

Searching for China, Discovering America^{*}

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Trade between China and Europe was established before the Christian era, occurring along the Silk Road since the Han Dynasty (221-206 BC). Land routes through Central Asia between Chang An and Constantinople and sea routes across the Mediterranean and Red Seas took Chinese spices, tea, porcelain, silk, paper and other exotic items to the West. In general, China was the seller in this trade, which the Chinese characterized as a tributary system, supplying quality products of a highly developed culture unavailable in the Europe of that day. But the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 made the land route more difficult, precarious and expensive, and ways were sought to reach China by sea.

Coincidentally, by the mid-fifteenth century during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), tumultuous changes were occurring in China that would reverberate throughout the world. As the largest economy in the world with a population of over one hundred million people—more than Europe's combined populations—China was also the first culture to employ paper currency. However, it was not a stable financial system. Based on the woodblock printing process, Chinese paper currency was easily counterfeited, which led to repeated devaluations and inflationary spirals despite vigorous and extreme measures to maintain stability.

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During the last of many failed attempts to establish a sustainable paper currency system, there occurred a gradual shift to silver as a medium of exchange. As the value of the paper currency depreciated and inflation roared once again, China's large merchant class increasingly demanded payment in specie, principally in silver. Reluctantly, in 1423, the imperial throne decided to consolidate multiple taxes into one, called the "single whip" or "single lash" tax.

Within a few years, by the middle of the century, the emperor decided to shift entirely to a silver-based monetary system. Suddenly, China had turned from being a seller of goods to the world to a buyer of silver from it, because China's domestic silver production could not come close to satisfying domestic demand. The silverization of the Chinese economy would have far-reaching consequences not only for China, but also for the world, as China became a magnet for the metal. But where would the silver come from, and how would it be transported to the Middle Kingdom?

Word of the monetary transformation spread through China's tributary system to all of Asia, and by caravan along the Silk Road to Europe. No doubt the famous admiral, Zheng Ho, during his seven voyages across the southern oceans to East Africa and places between (1403-1433) was but one of many traders who carried the news of China's growing demand for silver, and her willingness to pay handsomely to get it. The decision to import silver galvanized potential sellers the world over into the search for new routes to China, as well as for the precious metal, because the arbitrage opportunities for profit and wealth accumulation were limitless. Hypothetically, as Giraldez described it, given the divergent exchange ratio between gold and silver,

[A merchant] could use an ounce of gold to buy, say, eleven ounces of silver in Amsterdam, transport the silver to China and exchange the eleven ounces there for about two ounces of gold. The two ounces of gold could be brought back to Europe and exchanged for twenty-two ounces of silver, which

could again be transported back to China where its value was doubled again. This process of “arbitrage” would continue until China’s silver stock rose sufficiently to lower its value there to the value prevailing in the rest of the world.¹

In other words, as silver flowed into China, gold and other products flowed out. It would in fact take over a century for this process of equilibration to work itself out and for gold and silver ratios to converge in Europe and China and effectively minimize arbitrage opportunities. But until then, it would be the prospect of tremendous arbitrage profits that drove the search for gold and silver in Europe, the Orient, and the Americas, triggering a price revolution and linking together regional economies into a world economy, certainly as far as trade in precious metals was concerned.

Adam Smith, in *Wealth of Nations*, observed the continuing power of the arbitrage effect at the end of the eighteenth century. Silver, he said,

continues to be extremely advantageous to carry from Europe to India. There is scarce any commodity which brings a better price there, or which, in proportion to the quantity of labour and commodities which it costs in Europe, will purchase or command a greater quantity of labour and commodities in India. It is more advantageous, too, to carry silver thither than gold, because in China...the proportion between fine silver and find gold is but as ten, or at most as twelve, to one; whereas in Europe it is as fourteen or fifteen to one. In China, and the greater part of the other markets of India, ten, or at most twelve, ounces of silver will purchase an ounce of gold; in Europe it requires from fourteen to fifteen ounces. In the cargoes, therefore, of the greater art of

¹ A. Giraldez Rivero, “Born With a Silver Spoon: China, American Silver and Global Markets During the Early Modern Period,” PhD Diss., (University of Amsterdam, 1999), 57.

European ships which sail to India [and China], silver has generally been one of the most valuable articles.... The silver of the new continent seems in this manner to be one of the principal commodities by which the commerce between the two extremities of the old one is carried on, and it is by means of it, in a great measures, that those distant parts of the world are connected with one another.²

Spain—Silver, Gold, and Empire

As China's demand for silver grew, multiple supply sources soon emerged, including Hungary and Japan, but the first response came from Spain.³ Europeans had known of China since the days of Marco Polo's voyages in the late thirteenth century, and travel along the caravan trade route across Central Asia and the Mediterranean was common. But European interest in the China trade leaped on the news of China's new demand for silver. The Chinese were paying double the price for silver compared to the going rate in Europe. The arbitrage possibility inspired visions of great wealth and power—if only the opportunity could be accessed. Therein lay a problem. By the fifteenth century the Ottomans had taken control of the land route to China, and their fees, added to those of the Venetians commanding the Mediterranean segment of the route, made transit expensive.

Was there a shorter route by sea? The Portuguese thought so. Their intrepid seamen had already explored the west coast of Africa, establishing trading posts and settlements. They believed that once they rounded the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of the continent, the way would be open to the Orient.

² Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1776), chapter 11.

³ Hungary was an important source of silver mining at this time, but its subjection to Ottoman domination limited its role in the emerging global silver market. Japan also became a major silver producer, a subject that will be taken up in a later chapter.

A young but experienced Genoese seaman and navigator named Christopher Columbus had another idea. Based on his own studies and the charts and records of his deceased father-in-law, who was also a mapmaker and navigator, Columbus advanced the idea of going directly west, instead of south, to reach China more quickly.⁴

In 1484, Columbus presented his idea to King John II of Portugal, who set up a commission to study it. The king's commission rejected Columbus' proposal on logistical grounds, believing that the distances to China were greater than he claimed and that therefore there would be no place to resupply his ships en route. The fact that the king's seamen were succeeding in their voyages sailing along the African coast no doubt was a factor in his decision. The king's rejection combined with the death of his wife, Felipa, left Columbus dejected and despondent, prompting his decision to move to Spain with his five-year-old son Diego the following year.

Gaining an audience in May 1486 with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, co-rulers of Castile, Columbus proposed his shortcut to China once again, and once again a king's maritime commission considered and rejected it. But Ferdinand and Isabella believed Columbus' proposal had merit, granting him a retainer and a place at court. They were heavily engaged in a long war to expel the Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula and decided to postpone consideration of other projects until the war was over. In the meantime, Columbus accepted an invitation of King John II to return to Portugal, which he did in 1488. Unfortunately for Columbus, the move came at a most inopportune time.

In December 1488, in a major development, Portuguese explorer Bartholomew Diaz returned from his successful circumnavigation of the Cape of Good Hope around the southern tip of Africa. It meant that the Portuguese had found a sea route to India

⁴ Arnold K. Garr, "Years in Portugal: Emergence of the Grand Idea," *Christopher Columbus: A Latter Day Saint Perspective* (Provo: BYU Press, 1992) 19-28.

and beyond to the Orient. It also meant that the King now lost interest in Columbus' idea of sailing west. With little hope of finding a sponsor among the Portuguese, who were committed to the southern approach, Columbus repaired once again to Spain. At the same time, he sent his brother Bartholomew to both London and Paris to explore the possibilities there. English King Henry VII showed no interest, but King Charles VIII of France offered him the job of court mapmaker, which he accepted.⁵

Back in Spain once again in 1490, Columbus made yet another pitch for his idea to sail west to China and once again was rejected by the royal commission. This time, however, the king and queen privately advised him to be prepared to present his plan again once the war with the Muslims was over, which appeared imminent. Unfortunately the battle for Granada, which would decide the outcome, dragged on; and Columbus, losing patience, decided to join his brother in Paris and try his luck at the court of Charles VIII. As luck would have it, he was persuaded at the last moment to make one last presentation to Ferdinand and Isabella.

As the king's commission was considering his proposal, on January 2, 1492, Spain defeated the Muslims at Granada, completing the *Reconquista* and greatly strengthening a newly unified Spain. Ferdinand and Isabella were now favorably disposed to reconsider Columbus' plan, but the admiral overreached. He demanded that, if successful, he be awarded hereditary titles and governorship over all lands discovered in addition to a ten percent finder's fee of all wealth found. Ferdinand and Isabella thought his terms "too extravagant," and declined his proposal. Rejected again, Columbus decided once and for all to leave Spain, join his brother in France and try there.

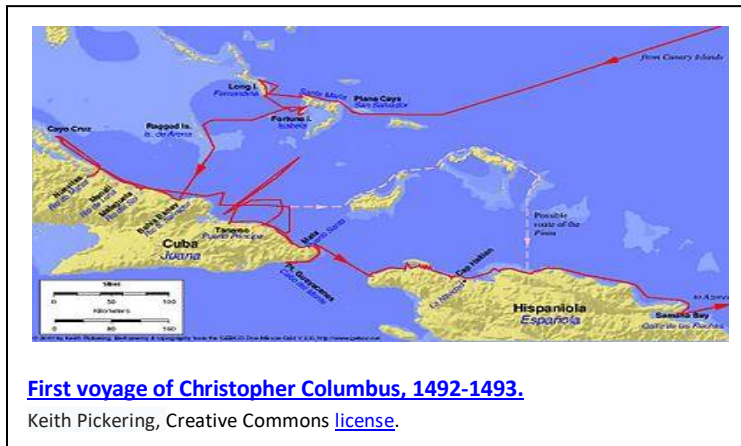
On his way to France, Columbus stopped at Cordoba, and while there, events at court in Santa Fe led to a reversal of fortune. Luis de Santangel, financial adviser to the crown, persuaded the queen to change her mind. He argued that Columbus' plan offered little risk

⁵ Garr, "Years in Spain: Columbus Finds a Sponsor," Ibid, 29-37.

and great potential reward in terms of imperial glory, religious evangelism, territorial acquisition and national wealth. In the end, after eight years of almost continual frustration and rejection, Columbus received support for his expedition from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, who granted everything he demanded—contingent, of course, upon the success of his mission.⁶

Christopher Columbus and the Search for Gold and Cathay

With three ships manned by eighty-seven men, Columbus set off from Palos, Spain on August 3, 1492. Instead of sailing due west to the Azores, which were under Portuguese control, he went south to the Canary Islands off the northwest coast of Africa. After replenishing provisions, he headed west on September 6, under favorable northeast trade winds, arriving off the coast of the Bahamas on October 12.



Columbus thought—and would consistently but erroneously maintain—that he had reached China, but of course he had not. Upon his arrival, the natives all thought he had come from heaven, as their beliefs predicted would occur, and therefore initially treated him with

⁶ “Columbus, Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand in Cordoba: The Real Connection,” *Infocordoba.com*, updated March 1, 2013.

great deference. Moving on, he landed on the southeast coast of Cuba, which he again thought was China, or at least, Japan. Sailing further he landed on Haiti, which he christened *La Isla Española* (*Insula Hispana* in Latin; subsequently the name was Latinized as *Hispaniola*), and where he at last obtained some gold trinkets but lost one of his ships. Gold and other riches, after all, were what he was after.

After three months exploring the islands, but never actually setting foot on the continent of North America, Columbus departed for Spain on January 16, 1493, leaving behind forty of his men to hold the redoubt they had built, called *La Navidad*. The return voyage turned into a nightmare, as his ships were battered by a severe winter storm in mid-February that forced him to seek safe harbor on the small island of Santa Maria in the Azores. However, unfriendly Portuguese authorities temporarily detained him and his men for ten days (February 18-28) before he was permitted to proceed.⁷ Upon approaching the Spanish coast he was beset by yet a second storm that forced him to put in at Lisbon, Portugal. After being “interviewed” by King John II, Columbus straggled back to his point of departure at Palos, Spain, on March 15.

Columbus had not brought back sufficient bounty to pay for the cost of his expedition, but the news of his voyage electrified the courts of Europe. The significance of his undertaking lay not in his failure to reach China, but in its promise of vast new lands to be discovered and riches to be obtained. In his report to the King and Queen, Columbus continued to assert that he had discovered the shortcut to China, and told of being informed of “a greater abundance of gold” on islands that he had not visited. He maintained that if his sovereigns would support another expedition “I will give them as

⁷ Rebecca Catz, “Columbus in the Azores,” *Portuguese Studies*, 6 (1990), 17–23.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41104900>

much gold as they have need of, and in addition spices, cotton and mastic...and as much aloes-wood, and as many heathen slaves as their majesties may choose to demand.”⁸

News of Columbus’ discoveries was, perhaps, of greatest concern to King John II of Portugal. No doubt alerted in advance as the result of his earlier interview with Columbus, the king declared that according to the 1484 Papal Bull of Pope Sixtus IV, which granted to Portugal all of the lands south of the Cape Verde Islands, Columbus’ discovery was Portugal’s. Ferdinand and Isabella countered his claim with an appeal to the new Pope, the Spanish-born Alexander VI, whom they had helped gain the papacy. Pope Alexander obliged, establishing a demarcation line that ruled in favor of Columbus, thus legitimizing Spain’s claim.

Armed with competing Papal Bulls, the sovereigns decided to compromise. The Treaty of Tordesillas, June 7, 1494, divided the unknown world between them. Portugal was awarded rights to all yet undiscovered territory east of a longitudinal line roughly 1,185 miles west of the Cape Verde Islands, and Spain was awarded rights to all yet undiscovered territory west of it. This gave Portugal claim to the eastern portion of Brazil that juts into the Atlantic. Despite the fact that no other country ever recognized the treaty, it served to roughly denote the boundaries of future exploration by the two powers.⁹

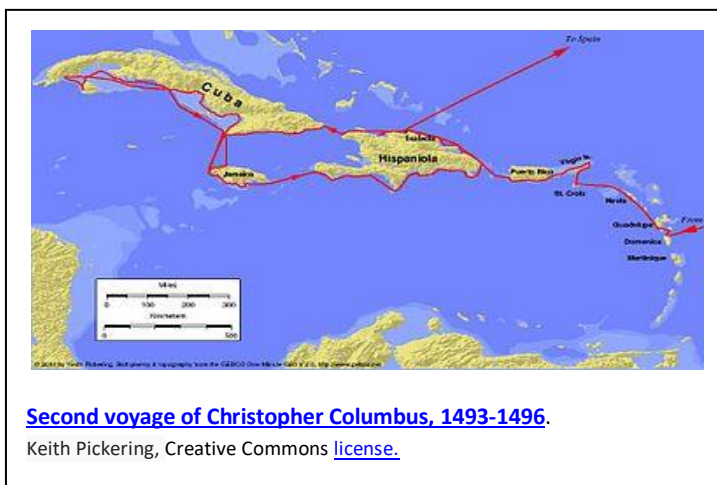
Meanwhile, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella were persuaded by Columbus’ promises and agreed to support a larger expedition. Their objectives were to establish a permanent settlement in the “new world,” use it as a base from which to find China, and to search for gold and silver to finance their dreams of empire. “Gold

⁸ “Columbus reports on his first voyage, 1493,” *History Now*, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, www.gilderlehrman.org.

⁹ “Treaty of Tordesillas,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com, updated December 10, 2018.

fever” had consumed Spain, so there was no dearth of investors to fund Columbus’ second trip. This expedition would be nearly six times the size of the first, with seventeen ships and over fourteen times the number of passengers and crew. Twelve hundred adventurers—soldiers of fortune, farmers, carpenters and other workmen—had signed on for the prospect of enrichment, including priests determined to convert the heathens. They brought with them horses, sheep, cattle, dogs, and various food plants they hoped to cultivate on the islands. They also brought disease.

Columbus set out on his second voyage to America on September 24, 1493, arriving first at the island he named *Dominica*, which lay roughly at the mid-point of the West Indies island chain, on November 3. He sailed north and west from there passing through the Virgin Islands and reaching Puerto Rico on November 19. Three days later he arrived at Hispaniola (Haiti), the island he had discovered on his first trip. Seeking the forty men he had left to maintain the settlement at La Navidad, he found that they had all been killed and the settlement burned to the ground. Upon investigation he learned that the settlers had begun seizing native women, prompting outraged natives to rise up against them in revenge.



Columbus decided to establish a new settlement on the north coast where he had found some gold nuggets on his first trip. He named this place *La Isabella*. Exploring inland and finding some gold mines, he also established a fort in the interior. Conditions were difficult and many of the settlers perished from an undetermined sickness. Farming was unsuccessful as crops withered. Many settlers tried to barter with the natives for gold, but pickings were slim, and they became restive. Columbus sought to use force to maintain order against settlers and natives alike, including the use of fierce dogs that he had brought with him, but these tactics only inflamed sentiment against him.¹⁰ Finally, on February 2, 1494, he sent twelve of his ships back to Spain with several hundred disgruntled settlers who had endured enough.

When the ships arrived at Cadiz on March 9, the settlers disembarked along with some thirty thousand pesos worth of gold dust obtained from the mines and from panning the rivers. Despite its paucity, it was enough to arouse ideas of a gold rush to the Indies. Complaints about Columbus' governorship by those who had returned, however, prompted Ferdinand and Isabella to send the papal legate Bernard Buyl to the colony "to check on Columbus." Buyl's report to Ferdinand and Isabella recounted "how Columbus brutalized the natives, how the colony was almost in a state of anarchy, and how the island did not seem to be anywhere near India."¹¹

Meanwhile, unaware of the growing concerns of the throne, on April 24, 1494, Columbus set out from Española (Haiti) on an exploratory trip, searching for China. Instead, he rediscovered Cuba. For the next four months he explored it and nearby islands, returning

¹⁰ John and Jeannette Varner, *Dogs of the Conquest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 4.

¹¹ Mary Ames Mitchell, "1493—Christopher Columbus' Second Voyage," *Crossing The Ocean Sea*, crossingtheoceansea.com.

to Española on August 20. Again, mistakenly, he believed that Cuba was a peninsula of China. What he found upon his return to Española was that conditions had deteriorated. Nine months had passed and the settlers who had decided to stay were greatly disillusioned. Worse, there was little prospect of finding enough gold to repay the investors who had funded his expedition.

Desperate to find gold, Columbus' first scheme was to set up a tribute system whereby native men were coerced to deliver a specific quota of gold and silver every three months or face severe punishment. That only drove natives away. Those who did not die from the diseases brought by the Spanish, especially smallpox against which they had no immunity, simply vanished into the forests, or fled the islands entirely. Columbus enslaved those who remained, forcing them to labor in the mines and farms. He employed his superior weapons power and war dogs to attack and subdue the natives in the surrounding islands, among them *Caribes* who were said to be cannibals. His brutal policies were partly responsible for the population decline that began in the islands. Disease was the other.

Early in 1495 Columbus hit upon a second scheme whereby he thought he could obtain funds to repay his investors—the slave trade. He knew that the Portuguese had been engaged in a profitable slave trade in Africa and that some of the native tribes he had encountered in the islands enslaved their enemies. He sent a letter to the king and queen aboard one of the ships that periodically returned to Spain proposing that he send natives back to Europe as slaves. Columbus did not wait for an answer, seizing some 1,600 natives and shipping 560 to Spain. Two hundred perished en route, many others were ill by the time they arrived.

Columbus had not shipped these slaves to the king and queen, but to one of his investors, the Florentine venture capitalist Gianatto Berardi, who was in the African slave trade. Ferdinand and Isabella were outraged when they learned that Berardi was attempting to auction off slaves obtained from Columbus. Although

they had sent Columbus a reply rejecting his proposal, he had pre-empted them. They had no intention of following in the footsteps of the Portuguese slavers, even though they had enslaved Muslims captured in battle. As Catholics, they were opposed to enslavement, so they released most, sent those who wished back to the islands, and used some to work in galleys. As long as Isabella was alive the throne refused to countenance the slave trade. That would change after her death when the population decline of the indigenous Indians prompted a reversal and Ferdinand authorized the shipment of slaves to the Indies.

Disappointment with Columbus and a Change of Plan

What Ferdinand and Isabella learned about Columbus' governorship and explorations of the islands convinced them that he had exaggerated about the "riches of the Indies." His promises had been empty. There was no discovery of China, no huge deposits of gold, and no spices or other valuable objects, only slaves. They decided to open the field of exploration to all comers, while taking back some of the promises they made to Columbus. On April 10, the monarchs issued new rules for colonization of the Indies. Under the so-called *New Permissions*, Columbus' writ was now limited to Española. Everywhere else was open for exploration and claim by any Spanish subject, as long as they acted in the name of Spain. Henceforth, new expeditions would require the crown's formal assent, and those that received it would be supported for a full year. The conquistadors were promised one third of the proceeds from their booty and ninety percent of the goods seized. They would be free from taxes although the crown would expect to receive its "royal fifth."¹²

When Columbus learned of the crown's decision to change policy, he decided to return to Spain. However, in the islands the hurricane season of 1495 wreaked havoc with Columbus' ships as well

¹² Ibid.

as others that had come as part of the new policy, delaying his return. Constructing a new ship from the debris of sunken craft, Columbus set off for Spain on March 10, 1496 with over two hundred unhappy colonists to determine his fate, arriving in Cadiz on June 11. Although it would take over a year for Columbus to clear his name and get back in the good graces of Ferdinand and Isabella, it was apparent that his success in reaching new lands had increased the pace of exploration.

Zuan Chabotto, or John Cabot as we have come to know him, was a Venetian who persuaded England's Henry VII to fund an expedition to find a faster way to China along the North Atlantic route. His first voyage was aborted after he reached Iceland in 1496, but his second was more successful, reaching Newfoundland and Nova Scotia in the summer of 1497. He, too, thought he had discovered the shortcut to China even though the terrain he observed did not match reports about Cathay. Cabot claimed these lands for England and Venice, returning to Bristol in the summer of 1497. Cabot's voyages were England's first forays into the exploration of the New World, but there would be over a hundred years' hiatus before permanent English settlements were founded in North America.

The summer of 1497 saw two more departures. Cabot set out on his third voyage and the Portuguese Vasco de Gama also left on his search for India. His voyage would take over two years to complete, but as far as Ferdinand and Isabella were concerned, pressure was building to continue efforts to find the shortcut to China. Relenting, they once again turned to their proven explorer, the Admiral of the Seas. Two additional factors persuaded them to support Columbus' third trip. These were rumors by some of those who had returned of large gold mines on Española and Portuguese reports that indicated a large continent lay further to the south of the Indies and west of the Cape Verdes. Could it be the fabled Cathay?

Ferdinand and Isabella commanded Columbus to ameliorate his rule of the island by freeing the enslaved natives and attempting to convert them, instead. He was also directed to relocate his settlement

closer to where the gold mines were reportedly located on the south side of the island. (The new settlement would be Santo Domingo, which would shortly become a major portal for entry into the New World.) Most of all, his mission was to look south to determine what was there.

Departing with six ships at the end of May 1498, he reached the Canary Islands on June 19 where he resupplied his ships. Upon departure he divided his flotilla, sending his brother Bartholomew with three ships directly west to Española and sailing the other three southward, to where he thought the rumored continent might be. Columbus found South America, but did not realize it. His ships reached Trinidad, off the northeast coast of South America, and identified the mouth of the Orinoco River before heading to Española in August. As before, however, he misperceived where he had gone, professing to believe that what he had explored had been the coast of India.¹³



[Third voyage of Christopher Columbus, 1498-1500.](#)

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Arriving at Española, Columbus found the colony up in arms against his brother Bartholomew. To restore some semblance of order

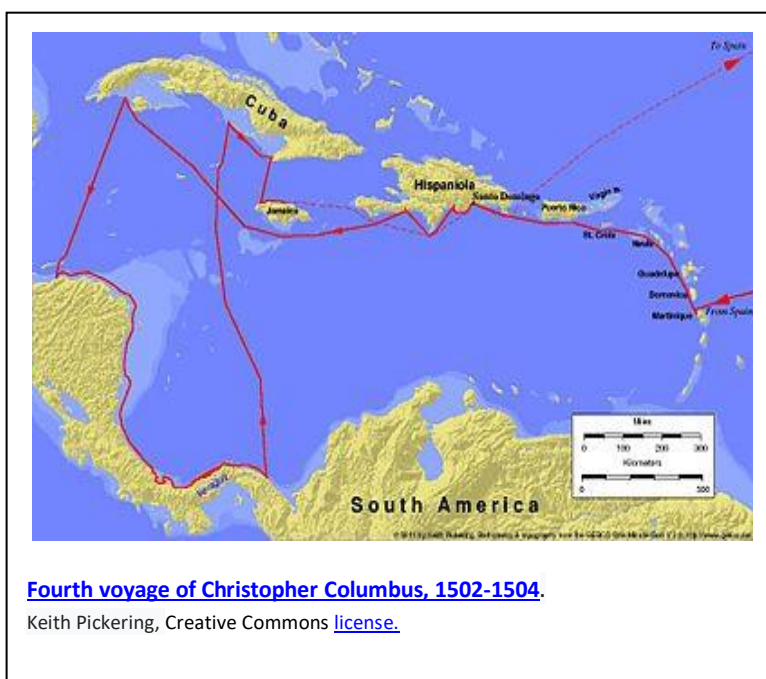
¹³ "Christopher Columbus' Third Voyage," Ibid.

he employed harsh measures, executing by hanging the leading rebels and imprisoning others, but animus continued to fester. It would take two years to achieve order, though with lasting resentment. Unable to restore harmony, Columbus requested that Ferdinand and Isabella send a judge to reestablish order. They sent a commissioner, Don Francisco de Bobadilla. When he arrived at Santo Domingo in August 1500, he quickly removed Columbus and his people from power, put them in chains, and sent them back to Spain for trial. In Spain, the admiral was quickly exonerated and compensated for his ordeal but remained under a cloud for several months. It was apparent to Spanish officials that Columbus was a great navigator, but a poor administrator.

Meanwhile, more was being learned about the vast landmass across the Atlantic as Ferdinand and Isabella sent expeditions far and wide. Seamen explored and mapped as far south as the Rio de la Plata in present-day Argentina and as far north as Nova Scotia. Also, Vasco de Gama had returned in the fall of 1499 having reached the west coast of India. It seemed that the dream of bypassing the Turkish grip on the Silk Road to China was in sight—and the Portuguese had done it. All this galvanized Ferdinand and Isabella to make one last effort to discover China—and Columbus was once again called upon to give it a try. The monarchs agreed to finance a fourth voyage, making it clear that their interest was not in further colonization of the Indies, but in finding the way to China and in the acquisition of wealth—gold, silver, spices—to finance their budding empire. Indeed, they forbade him to visit his old island home of Española, directing him to search for the Strait of Malacca, which was understood to be the gateway to China and Japan.

Columbus left Cadiz on his fourth voyage with four ships and 140 men at the end of the first week of May 1502, reaching the Indies at the end of June. During the sea passage he discovered that one of his ships had become damaged. Although commanded not to go to Española where the settlement's feelings were still strong against him, Columbus decided to put in to Santo Domingo anyway to acquire

another ship. But the new governor, Nicolás de Ovando, denied him entry, forcing Columbus to drop anchor in a secluded nearby cove. The altercation turned out to be fortuitous because the first of several hurricanes that seemed to dog Columbus hit Santo Domingo destroying nearly all of the treasure ships that had just set out for Spain. Columbus' ships survived the storm with but moderate damage.¹⁴



Fourth voyage of Christopher Columbus, 1502-1504.

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Leaving the island, Columbus sailed across the Caribbean, reaching landfall off present-day Honduras at the end of July. He spent the next two months working his way down the coast to present-day Panama. Although beset by storms and hostile, as well as some

¹⁴ Keith A. Pickering, "The Fourth Voyage of Columbus," The Columbus Navigation Homepage, <http://columbuslandfall.com/ccnav/index.shtml>

friendly, natives, including perhaps some of the Maya tribe, this part of his voyage was truly one of discovery. He found that the natives possessed and were willing to trade away an abundance of gold, and he learned from them that a short distance across the isthmus lay a vast ocean.¹⁵ (This information reinforced what he had learned from fellow Spanish explorer Rodrigo de Bastidas who had discovered Panama a year earlier.)

It was now the New Year, 1503, and Columbus decided to establish a base on the north coast of Panama at the mouth of the Belen River. He sought to use the fort as his headquarters as he searched the area for gold and the south coast. By early April the gold had petered out and he decided to return to Spain with the good news—even though he had not actually reached the Pacific coast. At this point Indians mounted a powerful attack on his fort, which he barely was able to fend off, losing a ship in the process. Columbus abandoned the fort and, cramming his men aboard the remaining three ships, started for home.¹⁶

No sooner had he set out than he realized his ships were badly weakened by shipworms, the wood-eating mollusks that were the bane of all mariners. In fact, he had to abandon one ship almost immediately, as it was no longer seaworthy. Now with only two ships, overloaded with crew and bounty, Columbus decided to head for Santo Domingo for repairs. He never made it. Another storm hit off Cuba and he was forced to beach his sinking ships on Jamaica, an island that was as yet unsettled by the Spanish. Landing on June 25, 1503, Columbus and his men would be stranded on Jamaica for an entire year, even though two of his men, with help from local Indians, managed to sail a reinforced canoe fitted with a sail to Santo Domingo for help. Governor Ovando, however, no friend of Columbus as we have seen, refused to send a rescue ship. It would not be until mid-June, 1504 that Columbus' men were able to charter a sloop to rescue

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

the marooned expedition. He returned home to Cadiz on November 7, 1504, completing his last voyage.¹⁷

Columbus had stumbled his way into the new world, an epic achievement based on completely false premises, fervently believing with each voyage that he was only a step away from China. He never reached China, or Japan, or the Malacca Straits, but he did establish despite all his denials that a vast, new unexplored land existed between Europe and Asia. His exploits over a dozen years opened the floodgates to other European adventurers who dared to explore the New World, which would be named after one of them—Amerigo Vespucci—in 1507, a year after Columbus passed away. Columbus enjoyed the legacy of discovery, but it would be his compatriots, whom he inspired, who would establish the financial basis of Spain's empire.¹⁸

Death of Isabella and Dawn of Ferdinand's Machiavellianism

Christopher Columbus' return to Spain had come less than three weeks before the death of his beloved queen Isabella, November 24, 1504. Her death would mark a major turn in Ferdinand's approach to foreign affairs once issues of succession had been surmounted. In July 1505, Ferdinand struck an alliance with France by marrying Germaine de Foix, niece of Louis XII. Two years later when named Regent to his six-year-old grandson Charles, the future Charles V, Ferdinand's plans to expand the empire became more Machiavellian. Indeed, Machiavelli's *Prince* was said to have been modeled after him. He built a coalition with France, Pope Julius II, and the Holy Roman Emperor Maximillian to defeat the Republic of Venice in 1508. Two years later, however, he turned against France,

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ For a concise account of Columbus' misunderstandings, see Edmund S. Morgan, "Columbus' Confusion About the New World," *Smithsonian Magazine* (online), October 2009, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/columbus-confusion-about-the-new-world-140132422/>

allying with the pope, the emperor, and Henry VIII to seize the duchy of Navarre on the northwest border between Spain and France.

It soon became apparent to Ferdinand that sustaining armies in combat required more wealth than he had at his disposal. His need for greater wealth to fund his quest for empire soon turned his attention to the Indies. As the king noted the steady increase in gold being imported from the islands, he directed further exploration of the mainland. (Between 1503 and 1505 nearly half a million pesos had been imported and between 1505 and 1510 the figure nearly doubled, but there were clear signs that they were reaching the limits of what more could be extracted.)¹⁹ On July 25, 1511, Ferdinand exhorted his conquistadors: “get gold, humanely, if you can, but at all hazards, get gold.”²⁰ He would not live to see his charge fulfilled, dying January 23, 1516, but his successors would get gold, in full measure, and not by any means humanely.

In other words, Ferdinand shifted emphasis from a search for a shortcut to China to a search for gold and other wealth in the New World that would support his ambitious dreams for empire in Europe. Yet, Spanish discovery and conquest was not an orderly process. In fact, much the reverse was true. In 1508 King Ferdinand had put in place an administrative structure for exploration of the mainland beyond the islands which he called *Tierra Firme*, or what would be referred to as the Spanish Main(land). The people put in charge, however, were venal officials with connections to the crown more interested in consolidating their hold on power than exploring new territories. Much like the experience of Columbus, for all three of the conquistadors who became renowned figures in Spanish history—Vasco Nunez de Balboa, Hernan Cortez, and Francisco Pizarro—

¹⁹ Hugh Thomas, *Rivers of Gold: The Rise of the Spanish Empire From Columbus to Magellan* (New York: Random House, 2003), 291.

²⁰ Jade Davenport, “Spanish Conquistadors and the Looting of Mexican, Peruvian Gold Treasures,” *Mining Weekly*, September 7, 2012. The author estimates that the Spanish extracted an average of one ton of gold a year from the islands from 1503 to 1530.

exploration and discovery came in spite of rather than because of the king's men in the Indies.

The Triumph and Tragedy of Vasco Nunez de Balboa

During his ten years on the Panamanian isthmus from 1509 to 1519, Balboa rose through the ranks from stowaway to governor of the province of Panama, part of present-day Panama, based on his fighting and leadership skills. He would forever be remembered as the discoverer of the Pacific. His emergence began in a most unassuming manner, in the summer of 1510 as he fled debt collectors by stowing away aboard a ship captained by Martin Enciso, partner of Alonso de Ojeda. The ship was bound with supplies for San Sebastian, a newly settled colony on the Gulf of Urabá in Nueva Andalucía (a Spanish governate that included the northern coastlines of present-day Colombia and Venezuela). When Balboa emerged in mid-voyage from a large barrel in which he had hid, Enciso at first thought to drop him off on a deserted island but was persuaded to allow him to stay. The crew would refer to him as *el hombre del casco*, the man from the barrel.²¹

On entering the Gulf of Urabá, Enciso encountered an outbound ship of settlers, led by Francisco Pizarro, who had decided to abandon San Sebastian and return to Santo Domingo, Española. Undeterred, Enciso proceeded to San Sebastian; but upon arriving and seeing that hostile Indians had destroyed the settlement, he was persuaded by Balboa to relocate to the other side of the Gulf. There they established the settlement of *Santa Maria de la Antigua del Darien*, or simply, Darien.

After establishing Darien, a dispute arose over Enciso's leadership. Enciso sought to commandeer the lion's share of all gold accumulated by the settlers. Led by Balboa, the settlers overthrew Enciso and elected Balboa and Martin Samudio as joint mayors of

²¹ Charles Anderson, *Old Panama and Castilla Del Oro: A Narrative History* (Boston: Page Co, 1914), 158.

Darien. They then put Enciso on trial, charging him with illegal usurpation of power. He was found guilty and placed in irons. Later, Balboa would exile him to Spain. For the next three years, the settlement thrived under Balboa's leadership. Ably supported by Francisco Pizarro, he explored surrounding territory, defeating hostile Indian tribes, befriendng others, but also coming across indications of gold among the tribesman. Most important, Balboa learned from them of a land of great wealth across the Southern Sea where gold was so plentiful it was used as tableware.

Following demonstrable success at Darien, Balboa attempted to legitimize his dubious rise to leadership, petitioning the king to authorize, if not also finance, further exploration. He decided to send Enciso back to Spain in exile, accompanied by two of his own supporters whose charge would be to reinforce his explanation of events. As was frequently the case, when conquistadors came into conflict with the king's appointed officials, the explorers in the field sought direct contact with the king to overrule his island administrators. Thus, Balboa sent two letters to Ferdinand explaining his actions regarding Enciso and presenting information he had obtained from friendly tribesmen about vast riches that lay within reach beyond the sea.

Balboa's letters of January 20 and March 4, 1513 spoke of the existence of a land beyond "the other sea," meaning the sea on the south side of the Panamanian isthmus, whose rivers flowed with gold. Wealth was so commonplace, he said, that people used gold plates and goblets in their daily lives. To reach this land he proposed that the king send sufficient men and supplies to build a shipyard to construct enough ships to move a large expeditionary force to conquer the land and seize its riches. He asked for "one great favor," which was for the king to forbid the passage of all lawyers to Tierra Firme because "not only are they themselves bad, but they make others bad" with their "litigations and villainies."²² Unfortunately for Balboa, it would be the

²² Ibid, 168, note 8.

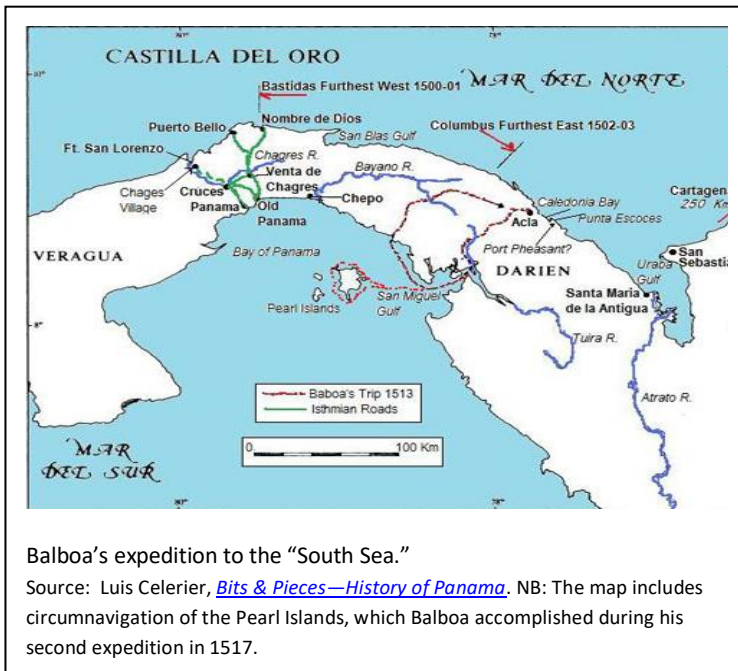
litigations and villainies of the very men the king would send that would lead to Balboa's untimely demise.

Receiving this news, however, King Ferdinand was elated by his conquistador's discovery, yet at the same time deeply concerned about the legality of his methods, for Enciso had managed to persuade him that Balboa had usurped power. To resolve his dilemma, in August, the king made three fundamental decisions. First, he reorganized Tierra Firme, and renamed it *Castilla del Oro*, "Castile of Gold," based on Balboa's news. Then, responding affirmatively to Balboa's entreaties, he authorized the largest expedition to the Indies since Columbus' second voyage and only the second ever financed entirely by the king himself. All other expeditions were financed either by private companies, or as joint ventures with investors. Third, he named the old court favorite Pedro Arias de Avila, known as Pedrarias, to head the expedition. The king also named him governor of the newly designated lands as he was familiar with gold mining and tasked him with resolving the dispute between Balboa and Enciso. He named Balboa *Adelantado* (royal representative) of the South Sea, but relieved him of the dubious governorship of Darien. Presumably, he would be free to continue exploration of new lands to the south.

It would be more than a year before Pedrarias' expedition was properly outfitted, departing on April 11, 1514, but the result would not be what the king hoped.²³ In the meantime, Balboa, learning of the king's decision, and fearful of what it might mean for him, decided to press forward with his explorations. Based on the limited resources at hand, he set off to find the South Sea on September 1, 1513. With only 190 men, but several ferocious war dogs, and by augmenting his forces with natives befriended along the way, he managed to hack through the dense jungle and past hostile tribes to the southern coast of Panama. On September 25, he ascended to the top of a mountain, from which he could see what he

²³ Ibid, 184-187.

named the South Sea (but which would be renamed The Pacific by Magellan seven years later). He named it the South Sea because it was directly south of the Panamanian isthmus, which lies on an east-west axis. He also promptly claimed the sea and all adjoining lands for the king of Spain. It was a moment of triumph for the intrepid explorer for he now knew the fabled land of gold and riches was within reach, once he received the men and materials he requested from the king.²⁴



Balboa's expedition to the "South Sea."

Source: Luis Celerier, [Bits & Pieces—History of Panama](#). NB: The map includes circumnavigation of the Pearl Islands, which Balboa accomplished during his second expedition in 1517.

The following June 30, 1514, Governor Pedrarias arrived at Darien with a flotilla of seventeen ships and 2,000 men and women, and all the materials Balboa had requested. On board were Pedrarias' wife, Dona Isabel and Balboa's friend the Bishop Orlando Quevedo, along with magistrates and church officials who were to fill out a full administration in the new land. In what must have come as a shock to Balboa, however, also on board was the same Martin de Enciso, whom

²⁴ Ibid, 169-174.

he had exiled, but who was now appointed the chief constable for Pedrarias. Nevertheless, Balboa reported fully on his expeditions, the acquisition of gold holdings, but most importantly of his discovery of the South Sea.

Pedrarias quickly installed his new administration, relieving Balboa and those who had been in charge at Darien, even while congratulating him for the work he had done. Then, he began his investigation of Balboa's performance in Darien. The *residencia*, or formal inquiry, conducted by jurist Gaspar de Espinoza, reluctantly found that he was innocent of serious charges made against him by Enciso, but nevertheless levied a large fine to repair the damage done to him, depriving Balboa of a significant portion of his wealth. Pedrarias, clearly perceiving Balboa as a political threat, had wanted to send him back to Spain in chains and was only thwarted in this by the intercession of his own wife, Dona Isabel, and Bishop Quevedo.

Balboa was free, but relations with Pedrarias became strained to the utmost. Moreover, the governor's concern to establish his dominance over the settlement, rather than promote the welfare of its inhabitants, sent the settlers roiling in discontent, both those who had just arrived as well as those who were already there. Indeed, one hundred of those who had come with Pedrarias decided to leave Darien for Cuba, because they had not been given the land and natives that had been promised to them, a part of the story that will be picked up in the next section.

Seeking the fabled temples of gold described by Balboa, Pedrarias sent out several expeditions to find them. All failed. At the same time, contrary to the king's intention, the governor denied Balboa's request to lead an expedition to the South Sea. Stymied, Balboa decided to proceed on his own, recruit his own men secretly in Cuba, and head off for the South Sea. Unfortunately for Balboa, Pedrarias discovered his plan, arrested him a second time, and once again, Balboa's friend Bishop Quevado persuaded the governor to

show leniency and Balboa was freed. But news of the latest confrontation between the two men reached the king, who finally realized he must intervene.

King Ferdinand, attempting to protect Balboa, sent orders adding to his title of *Adelantado*, or royal representative, of the South Sea, by naming him Governor of Panama.²⁵ Although Pedrarias would remain in overall command of Castilla del Oro, the king specifically ordered him to release Balboa and dismiss all charges relating to his presumed attempt to mount a clandestine expedition. In an effort to bring about a reconciliation, Balboa's friend, Bishop Quevado proposed the marriage of Balboa to Pedrarias' daughter, who resided in Spain. It would be a proxy marriage—husband and wife would never meet—but it would serve to heal the breach between Balboa and Pedrarias, at least on paper. Balboa agreed; the marriage was performed in absentia in April 1516, and for two years there was a semblance of peace between the two men.

Balboa, now not only *Adelantado* of the South Sea, but also governor of a province, and son-in-law of Pedrarias, was free to act more independently. With authority to mount an expedition, in April 1517 Balboa entered into a partnership with Pascual Andagoya and Hernando de Soto to establish the South Sea company to finance it. De Soto was Pedrarias' man reporting on Balboa's progress.²⁶ Balboa set up a shipyard in Acla, an outpost some forty miles to the west and up the coast from Darien and began to build four ships with which he hoped to move his expedition. He would build in Acla, which he believed free of shipworm; then transport the components for assembly on the Pacific coast, but the project met one misfortune after another. Balboa was wrong about Acla being immune from shipworm and a major flood washed away much of his materials.

²⁵ Roscoe Hill, "The Office of Adelantado," *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 28, no. 4, (December 1913), 653. The king's order was dated September 23, 1514 but did not reach Balboa until the following year.

²⁶ Paul Kochis, *God, Glory and Gold: Journey To The Conquest Of The Incas* (Minneapolis: Mill City Press, 2013), 73-74.

Finally, in the fall of 1517 he managed to complete two of the four ships he planned, got them to the Bay of San Miguel on the Pacific coast, and explored the Pearl Islands nearby before turning back.

Meanwhile, developments in Spain dramatically affected events in the Indies once again. Bishop Quevado had returned to Spain with some disgruntled settlers and informed the new King Charles I, who had succeeded King Ferdinand after his death on January 23, 1516, that Pedrarias had failed in every aspect of his mission. Persuaded, King Charles decided to replace Pedrarias with the governor of the Canary Islands, Lope de Sosa. When Pedrarias learned of the king's decision, he decided to destroy Balboa, fearful of his fame, of his own disgrace, if not eclipse, and of what Balboa could say against him during the inevitable *residencia*.

When Balboa learned of the king's decision he resolved to set out for the fabulous land beyond the South Sea as soon as his last two ships were completed and before de Sosa could arrive to prohibit it. Discovery of new land and especially the establishment of a settlement were the legal bases in those days for governorship and political independence of men such as Pedrarias. All claims, indeed all actions, of course, would be undertaken in the name of the king. For Balboa, it would be a repeat performance, but on a grander scale, of his preemptive move to discover the South Sea just prior to Pedrarias' arrival four years before in 1514.

Pedrarias, however, learned of Balboa's plans—either from de Soto, or from one of Balboa's men, Andres Garabito, who claimed that he intended to “throw off allegiance to him as soon as he reached the ocean.” Garabito's motive, it seems, was romantic. He longed for Balboa's Indian companion and set out to thwart him by revealing to Pedrarias that he had not cast her off as he had promised when he agreed to marry his daughter. In Pedrarias' mind, Balboa's presumed faithlessness was the last straw. He now had grounds to believe that

Balboa was planning to act without authority to set up an independent settlement.²⁷

Pedrarias set a trap to draw Balboa away from his base and followers at San Miguel on the South coast to Acla. He sent a letter to him requesting a meeting to confer about his planned expedition. Unsuspecting, the conquistador agreed to meet. To disguise his intent, the governor sent Francisco Pizarro, one of his loyal lieutenants, who was a friend of Balboa—indeed had been second in command of the expedition that discovered the Pacific—with a group of men to meet him en route. Taking Balboa by surprise, Pizarro arrested him and brought him before Pedrarias. In a show trial held in Acla, Pedrarias accused Balboa of treason, of planning to usurp power in Castilla del Oro and set up an independent settlement on the South Sea. The governor supported by Chief Constable Enciso (!) found Balboa guilty as charged and, denying him any appeal, sentenced him and four compatriots to execution by beheading. In Pedrarias' view "since [Balboa] has sinned, let him die for it" (*pues se pecho, muera por ello*). The sentence was carried out on January 12, 1519.²⁸

The irony was that Governor Lope de Sosa would never live to replace Pedrarias, dying the day he arrived at Darien, May 20, 1520. Pedrarias himself would formally establish the city of Panama on August 15, 1519 as a port on the south side of the isthmus, but the king would reassign him to the post of governor of Nicaragua where he would continue to serve the crown for eleven more years. As an administrator and agent of the crown, however, Pedrarias would be a failure as it would be under his aegis that Castilla del Oro would dwindle and limp along with little success. Murder, rape, and pillage could only continue for so long before exhausting the native resources.

²⁷ Anderson, *Old Panama and Castilla del Oro*, 204-205.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 206-207.

Pedrarias is universally reviled by historians of this period, but he was but a metaphor for the general conflict dynamic of bureaucrat versus conquistador that defined this early period of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. In all cases during these early years, the impulse of the crown was to direct governors to gain control and thus to squeeze profits from the activities of the conquistadors, and for the conquistadors to elude constraints of the governors by appealing to the crown.

Discovery of Yucatan: The Expedition of Cordova

The factors of production—land, labor, and capital—in the Indies were distorted by the Spanish concept of exploration, conquest, and settlement. Those who signed on for the voyage to the New World were assured land and native Indian slaves to work it, the amount of land and number of slaves being a function of the rank and role of the settler. This was the *repartimiento*, or later the *encomienda* system.²⁹ Even though the natives were slaves, the Spanish justified this arrangement by the euphemism that they were paid workers. The settlers themselves were universally motivated by the lure of gold and other riches and their slaves were there to help them get it.

But everywhere the Spanish went, the native population declined—if not by slaughter during conquest, then by disease to which the Spanish exposed them; if not by disease, then by overwork. Native labor was essential to sustain their settlements and towns, work the fields, and search for gold using placer mining methods in the rivers and shallow mines. Increasingly, the island natives simply melted away. In less than twenty years since Columbus, Spanish leaders began to realize that the population of the main islands of the Indies—Española, Cuba, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico—was declining. There was a growing labor shortage. Without labor the land was valueless and the capital (gold) could not be obtained.

²⁹ J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 39.

Spanish leaders came up with three answers to this growing dilemma. The first came from the Catholic Church, whose leaders argued for a more humane treatment of the native population, thinking that religious conversion would persuade more to remain in place. This was a course that was more honored in the breach than in the observance. King Ferdinand made two additional decisions to alleviate the labor shortage. Claiming that “I need [gold] for the war in Africa” against the Barbary pirates, on February 10, 1510 he signed a decree permitting the importation of African slaves to work in the gold mines. He also authorized governors of the settlements to bring slaves in from nearby islands.³⁰ All three decisions would significantly shape Spanish exploration, conquest, and settlement of the Americas. But it was the demand for gold, its dwindling supply in the islands, and the lure of the rumors of “rivers of gold” on the mainland that drove all else.

Chronicler Bernal Diaz de Castillo provided a first-hand account of this dilemma. Having signed onto the expedition that brought Pedrarias to Darien in 1514, he and about a hundred other settlers quickly decided to leave because there was neither sufficient land nor native slaves for them. They decided to go to Cuba, which had recently been settled. Upon their arrival, Governor Diego Velasquez allocated them land, but could only promise to give them natives “as soon as there were any to spare.”³¹ After three years and still no slaves, the men as a group decided to take matters into their own hands and acquire some of their own.

They reached agreement with a wealthy landowner, Francisco Hernandez de Cordova, to mount an expedition. Their goal was to explore new lands, being ever on the lookout for gold, and to acquire slaves to alleviate the labor shortage. Financing the expedition out of their own pockets, they purchased three ships, one from the

³⁰ Thomas, *Rivers of Gold*, 290-291.

³¹ Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, trans. Alfred Percival Maudslay, M.A. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1908), 9-11.

governor himself, who, in return for granting permission for the expedition was to receive his profit in the form of additional slaves, too. Setting off on February 8, 1517, their crew of 110 men included a priest and an accountant—the priest to provide the usual blessing and opportunity to proselytize, and the accountant to mark out the “royal fifth” the crown claimed of any treasure found.³²

Sailing due west of Cuba toward the setting sun, in early March they approached the tip of the Yucatan peninsula, at a place they called Cape Catoche. What they saw amazed them. From the ship they saw a large settlement a few miles off the coast of homes built of stone and mortar, large temples, stone idols, and large fields of cultivated crops. As it was larger than any town in the islands, they named it Great Cairo, for it indicated the existence of an advanced civilization comparable to that of Egypt.³³



Cordova did not know it, but each stop he made during his voyage took him to a different Mayan province in what was a loosely

³² Ibid, 12.

³³ Arthur Helps, *The Spanish Conquest in New America, Vol. II* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1856), 215.

federated and declining civilization. The Maya had long since been eclipsed by the Aztecs as the dominant force in the Yucatan, but vestiges of their former civilization remained. Indeed, the Spaniards were struck by the disparity between the sophistication of the art and architecture and the relative crudity of the Indians, their tools and weapons.

As they prepared to disembark they were met by a band of native Indians who rowed out to meet them in canoes. An initial friendly encounter involving an exchange of gifts led to an agreement that the Indians would return the next day to escort them to the town. Next day, as promised a large contingent of Indians appeared, welcoming them ashore. But on the way to the settlement the Indians led the Spaniards into an ambush resulting in a furious battle in which thirteen Spaniards were wounded. Two later died of their wounds. Having driven off the Indians and captured two (whom they would train as interpreters), the men explored the settlement, which was deserted. They found some gold artifacts and marveled at the sophisticated architecture of the temples and stone carvings. Recovering back to their ships, the expedition sailed westward along the coast for two weeks before putting in at a cove they named Campeche.

At Campeche a band of about fifty Indians approached as they were filling their casks with fresh water. Invited to follow them, the Spaniards proceeded warily to the village where they were told in sign language that they must leave forthwith or else be attacked. Convening in a place where there was clear evidence of human sacrifice, they issued an ultimatum to Cordova in the form of a stack of burning reeds, which, once burned, would signal an attack if they had not yet left. At the same time, more Indians joined them in full war paint, making clear the Spanish were not welcome. The message was clear. Cordova and his men quickly decided to retreat to the boats and continue their journey, avoiding a battle—this time.

Sailing further for another week along the coast they put in again for water at a place they designated Champoton. Once again, after filling their casks, they found themselves surrounded by Indians, a greater number than at Campeche and more menacing. It was evident from the brandishing of weapons and war whoops that the Indians intended to attack the entire party, making a battle unavoidable. In a fierce engagement where they were greatly outnumbered, they lost fifty men. Indeed, only one member of their party was not wounded in the melee. But fighting with everything they had, they managed to retreat to their boats and cast off. The Spanish called the place "the coast of the disastrous battle."³⁴

Following this, Cordova decided, and all agreed, to return to Cuba. But as they were totally without water and their numbers were fewer they decided to break up one of their ships and sail the remaining two to Florida where one of the captains knew there would be fresh water. Then, they would return to Cuba. In Florida, too, however, there was confrontation and battle with the Indians, who attacked and attempted to seize one of the boats, but the Spaniards beat them back and were able to depart with water casks full, though leaking. Mortally wounded from battle, Cordova led his men back to Cuba, where he would expire a short time thereafter.

Upon the expedition's return to Cuba, "word spread like wildfire" of their great discovery. They had lost 57 of their 110 and had not captured any slaves, but returned with tales of battles, of gold, of treasure, and of an advanced if warlike civilization. They had encountered only hostile natives bent on opposing them. Nevertheless, they had brought back enough idols, statuary, and artifacts "of many different shapes," to raise wild speculation of its origins. Some thought that "they belonged to the Gentiles...or the Jews" who had been cast out of Jerusalem. Governor Velasquez in particular was overcome with the discovery of gold. When he

³⁴ Diaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, 24-25.

questioned the two natives they had brought back with them about the existence of gold mines, they indicated that “there was much [gold] in their land.”³⁵

Discovery of Mexico: The Expedition of Grijalva

Governor Velasquez, greatly excited by the prospect of obtaining gold, reported the discovery to the king’s Council of the Indies in Seville, and requested authority to explore further. Although by this time at least two ships per week sailed between Santo Domingo and Cadiz, making communication reasonably quick, Velasquez did not wait for an answer.³⁶ He proceeded to outfit another expedition to follow the path Cordova had charted and go beyond it. This expedition would be more powerful than the last to ensure they could overcome all native opposition. Thus, Velasquez assembled four ships with 240 men under the command of his nephew Juan de Grijalva. (Cordova had sailed with three ships and 110 men.) Whereas Cordova had sailed with only muskets, swords, and crossbows, Velasquez provided Grijalva with light cannon and war dogs, the large, ferocious and terrifying mastiffs that the Spanish had used in their conquest of the islands, especially of Cuba.³⁷

Grijalva’s instructions called for him to “obtain by barter all the gold and silver that could be procured, and that if it appeared to be advisable to form a settlement...but if not then...return to Cuba.” The expedition left the north coast port of Matanzas, Cuba on April 8, 1518.³⁸ By early May, the sailors sighted present-day Cozumel, where

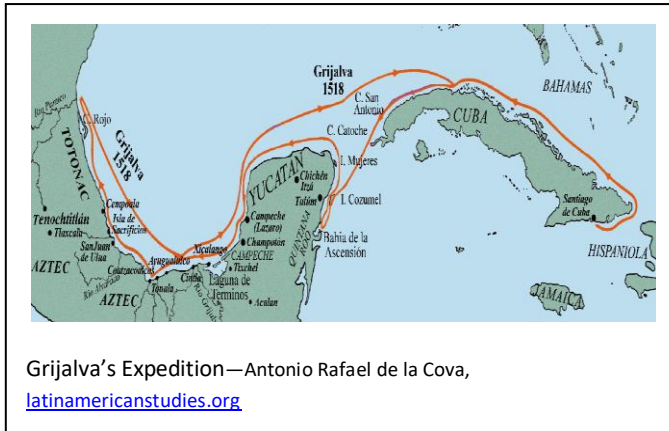
³⁵ Ibid, 32.

³⁶ See Thomas, *Rivers of Gold*, 546, for the list of registered vessels traveling to and from the Indies.

³⁷ Graham Hancock, “The Spanish use of Animals as Weapons of War,” *Ancient Origins*, October 6, 2013, <https://www.ancient-origins.net/opinion-guest-authors/spanish-use-animals-weapons-war-00898>, and John and Jeannette Varner, *Dogs of the Conquest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983).

³⁸ Diaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, 37-39. Other authors mark Santiago as the initial point of departure, either in April or January. See Hubert

they went ashore. Approaching a village, they saw that all of its inhabitants had fled inland, except for two elderly men and a woman who claimed that she had been shipwrecked on the island. She was from Jamaica and could speak the Mayan tongue, making her very useful as an interpreter.



Grijalva's Expedition—Antonio Rafael de la Cova,
latinamericanstudies.org

Re-embarking, Grijalva sailed south along the coast to the town of Tulum, about fifty miles, before reversing direction and picking up Cordova's course. Sailing around the peninsula and bypassing Cape Catoche, the ships stopped next at Champoton where Cordova had suffered a serious defeat. As before the Indians massed at the beach to attack the landing party, but this time the Spaniards were better armed with light cannon and muskets that could penetrate Indian padded cotton armor and war dogs that terrified and panicked the Indians. In the fierce battle that ensued, the 100 men of the landing party suffered eight killed and sixty wounded. The Spaniards, however, savagely crushed the Indians, depleting their

Howe Bancroft, *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft, Volume IX, History of Mexico, Vol. I. 1516-1521* (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft and Company, 1883), 17. Arthur Helps, *The Spanish Conquest of America and Its Relation to the History of Slavery and to the Government of Colonies, Vol. II* (London: John Parker and Son West Strand, 1855), 217, says simply "Grijalva set sail from Cuba on the 5th of April, 1518."

ranks, killing over two hundred and driving them out of their village and into the neighboring swamp.

After spending four days ransacking the village, they proceeded along the coast, putting in at two more coves for protection, until they came to the Tabasco River (which they named *Rio Grijalva*). Averting a confrontation, Grijalva managed to engage the Indians in peaceful conversation and barter of goods. The Indians conveyed the idea that while they themselves did not have much gold, the land to the west, which they called Mexica, had “plenty of gold.”³⁹ Proceeding further west, they reached another river where, despite orders to keep the ships together, Pedro de Alvarado sailed his ship up river alone (Alvarado was a conquistador in his own right, who would play a major role later in this history). When Alvarado returned after three days, he was reprimanded severely for putting himself and the others in a vulnerable position. They had been at sea for over two months and after the battle at Champoton, had managed to avoid large-scale battles, but had not obtained or located large amounts of gold.

Around mid-June, they reached a river they named *Rio Banderas* because of the welcoming presence of Indians flying white banners on the shore. There they encountered native chiefs who spoke a language their interpreters did not understand. It was clear to them that they had passed into a new territory. Indeed, Grijalva named it New Spain. This was the land of the Aztecs, as we call them today, but which they called Mexica. Their chiefs made it plain that the great ruler of the Mexica, Montezuma, had followed their every move from the time they first spotted Cordova’s ships the year before. They revealed that they knew about the landings and battles at Cape Catoche, Campeche, and Champoton, and that ever since the second battle of Champoton, Montezuma had given orders for them to engage peacefully and not to fight. Staying for a week, the Spaniards bartered goods for gold in the extraordinary amount of 16,000

³⁹ Diaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, 49.

crowns. But as they explored further, they came upon an island with evidence of recent human sacrifice, which seemed to be an omen and a warning against further encroachment. They named it *Isla de los Sacrificios*.⁴⁰

Assessing their circumstances, Grijalva decided that there was no prospect for establishing a settlement. They were too few and could not guarantee their security against a large-scale attack, or even their food supply. He decided to send Alvarado back to Cuba for reinforcements, which would permit a settlement, but also remove a dissident voice from among them. Alvarado was entrusted with most of the gold and other treasure they had accumulated in the form of idols, and cloth, as well as the wounded. With the departure of Alvarado, their number was now three ships and as they continued to explore the coast, observing many towns along the way, they debated among themselves their future course of action.

As it was now getting into the rainy season, and no reinforcements had come, they decided against further exploration and to return to Cuba. They were forced to stop several times for ship repairs, to obtain water, and await favorable currents. Now that they were on their way out, however, the natives encountered during their return voyage were largely friendly, willing to provide food and to barter gold for beads and other trinkets. On about November 1, the flotilla anchored once again at Matanzas, Cuba, where Grijalva received an order from Governor Velasquez to return immediately to Santiago.⁴¹

⁴⁰ William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, (New York: The Modern Library, 1843), 125-126.

⁴¹ Bancroft, *History of Mexico*, 30-31. Diaz del Castillo, in *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, 61-63, recounts that before leaving Mexico, they stopped at Rio Tonalá for ship repair, and Campeche for provisions, and then reached Santiago in 45 days. Peck says the fleet left Campeche on September 8 and reached Puerto Carenas (present day Havana) on the 30th, finally arriving at Santiago in early November:

In the meantime, Alvarado's return had both gratified and worried Governor Velasquez. When the governor "beheld the gold," he was "astonished at our having discovered such rich lands."⁴² Furthermore, "news [of the gold] spread like wildfire throughout the island."⁴³ The gold booty confirmed the many rumors of vast sources of gold in the Americas, but the hostile reactions of the Indians meant that getting it would not be easy. He had been worried about his nephew from the beginning, sending a small sloop commanded by Cristóbal de Olid to follow him, which unfortunately had been forced to turn back because of a storm. The many wounded men Alvarado brought back, and reports of injuries Grijalva had suffered (several arrow wounds and a couple of broken teeth), concerned him even more. Perhaps most disconcerting were Alvarado's claims, later shown to have been spurious, that Grijalva had been a weak leader, had feared establishing a settlement, and that he himself had supported establishing one and had taken the lead in exploration and discovery. But most importantly, without a settlement there could be no claim to the land that could not be contested by others.

Accordingly, the governor decided to send a rescue and replenishment mission to Grijalva and include Alvarado in it to help find him. After much deliberation, the governor offered the opportunity to two of his associates, first to Vasco Porcallo and then to Balthazar Bermudez, but neither would agree to the terms the governor proposed, requiring them to finance the expedition.⁴⁴ Velasquez then turned to Hernan Cortez, whom he knew had

Douglas T. Peck, *The Yucatan—From Prehistoric Times to the Great Maya Revolt, A Narrative* (Xlibris Corp., 2005), 242-244.

⁴² Diaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, 58-59.

⁴³ Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, 135.

⁴⁴ Charles Saint John Fancourt, *The History of Yucatan*, (London: John Murray, 1854), 17-18. Lopez de Gomara, *The Pleasant History of the Conquest of the West Indies*, trans Thomas Nichols (London: Thomas Creed, 1596), 17, mentions only Bermudez.

accumulated a small fortune from his gold mining and agricultural endeavors. The motives for the choice of Cortez have varied, from picking him for his financial resources, his leadership skills, or to selecting him in hopes of ridding him as a competitor, but the fact is the governor obtained a license from the King's Council in Santo Domingo and the two men entered into a contract on October 23, 1518.⁴⁵

With the seemingly modest and limited objective of rescuing a compatriot, the Spanish presence in the Americas entered into a new and unpredictable phase. Governor Velasquez attempted to rescind his contract with Cortez when Grijalva returned safely, but Cortez sailed to the mainland in defiance of his governor's retraction. No one could have foretold that this ignominious beginning would lead to the conquest of the Aztec civilization and establishment of Spanish rule in Mexico.



Diego Velasquez de Cuellar

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⁴⁵ "Instructions Given by Velasquez, Governor of Cuba, to Cortes, on His Taking Command of the Expedition; Dated at Fernandina, October 23, 1518," in William H. Prescott, *Mexico and the Life of the Conqueror, Fernando Cortes, Vol. II* (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier and Son, 1900), 423-26.