

# THREE WORLDS MEET: THE COLUMBIAN ENCOUNTER AND ITS LEGACY

A Unit of Study for Grades 5-9

by

JAMES DRAKE  
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JOSEPH PALUMBO



NATIONAL CENTER FOR HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS  
University of California, Los Angeles

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## TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

### I. UNIT OVERVIEW

Columbus's momentous arrival in 1492 in the Caribbean ended the mutual isolation of two regions of the globe. From this moment on, the future of the Americas has been inextricably linked to those of Europe, Asia, and Africa. The watershed encounter between Columbus and Native Americans signalled the beginning of an ever-increasing global interdependence that has had monumental effects—both positive and negative—for world history. These effects continue into the present. Accordingly, historical portrayals of Columbus have varied tremendously. At one extreme he appears a mythical hero, a bold adventurer and intrepid navigator, the honoree of a national holiday, and the worthy namesake for dozens of U. S. cities and a South American country. At the opposite extreme, many see him as responsible for an environmental holocaust and five hundred years of genocide. Only by studying the historical context in which Columbus sailed can we hope to arrive at an accurate and balanced understanding of this pivotal event.

The lessons included in this unit present the Columbian encounter from a variety of perspectives. For centuries, educators have taught the story of the Columbian encounter from a European point of view, as the discovery of a "New World" and the subsequent expansion of Europeans into it. It is important to remember that after 1492 both Native Americans and even those Europeans who stayed at home also lived in a "New World." With the arrival of Europeans the Americas acquired a host of diseases, flora, fauna, and unfamiliar cultures. For Europeans, the knowledge of two previously unknown continents challenged conventional wisdom and their traditional world view. At the same time, it would be inaccurate to portray Native Americans and Africans as merely reacting to European exploits. Indeed, as this unit demonstrates, Native Americans and Africans significantly shaped the subsequent development of both the Americas and

## ***Teacher Background Materials***

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Europe. This unit begins by comparing and contrasting American and European cultures before 1492. It then examines the changes in European society leading to the wave of maritime exploration at the end of the fifteenth century, which resulted in the famed contact between Europeans and Native Americans. Finally, it explores the dramatic changes wrought by the interaction between two previously isolated regions.

Students should learn from this unit that the actions of historically prominent figures such as Columbus often reflect the general trends and values of their time. This knowledge, however, should not lead them to see history as a string of inevitable events; rather individual choices and contingency shape history. Regardless of whether those involved in the Columbian encounter made good or bad decisions, studying those decisions will help students to understand the world today.

### **II. UNIT CONTEXT**

This unit would complement any studies of the Crusades, the Renaissance, European maritime exploration, or Ancient American history. As the scope of this lesson is broad, it could also serve as an introduction to several topics, especially European colonization of the Americas, slavery and the slave trade, Native American history after 1492, or the history of Mexico. Finally, this unit can help students understand the controversy surrounding Columbus and his first voyage to the Americas by placing it in its proper historical context.

### **III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS**

"Three Worlds Meet: The Columbian Encounter and Its Legacy" provides teaching materials that address *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), in both United States and World History. Lessons specifically address United States History, **Era 1, Standard 2**, "How early European exploration and colonization resulted

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in cultural and ecological interactions among previously unconnected peoples" and World History, **Era 6, Standard 1**, "How the transoceanic interlinking of all major regions of the world from 1450 to 1600 led to global transformations," and **Standard 6**, "Major global trends from 1450 to 1770."

This unit likewise integrates a number of specific Historical Thinking Standards including: reconstruct patterns of historical succession and duration in which historical developments have unfolded; draw upon data in historical maps; analyze cause-and-effect relationships; draw comparisons across eras and regions in order to define enduring issues; interrogate historical data by uncovering the social, political, and economic context in which it was created; and, evaluate alternative courses of action.

#### **IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES**

1. To understand how the European world view had developed in the years preceding Columbus's voyage and how Christo-Eurocentrism pervaded this view.
2. To understand that before 1492 diverse societies existed in the Americas.
3. To examine how historians draw on archaeological sources to study native Americans.
4. To compare European societies with Native American societies.
5. To investigate the various motives prompting Columbus' voyage.
6. To understand how the motives and beliefs of both Europeans and Americans helped to shape the first encounters between the two peoples by examining accounts of these encounters from both Spanish and Aztec points of view.

### ***Teacher Background Materials***

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7. To explain how ethnocentrism and the drive for profit led some Spaniards to exploit the labor of Native Americans and Africans and to understand the brutality embodied in this labor system.
8. To explain how the exchange of culture, flora, fauna, and disease took place after 1492.

### **V. LESSON PLANS**

1. The Changing European World View (2 days)
2. The Many Peoples of the Americas (2 days)
3. The First Voyage: Motives and Shipboard Conditions (1 day)
4. First Encounters (2–3 days)
5. Relations Among the Races (2 days)
6. Seeds of Change (1–2 days)

## **LESSON ONE**

### **THE CHANGING EUROPEAN WORLD VIEW**

#### **A. OBJECTIVES**

1. To understand the concept of a Christian/European centered world view by analyzing and interpreting the "Ebstorf World Map" of 1240.
2. To assess how European cartographic knowledge had expanded by 1492 yet failed to comprehend the true size of the world.
3. To explore how Columbus's voyages further expanded European cartographic knowledge by tracing those routes.
4. To understand that although Columbus receives credit as the first European explorer to establish lasting contact with the Americas, he was simply one of many European explorers attempting to expand European influence.

#### **B. LESSON BACKGROUND MATERIALS**

That Columbus tried to reach Asia by sailing across the Atlantic tells us something about Europe's cartographic knowledge at the time. Contrary to popular myth, most Europeans believed the earth to be round. Several centuries earlier, however, Europe's world view had differed radically from that of Columbus. In the thirteenth century, as the first map in this lesson demonstrates, Christianity heavily influenced Europe's geographical perception. The "Ebstorf World Map" of 1240 demonstrates some of the religious ethnocentricity of Europe that persisted through Columbus's day and beyond. This map depicts the world as the body of Christ, with Christianity's most holy city—Jerusalem—at its center. Christ's head sits at the top of the map (the east), his feet at the bottom (the west), and his hands lay outstretched at the sides (north and south) offering salvation. Europe has the most cities, while the non-Christian people of Asia and

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Africa often appear as monsters and cannibals. Columbus inherited portions of this ethnocentric world view in which Christianity occupies the center of the earth; beyond this center lay non-Christians awaiting "discovery."

Although the spiritual theme constitutes the focal point of the Ebstorf map, its basic structure derives from the "T-O" map that originated before Christ. In these maps the three known continents sit surrounded by an ocean and separated by the Don, the Nile, and the Mediterranean. Asia occupies the top half, Europe the bottom left, and Africa the bottom right. The Ebstorf map follows this pattern, with Spain situated just above Christ's feet and Italy jutting out into the water just below the center.

By Columbus's time cartographic renditions of the earth had become much more similar to those of the present day. In 1492, Martin Behaim produced the second map that appears in this lesson, and it accurately represents Columbus's vision of the world. The Americas are noticeably absent from the map, and Columbus's stated destination of Japan and Asia lies due east of Europe. Not only were Columbus and Behaim unaware of the Americas, but they also grossly underestimated the circumference of the earth. They believed the world to be one-third of its actual circumference. For Columbus, this underestimation made a transoceanic voyage to Asia seem reasonable. Ironically, had he known the true size of the earth he may not have ventured across the Atlantic.

The lack of an accurate means to measure longitude contributed to Columbus's underestimation of the circumference of the world. While Columbus and other Europeans had borrowed technological innovations from throughout their own continent as well as Asia and Africa, navigators of the time could still produce only crude estimates of the distances they had travelled to the east or west. The use of a magnetic compass, borrowed from Muslims in the twelfth century, told European navigators the direction they travelled. Latitude, or north-south position, could be accurately

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## ***Lesson One***

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gauged by examining the position of the sun or stars. Longitude, on the other hand, could only be estimated through a sailor's guess at how fast and for how long a ship had been travelling. The exploits of other navigators (see **Document D**) contributed to Europe's geographical knowledge, but not until Magellan circumnavigated the globe in 1522 did Europeans have a true feeling for the size of the earth.

Sources: J. B. Harley, *Maps and the Columbian Encounter* (1990); William D. Phillips, Jr., and Carla Rahn Phillips, *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus* (1992); and Gary B. Nash, Julie Roy Jeffrey, et al., *The American People Creating a Nation and a Society*, 2nd ed. (1990).

### **C. LESSON ACTIVITIES** (2 days)

1. Have students look at modern world maps (desktops, wall or atlas) and ask them to locate North America. Lead the students in a discussion framed around the question *Why is North America almost always in the middle?*
2. Help students understand the concept of *centrism*—the idea that your world is at the center and all else radiates outward from that point.

Examples:

current world map

Chinese concept of the "Middle Kingdom"

"All roads lead to Rome"

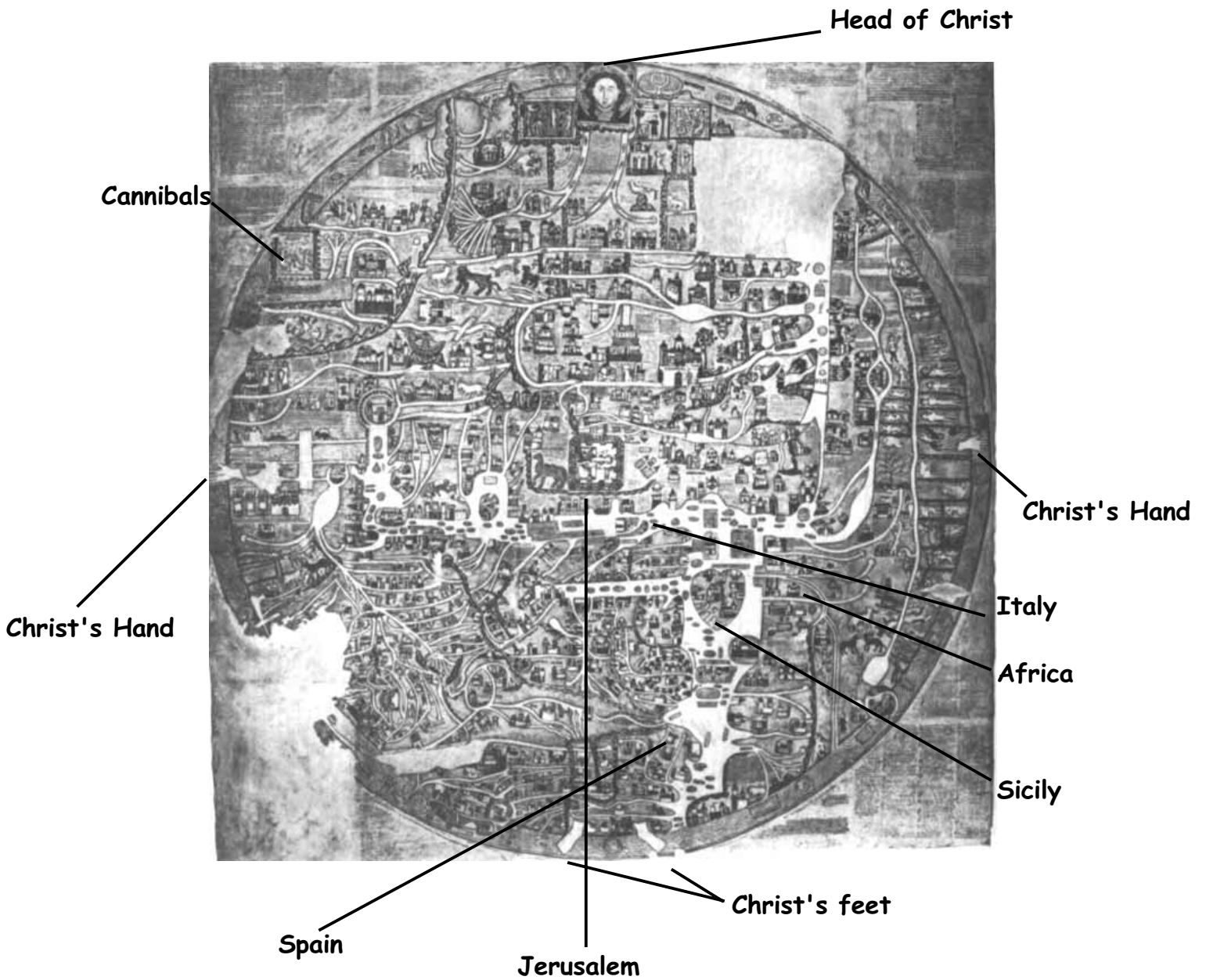
3. Distribute **Document A** to students, the "Ebstorf World Map" of 1240. Using the teacher's information in the lesson background, and the guiding questions, help students to see how this map is an example of Christian/European centrism
4. Explain that by the time of Columbus (250+ years later) cartographic knowledge had expanded. Distribute **Document B**, *Geographische Vorstellung*. Indicate that although an improvement, it still lacks a knowledge of part of the world. What is that part?

5. **Document B** is important for it is under this cartographic framework that European explorers felt they could sail west from Europe to reach Asia. Why did they think that?
6. Show students the map of Columbus's first voyage, **Document C**. Compare this to **Document B**. Ask students how his voyage expanded European cartographic knowledge?
7. Distribute **Document D**. Ask students to trace and color-code routes of Cabot, DaGama, Magellan, Verrazano, and Cartier giving a different color to each explorer. Use the Teacher Key to guide students. Use the completed map to help students see that although Columbus is regarded as "first," he was one of many Europeans attempting to expand European influence.



Girolamo Benzoni, "Christopher Columbus bidding farewell to the Spanish Monarchy," *Historia del Mondo Nuovo* [*History of the New World*], (Francofort, 1595.) Library of Congress.

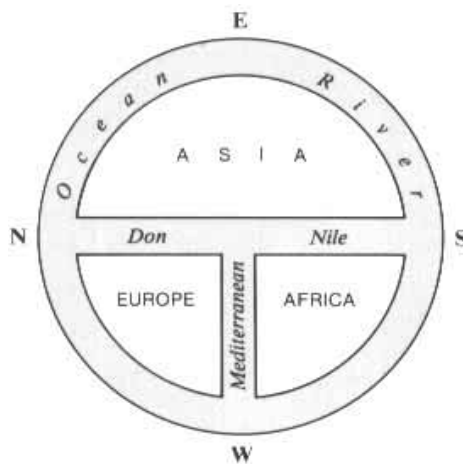
**EBSTORF MAP C. 1240**



Source: Rare Books and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.

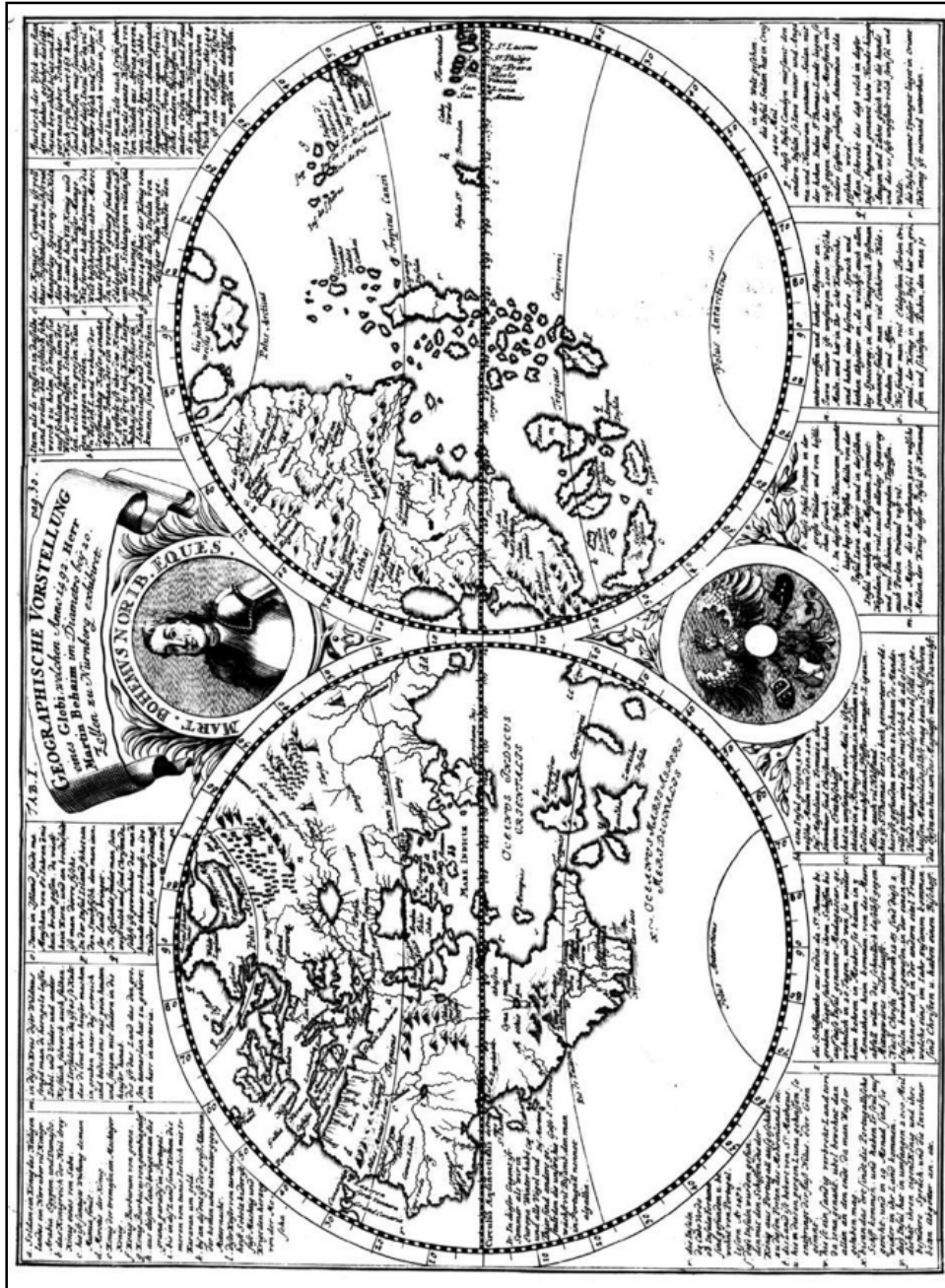
1. List examples of how this map shows a Christian/European centered view of the world.
2. Based on this map, what might European explorers expect to find to the east?
3. How can you use the map to help you prove this statement: *"Europeans believed that all the world could and should be converted to Christianity."*

**T-O Map**



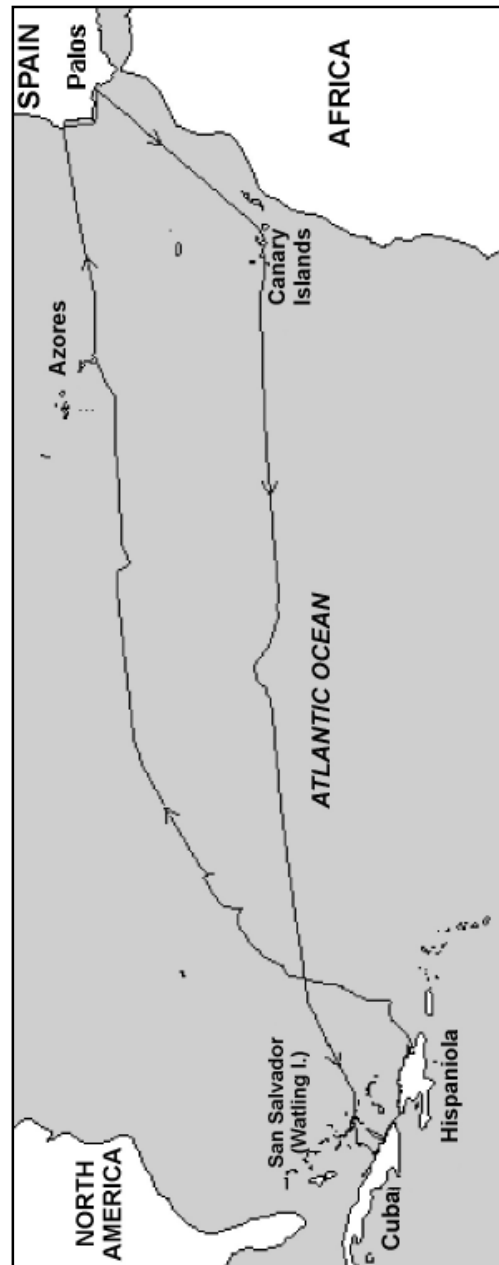
*T-O Map Diagram*

# GEOGRAPHISCHE VORSTELLUNG



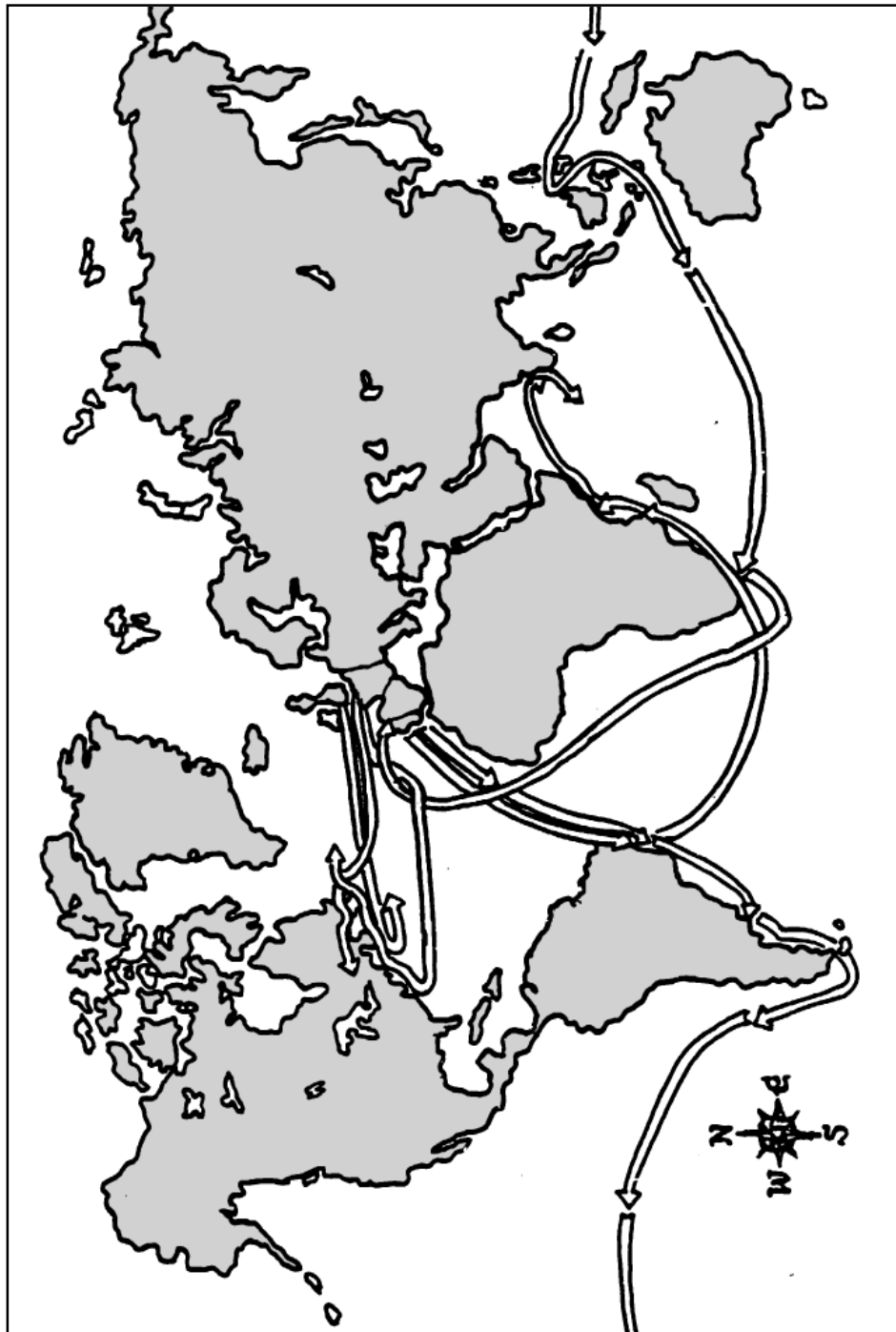
Source: Johann Gabriel Doppelmayr, *Benhim's Globe of the World* (Library of Congress, 1730)

## FIRST VOYAGE OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, 1492-93



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### THE AGE OF EXPLORATION



Illustrated by Sharon Rudhal



### THE AGE OF EXPLORATION (Teacher Key)



- J. Cabot (England) 1497 ————▲
- DaGama (Portugal) 1497-1498 - - - -▲
- Magellan (Spain) 1519-1522 ————▲
- Verrazano (France) 1524 ······▲
- Cartier (France) 1535 ······xxxxx▲

Illustrated by Sharon Rudhal