

## Christopher Columbus: The Man Versus The Myth

The information that Columbus wanted most was: Where is the gold? He had persuaded the king and queen of Spain to finance his expedition to the lands... For, like other knowledgeable and informed people of his time, he knew the world was round and that because of this, he would be able to sail west in order to get to the Far East.

He set out with three sailing ships, the largest of which was the Santa Maria, perhaps 100 feet long with 39 crewmembers. Columbus would never have made it to Asia... one-fourth of the way there he came upon an unknown uncharted land that lay between Europe and Asia—the Americas. It was early October 1492 and while they were sailing, they saw branches and sticks floating in the water. They also saw flocks of birds. These were signs of land. Then, on October 12, a sailor named Rodrigo cried out that he saw land. What Rodrigo saw was an island in the Bahamas, in the Caribbean Sea. The first man to see land was supposed to receive a yearly pension of 10,000 maravedis for life, but Rodrigo never received any of this money. Columbus claimed he had seen a light the evening before and because of this, Columbus received the reward.

So, approaching land, Columbus and his crew were met by the Arawak Indians, who swam out to greet them. The Arawaks lived in village communes, had a developed agriculture of corn, yams, and cassava. They had no iron, but they wore tiny gold ornaments in their ears. This was to have enormous consequences: it led Columbus to take some of them aboard his ship as prisoners because he insisted that they guide him to the source of their gold. He then sailed to what is now Cuba, and then to Hispaniola (the island which now today consists of Haiti and the Dominican Republic). There, bits of visible gold in the rivers, and a gold mask presented to Columbus by a local Indian chief, led to wild visions of gold-fields.

On one part of the island of Hispaniola, Columbus got into a fight with some Indians who refused to trade bows and arrows with the Spaniards. Two of the Indians were run through with swords and bled to death. The Nina and the Pinta (the two other ships Columbus brought with him) set sail for Spain. When the weather turned cold, the Indian prisoners began to die.

The Indians, Columbus reported, "are so naïve and so free with their possessions that no one who has not witnessed them would believe it. When you ask for something they have, they never say no. To the contrary, they offer to share with anyone..." The next time he came to the New World, Columbus's goal was clear: slaves and gold. He went with his crew from island to island in the Caribbean, taking Indians as captives. In the year 1495, they went on a great slave raid, rounding up fifteen hundred Arawak men, women, and children, putting them in pens guarded by dogs, then picking the 500 best specimens to load onto the ships. Of those 500 people, 200 died on the way to Spain.

But too many of the slaves died in captivity. And so Columbus, desperate to pay back the people who had invested, had to make good his promise to fill the ships with gold. On the island of Haiti in the Caribbean, the Spaniards ordered all persons 14 years and older to collect a certain quantity of gold every three months. When they brought it, they were given copper tokens to hang around their necks. Indians found without a copper token had their hands cut off and bled to death. The Indians were killed because without the tokens around their neck, it meant they were not making any money for Columbus.

The Indians had been given an impossible task. The only gold was bits of dust taken from the streams. So they fled, were hunted down with dogs, and were killed. Trying to put together an army of resistance, the Arawaks faced Spaniards who had armor, muskets, swords, and horses. When the Spaniards took prisoners they were hung or burned to death. Among the Arawaks, mass suicides began, with cassava poison. In two years, through murder, mutilation, or suicide, half of the 250,000 Indians on Haiti were dead.