

**Record: 1**

**Title:** An Intriguing Proposal.

**Timeline:** U.S. History -- European Colonization of the Americas (1492-1769)

**Subject(s):** COLUMBUS, Christopher; VOYAGES & travels

**Geographic Terms:** SPAIN

**Author(s):** Hoisington, Sona

**Source:** Calliope, Feb2010, Vol. 20 Issue 5, p13

**Document Type:** Article

**Abstract:** The article presents information on the voyage made on ships by Christopher Columbus for Spain in 1492.

**Accession Number:** 48341283

**ISSN:** 1050-7086

**Lexile:** 1040

**Database:** History Reference Center

**Notes:** This title is not held locally

### **An Intriguing Proposal**

Isabella and Christopher Columbus, both born in 1451, are forever linked in the history of exploration. They first met in Cordova in 1486, when Columbus was granted an audience. Isabella was struck by the tall, handsome Italian, who hailed from Genoa and had lived in Lisbon, the center of Portuguese navigation. She was impressed by his seafaring experience, his confidence, and the eloquence of his words. Columbus brought Isabella an intriguing proposal, one that promised to bring vast riches to the kingdom of Castile. He told Isabella that were she to sponsor him, he could find a new route to Asia by sailing west across the Atlantic Ocean, or the Ocean Sea, as it was then called.

#### **Not the Right Time**

Isabella was very interested in Columbu idea. Here was a way of making Spain rich and outsmarting her kingdom's greatest rival, the Portuguese, who had discovered gold on Africa's west coast. Portugal's King John II flaunted his country's new wealth, its claims to political control over Africa, and its success in spreading the Catholic faith. Still, Isabella did not immediately agree to Columbus' proposal. At the time, she and Ferdinand were involved in a costly war against the Moors in the kingdom of Granada, the last Moorish stronghold in Spain.

Already in its fifth year, the conflict dragged on and on. Sometimes the Spaniards would win a battle and take a Moorish city; sometimes they would be defeated. While Isabella, as a woman,

could not lead troops in battle, she played an active role in the campaign, securing supplies and funds for the army. Since she and Ferdinand were constantly on the move, they had assembled a traveling court. So it was at one of these "camp" courts that Isabella first met Columbus.

By the fall of 1491, the war against the Moors was coming to a close. Isabella sent for Columbus, requesting that he come again to the camp court, now located outside the city of Granada, seat of the Moorish kings. She sent Columbus money for new clothes and provided him with a mule for transportation. The mule was a luxury, since its use in wartime was largely restricted to the army. Once again, Columbus presented his proposal, but the committee of experts who reviewed it advised Isabella against such an undertaking. Disheartened, Columbus left the court.

### **It's a Go!**

Soon after, the Moors surrendered. Overjoyed by her victory, Isabella recalled Columbus and agreed to sponsor him. Now, more than ever, Spain needed new sources of revenue. And, although Isabella offered to pawn her jewels, she quickly realized that she could benefit from Columbus' exploration without having to make this sacrifice. Luis de Santangel, the manager of the royal accounts, said public funds could be advanced and wealthy Spaniards and Genoese merchants who lived in Seville would also put up money. In addition, the town of Palos on the Atlantic coast of Castile could be ordered to provide Columbus with two caravels, since they owed the crown a fine for engaging in smuggling activities.

Before Isabella authorized preparations for Columbus' voyage, she had a contract drawn up, specifying what the crown expected to gain from his voyage and what it was willing to grant him: The crown would retain control over all discovered territories, and Columbus would be made a royal admiral, viceroy, and governor — general over all he might find, with rights to one-tenth of any treasure found. The monarchs issued him a letter of safe conduct: "We send Christopher Columbus with three caravels through the Ocean Sea to the Indies, on some business that touches the service of God and especially of the Catholic faith and our own benefit."

### **'I've Reached Asia!'**

Finally, on August 3, 1492, Columbus set sail from Palos, in southern Spain, with 90 men and three ships — the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria. On October 12, he landed on an unidentified island. Believing that the earth was much smaller than it actually is, he was convinced that he had found Asia. Instead, what he had found was a small island in the Caribbean. Soon after, the Santa Maria ran aground on a larger island, which Columbus named Hispaniola. There, he built a fort and left some 30 men to garrison it. He then sailed back to Spain with monkeys, parrots, cinnamon, chili peppers, small pieces of gold, and six native Indians.

Forced by an ill wind to disembark in Lisbon, Columbus immediately proclaimed his discovery of a new route to Asia. News spread quickly. By the time he arrived in Spain and began traveling to

Barcelona, where Isabella and Ferdinand were, people crowded the roads to catch a glimpse of the explorer and his exotic finds.

Columbus received a warm welcome at court. The six native Indians, with gold circles in their ears and nostrils, were the object of much curiosity and admiration. They were baptized into the Catholic faith with the queen, king, and prince standing as godparents. Impressed by Columbus' account of his travels, Isabella and Ferdinand immediately authorized a second voyage of exploration. Isabella directed Columbus to establish a colony on Hispaniola and to convert the native peoples to Catholicism. Columbus set sail in September 1493, with 17 ships, 1,200 men, and 12 priests. Isabella and Ferdinand cautioned him to treat the Indians with affection and respect and to honor them.

### **A Poor Administrator**

Columbus was appointed governor of the colony he established on Hispaniola. But he was not a good administrator and was soon feuding with both the Indians and the Spanish colonists he had brought with him.

Even using forced Indian labor, they found little gold. Farming also proved difficult. Word got back to Isabella and Ferdinand that the colony was not prospering and that Columbus was a poor administrator.

When Columbus proposed exporting native Indians as slaves to Europe, Isabella objected on religious grounds, declaring that the Indians had souls and should be converted to Catholicism and baptized. However, she also realized that they did not make good slaves, as many of them died of disease when they came in contact with Europeans. Instead, Isabella ordered the colony to grow sugar cane, since sugar was a rare commodity in Europe.

By the time Columbus made his third voyage in 1498, Isabella had become skeptical about his claim of having discovered a new route to Asia and outfitted him with only two ships. Columbus chose to take a more southerly route and actually reached South America, but did not stop to explore it. When he arrived at Hispaniola, he found the situation unmanageable and appealed to Spain to send an assistant. Francisco de Bobadilla, the man sent to investigate, promptly shipped Columbus back to Spain to stand trial.

### **From Hero to Prisoner**

Appalled to see Columbus ushered into her presence in chains, Isabella ordered him set free. But her faith in his abilities to govern Hispaniola was gone, and she appointed a new governor, Nicolas de Ovando.

In 1502, Columbus was granted permission to make a fourth voyage of exploration, but was provided with only a single vessel. He continued to search for a passage to Asia, but spent almost

a year marooned on Jamaica. By the time he returned to Spain in the fall of 1504, Isabella lay dying. Some 18 months later, Columbus died. Although he never realized any financial gain from his explorations, he was made a nobleman, and his coat of arms featured royal symbols: the castle and lion of Castile.

### **DID YOU KNOW**

Tradition says that after Columbus returned from his historic 1492 trip, he was dining with Spanish nobles who said that anyone could have made his discovery. Without replying, Columbus asked that a fresh egg be brought to him and then asked the nobles to make it stand on its end. When no one could, Columbus tapped one end, slightly breaking the shell, and then placed it standing upright. His message was obvious: Once something has been done, it seems easy to others.

**Caravels** were small, light sailing ships, especially those used by the Spanish and Portuguese in the 15th and 16th centuries. They had two or three masts and lateen sails or a mix of lateen and square sails.

### **"I made it! Queen Isabella will be well pleased!"**

"However, it was not Asia that Columbus had reached, but the lands that would be called the Americas.

**Hispaniola** is Spanish for "Little Spain." Today, the island is divided between the nations of the Republic of Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

The illustration at right dates to 1494 and shows Columbus landing on Hispaniola.

### **"Let's take a look!"**

The gifts Columbus brought with him, as well as the clothes and weapons he and his men had, must have seemed strange to those they met in the New World.

PHOTO (COLOR): Published in Germany between 1497 and 1504, this woodcut is credited as the first European representation of people in the New World. Look closely at the details for an idea of what some Europeans thought at the time.

PHOTO (COLOR)

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By Sona Hoisington

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**Source:** Calliope, Feb2010, Vol. 20 Issue 5, p13, 7p

**Item:** 48341283