



## Supporting Question 3

### Featured Source

**Source A:** Alan Taylor, description of how the printing press shaped the Age of Exploration, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (excerpts), 2002

During the second half of the fifteenth century, the development of the printing press immensely lowered the cost and increased the volume of book publishing. More people learned to read, as books became available to more than the wealthy and leisured elite. By the end of the century, Europeans possessed twenty million copies of printed books. Readers especially delighted in vivid accounts of the wealth and power of India and China. These included the real travels of Marco Polo, an Italian merchant, as well as the pure fictions attributed to John de Mandeville. Inspired by their literary fantasies, European visionaries longed to reach the Far East to enlist their peoples and wealth for a climactic crusade against Islam....

[Upon reaching the West Indies on his maiden voyage across the Atlantic,] Columbus unilaterally declared the natives subject to the Spanish crown. He reported, "I found very many islands filled with people innumerable, and of them all I have taken possession for their highnesses, by proclamation made and with the royal standard unfurled, and no opposition was offered to me." Of course, not understanding a word of Spanish, the Indians failed to recognize any cue to oppose Columbus's ceremony. As a further act of possession, he systematically renamed all of the islands to honor the Spanish royal family or the Christian holy days. Columbus even renamed himself, adopting the first name "Christoferens"—meaning "Christ-bearer," testimony to his sense of divine image.

After his largest ship ran aground, Columbus decided immediately to start a colony by obliging thirty-nine crew members to remain on the island he called Hispaniola. They built a crude fort from the timbers of their wrecked ship. In the two remaining vessels Columbus sailed home, taking a roundabout route north and then east, to catch winds bound for Europe. He reached Spain in March 1493 to receive a hero's welcome from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella.

What happened next rendered Columbus's voyage of enduring and global significance, far beyond the achievements of his Norse predecessors. The Norse discoveries proved a dead end because they remained largely unknown outside of the northwestern fringe of Scandinavia. Thanks to the newly invented printing press, word of Columbus's voyage and discovery spread rapidly and widely through Europe. Eagerly read, his published report ran through nine editions in 1493 and twenty by 1500. Publication in multiplying print helped to ensure that Columbus's voyages would lead to an accelerating spiral of further voyages meant to discern the bounds and exploit the peoples of the new lands.

Intrigued by Columbus's glowing reports of the Indians' gold jewelry and their supposed proximity to Asia, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella promptly decided to send Columbus back with another, larger expedition of exploration and colonization.

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**Source B:** Christopher Columbus, letter to Queen Isabella I and King Ferdinand II of Spain describing his first voyage (excerpts), 1493

*NOTE: On August 3, 1492, Columbus set sail from Spain to find an all-water route to Asia. On October 12, more than two months later, Columbus landed on an island in the Bahamas that he called San Salvador; the natives called it Guanahani.*

*For nearly five months, Columbus explored the Caribbean, particularly the islands of Juana (Cuba) and Hispaniola (Santo Domingo), before returning to Spain. He left thirty-nine men to build a settlement called La Navidad in present-day Haiti. He also kidnapped several Native Americans (between ten and twenty-five) to take back to Spain—only eight survived. Columbus brought back small amounts of gold as well as native birds and plants to show the richness of the continent he believed to be India.*

*When Columbus arrived back in Spain on March 15, 1493, he immediately wrote a letter announcing his discoveries to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, who had helped finance his trip. The letter was written in Spanish and sent to Rome, where it was printed in Latin by Stephan Planck. Planck mistakenly left Queen Isabella's name out of the pamphlet's introduction but quickly realized his error and reprinted the pamphlet a few days later. The copy shown here is the second, corrected edition of the pamphlet.*

*The Latin printing of this letter announced the existence of the American continent throughout Europe. "I discovered many islands inhabited by numerous people. I took possession of all of them for our most fortunate King by making public proclamation and unfurling his standard, no one making any resistance," Columbus wrote.*

*In addition to announcing his momentous discovery, Columbus's letter also provides observations of the native people's culture and lack of weapons, noting that "they are destitute of arms, which are entirely unknown to them, and for which they are not adapted; not on account of any bodily deformity, for they are well made, but because they are timid and full of terror." Writing that the natives are "fearful and timid...guileless and honest," Columbus declares that the land could easily be conquered by Spain, and the natives "might become Christians and inclined to love our King and Queen and Princes and all the people of Spain."*

I have determined to write you this letter to inform you of everything that has been done and discovered in this voyage of mine.

On the thirty-third day after leaving Cadiz I came into the Indian Sea, where I discovered many islands inhabited by numerous people. I took possession of all of them for our most fortunate King by making public proclamation and unfurling his standard, no one making any resistance. The island called Juana, as well as the others in its neighborhood, is exceedingly fertile. It has numerous harbors on all sides, very safe and wide, above comparison with any I have ever seen. Through it flow many very broad and health-giving rivers; and there are in it numerous very lofty mountains. All these island are very beautiful, and of quite different shapes; easy to be traversed, and full of the greatest variety of trees reaching to the stars....

In the island, which I have said before was called *Hispana*, there are very lofty and beautiful mountains, great farms, groves and fields, most fertile both for cultivation and for pasturage, and well adapted for constructing buildings. The convenience of the harbors in this island, and the excellence of the rivers, in volume and salubrity, surpass human belief, unless [one] should see them. In it the trees, pasture-lands and fruits different much from



those of Juana. Besides, this *Hispana* abounds in various kinds of species, gold and metals. The inhabitants ... are all, as I said before, unprovided with any sort of iron, and they are destitute of arms, which are entirely unknown to them, and for which they are not adapted; not on account of any bodily deformity, for they are well made, but because they are timid and full of terror....But when they see that they are safe, and all fear is banished, they are very guileless and honest, and very liberal of all they have. No one refuses the asker anything that he possesses; on the contrary they themselves invite us to ask for it. They manifest the greatest affection towards all of us, exchanging valuable things for trifles, content with the very least thing or nothing at all....I gave them many beautiful and pleasing things, which I had brought with me, for no return whatever, in order to win their affection, and that they might become Christians and inclined to love our King and Queen and Princes and all the people of Spain; and that they might be eager to search for and gather and give to us what they abound in and we greatly need.

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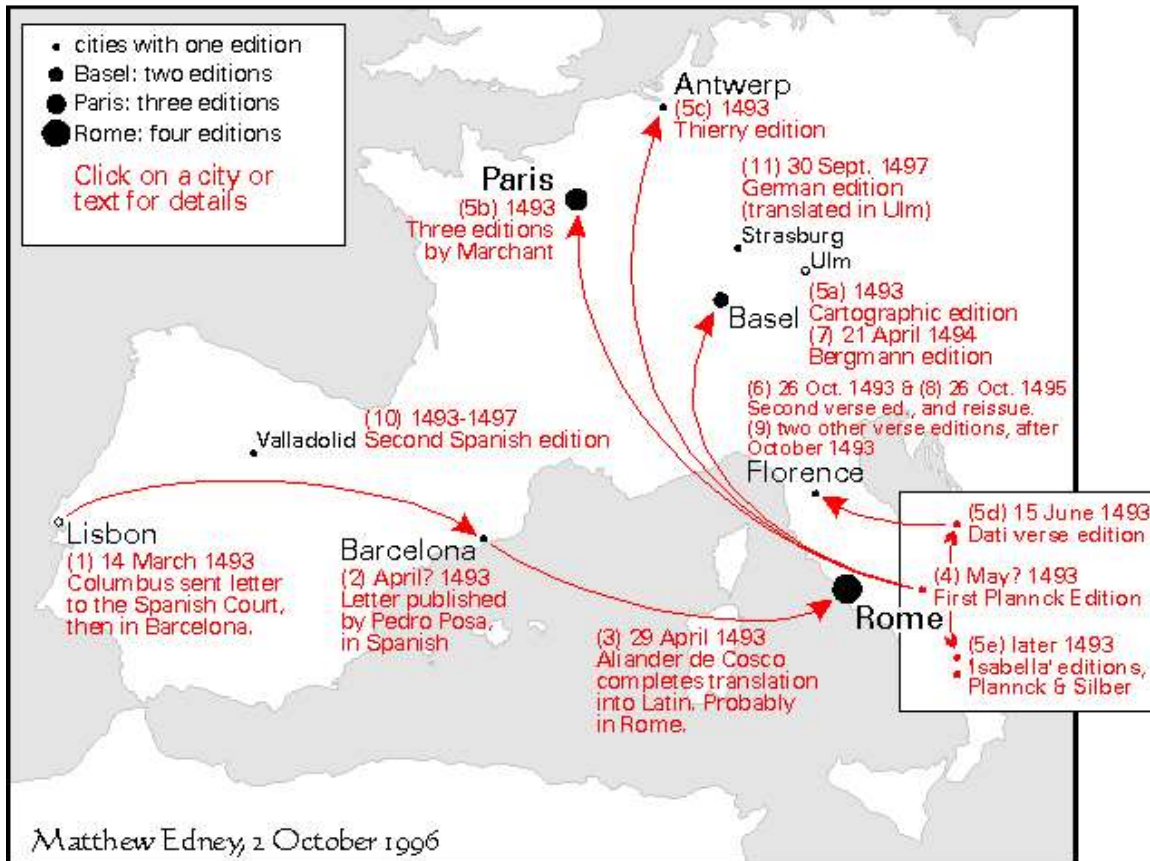
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**Source C:** Matthew Edney, map and description of how Columbus's letter spread across Europe, "Geographical Diffusion of Columbus's First Letter," Osher Map Library: Smith Center for Cartographic Education, 1996

*NOTE: Per the Osher Map Library, the map is no longer clickable.*

## Geographical Diffusion of Columbus's First Letter



Christopher Columbus's 1493 announcement of the success of his voyage westward across the Atlantic Ocean quickly became one of the earliest 'best sellers' of European publishing. No less than eleven editions were published in 1493! They were issued across western Europe, in Spain, Italy, France, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. Six more editions were published in 1494–97. They are however all quite rare today; several of the editions survive in only a single copy; in total there are no more than 80 extant copies of all the editions.

This document traces the extremely rapid dissemination of the letter through its first 17 published editions. It is impossible to date all the editions precisely, but we can discern the basic pattern of the diffusion of this new knowledge to the major urban centers of western Europe.

Smith Center for Cartographic Education, University of Southern Maine. <http://www.oshermaps.org/special-map-exhibits/columbus-letter/iv-diffusion-columbus-letter-through-europe-1493-1497>. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>).