

# CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS: MAN AND SAILOR

Events of Columbus' time: Marco Polo and other European travelers to the East brought back new foods (pasta, for example). Traders returned with spices, necessary both to preserve food and to disguise the taste of rotten food. The Islamic conquest of the Byzantine Empire (1450's) made trade with Western Europe difficult and/or expensive. Finally, the Genoese and Venetian system of sea trade routes to the East, combined with the Islamic monopoly of land trade routes (the Silk Road through Central Asia and Turkey) was breaking down; other nations and powers wished to find alternative routes which would eliminate monopolies, reserve all profits for themselves, and eliminate the taxes paid to Islamic rulers.

Technical improvements in marine travel matched developments in the political sphere. Sea-faring societies developed the caravel rig, with triangular lateen sails; this rig had distinct advantages in sailing to windward, making it easier to return to port. As people from Western Europe traveled farther, there was improving knowledge of foreign lands and continuing improvements in map- and chart-making to record this knowledge. Finally, Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal (1394-1460) made many resources available to enhance knowledge of the sea. He influenced the development and accuracy of charts (particularly of the African coast), technical improvements in shipbuilding, and a cross-fertilization of maritime knowledge.

There were several supposed pre-Columbian voyages to America. One was legendary: a voyage of St. Brendan from Ireland (in Irish *carraghs*, small leather-covered boats) was to the West, supposedly between 400-500 AD, which discovered



islands to the Westward (called "Antillia"). These legends were so persistent that the Portuguese, searching for Antillia, discovered the Azores in 1427. The Norse under Leif Ericsson settled at L'Anse aux Meadows (Newfoundland) at an archeologically proven site. Finally, one recent author has postulated that several Chinese fleets visited North and South America in the 1420's with the objective of setting up a vast trading empire.

Columbus the Man: By 1440 Domenico Columbo, Columbus' father, had become a master wool weaver, and in 1445 he married Susanna da Fontannarossa, the daughter of a fellow guild member. He leased a house near one of Genoa's city gates, the Porta dell' Olivella, where Christoforo Columbo was born in 1451. Christoforo was the couple's eldest child and had at least two siblings, Bartholomew and Giacomo. Domenico also received a minor political appointment, when he was made warder of the Porta dell' Olivella, with several men working for him and a fairly good salary. Christoforo attended the guild school and studied Latin, religion, geography and mathematics. At this time, he began to show a natural bent for drawing. Throughout his writings, Columbus showed a great interest in the natural world around him. He described shorelines, harbors, plants, and people that he observed on his travels. Sometime during his early years, his father lost his position, and money became tight. This loss of family wealth in his early years, combined with the contractual atmosphere in the Genoa of his day, had repercussions in Columbus' later life and dealings.

We know of Columbus' appearance only through written descriptions; no portrait from life exists. Most sources agree that he was tall, red-haired when young but quickly turning gray, ruddy-complexioned, hawk-nosed, blue-eyed, with a long face and high



cheekbones. He married Dona Felipa Perestrello e Moniz, the daughter of one of the hereditary governors of the Azores, and Columbus and she lived in the Azores for several years. It was here that Columbus noted that the winds in this latitude blew consistently from the West. Dona Felipa bore him one son, Diego, and died around 1485. After her death, Columbus left Portugal for Palos de la Frontera, a Spanish port on the Portuguese border.

It was here that Columbus took a mistress, Beatriz Enriquez de Harana, a cousin of a seaman from Palos. With her he had one son, Ferdinand. Although he never married her, he provided generously for her and Ferdinand in his will. Ferdinand worked with Columbus' legitimate son, Diego, to assist in establishing Columbus' titles and contractual arrangements with the Spanish crown, and the families remained cordial for several generations.

Columbus the Sailor: As a youth, Columbus made coastal voyages from Genoa to nearby towns to deliver his father's goods. He gradually went on longer voyages as he made the sea his calling: voyages throughout the Mediterranean, down the coast of Africa, and north to Iceland and beyond. It is this part of Columbus' life for which records are lacking. On one voyage, probably in the mid-1470's, his ship – one of a convoy - was attacked by pirates just outside the Strait of Gibraltar. Although wounded, Columbus floated ashore on wreckage and landed in Portugal. He joined his mapmaker brother Bartholomew in Lisbon. He thus found himself in the center of the exploration environment: the Portuguese made the best maps, the best ships, and had the best exploration program to reach the Spice Islands of the Indies by sailing around the coast



of Africa. Columbus, talented in drawing and observation, was himself an excellent mapmaker.

Columbus the Negotiator: The Enterprise of the Indies: The theory of sailing westward to reach the East actually began with ancient Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle. Shortly before Columbus' time, Portugal undertook a search of the legendary islands to the westward (Antillia). Although the strong prevailing westerlies made sailing westward difficult, in 1427 the Portuguese discovered the Azores, an island group in mid-Atlantic. Columbus and his wife lived in the Azores for a brief period after their marriage in 1479. It was here that Columbus may have noticed physical clues of land to the westward: driftwood unknown to Europeans, "fava do mar," unknown plants drifting from the west, and constant westerly winds.

Columbus engaged in some creative mathematics to determine the distance from the Iberian peninsula to China and Japan. In order to reduce the distance to the East and hence make the Enterprise more "marketable," Columbus fudged his numbers in two ways: 1) he projected the Eurasian land mass much farther to the east (225 degrees, actually about 180 degrees); and 2) he reduced the miles per degree by about 25% (although the ancient Greeks had measured the actual circumference of the earth fairly accurately). These two faulty calculations put Japan only 2400 miles west of the Canary Islands (instead of the actual 10,600), and China 3500 miles (instead of the actual 11,700).

Columbus first negotiated with Joao, king of Portugal, from 1484-1488. The king and his science advisors did not agree with Columbus' calculations. Late in 1488, the



Portuguese Bartholomew Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope; this development ended any Portuguese interest in Columbus' idea of sailing westward. In 1488, Columbus sent his brother Bartholomew to London to negotiate with Henry VII; but with the Wars of the Roses just over (1487), the king was uninterested in exploration. Next Bartholomew went to France, but was also rebuffed there. Having failed at negotiations with other countries, Columbus went to Spain.

Just after the death of his wife (exact date unknown), Columbus and his small son Diego (aged 4 or 5) left Portugal suddenly (under a legal or financial cloud) and arrived in Palos de la Frontera, a small Spanish port on the Rio Tinto just across the Portuguese border. He enrolled Diego in a school at the Franciscan monastery of La Rabida, just outside the town. One of the friars, Antonio de Marchena, was an avid cosmographer and astronomer; another friar, Juan Perez, was known at the Spanish court; both assisted Columbus in his preparation and presentation of his arguments to the Spanish Crown.

Columbus was involved in several negotiations with the Spanish court over the next several years. Throughout, Queen Isabella was much more interested in his proposal than King Ferdinand. The main sticking point was the continuing war against the Moors. The Queen promised favorable action after the conclusion of the war. When Grenada fell in early 1492, the stage was set for the "Enterprise of the Indies." The Crown agreed to Columbus' following conditions: 1)Columbus would be Admiral over all the lands he discovered; 2)he would be viceroy and governor-general over all the lands discovered; 3)he was entitled to one-tenth of the precious metals, gems, and spices from those areas; 4)he could adjudicate any disputes; 5)he had the option to pay



one-eighth of the expense of ships sailing to lands he discovered, and take one-eighth of the profits; and 6) he was entitled to the noble title "Don."

Columbus' First Voyage: In August 1492, the crown levied a fine of two ships against the town of Palos. The town offered two caravels, the *Pinta*, and the *Nina*, commanded by Martin Alonso and Vicente Yanez Pinzon, respectively. Columbus himself chartered the Santa Maria, a Galician-built *nao*. The little fleet left Palos August 3, 1492, and sailed toward the Canary Islands. They arrived at the Canary Islands on August 12, 1492, where Columbus made two major repairs: he repaired the *Pinta's* rudder and he changed the rig of the *Nina* from a lateen rig to a square rig. The Canaries were at the northern edge of the northeast trade wind zone.

Columbus and his fleet left the Canary Islands on September 9, 1492. He arrived at the Bahamas on October 12, 1492. Traditionally, his first landfall was at San Salvador. He next touched on other small cays in the Bahamas. He sailed along the northern coast of Cuba, and discovered Hispanola. On the early morning of December 25, the Santa Maria was wrecked on a reef along the northern cape of what is now Haiti. Columbus erected a fort (*La Navidad*, in honor of the day), under the command of Diego de Harana, to house the crew he could not take home. On January 6, 1493, Columbus, in the *Nina*, left for home, with the *Pinta*. He sailed northeasterly until he got into the latitude of the prevailing westerly winds. The *Nina*, with Columbus, reached the Azores on February 12, and left for Europe on February 24, after convincing the suspicious Portuguese that he had not been poaching along the coast of Africa. He reached the southeast coast of Portugal on March 13, 1493, and arrived back in Palos



on March 15. Martin Alonso Pinzon's *Pinta* missed the Azores, landed on the north coast of Spain, and finally arrived back to Palos also on March 15, just hours after Columbus.

Results of the first voyage included the Crown's determination to colonize the islands of the new world, to find gold and precious stones, and to convert the Indians.

Columbus' Second Voyage: The Spanish crown had decided to colonize the Indies and decided upon Hispaniola. They appropriated seventeen vessels for this colonizing expedition, which left Spain on September 25, 1493, and arrived at Dominica in the Lesser Antillies in November 1493. These remained the Spanish sailing directions for the next 200+ years: arrive at Dominica, turn northwest with the wind abeam, and sail until reaching the island of choice. Columbus discovered and named most of the Lesser Antillies: Guadalupe, Montserrat, Antigua, Redonda, Nevis, St. Christopher (St. Kitts), St. Eustatia (Satia), Saba, Virgin Islands (St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix), Vieques, and Puerto Rico. On January 2, 1494, he established a new city on Santo Domingo, and named it Isabela after the queen. Columbus sent reconnoitering parties into the interior to look for gold, under the command of Alonso de Hojeda, who authorized and began a policy of cruelty and exploitation of the Indians.

From April 24 to May 14, 1494, Columbus and three caravels explored the coast of Cuba, sailed around Jamaica and arrived back at Isabela on September 29, 1494. At Isabela, Columbus met his brother Bartholomew, who had taken three supply caravels from Spain to Hispaniola. Bartholomew was a very practical man: mapmaker, linguist, strong-willed, and sense of command with absolute loyalty to his brother. Morison



describes him as "intelligent without being intellectual." Christopher and Bartholomew had problems with the civil administration of the colony. He left Hispaniola in March 1496 to return to Spain to protect his name and reputation against those slandering his administration and governance. Aboard his favorite, Nina, Columbus sailed home and arrived in Cadiz in late 1493.

Third Voyage: As a prelude to his third voyage, Columbus visited the king and queen in northern Spain, and received permission for a third voyage, the dual purpose of resupplying Hispaniola and discovering lands to the South; the fleet would consist of six vessels: three resupply caravels to Hispaniola and three vessels of discovery: El Correo (the mail), La Vaquenos, and a third unnamed *nao*. He reached the Canary Islands on June 19. There the fleet split, with three ships going to Hispaniola and three continuing southwest to the Cape Verde Islands, where they headed west on a more southerly latitude than the first two voyages. The fleet reached Trinidad and explored the area between Trinidad and Venezuela (the first time he had seen the American mainland), and the northern coast of Venezuela. Columbus concluded that "I believe that this is a very great continent, which until today has been unknown." In late August 1498, he arrived at Santo Domingo, where he found the colony in a state of turmoil.

The colonists had moved the capital to a new town: Santo Domingo (Isabela Neuva). Francisco Roldan had led a revolt of the colonists against Bartholomew Columbus. The **encomienda** system had begun: each settler was allowed a large plot of land, with the Indians living on it and working it. Because of the colony's problems, Ferdinand and Isabela selected Bobadilla, to replace Columbus as administrator of



Hispaniola. Christopher and Bartholomew were arrested and sent to Spain in chains to stand trial. The Crown perceived Columbus and Bartholomew as failed administrators; but the primary cause was that all the colonists wanted to grow rich without working.

Columbus interacted with the Spanish court to clear his name (successful), regain his station as governor/administrator of Hispaniola (unsuccessful), and gain backing for a new expedition to locate a strait through the new continent (successful).

Fourth Voyage: Columbus viewed this as his greatest voyage (El Alto Viaje – the High Voyage). His fleet consisted of four caravels. The fleet left Spain May 9, 1502; some of the officers, especially the Porras brothers, were chosen by the Crown and were disloyal to Columbus throughout the voyage. The fleet arrived at the Canary Islands on May 20 and left on May 25 after taking on wood and water. They anchored off Santo Domingo on June 29. The administration, led by Bobadilla, refused to let Columbus ashore, despite his forecast of a hurricane. Columbus' fleet sought shelter in a nearby bay, while the hurricane sunk twenty-nine out of thirty ships in the homeward-bound treasure fleet; Bobadilla was aboard one of the ships. Columbus decided to explore the western Caribbean, including the coasts of Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama, called at that time "Veragua." Columbus' family was given the title "Dukes of Veragua," a title which his descendants still hold today. He continued to look for a source of gold and for indications of a possible strait.

Two of his four ships were so rotten that they had to be left in harbors on the coast of what is now Panama: the Gallego in Belen, and the Vizcaina in Porto Bello. His remaining two ships – Capitano and Santiago – were also very rotten with *toredo* –



shipworm – damage. The ships were in such bad condition that Columbus could not return to Santo Domingo, and ran them both aground on Jamaica rather than risk sinking in the open sea .

From the end of June 1503 through June 1504, he and his crews were marooned on the island of Jamaica. Although there were sources of water nearby and the Indians (overawed by Columbus' successful prediction of a lunar eclipse from an almanac) provided food, the men were anxious to get back to Spanish territory. The Porras brothers instigated a mutiny of forty-eight out of the 100 officers and men, which Columbus and his loyal officers put down. Finally, Columbus and his crew were rescued at the end of June 1504. They embarked for Spain September 12, 1504 and docked in Sanlucar de Barrameda, near Palos, on November 7, 1504.

Columbus' Reception: Upon his return, Queen Isabella, Columbus' major patron, was near death. Columbus, although arthritic and infirm, followed the movements of the court, hoping for an audience with the King. Finally, Columbus died on May 20, 1506. The king did not acknowledge his monetary rights, leading to decades-long court hearings. For the next fifty years, the *Pleitos de Colon* took place. These were efforts by the Crown to eliminate the privileges granted Columbus; Columbus' descendants had to prove that the idea and execution of the voyages was his, and that he deserved the monetary royalties and noble titles promised.

Results of Columbian Voyages: Columbus discovered whole new continents and peoples, although he did not realize it. There were numerous exchanges: the



Europeans brought smallpox and other diseases (they were immune, but the Indians were not); foodstuffs such as oranges and sugar, war material such as arms and armor, and domesticated animals such as horses, pigs, sheep, goats, and cattle. The natives gave foodstuffs such as potatoes, yams, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, corn, peanuts, cacao, squashes, and many place names. They also gave words and concepts: hammocks and canoes. One major contribution to our current good life were disease-free grapevine rootstock (which were later – 1860's-1870's – planted in Europe), so that European grapevines, with no natural resistance to the phylloxera, could be grafted onto the disease-resistant roots.