

Translator's Note: What follows is the only English translation known to us in their entirety of Chapters III and IV of Hernan Colon's biography of his father, Cristobal Colon, Historia del Almirante (History of the Admiral), written over 1537-1539. Hernan Colon was the natural son of Cristobal Colon, born in Cordoba in 1488 of Beatriz Enriquez de Arana, his father's mistress. dying in 1539 in Seville. In 1502-1504, Hernan, still in his teens, accompanied his father's on the latter's fourth voyage to the New World. The translations are made from a Spanish-language edition of the biography published in Madrid in 2000, as initially edited, introduced, and annotated by Luis Arranz Marquez in 1984. Bartolome de las Casas, in his famous Historia de la Indias, largely written between 1550 and 1563 after his return to Spain, had access to the Spanish-language manuscript of Hernan Colon's biography of his father well before it was first published in Italian in 1571. In his own work, Las Casas quite obviously "borrowed" substantially from Hernan Colon's Chapter III description of the Admiral. The footnotes with the translations are my own. — Don Devereux, Tempe, Arizona, August, 2008.

HISTORIA DEL ALMIRANTE (History of the Admiral)

**Hernan Colon
1537-1539**

*translated by Don Devereux
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CHAPTER III

Of the disposition of the person of the Admiral and of the sciences which he mastered

The Admiral was a man well formed and of more than medium stature; a large face, the cheeks a bit high; without declining toward either obesity or a withered state; an aquiline nose and blue eyes; a pale freshness of face, ruddy when inflamed; in his youth he had golden hair, but at 30 years of age it had already become white. In eating and drinking and in adorning his person he was very modest and moderate; affable in conversation with foreigners, and with his own household most agreeable, with a decent and gentle composure. He was so observant in matters of religion that, in his fastings and in praying the holy office, he could have been held to be someone who had professed religious vows; such an enemy of those who cursed and blasphemed that I swear I never saw him give out any oath other than "by Saint Ferdinand"¹ and when he found himself extremely irritated with someone it was his manner of reprimanding to say to him: "Where are you with God? Because you did this? And you said that?"; if sometime he had to write, his pen was not tried without first writing these words: *Jesus cum Maria*,

¹ In Spanish, the oath is a more melodious "por San Fernando."

*sit nobis in via;*² so good an inscription that only then could the bread be earned.

Leaving other particularities that in the context of history could be written in his time, we will move on to enumerate the sciences to which he most applied himself, and I will say that while still young he learned his letters and studied in Pavia³ that which sufficed in order to understand cosmographers, a lesson of which he was very fond, and a respect for which was also given to astrology⁴ and geometry; because these sciences have such a connection between them that there cannot be one without the other, and even Ptolemy in the beginning of his *Cosmography* says that no one can be a good cosmographer if he also could not draw. The Admiral knew as well how to make sketches to place the lands and to fix cosmographic bodies on a plane or sphere.

CHAPTER IV

Of the activities which occupied the Admiral before coming to Spain

The Admiral, having knowledge of these sciences, began to attend to the sea and to make some journeys to the East and the West, about which, as of many other things in his early years, I do not have enough information, because he died when I did not yet have the boldness or experience to ask him about it, through respect of a son, or to speak more concisely, because then as a boy, I found myself far removed from any notion of writing about him; but in a letter that he wrote to the Catholic Monarchs in the year 1501, to those on whom one could not count but that it were the truth, he says the following words:

“Most Exalted Monarchs: At a very young age I began sailing the sea, and I have continued doing so until today; the same path inclines whomever pursues it to desire to know the secrets of the world; already 40 years have passed in which I have been so engaged. All that until now can be navigated I have traveled. I have had dealings and conversations with wise people, ecclesiastic and secular, Latins and Greeks, Jews and Moors, and with many others of different sects; I will attribute this desire of mine to Our Father Himself, having from Him to that end a spirit of intelligence. Of seamanship he gave me an abundance; in astrology⁵ he told me what was sufficient, and of geometry and arithmetic, he enriched me in mind and hands for the first time to see this sphere, and on it the cities, rivers and mountains, islands and ports, all in its proper place. During this time I have seen and placed study on looking into all scriptures, cosmography,

² Ex-Jesuit colleague Robert Blair Kaiser tells me that this Latin phrase is historically familiar to many Catholics, meaning, “Jesus, with Mary, be with us on the way.”

³ According to editor Luis Annanz Marquez, “No other chronicler has agreed that Cristobal Colon ever trod the halls of the University of Pavia. And so far it has never been confirmed.”

⁴ Back in those years, this term actually meant what is now considered to be astronomy.

⁵ Again, the reference is really to astronomy, not to astrology as presently understood.

histories, chronicles, and philosophy and other arts, in such a manner that Our Father opened to me an understanding with His palpable hand, so that it became feasible to navigate from here to the Indies, and the will inflamed me for the execution of it, and with this fire I came to Your Highnesses. All those who considered my enterprise with laughter and ridicule negated it; all of the learned men to whom I spoke would not come forward, nor their authorities; Your Highnesses alone kept the faith and constancy.”

In another letter which he wrote to the Catholic Monarchs in the month of January in the year 1495, from Hispaniola,⁶ enumerating the variations and errors in which they kept finding themselves on the ships' courses and pilotings, he says:

“It happened to me that King Reynel,⁷ whom God now has, sent me to Tunis to seize the galley Fernandina, and already being on the island of San Pedro in Sardinia, a settee reported to me that two naves and a carack were with said vessel;⁸ by which the people who were with me were disturbed, and they determined not to continue the voyage, except to return to Marseilles for another nave and more men. Having seen that without some cunning I could not overcome their will, I consented to their demand and, altering the workings of the compass, took to sailing by nightfall, and another day on leaving the sun we were within the cape of Carthage, having them all certain we were going to Marseilles.”

In the same manner in a reminiscence or notation that he wrote, demonstrating all five zones to be habitable, proving it with the experience of his navigation, he says:

“I sailed in the year 1477, in the month of February, beyond Thule,⁹ an island, a hundred leagues, whose southern part distances itself from the equinoctial line¹⁰ 73 degrees, not 63 as some say,¹¹ and it is not within the line which includes Europe as Ptolemy says, but

⁶ Hispaniola refers to the Caribbean island now encompassing the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

⁷ According to editor Luis Arranz Marquez, this pertains to René or Renato d'Anjou, a prince who challenged the King of Aragon for the crown of Naples; this episode must have occurred toward the end of 1472 when Cristobal Colon would have been 21 years old and would have fought, as did all of Genoa, on the side of Anjou.

⁸ A *galeaza* or *galley* was a large vessel of the time, capable of being heavily armed; a *nao* or *nave* was also a formidable, three- or four-decked ship of the period; a *carraca* or *carack* was a sizable transport vessel, and a *saetia* or *settee* was a single-decked ship with a sharp prow once used in the Mediterranean, with two or three masts supporting lateen sails.

⁹ The Thule visited by Cristobal Colon in 1477 is now widely accepted to have been Iceland, an opinion shared by editor Luis Arranz Marquez.

¹⁰ The equinoctial line is, of course, the Equator.

¹¹ In this instance it was Cristobal Colon who was wrong: the southern coast of Iceland is around 63 ° N latitude, just as some others had said.

rather much more to the west, and to this island, which is as large as England, go Englishmen with their merchandise, especially those from Bristol, and at the time that I went there, the sea was not congealed, although there were huge tides, so much that in some places twice a day it would come up 25 brazas,¹² and it would descend in others as much in height.”

The truth is that Thule, of which Ptolemy makes mention, is in the place where the Admiral says and today is called Frislanda;¹³ and further ahead, proving that the equinoctial line is itself habitable, he also says, “I was in the castle of Saint George of the Mine of the King of Portugal,¹⁴ which was just below the equinoctial line, and I am a good witness that it is not unlivable as some hold”; and in the book on the first voyage,¹⁵ he says that he saw “some sirens on the coast of Malagueta,¹⁶ although they were not very similar to those women as they are painted”; and in another place he says: “Sailing many times from Lisbon to Guinea, I diligently will consider that a degree corresponds on land to 56 and two-thirds miles”; and further forward he says that on Quios,¹⁷ an island in the archipelago, he saw resin being extracted from mastic trees; and in another place he says: “For 23 years, I have traveled the sea without leaving it for enough time that it ought to be discounted; I saw the East and all of the West which is known¹⁸ by sailing toward the North, that is, England, and I have navigated to Guinea. But nowhere have I seen such good ports as those in the land of the Indies”; and further ahead, he affirms that he began to sail at 14 years old and that he always followed the sea. And in his book on the second voyage,¹⁹ he says” “I have found myself bringing two naves and leaving one in Porto Santo²⁰ to make a little, where it was detained for a day, and I still arrived at Lisbon eight days before it, because I bore a tempest of wind from the southwest, and it to the contrary felt nothing but a slight north-northeast breeze.”

As a result, from these authorities or testimonies, we can understand how experienced the Admiral was in the things of the sea, and the many lands and places through which he traveled, before becoming engaged in the enterprise of discovery.

¹² While a *braza* often is translated as a fathom, measuring some six feet, the Genoese *braza* or *braccio*, according to historian Samuel ElioT Morison, distinctly measured on 22.9 inches. As a result, Cristobal Colon’s reference is to a tide actually upwards to 50 feet in height, still something of a puzzle to ocean experts

¹³ Here Hernan Colon mistakenly places his father’s Thule as Frislanda, a group of small, scattered islands north of Scotland and the Orkneys now called the Faeroes.

¹⁴ As described by Luis Arranz Marquez, the fortress San Jorge de la Mina was erected by the Portuguese in 1482 on the African coast of the Gulf of Guinea.

¹⁵ This is a reference to Cristobal Colon’s first voyage to the New World in 1492.

¹⁶ Per Luis Arranz Marquez, the coast of Malagueta extended from Liberia to the entrance of the Gulf of Guinea.

¹⁷ As located by Luis Arranz Marquez, Quios was an island off the coast of Italy controlled by Genoa in Cristobal Colon’s time

¹⁸ As used here, Cristobal Colon’s East was the Levant, lands of the eastern Mediterranean now commonly called the Middle East; and his West essentially was Europe.

¹⁹ Again, this is a reference to Cristobal Colon’s second voyage to the New World.

²⁰ At the time, Cristobal Colon must have been sailing from the Canary Islands or perhaps even the Azores via Porto Santo in the Madeira Islands en route to Lisbon in Portugal.