

The Discovery of America



Overview :

Americans get a day off work on October 10 to celebrate Columbus Day. It's an annual holiday that commemorates the day on October 12, 1492, when the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus officially set foot in the Americas, and claimed the land for Spain. It has been a national holiday in the United States since 1937. It is commonly said that "Columbus discovered America." It would be more accurate, perhaps, to say that he introduced the Americas to Western Europe during his four voyages to the region between 1492 and 1502. It's also safe to say that he paved the way for the massive influx of western Europeans that would ultimately form several new nations including the United States, Canada and Mexico. But to say he "discovered" America is a bit of a misnomer because there were plenty of people already here when he arrived.

Columbus's Description of the Discovery of America (1492):

The passage below is taken from a version of Columbus's journals edited by Bartolomeo de Las Casas. As you read the passage, imagine the thrill of discovery that would have been experienced by the sailors on board Columbus's ships. For them this was truly a venture into the unknown. For many years Columbus's landing was judged to have been made on San Salvador (Watling Island). A recent study retracing the voyage suggests that Columbus landed on the island of Samana Cay, more than sixty miles to the southeast of San Salvador. Many scholars will not agree with this new assertion, and the exact location of the island does not change the nature of the reaction shown in this journal.



The Passage:

"... the Admiral requested and admonished them to keep a sharp lookout at the castle of the bow, and to look well for land, and said that he would give to him who first saw land a silk doublet, besides the other rewards which the King and Queen had promised, namely and annual pension of ten thousand maravedis to him who should see it first. Two hours after midnight, the land appeared about two leagues off. They lowered all the sails, leaving only a storm square sail, which is the mainsail without bonnets, and lay to until Friday when they reached a small island of the Lucayos, called Guanahani by the natives. They soon saw people naked, and the Admiral went on shore in the armed boatAs soon as they had landed they saw trees of a brilliant green abundance of water and fruits of various kinds. The Admiral called the two captains and the rest who had come on shore . . . and he called them as witnesses to certify that he in the presence of them all, was taking, as he in fact took possession of said island for the king and Queen his masters, making the declarations that were required as they will be found more fully in the attestations then taken down in writing. Soon after a large crowd of natives congregated there. What follows are the Admiral's own words in his book on the first voyage and discovery of these Indies. "In order to win the friendship and affection of that people, and because I am convinced that their conversion to our Holy Faith would be better promoted through love than through force; I presented some of them with red caps and some strings of glass beads which they placed around their necks, and with other trifles of insignificant worth that delighted them and by which we have got a wonderful hold on their affections.

They afterwards came to the boats of the vessels swimming, bringing us parrots, cotton thread in balls, and spears, and many other things which they bartered for others we gave them, as glass beads and little bells. I saw but one very young girl, all the rest being very young men, none of them being over thirty years of age; their forms being very well proportioned; their bodies graceful and their features handsome: their hair is as course as the hair of a horse's tail and cut short: they wear their hair over their eyebrows except a little behind which they wear long, and which they never cut: some of them paint themselves black, and they are of the color of the Canary islanders, neither black nor white, and some paint themselves white, and some red, and some with whatever they find, and some paint their faces and some the whole body, and some their eyes only, and some their noses only. They do not carry arms and have no knowledge of them, for when I showed them our swords they took them by the edge, and through ignorance, cut themselves. They have no iron; their spears consist of staffs without iron, some of them having a fish's tooth at the end, and others other things. As a body they are of good size, good demeanor, and well formed. . . . They must be very good servants and very intelligent, because I see that they repeat very quickly what I told them, and it is my conviction that they would easily become Christians, for they seem not [to] have any sect "

[From Christopher Columbus, Journals, Thursday, October 11, and Friday October 12, 1492.]