

3 The First Two Voyages of Christopher Columbus (1492-1496)

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3.1 Columbus Prepares His First Voyage Across the Ocean and Departs

Columbus, having come to an agreement with Queen Isabella, had prepared to travel to Asia by sailing westward. Given that the Queen only financed a part of the expedition expenses, he sought and obtained financing from Florentine and Genoese bankers. The difficulty of recruiting a crew remained. To adventure towards the unknown may appear attractive to dreamers, but not to sailors who want their own land back under their feet and to find themselves at home again at the end of a contract. The outward journey was guaranteed by favourable and constant winds, but precisely for this reason the return voyage seemed very uncertain to the men to be recruited.

Finding the most suitable ship was easier. The flagship was to be the *Santa María*, a 'carrack' of about 120 tons, owned by Juan de La Cosa, expert Biscalian navigator and cartographer, who was to have the role of *maestre* on board, while Columbus held direct command. In addition to this ship, the Queen was to provide two caravels, the *Niña* and the *Pinta*, which the city of Palos was to make available as payment for a fine. These ships, each about 50 tons, were to be under the command of two expert sailors, the brothers Martín Alonso and Vicente Yáñez of the Pinzón family. However, Martín Alonso, the elder brother, was not used to sailing under the orders of foreigners and was convinced that the fine imposed by the Queen was an abuse of power.¹

¹ Juan Manzano Manzano wrote a vast work in three volumes on the Pinzón family from Palos, *Los Pinzones y el descubrimiento de América*.

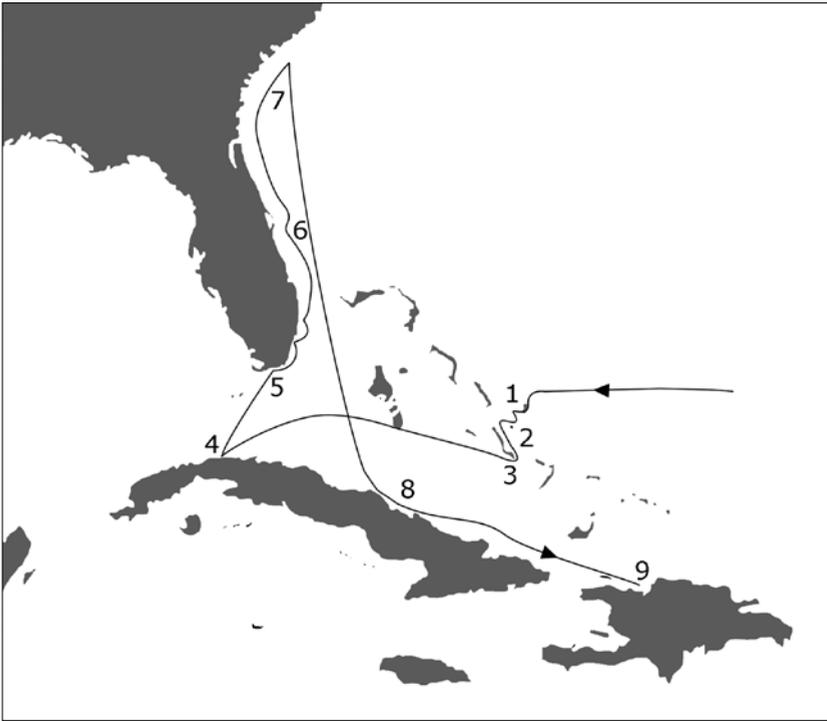


Figure 3.1 An attempt to reconstruct the course followed by Columbus after October 12, 1492, reconciling the maps and map place names derived from the Portuguese *Padrão Real* with what Columbus and others wrote. 1) Arrival at San Salvador on October 12; 2) on October 15 he followed the coast of the island of Santa María; 3) from October 16-18 he followed the coast of Fernandina Island (today Long Island); 4) he reached a harbour on the north-west side of the island of Cuba; 5) between October 23 and 24 he began the crossing on a north-easterly course arriving at Cabo Hermoso (today Cape Sable); 6) from October 28 onwards he explored Florida, Georgia and S. Carolina as far as latitude 32°N; 7) on November 12 he left for the south; 8) he arrived at Puerto del Príncipe on November 18 and explored the north-eastern coast of the island of Cuba; 9) on November 22 he established a base on the island of Hispaniola

In the end, with the addition of two criminals who, in return for a pardon from heavy penal sentences, were to participate in the venture, the crew was complete:² there were ninety men, mainly Castilians, among them many from Palos, none being subjects of King Ferdinand, and the names of all of them have come down to us. Over sixty of the men were aboard the *Santa María*, while the others sailed on board the two caravels.

At dawn on August 2, 1492, the small fleet set sail from the port of Palos: first stop the Canary Islands. After a few days of navigation, the *Pinta*'s rudder broke twice, which made Columbus suspicious, as he noted in the ship's diary. Once they reached the island of Gran Canaria the rudder was replaced with a new one, the last provisions were taken on board and on September 1 the crossing began. The trade winds pushed the three ships towards the west and day-by-day Columbus carefully measured the course travelled in order to be able to calculate the longitude of the lands they came across. The reference meridian was that of Gomera, a small island at the centre of

² Gould y Quincy, "Nueva lista documentada de los tripulantes de Colón en 1492".

the archipelago of the Canaries. As soon as they crossed the meridian of the Azores, Columbus was surprised to note the compass needle, which usually pointed just west of the Pole Star, now pointed just to the east of it. He took note of this strange phenomenon and reassured the other pilots who were alarmed by the strange event. He also calmed the crews with regard to the green expanses of *Sargassum*, floating seaweed that appeared at the ships' prows like insidious submerged meadows. Despite Columbus' encouragement, and although signs appeared indicating land was nearing – flocks of small birds, tree branches with fresh green leaves – after a month of navigation the crew remained perturbed and unhappy.

During the night of October 11, a fire was seen in the distance, and the next day Friday October 12, a small white island, rather low and covered in rich vegetation, was finally sighted. Christopher Columbus was certain he had reached, as predicted, the outposts of the Asian continent. However, the appearance and behaviour of the natives who crowded onto the beach to meet them were unexpected: they were naked, with rather light skin, carried rudimentary weapons, were “simple and good”, friendly, and ready to help.

After the ceremony during which Columbus took possession of the island in the name of the Spanish sovereigns, he named the island, known as Guanahani by the natives, San Salvador (today Warling) and immediately asked whether there were precious spices and gold there, showing the examples he had brought with him. The reply was negative and the Admiral left the island post-haste taking on board a group of natives, many of whom soon escaped by jumping into the sea. Yet, some stayed and one of them, who was given the name Diego de Colón, stayed with the Admiral, acting as his interpreter for many years. The fleet visited other nearby islands, which Columbus named Santa María (today Rum Cay) and Fernandina (today Long Island). The latter seemed very large and its population more developed: the natives knew how to weave on the loom and some of them wore simple clothes. Following the mirage of gold, from the island of Fernandina the fleet reached an island known as Saometo by its inhabitants, a name which Columbus changed to Isabella (today Cuba), a varied and pleasant island almost entirely surrounded by dangerous shallows and coral reefs that made it difficult to get close to land. Keeping away from that island the fleet reached a place of extraordinary beauty that he named ‘Capo Bello’, specifying: “This which I call Capo Bello I believe to be an island separated from Saometo [i.e. Cuba island] and [between the two] there is positioned another smaller one”.³

The detailed description of this place and its position suggest that it was Cape Sable, the southernmost tip of today's Everglades National Park in Florida.⁴

³ “Este, al que yo digo Cabo hermoso, crea que es isla apartada de Saometo y aùn hay ya otra entremedias pequeña”. Columbus, *Diario de a bordo*, 19 de octubre. In the many reconstructions of the route followed by Columbus from October 19 to November 10, his ships sailed around the island of Cuba. This reconstruction is not likely since the waters surrounding the island, except in a stretch of the southern coast and a shorter one near Havana, are fraught with dangers for sailing due to the shallow waters and submerged rocks. See also § 3.8 and [fig. 3.5].

⁴ The navigation undertaken by Christopher Columbus after reaching San Salvador appears in his *Diario de a bordo*, whose original was lost or damaged. Bartolomé de las Casas, who edited the publication of that *Diario*, filled in the missing parts with passages from a *Letter to the Sovereigns of Spain* sent by Columbus himself, while Fernando Colombo in *Le Historie di Cristoforo Colombo* (vol. 1, 118-20, here cited as *Le Historie*) found a different solution. In both cases,

Having sailed northward and landing along the eastern coast of the large Florida peninsula on Friday October 21, Columbus had a surprise that he described in the following manner:

There was much water and many lakes in this land, by one of which I saw a snake seven feet [over 2 m] long and with a belly a good foot [35 cm] wide, which being bothered by my men dove into the lake, but as it was shallow they killed it with a lance, not without some fear and admiration for its ferocity and nasty appearance [...] once the horrible skin and those scales with which it was covered were removed, it had white meat of a sweet and good taste.

There was no name for this animal, certainly an alligator, and someone jokingly called it *lagarto* (lizard) and this name was given to a small river that ran nearby: Río de los Lagartos, a name that appears, slightly modified, on antique maps showing the Atlantic coast of Florida. Columbus arranged for the skin to be tanned so as to take it to the Spanish sovereigns; the next day they were able to kill another specimen,⁵ which Martín Alonso had tanned in order to present it to the Convento de la Rábida where perhaps it is still kept.

On Sunday October 28, they anchored

at the mouth of a large river which was called Río de la Luna, where the trees were very thick and tall, adorned with flowers and fruits different from ours and there was a large number of birds with great gaiety, because tall grass could be seen there.

Upon seeing the ships, the inhabitants of these places had fled.

Columbus and his men weighed anchor and sailed until they reached the mouth of a larger river, which the Admiral named Río de Mares. Here too, on their arrival the natives fled “towards the mountains that were very high and rounded and full of trees and delightful plants”.⁶ Based on this description, Río de Mares can be identified as the narrow lagoon behind present-day Cape Canaveral in Florida and the ‘very high and rounded mountains’ as the hills near Pinecastle, given that there are no others within 200 miles.⁷

Columbus, realising that on their arrival many of the natives fled, thought that it would be better to send only two sailors accompanied by two natives to act as interpreters to carry out inland exploration. In the meantime, his

the text regarding October 23-28 can be interpreted in various ways. Here the choice is to follow an interpretation that agrees both with the cartography and toponymy present in the Cantino Planisphere and on other maps derived from the *Padrão Real* from Portugal that predates 1502.

⁵ Based on the description, Peter Martyr d’Anghiera, who had visited Egypt, identifies it in his *Decades* as an animal similar to a crocodile.

⁶ *Le Historie*, vol. 1, ch. XXVI, 123. The fact that the island Columbus called Isabella was also called Cuba, like the *terra firma* opposite, has been the cause of many misunderstandings. See fig. 3.4 and § 13.5.

⁷ The description of these places that appears in Columbus’ *Diario de a bordo* is far better suited to Florida and the lands to its north, represented in the earliest maps that have come down to us, than the island of Cuba. Evidence that the Admiral explored the North American coast from the southern tip of Florida to beyond the mouth of the Savannah River comes both from the passages cited and from the charts derived from the Portuguese *Padrão Real*. The reconstruction of the voyage undertaken after October 24 that appears in the *Diario de a bordo* edited by Luis Arranz Márquez (1991, 97), reflecting the opinion of many specialists in the last century, contrasts with the earliest testimony.

ship would be beached for caulking, making the hull watertight by filling cracks and fissures with hemp and pitch.

The four men advanced for twelve leagues (about sixty kilometres) in that luxuriant and populous land. They saw an infinity of species of trees and plants that did not grow along the coast, great varieties of birds, especially parrots, but also partridges and nightingales. The natives offered them sweet potatoes, legumes similar to beans and broad beans, and above all maize that tasted very good either cooked, grilled or ground into meal. They saw cotton bushes, “and in one house found over 12,500 pounds of spun cotton”. They were surprised on meeting people who carried between their fingers rolled up tobacco leaves that burned at one end. They reached a village of ‘a thousand hearths’ (that is about one thousand families) with fifty large houses. In his narration of the places thus described, Bartolomé de las Casas tinged them with the colours of a fairy tale.

According to this friar, the four ambassadors assumed that they had entered into Cathay, the land described by Marco Polo, bearers of a letter for the Great Khan, who obviously they never reached.

The ambassadors returned to the ships on November 5, accompanied by a ‘king’, probably an important chieftain, and by his son and a servant. Columbus treated them with friendship and respect, asking whether they knew where gold and spices could be found. They replied that there was none in those places, but such things could be found in abundance on the faraway island of Beghio, to the south.

The Admiral wanted to leave immediately for the island, also because at the latitude he found himself it had started to get cold and an icy wind was blowing. However, the wind changed and the fleet was pushed further north, as far as 42° latitude, as referred by Columbus. In actual fact, the Admiral had ‘adjusted’ the latitude of the entire archipelago by about ten degrees to the north in order to prevent the Portuguese from claiming those lands for themselves based on the terms of the Treaty of Alcáçovas drawn up between Spain and Portugal.⁸ It must therefore be presumed that he did in fact not sail beyond 32° latitude, given that cotton plants do not grow beyond that.

Once they set sail again, they managed to reach warmer climes and the desired island with its wealth of gold. The natives called it Haiti, but the Admiral renamed it Hispaniola, Little Spain, and this should be the name of the entire island.

Angelo Trevisan, secretary to Domenico Pisani, ambassador of the Most Serene Republic of Venice to Spain and Portugal, summed up Columbus’ voyage in the period between October 20 and November 20, based (presumably) on information gathered from those who had taken part. He wrote:

And in this first voyage he only discovered six islands, two of which of unprecedented size, one was called ‘la Spagnola’ [Haiti], the other Juana, but it was not certain that Juana was an island. Proceeding along the coast of these islands, in the month of November they heard nightingales singing in dense forests, [Columbus] discovered great rivers of fresh wa-

⁸ According to the Treaty of Alcáçovas, the areas of influence of the Spaniards and the Portuguese were established as follows: the territories north of the Canaries’ parallel belonged to the formers and south of the Canaries to the Portuguese. The fact that Columbus had explored those territories removes all value from the diatribe about who set foot on that continent first. Other considerations are discussed below.

ter, deep natural harbours that could contain a very large fleet. Navigating along the coast of Juana by the mistral wind [towards the north-west] he travelled 800 miles in a straight line without finding the end or sign of an end, as far as one could see. Therefore, he thought it was the mainland and decided to invert his course, which the sea also forced him to do, because he had sailed via gulfs [the open sea] having turned the prow to the north so much that the Bora [an icy north wind] began to cause the ships to suffer. Turning the prow to the east looking for the island of *Osyra* [...] he finally found this island that he called Spagnola.⁹

Such a summary leaves little doubt about how Columbus spent those thirty-one days between October and November.

3.2 Martín Alonso's Desertion and the Shipwreck of the *Santa María*

When in view of Hispaniola [Haiti] on November 21, the *Pinta* disappeared over the horizon: Martín Alonso had deserted.¹⁰ According to some, the Indians told Martín Alonso that in a certain place on the island there was a lot of gold and he attempted to take possession of it for himself. According to others he set off to reconnoitre, convinced he could be the first to reach the wealthy mainland of Asia (which he never found). This second hypothesis deserves attention.

In his *Journal*, Columbus commented on the event with resentment but without fear for the future. However, this desertion became a serious problem when on Christmas night 1492, while all were sleeping, including the cabin boy on watch, the *Santa María* hit a reef and began to take on water. The crew were able to save themselves and recover part of the provisions and a few other things, and then the ship sank and the waves demolished the wreck.

Based on the agreements made with the sovereigns, with this discovery, Christopher Columbus had become *Almirante de la Mar Océano* (Admiral of the Ocean Sea) and viceroy of these islands, but at that moment he was only a shipwrecked person. He still had seventy-four men but very few provisions, and only one caravel able to re-cross the ocean carrying at most forty people. He noted the disaster in the *Journal* and without losing heart decided that the sailors should build a small fort with the wreckage of the *Santa María*, equipped with all the arms they had brought from Spain, which

⁹ Translation of an original passage written in Venetian dialect published in the excellent book edited by Angela Caracciolo, *Angelo Trevisan, Lettere sul Nuovo Mondo, Granada 1501, testo critico*, 30. The original text reads: "in questa prima navigazione scoperseno sei sole isole, do dele qual de grandezza inaudita; una chiamò la Spagnola, l'altra la Zoanna. Ma la Zoanna non hebbe ben certo che la fosse insula. Scorrendo per coste de epse, sentino cantar del mese de novembre fra densissimi boschi el rossignolo. Trovò grandissimi fiumi de dolcissimi aque, porti natural profundissimi per grandissima armata; et scorrendo la costa dela Zoana per maestro, per drito lado andò 800 milia che non trovò né termine né segno de termine, quanto potevan veder cun li ochi; unde pensò fusse terra ferma, et deliberò tornar, che così etiam lo costrenzeva el mar, perché l'era andato tanto per diversi colfi che l' haveva volto la prova al septentrionale, ita che la borrea hormai li comenzava dar travaglio. Voltata dunque la prova verso Levante cercando la insula Osyra [...] tandem trovò questa insula che 'l chiamò Spagnola".

¹⁰ The quotations and events narrated here are taken from *Le Historie*, vol. 1, chs. XXV-XXIX, 120-30.

would house part of the crew while awaiting their chance to return. The island promised to provide the necessary food, the environment was splendid and healthy, gold and women were not lacking, while the crossing with a caravel overloaded with people would be very risky. Thirty-eight sailors stayed on the island under the command of Diego de Arana, a bailiff back home and cousin of Beatriz, Columbus' partner and mother of his son Hernando.

Columbus was ready to set sail for Spain, when the sails of the *Pinta* were sighted. Several sailors went to meet the ship in the *Santa María's* surviving tender and a native canoe. Martín Alonso could have been hanged for his disobedience and desertion, but Columbus decided to accept the traitor's false justifications to avoid making the situation worse, even though he did not fail to express his anger. For pride, the Admiral did not ask him what he had seen during that month, but many others did; in particular, his brother Vicente and the second-in-command Juan de La Cosa were assiduous in doing so.¹¹ Vicente Yañez and others begged Columbus to forgive his brother. Columbus was aware of running a great risk: he, alone and a foreigner, was going to have to lead a hostile crew in the vast solitude of the ocean. Luckily, he was also the only one who knew the return route to Spain and it was for this reason that Martín Alonso returned to him and why the crew would obey him.

Things went well for him, he got safely home, but throughout the voyage, Columbus must have thought that he would never undertake such an endeavour again without having trustworthy people with him; and such a decision was the beginning of a great deal of other trouble for him.

3.3 Columbus' Return Voyage

Already during the period (1481-1483) when he lived on the island of Porto Santo near Madeira and travelled back and forth between Portugal and the Azores, Christopher Columbus had carefully studied the regime of the winds, ascertaining that they regularly blew from the west. Objects of unknown provenance transported by the sea currents also came from the west. Based on this, he had concluded that the best way to return to Europe from overseas was to travel north to reach the latitude of about 38° North, from there turn eastward to reach the Azores with the aid of favourable winds and sea currents, and then continue on to Spain and Portugal.¹² He followed this route in the winter of 1493 and sailing ships used it for the next three hundred years.

The first days of navigation were serene and the sea was very calm, so much so that the Indios who had been taken on board dove into the water to swim. A few days later, the *Niña* and the *Pinta* were hit by a violent storm and they lost sight of each other, even though the fire burning in the iron basin at the prow of the *Niña* did not go out. The weather worsened and everyone feared the worst. Columbus, foreseeing a shipwreck, took a sheet of parchment, wrote a concise account of his discoveries, and sealed it carefully in a small cask to be entrusted to the waves. The crew thought that it

¹¹ S.E. Morison recalls that in the lawsuit against the Treasury filed by the heirs of Christopher Columbus it is reported that Martín Alonso would have reached the continent when he deserted navigating towards the west.

¹² *Le Historie*, vol. 1, chs. VII-IX, 65-79.

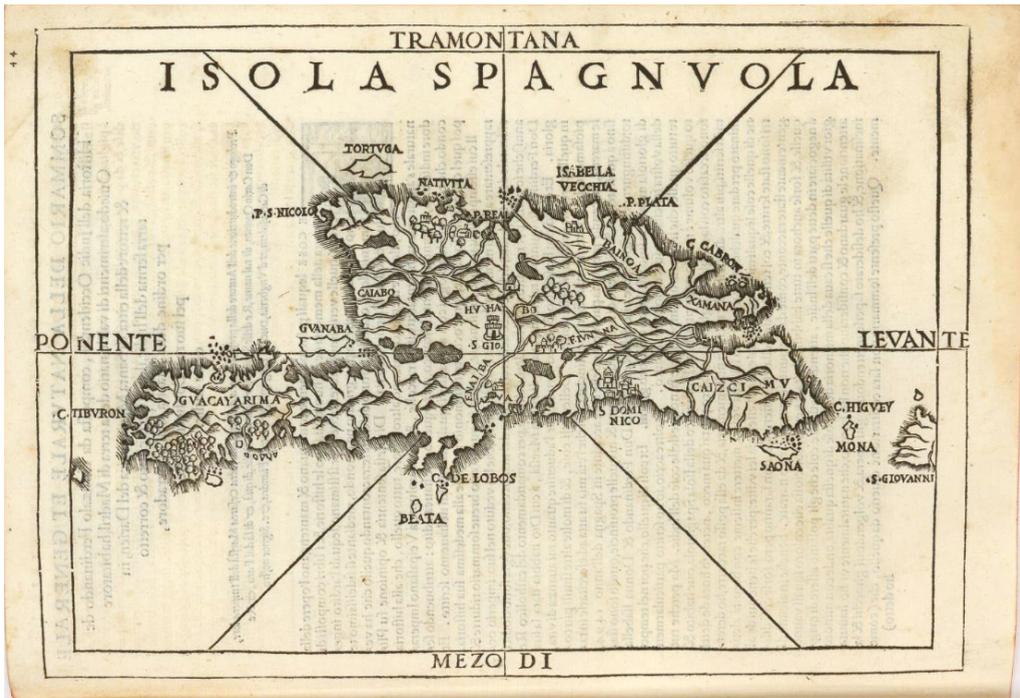


Figure 3.2 Map of the island of Hispaniola (Haiti) printed in Venice by Giunti in 1556. To the north, the village of Natività, or Navidad, and the city of Isabella (inland, to the east of the Cibao mine); below on the opposite coast, to the east of the city, is the port of Santo Domingo. © John Carter Brown Library at Brown University

was a propitiatory ritual and vowed to go in pilgrimage to the nearest sanctuary of the Madonna should they be saved. They were lucky: not long afterwards, they saw a small island during an unexpected let-up in the storm. Columbus recognised it to be Santa María, the southernmost island of the Azores, on the side of which stood a sanctuary dedicated to the Madonna.

Half of the crew boarded a tender and landed to go and fulfil their vows, but in the meantime a large ship arrived carrying the island's Portuguese commander. He took the tender and Spanish sailors hostage and addressed Columbus in menacing terms. The latter replied angrily but, given that the anchorage was precarious and the weather was worsening again, he had to seek shelter elsewhere. He returned a few days later, presenting his credentials to the commander and demanding the release of the sailors and the tender. This time the Portuguese captain agreed.

Columbus departed hastily, but after a week of navigation the ships were hit by another terrible storm that tore the *Niña's* sails and once again left it at the mercy of the waves until at dusk they sighted mainland Europe. They stayed out at sea and at dawn on March 4, 1493, they were off Lisbon. With only the foresail, the *Niña* was pushed by a furious wind and flood tide into the Tagus estuary, the entrance to the river port, in front of the astonished people who had gathered to watch the spectacle. This was something of a miracle.

At first, the reception in Lisbon was brusque: a large ship bristling with cannons that defended the port came alongside the *Niña* and its command-

er Bartolomeu Dias ordered that the captain should go and explain his arrival to the sovereign's ministers. Again, Columbus proudly presented himself as the Admiral of the Spanish sovereigns and presented his credentials, showing the Indios who had come with him to the amazed people and asking to be received not by the ministers but by the King himself. The request was accepted by Dias who knew Columbus and was aware of his proposals. While waiting for King John II to be informed of his unexpected arrival, Columbus wrote a message for the King and Queen of Spain.

In the meantime, people crowded round to look at the ships and the seven strange men from unknown lands, who in turn looked out over the broadsides and marvelled at the large and beautiful European city.

The Portuguese King's invitation arrived four days later carried by the King's chamberlain, Dom Martín de Noronha. Columbus went to the palace of Belem, just outside Lisbon, where he was welcomed by the courtiers who accompanied him to the King. When the Admiral was in his presence, the old King, who knew him well,

treated him with great honour and was very welcoming, making him replace his hat, and having him sit on a chair [near the throne]. Later, after he had heard the details of his victory, he offered him all that was necessary for the service of the 'most Catholic' sovereigns: even though it seemed to him that according to what had been agreed between them [through the Treaty of Alcáçovas of 1480], this conquest belonged to him.¹³

Columbus declared he knew nothing of this and altered - as we have seen - the geographical coordinates of the islands so that they fell outside of the Portuguese claims.¹⁴

The consultations lasted three days during which King John had Columbus tell him all about the voyage, regretting that he had not believed him years before when Columbus had asked to sail in the King's name and at the same time thinking about how to remedy the situation that had arisen.¹⁵

While the Admiral was a guest at the court, the sailors of Lisbon and several of the King's functionaries gathered information from the Spanish sailors, who were relaxing in the port's taverns after the labours of the voyage. It was then that a map of the places visited on the other side of the ocean must have been circulated and whose details are drawn on the Cantino Planisphere, a copy of the *Padrão Real*. Many of the names on this Portuguese map are written in Spanish or Italian.

Nine days had passed since the arrival in Lisbon when the *Niña* unfurled her sails for the return to Palos, where she arrived on the morning of March 15. The sailors were welcomed with great celebrations; a few hours later Martín Alonso's *Pinta*, which the storm had pushed northward to Baiona in Galicia, arrived. Martín Alonso had announced his arrival to the King of

¹³ *Le Historie*, vol. 1, ch. XL, 155.

¹⁴ This trick of altering the latitude and longitude affected the cartography of the Gulf of Mexico for a long period.

¹⁵ The initiatives of King João II of Portugal are discussed by Valentini in "The Portuguese in the Track of Columbus" (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/196667>). It is not unlikely that King João requested and obtained that Columbus would show him the cartography of those places that appears in the *Padrão Real* of around 1500 with the annotations and false geographical coordinates of Columbus. See § 3.1 and caption of fig. 3.4.

Spain via a courier, and he was broken by illness and by fear. He took refuge in the nearby friary of La Rábida, where Columbus also liked to take refuge, and died there some fifteen days later. Columbus only wrote about Martín Alonso's deplorable behaviour and desertion in his *Journal*, and thus Queen Isabella immediately took care of the captain's widow and children.

A few weeks later, Columbus travelled overland to Barcelona, where the court was in residence at that time. He was welcomed there by celebrations that were less grandiose than those described by his son Hernando. It is useful to know that during this period Spain was divided into two parts: the Kingdom of Castile and León, which was ruled by Isabella, and the Kingdom of Aragon, which Ferdinand ruled. Ferdinand and Isabella were married, reigning together over this large country that had no capital city as the sovereigns often changed their residence according to the needs of the moment.

3.4 King Ferdinand is Suspicious of the Admiral

The events of Columbus' voyage and, in particular, his return have something of the miraculous, which led it to be imagined that he, Christopher, 'bringer of Christ', had been designated and protected by divine providence during his extraordinary endeavour. Indeed, three hundred and fifty years later, the French nobleman Antoine Roselly de Lorgues wrote a vast eulogistic work about him (published in 1855) and, in agreement with the Franciscan Order and the City of Genoa, promoted the beatification of the great navigator. This process, begun under Pope Pius IX in the second half of the 19th century, has never been completed. In March 1493, the 'most Catholic' King Ferdinand was happy for the success of the voyage but very worried about the way the adventurous endeavour had concluded, suspecting that Columbus was scheming with his rival king. Towards the end of that month, numerous alarming messages had reached him. Before proposing that Queen Isabella sponsor the expedition, the Genoese navigator had negotiated with King John II of Portugal. King Ferdinand also remembered that Portugal's fortune overseas had begun when King Denis nominated the Genoese Emanuele Pessagno 'Admiral of the Portuguese Fleet', whose descendants were still active in that country. Furthermore, he did not agree with the Queen about the titles that she had granted Columbus as a reward for the outcome of his venture.¹⁶ Consequently, the King took over the organisation and made a series of decisions with extraordinary rapidity and efficiency, which influenced the subsequent development of events.

3.5 King Ferdinand's Hasty Stipulations

The second half of March 1493 was extenuating for the Spanish sovereigns due to the frenetic and continuous arrival of news requiring immediate decisions. The first message arrived from the ambassador in Lisbon who updated them on events there and informed them of Columbus' return from a success-

¹⁶ King Ferdinand of Aragon's worries and the provisions he took regarding Columbus' voyage are described by Juan Manzano Manzano, *Los Pinzones y el descubrimiento de América*, vol. 1, ch. 1, § 15.

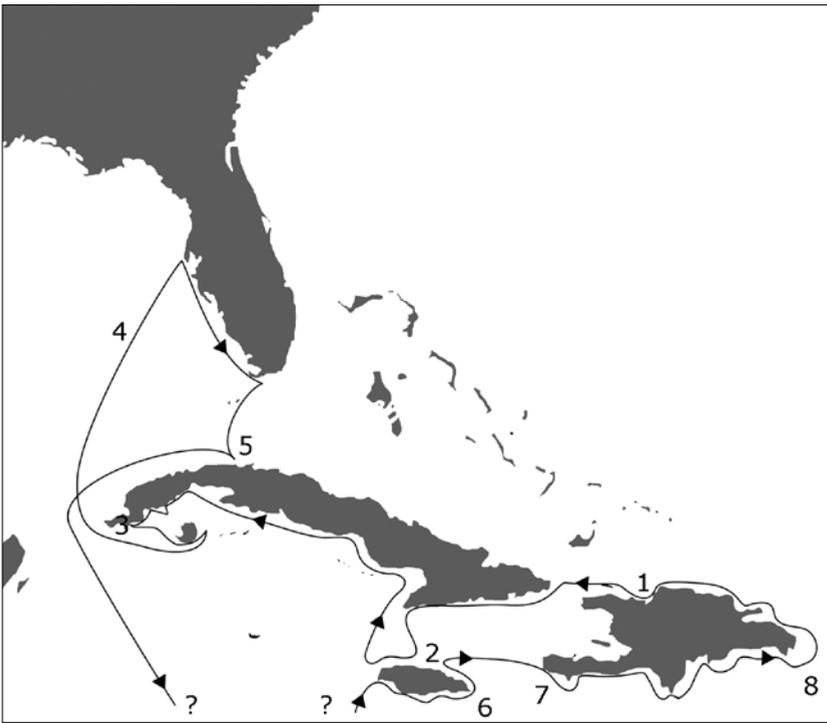


Figure 3.3 Reconstruction of the route of the voyage undertaken by Columbus between April and September 1492 to establish whether Cuba/Juana was part of the Asian mainland: 1) departure from Isabela on April 24 and exploration of the southern coast of the island of Cuba/Juana; 2) course set for Jamaica, exploration of the north-western coast of this island and return to the south-eastern coast of Cuba; 3) exploration of Evangelista or Isle of Pines; 4) course set for the western coast of Florida; 5) recognition of the north-western coast of Florida, after which the fleet sailed (to the south-east?) for 15 days, then inverted its course to head towards the north-east and complete the exploration of the Jamaican coast; 6) course set for Haiti; 7) Cape San Michele, today Cabo Tiburón, is reached; 8) discovery of the island known as Saona and the circumnavigation of Haiti is completed. The fleet returns to Isabela

ful expedition and of his visit to King John II. Soon afterwards, the message from Martín Alonso Pinzón arrived informing them that he had reached Baiona from the newly discovered islands and asking to be received by their majesties. The third message arrived on March 19, sent by Don Luis de la Cerda, Duke of Medinaceli, with regard to Columbus' return from the Indies and asking permission to establish a regular annual service to those islands.

The Duke, a friend of Columbus, thought it would be a good base from which to trade with the countries of Asia. A few days later, the King and Queen received a message from King John II claiming Portugal's right to the newly discovered islands based on the Treaty of Alcáçovas (1480), endorsed by Pope Sixtus IV, and announcing that his ships would be going there. Lastly, on March 30, a message arrived that had been sent by the Admiral from Palos two weeks previously, the content of which is uncertain. This last message probably repeated, at least in part, the contents of the letter Columbus had written to his friend Luis de Santángel, an important court functionary, while still at sea.

Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand alternated between happiness for Columbus' success and alarm for the problems that could arise out of it. There-

fore, they informed Martín Alonso Pinzón that they would only receive him with Columbus and quickly promulgated an edict forbidding anyone to travel to the newly discovered lands:

no person, of whatever state or condition, should dare to travel to these islands and lands, and to others still, nor undertake relations with them or anyone of them if not under our license or special decree, on pain of death, or the loss of any ships and the merchandise carried on them.¹⁷

This edict, which limited the powers granted to Christopher Columbus in the *Capitulación de Santa Fe*, was read out by decree of the Queen on March 30 in all archiepiscopal and episcopal sees after the sermon, as was usual at that time. It was not so much prompted by the Duke of Medinaceli's request, which remained pending, rather by possible infractions on the part of or on behalf of the Portuguese.

Shortly before, the powerful Cardinal Mendoza had been consulted and in agreement with him an urgent message was sent to Alexander VI Borgia, elected Pope a few months before, requesting that he intervene with a decree. Two first bulls of the Spanish Pope were issued in early May, establishing that all islands and mainland situated on this side of the meridian that passes 100 leagues west of the Azores and Cape Verde Islands were to belong to Portugal. But on their arrival in Spain a new one was requested with several modifications, about which Columbus himself had intervened. The demarcation line (known as the *raya*) remained very vague given that these islands extended over four longitudinal degrees and the actual length of a league varied from country to country and from epoch to epoch.

Therefore, a meeting with the Portuguese had to be organised as quickly as possible in order to reach an agreement about where that border fell. On the request of King Ferdinand, the meeting took place in the Spanish town of Tordesillas, situated on the Duero River, on June 7, 1494. Cardinal Mendoza took part, assisted by the cosmographer Jaime Ferrer, of Catalan and Neapolitan origins. At Tordesillas, the Portuguese delegation included Duarte Pacheco Pereira, an important navigator, a highly cultured man with a university degree, who was King John II's official geographer. It was decided that the line of demarcation should be set at a point 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands.

Furthermore, King Ferdinand arranged an expedition to the island of Hispaniola (hereinafter referred to as Haiti) made up of a large garrison of colonists with the aim of consolidating the Spanish presence there. The expedition was again entrusted to the Admiral, who was to be accompanied by royal functionaries, while the preparations were entrusted to Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca, who had just been ordained a priest and had no particular ability in questions of navigation, but was recommended by Queen Isabella's confessor. Subsequently, Fonseca was entrusted with the organisation of all voyages outside of the Caribbean Sea, thus effectively taking such organisation out of Columbus' hands.

¹⁷ Manzano Manzano, *Los Pinzones y el descubrimiento de América*, vol. 1, ch. 1, § 13.

3.6 The Admiral's Second Voyage Begins

The second voyage was organised surprisingly fast and with substantial means. King Ferdinand made 17 ships, large and small, available. This time it was easier to recruit the crews given that the destination was now considered an outpost for trade with the Asiatic markets and thus had become very appealing. The colonists were also easily found; artisans with their equipment and peasants with horses, mules and donkeys were recruited. Numerous friars, miners, farmers with seeds and agricultural equipment, carpenters and *hidalgos* (cadets from aristocratic families) also joined the expedition, all of them poor and in search of riches. In all, there were about 1,200 people, including five women. One thousand people were on the King's payroll, Columbus paid one hundred, and others paid for themselves. No one or almost no one had the pioneering spirit, each hoped to make a fortune and then return home. Some, perhaps many, had exaggerated about their abilities as artisans in order to be taken on.

The King had taken the precaution of placing Catalan gentlemen faithful to him alongside Columbus, by now Admiral and Viceroy. These individuals included a *veedor* (inspector) and several functionaries who he hoped would obtain important appointments in the government of the island.

Columbus - who had placed his sons in the school for pages created by Peter Martyr at court - was accompanied by his brother Diego; by Giovanni Antonio Columbus, a relative; by Michele de Cuneo a nobleman from Savona, and Antonio de Torres, another friend, commander of the Second Fleet.

Columbus recalled his brother Bartholomew from France to participate in the voyage, but he did not reach Spain in time to embark.

The fleet set sail from Cadiz before dawn on September 25, 1493, setting a course for the Canary Islands. From there, the ocean crossing began on October 7 following a route that would take the ships to the south of Haiti. On the night of November 2, St. Elmo's fire (i.e. an electric discharge) appeared on the ships' masts as a good omen. On November 3, after 27 days of navigation, they sighted the many islands forming the archipelago of the Lesser Antilles. They did not find good anchorage off the first island, which they named Dominica, and had to proceed to another island, which was named Mariagalante, after the flagship. After a short stop, the fleet reached an island that was given the name Guadalupe. They spent a longer period here, without however making contact with the inhabitants who were perhaps hiding in the forest. As was discovered later, it was a population of warlike women, thus this place was also known as 'the Island of the Women', or 'Isola delle Pulzelle' in Tuscan.

During the stop over on Guadalupe, an important individual, the *veedor* 'comendador' Diego Márquez, a Catalan, without telling anyone ventured off into the dense forest covering the island with about ten companions and got lost. On this occasion, a young adventurer, Alonso de Ojeda, came to the fore and led the rescue party, which carried trumpets, drums and firearms. Even such a noisy expedient did not lead to the discovery of the missing companions, who were eventually found when they used smoke signals. The Admiral, now many days late because of this episode, was infuriated and had the Catalan inspector put in irons in the ship's hold. The latter never forgot this humiliation and, when the occasion arose, knew how to exact revenge.

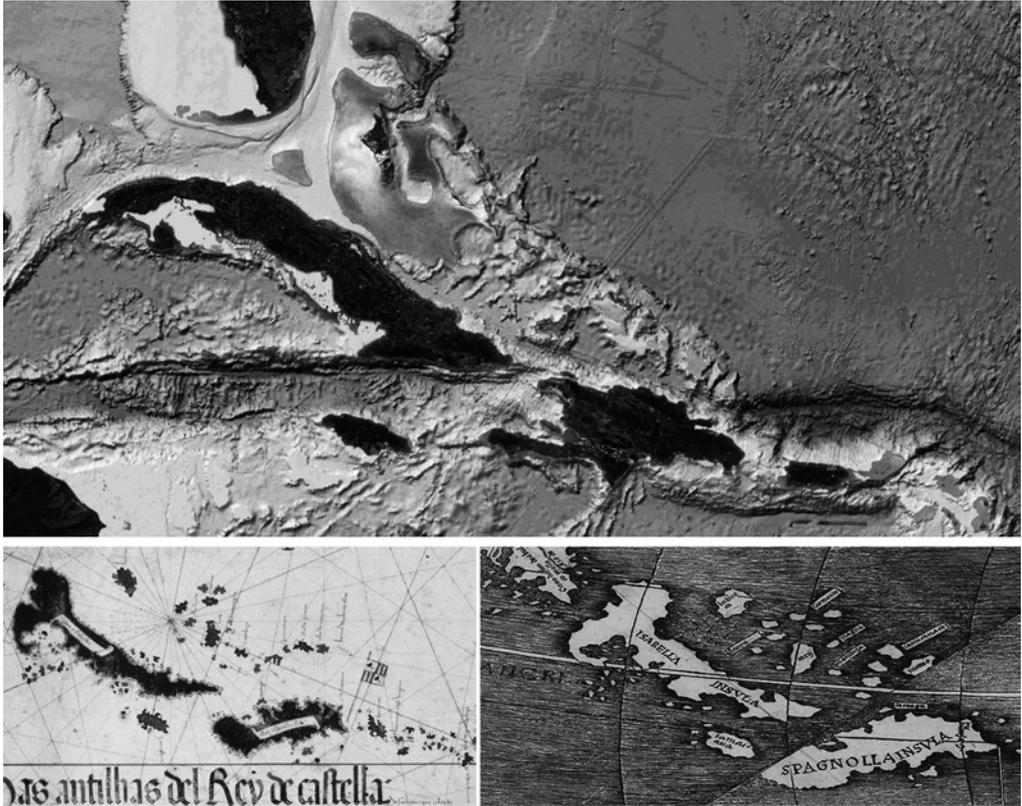


Figura 3.5 Satellite image of the Greater Antilles and the southern tip of Florida (from Google Earth); bottom left, part of the Portuguese map known as the *Cantino Planisphere* (1501-02); bottom right a detail from the Waldseemüller Map (1507). Note in the two lower images the bulge in the north-western part of the island, which is in fact a vast sandbank covered by algae, also recognisable on the satellite image. Note also in the western part of Cuba a long, curved peninsula defining a gulf; in actual fact this is an error of perspective as, approaching from the south-east, the isle Los Pinos (today, Isla de la Juventud), appears attached to the island of Cuba. Also of note is the fact that the names are written in Italian even though the maps derive from a Portuguese original

3.7 Alonso de Ojeda

The role he played in the events of those years requires that Alonso de Ojeda be presented here. He was a young penniless *hidalgo*, with an unusual character, whose destiny was entwined with that of Columbus, Vespucci and others.

Ojeda had been a page to the powerful Duke of Medinaceli, in whose service he remained for some time, perhaps as a fencing master. The Dukes of Medinaceli dealt with ships and fleets, but there is no evidence that Ojeda was an expert in anything to do with the sea at this time.

Bartolomé de las Casas tells of Ojeda's extraordinary bravery. He climbed to the top of the bell tower of Seville's largest church, accompanying Queen Isabella.¹⁸ Once he reached the top, he saw a beam that projected about sev-

¹⁸ The tower was a former minaret known as La Giralda.

en metres into the void: he climbed onto it, walked along it fearlessly and, reaching the end, performed a pirouette with one leg sticking out into the air and with nonchalance returned to the tower.¹⁹

Later, when he was twenty-four years old, we find him among those laying siege to Granada where he got himself noted for his extraordinary skill in the use of weapons. He was captain of one of the ships that participated in Columbus' second voyage.

Later, recommended by his cousin of the same name and an important member of the Inquisition, Ojeda became a person of trust in the entourage of the Bishop of Badajoz, Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca, who noted his courage and great ambition.

3.8 The Colonisation of Haiti Proceeds Badly

Soon after the arrival at Haiti, it was discovered to everyone's horror that the garrison of thirty-nine men left in the small fort of Navidad had been massacred. The tribal chiefs were interrogated about the crime, but they defended themselves by accusing each other. Columbus pretended to believe their lies to avoid delaying the urgent work required to organise the colony. A large contingent was put to work to build the new town of Isabela: many colonists worked unwillingly, as they were tired or had caught syphilis from the local women, a disease unknown in Europe which at that time was called 'pustules'.

The *hidalgos* were recalcitrant because they hated doing manual labour, which according to them was dishonourable. Columbus, suffering from arthritis, was obsessed with the desire to find the gold he had promised to the Spanish sovereigns and by the need for money. He entrusted Ojeda with the job of finding the fabulous gold mine he had learned of from the natives. The *hidalgo* set off straightaway at the head of a squad of fifteen audacious men and found the mine in the territory of Cibao, in inland Haiti, within an area ruled by the warlike and authoritative *Cacique* Caonabo. He immediately informed Columbus who was happy to hear the news and departed for the place with a large contingent of about five hundred men to make a show of force to the natives. However, the result was not the desired one, given that after an initially easy route they had to negotiate impervious terrain and cross turbulent rivers. Many could not swim and were helped by the natives who had come from afar to join the long caravan. "Those who did not know how to swim had two Indians who held them up as they swam, who again out of affection or for some trinket that we gave them carried our things, weapons and all there was to carry over their heads". In this way, they gave the impression of having very few resources.

On reaching the Cibao mine, the ramshackle group, using wood they gathered from the forest, began to build a small fort, which was named San Thomás. They worked with alacrity without finding the gold; instead, they traded for two thousand *castellani* worth of gold, about ten kilograms, with the natives. Some bartered

¹⁹ De Navarrete relates this extraordinary episode in *Colección de los Viajes y descubrimientos*, vol. 3, 163 in the section entitled "Noticias biograficas del capitán Alonso de Ojeda".

in secret, against the regulations and our statute, to the value of about one thousand *castellani*, and as you know, the devil makes you do wrong and then reveals it [...] and so it was that almost all were discovered, and he who was found in the wrong was heavily flogged, some had their ears cut off, some the nose, which was piteous to see.²⁰

When the construction was at a good point, Columbus left thirty-six men at the site under the command of the Catalan Captain Pedro Margarit and returned to the town of Isabela with the other men who were increasingly tired and disillusioned. They had seen that gold was not collected in handfuls but through hard work and amidst many dangers. Many colonists insisted that they wanted to return home and were pacified by the promise of a subsidy, which they never received.

Soon after his return, Columbus received a message from Captain Margarit informing him that the natives had besieged the fort and that provisions and protection were needed. Once again, Columbus sent Ojeda to resolve the situation, and once again he showed himself to be up to the task, freeing the fort and staying there to manage the mine.

Both Ojeda and the tribal chief Caonabo were men of action and did not like holding their men back. Caonabo was the first to act; he led a multitude of angry Indios against the invaders and their new colony. The Indios, virtually unarmed compared to the Spanish, were a hundred times more numerous. At this point Ojeda intervened, accompanied by a few men on horseback: he boldly went to see the *Cacique* and through much flattery and offering friendship managed to set a trap and capture him. Pretending that they were a gift, he put a pair of brass handcuffs on the chief's wrists and took him prisoner. Ojeda hauled him up onto his horse and, in front of the terrified Indios, carried him off to Columbus. He then returned to the mine, where, in the meantime, the Indios had ceased hostilities. The *Cacique* Caonabo was shipped to Spain but never arrived as he died during the voyage.

Deluding himself that the situation was resolved, Columbus charged his trusted friend Antonio de Torres, who was returning to Spain, to request more supplies, and decided to dedicate himself to exploration.

3.9 The Admiral Leaves with the Aim of Circumnavigating 'la Terra Juana'

During his first voyage, Columbus was unsure whether the great land the natives called Cuba, and which he named Juana, was an island or part of the Asian continent. With a hiatus in the organisational problems, he decided to end this doubt by attempting to circumnavigate that land.²¹

²⁰ These quotes come from "Lettera di Michele de Cuneo a G. Annari", edited by Luigi Firpo in *Colombo, Vespucci, Verrazzano*, 56-7, ll. 184-216. This document is cited as "Lettera a G. Annari".

²¹ There are four main sources for the voyage undertaken by Christopher Columbus between April 24 and September 29, 1494: *Le Historie* by Hernando Colón who learnt about it from his father and had access to his papers; the *Lettera a Gerolamo Annari* written in 1495 by Michele de Cuneo who took part in the voyage; the *De orbe novo prima decade*, by Peter Martyr d'Anghiera of 1516 who gathered information from Columbus and other people who had participated in the voyage; *Las Historias de Las Indias* by Bartolomé de las Casas, c. 1525, only fully published in 1875. Other information – in my opinion completely reliable – can be deduced from the following cartography: the *Planisphere* by Juan de La Cosa, cartographer on that voyage, drawn up in

He organised the exploration choosing three caravels with small draught, as he knew that those waters presented shallows and dangerous sandbanks. The flagship of the small fleet was to be the *Niña*, the smallest, renamed *Santa Clara*. There were about ninety crewmen, including one of absolute trust: Michele de Cuneo from Savona. Other participants were the Basque mariner Juan de La Cosa, formerly owner and *maestre* of the *Santa María*, who on this occasion had the job of *maestre de carta de navegación*, in other words cartographer, and Fernando Pérez de Luna, scribe and notary. Also present was the Indio whom Columbus had recruited on the island of San Salvador at the beginning of the first voyage to act as interpreter. Given the name Diego di Colón, he was of great help to the Admiral on many occasions.

The small fleet set sail on April 25, 1494 from Isabela, the town under construction on the northern coast of Haiti. The following night, it anchored off Tortuga, a beautiful island seen on the previous voyage; on April 26, the fleet anchored in the harbour of San Nicola at the western end of Haiti, only just over 100 kilometres from the island of Cuba. The ships then sailed westward following the island's south-eastern coast dominated by the Sierra Maestra and docked at Porto Grande (now Guantánamo), a deep and safe harbour surrounded by sheer cliffs. Five canoes laden with fish floated in the harbour and more fish were being cooked on the beach where a group of native fishermen were resting. Awoken by cannon shot fired from the ships, they fled to take shelter behind some high rocks. On being reassured by the interpreter, they came down to the beach where the Spanish were banqueting on the fish they had cooked.

At Porto Grande, it became clear that the Admiral, or someone on his behalf, had forgotten to load enough provisions. The crew remedied by exchanging food for trinkets that the natives greatly appreciated, but from that moment onwards the voyage was marked by hunger. For the Admiral, who had decided to keep watch while the ships were in those dangerous waters and not to sleep more than three hours a night, the voyage was also marked by a lack of sleep.

The natives told him there was no gold on the island of Cuba but added, perhaps out of courtesy, that it could be found on an island that lay five days sailing away.²² The island called 'Jamahich' was situated to the south, and Columbus was soon heading towards it. Today the island is known as Jamai-

1500; from the map known as the Cantino Planisphere of 1501-1502, derived from the *Padrão Real*, the official map of the Portuguese navy; the *Planisphere* by Niccolò Caveri of 1502; the Waldseemüller Map printed in 1507, derived for America from the maps made by Amerigo Vespucci. The written sources, except that by de Cuneo, provide rather different information from that provided by the cartography listed above, which is always consistent regarding the island of Cuba and the south-eastern part of what is now North America, as well as by the *Carta Marina* of 1516. The cartography is also uniform in the minute details and the use of names, the toponymy. It should also be noted that in his account de Cuneo never mentions the name of Cuba, while Hernando Colón often uses this name and in an imprecise way. Unfortunately, there are gaps in his long narration because during the voyage his father Christopher was ill and could not make full notes of all the events. De Cuneo's account is shorter and fuller, but he was a passenger and, not having access to the navigational instruments, he could have been mistaken about the route sailed. However, this collection of evidence helps us to establish how Columbus' fleet reached Florida and the lands to its north during the first two voyages, but also persuades us that the problem needs further investigation. The way the first stretch of the navigation, up until May 5, 1494, is narrated in *Le Historie* is contrary to Columbus' plan to establish whether or not Cuba (or Juana as he called it) was part the Asian continent, as he thought when he reached there on his first voyage; instead it agrees with the place names.

²² Michele de Cuneo, "Lettera a G. Annari", 62-8, ll. 436-81.

ca. The expedition reached it during a storm on May 5 and was met by a hostile reception. The sailors did not hold back in their use of arms, many Indios were killed and hostility turned into collaboration. They obtained food and water and were able to rest and explore the island. There was no trace of gold. The expedition stayed on the luxuriant island of Jamaica until May 13 when it sailed for the return journey to Cuba. Hernando Colón wrote that his father intended to “follow its coast downwards [to the west] until they had sailed 500 or 600 leagues of that coast and ascertained whether it was an island or the mainland”. However, events during the voyage meant that the Admiral had to change his plans several times. He reached “a cape on Cuba that was called Santa Cruz and following the coast downwards he encountered terrible thunder and lightning; due to which, together with the many sandbanks and channels encountered, he ran many great risks and felt great fatigue”. The ships were caught up in a vast gulf full of many tiny islands, sandbanks and reefs, furrowed by several narrow channels in which the boats went ahead of the ships, the sailors taking soundings and communicating their depth by gesturing and shouting.

Columbus did not count the islands and named this insidious but beautiful labyrinth, the ‘Gardens of the Queen’ as it is still known today.

The shallows and dense mangrove forest prevented the ships from nearing the coast of the largest island, but the boats were able to penetrate the vegetation and managed to reach hidden places and beaches where they had surprising encounters. In one of these channels, they saw several native fishermen, who, using gestures, invited the new arrivals to be quiet and keep still. The Indios were fishing using remoras, fish they held by a cord attached to the tail. The remoras reached much larger sea creatures to which they attached themselves using a strong sucker situated behind their head. At this point, the fisherman carefully pulled the cord and recovered the remora and the animal to which it had attached itself.

In these coastal waters, a sailor carrying a crossbow landed on a white beach with the intention of hunting some game. He entered the trees where he met a man wearing a long white robe and carrying weapons; he then saw two more dressed and armed in the same way, then another thirty appeared at which point he ran shouting back to the ships. Columbus was informed and he hoped to have arrived among a more advanced population. Therefore, he sent a squad to explore the place; the men only found the traces left by the fishermen and numerous white-feathered cranes, and so thought that it had been a hallucination caused by the blinding light and prolonged fasting.

The fleet anchored near the far western tip of Cuba, in the Gulf of Babatanó. The splendour of the tropical environment never ceased to amaze: “They saw turtles of two or three arm’s lengths [120-180 cm] in such numbers that they covered the sea. Then at sunrise they saw a cloud of sea crows so large that it blocked the light of the sun, coming from the high sea towards the island, where they soon landed: many doves and other birds of various types were seen, and the next day so many butterflies came to the ships that they darkened the air and lasted until the evening when they were dispersed by heavy rain”.²³

Finally, they rounded the promontory that closed the long inlet and reached a second bay very similar to the one they had just left; again small

²³ *Le Historie*, chs. LV and LVI, vol. 1, 191-6.

flat islands, some covered with rich vegetation, others arid, some inhabited, others deserted. However, they found a large and evocative island, covered with pine trees, which Columbus named 'Evangelista', later known as 'Isle of Pines', today called Isla de la Juventud.

The natives were, as usual, friendly and generous with their food, and Columbus repaid them with small presents that were much appreciated. He learnt from one quick-witted Indio, with whom he liked to talk, that the King or *Cacique* of the western part did not speak with his subjects, except for signs, through which he was immediately obeyed in all that he commanded. The native also told Columbus that Cuba was certainly an island and that all that coast was very low; this news reminded Columbus that he was there to resolve the question of whether the Land of Cuba, Juana, was also an island or part of the Asian continent. The day had been very tiring; the sailors had had to drag the three caravels from one channel to another with ropes. The provisions were few and had gone bad. Columbus, increasingly tired, began to doubt the possibility of completing his plan and thought that it would be better to return to Haiti. The natives had assured Columbus that it was possible to walk for 20 days, the equivalent of 200 leagues, beyond the place he reached along the western coast of that land without reaching the end. Columbus thought that adding 200 leagues to those he had travelled along the coast of Cuba/Juana during his first voyage would make a total perimeter of 335 leagues, a length superior to that of any other island he knew; he could be sure that this land was part of Asia, perhaps China.

Convinced of his reasoning, on June 12 he sent for Fernando Pérez de Luna, who functioned as a notary, and ordered him to make all the officers and crew swear, after he had explained the result of his calculation, that the Land of Cuba/Juana was part of Asia. Those who swore the contrary would be severely punished according to rank: a large monetary fine, removal of the tongue or severe flogging.

Fernando Pérez diligently carried out this task: all took the oath, happy about the prospect of soon returning to Haiti, and the notary drew up the document. Unfortunately, he died before the final draft was written, and his work was completed by his successor, Diego Peñalosa, on January 14, 1495.²⁴

The estimate of the size of the Land of Cuba was cautious, the conclusion plausible but not the strange procedure imposed by the Admiral, and the punishments for those who swore falsely were absurd; nevertheless, the 'feudal lord' of the Ocean Sea could allow himself all of this.

The fleet set sail on June 13, stopped at the island of Evangelista to take on water and timber and proceeded southward. They entered a channel without an exit and had to return to Evangelista.

On Wednesday June 25 [the fleet] departed towards the north-west heading for some small islands that were visible 5 leagues away,²⁵ and, passing somewhat further on, came to a sea so spotted with green and white that it appeared to be a sandbank [...] across which they travelled for 7 leagues until they found a sea as white as milk [...] this sea blinded whoever looked at it, and it seemed that it was all shallows and without the

²⁴ The document in question is reproduced by De Navarrete in vol. 2, 162-8, of his work. It is not mentioned in the accounts of Hernando Colón, Michele de Cuneo or Peter Martyr d'Anghiera.

²⁵ These were the Florida Keys or Florida Reefs.

depth needed for a ship [...]. Having navigated this sea for the space of 4 leagues they entered into a deep sea as black as ink and on this sailed until they reached [the Land of] Cuba.²⁶

Hernando Colón continues:

Whence travelling east, with very little wind and via channels and shallows on July 30 [*lapsus* for June 30]²⁷ writing the memories of that journey, he rammed his ship so hard against land that, unable to drag it out with the anchors or other expedients, it pleased God that it was pulled out by the prow, [...] although with very heavy damage [...] freed at last, as the wind and shallows conceded [...] it was molested by many waters that were generated in those mountains by lagoons that lay by the sea [...] until it returned to lay off the coast of the island of Cuba towards the east.²⁸

The voyage in such dangerous waters lasted seven days after which on Sunday July 7 they landed on the western part of the island where the chaplain celebrated Mass. A very aged *Cacique* watched the ritual of the Mass with great attention and then, to the Admiral's great surprise, had a long discussion with him about religion.²⁹

They set sail again, as Michele de Cuneo writes:

We headed out to sea and left the first archipelago *da maestro* [thus towards the south-east] and entered the open sea, and we sailed for about 15 days, not finding land of any sort. *Sic viso* we all began to murmur saying that we were going to drown and that there was not enough food. When the Admiral understood this, he set course for land and we anchored at the island called Jamahich [...] where we stayed for about 17 days and where we took on provisions.

This long digression and the food and water provided by the natives are not mentioned in *Le Historie*.³⁰

They then set sail for the island of Cuba. On August 20 Michele de Cuneo sighted the extreme end of an island that extended to the east, and the Admiral named that cape San Michele.³¹ They did not know which island it was when Columbus heard his name called by an Indio whose canoe had come alongside the *Niña*: he then realised that he was on the southern coast of Haiti. The natives told him that a number of Christians from the town of Isabela had reached this place and that everything was going well.

²⁶ *Le Historie*, vol. 1, ch. LVII, 198. This was almost certainly the bay of the Ten Thousand Islands, which are tiny but shown on the *Padrão Real* and other maps derived from it, as exaggeratedly large.

²⁷ This incident is also mentioned by Bartolomé de las Casas (vol. 2, ch. 96, of *Las Historias de las Indias*). From July 7 to 17, there is a gap that is filled by the narration in de Cuneo's letter to G. Annari.

²⁸ *Le Historie*, vol. 1, ch. LVII, 198. After the incident during which the ship was badly damaged, Columbus turned back to the east (in reality the south-east) to the point of departure and continued along the island's southern coast as far as Cape Santa Cruz.

²⁹ De Cuneo, "Lettera a G. Annari", 71-2, ll. 568-576.

³⁰ During Columbus' fourth voyage, the Jamaican natives once again fed and assisted the entire fleet when it was shipwrecked there (see chapter 11, § 11.6).

³¹ Today the Tiburón Peninsula, that is 'of the sharks'.

Columbus was happy to hear this news and sent nine of his men to inform the colonists at Isabela that the fleet was returning.

They set sail following the coast towards the east; once again, Michele de Cuneo was the first to sight an island beyond the prow. They landed there and found it to be very beautiful and densely populated: thirty-seven villages and perhaps thirty thousand inhabitants. The Admiral took possession of it for the Spanish Crown and, as Viceroy of those places, donated them to his friend from Savona with a medieval ceremony.

Michele describes it as follows:

and using the prescribed rituals I took possession of it, as did the said Admiral [...] by virtue of a public notary's act, and on the said island I pulled up grass, cut trees and set up crosses and also gallows and, in the name of God, I christened it with the name Bella Saonese.³²

They set sail again, heading east. Columbus, although exhausted and very ill, planned to continue to the Lesser Antilles to eradicate the 'mala genia' of the cannibals, a population inhabiting these islands along the Mexican coast and practising anthropophagy. Columbus had heard Taino Indians, their preferred victims, speak about them with great terror, and he encountered them when he returned on his second voyage. Amerigo would describe their customs and would call them Camballi.

Columbus' fantasies of great power, perhaps caused by prolonged lack of sleep, made him believe such an endeavour was possible at that time. However, on September 24 he collapsed and fell into a coma. The other captains decided to round the western end of Haiti and quickly take him to the town of Isabela. There he recovered and had the great pleasure of finding his brother Bartholomew who had arrived three months earlier with the ships bringing provisions from Spain.

During his first voyage, Columbus had mapped the eastern coast of North America - including Florida - as well as the northern coast of Cuba. During his second expedition, he mapped the western coast of Florida, the southern coast of Cuba, as well as the coasts of Jamaica and Haiti. Both these coastlines, joined together, appear in the Portuguese *Padrão Real* and maps derived from it. It is easy to imagine how Columbus' first drawings reached Lisbon (see § 3.3) during his long stay in the city in March 1493, but more difficult to understand how the other drawings reached there.

3.10 The Difficult Period of Colonisation Ends Disastrously

The Admiral had only just returned to Haiti when he heard that the colonists were threatening rebellion and that the Indians, exasperated by the oppression they were suffering, had banded together and were promoting hostilities. The clash came in the pleasant valley of Vega Real. The outcome was uncertain until Ojeda, with a small group of horsemen, rushed up behind the natives and set numerous boar-hunting dogs on them. The ferocious an-

³² From "Lettera a G. Annari", 72, ll. 590-8. According to Luigi Firpo, editor of the "Lettera", in medieval symbolism, pulling up grass and cutting down trees indicate feudal rights over a territory, while setting up crosses indicates religious protection and the gallows indicate penal jurisdiction.

imals terrified the Indios throwing them into confusion and the result was a dreadful bloodbath. This action decided the outcome of the cruel fight. When the island was, shall we say, pacified, the Admiral quickly nominated the men who were to govern it. In doing so, he committed a series of errors that compromised his future. He nominated his brother Bartholomew deputy governor (*adelantado*) of the island, a position he could not assign to a Genoese citizen, and it was also inopportune as Bartholomew had only just arrived and was still unable to make head or tail of the complicated tangle of conflicts. Columbus gave his brother Diego, a mediocre man, a lesser office, while Giovanni Antonio Columbus, a distant relative, became captain of one of the ships. Lastly, he nominated his own squire Francisco Roldán, although little *letrado* [poorly educated], *alcalde mayor*, that is chief justice. He could not have made a worse choice.

Alonso de Ojeda received high praise from Columbus, who described his merits to the Spanish sovereigns, and gave him a piece of land. However, since the courageous and ambitious swordsman expected and deserved much more, he was bitterly disappointed and bore great rancour towards the ungrateful Admiral.

Even the captain Pedro Margarit, a Catalan nobleman who was a close friend of Columbus, began to see him in a different light. Margarit was at the head of four hundred men who were supposed to search the island to put down any disturbances and uphold the Viceroy's authority. However, at this point he was very unsatisfied with the situation and convinced he had no future on the island. As soon as he heard that the ships that had brought provisions from Spain were about to make the return voyage, he abandoned everything and boarded the ship to return home. His men, who suddenly found themselves without a leader, dispersed and began plundering the island and killing the natives, thus causing the disorders they were supposed to be suppressing. In reprisal, the natives ambushed many of these men when they became isolated.

Columbus, who respected Margarit and considered him a good and trusted friend, was very embittered by his desertion that had ended in disaster. The Admiral still did not understand that the discord among his collaborators was caused by his decision to favour his relatives, ignoring the merits of others. However, he managed to foresee that the people returning to Spain would give negative reports of his policies. Therefore, he too decided to return to Spain. It was too late: the Spanish royals, informed by the unhappy and angry returnees, had already sent an inquisitor, Juan Aguado, who arrived at that moment. Columbus tried to get the inquisitor on his side, but with little success. He then decided that he must hurry to provide the King with his own version of the facts and neutralise the unfavourable voices.

3.11 Columbus' Gold

For Columbus, like most of the people who accompanied him, the search for gold was an obsession. This was because he had promised to provide great riches for the Queen and he himself had come to understand that honours and noble titles were worth little if not followed by a very high standard of living, while he on the contrary was debt-laden. Towards the middle of his second stay in Haiti, Columbus had taken stock of the situation. The gold was there, but good organisation and a great deal of time were needed to obtain

it;³³ there were spices – paprika, tabasco, cayenne pepper and similar spices growing in Central America – but their value was insignificant compared to those arriving from the Molucca Islands. A third source of riches could have been the naked people who wandered numerous and defenceless, and thus were easy to capture and sell as slaves.

This was not an unusual plan for the period; indeed, the wealth and power of the Florentine Marchionni family, who lived in Lisbon, mainly derived from this trade, as did part of the Medici family's riches. However, there was a rule that could not be broken: it was unlawful to enslave a person of one's own religion. Consequently, it was not expedient to convert the natives to Christianity if one wanted to enslave them; besides, the latter were unable to take such a decision consciously.

When some of the ships from the second expedition were on the point of returning to Spain, the Viceroy ordered that many Indios, about one thousand six hundred, were to be gathered together at the embarkation point. He consigned some of them as slaves to the colonists and made more than five hundred of them board the ships that Antonio de Torres was taking back to Spain, where they would be sold.³⁴

This angered the island's chieftains, although they very civilly sent a delegation of wise men whom the Viceroy refused to meet. This action made him lose the respect of Friar Buyl, the King's secretary who was head of the group of religious men in Haiti.

Furthermore, during the navigation to Spain, which was much longer than foreseen, over two hundred natives, packed into very little space on the ships, died of privation and illness, and their bodies were thrown into the sea, while the others barely survived. Queen Isabella's lady in waiting, doña Juana de Torres, sister of Antonio de Torres who had transported this cargo, informed her of this tragedy. The Queen was indignant and ordered that the slaves be entrusted to Bishop Fonseca so that he could send them back to their island (only a few actually returned home). Furthermore, she forbade that her subjects in the Indies be captured and sold into slavery, even though she allowed the colonists to use them as slaves in their own lands, which was much worse. In other words, a series of disastrous events occurred.

3.12 The Admiral Returns from His Second Voyage

The three ships led by Bartholomew Columbus to Haiti also returned to Spain. Michele de Cuneo travelled on one, and on another were the other protagonists of that expedition: the *veedor comendador* Don Diego Márquez (whom the Admiral had put in chains in a ship's hold after the episode on the island of Guadalupe), Friar Bernardo Buyl, angered by the lack of evangelization of the Indios and Columbus' disregard of suggestions of moderation, Pedro Margarit, who had abandoned his troops, and Alonso de Ojeda, disappointed and furious because his audacious and successful interventions had not been compensated as they deserved. Furthermore, the four men were convinced that the three Genoese brothers intended to take possession of the new islands that were supposed to be claimed for Spain.

³³ The mine, now in the Dominican Republic, is still worked today using modern methods.

³⁴ See Michele de Cuneo, "Lettera a G. Annari", 73-4, ll. 614-44.

Columbus set sail for Spain on March 10, 1496, with several of the ships used in the exploration of Cuba. He had 255 people with him, 30 of whom were Indios. Once again, Columbus took on insufficient provisions and he realised this a few days after his departure. Therefore, he attempted to acquire some on the island of Guadalupe, which he had visited on the outgoing journey. He received a hostile greeting from a group of angry women, armed with bows and arrows. The Admiral had an Indio interpreter, who was with him on board, swim ashore in order to explain that they only needed food for the journey home. The women sent them to their husbands on the other side of the island. There, they received an even worse response and only managed to land after causing the natives to flee by firing the ships' cannons.

Once they landed on the island, they plundered the houses, finding maize and a lot of manioc flour, which the natives were preparing for making bread; they completed the work and loaded the supplies on board the ships. They also found honey and wax and, surprisingly, even looms for weaving cloth for their tents, as well as two iron hatchets, perhaps from the wreck of the *Santa María*, perhaps of different origin.³⁵

Columbus sent 40 men to capture several natives. They returned with 10 women and 3 children, recounting that one of these women

fled and a very fast and daring canario [native of the Canary Islands] could barely reach her [...]. Nonetheless, the woman would have escaped him, but, as [she] saw that he was alone, thought that she could catch him and thus came to blows with him; the canario could not resist her, they fell to the ground, and she began to choke him.

In the end, his companions arrived and managed to save him. The account continues:

that Cacique, or woman, that they captured told them the whole island was inhabited by women and that those who had prevented them from landing the boats were all women except for four men who had ventured there from another island, because at a certain time of the year they came to take pleasure and lie with them. The women of another island called Matrimino [Martinique] also did the same.

As well as appearing strong and courageous, these Amazons

seem gifted with more reason than those of the other islands, because [while] in other places they calculate no time except day and night, these women calculated the time using the other stars, saying: when the Plough [Big Dipper] rises, or such star was at its highest, then it is time to do this and that.

What we find here is a description, which seems frank and reliable, of an advanced matriarchal society settled in the Lesser Antilles.

Columbus' two ships undertook the crossing towards Europe without first reaching a more northerly latitude as the Admiral had done on his first return voyage. Such a choice, perhaps dictated by the storms encountered that time, made the journey much longer, so that the provisions were

³⁵ This and the next three citations are drawn from *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXII, 14 ff.

insufficient and it became necessary to ration them strictly, leading to discontent among the crew. Columbus managed to prevent them from throwing the natives overboard and to impose calm, giving definite information about where they were and about how and when they would reach Andalusia. His predictions proved correct, contrary to those of the pilots on board: "because of this, seafaring men held him to be very wise and godlike in the facts of navigation". Thus wrote Hernando, younger son of Christopher Columbus and chronicler of his father's endeavours.

Having landed in Spain on June 10, the Admiral immediately set about obtaining permission to organise another voyage. Yet, unable to see his own deeds from the point of view of the Spanish and their rulers, he was surprised and embittered by the coldness with which his requests were heard. Columbus attributed this to the preconceived hostilities of the courtiers and Bishop Fonseca, who insisted on infringing the rights he had acquired. He did not imagine that Alonso de Ojeda would have described him to the Bishop in a very bad light and that the *veedor* Don Diego Márquez and Friar Buyl would have done the same to the King and Queen, who only received him ten months later.

3.13 A Princely Wedding

Columbus was waiting to be summoned to court to give his account of the situation that had arisen in Haiti, in which he had been preceded, as seen, by many of King Ferdinand's men. The wait was interrupted by a letter from Isabella asking him³⁶ about the safest route for the ship that was to carry the bride of her son, the Crown Prince, from Flanders to Spain. There was the risk that French pirates would capture it.

The seventeen-year-old Princess Margaret of Austria, daughter of the Emperor Maximilian, set sail in early January; the ship did not encounter pirates, but rather a terrible storm. Margaret prepared to die. As referred by the chroniclers who were part of her entourage, she wrote her own epitaph, put the sheet of paper in a small leather bag together with her favourite jewels, and tied the bag to her wrist. Yet, it was not time for her to die, the ship arrived unharmed in Spain and she reached Burgos, where the prince her husband (the wedding had been celebrated by proxy) awaited her. The festivities were to take place in April 1497 and the Admiral was invited for the occasion.

Columbus reached Burgos where his sons Diego and Hernando were pages to the Prince of Asturias, heir to the throne of all Spain. Hernando wrote of his father:

Having reached Burgos, he immediately presented their Catholic Majesties with many things he had brought from the Indies, various birds and animals, trees and plants, instruments, and things the Indios used for their needs and pleasure: and many masks and belts with various figures, in which the Indios put gold sheets in place of eyes and ears: and next many granules of gold, produced like this by nature, tiny and the size of broad beans and chickpeas, and some granules, as big as dove's eggs.

³⁶ Letter dated August 18, 1496.

He added: “their Catholic Majesties accepted them with much joy and considered them a great favour”.³⁷ Perhaps that cheerfulness was somewhat forced, given that, amid the magnificence of the Prince’s wedding with the beautiful and wise daughter of the most powerful man in the Western Hemisphere, many of the things Columbus offered them must have appeared little more than trinkets. On that occasion, Viceroy Columbus begged the king to send more help to the colonists in Haiti and he finally managed to take control of the situation.

The lights of the great celebration had not long gone out when the Prince of Asturias, having always been delicate and sickly, caught smallpox and died soon afterwards, perhaps more due to the cure than the illness itself. It was the beginning of October and the court went into deep mourning, all its hope resting in the young bride who was pregnant. Unfortunately, after two months of widowhood, her baby, a boy, was stillborn. The mourning became even deeper and soon immobilised the entire country.

³⁷ *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXIV, 19.

