

WHO WAS THAT MAN?

When Columbus died in 1506, the event didn't even make the evening news. Of course there wasn't any evening news, but the point is when the man died, no one really noticed. Columbus was no celebrity.

Now that the explorer has starred in major classrooms across America, people are realizing they don't really know too much about him. Since he wasn't that popular in his own lifetime, no one bothered to paint a portrait of him, interview him – or even ask him for an autograph. Just about the only traces of his life are a ship's log kept during his first voyage, and a biography by his son Ferdinand that is full of exaggerations.

So in the past 500 years, artists and historians have done a lot of guessing about Columbus. In the process, dozens of paintings and biographies have been produced. And rarely does he look the same from one to the next.

On the following pages, you'll read three short biographies of Columbus. Each biography offers a different view.

In the first, Columbus is a hero; in the second, a lucky bumbler; and in the third, a greedy businessman. The events described in each probably did happen. But the interpretations are up for debate.

Which is the real Columbus? Probably some combination of all three. Then again, maybe only one thing's certain: There's more than one way to paint a picture – and to tell a story.

Biography 1

The Father of Freedom

“The farther one goes, the more one learns.” said Christopher Columbus, the greatest of explorers. In these words lies the secret of his heroism. Columbus spent his life expanding horizons, pushing the limits of human knowledge. He had no fear of the unknown, only a desire to uncover secrets. On the strength of his ambition, he led the way into the future, to discover and create a truly new world.

Columbus was born in 1451 in Genoa (in modern-day Italy), the son of a modest weaver. He could easily have learned his father’s trade and spent the rest of his life at home making cloth of cotton and wool. Instead, determined to learn about the world, Columbus signed on with every merchant ship he could find. From age 15 to 25, he lived for the sea, taking dangerous journeys down the coast of Africa and possibly as far north as Iceland. **“Wherever ship has sailed,”** he wrote, **“there I have voyaged.”**

When did the burning desire to go west across the ocean first seize Columbus? On his northern voyages he may have heard tales of ancient Viking journeys to a land called Vinland (probably Newfoundland). Or he may simply have spent many hours at sea gazing at the horizon and wondering what lay beyond.

When he was 25, Columbus moved to Lisbon, Portugal, where his brother worked as a mapmaker. There the explorer-to-be devoted himself to learning. He had no real schooling, but he had something better – curiosity. He read ancient Greek philosophy, medieval astrology, and anything that had to do with the shape of the world. **“I have seen,”** Columbus reported, **“and truly I have studied, all books – histories, chronicles, and philosophies.”**

Admiral of the Ocean Sea

With the help of ancient Greek geographers, Columbus calculated that it was possible to cross the Ocean Sea – the body of water thought to separate western Europe from the riches of Eastern Asia. Most of his associates laughed at his conclusions. And when Columbus brought his plan before King John II, the ruler of Portugal laughed too.

Not to be discouraged, Columbus traveled to Spain to meet with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Again, he was rejected. But in 1492, after six agonizing years, Columbus finally persuaded the royal couple to sponsor his voyage. Captain Columbus – soon to be Admiral – would sail the Ocean Sea. The rest of the story is, of course, well known. The Admiral never made it to Asia. But he found something much more important – a new world. Columbus’s spirit lives on in that world – a world that is guided by the thirst for knowledge, and that gives everyone the chance to pursue a vision. Thanks to the spirit of that first explorer, all the people in America have the right to be their own Columbus.

Biography 2

A Lucky Adventurer

Christopher Columbus is history's most talked-about bumbler. He was a restless wanderer, always traveling because he never felt connected to any country. He had no real loyalties and no great talents. What he had was a desire for adventure, and more important, a moment of colossal luck – a moment that quickly passed, but one that the world never forgot.

Columbus's fascination with fool-hardy adventure probably started early in his life. At 14, in Genoa, he started hanging out with merchant sailors, a rootless bunch of adventurers who cared about little else besides boats, rum, and money. At 25, Columbus showed up – probably broke – at his brother's doorstep in Portugal. Brother Bartholomew was a mapmaker, so he regularly spent time with sea captains, hoping to pick up new information on the shape of the African coastline or the outline of northern Europe. As Columbus eagerly listened, the captains may have speculated that Asia was just a short sail west. After all they had surely heard the rumors about two Chinese corpses that washed up on the shores of Ireland. And what about the sailors in the Ocean Sea who had found wood marked with strange – probably Asian – carvings?

Such tall tales were enough to encourage Columbus to risk his neck sailing west to Asia.

He dug into countless old books, searching for support for his scheme. Anything that suggested Asia might be within reach, he latched on to. Anything that counseled caution, he ignored. Soon, he began to pester anyone of importance to help him arrange a meeting with the rulers of Europe.

Right Time and Right Place

It just so happened that Columbus was in the right place at the right time. In the late 1400's, the rulers of Europe were looking for a new way to reach Asia. For centuries they had been getting fine silks and spices by traveling east overland to Arabia and to India. But during the last 100 years, the powerful Ottoman Empire had taken over these routes to Asia, demanding much higher prices for the goods.

When Columbus appealed to the king and queen of Spain, they eventually agreed. Sure the plan was crazy, but the rulers had to compete with Portugal. There the king (who had already rejected Columbus) was sponsoring a voyage to Asia by way of the Southern tip of Africa.

Aboard the Santa Maria, luck took over once again, Columbus was aiming northwest, for Japan. Only thanks to strong winds that carried him south did he manage to “discover” the Bahamas.

But that's where Columbus's luck ended. During the first voyage, he ran a ship aground while sleeping off a celebration. Then he started a colony of 39 men, all of whom were killed by Tainos (the European term for the inhabitants of

Hispaniola). In later expeditions, he turned the finances of the first successful colony, Hispaniola, into chaos. On his last voyage, the navigator was shipwrecked on Jamaica for almost a year. Unashamed, he returned to Europe, insisting that he not only found Asia, but also the Garden of Eden!

The year after Columbus's death came the final reminder of the explorer's mistakes. In 1507, the New World was named "America," after his rival, Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci.

If only Columbus had realized that he had bumbled into a New World, we might be living in Columbusland.

Biography 3

The Greedy Fortune Hunter

“Gold is most excellent. He who possesses gold may do all he wishes in this world.”

These were the words of Christopher Columbus – the man we have come to know as a heroic adventurer. In fact, there was nothing heroic about Columbus; he was, quite simply, greedy.

And the European invasion of the Americas was nothing more than a quest for profit – a quest that has led to the death of millions and the destruction of the environment.

It's no great surprise that Columbus turned out the way he did. He grew up in Genoa, a port city full of merchants and bankers. It was a city driven by money and the search for new ways of making it – regardless of the cost to others.

Chances are that some of the ships Columbus sailed on in his youth returned from Africa with cargos of chained men, ready to be sold into slavery. But it appears Columbus wasn't making enough money to satisfy himself. He went to Portugal in 1476 and became obsessed with the writings of Marco Polo, an Italian who traveled in Asia in the 1200's. One can imagine Columbus's eyes widening as he read Polo's account of Cathay (China), the kingdom of the Great Khan, where houses had roofs of gold and costly spices grew everywhere.

Dreaming of riches, Columbus conceived an “enterprise,” a business deal. He became a salesman, and made his presentation to anyone in a position of influence. Columbus drove a hard bargain. He wanted 10 percent of any riches produced in the lands he might discover; he wanted to govern those lands; and he wanted the title of Admiral of the Ocean Sea, which would be passed on to his descendents.

Deception and Cruelty

Portugal turned him down – most explorers demanded nothing besides the cost of voyage. But Columbus didn't care whose flag he sailed under. He simply did what any businessman would do; he went to the competition.

In Spain his presentation was probably full of boasts and exaggerations. But the Spanish took the bait, and Columbus set sail.

From here on, the story becomes one of deception, greed, and cruelty. Even the day the ships arrived in the Bahamas is marked by injustice. A reward had been offered to the first sailor to sight land. But when Juan Rodriguez Bermejo cried out, “Tierra!” from his lookout post on October 12, Columbus claimed he had seen a light the night before, and kept the reward for himself.

After the landing, things got worse. Trying to squeeze the islands dry, Columbus enslaved the Indians. He demanded that each adult Taino bring gold every three months. There was scarcely any gold on the island, so most of the

Indians came to him empty-handed. They left with no hands at all: Columbus cut them off.

The Admiral, as he was now called, was also cruel to his own people. "When the settlers on Hispaniola grew hungry and sick, Columbus still commanded them to hunt for more gold. He withheld people's salaries and even ordered colonists hanged for crimes as minor as stealing fruit.

The discredited explorer spent the final years of his life haggling over his right to 10 percent of the revenues from the New World. As he suffered through a horrible illness, what may have caused him the most pain was the thought of riches lying just beyond his grasp.