

Robert Petrone: Christopher Columbus is the greatest hero of the 15th & 16th centuries (pt. IV): “The Discovery”

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Christopher Columbus was none of the epithets with which his detractors repeatedly characterize him — and all of the historical resources show this unequivocally. Part four in a series of seven.

By Robert Petrone

“It was an Italian who began the story of immigration to America,” wrote the Library of Congress of Christopher Columbus. Since that time, so many have immigrated to this, the freest country ever created on earth. And with the most opportunity than any country, the United States now boasts the largest immigrant population in the world. Indeed, by the 1980s, more Africans had come to the U.S. voluntarily as immigrants than had ever come as slaves, proving our nation still to be the land of opportunity and of the free, and the endpoint for all modern-day pilgrims of freedom and opportunity.

None of this would have been possible had the American continents not been revealed to the rest of the world by Christopher Columbus. *This* is what we mean when we use the shorthand phrase “Columbus discovered America.” No one ever said or implied that “discovered America” meant “was the first to set foot on the American continents,” not our teachers, not our forebears’ teachers and not the original historians who contemporaneously recorded the settlement of the West Indies.

All accounts of Christopher Columbus’s October 12, 1492, landfall in the West Indies, including his own, have always acknowledged that the Americas were occupied when he arrived. They had been colonized at least thousands of years prior by Asiatic tribes who had crossed what is now the Bering Strait via ice bridges that had formed during the Ice Age. We refer to these people as “Native Americans,” but the semantic gamesmanship Columbus detractors engage

in over the word “discover” is equally applicable to the term “Native Americans.” The Tainos, Caribs, Canibs, and all the tribes of the Americas, North, Central and South, were not natives, but *perhaps* the first nations of the Americas and the first colonizers of the American continents. Technically, no human beings were native to the Americas, nor indeed to any continent aside, perhaps, from Africa, which modern science considers to be the point of origin of *homo sapiens*. Every other continent and the rest of Africa were colonized first by early hominid nomads, then tribes, then empires, then nations. And each group fought with other contemporaneous groups over land. The tribal, Asiatic colonists of the American continents were no exception.

But if one insists on replacing the shorthand statement “Columbus discovered America” with the cumbersome and unnecessary statement “Columbus made landfall in America, long after Asiatic tribes colonized the landmasses and, possibly even after the landfalls of Norsemen, pre-Roman Iberians, Carthaginians and Romans, and brought the existence of the lands and its inhabitants to light to the rest of the world, initiating cultural, economic and political relations between the Old World and the New, and commencing a perpetual exchange of science, technology, law, commerce, art, music, literature and people,” then one is simply being overly technical. Everyone knows we mean *that* when we say, “Columbus discovered America.”

Still, the word “discover” is, technically, etymologically correct. The original fifteenth-century sources used the Spanish verb “descubrir,” meaning to “take off” or “undo” (des-) “the covering of” (*cubrir*, to cover) something, hence the English translation to dis-cover. That is precisely what Columbus did: uncovered the continents of the Americas for the rest of the world by closing that obfuscating distance, revealing the existence of the Americas and its inhabitants to Europe. Immediately, word spread to Africa, Asia and elsewhere.

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No doubt, had Columbus not made landfall in 1492, someone else would have not long after: perhaps the Portuguese, who were making extraordinary nautical progress near the Cape of Africa at that time, where they were kidnapping Africans for slave-trade; or the English, who boasted an impressive, militarized navy under the House of Tudor; or the Moorish Jihadists, who were fleeing Spain after eight hundred years of having occupied Europe and having murdered and enslaved Europeans. Had any of those groups made landfall without Christopher Columbus at the helm, there would have been no check on or resistance to the atrocities these groups would have committed.

The Spanish were just as warlike as the Portuguese, English and Moors, but the Portuguese and English had declined to fund Columbus's expedition, as explained in my previous *Broad + Liberty* article. Columbus never bothered to ask the Moorish Jihadists, who likely would have cut off his head or enslaved him simply for being a Christian. Only the Spanish agreed to let him guide this expedition, and, as this article and my subsequent articles will demonstrate, Columbus was, at all times, a pacifying force in this endeavor.

That endeavor commenced on Friday, August 3, 1492, a half-hour before sunrise. Now bearing the title of respect of *Don* Christopher and the seafaring rank "High Admiral of the Ocean Sea," both of which the Spanish Crown granted him, Columbus boarded his flagship, a carrack or "*nao*," named *La Santa María de la Inmaculada Concepción* and nicknamed the *Capitana* ("Captain's ship") or *Gallega* ("Galician"). Captain Vicente Yáñez Pinzón boarded a caravel nicknamed the *Niña*, its formal name being the *Santa Clara*, and his brother, the treacherous Captain Martin Alonzo Pinzón, boarded another, the *Pinta*, its formal name being lost to history.

Exactly seven months earlier, almost to the day, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella had begun their *Reconquista* of Moor-occupied Spain with their now-unified, three-kingdom army. They expelled the Moorish king from Grenada and commenced their Spanish Inquisition against the Jews. Though contract-bound to the service of the King and Queen of Spain, Columbus engaged in a remarkable act of sedition against these two royal, murderous inquisitors; he offered crew positions to Jews fleeing their Inquisition. Columbus had an accomplice on the inside, Luis de San Angel, a Jew who had "converted" and received a position in Ferdinand and Isabella's Court. Columbus's collective crew manifests read like a veritable Schindler's list of lives he had saved. Admiral Columbus began his First Voyage with this, his first deed of civil rights activism, but it would not be his last. He would spend the rest of his life championing the Jews, the tribes of the Americas and the poor, in that order.

Not all of Columbus's crewmen were fugitive Jews. Most, in fact, were "low men." Unless a captain intended to press men into service against their wills, assembling a crew usually involved setting up at a table in a tavern and taking the names of anyone willing to lay down their life for a long and dangerous ocean voyage. Those that took the job were usually covertly running from something: if not religious persecution, then a death sentence or trial for murder, rape, or some other crime; a debtor seeking significant recompense; or an unhappy family life with a difficult spouse or parent. That meant that most crewmen were secretly troubled, difficult men at best, and hardened criminals at worst. Many who had enlisted for Columbus's crew, moreover, were looking to turn a fast profit in China and then return to Spain to live comfortably, or roister away their fortune along with the rest of their short lives. But beggars could not be choosers, and after begging countless dukes and princes for a decade of his life in a "cloak [that] was poor and ragged," Don Christopher, High Admiral of the Ocean Sea, assembled the ships and men the Crown handed him (Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, *General and Natural History of the Indies*).

Admiral Columbus was a seasoned sailor, and knew how to deal with an unruly crew of “low men.” On the morning he set sail, he attended Confession and received the Eucharist. His fledgling flotilla departed the port town of Palos (now Palos de la Frontera, Huelva, Andalusia, Spain) on a course for the Canary Islands, a way-station before setting out in earnest for the Indies. He led his crew in prayer every half hour and instructed the youngest sailors to take over that duty for the duration of the voyage. He ended each day with the crew in recitation of the “Our Father,” the “Hail Mary,” the “Apostles’ Creed” and the “Hail, Holy Queen.” This display of piety was no show. In his cabin, he privately said his Book of Hours, a collection of prayers and psalms for Catholic devotion.

Columbus and his crew would need the prayers. The Portuguese-ruled Canary Islands were dangerous for him: King John II of Portugal held a grudge against the Admiral, despite himself being the agent of treachery against Columbus. Before Spain agreed to fund the expedition, King John promised to do so, but as a ruse; he stole all of Columbus’s maps and charts, delivered them to a fleet of his own, and had them leave without Columbus. A devastating storm crippled the clandestine Portuguese fleet, forcing it to return to port and, thus, alerting Columbus to the chicanery. Columbus took back his maps and charts and took his business elsewhere, much to King John’s chagrin.

King John was not the only threat to this expedition. The owner of the *Pinta*, Christobál Quintero, and an accomplice, Gómez Rascón, quickly decided on the third day that they “disliked the voyage,” and sabotaged the rudder of the *Pinta* to render it unseaworthy. The other sailors nevertheless fixed it enough to reach the Canary Islands on the seventh day, where they completed the repairs. But while there, Columbus encountered a crew of Portuguese sailors who warned him that the petulant King John had sent bounty hunters to the Canaries to capture him “for taking his venture to Castile.” He wasted no time in departing.

On Thursday, September 6, 1492, Admiral Columbus left the farthest stretches of Christendom for the unknown. Facing a powerful nor’easter on his first day of travel from the Canaries, he proceeded with a sense of divine mission, evident in all his logs, journals and correspondences. He recorded his journey meticulously, though he had on board no nautical instruments — no record of even an astrolabe — thanks to the half-a-“trifle” the Crown deigned to spare to fund his voyage.

Columbus was rich in experience, however, with a significant advantage over most sailors of his day — what fifteenth-century historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviendo y Valdés called, in his *General and Natural History of the Indies*, a “secret of navigation.” Columbus had learned, from the Portuguese he had sailed with in his youth, to navigate by taking the altitudes of the sun vis-à-vis the North Star, allowing him to negotiate “very large stretches of sea” while the sailors of other nations “steered as in the Mediterranean, along the shores...hugging the coast.” He observed Atlantic wind patterns he called “the prevailing Westerlies.” He introduced

the principal of “compass variation,” the variation at any point on the surface of the earth between the direction to magnetic and geodetic “true” north. This nautical genius, whom Bartolomé de las Casas characterized as “the most outstanding sailor in the world, versed like no other in the art of navigation” (*Historia de las Indias*, Book I, 17), laid down compass courses and estimated direction and distance on timeworn charts using nothing more than his own “dead reckoning;” sheer force of will; and, by his own accounts, “Divine Providence.”

Admiral Columbus understandably believed this mission to be guided by Divine Providence because it was full of miracles. First, the majority of the voyage continued over calm seas and under clear skies, save for a single storm and a single, separate encounter with high waves. On the eighth day after departure from Christendom, the flotilla encountered a tern and a tropical bird, neither of which were known to fly more than twenty leagues from land — about a single day’s travel at the flotilla’s average speed — yet they were still *twenty-four* days from landfall. In the early night of the ninth day from Christendom, they spotted what de las Casas described in his digest of the Admiral’s log as “a marvelous streak of fire fall from the sky into the sea four or five leagues away.” On the eleventh day, they spotted a crab floating in a morass of seaweed, a sure sign that land was near, yet none was to be found. The crewmen became frightened and depressed. On the twelfth day from Christendom, they spotted a flock of birds, and in the many ensuing days, they saw a host of petrels, doves, frigate-birds, tropic birds, ducks, gulls, turns, river-birds and boobies, none of which were “accustomed to fly more than twenty leagues from land,” yet, miraculously, there they were, as if heralds of the impending arrival in the New World, though the three ships were still weeks away from landfall and over four hundred leagues from Christendom. On the fifteenth day, a whale came to greet them in the dead-calm waters. After over two weeks of false hope of imminent landfall, this cetacean chaperone did little to allay the crewmen’s growing depression. And the windless waters caused them to fear “that no winds blew in these seas that could carry them back to Spain.” Again, as if by Divine Providence, a headwind miraculously appeared, lifting the spirits of the crew.

On the nineteenth day from Christendom, a watchman called out that he had sighted land, but it turned out to be a mirage created by, of all things, a guiding cloud. For twelve more days, the crew suffered, starved and despaired. All these sure signs had still yielded no landfall.

On the thirty-first day since their departure from the Canary Islands, a watchman again claimed to have seen land. So confident was the entire crew that this sighting was no mistake that they raised their standard and fired a Lombard cannon as a signal to port. But no port of the Great Khan, nor indeed of any other, lay ahead. The land they thought they had sighted had disappeared as mysteriously as it had appeared. The crew despaired and could “bear no more.” But Admiral Columbus told them there was no use complaining because, he correctly

predicted, they had passed out of the waters of the Atlantic Ocean and reached the sea where landfall would be made. On the penultimate day of travel, they met “rougher seas than any they had met with on the voyage.” But once through them, they found a stick that had been carved with an iron tool and another covered in barnacles. The men rejoiced, fell to their knees in grateful prayer and kept a sharp watch for the islands they now knew for certain were near.

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At approximately ten o’clock on the night of Tuesday, October 11, 1492, a remarkable miracle transpired for which no explanation has ever been given. Sailor Juan Rodriguez Bermeo of Triana, Spain, spotted a speck of land from the crow’s nest of Admiral Columbus’s flagship. The Admiral saw what he described as a light “like a wax candle that went up and down,” though they were, in fact, too many leagues away to see any landborne source of light, telescopically or otherwise. No record since, historical or scientific, has ever explained the luminous phenomenon, but the three vessels faithfully followed this polestar westward.

Two hours after midnight, on Friday, October 12, 1492, the flotilla arrived off the shore of an island. The Taino colonists called it Guanahani, but the desperate, starving, exhausted, rejoicing Christopher Columbus, as the Crown-appointed “Viceroy of all the lands he should discover,” called it “*San Salvador*,” “Holy Savior.” He named this land, the site of unity between the Old World and the New, of the social singularity that was to change the world forever henceforth, after Jesus.

The crewmen took down all the sails but the mainsail, waiting for daylight. Whenceforth, they took to land on the small island. “Immediately some naked people appeared and the Admiral went ashore” with his caravel captains and “recorder” Rodrigo Escobedo. “Soon many people of the island came up to them” (Bartolomé de las Casas, *Digest of Columbus’s Log Book*). Of that moment, Columbus wrote, “In order to earn their friendship, since I knew they were a people to be converted and won to our holy faith by love and friendship rather than by force, I gave some of them red caps and glass beads which they hung round their necks [and which] pleased them greatly and they became marvelously friendly to us.” Afterwards, he wrote, welcome parties of islanders “swam out to the ship’s boats in which we were sitting, bringing us parrots and balls of cotton thread and spears and many other things, which they exchanged with us for such objects as glass beads, hawks and bells. In fact, they very willingly traded everything they had” (*Id.*). Not only had Columbus succeeded in his trans-Atlantic voyage, proving it could be done, but first contact between the Europeans and the tribes of the West Indies was a rousing success: Christopher Columbus embraced the Tainos in friendship and they him.

The first meeting of the tribes of the New World and the explorers of the Old involved no tribalism, no oppression, and no violence, only love, unity and the brotherhood of their common humanity. How far the modern world has fallen in eschewal of these sacred values to which Columbus adhered so piously and faithfully.

Many modern, and post-modern, revisionist historians misquote Columbus's own journals and correspondences to the Crown to portray him as counseling the Crown to enslave the islanders he found. In fact, in every recorded address to the Crown from the outset, he counseled just the opposite. Referring to the islanders as "very intelligent," "very gentle" and "a very fine people," he repeatedly advocated Baptizing them; Baptized people could **not** be enslaved in Christendom. In fact, he feared, rather, that subjects of the Great Khan would "come from the mainland to capture them for slaves," or that others from other nations or more savage tribes would attempt the same or worse. By this pledge to protect the islanders, Columbus engaged in his first deed of civil rights activism on their behalf; it would not be the last by any stretch.

Similarly, many detractors rely on a mistranslation of the fifteenth-century, Spanish verb "subjugar" to suggest that Columbus exhorted the Crown to "subjugate" the islanders. In fact, Columbus used the verb to exhort the Crown to "make subjects of" — or, in the modern vernacular, to make "citizens" of — the indigenes so that they would enjoy all the rights, privileges and protections of Spanish nationality, including protection from enslavement. He knew the ultimate decision whether to treat the islanders as conquered people or citizens would be up to the Crown, but he repeatedly counseled, sometimes explicitly and sometimes subtly where necessary, that the tribal peoples of the West Indies be given neither lashes nor servitude, but "the love and service of their Highnesses and of the whole Spanish nation" (Letter of Columbus dated February 15, 1493).

In the two months following Columbus's peaceful and propitious first contact with the islanders of Guanahani / San Salvador, he visited at least a dozen more islands, repeatedly and without exception making friends and allies with every single tribe and village he met on every inhabited island he visited. Though all of the islanders, men and women alike, went about unarmed and "naked as their mothers bore them," he ensured no sailor harmed a hair on the head of any of them. Columbus and his crew traded trinkets for the balls of cotton the islanders offered, and Columbus ensured that his men engaged only in fair trade and did not exploit the islanders in their bartering transactions. He insisted his sailors "give[] as much as they were asked" in bargaining with the islanders and got "angry with" the Spaniards if they did not (Bartolomé de las Casas, *Digest of Columbus's Log Book*).

Repeatedly, many of the Taino islanders Columbus encountered recounted tales of savage cannibals from the northwest reaches of the archipelago, the Caribs, who frequently "descended at certain seasons of the year," "robbing and taking all they can," and who "captured [the Taino] people and took them away to be eaten" (*Id.*; Letter of Columbus dated

February 15, 1493). The settlers would later discover that the Caribs were committing many manners of atrocities upon the Tainos, including kidnapping those of Boriquen (modern-day Puerto Rico), castrating and enslaving the boys, eating the men, and raping and impregnating the women only to feast on their newborn babies.

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Among the many friends Columbus made who warned of the atrocities of the Caribs was his best friend in the New World, Taino *cacique* (king) Guacanagarí. On Christmas Eve, while moored off of Hispaniola (now Cap Haïtien, Haiti), the steersman of the flagship *Santa María*, against Columbus's strict orders, handed the wheel of the vessel to a “ship's boy,” who damaged the rudder on rocks so badly he rendered the ship forevermore unseaworthy. To make matters worse, the treacherous Captain Martin Alonzo Pinzón of the *Pinta* mutinously abandoned the flotilla to find gold, leaving Columbus's retinue reduced to but a single ship, the *Niña*. In the mere two-and-a-half weeks they had come to know each other, Guacanagarí so came to love Columbus as to be “proud to call [him] and treat [him] as a brother” (Letter of Columbus dated February 15, 1493). On Christmas Day, Guacanagarí had his entire village empty the shipwreck of the *Santa María* of all the crew's effects, placed them in three houses he had the occupants vacate, and posted armed villagers to guard the sailors' possessions throughout the night. Guacanagarí openly “wept, showing great sorrow at” the disastrous wreck of Columbus's flagship and promised his newfound Genoan friend “he would give [him] everything he had” (Diego Colón, *The Life of the Admiral*, Chapter 33).

In return, in addition to bestowing gifts upon Guacanagarí and his kin, Columbus promised to protect the entire tribe, and indeed the entire island, from the Carib marauders. Even as the crew rested there, Carib canoemen, or some other hostile tribe, arrived on the shoreline and stormed the village. Guacanagarí, aided by Columbus and his men, chased them off without a single fatality. Seeing the threat for himself, and pursuant to a formal treaty he personally drafted, Governor Columbus left behind thirty-seven sailors, supervised by the King's steward and the flotilla's discipline officer, along with provisions, arms and a rowboat to protect the island and its inhabitants from the Caribs.

Admiral Columbus took willing passengers from each tribe he encountered aboard the *Niña* to meet the Crown, one islander even canoeing furiously in pursuit of the departing caravel to implore the Admiral to take him with them so he and his family could appear together before

the Spanish monarchs. "The Admiral was highly delighted by this man's action and ordered that the whole family should be well treated and entertained" (Diego Colón, *The Life of the Admiral*, Chapter 29). As Columbus finally left the coast of Hispaniola, he suddenly reunited offshore with the insincerely-contrite Pinzón, Captain of the *Pinta*, who was chagrined at being found and restored into service. No sooner had the flotilla newly reformed was it attacked again by the Carib canoemen, this time armed with poisoned arrows. Rather than return hostilities, Columbus welcomed the man-eating chieftain, painted head-to-toe in black war-paint, aboard the *Niña*, where, facing down the Admiral, he "made a speech as fierce as his appearance" (*Id.*, Chapter 36). Admiral Columbus served him a meal *not* of human flesh; bestowed gifts upon him; and, through his new Taino translators, worked a diplomatic miracle, completely diffusing the confrontation. Admiral Columbus sent the warrior back to shore, accompanied by a small cadre of sailors, who then bartered with the rest of the war party, whom the leader ordered to lay down their weapons. Whether by planned perfidy or paucity of patience, the war party eventually picked up their arms again and attacked anyway. Yet again, Admiral Columbus chased them off without a single fatality before finally departing the West Indies, and bringing his first sojourn in the Americas to a remarkable, peaceful and successful close.

Few instances of first contact in history have proceeded without bloodshed or loss of life. Admiral Columbus managed to negotiate first contact with at least a dozen tribes of the West Indies — including hostile, cannibalistic canoemen who twice attacked him and his crew — without a single fatality, sowing good will and friendship in every village port. But Christopher Columbus was no average man. In his *Historia*, Bartolomé de las Casas, official (and vehement) Protector of the Indians, not only described the "illustrious Genoese" as "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" (Book I, Chapter 3), but "that most worthy man [who was] second to God but first in the eyes of men" (*Id.*, Chapter 76). And of Columbus's Voyage, de las Casas wrote, "Many is the time I have wished for the eloquence to extol the indescribable service to God and to the whole world which Christopher Columbus rendered at the cost of such pain and dangers, such skill and expertise, when he so courageously discovered the New World" (*Id.*).

Indeed, Christopher Columbus did just that. For all the unfounded accusations levied against him as a racist, rapist, slaver, maimer, murderer and genocidal maniac, the primary sources clearly demonstrate that he not only was none of those things, but precisely the opposite. He prevented the Spaniards under his command from exploiting the tribal peoples of the Americas. For all the bloodshed that ensued in the West Indies after a conspiring cabal of *hidalgos* (landed nobles) took Columbus out of the picture, as will be detailed in my upcoming articles for *Broad + Liberty*, Columbus's presence and leadership caused things go as well as they possibly could have for both the Spanish settlers and the tribes of the Americas.

Christopher Columbus proved it was possible to safely cross the Atlantic Ocean. He blazed trans-Atlantic routes still used by twenty-first-century sailors. He founded the first permanent European settlements in and began the recorded history of the Americas. He initiated more than five hundred years of cultural, economic and political relations between the Old World and the New, commencing an enduring exchange of science, technology, law, commerce, art, music, literature, and *people*, benefiting and enriching the globe from pole to pole.

Our own historical icons commemorated him well for these unparalleled deeds. In 1775, Phillis Wheatley, a fourteen-year-old, free, African-American girl wrote a poem that so moved General George Washington that he distributed it throughout the thirteen Colonies. In it she used "Columbia" as a personification of the American nation. Thereafter, Columbia and Columbus appeared in myriad poems, songs and essays, firmly weaving the intrepid mariner into the fabric of American identity. The Founding Fathers celebrated the 300th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's landfall on October 12, 1792, one year after they named the nation's capital after him, adorned with many statues and paintings of him, none of which had been created during his life.

Since then, 144 places in the United States have been named after Christopher Columbus, including cities, counties, towns, bodies of water, and schools. On June 29, 1868, the first Vatican Council petitioned for his sainthood. A generation later, in 1892, President Benjamin Harrison proposed a national celebration, and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt institutionalized the holiday in 1937, which we have celebrated annually to this day.

Columbus Day is more than just a commemoration of this mariner, the first founder and first civil rights activist of the Americas. It is a monumentalization of the legacy of his watershed voyage: the European contributions of Greco-Roman democracy and law, Judeo-Christian ethics and morals, and the tenet that all human beings are equal in the eyes of their Creator. We must never forget these sacred principles and, like Christopher Columbus, never fail to practice them in our words, in our deeds and in our government.

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