
Document 1492A

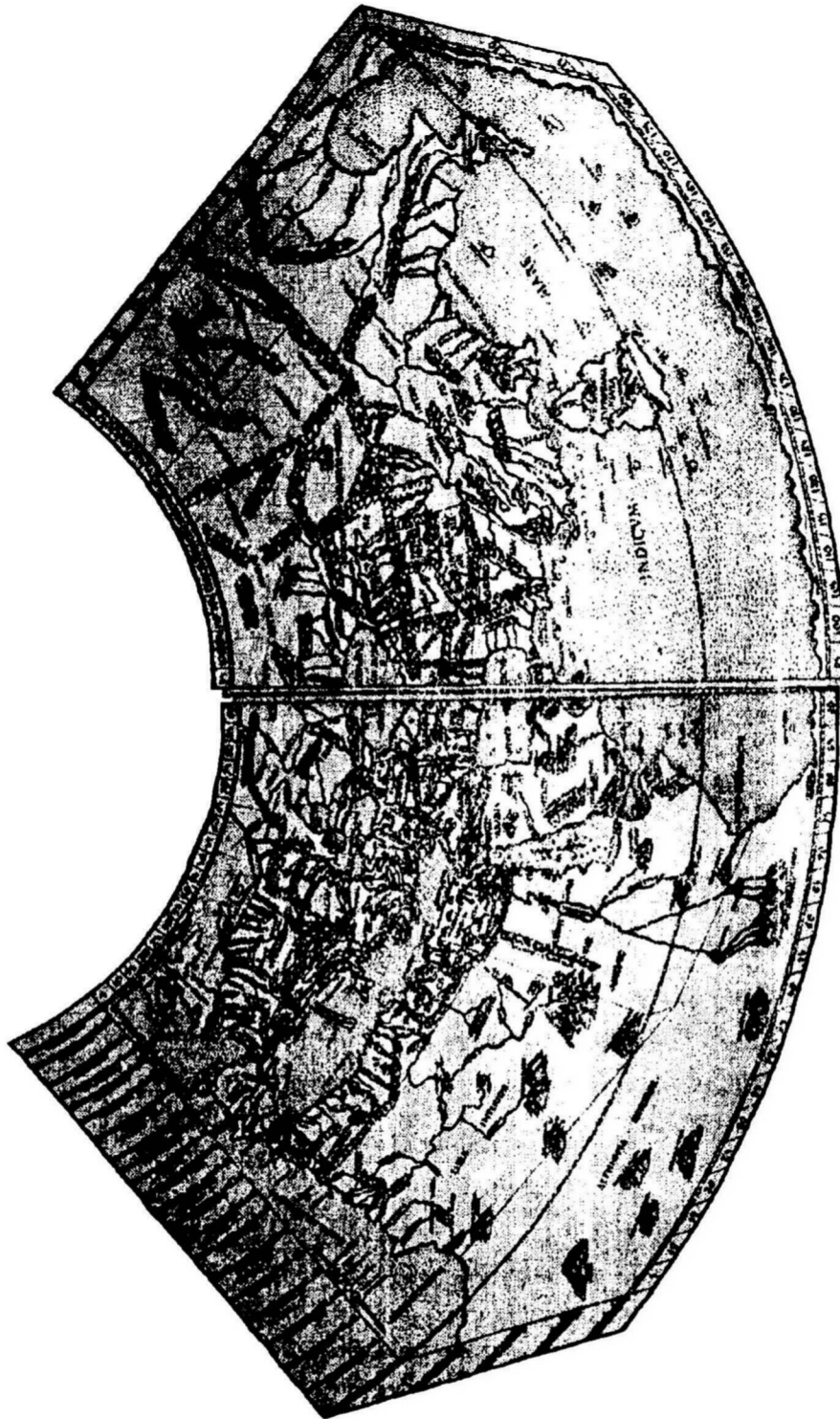
Columbus discovered a new world and prepared the way for the other discoveries that followed

Source: Original edition of the letter written by Columbus to the King and Queen of Spain, dated at Santa Maria in the Azores on 4 February 1493, and posted from Lisbon on 4 March. Published by Carlos Sanz in: (1) La carta de Colón (Madrid, 1958) and (2) El gran secreto de la carta de Colón (Madrid, 1959). Literal translation into English by the editor of this series.

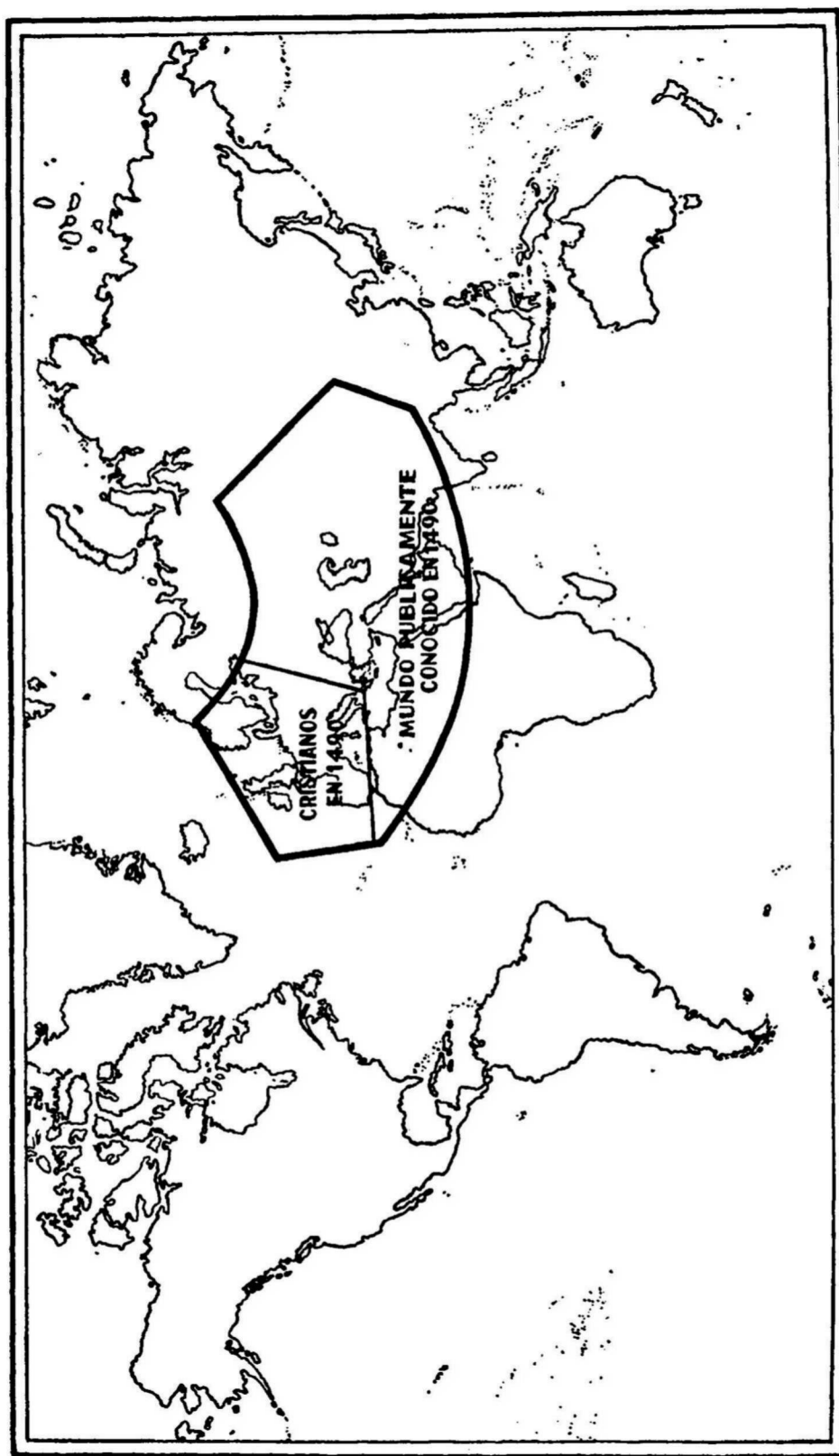
Introductory Note

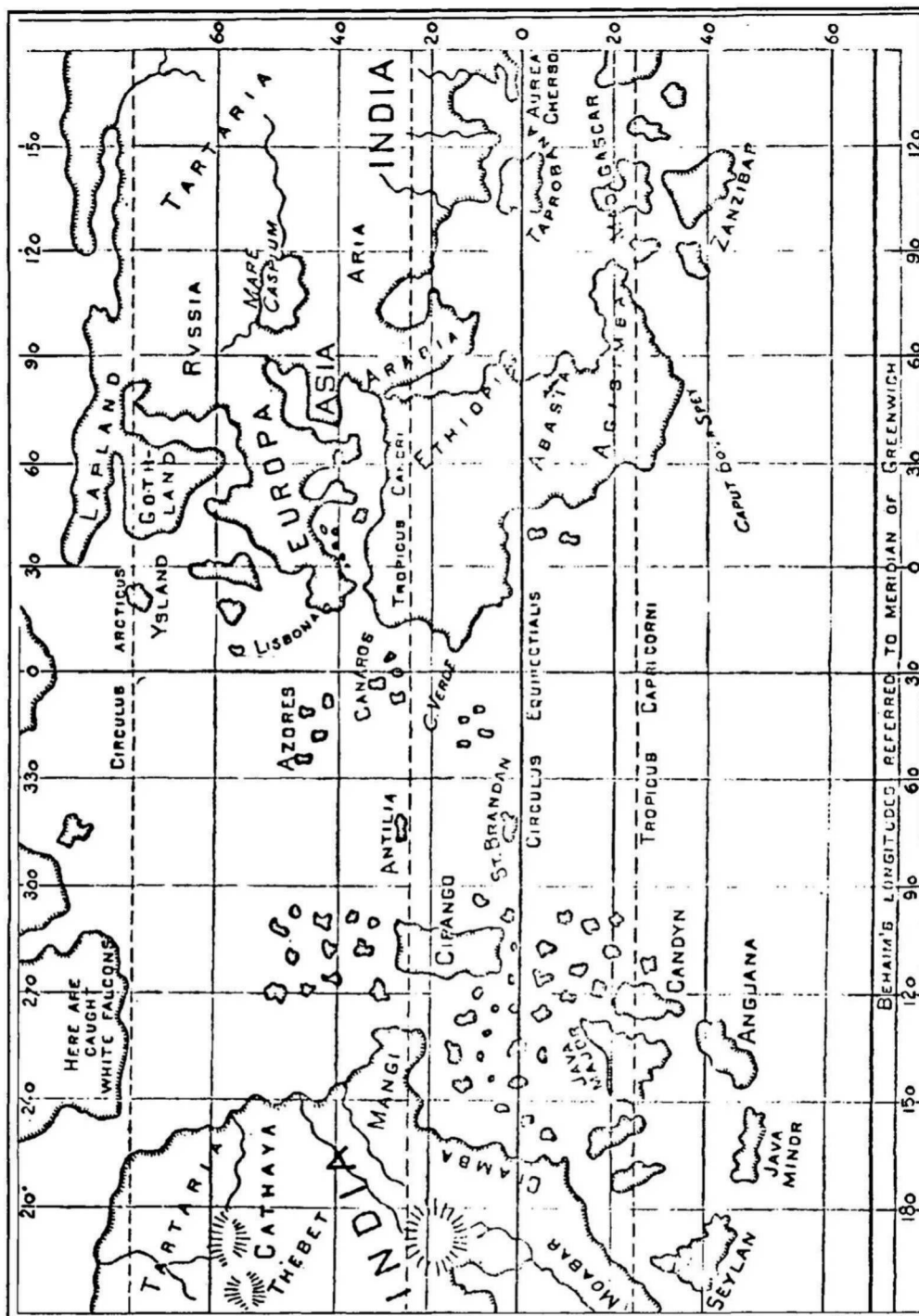
In 1490, the World as known to the European public was but a small part of the globe (See the figures below). The first voyage of Columbus in 1492 and the European discovery of America was to change all that, because upon his return Columbus wrote many letters, all of them being summaries of his journal or logbook. His official report to his sponsors, the King and Queen of Spain, was sent in many copies through the offices of various court officials, namely Luis de Santangel, Gabriel Sanchez and the Duke of Medinaceli. Someone gave his copy of the report to a printer in Barcelona (where the court resided at that time) and it was already published by the middle of March. The letter of Columbus was reprinted and also edited in Latin, Italian and German as the news of the discovery of a New World spread throughout Christian Europe¹. The quick distribution of Columbus' letter explains why the full text of his logbook was not published until many years later, in edited format, by Father de la Casas, in his **Historia de las Indias**.

¹ The Barcelona edition is undoubtedly the first one. All printed copies of it had disappeared until one was discovered in 1889 by Maisonneuve. See Carlos Sanz (1958 & 1959) for the full story.



The “oikumene” or inhabited World of Ptolemy as it was known to Europeans before Columbus sailed for America. Europe, North Africa and Asia are recognizable. (From Claude Ptolemy’s *Geographiae*, Rome 1490) Note the position of this “oikumene” on a planisphere of the world (facing page).





Martin Behaim's Globe of 1492, reduced to Mercator's projection. The original globe is kept at the City Hall of Nuremberg, according to John Fiske. Before Columbus, Europeans were still unaware of the extent of the real world. (Adapted from John Fiske's *"The Discovery of America"*, Boston & New York, Houghton & Mifflin, 1892, Vol. I, pp. 422-423)

SE A D R por que se que aureis plazer de la gran vitoria que nuestro señor me
 ba dado en mi viaje vos escríbo esta por la qñ sabreis como en ciente dias pase
 las islas cō la annada q los illustrissimos Rey e Reyna nros señores me dieron
 odo yo falle muy muchas islas pobladas cō gente sin numero: y dellas todas
 he tomado posesion por sus altezas con pregon y uadera real estenoida y non me
 e con adicho Ala primera q yo falle puse nonbre sant saluador a comemoracion de su alta magest
 ad el qual marauillosamente todo esto andado los idios la llaman guanabari Ala segūda
 puse nonbre la isla de santa maria de concepcion ala tercera ferrandina ala quarta la isla bella
 ala quinta la Isla Juana e asi a cada vna nonbre nuevo Quando yo llegne ala Juana seg
 ui io la costa della a poniente y la falle tan grande q pense que setia tierra firme la prouicia de
 carayo y como no falle asi villas y luguares en la costa de la mar saluo pequenas poblaciones
 con lagente delas q ules no podia haueer fabla por que luego fuyan todos: andaua yo a de
 lante por el dicho camino pñdo deuo errar grādes Ciudades o villas y al cabo de muchas
 leguas visto q no hauiā inonacion que la costa me leuaua alscetion de adōde mi voluntad
 en cōtraria porq el yucuo era ya ecarnado yo tenia proposito de hazer del al austre y tan biē
 el vieto medio a delate determine deuo aguardar otro tiepo y bolui atras fasta un señalado por
 to de adōde ebie dos hōbres por la tierra para saber si hauiā Rey o grādes Ciudades adōn
 e cō tres jornadas y hallazō infinitas poblaciones pequenas i gēte si numero mas no cosa de leg
 timo por lo qual se bolnierzō yo enredia barro de otros idios q ia tenia tomados como cōpñ
 nuamente esta tierra era Isla e asi segui la costa della al oriēte ciento i siete leguas fasta dō de fa
 zia fin: del qual cabo vi otra Isla al oriēte distica de esta diez o ocho leguas ala qual luego
 puse nonbre la española y fui alli y segui la parte del scetentrion asi como de la mana al oriēte
 cxxviii grādes leguas por linea recta del oriēte asi como de la iuana la qual y todas las otras
 sō fortissimas en demasiado grado y esta enestrano en ella ay muchos puertos en la costa de la
 mar si cōparaciō de otros q yo sepa en cristianos y fartos rios y buenos y grandes q es mara
 villa las tierras della sō altas y e ella muy muchas sierras y mōtañas altissimas si cōparaciō
 de la isla de cōtre fructos as f. rinosissimas de mil fechuras y todas adabiles y llenas de arboles
 de mil maneras i altas i parecen q llegā al cielo i tēgo por dicho q tantas pierda la foia segun lo
 puede cōpñder q los vira vroses i tā berinosos como sō por mayo en spaña i dellos stauā fior
 noos dellos cō fructo i dellos enotratermino segū es su calidat i cātau el rui scior i otros pa
 xaricos de mil maneras en el mes de nouiēbre por alli dō de io āpaua ay palmas de seis o de
 ocho maneras q es admiracion verlas por la diformidad fermosa dellas mas asicomo los o
 otros arboles y fructos eternas en ella ay pinars amaraulla eay canpiñas grādisimas eay m
 el de muchas maneras de aues y frutas muy diuersas en las tierras ay muchas minas de me
 tales eay gēte istinabile numero La española es marauilla la sierra y las mōtañas y las uegas
 las campiñas y las tierras tan fermosas y gruecas para plautar y sebrar paciar ganados de to
 das suertes para hedificaciō de villas elugares los puertos de la mar aqui no hauna chernas sin
 vista y de los rios muchos y grandes y buenas aguas los mas de los quales traē oro e lozabo
 les y fructos e yeruas ay grandes diferencias de aquel las de la india en esta ay muchas sierr
 ras y grandes minas de oro y de otros metales. Lagenue desta ysla y de todas las otras q be
 fallado y baido: ni aya baido noticia andan todos desuados hōbres y mugeres asi como
 sus madres los parē haun que algunas mugeres se cobian un solo lugar cō vna foia de y
 na: o vna cosa de algo dō quepa ello fazen ellos no tienen fierzo ni azeron. annas niso
 adlo no por que no sō gente bien difnesta y de fermosa estatura saluo que sō muy re
 amaraulla no tienē orzarmas saluo las 7 de las cañas quando el cōla sume
 qual ponen al cabo un pallo agudo eno van vna de aqllas que m
 chuo embia: antra dos otros hombres alguna villa pa haueer fabla. . .

The letter of Columbus announced the discovery of the Indies [sic] by a western route. He was convinced that he had reached the coast of China or that of Japan that Marco Polo had written about 200 years earlier. In 1492, he thought that Cuba was Cipango, i.e. Japan, but later on when he took up residence on Española Island (today's Dominican Republic), Columbus remained convinced that this island was Japan¹. In fact, in 1502, he thought of himself as the Viceroy of Asia.²

Pope Alexander VI, who was a Spaniard, first heard of Columbus' discovery through a letter which the Duke of Medinaceli wrote to a Spanish cardinal, Pedro González de Mendoza, on March 19th. The cardinal must have shown this letter to the Pope because, in April, the draft of a papal bull (See Doc. 1493) was made ready, before an official request for such a document had been received from the Spanish court.³

(Facing page) **First page of the letter that Columbus wrote to the King and Queen of Spain**, dated 15 February 1493, announcing his discovery of the New World. It was printed in Barcelona by Pedro Posa and reproduced with commentaries by Carlos Sanz in 1958 from an original now kept in the Lenox Collection of the New York Public Library (The other pages are shown below).

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- 1 It is possible that the word Cipango was originally a typographical error for Nipango, or Nipongo, the latter of which means Japanese. However, most scholars say that Marco Polo got it from the Chinese word for Japan, Jih-pên-kwé.
 - 2 See p. 155 of Sanz' *El gran secreto*.
 - 3 Before his first voyage, Columbus had written to the astronomer Toscanelli and received a copy of the letter and map that he had sent to the king in 1474. Columbus had the map with him during his first voyage. Father de las Casas (See his *Historia*, tome I, Madrid, 1875, pp. 96, 279) had it in his possession afterwards. It has since been lost, but it was so well described in the letter that the work of restoring it has been attempted several times. The version shown above has been adapted from Winsor, who took it from *Das Ausland*, 1867, p. 5).

Letter from Columbus to the King and Queen of Spain

Sir,

Because I know you will derive great pleasure in the great victory that the Lord has given me in my voyage, I write this letter, by which you will learn how in 20 days¹ I passed from the Canary Islands to the Indies, with the fleet which the Most Illustrious King and Queen, our Lords, had given me. There I found many islands inhabited by countless people, and I have taken possession of all of them for Your Highnesses, with a proclamation and the royal flag flying, and I was not contradicted.

To the first island that I found I gave the name of **San Salvador**, in honor of His Divine Majesty who so marvelously has given it all; the Indians call it **Guanahani**.² To the second one, I gave the name of Island of **Santa María de Concepción**, to the third one **Fernandina**, to the fourth **Isabela**, to the fifth **Juana**, and so on to each a new name.³

When I arrived at Juana, I followed the coast westward, and found it so long that I thought it might be the mainland, the province of Catayo⁴, but as I did not find any towns or sites along the coast, except small villages, with whose people I could not make contact, because then they all fled, I was going forward in that direction hoping to find cities and towns for sure. At the end of many leagues, seeing that there was no innovation, and that the coast was taking me to the north, in the direction contrary to the one I wished to follow because the winter had already set in, and I intended to go south, and also because the wind was pushing me, I determined not to postpone any longer, and I turned back to a port spotted previously, from where I sent two men inland to see if there were a King or large cities. They walked for three days and found an infinite number of small sites and countless people, but no evidence of government; for this reason, they turned back.

I understood sufficiently from other Indians whom I had taken, that this land was an island, so I followed its coast eastward for 107 leagues⁵ until it came to an end. From

- 1 Ed. note: According to the logbook, and manuscript versions of the letter found in the Simancas archives, it took him 33 days, from 8 September until 11 October.
- 2 Ed. note: This island is in the Bahamas and is called Samana Cay today. See the article by Joseph Judge in the National Geographic magazine of November 1986 entitled: "Where Columbus Found the New World." It is worth mentioning that in his logbook entry for 13 Oct 1492, Columbus described the natives as thieves: "They take what they can and then dive and swim away."
- 3 Ed. note: Santa María is called Crooked I. today, Fernandina Long I. Isabela, whose native name was Samoet, according to the logbook, is now Fortune I. As for Juana, its native name was Cuba, then as now.
- 4 Ed. note: Part of Cathay or China, but his logbook entries for 21 & 22 Oct 1492 indicate that he thought Cuba was Cipango or Japan.
- 5 Ed. note: In his logbook entry for 5th of December, Columbus estimated the same distance as 120 leagues.

se y puedo decir y todas las tengo por de sus altezas qual dellas pueden disponer como y tauco
phamete como de los Reynos de castilla en esta española en ellugar mas cōuenible y mejor
comarca para las minas del oro por todo mato así de la tierra firme de aqua como de a quella
de alla del gran can. adō de natura grande trato egualdad de comarcao possessiō e de una villa gran
de ala qual puse nōbre la villa de nauidad: y en ella bñficio fuerza y fortaleza que ya acitaelo
ya estar: del to no acabao y heuerado en ella gente que abasta para semearse fecho cō annas
y arrellanas e vituallas por mas de vii año y fusta y maestro de la mar en todas artes para fazer
otras y grande amistad cō el Rey de aquella tierra en tanto grado que se precia de me llamar y
etener por hermano e haū que le mudase la volūntad a bñficio de esta gēte el mulo suyo no sabē
que sean armis y andan desnudos como y ahe dicho sō los mas temerosos que ay en el mūdo
alique solamente la gente que alla queda es para desistir toda aquella tierra y es ylla si pelgro
de sus personas sabiendo segurar en todas estas islas me parece que todos los òbres sean cōtē
tos cō una mageri a su maior al Rey dan fusta: e yure. las mugeres me parece que trabaxā
mas que los òbres u hepodido en tender si bien bienes propios que me paredo ver q a q̃lo
que vno tenia todos hazian parte en especial de las cosas comēdas en estas islas fusta aqui
no he hallado òbres mostrados cōmo muchos pensauan mas antes estoda gēte de muy lindo
acatamiento ni sō negros como ē guinea saluo cō sus cabellos corredios y no secrian adōcay
i peto de natiado de los rayos solares es verdad que el sol tiene q̃mā grand fuerza puesto que es di
distinta de la lina i qu inocual veire esis grādes en estas islas adōcay mōtias grandes: ay tenia
a fuerza el fno este yuictino: un sellos lo sufren por la costumbre que cō la ayuda de las viandas
comen cō especias muchas y muy calientes en comalia. alique mostrados no he hallado ninori
cia saluo de una ylla que es aqui en la segunda ala entrada de las yndias q̃ es poblada de una
gente que tieue en todas las yllas por muy feroces los quales comē carne vianda estos tieue
muchas canas cōlas quales corē todas las yllas de ida robā yromā quanto pueden ellos
no sō mas difformes que los otros saluo q̃ tieue en costumbre extraer los cabellos largos cō
mugeres y usan arcos y flechas de las mismas armas de canas cō un palillo alcabo por do se
to de fierro q̃ no tieue sō feroces entre estos otros pueblos me sō de comaliado grado couardes
mas yo no los tengo en nada mas que a los otros: estos sō aquellos q̃ trata cōlas mugeres
de matornomo q̃ es lapuine. a ylla pariendo de pañia para las idias q̃ se falla en la qual no ay
bōbre ni guano: ellas uo vñ exacio feneuñ saluo arcos y flechas como los sobre dichos de canas
y canas y cobigan cōlaues de arambre de que tieue mucho otra ylla me seguran mayor q̃ la
española en que las psonas no tieue ningū cabello. En esta ay oro si cuento y de las y de las o
tras traigo conmigo idios para testimonio: e cōcluiō a hablar desto solamente que sea fecho este
viage que fuer si de coriza que puedē de sus altezas q̃ yo les dare oro quanto oviere menester con
muy poca ayuda q̃ sus altezas me darā agora i pcaran y algo dō quanto sus altezas mādara
cargar y alimanta quanta mandaran cargar e de la qual fusta oy no icha fallado saluo en gre
cia en la ylla de rio y el señorio la uenoe como quiere y ligualoe quāto mandaran cargar y es
daños quātos mādaran cargar e se a se los yocantes y creu haue fallado ruy baruo. y caue
la e otras mil cosas de distancia fallare que harā fallado la gēte que yo alla oero por que yo
no me he detenido nīgū cabo en quāto elucuta me aia dāo lugar: de uenegar solamente en la
villa de nauidad en quanto oxe asegurado. E bien aserado. E ala verdad mucho mas ficiera
si los nauios me siruieran como razō de matornomo. Ello es hazto y creu oio: u nēstio señoz
el qual da a todos aquellos q̃ auoan su canuto victoria de cosas que parecen imposibles: y esta
señalada mēre fue la una por q̃ haū que de las islas. e aian fallado. E cōmpto todo va por cō
lectura sin allegor oculta saluo cōprenciendo a tanto que los ofres los mas escarbauan e
mzgaun mas por fable que por poca. dello así que pues nuestro: Recorditoz oio est. vñ
sona. A nuestros Illustsimos rey: e Reyna: e Rey: e famofos de q̃ a la cosa. A dō de toda

this cape, there was another island distant 18 leagues, to which I gave the name of **Española**¹. I went there, and followed its northern coast, as I had done at Juana, eastward for a distance of 188 leagues. This island like all the others is very fertile to an excessive degree, and this one in the extreme. There are many ports along its sea coast, without comparison that I know of in Christendom, and quite a few rivers marvellously good and large. Its lands are high and on them very many peaks and very high mountains, without comparison even with the island of Tenerife², all very pretty, of a thousand shapes, and all accessible on foot and full of trees of a thousand forms and so high as to seem to reach the sky. I am told that they never lose their leaves, according to what I can understand, as I saw them as green and as pretty as those of Spain in May. Some of them are in bloom, others with fruit, still others at another stage in accordance with their character. And the nightingale was singing along with other birds in a thousand ways during the month of November when I was visiting there. There are from six to eight types of palm trees whose beautiful diversity is a joy to behold, and the same for the other trees, fruits and grasses. It has pine trees galore, and very extensive prairies, also honey and many types of birds and very diverse fruits. Inland can be found many metal mines and a countless population.

Española Island is wonderful. The peaks and the mountains, the prairies and the lands are so beautiful and rich for planting and sowing, for raising cattle of all sorts, for erecting towns and villages. Sea ports? Well, hard to believe for anyone but an eyewitness. As for rivers, there are many, and with plenty of good water; most of them carry gold. Among the trees, fruits and grasses there are many differences with those in Juana; in the latter, there are many spices, and big mines of gold and of other metals.

The people of this island and of the others, that I have discovered or been told of, all go naked, men and women, just like when their mothers give them birth, although a few women covered one spot only with a plant leaf or a mesh of cotton that they make for the purpose. They do not have any iron, steel nor weapons; they are not made for them either. It is not because they are not well-built people with a beautiful stature; rather, they are so laughingly afraid. They do not have any other weapons besides spears made of mature³ canes, at the tip of which they place a small sharpened stick, but they do not use them. So it is that many times I happened to send ashore two or three men to some village to make contact; large numbers came out to meet them, and then after seeing them landing, they fled, with the parents not even waiting for their children. This happened, not on account of us having done them any harm; rather, at every cape that I had been and had been able to make contact, I have given them from everything I had, clothes as well as many other things, without having received from them anything. However, they are hopelessly scared. It is true that once they gain confidence and lose this fear, they are so much without any cunningness and so liberal with what they have that only an eyewitness could believe it. With some thing they might have, if one asks

1 Ed. note: Hispaniola I., on which Haïti and the Dominican Republic are located today.

2 Ed. note: One of the Canary Islands.

3 Ed. note: Literally, when they are bearing seeds.

La christiandad oene tomar alegría y faze grandes fiestas y bar gradas solenes ala sancta trinidad cō muchas oraciones solenes por el tanto en calcaniēto que hanran en to:mando se tantos pueblos a nuestra sancta fe :y despues por los bienes tēporales q̄ no solamente ala espanya mas a todos los christianos ternan aqui refugio y ganancia esto segun el fecho asi embreue fecha en la calauera sobre las yllas de canana a xv de febrezo año Mdl. cccclxxxiii.

Fara lo que mandareys El Almirante

Anima que venia dentro en la Carta.

Despues de la escipto: y estado en mar de. Castilla salio tanto viēto cō migo. sul y sueste que meba fecho descargar los nauios po con aqui en este puerto de lisbona¹ of que fue la mayo 2 maravilla del mundo adōde acorde esciur alas altexas. en todas las yndias de siempre balla do y los tēporall como en mayo adōde yo fuy en xxxiiidial y volui en xviii salio qudtas comi, sas me ape tenido xlii dias corriendo por esta mar: dicen aqua todos los bōbres oda marq, mas ouo tan mal yuicio no ni tantas perdidas de naues fecha ba quatorze dias de marzo:

**ESTA Carta en bio Colom A. dcuano Deraciō
De las Ylas Halladas en Las Yndias: Lōmias
A Oua De Das. Altexas**

them for it, they never refuse to give it; firstly, they invite the person who has it and show him so much love that they would give their hearts, and whether it be a thing of value or one of little price, they then for whatever thing, no matter how it was given them, are happy with it.

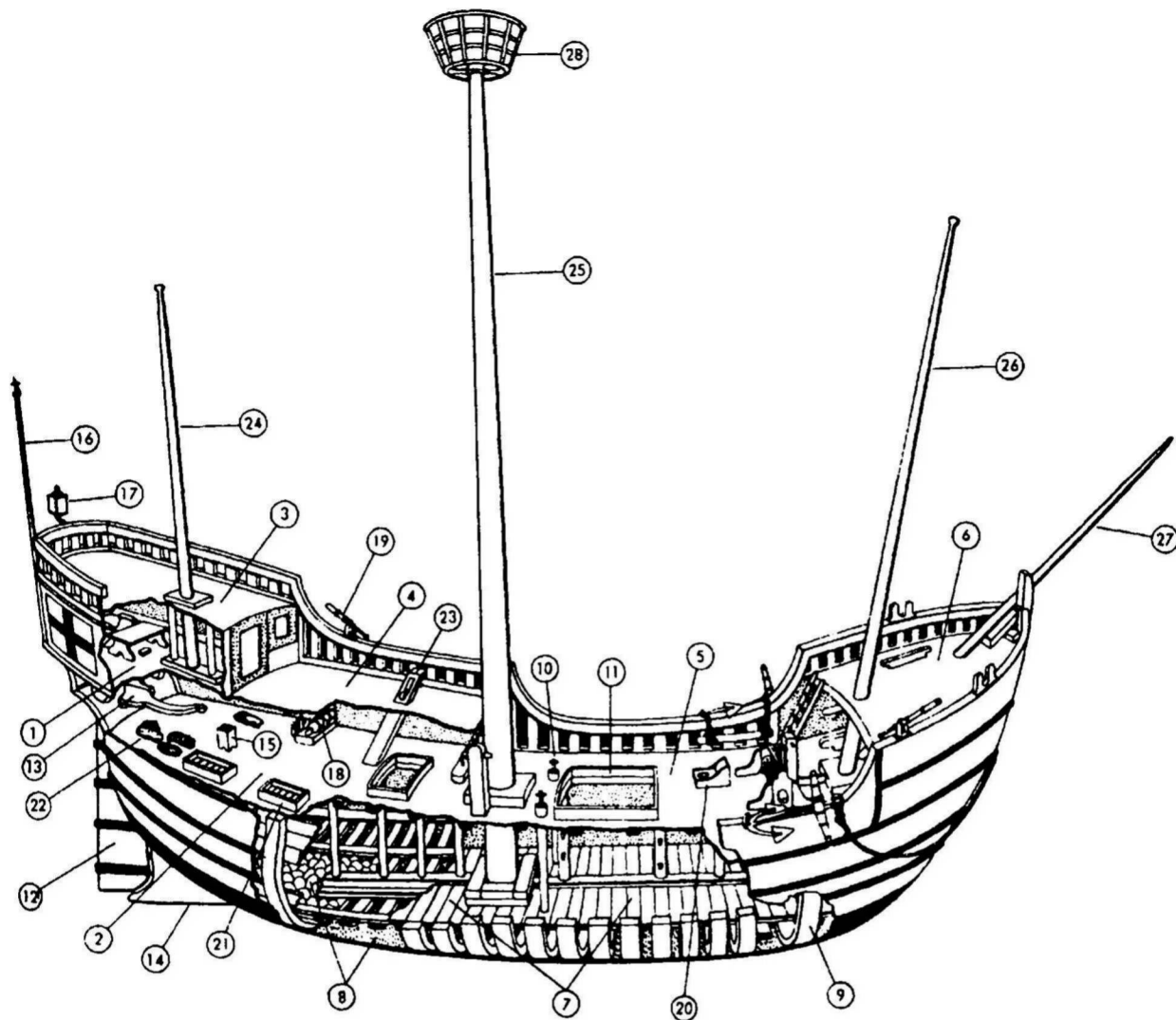
I forbid that they be given worthless things like broken pieces of pottery or broken glass or lace cordons, although whenever they could get their hands on those, they seemed to them like the best jewel in the world. It turned out that a sailor who got gold worth two and a half castellanos for one cordon, and others got much more for things worth much less. And for new copper coins they were giving as much gold as they had, even if it were two or three castellanos worth, or for one or two arrobas¹ of woven cotton. They even took pieces of broken barrel hoops, and they were giving what they had [behaving] like animals, so much so that it seemed to me a bad thing, and I forbid it. And I gave them for free a thousand good things I had so that they would get attached, and later on become Christians, accept the love and the service of Your Highnesses and of the whole Spanish nation; also, so that they would try and help us by giving us things they have in abundance and that are necessary for us.

They do not know about any sect, not even idolatry, except that they all believe that power and good are in the sky; and they believed very firmly that I, with the ships and crew, came from the sky, and as such they were receiving me at every cape after they had lost their fear. This did not come about as a result of their ignorance—they are

1 Ed. note: A Spanish weight equivalent to 25 pounds or 11.25 kilograms.

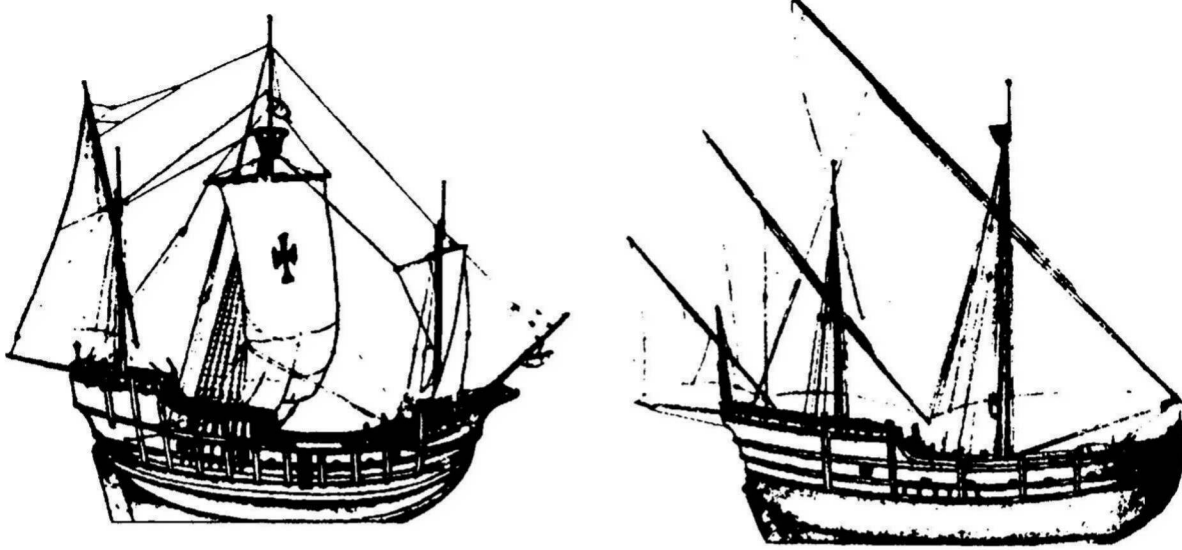


An artist's conception of Columbus' flagship. The label "*Oceanica classis* [præfectus]" means [Naval] Prefect, Oceanic class, i.e. Admiral of the Ocean Sea. This title referred to the Atlantic Ocean, as opposed to the Mediterranean Sea. (From a woodcut in the Latin edition of 1493 or 1494 printed in Basle)



Late 15th-century "round" nao and lateen caravel of the type used by Columbus on his voyage of discovery.

The detailed arrangement aboard a nao was as shown: (1) Captain's cabin, (2) crew quarters, (3) coach, or poop castle, (4) quarter-deck, (5) main deck, (6) fore castle, (7) hold, (8) well and ballast, (9) frame, (10) pump, (11) hatch, (12) rudder, (13) helm, (14) keel, (15) binnacle, (16) flag pole, (17) light or lantern, (18) bombard, (19) falconet, (20) firepit, or portable kitchen, (21) officer's chest, (22) mats for the crew, (23) belaying pin to fix the halliard, (24) mizzen-mast for a lateen sail, (25) main-mast for a "round" sail, (26) boom for a sprit sail, (27) crow's nest.



Spanish ships of the late 15th century, one rigged as a nao (left) and the other as a caravel with lateen sails. Both were used at the port of Palos whence Columbus set out on his voyage of discovery.

rather very ingenious, and men who sail over all of those seas, something that gives them a wonderful reputation—but because they had never seen people with clothes nor ships such as ours.

After I arrived at the Indies, at the first island that I discovered, I took a few of them by force so that they would learn [our language] and give me information about what there was in those parts. So it is that they eventually understood us and we them, either by words or signs. These men have improved very much; nowadays, I still have them with me and they are still of the opinion that I come from the sky, even after having had many conversations with me. They were the first to announce it wherever I came to, and the others would go from house to house, and to neighboring towns shouting: Come and see the people from the sky. And all of them, men and women, once they had gathered enough courage, would all come, even down to the smallest one, and bring us something to eat and drink, which they gave with amazing love.

At all the islands, they have very many canoes similar to [our] launches¹; there are some big ones, small ones, and not a few of them larger than a fusta with 18 thwarts. They are not as wide, however, because they are [dug out] of only one piece of wood; our row boat is nothing compared to theirs, because they go like you would not believe.

¹ Ed. note: The word used for launch is *fusta* which was a foyst or small patache. However, what is described here is a native dugout canoe.

Fernād⁹ rex byspania



Ferdinand, King of Spain, says the caption in Latin. His own kingdom of Castile was linked with that of his wife, Isabella, Queen of Leon. Hence the symbols of castles and lions on the shield representing the united kingdoms. The other shield, showing pomegranate fruits (called *granada* in Spanish), represented their recent conquest of Granada, just before Columbus left on his first voyage of discovery. (From the Basle edition)

With such canoes, they travel between all of those islands, which are numberless, and they carry their merchandise. I have seen some of these canoes with 70 to 80 men inside, each of them with his oar.

In all of those islands, I did not see much diversity in the features of the people, nor in their customs, nor in their language; rather, they all understand one another¹, which is something very noteworthy, given that I hope Your Highnesses will decide to convert them to our Holy Faith, toward which they are well disposed.

I have already said how I had covered 107 leagues along the sea coast, directly from west to east, along Juana Island; because of such a distance, I can say that this island is bigger than England and Scotland together, because beyond these 107 leagues, there remain towards the west two provinces that I have not visited, one of them they call Avan² where the people [sic] with tails live³; the said provinces cannot measure fewer than 50 or 60 leagues, according to what I can understand from these Indians I have with me, and they know all the islands.

As for Española Island, in circumference it has more than the whole of Spain from the port of Colunya⁴, along the coast, as far as Fuente Rabía in Vizcaya, given that, in one traverse, I covered 188 long leagues in a straight line from west to east. This island is desirable; to see it is never to leave it. Here, given that all might be taken possession of for Your Highnesses, and all could be better supplied than what I know or can say, I have taken [possession of] them all for Your Highnesses, and you may dispose of them as fully as with the kingdoms of Spain. At this Española, in one of the most convenient places and best regions for mining gold and for all types of businesses, from the mainland here, as well as from there to the mainland of the Great Can⁵, where there

1 Ed. note: A little white lie, because he noted in his logbook that the dialects spoken in the Bahamas (and Cuba) and spoken at the Dominican Republic “had some diversity in the words for things”, and that his Lucayan (Bahamian) interpreters “did not understand well”. Among other things, this difference is at the origin of our modern words: Caribbean, and cannibal, words of the same origin, and with connotations similar to the words Inuit versus Eskimo. See further comments in another footnote below.

2 Ed. note: Havana today. Written Anan, Nahan or Nhan depending of the source manuscript.

3 Ed. note: Volafan, who has provided a Spanish transcription of this letter, says (in Sanz’ *El gran secreto*, p. 490) that the word Agnan meant devil in the Carib language, and that there was a misunderstanding here between the Spanish and their Lucayan guides who were probably talking about monkeys, not men.

4 Ed. note: Apparently the port of Colibre in Cataluña, according to Volafan. The port of Collioure which then belonged to Aragon, says Samuel Eliot Morison, in his translation (Sanz, p. 502). Some Spanish translators are of the opinion that Colunya means Columnas [The Columns], i.e. Gibraltar, but that would not correspond to “the whole of Spain”.

5 Ed. note: A reference to the Great Khan or Mongolian ruler of China, as reported by Marco Polo.



King Ferdinand of Spain learning about the events of the first voyage of Columbus who, with three small ships, went on to discover the West Indies, although he thought he had reached the coast of China, part of "Upper India". The so-called Indians whom he met were all naked, and some were said by him to have been cannibals. (From the Florence 1493 edition in Italian)

will be great business and profit, I have taken possession of a large town, to which I gave the name of Town of Navidad. In it, I have built defenses and a fort which should all be completed by now, and I have left at it enough people for such a job, with weapons, artillery and food supplies for more than one year, with one *fusta* [i.e. launch] and a master of all sea trades to make [more]. There is a great friendship between the King of that land, to such a degree that he prided himself in calling me and treating me as a brother. Although he might change his mind and attack these men [of ours], neither he nor his people know what are weapons, and they go naked as I have said, and they are the most frightened ones in the world. So, the people [I] left there are enough to destroy that whole land; it is an island without danger to their persons, if they know how to control themselves.¹

In all of these islands it seems to me that all the men are contented with one woman, but to their leader or King² they give as many as twenty. It seems to me that the women work more than the men. I have not been able to find out if they have their own properties; rather it seemed to me that I saw that what one had they all shared, specially the edible stuff.

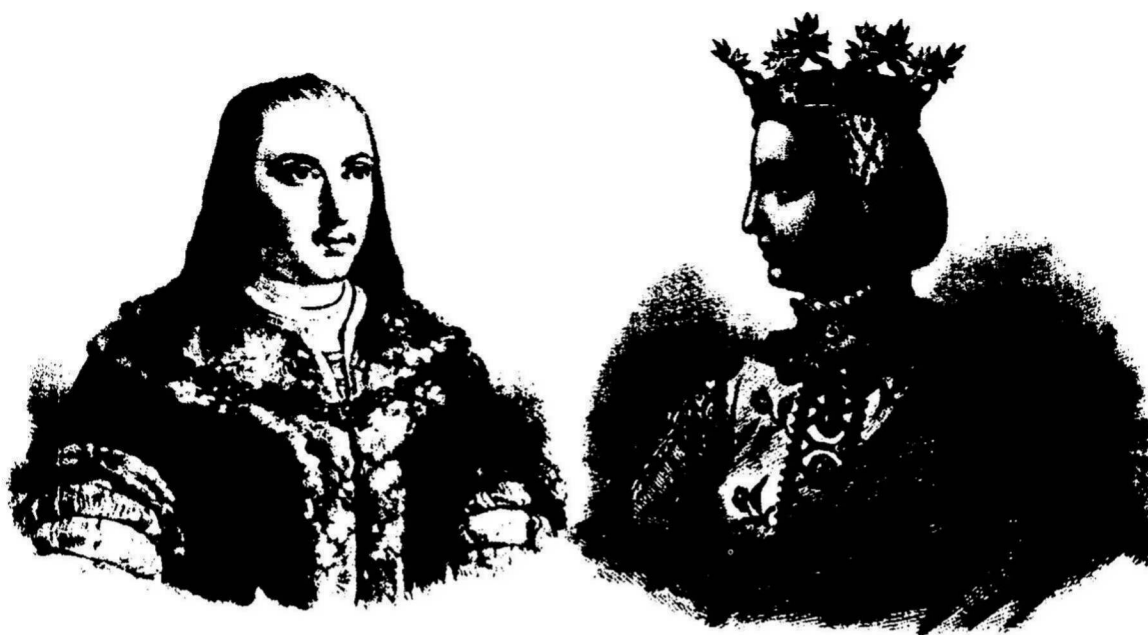
In these islands, until now I have not found any monstrous men as many [of us] had expected; to the contrary, all the people have very pretty countenance, as they are not black as in Guinea³, and have their hair loose, and they do not grow up where the effect of the solar rays are too strong. It is true that the sun is strong, given that the distance from the equinoctial line is 26 degrees⁴, but in these islands, where there are big mountains, there the cold was strong this winter as well; however, these people tolerate

1 Ed. note: They did not, because when Columbus returned on his second voyage, they had all disappeared (the Indians also) and the fort burned to the ground. The site of Navidad has been recently re-discovered on the north coast of Haïti, east of the town of Cap Haïtien.

2 Ed. note: In his logbook, Columbus says that the Indian word for King was Cacique. This word was later used by the Spanish colonists to refer to petty native rulers or tribal chiefs.

3 Ed. note: The word Guinea was used then to mean Africa as a whole.

4 Ed. note: Columbus' latitudes are notoriously too high throughout his logbook. The latitude of the north coast of Haïti is about 20° N.



King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. *They had married in 1469, and soon inherited kingdoms which they proceeded to unite as one country. Queen Isabella was the patroness of Columbus.*

it out of habit and with the help of the food they eat which is very hot and spicy in the extreme. So, as far as monsters are concerned, I have not heard of any, except that there is one island¹, which is here the second one at the entrance of the Indies, that is populated by a people whom in all the islands they estimate very fierce, and who eat living flesh. They have canoes with which they rove all the islands of India, steal and take as

1 Ed. note: Some other copy of Columbus's letter, says "island of Quarives". Hence, the word Carib for that tribe of man-eaters, also called Caniba in their own language, according to the same Columbus in his logbook (entry of 13 January 1493); hence, the origin of the word cannibal. The island in question is called Dominica today. Peter Martyr, however, in his 8th Decade, Chapter 6, says that the word Carib meant "stronger" in all the dialects of the region.

much as they can. They are not more misshapen than the others, except that they have the custom of wearing their hair long like women. They use bows and arrows made of the same cane as the weapons¹, with the little stick at the tip, for lack of iron which they do not have. They are fierce, when compared with these other peoples who are cowardly to such a high degree, but I do not consider them much different than the others. They are the ones who deal with the women of Matremonio², which is the first island to be found [when] coming from Spain toward the Indies, in which there are no men at all. These women do not use feminine exercise, rather bows and arrows, made of cane like the above-mentioned ones, and they arm themselves and cover themselves with sheets of copper³, which they have in quantity.

In another island, which they have assured me is larger than Española, the people have no hair at all. And there is gold aplenty. From it and from the others I bring with me some Indians as a proof.⁴

In conclusion, just to mention what has been done during this voyage, which was a bit hurried, Your Highnesses will see that I will give you as much gold as necessary, with the very small assistance that Your Highnesses will give me; as for spices and cotton, as much as Your Highnesses will wish, and mastic trees as many as you wish to be loaded, of the type that heretofore has only been found in Greece at the island of Chios, which the [Venitian] Government sells as it wishes. As for aloes, as much as you wish loaded, and the same for slaves, who would be idolaters. I believe I have found rhubarb and cinnamon, and I will find a thousand useful things, such as the men I have left there would have found already; I myself did not tarry at any cape, whenever the wind was favorable to me, except at the Town of Navidad, in order to fortify and settle it. In truth, I would have done much more if the ships had served me as reason demanded it.⁵

1 Ed. note: The cane spears mentioned earlier.

2 Ed. note: Thus in the printed version, which is a Freudian slip for "marriage". The word is written Mateunin in the first Latin edition, which came from the Matinino of the other manuscript copies, and of Columbus' logbook. The name of this island was later written Martinica, and it is today's French Martinique. The island was then reported to be peopled with amazons.

3 Ed. note: The Spanish word used by Columbus was "alambre", a word now meaning "copper wire" or simply "wire". Copper plates were then used as rudimentary armor, it seems.

4 Ed. note: The first time that the word "Indios", i.e. Indians, appeared in print; it became synonymous with "natives of the New World", even after it was realized that India was located nowhere near America.

5 Ed. note: Admiral Morison says that this is an oblique reference to Captain Pinzon, who had gone ahead in the *Pinta* once, without Columbus' permission. No mention is here made of the loss of his own flagship, which occurred one night when a lone ship's boy had been left at the helm.



The New World that Columbus had discovered was to be conquered in the name of Christ as well as for the Christian King... (*From the Strasburg 1497 edition in German*)

Enough said. Eternal God, Our Lord, [is the one] who gives, to all those who follow his way, victory in things seemingly impossible, and this voyage was certainly one of those. Although others¹ have talked about these lands, the tales were all conjectures and not eyewitness reports, except that, understanding as much as the eyewitnesses, some would listen and judge it to be a mere fable, with not even a little bit true. So it is that our Redeemer has given this victory to our Most Illustrious King and Queen and to their famous kingdoms such a high thing, from which the whole of Christendom may rejoice and celebrate, giving solemn thanks to the Holy Trinity, with many solemn prayers for the great exaltation to be had in annexing so many peoples to our Holy Faith, and afterwards for the good weather. Not only Spain but the whole of Christen-

1 Ed. note: Marco Polo, Ptolemy, etc. but certainly not a reference to the Viking sagas.

dom will find refreshments and profit here. This is in accordance with the facts, albeit briefly.

From aboard the caravel off the Canary [sic] Islands, on the 15th of February of the year 1493.¹

I am at your command,
The Admiral.²



Facsimile signature of Columbus

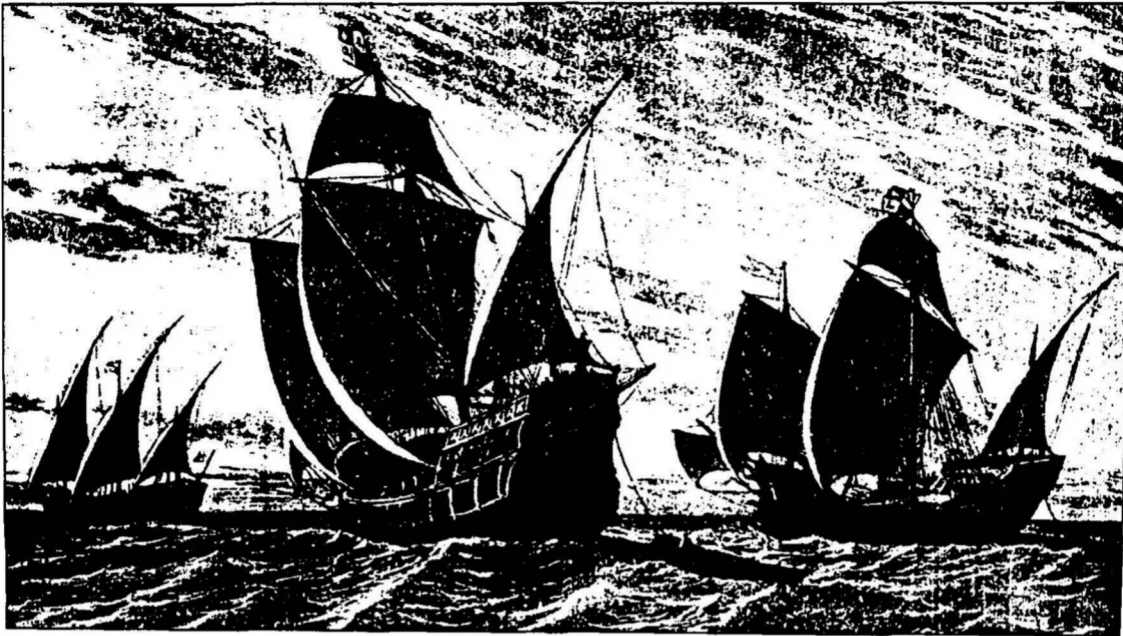
Facsimile of Columbus's cryptic signature, which reads: "Xp̄o FERENS". Above the signature are several small, stylized letters and symbols, including "S.", "A", and "S.", which are part of the cryptic message.



Christopher Columbus. *Two contemporary portraits. The one on the left is more authentic; it is copied from Capriolo, 1596. Columbus' cryptic signature is: "Servus Supplex Altissimi Salvatoris. Jesus, Maria, Joseph. Christo Ferens." The last words mean Christopher, the bearer of Christ.*

1 Ed. note: Thus in the printed version, but as follows in other manuscripts: "above the Island of S. Maria [i.e. in the Azores], 18th Feb 93."

2 Ed. note: As it is said in most Latin editions: *Oceanica classis praefectus*, part of which can be seen in the figure on page.49. The original letters were signed Christopher Colón.



The three ships of Columbus. *His flagship, the Santa María, of 100 tons, was wrecked off the northern coast of Hispaniola Island (Haïti today). The Pinta was a square-rigged "round caravel" or nao of 60 tons, and the Niña, a caravel of 50 tons. (From Koelliker, based on a painting (1885) by Rafael Monleón, in the Museo Naval, Madrid)*