

11 The Beginning of Colonial Policies in Portugal and Spain: The Last Voyages of Columbus and Vespucci

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11.1 New Policies for the Spanish Expeditions to the New World: Ojeda Becomes Governor of Coquibacoa and Urabá

For the moment let us interrupt the narration of Amerigo’s vicissitudes in Portugal to follow to the end the parabola of Alonso de Ojeda, once a young, fearless and skilled soldier who could no longer forgo the violent and brutal behaviour he had adopted.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, King Ferdinand, who made all the decisions since Queen Isabella preferred not to deal with such questions, thought it necessary to change the policy regarding the colonisation of overseas territories. He established that whoever committed themselves to organising a new colony in a prearranged place, taking with them suitable personnel and their own or hired ships, would become its governor. This criterion and high-flown title flattered the self-esteem of whoever decided to undertake what appeared to be a relatively simple task, yet was anything but easy; overall, it imitated the new Portuguese policies. As usual, the logistical organisation was left to Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca who had advanced in his ecclesiastical career to also become Bishop of Cordoba.

This time the Bishop’s first choice was Alonso de Ojeda, who had come to an agreement with two wealthy Sevillian merchants, Juan de Vergara and

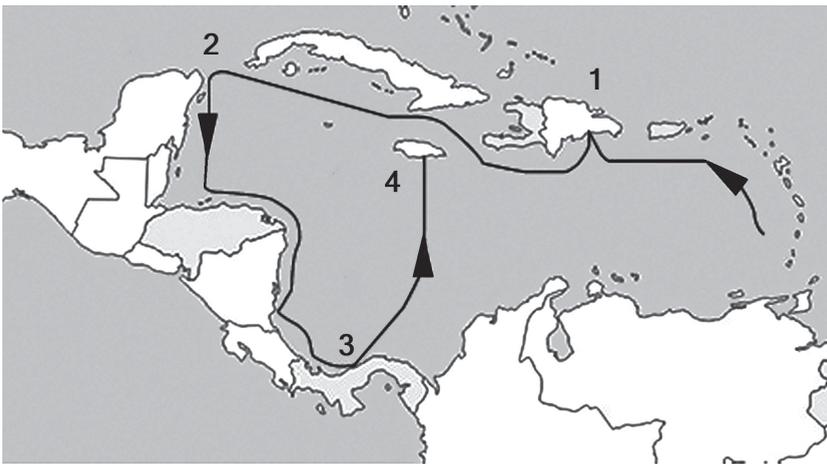


Figure 11.1 The fourth voyage of Christopher Columbus in Central America:
 1) stop in Santo Domingo; 2) encounter with the great Maya canoe;
 3) long period in Costa Rica to create the city of Belen; 4) shipwreck in Jamaica

García de Ocampo. Proud of the title of *Gobernador de Coquibacoa* (the lagoon of Maracaibo), Ojeda sailed in January 1502 with four ships and 240 men. The first port of call was Isla de Margarita where, ‘through various means’ he acquired many shiny pearls. He then continued to the Guajira Peninsula, in the pleasant bay of Honda, where he intended to found a village. There, before building houses and fortifications, Ojeda and his men began attacking and robbing the Indios, who grouped together and managed to throw the first colonists who wanted to settle that land back into the sea. The survivors took refuge in Haiti where Vergara and Ocampo, deluded by the failure of their joint enterprise, denounced Ojeda for his violence. Ojeda was obliged to repay his partners and was imprisoned in May 1502. It was only two years later that Bishop Fonseca managed to commute the sentence into a financial sanction.

11.2 Christopher Columbus Undertakes His Fourth Voyage

Let us return to what happened after November 20, 1500 when the three Columbus brothers arrived at Cadiz in chains and were taken into custody by the city’s chief magistrate. The sovereigns, who were in Granada at the time, were informed of this in mid-December and immediately had them freed. They also saw to it that everything Bobadilla had seized from Christopher Columbus was returned to him. For a period of time, Columbus remained alone and bad-tempered. This is how Angelo Trevisan¹ described him when, towards the end of August, he went to visit him to ask if he could have a copy of his journeys. However, it was precisely in this period that the Spanish sovereigns remembered him, given that he knew much that was im-

¹ See Angelo Trevisan, cited in Chapter 3 (§ 3.1 and note 9).

portant for them. Therefore, they invited him to join them in the beautiful city of Toro where they were in residence. They reassured the Admiral that the hereditary titles he had been given would pass on to his heirs, but they did not reinstate him as governor. On the contrary, they hurriedly named a new one and sent him to Haiti with a large fleet of 32 ships and 2,500 people, including well-armed soldiers; the new governor was a Franciscan friar Don Nicolás de Ovando 'comendador' of Lares. Soon after departure, a terrible storm caused the wreck of four ships and the deaths of about 200 people. The sovereigns were informed immediately and were deeply saddened by the news, but the worst was yet to come for the fleet. The remaining 28 ships reached Santo Domingo on April 5, 1502.

It had been established that Christopher Columbus should not set foot on the island; however, he was given the faculty to undertake the great enterprise that he had dreamed of: to find the westward passage to the Indian Ocean, after which to free Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulchre and then return to Spain from the east.

On May 9, 1502, Columbus set sail from Cadiz with four ships crewed by 140 men. With him were his brother Bartholomew and his thirteen-year-old son Hernando,² who later wrote *Le Historie* about his father. However, Hernando did not describe this expedition based on his father's notes and diaries, as he did in the rest of the book, but directly from his own experience as an adolescent, using the genuine colours and expressions of youth.

Disobeying orders, the Admiral headed straight for Santo Domingo and tried to enter the port. He wanted revenge; he wanted the people of the island to see that he was alive and enjoyed the King's favour. He also wanted to check whether the new governor would disobey orders and come to his aid if he, Columbus, declared himself to be in difficulty. Chance favoured this plan: he foresaw the arrival of a hurricane. Therefore, he said that one of his ships, the *Bermuda*, had serious problems and he wished to replace it with a better vessel at his own expense. He also added that he had urgent need of shelter due to the arrival of a fierce storm. For this reason, he strongly recommended that the large fleet of 28 ships, which was about to leave the port of Santo Domingo to return to Spain, should delay its departure.

The new governor Ovando conceded nothing and let the great fleet take to the open sea: some of those present derided Columbus calling him a false prophet of disasters. The next day, while Columbus's ships sailed away from the eye of the hurricane seeking refuge in one of Haiti's bays, the sky darkened and the fury of the elements hit the great fleet. Twenty-four ships sank and only four survived; of these only one reached Spain. The 'comendador' Bobadilla died in the disaster, as did many of the people accompanying him, including the *alcalde* Francisco Roldán, and the courageous Antonio de Torres who had safely crossed the ocean many times; another courageous sailor Pedro Alonso Niño died with him. The only ship that managed to return to Andalusia was the *Gucchia*,³ which was carrying the possessions of Columbus, who after this event earned fame as a powerful and vindictive wizard.

² The two sons of Christopher Columbus always and only used the Spanish names Diego and Hernando Colón; however, as the author of the *Le Historie di Cristoforo Colombo* the latter also appears with the Italian name Fernando Colombo and the English name Ferdinand Columbus.

³ *Le Historie*, vol. II, ch. LXXXVIII, 88.

11.3 To Centralise the Administration of West Indies Queen Isabella Creates the Casa De La Contratación

The news of the wreck of the great fleet arrived in Spain at the beginning of 1503 and prompted a radical renewal of the policy of overseas travel. The city of Seville – in which the new university set up by Queen Isabella was beginning to function – had been given an institution, the *Casa de la Contratación*, and a beautiful building was designed to house it, which can still be admired today. The *Casa de la Contratación* acted as a Stock Exchange, Chamber of Commerce and also Treasury, and it was crossed over the next decades by a river of gold and silver.

Expenses were carefully recorded and controlled so that its archives keep a trove of documents on shipping companies, and also on the way in which people lived then in that city. The *Casa de la Contratación* also had two caravels which guaranteed a monthly postal connection with the West Indies. A modernization, in short, that allowed Seville to compete with Lisbon.

For the time being the Bishop Fonseca, who had also become Bishop of Palencia, was put aside. He had become very rich and it was believed he owned an army of 800 slaves.

11.4 Columbus Explores the Coasts of Honduras, Costa Rica and Panama in Search of a Passage to the West

When denied shelter in the port of Santo Domingo, the Admiral decided to get as far away as possible from the hurricane by sailing westward. The decision was a happy one, as his ships were dispersed by the violence of the elements but managed to regroup in the port of Azua, as had been agreed in advance. There, the sailors repaired the damage to the ships. When they finally unfurled their sails, a dead calm set in, which put the fleet at the mercy of the currents that dragged them towards some small islands. They called the islands 'le Pozze' (the Wells) because of the many wells the sailors had to dig in the sand in order to find drinking water.

From there, Columbus would have liked to reach the Gulf of Veragua (today the Mosquito Gulf) where, according to the Indios, there was a narrow isthmus separating two seas. However, the interpreter had misunderstood and thought that there was a narrow passage leading to another sea.⁴ The Admiral was sailing towards those parts when, not far off land, he had a surprising encounter: in front of his ship appeared a great canoe, two and a half metres wide and longer than a galley, an oared vessel over 30 metres long. At its centre was a canopy similar to the cabins on Venetian gondolas but covered with palm leaves. Twenty-five men rowed the canoe and there were several people under the canopy, including women and children. The vessel was that of a merchant belonging to a very advanced people, who were however in serious decline in that period, the Maya.⁵ The merchant had a stock of cotton yarn, which he exchanged for sheets, shirts and other simple garments, and for copper and crucibles for smelting gold and copper; he also had a bag of cocoa beans on board his canoe.

⁴ *Le Historie*, vol. II, ch. XC, 93.

⁵ This is narrated by Hernando Colón in *Le Historie*, vol. II, Ch. LXXXIX, 91.

The young Hernando Colón who witnessed this encounter described it with amazement and amusement,

for provisions they carried roots and grain, like that eaten at Spagnola [Haiti]⁶ and a sort of wine made of maize that is similar to English ale and many of those almonds that they use for money in Nuova Spagna [Mexico], which they seemed to value greatly [...] as I noticed that when some of the almonds fell all of them quickly bent to pick them up, as if an eye had fallen from one of them, in that moment seeming to lose any worry about their own condition, seeing themselves taken prisoner from their canoe to the ships, among such strange and fierce people as we must have seemed to them.

The latter is an unexpected confession resembling that made by Michel de Montaigne in his *Essais*, in which he dedicates a whole chapter to the relativity of the concept of savage.⁷

In the end, the Admiral released all the travellers in the canoe except for an old man whom he kept with him for a while to gain useful information; then he let him go.

Therefore, without entering the merchant's country of origin, he sailed along the northern coast of present-day Honduras, encountering many tribes of different customs. The members of one of these tribes wore loin-cloths and sleeveless shirts. In contrast, another tribe with darker skin went completely naked and the men made holes in their ears that were so large that a hen's egg could have passed through. This fact caused Columbus to name north-eastern Honduras 'Costa delle Orecchie' or Costa de Oreja (Ear Coast).

Continuing eastward, the Admiral saw very beautiful places but continued sailing. He was impatient to leave the gulf and, navigating southward, reach the opening to the other sea and finally the Asian markets. However, the sea currents and winds prevented this. He sailed close to the wind and, not having suitable sails, sometimes found himself further back than his starting point. This Sisyphean torment lasted 70 days [20?] and it was only in mid-August 1502 that the ships reached the extreme point of the peninsula and rounded it: they named the cape Gracias a Dios (Thanks to God), and so it is still known today.

The navigation southward was easier and calmer; the fleet entered several bays and river estuaries (which in this isthmus carry vast amounts of water in a torrential regime), without finding any passage. Instead, on one occasion a flooded river capsized one of their boats and all the sailors were drowned. On another occasion, the flagship was pushed by the current against another and almost ended up on top of it. They continued to cruise along the coast of present-day Costa Rica and Panama, while the 'bisse', or shipworms (long white molluscs), bored into the ships' hulls, making numerous holes. The ships⁸ took on water and only remained afloat because the sailors pumped it out.

⁶ This was maize.

⁷ Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, ch. XXX of book I, published for the first time in 1580.

⁸ Usually, shipworms bore into floating tree trunks from the forests in those areas, carried in to the sea by the rivers; for these destructive creatures, there was no difference between tree trunks and the hulls of wooden ships.

The passage to the other sea did not exist, but the Indios of the area had a lot of gold, both fine gold in the form of shiny medallions, called 'specchi', worn on their chests tied with a cord, and low-quality gold that the Spaniards called 'eagles'. They exchanged a lot of it for the usual trifles. When they had nothing more to exchange, or were in a hurry, they became aggressive and brutal, and the Indios, fed up and annoyed, were ready to fight. Columbus, using some kindness and some warning shots from the cannon, managed to avoid a clash.

On about December 5, another hurricane began, one of those that often lash the Caribbean coasts. Hernando Colón, who was not an experienced sailor, described the fury of the elements in the following manner:

with so much thunder and lightning that people dared not open their eyes and it seemed that the ships were going under and the sky was falling down. Some rolls of thunder continued for so long that it was thought certain that a company ship was firing artillery as a signal for help. Other times the weather turned to heavy rain that did not stop for either two or three days, in a such a manner that it seemed like a new Deluge [...] in such frightening storms there was fear of fire from lightning bolts, and of the air for its fury and of water for the waves and of the land for the shallows and reefs [...]. In addition to these diverse fears, another one no less dangerous and amazing came upon us, a tornado that passed among the ships.⁹

His father Christopher, exploiting the colours and splendour of the Castilian language, described the hurricane to the Spanish sovereigns,

Never had human eyes seen such a swollen and foaming sea. The wind prevented us from advancing or proceeding in another direction and held me in that sea that seemed like blood and boiled like a cauldron over a great fire. Never was such a terrifying sky seen: for a whole day and night burning like a fire, emitting with flashes of lightning so many flames that in every moment I checked that it had not taken away masts and sails. Those thunderbolts fell with such terrifying fury that it was feared they would have destroyed the ships.¹⁰

The end of the year 1502 was stormy and terrible. On the Epiphany of the New Year, Columbus decided to set up a base by a river in a locality he named Betlem. He also decided to build a village from which the gold mines could be reached and sought to establish friendly relations with the local people. During a meeting with some natives, Hernando noted that they continually chewed some sort of dried plant "and sometimes they put in a type of powder, which they carry with the said plant". He then commented, "We believe the plant to be the reason why they have such rotten and putrid teeth".¹¹

⁹ *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. XCIV: fire, air, water and earth were the four elements of ancient Greek tradition.

¹⁰ Christopher Columbus, *Lettere ai reali di Spagna* ("Relazione del quarto viaggio", 8).

¹¹ *Le Historie*, vol. 2, chs. XCV and XCVI, perhaps they were chewing tobacco. This description corresponds to that of Vespucci, who, after meeting the giants, met the plant chewers. See Chapter 7 (§ 7.6 and note 14).

Ten stone houses were built and the village was looking good, although the ships were being seriously damaged by shipworms. At this point, the news arrived that the *Cacique* Quibio, on whose territory the village of Betlem stood, was considering making an attack. He did not want (and rightly so) that the strangers would become permanently established in his territory. Diego Méndez, a generous associate of the Columbus brothers, ascertained that the news was true and together with Bartholomew and other sailors managed to capture the *Cacique* and his family, along with other important members of the tribe. They also took possession of their great riches. In fact, these Indios loved gold and adorning themselves with it, so that they possessed numerous splendid necklaces and even crowns.

The prisoners, who were to be hostages, were shut in the hold of the flagship that was about to set sail for Castile. Columbus intended to recruit soldiers for the colony's protection and buy new supplies, while the men of the village had to dig for gold. It was soon clear that this plan could not be put into action.

11.5 Christopher Columbus Returns from His Last Voyage

The flagship had just picked up its moorings when some of the Indio hostages escaped and threw themselves into the sea to swim ashore, while those who did not manage to escape from the hold killed themselves. The escape made the men destined to remain in Betlem afraid that an unwinnable war would begin. They desperately asked the Admiral, whose ship was still anchored just off shore, to be allowed to abandon the newly-built village. Columbus resigned himself to doing what they asked. The village was hurriedly abandoned without difficulty. However, they had to abandon a ship that was no longer seaworthy, setting sail with the other three for Haiti. The weather was bad and the shipworms had opened many new holes in the hulls; keeping the bilge pumps working was extenuating work for the sailors. It was necessary to abandon a second ship and its crew was set to work pumping water from the surviving vessels. When they arrived in sight of Jamaica, the ships were barely afloat. They were pushed up against one of the island's beaches, anchored at the shore, and firmly linked together with planks and beams. For a year, the shipwrecked sailors lived on the ships and fed themselves at the natives' expense, in return giving them the usual trifles and later only promises. They did not have any boats. The Admiral thought to send Captain Bartolomeo Fieschi and the *escribano mayor* Diego Méndez to Haiti with two canoes rowed by natives. The small group transferred to the eastern end of the island to shorten the crossing, which was made difficult by violent currents. There they waited until the sea became calm and they finally departed. Bartholomew Columbus, who had accompanied them as far as the beach, "stayed there until, when evening came, he lost sight of them and then slowly returned to the ships".¹²

The days passed and the situation worsened. Hernando listened to the sailors' conversations; they were increasingly unhappy and frightened. Their words soon became menacing and, in the end, a revolt broke out instigated by Captain Francisco de Porras and his brother Diego, who was also a

¹² *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. CI, 134.

scribe of the fleet. In the end, Captain Porras, backed by numerous sailors, threatened Columbus:

some shouted: to death! others: to Castile, to Castile! and others asked: what shall we do Captain? And, although the Admiral was confined to bed with such bad gout that he could not stand up, he could not refrain from getting up and limping towards the noise. But, three or four people of honour, his servants, embraced him so that the riotous crowd could not kill him, and with great effort put him back to bed. [They] then ran to the Prefect [Bartholomew] who with courageous spirit had opposed by a lance in hand, and, taking it away from him by force put him with his brother, praying Captain Porras to go with God.

Thus, the anguished fourteen-year-old Hernando described this drama.¹³

The angry rebels left, taking with them the ten canoes that Christopher Columbus had acquired from the natives for all eventualities, and headed to the island's eastern point intending to leave for Haiti in the boats. Another tragedy followed: they had only just departed when the stormy sea forced them to lighten their load and throw their supplies and everything they carried with them except their weapons into the sea.

Then they cruelly killed many of the *Indios* who had been forced to row for them. They attempted several times to leave, but many months passed and they were still there, plundering and harming the tribes who lived along the coast.

The exasperated natives threatened to attack the men left on board the ships. Although ill, Columbus managed to get out of the situation through luck and cunning. He had read in the *Almanach* of Regiomontanus that a lunar eclipse was due. Therefore, he announced that a divine punishment would befall all those who threatened him. While the eclipse took place, he withdrew promising the terrorised people that he would pray to his god to return the celestial body. The Moon returned and the frightened natives submissively returned to helping the shipwrecked sailors.

Eight months had passed since the departure of Diego Méndez and Bartolomeo Fieschi, and the anger and desperation of the shipwrecked men were growing. Once again, fate assisted the Admiral: a large caravel arrived from Haiti, sent by Governor Ovando. The captain consigned a barrel of wine and a side of pork, promised the arrival of the ship acquired by the two emissaries with Columbus's money and departed, refusing even to take letters that some of the shipwrecked sailors begged to send. However, he delivered a letter from Diego Méndez, which helped the Admiral to understand the complicated intrigues behind the slow development of these events.

By now certain of imminent rescue, Christopher Columbus informed the mutineers, who were still camped at the easternmost point of Jamaica, that he forgave them and would give them safe-conduct if they intended to board the ship that was about to arrive. The mutineers angrily replied that they would return, but to take him prisoner.

Therefore, Columbus sent his brother Bartholomew with 50 well-armed men to convince them; the group was attacked by the rebels, but Bartholomew's men won the day, taking Francisco de Porras prisoner and kill-

¹³ *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. CII, 137.

ing several of his men, so that the others dispersed. When the ship bought in Haiti arrived, they asked for forgiveness, which was granted. They embarked and finally all, friends and rebels, reached Haiti on August 13, 1504. A year had passed since the shipwreck in Jamaica.

Many of the shipwrecked sailors chose to stay in Haiti; the others reached Sanlúcar de Barrameda on November 7 of the same year, but not without suffering further problems.

Columbus reached Seville where he cured his bad arthritis and rested to recover from the strain of this difficult experience.

11.6 Amerigo Undertakes His Disastrous Fourth Voyage

Once again, we must go back in time.

After the return of the Third Fleet under the command of Vasco da Gama, the fabulous ‘Spice Islands’ began to seem real. They were identified as the islands called Moluku by the natives, situated between the large islands on the Equator today known as Celebes and New Guinea, which lay much further east than all the lands hitherto reached by the Portuguese. King Manuel wanted to take possession of them at any cost, as obtaining spices where they were produced rather than from the Indian markets controlled by the Arabs would have reduced the cost and kept in check the competition.

An enormous effort was made to set up a new expedition to the east: King Manuel sent the Fourth Fleet, made up of 15 ships and 800 men (sailors and soldiers) once again commanded by Vasco da Gama. It left Lisbon on February 10, 1502. Two months later, he sent five more ships commanded by Estêvão da Gama as reinforcements. In the autumn of 1502, the King planned to send another six ships under the command of the courtier Gonçalo Coelho. Officially, the idea was to reach Molucca (Malaysia), situated above the Equator in southern East Asia according to Ptolemy’s *Geography*.

The route the contingent of six ships was to take was not provided; presumably, King Manuel was in a hurry to know the position of the western passage to Molucca. The Spaniards, by using this passage, would be able to endanger his plans and even the Portuguese commercial bases in Asia. The flagship on this voyage was a recently launched 300-ton brig, a beautiful and imposing vessel that would be supported by smaller ships. At least one of them, belonging to Fernando de Noronha, was destined to end its voyage early, in the Land of Vera Cruz discovered by Cabral. It is presumed that the others aimed to reach the stormy southern latitudes during the more favourable and milder season.

The six ships left Lisbon on May 10, 1503,¹⁴ one of them under the command of Amerigo. On the same day, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de’ Medici died at the age of forty while returning to Florence from Paris. Twelve years earlier, Amerigo Vespucci had been his friend and *factotum* and was counting on his support for a possible return to Florence.

The Portuguese fleet stopped at the Cape Verde Islands, where a supply of meat was taken on board. The captain major decided to stay there for 13 days. The fleet was supposed to leave on a south-south-westerly course, but the captain wanted to head south-south-east to reach the port of Sierra Leo-

¹⁴ “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 118v.

ne. The subordinate captains protested, as this increased the already large delay without any necessity, but Gonçalo Coelho, who was “presumptuous and very obstinate”, held firm; he wished to be seen in that port at the command of a fleet of six ships. The bad weather and the strong contrary wind kept the fleet in sight of the port for four days without being able to enter.

Finally, Coelho resigned himself and resumed navigation according to the pre-established route.

They sailed for about 300 leagues and were just below the Equator when they were surprised by the sight of a small island in the middle of the ocean, perhaps 22 leagues away. It was the island that Cabral had named Quaresima,¹⁵ and it appears with this name on the *Padrão Real*, whereas André Gonçalves had named it after Saint John. However, the commander did not know this. The night of Saint Lawrence was falling (10th August) and in nearing the island the great flagship hit a reef and began to take on water. The other five ships came alongside to help, in great confusion. The captain major ordered Vespucci to seek a suitable place on the island that could shelter the entire fleet in order to repair the ship. Vespucci departed immediately leaving behind the tender from his own ship with more than half his crew, and at a distance of 15 miles he found a good natural harbour that would house the fleet.

Amerigo and the sailors waited there for a few days for the other ships to join them: tragedy was in the air. Amerigo wrote, “We were very dejected and the men were full of apprehensions, and I could not console them”.¹⁶

On the eighth day of waiting, they saw a ship’s sails and, fearing they would not be seen, set sail and hurried to meet it: it was Fernando de Noronha’s ship. As soon as they were close enough to exchange news, they learned that “the flagship had sunk, its crew was saved, and that my boat with nine men stayed with the fleet which had sailed ahead”.¹⁷ The situation was becoming absurd.

They put a brave face on the situation, returned to the island which, as Amerigo noted, offered

an abundance of fresh water, quantities of trees full of an infinite number of sea and land birds. They were so tame they allowed us to catch them with our hands and we took so many that we filled a boat with them. We saw no animals other than very large rats and lizards with two tails and some snakes.¹⁸

According to the instructions received at their departure, the ships that became separated from the fleet should have regrouped in the port that Vespucci called ‘Badia di Tutti Santi’: they went there and waited, as agreed, for two months and four days; it was late October. They then set sail again heading southward and, reaching the area of the small bay of Caravelas, in com-

¹⁵ This name appears on the Cantino Planisphere of 1501-02 and on the map made by Juan de La Cosa; today the island is called Fernando de Noronha, after the merchant who was gifted it by the King.

¹⁶ *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 119rb.

¹⁷ “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 119va.

¹⁸ *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 119va. This voyage, held by many biographers to be invented, is confirmed in Maffei, *Le istorie delle Indie orientali* (translation from a mid-16th century text), and the description of the island corresponds to that written by Charles Darwin, who reached it with the *Beagle* 300 years later on 20th February 1832, see *Journal of Researches into the Natural History*, ch. 1. On the true occurrence of very large “rats” on the island (the extinct native rodent *Noronhomys vespuccii*), see Carleton, Olson, “Amerigo Vespucci and the rat of Fernando de Noronha”.

pliance with the prescribed regulations for the colonisation of new lands,¹⁹ stayed for five months, built a fort and appeased the natives of the territory.

Vespucci exploited the situation to travel ca. 140 miles (c. 200 km) inland with about thirty men and, avoiding any comment on this enterprise, wrote: “I saw so many things that I refrain from recounting them, reserving them for my *Four Voyages*”.²⁰ Once the fort was built, it was equipped with 12 bombards, many other arms and six months provisions. The captains left the 24 men who had originally travelled on board the sunken flagship there. The other ships were loaded with brazilwood and set sail during the first days of April 1504. After 77 days straight sailing (made possible by knowledge of the longitude) they reached Lisbon, seven months before Columbus returned. Amerigo commented: “We were very well received, more so than anyone would believe, for the entire city had given us up, because the other ships from the fleet were lost owing to the pride and folly of our captain, and thus did God reward him for his pride”.²¹

11.7 Amerigo Writes *Le Quattro Navigazioni* from which He Takes the “Lettera a Soderini”

Mundus Novus had already been published for the first time towards the end of 1503, and it had reached the Iberian Peninsula, perhaps a month later, sent by one of King Manuel’s zealous informers when Amerigo, following the shipwreck of Gonçalo Coelho, was in the New World. The King read the pages with increasing ill humour: they criticised the limitations of the Portuguese navy; there was too much talk of the lands that belonged to him but that he was unable to manage due to lack of suitable people to do the job.

However, when Amerigo unexpectedly arrived in Lisbon on June 28, 1504, the King put on a good face. Now that the court astronomer had disappeared, he could not do without him.

On the same day of his arrival, Amerigo wrote the fourth and last “Lettera familiare” to his friend Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, whose death he did not know. Only a passage quoted by Angelo Bandini (1745) is known of this letter, in which Amerigo complained that King Manuel was not returning him his astronomical notebook. Amerigo had also the time to finish *The Four Journeys* which he had begun to write on arriving in Sierra Leone and during the stopover in the Azores, using his own ship’s diaries and notes taken on various occasions; thus he reordered his own memories. When he finished, he reread the rough draft and felt an impulse of recoil: it was too far below the exceptional experiences he had lived, too dry, too bristling with measurements and numbers, he would have to write it in a very different way.

I set to writing a small book that I call *The Four Journeys* [...] and which I have yet to publish, because there are many of my own things that are not to my liking so that I find no taste in what I have written, although there are many who exhort me to publish”.²²

¹⁹ See § 12.2.

²⁰ “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 120ra.

²¹ “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 120rb.

²² *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 106ra.

In the meantime, he had learned with great sadness of the death of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco and Rabbi Zacuto's flight from Lisbon. His plans for the future had come to nothing. Then, the letter arrived from *gonfaloniere* Piero Soderini, with whom he had studied under the guidance of his uncle Giorgio Antonio. Soderini asked for news of his life and adventures, and Amerigo thought that perhaps he could reconnect with his native city.

He began to write his reply to Piero Soderini, this time based on his memories. His most vivid memories were those of his first voyage: the forests dense with evergreen trees, full of inebriating scents, after months of hard work endured while breathing the stench of the bilges and dried fish in the storeroom. Having something solid under one's feet and an endless supply of fresh water, to enjoy the scent of the trees that always offer fruit and to enjoy the presence of so many noisy multicoloured birds and numerous other strange animals, all of this provided moments of happiness and well-being that made it seem the Earthly Paradise. Nor did he forget the people, the naked people, friendly and ready to cooperate. After the narration of the first voyage, Amerigo continued in a more sober, technical vein, alas talking of the conflicts with the natives and then of the turbulent relationship among the Spaniards in Haiti. He was forced to say very little about the third voyage, even though his experiences were even richer, more complex and, in some ways, glorious. Lastly, the fourth voyage reminded him of the loss of half his crew, men he was very close to, faces he would never see again.

When he put down his pen, he again received an unexpected visit.