

AMERICI VESPVCI

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Knowledge Hegemonies  
in the Early Modern World 1

# Amerigo Vespucci: The Historical Context of His Explorations and Scientific Contribution

Pietro Omodeo

edited by Pietro Daniel Omodeo



Edizioni  
Ca' Foscari

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and Scientific Contribution

## **Knowledge Hegemonies in the Early Modern World**

1



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# Knowledge Hegemonies in the Early Modern World

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Pietro Omodeo; Pietro Daniel Omodeo (edited by)

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# **Amerigo Vespucci: The Historical Context of His Explorations and Scientific Contribution**

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## **Abstract**

This book offers a new reconstruction of Amerigo Vespucci's navigational and scientific endeavours in their historical context. The Author argues that all the manuscripts or texts that Vespucci left to posterity are reliable and true, except for several amendments imposed upon him for reasons linked to the political and economic interests of those who authorised him to undertake his journeys or which were the result of relationships with his companions. The earliest genuine documentation, which dates from the late fifteenth century or early sixteenth century, confirms this position. Fortunately, careful philological studies of Vespucci's principal written works are available, while some of his original drawings, which confirm, clarify and enrich what he narrated in his letters, can be identified in Waldseemüller's large map known as *Universalis cosmographia* (1507).

**Keywords** Amerigo Vespucci. Political background of early Renaissance navigation. Textual criticism of Vespucci's letters. Origin of the New World's name. Vespucci's scientific legacy. Columbus versus Vespucci: their different achievements and fates.



# **Amerigo Vespucci: The Historical Context of His Explorations and Scientific Contribution**

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Figure 1 Martin Waldseemüller, *Universalis cosmographia secundum Ptholomæi traditionem et Americi Vespucii* (1507). © Cornell University



To the memory of  
my father Adolfo Omodeo  
and my son Adolfo Sergio Omodeo





## The Editor's Foreword

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The impact of Amerigo Vespucci's reports on the New World can hardly be overestimated. When Nicolaus Copernicus ignited the 'astronomical revolution' through his epoch-making message that a radically different, mathematically founded vision of the cosmos was possible, he introduced his heliocentric theory as the astronomical counterpart of the geographical shift that had already been produced by Vespucci's announcement that another continent existed – a *New World*, according to the title of the latter's most famous work *Mundus novus* (1503). As one reads in Copernicus's *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* I,3 (1543), the most prominent astronomer and geographer of Hellenistic antiquity, Ptolemy, had transmitted to the posterity a narrow image of the habitable world as this, according to him, occupied only half of the globe; the moderns expanded their geographical knowledge through the exploration of thus-far unknown regions, both in the east and in the west. This concerned China (*Cathagya*), new islands discovered by the Spaniards and the Portuguese,

and especially America, named after the ship's captain who found it. On account of its still undisclosed size it is thought to be a second group of inhabited countries. [...] So little reason have we to marvel at the existence of antipodes or antichthones. Indeed, geometrical reasoning about the location of America compels us to believe that it is diametrically opposite the Ganges district of India.<sup>1</sup>

The Copernican theory of the planetary earth that rotates around the sun constituted a drastic emendation of Ptolemy's *Almagest* that was akin to the emendation of Ptolemy's *Geography*, which was perceived as a necessary shift in the age of Columbus, Vespucci, and Magellan. The discoveries of the seafarers who navigated under the flags of the Iberian kings brought about profound changes in the knowledge of the globe we inhabit and the way we represent it. Vespucci clearly perceived the philosophical import of the novelties he witnessed:

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolaus Copernicus: *On the Revolutions*, 10. Cf. *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*. Nuremberg: Petreius, 1543: f. 2r.

These [regions] we may rightly call a new world. Because our ancestors had no knowledge of them, and it will be a matter wholly new to all those who hear about them. For this transcends the view held by our ancients.<sup>2</sup>

In the course of the controversy over the ancients and the moderns, in which modern ingenuity was extolled against the mere authority of the ancients, Copernicus' astronomy was to become the scientific revolution *par excellence*. Yet, in the background of the scientific achievements of the moderns, there is a complex - and often tragic and violent - history of maritime travels, political intrigues, military expansion, and economic interests.

The Renaissance physician, mathematician, and philosopher Girolamo Cardano lucidly perceived that European globalization marked a cultural turning point, and also indicated the scientific-technological means that made it possible. In his autobiography, *De vita propria liber*, Cardano presents the three canonical technologies of modernity - gunpowder, the compass, and the printing press - as the most remarkable "natural prodigies observed, rare though, in my life". As important as they are, all of them are overshadowed by the geographical discoveries of his time. The marvel at the encounter with the unknown emerges from his list of novel localities to be added to the atlases - some of them are perhaps imaginary; all of them imagination triggering:

Among the extraordinary, though quite natural circumstances of my life, the first and most unusual is that I was born in the century in which the whole world became known; whereas the ancients were familiar with but little more than a third part of it.

On the one hand we explore America - I now refer to the part peculiarly designated by that name - Brazil, a great part of which was before unknown, Terra del Fuego, Patagonia, Peru, Charcas, Parana, Acutia, Caribana, Picora, New Spain, Quito, of Quinira the more western part, New France and regions more to the south of this toward Florida, Cortereal, Estotilant, and Marata. Besides all these, toward the east under the Antarctic we find the Antiscians somewhat like Scythians, and some Northern peoples not yet known, as well as Japan, Binarchia, the Amazonas, and a region which is beyond the Island of the Demons, if these be not fabled islands - all discoveries sure to give rise to great and calamitous events in order that a just distribution of them may be maintained.<sup>3</sup>

The expansion of geographical knowledge corresponded to a reconfiguration of geopolitics. A planetary consciousness - which still constitutes an uncompleted task today - began to emerge in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a consequence of cross-cultural encounters and clashes and because of the formation of the first 'planetary Empire' - that of Charles V, on which "the sun never set".

This book reconstructs the individual and collective vicissitudes that gave birth to our modernity through an attentive study of key textual and cartographic sources enabling us to trace the origins of the idea of a fourth continent, to comprehend the reasons it was given the name of 'America' after

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<sup>2</sup> Amerigo Vespucci: *Mundus Novus*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Cardano, *The Book of My Life*, 189 (posthumous).

its 'announcer' and to understand the century-long polemics caused by the ascription of its 'discovery' to Vespucci.

It is a special honour for me to inaugurate this series in the socio-political history of early modern science with a book written by a person who is dear to me, my grandfather Pietro, whose passionate study of nature, philosophy, and history has provided me with an invaluable example. This publication aims to inspire further inquiries into the early-modern roots of the scientific world we live in.

Venice, January 2020  
Pietro Daniel Omodeo



## Introduction

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At the beginning of the 20th century, two German scholars, Josef Fischer and Franz Wieser, found twelve printed sheets of paper in the archives of a Bavarian noble family, which, arranged in the correct order, formed a map to be pasted onto wall. Together with these sheets there was another map, but of a different type: it was made up of twelve sections to be cut out and glued onto a solid globe about 12 centimetres in diameter.

The large map, called the *Universalis Cosmographia* or also the *Waldseemüller Planisphere*, after the geographer who made it, represented the Earth's entire surface with the three continents Europe, Asia and Africa drawn according to Claudius Ptolemy's representation, as well as the New World, shown based on the information provided by Amerigo Vespucci and dedicated to him with the name 'America'. Both the wall map and the one that was supposed to cover a solid globe were printed using the technique of xylography in the town of Saint-Dié-des-Vosges in the Franco-German Duchy of Lorraine.

This authentic treasure was made known in 1907, exactly four hundred years after its date of publication. At the time, it only aroused slight interest, perhaps because it was not possible to see the smallest details on the copies that were immediately distributed, but principally because they exalted the work of Amerigo Vespucci who at the time was not held in high esteem.

One hundred years later, in the early part of this century, the Waldseemüller Map was acquired by the Library of Congress in Washington, which immediately put a very good reproduction on the internet, thus making it possible to identify a growing number of clues suggesting a direct derivation of the image of America from material provided by Vespucci himself.<sup>1</sup>

The present volume deals with events that took place five hundred years ago, between the end of the 15th century and the early 16th century. These events led to the conquest of the oceans and the discovery of a Fourth Continent populated by many peoples in various stages of social and cultural development, rich in treasures such as gold and pearls, in addition to many products which we would now find it difficult to do without, such as maize, potatoes, tomatoes, cocoa, rubber, tobacco, vanilla and quinine.

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<sup>1</sup> See Omodeo, "The Authenticity of Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus*", 359-88.

The premise for this endeavour was the discovery, or rediscovery, of the archipelagos of the Canaries, Madeira, Azores and Cape Verde, which became the outposts from which to venture into the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean. Other events stimulated oceanic navigation: the exchange of goods between the peoples of central-northern Europe and those of the Mediterranean, in addition to fishing in tropical waters and the cold northern seas with an abundance of fish, which preserved in various ways was distributed throughout Europe, improving the diets of its populations that were growing despite continuing epidemics.

The contemporary development of the arts, technology and science, together with the boom in the number of printed books, stimulated the spread of a new culture and boosted confidence in the rational activity of man, able to undertake the greatest and most arduous endeavours with such energy that within the space of a few decades a new epoch was born.

The rediscovery of Ptolemy's *Geography* and the ideas of Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli on the configuration of the oceans and the continents known at the time, together with the economic and commercial programmes of the forward-thinking Portuguese Prince Henry "the Navigator", inspired sailors to travel ever further and naval architects to design ships better suited to this purpose.

Thanks to this, the most skilful and daring mariners were able to prove their talent and became the protagonists of incredible events: Christopher Columbus, Bartolomeu Dias, Vasco da Gama, Juan de La Cosa, Amerigo Vespucci, John Cabot, Vicente Yáñez Pinzón and Ferdinand Magellan. These protagonists, even though travelling under rival flags, did not compete with each other using dishonest means: they played the role they had chosen or which they had been assigned, earning the recognition of all.

Vespucci in particular, for whom an updated biography is proposed in this work, was praised by many of his contemporaries, including his presumed rival Christopher Columbus. Only Bartolomé de las Casas, courageous defender of the rights of the Indios, spoke of Amerigo's 'usurpation' of Columbus's merits. However, this priest was misinformed and had misunderstood - as we will see below - the roles of the two navigators in the arduous and lengthy task of discovering those far-away lands.

With the publication of *Historia del Nuevo Mundo* by Juan Bautista Muñoz (1793) and, above all, the *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos* by Don Martín Fernández de Navarrete (1826-1837) the confusion over the roles and respective merits of Columbus and Vespucci, which was already outlined in the 16th century, generated a bitter controversy between Vespucci's detractors, who considered it unjust that the New World received the name of America, and his defenders who were of the opposite opinion, a debate that continued throughout the 19th century.

This controversy increased in vehemence as time passed, assuming paradoxical connotations. In the early 1900s, Alberto Magnaghi declared in a monograph that the printed letters by Amerigo were false, that his first and fourth voyages never happened, and that he had travelled on behalf of Portugal only to inform the Spanish of what he had seen.<sup>2</sup> This gratuitous reconstruction further characterised Amerigo as being just a braggart and a spy. The diminishment of his historical relevance was continued by many histori-

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<sup>2</sup> Magnaghi, *Amerigo Vespucci, studio critico*.

ans of science. In the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*,<sup>3</sup> for example, Vespucci is only mentioned in three notes, two of which of no significance, while he is not mentioned at all in the *Biographical Encyclopedia of Scientists*<sup>4</sup> nor is he mentioned in *The Mapping of America* by R.V. Tooley.<sup>5</sup> A partial remedy to this misleading perspective on Vespucci's scientific merits and the importance of geography for the history of science has been provided by the volume on *Early Modern Science of The Cambridge History of Science*, edited by Kathrin Park and Lorraine Daston, who included an illuminating section to "Cosmography" by Klaus Vogel.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Robert Wallisch, in his German edition of *Mundus novus*, has significantly contributed to dispel the doubts about Vespucci's authorship and to reassess his scientific achievement.<sup>7</sup>

In the new millennium, the criticism again intensified producing new arguments. Felipe Fernández-Armesto, in his book *Amerigo: The Man Who Gave His Name to America*, published in 2006, describes the navigator in this way: "Amerigo [...] was a pimp in his youth and a magus in his maturity", using magus to indicate an able illusionist who can get one over on anybody.<sup>8</sup> The most trivial (and boring) slander became a trap into which an author with genuine merits fell: Tzvetan Todorov, the anthropologist of the Europeans' encounter with the American *other*, characterises Vespucci as an "obscene writer of pornography".<sup>9</sup> Fortunately, Amerigo's actions are now being re-evaluated, as is also evident in the proceedings of a conference held on the 500th anniversary of his death.<sup>10</sup>

My reconstruction of Vespucci's endeavour and context will show that it is reasonable that everything that he has handed down in manuscript or printed form is true, except for several variations imposed on him for understandable reasons by those who authorised him to undertake the journey or by relationships with his companions of 'adventure'.<sup>11</sup> This conviction has obliged me to start by returning to the earliest genuine documentation dating to the late fifteenth century or early sixteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Fortunately, Vespucci's principal written works have been studied with careful philological criteria by Luciano Formisano in various publications.<sup>13</sup> Original drawings by Amerigo Vespucci are inserted in the above mentioned Waldseemüller wall map, which confirm, clarify and enrich what he narrated in his letters.<sup>14</sup>

**3** Directed by Charles C. Gillespie, 18 vols. in 4°, published in New York under the auspices of the American Council of Learned Societies (1970 to 1980).

**4** Published in 6 volumes in Bristol and Philadelphia in 1994.

**5** Tooley, *The Mapping of America*.

**6** Vogel, "Cosmography", 469-96.

**7** Wallisch, "Zur Rehabilitierung des *Mundus Novus* und seines Autors", 157-69.

**8** Fernández-Armesto, *Amerigo: The Man Who Gave His Name to America*, ix.

**9** Todorov, "Viaggiatori e indigeni", 329-57.

**10** Pinto, Rombai, Tripodi, *Vespucci, Firenze e le Americhe*.

**11** See Omodeo, "The Authenticity of Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus*", 359-88.

**12** The collection of documents preceded by a bibliography compiled by Ilaria Luzzana Caracci, *Amerigo Vespucci*, in 2 volumes (1996-1999), is very useful.

**13** Formisano, *Amerigo Vespucci: Lettere di Viaggio; Iddio ci dia buon viaggio e guadagno (Codice Vaglienti)*, here cited as *Codice Vaglienti*. See also Formisano, Masetti, *America sive mundus Novus, le lettere a stampa attribuite ad Amerigo Vespucci*; Perini, *Amerigo Vespucci cronache epistolari*.

**14** In October 2016, a second digitised edition of this wall map appeared. I refer to the project of the Galileo Museum in Florence and the U.S. Library of Congress, viewable at the following web address: <http://mostre.museogalileo.it/waldseemuller>.



To give a more complete picture I have linked the endeavours of Amerigo Vespucci with those of Christopher Columbus, Alonso de Ojeda, Vasco da Gama, Pedro Álvares Cabral, Juan de La Cosa and others, as all operated within a large common plan. Indeed, geographical exploration, although it widened human knowledge, has always had a high cost and therefore significant economic consequences, such as the conquest of markets and other sources of wealth, as well as increasing power and prestige. The aim is to give a rational picture of such decisions, which were only rarely based on capricious likes and dislikes, while they more often derived from opportunities and contingent political necessities.

The political choices behind geographical explorations, especially those made by the Portuguese, were not made in an open manner, indeed they were often undertaken in secret. Such a way of proceeding obliges scholars of such ancient events to propose hypotheses and conjectures regarding the timing and motives of such choices. I too have had to proceed in this way and in so doing have often strayed from the traditional criteria. My way of proceeding was dictated by the conviction that the Vespucci question is “a badly put question”: these are the words that open the great philological study by Luciano Formisano (1985), and I totally agree. Supported by this conviction, I have examined how some misunderstandings came to arise and how they subsequently became exaggerated. I have dedicated the final part of the book to this examination, while I have always clarified how and why I distance myself from standard narratives, confining part of these technical justifications to the notes, so as not to weigh down the reader. I have also carefully indicated in what ways my conjectures can be confirmed or refuted. I leave such verification to others as I cannot do it myself given my advanced age.

Among the important gaps to be filled in the scholarship on Vespucci, I would like to mention three. The first one concerns the events of the time between December 1497 and February 1498. I offer here a reconstruction based on the evidence we have at our disposal. I derive this evidence from cartography. The second gap (which cannot be reconstructed, yet) concerns Vespucci’s flight from Portugal and his arrival in Sevilla between December 1504 and January 1505. The third problem indirectly relates to Vespucci as it concerns the mapping of the New World by Christopher Columbus.

### **Note on translation**

Unless otherwise specified, the English quotations contained herein are my own translations of the original texts.

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## **Chronology of the Most Important Voyages**

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To help the reader I have summed up, in chronological order, the voyages undertaken on behalf of Spain and Portugal that are mentioned in this book.

1. Bartolomeu Dias sailed from Lisbon in August 1487, followed the coast of West Africa, then widened his course towards the west. After a violent storm, he found a free passage to the Indian Ocean and continued his voyage as far as the present-day port of Kwaaihoek at the mouth of the Boesmans River in eastern South Africa. During the return voyage, he sighted Cabo das Tormentas, now called the Cape of Good Hope. He arrived in Lisbon in December 1488.
2. Christopher Columbus sailed on August 3, 1492 from the port of Palos in Andalusia to cross the Atlantic Ocean and reach Asia. Instead, he landed on the island of San Salvador in the Lucayan archipelago (the Bahamas). He continued north and then when returning south again he reached the island of Haiti/Hispaniola. He returned to Palos on March 5, 1493.
3. Christopher Columbus sailed from Cadiz on September 25, 1493 to take colonists to Haiti where he arrived on November 22. He undertook a voyage of exploration towards the west and north-west between April 24 and September 29, 1494. After capturing numerous slaves, he arrived back in Cadiz on June 11, 1495.
4. Four merchants, including Amerigo Vespucci, set sail from Cadiz on May 10, 1497. The fleet explored the north-eastern coast of South America. They continued northwards along the Lesser Antilles reaching Hispaniola, from where they sailed westwards to Yucatán and explored the isthmus between the two parts of the New World. The merchants repaired the ships, captured the men of a tribe of cannibals as slaves, and arrived back in Cadiz on October 15, 1498.
5. On July 8, 1497, the 'First Fleet' destined to reach the markets of India set sail from Lisbon under the command of Vasco da Gama. On December 25, the fleet reached the eastern coast of South Africa, which was given the name Natal. Between April and May 1498, they crossed from Malindi to Calicut. The return voyage began on Au-

- gust 29, 1498 and the crossing as far as the African coast lasted 90 days, during which most of the crews died of scurvy. Only one ship returned to Lisbon in early September 1499.
6. Christopher Columbus departed from Cadiz for his third voyage on May 30, 1498, landing in South America in the Gulf of Paria on August 1, 1498, arriving at Santo Domingo, Haiti, on August 30 of that year. As the result of the colonists' rebellion, Columbus and his brothers were taken back to Cadiz in chains, arriving in late November 1500.
  7. On May 16, 1499, Ojeda, de La Cosa and Vespucci sailed from Cadiz. At the Canary Islands, Vespucci and de La Cosa parted company with Ojeda and continued to the Cape Verde Islands from where they sailed to cross the Atlantic Ocean. They reached the mouth of the Amazon River, sailing south as far as the Cape of Saint Augustine, inverting their course and following the coast beyond the island of Trinidad. They were reunited with Ojeda and on November 22 set sail for Cadiz, once again parting company with Ojeda, and arriving on January 8, 1500.
  8. The 'Second Fleet' left from Lisbon on March 9, 1500, heading for the East Indies under the command of Pedro Álvares Cabral. The fleet widened its course too far to the west and on April 26, 1500 reached Porto Seguro in present-day Brazil. On May 1, the fleet set sail again, but after four ships were destroyed by a storm, it reached Calicut at the end of 1500 where a violent clash took place with the local inhabitants. The ships returned separately towards Lisbon, the first two meeting the fleet of which Amerigo Vespucci was the navigator at the end of May 1501.
  9. On May 10, 1501, a small fleet of three ships led by Amerigo Vespucci set sail from Lisbon. At the end of the month, they encountered two ships from Cabral's fleet in the port of Bezeguiche (now Dakar). Following a difficult ocean crossing, on August 17 they reached Brazil at ~40°20' West, proceeded southward and reached a place they named Cananea (at Brazil's southern border). Amerigo calculated the longitude at different places along the coast. On March 6, 1502, they reached the port of San Julián. On reaching 52° South, the fleet began its return voyage, arriving in Lisbon in September 1502.
  10. On May 9, 1502, Christopher Columbus left Cadiz on his fourth voyage. He was in search of a passage from the Caribbean Sea towards Asia and reached Santo Domingo, Haiti, on June 29. In early July, a hurricane destroyed 24 Spanish ships. Columbus reached Panama sometime in March 1503; he discovered a productive gold mine but not the passage to the west. During the return voyage, the crews took refuge on the coast of Jamaica where they remained for a year. They arrived in Haiti on August 13, 1504 and returned to the port of Sanlúcar de Barrameda in Spain on November 7, 1504.
  11. Amerigo Vespucci sailed from Lisbon on May 10, 1503 for his fourth voyage with the goal of reaching the Moluccas. The fleet was under the command of Gonçalo Coelho who was wrecked on the rocks of Quaresima Island (now called Fernando de Noronha) and then continued together with a merchant's ship. After a stop at All Saints' Bay (Baía de Todos os Santos), a base, including a fort, was built at the bay of Caravelas. They returned to Lisbon on June 28, 1504.

## Measurements

The measurements relating to tonnage, weight and length are those provided by Amerigo Vespucci. The tonnage measurements are in tuns, or *butti*, greater than the modern metric tons by 20%. The weights of dry food stuffs are in pounds (c. 450 grams); in this text, they are converted to kilograms or quintals. The most common measurements of length used by Amerigo are leagues and miles. According to him, each league is equivalent to four miles, although it is not clear what the length of a mile is: the Roman mile was c. 1,600 m, the same figure then used in the Iberian Peninsula. However, Vespucci's estimations are most often vague. In this text, each land mile equals c. 1,200 m, each nautical mile 1,400 m. The numerical estimates of populations, of times, or of ages are usually reliable but were often exaggerated by ancient translators. Christopher Columbus used measurements more correctly, so that one league equalled 3.5 Roman miles; he used latitudes in a correct manner but adjusted them according to need.



# 1 The Vespucci Family in Florence, Amerigo Vespucci's Education (1454-1491)

**Summary** 1.1 The Notary, Ser Nastagio Vespucci. – 1.2 Amerigo Vespucci's Family. – 1.3 Amerigo's Education. – 1.4 Amerigo in Paris and Later in the Service of Lorenzo, Son of Pierfrancesco de' Medici. – 1.5 Problems with the Medici Commercial House in Seville. – 1.6 Seville and its Port.

## 1.1 The Notary, Ser Nastagio Vespucci

In 1457, when the notary Nastagio Vespucci, son of the notary Amerigo Vespucci, declared his patrimony and income to the Florentine Land Register, he stated that his family comprised his wife Mona Lisa, twenty-two years old, and five children, Antonio, Girolamo, Amerigo, Bernardo and Agnoletta, with an age difference of just one year between successive siblings. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his declaration regarding his modest patrimony and equally modest income, but doubts remain about the fact that his wife began to bear children aged seventeen and continued to do so for the next four years without pause. In fact, in Nastagio's next declaration to the land register, thirteen years later in 1470, his age has increased by twelve and not thirteen years, the age of his wife by fourteen years and the ages of the first three sons by eleven years. The age of the youngest son is not mentioned, while the daughter Agnoletta does not appear among the mouths to be fed and therefore was presumably dead.<sup>1</sup>

The reading of the last declaration to the land register made by the notary in 1480 reveals further surprises. In these ten years Mona Lisa's age has increased by seven years, while that of each of her first three sons has increased by 15 years, consequently the gap between the age of the mother

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<sup>1</sup> The life of Amerigo in Florence has mainly been deduced from the work by Angelo Maria Bandini, *Vita e lettere di Amerigo Vespucci*, partially available online, republished in *Onoranze centenarie a Paolo Toscanelli e ad Amerigo Vespucci*, and, above all, from the contributions by Ida Masetti Bencini and Mary Howard Smith entitled "La vita di Vespucci a Firenze". Claudia Tripodi has written a book, *Prima di Amerigo*, about the Vespucci who lived before Amerigo.



and her first-born is fifteen years. In contrast, the age of the declarant has increased by eleven years and corresponds with the real age of the individual, born in 1427, and therefore fifty-three years old.

This collection of contradictory information persuades us that ser Nastagio's memory had been very confused for some time and suggests that Pievano Arlotto, who insinuated in his satires that ser Nastagio drank too much of the wine from his own vineyard, was right.<sup>2</sup> The fact is that Amerigo's date of birth remains uncertain. The preferred date is usually the one on his christening certificate: 1454. In this case, Amerigo would be a contemporary of Bartolomé de Las Casas and Angelo Poliziano. The date 1452 is also plausible; in this case, Amerigo would have been the same age as Leonardo da Vinci, fra' Girolamo Savonarola and Piero Soderini, who later was elected to a lifetime term as *gonfaloniere* of Florence, that is, the town perpetual president.

## 1.2 Amerigo Vespucci's Family

The Vespucci were members of the minor country aristocracy and came from Peretola, a small town near Florence, today a suburb of the Tuscan capital. The family had moved to the great city, where several of its members had held important offices, two centuries before. In this city, always divided by opposing factions, the Vespucci traditionally sided against the Medici, who had been aiming to dominate the city for some time and had their eyes on other lands and cities in Tuscany. However, the Vespucci family was on good terms with Pierfrancesco de' Medici, cousin of Lorenzo the Magnificent, and subsequently with his sons Lorenzo and Giovanni, who were involved in trade on a European scale and showed no interest in political power.

In the second half of the fifteenth century, Amerigo's branch of the family was well-off, owning several houses in Florence and at Peretola, together with a number of vineyards at Peretola and elsewhere and a small hospice for pilgrims in the Ognissanti quarter of Florence; in addition, it owned a frescoed chapel in the Ognissanti Church, which also functioned as the family tomb. Simone Vespucci, one of the most prestigious members of the family, had it built in the 1300s. In the main fresco, attributed to Ghirlandaio, the Madonna protects members of the Vespucci family who appear gathered beneath her mantle; in the fresco below, the young Amerigo can be seen next to his uncle Giorgio Antonio. Amerigo was born and grew up in this family and city environment and held vivid memories of it for the rest of his life.

The Vespucci family's situation had declined somewhat when the notary ser Amerigo di Stagio, young Amerigo's grandfather, got into great debt and committed serious administrative irregularities, reducing himself to poverty. His youngest son Giorgio Antonio rose above this, becoming a cultured man and esteemed humanist and tutor to Lorenzo, son of Pierfrancesco de' Medici. Subsequently, Giorgio Antonio took holy orders and joined the Dominican Order. As we have seen, his elder brother ser Nastagio got himself into trouble by overindulging in wine.

By now elderly, ser Nastagio was abandoned by his wife who went to live with her eldest son Antonio, also a notary and married with children. Ser Nastagio lived with his other three sons: Amerigo, Girolamo and Bernardo.

<sup>2</sup> Facezia LXV in Folena, *Motti e facezie del Piovano Arlotto*.

A notarial act drawn up just before his death consists of two parts. In the first part, which is untidy and confused, ser Nastagio names his son Amerigo as his legal representative in all senses. In the second part, also incoherent and signed by different witnesses, ser Nastagio abandons a dispute with his father-in-law regarding one hundred 'florins of good mint', the dowry of his wife Mona Lisa, which he claimed not to have received from her father. In giving up this dispute, he excuses himself saying he is unable to remember properly "as human memory vacillates". It seems that this second part of the document was drawn up on the wishes of Amerigo who had agreed to be his father's legal representative only if he gave up the rather squalid dispute.

Ser Nastagio died in 1485, the year the act was drawn up, leaving the three sons who still lived with him without means.

### 1.3 Amerigo's Education

Ser Nastagio's sons had learnt to read, write and count as befitted most Florentine boys in the second half of the 1400s. Antonio, having also learnt Latin and acquired other pertinent notions, was able to attend Pisa University where he studied law. In contrast, the brothers Gerolamo and Bernardo did not continue their studies and were waiting to find employment. Amerigo was tutored by his erudite uncle Giorgio Antonio, but with modest results: his school exercise books have come down to us but contain no more than the most elementary notions. A piece of Latin homework, done when he was twenty-two years old, shows that he knew no more about the language than an adolescent of the time.<sup>3</sup> However, later he was able to read Latin without difficulty. At the age of fifty, Amerigo, aware of his own limits and reflecting upon his wrong choices, wrote to his fellow student Piero Soderini:

remembering how at the time of our youth [...] going to listen to the principles of grammar under the good guidance and doctrine of the venerable religious friar of San Marco, my uncle Giorgio Antonio Vespucci, whose advice and doctrine it would have pleased God that I followed so that, 'I would be a different man to the one that I am', as Petrarch states.<sup>4</sup>

In actual fact, Amerigo had studied a great deal, but in a disorderly fashion. He was well-versed in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and had read the works of renowned authors such as Pliny, and knew Aristotle's naturalistic works.<sup>5</sup> He also studied astronomy and geography, a much-cultivated discipline in Florence, the city where a precious Greek codex by Claudius Ptolemy (2nd century AD) had arrived some decades earlier and was subjected to critical analysis by humanists and translated into Latin and Italian.

Furthermore, at that time, the cosmographer Paolo del Pozzo Toscanelli enjoyed well-deserved prestige, and in a letter to the King of Portugal had indicated that the easiest way to reach the great emporia of southern Asia was to cross the "Ocean Sea" sailing westward.

<sup>3</sup> See Bandini, *Vita e lettere di Amerigo Vespucci*, XXVII.

<sup>4</sup> "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 101ra.

<sup>5</sup> References to the Aristotelian tradition can be found, for example, in "Frammento Ridolfi", in Formisano, *Amerigo Vespucci: lettere di viaggio*, 29, ll. 24-5.

In such a cultural climate, the young Amerigo was excited to the point of buying a large map of the known world, painted on leather, for the conspicuous sum of 130 gold ducats, a sum that seems greatly exaggerated.

#### **1.4 Amerigo in Paris and Later in the Service of Lorenzo, Son of Pierfrancesco De' Medici**

The industrious city of Florence, which traded with all of Europe and financed its most profitable initiatives, had diplomatic relationships with several important European states. When necessary, delegations would be sent to these states led by an 'orator', that is, an able and eloquent man, who would expound the city's problems and intentions. This occurred after the Pazzi plot whose conspirators, in agreement with Pope Sixtus IV, had attempted to murder Lorenzo the Magnificent. Florence sent a delegation to France to gain its support against Papal interference.

The delegation, led by Guidantonio Vespucci, departed in 1478. Amerigo, second cousin to Guidantonio, was the delegation's secretary. The negotiations lasted nearly two years and provided Amerigo with important opportunities, including learning French. However, on his return to Florence he found himself unemployed.

Fortunately, in 1483 he found employment with Lorenzo, son of Pierfrancesco de' Medici and Semiramide Appiani, daughter of Jacopo, lord of Piombino. The couple were about ten years younger than Amerigo. This important position was perhaps found for him by his uncle Giorgio Antonio, preceptor and close friend of Lorenzo, or by Semiramide, distant cousin-in-law to Amerigo. This was certainly a position that suited him well.

The brothers Lorenzo and Giovanni, Pierfrancesco's heirs, were very wealthy. They owned well-cultivated and productive lands including the estate of Cafaggiolo, which extended over the bottom of a lake that had been drained. It was very fertile land, protected by a splendid castle which can still be admired today in the lower part of the Mugello valley, on the road from Florence to Bologna. Another source of wealth was the bank, which had branches in some European cities where it was associated with various types of enterprises.

Amerigo's position was that of 'maggiore', which corresponds to today 'butler', but in actual fact he was a factotum. Semiramide would turn to him for simple matters such as the children's clothing, or the arrangements for a party; the farm managers would ask him about decisions regarding the price of wine and other products, while Lorenzo, the master, sent him on errands in nearby towns. Above all, he dealt with the crowds of common people, prisoners, debtors, failed artisans who turned to him as a go-between to the powerful Lorenzo, who would have been able to help them resolve their problems.

His correspondence of those years shows how the poor and the wealthy of Florence lived and what problems assailed them five hundred years ago: a way of life that overall is not very different from the modern one, plagues, means of transport and communications apart. These antique letters also provide information about Amerigo's private life: a bachelor about thirty years old who frequented beautiful women of loose morals. His cousin Pietro, captain of the garrison at Pisa, wrote him confidential letters about one of these women, whom he had fallen with and wished to reward.

## 1.5 Problems with the Medici Commercial House in Seville

The heirs of Pierfrancesco de' Medici owned a bank in Seville, capital of Andalusia. In 1489, Donato Niccolini, its administrator, arrived in Florence from Spain. He brought bad news: Tommaso Capponi, who directed the bank, had made mistakes and committed administrative fraud, which needed to be rectified quickly. The Medici also owned a large business that dealt in the slave trade and a naval yard for the repair and fitting-out of ships in Seville, which Donato Niccolini suggested should be entrusted to Giannotto Berardi. The latter had gained wide experience in these areas working in Lisbon with Bartolomeo Marchionni, another Florentine businessman. This was arranged and Giannotto Berardi moved to Seville to begin work.<sup>6</sup>

Two years later, the business was flourishing, as Giannotto told Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, informing him that he needed a trusted collaborator. Lorenzo suggested to his factotum that he move to Seville in order to help Berardi, thus abandoning, at the age of almost forty, a pleasant and comfortable life to move to a faraway place and face a new and more demanding job. Amerigo accepted and left in December 1490 or the following January.

## 1.6 Seville and Its Port

In the late fifteenth century, the ancient city of Seville, which stood on the left bank of the Guadalquivir River, was home to about 70,000 inhabitants and surrounded by high walls; it was made lively by its markets, its artisans and the port, the splendour of its Moorish architecture overlaid by magnificent Gothic and Renaissance buildings.

The city port, situated on a wide bend in the river, had one particular characteristic that made it very safe; it stood 80 kilometres from the ocean, in the interior of the Iberian Peninsula. The great Atlantic tides, up to ten metres high, pushed the water, boats and ships as far as Seville and beyond, and regularly drained the riverbed, keeping it clean. The outgoing tide carried the boats back to the river mouth where there was a smaller port, Sanlúcar de Barrameda, where other boats waited for the rising tide.

However, there was a narrow point on the river constituted by the pillars of a Moorish bridge that had collapsed in the distant past.

Although Seville was unique as a river port, like many other ports it was hospitable: whoever arrived there burdened by the many needs of all types accumulated during weeks and months of navigation, and also with experiences to compare with those of others, found someone who could provide help and information, in a mixture of nationalities and languages. A so-called 'lingua franca' was spoken in the port, an ephemeral language with simple grammar and a mixture of Castilian, Portuguese, Genoese, Catalan and even Arabic words and phrases.

When Amerigo reached Seville, aged about forty, he learnt the port's idiom and used it throughout his life, even forgetting the correct use of the Tuscan language.

<sup>6</sup> Luzzana Caraci, *Per lasciare di me qualche fama*, 56.



## **2 Berardi and Vespucci in Seville (1490-1496)**

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**Summary** 2.1 The Medici/Berardi Commercial House in Seville. – 2.2 Vespucci's Apprenticeship. – 2.3 The Year 1492. – 2.4 Giannotto Berardi Separates from the Group of Florentines. – 2.5 The Company Dissolves and Amerigo Begins a New Life.

### **2.1 The Medici/Berardi Commercial House in Seville**

The Medici/Berardi commercial house in Seville, reorganised after Tommaso Capponi was dismissed, was active in three areas: shipbuilding and repair, the slave trade and finance, the latter administered independently of the other two but which managed the profits they made, something much appreciated by the sovereigns who provided careful protection. Giannotto Berardi, who had dealt mainly with the slave trade in Portugal, preferred this activity on which he had built most of his personal fortune.

It is a little known but certain fact that the slave trade in the Iberian Peninsula between the 15th century and the early decades of the 16th century was completely in the hands of Florentine families.<sup>1</sup> The Marchionni family held the monopoly in Lisbon, while in Andalusia the Medici/Berardi acquired such 'merchandise' from the coast of Guinea and had most of it sent to Valencia where the Barzi family, also Florentine, then sent it on to the rest of Europe.

At the end of the medieval period, this commerce had not yet assumed the atrocious characteristics it acquired from the mid-16th century onwards, when the extermination of the Indios in their lands caused a progressive lack of labourers. The black slaves from Guinea and the Guanches from the Canary Islands were used in wealthy households as servants while prisoners of war became galley slaves. In this period, Lisbon is described as crawling with slaves who also compensated for the country's demographic crisis. The Iberian ships searched the so-called Slave Coast, which extended from Mauritania to Sierra Leone, and their administrative officer, the *maestre*,

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**1** See Guidi Bruscoli, *Bartolomeo Marchionni*.



**Figure 2.1** Copper engraving of the *abbey* of Ognissanti in Florence, of which Amerigo Vespucci always held fond memories, after Giuseppe Zocchi's painting (published in Florence in 1760). Vespucci would call after it the locality of All Saints' Abbey (Baía de Todos os Santos)

bought slaves from Arab traders or tribal chieftains and even from families in the poorest villages. Sometimes they acquired slaves through skirmishes and raids into the interior, albeit not without cost. Purchase was preferable to capture as the individuals most suitable to the European market could be chosen. It sometimes happened that the *maestre*, or those charged with this type of work, betrayed the ship owners and sold the slaves during the voyage to less expert or less fortunate colleagues, or to accomplices, making the sale appear as an escape or death during transport and pocketing the profits.

## 2.2 Vespucci's Apprenticeship

All scholars who have studied Amerigo's endeavours have found it difficult to understand how this 'landlubber' at over forty years of age acquired the necessary skill to undertake daring seafaring ventures crowned with success. Amerigo certainly acquired great experience of ship's maintenance, repair and construction during his time in the Berardi shipyard, particularly after the owner's death. Moreover, in the shipyard he instructed clients in the use of the instruments that completed a ship's furnishings: various types of compass from Holland and Genoa, quadrants and sextants necessary for establishing latitude (some made in Egypt), hourglasses and portable sundials.

Amerigo was also very interested in the slave trade, to which he was introduced by Giannotto Berardi. He was often employed by Berardi as *maestre*, a position of trust, which led him to travel to the Canary Islands and along the coast of Guinea. Amerigo wrote of these voyages in a letter known as the “Ridolfi Fragment”: “I have navigated across all the parallels from Morocco to the ends of Ethiopia [Black Africa] and past the parallel of 32° [52°] to the south. I have been to many parts of Africa and Ethiopia: to Cape Catim, Cape Anghila, to Zanaga, to Cape Verde, to Rio Grande, to Sierra Leone lying at 7° above the Equator, and I have seen and talked to countless people, and all are black, but even more so in one place than in another”.

In addition to 52° South and Sierra Leone, which he reached during his third voyage, he notes the places where he dropped anchor for the slave trade. Indeed, he describes those places with the words of one who has seen them with his own eyes: “All the land of Ethiopia is sparsely populated, there is a lack of fresh water, it rains very little, and the soil is very sandy and scorched by the heat of the sun. There are endless sandy deserts and very few forests or woods, and the prevailing winds in these parts are the levanter and sirocco, which are hot”.<sup>2</sup> Amerigo wrote this to a somewhat arrogant geographer without fear of refutation and showing his wide knowledge of the Dark Continent also through comparison of the African fauna with that of the New World, which he was the first to describe.

Sailing as a *maestre* was hardly the best apprenticeship for becoming a great navigator. However, it allowed him to gain first-hand knowledge of the risks of navigation, to observe the handling of the sails, to memorise the orders given to the crew, to understand why in certain circumstances a certain action had to be taken and in others a different one.

One year after his arrival in Seville, Amerigo was already used to the lively city and enjoying his new job at the Berardi Company.

### 2.3 The Year 1492

The year 1492 was unlike any other. Many events occurred and many decisions were taken that changed not only the historical prospects of Tuscany but those of Spain, Europe and the entire world.

Lorenzo, son of Piero de’ Medici, known as ‘the Magnificent’ for his patronage of great artists and men of letters, for his writings and for the splendid buildings he commissioned, died in Florence. He was succeeded by his son Piero, nicknamed ‘the Fatuous’ because he was an ineffectual and vain man. The cousins Lorenzo and Giovanni di Pierfrancesco, who could not stand him, were exiled from Florence after beating him up during an encounter.

In Spain, Queen Isabella and her husband Ferdinand had decided to reconquer the last Iberian territory occupied by the Arabs, the caliphate of Granada. During the siege, the King and the Queen lived in a great encampment set up at Santa Fe outside the city; Granada fell in January 1492. As the surrender had been previously arranged, there was not much bloodshed, but immediately afterwards the ‘most Catholic’ sovereigns treated the vanquished very harshly forcing them to convert or leave the city. The caliph of Egypt protested strongly about this infraction of the agreed terms

2 “Frammento Ridolfi” in Formisano, *Amerigo Vespucci lettere di viaggio*, 30-1.



of the surrender which provided the promise of civil treatment for the Muslim citizens. His threat of reprisals caused alarm, and Queen Isabella had to try to remedy the situation by sending a delegation led by her secretary Peter Martyr d'Anghiera.

In March 1492, the Spanish sovereigns signed the Alhambra Decree, drawn up by the implacable inquisitor the Dominican friar Tomás de Torquemada, which made it obligatory for Jews to convert to Catholicism or be expelled from the kingdom. This edict provoked the exodus of a large number of cultured and competent citizens towards the Maghreb, the Ottoman Empire and southern Europe. It is estimated that Portugal, which at the time was not controlled by the Inquisition, accepted about 120,000 of them. Immediately after Grenada's surrender, Ferdinand and Isabella signed the *Capitulación de Santa Fe*, the agreement that allowed Columbus to reach the fabulous markets of Asia by crossing the ocean towards the west. If he succeeded, the navigator was to be rewarded with noble titles, feudal powers and economic advantages. This contract, stipulated amid the euphoria of the conquest of Granada, presented anomalies even for that time: the Genoese navigator undertook to find and secure for the Spanish Crown unknown lands and to identify the routes across the ocean that would have allowed him to complete this endeavour. In exchange, the royals granted him permission to attempt this venture (something that was not of their exclusive competence and that cost them nothing), they granted him hereditary noble titles (which also cost them nothing), gave a modest contribution towards the cost of the voyage, but above all granted feudal rights over any lands discovered and conquered beyond the ocean. In the case of failure, Columbus would lose everything: the money he contributed to the successful outcome of the venture and perhaps even his life. In the case of success, he would gain enormous economic benefits, which perhaps he would not have obtained from a less wealthy patron.

In this period, in order to gain more power, princes and republics stipulated contracts of this type with 'captains of adventure' who headed bands of mercenaries, and did the same with the best navigators. In Columbus' case, the negotiations lasted five years.

King Ferdinand disapproved but limited himself in this phase to forbidding his subjects to take part in Columbus's venture.

Having decided the outcome of Columbus's venture, Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon decided to complete the conquest of the Canary Islands by taking La Palma. This island was still in the hands of the Guanches, a proud indigenous population of Berber descent whose way of life was still very primitive; indeed, their only weapons were clubs and stones. For this endeavour, the sovereigns chose Don Alonso Fernández de Lugo, who had distinguished himself during the conquest of Gran Canaria Island. He was made an inviting proposal: if he conquered La Palma within a year, he would become its governor, he would have the right to a percentage of the prisoners to sell as slaves and, lastly, he would be given the sum of 700,000 *maravedís*, a conspicuous sum but not astronomical. This type of contract appealed to King Ferdinand: a clear agreement that allowed him to keep the contracting party under control until he fulfilled his obligations. Also in 1492, the Spanish sovereigns decided to arrange two marriages in order to strengthen ties with the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, who had made a substantial contribution of soldiers and arms for the conquest of Granada. His children, Philip the Handsome and Margaret of Austria (then twelve years old), were

to marry respectively two of Isabella and Ferdinand's children: the princess Joanna and her brother John, hereditary prince to the whole of Spain. Both marriages were short-lived and ended in the most wretched ways.

Another occurrence in 1492 of great importance for the events discussed here was the death of Pope Innocent VIII, who was succeeded by Pope Alexander VI, a member of the noble Borgia family from Aragon.

Other more modest but none the less significant events occurring that year were the creation of a terrestrial globe about 50 cm in diameter with a metal stand by Martin Behaim of Nuremberg and the opening of the first printing shop in Seville.

## 2.4 Giannotto Berardi Separates from the Group of Florentines

Giannotto Berardi had followed the development of Columbus' project with great attention and was drawn by the Genoese navigator's personality, seeing him at the forefront of a new season of exploration. When he discovered that Columbus was looking for a financial backer for his venture, Berardi proposed himself without involving the Medici bank and at the same time took the opportunity to also finance Alonso Fernández de Lugo, suggesting they form a company together with Francesco Rivarolo, a Genoese businessman. Through this financing, he hoped to be able to gain an advantage in the trade of valuable goods from the Canary Islands, in particular cochineal.<sup>3</sup>

With these private agreements, Berardi ended his association with Lorenzo and Giovanni di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, who continued to manage the bank through Donato Niccolini and Piero Rondinelli. Together with Girolamo Ruffaldi and Amerigo, who had become his right-hand man, Berardi continued to run the shipyard, which received important contracts for Christopher Columbus' voyages.

Unfortunately, Alonso de Lugo caused his partners a great deal of trouble: having conquered the island of La Palma in May 1493, within the agreed terms, he sold the 140 slaves he had captured for his own profit. He kept his part of the 700,000 *maravedís* received from the Queen, which he should have shared with his partners, and returned the rest to the Spanish Crown. Through these actions, he hoped to ensure for himself the contract for the conquest of Tenerife where the natives were still holding out. The conquest of the last of the Canary Islands ended in disaster. The Spanish captain, at the head of an army of two thousand men, was surprised and beaten in an ambush by the native chieftain Bencomo, and de Lugo himself was hit full in the face by a stone that smashed many of his teeth. By then without means, he had to take refuge on Gran Canaria. Two years later, having been granted an extension of 10 months by the Queen and received substantial help from the Duke of Medina Sidonia, de Lugo managed to take Tenerife in July 1495. He became governor of La Palma and Tenerife. Later, he had important military successes in North Africa and received further rewards.

<sup>3</sup> The cochineal is an insect from which is derived a red dye for textiles and also for beverages.

## 2.5 The Company Dissolves and Amerigo Begins a New Life

Seeing their shares vanish along with any hope of being favoured in commerce with the Canaries, de Lugo's partners began a court case against him. In the meantime, in February 1495 Niccolini sent Giannotto Berardi a protest for non-payment of a debt he had contracted with the Medici bank.

Furthermore, Queen Isabella forbade that her subjects in the new far-off islands be enslaved and ordered that those who had already been transported to Spain be returned immediately. It was more profitable for the sovereigns to have large numbers of subjects who produced goods and paid taxes, rather than numerous slaves enriching private citizens.

Feeling overwhelmed by these events, Giannotto Berardi became gravely ill and wrote this in his will:

In the very noble and faithful city of Seville, Tuesday the fifteenth of the month of December in the year [...] 1495 [...] present a notary, witnesses for me that I Giannotto Berardi, Florentine merchant, resident in this city being infirm of body but sound in mind [...] say and confess, to tell the truth to God and to protect the salvation of my soul, that the gentleman Admiral Don Christopher Columbus owes me and is obliged to give me and pay me one hundred and eighty thousand *maravedís*, a little more, a little less, as will be seen from my registers, and for the service and work I have carried out for three years, with dedication and goodwill for his lordship and for his brothers and children and business; and to serve him I left my business and my house, and lost and ruined the company belonging to myself and my friends, and even my body, if our Lord takes me away from the pains of this world, for the work and toils I have taken upon myself in serving his lordship, travelling, as I have travelled, many roads and suffering many anxieties.<sup>4</sup>

Giannotto Berardi died a few days after writing his will, which named Amerigo Vespucci and Girolamo Ruffaldi as his executors. Amerigo stayed on to manage the shipyard, now in financial difficulty, but he had several credit repayments due and a contract for twelve ships to be fulfilled in lots of four. But he had no luck: the first four ships were fitted-out late due to the transferral of the shipyard and, before being consigned, were dragged away by a storm and smashed against the coast between Cadiz, Rota and Tarifa, near Gibraltar. It was February 1496. Nearly all the crew members were saved, but the economic damage was irreparable. Powerless, Amerigo witnessed the destruction of the ships and decided to leave commerce and dedicate himself to voyages of exploration.

<sup>4</sup> This quote is taken from Formisano et al., *Amerigo Vespucci. La vita e i viaggi*, 105.

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

**Summary** 3.1 Columbus Prepares His First Voyage Across the Ocean and Departs. – 3.2 Martín Alonso's Desertion and the Shipwreck of the Santa María. – 3.3 Columbus' Return Voyage. – 3.4 King Ferdinand is Suspicious of the Admiral. – 3.5 King Ferdinand's Hasty Stipulations. – 3.6 The Admiral's Second Voyage Begins. – 3.7 Alonso de Ojeda. – 3.8 The Colonisation of Haiti Proceeds Badly. – 3.9 The Admiral Leaves with the Aim of Circumnavigating 'la terra Juana'. – 3.10 The Difficult Period of Colonisation Ends Disastrously. – 3.11 Columbus' Gold. – 3.12 The Admiral Returns from His Second Voyage. – 3.13 A Princely Wedding.

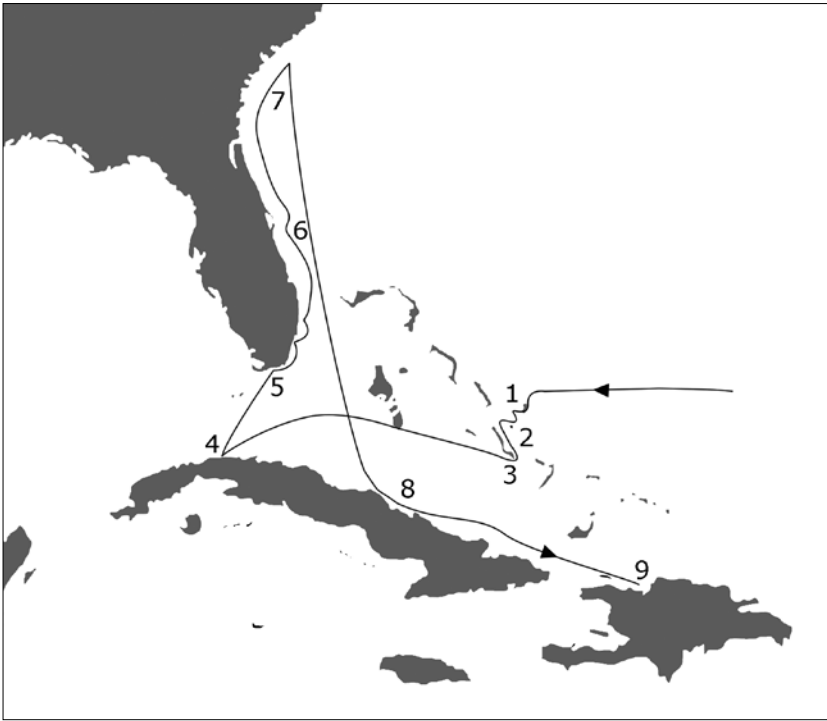
### 3.1 Columbus Prepares His First Voyage Across the Ocean and Departs

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.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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:<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> 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 rudimental 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”.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> “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].

<sup>4</sup> 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,<sup>5</sup> 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”.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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

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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.

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

<sup>6</sup> *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.

<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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-

<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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

<sup>9</sup> 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".

<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> *Le Historie*, vol. 1, chs. VII-IX, 65-79.

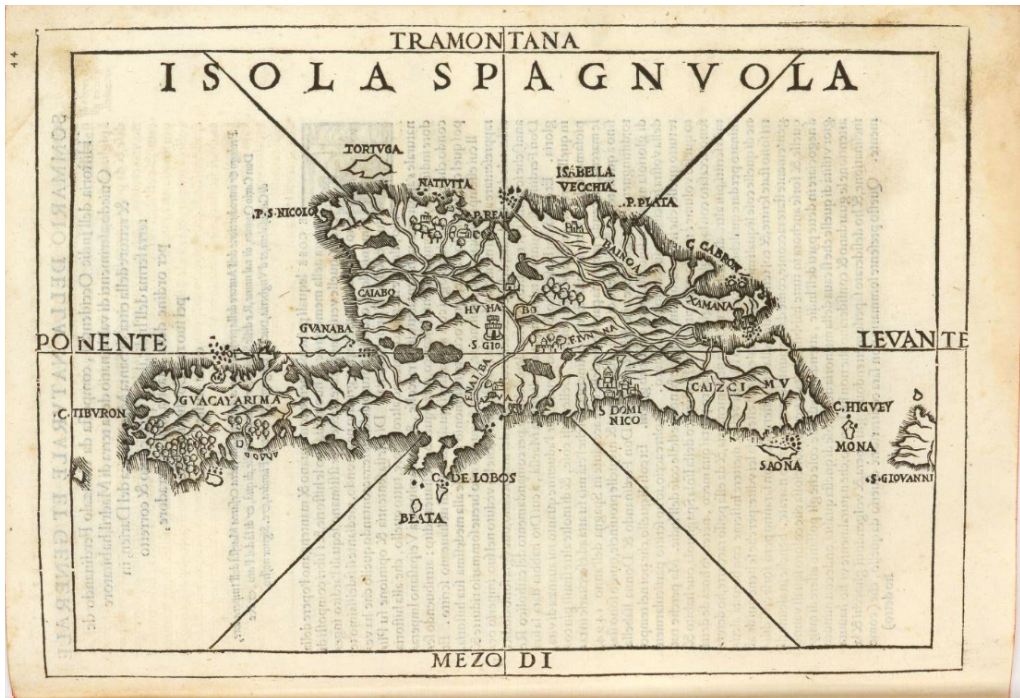


Figure 3.2 Map of the island of Hispaniola (Haiti) printed in Venice by Giunti in 1556. To the north, the village of Natività, or Navidad, and the city of Isabela (inland, to the east of the Cibao mine); below on the opposite coast, to the east of the city, is the port of Santo Domingo. © John Carter 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup>

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

<sup>13</sup> *Le Historie*, vol. 1, ch. XL, 155.

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

<sup>15</sup> 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.

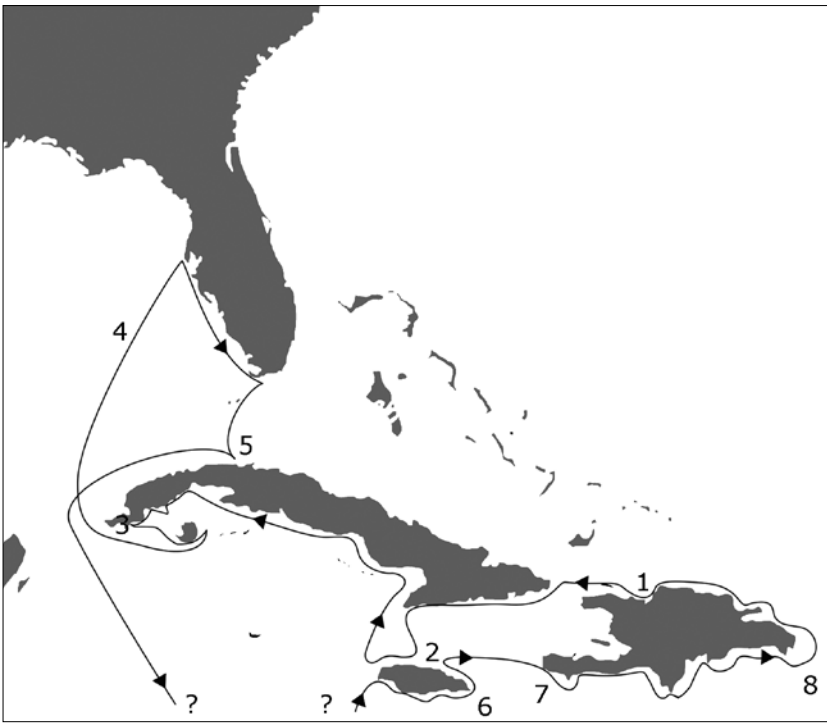
### 3.4 King Ferdinand is Suspicious of the Admiral

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.<sup>16</sup> 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-

<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.

<sup>17</sup> 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.



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.<sup>19</sup>

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

<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> 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".

<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> The island called 'Jamahich' was situated to the south, and Columbus was soon heading towards it. Today the island is known as Jamai-

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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.

<sup>22</sup> 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”.<sup>23</sup>

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

<sup>23</sup> *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.<sup>24</sup>

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,<sup>25</sup> 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

<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

Hernando Colón continues:

Whence travelling east, with very little wind and via channels and shallows on July 30 [*lapsus* for June 30]<sup>27</sup> writing the memories of that journey, he ramméd 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.<sup>28</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup>

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*.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> *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.

<sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup> *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.

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

<sup>30</sup> 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).

<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup>

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-

<sup>32</sup> 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;<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

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.

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

<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

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

<sup>35</sup> 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 him<sup>36</sup> 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.

<sup>36</sup> Letter dated August 18, 1496.

He added: “their Catholic Majesties accepted them with much joy and considered them a great favour”.<sup>37</sup> 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.

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<sup>37</sup> *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXIV, 19.



## 4 Vespucci Participates in the Expedition of the Four Merchants (1497-1498)

**Summary** 4.1 The Organisation of Overseas Voyages is Promoted Without Success. – 4.2 Four Merchants Form a Cooperative to Cross the Ocean and Reach Asia. – 4.3 Vespucci Describes Those Far-off Lands and their Inhabitants. – 4.4 Conjectures Regarding a Gap in the Narration. – 4.5 A Cruel Clash. – 4.6 The Voyage of the Four Merchants is Authentic.

### 4.1 The Organisation of Overseas Voyages is Promoted Without Success

The port of Seville, situated on the Guadalquivir River at 80 km from its mouth, was safe, but at the end of the 15th century began to have problems, as larger ships with greater draughts were being planned and built, which could barely navigate the river due to their size. Consequently, the naval traffic decreased and the shipyards had to move elsewhere. The port's crisis seemed without remedy and those who ran it and the many people who worked there sought new solutions.

In the meantime, King Ferdinand of Aragon, who had taken control of Spain's colonial expansion and mistrusted Christopher Columbus, had planned how to develop Hispaniola/Haiti and exploit those faraway lands to the maximum. With this aim, the King issued a decree, dated April 10, 1495,<sup>1</sup> which liberalised the exploration of the 'West Indies' and offered incentives for the settlement of the island of Haiti by Europeans. With this decree, he allowed anyone, after minimal vetting and reduced taxation, the chance to venture towards the west or move to Haiti for their own commercial interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes*, vol. 2, document no. LXXXVI, 186. The decree, issued when the Admiral had been in Haiti/Hispaniola for about a year, was revoked following the protests of the person concerned on June 2, 1497 (see Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes*, document CXIII, 224) when the four merchants had already departed. With regard to these so-called 'minor voyages', that author writes: "as these expeditions were undertaken by private individuals or at their own expense, their diaries and itineraries are not preserved" (vol. 2, 3, fn. 1). This information perhaps also refers to the voyage of the four merchants.





**Figure 4.1** The voyage of the 'Four Merchants', Vespucci's first transoceanic journey between May 10, 1497 and October 8, 1498, departure from Cadiz and stopover at the Canary Islands; 1) arrival at about latitude 6°N on the coast of the new continent and 2) visit to a Tupi tribe; the fleet may have sailed along the coasts of the Lesser and Greater Antilles (dotted line) and 3) from there, arrival at a stilt-house village (latitude 20°N) where they receive a hostile reception; 4) the fleet continues almost to the Tropic of Cancer where they encounter a Huastec population in the province of Parias. Return south along the eastern coast of the isthmus where they obtain interesting geographical information from the natives 5) with a stopover in the Gulf of Honduras and 6) arrival at the port of Caracas in June 1498, where the ships are repaired and re-equipped; 7) arrival at the island of Grenada, where 320 Cannibals are taken prisoner; 8) course set for the Azores, for the return to Cadiz

Moreover, the cosmographer Jaime Ferrer, having arrived in the Andalusian capital near the end of 1496, spread the contents of a letter, endorsed by Queen Isabella, affirming that the most precious spices and even great riches in gold, pearls and precious stones were to be found south of the Equator in eastern Asia, in the Moluccas. Jaime Ferrer was well-informed, having travelled in the Arab countries of the Near East, and was eloquent, so that in the lively city of Seville he found great success.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the economic and political conditions were in place for attempting the adventure of crossing the ocean for one's own purposes; such an undertaking was made even more attractive by the able propaganda spread by Jaime Ferrer. Therefore, it is surprising that for about two years no initiatives at all were taken.

<sup>2</sup> On the influence of J. Ferrer on navigators' choices, see Taviani, "Jaime Ferrer e il terzo viaggio di scoperta di Cristoforo Colombo". See also Consuelo Varela, *Colón y los florentinos*, 97 fn. 20.

## 4.2 Four Merchants Form a Cooperative to Cross the Ocean and Reach Asia

It is likely that the main obstacle to any initiative was of a financial nature. The first to decide to attempt the venture were four merchants who formed a cooperative which foresaw that all the partners would travel at their own risk and the net profit would be equally divided among the surviving partners.

It is very important to make an effort to understand the events of this overseas expedition which, after Columbus' one, was the first to be carried out autonomously, because it was the longest exploration accomplished at that time, having lasted 15 and a half months. Not only that, it is also the journey during which some protagonists of that great season of sea adventures completed their preparations and acquired complete confidence in their capabilities, Amerigo Vespucci first.

It is very likely that among the four captains were included Juan de La Cosa and Vicente Yáñez Pinzón, veterans of the first voyage of Columbus. The Admiral left both of them on land when he was planning his third trip, and they both had money, since the Queen had generously indemnified the first for the loss of the *Santa María* shipwrecked the night of Christmas 1492, the latter for the early loss of his brother Martín Alonso, who fell ill during the trip and died immediately after returning to Palos.

It should be added, decisively, that they both knew the route to return to Europe, having followed it under Columbus himself, and that they had received the confidences of Martín Alonso about what he had seen during his desertion to the west, which lasted 45 days; and they were eager to repeat it in turn. Finally, it is certain that the young noble Martín Fernández de Enciso, who from Vespucci's will appeared to be the owner of the bombards taken on board ship, also participated in the journey of the Four Merchants.

The expedition, which departed with King Ferdinand's permission, granted via Bishop Fonseca, was organised in such a way as to make a substantial saving on initial expenditure. They would purchase the minimum amount of provisions, confident of acquiring the rest during the voyage, thus avoiding any waste due to the very hot climate, which spoiled foodstuffs after only a few months. Above all, they would avoid advancing two or three months pay for the crew, as was the custom at the time, by dividing among everyone what they would gain during the voyage. In short, the way to operate when faced by a lack of capital was to organise a cooperative. It may be presumed that Vespucci also put the remaining equipment from the shipyard he had directed for two years into this venture and that Martín de Enciso contributed the bombards he had at his disposition.<sup>3</sup>

It is certain that, when everything was ready, there were four captains, an overall crew of 57 men, 14 or 15 for each of the four caravels, all of which quite large in tonnage. The plan involved great risks, but maximum caution would lessen them.

The fleet set sail from Cadiz on May 10, 1497. In a few days, the expedition reached the Canary Islands where they took on supplies of water and firewood, while fish had been caught in the bountiful shallows of the Atlantic coast of Morocco and immediately dried in the sun. They departed from

<sup>3</sup> Source of this information is Vespucci's *Will*, published by Varela in the appendix to her book *Colón y los florentinos*.



**Figure 4.2** The Lagartos lagoon and the Tecolutla River, near present-day Veracruz in Mexico. In one of these places, perhaps the Four Merchants encountered the stilthouse-dwelling cannibals

the Canary Islands on a W-¼SW course, which according to geographical knowledge of the time would have taken them to the Malay Peninsula situated by the Equator in the Indian Ocean. In actual fact, following that route, after sailing for about forty days with favourable trade winds, the caravels reached the coast of the New World at the latitude of 6° north, along which runs a large stretch of the coast of present-day Suriname.<sup>4</sup>

### 4.3 Vespucci Describes Those Far-off Lands and their Inhabitants

After a first unsuccessful attempt to land, Amerigo, who had not forgot the disaster of his four ships on the coast of Andalusia, proposed that the four caravels anchor in safe waters at a certain distance from the shore. Forty sailors ‘in good order’ took boats ashore, while the rest of the crews remained on board to guard the ships. Numerous natives had gathered on the beach, but they turned and ran before the sailors landed: the men and women were naked. Neither the nudity nor the shyness of the people was a surprise to the Spanish; some were veterans of Columbus’ voyage and all

<sup>4</sup> Not at 16° N as appears by mistake in the various versions of “Lettera a Soderini”, which is unacceptable for various reasons. Don Martín de Navarrete, historian of Renaissance navigation, corrects the error in this way: “parece cierto que la recalada fué á la costas de la Guyana que estan entre 5° y 6° lat. N” (de Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos*, vol. 3, 200 fn.). Germán Arciniegas (1955), correctly believing that Vespucci was sincere, reconstructed this voyage without taking into account the misprint; hence he began on the wrong foot. Vespucci, however, who intended to reach the Spice Islands situated in the Asian east, specifies that he departed from Gran Canaria on a W¼SW course; by following this he would have reached the coast of present-day Suriname. Magnaghi (*Amerigo Vespucci: Studio critico*), having checked where the chosen course would have led, states that they would have reached the coast at 6° N and not 16° N; however, he concludes that the confusion about the numbers confirms that the “Lettera a Soderini” is a fake.

were informed about the natives' behaviour. They left the trinkets they had brought with them in full view on the beach: mirrors, necklaces of shiny glass beads and rattles. Such an offering enticed the natives who the next day came out to meet the friendly and cheerful strangers. They came unarmed bringing their women and children with them.

After this first contact, the Spanish decided to explore the territory, travelling a long way inland in search of treasures but finding almost nothing. "Their riches are plumes from the most colourful birds, or bracelets made from fish bones or white or green stones [...] or many other things that for us are of no value at all",<sup>5</sup> wrote a disappointed Amerigo.

During the excursions inland, the sailors observed the fauna, which according to Amerigo had some similarities with the African one, in addition to the characteristics and customs of the natives, of the Tupí group (not the Taino) who populated the coasts of the Caribbean Sea. Amerigo included various types of useful information in his report:<sup>6</sup> they were armed with well-made bows and arrows, but the arrowhead was a fish bone or bone fragment, as they did not have iron; they were skilled archers and, in some places, even women used the bow. They also had spears, the tips hardened by fire, and clubs whose heads were decorated with beautiful sculptures.

Amerigo added other information about the physical capabilities of these people, which information probably derived from the habit of observing the human merchandise when he worked in the slave trade as an employee of Berardi. They were tall and agile runners – he explained – and tireless swimmers, the women even more so than the men; one can see them swimming alone as far as two leagues out from the beach (twenty kilometres there and back); these women were also able to carry burdens that men were unable to, and carry them for incredible distances. Such differentiation can still be observed today in primitive (and not so primitive) human communities: *to men the arms, to the women the burdens*.

Next Amerigo seemed to digress on a completely unrelated topic: "They talk little and in low voices, using the same accents as ourselves, as they form the words either on the palate or teeth or lips, except they use other names for things".<sup>7</sup> A humanistic attention to issues of pronunciation can be observed in this note, but it is also linked to the evaluation of a slave's price, which is lowered by a guttural pronunciation that made it difficult to communicate with the master. In addition to this note, which can be defined as of a 'professional type', Amerigo described the skin colour, facial features – which recalled those of the Tartars – the stature, and in particular, the robust conformation of the women's bodies that did not seem to suffer any ill effects from multiple births and breast-feeding.

He then gave a detailed ethnographic description of a human population whose cultural development, due to their long isolation, stopped at the phase preceding the agricultural revolution of the Late Neolithic period: the people were naked and 'of cleanly habits, constantly washing themselves'. They dedicated much time to shaving and removing their hair, even pulling out their eyebrows and the lashes from the 'covers of the eyes', as Vespucci calls the eyelids momentarily forgetting the correct word in Italian. The

<sup>5</sup> "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 104vb.

<sup>6</sup> "Lettera a Soderini", folios 103-106ra.

<sup>7</sup> "Lettera a Soderini", folio 103va.

men shaved their temples as well as their beards. They respected the basic rules of hygiene and hid themselves away when they needed to defecate, but urinated freely in public.

They lived in large communal dwellings (later known as *malocas*), which were about 5 to 6 metres wide and as much as 15 times that in length; they had a barrel-shaped roof and two small entrances at the ends, and were supported on large posts driven into the ground. The walls and roof were made of palm leaves. Inside, other posts supported hammocks along two sides; these hammocks were made from robust cotton netting and were pleasant to sleep in: below them, a fire of plant material – I think mainly tobacco – was lit, not for heat but to keep the blood-sucking insects at bay, a common torment in those places. Every 8 to 10 years the entire village was abandoned and reconstructed elsewhere for reasons of hygiene and so that the forest could grow there again, an expedient that is still used today by the indigenous populations of Papua.

The people were healthy and long-lived and, when necessary, knew how to cure themselves with their diet, with various herbs and by letting blood, not from the arms but from the thigh or calves. For more serious illnesses they used a drastic cure that seems lethal but is usually effective: the patient, even with a high or rising fever, was first bathed from head to foot in cold water and then fires are made all around him to keep the temperature high, while all the time he is turned backwards and forwards. After about two hours of this treatment, the patient was finally left to sleep. A very strange procedure, so much so that some authors believe this to be an invented story. However, about twelve years later, Giovanni da Verrazzano, also a great navigator, described a similar cure with heat used by the natives of present-day North Carolina to treat one of his sailors who was half-drowned.

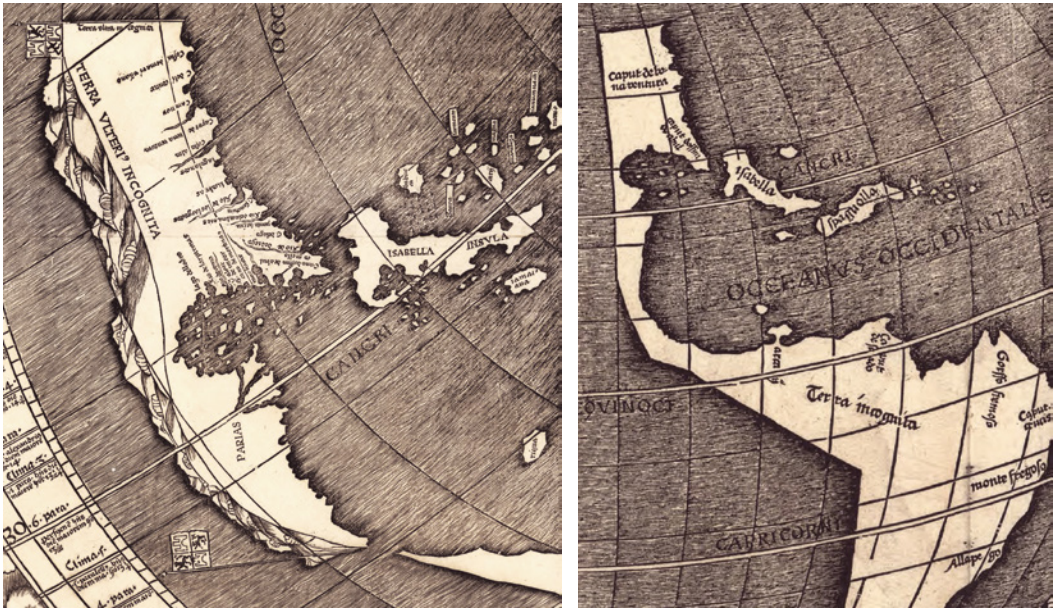
Continuing on the topic of health and hygiene, Vespucci added that the women had easy births and after a few hours the mother got up, washed herself and the baby, and was back to normal the next day. If however the pregnant woman left her man, she could interrupt the pregnancy by the use of certain herbs.

Their food consisted of sweet potatoes and manioc which, when grated, could be reduced to starch or flour that was good for making bread. Amerigo stated that the Tupí did not have wheat or any other type of grain (and therefore they did not know maize), they ate lots of fish and seafood, very little meat, which was mainly human flesh. They ate a large amount of fruit, which they also fermented in terracotta pots to make alcoholic drinks.

Food and drink were prepared in abundance by the community, and each person could eat and drink as much as they liked when they liked.

Amerigo also gave a careful and very detailed description of the social customs of the Tupí Indios which, as a result of his words, were summarised by the fake phonetic indication: they had neither R, nor F, nor L, which meant they have neither Royal ruler, nor Faith, nor any Laws. Indeed, their society had no hierarchy, nor was it ruled by laws, also because private property did not exist, nor did they practice matrimony. As to faith, Vespucci observed that they were not Christian, or Hebrew, or Mohammedan, or even idolaters. “Perhaps they are Epicurean”, he concluded with amazement, adding, “[t]hey do not bring men to justice, nor punish offenders, nor do the fathers or mothers chastise their children, and surprisingly we never or hardly ever saw them quarrel”.<sup>8</sup>

8 “Lettera a Soderini”, folio 104va.



**Figure 4.3** In these two images, both from the Waldseemüller's Map and derived from Amerigo Vespucci, the isthmus between North and South America appears for the first time; the two stubby peninsulas of the Yucatán and Honduras extend eastward and the Tropic of Cancer is mistakenly drawn between them. On the western side of the isthmus, there is a mountain chain and then the Pacific Ocean. A comparison of the two drawings shows that the opening leading from the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean is no longer present on the right-hand map and that the two exaggeratedly large islands situated in the Gulf of Honduras also disappear. © Library of Congress, Washington DC (USA)

After a couple of fruitless months of searching for treasures, the four captains gathered to decide what to do. The natives had informed them that the coast continued both on one side and on the other for a long stretch without opening towards the west.

#### 4.4 Conjectures Regarding a Gap in the Narration

Little doubt remains about this first part of the journey of the Four Merchants: Amerigo's description of many details about life and customs of the Tupí-Guaraní tribes coincides with the descriptions made by Hans Staden in 1557 and, independently, by André Thevet the following year,<sup>9</sup> as well as with those by many modern anthropologists.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Thevet knew the writings of Vespucci whom he vividly praised. Before these descriptions, Thomas More's *Utopia* appeared around 1516, a work in which from the first page the four journeys made by Amerigo (in 1497, in 1498, in 1500 and in 1503) are spoken of.

<sup>9</sup> Staden, *Warhaftige Historia und beschreibung eyner Landtschafft* (copies of the original text and the English translation can be found online); Thevet, *Les singularitez de la France antarctique*.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Métraux, *La civilisation matérielle des tribus Tupi-Guarani*.

However, after the stop in the current Surinam, which lasted until October/November 1497, a gap appears that lasts at least until February of the following year. Vespucci referred to his notebook titled *The Four Journeys* in which he was to give an accurate and detailed account of his overseas travels. The narrative then resumes with the episode of the clash with the cannibals of the stilt houses around February 1498. Where did the fleet of the Four Merchants sail during the three months from November 1497 to January 1498? The reconstruction of that itinerary is very important to reconstruct the history not only of Amerigo but also of Juan de La Cosa, Vicente Yáñez Pinzón and many others.

Proceeding to the north was for Juan de La Cosa and Vicente Yáñez Pinzón preferable than going even more into the unknown, and for both the curiosity of finding the places described by Martín Alonso during the 45 days of his desertion must have been strong.

Thus, they headed north and, having reached Trinidad, set course along the arc of the Lesser Antilles. Of this itinerary, quite obvious because it was known to two of the captains who were veterans of Columbus' first two voyages, we find traces in the *Prima lettera familiare* in which various narratives of Amerigo's first journey are mixed with the account of the second journey. The mention of the "endless islands I had seen"<sup>11</sup> cannot refer to the second journey. Of the Lesser Antilles there is also a trace in the "Lettera a Soderini"<sup>12</sup> Weak traces, that still leave some room for doubt, but on the Waldseemüller's map there is a safer indication: the island of the Pulzelle located in the wrong place (at 30° S) but certainly drawn by Vespucci, and called the Island of Guadalupe by Christopher Columbus. The fleet commanded by Juan de La Cosa revolved around the island, whose shape is very well approximated to the real one. It is not known whether the sailors arrived land, but eventually they reached Hispaniola/Haiti rejoining the Spanish colonists.

The Four Merchants did not know that the Spanish Monarchs had forbidden to visit the lands discovered by Christopher Columbus to those who did not have the proper authorisation. In fact, Columbus had protested loudly against the liberalization of trade with these islands, which as we have seen, violated the *Capitulación de Santa Fe* that gave him total control over the management of voyages westward across the Ocean. For this reason, King Ferdinand had revoked this decree, ordering that whoever crossed the Ocean must stay away from the lands discovered by the Admiral. When Amerigo, returning to Seville, learned that he had unintentionally violated a royal decree, he decided to keep silent about what he had done and seen in those places, omitting the compromising step.

#### 4.5 A Cruel Clash

When the narration resumes, Vespucci let it be understood that the fleet, travelling north-west, reached a point 80 leagues from where the Tropic of Cancer touched the eastern coast of Mexico. Up to this point, relations with the natives had been friendly, but here the expedition had a dangerous

<sup>11</sup> "Prima lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 45vb.

<sup>12</sup> "Lettera a Soderini", folio 109vb.

encounter with a tribe of Camballi (or Cannibals) who lived near a port of Campeche, not far from the 20° N parallel.

Vespucci recounted this episode to the *gonfaloniere* Piero Soderini:

we found a population [a village] built over water like at Venice: there were about 44 large houses supported on very thick piles, and they had doors or entrances like drawbridges; and from one house there was a way to reach all the others via the drawbridges that led from house to house. When the people saw us, they showed they were afraid and immediately drew up all the bridges. While looking at this wonder, we saw approaching by sea about 22 canoes, the type of boat they use made by hollowing out a single tree. They came to our ships, and seemed to gaze with marvel at our clothes, and us, but kept their distance. Thus, we made signs to them to come to us, giving assurances of friendship; and seeing that they did not approach we went to them, but they did not wait for us and went ashore making signs that we should wait and they would soon return. They went behind a hill and it was not long before they returned.

When they returned, they brought 16 of their young girls, who got into the canoes with them and came to our boats, and in each boat they put 4, and we were as much surprised by this as your Magnificence will be; they were among the boats in their canoes speaking with us, which we took as a sign of friendship.

Then we saw many people coming from the houses swimming in the sea; and as they approached us, and us not suspecting anything, at that moment some old women appeared at the doors crying out and tearing their hair in sign of great sadness. This made us suspect something and each man took up his arms; and suddenly the girls on our ships threw themselves into the sea, and the men in the canoes came toward us and began to shoot with bows and arrows. Those who were swimming carried a spear hidden below the water as much as possible. As soon as we recognized this treachery, we began not only to defend ourselves but also to attack them vigorously and sank many of their canoes with our boats.<sup>13</sup>

From this account, it may be deduced that Vespucci and his companions met hostile Indians who attacked them by surprise since they had previous experiences of invaders with heinous behaviour, after which the natives had studied how to react if such people returned. Who were these invaders? Only the crew of the *Pinta* could have arrived in that place at the end of December 1492, preceding the sailors on board the four caravels belonging to the merchants arrived from Cadiz.<sup>14</sup>

Amerigo concludes his narration with the following words:

We captured two girls and three men, and went to their houses and entered them, but found only two old women and a sick man. We took many of their things but they were of little value, and we did not burn their houses because we would have felt pangs of conscience; and we returned

<sup>13</sup> "Lettera a Soderini", folio 106vb.

<sup>14</sup> If archaeologists were to find remains of these stilt houses, they would add another piece of evidence to this reconstruction.



to our boats with five prisoners and then to the ships and put irons on the feet of each, except for the girls. The next night the girls and one of the men escaped with great cunning.<sup>15</sup>

The astuteness used for this escape is, I believe, the same narrated by Michele de Cuneo regarding three Indio prisoners, destined to be shot by arrows, on which “fettters were placed, but at night they gnawed at each other’s heels with their teeth with such ability that they got out of the fettters and escaped”.<sup>16</sup> The Spanish were left with two Camballi, whom the crew took with them on the rest of the journey.

The next day, the fleet began sailing northward, following the coastline. When they had travelled 80 leagues, the sailors saw a large number of people along a beach, estimating them to be about 4,000. It was March 1498. They agreed among themselves to go and meet them, but in the time it took to put their boats in the water and reach the shore the natives had disappeared leaving many of their things on the beach. A group of sailors followed the tracks that led to a nearby forest and discovered an encampment where the natives had cooked many freshly caught fish and other strange animals. One of these was alive, tied up with a rope, “it looked like a serpent, but it had no wings, and was so horrible in appearance that they wondered at its proud demeanour”.<sup>17</sup> They were in fact iguanas, harmless herbivorous lizards with long claws whose meat was very good to eat. The sailors did not touch any of the food; instead they left many things in view that they knew the Indios would like such as mirrors, rattles and necklaces of glass beads, and then returned to the ship. The next morning, the unarmed natives were all on the beach with their women and children, who celebrated noisily, and they cheerfully welcomed the Spanish who had come ashore.

Vespucci narrated:

we agreed that 23 of us Christians should go with them in good order and with the firm resolve to die as good men if necessary. When we had been there almost three days, we went with them into the interior. At three leagues from the beach, we came to a village with a large population and few houses (there were no more than nine), where we were welcomed with so many barbarous ceremonies that the pen will not suffice to write them down; there were dances and songs and tears mixed with joy and lots of food. We stayed the night in this place and they offered us their women, from whom we could not defend ourselves.<sup>18</sup>

A prehistoric version of *la dolce vita*. Such unbridled merriment coincides with that narrated by Cabral’s companions when they reached the New World two years later and one thousand leagues further south (see Chapter 8).

The description of the customs and social organisation of a population close to the Aztec empire opens an interesting window on some aspects of the recent evolution of human society. It must be added that the character-

<sup>15</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”, folios 106vb-107ra.

<sup>16</sup> “Lettera a G. Annari”, ll. 228-32.

<sup>17</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 107rb. The idea that a snake could have wings may derive from the Aztec myth.

<sup>18</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”, folio 108ra.

istics noted by Vespucci found parallels in other populations both near and far, as we will see below with reference to the Tupí of Porto Seguro.

When they began to understand each other better – these people spoke a rather different language from the others – Vespucci learnt that he was in the province of Parias,<sup>19</sup> and so he calculated the latitude and discovered that this was just below the parallel of the Tropic of Cancer and marked that name on the map he was preparing. This name can be found written on the Waldseemüller Map, and from later chronicles we learn that the people who had given them such a warm welcome were the Huastecs and they lived in the northern part of the Aztec empire, in the area around the present-day city of Tampico. The four merchants did not realise that they were so close to the most advanced indigenous population in that vast area. Before departing, as Easter would fall shortly after, on 15 April, they wanted to convert their new friends: “We set up a baptismal font and many people were baptized and they called us, in their language, *carai*bi which means *men of great wisdom*”.<sup>20</sup> This is the first attempt to evangelize the Indians and, for many decades to come, will remain the only one.

The fleet of the four merchants left the province of Parias a few days after Easter 1498, sailing along the luxuriant coast of the isthmus that joins the two great continental masses of the New World. The expedition landed numerous times in the hope of bartering modest trifles for precious spices and gold. There were no spices and all they saw of gold were some pieces the natives wore as decoration on their ears and neck. Amerigo wrote, “in many places we bartered gold and not in great quantity, but did much in discovering the land and in ascertaining that [the natives] had gold”.<sup>21</sup> This gold came from the mine situated between Panama and Costa Rica, which Columbus would identify during his final voyage.

In the Mosquito Gulf, where they arrived in early June after thirteen months of navigation, the crewmen were suffering great hardships. There was little food and it had gone bad. The ships, bored into by shipworms,<sup>22</sup> were taking on water and the men working the pumps were exhausted. There was an urgent need to repair the ships and return home. Therefore, they headed to a port “the best in the world”, as Amerigo wrote. Such a description of the port of Caracas was certainly exaggerated, but it was fair for that stretch of coast.

The captains met to plan their return: prior to leaving Cadiz they had decided that, if no gold or spices were found, they would make up for the expenses of the voyage by capturing prisoners to sell as slaves; the ships and their equipment were chosen with a view to this eventuality. Therefore, in repairing the ships, they needed to adapt them to the purpose of transporting large numbers of people. Amerigo had a great deal of experience in this regard.

Having reached Caracas, they chose a wide beach with a slight slope. Before dragging the ships, their only security, up onto the beach, the sailors built a bastion on which all the cannons were positioned in such a way as to

<sup>19</sup> In the printed Latin text of Saint-Dié, it reads *Lariab* instead of *Parias*, an error caused perhaps by damage to the manuscript.

<sup>20</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 109ra.

<sup>21</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”, folio 109ra.

<sup>22</sup> Shipworms are long white molluscs (with a rudimentary shell) that bore into tree trunks floating in the sea, and they feed in the same way on ships’ timber.

create a wide range of action. When this was done, they began to prepare and caulk the ships, using brass sheeting to repair the worst leaks. Bars were also installed for locking below deck the captives they intended to take.

The people of the place gave a great deal of help and brought their own foodstuffs, as the provisions put on board in Cadiz were by now inedible. They helped drag heavy loads and in turn observed the use of iron and unknown tools. It was a brotherly collaboration. In that peaceful climate, once the linguistic barriers were overcome, the Indios complained of raids by people that lived on a faraway island, who came in their canoes, attacked and killed many and then ate them, capturing others to take as slaves and then devour them later on their island. They asked to be defended from those cruel people.

The captains promised to do something and, when everything was ready for their departure and the request for help was repeated, they agreed to help on the condition that their allies came back by their own means, as they had to continue their journey onwards. Seven natives accepted, and were welcomed on board: "And so we departed from these people leaving many friends there".<sup>23</sup>

They crossed the southern part of the Caribbean Sea on an east-northeasterly course and after seven days of navigation reached a chain of small and large islands (see § 4.4), some deserted, others inhabited, until they sighted an island called 'Iti' by its inhabitants, perhaps the present-day island of Grenada. Well-armed men boarded the tenders and attempted to land. About 400 naked men and women were standing on the beach armed with spears, bows and arrows, and many carried a small square shield placed in such a way that it did not impede the use of the bow.

They were Camballi, and they stood proud and warlike intent to prevent the foreigners from landing. Indeed, when the tenders came within range, they entered the water and began loosing arrows. Amerigo had time to note: "All had painted their bodies with different colours and were adorned with feathers".<sup>24</sup> The Indios on board the Spanish ships explained that when they presented themselves in this way they meant to fight. The sailors fired several bombard shots from the boats; hearing the noise and seeing several of their own dead or wounded, the proud fighters retreated.

After consultation, the captains decided to follow them, and when they reached them the natives began loosing arrows and injured some of their pursuers, keeping a distance to avoid hand to hand fighting. Yet, there was no escape. The crossbow men and gunners killed several natives and finally the sailors used their swords and spears to kill still more. The surviving Camballi fled to the hills and forests, while the victors returned to the ships, tired but satisfied; the seven friendly natives, who had fought and won with them, were so pleased they could hardly contain themselves.

The next day the warriors of the island regrouped and many came to the beach in great numbers blowing horns and other instruments, all painted and adorned with feathers: "It was a very strange thing to behold them".<sup>25</sup> Once again, the captains quickly consulted with each other, took up arms, and prepared to land and face those who appeared as enemies. This time 57

<sup>23</sup> "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 109vb.

<sup>24</sup> "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 110ra.

<sup>25</sup> "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 110rb.

of them landed, including the 7 friendly Indios, and divided into four detachments, each with its own captain, while seven unfit men were left to guard the ships. It was not difficult to land as the islanders kept their distance fearing the bombard shots. The fighting lasted a long time, and many of the native warriors were killed or wounded, while those of them who could retreat and fled. The sailors followed them to their village where they captured 250 prisoners and burnt their houses.

The Spanish lost one man and half of them were wounded. Five of the seven Indios who bravely fought with them were also wounded: they were given seven prisoners (one for each of them), four women and three men. With a canoe taken from the beach, they returned home “very happy and amazed at our power”.<sup>26</sup>

In narrating these brutal events, Amerigo stressed that the enslaved natives were cruel enemies, beaten in battle and not harmless people captured through treachery. Indeed, he let it be understood that all his companions, who had acted valorously, shared this opinion.

Once the prisoners were locked up in the hold, they quickly departed; there were over 200 extra mouths to feed. They navigated northward as far as the latitude of the Azores, and from there the fleet turned east and reached the islands as planned. There they took on provisions and then set sail for the Iberian Peninsula.

It should be noted that, after leaving the Antilles, the fleet did not take the shortest route, which would have been the natural choice; instead it followed the much longer route that Columbus had planned for his return from his first voyage. This could not have been by chance, and it can be presumed that one captain of this journey was veteran of the first voyage of Columbus and remembered the route followed well.

Unfortunately, the contrary winds blew the four caravels a long way off course to the south, as far as the Canary Islands. From there they reached Madeira and after 67 days landed at Cadiz; it was October 15, 1498. During this interminably slow zigzag across the ocean, one sailor who had been wounded in the fighting died, as did about thirty prisoners closed in the confined space of the hold.

On arrival at Cadiz we sold our slaves, of which we had 200, the rest having died in the gulf. Deducting the cost of all the wear and tear on the ships, we were left with about 200 ducats, and these had to be divided in 55 parts, so that each Christian received little. Yet, we were happy to have survived.<sup>27</sup>

Amerigo completed his first ocean crossing in the company of expert and determined people, one of whom was certainly Juan de La Cosa. The voyage was full of difficulties and dangerous events. He had contributed, with his experience as the director of a shipyard and as *maestre* in the slave trade, to the success of the entire expedition. This made him gain the respect of his companions in adventure and many others, and this respect provided him with the opportunities to undertake further voyages.

<sup>26</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 110va.

<sup>27</sup> “Prima lettera familiare”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 46va.

Vespucci was aware that this first voyage had had a very positive influence and in the “Lettera a Soderini” he wrote more pages about it than he would dedicate to all the other voyages together.

#### 4.6 The Voyage of the Four Merchants is Authentic

In the period from the end of the 19th century to almost the middle of the 20th century, the ‘Vespucci question’ escalated and many accusations focused on the narration of the voyage, which I called here that ‘of the Four Merchants’, which was claimed to have never occurred and had been entirely invented. There were three reasons for such a sentence, which discredited both the *Mundus novus* and the “Lettera a Soderini”, both in the Italian and the Latin version. Firstly, the place of landing overseas was wrong; secondly, there is no consistency between the narration in the “Prima lettera familiare” (considered truthful) and the contents of the “Lettera a Soderini”; thirdly, there is no evidence in the documents of that era that the journey took place.

The first objection had in fact already been overcome many decades earlier by Navarrete who proposed the correction of the misprint 16° into 6° (see § 4.2, note 4). The second objection is resolved by the consideration that the “Prima lettera familiare” had a long and troubled drafting (see § 9.3) and ends in two different ways, both with the end of the first voyage and with the end of the second voyage. To the third objection one can reply that the required documentation, being half a millennium old, may have remained buried in the archives and may be recoverable, as a possible line of further research, in the chronicles of Cadiz, a city in which the arrival and sale of 200 slaves coming from a distant world could not have been ignored.<sup>28</sup>

This answer of mine will not satisfy those readers who for too long a time have been conditioned by the cancellation of a year and a half of Amerigo’s life. This cancellation, relating to an important period of personal development resulting from indelible experiences, has made the life work of the Florentine merchant absurd and incomprehensible. His image has been transformed into that of an incapable braggart who embellished his own reputation with the achievements of others.

To give back to Amerigo a more truthful image, I reiterate that his description of the native tribes coincides with those of Hans Staden in 1557 and with that of André Thevet in 1558; that Thevet, among other things, vividly praises Amerigo. And that Thomas More on the first page of his *Utopia* talks about four trips made by Amerigo. In addition, there is another argument taken from the Vespucci cartography used by Martin Waldseemüller for his large wall map or *Planisphere* (see § 13.4). In that *Planisphere* printed in 1507, the isthmus between the two continental masses of the New World is depicted in such a way that it is very close to the geography known today. The eastern coast of the isthmus appears sinuous due to two stubby peninsulas extending eastward: the peninsula of Yucatán, whose extremity faces the island of Cuba, and the peninsula of Honduras/Guatemala, separated from Yucatán by a gulf hosting two islands (depicted exaggeratedly large),

<sup>28</sup> The following acknowledge without hesitation or doubts that all four of Amerigo Vespucci’s voyages actually took place: Consuelo Varela, in her excellent book *Colón y los florentinos*, and Leonardo Rombai in “Le possibili basi geografiche di Amerigo Vespucci”.

today known as the Turneffe Atoll and the Bay Islands. The western coast of the isthmus has an arched form, convex to the west, bordered by mountain ranges and bathed by a large ocean which Vasco Nuñez de Balboa would call the Southern Ocean in 1513, and Magellan would call the Pacific in 1520.

In the small hemisphere in the upper right of the *Planisphere*, the same representation appears, somewhat simplified, with an important correction: the westward passage cutting the isthmus at the parallel 15°N disappears.

The eastern coast of the isthmus, perhaps viewed by Martín Alonso Pinzón in November 1492, was visited and drawn by Vespucci when the fleet including his ship sailed along it in April-May 1498, from Tampico to the present-day Venezuela. He drew the western coast based on information provided to him by the Indios.

Christopher Columbus arrived in Yucatán in January 1503 when he intercepted a large Mayan canoe (see § 11.4), although he gave no information about it. Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba arrived there in 1507, although he considered it an island, which is what the *conquistadores* believed when they arrived there two years later.

In conclusion, the part of the *Planisphere* derived from Amerigo bears the oldest and most certain testimony of the voyage in which he participated in 1497-98.

To end this chapter, I would like to add a final consideration of a different kind which, in my opinion, is definitive. Amerigo described with surprise the encounter with the stilt house-dwelling Camballi, as well as the trap they devised to destroy the Spanish and the way in which that trap was thwarted. Amerigo also described the help and spontaneous collaboration offered by the Taino tribe when the expedition stopped at Porto Caracas to repair the ships, and he told of their request to be able to fight along with them against the fierce Camballi, their common enemies. He recounted finally how seven of them fraternally and courageously fought in the hard battle and that five of them were wounded, were rewarded by the Spanish expedition and were left to return to their village with a canoe, as agreed (compare also with Chapter 12). These extraordinary and stirring episodes cannot be the result of his imagination: they were actually experienced.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Prima lettera familiare*, in *Codice Vaglianti*, folios 46r-46v. A further confirmation is found, rather confused, in the *Letter of Girolamo Vianello* transcribed in Chapter 12 (§ 12.6).



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## **5 Vasco Da Gama Reaches India, John Cabot Reaches Nova Scotia and Duarte Pacheco Pereira Reaches the Coast of Present- Day Brazil (1497-1498)**

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**Summary** 5.1 Vasco da Gama reaches India and John Cabot Reaches Nova Scotia. – 5.2 King Henry VII of England Enters the Competition. – 5.3 Duarte Pacheco Pereira and His Controversial Transoceanic Voyage.

### **5.1 Vasco da Gama Reaches India and John Cabot Reaches Nova Scotia**

In Portugal, King John II, by now old and tired, prepared the reply to Christopher Columbus's success by sending a small fleet to India, but on Christmas day 1495 he died and the expedition was suspended. His successor King Manuel I resumed the programme and in 1497 armed a 'First Fleet' (or 'Prima Armada') destined to reach the markets of Asia. The fleet comprised two specifically constructed whaling ships, the *São Gabriel* (120 t) commanded by Vasco da Gama and the *São Rafael* commanded by Paolo da Gama, as well as the *Berrio* (50 t) captained by Nicolau Coelho and the *Santa Fé*, a small ship captained by Gonçalo Nuñez used to transport the provisions and destined to be destroyed during the return journey. The fleet was crewed by 170 men and was escorted as far as Cape Verde by a caravel captained by Bartolomeu Dias.

The 'First Fleet' had sailed on July 8, 1497 two months after the four merchants departed from Cadiz. It sailed to the Cape Verde Islands and then, breaking the tradition of sailing along the coast, headed westward to pick up the southern trade winds in the open sea. This would take the fleet to the Cape of Good Hope and, having rounded the cape, it would advance into the Indian Ocean. Thus, on December 25 Vasco da Gama reached a stretch of the eastern coast of South Africa, which he named Natal. He swiftly sailed north as far as Mombasa where he came into conflict with the local authori-



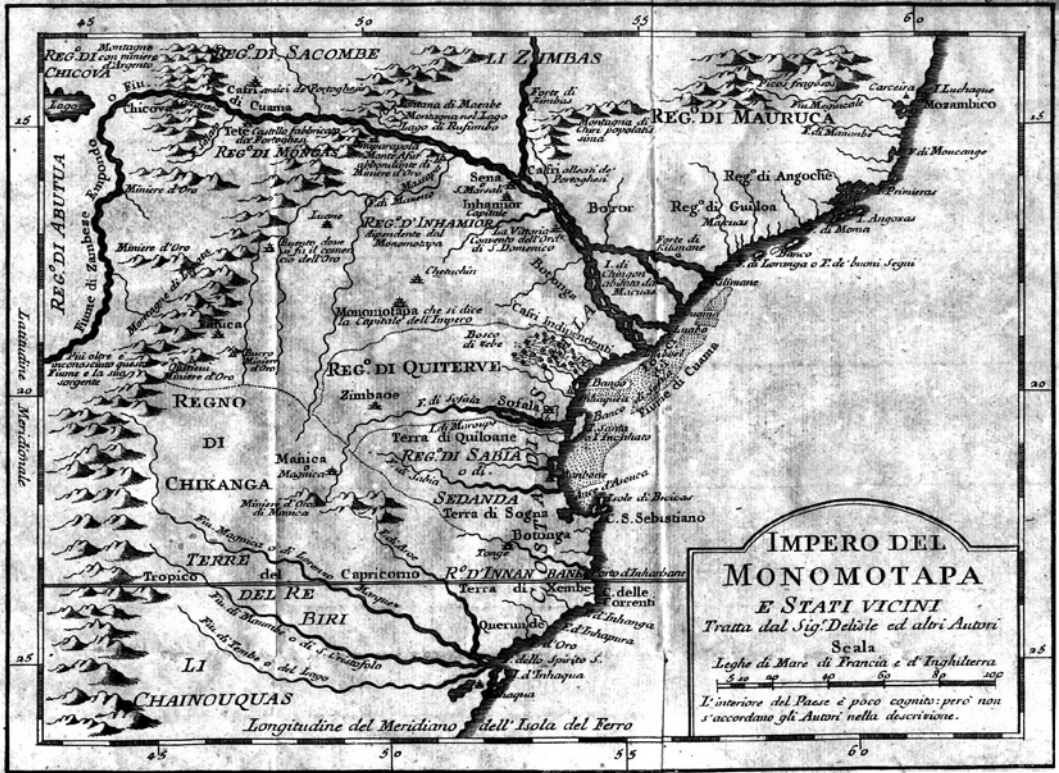


Figure 5.1 Eighteenth century map of south-eastern Africa showing the places visited by Vasco da Gama's First Fleet. The large river at the top is the Zambezi. *Impero del Monomotapa e Stati Vicini* by Jacques Nicolas Bellin (1781). © Stanford University Libraries/University of Cape Town Libraries

ties, and then to Malindi, where he received a friendly welcome. These lands were unknown to Europeans, organised into large and small kingdoms controlled by the Arabs.

At Malindi, Vasco da Gama hired a skilful Yemeni pilot, who in May led the small fleet to Calicut, in whose harbour many strange ships from far-away lands were moored. The city stood on the south-western coast of India (today it is called Kozhikode) and was governed by a rich Rajah, or Indian Prince. Negotiations with the prince to obtain permission to establish a Portuguese base in the city were made difficult by the Arab merchants who had an important trading centre at Calicut. From here, they sent spices to Egypt where they were loaded onto Venetian ships and then distributed throughout the Mediterranean and central Europe.

In these circumstances, Vasco da Gama realised that the architecture and sails of the Asian ships were inferior to those of the Portuguese vessels, a flaw that hampered their manoeuvrability. Nor were the Asian ships armed and this made them vulnerable. He also noticed that the large cities on the Indian Ocean were not surrounded by walls and were much wealthier and livelier than was believed in Portugal, so much so that the gifts given to the Rajah were to be considered rather modest and even the letter sent by King Manuel to the Indian prince did not seem very flattering. However, Vasco da Gama obtained something and, to consolidate the agreement,

organised an exchange of hostages: he left some Portuguese individuals in Calicut and took two high-ranking people from the city with him. Then, on October 5, 1498 he set sail to return to Lisbon.

This was an unfortunate time for returning as in those days the monsoons began to blow from south-west. Vasco da Gama was probably advised against departing, but he overestimated the resources and advantages available to him. The ships survived but were obliged to tack arduously for three entire months, while an unknown illness began to take a toll of the crews. The illness was scurvy and was unknown in the Mediterranean and the Iberian Peninsula, although Scandinavian sailors knew it as *Scherbuch*. It caused the mouth to become inflamed, bleed and swell up so that the sick could not eat and were overcome by weakness. If they did not receive suitable food, they died within two or three weeks. After three months of navigation, 55 sailors were dead and others were very weak. Vasco da Gama docked at the Cape Verde Islands in order to cure his brother Paolo who however died when they reached the Azores, where it was necessary to destroy the *São Rafael*, which no longer had a crew (the *Santa Fé* had already been demolished). Vasco da Gama returned to Lisbon on September 9, 1499 with only his flagship, which had half a crew but carried a precious cargo that guaranteed some profit. Amerigo Vespucci reported about Vasco da Gama's return after this enterprise,<sup>1</sup> while Girolamo Sernigi, a Florentine merchant, wrote an account of the voyage.<sup>2</sup>

Vasco da Gama's voyage concluded the first phase of Prince Henry the Navigator's ambitious programme<sup>3</sup> whose success was due to the heroic efforts made by the Portuguese in opening a new trade route. The entire world economy was on the point of being profoundly changed. However, King Manuel was angered about the great losses suffered by the expedition and for how badly he thought he had been made to look in the eyes of the Indian prince by Vasco da Gama's presentation of gifts that were too modest. As a precaution, he exaggerated the economic results of the endeavour and immediately began planning a second and greater one, to be entrusted to a different captain.

## 5.2 King Henry VII of England Enters the Competition

In Portugal, voyages along the African coasts were initially contracted out, but following the conquest of the gold mine in Guinea, the great seagoing ventures were decided and organised directly by the King and his councillors, who had a solid central base and an efficient logistical network that was enlarged as the programmes progressed. In contrast, in other countries, journeys of exploration opening routes towards new worlds, and also towards new markets, were decided and organised under the impetus of seafaring men who wished to widen their own horizons; as had happened with Christopher Columbus in Spain, so it happened in England where John Cabot had arrived.

<sup>1</sup> "Prima lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 47ra.

<sup>2</sup> *Codice Vaglianti*, folios 57va-65ra.

<sup>3</sup> Prince Henry de Sagres, called 'the Navigator' (1415-1460), was a farsighted individual who throughout his life encouraged Portugal's expansion on the seas and towards Asian markets. This policy was pursued with success for 300 years.



**Figure 5.2** The sails of a Portuguese caravel destined for open ocean navigation. The sails and the flag at the top of the mast are decorated with the cross of the Portuguese navy. The image, from a Renaissance manuscript, belongs to the Academia das Ciências de Lisboa

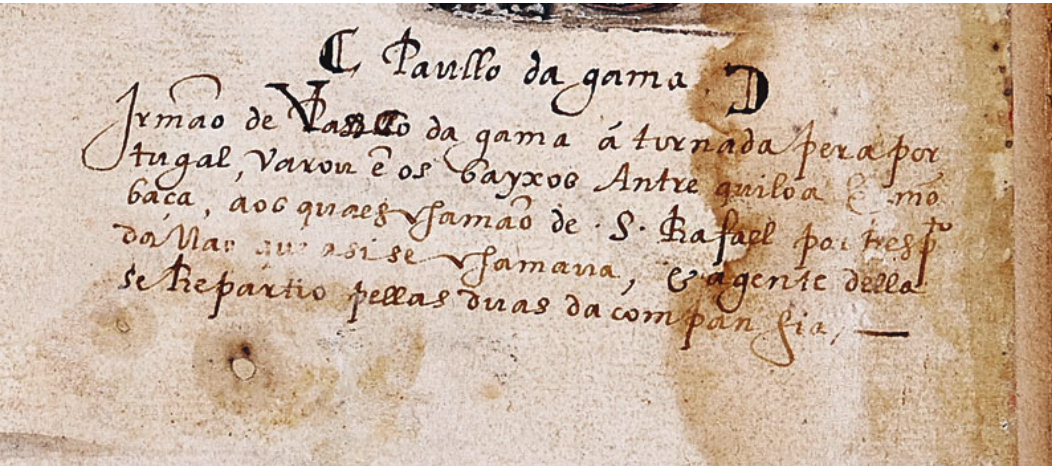
This daring sailor - who had an adventurer's temperament - belonged to a distinguished family from Gaeta<sup>4</sup> which had been forced to take refuge in Venice. In 1476, he was granted Venetian citizenship, but he had to leave the city because of his heavy debts. In about 1492, he was in Valencia, where he was issued with an extradition warrant sent from Venice requiring him to return to serve a sentence for non-payment of debt.

He ignored this and continued to work for King Ferdinand of Aragon, directing the works for the enlargement of the port. These works were interrupted when the King had to hurriedly finance the colonisation of Haiti. John Cabot then went to London and put a proposal to King Henry VII: reaching China by navigating along a more northerly route than the one followed by Columbus. King Henry - perhaps jealous of King Ferdinand - gave him permission to undertake this venture, and the Bardi family of Florence provided the funding.

John Cabot would have liked to have a small fleet at his disposition, but only managed to equip one 50-ton ship, the *Matthew*, with a crew of 18 men, including his thirteen-year-old son Sebastian. He set sail from Bristol on May 2, 1497: two months would pass before Vasco da Gama departed in the attempt to reach India, while eight days later the four merchants including Amerigo Vespucci set sail to explore the lands on the other side of the ocean.

After 53 days of navigation, Cabot reached Cape Breton Island, adjacent to Nova Scotia, at a lower latitude than Bristol but with a much harsher climate. He took possession of the island in the name of King Henry VII. During the return journey, he saw the large island of Newfoundland. He reached Bristol in early August, believing he had reached Cipangu, as Japan was known at that time, a large but little-known country. For the acquisition of this land, the king compensated Cabot with ten pounds sterling, but a few months later granted him a small life annuity.

<sup>4</sup> The surname 'Caboto' is probably a modification of 'Caputo', which is still common in Lazio and Campania.



The taking of that island by the English Crown angered the Portuguese and Spanish sovereigns who sustained that, according to the Treaty of Tordesillas, the land belonged to them. Henry VII ignored their protests and a year later organised another venture with six ships and over 200 men, once again giving command to John Cabot, who was again accompanied by his son Sebastian.

The fleet departed between June and July following an even more northerly route. The outcome of this expedition is unknown: it is likely that shipwrecks decimated the fleet, while it is certain that at least one ship returned with Cabot and his son on board.

John died soon after his return, while Sebastian went on to become a great navigator who surpassed his father's achievements and did great service to Spain.

### 5.3 Duarte Pacheco Pereira and His Controversial Transoceanic Voyage

It is appropriate to introduce the somewhat mysterious Portuguese individual who perhaps paved the way for the Second Fleet under the command of Cabral (see Chapter 8). Duarte Pacheco Pereira (1460-1533) is usually shown wearing a steel cuirass and holding a large sword with a strangely shaped hilt. This architect and soldier had built and defended the fortifications for the 'bridgeheads' established by Portugal along the coasts of Africa and Asia. In his poem *The Lusids*, the poet Luís Vaz de Camões compared Pacheco Pereira to Achilles, as he had managed to defend the base of Cochín in India with only 150 Portuguese and the few local people against the army of the Zamorin (or Prince) of Calicut estimated at over 50,000 men. An epic defence perhaps more worthy of Hector than Achilles.

In his book,<sup>5</sup> Joaquim Barradas de Carvalho compares him instead to Leonardo da Vinci because of his studies on various naturalistic themes, including his exceptional studies on the relationship between the lunar phases and tides set out in a singular work entitled *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis* (1506-08).

Pacheco Pereira is attributed with a voyage to the coast of Brazil undertaken in 1498 with a fleet of eight ships. Yet, some authors, convinced that the primary achievements of their preferred personalities have great historical value, deny that this voyage ever happened, just as they deny the authenticity of those of Amerigo Vespucci and Juan de La Cosa. However, the premises for Pacheco Pereira's voyage exist: the Portuguese had a great interest in knowing what they had gained from the Treaty of Tordesillas and ascertaining where the *raya* passed.

The obvious incentive for this voyage was the possibility to verify what Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci might have seen, having both departed from the Cape Verde Islands to cross the ocean. There exists an important confirmation: both Vespucci, who reached those parts a year later, and Vicente Yáñez Pinzón, who reached the Brazilian coast in January 1500, met Indio tribes, who were expert in the Europeans' cruel behaviours and therefore set fatal traps for these navigators. Although in the Portuguese chronicles of the late 15th century there is no trace of the discoveries of Duarte Pacheco Pereira, it is certain that they were immediately introduced in the *Padrão Real* of 1500, and then in the copy of it that Alberto Cantino brought to Italy. In this copy, made in 1501-02, we find the drawing of the stretch of coast between the parallels 15° and 32° South and a series of place names that stops shortly before the Tropic of Capricorn. None of the many Spanish caravels that in the year 1500, or the year before, explored the eastern cusp of the New World, reached these places.

In conclusion, this much-debated voyage would have opened the shortest route across the ocean for successive expeditions and would have provided a motive for the peremptory order issued by the Portuguese that no violence should be done to the natives.

Duarte Pacheco Pereira, a man of rare qualities, was the victim of the hostility of King John II's courtiers and later of the more perilous hostility of King Manuel I, and thus he died poor and forgotten.

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5 As fonte de Duarte Pacheco Pereira no "Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis".

## **6 Many Ships Reach Haiti in August-September 1500, the Last Being that of the Inquisitor Bobadilla**

**Summary** 6.1 An Ungovernable Island. – 6.2 The Alcalde Francisco Roldán Incites a Revolt. – 6.3 The Admiral’s Third Voyage Begins. – 6.4 The Three Ships Under the Command of Alonso Sánchez De Carvajal Reach Haiti. – 6.5 Alonso Ojeda, Juan De La Cosa and Amerigo Vespucci Reach Haiti on September 5, 1499. – 6.6 Alonso De Ojeda Attempts to Put His Own Plan into Action. – 6.7 The Story of Don Fernando De Guevara and His Cousin Adrián Múxica. – 6.8 A Period of Violence and Retaliation. – 6.9 The ‘Comendador’ Francisco De Bobadilla Arrives and the Columbus Brothers are Arrested and Returned to Spain in Chains.

### **6.1 An Ungovernable Island**

Let us now return to Admiral Columbus, who had hurriedly returned to Castile to defend his actions to the Spanish sovereigns. He was also planning to increase the colonisation of Haiti and to expand exploration of the lands across the ocean. His return was necessary and urgent, but he left his brothers Diego and Bartholomew, the first a weak man, the second unfamiliar with the situation, in a critical position in the island, which was troubled by many unsolved problems.

The development of the town of Isabela was going badly, since it did not have a decent harbour and the environment was unhealthy, also because there was a syphilis outbreak among the natives. It is estimated that, in the first year, this disease caused the deaths of at least 100 colonists and it was reported at the time that 160 were infected.<sup>1</sup> In addition, about four hundred men who were supposed to constitute the backbone of the colony, disillusioned by the abandonment of their captain Margarit and without any point of reference, roamed the island with the main intent of exploiting the

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<sup>1</sup> Doctor Chanca, a physician from Seville and head of the fleet’s medical service, mentions this in a report (“Carta del Doctor Diego Álvarez Chanca al Cabildo de Sevilla 1494”. Gil, Varela, *Cartas de particulares a Colón y relaciones coetáneas*). He also mentions spices that would later have enormous success all over the world, even if of little economic value: chili, cayenne and tabasco.



**Figure 6.1** The shortest distance across the Atlantic between South America and Guinea

large Indio population. It became increasingly clear to the Indios that the invaders had come to stay and would never leave spontaneously; therefore, they set traps for the disbanded sailors and killed them.

On the other hand, the fragile social fabric of the natives was wearing thin, as the chieftains lost prestige by being forced to collaborate with the invaders and pay tributes in gold and cotton. These people, who went naked and did not use any sort of currency, were not impoverished by these tributes, but they felt tormented in their own land by hard work which they were unused to and seemed pointless to them.

## 6.2 The Alcalde Francisco Roldán Incites a Revolt

In Haiti, an entire year had passed since Columbus's departure and there had been no news of him or help from the homeland. Food was scarce as the crops planted according to European methods produced little, while the natives' contribution continued to diminish as they hid themselves in the most inaccessible parts of the island. The colonists felt forgotten and abandoned.

At Isabela the carpenters had built a caravel that remained there, on the beach, never launched due to the lack of ropes and metal parts that could not be found on the island. The ship was a beacon of hope, and an argument broke out which turned into a revolt against the 'Genoese'.

According to the account written by Hernando, the younger son of Columbus and nephew to Diego and Bartholomew, the *alcalde mayor* Francisco Roldán insisted that Diego Colón launch the caravel. Diego replied in a rather scornful manner that Roldán and his followers knew nothing of the sea, and that without equipment the caravel was not seaworthy. At this point, Roldán insinuated that Bartholomew had left the ship in that condi-

tion because he meant to use it to save himself and his brother. He menacingly reproached him with the fact that their administration had never paid the money promised to the colonists when they were taken on, adding that it was an intolerable abuse of power to prohibit his people from setting up families with the native women.<sup>2</sup>

The two parted on very bad terms. Roldán gathered a group of malcontents and they moved to Xaragua, a delightful part of Haiti, home to the most beautiful Indio women. They butchered some of the animals they had appropriated and banqueted with the meat. Then, using the arguments with which he had reproached Diego Colón, Roldán designated himself as their leader and sought out followers among the malcontents. He proposed, among other things, to kill Bartholomew Columbus, but the latter was a prudent and well-advised man and Roldán's repeated attempts failed.

Thus, a year and a half went by with exchanges of insults and threats, but in a state of stalemate between two forces that were more or less equal.

### 6.3 The Admiral's Third Voyage Begins

Meanwhile in Andalusia, where the Admiral had landed with the intention of planning a project that would consolidate the colonisation and increase knowledge of those places, everything was proceeding exasperatingly slowly. His main contact in Seville was Bishop Fonseca who, perhaps obeying orders from his superiors, raised difficulties regarding finances and other questions. Yet, there was an urgent need to send provisions to the colonists in Haiti who could no longer rely on the food provided by the natives, who were by now in silent revolt. As an emergency measure, two ships full of provisions were sent ahead in mid-February, under the command of Pedro Hernández Coronel, who reached his destination well behind schedule.

It was only after several months' delay that the bankers and businessmen of Genoa who owned commercial houses in Andalusia decided to complete the financing. Columbus was able to set sail on May 30, 1498 from the port of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, at the mouth of the Guadalquivir River, with six ships, three carrying soldiers, arms and provisions for the colonists. Six women also travelled with them: four were colonists' wives and two were Spanish gypsies. The voyage was slowed by a stop at Madeira and by having to chase and recapture two Castilian ships that had been taken by a French pirate ship.

When they reached the Canary Islands, Columbus sent the three cargo ships, under the command of Pedro de Arana, Alonso Sánchez de Carvajal and Giovanni Antonio Colombo, to Haiti. They arrived very late and in the wrong place: exactly where the rebel Roldán had settled.

For his third voyage, the Admiral did not take with him Vicente Jáñez Pinzón and Juan de La Cosa, who had both in the meantime been compensated by the Queen for the loss of their ships.

The Admiral, following the suggestion of the cosmographer Jaime Ferrer, continued towards the presumed Asian countries situated below the Equator, stopping at the island of Boa Vista, the easternmost of the Cape Verde Islands, owned by Portugal, where it had established a leper colony. This

<sup>2</sup> *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXXIII, 42-3.



ancient contagious disease that slowly devours human flesh, monstrously deforming the facial features and hands and eventually causing the loss of parts of the extremities, terrorised people. For this reason, the King of Portugal confined lepers to Boa Vista, assuring the poor wretches that the flesh and blood of the turtles that reached there in great numbers would cure them. At the time, it was thought that a king's touch could cure leprosy, and perhaps it was for this reason that the great King of France, Louis XI, caught the disease. He sent two ships to the island and they returned with the fabled remedy, but it was too late, the king had died.<sup>3</sup>

Due to the presence of lepers, the island was not protected by a military garrison, but only by several caretakers. From there Columbus travelled to the island of Santiago, officially to buy several oxen to take to Haiti as livestock. Not finding anything suitable, on July 5, 1498 he began the ocean crossing on a south-westerly course. This route was unknown to him, but according to his calculations, which coincided with those of Vespucci, it would take the fleet to the Moluccas, the Asian islands rich in spices.

Things went wrong, the ships hit the doldrums and were becalmed for many days in a torrid, misty and humid climate. Hernando wrote that his father's arthritis worsened and his eyes became inflamed, adding, "[t]he Admiral thought they would be burnt alive together with the ships".<sup>4</sup> Medieval fantasies of a torrid and fatal climate terrorised the sailors, and thus as soon as a little wind arose the badly ailing Columbus changed course and the fleet veered towards the north-west.

Once out of the equatorial doldrums, the three ships were sailing west-north-west when Alonso Pérez, who was on the top, saw three hills on the horizon in front of the prow and great celebrations ensued. As they proceeded, it became clear that the hills belonged to an island, which Columbus named Trinidad. Following its southern coast, the sailors found themselves before one of the mouths of the great Orinoco River from which vast quantities of water flowed into the ocean. Faced with this spectacle, Columbus, who was still suffering from inflammation of his eyes, had the sensation of being in *otro mundo* (in 'another world') and thought that such a large amount of water must come from a vast land that the Indios had sometimes told him about: to him, it was part of Asia.

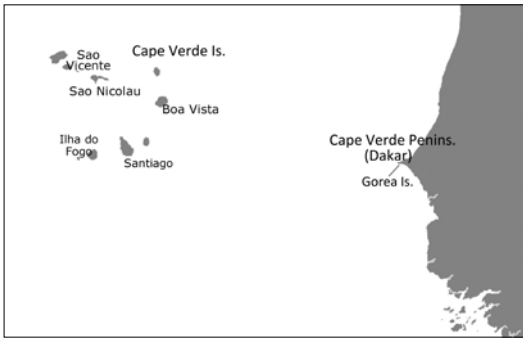
The ships had anchored in front of the river mouth when a great flood tide poured out of the Orinoco, while a tidal wave came out of the gulf itself. The waves 'crashed' against each other and lifted the ships to an incredible height. Luck would have it that none of them capsized.

Columbus immediately decided to leave this place, which he named Boca del Serpiente or Serpent's Mouth. The fleet sailed along the island's eastern and northern coast until another entrance to the gulf was found, but it was not easy to pass through. Columbus named this entrance the Bocas del Dragón or Dragon's Mouth. Here the waters were calm and the ships anchored opposite the island of Trinidad. It was not clear whether it was an island or *terra firma* but Columbus named it Isla Santa.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> I found this information in a note by Caddeo, editor of *Le Historie di Cristoforo Colombo*, vol. 2, fn. 11 to ch. LXV, 24-5.

<sup>4</sup> *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXVI, 26

<sup>5</sup> *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXVII, 30.



**Figure 6.2** The Cape Verde archipelago, belonging to Portugal, shortens the voyage between Guinea and South America

Upon landing, the sailors met friendly natives who told them that this was Paria. The gulf, situated between the island and the continent, still bears that name today.

Hernando Colón wrote ten pages<sup>6</sup> in his book *Le Historie* about the fact that on August 1, 1498 his father Christopher came ashore on *terra firma* and knew it to be so. This notion was crucial to the lawsuit that he and his brother Diego took against the Treasury in 1509. The Treasury's lawyers (and therefore those of the Crown) objected that Christopher and his heirs had no right to the wealth coming from the East Indies but only from the islands that he had discovered. This was clearly a pretext, given that on his first voyage, he had landed on the continent (but few remembered this) and that during his fourth voyage he had discovered great riches on the mainland. It was also certain that the Admiral, in observing the mouth of the Orinoco, was well aware that a river of such size carried water from the mainland and not from an island, and that the continent was Asia. However, these arguments carried no weight in a farcical trial.

The fleet exited the Bocas del Dragón, situated in the northern part of the gulf, heading for Haiti where it docked in the port of Santo Domingo on August 30, 1498. The Admiral hoped to be able to rest at last. Unfortunately, the brothers informed him of the colonists' revolt, which by then had been going on for a year and a half, and of the fact that the three ships carrying soldiers, arms and supplies, sent from the Canaries, had not yet arrived.

#### 6.4 The Three Ships Under the Command of Alonso Sánchez De Carvajal Reach Haiti

At the beginning of September, the three ships that Columbus had sent on to Haiti from the Canary Islands reached Xaragua. The ships were supposed to have docked in the port of Santo Domingo at least one week before him, since he had initially decided to take a longer route sailing south of the Equator, a detour he then abandoned (§ 6.3). Due to the three captains' inexperience, or other unknown reasons, the fleet reached Haiti more than a month later. The captains could not find the port of Santo Domingo and docked at Xara-

<sup>6</sup> *Le Historie*, vol. 2, chs. LXVII-LXXII, 30-9.

gua, precisely where Francisco Roldán was entrenched. He immediately understood the situation and, in order to deceive them, led the new arrivals to believe that he was the Admiral's great friend. The deceit was short lived, but lasted long enough to incite the forty men transported there by mistake to desert. Some of them were criminals whose sentence had been commuted to hard labour in the island's mines and elsewhere, and so it seemed like a good idea to side with the rebels. Roldán also managed to acquire from Captain Carvajal the numerous crossbows and swords that the ships were carrying, paying for them with the gold taken from the islanders.

Many arguments and much duplicity followed, and in the end the three captains decided to set sail for Santo Domingo. The voyage was long due to the contrary wind and currents. When the fleet reached its destination the provisions were rotten, the few remaining loyal men were exhausted and Carvajal's ship was unusable.

Roldán now got the upper hand as he had acquired forty more well-armed men and knew how to use this to his advantage against the Admiral, who was still very ill.

Exhausting negotiations began with the ambiguous Captain Carvajal acting as intermediary.

For the sake of peace, and aware that his forces were inadequate, Columbus decided against using hard tactics and resigned to pretending that his antagonist's mendacious arguments were valid, just as he had done years before with the deserter Martín Alonso Pinzón. He ceded to the rebel Roldán's most pressing requests, but, with exasperating arrogance, the latter went back on the agreements that had just been reached and the Admiral, tired and frustrated, left him a free hand. Roldán, achieved the desired success, however, had to be very careful and watch his back, as unforeseen events matured.

### 6.5 **Alonso Ojeda, Juan De La Cosa and Amerigo Vespucci Reach Haiti on September 5, 1499**

Columbus' son, Hernando Colón, reported in *Le Historie* that, in a moment of truce in the conflict between Roldán and the Columbus brothers:

there arrived an Alonso de Ojeda who came with 4 ships [...] and because those sailors navigated aimlessly, on September 5, 1499 he entered the port that the Christians named *Brasil*, and the Indians called Taquimo, with the thought of taking what he could from the Indians and loading on brazilwood and slaves. And while he awaited these things, he was all given to wrongdoing: and to show that he was favoured by the Bishop [Fonseca] [...] he sought to stir up another uprising by announcing for certain that Queen Donna Isabella was about to die; and that, having died, there would have been nobody who favoured the Admiral any more: and that he, as true, and certainly servant of the said Bishop, could do whatever he wanted in prejudice to the Admiral, for the enmity that was between them.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXXXIV, 66-7.

In fact, the *hidalgo* had sailed on May 18, 1499, together with Juan de La Cosa and Amerigo Vespucci who commanded two other caravels. When the fleet reached the Canary Islands, Ojeda seized a fourth caravel entrusting the command to Don Hernando Guevara, and committed other acts of piracy, and his companions preferred to disassociate themselves from him, sailing on to the Cape Islands. After committing other thefts against compatriots who had settled in the Canaries, Ojeda reached the Caribbean Sea between July and August, where he was reunited with his companions. The expedition took on the fresh supplies it needed and Vespucci and de La Cosa then decided to definitively separate from Ojeda. They dedicated themselves to repairing their ships while the *hidalgo*, as mentioned above, attempted to stir up the colonists against Columbus who had reached Haiti a few days before him.

In order to simplify the narration, we will follow the events in Haiti to their dramatic conclusion, while in the next chapter we will return to a reconstruction of the adventures of those who in that year set sail from Andalusia to reach the Spice Islands, as suggested by Jaime Ferrer, but found themselves in very different places.

## 6.6 Alonso De Ojeda Attempts to Put His Own Plan into Action

On landing in Haiti, Ojeda gained information from the rebels and the Indians about the situation on the island, about who was in charge and how to acquire supplies. Backed by a small army of about seventy men, he proposed to rekindle the rebellion against Columbus and kill him. However, first he needed to obtain bread.

At this point, Ojeda was abandoned by those who did not agree with his plan. Vespucci and de La Cosa sought a tranquil place, while Don Fernando de Guevara wished to join a *hidalgo* Adrián Múxica, his cousin, who had set himself up on a beautiful estate where he raised dogs and falcons. In the meantime, the *alcalde* Roldán in Xaragua was informed of Ojeda's arrival and his intentions. He decided to make a surprise attack on Ojeda and on September 29 reached him with a group of well-armed men while he was obtaining bread from a *Cacique*. As soon as Ojeda saw Roldán he guessed his intentions and decided that his contingent of men was not large enough to sustain a fight. Thus, he quickly approached Roldán and declared himself a friend, saying he was on a voyage of discovery, that his men needed provisions, that they had fought the natives and twenty of his men were wounded, that on the mainland they had seen ferocious beasts and that he would like to meet the Admiral.

Roldán was puzzled by these words and abandoned the idea of attacking Ojeda. They parted company, each very suspicious of the other; in any case, Ojeda did not stop stirring up the colonists and seizing whatever he could in constant skirmishes with the natives. Vespucci and de La Cosa were careful not to get involved in such events and kept out of the way, looking after their ships. As usual, in his letter, Amerigo avoided making specific accusations, summarising that difficult period in this way:

We stayed on the island of Antiglia [Haiti], which Christopher Columbus discovered some years ago, where we carried out a lot of maintenance and stayed for *two months and seventeen days*. Here we suffered many



**Figure 6.3** The river port of Santo Domingo from a drawing by Nicolás de Cardona from his *Descripciones geográficas e hydrográficas de muchas tierras y mares del Norte y Sur en las Indias* (1632). © Biblioteca Digital Hispánica/Biblioteca Nacional de España

troubles with the same Christians who on that island are with Columbus, I believe through envy, which to avoid being verbose I will not recount.<sup>8</sup>

Towards the end of the year, having finished repairing the ships, the two captains decided to part from Ojeda for the second time and return to Spain.

Ojeda, left only with his soldiers and two caravels, continued in his usual abusive way, but in February had a flash of his earlier audacity and decided to attack Roldán's stronghold when the latter was away. Ojeda anchored off Xaragua and landed there with many of his followers. He spread the word among the people that

the Catholic majesties had elected him the Admiral's counsellor, together with Carvajal, so that they would not allow him to do anything that did not seem to be in the service of their majesties, and among the many other things that they had commanded of him, there was one: that he immediately pay in cash all those who on the island had been in their service, and as the Admiral was not reasonable enough to do so, he [Ojeda] offered to go to Santo Domingo and force him to pay them, after which, if they were of this opinion, to throw him off the island dead or alive.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 114vb. 'Antiglia' is the Portuguese name for Haiti; italics added.

<sup>9</sup> *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXXXIV, 68.

Therefore, we see that both adventurers used the same arguments: the unpaid wages and the elimination of the person presumed responsible for all their troubles. Some of the listeners, enthused by this speech, sided with Ojeda, but many understood his intentions and challenged him. A fight broke out that left dead and wounded on both sides. However, the *alcalde* Roldán soon intervened with numerous reinforcements and Ojeda quickly took refuge on one of his ships anchored just off shore.

Roldán challenged Ojeda to land and talk; he in turn challenged Roldán to come aboard,

Roldán, seeing that Ojeda did not dare to come ashore, offered to board one of the ships to talk [...] and sent to ask for one of his boats, he in turn sent one with several guards. And having taken on board Roldán with 6 or 7 men, when they felt themselves secure, Roldán and his men attacked those of Ojeda with bare swords, and killing some and wounding many, took possession of the boat and with it returned to shore.<sup>10</sup>

This rather squalid story of reciprocal deceit between the two adventurers did not end there. Roldán told Ojeda to leave as soon as possible, and the latter replied that he could not sail without the boat and proposed an exchange. If Roldán returned the boat, he would return several of his men whom he held as hostages on board and would leave.

Roldán accepted and Ojeda deceived him one last time; instead of hostages, which he did not have, he sent two of his own men whom he did not like: the surgeon *maestre* Alonso who had just finished tending the wounded from the fight and Juan de Velásquez.

Following this final deceit, Ojeda did not immediately set sail for Europe but continued to navigate along the island's coast hoping to find some other opportunities, but he saw that Roldán's organised surveillance worked; he then crossed the ocean and reached Cadiz on July 22, 1500. He had collected a large amount of gold, had many slaves and a large amount of brazilwood to sell, and he was due a recompense by the king for the many months of navigation he declared to have undertaken. In other words, he was now rich. Yet, he wanted more.

Roldán was left with the two men exchanged for the boat, *maestre* Alonso and Juan de Velásquez; not knowing what to do with them, he handed them over to Columbus, who listened to their story with increasing anger against Alonso de Ojeda. Columbus ordered his deputy Rodrigo Pérez to collect their testimony on the abuses carried out by Ojeda, which he did, diligently following the orders received.

The original document signed by the two witnesses reached the hands of Columbus's eldest son, Diego, who, after his father's death, inherited the title of Admiral of the Ocean Sea and office of Viceroy. Diego had married Maria di Toledo, a member of the family of the Dukes of Alba, the most illustrious house in Spain. When Diego, having become Second Admiral, died, his widow collected his papers in her own archive. These papers passed from generation to generation until the Duchess of Berwick and Alba published them in Madrid in 1892. It does not appear that Christopher Columbus had ever made use of this document.

<sup>10</sup> *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXXXIV, 69.

### 6.7 **The Story of Don Fernando De Guevara and His Cousin Adrián Múxica**

Let us return to Roldán's misdeeds. Múxica's estate was a short distance from the place where Anacaona, widow of the *Cacique* Caonabo, lived. She was a courageous and shrewd woman who had succeeded her husband at the head of the tribe. The *Cacique* had an extraordinarily beautiful daughter, Higuano-ta, whom she married to Don Fernando de Guevara. This beautiful woman had also had a relationship with the *alcalde* Roldán, who had fallen madly in love with her. When he heard of the marriage, he ordered that the woman be returned to him. Don Guevara was infuriated by this incredible arrogance. He refused to hand over his bride, and together with his cousin, Adrián Múxica, planned to trap and kill Roldán. The latter had a very good network of informers and managed to capture Múxica and seven accomplices. He handed them all over to Columbus, saying that they had plotted to kill both himself and the Admiral. It seems that Roldán later hanged Adrián Múxica with his own hands.

### 6.8 **A Period of Violence and Retaliation**

Having got rid of his rival, Roldán wrote to the powerful Archbishop Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, Queen Isabella's confessor and future Chief Inquisitor of Castile, with whom he had a good relationship, to give his version of the events in Haiti. Christopher Columbus also wrote a letter, but to the sovereigns, lamenting Roldán's revolt and asking that an expert in law be sent. Both letters departed on one of the ships commanded by Pedro Hernández Coronel.

After this, Roldán prudently retired to the lands he had had the Admiral grant him, and waited to see what happened. Columbus and his energetic brother Bartholomew took strong measures in an attempt to get the situation back under control. Among their first targets was Pedro Riquelme, formerly the Admiral's deputy, who with the excuse of building accommodation for his men had constructed a small fort next to Santo Domingo. This was a very dangerous strategy for the Genoese brothers; Bartholomew somehow managed to take the fort and hold its garrison prisoner within, including Don Fernando de Guevara who had taken refuge there. Then, together with Christopher, he searched the island capturing other enemies, whom he shut up in a well. They gradually hanged the ringleaders, while others who were held responsible for lesser crimes were flogged or had their noses or ears cut off. The colonists were infuriated.

### 6.9 **The 'Comendador' Francisco De Bobadilla Arrives and the Columbus Brothers are Arrested and Returned to Spain in Chains**

After the first news arrived from Haiti, King Ferdinand, who now had sole charge of affairs regarding the East Indies, decided to send a person of trust, the 'comendador' Francisco de Bobadilla, as inquisitor. However, he delayed this provision until he knew whether those faraway events had ended and, if so, in what manner. When he received Columbus's letter and was informed of Roldán's accusations by Archbishop Cisneros, the King decided

to send the inquisitor, giving him *carte blanche*, i.e. letters bearing only his signature and seal, which Bobadilla could fill out according to the situation.

The judicial inquisitor Francisco de Bobadilla reached Santo Domingo on August 24, 1500 with two ships carrying a large number of well-armed men. When his ship docked in the river port, two gibbets stood on either side of the river on which hung two executed Christians. Bobadilla decided not to go ashore straight away, also because neither of the Columbus brothers had come to meet him. He informed the people crowding round the ship that he had brought the money from the King to pay what was due to the colonists. The latter did not hesitate to express their anger for the unjust and cruel abuses they had suffered at the hands of the Genoese brothers.

When Bobadilla finally managed to speak to the Columbus brothers, they defended themselves in a rather arrogant manner using procedural expedients, without documenting the difficulties in trying to govern people who threatened them and repeatedly tried to kill them.

Bobadilla told the Columbus brothers that many of the convictions and punishments were of a disproportionate severity to the offences and had been inflicted without the proper procedure. Therefore, he freed all prisoners, listening to their accusations against their accusers. He argued mainly that many death sentences had been inflicted without a proper trial, sometimes without giving the condemned the possibility to go to confession. He accused Columbus of having prevented the evangelization of the natives and of acting with greed and avidity in denying food to the starving colonists. There was enough evidence. After a month-long inquiry, Christopher, Bartholomew and Diego Columbus were stripped of all their offices and, in chains, embarked for Spain amid the shouts and insults of those present.<sup>11</sup> They disembarked in Cadiz on November 20, 1500.

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<sup>11</sup> Bobadilla's inquest and the vicissitudes of the Columbus brothers, and others, during the second half of the year 1500 are narrated and documented by Consuelo Varela in *La caída de Cristóbal Colón/El juicio de Bobadilla*. An Italian translation of this book is available, *Inchiesta su Cristoforo Colombo; il dossier Bobadilla*. Genoa: Fratelli Frilli Editori, 2008.





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## **7 Vespucci's Second Voyage and the Sea of Pearls (1499- 1500)**

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**Summary** 7.1 Omissions and Contradictions Regarding Vespucci's Second Voyage Appear in the Historical Documents. – 7.2 The Voyage of Ojeda, de La Cosa and Vespucci Develops in an Unexpected Manner. – 7.3 Nearly a Game of Dexterity. – 7.4 Vicente Yáñez Pinzón Crosses the Ocean with Four Caravels and Describes the Mouths of the Amazon and the Sweet Sea. – 7.5 Guerra and Niño Return to Cadiz with Many Pearls, Ojeda Arrives Soon Afterwards. – 7.6 Exploration Along the Southern Coast of the Caribbean Sea. – 7.7 Vespucci Makes the First Measurement of Longitude. – 7.8 The Cartography Relating to the Second Voyage of Amerigo Vespucci.

### **7.1 Omissions and Contradictions Regarding Vespucci's Second Voyage Appear in the Historical Documents**

In the preceding pages, I described some of the events of the voyage undertaken by Ojeda, de La Cosa and Vespucci, which became intertwined with the dramatic developments of Christopher Columbus' return to Haiti in August 1498. However, before returning to the main narrative, I think it is appropriate to inform the reader that variations and contradictions appear in the documentation regarding this voyage, which was Vespucci's second one. For example, the departure from Cadiz is dated to both May 16 and May 18; the number of ships in the expedition are two in the "Prima lettera familiare", three in the "Lettera a Soderini", four in Hernando Colón's *Le Historie*; the Atlantic crossing lasted, depending on the various texts and copies of such texts, 19, 20, 24 or 44 days; the flotilla's return is dated from January 1500 to October of the same year. And so on. Fortunately, in most cases, it is possible to resolve this exasperating numbers game thanks to the fact that other data concerning the routes and distances covered vary much less and to the fact that we have various sources that supplement each other.

There are three main sources for this voyage: as mentioned, the "Prima lettera familiare" and the "Lettera a Soderini" written by Amerigo, in neither of which is there any mention of Alonso de Ojeda, and the *Pesquisa*,



**Figure 7.1** The second voyage of Vespucci, de La Cosa and Ojeda lasting eight months, between May 16, 1499 and January 8, 1500: 1) Departure from Cadiz; 2) Vespucci and de La Cosa part from Ojeda and continue as far as Ilha do Fogo; 3) they sail from Ilha do Fogo on May 29, the crossing takes about twenty days; 4) on June 27 they reach *terra firma* (north of the Amazon River) and explore the interior; 5) they proceed as far as Cape S. Agostino where they invert their course; 6) they reach the island of Trinidad; 7) they rejoin Ojeda; 8) the clash at Rio Flechado, a long stay at the port of Chichiriviche; 9) on September 5 they reach Haiti where they repair their ships and, after two and a half months, set sail for Cadiz on November 22, where they arrive on January 8

i.e. the inquest into Ojeda's behaviour ordered by Christopher Columbus, in which there is no reference to either Amerigo Vespucci or Juan de La Cosa. A passage written by Hernando Colón, cited in the preceding chapter, forms a link among the main documents. Thanks to this situation, it becomes possible to present a complete account of what took place during this voyage, albeit with some approximations.

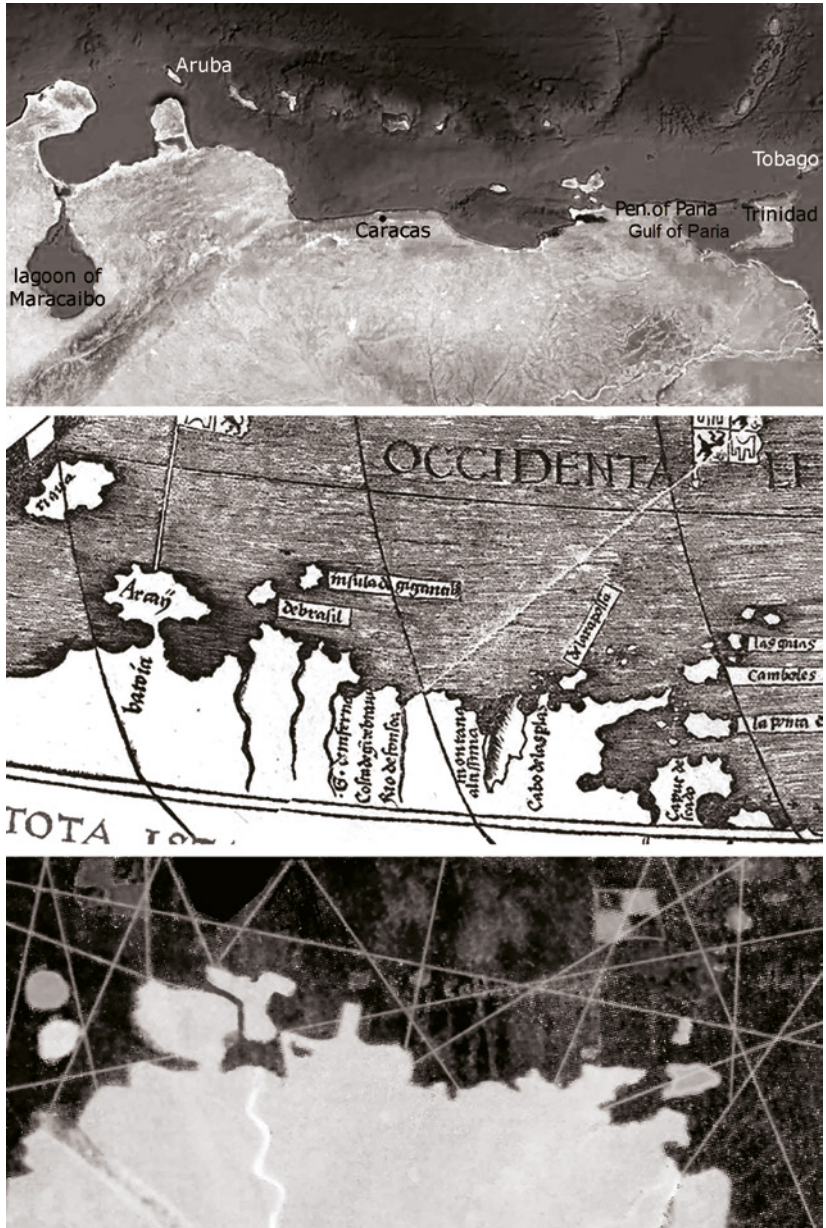
## 7.2 The Voyage of Ojeda, De La Cosa and Vespucci Develops in an Unexpected Manner

The outcome of the voyage undertaken in 1497-98 by the four merchants was rather disappointing from an economic point of view, so they dedicated themselves to other activities. Meanwhile, Bishop Fonseca, who had finally received numerous requests from people desiring to cross the ocean, and this time had the money to finance such voyages, altered his plans in an attempt to make them more suited to the needs of Spain. Therefore, he entrusted Juan de La Cosa and Amerigo Vespucci, who played a prominent role in the preceding voyage, with the task of undertaking a journey of exploration and study in those far off lands. The Bishop also included his personal favourite Alonso de Ojeda, who had captained a ship during Columbus' venture for the colonisation of Haiti. The agreed regulations (the 'capitoli') stated that the crews must keep away from the islands discovered by Columbus and perhaps established how and where the ships should regroup if they were separated during the journey, while they did not foresee the presence of a 'captain major'.

They were due to sail from Cadiz in mid-May, a period that had been propitious for the first voyage; it is not known whether they had calculated the duration of this expedition. It is known that Amerigo delegated his wife and brother-in-law to look after his affairs. Several problems occurred before the departure. While Vespucci and de la Cosa's caravels were equipped and provisioned, Ojeda's overcrowded ship was lacking equipment and supplies. Ojeda (certainly for some scheme of his own) had hired too many people to fit onto a caravel of normal dimensions. In his testimony to the *Pesquisa* (the inquest on Ojeda's improper behaviour promoted by Columbus), Juan de Velásquez provided an almost complete list of the crew, over thirty people, including three pilots, the *hidalgo* Don Fernando de Guevara and two cabin boys who had been his servants. There was no *maestre*, the chief officer who administered the ship; Ojeda had used a pretext to send him to Seville and he did not return in time: the captain wished to be rid of him.

Another witness who appears in the *Pesquisa*, the surgeon Alonso, who had temporarily replaced the abandoned *maestre*, reported that Ojeda had wanted to take possession of a caravel named *La Gorda* (the Pot-bellied), but failed in his intent. He also added that prior to departure Ojeda sent someone under the cover of night to steal a boat from the port of Santa María, north of Cadiz. In short, his behaviour did not bode well.

The three caravels finally left the port of Cadiz on the morning of May 16, 1499, following the coast of Africa as far as the shallows in front of the Moroccan city of Safi where the sailors on numerous Spanish ships were busy fishing. Given the chance, they exchanged goods with the 'Moors', in other words the Arabs and Berbers, who inhabited these coasts. Once among these ships, Ojeda asked which was the best caravel. One from Huelva was



**Figure 7.2** A stretch of the northern coast of South America. Above: satellite image in inverted colours. Centre: the image according to Amerigo taken from the Waldseemüller Map, in which the Guajira Peninsula (on the far left of the image) appears as an island and is situated on the western limit of his navigation, the Equator is drawn at  $9-10^\circ$  too far north, but this is Waldseemüller's error. Below: the image according to Juan de La Cosa; in it the Paraganá Peninsula is too large, so that it is confused with the island of Aruba; the western limit is the same as that of Amerigo and the Guajira Peninsula is drawn twice as an island separated from the mainland; the lagoon of Maracaibo is also missing on this map as it is on that by Waldseemüller. It is legitimate to conclude that both Vespucci and de La Cosa did not sail any further west than the Guajira Peninsula. (Graphic: G. Carpentiero; the retouches on the island of Paraganá are by P. Omodeo). Provenance: Details from Waldseemüller's map (Library of Congress, Washington DC, USA) and Juan de La Cosa's world map. © Wikimedia Commons

pointed out to him, and the *hidalgo* took possession of it. He arrogantly transferred its crew to another ship that was returning to Andalusia, while the two owners refused to leave their ship and because of this found themselves dragged into someone else's adventure: it seems one of them died, perhaps during a conflict with Indios.

Ojeda gave command of this caravel to Don Fernando de Guevara and completed the fitting out of the ship for the ocean crossing by stealing sails, ropes, timber and other equipment from the fishing vessels that had not got out of his way in time. He sold gunpowder to the Arabs (which was forbidden) and cloth that was on board the stolen caravel. Then, he headed to the nearby Canary Islands in order to get supplies, intending to steal what he could, and did so starting at Lanzarote, where he sacked the wealthy home of Doña Inés Peraza, which was empty at the time.

At this point, Vespucci and de La Cosa, who had witnessed these acts of piracy but were not involved, decided to abandon their piratical companion and turned towards the Cape Verde Islands situated further south, following a different route.

Vespucci writes in his report on this voyage, not mentioning Ojeda, "[w]e began our journey at the Cape Verde Islands, *passing in sight of the island of Gran Canaria*; and we navigated until we reached an island called the Island of Fire".<sup>1</sup> Ilha do Fogo, one of the southernmost of the Cape Verde archipelago, got its name from the active volcano there. After stopping for two days to take on the last supplies, the caravels of Vespucci and de La Cosa set sail to face the ocean. They were joined by a *caravelletta* of 45 tons, which it is known was fast and easy to manoeuvre: the crew had chosen to chance this venture relying on their experience.

The crossing, with favourable winds, was fast, taking more or less twenty days, and on June 27, 1499, when they reached the 'Equinoctial line', i.e. the Equator, the sailors saw a great land mass. Amerigo describes their landing: "We anchored our ships and lowered our boats and going in them to land [...] we found it full of large trees, and flooded by great rivers and we attempted in many parts to land there".<sup>2</sup>

The riverbanks and even the seashore were lined by a deep mangrove forest so dense that birds could not fly through it, only over it, and the sailors could not land and reach the inland populations, whose presence was revealed by thin plumes of smoke that rose high into the air. They had reached the mouth of the Amazon River, which had yet to receive a name from Europeans.

Hence, they set sail on an east-south-east heading, staying within sight of land, and reached the point where the coastline turned south. The ships did not manage to round the cape as the sea currents were against them, even though the sails were filled by a good wind. Vespucci wrote that the current was even stronger than that in the Straits of Messina and Gibraltar.<sup>3</sup> They inverted their course, abandoning the attempt to find the opening towards the Spice Islands in Asia. Therefore, Vespucci and de La Cosa resumed carefully mapping the coast, giving names to promontories and bays and even to the mouths of rivers large and small, names mainly chosen according to the

1 "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 110vb; italics added.

2 "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 111ra.

3 "Prima lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 42rb.

saint who appeared on the calendar for that day. Amerigo noted with amazement that around midday men's shadows disappeared (a phenomenon which was to give rise to legends) and took to studying the southern night sky with its myriad of bright stars, among which the Southern Cross was particularly brilliant. The sight reminded Amerigo of Dante's verses in the first canto of *Purgatorio* (23-27) written two hundred years before, which he cites:<sup>4</sup>

... and I saw four stars  
 never seen before but by the first people.  
 The sky seemed to rejoice in their flames.  
 O widowed region of the north,  
 Since thou art denied that sight!<sup>5</sup>

### 7.3 Nearly a Game of Dexterity

When the caravels veered to follow the northern coast of the island Trinidad, the sailors spotted a long canoe crowded with people that was heading towards the Bocas del Dragón, the entrance to a gulf situated west of the island. The men in the canoe saw the caravel and stopped, their oars raised, to watch it in great wonder.

The Spaniards decided to intercept it: the small fast-sailing caravel that had joined the other two was positioned windward and with a rapid manoeuvre came alongside the canoe and then passed it. However, in order to avoid a collision, it had to veer, thus finding itself leeward. Seizing their advantage, the men in the canoe rowed hard to escape. In the meantime, the other two ships had let down their boats, which took part in the chase. After two hours of effort, the *carovelletta* again flanked the canoe, whose rowers, closely pressed between the ship and the boats, jumped into the water and scattered swimming ashore, a distance of six miles. The sailors only managed to capture two of them, dragging them on board one of the boats. Other sailors took control of the canoe in which four boys remained. They had recently been castrated and their penises had been removed. Using gestures, they explained that the Camballi (Cannibals) had done this in order to fatten them up and then eat them.

The two captured Camballi were not ill-treated, one of them was given some trinkets so that once back on land he could inform his tribe that the new arrivals were friendly and would return their great canoe. The latter was a prodigious piece of native artisanship: able to carry seventy men, it was dug out of an enormous tree trunk and was 42 metres long, double the length of a caravel, and 1.30 metres wide. The tree it was made from must have been a giant over 60 metres tall; the Camballi were proud of their boat.

The next day, the men of the tribe - unarmed - came to reclaim their canoe. They hauled it to a safe place, but then all disappeared and there was no chance to treat with them. The sailors noted that they wore gold in their ears.

Many questions arose around the long Camballi canoe, as well as around the great canoe of the Mayan merchant described by Hernando Colón: how

<sup>4</sup> "Prima lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 42vb.

<sup>5</sup> Dante, *Comedy*, transl. by Uberto Limentani.

could the natives of the New World cut down colossal trees with a diameter at the base of more than two meters with the stone tools they had available? How did they manage to dug out the canoe correctly giving each part the right thickness? Which trees were chosen to prepare similar boats? And so on.

It is little known that in the Chinese province of Sichuan, in the great imperial canal, traditional regattas took place between boats of a structure and size comparable to the canoes we are talking about. These are the Dragon Boats derived from the enormous trunks of Metasequoias that grow in that province. The study of the way in which the Dragon Boats are built will give us an answer to the questions mentioned, but at the same time it raises the big question: how is it possible that, in ancient times on two different continents separated by the Pacific Ocean, techniques very similar, involving the orderly and precise work of a hundred men headed by a boat architect, have developed?

Finally, the fleet entered the bay, which Columbus, during his third voyage, had named the Gulf of Paria; here the sailors encountered other tribes with other customs who gave the strangers a friendly welcome and bartered 150 pearls for a small bell, both sides being convinced they had struck a great bargain. The fleet stayed seventeen days in this place, which remained engraved in Amerigo's heart. He wrote that during this stay the natives offered them good white and red wine prepared from fermented fruit. The stay was not just a holiday: the sailors from one boat travelled up the river that flowed into that gulf, sighting a mountain chain and many large animals including beasts similar to African lions and leopards.

Vespucci and de La Cosa continued along the coast of what is now Venezuela, running from east to west at the latitude 11° North. Off the northern part of the coast they encountered a scattered line of islands: the Leeward Islands. The first of them had been named Isla de Margarita by Columbus the year before and was rich in trees, palms, villages and pearl-bearing oysters. The natives dived to fish for oysters and collected the pearls, which reached the size of a hazelnut; they kept them like children collect marbles, and sometimes wore them when they managed to perforate them. To do this, they perhaps used long thin flint or obsidian flakes (raw materials not present on these islands), although the holes they made were ugly and untidy.

The natives explained to Vespucci that the pearls developed inside the oyster, that they grew and became round and when mature detached themselves and passed into the animal's flesh: that is what Amerigo understood.<sup>6</sup> Even the half pearls still attached to the shell were of some value, since they could be detached with a thin blade and then sewn onto clothes. In his letter, Amerigo lamented the fact that these half pearls soon deteriorated.

<sup>6</sup> In actual fact, in most cases, pearls are the result of a defence mechanism against microscopic parasites that are neutralised by the deposition of numerous, very thin, alternating layers of calcite and aragonite. If the parasite is between the oyster's mantle and the shell, the pearl grows inside the shell and remains there.



#### 7.4 **Vicente Yáñez Pinzón Crosses the Ocean with Four Caravels and Describes the Mouths of the Amazon and the Sweet Sea**

After the expedition of Juan de La Cosa and Amerigo Vespucci, in the last months of 1499 three other expeditions sailed from Andalusia across the Ocean starting from the Cape Verde Islands, with destination to the West Indies. A crossing was carried out by Cristóbal Guerra with a single caravel, which then, apparently, when he arrived at the Caribbean Sea, was accompanied by that of Alonso Niño who had reached the Pearl Islands, joining Juan de La Cosa and Vespucci. The second expedition was that of Diego de Lepe, departed from Palos with two caravels.

Finally, Vicente Yáñez Pinzón sailed in early December of that year. He had organised a flotilla of four caravels among which *Niña* stood out, having just returned from the first two voyages of Christopher Columbus. Vicente Yáñez was travelling at his own expense because Queen Isabella had largely compensated the Pinzón family for the death of Martín Alonso. The crew consisted of about eighty people, almost all from Palos. The fleet could set sail only at the beginning of December of that year, delayed by bureaucratic problems concerning the weapons to be loaded.<sup>7</sup> The preliminary agreement provided that the fleet would not touch the islands and lands discovered by Columbus and avoid the lands due to Portugal, as well as the payment of one fifth of the gain to the crown of Castile, if there was one.

The crossing began from the island of Santiago in the archipelago of Cape Verde, on January 8, 1500. Shortly after cutting the Equator, the fleet was hit by a violent storm, which fortunately did not cause much damage. They landed at the mouth of a large river, perhaps Rio Parnaiba, where they first met the natives who showed themselves hostile. They were very tall, notes Vicente Yáñez, as are the Germans and the Slavs, and had very large feet.

They sailed on and met another hostile tribe with which the Spaniards came to blows because of a piece of wood bent at the elbow and covered with gold, which had fallen to the ground. The natives had the worst but the fight cost the Spaniards eight deaths and fifteen wounded.

They proceeded further and reached a cape which was given the name of Cabo Santa María de la Consolación, cape of Saint Augustine for the fleet of Juan de La Cosa and Vespucci, who had been blocked there by the strong sea currents.

They took possession of those lands on behalf of the sovereigns of Spain. It is not known if and how much they continued to follow the coast towards midday, but it is known that the flotilla reversed course towards north when they entered the Sweet Sea.

In the Portolan Chart called *King-Hamy* of 1502 and in that of Kustmann II of same date, the Sweet Sea at the Equator is depicted as a wide interruption of the continental mass, but Vicente Yáñez helped by those who travelled with him made it clear that the fresh water dominates the marine one and comes from the many mouths of a large river which they named Rio Maraíón.

The fleet continued to the Sea of Pearls, in the south-eastern part of the Caribbean Sea, and then reached the Greater Antilles, places well known to the commander, where it was hit by a terrible hurricane that unfortu-

<sup>7</sup> Manzano Manzano, *Los Pinzones y el descubrimiento de América*, vol. 1, ch. 2 (VI), 291.

nately sank two caravels. The two surviving ships returned to Palos in September 1500.

Once again Queen Isabela rescued Vicente Yáñez and appointed him knight; later she gave him the post of governor of Puerto Rico.

### 7.5 Guerra and Niño Return to Cadiz with Many Pearls, Ojeda Arrives Soon Afterwards

The *caravelleta* that had joined Vespucci's ships belonged to Cristóbal Guerra and Per Alonso Niño and had a rather large crew of thirty-three men. It separated from the other ships shortly after its exploits at the 'Bocas del Dragón'. The crew dedicated themselves to bartering pearls with the Indios along the north-eastern coast of present-day Venezuela, establishing friendly relations with the natives and reaching as far as Isla de Margarita and the Guajira Peninsula.

Guerra and Niño's ship crossed the ocean in sixty-one days and reached Cadiz on April 6, 1500. It carried "the largest amount of riches that had arrived from the New World up until that moment".<sup>8</sup> A few days later, Ojeda's ships arrived.

### 7.6 Exploration Along the Southern Coast of the Caribbean Sea

The evidence given at the inquest demanded by Columbus into Ojeda's behaviour indicates that the caravels on which Ojeda and Don Guevara travelled following the robberies committed on the Canary Islands also reached Trinidad and the Gulf of Paria. The men hired by Ojeda soon began to act cruelly, "killing, stealing and fighting the inhabitants of the place: they killed many who were peaceful and tranquil, as the Admiral had left them".<sup>9</sup> Using brutal and hasty methods, the *hidalgo* took whatever he considered to be of value, killing whoever rebelled, while many of his men molested the local women. The two caravels continued along the coast, which turned from east westward, also visiting the islands along it. Ojeda also captured some locals with the aim of selling them as slaves, and he took on the best of them as reinforcements for his own small army. He travelled westward to the Gulf of Urabá, beneath the mountainous slopes of the Darién, where the Panama Isthmus is grafted into South America. Juan de La Cosa on that occasion did not go so far west, as shown by his map of 1500.

The injured and angry natives knew how to organise themselves in order to prevent the brutal foreigners from landing, and many began to poison their arrowheads. Vespucci and de La Cosa's sailors became aware of this when, having left the Isla de Margarita, they began to map the coast: the increasingly angry natives prevented them from landing.

And, navigating along the coast every day we discovered an endless number of people who spoke different languages. When we had navigated for 400 leagues, we began to find people who did not want our friendship,

<sup>8</sup> See HARRISSE, *The Discovery of North America*, 676-8.

<sup>9</sup> *Pesquisa*, testimony given by Juan de Velásquez, 30.

but waited for us with their weapons, which are bows and arrows. When we went towards the shore with our boats, they prevented us from landing so that we were forced to fight them and once the battle ended they were in a bad way because they were [naked] and we killed many of them.<sup>10</sup>

On an unspecified stretch of coast, perhaps near the port of Caracas, Vespucci and de La Cosa met up with Ojeda and Don Guevara. They all travelled westward and on reaching Golfo Triste, the expedition faced the toughest fight of this voyage. Amerigo described it thus,

On a certain day we saw numerous people, all armed to prevent us from landing. Twenty-six well-armed men got ready and we covered the boats because they were firing many arrows that wounded some of us before we landed. We fought them with great effort; indeed, they were very audacious, not knowing what a weapon the sword was and how it cut. A large multitude charged us and so many arrows flew that we did not know how to protect ourselves, and we lost hope of winning and turned our backs to jump back in the boats. While we retreated and fled, one of our Portuguese sailors, aged 55, who was defending the boats [a son of whom was in the fray] having seen us in great danger, jumped out of the boat shouting loudly: 'men face your enemy, as God will give you victory'; he knelt, said a prayer and threw himself into the counter-attack, and all of us with him.

In the end, the natives were beaten: "we killed 150 of them and burnt 180 of their houses".<sup>11</sup> About twenty Spaniards were wounded and one of them, pierced by an arrow in the chest, died.

The Amerigo who wrote this is very different from the one who, after the surprise attack by the Camballi from the stilt-house village wrote, "we did not want to burn their houses, as we would have been full of remorse".

They left the site of the conflict, which is indicated on the 1523 map by Juan Vespuccio, Amerigo's nephew, with the name of 'Rio delle frecce' and 'Case arse', and took refuge in the nearby bay of Chichiriviche, where they stayed for 20 days to mend their wounds and rest. It was on this occasion that Vespucci measured the longitude. After this long break, they set sail again heading west, still hoping to reach the fabulous lands of Asia described by Marco Polo. They reached the mushroom-shaped Paraguaná Peninsula; its shape makes it easily recognisable on all the maps drawn in the early 16th century showing the Caribbean Sea. It may be presumed that this peninsula marks the westernmost point mapped by de La Cosa and Amerigo Vespucci, as they placed the flag of Castile and León near to it, an indication that this was the limit of the lands discovered "by order of the king of Castile".

To the east of the Paraguaná Peninsula lay the Island of Giants, today Curaçao, where Vespucci had an extraordinary surprise,<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> "Prima lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 44vb.

<sup>11</sup> "Prima lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folios 44vb and 45ra. This episode does not appear in the "Lettera a Soderini". However, Hernando Colón mentions it in *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXXXIV, 66.

<sup>12</sup> He describes it in the "Prima lettera familiare" and the "Lettera a Soderini". I follow the latter version in folios 113va and 114va.

in a valley we saw five of their huts that seemed to be uninhabited and we went to them. We found only five women – two old ladies and three girls so tall that we looked at them with amazement; when they saw us, they were too afraid to run away: the two old women invited us in their own words to enter the hut and brought out many things to eat. They were taller than a large man could be tall, like Francesco degli Albizzi of Florence, but better proportioned. We thought to take the three girls and bring them to Castile as a thing of wonder. While we were deciding how to go about this, thirty-six men entered by the door of the hut; they were even taller than their women and also well-made and handsome to behold. They alarmed us so that we wished to be on our ships and not among such people. They carried very large bows and arrows and great clubs and talked among themselves in such tones that it seemed they wanted to harm us. In the light of this danger, we consulted each other as to whether we should attack them first inside the hut, or outside, some said to wait and see what they did. We agreed to leave the hut and go back to the ships as if nothing had happened. This we did and we headed towards the ships. They followed behind us at about a stone's throw away, talking amongst themselves, I believe they were just as afraid of us as we were of them, because when we stopped to rest they did the same without coming any closer. Finally, we reached the beach where the boats were waiting for us and we got in. As soon as we were some distance from the shore, they rushed into the water and shot many arrows at us, but we no longer feared them, we fired two bombard shots, more to frighten than to harm them, and they all fled into the woods.

In the “Lettera a Soderini”, the account of the meeting with the giants, which seems truthful and which physical anthropology suggests is plausible,<sup>13</sup> is followed by the account of another encounter. Vespucci wrote,

They were brutish in appearance and gesture, and all had their cheeks so full of some green herb, which they continued to chew like animals, so that they could hardly speak. Each had two small dried gourds around their neck; one was full of the herb they had in their mouths and the other with white flour that looked like powdered chalk. From time to time, they took a stick, which they wet with their mouth, and put it into the gourd with the flour and then put it inside both cheeks, flouring the herb already in there, and this they did often. Such a thing amazed us, we did not understand its secret, or why they did it.

This may have been coca leaves which, when mixed with ash that helps to extract its active principle, reduces tiredness and the desire to drink.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> We must remember that in this period Europeans were shorter than they are today, being 160 cm tall on average, or less.

<sup>14</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folios 112vb and 113ra. Other scholars and I view this strange habit as an invention based on the chewing of betel leaves practiced in India, Indonesia and some parts of Africa. However, it has close parallels with what Hernando Colón wrote about a tribe in what is now Panama, and thus is authentic. See *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. XCVI, 116.

## 7.7 Vespucci Makes the First Measurement of Longitude

Amerigo was well-versed in the *Geography* written by the early astronomer and geographer Claudius Ptolemy of Alexandria, and he carried a copy with him. In this work, a method is suggested for measuring longitude based on the lunar eclipses that are visible at the same moment from faraway places but at different local times. Once the chronological difference is calculated, it is possible to work out both the distance in degrees between the meridians that pass through those places and the distance in miles between them.

Ptolemy's method had a limit: lunar eclipses are rare events, occurring perhaps twice a year and are only visible along a relatively narrow strip of the Earth's surface. This limit constitutes a serious problem because navigators and travellers often need to know the longitude of a place, and it is indispensable for the cartographer's work.

In order to overcome this limitation, it was necessary to fully understand the problem and then devise a practical solution. Therefore, Amerigo went back over all his studies:

As for longitude, I declare that I encountered the greatest difficulty in finding it and laboured greatly to discover for certain how far I had travelled in terms of longitude, so that in the end I found it best to spend sleepless nights observing the positions of one or other planet and *maxime* of the Moon with the other planets, because the Moon travels faster than any other planet; [then] with the *Almanach* by Johannes Regiomontanus, calculated for the meridian of the city of Ferrara, comparing it with the calculations from the Alfonsine Tables. And after many nights of this experience, on the night of August 23, 1499, there was a conjunction of the Moon and Mars, which according to the *Almanach* must have occurred at midnight, or half an hour earlier. I found that when the Moon rose on our horizon, which occurred an hour and a half after the Sun set, it passed the planet [Mars] to the east: I say that the Moon was further east than Mars [by] one degree [and] a few minutes more and at midnight was on the horizon [of Mars] by 5 and a half degrees, a little more or [a little less] [...].<sup>15</sup>

In this discourse, broken up by tedious repetitions and elisions, Amerigo means that after long and laboured reflection he decided to follow, night after night, the intricate route of the Moon and planets between the fixed stars until he came across an event (the conjunction of the Moon and Mars) noted, together with the local time and reference meridian, in the *Almanach for the prediction of astronomical events* (the so-called *Ephemerides*).<sup>16</sup>

Amerigo's measurement of longitude taken on the Venezuelan coast was imprecise because, when on August 23, 1499 he observed the time of the 'conjunction' of the Moon and Mars, he only had the previous calculation made by Regiomontanus to use as a comparison, which related to the time of

<sup>15</sup> Formisano, *Amerigo Vespucci, Lettere di viaggio*, 6-7. Described also in "Prima lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 43r.

<sup>16</sup> As far as I know, Eugenio Oberti (*Amerigo Vespucci: Alla scoperta del continente sudamericano*, 4) was the first to recognise Amerigo's priority in using the conjunction of planets to calculate longitude. To date, it cannot be excluded that Amerigo was preceded by Arab authors, but he nevertheless appears sincere when he describes the way in which he has come to expand the Ptolemaic method.

observation at the meridian of Ferrara transposed to the meridian of Cadiz. However, although approximate the result was good enough to show that this land, based on the Treaty of Tordesillas, belonged to Spain, and furthermore made it possible to establish that Cape of Saint Augustine, where he had arrived a month earlier and which was situated many leagues further east, belonged to Portugal.

In this circumstance, Amerigo introduced another important piece of information: the circumference of the Earth, which according to Ptolemy and Alfraganus was 24,000 miles or 6,000 leagues (38,000 km).<sup>17</sup> This measurement, which is repeated in the *Ridolfi Fragment*, is much greater than that accepted by cartographers of the time and large enough to insert a space between Asia and Europe in which the New World could be positioned, together with the vast ocean that Magellan would name the Pacific twenty years later.

Amerigo said little or nothing about this, but the sailors who witnessed these observations had vaguely understood what he was doing. Juan de La Cosa, who worked closely with Amerigo, and the two Portuguese sailors who were part of the expedition knew very well that he was measuring the longitude; it was information that was very useful to de La Cosa for his own work, even though the novelty of the Florentine's method did not interest him.

## 7.8 The Cartography Relating to the Second Voyage of Amerigo Vespucci

Queen Isabella had urged Christopher Columbus to prepare a map of the lands he visited for her, but he did not satisfy her wishes. It is a singular fact which to date has no explanation. For this reason, Juan de La Cosa was engaged for the Admiral's second voyage, with the precise commission of mapping those faraway lands (see § 3.9). In 1500, de La Cosa prepared a very interesting map for the Queen drawn and painted on a large cowhide.<sup>18</sup>

At first sight, what stands out on this map is the different ways in which its parts are drawn. The right-hand part is precisely drawn in a light hand, even too light, while the inscriptions are often hesitant and erroneous, a defect perhaps due to the type of education received, as well as the Basque people's proverbial lack of knowledge of the Spanish language. In contrast, the left-hand part representing the New World - we will call it that for the moment - is drawn with a heavy hand and dark colours. It could be said that the author, having prepared a very good image of part of the Old World, had drawn out a first sketch of the New World to be recopied later. On a second look, one notes that the line of the Equator is drawn correctly, while the Tropic of Cancer runs about ten degrees too far south, an unsurprising error given the relationship between de La Cosa and Christopher Columbus who had introduced the error to avoid arguments with Portugal. The *raya* is drawn about sixteen degrees too far east so that no part of the discovered lands belongs to Portugal. This anomaly perhaps occurred because when Vicente Yáñez Pinzón reached the eastern limit of South America in

<sup>17</sup> "Prima lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 43va. It should be remembered that a mile equivalent to 1.4 km was also in use at this time.

<sup>18</sup> Comellas, *El mapa de Juan de La Cosa*.

1500 he took possession of it for the Spanish sovereigns and de La Cosa deduced that this part of the continent was situated within the agreed limits.

However, the key question about this map is the following: does the continental mass that appears on the left represent part of Asia, in agreement with Columbus, or the New World as Vespucci began to imagine after his second voyage?<sup>19</sup>

The answer is this: for de La Cosa, in agreement with the Admiral, it was Asia, as the image is constructed in such a way that Asia is divided in two without leaving space for a new ocean. Therefore, it is not correct to speak of the New World in regard to this map, but rather the 'West Indies', as was the case in Spain throughout the 18th century. Navarrete<sup>20</sup> credits Alonso de Ojeda with the merit of having explored the same stretch of the coast of present-day Venezuela, including the vast Maracaibo lagoon and the coast of present-day Colombia as far as the deep Gulf of Urabá, which is overlooked by the sheer faces of the Darién mountain range. There is no reason to doubt this information, also because these places were often visited by the *hidalgo*, while it is certain that they were never visited by Amerigo.

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**19** See § 9.3 herein and "Prima lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 47ra.

**20** *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos*, vol. 3, Prologue.

## 8 The Portuguese Second Fleet Under the Command of Álvares Cabral Crosses the Atlantic and Reaches India (1500-1501)

**Summary** 8.1 On the Way to India the Portuguese Second Fleet Stops Over in Porto Seguro. – 8.2 Cabral's Fleet Reaches India.

### 8.1 On the Way to India the Portuguese Second Fleet Stops Over in Porto Seguro

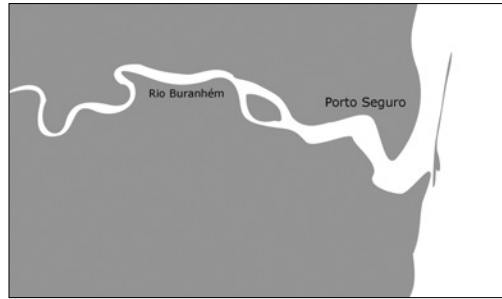
In Portugal, King Manuel, having evaluated the successes achieved and errors made during the voyage of the First Fleet (or First Armada), quickly organised the voyage of the Second Fleet to the East Indies. On March 9, 1500, this fleet of thirteen ships, i.e. four caravels and nine larger vessels, carrying a total of 1,400 men (sailors, soldiers and merchants), set sail from Lisbon. Two ships were chartered, one from the Florentines Bartolomeo Marchionni and Girolamo Sernigi, the other from Diogo da Silva, Count of Portalegre. The 240-ton flagship *El Rey* and ten other ships were equipped with heavy artillery and belonged to the Crown.

The fleet was under the command of the young nobleman Pedro Álvares Cabral (1467-1520) and its mission was to reach the markets of the Indian Ocean. For this reason, no expense had been spared in equipping the ships; in addition to the artillery they carried a large amount of money and goods for exchange (mainly metals: lead, copper and mercury), and many glittering gifts to be distributed, created by refined artisans. King Manuel remembered Vasco da Gama's humiliation over the small size of his ships and gifts, and intended to present himself on the eastern markets as a great king whose magnificence could rival that of the Indian princes. Amerigo wrote to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco informing him of the fleet's imminent departure: "And now once again the King of Portugal has equipped 12 ships with great riches".<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Prima lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 47ra.





**Figure 8.1** Porto Seguro, the river port where Cabral's fleet docked (from Google Earth). Mount Pascoal is situated 60 km to the south

Alongside those splendid, well-painted ships sailed two modest caravels under the command of the brothers Bartolomeu and Diogo Dias destined to explore the eastern coast of Africa, which were supposed to identify Sofala, a city with a nearby gold mine. The thirteen ships sailed fast: after five days, they sighted the Canary Islands and eight days later they reached the Cape Verde Islands. Then they crossed the ocean on a south-westerly course that took the fleet far out to sea to catch the southern trade winds, which would push them some distance south of the Cape of Good Hope.

The crossing had only just begun when Vasco de Ataíde's caravel disappeared without apparent reason. The fleet searched for it for many hours; his brother Pêro de Ataíde, known as 'Captain Hell', searched the ocean from his ship, scanning the horizon in vain for a wreck, or a survivor. Evening came and they continued their navigation, making increasing leeway towards the west. On about March 12, a small island was sighted, which they named Quaresima. After further days of navigation, the lookouts saw signs of land: banks of seaweed and land birds. On April 24, 1500 the Friday after Easter, they saw a great mountain (which in reality was not that high), which was named Mount Pascoal, and many natives standing still along the beach watching the fascinating spectacle of the sailing ships, which were very strange and seemed enormous to them. They had reached the coast of present-day Brazil.

While the ships were anchored offshore in a place that seemed secure, a boat was sent ashore to establish contact with the natives who appeared warlike. In the meantime, a strong southerly wind began to blow: the situation risked becoming critical and so the captains re-called the sailors who had gone ashore. They had been unable to communicate with the *Indios*. The fleet, entrusting itself to the wind, sailed in search of a more hospitable place. The waters were made dangerous by submerged reefs, sandbanks and large floating trunks, so that boats were sent ahead of the ships, the sailors sounding the sea floor and shouting out the depth. After about forty miles of careful navigation a river mouth was sighted. This was the Buranhém, as it was later named, which before reaching the ocean formed a great body of water with the capacity to shelter the entire fleet; an appropriate name was chosen, Porto Seguro.<sup>2</sup> Although surrounded by a tall forest, in some ways it was similar to Lisbon's river port situated upstream of the mouth of the Tagus.

<sup>2</sup> The stopover at Porto Seguro was described between 1500 and 1502 by five different people: the Portuguese, Pêro Vaz de Caminha, the *maestre* João Faras, an anonymous pilot, and the two Florentines Girolamo Sernigi and Amerigo Vespucci. In addition, it was clearly illustrated by the painter and cartographer Lopo Homem in the *Miller Atlas*.

Several small canoes with native fishermen were floating there. One, with two naked men adorned with multi-coloured feathers, came alongside the flagship. With gestures, they were invited aboard the ship where a solemn welcome was prepared. Amazed at the sight, the two natives came into the presence of Cabral, who was dressed in sumptuous clothes and had a showy gold neck-chain hanging on his chest. He treated them as though they were ambassadors from a great chief. The interaction between them was disappointing: one of the fishermen pointed at the necklace, and using gestures perhaps asked if he could have it, but this gift was refused. Both Indios made downward-pointing gestures that were interpreted in contrasting ways. In the end, the bewilderment and apprehension caused by this meeting got the better of them; both young men lay down on the deck and went to sleep. The crew members observed their carefully shaved and painted naked bodies. Someone put something under their heads and others covered their nakedness. When the Indios awoke their dream continued; they were accompanied ashore and given many gifts: showy hats, two shirts, mirrors and bells. Once ashore they disappeared among their tribesmen who crowded around them.

There were more meetings with members of the tribe in the following days: some Indios were suspicious and reticent and held back others who seemed more welcoming, but in the end festive cordiality prevailed and the people became increasingly good-humoured. Many danced to the sound of their instruments and at this point the young captain Diogo Dias got out his bagpipes and began to play and dance with them. The jollity became increasingly unrestrained.

Pêro Vaz de Caminha, the Admiral's secretary, carefully recorded the events of this close encounter. He described the vigorous and healthy bodies of the people (of Tupiniquim stock), saying that this agitated community reminded him of a well-fed herd of wild animals. He did not say this in an unfriendly manner, quite the opposite. The comparison with the small, often undernourished or crippled people of his own country, was all to the advantage of the natives. Pêro Vaz carefully described three young women, their long, loose, shoulder-length hair, the carefully shaved robust bodies, elegantly painted, the fine faces that, unlike those of the men, were not deformed by bones inserted into the lips or coloured stones in holes in the cheeks.

In the meantime, the captain major decided on the names to give to these places and christened those vast lands, not understanding whether they were part of an island or a continent, with the name Vera Cruz. In addition, it also seemed certain that they were on this side of the *raya* and thus belonged to Portugal. In any case, Cabral took possession of them in the name of King Manuel. He consulted with the captains of the many ships on what to do and on the advisability of not delaying the departure for the East Indies.

He discussed the idea of carrying off a number of natives, but the idea was discarded: it was better to remain on friendly terms. It was decided to leave behind two *degradados* (criminals sentenced to death who were crew members) so that they could learn the language and collect important information for those who might arrive there in the future. It was also decided to immediately send a ship back to Lisbon with news of the newly discovered lands. The chosen vessel was a caravel under the command of André Gonçalves, which carried all the supplies for the entire fleet and was to be destroyed when the supplies had been consumed. The name of this caravel, protagonist of an epic solo voyage, is unknown, but it is usually called the *naveta*.

Cabral decided to send Diogo Dias, who had become friendly with the natives, to visit their village situated a short distance away near the beach. He went with the two *degradados* who were to remain there.

Before setting sail, Cabral intended to celebrate the Easter. A cross, made of two large tree trunks, was raised on a small islet close to the land delimiting the harbour. The natives helped and keenly observed the iron tools used to cut the wood and the nails used to join the trunks. They immediately understood the great value of this metal. The priests travelling with the fleet celebrated the sung mass with solemnity; the natives participated with empathy sharing the sense of the sacred, and the Christian sailors were struck by this.

When the sailors unloaded the supplies from the *naveta* to then distribute them among the other ships, the natives helped, and they also assisted in loading logs of brazilwood, which produced a red dye. This episode was illustrated with great accuracy on the Portuguese nautical chart made by Lopo Homem in 1502.

As stated above, Diogo Dias, the jovial entertainer, accompanied by the two condemned men, went to the native village carrying his bagpipes. He observed the *malocas*, the great long houses supported on large tree trunks and roofed with palm leaves, and inside he saw the hammocks woven from cotton cords hanging in rows down both sides of the hut; he did not see the supplies of smoked meat hanging above, or did not give them much attention. He went outside and began to play his bagpipes and once again, loud music and dancing broke out.

When night came, the three Portuguese men were accompanied to the shore, but only Diogo got into the boat. The two condemned men stayed on the beach crying and the Indios, moved by this, insisted that they too were taken to the ships, but without success. Being left behind was the condemned men's fortune.

It was time to depart: the *naveta* under the command of André Gonçalves, an experienced man from a noble family, set sail on May 1 on a north-easterly course, destination Lisbon, to take news of the great discovery to King Manuel. The fleet sailed the next day, heading towards a destiny of storms, conflicts and successes.

## 8.2 Cabral's Fleet Reaches India

Cabral and his fleet had left Porto Seguro on May 2, 1500, sailing towards the Cape of Good Hope, a crossing of 1,500 leagues. On May 12, a comet with a long tail appeared low on the horizon towards Arabia.<sup>3</sup> It remained visible for about ten days and then set. On Sunday May 24, while the fleet sailed together, a sudden gust of wind came from the bows, so sudden that it went unnoticed until it tore the sails and broke the masts of many ships. In a moment, four ships keeled over and sank with all on board, without a chance of rescuing anyone. Among them were the caravel of the skilful and courageous Bartolomeu Dias and the ship hired from the Count of Portalegre. The seven surviving ships continued in that terrible squall with broken masts and torn sails for the whole day, and then the sea swelled to such a degree that it seemed as though the ships were "to rise up to heaven". The wind sudden-

<sup>3</sup> It was thought at the time that comets were meteors that travelled through the atmosphere.

ly dropped although the storm was still so fierce that none of the captains dared unfurl his remaining sails. Adrift in the dark, some of the ships lost sight of each other. Two remained with the flagship, the *El Rey*, another two with the great ship the *Anunciada*.

The seventh ship, Diogo Dias's caravel, had disappeared. The six ships finally regrouped at the small Island of Mozambique, off eastern Africa, whose pasha gave them a friendly welcome. From here, the fleet reached Kilwa where Cabral attempted, unsuccessfully, to come to a diplomatic agreement with the pasha there. The fleet then sailed up the coast as far as Malindi where Cabral took on two skilled local pilots, as Vasco da Gama had done three years earlier, in order to reach the western coast of India.

When they reached the great peninsula, they stopped in a quiet place where the ships were repaired and repainted. The fleet then reached Calicut where Cabral was received by the city's prince, the Rajah or Zamorin, in his luxurious residence. Cabral offered him gifts of high workmanship, including splendid crystal wares, and presented his King's credentials together with a very flattering letter the latter had written to his faraway peers. Cabral also arranged the exchange of hostages that Vasco da Gama had organised previously. In other words, Cabral proceeded with careful diplomacy and great generosity, after which he asked the Rajah for permission to establish a base in the city for trading with Portugal. Permission was granted but not without some hesitation. The agreement was soon in the public domain and caused alarm among the Arab community, which controlled most of the trade that took place in that port.

Cabral, underestimating this alarm, began to build the fortifications that were to house the base. After two months of work, the increasingly hostile Arab merchants stirred up a revolt involving the local population, and a reciprocal massacre began. The Portuguese at the base were all killed, and only those who threw themselves into the water and swam to the ships survived. Aires Corera, head of the base, the secretary Pêro Vaz de Caminha, João Faras, King Manuel's physician and astronomer, three friars and more than fifty soldiers and sailors all died. The men from the Portuguese ships then attacked a 'Moorish' ship, killed the crew and set fire to it. Seeing that the Rajah did not intervene, as had been agreed, the Portuguese artillery fired on the city for a whole day destroying many houses and killing 'six hundred'<sup>4</sup> inhabitants. These events occurred during the last days of 1500.<sup>5</sup>

The Portuguese fleet then set sail heading south, reaching the city of Cochin, where the Rajah was friendly and hospitable. Cabral carried out a more modest version of his programme. Having organised a base at Cananea and taken on board spices and other goods, he headed towards Africa in order to return home before the monsoons prevented him from doing so. In this way, he avoided an attack by the Arabs who had gathered a fleet of eighty ships with the intention of destroying the hated competitors. The crossing was not tranquil. First, the Portuguese intercepted and plundered an Indian ship. Then, upon reaching Malindi, the great flagship *El Rey* leading the convoy ran aground and its keel was ripped open. The crew and cargo were saved, but the beautiful ship of 240 tons had to be burned. The numerous cannons that were its pride were given to the city. At this point,

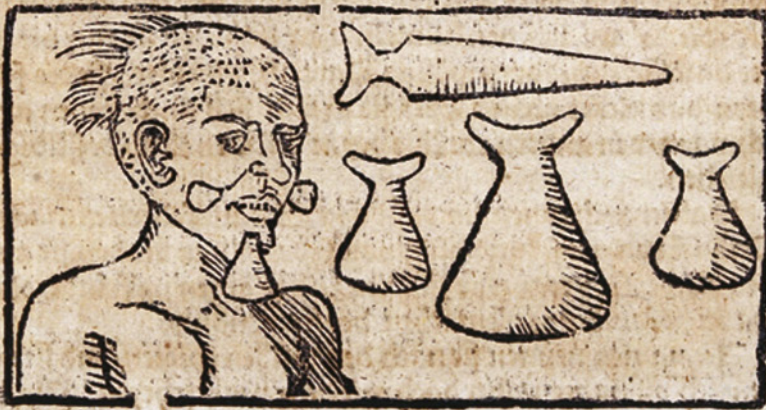
<sup>4</sup> For the Latins, 'six hundred' indicates a large and indeterminate number.

<sup>5</sup> Exactly when the Columbus brothers were being taken to Seville in chains.

**S**ie machen eyne platten vff frem haupt/lassen daumb  
 her eyn krenzlein von haren wie eyn m̄sch. Ich hab  
 sie offte gefragt/wober sie das mustet der haar betten/  
 Sagten sie/ Vhre vorwarter bettens an eynem Wanne gese-  
 hen/der bette Weire Humane geheysen/vnd bette vil wun-  
 derbarlichs dings vnter snen gethan/vnd man wil es sei eyn  
 Propheet oder Apostel gewesen.

Weiter fragte ich sie/womit sie betten die har Konnen ab-  
 schneiden/ehe snen dieschiff betten scheren bracht /sagten sie  
 betten eynen stein teil genomen/betten eyn ander ding darun-  
 ter gehalten/daruff die har abgeschlagen/dan die mittelste  
 platte hatten sie mit eynem schiber/eyns gebellen steyns/  
 welche sie vil brauchen zum scheren/gemacht. Weiter ha-  
 ben sie eyn ding von roten feddern gemacht/heyset kannitta-  
 re/das binden sie vmb den kopff.

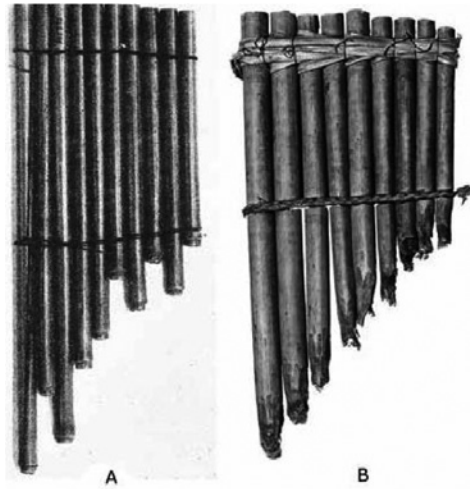
Sie haben auch inden vndersten lippen des mundes/eyn  
 groß loch/das machen sie von jugent auff/wan sie noch juns-  
 gen sein/stechen sie snen mit eynem spitzen birzborns knochen  
 syn löchlin hindurch/darin stecken sie dan eyn steynlein oder



Figures 8.2a-b The 'ornaments' inserted into the cheeks of the male members of the Tupinambá Indios are carefully smoothed coloured stones. From Hans Staden, *Wahhaftige Historia* (Marburg 1557).  
 © Biblioteca Digital de Obras Raras e Especiais da Universidade de São Paulo

Wahrhafftiger kurtzer be-  
richt/handel vnd sicken der Tuppin In-  
bas/derer gefangner ich gewesen bin/Wonen in Ame-  
rica/ire landt schaffe ligt in in 24. gradus vff der  
Seuden seit d linien æquinoctial/ir landtstoffet  
an eyn reffer/Aio de Jenero genant.





**Figure 8.3** Pan flutes were part of the musical repertoire of the South American Tupiniquim Indios (A) and of the Melanesian population of the Solomon Islands (B); both populations were late-Neolithic cultures. Each pipe of the flute was tuned individually. Fig. A from: Métraux, *La civilisation matérielle des tribus Tupi-Guarani* (1928); fig. B: Toulouse Muséum d'histoire naturelle. © Didier Descouens, Wikimedia Commons

Cabral ordered Nicolau Coelho, captain of the *Anunciada*, to sail ahead alone to the appointment at Cape Verde, which had been prearranged in Lisbon.

This ship, the fastest in the fleet, arrived there punctually at the end of May 1501. Cabral remained in the rearguard, his fleet reduced from thirteen ships to five.

In reality, six vessels survived, because Diogo Dias had not been shipwrecked as all had feared. After the great storm, his caravel drifted for many days until a sailor on watch in the crow's nest sighted a large uninhabited island, which today is called Mauritius, and a few days later, the island of Réunion, also uninhabited.<sup>6</sup>

The ship then veered west, came to a land they did not recognise and sailed northward up the coast. This was Madagascar, a very large island whose existence they were unaware of, although it was well-known to the Arabs as it was the setting for some of the adventures of 'Sinbad the Sailor' from *A Thousand and One Nights*. On reaching the northern end of the island, the small caravel once more sailed in the vastness of the Indian Ocean. After several weeks of navigation towards the north, they came in sight of Cape Guardafui (today Ras Asir) at the top of the Horn of Africa. The hostility of its inhabitants forced Dias to take to the open sea. For many weeks, the ship was at the mercy of monsoons and threats from pirates. Thirst, hunger and scurvy took their toll on the crew. Finally, on reaching the coast of present-day Eritrea they found help and were able to obtain water and fresh supplies. Only six men survived with the captain Diogo Dias, a crew so small that it was only possible to manage the caravel by working non-stop for many hours with hardly any sleep. The captain decided to sail southward along the coast of East Africa, round the Cape of Good Hope and sail up to Cape Verde. The caravel was the first to make the rendezvous at the end of May 1501.

<sup>6</sup> These islands are today called the Mascarenes.

## 9 Amerigo Vespucci in Lisbon (1500-1501)

**Summary** 9.1 The Supply Ship Reaches Lisbon. – 9.2 King Manuel Invites Amerigo Vespucci to Lisbon Twice. – 9.3 Amerigo Ends the Long Letter to Lorenzo Di Pierfrancesco. – 9.4 Vespucci's Long Stay in Lisbon, Careful Preparations for the Astronomical Observations.

### 9.1 The Supply Ship Reaches Lisbon

Little is known of the return voyage of the old and dilapidated *naveta* loaded with brazilwood and destined for demolition, but navigation is subject to precise rules and therefore it is not difficult to reconstruct the vicissitudes it had to face. André Gonçalves sailed in view of the coast of the New World, yet keeping as far out to sea as possible in order to avoid reefs and shallows. Having reached Cape of Saint Augustine – the eastern point of the New World – in about fifteen days, captain Gonçalves had to decide which course to set: sailing towards the north-west to reach the Antilles and then crossing the ocean in safety following an already tested route, or undertaking the crossing using a shorter route never before taken in that direction. He chose to face the dangerous equatorial waters and reach the Portuguese-inhabited Cape Verde Islands, and so avoid the Spanish-controlled waters.

The crossing was problem free and very fast. On May 18, they passed a deserted island already sighted by Cabral's flagship, which at that time had been named Quaresima,<sup>1</sup> but Gonçalves did not know this. The island was covered by great forests and surrounded by menacing rocks. The captain chose to take note of its position, named it after Saint John (the saint of the day, Pope John I) and continued sailing fast towards the Cape Verde Islands. From there, in twelve days – just over what it had taken during the outward voyage – Gonçalves reached Lisbon in mid-June.

King Manuel was immediately told about the first part of Cabral's voyage, he read the letters sent to him from Porto Seguro, and was pleased about

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**1** The island appears on the Cantino Planisphere with the name given it by Cabral, Quaresima, during Lent (Quaresima) of 1500. Today it is called Fernando de Noronha and belongs to Brazil, and it is occupied by a village and a small airport. It also appears on Juan de La Cosa's map.





**Figure 9.1** The island of many names: Quaresima, São João, Fernando de Noronha. This may have been the bay in which Vespucci found refuge. © Wikimedia Commons

the brazilwood: its quality was as good as that from Asia and cost nothing, except the transport which was much shorter. As for the vast Land of Vera Cruz, which Cabral had taken possession of in name of the Portuguese Crown, there was a substantial problem: in order to claim legitimate possession, it was indispensable to prove that it was situated within the limits established by the Treaty of Tordesillas. This was necessary and urgent, as it was known that Spanish ships had already reached unknown lands in that area and Spanish expeditions were underway to return there. There was also recent news that a number of caravels had returned from those places and the captain of one of them, Amerigo Vespucci, had measured its longitude.

There were only a few expert sailors in King Manuel's small kingdom. Many of them were sailing in the East with Cabral; others were engaged in the traditional commerce of hides, cloth and other goods with northern Europe, or fishing along the African coasts to then sell the catch to people in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, as soon as Cabral returned, the King intended to send a third fleet towards the east under the command of Vasco da Gama with whom he had reconciled (see § 5.1). He wanted to establish a continuous flow of luxury goods from the Asian markets.

The King decided that it would be opportune to prepare a small fleet and to take on an expert pilot - Vespucci to be precise - to carry out the most urgent work, at little cost and in the utmost secrecy. The *política do sigilo* - the *policy of secrecy* - had never betrayed him or his predecessors. Perhaps this is why we have no details of who the captains were on this expedition: most historians believe, rightly, that the captain general was André Gonçalves, who knew the route back to Porto Seguro very well.

## 9.2 King Manuel Invites Amerigo Vespucci to Lisbon Twice

On their return to Andalusia, Vespucci and de La Cosa informed Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of the unknown lands they had visited. They gave the Queen the few treasures they had found: large crystals of amethyst and beryl as well as “an oyster in which there were 130 pearls and others which had less, the Queen took the one with 130 pearls and I found a way not to let her see the others”,<sup>2</sup> as Vespucci wrote in his “Lettera a Soderini”. However, in the Latin translation this passage is omitted, while in the “Prima lettera familiare” he wrote: “we took out 14 pearls grown in the oyster’s flesh that greatly pleased the Queen”.

Following this important visit, Amerigo took up residence in a beautiful house in Seville, made available to him by Bishop Fonseca by order of King Ferdinand of Aragon. The navigator was recovering from the fatigue of the voyage and malarial fever: two days of fever and one without, the rhythm of the ‘double quartan’ form. The terrible cold pervading the body and the violent trembling accompanying the rising fever, even during the hottest summer days, had disappeared, but he was still unwell.

In the meantime, a messenger arrived with an astonishing request: “come to Lisbon because the King of Portugal has an assignment he wishes to entrust to you and for which you will be well-paid”.<sup>3</sup> Amerigo, who was unaware of André Gonçalves’ return, and did not imagine that news of his own recent expedition had reached Lisbon, was amazed by this request. After seeking advice, perhaps from his wife, he replied with these words: “I am in ill health. When I am well, if Your Highness still wishes to make use of me I will do what is commanded”. In those days, he also received a letter from Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco asking for news, to which he began to reply with difficulty.

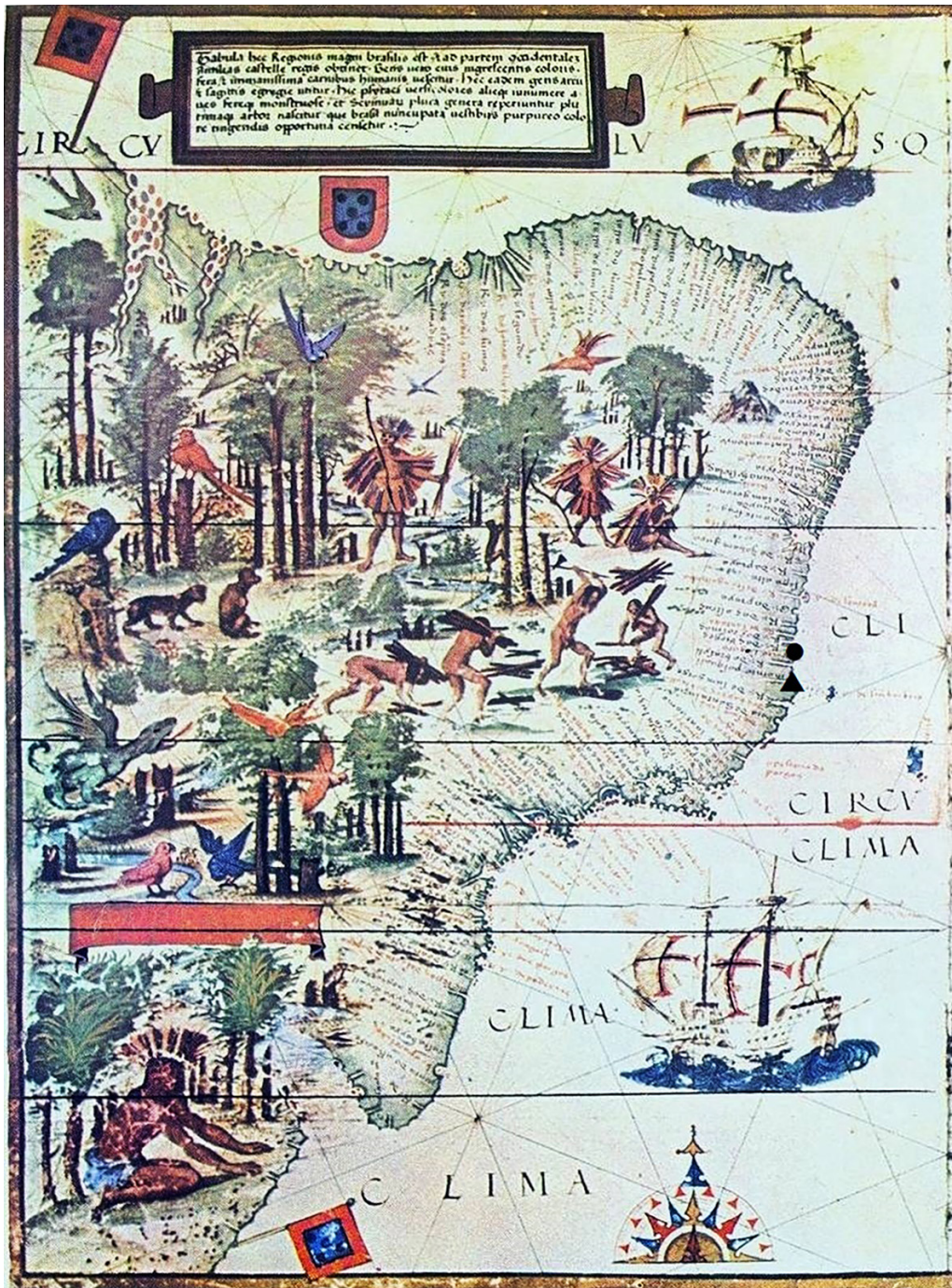
Amerigo had not yet forgotten King Manuel’s invitation, or finished the letter to Lorenzo, when a friend from Florence came to visit him in Lisbon. This was Giuliano di Bartolomeo of the del Giocondo family,<sup>4</sup> wealthy silk producers and traders who had been in contact with Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, who also raised silk worms on his estates. After talking about common acquaintances and discussing the situation in Andalusia and Portugal, Giuliano del Giocondo explained the reason for his visit: King Manuel needed an expert to calculate the longitude of the lands discovered by Cabral in order to decide whether, according to the Treaty of Torsedillas, they belonged to Portugal or not. The King assured that three caravels were ready to sail, and that his astronomer, Abraham Zacuto, a Sephardic Jew, would provide assistance in defining a method for establishing longitude. Moreover, the astronomer had a collection of useful instruments for this purpose. Lastly, Giuliano del Giocondo added that Amerigo would be well-paid for this work.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Formisano, *Lettere di viaggio*, 57, ll. 27-30. This subterfuge is only mentioned in the edition of the “Lettera a Soderini” printed in Florence (1505?). Was it perhaps an attempt at tax dodging?

<sup>3</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 115ra.

<sup>4</sup> On this family, see Pallanti, *La vera identità della Gioconda*.

<sup>5</sup> In the “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 115ra, the text reads: “venne el detto Giuliano a Sivilia, per la venuta e prieghi del quale fui forzato a venire”. The arguments put forward by Giuliano del Giocondo are inductive reconstructions based on what subsequently occurred; according to J. Gil, cited by Varela, *Colombo e i fiorentini*, Vespucci’s decision to go to Lisbon



**Figure 9.2** This image shows the Indios of Porto Seguro helping to cut and load brazilwood. From a map by Lopo Homem, *Terra Brasilia*, included in the Miller Atlas (1519). Note the native using an iron tool given to him by the sailors. The dot marked on the coast indicates Porto Seguro, the triangle indicates Mount Pascoal, in the shadow of which Cabral's fleet anchored. The flags with five circles, belonging to the Portuguese navy, indicate the boundaries (very liberally calculated) of Portugal's large colony. Provenance: Bibliothèque nationale de France

Vespucci, who during his period of convalescence had thought many times about the Southern Sky, resplendent with thus-far unknown stars, said that the commission interested him and that he would go to Lisbon. Giuliano del Giocondo hastened to take him back to the Portuguese capital. It was the beginning of July.

All occurred in a great hurry and Amerigo, who in Lisbon completed his letter of reply to his former employer, regretfully admitted to having left the house where he had spent his convalescence, *insalutato hospite*, without taking proper leave of his host.

### 9.3 Amerigo Ends the Long Letter to Lorenzo Di Pierfrancesco

Following the death of Giannotto Berardi and the definitive collapse of the company, Amerigo was perhaps annoyed by the fact that Lorenzo had made arrangements for the bank in Seville but had not provided for him, leaving him without any prospects in a foreign country. Amerigo's compatriots who travelled back and forth to Seville on business had informed him of the troubles in Florence, where rival factions were constantly clashing. He had heard of Piero de' Medici's banishment from the city in 1494. He also knew that Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco and his brother Giovanni had repudiated the House of Medici and its coat of arms, a shield decorated with five balls, and had taken the new surname Popolano. Amerigo may have known about Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco's journey to Naples in the same year. He had perhaps been told of the vehement preaching of the Dominican friar Savonarola against the Medici's corruption and ambition, which threatened the city's Republican regime. He may have heard how the Medici faction, in agreement with the Vatican, had managed to get the friar hanged and his body burned in a public square in 1498.

Therefore, he understood that Lorenzo had not deliberately abandoned him; he just did not have the time to deal with him, "And now - Amerigo asked himself - what shall I tell him?" He thought about what to do and then considered that no grumbling was expedient and thus decided to make it clear that the King of Spain in person had given him an assignment, which he had completed with both success and profit.

Amerigo had not written a letter for a long time and he began with difficulty: 'Magnificent Lord', then repeating several times 'Your Magnificence'. He also found a quip, which he thought amusing, and in the end told the story of his second voyage that had ended two months previously.

Your Magnificence will understand how on the commission of his Highness the King of Spain I departed with two caravels on May 18, 1499 to go and explore in the west via the Ocean Sea.<sup>6</sup>

So began Amerigo's account. He wrote of crossing the Atlantic in twenty-four days, *departing from the Canary Islands* and arriving in those places, and he spoke of his amazement at the Equator around midday: the sun was vertical, that is in a position creating no shadows. He told of the enormous

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was also influenced by the fact that the Spanish royals had forbidden foreigners from participating in voyages of discovery from 1500 onwards, a very near date.

6 "Prima lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 41rb.

mass of water pouring into the sea from a vast river (the Amazon), making the seawater drinkable at a great distance from the river mouth, of the mangrove forests along the banks, so dense that it was impossible to land with the boats. He told of an island (Curaçao) populated by men of giant stature and of the brief terrifying encounter with them. However, when he should have continued with the arrival of Alonso de Ojeda and his acts of piracy, he cut the story short and did not mention him.

Lastly, at the end of this “Prima lettera familiare”, there is a passage that is not easy to interpret but from which interesting conclusions can be drawn:

I decided, Magnificent Lorenzo, just as I have recounted by letter what happened to me, to send two figures of the description of the world made by my own hand, and you shall see that they are a flat figure [planisphere] and a globe which I intend to send to you via our Florentine agent Francesco Lotti who is here: I believe they will please you, especially the spherical map, as a short time ago I made one for their Highnesses and they value it a great deal.<sup>7</sup> I wished to bring them myself, but the new plan to return once again to discovery affords me neither the place nor the time. There is no lack of people in that city [Florence] who know the figure of the world who would perhaps correct some things on it, however, whosoever would send me [objections], should await my arrival so that I can defend myself.<sup>8</sup>

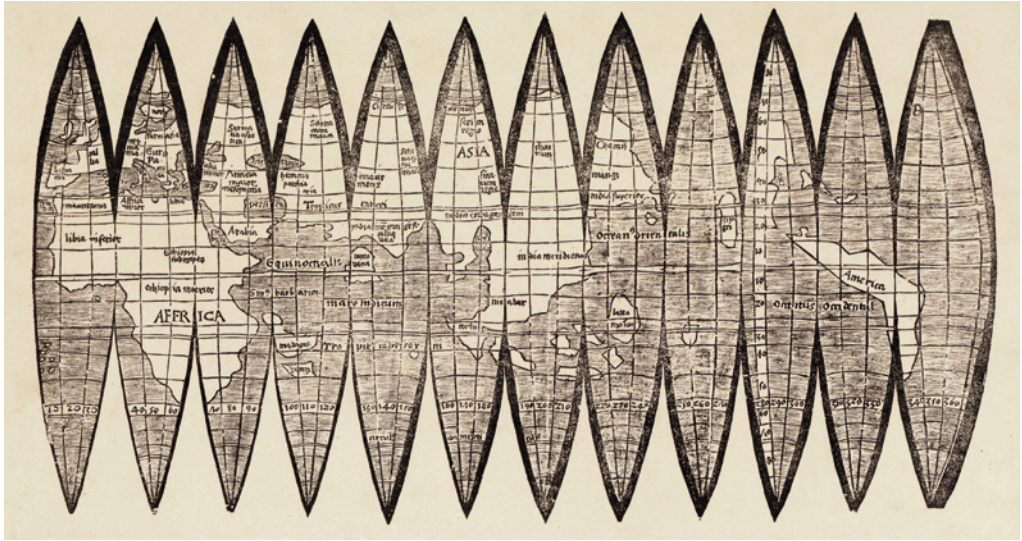
In short, after his second voyage, Amerigo told Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco that he had made a map and globe that would please him. He added that if some Florentines wished to criticise or correct his new idea, they should wait for his return to Florence, as he would know, perhaps, how to defend it. To what idea was Vespucci referring? The answer is that he was already persuaded that the recently discovered lands were not part of Asia, but constituted a new continent and that an examination of the globe would provide the proof. It is a great pity that the map and globe have not come down to us; however, it is plausible that the globe he described was the prototype for the one published by the cartographers of Lorraine whom I will discuss in detail later (see Chapter 13).

Towards the end of his “Prima lettera familiare”, Amerigo digressed and told how his first voyage ended with the capture of slaves that were then sold in Cadiz, the profits divided equally between the fifty-five surviving crew members. In other words, this was an informal letter written without respecting chronology, but aimed at satisfying Lorenzo’s curiosity and at letting him know that he, Amerigo, had managed to survive using his own resources.

When he reached Lisbon, Amerigo – who had not finished the letter – told Lorenzo about the voyage he was about to undertake, informed him of the return of King Manuel’s First Fleet and also of the recent departure of the Second Fleet. The long letter was completed on July 18, 1500, but he only departed from Lisbon eleven months later.

<sup>7</sup> The passage is ambiguous as the context is the Kingdom of Portugal, while the Highnesses referred to seem to be the sovereigns of Spain: Isabella, who ruled in Castile and León, and Ferdinand, who ruled in Aragon and Catalonia.

<sup>8</sup> “Prima lettera familiare”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 47ra.



**Figure 9.3** Gores of Waldseemüller's globus (1507). Terrestrial globes were rare in the 1400s: the first and only one that has come down to us is that made by Martin Behaim in 1492, with a metal framework and about 50 centimetres in diameter. The next ones of which we have certain knowledge are those made by Vespucci: spheres 15-20 centimetres in diameter covered by paper segments, an expedient then used by Waldseemüller to print an image of the Earth like the one shown here. Note on the right the word 'America'. © Badische Landesbibliothek (Wikimedia Commons)

#### 9.4 Vespucci's Long Stay in Lisbon, Careful Preparations for the Astronomical Observations

In the Portuguese capital, preparation for the voyage was meticulous, especially that regarding the plan to calculate the longitude of those faraway places. Today, all we need to do is press a few keys until the artificial satellites tell us, to within a few metres, the longitude and latitude of our position, but at that time measuring the longitude of newly discovered lands was an epic achievement worthy of a monument.

In addition to a portable sundial, Vespucci had equipped himself with a series of sand hourglasses and water-clocks (clepsydras) for establishing the local time, and he added 'balestillhas' (cross-staffs), instruments that function as goniometers, making it possible to follow the gradual approaching of two stars without too much trouble.

During his training, Vespucci often talked of the Southern Sky, of the opportunity of defining a map of that sky, which he had observed so many times and greatly wished to make known to the people of the Northern Hemisphere. Furthermore, it was decided that Abraham Zacuto himself was to observe the astronomical events relative to the calculation of the longitude in Lisbon. Vespucci was very grateful for this valid collaboration, but he did not provide any details.

At that time, calculating the latitude of a place, both on land and at sea, was relatively easy for whoever was in the Northern Hemisphere. It was enough to measure, in degrees, the height above the horizon of the Pole Star, correcting the result, if necessary, as the star was not on the exact celestial pole but was about three degrees off it. With the astrolabe, which originally was no more than a goniometer with a plumb line and other accessories

attached, the process was simpler and faster. In the Southern Hemisphere, the calculation was more complex, because there is no star situated on the celestial pole or thereabouts. By day, the latitude was estimated by measuring the height of the sun above the horizon at midday, and as this height varies with the changing seasons it was necessary to use purposely compiled tables. At night, instead, it was necessary to identify the southern celestial pole based on the position of several stars, the latitude of the celestial sphere along which they rotate having been calculated beforehand.

To calculate the longitude of a place with respect to a reference meridian is a long and complicated task. According to Amerigo's variation of Ptolemy's method (the only one in use in Europe at the time), it was necessary, as we have already seen (see § 7.7), to measure the exact local time of a conjunction (the point when two planets or a planet and the Moon are closest to each other), both in the unknown place and on the reference meridian. The difference in the times can be transformed into a difference in degrees, taking into account that in twenty-four hours a given point on the Earth's surface rotates, with respect to a fixed star, by 360°.<sup>9</sup>

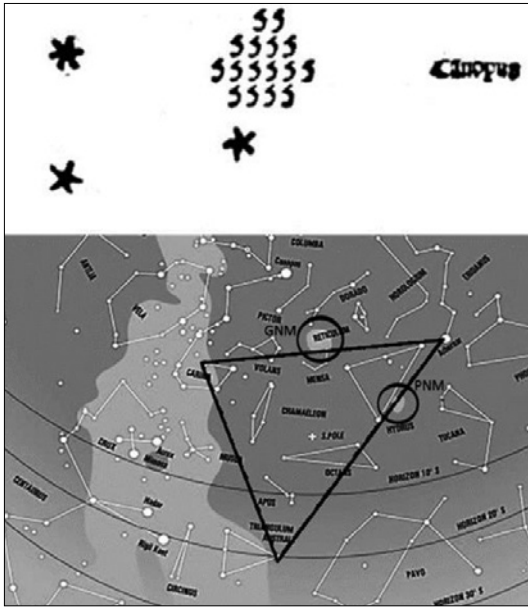
However, the dates and times of the planetary conjunctions had been measured, and even calculated for the future, by Spanish, German and Italian astronomers in order to draw up the horoscopes used to then predict the character, virtues and fortune of princely newborns and even the outcome of illnesses for rich patients. These dates and times, together with the dates of lunations, were collected in special almanachs called *Ephemerides*. They were not always precise, which was not a problem for making horoscopes but could certainly cause problems when measuring longitude. The astronomer Zacuto had calculated many dates for the Portuguese navy and had drawn up an *Almanach of Ephemerides* that was not only valid for several years, like preceding ones, but was 'perpetual'. In other words, with some small additions, it became valid for all occasions given that the astronomical events recur over the course of long or very long periods.

Among the conjunctions that were to occur between 1500 and mid-1501, several were chosen that would be visible during the night both in Lisbon and from the coasts of the New World. In theory, only two measurements would have sufficed, but it was better to plan for a few more in case bad weather prevented the observation of the conjunctions in one place or the other. It was understood that the same observations would also be made in correspondence with the Lisbon meridian (thus following Ptolemy's suggestion) with the aim of eliminating any errors that had crept into the earlier calculation.

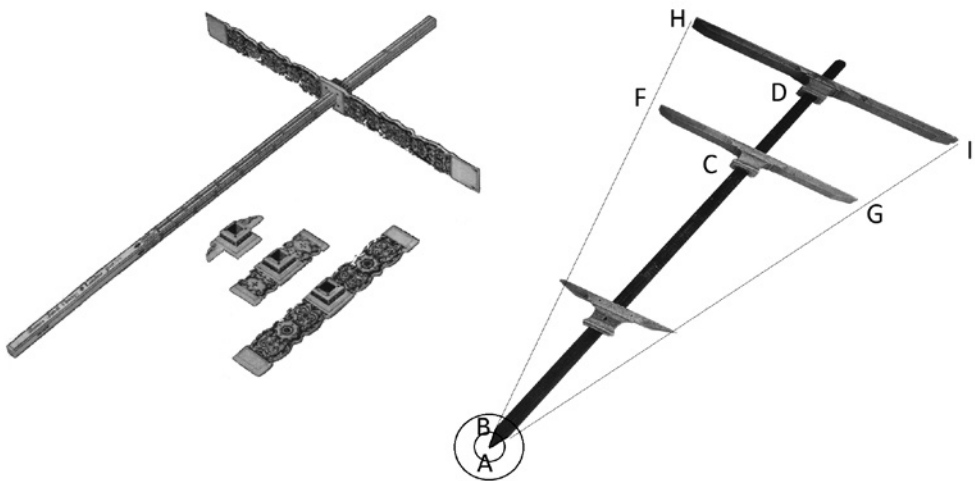
However, Vespucci was able to calculate the longitude on the other side of the ocean based on the more precise ephemerides relating to Lisbon that he carried with him. They would be needed for planning the route home from the New World. The possibility of calculating longitude during the voyage in order to decide on the return route reduced the risks and inspired confidence in the crew.

In Lisbon, Vespucci also practised calculating the orbit of the brightest stars, in other words establishing the latitudes of the celestial sphere along which they seemed to travel. To this end, he practised using astronomical instruments that he did not have access to in Seville.

<sup>9</sup> At the time, it was thought that the celestial sphere turned 360° in a day around the Earth; the result of the calculation remains the same in both cases.



**Figure 9.4** To identify the position of the southern celestial pole, the following expedient can be adopted: look for it among the three largest stars *Achernar*,  $\alpha$  *Trianguli* and  $\beta$  *Carinae*. The constellation described by Vespucci in *Mundus Novus* could correspond to the constellation of *Hydrus* situated inside the large triangle whose hypotenuse touches the Small Magellanic Cloud (PNM in the figure) (from Omodeo, "The Authenticity of Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus*", 378)



**Figure 9.5** The 'balestilha' or cross-staff was the instrument most commonly used by astronomers before the discovery of the telescope in the early 1600s. It consists of a staff or pole with graduations on three (or four) sides and three (or four) cross-pieces or transoms. The observer looked down from one end of the main staff (B), lining up the end of one transom (H) with a star whose position is known and sliding the transom until its other end (I) coincides with the star whose angular distance is to be measured



Lastly, it was established that a mason should sculpt several markers (*padroes* in Portuguese) in Lisbon stone to be taken on board and then left for future reference in the places of observation: as the Portuguese had done previously along the coasts of Africa. The use of a much greater number of precisely predictable astronomical events, according to Vespucci's advice, gave a substantial impulse to the measuring of longitude, thus improving navigational safety and the production of nautical maps, while the study of planetary events, no longer involving superstition, but with technical and scientific aims, contributed to the rise of modern astronomy.

## **10 Vespucci's Third Voyage and the Announcement of a New World (1501-1502)**

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**Summary** 10.1 The Flotilla Piloted by Vespucci Meets the Ships from Cabral's Fleet at Cape Verde. – 10.2 Vespucci Undertakes the Third Crossing of the Ocean Sea. – 10.3 A Hostile Reception: Three Sailors are Killed and Eaten by Cannibals. – 10.4 Return to Porto Seguro. – 10.5 The Natives Provide Important Information. – 10.6 The Customs of a Population with a Late Neolithic Culture. – 10.7 Further and Further South, in Search of the Passage to Beyond. – 10.8 Amerigo Vespucci, Astronomer. – 10.9 The Epic Crossing to Sierra Leone. – 10.10 Amerigo Returns to Lisbon from His Third Voyage and Announces the Existence of a New World.

### **10.1 The Flotilla Piloted by Vespucci Meets the Ships from Cabral's Fleet at Cape Verde**

It had been prearranged that the small fleet piloted by Vespucci should set sail from Lisbon towards the middle of May 1501. A few days before leaving, Amerigo saw to the stowage of the scientific material on the caravels. The *maestre* took care of stowing the supplies of food, water and wine necessary for a voyage lasting a year and a half, together with the *padroes* sculpted in Lisbon. The captain major, André Gonçalves,<sup>1</sup> had received the usual instructions that foresaw a rendezvous with Cabral's ships in the last week of the month at Cape Verde, as well as about how to treat the indigenous populations. The crew embarked on May 13, 1501. At dawn the next day, on the ebb tide, the ships navigated the six miles separating Lisbon's river port from the sea and, with a good aft wind, the three caravels sailed southward. On the fifth day, they crossed the archipelago of the Canary Islands and then for two days the sailors fished in the bountiful shallows to stock up with fish.

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**1** The name of André Gonçalves as captain of the *naveta* and then commander of the subsequent Portuguese expedition of three ships begun in May 1501 and completed in September 1502 appears in the work of Gaspar Correia *Lendas da Índia* (vol. 1, pt. 1, 152). The only known participant in this expedition was Gherardo Verde, who had the trust of both Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco and Bartolomeo Marchionni; he left the fleet at Bezequiche to board the *Anunciada* in order to collect goods and information to send to Florence.

On May 27, they sighted the Cape Verde Peninsula, clearly recognisable by the narrow verdant promontory extending towards the west, interrupting the grey profile of the beaches of Senegal. They had sailed trouble-free at a speed of eight knots for eight days in a row.

They arrived in time for the meeting with the ships from Cabral's fleet that had regrouped there as pre-arranged in order to return to Lisbon together. Great news was expected. As soon as the three caravels rounded the hook-shaped cape, they saw the city known by its inhabitants as Bezeguiche (now Dakar) and the small island of Gorée, which protected the port, in front of which several ships were anchored. One of these vessels was Diogo Dias's caravel, which by itself and for a long time had explored the waters, islands and coasts of East Africa. The three caravels from Lisbon anchored nearby and, after exchanging greetings, the sailors were informed of the disaster suffered by the Second Fleet and its unfortunate return from those coasts. The next day, the *Anunciada* arrived, the great ship chartered from Bartolomeo Marchionni and Girolamo Sernigi, captained by the capable Nicolau Coelho (see Chapter 8). The crews shouted greetings to each other, asking for news of friends and relatives and of the riches they were carrying to the homeland.

As soon as he could, Amerigo Vespucci asked for details of the Portuguese fleet's great enterprise. He explained in turn that his three ships were travelling towards the lands they had discovered a year earlier, across the Ocean Sea. Perhaps he also spoke about the idea of reaching the same places they had reached but by navigating other seas. He talked the most with Gaspar da Gama, a Jewish native of Goa who had sailed in the service of Vasco da Gama and knew the places he had just returned from very well. Using a rather rudimentary map, he listed the ports of call of East Africa (including those on the Red Sea), of the Persian Gulf and of western India. He also added that in the interior of the great Indian peninsula there was "a kingdom called Parlicati [Pulicat], which is a great kingdom rich in gold and pearls and jewels and precious stones". Gaspar da Gama then told Vespucci about the island of Zilan [Sri Lanka, or Ceylon], which he insisted should not be confused with the island of Tapobrana [Sumatra]. Zilan is also "very rich in precious stones, pearls and spices of all types, and other riches such as elephants and very fine pairs of horses".<sup>2</sup>

The "Seconda lettera familiare" provides more information that Amerigo thought useful to his former employer for trading in the market of such expensive goods:

[t]he said ships carry the following: they are loaded with infinite amounts of cinnamon; ginger, both green and dried; much pepper, cloves, nutmegs and their parts; musk and civet; storax; spicewood; cassia; gum; incense and myrrh; red and white sandalwood; camphor; grey amber; lacquer and tar; opium; aloe [...] and many other foodstuffs that it would be long to list them all.

He then adds, "I know nothing certain about jewels, except that I saw many diamonds, pearls and rubies, and among these one of beautiful colour that weighed seven and a half carats inserted in a stone".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> "Seconda lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 51v.

<sup>3</sup> "Seconda lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 52r.



**Figure 10.1** The port of Dakar (then known as Bezequiche) is situated at the western end of the Cape Verde Peninsula and is protected by the small island of Gorée

The endless list of places and cities and the wealth of goods transported on the ships may have sounded exaggerated, and so Vespucci added, “Believe me Lorenzo that what I have written thus far is the truth”. Lastly, considering his own future in the light of the tragic losses suffered by Cabral’s fleet, he concludes,

This voyage I now undertake I see is dangerous [...] none the less I undertake it with a candid spirit to serve God and the world. If God has made use of me it will give me virtue as I am prepared to carry out all His wishes, provided He grants my soul eternal rest.<sup>4</sup>

As his flotilla was about to leave Cape Verde, Amerigo hurriedly finished the letter and entrusted it to Gherardo Verde who travelled with him and embarked on the *Anunciada* that was going to Cadiz; from Cadiz he travelled to Florence. Thus, the letter, copied and recopied by the merchants who were interested in it, has come down to us.

## 10.2 Vespucci Undertakes the Third Crossing of the Ocean Sea

The ocean crossing, on the shortest route between Africa and the New World, proved to be very long and fraught with dangers, just as Amerigo had foreseen. A few days after they left the safe port of Bezequiche (Dakar), sailing south-south-east, the three caravels entered a vast area of low pressure, as can be encountered along the equatorial belt, and for forty-four days they proceeded under an interminable storm. Night and day, a dark sky poured torrential rain on the small fleet tossed by the violence of the waves. The fires that were kept burning at the stern meant that the pilots did not lose sight of each other, but the wood and drinking water were running out. The crews were afraid that the end was near when Amerigo, during a moment when the night sky cleared, managed to distinguish some of the stars of Ur-

<sup>4</sup> “Seconda lettera familiare”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 52v.

sa Minor low on the horizon, and using the astrolabe he managed to establish the latitude. He also noted that the compass needle pointed just east of the celestial pole instead of slightly west of it. This change in the magnetic declination indicated, as Christopher Columbus had established on his first voyage, that they were just beyond the meridian of the Azores. Having made his calculations, Amerigo announced that dry land was not far off, perhaps a week's navigation to the west. At this good news, the captain major gave the command to him for the time necessary to reach land. The new course was followed and, finally, after many days of difficult navigation, on August 17, 1500 they sighted land at latitude 5° South.

### 10.3 A Hostile Reception: Three Sailors are Killed and Eaten by Cannibals

The captains anchored the caravels about two miles off shore. Those who had travelled along these coasts knew of the many hidden obstacles where the sea was shallow. All knew the sad adventure of Columbus's flagship (§ 3.3) and the more recent incident of the *El Rey* (§ 8.2), so that everyone adapted without discussion to the principle: never expose the ship that must take you home to any risk.

The seashore was deserted, but the openings in the thick vegetation, as well as the smoke rising above the trees, showed that there were people. On coming ashore, the captain major took possession of the land in the name of King Manuel. The brevity of the navigation undertaken after crossing the meridian of the Azores persuaded him that they had not passed the *raya*,<sup>5</sup> and thus the ceremony was justified. A squad went in search of provisions. They collected wood and drew water from a nearby source. While they were doing this, they noticed that a large number of natives had gathered on a high hilltop to watch them. They were naked and looked like others Amerigo had seen, but these natives were suspicious and did not respond to the signs of invitation. Therefore, the sailors left the bells and mirrors and other trinkets they had brought with them clearly visible on the beach, got back in their boats and departed from the shore: it was dusk. While they rowed back to the anchored ships, they saw the natives hurriedly come down the hill and take the things left on the sand.

The next morning, from the ships, they saw that the natives seen the day before were on the beach and were making smoke signals, which seemed to be calling them. The boats returned to the eagerly desired land, as perhaps riches were awaiting them. Using signs, the natives indicated that the sailors should go with them into the interior, and two crewmen asked the captain for permission to "go with them to the interior to see what kind of people they are and if they had any riches or spices, or other goods".<sup>6</sup> The captain agreed on the understanding that the sailors return within five days. Taking the usual things to barter with the natives, they set off full of hope.

<sup>5</sup> The *raya* was the demarcation line between the territories belonging to Portugal situated to the east and the Spanish lands to the west. The *raya* ran more or less from the mouth of the Amazon River southward along the present-day meridian 50° W.

<sup>6</sup> "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 116r.

## Von der neuen welt

darß vō den völcern andere kaußte/vñ sind vō vns  
gangen/mit dem geding/dz sy zū vns nach fünf tagen  
vff das höchst sorgten wider zekommen/wann wir ir  
so lang warteten/vnd also haben sy den weg angriffen  
vnd wir die widerfart zū vnsern schiffen genen.



**Figure 10.2** Natives, using women as bait, attract a Portuguese sailor, whom is killed by one of them with a club.  
Image from a German edition of Vespucci's *Von der neuen Welt* (Strasbourg, 1509)

The natives came and went, but did not communicate with the new arrivals, and five days passed, then six and then seven. Finally, on the seventh day, when the sailors came ashore the natives appeared with their women:

And given that they were still unsure, we agreed to send one of our men, who was an agile and valiant youth, and to best reassure them we went back to the boats, and he went among the women, and as he reached them they formed a great circle around him and began to touch and feel him, wondering at him in amazement. We saw a woman come down from the hill carrying a great stick in her hand. When she reached the place where our Christian stood, she went up behind him, raised the club and gave him such a blow that he fell dead on the ground. Immediately the women took him by the feet and dragged him towards the hill and the men rushed towards the beach and shot at us with their bows and arrows.<sup>7</sup>

A treacherous ambush, and once again women were used as the bait. Under a hail of arrows, no one managed to go ashore. They shot four rounds from the bombard, which missed the target but the noise scattered the attackers. The captain major forbade the sailors to hunt down the assassins, and the orders in this regard were peremptory. Thus, all were powerless witnesses to the dismemberment of their companion's body and watched in horror as he was roasted for a cannibalesque banquet. The cannibals mocked them and made it clear that the two companions they were waiting for had met the same end, "and they were sated by so much outrage, and we departed from them unwillingly and with much shame caused by the decision of our captain".

In actual fact, this tragedy was not the captain major's fault, as he was only following orders. The fault lay with those who had preceded this expedition in the area and had left very bad memories of their behaviour. The dark mood caused by this event and by being forbidden to retaliate accompanied them for a long time as they sailed.

Proceeding eastward, they reached a characteristic locality that was named the Ponta dos Tres Irmãos (Point of the Three Brothers) because of the presence of a row of three isolated hills. The ships then anchored nine miles further east, in a tranquil place that was given the name 'Praia dos Marcos'. As had been arranged, it was on this beach during the night between the August 31 and September 1 that Amerigo calculated the time of the conjunction between the Moon and the planet Jupiter.<sup>8</sup> According to the ephemerides, this event would also be seen in Lisbon when the Moon partially eclipsed the planet at 23:18. The difference between the two measurements made it possible to establish the longitude of the land, which indicated that it definitely belonged to Portugal and not Spain, thus showing that Vicente Yáñez Pinzón was wrong when he claimed those places in the name of the Spanish Crown. Proud of this, the sailors erected the first of the three *padroes*.<sup>9</sup>

After a short navigation, they reached the point where the coast turned south-east. This time, they stayed out at sea, managing to get the better of

<sup>7</sup> "Lettera a Soderini", folio 116v.

<sup>8</sup> I owe this information and the calculation of the astronomical events used here to Prof. Vincenzo Millucci of the University of Siena. I thank him warmly for his expertise and patience.

<sup>9</sup> The places where the *padroes* were positioned have been identified by Luzzana Caraci, *Per lasciare di me qualche fama*.



**Figure 10.3** The third voyage of Amerigo: Lisbon May 19, 1501–September 7, 1502. 1) departure from Lisbon; 2) meeting with Cabral’s ships and stay until May 30, crossing in 67 days; 3) arrival in the New World at 5°S on August 17, the natives kill and eat three sailors; 4) landing at Praia dos Marcos on August 31 and calculation of longitude; 5) landing at Baía de Todos os Santos and second calculation of longitude between the September 27 and 28; 6) long stay at Porto Seguro; 7) January 6, 1502, stop at Rio de Janeiro; 8) January 15, a stop to take stock of the situation; 9) landing at Puerto San Julián (49°18’S) on March 6; 10) the islands now called the Falklands are sighted on April 7, beginning of the journey home; 11) arrival at Sierra Leone on May 10 and a long stay; 12) arrival at the Azores in mid-August and a long stay; return to Lisbon



the violent marine currents, which during the voyage two years earlier had obliged Juan de La Cosa and Amerigo Vespucci to invert their course. The three caravels then stopped in the bay of Pititinga. It was a long stay. Almost one month after the measurement of the longitude, they reached the Cape of Saint Augustine (south of present-day Recife), the easternmost point of the continent. They also stayed there for quite a while, while two boats searched that stretch of very insidious sea and a third sailed up the great São Francisco River to the point where the mountain chains seemed to close the river to both the north and south. After another month dedicated to searching the sea and hinterlands, on November 1 the flotilla reached a splendid bay, today called Baía. On the map he was making, Amerigo wrote “Badia di tutti e’ Santi” (All Saints’ Abbey), using the name of one of the beautiful churches in Florence that overlooked the river Arno, the memory of which was very dear to him.

Today the city of Salvador stands on the promontory closing the bay to the north, and here Amerigo again calculated the longitude using, in the night between September 27 and 28, the maximum vicinity between the Moon and Jupiter. In this way, he again established that this land belonged to Portugal. To commemorate this, the second *padrão* was erected.

From Baía, the coastline continued almost straight southward as far as Cape Caravelas. In those parts, the expedition encountered a friendly and curious tribe. The natives accepted gifts of bells and mirrors, and they gladly participated in the game of indicating an object or person, pronouncing the name in their own language and listening to the name in Portuguese. Some revealed themselves to be very quick learners and some of the visitors proposed to take two of them onboard as interpreters. Three Indios agreed to leave with the flotilla and trustingly embarked. They set sail once again towards the south; Captain Gonçalves recognised a less humid environment, a sparser forest, and knew that Porto Seguro was not far off.

#### 10.4 Return to Porto Seguro

The ocean was calm, but the waters were becoming dangerous, with reefs and sandbanks, and then the lookout in the crow’s nest, having recognised the place, shouts, “Porto Seguro!” While the three caravels entered the vast calm expanse of water all in a line, the natives, all of them naked, crowded onto the beach making a great commotion. Two men clothed in rags arrived in a hurry and were more agitated than the rest. When they entered the water to get closer, they could be heard to shout greetings in Portuguese! They were the *degradados*,<sup>10</sup> the two condemned men left there by Cabral who had survived more than twenty months in that land with the help of the natives: breathless from running they cried and laughed at the same time.

The captain major, Vespucci and several sailors went to inspect the village situated between the scented forest and the vast sea. They also inspected the *malocas*, the large houses built by the natives, inside which they had a macabre surprise. Pieces of smoked meat, certainly human, hung from the ceilings, the remains of enemies killed in the recurring local conflicts.

<sup>10</sup> Mentioned by Valentim Fernandes who adds that they were taken back to the expedition’s homeland (cf. Luzzana Caraci, *Per lasciare di me qualche fama*, 148 fn. 22, 168 fn. 122).

Similar trophies became, together with parrots, the emblems of those extraordinary lands. Apart from this particular, Porto Seguro seemed the ideal place for a long stay. Part of the time could be dedicated to gathering information about the existence of wealth in the form of spices, gold and precious stones, but first it was necessary to map the geography of this land that seemed increasingly vast and without confines. They had interpreters, the three Indios they had brought with them for the purpose and the two Portuguese who in a year and a half had learnt a great deal. In this regard, Vespucci was very lucky: he was shown an old man who lived in the village and had arrived there some time before, and he came from a nomadic tribe that wandered, it must be presumed, much further south.

Amerigo decided to live in the village with the natives, as he had done on previous occasions, sleeping in their comfortable hammocks and eating their food, which tasted much better than the biscuit and dry fish eaten aboard ship.

He lists many animals: lions, pumas, jaguars, cats differing from the Spanish ones and lynxes (in reality these were large cats), small wild pigs (peccaries), roe deer, deer, fallow deer, hares and rabbits, and very long snakes. He did not forget the monkeys: "baboons and *gatti mammoni* [magical creatures] of all types". He also mentions bears, which were perhaps anteaters, and birds, including numerous parrots, more than Pliny could have imagined. Amerigo concludes, "I believe that so many species would not have fit into Noah's ark".

### 10.5 The Natives Provide Important Information

Amerigo would often spend many hours at the beach where, with the help of interpreters, he sought to gather information from the very old Indio with the lined face and vivid memory. The man, drawing with a stick in the sand, explained that to the west lay an endless chain of high mountains covered with glistening white snow, which could be seen by travelling up the river. Amerigo asked, "Even the river that flows into the lagoon of Porto Seguro?" - "Certainly, travelling up all the rivers" - "What is beyond the mountains?" - "Long narrow plains, beaches and a great sea, like the one in front of us".

For other questions it was hard to find the right words to understand each other and the drawings in the sand became confused, "Is there a passage leading to this sea?" - Amerigo insisted - "I have been told that where it is always cold and the nights are long there is a river that crosses the mountains". Amerigo continued - "Is the river water drinkable or not?" "I do not know, many moons have passed", the old man digressed. "How many moons have you lived?" - "Many, many" - the old man, concentrated, collected pebbles from the beach and arranged them like an abacus, the answer was precise "1700 moons"; Vespucci interprets: "I think that makes 132 years, counting 13 lunar cycles per year".

Apart from the age of the old Indio, his conversation with Amerigo is imaginary, but not completely. The questions are invented, but the answers are unequivocally documented on the map drawn up and printed by the cartographers Waldseemüller and Ringmann. It is a faithful interpretation of what the sailors on the three caravels had heard and seen with their own eyes: the long Cordillera of the Andes is drawn as a pile of mounds, as was the custom in Tuscany (see § 13.4 and fig. 13.5), and the western coast of

the new continent and an ocean never navigated or even seen by Europeans also appear.<sup>11</sup>

In Vespucci's narration, there is no passage to the south-west between the two oceans; nor does it appear on the projection used by Waldseemüller. However, during navigation, the sailors were constantly on the lookout for it, and they believed they saw its entrance.

When the flotilla was preparing to continue its long and difficult journey, the two *degradados* boarded a ship, still incredulous of their good fortune. They brought with them objects given to them by the Indios with whom they had lived.<sup>12</sup>

## 10.6 The Customs of a Population with a Late Neolithic Culture

Cabral's men have left us vivid and fleeting images of the village of Porto Seguro, albeit rather superficial ones as the encounter only lasted a few days. After living with the natives for a month, Vespucci described a society whose subsistence was largely based on fishing and gathering 'roots', in addition to eating fresh fruit, which was also used to produce a slightly alcoholic drink fermented in terracotta pots. In addition to fishing, the necessary protein in their diet was provided by hunting (mainly iguanas) and cannibalism. It was a balanced and plentiful diet, which did not transmit parasites and intestinal infections and was guaranteed throughout the year. It required little work, leaving time for relaxation and the care of the body, which for those people consisted in carefully shaving and removing all body hair, painting the skin and deforming the face, although only men practised the latter.

The tribe was not hierarchical and its social structure was not bound by laws. Internal frictions were minimal, almost non-existent, one reason being that private property did not exist. It was their custom to share everything; such a practice persisted among the tribes of Terra del Fuego when Charles Darwin visited there at the beginning of the 19th century.<sup>13</sup>

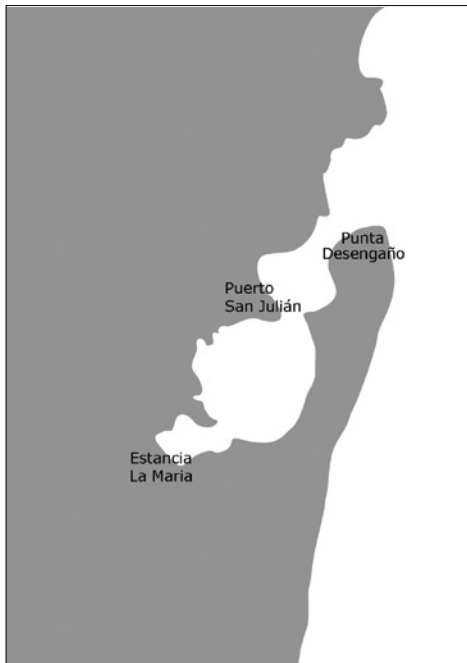
Therefore, life within the tribe was peaceful, but there were frequent clashes with neighbouring tribes,

And when they fight, they kill each other with the utmost cruelty, and whoever is victorious buries his own dead and dismembers his enemies and

<sup>11</sup> In this period, the Indios, like all populations conserving part of the Neolithic culture, had a precise awareness of the geographical conformation of their country, even on a broad scale. There is no direct information for the Tupí-Guaraní people, but we have information about the Mexican populations from both Peter Martyr and Hernán Cortés, who wrote that they had maps drawn on textiles made of cotton or agave fibres in which towns, villages, watercourses and mountains were in the correct position. Cortés used them during the conquest of Mexico (see Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*). It is also known that the Inuit people were able to precisely draw places and itineraries with which to move about the Arctic lands, while Charles Darwin in his *Journal of Researches into the Natural History etc.* (ch. 10) states that the Fuegians (inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego) gave a name to every detail of the landscape in their barren territory.

<sup>12</sup> This results from a notarial act in which the noted humanist and editor Valentim Fernandes guarantees the authenticity of the objects taken to Lisbon by two sailors. See Amado, Figueiredo, "Documento puoco conhecido sobre o Brasil, documento puoco conhecido sobre o Brasil de 1500".

<sup>13</sup> Darwin, *Journal of Researches into the Natural History etc.*, ch. 10.



**Figure 10.4** Puerto San Julián, where Amerigo's flotilla anchored on March 6, 1501, and where Magellan's fleet also sheltered on March 31, 1520 before departing for his circumnavigation of the globe. The privateer Francis Drake also wintered there with his ships in 1578, prior to sailing around the world. Lastly, the *Beagle*, the brig under the command of Robert FitzRoy, with Charles Darwin on board, passed through here in 1834 during its voyage around the world

eats them. The captives are imprisoned and kept as slaves in their houses; and if a woman, they sleep with her, if a man they wed him to their daughters. In certain moments, when they are taken by a devilish temper, they gather together relatives and other people, they stand an enslaved mother and all the children had by her in front of them, and with certain rituals kill them, piercing them with arrows, and eat them. The same is done with enslaved men and their offspring. This is certain, because we found smoked human flesh in their houses. We bought 10 children from them, males and females whom they had decided to sacrifice (or, rather 'to damn'). We strongly rebuked them, I do not know whether they will change their ways.<sup>14</sup>

On this occasion, Amerigo spent time describing the natives' sexual habits. He noted that the women, although naked, moved with composure without showing their genitals, and they were helped in this by the conformation of their thighs. However, they seemed very libidinous, as they, not the men, initiated free and public sexual relations. The women were also in the habit of forcing the men to use a dangerous erectile stimulant, consisting of insect larvae covered with stinging hairs, similar to the cantharis or 'Spanish fly', a beetle used for the same purpose in Europe.

Amerigo was shocked that the women took such initiatives, just as it is still shocking to certain irritating conformists who deplore the fact that he

**14** "Terza lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folios 54vb and 55ra. The cannibalism and many other particulars detailed here are confirmed by a German gunner who was held prisoner for many months by the Tupinambá and was fortunate enough to be released: Staden, *Warhaftige Historia und Beschreibung eyner Landtschafft*.

talked openly about such things. However, they are wrong, as his testimony is allusive and only becomes explicit in the *Novus Mundus* written in Latin.<sup>15</sup> In any case, female initiative in sexual relations seems to have much earlier origins and still exists in a matriarchal population in eastern Tibet, called the Naxi and belonging to the Moso group of Tibetan origin. This is an interesting coincidence, since the Native American populations (except the Inuit peoples) have Tibetan origins.

Seen from this perspective, the behaviour of the Indio women makes it easier to understand the natives' reaction to the violence perpetrated by the foreigners on their women, which appeared to them absurd as well as wicked.<sup>16</sup> After witnessing such violence, the Indios thought to exploit the new arrivals' weakness, while the women agreed to offer themselves as bait to trap the foreigners.

From Vespucci's description, it can be established that, at the end of the 15th century, the Tupí-Guaraní population constituted a vast ethnos, which at the time, on the threshold of the agricultural revolution, appeared as a late Neolithic culture. Indeed, they lived by fishing and gathering and knew neither bronze nor iron, and not even maize (Vespucci was definite about this, but is belied by Girolamo Sernigi) or the banana, a plant they would grow some years later.<sup>17</sup>

Two years prior to Vespucci, another traveller, Michele de Cuneo, had described the Camballi (Cannibals) who lived further north of the islands in the Caribbean Sea as a population with a more developed culture than the Tupí. They were great cultivators, in addition to gathering fruit and tobacco leaves. Their society included the figure of tribal chief (*Cacique*), who in some cases was subordinate to another more authoritative chieftain.

During the Renaissance, the description of an unstructured and anarchic society such as that provided by Vespucci in the *Mundus Novus* and the "Lettera a Soderini" stimulated a number of writers, who felt that the weight of incongruous rules and laws impeded the ability to imagine freer societies. The first of a long series was Thomas More who, in *Utopia* published in 1516, recognised Vespucci's merits as a traveller and narrator. Years later, Michel de Montaigne reflected critically in his *Essai* (1580) on the customs of the natives in the New World, as described by the first navigators and explorers, and on the tragic clash between the *conquistadores* and the Indios.

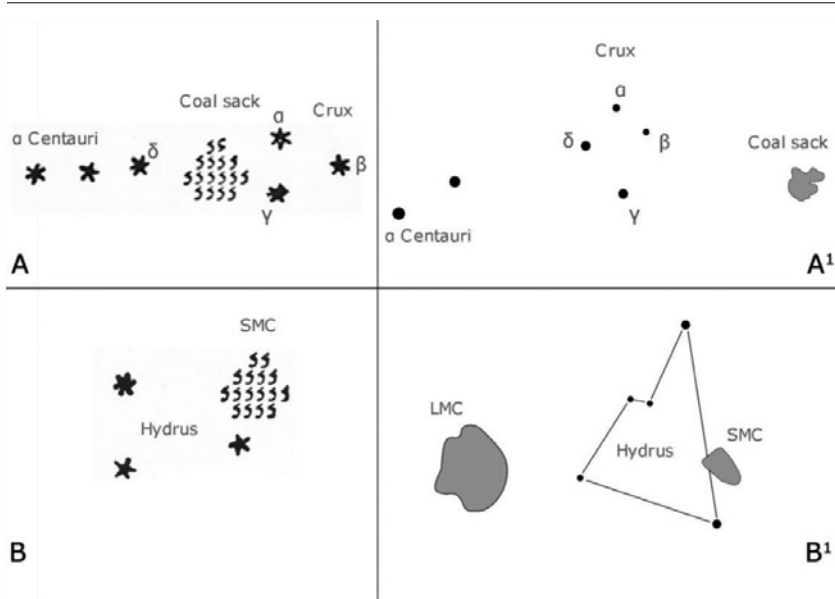
## 10.7 Further and Further South, in Search of the Passage to Beyond

Having left Porto Seguro, the flotilla piloted by Amerigo anchored below Mount Pascoal, in the place where Cabral had taken possession of the Land of Vera Cruz in the name of King Manuel, after which it continued south. The series of saint's names from each day of the calendar that appear along the coast tell us that on December 13 they stopped at the mouth of the Santa

<sup>15</sup> The use of a language known only to a few, such as Latin, to discuss salacious subjects is ancient and lasted until the end of the 1800s.

<sup>16</sup> See § 7.6.

<sup>17</sup> The banana would be introduced to the New World in those years by friars from a monastery on the Canary Islands who had received them from Morocco.



**Figure 10.5** Comparison of the two surviving images of the Southern Sky outlined by Vespucci, realised with incunabula in the Roman edition of the *Mundus Novus* (A and B), with more recent astronomical images of the same sky (A1 and B1). The group of letters on the left, named ‘Canopo scuro’ by Vespucci (in A), represents the Coalsack nebula (in A1), whose position does not correspond in the two images. Below (B), the constellation of *Hydrus* with the Small Magellanic Cloud (SMC) on the right. LMC represent the Large Magellanic Cloud. Of the two drawings made by Vespucci, the second (B) is very close to reality, while the first (A) is less so. The mistake in positioning the Coalsack could have been made by the typesetter

Lucía River and the map tells us that the boats travelled some way upriver; on about December 20 they sighted the Serra São Thomé (today Serra de Caymore). On the Epiphany they reached the splendid Baía dos Reis, that is the Bay of the Three Wise Men, where the city of Rio de Janeiro stands today.

On the Waldseemüller Map, beyond the edge of that bay (within which the *Ilha do Governador* is not marked) the enigmatic words *piñachullo dcentio* appear. This text has been interpreted in various and contrasting ways. In fact, *piñachullo* can be translated as ‘pinnacle’, while *dcentio* means nothing unless it is read *detentio* and translated from an improbable Latin as ‘detention’ or ‘imprisonment’. More likely is the reading *do tentio*, to be interpreted as a humorous reference to the Corcovado hill, or to some curious episode, in a similar manner to *vazia baril*, which appears below the São Francisco River and translates as ‘empty the barrel’.

After the stay at Baía dos Reis, the expedition reached Porto São Sebastião. Here, during the night between January 17 and 18, Amerigo measured the longitude for the third time. He used the ephemerides calculated in Lisbon, again relative to the maximum approach of Mars and the Moon, when their azimuths coincided; the event was visible in Lisbon at about midnight.<sup>18</sup> The third marker was not positioned here, perhaps because it was far from the confines of Portugal’s possessions, but at Cananéia, reached the following week and closer to that border. On January 25, the fleet anchored

<sup>18</sup> This information was provided by Vincenzo Millucci, whom I warmly thank.

between Cananéia and the opposite island, a place named by the mapmaker, using bad Latin, as *Rio de Cananorum*.<sup>19</sup>

The expedition fulfilled its obligation to confirm that the Land of Vera Cruz discovered by Cabral belonged to Portugal together with other neighbouring lands. *It also ascertained that the New World constituted an actual continent*, which blocked for a great distance the continuation of journeys to the Moluccas. What else remained to be achieved? The captain major asked the other captains about the condition of their ships and crews and how much longer they would be able to continue navigation. The reply was six months. He therefore asked Vespucci to decide what to do, as he was better able to orient himself in those waters and had the clearest ideas on how to proceed.

The information obtained from the Indios led Amerigo to believe that the passage west was close by. He was in the same situation as Bartolomeu Dias had been thirteen years earlier. The Portuguese navigator, having unexpectedly found the opening towards the east after a great tempest, had to choose: continue into the unknown or return home? Dias had persuaded the crew to carry on. In the same way, Amerigo, faced with the alternative of returning home or continuing to navigate in the cold southern autumn and in unknown stormy waters, came to a decision. He decided they should take on enough supplies for six months and proceed south, hoping to find the passage towards Asia.

The voyage continued as far as latitude 52° South. Amerigo wrote almost nothing about what occurred during this period, and the map that has guided us so far is also silent. It is unrealistic to believe that the expedition wandered as if on vacation for a month and a half in the icy and tempestuous waters of Patagonia. It is more logical to believe that the navigator continued to seek the south-west passage of which he had heard more from the nomadic natives who roamed those places; it is precisely the names attributed to these places that provide us with a common thread.

Saint Julian, Bishop of Toledo, is celebrated on March 6. On that day, the flotilla finally came to what seemed to be the mouth of a channel leading to the other sea. The pilots entered, sailing along its northern coast and soon reached a vast bay of calm water. They continued onwards and after some time reached the back of the bay.

Continuing to follow the coast that turned north-east, all hoped to find a way turning west that led to the other sea, but having sailed around a promontory they were disappointed to find themselves in the turbulent ocean once again. The promontory was named Punta Desengaño (Delusion Point), and it is still known as such, in memory of that moment of discouragement.

The expedition obstinately continued to sail southward in the face of increasing difficulties. After having navigated for about 60 leagues, Amerigo managed to calculate the latitude: 52° South. At that moment, the sailors in the crow's nest thought they saw the opening of a channel between the high, sheer black cliffs battered by crashing waves. They were in great danger and the ships were forced to distance themselves from that inferno by veering east.

Amerigo never described this brusque finale, but having sailed right round the bay they were back at the entrance; many of the sailors remained

<sup>19</sup> The name Cananea is that of a locality in East India where the Portuguese had established a first base during Cabral's voyage. Amerigo had news of it from Gaspar da Gama when they met in the port of Cape Verde.

convinced they had seen the mouth of the sought-after channel. We have the testimony of Antonio Pigafetta of Vicenza regarding this conviction, who twenty years later was aboard the flagship of the expedition led by Ferdinand Magellan. Pigafetta wrote,

And if it were not for the captain major we would not have found this entrance, as all thought and said that it was closed all around, but the captain general knew he had to navigate a hidden passage as he had seen it in the King of Portugal's treasury on a map made by the very excellent Martin Behaim.<sup>20</sup>

Most of Magellan's biographers refute the words written by the chronicler from Vicenza using rather weak justifications.<sup>21</sup> However, it is completely plausible that Martin Behaim, or someone before him, had gathered information from the veterans of the 1501-1502 Portuguese expedition. This fact is confirmed by the attempt made shortly afterwards by the Portuguese, who sent the expedition of Gonçalo Coelho including Vespucci as a pilot, as well as the expedition prepared by the Spanish in 1503-1506, once again entrusted to Vespucci and subsequently revoked (see Chapter 12 and Epilogue). Besides, Magellan headed precisely to Puerto San Julián to overwinter before finding the strait that the great geographer Mercator was to name after him.

Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the Portuguese expedition of 1501-1502 provided Magellan with vital information, much of which the explorers had learnt from the Indios.

## 10.8 Amerigo Vespucci, Astronomer

Today little attention is paid to the stars, which are obscured by light pollution and smog. Yet, only a century ago they were an important part of everyday life, so much so that children were taught to identify the most luminous planets and stars, to call them by their names, and to recognise the constellations. These notions, useful for finding one's bearings in the dark of the night, were also used in certain circumstances for calculating the time during the night, or the date.

During his third voyage, Amerigo, who had learnt how to use the astronomical instruments of the period from Rabbi Zacuto, managed to calculate the position of the brightest stars and establish their magnitude. He identified the two small constellations of *Crux* (with the Southern Cross) and *Hydrus*, and he discovered two *Canopi chiari*, two luminous clouds today named after Magellan, and also a *Canopo scuro*,<sup>22</sup> a dark nebula now known as the Coalsack. Lastly, he established that the southern celestial

<sup>20</sup> Martin Behaim (1439-1506) made an excellent globe which, according to tradition, Magellan showed to Emperor Charles V to convince him to finance one of his projects.

<sup>21</sup> According to Camillo Manfroni, editor of *Relazione del primo viaggio intorno al mondo* by Antonio Pigafetta, Magellan was cheated out of his discovery "by Spanish nationalists who cannot accept the fact that the discovery was made by a foreigner" (94 fn.). According to Laurence Bergreen, author of *Over the Edge of the World*, Pigafetta's view is refuted by the fact that the channel does not appear on Behaim's globe, except that Pigafetta talks of a *map* and not a *globe*, which besides dates to 1495. Others argue the question pointlessly.

<sup>22</sup> *Canopo* is used by Vespucci in the general sense of 'celestial body' that it has in the Semitic languages.



Fabricque D'un Instrument  
Pour tracer la Longitude de l'est et ouest en quelque terre que l'on soit.



autant que a luyz amy au traicte d'ung royaume a d'ice decouvert par ce que y donna a este delecte... Autrement de ce que...  
Et pour tracer la longitude de l'est et ouest en quelque terre que l'on soit. On prendra une planche de bois de quatre toises de longueur...  
Et au milieu de ce fil sera un petit anneau de fer...  
Et la ligne de l'est et ouest sera tracée...  
Et ainsi sera fait un instrument...  
Lequel servira a tracer la longitude de l'est et ouest en quelque terre que l'on soit.

- Lusaige dudit Instrument -

Quand l'on desira tracer la longitude de luy sera eslonge' long de la ligne diametrale de quelque terre que l'on soit...  
L'instrument ainsi composé comme devant est dit...  
Et pour tracer la longitude de l'est et ouest en quelque terre que l'on soit. On prendra une planche de bois de quatre toises de longueur...  
Et au milieu de ce fil sera un petit anneau de fer...  
Et la ligne de l'est et ouest sera tracée...  
Et ainsi sera fait un instrument...  
Lequel servira a tracer la longitude de l'est et ouest en quelque terre que l'on soit.



Ensuiet. Le moyen de scauoir freuer.  
Par le Midi du soleil avec le premier horizon trouue combien ton est de degres de hauteur de latitude long de la longitude et de la ligne diametrale.



Il faut que vous eschangez et auant autres instruments propres pour tracer la longitude et latitude de l'on...  
Et pour tracer la longitude de l'est et ouest en quelque terre que l'on soit. On prendra une planche de bois de quatre toises de longueur...  
Et au milieu de ce fil sera un petit anneau de fer...  
Et la ligne de l'est et ouest sera tracée...  
Et ainsi sera fait un instrument...  
Lequel servira a tracer la longitude de l'est et ouest en quelque terre que l'on soit.

Figure 10.6 Jacques Devalux in his famous manuscript Les premières Œuvres (1583) depicts a scene with Portuguese ships. A geographer explorer studies the stars; the ships are flying the flag of the Portuguese navy. The image refers to the calculations made by the Portuguese along the African coasts or by Vespucci along the coasts of the New World. Provenance: Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des manuscrits. Français 150

pole was situated almost at the centre of the triangle with the stars *Achernar*,  $\alpha$  Trianguli and  $\beta$  Carinae at its vertices and whose hypotenuse touches the Small Magellanic Cloud. The identification of the southern celestial pole was indispensable to him for establishing the orbits travelled around it by the most luminous stars.

During the full moon, the study of the stars was disturbed by too much light. However, Amerigo, while observing the rainy sky with his back to the Moon, noted a wide luminous arch similar to the multicoloured rainbow seen by day. He called his companions of adventure to confirm what he saw and their reply was positive; yes, the 'moonbow' was there. Today we know that the lunar rainbow exists, but moonlight, diffracted by water droplets suspended in the atmosphere, is too weak for the human eye to distinguish the colours within it.

Continuing towards the highest southern latitudes, where the nights in late autumn became very long as well as very cold, Amerigo sighted strange flashes of light in the sky and made note of them; perhaps they were the *aurora australis*, corresponding to the Northern Hemisphere's *aurora borealis*. After many long nights watching the sky, Amerigo felt proud to have undertaken so much work that would be of use to scholars.

### 10.9 The Epic Crossing to Sierra Leone

On April 7, 1502, the night lasted 15 hours and before the end of the day the lookouts sighted a new land among the autumn mists towards the south: the Falkland Islands as they are known today. They followed the grey coast for twenty leagues, the length of the northern part of the islands that appeared deserted and wild and offered no port or shelter. There was no point in trying to stop there as the cold had become intolerable and the sky was darkening with the menace of a great storm. In the mist, the fires at the ships' sterns were almost invisible. The captain major consulted with Amerigo, the gale was almost upon them, and there was no time to waste. They signalled to the other ships to draw near; it was time to set a course for Portugal!

Amerigo had taken stock of the situation just before reaching Cananéia and from that meridian he had travelled east for about 60 leagues. He calculated a north-north-easterly course along which they would navigate to reach the port in western Guinea situated below Sierra Leone.

It was good advice, it is certain that if we had stayed that night, we would all have been lost, because as soon as the ships formed a line, for all the night and following day there was a great tempest and we thought we would be lost and made solemn vows to undertake pilgrimages and other rituals, as is the custom of sailors.<sup>23</sup>

In five days, they travelled 250 leagues (about 1,250 km) towards more temperate climes. The ships sailed with bare masts, only the foresail was unfurled and kept low in order to keep the prow high above the rough seas. Subsequently, the sea became calmer and the air warmer. They crossed the Equator, and on May 10, by the grace of God, they sighted the coast

<sup>23</sup> "Lettera a Soderini", folio 118ra.

of Guinea and then Sierra Leone and its port. Amerigo narrates the thirty-one days of the most daring navigation undertaken to that date in just eight lines. The three caravels had crossed the Atlantic Ocean from south to north, sailing 1,500 leagues (7,500 km), overcoming the continuous violent storms that lash the latitudes of 50° and 40° South. Almost all scholars who have studied this enterprise have thought it impossible for those small and fragile ships, and none have dared trace on paper the course taken by the small fleet on its return voyage, except for Roberto Levillier in 1948 and Jean-Paul Duviols in 2005.<sup>24</sup>

The flotilla stayed in Sierra Leone for fifteen days. One of the caravels had to be burned, as it was no longer sea-worthy. From this port, the surviving caravels sailed to the Azores, where they spent fifteen days during which Amerigo wrote up his astronomical observations in a booklet, which has not come down to us. After leaving Sierra Leone, the navigation was much slower, perhaps with the aim of returning on the deadline that had been established before the expedition's departure. Therefore, after fifteen months, eleven of which spent south of the Equator without the help of the North Star, on September 7, 1502, the protagonists of this great enterprise reached Lisbon.

### 10.10 Amerigo Returns to Lisbon from His Third Voyage and Announces the Existence of a New World

The news that the small fleet piloted by Amerigo Vespucci had returned from the long journey, rich in so many extraordinary discoveries, spread like wildfire from the port of Lisbon to the entire city. Pietro Rondinelli, a businessman and Vespucci's former colleague, came to hear about it. He was in Lisbon to gather information about the spice trade after the recent arrivals from the East Indies.

Rondinelli immediately went to see his old friend and found him to be proud of the results but very unhappy about the treatment he received from King Manuel to whom he had just recounted the expedition's success. The King had immediately paid Amerigo what he was due for the 16 months of navigation as a pilot, a very modest sum only double what was paid to a specialist mariner. He had also bestowed on him an order of chivalry, perhaps that of Christ,<sup>25</sup> which had also been awarded to Vasco da Gama. The King asked to see what he had written and documented during the voyage, also forcing him to swear that he would keep quiet about anything that could be of use to the Spanish. Amerigo was very embittered and indignant about this and much else besides. This mood transpires from the announcement of his enterprise that he sent to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, his patron and friend in Florence.

<sup>24</sup> Levillier, *America le bien llamada*; Jean-Paul Duviols, *Le nouveau monde: Les voyages d'Amerigo Vespucci*.

<sup>25</sup> On October 3, 1502, Pietro Rondinelli wrote: "We will have Amerigo Vespucci here [in Seville] in a few days' time, who has undergone great labours and has had little profit, which merited more than the order" (*Codice Vaglianti*, folio 57rb). The abbot Angelo M. Bandini wrote: "The gratitude of the King of Portugal wished to perpetuate the memory of so great a man, by hanging as an immortal trophy in the Lisbon Cathedral the glorious remains of his conquering ship named the *Victoria*, which like the ship of Argus had courageously ploughed unknown seas". *Vita e lettere di Amerigo Vespucci*, Firenze MDCCXLV.

He sums up the results of that voyage in a short six-page letter (the “Terza lettera familiare”) in two brief phrases, “we arrived in a new land, which we found to be a terra firma for many reasons that will be told” and adds some lines later,

To conclude, I was down in the Antipodes, which by my navigation was in the fourth part of the world; the point of my highest zenith in that part formed a spherical right angle with those of the inhabitants of this north that are at longitude of 40° [from Gomara]; and this is enough.<sup>26</sup>

After these words, Vespucci makes no further mention of his discovery but only writes about natural history, repeating things already said. However, it is opportune to cite two more short passages that help us to interpret two important facts, “I noted many wonderful works of God, and determined to inform your Magnificence of them, as I always have of *my other voyages*”. In this phrase, the plural indicates that Amerigo had undertaken two voyages prior to this, not one only. The other phrase reads,

All the notable things that happened to me during my voyage I have collected in a notebook so that when I am in retirement I can deal with them *to leave some fame of myself after my death*. I intend to send you a summary, but His Serene Highness the King is keeping it: when he returns it to me it will be done.<sup>27</sup>

Amerigo continued diligently to reorganise the results of his travels, initially working during the stopovers on the journey home. He also worked, together with some of the captains who had sailed with Cabral, on the necessary updating of the *Padrão Real*, of which he had made a copy for personal use before departing on his voyage. He was increasingly convinced of the validity of the idea, which he mentioned in the “Prima lettera familiare” sent to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, that the Earth was vaster than used to be thought and contained lands and seas that had remained unknown until that time.

Several weeks had passed since he sent the letter to his friend, when he received an unexpected visit from the preacher friar Giovanni Giocondo of Verona, probably sent by Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco who wished to know more than was written in the laconic message received. Giovanni Giocondo, a cultured and spirited man, was an interpreter of Latin inscriptions and above all the architect of excellent buildings and bridges which can be admired in Italy and France. He too was keen to learn more about the far-away, newly discovered world.

The friar obtained a second letter from Amerigo, which contained more news and precise affirmations regarding the existence of a new world, its inhabitants and its climate. Amerigo again complained that King Manuel had not returned his astronomical writings, and added a summary description of the Southern Sky and a sketch of the celestial bodies he had seen.

<sup>26</sup> “Terza lettera familiare”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 53r. The second phrase after the affirmation “fourth part of the world” becomes confused (deliberately?). Ramusio attempts an interpretation in his work *Delle navigazioni et viaggi*, vol. III.

<sup>27</sup> “Terza lettera familiare”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 53rb; emphasis added.

It is not known what route Giovanni Giocondo took on his home journey, or where he stopped. However, it seems certain that along the way he came to learn of the sudden death of the person to whom the letter was addressed. Unsure of what to do with it, he decided to translate it into Latin and have it printed. In the translation, he added some emphasis, exaggerating some extraordinary facts. He then handed it to a printer, it is not known whether in Augsburg in Germany or in Paris or Rome, and departed without seeing the proofs. The printer did his best but could not understand some words: he got Amerigo's name wrong, it became 'Alberico', and also Lorenzo's patronymic confusing him with Lorenzo di Piero, called the 'Magnificent'. Despite these errors and oversights, the eight printed pages that appeared in the late summer of 1503 were an incredible success. Within two years, more than twelve editions and reprints appeared in many European countries, in addition to translations in several languages.<sup>28</sup> Tens of thousands of copies spread the extraordinary announcement.

It must be clear to the reader that all of this occurred without Amerigo Vespucci's knowledge, as he, as will be seen below, was on the other side of the ocean during those months and was struggling, after the wreck of the flagship, to prepare the colonisation of Brazil, together with Fernando de Noronha. It should also be added that he earned no money from the printing of his letter because he did not benefit from any special 'privileges', as was often the case in that time.

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**28** The account of how the letter was published is taken from my paper: Omodeo, "The Authenticity of Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus*".

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

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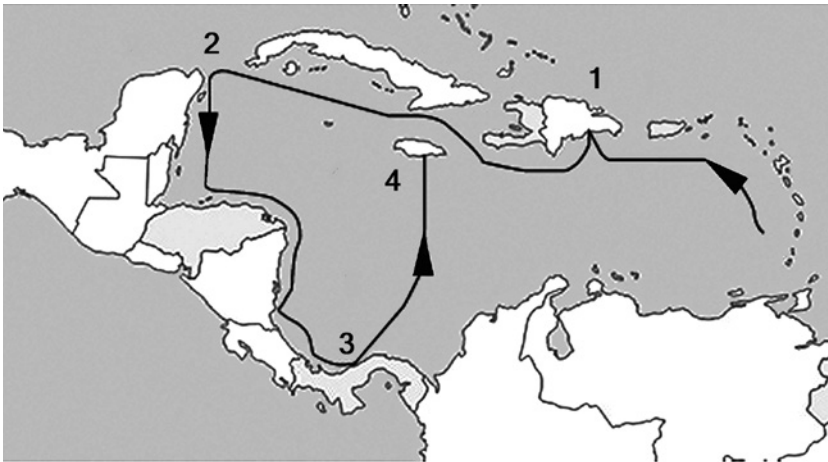
**Summary** 11.1 New Policies for the Spanish Expeditions to the New World: Ojeda Becomes Governor of Coquibacoa and Urabá. – 11.2 Christopher Columbus Undertakes His Fourth Voyage. – 11.3 To Centralise the Administration of West Indies Queen Isabella Creates the Casa De La Contratación. – 11.4 Columbus Explores the Coasts of Honduras, Costarica and Panama in Search of a Passage to the West. – 11.5 Christopher Columbus Returns from His Last Voyage. – 11.6 Amerigo Undertakes His Disastrous Fourth Voyage. – 11.7 Amerigo Writes *Le Quattro Navigazioni* from which He Takes the “Lettera a Soderini”.

## **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 Trevisan<sup>1</sup> 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-

<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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*,<sup>3</sup> which was carrying the possessions of Columbus, who after this event earned fame as a powerful and vindictive wizard.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> *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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> *Le Historie*, vol. II, ch. XC, 93.

<sup>5</sup> 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]<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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 ships<sup>8</sup> took on water and only remained afloat because the sailors pumped it out.

<sup>6</sup> This was maize.

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

<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

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".<sup>11</sup>

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

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

<sup>11</sup> *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".<sup>12</sup>

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

<sup>12</sup> *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.<sup>13</sup>

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-

<sup>13</sup> *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,<sup>14</sup> 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-

<sup>14</sup> “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,<sup>15</sup> 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”.<sup>16</sup>

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”.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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-

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 119rb.

<sup>17</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 119va.

<sup>18</sup> *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,<sup>19</sup> 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*”.<sup>20</sup> 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”.<sup>21</sup>

### 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”.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See § 12.2.

<sup>20</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 120ra.

<sup>21</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 120rb.

<sup>22</sup> *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.

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## **12 A Period of Political Instability Begins and Major Projects are Entrusted to Vespucci (1505-1506)**

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**Summary** 12.1 “Nothing Makes a Prince So Well Esteemed as Undertaking Great Enterprises”. – 12.2 King Manuel’s Policies for Managing the Lands of Vera Cruz. – 12.3 Amerigo Returns to Seville and is Invited to Court. Columbus Entrusts Him with a Delicate Mission. – 12.4 An Expedition to the Moluccas is Scheduled, Amerigo Becomes a Citizen of Castile. – 12.5 The Great Plan to Reach the Moluccas Islands. – 12.6 The Letter of Girolamo Vianello to the Republic of Venice. – 12.7 Christopher Columbus Dies at Valladolid. – 12.8 West Indies or New World? The Seed of a Long Disagreement. – 12.9 Columbus’s Son Diego Succeeds Him Becoming Second Admiral of the Ocean Sea. – 12.10 The Brief Reign of Philip of Austria. The Trip to the Moluccas is Cancelled.

In this chapter, news of events that occurred at the same time in different places are intertwined: dynastic problems in Spain, problems with the Inquisition in Portugal, the preparation of an expedition to the Moluccas, meetings with the Huastecs in Mexico, and death of Christopher Columbus and subsequent problems.

### **12.1 “Nothing Makes a Prince So Well Esteemed as Undertaking Great Enterprises”<sup>1</sup>**

In 1505, after the death of Queen Isabella, a period of political instability began in Spain. According to the dynastic rules, Isabella was succeeded by her daughter Juana, who at that time lived in Flanders with her husband Archduke Philip of Austria and her first five children.

Doña Juana of Castile was nicknamed Juana la Loca (the mad) but she was not crazy, at least in the sense that we understand the word today; certainly, she did not behave ‘serenely’ as was demanded by the etiquette of the court. There was much talk about the scenes of jealousy surrounding the infidelity of her beloved, Philip the Handsome; besides, for years she ne-



**Figure 12.1** Aztec gold labret, Serpent with Articulated Tongue, ca. 1300-1521, Public Domain.  
Source: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/321343>

glected the sacrament of confession, which was a grave sin for the daughter of most Catholic parents. On the other hand, the decrees she signed and the initiatives she promoted evince nothing but wisdom. Since Doña Juana always showed interest in overseas exploration, and intervened with valid decisions in this field, we would like to understand her better, since she is described in contrasting ways and still remains controversial.<sup>2</sup>

When the problem of succession to the throne of Castile arose, King Ferdinand summoned the *Cortes* to Toro, where he resided at that time: the *Cortes* were large assemblies composed of different strata of Spanish society called to discuss problems of the country. This last meeting of the *Cortes* being particularly quiet, King Ferdinand presented himself as the candidate to succeed Isabella. He proposed a Spanish expedition that would outrun the Portuguese rivals to the Moluccas, islands rich in spices and other priceless treasures. The *Cortes* preferred Doña Juana as the successor, and the Catalan King accepted the assembly's decision but did not abandon the idea of sending a fleet to the Spice Islands.

<sup>2</sup> Airaldi, Varela, *Isabella di Castiglia*.

## 12.2 King Manuel's Policies for Managing the Lands of Vera Cruz

Serious political problems also arose in Portugal.

Manuel I was a great King for Portugal. He determinedly built the commercial and colonial empire that brought glory and riches to himself and his country. Luís Vaz de Camões celebrated this remarkable enterprise in the epic poem *The Lusiads*. However, Manuel I was not the conventional magnanimous King of the fables; he was often cruel and distrustful, as well as miserly. Those who did him great service received small recompense, and thus he alienated many people. His treatment of Afonso de Albuquerque and Ferdinand Magellan is well known (see Epilogue), and the case of Amerigo Vespucci, who paved the way for Magellan's enterprise, was not different, and perhaps even worse. However, it must be said that at that time the King was at an impasse, of the sort that makes even the best news sound bad. In this period, Portugal was a small, sparsely populated kingdom, with just over one million inhabitants, and it was extraordinary that it had been able to create a commercial empire in the faraway countries of the Indian Ocean. Amerigo's news meant that the King had to move swiftly and take control of another empire on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, just when the country was about to lose a substantial part - almost one fifth - of its population.

It so happened that King Manuel had been widowed in 1498; his wife Isabella was the daughter of Queen Isabella of Castile and León. According to the dynastic rules, which were strictly respected at that time, he had the right to take Maria, younger daughter of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, as his second wife. The devout Catholic sovereigns agreed to this, but insisted that Portugal should conform to the policy of the Inquisition by forcing the Jews to convert or leave the country. At the time, Portugal was home to about two hundred thousand Sephardic Jews who constituted the educated and active part of the population, so much so that many had become indispensable functionaries, many of them as part of the court.

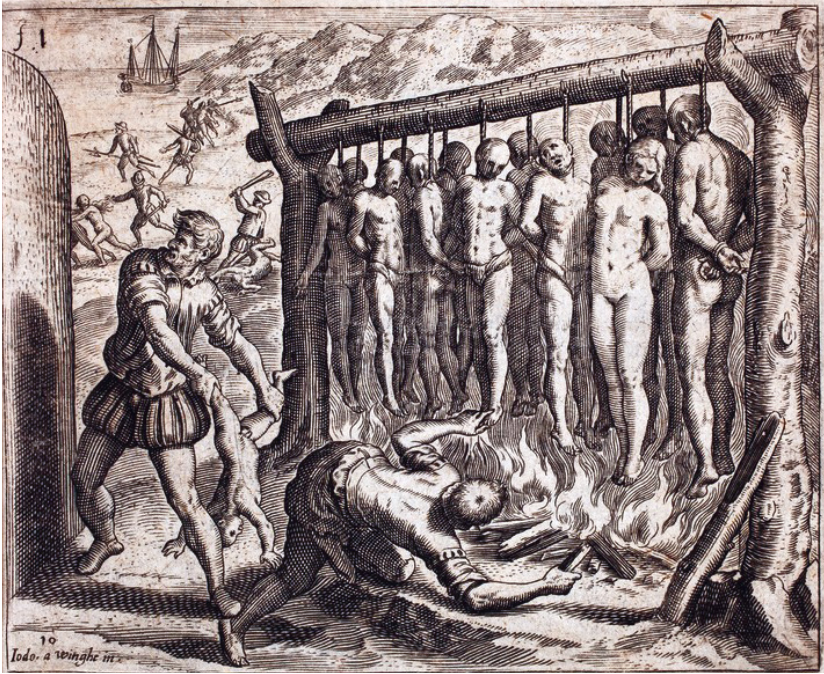
After the second marriage with Maria, Dom Manuel prevaricated and did not obey the Inquisition, which was not yet present in his kingdom. However, he could not continue in this manner, nor could he do without one fifth of the population.

Therefore, the King issued a decree that forced the Jews to convert to Catholicism without giving them the choice of leaving the country; yet, it did give them the possibility of immigrating to the New World with the advantage of greatly reduced taxes.

The King of Portugal contracted out the lands that he [Vespucci] discovered to certain new Christians, and they are obliged to send 6 ships each year and discover 300 leagues further each year, and build a fort in the discovered [place] and maintain it for 3 years, and the first year they will pay nothing, the second year 1/6, and the third 1/4; and they will count on transporting large amounts of brazilwood and slaves, and perhaps they will find other profitable things there.<sup>3</sup>

It was implicit that, on the other side of the ocean, the Jews would be able to continue following their traditions and would not be subjected to any checks.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from P. Rondinelli, *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 57rb.



**Figure 12.2** Collective hanging of Indios by the Spanish conquistadores. The illustration by Jean Israel de Bry is taken from the 1598 edition of the book by Bartolomé de las Casas, *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (Frankfurt 1598). © Wikimedia Commons

The result was not what he desired: only a small number of ‘new Christians’ were able to create bases in the New World at the time, while others fled to the Maghreb and some even reached Palestine, as for example Rabbi Zacuto did in 1504. Many remained in the country, and were judged ‘bad converts’ and at first regarded with suspicion by the Catholic authorities and then scorned as ‘marranos’. Finally, in 1506, thousands were massacred in one of the first pogroms of history. King Manuel was furious. He had some of the perpetrators punished with death, but this was of no use to stop their actions.

### 12.3 Amerigo Returns to Seville and is Invited to Court. Columbus Entrusts Him with a Delicate Mission

It is not known whether Amerigo arrived in Seville in December 1504 or in the following January, and whether he arrived by sea or by land. But it is very likely that he was fleeing Portugal, given the measures taken against him by King Manuel.

In February 1505 Vespucci was invited to court by Ferdinand of Aragon in Toro. When Christopher Columbus, who had returned to Seville one or two months before him, was informed of that invitation, he asked Amerigo to intercede on his behalf with the King who, since his return from his fourth journey, seemed to have forgotten about him. On that occasion he

also gave him a letter for his son Diego who resided in Toro together with his brother Hernando in the employ of Queen Juana as pages. The content of that letter is known to us and is important because it belies the legend of the bitter competition between the two navigators:

Dearest son, I spoke with Amerigo Vespucci, the bearer of this letter, who has been called to the royal court for questions relating to navigation. He always wanted to please me. He is a very honest man, but fortune has been as adverse to him as to many others and his labors have not been so profitable to him as it was reasonable to expect. He comes for my good, and very anxious to do everything that may prove to be beneficial to me if it is within his power. You must see what kind of service he may render to my advantage and cooperate with him in having it rendered. He will work and speak and do everything suggested, but the suggestion must be made secretly so as to remove suspicion. I told him everything I could tell him about my case, and I told him of the reward which they have given and continue to give to me. Your father, who loves you very much.<sup>4</sup>

Amerigo's mediation was successful, after which Christopher Columbus moved to a simple residence in Valladolid. From Valladolid, travelling down the river Duero, it was easy to reach Toro where his two sons lived.

#### 12.4 An Expedition to the Moluccas is Scheduled and Amerigo Becomes a Citizen of Castile

The expedition to the Moluccas was scheduled<sup>5</sup> and for two months Vespucci had been working on the ambitious programme when, perhaps due to the expiry of a debt, he urgently needed money. King Ferdinand promptly arranged to help him by sending a note that deserves to be transcribed here:

The King to Alonso de Morales, treasurer of the Most Serene Queen Doña Juana, my dear and much loved daughter. I command you that, from whatever amount of money [maravedís] you have in your hands, you give and pay immediately [luego] to Amerigo Vespucci, a citizen of Seville, 12,000 *maravedís*, which I give him as a supporting gift; and take [his] support payment certificate with which, together with this coupon of mine, I order that you make sure that the said 12,000 *maravedís* have been received; and from now on do nothing else...<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting to note that King Ferdinand had free access to the finances of his beloved daughter, but it remains unclear why Amerigo needed the sum of 12,000 *maravedís*, which corresponded to a year's pay for a modest employee. Note that the price of a mule was 24,000 *maravedís*. Could it be the residual payment for those who had helped him reach Seville after leaving Lisbon?

<sup>4</sup> Facsimile and English translation in *The Authentic Letters of Columbus. Translations* [by José Ignacio Rodríguez] <https://archive.org/details/authenticletters00colu/page/170>

<sup>5</sup> On the expedition see Luzzana Caraci, *Per lasciare di me qualche fama*, ch. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos*, vol. 3, doc. III, 292.

Another difficulty arose when it was decided that Amerigo would have commanded a ship for that expedition. This contrasted with the ban, promulgated five years earlier, that foreigners participate in overseas trips organised by Spain. It was remedied by a decree from Queen Doña Juana who granted the Florentine citizenship of the kingdoms of Castile and León. The decree of April 24, 1505 contains words of praise for Amerigo Vespucci,<sup>7</sup> but these are bureaucratic formulas that we find equivalents for in similar documents.

### 12.5 The Great Plan to Reach the Moluccas Islands

The programme of the Moluccan journey included a route that was not very different from the one assigned to Gonçalo Coelho's failed expedition to the Malacca peninsula. The fleet had to be composed of six ships: three to be ordered from the shipyards of the Basque Country, and these would be particularly sturdy, as in the north-eastern coast of Spain where whaling was practiced they knew how to build a ship. A fourth ship was to be found in Andalusia along with two small support vessels. The possibility of covering the hulls with lead sheaths to protect them from the shipworms was also taken into consideration. This improvement was suggested by Amerigo, mindful of its work as shipyard manager.

In a few words, the route was to be as follows: to reach the bay of San Julian, cross the strait located a few degrees south in late December, during the least stormy time of the austral summer, then sail west into the great unknown sea, and finally head towards the Equator where the Spice Islands arise. The route for the return journey would be decided on the spot: either continuing towards the west, perhaps touching Arabia and then rounding Africa, as Christopher Columbus had dreamed, or going back and crossing the strait indicated by the Indios and then back home. The total duration of the trip was to be two years: such a long navigation in space and time had never been planned. The crew would consist of 200 people, including sailors and soldiers, all paid three months in advance: the bread and other supplies had to be commensurate with these values. Amerigo was to lead the enterprise with 50,000 *maravedís* of annual pay. His second-in-command would be Vicente Yáñez Pinzón who, at Amerigo's request, was immediately recalled from Palos where he then resided.<sup>8</sup>

There were many difficulties: from the equatorial calms and storms, to the endless squalls and the frost of the latitudes next to the Antarctic Polar Circle. However, the most serious difficulty was the hostility of the Portuguese: the expedition should avoid their ports and bases, of which little was known, and for this purpose it was even possible to reach the port of San Julian without a stop. In 1504, Vespucci had crossed the Ocean Sea from 52°S to Sierra Leone without a stop; he had also piloted the return from Brazil to Lisbon making a non-stop navigation of almost two and a half months. In short, the programmes were formulated on the basis of solid experiences, long investigations and scrupulous controls.

<sup>7</sup> Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos*, vol. 3, doc. IV, 292.

<sup>8</sup> "Vicente Yáñez deve consultarsi e parlare con Amerigo riguardo alla flotta che i suddetti danno per ordine di sua altezza", cited from Luzzana Caraci, *Amerigo Vespucci*, 119-20, doc. 100.

As decisions were taken, orders began to be issued and the programme planners themselves executed them in the right way: fitting out the ships and procuring the food necessary for two years of travel for 200 people was not easy, since the harvest had been very scarce and the wheat needed to prepare the 'biscuit', the staple food of sailors, had very high prices.<sup>9</sup>

## 12.6 The Letter of Girolamo Vianello to the Republic of Venice

The programmes for the new naval enterprise intrigued the diplomats and informants of the Serenissima Republic of Venice, who sent more and more messages back to the Republic intended for the prediction of market trends. These often untidy/rambling messages, in which ancient facts are sometimes intertwined with projects to be implemented, were collected by Marino Sanuto in his *Diarii*, a veritable mine of news on relevant episodes.<sup>10</sup>

Marino Sanuto's accounts, which were written in the Venetian dialect, are sometimes unclear and the subsequent transcriptions edited by those who misunderstood that dialect make reading them difficult. There is, however, a long letter from Girolamo Vianello that contains news of facts of such great interest that they deserve to be reconstructed, even at the risk of stumbling.<sup>11</sup>

In March 1504, King Ferdinand of Aragon commissioned a fleet of four ships that were to be commanded by the Basque sailor Juan de La Cosa, with a crew of 150 men, including sailors and soldiers, to explore the Pearl coast<sup>12</sup> (north-eastern coast of Venezuela) and build a solid stone tower.

It also appears, from another source, that a plague epidemic had broken out in the West Indies. Leonardo de Ca' Masser thus writes in anguish on April 16, 1506, that "we don't talk about spices and goods, everything is dried up, the earth is abandoned, from 80 to 100 people die a day".<sup>13</sup>

Vianello's letter,<sup>14</sup> which is dated December 23, 1506, consists of two parts. In the first part, he talks about two ships commanded by Amerigo Vespucci and Juan de La Cosa that, beyond the Ocean, discovered a land in which a river [the Amazon river] opened its 40 leagues-wide mouth. The two ships went up the river for 150 leagues and encountered small islands, many of which were inhabited by naked natives. Returning and traveling 600 leagues along the coast, they encountered an Indian canoe which "dug into a wooden trunk like a hoof, sailed and headed to the mainland loaded with 80 men". These are episodes related to the Second Voyage (see Chapter 7). In the following, the story seems to be confused with the narration

<sup>9</sup> These problems are carefully described by Bonari, *Amerigo Vespucci*, 301-2.

<sup>10</sup> *I Diarii di Marino Sanuto* (manuscripts of 1466-1536), Venezia, Stabilimento Visentini Federico ed., 1879-1902.

<sup>11</sup> The letter of Vianello, much disputed since its discovery, has become understandable only in the light of the journey of Juan de La Cosa and Vespucci here reconstructed in Chapter 7 and in the light of the Voyage of the Four Merchants. The key-word to place the central episode in the right context is Alsechi (= Aztecs).

<sup>12</sup> See Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos*, vol. 3, doc. XXI, 109.

<sup>13</sup> Luzzana Caraci, *Amerigo Vespucci*, 141, doc. 102.

<sup>14</sup> My primary reference for Vianello's letter is Luzzana Caraci, *Amerigo Vespucci*, 148-50, doc. 105. A concordant transcription of the document is found in Ferraro, *Relazione delle scoperte fatte da C. Colombo, da A. Vespucci e da altri*, 211-18.



of the fight with the Camballi that occurred at the end of the Voyage of the Four Merchants (see Chapter 4): “they had many bows and shields made of a wood as light as cork but very robust; they went to these islands to capture people who live there and eat them, as we eat deer and roe deer. Our men took these Indians who have ebony bows and the strings are nerves [?] of snakes”. A digression then appears about an island inhabited half by native people and half by many reptiles. This section concludes: “said vessels left and brought with them seven Indians who were good pilots of those lands”, a phrase that reminds us of the 7 Indians who with the Spaniards reached a distant island where they fought, won and captured 250 Camballi as slaves.

The second part of Vianello’s letter regards more recent and completely different events, related to the expedition of the four ships commanded by Juan de La Cosa, which however seems to contain reminiscences of the Voyage of the Four Merchants who arrived in the Gulf of Campeche at Easter time in 1498.

[T]hey reached a place called ‘Alsechii’ and [the ships] proceeded 400 leagues towards ‘west garbino’ [WSW] along the coast and [the sailors] went ashore. They found many houses from which many Indians came out to receive them with honor. They said that one of them, some time before, had predicted that some ships of a great King unknown to them were about to arrive from the east, that he would reduce them to servitude and that everyone would receive perpetual life and their [people] would be adorned with various clothes.

They said that when they saw our ships their King exclaimed: “here are the ships I have been talking about for 10 years now”.

That King came with a golden breastplate, a golden mask with four golden rattles weighing one mark [230.35 g] each at his feet; with him were 20 Indians, all with golden masks on their faces, playing gold castanets that weighed 30 marks each. And when they saw those of the island [?], they began to disdain and fight hard with poisoned arrows, and also against us. There were about 5,000 of them, and 140 of us went ashore; they were [came] at blows: they tore to pieces about 700 of them; one of our fighters died of an arrow. Our men reached the houses and took castanets, masks, rattles and that armor with the aforementioned King (taken alive) for 800 marks and set fire to those houses. There they stayed for 96 days, since the three ships that remained were damaged [collapsed]<sup>15</sup> and went down.

Seeing this [trouble] they unloaded the provisions and ammunition and built a fort with a very solid tower. Every day they came to blows with the Indians and [spent] the night inside the park [central courtyard], the day lined up outside, and they earned as much as [the distance] they walked, but they dared not expose themselves beyond their station.

One day they arrived at a lake and with certain ‘vernicali’ [wooden bowls] they began to wash that sand and in half an hour each one washed four to six to eight gold Castilian [coins]; and those Indians taken [prisoner] told them not to tire themselves to wash, since beyond a high mountain that was in front of them, half a league away, a river flowed into the valley

<sup>15</sup> Literally ‘se abissorono’, that is they were invaded by ‘bisse’ (shipworms, *Teredo navalis*), common trouble in that gulf.

at the bottom of which there was not much need to wash, since in one day everyone could collect ten gold marks [2.3 kg] without too much effort.

Finally, although they had little hope of leaving, they decided to raise [for protection] the bulwarks of the boats and lifeboats that remained, and return traveling along the coast to Hispaniola/Haiti.

During the 96 days that they remained there, many people died of an illness that struck them and only 44 survived. Finally, with God's help, the survivors left the place safely, except for ten people who wanted to stay in the tower with enough food and ammunition for a year. During the return they were attacked three times by the natives with their canoes, who were always defeated. They arrived in this way safely at the base.

I saw all the pieces of gold brought from there and also, among other things, excellent pepper but bigger than usual, like a pea of medium diameter, and nutmeg as big as our 'masculine' nut[meg]s. They brought gold for 70 marks, virgin pearls [not drilled] of 10 and 12 carats, round and pear shaped, and lots of brazilwood. The Indians carried a green stone like diaspore four fingers long, right in the middle of the cheek and the lower lip (in general they do not wear beards).

Vianello reported what he had heard and seen without commenting, but a comment on and clarification of this second part of the letter is really necessary.

In this account, we witness the meeting of old acquaintances who exchange, without uncertainty, distant memories of almost a decade: "here are the ships I told you about ten years ago" and then, perhaps, a reference to evangelization appeared on the occasion of Easter 1498, attested to by the allusion to a 'perpetual life'. At this point, however, the natives become suspicious because among the foreigners there are 'those of the island together with them'; on the other hand, the craving for gold becomes unstoppable. In this way, the conflict is triggered, as in the stories of the Nibelungs.

On one side people from the ships gather, while on the other thousands of soldiers with bows and arrows assemble, 700 of which are 'torn to pieces', while the Spaniards lose one man and remain in possession of the field.

The winners came out cautiously from their fort, since they were besieged. But they managed to find even more gold, in addition to that which they stripped off their dead. After three months and more they realised that the shipworms had damaged their three ships, making them useless. In addition, an epidemic killed almost a third of the expedition's men: such small crews could be saved with boats and lifeboats, which had remained intact because they were pulled dry, along with the gold they had piled up. What the visitors saw was only one fifth of the total, the portion due to the Crown: Juan de La Cosa had become very rich.

All this seems like a dream, a restless dream of finding gold, pearls and even spices, the spices which were so sought-after but never found. But it was not a dream: the trophies of that trip were there, in a well-kept room, the gold had been weighed, catalogued and well protected.

Vianello, who lost himself listening to those marvels, wanted to add a final strange detail of de La Cosa's and Vespucci's first voyage: the Indios pierced their cheeks to insert "a green stone, like a diaspore, four fingers long".<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Compare with fig. 8.2.

Vianello closed his letter of December 1506 with a last piece of news: “The Archbishop [Fonseca?] sends back these two captains (Vespucci and de La Cosa) with 8 ships and 400 men very well equipped with artillery weapons, etc.”

This is how I read this letter, and there, in the vast Gulf of Campeche, you can find the ruins of a well-built tower and the remains of a battle, the first of the conquest of New Spain, as Mexico was then called.

### 12.7 Christopher Columbus Dies at Valladolid

Vespucci’s mediation was successful.

In May 1505, Christopher Columbus, together with his brother Bartholomew, were received at the King’s court and, with the assistance of an intercession from the Bishop of Seville [de Deza], Christopher had some of his rights restored. In the tranquillity of his new home in Valladolid, Columbus returned to collaborating with his friend the friar Gaspare Gorricio on the completion of his *Book of Prophecies*.

The marriage of Don Diego Colón to the virtuous Maria di Toledo, a member of the very powerful family of the Dukes of Alba, was planned, but Christopher was unable to attend the wedding. On May 20, 1506, the suffering that afflicted the great Genoese navigator came to an end. His coffin was taken from Valladolid to Seville, where the funeral was celebrated in the church of Santa María de la Antigua; the body, dressed in a Franciscan habit, was buried in the monastery of San Francisco.

### 12.8 West Indies or New World? The Seed of a Long Disagreement

Fernando Colón’s *Le Historie* ends with the death of Christopher Columbus, but the author added an appendix that reads, “By order of the Catholic King an epitaph written in the Castilian language was set up in perpetual memory of his unforgettable feats, and the discovery of the Indies, which reads: A CASTIGLIA Y Á LEÓN / NUEVO MUNDO DIÓ COLÓN”. The editor of this work, Rinaldo Caddeo, rightly affirms that King Ferdinand “would never have thought up or authorized this motto”, adding that it appears for the first time in the work by Gonzalo Oviedo dated 1531, in a slightly different form “POR CASTILLA Y POR LEÓN NUEVO MUNDO ALLÓ COLÓN”. This is also the formulation in which it appears on the coat of arms of the Admiral of the Ocean Sea. The editor concludes that the motto, “entered into the conscience of peoples and of history, which sooner or later render to Heroes the glory that ingrates would wish to strip from them”.<sup>17</sup>

Caddeo’s opinion is decisive: the conviction that the First Admiral had found and given Spain a New World was born in the collective conscience. Although this opinion was true in some ways, it was not exact, as a careful examination shows that Christopher Columbus had always believed he had reached Asia and not a New World. This is confirmed by the official documents that always use the name West Indies, a name the cartographers almost always rejected. Hernando Colón never cited Amerigo and firm-

<sup>17</sup> See note 2 by Rinaldo Caddeo to *Le Historie* by Fernando Colón, vol. 2, 157.

ly sustained that his father had set foot on the mainland, but not on a new continent. He never called Amerigo a usurper, and he was a friend and collaborator of Juan Vespuccio.<sup>18</sup>

Columbus never believed in a New World, even though many believed the contrary: a biographer can only assign to each his own merits.

### 12.9 Columbus's Son Diego Succeeds Him Becoming Second Admiral of the Ocean Sea

Diego succeeded his father with the title of Second Admiral, also obtaining the post of Viceroy and Governor of Haiti. He had a very large income, but none of his revenue came from Nueva España and Nueva Andalucía, territories that promised to be infinitely more profitable than Haiti/Hispaniola.

Before departing for Santo Domingo, where he intended to settle, prompted by his young and energetic wife and the backing of the family of the Dukes of Alba, Don Diego Colón and his brother Hernando had brought the court action mentioned above. The case dragged on from 1508 until 1526, the date of Don Diego's death, without reaching a conclusion.

Don Diego succeeded Nicolás de Ovando as viceroy. The latter had initiated a violent and wicked repression of the Indios. His brutality was such that he had several *Caciques* who were meeting inside a hut burnt alive, while he in the meantime distracted himself by playing the game 'piastrelle' with a friend.

He then had Anacaona, a wise woman and the only surviving *Cacique*, hanged.<sup>19</sup> Diego Méndez, who was attempting to find a ship in Haiti to save the shipwrecked sailors in Jamaica, wrote: "The Governor kept me for seven months, until he had finished burning and hanging 84 *Caciques*, lords of vassals". Nicolás de Ovando's ferocity and insane cruelty had no precedents; by comparison, the misdeeds attributed to Christopher Columbus appeared insignificant. Devastated by such horror, many Indios, finding themselves without a leader, committed suicide by drinking water poisoned with manioc, while others took refuge in inaccessible places, and *encomienda* (serfdom) caused the rapid deaths of those forced to work on the land. The new viceroy Don Diego attempted to remedy this disaster by importing slaves from the Old World, but they also took refuge in the mountains. Thus, the rapid, unstoppable and total extinction of the 'infinite' natives of Hispaniola/Haiti was completed.

### 12.10 The Brief Reign of Philip of Austria. The Trip to the Moluccas is Cancelled

Philip of Austria, who had encountered major problems during the trip, landed in Spain in April 1506. He reached Burgos, capital of Old Castile where he met Ferdinand of Aragon and discussed many questions with him concerning his succession to the kingdom of Castile and León. The discussion was not easy and the two Kings found themselves in agreement only on two

<sup>18</sup> See Consuelo Varela, *Colón y los florentinos*, 95.

<sup>19</sup> See note 4 by Rinaldo Caddeo to *Le Historie* by Fernando Colón, vol. 2, 81-2.

things: that Queen Juana had to remain under tutelage and that the plan to reach the Moluccas was to be realised. Concerning all the rest, King Ferdinand had to give his forced assent which, at the end of the negotiations, he denied with a document that had to remain secret.

King Philip I immersed himself in the programmes concerning the West Indies, managing them through the *Casa de la Contratación*: the Bishop Fonseca was put aside, replaced by the Bishop de Vela, a great chamberlain of the King and a more prudent man. Many financial difficulties started coming up: who had to pay so many expenses? The crew to be hired demanded a much more substantial advance since the duration of the expedition was much longer than usual. Finally, it was not possible to meet the departure date.

After 5 months of reign, Philip I fell seriously ill and within ten days he died at 28 years old. The causes of his illness were and remain obscure: a violent strain seemed likely, but it also could have been poisoning. Many thought that behind the poisoning lay the hand of an assassin engaged by King Ferdinand, a thesis that ancient and modern historians exclude. But Doña Juana had to believe in the worst, and it is said that for days and days she followed the coffin of her beloved spouse through the lands of Castile deep in the throes of depression. Besides, she was pregnant with her last daughter.

Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros, who had been appointed her guardian given that Ferdinand was in Naples, somehow managed to comfort her.

With the death of Philip I of Spain, Ferdinand of Aragon became King and ruler of the whole of Spain, as well as of the Two Sicilies and master of the islands and the land beyond the Ocean.

At that point, he thought it appropriate to cut the expenses for the expedition to the Moluccas and to silence his son-in-law Don Manuel of Portugal, who was protesting threateningly, by cancelling the ongoing project, assigning Amerigo Vespucci and Vicente Yáñez Pinzón to resell the wheat and flour and the other provisions purchased for the expedition and to sell the three ships built in the Basque Country or use them for other purposes.

The two captains resumed traveling around Spain and visiting the ports of Andalusia to obey new orders.

## **13 Vespucci and the Coterie of Saint-Dié-Des-Vosges; the Waldseemüller Map and Vespucci's Contribution; the Name America is Proposed**

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**Summary** 13.1 The Emissary from the Gymnasium of Lorraine Meets Amerigo. – 13.2 Philology's Contribution to the Historiography of Vespucci. – 13.3 The Name America is Proposed for the New World. – 13.4 Amerigo's contribution to the Waldseemüller Map. – 13.5 The Idea of the New World is Accepted by the Cartographers Who Use for It the Names Proposed by Amerigo.

While in the years 1505-1506 the many events narrated in the previous pages took place, in Lorraine Waldseemüller and Ringmann had worked on the printed *Planisphere*, a great masterpiece of Renaissance cartography, whose content, here, must be examined. I will reconstruct their derivation of materials for the map from Vespucci, as it is important to understand why and how this material travelled from Lisbon to Lorraine.

### **13.1 The Emissary from the Gymnasium of Lorraine Meets Amerigo**

At the beginning of the 16th century, there was a cultural centre, the Gymnasium, in the town of Saint-Dié in the Franco-German Duchy of Lorraine, which promoted excellent studies in the field of New World geography, so much so that in the 1800s the title of 'Godmother of America' was conferred on the town. The Gymnasium was directed by three scholars: the elderly Vautrin Lud (1448-1527), secretary to the Duke of Lorraine and director of the duchy's mines, the young Matthias Ringmann (~1482-1511), a Hellenist, poet and above all cosmographer with a good background in mathematics, and Martin Waldseemüller (1470-1521), a German cartographer and theo-

logian who also used the name *Ilacomylus*, derived from the ancient Greek according to the fashion at the time.

Martin Waldseemüller had begun the preparation of a very large map that included all of the known world, to be printed using xylography, something that had never been attempted for maps of that size. Precisely at the time he arrived in Lorraine between 1503 and 1504, the letter to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, *Mundus Novus*, in which Amerigo Vespucci explicitly announced that on the western side of the Ocean Sea there was a new continent, not Asia, was printed in Rome, Venice and Augusta.<sup>1</sup> The scholars who directed the Gymnasium judged that, in order to insert such novelty into the map in preparation, the necessary material and information had to be obtained from Amerigo himself. The question was how to persuade the author to agree to the request. Making use of the unreliable postal systems of the time was not opportune, also because they could not foresee the way in which Amerigo would react. A much better alternative was to send a messenger to Lisbon with a sum of money for the possible acquisition of the material, which the Florentine would be unable to refuse. Whom to entrust with this delicate commission? It is likely, but not certain, that Matthias Ringmann was chosen. He was the youngest and liveliest of the group, and, more importantly, he was a correspondent and friend of Valentim Fernandes the well-known humanist who lived in that city, was a travel-lover and knew Vespucci directly or indirectly.<sup>2</sup>

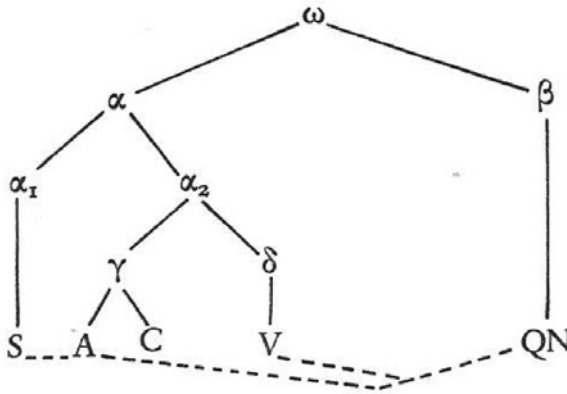
Vespucci had returned to Lisbon from his fourth voyage and he immediately informed Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco about it, complaining, once again, that the King had not given him the manuscript of his astronomical observations.<sup>3</sup> When he learned of the sudden and precocious death of his dear friend and trusted protector, he was deeply saddened. Indeed, the prospects of his future changed.

Some time later, there arrived the letter from his former classmate, Piero Soderini, who in the meantime had become 'perpetual *gonfaloniere*', i.e. lifetime president of the Republic of Florence, who asked him about his experiences as a navigator. He prepared the reply, extracting from the draft of *The Four Journeys* the famous "Lettera a Soderini". He had sent it when, at the beginning of 1505, the emissary from Lorraine arrived unexpectedly. The meeting was very propitious. One can imagine that they talked for a long time in French, the language in which they understood each other best. Then, Amerigo handed over a copy of the "Lettera", omitting the name of the person to whom it was written, and showed the emissary the maps of the New World, carefully excluding the lands belonging to Spain situated below the 40° South parallel. The emissary from Lorraine had a portrait of Amerigo painted, a fortunate initiative for posterity, as it is the only authentic adult portrait of the Florentine navigator that has come down to us. In the portrait, Amerigo has a beard and holds a large cartographer's compass. In the image, probably by an artist specialised in making portraits for traveller's identification documents as was the custom then, several small

<sup>1</sup> The Latin name for Augsburg, the Bavarian city situated on the border with Swabia; a 1505 edition of the *Mundus Novus*, which appeared in Strasbourg the capital of Lorraine, is also known. See Omodeo, "The Authenticity of Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus*".

<sup>2</sup> I may be mistaken about the chosen emissary's name, but not about the fact that the negotiations with Vespucci were carried out via an emissary.

<sup>3</sup> See Bandini, *Vita e lettere di Amerigo Vespucci*, LIV and following.



**Figure 13.1.** The figure represents the 'family tree' or diagram of the descent of the five surviving antique copies of the "Lettera a Soderini" indicated by the letters S, C, A, V and QN. S and QN are printed copies; QN indicates the copy translated into Latin in Lorraine. The Greek letters  $\alpha$  -  $\delta$  indicate hypothetical intermediate copies, while  $\omega$  indicates the original example. This diagram was created by Luciano Formisano and published in 1985 in his *Amerigo Vespucci, Lettere di viaggio*, 11, note 10 (by kind permission of the author). Note that the QN copy from Lorraine is the closest to the last original  $\omega$

distinctive characteristics are clear, such as the shadows around the eyes and the warts on the nose and cheek.

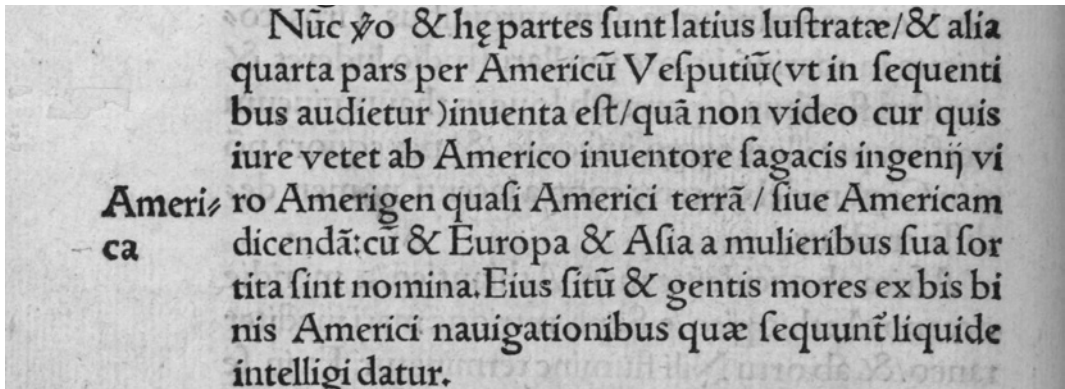
My reconstruction fits very well, perhaps too well, so much so that it raises some perplexities. However, it can be verified, or refuted, through research and the study of the letters between Ringmann and Fernandes. Fortunately, there is another way to confirm the hypothesis that the relationship between Vespucci and the scholars from Lorraine was established thanks to a meeting: the path indicated by philology.

### 13.2 Philology's Contribution to the Historiography of Vespucci

Philology, the ancient science that tends to restore legibility to documents and remove any falsities, is of inestimable value to the data processing a historiographer must undertake. It can provide answers in terms of certainty, and not of lesser or greater probability as occurs with those who only proceed using inductive logic. Not only does philology provide clear and reliable tools, it can also provide solutions to apparently inextricable problems. To those who study Vespucci, philology offers a quiet certainty regarding the debated "Lettera a Soderini", which it would be better to call the "Lettera al gonfaloniere Piero Soderini e al duca René II di Lorena". Five different copies have come down to us from the distant past, four in Italian and one in Latin, indicated respectively by the letters S, A, C, V and QN (the last being the initials for the Latin copy).

Luciano Formisano has created a 'family tree' of these five copies, which shows a diagram of the derivations and relationships between the five documents and their genesis through time. The procedure used was rendered particularly laborious by the fact that the copies of the text were not made by professional copiers, whose methods are known, but by occasional, disordered and erratic copiers. One copy is in Latin, fortunately the work of a very skilled translator.





**Figure 13.2** Facsimile of a passage from the *Cosmographiae introductio* in which, with great enthusiasm for Amerigo's success, the name 'America' is proposed for the New World

This 'family tree' tells us that the printed copy in Latin (QN), made by the scholars of the Gymnasium in Lorraine, is the closest to the original copy ( $\omega$ ) (in this case written by Vespucci) via at least one other copy ( $\beta$ ) that came from Lisbon. The only fact that is not demonstrated by this conclusion is that  $\omega$  was written by Vespucci (but this can be deduced from the context) and that between copies  $\omega$  and  $\beta$  there were intermediate copies, a fact of little importance which remains conjectural.

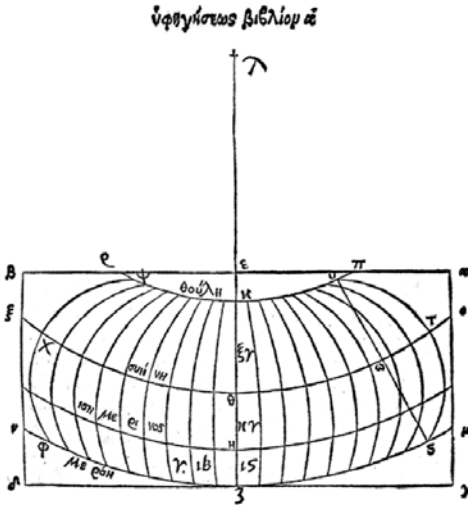
### 13.3 The Name America is Proposed for the New World

When the material obtained by the emissary reached the three scholars at Saint-Dié, it seemed appropriate to present the "Lettera" to their Duke as a personal gift from Amerigo Vespucci, which was plausible given that the Duke had been a pupil of his uncle Giorgio Antonio Vespucci in Florence.<sup>4</sup> The "Lettera" was written in incorrect Italian and there was no dedication, so the scholars of Saint-Dié gave it to a monk, Johannes Basin de Sendacourt, who was a good Latinist and poet, to translate into Latin. He also adapted the letter to the new circumstances.<sup>5</sup>

Martin Waldseemüller quickly got to work on the new material. Firstly, he created a small globe on which the New World was identified with the name 'America', according to what was agreed with Ringmann who had been strongly and positively influenced by Amerigo's personality. The two cartographers wrote a brief paper in which they explained how the large map had been planned and made. To this, they added the Latin translation of the "Lettera", this time with a dedication to Duke René II of Lorraine. This work was published in 1507 with the title *Cosmographiae introductio cum quibusdam geometriae ac astronomiae principijs* (Introduction to Cos-

<sup>4</sup> Bogdan, *La Lorraine des ducs*.

<sup>5</sup> The "Lettera" was also published in Italian in Florence in about 1505.



**Figure 13.3** The grid of meridians and parallels according to Ptolemy's 'second conic projection', from the first Greek edition of his *Geography* edited by Erasmus of Rotterdam. This projection was used by Waldseemüller for his great map, with some variations. From *The Naming of America* by J.W. Hessler, D. Giles (London, 2008, 47)

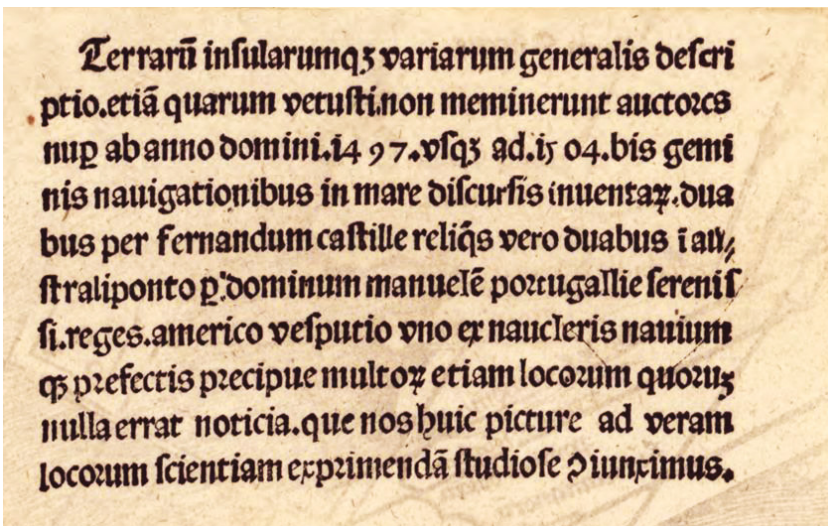
mography with *Elements of Geometry and Astronomy*),<sup>6</sup> in which the introduction of the name America is justified as follows:

In effect, these parts of the world [Europe, Asia and Africa] are well illustrated, while another fourth part was discovered by Amerigo Vespucci (as will be seen in the following pages), which I cannot see why someone could reasonably prevent it being named after its discoverer – a man of shrewd intelligence – *Amerigen*, almost land of Amerigo, or better, *America*, given that Europe and Asia derive their names from women. Its position and the customs of its peoples are clearly understood from *The Four Journeys* which follows in the pages below.<sup>7</sup>

Ringmann and Waldseemüller truly believed that assigning the name 'America' would not give rise to any opposition; instead, it immediately aroused the displeasure of important people. It displeased King Manuel of Portugal, who had financed and arranged everything for that voyage of discovery and would never have accepted reigning over lands that were named after his humble servant. It also displeased Emperor Maximilian, or his courtiers, who had financed the preparation and printing of the great map. Later, Bartolomé de las Casas also objected, insisting on the fact that Christopher Columbus had discovered those lands, not Vespucci. He was right, even though his main argu-

<sup>6</sup> The book was printed in Saint-Dié in 1507, had other mentions in Strasbourg and was reprinted in facsimile at the beginning of the 20th century (1907) with the addition of an English translation, with the title *The "Cosmographiae introductio" of Martin Waldseemüller in facsimile*.

<sup>7</sup> *The "Cosmographiae introductio" of Martin Waldseemüller in facsimile*, xxx.



**Figure 13.4** Cartouche at the lower left-hand corner of the Waldseemüller Map: "General description of the lands and various islands, including those the ancient authors did not record, recently discovered – from 1497 to 1504, during four journeys, two undertaken in the name of Ferdinand of Castile and the other two across the southern sea in the name of Manuel of Portugal, their Serene Highnesses – recounted by Amerigo Vesputio, one of the owners and commanders of the ships, above all [a description] of the many places about which there was no information and which we have carefully added to this drawing, to develop an authentic knowledge of the places". © Library of Congress, Washington DC (USA)

ment was that the Genoese navigator's success was dictated by Providence.<sup>8</sup>

Neither Columbus nor Vespucci were responsible for or aware of this controversy, although the latter almost certainly had a chance to see the great map with the continent that bore his name. However, the new name proposed by the cartographers of Saint-Dié was not accepted at the time, but only 80 years later.

### 13.4 Amerigo's contribution to the Waldseemüller Map

Waldseemüller designed his *Planisphere* in an innovative and modern way, making it much richer in information than the charts and pilot's books used at the time for navigation. Above all, it was printed and he introduced information about rivers, mountains and cities, indicated the areas of political influence and the growing colonies, information usually missing in the pilot's books. He also established the use of the graded scale on the edge of maps. He used Latin for the toponymy, but did not always manage to translate the incomprehensible names and left them as he read them. He glued on labels on which additional information was printed in a language that perhaps varied according to the customers.

He used Claudius Ptolemy's 'second conical projection' as the basis, which he then modified. A grid of meridians and parallels arranged according to geometric and mathematical rules formed the basis of this projection. For

<sup>8</sup> Bartolomé de las Casas, *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, ch. 175.

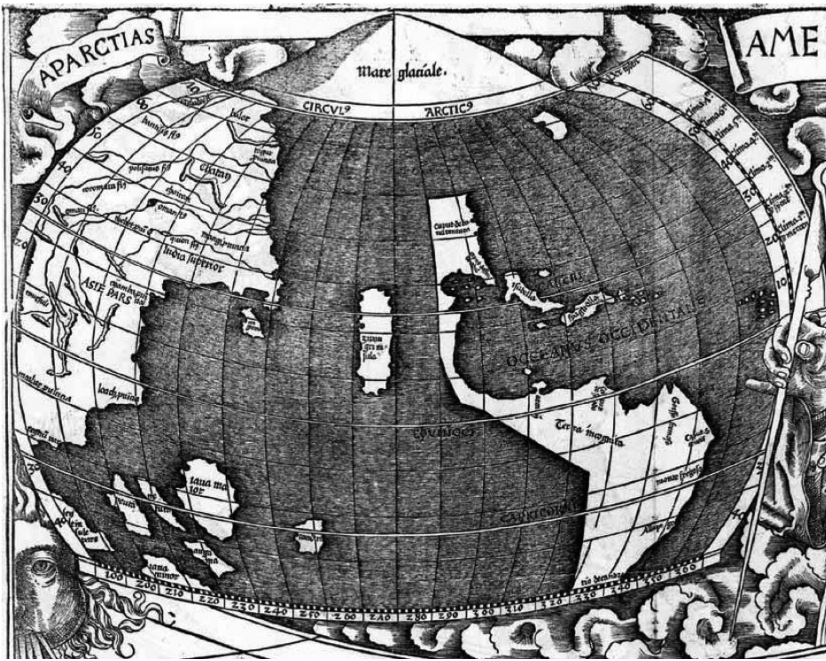


**Figure 13.5** Comparison of the cartographic representation of mountains in the various continents in the Waldseemüller Map (1507). Throughout Europe and Asia, the mountains are stylised as ‘mole tunnels’ (the detail at top left shows the Emodii Mons, that is, the Himalaya). In Africa the style is consistently ‘dune-like’ (the detail at bottom left shows the Moon Mountains, with the sources of the Nile). In the New World (on the right), the chains of North America and the Andes of Ecuador and Chile are drawn in the Tuscan style, as a ‘pile of mounds’, as stylised in the Monte dei Paschi logo and in the heraldic symbol of the Chigi family

simplicity, the grid excluded the polar caps and a wide band of the Southern Hemisphere below the 40° South parallel. Thus, the world took on the form of a long, flared cape laid out on a flat surface. Jerusalem was no longer at the centre of the oecumene, as was the case in the medieval period; the origin of the meridians was placed on the island of La Gomera, in the Canaries, as Ptolemy had done.<sup>9</sup>

The cartographers of the Gymnasium updated in various ways the image of the ‘Old World’ of Ptolemaic tradition, which was by then twelve centuries old. They showed the precise southern borders of Africa that had been ascertained by the Portuguese expeditions, adding Madagascar and the Mascarene Islands as Diogo Dias had described them. However, following

<sup>9</sup> For those who wish to know more about this famous map, see *The “Cosmographiae introductio” of Martin Waldseemüller in facsimile*; also very useful is Hessler, *The Naming of America, Martin Waldseemüller 1507 World Map*. Jerry Brotton discusses it in *A History of the World in Twelve Maps*.



**Figure 13.6** The ocean that would later be called the Pacific and South America according to Vespucci are shown on the small hemisphere placed above the Waldseemüller Map. Japan is at the centre and the large islands of present-day Indonesia are below left. An identical but enlarged version of this image appears on the “globe vert” attributed today to Waldseemüller, reproduced in the following figure. Library of Congress, Washington DC (USA)

Ptolemy they traced the Equator too far north by about ten degrees in Africa, repeating the error for the American continent, while on the *Padrão Real* (judging by the Cantino Planisphere) it is traced correctly<sup>10</sup> and Vespucci gave the correct latitude for Cape Verde and Sierra Leone. The cartographers also introduced some details of the south-western part of Asia, provided by Vasco da Gama and Álvares Cabral. For Europe they added the names of cities and completed the outline of the Mediterranean, adding what had been drawn by the cartographers from Genoa, Venice and Majorca, but making the Gulf of Sirte too small; Scandinavia and Greenland were still represented in a less than rudimentary manner. It was Olaus Magnus who would provide a good illustration of Scandinavia on his excellent *Carta Marina*, printed in Venice in 1539 and formed by six sheets to be joined to form one, just as Waldseemüller had designed his *Planisphere*.

Thus, for the New World and the New Ocean, Waldseemüller and Ringmann had used what they had received from Vespucci, who had inserted his own discoveries in his copy of the *Padrão Real*. The image of South America on the great map is certainly the one drawn up by Amerigo, as is explicitly written at the bottom of the map and in the box at the bottom left hand side.<sup>11</sup> This can be deduced from the cordillera of the Andes and other moun-

<sup>10</sup> Nunn dedicated the first chapter of *The Geographical Conceptions of Columbus* to the position of the Equator in Africa.

<sup>11</sup> The writing on the lower edge of the map reads: *Universalis cosmographia secundum Ptholomei traditionem et Americii aliorumque lustrationes* (Universal cosmography according to the tradition of Ptolemy and the illustrations of Amerigo Vespucci and others).

tain chains drawn in the Tuscan style, never used by other cartographers. It can also be deduced from the toponym *Abbatia Omnium Sanctorum*, the Latin translation of 'Badia di Tutti e' Santi' (All Saints' Abbey), the name of the church in Florence that was dear to Amerigo, as well as from islands with Italian names about which more will be said below.

All lands south of Brazil are missing from South America, for which Vespucci limits his comments to "we sailed so far on this wind [the sirocco] that we found ourselves [so] high that the southern celestial pole was 52 degrees above our horizon".<sup>12</sup> It may be presumed that Vespucci did not talk about what he had seen of the continent's coast during the navigation between January 26 and April 7, 1502 out of respect for the oath he had been forced to take.

Central America is represented in a way that is very similar to how it appears on the Portuguese *Padrão Real* of 1500.<sup>13</sup> In particular, the southern coast and the Leeward Islands in the Caribbean Sea conform to the way in which Vespucci and de La Cosa had drawn them: the Guajira Peninsula appears as an island, while the Gulf of Urabá is not shown.

On the large map, the Isthmus of Panama is drawn in a new and revolutionary way on the basis of what was seen during the Voyage of the Four Merchants and on the basis of the information provided by the Indios. As I anticipated at the end of Chapter 4 (§ 4.6), the Author is about twenty years ahead of the correct understanding of this isthmus.

The new ocean west of the isthmus, unknown to Europeans, would only be seen in 1513 by Vasco Núñez de Balboa who named it the South Sea and then by Magellan who in 1520 called it the Pacific Ocean. It is very important to note that this ocean is on the map thanks to the fact that the cartographer constructed it assigning to the geographical degrees a greater length than that used previously, still however remaining a little below the measure accepted today (see § 7.7).

Cuba and the part of North America are represented according to the Portuguese *Padrão Real*, i.e. the way those coasts were seen during the first and second voyages of Columbus.<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that, on the *Planisphere* by Niccolò Caveri, the illustrator added a forest to the west of the North American coast, while Vespucci, in his stylised manner, drew there the mountains that rise to the west of the great coastal plain of Georgia and South Carolina, which today are called the Allegheny Mountains. It can be presumed that he had been informed about these mountains by the natives, the same ones who had told him about the mountains that he depicted in the eastern part of the Yucatán and in Honduras.

One strange detail on the planisphere is constituted by a group of seven islands situated on the southern meridian of the Canaries, just below the 30° South parallel. The islands are marked with the Portuguese flag and the words "Insule.7. delle Pulzelle" are written on the central one. At the time, the island of Guadalupe in the Lesser Antilles was known as the Isola delle Pulzelle (or Isola delle Donne, i.e. Island of Women), as its inhabitants were all female. This may have been a note by Vespucci who aimed to improve the image of those islands, which the cartographer inserted in the wrong position

<sup>12</sup> "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 117vb.

<sup>13</sup> See the Cantino Planisphere, a copy of the *Padrão Real*.

<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 3.



**Figure 13.7** The globe once attributed to Schöner and today to Waldseemüller derives, as regards the images and size, from the hemisphere containing America and the Pacific Ocean (cf. preceding figure); Peru has been added and it shows the Antarctic which the Portuguese knew vaguely. This “globe vert” is preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France

and the engraver had to re-engrave and fit into the plate, thus damaging it. Why? Perhaps because news had just arrived of the discovery of the islands of Tristan da Cunha in 1506, which are situated more or less in that position.

Another strange correction appears on this map and regards the Canary Islands and the Cape Verde archipelago, which are too close to each other and out of proportion. The defect is due to the fact that in correspondence with Africa the line of the Equator is about  $10^\circ$  too far north according to the ancient geographer Ptolemy (as mentioned above) and the Cape Verde Islands are positioned too far north, while the Canaries are in the correct position. The correction does not remedy the error but renders it more obvious. Both these corrections regarding the Atlantic islands appear on a

much smaller and coloured map by Waldseemüller, which was created after the corrections were made to the large map that has come down to us. It is reproduced in Figure 1 of this volume.

### 13.5 The Idea of the New World is Accepted by the Cartographers Who Use for It the Names Proposed by Amerigo

The name America proposed by the scholars from Lorraine was not immediately successful, although the great map of the German cartographer widely circulated. Almost all cartographers in the first half of the 16th century received Amerigo's message and used the term *Mondo Nuovo* (New World) introduced by him and other equivalent terms he used. The name America appears for the first time on the *Planisfero di Pesaro*, dated 1508, while "Terra Sancte Crucis, sive Mundus novus" can be read on the *Planisphere* by Johannes Ruysch dated 1508. 'Terra S. Crucis sive Mundus Novus' is written on the *Planisphere* by Francesco Rosselli of the same year.

The extraordinary map of South America in polar projection, from 1519 (?) and attributed to Pedro Reinel, bears the words "Terra do Brasil". On the 1525 *Planisphere* by Niño García de Toreno, a cartouche placed at the height of present-day South America contains the words "Terra Firme" (*sic*). "Mundus Novus" can be read on the *Planisphere* by Diego Ribero *cosmógrafo de su Majestad* (1527); and it is also named in this way on the *Carta del Nuevo Mundo* in Battista Agnese's 1544 atlas. On the *Carta Marina* of 1516, the northern part of the new continent is called, as Christopher Columbus had done over 20 years earlier, the "Terra de Cuba Asiae Partis", but in a globe also attributed to Waldseemüller all the new concepts introduced by Amerigo are used.

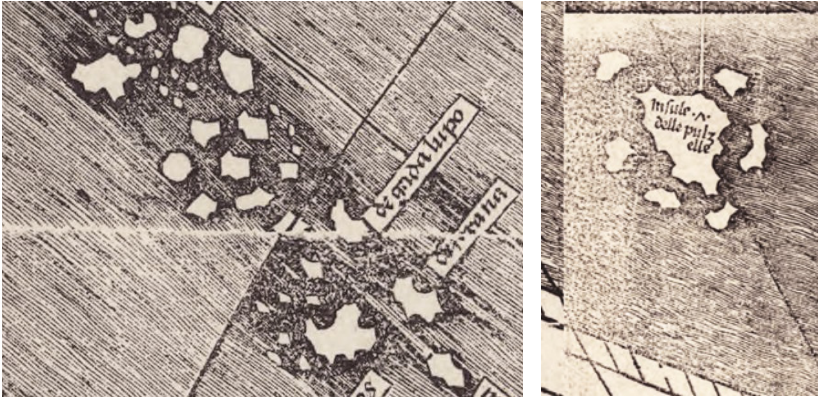
No names appear on the map of Juan Vespuccio, Amerigo's nephew, which dates to 1523 and was perhaps incomplete, while "Tierra Firme" can be read on Salviati's one dated 1525.

Finally, we read "America sive India Nova" on a map of 1570 by Abraham Ortelius, in which the cordillera of the Andes is shown in almost the correct position. However, this is an exception, given that on the Portuguese *Planisphere* in four sheets by Bartolomeu Coelho, dated 1580, present-day North America is called "Mundus Novus", while South America is named "Quarta Pars Orbis" (both names used by Vespucci).

The list of cartographers who abandoned Columbus's idea that the new lands were parts of Asia and accepted Vespucci's idea that this was the New World can be lengthened, but it is not the case to bore the reader. If the cartographers did not accept the name America, one might think that to those who knew Amerigo, or had heard him spoken of as an ordinary person, it seemed inappropriate to use his name for a new continent.

Later, when Amerigo had been dead for about 70 years and by then had acquired mythical status, all except a few Spaniards and Portuguese used the name America. This choice was influenced by the opinion of Ortelius and even more so by that of Mercator, who adopted this name in his 1585 *Atlas*. Mercator felt great admiration for the protagonists of that period and indeed proposed the name Magellania for the lands south of the Magellan Strait, while he forgot Christopher Columbus, *Almirante del Mar Océano*, whose name did not appear on any map.





**Figure 13.8** The same group of islands appear twice on the Waldseemüller Map. The first, at the centre of the left-hand image, is etched in a traditional way, the second, on the right, is more detailed and of different proportions. I presume that the geographers of the Gymnasium had inserted the second image by Vespucci in the wrong place (on the meridian of Gomera and at latitude 30°S), believing it to be of a different archipelago. Both images represent the island of Guadalupe, known as 'delle Pulzelle', and those that surround it, inhabited by a population of Indio Amazons. © Library of Congress, Washington DC (USA)

Amerigo's concept gained success both with cartographers and with other important Renaissance figures: Thomas More, Copernicus and Montaigne.

As I mentioned previously, Thomas More, politician as well as celebrated humanist, was struck upon reading the description of the Tupí society, free of conflicts and having universal respect for the needs and wishes of others. In his *Utopia*, he imagined a society that was far more developed in the knowledge of literature, the arts and sciences, with a pacific and fruitful internal coexistence. Its hero is one Raphael Hythlodæus, a well-educated man who had accompanied Vespucci on his first three voyages but not the fourth, as on that occasion he had travelled towards the islands of Asia and found Utopia, a non-existent island, of which he describes the perfect social and cultural organisation.<sup>15</sup>

From the first pages of his own masterpiece, Copernicus announced the discovery of a fourth continent, while Montaigne, often using Amerigo's own words, whom he did not mention, wrote widely about the Indios' behaviour, comparing it with that of the *conquistadores*.

In contrast, news of Columbus diminished in that period, even though his great enterprise is remembered in all works about geographical discoveries.

<sup>15</sup> The exact title of the work, published in 1516, is *Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus de optimo de rei publicae status, deque nova insula Utopia*.

## 14 The Final Years of Vespucci and His Scientific Merits

**Summary** 14.1 The Voyage to the Moluccas is Cancelled. Amerigo is Named Piloto Mayor. – 14.2 Amerigo's Will and Death in Seville. – 14.3 The Image of Amerigo Vespucci. – 14.4 The Legacy of Amerigo Vespucci. – 14.5 A Misunderstanding Divides Amerigo's Biographers. – 14.6 J.B. Muñoz Writes his *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*. – 14.7 The 'Vespucci Question' Becomes More Complicated. – 14.8 All References to Vespucci and His Voyages are Deleted from the Portuguese Archives. – 14.9 *Damnatio Memoriae*. – 14.10 A Question of Method.

### 14.1 The Voyage to the Moluccas is Cancelled. Amerigo is Named Piloto Mayor

On becoming King of all Spain, Ferdinand of Aragon cancelled the expedition to the Moluccas: expenses continued to grow and funding did not work, while King Manuel who was suspicious of its objectives protested intensely. Therefore, Amerigo Vespucci and Vicente Yáñez Pinzón were entrusted with selling off the large quantity of supplies and the three ships acquired for the voyage.

In 1508, Vespucci, Vicente Yáñez Pinzón and Juan Díaz de Solís<sup>1</sup> were charged with escorting a large cargo of gold, from the mines identified by Columbus in the West Indies, and other goods belonging to the Queen that were in Burgos. On the same occasion, Amerigo was conferred with the title of *Piloto Mayor* (Chief Navigator) of the *Casa de Contratación*.

It was an important and well-paid position, which required him to instruct and examine those who wished to become sea captains. In practice, he had to organise a course of studies that led to an official qualification after passing an exam. Very little is known about the teaching Amerigo undertook in his own home,<sup>2</sup> but it is certain that he also taught map-making and how to calculate longitude according to the method he had devised and tested, and

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<sup>1</sup> On Juan Díaz de Solís see *Le Historie*, vol. II, ch. LXXXIX, 90 fn. 6.

<sup>2</sup> The pilot Niño García wrote: "Amerigo me decia muchas veces que podia poner el cabo [S. Agustín] en 8°, hacienda yo cartas en su casa" (Amerigo told me several times; when I drew maps at his house, that I could put the cape [of Saint Augustine] at 8° S). From: Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos*, 3: 320.



**Figure 14.1** An allegory by Stradanus, in which Amerigo Vespucci, shown as an astronomer (with armillary sphere and banner with the Southern Cross), encounters America represented as an Indio of colossal stature. Note the cannibalistic feast in the background and the many animals on the right including an anteater (in the foreground). The Latin inscription below the image reads “Amerigo discovered America. Once named, always alert”. The attribution of the discovery to Amerigo is the artist’s mistake; the second part of the inscription, reminiscent of formulas used during weddings, perhaps alludes to a marriage in which the wife takes the husband’s name. Illustration by Jan Van der Straet (Stradanus); etching by Theodor Galle. Second half of the 16th century. © Wikimedia Commons

which he had only revealed to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco and Rabbi Zacuto.

Having to teach at home and the fact that his nephew Juan, son of his younger brother Antonio, a lawyer in Florence, came to live with him persuaded Amerigo to move to a larger residence, which he sublet from Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca<sup>3</sup> who in the meantime had become Bishop of Palencia.

In addition to instructing sea captains, Vespucci was also entrusted with overseeing the *Padrón Real*, the official map of Spain and its territories created at that time perhaps in response to his own proposal: he was to keep it, update it and give a copy to whomever had the right to have one. Vespucci was too generous in distributing copies, so much so that King Ferdinand became alarmed and ordered one of his functionaries to make Vespucci take an oath promising to only give copies to persons authorised by the King or the *Casa de Contratación*. In this unusual procedure, there is perhaps an ironic reference to Amerigo’s required compliance with the oath imposed on him by King Manuel, which created problems in the preparation and management of overseas voyages.

We have a letter from this period, dated December 9, 1508, written by Vespucci to Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros. Having stated that he had no personal interest in the question, Vespucci explained to this important individ-

<sup>3</sup> Consuelo Varela, *Colón y los florentinos*, 83.

ual the way in which he thought King Ferdinand could regulate the trading of goods, especially textiles, between Spain and its new colonies.

Such an exchange of views shows that Amerigo was not only respected for his navigational abilities, but also for his competence in commercial questions.

## 14.2 Amerigo's Will and Death in Seville

Amerigo's life in Seville became more comfortable even though sedentary. In 1510 the plague spread through Andalusia (the type is unknown), and upon becoming ill he wished to make a will,<sup>4</sup> dated April 1511. The document's nine pages reveal some aspects of Amerigo's life that would be otherwise completely unknown, as well as his family affections. He was very fond of his wife, despite his long absences. He left her all that he had acquired during his stay in Spain, "I confirm, so as not to have burdens on my conscience, that everything I possess, movable property, real estate and animals in this kingdom of Spain [...], I have earned or acquired during the period of my marriage to María Cerezo, my wife, daughter of Gonzalo".

He was also very fond of his nephew Juan. He left him his nautical instruments, including a metal astrolabe, scientific books and novels, written in Latin and other languages, in addition to his clothes, some of which made of silk and woollen cloth. It does not appear that he left him his maps and written works.<sup>5</sup>

Amerigo provided for various bequests to numerous churches in Seville, the most important being the church of San Francisco in which he wished to be buried. Other bequests were made to his servants Juan and Juana.

He left his wife three slaves, two Africans and a 25-year-old called Isabel from the Canary Islands, who had two small children, Juanico and Juanica. He urged that good care be taken of this family and forbade them being sold.

The list of debts in his will is short and for us informative, "I owe *maestre* Cristóbal, a gunner who is in Hurava [Urabá] in the Indies, 26 gold ducats. I owe Agostín, Florentine bookseller in Lisbon, 3 gold ducats: they should be paid from my assets", and he adds "I confess that I have at my house, here in Seville, 11 bombards, one large and 10 small, property of the diplomat de Enciso who is in India. They must be given to him".

The bombards in question are probably those carried by the fleet of the four merchants and which in the port of Caracas were arranged to defend the shipyard where the caravels were repaired. The gunner Cristóbal had sold those arms and gunpowder to Martín Fernández de Enciso, author of a *Suma de geographia*, a splendid *incunabulum* of 1518 in which he wrote extensively of the West Indies.

The list of his debtors is as long as that of his creditors is short: in other words, he was unable to refuse anyone who asked him for help, and we also know that he did not have receipts for some of his loans. This is a certain recipe for becoming poor.

<sup>4</sup> Consuelo Varela found this document, which she published in the appendix of her 1988 book, *Colón y los florentinos* (pp. 167-72 of the Italian translation).

<sup>5</sup> On the large map drawn by Juan Vespuccio, there are no details taken from the maps that his uncle made showing the geography of those territories. It seems probable that Amerigo's *The Four Journeys* was in Hernando Colón's large library.

There is only a single trace in the will of the five years spent in Portugal. The accounting and bequests in Florence, where Amerigo had other assets, are carefully kept separate from those in Spain. He seemed to remember very little of his period in Florence: as Consuelo Varela notes, he did not know whether his mother was still alive, and he forgot to mention his brother Girolamo.

His creditors were friends and companions of travel and overseas adventures: Juan de La Cosa for assistance rendered to his family during his absence from Seville and for other reasons; Don Diego de Nicuesa, Governor of Veragua, who gave him two water pumps, one copper the other zinc, because that is how seafarers help each other.

Amerigo was unaware of the tragic deaths of both friends, the first pierced by a hundred arrows, the second left to die on an unseaworthy vessel by Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, who was in turn murdered by his father-in-law Pedrarias Dávila; and seafarers also died in such manner.

The largest debt, 144,000 *maravedís* owed to him by the widow of Gianotto Berardi, was remitted, which Consuela Varela also notes.

The executors of the will were his loyal friend of many years Pietro Rondinelli and Emanuele Cattaneo from Genoa.

Amerigo did not die after dictating his will, but in the following year on February 22, 1512; the will was revoked perhaps because some of those named in it had died in the meantime.

He asked to be buried in a Franciscan habit as a sign of humility, like Queen Isabella and Christopher Columbus. The Florentine navigator was temporarily buried in the funerary chapel of his father-in-law Gonzalo Fernando Cerezo.

### 14.3 The Image of Amerigo Vespucci

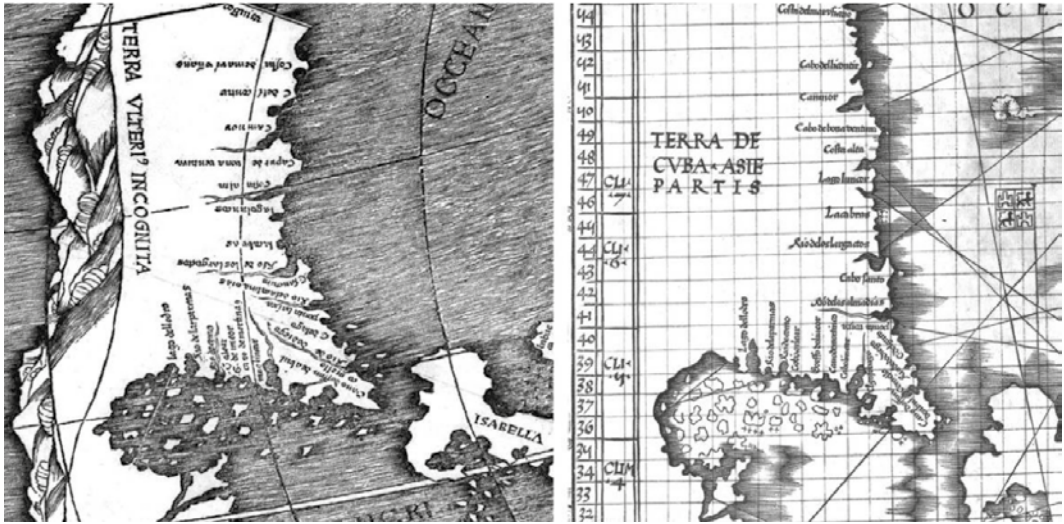
Amerigo was a calm and strong-willed man. During adolescence, his education was disjointed, but he continued to study until well into adulthood, mastering the principles of cosmology and becoming creative in that field. He wrote “To leave some fame of myself”, but he did not seek fame for the acquired wealth or the battles won but rather for the cultural progress that he had promoted. He was aware of the need to contribute to the progress of the community in which he worked and lived: “To act with a resolute soul to serve God and the world”, this was his motto.

After all, he was a Renaissance man.

He worked with reserve and discretion, always keeping a low profile but aware of his own considerable abilities. This characteristic could have led to him disappearing from the picture of great contributors to human progress had his friend and benefactor Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco and the scholars of Saint-Dié in Lorraine not asked him to inform them of his achievements and then passed on what he had recounted to them.

He was often kind (a virtue scorned today) even to those who were hostile towards him, examples being the return of the huge canoe to the cannibals, contributing to the ransom of ten Indios destined to be eaten by cannibals, and his decision not to burn the stilt houses. The reading of his will also shows his generosity.

His words also reveal a serene religiosity with traces of Puritanism, derived from the teaching of his uncle Giorgio Antonio.



**Figure 14.2** On the left a detail of Waldseemüller's *Planisphere* (1507), representing part of North America in accordance to Vespucci's own updating of the Portuguese *Padrão Real*. On the right, a detail of the *Carta Marina* (1516), of identical derivation, on which there is the inscription "Terra de Cuba/Asie partis", which expresses Columbus's conviction

Like Columbus, Amerigo was able to get up after every fall, silent and stubborn: after the failure of the company he worked for; after the loss of the four new ships that before being consigned were dashed against the coast by a storm, one after the other; when he had to flee from Lisbon to avoid the anger of King Manuel, after having reached the height of success, abandoning the documentation relating to what he had achieved through hard toil and suffering, then ceding what remained to the emissary from far-off Lorraine. "We will soon have Amerigo in Seville, who deserved much more than the title of 'cavaliere' that was granted him",<sup>6</sup> commented Piero Rondinelli. In this regard, Christopher Columbus wrote to his son Diego, "I have spoken with Amerigo Vespucci. He always wishes to please me, he is a very decent man, luck was against him, like it was for many others; his actions have not brought him all the advantages they should have".<sup>7</sup>

Having taken refuge in Seville with nothing, he got back on his feet again in the service of two young sovereigns who wished to do great things; there was the prospect of the new final voyage to the New World and then tragedy struck. King Philip, son of a great emperor, died at 28 years old; Joanna, the young Queen, was driven out of her mind by the atrocious mourning, and all prospects collapsed. Amerigo had to pick up the pieces, get rid of the ships and supplies acquired for that voyage during which he could have completed and consolidated all he had created. This was the final and bitterest blow.

<sup>6</sup> *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 57rb.

<sup>7</sup> Facsimile and English translation in *The authentic letters of Columbus*. Translations [by José Ignacio Rodríguez] <https://archive.org/details/authenticletters00colu/page/170>.



Figure 14.3 Allegory of the dialectician who sets the greyhounds of truth and falsity to hunting down the 'problem'. Frontispiece of Book II of *Margarita Philosophica* (1503) by Gregor Reisch, humanist, cosmographer and cartographer. © Wikimedia Commons

Amerigo was not the first and neither was he the last of those who created and constructed the Renaissance to be persecuted by adverse fortune and the cruel stupidity of those who managed the fate of the community.

#### 14.4 The Legacy of Amerigo Vespucci

I have had the opportunity on several occasions to highlight the positive and universal welcome afforded to Amerigo's announcement of the existence of a New World, or a fourth part of the world. I have referred to the welcome given to Amerigo's narration by eminent people and I shall not list the other commendations that can be read in books of the period. I will say that the announcement caused a reaction that could even be called a cultural revolution.<sup>8</sup> Abbot Angelo Bandini refers to an episode that I in turn am happy to recount. When the surprising news of a New World reached Florence, the city authorities decided to celebrate it in the Ognissanti quarter, loved by generations of the Vespucci family, where celebratory illuminations were kept alight for three days. We do not know whether Amerigo was aware of this; if he was, it would have made him happier than all the praise received.

Among the immediate reactions to the *Mundus Novus* was that of someone who must certainly have been a cultured man versed in the cosmology of the time. As Amerigo wrote him a letter<sup>9</sup> in which he used a larger number of Spanish words than usual, it may be suggested that he was addressing a Spaniard who understood Italian.<sup>10</sup> Amerigo explained the characteristics of the hemisphere he explored to him, characteristics that not only regard geography but also aspects of cosmology.

Although such explanations are not as rigorous as required today, they reveal a constant attention to all that the author encountered during his travels: variations in the sun's height, in the temperature and in the luxuriance of the flora during the course of the seasons, establishing a constant comparison with what was seen on the other side of the Atlantic. The populations inhabiting the torrid zone are not uniform in skin colour: in Africa they are black, on the other side of the ocean they are light-skinned and this for different reasons, including the fact that the New World is richer in fresh water, cooler and has more luxuriant vegetation. Vespucci did not accept the simplistic generalisation based merely on the influence of the stars/planets and latitude, but believed that the various circumstances relating to the living conditions of those little-known populations had to be taken into consideration: how they ate, reproduced and prospered. It is not merely by chance that he cites the 'philosopher par excellence' Aristotle, whose 'cause and effect' he seems to accept when discussing the question of biological heredity, a question he curiously came across with regard to birds' lack of fear of men they had never previously encountered.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For other favourable reactions, see the book by the excellent scholar Abbot Angelo Maria Bandini, *Vita e lettere di Amerigo Vespucci*, Firenze, 1745.

<sup>9</sup> The Ridolfi Fragment, c. 1505, in Formisano, *Amerigo Vespucci, Lettere di viaggio*, 29 and ff.

<sup>10</sup> Because of these characteristics and the topics discussed, it may have been the Catalan/Neapolitan cosmographer Jaime Ferrer, who, backed by Queen Isabella, took his own letter to Seville (see the beginning of Chapter 4), in which he put forward the same ideas that Vespucci rebutted in this reply.

<sup>11</sup> Gerolamo Cardano would later brilliantly develop this observation on biological heredity.



The anthropological comparison between the indigenous populations of the two continents, one of Mongolian stock and the other of Black descent, was avant-garde for the period. This comparison probably derived from the habit of assessing the price of slaves, a habit he probably picked up when he worked for the Berardi commercial house, which had accumulated wealth through the slave trade. This practice allowed him to appreciate characteristics that were not so obvious, for example tone of voice.

As regards the customs and habits of the people he encountered, that is the social life and ethnology of the Indios, Vespucci had an advantage over his contemporaries who travelled in the New World. This advantage consisted in having lived with the Indios for weeks at a time on several occasions. These long stays, not without risk, allowed him to observe infrequent events such as births, funerals and medical treatments. His discussion becomes so interesting that the reader would like to know more, wishing that Vespucci had lived with the natives for a much longer period and had been able to tell us how they managed to cut down huge trees up to eighty metres high using stone axes, or how they managed to excavate the trunks to make sturdy canoes.

The reader would like to know how those people, without, or almost without, a tribal hierarchy, could move an entire village every eight to ten years, rebuilding dwellings that could house two or three hundred people. The reader would also like to know how they built villages of stilt houses with drawbridges and other devices, marvellous constructions that required the efficient collaboration of hundreds of men for many months (when it came to burning down such a complex, Amerigo and his companions hesitated and then abandoned the idea). In short, the abundance of information Amerigo provided about what the populations that appeared to him in very primitive conditions were capable of building constitutes a very valuable patrimony, which to date has not been made as much use of as it merits.

To the false teachers who hold that history-oriented naturalistic disciplines do not constitute 'real science',<sup>12</sup> I believe it correct to point out that when Christopher Columbus planned the routes to and from the Asian markets he enhanced 'real science', as did Amerigo Vespucci when he planned the measurement of longitude.<sup>13</sup>

For this purpose, Claudius Ptolemy had suggested a method based on lunar eclipses, rare events unusable for very distant places. Amerigo understood that any astronomical event observable at the same time in distant places, at different local times, could be used for measuring longitude, and therefore developed an extension of the Ptolemaic method. This extension was described in the "Prima lettera familiare" addressed to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco in July 1500<sup>14</sup> (see Chapter 7, § 7.7). Later, he applied it several times during the third voyage along the coasts of Brazil. Finally, he taught it some years later to the school for navigators in Seville; indeed, this method was in general use at the beginning of the 16th century, to the great advantage of cartography and navigation.

<sup>12</sup> See Omodeo, *Il Secolo d'oro*, forthcoming, § 15.8.

<sup>13</sup> "Longitude is something more difficult, which few people can know, except for those who remain awake and look at the conjunction of the Moon with the planets. Because of the said longitude I have lost a lot of sleep and my life has been shortened for x years, but I keep everything well spent, because I hope to come into fame for centuries, if I return with good health from this journey". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 49va.

<sup>14</sup> *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 43.

Amerigo's innovation turned the attention of scholars of this period to all celestial phenomena of use for measuring longitude. In fact, when Galileo Galilei discovered the 'Medician stars' that orbit around Jupiter<sup>15</sup> with astronomical precision, they were persuaded that the times of their appearance and disappearance behind the planet could be used for further development of the Ptolemaic method. Others thought the same and consequently Galileo received, from Venice and Holland, requests for the calculation of the ephemerides for these small planets. In those years, Galileo was a prisoner at Arcetri and his sight was weakened. Therefore, he passed on the requests to his pupil Benedetto Castelli, a Benedictine monk. However, when Castelli had finished the work, unexpected discrepancies were found: when Jupiter was behind the Sun with respect to the Earth, there was a delay of about twenty minutes in the calculated values. In order to explain this difference, it had to be concluded that light moves with a finite velocity, and the Danish astronomer O. Roemer proposed a first estimate of this speed of 215,000 km/second (rather than the 299,000 km/sec accepted today). Such an unexpected discovery derived from Vespucci's momentous proposal.

As for the study of the coordinates of the largest stars of the Southern Hemisphere, almost a century passed before someone returned to the work Amerigo Vespucci began with great difficulty in the autumn months of 1502.

#### 14.5 A Misunderstanding Divides Amerigo's Biographers

During the 18th century, also known as the Age of Enlightenment, there was a revival of interest in great cultural and explorative endeavours, as well as in the lives of illustrious men. Thus, a first, well-documented, biography of Amerigo Vespucci appeared in Florence. This was the *Vita e lettere di Amerigo Vespucci* written by the abbot Angelo Bandini (1726-1803), librarian and archivist, published with the date of 1745.<sup>16</sup> Bandini presented to readers the three letters written by Amerigo, which together constitute an adequate description of the Florentine navigator's work: the "Prima lettera familiare" (unknown before then), the "Lettera a Soderini" and the "Mundus Novus", the two latter translated from Latin into Italian.<sup>17</sup> Abbot Bandini added a Prologue to the three letters, about seventy pages long, in which he outlined the life and merits of Amerigo.

These pages contain a good deal of praise and parochialism together with odes and sonnets, as was the practice at the time; however, they are also well-documented, honest and correct. It is a pity that they have been read little and studied even less.

Bandini did not hide the fact that Vespucci was the target of criticism and cited some examples. Among these is a passage by the abbot Noël-An-

<sup>15</sup> The description appeared in the *Sidereus Nuncius*, Venice 1610.

<sup>16</sup> This biography, rich both in details taken from works that were difficult to obtain and in very pertinent critical considerations, cannot have been written by a 19-year-old novice, but rather by a mature scholar. Moreover, the dedication to Giulio Ranieri Orlandini del Beccuto, chamberlain of Grand Duke Francis III of Lorraine, who had procured him the position as librarian, supports this. Muñoz, who is discussed in the following page, dates this book to 1754 (*Historia del Nuevo-Mundo*, X, l. 5).

<sup>17</sup> The *Vita e lettere di Amerigo* also contains the letter by Girolamo Sernigi describing Vasco da Gama's first voyage (see *Codice Vaglianti*, folios 61ra-65ra), although it is wrongly attributed to Vespucci.

toine Pluche, who in the vast work *Spectacle de la Nature* (1732-1742) wrote:

He published reports in which he attributed to himself the discovery of the new terra firma. He was doubly unjust towards Columbus, causing this great man to be stripped of his offices, and to lose his freedom, stealing through his charlatanism the glory of giving his name to the continent discovered by Columbus.<sup>18</sup>

Bandini also cited another severe and singular criticism aimed at Amerigo by the Jesuit Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix, translating from the French as follows:

Amerigo Vespucci, who was nothing more than a private citizen in the fleet and Ojeda's partner in the endeavour, has published the account of this discovery, for which he takes all the honours, and, to persuade the public that he was the first European to land on the continent of this vast part of the world, dared to affirm that his voyage lasted 25 months [*sic*]. Ojeda, questioned by a magistrate during a case in this regard, contradicted him under oath; but as he [Amerigo] was immediately believed on his word, they became used to using his name for the New World.<sup>19</sup>

The source of Abbot Pluche's information about Amerigo's usurpation is unknown. However, in the case of P.F.X. de Charlevoix, it is easy to believe that it was through hearsay, picked up during his visits to the Jesuit colleges established in Haiti and Paraguay. The misunderstanding persists in these harsh reproaches aimed at Amerigo, which I have mentioned several times regarding the achievements of the two great protagonists of the explorations on the other side of the Atlantic.

Columbus had announced the discovery of a new archipelago across the ocean, the Antilles, which blocked the way to the Indies (but in actual fact he knew much more). Vespucci, who had sailed along a much longer stretch of the continent's coast, also exploring inland several times, had announced the existence of a new continent, a fourth part of the world. This was sensational news for the period. The cartographers, without exception, accepted it immediately. It would have been enough to go back to the sources to clarify this misunderstanding, as Abbot Bandini knew, but this did not happen. Instead, the misunderstanding grew as the unjust criticisms of Abbot Pluche, an author with many readers and high standing, were published in France in a series called *Biographie des hommes illustres*, distributed throughout Europe.

<sup>18</sup> This successful publication, Pluche's *Spectacle de la Nature*, had many editions and translations, including Italian; this passage appears in vol. VIII, section V.

<sup>19</sup> de Charlevoix, *Histoire de L'Isle Espagnole ou de S. Domingue*.

### 14.6 J.B. Muñoz Writes His *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*

The Age of Enlightenment was coming to its turbulent end when King Charles III of Spain asked his subject Juan Bautista Muñoz to write a work on the most glorious period of his kingdom. The latter set to work and thus in 1793 (on the eve of the ‘Terror’ in nearby France) the first volume of a painstaking and elegant edition of the *Historia del Nuevo Mundo* appeared in Madrid. The *Historia* was a strangely dull work without bibliographical references that narrated the life of Christopher Columbus up until the autumn of 1500, the year in which for the Genoese navigator it seemed “the moment had come to rest and enjoy his well-earned rewards, and then came the fatal blow that embittered all the days of his life”. Those words ended Volume I; volume II never appeared, and thus the work remained mutilated (like many other works published in Spain at the time) and the reader remains permanently in doubt about how an unknown assailant came to strike Columbus.

By contrast, the thirty pages of the ‘prologue’ are vivid and clear. Here, J.B. Muñoz narrated how he documented his work and made severe judgments on a number of authors, in particular Angelo Bandini and Peter Martyr d’Anghiera, and he was also extremely caustic about Amerigo Vespucci. He wrote,

The pages written by the abbot Bandini were useful to me for completing the proof of his fraud, which I will exhibit in an opportune place. In the meantime, I cannot help noting this among the fruits of his charlatanism: Vespucci as a man of the sea was inferior to almost all the explorers of his time; despite this he was rewarded almost more than all the others, and until today his memory has been only a little less honoured than the incomparable Columbus. Despite the fact that a thousand scholarly writers have unmasked the Florentine imposter, his apologists have not been lacking.<sup>20</sup>

Here, the story of usurpation was reinforced by the added accusation of incompetence.

Vespucci’s faults were not specified in this book, nor did Muñoz document them. It seems they consisted in having appropriated Columbus’ merits, to such a degree as to almost appear of the same stature. However, the historiographer was unaware that already in the title of his book *Historia del Nuevo Mundo* he attributed Columbus with something that did not belong to him, but rather to Amerigo. Indeed, Columbus never affirmed that he had reached a New World rather than Asia.

The anger of Muñoz – who was unaware that Amerigo had received Spanish citizenship – probably derived from the fact that Vespucci had made it known that the Brazilian territories belonged to Portugal, the nation that had exploited this to take possession of many other lands belonging to Spain. However, there is something that escapes us in all of this ill-will. I remain certain that Muñoz did not justify in any way the serious accusations he made against Amerigo.

About 15 years after these occurrences, Charles IV and his son Ferdinand VII were forced by Napoleon Bonaparte to cede the Spanish crown

<sup>20</sup> Muñoz, *Historia del Nuevo-Mundo*, X.

to his brother Joseph, already King of Naples. This began a very dark period for Spain.

### 14.7 The ‘Vespucci Question’ Becomes More Complicated

The complex problem of interpreting the events narrated herein meant that many people have denied Amerigo’s success, often with indignation and anger. According to his various denigrators, he had appropriated Columbus’ merits through deception and lies. In reply to this, it must be said that Amerigo never claimed to have discovered the islands and territories first discovered by Columbus and neither did he propose to name them after himself. He very appropriately maintained that the new lands were part of a New World and not to Asia, as he himself had previously believed and as Christopher Columbus continued to do.

The discovery of the existence of a fourth part of the world was not the result of a moment, it was a process that developed over time; beginning with Christopher Columbus, it matured thanks to Amerigo and it concluded, but not definitively, with Magellan’s enterprise.

As clarified above, even the name America, proposed by the cartographers of Saint-Dié, was not finally accepted for many decades. In the meantime, the case against the Crown, known as the *Pesquisa Colombina*, was continuing and becoming more complicated. As inferred from Fernando Colombo’s *Le Historie*, the Treasury’s defenders maintained, mistakenly but perhaps in good faith, that Columbus’ merits – and therefore the division of the resulting wealth – did not regard the discovery of the *terra firma* but only of the islands, and that the navigator’s heirs must therefore be satisfied with what came from the said islands. The heirs (or their representatives) replied that the Admiral had also discovered the *terra firma* in the Gulf of Paria.

It is a telling fact that in this judicial debate, which partly took place in Haiti, there was no mention of the Admiral having set foot on *terra firma* during his first voyage, believing he was in Asia, and that he also returned there during his second voyage. Vespucci was aware of this, having drawn that land on his own map, which we find marked with the emblem of Castile. Obviously, in this judicial context Juan de La Cosa, who was an eyewitness, could not intervene, while Vespucci, a decisive witness, was not called to testify. Instead, Alonso de Ojeda, a man who should have been in prison for his piracy and murders, was called to give evidence in court.

### 14.8 All References to Vespucci and His Voyages are Deleted from the Portuguese Archives

On May 24, 1826, Don Martín Fernández de Navarrete, an excellent historian of Spanish Renaissance navigation, turned to the Viscount of Santarém, a Portuguese politician who was very devoted to the King, and at the time the head of the royal archive of Torre do Tombo. Navarrete wanted information on the documents housed there relating to Amerigo Vespucci. Two months later, on July 25, Don Navarrete received a surprising reply. There was no mention of Vespucci’s name in King Manuel’s original papers between 1495 and 1503, nor did it appear in the 82,902 documents of the chronological collection, nor in the 6,095 documents in the Las Gvetas col-

lection and not even among the numerous sheaves of correspondence written by the King and other personages. Nor could any reference to Giuliano del Giocondo and Bartolomeo del Giocondo be found in those documents.<sup>21</sup>

The eager Viscount of Santarém added that he could not find any mention of Amerigo in the books and manuscripts of his own era, relating to the years 1497-1631 housed in the Royal Library in Paris. As the archivist concluded, “Vespucci’s claims [and what he recounts] in his *Lettera a Pietro Soderini* are therefore very dubious”. The diligent archivist added that there was not even any trace of Vespucci in the documents relating to a Portuguese pilot who stopped at Bezeguiche,<sup>22</sup> on his way to Calicut, where he met the ships sent by King Manuel to find new markets. He dwelt on this subject, confusing the dates.<sup>23</sup>

It is not credible that the Viscount of Santarém, who moreover said that he was seriously ill during this period, was able to trace the enormous number of documents that he mentioned in less than two months. Nor can it possibly be believed that he managed to examine over one hundred thousand manuscript pages, a task that would take many years, perhaps decades, to complete. Therefore, the viscount, carried away by his zeal, passed off as his own the final account of the long and difficult work of others, obeying orders that could not be disregarded.

Despite this, Don Martín Navarrete accepted this information as valid. Furthermore, having carefully translated the letter addressed to Duke René II of Lorraine into Castilian from the Latin of Abbot Johannes Basin,<sup>24</sup> he became aware that it presented various oversights and inconsistencies and convinced himself that his Portuguese correspondent was right. He concluded that Vespucci had lied on many occasions in order to appropriate Columbus’ merits, nevertheless admitting with some caution that Vespucci had taken part, although in a subordinate capacity, in the endeavours he recounted.

To those who agree with Navarrete, one can reply that there is substantial evidence that the voyages took place and that Amerigo played a leading part in them. It is a fact that Pietro Rondinelli, who visited Vespucci in Lisbon after his return from the 1501-02 voyage across the ocean, and with whom he had a firm friendship, stated that King Manuel had conferred a knightly order on him. It is a fact that Vespucci provided Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de’ Medici with an accurate description of the cargo on the ships in Cabral’s second fleet, which had returned from India, which description was useful for Lorenzo’s commercial interests. It is also a fact that Amerigo described the *Canopi chiari* and their exact position in the Southern Sky, which corresponds to the observation of Magellan, who saw those ‘clouds’ about 20 years later. The same goes for the description of the *Canopo scuro*, i.e. the Coalsack nebula, visible in the Southern Hemisphere, which Amerigo had observed and described.

It is difficult to deny that Amerigo measured longitude for King Manuel, nor can it be contested that he reached Porto Seguro and took on board his

<sup>21</sup> Error for ‘Giuliano di Bartolomeo del Giocondo’; Navarrete referred to Viscount of Santarém’s letter in *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos*, vol. III, 309-14.

<sup>22</sup> The native name for Dakar.

<sup>23</sup> See the beginning of Chapter 10.

<sup>24</sup> See § 13.2.

ship the two *degradados* left there by Cabral.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, extremely reliable documentation exists regarding the activities of Giuliano del Giocondo in Lisbon.<sup>26</sup> It is also certain that Vespucci sailed for a long distance along the western coast of the Atlantic and that he made a detailed drawing of that part of the New World and established its longitude. On this occasion, I will omit much more information about the existence and reality of his voyages, which have been extensively presented in this book.

The many refutations of the hasty denials and categorical affirmations made by the ‘head archivist’ strongly suggest that King Manuel, the only one who could give such an order, had commanded that every trace of Vespucci’s achievements in Portugal should be removed: a definitive *damnatio memoriae*.<sup>27</sup>

### 14.9 Damnatio Memoriae

King Manuel was right to be angry with Vespucci. One reason derived from the fact that this servant of his, in the *Mundus Novus* – a copy of which the King had received from some zealous courtier – strongly criticised the Portuguese navy. Amerigo perhaps was right regarding the crew he sailed with to the southern Atlantic Ocean, but he was wrong to generalise. Bartolomeu Dias was an excellent and courageous navigator, as were his brother Diego, Vasco da Gama and Nicolau Coelho (captain of the *Anunciada*) and others. A more serious reason for King Manuel’s anger towards the Florentine was the fact that he had talked too much about voyages and places that should have remained a secret. The king was convinced that a policy of strict secrecy was the best thing, but he had no perception that this policy, constantly pursued by him, presented great flaws. He was unaware, for example, that a modest Florentine merchant, Pietro Vaglianti, kept copies of two of his letters written to Pope Julius II and Pope Leo X on his desk,<sup>28</sup> letters in which he boasted of Portuguese naval and commercial successes, information that was useful for predicting commercial trends.

Isolated in his palace, rather distant from Lisbon and its port, King Manuel did not realise that the veterans of the great voyages were besieged by hordes of curious people in the port’s taverns who asked for news about everything, and that this news, intercepted by many informers, reached precisely the places he did not want it to. The *política de sigilo* was worth about as much as ‘Pulcinella’s secret’, that of the Neapolitan mask who wears a sailor’s uniform.

When King Manuel heard that Amerigo had taken refuge in Spain and was preparing an expedition to the Moluccas of which he was to be a captain, he

<sup>25</sup> Valentim Fernandes, illustrious humanist and publisher, correspondent with Matthias Ringmann, author of *Navegação dos portugueses para além do círculo equinocial*, guaranteed, as a notary, the authenticity of the objects that the two *degradados* took back to Lisbon from Porto Seguro. See Janaína Amado, Luiz Carlos Figueiredo, “A Certidão de Valentim Fernandes, documento pouco conhecido sobre o Brasil de 1500”.

<sup>26</sup> See Pietro Omodeo, “The Authenticity of Amerigo Vespucci’s *Mundus Novus*”, 362.

<sup>27</sup> On this *damnatio* vedi Formisano, *Amerigo Vespucci, Lettere di Viaggio*, 192.

<sup>28</sup> In the *Codice Vaglianti*, the “Letter to Pope Julius II” appears in folio 120vb, and the “Letter to Leo X” in folio 140va. This codex also includes a report on the Kingdom of Congo (folios 85ra-100rb) prepared on behalf of King John II of Portugal.

persuaded himself that Amerigo had broken his oath. He furiously wrote in threatening terms to his father-in-law, King Ferdinand of Aragon, asking him to cancel the planned visit by Philip of Austria and Queen Joanna, his wife, which was done without protest. As for Amerigo, traitor and perjurer, the king decreed a *damnatio memoriae*: nothing of what his unfaithful servant had done for him was to be remembered. It may be presumed that the people to whom the king assigned the task of enacting the decree did their best, but they certainly took too much time, so that the judgment did not have the desired effect. Too many people had taken part in the expeditions, or knew about them, and they contributed to confirming the accounts given by Amerigo, who at the time was highly respected and admired for his achievements.

Forty years after the publication of Navarrete's great work, it happened that the respected American essayist and poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson, ignoring Navarrete's caution, heavily exaggerated what he had written, and at a conference in 1865 stated:

Strange [...] that broad America must wear the name of a thief. Amerigo Vespucci, the pickle dealer at Seville [...] whose highest naval rank was boatswain's mate in an expedition that never sailed, managed in this lying world to supplant Columbus, and baptize half the Earth with his own dishonest name.<sup>29</sup>

Such words, which resounded at the end of the American Civil War, caused a great stir, leading to the publication of many articles and books, over the following century and a half, deploring the inappropriate and unworthy choice of the name of a counterfeiter for the New World. Thus, the *Vespucci question* was born, which had an infelicitous following in Italy.

#### 14.10 A Question of Method

Before concluding, it is appropriate to make a brief analysis of two questions regarding Navarrete's great work in five volumes, published in the 1820s, to which many of the authors who have written on Vespucci refer, including all his detractors. At the beginning of volume III, Navarrete discussed the methods that should be followed by writers of history. The first recommendation regarded the gathering of adequate documentation. The Spanish scholar constituted a commendable example in this regard. He published a mountain of documents from archives, documents that are still useful to those who study Renaissance navigation. Another of his correct recommendations is that of not allowing oneself to be affected by admiration and enthusiasm, avoiding a poetic compilation of epic events for which moderation is appropriate in order to avoid betraying historical truth. Both recommendations were taken up by Ilaria Luzzana Caraci and Consuelo Varela, who in turn added other documents concerning navigators of that great era.

In actual fact, total reliance on official documents does not always guarantee reaching the historical truth desired by Don Martín Navarrete, primarily because if the collection is incomplete other documents could make it necessary to modify or overturn the acquired 'truth'. Moreover, the erro-

<sup>29</sup> Emerson, *English Traits*.



neous reading of a document can decrease the value of the formulated opinion. An example of the risks involved for the historiographer is the case of Alonso de Ojeda, much praised by chroniclers of the time and by some modern authors. This lively and daring young man underwent a great transformation during his lifetime, documented by the case against him promoted by Columbus and the sentence inflicted on him after the disaster he caused as Governor of Coquibacoa,<sup>30</sup> as well as by Queen Joanna's injunction.<sup>31</sup> Hence, the historiographer must come to a very different conclusion about him and his activities.

A similar rectification must be made concerning the sanctity of Christopher Columbus, for whom the process of beatification was begun in the second half of the 19th century. This was promoted by the Franciscans and the city of Genoa based on a study by Antoine Roselly de Lorgues<sup>32</sup> of the Genoese navigator's merits. This idea of sanctity was contradicted by what is narrated in de Cuneo's letter<sup>33</sup> and in Bobadilla's report,<sup>34</sup> even if the necessary revision does not affect the judgement of his stature and merits as a man and navigator.

Where Navarrete's opinion really cannot be accepted is on the subject of Vespucci's faults, which he carefully list and from which he derived a completely negative judgement, in his opinion definitive and unalterable. Indeed, he thought it permissible to scoff at any possible awkward attempt to contrast his 'historical truth'. Such an attitude could have harmful effects in environments in which anyone who disagrees with the opinions of those in power is considered guilty, forcing novices into conformism.

Many of Navarrete's accusations appear in the notes placed below his own translation from Latin to Castilian of Vespucci's letter dedicated to Duke René II of Lorraine. Some of his criticisms regard the fact that Vespucci's description of the natives' customs differs from that given by Columbus. This is true, but it is due to the fact that Vespucci often described populations different from the Taino and from the Cannibals that Columbus encountered in the Antilles. Navarrete also criticised Vespucci's narration of the capture and sale of over two hundred slaves in the "Lettera a Soderini", which he states occurred at the end of the first voyage, while in the "Prima lettera familiare" this episode seems to have occurred after the second voyage. The incongruity exists, but it is not due to malice: Vespucci was replying to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco who asked to be informed of the most notable things that happened to him; in satisfying this request, he committed an excusable chronological mistake, not a deception.

Navarrete also criticised the dates and measurements, which vary in an exasperating manner from one letter to another, sometimes between one line and another on the same page.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See § 11.1.

<sup>31</sup> "Real provisión para que se proceda en la Española contra Alonso de Hojeda, Bernardino de Talavera y sus cómplices, por crímenes". Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos*, 3: 120.

<sup>32</sup> Roselly de Lorgues, *Cristoforo Colombo, Storia della sua vita*.

<sup>33</sup> See § 3.8.

<sup>34</sup> See § 6.9.

<sup>35</sup> Such errors constitute a serious problem that were common in the period, so much so that in his great work on pure and applied mathematics, *General Trattato di Numeri et Misure* (1556-60), Tartaglia felt it necessary to dedicate an entire chapter to the way in which numbers should

However, Navarrete had already formulated his condemnation of Vespucci in the Prologue to Volume III where he wrote,

The second Section contains the reports on the four journeys that it is presumed Amerigo Vespucci undertook, which were not published in Spain but rather in a hidden and cunning manner in various places in Europe (while the family of Columbus was on the island of San Domingo), succeeding in calling the new continent by a name that did not belong to it [...]; the artful caution with which the reports spread through foreign countries, always avoiding appearing in Spain and Portugal where it was not so easy to hide the truth: and later neither court sentences nor the force of the law were enough to remove the name *America* from the part of the world discovered by Christopher Columbus and the Spaniards who followed him in such an audacious and dangerous endeavour.<sup>36</sup>

No authentic substantial facts are cited in this severe accusation, while the fact that Columbus knew about Amerigo's third voyage and that its merits went unrecognised is ignored. Moreover, Navarrete held Vespucci responsible for what was published in Europe about his travels, but it would not have been difficult for him to ascertain that the *Mundus Novus* was published in faraway places and without Vespucci's knowledge, as he was on his fourth voyage at the time. Besides, King Manuel and the Spanish sovereigns had certainly been informed about these publications by their diplomats. Navarrete also ignored the fact that Amerigo had become a Spanish citizen, a citizen of the country whose values he meant to defend.

One can understand the distress of an erudite and patriotic man like Navarrete, writing at the time of the restoration following Napoleon Bonaparte's tyrannical seizure of power in Spain. One can understand the desolation of a man contemplating the ruin of his own country, from which the overseas colonies had just separated, and easily understand why he wished to glorify a distant period of wealth and power, wounded by a presumed usurpation. What one cannot understand are those who insist in wrongly denigrating Amerigo Vespucci, a man of great merits, with accusations that are easily disproven.

be written. In Amerigo's writings, this question is often extremely complicated, even though a source of ambiguities can be identified in the fact that the number 4, if not accompanied by other Arabic numbers, can often be mistaken for the Roman numeral X. For this reason, 4 is read as ten and 44 read as twenty: mine is a modest corrective for a multitude of errors.

**36** "La Seccion II contiene las relaciones de los cuatro viages que supone haber hecho Américo Vespuccio; las cuales nunca se han impreso en España; pero divulgadas oculta y artificialmente por Europa (mientras la familia de los Colones residia en la isla de Santo Domingo) lograron apellidar al nuevo continente con un nombre que no le correspondia [...] la cautela artificiosa con que se propagaban por países extranjeros, huyendo siempre de aparecer en España y Portugal donde no era tan fácil ocultar la verdad; ni en tiempos posteriores las sentencias judiciales ni la fuerza de las leyes, hayan bastado á privar del nombre de *América* a la parte del mundo que descubrió Don Cristóbal Colon y los españoles que le siguieron e imitaron en tan árdua y peligrosa carrera".



## **15 Epilogue (1515-1521)**

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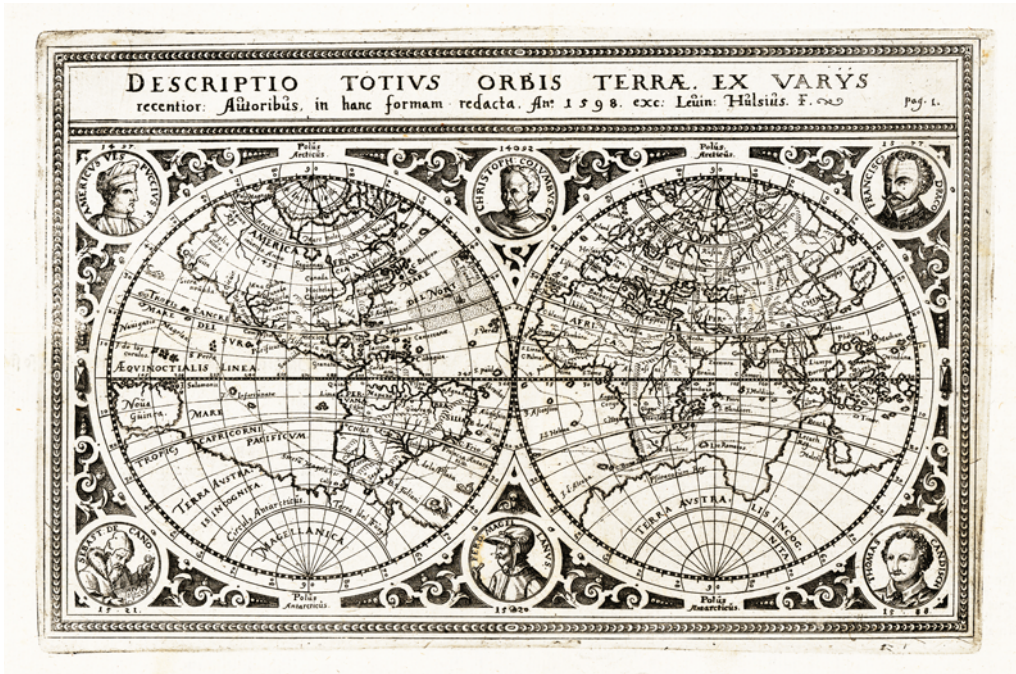
Afonso de Albuquerque was for some time in charge of a part of Tristan da Cunha's large fleet, but he soon became an independent captain and contributed to the knowledge of Asia as a daring sailor and soldier. He was the first European to have sailed his ships into the Red Sea and establish contact with the Negus of Abyssinia. He reached and explored the Persian Gulf, a mythical place that for many centuries had been unreachable. He consolidated the tenure of the base of Goa on the west coast of the Indian peninsula, modelling it in his own way; from there he went further to the east, taking possession of the Malacca, the peninsula that juts out towards the Equator. As a soldier he was bold, but often cruel and ruthless; at the same time, he was a skilled and clever diplomat. Having reached Canton in southern China he established trade contacts with the great Ming empire. The year was 1513.

He was named Governor of Portuguese India. He went south of Malaysia to the mythical islands of Sumatra and Java, in short, great swathes of Asia opened up before the man who was now aiming for the Spice Islands. But when he returned to the base of Goa in December 1515, he had a terrible news waiting for him: King Manuel had deprived him of the office of Governor, giving his command to a rival of his, Lopo Soares de Albergaria.

Feeling destroyed, Albuquerque wrote a memorial in which he assured the King of his loyalty, asked clemency for his son Brás who had helped him with great courage, and begged the King to transfer all the honours and rewards that were due to himself to Brás and a little later, on December 16, he died of a broken heart.

On January 23, 1516, King Ferdinand of Aragon died. In his will he had ordered that Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros should assume the office of regent. The cardinal carefully arranged for the succession of Carlos of Habsburg, grandson of Ferdinand and of Maximilian I, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, and Carlos in September 1517 became King Carlos I of the whole of Spain at the age of 17.

The very young ruler neglected to summon the *Cortes* to legitimise his access to the throne, and apparently he took his mother Queen Juana from the convent - a prison in which she had been locked up; he had not seen her since he was seven.



**Figure 15.1** A hundred years after the success of Christopher Columbus, in this representation of the Earth's surface (1592) divided into two hemispheres, Leivius Hulsius has placed six medallions in which he shows the principal discoverers of the New World: Columbus, Vesputti, Magellan and the three men who circumnavigated the world, Juan Sebastián Elcano, Francis Drake and Thomas Cavendish

Carlos I became familiar with his royal duties, and soon gave orders to the *Casa de la Contratación* to resume the organisation of a fleet that would reach the mythical Moluccas, which were rich in many treasures. He had heard about them during his adolescence, and he knew that his parents had taken care of the project. The urge to restart the trip was given, probably, both by his mother and by two people who had left Portugal following disagreements with King Manuel, who as he aged became increasingly bitter with his subjects and closed with his secrets: the cosmographer and astronomer Ruy Faleiro and Ferdinand Magellan. The Fugger bank said it was ready to participate in the financing of the project.

Resources were not lacking. In addition, the succession to Emperor Maximilian, now blind and very ill, was approaching. The office of emperor, however, was not hereditary but elective, and Carlos I of Spain succeeded in earning the esteem of the German Prince-electors with the gold of Spain and was unanimously elected Holy Roman Emperor. Moreover, he was of the same opinion as his grandfather Ferdinand of Aragon (and Machiavelli) that 'nothing makes a prince so well esteemed as undertaking great enterprises and setting a fine example'.

He then restored the *Casa de la Contratación* for the implementation of the plan to reach the Moluccas by crossing the strait that would take the name of Magellan. It was the third time that this attempt was repeated, and this time it ended successfully, albeit at a very high price.

Five brigantines, two of about 130 tons, two 90-ton whalers and a 60-ton caravel, loaded with enough food (biscuits, smoked meat and more) for two years for a crew of 234 men, took part in the enterprise. Two stops were planned in the New World: the first in the great gulf of Rio de la Plata and the second in the Gulf of San Julian at 49°S, where the fleet piloted by Vespucci had stopped in 1501.

It was a programme based on the one that failed ten years earlier, but with the explicit goal that the latitude of the Moluccan islands would be checked to determine whether, according to the Treaty of Tordesillas, they belonged to Spain or Portugal. The task of establishing the correct coordinates was entrusted to Ruy Faleiro, a Portuguese man who was also very angry with his country; he, however, fell ill before leaving and was replaced by Andrés de san Martin.

Another innovation was that the crew was not exclusively Spanish but international, including many Portuguese people and sailors from the Venetian and Genoese Republics.

During the ocean crossing, the first tensions began to emerge between Magellan and the Spanish captains. The ships reached the bay of Rio de Janeiro and lingered to explore the estuary of Rio della Plata, reaching the base of San Julian in December 1519, where the disagreements between the major captain and the other captains escalated. Some of these captains hatched a plot; Magellan became aware of it and reacted with extreme violence: the rebel leader was stabbed and his body was quartered; another was killed and two others, including the *veedor*, the supervisor of the expedition, were transported to a deserted place, and abandoned. In the end, the main captain had his way.

Another tragedy occurred when the ship *Santiago* was wrecked and the crew was saved with great difficulty. Due to all these troubles, the season suitable for crossing the strait was now over.

The sailors had to winter with reduced rations, the cold was intolerable, and many were eager to return to Spain. Finally the four ships entered/approached the strait; but the brigantine *San Antonio* disappeared. The searches for it were useless: it had deserted. Only three ships made their way into the Southern Ocean.

In November 1520, a year late, they crossed the strait later dedicated to Magellan, and faced the Ocean which was baptized with the name of Pacifico. The course through the ocean was completed in three months and 20 days, but the sailors paid a high price from hunger and scurvy: nineteen of them lost their lives.

When Magellan arrived at the islands - which would later be called the Philippines in honour of the infant Philip - he stopped in a city, Cebu, whose king welcomed him amicably. Magellan hastened to convert him and his people to Christianity and would have liked to convert the surrounding populations too, but found himself involved in a skirmish in which he was killed along with seven sailors.

The survivors elected a new captain and returned to those who had welcomed them, but this time a trap had been set and another 28 of them, including Captain Serrano who had succeeded Magellan, were slaughtered. The Basque pilot Sebastian Elcano took the lead, burned the ship that no longer had any crew, and with only two surviving ships, fled to the Moluccas. When he arrived he made no claim whatsoever, loaded the ship *Victoria* with spices and sailed with it towards the south-west, boldly pointing to

the south of the Cape of Good Hope, to then sail northward without stopping up to the Cape Verde Islands.

There he took on fresh supplies and resumed the journey, escaping by a whisker from the Portuguese, but the 13 sailors who did not arrive in time to embark were reduced to slavery. Sebastian Elcano returned to Seville after exactly three years; eighteen survivors remained with him, including the chronicler of the expedition, Antonio Pigafetta of Vicenza, who had embarked at his own expense on behalf of the Venetian Republic. The other ship, the *Trinidad*, which had been left in a poor condition, was repaired by survivors of the crew who attempted to cross the Pacific eastwards, but it was intercepted by the Portuguese and the crew were also enslaved; only two sailors ever saw Europe again.

On November 7, 1523, Pigafetta reported this enterprise to the Council of Ten in Venice and the following year he obtained the privilege of printing his own narrative, which was published in 1524. It is a precious account of the very long and troubled navigation.<sup>1</sup> Accidents, hunger and scurvy are reported, but there is also detailed technical information on all the places they reached. In the manner of Marco Polo, Pigafetta described how cities and islands were governed, which currencies were used and what their values were, the useful products to buy, the most requested goods, and what could be bartered. In addition to this, imitating Vespucci, he described in lively detail the appearance and behaviour of the populations he met, how those people ate, how they lit their fire, which weapons they used, how they adorned themselves, and their funerals and sexual habits. He also compiled long lists of words used in various indigenous languages, lists which later became precious to missionaries and linguists. In short, he was an observer free from prejudices and superstitions, who, however, sometimes exaggerated.

He described exotic plants and animals and even the beliefs of the populations he visited, always careful to specify what he saw with his own eyes and what he was told. He described the 'clouds of Magellan' (the small satellite galaxy of our galaxy, already seen and described by Vespucci), but he was not good at astronomy nor in the art of navigation: the geographical coordinates he indicated are often erroneous.

The astronomer and cosmographer of the expedition had been killed in Cebu, and the indications by the other survivors of the long journey regarding the position of the Moluccas were very vague and were not sufficient to clarify the question that had given occasion to the enterprise: did the Spice Islands fall within the limits of the Treaty of Tordesillas? However, Carlos I, by now Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, had other major problems in those years, and renounced his claims (legitimate but not fair) on the Moluccas against a payment by the Portuguese of 350,000 gold ducats, while the Philippines remained with Spain. The sun never set on the empire of the twenty-one year old emperor.

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**1** Pigafetta's report was edited by Manfroni, *Relazione del primo viaggio intorno al mondo di Antonio Pigafetta*. Another excellent critical edition is the one edited by Andrea Canova (*Antonio Pigafetta, Relazione del primo viaggio attorno al mondo*). A complete documentation appears in: Compañía General de Tabacos de Filipinas, *Colección general de documentos relativos a las Islas Filipinas etc.* A modern reconstruction, also based on other reports that have come to us, is provided by Bergreen, *Over the Edge of the World. Magellan's Terrifying Circumnavigation of the Globe*.

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## Sources

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Sources for the life and enterprises of Vespucci are his *Lettere* and the contemporary works that speak of him, as well as the many maps from the beginning of the sixteenth century based in some way on what he saw or learned from conversations with the Indios. His two works, one containing his astronomical observations, the other derived from the logbooks and notes concerning hiring and accounting, have been lost. The astronomical work could perhaps be partly reconstructed through the post-1501 writings of Abraham Zacuto, King Manuel's astronomer. *The Four Journeys*, several copies of which must have existed, could perhaps be found in some archive.

There are two editions of great philological value of the *Lettere familiari* and the *Lettere di viaggio*: the works of Luciano Formisano, *Amerigo Vespucci, Lettere di viaggio* and *Iddio ci dia buon viaggio e guadagno*. The latter work contains the entire critical edition of the *Codice Vaglianti* of the Biblioteca Riccardiana, ms. 1910. This codex, in addition to including most of Vespucci's *Lettere*, contains material of great interest for reconstruction of the environments in which his voyages of discovery took place.

Nothing emerges from these very careful editions that would make one suspect falsifications of Vespucci's writings by a foreign hand, while the gaps and some 'adjustments' dictated by the necessities of the moment for which Vespucci was responsible appear evident and can at times be integrated or corrected. See also Diego Álvarez Chanca: "Relación al Cabildo de Sevilla, 1494" (in Gil, Varela, *Cartas de particulares a Colón y relaciones coetáneas*).

Essential for an understanding of Ojeda's behaviour and his relations with Vespucci are: "Pesquisa contra Alonso de Ojeda sobre su premier viage á las Indias (1499)" (in Duquesa de Berwick y de Alba, *Autógrafos de Cristóbal Colón y Papeles de América*), and Vespucci's *Will* published by Varela in the appendix to her book *Colón y los florentinos*. Also in this work is Columbus's letter to his son Diego in which the Genoese navigator speaks of Amerigo Vespucci.

The cartography necessary to understanding Vespucci's itineraries is the following:

- Juan de La Cosa: map created for Queen Isabella (1500); Cantino Planisphere of 1502; *Planisphere* of Niccolò Caveri of 1502; Kunstermann

Nautical map II of 1502; Waldseemüller Map of 1507; *Carta Marina* of 1516; south polar projection map by Pedro Reinel of c. 1522 (conserved in Istanbul); map of the World by Juan Vespuccio of 1523.<sup>1</sup>

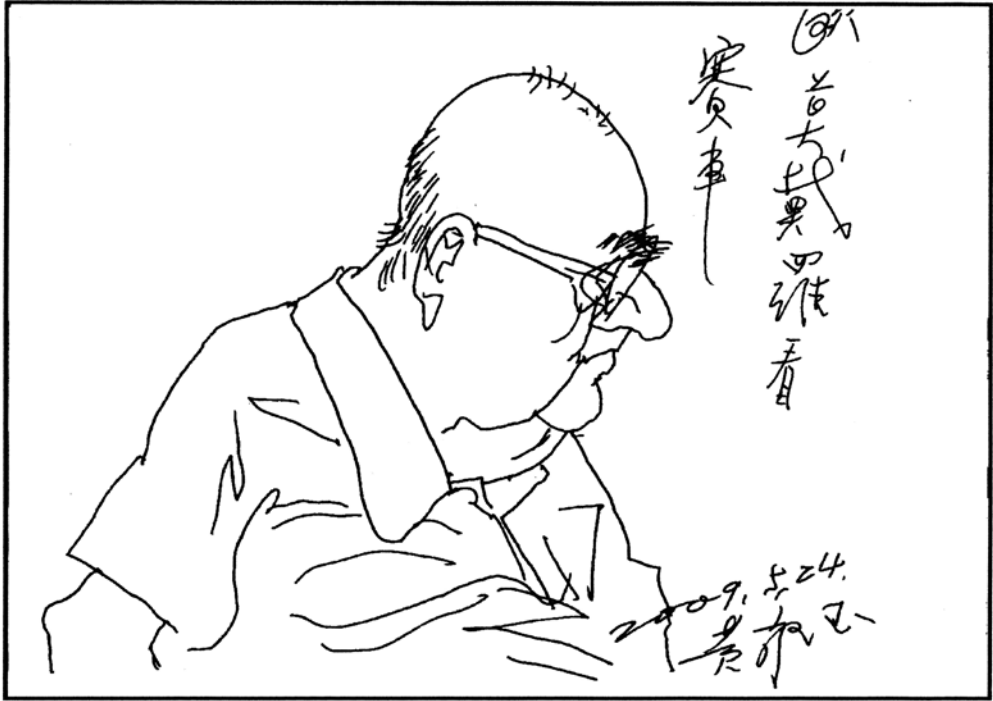
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**1** A relevant publication has just appeared: Van Duzer, Martin Chet. *Waldseemüller's Carta marina of 1516: Study and Transcription of the Long Legends* (New York: Springer, 2020), which unfortunately could not be taken into account in this book.

## **Biobibliographies**







A portrait of Pietro Omodeo by Huang Yongyu

**Pietro Omodeo** (Cefalù, 1919) attended the Sannazaro Classical High School in Naples and then studied Natural Sciences at the University of Pisa. He graduated under Giuseppe Colosi in 1940. He was a research assistant to Umberto Pierantoni and Emanuele Padoa, who were both scholars of vast scientific and humanist culture. He taught Biology, Zoology and Zoogeography at several universities. Moreover, he investigated the History of Scientific Thought and the History of Biology. Presently, he is an emeritus scholar at the University of Siena. Pietro Omodeo has edited the Italian editions of several works by Lamarck, Darwin and Diderot. He is the author of *Biologia* (1983); *Creazionismo ed evolucionismo* (1984); *Biologia con rabbia e con amore* and *Gli abissi del tempo* (1989 and 2000); *Alle origini delle Scienze Naturali (1491-1632)* (2001). He has published many articles and monographs on Zoology, Theoretical Biology, the History of Science and Evolutionary Theory.

He is a member of the Accademia dei Fisiocritici of Siena (Siena Academy of Sciences) and is a recipient of the “Diploma di Medaglia d’Oro di Benemerito della Scuola, della Cultura e dell’Arte” from the Italian President Pertini. He retired in 1995 and, not knowing how to do anything else, continues to study.

**Pietro Daniel Omodeo** (New York, 1979), the editor of this book, is the grandson of Pietro Omodeo. He is a historian of science and professor of Historical epistemology at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Italy. He is the Principal Investigator of the consolidator grant project *EarlyModernCosmology*, funded by the European Research Council (Horizon 2020, GA 725883), and the FARE project *EarlyGeoPraxis*, funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research.

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This book offers a new reconstruction of Amerigo Vespucci's navigational and scientific endeavours in their historical context. The author argues that all of the manuscripts or texts that Vespucci left to posterity are reliable and true, except for several amendments imposed upon him for reasons linked to the political and economic interests of those who authorised him to undertake his journeys or which were the result of relationships with his companions. The earliest genuine documentation, which dates from the late fifteenth century or early sixteenth century, confirms this position. Fortunately, careful philological studies of Vespucci's principal written works are available, while some of his original drawings, which confirm, clarify and enrich what he narrated in his letters, can be identified in Waldseemüller's large map known as *Universalis cosmographia* (1507).



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