

Mistaken, But Lucky

By: Rick Poling

Columbus Day is celebrated in honor of a man who, like many other revered figures in history, acquired his fame by being mistaken, but lucky.

Christopher Columbus believed that only an expanse of water stood between Spain and Asia, and that Japan could be directly reached from Spain by sailing west across the Atlantic Ocean. Of course, he failed to realize the existence of a 16.4 million square mile land mass we now know as the Americas (North America, Central America and South America, which together comprise about 28 percent of the Earth's total land area), but most leading European scholars of the 15th century similarly believed that an uninterrupted westerly water route existed. He significantly departed, however, from all scholars of his day in four major aspects that were crucial in determining whether or not his plan to sail west from Spain to Japan was feasible.

First, although the circumference of the Earth had been accurately calculated as early as the 3rd century BC, Christopher Columbus applied incorrect conversion factors to all of the earlier calculations and consequently thought the Earth was about 63% of its actual size, thereby believing Earth's circumference to be 15,700 miles rather than its actual 24,900. He calculated the distance between Spain and Japan to be about 2,300 statute miles, which stretched the feasible distance for a non-stop voyage in those days, but still left the voyages arguably feasible. Although many others familiar with the historical calculations correctly argued that the actual direct distance would be over five times farther than Columbus' estimate, Columbus ignored their reasoning and doggedly clung to his own.

Second, Columbus believed that the Earth's surface was mostly land instead of being mostly water, and had the Earth's 71% water to 29% land ratio almost exactly backwards. This led him to believe there was far less water to cross before encountering another land mass.

Third, he believed the Asian land mass was significantly larger than its actual size, and, more importantly, that it extended much farther to the east, in the direction of Europe. This contributed to his mistaken view that the westerly distance to Asia from Spain was far less than was commonly (and correctly) thought.

Last, and of the greatest significance in his gross underestimation of the distance between Spain and Japan, Columbus believed Japan and China were separated by a broad body of water and that Japan was therefore well to the east of China, that Japan was much larger in size than it is, and that Japan laid close to the equator, with an east coast near present-day Mexico City (and by some accounts, even closer to Spain in the eastern Caribbean). Furthermore, he erroneously believed there were inhabited islands to the east of Japan that could be utilized to re-provision ships with fresh water and food, and that such islands might not be very far west of the Azores, which had been within fairly easy reach of Spanish and Portuguese vessels for several years.

Luckily for Columbus, but not so lucky for Europe, the dynamic and valuable trade that the European powers had developed with India and Asia diminished and became virtually nonexistent with the decline of the friendly Byzantine Empire and the rise of the unfriendly Ottoman Empire, capped by the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The overland trade routes previously utilized became far too dangerous, resulting in a strong rivalry among the European powers to be the first to develop a new trade route by water and thereby gain economic superiority over the others.

Columbus took full advantage of that rivalry. Beginning in 1485, he sought funding for a westward voyage from the monarchs of Portugal and Spain (whom both declined upon the advice of their experts that Columbus' distance estimates were far too short), as well as from England and Italy. After repeated requests for reconsideration, Spain's "Catholic Monarchs," King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, finally agreed in 1492 to sponsor Columbus' venture, primarily out of desperation to find a trade route that would boost Spain's war-depleted fortunes and their fear that Portugal's recent success in sailing around the tip of Africa had given Portugal a significant lead in the race.

On the evening of August 3, 1492, Columbus departed Spain with three ships: Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria. He docked briefly at the Canary Islands off the coast of Africa to restock provisions and to make some minor repairs, and on September 6th, the long voyage west began.

Columbus was extremely lucky from the very onset of the western voyage. First, Portuguese vessels that were intent on interrupting the voyage near the Canary Islands failed to cross paths with Columbus' ships. Second, strong westward trade winds filled the ships' sails and propelled them continuously throughout the voyage without any periods of calm that could have left them stranded. Third, Columbus was sailing through an area of the Atlantic during what we now know as "hurricane season" when severe tropical storms are commonplace, yet he encountered no foul weather. Fourth, 29 days into the voyage when the crew was getting more and more unsettled due to no sign of land, a large flock of birds was spotted; this not only reassured the crew that land may be nearby, it also allowed a course change to follow the birds' path that likely led to a quicker landing. And finally, Columbus was lucky that there was indeed a land mass in his path within a reachable distance; it just wasn't the land mass he'd hoped for.

Land was sighted five days after the bird sighting at 2:00am on October 12th by a sailor named Roridgo de Triana, although Columbus later asserted that he, not Triana, had been the first to see land to earn a reward the Catholic Monarchs had established for that accomplishment. Interestingly, Columbus' first landing was not on the continental mainland but on an island in present-day Bahamas, and he also visited present-day Cuba before returning to Spain. In fact, he did not touch the mainland of the Americas continents until his third voyage in 1498, when he landed on the present-day country of Venezuela in South America.

Although the United States designated Columbus Day as a federal holiday in 1937, Columbus never touched what is now the United States, or even North America. The first documented European landing on the United States mainland is accorded to Ponce de Leon in 1513. For this reason (among others, including evidence that Leif Ericson was the first to land on North America 500 years before Columbus' voyages, or contentions that Columbus Day and Columbus' mistreatment of the island natives he encountered dishonors the peoples inhabiting the Americas long before Columbus' arrival), there are local areas and States that celebrate the day under different names such as "Native American Day," and do not recognize Columbus Day at all.

Until the time of his death, Columbus maintained that he had discovered islands and land mass associated with Asia or the East Indies, and refused to accept any theory or contention that it was instead a new continental land mass. That may explain why the American continents were not named for Columbus but instead for Florentine explorer Amerigo Vespucci, using the feminine derivation of his name. Perhaps "hard-headed" should be added to "mistaken" and "lucky!"

QUOTE OF THE MONTH: "Just because something doesn't do what you planned it to do in the first place doesn't mean it's useless." Thomas Edison