

# Digital History

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## Utilizing the Native Labor Force

*Digital History ID 55*

Author: Christopher Columbus

Date: 1492

### Annotation:

Christopher Columbus's voyages of discovery were part of a much broader pattern of European commercial and financial expansion during the fifteenth century. In the span of less than four decades, European countries revolutionized sea travel. Led by tiny Portugal, fifteenth-century European mariners adapted from the Arabs a small sturdy ship known as the caravel capable of sailing against the wind. They also refined such navigational aids as the astrolabe and quadrants, allowing sailors to accurately chart their latitude, while mapmakers and geographers greatly improved the quality of maps. In just a decade, from 1488 to 1498, European sailors mastered the winds and currents of the south Atlantic, making it possible for the first time to sail from Western Europe to West Africa and into the Indian Ocean.

With financial support from German and Italian bankers and merchants, Portugal was able to exploit these discoveries and create a system of long-distance trade and commerce based on sugar and slavery. As early as 1420, the Portuguese began to settle islands off the West African coast. In Madeira, the Azores, the Canary Islands, and other islands, the Portuguese introduced sugar cane. Beginning in 1443, Portugal established a string of trading posts along the West African coast, which soon became major sources of slave labor for the Iberian Peninsula and especially for the Atlantic island sugar plantations.

Christopher Columbus was very familiar with this network of Atlantic trade. Born in Genoa in 1451, the son of an Italian wool weaver, Columbus was pushed by his father into trade. In 1476 he settled in a Genoese trading community in Portugal. There, he met his wife, whose father was the Portuguese governor of an island off Africa's Atlantic coast. For ten years Columbus lived in Madeira and made voyages to the Azores, the Canary Islands, and western Africa. Forty-one years old at the time he made his first voyage of discovery, Columbus was obsessed with the idea of finding a new route to the Far East, which would provide him with enough wealth to pay for the liberation of the Holy Land from Islamic rule. Personally familiar with slavery and sugar production when he arrived in the Caribbean, he quickly saw the opportunity to extract riches from this new land.

As the following extracts from his journal reveal, within days of his arrival in the New World, Columbus regarded the Indian population as a potential labor source. As he and other Europeans would soon discover, the Indians, especially the Caribs, were not as timid or as easily dominated as Columbus originally thought.

### Document:

Sunday, 14th of October

...these people are very simple as regards the use of arms, as your Highnesses will see from the seven that I caused to be taken, to bring home and learn our language and return; unless your Highnesses should order them all to be brought to Castile, or to be kept as captives on

the same island; for with fifty men they can all be subjugated and made to do what is required of them....

Sunday, 16th of December

...your Highnesses may believe that this island (Hispaniola), and all the others, are as much yours as Castile. Here there is only wanting a settlement and the order to the people to do what is required. For I, with the force I have under me, which is not large, could march over all these islands without opposition. I have seen only three sailors land, without wishing to do harm, and a multitude of Indians fled before them. They have no arms, and are without warlike instincts; they all go naked, and are so timid that a thousand would not stand before three of our men. So that they are good to be ordered about, to work and sow, and do all that may be necessary, and to build towns, and they should be taught to go about clothed and to adopt our customs.

"Journal of the First Voyage of Christopher Columbus, 1492-1493," in E.G. Bourne, *The Northmen, Columbus and Cabot, 985-1503* (New York, 1906), 114, 145-146, 182

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