**The Era Before Columbus**

1. **Medieval European Knowledge:**
   * Before Columbus, Europeans had limited knowledge of the world beyond Europe, North Africa, and parts of Asia. The prevailing view was that the Earth was round, but its size and the lands it contained were poorly understood.
   * Norse explorers, including Leif Erikson, reached parts of North America (Vinland, likely Newfoundland) around 1000 CE, but this did not lead to lasting European engagement with the continent.
2. **The Age of Exploration Begins:**
   * By the late 15th century, European powers were eager to find new trade routes to Asia to access spices, silk, and other goods.
   * Advances in navigation (e.g., the astrolabe, compass) and shipbuilding (e.g., caravels) enabled longer sea voyages.

**Columbus's Voyages**

1. **First Voyage (1492-1493):**
   * **Sponsorship:** Columbus, a Genoese sailor, secured funding from Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain after failing to gain support in Portugal and other courts. They sought a westward route to Asia.
   * **Departure:** On August 3, 1492, Columbus set sail with three ships—the *Santa María*, *Pinta*, and *Niña*.
   * **Discovery:** On October 12, 1492, Columbus landed in the Bahamas, on an island he named San Salvador (likely present-day Guanahani). He believed he had reached islands near Asia.
   * **Exploration:** Columbus explored parts of the Caribbean, including Cuba and Hispaniola, encountering indigenous peoples like the Taíno, whom he called "Indians," mistakenly believing he was in the East Indies.
   * **Return:** In early 1493, he returned to Spain, hailed as a hero, bringing back small amounts of gold, spices, and captured natives.
2. **Subsequent Voyages:**
   * **Second Voyage (1493-1496):** Columbus returned with 17 ships and over 1,000 men to establish colonies. This voyage marked the beginning of European colonization in the Americas. He founded the settlement of La Isabela on Hispaniola, though it struggled to survive.
   * **Third Voyage (1498-1500):** Columbus reached South America (modern Venezuela) and realized he had found a new landmass but still believed it was connected to Asia.
   * **Fourth Voyage (1502-1504):** Columbus explored Central America (modern Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama) in search of a passage to Asia. His fleet was damaged, and he was marooned in Jamaica for a year before returning to Spain.

**Immediate Impacts of Columbus's Voyages**

1. **Columbian Exchange:**
   * The voyages initiated the exchange of plants, animals, diseases, and cultures between the Old and New Worlds.
   * **From the Americas:** Corn, potatoes, tomatoes, tobacco, and cacao were introduced to Europe.
   * **From Europe/Africa:** Horses, cattle, wheat, and diseases like smallpox were brought to the Americas, devastating indigenous populations.
2. **Colonial Expansion:**
   * Spain established colonies in the Caribbean and later on the American mainland.
   * The Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), brokered by the Pope, divided the New World between Spain and Portugal.
3. **Indigenous Impact:**
   * Columbus's arrival heralded the beginning of widespread colonization, leading to the displacement, exploitation, and decimation of indigenous populations.
   * Forced labor systems, such as the encomienda, were imposed on native peoples.
4. **Reassessment of the World:**
   * Columbus’s voyages disproved older geographic models and demonstrated that vast lands lay between Europe and Asia, eventually leading to the identification of the Americas as separate continents (thanks to Amerigo Vespucci).

**Legacy and Controversy**

1. **Hero or Villain?**
   * Columbus was celebrated for centuries as a bold explorer and visionary. Columbus Day, established in 1937 in the U.S., honors his voyages.
   * Modern reassessments criticize him for initiating the enslavement and suffering of indigenous peoples and view his actions as part of a larger pattern of European conquest and exploitation.
2. **Transformational Impact:**
   * Columbus’s expeditions opened the door to European exploration and colonization, fundamentally altering the trajectory of world history.