CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS: THE AGE OF DISCOVERY

During the 15th and 16th centuries, leaders of several European nations paid for trips abroad in the hope that explorers would find great wealth and undiscovered lands. The Portuguese were the earliest participants in this “Age of Discovery.” Starting in about 1420, small Portuguese ships known as caravels zipped along the African coast, carrying spices, gold, slaves and other goods from Asia and Africa to Europe. Other European nations, particularly Spain, were eager to share in the riches of the “Far East”, Asia. By the end of the 15th century, Spain’s turned its attention to exploration and conquest in other areas of the world.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS: EARLY LIFE

Christopher Columbus, the son of a wool merchant, was born in Genoa in about 1451. When he was still a teenager, he got a job on a merchant ship. He remained at sea until 1470, when French pirates attacked his ship as it sailed north along the Portuguese coast. The boat sank, but the young Columbus floated to shore on a scrap of wood and made his way to Lisbon, where he studied mathematics, astronomy, cartography and navigation. He also began to hatch the plan that would change the world forever.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS: THE FIRST VOYAGE

At the end of the 15th century, it was nearly impossible to reach Asia from Europe by land. The route was long and encounters with hostile armies were difficult to avoid. Portuguese explorers solved this problem by taking to the sea: They sailed south along the West African coast and around the Cape of Good Hope.

But Columbus had a different idea: Why not sail west across the Atlantic instead of around the massive African continent? The young navigator’s logic was sound, but his math was wrong. He argued (incorrectly) that the circumference (distance around the Earth) was much smaller than his other believed it was. Columbus believed that the journey by boat from Europe to Asia should be not only possible but easy. He presented his plan to officials in Portugal and England, but it was not until 1491 that he found a supporting audience: the Spanish King and Queen; Ferdinand and Isabella.

Columbus wanted fame and fortune. Ferdinand and Isabella wanted the same, along with the opportunity to spread the Catholic religion to lands across the globe. (Columbus was also a Catholic.) Columbus’ contract with the Spanish rulers promised that he could keep 10 percent of whatever riches he found, along with a noble title and the governorship of any lands he should encounter.

On August 3, 1492, Columbus and his crew set sail from Spain in three ships: the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria. On October 12, the ships made landfall–not in Asia, as Columbus thought, but on one of the islands in the Bahamas in Central America. For months, Columbus sailed from island to island in what we now know as the Caribbean, looking for the “pearls, precious stones, gold, silver, spices, and other objects and merchandise whatsoever” that he had promised to the Spanish King and Queen, but he did not find much. In March 1493, leaving 40 men behind in a settlement on Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic), he returned to Spain.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS: LATER VOYAGES

About six months later, in September 1493, Columbus returned to the Americas. He found the Hispaniola settlement destroyed. Columbus left his brothers Bartolomeo and Diego behind to rebuild, along with part of his ships’ crew and hundreds of enslaved natives, the Taino people. Then Columbus headed west, with Taino slaves, to continue his search for gold and other riches. Since he didn’t find much Columbus sent 500 Taino slaves to Queen Isabella. The queen was upset–she believed that any people Columbus “discovered” were now Spanish subject and should not be slaves. Queen Isabella angrily returned the explorer’s gift.

In May 1498, Columbus sailed west across the Atlantic for the third time. He visited Trinidad and the South American mainland before returning to the ill-fated Hispaniola settlement, where the Taino had started a bloody revolt against the Columbus brothers’ mismanagement and brutality. Conditions were so bad that Spanish King and Queen had to send a new governor to take over. Christopher Columbus was arrested and returned to Spain in chains.

In 1502, cleared of the most serious charges but stripped of his noble titles, the aging Columbus persuaded the Spanish king to pay for one last trip across the Atlantic. This time, Columbus made it all the way to Panama–just miles from the Pacific Ocean–where he had to abandon two of his four ships in the face of an attack from hostile natives. Empty-handed, the elderly explorer returned to Spain, where he died in 1506.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS: LEGACY

Christopher Columbus did not “discover” the Americas, nor was he even the first European to visit the “New World.” (Viking explorers had sailed to Greenland and Newfoundland in the 11th century.) However, his journey kicked off centuries of exploration and exploitation on the American continents. The consequences of his explorations were severe for the native populations of the areas he and the conquistadores conquered. Disease and environmental changes resulted in the destruction of the majority of the native population over time, while Europeans continued to extract natural resources from these territories. Today, Columbus has a mixed legacy—he is remembered as a daring and path-breaking explorer who transformed the New World, yet his actions also unleashed changes that would eventually devastate the native populations he and his fellow explorers encountered.

Jury Research Questions:

***Directions: You may work with one other jury member to read and answer the questions for each section.***

**CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS: THE AGE OF DISCOVERY**

1. What was the first European nation to begin exploring?

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2. Where did they go and what did they find?

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**CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS: EARLY LIFE**

3. What was Columbus’ first job?

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4. What happened to Columbus as a teenager?

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5. What subjects did Columbus study in Lisbon?

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**CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS: THE FIRST VOYAGE**

6. Why was it difficult to reach Asia by land?

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7. What was Columbus’ new idea?

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8. What was wrong with his idea?

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9. Who decided to support Columbus (and pay for his trip)?

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10. What two things did King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella want from Columbus’ explorations?

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11. What was Columbus promised by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella?

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12. When and where did Columbus land?

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13. What did Columbus search for in the Caribbean?

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14. What did he find?

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**CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS: LATER VOYAGES**

15. What did Columbus find when he got back to the island of Hispanola?

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16. What did Columbus send to Queen Isabella when he did not find many riches?

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17. What did Queen Isabella do with his “gift”? Why?

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18. In May 1498 what happened at the settlement in Hispanola?

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19. What did the King and Queen do after the revolt in Hispanola?

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20. What happened to Columbus?

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