

Worlds Transformed

An Exchange of Cultures

When Christopher Columbus encountered the Taino people on the island they called Guanahani in 1492, he touched off an exchange of plants, animals, diseases, and cultures that transformed worlds. Natives inhabiting the "New World," as the Europeans called it, would pay a heavy price for living in an area now coveted by aggressive outsiders. At the same time, people living in the "Old World" would have their lives altered by the repercussions of this contact. Indeed, after 1492 the world would never be the same again, either geographically or culturally.

Video: The Columbian Exchange

European settlement in the New World began a process of biological, human, cultural, and material exchange, known as the Columbian exchange. This exchange has been an important marker in the history of the world.

Look for answers to these questions when watching the video:

What was Columbus's vision?

In what ways did Columbus reflect the spirit of his times?

Define the term *Columbian exchange*. What were the short- and long-term consequences of this exchange?

Video script:

Music introduction

Narrator: For centuries Western Europeans had dreaded the dangers of the Atlantic Ocean. They called it the green sea of darkness.

But by the mid-1400s, new advances in navigation allowed the intrepid Portuguese to sail partway down the western coast of Africa, and as far west as the Cape Verde Islands.

While the Portuguese tried to discover a route eastward to the Indies, a young man from Genoa was convinced that the East Indies could be reached by sailing west.

Actor, Christopher Columbus: "Aristotle says that between the end of Spain and the beginning of India is a small sea, navigable in a few days."

Narrator: Almost everyone else thought Christopher Columbus was wrong. But after six years of indecision, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain finally consented to Columbus' "enterprise of the indies."

And on August 3, 1492 he set out with three ships on a journey he expected to last no more than a few weeks.

More than two months later his ships were still at sea. His crew, frightened of the unknown and worried that they would not be able to return, threatened to mutiny if he did not turn back.

On the following day, October 11th, from the deck of the Santa Maria, Columbus sighted land. From the moment Columbus and his men set foot on the island he christened San Salvador, they began an irreversible process of biological, cultural, and material exchange that continues to this day.

Stuart Schwartz, Yale University: The Columbian Exchange is an idea that what happened when Columbus arrived in the new world was it began a whole system of exchanges between the old world and the new world; not only in human terms but in biological terms.

Al Crosby, University of Texas at Austin: Before 1492, life forms in the world had been developing divergently because of geographical isolation in the old world and the new world. And then Columbus connected the two, and ever since then, we've been connecting them tighter and tighter and tighter and there is just an avalanche of life forms back and forth.

Stuart Schwartz: In some ways, the short terms effects were disastrous. The introduction of European diseases, for example, decimated American Indian populations. It was really a holocaust, which in many places whole peoples dying out, and in large sections of the Americas, up to 90% of the population decimated by diseases.

Al Crosby: After the initial disease crash, the food crops that the Europeans and Africans brought with them fueled a population growth in the Americas that's still going on. What happened in the old world is even more spectacular, and probably more important because you cannot imagine how all those people could be living in Asia, in Eurasia, in Africa, without American Indian crops. Maize is the most important single crop for highland Indonesia. Potatoes have been the staple of very nearly every meal in Scandinavia; right across Northern Europe, Russia.

Stuart Schwartz: We're still living today with the results of the Columbian exchange. And many

people have said that, in fact, 1492 and the so-called “discovery of America” was perhaps the most important event in the history of the world, as a real sort of marker in the history of the world, and that the history of the world really should be developed to be “before 1492” and “after 1492”, for the reason of the Columbian Exchange.

End of video.

Activity: Check Your Understanding

Presents the controversial conclusion of some historians that the so-called “discovery of America” was the most important event in the history of the world. These historians cite the Columbian Exchange between Europe and the New World as the primary reason for that conclusion. Regardless of the ranking of that event, there is no question that worlds were fundamentally transformed by continuous contact between Europeans and the peoples living in the Americas.