

“Christopher Columbus and Portugal” by Rebecca Catz

Christopher Columbus arrived in Portugal as the result of a naval battle which blew his ship out from under him and forced him to swim for his life. He came ashore near Lagos, on the southern coast of Portugal, not far from Cape Saint Vincent. It was a fortuitous landing that seemed to portend the future, for Lagos had been the starting point for the Portuguese navigators in the days of Prince Henry, who had first set in motion the systematic exploration of the coast of West Africa and the regions of the Atlantic that lay off her shores. It happened in May 1476, when most of the Mediterranean was at war. Genoa had prudently obtained a safe conduct from the French King before organizing a convoy to ship a cargo of mastic--an aromatic resin of some sort--to the ports of Lisbon, England, and Flanders. In spite of the safe conduct they were suddenly attacked by a Franco-Portuguese war fleet commanded by a famous naval hero, a corsair named Guillaume de Casenove.

After recovering from his wounds and the long swim, Columbus made his way from Lagos to Lisbon. This was the obvious place for him to go since his ship had been destined for Lisbon. Besides, it was the most important port in Europe at the time and there was a large Genoese colony living and working in the city. He probably reached Lisbon by September of 1476, where he was cared for by his compatriots and perhaps by the representatives of the Italian merchant families with whom he had close ties and with whom he had started out on the expedition.

From the middle of the 15th century, as Portuguese explorers extended their knowledge of the West African coast and of the Atlantic islands, a demand grew for charts which might assist merchant vessels to find places of commercial interest recently discovered. The earliest charts embodying the required information were drawn by Italians. But they were mostly derived from Portuguese sources and had Portuguese place names. During the latter part of the 15th century, a chart-making industry grew up in Lisbon itself, partly due to the Genoese who had settled there. Columbus's brother Bartholomew was one of those Genoese cartographers, who plied his trade in Portugal. According to the contemporary chronicler, Antonio Gallo, who knew the Columbus family well, Bartholomew opened a chart-making establishment in Lisbon before his older brother arrived, and that afterwards, he took him into partnership and imparted to him the ideas that led to the discovery of America. Confirming this in part is the account of Andres Bernaldez of Seville, a chaplain who also knew Columbus and who describes him in his "History of the Catholic Kings," as a "hawker of printed books . . . [and] a man of great intelligence, though with little book learning, very skillful in the art of cosmography and the mapping of the world." Samuel Eliot Morison, one of his most important biographers, also believes that Columbus was a skilled chartmaker. "This," he says, "is seen by the sure touch in his free-hand sketch of northern Haiti, the only one undoubtedly his that has survived." Armando Cortesao also regarded Columbus as a cartographer since he included him as well as his brother in his voluminous work, "Cartografia e cartografos portugueses dos seculos XV e XVI," in which he also presents a very hypothetical case for the Portuguese nationality of Columbus.

Shortly after reaching the city of Lisbon, Columbus was at sea again. He joined a second fleet sent from Genoa to pick up the survivors of the battle off Cape St. Vincent and proceed on its way to England which had been its original destination. This second merchant fleet was composed of two ships that had escaped from the battle, as well as three ships belonging to rich Italian merchant families, all of whom were closely associated with Columbus. And at the end of December 1476, the Genoese fleet continued the voyage that had been interrupted five months before by the corsair Guillaume de Casenove.

From London, he would have gone on to Bristol, an English seaport of great importance. Their commercial interests would also have taken the Genoese ships to Galway, on the western coast of Ireland, and from there, further north to Iceland.

Some historians doubt that Columbus ever went to Iceland and as a result, a small literature has grown up over the years on the subject of Columbus's Iceland voyage, and the issue is still not decided. The little that we know about this voyage comes to us in part on the authority of his son Ferdinand, quoting from a now lost memorandum of his father, which he wrote to prove that the torrid and the Arctic zones were inhabitable. "In the month of February 1477," he says, "I sailed 100 leagues beyond the island of Tile whose southern part is in latitude 73x north . . . and at the time when I was there the sea was not frozen, but there were vast tides, so great that they rose and fell as much as 26 braccia (about 50 feet), twice a day . . ." Tile is clearly Thule, or Ultima Thule, as Iceland was called. There was a regular trade at that time between Lisbon, Bristol and Iceland, and the Bristol merchants were in constant relations with the Icelanders, exporting their manufactured goods largely in return for fish. Confirmation of the fact that he did indeed go to Iceland is given by

Columbus himself in a note in his own hand-writing, inscribed in his copy of Pope Pius II's book--"History of Memorable Things that Happened in My Time"--written in Latin, and which translates as follows: "Men have come hither from Cathay in the Orient. Many remarkable things have we seen, particularly at Galway, in Ireland, a man and a woman of most unusual appearance adrift in two boats." The identity of the bodies has been convincingly suggested by David Quinn as Inuit, an Eskimo people, who, with their Mongol-type features, probably resembled Orientals. Columbus is indeed very likely to have visited Galway, if, as he says, he had been on a voyage to Iceland. It is the natural intermediate port of call between Iceland and Bristol.

In her paper on Columbus and Iceland, A. A. Ruddock points out that in the main, the information given by Columbus's son Ferdinand was correct. A ship did indeed go to Iceland in 1477; the sea was not frozen, the winter was mild, and a voyage of a 100 leagues beyond Iceland was quite possible and that in all probability such a voyage was made. But, Ruddock insists, it was not made by Columbus. He learned of the voyage by some Bristol man but he or someone else confused the location of the 50 foot tides and in this confusion lies the vital clue to the riddle. As for Morison, he says that "it would be time and effort wasted to find an explanation of all this."

How long he was at sea we do not know. Like every sailor in other centuries, he may have worked at two trades, that of map maker and book seller in the winter months, and merchant seaman at other times. It is possible that he may have had a commercial career as factor or agent for the rich Genoese merchants in Lisbon. But of all his voyages during those early years in Portugal, there is one that, unlike the others, is fairly well documented. It concerns a voyage he made to Madeira in 1478-79 on behalf of a Genoese merchant, Ludovico or Luigi Centurione, for whom he had sailed before, to purchase a quantity of sugar for sale in Genoa. Some confusion took place between Columbus's employer and the suppliers in Madeira about the payment of the money and Columbus was forced to sail to Genoa with far less than the required consignment of sugar. A subsequent investigation in court showed that Columbus was blameless in the matter and he returned to Lisbon. It was shortly after this, that the 28-year-old Columbus took a decisive step in his private life, and one that was to prove equally important to his future career. He married Filipa Moniz Perestrelo, the daughter of Bartholomew Perestrelo who had been made first governor of Porto Santo in the Madeiras. She was also the granddaughter of Gil Moniz, who came from one of the oldest families in Portugal, and who had been a close companion of Prince Henry the Navigator. They met, according to his son, at the convent of the Saints in Lisbon where Columbus used to go to hear Mass. It was remarkable for being the convent belonging to the nuns of the military order of Santiago or St. James, the purpose of which was to provide a home for the wives and daughters of this famous Order of Knights Militant while the men were away fighting the heathen in the Holy Land or elsewhere. For an ambitious young man, anxious to become acquainted with a potential wife from upper class society, there could have been no better place to choose for his church-going. Young women were scrupulously chaperoned and there was no social life in those days where a man like Columbus could meet a suitable bride from a completely different stratum of society. Only in a church was it possible for the two sexes to see one another--however fleetingly. The advantages of the match were immense. She was to prove the key that was to open the way for his acceptance into a world where power and influence could be courted and obtained.

It was only natural that, with his new brother-in-law established in Porto Santo as its Governor, he should in due course leave Lisbon and, taking his wife with him, make for the island which, coupled with Madeira, was at that time the advance headquarters, as it were, of man's invasion of the Atlantic. What is certain is that, while Columbus probably engaged in trade--and certainly went on a number of voyages during these years--his curiosity was constantly being whetted by meeting with sailors and ship captains who had been to the edge of the unknown, and by the fact that he himself was living on the frontiers of the Atlantic.

His son Ferdinand writes that "He learned from pilots who were experienced in the voyages to Madeira and the Azores, facts and signs which convinced him that an unknown land lay to the West. Martin Vicente, a pilot of the King of Portugal, told him how he had taken from the water an artistically carved piece of wood, 450 leagues from Cape St. Vincent. This wood had been driven across the ocean by the west wind--a fact which led the sailors to believe that there were certainly other islands in that direction which had not yet been discovered."

Both in Madeira and in the Azores further evidence came to light from time to time suggesting that there was indeed some unknown land lying far out in the western Atlantic. Large canes, pines of unknown species, and even pieces of carved wood had been picked up on the westernmost beaches of the islands. It was reported from Flores, westernmost of the Azores, that the bodies of two men had been washed ashore and the Portuguese colonists declared that their broad faces

showed they were not Europeans. It is just conceivable that two Carib Indians might have been carried out to sea in a canoe and, after finally dying of starvation and exposure, were cast up on Flores.

Ferdinand Columbus wrote that "It was in Portugal that his father began to surmise that, if the Portuguese sailed so far to the south, as they did in the ships sent down the coast of Africa by Prince Henry--it might equally be possible to sail westward and find lands in that direction." Some of Prince Henry's ships did in fact sail to the west. Early in the 1450s, Diogo de Teive, one of Prince Henry's captains, set out into the Atlantic northwest from the Azores islands of Corvo and Flores. They were working along the southern edge of the Azores current where the winds often blow from a southwesterly direction, and where, in some places, the warm water is dense with Sargasso weed. Diogo de Teive had sailed right across the Gulf Stream and come out where the cold Newfoundland current runs down from the north. Unequipped for cold weather, and unprepared for so long a voyage, he turned back to Portugal where he put it on record that he was convinced that there was land to the northwest. It is quite likely that Columbus heard about this voyage, but, if he did so, he might well have connected it with nothing more than the general knowledge of the Icelanders that Greenland existed, and that there was land well to the north and west of their own island. The fact is that all these speculations were in the air when Columbus was living at Porto Santo and Madeira, but they were only speculations.

Not long after the birth of Columbus's first son in Porto Santo, his wife died and Columbus returned to Lisbon. During the scant decade that Columbus lived in Portugal, he certainly sailed once, if not more, to the west coast of Africa which the Portuguese called Guinea, and where they were busily engaged in trade and in building a fortified factory or trading post at Sao Jorge da Mina on the Gold Coast. On his copy of Pope Pius II's book--which I mentioned before--opposite a passage where Eratosthenes is quoted regarding the climate below the Equator which he says is temperate, Columbus wrote: "Directly below the Equator is the castle of Mina of the most serene King of Portugal, which we have seen." From other evidence in his notes, reports, and letters, it seems likely that he made several visits to West Africa and the Gold Coast. Also, the name of Guinea appears frequently in his journal of the first voyage to America. It served him as a point of comparison with the new world of the Indies. It must have been on his voyages to West Africa with the Portuguese that he observed that the winds in this area blew predominantly from the northeast, which is ideal for running down a latitude in a westerly direction. He, as well as the Portuguese who had preceded him, had discovered that phenomenon, the northeast Trade Winds, upon which the economy of Europe was to depend for centuries to come. At any rate, as suggested by Morison, it must have been on these voyages under the Portuguese flag, that he became a proficient navigator.

No one can say for certain at what moment Columbus conceived the idea of sailing westward across the Atlantic to reach the Indies. But it must have been on his mind during the early years he spent in Lisbon. The best evidence of this is to be found in the correspondence he is known to have had with a Florentine physician, Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli. Sometime during the year 1474, Toscanelli had been corresponding with a Canon of the Lisbon cathedral, Ferdinand Martins, who had been trying to convince the King of Portugal, Afonso V, that there was a quicker way to the Indies than around the southernmost point of Africa. Toscanelli, who took the writings of Marco Polo as gospel, was of the opinion that the world was a great deal smaller than it actually is. Sometime later, Columbus wrote to Toscanelli, enclosing a sphere with his letter, in which he expressed a desire to open communications with the East by a direct voyage to the West across the Atlantic. Toscanelli replied courteously by sending him a chart based on his conception of the earth, largely derived from Marco Polo's account of the Far East, and enclosed with it a copy of the letter he had earlier sent to Ferdinand Martins. In his original letter, Toscanelli had maintained that a course west out of Lisbon would bring the navigator to the Chinese province of Mangi after about 5,000 miles--though 11,000 would have been nearer the mark--and that "passing by the island of Antilia, after only 2,000 miles, he would reach 'Cipangu'," as Marco Polo called Japan, an island rich in all precious metals and stones which stirred Columbus's imagination. (As for Mangi or Man-tzu, it was an ancient empire south of the Yellow River conquered by the Mongols in 1276, after Marco's arrival in China.)

But the important thing that Columbus obtained from Toscanelli, apart from the prestige of having an eminent scholar approve his plans, was the Florentine's approval of Marco Polo. Columbus however, thought he knew better, and that the ocean was even narrower than Toscanelli supposed. At any rate, by the time that Columbus returned from his voyage to Africa, probably in 1484, he was ready to make an amazing proposition to King John II of Portugal.

John, who succeeded his father Afonso V in 1481, was undoubtedly the right man for Columbus to approach with this project of a great voyage to the West. Unfortunately, the state of the kingdom of Portugal was such that John was far too preoccupied at that moment with potential civil war and disputes with Spain to devote much time to the extension of

Portuguese sea exploration. But it is evidence enough of his eagerness to promote such adventures that he agreed in 1484 to consider the plan of this importunate Genoese.

Apparently, Columbus experienced none of the difficulties in obtaining an audience with King John that he was later to encounter in interviewing the Catholic Kings. He may have used the influence and connections of his powerful in-laws, for he knew that without the backing of the King there could be no hope of his securing the ships and men he needed for the voyage. What he proposed to John II was an expedition that would sail west into the Atlantic, rather than following the current Portuguese practice of attempting the circumnavigation of Africa. He would thus reach the desired lands and "the kingdom of the Khan" by the direct westward route. Columbus's own demands in return for the vast fortune that he was offering the King were in keeping with the grandiosity of his ideas. These demands are believed to be the same as those he presented years later to the Catholic Kings, though they are not confirmed in the Portuguese sources. His demands and his overbearing manner were so outrageous that the King had his doubts about having anything further to do with him. Nevertheless, John showed him consideration that he probably would not have afforded many adventurers, by referring the matter to a scientific council. But he could offer the King's learned councillors no respectable calculations regarding the westward distance to Cipangu; and when finally concluded, the council's report was adverse. The Portuguese who rejected Columbus's project had no choice. They did only what might have been expected of any well-ordered government dealing with an adventurer of vast pretensions but meager attainments.

Also, one of the reasons for King John's rejection of Columbus's project was that John had a government policy that distinguished between national and private enterprise. His treasury financed the African coastwise explorations which year by year were bringing him closer to his goal of rounding the Cape. This constituted a national enterprise. The navigators like Diogo Cao or Bartholomew Dias, whom he sent on these expeditions, were royal agents, sent to do a particular task. However, none of these discoverers acquired private rights in the regions explored. Columbus wanted to be a King's agent, but desired to make his terms in advance. This was contrary to established policy. His projected voyage fell within the category of private initiative and Columbus had no money and no financial backing. The field of discovery in the Atlantic and its islands had always been exploited this way by the Portuguese. Columbus proposed to enter a field hitherto dominated by private entrepreneurs, and on top of it, he claimed rewards far greater than any of these entrepreneurs had thought of demanding. On successful completion of the type of discovery voyage proposed by Columbus, he would generally have received proprietary rights and some economic privileges, but nothing like the noble title of "Dom" which Columbus demanded, or the rank of an admiral, or ships supplied by the Crown. Private discovery missions cost the Crown nothing; hence permission was granted easily. But for the Crown to outfit an adventurer, and then to step into the background in that adventurer's favor, was out of the question.

Although Columbus remained on friendly terms with King John, he knew it was time to look elsewhere for a patron. In 1485, with his dreams of financial success in ruins, and with his even greater dream of discovering the Indies dismissed by the King's advisors, Columbus left for Spain, clandestinely, it was said, to avoid his creditors. About two years later, near the end of 1487, Columbus got in touch with the Portuguese King again. Writing to him from Seville, he asked John to be allowed to return to Portugal under a safe conduct that would protect him--it is presumed--against his creditors, though there is no mention of them in the King's letter. Columbus's letter to the King is lost, but it is obvious from the King's reply that it was the future Admiral who had initiated the correspondence. Writing from Avis on 20 March 1488, John sent him an extremely cordial letter, urging him to return to Portugal, and assuring him that his services would be appreciated.

What Columbus did not know at the time he wrote the King was that two years before, in 1486, John had sent another expedition down the coast of Africa, led by Bartholomew Dias, who discovered the maritime route to India. Columbus was in Lisbon in December of 1488 when Dias returned from his voyage. It must have been a moment of unbearable bitterness for him, for it meant the end of any chance he might have had of arousing the King's interest in his project. So once again, at the end of 1488, Columbus left Portugal for Spain, a disappointed man. But five years later, in March of 1493, it was a different Columbus--triumphant and euphoric--who appeared in Lisbon, for the last time, on his return from his first voyage to America.

There is no question but that it was the technical innovations largely due to the Portuguese that made possible the voyages of Columbus to America. Improvements in shipbuilding, progress in the pilot's art, culminating in navigation by the stars, development of nautical mapmaking leading to the introduction of the scale of latitudes, study of weather and ocean-current conditions, and the consequent tracing of the best routes, taking into account the winds and currents of each area--

all these factors made it possible to create a real system of high sea navigation in the Atlantic. And let us not forget that Columbus arrived on the scene precisely when half a century of progress in these different spheres was leading to spectacular practical results of the Age of Discoveries.

There is no doubt that Columbus's first great voyage of discovery can be considered as the logical result of the voyages that the Portuguese were making in the North Atlantic and along the African coast since the days of Prince Henry the Navigator. Columbus had the good sense to utilize the knowledge of the winds and currents that he had acquired in the course of his voyages with the Portuguese and to trace the best possible course that would lead him to land on the other side of the world. It is an incontrovertible fact that Columbus learned most of what he knew about high sea navigation under the flag of Portugal.

I do believe that a great part of the glory that had gone to Spain for the discovery of Columbus should have been attributed to Portugal.

Paper presented by Rebecca Catz, in Washington, D.C., on September 25, 1990. Conference title: "Spain and Portugal of the Navigators: the Iberian Peninsula Countries, Europe and New Horizons."