

You will need to have your world map and your map of Italy to be able to follow along with today's story. There is also a map of Spain and Portugal below which will be helpful today.

Christopher Columbus

Yesterday we heard about how Henry the Navigator opened people to the many possibilities of sea voyages. News of the fact that ships had sailed to unknown shores was exciting, and people's minds were stirred by the stories of such adventures. In days gone by, people had a fuzzy sort of an idea that there was a place far away called Africa and another place called India, but no one thought much about what they looked like. Now, tales of the great riches, like gold, gems and ivory, that could be found in such places, roused interest in the people.

It is interesting to look at people's ideas of these parts of the world at this time. Old maps show Java, in Indonesia, inhabited by men and women with tails, and another map shows cotton growing in India with little sheep as fruit hanging from the branches. Sparked by Henry's discoveries, people were interested in knowing about these parts of the world, so these maps were popular.

Portugal's rivals, Venice and Genoa were still in the spice trade. You can look at your map of Italy to see where these two places are. They are on either side of the peninsula that is the boot-shape of Italy, at the top of the boot.

Italy was a maker of very fine cloth, and the ships of Genoa carried this cloth through the Strait of Gibraltar (between Spain and Africa), and then north to England. You can work out the path of this journey on your world map. The English made the journey worthwhile, paying good money for the fabric, and so the Genoese sailed frequently along this route. You can see that this journey took the ships past France, and it was not always a safe journey, as the French would attack and rob the Genoese ships of their goods.



Columbus as a boy on the port of Genoa

In 1476 there was such a battle between the French and Genoese. This occurred only a few miles from Portugal. The Genoese ship sank, and many sailors drowned. One of the Genoese sailors was badly wounded, but he managed to hold onto a plank of wood. For hours he drifted, floating on this wood. With some luck, the waves guided him towards Portugal, and he was finally tossed ashore.

This shipwrecked sailor, whose name was Christopher Columbus was discovered by the Portuguese. They were kind and helpful, looking after Columbus until he had recovered. Once he was well enough, he travelled to Lisbon which is the capital of Portugal. (You can see Lisbon on the map below.) Lisbon was very different to

Columbus' hometown of Genoa – it had a flourishing port, while Genoa's was slowly dying with less and less trade each year. So Columbus saw the busy port of Lisbon with all the vessels coming in from the east, filled with gold dust, ivory, and slaves from Africa. The streets were full of sailors from all kinds of places and Columbus thought he would like to stay in this prosperous place, rather than go back to Genoa. He found work as a map-maker, and in time married a Portuguese girl who was actually the daughter of one of the captains who had discovered Madeira.



A fellow Italian called Toscanelli made maps also, and Columbus, who loved to study maps, bought one of Toscanelli's maps. Now Toscanelli had read the books of a famous Italian traveller, Marco Polo who had travelled to China – or Cathay as it was called then – and visited the lands of Kublai Khan who ruled the Mongol Empire.



Marco Polo had gone east and reached China and India, and two hundred years later, this inspired a new idea in Toscanelli: if the earth was round it should be possible to get to Asia by sailing west, and arriving from the other side, so to speak.

While we know this is true, Toscanelli made one huge mistake. The actual size of the earth was unknown to him, and he actually imagined it to be much smaller than it is. On his map he had the coast of China only about five thousand kilometres from Portugal, when it is actually sixteen thousand kilometres. Nobody knew the real distances at the time.

So, when Columbus studied Toscanelli's map, he had a great idea himself. The Portuguese were trying to sail east, going down the coast of Africa first, and this made the eastward journey about sixteen thousand kilometres long. 'If the ships went west, across the Atlantic Ocean, surely that would be quicker,' was Columbus' thinking. And then he thought, 'Perhaps I could be the one to open up this new route to Cathay.' In order for Columbus to reach his dream he needed someone wealthy to fund his trip, that is to give him ships and food for the journey and sailors as well.

There was another problem though – in those days the Atlantic Ocean was called the Sea of Darkness. People thought that beyond the Canary Islands and Madeira, there was an endless dark fog. You can imagine that when Columbus put his idea forward to the King of Portugal no one wanted to waste money on such a dangerous and pointless journey. Columbus found that the adventurous spirit of Prince Henry did not live in the King of Portugal.

At this time Columbus and his wife had a little boy, but very sadly, Columbus' wife died. Now there really was nothing keeping Columbus in Portugal, so he decided to try his luck in Spain. He and his son set off but once they arrived, it

was obvious that they had come at a really bad time. The rulers of Spain were King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, and it was the queen who made all the important decisions. She had her heart set on one great ambition – to conquer the southern part of Spain, which was still under the rule of Muslims, and make it Christian, for Isabella was a devout Catholic. At the time Columbus arrived, a war was going on between the Spanish and the Arabs. Isabella told Columbus that she would only give his idea some thought once her mission was



Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand

accomplished – once Granada was won by the Spanish and the Arab stronghold had fallen.



So Columbus had to wait, which was not easy because the Spanish noblemen of the Court despised this commoner, and the monks and priests did not like his modern ideas. They were concerned that Columbus would sail off the edge of the world and never be able to sail back.

Finally, Granada, which you can see on this map of Spain, was taken by the Spanish troops and now all of Spain was under Isabella's rule. This battle had cost a lot of money though, which meant Isabella did not have anything to give towards Columbus' expedition, even though she was interested in it.

Columbus was devastated and decided to leave Spain, thinking he might go to France or England and try his luck there. After a short distance, he decided to rest at an inn and was stopped by a man on horseback. A Spanish nobleman, Luis de Santangel, had offered to lend Columbus the money for the expedition. He could see the benefit of Columbus being able to

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find a shorter route to the spices and trade which could make Spain rich, so he was happy to take the risk.

In a few months, Columbus had three ships set sail from Spain. The main ship was called Santa Maria and two smaller ships accompanied her. It was Friday August 3, 1492 when they set sail. It was a year that changed the history of the world, and tomorrow we will hear more about what that means!

