

# 16 A New Land Is "Discovered"



None of the many portraits of Columbus was made during his lifetime, so no one knows what he really looked like.

If you've ever seen a painting of Christopher Columbus, forget it. All of them were done long after he died. We can trust descriptions of him written by those who knew him best: his sons.

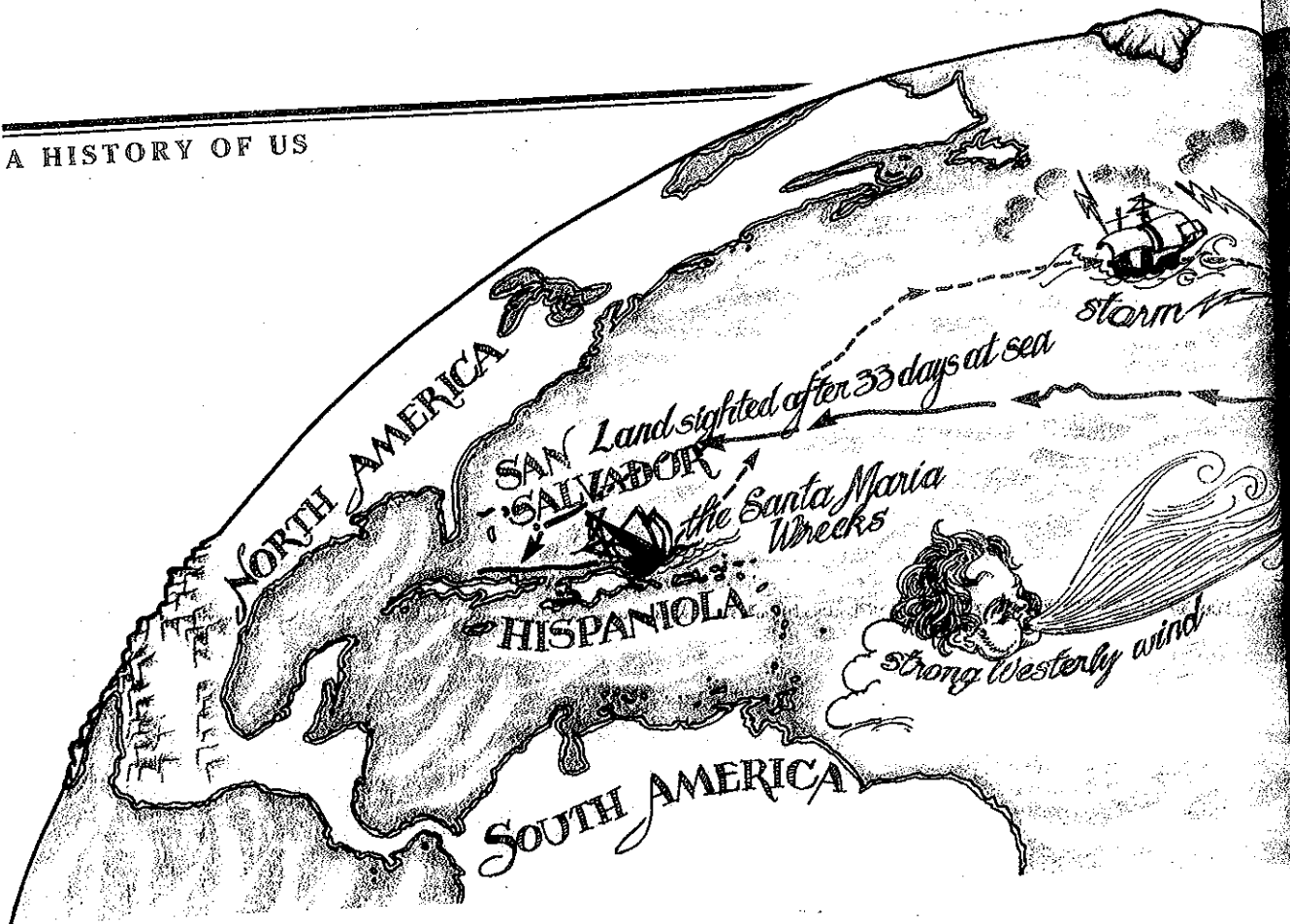
They tell of a man who is six feet tall, slim, with blond hair that turns white when he is 30. He has the manners and dignity of a nobleman, although his father was said to be a weaver of wool. Perhaps if Columbus were less of a gentleman, he could better handle the rough men who sail with him. That will always be a problem for him.

It is August 3, 1492, and three tiny ships—the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa María*—set sail from Palos, Spain. Columbus, on the *Santa María*, is 41 years old and commodore of the three-ship fleet and its crew of 90 men. In his pocket is a letter from King Ferdinand to the Grand Khan, the ruler of China. On board is a learned man who speaks Arabic and Hebrew; Columbus thinks those languages will help him talk to the people of Cathay. When the sailors cast off, it is with a feeling of excitement. They know that if they make it, this will be one of the great voyages of all time. They hope to return with gold and spices. Spices make food taste good even if it is a bit spoiled. In these days before refrigerators, spices are very valuable.

The ships stop in the Canary Islands for supplies and perhaps courage; then, on September 6, they head out into the unknown ocean. Columbus has his compass and an astrolabe to guide him. The astrolabe tells him how high the North Star is above the horizon. With

He has many names, too: Cristobal Colón to the Spanish, Cristoforo Colombo to the Italians.



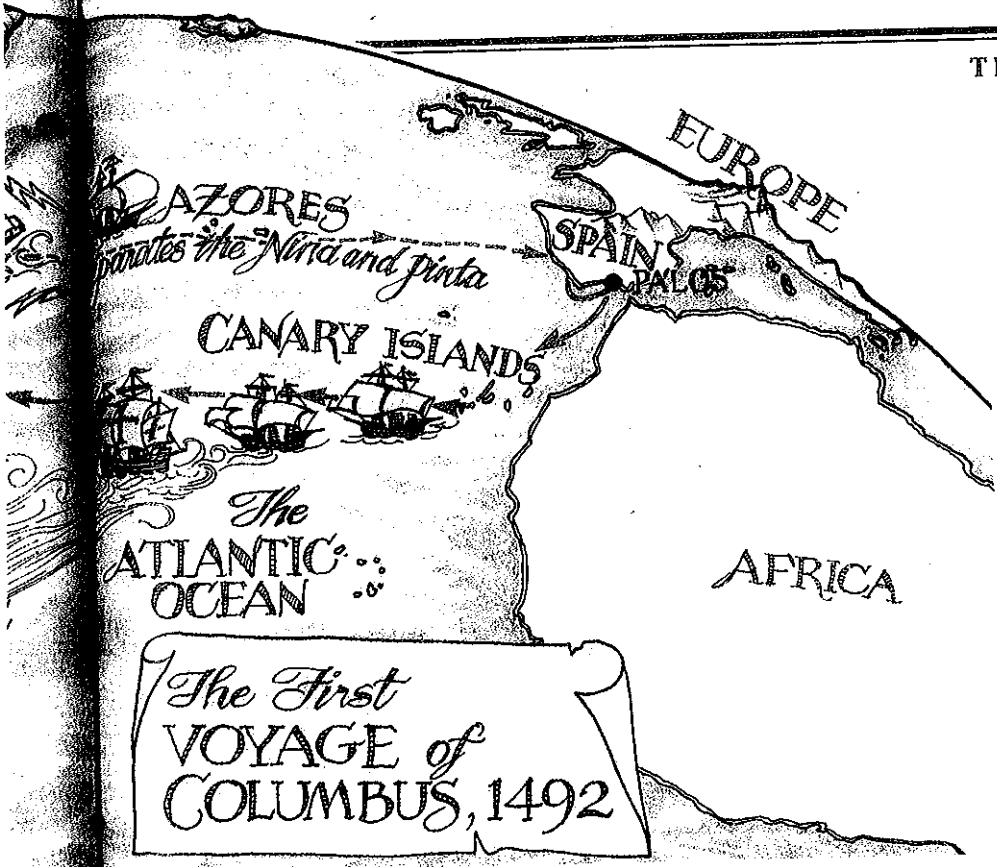


### Magnetic North

**M**agnets always point north, don't they? Well, not quite. Columbus was the first person to discover that. As he sailed west his compass direction changed a bit. Columbus knew something was wrong, but he didn't tell his crew. They would have panicked had they thought the compass couldn't be trusted. Now we know a compass points not to the North Pole but to a magnetic pole nearby.

it, he is able to tell his latitude. If he follows a line of latitude, he can keep a straight course. That sounds easier than it is. The rolling of the ship makes the astrolabe readings uneven. Columbus is one of the best sailors the world will ever know. Being a good sailor, he keeps a record of the winds, the speed of the ship, and the compass direction. That tells him how far he has gone in the vast sea. Calculating your position, or longitude, this way is called "dead reckoning." Besides, Columbus seems to have a natural sense of the best way to go: he is famous for being able to find his way at sea. He picks a route with fair winds. Still, it is frightening to go where no one has gone before.

In mid-September they come to what seems to be a meadow of grass in the middle of the ocean. It is the Sargasso Sea—an area of thick green seaweed. The sailors have never seen anything like this. They are afraid the ships will get tangled in the green muck. But soon they are out of it and into the open sea again. Now there is a fierce storm with waves that rise higher than the church towers in Palos. The ships are sturdy and the seamen skilled, so they survive the tempest. But the sailors are discouraged and fearful. The sea seems endless. On October 9 they say they will go no farther. Columbus pleads for three more days of sailing. Then, he says, if they don't see land they may cut off his head and sail home in peace.



**Mutiny**—it means “re-volt” or “rebellion.” Some sailors talked of taking over the ship and heading back to Spain. That would have been a mutiny.

**Cabin Boys**

**E**very sailing ship had boys as sailors. Boys were obedient, easy to control, and good at climbing the sails’ ropes, or rigging. Every half hour a boy shouted out the time. Here is the call for five o’clock:

*Five is past and six  
flowath;  
More shall follow if God  
willeth.  
Count and pass,  
Make voyage fast.*

Three days later, on October 12, a lookout high on the *Pinta*’s mast yells, “*Tierra! Tierra!*” It is the Spanish word for land. The Bahama Islands are straight ahead.

They have made it to the Indies! Columbus was right after all, or so they think. Columbus names the island where they land San Salvador; that means “Holy Saviour.” He plants a cross and a Spanish flag on San Salvador. Columbus is a religious man; he believes it is God’s wish that he sail and conquer in the name of a Catholic king and queen.

Soon he knows he is not in China. That doesn’t bother Columbus. Marco Polo wrote that there were thousands of islands in the Indies. San Salvador must be one of those islands. Japan, China, and the rest of the Indies are sure to be nearby. The island is small but splendid, with tall trees, gorgeous birds, a beautiful beach, and friendly people.

Columbus calls the people Indians. He is puzzled when they don’t understand Arabic. Actually, the language they speak is Arawak. They are members of a Taino (TY-no)

King Ferdinand of Spain watches regally from his side of the Atlantic Ocean as the Taino flee from Columbus and his crew.





Why isn't Columbus looking for land through a telescope?

It hadn't been invented yet.

**Immunity** (ih MYOON ih tee). It means resistance to infection. (Sometimes it means exemption from certain laws.)

**Historians** aren't sure about this, but many believe that the Carib (in their language it means "valiant people") were cannibals. One thing is sure: the Taino feared them. That may explain why the Taino were so eager to help Columbus. Perhaps they wanted him as an ally against their enemies.

tribe, although soon others will be calling them Indians. Columbus says of them: "They remained so much our friends that it was a marvel...they came swimming to the ships' boats, and brought us parrots and cotton thread...and many other things, and in exchange we gave them little glass beads....Finally they exchanged with us everything they had, with good will."

Columbus is lucky. If he had landed on a nearby island, he would have been greeted by Caribs—a tribe of warriors—and might not have lived to tell the world of his discovery.

The Taino are peaceful fisherfolk. They welcome the voyagers who have

come in bright ships and brought shining beads that seem to capture the sunshine. But what must be in the Indians' minds when they first see these men? Do they think it strange that they wear heavy clothing in a warm land? (Columbus says the Indians wear nothing at all.) Are they surprised that the strangers have skin the color of melons, or that one—a black man from Africa—is dark as chocolate? (Columbus says the Indians are handsome, their skin brown, their hair straight.) Do the smells of the seafarers bother them? (The Europeans do not bathe.) Whatever they think, the swords that Columbus and his men carry help convince the natives to do as the strangers wish.

Besides, they want to please. The Taino are generous and intelligent people. Columbus says they learn Spanish words quickly. They also communicate through sign language.

The Taino don't realize that they do not have long to live. Columbus will kidnap some and take them to Europe as trophies of his voyage. He will help turn many of them into slaves. Soon all the Arawak-speaking tribes will be dead—killed by European weapons, slavery, and diseases. Those diseases—like smallpox and measles—are new in this hemisphere. The natives have no immunity to them.

But that is to come. At first the Taino help Columbus. He is determined to find gold and the Grand Khan. The Taino take him to a huge island they call Colba. It is Cuba. Here there are many natives, and some wear ornaments of gold! Yet the Grand Khan is nowhere to be found. (Columbus is not discouraged: China and Japan must be nearby.) These Indians seem to be fire-eaters: they put a smoking weed in their mouths. It is the first time the Spaniards have seen tobacco.

There are pearls on Cuba, and enough gold ornaments to take samples to please King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Columbus sails home to Spain with brightly colored parrots, Indians, and gold trinkets. Can you imagine what happens when he arrives in Spain? Hardly anyone believed they would ever see him again. But he has found Cathay! At least that is what he says and believes. Now he is a great hero. The king and queen name him Lord Admiral of the Ocean Seas.

Until Columbus met Indians who slept in them, hammocks, so useful on a ship, were unknown to Europeans.

### From Columbus's Pen

*These are the actual words of Christopher Columbus, written in a letter in 1493 to Luis de Santangel, Treasurer of Aragon, Spain, telling of his discovery:*

Sir;  
 ...I write this to tell you how in thirty-three days I sailed to the Indies with the fleet that the illustrious King and Queen, our Sovereigns, gave me, where I discovered a great many islands, inhabited by numberless people; and of all I have taken possession for their Highnesses by proclamation and display of the Royal Standard....

[Hispaniola is] full of trees of endless varieties, so high that they seem to touch the sky, and I have been told that they never lose their foliage. I saw them as green and lovely as trees are in Spain in the month of May. Some of them were covered with blossoms, some with fruit....There were palm trees of six or eight varieties....There are wonderful pinewoods, and very extensive ranges of meadowland. There is honey, and there are many kinds of birds, and a great variety of fruits....Hispaniola is a marvel.

...[The Indians] are well-made men of commanding stature,

they appear extraordinarily timid. The only arms they have are sticks of cane, cut when in seed, with a sharpened stick at the end, and they are afraid to use these. Often I have sent two or three men ashore to some town to converse with them, and the natives came out in great numbers, and as soon as they saw our men arrive, fled without a moment's delay although I protected them from all injury.

...they are so unsuspecting and so generous with what they possess, that no one who had not seen it would believe it.

...In the first isle I discovered, I took by force some of the natives, that from them we might gain some information of what there was in these parts; and so it was that we immediately understood each other, either by words or signs.

They...believe that I come from heaven...wherever I went ...[they ran] from house to house and to the towns around, crying out, "Come! Come! and see the men from heaven!"

As for monsters, I have found no trace of them except at the



point in the second isle as one enters the Indies, which is inhabited by a people considered by all the isles as most ferocious, who eat human flesh. They possess many canoes, with which they overrun all the isles of India, stealing and seizing all they can.

—Christopher Columbus

.S.  
 .S. A .S.  
 X M Y  
 XPO FERENS

This is Columbus's signature. The bottom word is half Greek, half-Latin: it says "Christ-bearer"—which is what Christopher means in Latin.