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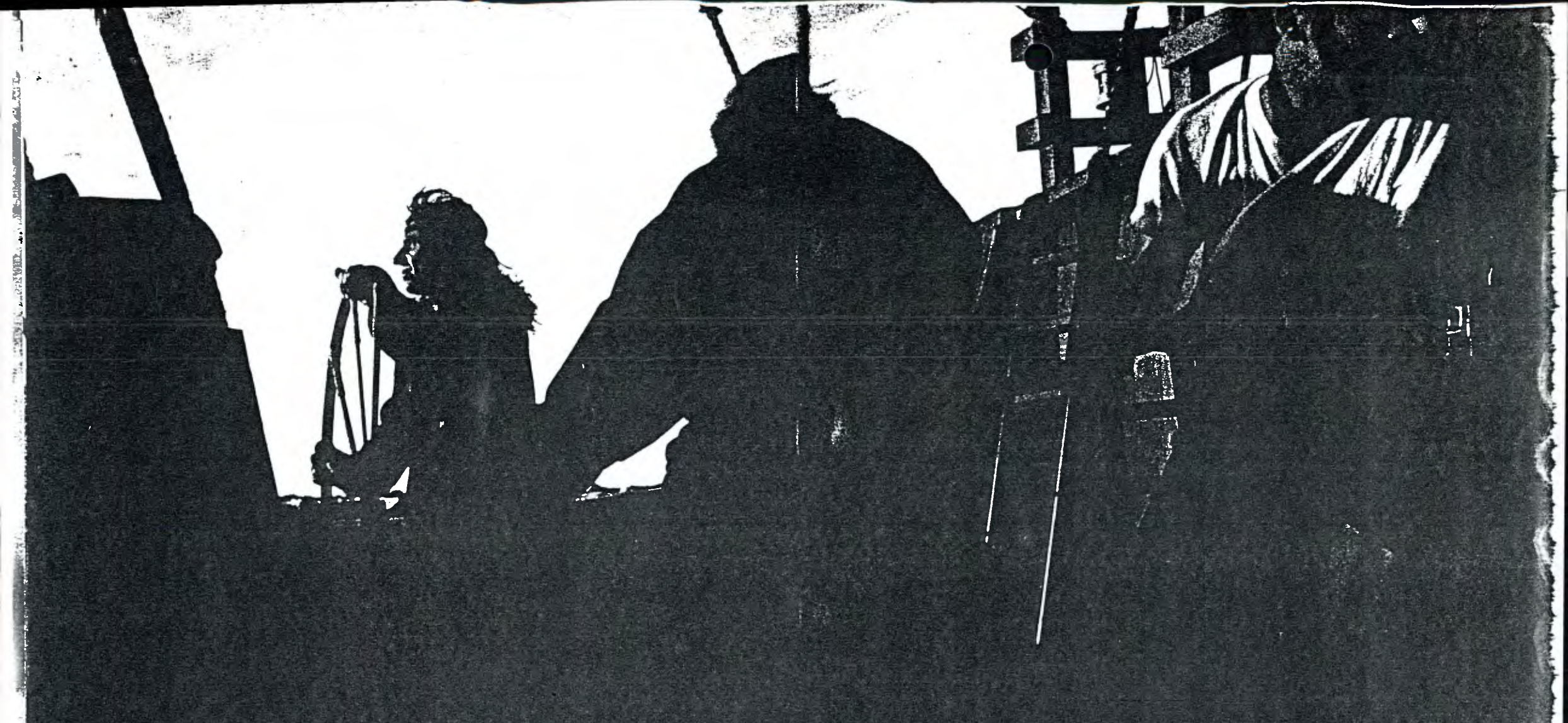
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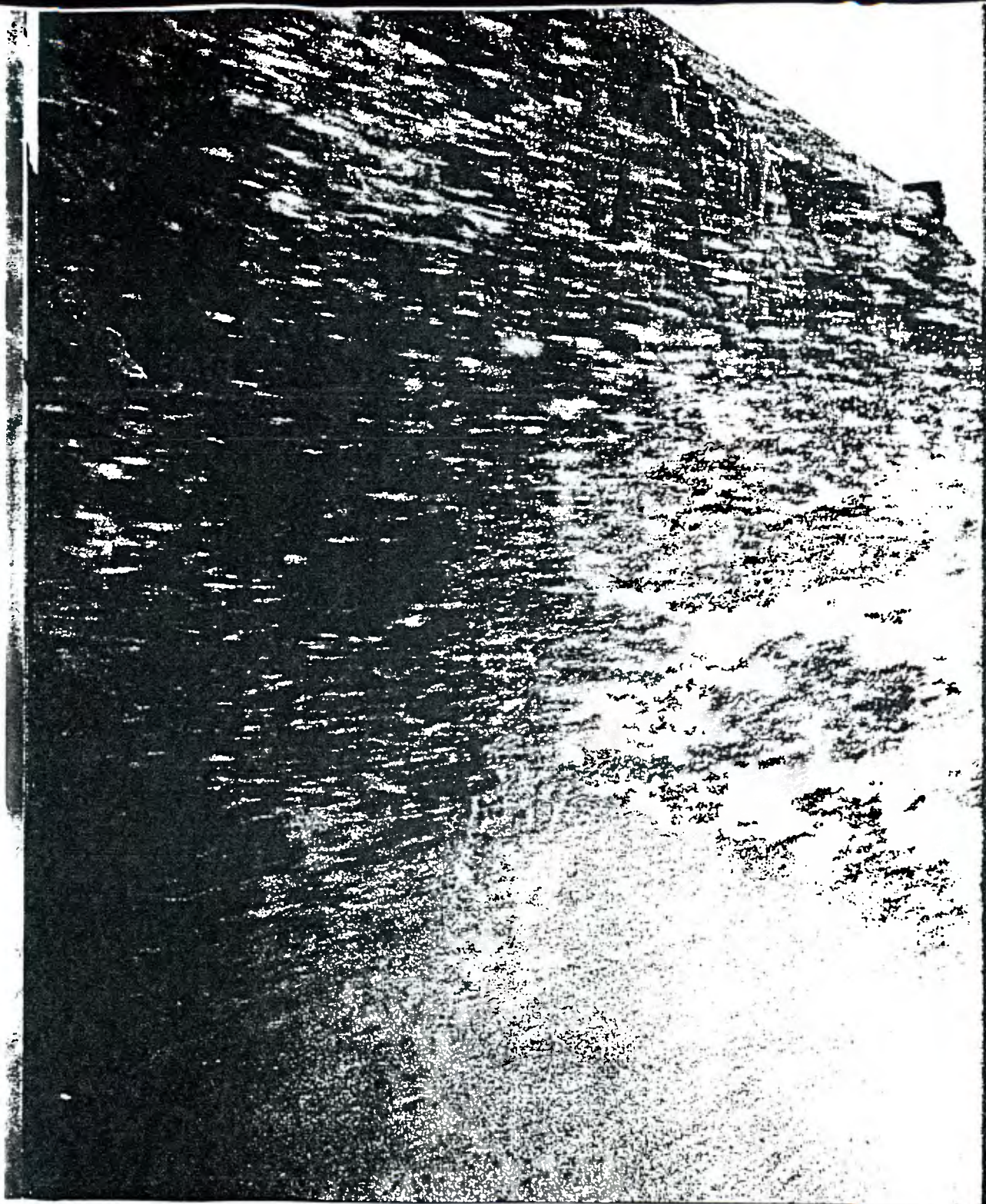
# COLUMBUS

In the  
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**S**alt air and sailing ships seduced a teenage Columbus. By the early 1470s he set sail along European trade routes, working as a commercial agent aboard ships similar to this copy of the *Santa María*. He chartered and stocked boats, hired sailors, and managed

money. A man on a mission as well as a mariner, Columbus believed God “granted me the gift of knowledge . . . [and] revealed to me that it was feasible to sail . . . to the Indies, and placed in me a burning desire to carry out this plan.”



**S**hipwrecked off the Portuguese coast in 1476; Columbus struggled ashore. For nine years he lived amid sailors and explorers energized by the world view of Prince Henry the Navigator, who drew scholars to his school atop the cliffs at Sagres.

A CLOUD OF SWALLOWS wheeled around Seville's great Gothic cathedral, roused by the clangor of its bells. In the dim interior a shaft of sunlight bathed the draped sarcophagus of Christopher Columbus, borne on the massive carved figures of four kings. Spain, itself an infinite tangle of ends and beginnings, was the fitting place to begin an inquiry about Columbus, at the spot that marks the finish of his unique career.

Gazing at the tomb, I wondered at the controversy that swirls around this man, perhaps even more today than when he lived. The events of his remarkable life, as well as the results of his epochal voyages, still spark lively, often bitter debate. Even his final resting-place is hotly disputed: Do his bones lie here in Seville or in a lead coffin across the sea?

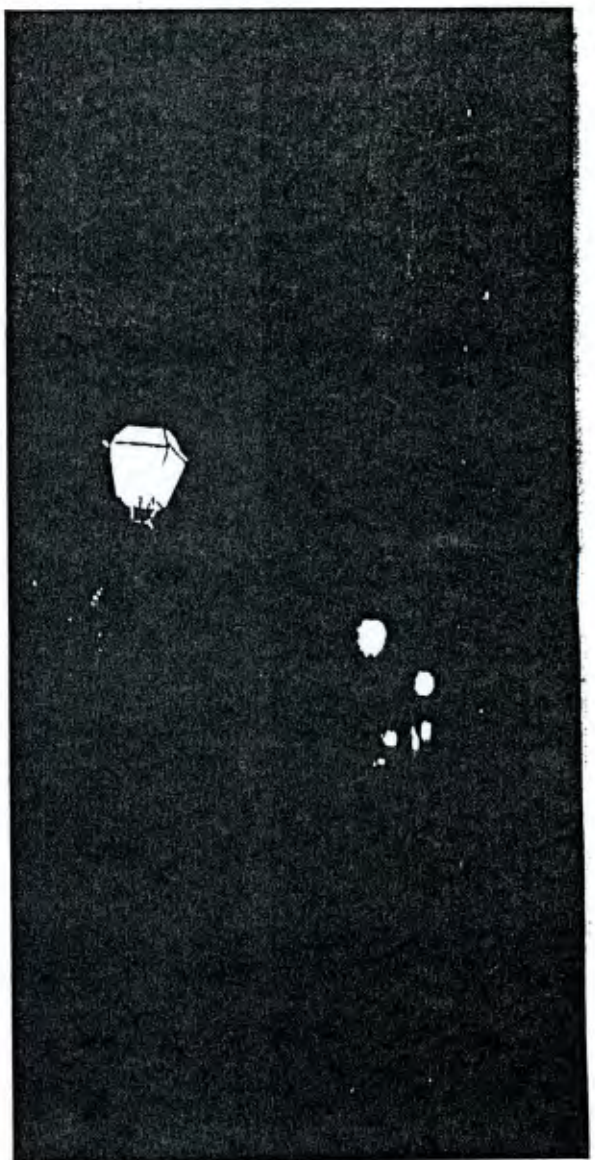
I faced a difficult task. How could I, across a gulf of five centuries, probe the nature of this historic figure? How could I explore the restless, questing mind of the man who sought to reach the East by sailing west?

As a historian who works with original documents, I would have to follow a widely scattered paper trail. The Columbus documents, though many are contested, include more than 2,500 notes penned in the margins of books he owned; some 80 letters, notes, and memorials; copies of the log from his first New World voyage; volumes he compiled; and his will. Most of the books and manuscripts reside in Spain, but there are important Columbus materials in Italy, France, and the United States.

Most scholars agree that Genoa was the birthplace of Christopher Columbus, yet even this gives rise to emotional debate. Some believe his signature in code reveals Portuguese ancestry. Others declare him Scandinavian (a "Spanish-Jewish-Norwegian prince," says one enthusiast). Ibiza, in the Balearic Islands, has its partisans, and there are a host of other claimed Columbuses: Greek, Galician, Swiss, Catalanian, even Armenian and Chinese.

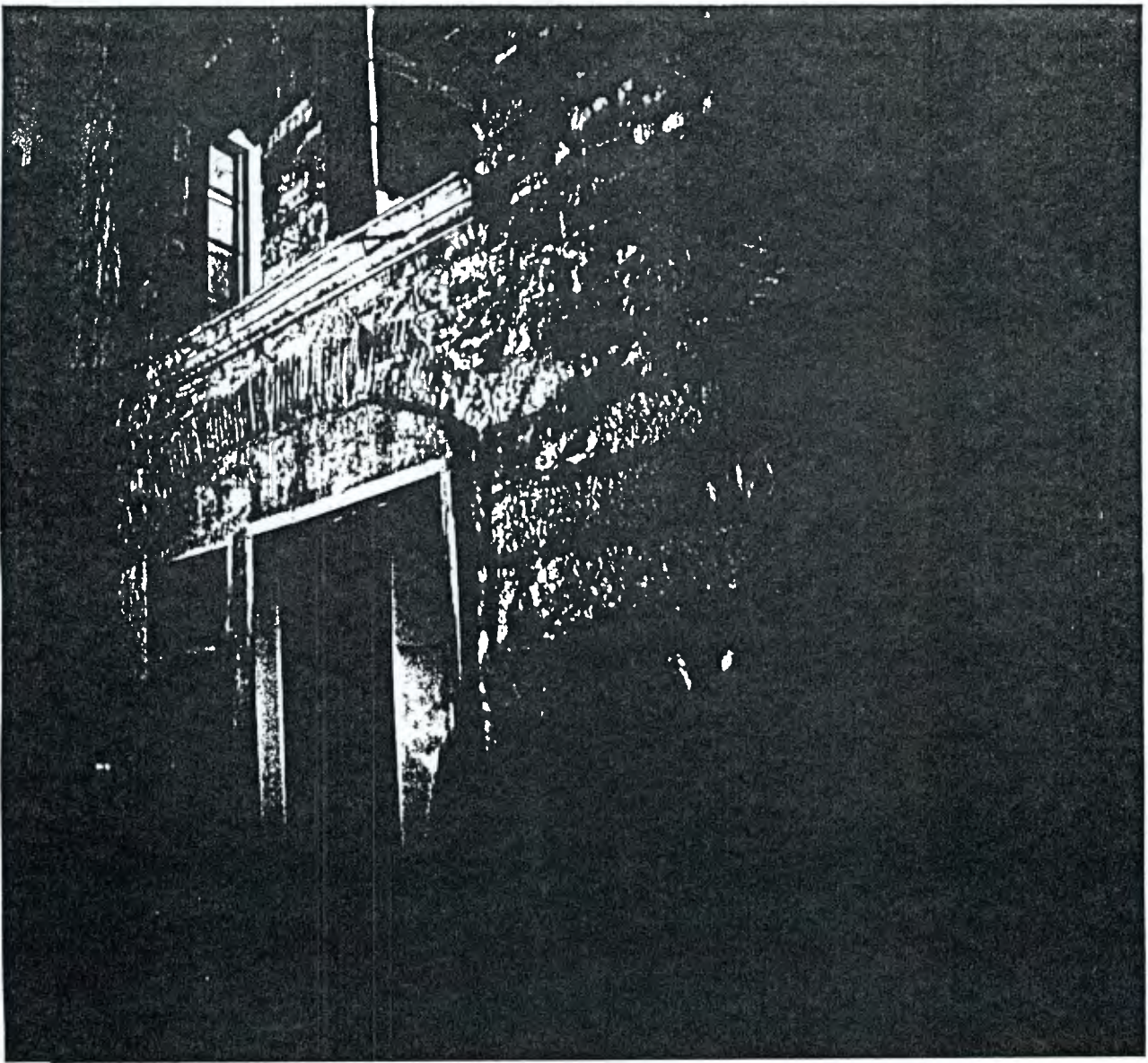
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Just as ancient mariners set out to find new lands, historian EUGENE LYON voyages through Old World archives in quest of new insights. His most recent article for the GEOGRAPHIC was "Track of the Manila Galleons" in September 1990. BOB SACHA's photographic explorations include the world of "America's Ancient Skywatchers" in March 1990.



Surely, to find the nature of the man, I would have to fix with certainty the place and time of his birth. A solid clue came as I searched the archives of the Dukes of the Infantado in their Madrid palace. Here, I knew, priest-historian Bartolomé de las Casas' copy of Columbus's log had been found in the 18th century.

After examining many tightly packed bundles, or *legajos*, on shelves that filled a small room in the Infantado *palacio*, I felt a stir of excitement. In a slim bundle I came upon a creased and folded binder fastened with knotted string. On its cover was traced in pencil: *Genealogía de Colón*—Genealogy of Columbus. Inside, a chart described the succession to the Columbus estate, the



subject of lawsuits for more than 200 years.

My eye fell on the circle enclosing "Cristóbal Colón, first Admiral," one of the mariner's many titles. In the circle above was "Domingo Colombo," a reference to Christopher's father—Domenico Colombo as his name appears in official Genoese records. Here was a link placing the Columbus family in Genoa. But I would have to go to Italy to test the evidence.

In Genoa I was greeted by Aldo Agosto, a noted Columbus scholar and director of the provincial archives. He led me upstairs to the Sala Colombiana, a small room that holds many original Columbus family documents. They have survived the losses and traumas of five centuries, including Louis XIV's 1684

*Christopher Columbus slept here (we think). Although the exact location of his childhood home is unknown, his family lived somewhere near the towers of the Porta Soprana, one of several city gates in Genoa, Italy.*

*Christopher's father, Domenico, worked primarily as a master wool weaver. But he also kept a tavern, dabbled in real estate, and was a partisan for the mighty Fregoso family, who, when in power, gave Domenico a gatekeeper's job. Patronage, Christopher must have realized, pays off.*

naval bombardment of Genoa, when notary records were largely destroyed by fire.

More than 60 documents recount the story of the Columbus family, beginning with the youth of Domenico, whose name I had seen in Madrid. He was apprenticed to a Flemish weaver at 11 and rose to become a master weaver. In the boisterous, enterprising spirit of Genoa, he also worked as cheese maker, tavern keeper, and dealer in wool and wine.

Domenico Colombo married Susanna Fontanarossa, the papers attest. Their firstborn was Cristoforo, in 1451; later came Giovanni Pellegrino, Bartolomeo, Giacomo, and daughter Bianchinetta.

As a youth, Christopher was already at work with his father. He first appears in the notarial record of September 1470; later that year, at "greater than nineteen years of age," he obligated himself for a quantity of wine. By 1472 Columbus had learned his father's trade, for in that year he is called *lanaiolo*, a worker in wool.

Dr. Agosto next showed me the Assereto document, named for the man who in 1904 recognized its importance. It involves a 1479 lawsuit over a sugar transaction on the Atlantic island of Madeira. In it young Christopher swore that he was a 27-year-old Genoese citizen resident in Portugal and had been hired to represent the Genoese merchants in that transaction. Here was proof that he had relocated to Portugal.

Then I saw a document that clearly identifies Genoa's Columbus as Spain's celebrated Admiral of the Ocean Sea. In 1496 three of his Genoese cousins agreed to share the cost of sending one of them, Giovanni, to serve "Lord Christopher Columbus, Admiral of the King of Spain." Giovanni captained a ship on Columbus's third voyage and acted later as his aide.

Columbus himself alludes to his birthplace. In 1502 he wrote from Spain to directors of Genoa's Bank of San Giorgio, offering an endowment to relieve the city's poor of the tax on food and wine. "Even though my body walks here," he wrote poignantly, "my heart is always there."

There exist many other contemporary testimonies to his origin. After seeing the primary documents, I was convinced; wherever he may have gone thereafter, Christopher Columbus, son of the weaver Domenico Colombo, began his life in 15th-century Genoa.

**W**HAT EARLY INFLUENCES helped form the mind of Columbus? We find little about him during the Mediterranean years. One writer believes he was illiterate until 1494. At the other extreme the Admiral's son Ferdinand says of his father: "He learned his letters at a tender age and studied . . . at the University of Pavia."

The University of Pavia has no record that Christopher Columbus ever studied there. But Aldo Agosto has suggested that he may have attended a monastery school in a district of Genoa called Paverano, thus giving rise to the word "Pavia." Antonio Gallo, a Genoese who knew the family, wrote that the boys learned their few letters in their youth. A tantalizing bit of evidence in this regard came



years later, in 1509, when Columbus's brother Bartholomew gave his nephew Ferdinand an instruction book on handwriting; possibly Christopher and Bartholomew had used it as youngsters. Recent study of Columbus's papers by noted handwriting expert Charles Hamilton strongly suggests that he learned to write while young.

Columbus may have acquired the rudiments of Latin—a language he later used widely, if imperfectly—in Genoa. It appears, however, that he was only semiliterate; certainly he did not then learn to write Genoese.

His Genoese heritage helped greatly to shape Columbus and his view of the world. I took a taxi to the best place from which to see Genoa, its hilltop citadel, the Castelletto. From that vantage point one can grasp the

nature of the city and the destiny of her people: Compressed between surrounding hills and the shore, Genoa spills down to the Ligurian Sea. Blocked in by such powerful rival cities as Milan and Florence and with little fertile hinterland, the people of Genoa were forced to seek their livelihood upon the Mediterranean Sea.

In the 15th century the Republic of Genoa was a lively, turbulent place, its atmosphere harsh but stimulating. The Genoese had no king, but selected powerful men as doges to rule them. Sporadic warfare between prominent families often led to bloodshed.

Throughout his life Columbus displayed many of the same traits as his fellow Genoese. They were a stubborn, acquisitive people, prospering through hard work and thrift, diligent in details, jealous of time. They created business enterprises far beyond the confines of their city. As Columbus himself would become, the Genoese were true cosmopolitans. They often married abroad and learned other languages, coexisting readily with other peoples.

During the late Middle Ages, trade from Genoa expanded rapidly into nearby Corsica, Sardinia, and Sicily (map, page 21); Genoese merchants sought the wheat, salt, wine, and wool of Iberia. They spread through western Europe and the Levant and built trading centers near Constantinople, on the Black Sea, and on the Greek island of Chios. They traded on the Danube and in Kiev.

At Tunis, an entrepôt in northern Africa, they traded for gold. As Columbus himself said, "Genoese . . . and all the people who have pearls, precious stones and other valuable things, take them to the end of the earth . . . to convert them into gold." Gold was, for the Genoese, the ultimate store of wealth.



*Rich, powerful Genoese men needed Columbus—and he needed them. The ancestors of Giannetto Fieschi (left) rented a house to the Columbus family; years later, Christopher hired a Fieschi to command a transatlantic caravel. Wine maker Paolo Spinola (above) descends from a family of slipowners who once engaged Christopher as a commercial agent. So did Giacomo Centurione Scotto's family, who controlled one of Genoa's most prominent and prosperous merchant banks.*





Exotic African and Eastern products—sugar, spices, and slaves—always attracted the Genoese. As militant Islam closed the roads to the riches of the East, Genoese merchants gradually looked westward to the Atlantic. It was inevitable that some of these enterprising traders became explorers: Both activities share a common element of risk taking.

In the Mediterranean and later in the Atlantic context, the same Genoese family names appeared time and again: Cattaneo, Rivarolo, Spinola, Pinelli, Di Negro, Doria, Centurione. One of these clans, the Di Negro

family, may have given Columbus his start as a seafarer.

"From a very early age," he states in a 1501 letter, "I entered sailing upon the sea and have continued it until today." It is possible he had already undertaken one or more voyages by the year 1470; after 1472, he was evidently committed to the life of the sea.

Columbus first sailed the Mediterranean, and his career is only understandable in light of this experience.

His log, letters, and notes reveal a wide familiarity with that part of the world. He knew Marseille and may have been involved in the wine and wool trade with Spain's Castile. He knew the coasts of Aragon well and visited or sighted Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, and the Balearic Islands. He voyaged to Chios off the coast of Asia Minor, likely in 1475. Beyond, the young Genoese could not fail to note, lay the East.

In a letter written in 1502 to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Castile, Columbus outlined detailed sailing directions between Cádiz and Naples, for both

summer and winter. In the letter he might have been describing himself: "For this navigation there are noted men, who have so committed themselves to it that they know all the courses, and what storms they may expect, according to the season of year in which they sail."

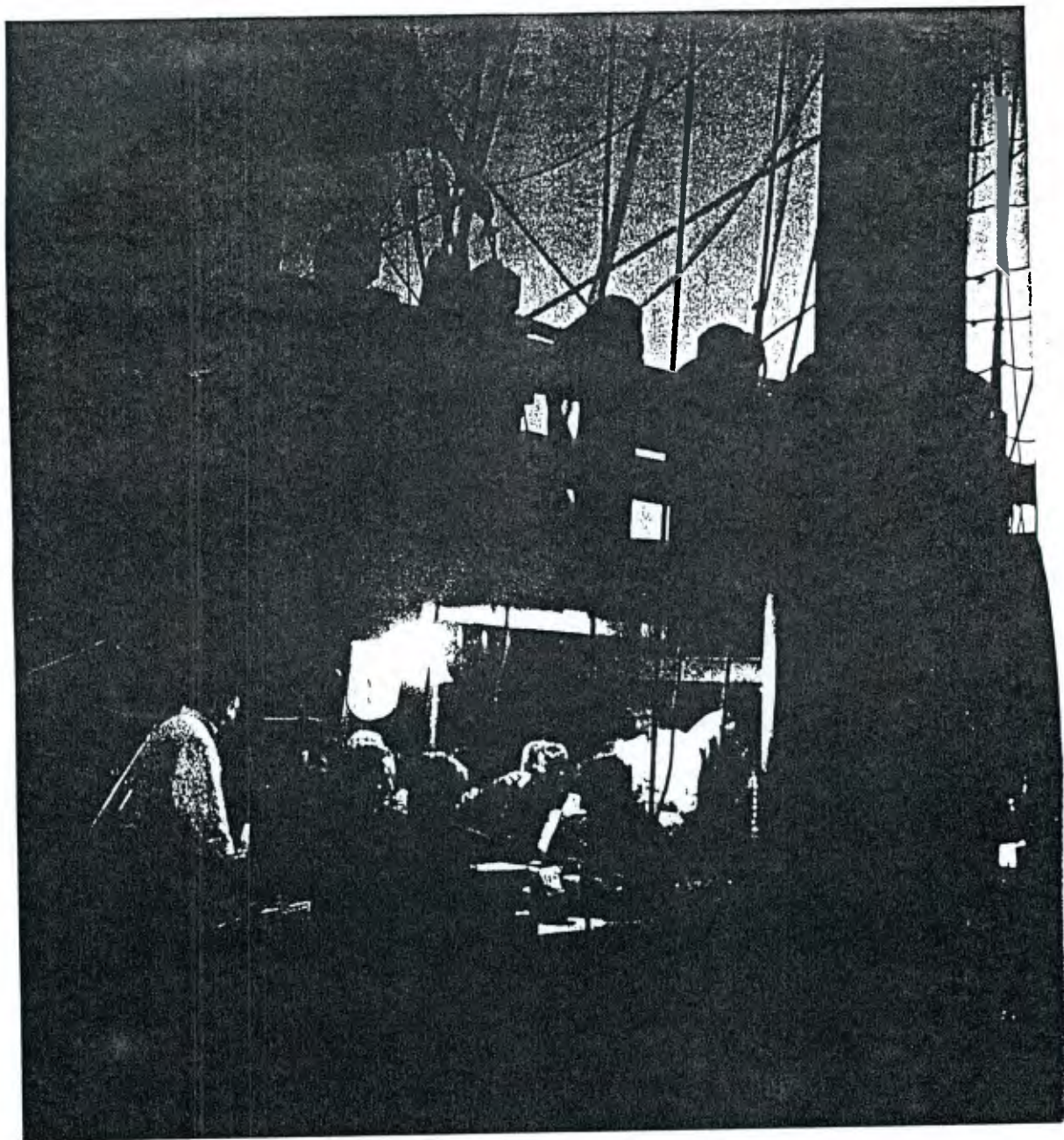
Many testimonies describe his profound understanding of weather and prevailing winds. He correctly predicted storms. He practiced using the sounding line and the mariner's compass. He mastered reading



*"People think I was obliged by family tradition to join the Spanish Navy, but that's not true," says Columbus's direct descendant and namesake, Lt. Comdr. Cristóbal Colón XX. "I joined because I love the sea." Sailor, helicopter pilot, model-ship builder, and father of Cristóbal XXI, Colón believes that despite our extensive knowledge of the earth, the spirit of discovery is not dead. "Nothing is as thrilling," he says, "as discovering untouched places for yourself."*





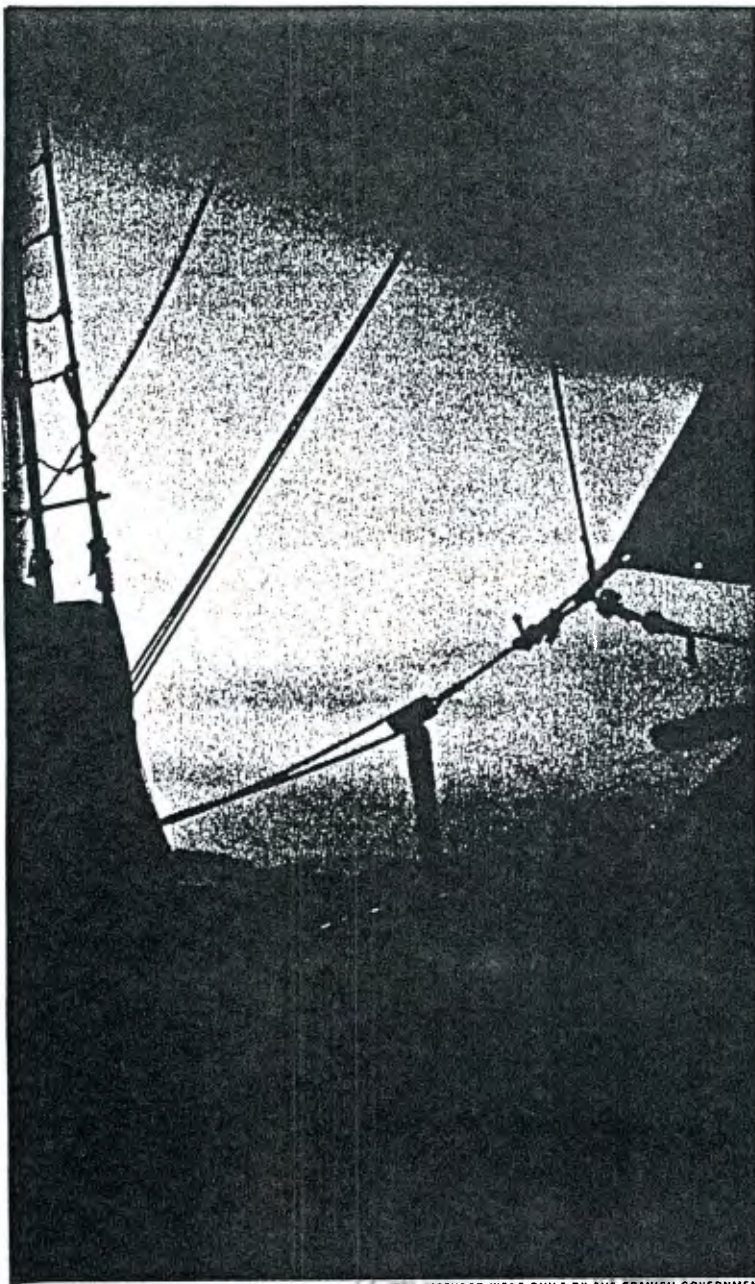


charts and calculating the complex time-speed-distance equation that is basic to dead-reckoning sailing. All these things and more he undoubtedly learned in the Mediterranean Sea.

**M**ORE THAN ALL ELSE, the Mediterranean years sharpened the natural powers of observation Columbus displayed throughout his lifetime. It was here that he raised his eyes to the skies, a vast theater across which there wheeled a multitude of stars and planets. He believed, in this century before

the Copernican revolution, that the earth, fixed in space, was surrounded by the other heavenly bodies, which revolved around it. He studied the constellations and how to mark the passage of the sun through the 12 houses of the zodiac. The young seaman noted the errant track of meteors and watched for special arrays, or conjunctions, of the planets visible to the naked eye.

These phenomena aroused Columbus's natural curiosity about the earth for, as he later said, navigation is an "art which inclines him who follows it to wish to know the secrets of this world."



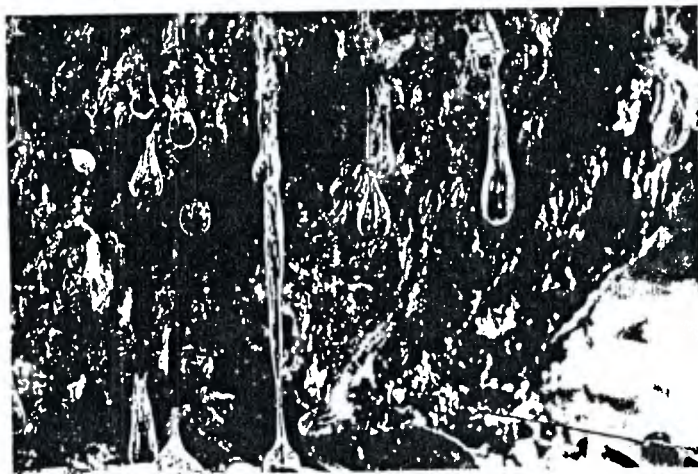
*Daylight disappears—and so does dinner aboard the Santa María, a reproduction of Columbus's transatlantic flagship. Sailing along the coasts of Europe and Africa in similar square-rigged vessels, Columbus lived life at the whim of the winds, often finding himself becalmed for days, with plenty of time to read, think, dream, and scheme.*



*Columbus learned basic seamanship not from books but from practice: to set the anchor properly, use a quadrant, estimate speed and distance, and read the winds. Standing on Santa María's quarterdeck, crewmen furl the heavy canvas sails.*

THIS REPRODUCTION AND OTHERS PICTURED WERE BUILT BY THE SPANISH GOVERNMENT.





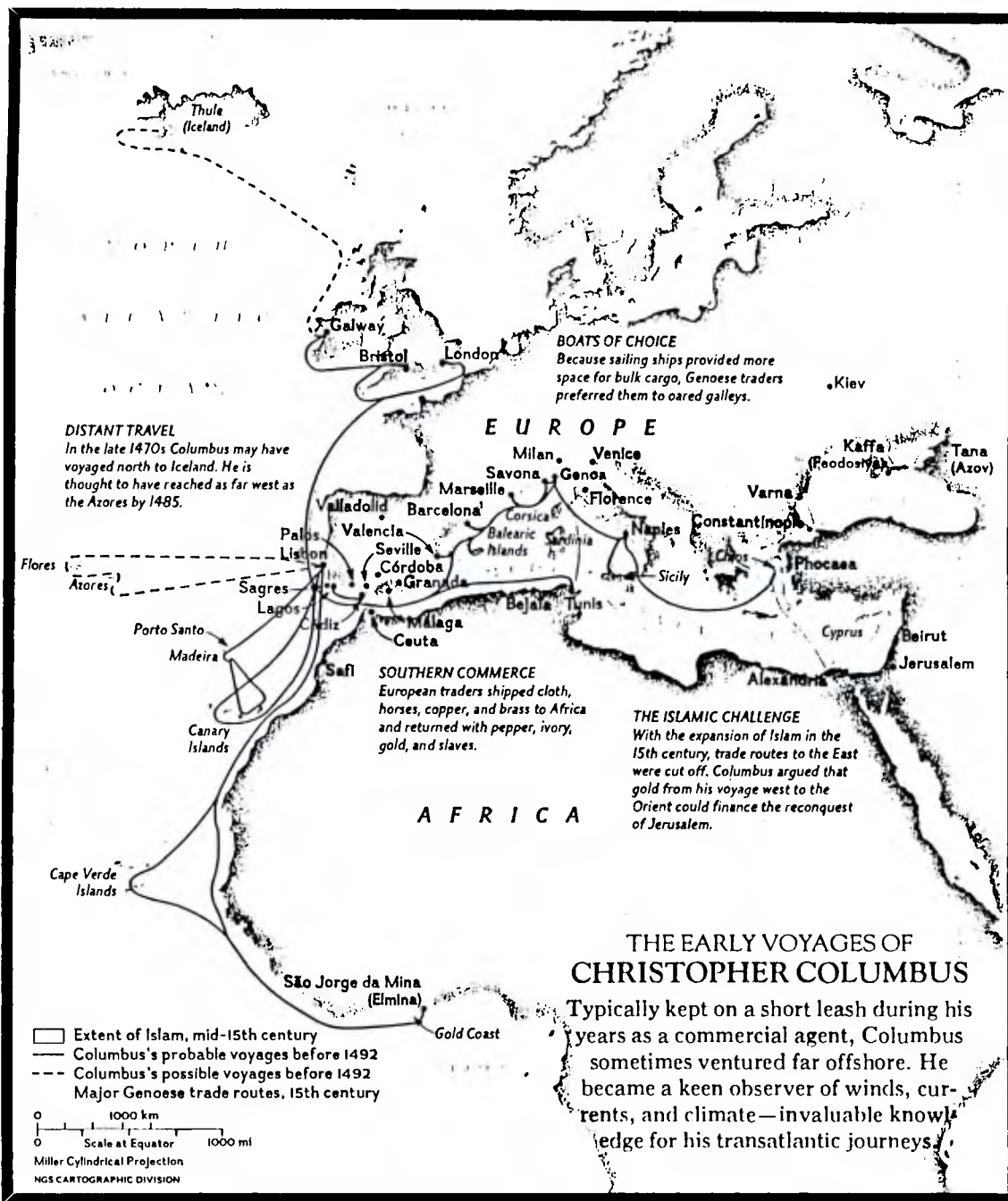
Cut the bark on these ever-green shrubs and out oozes an odoriferous, transparent resin called mastic. Cultivated on Chios, a mountainous island in the Aegean Sea, mastic shrubs were valued by the ancient Greeks, who prescribed the resin to purify blood and treat rheumatism. Columbus visited Chios at least once, sent by Genoese traders eager to cash in on this lucrative crop. Today mastic is used in varnishes, dental adhesives, and perfumes.

**C**HRISTOPHER COLUMBUS had left the Mediterranean behind when events occurred that would irrevocably link him with Atlantic exploration. In 1476 the Spinola and Di Negro families organized a trading venture to England. Five vessels sailed from Genoa, passed through the Strait of Gibraltar, and entered the broad Atlantic. Near Europe's extreme southwest point at Cape St. Vincent, they were attacked by French pirates.

In the bitter battle, ships from both sides

were sunk, including the one the Genoese agent was on. Although many drowned, Columbus reached shore, near Lagos in Portugal. Soon the young sailor made his way to Lisbon, where a new and important stage in his life began.

Lisbon's Praça do Comércio, where exploration caravels and spice ships once moored, still bustles with maritime life; beyond, the Tagus estuary widens out into the Atlantic. But time has erased virtually all traces of Columbus. A significant part of the 15th-century



Portuguese archives, as well as the Genoese quarter near the waterfront, was destroyed in the catastrophic earthquake of 1755.

In Lisbon, Columbus naturally established himself among the Genoese. He joined in a stimulating atmosphere of ocean exploration. A long rivalry between Portugal and Castile was continuing along the African coast and in the Atlantic. Maps displayed newly discovered islands: Madeira, Porto Santo, the Azores, the Canaries. There were also imaginary ones: Antilia, St. Brendan's, and Brazil.

*Search for Columbus*

Many sailors felt about the Atlantic as had 12th-century Arab geographer Al-Idrisi: "No one knows what is in that sea, because of many obstacles to navigation—profound darkness, high waves, frequent storms, innumerable monsters which people it, and violent winds. No sailor dares to penetrate it; they limit themselves to sailing along the coasts without losing sight of land."

So the Atlantic became known by the Arab name, Sea of Darkness. A 1367 chart depicted a giant figure with arm upraised, warning

against voyaging westward.

Despite such fears and encouraged by the remarkable Prince Henry the Navigator, the Portuguese proceeded to develop their seaborne enterprise. At Sagres on Cape St. Vincent, land's end in Portugal, Henry held symposia on navigation and cartography to pursue his goals: an eastern sea route to the Orient and exploration of Atlantic isles. His vessel of choice was the nimble, shallow-draft caravel, altered to carry square sails before the steady Atlantic winds. By 1420 the Portuguese had planted their first settlements in the Madeiras. Twelve years later, exploration of the Azores began. Meantime, the Portuguese were pushing



down the west coast of Africa. By 1470 they reached the Equator; the next year they found gold in Guinea (present-day Ghana). Castile soon challenged Portugal by disputing the claim to Guinea and settling the Canary Islands.

**B**Y THIS TIME Columbus was ready to advance his career. He courted Felipa Moniz Perestrello, whose father had been an Atlantic island colonizer before his death. When they married in 1479, commoner Columbus moved up into a noble family with access to the Portuguese court.

The young man from Genoa was sent by



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the Centurione and Di Negro families to Madeira as factor to handle their affairs. I found evidence that Columbus and his bride lived there for some time—not on Porto Santo, as popularly believed: When he later passed through the islands on his third New World voyage, he was welcomed as a former resident on Madeira but enjoyed no such greeting at Porto Santo, where he also put in.

Columbus was on Madeira in 1478, when the sugar transaction occurred that required his return to Genoa to testify. In the lawsuit he declared that he had a personal fortune of "more than 100 florins." Clearly the young factor had married well and risen in the world of trade.

By 1480 the couple had returned to Lisbon, where their son Diego was born. There, Columbus acquired from his father-in-law's widow the charts and documents describing the Atlantic voyages. These excited him,

stirring his developing interest in ocean exploration.

Perhaps among those papers he discovered a copy of a letter by Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli, respected Florentine geographer and mathematician, dated June 25, 1474, that was to be sent to Portugal's king. Another copy was found in the 19th century, at the back of one of Columbus's books and containing Latin errors typical of him. Charles

*Gold fever grips a laborer (below) shoveling and straining mud from the banks of Ghana's Ankobra River. Crowned by a golden galaxy, Chief Nana Yaw Asante (opposite) owns part of the river and leases stakes to prospectors. Columbus caught the fever too. "Anyone who has [gold]," he wrote, "can do whatever he likes in the world. . . . even bring souls into paradise."*



Hamilton firmly believes that the text is in Columbus's handwriting.

The letter displays Toscanelli's knowledge of travels to the Orient by Marco Polo and others and describes how one might travel to the East by sailing west from Europe. First, he said, you would reach Antilia (mythical) and then the rich island of Cipangu (Japan). It would then be a fairly short sail to the Asian mainland and its spices and precious stones. Further, the letter tells of the great prince of Cathay (China), the Grand Khan, who had sent emissaries to the Pope seeking teachers of the Gospel. These themes are repeated in later writings of Columbus.

With the letter was a map incorporating Toscanelli's theories. Columbus probably possessed a copy. The Toscanelli map and letter either began or confirmed Columbus's interest in the idea of sailing west across a relatively narrow Atlantic directly to Asia. These documents must have been among the mariner's most prized possessions.

**C**OLUMBUS BEGAN to collect evidence of what might lie beyond the western horizon. He sought sailors and island residents who could contribute to his growing store of rumor, conjecture, and data. He placed this material in what he called his "papers."

We know that he heard, and evidently believed, the tale of the island of Antilia and its Seven Cities. Supposedly, in the time of Henry the Navigator, a Portuguese ship was blown off course to the island, where the crew found remnants of settlement by an Iberian archbishop and six other bishops. Columbus also heard reports of other islands to the west of Madeira and the Canaries.

From one Martín Vicente, a Portuguese pilot, he learned that, some 1,400 miles west of Cape St. Vincent, the sea had yielded a piece of wood carved by human hand, which must have drifted from the west. A similar piece had been found on Porto Santo.

An avocation helped Columbus grow as a cosmographer: With his brother Bartholomew, who had come to Lisbon, he began to produce and sell marine charts. Other maps available in this marine entrepôt kept him abreast of new discoveries and settlements.

Prior to 1492, Columbus sailed extensively in the Atlantic, where he learned open-ocean navigation. In addition to the Madeira

journeys, Columbus tells us that he made a voyage to Porto Santo in command of two ships. He continued his interrupted 1476 trip to England, sailing there "with the Portuguese." On that or another trip he went to Galway Bay in Ireland. There, he reported, two bodies with "strange features" had washed ashore in two small boats. In a secondary source Columbus says that in February 1477 he traveled a hundred leagues beyond Tile (Thule), where he noted the immense tides. Perhaps he had reached Iceland.

The difficult northern navigation certainly appears very familiar to Columbus: "The trade and traffic from Spain to Flanders continues substantial. They are great sailors who sail this route. . . . In the month of January . . . it is rare that there are not some strong ENE and NNE winds. These . . . are savage, cold, and even dangerous."

In the log from his first voyage to the New World, Columbus displays his experience in the wintry Atlantic: "We will return from the Indies with the westerly winds, which I have observed firsthand in the winter along the coast of Portugal and Galicia."

His long passages southward were especially useful. Genoese trade with Portuguese Guinea and the new Castilian colonies in the Canary Islands involved Columbus in more than one trip from Lisbon to the African coast. He displayed knowledge of the Cape Verdes, the Canaries, and the Portuguese fortress of São Jorge da Mina (Elmina) on the Gold Coast.

These African expeditions further prepared Columbus for his enterprise of the Indies. They involved him directly in long-distance navigation and the outfitting of vessels for such voyages. They exposed him to the landscape and products of the tropics.

Now he knew, despite age-old beliefs, that the torrid zone was inhabited. This had wider implications: No place on earth was forbidden. Man could travel to, even settle, any part he could reach. His southern voyages involved Columbus in trade and barter with indigenous peoples—black Africans and Canarian Guanches. He also became acquainted with the slave trade, in which Genoese, Portuguese, and Castilians were active.

On his long African passages Columbus, like other dead-reckoning sailors, grappled with the problems of time and distance on the open sea. He says: "In sailing frequently





*Upholding religious tradition, a Holy Week penitent places a medallion of metal flowers on a crucifix in Savona, Italy. In the 15th century religious brotherhoods carried such crosses through the streets during annual festivals honoring their patron saint. Columbus—a fervent Catholic—may have participated as a member of a wool workers fraternity.*

from Lisbon to Guinea southward, I noted with care the route followed, and afterwards I took the elevation of the sun many times with quadrant and other instruments.”

Perhaps the most important insight gained by Christopher Columbus was his discovery concerning the great oceanic wind system. Along the Portuguese coasts and in the Madeira Islands, he had experienced the strong west winds that brought flotsam ashore from the direction of the sunset. Then, on voyages to Africa and the Canary and Cape Verde Islands, he felt the steady northeast trades. In this, Columbus reasoned, lay the secret to an Atlantic round-trip: Drop down south to go westward with the trade winds, and return at a higher latitude with the westerlies.

At last, Columbus felt ready. He determined to petition John II, the Portuguese king, for ships and men to undertake the Atlantic voyage. In late 1483 or early 1484, he approached the king, offering to find Cipangu and India. The king called in experts,

including astronomers and mathematicians, to judge the proposal. They turned the Genoese down, calculating that the Atlantic distances involved were far greater than he had estimated. Nonetheless, John II secretly sent a vessel to test Columbus's theory; it returned without reaching any shore.

**L**IFE SOON TOOK another turn for Columbus. With his wife's death in the early 1480s and the rejection of his proposal, he abandoned his career as merchant-navigator to follow his plan, now an obsession. He would seek support from the rulers of Castile and Aragon. When he left Lisbon, Columbus owed money to several Genoese merchants. Later, moved by conscience, he asked his heirs in his will to satisfy his debts anonymously.

In spring 1485 with his son, Diego, Christopher Columbus arrived by ship at the small Andalusian port of Palos de la Frontera. He intended to leave young Diego with his late

wife's sister, in nearby Huelva. This would free him to pursue his enterprise at court.

As to Columbus's appearance at the time, accounts agree: Plainly dressed, he was tall and heavyset, of ruddy complexion, with an aquiline nose set in a long face. His eyes were gray-blue and could sparkle with emotion. Although the widower was only 34, his hair already was white.

His accent immediately marked him as a foreigner to Castile, but Columbus could be eloquent when the force of his enthusiasm burst through the barriers of language. Beneath an outwardly cordial manner, tempered with gravity, there lay concealed a massive pride and a quick, fierce temper.

By now his spoken Genoese was probably tinged with a sailor's patois. He may have already acquired Castilian on voyages to Cádiz or Barcelona. Virtually all his writings not in Latin are in Castilian. But many Portuguese usages dot his notes and letters, showing that Columbus had also learned that language in Lisbon or at sea with Portuguese mariners.

In need of shelter until he could settle his son, Columbus heard that a local monastery, Santa Marfa de la Rábida, housed travelers. He and Diego walked the short distance from Palos to the monastery, carrying their personal possessions. In later years he must surely have considered his arrival at La Rábida providential.

A serene and lovely place, the monastery stands on a pine-covered eminence, overlooking the junction of the Tinto and Odiel Rivers where their estuary flows out toward the open Atlantic. This was a house of Franciscan friars, and its guardian, Antonio de Marchena, was to be a figure of supreme importance to the career and mission of Christopher Columbus.

Marchena belonged to the Observantines, a group with an apocalyptic agenda: Looking to the end times, when all the world would be converted to Christ, they hoped to recover Jerusalem's holy places from the Muslims. Significantly, these tenets became ruling motives in the life and writings of Columbus.

The Genoese mariner and the friar became fast friends. Columbus received spiritual

and intellectual counsel from Marchena, an educated man and dedicated cosmographer, and possibly accepted help in composing and reading Latin and Castilian. More important, the friar had access to the power structure at court.

Columbus's religious beliefs must have intensified during his time at La Rábida. He is reported to have been regular in prayer and at Mass and to have possessed and used a Book of Hours, reciting it like any churchman. Some later writers have expressed doubt about the sincerity of his faith, but it was not questioned by clergymen who knew him. Even beyond personal piety, Columbus began to believe that his plan for Atlantic navigation was divinely supported, that it was somehow connected with God's purpose for the world.

Antonio de Marchena wrote a letter on his behalf to Hernando de Talavera, the queen's confessor. The letter asked the right to petition the royal council, which made recommendations to the crown.

The itinerant court was then at Córdoba, more than a hundred miles away. Columbus made his way to the city and found it a crowded, bustling military camp, the advance base for the war to regain Granada.

**T**HE LAND to which Columbus had come was not yet the Spain we know today. The marriage in 1469 of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile united several Christian kingdoms. As their court moved around the land, the monarchs gained control over local nobles and authorities and built an army that would one day be Europe's most powerful. These were kingdoms on crusade against Islam. This 700-year battle, the *Reconquista*, had shaped a warrior people, created a dominant language—Castilian—and fostered ardent Catholicism. Christian rulers had pushed the Moors southeastward until they occupied only the Kingdom of Granada.

After submitting his petition, Columbus began a seven-year struggle for approval. He appeared repeatedly before Isabella and Ferdinand, making presentations to the royal

*Empire Plaza in Lisbon commemorates the seafaring glory days of Portugal—but not of Columbus. In 1488 his plan to sail west to the Orient was again spurned by King John II, after Bartolomeu Dias discovered a route east around Africa. Dejected, Columbus returned to Spain on his search for a sponsor.*



council and before learned commissions.

Offering the monarchs what he believed was the key to the riches of the Indies, Columbus was met with skepticism, even ridicule. The *letrados*, the advisers, disputed his belief in a relatively short Atlantic crossing, just as the Portuguese had done. Finally, in 1487, Columbus was dismissed.

Although he was given hope of future support, he felt personal rejection. With the bitterness of humbled pride, he swore that he would seek out authorities to confound his enemies. Another of his enduring traits was persistence: "I plow ahead," he said, "no matter how the winds might lash me."

In Córdoba, which became his home base,

Beatriz Enríquez de Arana, the orphaned daughter of a farming family, caught the widower's eye. They became lovers, and in August 1488 Beatriz bore him a son. Columbus named him Ferdinand, for the king. But it seems the ambitious man would not compromise his advancement by marrying a commoner; although it weighed on his conscience, he would never give her his name.

A contemporary, Andrés Bernáldez, describes how Columbus made his living at this time: "There was a man from the land of Genoa, seller of printed books, who traded in this land of Andalusia and principally in Seville, who was called Cristóbal Colón."

As a bookseller Columbus was participating in a veritable revolution. By 1480

King Solomon's treasures came from "Ophir, now called the Land of Gold, in India." The text describes how, from a kingdom on the Sea of Tarshish, he received silver, "elephants, peacocks and apes." There was something familiar about the quotations; then I recalled that the narrative of Columbus's fourth voyage to the New World and a letter from his later years repeat, almost word for word, the same themes—the search for King Solomon's mines, the gold of Ophir, the valuables from the Sea of Tarshish, the riches of India. To the end of his days Christopher Columbus would seek these treasures.

**P**RESUMABLY, the master seaman owned only a few books because he preferred compendiums like the *Historia rerum* and Pierre d'Ailly's collection of geographic tracts called *Imago Mundi*. These enabled him to avoid tackling lengthy and difficult works directly, for he apparently felt his way slowly into the world of knowledge.

Those works Columbus had, he read minutely, covering the margins with more than 2,500 notes. He underlined many passages, often drawing a pointing hand for emphasis. All but two of the marginalia are written in Latin or Castilian. Some are cryptic, and a few, like his signature, appear to be in code; many scholars have been struck by this secretive aspect of his nature.

Opinions differ widely about authorship of the notes. German paleographer Fritz Streicher claimed that only about 220 could be attributed to Columbus. On the other hand Italian scholar Cesare de Lollis believed that nearly all were his. Charles Hamilton agrees.

I found many connections between the marginalia and other Columbus writings.

Cross-references exist. Other unifying factors include language, handwriting style, and consistent Latin errors. The notes were clearly created by one dominant mind and form a coherent whole.

Many reflect his curiosity about astonishingly diverse topics: the Evil Eye, fine horseflesh, the Colossus of Rhodes, the death of Attila, medicine and disease, chameleons, the Punic Wars, Amazons, the Greek origin of Latin words, Icarus, Plato, St. Paul, Alexander the Great, one-eyed Scythians, birds of Egypt, and the precious stones and metals of

the Orient. One entry affirms his staunch Christian belief in life after death. Underlining Pliny's skeptical statement that mortals could not become immortal, he declares in the margin: "This is untrue."

His belief in the value of personal experience and practical experiment is also displayed. The notes disclose his struggle to measure, comprehend, and master the secrets of the earth. He was obsessed with time; he repeatedly measured the length of days, months, and the solar year.

Columbus calculated and recalculated the days until the end of the world. Among the *Historia rerum* endpapers is a chart entitled "An account of the Creation of the world according to the Jews." It recounts the years from the time of Adam "until now, the year of the birth of Our

Lord of 1481." Columbus determined later that there remained 150 years to bring earth's godless multitudes into Christ's fold.

Vital clues to his vision of the universe are given, and the writings reveal his debt to early geographers, especially Ptolemy, a second-century Alexandrian. Both believed in an immovable, spherical earth at the center of the universe. Ptolemy divided the globe



Following his forebear's footsteps, Cristóbal Colón XX signs the register at La Rábida, a Spanish monastery. Here in 1485 Columbus was befriended by Friar Antonio de Marchena, who became his contact with the royal court. Clergymen liked Columbus, whose ideas, notes, and sketches—such as the planisphere (right) showing the Far East as the Far West—were often heavily influenced by Scripture.



*Fierce winds warp ancient sabina trees on Hierro, westernmost of the Canary Islands. Such westward-bowing trees may have provided Columbus with proof that the trade winds of the Atlantic were reliable enough to drive him speedily toward the riches of the East.*

European printing presses—more than a hundred—were publishing scores of titles. Columbus also acquired his own small book collection.

**S**Eeking Columbus's thought through the works he owned, I returned to Seville's magnificent cathedral to visit the Biblioteca Colombina, which holds ten of them. There the director, Father Juan Guillén Torralba, seated me in a small chamber and carefully placed before me a printed book bound in leather.

The rumble of traffic outside, the close heat within the room—all distractions faded as I opened the small volume. It was perhaps

the most portentous thing I would ever hold in my hands: the *Historia rerum ubique gestarum*, or *History of All Things and All Deeds*, by Aeneas Sylvius (later Pope Pius II), printed in Venice in 1477. Christopher Columbus had cherished this book and studied it over many years. Leafing through the pages, I saw that they were covered with marginal notes.

At the end of the printed text were five additional handwritten pages, including Columbus's copy of the Toscanelli letter. On the last of these pages was a finely drawn, delicately tinted planisphere (page 35), with the Equator and other major dividing lines traced on its surface. As I puzzled out the Latin notes on the sphere, I felt a surge of excitement.

Here, I was certain, Columbus had placed his master plan on paper. His notation on the right side refers to the *sinus sinarum*, the sea of China. Combined with the note on the left, he indicates that the Far East is also the Far West. Never, I thought, could I come any closer to the mind, and driving vision, of Christopher Columbus.

Others, of course, had preceded me. One of them, the distinguished Italian interpreter of Columbus, Senator Paolo Emilio Taviani, has deduced that these five pages were once separate from the book. Researchers have also concluded that they were precious remnants of Columbus's original "papers," sewn into the end of one of his favorite books.

These pages evidently hold the earliest surviving writings of Columbus. On one he lists the Old Testament books and prophets on whom he relied. He tells of "the Holy Spirit, which with rays of marvelous brightness comforted me with His holy and sacred Scripture, in a high, clear voice." The Scriptures spoke strongly to him: passages about the East, the conversion of heathens, the recovery of holy Jerusalem, and the approaching end times, when Christ would come again.

Columbus's papers also refer to Flavius Josephus's *De Antiquitatibus*, stating that

into seven climate zones. So did Columbus. Ptolemy's earth featured one great island of Eurasia, with an incomplete Africa appended, surrounded by the Ocean Sea. Completely missing from Ptolemy's world and Columbus's were the Americas and the vast Pacific Ocean.

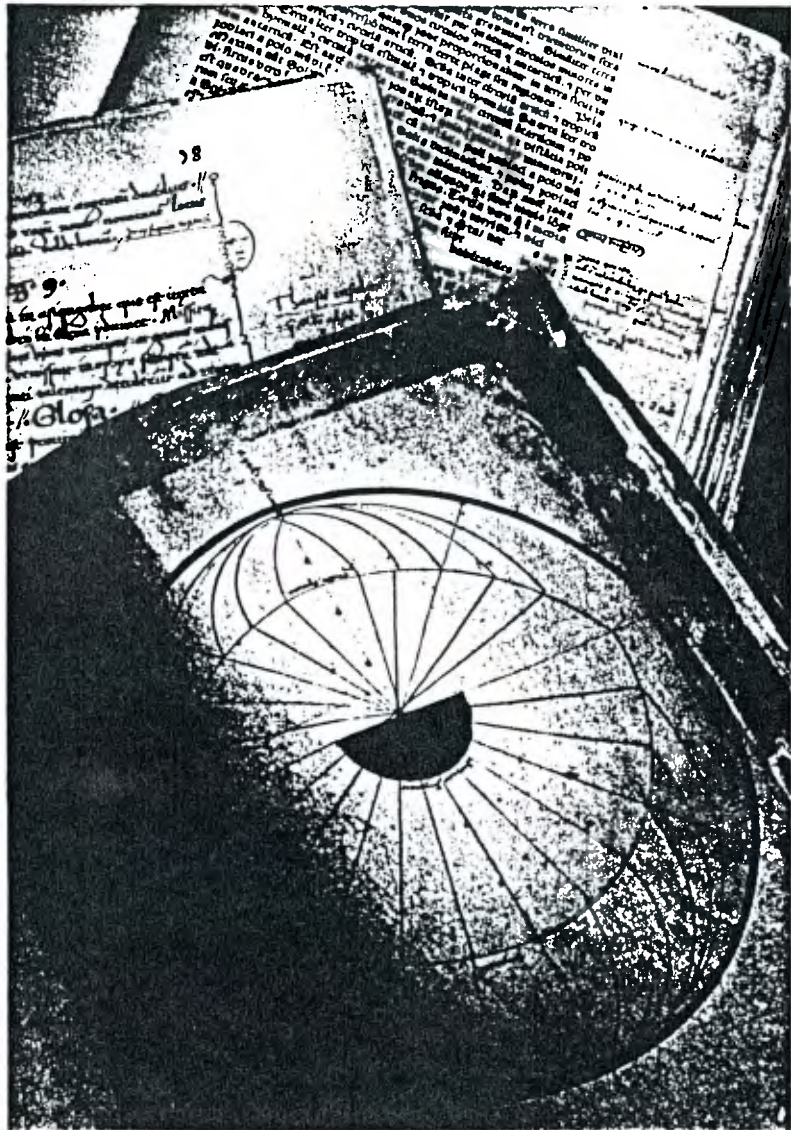
Columbus made a rough measure of east-west distance by calculations in hours and degrees. He knew that 24 hours of 15 degrees apiece would encircle the earth, but he clung to an outdated yet common misconception that the size of a degree was  $56\frac{2}{3}$  Roman miles. Consequently, he underestimated earth's circumference by some 25 percent.

Columbus eagerly sought scholarly support for his theory that Asia lay a relatively short sail west. In the *Imago Mundi*, he found an assertion from one of the apocryphal books of Esdras that the world was six parts land and one part ocean (actually more than 70 percent is water). D'Ailly quoted another statement: "According to Aristotle the end of the inhabited lands to the east and the end of the inhabited lands to the west are quite close and between them is a small sea, navigable in a few days." Columbus repeated this verbatim in the margin; one can almost see him nodding in agreement.

Thus, although as a practical navigator the Genoese knew his leagues and miles well, his foray into theoretical cosmography was a dismal failure. He clung stubbornly to underestimating the length of a degree and overextending Asia eastward. But, of course, without these errors, Columbus might never have made his momentous voyages.

Columbus's geography was colored by fantasy and legend. In one book he writes of wild

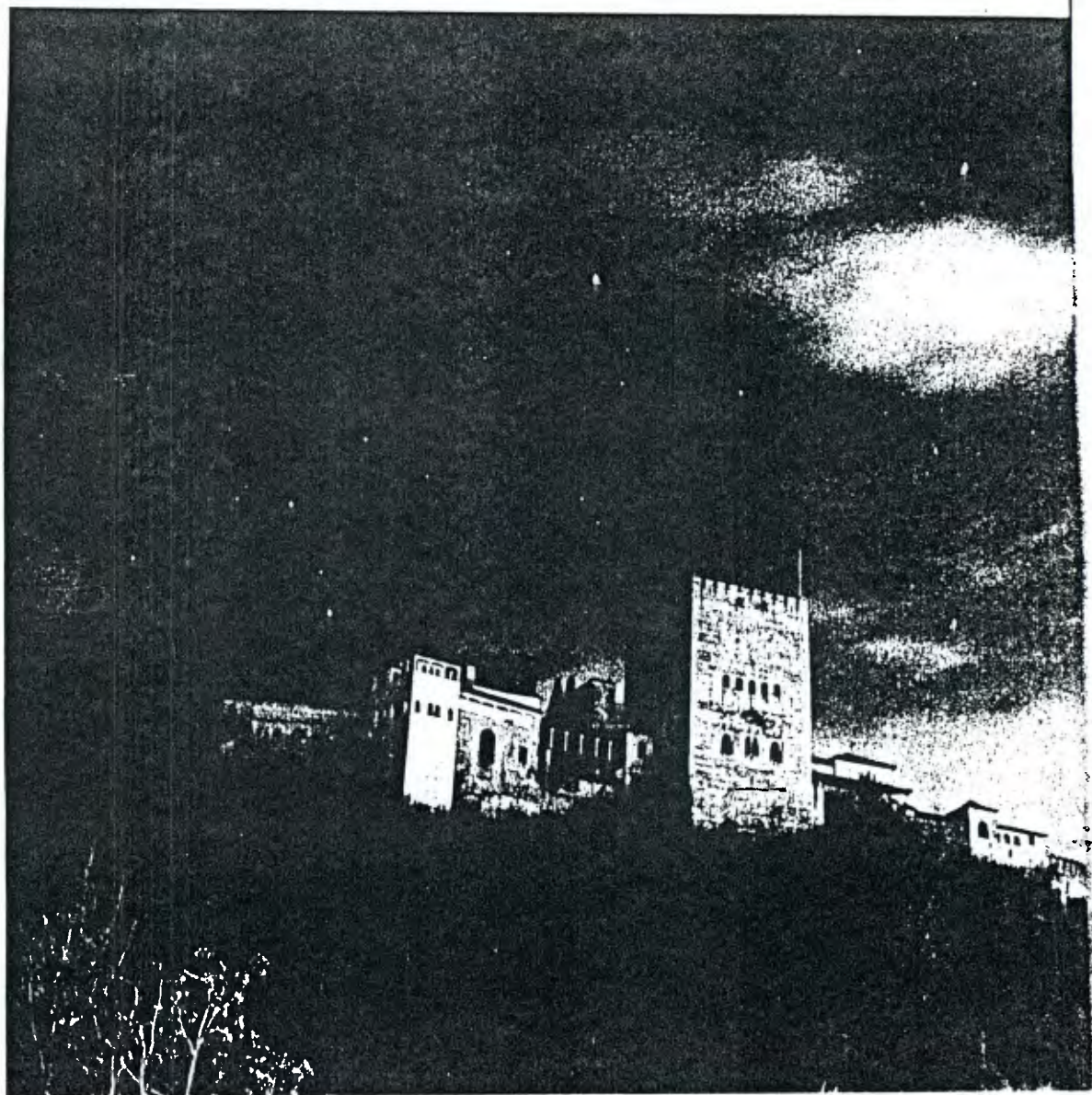
men at the ends of the earth "who eat human flesh; they have corrupt and horrible faces." Perhaps he expected to find what he had seen painted on parchment charts: Arabs riding camels, Christian king Prester John sitting on his throne in exotic lands. He hoped to see the Grand Khan, China's Mongol ruler, unaware that the Mongol dynasty had ceased



PHOTOGRAPHED AT BIBLIOTECA COLOMBINA

its reign more than a hundred years before.

In 1488 Columbus made another visit to Portugal, again seeking support from John II. The timing was abysmal: The court was celebrating the return of Bartolomeu Dias with two caravels from his voyage around the Cape of Good Hope, thereby opening the eastern route to India.



The urgency was all too clear: The Genoese would have to find funds for his enterprise in Castile or go elsewhere. He sent his brother Bartholomew to England to present the project to Henry VII and contemplated approaching the king of France.

A turning point came early in 1492 when Boabdil—the last of the Moorish rulers—surrendered the keys to Granada. Columbus was an eyewitness: “On the second day of January . . . in the great city of Granada, I saw the royal banners of Your Highnesses placed by force of arms on the towers of the Alhambra, the citadel of that city, and I saw the Moorish King come to the city gates and kiss the royal hands of Your Highnesses.” The long war against the Moors had ended;

now the energies of the kingdom could be directed outward.

At this critical juncture Columbus’s repressed pride broke through; he made extravagant demands that almost destroyed his chances for a royal agreement. He asked for the hereditary positions of Admiral of the Ocean Sea as well as Viceroy and Governor of lands that he might find, and requested a percentage of all revenues from these new territories.

Again his plan was rejected, then reconsidered, and finally approved. On April 17, 1492, he signed a contract with Castile that gave him the titles he had asked for and one-tenth of all revenues from his discoveries. But Columbus never lost sight of the crusading



*Last stronghold of the Moors in Spain, Granada's towering Alhambra stymied King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, who were determined to drive out the Muslims. Consumed by this holy war, they had little interest in Columbus and his incessant pleadings for patronage. But when the Moors surrendered in 1492, the monarchs, seeking new ventures, surrendered to Columbus.*

Spain and back, Columbus reached and explored the Bahamas and the Greater Antilles, encountered the great South American landmass, and coasted the Caribbean side of the Isthmus of Panama.

The islands and mainland he sighted did not resemble his vivid dream geography. Refusing to accept that his Indies were not Asia, he continued to seek the Grand Khan and the source of Solomon's riches. Exploring Cuba, he made his crew swear that it was the Asian mainland. On the coast of South America he thought he had found the "earthly paradise." Certain that Hispaniola was the "end of the East," he said: "Either it is Ophir, or it is Cipangu." He would go to his grave believing all of it.

**O**N RETURNING from his first voyage, Christopher Columbus was showered with honors. He rode out on horseback with King Ferdinand and enjoyed the unique favor of sitting in the presence of the king and queen. He was now to be titled "Don." Far indeed had the weaver's boy come; up, as Columbus himself wrote, "from nothing."

His triumph was uneasy and short-lived. Opposition grew at court, where many disdained him as a foreigner. And the brilliant navigator proved to be a harsh and questionable administrator: Rebellion flared in the colony he had planted on Hispaniola during his second voyage (see the article about La Isabela beginning on page 40), and he was returned to Spain humiliated, in chains. The crown already had opened the exploration of the Indies to other captains.

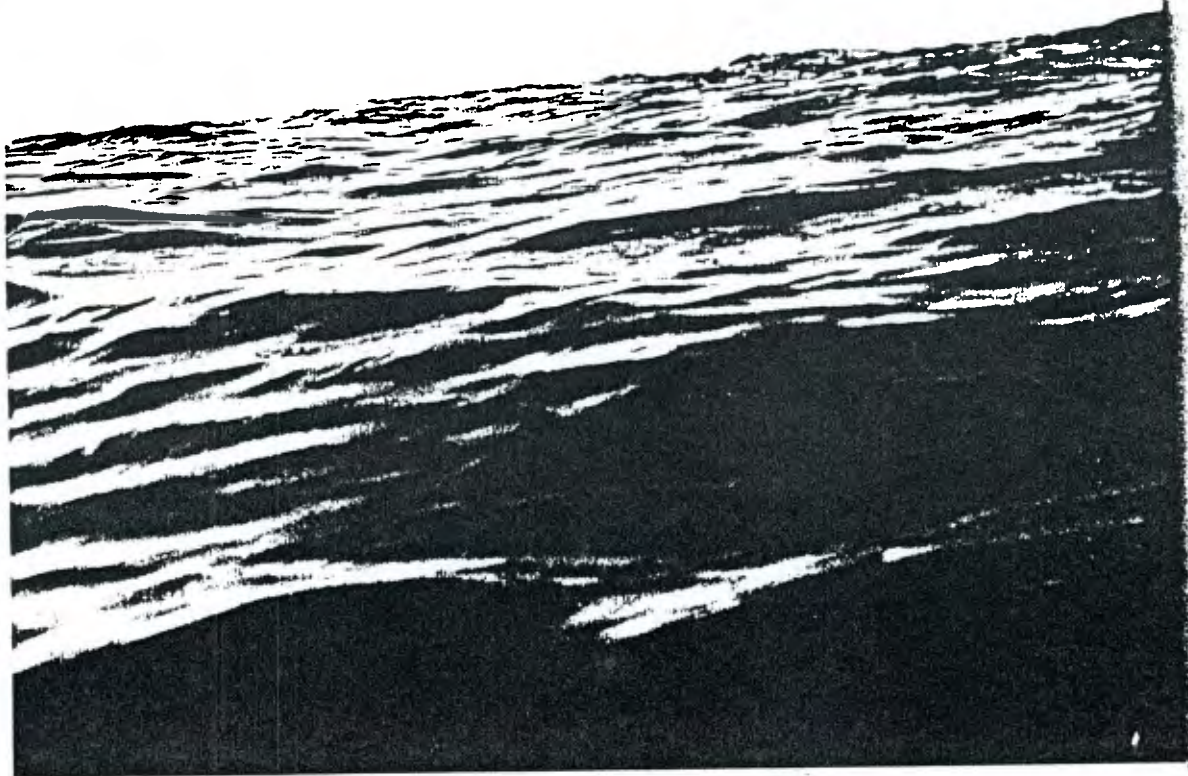
Columbus labored for restoration of his awards and benefits; all these he had carefully documented in his *Book of Privileges* to assure that they would be passed on to his sons and their descendants. Gradually he regained a degree of royal favor, and revenues

aspect of his journey; he intended that the forthcoming Indies revenues should primarily be dedicated to the recovery of Jerusalem from the Muslims.

Now, after years ashore, the sailor could return to his element: "I left the city of Granada on Saturday, May 12, and came to the town of Palos, where I outfitted three very good ships." On Friday, August 3, just before dawn, the *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Marta* sailed downriver to the sea. As the rising sun struck their sails, they were under way to the Canary Islands to catch the winds that, Christopher Columbus knew beyond all doubt, would carry them by way of Cipangu to Cathay and to India.

Ultimately, on four fateful voyages from





*"They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters," reads Psalm 107, "[the Lord] bringeth them unto their desired haven." But the Niña, Pinta, and*

he had been promised began to trickle in.

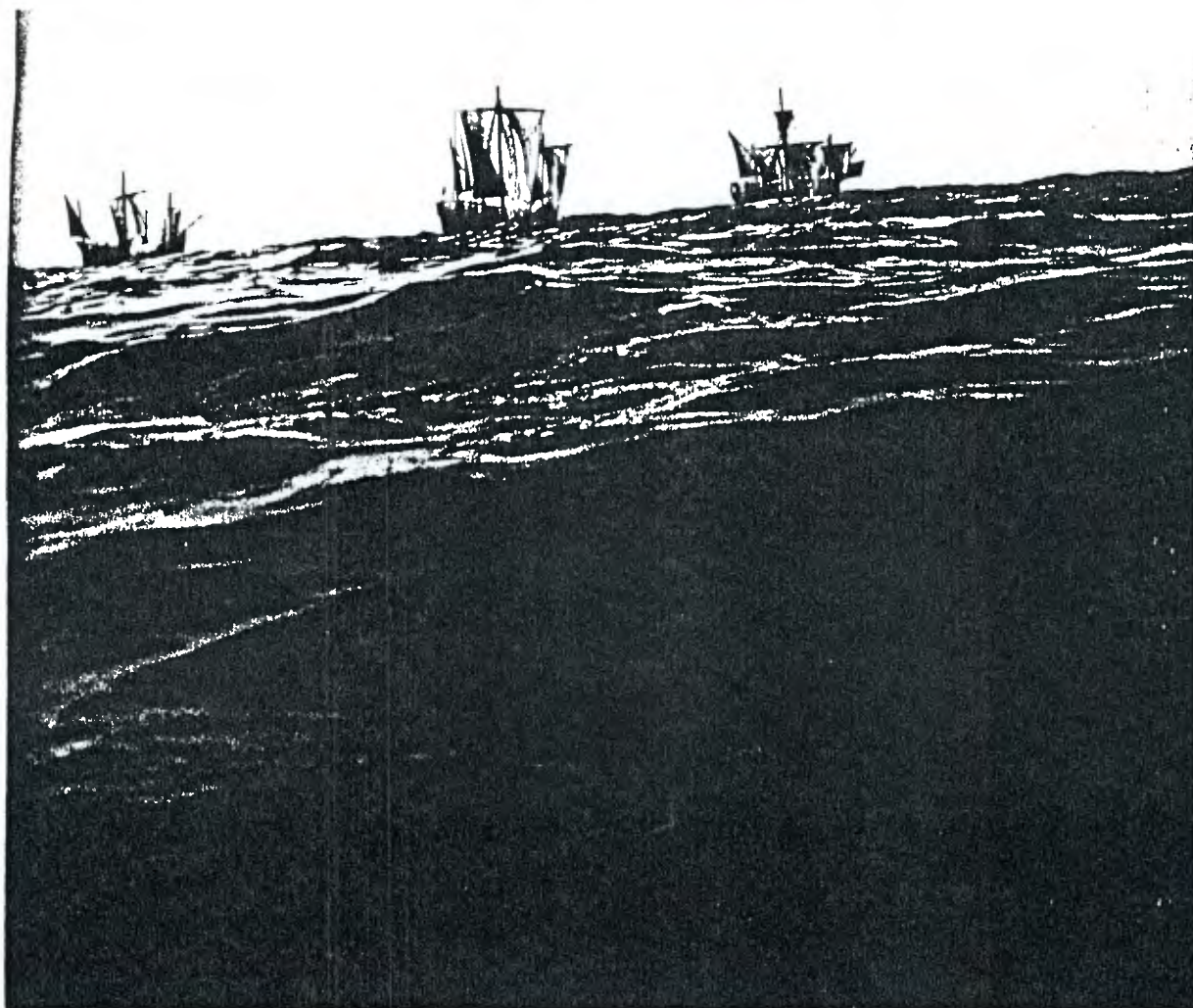
The last part of the Admiral's life was plagued with illness. On his first voyage he noted the "sore eyes" that later disabled him. He may have contracted malaria and typhus, and probably suffered from Reiter's syndrome, which combines eye and urinary tract disorders with arthritis.

Columbus was sustained by his firm religious faith. He resolved to give up science and "cleave to the Holy and Sacred Scriptures," for he was convinced that prophecies had been fulfilled by his voyages to the Indies. "God," he said, "made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth. . . . He showed me where to find it." With the help of clerics, he began to write his *Book of Prophecies*, which foretold the coming world unity.

No longer able to follow the court as it moved from city to city, he retired to a modest house at Valladolid. In the spring of 1506, at age 55, Columbus complained, "This illness now works me without pity." Cardiac complications had probably set in; his body was swollen with dropsy. The end was near. His testament reveals a conscience not yet at rest. He ordered Diego to "provide for Beatriz Enríquez, mother of my son Don Ferdinand, so that she might live decently, as a person to whom I am so greatly indebted."

On May 20, 1506, Christopher Columbus died, and was buried in Franciscan robes. Perhaps now the striver, the bearer for Christ, had found the paradise at the east end of the earth.

His body was removed to a monastery, the Cartuja of Seville. Yet his spirit was restless



*Santa María never reached the Orient, chancing instead upon another world. That fact eluded a devout and driven Columbus, forever famous for what he forever denied.*

even in death. His bones were shipped to Santo Domingo about 1540 to rest with honor in the cathedral. His presumed remains were moved to Havana in 1796 and thence again to Seville in 1899. But were they? The argument still rages; some claim that the wrong bones were moved from Santo Domingo and that he still rests in his beloved island of Hispaniola. So even the Admiral's honored dust still arouses passionate debate.

**W**HIO THEN WAS Christopher Columbus? A man both of and beyond his time, he bestrode the boundary between ages, possessing a nature rich in contradictions.

This most singular sailor was in fact an empirical mystic, within whom the temporal and the spiritual warred. A plebeian who

rose to noble state, he inwardly disclaimed the citadels of power while ardently seeking their privileges. Not highly educated, he deeply admired learning. Believing that his God would open for him the sea road to the earthly paradise, he felt empowered on his mission by the Holy Spirit.

At the end he had triumphed over his detractors to conquer the Sea of Darkness. While pursuing one vision, he inadvertently realized another: the outreach of Europe into a hitherto separate, but henceforth vastly wider world.

Truly this uncommon commoner Christopher Columbus began a process that, in words from a passage in one of the books of Esdras, "shook the earth, moved the round world, made the depths shudder, and turned creation upside down." □



V CENTENARIO  
LLEGADA DE CRISTOBAL COLON  
A AMERICA

COMISION NACIONAL PREPARATORIA - CHILE

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