

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

By Encyclopaedia Britannica, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.20.17

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

In 1492, Italian explorer Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean islands. Although Europeans would not realize it for several years, this was a momentous, though accidental, discovery. The Americas are the continents of the Western Hemisphere. They are made up of North America, which includes Central America, Greenland, the Caribbean islands and South America. Europeans called these continents the “New World” because at the time they were wholly unknown.

The first peoples to explore and colonize the Americas, however, were not Europeans but the ancestors of the American Indians. These early explorers were members of nomadic hunter-gatherer 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 sea levels dropped, a land bridge emerged across the Bering Strait, which connected Asia to what is now Alaska.

The first Europeans did not arrive in the Americas until many thousands of years later. By that time, the Indians had explored and settled the entire “New World.”

Early European explorers

It is not known exactly 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 500s. The monks are said to have reached a large land mass, which could have been either North America or the Canary Islands.

The Vikings of Norway are the first Europeans known to have visited North America. A Viking named Erik Thorvaldsson, also known as Erik the Red, established a colony in Greenland in 982.

The first Europeans to land on the mainland of North America were a group led by Viking explorer Leif Eriksson, one of Erik the Red's sons. They probably reached the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador in northeastern Canada. Modern archaeologists have found evidence of Viking settlements there from about Leif's time.

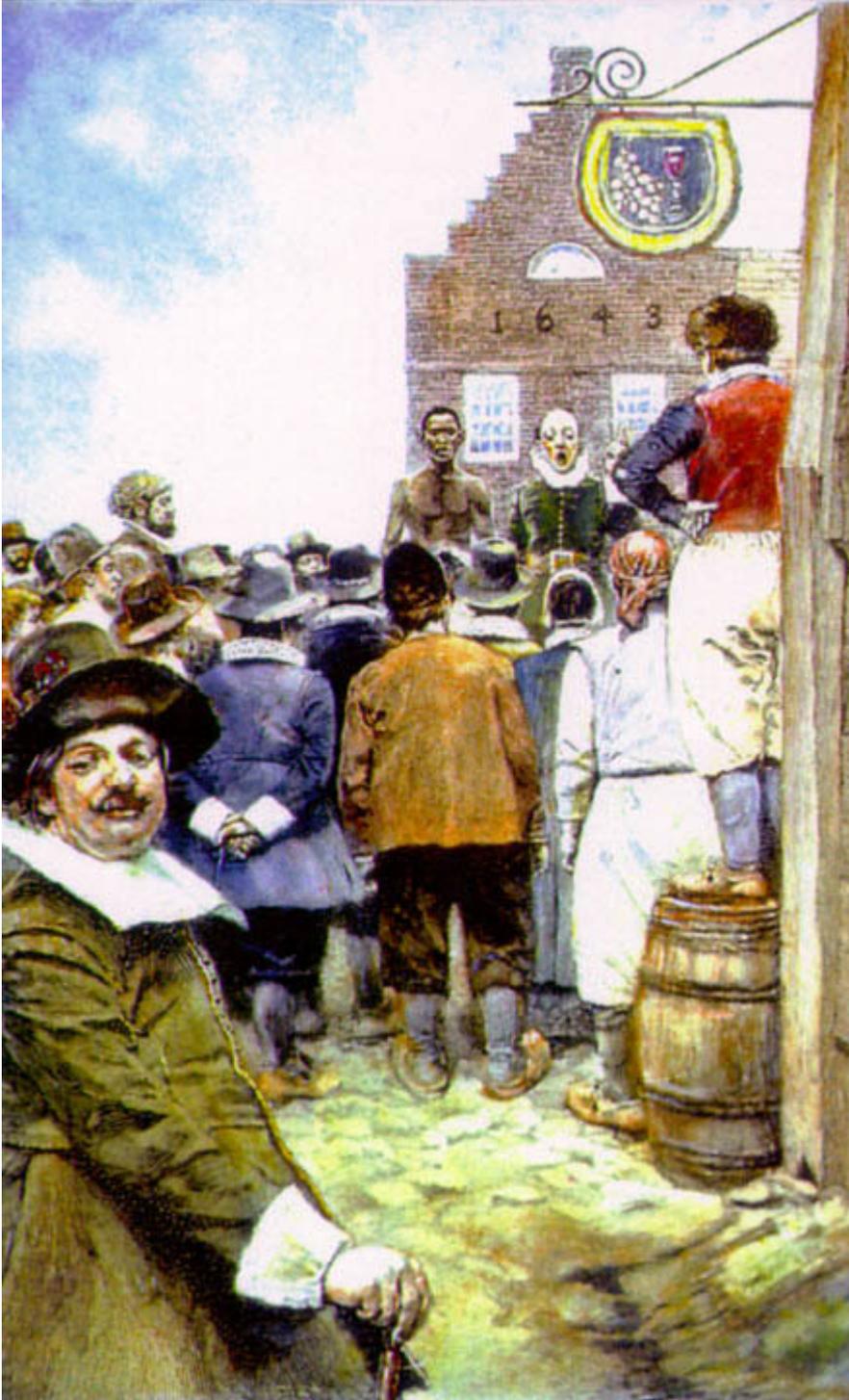


The expedition continued southward, reaching a warmer wooded land where “wine berries,” or grapes, grew. They named this place Vinland, meaning “Wine Land.” Vinland may have been in what is now Maryland or Virginia in the southern United States.

The Age of Discovery (or the Age of Exploration)

In the 1400s and 1500s, Europeans “rediscovered” the Americas during the great period of maritime exploration known as the Age of Discovery. Europeans also explored the coasts of Africa. They sent ships directly to India and Southeast Asia and sailed completely around the globe.

The Age of Discovery had a profound impact worldwide. European exploration created 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. Indian populations further shrunk 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 into Europe from the mines, enriching European countries.



European exploration led to the exchange of plants, animals, germs, technologies and ideas across continents. Many of the crops now used to feed the world came from the Americas and were spread as a result of the Age of Discovery. Potatoes, corn, tomatoes, chocolate, hot peppers, peanuts, pineapple and tobacco were all from the Americas. Europeans brought domesticated animals to the Americas. They 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 were produced in great quantities on New World plantations, which created the sugar processing and cotton textile industries in Europe.

Advances fostering exploration

Most medieval Europeans were ignorant of other places in the world. Several events increased Europeans' curiosity about the world. Christians from Europe fought in wars, called the Crusades, in the Middle East and brought wonderful products home. 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.

Bigger ships that could handle strong ocean wind and hold large amounts of supplies were invented, making it possible to sail across the ocean. Discoveries in the science of the stars—astronomy—helped sailors navigate their ships better. Part of the new knowledge came from the writings 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, or mapmaking. Developments in printing and engraving helped make maps more widely available. Geographers made maps more and more accurate. Better instruments were being used for astronomical observation and navigation of ships.



The magnetic compass had reached Europe in the 1100s. In addition, navigators began using the cross-staff and the astrolabe to determine a ship's latitude, or its north-south position. Little by little it became safer for sailors to venture into unknown seas.

The desire for new trade routes

European explorers found the New World by mistake; they were looking for better trade routes to China, India and Southeast Asia. Spices, carpets, jewels and silks had been trickling into Europe mainly by overland routes, which were becoming more dangerous. Asian merchandise was scarce and expensive in Europe. Ships could carry goods more cheaply and in greater quantity.

Quiz

- 1 Look at the image in the section "The Age of Discovery (or the Age of Exploration)."
Which conclusion is supported by both the image and the article?
 - (A) Europeans enjoyed slavery markets and often wore their finest clothes.
 - (B) Europeans profited from the slave trade in the New World.
 - (C) Europeans did not know how to grow staple crops like potatoes and corn, but slaves did.
 - (D) Europeans living in New Amsterdam were more likely to use slaves for textile industries.

- 2 How does the image in the section "Early European explorers" relate to a main idea in the section?
 - (A) The detailed suit of armor emphasizes Erik the Red and the Vikings were powerful explorers.
 - (B) The confused look on his face illustrates Erik the Red had not intended to discover the Americas.
 - (C) The variety of weapons suggest Vikings probably stole weaponry from the places they explored.
 - (D) The use of black and white helps readers understand how long ago the Vikings were exploring.

- 3 Which section of the article highlights the idea that European explorers had significant global effects after they "rediscovered" the Americas?
 - (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-3]
 - (B) "Early European explorers"
 - (C) "The Age of Discovery (or the Age of Exploration)"
 - (D) "Advances fostering exploration"

- 4 According to the section "Advances fostering exploration," which of the following was a cause for Europeans' increased curiosity about the world?
 - (A) the products European Christians brought home from the Crusades
 - (B) Leif Eriksson's stories about his expeditions to North America
 - (C) the emergence of a land bridge across the Bering Strait after sea levels dropped
 - (D) a need for new shipping routes from Europe to different parts of the world

Answer Key

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