

## 4 Vespucci Participates in the Expedition of the Four Merchants (1497-1498)

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### 4.1 The Organisation of Overseas Voyages is Promoted Without Success

The port of Seville, situated on the Guadalquivir River at 80 km from its mouth, was safe, but at the end of the 15th century began to have problems, as larger ships with greater draughts were being planned and built, which could barely navigate the river due to their size. Consequently, the naval traffic decreased and the shipyards had to move elsewhere. The port's crisis seemed without remedy and those who ran it and the many people who worked there sought new solutions.

In the meantime, King Ferdinand of Aragon, who had taken control of Spain's colonial expansion and mistrusted Christopher Columbus, had planned how to develop Hispaniola/Haiti and exploit those faraway lands to the maximum. With this aim, the King issued a decree, dated April 10, 1495,<sup>1</sup> which liberalised the exploration of the 'West Indies' and offered incentives for the settlement of the island of Haiti by Europeans. With this decree, he allowed anyone, after minimal vetting and reduced taxation, the chance to venture towards the west or move to Haiti for their own commercial interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes*, vol. 2, document no. LXXXVI, 186. The decree, issued when the Admiral had been in Haiti/Hispaniola for about a year, was revoked following the protests of the person concerned on June 2, 1497 (see Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes*, document CXIII, 224) when the four merchants had already departed. With regard to these so-called 'minor voyages', that author writes: "as these expeditions were undertaken by private individuals or at their own expense, their diaries and itineraries are not preserved" (vol. 2, 3, fn. 1). This information perhaps also refers to the voyage of the four merchants.



**Figure 4.1** The voyage of the 'Four Merchants', Vespucci's first transoceanic journey between May 10, 1497 and October 8, 1498, departure from Cadiz and stopover at the Canary Islands; 1) arrival at about latitude 6°N on the coast of the new continent and 2) visit to a Tupí tribe; the fleet may have sailed along the coasts of the Lesser and Greater Antilles (dotted line) and 3) from there, arrival at a stilt-house village (latitude 20°N) where they receive a hostile reception; 4) the fleet continues almost to the Tropic of Cancer where they encounter a Huastec population in the province of Parias. Return south along the eastern coast of the isthmus where they obtain interesting geographical information from the natives 5) with a stopover in the Gulf of Honduras and 6) arrival at the port of Caracas in June 1498, where the ships are repaired and re-equipped; 7) arrival at the island of Grenada, where 320 Cannibals are taken prisoner; 8) course set for the Azores, for the return to Cadiz

Moreover, the cosmographer Jaime Ferrer, having arrived in the Andalusian capital near the end of 1496, spread the contents of a letter, endorsed by Queen Isabella, affirming that the most precious spices and even great riches in gold, pearls and precious stones were to be found south of the Equator in eastern Asia, in the Moluccas. Jaime Ferrer was well-informed, having travelled in the Arab countries of the Near East, and was eloquent, so that in the lively city of Seville he found great success.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the economic and political conditions were in place for attempting the adventure of crossing the ocean for one's own purposes; such an undertaking was made even more attractive by the able propaganda spread by Jaime Ferrer. Therefore, it is surprising that for about two years no initiatives at all were taken.

<sup>2</sup> On the influence of J. Ferrer on navigators' choices, see Taviani, "Jaime Ferrer e il terzo viaggio di scoperta di Cristoforo Colombo". See also Consuelo Varela, *Colón y los florentinos*, 97 fn. 20.

## 4.2 Four Merchants Form a Cooperative to Cross the Ocean and Reach Asia

It is likely that the main obstacle to any initiative was of a financial nature. The first to decide to attempt the venture were four merchants who formed a cooperative which foresaw that all the partners would travel at their own risk and the net profit would be equally divided among the surviving partners.

It is very important to make an effort to understand the events of this overseas expedition which, after Columbus' one, was the first to be carried out autonomously, because it was the longest exploration accomplished at that time, having lasted 15 and a half months. Not only that, it is also the journey during which some protagonists of that great season of sea adventures completed their preparations and acquired complete confidence in their capabilities, Amerigo Vespucci first.

It is very likely that among the four captains were included Juan de La Cosa and Vicente Yáñez Pinzón, veterans of the first voyage of Columbus. The Admiral left both of them on land when he was planning his third trip, and they both had money, since the Queen had generously indemnified the first for the loss of the *Santa María* shipwrecked the night of Christmas 1492, the latter for the early loss of his brother Martín Alonso, who fell ill during the trip and died immediately after returning to Palos.

It should be added, decisively, that they both knew the route to return to Europe, having followed it under Columbus himself, and that they had received the confidences of Martín Alonso about what he had seen during his desertion to the west, which lasted 45 days; and they were eager to repeat it in turn. Finally, it is certain that the young noble Martín Fernández de Enciso, who from Vespucci's will appeared to be the owner of the bombards taken on board ship, also participated in the journey of the Four Merchants.

The expedition, which departed with King Ferdinand's permission, granted via Bishop Fonseca, was organised in such a way as to make a substantial saving on initial expenditure. They would purchase the minimum amount of provisions, confident of acquiring the rest during the voyage, thus avoiding any waste due to the very hot climate, which spoiled foodstuffs after only a few months. Above all, they would avoid advancing two or three months pay for the crew, as was the custom at the time, by dividing among everyone what they would gain during the voyage. In short, the way to operate when faced by a lack of capital was to organise a cooperative. It may be presumed that Vespucci also put the remaining equipment from the shipyard he had directed for two years into this venture and that Martín de Enciso contributed the bombards he had at his disposition.<sup>3</sup>

It is certain that, when everything was ready, there were four captains, an overall crew of 57 men, 14 or 15 for each of the four caravels, all of which quite large in tonnage. The plan involved great risks, but maximum caution would lessen them.

The fleet set sail from Cadiz on May 10, 1497. In a few days, the expedition reached the Canary Islands where they took on supplies of water and firewood, while fish had been caught in the bountiful shallows of the Atlantic coast of Morocco and immediately dried in the sun. They departed from

<sup>3</sup> Source of this information is Vespucci's *Will*, published by Varela in the appendix to her book *Colón y los florentinos*.



**Figure 4.2** The Lagartos lagoon and the Tecolutla River, near present-day Veracruz in Mexico. In one of these places, perhaps the Four Merchants encountered the stilthouse-dwelling cannibals

the Canary Islands on a W-¼SW course, which according to geographical knowledge of the time would have taken them to the Malay Peninsula situated by the Equator in the Indian Ocean. In actual fact, following that route, after sailing for about forty days with favourable trade winds, the caravels reached the coast of the New World at the latitude of 6° north, along which runs a large stretch of the coast of present-day Suriname.<sup>4</sup>

### 4.3 Vespucci Describes Those Far-off Lands and their Inhabitants

After a first unsuccessful attempt to land, Amerigo, who had not forgot the disaster of his four ships on the coast of Andalusia, proposed that the four caravels anchor in safe waters at a certain distance from the shore. Forty sailors ‘in good order’ took boats ashore, while the rest of the crews remained on board to guard the ships. Numerous natives had gathered on the beach, but they turned and ran before the sailors landed: the men and women were naked. Neither the nudity nor the shyness of the people was a surprise to the Spanish; some were veterans of Columbus’ voyage and all

<sup>4</sup> Not at 16° N as appears by mistake in the various versions of “Lettera a Soderini”, which is unacceptable for various reasons. Don Martín de Navarrete, historian of Renaissance navigation, corrects the error in this way: “parece cierto que la recalada fué á la costas de la Guyana que estan entre 5° y 6° lat. N” (de Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos*, vol. 3, 200 fn.). Germán Arciniegas (1955), correctly believing that Vespucci was sincere, reconstructed this voyage without taking into account the misprint; hence he began on the wrong foot. Vespucci, however, who intended to reach the Spice Islands situated in the Asian east, specifies that he departed from Gran Canaria on a W¼SW course; by following this he would have reached the coast of present-day Suriname. Magnaghi (*Amerigo Vespucci: Studio critico*), having checked where the chosen course would have led, states that they would have reached the coast at 6° N and not 16° N; however, he concludes that the confusion about the numbers confirms that the “Lettera a Soderini” is a fake.

were informed about the natives' behaviour. They left the trinkets they had brought with them in full view on the beach: mirrors, necklaces of shiny glass beads and rattles. Such an offering enticed the natives who the next day came out to meet the friendly and cheerful strangers. They came unarmed bringing their women and children with them.

After this first contact, the Spanish decided to explore the territory, travelling a long way inland in search of treasures but finding almost nothing. "Their riches are plumes from the most colourful birds, or bracelets made from fish bones or white or green stones [...] or many other things that for us are of no value at all",<sup>5</sup> wrote a disappointed Amerigo.

During the excursions inland, the sailors observed the fauna, which according to Amerigo had some similarities with the African one, in addition to the characteristics and customs of the natives, of the Tupí group (not the Taino) who populated the coasts of the Caribbean Sea. Amerigo included various types of useful information in his report:<sup>6</sup> they were armed with well-made bows and arrows, but the arrowhead was a fish bone or bone fragment, as they did not have iron; they were skilled archers and, in some places, even women used the bow. They also had spears, the tips hardened by fire, and clubs whose heads were decorated with beautiful sculptures.

Amerigo added other information about the physical capabilities of these people, which information probably derived from the habit of observing the human merchandise when he worked in the slave trade as an employee of Berardi. They were tall and agile runners – he explained – and tireless swimmers, the women even more so than the men; one can see them swimming alone as far as two leagues out from the beach (twenty kilometres there and back); these women were also able to carry burdens that men were unable to, and carry them for incredible distances. Such differentiation can still be observed today in primitive (and not so primitive) human communities: *to men the arms, to the women the burdens*.

Next Amerigo seemed to digress on a completely unrelated topic: "They talk little and in low voices, using the same accents as ourselves, as they form the words either on the palate or teeth or lips, except they use other names for things".<sup>7</sup> A humanistic attention to issues of pronunciation can be observed in this note, but it is also linked to the evaluation of a slave's price, which is lowered by a guttural pronunciation that made it difficult to communicate with the master. In addition to this note, which can be defined as of a 'professional type', Amerigo described the skin colour, facial features – which recalled those of the Tartars – the stature, and in particular, the robust conformation of the women's bodies that did not seem to suffer any ill effects from multiple births and breast-feeding.

He then gave a detailed ethnographic description of a human population whose cultural development, due to their long isolation, stopped at the phase preceding the agricultural revolution of the Late Neolithic period: the people were naked and 'of cleanly habits, constantly washing themselves'. They dedicated much time to shaving and removing their hair, even pulling out their eyebrows and the lashes from the 'covers of the eyes', as Vespucci calls the eyelids momentarily forgetting the correct word in Italian. The

<sup>5</sup> "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 104vb.

<sup>6</sup> "Lettera a Soderini", folios 103-106ra.

<sup>7</sup> "Lettera a Soderini", folio 103va.

men shaved their temples as well as their beards. They respected the basic rules of hygiene and hid themselves away when they needed to defecate, but urinated freely in public.

They lived in large communal dwellings (later known as *malocas*), which were about 5 to 6 metres wide and as much as 15 times that in length; they had a barrel-shaped roof and two small entrances at the ends, and were supported on large posts driven into the ground. The walls and roof were made of palm leaves. Inside, other posts supported hammocks along two sides; these hammocks were made from robust cotton netting and were pleasant to sleep in: below them, a fire of plant material – I think mainly tobacco – was lit, not for heat but to keep the blood-sucking insects at bay, a common torment in those places. Every 8 to 10 years the entire village was abandoned and reconstructed elsewhere for reasons of hygiene and so that the forest could grow there again, an expedient that is still used today by the indigenous populations of Papua.

The people were healthy and long-lived and, when necessary, knew how to cure themselves with their diet, with various herbs and by letting blood, not from the arms but from the thigh or calves. For more serious illnesses they used a drastic cure that seems lethal but is usually effective: the patient, even with a high or rising fever, was first bathed from head to foot in cold water and then fires are made all around him to keep the temperature high, while all the time he is turned backwards and forwards. After about two hours of this treatment, the patient was finally left to sleep. A very strange procedure, so much so that some authors believe this to be an invented story. However, about twelve years later, Giovanni da Verrazzano, also a great navigator, described a similar cure with heat used by the natives of present-day North Carolina to treat one of his sailors who was half-drowned.

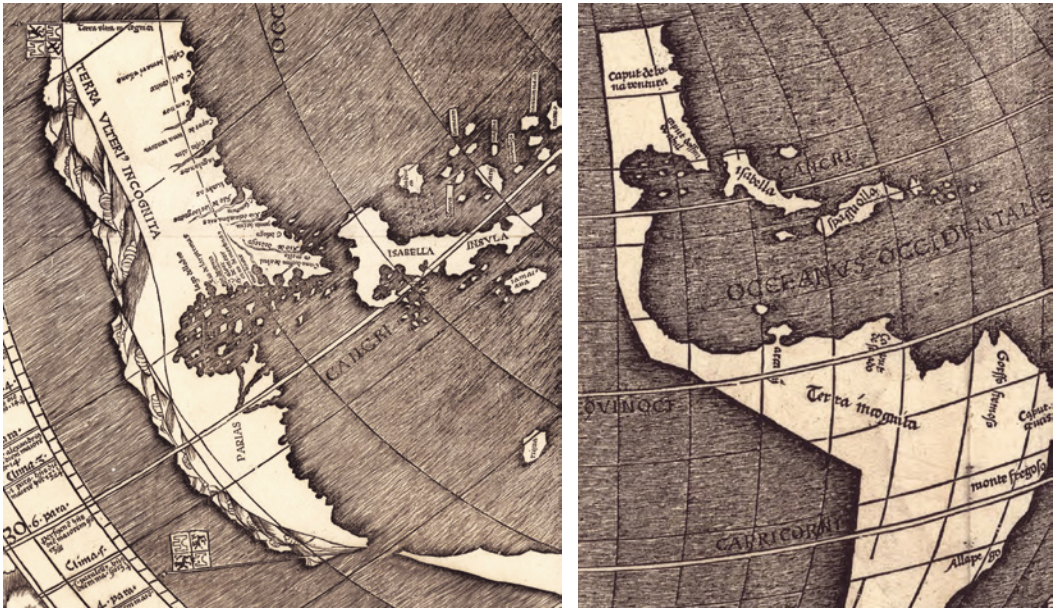
Continuing on the topic of health and hygiene, Vespucci added that the women had easy births and after a few hours the mother got up, washed herself and the baby, and was back to normal the next day. If however the pregnant woman left her man, she could interrupt the pregnancy by the use of certain herbs.

Their food consisted of sweet potatoes and manioc which, when grated, could be reduced to starch or flour that was good for making bread. Amerigo stated that the Tupí did not have wheat or any other type of grain (and therefore they did not know maize), they ate lots of fish and seafood, very little meat, which was mainly human flesh. They ate a large amount of fruit, which they also fermented in terracotta pots to make alcoholic drinks.

Food and drink were prepared in abundance by the community, and each person could eat and drink as much as they liked when they liked.

Amerigo also gave a careful and very detailed description of the social customs of the Tupí Indios which, as a result of his words, were summarised by the fake phonetic indication: they had neither R, nor F, nor L, which meant they have neither Royal ruler, nor Faith, nor any Laws. Indeed, their society had no hierarchy, nor was it ruled by laws, also because private property did not exist, nor did they practice matrimony. As to faith, Vespucci observed that they were not Christian, or Hebrew, or Mohammedan, or even idolaters. “Perhaps they are Epicurean”, he concluded with amazement, adding, “[t]hey do not bring men to justice, nor punish offenders, nor do the fathers or mothers chastise their children, and surprisingly we never or hardly ever saw them quarrel”.<sup>8</sup>

8 “Lettera a Soderini”, folio 104va.



**Figure 4.3** In these two images, both from the Waldseemüller's Map and derived from Amerigo Vespucci, the isthmus between North and South America appears for the first time; the two stubby peninsulas of the Yucatán and Honduras extend eastward and the Tropic of Cancer is mistakenly drawn between them. On the western side of the isthmus, there is a mountain chain and then the Pacific Ocean. A comparison of the two drawings shows that the opening leading from the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean is no longer present on the right-hand map and that the two exaggeratedly large islands situated in the Gulf of Honduras also disappear. © Library of Congress, Washington DC (USA)

After a couple of fruitless months of searching for treasures, the four captains gathered to decide what to do. The natives had informed them that the coast continued both on one side and on the other for a long stretch without opening towards the west.

#### 4.4 Conjectures Regarding a Gap in the Narration

Little doubt remains about this first part of the journey of the Four Merchants: Amerigo's description of many details about life and customs of the Tupí-Guaraní tribes coincides with the descriptions made by Hans Staden in 1557 and, independently, by André Thevet the following year,<sup>9</sup> as well as with those by many modern anthropologists.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Thevet knew the writings of Vespucci whom he vividly praised. Before these descriptions, Thomas More's *Utopia* appeared around 1516, a work in which from the first page the four journeys made by Amerigo (in 1497, in 1498, in 1500 and in 1503) are spoken of.

<sup>9</sup> Staden, *Warhaftige Historia und beschreibung eyner Landtschafft* (copies of the original text and the English translation can be found online); Thevet, *Les singularitez de la France antarctique*.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Métraux, *La civilisation matérielle des tribus Tupi-Guarani*.

However, after the stop in the current Surinam, which lasted until October/November 1497, a gap appears that lasts at least until February of the following year. Vespucci referred to his notebook titled *The Four Journeys* in which he was to give an accurate and detailed account of his overseas travels. The narrative then resumes with the episode of the clash with the cannibals of the stilt houses around February 1498. Where did the fleet of the Four Merchants sail during the three months from November 1497 to January 1498? The reconstruction of that itinerary is very important to reconstruct the history not only of Amerigo but also of Juan de La Cosa, Vicente Yáñez Pinzón and many others.

Proceeding to the north was for Juan de La Cosa and Vicente Yáñez Pinzón preferable than going even more into the unknown, and for both the curiosity of finding the places described by Martín Alonso during the 45 days of his desertion must have been strong.

Thus, they headed north and, having reached Trinidad, set course along the arc of the Lesser Antilles. Of this itinerary, quite obvious because it was known to two of the captains who were veterans of Columbus' first two voyages, we find traces in the *Prima lettera familiare* in which various narratives of Amerigo's first journey are mixed with the account of the second journey. The mention of the "endless islands I had seen"<sup>11</sup> cannot refer to the second journey. Of the Lesser Antilles there is also a trace in the "Lettera a Soderini"<sup>12</sup> Weak traces, that still leave some room for doubt, but on the Waldseemüller's map there is a safer indication: the island of the Pulzelle located in the wrong place (at 30° S) but certainly drawn by Vespucci, and called the Island of Guadalupe by Christopher Columbus. The fleet commanded by Juan de La Cosa revolved around the island, whose shape is very well approximated to the real one. It is not known whether the sailors arrived land, but eventually they reached Hispaniola/Haiti rejoining the Spanish colonists.

The Four Merchants did not know that the Spanish Monarchs had forbidden to visit the lands discovered by Christopher Columbus to those who did not have the proper authorisation. In fact, Columbus had protested loudly against the liberalization of trade with these islands, which as we have seen, violated the *Capitulación de Santa Fe* that gave him total control over the management of voyages westward across the Ocean. For this reason, King Ferdinand had revoked this decree, ordering that whoever crossed the Ocean must stay away from the lands discovered by the Admiral. When Amerigo, returning to Seville, learned that he had unintentionally violated a royal decree, he decided to keep silent about what he had done and seen in those places, omitting the compromising step.

#### 4.5 A Cruel Clash

When the narration resumes, Vespucci let it be understood that the fleet, travelling north-west, reached a point 80 leagues from where the Tropic of Cancer touched the eastern coast of Mexico. Up to this point, relations with the natives had been friendly, but here the expedition had a dangerous

<sup>11</sup> "Prima lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 45vb.

<sup>12</sup> "Lettera a Soderini", folio 109vb.



encounter with a tribe of Camballi (or Cannibals) who lived near a port of Campeche, not far from the 20° N parallel.

Vespucci recounted this episode to the *gonfaloniere* Piero Soderini:

we found a population [a village] built over water like at Venice: there were about 44 large houses supported on very thick piles, and they had doors or entrances like drawbridges; and from one house there was a way to reach all the others via the drawbridges that led from house to house. When the people saw us, they showed they were afraid and immediately drew up all the bridges. While looking at this wonder, we saw approaching by sea about 22 canoes, the type of boat they use made by hollowing out a single tree. They came to our ships, and seemed to gaze with marvel at our clothes, and us, but kept their distance. Thus, we made signs to them to come to us, giving assurances of friendship; and seeing that they did not approach we went to them, but they did not wait for us and went ashore making signs that we should wait and they would soon return. They went behind a hill and it was not long before they returned.

When they returned, they brought 16 of their young girls, who got into the canoes with them and came to our boats, and in each boat they put 4, and we were as much surprised by this as your Magnificence will be; they were among the boats in their canoes speaking with us, which we took as a sign of friendship.

Then we saw many people coming from the houses swimming in the sea; and as they approached us, and us not suspecting anything, at that moment some old women appeared at the doors crying out and tearing their hair in sign of great sadness. This made us suspect something and each man took up his arms; and suddenly the girls on our ships threw themselves into the sea, and the men in the canoes came toward us and began to shoot with bows and arrows. Those who were swimming carried a spear hidden below the water as much as possible. As soon as we recognized this treachery, we began not only to defend ourselves but also to attack them vigorously and sank many of their canoes with our boats.<sup>13</sup>

From this account, it may be deduced that Vespucci and his companions met hostile Indians who attacked them by surprise since they had previous experiences of invaders with heinous behaviour, after which the natives had studied how to react if such people returned. Who were these invaders? Only the crew of the *Pinta* could have arrived in that place at the end of December 1492, preceding the sailors on board the four caravels belonging to the merchants arrived from Cadiz.<sup>14</sup>

Amerigo concludes his narration with the following words:

We captured two girls and three men, and went to their houses and entered them, but found only two old women and a sick man. We took many of their things but they were of little value, and we did not burn their houses because we would have felt pangs of conscience; and we returned

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<sup>13</sup> "Lettera a Soderini", folio 106vb.

<sup>14</sup> If archaeologists were to find remains of these stilt houses, they would add another piece of evidence to this reconstruction.

to our boats with five prisoners and then to the ships and put irons on the feet of each, except for the girls. The next night the girls and one of the men escaped with great cunning.<sup>15</sup>

The astuteness used for this escape is, I believe, the same narrated by Michele de Cuneo regarding three Indio prisoners, destined to be shot by arrows, on which “fettters were placed, but at night they gnawed at each other’s heels with their teeth with such ability that they got out of the fettters and escaped”.<sup>16</sup> The Spanish were left with two Camballi, whom the crew took with them on the rest of the journey.

The next day, the fleet began sailing northward, following the coastline. When they had travelled 80 leagues, the sailors saw a large number of people along a beach, estimating them to be about 4,000. It was March 1498. They agreed among themselves to go and meet them, but in the time it took to put their boats in the water and reach the shore the natives had disappeared leaving many of their things on the beach. A group of sailors followed the tracks that led to a nearby forest and discovered an encampment where the natives had cooked many freshly caught fish and other strange animals. One of these was alive, tied up with a rope, “it looked like a serpent, but it had no wings, and was so horrible in appearance that they wondered at its proud demeanour”.<sup>17</sup> They were in fact iguanas, harmless herbivorous lizards with long claws whose meat was very good to eat. The sailors did not touch any of the food; instead they left many things in view that they knew the Indios would like such as mirrors, rattles and necklaces of glass beads, and then returned to the ship. The next morning, the unarmed natives were all on the beach with their women and children, who celebrated noisily, and they cheerfully welcomed the Spanish who had come ashore.

Vespucci narrated:

we agreed that 23 of us Christians should go with them in good order and with the firm resolve to die as good men if necessary. When we had been there almost three days, we went with them into the interior. At three leagues from the beach, we came to a village with a large population and few houses (there were no more than nine), where we were welcomed with so many barbarous ceremonies that the pen will not suffice to write them down; there were dances and songs and tears mixed with joy and lots of food. We stayed the night in this place and they offered us their women, from whom we could not defend ourselves.<sup>18</sup>

A prehistoric version of *la dolce vita*. Such unbridled merriment coincides with that narrated by Cabral’s companions when they reached the New World two years later and one thousand leagues further south (see Chapter 8).

The description of the customs and social organisation of a population close to the Aztec empire opens an interesting window on some aspects of the recent evolution of human society. It must be added that the character-

<sup>15</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”, folios 106vb-107ra.

<sup>16</sup> “Lettera a G. Annari”, ll. 228-32.

<sup>17</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 107rb. The idea that a snake could have wings may derive from the Aztec myth.

<sup>18</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”, folio 108ra.

istics noted by Vespucci found parallels in other populations both near and far, as we will see below with reference to the Tupí of Porto Seguro.

When they began to understand each other better – these people spoke a rather different language from the others – Vespucci learnt that he was in the province of Parias,<sup>19</sup> and so he calculated the latitude and discovered that this was just below the parallel of the Tropic of Cancer and marked that name on the map he was preparing. This name can be found written on the Waldseemüller Map, and from later chronicles we learn that the people who had given them such a warm welcome were the Huastecs and they lived in the northern part of the Aztec empire, in the area around the present-day city of Tampico. The four merchants did not realise that they were so close to the most advanced indigenous population in that vast area. Before departing, as Easter would fall shortly after, on 15 April, they wanted to convert their new friends: “We set up a baptismal font and many people were baptized and they called us, in their language, *carai*bi which means *men of great wisdom*”.<sup>20</sup> This is the first attempt to evangelize the Indians and, for many decades to come, will remain the only one.

The fleet of the four merchants left the province of Parias a few days after Easter 1498, sailing along the luxuriant coast of the isthmus that joins the two great continental masses of the New World. The expedition landed numerous times in the hope of bartering modest trifles for precious spices and gold. There were no spices and all they saw of gold were some pieces the natives wore as decoration on their ears and neck. Amerigo wrote, “in many places we bartered gold and not in great quantity, but did much in discovering the land and in ascertaining that [the natives] had gold”.<sup>21</sup> This gold came from the mine situated between Panama and Costa Rica, which Columbus would identify during his final voyage.

In the Mosquito Gulf, where they arrived in early June after thirteen months of navigation, the crewmen were suffering great hardships. There was little food and it had gone bad. The ships, bored into by shipworms,<sup>22</sup> were taking on water and the men working the pumps were exhausted. There was an urgent need to repair the ships and return home. Therefore, they headed to a port “the best in the world”, as Amerigo wrote. Such a description of the port of Caracas was certainly exaggerated, but it was fair for that stretch of coast.

The captains met to plan their return: prior to leaving Cadiz they had decided that, if no gold or spices were found, they would make up for the expenses of the voyage by capturing prisoners to sell as slaves; the ships and their equipment were chosen with a view to this eventuality. Therefore, in repairing the ships, they needed to adapt them to the purpose of transporting large numbers of people. Amerigo had a great deal of experience in this regard.

Having reached Caracas, they chose a wide beach with a slight slope. Before dragging the ships, their only security, up onto the beach, the sailors built a bastion on which all the cannons were positioned in such a way as to

<sup>19</sup> In the printed Latin text of Saint-Dié, it reads *Lariab* instead of *Parias*, an error caused perhaps by damage to the manuscript.

<sup>20</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 109ra.

<sup>21</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”, folio 109ra.

<sup>22</sup> Shipworms are long white molluscs (with a rudimentary shell) that bore into tree trunks floating in the sea, and they feed in the same way on ships’ timber.

create a wide range of action. When this was done, they began to prepare and caulk the ships, using brass sheeting to repair the worst leaks. Bars were also installed for locking below deck the captives they intended to take.

The people of the place gave a great deal of help and brought their own foodstuffs, as the provisions put on board in Cadiz were by now inedible. They helped drag heavy loads and in turn observed the use of iron and unknown tools. It was a brotherly collaboration. In that peaceful climate, once the linguistic barriers were overcome, the Indios complained of raids by people that lived on a faraway island, who came in their canoes, attacked and killed many and then ate them, capturing others to take as slaves and then devour them later on their island. They asked to be defended from those cruel people.

The captains promised to do something and, when everything was ready for their departure and the request for help was repeated, they agreed to help on the condition that their allies came back by their own means, as they had to continue their journey onwards. Seven natives accepted, and were welcomed on board: "And so we departed from these people leaving many friends there".<sup>23</sup>

They crossed the southern part of the Caribbean Sea on an east-northeasterly course and after seven days of navigation reached a chain of small and large islands (see § 4.4), some deserted, others inhabited, until they sighted an island called 'Iti' by its inhabitants, perhaps the present-day island of Grenada. Well-armed men boarded the tenders and attempted to land. About 400 naked men and women were standing on the beach armed with spears, bows and arrows, and many carried a small square shield placed in such a way that it did not impede the use of the bow.

They were Camballi, and they stood proud and warlike intent to prevent the foreigners from landing. Indeed, when the tenders came within range, they entered the water and began loosing arrows. Amerigo had time to note: "All had painted their bodies with different colours and were adorned with feathers".<sup>24</sup> The Indios on board the Spanish ships explained that when they presented themselves in this way they meant to fight. The sailors fired several bombard shots from the boats; hearing the noise and seeing several of their own dead or wounded, the proud fighters retreated.

After consultation, the captains decided to follow them, and when they reached them the natives began loosing arrows and injured some of their pursuers, keeping a distance to avoid hand to hand fighting. Yet, there was no escape. The crossbow men and gunners killed several natives and finally the sailors used their swords and spears to kill still more. The surviving Camballi fled to the hills and forests, while the victors returned to the ships, tired but satisfied; the seven friendly natives, who had fought and won with them, were so pleased they could hardly contain themselves.

The next day the warriors of the island regrouped and many came to the beach in great numbers blowing horns and other instruments, all painted and adorned with feathers: "It was a very strange thing to behold them".<sup>25</sup> Once again, the captains quickly consulted with each other, took up arms, and prepared to land and face those who appeared as enemies. This time 57

<sup>23</sup> "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 109vb.

<sup>24</sup> "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 110ra.

<sup>25</sup> "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 110rb.

of them landed, including the 7 friendly Indios, and divided into four detachments, each with its own captain, while seven unfit men were left to guard the ships. It was not difficult to land as the islanders kept their distance fearing the bombard shots. The fighting lasted a long time, and many of the native warriors were killed or wounded, while those of them who could retreat and fled. The sailors followed them to their village where they captured 250 prisoners and burnt their houses.

The Spanish lost one man and half of them were wounded. Five of the seven Indios who bravely fought with them were also wounded: they were given seven prisoners (one for each of them), four women and three men. With a canoe taken from the beach, they returned home “very happy and amazed at our power”.<sup>26</sup>

In narrating these brutal events, Amerigo stressed that the enslaved natives were cruel enemies, beaten in battle and not harmless people captured through treachery. Indeed, he let it be understood that all his companions, who had acted valorously, shared this opinion.

Once the prisoners were locked up in the hold, they quickly departed; there were over 200 extra mouths to feed. They navigated northward as far as the latitude of the Azores, and from there the fleet turned east and reached the islands as planned. There they took on provisions and then set sail for the Iberian Peninsula.

It should be noted that, after leaving the Antilles, the fleet did not take the shortest route, which would have been the natural choice; instead it followed the much longer route that Columbus had planned for his return from his first voyage. This could not have been by chance, and it can be presumed that one captain of this journey was veteran of the first voyage of Columbus and remembered the route followed well.

Unfortunately, the contrary winds blew the four caravels a long way off course to the south, as far as the Canary Islands. From there they reached Madeira and after 67 days landed at Cadiz; it was October 15, 1498. During this interminably slow zigzag across the ocean, one sailor who had been wounded in the fighting died, as did about thirty prisoners closed in the confined space of the hold.

On arrival at Cadiz we sold our slaves, of which we had 200, the rest having died in the gulf. Deducting the cost of all the wear and tear on the ships, we were left with about 200 ducats, and these had to be divided in 55 parts, so that each Christian received little. Yet, we were happy to have survived.<sup>27</sup>

Amerigo completed his first ocean crossing in the company of expert and determined people, one of whom was certainly Juan de La Cosa. The voyage was full of difficulties and dangerous events. He had contributed, with his experience as the director of a shipyard and as *maestre* in the slave trade, to the success of the entire expedition. This made him gain the respect of his companions in adventure and many others, and this respect provided him with the opportunities to undertake further voyages.

<sup>26</sup> “Lettera a Soderini”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 110va.

<sup>27</sup> “Prima lettera familiare”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 46va.

Vespucci was aware that this first voyage had had a very positive influence and in the “Lettera a Soderini” he wrote more pages about it than he would dedicate to all the other voyages together.

#### 4.6 The Voyage of the Four Merchants is Authentic

In the period from the end of the 19th century to almost the middle of the 20th century, the ‘Vespucci question’ escalated and many accusations focused on the narration of the voyage, which I called here that ‘of the Four Merchants’, which was claimed to have never occurred and had been entirely invented. There were three reasons for such a sentence, which discredited both the *Mundus novus* and the “Lettera a Soderini”, both in the Italian and the Latin version. Firstly, the place of landing overseas was wrong; secondly, there is no consistency between the narration in the “Prima lettera familiare” (considered truthful) and the contents of the “Lettera a Soderini”; thirdly, there is no evidence in the documents of that era that the journey took place.

The first objection had in fact already been overcome many decades earlier by Navarrete who proposed the correction of the misprint 16° into 6° (see § 4.2, note 4). The second objection is resolved by the consideration that the “Prima lettera familiare” had a long and troubled drafting (see § 9.3) and ends in two different ways, both with the end of the first voyage and with the end of the second voyage. To the third objection one can reply that the required documentation, being half a millennium old, may have remained buried in the archives and may be recoverable, as a possible line of further research, in the chronicles of Cadiz, a city in which the arrival and sale of 200 slaves coming from a distant world could not have been ignored.<sup>28</sup>

This answer of mine will not satisfy those readers who for too long a time have been conditioned by the cancellation of a year and a half of Amerigo’s life. This cancellation, relating to an important period of personal development resulting from indelible experiences, has made the life work of the Florentine merchant absurd and incomprehensible. His image has been transformed into that of an incapable braggart who embellished his own reputation with the achievements of others.

To give back to Amerigo a more truthful image, I reiterate that his description of the native tribes coincides with those of Hans Staden in 1557 and with that of André Thevet in 1558; that Thevet, among other things, vividly praises Amerigo. And that Thomas More on the first page of his *Utopia* talks about four trips made by Amerigo. In addition, there is another argument taken from the Vespucci cartography used by Martin Waldseemüller for his large wall map or *Planisphere* (see § 13.4). In that *Planisphere* printed in 1507, the isthmus between the two continental masses of the New World is depicted in such a way that it is very close to the geography known today. The eastern coast of the isthmus appears sinuous due to two stubby peninsulas extending eastward: the peninsula of Yucatán, whose extremity faces the island of Cuba, and the peninsula of Honduras/Guatemala, separated from Yucatán by a gulf hosting two islands (depicted exaggeratedly large),

<sup>28</sup> The following acknowledge without hesitation or doubts that all four of Amerigo Vespucci’s voyages actually took place: Consuelo Varela, in her excellent book *Colón y los florentinos*, and Leonardo Rombai in “Le possibili basi geografiche di Amerigo Vespucci”.

today known as the Turneffe Atoll and the Bay Islands. The western coast of the isthmus has an arched form, convex to the west, bordered by mountain ranges and bathed by a large ocean which Vasco Nuñez de Balboa would call the Southern Ocean in 1513, and Magellan would call the Pacific in 1520.

In the small hemisphere in the upper right of the *Planisphere*, the same representation appears, somewhat simplified, with an important correction: the westward passage cutting the isthmus at the parallel 15°N disappears.

The eastern coast of the isthmus, perhaps viewed by Martín Alonso Pinzón in November 1492, was visited and drawn by Vespucci when the fleet including his ship sailed along it in April-May 1498, from Tampico to the present-day Venezuela. He drew the western coast based on information provided to him by the Indios.

Christopher Columbus arrived in Yucatán in January 1503 when he intercepted a large Mayan canoe (see § 11.4), although he gave no information about it. Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba arrived there in 1507, although he considered it an island, which is what the *conquistadores* believed when they arrived there two years later.

In conclusion, the part of the *Planisphere* derived from Amerigo bears the oldest and most certain testimony of the voyage in which he participated in 1497-98.

To end this chapter, I would like to add a final consideration of a different kind which, in my opinion, is definitive. Amerigo described with surprise the encounter with the stilt house-dwelling Camballi, as well as the trap they devised to destroy the Spanish and the way in which that trap was thwarted. Amerigo also described the help and spontaneous collaboration offered by the Taino tribe when the expedition stopped at Porto Caracas to repair the ships, and he told of their request to be able to fight along with them against the fierce Camballi, their common enemies. He recounted finally how seven of them fraternally and courageously fought in the hard battle and that five of them were wounded, were rewarded by the Spanish expedition and were left to return to their village with a canoe, as agreed (compare also with Chapter 12). These extraordinary and stirring episodes cannot be the result of his imagination: they were actually experienced.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Prima lettera familiare*, in *Codice Vaglianti*, folios 46r-46v. A further confirmation is found, rather confused, in the *Letter of Girolamo Vianello* transcribed in Chapter 12 (§ 12.6).

