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Christopher Columbus, Failure

No matter how widely he had been hailed as a hero 14 years before, by 1506, when he died (500 years ago today), Christopher Columbus was all washed up.

Crowds from across Spain lined the streets of Seville in 1493 to welcome him home from his first voyage to the Americas, but he already hadn't found what he was looking for, a seaway to India's spice-trade ports. He never would, though the search consumed the rest of his life. A little genocide here, some slavery there, several mutinies, and multiple executions of crew members later, and Columbus fell out of favor with the Spanish crown and the public. When he died he was surrounded by family and by the trappings of his substantial income. But he went to his grave with the gouging sense of injustice he couldn't forgive and of failure he couldn't explain.



A sentimental imagining of the explorer's deathbed.
(Library of Congress)

His reputation began to sour during his second expedition.

Flush with the success of 1492, he had been named viceroy and governor of all the islands he discovered. Some 1,400 men jostled for berths on his 17 ships bound for the gold-studded heaven on earth in the west. But the large crew was difficult to feed, and the work to be done—digging canals, searching for gold—was backbreaking. Instead of entering paradise, the Spanish settlers found hell on earth, complete with an inept governor. At the helm of a ship, Columbus's navigational instinct, supreme confidence, and unflagging ambition made him an excellent admiral. But his leadership skills disappeared as soon as he set foot ashore. When he returned to Spain in June 1496 with 500 Indian slaves—much to the chagrin of Queen Isabella, who deplored slavery—he plunged into a cauldron of accusations from sick, embittered crew members, among them a priest he had denied rations to after he chastised Columbus for whipping recalcitrant settlers.

King Ferdinand, for his part, was worried about competition with the Portuguese for claim to the new territory. The king of Portugal theorized that further lands lay south of Cuba. Columbus promised to find them for Spain. He persuaded the religious Isabella to back him by observing that any gold he might discover could fund a crusade to reclaim Jerusalem from the infidels.

On May 30, 1498, six caravels sailed west from Sanlúcar de Barrameda, three on the usual passage for Hispaniola, where Columbus had left his brother Bartholomew in charge, and three in untested waters along the equator. But after a month of travel on the new course, Columbus and his crew found themselves becalmed for eight days under a blazing sun that putrefied their food and, they feared, might ignite the ships. When a breeze finally rescued them, Columbus steered toward familiar channels in the north, forsaking the route that would have brought him to the Amazon basin.

His men still managed to become the first Europeans to see South America. Lookouts spotted the forested hills of Venezuela's Paria peninsula in August, but the sailors, conditioned by the Caribbean's intricate beadwork of archipelagos, assumed this was just one more island. Weeks of staring into the sun to navigate had left Columbus's eyes weepy, swollen, and bloodshot, and he simply couldn't see the clues that Paria might be part of something larger. When his crewmen went ashore, on August 5, the first Europeans to walk on the American mainland, he stayed in bed. But when those same men returned, on August 11, with tales of an immense freshwater delta—so big it must issue from a river longer than any island could hold—they planted the first seeds of doubt in Columbus's mind. And as his attempts to circumnavigate Paria revealed more and more coastline, he floundered in confusion.

Geographical wisdom dating back to the ancients presumed only three continents. No one in Europe, the Islamic Middle East, China, or India had heard of a fourth. Could the thinkers of Greece, the authors of the Bible, and the leading modern cosmographers all be wrong? Columbus groped for another explanation. "The

Scriptures tell us that in the Earthly Paradise grows the tree of life," he wrote on August 15, "and that from it flows the source that gives rise to the four great rivers, the Ganges, the Tigris, the Euphrates, and the Nile. The Earthly Paradise, which no one can reach except by the will of God, lies at the end of the Orient, and that is where we are." Explorers accepted the idea that the Garden of Eden was a physical place on earth until the mid-1500s. Nonetheless, Columbus hedged. "If this river does not flow from Paradise, it must come from an immense land to the south, whereof no one till now has had any knowledge," he added. "I believe that this is a most extensive mainland, which no one knew about until today."

But given the fine line between cosmography and theology, he had to challenge nothing less than church doctrine to assert that opinion, and doing so could earn him a heresy charge. The safest explanation, which he seems to have swallowed eagerly, was that this was just an uncharted province of China. With that settled, history's most famous explorer made an uncharacteristic move: He decided he didn't want to explore anything that might upset common knowledge. Jilting fate, he abandoned Venezuela to check up on his brother in Hispaniola. Thus the biggest discovery in geography passed completely unheralded by its discoverer. His whole life, Columbus had believed that God had destined him for glory. But once left behind, destiny seemed never to be on Columbus's side again.

For starters, gory chaos greeted him on Hispaniola. Abused by the Spanish colonists, the Indians had struck back with violent uprisings. Disease and hunger, exacerbated by Bartholomew's mismanagement, had split the settlers into two warring bands. A hundred men led by the colony's chief justice, Francisco Roldan, were rebelling against those still loyal to Bartholomew. Columbus immediately recognized the mutiny as potentially fatal to both his colony and his authority as viceroy. The son of a plebeian Genoese merchant, he had risen to command the favor of the Spanish crown; he got there with a concentrated lust for power and prestige. But with only 70 faithful, he couldn't fight back against Roldon. So he eventually caved to all the rebels' demands: Exempt from punishment, they could return to Spain or claim free land on Hispaniola; they would be paid back wages; and Roldon was promoted.

In a letter to the Spanish monarchs explaining the situation, Columbus requested 50 more men and an administrator of justice. Ferdinand and Isabella were not about to commit more subjects to this troublesome, seemingly pointless colony, but the administrator sounded like a good idea. Considering Hispaniola's importance as a stopover in further exploration of the west, the monarchs realized they had granted Columbus too much power. They hoped Francisco Bobadilla, an officer of the crown, could get him to return home peacefully.

Bobadilla's first sight upon landing on Hispaniola was a gibbet hung with the corpses of six rebellious Spanish settlers. Columbus and Bartholomew were on an expedition inland, but when Bobadilla questioned their brother, Diego, he found out that more settlers were scheduled to be hanged the next day. Bobadilla forbade the executions, but Diego replied that he only took orders from the viceroy. At that, Bobadilla jailed Diego and took over Columbus's house, possessions, and job. When Columbus and Bartholomew returned, Columbus furiously challenged Bobadilla's authority—so Bobadilla threw him and Bartholomew in prison too. There the three Columbus brothers waited for two months, until Bobadilla realized an inquest would be too much work and returned them to Spain for trial. As Christopher Columbus was led in chains from his cell in early October 1500, he thought he was about to be executed.

Instead, an equerry ushered him and his brothers onto a ship heading home. As soon they left port, the captain offered to remove Columbus's restraints. "I have been placed in chains by the order of the sovereigns," Columbus replied, "and I shall wear them until the sovereigns themselves should order them removed." True to his word, he dragged his bonds with an ostentatious rattle through the streets of Cadiz and Seville. Ferdinand and Isabella ordered him freed as soon as the news reached them. They had wanted him removed from power, not humiliated.

But their long-unwavering confidence in him had vanished. He begged to be reinstated as viceroy; they refused. To a man who believed he had been appointed by God to discover and rule the Indies, this felt like a perversion of destiny. He could continue to draw his duties on Spain's profits from the New World, an income that would have allowed him to retire in luxury. But the 49-year-old explorer, nearly blind and crippled from arthritis, could never keep his eyes from the western horizon.

He sensed he was losing his influence to new explorers. Under the Portuguese flag in 1498, Vasco de Gama had reached India by sailing east around Cape Horn. The Portuguese had beaten Columbus. But if Columbus found a shorter route via the west, maybe he could win his governorship back. From Marco Polo, Europeans had learned about the only sea route between China and India—the Strait of Malacca, separating Sumatra and Malaysia. If Columbus had found the Asian continent on his last trip, the passage had to be nearby. Of course, his conception of Asian geography was a little off. He had no idea of the size of the continent and assumed that China and India were squished together with the Indies just offshore. But Ferdinand and Isabella were no better informed. They approved his expedition on March 14, 1502, with two caveats: He would send back no slaves, and he would not stop on Hispaniola except in an emergency.

So, with four rickety ships and 150 men, he set out across the Atlantic for one last shot in the dark. He made the crossing in record time—16 days—and headed straight for Hispaniola. The new governor refused to let him

land and ignored his warnings of a coming hurricane. “What man ever born, not excepting Job, would not have died of despair when in such weather, seeking safety for my son, brother, shipmates and myself, we were forbidden the land and the harbors that I, by God’s will and sweating blood, had won for Spain?” As he found a safe inlet west of Santo Domingo, the governor dispatched 30 ships bound for Spain, 25 of which sank in the storm Columbus foresaw. Both Roldon and Bobadilla drowned. Four ships were forced to turn back, and only one reached Spain—the one transporting Columbus’s share of the New World gold.

When the sky cleared, Columbus and his crew journeyed west to an area of the Caribbean they had never explored. They reached what is now Honduras on July 31. There Bartholomew met a canoe full of Indians transporting the fruits of an advanced civilization: copper razors and knives, wooden swords set with flint, colorful cotton shirts, and beer. They were Chontal Mayans, traveling from Campeche Bay to the trading ports of Central America. Had Columbus followed them back to the Yucatan, he would have discovered the pyramids and monuments of Mexican civilization. But he had no time to divert from the search for the passage. After all, this was Asia; how unusual should it be to find advanced Chinese? In a letter to Ferdinand and Isabella, he wrote two lines about the Mayans and devoted four times as much space to a fight between a boar and a spider monkey. At yet another crossroads, Columbus, thinking he was choosing the path to discovery and accolades, again chose the route to pain and regret.

Traveling south against the wind and current, his ships moved only six miles a day for the next month along the east coast of Central America. “What with the heat and dampness,” his son Fernando wrote, “our ship biscuit had become so wormy that, God help me, I saw many who waited for darkness to eat the porridge made of it, that they might not see the maggots.” But Columbus, aware that this might be his last voyage, refused to give up. Finally the Spanish arrived in Panama’s Chiriqui Lagoon in early October, where natives told them it was just a nine-day hike across the isthmus to another ocean. This must be the place. From here, Columbus calculated, it would be a ten-day sail to the Ganges. His men explored every inlet of the lagoon in search of the strait, but to no avail. Joyful anticipation turned to desperation, and desperation to bitter disappointment. After three days, Columbus returned to the open sea, his hopes suffocated, his only goal now the acquisition of wealth.

Low tide beached him until April at the gold fields of Panama, where his men waged bloody war with Indians. He himself caught malaria. When the waters finally rose, termite-like worms had made lace of the ships’ hulls. With only three viable caravels, he headed for Hispaniola one last time. He made it as far as Jamaica. From there, he sent an emissary by canoe the 105 miles to Santo Domingo to ask for transportation home. The governor of Hispaniola waited nine months to answer the request, nine months in which the starved, disease-ridden Spanish on Jamaica staged one last failed rebellion against their sickly captain. Finally, on September 12, 1504, a relief expedition left for Seville with Columbus on board. He would never again lay eyes on the land he had claimed for Spain 12 years earlier.

His previous returns home had been buoyed by triumph or righteous martyrdom, but when he reached Seville on November 8, he was weighted by failure. Prone to fevered deliriums, he continued to demand the offices of viceroy and governor of the Indies. Ferdinand refused, but he offered Columbus the title of admiral of the ocean sea as consolation. For the first time, Columbus registered the defeat. Immobilized by gout and arthritis at just 53, he retreated to bed.

In a few years, cartographers would name the vast lands of the Western Hemisphere after Amerigo Vespucci, the Florentine explorer who first recognized South America as its own continent, and Ferdinand Magellan would find a passage to the Pacific in the west by looking south of the equator. By then the man who had opened the door for those advances—but balked at walking through—was no longer around to jockey for credit. On May 20, 1506, in Valladolid, Spain, with his two brothers and two sons at his side, Columbus uttered his last words: “In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum” (“Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit”).

He died in the comfort of wealth—his descendants would live off his money for generations—and the silence of obscurity. But just a few miles away, King Ferdinand didn’t even receive word that Columbus was ill. The final journey of the explorer who reorganized the globe, a funeral procession through the city streets, passed unnoticed even by the residents of Valladolid.

—*Christine Gibson is a former editor at American Heritage magazine.*