

He ventured where no other man of his age dared to go. He saw things no other man of his age had ever seen. He discovered a New World.

For centuries, he was universally admired as a hero. Now he's widely considered to be a despoiler of paradise, an enslaver, and a genocidal maniac.

I'm talking, of course, about Christopher Columbus. So which is true? Is he a hero—or a villain?

The truth is complicated, as the truth often is—especially when you have to go back 500 years to find it. But let's try to get as close as we can.

Columbus was born in 1451 in the port city of Genoa, Italy. At a time when birth often determined destiny, his origins were entirely unremarkable. His father was a middle-class wool weaver who expected his son to follow the same path. But Columbus had different plans. The Age of Discovery was dawning. The future belonged to the bold. And the bold went to sea.

By the time he turned 30, Columbus had sailed to Iceland, Ireland, and Africa. Somewhere on his many voyages, he became obsessed with the idea that there was a westward sea route from Europe to India. But there were no maps to consult, only wild rumors of sea monsters and endless ocean.

He put together the 15th-century version of a PowerPoint presentation for the king of Portugal, then the world's leading sea power. But the king, heeding the advice of his experts, turned him down. It simply couldn't be done, the experts told the king. It was pure speculation, and an expensive one at that.

So Columbus took his plans to Spain. But King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella weren't interested either—at least, not at first.

Columbus persevered. After eight years, they finally relented. They gave the explorer three small ships. There was a time when every schoolkid knew their names—the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria—and the year in which Columbus set sail: 1492.

Except for a compass and the stars, Columbus had virtually no navigation tools at his disposal. He was, to mix metaphors, flying blind. He was heading west. That's about all he knew.

Once the ships left the Canary Islands, they were on their own. His crews stayed loyal for the first week, but by the third week, they had lost their nerve. Columbus, however, never lost his. By sheer force of will, he kept his men in line.

Finally, after 10 long weeks at sea, on the night of October 11, Columbus spotted land.

He called it San Salvador. Today we know it as the Bahamas.

There Columbus and his men encountered the Taino tribe. The first encounter between Europe and the Americas went well. The Taino were curious and helpful. Columbus was emphatic that his crew treat them with kindness and respect.

Lest you think that Columbus stumbled on the Garden of Eden, the islands were also inhabited by the Caribs, a tribe of cannibals for whom, according to Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Samuel Eliot Morison, babies were a delicacy—or, in Morison’s words, “a...toothsome morsel.” Like every place else on Earth, in every time in history, the local peoples were a mixed bag. Some good, some not so good.

Upon his return to Spain, word of the Italian explorer’s successful voyage quickly spread throughout Europe. A New World had been discovered, and the Old World would never be the same.

Columbus was a man meant for the sea. On land, he was easily outmaneuvered and betrayed by professional politicians and bureaucrats. It is on their dubious, self-serving accounts that modern attacks on Columbus’s reputation are based. In his own day, these attacks made the explorer’s life a misery.

Columbus was not blameless. He sold natives into slavery. But the explorer did not invent slavery, which was common around the world long before and long after Columbus’s time.

As for the charge of genocide, there was no genocide. There were atrocities—most occurring after Columbus was dead and gone. There was also widespread intermarriage between the Spaniards and the natives, which eventually led to the people we now call Hispanic or Latino. You don’t marry people you seek to destroy.

It’s unfair to focus only on Columbus’s sins. It’s also unfair to judge someone who lived 500 years ago by today’s standards.

His own assessment of his actions is much more revealing: “Let those who are fond of blaming and finding fault, while they sit safely at home, ask, ‘Why did you not do thus and so?’”

There’s a reason why Columbus has so long been celebrated—why so many statues, schools, towns, cities, a national holiday, an Ivy League university, and even a country bear his name.

It’s this simple fact:

When we celebrate Columbus, we celebrate the arrival of Western Civilization to the Western Hemisphere. And if you can’t celebrate that, it says much more about your moral compass than about history’s greatest explorer.

(Transcript from [Celebrating Columbus](#))