

A DISCOVERY

Chapter 1 Dreams of an Empire

1492! This was the year that changed world history. It brought forth empires that would last for centuries. But, before those events occurred, it's important to recognize the singular achievement of this voyage by a Genoese sailor named Christopher Columbus. It set the stage for sea lanes of communication that still comprise 80% of all international cargo transportation today.¹ The Spanish and British empires depended on them as does the United States today. Indeed, it is not too much to compare his first trip to the first Apollo landing on the moon. From it, commercial space travel is becoming a reality just as commercial sea travel expanded upon this first voyage by Columbus.

Columbus was not the first European to land on American shores. Leif Erikson had done so approximately 500 years earlier. But other than leaving a few remnants of possible Norse settlements, the contact was lost. Legend has it that this first landing was strictly an accident. He was simply blown off course.²

He succeeded because of the short distances he had to travel. Norse sailors had mastered the navigation of distances between Europe, Iceland, and Greenland. North America, or Vinland, as the Norse called this new land, was really a leg not much further than what they had explored before. The ships they used could withstand the rigors of these voyages.

These ships were of various sizes, but they were designed for riverine travel and landing on shores where they would be dragged onto beaches. This limited their tonnages to mid-twenties. Originally entirely rowed, square trailing wind sails were added as an additional propulsion around the 7th century CE. But, like the Roman ships that plied the ports of that ancient empire, they were still fundamentally rowed ships.³ Such technology would not have been adaptable to direct transoceanic travel.

The fleet that Columbus commanded was based on entirely different technology. These ships, known as caravels, had bigger hulls of 50 to 160 tons that were steered with tiller-controlled rudders. They mounted two or three masts as compared to the single masts of the Viking ships. The important element of these ships was that in addition to their traditional square sails, the caravels also had lateen sails.⁴ Originated in the eastern Mediterranean as early as the 2nd century BCE, its triangular shape offered the same aerodynamic advantages of an airplane wing. That is, its curve created a pressure differential between the front side and the rear. With a lesser pressure in front, the greater pressure in the rear could push the wing along. This allowed his ships to sail closer into head winds than was possible with the square-rigged Viking ships.⁵ This capability permitted them to tack in zig-zag directions.⁶

¹ "Container Shipping – Figures and Facts." *Statistics*. <https://www.statista.com/topics/1367/container-shipping/>. 26 April 2023.

² "Leif Erikson." *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leif_Erikson. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leif_Erikson. 26 April 2023.

³ "Viking Ships." *World History Encyclopedia*. https://www.worldhistory.org/Viking_Ships/. 26 April 2023.

⁴ "Caravels." *Wikipedia*. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caravel>. 26 April 2023.

⁵ "Lateen Sail." *Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/technology/lateen-sail>, 26 April 2023.

⁶ "Tacking." *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tacking_\(sailing\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tacking_(sailing)). 26 April 2023.



Figure 1 – Replica of “The Mathew of Bristol.” This ship was sailed by John Cabot in his explorations of North America.⁷

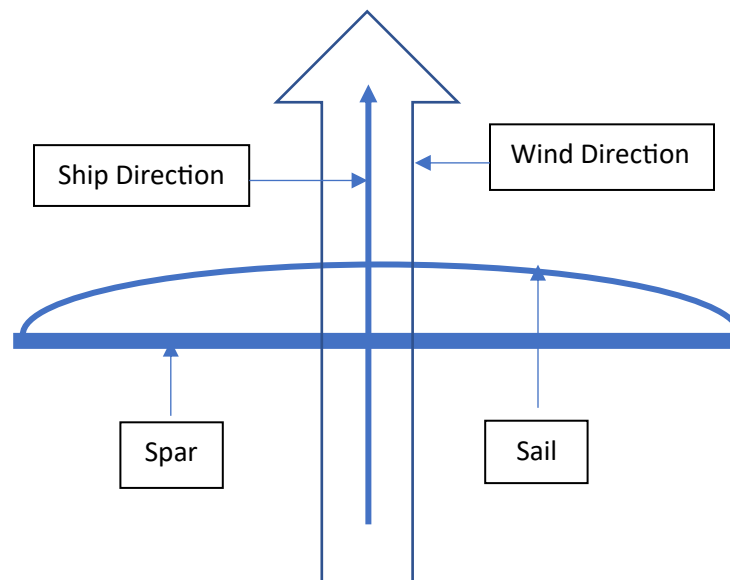


Figure 2– Square Sail

⁷ Caravels – Mathew of Bristol. <https://search.aol.com/aol/search?q=caravels%20photos&it=loki-keyword>. 30 April 2023.

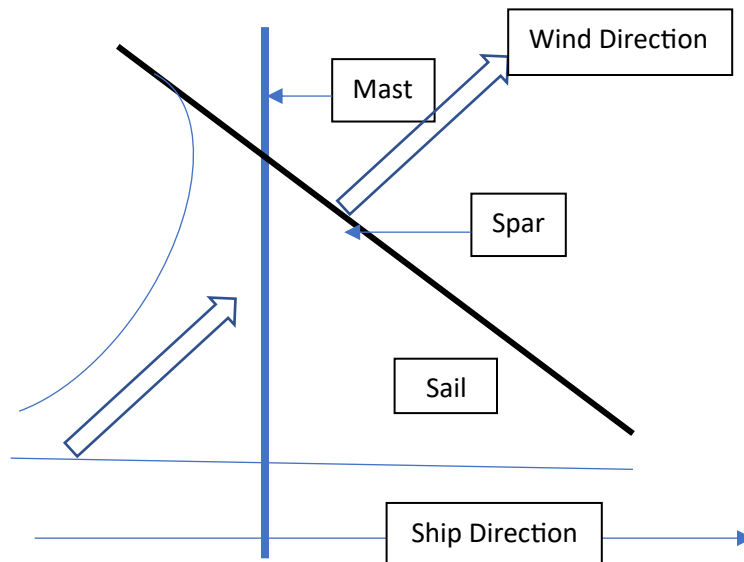


Figure 3 – Lateen Sail

The Nina and her sister ships were truly free of oars. They were designed and sailed as wind-driven vessels. With this constant energy source, manpower for oars was no longer needed and efficient transoceanic voyages became a reality. The larger size of these ships meant more cargo could be carried back and forth. Commercial and military commerce became possible on scales unimaginable before.



Figure 4 – La Nina. Note the use of both Lateen and Square sails.⁸

⁸ La Nina.

https://search.aol.com/aol/search;_ylt=AwrJ.TZY50xk2E4WEgRpCWWH;_ylc=X1MDMTE5NzgwMzg4MQRfcgMyBGZyA2xva2kta2V5d29yZARncHJpZAN2RG1qVkJBM1JPT2p0YTBB3ZUdRSUhBBG5fcnNsdAMwBG5fc3VnZwMxBG9yaWdpbgNzZW9yY2guYW9sLmNvbQRwb3MDMARwcnXN0cgMEcHFzdHJsAzAEcXN0cmwDMTYEcXVlcnkDbmluYSUyMHN0a

The three ships that Columbus commanded were very small. They had none of the capabilities of the galleons of later centuries. But, like the cramped Apollos, they reached the Americas and returned home. World empires became a reality.

But empires were a thing of the future. Asian spices were the immediate goal. Medieval tastes were crazed for the aromas and exotic flavors of spices. There was a famous cookbook, *Le Ménagier de Paris*, that describes the usage of “ginger, cloves, mixed with grains of paradise, long pepper, and a half pound of cinnamon.”⁹ If they were not used to enhance foods, physicians used them for medical purposes.¹⁰ Altogether, they were a product of premium value especially as a means of conspicuous consumption. Laying out meals heavy with spices was a “mark of status.”¹¹

Obtaining these spices was an expensive process. Demand was exceedingly high and supplies were scarce because they came mostly from the Far East.¹² Transporting them meant long overland distances via the Spice Routes made famous by Marco Polo.¹³ Any sea trade was confined mostly around the middle distributors of India whose ships could circumscribe Asian ports and bring back spices.¹⁴ Because of the European demand and the distances traversed for supplying it, prices were high. At one point, 500 pounds of pepper, attained prices as high as 200 dinars in 1412. At today’s exchange rates, these gold coins were worth about \$185.00 apiece, which generated a total cost of \$37,000 or \$74.00 a pound. Expensive fare.¹⁵

Finding a faster, more economical way of supplying these expensive spices was an enticement worthy of any entrepreneur. Land routes were well known leaving the sea as the only alternative. Ocean travel was dangerous, but the rewards compensated the risks very well.¹⁶ At the prices cited above, even the small cargo holds of Columbus’s fleet could return enough spices to render a good profit for any sponsor of such voyages.

Iberian royalty well understood the prospects of great wealth from the spice trade. The Portuguese led the way. Starting in the first half of the 15th century, the third son of King John I and his wife, Phillipa, Prince Henry the Navigator, sponsored voyages that followed the coastline of Africa.¹⁷ Eventually, under the leadership of Vasco da Gama, this strategy was continued around Africa and across the Indian ocean. Contact was made with India in 1497.

[XAlMjBwaG90b3MEdF9zdG1wAzE2ODI3NjE1Nzc-?q=nina+ship+photos&s_it=sb-top&v_t=loki-keyword](https://www.quora.com/How-much-was-the-medieval-gold-dinar-worth-compared-to-todays-standards). 30 April 2023.

⁹ Freedman. Paul. *Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press. Kindle Location 606.

¹⁰ Ibid. Kindle Location 522.

¹¹ Ibid. Kindle Location 816.

¹² Ibid. Kindle Location 1755.

¹³ Ibid. Kindle Location 1805.

¹⁴ Ibid. Kindle Location 1819.

¹⁵ “How Much Was the Medieval Gold Dinar Worth Compared to Today’s Standards?” *Quora*.

<https://www.quora.com/How-much-was-the-medieval-gold-dinar-worth-compared-to-todays-standards>. 26 April 2023.

¹⁶ “What Motivations Caused Christopher Columbus to Go and Explore the New World?” *E Notes*.

<https://www.enotes.com/homework-help/what-motivations-caused-christopher-columbus-go-470855>.

25<https://www.enotes.com/homework-help/what-motivations-caused-christopher-columbus-go-470855>. 26 April 2023.

¹⁷ “Prince Henry the Navigator.” *World History Encyclopedia*.

https://www.worldhistory.org/Prince_Henry_the_Navigator/. 26 April 2023.

The motives of this ambitious royalty were clear: an empire based on gold, silver, and spices. Prince Henry started a program of territorial expansion in 1415 by conquering Cueta, a city located in North Africa. Next, he set his sights on further domains. To do this he enhanced the development of the caravels. Originally built by Portuguese fishermen for trawling fishing grounds, Prince Henry saw how their capabilities could be expanded for longer voyages.

John I's successor, John II, continued this progress. He had two ambitions. First was to end his feudal dependence on the Portuguese nobility. He did not want to suffer the power losses suffered by an English king, John I, who was forced to sign the Magna Carta two centuries earlier. To do this, he needed independent sources of money. The riches indicated by Prince Henry offered an opportunity. Second, he wanted to break the monopoly power of Venice over the existing spice trades. Before spices could enter northern Europe, they had to go through Venice, which extracted a lucrative middleman's fee. The core of this stranglehold was the vast network of trading contacts along the Silk Road that had been established by Venetian merchants among whom was the famous Marco Polo and his family.¹⁸ By simply going around the Venetian network, Vasco da Gama provided the solutions John needed to achieve his ambitions. Starting with De Gama's first landing in 1498, a variety of royal colonies and trading establishments were founded, and the Portuguese empire continued to flourish.¹⁹

Parenthetically, the failure of England's John I to eliminate the power of his barons provided a large difference in subsequent developments of the Americas. This theme will be enlarged later in this narrative.

The Spanish royal family, who sponsored Columbus's trip in 1492, lagged Portugal's imperial progress by 75 years. But they had had a lot of history to overcome before they could rule a truly unified country under a Spanish flag. Many different peoples occupied the land starting with the Celts. Then came the Romans who turned the peninsula into a unified province. Following the decline of Rome, Germanic tribes known as Visigoths occupied the land until the arrival of the Muslims in 711. They took over the territory fairly easily because of the chaos created by a Visigoth civil war.

The next 700 years were noted for a flourishing culture that combined both Jewish and Muslim traditions. The two peoples lived comfortably together while engaged in trade and art. This was not to say that unrest did not occur. There were uprisings from the Visigothic Romans and various invasions by Vikings and other raiders. Throughout these years Christians were infiltrating the territory and consolidating power. Their first success in establishing individual rule was in northern Spain along the Pyrenees mountains where they created the kingdom of Asturias. From this base, the Christians moved southward to capture evermore territory.²⁰

It was during these times in the 11th century that the great Spanish hero, El Cid, came to fame. Born in the northern city of Burgos in 1043, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar was a professional soldier fighting for both the Christians and Muslims. Doing so allowed him to exploit the instability of the various ruling families and create his own political base in Valencia. As he did so, he earned the

¹⁸ "Silk Roads Programme." *UNESCO*.

<https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/venice><https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/venice>. 26 April 2023.

¹⁹ Op Cit. Vasco da Gama. 26 April 2023.

²⁰ "History of Spain." *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Spain. 27 April 2023.

Arabic title, El Cid, which meant The Lord. Today he is remembered as the epitome of medieval knighthood with its values of strength, valor, loyalty, just and piety.²¹

The exploits of El Cid reveal the declining power of the Muslims. They continued to lose ground until its last ruler, Emir [Muhammad XII](#), surrendered Granada to Spanish rule on 2 January 1492. At that point, all Muslims and Jews were forced either to convert to Catholicism or be expelled from Spain. These *Conversos* have endured centuries of persecution that has affected descendants to this day. Among the Jews, they dispersed back to Mediterranean countries and became known as Sephardics, or they emigrated northwards to Europe to become the second great sect: Ashkenazi. *Fiddler on the Roof* depicted this latter Jewish life.²²

As Muslim control of Spain waned, the question among Christians was, “Who will be in charge?” By the 15th century, there were two principal contenders: the kingdoms of Castile, which occupied the northern and central parts of Spain, and the kingdom of Aragon, which lay in the northeastern part. Further complicating this witches brew was the death of the Castilian king, Henry IV, in 1474. He did not leave behind a son and hence, without a clear line of succession, a five-year war broke out that became known as the War of Castilian Succession (1474 – 1479). Two princesses vied for the vacant throne. Both had international dynastic connections. Joanna la Beltraneja was supported by France and Portugal and was touted to have been Henry’s choice. The other was Henry’s half-sister, Queen Isabella I of Castile. The kingdom of Aragon and the Castilian nobility supported her.

The issue of succession was fraught with danger for Isabella. She was not the eldest scion of Henry. Rather as a female and the sister of a younger brother, Alfonso, her claim was tenuous at best. Furthermore, the nobility of Castile favored Alfonso, and Henry complied with their desires. But these plans never came to pass as Alfonso died of the plague. There was also a sinister conspiracy theory that he died of poisoning that was never proven. However he died, it meant that Henry’s second choice for the throne, Isabella, was crowned upon his death on 12 December 1474. Isabella had already married the king of Aragon, Ferdinand II, in 1469.²³ Upon her ascension, they created a consortium of power that sufficed to unite Spain into a complete Christian unity. Isabella’s claim to Castilian power made her the dominant partner; but together they worked effectively enough to become the “Catholic Monarchs.”²⁴

Once on her throne, Isabella had a lot of internal improvements to make before she could think about the outer world. First was to cement her seat. Immediately after her coronation, cabals were afoot to dethrone her. Diego Pacheco, Marquis of Villena, plotted with his uncle, the Archbishop of Toledo, to restore Joanna la Beltraneja’s claim to the throne. This entailed a call to her supporter, the Portuguese king, Alfonso, to invade Spain, which he did in May 1475. While his defeat was ambiguous, it did give Isabella the political boost she needed to secure her throne.

Next, she had to deal with the legacy of her brother’s profligate ways. The state’s finances were in disarray and crime was rampant. Her first action in 1474 was creating a strong police force, *La Santa Hermandad*, that forced the kingdom into order. This program sent a strong force to Galicia and forced the larcenous petty nobles there into lives of relative honesty.

²¹ “El Cid.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El_Cid. 27 April 2023.

²² “Granada.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Granada>. 27 April 2023.

²³ “Isabella of Castile.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isabella_I_of_Castile. 27 April 2023.

²⁴ Op Cit. History of Spain. 27 April 2023.

Financial recovery was her big concern. Henry had spent lavishly and supported his expenses by selling off properties at fire sale prices. This drained his coffers of the rents that were normally collected. Through the support of the Spanish parliament, the *Cortes of Toledo*, these lands were largely restored to the throne. Other properties that were granted to supporting nobility for appropriate deeds were not restored, but the owners were forced to buy them at expensive costs.

At the same time, inflation was rampant because of excessive production of coinage. Henry had authorized the expansion of mints from five to 150. While this tactic created enough currency to pay immediate bills, it created long-term problems that face all politicians who resort to pumping excess money into an economy. Isabella closed the number of mints and reduced coinage production to a sustainable economic level.

Isabella's bureaucracy that was needed to manage her government needed a complete overhaul. Under the feudal concepts of the day, the nobility held inherited titles and idly managed estates as absentee landlords. Effecting the Queen's desires was only important to them if they directly benefited. Consequently, royal policies were slow in implementation. Seeing this, Isabella relied less on them in favor of professional administrators taken from the lower ranks of nobility. She did so by reorganizing her royal council to eliminate members who attended through political favor or inherited titles. She wanted people reliant on professional acumen working for her and as a result, her government became more effective.²⁵ In this way, this queen anticipated by almost 200 years a policy initiated in France whereby the nobility was divided into two classes: the Nobility of the Sword (*Noblesse d' Epée*) and the Nobility of the Robe (*Noblesse de Robe*). The former was simply recognized for what they were: holdovers of the feudal era, whereas the latter were recognized for their abilities and intensive studies.²⁶ The outstanding personality of the Robe was Montesquieu who became the philosophical light of enlightened governance. Among the ideas he advocated were individual liberties under the aegis of law and the division of governmental powers among the legislative branch, executive branch, and judicial branch. These became guiding principles of American Founding Fathers.²⁷

All these activities necessarily took 17 years of effort, while the Portuguese court was pursuing imperial goals. They had achieved full control of the African route to eastern spice markets. Given the close ties between the Spanish courts and the Portuguese courts, Isabella was undoubtedly aware of these facts. Once she had attained control over her dominion, she was willing to listen to proposals that offered entry into an empire and the riches of the spice trade.

Enter Christopher Columbus. He was born the son of a wool weaver in the city of Genoa in 1451. Placed first in a business apprenticeship in 1473, he started his early sea voyages to nearby islands and then to the British Isles. By 1485, he was trading with Portuguese outposts along the coast of Africa. While pursuing these activities he studied foreign languages and the geographic theories of Ptolemy, who proposed the world was a globe. An astronomer, Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli, had proposed in 1473 to the Portuguese king, Alfonso V, a concept of sailing around the globe as a shorter and faster route to the spice markets in the east. As seen before,

²⁵ Op Cit. *Isabella of Castile*. 28 April 2023.

²⁶ "Nobles of the Robe." *Wikipedia*. https://search.aol.com/aol/search?q=nobility%20of%20the%20robe&s_it=loki-keyword. 28 April 2023.

²⁷ "Montesquieu." *Wikipedia*. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montesquieuhttps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montesquieu>. 28 April 2023.

this idea was rejected in favor of sailing around Africa, but it was still an idea known to people. Among them was Christopher Columbus.

Columbus also knew his weather patterns and understood how to turn them to his advantage. Although caravels of the day could tack or beat to the wind, progress would be slow. Columbus knew that following the trade winds eastward would alleviate this problem and make for a faster return.

Taking all this information in hand, Columbus started a long lobbying effort to gain royal support for a global trip to the spice markets. He went first to the Portuguese court and was rejected. He was turned down because geographers saw that his mileage estimates were too short. Other efforts were made in France and England but to no avail. He then made several efforts before the Spanish courts and finally in April 1492, Isabella and Ferdinand agreed to a "Capitulations of Santa Fe" wherein a successful voyage would result in Columbus becoming a lord admiral of the seas, viceroy of any discovered lands, and a 10% return of any earned revenues.

Ultimately Columbus made four trips to the new lands that led to little financial gain. He was stripped of all honors and denied promised revenues. He did not bring back the profitable spices that were the basis of his trips. Rather, he returned with news about an unforeseen land that lay between Spain and Asia. Clearly the discoveries of Leif Erikson were unknown to the court and to Columbus. This ignorance begged the questions of what was this new land? What did it have to offer? What could be done with it? The next century would bring many answers.

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