

6 Many Ships Reach Haiti in August-September 1500, the Last Being that of the Inquisitor Bobadilla

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6.1 An Ungovernable Island

Let us now return to Admiral Columbus, who had hurriedly returned to Castile to defend his actions to the Spanish sovereigns. He was also planning to increase the colonisation of Haiti and to expand exploration of the lands across the ocean. His return was necessary and urgent, but he left his brothers Diego and Bartholomew, the first a weak man, the second unfamiliar with the situation, in a critical position in the island, which was troubled by many unsolved problems.

The development of the town of Isabela was going badly, since it did not have a decent harbour and the environment was unhealthy, also because there was a syphilis outbreak among the natives. It is estimated that, in the first year, this disease caused the deaths of at least 100 colonists and it was reported at the time that 160 were infected.¹ In addition, about four hundred men who were supposed to constitute the backbone of the colony, disillusioned by the abandonment of their captain Margarit and without any point of reference, roamed the island with the main intent of exploiting the

¹ Doctor Chanca, a physician from Seville and head of the fleet’s medical service, mentions this in a report (“Carta del Doctor Diego Álvarez Chanca al Cabildo de Sevilla 1494”. Gil, Varela, *Cartas de particulares a Colón y relaciones coetáneas*). He also mentions spices that would later have enormous success all over the world, even if of little economic value: chili, cayenne and tabasco.



Figure 6.1 The shortest distance across the Atlantic between South America and Guinea

large Indio population. It became increasingly clear to the Indios that the invaders had come to stay and would never leave spontaneously; therefore, they set traps for the disbanded sailors and killed them.

On the other hand, the fragile social fabric of the natives was wearing thin, as the chieftains lost prestige by being forced to collaborate with the invaders and pay tributes in gold and cotton. These people, who went naked and did not use any sort of currency, were not impoverished by these tributes, but they felt tormented in their own land by hard work which they were unused to and seemed pointless to them.

6.2 The Alcalde Francisco Roldán Incites a Revolt

In Haiti, an entire year had passed since Columbus's departure and there had been no news of him or help from the homeland. Food was scarce as the crops planted according to European methods produced little, while the natives' contribution continued to diminish as they hid themselves in the most inaccessible parts of the island. The colonists felt forgotten and abandoned.

At Isabela the carpenters had built a caravel that remained there, on the beach, never launched due to the lack of ropes and metal parts that could not be found on the island. The ship was a beacon of hope, and an argument broke out which turned into a revolt against the 'Genoese'.

According to the account written by Hernando, the younger son of Columbus and nephew to Diego and Bartholomew, the *alcalde mayor* Francisco Roldán insisted that Diego Colón launch the caravel. Diego replied in a rather scornful manner that Roldán and his followers knew nothing of the sea, and that without equipment the caravel was not seaworthy. At this point, Roldán insinuated that Bartholomew had left the ship in that condi-

tion because he meant to use it to save himself and his brother. He menacingly reproached him with the fact that their administration had never paid the money promised to the colonists when they were taken on, adding that it was an intolerable abuse of power to prohibit his people from setting up families with the native women.²

The two parted on very bad terms. Roldán gathered a group of malcontents and they moved to Xaragua, a delightful part of Haiti, home to the most beautiful Indio women. They butchered some of the animals they had appropriated and banqueted with the meat. Then, using the arguments with which he had reproached Diego Colón, Roldán designated himself as their leader and sought out followers among the malcontents. He proposed, among other things, to kill Bartholomew Columbus, but the latter was a prudent and well-advised man and Roldán's repeated attempts failed.

Thus, a year and a half went by with exchanges of insults and threats, but in a state of stalemate between two forces that were more or less equal.

6.3 The Admiral's Third Voyage Begins

Meanwhile in Andalusia, where the Admiral had landed with the intention of planning a project that would consolidate the colonisation and increase knowledge of those places, everything was proceeding exasperatingly slowly. His main contact in Seville was Bishop Fonseca who, perhaps obeying orders from his superiors, raised difficulties regarding finances and other questions. Yet, there was an urgent need to send provisions to the colonists in Haiti who could no longer rely on the food provided by the natives, who were by now in silent revolt. As an emergency measure, two ships full of provisions were sent ahead in mid-February, under the command of Pedro Hernández Coronel, who reached his destination well behind schedule.

It was only after several months' delay that the bankers and businessmen of Genoa who owned commercial houses in Andalusia decided to complete the financing. Columbus was able to set sail on May 30, 1498 from the port of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, at the mouth of the Guadalquivir River, with six ships, three carrying soldiers, arms and provisions for the colonists. Six women also travelled with them: four were colonists' wives and two were Spanish gypsies. The voyage was slowed by a stop at Madeira and by having to chase and recapture two Castilian ships that had been taken by a French pirate ship.

When they reached the Canary Islands, Columbus sent the three cargo ships, under the command of Pedro de Arana, Alonso Sánchez de Carvajal and Giovanni Antonio Colombo, to Haiti. They arrived very late and in the wrong place: exactly where the rebel Roldán had settled.

For his third voyage, the Admiral did not take with him Vicente Jáñez Pinzón and Juan de La Cosa, who had both in the meantime been compensated by the Queen for the loss of their ships.

The Admiral, following the suggestion of the cosmographer Jaime Ferrer, continued towards the presumed Asian countries situated below the Equator, stopping at the island of Boa Vista, the easternmost of the Cape Verde Islands, owned by Portugal, where it had established a leper colony. This

² *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXXIII, 42-3.

ancient contagious disease that slowly devours human flesh, monstrously deforming the facial features and hands and eventually causing the loss of parts of the extremities, terrorised people. For this reason, the King of Portugal confined lepers to Boa Vista, assuring the poor wretches that the flesh and blood of the turtles that reached there in great numbers would cure them. At the time, it was thought that a king's touch could cure leprosy, and perhaps it was for this reason that the great King of France, Louis XI, caught the disease. He sent two ships to the island and they returned with the fabled remedy, but it was too late, the king had died.³

Due to the presence of lepers, the island was not protected by a military garrison, but only by several caretakers. From there Columbus travelled to the island of Santiago, officially to buy several oxen to take to Haiti as livestock. Not finding anything suitable, on July 5, 1498 he began the ocean crossing on a south-westerly course. This route was unknown to him, but according to his calculations, which coincided with those of Vespucci, it would take the fleet to the Moluccas, the Asian islands rich in spices.

Things went wrong, the ships hit the doldrums and were becalmed for many days in a torrid, misty and humid climate. Hernando wrote that his father's arthritis worsened and his eyes became inflamed, adding, "[t]he Admiral thought they would be burnt alive together with the ships".⁴ Medieval fantasies of a torrid and fatal climate terrorised the sailors, and thus as soon as a little wind arose the badly ailing Columbus changed course and the fleet veered towards the north-west.

Once out of the equatorial doldrums, the three ships were sailing west-north-west when Alonso Pérez, who was on the top, saw three hills on the horizon in front of the prow and great celebrations ensued. As they proceeded, it became clear that the hills belonged to an island, which Columbus named Trinidad. Following its southern coast, the sailors found themselves before one of the mouths of the great Orinoco River from which vast quantities of water flowed into the ocean. Faced with this spectacle, Columbus, who was still suffering from inflammation of his eyes, had the sensation of being in *otro mundo* (in 'another world') and thought that such a large amount of water must come from a vast land that the Indios had sometimes told him about: to him, it was part of Asia.

The ships had anchored in front of the river mouth when a great flood tide poured out of the Orinoco, while a tidal wave came out of the gulf itself. The waves 'crashed' against each other and lifted the ships to an incredible height. Luck would have it that none of them capsized.

Columbus immediately decided to leave this place, which he named Boca del Serpiente or Serpent's Mouth. The fleet sailed along the island's eastern and northern coast until another entrance to the gulf was found, but it was not easy to pass through. Columbus named this entrance the Bocas del Dragón or Dragon's Mouth. Here the waters were calm and the ships anchored opposite the island of Trinidad. It was not clear whether it was an island or *terra firma* but Columbus named it Isla Santa.⁵

³ I found this information in a note by Caddeo, editor of *Le Historie di Cristoforo Colombo*, vol. 2, fn. 11 to ch. LXV, 24-5.

⁴ *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXVI, 26

⁵ *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXVII, 30.

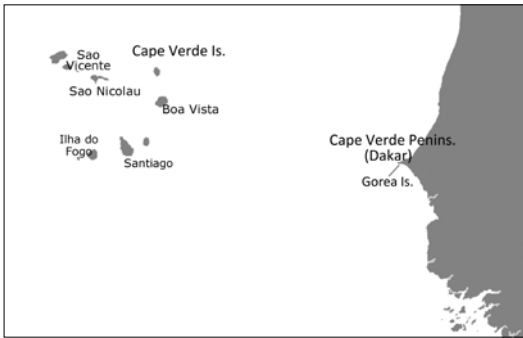


Figure 6.2 The Cape Verde archipelago, belonging to Portugal, shortens the voyage between Guinea and South America

Upon landing, the sailors met friendly natives who told them that this was Paria. The gulf, situated between the island and the continent, still bears that name today.

Hernando Colón wrote ten pages⁶ in his book *Le Historie* about the fact that on August 1, 1498 his father Christopher came ashore on *terra firma* and knew it to be so. This notion was crucial to the lawsuit that he and his brother Diego took against the Treasury in 1509. The Treasury's lawyers (and therefore those of the Crown) objected that Christopher and his heirs had no right to the wealth coming from the East Indies but only from the islands that he had discovered. This was clearly a pretext, given that on his first voyage, he had landed on the continent (but few remembered this) and that during his fourth voyage he had discovered great riches on the mainland. It was also certain that the Admiral, in observing the mouth of the Orinoco, was well aware that a river of such size carried water from the mainland and not from an island, and that the continent was Asia. However, these arguments carried no weight in a farcical trial.

The fleet exited the Bocas del Dragón, situated in the northern part of the gulf, heading for Haiti where it docked in the port of Santo Domingo on August 30, 1498. The Admiral hoped to be able to rest at last. Unfortunately, the brothers informed him of the colonists' revolt, which by then had been going on for a year and a half, and of the fact that the three ships carrying soldiers, arms and supplies, sent from the Canaries, had not yet arrived.

6.4 The Three Ships Under the Command of Alonso Sánchez De Carvajal Reach Haiti

At the beginning of September, the three ships that Columbus had sent on to Haiti from the Canary Islands reached Xaragua. The ships were supposed to have docked in the port of Santo Domingo at least one week before him, since he had initially decided to take a longer route sailing south of the Equator, a detour he then abandoned (§ 6.3). Due to the three captains' inexperience, or other unknown reasons, the fleet reached Haiti more than a month later. The captains could not find the port of Santo Domingo and docked at Xara-

⁶ *Le Historie*, vol. 2, chs. LXVII-LXXII, 30-9.

gua, precisely where Francisco Roldán was entrenched. He immediately understood the situation and, in order to deceive them, led the new arrivals to believe that he was the Admiral's great friend. The deceit was short lived, but lasted long enough to incite the forty men transported there by mistake to desert. Some of them were criminals whose sentence had been commuted to hard labour in the island's mines and elsewhere, and so it seemed like a good idea to side with the rebels. Roldán also managed to acquire from Captain Carvajal the numerous crossbows and swords that the ships were carrying, paying for them with the gold taken from the islanders.

Many arguments and much duplicity followed, and in the end the three captains decided to set sail for Santo Domingo. The voyage was long due to the contrary wind and currents. When the fleet reached its destination the provisions were rotten, the few remaining loyal men were exhausted and Carvajal's ship was unusable.

Roldán now got the upper hand as he had acquired forty more well-armed men and knew how to use this to his advantage against the Admiral, who was still very ill.

Exhausting negotiations began with the ambiguous Captain Carvajal acting as intermediary.

For the sake of peace, and aware that his forces were inadequate, Columbus decided against using hard tactics and resigned to pretending that his antagonist's mendacious arguments were valid, just as he had done years before with the deserter Martín Alonso Pinzón. He ceded to the rebel Roldán's most pressing requests, but, with exasperating arrogance, the latter went back on the agreements that had just been reached and the Admiral, tired and frustrated, left him a free hand. Roldán, achieved the desired success, however, had to be very careful and watch his back, as unforeseen events matured.

6.5 Alonso Ojeda, Juan De La Cosa and Amerigo Vespucci Reach Haiti on September 5, 1499

Columbus' son, Hernando Colón, reported in *Le Historie* that, in a moment of truce in the conflict between Roldán and the Columbus brothers:

there arrived an Alonso de Ojeda who came with 4 ships [...] and because those sailors navigated aimlessly, on September 5, 1499 he entered the port that the Christians named *Brasil*, and the Indians called Taquimo, with the thought of taking what he could from the Indians and loading on brazilwood and slaves. And while he awaited these things, he was all given to wrongdoing: and to show that he was favoured by the Bishop [Fonseca] [...] he sought to stir up another uprising by announcing for certain that Queen Donna Isabella was about to die; and that, having died, there would have been nobody who favoured the Admiral any more: and that he, as true, and certainly servant of the said Bishop, could do whatever he wanted in prejudice to the Admiral, for the enmity that was between them.⁷

⁷ *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXXXIV, 66-7.

In fact, the *hidalgo* had sailed on May 18, 1499, together with Juan de La Cosa and Amerigo Vespucci who commanded two other caravels. When the fleet reached the Canary Islands, Ojeda seized a fourth caravel entrusting the command to Don Hernando Guevara, and committed other acts of piracy, and his companions preferred to disassociate themselves from him, sailing on to the Cape Islands. After committing other thefts against compatriots who had settled in the Canaries, Ojeda reached the Caribbean Sea between July and August, where he was reunited with his companions. The expedition took on the fresh supplies it needed and Vespucci and de La Cosa then decided to definitively separate from Ojeda. They dedicated themselves to repairing their ships while the *hidalgo*, as mentioned above, attempted to stir up the colonists against Columbus who had reached Haiti a few days before him.

In order to simplify the narration, we will follow the events in Haiti to their dramatic conclusion, while in the next chapter we will return to a reconstruction of the adventures of those who in that year set sail from Andalusia to reach the Spice Islands, as suggested by Jaime Ferrer, but found themselves in very different places.

6.6 Alonso De Ojeda Attempts to Put His Own Plan into Action

On landing in Haiti, Ojeda gained information from the rebels and the Indians about the situation on the island, about who was in charge and how to acquire supplies. Backed by a small army of about seventy men, he proposed to rekindle the rebellion against Columbus and kill him. However, first he needed to obtain bread.

At this point, Ojeda was abandoned by those who did not agree with his plan. Vespucci and de La Cosa sought a tranquil place, while Don Fernando de Guevara wished to join a *hidalgo* Adrián Múxica, his cousin, who had set himself up on a beautiful estate where he raised dogs and falcons. In the meantime, the *alcalde* Roldán in Xaragua was informed of Ojeda's arrival and his intentions. He decided to make a surprise attack on Ojeda and on September 29 reached him with a group of well-armed men while he was obtaining bread from a *Cacique*. As soon as Ojeda saw Roldán he guessed his intentions and decided that his contingent of men was not large enough to sustain a fight. Thus, he quickly approached Roldán and declared himself a friend, saying he was on a voyage of discovery, that his men needed provisions, that they had fought the natives and twenty of his men were wounded, that on the mainland they had seen ferocious beasts and that he would like to meet the Admiral.

Roldán was puzzled by these words and abandoned the idea of attacking Ojeda. They parted company, each very suspicious of the other; in any case, Ojeda did not stop stirring up the colonists and seizing whatever he could in constant skirmishes with the natives. Vespucci and de La Cosa were careful not to get involved in such events and kept out of the way, looking after their ships. As usual, in his letter, Amerigo avoided making specific accusations, summarising that difficult period in this way:

We stayed on the island of Antiglia [Haiti], which Christopher Columbus discovered some years ago, where we carried out a lot of maintenance and stayed for *two months and seventeen days*. Here we suffered many



Figure 6.3 The river port of Santo Domingo from a drawing by Nicolás de Cardona from his *Descripciones geográficas e hidrográficas de muchas tierras y mares del Norte y Sur en las Indias* (1632). © Biblioteca Digital Hispánica/Biblioteca Nacional de España

troubles with the same Christians who on that island are with Columbus, I believe through envy, which to avoid being verbose I will not recount.⁸

Towards the end of the year, having finished repairing the ships, the two captains decided to part from Ojeda for the second time and return to Spain.

Ojeda, left only with his soldiers and two caravels, continued in his usual abusive way, but in February had a flash of his earlier audacity and decided to attack Roldán's stronghold when the latter was away. Ojeda anchored off Xaragua and landed there with many of his followers. He spread the word among the people that

the Catholic majesties had elected him the Admiral's counsellor, together with Carvajal, so that they would not allow him to do anything that did not seem to be in the service of their majesties, and among the many other things that they had commanded of him, there was one: that he immediately pay in cash all those who on the island had been in their service, and as the Admiral was not reasonable enough to do so, he [Ojeda] offered to go to Santo Domingo and force him to pay them, after which, if they were of this opinion, to throw him off the island dead or alive.⁹

⁸ "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 114vb. 'Antiglia' is the Portuguese name for Haiti; italics added.

⁹ *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXXXIV, 68.

Therefore, we see that both adventurers used the same arguments: the unpaid wages and the elimination of the person presumed responsible for all their troubles. Some of the listeners, enthused by this speech, sided with Ojeda, but many understood his intentions and challenged him. A fight broke out that left dead and wounded on both sides. However, the *alcalde* Roldán soon intervened with numerous reinforcements and Ojeda quickly took refuge on one of his ships anchored just off shore.

Roldán challenged Ojeda to land and talk; he in turn challenged Roldán to come aboard,

Roldán, seeing that Ojeda did not dare to come ashore, offered to board one of the ships to talk [...] and sent to ask for one of his boats, he in turn sent one with several guards. And having taken on board Roldán with 6 or 7 men, when they felt themselves secure, Roldán and his men attacked those of Ojeda with bare swords, and killing some and wounding many, took possession of the boat and with it returned to shore.¹⁰

This rather squalid story of reciprocal deceit between the two adventurers did not end there. Roldán told Ojeda to leave as soon as possible, and the latter replied that he could not sail without the boat and proposed an exchange. If Roldán returned the boat, he would return several of his men whom he held as hostages on board and would leave.

Roldán accepted and Ojeda deceived him one last time; instead of hostages, which he did not have, he sent two of his own men whom he did not like: the surgeon *maestre* Alonso who had just finished tending the wounded from the fight and Juan de Velásquez.

Following this final deceit, Ojeda did not immediately set sail for Europe but continued to navigate along the island's coast hoping to find some other opportunities, but he saw that Roldán's organised surveillance worked; he then crossed the ocean and reached Cadiz on July 22, 1500. He had collected a large amount of gold, had many slaves and a large amount of brazilwood to sell, and he was due a recompense by the king for the many months of navigation he declared to have undertaken. In other words, he was now rich. Yet, he wanted more.

Roldán was left with the two men exchanged for the boat, *maestre* Alonso and Juan de Velásquez; not knowing what to do with them, he handed them over to Columbus, who listened to their story with increasing anger against Alonso de Ojeda. Columbus ordered his deputy Rodrigo Pérez to collect their testimony on the abuses carried out by Ojeda, which he did, diligently following the orders received.

The original document signed by the two witnesses reached the hands of Columbus's eldest son, Diego, who, after his father's death, inherited the title of Admiral of the Ocean Sea and office of Viceroy. Diego had married Maria di Toledo, a member of the family of the Dukes of Alba, the most illustrious house in Spain. When Diego, having become Second Admiral, died, his widow collected his papers in her own archive. These papers passed from generation to generation until the Duchess of Berwick and Alba published them in Madrid in 1892. It does not appear that Christopher Columbus had ever made use of this document.

¹⁰ *Le Historie*, vol. 2, ch. LXXXIV, 69.

6.7 **The Story of Don Fernando De Guevara and His Cousin Adrián Múxica**

Let us return to Roldán's misdeeds. Múxica's estate was a short distance from the place where Anacaona, widow of the *Cacique* Caonabo, lived. She was a courageous and shrewd woman who had succeeded her husband at the head of the tribe. The *Cacique* had an extraordinarily beautiful daughter, Higuano-ta, whom she married to Don Fernando de Guevara. This beautiful woman had also had a relationship with the *alcalde* Roldán, who had fallen madly in love with her. When he heard of the marriage, he ordered that the woman be returned to him. Don Guevara was infuriated by this incredible arrogance. He refused to hand over his bride, and together with his cousin, Adrián Múxica, planned to trap and kill Roldán. The latter had a very good network of informers and managed to capture Múxica and seven accomplices. He handed them all over to Columbus, saying that they had plotted to kill both himself and the Admiral. It seems that Roldán later hanged Adrián Múxica with his own hands.

6.8 **A Period of Violence and Retaliation**

Having got rid of his rival, Roldán wrote to the powerful Archbishop Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, Queen Isabella's confessor and future Chief Inquisitor of Castile, with whom he had a good relationship, to give his version of the events in Haiti. Christopher Columbus also wrote a letter, but to the sovereigns, lamenting Roldán's revolt and asking that an expert in law be sent. Both letters departed on one of the ships commanded by Pedro Hernández Coronel.

After this, Roldán prudently retired to the lands he had had the Admiral grant him, and waited to see what happened. Columbus and his energetic brother Bartholomew took strong measures in an attempt to get the situation back under control. Among their first targets was Pedro Riquelme, formerly the Admiral's deputy, who with the excuse of building accommodation for his men had constructed a small fort next to Santo Domingo. This was a very dangerous strategy for the Genoese brothers; Bartholomew somehow managed to take the fort and hold its garrison prisoner within, including Don Fernando de Guevara who had taken refuge there. Then, together with Christopher, he searched the island capturing other enemies, whom he shut up in a well. They gradually hanged the ringleaders, while others who were held responsible for lesser crimes were flogged or had their noses or ears cut off. The colonists were infuriated.

6.9 **The 'Comendador' Francisco De Bobadilla Arrives and the Columbus Brothers are Arrested and Returned to Spain in Chains**

After the first news arrived from Haiti, King Ferdinand, who now had sole charge of affairs regarding the East Indies, decided to send a person of trust, the 'comendador' Francisco de Bobadilla, as inquisitor. However, he delayed this provision until he knew whether those faraway events had ended and, if so, in what manner. When he received Columbus's letter and was informed of Roldán's accusations by Archbishop Cisneros, the King decided

to send the inquisitor, giving him *carte blanche*, i.e. letters bearing only his signature and seal, which Bobadilla could fill out according to the situation.

The judicial inquisitor Francisco de Bobadilla reached Santo Domingo on August 24, 1500 with two ships carrying a large number of well-armed men. When his ship docked in the river port, two gibbets stood on either side of the river on which hung two executed Christians. Bobadilla decided not to go ashore straight away, also because neither of the Columbus brothers had come to meet him. He informed the people crowding round the ship that he had brought the money from the King to pay what was due to the colonists. The latter did not hesitate to express their anger for the unjust and cruel abuses they had suffered at the hands of the Genoese brothers.

When Bobadilla finally managed to speak to the Columbus brothers, they defended themselves in a rather arrogant manner using procedural expedients, without documenting the difficulties in trying to govern people who threatened them and repeatedly tried to kill them.

Bobadilla told the Columbus brothers that many of the convictions and punishments were of a disproportionate severity to the offences and had been inflicted without the proper procedure. Therefore, he freed all prisoners, listening to their accusations against their accusers. He argued mainly that many death sentences had been inflicted without a proper trial, sometimes without giving the condemned the possibility to go to confession. He accused Columbus of having prevented the evangelization of the natives and of acting with greed and avidity in denying food to the starving colonists. There was enough evidence. After a month-long inquiry, Christopher, Bartholomew and Diego Columbus were stripped of all their offices and, in chains, embarked for Spain amid the shouts and insults of those present.¹¹ They disembarked in Cadiz on November 20, 1500.

¹¹ Bobadilla's inquest and the vicissitudes of the Columbus brothers, and others, during the second half of the year 1500 are narrated and documented by Consuelo Varela in *La caída de Cristóbal Colón/El juicio de Bobadilla*. An Italian translation of this book is available, *Inchiesta su Cristoforo Colombo; il dossier Bobadilla*. Genoa: Fratelli Frilli Editori, 2008.

