

# **COLUMBUS: Controversies and Unsolved Mysteries**

*The facts behind the fiction*

A companion handbook to “The Columbus Conspiracy” mystery  
fiction thriller

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## INTRODUCTION: THE WEB OF FOG

*"In te Domine speravi: non confundar in aeternum"*

- *Epitaph of Columbus tomb*

Columbus life has never been consensual amongst historians. It is strewn with contradictions. Mostly, historians rely on documents produced decades or centuries later. The picture we have of the navigator is of an inspired, brilliant but mercurial and self-serving adventurer, lost at sea most of the times, an opportunistic climbing up the social ladder who made his great discovery by pure chance and never recognizing his mistake of reaching the wrong Indies, a tyrannical governor obsessed with gold, prone to atrocities against his own crew, let alone the cruelty, genocide and enslavement of the entire native population.

Although part or most of these accusations may be true, the contradictions and unsolved mysteries around Columbus are enough to warrant at least a certain level of healthy suspicion: the fairy tale fabricated over the past five centuries may be just a series of unfortunate coincidences mixed with charlatans and power politics... or it may be a cover up for something entirely different. The traditional account depicts a man dissociated of reality, a lunatic living his own illusions of grandeur, unable to use nautical instruments and confused about measurements or distance... but at the same time capable of extraordinary feats, not least deceiving one of the most powerful countries of his time for almost a decade.

The voyages of Columbus are so memorable exactly because they are loaded with mysticism, delusion, obstinate courage and drama. If nothing else, Columbus was a most skilful writer and actor, turning his four voyages into epic adventures and his life into a true Shakespearean play.

Historians were never quite convinced about the conventional view of Columbus as a poor, uneducated man from a family of Genoese wool weavers who inexplicably appears in Portugal and in about two years becomes fluent in Portuguese and Latin, masters cosmography, geography and mathematics, is admitted to the highly secretive senior counsel of king D. João II and his elite Board of Mathematicians and marries a high-ranked Portuguese noble lady of royal blood. This meteoric ascension in social and cultural status would be difficult today. It would be impossible in the XV century.

The traditional account, retold over and over again in schoolbooks, is ridden with contradictions, unlikely stories and forged documents. It lasted five hundred years and only recently is being revealed for what it probably is: a fairy tale. Only recently, over the past two decades, in depth research by historians, calligraphists, etymologists, genealogists and DNA tests have started to shed some light on the intricate web of deceit and forgery weaved by kings, popes, chroniclers and opportunistic charlatans. These recent discoveries have chattered to pieces the massive illusion constructed around the life and identity of Columbus.

The contradictions on the official narrative have been recognized for a long time, but in the absence of reliable alternative sources, it stuck. The rags to riches story created a global hero, celebrated by dozens of statues all over the world, from Genoa to Central Park in NY. The mystery around his identity and origins, the rags to riches novella, it all contributed to elevate Colon's to global stardom: the myth of a man who, by strength of character, vision, genius and courage, fought the “fossilized” middle ages flat Earth cosmography of the church and found the New World. We now realize that “glorified” image is pure non sense, or at least tells only part of the story.

This deep web of contradictions, misinformation and lies about the life of Christopher Columbus has proven a fertile ground for conspiracy theories and heated debates amongst historians, sparkling the imagination of many – thus adding even more to the confusion and noise around Columbus, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish proven facts from hearsay.

Almost all original documents on which the history of Columbus is based have disappeared – either due to the rigid policy of secrecy adopted by Portugal during the Age of Discoveries (scientific knowledge, shipbuilding technics, ocean winds and currents, maps and land discoveries were treated as state secrets and transmission of such secrets punished by death penalty), by the destruction of original documents or even by outright adulterations and falsifications. So, historians have had to resort to narratives created decades after Columbus' death.

The list of contradictions, mysteries and unsolved questions around Columbus is indeed vast. Here is a summary of some of the key facts and open questions we will explore in this book:

## **1. Contradictions and forgeries behind the traditional account. Is it a farce?**

- a) The name Columbus is an adulteration of Colon, which is the name used in all documents in Portugal and Spain during his life until 1504 (when Ruy the Pina replaced the name Colon by the Italian version Colombo), including in royal deeds and letters. His son Fernando, in the “Historia del Almirante”, plainly refutes the name Columbus and insists on Colon, which has a rather different meaning: Columbus means “pigeon”, whereas Colon means “member”. The name Columbus started being used in an Italian translation of the first letter to Luis de Santangel and later picked up by the Portuguese chronicler Ruy de Pina. The discoverer is still known today as Colon in all Spanish speaking countries.
- b) The name Columbus was paramount to the claim of an Italian rich merchant who tried to establish a link between Colon and the Genoese Columbus, purporting himself as heir of the titles and riches of the Admiral during the Inheritance Trials of 1578-1608, more than 70 years after Colon’s death.
- c) The documents that support the Genoese thesis, in particular a supposed testament (Mayorazgo) of 1498, have substantial signs of forgery and were deemed fake by the Spanish court at the time, who refuted them. This testament was never mentioned by Colon (he refers to a will written shortly before the last expedition in 1502) and only appeared for the Inheritance Trials, more than 70 years after Columbus death.
- d) DNA studies conducted in 2003 from the remains of Colon, his brother Diego and his son Fernando disproved any link between Colon and the many Columbus families in Italy previously identified as candidates for the Genoese thesis.
- e) The original “Historia del Almirante”, written by his son Fernando Colon, disappeared around the time of the Inheritance Trials. The only surviving version is an Italian translation created around the time of the Inheritance trials. There, Fernando supposedly claims his father was born in Genoa. How convenient for the claims of the Genoese merchant that suddenly, at the Inheritance trials, an unknown Mayorazgo and an Italian translation of Fernando’s book suddenly appear, claiming his Genoan origins.
- f) Colon never wrote in Italian, not even when writing to Italians like Toscanelli or to the Bank of San Giorgio in Genoa or to his brothers. All his letters and documents, even side note scribbles on the books of his massive library, were written in Portuguese, Spanish or Latin.
- g) The Columbus or Colon name is not found in any document before 1487. Colon was a profligate writer and we have a detailed account of his life after 1484, when he ran away to Spain supposedly persecuted in Portugal as suspect of participating in the 1484 conspiracy to kill the Portuguese king. But there is absolutely no reference to a Colon or

a Columbus before 1484, despite being part of the elite Junta dos Matemáticos, commanding Portuguese expeditions and marrying a high noble lady. Is it possible that Christopher Colon was a pseudonym adopted when he moved to Spain?

**2. Was Columbus a high-born noble, instead of the son of a poor family of Genoese wool-weavers?**

- a) Columbus married a high ranked Portuguese noble lady, Dona Filipa, member of the elite Order of Santiago, related to the royal family and cousin of the nobles and elite diplomats of Portuguese maritime discoveries, Vasco da Gama and Pedro Álvares Cabral. In the highly hierarchical European society of the XV century, a poor wool weaver of no distinction would never be allowed to marry a high noble lady like Filipa. As a Dona of the All Saints Convent in Lisbon, Filipa's marriage would have to be approved by the master of the Santiago order... king Dom João II himself! This marriage took place in 1489, supposedly just two years after Columbus washed up, penniless and uneducated, in the shores near Lisbon.
- b) When Queen Isabella awarded Columbus an "enlarged" coat of arms after his successful return, the document clearly refers that in the fourth quadrant of the arms there should be "the arms your family used to wear". It is quite evident Columbus was already a nobleman with a coat of arms long before his great deeds.
- c) Queen Isabella Royal Decree of 1492, establishing the agreement to sponsor Columbus first expedition (the "Capitulaciones de Santa Fe"), refers to Colon as "Don", a nobility title. The Royal Decree states: "By these presents, we dispatch the noble man Christoforus Colón with three equipped caravels over the Ocean Seas toward the regions of India". Columbus is unequivocally called a noble man before his expedition, whereas the traditional account portrays him as a poor wool weaver granted nobility status by Queen Isabella in reward for the discovery of the western indies.
- d) For the preparation of the first expedition, the Spanish crown contributed with 1.000.000 maravedis (loaned by the Jew Luis de Santangel). Some say the Queen pawned her jewels as collateral for the loan, but that is rather unlikely: Castella crown jewels were already pawned to fund the Granada war, conquered in 1492. Columbus himself contributed with 500.000 maravedis of his own money, which would be impossible for the son of a poor wool weaver.
- e) The Virgin of Navigators, painted in the early XVI century and exposed in the Seville Cathedral (that hosts the tomb of Columbus), shows Columbus dressed in an intricate

embroidery with a pattern of pomegranate trios. Concealed in the sleeve of Columbus robes is... a crown!

f) When Colon appears in Spain in 1484 (eight years after supposedly washing up, poor and uneducated, after swimming six miles from a shipwreck to a beach near Lisbon), running away from the Portuguese King João II after a failed coup to kill the King, he was received in Spain with all the honours of a high noble... years before he even sat foot on the Santa Maria for his first “official” voyage! For several years after 1484, he was hosted as a “hidalgo” (literally, “son-of-someone”, meaning “of high lineage”) by the Count of Medinaceli, an influential Castilian noble. Why would an Italian wool weaver of no pedigree be lodged by high “hidalgos” when he arrived in Spain, long before his claim to fame?

### **3. Why has the image of Columbus been adulterated?**

a) In “Historia del Almirante”, his son Fernando describes the physical aspect of Columbus: “Tall, above the average height, with a long and authoritative face, aquiline nose, blue eyes, pale skin with flushed red cheeks. His beard and hair, blond during his youth, have quickly faded white from his hard labors”. Two known portraits painted in the early XVI century by Spanish painters who were likely to have actually seen Columbus (including the Virgin of the Navigators, at the Seville Cathedral) depict him as tall, blond with long face and aquiline nose.

b) However, the most widely recognized image of Columbus is a portrait in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, portraying Columbus with much more “Mediterranean” looks: dark hair (covered with a tricorn hat), round fat face, bulbous nose and large neck. It was painted by Sebastiano del Piombo around 1529-1530, 24 years after Columbus death by an artist who probably never saw Columbus in person. Most striking is the inscription that runs at the top of this painting, identifying the sitter as Columbus, and the signature. The inscription was certainly included much later than the original painting. In those days it was unusual for an artist to sign or legend a work. Piombo's biographer, Michael Hirst, considers the portrait was probably of a cleric in Bologna. The Metropolitan Museum recognized the dubious claim of the inscription and now legends the painting as “Portrait of a Man, said to be Christopher Columbus”).

c) Why have other portraits likely to be closer to Columbus true resemblance been ignored? Why has a “long face, aquiline nose, blue eyes, blond hair faded white” been transformed into a dark haired, round face image?

**4. Was Columbus a lunatic, lost at sea, who grossly underestimated the size of the Earth and discovered the New World "by pure chance"?**

a) Despite being often depicted, by the conventional historical view, as a lunatic dreamer who wrongly under-estimated the length of the Earth's longitude-degrees, there is strong evidence that Colon was highly competent in the sciences of his time and conscientiously fooled others by tampering instruments, distorting facts, lying – while simultaneously controlling with an iron fist all information and data collected by the pilots of his fleet. He maintained double logbooks of the journeys, one for his personal files and the other to show the Spanish court. Later in his life, he confesses to using tampered nautical instruments to confound the rest of the crew.

b) On his first expedition, Colon took a straight line to his final destination, crossing the Atlantic in 33 days (which is still impressive by today's standards). It is likely he knew exactly where he was going!

c) Two of the three ships in his first expedition, the Niña and Pinta, were tiny vessels, only 50 to 70 feet from bow to stern. If Columbus was preparing for a long expedition around the globe, even by his erroneous claims to the Spanish Queen about the size of the Earth, he surely would have taken larger, studier vessels capable of carrying supplies for a long voyage. But instead of Naus (carracks), he chose the tiny Caravela Latina (caravels) of Portuguese design, prized for their speed and maneuverability. But instead of the lateen-sails rigging used for the African voyages (triangular sails required to sail upwind in the return journey, against the prevailing northern winds of the eastern Atlantic), Columbus changed the rigging when the fleet stopped in Canarias and ordered the first two masts to be rigged with square sails (known as Caravela Redonda), for ocean speed. That rigging combination made ships like the Niña and the Pinta some of the best sailing vessels of their time. Columbus knew exactly where he was going and the type of winds he would find.

d) In his inaugural voyage to (re)discover the Americas, he secretly took with him sticks of cinnamon, which later a Portuguese sailor "discovered" on the Caribbean islands and showed to Martin Pinzón, convincing him they were in the spice lands of India. This was probably the only cinnamon ever found in the Caribbean! Was Colon an ultra-calculist master of deceit (contrary to the traditional tales of a lunatic madman who couldn't find his ways on the high seas), or did he know in advance he was not heading towards India and took the cinnamon to support his farce?

e) Columbus never – never – called the lands he discovered “India”, but always “the Indies”. He was careful to avoid an open lie. He knew perfectly well he was far away from India. This distinction has remained in Portuguese language: the Indians from India are called “Indianos” whereas the Indians from America are called “Índios”.

f) The episodes where Colon seems to be lost at sea, could not use navigation instruments or grossly underestimated the size of the globe increasingly look like a ruse, a charade to conceal his true intentions. When trying to convince the Spanish court to support his voyage, he uses a measure of the degree at the equator of 56,66 miles, underestimating the true size of the equatorial circumference by 20%. But the calculations on his personal logbook demonstrate he had a pretty good idea of the globe’s true size, erring by only 5%.

g) During the moon eclipse in Saone, an islet on the eastern tip of Hispaniola, he wrote in his personal diary an estimate of 5h (just 83°) west of Cape Saint Vincent in Portugal, whereas India was 15h (225°) west! Colon knew perfectly well he was still more than 140° from the true India! Despite recording on his personal logbooks the correct 5 hours’ longitude difference from Cape Saint Vincent to Hispaniola, he changed to 10 hours in the letter he wrote to the Pope. The impunity of such blatant lie to the Pope can only indicate the extent of Colon’s deceit.

h) There is a fascinating event in the last expedition, where Colon, facing hostility from local indigenous peoples on whom the crew depended to source food and water, accurately predicted a moon eclipse and staged a mystical showoff that convinced natives he was of a divine nature and promptly brought the fleet the supplies they needed. How astonishing that a XV century man accurately predicts a moon eclipse thanks to his cosmographic knowledge, but at the same time is a fool that doesn’t know how to use an astrolabe!

## **5. Was Columbus Portuguese? Could he have been an agent of Dom João II to deceive the Spanish Catholic Monarchs?**

a) Columbus married a high ranking Portuguese noble lady, a Dona of the All Saints Convent, whose marriage had to be approved by the Grand Master of the Santiago Order... the Portuguese king himself, Dom João II!

b) Colon’s Spanish writings have many Portuguese-adapted words, as if he fell back to his native language when missing a specific Spanish word.

c) Even after moving to Spain, Colon maintained regular correspondence with the king of Portugal, who treated him as “our special friend in Seville”. Colon was invited to join the audience of Bartolomeu Dias with King João II in 1488, after the historic rounding of Cape of Good Hope that cracked open the maritime way to India. Why would the Portuguese king share critical State secrets with a foreigner working for the Spanish Monarchs?

d) Just before Colon’s departure in the first expedition, King João II sent him the valuable solar declination tables created by Master Zacuto (a Jewish cosmographer who worked with the Portuguese). These tables allowed calculating latitude during daytime, adjusting for the annual path of the sun in the sky.

e) After returning from his first voyage back to Europe, instead of heading to Spain, he set a conscious, constant route to Lisbon. He claims it was due to a sudden storm setting him off track, but the fact is that he set out on a quasi-straight line to Lisbon after departing Azores. After anchoring in Lisbon, Colon travelled 80km for an audience with the Portuguese king, in Vale do Paraíso, and then stopped at Vila Franca de Xira for an audience with the Portuguese queen. He remained two weeks in Portugal before heading to Spain.

f) The fourth quadrant of Columbus’ coat of arms shows the arms “his family used to wear”: five anchors arranged in a saltire pattern (St. Andrews diagonal cross). The saltire pattern, unusual in nobility lineages, is also used in the five “wounds of Christ” inside the shields of the Portuguese flag central sphere.

g) For many years before appearing in Spain in 1484, Colon commanded Portuguese maritime expeditions, was privy to the scientific and technological secrets of the most advanced nation of his time and a trusted counsel of king D. João II. He most likely took part of the Portuguese-Danish expedition of 1476/77 that reached Nova Scotia and Newfoundland in the Canadian coast.

h) The Caribbean islands were shown in Portuguese maps long before Columbus first voyage (the Antilles, the “ilhas antes dos Açores”, or islands behind the Azores). It is likely Columbus knew the Canadian coast and the Caribbean islands beforehand and simply “rediscovered” them.

i) The ceiling of the large Discoveries Hall of the royal Palace of Mafra, painted in the XVIII century, depicts the grand heroes of Portuguese discoveries: Infante D. Henrique (Henry the Navigator, as he became known to world history, despite barely having set foot on a caravel) , Pedro Álvares Cabral (discoverer of Brazil) Vasco da Gama (discoverer of the maritime way to India)... and a dishevelled man in shackles, with a serpent

threatening his throat as if preventing him from speaking, unrecognizable but for an inscription at his feet identifying him as Columbus... what is a Genoese traitor who sailed under the Spanish banners doing on the ceiling of a Portuguese royal Palace depicting national heroes?

## **6. Was Columbus of Jewish origin?**

- a) Columbus benefited from the key support of Jews like Luis de Santangel and Gabriel Sanchez in the financing of the first expedition.
- b) In his first expedition, Columbus used Abraão Zacuto's Solar Declination Tables, written in Hebrew.
- c) He enlisted dozens of Jews on the crew of his first voyage. The ships sailed out of Spain on 3 August 1492, the exact day of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain by Isabella's royal decree. Contrary to the usual practice, Columbus didn't spend the night before departure in vigil in a church, but required the crew to board, sealing off the ships before midnight. On the day of the expulsion, Columbus' ships set sail, a symbolic new Exodus in search of a new Promised Land.

## **7. What is the meaning of Columbus signature? Columbus may have been "the last Templar", a member of the Order of Christ with a secret mystical mission.**

- a) Columbus' signature is a cryptic anagram in a triangular form, probably of a cabalistic nature, whose meaning has eluded scholars for 500 years. Despite its overall meaning remaining concealed to this day, Columbus himself attributed a lot of relevance to it, to the point of insisting on his testament that his heirs must continue using that precise signature, as if it carried a hidden message for posterity.
- b) The top two lines of Colon's signature, triangular shaped, suggest a link to the Templars: the three 'S' standing for Spirito Sanctus Salvatore, a Templar motto.
- c) The 'XMY' in the third line of the signature may have a deeper hidden meaning, standing for Christ, Mohammed and Yahweh, invoking Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and Templar doctrine of protecting all faiths, Christians, Muslims and Jews.
- d) There is some consensus about the ':XpoFerens.' in the last line of Colon's signature. The ":" is used in most modern languages as a punctuation mark preceding a list of related ideas. It is named after the Latin word 'colon' or the Greek 'kolon'. In Latin and Greek 'colon' is not a punctuation mark, but a concept meaning 'member', or a 'part of

a larger idea'. 'Xpo' comes from the Greek Χριστός, meaning "Christ" (just like we write Xmas for Christmas). So, ': Xpo' probably means 'Member of Christ', or 'Member of the Order of Christ'. And 'Ferens' is a form of the Latin verb 'fero', meaning "to carry, to walk, to transport". So, ': XpoFerens' means "Member of the Order of Christ" but also "Carry Christ". Crispoferens is also a Latinization of Cristovão, the Saint who carried the Christ Child across a river. Columbus signature ": Xpo ferens" can thus be decoded as "member of the Order of Christ", a Portuguese Order created to receive the Templar knights after their extinction in 1312 by Pope Clement V.

- e) His personal writing desk, taken to the United States in the early XX century and presently in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania at the Columbus Chapel of Boal Mansion Museum, shows three scallop shells on each side, plus another shell above the key lock, surrounded by eight-pointed stars. The scallop shells are the symbol of Santiago de Compostela, used by the pilgrims as they walk the Santiago Paths. Filipa, Colon's wife, was from a lineage of knights of the Santiago Order. We can reasonably assume Colon himself was a member of the Santiago Order or its sister Order of Christ.
- f) In Columbus' coat of arms, the fourth quadrant includes his previous nobility arms, arranged as five anchors in a saltire pattern over a blue field. The saltire pattern is unusual in nobility lineages. It is the St. Andrew's cross pattern used in the Scottish flag and in the crosses within the shields of the Portuguese flag. The two countries have strong Templar traditions (Order of Christ created in Portugal to receive the Templars after the pope's extinction order; Roslyn chapel in Scotland).
- g) Columbus may indeed have been the last Templar Knight (or rather, a member of the Order of Christ, created by Portuguese King Dom Dinis to shelter the Knights Templar as they fled other European countries when Pope Clement V and French King Felipe IV extinguished and exterminated the Templars in 1314). Was there a secret Templar mission in Columbus' attempt to establish a colony in a new, empty land, where those prosecuted by the Inquisition (Christian heretics, Jews, Muslims) could find protection?
- h) The Templars had for centuries dreamed of a new Promised Land of spiritual freedom and purity...the Avalon of Arthurian tales. In the Book of Prophecies Columbus wrote in his final years, he extensively refers to a quest for the Promised Land.
- i) When Bobadilla was sent to arrest Colon and remove him from commander of Hispaniola, he accused Colon of using a secret, cryptic alphabet to write coded letters, supposedly part of a conspiracy to rebel against Spain and establish a new kingdom in Hispaniola. Unfortunately, those cyphered letters were lost in the shipwreck of 1502. Nevertheless, Colon's books and letters are dotted with unknown characters, potentially

from a secret cryptic alphabet. Was he communicating a secret message to the recipients of the letters, on the side of the main “official” texts?

j) Columbus’ cryptic signature contains a “hooked X”. This “hooked X” appears in places far apart, suggesting a current of symbolic meaning uniting sites with strong Templar traditions: American sites associated with pre-Columbian Templars (Westford Knight, Kensington Runestone); Scotland’s Rosslyn Chapel from where Henry Sinclair supposedly crossed the Atlantic to Nova Scotia (carved in the wood); Portugal’s Church of Santa Maria dos Olivais in Tomar, next to the Covent of Christ, the Templar’s headquarters (stained glass in the main nave and outside wall carvings); Christopher Columbus cabalistic signature.

k) In 1495/96, an armada of at least 11 ships mysteriously disappeared from La Isabella due to a hurricane. The city was abandoned and the settlers moved to la Hispaniola. However, despite long and hard efforts to find the lost Columbus ships – including a dedicated project from the Center for Underwater Science of the University of Indiana and a National Geographic series looking for the “lost fleet of Columbus” using the most modern search technology – the fleet was never found. What happened to Columbus lost fleet? Is it possible it was never lost at all, but used for some other “secret mission”?

## **8. Was there a conspiracy to hide Columbus' true identity and mission for 500 years?**

a) Over 500 years, many have gone to great lengths to hide the true identity of Colon. Original documents were tampered with, leaving us with “official documents” where words have been deleted or replaced, collages of texts were inserted to replace parts cut out, documents with pages ripped off. Falsifications have been produced to create a fable that successfully deceived historians for five centuries. Attempts to investigate the unsolved mysteries and many contradictions of the conventional theory of the “poor Genoese weaver” have constantly been met by active censorship: books forbidden, documents destroyed and researchers ordered to stop poking around.

b) Two genealogy books were published in the early XVIII century, by different authors but using the same pseudonym, Dom Tivisco. One of the books was published in Portugal and subject to censorship by the King, who banned the book by royal decree. The other was printed aboard a ship outside any national borders and then circulated in Spain. A lot of trouble around two genealogy books, published 200 years after Colon’s death. The genealogy books contain a reference to Colon that says: “The greatest Portuguese discoverer of all times was the last sprout of Henrique.”

- c) Boal Mansion is a treasure of unresolved mysteries. Besides the Santiago shells on the Admiral's desk, there is also a genealogical tree of the House of the Dukes of Veragua, Colon's descendants, starting with the three original Colon brothers of the lineage... but without parents. The ivy line that follows the lineage just disappears out of the side of the paper, omitting the ancestors, as if the three brothers were born out of cloud of fog by magical summoning.
- d) At the end of the XIX century, a stream of documents was made public by the City of Genoa, including forged collages with different handwritings and blank sections.
- e) In the XX century, the Spanish historian Ricardo Róspide supposedly found an important document about Columbus, but it was silenced (probably censored by the conservative religious dictatorships of Salazar and Franco). He confessed to a close friend that if he published what he had found he would face grave danger. Róspide died shortly after. The document or proof Róspide uncovered was never found.
- f) The epitaph in Columbus original tomb is premonitory: "In te Domine speravi: non confundar in aeternum". As if leaving a message for the future: "I believe in God, I shall not be confused forever".

Colon's life is ridden with contradictions and open questions. No-one honestly believed the farce of the poor Genoese wool-weaver turned vice-Roy, but it kept being parroted away for the lack of a definitive alternative. The traditional story became widespread because it is endearing: rags to riches just by sheer brilliance and perseverance. Colon has a mystical aura of social mobility, just like a Walt Disney story. All that is required to create a good lie is to create a plausible lie and repeat it exhaustively. As time goes by, facts are forgotten and the nicely fitting lie becomes an acceptable truth. Alternative plausible theories, for the lack of irrefutable proof, have been simply ignored: better the devil you know than the devil you don't...

However, there have been some academic breakthroughs around Colon since the turn of the century. The investigation of the past two decades has only just started to unveil the thick layer of contradictions, forgery and fog created around Colon and his expeditions.

The power struggles between Portugal and Spain, the two superpowers of their time, could possibly justify some conspiracy or cover up around Columbus for a few decades. But what is clearly inexplicable is that such censorship continued relentlessly for 500 years! What political, economic or religious interests could justify such secrecy?

Are the contradictions and controversies around Columbus simply the chance result of fortuitous errors, political manoeuvring and self-interested charlatans, adding up over time to an enormous farce? Or is there a much bigger reason, some sort of conspiracy that connects all those loose ends? Behind all the contradictions and unsolved mysteries, could there be something else? We may never find out his true name, but more importantly, why have so many for so long conspired to cover up his identity and true mission?

## THE AGE OF DISCOVERIES: A “SPACE RACE” BETWEEN PORTUGAL AND SPAIN

While cruising through the mysteries and lives of those great adventurers who gave “new worlds to the world”, we are spectators of a turning point in human history and the birth of the modern world.

For centuries, the Arabs dominated the land routes of the silk road and the Italian republics of Venice and Genoa monopolized the Mediterranean trade up to the Pillars of Hercules, in the Gibraltar straight. Spices were more than a commercial commodity. They were claimed to have almost-magical properties, used as elixir to cure certain diseases and in concoctions for enhanced sexual prowess. They masked the flavor and odor of rotting food. They were exotic luxuries worth fortunes. Since the Romans, beyond those Pillars of Hercules lied the “Mar Tenebroso”, the Sea of Darkness, full of monsters and dangers. The sun set down to the west by entering the water in boiling cascades at the end of the world.

At the beginning of the XV century, the majestic, impressive vessels of the Chinese Ming dynasty sailed the Indic Ocean in a unique display of strength and diplomatic show-off. There were no weapons aboard those impressive ships, but the sheer size of the fleet and the riches brought with it to bestow gifts on the “barbarians” was enough as a show of dominance.

Less than a century later, the Chinese fleet had retreated and China closed itself to the world, to an extreme point where building sea-faring vessels was a criminal offence. The Portuguese had dominated the Atlantic winds and currents, rounded Africa through the Cape of Good Hope, reached India and discovered Brazil. Over the following decades, Portugal and Spain divided the world between the two. Portuguese fleets reached Brazil, India, China, Japan, Indonesia. The Spanish “Conquistadores” took control of Latin America, decimating ancient civilizations. In their return journeys, the fleets bought a display of colours, languages, cultures, spices and ideas that would melt the last bastions of the medieval ages. And well, yes... also slaves, who would be the grounding force to colonize the American continent.

### PORUGAL AND THE AGE OF DISCOVERIES

In 1415, a tiny country of less than one million inhabitants in the western corner of Europe set off across the Mediterranean to conquer Ceuta, a display of courage and dare from the new founded Aviz dynasty. From the ashes of the succession crisis, the

bastard João, Master of the Order of Aviz, claimed the throne to himself by popular acclaim and against the preferences of the nobility. He married Filipa de Lencastre, from the English house of Lancaster. The Portuguese father and English mother raised five sons and one daughter, all profoundly religious but also ambitious, proud and wide-minded: Henry the Navigator who would found the Sagres School and establish the scientific and technical basis of the Age of Discoveries, bringing together the most prominent minds of his time; Pedro, a prince who travelled the world and became known by his immense culture, and was the regent until his nephew Afonso V came of age; Duarte, who would be King of Portugal after his father, known as the Philosopher King; João, grandfather of Queen Isabella of Spain and King Manuel I of Portugal; Fernando, the Saint Infante, who died in captivity in Fez to prevent returning Ceuta to the Moors; and Isabel, Duchesse of Bourgogne.

Within a few decades, by mid- 1480's, Portugal was the most advanced scientific and maritime power of the time, attracting the most brilliant mathematicians and cosmographers to Lisbon and the Sagres School founded 40 years earlier by Henry the Navigator (Infante Dom Henrique). Throughout the XV century, the Portuguese crown followed a relentless effort to push south through the African coast, not just establishing trading outposts but also looking for the passage into the Indic and the route to the spice lands of India.

By 1470, Portuguese sailors had crossed south of the Equator, disproving the myth the fleets would fall into an abyss of boiling waters for being too close to the sun or that they would not be able to return north due to the globe's curvature. In 1485 the Portuguese scientists led by the Jew Zacuto created the Tables of Solar Declination at the Equator, which allowed to establish a boat's position based on the sun (until then, navigation was based only on the polar star, which is not seen from the south hemisphere). And the great mathematician of the Junta dos Matemáticos, Pedro Correia da Cunha, brother in law of Christopher Colon, was working on an estimation of the length of the globe's degree, which he achieved with such accuracy it would take 200 years to improve on his calculations.

Henry the Navigator and his School of Sagres established Portuguese supremacy in terms of nautical science, cosmography and sailing techniques. Over decades, with massive costs, Portuguese "Caravelas" steadily run down the coast of Africa looking for the passageway into the Indic ocean and the route to the spices, gold and silks of the east. In the return voyages, they had to perform a long westwards arch in the south Atlantic to follow the prevailing trade winds, reaching to the "Antilles", the Caribbean islands officially (re)discovered by Columbus in 1492.

By the end of the XV century, the spice trade had shifted and with it the balance of power.

Besides riches, this was a religious and empire-building enterprise, embedded in the value-system of medieval knights. Europe and Christianity were under pressure on its eastern border: the Crusades to recover Jerusalem had failed, the Ottoman empire had just conquered Constantinople (Istanbul) and pushed on... The Atlantic was the only available route to expand Christianity, and maritime discovery expeditions were not only a great feat of commercial and financial enterprise but also an act of faith blessed by the Pope - who signed Bulas for each approved expedition, blessing the sailors with absolution of all sins and the King with rights of ruling the newfound lands.

The world became a global village, for the first time, under the vision and curatorship of the House of Aviz, bringing to Europe a flurry of new cultures, colours and languages that definitely put an end to the Middle Ages and laid the foundation of the global economy. A country of less than one million people moved itself from the periphery of Europe into the centre of the world, a maritime empire of planetary reach that immodestly and presumptuously took what it considered its God-given right: gold and slaves from Guinea and Brazil, pepper and precious stones from India, cinnamon from Taprobana (Ceylon/Sri Lanka), clove from the Moluccas (Indonesia) and intricate jewels from China. It set in motion the forces of globalization and 500 years of western violently imposed supremacy over the rest of the world.

## A “COLD WAR” THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

But in the mid 1480's King João II had another concern. He understood that Granada would soon fall, thus removing the last bastion of Arab occupation of the Iberian Peninsula. With the Spanish War of Reconquista approaching its end, King João II rightly intuited what the Spanish monarchs would do just after the fall of Granada: turn their attentions to the Atlantic. This would set off the competitive race between the two countries to reach and claim...well, the world.

It was in retrospect a true Space Race, similar to the race to reach the moon between the USA and USSR in the XX century (though with significantly more deaths). In 1482, Diogo Cão planted the first two “padrões”, large stone pillars with an iron cross and an inscription, to mark the limit his caravels had reached: one in present-day Benguela, Angola and the other in the mouth of River Zaire, Congo. After these, the Portuguese sailors kept hauling stone pillars at marking points of their expeditions. These were men-sized stone pillars, transported thousands of miles from Lisbon and are

a statement of intentions, like an American flag planted on the moon or the “greetings to the universe” in 55 languages of the gold record carried on Voyager spacecraft.

Undoubtedly, the Age of Discoveries constituted a turning point in human history, jump-starting the shift from Middle Ages to Renaissance and henceforth the industrial revolution. It is, in the scientific and technical progress it required, the utter courage and ambition it demanded and the overreaching social, artistic and cultural changes it unlocked, truly comparable to the Space Race – I dare say, the impact of the Age of Discoveries vastly surpasses the Space Race... it would require the next SpaceX mission to Mars to discover wild animals and plants and intelligent creatures in Mars to take the Space Age to the same level of social and cultural impact as the Maritime Age of Discoveries.

At the turn of the century, the terrifying ocean had been conquered, giving humankind a new sense of technical power, free-will and self-belief. For the first time, humanity had a reasonable understanding of the shape of the world. For centuries, the Pillars of Hercules (the Gibraltar strait) marked the limit beyond which no sailor would venture. Legend has it that the Romans had engraved an inscription in the Pillars of Hercules saying “Non plus ultra” (nothing further beyond). In the XVI century, the inscription was erased.

## CONTRADICTIONS AND FORGERIES

Historians were never quite convinced about the conventional view of Columbus as a poor, uneducated man from a family of Genoese wool weavers who inexplicably appears in Portugal – the old tale says he wrecked off the shore of Lisbon and swam 6 miles to reach land. Swimming such long distance would be a feat even for an athletic good swimmer.

Less than two years after washing ashore, penniless and illiterate, to Lisbon, this man becomes fluent in Portuguese, Spanish and Latin, masters cosmography, geography and mathematics, is admitted to the highly secretive senior counsel of king D. João II and his elite Board of Mathematicians. In 1479, he marries Dona Filipa Moniz Perestrelo, a “fidalga” of royal lineage, cousin of the elite Portuguese diplomats and discoverers, Vasco da Gama and Pedro Álvares Cabral. Dona Filipa was one of the twelve “doras comendadoras” of the All Saints Convent, where she lived, an elite place affiliated with the Order of Santiago. As a “dona” of All Saints, her marriage would have to be approved by the Grand Master of Santiago, who at the time was the King himself!

A poor Italian wool-weaver or even ascending merchant would never have access to the Convent, reserved for the high nobility in a highly stratified society. How odd, or how convenient, that the log books of the Convent where the marriage of Dona Filipa must have been recorded, with the true name of her husband, were never found. This meteoric ascension in social and cultural status would be difficult today. It would be impossible in the XV century.

All evidence suggests that Colon was a high ranked noble long before the expedition that made him famous, not the uneducated, penniless son of a poor Genoese family of wool-weavers (see detailed chapter on this issue).

Another tell-tale fact is that the three Italian brothers (Christopher, Bartolomé and Diego) never wrote between themselves in Italian, but in Spanish or Latin! The letters written by Colon to the Italian cosmographer Toscanelli, to his Italian friend at Las Cuevas Monastery Friar Gaspar Gorricio and to the Genoese Bank of Saint George, were written in Spanish or in Latin, never in Italian. All his letters and documents, even the exhaustive side notes he used to make on his books, are in Spanish or Latin.

In the very few instances Colon tries to write in Italian, he shows a total ineptitude and commits gross errors that reveal he was never used to the language, not even orally. He was not even able to use the right form of “I”: he uses the Spanish “Yo” instead of the Italian “Io”.

The fairy tale of Columbus was born out of secrecy and disinformation. Just add greed and trickery and you get the perfect ingredients for a Mexican telenovela...

The swindler appeared 90 years after Columbus death. Baltazar Columbus, a rich Italian merchant, presented himself to the Spanish Council of the Indies as the heir of Columbus, during the successions and inheritance trial of 1579-1609 (known as the "Pleyto"), conducted by the Real y Supremo Consejo de Indias.

After the death of the fourth Admiral in 1578 without any direct heirs, a legal battle ensued to claim the inheritance titles, riches and rights. A lot was at stake during those trials. Over the 30 years of the trials, several Italians tried to claim their links, often with the political support of the city of Genoa. Anton Colombo, from Placentia, was rejected for not being able to prove any relationship. Bernardo Colombo, from Cogoleto, also failed the con, accused of producing a false genealogy. The Genoese merchant Baltazar Columbus tried to claim the genealogical link between Colon and his family, presenting as his proof a 'testament' (Mayorazgo) supposedly signed by Columbus on 22 February 1498, which starts with the words 'I, Christopher Columbus, born in Genoa...'.

How extraordinary. Colon and his heirs go to great lengths to hide his true origin, and yet, 90 years after it was written, a testament appears which so clearly and conveniently states the Admiral's place of birth. As it happens, the claims of this Italian merchant were dismissed by the court as a fraud and the Mayorazgo as a forgery: it is not "legitimate, nor authentic, nor solemn (...) after analysis of all the judges of the investigation Council, it was proven to be nothing more than a simple piece of paper". And yet, many continue to insist on using the Mayorazgo to support the Genoese theory!

Baltazar Colombo also presented witnesses, including a monk that stated under oath to remember the birth of the Colombo brothers in the castle of Cuccaro. Colon was born around 1450, the monk statement was made in 1580. Even if the monk was a young man of 20 when he witnessed the birth of Colombo, by 1580 he would be...150 years old!

The true testament was written by Columbus in 1502, before embarking in his last expedition. However, this 1502 "true Mayorazgo" disappeared, replaced in the annals of history by the "fake Mayorazgo" of 1498...

The succession and inheritance trial was concluded in 1609, recognizing Nuno Álvares Pereira Colon e Portugal – descendent of the marriage of the third grandson of Portuguese hero Saint Dom Nuno Álvares Pereira with the granddaughter of Colon – as the true heir and fifth Admiral of the Indies.

That fantasy has later been arduously defended by the city of Genoa, to claim its own global hero.

Between 1892 and 1896, almost 400 years after Colon's death, the Italian Columbus Commission published a series of documents known as the Raccolta Colombina. In those documents, the Italians go to great lengths to demonstrate the existence of a Columbus family from Genoa. The only thing the Raccolta documents prove is that there was a poor family of wool-weavers named Columbus (a rather common name), from Genoa... and so what?

Besides, many documents of the Raccolta are manipulated: manuscript copies without the originals, documents with insertions and collages of different sources. The lack of credibility of many documents led Ángel Duvale, a Spanish academic, to say that the Italians "should have eliminated those false documents".

Finally, in 1904, the city of Genoa published the Documento Asereto, a document supposedly dated 25 August 1479, presenting a Christofforus de Columbo, of unknown parents, born in Genoa in 1451, who was sent to Madeira to buy sugar... Moreover, the Documento Asereto is nothing more than loose sheets bundled together to look like a notarial booklet. The original document contains full empty pages, different handwritings and parts of text written over other text. It does look, very much, like a fraud.

The traditional account, retold over and over again in schoolbooks, is ridden with contradictions, a well-orchestrated conspiracy that lasted for five hundred years and only recently is being revealed for what it is: a fairy tale.

Colon and the powerful people around him never wanted his true origins and mission to be known to the world! At least this surely is consensual. His son Fernando Colon writes these blatant words in his "Historia del Almirante": "He wanted to be unknown and uncertain his origin and homeland".

So, considering all the contradictions and loopholes in the Italian thesis, who was Columbus after all? There are plenty of theories about Colon's true identity. Genoa, Portugal, Cataluña, Galicia, Ibiza, Madeira, Greece... all have been advanced as his birthplace. Which simply demonstrates how well the secret was hurdled. For instance, it has been suggested Colon was an illegitimate son of the pope Martinho V, whose birth name was Otto Colonna. It has also been suggested he was the illegitimate son of Henry

the Navigator, who supposedly lived a life of celibate. There are plenty of alternative theories, but we simply don't have facts to irrefutably prove one or the other.

What we do know is that the true identity and mission of Columbus is hidden in a deep fog, and we cannot take the traditional Italian thesis at face value.

Any attempt to get at least a bit closer to a true understanding of Columbus and his deeds must recognize that there is a lot of myth-making PR or even outright manipulation of facts around Columbus. He was turned into a global celebrity, a national Italian hero and a symbol of the New World, with more than 100 monuments worldwide.

The mystery around his identity and origins, the rags to riches novella, it all contributed to elevate Colon's to global stardom: the myth of a man who, by strength of character, vision, genius and courage, fought the "fossilized" middle ages flat Earth cosmography of the church and found the New World. We now realize that "glorified" image is pure non sense.