

EARLY AMERICA

At daybreak on the morning of Friday, August 3, 1492, An Italian adventurer named Christopher Columbus set sail from Spain to find a new way from Europe to Asia, his aim was to open up a shorter trade route between the two continents. In Asia, he intended to load his three small ships with silk, spices and gold, and sail back to Europe a rich man.

Columbus first sailed south to the Canary Islands, then he turned west across the unknown waters of the Mid-Atlantic ocean, ten weeks after leaving Spain, on the morning of October 12, he stepped ashore on the beach of a low sandy island, he named the island San Salvador – Holy Savior, Columbus believed that he had landed in the Indies, a group of islands close to the main land of India, for this reason he called the friendly brown-skinned people who greeted him “Los Indios”, “The Indians”.

In fact, Columbus was not near India, it was not the edge of Asia that he had reached, but islands off the shores of a new continent, Europeans would soon name the new continent “America”, but for many years they went on calling its inhabitants Indians. Only recently have these first Americans been described more accurately as “Native Americans” or “Amerindians”.

There were many different groups of Amerindians, those north of Mexico, in what is now the United States and Canada, were scattered across the grasslands and forests in separate tribes, these tribes followed very different ways of life, some were hunters, some were farmers, some were peaceful, others warlike.

They spoke over 300 separate languages, some of which were as different from one another as English is from Chinese. Europeans called America the “new world “, but it was not new to the Amerindians, their ancestors had already been living there for maybe 50.000 years when Columbus stepped on to the beach in San Salvador, we say maybe because nobody is completely sure .scientists believe that the distant ancestors of the Amerindians came to America from Asia, this happened they say, during the earth’s last ice age, long before people began to make written records. At that time a bridge of ice joined Asia to America across what is now the Bering Strait. Hunters from Siberia crossed this bridge into Alaska, from Alaska the hunters moved south and east across America, following herds of Caribou and buffalo, as the animals went from one feeding ground to the next.

Maybe 12000 years ago, descendants of these first Americans were crossing the Isthmus of Panama into South America. About 50000 years later, their camp fires were burning on the frozen tip of the continent, now called ***Tierra del Fuego***, Land of fire.

For many centuries early Amerindians lived as wandering hunters and gatherers of food, then a more settled way of life began. People living in highland areas of what is now Mexico found a wild grass with tiny seeds that were good to eat. These people became America’s first farmers, they cultivated the wild grass with great care to make its seeds larger, eventually it became Indian corn, or Maize. Other cultivated plant foods were developed by 5000 BC Amerindians in Mexico were growing and eating beans, squash and peppers.