

Primary Sources: Columbus' Letter Announcing his Discovery, 1493

By Christopher Columbus, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.27.17

Word Count **1,049**



TOP: "Landing of Columbus (12 October 1492)," a painting by John Vanderlyn. MAP: The route of Columbus' first voyage. Modern place names are in black, and Columbus' place names are in blue. Images courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Editor's Note: This letter was written by Christopher Columbus to Luis de Santangel, the finance minister of King Ferdinand II of Spain. Santangel was in charge of the money in the treasury of King Ferdinand and was the person who convinced King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to pay for Columbus' trip in 1492. The letter is the first known document announcing the results of the first voyage of Columbus that set out in 1492 and reached the Americas. The letter was written on Feb. 15, 1493, aboard the ship Niña, on the return trip back to Europe. Columbus arrived in Lisbon, Portugal on March 4, 1493. The letter was probably translated from Italian into Spanish in Lisbon and then sent to Santangel at the Spanish court of King Ferdinand.

The letter helped to spread the news of Columbus' voyage throughout Europe. In the letter, Columbus claims to have discovered and taken control of a series of islands in the Indian Ocean in Asia, but he was wrong; he had landed on the Caribbean islands of the Americas. He described the islands, particularly Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican

Republic today) and Juana (Cuba today), exaggerating their size and wealth in gold and suggesting that mainland China was close nearby. He felt the native people that he called "Indians" were peaceful and willing to convert to Catholicism.

"I Saw No Towns Or Cities On The Sea Coast"

Because my undertakings have attained success, I know that it will be pleasing to you to read of everything done and discovered in this voyage. On the 33rd day after I departed from Cadiz, Spain, I came to the Indian sea, where I found many islands inhabited by more men than I could count. I loudly claimed these islands for our most fortunate king, with flags flying and no one objecting. To the first of these, called Guanahani by the Indians, I gave the name of the blessed Savior, for it was He who helped me reach this as well as the other islands. I also called each one of the others by a new name, as I ordered one island to be called Santa Maria of the Conception, another Fernandina, another Isabella, another Juana [Cuba today] and so on with the rest. I proceeded along the coast of Juana towards the west. I found it so large that I believed it to be not an island, but the country of Cathay [China today]. I saw no towns or cities on the sea coast. There were some villages and small farms and the people ran off as soon as we approached. Juana is surrounded by many very safe and wide harbors, like no others that I have ever seen. Many great, fresh and healthy rivers flow through it and also many very high mountains are there. All these islands are very beautiful and full of a great variety of trees stretching up to the stars; the leaves of which I believe are never shed, for I saw them as green and flourishing as they are usually in Spain in the month of May. Some of them were blossoming, some were bearing fruit, some were in other conditions; each one was thriving in its own way. The nightingale and other birds were singing in the month of November, when I was exploring them. On the island of Juana there are seven or eight kinds of palm trees, which far excel ours in height and beauty, just as all the other trees, herbs and fruits do. There are also excellent pine trees, vast plains and meadows, a variety of birds, a variety of honey and a variety of metals, but not iron.

"There Is No Iron And They Are Also Without Weapons"

In the one which was called Hispaniola [Haiti and the Dominican Republic today], there are great and beautiful mountains, vast fields, groves and plains suitable for planting and cultivating, where houses can be built. The convenience of the harbors in this island and the remarkable number of rivers contributing to the healthfulness of man exceed belief. The trees, pastures and fruits of this island differ greatly from those of Juana. This Hispaniola, moreover, abounds in different kinds of spices, in gold and in metals. As I said above, there is no iron and they are also without weapons, which indeed are unknown. They have simple ways, are trustworthy and quick to offer us anything they possess. They even invite us to ask for things. They show greater love for all others than for themselves; they give valuable things for trifles, being satisfied even with a very small return, or with nothing. However, I did not allow things of no value to be given to them, such as pieces of

plates, dishes and glass; although if they were able to obtain these, it seemed to them like getting the most beautiful jewels in the world. In all these islands there is no difference in the appearance of the people, nor in their ways and language, but all understand each other, a fact that is very important for the end which I suppose to be earnestly desired by our most important king; that is, their conversion to the holy religion of Christ, to which in truth, as far as I can see, they are very ready to do. In all these islands, as I have understood, each man is content with only one wife, except the princes or kings, who are permitted to have 20. The women appear to work more than the men, but I was not able to find out surely whether they have individual property, for I saw that one man had the duty of distributing to the others, especially refreshments, food and things of that kind. Truly great and wonderful is the holy Christian religion that of our sovereigns, which is greater than what we have been able to do here because divine will has rewarded our human efforts. For God does listen to his servants who love his commandments, even in impossibilities, as has happened to us on the present occasion, who have attained that which hitherto mortal men have never reached. These things that have been done are thus briefly related. Farewell.

Christopher Columbus, Admiral of the Ocean Fleet.

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following sentences from Columbus' letter BEST develops a central idea?
- (A) On the 33rd day after I departed from Cadiz, Spain, I came to the Indian sea, where I found many islands inhabited by more men than I could count.
 - (B) In the one which was called Hispaniola [Haiti and the Dominican Republic today], there are great and beautiful mountains, vast fields, groves and plains suitable for planting and cultivating, where houses can be built.
 - (C) As I said above, there is no iron and they are also without weapons, which indeed are unknown.
 - (D) Truly great and wonderful is the holy Christian religion that of our sovereigns, which is greater than what we have been able to do here because divine will has rewarded our human efforts.
- 2 Which answer choice provides an accurate and objective summary of the article?
- (A) Columbus' letter describes his encounters with the natives he discovered. He explains how he successfully established a peaceful relationship with the Indians.
 - (B) Columbus' letter details his success as an explorer. He exaggerates the features of the islands he discovered and the natives he encountered.
 - (C) Columbus' letter describes how he claimed the islands in the Indian Sea for the king. He explains how he effectively named the islands and interacted with the Indians.
 - (D) Columbus' letter announces his discovery of islands he believed to be in the Indian Ocean. He describes features that make them suitable for future colonization.
- 3 In the section "I Saw No Towns Or Cities On The Sea Coast," what is Columbus' purpose in speaking about the lack of settlements and plentiful harbors along the coast?
- (A) to prove that the area had not been discovered before
 - (B) to show how some of the islands were not suitable for settlement
 - (C) to convince his audience of the islands potential as a settlement
 - (D) to show how vast and largely unexplored the islands were

- 4 What is the purpose of Columbus' favorable description of the Indians and their "love for all others"?
- (A) to show that the Indians are peaceful and will not resist being converted to Christianity
 - (B) to show how the Europeans can learn from the Indians and their treatment of one another
 - (C) to prove that Indians have already adopted Christianity into their way of life
 - (D) to prove that the Indians do not value material possessions and will work for free