

## Christopher Columbus and the Tainos

Students in Core Knowledge schools should have studied Christopher Columbus in earlier grades, but it makes sense to review his voyage again in this grade and place it in the larger context of the Age of Exploration.

Columbus was born in the Italian city of Genoa, but eventually became an explorer for Ferdinand and Isabella, rulers of territories that joined together to form the modern nation of Spain. As a young man, Columbus studied map-making and became a sailor. He sailed with the Portuguese along the western coast of Africa in the 1480s. About this time the Portuguese began looking for a route around Africa to India and the Spice Islands. But Columbus had another idea. He believed that Earth was smaller than in fact it is, and he concluded that it should be possible to reach the Indies by sailing west.

In 1484 Columbus presented his idea to the Portuguese king. The king chose not to support the mission. After several years of lobbying, Columbus succeeded in convincing Ferdinand and Isabella to support his expedition.

Columbus sailed with three ships, the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria. They left in August of 1492. After a stop in the Canary Islands, the ships began sailing west. The crew soon grew nervous at how far they had sailed into unknown territory. In early October, land was finally sighted.

Columbus landed on an island in the Bahamas on October 12, 1492. Columbus promptly renamed the island San Salvador (Saint Salvador) and claimed it for Spain. The first native Americans whom Christopher Columbus met in the New World were the Taino, speakers of the Arawak languages. The Taino were nomadic hunters and gatherers who inhabited several islands in the Caribbean.

Columbus described his impressions of the people and the land in his journal:

. . . [T]his people has no religion nor are they idolaters, but very mild and without knowing what evil is, nor how to kill others, nor how to take them, and without arms, and so timorous that from one of our men ten of them fly, although they do sport with them, and ready to believe and knowing that there is a God in heaven, and sure that we have come from heaven; and very ready at any prayer which we tell them to repeat, and they make the sign of the cross.

So your Highness should determine to make them Christians, for I believe that if they begin, in a short time they will have accomplished converting to our holy faith a multitude of towns. Without doubt there are in these lands the greatest quantities of gold, for not without cause do these Indians whom I am bringing say that there are places in these isles where they dig out gold and wear it on their necks, in their ears and on their arms and legs, and the bracelets are very thick.

In December of that year, on an island that Columbus renamed Hispaniola, the Taino helped his crew build a fort, La Navidad, from the lumber of the wrecked Santa Maria. Expecting to return with more ships, supplies, and colonists, Columbus left some of his crewmen on Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and sailed back to Spain. When he returned to La Navidad a year later, Columbus found that the Taino had killed the sailors in retaliation for the sailors' demands for food, gold, and labor.

These killings, combined with attacks on the Spanish by small groups of Taino and other native peoples on other Caribbean islands, provoked Columbus to use force. As the newly appointed governor of all lands he discovered, Columbus built a second fort on Hispaniola and assigned to it the soldiers who had come on the expedition with him. The soldiers, with their metal armor, guns, and horses, easily subdued the Taino. Columbus then demanded gold from the Taino and ordered that 550 Taino be sent to Spain as slaves. (39)

After two more voyages Columbus was relieved of his post as governor of the new lands because of mismanagement and sent back to Spain. However, the brutal precedent he set in regard to the treatment of native peoples was followed by his successors, who enslaved them by the thousands.

## Treaty of Tordesillas

Portugal and Spain took the lead in the exploration of the Americas, and since the two nations were rivals, there was a possibility that they would come into conflict over colonies. To avoid this, in 1493, the pope had established a line of demarcation roughly down the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, dividing the non-European world between Spain and Portugal. Spain was to have the Americas to colonize and Portugal would control Africa and Asia. The following year, the two nations negotiated the Treaty of Tordesillas, which shifted the line of demarcation west. This movement in the imaginary line secured Portugal's claim to Brazil. Essentially, the Spanish and the Portuguese divided up a large portion of the world between them. No consideration was given to the other nations of the world or to the wishes of the native peoples themselves.