**The Truth About Christopher Columbus**

Was Columbus a Hero or a Villain?

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 natives. What are the facts about Christopher Columbus?​

**The Myth of Christopher Columbus**

Schoolchildren are taught that [Christopher Columbus](https://www.thoughtco.com/biography-of-christopher-columbus-2136699) wanted to find America, or in some cases that he wanted to prove that the world was round. He convinced Queen Isabela 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 it was possible to sail off the edge of it was common in [the Middle Ages](https://www.thoughtco.com/defining-the-middle-ages-introduction-1788882), but by Columbus' time, most people did not believe it. His [first New World journey](https://www.thoughtco.com/first-new-world-voyage-christopher-columbus-2136437) 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 eastern Asia by sailing west.

Had he succeeded in finding [a new trade route](https://www.thoughtco.com/indian-ocean-trade-routes-195514), 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.

**Myth #2: Columbus Persuaded the Queen to Sell Her Jewels to Finance the Trip**

He didn't need to. Isabela and her husband Ferdinand had more than enough money to send Columbus sailing off to the west in three 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 because [he needed to leave some of his men behind](https://www.thoughtco.com/la-navidad-first-european-settlement-2136439).

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](https://www.thoughtco.com/the-trans-atlantic-slave-trade-44544) was very profitable. 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 new trade route, but the people he met had little to trade. He captured some natives to show that they would make good slaves. Years later, he would be devastated to learn that Queen Isabela 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 bust. 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, he was able to get funding for a [second, much larger voyage](https://www.thoughtco.com/the-second-voyage-of-christopher-columbus-2136700) of exploration and colonization.

Columbus stubbornly stuck to his beliefs for the rest of his life. He always believed that the lands he found were the easternmost part of Asia and that the rich markets of Japan and India were just a little farther away. He even put forth his strange pear-shaped Earth theory in order to make the facts fit his assumptions. Columbus himself went to the grave without admitting that they were right.

[**Christopher Columbus**](https://www.thoughtco.com/facts-about-christopher-columbus-2136702)**: Hero or Villain?**

Since his death in 1506, Columbus’ life story has undergone many revisions. He is painted as a villain by Native-Americans, 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 the King and Queen of Spain, and they rewarded him by sending him to the New World a total of four times. While he took slaves from those tribes that fought him and his men, he seems to have dealt fairly with those tribes that he befriended.

But there are many stains on his legacy as well.

* 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 those 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.
* 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.
* As governor of [Santo Domingo](https://www.thoughtco.com/history-of-santo-domingo-dominican-republic-2136382) on Hispaniola, he was a mean leader who kept all profits for himself and his brothers and was hatedd 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](https://www.thoughtco.com/the-third-voyage-of-christopher-columbus-2136701).

Previously, belief that Columbus was 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.