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Years in Portugal: Emergence of the Grand Idea

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CHAPTER THREE

Years In Portugal: Emergence of the Grand Idea

During this time, I have searched out and studied all kinds of texts: geographies, histories, chronologies, philosophies, and other subjects. . . . The Lord opened my mind to the fact that it would be possible to sail from here to the Indies, and he opened my will to desire to accomplish the project.

—Christopher Columbus

A major turning point in Christopher Columbus' life happened when he moved from Genoa to Portugal in 1476. The story of this move is one of adventure, courage and inspiration. It began in May 1476, when he signed on to sail with a Genoese merchant fleet bound for England. The Spinola and DiNegro families sponsored a convoy of five ships to carry goods to Portugal, Flanders, and England. Going on this voyage provided Columbus an opportunity to sail for the first time on the Great Ocean sea, as the Atlantic was then called. The fleet experienced relatively smooth sailing during the early stages of the journey, sailing westward on the Mediterranean through the Strait of Gibraltar, then northward on the spacious Atlantic.

On 13 August, as they were sailing near the coast of Portugal, a French war fleet of at least 13 ships launched a surprise attack against the Genoese convoy. They fought all day, and by nightfall, three Genoese and four French vessels had been sunk, drowning hundreds of men. Columbus' ship caught fire, and the blaze spread so rapidly that the crew was unable to extinguish it. Their only recourse was to jump overboard and cast their fate with the sea. Even though he was as much as six miles off shore, Columbus was able to reach land. Ferdinand says he used the aid of a free-floating oar, but the Phillipses reject that story as being over dramatic and say "we simply do not know" how Columbus made it to shore (Phillips and Phillips 95).

However, Ferdinand believed that the Lord had intervened on this occasion in order to save his father's life, claiming that it "pleased God, who was preserving him for greater things, to give him strength to reach the shore" (Ferdinand 14). This incident was no doubt one of the many times that Columbus was "wrought upon" by the Spirit of God, as foretold in 1 Nephi 13:12. Certainly, it was not time for him to die inasmuch as he had not yet fulfilled his prophesied destiny.

Columbus eventually found his way to Lisbon, Portugal, where he took up residence in a colony of Genoese merchants. He established a map-making business which was his occupation when he was not at sea. It seems, indeed, providential that Christopher would choose to live in Lisbon, because at the time it was the world center for oceanic sailing and discovery. Prince Henry the Navigator, of Portugal, had established an important research center at Cape St. Vincent to study oceanic navigation and to encourage voyages of exploration down the west coast of Africa. In the 1460s and 1470s, the Portuguese continued to inch their way down the African coast in hopes of one day rounding the southern tip of the continent and sailing east to India and Asia. Without a doubt, they were the world's preeminent sailors and explorers in this period of history, and

Columbus' new home was their center for operations (Morison 1:39–41).

Adventures on the Atlantic

In this new environment, Columbus could not resist the lure of the ocean and eventually found himself back at sea, sailing just north of Iceland. He wrote, "In the month of February, 1477, I sailed one hundred leagues beyond the island of Tile [Iceland] . . . which is as big as England. . . . When I was there the sea was not frozen, but the tides were so great that in some places they rose twenty-six fathoms, and fell as much in depth" (Ferdinand 11). With this trip, he had braved the northern ocean, broadened his navigational experience, and possibly even increased his desire to explore further.

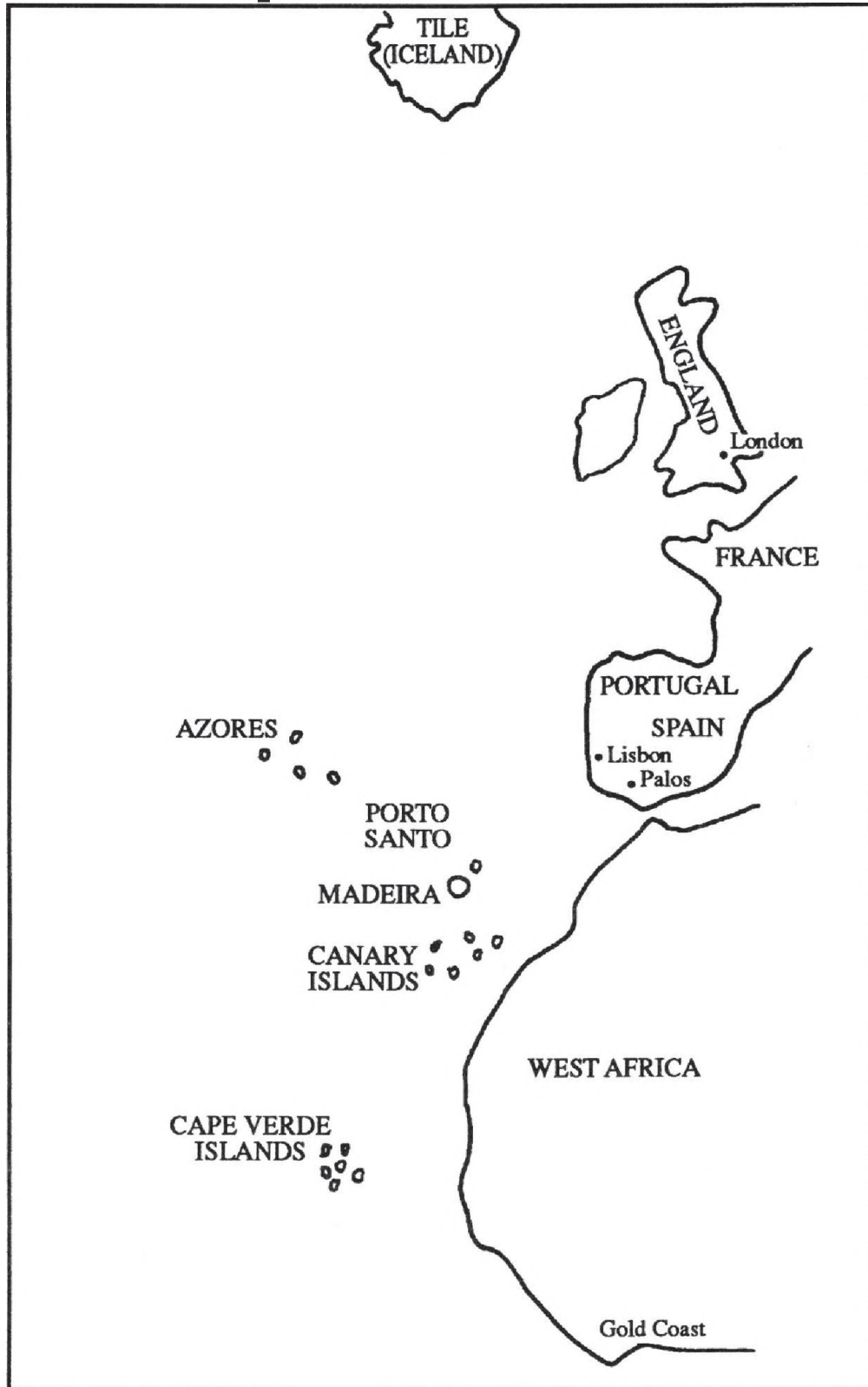
In the summer of 1478, the DiNegro family employed Columbus once again, this time to sail to the Madeira Islands to buy 60,000 pounds of sugar for transport to Genoa. On this voyage, he sailed south and west into the Atlantic Ocean, returning to Lisbon after making delivery at Genoa (Fernández-Armesto 29). With the completion of this voyage, the young captain further expanded his oceanic experience and deepened his thirst for adventure.

Christopher and Felipa

The next important step in the life of Columbus was his marriage, probably in 1479, to Felipa Perestrello e Moniz, the daughter of Portuguese nobles. Scholars give particular attention to Christopher's marriage not only for its romance, but also for the impact that it had on the future of his career. Inasmuch as he was a foreigner of relatively low birth who had literally washed ashore just a few years earlier, one might wonder how Christopher was able to marry into a family of noble descent.

Felipa's father, Bartholomew Perestrello, was among the first to colonize the Madeira Islands, and later received the

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hereditary title of Captain of Porto Santo, an island in the Madeiras. After his death in 1457, his wife, Isabel Moniz, sold her rights to the captaincy of Porto Santo, evidently intending to live off the proceeds of the sale. However, her son, Bartholomew, sued for the return of the rights to him, as the rightful benefactor of the captaincy, leaving his mother with “slender means to support her rank” (Morison 1:50–51).

At this time, Felipa was about 25 years old and was enrolled in the boarding school called Convento dos Santos (Convent of the Saints) near Columbus’ map-making establishment. Christopher, being a good Catholic, met Felipa while attending mass in the chapel at the convent (Las Casas 19). The only primary source description we have of their courtship is Ferdinand’s. He notes that since Christopher “behaved very honorably and was a man of handsome presence and one who never turned from the path of honesty, . . . [Felipa] had such conversation and friendship with him that she became his wife” (Ferdinand 14). Her mother, Isabel, suffering from the loss of income due to her son’s recent suit for the captaincy of Porto Santo, was probably quite pleased to have Felipa married, thereby offering relief from the burden of supporting her.

By marrying Felipa, a daughter of nobility, Columbus effectively gained access to the royal courts of Europe, and eventually was able to sell his adventurous plan to the monarchs of neighboring Spain. Historians seem agreed that had he married a woman of lower status, Columbus probably never would have gained a royal audience to sponsor his expedition.

At first the newlyweds lived with Felipa’s widowed mother who, observing Christopher’s lively interest in navigation, shared stories of her late husband’s seafaring adventures. She also gave Christopher the writings, navigational instruments, and sea-charts that her husband had left behind. This information fired Columbus’ imagination so much that he and Felipa soon decided to sail to the Madeiras to live on the islands that her father had helped colonize (Tarvani, *The Great Adventure*, 38–39). The young couple apparently spent most of the next

few years living in the Madeiras, both on Porto Santo and in Funchal. This must have been a pleasant time for Columbus. During these years he enjoyed going over his late father-in-law's maps and writings which had come into his possession. In 1480, while they were living in Porto Santo, their first son, Diego, was born (Morison 1:51, 59n19).

By 1481, however, Columbus again became restless. He learned that the Portuguese had sailed far enough south to reach the Gold Coast of Africa near the equator. This was essentially the only known part of the Atlantic to which Christopher had not yet sailed. Therefore, during the time he was living in the Madeiras, he made at least one trip to the African Gold Coast. While Columbus was there, he was able to observe for himself that people were actually able to live near the equator. This observation dispelled a myth he had read earlier which maintained that the equatorial zone was uninhabitable because of excessive heat (Phillips and Phillips 106).

With this voyage, Christopher became the most widely travelled seaman of his day. During the years he sailed the Mediterranean, he had been to such diverse places as Chios, Tunis and Marseilles. Now, having moved to Portugal and the Madeiras, he could boast of experience sailing in the Atlantic, to Iceland in the north and to the Gold Coast of Africa in the south. Las Casas claimed: "Columbus was the most outstanding sailor in the world, versed like no other in the art of navigation, for which divine Providence chose him to accomplish the most outstanding feat ever accomplished in the world until now" (Las Casas 17). Now Columbus was ready to plan for an expedition to the Indies, a leap of faith, that would thrust his name, forever, into the annals of history.

Beginnings of a Daring Plan

It was during this period of time that Columbus began to formulate his plan for the great "Enterprise of the Indies," his dream of reaching the East by sailing west. One of the most

pertinent questions concerning this plan is: what information was available to Christopher which helped him develop and refine the grand idea? We do know that, while he lived in Portugal, Columbus became an avid student of the Bible and of the writings of prominent theologians, philosophers, mathematicians, geographers and world travelers. He made literally hundreds of notes in the margins of the books that he read, giving insight as to which writings impressed him the most.

Besides the Bible, his other favorite books were Pierre d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi* (Image of the World), Pope Pius II's *Historia Rerum* (History of the World), and Marco Polo's *Description of the World* (Morison 1:120). Of these three works, d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi*, which summarizes geographical thought of the fifteenth-century, evidently had the greatest influence on Columbus' understanding of world geography. His copy of the book is now housed in the Columbus Library in Seville, Spain. In this single volume, Christopher made at least 898 marginal notes, reflecting his great interest in the message of the text (West 2:746).

Many passages in *Imago Mundi* give the impression that the Eurasian continent spans most of the circumference of the earth and that the ocean, therefore, is not particularly broad. Columbus' notes indicate that he was eager to embrace any statement in the work which would advance this theory. He took note of the following statements:

The end of the habitable earth toward the Orient [east] and the end of the habitable earth toward the Occident [west] are near enough, and between them is a small sea.

Between the end of Spain and the beginning of India is no great width.

An arm of the sea extends between India and Spain.

India is near Spain.

The beginnings of the Orient and of the Occident are close.

From the end of the Occident to the end of India *by land* is much greater than half the globe.

Aristotle [says] between the end of Spain and the beginning of India is a small sea navigable in a few days...Esdras [says] six parts [of the globe] are habitable and the seventh is covered with water.

The end of Spain and the beginning of India are not far distant but close, and it is evident *that this sea is navigable in a few days with a fair wind.* (Morison 1:122–23, 128n33, n35; emphasis added)

With such a body of statements to support his plan, it is not surprising that Columbus soon became convinced of the feasibility of his strategy for sailing to the Indies.

Christopher's study of Marco Polo's *Description of the World* further supported the conclusions he had drawn from d'Ailly's writings and added fire to his imagination. Polo's book highlights his travels in the Orient in the early fourteenth century, and recounts the marvels of the Grand Khan and of the island of Japan (Cipangu), which Marco Polo said lay 1500 miles off the coast of China. Some scholars doubted the accuracy of this geography, but Columbus was compelled to believe his account that the eastern edge of Asia lay much closer to Europe, by sea, than other men believed (Morison 1:46).

Paolo Toscanelli was one of the few scholars during Columbus' time who approved of Marco Polo. This prestigious Florentine physician was also destined to play an important role in encouraging Christopher to carry out his grand idea. In 1474, the king of Portugal invited Toscanelli to write the crown a letter developing his views on the possibility of travelling to the Indies by sailing westward on the Atlantic Ocean. When Columbus heard of this correspondence, he naturally became interested and wrote to Toscanelli personally. The physician was kind enough to send Christopher a copy of the letter and a sea-chart which he had previously forwarded to the king.

While no one knows where this chart is, a copy of Toscanelli's letter describing it can be found in Ferdinand's biography of his father (Ferdinand 19–22). Toscanelli's map is reported to have shown the west coasts of Europe and Africa, to the extent that they had been explored by the Portuguese up to that time. It also contained a description of the east coast of

Asia, including Japan and the east Asian islands as they existed in Toscanelli's concept of the world. He drew the Atlantic Ocean between Europe and Africa, on the eastern portion of the map, and Asia, on the western portion and superimposed a grid system of parallel lines over the drawing; each grid square supposedly covering a distance of 250 miles. The American continents, of course, were not on the chart, but Toscanelli did include a depiction of the fictitious Antillia island (the Island of the Seven Cities), which was thought to have existed in the middle of the Ocean Sea. The mapmaker believed that one could sail from Lisbon to China "with all security" (Ferdinand 21), and that the voyage could be broken at both the mythical island of Antillia and later, the island of Japan. Columbus agreed that a person could safely sail to the Indies and used Toscanelli's letter and sea-chart as evidence when he attempted to sell his plan to the monarchs of Europe (Morison 1:46).

It is important to note that, even though Columbus used the writings of d'Ailly, Polo, Toscanelli, and others as evidence to support and refine his plan, he never claimed that he derived his grand idea from any of them. Instead he sincerely credited the Lord for the inspiration for the Enterprise of the Indies. He wrote: "I have searched out and studied all kinds of texts: geographies, histories, chronologies, philosophies and other subjects. With a hand that could be felt, *the Lord opened my mind to the fact that it would be possible to sail from here to the Indies*, and he opened my will to desire to accomplish the project" (West and Kling 105; emphasis added).

Armed with a collection of authoritative statements to substantiate his plan, Columbus was now prepared to seek royal sponsorship for his enterprise. Inasmuch as he had lived in Portugal for the last eight years and even married into nobility from that country, Columbus chose, first, to present his plan to the Portuguese crown. In 1484 Christopher gained an audience with John II, who had become king of Portugal in 1481 (Earenfight 1:396).

King John thought enough of Christopher's enterprise to refer it to a maritime commission, headed by Diogo Ortiz. Unfortunately the members of the commission recommended that the plan be rejected, but it was not because they believed the world was flat. Scholars in literally all of the major universities of Europe at that time taught that the earth was round. The flat-earth myth is a fable that refuses to die in an otherwise enlightened world (Russell 1–11). The problem in 1484 was that most learned men believed the sea distance between Europe and the Indies was so great that it would be impossible to make the voyage without first running out of provisions. Furthermore, even if the voyage could be made, they felt it would be financially impractical to attempt it. The commission consequently rejected the proposal, believing that the idea was "vain, simply founded on imagination, or on things like that Isle Cypango of Marco Polo" (Morison 1:94).

This rejection, coupled with the fact that his wife, Felipa, had recently died, was most disheartening to Columbus. He, therefore, decided that he and his five-year-old son, Diego, would move to Spain in search of a better life. It was in Spain that this visionary man from Genoa would finally obtain the royal support he needed to fulfill his divine mission.