

Christopher Columbus Didn't Discover the New World; he Rediscovered it

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Viking Leif Erikson discovers North America before Christopher Columbus. Photo from Wikimedia.

In 1492, the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean islands—a momentous event in world history. Although Europeans would not realize it for several years, he had accidentally “discovered” the Americas. The Americas are the continents of the Western Hemisphere: North America (which includes Central America and the Caribbean islands) and South America. Europeans called these continents the “New World” because at the time they were wholly unknown to people of the world’s other continents. This article discusses the European discovery and early exploration of the Americas, including the great era of maritime exploration known as the Age of Discovery, or the Age of Exploration. For information on the European settlement of the Americas, see *Americas, colonization of the*.

The first peoples to explore and settle the Americas, however, were not Europeans, but the ancestors of the American Indians. These early explorers were members of nomadic hunter-gatherer cultural groups. They moved from Asia to North America during the last Ice Age, when thick ice sheets covered much of northern North America. As the ice sheets absorbed water, the sea levels dropped and a land bridge emerged along what is now the Bering Strait. From about 30,000 to 12,000 years ago, this land bridge connected northeastern Asia to what

is now Alaska. Some peoples came to North America by following the Pacific coast southward. They may have combined walking with boat travel. Others walked across a glacier-free area through the center of what is now Canada.

Continued melting of the ice gradually opened up the land, allowing people to spread out across North America and down into South America. No single person made any large part of the long journey; one group after another continued the march over many centuries. The first Europeans did not arrive in the Americas until many thousands of years later. By that time, the Indians had explored and settled all portions of the “New World.”

Early European explorers

It is not known for certain when the first Europeans reached the Americas. Legends tell of early visitors from Ireland and Wales. According to an epic tale, St. Brendan and other Irish monks made an astonishing journey westward through the Atlantic Ocean in the 6th century A.D. They are said to have reached a large land mass. It has been speculated that this land could have been North America or the Canary Islands. Although St. Brendan was a real person, the tale of his Atlantic journey was likely fiction.

Another legendary traveler, Madog ab Owain Gwynedd of Wales, was said to have reached North America in the 12th century. He supposedly sailed to Ireland and then westward. Some people have believed that Madog and his party became the ancestors of a group of American Indians who were said to speak Welsh. However, most anthropologists believe that the story of Madog is not true.

In the 9th century, the Vikings of Norway, or the Norsemen, arrived in Iceland, which had already been settled by Irish colonists. Irish refugees from Iceland, fleeing before the advance of the Vikings, may have been the first Europeans to arrive in Greenland and Newfoundland (now in northeastern Canada), though this is mere surmise. Greenland, a large island in the North Atlantic Ocean, is considered part of North America.

The Vikings of Norway are the first Europeans known to have visited North America. A Viking named Erik Thorvaldsson sailed near Greenland in the 10th century. The Viking, known as Erik the Red (because of his red hair and beard), was the first to colonize the island. In about 980, Erik was banished from Iceland after he killed a neighbor in a quarrel. He decided to spend his exile exploring Greenland. Erik sailed in 982 with his household and livestock and established a colony on the southwest coast of Greenland. During Erik’s three-year exile, the settlers encountered no other people, though they explored to the north.



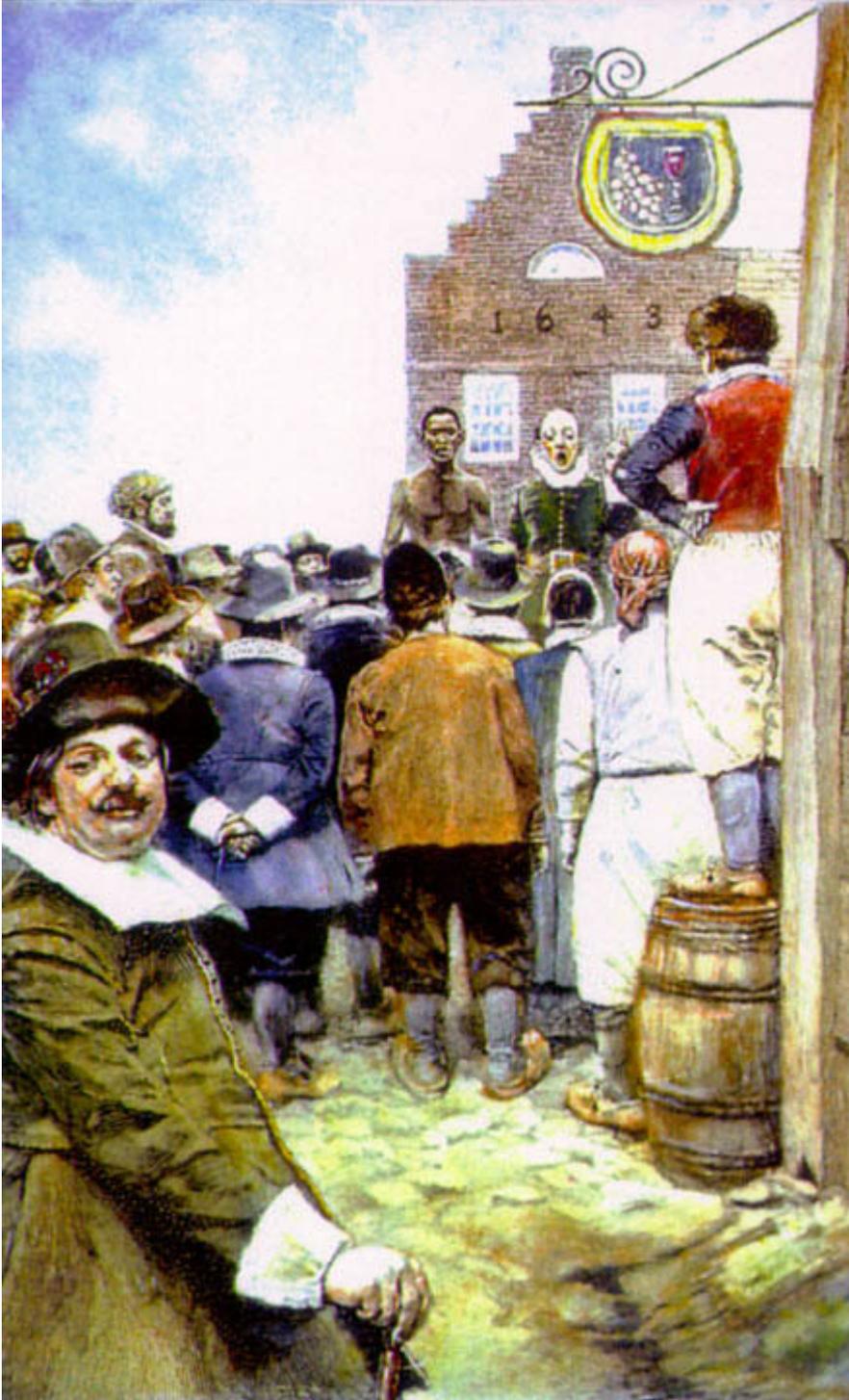
Erik returned to Iceland in 986. He wanted to persuade the Norse people there to help him colonize the land he had explored, so he gave the icy island a favorable name: Greenland. His descriptions of the territory convinced many people to join a return expedition. By the year 1000 there were an estimated 1,000 Scandinavian settlers in the colony.

The first Europeans to land on the mainland of North America were the Viking explorer Leif Erikson and his party. Leif was one of Erik the Red's sons and had accompanied him to Greenland. The exploits of Erik and Leif are the subjects of Norse sagas, which are stories or histories in prose. According to one of the sagas, a man named Bjarni Herjolfsson was blown off course while sailing from Iceland to Greenland in about the year 1000. He was carried far to the southwest, where he saw an unknown shore, and then returned to tell his tale. Leif Erikson and about 30 other people set out in 1001 to explore this land. They probably reached the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador (now in northeastern Canada). Modern archaeologists have found evidence of Viking settlements there from about Leif's time.

The expedition continued southward, reaching a warmer wooded land where "wine berries," or grapes, grew. They named this place Vinland, meaning "Wine Land," though the fruit they found may actually have been cranberries. Vinland may have been in what is now Maryland or Virginia, in the southern United States, or perhaps the lands around the Gulf of St. Lawrence, in southeastern Canada.

Leif and the other members of the expedition built houses in Vinland and explored the region before returning to Greenland. Later Viking expeditions tried to establish colonies, but within a few years their trade with the local Indians had turned to warfare. The colonists gave up and returned to Greenland. In about 1013, Erik the Red's daughter Freydis led an unsuccessful expedition to Vinland. So ended the Norse visits to the Americas as far as the historical record is concerned. Little knowledge of these first discoveries came down to the next European explorers to reach the Americas, hundreds of years later. The Age of Discovery (or the Age of Exploration) Europeans "rediscovered" the Americas during the great period of maritime exploration known as the Age of Discovery, in the 15th and 16th centuries. During this period, Europeans also explored the coasts of Africa, sent ships directly to India and Southeast Asia, and sailed completely around the globe.

The effects of the Age of Discovery were diverse and profound worldwide. European exploration ushered in globalization—the development of economic and cultural links throughout the world. Europeans conquered and colonized distant lands, establishing vast empires. In the Americas, violent conquest and diseases accidentally brought over by the Europeans killed enormous numbers of Indians. Smallpox, yellow fever, malaria, influenza and measles were among the diseases spread to the New World. Indian populations further decreased as Europeans forced them to work on plantations and in mines under harsh conditions. Europeans later imported black African slaves to the Americas to replace the Indians as a labor source. Meanwhile, gold and silver poured back to Europe from the mines, enriching European economies.



European exploration led to the exchange of plants, animals, germs, technologies and ideas across continents in what is now called the Columbian Exchange (after Christopher Columbus). A significant portion of the crops now used to feed the world's population originated in the Americas and were spread as a result of the Age of Discovery. Potatoes, corn (maize), tomatoes, sweet potatoes, squash, cassava, cacao (the source of chocolate), hot peppers, peanuts (groundnuts), pineapple and tobacco were among the crops introduced to Europe, Africa and Asia from the Americas. New food sources from more productive crops led to population booms in the Old World. Europeans introduced domesticated animals such as

horses, cattle, sheep and pigs to the Americas. The Europeans also brought new crops such as wheat, rice, oats, bananas, olives, sugarcane and coffee to the Americas and introduced steel and guns. Sugar and cotton began to be produced in great quantities on New World plantations, which led to the creation of sugar processing and cotton textile industries in Europe. In addition, the capitalist system of Europe grew and spread. Missionaries from Europe introduced Christianity far and wide.

Advances fostering exploration

The Viking discoveries were little known to other Europeans of the Middle Ages. Most medieval Europeans were ignorant of other places in the world. Maps of the time generally showed only a broad strip of land and water reaching from Greenland south to the Mediterranean coasts of Europe and Africa and far eastward to China's Pacific shore.

Several events and developments in the years preceding the Age of Discovery served to increase Europeans' curiosity about the world. Christians from Europe had been fighting in wars, called the Crusades, in western Asia. The Crusaders had brought wonderful products home from Asia. People were also excited by the story of Marco Polo, which told of his trip to China in the 1200s and the great wonders there.

Ships called caravels, which were small, light and quick, came increasingly into use in the early 15th century. They were propelled by sails and were steered by a rudder. Caravels were often equipped with lateen (triangular) sails rather than square sails. The ancient square sail permitted sailing only before the wind; that is, with the wind generally behind the ship. The lateen sail was a major advance because it allowed the ship to sail close to the direction from which the wind blew.

When explorers began making longer voyages, a ship called a carrack or nao proved better than the caravel. The carrack was a rounder, heavier ship more fitted to cope with ocean winds. It had both square and lateen sails. The carrack also had more room to store provisions for longer journeys as well as the spices and other trade goods the explorers acquired.

Discoveries in the science of the stars—astronomy—helped sailors navigate their ships better. Many people knew that Earth is round. Part of the new knowledge came from the long-forgotten writings of great thinkers of ancient Greece and Rome. This rebirth of interest in ancient learning was called the Renaissance.

The rediscovery of an important ancient Greek work, Ptolemy's Guide to Geography, greatly increased interest in cartography, the art and science of mapmaking. Developments in printing and engraving helped make maps more widely available. Geographers were also able to make maps more and more accurate, partly because better instruments were being used for astronomical observation and navigation of ships.



The magnetic compass had reached Europe in the 1100s. Within a hundred years or so, sea captains learned to rely on it for direction-finding. In addition, navigators began using devices known as the cross-staff and the astrolabe to determine a ship's latitude (north-south position). Little by little it became safer for sailors to venture into unknown seas. Sailors made discoveries that allowed cartographers to make better maps that showed more of the world; these maps in turn inspired and aided further voyages of exploration.

The desire for new trade routes

European explorers found the New World by mistake; they were not looking to find new continents but new sea routes. Europeans mainly wanted to find better trade routes to China, India and Southeast Asia. They valued many products from Asia, including cloves, pepper and other spices that were used to make food taste good and to keep it from spoiling. Also in demand were such luxuries as sheer, colorful silken cloths, rich carpets and sparkling jewelry. The wealth of the East had been trickling into western Europe mainly by overland routes. Asian merchandise was thus both scarce and expensive in Europe. Goods changed hands many times before they reached the consumer, and at each exchange the cost increased. The merchandise was transported by camel or horse caravans, with each animal carrying only a comparatively small load. Ships could carry goods more cheaply and in greater quantity. The

Italian port cities were satisfied with their monopoly of the old trading routes. On the other hand, Portugal, Spain, England and France wanted to find new sea routes to Asia in order to import goods directly.

The older trading routes were also becoming less useful. While the Mongols controlled a vast empire in China and Central Asia, traders had been able to travel the overland routes safely. Toward the end of the 14th century the empire began to break apart, and Western merchants were no longer assured of safe conduct along the land routes. In addition, the Ottoman Turks, who were hostile to Christians, were gaining power. They blocked the outlets to the Mediterranean Sea and thus to the ancient sea routes from the East. The Ottomans also effectively closed the land routes.

Quiz

- 1 Read the sentence from the section "Advances fostering exploration."

The rediscovery of an important ancient Greek work, Ptolemy's Guide to Geography, greatly increased interest in cartography, the art and science of mapmaking.

Based on this sentence, which of the following conclusions can be drawn?

- (A) Medieval Europeans might not have been able to make the discoveries they did if they had not had access to ancient Greek works.
 - (B) The ancient Greeks had already discovered many parts of the world that medieval Europeans had not.
 - (C) Medieval Europeans would have known nothing about cartography or geography without ancient Greek works.
 - (D) The ancient Greeks were significantly smarter scientists and braver explorers than medieval Europeans.
- 2 Which of the following sentences from the section "Early European explorers" BEST shows Erik the Red's passion for exploration?
- (A) In about 980, Erik was banished from Iceland after he killed a neighbor in a quarrel.
 - (B) Erik sailed in 982 with his household and livestock and established a colony on the southwest coast of Greenland.
 - (C) He wanted to persuade the Norse people there to help him colonize the land he had explored, so he gave the icy island a favorable name: Greenland.
 - (D) The exploits of Erik and Leif are the subjects of Norse sagas, which are stories or histories in prose.
- 3 What is the MOST likely reason why the author included the image in the section "Early European explorers"?
- (A) to highlight the superior weaponry the Vikings had
 - (B) to show a famous Viking to help readers visualize how they were outfitted
 - (C) to emphasize it was the Vikings, not the Europeans, who first discovered the Americas
 - (D) to contrast common knowledge about the Vikings' appearance with the reality of how they looked

- 4 What limitation does the image in the section "Advances fostering exploration" have that the text in the section does not have?
- (A) The image does not help readers visualize the routes that medieval explorers might have taken.
 - (B) The image only helps readers understand how Europeans visualized the world.
 - (C) The image does not help readers visualize how medieval Europeans understood the world.
 - (D) The image only helps readers visualize one thing in a section with much technical language.

Answer Key

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The rediscovery of an important ancient Greek work, Ptolemy's Guide to Geography, greatly increased interest in cartography, the art and science of mapmaking.

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