Chapter Two

Discovery

The most famous discoverer and major chronicler of his voyages is Christopher Columbus, but others who accompanied him on some part of his four voyages also reported on their experiences. Columbus and most participants in these and later discoveries wrote to fulfill an obligation to report to authorities in Spain or to promote their enterprises. As a result, the ship's log and letters are the predominant discourses in this group. Columbus's son Hernando, a participant on his father's fourth voyage, chose the discourse of biography. Amerigo Vespucci, working for the Portuguese and Spanish crowns, reported his voyages in letters written in Italian.

Columbus was born to Domenico Colombo and Susanna Fontanarossa between 26 August and 31 October 1451 in Genoa. His family were wool-weavers. There is little evidence available of his early life, but he claims he went to sea at a young age.¹ Columbus wrote in Spanish and very little in Latin. Menéndez Pidal believes that Columbus learned Spanish in the years he spent in Portugal, because his Spanish is filled with Portuguese influences affecting his Castilian grammar and vocabulary.² Some scholars have held that Columbus was from a Spanish-Jewish family that had settled in Genoa to escape the pogrom unleashed throughout Spain in 1391.³

Columbus developed a plan to sail to the Orient by a westward route. Various elements came together to generate this plan in the mind and fantasy of the Genoese: contacts in Lisbon; his sailing experience in the South Atlantic for the Portuguese; his reading of Pierre d'Ailly, Marco Polo, Ptolemy, Pliny, Toscanelli; and biblical prophecies, especially the apocryphal second book of Esdras.⁴

Columbus annotated his reading in apostillas, marginal notes to a series of books. The notes are among his early writings and are helpful to understand Columbus's mentality and details of his biography. Among the annotated books preserved in the Biblioteca Colombina at Seville are Pierre d'Ailly's Imago mundi (Image of the
World), Pius II's *Historia rerum ubique gestarum*, (History of Deeds Everywhere), Marco Polo, and Pliny's *Historia natural* (Natural History). A question exists as to whether Columbus or his brother Bartholomew made the annotations. Varela concludes that the notes are attributable to Christopher Columbus because they form a homogeneous block showing the same way of thinking, the same language, and common handwriting habits. The marginal notes contain Columbus's remarks on observations made during visits or stays in Ireland, the Portuguese fortress at La Mina in Africa, and Lisbon. They concern the habitability of the torrid zone; the biblical Tharsis, which he claimed was on Hispaniola; the growing of parsley, and the age of the world according to biblical computation.

In formulating his plan, Columbus also relied on information he received in letters from Florentine physician and astronomer Paolo da Pozzi Toscanelli. Two letters, whose authenticity was once disputed but is now accepted, are important for supporting the feasibility of Columbus's proposed voyage and for the vision of wealth, fabulous cities, and large populations he would find in the East. The letter to Martins concerns a shorter sea route to the spice lands to be found by sailing westward and covers such topics as the region's dense population; many cities; the one prince; the Great Khan; the interest of the Khan's ancestors in learning about Christianity; the immense wealth in gold, silver, gems, and spices; and philosophers and astrologers.

**Columbus's First Voyage**

Columbus wrote the *Diario de abordo* (Diary) of the first voyage while making that voyage. When he returned to Spain and met the Catholic monarchs in Barcelona, he gave the original to Queen Isabella; she had a copy made for Columbus. Both the original and the copy are lost, so we have to rely on an abstract of the *Diary* with glosses made by Bartolomé de las Casas in his *Historia de las Indias* (History of the Indies). Las Casas gained access to Columbus's papers through his friendship with Columbus's son Diego Colón (Colón is Spanish for Columbus), whom he met in Hispaniola. Over the years Las Casas had direct access to Columbus's papers and also could consult texts in the Dominican convent of St. Paul in Seville, where the library of Columbus's son Hernando was housed after Hernando's death. As presented in Las Casas's *History*, the *Diary* becomes a discourse in the third person with occasional passages in the first person. In this fashion Las Casas controls Columbus's discourse and lets him be heard when Las Casas believes it is appropriate. This procedure is ironic in view of the fact that Columbus silenced the Indians in his discourse; now his copyist silences him.

The *Diary* exemplifies the hybridization of discourses prevalent in chronicles dealing with the discovery and conquest of the New World. A diary insofar as it is a day-to-day record of events and a ship's log, the record is also a *carta* or letter because it has a sender, Columbus, and a receiver, the Catholic monarchs (Mignolo 1982, 60). As a *carta* it has another aspect, that of a verbal chart of the ocean and islands traveled. It may also be considered a *memoria*, or memoir, in keeping with the monarchs' orders given for Columbus's fourth voyage when they ask him to "facer memoria," to keep a record of the voyage.

A prologue addressed to the Catholic monarchs introduces the *Diary*. The prologue's introduction participates in the epistolary discourse. Columbus apparently wrote the prologue as he began the voyage, as indicated by his reference to the current year of 1492. He uses the prologue to guide the monarchs' interpretation of his voyage; he tries to control their reaction to his exploration by placing the voyage within the framework of the Catholic sovereigns' mission to evangelize. He reminds them of their awards to him and mentions his plans to do a new sailing chart and to put together a book. Columbus outlines his mission in the prologue: he is to go to India to see its princes, people, and lands; he is to see how the inhabitants might be converted; and he is to go westerly by an ocean route not previously traveled. The prologue makes no specific mention of looking for gold or of establishing future trade. Columbus places his mission in the context of events occurring in 1492, especially the consolidation of the Christian faith on Spanish soil. With that accomplished, the Catholic monarchs can turn their vision outwards to undertake the task of evangelization. Columbus addresses the sovereigns as Christian monarchs and lists their Christian accomplishments: in January they concluded the centuries-long reconquista (reconquest) by taking the last Moorish stronghold of Granada. Furthermore, the rulers expelled all the Jews from their kingdoms and dominions. Columbus affirms that he convinced the
sovereigns to send him on this voyage because they had demonstrated they were defenders of the Christian faith. Because of a report Columbus gave to the king and queen about the Great Khan of India, who along with his predecessors had been trying unsuccessfully to get Rome to send men to instruct them in the Christian faith, the king and queen decided to send Columbus to India to investigate how they might best be converted. Columbus casts the Pope in a negative light, as derelict in fulfilling his responsibility to evangelize, and he exalts the Spanish rulers.

In the prologue Columbus reminds the monarchs of the rewards they promised him when they ordered him to go to India: they raised him to the nobility calling him “don,” made him grand admiral of the Ocean Sea and viceroy and perpetual governor of all the islands and lands that might be discovered in the Ocean Sea, and guaranteed that Columbus’s oldest son would succeed him and that all of these awards would be handed down in Columbus’s family. Toward the end of the prologue, Columbus alludes to the great labor he will expend on this voyage and the sacrifice he will have to make of not getting much sleep. This statement functions to remind the monarchs to keep their promises and reward him.

The Diary obeys the monarchs’ orders to report on the lands, princes, people, and their possibility of conversion. The nature of a diary is evident in Columbus’s intention to write down his experiences and progress each day. He plans a new sailing chart in which he will locate all of the sea and lands of the Ocean Sea in their proper places and will compose a book with paintings of what has been observed. The daily entries contain information on longitude and latitude, on winds and islands, so in a sense he composed a verbal chart. The text of the Diary may be divided according to the three stages of the voyage: the outbound voyage, 3 August to 12 October 1492, from Palos to the Bahamas; traveling in the New World, 12 October 1492 to 16 January 1493, from the Bahamas to Hispaniola; and the return voyage, 16 January to 15 March 1493, from Hispaniola to the Iberian Peninsula.

Columbus and his crew set sail in three caravels, the Santa María, the Niña, and the Pinta, from Palos on 3 August 1492. On 12 August they reached the Canary Islands, where they stayed before making the final departure for India on 6 September. The outbound voyage was beset with problems. The rudder of the Pinta broke, and Columbus believed it was sabotaged by two members of the crew, Cristóbal Quintero and Gómez Rascón. The episode highlights the relationship between Martín Alonso Pinzón, second in command, and Columbus, a relationship that was favorable at the start but would change later. The Portuguese threatened to capture the caravels, and Columbus surmises that the king of Portugal is envious that Columbus went to Castile for help for this voyage. The sailors were depressed over compass markings. On another occasion, they worried about winds for returning to Spain. The wind problem was solved by nature, but Columbus described the solution as a miracle. He saw it as a sign that had occurred only once before in history, in the time of Moses when the Jews were leaving Egypt. Columbus establishes an analogy between himself and Moses; Columbus’s men complain about him as the Jews did about Moses, but divine favor aided Moses and now Columbus.

Another problem was the false hope of sighting land, resulting in the sailors’ disillusionment, which continued for quite a while; the first sighting, which turned out to be false, was 25 September, but it was not until the night of 11-12 October that they actually saw land. Pinzón, who comes across as an intelligent and stable figure whom Columbus can trust, played an important role in the sighting — a role that Columbus prefers not to acknowledge and that is a source of the growing tension between them. Pinzón advised steering southwest by west; at first Columbus does not accept this advice; then, the next day, he follows Pinzón’s advice but justifies it because he saw migrating birds from north to southwest; the Portuguese had discovered lands by following the migrating birds. This explanation permits Columbus to save his pride. As the men’s discontent grows, Columbus encourages them by offering hope of benefits they will receive if their journey succeeds. Throughout the problems and complaints of the outbound voyage Columbus persists in his purpose of reaching India, and he will permit no delay.

In his encounter with the New World, Columbus faced a twofold problem: the recognition of new objects and experiences and the communication of the newly acquired knowledge to his European audience. Las Casas, in his transcription and summary of several Columbian documents, expressed doubts about certain reports. Columbus sees and expresses what he saw. But there are problems with this seeing and saying. Columbus is capable of manipulating
what he sees to produce a certain reaction in the reader. For the consumption of his sailors, Columbus admits that he manipulated the record of the mileage covered each day on the outbound voyage. He recorded less mileage than the ships actually accrued in a day's time out of concern that his men would be afraid if they learned they were going far from Spain. On the return voyage Columbus says he did not write down the correct route that he took so that other voyagers and discoverers would not retrace his path. Even his report of the arrival on Portuguese soil may have been an attempt to manipulate an appropriate response from his readers and Spanish backers; he says residents of a Portuguese village received the news of his discovery with joy.

Perspectives on the Diary

A reading of Columbus's Diary of the first voyage shows that he was aware of the problem of perception and expression. He confesses ignorance concerning the meaning of statues of female figures and whether their purpose is as objects of art or of worship. He laments not knowing some spice trees or trees he thinks are spice-bearing. He was especially concerned that his readers would have trouble believing him. Columbus begs the king and queen not to think he is exaggerating in his descriptions; rather, he is telling only a hundredth part of the reality and one must see it to believe it. Columbus apologizes for constantly describing things in superlative terms; he must have realized that excessive hyperbole would make his readers wonder what was true. Perhaps it is most useful to look at the entry of his Diary that captures Columbus's first perceptions, reactions, and his recording of what he saw. That crucial first day can serve as a measure against which to compare what he saw on the rest of his first voyage.

Columbus first sights land but does not describe it. At dawn on 12 October, as they draw near to land, the first thing the Spaniards see are naked people. After taking official possession of the land in the name of Ferdinand and Isabella, Columbus devotes the rest of the day's entry to his impressions of the people and his relating to them. The entry for the second day also deals mainly with the people, while he writes briefly and, as it were parenthetically, about the land. Finally, Columbus reveals his consuming interest in gold. Of the three elements - land, people, and gold - mentioned in the entries for the first two days in the New World, the most interesting comments concern the inhabitants. Generally, throughout the Diary of the first voyage, more is written about the inhabitants of the New World than about nature or gold, showing Columbus's fascination with the Indians.

Columbus describes the natural elements briefly and in general terms. Columbus wants to make the unseen known to his readers in Spain. Plants, trees, and climate are made recognizable to them: the trees are like those in Castile or Andalusia in April or May; they resemble those described by Pliny that Columbus has seen on the island of Chios. The fish are "very different from ours," he says, "so that it is a marvel." One passage describes gold-speckled stones in a river, and he recalls seeing the same thing in the river Tagus, the implication being that since stones in the Tagus were evidence of gold, there must be gold in this New World river. Columbus's haste to discover sources of gold affects his perception; he is constantly moving on and admits that many things might be missed, but he does not want to delay his search for gold. Columbus's brief descriptions of natural elements, devoid of detail, have a monotonous quality. The reader can predict how the next landscape encountered will be described. The natural elements are often Eden-like. The air is described as gentle and warm to show that the region was habitable. Recalling Asia as described by Marco Polo, the lands are described according to their extension, their greenery, fertility, abundance of water, and the presence of mountains. E. W. Palm affirms that Columbus used images from medieval literature, for example, from the "dolce stil nuovo" (136). The use of literary imagery does not mean, though, that Columbus was writing belle lettristic literature. His primary task, as Mignolo has pointed out, was to discover; he wrote as an obligation to report to his monarchs (Mignolo 1982, 59). Primary interests include how the land and its products can be colonized and exploited for commerce and what may be suitable locations for ports and defenses. Columbus mentions few animals; those he does observe are exotic to a European: parrots, monkeys, strange fish. Tropical vegetation is judged essentially on the basis of its potential to yield spices. Rivers, streams, and coastal waters are scrutinized for traces of gold and pearls.
The inhabitants receive more detailed description than nature, yet there is a predictable pattern, with certain aspects singled out: the Indians' physical features, moral attributes (peaceful, generous), and intellectual qualities (docile and quick to learn). Their learning ability is gauged by Columbus on the basis of their repeating what the Spaniards say, not on whether they can think for themselves. As Columbus proceeds from island to island, he notes similarities and differences among the natives of the region and evaluates the degree of civilization they demonstrate. The comparison between indigenous peoples and the revision of his earlier opinions, although not done consistently, contrasts with Columbus's monotonous characterization of nature. For Beatriz Pastor, Columbus characterizes the native Caribbean population in terms of lacks: they were not clothed, not rich, not traders, and did not possess weapons (37). Originally perceived in a state of Eden-like innocence, they go naked like Adam and Eve, not needing wealth and weapons. Columbus's characterization of innocence highlights is conducive to their exploitation.

In Columbus's description of the natives and his dealings with them during these first two days, two traits predominate and intertwine: evangelization and commerce; commerce wins out. Attention to evangelization fulfills one of the charges of Columbus's mission as outlined in the prologue to the Diary. The natives' first approach to the Spaniards suggests how best to evangelize them. Columbus gives them gifts to make them friendly because, he reasons, they would be better converted to Christianity by love than by force. The Indians offer parrots, balls of cotton thread, javelins, and other items in exchange, giving the impression that the Indians looked upon the transaction as barter. Columbus may well have included this detail to show the possibility of future trade and that the Indians could be given articles of little value and still be pleased. One note of disappointment sounds in all of this; Columbus concludes rather quickly and realistically that the natives are very poor.

Enhancing prospects of both evangelization and commerce is the Indians' defenselessness: they do not bear arms and are so ignorant of them that they cut themselves when handling the Spaniards' swords. Not only does Columbus link evangelization and trade, but he appears to link slavery and evangelization in the same utterance. On this second day, Columbus is already planning to take some of the Indians back to Spain so "they could learn to speak," ostensibly to learn Christian doctrine, return to the islands, and help with the evangelization of the other natives.

Columbus undermines his argument that the Indians are peaceful by mentioning their giving javelins to the Spaniards. Perhaps he dismisses the javelins - like sticks with a hook on the tip - as weapons in comparison with the European arms, but self-contradiction occurs on other occasions in the Diary, particularly in relation to trusting the Indians and the language spoken by them. Columbus boasted about the innocence of the Indians, but builds a fortress and justifies it in these terms: "they are naked and without arms and very cowardly, beyond hope of cure. But it is right that this tower should be built, and it is as it should be, being so far from Your Highnesses, and that they may recognize the skill of Your Highnesses' subjects, and what they can do, so that they may serve them with love and fear" (26 December). Reading between the lines we can see that he does not trust the natives and even lacks respect for them, calling them cowardly. Elsewhere Columbus undercuts his earlier presentation of the idyllic, tame Indian when he admits that some are warlike. The Christians wound two Indians and the rest flee even though they outnumbered the Spaniards 50 to 7, possibly an exaggeration to enhance the powers of the Christians. Columbus refers to the Spanish here as Christians in opposition to the Indians, who appear as infidels like the Moors whom the Christian Spaniards fought for several centuries.

Columbus suspects the Indians do know of gold and are trying to prevent him from locating it. One Indian told Columbus about lands "in which there was endless gold; which names the Admiral wrote down, and when a brother of the king knew what he had said, he scolded him, as the Admiral gathered. On other occasions also the Admiral understood that the king endeavored that he shouldn't know whence the gold came or was collected, because he did not wish him to barter or buy elsewhere" (Morison, Journals, 140).

Throughout the journey Columbus postulates a single language among the Indians so that their conversion should be easy, but he contradicts himself by observing different words for things. Despite Columbus's not understanding the Indians well he jumps to conclusions regarding the existence of gold in a certain area. When he meets an Indian, believed to be a man-eating Carib, and the man tells him about gold, Columbus shows his awareness of language differ-
ences among the natives of the different islands. The Spanish had to resort to sign language to communicate with the Indians. In what Pastor calls the "systematic erasure of native voices," Columbus does not let the Indians speak in the Diary without filtering what they say by his use of qualifiers, such as "I felt that," "I understood that he said to me."13

Toward the end of the return voyage, when Columbus fears that he and his ship may be lost during a storm, he puts information about the voyage on a parchment within a barrel dropped into the sea, hoping that one day it will reach the Spanish monarchs. The message on the parchment would, in Columbus's words, "show that he had told the truth in what he said and professed to reveal" (14 February). This refers to his pre-voyage arguments, the project he commended to the Spanish monarchs, and he now believes he has proven that what he encountered on this voyage has confirmed his project.

A Postscript: Columbus's Letter on the First Voyage

Columbus's letter to the sovereigns on the first voyage is in keeping with the practice of Spanish captains to write such letters during the final homeward bound voyage.14 Columbus offers a summary of the first voyage: "This is what has been done, though in brief." The letter, written before 10 February 1493 on board the Niña, was dated 15 February off the Azores. The postscript was written 4 March near Lisbon. Although entitled "Letter to the Sovereigns," the account is addressed to "Luis de Santángel, Keeper of the Privy Purse," a friend of Columbus. A similar letter was sent to Gabriel Sánchez, treasurer of the Kingdom of Aragon, enclosed in another letter to the king and queen, now lost. Morison speculates the cover letter to the monarchs followed a formula of asking the king and queen to read the letter and to command him to come to the court to render an account of the voyage just completed (Morison, Journals, 180). The letter was very popular as a source of knowledge on the discovery. Since the letter was written toward the end of his first voyage, Columbus sees events from hindsight. The nautical information so evident in the Diary of the first voyage is missing from the letter.

The opening paragraph briefly recounts Columbus's accomplishments: he found many islands with a numerous population, he took possession of them for the Spanish monarchs, and he named the islands.15 Following a hierarchical order, Columbus gives credit for his accomplishment first to the Heavenly King and then to the earthly king and queen, Ferdinand and Isabella. In naming the islands Columbus also followed a definite hierarchy: the first island for Christ, San Salvador; the second for the Virgin Mary, Isla de Santa María de la Concepción; the third for Ferdinand, Fernandina; the fourth for Isabella, La Isla Bella; the fifth for the royal couple's daughter, Juana.

The letter reiterates themes mentioned at the end of the Diary of the first voyage. Columbus sees his voyage as a triumph given by God and himself as God's instrument for this discovery. Columbus, who earned divine favor because he walked in God's way, now savors victory in the wake of years of struggle to convince the monarchs of the desirability of his plan and the obstacles to overcome. The letter's ending includes the king and queen as also being given the triumph by God, and the joy and material benefits of the enterprise extend to all Christendom.

The letter intends to demonstrate the success of the voyage. To that end, Columbus gives a different explanation here than in the Diary of why he founded Navidad, omits the destruction of the Santa María, but implies that he consciously and purposely founded the settlement because of its strategic location for gold and trade between Spain and the New World. Descriptions of the land and people in the letter support Columbus's argument that the voyage was successful: incredible harbors can be used in future trade; most rivers and streams contain gold and there are great mines of gold and other metals; there are many spices. Columbus stresses that these things cannot be believed without seeing them.

In the letter, for the first time, the natives of this hemisphere are called Indians. Columbus presents the Indians as well-built and handsome, innocent, timid, and peaceful in temperament. Columbus actually misjudged the Indians' friendship and peacefulness, especially of their chief Guacanagari. When he returns on his second voyage, he discovers the settlement at Navidad has been destroyed. The natives are free with their possessions and delighted with worthless objects they receive from the Spaniards. They go about naked and
have no weapons of iron or steel. Some of Columbus's information on the Indians is of ethnographic interest: he observed monogamy among the people but polygamy for the king; women work more than the men; Columbus was not sure that the Indians respected private property, but he did see an example of communitarian living in the sharing of meals. They belong to no sect and practice no idolatry; they have the simple religious belief that the sky is the source of all power and goodness. Columbus attributes their belief that Columbus, his men, and ships have come from the sky not to a lack of intelligence but to never having seen clothed people or European ships.

Emphasis on the unity of appearance, customs, and language among these people is meant to convince the Spanish king and queen that it will be easy to convert them to Christianity. In an attempt at linguistic imperialism, Columbus captures some Indians so they can learn Castilian and give information to the Spanish, while the Diary affirms that some Spanish mariners attempted to learn the Indians' language to communicate with them. Columbus portrays himself as the generous defender of the Indians who forbade his men to give the natives worthless objects, while he gave them "good and pleasant things." Columbus's gifts, he admits, are intended to win the natives over so they will be kind to the Spaniards, become Christians, and lovingly serve Their Majesties. Naturally he wants the Indians to give things that they have in abundance on the islands that are needed by the Spanish. Contradictions appear in his self-portrait, however, as when some Indians are taken captive, although he proposes enslaving only the Indians who persist in their idolatry.

Although Columbus has a prior mental model of this new world, his empirical approach renders him open to revising preconceived notions, as seen in his statement that in these islands he has found no human monstrosities, "as many expected." He has heard that there are some people with tails in two provinces that he has not yet visited, but he reserves judgment. On the other hand, he mentions cannibals and Amazon-like women, although he has not seen them.

Columbus ends the letter arguing for more help from the sovereigns. This voyage was hasty and the ships were not serviceable. Previous talk and writing about these lands was all conjecture, because those people did not see the lands as Columbus did. The ending attempts to justify limited accomplishments on this voyage, especially the paucity of material goods, particularly gold and spices. He promises great wealth in various forms: gold, precious stones, spices, and slaves.

The Second Voyage

Columbus's second voyage to the New World began on 25 September 1493. No journal or abstract of this voyage has survived, but some writings by Columbus and others exist, including Columbus's memorial to the sovereigns, of April 1493, outlining his ideas on colonizing Hispaniola with a series of trading posts, and the Torres memorandum of 30 January 1494, which was Columbus's official report on the colonization of Hispaniola and a request for people and things he needed. The gaps left by the disappearance of Columbus's journal can be filled by minor chronicles of the second voyage: Michele de Cuneo, Niccolò Syllacio, and Diego Alvarez Chanca.

Before undertaking the second voyage, Columbus set down his colonial policy in a memorial to the sovereigns dated April 1493, a document considered by Morison "as the beginning of Spanish, and indeed European, colonial policy in the New World." The memorial was sent from Seville in early April 1493, before Columbus left for Barcelona, to be received by the Catholic monarchs after his first voyage. In it, Columbus states his ideas for the settlement and government of Hispaniola and the other islands discovered and to be discovered. He recommends that 2,000 colonists to be settled in three or four towns should be sent to secure the island and facilitate trade. Each town should have its magistrate and notary and a church with clergy to administer the sacraments and convert the Indians. Most of the memorial deals with rules about gold, again showing Columbus's great preoccupation with it while implying for benefit of the monarchs that gold is so abundant that its acquisition and sharing must be regulated by numerous rules. Governmental and spiritual matters are made dependent upon gold; for example, magistrates and notaries should be paid for their services, and one percent of gold should be reserved for building churches and supporting priests.

The minor chronicles offer revealing details of the second voyage. Michele de Cuneo, from a noble family of Savona and probably a boyhood friend of Columbus, went on Columbus's second voyage as
a volunteer. Back in Savona, Cuneo put his American experience in a letter to his friend Hieronymo Annari. The letter, written in literary Italian with some Genoese dialectal expressions, is dated 15 October 1495 from Savona and responds to Annari’s request to learn about Columbus’s second voyage. Some of the content of Cuneo’s letter is determined by questions posed by Annari. The body of the letter reports on the voyage from Cádiz to Hispaniola, the exploration of the Cibao, on fauna and flora, the Indians, the voyage along the south coast of Cuba and the discovery of Jamaica, and the capture of Indians, some of whom are brought to Spain.

Cuneo’s often unflattering report contrasts with Columbus’s versions of his expeditions. As an interesting biographical detail, Cuneo recalls Columbus’s amorous involvement with the lady of Gomera, Doña Beatriz de Peraza. Cuneo has Columbus say that the desire for gold is the main reason he undertook the dangerous voyage. The men, motivated by greed for gold, kept themselves in top physical shape, despite bad weather and poor food. In violation of the rules, they bartered gold in secret and robbed the Indians. On the island of Santa María la Gallante, 11 men organized a group to plunder the area but were lost in the wilderness. Cuneo does not criticize their intention to rob. This chronicler reports that on Guadeloupe, when Caribs fled, the Spaniards entered their houses and took whatever they desired, enslaving the Indians and carrying the best off to Spain while permitting the colonists to choose slaves from among the remainder. Neither is Cuneo shy in describing his sexual treatment of a beautiful Carib woman whom he beat into submission. He boasts of his lust and his abuse. Upon taking possession of an island granted him by Columbus, Cuneo cleared a plot of ground and simultaneously set up the cross and the gallows, thus offering both salvation and punishment to the natives.

On the second voyage, Columbus insisted that Cuba was the mainland. An abbot and most of the men, including Cuneo, disagreed. Columbus, to prevent discordant opinions affecting the future of the enterprise, did not wish to let the abbot return with the crew to Spain. Still, despite criticism of Columbus, Cuneo ends the letter praising him for his magnanimity and skills as a navigator.

The letter undermines positive impressions of the place and people that Columbus tried to convey in his writing on the first voyage. When Columbus founded Navidad, he praised its location, yet Cuneo describes the place as unhealthy because of its marshes, while the streams yielded not a bit of gold. The slaves on the ship became sick and could not work. Cuneo views the Indians as beasts who sleep on the ground, eat when they like, have sex openly, and practice sodomy. He does credit them with not being jealous.

Two letters concerning the second voyage are more favorable than Cuneo’s to Columbus and his enterprise. The texts of Guillermo Coma and Diego Alvarez Chanca have the same objective, an exaggerated glorification of Columbus, the discoverer. Guillermo Coma, a Spanish physician, went on Columbus’s second voyage. Coma’s friend, the Sicilian Niccolò Syllacio, a lecturer on philosophy at the University of Pavia, translated Coma’s Spanish letter into Latin, putting it in the style of Lucian. The Coma-Syllacio letter is, according to Morison, the earliest printed report on the New World after Columbus’s letter on his first voyage (229). Syllacio’s translation, with a dedication to the Duke of Milan, Ludovico Maria Sforza, was published at Pavia as a pamphlet in 1494 or early 1495. Morison speculates that the purpose of the pamphlet was diplomatic (Journals, 229). The Duke, then in conflict with Charles VIII of France, was seeking Spanish support, hence, the compliments to Ferdinand and Isabella found in the letter.

Syllacio’s humanistic studies exert their influence on his translation, which recasts the New World in terms of classical antiquity. The influence of Virgil and Apuleius is evident, and Gaius Pliny is frequently cited as an authority on natural history. He views the cannibals’ devouring of the children of their captives as fiction — the story of Saturn eating his sons — being transformed into fact. Syllacio describes the rescue from a storm on spiritual and scientific levels, and the spiritual interpretation is further nuanced into pagan mythology and Christian hagiography. When all on board the ship had prayed for rescue, a god appeared. The god, speculates Syllacio, could have been the twin offspring of Leda who come to the aid of ships, or fiery humors that dissolved the storm cloud. Syllacio decides it was St. Elmo who heeds the prayers of sailors. As Columbus did in the Diary of his first voyage, Syllacio casts him in the role of a new Moses, who in the midst of his men’s suffering from thirst, promises them a new land flowing with fountains and streams.

Syllacio stresses that the settlement at Navidad was intended to garrison the fortress, trade with the people, and civilize them. The
letter blames the destruction of the Spaniards at Navidad on the licentious conduct of the men towards the Indian women, each Spaniard taking five. Syllacio mitigates the charge by commenting that the Spaniards' behavior was doubtless for the sake of progeny. The Indian men are portrayed as human in their emotions, banding together to avenge the insult to their honor.

The letter contains little on the search for gold, although Syllacio with some hesitation relates a tale he heard from a credible witness that in the region there was a rock that gushed forth gold when struck with a club, a variant of the story of Moses striking a rock and water flowing out. Syllacio speaks instead of farmers colonizing the lush and fertile land. Descriptions of the new factoría at Isabela constitute an idealistic projection rather than a realistic view. Syllacio foresees the city in a few years as the rival of any in Spain, with a large population and magnificent buildings, a broad avenue running through the town, and a mighty fortress on a hill. In preparation for future visits by the Spanish monarchs, Columbus's residence is called the royal palace.

Diego Alvarez Chanca reported his experience during Columbus's second voyage in a letter to the Town Council of Seville.20 Alvarez Chanca, a native of Seville, requested to go on the second voyage as physician. Gold is the prime concern for Chanca, as it was for Columbus. Pedro Mártir reports that Chanca was greedy for gold. Columbus's reaction after discovering the massacre at Navidad is typical of this man obsessed with gold. He commanded that the ground be searched where the fortification had been in case gold had been buried there, as he had previously ordered. To encourage future expeditions, Chanca assures his readers that gold is so abundant that the Spanish sovereigns can consider themselves the richest rulers in the world.

Some Indians were more civilized than those of other islands, but the Caribs are described as living in degradation worse than beasts. Their choosing unsuitable locations for their dwellings and their diet of snakes and insects are adduced as evidence of low intelligence. The vocabulary of the letter betrays the Spaniards' attitude toward the Indians, who are referred to as heads of cattle. On the destruction of Navidad, Chanca implies the Indians' culpability when he reports the Indians as not approaching the Spaniards on their return to Navidad on the second voyage, as if they had something to hide. He has a mixed opinion on the natives' capacity for conversion; they imitate what the Spaniards do, but they also keep idols in their huts.

Columbus's Third Voyage

The third Columbine voyage left Sanlúcar de Barrameda in May of 1498. The three principal sources for this voyage include Las Casas's abstract of Columbus's lost diary made during the outbound voyage, Columbus's letter to the sovereigns of 18 October 1498 and his letter to Doña Juana Torres of 1500.

Compared with the Diary of the first voyage, the abstract of the third voyage is less detailed, but it does have the texture of a journal, with the days spent on the voyage given not as headings but embedded in the text.21 As in his diary of the first voyage, Columbus addresses Ferdinand and Isabella, again producing a hybrid of ship's log and letter. From the abstract it seems that Columbus's lost diary of the third voyage was written as a propaganda piece directed to the sovereigns and not primarily as the customary ship's log. Columbus states that his purpose on the third voyage was to discover new lands and islands south of the equator. He wants to test the theory that there were more lands to the west, a theory propounded by the Portuguese king John II and corroborated by the Indians of Hispaniola, who spoke of black people south and southeast of Hispaniola. But in his concern for the people he left on Hispaniola, he sent three caravels directly there with supplies.

Throughout the text Columbus seeks to convince the king and queen to continue their support for the enterprise in the face of disparagers and opponents. During the outbound voyage on the Cape Verde Islands, Columbus compares the lands won by the Portuguese unfavorably with those he has discovered for Spain. The Cape Verde Islands, he says, are dry, sterile, and a haven for lepers. The sovereigns are meant to compare the Cape Verdes with the lands Columbus discovered so they will appreciate what he had discovered for them. He also compares the great amounts spent by the Portuguese on their African discoveries and the poor results with the greater rewards to come from lands in the New World, despite the little spent by Castile. Columbus also informs the sovereigns that he
is well aware of the impact of his first discoveries: their fame resounds throughout the world.

Columbus and his crew suffered a great deal on this voyage, experiencing heat so intense they feared they would burn to death. Divine intervention, in Columbus's thinking, granted a respite. Here again Columbus infers that he is divinely chosen for a mission, so the rain storms and cloudy weather are sent by God. They were also rescued from being engulfed by a great tidal wave in the Gulf of Paria. In addition to mortal threats from nature, Columbus personally suffered from gout, insomnia and eye trouble.

The third expedition encountered people of a new cultural area that ran from eastern Venezuela to Honduras. These inhabitants were skilled in fishing, weaving and metallurgy. As proof that the climate was mild and the area habitable, Columbus cites people living near the equator who were lighter in color than expected, with flowing hair. These heavily armed people used embroidered articles woven from cotton. Columbus notices the similarity in the workmanship of these articles and those of Guinea, but he then dismisses a connection. More civilized than those on Hispaniola, these people have attractive houses and are willing to please and extend hospitality. Evidence of gold in the region appears in the people's wearing of objects that look like golden eyes around their necks. There is also evidence of pearls.

A theme that runs through the rest of the narrative is the haste to return to Hispaniola because the provisions for which Columbus paid dearly were spoiling. Columbus gives several reasons for hastening back to Hispaniola, some of which seem legitimate, but one wonders if some are excuses for not continuing to explore this new continent he claims is so near. Among the legitimate reasons, Columbus has not heard from Hispaniola in some time, supplies were badly needed there, and those he was carrying were quickly spoiling. He also claims he has almost lost his eyesight from continual watches in the night. Among Columbus's more questionable reasons for not staying in the area to make more discoveries is that his men had not come prepared to make discoveries (he did not tell them before leaving Castile of his intention because he feared they would create obstacles and ask for more pay). The vessels, he argues, were too big for discovery. These reasons are suspicious because at the beginning of the abstract Columbus indicates that the purpose of his voyage is discovery.

Columbus frequently reminds the sovereigns of what he has accomplished for them, asking them not to pay attention to those who speak against the undertaking. He balances what the sovereigns have spent against what they will reap, expressing fears that the enterprise might be abandoned. They should not abandon the undertaking, he argues, but proceed and give Columbus aid. Contrasting what the Portuguese spent on behalf of their possessions in Guinea, he stresses the opportunity for Ferdinand and Isabella to be the first Spanish rulers to gain land outside of Spain. Columbus speaks of the regions he has discovered as "another world," and concludes from the abundance of sweet water in the gulf coming from the great river Orinoco and from his reading of the biblical Esdras, book 4, chapter 6, that he is near a continent previously unknown.

Toward the end of the abstract, Columbus stresses his spiritual bent. His renunciation of material for spiritual gain could be his way of exhorting the monarchs not to put too much emphasis on getting gold and spices from the enterprise but to be happy with contributing to the service of God. He has not endured the sufferings of this voyage to enrich himself, for he knows that everything in this world is vain except what is done for God. With the implication that the sovereigns are wavering in their support, Columbus reminds them that he has demonstrated the existence of gold in these lands. He mentions both the new continent and the earthly paradise at the end of the abstract when summarizing his case with the sovereigns for their continued support.

The letter to the sovereigns of 18 October 1498 was written not long after Columbus arrived on Santo Domingo, 31 August 1498, but it was sent along with a painting in October. The letter stands in relation to the abstract of the third voyage as the letter to Santángel does to the diary of the first voyage. It is much longer than the letter on the first voyage, but it too has a propagandistic objective.

Columbus's tone is not depressed, despite the opposition he knows exists at Court. As he has been doing all along, he views the enterprise of the Indies as divinely inspired and himself as having a divine mission, believing the enterprise to have been foretold by the prophet Isaiah. Insisting that something of value will come of his journeys, he argues that his critics put their trust only in material
gain (which he renounced toward the end of the abstract of the third voyage to defuse criticism of the lack of material returns from the undertaking). Concerning opposition to the initial project, Columbus recalls that he was supported by two friars and the monarchs. Placing origins of his defamation during the second voyage, Columbus acknowledges the main complaint that he did not send quantities of gold immediately, having been hindered by the brevity of time and other obstacles. He cites as proof of his success, nonetheless, the many peoples to be saved, the service of these peoples as subjects of the Spanish crown, plus evidence of the existence of gold, copper, and many spices. Columbus appeals indirectly to the pride and ambition of Ferdinand and Isabella, alleging that his disparagers could not be swayed by the achievements of great princes in the past and referring to the competition of the Portuguese, who colonized Guinea. He reiterates that he has discovered another world, different from that of the Greeks and Romans.

Columbus makes several points about the New World in the third letter. One hundred leagues west of the Azores he observed a considerable change in the sky, the stars, and the temperature. It seemed as if a hill were there and he was ascending. Columbus reconsiders the opinion of authorities that the world is spherical, emphasizing that their theory was the result of speculation on their own hemisphere, while he had first-hand knowledge of the Western Hemisphere. Holy Scripture testifies that there is an earthly paradise containing the tree of life and a fountain. Columbus believes that beneath the equinoctial line, at the summit of the earth, which is shaped like the stalk of a pear, is the location of the earthly paradise, but no one can go there if God does not will it. Columbus also disputes accepted belief about the earthly paradise; he does not believe it is a rugged mountain. To support his opinion that the earth is mainly land, not water, Columbus cites authorities such as Pliny, Petrus Comestor, Nicholas of Lyra, Aristotle, Averroes, and Pierre d’Ailly. The contrary position was held by Ptolemy and his disciples. From Columbus’s own experience he knows that the climate is increasingly mild, the trees are green as in Valencia in April, and the people, of lighter color, with long smooth hair, are more intelligent and are not cowardly.

Toward the end of the letter, to strengthen his case with the monarchs, Columbus again reports on the process of evangelization among the natives, which he joins to political allegiance, so that by making them Christians he also makes them subjects of their majesties. He ends the letter by praying for the forgiveness of his calumniators.

Columbus’s Letter to Doña Juana Torres

Columbus wrote his letter to Doña Juana Torres, dated 1500, while being returned to Spain as a prisoner, or possibly upon landing. He wrote to Doña Juana because she was the queen’s confidante. Doña Juana had been the governess of Isabella’s son, the Infante Don Juan, now dead, and Columbus had met her at Court where his two sons had served as pages to Don Juan. The letter attempts to justify what Columbus has done on the third voyage and to plead for Doña Juana’s mediation with the Catholic monarchs, especially with the queen, to stop slanders by his opponents, to remind the sovereigns of their promises to him, and, if they feel he still needs to be judged, to send two honorable persons to the Indies to see that they can obtain gold in a matter of hours.

This letter, written by a man in chains, so to speak, differs markedly in tone from the more triumphant letter to the sovereigns on the third voyage. Columbus, using the medieval motif of the world versus God, represents the world as having mistreated him and employs biblical imagery of the depths to convey his experience. The world oppresses him, but God, who has saved him recently from great distress, will do the same again. In that recent experience Columbus heard a voice saying “O man of little faith, arise, for it is I; fear not” (Morison, Journals, 290-91). Columbus then summarizes the background of his voyages. Reading between the lines, it seems that Columbus was criticized for not coming up with sufficient gold to justify his mission. To make matters worse, rumor circulates that Columbus’s patron Queen Isabella is dead.

Frequent references to spiritual matters may constitute Columbus’s appeal to the spiritually inclined Queen Isabella, then grieving over the loss of her son, the Infante Don Juan. Columbus equates the new world he has discovered with the New Heaven and the New Earth described in the biblical books of Isaiah and the Apocalypse and claims that God made him the messenger of these new lands. Attributing the undertaking solely to the initiative and support of
Queen Isabella, and not mentioning King Ferdinand until much later, Columbus portrays the queen as chosen by God, who gave her the spirit of understanding and great courage. God made Isabella the heiress of all as his well-beloved daughter (an idea that reflects the biblical relationship between God the Father and Christ His Son). Columbus equates himself with St. Peter and the Apostles who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, struggled in the world but finally triumphed. When Columbus's alleged misdeeds are investigated by Bobadilla, sent by the monarchs, Columbus takes courage from his belief that God, who delivered Daniel and the three youths from the lions' den, will likewise deliver him from this oppression. Now Columbus is reviled and would gladly renounce the whole enterprise were it not for his dedication to the queen. Columbus declares he undertook the mission partly to assuage the queen's grief at the death of her son.

Criticized for not delivering enough gold, Columbus hoped on the third voyage to bring back pearls and gold. But he ran into problems: half the population of Hispaniola was in rebellion against him, and he was harassed by Alonso de Hojeda. Columbus is resigned to the monarchs' decision to send Bobadilla, but he criticizes Bobadilla for issuing the colonists a large number of permits to seek gold. The permits are not in the best interest of the monarchs because the settlers want to grab what they can and leave Hispaniola. Columbus, through Doña Juana, begs redress of what he considers wrongs done to him by calumniators and especially by Bobadilla, reminding the monarchs of their promises to him at the outset of all his voyages.

Columbus speculates he may have given the impression that he was fleeing, and so Bobadilla arrested him and his brothers. Columbus says he does not understand why he was imprisoned. Attributing greed for gold to Bobadilla, Columbus criticizes the way he has been judged: he should be judged not as the governor of a long-established territory, such as Sicily, but as a captain who must contend with the entirely different situation of the conquest. As a captain, he ought to be judged by men of arms, not by men of letters.

Columbus's discovery of an extensive gold mine is a miraculous event announced by a prophetic message. He heard, he claims, a message from Christ on Christmas Day when he was suffering from the attacks of Christians and Indians. About to abandon everything, he received the divine message to be of good cheer: all shall be provided for him and he will receive relief. That very day, he learned there were mines over 80 leagues of land; later it was clarified that there was one massive mine.

Columbus finally admits to having committed errors, arguing that he did not commit them maliciously but through ignorance and necessity. He expects the monarchs to be more charitable toward someone who has rendered them so much service. He hopes they will not want to judge him, but he hedges his bets by requesting that they order an inquiry into his affairs by two honorable persons at Columbus's expense; he is confident they will find a considerable amount of gold in four hours. One of Columbus's greatest complaints against Bobadilla is for his seizing of Columbus's records, thus giving Columbus no way to clear himself. The final words of the letter affirm his belief in God's power to punish ingratitude and injuries.

The Fourth and Final Voyage

Columbus, in chains, arrived in Spain in October 1500. While the crown was considering his case, minor voyages of exploration were undertaken. In 1501 the monarchs named Nicolás de Ovando governor of the Indies. Columbus, finally freed, prepared for his fourth voyage and left Spain in May 1502. Arias Pérez, who made the fourth voyage with Columbus, said that Columbus “always called this, his Fourth and last expedition, el alto viaje.”

This “high voyage” was the most dangerous of the four voyages, and Columbus returned to Spain a defeated man. He poured out his sentiments in the Lettera Rarissima to the sovereign, 7 July 1503. Internal evidence, according to Morison, shows that Columbus wrote the opening sentences on Dominica, but really began writing the letter in Belén and finished it shortly after his arrival in Jamaica (371). Columbus entrusted the completed epistle to Diego Méndez for delivery to Spain. It was written in Spanish, but the Spanish text has since been lost. The earliest source is an Italian translation published by Simone de Lovere at Venice in May 1505, known as the Lettera Rarissima, the name under which it was reprinted by a librarian of the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice in 1810.
When Columbus arrived off Hispaniola, he was told in the name of the sovereigns that he was prohibited from going ashore. The people with Columbus, including his son Ferdinand and his brother Diego, became discouraged. Many horrendous storms follow, becoming progressively worse, so that Columbus likens them to the biblical deluge. Columbus attributes to his brother Diego the salvation of one of the ships. His people were exhausted and depressed from the storms and prepared themselves for death at any moment. Columbus was especially concerned for the sufferings of his son, but the youth proved to be courageous and picked up the spirits of his fellow crewmen.

Columbus complains of ingratitude when he reviews his life of service amidst great hardships; now he has no roof over his head, no money to pay his bills; his son Diego, left behind in Spain, has been dispossessed of honor and his father's estate. Columbus's only hope is in the king and queen whom he calls just and grateful several times in the letter, so it becomes a motif, part of the plea for justice and gratitude.

Columbus reports gold in the province of Veragua, but it is all hearsay. He decides not to return to the mines, which he considers already won, and thereby creates in the sovereigns the expectation of gold, the certitude that it is there. Unfortunately, no one can say where Veragua is or how they got there because the weather and the currents drove them. More indications of gold exist, but the Indians give incorrect directions at the order of their leader, Quibian, who wants to deceive the Spaniards and keep gold. Columbus's brother Diego and others do go in search of gold and bring back a great quantity, says Columbus.

When Columbus tries to leave the island, the condition of his ships and the weather prevent his departure. Suffering from a high fever and exhaustion, Columbus feels hopeless. He cries out to the monarchs' captains and they do not answer. Only God answers his cry cast to the winds by means of a voice, not the voice of God, but of His messenger. Columbus is asleep, as if he were in a swoon in keeping with the mystical nature of the event, when he hears the voice.

The voice chides Columbus for his doubts, recounting what God has done for Columbus and implying that He did not do more for Moses and David - again, Columbus equates himself with biblical figures of the chosen. Columbus has been special since his birth, and now in his manhood God made him world famous by his discoveries. The voice, saying that God gave the Indies to Columbus, confirms Columbus's claim. God also gave Columbus the keys to the limits of the Ocean Sea. Citing biblical precedents of Abraham and Sarah, the voice prophesies that Columbus will accomplish more in his old age. As Columbus did in his letter to Doña Juana, the voice blames the world and not God for afflicting Columbus. In a transparent reminder to the sovereigns, the voice says: "The privileges and promises which God bestows, He doth not revoke; nor doth He say, after having received service, that that was not His intention, and that it is to be understood differently. Nor doth He mete out suffering to show His might. Whatever He promises He fulfills with interest; that is His way." The voice states that God has revealed a portion of the rewards Columbus will receive, but the voice does not say exactly what they are. The voice's last words are "'Fear not, but have trust. All these tribulations are written on tablets of marble, and not without cause" (Morison, Journals, 378-79).

The people of Caria and the surrounding region practice sorcery, and they attempt to cast a spell on Columbus with magic powder. Columbus paints a different picture of natives this time: instead of the unity of language he claimed on the first voyage, the multiplicity of languages makes it difficult for Spaniards to get information (a potential justification for not getting the information).

In the letter, Columbus mentions his desire to undertake a new project, the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the conversion of the people of the East. His discussion of gold leads him into declaring this intention. Columbus cites Josephus, who says Solomon obtained his gold in Aurea. Columbus claims that the gold mines of Aurea are part of the mines in Veragua. Now the Spanish monarchs can give orders to collect gold from the same source used by Solomon and David. It is not clear for which mission Columbus is volunteering, for rebuilding Jerusalem or for carrying the Christian gospel to Cathay. He believes that Joachim of Flora has prophesied that a man from Spain will rebuild Jerusalem. Joachim, however, did not mention a Spaniard for this task. At this point, Columbus has reached the depths: he is bankrupt materially and spiritually; he asks whoever has charity, truth, and justice to weep for him. He asks the
sovereigns to help him go on a pilgrimage to Rome and other places, if they transfer him from Jamaica.

The Biography by Columbus’s Son

A work that merits inclusion in the category of chronicle of the Indies is Ferdinand Columbus’s (1488-1539) biography of his father. What makes it unique is that Ferdinand participated in one of the voyages, the fourth, made by his father to the New World, and Ferdinand also drew on his father’s writings and letters, some of which have been lost. Ferdinand, the son of Columbus’s mistress, Beatriz Enriquez, was of a scholarly bent and a bibliophile amassing more than 15,000 books before his death. According to his will, Ferdinand’s books became the property of the Cathedral Chapter of Seville; later they constituted the Biblioteca Colombina. Unfortunately, most of the books were lost or destroyed. Ferdinand wrote the biography toward the end of his life, and it was not published in his lifetime. It was issued in Italian, not in the original Spanish.

The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus by His Son Ferdinand consists of a dedication to Baliano de Fornari, the author’s foreword, and 108 chapters.27 The early chapters (1 through 15) are polemical in their consideration of Columbus’s origins; the refutation of Giustiniani’s false account of Columbus’s early occupation; Columbus’s education; his activities before he came to Spain; his three principal reasons for believing he could discover the Indies; the refutation of Gonzalo de Oviedo’s claim that Spain in an earlier time was in possession of the Indies; Columbus’s disillusionment upon not receiving support from the Portuguese king; and his eventual turning to Ferdinand and Isabella. The remaining chapters narrate Columbus’s four voyages; the last chapter briefly recounts the last days of Columbus and his death in Valladolid.

The Italian translation is dedicated to Baliano de Fornari, a wealthy physician of Genoa, by Giuseppe Moleto, a Sicilian mathematician and professor at the University of Padua, who helped Giovanni Battista di Marini with the task of publishing the Italian edition. The dedication does not mention that the Italian translation was done by Alfonso de Ulloa. The dedication echoes a notion repeated with some frequency by Ferdinand in the biography, that Columbus is a man chosen by divine providence to reveal hidden knowledge beneficial to humankind.

In his foreword Ferdinand Columbus states it was fitting for him to write the history of his father’s life and discovery of the New World and the Indies because he had sailed with his father. When he saw that other historians had been uneven in their treatment of his father’s life so that the truth had not been told, he decided to write his own version. He promises to tell the story of his father’s life using as sources Columbus’s writings and letters and his own observations. Later, Ferdinand confesses that his knowledge of his father’s voyages and early days is imperfect because his father died before he could question him about certain matters.

In his attempt to honor the memory of his father, Ferdinand deals with questions of Columbus’s parentage and ancestry, because those who were born in great cities and of noble parents are the ones who receive honor. Ferdinand states that some people wanted him to write of the noble origins of his family, descended from a Roman hero, Colonnus, and including among their ancestors two Colonii, who, according to Sabelicus, won a victory over the Venetians. Ferdinand rejects the position that honor derived from birthplace and ancestry is paramount and promulgates a notion of honor based on deeds. His father earned honor by his illustrious deeds. Ferdinand sidesteps the issue of his father’s noble birth by introducing the notion of providentialism and portraying him as chosen by Christ to be His apostle to carry His name to distant lands. Columbus is compared with Christ, who was content to come from obscure parents. Columbus himself chose to leave in obscurity his birthplace and family. The truly important issue is that Columbus had the qualities his great task required. Columbus’s parents, says Ferdinand, were persons of worth but reduced to poverty by wars in Lombardy.

Having sidestepped the issue of his father’s origins, Ferdinand compensates by explaining the etymology of Columbus’s name, allegedly changed from Colombo to Colón to conform to the country he came to live in and to relate it to Colonus. The latter intention demonstrates that Columbus was still concerned with positing a noble ancestry for himself. The etymological interpretation of the mystery of Columbus’s name is part of Ferdinand’s providential reading of his father’s life. The name foretold the role he was to play.
The surname Columbus means "dove" because Columbus brought the grace of the Holy Spirit to the New World. The combination Christopher and Colón, the Spanish version of Colonnus, which, says Ferdinand, means "member" in Greek, represents Columbus as a member of Christ. Christophorus Colonnus, like St. Christopher, "crossed over with his company that the Indian nations might become dwellers in the triumphant Church of Heaven" (Life of Columbus by His Son, 4). Ultimately, Ferdinand argues that one should not inquire about Columbus's ancestry or parentage, since he is the source of his own glory, a concept prevalent in Spanish Golden Age authors, like Cervantes. Despite insisting on ignoring his father's ancestry and emphasizing his father as source of his own glory, Ferdinand himself claims glory from his father's deeds.

A point that, according to Ferdinand, undermines his father's honor is the claim by the historian and Bishop of Nebbio in Corsica, Agostino Giustiniani, that Columbus, before he became an admiral, practiced manual skills. Giustiniani made his claim in his Polyglot Psalter (1516). Ferdinand takes pains to disprove the charge because, he says, manual labor did not correspond to the greatness of his deeds. Ferdinand refutes Giustiniani's claim by citing the bishop himself who, says Ferdinand, contradicts himself in a statement in the Psalter outlining the early days of Columbus's career but making no mention that he practiced manual arts. To further discount Giustiniani's artisan claim, Ferdinand says his father studied at the University of Pavia, but there is no evidence for it, and lists the sciences Columbus learned through reading - geography, astronomy, geometry, and map making. As further refutation of the claim of manual labor, Ferdinand in chapter 4 cites examples of Columbus's navigational experience in many lands before becoming an admiral.

For Ferdinand, Giustiniani is a "false historian and an inconsiderate, prejudicial, and malicious compatriot" (Life of Columbus by His Son, 6). Ferdinand further maintains that Giustiniani told more than 12 falsehoods about Columbus's navigation and discovery. Ferdinand briefly refutes these falsehoods, such as that Columbus did not learn geography from his brother in Lisbon but taught his brother, that Ferdinand and Isabella did not immediately accept Columbus's proposals, but he had to wait seven years for that acceptance, that Columbus did not travel with two ships but three, that he did not discover Hispaniola first but Guanahani (San Salvador).

Ferdinand takes up the three reasons that persuaded Columbus to undertake the discovery of the Indies to show the weak foundation of the project and to satisfy the many persons who wish to know the exact reasons. Columbus based his project on natural reason, the authority of writers, and the testimony of sailors.

To defend his father, who was censured for naming the lands he discovered the Indies, Ferdinand offers two explanations: the lands were the eastern part of India beyond the Ganges, and he hoped the name India, with its associations of wealth, would attract the interest of the Catholic sovereigns who had doubts about the enterprise.

Ferdinand also argued against claims made by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo that prejudice Columbus's honor and glory. Oviedo maintained that there was an earlier discoverer of the sea route to the Indies and that Spain had earlier possessed the Indies. Chapter 10 is devoted to demonstrating the falsehood of Fernández de Oviedo's claim, which was presented in book 2, chapter 3, of his Historia general y natural de las Indias (General and Natural History of the Indies) of 1535. Ferdinand says that Oviedo did not know Latin, that he used a translation that altered the Latin text of Aristotle; Ferdinand believes that Aristotle was referring to the Azores.

Ferdinand's life of his father has always attracted interest because the author went on the fourth voyage. In one of his documents on the voyage Columbus praised the bravery of his young son, then 13 years old, which inspired the others on the voyage and consoles his father. In Ferdinand's account of the voyage, he does not mention himself as a hero or in any special way. Ferdinand places himself in the "we" of the crew; he is an observer and, like the other men, suffers the brunt of storms and the deprivation of food. Ferdinand uses the third-person narrative when writing about his father. Ferdinand himself recedes into the background of the group, the "we" and "us"; occasionally, the "I" emerges to comment or explain a point. Ferdinand's position is in keeping with his concept of historiography as practiced in the Renaissance, where the center of the narration is the hero.

Isabella had died in 1504 to the great grief of Columbus; she had aided and favored him while Ferdinand was unsympathetic to his projects. Now King Ferdinand wanted to rescind all Columbus's rights and privileges, but was deterred, says Ferdinand, by his sense of shame, which governs noble souls. Even if Ulloa or someone else
added the end section on the epitaph to Columbus’s tomb in Seville, the epitaph, “To Castille and Leon / Columbus gave a New World,” and last paragraph correspond to the thesis of Ferdinand Columbus’s *The Life of the Admiral*, that Columbus rightly deserves honor and glory for being the discoverer of the West Indies.

### The Accounts of Vespucci

The Italian merchant and navigator Amerigo Vespucci, a contemporary of Columbus, was born in 1454 in Florence and died in 1512 in Seville. He was a man of commerce and an explorer whose writings report his participation in early voyages to the New World. His name has been handed down to posterity—America—for the newly discovered lands in the Western Hemisphere. Unlike Columbus, Vespucci had received a formal humanistic education from his uncle, the Dominican friar Giorgio Antonio. That humanistic education most likely accounts for Vespucci’s intellectual curiosity, his willingness to question the established authority of the philosophers and to contradict them when he had the evidence. Vespucci’s empirical approach is more pronounced than that of Columbus, who reached many of his theories from his reading of scripture.

In 1484, Vespucci entered the service of Lorenzo Pier Francesco de Medici, to whom he addressed several of his letters. His work for Lorenzo brought him to Seville for the first time in 1489; the Medici’s agent there, Berardi, was involved in outfitting fleets. At Berardi’s death, Vespucci managed the agency. Vespucci met Columbus during preparations for Columbus’s third voyage. Vespucci himself turned to voyages of discovery for a period between 1497 and 1504. In 1508, Vespucci’s navigational skills and experience were recognized when he was appointed chief navigator for the Casa de Contratación (House of Trade) in Seville, a position of great responsibility that entailed examinations for marine licenses and the preparation of official maps of the newly discovered lands.

The letter of 18 July 1500 from Seville to Lorenzo Pier Francesco de Medici recounts Vespucci’s explorations in service to the Catholic monarchs. The discourse employed is, as he states, an account by letter. To round out the written account of his voyage he, like Columbus, has also made plans and descriptions of the world that he will send to Pier Francesco. Vespucci says the letter of 1502 may be considered a schedule or *capita rerum* of the things he observed. Discovery and observation are paramount to Vespucci, for whom these explorations were genuine voyages of discovery, unlike those made two years earlier by a fleet sent out by the king of Portugal to make discoveries by way of Guinea. Vespucci says the Portuguese went to lands already discovered and by a route described in cosmographical authors. Vespucci stresses that his third voyage was made solely for the purpose of discovery, not to look for profit. Although they found nothing of value while exploring, he is unwilling to concede the absence of wealth. Vespucci admits he is a doubting Thomas—his own words—when natives tell him of gold and other metals to be found in the region. Vespucci has to see it before he will believe.

In his voyages and letters, Vespucci’s motivation is to achieve fame. In the letter of 4 June 1501 he prays that it may not be pride, since he dedicates each task to God’s service, yet there is not the insistence on spiritual concerns evident in Columbus’s writings. In another letter, of 18 July 1500, Vespucci seeks recognition for having designated the polar star of the meridian. However, he was not able to achieve his goal, blaming bad nights and faulty instruments. A letter on Vespucci’s third voyage gathers together the most notable occurrences of this expedition. Vespucci hoped to expand that work in leisure time and to achieve by it fame after death. The case of the polar star illustrates Vespucci’s humanist-inspired attitude toward authorities and experience. The polar star, he believed, was described by Dante in *Purgatory*, Canto 1. Vespucci was guided partly by authorities, but what he learned through experience overrode accepted authority. In this letter, Vespucci disproves the theory of most philosophers, who held that the Torrid Zone was uninhabitable because of the great heat there. Vespucci found reality to be very different. For him, practical experience was of more value than theory.

Vespucci’s letter of 18 July concerns navigation in the South and West, his observations of the country discovered, along with its inhabitants and animals. Empirical observation is evident as Vespucci described the purpose of his mission to a group of natives that he and his crew were men of peace out to see the world. Vespucci at one point imagined himself in a terrestrial paradise because of the
beautiful and sweet-smelling trees. Later in the letter on his third voyage—believed to be written in 1502—he conjectures he must be near the terrestrial paradise because of the abundance of trees, birds, herbs, and fruits. Vespucci, unlike Columbus, mentions but does not give importance to the terrestrial paradise. Columbus had stressed the generosity of the natives encountered in his earlier voyages. A difference from Columbus’s presentation of the natives is that they gave more out of fear than affection. Vespucci believes that the land he found was bounded by the eastern part of Asia. Opportunities for material gain were listed matter-of-factly (unlike in Columbus’s writings). Vespucci does not have to make a case for the economic potential of the areas explored. The crew brought back gold, pearls, and precious stones, and sold many slaves when they reached Cádiz, although Vespucci offers no explanation or justification for taking and selling slaves.

The letter of 4 June 1501, addressed to Lorenzo Di Pier Francesco de Medici from Cape Verde, was written from the high seas at the beginning of Vespucci’s third voyage and presents information on India that Vespucci learned from one Gaspar, a crew member on one of two Portuguese ships returning home. The letter is more a report about the two ships’ experience in India than about Vespucci’s own third voyage. Gaspar’s account of the visit to a kingdom in the interior of India rich in gold, pearls, and gems is reminiscent of the lands Columbus sought. Vespucci’s catalog of the Portuguese treasure from India notes the good business and great riches of the king of Portugal. His references to Indian place names, as Vespucci is aware, do not coincide with the names recorded by the writers of antiquity. In a similar situation Columbus would force a relationship between the ancient name and what he heard in the Caribbean, as in the case of Saba, the place of origin of the three wise kings of the Gospels, attributing the discrepancy to the natives’ poor pronunciation. Vespucci, by contrast, conjectures that the names have been changed, as with place names in Europe.

The continuation and termination of Vespucci’s third voyage is recounted in an undated letter, which Letellier believes was written in 1502 from Lisbon and addressed to Lorenzo. Vespucci’s description of the natives encountered on this voyage contains Utopian elements: there is no private property, but they hold everything in common; there are no boundaries of kingdom or province; and they obey no king or lord, since each is his own master. The Indians have no religious belief but live according to the laws of nature. Vespucci, unlike Columbus, does not conclude from these data that it would be easy to convert them to the Christian faith. The idealistic life of the Indians is disturbed, however, by war, whose only cause, so far as Vespucci was able to learn, was to avenge the murder of ancestors.

The report on the third voyage posed some questions that Vespucci attempted to answer in the fragmentary letter (1502?), in a response to several questions raised by Lorenzo and others whom Vespucci calls slanderers and malicious and envious persons. He stands by his statement in the earlier letter that the people in the Torrid Zone were not black, but white, even though this contradicts the philosophers’ opinions. Vespucci chides the recipient of his letter for not answering his accusers. In his defense of the letter to which objections were raised, Vespucci explains that it was in the style of a familiar letter. He hopes eventually to write something with the help of a learned person that he can leave behind, which will give him fame.

Vespucci’s most famous letter has received the Latin title Mundus novus (New World). Probably written between September 1502 and May 1503, it is addressed to Lorenzo Pietro de Medici. In it, Vespucci identifies the new lands as a new world and declares that his last voyage has exposed two beliefs as erroneous: the ancients who said there was no continent to the south beyond the equator, and others who said there was a continent but claimed that it was uninhabitable. The purpose of the journey was to seek new regions toward the south. Vespucci describes the route of the voyage that, he claims, sailed over a fourth of the world. Like Columbus on several occasions, Vespucci and his crew suffered many violent storms and often feared for their lives. To his earlier descriptions of the natives, Vespucci adds that they are more epicureans than stoics, and there are no merchants among them which would seem to give the Europeans an advantage in future commercial enterprises. Again, there is no mention of converting the natives, but Vespucci’s men tried to dissuade the natives from their depraved customs. Among the details observed in these lands: the climate is temperate and good; there is no illness caused by corrupt air; there are no fruits similar to the European varieties; there are no metals except gold,
which is abundant but not valued by the natives; and the region is rich in pearls. Finally, Vespucci believes that if the terrestrial paradise is to be found anywhere, it surely must be in these lands. The inclusion of descriptions and diagrams of the stellar formations he observed during the journey adds another dimension to the discourse of the letter. In addition, Vespucci claims he has prepared a little book, now in possession of the Portuguese king, in which he has diagrammed the movements of the stars.

The last text attributed to Vespucci provides a summation of the four voyages he claims to have made. The *Lettera di Amerigo Vespucci delle isole nuovamente trovate in quattro suoi viaggi* (Amerigo Vespucci’s Letter about the Islands Recently Discovered on His Four Voyages), usually cited as the *Lettera*, is addressed from Lisbon on 4 September 1504 to Pier Soderini, gonfalonier of Florence. The recapitulation of the four voyages is introduced by a prologue and followed by a brief conclusion. Vespucci calls his account a “prolix letter” to Soderini, who is a very busy man with affairs of state. The contents of the long letter, he observes with feigned modesty, are not befitting a man of Soderini’s rank, for they are presented in a barbarous style devoid of learning. These defects are counterbalanced by Vespucci’s confidence in Soderini’s virtues and in the truth of the account that deals with things that the ancients never wrote about. Vespucci says he wrote the letter to Soderini at the insistence of Benvenuto Benvenuti, a fellow Florentine and friend of both men.

Common to all of the foregoing accounts is a certain measure of clearly perceptible self-interest that could bias the reporting. Since that bias is abundantly evident, however, readers may allow for it and discount certain passages accordingly, thereby reducing the skewing of the narration. These diaries and letters are remarkable, not only for their recording of one of the great moments of history but for what they tell us (inadvertently as well as deliberately) about their writers, their cultures, and the spirit of the age.