

Resource 6: Why Did No One Want to Pay for Columbus' Trip?

Columbus started approaching Kings and Queens of Europe to sponsor (pay for) his Enterprise of the Indies in 1483. Remember, his idea was to sail to the Far East – China and the Spice Islands – by sailing west.

What Did Portugal Say?

He went to King John II of Portugal first. King John asked his experts to look over Columbus' plan. The experts told King John not to sponsor Columbus' trip.

Many people today believe that the reason why Columbus was turned down several times was because people living in the time of Columbus believed the world was flat and that ships would fall off the earth at some point if they sailed too far.

While uneducated people in Columbus' day may have believed in a flat earth theory, no educated person in the 1480s believed the world was flat. Experts concluded centuries earlier that the world was round. Columbus did not have to convince King John or his experts that the world was round.

So Why Was Columbus Turned Down?

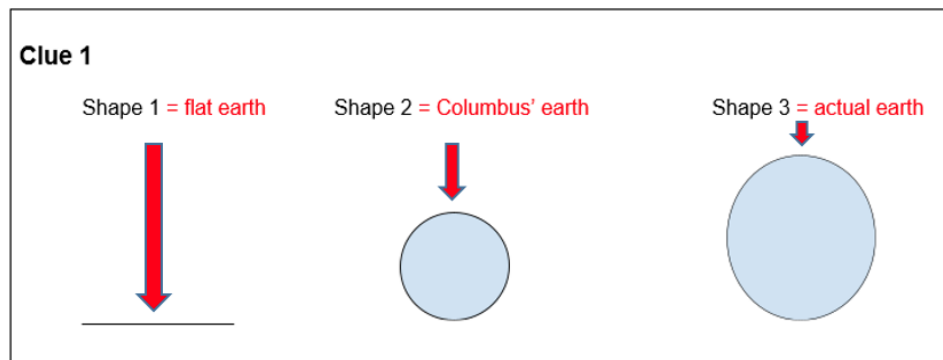
Columbus' plan was based on a very big error. When the experts asked him how many miles he believed he would have to travel from Europe to the Far East, Columbus estimated 2,400 miles. Experts in Europe believed it would be closer to 9,600 miles! That is a very big difference.

You see, Columbus thought the world was much smaller than it actually is. The actual distance around the world at the equator is 24,901 miles. Columbus suggested that it was less than 7,000 miles to go around the world.

Why would that be important?

The ships Columbus was asking for were about the size of a tennis court. Experts argued that there would not be enough room on the ships for the supplies (e.g., food, water) needed to travel 9,600 miles. The crews would run out of food and water.

Do you understand how the clues you were given help explain why Columbus had a hard time finding people to sponsor his Enterprise of the Indies plan?



And remember the second clue? No one could walk from Delaware to California with only enough supplies in a single backpack. So, we hope that your response to your friend who asked you to pay for his trip was, “no way.”

Columbus Tries Spain

After King John II of Portugal said no to Columbus, he went to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain and asked them to sponsor his Enterprise of the Indies. They set up a committee of experts to study Columbus’ plan and turned him down in 1486. A big reason was that they were fighting a war and could not afford to spend money on something else.

BUT they did not want him to take his idea to another country for fear that another country would gain fame and wealth if Columbus’ idea actually worked. So, they gave him an allowance to stay in Spain. Still, Columbus was frustrated. So, he went back to King John of Portugal again. And again, he was turned down.

Worried that Columbus might try his luck with another country, Queen Isabella of Spain gave Columbus a letter that ordered any town or city in Spain to give Columbus food and a place to stay.

In 1492, guess what happened? Spain won their war. Queen Isabella brought Columbus back and Spain agreed to sponsor Columbus’ risky Enterprise.

What Did Columbus Ask For?

Columbus asked for ships, supplies, crews for each of the ships. He also asked for 10% of whatever riches he discovered, and to be granted the title of “Admiral of the Ocean Sea” and governor of any new lands that he claimed for Spain.

What Did He Agree to Give in Return?

Columbus agreed to claim any unclaimed lands for Spain. He also agreed to bring back gold, spices, silks, and other valuable resources from the Far East. And, he promised to help convert the people he met to the Christian religion - something that Ferdinand and Isabella thought was really important.

Did Spain’s Risky Investment Pay Off?

Sometimes big risks lead to big rewards. According to one estimate, between 1500 and 1650, Spain brought back **181 tons of gold and 16,000 tons of silver** from the land that Columbus claimed for Spain. In today's money, that much gold would be worth nearly \$4 billion, and the silver would be worth over \$7 billion.

All of this money allowed Spain to build a powerful navy that made it the richest and most powerful country of its time.