were treated. Hundreds were captured and sold into slavery back in Spain, and thousands eventually died from their brutal treatment. Columbus' violence was seen as excessive and he lost his position as governor.



Glossary

Enslaved - to make someone a slave

Natives - people who are born in a place/are the natural inhabitants of a place

Colony - land that is under the control of another person or country

Convert - to change religion



Questions

1. Where did Columbus expect to land by sailing due west?
2. What did Columbus name the first island that he arrived at?
3. Why was the island of Ayiti/Hispaniola important to Columbus?
4. What did Columbus take back to Spain to convince them that the area was worth colonising?
5. Why was Columbus' power as governor taken away in 1499?

