

Christopher Columbus, self-taught geographer

*Humberto López Torres **



I Five hundred years after his arrival, Christopher Columbus and his personality are still objects of polemic, especially regarding his birthplace, the origin of his forebears and his exact landing place on October 12, 1492.

An English writer at the end of the last century started a legend that Columbus was Greek. In 1682, two hundred years earlier, another Englishman said Columbus was born in London. In the 1930s, Portuguese amateur historians devised the thesis that Zarco, the discoverer of Porto Santo and Madeira, and Christopher Columbus were one and the same person.

The city of Calvi, Corsica, still calls itself the admiral's cradle and a

plaque identifies a semi-ruined house as his birthplace. In Spain, there are versions (never validated) that Columbus was born in Plasencia, Extremadura; Tortoso, Catalonia; and even Pontevedra, Galicia. All serious researchers now agree, on documentary evidence, that Christopher Columbus was Genoese.

The question of his homeland resolved, a novel has been hatched about his family. The legend of a Jewish Columbus arose in Jewish circles in the 15th century, when someone named Colombo boasted of being related to the discoverer. Emphasis was placed on some of his features: his aquiline nose, his thorough knowledge of the Old Testament, his mystical or fanatical

character and his yearning for gold. All this was interpreted as a clear indication of his Jewish origin.

Columbus' great grandfather was a farmer from Moconesi, in the high valley of Fontanabuona. His grandfather, Giovanni, born in Moconesi, moved to Quinto. In the Middle Ages, Jews were neither farmers nor lived in rural areas.

Domenico Colombo, his father, was active in the Fregoso Party and was several times appointed guardian of the city gates, a title and responsibility forbidden to Jews and the sons and nephews of converted Jews at that time. Domenico bought and sold real estate, also forbidden to Jews.

There are four acceptable hypotheses about where he landed in the Bahamas: Guanahani, Grand Turk-Caicos, Cat Island and the Samaná hypothesis about islands close to San Salvador.

The last three hypotheses can be discarded based on information provided by Columbus about the island where he landed on October 12.

Christopher Columbus still inspires lively debate five hundred years after he demonstrated there was no abyss on the other side of the Atlantic, just more land. His efforts made the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa aware of each other.

After very detailed research, experts agree that the landing was on Guanahaní, the Taino name for the island Columbus called San Salvador. Later called Trianglo, then Guanahaní again, and then Watling. More recently, the Bahamas government rechristened it San Salvador.

Insofar as his personality is concerned, Christopher Columbus had the psychological make-up of a modern man: concrete and practical to the last detail. He trusted only direct experience, which he always strove to acquire. He used it to map out his plans and from it conceived his grand project.

He was neither inept nor inefficient, but did not possess the principal political gifts of cautious

It was hard for him to convince scientists and officials about the viability of his plan. But specialists such as Friar Antonio de Marchena, Father Juan Pérez, both from La Rábida, and Father Diego Deza, professor at the University of Salamanca and prior of the monastery of St. Stephen, did believe in him.

Thanks to them, Don Enrique de Guzmán, Duke of Medina Sidonia, Luis de la Cerda, Duke of Medinacelli, and Queen Isabella herself were interested in the plan, the queen becoming its official sponsor. Financing came from Luis de Santangel, a converted Jew and intimate friend of King Ferdinand, treasurer of the House of Aragon and general tax collector, but also a

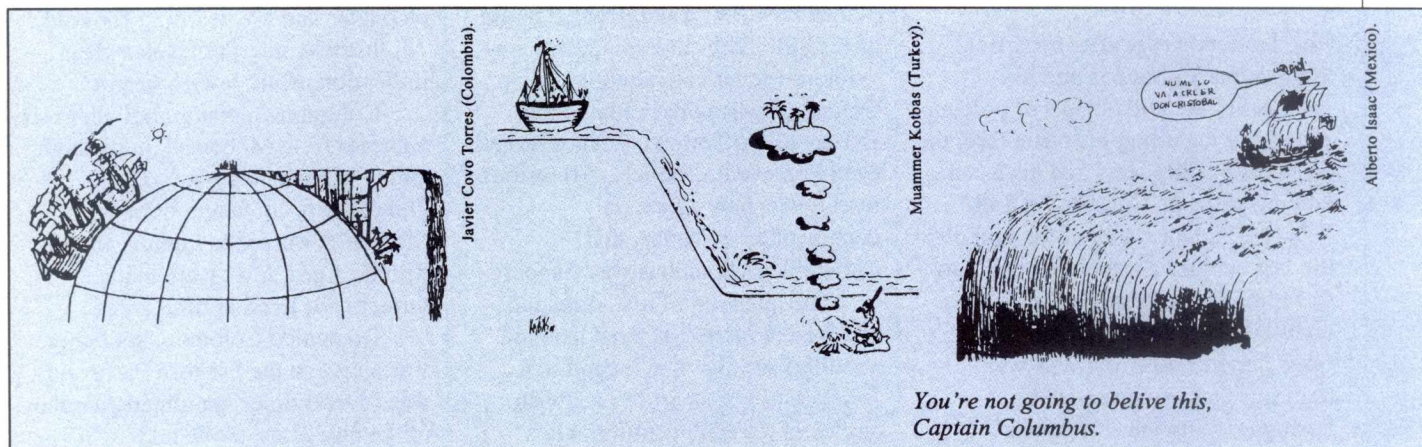
The king was unaware of his death. The chronicler of Valladolid did not record it, nor did Spain inform the world that its famous discoverer had died.

A forgotten Columbus was not the result of occasional negligence. It lasted three centuries, though he left in his wake an inescapable reality that modified the geography of the globe and the conscience of Europe.

His biography, written by Father Las Casas around 1550, was not published until 1875. A similar work by Andrea Bernáldez, Columbus' contemporary, was printed in 1870.

II

Ever since he thought up his plan to reach the Orient from the west,



firmness in his decisions and a profound knowledge of men, the latter being essential for prudent selection when handing out posts.

The image of Columbus as a mere adventurer is false, though he never spurned and often or perhaps always pursued adventure. But his plan to reach the Orient by sailing west was neither impulse nor improvisation. It was the result of a rigorous study of geography, consulted, modified, discussed and finally accepted by those who believed in him: Isabella I of Castile and, grudgingly, her husband Ferdinand of Aragon.

businessman with ties to Genoese and Florentine merchants established in Seville and Cordoba.

While Isabella was alive, Columbus had access to the Court and four trips were authorized. When she died on November 26, 1504, he no longer had a sponsor and, though his son Diego belonged first to the queen's, then to the king's guards—and came to be a shrewd member of the Court, skillful at getting favors—he achieved nothing in his father's behalf. Afflicted with rheumatism and gout, Christopher Columbus died delirious and hallucinating in Valladolid on March 20, 1506.

Columbus had been wavering between Messianism (the conversion of thousands of souls to the Catholic faith), and materialism (searching for gold). To his arguments based on geography and cartography, he added substantial doses of fantasy to convince his sponsors.

During the riskiest first voyage, because they were heading into the unknown, Columbus shaved the number of miles¹ sailed daily to make the sailors believe they had covered a shorter distance than they really had.

¹ See *Voices of Mexico*. No. 18, Jan-Mar, 1992, p. 77.

He was convinced the new lands were Japan and China (Cipango and Cathay as Marco Polo called them). Neither the discoveries made after his, nor the knowledge that he was responsible for falsifying measurements of degrees and miles during the first voyage, shook him from that belief before he died.

During his stay in Portugal and in Porto Santo, Columbus analyzed the classical Greek geographic studies in depth and based his entire plan on Ptolemy. For the latter, Terra Firma extended from Cape St. Vincent, the westernmost point of the Iberian peninsula, to Cape Catignara, designated the easternmost point of Asia, and covered 180 degrees of latitude, that is, half of the globe.

between Europe and Far Eastern Asia. Deliberate or not, the error was enormous.²

Such distortions led King John II of Portugal to reject the plan in 1485, and Ferdinand and Isabella of Castile to do the same in 1490.

What finally convinced the Spanish rulers of the trip's viability was the support Columbus got from the Franciscans at La Rábida and from the expansionist euphoria inspired by the capitulation of Granada, the last Moslem stronghold in Spain, on January 2, 1492.

Moreover, Columbus was not the great sailor some of his panegyrists have described. Son of Domenico, wool merchant and later tavern keeper, young Christopher had a chance to

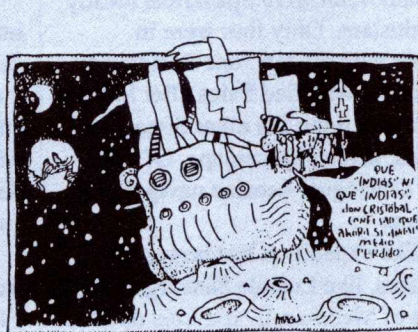
France, was attacked by pirates and Columbus was miraculously spared by swimming almost 10 km to Portugal.

Although he sailed from Portugal to Iceland and England and got to know Guinea in equatorial Africa, Columbus did not receive the command of a ship. He applied himself rather to the study of land and sea geography, geometry, physics and astronomy. His knowledge of heavenly bodies, tides, currents and latitudes fed his fantasies.

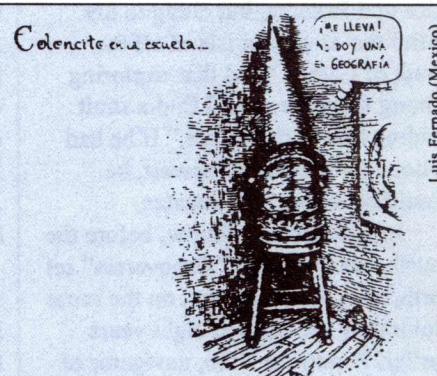
His thirst to discover gold deposits that would make him immensely wealthy, his obsession with spreading Catholicism to every corner he discovered, as well as his vehemence and knack of persuasion, caught the eye of the rulers, courtiers



*Damn it!
Columbus!*



*Indians? What Indians?
Admit it, you're lost!*



*Young Columbus in school...
Oh, darn! I just don't understand geography.*

But for Marino de Tiro, the second-century Greek mathematician, Terra Firma extended 225 degrees, 45 more than those calculated by Ptolemy. On his own, Columbus added another 28 degrees to Marino de Tiro's 225 degrees because of indications culled from Marco Polo, as well as another 30 for the distance between Cathay and Cipango.

This would encompass the continental mass, so that the rest of the sea would leave 77. He subtracted another 9 degrees for a stop he planned to make at the Canaries. Of Ptolemy's 180 degrees, only 68 remained, almost a third to be sailed

sail coastwise when he was thirteen or fourteen years old. He sailed between Genoa and Savona, west as far as Nice and later Portovenere and south to Corsica.

The Centurione, Spinola and Di Negro families, merchants, ship owners and friends of his family, took him as passenger on voyages to the Greek island of Chios and then, also as a passenger, beyond Gibraltar to see the Atlantic. But the fleet, sailing to

² Columbus' corrections did not go far enough to compensate for Ptolemy's miscalculation of a degree measuring 50 nautical miles instead of 60 as was later determined (Editor's note).

and merchants of emerging Spain, enlisted their support for the voyage and, if successful, would earn him the title of Admiral of the Ocean Sea and viceroy and governor of all the lands he discovered.

His inexperience as a sailor brought him into conflict with Martín Alonso Pinzón, who almost led a mutiny on the first voyage and then deserted with the Pinta and its entire crew. Pinzón died five days after the ships returned triumphant to Spain.

His excessive vehemence in maintaining that his arguments were irrefutable and his lack of tact when

giving his reasons, gradually lost him the confidence of the rulers. His third and fourth voyages were authorized “as the best way of getting rid of an irksome postulant rather than out of any interest in acquiring new lands.”

Columbus always thought Cuba was the Malaysian peninsula. If he had sailed 100 miles farther, he would have realized it was an island. But he turned back. On the fourth voyage, he touched Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa

to the Spanish crown and questionable claim to have been the first white man to see the new continent earned him the honor of having his name attached to it.

III

Columbus took 90 men with him in three ships on his first voyage. Except for four foreigners —a Portuguese, a Genoese called Jacobo Rimo, a Venetian and a Calabrese— plus

maneuverable and fit for coastal traffic, though not made for sailing on the high seas. Their triangular lateen sails were replaced by square sails bent to taller masts.

The third caravel, La Gallega —so called because it belonged to a Galician, Juan de la Cosa— was anchored at Palos awaiting cargo. Columbus chartered it and because it was larger than the other two, chose it as his flagship, christening it the Santa María.

The crew aboard the Santa María consisted of 39 men; 27 sailed in the Pinta and in 24 in the Niña.

Columbus, captain of the fleet, was also captain of the Santa María. The captain of the Pinta was Martín Alonso Pinzón, and his brother Vicente commanded the Niña.

Besides sailors, there was an interpreter, Luis de Torres, who knew Hebrew and Arabic; a master-at-arms; a notary and secretary; an accountant and a king’s steward, Pedro Gutiérrez, who was suspected of being a spy for King Ferdinand and Columbus’ enemies at Court.

The voyage lasted 217 days, from August 3, 1492 to March 15, 1493. During that time, they discovered the trade winds; the

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Rica and Panama, but clung to his belief that it was an island off the south of Cathay “and that exploring among them, he would find a strait leading him to the Indies.” If he had followed the coast northwest, he would have touched Yucatan.

In Columbus’ lifetime, before the fourth voyage, other “discoverers” set forth, with royal consent, on the route Columbus had opened eight years earlier. Peralonso Niño, navigator of the Santa María in 1492, discovered the estuary of the Amazon River; Rodrigo de Bastidas sailed from Venezuela to the Gulf of Darien in what is today Panama; Pedro Alvarez Gouvea Cabral, a Portuguese navigator, discovered the coast of Brazil, while the Venetian, Giovanni Caboto, went north in search of the “Seven Cities” on behalf of Henry VII of England.

Alonso de Ojeda reached the Gulf of Paria at the mouth of the Orinoco, which Columbus had explored, and made a fortune of millions in pearls he found there. With him traveled a Florentine, the employee of a commercial bank in Seville, called Americo Vespucci. His later appointment as chief navigator

Columbus, all were Spaniards, mostly Andalusians. Only four were in trouble with the law: one Bartolomé de Torres, who fled Palos after killing a man in a fight; the other three, his friends, helped him escape. Of these, Juan de Moguer became navigator of his ship.

The expedition had powerful sponsors, like Luis de Santangel, the Duke of Medinacelli and Luis de la Cerda, so that Queen Isabella was

never in danger of having to pledge her jewels as collateral. On the contrary, the Crown, under pretext of African contraband recently discovered in the port of Palos, forced the municipality to pay for the construction and fitting out of two caravels for a twelve-month voyage. The Niña and the Pinta were fast,

magnetic pole, different from the geographical one; great banks of algae floating on the water’s surface, making navigating enormously difficult, as well as heretofore unknown birds, vegetation and fruit.

On September 30, Martín Alonso Pinzón thought he saw something resembling an island. False alarm.

“His plan to reach the Orient by sailing west was neither an impulse nor an improvisation. It was the result of a rigorous study of geography”

Something similar happened on October 7, when a bombard was fired from the Niña and a flag hoisted on the mainmast, a signal that land was sighted. The disillusionment added to discontent among the crew.

carrying grains, cereals, grapevines, horses, pigs and sheep. This was the voyage that began colonization, confrontations with natives, disputes between Spaniards and the enslavement of native peoples who,

eaten away by mollusks called "wood worms." He remained shipwrecked in Jamaica for an entire year. He was rescued, transferred to Hispaniola and, from there, returned to Spain.

With his body devastated and his spirit humiliated, he arrived in Seville in October 1504. Though he was only 53 years old, he suffered from gout, and advanced arthritis caused him frequent fevers.

Although he was recognized as Admiral of the Ocean Sea, such was not the case with the titles of viceroy or governor. Only two percent of the rights and privileges from commercial operations were granted him.

Christopher Columbus' life, thought and actions place him at the transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. His theoretical, philosophical and theological views were medieval as were his scientific suppositions. In contrast, his inquiring mind, noteworthy love of nature, capacity —when the moment arrived— to attempt to explain hitherto unobserved phenomena and undefined facts were pure Renaissance.

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On the night of October 11, Columbus believed he saw a light on the rough seas, not revealing it but writing it down in his diary. Pedro Gutiérrez, the king's spy, also saw the light, but Rodrigo Sánchez, the royal inspector, did not.

On the morning of October 12, from the Pinta, seaman Antonio Rodríguez Bermejo cried out the long awaited words: "Land, land!" and won the 10,000 maravedis offered to the first man to sight land on the other side of the Atlantic. But, to the king and queen, Columbus said he had sighted it first and they believed him.

The landing was on the island called Guanahani, which Columbus christened San Salvador, part of the Bahamas archipelago. Then he touched Cuba and Haiti. Columbus' flagship ran aground on a coral reef in Caracol Bay, in what is now Haiti, on Christmas Eve 1492, and its timbers became part of the ill-fated fort and first settlement at Navidad. On the return voyage, two violent storms almost sank the Niña, with Columbus aboard, and the Pinta.

The admiral arrived in Barcelona on April 30, 1493, where the Court was at that time. He was rendered honors reserved only for the great figures of Spain. Two months after his arrival in the Gothic city of Barcelona, news of his discovery had shot all across Europe.

On September 25 of that year, Columbus began his second voyage. He took 1,200 men in 27 ships, also

sent back to Spain, were sold at the slave market in Seville.

On his third voyage, Columbus reached the Gulf of Paria, at the mouth of the Orinoco. There he founded Santo Domingo. But cruelty to the natives and uprisings among the Spaniards led the king and queen to send Francisco de Bobadilla to replace Columbus, who was sent back to Spain in irons.

On his fourth and final voyage, Columbus touched the coast of Central America, which he imagined to be an island. He was shipwrecked in one of his vessels, while the other two were



"Americae relectio", medallions with Christopher Columbus' and Americus Vesputius' portraits.

Joannes Stredan (drawing).
Collaert (engraving).
Antwerp, 1585.

IV

Christopher Columbus' enterprise to enter the Atlantic proposed to demonstrate two things: to reach the Indies by the shortest route and prove the theory that the Earth was round, a truism accepted by all in the 15th century but that had remained unproven until then.

Columbus had studied geography, physics and geometry in depth, he had gone into the classical Greek scientists, he took Marco Polo's descriptions of Cathay and Cipango as dogma, and he considered himself the one to carry out Ezra's Old Testament prophecies.

Living in Portugal, Genoese Columbus voyaged to Iceland and, on the return trip, proved that there were 13-meter tides in the port of Bristol certain times of the year. Therefore, it was impossible for the sea around the continent to end in an abyss, as the Medieval Catholic Church contended. If the tide rose at Bristol, it would necessarily have to drop in another

part of the world and, as it dropped at Bristol, it would rise somewhere else.

Portugal far outstripped the rest of Europe in discoveries, subjugations and colonizations at this time. The Azores, Madeira and African territories from modern Senegal, including Mauritania, to Equatorial Guinea, were Portuguese territories. It had a

Alfonso V of Portugal about the viability of crossing the Atlantic westward as the shortest route to the Indies, to the east.

In an extensive letter accompanied by maps, cartographic reports, and measurements on parallels and meridians, Toscanelli stated that "crossing the Atlantic was the shortest

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powerful fleet and its rulers were all interested in maritime expeditions. A Portuguese, Bartolomé Díaz rounded the Cape of Good Hope, the southernmost tip of Africa, in 1488.

In 1474, Florentine Paolo Toscanelli, a humanist, student of codices, mathematician and geographer, was asked by King

way to reach Asia.” The maps were very detailed and graphically traced the route to Cipango and Cathay, with the possibility of finding islands on the way.

Neither Alfonso V nor his court gave that statement much importance, and the letter and maps were shelved in the royal archives. Though not totally confirmed, Columbus is said to have had access to the letters and knew how to take advantage of their content.

Columbus' detractors say that when he lived in Porto Santo with his Portuguese wife, Felipa Moniz Perestrello, the survivor of a shipwreck from an expedition that had crossed the ocean and found new lands was washed up on that coast. Columbus talked with him, got all the useful information he could out of him, and left him to die (some say killed him so that no one else would know his secret).

When he presented his plan for an Atlantic voyage to King John II of Portugal in 1483, the king did not reject it outright. He submitted it to the consideration of learned men such as cosmographer Diego Ortiz, bishop of Ceuta, and to the Jewish experts in nautical geography, José and Rodrigo Vizinho. They were unanimous in their opinion that Columbus' calculations were incorrect. Following



Columbus meets New World Indians.

R. Bonatti (etching).
P. Polaggi (printing).

this, the king officially turned Columbus down.

The circumstances of Ferdinand and Isabella's official rejection were similar. In May 1486, they received Columbus in Cordoba. Their impression was that the Genoese, besides being knowledgeable about the sea and science, was audacious and ambitious. The plan was presented to them as an instrument for obtaining gold and riches with which they could reconquer Jerusalem.

The proposal was placed in the hands of a commission of experts headed by Father Fernando de Talavera, superior of the Prado monastery and the queen's confessor. It was composed of scholars in different disciplines, almost all professors at the University of Salamanca.

Their judgement was rendered at the end of 1490, more than four years later, and was negative. Columbus' hypotheses were considered "senseless": the distance calculated between Castile and the Indies was just as unlikely as that "there might be a place the existence of which

who vaguely promised support but without confirming anything.

Once again, the monks of La Rábida intervened: Father Diego Deza, Beatriz de Bobadilla, Marquise de Moya and lady-in-waiting to the

or gray eyes, with a steady gaze. His air, as a whole, was quite noble, with a certain solemnity and a marked willpower. Obstinate and silent, with an enigmatic mien. But when he wanted to be persuasive, he expressed

“In 1982, at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, 71 portraits of the navigator were placed side by side, and no two were alike”

queen, her husband Andrés de Cabrera, and the merchant Luis de Santangel, Columbus once again presented his plan to the Spanish king and queen at Santa Fe, the Christian camp near Granada.

The Castilian bureaucracy took three months to draw up the contract between the Crown and Columbus. It was signed on April 17, 1492, the date on which preparations officially began for the voyage that was to change the world.

himself with ease and this happened when he wanted something.

As far as we know, he was never obsessed with women. Many different passions bound his heart. But, though he was attractive, he had an almost impassive lack of concern for the opposite sex, a kind of cold disposition to let women throw themselves at him. He had love affairs, but awaited them unmoved, searching and not searching, a prisoner of desires that were not exactly his own.

His wife, Felipa Moniz Perestrello, whom he married in Lisbon in 1468 and who bore his son Diego, belonged to a family of some nobility related to courtly circles. Her father, a cultivated man of the sea, belonged to a circle of young men educated by Henry the Navigator at the famous school at Sagres.

He participated in the discovery of Madeira around 1437 and headed the expedition that occupied Porto Santo. For that, he received the title of governor and the right to govern. Later, he was a municipal advisor in Lisbon.

Felipa's father had already died when Columbus met her and the family's rank and fortunes were somewhat diminished. But for Columbus, the marriage meant a step upward in Portuguese society. Felipa died around 1485 and, so it appears, without the widower showing much despair.

“Although of medieval spirit, Columbus was a Christian and a Catholic in the modern sense”

could still be unknown so many millennia after having been created by God.”

Columbus was almost not received at Court in 1491. His insistence became bothersome for rulers concerned with fighting their final battle against the Moslems and their stronghold in Granada. They had little interest in maritime adventures and discoveries.

Columbus made representations to Charles VIII of France and Henry VII of England, but to no avail. He again approached John II of Portugal,

V No one can say with certainty what Christopher Columbus was really like. At the 1982 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, 71 portraits of the navigator were placed side by side and no two were alike. With and without moustache, differing skin tones, a face sometimes long, sometimes oval.

His biographers describe him as having a Nazarene air, hair dishevelled, reddish, a flaming blond that soon turned white. A man of good stature, “taller than average,” lively clear-blue

In pursuit of the king and queen, Columbus resided in Cordoba from the end of 1485 and all of 1486. There he met the beautiful Beatriz Enríquez de Harana, fifteen years his junior. Stunned by the warm words of the Genoese, by his fantasies and dreams of wealth, she was fascinated by him. She became his lover, giving birth to his second son, Fernando, in August 1488.

wanted. And Columbus, though no conquistador of women, was not used to saying no either.

It has also been said that Queen Isabella's pulse quickened when Columbus appeared at Court. Isabella was the same age as Columbus, had honey-colored hair, light-colored eyes and white skin. She was not tall and her figure was rather round. All told, there was a mixture of softness and

and apostasy were one and the same thing.

There is likewise evidence of his negative characteristics: his fondness for money and privilege, his mistrust, miserliness, nepotism, indifference to the terrible practice of slavery and, above all, pride. In the final years of his life, he felt he was the man to initiate the Third Era: the era of the Holy Spirit.

No one can deny that Columbus was a great geographer: self-taught, but sensitive, sharp and inspired. Having just arrived in the New World, he was an attentive observer of the land, plants, animal behavior, distribution of heat and variations in the Earth's magnetism.

His was not the case of a fortunate traveler become discoverer by chance. He was the inventor of a hitherto unheard of idea.

From the Late Paleolithic on, 20 or 25 thousand years ago, the Americas had been populated by men who crossed the Bering Strait. When Columbus landed in San Salvador, there were millions of inhabitants on the continent. Great civilizations prospered and others had already disappeared.

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Beatriz came from a family of vintners with their own lands near Santa María de Trasierra, near Cordoba. Beatriz was well-to-do, knew how to read and write, qualities infrequent in women not of the nobility. The relationship with Columbus differed little from marriage, though the navigator never married her.

Christopher Columbus was a poor man who knew how to choose well-to-do women. First his wife Felipa, then Beatriz. There is talk of others, but no historical proof.

The intervention of Beatriz de Bobadilla, Marquise of Moya, was very important in getting the queen to authorize Columbus' plan. Some say that Columbus never married Beatriz Enríquez de Harana so as not to awaken the marquise's jealousy and lose the benefit of her access to the Court.

When Columbus began his first voyage, he put in at Canary Islands and stayed from August 12 to September 6 on Gomera Island, where Beatriz de Bobadilla was governor. The Marquise of Moya was young, beautiful, energetic and impetuous. She knew what she

arrogance, but a sensitive spirit with a propensity to give reign to fantasies.

To judge from his encounters with different women throughout his lifetime, Columbus must have been a fascinating man. He was pleasant-looking upon first appearance and women instinctively opened their arms to him more than he did or probably had intentions of doing.

“Columbus' merit rests on the fact that his voyage proved there was no abyss on the other side of the ocean”

Although of medieval spirit, Columbus was a Christian and a Catholic in the modern sense. He had a solid, sincere, inexhaustible faith, free of superstition and hypocrisy at all times. He was never a clergyman nor did he hesitate to confront clerics in defense of his plan and to demonstrate its viability at a time when, in the eyes of the Inquisition, dissent from dogma

Columbus' merit rests on the fact that his voyage demonstrated that there was no abyss on the other side of the ocean. There was more land. Only because of his voyage, Europe, Asia and Africa became aware of the existence of a new world. And the Americas became aware of the existence of three other continents. It was a mutual encounter that deeply changed the course of history ❧