

Christopher Columbus

[1451-1506]

Born in the Italian seaport of Genoa in 1451, Christopher Columbus was the son of Domenico Columbo, a wool merchant, and Suzanna Fontanarossa, the daughter of a wool merchant. Columbus evidently had no formal education, and he apparently learned to read and write only as an adult. He was trained in the wool trade and may also have studied map-making with his brother, Bartolomeo. His first experience at sea was in 1474, when he spent a year on a ship bound for Khios, an island in the Aegean Sea. Two years later, Columbus was a member of the crew of a commercial ship that was attacked by French privateers. Few other details are known about his life until 1477, when Columbus was living in Lisbon, Portugal, where his brother was working as a mapmaker. That year, he became a merchant sailor with the Portuguese fleet and sailed to Ireland and possibly Iceland. Other voyages took him to the coast of West Africa.

Columbus was poised for a career as an explorer. In the fifteenth century, the expansion of the Muslim Ottoman Empire began to disrupt the lucrative overland trade routes from Christian Europe to India and China. Europeans were consequently determined to discover another trade route to the East. Inspired by his earlier voyages, his commitment to spreading Christianity, and a favorite book, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, with its accounts of the riches of the East, Columbus sought support for a voyage that would find a way there by sailing west across the Atlantic Ocean. By the fifteenth century, most Europeans no longer believed that the world was flat, but there was widespread disagreement about the size of the circumference of the earth. Columbus first offered his services to the rulers of Portugal. But they believed that his calculations were wrong, and their interests were, at least for the moment, focused on West Africa. Columbus then approached the courts of France and England, both of which also rejected his plan. Finally, he turned to the new monarchs of a united Spain, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel, who granted him permission and funding for a voyage to begin in 1492. On August 3, Columbus set sail from Palos, Spain, with three ships, the *Santa María*, the *Niña*, and the *Pinta*. He reached what are now called the West Indies on October 12, 1492. Believing he had reached the East Indies, Columbus renamed each island he encountered, claiming for Spain both the lands and their natives, whom he collectively called "*los indios*," or the Indians. He also started a colony by leaving thirty-nine crew members on the island he named Hispaniola, where he assumed they would begin to Christianize the natives and establish plantations that would bring economic benefits to Spain.

Returning to Spain in 1493, Columbus reported his "discoveries" and proclaimed the great riches of the "New World." During the following five years, he undertook three additional voyages, further exploring the islands of the Caribbean as well as stretches of the coasts of Central and South America. Columbus never set foot on North America, and until the

The Columbus Letter

The Latin translation of Columbus's letter published in Basel in 1494 contains the first portrait of the peoples he encountered, represented by two groups of naked "Indians." The scene focuses on the imminent exchange of gifts between the figure on the shore and the two Europeans landing on the island. Like the ship in the foreground, which bears little resemblance to the light, three-masted caravels used for exploration during the fifteenth century, the peaceful scene bears little relation to the brutal Spanish conquest of the Americas that swiftly followed Columbus's first voyage in 1492.

De Insulis nuper in mari Indico repertis



end of his life believed that the lands he explored were close to the mainland of Asia. Although he did not achieve his ultimate goal of finding a new trade route to China, Columbus gained riches for himself and paved the way for the expansion of European commerce and Christianity into these new territories for the next three hundred years.

What was a boon for Spain and later for other European nations, however, was a catastrophe for the indigenous inhabitants of the lands Columbus opened up to colonization. Ancient religious practices and cultural traditions were destroyed by colonists determined to impose European culture and spread Catholicism. In addition to being exposed to diseases to which they had no immunity, the native populations were frequently subjected to enslavement or slaughter. On the island of Hispaniola, for example, the native Taino population was reduced from as many as one million in 1492 to roughly thirty thousand in 1510, only four years after Columbus died and was buried in Spain. At the request of his widow, however, his remains were later moved to Hispaniola, where they were buried by the side of the altar in the cathedral of Santa Domingo.

Columbus's "Letter." Onboard the *Niña* on his homeward passage to Spain in 1493, and in the midst of a hurricane, Columbus wrote a formal letter to Luis de Santangel, secretary to the royal court of Spain, which had supported his project to find a new trade route to China. Columbus clearly intended his letter to be read by the sovereigns who sponsored his voyage, the Spanish monarchs King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel. Although he drew heavily on the detailed journal he kept during his eight-month voyage, Columbus sought to heighten interest in his discoveries by exaggerating some of his findings, especially the "gold incalculable" to be found on the islands he had explored. Columbus also designed the letter as a public report of his voyage, discoveries, and formal claim of new territories for Spain. The letter was consequently printed in Barcelona in late March or early April 1493. A brief pamphlet printed on two leaves of folio-sized paper, the letter is considered by many scholars to be the single most important printed document in the history of the early exploration of the Americas. Copies of the pamphlet were distributed throughout Spain, and soon there were nearly two dozen editions of the letter in several European languages, some of them accompanied by fanciful illustrations of the natives Columbus had encountered. For the first time, an account of the "New World" was available for large numbers to read, and Columbus's letter fired the imaginations of Europeans and spurred further exploration of what later came to be called America. The text is taken from *The Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, edited and translated from the Spanish by Cecil Jane (1930).

LETTER OF COLUMBUS, DESCRIBING THE RESULTS OF HIS FIRST VOYAGE

Sir:

Since I know that you will be pleased at the great victory with which Our Lord has crowned my voyage, I write this to you, from which you will learn how in thirty-three days I passed from the Canary Islands to the Indies, with the fleet which the most illustrious king and queen, our sovereigns, gave to me. There I found very many islands, filled with people innumerable, and of them all I have taken possession for their highnesses, by proclamation made and with the royal standard unfurled, and no opposition was offered to me.

To the first island which I found I gave the name "San Salvador," in remembrance of the Divine Majesty, Who had marvellously bestowed all this; the Indians call it "Guahani." To the second, I gave the name the island of "Santa Maria de Concepcion," to the third, "Fernandina," to the fourth, "Isabella," to the fifth island, "Juana," and so each received from me a new name.¹

¹ To the first island . . . a new name: The islands Columbus named have not been positively identified, except for *Juana*, his name for what is now Cuba.

When I came to Juana, I followed its coast to the westward, and I found it to be so extensive that I thought that it must be the mainland, the province of Cathay.² And since there were neither towns nor villages on the seashore, but small hamlets only, with the people of which I could not have speech, because they all fled immediately, I went forward on the same course, thinking that I could not fail to find great cities and towns. At the end of many leagues, seeing that there was no change and that the coast was bearing me northwards, which I wished to avoid, since winter was already approaching and I proposed to make from it to the south, and as, moreover, the wind was carrying me forward, I determined not to wait for a change in the weather and retraced my path as far as a remarkable harbour known to me. From that point, I sent two men inland to learn if there were a king or great cities. They travelled three days' journey, finding an infinity of small hamlets and people without number, but nothing of importance. For this reason, they returned.

I understood sufficiently from other Indians, whom I had already taken, that this land was nothing but an island, and I therefore followed its coast eastward for one hundred and seven leagues to the point where it ended. From that point, I saw another island, distant about eighteen leagues from the first, to the east, and to it I at once gave the name "Española."³ I went there and followed its northern coast, as I had followed that of Juana, to the eastward for one hundred and eighty-eight great leagues in a straight line. This island and all the others are very fertile to a limitless degree, and this island is extremely so. In it there are many harbours on the coast of the sea, beyond comparison with others that I know in Christendom, and many rivers, good and large, which is marvellous. Its lands are high; there are in it many sierras and very lofty mountains, beyond comparison with that of Teneriffe.⁴ All are most beautiful, of a thousand shapes; all are accessible and are filled with trees of a thousand kinds and tall, so that they seem to touch the sky. I am told that they never lose their foliage, and this I can believe, for I saw them as green and lovely as they are in Spain in May, and some of them were flowering, some bearing fruit, and some on another stage, according to their nature. The nightingale was singing⁵ and other birds of a thousand kinds, in the month of November, there where I went. There are six or eight kinds of palm, which are a wonder to behold on account of their beautiful variety, but so are the other trees and fruits and plants. In it are marvellous pine groves; there are very wide and smiling plains, and there is honey; and there are birds of many kinds and fruits in great diversity. In the interior, there are mines of metals, and the population is without number. Española is a marvel.

The sierras and the mountains, the plains, the arable and pasture lands, are so lovely and so rich for planting and sowing, for breeding cattle of every kind, for building towns and villages. The harbours of the sea here are such as cannot be believed to exist unless they have been seen, and so with the rivers, many and great, and of good water, the

2. Cathay: A province of China, which Columbus initially thought he had reached.

3. "Española": Today, the island of Hispaniola includes the countries of Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

4. Teneriffe: One of the Canary Islands, an archipelago off the coast of northwestern Africa.

5. The nightingale was singing: Columbus was mistaken, since the nightingale, or European thrush, was not native to the West Indies.

majority of which contain gold. In the trees, fruits and plants, there is a great difference from those of Juana. In this island, there are many spices and great mines of gold and of other metals.

The people of this island and of all the other islands which I have found and of which I have information, all go naked, men and women, as their mothers bore them, although some of the women cover a single place with the leaf of a plant or with a net of cotton which they make for the purpose. They have no iron or steel or weapons, nor are they fitted to use them. This is not because they are not well built and of handsome stature, but because they are very marvellously timorous. They have no other arms than spears made of canes, cut in seeding time, to the ends of which they fix a small sharpened stick. Of these they do not dare to make use, for many times it has happened that I have sent ashore two or three men to some town to have speech with them, and countless people have come out to them, and as soon as they have seen my men approaching, they have fled, a father even not waiting for his son. This is not because ill has been done to any one of them; on the contrary, at every place where I have been and have been able to have speech with them, I have given to them of that which I had, such as cloth and many other things, receiving nothing in exchange. But so they are, incurably timid. It is true that, after they have been reassured and have lost this fear, they are so guileless and so generous with all that they possess, that no one would believe it who has not seen it. They refuse nothing that they possess, if it be asked of them; on the contrary, they invite any one to share it and display as much love as if they would give their hearts. They are content with whatever trifle of whatever kind it may be that is given to them, whether it be of value or valueless. I forbade that they should be given things so worthless as fragments of broken crockery, scraps of broken glass and ends of straps, although when they were able to get them, they fancied that they possessed the best jewel in the world. So it was found that for a strap a sailor received gold to the weight of two and a half castellanos,⁶ and others received much more for other things which were worth less. As for new blancas,⁷ for them they would give everything which they had, although it might be two or three castellanos' weight of gold or an arroba⁸ or two of spun cotton. They took even the pieces of the broken hoops of the wine barrels and, like savages, gave what they had, so that it seemed to me to be wrong and I forbade it. I gave them a thousand handsome good things, which I had brought, in order that they might conceive affection for us and, more than that, might become Christians and be inclined to the love and service of your highnesses and of the whole Castilian nation,⁹ and strive to aid us and to give us of the things which they have in abundance and which are necessary to us.

They do not hold any creed nor are they idolaters; only they all believe that power and good are in the heavens and are very firmly convinced that I, with these ships and men, came from the heavens, and in this belief they everywhere received me after they had mastered their fear. This belief is not the result of ignorance, for they are, on the contrary, of a very acute intelligence and they are men who navigate all those seas, so that it

6. castellanos: Gold coins.

7. blancas: Small coins worth less than a cent.

8. arroba: Roll of cloth.

9. Castilian nation: Spain.

is amazing how good an account they give of everything. It is because they have never seen people clothed or ships of such a kind.

As soon as I arrived in the Indies, in the first island which I found, I took by force some of the natives,¹⁰ in order that they might learn and might give me information of that which there is in these parts. And so it was that they soon understood us, and we them, either by speech or signs, and they have been very serviceable. I still carry them with me, and they are always assured that I come from Heaven, for all the intercourse which they have had with me. They were the first to announce this wherever I went, and the others went running from house to house, and to the neighbouring towns, with loud cries of, "Come! Come! See the men from Heaven!" So all, men and women alike, when their minds are set at rest concerning us, came, not one, small or great, remaining behind, and they all brought something to eat and drink, which they gave with extraordinary affection.

In all the islands, they have very many canoes, which are like rowing fustas, some larger and some smaller; some are greater than a fusta of eighteen benches.¹¹ They are not so broad, because they are made of a single log of wood, but a fusta would not keep up with them in rowing, since their speed is a thing incredible. In these they navigate among all those islands, which are innumerable, and carry their goods. One of these canoes I have seen with seventy and eighty men in it, each one with his oar.

In all these islands, I saw no great diversity in the appearance of the people or in their manners and language. On the contrary, they all understand one another, which is a very curious thing, on account of which I hope that their highnesses will determine upon their conversion to our holy faith, towards which they are very inclined.

I have already said how I went one hundred and seven leagues in a straight line from west to east along the seashore of the island of Juana, and as a result of this voyage I can say that this island is larger than England and Scotland together, for, beyond these one hundred and seven leagues, there remain to the westward two provinces to which I have not gone. One of these provinces they call "Avan," and there people are born with tails. These provinces cannot have a length of less than fifty or sixty leagues, as I could understand from those Indians whom I have and who know all the islands.

The other island, Española, has a circumference greater than all Spain from Collioure by the seacoast to Fuenterrabia in Vizcaya, for I voyaged along one side for one hundred and eighty-eight great leagues in a straight line from west to east.¹² It is a land to be desired and, when seen, never to be left. I have taken possession of all for their highnesses, and all are more richly endowed than I know how or am able to say, and I hold all for their highnesses, so that they may dispose of them as they do of the kingdoms of Castile and as absolutely. But especially, in this Española, in the situation most convenient and in the best position for the mines of gold and for all trade as well with

10. took by force some of the natives: Columbus enslaved some natives, whom he taught Spanish so that they could serve as translators.

11. a fusta of eighteen benches: To facilitate trade among the islands, the natives built large canoes made of a single log, with benches for rowers and space at either end for passengers and cargo.

12. from west to east: In equating the circuit of the island to the distance around the Spanish peninsula from Collioure on the Gulf of Lyons to Fuenterrabia on the Bay of Biscay, Columbus greatly exaggerated the size of Hispaniola.

the mainland here as with that there, belonging to the Grand Khan,¹³ where will be great trade and profit, I have taken possession of a large town, to which I gave the name "Villa de Navidad," and in it I have made fortifications and a fort, which will now by this time be entirely completed. In it I have left enough men for such a purpose with arms and artillery and provisions for more than a year, and a fusta, and one, a master of all seacraft, to build others, and I have established great friendship with the king of that land, so much so, that he was proud to call me "brother" and to treat me as such. And even were he to change his attitude to one of hostility towards these men, he and his do not know what arms are. They go naked, as I have already said, and they are the most timorous people in the world, so that the men whom I have left there alone would suffice to destroy all that land, and the island is without danger for their persons, if they know how to govern themselves.

In all these islands, it seems to me that all men are content with one woman, and to their chief or king they give as many as twenty. It appears to me that the women work more than do the men. I have not been able to learn if they hold private property; it seemed to me to be that all took a share in that which any one had, especially of eatable things.

In these islands I have so far found no human monstrosities, as many expected, but on the contrary the whole population is very well formed, nor are they negroes as in Guinea, but their hair is flowing and they are not born where there is intense force in the rays of the sun. It is true that the sun has there great power, although it is distant from the equinoctial line twenty-six degrees. In these islands, where there are high mountains, the cold was severe this winter, but they endure it, being used to it and with the help of meats which they consume with many and extremely hot spices. As I have found no monsters, so I have had no report of any, except in an island "Quaris," which is the second at the coming into the Indies,¹⁴ and which is inhabited by a people who are regarded in all the islands as very fierce and who eat human flesh. They have many canoes with which they range through all the islands of India and pillage and take whatever they can. They are no more malformed than are the others, except that they have the custom of wearing their hair long like women, and they use bows and arrows of the same cane stems, with a small piece of wood at the end, owing to their lack of iron which they do not possess. They are ferocious among these other people who are cowardly to an excessive degree, but I make no more account of them than of the rest. These are they who have intercourse with the women of "Martinio,"¹⁵ which is the first island met on the way from Spain to the Indies, in which there is not a man. These women engage in no feminine occupation, but use bows and arrows of cane, like those already mentioned, and they arm and protect themselves with plates of copper, of which they have much.

In another island, which they assure me is larger than Española, the people have no hair. In it there is gold incalculable, and from it and from the other islands I bring with me Indians as evidence.

13. **Grand Khan:** The name given to the leader of the Mongolian Empire in China.

14. **an island "Quaris" . . . at the coming into the Indies:** The captive natives evidently indicated the position of this island, which they called "Quaris." Columbus landed on the island, which he renamed Dominica, during his second voyage in 1494.

15. **"Martinio":** Martinique, as the island was later named by the French.

In conclusion, to speak only of that which has been accomplished on this voyage, which was so hasty, their highnesses can see that I will give them as much gold as they may need, if their highnesses will render me very slight assistance; moreover, I will give them spices and cotton, as much as their highnesses shall command; and mastic, as much as they shall order to be shipped and which, up to now, has been found only in Greece, in the island of Chios, and the Seignory¹⁶ sells it for what it pleases; and aloe, as much as they shall order to be shipped; and slaves, as many as they shall order to be shipped and who will be from the idolaters.¹⁷ I believe also that I have found rhubarb and cinnamon, and I shall find a thousand other things of value, which the people whom I have left there will have discovered, for I have not delayed at any point, so far as the wind allowed me to sail, except in the town of Navidad, in order to leave it secured and well established, and in truth I should have done much more if the ships had served me as reason demanded.¹⁸

This is enough. And the eternal God, Our Lord, Who gives to all those who walk in His way, triumph over things which appear to be impossible, and this was notably one. For, although men have talked or have written of these lands, all was conjectural, without suggestion of ocular evidence, but amounted only to this, that those who heard for the most part listened and judged rather by hearsay than from even a small something tangible. So that, since Our Redeemer has given the victory to our most illustrious king and queen, and to their renowned kingdoms, in so great a matter, for this all Christendom ought to feel delight and make great feasts and give solemn thanks to the Holy Trinity, with many solemn prayers for the great exaltation which they shall have in the turning of so many peoples to our holy faith, and afterwards for the temporal benefits, because not only Spain but all Christendom will have hence refreshment and gain.

This in accordance with that which has been accomplished, thus briefly.

Done in the caravel, off the Canary Islands, on the fifteenth of February, in the year one thousand four hundred and ninety-three.

At your orders.

THE ADMIRAL

After having written this,¹⁹ and being in the sea of Castile, there came upon me so great a south-south-west wind that I was obliged to lighten ship. But I ran here to-day into this port of Lisbon, which was the greatest marvel in the world, whence I decided to write to their highnesses. In all the Indies, I have always found weather like May. There I went in thirty-three days and I should have returned in twenty-eight, save for these storms which have detained me for fourteen days, beating about in this sea. Here all the sailors say that never has there been so bad a winter nor so many ships lost.

Done on the fourth day of March.

[1493, 1930]

16. **Seignory:** The system of government in Genoa, Italy, where Columbus was born.

17. **idolaters:** Non-Christians. Columbus includes the discovery of a new source of slaves as one of the important outcomes of his voyage.

18. **ships . . . demanded:** The *Santa María*, Columbus's flagship, was grounded on a reef near Hispaniola and sank on December 25, 1492. His other ships, the *Pinta* and the *Niña*, were caravels, smaller vessels designed for speed and maneuverability in difficult waters.

19. **After having written this:** This note was wrapped around the letter and sealed.