

Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) was born in Genoa, Italy. Columbus's "Journal" chronicles his journey to the Americas (not America), which brought him to the Bahamas, Cuba and Hispaniola (which he was convinced was Japan and China). Even though Columbus did not discover America, he is still part of the American narrative and paved the way for all the European settlers, explorers and imperialists after.

Excerpts of *Journal of the First Voyage of Columbus* by Christopher Columbus

October 21st, 1492

"At ten o'clock I arrived here, off this islands, and anchored, as well as the [other ships]. After breakfast I went on shore, and found only one house, in which there was no one, and I supposed they had fled from fear, because all their property was left in the house. I would not allow anything to be touched, but set out with the captains and people to explore the island. If the others already seen are very beautiful, green, and fertile, this is much more so, with large trees and very green. Here there are large lagoons with wonderful vegetation on their banks. Throughout the island all is green, and the herbage like April in Andalusia. The songs of the birds were so pleasant that it seemed as if a man could never wish to leave the place. The flocks of parrots concealed the sun; and the birds were so numerous, and of so many different kinds, that it was wonderful. There are trees of a thousand sorts, and all have their several fruits; and I feel the most unhappy man in the world not to know them, for I am well assured that they are all valuable. I bring home specimens of them, and also of the land. Thus walking along round one of the lakes I saw a serpent, which we killed, and I bring home the skin for your Highnesses. As soon as it saw us it went into the lagoon, and we followed, as the water was not very deep, until we killed it with lances. It is 7 spans long, and I believe that there are many like it in these lagoons. Here I came upon some aloes, and I have determined to take ten quintals [220 pounds] on board tomorrow, for they tell me that they are worth a good deal. Also, while in search of good water, we came to a village about half a league from our anchorage. The people, as soon as they heard us, all fled and left their houses, hiding their property in the wood. I would not allow a thing to be touched, even the value of a pin. Presently some men among them came to us, and one came quite close. I gave him some bells and glass beads, which made him very content and happy. That our friendship might be further increased, I resolved to ask him for something; I requested him to get some water. After I had gone on board, the natives came to the beach with calabashes [water containers] full of water, and they delighted much in giving it to us. I

ordered another string of glass beads to be presented to them, and they said they would come again tomorrow. I wished to fill up all the ships with water at this place, and, if there should be time, I intended to search the island until I had had speech with the king, and seen whether he had the gold of which I had heard. I shall then shape a course for another much larger island, which I believe to be Cipango [Cuba], judging from the signs made by the Indians I bring with me. They call it Cuba, and they say that there are ships and many skillful sailors there. Beyond this island there is another called Bosio [Haiti], which they also say is very large, and others we shall see as we pass, lying between. According as I obtain tidings of gold or spices I shall settle what should be done. I am still resolved to go to the mainland and the city of Guisay [a theoretical city in Asia], and to deliver the letters of your Highnesses to the Gran Can [or Khan, an Asian emperor], requesting a reply and returning with it."

October 22nd

"All last night and to-day I was here, waiting to see if the king or other person would bring gold or anything of value. Many of these people came, like those of the other islands, equally naked, and equally painted, some white, some red, some black, and others in many ways. They brought darts and skeins of cotton to barter, which they exchanged with the sailors for bits of glass, broken crockery, and pieces of earthenware. Some of them had pieces of gold fastened in their noses, which they willingly gave for a hawk's bell and glass beads. But there was so little that it counts for nothing. It is true that they looked upon any little thing that I gave them as a wonder, and they held our arrival to be a great marvel, believing that we came from heaven..."

October 23rd

"I desired to set out today for the island of Cuba, which I think must be Cipango, according to the signs these people make, indicative of its size and riches, and I did not delay any more here nor [attempt to sail] . . . round this island to the

residence of this king or lord, and have speech with him, as I had intended. This would cause me much delay, and I see that there is no gold mine here. To sail round would need several winds, for it does not blow here as men may wish. It is better to go where there is great entertainment, so I say that it is not reasonable to wait, but rather to continue the voyage and inspect much land, until some very profitable country is reached, my belief being that it will be rich in spices. That I have no personal knowledge of these products causes me the greatest sorrow in the world, for I see a thousand kinds of trees, each one with its own special fruit, all green now as in Spain during the months of May and June, as well as a thousand kinds of herbs with their flowers; yet I know none of them except this aloe, of which I ordered a quantity to be brought on board to bring to your Highnesses.

Monday, 12 November

...Yesterday...I thought it a good idea to take some of the people from the river to convey them to Your Majesties, so that they may learn our language and tell us what there is in their country, and learn our customs and matters of the Faith, and interpret for our people when they return, for I can see from my own observations that these people have no religion, nor are they idolators. They are gentle, and do not know the meaning of evil, nor killing, nor taking prisoners; they have no weapons and are so

timid that one of our men can frighten away a hundred of them, just as a joke. They are ready to believe; they acknowledge that there is a God in Heaven, and are convinced that that is where we have come from, and they are quick to recite any prayer we tell them to say, and to make the sign of the cross.

Your Majesties should therefore determine to convert them to Christianity, for I believe that once this is begun a host of peoples will soon be converted to our Holy Faith, and great domains and their wealth and all their peoples will be won for Spain, for there is no doubt that these lands hold enormous quantities of gold....

On the river Mares, which I left last night, there is certainly a great amount of mastic [a small tree that bleeds resin], and it could be increased if more were wanted, for these trees take easily if replanted and there are plenty of them... One could also obtain great quantities of cotton, which I think could very well be sold here (rather than taking it to Spain) in the cities of the Great Khan....

A canoe came alongside us yesterday with six young men. Five of them came aboard, and I ordered them to be seized and have brought them away with me. I then sent men to a house on the west side of the river, and they brought back seven females, some young and some adult.... I did this

because men behave better in Spain when they have women of their own land with them than when they are deprived of them. Men have often been taken from Guinea to Portugal to learn the language, and given good treatment and gifts, and when they were taken back with a view to employing them in their own country they went ashore and were never seen again....



Name:

Class Period:

"Journal of the First Voyage of Columbus" Questions

Directions: After reading the text, answer the questions below using complete sentences and textual evidence when appropriate.

1. Who is the intended audience for this piece? What details does Columbus include that might appeal to his audience?

2. How might Columbus's narration be different if it was written for a family member?

3. How would you describe Columbus's attitude towards this new land? What words and details capture this tone?

4. In what ways do the Spanish and the natives' value systems differ? In what ways are they similar?

5. Should Columbus's journal be considered historically accurate? Why or why not?

6. Describe Columbus' interactions with the natives depicted in November 12th journal entry. Do you think he had the right to order 12 natives "to be seized"? Why or why not?
