

Background to Dr. Chanca's Letter

Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) was born in the city-state of Genoa in northwestern Italy. As a young man he worked for Genoese merchants in Lisbon, and his ocean travels extended as far as Iceland in the north, Ghana in the south, and the Azores in the west. While the Portuguese were developing a route to Asia by sailing down the coast of Africa, Columbus became fixated on the idea of getting to the East by sailing to the west. In 1492, Columbus finally received financial backing from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. The royal decree stated that they were sending him with three caravels across the Ocean Sea to the Indies in order to expand the Catholic faith as well as for their own benefit and utility.

During the first of his four voyages to the New World, Columbus departed Spain on August 3, 1492, and arrived in the Caribbean on October 12, 1492. His initial landing was on a Bahamian island, which he immediately claimed along with its people for the King and Queen of Spain; this pattern of claiming land and people would continue as he journeyed from one island to another. As part of claiming an island, he would name it, calling the first San Salvador and dubbing the people "Indians," because he believed they were inhabitants of South and East Asia (which Europeans at the time broadly referred to as "India" or "the Indies"). Leaving the Bahamas, Columbus explored portions of the northern coasts of Cuba and Hispaniola. The natives he met along the way believed his arrival fulfilled a longstanding prophecy that divine or divinely inspired creatures from the sky would one day visit their islands. These inhabitants, called Tainos, also possessed a fearful preoccupation with another group of natives, the marauding and man-eating Caribs.

Late in the evening on Christmas Eve, while sailing gently along the coast of Hispaniola, the steersman of the flagship, the Santa Maria, decided to sleep and handed the tiller over to the ship's boy. In the moments that followed, the Santa Maria was caught on a reef and the force of the sea began breaking her apart. Nothing could be done to save her. The wreck of the Santa Maria made it necessary to leave some crewmen behind when the time came to return to Spain. Although the natives along this coast, under their kind king, Guacamari, seemed peaceful enough, Columbus wanted to ensure the safety of his men. Using the boards from the Santa Maria, he built a fort. About forty men were left behind on Hispaniola.

Ferdinand and Isabella were extremely pleased with the outcome of Columbus's first voyage, so much so that they sent him back on a second voyage with a fleet of seventeen ships. Accompanying Columbus on the second voyage was Diego Alvarez Chanca, Queen Isabella's personal physician and now the fleet's physician. Of all those with Columbus, Chanca was one of the best educated. During the voyage, Dr. Chanca wrote a letter to the municipal council of his native city of Seville. The letter is highly descriptive of what he observed, experienced, and came to believe on Columbus's second voyage. The letter pointedly discusses the cannibalistic Island Caribs and the fate of Columbus's men who were left behind on the first voyage. The excerpt that follows is an abridged version of Dr. Chanca's letter.