**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 explorer, and navigator ​has been told many times. To some, he was an brave explorer. To others, he was a monster, a slave trader who spread 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,
* 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 and that
* 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 something that by Columbus' time, most people did not believe.

His [first New World journey](https://www.thoughtco.com/first-new-world-voyage-christopher-columbus-2136437) proved the earth was much larger than people previously thought. Columbus, basing his calculations on incorrect assumptions about the size of the earth.

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 cultures that had little gold, silver, or trade goods.

**Myth #2: Columbus Convinced 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.

**Myth #3: He Made Friends With the Natives He Met**

This one is partially true. Columbus and his men, 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. He made friends with a local chief 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 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 needed to make money. He captured some natives to show that they would make good slaves.

**Myth #4: He Returned to Spain in Glory, Having Discovered the Americas**

Again, this one is half-true. At first, most people Spain considered his first voyage a total failure. 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 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. Columbus himself died without admitting that he was wrong.

[**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

He was once seriously considered for sainthood.

What’s the real scoop?

Columbus was neither a monster nor a saint. He had some strong 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 talented sailor, navigator and ship captain. He bravely went west without a map, trusting his calculations. He was 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. He did not do this on purpose, but the results may have happened eventually.
* His discovery opened the doors to those who looted cultures 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.
* He was a mean leader who kept profits for himself and was hated by the colonists whose lives he controlled. People tried to kill him a number of times and he was sent back to Spain.

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.