

1991

The new man and the new world the influence of Renaissance humanism on the explorers of the Italian era of discovery

Richard Di Giacomo
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses

Recommended Citation

Di Giacomo, Richard, "The new man and the new world the influence of Renaissance humanism on the explorers of the Italian era of discovery" (1991). *Master's Theses*. 107.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.583f-m57m>

https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/107

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Graduate Research at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

U·M·I

University Microfilms International
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600



Order Number 1344253

**The new man and the new world: The influence of Renaissance
humanism on the explorers of the Italian Era of Discovery**

Di Giacomo, Richard, M.A.

San Jose State University, 1991

Copyright ©1991 by Di Giacomo, Richard. All rights reserved.

U·M·I
300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106



**THE NEW MAN AND THE NEW WORLD:
THE INFLUENCE OF RENAISSANCE HUMANISM ON THE EXPLORERS OF
THE ITALIAN ERA OF DISCOVERY**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

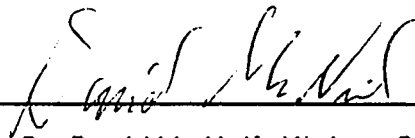
Master of Arts

By

Richard Di Giacomo

May, 1991

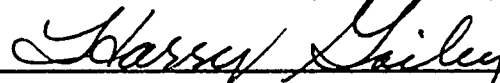
APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY



Dr. David Mc Neil, History Professor

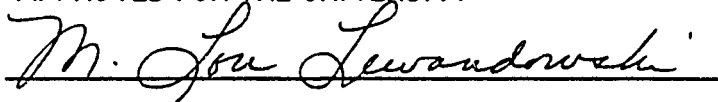


Dr. Charles Keserich, Dept. Chairperson



Dr. Harry Gailley, History Professor

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY



© 1991

Richard Di Giacomo

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

THE NEW MAN AND THE NEW WORLD: THE INFLUENCE OF RENAISSANCE HUMANISM ON THE EXPLORERS OF THE ITALIAN ERA OF DISCOVERY

The collective discoveries of Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, John and Sebastian Cabot, and Giovanni da Verrazzano constitute a distinct Italian Era of Discovery which laid the groundwork for all other voyages which followed. The Italian discoverers deserve a place alongside the well-known Humanists in the history of art, literature, philosophy, and government by virtue of their research and accomplishments. The explorers also made original contributions to the fields of science, navigation and cartography.

The world view of the Italian explorers evolved to include the concept of a new world. They had to reevaluate their cosmography and change the maps to reflect their new knowledge. The concept of a New World was equally profound as that of a new age. The most important contribution of the Italian explorers was not what they found, but the change in thinking that took place when they tried to explain their discoveries.

Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
1. Introduction	i
The Italian Era of Discovery	5
2. Christopher Columbus	24
3. Amerigo Vespucci	50
4. John and Sebastian Cabot	80
6. Giovanni da Verrazzano	108
7. The Impact of the Age of Discovery on Italy	124
Conclusion	127
Appendixes	
A. Italian Voyages of Discovery	132
B. Chronology of the Italian Era of Discovery	133
Bibliography	134

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have long debated the differences between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and an important part of this debate has been the discussion over what distinguishes the Renaissance man from his predecessors. Ever since the appearance of the seminal chapters in Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*,¹ which discussed the matter, countless followers and detractors of Burckhardt have ventured their own lists of which qualities do or do not typify the Renaissance man.

Over the years a kind of litmus test for the Renaissance man has evolved with varied, but nonetheless generally common characteristics. The Renaissance man had: the first true awareness of man's location in time and space because of his study of geography, history, and natural philosophy;² a more accurate sense of history;³ and a distinct awareness of being part of an new age;⁴ a renewed belief in the dignity of man and the importance of his actions and abilities instead of exclusive belief in external influences such as fate or divine intervention;⁵ a new love of learning inspired by the classics, which was followed by a drive to surpass the accomplishments of the Ancients; a disregard for the Scholasticism and rigid subject divisions of medieval universities, opting instead for a broadening of knowledge to

include new subjects and research methods;⁶ and, finally, a new sense of individualism stressing fame, virtue, and civic accomplishment over piety and humility which inspired him to accomplish great deeds.⁷

In the enthusiasm of scholars to point out the differences between the Renaissance and medieval man, the parameters of this discussion have often been laid out in dramatic, black and white contrasts, when in reality the lines are often blurred, as with any historical comparison. In an effort to demonstrate that the thoughts of the Renaissance man typified in many ways the beginning of the modern mind, some historians have exaggerated the contrasts between the medieval and Renaissance man. They have annoyed Medievalists with their portraits of the medieval man as childlike in his simplicity and unswerving in his loyalty to God and authority. By contrast, the Renaissance man is sometimes depicted as a kind of superhuman or demigod for whom nothing is impossible. The Renaissance man is sometimes shown to have so much self-pride and worldliness that he routinely defies God and authority, relying only on his own judgement, somehow strangely divorced from the world of Christendom around him. His supposed complete dedication to secularism is praised by some authors as sophisticated and adult only because it reflects modern thinking. Indeed, Renaissance men are often depicted as so far ahead of their time that they

have nothing in common with the world around them.⁶ This is not a very realistic portrayal of the intellectual climate of the Renaissance.

In truth, the man of the Renaissance fit neither of these two extremes. He was not the man of childlike medieval faith nor the modern-thinking, sophisticated adult. He was more like an adolescent who sometimes displays adult-like characteristics and at other times those of a child. Nor is this atypical of any age of transition; man is the product of his past as much as the present, and no age can be completely distinct from that which preceded and that which followed it. The need to overclassify men of different eras comes from what is known: as a Whig interpretation of history, in other words, a need to see progress in the development of man over time to something better (and naturally more like one's own age). This interpretation is flawed because man shares common characteristics throughout the ages, and there is nothing better or worse about modern man. The man of the Renaissance was still pious, still trusted authority, and still tried to explain the unknown within the boundaries of the known before daring to say that all others before him had been wrong.⁹

Scholars who have ventured their opinions on what constitutes a Renaissance man have profiled men of all backgrounds, from all parts of Europe.¹⁰ Everyone from Polish clerics to Spanish soldiers have been

called Humanists at some point. One group that has been ignored, however, is the explorers. It is odd that although much has been written about Italy as the birthplace of a new age, nothing has been said about it being the birthplace of the concept of the New World. Thomas Goldstein has written some very good works discussing the interrelated concepts of discovery and Humanism, but has limited himself to the speculations of the Humanist geographers of Florence.¹¹ He had not discussed the men who picked up on these ideas and carried them into action.

The typical discussion of explorers has centered around biographical data, navigational studies, and who deserves credit for discovering what. Going beyond this basic knowledge, it will be demonstrated in the course of this paper that the Italian explorers had humanistic motives for their voyages of discovery and that Humanism influenced how they interpreted what they found. This is evidenced by their research in the classics while preparing for their voyages, scientific and cartographical work, and search for new knowledge. The Italian discoverers also possessed the typical Renaissance desire to bring fame to themselves through great and virtuous deeds, and to find a better understanding of man and his role in the world. I also wish to profile the world view of the Renaissance explorers of Italy by examining their writings and what was said about them by their

contemporaries. It will be demonstrated from this that the explorers were Humanists of an equal rank to those of fame in the history of art, literature, philosophy, and government by virtue of their academic preparation, accomplishments, and impact on intellectual history.

THE ITALIAN ERA OF DISCOVERY: 1492-1528

Before examining the influence of Humanism on the Italian discoverers it would first be useful to discuss the historical context of the period in which their discoveries were made. In contrast to the usual interpretation of the Era of Discovery as a phenomenon which occurred throughout Europe, an argument can be made for a distinct, earlier phase, which was wholly Italian.

Scholars today generally agree that the discovery of America was not the goal of Columbus when he set sail for his first voyage in 1492.¹² Most scholars will agree that instead he was looking for a shorter route to Asia than the Portuguese route around the Cape of Good Hope. What is not generally known, however, is that Columbus led an entire generation of Italian discoverers who shared his goal of sailing west from Europe to reach Asia and would consequently try routes of their own. None of them found a passage through to Asia, but they did explore long stretches of coastline in

what would soon be recognized as the New World. As a result, most of the shorelines and large rivers of the Atlantic seaboard of the continents of North and South America were first discovered by Italians.

Explorers of other nationalities came later to fill in the details of coastlines and to exploit the newly-found lands for their own purposes, but without exception those who first proposed the westward voyages to America were Italians. The motivation behind these plans was to gain more direct access to the markets of Asia by avoiding the long overland route and the price increases of the Arab middlemen. Because Portugal was busy trying a route of its own, the Italians sought patronage among each of Portugal's European rivals. They promised to secure a quicker supply route to the spices and luxuries of the East, thereby bringing riches and fame for the nations which had hitherto been denied direct access to these highly valued goods.

By examining the origins of the plans to cross the Atlantic and the way in which each of the Italian explorers sought to fulfill Columbus' dream in his own way, we gain a clear picture of a distinct era of Italian discovery which is not apparent by simply looking at the lives of the discoverers individually. The dream of Columbus is clearly the common thread among explorers who will be examined in this study.

In many ways the Italian peninsula in the Renaissance was the perfect breeding ground for the ideas which inspired the great discoveries of the Italians and others. A unique set of conditions existed in Italy in the fifteenth century which made it the cultural, economic, and religious capital of the World despite the fact that it was still divided into seven major states and a smattering of smaller states and principalities.

A number of new arts and sciences were springing up which would provide Europe with the greatest new awakening of civilization since the fall of the Roman Empire. The list of Italian contributions to the new age is staggering. Among the new developments were Humanist philosophy and literature, Renaissance art, architecture and music. New social and political theory and practices were being developed which would lay the foundations of the modern world. Economically, the Italians became the leaders of a commercial revolution by establishing the first means of mass production through specialization of industry and the use of joint capital. The quality and appeal of Italian manufactured goods and the luxuries which Italians imported from the East allowed them to establish Europe's first network of international trade, banking, and currency exchange.

The most important development for our present study, however, was the creation of a new school of cartography which proved to be an important forerunner of the Scientific Revolution because of its use of what would later be called the empirical method.¹³ The Italian cartographers added to their base of geographical knowledge new information gained by observation and experimentation. They were able to update their maps constantly, rather than rely strictly upon the geographical opinions of the Ancients.¹⁴ As with the Humanist scholars in literature, the geographers began collecting maps from everywhere and improving their own products until they were the finest to be found in Europe. They in turn used this knowledge to formulate further geographical hypotheses, the most important of which, we shall see, being that of the possibility of reaching the East by sailing west. The Italians originally had a monopoly over trade with the East which others sought to bypass by finding a route of their own. Italian dominance of trade with the Arabs in the Levant for goods brought from the East evolved from their role in leading and transporting Crusaders to the Holy Land in the Middle Ages. Since the most important cities in the Italian trade network were also great naval powers, it is only natural that the cities with access to ports (Venice, Genoa, and Florence, which used Pisa and Piombino), would be the

homes of the Italian explorers. The great seafaring and commercial reputations of these cities would open many doors for the Italian explorers as they sought patronage in foreign lands. Furthermore, the ideas of the Italian Renaissance were exported along with their trade goods, and did much to prepare the way for their overtures.¹⁵

Even before the Renaissance, travel had long been a part of the tradition of the Italian peninsula. Ever since the days of Marco Polo Italian merchants and clerics had been travelling to little-known parts of the Earth and reporting back on what they had found.¹⁶ The impetus for exploration across the Atlantic (which had seemed impassable to the Ancients) occurred when all the right factors came together about the time of the Council of Florence in 1439. While talks went on to try to reconcile the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, Florentine geographers took the opportunity to interview the curious-looking foreign visitors from the fringes of the known world as to the extent of their geographical knowledge.¹⁷ Paolo Toscanelli and others began to combine these new bits of information with what they had been studying in the preceding years since the revival of study of the Ancient Geographers Ptolemy and Strabo.

In typical humanist fashion, they were willing to break with medieval authoritarianism and substitute newly-obtained information to reform their ideas about areas such as Asia, where the Ancients had been wrong¹⁸ Realizing that the Ancients had based their notions on limited experience and second hand observation at best, the Italian cartographers chose to believe those who had claimed to actually have been there instead.

In the fourteenth century Italian cartographers gained fame by producing a series of practical charts for navigating coastlines called "portolani" because of their usefulness for finding familiar European ports. When the Italians added this practical slant to their improvements on the observations of the Ancients, a whole new concept in cartography was born: that of updating maps with better observation and drawing skills. With this, geography moved from philosophical speculation to a precise science.¹⁹

From the informal geographical discussions during the Council of Florence, which had nothing to do with the church business being conducted, many new geographical notions began to take shape. Not many of these ideas ever went beyond changes in locally-produced maps, but what began to evolve in the mind of Toscanelli, we can be sure at least, was the notion of sailing west to reach Asia.²⁰ As with many other aspects of the Italian

Renaissance, this was borne out of both necessity and creative genius. On the practical side, the overland routes which the Arabs used to bring in luxury goods from the East to the Levant were cut off by the advance of the Turkish armies,²¹ and the Portuguese were making advances in shipbuilding which allowed for sailing out on the open sea for the first time.²²

The creative genius of Toscanelli, which perhaps makes him the most underrated of Renaissance men, was to determine that the actual distance between Europe and Asia was much shorter than the Ancients had believed (based on the new reports) and that a western passage might be conceivably made. Speculation as to the possibility of a western crossing probably occurred in the Middle Ages as well, but the distance was considered too great and the ships too frail to make the crossing. Toscanelli did much to spread his findings, and we know that at least Columbus corresponded with him.²³ Columbus did his best to gather evidence for this novel proposal and try it out. In fact, it became his life's passion. Through him the other Italian explorers learned of the idea and did their best to try out routes to the East of their own.

Italian merchants and scholars began to be interested in the idea for two reasons: first, because of their tradition of learning by observation which they perfected in the arts, and second, their lust for adventure and

profit.²⁴ The connection between merchants, patrons, and scholars is by no means a contrivance. Many of the great men of the Renaissance carried on a number of these roles simultaneously or changed from one role to the other with ease, as is perhaps best exemplified by the career of Lorenzo the Magnificent. But because of conditions in Italy itself, the explorers had to seek patronage elsewhere. Once they found it, the Great Age of Discovery was born.

Several factors contributed to the need for Italians to seek foreign aid to support their voyages of discovery. First, the economy of the day required that anyone who wished to pursue an endeavor which was radically different from the traditional occupational pursuits of his forefathers obtain support from a powerful patron. This was as much true for the explorers in the Renaissance as it was for the artists, philosophers, and men of letters.²⁵

Second, although the practice of merchant capitalism which had been perfected by the Italians for their commercial exploits in Europe proved to be important in providing ships, men, and equipment for the discoverers, the Italian patrons and merchants were so busy with other enterprises that they had no time or money left for the explorers. Hence, the need to seek sponsorship from foreign capitalists and patrons.²⁶

The Italian merchants had too much at stake in the status quo to want to invest heavily in anything which might upset it.²⁷ They were eager to keep up with any news from the New World and occasionally invested in merchant ventures to exploit recent discoveries, but unfortunately spent most of their time and energy figuring out how to make money from the foolish excesses²⁸ of others (who rapidly spent the gold obtained from the New World) instead of going out and claiming lands for themselves. Furthermore, in the face of internal struggles, interstate rivalries, and the threat of foreign invasion, no one Italian state was ever powerful enough to sponsor voyages of discovery of its own.

Italian resources were strained to the limit at the time of the beginning of the Great Age of Discovery and simply could not accommodate anything new. The Venetians overcame the loss of territory and subsequent payment of duties to the Turks only by extending their empire inland to include parts of Italy. They were soon to learn that the power struggles of the Italian mainland came at no little cost, however. Their overseas empire gradually fell away as they increasingly diverted their energies to defending their territories and allies in the Italian states. As we shall see later, when an opportunity came to them to join the race to explore and claim parts of the New World, they were forced to back out of negotiations

for fear of reprisals from their larger European rivals. The Genoans continued their prosperity for a while by serving as the European distributors of Portuguese spice imports. They still cut a high share of the profit, but the city-state eventually suffered internal collapse due to economic decline and foreign pressures.

Meanwhile, the Florentines managed to keep a competitive edge by monopolizing banking, papal collections, international currency exchange, and loans to foreign monarchs. But ultimately, failures in these foreign investments caused their economic collapse as well.²⁹ One by one the great financial powers of Italy declined, and the mercenaries and foreign powers which the city-states once brought in to fight their fights began to realize that they were stronger than either side in the local conflict.

Eventually, Italy's neighbors became so powerful that they could battle among themselves for control of Italy itself, thus ending Italian commercial domination once and for all and extinguishing all hopes towards Italian unification. This became possible because France and Spain had unified earlier and could use the gold from the New World to build large armies of conquest. Furthermore, although they had been economically backward and dependent on Italy for high quality goods, they began to develop domestic industries and fleets to rival those of Italy.

Italy's active role in the development of the New World was limited to the individual accomplishments of its discoverers because of its political isolation and disunity during the Age of Discovery.³⁰ Perhaps the greatest irony of the Italian Era of Discovery was that very little of the profits from these great voyages came to the explorers themselves or their states of origin in Italy. Nearly every one of the expeditions was a commercial failure, and additional voyages became increasingly more difficult to finance. None of the explorers died wealthy men, and no Italian state ever claimed a colony in the New World (though other small nations did).³¹

With the hundreds of sailors, scholars, and merchantmen from various Italian states who sailed under the flags of other nations, it is not difficult to imagine how an Italian empire in the New World might have been established had Italy been a united country at the time. Instead of this, we have the legacy of the Italian Renaissance and all that it has given the World, of which the Italian Era of Discovery was an important part.

At this point it would be useful to provide the reader with a brief summary of the careers of the great Italian discoverers. We shall avoid the numerous controversies which surround the careers and accomplishments of the discoverers and merely recount what is commonly accepted as being

true. Should the reader have further interest in these controversies, a number of professional studies are widely available which discuss the various possibilities.

Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) was a Genoan whose real name was Cristoforo Colombo. He began sailing at the age of twelve and was involved in navigation and mapmaking all of his life. We do not know for certain how many voyages he made in preparation for the epic crossing of 1492, but nearly every destination known and unknown in the Atlantic at the time has been suggested at one time or another. Columbus made four voyages to the New World for Spain (1492, 1493, 1498, and 1502). His voyages primarily centered around the islands of the Caribbean, the eastern shores of Central America south of the Yucatan Peninsula, and the northern shores of South America. His primary accomplishment was opening up the Atlantic to exploration and permanent development by Europeans. As we shall see later, he did not in a real sense discover America.

Amerigo Vespucci (1454-1512) was a Florentine with close connections to the ruling Medici family. He was well versed in humanist philosophy, mapmaking, navigation and merchant skills. He surveyed the coasts of South America for a passage to Asia in places that Columbus and others had neglected. His principal voyages were for Spain in 1499 and

Portugal in 1501-1502. His most outstanding accomplishment was to realize his discovery was an entirely new continent, not just a part of Asia. Appropriately, therefore, the New World is named after him.

The father and son team of John and Sebastian Cabot sailed in a series of voyages for England in an attempt to reach Asia by a northern route. John Cabot (1450-1498?) was a Genoan whose real name was Giovanni Caboto. He made two voyages to the New World, one in 1497 and another in 1498. He either died at sea or died in obscurity upon his return because of his inability to substantiate the claims of having found Asia.

His son, however, went to the area near Labrador in 1509 and after having realized the error of his father's ways began the search for the Northwest Passage. Having failed that, he was also instrumental in organizing an expedition to search for a Northeast Passage, but was not allowed to go along because by that time he was advanced in age. The Cabots led the way for future British explorers and established important claims for the later development of British North America.

Antonio Pigafetta (c. 1492 to 1534) is best remembered for his first-person account of Magellan's attempt to circumnavigate the globe. He was born in Vicenza, Italy, and was a papal envoy to the Spanish at the time that he volunteered for the voyage. He entered the Order of the Knights of

St. John on Malta upon his return. He was a typical Renaissance merchant scholar and his talents as a man of letters were put to good use in his beautifully written account of Magellan's voyage.

Although not discussed at length in this paper because so little is known about him, Antonio Pigafetta is important because he informed the other Italian explorers of the possibility of a southern passage to Asia. This would change the focus of their voyages from north to south as word spread, and help them better understand that the areas that they had initially discovered were probably not a part of Asia. Magellan's voyage was the one which finally proved that a western route could be used to reach Asia, but that it was neither as easy nor as short as the Italians had believed. Consequently, through possible contact with Magellan himself, or by hearing of Pigafetta's account, the Italian discoverers began to join the search for a shorter southern passage.

Finally, Giovanni Verrazzano (1485?-1528) sailed to survey the eastern coast of North America for a possible strait opening to a passage to Asia. He probably tried this route because he had not yet heard of the return of the survivors from Magellan's expedition. He was born in Venice but was a member of the Florentine merchant colony in Lyons, France. He sailed extensively for this group on commercial ventures to the Levant and

gathered information and maps everywhere that he went. He did not find the sought-for passage to Asia, but was instrumental in leading the way for further French exploration and colonization of North America. Towards the end of his life he also conducted expeditions which searched for passages through South and Central America, but did not succeed in either of these goals.

All of these men, in their own way, contributed to our portrait of the Renaissance man as discoverer. They were not merely adventurers, but men greatly influenced by the Humanism of their age. Because of their education and research, they carried with them the ideas and fresh outlook of the Renaissance towards the world. Specific aspects of the Renaissance man in each of the explorers will be pointed out as this survey continues. This will be done by examining their academic preparations and navigational accomplishments as revealed in their journals, contemporary accounts, and in the works of their biographers.

In general, the explorers based their decisions on the gathering of evidence tempered by empirical methods. Observation and experimentation allowed them to be open-minded enough to question the ancient authorities when necessary.³² Each of the Italian explorers was a student of the "Italian School of Cartography" in his own right and carried its ideas into

his methods of preparation and exploration. They also invented new instruments and techniques to meet and survey new conditions, instead of just relying on what tradition said must be true.³³

NOTES

- ¹ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 5th ed. (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1937).
- ² German Arciniegas, *America in Europe: A History of the New World in Reverse* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975), pp.76-77.
- ³ Wallace Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), p. 2.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ J. H. Plumb, gen. ed., *The Pelican History of European Thought*, 10 vols. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978), vol. 3: *From Humanism to Science: 1480-1700*, by Robert Mandrou, trans. Brian Pierce, pp. 42-46.
- ⁷ Burckhardt, part II, especially p. 81.
- ⁸ Ferguson, pp. 198-199.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 9 in passim.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ See bibliography.
- ¹² Samuel E. Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942), p. 54.
- ¹³ Thomas Goldstein, "Geography in Fifteenth-Century Florence" in *Merchants & Scholars: Essays in the History of Exploration and Trade*, John Parker ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), p. 12.
- ¹⁴ Frederick J. Pohl, *Amerigo Vespucci: Pilot Major* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), p. 9.
- ¹⁵ Thomas Goldstein, "Florentine Humanism and the Vision of the New World" *Actos do Congresso Internacional de Historia Dos Descobrimentos 4* (1961): 195-207 in passim.
- ¹⁶ Goldstein, "Geography in Fifteenth-Century Florence", p. 18.

¹⁷ Boies Penrose, *Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance, 1420-1620* (n.p.: Harvard University Press, 1952; reprint ed., New York: Atheneum, 1975), pp. 3-27 in passim.

¹⁸ Goldstein, "Geography in Fifteenth-Century Florence" pp. 16-22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Geographers could no longer merely sit at their desks and speculate as to the nature of the globe. As Europeans began to explore the far corners of the Earth in the following centuries, people demanded up-to-date maps to guide them. As man began to break out from the mental confines of medieval geography, a passion developed to fill in the blanks on maps marked Terra Incognita or with the names of mythical lands. This need to know of the Renaissance man drove him to go to distant lands and find out for himself.

²¹ For more on this see Hirsch, Elizabeth Feist, "The Discoveries and the Humanists" in *Merchants & Scholars: Essays in the History of Exploration and Trade*, John Parker ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), p. 41.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²² Pohl, p. 7.

²³ Morison, pp. 27-28.

²⁴ Goldstein, "Geography in Fifteenth-Century Florence" pp. 11- 16.

²⁵ Thomas Goldstein, "The Role of the Italian Merchant Class in Renaissance and Discoveries" *Terrae Incognitae* 8(1976): 20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁷ J. H. Parry, *The Age of Reconnaissance: Discovery, Exploration and Settlement, 1450-1650* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1965), p. 46.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ James Edward Gillespie, *A History of Geographical Discovery: 1400-1800* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1933), pp. 74-75.

³⁰Parry, pp. 44-48 also see J.N. Stephens, *The Fall of the Florentine Republic 1512-1530* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 136-137.

³¹Gillespie, pp. 65-66.

³²Parry, p. 48.

³³Hirsch, pp. 36-37.

CHAPTER II

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

To many people Columbus represents the very embodiment of discovery. He is in many ways the consummate explorer because he was first and foremost a man of action. His accomplishments overshadow the storm of controversy which already began to rise about him while he lived, and continued to brew for centuries after his death. Many a scholar's livelihood has been based upon crediting or discrediting Columbus in some way or another, but as mistaken as he may or may not have been, he is nonetheless a man of great accomplishment. So much so, in fact, that Jacob Burckhardt chose Columbus as his example of the Renaissance man whose desire for personal fame and fortune set him apart from the often unnamed heroes of the Middle Ages.¹

Although medieval in much of his outlook and behavior as we shall see, Columbus did display the characteristics of a Renaissance man. The foremost of these was the humanistic research which he conducted in preparation for the voyages to America. His research was as exhaustive as any Humanist scholar's. He scoured the classics, the Bible, and the works of medieval travellers for clues to what might lie to the west and how best to get there. As his son Ferdinand was quick to point out, Columbus drew from

"the authority of many learned men who said that one could sail westward from the western end of Africa and Spain to the eastern end of India, and that no great sea lay between." ²

He went on to cite the evidence of Aristotle, Ptolemy, Marinus, Strabo, Pliny and others that his father's idea was worthy of Spain's support. The same is repeatedly echoed in Columbus' letters to the sovereigns whenever it was necessary to argue his case. ³ Like a good trial lawyer, he knew that everything was riding on how well-prepared he was, so he went to great pains to find every scrap of evidence he could. Many scholars have written thorough analyses of Columbus' sources of inspiration, so the reader will not be troubled with a lengthy discussion of them at this point. Suffice to say that Columbus used every source available to him (although his interpretations were sometimes questionable) in order to prove his case. ⁴

Not content to be a merely a medieval "armchair traveller," Columbus also gained practical knowledge from his contemporaries. While working as a mapmaker in Portugal he interviewed many sailors to find out what they knew about previously uncharted areas to the west and south of Europe. He travelled by sea to the limits of the known world asking those he came in contact with what lay beyond before taking on such a daring venture

as crossing the Atlantic. He travelled north to England and Ireland, and possibly as far as Iceland to inquire after the findings of the Vikings.⁵ He travelled south to the limits of the Portuguese discoveries in Africa where his visit to the gold-bearing city of La Mine below the equator proved to him that the southern hemisphere was habitable and not merely a place of fire as legend had it.⁶ He travelled east to the Levant to see for himself some of the areas mentioned by Marco Polo and inquired about what lay beyond. While there Columbus might have first gotten the passion for recapturing the Holy Land and winning lost souls which would dominate his rationale for crossing the Atlantic to reach Asia.⁷ Finally, he went west to the Azores and Canaries, the farthest islands discovered by the Spanish and Portuguese in the Atlantic. He went there to follow up on rumors of voyages further westward which had never returned, and to avoid meeting the same fate he studied the winds and currents to determine the best possible route to the Indies.⁸

His son Ferdinand related that Columbus even listened to stories of strange plants, carvings, canoes, and dead Indians who washed up on the western shores of these islands and compared them with descriptions of Asia mentioned by Ptolemy and others. He called them "curiosities" however, and indicated that his father never made them his main proof.⁹

Columbus' scholarly ability was evidenced by his research in the classics and cartography, and by the persuasive letters he wrote to the regents of Europe petitioning for their support. Columbus' scholarly reputation inspired his son Ferdinand to become a great Humanist in his own right. In preparation for writing his father's biography, Ferdinand founded a library of his father's books and papers and added to it books which he collected from many parts of Europe. Ferdinand also accompanied his father on some of his voyages. His expertise was also put to good use when Ferdinand served on a royal commission which corrected marine charts, commissioned pilots, and decided the rival claims of Spain and Portugal over the Moluccas.¹⁰

Columbus himself corresponded with the noted Humanist Paolo Toscanelli and was no doubt influenced by the latter's vision of travelling westward to reach the East.¹¹ Columbus also compared notes with some of the best Humanist cartographers of his day asking for copies of any books or maps he could get his hands on. He and his brother Bartholomew (Bartolomeo) set up a cartography shop while in Portugal which did a brisk business because of Genoa's fine reputation in mapmaking. A contemporary historian, Andrés Bernaldez, acknowledged that Columbus was "... very skilled in the art of cosmography and the mapping of the world."¹²

When defending his qualifications before the king and queen of Spain Columbus argued,

I have had dealings and conversation with learned men, priests, and laymen, Latins and Greeks, Jews and Moors, and many others of other sects. I found Our Lord very favorable to this my desire, and to further it He granted me the gift of knowledge. He made me skilled in seamanship, equipped me abundantly with the sciences of astronomy, geometry, and arithmetic, and taught my mind and hand to draw this sphere and upon it the cities, rivers, mountains, islands, and ports, each in its proper place.¹³

As stated earlier, the process of Humanist cartography involved both drawing from the works of accepted authorities among the Ancients and adding on recent findings to make up-to-date, practical sailing charts. The acquisition of this skill had two benefits for Columbus. First, he was exposed to the notions of the Ancients regarding the size of the earth and what lay beyond the known world. We know, for example, that after corresponding with Toscanelli about the geography of Ptolemy and others, Columbus began thinking about attempting a crossing of the Atlantic. Second, it gave him practice in making the new map form of globes or spheres which made compelling visual aids when trying to convince wary sovereigns to back his voyages.¹⁴ These methods were not lost on Columbus' followers either; most of them would also employ maps as a source of income and as a way to garner support for their voyages.

Columbus' navigational skills also show that he was well-informed about some of the new advances in science in his day. Columbus is credited with many navigational firsts and even experimented with new navigational techniques on his voyages. He is credited with being the first to discover magnetic declination and its variations. He was also the first to find the wind patterns and currents of the Western Atlantic and determine the courses for regular transatlantic crossings. He was the first European to develop techniques to sail successfully through the unique hazards of the Sargasso Sea and the Caribbean; the former with its almost complete lack of winds, and the latter with its coral reefs, sudden storms and even hurricanes.¹⁵ Many later vessels would founder and be lost in these same areas. It is particularly because of his skill in handling the previously unexpected dangers of the Caribbean that Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, a priest and scholar who had travelled widely in the area, declared, "I think Christopher Columbus was the most outstanding sailor in the world, versed like no other in the art of navigation."¹⁶

What is most often cited as evidence of a Renaissance man is a broad base of knowledge, and Columbus met this requirement easily. He scoured every book he could find in his day for knowledge pertaining to his proposed voyage and acquired many skills along the way. As we have seen

above, he knew about cartography, astronomy, navigation, mathematics, and in his letters he often referred to the Bible and the classics. In the letter cited above Columbus continues, "... I have made it my business to read all that has been written on geography, history, philosophy, and other sciences"¹⁷ All of these subjects were in the standard curriculum of Humanist scholars. His son Ferdinand claimed that Columbus studied Latin at the University of Pavia, though we have no record of his enrollment there.¹⁸

Some scholars have cited this as evidence of Columbus' shortcomings in the area of academic preparation, but like many geniuses of the Italian Renaissance, Columbus' research and proposals were beyond the reach of the traditional curriculum of the universities. Instead, Columbus relied upon independent research and correspondence with other Humanist cartographers to formulate his ideas.¹⁹

Furthermore, he was known for his quality of writing and penmanship. Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, a contemporary historian who had access to Columbus' papers, confirms Columbus' learning and said of Columbus' writing: "... He learned such calligraphy---I saw his writing many times---that he could have made a living by it."²⁰ His writing style for the most part is that of a seaman carefully recording navigational

details in his journal of the first voyage to the Caribbean, but occasionally he waxes poetic in a style reminiscent of the Humanist poets when describing the beauty of it all. While exploring the island of Fernandina (Long Island) he reminisced:

During this time I walked among some trees, which were the most beautiful thing to see that I had ever seen, viewing as much verdure in so great a development as in the month of May in Andalusia, and all the trees were as different from ours as day from night, and so the fruits, the herbage, the rocks, and all things.²¹

He also told Andrés Bernaldez, the author of *Historia de los Reyes Católicos*, with whom he stayed after returning from his second voyage, that in the Gulf of Cochinos in Cuba,

... there gushed forth two springs of water below it ... and when the tide was on the flood, the water was so cold and of such goodness and so sweet, that no better could be found in the world, ... and all rested there on the grass by those springs amid the scent of the flowers which was marvellous, and the sweetness of the singing of the little birds, so many and so delightful, and under the shade of those palms so tall and fair that it was a wonder to see it all.²²

Upon arriving in the New World he also made fascinating observations about the culture, religion, and society of its inhabitants. He was surprised to not see the large cities and urban culture that Marco Polo had described, but he faithfully recorded what he saw nonetheless. Of the first people he encountered he observed, "They all went about as naked as

their mothers bore them; and a woman who was there wore no more clothes than the men.⁻²³ And of their physical appearance he commented,

Their hair was straight, thick, and short . . . They had handsome features, spoiled somewhat by their unpleasantly broad foreheads. They were of middle stature, well formed and sturdy, with olive-colored skins that gave them the appearance of Canary Islanders or sunburned peasants. Some were painted black, others white, and still others red; some painted only the face, others the whole body, and others only the eyes or nose."²⁴

He goes on to describe their culture, "They had no arms like ours, nor knew thereof; for when the Christians showed them a naked sword they foolishly grasped it by the blade and cut themselves."²⁵ He also describes their weapons, canoes, and the lack of large animals, enemies, or permanent houses. Columbus noted that the natives had a fascination with all things European because they believed that Columbus and his men were from Heaven. And so it is for every place that Columbus visits; he records so much detail and carefully contrasts the cultural differences of each group so well that some scholars have suggested that Columbus was the first cultural anthropologist for the Americas.²⁶

Columbus' willingness to go beyond a mere book knowledge of distant lands and explore them himself distinguishes him from medieval scholars. His preparatory, information-gathering journeys, petitions to the royal houses of Europe for support, the four Atlantic crossings, and

exploration of a vast area of the New World gave him a very cosmopolitan outlook.

This was not much different from the merchant-scholars of his Italian homeland because he had a keen eye for a way to turn a profit from his discoveries. The journal of his voyage and his letters are full of detailed observations of what gold, spices and other commodities might be returned from the newfound lands and how inclined the natives might be to help extract them. For example, Columbus speculates about the first Native Americans that he sees: "They ought to be good servants and of good skill, for I see that they repeat very quickly whatever was said to them."²⁷ And later Las Casas quotes Columbus: "... Nothing was lacking but to know the language and to give them orders, because every order that was given to them they would obey without opposition."²⁸

The influence of Marco Polo on Columbus in this respect is very clear because many parts of his writings sound exactly like what Polo might have said, had he been describing the same areas. Like Polo, Columbus comments on the availability of natural resources, the relative friendliness or military potential of natives, facilities which would serve well for ports or ship building and many other bits of information which were no doubt included for the benefit of future traders in the region.

Both men came from a merchant family and wrote with mercantile matters in mind. Columbus read Polo's book, took detailed notes on it, and even took it with him on the voyages.²⁹ At times Columbus comments on the commodities which Polo said should be at a given location; unfortunately he was nowhere near the places Polo was talking about and was often wrong in matching his findings with the identification of plants, animals and minerals which Polo described.

Although Columbus was influenced by humanism in many ways, he still retained several medieval characteristics. He was in fact a transitional figure between the Renaissance and medieval man.

Christopher Columbus had one foot in the medieval world and one in the modern. . . . Columbus' theoretical approach to philosophy, theology, and certain scientific concepts places him firmly in the Middle Ages, but his overwhelming scientific curiosity, his bent for investigation, his interest in the natural world, and his ability to accept facts hitherto unknown make him a man of the Renaissance.³⁰

To the modern observer, the mind-set of Columbus is full of contradictions. Perhaps this is why the list of his biographers is seemingly endless and the historiography of his exploits contains books which describe him as everything ranging from saint to fool.³¹

The achievement of Christopher Columbus undeniably made a great contribution to the emergence of the modern age and placed him firmly among the great men of the Renaissance. Like them, he had been stimulated by the recovery of ancient learning into looking with new curiosity at the world around him and in speculating on its limits. At the same time he was conservative in his basic outlook, so that, paradoxically, the discoverer of the new world continued to the end of his career to draw arguments and ideas from the conventional works of medieval cosmographers.³²

Upon closer examination we see, then, that Columbus was in fact a transitional figure between the medieval and Renaissance man in much the same way as Dante has been portrayed as a transitional figure for literature. Like Dante, Columbus' desire to show men a clearer vision of the Gospel was foremost in his life work (while converting the lost is only given token mention by the other discoverers). Reaching remote and forgotten Christian allies (such as the kingdom of Prester John or the Christians in the Mongol court mentioned by Marco Polo) or the possibility of converting new and unknown peoples suggested by the Ancients was almost as important to him as finding Asia.

Always before Columbus' mind were the words of Seneca in *Medea*:

"An age will come after many years when the Ocean will loose the chains of things, and a huge land lie revealed; when Tethys will disclose new worlds and Thule no more be the ultimate."³³ Like many others of his time, Columbus probably looked forward to replacing the vast numbers of people lost to Christianity by the advances of Islam. Inspired by Marco Polo's descriptions of the relative receptivity of the citizens of the Mongol Empire to Christianity, Columbus probably hoped to convert the people that he had found on what he thought were the eastern shores of Asia to create or strengthen an eastern challenge to Islam.

Columbus frequently commented on the religious disposition of the Native Americans he encountered³⁴ and their apparent receptivity to conversion. He reasoned, "I believe that they would easily be made Christians, because it seemed to me that they belonged to no religion."³⁵ Later he said, "I don't recognize in them any religion, and I believe that very promptly they would turn Christians, for they are of very good understanding."³⁶ Columbus' careful religious observances, piety and model Christian behavior are commented upon by all his favorable biographers,³⁷ and throughout his writings he portrays himself as a man called by God to accomplish his quest.³⁸

In a letter to the king and queen of Spain upon his return from the third voyage to America Columbus declares, "Our Lord made me the messenger of and showed me the way to the new Heaven and earth."³⁹ This doubtlessly played an important role in convincing the highly-religious Queen Isabella to support his mission. Conscious of her role in the recent crusade-like actions of uniting Spain and driving out the infidels, Columbus sought to persuade Isabella that his mission would bring countless millions more under the rule of Christendom. He deliberately reminds her of this fact when in the above-mentioned letter he says, "Incredulity struck everyone except our lady the Queen, who was enlightened and made to inherit it all as His beloved daughter; I went to take possession of this in her royal name."⁴⁰ At another time Columbus even stated that he wanted all the profits from his venture to fund the Crusades in the Holy Land.⁴¹

This crusader mentality identifies him firmly with the mind-set of the Middle Ages. Thoroughly lacking from his writings are any traces of Christian Humanism common among Italian scholars of his day.⁴² The dignity of man or a new outlook towards God are nowhere to be found. Nor does Columbus apply the new techniques of textual criticism to the portions of Scripture which he draws upon for evidence. Finally, he makes no

mention of his efforts being part of a new and distinct era in history. He merely sees his efforts to convert the Indians as an extension of the reign of Christendom over the realms of Darkness. To him, his mission is a part of the Great Commission and the efforts of the Crusades.⁴³

Moreover, although Columbus was influenced by Toscanelli the Humanist, had gathered information on Atlantic winds and currents through his own observations, and consulted the latest maps, his main sources for the possibility of reaching Asia by sailing west were from ancient and medieval sources. His stubborn reliance on Ptolemy, the Apocrypha, and the accounts of Marco Polo regarding the nature of the Asian coastline (even when what he found was in direct contradiction to them) tarnishes his humanist reputation and resembles the scholasticism of a medieval authoritarian.⁴⁴

Columbus attempted to find the shortest possible distance for the length of a degree of longitude and thus the circumference of the earth in order to make the Atlantic crossing seem more feasible. In so doing, however, he deliberately ignored contradictory and more widely accepted estimates in a way which can be called self-serving at best, and unscientifically suppressing evidence at worst. Also, most Christian Humanists would have rejected the use of the statement in the apocryphal

book of 2 Esdras about the earth being 6/7 habitable land and only one part water, because the book of Esdras was not canonized or recognized by all the Church Fathers. Columbus stubbornly clung to Esdras over even Ptolemy or Aristotle because, "Esdras symbolized faith, the medieval belief that doctrine is inseparable from truth."⁴⁵

These techniques shed doubt on his honest use of textual criticism as a Humanist. Perhaps Columbus felt strongly enough that the ends justified the means on this matter to ignore his scruples in order to better persuade his supporters. At any rate, the effort backfired when the Royal Commission appointed by Spain to study Columbus' proposal found the ancient and Church sources which contradicted Columbus' and proceeded to pick his arguments apart point by point.⁴⁶

This only succeeded in delaying Columbus' departure considerably. Nor was that the end of it; later these same arguments would reappear in the trials resulting from Columbus' dispute with the Crown regarding his share of the returns from his ventures.⁴⁷ Some of the unfair accusations against Columbus about whether he really was the first to discover America and what a poor job he did administering its first colonies have served as fodder for his detractors' biographies from the time of the trial to this day.⁴⁸

Columbus' most medieval trait, by far, was insisting to his dying day that he had found Asia despite all proofs against it.⁴⁹ When faced with evidence to the contrary, every other discoverer eventually abandoned his belief that what he had discovered was Asia, but not Columbus. A true Renaissance man would have revised his concept of the truth after having found evidence contrary to the Ancients' opinions. This practice was at the heart of the methods of Humanist cartography in which the explorers had all been schooled. Columbus, however, stubbornly tried to rearrange the facts to fit his preconceived notions of what the Ancients had said he should find, regardless of how ridiculous or impossible this became.

In his first voyage he found only islands, but he insisted that the islands were the Indies and that the inhabitants must be Indians (thereby creating what is perhaps the longest running misnomer in history). Perplexed by not finding what he knew must be at these latitudes, he desperately searched for scraps of evidence to prove that he had found Asia. He brought back with him plant samples, the natives themselves, and a little gold as proof.⁵⁰

He returned to Spain quickly to make his discovery known, insisting that the land of the Great Khan was very near what he had seen. From the very beginning some doubted his proof, however.⁵¹ Had he continued just a

little farther he would have seen that he was nowhere near the places that Polo had described. The natives had told him that they had never heard of these places, but he disregarded their opinions. Instead, he brought himself and others much misery by having to return to the Indies over and over again (with increasing difficulty in gaining support) to try to substantiate his claims.⁵²

On his second voyage, Columbus landed on the island of Cuba, but he insisted that it was an extension of the Asian mainland. Columbus was convinced that he had reached the Golden Chersonese (the Malay Peninsula), which Marco Polo had described. His stubbornness kept him from doing such a simple thing as circumnavigating Cuba (though the natives had told him that it was an island)⁵³ because he wanted to continue on to find the straits which would allow him to pass westward to India. Had he merely turned north from Hispaniola, he would have discovered that North America was not the Asian Mainland. In fact, he made his crew swear upon pain of death that Cuba was not an island in order to prevent anyone from contradicting his claims before the Spanish Court.⁵⁴

In his further voyages he explored the eastern coast of Central America and the northern coast of South America, but when he could not find Japan, China, or the passage to India which Polo had described, the

cracks in his arguments began to widen. On the third voyage, Columbus discovered a mainland to the south of his previous findings. Unwilling to revise his cosmology to fit this anomaly, he explained the geographical inconsistency as the mythical land of the Terrestrial Paradise.

When one considers that Columbus' journal is free from the typical medieval travelogue's accounts of mythical beasts and strangely formed men, it is hard to believe that he would so readily substitute the fountains of the Garden of Eden for an unexplained fresh water source in the Gulf of Paria. It seems that Columbus himself began to have doubts when he referred to this land as a New World, but kept within religious orthodoxy by not distinguishing it as a new continent or land not mentioned by the Bible or the Ancients. By going with the Terrestrial Paradise theory, Columbus could explain away this area and the other islands he had found as an anomaly to the areas of the Asian coastline mentioned by Polo and Ptolemy and still press on towards the passage to India.⁵⁵

On the fourth voyage he sailed along the coast of Central America, believing that he was following the Malay Peninsula to the Strait. He never found it, but returned home saying that he had not gone far enough and had given up only because of the poor condition of his ships. Many authors have speculated whether Columbus knew by this point that he had not reached

Asia and was considering the possibility of a new world. Any private doubts he may have had, he kept to himself however, because he returned to Spain to try to convince the Crown that he was close to Asia before his enemies could do otherwise.⁵⁶ By now, however, the wary Spanish had become like the villagers in the fable who had grown tired of hearing the boy cry wolf and refused to listen to him any more. They even rejected a request by his son Ferdinand to conduct a voyage of exploration in 1511.⁵⁷ Ferdinand would have to find his own claim to fame as a writer and maritime advisor.

Columbus had to leave it to other Spanish explorers to fill out the details of the coastlines and interiors of the lands bordering the Caribbean. At first the Spanish continued to call the new lands the Indies, but the circumnavigation of the globe by the Magellan Expedition of 1519-1522 confirmed that the New World was not a part of Asia. Once it was clear to the Spanish that the land was merely an obstacle on the way to Asia and not Asia itself, they had to reevaluate their colonization policy. In the meantime others began to search for alternate routes to Asia. It is possible that if Columbus had taken a different course on his voyages, the true nature of the New World might have been known much earlier and Columbus would have gone down in a more favorable light in history.

In the end, the Spanish were disappointed because Columbus was not able to deliver on his promises. At first the Crown begrudged his support, then ignored him, and finally began to take legal action to deny him the titles, rights and privileges which had been granted to him earlier. What began as a dispute over the elusiveness of Columbus' proof for his findings, became in time an obsession with making the colonies pay dividends worth all of the effort expended. Like any other business investment, the backers of Columbus could not be expected to take loss after loss with no tangible returns.

Nor were the early settlers happy to be in the New World. It should be remembered that the first colony in America was hardly voluntary; it was a military garrison to protect what was found. Its members were faced with many hardships, including disease, cannibal attacks, hurricanes, and shortage of supplies. And even if one did survive, there was no immediate promise of fame or fortune.⁵⁸ There is little wonder that the New World attracted few settlers until Cortés and Pizarro brought Spain gold through conquest and plunder. Perhaps this Spanish sense of initial disappointment with the discoveries of Columbus accounts for their brutality in conquering and enslaving the natives of the New World.⁵⁹

Nonetheless, Columbus' deeds served as an inspiration to many explorers who came after him. As we shall see later, all of the other Italian explorers were initially influenced by his notion of sailing west to reach the East; they merely differed in their proposed routes and interpretation of what they found. Likewise, a group of men which served under Columbus went on to further explore the New World under the Spanish.⁶⁰

Notes

¹ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 5th ed. (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1937), p. 84.

² Hernando Colón (Ferdinand Columbus), *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus*, trans. Benjamin Keen (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1959), p. 15.

³ See *Journals and other Documents on the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, trans. and ed. by Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: The Heritage Press, 1963).

⁴ See G.R. Crone, *The Discovery of America* (New York: Weybright & Talley, 1969).

⁵ Gianni Granzotto, Stephen Sartorelli trans. *Christopher Columbus* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co. 1985), pp. 36-38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

⁹ Ferdinand Columbus, pp. 23-28.

¹⁰ Ferdinand Columbus, introduction in *passim*.

¹¹ See above, p. 8.

¹² As cited in Samuel E. Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company), 1942), p. 35.

¹³ As cited in a letter to the king and queen of Spain in Ferdinand Columbus, p. 10.

¹⁴ Thomas Goldstein, "15th Century Geography Against the Background of Medieval Science", paper presented at the 4th annual meeting of the Society for the History of Discoveries, Salem, Mass., 13-14 November, 1964. (Typewritten), p. 5; also Granzotto, p. 49.

¹⁵Roberto Almagia, *L'Opera del Genio Italiano All'Estero vol. 1: Gli Italiani: I Primi Esploratori Dell'America* [The Italians: The First Explorers of America] (Rome: La Libreria Dello Stato, 1937), p. 377.

¹⁶Bartolomé de Las Casas, *History of the Indies*, André Collard, trans. and ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 17.

¹⁷Ferdinand Columbus, p. 10.

¹⁸Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, p. 15.

¹⁹Granzotto, p. 54. Also, Samuel Morison, for all of his praise of Columbus in *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* and other writings, surprisingly downplays Columbus' education. He also contradicts himself by stating that Columbus' writings are unspectacular seaman's notes on one occasion (in the introduction to his *Journal and other Documents of Columbus*) and idyllic on another (in *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, his biography of Columbus).

²⁰Bartolomé de Las Casas, p.15.

²¹Morison, *Journals and other Documents*, p. 73.

²²Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, p. 459.

²³Ferdinand Columbus, p. 60.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁶Alfred W. Crosby Jr., *The Columbian Exchange* (Westport, Co.: Greenwood Press, 1972), pp. 3-6.

²⁷Morison, *Journals and other Documents*, p. 65.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 129.

²⁹Granzotto, p. 39.

³⁰Emilio Taviani, *Christopher Columbus: The Grand Design* (London: Orbis Publishing Ltd., 1985), pp.17-18.

³¹Frederick J. Pohl, *Amerigo Vespucci: Pilot Major* (New York: Morningside Heights: Columbia University Press, 1944), p. 11, also see Henry Vignaud, *The Columbian Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Publishing Co., 1920) and

the endnotes of chapters 1-8 in Samuel Morison's *The European Discovery of America: The Southern Voyages: 1492-1616* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

³²G. R. Crone, p. 1.

³³As cited in Morison, *The European Discovery of America: The Southern Voyages*, p. 27.

³⁴For the best account see Ferdinand Columbus, ch. 62.

³⁵Morison, *Journals and other Documents*, p. 65.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 72.

³⁷Which isn't to say that there aren't unfavorable biographers. For more information see annotated bibliography following ch. 1 of Morison's *The European Discovery of America: The Southern Voyages*, or "Medio Siglo De Estudios Colombinos" *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 38 (1981): 1-24 for an up-to-date historiography of the controversies surrounding Columbus.

³⁸Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, pp. 5-6.

³⁹Las Casas, p. 70.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹John Addington Symonds, *The Renaissance in Italy: The Revival of Learning* (London: Smith, Elder & Co. New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1906), p. 15.

⁴²Although this may be more in keeping with the Spanish humanism of the Court.

⁴³Symonds, p. 14.

⁴⁴Paul Herrmann, *The Great Age of Discovery* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958), pp.15-21.

⁴⁵Granzotto, p. 56.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 78-83.

⁴⁷Both Las Casas and Ferdinand Columbus attempted to refute the claims against Columbus in the early chapters of their works, but their arguments had little impact on public opinion because they were not published until after their deaths.

⁴⁸ Morison's *Journal and other Documents of Columbus* contains most of the testimonies against Columbus by those who served under him. For essays on some of the early and/or contemporary biographers who attempted to discredit Columbus see *Columbus, Cortés, and Other Essays*, Ramon Iglesia ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

⁴⁹ Edmundo O'Gorman, *The Invention of America: An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of its History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977), p. 59.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

⁵¹ Herrmann, pp. 9-10.

⁵² O'Gorman, pp. 81-85.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-98.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-104.

⁵⁶ George E. Nunn, *The Geographical Conceptions of Columbus: A Critical Consideration of Four Problems*, American Geographical Society, Research Series no. 14 (New York: American Geographical Society, 1929), Ch. 3; also Granzotto, p. 279.

⁵⁷ Iglesia, p. 233.

⁵⁸ O'Gorman, pp. 90-91.

⁵⁹ James A. Williamson with cartography of the voyages by R. A. Skelton, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery under Henry VII* (Glasgow: Robert Mac Lehosé & Co. Ltd. The University of Cambridge Press for the Hakluyt Society, 1962), p. 76.

⁶⁰ See Washington Irving, *Voyages and Discoveries of the Companions of Columbus* (New York: Frederick Unger, 1956), or Samuel Morison's *The European Discovery of America: The Southern Voyages 1492-1616*.

CHAPTER III

AMERIGO VESPUCCI

The main torchbearer of the dream of Columbus was Amerigo Vespucci. He began his exploring career under Alonso de Ojeda, an explorer for Spain and onetime lieutenant of Columbus, who decided to follow up on the attempts of Columbus to find a strait which would allow passage to India. Ojeda would fail and eventually be denied permission to return to the area by the Spanish Crown, but Vespucci would go on to other areas in search of that same pursuit. More important, Vespucci would eventually realize that the coastline he was passing by was a new continent, not merely an extension of Asia as Columbus had supposed.

It is fitting therefore that the two continents of the New World are named after him and not Columbus because Vespucci was the first to realize that what he had discovered was not a part of Asia, rather a whole new world.¹ Undaunted by his early disappointments, he went on to capitalize on what he had found by seeking new routes to Asia, and experimenting with stellar observations, longitudinal measurement, and techniques of navigation.

Whereas Columbus was a transitional figure, Amerigo Vespucci represented the Renaissance man as explorer in every way.² Vespucci's

thorough humanist education influenced his religious and philosophical views, cosmology, and scholarly objectivity in his approach to the unknown. Vespucci shared with Columbus the background of a non-university, humanist-based education,³ but because he was brought up in Florence he had much stronger ties to the central figures of the Italian Renaissance than the Genoese Columbus. The Vespucci family had a long tradition of business and political leadership in Florence. Because of this they were trusted associates of the ruling Medici family, the patrons and friends of many of the most important Humanists of the day.⁴

Amerigo's uncle Giorgio Antonio was a noted Humanist and book collector. He had studied Greek under Filippo di Ser Ugolino Pierruzzi and acquired many ancient works for his personal library, which he eventually gave to the Medici family and the library of San Marco. As an important member of the Florentine Academy, he was a friend of Marsilio Ficino, the chief scholar responsible for the revival of Platonism in Florence, as well as a friend of the noted Hellenists Francesco Castiglione and Donato Acciaiuoli and other Humanists. This group studied the classics, contemporary poetry and most important, were all followers of Toscanelli. They often met to discuss geography and cosmography and were later kept abreast of Vespucci's discoveries through letters and maps which he sent to

them. Giorgio Antonio had a great influence on his young nephew Amerigo, as did Antonio di Jacopo Lanfredini, a future director of the School of Florence, and Piero Soderini, the man who would become the only person ever elected gonfalonier of Florence for life, and whom Giorgio Antonio taught Latin, the classics, geography and the physical sciences.⁵ As we shall see, Vespucci corresponded with this group and the Medici family all of his life regarding his discoveries and geographical theories.

Vespucci must have learned his lessons well because it was said of his cartography that the Spanish royalty "... esteem it highly."⁶ In a letter to Lorenzo di Pier Francesco de Medici in 1500 Vespucci reaffirms that "men are not lacking in your city who understand the map of the world, who may perhaps correct something in it; nevertheless, whatever is to be corrected, let them await my coming, since it may be that I shall successfully defend my map."⁷ We can see, therefore, that by the time Vespucci had become a famous explorer he was not afraid to defend his mapmaking abilities against the followers of Toscanelli, for he felt that he could demonstrate to them new areas of the world which they had not anticipated. He boldly stated that he could challenge the geographical experts because he had gone to the new lands and seen with his own eyes things which had contradicted the cosmographical notions of the Ancients.

Vespucci probably had the most well-rounded humanist education of any explorer because of his uncle's teachings and the influence of his associates. The influence of Giorgio Antonio's humanistic teachings on Amerigo can be seen from writings Amerigo made as a youth.

In a composition Amerigo wrote,

I have always loved virtuous men and wished well to all who follow the paths of virtue. . . . I should like to tell you about a group of wise and learned young men I saw a few days ago, who in their conversation revealed no other goal than the study of letters. . . . They have so aroused in me an ardor for such studies that I have put aside every other thought, to follow the path of virtue. . . .

My father anxiously desires that I seek out and learn those things which may help me to win fame and honor. . . . I shall conquer myself, and I shall behave in such a manner as to put aside from me all lewd pleasures and give true signs of virtue.⁸

And in emulation of his book-collecting uncle, young Vespucci concluded by discussing the collector's value of a work of Plato that he had recently purchased.⁹

The influence of Amerigo's study of Petrarch can be seen here when one recalls the famous statement of Petrarch: "Our sons formerly employed themselves in preparing such papers as might be useful to themselves or to their friends, relating to family affairs, business, or the wordy din of the courts. Now we are all engaged in the same occupation, and it is literally true, as Horace says, 'learned or unlearned, we are all writing verses

alike."¹⁰ Late in life Vespucci would recall to Piero Soderini the happy days studying under Giorgio Antonio and lament, "... had it been possible to follow in his footsteps, 'I should be quite a different man today', as Petrarch says. However that may be, I am not ashamed of being what I am; for I have always taken pleasure in virtue for its own sake and in scholarship."¹¹

Also, Vespucci had an awareness that he lived in a time which was different from the past. The Humanist scholar, Lorenzo Valla, had said:

But truly, as wretched as were those former times in which no learned man was to be found, so much the more this our age should be congratulated, in which (if we exert ourselves a little more) I am confident that the language of Rome will shortly grow stronger than the city itself, and with it all the disciplines will be restored.¹²

And Vespucci reflected in the same vein:

In days past a man died who never awoke. He lived as though in a perpetual sleep. He contributed nothing to philosophy, he never engaged in a disputation or laid an argument before one who could answer him, or took part in battle, or occupied himself in trade.¹³

Finally, a glimpse of what would eventually become Amerigo's most important life pursuit emerges in these same compositions:

Going back and forth to many distant lands, whereby talking and trading one can learn many things, not a few merchants have become wise and learned, something that cannot be explained in a few words. Moving about and making inquiries concerning the world, whose limits we have not yet completely ascertained, they can furnish valuable

advice by word and association to those who come to them in search of counsel or clarification of some doubt concerning business and custom.¹⁴

When the House of the Medici sent Vespucci to Spain, he earned enough money to buy his first map. The beautiful and highly accurate Valesca map of the Mediterranean was a financial sacrifice for Vespucci at the time, but by insisting in the best quality available, Vespucci showed that his interest in navigation was becoming more serious.¹⁵

While living in Seville he learned of the voyages of discovery being conducted by Columbus at the time and became one of his financial backers through a mutual business partner, Gianetto Berardi. We do not have proof that Columbus and Vespucci actually met, but the common business and geographical interests of the two made it likely.¹⁶ For example, Berardi mentions Vespucci as a trusted associate in a portion of his will regarding a debt to be paid by Columbus.¹⁷ Perhaps the two learned men exchanged ideas regarding the nature of the globe and the teachings of Toscanelli.

Whatever the case, when Vespucci decided to conduct voyages of his own shortly after beginning to handle Columbus' business affairs, he had an easier time gaining support for several reasons. First, he spoke with more confidence and authority because of his better education. Second, he had a much less difficult time defending his proposals because he did not try use

a shorter measurement of the length of a degree of longitude to make the earth seem smaller and his voyages more easily completed. He was also better known and more accepted as a resident of Spain than Columbus. This was partly because of his business connections with the Medici, his longtime residence in Seville, and because he had asked for Spanish patronage exclusively and avoided Columbus' mistake of going to Portugal first. Most important, however, is the fact that Columbus had paved the way for voyages of discovery by others because of his ceaseless petitioning and explanation of his ideas to anyone who would listen. Finally, although the Crown had promised exclusive rights of exploration to Columbus, they began to grant permission to other explorers like Vespucci because they did not make the same large demands for a share of the wealth or political leadership of the lands discovered.¹⁸

Vespucci set sail under the Spanish flag on his first voyage in May of 1499 with Alonso de Ojeda as the titular head of the expedition. At first the expedition continued along the northern coast of South America doing little more than confirming what Columbus had found. Vespucci soon showed his strong individualistic spirit, however, by splitting off from the main group and trying another route. He realized after a point that the route to Asia was not to be found by going directly west and therefore decided to

turn back and seek a different passage by going south. He proceeded to explore the coast of what is now Brazil, and turned back only when he realized that he did not have the resources to go on any further.¹⁹

On his second voyage in 1501 Vespucci switched to Portugal for support largely because he knew that the areas he wished to explore would probably fall within Portugal's jurisdiction under the Treaty of Tordesillas. Interestingly, the Portuguese made no public announcement of the expedition because they were not anxious to publicize exploration so close to the agreed-upon Line of Demarcation between the claims of Spain and those of Portugal.²⁰

Vespucci returned to the coast of Brazil near the point where he had been before and then turned south. He was greatly encouraged when the coast soon began to turn westward because he thought that a passage to the Far East might open up. His hope soon turned to disappointment when the coast began going southward once again. He continued on, however, turning back only when the severe storms and cold weather barred further travel towards the Antarctic Circle and his ships were beginning to show wear. Perhaps at this point he assumed that the coastline kept going southward until it joined the fabled continent of Terra Australis, which was presumed to go all the way around the world, join all of the continents in the Southern

Hemisphere and thus enclose the one, great, Ocean Sea. He would have known enough to realize that exploring along this much longer coastline would have been beyond his resources.

It is just as likely that Vespucci turned back because he faced the threat of mutiny on the part of his crew. After all, they had travelled several thousand miles by this point with no end to the coastline in sight.²¹ Later, at about this same point, Magellan would successfully put down a mutiny attempt and continue on to discover the long sought-after strait which now bears his name.²² The threat of mutiny played an important role in the history of discovery. Columbus barely avoided one by finding land when he did,²³ and by lying to the crew about the distance covered.²⁴ Amerigo Vespucci and both John and Sebastian Cabot were forced to turn back from their goals at various points because of complaints by the crew. Mutiny remains the least studied aspect of the Great Age of Discovery, even though it was an important factor in the success or failure of any given voyage.

Although Vespucci did not accomplish his primary task of finding a route to Asia, his achievements on a practical level won him fame in his own day in Spain and abroad. Columbus, on the other hand, was largely unknown outside of Spain because of the controversy over his claim to have

found Asia and because the Spanish wanted to keep any information regarding a new trade route a secret from other trading nations. Most accounts of Columbus' discovery were either published after his death or not published at all. In contrast, the news of Vespucci's voyages was spread rapidly because they were known of in both Spain and Portugal and widely published in Italy. Vespucci's navigational skills provided him with gainful employment until the end of his life.²⁵ In contrast, Columbus was denied many of the rewards promised to him for opening up the Atlantic and finding lands to the west. His failure to deliver on the promises made about these same lands haunted him the rest of his life as he struggled in vain attempts to substantiate his claims.²⁶

We know from Vespucci's accounts that he was not always in command of the voyages, but whether the sponsoring nations decided to put someone of their own country in charge to avoid the leadership problems they were having with Columbus and his family or for other reasons, Vespucci's influence was always paramount. He always participated in the decision-making for the group, and by the end of each voyage he was clearly in command. Regardless of whom the sponsoring monarch had put in charge originally, or whether that command was nominal or not, Vespucci always surfaced as the actual leader by virtue of his ability. Because Vespucci

wrote the accounts of his voyages and the officially appointed leaders go unnamed, it is he who is given credit for these discoveries.

Like Columbus, Vespucci waxed poetic when describing the incredible beauty of the lands he found. In a letter to Lorenzo di Pier Francesco de Medici written in 1502 he mused,

This land is very pleasing, full of an infinite number of very tall trees which never lose their leaves and throughout the year are fragrant with the sweetest aromas and yield an endless supply of fruits, many of which are good to taste and conducive to bodily health. The fields produce many herbs and flowers and most delicious and wholesome roots. Sometimes I was so wonder-struck by the fragrant smells of the herbs and flowers and the savor of the fruits and the roots that I fancied myself near the Terrestrial Paradise.²⁷

The primeval beauty of the tropical rain forests must have conjured up youthful memories of the paintings of fantastical gardens by Sandro Botticelli and other Florentine painters whom Vespucci knew. It is also noteworthy that Vespucci was the first to mention here the healthfulness of the rain forest's plants. How much more he would have been amazed had he been aware of the great value of these plants to today's medicine?

Following in the footsteps of Columbus in another way, Vespucci gave us some of the first descriptions of the way of life of the natives he found. He relates,

I strove a great deal to understand their conduct and customs. For twenty-seven days I ate and slept among them, and what I learned about them is as follows. Having no laws or religious faith, they live according to nature. They understand nothing of the immortality of the soul. There is no possession of private property among them, for everything is in common. They have no boundaries of kingdom or province. They have no king, nor do they obey anyone. Each one is his own master. There is no administration of justice, which is unnecessary to them, because in their code no one rules. They live in communal dwellings, built in the fashion of very large cabins. For people who have no iron or indeed any metal, one can call their cabins truly miraculous houses.²⁸

In every locale that Vespucci visited he made careful and detailed observations about the culture, religion, dietary habits (including cannibalism), and relative friendliness or unfriendliness of the natives. He noted differences in the skin color, stature, sex relations, dwellings, and language of the natives.

Vespucci went into much more detail than Columbus did when describing the culture of the natives. He still had the merchant's eye for a good port or valuable local commodities, but he put far less emphasis on these things than Columbus did. Furthermore, he made a distinction between a voyage of discovery and a commercial venture, and he brought back items for trade only when it was required of him.²⁹ He even made the distinction between discoveries (like his own) and rediscovery (like Vasco de Gama's) because de Gama was travelling a route already mentioned

by the Ancients. This tells us about the extent of Vespucci's preparation for his voyages because he could have only made such a distinction if he had read about the ancient circumnavigation of Africa by the Phoenicians.³⁰

In another departure from Columbus' narrative, Vespucci avoided specific references to things in Asia mentioned by Marco Polo and instead commented on the uniqueness of what he himself had found. He also stopped calling the people he found Indians after the first voyage; thereafter he merely referred to them as natives.³¹ This tells us that he was not under any great burden to prove he was in Asia but was willing to accept the possibility of a previously undiscovered land.

Unlike Columbus, Vespucci never tried to explain away things that contradicted the bounds of what was known. Instead, he openly challenged the opinions of the ancient geographer Strabo and others when personal experience proved them wrong. In a letter to Lorenzo di Pier Francesco de' Medici written in 1500 he boldly states,

It appears to me, most excellent Lorenzo, that by this voyage of mine the opinion of the majority of the philosophers is confuted, who assert that no one can live in the Torrid Zone because of the great heat, for in this voyage I found it to be the contrary. The air is fresher and more temperate in this region, and so many people are living in it that their numbers are greater than those who live outside of it. Rationally, let it be said in a whisper, experience is certainly worth more than theory.³²

In the same challenging manner he stated later in the same letter, "It is said that in the whole world there are not more than seventy-seven languages, but I declare that there are more than a thousand. I alone have heard more than forty."³³ Daring to question and improve upon ancient authorities is an unmistakable example of the thinking of a late Renaissance man. Vespucci was not content to merely imitate the Ancients or conform his ideas to theirs. True to the ideals of the Florentine Renaissance, Vespucci wished to surpass them and accomplish greater deeds of his own.

Moreover, his religion and philosophy were more in keeping with those of the Italian Renaissance because the primary drive for his discoveries was the quest for knowledge, virtue, and fame, not a need to satisfy the great commission or start a new crusade. In a version of the letter to Piero Soderini of 1504 which appears in the contemporary work on geography *Cosmographiae Introductio*, Vespucci, in typical Florentine fashion, recalled that the lure of fame and a desire to perform virtuous deeds called him from the mundane world of business,

... I came to this country primarily as a merchant. ... But when I observed the various changes of fortune, and saw how vain and fleeting riches are ... I determined to abandon the business career and to devote all my efforts to worthier and more enduring ends. And so I set about visiting different parts of the world and seeing its many wonders.³⁴

He made efforts to Christianize the natives just as his contemporaries did, but this was not his primary purpose. In fact, such efforts are mentioned only once in all his writings. There is a decidedly more secular tone in Vespucci's writings than in those of Columbus. He mentioned embarking on voyages of discovery to do God's will, but he also hoped to gain everlasting fame for himself.

Vespucci had the common Renaissance attitude that the best way to get closer to God was to accomplish one's utmost and thereby achieve virtue, which is pleasing unto God. His ambition was evident when he said,

In the endeavor to ascertain longitude I have lost much sleep, and have shortened my life ten years, but I hold it well worth the cost, because if I return in safety from this voyage I hope to win fame throughout the ages. May God not ascribe my ambition to arrogance! All my labor is consecrated to His holy service.³⁵

Vespucci's humanism was also reflected in his cosmology. Like Columbus, Vespucci said that the lands he saw reminded him of the accounts of the Terrestrial Paradise, but that is where he stopped. He merely said that the land seemed that beautiful to him, he did not believe that the Garden of Eden was a literal place on the globe. Columbus, on the other hand, wrote a lengthy argument claiming that Eden must have been what he found near the Gulf of Paria to cover up contradictions between what he expected and what he found.³⁶

In a manner reminiscent of the ancient geographers, Vespucci carefully recorded the differences of one group from another when discussing the religion and culture of the natives. When recounting the beliefs of one group of natives he encountered, Vespucci approached the unexplainable and unfamiliar by relating their beliefs to contemporary and ancient schools of philosophy,

No one of this race, as far as we saw, observed any religious law. They can not justly be called either Jews or Moors; nay they are far worse than the Gentiles themselves or the pagans, for we could not discover that they performed any sacrifices nor that they had any special places or houses of worship. Since their life is so entirely given over to pleasure, I should style it Epicurean.³⁷

Vespucci also accepted the natives' nakedness and customs as derived from nature rather than out of sinfulness or lack of shame.³⁸

Columbus and Vespucci may have viewed the world somewhat differently, but there was no conflict between the two of them regarding their claims or discoveries. Among the more vain attempts of some scholars has been that of trying to prove that there was some kind of rivalry or enmity between Columbus and Vespucci during their lifetimes. They contend that Vespucci conspired to steal Columbus' glory by claiming to be the first to discover America.³⁹ Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, Columbus had intimate business dealings with Vespucci; the

two corresponded and were probably friends. As we have seen, we have no conclusive evidence that they shared ideas about Toscanelli's geographical concepts, but their mutual acquaintances and business dealings made it likely. Columbus, in a letter to his son dated February 5, 1505, confided that he trusted Vespucci implicitly,

i spoke with Amerigo Vespucci, the bearer of this letter, who is going to court on matters relating to navigation. He always showed a desire to please me, and is a very respectable man. Fortune has been adverse to him, as to many others. His labours have not been so profitable to him as he might have expected. He leaves me with the desire to do me service, if it should be in his power.⁴⁰

At any rate, it was not long after the return of Columbus from his second voyage that Vespucci decided to go beyond financing voyages of discovery and conduct them himself. While on his voyages Vespucci mentioned Columbus by name and gave him credit for discovering several places. The only exception to this is that Vespucci gave an earlier date than Columbus for his exploration of the northern shore of the South American mainland. He said that the place was already named Paria, however, and made no attempt to directly claim credit for discovering it before Columbus. The inconsistency can either be explained by the frailty of human memory regarding dates and place names or by an error made by the

translator or publisher.⁴¹ Nothing in the tone of any of his accounts of the voyage would indicate that Vespucci deliberately contradicted Columbus or tried to steal his glory.

The real reason historians writing soon after the death of the two discoverers discredited Vespucci was that two widely published accounts of Vespucci's journeys, the *Mundus Novus* and the *Cosmographiae Introductio*, gave Vespucci credit for discovering America first, and made no mention of Columbus. Unfortunately, Vespucci had no knowledge of their publication or he probably would have cleared up the matter.⁴² These documents provided the basis for centuries of historiography which attempted to defame the character of Vespucci on the false belief that he either purposely had the books published and suppressed word of Columbus' accomplishments, or did nothing to stop them for his own selfish pursuit of vainglory and profits.⁴³

These two published versions of Vespucci's travels also began the controversy over whether America is rightly named for Vespucci.⁴⁴ The introduction to *Cosmographiae Introductio* proclaimed: "... The fourth part of the earth, which, because Amerigo discovered it, we may call Amerige, the land of Amerigo, so to speak, or America."⁴⁵ It later explains the feminine ending of the name as necessary because all the other continents

were named for women.⁴⁶ Thus the strange explanation for a continent which is named for a man, but has a feminine name.

America is rightly-named because the true discoverer is the one who knows what he has found.⁴⁷ Vespucci's most important accomplishment was realizing that the lands that he had discovered were not a part of Asia, but a whole new continent-- a new world.⁴⁸ (He began to realize this at some time during his second voyage). Vespucci very cleverly offered as proof of this two observations: he deduced that the long coastlines that he passed must have been part of a continental landmass because of the great volume of water of its huge rivers, and that the many large animals which he observed are not normally seen on islands.⁴⁹ This shows that the scientific teachings of Giorgio Antonio were put to practical use by Amerigo during his voyages of discovery, and that like other Renaissance men, Vespucci was well-versed in many subjects.

The news of Vespucci's discovery of a new continent, and not just islands near Asia, did not reach Europe until a few years later, but the widespread publication of his findings meant that most people heard of Vespucci's discoveries and the conclusions drawn from them before those of Columbus. In a tract called *Mundus Novus*, based on Vespucci's letters to the Medici, Vespucci said that he had found a new world:

For none of our ancestors had any knowledge of the countries we saw, nor any idea what they contained. Our knowledge goes far beyond theirs. Most of them believed that no mainland existed south of the equator, that there were only endless stretches of sea which they called the Atlantic. And even those who considered the existence of a continent possible said that it must be uninhabitable. My voyage has now proved this view erroneous.⁵⁰

This news caused quite a stir, and the new medium of printing helped to make Vespucci's letters become "best-sellers" in Europe. Meanwhile those of Columbus remained largely unknown because the Spanish wished to keep secret what they still hoped was a faster route to Asia.⁵¹ Unfortunately, as we shall see, this misled careless scholars of future generations either to ignore Columbus' accomplishments entirely or to try to vindicate him to such a degree as to portray Vespucci as an usurper and a fraud.⁵²

Besides being the first to recognize the New World for what it was, Vespucci also made important advances in the science of navigation. Discontented with the rather haphazard way in which navigation had been conducted below the equator by the Portuguese up to that time, he decided to try to find the pole star for the Southern Hemisphere. He did not find it, but he did contribute significantly to charting the brighter stars of the southern skies in such a way as to be useful to future navigators.⁵³ Also, to avoid the gross errors made by Spanish navigators in measuring

longitude, he invented a new method of calculating the distance a ship covered by use of astronomical observation and mathematical calculation. The method in use at the time was to rely on dead reckoning from fixed points of departure which were well-known to the navigators. This meant that they could determine latitude by approximation, but were always unclear about longitude due to the lack of accurate means of measuring the speed and distance travelled.⁵⁴ This accounts for the hit and miss nature of early Spanish navigation and explains why several expeditions leaving from the same place could all end up at radically different destinations.⁵⁵

Vespucci's method of mathematical calculation proved to be the most precise method of determining longitude and distance and speed travelled until the invention of the first reliable shipboard clock in 1714 by John Harrison. Until that time Vespucci's method of astronomical observation was used widely.⁵⁶ He also calculated the circumference of the Earth remarkably within two miles of the correct figure!⁵⁷

In recognition of his skills Vespucci was made Pilot Major, a special teaching post appointed by the Spanish Crown to teach its navigators this method and the use of better maps and navigational tools. The document which appointed Vespucci to the position describes the loss of life and property by untrained pilots until then and declares that pilots:

... shall be instructed and shall know what is necessary for them to know respecting the quadrant and astrolabe, in order that, by uniting theory with practice, they may be able to make good use of them in the said voyages made to the said parts, and, without such knowledge, no one shall go in the said ships as pilots, nor receive pay as pilots, nor may the masters receive them on board ship, until they have first been examined by you, Amerigo Despucci (sic), our Chief Pilot

... It is also reported to us that there are many charts, by different masters, on which are delineated the lands and islands of the Indies to us belonging, which by our order have recently been discovered, and that these charts differ very much from one another, as well in the routes as in the delineations of coasts, which may cause much inconvenience. In order that there may be uniformity, it is our pleasure, and we order that there shall be made a general chart [*Padron General*], and that it may be more accurate, we order our officers of the House of *Contratacion* at Seville that they shall assemble all the ablest pilots that are to be found in the country at the time, and that, in the presence of you, Amerigo Despucci, our Chief Pilot, a *padron* of all the lands and islands of the Indies that have hitherto been discovered belonging to our kingdoms and lordships shall be made . . .⁵⁸

Vespucci put his skills as a cartographer and navigator to good use and performed this task well. This job provided him with enough intellectual satisfaction and financial remuneration to keep him comfortable for the rest of his life.⁵⁹

Vespucci's final contribution was the influence he had on his nephew, Giovanni. It is believed that Giovanni accompanied his uncle on some of his voyages because he was later appointed to the same distinguished post of Pilot Major for Spain in 1512, a position that one

could not get without great experience at sea. We know for certain that he accompanied Pedrarias de Avila as a pilot in the expedition to settle the area of Darien in 1514. It was said at that time that he had possession of his uncle's papers, charts, and maps which made his contribution very helpful to the precise navigation of the voyage. He also picked up on his uncle's mapmaking skills as evidenced by a beautiful mappemonde that is still extant (unlike his uncle's maps, unfortunately).⁶⁰

The many accomplishments of Vespucci did not win him the fame one might imagine. A series of events related to the publication of his letters occurred about which Vespucci knew nothing. A number of his accounts would be bastardized, embellished upon, and translated and retranslated, resulting in changes that Vespucci would hardly have recognized.⁶¹ As a result, controversies have arisen as to whether he conducted two voyages of discovery or four, whether he preempted Columbus in the discovery of the northern coastline of South America, and whether some of his accounts were made up by Vespucci or forged by others. Some have even doubted whether Vespucci sailed at all or knew anything about cosmography due to false assumptions of Vespucci's desire for fame at any cost.⁶²

Some of this confusion may have resulted from the fact that Vespucci planned to publish a book to replace and clarify the contradictions contained in his letters. In an undated letter to his friends in Florence defending those who disputed him he complained, "... you are filling me with vainglory by making me think that my letter is considered a great paper, when I dashed it off as one writes to an acquaintance."⁶³

Unfortunately, however, the king of Spain never returned the advance copy to Vespucci to finish editing. Since then this book has been lost, and several overlapping and sometimes contradictory accounts of Vespucci's travels have been published, which are probably partly based on this book and partly on his letters. This unfortunate set of circumstances reminds one how often the historian's task is made more difficult by men's unfinished deeds or memoirs which are written in too much of a rush. Unfortunately most men are too busy in this life to make sure that the record is set straight for posterity. When discussing the lost works of the discoverers the Italian historian Roberto Almagia comments, "... the loss of this precious material, that would permit us to be able to more completely reconstruct the character and the work of these Great Ones, does not have to diminish the value of their contributions in our eyes."⁶⁴

Most of the errors and controversies in the conflicting documents revolve around dates of voyages and precise measurements of locations Vespucci claimed to have visited. These kinds of errors probably resulted from mistakes made by translators and copyists. Since these have been dealt with extensively by other authors and are not directly relevant to our current theme, they will not be discussed at this point. Vespucci's observations on nature and the culture of the natives he found are a common thread in all his writings and are largely undisputed, so they have been quoted without reservation. Other references to the character or claims of Vespucci are for the reader to evaluate for himself. The notes at the end of this chapter provide ample information regarding the disputed voyages and documents for one to investigate further if so desired.

Despite the controversies which have marred his reputation, Vespucci is a key figure in the Age of Discovery because of his many contributions. He was instrumental in opening up the only route which would prove an acceptable passage to Asia, and was the first to declare his discoveries part of the New World. He was a skilled cartographer, navigator, and observational astronomer. He was instrumental in institutionalizing Spanish exploration by serving as the first Pilot Major, training and outfitting discoverers, and consolidating and refining maps to

help lay the groundwork for the Spanish Empire in the New World. He was a keen observer of nature and culture and provided us with some of the best and earliest descriptions of South America and its inhabitants.

What's more, Vespucci was a child of the Florentine Renaissance. His humanist training and sentiments are evident throughout his writings, and they had a profound effect on his world view, religion and philosophy. He also showed the beginnings of what would soon be recognized as the empirical method when he doubted a priori assumptions or the opinions of ancient authorities in the face of contradictory evidence. He took an important step in the theoretical conceptualization of the New World by refusing to explain away exceptions to the cosmography of the Ptolemaic-Polo tradition of the late Middle Ages. Instead he revised his concept of the globe as new experiences and discoveries brought about changes in his thinking. So it is that mapmakers have rightly used the name America because it was Amerigo Vespucci who first recognized it as a new world.

NOTES

¹ Frederick J. Pohl, *Amerigo Vespucci: Pilot Major* (New York: Morningside Heights: Columbia University Press, 1944), pp. 175-179.

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴ Germán Arciniegas, *Amerigo and the New World: The Life and Times of Amerigo Vespucci*, Harriet de Onís trans. (New York: Alfred a. Knopf, 1955), ch. 3 in passim.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-47, also Pohl, pp. 15-20.

⁶ As cited by Pohl, p. 89.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Arciniegas, p. 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ From Francesco Petrarca, "The Man of Letters" as cited in *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin eds. (New York: Penguin Books), 1961, p. 121.

¹¹ The Introduction to the Four Voyages letter in the version of the Soderini Letter of 1504 as it appears in Martin Waldseemüller's, *Cosmographiae Introductio*. March of America Facsimile Series, no. 2, Joseph Fischer and Franz von Wieser trans. (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Inc., 1966), pp. 85-86.

¹² From Lorenzo Valla's "The Glory of the Latin Language" as cited in *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, p. 134.

¹³ Arciniegas, pp. 42-43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.

¹⁷ Pohl, pp. 43-44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 175-179.

²⁰ See Pohl, pp. 91-105 in *passim*.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-75 in *passim*.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 106-125 in *passim*.

²³ Arciniegas, pp. 245-255.

²⁴ Paul Herrmann, *The Great Age of Discovery* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1956), p. 35.

²⁵ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers: A History of Man's Search to Know His World and Himself* (New York: Random House Inc., 1963), p. 234.

²⁶ Arciniegas, pp. 273-284.

²⁷ Pohl, p. 132.

²⁸ Pohl, pp. 132-133.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

³² Pohl, p. 81.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³⁵ Pohl, p. 127.

³⁶ Pohl, p. 113.

³⁷ Four Voyages version of the Soderini Letter of 1504 as it appears in Waldseemüller, *Cosmographiae Introductio*, p. 97.

³⁸ Fragmentary letter of Vespucci to his friends in Florence (c. 1502) as cited in Arciniegas, p. 237.

³⁹ This began when Las Casas attempted to discredit Vespucci based on incomplete information (see note 41 below), but became particularly popular when nationalistic New World historians rallied around American

folk heroes in the last century, denouncing any rivals of Columbus. Again, had they carefully examined all of the sources and not just based their opinion on Las Casas' judgement, they would have seen no conflict between the claims of Columbus and Vespucci. As a result the historiographical reputation of Vespucci was severely tarnished and objective examination of the life of Vespucci did not begin until this century.

⁴⁰As cited in Clements R. Markham ed. and trans. *The Letters of Amerigo Vespucci and other Documents Illustrative of His Career* (New York: Burt Franklin, reprint ed. n. d., originally published by Hakluyt Society), p. 57.

⁴¹Roberto Levillier claims in *Americo Vesputio* (Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispanica, 1966), pp. 26-29, that the original Italian version of the account of this discovery calls the place Lariab which is an area in Mexico, nowhere near Columbus' discovery. He also says that the reason why Ferdinand Columbus never attacked Vespucci for usurping his father's claims is that he had an accurate copy of the Italian original, and saw no contradictions in the two dates and places of discovery. Levillier states that Las Casas was in error in calling Vespucci a fraud because Las Casas' only copy of Vespucci's travels was an inaccurate Latin translation. He further states that this initial error was the beginning of the deluge of discredit unjustly heaped upon Vespucci since then.

⁴²Stefan Zweig, *Amerigo: A Comedy of Errors in History* Andrew St. James trans. (New York: The Viking Press, 1952).

⁴³Pohl, pp. 147-167 in passim.

⁴⁴See Edmundo O'Gorman, *The Invention of America: An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of Its History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977) or Roberto Levillier, *América, La Bien Llamada [America: The Well-Named Land]*, 2 vols. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Guillermo Kraft Ltd., 1948).

⁴⁵Four Voyages version of the Soderini Letter of 1504 as it appears in Waldseemüller, *Cosmographiae Introductio*, p. 63.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 70.

⁴⁷O'Gorman, pp. 38-39.

⁴⁸Pohl, p. 140.

⁴⁹Pohl, p. 77 and p. 83 respectively.

⁵⁰As cited in Zweig, p. 40.

⁵¹Boorstin, pp. 253-254.

⁵²See below pp. 23-25 and Arciniegas, pp. 302-314.

⁵³Pohl, p. 125.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 48-49.

⁵⁵Herrmann, p. 32.

⁵⁶Pohl, pp. 62-68.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 119.

⁵⁸As cited in Markham, *The Letters of Amerigo Vespucci*, pp. 63-65.

⁵⁹Arciniegas, pp. 273-284.

⁶⁰Roberto Almagia, *L'Opera del Genio Italiano All'Estero*, vol. 1: *Gli Italiani: I Primi Esploratori Dell'America [The Italians: The First Explorers of America]* (Rome: La Libreria Dello Stato, 1937), pp. 284-288.

⁶¹Pohl, ch. 10.

⁶²Levillier, *Américo Vespuccio*, pp. 29-30.

⁶³Fragmentary letter (c. 1502) as cited in Arciniegas, p. 242.

⁶⁴Almagia, p. 378.

Chapter IV

THE CABOTS

Because of the mountain of literature which has been written about Columbus, it is easy to forget that John Cabot set sail seeking the same goals only five years after Columbus' first voyage. The major difference is that Cabot sailed under the British Crown. Little is known about Cabot because the lack of documentation concerning him or his son Sebastian. No written account by this most famous father and son exploring team has survived, but from numerous contemporary sources it appears that such a document (or documents) once existed. From these contemporary, secondary accounts we can patch together the details of the Cabots' lives and discoveries. Their identity in the accounts is certain, even though their names appear in somewhat different forms as the various chroniclers struggled to spell names that were foreign to them.

John Cabot probably came under the influence of Columbus just as many others of his time had. Records from Valencia, Spain of 1492 show that a Venetian named Johan Caboto Montecalunya received permission from the king to rebuild the port, but we are not sure if this was the same man as the famous explorer. At any rate, the deal fell through, so we may never know.¹ If this man was the same John Cabot as the discoverer, he may have

easily conferred with Columbus before the latter's first voyage. The two men of like minds might also have met in Seville when Columbus returned from his second voyage in 1493.² Is it not possible that Columbus might have shared the same ideas with Cabot that he had with Toscanelli, Vespucci, and many European heads of state?³

We know that the Iberian Peninsula at this time was very open to Italians because of their contributions to geography, cartography, the arts, philosophy, and of course, trade.⁴ It could be that John Cabot picked up on the ideas of Toscanelli and Marco Polo which were in wide circulation at the time.⁵ After all, Toscanelli's letter proposing a westward route to Asia was originally sent to the King of Portugal; Columbus merely heard it being discussed among sailors and cartographers and wrote to Toscanelli asking for a copy.

All of the explorers examined in this study spent some time in Spain and/or Portugal because they knew that was where all of the latest information on discovery was available. Men in the Iberian peninsula openly discussed their notions of geography and proposals of exploration, and competition for royal commissions was fierce. Most of the Italian discoverers formulated their ideas in Spain and Portugal even if they later explored for other countries. Many of the Italian explorers returned to these

countries when patronage elsewhere failed or they needed a reliable income from teaching cartography or navigational techniques to others. John and Sebastian Cabot were no exception.

Numerous contemporary observers testify to the cartographical and navigational ability of the Cabots. Polydore Virgil, the author of the *Anglica Historia* of 1512-1513 proclaims that John Cabot was "... a Venetian by birth, and a most skillful mariner."⁶ A letter to the Duke of Milan attributed to the ambassador to England, Raimondo de Soncino, of August, 1497, states, "some months ago his Majesty sent out a Venetian, who is a very good mariner, and has good skill in discovering new islands..."⁷ In another letter dated December 18, 1497, Soncino tells his sovereign, "there is in this Kingdom a man of the people, Messer Zoene Caboto by name, of kindly wit and a most expert mariner.... This Messer Zoene has the description of the world in a map, and also in a solid sphere, which he has made, and shows where he has been.... He says that on previous occasions he has been to Mecca, whither spices are borne by carevans from distant countries."⁸ And finally, *The Great Chronicle of London* of September 1497-1498 describes John Cabot as "... a vennylian which made hym sylf verray expert & kunnyng In knowlage of the cyrcuyte of

the world and the landis of the same, as by a cart & othir demonstracions Reasonable he shewid⁻⁹

Sebastian Cabot is described by Peter Martyr d'Anghiera in his *The Decades of the New World or West Indies of 1534* as " . . . the very prudent and practical navigator Sebastian Cabot the Venetian, who when a child was taken to England by his father, and on the latter's death, being very rich and of an enterprising mind, thought that, as Christopher Columbus had done, so he too wished to discover some new part of the world."¹⁰ Richard Willes in his work: *The History of Travayle in the West Indies and East Indies of 1577* tells us that Sebastian Cabot " . . . was not only a skilful sea man, but a long traveller"¹¹ whose maps were better than those of Mercator because he had entered the northwest strait personally and that " . . . in his owne discourse of navigation you may reade in his carde drawn with his owne hands"¹²

Giovanni Battista Remusio, an Italian historian and early collector of voyages of discovery, relates a story in his *Primo Volume delle Navigazioni et Viaggi of 1550* told by Hieronimo Fracastoro. Fracastoro was privileged to meet Sebastian Cabot (possibly when Sebastian was negotiating with Venice concerning a voyage of discovery which was never carried out), view his globes and maps, and discuss his plans for discovery.

He recalls that Sebastian was:

... so worthy and experienced in things pertaining to navigation and cosmography that in Spain there is not now his equal ... and for this reason he is called the Pilot Major.

... Unexpectedly I met this man and found him a most amiable and courteous person, who was very kind to me and showed me many things, and amongst others a large map of the world with the navigations set forth, both of the Portuguese and the Castilians. And he told me that, his father having left Venice many years ago and having gone to England to trade, he took him with him to the city of London, when he [Sebastian] was rather young, but not before he learnt the humanities and the sphere.¹³

The famous British compiler of accounts of discovery, Richard Hakluyt, in his *Divers Voyages* of 1582 stated that the writings, maps, and globes of the Cabots were entrusted to one, William Worthington, until such time that they be published "... because so worthie monumentes should not be buried in perpetuall oblivion ..."¹⁴ Tragically, that is precisely what happened because whether they were published or not, none of these works has survived.

Like Columbus and Vespucci, John Cabot also sought patronage initially in Spain and Portugal. In 1498 the Spanish agent to the Crown in England said of John Cabot, "I have seen the map made by the discoverer, who is another Genoese like Columbus, who has been in Seville and at Lisbon seeking to obtain persons to aid him in this discovery."¹⁵ Evidently Cabot

was rejected, however, and had to look elsewhere. Just as in Columbus' case, the Portuguese turned down Cabot because they had reason to believe that their own eastern route to Asia would soon pay off. The Spanish turned down Cabot because they were still placing their hope in Columbus' western route and in their own explorers. There were simply too many imitators of Columbus in Spain at the moment, and too few resources to spare for such endeavors after Spain's long war against those that they called the Infidels. For the time being at least, the Crown defended Columbus' claim that the Indies had already been found and could still be persuaded to supply ships to confirm the earlier findings.¹⁶

The English had already been approached by Columbus' brother Bartholomew in 1486, but had turned him down.¹⁷ What interested them in Cabot's proposal was that he claimed he could reach Asia more quickly than the Spanish had simply by taking a more northerly route. Furthermore, he could avoid the Spanish and Portuguese fleets and therefore any possible confrontations with them. The English were still close enough to the Roman Catholic Church at that time to want to avoid flagrant violations of the papal Treaty of Tordesillas, which had given the Spanish the Western Hemisphere to colonize and the Portuguese the East. At this stage England could ill afford another war after the tremendous drains of the Hundred

Years' War with France and the War of the Roses at home. Only the promise of new wealth for England could capture Henry VII's interest.¹⁸

Fortunately, the logic behind Cabot's proposal was very compelling. He reasoned that Asia would be closer to Europe from a northern approach because of the closeness of the bands of longitude as they begin to converge towards the pole. He said that Columbus had not reached his goal merely because he had not gone far enough west. Cabot claimed that by sailing west from England, the distance of the Atlantic passage could be reduced. Then, by sailing southwest from the initial landfall, the inhabited parts of Asia could be reached before Columbus or any Spaniard reached them. The English would then be free to trade directly with the Asians and not have to worry about Spanish or Portuguese interference.¹⁹

This was a proposal based on sound geographical reasoning by a man who was well-versed in the latest developments in cosmography. Cabot's use of the globe to show the possibility of a shorter route to Asia was a more compelling visual aid than the one-dimensional sailing charts which most navigators used at the time. A contemporary source tells us that Cabot's use of the globe is what won the king over. Reimondo de Soncino related John Cabot's persuasiveness in the following:

... He therefore reasons that these things [spices] come from places far away from them [the Arabs], and so on from one to the other, always assuming that the earth is round, it follows as a matter of course that the last of all must take them in the north towards the west. He tells all this in such a way, and makes everything so plain, that I also feel compelled to believe him. What is much more, his Majesty, who is wise and not prodigal, also gives him some credence. ... By means of this they hope to make London a more important mart for spices than Alexandria.²⁰

John Cabot was wrong in thinking that the source of spices was northern Asia, but right in assuming that they were traded from hand to hand many times from a source in the Far East. What he could not have known, however, was that the figures which he was using from Ptolemy for the circumference of the earth were too small. Columbus had made the same error, but by 1501 or so Vespucci had guessed as much because of his own calculations. Therefore, although North America was proportionately closer in the high latitudes, Asia was still incredibly far away.

Like Columbus, Cabot probably died thinking he had found Asia. It is to his credit, however, that he did not further shorten Ptolemy's figures on the circumference of the earth to manufacture plausibility for his arguments as Columbus had.²¹ Had Cabot lived longer, he probably would have seen the error in his thinking and changed his strategy as we know his son eventually did. In contrast, Columbus misled an entire generation of Spanish rulers, explorers, and cartographers to believe he had found Asia.

John Cabot had been very effective in convincing the English Crown to underwrite his enterprise, even though it was radically different from anything else the British had tried up to that time. Cabot's ideas were well before their time for England of the 15th century. To the English, the North Atlantic was little more than a good fishery.²² The tales of Viking and Irish voyages of discovery and Nordic colonies in the islands of the North Atlantic were long forgotten. There were legends of such lands as the Seven Cities of Cibola, the islands of St. Brenden, and Brasil, but until Cabot came along with a plan to reach Asia by sailing west there was little interest in voyages of discovery.²³

While living in Lisbon, Cabot heard many tales from the merchants from Bristol stationed there. They told him that in the early 1490's a series of voyages had gone out to the west from England, searching for new fishing sites free from the control of Icelanders.²⁴ Cabot heard of uncharted lands to the west of Iceland and thought that they might be a part of Asia. It seemed to him that a voyage of discovery from those latitudes might be a worthwhile undertaking. Soon afterward he went to Bristol personally to investigate further and then he went to king Henry VII to try to convince him to sponsor an expedition.

It is to Cabot's credit that he not only conceived the idea of a northern approach to reaching Asia, but was also able to win Henry over. He produced an impressive collection of maps, globes, and documentary evidence to prove his point and soon had the king convinced. In typical Renaissance fashion, he combined knowledge from research with empirical evaluation of new facts to back up his theory. He also emphasized the practical benefits of exploration by convincing the king that he could have riches of Cipangu (Japan), conquer the infidels, and claim new lands for England. The Letter of Patent issued to John Cabot on March 5, 1496 authorizes him "... to find, discover and investigate whatsoever islands, countries, regions or provinces of heathens and infidels, in whatsoever part of the world placed, which before this time were unknown to all Christians."²⁵ He then agrees to give the bulk of the profits to John Cabot and his heirs, keeping only a fifth for himself.²⁶

What more could Henry ask for? He enthusiastically backed Cabot, and scored a bit of a diplomatic coup by managing to sponsor the first voyage of discovery not conducted by members of the Treaty of Tordesillas. It was a coup because he did this without being drawn into a conflict with its signatories or his Continental allies.²⁷ In fact, in future voyages the Portuguese cooperated with the English and managed to explore the

Northwestern Atlantic without conflict because they were hoping to exploit a loophole in the treaty by proving that the newly found territories were beyond the Line of Demarcation showing those areas belonging to Spain.²⁸

They were unsuccessful in North America, but they did manage to demonstrate that Brazil was within their sphere of influence and thus they gained a foothold on a part of the New World. For its part, Spain was too preoccupied with developing its other possessions and defending its claim to the Philippines to get involved with defending its claims to North America by force. The English staked a claim in North America by virtue of the old axiom that possession is nine-tenths of the law and no one did anything to stop them.

Cabot set sail from Bristol about the 20th of May, 1497, heading west to Dursey Head, Ireland, and from there westward in almost a direct line to Newfoundland. Ironically, his landing was within a few miles of Leif Ericson's nearly five hundred years before, but any trace of the colony that Ericson had left was gone, and the voyage itself long forgotten.²⁹ Cabot claimed the land for England, but also planted the banner of St. Mark as a tribute to his native Venice. He did not spend much time ashore, but he did have time to observe the inhabitants, as we shall see shortly. He explored the waters near Newfoundland, searching for a strait that would open up to

Asia. When he thought that he had found it, he returned to England to plan a larger expedition which would investigate further. He could not take chances at more extensive exploration because he was short of supplies and had just one ship, the *Mattea* or Matthew, with only a small crew.

Cabot was unable to prove that the land he had found was Asia, but he did furnish evidence that it was inhabited, having found paths, campfire sightings, game snares, a needle for making nets, and other man-made objects. He also saw felled trees, cultured fields, and animal droppings, which he interpreted as signs of agriculture. This created enough excitement in England to cause most people to believe that Cabot had done what he had set out to do. Lorenzo Pasqualigo, a contemporary of Cabot, wrote to his brothers in Venice on August 23, 1497: "He has discovered mainland 700 leagues away, which is the country of the Great Khan . . ." ³⁰

Similarly, Soncino wrote in the same year to the Duke of Milan that Cabot had discovered the Seven Cities of Cibola and "... gained a part of Asia without a stroke of the sword." ³¹ Finally, John Day in an undated letter to the "Lord Grand Admiral" of Spain (probably Columbus) reported that John Cabot had confirmed the findings of the Bristol merchants who had earlier claimed to have found the Isle of Brasil. ³² John Cabot was warmly received in England upon his return. Pasqualigo said that "... he is

called the Great Admiral and a vast honor is paid to him and he goes dressed in silk, and these English run after him like mad³³ This lavish spending on the part of Cabot was made possible because the king gave him a government stipend for life and granted a charter for a second voyage.³⁴

Soncino relates that Cabot told him that:

The land is excellent and temperate, and they believe that Brazil wood and silk are native there. They assert that the sea there is swarming with fish, which can be taken not only with the net, but in baskets let down with a stone, so that it sinks in the water. I have heard this Messer Zoane state so much. These same English, his companions, say that they could bring so many fish that this kingdom would have no further need of Iceland But Messer Zoane has his mind set upon even greater things, because he proposes to keep along the coast from the place at which he touched, more and more to the east, until he reaches an island he calls Cipango, situated in the equinoctial region, where he believes that all the spices of the world have their origin, as well as the jewels.³⁵

As fate would have it, however, tragedy would rain on John Cabot's life as it did on so many other explorers. Something went wrong on his second voyage, the nature of which remains uncertain, because of scanty evidence. He was either lost at sea, or he returned to England a failure and retired in ignominy. As Polydore Virgil, the writer of the *Anglica Historia* rather unceremoniously put it: "In the event he is believed to have found the new lands nowhere but on the very bottom of the ocean, to which he is thought to have descended together with his boat, the victim himself of that

self-same ocean; since after that voyage he was never seen again anywhere.³⁶ Either way we know that it soon became known in England from those who did return that he had not found what he had sought.³⁷

The details of what John Cabot found on his second voyage are sketchy, but the few facts that we do have are enticing. Pedro de Ayala sent an alarmed letter in cipher to the Spanish sovereigns on July 25, 1498, that the British were beginning to encroach upon lands claimed by Spain. He cried, "I find that what they have discovered or are in search of is possessed by Your Highnesses by the convention with Portugal [The Treaty of Tordesillas].³⁸ He further claimed that Cabot faked his maps to make it appear that the lands discovered were not part of those claimed by Spain.³⁹

The Spanish historian, Alonso de Santa Cruz, tells us in his *Islario General de Todas las Islas del Mundo*, written in 1541, that:

... [John Cabot] had coasted the land and northern shore even farther than the land of the Bacallaos [Newfoundland] and almost as far as Florida, that even in July there were such great floes and masses of ice on the sea, larger than their ships, which came along the coast propelled by the currents, that they could hardly keep clear of them.⁴⁰

He then credited Cabot with discovering Labrador and some smaller islands and stated that by the time of his writing the English frequented the area, extracting large quantities of fish and valuable trade in furs with the

large native population. He further reasoned that the area which Cabot found was a mainland by virtue of the large rivers located there.⁴¹

A map which was supposed to have been created by Sebastian Cabot⁴² has a narrative which combines elements of John Cabot's first and second voyages in a legend corresponding to the areas he discovered. It describes the natives as follows:

The people of it are dressed in the skins of animals; they use in their wars bows and arrows, lances and darts, and certain clubs of wood, and slings. It is a very sterile land. There are in it many white bears, and very large stags like horses, and many other animals; and likewise there is infinite fish . . . and likewise there are in the same land hawks like black crows, eagles, partridges, linnets, and many other birds of different kinds.⁴³

Finally, a clue as to what might have been the fate of John Cabot is found in a letter of Pietro Pasqualigo to his brothers in Venice, dated October 19, 1501. He related the expedition led by Gaspar Corte Real to follow up on Portuguese claims to the area (hoping that it was east of the Line of Demarcation of the Treaty of Tordesillas) and said that they found among natives knowing of no metals ". . . a piece of broken gilt sword, which certainly seems to have been made in Italy. One of the boys was wearing in his ears two silver rings which without doubt seem to have been made in Venice."⁴⁴ Historians differ as to whether this indicated the signs

of a battle that was fought and lost, items abandoned by the Cabot expedition in haste, trade items, or nothing at all.⁴⁵

We know slightly more about the life of Sebastian Cabot because he died at a very old age of natural causes and had gathered a great many friends and much influence during his long career. We even have a unique example of a map which bears his name, though his role in its construction is disputed. We do not have a surviving written account by him, however, so as with his father, we must patch together the details of his voyages from his contemporaries.

Sebastian's most important contribution was turning the tragedy of his father's death into victory. He was instrumental in developing England's exploration policy to the west and to the east by continuing the search for passages to Asia. Having probably accompanied his father on his voyages, he set out on a voyage of his own 1508 to confirm his father's findings. When it became clear to him that a strait opening up to Asia was not where he had expected to find it, he sought the Northwest Passage to bypass the "Firstseenland" and go to Asia directly instead. Sebastian did not accept defeat or stubbornly defend the impossible; instead he opened a whole new epoch in the Age of Discovery by initiating a search by the British and French for this passage which would last for nearly three-hundred years.

During the course of his career Sebastian would change his direction of exploration many times as he received updated information regarding other discoveries.

Peter Martyr of Anghiera in his *De Orbe Novo Decades* of 1516 discussed the various water routes which were being explored as possible openings to Asia. He noted that all the currents flowed westward in the lands found thus far, and thereby reasoned (incorrectly) that there must have been an opening towards which all of these waters flowed, thus allowing passage to the seas of Asia. He then discussed the frozen waters of the north explored by Sebastian,

He equipped two ships at his own cost in Britain, and with three hundred men steered first for the north, until even in the month of July he found great icebergs floating in the sea and almost continuous daylight, yet with the land free by the melting of the ice. Wherefore he was obliged, as he says, to turn and make for the west. And he extended his course furthermore to the southward owing to the curve of the coastline, so that his latitude was almost that of the straits of Gibraltar and he penetrated so far to the west that he had the island of Cuba on his left⁴⁶

Following that, he described the land that Sebastian found:

Cabot himself called those lands the Baccallaos because in the adjacent sea he found so great a quantity of a certain kind of great fish like tunnies, called bacallaos by the inhabitants, that at times they stayed the passage of his ships. He also found the men of those lands clothed in skins and not anywhere devoid of intelligence. He says there are great numbers of bears there, which eat fish . . . on

which account, he says, the bears are less dangerous to men. Many say that they have seen copper ore in places in the hands of the inhabitants.

I know Cabot as a familiar friend and sometimes as a guest in my house⁴⁷

Ramusio recorded in 1550 that Sebastian also confided the above to Hieronimo Fracastoro, recalling that upon hearing of Columbus' discoveries:

There was born in me a great desire and an eagerness that I should do some signal deed also, and knowing by reason of the sphere that if I sailed by way of the north west I should have a shorter road to find the Indies, I at once communicated my thought to his majesty, who was very pleased and equipped for me two caravels with all things needful And I began to sail towards the north-west, thinking not to find land until I came to Cathay, and from thence to turn towards the Indies. But at the end of some days I discovered land, which ran to the north, which greatly displeased me⁴⁸

He continued southward along the coast:

. . . always with the purpose of finding a passage to the Indies, and came as far as that part now called Florida. And, my victuals being short, I decided to return to England, where, on my arrival, I found great disturbances, of the people in rebellion and of a war with Scotland. There was no further thought of sailing to those parts, for which reason I came to Spain.⁴⁹

Once in Spain, Sebastian put his talents to good use. The king appointed him to take up Vespucci's old job as Pilot Major for the Spanish navigators. While in this office he was active in cartography, examining pilots, outfitting voyages, and serving as an expert witness in negotiations arising from territorial disputes between Spain and Portugal over the lands

recently discovered.⁵⁰ For a brief period from 1522-1523 Sebastian secretly negotiated with Venice to conduct a new expedition to explore the Northwest Passage. The Venetians appealed to Cabot's loyalty to his country of origin, but neither party could surmount the difficulty of conducting a secret voyage under the noses of the Spanish and Portuguese without being detected. In the end, Sebastian stayed loyal to Spain and the expedition never took place.⁵¹ This was as close as an Italian state would ever get to conducting an original voyage of discovery of its own, though routine commercial ventures to the New World would become common.

He also led an expedition to search for a passage to Asia through the Rio de la Plata in South America. This ill-fated voyage began on April 2, 1526. This expedition was originally commissioned as a follow-up to the success of Magellan's crew in finally reaching the spice islands by sailing west, but at some point Sebastian decided to change the objective of the voyage. The reasons for this were unclear.⁵² The expedition was divided in its purposes from the beginning because its private backers were in search of a quick profit and the king only wanted to obtain geopolitical information which might be useful to him later. This brought about strife and division among the officers representing both sides which was no doubt exacerbated by those who resented having a foreigner in command. The dissension among

the officers and crew resulted in several mutiny attempts and the loss of the flagship on the rocks during a moment when command broke down.

Soon after this, Sebastian found survivors of the de Solis expedition which he rescued north of and around the Rio de la Plata. They told him tales of limitless silver to be found inland. He proceeded to explore the mouth of the river and the Parana and Uruguay rivers that feed into it to follow up on claims by the natives of huge amounts of silver and a large ocean to be found to the west of the mountains. After years of plodding through the jungle and exhausting themselves exploring treacherous and hostile upriver areas in small boats, Sebastian returned to Spain in July of 1530 with only one in ten of his original crew because of starvation, disease, and Indian attacks. He brought back with him only some gold and silver artifacts and slaves to show for his efforts. The king was grateful for the geographical and strategic information gathered, however, and the promise of riches would cause numerous Spanish expeditions to suffer hardships in the area until the native population was subdued and the area developed.⁵³

Upon his return to Spain, Sebastian was taken to court by his enemies over alleged misconduct and abuse of command (much like Columbus) and was fined and sentenced to exile. The king overturned this

sentence, however, and reappointed him to the post of Pilot Major.⁵⁴ During his remaining time in Spain he worked on a theory for determining longitude with the use of magnetic variations and another by using the sun's declination at midday and comparing it to the recorded level at a known location. Neither of these produced immediate, reliable results, but they show an active mind engaged in practical, scientific endeavor, nonetheless.⁵⁵

After the mixed results of this mission, and with his popularity probably falling, Sebastian began to consider looking for sponsorship elsewhere than Spain once again. When his Spanish wife, Doña Catalina, died in 1547, his last tie to Spain was gone. He returned to England and became quite busy as a cartographer and sponsor of voyages. Finally, when he was quite old he was instrumental in beginning the search for a Northeast Passage. He was the Governor of "The Merchant Adventurers of England for the Discovery of Lands, Territories, Isles, Dominions and Seignories Unknown" which later became known as the Muscovy Company. He sponsored and outfitted expeditions, but he did not carry out them out himself. He was finally able to realize the lifetime dream that he and his father had to bring Asian trade to England, because the Muscovy Company ultimately broke the trade monopoly of the Hanseatic League by travelling

to Moscow and arranging a trading treaty in 1554. After a long life, full of accomplishments, Sebastian died in 1557 at the advanced age of seventy-three.⁵⁶

Unfortunately, in their haste to forget John Cabot's failure to find Asia, the British dropped his name entirely from their chronicles, and his voyages were popularly associated with those of his son even while Sebastian was still alive. John was forgotten by his contemporaries because he had failed; his son lionized because the prospect of a Northwest Passage still held some hope.⁵⁷ If history was truly rewritten in this way, it would be a fascinating example of the selective memory of popular history, which has so distorted our image of many of the explorers. Often we remember things the way we want to see them.

As a result of the failure of the Cabots to find a shorter westward route to Asia, the British switched their exploration policy. They bypassed the newly-found lands and continued on in search of a Northwest Passage. An important consequence of this was that even though they had reached the North American Mainland almost as early as the Spanish explorers had, they postponed its development and exploitation until around 1600.

The choice of the British to postpone the colonization of the lands found by the Cabots can be explained by a number of factors. The most

Immediate of these was that when Henry VII died his successors were not as interested in sponsoring exploration as he had been, and there was a temporary lull in British discovery after the voyages of the Cabots. This is why Sebastian moved to Portugal and then Spain; he could no longer find sponsorship in England.⁵⁸

Secondly, the British had not received returns on the voyages which had been sponsored to date. Interest in voyages of discovery was at last renewed in Francis Drake's time, but only because the British privateers could always fall back on plundering Spanish galleons loaded with gold from the New World to meet expenses if their voyages of discovery were not profitable. British voyages of this period usually only retraced the steps of others or wasted time on dead-end attempts at Northwest or Northeast Passages. Only after the defeat of the Spanish Armada did the British feel comfortable with sending large numbers of settlers to North America because they knew that the Spanish were finally powerless to stop them.⁵⁹

As we have seen, the Cabots were instrumental in searching for alternate routes to Asia than those sought for by the Spanish and the Portuguese. This helped to lead to the beginning of the British era of discovery and the ultimate British settlement of North America. By-products of their efforts were also the opening up of English trade with

Muscovy and the further exploitation of the interior of South America by the Spanish. Their discoveries forced the Spanish and Portuguese to hammer out some of the finer territorial disputes resulting from the Treaty of Tordesillas. Accordingly Spain and Portugal began to send new explorers inland to try and solidify their claims and develop the interior of the new continents.

The Cabots used the same methods as other Humanist cartographers in the preparation for their voyages, and Sebastian Cabot at least would be able to revise his cosmography as new experience dictated in much the same way as Vespucci did. We know that their discoveries and cartography had a profound effect on the theoretical conceptualization of the New World⁶⁰ and inspired many others to investigate it further. It is a pity that none of their own writings or maps have survived or we might know more of how their thinking was influenced by humanism. Still, we have seen that in the opinion of many of their contemporaries they were men of learning and expert mariners.

Notes

¹ As cited in James A. Williamson, R. A. Skelton cartographer, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery under Henry VII*, Glasgow: Robert Mac Lehose & Co. Ltd. published for the Hakluyt Society, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962, pp. 196-199. It is unclear what the name Montecalunya meant as it appears nowhere else.

² Ibid., pp. 40-42.

³ Ibid., pp. 55-56.

⁴ Frederick J. Pohl, *Amerigo Vespucci: Pilot Major* (New York: Morningside Heights: Columbia University Press, 1944), p. 34.

⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

⁶ As cited in Williamson, p. 225.

⁷ As cited in Williamson, pp. 208-209.

⁸ As cited in Williamson, pp. 209-210.

⁹ As cited in Williamson, p. 220.

¹⁰ As cited in Williamson, p. 268.

¹¹ As cited in Williamson, p. 279.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ As cited in Williamson, pp. 271-272.

¹⁴ As cited in Williamson, p. 280.

¹⁵ As cited in Williamson, p. 228.

¹⁶ Williamson, p. 42.

¹⁷ The story of this trip is recounted for us by Christopher Columbus' son Ferdinand in *Le Historie di Cristoforo Colombo* as cited in Williamson, pp. 199-200.

¹⁸ Charles E. Nowell, *The Great Discoveries and the First Colonial Empires*, (London: Cornell University Press), 1974, p. 113.

¹⁹ Williamson, pp. 45-53.

- ²⁰ Soncino letter of December 18, 1497, As cited in Williamson, p. 210.
- ²¹ Williamson, p. 16.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-18.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- ²⁵ As cited in Williamson, pp. 204-205.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ Williamson, pp. 51-52.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 116-144 in *passim*.
- ²⁹ According to Samuel Morison's calculations in *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages A. D. 500-1600*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), ch. 6.
- ³⁰ As cited in Williamson, p. 206.
- ³¹ Soncino letters of August 24th and December 18th of 1497, as cited in Williamson, pp. 208-209.
- ³² Williamson, p. 213, also pp. 87-88.
- ³³ As cited in Williamson, p. 208.
- ³⁴ Williamson, pp. 84-94.
- ³⁵ As cited in Williamson, p. 210.
- ³⁶ As cited in Williamson, pp. 224-225.
- ³⁷ Williamson, p. 105.
- ³⁸ As cited in Williamson, pp. 228-229.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ As cited in Williamson, p. 231.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 232.
- ⁴² Although Williamson disputes its authenticity due to errors in dates, language, and inaccuracy in the areas Cabot knew. He does confide

that Sebastian may have lent his name to the project, but did not inspect the final product. Williamson, pp. 57-59. Roberto Almagia in *L'opera del Genio Italiano All'Estero*, vol. 1: *Gli Italiani: I Primi Esploratori Dell'America [The Italians: The First Explorers of America]* (Rome: La Libreria Dello Stato, 1937), suggests that the unclear areas were deliberately kept vague by Sebastian to protect state secrets.

⁴³ As cited in Williamson, p. 207.

⁴⁴ As cited in Williamson, p. 230.

⁴⁵ See Morison, *Northern Voyages*, p. 180 and Williamson, pp. 106-107.

⁴⁶ As cited in Williamson, pp. 266-267.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

⁴⁸ As cited in Williamson, p. 272. Note that some of the dates and details of this account are confused with those of John Cabot as the story was being told third-handedly.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Almagia, pp. 316-317. Interestingly, Ferdinand Columbus and Giovanni Vespucci were also involved in the negotiations.

⁵¹ See Williamson, pp. 282-285; also Almagia, pp. 314-316.

⁵² Almagia claims Cabot changed objectives because he had lost his flag ship and the remaining crew and ships were in no condition to go as far as Asia (p. 317). Williamson, in the final chapter of his earlier work entitled *The Voyages of the Cabots and the Discovery of North America*, (London: Argonaut Press, 1929), proposes that a secret pact existed between the king and Cabot to go to Rio de la Plata instead of Asia and that Sebastian was just following orders accordingly. Characteristically, Morison in Ch. 22 of *The European Discovery of America: The Southern Voyages: 1492-1616*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), claims that Sebastian was an incompetent fraud who had invented his earlier voyage to the Northwest and was unfit as a commander in this one. He says that Cabot made serious errors in navigation, cartography, and command, and his only motive for exploring the Rio de la Plata was greed for gold and silver. The question remains how such an incompetent could conduct so

many voyages of discovery in vastly different climates and hold responsible and trustworthy commands over the lives of other navigators in both Spain and England!

⁵³The fairest and most unbiased account of this voyage can be found in *The Voyages of the Cabots and the Discovery of North America*. Although the author admits that it is a cursory treatment, no one else has covered the subject in greater detail since. Almgren's treatment of Sebastian Cabot is thorough but a little too apologetic and Morison ignores a great deal of positive character description from other sources which far outweigh this one example of bad judgement and possible character flaws in the area of command. As with many other explorers Sebastian Cabot has been needlessly maligned due to incomplete information used by scholars.

⁵⁴The testimony of Cabot's enemies in this trial was the source of most of the defamation of Sebastian's character. Much the same thing happened to Columbus possibly because of nationalistic suspicion and resentment of foreign commanders by native Spaniards. Morison makes the same mistake as many 19th Century historians by placing too much weight on these sources in an attempt to assassinate the character of Sebastian.

A more balanced assessment such as Williamson's shows that most of Cabot's contemporaries liked and trusted the man, and that his failures were no worse than many other conquistadors.

⁵⁵Williamson, *The Voyages of the Cabots and the Discovery of North America*, pp. 279-280.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 281-284.

⁵⁷Williamson, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery under Henry VII*, pp. 95-97.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 170-171.

⁵⁹James Edward Gillespie, *A History of Geographical Discovery: 1400-1800* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1933), p. 66.

⁶⁰R.A. Skelton discusses the influence of the Cabots' discoveries on cartography in the final chapter of *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery under Henry VII*.

Chapter V

GIOVANNI DA VERRAZZANO

Sebastian Cabot's final voyages revolved around trying to find alternative routes to Magellan's passage to Asia,¹ but he was not the first Italian explorer influenced by Magellan. Giovanni de Verrazzano, a young Florentine merchant, was briefly acquainted with Magellan while they were in Spain and Portugal. Antonio de Silveira de Meneses, the governor of Mozambique, wrote a letter in July of 1518 to the King of Portugal stating that Verrazzano had been in Lisbon and had accompanied Magellan when Magellan left Portugal to offer his services to the King of Spain. We can only speculate as to what ideas of discovery the two men might have discussed or to why Verrazzano decided not to go with Magellan on his attempt to circumnavigate the globe in the Southern Hemisphere. Perhaps Verrazzano had already thought to try a shorter route in the Northern Hemisphere. Unfortunately, the documents tell us nothing further of their relationship, but Verrazzano must have heard of the return to Spain of Magellan's ships after their leader's untimely death in the South Pacific, and he must have been influenced by the news that Asia could be reached by sailing west.²

By the time that Magellan's crew returned to Spain in 1522, the only major nation in Europe which did not have a stake in the discovery of the New World was France. France was going through a difficult time in its history because it found that its traditional power which came from being one of the oldest and largest monarchies in Europe was suddenly and seriously rivaled by the upstart Spain. Spain had used the wealth of its New World colonies and European dependencies as well as the momentum of its unification movement to amass a powerful military and alliance system. France was now surrounded by a hostile Spain which also controlled the Holy Roman Empire and the Low Countries. France's attempts at military intervention in Italy were being thwarted by Spain and the Holy Roman Empire, and France began to look elsewhere for a place to exercise its power. For these reasons the New World began to look appealing. Once France overcame the difficulties of its internal religious wars stemming from the Protestant Reformation, it was willing to look for overseas possessions, but by that point all of the best sites were already taken by the other European powers.³

France also became interested in seeking trade with the East because it faced a degree of economic isolation due to its largely Medieval economy. France was dependent on Italian merchants for credit and

industrial goods because its economy was entirely domestic-oriented and had no means of distribution for imported luxury goods, nor could the Crown raise enough money through taxes alone to finance its many wars. The French were tired of paying for goods second-handedly at exorbitant prices,⁴ and wished to find an unobstructed route to Asia of their own. Furthermore, France was somewhat jealous of the other powers' colonies and was encouraged by England's success in challenging the monopoly of Spain and Portugal in the New World. Slowly France began to build an interest in the New World as a way to gain wealth and independence for itself.

So it was that Francis I was ready to listen when Giovanni da Verrazzano appealed to him for support for an expedition to explore a yet-untried route to the East. Francis I was very open to latest Italian ideas and influences and accordingly surrounded himself at court with many Italian artists, chefs, generals, ministers, mistresses, and bankers. Verrazzano was well at home at the court of Francis I because of his widespread patronage and acceptance of Italians. Verrazzano's longtime residence in France and influential French friends were also helpful in getting him an audience with the King.⁵

We know little of Verrazzano's early days except to say that he was a Florentine by nationality, but lived and worked in a foreign country. This was in keeping with the tradition of many other Florentines before him, but it is unknown whether he was actually born in Florence or not. Regardless of his birthplace he was still considered a Florentine by his contemporaries, and his association with the Florentine colony of merchants and bankers living in Lyons proved to be of great benefit to his career as an explorer.⁶

He was related to the Rucellai family, banking partners of the Medici and the bankers of Jean Ango, a noted Humanist and outfitter of voyages of discovery. He knew Zanobio Rucellai well enough to place him alongside his own brother Girolamo in the handling of his estate.⁷ He was also related to the Guadagni family, a wealthy group of Florentine exiles who helped him. Other supporters were the wealthy Albizi, Buonoaccorsi (spelled Boncorsy by the French), and Gondi families. In fact, the list of his financial backers reads like a list of "Who's Who" among Florentine bankers abroad and included representatives of some of the most wealthy and influential families in Florence. Verrazzano would ultimately undertake his voyage of discovery with the backing of the king and his friends and in a kind of joint venture between royal and private capital.⁸

While based in Lyons he obtained experience as a navigator and travelled widely in the Levant while in the employ of Florentine and French merchants. Bernardo Carli, a Florentine merchant, wrote to his father in Florence in 1524 that Verrazzano had lived in Cairo for a period of several years, "... and not only in Egypt and Syria, but also all the known world, and thence by reason of his merit is esteemed another Amerigo Vespucci, another Ferdinand Magellan and even more."⁹ Everywhere he went he exchanged news about recent discoveries and added to his geographical knowledge. He and his brother Girolamo began making maps and globes, described as "excellent" by Richard Hakluyt in his *Divers Voyages* of 1582 and 1584, so much so that they were given to the royal family.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the only one which has survived is Girolamo's world map. Among the finest of its time, it also included the voyages he undertook with his brother, and many later maps were based on it.¹¹

During his travels and geographical studies Verrazzano began to formulate in his mind the idea of exploring North America for a passage to Asia. He may have also taken part in the Aubert expedition, which explored in the area of Newfoundland in 1508, though the evidence is sketchy.¹² In any case, he had no trouble identifying Newfoundland when he later explored the eastern coastline of North America.

Whether he had been there before or not, it was known since the time of John Cabot that the only remaining possibility for an undiscovered Northern Passage to Asia lay in the hope of a strait opening up somewhere along the eastern coast of North America.¹³ In fact, only the Atlantic seaboard south of the British claims in Newfoundland and north of the Spanish claims in Florida remained open to exploration, so Verrazzano led an expedition in 1523 to survey this coastline for a passage to Asia. He carefully avoided encroaching upon the claims of others and embroiling France in a diplomatic battle with its neighbors. As it was, news of his plans leaked out before he ever set sail, and the alarmed Portuguese, who had been exploring in the area, sent envoys to France to discuss potentially rival claims. The primary result of this was that Verrazzano's fleet was reduced from four ships to one in the hopes of avoiding detection.¹⁴

Verrazzano did not find the passage to Asia that he sought, but he did provide Europe with a valuable geographical, natural, and ethnographical report of this last unknown stretch of the western shores of the Atlantic. His descriptions of the lands he found and the people he met are among the finest of any explorer before or since. It has been suggested that Verrazzano's writings show the earmarks of a humanist education because of the quality of the language he used, the literary allusions, and his

knowledge of mathematics and science.¹⁵ In his letter to the King of France upon his return he included many classical allusions. For example, Verrazzano described a particular forest he had seen as Hyrcanien, called another beautiful spot Arcadie, compared an island to Rhodes, and said the native women of one locale wore their hair like those of Egypt and Syria.¹⁶

In the spirit of the new cartography of the Renaissance, Verrazzano recognized the difference between what the Ancients knew and what was new knowledge. He wasted no time declaring in the very beginning of his letter to king Francis I that, "... there appeared a new land which had never been seen before by any man, either ancient or modern."¹⁷ Awed by its beauty he wrote about a place where, "... we could see a stretch of country much higher than the sandy shore, with many beautiful fields and plains full of great forests, some sparse and some dense; and the trees have so many colors, and are so beautiful and delightful that they defy description."¹⁸

Verrazzano said that the Native Americans "resemble Orientals, particularly those from the farthest Sinarian regions,"¹⁹ which means that he either guessed at the Native Americans' Asian ancestry or merely saw what he wanted to see, thinking that he was in Asia. Unlike other explorers who lumped all natives together as a race of savages, it is to Verrazzano's

credit that he carefully recorded differences in appearance, dress, customs, and culture among the different groups that he encountered. Overall, his tone when describing the natives was not ethnocentric, condescending or judgemental.²⁰

Much like Marco Polo in his accounts of Asia, Verrazzano was careful to point out potential trade commodities and mineral sources he encountered. He described the land not only in terms of its beauty, but in terms of its potential for harboring ships, cultivating crops, and landing troops. Like all of the other Italian merchant discoverers, Verrazzano did not neglect the commercial aspects of the voyage nor the natives' receptivity to conversion, because he knew the importance of renewed patronage at home.

Verrazzano very succinctly stated the purpose of his voyage of discovery and then candidly revealed how his notion of cosmology was changed by it. He states,

My intention on this voyage was to reach Cathay and the extreme eastern coast of Asia, but I did not expect to find such an obstacle of new land as I have found; and if for some reason I did expect to find it, I estimated there would be some strait to get through to the Eastern Ocean. This was the opinion of all the Ancients, who certainly believed that our Western Ocean was joined to the Eastern Ocean of India without any land in between. Aristotle supports this theory by arguments of various analogies, but this opinion is quite contrary to that of the moderns, and has been proven false by

experience. Nevertheless, land has been found by modern man which appears to be larger than our Europe, than Africa, and almost larger than Asia, if we estimate its size correctly.²¹

What more concise and precise statement of the beginning of modern thinking could there be? Clearly Verrazzano had no trouble distinguishing his age from those past or in redefining his world view as new information required it. With Verrazzano's clear admissions we have left behind the shadows of doubt that plagued Columbus. The new generation of explorers that followed Verrazzano could freely discard their outdated notions of cosmology and redraw the map as they went along.

Verrazzano's observations provided those who followed him with a great deal of valuable information. He in fact compiled a "little book" of longitudinal, tidal, and astronomical observations which he said "... would prove rather useful to navigators."²² He told the King that he hoped that the book would thereby promote science.²³ Tragically, this book, like so many others by the discoverers, is lost. Nor do we have written accounts of any of his other voyages. They would have no doubt shed more light on Verrazzano's intriguing life and accomplishments.

Verrazzano contributed much to our knowledge of navigation and of North American native populations, flora and fauna. In a major error, however, he felt that the amount of land that he discovered in the New

World proved that there was more land on earth than water. Another error was that he mistook the sandbars off the eastern tidelands of North America as an isthmus with a great ocean lying just beyond. He did this because of his zeal to find a strait which would provide a potential opening to Asia. These errors confused mapmakers for sometime afterwards because they drew an otherwise correct North American coastline with the addition of an inland sea nearly touching the lands that Verrazzano described or continued to draw North America as a huge extension of Asia.²⁴ This is despite the fact that Verrazzano said, "all this land or New World which we have described above is joined together, but it is not linked with Asia or Africa Therefore the continent would lie between two seas, to the east and west; but these two seas do not in fact surround either of the two continents."²⁵ Verrazzano must have realized his error, however, because he never returned to try to substantiate his claims. Instead he turned to commercial ventures along known coasts and attempts to find a previously overlooked passageway to Asia in Central or South America.

Perhaps Verrazzano knew of Sebastian Cabot's attempts to follow up on the Magellan expedition, and planned to do the same. Verrazzano led an expedition to explore the Southern passage in 1526, but it fell into disarray when his ships were unable to pass through the Strait of Magellan

because of severe weather conditions. Unsure of their chances for survival in the rough seas, they decided to turn east and try to round the Cape of Good Hope in Africa and go on to the Indian Ocean instead. It was known that the Moluccas could be reached by that route, and trade there would make the commercial backers of the voyage happy. Unfortunately, only one ship succeeded in rounding the Cape of Good Hope, and continuing on to the Moluccas. That ship ended up shipwrecked in Madagascar however, and was never heard from again. Meanwhile, having lost contact with this captain, Verrazzano and his brother Girolamo gave up hope for him and decided to turn west and return to Brazil. The Verrazzano brothers took on brazilwood on the return trip to salvage the expedition commercially, but little was accomplished in terms of discovery.²⁶

Equally uncertain is the nature of Verrazzano's death, but it is now generally accepted that he met an untimely death along with his crew in 1528 at the hands of cannibals (possibly Caribs) somewhere in the Caribbean while en route to search for a passage through Central America. Some historians have confused him for a pirate named Jean Florin who was executed by the Spanish in November, 1527. Archival documents of the Parliament of Normandy prove, however, that in April of 1528 he was still alive and negotiating the payment for a crew and ship to conduct a final

voyage of exploration to America.²⁷ Neither Verrazzano nor his crew were to survive the trip or find the passage, but an investor in the voyage paid to return the ship and its valuable cargo of brazilwood to its home port of Fécamp and recoup the investors losses and as best he could.²⁸

Two reliable pieces of testimony record how his death actually took place. One is the *Storia Poetica* by Giulio Giovio of 1560 which reads,

They were taken by cruel people who suddenly attacked them. They were killed, laid on the ground, cut into pieces and eaten down to the smallest bone by those people. And there also was Verrazzano's brother who saw the ground red with his brother's blood, but could give no help, being aboard the ship. He saw everything and, having later come to Rome, one day he told us, in tears, about this bitter event. Such a sad death had the seeker of new lands.²⁹

Another piece of testimony is provided by the great historian of navigation and discovery, Giovanni Battista Ramusio, in the third volume of his *Navigazioni et Viaggi* of 1556. He says that Verrazzano's letters of other voyages were "... lost in the travails of the poor city of Florence,"³⁰ and that Verrazzano and his landing party were

... roasted and eaten, such an unhappy end had this valorous gentleman who, had not this misfortune intervened, with his knowledge and great intelligence, which he had of the things of the sea and of the art of navigation, accompanied and favored with the immense liberality of King Francis, would have discovered and made known to the world all that part of land up to the north.³¹

He concluded by saying that Verrazzano had great plans to colonize, develop and Christianize the land, and continue the search for a passage through those lands to Asia. Verrazzano's last two voyages were funded by private individuals because Francis I was too heavily involved in the wars for control of Italy to pursue colonization of the New World. How different the history of North America might have been had Francis I sponsored more of Verrazzano's voyages and if Verrazzano had lived to carry them out.

NOTES

¹ Although not an explorer himself, Antonio Pigafetta deserves mention because without him we would have no written record of the expedition which Magellan led out from Spain in 1519. This mission was the one which finally completed Vespucci's goal of finding a southern passage to Asia by sailing west. Although Magellan himself died in the Philippines, his crew continued on and became the first men to circumnavigate the globe. An impressive fleet of five ships and 237 men left Spain, but only one ship and 38 men eventually returned.

Through all of this, the scholar Pigafetta managed to survive despite being in the thick of danger many times. Far from being an isolated chronicler, Pigafetta was an active participant in most of the major events of the voyage himself and described its many hardships and perils from firsthand experience. A certain amount of this can of course be attributed to the temptation of writers to exaggerate their own role in affairs, but his accomplishment is none the less significant. By any account, we owe a great debt to this fine Renaissance scholar for his beautifully-written account of this epic voyage. Pigafetta's own account of Magellan's voyage can be found in Antonio Pigafetta, *The Voyage of Magellan: The Journal of Antonio Pigafetta*, trans. Paula Spurlin Paige (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc. 1969).

² Lawrence Wroth, *The Voyages of Giovanni da Verrazzano: 1524-1528* (Hartford, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 56. Portions of Meneses letter relevant to Verrazzano are quoted in Wroth, p. 229.

³ Charles E. Nowell, *The Great Discoveries and the First Colonial Empires* (Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 1954, 10th edition, 1974), pp. 81-82.

⁴ James Edward Gillespie, *A History of Geographical Discovery: 1400-1800* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1933), pp. 65-66.

⁵ Samuel Morison, *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages A.D. 500-1600* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 279.

⁶ Wroth, p. 11 and pp. 57-64.

⁷ "Power of Attorney" letter, as cited in Wroth, p. 223.

⁸ Morison, *The Northern Voyages*, pp. 281-282.

⁹ Carli letter, as cited in Wroth, p. 10.

¹⁰ Richard Hakluyt, *Divers Voyages*, as cited in Wroth, p. 162.

¹¹ For a discussion of the Verazzano brothers' cartography and its impact see Wroth, ch. 12 and Roberto Almagia, *L'Opera del Genio Italiano All'Estero*, vol. 1: *Gli Italiani: I Primi Esploratori Dell'America [The Italians: The First Explorers of America]* (Rome: La Libreria Dello Stato, 1937), pp. 365-366.

¹² Wroth, pp. 8-9.

¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 14-16.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 66-70.

¹⁵ Morison, *The Northern Voyages*, p. 284.

¹⁶ "Cèllere Codex", as cited in Wroth, pp. 133-143 in *passim*.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 134.

²⁰ He was understandingly critical of one group of natives he encountered (in the area which would later be called New England) who showed their contempt for Verazzano's trading expedition by laughing at them and exposing their backsides in a common gesture of ridicule and scorn. His gentlemanly, Christian sensibilities having been shocked, Verazzano said that these people had "no courtesy in them" and called them "brute creatures." This humorous account is found in the Cèllere Codex, as cited in Wroth, p. 141.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 142.

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Wroth, pp. 165-177.

²⁵ Cèllere Codex, as cited in Wroth, p. 143.

²⁶This is the interpretation of events given by Wroth, based upon the seemingly contradictory accounts of the voyage by the Gouveia letter of July 18, 1528 and the Meneses letter of the same date as cited in Wroth, pp. 228-229.

²⁷Fécamp Documents, as cited in Wroth, p. 268.

²⁸According to the legal settlements resulting from the doomed expedition as documented in the Fécamp Documents, as cited in Wroth, p. 269.

²⁹Giulio Giovio, *Storia Poetica*, as cited in Wroth, p. 259.

³⁰Ramusio, *Navigazioni et Viaggi*, as cited in Wroth, p. 264.

³¹*Ibid.*

Chapter VI

THE IMPACT OF THE AGE OF DISCOVERY ON ITALY

With the death of Verrazzano the Italian Era of Discovery came to a close. Italians continued to serve as valuable crewmen due to their seafaring experience,¹ but the leadership of expeditions gradually began to pass into the hands of the non-Italians whom the early discoverers had trained. The nations which sponsored the Italians (with the exception of the Portuguese who had largely used their own nationals from the beginning) gradually began to develop a corps of their own explorers and no longer had need of outside help. Many of these men had been apprenticed by the early discoverers and went on to make important discoveries of their own. Lastly, the sponsoring nations developed mapmaking and navigational schools of their own as well as powerful fleets to rival those of the Italian merchants.²

A common thread can be traced from the early speculations of Italian geographers to the explorations of Italian discoverers to the colonial empires established in the New World by the conquistadors of other nations. The Italian explorers were all influenced by Toscanelli directly or indirectly in that each one shared his dream of sailing west to find a passage to the east. Each man was also a student of the Italian School of

Cartography in his own right and carried these ideas into his methods of preparation and exploration and eagerly taught them to others.

As we have seen, none of the Italian explorers accomplished his direct goal of finding a westward route to Asia, but they were successful in opening the way for others who followed after them. In addition, they made many important advances in navigational techniques and recorded observations of the people, lands, skies, and Atlantic winds and currents for those who came later. Every major portion of the coastline of the Americas was first explored by an Italian, and others came later to fill in the precise details and clear up inconsistencies. Most important of all, it was an Italian who first realized that the newly found land was not a part of Asia, but the New World.

Much of the commercial potential of the New World was pointed out first by Italians, but it was the other Europeans who would ultimately decide how the land would be used. The great irony of the Italian Era of Discovery is that the benefits of the Italians' discovery went to everyone but the Italian states. Many thousands of miles of coastline were first discovered by Italians, but not one Italian colony was ever founded in the New World. Furthermore, Italy was conquered and divided by its neighbors who ruled the weak city-states like colonies themselves.

Later, they used the money from their colonies to build large armies of occupation in Italy, thus squelching any chance of unification or independence for hundreds of years. Italy remained isolated from the economic opportunity of the New World and could only play a secondary role by managing the wealth of others or handling the distribution of goods from the New World. This sustained Italy for perhaps another fifty years after the discovery of America, but decline was inevitable as the other nations began to develop their own domestic industries to rival those of Italy and establish their independence from the Italian commercial network and trade monopoly.³

Italy stayed dwarfed and divided by its neighbors who had the good fortune to have unified earlier. Italian economic dominance was crushed in the struggle of the Italian states to defend themselves against foreign armies and the loss of trade markets and finance to Northern Europe. Add to this the repressiveness of the Counter-Reformation, and the Italian Renaissance died a still birth. Their financial, social, political, artistic, philosophical and scholastic innovations spread throughout Europe, but nearly died out in Italy itself.

The story of Italian Discovery begins and ends with geography.⁴ It was the Italians who first formed the notion of a New World, but its discovery and exploitation proved to be their downfall. Their voyages of discovery paved the way for others who would exploit the resources of the New World to overthrow Italy's dominance of the Old World. Now all that remains of their accomplishments are a few scattered places which bear their names. The mystical lands of Antilles, The Seven Cities of Cibola, The Isle of Brasil, and those mysterious lands described by Marco Polo eluded them. The names that they gave the lands that they found have nearly all been changed or forgotten. They did not find Asia, but the gift that they gave Europe in the form of the New World has brought Europe far more change and wealth than all the trade which was eventually established with the East.⁵

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the Italian explorers of the Renaissance had humanistic motives for their great accomplishments in the Age of Discovery. The explorers deserve a place alongside the well-known Humanists in the history of art, literature, philosophy, and government by virtue of their research and accomplishments. Just as the Humanists in

other fields turned to the classics for their inspiration, so did the humanistic explorers become distinguished by their research in the Classics while preparing for their voyages. The extent of their learning has been shown by examining their writings and the testimony of their contemporaries. The academic preparation of the Italian explorers was a critical factor in establishing their credibility when presenting their arguments to kings and other patrons. This is a factor which has often been overlooked in traditional studies of the discoverers' lives. The explorers also deserve credit for their original contributions to the fields of science, navigation and cartography. They were a breed of men who were as diligent in their search for new knowledge as any of the noteworthy Humanist scholars.

Each of the Italian explorers contributed to our portrait of the Renaissance man as discoverer in his own way. They were not merely adventurers, but men influenced by the Humanism of their age. Because of their education and research, they carried the ideas and fresh outlook of the Renaissance towards the world with them. Specific aspects of the Renaissance man vary from one explorer to another. Characteristics which are typically identified with the Renaissance man were developed to varying degrees among the different explorers. However, their common humanistic

educational background taught them the worth of man and inspired them to accomplish great deeds not only for God and country but also to make a name for themselves and bring the world new knowledge.

An intellectual evolution occurred in the minds of the discoverers which was to have far-reaching ramifications. The world view of the Renaissance explorers of Italy changed over time as new experiences caused them to reevaluate everything that they had learned and be bold enough to change the maps to reflect their new discoveries. In general, the explorers based their decisions on the gathering of evidence tempered by empirical methods. Observation and experimentation allowed them to be open-minded enough to question the ancient authorities when necessary.

The Italian discoverers also possessed the typical Renaissance desire to bring fame to themselves through great and virtuous deeds, and to find a better understanding of man and his role in the world. As this occurred, the Renaissance explorers had to come to terms with new information which challenged all of the accepted notions of cosmology and cosmography with which they had been raised and which they had learned in their extensive research of classical geographers.

A new thinking began to develop which could comprehend the concept of a new world. This concept of a new world was formed by a generation of explorers who had been raised in an intellectual climate which taught them that they were part of a new age. As with any intellectual revolution, this new thinking did not occur overnight. The realization that what they had found was a New World was to take the course of the entire Era of Italian Discovery to become accepted. Convincing the rest of the world and clearing up the controversies created by this revelation would take much longer.

In the time in which the Italian discoverers lived, the introduction of the concept of a New World was to have just as profound an impact as the claim of the other Humanists that mankind had begun a new age. Many of the controversies created by the ideas and accomplishments of the Humanist discoverers outlived the explorers themselves and are still being debated today. Perhaps the most important contribution of the Italian explorers is not (as has traditionally been maintained) the lands that they discovered, but the change in thinking that began to take place when the discoverers tried to explain what they had found.

NOTES

¹ A complete listing of all Italians known to be involved in the Age of Discovery can be found in the appendices of Roberto Almagia's *L'Opera del Genio Italiano All'Estero, vol. 1: Gli Italiani: I Primi Esploratori Dell'America* [The Italians: The First Explorers of America] (Rome: La Libreria Dello Stato, 1937).

² Lawrence Wroth, *The Voyages of Giovanni da Verrazzano: 1524-1528* (Hartford, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 255-262.

³ James Edward Gillespie, *A History of Geographical Discovery: 1400-1800* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1933), p. 86.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66. Also see Harry A. Miskimin, *The Economy of Early Renaissance Europe: 1300-1460* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 158.

⁵ Paul Herrmann, *The Great Age of Discovery* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958), p. 10.

Figure 1

Italian Voyages of Discovery

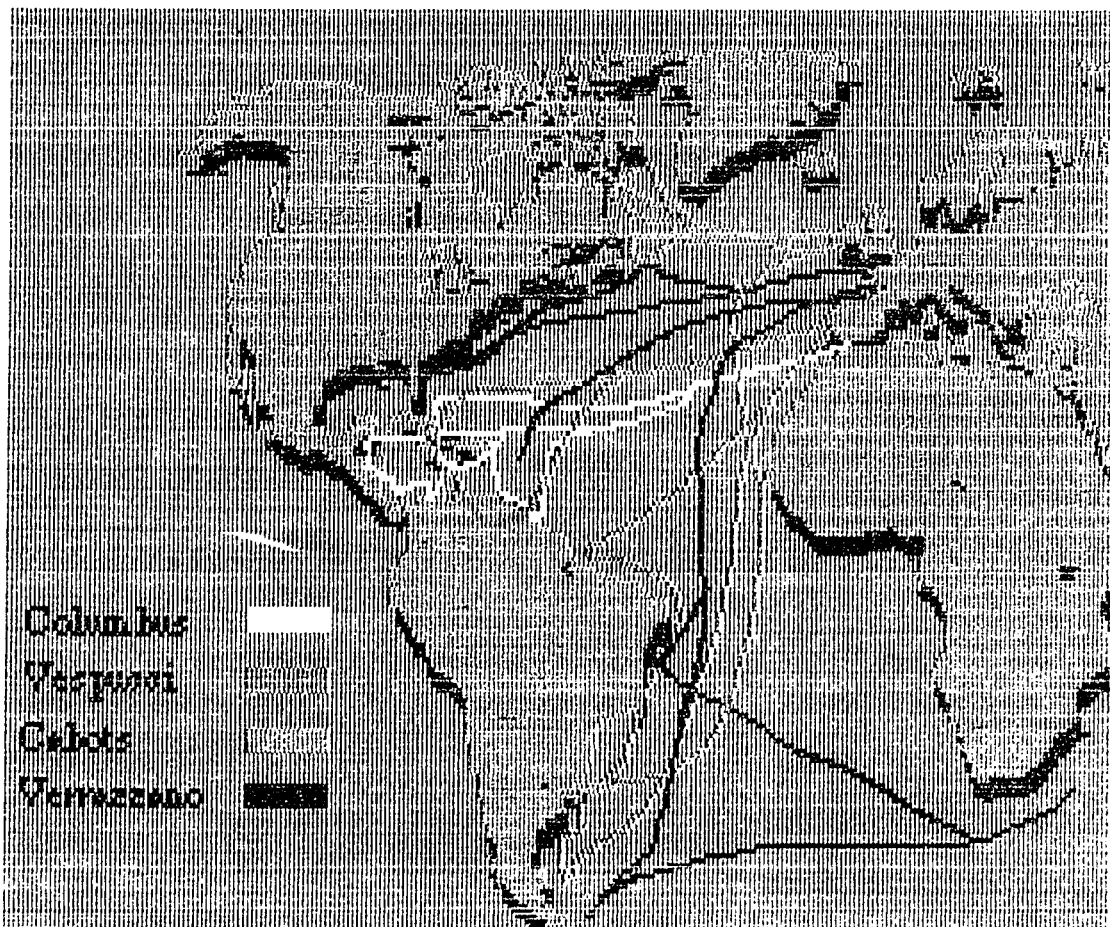


Figure 2

Chronology of the Italian Era of Discovery

<u>Years of Voyage</u>	<u>Discoverer</u>	<u>Area Explored</u>
1492	Columbus	Caribbean Islands
1493	Columbus	Caribbean Islands
1497	John Cabot	Newfoundland
1498	John Cabot	Newfoundland
1498	Columbus	northern coast of South America
1499	Vespucci-Ojeda	northern and eastern coasts of South America
1501	Vespucci	eastern coast of South America
1502	Columbus	eastern coast of Central America
1508	Sebastien Cabot	Newfoundland and Labrador
1523-24	Verrazzano	Atlantic seaboard of North America
1526-27	Verrazzano	Cape Horn and Cape of Good Hope
1528	Verrazzano	Caribbean
1526-30	Sebastien Cabot	Rio de la Plata

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. General Works:

1. Almagia, Roberto. *L'Opera del Genio Italiano All'Estero*. vol. 1: *Gli Italiani: I Primi Esploratori Dell'America [The Italians: The First Explorers of America]*. Rome: La Libreria Dello Stato, 1937.
2. Arciniegas, German. *America in Europe: A History of the New World in Reverse*. Translated by Gabriela Arciniegas and R. Victoria Arana. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975.
3. Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Discoverers: A History of Man's Search to Know His World and Himself*. New York: Random House Inc., 1983.
4. Burckhardt, Jacob. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. 5th ed. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1937.
5. Crone, G.R. *The Discovery of America*. New York: Weybright & Talley, 1969.
6. Ferguson, Wallace. *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation*. Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1948.
7. Gillespie, James Edward. *A History of Geographical Discovery: 1400-1800*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1933.

8. Herrmann, Paul. *The Great Age of Discovery*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958.

9. Miskimin, Harry A. *The Economy of Early Renaissance Europe: 1300-1450*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969.

10. Nowell, Charles E. *The Great Discoveries and the First Colonial Empires*. 10th ed. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974.

11. Parry, J. H.. *The Age of Reconnaissance: Discovery, Exploration and Settlement, 1450-1650*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1965.

12. Penrose, Boies. *Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance, 1420-1620*. N.p.: Harvard University Press, 1952; reprint ed., New York: Atheneum, 1975.

13. Ross, James Bruce and McLaughlin, Mary Martin eds. *The Portable Renaissance Reader*. New York: Penguin Books, 1981.

14. Plumb, J. H. ed. *The Pelican History of European Thought*. 10 vols. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978. Vol. 3: *From Humanism to Science: 1480-1700*, by Robert Mandrou. Translated by Brian Pierce.

15. Stephens, J. N. *The Fall of the Florentine Republic 1512-1530*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973.

16. Symonds, John Addington. *The Renaissance in Italy: The Revival of Learning*. London: Smith, Elder & Co. New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1906.

II. Works on the Discoverers:

1. Arciniegas, German. *Amerigo and the New World: The Life and Times of Amerigo Vespucci*. Translated by Harriet De Onis. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955.

2. Crosby, Alfred W. Jr. *The Columbian Exchange*. Westport, Co.: Greenwood Press, 1972.

3. Colón, Hernando (Ferdinand Columbus). *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus*. Translated by Benjamin Keen. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1959.

4. de Las Casas, Bartolomé. *History of the Indies*. Translated and edited by André Collard. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

5. Granzotto, Gianni. *Christopher Columbus*. Translated by Stephen Sartarelli. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1985.

6. Iglesia, Ramon ed. *Columbus, Cortés, and Other Essays*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.

7. Levillier, Roberto. *América: La Bien Llamada [America: The Well-Named Land]*. 2 vols. Buenos Aires: Editorial Guillermo Kraft Ltd., 1948.
8. Levillier, Roberto. *Americo Vesputio*. Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispanica, 1966.
9. Markham, Clements R. trans., notes, and intro. *The Letters of Amerigo Vespucci and Other Documents Illustrative of His Career*. New York: Burt Franklin, reprint ed., n. d. Originally published by Hakluyt Society.
10. Morison, Samuel E. *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942.
11. _____. *The European Discovery of America: The Southern Voyages: 1492-1616*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.
12. _____. *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages A. D. 500-1600*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.
13. Morison, Samuel E., trans. and ed. *Journals and Other Documents on the Life of Christopher Columbus*. New York: The Heritage Press, 1963.
14. Nunn, George E. *The Geographical Conceptions of Columbus: A Critical Consideration of Four Problems*. American Geographical Society, Research Series no. 14. New York: American Geographical Society, 1929.

15. O'Gorman, Edmundo. *The Invention of America: An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of its History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961 reprint ed. by Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1977.
16. Pigafetta, Antonio. *The Voyage of Magellan: The Journal of Antonio Pigafetta*. Translated by Paula Spurlin Poige. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969.
17. Pohl, Frederick J., *Amerigo Vespucci: Pilot Major*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1944.
18. Taviani, Emilio. *Christopher Columbus: The Grand Design*. London: Orbis Publishing Ltd., 1985.
19. Waldseemüller, Martin. *Cosmographiae Introductio*. Translated by Joseph Fischer and Franz von Wieser. March of America Facsimile Series, no. 2. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Inc., 1966.
20. Williamson, James A. *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery under Henry VII*. Cartography of the voyages by R. A. Skelton. Glasgow: Robert Mac Lehose & Co. Ltd. The University of Cambridge Press for the Hakluyt Society, 1962.
21. Williamson, James A. *The Voyages of the Cabots and the Discovery of North America*. London: Argonaut Press, 1929.

22. Wroth, Lawrence C. *The Voyages of Giovanni Verrazzano: 1524-1528*. Hartford, Conn. : Connecticut Printers Inc. for the Pierpont Morgan Library and the Yale University Press, 1970.

23. Zweig, Stefan. *Amerigo: A Comedy of Errors in History*. Translated by Andrew St. James. New York: The Viking Press, 1952.

III. Articles:

1. Goldstein, Thomas. "Florentine Humanism and the Vision of the New World" *Actos do Congresso Internacional da História Dos Descobrimentos* 4 (1961): 195-207.
2. _____. "The Role of the Italian Merchant Class in Renaissance and Discoveries" *Terrae Incognitae* 8 (1976): 19-28.
3. _____. "Geography in Fifteenth-Century Florence" in *Merchants & Scholars: Essays in the History of Exploration and Trade*. Edited by John Parker. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965.
4. _____. "15th Century Geography Against the Background of Medieval Science". A paper presented at the 4th annual meeting of the Society for the History of Discoveries, Salem, Mass., 13-14 November, 1964. (Typewritten).
5. Hirsch, Elisabeth Feist. "The Discoveries and the Humanists" in *Merchants & Scholars: Essays in the History of Exploration and Trade*. Edited by John Parker. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965.