



## Christopher Columbus and the "Blood Moon" Eclipse

By the time most youngsters reach the 3rd grade, they have heard the *mnemonic device*\*, "In fourteen hundred ninety two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." It used to be generally accepted that Christopher Columbus "discovered" America, when in fact, he did not. There were millions of "Native Americans" already occupying the area when the explorer arrived.

Columbus spent virtually his whole life obsessed with travelling the world. As a teenager, he got a job on a merchant ship and remained at sea for about 20 years learning everything he could about being a sailor. He then went to Lisbon, Spain where he studied mathematics, maps and navigation, and astronomy. His dream was to become a legendary explorer and change the world. Instead he became famous for finding something he wasn't looking for; he accidentally stumbled upon the Americas while in search of a direct water route west from Europe to Asia!

In the fall of 1492, Columbus and his three ships (the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria) made landfall on Hispanola, that's present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic. He called the natives "Indians" because he believed himself to be in the Indies.



After failing to find the "pearls, precious stones, gold, silver and spices" he had promised his royal patrons back in Spain, he returned home empty handed.

Over the next 10 years, Columbus made three more trips across the Atlantic Ocean to the "New World." It was on his fourth voyage that things went horribly wrong. A hungry "army" of shipworms voraciously ate their way through his wooden fleet, sinking two ships and forcing the explorer to beach two more on an island known today as Jamaica.

The Arawaks -- the island's friendly and very inquisitive natives -- welcomed the stranded crew, and provided food and shelter in return for items they could salvage from the ships. As the days turned into weeks, months, and finally years, the relationship with the Arawaks deteriorated when they realized that Columbus' mutinous crew members were cheating and stealing from them. The Jamaicans took the bold step of cutting off the food supply to their unwelcome visitors in retaliation.

Columbus realized that there was a real possibility that he and his crew could starve to death, so he retired to his ship's cabin to figure out what to do. From the time people first sailed the seas, they relied on the stars for navigation. There were two references that no sailor would travel without: the "*perpetual almanac*" compiled by Abraham Zacuto, that contained 300 pages of astronomical tables, and *Ephemerides*, that contained information on the position of the stars and heavenly objects at any certain time. Columbus perused these books and came up with a daring plan.

Armed with the information that a full eclipse of the moon would occur -- Columbus met with the Arawak chief and told him that the Christian god was very angry that he and his crew were being starved by the natives. He warned that, to prove his god's wrath, in three nights the deity would swallow up the moon and turn it blood red as it rose in the heavens. Some of the natives made fun of the prediction, but others feared what would happen. At the appointed time, the natives watched in terror as the Earth's shadow began to obliterate part of the rising moon's surface. As it continued to climb into the night sky, the shadow completely covered the moon until all that was left was a coppery, blood-red disc.

Columbus once again retired to his cabin to "consult" with his god. In fact, he was using an hour-glass to time the progress of the total lunar eclipse, so he could emerge just ahead of the shadow receding. He announced that his god had forgiven the natives and would allow the moon to return...and so it did. The Arawaks resumed providing food, and it is doubtful they gave the explorer and his crew any additional trouble. They were ultimately rescued and returned to Spain on November 7, 1504. Columbus would never return. ♦



\*a learning technique that aids information retention.