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The First Spanish Voyage to the New World

In the fifteenth century, Seville and Lisbon emerged as centers for merchants and traders trying to extend Europe's long-range trade routes in new and more profitable directions. The traditional eastern orientation of Mediterranean businessmen was threatened by increasing pressure on the spice roads by the Turks. At the same time, the exploration of the West African coast by the Portuguese offered a profitable alternative to the difficult Asian trade (Braudel 1972–74; Pike 1966, 1972; Sauer 1966).

The trading families of the city-state of Genoa were especially damaged by Turkish incursions on their eastern colonies and were faced with trade orientations shifting from east to west. Individually, the Genoese families employed a historically successful response to competing possibilities by diversifying; they sent representatives to live in many trading ports in the known world, including the trading centers of Andalusia. By the end of the fifteenth century, there were large and growing colonies of Genoese in Seville and Lisbon (Pike 1966:1–6). They were involved in a wide range of commercial activities, including moneylending and the short-distance trade of grain. They also continued to pursue long-distance trade to the east and north, taking advantage of the pivotal location of Seville and Lisbon between the Atlantic and Mediterranean markets. Their ships traveled from the tip of Africa to Iceland.¹

¹In 1477 Cristóbal Colón, who had been at sea for 16 years, sailed from Lisbon to Iceland and later to Africa's Gold Coast (Morison 1942:24–25).

Lisbon and Seville in the late fifteenth century were also markets for venture capital—money that could be invested in high-risk but potentially high-return enterprises (Floyd 1973; Pérez de Tudela 1983; Pike 1972). The Portuguese success in West Africa reinforced the belief that vast wealth accrued to those who opened up new markets and managed to retain some control over their exploitation. A good example was the fortified trading factory of São Jorge da Mina in Ghana, established by Don João II of Portugal in 1481 (Braudel 1972–74, 1982). Don Diogo d’Azambuja headed the expedition and directed the construction of a castle at the place now called Cape Coast. In 1481, São Jorge da Mina was near the forward edge of Portugal’s exploratory thrust down the African coast, and it represented a considerable risk on the part of the Portuguese princes and the explorers themselves. Although the ships never left sight of land, the 5,500-km (3,400 mi) voyage to São Jorge da Mina was nearly as long as the 6,400-km (4,000 mi) trip to the New World.

An ambitious Genoese sailor named Cristóbal Colón may have participated in d’Azambuja’s 1481 expedition (Morison 1942). In any case, Colón visited São Jorge da Mina shortly after its founding. On this and similar voyages for Portuguese entrepreneurs or for the Portuguese crown, Colón gained experience in sailing unknown coasts and in dealing with non-European people.

Colón and Toscanelli

Colón’s personal ambition to sail west across the Atlantic dated to before the trip to the Gold Coast. His remarkable correspondence with the Florentine geographer and astronomer Paolo Toscanelli was going on in the 1470s and ended with Toscanelli’s death in 1482. In the seafaring countries of the Mediterranean and Europe, Toscanelli was considered one of the foremost experts on geography and navigation in the period (Markham 1893; Morison 1942; Todorov 1984; Vignaud 1902). Toscanelli combined his calculations of the shape and size of the world with a careful reading of the accounts of the Far East that had been trickling westward with the spice caravans since the thirteenth century. Combining the classic geographic reconstructions of Ptolemy, and including the evidence of Marco Polo’s accounts of his expedition to China of the 1270s (and Polo’s uncles’ trip of the 1260s), Tosca-

nelli produced a map of the world and estimates of the distance between Portugal and the lands described by the Polos.

In reply to Colón's request for information Toscanelli's letter begins as follows:

Paul, the Physician, to Cristobal Colombo greeting. I perceive your magnificent and great desire to find a way to where the spices grow, and in reply to your letter I send you the copy of another letter which I wrote, some days ago, to a friend and favourite [Hernán Martínez] of the most serene King of Portugal before the wars of Castille, in reply to another which, by direction of his highness, he wrote to me on the . . . subject [of sailing west from Portugal to reach the East Indies], and I send you another sea chart like the one I sent him, by which you will be satisfied respecting your enquiries. (Columbus 1893:4)

So the information which Colón received about the western route to China was by no means his alone. Toscanelli was well respected, and his reconstruction of the world was the one most commonly accepted by navigators and educated people (Ballesteros y Beretta 1945; Vignaud 1902). His letter to Hernán Martínez and, through him, to the nephew of Prince Henry the Navigator and king of Portugal (Alfonso V) contains rather explicit sailing instructions.

I, therefore, send to his Majesty a chart made by my own hands, on which are delineated your coasts and islands, whence you must begin to make your journey always westward, and the places at which you should arrive, and how far from the pole or the equinoctial line you ought to keep, and through how much space or over how many miles you should arrive at those most fertile places full of all sorts of spices and jewels. . . .

From the city of Lisbon due west there are 26 spaces marked on the map, each of which has 250 miles, as far as the most noble and very great city of Quinsay [modern Hangzhou]. . . . But from the island of Antilia, known to you, to the most noble island of Cipangu [Cipangu, or Japan] there are ten spaces. For that island is most fertile in gold, pearls, and precious stones, and they cover the temples and palaces with solid gold. Thus the spaces of sea to be crossed in the unknown parts are not great. Many things might perhaps have been declared more exactly, but a diligent thinker will be able to clear up the rest for himself. (Columbus 1893:4, 8-9)

Toscanelli's estimate of a distance of 8,000 km (5,000 mi) between the Portuguese coast and Japan missed by about 16,000 km (10,000 miles), but it was close enough to the 6,400 km (4,000 mi) distance from Seville to the Caribbean islands that it compounded Colón's confusion when he arrived in the Bahamas. On October 21, 1492, only ten days after reaching land in the New World, Colón recorded in his journal,

I shall then shape a course for another much larger island, which I believe to be Cipango, judging from the signs made by the Indians I bring with me. They call it *Cuba*, and they say that there are ships and many skilled sailors there. Beyond this island there is another called *Bosio*, which they also say is very large, and others we shall see as we pass, lying between. According as I obtain tidings of gold or spices I shall settle what should be done. I am still resolved to go to the mainland and the city of Guisay [Toscanelli's "Quinsay"] and to deliver the letters [of greeting] of your Highnesses to the Grand Can, requesting a reply and returning with it. (Columbus 1893:55)

Although Colón's perception of the geography of the New World was distorted for the next decade, Toscanelli's backing reinforced Colón's desire to focus his efforts on the western oceans. It also lent the legitimacy of Toscanelli's name to his search for venture capital. In calculating the distance between Lisbon and Cipangu, however, Colón's underestimates were even more egregious than Toscanelli's. Colón figured that there were about 3,700 km (2,300 mi) between the Canaries and Japan (Morison 1942:65–70). His questionable mathematics, together with a widespread distrust of Marco Polo's stories by some educated Europeans, probably destroyed his chances of having the Portuguese government fund his first voyage. His 1484–85 request—three caravels, supplies, a title that would remain in his family perpetually, and a share of the profits—was turned down by Don João II.

Colón Secures Spanish Support for a Westward Voyage

In 1486, Colón turned his attention to the court of the Catholic sovereigns Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabela of Castille. His arrival in Seville was promising; he met and persuaded the count of Medinaceli, Don Luis de la Cerda, of the practicality and potential

profits of his expedition, and the count wanted to fund the enterprise immediately. The matter was referred to the court of Ferdinand and Isabela, who also took an interest in Colón but who were absorbed with the final battles of the *reconquista* of the Iberian peninsula from the Moors. The crown sent the business to committees for consideration, where Colón tried to meet the familiar criticisms concerning his calculations about the width of the western ocean. The decision was tabled for several years.

In 1488, Colón turned back to Don João II of Portugal, with whom he still had good relations. In the previous year, however, Don João's captain Bartolomé Díaz had rounded the tip of southern Africa, and Portugal had its own very profitable avenue of exploration to pursue.

While Colón was petitioning the courts of Andalusia, his brother and partner Bartolomé was doing the same in England and France. This is the first reference to Bartolomé we have from the chronicles and histories of the discovery. In many respects, Bartolomé was the more capable of the two. Las Casas describes Bartolomé as follows:

Here was a man who was prudent and very brave, and more calculating and astute than he appeared, and without the simplicity of Cristóbal. He had a Latin bearing and was expert in all of the things of men, extraordinarily wise and experienced in the ways of the sea. I believe that he was no less learned in cosmography and related things and in making navigational charts and globes and other things of that art than his brother, and I presume that in some of these things Bartolomé exceeded him, although he learned these things from Cristóbal.² He was taller than average in body, had a commanding and honorable appearance, although not as much as the Admiral. (*Historia*, I:153)

It is uncertain how far Bartolomé's negotiations with Henry VII progressed. Bartolomé's credentials were not impressive when he arrived in London in 1489 or 1490. In his nephew Fernando's biography, it is claimed that Bartolomé was attacked by pirates on the trip and arrived in London broke (*Columbus* 1824:36). Bartolomé's proposition was not rejected out of hand, however,

²In other accounts Cristóbal learned chartmaking from Bartolomé in the early 1470s in Lisbon (see *Morison* 1942:35–36).

and for the next few years he lived in England and France, trying to push his scheme through committees and making maps in France as a retainer of Charles VIII's elder sister.

Finally the Castillian siege of Grenada succeeded, and the war with the Moors was ended. This, it seemed, was what had held up Castillian support for Colón's expedition for a decade. But when Colón was summoned to Grenada (and provided with a generous allowance for travel and suitable clothes), it was to be for his greatest disappointment. Fernando's account of his father's rejection shows the real reasons why the matter was held up by so many years' deliberation.

Columbus was so high in his demands of honour and emolument, requiring that he should be appointed admiral and viceroy of all the countries he might discover, together with other important concessions. The Spanish councilors deemed his demands too high to be granted, as too considerable even in the event of success; and, in case of disappointment, they thought it would reflect ridicule and the imputation of folly upon the court to have conceded such high titles. Owing to these considerations the business again came to nothing. (Columbus 1824:40)

Much more than the money, which he probably could have had from many other investors, Colón wanted extraordinary privileges and a perpetual title, which only the sovereigns could give. Rank and privilege were supremely important in fifteenth-century Andalusia, and the arrogance of Colón—the son of a Genoese weaver, aspiring to the title “Almirante del Mar Océano” (Admiral of the Ocean Sea)—offended Ferdinand and Isabela's courtiers tremendously. Yet Colón's audacity was matched by his charisma and powers of persuasion. He had powerful friends and called in what favors he had at this critical juncture. This made the difference; the recommendations of the advisers who decided against Colón were overruled by the direct petition of Colón's friends to the king and queen, and a contract was made with Colón.

Colón was very lucky that his bid for a title did not cost him a chance to reach the New World first. It was widely believed that Cipangu lay beyond the Atlantic Ocean; the only question was how far away it was. Except for Díaz's discovery that Africa could in fact be circumnavigated, Portugal would undoubtedly have sent a party to the west.³

³In fact, Portugal already had attempted an expedition beyond the known

Once the decision was made, things moved quickly. Colón went to the port of Palos with a document from the king and queen demanding that the town supply two outfitted caravels. This was to be Palos's punishment for what the king and queen called "certain things done and committed by you to our disservice" (Morrison 1942:110). The two caravels were the *Niña* and the *Pinta*. Colón chartered the *Santa María* with the funds he had borrowed to contribute to the voyage. He apparently did not have much latitude in selecting ships, for the *Santa María* was too large and unwieldy for its purpose and always had trouble keeping up with the caravels.

A Palos family called Pinzón was instrumental in making the voyage possible. Las Casas calls them a family of "rich mariners and important people" in Palos (*Historia*, I:177). Martín Alonso Pinzón was captain of the *Pinta*, and his brother Vicente Yáñez Pinzón commanded the *Niña*. Several other Pinzóns appear on the lists of crews. The cooperation of the Pinzóns undoubtedly made it easier for Colón to recruit acceptable sailors in Palos. With their backing there was a greater sense that the expedition had a reasonable chance of returning, and even of making a profit. As it turned out, two of the three ships and fifty-two of the ninety men did return.

From Palos to the Bahamas

The three ships left Palos on August 3, 1492, and made for the Canary Islands, a voyage of about 1,300 km (800 mi). From August 12 until September 6, they stayed in the Canaries making repairs on the *Pinta*, refitting the *Niña's* sails, and loading stores and water. On September 9 they lost sight of the Canary Islands and continued west.

The explorers spent thirty-three days out of sight of land, turning the hourglass every half-hour, estimating their progress, making rudimentary observations of latitude and even more crude

islands of the Atlantic. Fernão Dulmo and João Estreito were given a commission in 1487 to sail beyond the Azores and find the island of Antilia, long rumored to lie farther west in the ocean. By leaving from the Azores, however, they missed the benefits of both the northeast trade winds and the north equatorial current moving from the Canaries to the Caribbean. Their two caravels sailed around in the high Atlantic for a few weeks and returned empty-handed.

guesses at their longitude. Understandably, a great deal of time was spent looking for signs of land. On September 14 Colón records in his journal that birds which never fly more than twenty-five leagues from land were sighted. On the sixteenth he saw “tufts of grass which were very green, and appeared to have been quite recently torn from the land” (Columbus 1893:24–30). On the seventeenth they found a live crab, and “very fine grass and herbs from rocks.” On the eighteenth they saw a large cloud, “which is a sign of the proximity of land.” On September 20 they saw a booby bird, or gannet, which they said never got more than twenty leagues from land, and the next day they saw a few more. On the twenty-first they saw a whale, “which is a sign that they were near land, because they always keep near the shore.” Sightings of birds, grass, and crabs continued until September 25, when Martín Alonso Pinzón spotted land. Colón recorded the following:

At sunset Martín Alonso went up on the poop of his ship, and with much joy called to the Admiral, claiming the reward, as he had sighted land. When the Admiral heard this positively declared, he says that he gave thanks to the Lord on his knees, while Martín Alonso said the *Gloria in excelsis* with his people. The Admiral’s crew did the same. Those of the *Niña* all went up on the mast and into the rigging, and declared that it was land. (Columbus 1893:30)

At the time, however, they were as far as one can get from land in the central Atlantic, the nearest being about 3,200 km (2,000 mi) in any direction. That they were this far out of the normal European sailing waters was remarkable, given that almost all of the sailing of the time was done within sight of land. Long open-water voyages were not unknown, however. The Norse had found Greenland from Iceland, a trip of 400 km (250 mi) and had coasted south to mainland North America, settling Newfoundland (McGovern 1980). In the late 1430s and early 1440s, in voyages that were prototypes for the Columbian expedition, the Portuguese had discovered the lonely Azores, 1,600 km (1,000 mi) off the mainland. Colón probably sailed twice as far out of the sight of land as the next longest European voyage up to that time. His voyage rivals the amazing voyages of discovery in Polynesia, for which legs of 1,000 km (620 mi) and more away from land were routine (Keegan and Diamond 1987).

The search for signs of land continued, and Colón recorded

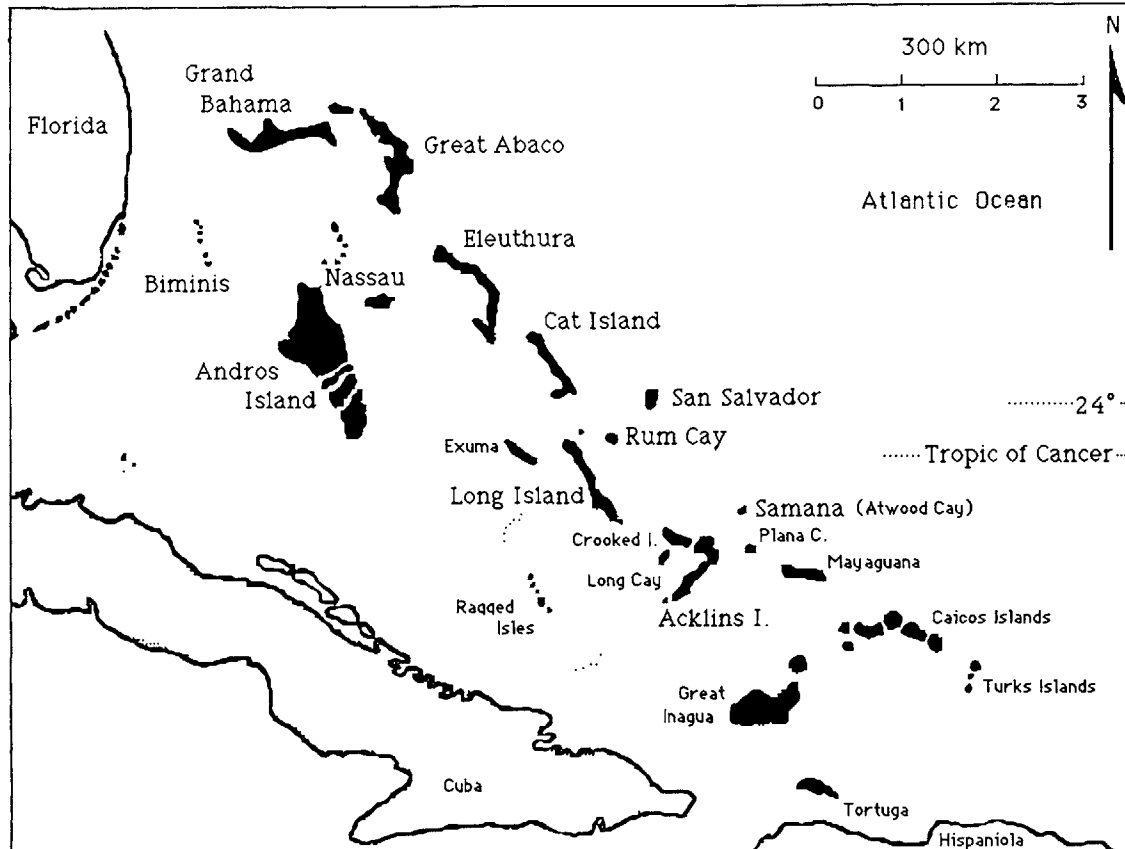
each sighting of birds. By October 10, 1492, they had been out of sight of land for more than a month, and despite the cosmographical arguments he had given the queen's committeees, the pervading feeling that land might never be found even creeps into Colón's journal. The night of the tenth Colón stood on the highest part of the deck and thought he saw a light in the west. The next morning, a sailor on the *Pinta* spotted the first island.

The debate over which island was Colón's first landfall has been extensive and heated. Parker (1985) reviews over 250 years of discussion and competing claims concerning the landfall and rehearses in detail the arguments of twelve scholars for their respective landfalls and routes of passage through the Bahamas (Navarrete 1825; Irving 1828; Montlezun 1828; Becher 1856; Varnhagen 1864; Fox 1880; Murdock 1884; Morison 1942; Verhoog 1947; Link and Link 1958; Didiez Burgos 1974; Molander 1981). These twelve researchers (who represent the tip of the iceberg in terms of the scholarship that has been applied to the problem [see De Vorsey and Parker 1985; Gerace 1987]) suggest a total of eight possible landfalls, ranging from the island of Eleuthera on the north (Molander 1981) to Turks Island on the south (Verhoog 1947, see also Verhoog 1985). These two islands are about 720 km (450 mi) apart, suggesting both the possible range of the landfall and the scope of the disagreement concerning its location. Since Parker's review article other scholars have discussed the question (e.g. Judge 1986; Perez 1987; Gerace 1987).

The Bahamas are a collection of around seven hundred islands, banks, and cays that rise only a few dozen meters above the surface (figure 5). The shallow waters of the Bahamas are tricky to navigate, but it was fortunate that the ships' westerly course brought them into this line of islands, for they could steer north or south from their landfall with the trade winds. Beating from west to east against the wind proved to be difficult, especially for the ungainly *Santa María* (Morison and Obregón 1964).

Of the eight islands mentioned in Parker's (1985) review as possible landfalls (San Salvador [Watlings], Turks, Cat Island, Mayaguana, Samana Cay, East Caicos, Plana Cays, and Eleuthera) that might have been the expedition's landfall, none is very large: Eleuthera, with 518 km² (200 mi²) is the largest. Cat Island is about 389 km² (150 mi²); San Salvador (Watling Island), about 163 km² (63 mi²) in area; and Samana Cay, under 50 km² (20 mi²); island areas are from Keegan 1985:78).

Figure 5. The Bahamas



The question of which island Colón's group encountered first remains open, and its resolution will rely on interpretation of the somewhat cryptic observations in Colón's journal and on the reconstructions of modern navigators. I find it probable that the landfall was in the central Bahamas, between Cat Island and Mayaguana. Whatever island the ships landed upon, however, it was occupied by Indians who called it *Guanahani*. They were similar in ancestry and culture to the people from the other islands.

The elaborate display the Spaniards put on when they landed was not proportional to the size of the island or the number of people there, but rather to the magnitude of the discoverers' dreams of glory. Colón's journal, as reproduced by Las Casas, describes the event.

The Admiral . . . took weapons and went to shore in his armed boat, taking all the people it could hold. He also ordered Martín Alonso Pinzón and Vicente Yáñez. The Admiral took the royal banner, and the two captains carried banners with the green cross which they flew on their ships as their emblem—with an *F* which stood for the king Don Fernando, and an *I*, for the queen Doña Isabel, and above each letter a crown, one on one tip of the cross, one on the other.

The Admiral and his party went on shore and fell to their knees, giving immense thanks to the all-powerful God, many shedding tears that they had been delivered safely, . . . especially Don Cristóbal Colon. . . . There the Admiral, in front of the two captains and Rodrigo de Escobedo, the secretary for the fleet, and Rodrigo Sánchez of Segovia, the royal *veedor* [witness, or inspector], and all of the men who had come to shore with him, . . . and before them all he took possession of the island and gave it the name San Salvador, for the king and for the queen, his lords, making the promises and statements that were required. (*Historia*, I:201)

The landing party planted their banners in the ground and took possession of the island in the name of Ferdinand and Isabela. It is not mentioned that the island and the people on it in no way matched Colón's expectations of what the Spice Islands of the Far East would be like. Marco Polo's tantalizing description of the island of Cipangu, or Japan, was quite different.

Zipangu is an island in the eastern ocean, situated at the distance of about fifteen hundred miles from the main-land, or the coast of Manji. It is of considerable size; its inhabitants have fair complex-

ions, are well made, and are civilized in their manners. Their religion is the worship of idols. They are independent of every foreign power, and governed only by their own kings. They have gold in the greatest abundance, its sources being inexhaustible, but as the king does not allow of its being exported, few merchants visit the country, or is it frequented by much shipping from other parts. To this circumstance we are to attribute the extraordinary richness of the sovereign's palace. . . . The entire roof is covered with a plating of gold. . . . The ceilings of the halls are of the same precious metal; many of the apartments have small tables of pure gold, of considerable thickness; and the windows also have golden ornaments. (Marco Polo 1908:323–24)

Undoubtedly, Colón assumed that he was on some outlying islands from Cipangu or the mainland that the Polos had visited. Later he would try to sail west and find the realm of the Great Khan. In the meantime, he began to describe the people that were on this island. His descriptions (in Las Casas's *Historia*) of the people of *Guanahani*, the indigenous name of the island, mirror his general assessment of all of the people he met on the first voyage.

The Indians, who were present there in great numbers, were astounded watching all of these actions by the Christians, and were taken aback by their beards, white skins, and clothes. . . . Along with those with him, the Admiral saw their simplicity, and with great pleasure and joy the Indians tolerated them; the Christians advanced to look at the Indians, no less amazed than the Indians were to look upon them; so great was their gentleness, simplicity, and confidence among people they had never known, despite their wild looks, and they could as easily have taken fright and fled from the Christians; it was marvelous how they walked among the Christians and were happy and were so natural and without fear or suspicion, as if they were fathers and sons; how they walked about as naked as when their mothers had bore them, with such nonchalance and simplicity. (*Historia*, I:202)

Colón describes the appearance of the inhabitants of *Guanahani* as follows:

All that I saw were young men, none of them more than 30 years old, very well made, of very handsome bodies and very good faces; the hair coarse almost as the hair of a horse's tail and short; the

hair they wear long and never cut. Some of them paint themselves black (and they are the color of the Canary Islanders, neither black nor white), and some paint themselves white, and others red, and others with what they have. Some paint their faces, others the whole body, others the eyes only, others only the nose. [from Morison's (1942:230) translation of Navarrete 1825]

Las Casas's transcription of Colón's journal continues,

They do not have weapons, or even know about them, because when shown a sword they grabbed it by the blade and cut themselves out of ignorance. They do not have any iron; their arrows are a kind without metal, and some of them have points made from the tooth of a fish, and others have other things. They are fairly tall and good looking, well made. They should be good and intelligent servants, and I believe that they could be converted into good Christians, for it does not appear that they have any other religion. (*Historia*, I:204)

The Indians of the Bahamas (or *Lucayos*, as the islands were known by their inhabitants) represented the northern limits of the expansion of Arawakan speakers into the Caribbean. From the archaeological evidence, it appears that people using Meillacan Ostionoid ceramics came north from the northern coast of Hispaniola around A.D. 800 (Keegan 1984, 1985; Keegan and Diamond 1987; Sullivan 1981). All the larger islands and cays in the Bahamas archipelago were colonized between A.D. 800 and the time of Spanish contact (Keegan and Maclachlan 1989).

The limestone plateau islands of the Bahamas are low and relatively dry. Most average 1,000–1,200 mm (40–47 in) of rain a year (Keegan 1985:90; Sears and Sullivan 1978:7), versus 1,700–2,300 mm (67–90 in) on the northeast coast of Hispaniola (Fuente Garcia 1976:165). The early inhabitants relied more on seafoods and less on the intensive cultivation of manioc than did the people of the Greater Antilles (Keegan 1986, 1988; Keegan and DeNiro 1988). Their villages were smaller and fewer than on the big islands, reflecting environmental constraints on production, scarcity of fresh water, and the strategy of colonization that the settlers employed (Keegan 1985).

Keegan's (1985) extensive settlement surveys of the Bahamas (and compilation of previous surveys) indicate that settlements—villages and smaller sites—are fairly densely distributed on the Bahamian islands. The larger sites, or “primate villages,” tend

to be located on the Leeward (western or northwestern) coasts, although exceptions exist (Keegan 1985, figs. 13–23; Sears and Sullivan 1978).

From the Bahamas to Cuba

Colón sailed around the southern end of the island and up the western coast, using the armed boat of the *Santa María* and the two ships' boats from the caravels. According to the account of Las Casas,

There he began to see two or three villages and a large number of people, both men and women, who came down to the beach calling to the Christians and giving thanks to God. Some of them brought fresh water; others, things to eat; others, seeing that the boats were not going to land, dived into the water and came swimming out to the boats, and the sailors understood that the swimmers were asking for signs that they had come from the sky. (*Historia*, I:208)

Still coasting along the leeward side of the island, Colón observed six houses on a small peninsula, and above it “such beautiful green groves, that he took to be gardens, with much water, more gracious and beautiful than Castille in the month of May”(p. 208). Strangely, apart from the initial landing to take possession of the island for the crown, the boats did not land again on the island that was the first landfall. Colón claimed that he did not trust the reefs, but it appeared that he was hesitant to go among the people yelling from shore. The next morning, October 15, he set sail for one of the nearby islands and never saw San Salvador again.

Colón was determined to find the island of Cipangu and needed guides. On the day they took possession of San Salvador, Colón noted in his journal that “I, our Lord being pleased, will take hence, at the time of my departure, six natives for your Highnesses, that they may learn to speak” (Columbus 1893:38). The next day, he was getting some vague directions from the Indians about the location of the mainland, where the Spaniards were given to understand that there was gold in abundance. He understood them to say that “there was land to the S., to the S.W., and N.W., and that the natives from the N.W. often came to attack them, and went on to the S.W. in search of gold and precious stones”

(p. 40). Colón decided to steer to the southwest, where the gold seemed to be. "I tried to get [some of the Lucayan Indians] to go there," Colón notes, "but afterward I saw that they had no inclination" (p. 39). On the fourteenth he tells the king and queen in his narrative that

these people are very simple as regards the use of arms, as your Highnesses will see from the seven that I caused to be taken, to bring home and learn our language and return; unless your Highnesses should order them all to be brought to Castille, or to be kept as captives⁴ on the same island; for with fifty men they can all be subjugated and made to do what is required of them. (p. 41)

Of these seven captive guides, several escaped immediately, jumping overboard when the ships were near other islands. Through the voyage to Cuba and Hispaniola, some of these guides escaped and were replaced by people from where the Spaniards happened to be. One Indian, possibly from among the first group of seven taken from San Salvador, went back to Spain with the expedition (along with five others) and was baptized with the name Diego Colón. He accompanied the Admiral on the second voyage and figured prominently as an interpreter and liaison between the Spanish and the Taíno Indians.

In the early contact period, trade was the most important vehicle for interaction between the Spaniards and Indians. Trading began on the day the expedition arrived at San Salvador and Colón had taken possession of the island for the king and queen (October 11, 1492). After the landing party returned to the boat, many Indians came swimming out to the ships, "bringing us parrots, spun cotton in balls and spears and many other things; and we bartered with them for other things that we gave them, such as little beads of glass and cascabeles" (Las Casas, *Historia*, I:204). This exchange of small goods—symbols and proof of the other group's alien nature—dominated the trade in the Bahamas.

Similar events occurred at the island Colón called Santa María

⁴Colón uses the word "captivos" for captives rather than "esclavos" (slaves), but the idea that the islands could be a source of slaves, as the Portuguese had viewed their lands in West Africa, was present from the beginning. Within ten years Alonso de Hojeda led slaving raids in these islands, transporting the captives to Hispaniola.

de la Concepción (Rum Cay in Morison's reconstruction), but on the larger Long Island, which they reached on October 16, the Indians seemed to carry out these negotiations with more sophistication than they had on the smaller islands to the northeast. Colón observed that the people there were very similar to those on the other islands in language and customs but noted that "they appeared more domestic, with more business sense and more subtle, because they were more inclined to bargain about the prices and payment for the little things that they brought than the others we had seen until this time" (Las Casas, *Historia*, I:212).⁵ This may have been because news of the Spaniards preceded them (as it certainly did) and the Indians were becoming accustomed to dealing with the foreigners. It may also be that the Spaniards, in trending to the south, were getting into areas of the Bahamas where more trade with the Indians of the Greater Antilles took place. From historic accounts from the island of Hispaniola and archaeological evidence in the islands the expedition first reached, we know that there was an active trade between the Greater Antilles and the Bahamas (Hoffman 1987; Keegan 1985; Sullivan 1981).

The Indians that they met first were accustomed to interisland trade. The trade items mentioned most are the skeins of spun cotton, which in the islands of the south were woven into capes and breechcloths. On San Salvador and Rum Cay, where cotton was offered in trade, the people did not wear such clothing.

On October 15, an event occurred which offers some idea of the interisland communication among the islands of the central Bahamas. The following is from Las Casas's transcription of the Admiral's journal:

In the channel between the island of Santa María and the next, which was given the name Fernandina [Rum Cay and Long Island], they come upon an Indian alone in a little canoe. He carried some of the bread of those lands, called *cazabí* [cassava] . . . and a calabash of water and in a small basket some green leaves [contezuelas verdes] and two *blancas* [the smallest denomination of coins], the currency of Castille, from which it was known that he came from

⁵Las Casas's text: "Le parecía más doméstica y de más trato y más sotiles, porque los vía meor regatear sobre los precios y paga de las cosillas que traían que los que hasta entonces había visto."

San Salvador; having passed Santa María, he was heading for Ferdinandina to give them news of the Christians; having gone so far, and being alone in his little canoe, he was tired, so the Admiral brought both him and his boat on board. They gave him bread and honey and wine to drink, and when they were near to land, they gave him presents and sent him on his way with all of his possessions. (*Historia*, I:211)

The Spaniards' interpretation that this man was a messenger rather than a trader was probably accurate. Other accounts of trading missions represent much larger-scale projects, with canoes that carried more than forty people. The man in the canoe seemed to be carrying only two things beyond the basic necessities: the dried leaves were probably either tobacco or *cohoba* (a narcotic snuff), items used in rituals in which Taíno caciques and shamens communicated with spirits while in drug-induced trances; the coins were the man's proof that the strangers for whom he was the forerunner were truly unique in Caribbean experience. Coins are not mentioned as trade items on San Salvador but must have been one of the items the Spaniards left on the island.⁶ The coins were also well suited to act as evidence of the Spaniards' extraordinary nature because Taíno metallurgy could not reproduce them and because they contained writing, other European symbols, and a style of representational art unknown in the Antilles (Tavares 1978).

With news of their coming preceding them, Colón took his ships southwestward through the Bahamas. On October 19 he sailed from Long Island to Crooked Island, which his guides called *Saomete* and Colón called Isabela. Along the way they saw a few small coastal villages, with hammocks hanging in the Lucayan houses, and encountered a species of dog that was indigenous to the New World (the mute or barkless New World dog). Coming around Crooked Island they spent the night of the nineteenth off of Fortune Island, which Colón called Cabo Hermoso. From his guides, Colón understood that there was a king on Fortune Island who had a great deal of gold. Even the Admiral was skeptical this time.

⁶Hoffman (1987) found a coin along with other European artifacts at the Long Bay site on San Salvador, a site which may have been the original landfall.

Tomorrow I intend to go so far inland as to find the village, and see and have some speech with this king, who, according to the signs they make, rules over all the neighbouring islands, goes about clothed, and wears much gold on his person. I do not give much faith to what they say, as well because I do not understand them as because they are so poor in gold that even a little that this king may have would appear much to them. (Columbus 1893:52–53).

The company stayed around Fortune and Crooked islands for a few more days, but the stories of the guides and the people who came to see the Europeans shifted to an island that they said was a day and a half's sail to the west-southwest from Crooked Island. From the reports he gathered, Colón was more sure than ever that this island the Indians called Cuba was in fact Cipangu. "I intended to go to the island of Cuba," Colón records on October 24, "where I heard of the people who were very great, and had gold, spices, merchandise, and large ships. . . . I cannot understand their language, but I believe that it is of the island of Cipango that they recount these wonders. On the spheres I saw, and on the delineations of the map of the world [which Paolo Toscanelli may have sent him], Cipango is in this region" (Columbus 1893:57). On October 25–26 the ships passed the Ragged Islands, a group of low islands that Colón called Las Islas de Arena. The islands must have been particularly unimpressive from the perspective of the ships, since these were the first islands not named for saints or royalty. They did not stop to take possession of the islands. On October 28, in heavy rain, they reached the north coast of the island the Indians called Cuba.

Like the Bahamas, eastern Cuba was one of the last areas colonized by the Arawakan speakers before European contact ended their migration through the Caribbean. Cuba had been occupied as early as 5000 B.C. by people who had a hunting and gathering economy, rather than the agricultural economy of the Arawakan speakers, and who did not make pottery (Veloz Maggiolo and Vega 1982; Koslowski 1978).

The Arawakan-speaking inhabitants of Cuba who met the discoverers apparently mentioned some non-Arawakan people called the *Guanahatabeys* and the *Guanahacabibes*. Formerly, the same peoples were called the *Ciboney* (Keegan and Maclachlan in press; Rouse 1986; Sauer 1966). It has been assumed that these people had been pushed westward or absorbed by the encroaching Taíno and that they still lived on the southwestern Guacayarima penin-

sula of Hispaniola and the western end of Cuba when the Europeans arrived (Rouse 1948; Sauer 1966). The identification of the ethnohistoric groups called *Guanahatabeys*, *Guanahacabibes*, and *Ciboney* with pre-Arawakan populations, and the assumption that they survived on Cuba and southwestern Hispaniola, has been challenged by Keegan and Maclachlan (in press) and Rouse and Moore (1983).

The archaeological sites of the aceramic, nonhorticultural Cubans are almost uniformly small coastal sites with a scatter of debris from their tools and food—fish, shellfish, iguanas, land and sea crabs, larger sea animals like the manatee and turtle, and land animals like the hutia (Rouse 1948:503–5).

The migration of people using Ostionan subseries ceramics reached eastern Cuba around A.D. 700 (Rouse 1986). Their archaeological remains and settlement preferences are very similar to those of the people who colonized Hispaniola, Jamaica, and the Bahamas. They grew manioc as a staple starch and complemented it with the kinds of terrestrial and marine foods that their nonhorticultural predecessors had collected. They located their settlements in places which would combine these components of their economy. The bays and rivers of northeast Cuba were ideal places for settlement, and as the three European ships sailed along the coast, they saw many of these villages.

The Taíno settlement in Cuba was strongly oriented to the east. They had strong ties of trade and social interaction with western Hispaniola, 83 km (52 mi) away across the Windward Passage. Nine of the ten ceremonial plazas or ball courts reported in the archaeological literature (Alegría 1983:16–27) are located near the eastern tip of Cuba, and the density of settlements was greatest in this part of the island.

Interaction with the Taíno on Cuba

Colón's ships reached Cuba on Sunday, October 28, and sailed into a bay which Colón named San Salvador. Following Morison's reconstruction of the first voyage (1942:254–55), their landfall was probably at Bahía Bariay. This bay is about 260 km (160 mi) northwest of the eastern tip of Cuba and was not densely populated in 1492. Colón made a reconnaissance of the bay in the *Santa María's* armed boat and found only two houses. The occupants of the houses had fled, but among the things they left

were nets, bone fishhooks, and fishing spears. The party concluded that this was merely a fishing camp for a larger inland settlement. Having fishing camps to catch and dry fish for shipment to inland settlements was practiced in the Greater Antilles, especially on Hispaniola, but in this bay the houses might just have been an isolated settlement.

On the twenty-ninth they sailed west about 13 km (8 mi) and found two more bays, the Río de la Luna and the Río de Mares. On the latter inlet, now called Puerto Gibara, they found a sizable village. Colón was anxious to find the more civilized parts of the Far East and the next day continued westward along the coast. His guides from the Bahamas continued to indicate that the cities the Admiral was searching for lay to the west, but the weather was not favorable, and the coast did not look any more promising as they headed west. On October 31 the wind shifted to the north and threatened a storm, so the company turned back for the shelter of Río de Mares.

Colón was more anxious than ever to find the Gran Khan and hoped for great things from Cuba. Instead, the Indians of Cuba were frustratingly similar to those of the other islands. The guides' assertions that Cipango was always just around the corner (although it was what Colón and the other captains also believed) had lost all credibility. On November 1 Colón wrote, "It is certain that this is the mainland, and that I am in front of *Zayto* and *Guinsay*" (Columbus 1893:65).

Zayto was the city Paolo Toscanelli had called *Zaitun* after Marco Polo's *Zai-tun*. The discrepancy between the account of *Zai-tun* given by Marco Polo and the reality of Cuba compounded the Admiral's frustration. Marco Polo describes the lands around *Zai-tun* (a port on the Chinese mainland across from the island of Taiwan) as follows:

Upon leaving the city of Kan-Giu and crossing the river to proceed in a south-easterly direction, you travel during five days through a well-inhabited country, passing towns, castles, and substantial dwellings, plentifully supplied with all kinds of provisions. The road lies over hills, across plains, and through woods, in which are found many of those shrubs from whence the camphor is procured. The country abounds also with game. The inhabitants are idolaters. They are subjects of the grand khan, and within the jurisdiction of Kan-giu. At the end of five days' journey, you arrive at the noble and handsome city of *Zai-tun*, which has a port on the sea-coast cele-

brated for the resort of shipping, loaded with merchandise, that is afterwards distributed through every part of the province of Manji. . .

The country is delightful. The people are idolaters, and have all the necessaries of life in plenty: their disposition is peaceable, and they are fond of ease and indulgence. Many persons arrive in this city from the interior parts of India for the purpose of having their persons ornamented by puncturing with needles (in the manner before described), as it is celebrated for the number of artists skilled in that practice. (Marco Polo 1908:317).

Colón had to view this account critically. The veracity of Marco Polo's stories was not unequivocally assumed by educated Europeans, and Colón would have had to allow for some exaggeration.

In contrast to other travelers to the East, Marco Polo's was in fact a highly accurate portrait. The master of hearsay evidence, Sir John Mandeville, traveled to the Far East from 1322 to 1356 and described the islands of the East Indies in his *Travels*.

There are many different kinds of people in these isles. In one, there is a race of great stature, like giants, foul and horrible to look at; they have one eye only, in the middle of their foreheads. They eat raw flesh and raw fish. In another part, there are ugly folk without heads, who have eyes in each shoulder; their mouths are round, like a horseshoe, in the middle of their chest. In yet another part there are headless men whose eyes and mouths are on their backs. And there are in another place folk with flat faces, without noses or eyes; but they have two small holes instead of eyes, and a flat lipless mouth. In another isle there are ugly fellows whose upper lip is so big that when they sleep in the sun they cover all their faces with it. (Mandeville 1983:137)

Colón had apparently read Mandeville and referred to myths like those concerning the islands of the Amazon women. Stories of the isle of the Amazons had been repeated since before Herodotus, and in the journal from the first voyage, Colón reported that this island was in the Caribbean. Along with Toscanelli's interpretations, Polo was a more useful eyewitness in Colón's exploration of the Caribbean. Colón continued to believe that Cuba was part of the mainland for a decade after 1492 and that he could have found the Gran Khan if he had continued westward. But adverse winds and the pressures from his colleagues dictated that he proceed eastward.

The expedition's eleven-day stay in Río de Mares was an interesting one, from what can be told from Colón's journal. They needed the time to recover from their long voyage and their experiences in the Bahamas. The ships needed to be beached (one at a time, the Admiral insisted), scraped, and recaulked with mastic to seal their leaks. They needed to restock the supply of fuel for the cooking fires and try to collect some additional food. One of their passengers from San Salvador went ashore and described the things that these strangers gave away, and a brisk trade soon developed.

Colón still wanted to find the "towns, castles, and substantial dwellings" that Marco Polo described and determined to send two men inland for six days. He selected the two men on the basis of their diplomatic qualifications and language skills. Rodrigo de Xeréz had traveled to Africa on a Portuguese expedition and had been part of a mission inland to visit an African king. The other man was Luis de Torres, "who had lived with the Adelantado of Murcia and had been a Jew⁷ and knew Hebrew and Chaldean and even spoke a little Arabic" (Las Casas, *Historia*, I:227). Las Casas continues:

With these two he sent two Indians, one of the ones they had brought from Guanahaní [San Salvador] and the other from the settlements along the Río de Mares. He sent with them some strings of beads and other things to trade for food if they ran short, and gave them six days in which to return. He gave them samples of spices so that they would know them if they saw them. He gave them instructions to ask for the king of that land, and to speak on behalf of the king and queen of Castille, who had sent the Admiral to present them with their letters and a royal present. (Pp. 227–28)

The four men headed up the river valley carrying royal presents and letters of greeting from the king and queen of Castille to the Gran Khan. On the night of November 5, three days later, they returned with a story of what was very much a state visit from the Indians' perspective. They said that they had marched twelve leagues (about 64 km, or 40 miles) inland and had visited a large village. The two ambassadors' description of their encounter with

⁷He was probably a convert who had avoided the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

the Taíno Indians matches those of later interactions so exactly that there is no doubt of the accuracy of their account.

They came to a village of 50 houses, where there were a thousand inhabitants, for many live in one house. These houses are like very large booths. They said that they were received with great solemnity, according to custom, and all, both men and women, came out to see them. They were lodged in the best houses, and the people touched them, kissing their hands and feet, marvelling and believing that they came from heaven, and so they gave them to understand. . . . When they arrived, the chief people conducted them by the arms to the principal house, gave them two chairs on which to sit, and all the natives sat round them on the ground. The Indians who came with them described the manner of living of the Christians, and said that they were good people. Presently the men went out, and the women came sitting round them in the same way, kissing their hands and feet, and looking to see if they were of flesh and bones like themselves. . . . Finding that they had no information respecting cities, the Spaniards returned; and if they had desired to take those who wished to accompany them, more than 500 men and women would have come, because they thought the Spaniards were returning to heaven. (Columbus 1893:69–70)

They were met by the cacique of the village and taken to the *bohio*, the rectangular house of the chief, that was distinct from the rounded *caneys* of the commoners. They were seated on carved *lignum vitae*, or “ironwood” *dujos*, the ceremonial seats that were the most valued possession of the Taíno elite.⁸ In the traditional Taíno formula of greeting for high-ranking visitors, they were given food as soon as they arrived (Las Casas, *Historia*, I:230). Las Casas is perhaps intentionally vague in describing the women’s part in this ritual. He says:

After a while all of the men left, and all of the women entered, and they seated themselves among the visitors, exactly as the men had

⁸Fernando Colón (1824) describes these seats in more detail: “They were seated upon wooden stools made of one piece, in very strange shapes, almost resembling some living creature with four very short legs. The tail was lifted up, and as broad as the seat, to serve for the convenience of leaning against; and the front was carved into the resemblance of a head, having golden eyes and ears” (Columbus 1824:120).

done, and all of them touched them and felt them to see if they were of meat and bone like them, and they kissed their hands and their feet, and they left nothing out in adoring them; they asked them insistently and with great urgency that they stay there and live with them. (P. 230)⁹

Fernando Colón's biography of his father adds a detail to the other's descriptions of the women's role in this episode. He says that the women "offered them presents of various articles" (Kerr 1824:63). What presents the women gave Colón's two emissaries is unknown, but the general pattern repeats itself in subsequent interactions with elite Taíno women: the men would greet the visitors first and give them food; afterward the women and sometimes the men would give them presents of high-status goods with symbolic value. This pattern will be seen again in the accounts of the Adelantado Bartolomé Colón's trip to the province of Xaraguá on Hispaniola (chapter 4).

The two Spaniards brought out the dried specimens of Southeast Asian spice plants (pepper and cinnamon) and asked their hosts where they could find such plants. The answer was very much like what they were told when they asked where the gold was: "No, there is none around here, but they have a lot of it to the southeast" (Las Casas *Historia*, I:230). They may have been referring to the southeastern tip of Cuba, or perhaps to the island of Hispaniola. The two men also questioned the villagers as well as they could about large inland cities, but it was obvious to them that they were in the largest village around. The next-largest village they had passed on their hike inland had had only five houses. So the explorers returned to the ships. The cacique of the village walked back with them to the Río de Mares, together with his son and another person.

By acting on the information and directions given him by all the Indians he had met, Colón was closing in on what was, in the Taíno frame of reference, the source of all good things—

⁹Las Casas's text: "Desde a un rato, salieronse todos los hombres, y entraron todas las mujeres, las cuales se asentaron alrededor dellos, como habían hecho los hombres, y todas las que podían los tentaban y palpaban si eran de carne y de hueso como ellos, y besábanles las manos y los pies, y no les faltaba sino adorarlos; rogábanles con gran instancia e importunaciones que se quedasen allí a vivir con ellos."

Hispaniola. "Today I got the ship afloat, and prepared to depart on Thursday, in the name of God, and to steer S.E. in search of gold and spices, and to discover land" (Columbus 1893:72).

He had news of another island that was due east of where they were on Cuba, one the Indians from the Bahamas called *Babeque*. This was Great Inagua Island, a stepping-stone between the Bahamas and Cuba that Colón had missed. Given the same reports of plentiful gold and spices by his guides, there was little reason to steer for Babeque instead of *Bohío* (the local name for Hispaniola). The difficulties of sailing directly into the easterly trade winds made it hard enough to get away from the northeast coast of Cuba. The course that Colón steered between November 12 and December 12 reveals both his indecision about which way they should head and his difficulties in pushing eastward. Martín Alonso Pinzón had neither problem: the agile *Pinta* could sail more easily into the wind, and Pinzón's guides argued persuasively that Babeque was where the gold was. On November 22 the *Pinta* took advantage of a southern breeze and headed for Grand Inagua, leaving the *Santa María* and the *Niña* behind.

Colón continued to sail in a southeasterly direction along the coast of Cuba for the next two weeks. They were held up by the weather for a few days in the large bay at Baracoa. On the eastern end of Cuba Colón comments several times on the number and size of the native canoes. On November 30 he records, "Near one river they saw a canoe dug out of a single tree, 95 *palmas* long, and capable of carrying 150 people" (Columbus 1893:93). A few days later,

they came to a cove in which were five very large canoes, so well constructed that it was a pleasure to look at them. They were under spreading trees, and a path led from them to a very well-built boat-house, so thatched that neither sun nor rain could do any harm. Within it there was another canoe made out of a single tree like the others, like a galley with 17 benches. It was a pleasant sight to look upon such goodly work. (P. 94).

These large seagoing canoes were the vessels used for interisland visits and trade throughout the Caribbean. The largest and most ornate were as much statements of a cacique's power and prestige as they were a form of transportation. Smaller canoes carried out trade between the islands equally well and with fewer people (Nicholson 1976).

The Discovery of Hispaniola

Finally, on December 5, Colón caught a favorable wind and left Punta Maisí on the eastern tip of Cuba and sailed out into the Windward Passage. After sailing some distance from the shores of Cuba, the mountains of Haiti came into view in the southeast, and Colón decided to head for them. This was a most disturbing turn of events for the islanders from the Bahamas. They appeared to be terrified of the people of Hispaniola and told the familiar Caribbean stories about the cannibalistic nature of those people. It is not clear just what this means; they had had a similar reaction to landing on the northeast coast of Cuba and insistently promoted Babeque as the next port of call. They may have been looking for a way to get closer to their own islands before trying to escape from the foreigners. It is possible, however, despite the trade that apparently went on between the two areas (Keegan 1985; Sullivan 1981), that the coast of Hispaniola was a dangerous place for people coming down from the frontier of the Arawakan expansion.

The people on Hispaniola's coasts greeted the Spaniards with a great deal more reticence and suspicion than any of the other islanders had. When they landed at Puerto St. Nicolas, they saw signs of a large population, but nobody came down to greet them. Colón noted that "there must be many inhabitants, judging from the number of large canoes, like galleys, with 15 benches" (Columbus 1893:101). For several days they saw signal fires burning day and night. The guides from the Bahamas did not even want to come on deck, much less go walking off into the forest to explain themselves to these dangerous cannibals. Colón decided that waiting around to make contact with the people of Puerto St. Nicolas would take too long, so he headed eastward along Hispaniola's north coast.

After being on the coasts of Hispaniola for five days, they still had not had any contact with the islanders. Colón had decided that his guides' words for cannibals, *canibas* and *caribas*, meant *Khan-ibas*—soldiers of the Gran Khan. On December 10 he sent some of his men inland to make contact, but they returned empty-handed. On the twelfth some of the crew caught a woman who was in the forest near the shore with a group of people and brought her to the ship. Colón employed the method he had used with success before, giving her cascabeles and glass beads, then

freeing her to spread the news of the foreigners' generosity. When no one arrived the next day, Colón sent an armed party inland to find the village. They walked up the valley of Les Trois Rivières and found a village "of a thousand houses, with over three thousand inhabitants" (Columbus 1893:108).¹⁰

The villagers fled when the party approached, but the guides chased them and explained that "the Christians were not from Caniba, but were from the sky, and they give lots of beautiful things to anyone they meet" (Las Casas, *Historia*, I:259). Two thousand villagers gathered around them and "put their hands on the Christians' heads, which was a sign of friendship and great reverence, and when they had done this they were all trembling until the Christians assured them" (p. 259). Some of the people went into the houses and brought out cassava bread and fish and many other things to eat. After the party had eaten, gifts were exchanged. The Indians had heard from the guides that Colón wanted parrots. Within the context of Taíno culture, this confirmed Colón's high status and importance. The beautiful multi-colored parrots were very highly valued and were seen to be suitable gifts for one cacique to give to another. The Taíno word for parrots—*guacamayas*—contains the prefix "gua," which also appears in the words for gold (*guanín*, sometimes also called *caona*), in the names of caciques (Guarionex and Guacanagarí), and in the names of some plants.

This was the beginning of a series of encounters with the Taíno caciques of northern Hispaniola. Colón's ship had been on the coast of Hispaniola for ten days, with signal fires continually announcing his presence, yet he had been carefully avoided by the inhabitants of the island. After his emissaries made their trip up the valley of Les Trois Rivières and established communication with the cacique there, the situation changed. Although his role was still indistinct at this point, the Admiral appears to have taken

¹⁰For the villages that they had seen until this point, the explorers had always guessed that about twenty people lived in each house. Based on archaeological evidence from Hispaniola, an estimate of 1,000 houses is probably excessive, for 150 *caney*s would have housed 3,000 people. Las Casas's transcription of the *Journal* refers to "la población de 1.000 casas y de más de 3.000 hombres"—a town of 1,000 houses and more than 3,000 *men* (cf. Navarrete's "inhabitants"). Even allowing for some exaggeration, this was certainly the largest village they had seen up to that time.

on an ambiguous position in the Taíno cultural order, having qualities of both a Taíno cacique and a god. Whichever he was, however, he must have seemed a powerful and dangerous presence to the local caciques, a presence which could no longer be ignored but which possibly could be turned into an advantage in the competition for social and political status among caciques.

The first of the visits from local leaders came on Sunday, December 16. In attempting to sail eastward along the north coast of Hispaniola, Colón had spent several days tacking back and forth in the 8-km (5-mi) strait between Hispaniola and the island they called Tortuga (Ile de la Tortue). On one of their several stops at the mouth of Les Trois Rivières (present day Port-de-Paix), they were met at the beach by five hundred people and, standing behind them, according to the journal, was their king (Las Casas, *Historia*, I:262; Columbus 1893:112). Many of the people came out to the boats and traded small pieces of gold with the sailors. The king stayed on the shore and watched. From the ship, Colón noted that he was treated with “reverence and respect.” Following Las Casas’s account,

The Admiral sent him a present, which they say he received with grave dignity, and that he was just a boy of twenty-one years, with an old tutor [ayo, which means “tutor” or “teacher”] and other councilors who asked questions and answered for him, for he spoke very little. One of the Indians that the Admiral had brought talked with him, saying that the Christians came from the sky and that they were going about looking for gold (although it seemed highly incongruous that anyone would come down from heaven to go about looking for gold), and that they wanted to go to the island of Baneque. The king responded that that was good and that Baneque had a lot of gold. (*Historia*, I:262)

That afternoon, the young cacique and his entourage came out to the *Santa María*. Through his struggling interpreters Colón gave a simplified version of his greetings to the Gran Khan. He tried to explain that he had come to these islands to take possession of them for the most powerful sovereigns in the world. The cacique and his party could not be convinced (because the interpreters could not believe it either) that the foreigners had not come from the sky, and so they assumed the king and queen of Castille were merely other beings who lived there.

Colón ordered that Castillian food be brought for the king.

He took one bite and passed the rest to the people who had come with him. The journal does not record what he was served, but it was probably three-month-old sea bread, or hardtack, and salted meat from Palos, along with Spanish wine. It is difficult to tell whether his indifference to the food was because it was repulsive to him or because he felt that the people accompanying him should have been served as well. Another possibility is that he was disturbed by the way Colón had inadvertently transposed the ritual order of Taíno greeting, in which food is exchanged before gifts. This complex interaction of Castillian and Taíno rituals of feasting and gift giving was very important in structuring the interactions of the two parties during the early contact period.

On the next day some of the explorers went to the nearby village to trade for gold. There they met a person whom the Admiral considered to be the “governor” of the province. Several caciques are mentioned over the course of a few days during this period, and the terminology used to identify them is indistinct. Colón had not used the word “cacique” in the journal until December 16 but had used other words such as “señor” (lord) to reflect the authority of the Taíno leaders. The Spaniards’ presence apparently attracted people to the local villages from a distance, so a cacique’s presence in a village does not necessarily mean that he lived there. It is not clear whether the “gobernador” the trading party met was the young cacique Colón had met the day before. This cacique had a large leaf-shaped piece of hammered gold and broke off piece after piece, trading them individually to the competing party of Spaniards.

That afternoon, back at the beach near the ships, a fascinating example of the competition for an effective relationship with the Europeans took place.

In the afternoon, a canoe arrived from Tortuga with forty men, and when it arrived at the beach, all of the people of the village, in a sign of peace, sat down on the ground, and most of the people on the canoe began to come in to the land. The aforementioned king [presumably the “gobernador” that had traded the leaf of gold in pieces] arose by himself and, with threatening words, made them get back in, splashing water at them with his hands and throwing stones into the water; that was the extent of his anger. After the advancing group had gone back to their canoe with much obedience and humility, he put a stone in the hand of the Admiral’s Alguacil [one of the officers, Diego de Arana] who was next to him, but the

Alguacil did not want to throw it. The king showed there that he favored the Admiral and the Christians; the ones in the canoe returned to Tortuga without any argument. (Las Casas, *Historia*, I:264–65)

The caciques seemed to recognize the value of these strangers as sources of exotic goods and as allies, whether supernatural or human. Yet their reaction to the Spaniards' presence always seemed equivocal. Immediately following the rock-throwing episode at the beach, the cacique said to the Admiral (or so Colón understood) that there was more gold on the island of Tortuga than there was on Hispaniola. Having seen a good deal of the well-populated and cultivated island of Tortuga, Colón did not accept this, believing that Tortuga did not have enough rivers for there to be gold. In his willingness to have Colón leave, however, the cacique on the beach was like the twenty-one-year-old cacique, who, after being greeted by the Admiral, had also been anxious to recommend that the Spaniards go to Babeque to find gold.

December 18 was the Feast of the Annunciation, which the explorers celebrated by dressing the ships with all of their banners and flags. Coincidentally, and to good effect, it was this day that the young cacique returned with two hundred of his followers to visit the Admiral. He arrived seated on a litter carried by four men and was ferried out to the *Santa María* along with a small company of his people. Colón and some of the officers were celebrating the afternoon feast on the deck, shadowed by the poop deck. Las Casas quoted Colón's handwritten journal verbatim.

When the young cacique came aboard the ship he found that we had already begun to eat at the table beneath the castle of the poop deck, and he quickly walked over and sat right next to me; he wouldn't let me come to greet him, nor even get up from the table, but wanted me to continue eating. And when he came beneath the castle, he gave a hand signal that everyone else should stay back, which they all obeyed with the greatest respect in the world, and all of them sat down out on the deck (except for two men of mature age which I guess are his advisors and tutors, who sat at this feet). I thought that he wanted to eat some of our food, and ordered some things be brought. When the food was put before him, he took from each thing a small bite as though he was the food taster, then sent the rest to his people, and all of them ate some. He did the same thing with his drink, only raising it to his mouth then giving it to

the others, all with a marvelous dignity and very few words. (*Historia*, I:265–66)

Colón was more astute than he knew when he remarked that the king acted as a food taster (“se toma para hacer la salva”). The young cacique was acting out a role in this context that is remarkably similar to the king’s role in a wide range of “chiefdom” or middle-range hierarchical societies known ethnographically and historically. The cacique intercedes between the Taíno world and the chaotic non-Taíno world, as much in the interactions with these dangerous and unpredictable foreigners as with the dangerous and unpredictable Caribbean hurricanes. His food tasting is such an intercession.

The way he received the food, tasted it, and then distributed it on to his subjects also recalls the classic formulations of the redistributive structure of chiefdom societies (Carneiro 1970, 1983; Earle 1977, 1987; Service 1971). On the *Santa María*, the young cacique acts just as he would in a feast for his personal *zemi*, or spirit helper, one of the most important Taíno ceremonies. In that feast, after purifying themselves and singing the songs that commemorate the *zemi*’s great deeds of the past, all the people bring in baskets and baskets of food and lay them at the feet of the cacique. He takes a bite, then gives it all back, and the feast begins. In this act, he expresses his ownership of the food and of the land and labor with which it was produced.

Colón, through the luck of sitting down to eat when he did, kept the Taíno ritual order of chiefly greeting intact—eat first, then exchange gifts.

After eating, one of the young cacique’s attendants brought him a belt¹¹ that was somewhat like the Castilian ones but of a different workmanship, and he gave it to me, along with two very delicate pieces of worked gold. From these pieces I gathered that they did not have much of it, but that they were not far from where there is a lot. I saw that he was pleased by a drapery [arambel] that was hanging above my bed, and I gave it to him along with some very nice pieces of amber I was wearing around my neck, some red shoes,

¹¹This belt is perhaps one that is now at the Ethnographic Museum of Vienna. It was probably a gift from Carlos V to one of his German cousins.

and a vial of water flavored with orange blossoms. He was so satisfied by all of this that it was marvelous. It caused him and his tutor and his advisers great pain that they could not understand me, nor I them; Nevertheless, they made it clear to me that if there was anything there that I wanted, the island was at my command. (Las Casas, *Historia*, I:265-66)

Like parrots and parrot feathers, the belt the young cacique gave the admiral had special significance in Taíno culture. The Taíno made quite realistic pottery vessels which often represented individuals sitting on the stools, or *dujos*, associated with high sociopolitical status and wearing elaborately worked belts. The belts that still exist are laboriously constructed of spun cotton interwoven with objects like small shells (often thousands), pieces of gold, and dog's teeth. In some cases a face presumed to be a principal Taíno god is woven into the front on the belt (Alegría 1980:8-12).

Among the Taíno, especially on Puerto Rico, belts took a second form. These were the intricately carved stone belts that were associated (in both the Caribbean and Mesoamerica) with the ball game. These belts were carved using a pecking technique from a single igneous rock and were enhanced with details to make them look like their organic models. These heavy stone rings were worn around the waist by some of the players on the ceremonial occasions when the ball game was played.

Some time passed after the young cacique had eaten and gifts had been exchanged before the party was ready to leave. Colón sent them ashore in the ships' boats and saluted them by firing the lombards. Once on shore the cacique climbed into his litter and left.

Over the next few days, the competition among local caciques for the explorers' attention was intense. On Friday, December 21, six of the Spaniards were sent to a large village near the bay where they were anchored. They were feted with "all the honor [the villagers] could devise." While they were away on this expedition, more canoes came to the *Santa María*, asking that the Admiral come and meet with their cacique, who was standing on the shore. While engaged with this large group, more emissaries from a third cacique were waiting in canoes with an invitation for Colón to come to another place in a bay, where their cacique was waiting. Colón answered this summons as well, going in the *Santa María's*

armed boat and never leaving the beach, despite their pleading for him to come and receive hospitality at their village.

While Colón was away from the *Santa María*, another cacique and his entourage had arrived by seagoing canoes from the west. Disappointed by the Admiral's absence and the stampede of other caciques trying to make contact with the Europeans, he had turned for home. Colón was disappointed that he had left, however, and sent a small party in the ship's boat to catch him. All along the northwest coast of Hispaniola they had been hearing stories of the fabulous gold-rich islands to the northwest, of which Babeque was the most often mentioned. Colón thought that he had missed his chance to see the cacique of that island and to find out whether there really was gold in abundance there. The party who followed the canoes found that the cacique was not from the western island but that his village was inland from the western part of the bay.

The next days were similarly frenzied, as the people of the entire northeast coast of the island tried to meet with the Europeans, have them come to their villages, and exchange food and presents. Colón continued to send out parties to visit the nearby villages, while he stayed on or near the ships. On the twenty-second he counted 120 canoes pressed in around the *Santa María* and *Niña*. He estimated that a thousand people had been on the canoes, and that another five hundred had swum to the ships. On the twenty-third the journal records visits from "five caciques, or the sons of caciques, with all of their houses, women and children, to see the Christians" (Las Casas, *Historia*, I:274). "The Admiral knew for certain," Las Casas continued, "that if they held the Christmas celebration in this port, all of the people in the whole island would come."

The Spaniards' interest in cassava bread, skeins of cotton, arrows, and parrots had quickly waned; all they wanted to trade for was gold. Even the relentless trading of trinkets for grains of gold had become exhausting. The canoes were at the side of the ship twenty-four hours a day. Colón was determined to push eastward and find the mine from which the gold came.

On Sunday, December 23, one of the exploring parties was taken to a village they described as "the largest of the villages they had seen, with the best-ordered streets and houses; and gathered around the plaza, which was very well swept, was the whole population of the town—more than two thousand men and infinite women and children; they were all staring at the Christians

rejoicing with the greatest admiration” (p. 274). This village was called *Guarico* and was the seat of *Guacanagarí*, the most important cacique of the northeast part of the island. Colón wanted to visit this village, which was some distance to the southeast, but decided to leave the safety (and onslaught of visitors) of the bay of Santo Tomás (modern Bahía de Acúl) and make the inland march to Guacanagarí’s village from one of the ports that lie to the east. He also wanted to follow a number of leads he had received about a source of gold called *Cibao* (which Colón believed to be a corruption of the word “Cipangu”).

The Loss of the *Santa María* and the Return to Spain

It was Christmas Eve, and after four difficult days of interaction with the local people, the *Santa María* and *Niña* were at sea again. They were tacking to the east against a light breeze with quartered sails and barely making headway. Their route had been scouted out by one of the ship’s boats, and the *Niña* was sailing out ahead of the *Santa María*. About 11 P.M. the watch changed, and as he usually did, Colón left the helm to the master of the ship, Juan de la Cosa, and went to his cabin. Along with most of the crew, he had not slept at all the night before. The excitement of having people coming onto the ship from all directions to see the foreigners had kept them all awake. La Cosa, in turn, gave the tiller to a young ship’s boy to hold and fell asleep as well. About midnight the *Santa María* drifted onto a sandbank so gently that no one was even awakened by the contact.

The young pilot might just as well have slammed the ship onto a reef, for the *Santa María* was doomed. Colón had some men launch the ship’s boat and haul the anchor out some distance astern so that they could try to winch the ship off the sandbar, but instead they rowed off in pursuit of the *Niña*, about 2 km (1.2 mi) away. The master of the *Niña* would not let them board and sent the boat from his own ship back, but by then it was too late. The current had turned the *Santa María* across the low swell, and the makeshift caulking they had applied in Cuba could not hold out the sea; the ship rocked sideways, then split open.

Colón sent his Alguazil and another of the Spanish nobility in one of the boats to ask the help of the cacique Guacanagarí, whose village was very near where the wreck occurred. The *Niña*, now

the only hope of getting back to Spain, could not get close to the wreck without risking the *Santa María's* fate. Martín Alonso Pinzón and the other caravel *Pinta* had not been seen for more than a month. Colón moved to the *Niña* and stood a safe distance offshore for the rest of the night.

Guacanagarí's people came very quickly with a fleet of large canoes and ferried the cargo of the *Santa María* to shore. The Alguazil reported that Guacanagarí wept on hearing the news and periodically through the night sent his relations and lieutenants weeping to the Admiral to console him. The rescue was more effective than anything Colón had hoped for, as the contents of the *Santa María* were quickly shuttled to shore and piled on the beach. The crew's perception was that their already tenuous fate would be sealed if their stores of preserved food were lost, but everything was carried to the village "without a needle missing" (Las Casas, *Historia*, I:278–79). Guacanagarí cleared out two very large houses in his village for the Spaniards' use.

Colón was reluctant to leave the *Niña*, perhaps out of fear of being deserted, and stayed on board all the next day. The cortege of people anxious to trade soon caught up with the *Niña* and began asking for "chuque chuque cascabeles," the brass bells that the Indians desired the most. On the twenty-sixth Guacanagarí and some of his people came out to the caravel to console the foreigners and offer the most generous hospitality they could. Colón agreed to go to the village and was royally treated. The customary feast was held as soon as they reached the village. Colón gave Guacanagarí a blouse, which among the Spanish was a symbol of high birth and wealth, and gave him a pair of gloves. In return, Colón was given a carved mask, with gold ornaments as eyes and ornamentation, and several other pieces of gold jewelry which symbolized high status, authority, and spiritual power among the Taíno. Over the next few days a genuine and remarkable rapport developed between the two men that would last for several years.

After expressing their recognition of the authority and power of the other, Colón began to try to demonstrate his own superiority. He asked for a Turkish bow that was in his equipment and promptly shot an arrow at one of his men (who had been warned). Guacanagarí's reaction to this curious display apparently satisfied the Admiral. For good measure, however, he had the men fire a *bombarda* and an *espingarda*, two weapons that despite their

inaccuracy and peril to the person holding them, made a tremendous noise, and Guacanagarí and all of his people fell flat on the ground.

A great believer in predestination, Colón by now accepted that his God had caused the people of Palos to provide him with such an inadequate ship, caused the crew to fall asleep, guided the *Santa María* onto the bank, and brought about all of the events of the last few days so that a settlement would be established at the place he now named Navidad. This situation seemed better each day. Volunteers were anxious to be allowed to stay behind and accumulate a fortune in gold, Guacanagarí appeared to want them to stay, and on December 27, word reached them that the long-lost *Pinta* was anchored in a bay on the north coast.

Thirty-eight men were to stay at Navidad. While consistently recording in his journal that it would not be needed, Colón ordered that a small fort be built from the decks and hull of the *Santa María*, with a large cellar inside. Colón and the *Niña* stayed in the bay before Guacanagarí's village for almost two weeks, building the fortaleza, resupplying the caravel, and deciding what of both ships' cargo would go back to Spain. Colón and his officers met several times with Guacanagarí. One such meeting was remarkable for its image of the political geography of Guacanagarí's part of the island and for the way the two leaders communicated with one another through giving gifts.

On Sunday, December 30, the Admiral went on shore to eat, arriving at the same time as five kings who were subjects of this great lord Guacanagarí. All had crowns of gold on their heads, representing their great authority. . . . When the Admiral landed, the king came to receive him and took him to the house [that he had given to the Spaniards], where there was a low platform and stools, and he seated the Admiral on one of them with great courtesy and veneration, and then he took the crown off of his head and put it on the Admiral's head. The Admiral took off a necklace of very nice beads [alaqueques] of many pretty colors that looked very nice and put it on Guacanagarí, and he also took off his cape of fine wool that he had worn that day and put it around his shoulders and sent for some colored boots and put them on his feet. He also gave him a large silver ring, because the Admiral knew that the king had seen a sailor with a big ring of silver and would have done much for it; it is true that they think a great deal of things made of white metal, whether it is silver or tin. (Las Casas, *Historia*, I:287-88)

The “coronation” of the Admiral meant a lot more within the European set of cultural categories than it did among the Taíno. Capes of parrot feathers, stools of black wood, finely woven belts, and masks seem to have carried greater symbolic importance, especially with references to political and spiritual power. But to Colón the crown meant a further transference of Guacanagarí’s fealty to Colón, and through him, to the sovereigns of Castille. Conversely, receiving the Admiral’s cape probably meant a great deal more to Guacanagarí and the caciques with him than Colón knew.

In part because of Colón’s vulnerability after the sinking of the *Santa María* and in spite of (or perhaps because of) their almost complete inability to communicate verbally, Guacanagarí and Colón’s relationship emerged as one of near-parity and mutual respect and acceptance. In the rest of the brief contact period on Hispaniola, this kind of alliance was almost unknown.

On January 4 Colón and the people who were going with him on the *Niña* finally left Guacanagarí and the thirty-eight men remaining at the little fortress of Navidad. Having heard that Martín Alonso Pinzón was still alive and to the east of him, Colón was anxious to make a course for Spain. He may have been afraid that the Pinzón family would try to take credit for the major part of the discoveries of the first voyage and lay claim to the Colón family’s privileges (which, in fact, they did [Floyd 1973]). Colón left almost all the trade goods with Diego de Arana, Pero Gutiérrez, and Rodrigo de Escobedo, the men in charge of Navidad. He hoped that by the time of this return voyage they would have turned it into a fortune in gold.

The *Niña* could sail into the wind more effectively than the *Santa María* ever could, and they made good progress over the next few days. They met up with the *Pinta* on January 6 near Montecristi. The rendezvous was a hostile one for both parties. Colón charged Pinzón with desertion, saying that through his greed and bad judgment he had threatened everyone’s survival by leaving the *Santa María* and *Niña*. Colón pointed out (very likely repeatedly) that he was the Admiral of the Ocean Sea, he was in charge of the expedition, and Pinzón was under his orders. All of this was true, but it was highly impolitic to say so quite so directly. Most of the crew of both ships were from Palos and were probably overjoyed to find their friends and relatives on the *Pinta* still alive. Vicente Yáñez Pinzón was the master of the *Niña* and, along

with most of both crews, was not pleased to see his brother abused by this self-important and intensely hierarchical Genoese.

The greatest disappointment, resulting in part from the Pinzón-Colón feud, is that there is no detailed historical account of the month the *Pinta* spent apart from the rest of the expedition. In his journal, which was his report to the king and queen, Colón is absorbed with condemning Pinzón's actions and refuting his excuses. He mentions only in passing that the *Pinta* had visited Babeque and had found no gold, had anchored in the same cove in front of Navidad, and had received information about the other large islands of *Yamaye* (Jamaica) and *Boriquén*, (Puerto Rico). Pinzón also penetrated some distance into the interior of Hispaniola and met with some of the caciques that would figure so prominently in the events of the next few years. It was in Colón's interest, however, to demonstrate that Pinzón had not discovered anything new and had no legal claim on the potential profits. In subsequent years, the Pinzón family sued the Colón family (unsuccessfully) for part of their spoils in the exploitation of Hispaniola, but the minute details of Martín Alonso Pinzón's interactions with the Indians he had met were lost forever.

This chill between Pinzón and Colón affected the rest of the voyage. They made as much speed as they could eastward along the north coast of Hispaniola and had only one major incident with the inhabitants of the island. On the Samaná peninsula, the northeasternmost tip of land on Hispaniola, they met a group of people who looked and spoke differently from those they had met in the west. When they stopped to take on water and food, the landing party met a group of men carrying large bows and arrows. They managed to talk with them and trade for some of the bows and arrows. One of the Indians agreed to come and meet the Admiral. Las Casas reproduces Colón's description.

He had a very strange looking face, totally darkened with charcoal (but it was not really charcoal, but instead a kind of ink made from a plant), although in all of these parts they paint themselves in diverse colors; these ones wear their hair very long, gathered up and bundled into a hairnet made of parrot feathers, and he was completely naked. The Admiral suspected that he was a Carib of those who ate people, but he was not, and they never found any who did that on this island. . . .

They asked where the Caribs were, and he showed them that they

were to the east; they asked him about gold, and he also pointed east to the island of San Juan [Puerto Rico], which the Admiral had seen the day before they rounded the entrance to this bay. (*Historia*, I:303).

When asking him about gold, Colón must have realized that although the Indian understood much of what they said, the people of Samaná had different words for many things. Colón gave him some of the remaining trade goods and sent him back to shore.

A larger group of Indians armed with bows and clubs were on shore waiting, and the envoy showed them the trade goods and told them not to be alarmed by the foreigners. Some of the men in the landing party began to trade for more of the bows, but after the Indians had given up two they became very nervous. A fight broke out, and the Spaniards retaliated with swords and crossbows. The battle apparently lasted only a few seconds, as both groups were in full retreat. The next day a reconciliation was made when a cacique came out to the caravel to exchange food and presents.

On January 16, just under one hundred days since they landed at San Salvador, the two caravels (both leaking alarmingly) caught a favorable wind and steered for Spain.