

The First Voyage: The Discovery

On Friday, October 12, 1492 the ships sighted land and the New World was discovered, although the men aboard did not know it yet. There was a reward of 10,000 maravedis (more than a year's wages for a typical sailor) from the Spanish Crown to the man who first sighted land. Columbus claimed the reward because the night land was sighted he thought he earlier saw a light in the West. It was flimsy evidence, but Columbus stole the reward from the sailor who first sighted land.

According to his log, Columbus believed that he had reached Asia and was near Japan and the Chinese Empire. At dawn, Columbus and his armed Spaniards went ashore, unfurled their flags, planted a cross, and claimed the land in the name of the king and queen of Spain. That ceremony attended the Spanish wherever they went.

Immediately after Columbus finished making his announcement of taking possession, the natives began arriving on the beach. They were all naked and friendly, and Columbus described those new Spanish subjects at some length. Some natives carried short wooden spears, but were so unacquainted with weaponry that when Columbus showed a native his sword, the man grabbed the sword by the blade and cut himself.

On that epic day of first contact, three evident dynamics presaged future trends. They obviously had no common language or culture, and Columbus badly misunderstood much of what the natives tried telling him using gestures. Second was Columbus's judgment of how easily the natives could be turned into Christians. Third was the event that Columbus finished that day's log with. Columbus inferred from native gestures that natives from other islands enslaved them. He thought that those natives would make fine slaves himself, so he captured six of them that first day.

On the second day of discovery, Columbus made first mention of the subject that dominated his logs: gold. He noticed that some natives had gold jewelry in their noses, so he made the first inquiry, an inquiry that initiated the **Spanish obsession for the next century**: "Where's the gold?"

The standard sequence of events was going ashore to new land, claiming it for Spain, planting a cross and asking where the gold was. Columbus's voyage of discovery was really a gold hunt. In Columbus's log of December 26, 1492, he made his journey's purpose clear: to find enough gold to finance another **Crusade** to conquer Jerusalem.

While reading Columbus's log, I was struck by how many times Columbus ordered his men to not steal from the natives. Columbus made sure the Spaniards would be on their best behavior for those initial encounters. The natives freely gave all they had, or would trade objects of immense value for baubles. Columbus continually expressed his amazement that the natives traded all manner of goods to the Spaniards for trinkets, or simply gave them away. As the boats sailed from island to island, the most common native reaction was fleeing when the Spaniards showed up (some seem to have thought that the ships were sea monsters, while others timidly fled from the strange men and boats). The other reaction was warmly welcoming the Spaniards. Columbus and his men never received a hostile reception on that voyage.

Columbus regularly remarked on the astounding beauty of the islands and the natives' friendly, happy, peaceful nature, but the obsession of his writings was always where the gold

was and how the islands' wealth could be exploited. A mere three days into his gold quest, on October 14th, Columbus made clear what he thought of the natives' military might. His log informed his king and queen, "With fifty men you could subject every one and make them do what you wished."

On October 15th the ships anchored at an island where the natives "let us go anywhere we desired and gave us anything we asked." After staying a couple of hours and determining that there was no gold, they prepared to leave. One of the captives then escaped by jumping overboard, as another had done the previous night. Columbus's men tried capturing the natives, but their boat was too quick. Columbus indicated to the local natives that his captives were with him because they had harmed him, but that ruse was probably unconvincing.

After sailing through the islands, visiting and trading with natives who had not fled, the ships came to another island on November 11. There a canoe with six "youths" in it approached the ship, and five came aboard. Columbus captured them. Then he sent his men ashore, where they captured seven women and three children. Columbus was modifying a standard Portuguese practice used in Africa, one he said he used many times when he was a slave runner: capturing the natives, taking them back to Europe, teaching them his language, and bringing them back as interpreters. It had not worked well with Africans, because the natives were not happy with their treatment, but Columbus thought that if he abducted entire families, he might have better luck. That evening, with his slave stock replenished, Columbus was delighted when a man came to the ship and asked to come aboard, as among the new captives were his wife and three children. Columbus happily allowed the man to become enslaved with his family.

On November 21, gold fever may have overcome the Pinta's captain, as he sailed away in search of gold. Columbus was outraged, but had no option but to continue with his two remaining ships.

After sailing along the coast of Cuba, asking about gold and riches, Columbus reached the island that he named La Isla Española, on December 6, 1492. Haiti and the Dominican Republic are on that island today. It was the first place permanently colonized by Europeans in the Western Hemisphere.

As usual, the natives fled when they saw the ships. Columbus and his men had to work hard at convincing the natives of their friendly intentions, especially when they had captured natives aboard. As they sailed along the coast, their reception was either friendly or the natives fled. Columbus began to understand the political order, and discovered that men called caciques were leaders of some sort. It was a hereditary office.

By "discovering" the Caribbean's inhabitants, Columbus had stumbled into a civilization about 1,500 years old. Española was the center of that island civilization, and a people known today as the Taino dominated it. They had migrated from South America, along the archipelago of Caribbean islands at about the time Jesus lived, gradually displacing a hunter-gatherer culture. The Taino were an Arawakan people. The Taino were by far the largest group and occupied the greatest portion of Caribbean land. The Taino's material and spiritual culture was what all other Caribbean groups based their culture on. The Taino were settled in agricultural communities and possessed a rich and diverse food supply. Life was easy in the pre-Columbian Caribbean, and if there could be any generalizations made of the Taino, particularly as compared to today, it would be their happiness and gentleness. Their world was about as close to earthly paradise as human existence has ever come, a fact that

was not lost on Columbus, as he often remarked upon it in his log. He regularly observed that the natives did not seem **capable of dishonesty**.

On December 25, 1492, with Columbus aboard, the Santa Maria ran aground at night while a boy was steering. The local village came to the rescue and unloaded the sinking ship. Columbus was amazed at the natives' helpfulness, and assured his king and queen that "not even a shoe string was lost!" The leader of the helpful local village welcomed the stranded sailors.

Because their largest ship was destroyed, Columbus left behind about 40 Spaniards and they built a fort from the ship's timbers. Many of Columbus's men begged to stay instead of sailing back to Spain. Columbus admitted that no fort was necessary among such friendly and peaceful people, but he could not put aside his European conditioning. Columbus wanted to condition the natives to obey their new Spanish overlords (although they did not know they had overlords yet) out of "love and fear." So Columbus had a Lombard and musket fired in a demonstration of power, frightening those happy, helpful natives.

On January 16, 1493, the ships were sailing back across the Atlantic, soon after they had murdered two natives while trading on January 13th. Columbus described those murdered natives and their people as "evil, and I believe they are from the island of Caribe, and that they eat men." That characterized the attitude that prevailed during the second voyage and beyond. If the natives were friendly and welcoming, they were the gentle Taino. If they were less than welcoming or were unfortunate enough to be murdered by the Spaniards, they were cannibalistic savages, deserving whatever fate the Spaniards could dish out.

On that first epic voyage, Columbus began the unfounded myth that the Caribbean natives practiced cannibalism. About the only evidence there ever was for Caribbean cannibalism came from Columbus's imagination while he interpreted native gestures. His misunderstandings correlated with European mythology. Columbus wrote of savage cannibals, people with an eye in the middle of their forehead, and dog-like noses that drink the blood of their victims after cutting their throats. Columbus found in native gestures what he expected to find.

When Columbus arrived back in Spain, his sponsors (the king and queen of Spain) were pleased to hear of new lands to exploit. Let there be no misunderstanding their intentions. It is true that Queen Isabella did not want to enslave the natives. She wanted loyal subjects. Yet, the sovereigns frowned on slavery only after it became evident that the natives made poor and unprofitable slaves, because they quickly died when shipped to Europe.