

CHAPTER ONE

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A Biographical Approach
to American History

by: Roderick Nash
Gregory Graves

Christopher Columbus

With a rising moon and a strong east wind behind them, the three ships sailed headlong into history. It was shortly before 2 A.M. on October 12, 1492, but most hands were on deck. The usual signs of a landfall—a green branch, a carved stick, many birds—had made them eager, desperate, for their first sight of land in thirty-three days. The tall, gray-haired captain braced himself on the sterncastle of the Santa Maria. His face showed the strain of a twenty-year dream on the brink of realization. Suddenly, a muffled shot from the lead ship, Pinta, broke the

hiss of the waves. It was the signal for land ahead, and the Pinta fell off the wind waiting for the flagship. As she approached, her captain, too, could see the pale gleam of limestone cliffs. Christopher Columbus had reached a new world.

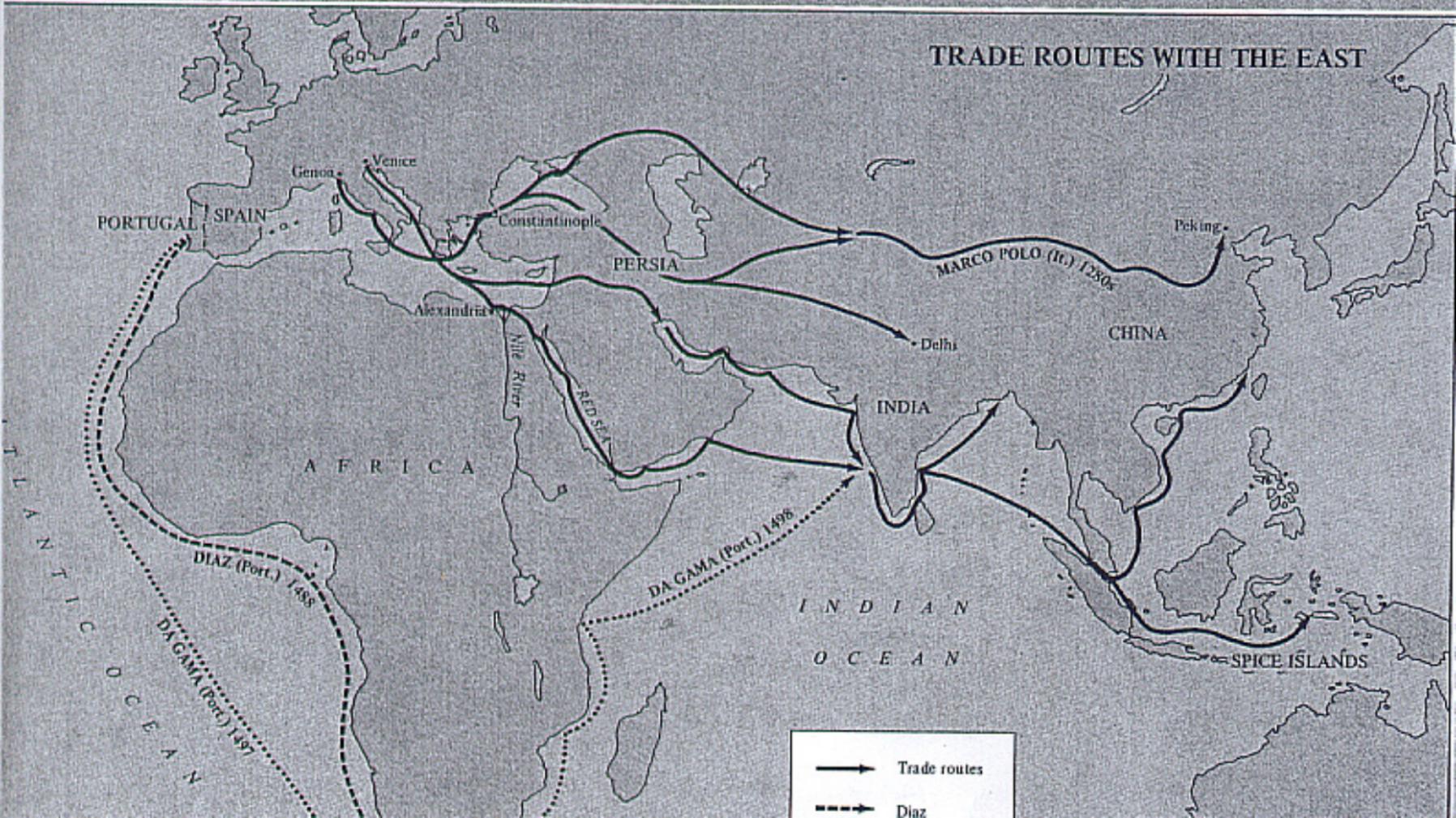
The son and grandson of humble weavers in the Republic of Genoa, north and west of Rome, Columbus, one might imagine, had little reason to anticipate a life of discovery and exploration. But the Europe into which he was born in 1451 simmered with the forces that eventually propelled him across the Atlantic. Some were already centuries old. Beginning in 1095, the several crusades to free Jerusalem from Turkish control had opened European eyes. Nobles and fighting men who had journeyed to the Holy Land had encountered a whole new standard of living at this crossroads where East met West. For the first time, the crusaders saw luxurious silk cloth, which contrasted sharply with their rough woolen garments such as those Columbus's family wove. And there were heavy, colorful tapestries that made ideal wall hangings for dark, drafty European castles and Oriental spices to preserve as well as flavor food.

The Europeans also saw fabulous quantities of gold and gems. They heard about still more, especially in the late thirteenth century when Marco Polo reported his overland journey to China, Japan, and the Spice Islands. Columbus's copy of Marco Polo's book was underlined where the author mentioned "pearls, precious stones, brocades, ivory, or pepper, nuts, nutmeg, cloves and an abundance of other spices." He also noted the reference to the palace of the king of Japan "which is entirely roofed with fine gold, just as our churches are roofed with lead." This knowledge of Asia whetted the appetite of Columbus's generation and lifted its eyes to far horizons.

European desire for the treasures of the East could be satisfied by traders. After goods from Asia arrived at eastern Mediterranean ports such as Constantinople and Alexandria, merchants from Genoa, along with those from Venice, Florence, and Pisa, distributed them throughout Europe. Prices, however, were exceedingly high. As a result, Europe was soon faced with an unfavorable balance of trade: money flowed east and goods west. Asia had no use for Europe's bulky agricultural products. The economic situation was bad, but, to make matters worse, in 1453 the Turks captured Constantinople and thus closed to the Christian Europeans the key link in the route to the East. Columbus's Europe desperately needed cheap and direct access to the Orient. The vast highway of the sea promised both.

The Renaissance also played an important role in readying Christopher Columbus and his society for the discovery, exploration, and colonization of the Americas. The term *renaissance* suggests a rebirth. To be sure, the so-called Dark Ages were not all that dismal except by contrast to the accomplishments of Greece and Rome. Around the twelfth century Arab and Jewish scholars alerted their European counterparts to the cultural brilliance of the classical

TRADE ROUTES WITH THE EAST



civilizations. A shiver of excitement spread north from Italy. A society long accustomed to the Christian emphasis on the afterlife, the next world, glimpsed the potential of the present. The idea of improving the human condition on earth—the idea of progress—gained momentum.

A major theme of the Renaissance was pride in humankind. Christianity had stressed human unworthiness and helplessness, but the heroes of the Renaissance were Alexander the Great, Aristotle, Caesar, and Mark Anthony. They had not been helpless, but rather had shaped the course of history in their time. Their triumphs were secular, not sacred; their rewards, very much in this world rather than in a heavenly world to come. Could not fifteenth-century people do likewise? A passion for fame, for glory, for achievement, for mastery gained a foothold in the European mind. Individualism flourished. It spread from the arts and letters to politics and business, and fed the development of capitalism. Columbus and his contemporaries were restless, increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo. Understandably, this dissatisfaction created an urge for new lands and new beginnings.

Columbus had the restlessness, confidence, and ambition of a Renaissance man, and the sea offered a perfect outlet for his energies. Columbus met the sea in the harbor of his native Genoa and may well have transported woolen cloth along the Italian coast. In his twenties he made his first extensive voyages in the Mediterranean as a common seaman. In the year 1476 Columbus sailed in a large Genoese convoy bound for Portugal, England, and the North Sea ports. Just outside the Strait of Gibraltar, however, a war fleet from France and Portugal descended on the convoy. In the furious battle that followed, Columbus was wounded and his ship sunk. Grasping an oar for support, he struggled six miles to the southern coast of Portugal. As he crawled onto the beach of an unknown country, his chances of ever commanding an expedition to the New World seemed remote. But Columbus was an unusual man with a knack for persevering in the face of adversity.

The country Columbus reached in such unpromising circumstances was then the European leader in maritime discovery. Much of the credit for Portugal's eminence goes to Dom Henrique, better known as Prince Henry the Navigator. This talented prince, who died in 1460, personified the spirit of the age of European expansion. From his headquarters on the Atlantic Ocean he sent expeditions into the unknown. Some went north and developed a brisk trade with England and Iceland. Others pushed west, a thousand miles into the open ocean, to find the Azores. But Prince Henry reserved his keenest enthusiasm for those who sailed south to coast along the dark continent of Africa. Here was a way to circumvent the Italian monopoly on trans-Mediterranean trade with Asia and India. Access to Africa also gave Portugal an opportunity to cash in on the lucrative slave trade which was developing. Driven by a desire for trade and wealth, Prince Henry's captains had, at the time of his death, reached within ten degrees of the equator.

The Portuguese also achieved preeminence in developing the sciences of sailing and navigation. Not only exploration but the entire colonization movement depended on establishing safe and reliable sea transport. Prince Henry

created a fifteenth-century equivalent of Cape Canaveral, gathering around him the best navigational minds in the Western world. The charts, tables, and astronomical observations they compiled made possible long expeditions on the open ocean without the need to stay close to shore. The refinement of the astrolabe, for example, permitted a captain to determine his latitude on the basis of star sightings with considerable accuracy. Equally important were the institutions of early capitalism, the banks and joint-stock companies that enabled Portugal to finance far-flung exploration. A shipwreck, ironically, had left Columbus in the best place to pursue the life of an explorer.

Within six months of dragging himself onto the Portuguese beach, Columbus recovered his health and once again put to sea. This time Iceland was the goal and trading the purpose. During the next few years he mastered Latin and Spanish, married into a prominent Portuguese family, and gained respect both as a gentleman and a seaman. He lived on one of the Madeira Islands west of Gibraltar for a year or more and, in the early 1480s, made at least one voyage around the hump of West Africa to Guinea and the Gold Coast. The African experience added greatly to his skill as a sea captain. It also produced an unexpected dividend. Columbus noticed that south of the Canary Islands the prevailing winds always blew from the east. Further north, off England and Portugal, they came out of the west. Gradually it dawned on him that to sail west into the North Atlantic winds was foolish. A far better course would be to sail south to the trade winds and then west on their wings. To return, one had simply to set a northerly course, catch the west wind, and ride it back to Europe.

Driftwood that storms frequently cast on European shores provided exciting evidence that Columbus was right in the theory that land lay to the west. When he lived on Madeira he could scarcely avoid noticing the huge tropical canes, seed pods, and tree trunks that came from Central and South America. Carved wood had even been found, and, on one occasion, two flat-faced human bodies, of an appearance strange to Europeans, washed onto the beach. The significance of all this was not lost on Columbus.

Returning from Africa with knowledge about wind patterns, Columbus gave increasing attention to the possibility of sailing west to reach the Far East. The roots of this idea lay in his understanding that the world was round. Educated Europeans had taken a spherical earth for granted for two thousand years; Columbus simply attempted afeat discussed for centuries. The size of the earth, however, and the distribution of its land masses were still hotly debated among the foremost scholars of Columbus's time. "Knowledge" tended to be a blend of fact, myth, and wishful thinking.

In constructing his conception of world geography, Columbus drew on a variety of ancient and contemporary sources. He owned an early fifteenth-century translation of the work of the Greek mathematician Ptolemy, whose calculations fell short of the earth's actual size. He also owned the standard geography of the late Middle Ages, Pierre d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi*, which was written in 1410 but not printed until 1480. Columbus pored over his copy, making marginal notations on almost every page. "The earth is round & spic-

he jotted at one point, ". . . between the end of Spain and the beginning of India lies a narrow sea that can be sailed in a few days." Further confirmation of this error came from the renowned Florentine physician and geographer Paul Toscanelli, to whom Columbus wrote for information sometime in 1481. Toscanelli stated confidently that the voyage Columbus proposed "is not only possible to make, but sure and certain, and will bring inestimable gain and utmost recognition." He also sent a map that Columbus used to calculate the distance from Portugal to Marco Polo's gold-roofed Japan as 3000 miles. This was only 9200 miles short!

Toscanelli's correspondence with Columbus perpetuated another geographical mistake. According to the Florentine, only open ocean lay to the west between Portugal and Japan. Most fifteenth-century Europeans agreed that at least an island or island group lay between these limits of geographical knowledge. No one, however, had conceived of a continent dividing the sea into the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Even if Columbus and his contemporaries knew of the Irish and Viking contacts with North America dating possibly from the sixth century and certainly from the eleventh, they did not realize it was a continent. Yet ignorance, in this case, proved advantageous. Rightly informed, Columbus would more than likely never have ventured west.

Myth also played an important role in his motivation. In company with Europeans since the Greeks, Columbus believed in an earthly paradise. Life was good in paradise, really good. Ripe fruit hung heavy on every bough. The climate was delightful, flowers perfumed the air. Precious stones and quantities of gold could be picked up at will. In some paradise traditions, these sensual joys were subordinated to spiritual ones. Paradise became a place where sin was unknown and people lived in accord with God's Commandments. Those lucky enough to enter paradise, it was thought, left behind all worry, fear, and discomfort—even death was unknown.

According to the Christian tradition, people once occupied paradise, but somewhere along the way they had become separated from it. Adam and Eve, for instance, were driven from the Garden of Eden by an angry God. Later generations, however, remembered—or at least they dreamed. Almost every culture in Western history has subscribed to the idea that paradise still existed: somewhere there was an island or a mountain or an enchanted valley. . . . If they could only find it, the good life could be regained. The thought was irresistible, particularly so when parts of the earth were yet unknown. It was tempting and easy to believe that paradise lay around the next bend, over the known horizon.

The idea of going *west* to find the lost paradise had existed for centuries before Columbus's venture. The Jews, wandering in the desert after fleeing Egypt, traveled back in that direction to find Canaan—their promised land of milk and honey. The Greeks, Romans, and Phoenicians had similar traditions of an earthly paradise to the west. These mythical places even appeared on maps, set in the middle of the Atlantic under the names of Antilla, Atlantis, the Islands of the Blest, Elysium, and the Isle of Fair Women. In the sixth century an Irish monk named St. Brendan supposedly sailed west in an attempt

to reach the paradisaical Fortunate Isles. According to the legend that grew up around this voyage, Brendan crossed the North Atlantic to Newfoundland, struck south to Bermuda, and then west to Florida. When he arrived, he found a settlement of Irish monks already enjoying the luxuriance of the tropics. True or not—and there is some evidence that Europeans of this time really did reach North America, if not paradise—the prospect of finding a Garden of Eden continually fired imaginations. In Columbus's time serious discussions of the location and characteristics of paradise were common in every European port. *Imago Mundi*, for example, declares that "the Earthly Paradise is an Elysian spot . . . far distant from our inhabited world both by land and sea." To be the discoverer of this place was reason enough to motivate a man like Columbus.

To implement his plans for a westward voyage to the East and perhaps to paradise, Columbus needed financial backing. He turned first to King John II of Portugal. Late in 1484 Columbus enthusiastically unfolded his plan to the king's advisory committee. This distinguished group of mathematicians and astronomers was not impressed. In particular, they doubted Columbus's calculation of the distance to Japan and China, contending, correctly, that it was closer to 10,000 than to 3,000 miles. The commission favored a course around Africa. Portuguese mariners were continuing the explorations to the south begun under Prince Henry, and it seemed only a matter of time before they would round Africa and open a sea route to India. Columbus watched in frustration and envy when in 1488 Bartholomeu Diaz sailed triumphantly into Lisbon after rounding the Cape of Good Hope. Now Portugal had no further use for Christopher Columbus.

At this low point in his career, Columbus became the beneficiary of Europe's changing political structure. Before the fifteenth century an endless series of nobles, barons, earls, and dukes vied for dominance within particular regions. The abundance of leaders scattered wealth and power into small and relatively weak units. From this feudal chaos, however, kings and nations began slowly to emerge. By the late fifteenth century a few families had proved superior in the political struggle for existence. Forcing subservience on what became the lesser nobility, they created a series of hereditary monarchies. Extremely competitive and ambitious, these emerging national rulers aspired to the Roman example of world domination. Discovery and expansion appealed to them as avenues to glory. The nation that could find an easy route to Asia and establish lucrative trading colonies would have an immense advantage over its rivals.

Columbus saw the personal advantages in this political situation. Portugal's good fortune in its African venture in 1488, he thought, might increase the appeal of his scheme elsewhere. So Columbus dispatched his brother to the courts of Henry VII in England and Charles VIII in France. He himself went to Spain, where Ferdinand and Isabella were ending a successful struggle for control of a kingdom.

At first, Columbus made little headway. Ambitious and conceited, he insisted, as a prerequisite for any voyage, on a guarantee of three fully equipped ships, one-tenth of all the treasures he might find, an appointment as governor-

and viceroy of the lands discovered, and a place in the Spanish nobility with the title Admiral of the Ocean Sea. Detractors raised the old question of distance; Columbus was again accused of unwarranted optimism. But other voices in the Spanish court, impressed with his brash confidence and aware of the need to compete with Portugal, were reluctant to dismiss him. Skepticism vied with desire. Now Columbus probably played his trump—the pattern of the winds. He explained *how* to reach Asia by following the northeast winds in the south Atlantic. Even if the trip proved longer than anticipated, it would be easy to turn north and ride the west winds home.

The king's treasurer, Luis de Santángel, thought it was worth the risk. He pointed out that the surrender of Granada, the last stronghold of African Moors in Spain, on January 2, 1492, had freed the nation's resources for discovery. The voyage just might prove a bonanza. Moreover, Columbus could be Spain's vehicle for spreading Christianity to heathen peoples. Considerations of gold, God, and glory, Santángel concluded, lent Columbus's proposal irresistible appeal.

The monarchs agreed. Queen Isabella even offered to pledge her crown jewels. Columbus, already on his way to France, was recalled by royal messenger. Ferdinand and Isabella accepted his terms in a formal agreement of April 17, 1492; and with ample money and connections, Columbus, his energy pent up, exploded into action. Less than three months after arriving in the port of Palos, Columbus was ready to begin his quest.

Two of the three ships in his expedition, the *Pinta* and *Niña*, were caravels. Light and narrow, these vessels of approximately seventy-five feet in length had been designed for extended voyages. They were swift and could sail almost directly into the wind. Columbus's flagship, the *Santa María*, was longer, bulkier, and slower. The shipowners of Palos apparently were unwilling to risk a third caravel on so dubious a venture. Still, ninety men volunteered for the crew. Of course, as a foreigner in Spain, Columbus needed the assistance of local residents who were also interested in the voyage. The most important among these were members of one of the leading shipping families of Palos: the Pinzóns. In addition to helping Columbus select an able crew, one Pinzón, Martín, commanded the *Pinta* and chose as his first mate a younger brother, Francisco. Still another Pinzón brother, Vicente, was captain of the *Niña*. The Pinzóns provided the expert seamanship and strong moral support that Columbus badly needed. On August 3, 1492, they left Palos bound for the unknown.

Just as he had proposed, Columbus led his expedition on a southwest slant to the Canary Islands, then due west along the 28th parallel of latitude. The winds proved favorable, as predicted, and the ships made good time. Of course, there were misgivings. Columbus had continually to restrain the crew from altering course to search for islands that seemed just out of sight. As the days stretched into weeks and no land appeared, whispers and then open complaints spread among the men. The sailors did not fear a sudden drop off a flat earth or sea monsters; they were simply a long way from home across an open ocean.

Responding to these challenges, Columbus offered reminders of the riches

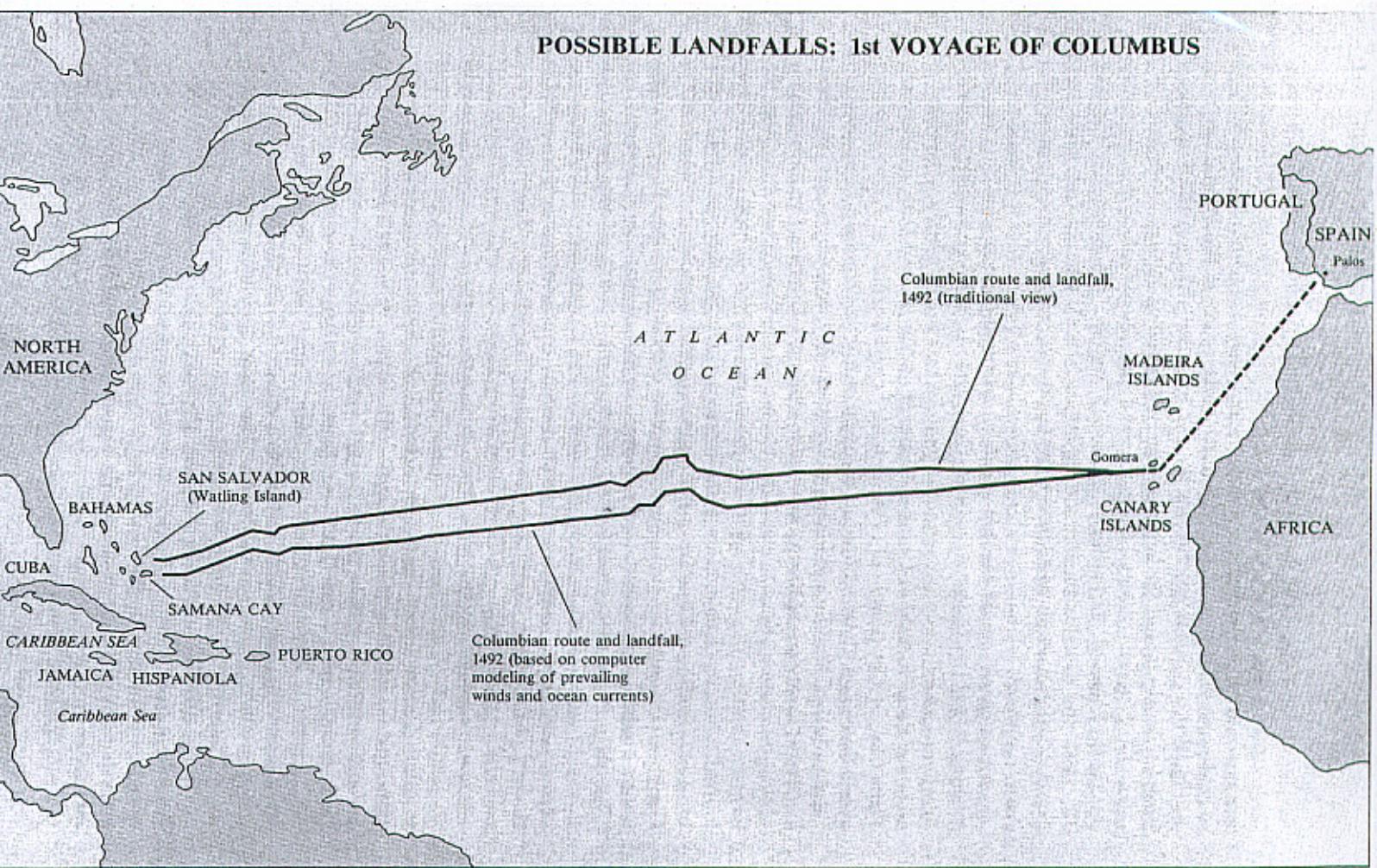
that lay ahead in Asia. He also deliberately falsified his log to make the distance back to Spain seem shorter. But ultimately it was a question of will. Columbus was committed. Only death or mutiny could have forced him to turn around in mid-passage. His spirit, and the continued support of the Pinzón brothers, sustained the crew. It was Martín Pinzón, who, aided by a flock of migratory birds obviously bound for land, convinced Columbus to turn southwest and miraculously, in the direction of the shortest distance to land. When San Salvador (as they named the landmass) loomed in sight on the morning of October 12, 1492, the captains Pinzón and their proclaimed Admiral Columbus prepared to disembark on what they were convinced was a remote corner of the Asian continent.

Although recent scholarship suggests that the actual landfall site was not Watling Island but Caicos or Samana Cay, there is still no conclusive proof as to where Columbus and his men first set foot on land. Whether they landed on one of these islands, or Crooked Island, Rum Cay, Grand Turk, Mayaguana, Plana Cay, or Cat Island (all of these have been identified as the true landfall at one time or another), Columbus did sight one of the Windward Islands of the Lesser Antilles. And he and his crew disembarked, came ashore, and explored

It was surely one of history's dramatic moments when a native of the island walking the beach at dawn, glanced up to see three ships approaching from the east. By the time the ships anchored, many natives had gathered. Columbus's journal notes their nakedness and describes them as "very well built, with handsome bodies and fine faces." These people had occupied the islands of the Caribbean for only a century. Their ancestors came into the area from mainland South America, conquering a more primitive race of islanders in the process. Ultimately, their roots went back to the Mongoloid hunters who crossed the Bering Strait to Alaska at least ten thousand and perhaps forty thousand years before Columbus appeared. Fanning out over a continent newly released from the grip of the glaciers (see Chapter 6, pages 158-160), their descendants were on hand to challenge the Vikings when they landed in the eleventh century. European contact with the New World before then is probable if not fully substantiated. Like Columbus, early mariners could have sailed the trade wind from the Canary Islands to the West Indies. Rock inscriptions from New England and inland sites as distant as the Mississippi Valley date from 1000 B.C. and are written in scripts known only to Celts, Basques, Libyans, and Egyptians. If these people did establish permanent settlements in the New World what happened to them? Where were the members of this first wave of European pioneers when Columbus touched on San Salvador? The answer among scholars who hold to the early-contact theory is they were still present—absorbed into the tribes of the still earlier migrants from Asia.

When Columbus termed the San Salvador people "Indians," he was, unknowingly, partly right. Their most distant ancestors *had* come from India (term loosely applied in the fifteenth century to Asia generally). But Columbus' conscious use of the term was strictly a product of wishful thinking and erroneous geography. As a twentieth-century Sioux, commenting on the history of the subjugation of the native American, put it, "Even the name Indian is not

POSSIBLE LANDFALLS: 1st VOYAGE OF COLUMBUS



ours. It was given to us by some dumb honky who got lost and thought he'd landed in India."

European arrogance toward the so-called Indians began with Columbus. From the start he regarded them as inferior even as he noted their good looks and idyllic environment. Nonchalantly he took possession of a land they occupied. And while gathering specimen flowers, fruit, and birds to take back to Europe, he also collected seven natives. In his mind they were just another type of animal, and his journal contains frank speculations on the ease with which they could be enslaved. "These people," he noted on October 14, "are very unskilled in arms, . . . with fifty men they could all be subjected and made to do all that one wished." The statement proved to be a grim prophecy.

The first island disappointed Columbus. There were no treasures of the Orient. But he saw what he wished to see, what *must*, he felt, be there. The Indians wore small gold ornaments. By signs, they gave the strangers to believe that much more could be found elsewhere. Columbus assumed that Japan was close at hand. On the afternoon of October 14 he left San Salvador, intending to island hop to Asia. The Spaniards cruised among several smaller islands and then, following natives' directions, pushed on to Cuba. When its high blue mountains appeared to the south, their goal once more seemed on the brink of realization. But again disappointment followed exaggerated expectation. No Grand Khan, wallowing in gold, could be located. Parties sent on inland explorations of Cuba returned with the same depressing story of poor natives and forbidding jungle.

The island of Hispaniola to which the explorers sailed next proved to be more promising. The Indians had considerable gold and told Columbus of rich mines in the interior. But just when success seemed imminent, the *Santa María* ran aground on a reef and was abandoned on Christmas Day in 1492. Columbus made a quick decision. He would plant a colony, called Navidad, and leave forty men on Hispaniola to find the gold and ascertain the location of Asia. On January 16, 1493, the *Pinta* and the *Niña* began the voyage home.

Columbus's arrival in Lisbon almost three months later, on March 4, triggered a surge of excitement. People debated whether he had found the outskirts of Asia, or islands midway between Europe and Asia, or a whole new continent, but few remained indifferent. Hunger for the Oriental trade combined with Renaissance curiosity and political ambition to create a climate in which Columbus's reports ignited imaginations. Europe was ripe for the news he brought. This had not been true at the time of the earlier discoveries of the New World. When the Vikings, for example, made contact in the eleventh century, Europeans were not straining impatiently at their physical and intellectual bounds. Asia and its riches were unknown. The Crusades had not begun. Neither capitalism nor nationalism had appeared. Open-ocean navigation was a risky, hit-or-miss operation. Consequently, the Viking feat had little impact on history. Christopher Columbus, on the contrary, had the good fortune to sail at a time when Europe was ready. His "discovery" began the continuous European expansion that led directly to the formation of the United States. Not literally, then, but significantly, Columbus discovered America.

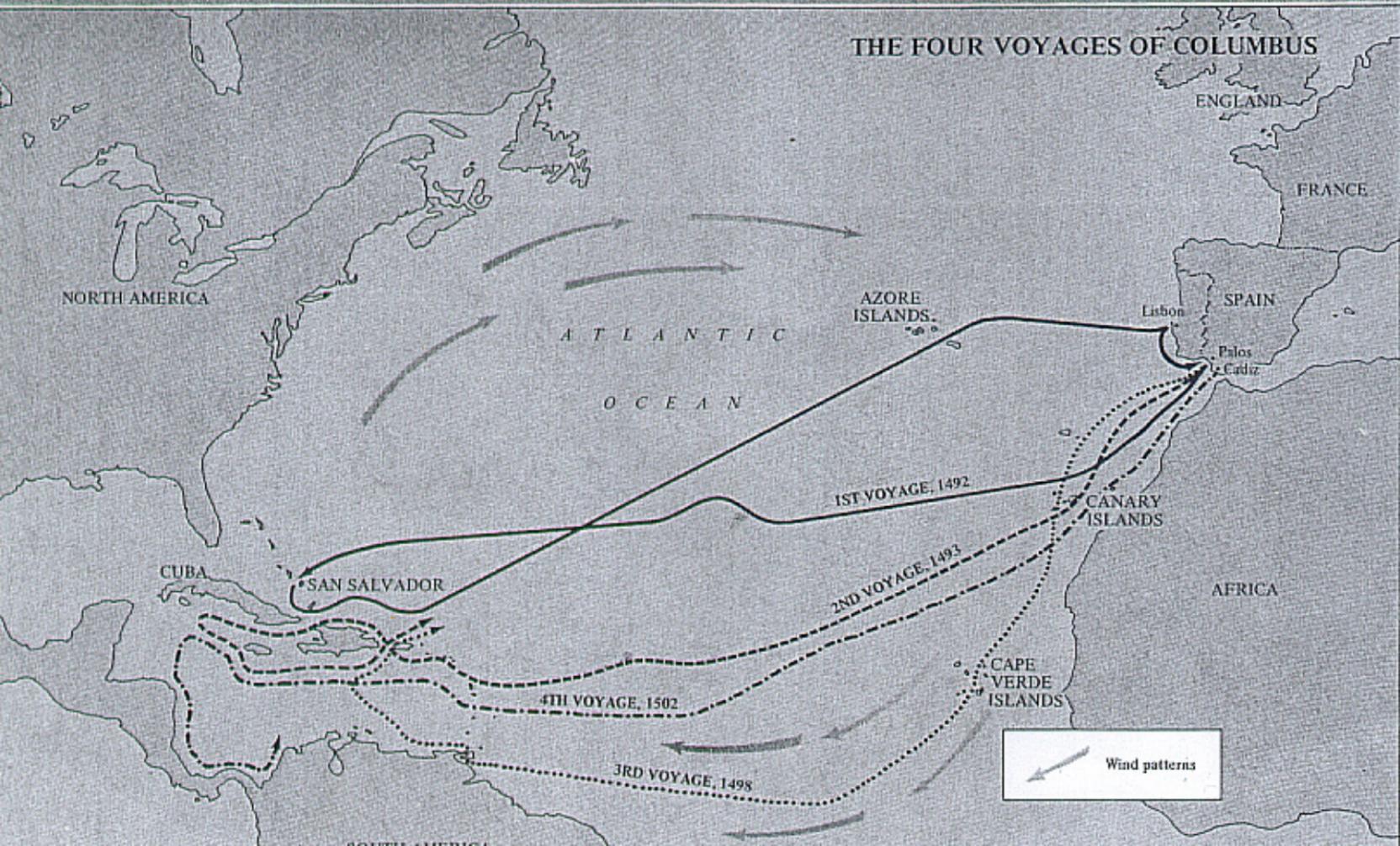
After completing his first round trip to the Caribbean, Columbus could have retired with his laurels, but for a man of his temperament, the first voyage could only be a prelude. Ferdinand and Isabella were similarly inclined. Their Admiral of the Ocean Sea had come to Barcelona and astounded them with his collection of strange fish, wood, and fruit. Columbus spread gold before the monarchs, assuring them that it was but a token of what existed. The Indians Columbus displayed to the court provided additional incentive. On command, they recited the Ave Maria and crossed themselves. In the eyes of fervent Catholics like Ferdinand and Isabella, this was reason enough to continue the western exploration. A whole civilization of heathens seemed to be waiting for conversion to Christianity. And by a Papal Bull of May 4, 1493, which set a Line of Demarcation one hundred leagues west of the Azores, Spain was given exclusive right to exploit and colonize the new lands.

With the stakes so high, Columbus found little difficulty in assembling the men and means to support his return to the Caribbean. On September 25, 1493, seventeen ships and between 1200 and 1500 men left the Spanish port of Cádiz. Once again the ocean crossing caused no problem, but the expedition failed to fulfill expectations. Neither the Asian mainland nor Japan materialized, although the search was much more extensive. The amount of gold was far smaller than Columbus expected. The Indians, moreover, proved as poor subjects for missionary work as the Spaniards proved missionaries. Columbus fought the cannibals of the Leeward Islands, and made them slaves and concubines. The Indians, however, turned the tables at Hispaniola. When Columbus returned to his Navidad colony, he found nothing but bones and charred timbers. Every Spaniard had been killed or carried off into the jungle.

Columbus's fortunes went from bad to worse. He attempted to start another colony, called Isabella, on Hispaniola, but his men suffered from sickness, dissension, and apathy. When they realized that gold could not be picked up on the beaches, they quickly became disenchanted with the New World. Actually, their situation was a symptom of the more general failure of the trading-post colony in the Americas. In wealthy and sophisticated societies like those of India and coastal Africa, Europeans simply set up shop and traded for valuable goods. Amid the comparatively poorer and more primitive people of the Caribbean and North America, however, there was little for which to trade. Europeans would have to *work* for wealth in these places; they would have to invest time, effort, and money before they could expect returns. Columbus unconsciously realized this in one of his official reports. Hispaniola, he declared, "is a wonder, with its hills and mountains, plains and meadows, and a land so rich and fertile for planting and sowing, for raising livestock of all sorts, for building towns and villages." But for over a century neither he nor his followers proved capable of translating this vision into reality. The lure of quick, easy wealth blinded them to the real abundance of the new land.

Troubled by discontent among his men, Columbus had to face the additional problem of full-scale war with the Indians. The missionary ideal broke down completely. Headstrong men, thousands of miles from home, did not respect Ferdinand and Isabella's directive that their new subjects be treated

THE FOUR VOYAGES OF COLUMBUS



gently. Between 1494 and 1496, about a third of the 300,000 natives of Hispaniola were slaughtered, and the remainder enslaved in the gold mines. Columbus implemented draconian measures for working the enslaved Indians, and used torture and execution to punish those who failed to bring in sufficient amounts of gold. The Arawaks, one of the tribes the Spaniards enslaved, resorted to mass suicide and infanticide rather than be worked to death by Columbus's lust for gold. Many other Indians died from the painful complications of smallpox, which they had contracted from the Europeans. Within fifty years of Columbus's landfall only five hundred Indians remained. They, too, were exterminated and replaced as a labor force by enslaved blacks from Africa.

As a colonial governor Columbus proved to be almost a total failure. Yet for a time he retained the confidence of Ferdinand and Isabella. In 1498 and 1502 the Admiral led new expeditions west, but he no longer pioneered. He had shown the way, and now others followed. His authority continued to dwindle, and at one point he was actually arrested and sent back to Spain in chains. Eventually he lost his position as governor.

Even Columbus's own assurance that he had found the edge of Asia began to waver. On his third voyage in 1498 he made the first recorded sighting of the South American continent. At first, he supposed it was another island, but there was disconcerting evidence to the contrary. Far from the coast, Columbus was amazed to find the sea fresh and suitable for drinking. He concluded, correctly, that the flow of a river had temporarily overcome the salinity of the ocean. But what a river! Columbus knew that only large land masses could produce rivers of this size. The experience forced him to admit that this land might be a continent, "another world," as his journal expressed it. But the old dream died hard. Perhaps, Columbus desperately reasoned, he had found a magic island not far from Asia that was none other than the earthly paradise.

Apart from such thoughts, there was little to cheer his declining years. Queen Isabella, whose faith in Columbus had been instrumental in making his first voyage possible, died late in 1504, and the Spanish court became increasingly deaf to the Admiral's pleas for restoration of his former incomes and positions. And then his health failed. Embittered and disappointed, yet still proud, Columbus gave up the struggle on May 20, 1506, in Valladolid, Spain. But the cruelest slight came a few years later. Martin Waldseemüller, a renowned German geographer, drew a map and wrote a book in which he mistakenly attributed the discovery of South America to Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci, a vain and deceitful man who actually followed in Columbus's footsteps. By the time Waldseemüller realized his error, it was too late. Europeans were using "America," not "Columbia," to refer to the entire New World.

Christopher Columbus opened the door for further European discovery and exploration of the Americas. Giovanni Caboto (better known as John Cabot), a Genoese like Columbus, carried England's flag along the northern route of the Vikings to claim Newfoundland for King Henry VII in 1497. Along with a crew of eighteen, Cabot set out from the British port of Bristol and, sailing along the Atlantic coast of North America, may have reached as far south as Maine before returning. A year later Cabot was back, searching for Japan

and the Spice Islands, but finding Delaware and the Chesapeake Bay instead. While Cabot set the foundation for English claims to North America, Francis Drake helped steer England along its way to ruling the seas. A favorite of Henry VIII's successor, Queen Elizabeth I, Drake could boast a long career of seafaring during the late sixteenth century, including slaving, privateering (attacking Spanish gold ships), circumnavigating the globe, and participating in the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588—an event more than symbolic in contributing to Spain's decline as a world power.

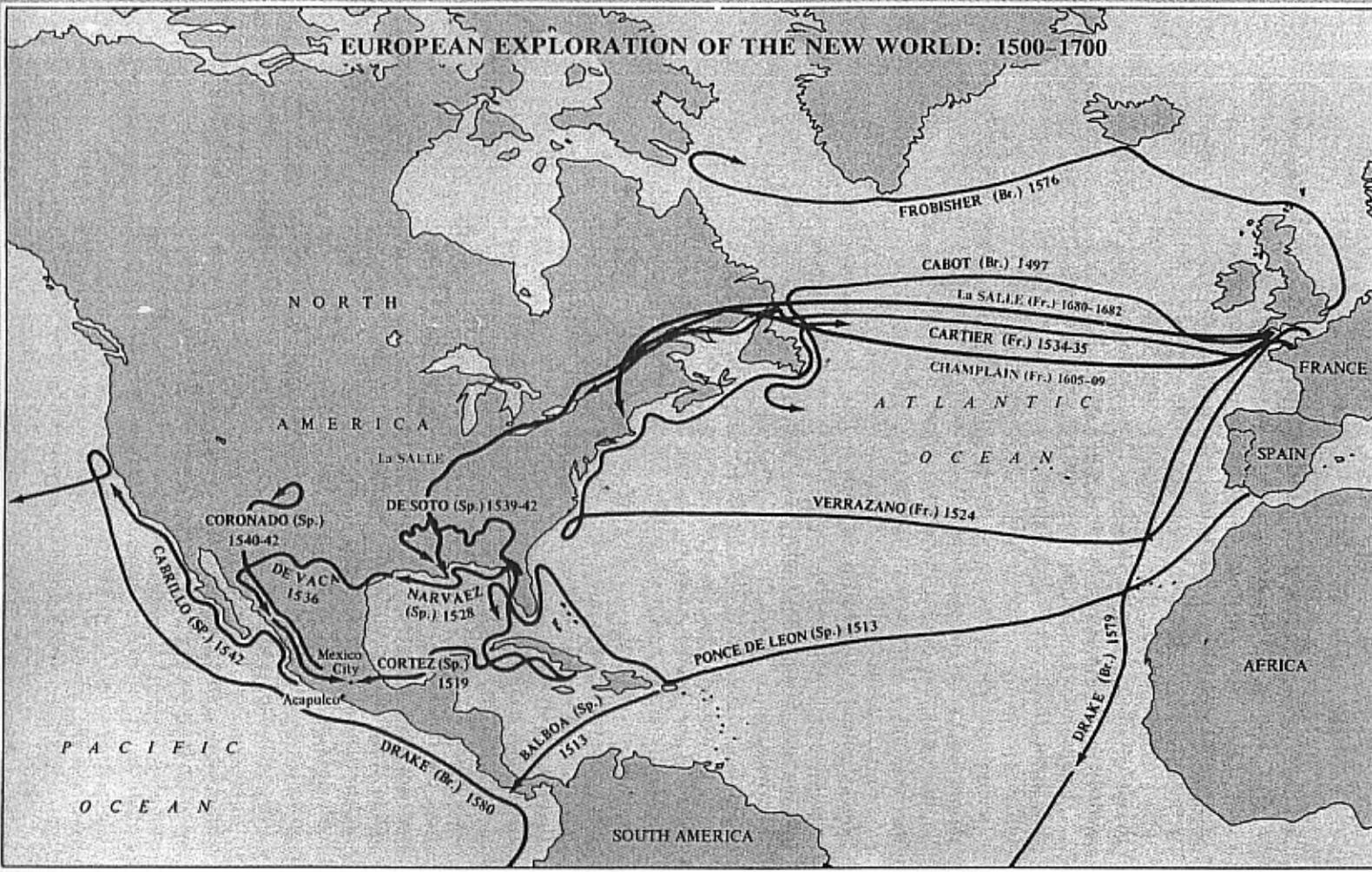
English colonization, however, did not start for almost a century. When it did, in the 1580s, Sir Walter Raleigh learned that the New World could deal lethal doses of the unexpected. His settlement on Roanoke Island off the North Carolina coast met the same fate as Columbus's Navidad. And only relief expeditions and radical reassessment of its purpose saved Jamestown, Virginia, from similar extinction during its "starving time" from 1607 to 1609. Europeans needed time to learn how to pioneer in a wilderness.

French contact with the New World began with fishing expeditions to Newfoundland's Grand Banks as early as 1504, but a formal effort at discovery awaited the appointment by Francis I of Giovanni da Verrazano, another Genoese mariner, as national explorer. In 1524 Verrazano became the first to sail the whole coast of North America from Florida to Newfoundland, but he found no northwest passage to Asia. Jacques Cartier tried again in 1534, leaving from St. Malo and sailing as far as the first rapids on the St. Lawrence River. He solidified the French claim to Canada. As in the Caribbean, the northland spawned rumors of fabulous golden kingdoms that vanished like mist as the explorers penetrated the wilderness. And despite the extensive seventeenth-century expeditions into the St. Lawrence River region by Samuel de Champlain, and Robert Cavalier Sieur de la Salle's exploration of the Mississippi River (both of whom sought gold and a northwest passage to Asia), ultimately the French had to be satisfied with fish, furs, and land.

For the Portuguese, the urge to explore the New World lessened considerably when, in 1498, Vasco da Gama actually reached India after rounding Africa. But the Spanish successors to Columbus continued to search for the elusive passage *through* the Americas. The pace of this quest increased after 1513 when Vasco Nuñez de Balboa struggled across the narrow isthmus of Panama and became the first European to see the Pacific Ocean from the west. The unlucky Columbus had spent the entire winter of 1502–1503 sailing up and down the Panamanian coast, unaware that he was only forty miles away from a clear passage to India.

Despite the failure to find India, Spain lost no time in improving on the opportunities that Columbus had created in the Caribbean and the adjacent mainlands. Juan Ponce de León, a member of Columbus's second expedition, found little except mangrove swamps in Florida in 1513, but Hernando Cortez in Mexico (1519) and Francisco Pizarro in Peru (1531) struck it rich. The exploits of these two conquistadores in many ways typify the history of encounters between the Europeans and Native Americans. Lust for gold and conquest compelled Cortez to lead an expedition with some six hundred soldiers into

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Mexico, the land of the Aztecs. For two years the Spaniards besieged the magnificent Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlán. Fighting was often fierce, but Cortez and his men had time on their side. The Aztecs themselves had conquered many other people in Mexico, and proved to be tyrannical rulers. Cleverly, Cortez turned those he liberated into belligerents against the Aztecs. But even more importantly, the same diseases that had decimated indigenous populations in the Caribbean—smallpox, measles, and diphtheria—also wreaked havoc in Mexico. In 1521 Cortez marched ruthlessly into Tenochtitlán, killing the few who were still healthy enough to resist him and looting the gold-laden Aztec coffers.

Ten years later Francisco Pizarro secured King Charles V's assent to launch a conquest of northwestern South America. Reliable sources had told of a fabulous kingdom on the other side of the Andes Mountains, and Pizarro and his band of one hundred and fifty conquistadores were assured of a percentage of the take if their conquest was successful. The Incas were an incredibly advanced people in art and culture and, through their own military conquests, had forged a huge empire of some 25 million people. Yet they, too, were susceptible to the diseases imported by the Europeans. Moreover, their religious prophecies foretold of the coming of gods who traveled on strange animals. When Pizarro and his bearded and helmeted men arrived on horseback, clad in armor and wielding steel swords and lances, many Incas (like the Aztecs before them) believed they were the gods of prophecy. Pizarro's treachery, however, soon dispelled such beliefs. Murdering the Inca king, Atahuallpa, Pizarro declared himself ruler and began to consolidate power over the vast but disease-ridden empire. Rape and torture accompanied his conquest, and the Incas watched in disbelief as the Spaniards melted down the golden walls of the imperial palace and then loaded the cooled ore onto their ships. Such bonanzas for Spain were unmitigated disasters from the viewpoint of the Aztecs and Incas. As was true of so many Native American-European encounters, the civilizations of the former were annihilated by the greed, violence, and diseases of the latter.

The gold that Cortez and Pizarro stole from the Aztecs and Incas made Spain the foremost power in Europe. It also sustained the New World treasure hunt through a succession of wild goose chases. In 1527–1528, for example, Pánfilo de Narváez led four hundred men through present-day Florida and Georgia and along the Gulf Coast to Texas. Disaster piled upon disaster until only two men remained. They staggered into Mexico City in 1536, after having traveled great distances with Indian tribes. One of these survivors, Cabeza de Vaca, returned with an incredible pack of lies about the Seven Cities of Cibola, where kings bathed in gold dust. The governor of Cuba, Hernando de Soto, could not resist. In 1539 he landed on the Florida coast with six hundred men. In the next four years de Soto, one of Pizarro's conquistadores in Peru, marched north to the Appalachian Mountains, then west through the Mississippi Valley and finally as far as Oklahoma. Depressed over his failure to find the Seven Cities, despised by his men, and stalked by hostile Indians, de Soto died somewhere in the frontier of present-day Arkansas during the winter of 1542.

At the same time, Francisco Vásquez de Coronado sought the mythica

Seven Cities from the west. He traveled north from Mexico into Arizona, discovered the Grand Canyon, and pushed east into Kansas only to return empty-handed in 1542. The accompanying sea voyage by Hernando de Alarcón up the Gulf of California and into the Colorado River was similarly unrewarding. Undaunted, the viceroy of New Spain immediately sent Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo sailing up the California coast past San Francisco Bay. Again, there was no gold but much frustration.

The false expectations of Columbus lived on in men like de Soto, Coronado, and Cabrillo. In spite of their courage and persistence, they failed to see the real potential of the New World. They set their sights fixedly on gold. They did not understand that in their disappointment they walked over and sailed along some of the most fertile land in the world—land capable of sustaining a great civilization. The problem, of course, was that, beginning with Columbus, the Spaniards were conquistadores, not farmers and settlers. Their purpose was the collection of treasure, not the extension of civilization. Even when souls, not gold, were the objective and priests rather than soldier-adventurers the agents, the Spanish proved to be inept colonizers. Their idea of a settlement was a virtual prison that cruelly forced both labor and religion down the throats of bewildered Indians. The primary concern of Spain in the Americas was, like France in its preoccupation with furs, a triumphant return to the Old World, not a permanent place in the New. The ultimate cost of such conduct was the loss of North America to the English latecomers who, after a few false starts, learned to accept the land for what it was. Christopher Columbus and his Spanish successors never even tried. Their dreams stood in the way, but their acts nonetheless paved the way for the settlement of America.

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*Available in paperback.