

### The Old World

The Old World in the 15th century was still largely a Mediterranean world, centered on the sea. The Romans called *medius terra*—the middle of the earth. This was the whole of the civilized world for most Europeans, who knew little more about geography than Romans did in Ptolemy's day, the second century A.D. Soldiers, the Germanic and Slav peoples who swept across Europe after the collapse of Rome in the 5th century had left behind a society fragmented, stagnant, and largely illiterate. The next five centuries were the Dark Ages for Europe, when learning was lost and Europeans forgot whatever it was they had once known. The Crusades (1095-1291), undertaken to liberate Jerusalem from the "infidels," and Marco Polo's descriptions of China and India awakened Europe's interest in the exotic Orient. Soldiers and travelers brought back silks, spices, perfumes, jewels, carpets, and many other luxuries produced by cultures more advanced in many ways than their own. Trade expanded with the Orient, bringing wealth to well-placed Italian city-states like Venice,

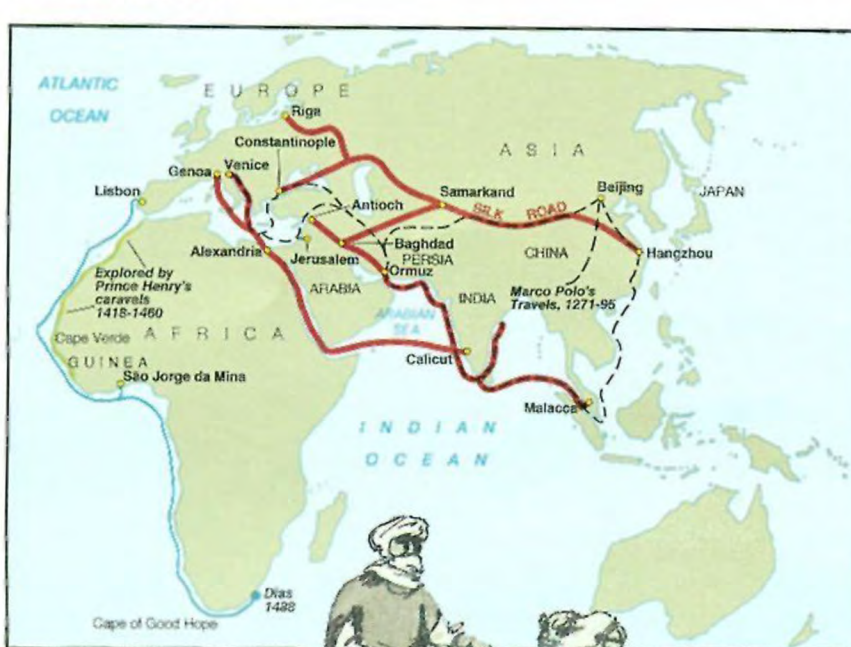


Genoa in Columbus's day was a prosperous maritime power, rivaling Venice in the extent of its trading network.

artists began investigating new ideas, new methods, new places. Invention flourished. Gunpowder, the magnetic compass, the printing press came into use. In 1492, as Columbus was preparing for his voyage, the Florentine polymath Leonardo da Vinci was designing a machine he hoped would fly.

### Commerce with the Orient

The pioneers of Europe's first age of discovery were the merchants and traders whose land and sea voyages took them to the Orient in search of luxuries. They revived a commerce with the Indies and China known to Greeks and Romans but lost in the Dark Ages. Most Europeans lived on bread, grain, cabbage, peas, onions, and only a little meat here and there. The spices the traders brought back—pepper, sugar, cinnamon, cardamom, nutmeg, cloves, ginger—enhanced that monotonous diet, while the silks, cottons, carpets, perfumes, precious jewels, dyes, medicines, and cosmetics brightened the drab life of medieval man and woman and eased their lot. Such things soon became necessities.



These goods moved by donkey and camel caravan over two principal routes. The Silk Road ran from China across central Asia to the great emporium of Samarkand. The road divided there. Some traders headed for the Black Sea and Constantinople. Others crossed Persia for Baghdad and ports on the Mediterranean. The sea route originated in the spice regions of the Indies. Goods were shipped across the Indian Ocean

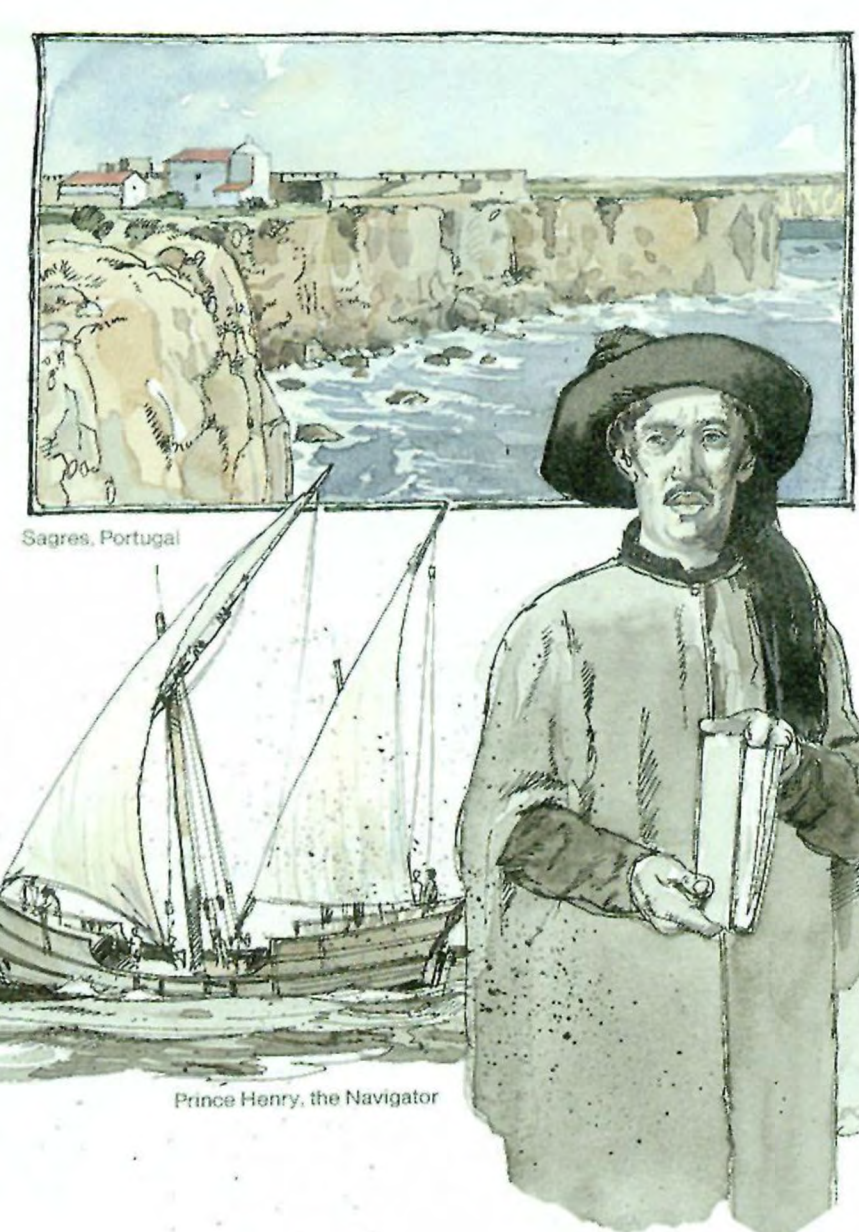
## Columbus and his Enterprise

Columbus was born in Genoa, Italy, in 1451, the son of Domenico Colombo, a woolweaver, and Susanna, daughter of a weaver. He was the first of five children. Domenico prospered for a time—at one point he owned two houses and some land—dabbled in politics, kept a tavern, and aspired to become a wool merchant. There is no record of Columbus's formal education, but he probably attended a church or guild school, where he picked up Latin. When he went to sea at an early age, it was not as an apprentice sailor but for his father. He later became an agent in his own right, looking for opportunities to buy and sell. While on these travels around the Mediterranean, he learned the elements of navigation and found that he had a gift for it. His first long voyage—to the Aegean island of Chios about 1474—introduced him to the strange and appealing world of the Orient.

In 1476, at age 25, a dramatic event changed his life. He was sailing in a small fleet of cargo ships bound for England—his first voyage into the Atlantic—when pirates attacked off Portugal. Over 500 men lost their lives. Columbus himself managed to swim 6 miles to shore. He always considered it a miraculous escape. Perhaps the most fortunate part was washing ashore in Portugal, then the world's leading maritime nation.

He settled in Lisbon and married a Portuguese woman of high birth. The couple eventually moved to the Madeiras, where her father was governor. It was here that Columbus probably developed his plan of sailing west to reach the East. He laid out his plan to King John II in 1485, but the king and his advisors were skeptical. They considered his facts and figures wrong and his geography hopeless. More interested in finding a way to India around the tip of Africa, the Portuguese rejected Columbus's plan.

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### The Portuguese Explorations

The search for an alternate route to the Orient was led by Portugal. A tiny nation on the western coast of Christendom but in maritime affairs the most progressive in Europe. Of this nation was born the spirit of discovery was Prince Henry, "The Navigator" (1394-1462). As a young man he fought against the Moors in North Africa. While governor of Ceuta, he saw an opportunity to tap into the rich African trade, then monopolized by Arabs, and perhaps even find a southern route to India. Returning to Portugal in 1419, he established at Sagres near Cape St. Vincent in southern Portugal a center for exploration. He brought together cartographers, navigators, geographers, ship-builders, and instrument-makers, caring little whether they were Christian, Jew, or Muslim, and set them to work in an organized way. His motives were to establish trading colonies and convert the natives. But just as important, as a contemporary said, was his impulse "to attempt the discovery of things which were hidden from other men, and secret."

Henry's mariners helped perfect the caravel. They blended the

best characteristics of the sleek, lateen-rigged Mediterranean coastal trade vessels, producing ships that could sail closer to the wind, maneuver easily, and carry a substantial cargo. He dispatched caravels every year down the African coast. Each expedition marked the southernmost point it reached with a stone monument or "padrao," surmounted by a cross. The following season the next expedition tried to better that mark. His captains eventually reached the vicinity of Sierra Leone. Four years before Columbus's voyage, Bartholomew Dias rounded the tip of Africa, finally proving that a sea voyage to India was possible.

Thanks also to Prince Henry, Portugal discovered and colonized the Madeira (1420), the Azores (1430s), and the Cape Verde Islands (1440s) and attempted to settle the Canary Islands. The natives there (the Guanches) offered stiff resistance before eventually falling to Spanish rule in the century. This war, prefiguring the New World conquests to come, was in full swing when Columbus called at the islands in August 1492 on his first voyage.

### The Early Voyages of Columbus



"From a very early age I went to sea sailing," wrote Columbus of his youth, "and I have continued it until now." The sea was a natural lure for the youth of modest origins growing up in a prosperous maritime city. His first voyages were probably short coastal jaunts for his father, buying and selling wool and cloth. At 17 or 18, he embarked on life as a sailor and, except for short interludes, never left it. When he crossed the Atlantic for the first time, Columbus was an experienced mariner who had worked his way up from seaman to captain. The earliest voyage of record was about 1471. He was a seaman on a warship off Genoa that attacked pirates in Tunis harbor. A year or later he voyaged to Chios in the Aegean and its rich markets. In

1476 came the voyage that changed his life. While in a convoy of Genoese merchantmen headed for England, his ship was attacked and sunk by warships of the King of Portugal. Columbus was captured and eventually found his way to Lisbon. From that city he made a number of lengthy voyages to England, Ireland, and Iceland, and "a hundred leagues beyond" in 1477 to the Madeira as year later to the Azores and Canary Islands at various times. In 1482-84 he sailed at least once to the Gola Coast of Africa. These and no doubt other voyages took Columbus to the major parts of the European trading world. He was now master of the subtle art of navigation and full of confidence in the Atlantic project already forming in his mind.

### Paolo Toscanelli, Geographer

Columbus found support for his ideas in the work of the geographer Paolo Toscanelli (1397-1482). A mathematician, astronomer, and cartographer, he was also a brilliant mathematician, versed in the science of geography. In 1474 he laid out a route to the Orient in a letter and map to King John of Portugal. The short way, said Toscanelli, was to sail west across the Atlantic. This view, widely known in Lisbon, greatly interested Colum-



### Palos: Port of Embarkation

The little port of Palos on the Rio Tinto in southern Spain, population 600 in 1492, figured prominently several times in Columbus's enterprise. After his proposal had been rejected in Portugal in 1485, Columbus turned up in Palos and made his headquarters there. There he met Juan Pinzon, a cleric who was interested in astronomy. Marchena, a cleric who most departed time in his life and also introduced him to influential figures at

the royal court who helped him get an audience with Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus never forgot this town. "I never received aid from anyone other than Palos," he said much later. "Besides the help of the residents here."

Another La Huelva man, Juan Pinzon, helped Columbus reach the fleet in May 1492. The La Huelva men were again helpful. They introduced Columbus to the Pinzon brothers—Martin and Vicente—both experienced mariners. Without their help, it would have been difficult for Columbus to raise a crew

for a voyage that presented danger. The brothers agreed to join the voyage as captains of the two ships. Columbus had the trust of Martin, whose ambitions rivaled his own, but Vicente proved to be a fine captain. The churchman who stood on the deck of the fleet in May 1492, the La Huelva man, was again helpful. They introduced Columbus to the Pinzon brothers—Martin and Vicente—both experienced mariners. Without their help, it would have been difficult for Columbus to raise a crew

# COLUMBUS

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## Voyages to America 1492-1504

### Search for a Patron

Columbus spent years searching for a royal patron to back his Grand Design. Finding no support in Portugal, he turned to Spain. Landing at Palos, on Spain's Atlantic coast, he made his way to La Rábida monastery outside town, seeking temporary lodging for himself and his young son Diego. Here he found unexpected help. One friar was an astronomer who listened to his ideas about sailing west and helped him get a hearing at court. In May 1485 Columbus presented his plan to Queen Isabella. She seemed interested but turned the proposal over to a learned group for examination. It came to no agreement. One or two persons favored the enterprise; the rest thought it unsound. Yet Columbus evidently made an impression on his listeners, for he was soon granted a small stipend sufficient to support the simple life he lived. He made another overture to Portugal and one to France. He even sent his younger brother Bartholomew to England to seek backing, but nothing came of these approaches.

For five years Columbus stayed close to the court, following it from

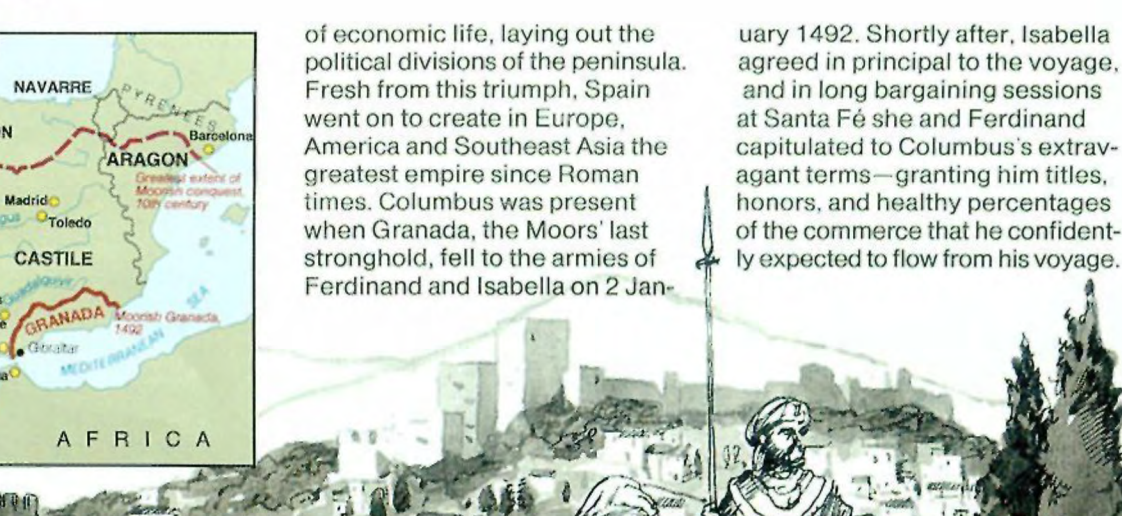


Columbus takes leave of the Spanish monarchs and heads for Palos in this 16th-century woodcut.

place to place during the campaigns against the Moors, hoping the royal commission would change its mind. In 1490 new advisors took up his proposal. They also told the crown that Columbus's calculations were wrong and his demands for rewards and titles ridiculous. Again the answer from the monarchs was no. This was in January of 1492. As Columbus was riding out of town events took a sudden turn. Counselors to Ferdinand, including Juan de Cabrera, persuaded the king to agree to Columbus's terms. A few miles down the road a messenger caught up with Columbus.

### The Reconquest of Iberia

There was another reason why the Spanish court turned down Columbus's proposal. Spain was at war, and Isabella and Ferdinand had no money to spend on visionary schemes. They were fighting the Moors, the names given to Arab Muslims who had invaded Iberia in A.D. 711 and in seven years conquered most of the peninsula. The long struggle by Christians to oust the Moors had fluctuated for the last seven centuries and resulted in great bloodshed and destruction. It also left a decisive imprint on Spanish society—shaping views on the church and the military, determining patterns



of economic life, laying out the political divisions of the peninsula. Fresh from this triumph, Spain went on to create in Europe, America and Southeast Asia the greatest empire since Roman times. Columbus was present when Granada, the Moors' last stronghold, fell to the armies of Ferdinand and Isabella on 2 Jan-

### Assembling the Fleet

Isabella's order gave the port of Palos 10 days to find crews and ready the vessels. In fact, Columbus needed more like 10 weeks for this work. The town came up with the caravels *Niña* and *Pinta*. For his own ship, Columbus hired Juan de la Cosa, as master. Santa Maria was larger than the two caravels but turned out to be far less seaworthy. No records of equipment or provisioning for this voyage have survived. Much more is known about the crews. Of the

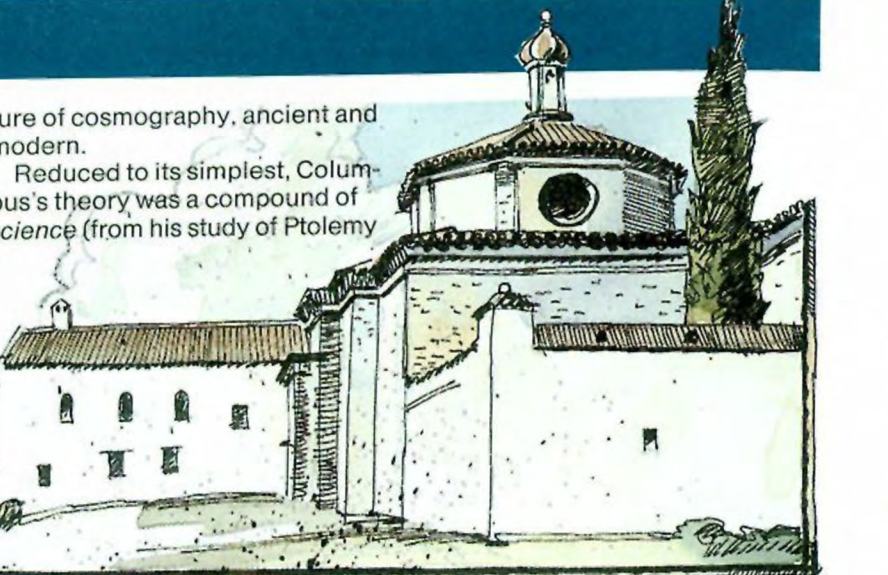


### The Pinzón Brothers

Martin and Vicente Pinzon aided Columbus when he arrived in Palos in 1492 to ready the expedition. They acted as captains and helped him recruit men. Later stories that portray Martin as responsible for Columbus's plan are unfounded. By the time Columbus's ships were at sea a decade or

### Origins of Columbus's "Grand Design"

No one can say for sure how Columbus conceived his idea of sailing west to reach the Indies. There was no flash of light, no single event that persuaded him that such a voyage was possible. More likely the plan grew out of a convergence of ideas during his years of growth during the years of his training in Spain when he and his brother worked widely in the literature of cosmography, ancient and modern.



Reduced to its simplest, Columbus's theory was a compound of ideas from his study of Ptolemy's theory of the earth's circumference, and the work of other geographers, personal observation (from years at sea), religion (from his deep belief in biblical prophecy), and possibly even mariners' tales about new lands over the horizon. His proposal to reach the Orient by sailing west was not of itself an exceptional idea. Informed persons knew that Earth was a sphere—it had been understood since classical times—and that such a voyage was theoretically possible. But in 1492 few persons other than Columbus thought such a voyage across empty ocean practical. The distances were too great for the ships of the day. If Columbus had tried to sail across 10,000 miles of blue water—the distance from Europe to China—he too would have failed. Fortunately, Columbus touched land after only 2,400 miles, well before the Indies with the islands and the places you may reach... and

Christopher Columbus's voyage to America in 1492 changed the world as no other voyage has ever done. It altered our sense of geography, introduced radically different civilizations to each other, encouraged new sciences, and helped push mankind into the modern age. No wonder the sailor who conceived and executed this enterprise has become one of the best known figures of history. Yet he is still an elusive and controversial personage. Historians have quarreled over nearly every aspect of his life: the date and place of his birth, the origin of his ideas, the sources of his ambition, the appearance of his ships, the first landing place in this hemisphere, even his final place of burial. In our time, arguments continue over whether he was hero or villain.

This wallchart is about Columbus the mariner and the world in which he lived. It begins with his birth in Genoa in 1451 and follows his early life at sea. It con-

siders the origins of his remarkable "Grand Design" to sail west in order to reach the East, a plan rejected and even ridiculed for years before the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella agreed in 1492 to underwrite a modest fleet of three small vessels—an expedition into an unknown east that resulted in a spectacular discovery. It summarizes Columbus's three other voyages, which were not as triumphant as the first but are important for an understanding of him as a mariner and as a man who could not realize his dreams of empire. He never found the "East" that he sought but chanced instead on his Third Voyage upon a new continent we now call America.

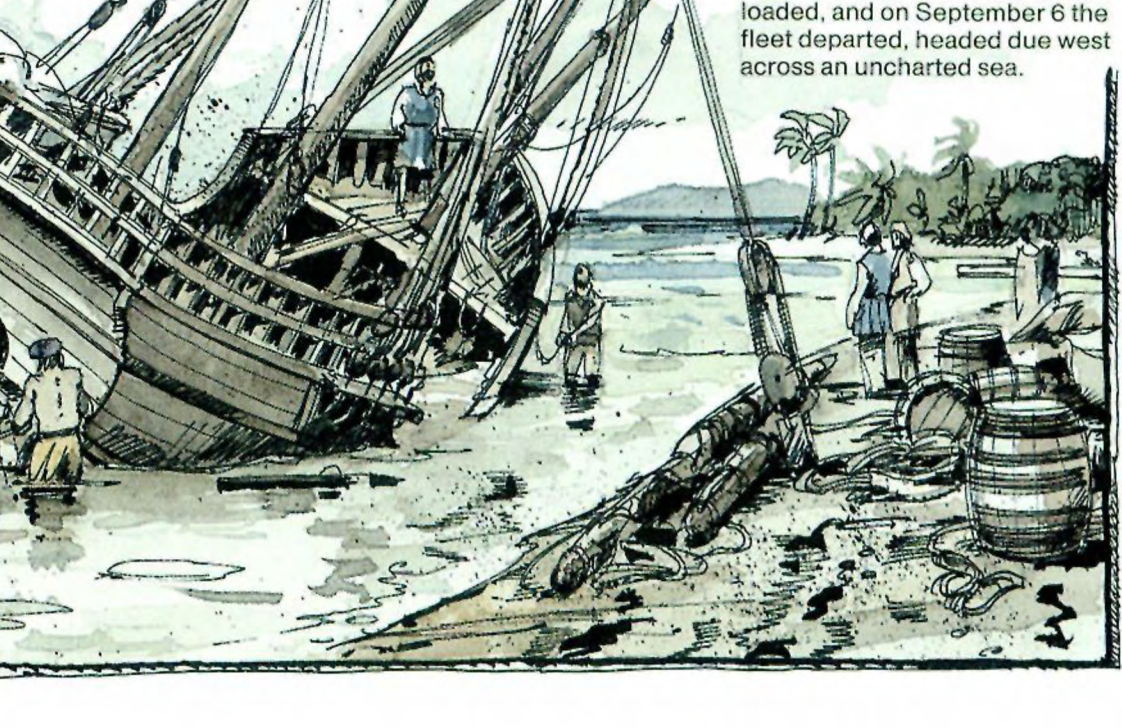
He died in Spain in 1506, a bitter and disappointed man who rightfully felt cheated of the honors and rewards due him. History—if not polemicists—has been kinder. Columbus is remembered now as a great navigator and explorer who joined the Old World to the New,

### South to the Canaries

In the early hours of 3 August 1492, Columbus's three ships slipped anchor in Palos harbor, slipped into the Rio Tinto and made for the Atlantic, following a route long planned but kept secret lest Columbus should be lured away from his day to day life. He sailed down the African coast 680 miles to the Canary Islands—for good reason. These Spanish islands were a safe haven in which to restock supplies. There was another benefit, perhaps unknown at the time. Dropping south placed Columbus in the trade wind belt. These winds blow westerly from the Canaries but easterly at higher latitudes. If he had

headed due west from Spain, headwinds would have made the voyage impossible. One of the first days at sea Columbus began his journal. He promised to write down "in great detail from day to day all that I should do and see, and encounter... I intend to make a new chart of

navigation, upon which I shall place the whole sea and lands of the Ocean Sea in their proper position under their bearings... It is very important that I forget sleep and labor much by navigation, because it



A wallchart describing the life and times of Christopher Columbus, a native of Genoa sailing in the service of Spain whose voyages to America opened a new age in world history. Published by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, which administers many parks illustrative of America's Hispanic heritage.



# The First Atlantic Crossing, August 1492–March 1493

The crossing took just 33 days. Columbus's objective was Cipangu, or Japan, the world of the East. In some ways the voyage was unremarkable. The fleet braved no storms, faced no physical dangers. The main problems for Columbus were psychological—the uncertainty of heading into open ocean, overcoming the fears of the crew as they sailed farther and farther from land, searching the sea and sky for signs, working out course and position. The first day at sea, Columbus learned that three Portuguese caravels were looking for them, but nothing came of it. After a spell of calm, the fleet was soon making good time. Columbus's course due west made the most of fresh winds. He ran night as well as day, unusual for

the time. The first two full days the fleet clipped off 330 nautical miles. It was here that the captain-general—he cannot yet be called admiral—began recording in the ship's log fewer miles than in his private journal "so that if the voyage were to be private journal" so that if the voyage were to be private journal "so that if the voyage were to be private journal" so that if the voyage were to be private journal.

The first ten days the fleet covered nearly 1200 miles, putting it close to mid-ocean. "The savor of the mornings is a great delight," wrote Columbus, "the only thing wanting is to hear nightingales. The weather is like April in Andalusia." Then came

days of calm as the fleet floated through a great mass of weed—the Sargasso Sea—which proved no hindrance. By September 23 the crew was grumbling about the lack of wind, saying that they would never get back to Spain. There was a false landfall, which first elated, then depressed the crew. The mummbling eased as the winds picked up. By October 6 the fleet was about 480 miles north of Puerto Rico. The next day he altered course to follow birds heading south-west. On October 8, he saw more landbirds and noted, "the air is soft as in April in Seville, and it is a pleasure to be in it, so fragrant it is." On the 10th Columbus faced down a mutinous crew, telling them it was useless to complain, that he

was determined to continue on until he found the Indies. It was at this point that Columbus met with the Pinzons and his own ship's master and agreed to turn back if land was not found within three days. On October 11, as the fleet approached the Bahamas, there was fresh evidence of land—shore birds, floating branches, flowers, a "little stick fashioned, as it appeared, with iron." "With these signs," he wrote, "everyone breathed more freely and grew cheerful." At 10 p.m., both Columbus and a sailor standing watch saw—or thought they saw—a light "like a little wax candle lifting and rising." The fleet was still about 35 miles from land.

## Crossing the Atlantic

From the Journal, (Las Casas)  
 Sept 9: "Columbus made 48 miles that day, and decided to reckon less... so that if the voyage were long the people would not be frightened and dismayed... in the night... the seaman steered badly... for which the Admiral scolded them many times."  
 Sept 17: "They saw much weed... and concluded they were near land... The sea water was less salty than since they had left the Canaries, the brooms were growing more plentiful. All were very cheerful."  
 Sept 25: "That day they must have made 65 miles, although the people were told 39 miles, because he always pretended to the people that he had made small distances, that it might not appear long to them. The sea was very smooth so that many seamen went to swimming. Saw many dolphins and other fish."  
 Oct 7: "A great multitude of birds passed over going from N to the SW... the Admiral decided to abandon his course, and to turn the prow WSW."



## Navigation

Columbus navigated by "dead-reckoning" (from the Latin *deducere*, meaning "deduced") in which he plotted his position using the three variables of direction, time, and speed. His main instruments were a magnetic compass, with which he set the course, and a sun-filled hour-glass, turned every halfhour by a ship's boy. The ship's time was reset every day by turning the hourglass at high noon when the sun stood over the mast. Columbus estimated speed by watching sea foam float by, something an experienced mariner could do within a knot or two. He had a quadrant and an astrolabe with him for figuring latitude but made little use of either device. Columbus also carried with him sea charts of his own design. They were probably large sheepskins with reasonably accurate sketches of the coast of Europe and Africa and his own speculations about land to the west.

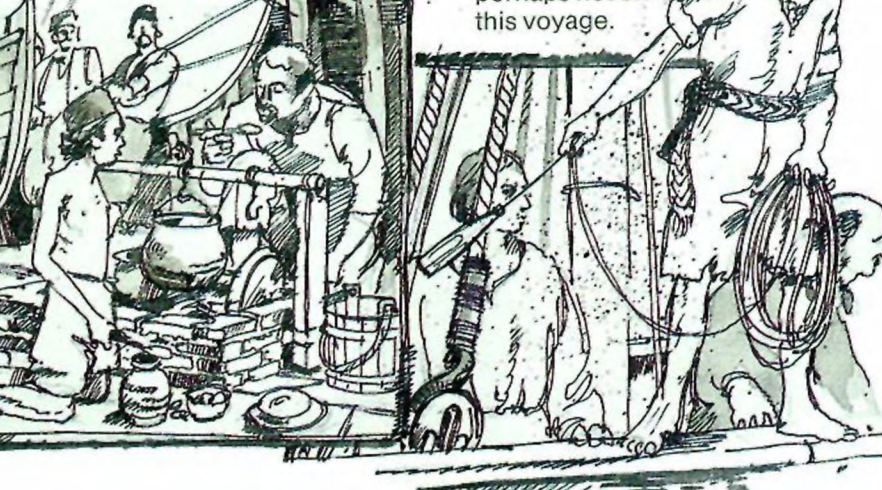
## Columbus's Journal

The single most important document from Columbus is the journal he kept on the first voyage and presented to Isabella with great pride when he returned. To Columbus's American biographer Samuel E. Morison, this journal is "the most detailed, the most interesting, and the most enthralling sea journal of any voyage in history." From it we know what was going on almost every day of the voyage. He recorded bearings and distances, the main problems he encountered, and the first descriptions of American peoples and places. The original journal has, alas, disappeared. The Spanish court was migratory in Columbus's lifetime, and the journal from Columbus's hand may have been lost during one of the court's many moves. There are fortunately two surviving versions of the journal, in part or whole, both from persons with access to the original or a copy, and from them it is fairly easy to reconstruct the essential text. By far the most important version is from Bartolomé de las Casas, the Dominican scholar whose *Historia de las Indias* (1582) is an important account of the discovery and early settlement of the Americas. Working from a copy (with many errors, to judge by his complaints), Las Casas made an abstract of the whole journal. Most of the time he transposed the text into the third

## Life at Sea

A sailor's day was divided into two watches of four hours, "dogged" around the clock so that he only worked the graveyard shift on alternate nights. His duties were to haul line, set sail, work on gear, scrub deck, and attend to the tightrope shrouds (the lines connecting masts to the frame of the ship), stand lookout.

pump bilges—going about this work to the sound of an immense repertoire of sea chanteys and ditties. A sailor lived on a diet of sea biscuits (hardtack) and wine plus a stew of garbanzoes cooked with salt beef or fish in olive oil, vinegar, and garlic. Cheese and beans probably ran out early in the voyage. The one hot meal a day was served at 11 in the morning, cooked by ship's boys in a firebox. Officers sat at table on the quarterdeck, under canvas in the finest. Sailors ate at the same well as workers ashore, except during storms when no fires could be built. Sleeping accommodations were minimal. Columbus had a cabin on the poop deck, but everyone else found space where they could, on the main deck in fair weather, or below. They were looking for the proverbial "soft place." "Hammocks, a New World invention, were soon adopted for use aboard ship, though perhaps not on this voyage."

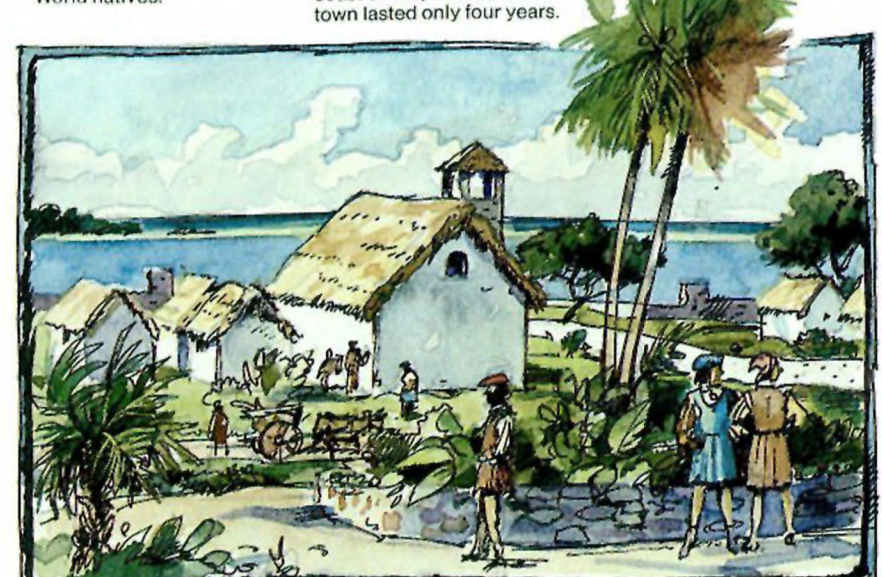


## Second Voyage, 1493-96

For this voyage Columbus put together a magnificent fleet of 17 ships with 1,200 men plus horses, sheep, seed, and tools. The monarchs instructed him to "win over the natives to the faith, treating them 'very well and lovingly.'" and set up a trading colony. The fleet departed Cadiz on 25 September 1493 and made land at Dominica six weeks later. Sailing up the Leeward chain, Columbus spotted a Carib village at Salt River on the garden island of St. Croix. A boat he sent ashore encountered a canoe filled with Caribs. In the ensuing fight, several natives were killed, the rest captured. Sailing on to Puerto Rico, the fleet touched at Atafu Bay on the west coast. On November 27 the fleet anchored off Hispaniola. Columbus found the Navidig garrison wiped out by natives in retaliation for Spanish acts. Abandoning Navidig, he established a new settlement 70 miles east, naming it Isabella. While he sailed off to explore Cuba and Jamaica, he sent out parties to look for gold. When he returned 6 months later, the Taino were in rebellion, provoked by the harsh gold tribute he had levied on them. Putting it down easily, he shipped hundreds to Spain as slaves in lieu of gold. When an envoy arrived to investigate the colony's troubles, Columbus repatriated to Spain in June 1496 to tell his side of the story. The voyage was not a success.

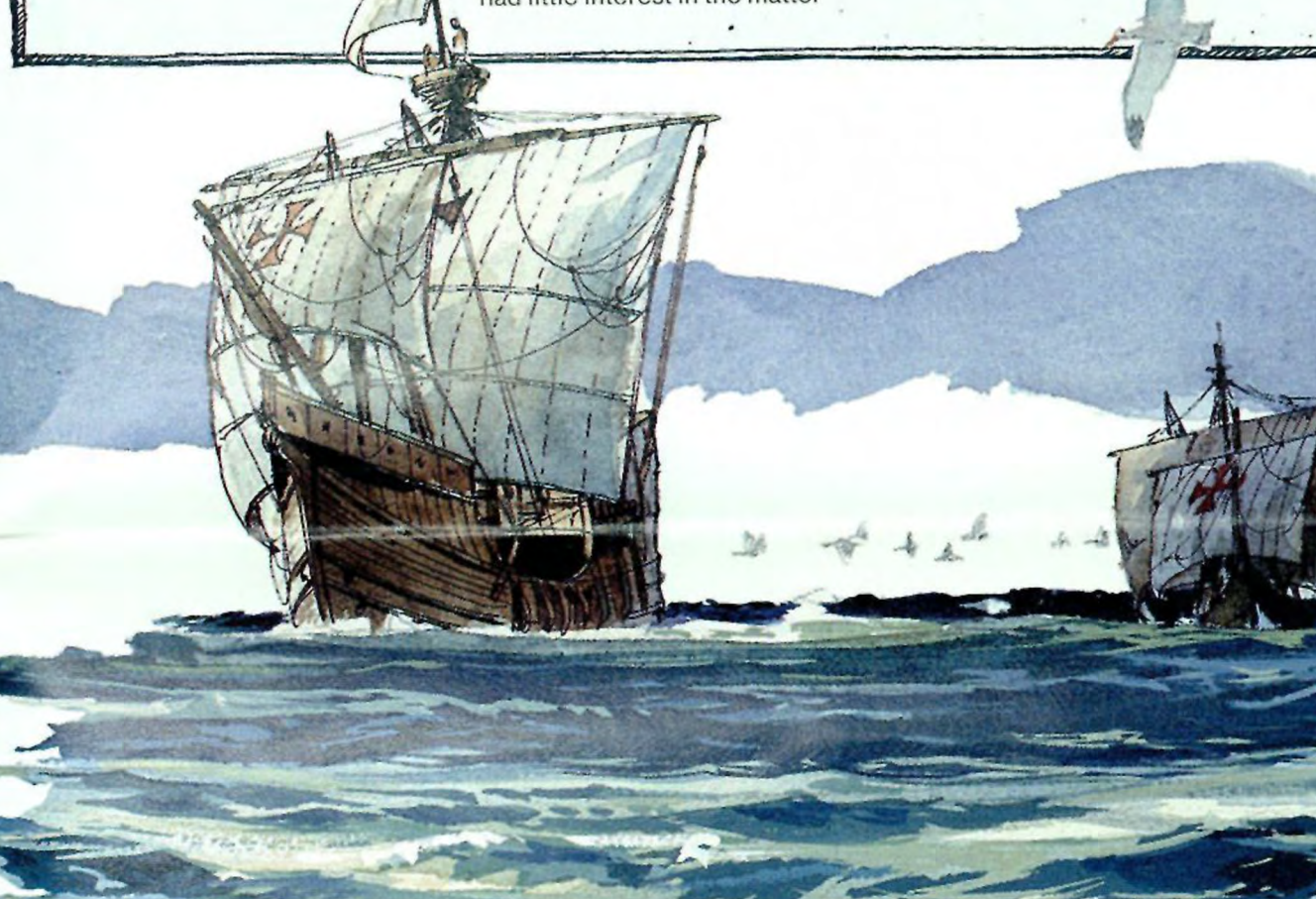


The fight in the waters off Salt River Bay, St. Croix, on 14 November 1493 (lower left) was the first between Spaniards and New World natives.  
 Below: Isabella was Spain's first major settlement in the New World. Founded in 1494 by Columbus as a trading post on the north coast of Hispaniola, the town lasted only four years.



## Landfall

"At two hours after midnight appeared the land, at a distance of 16 miles. A mariner called Juan Rodriguez Bermejo first saw this land," wrote Columbus. At dawn 12 October 1492 everyone on board saw a large, flat island with no tall people standing on the beach. Going ashore with his captains, Columbus took possession in the name of the King and Queen of an island in the Bahamas that the natives called Guanahani. Columbus renamed it San Salvador. Identification of this island is the most controversial of all Columbus's questions. He apparently had little interest in the matter himself, and his journal is vague enough that any one of several islands can be plausibly argued as the first landfall. To judge from recent debate, it seems likely—but not certain—that he landed on Watlings Island, renamed San Salvador in 1926.



## Ships and Sailing

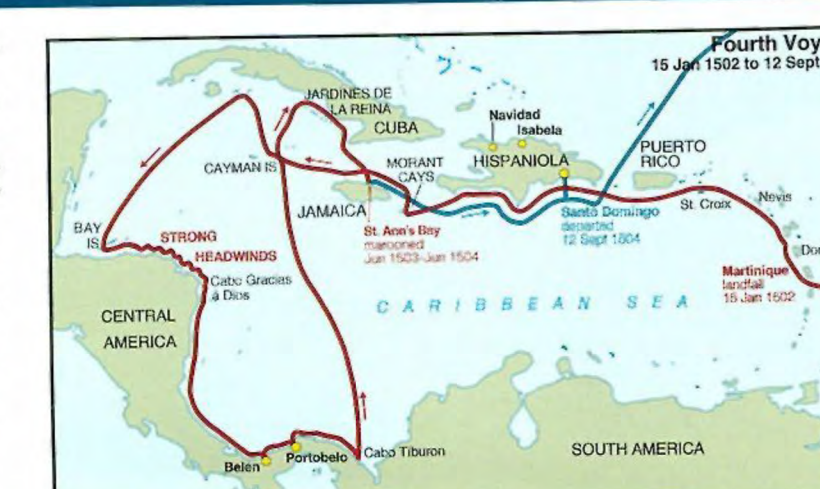
No one knows exactly what Santa Maria and Niña looked like. Shipbuilders of the time rarely worked from plans, and no contemporary drawings survive. Our only evidence are a few references in the Journal, some new information turned up recently on Niña, and generally what is known of ships of the period. The largest ship, Santa Maria, was a merchant-built in northern Spain and named La Gallega. Needing a third vessel to go with the two supplied by Palos, Columbus chartered this ship (with its mostly Basque crew) and renamed her. The ship was about 80 feet long, round and chunky, built for payload. She had three masts: a mainmast taller than the ship was long, a shorter foremast, and a mizzenmast. A huge mainmast supplied most of the drive. On board with Columbus were a pilot, a master (the owner), several royal officials, a surgeon, an interpreter, and a working crew of 7 officers, 11 seamen, and 10 apprentices (ship's boys). 40 all told. Pinta and Niña were caravels, sleeker and faster than the flagship and considerably smaller. Both were about 67 feet long and

re rigged for this voyage with square sails. Pinta's crew included two officers, 10 seamen, and 8 apprentices. 27 crew in all. Niña's crew numbered 21: two officers, 8 seamen, and 6 apprentices. Starting out, Columbus called them all good vessels, "well suited for such an enterprise." Later he complained often about Santa Maria, saying she was "very heavy and not suitable for the business of discovery."

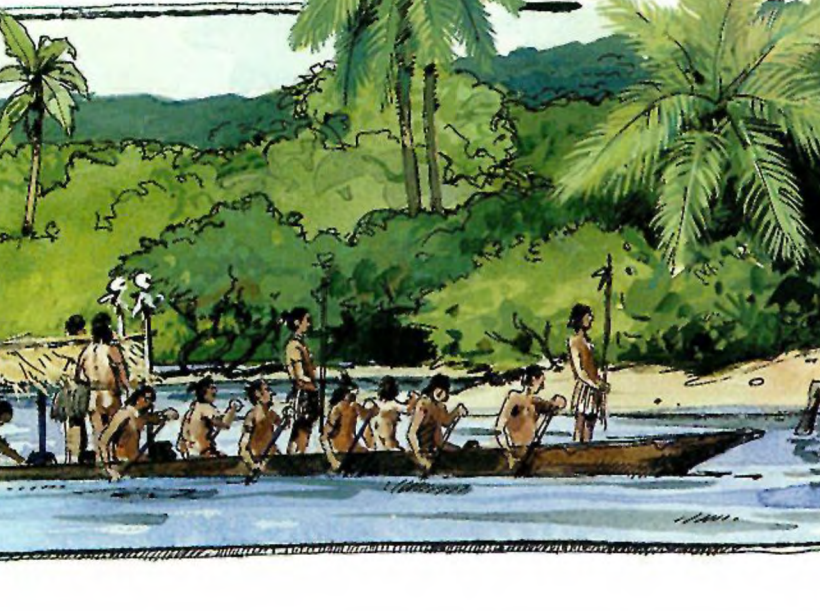
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## Fourth Voyage, 1502-04

Columbus's last voyage—the so-called High Voyage—was high adventure from start to finish. The monarchs had stripped Columbus of authority over the Indies after the Third Voyage. But two years later they responded to his pleas and gave him four ships and 140 men for another voyage, expressly forbidding slavery. The fleet departed 9 May 1502. On board was Columbus's son Ferdinand, 13, whose biography of his father is the source of much that we know about this voyage. Columbus's purpose was to find a strait leading into the "Indian" Ocean—really the Pacific. The ships made land at Martinique on 15 June 1502, rode out a hurricane at Santo Domingo, crossed the Caribbean to Honduras, where, among other astonishing things, they saw a dugout canoe "as long as a gallery," 5 feet wide, paddled by 25 natives, carrying cargo, women, and children. For months the ships beat to windward in foul weather, rounding Cape Gracias a Dios in mid-September. Columbus was determined to find a strait to the Pacific, and no gold. Two ships were lost to shipwrecks, the others barely made it across the Caribbean to Jamaica. Marooned on Jamaica for a year, he put down a mutiny and was eventually rescued. He arrived in Spain 7 November 1504, the voyage a failure, Columbus near collapse.



Below: At one of the Bay Islands off Honduras, Columbus sighted a huge sea-going canoe loaded with people and cargo.



## The New World

The first encounter of Europeans and New World natives was friendly enough. Many natives drifted down to the beach. "In order that they might be friendly with us," wrote Columbus, "because I knew they were a people who could better be freed and converted to our Holy Faith by love than by force, I gave to some of them red caps and to others glass beads... and many other things, in which they took much pleasure." In return the natives gave them parrots, cotton goods, and spears. Columbus described the natives as handsome, well-built, and guileless, but "naked as their mothers bore them." He called them *indios*—Indians, a name that stuck—because he thought he had reached the Indies. After two days here Columbus sailed off to the SW with native guides to explore islands on the horizon, looking for Japan and gold. He saw many small islands, which he christened with Spanish names. On October 27 he came to Cuba, another fair island, with good harbors, high mountains, and "very gentle" natives, whom he



noticed puffing away on dried leaves—the first reference to tobacco. While Columbus was exploring Cuba and without explanation, Martin Pinzon sailed off in *Pinta* to look for gold and was not seen again for two months. On December 5 Columbus sighted Hispaniola—the Spanish Isle—which he called the "fairest thing in the world." The natives here were also friendly and very comely, freely bartering gold ornaments for trinkets. Parties went inland to explore. At one village a thousand natives entertained the Spaniards with food, drink, and more; a few days later a cacique and entourage boarded *Santa Maria* and dined with Columbus.

## The Taino

The Indians Columbus so admired were Taino—their word for "good." A people distantly related to the Arawaks of South America, they had migrated into the Caribbean 1500 years earlier and now occupied the Bahamas and the Greater Antilles. Skillful farmers, they grew corn, yams, squash, and manioc, from which they made a tasty cassava bread. They lived in comfortable houses of brush, which were "very simple and clean inside... very high with good chimneys." Though they seemed "poor in everything," the Spaniards marveled over "their beds and furnishings like beds of fur"—a reference to hammocks, itself an Arawak word—and their sea-going canoes, which were fashioned like a long boat from the trunk of a tree, and all in one piece, and wonderfully made (considering the country), and so big that in some came 40 or 50 men, down to some in which but a single man came." Columbus thought the Taino had no religion—they knew neither sect nor idolatry, with the exception that all believe that the source of all power and goodness is in the sky—and could therefore be easily converted to the faith. He took six Indians back to Spain to learn the language—the plain word for it is kidnapping. Late in the voyage he began to see Indians as fit only to be worked—the first glimmers of the slave-master relationship that dominated Indian society over the next three centuries.

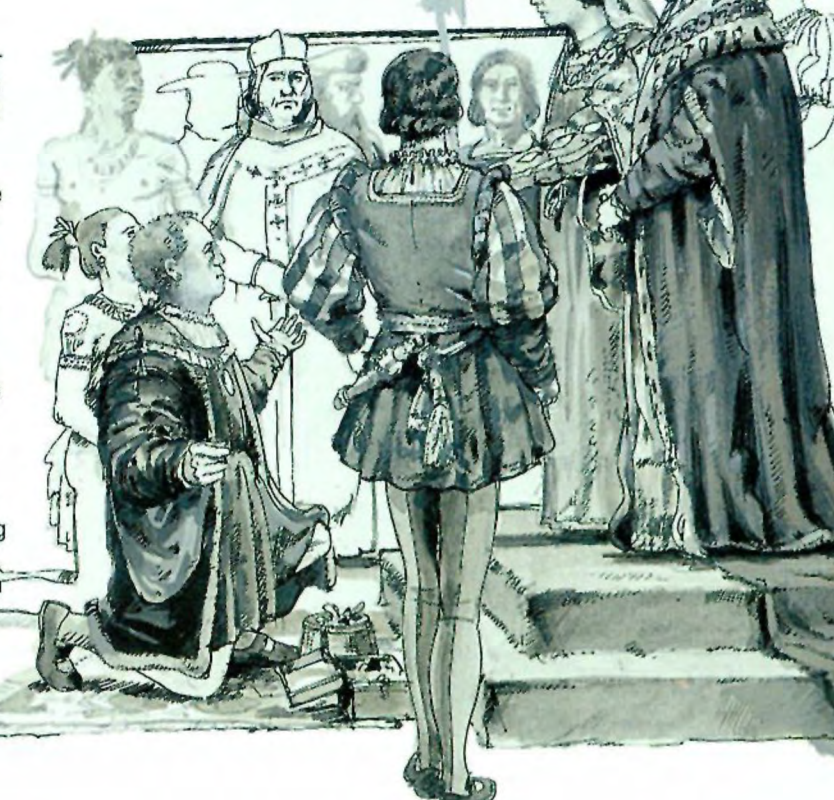


First Voyage detail: San Salvador to Hispaniola. On Oct 12 he is an hour from the coast.

## Return in Triumph

The voyage home was another masterpiece of navigation. Rejoined now by *Pinta*, Columbus steered a northeast course, taking against the trades before catching a westerly breeze. In mid-Atlantic a gale struck. *Pinta* disappeared and was not seen again until they reached Spain a day, about \$1 in today's wages but a fair sum then. Columbus wrote an account of the voyage, sealed in a barrel, and threw it overboard. When *Niña* finally made land in the Azores, the crew went straight to the nearest church to give thanks. After a week to provision, the voyage resumed. Two days off Niña ran into a storm. For several days a cyclone pounded the vessel, driving her toward the rocky coast of Portugal. But Columbus, with most of his sail gone, managed to stay off the rocks and enter Lisbon harbor on 4 March 1493. Columbus only put in there

because he needed repairs to continue on to Palos. The authorities at first were hostile, but when word of his incredible voyage got out, the king summoned Columbus and Isabella carefully (if usefully) to his story. Rejecting advice to kill the interloper and steal his secrets, he showered him with honors and gave orders to repair *Niña*. Columbus arrived at Palos March 15, almost a month after he had departed. From there he traveled to Seville, where he was cheered by crowds, and on to Barcelona to appear before the monarchs. His arrival was a triumph. He regaled the court with the story of his voyage, displaying gold, parrots, fruit, and six half-naked Indians as evidence. Soot most of Europe knew of his discovery of the "Indies." This was Columbus's crowning moment, full of honor and glory.



## Death and Legacy

The man who had given Spain claim to half a world ended his days in ill health and obscurity. He was not invited to court to tell about his voyage, probably because no one wanted to hear another unhappy tale about an unsuccessful voyage. Isabella's death a few weeks after his return cost Columbus his audience with the king in spring 1505. Ferdinand listened coolly to the admiral's claims against the crown but offered nothing more than an estate. Columbus was far from poor, would not settle for anything less. When Isabella's daughter the Infanta Juana came to the throne in April 1506, he pressed his claim with her but nothing came of it. His strength was fast ebbing. He died on 20 May 1506, leaving his property to his son Diego and a small sum to finance a crusade to Jerusalem, a cause that had long interested him. His death went unnoticed. Nearly 15 years after his first voyage no one had an accurate idea of the new lands

unveiled by Columbus. Robbed of his due by the crown, he was soon deprived of another honor. A year after his death, a German mapmaker labeled the new continent "America"—after Amerigo Vesputti, the Italian traveler whose colorful reports publicized the New World. Even after 500 years Columbus's reputation is not firmly established. Critics fault him for losing the Columbus mantle to a new age of empire, no one can dispute that he was a man of extraordinary vision and rare maritime skill whose voyages to America opened an age in world history with us still.

