

Ingrid Kurz

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS AND HIS INTERPRETERS

Introduction

The great Genoese, Portuguese and Spanish navigators, conquistadores and explorers appear to have been the first Europeans to have systematically had recourse to the services of interpreters. When they set out on their voyages and expeditions, they generally enlisted "interpreters," i.e., people who had picked up Arabic or other foreign languages by living in the foreign countries. References can be found in a great variety of archives of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. From the writings of Marco Polo and the reports of other traders who had been to the Far East, Christopher Columbus knew that Arab traders had reached his expected goal—Cathay (China) and Cipango (Japan)—before him by sailing eastward. Thus, when in August 1492 he set out on the expedition that led to the discovery of America, he, too, "... was careful to include a few men in his crew who would be able to converse in Arabic" (Roditi, p. 5). As it turned out, however, they were of no use in the New World (Sierra, p. 157). Columbus' logbook contains several entries referring to the use of interpretation and the overcoming of language problems, with specific mention of an interpreter by the name of Luis de Torres.

Columbus' First Voyage (August 3, 1492–March 15, 1493)

Christopher Columbus was but one among many who believed one could reach the Orient by sailing directly westward. Seeking support for his "Enterprise of the Indies," however, he was repeatedly rebuffed—first at the court of John II of Portugal and then at the court of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. Finally, after eight years of supplication by Columbus, the Spanish monarchs, having conquered the last Moorish stronghold, Granada, decided to risk the venture and give him their support. Articles of agreement were signed on April 17, 1492. On August 3, 1492, Columbus sailed from the town of Palos, Spain, with three "caravels," the *Santa Maria* (100 tons), the *Pinta* (60 tons), and the *Niña* (60 tons).

According to Columbus' logbook/diary, the crew of the *Santa Maria* was composed as follows:

Commander: Cristoforo Colombo

First officer: Peralonso Niño

Interpreter: Luis de Torres

Provost: Diego de Harana

Scribe: Rodrigo de Escobedo

Officers of the Crown: Rodrigo Sanchez de Segovia, Pedro Gutierrez

Forty sailors

After halting at the Canary Islands, Columbus sailed west from September 6 to October 7, when he changed his course to the southwest. With a smooth sea and favoring winds, the voyage across the Atlantic was made in a little over five weeks. But to the fearful sailors, the voyage seemed endless, and on October 10 a small mutiny had to be quelled. In his logbook entry, Columbus reported that he was expecting the sailors to start a fight against him with their knives and went on to say that "... I was not alone. Chachu, de Harana, the two Royal officers and the interpreter stood next to me, willing to sacrifice their lives."

Two days later, on October 12, the Admiral landed on a small island to which he gave the name San Salvador and which is now known as Watling Island in the Bahamas. He took possession of the land in the name of the Spanish rulers, while the natives gazed with awe at their strange visitors.

On that very first day when he stepped ashore on San Salvador (called Guanahaní by the natives), Columbus—after describing the natives and their surprise at the beards of the Spaniards—noted the following in his logbook: "On my return I shall take six of these men with me in order to show them to the King and the Queen. Besides, they are to learn our language." Taking captured natives back to Europe, showing them to the people at home, converting them to Christianity, teaching them Spanish and using them as interpreters on future expeditions were common practices at the time (Sierra, p. 158).

Columbus' logbook entry for October 14 is more specific: "We took seven natives aboard the *Santa Maria*. Luis de Torres shall endeavor to teach them Castilian so that we can use them as interpreters."

It seems, however, that not all of the natives Columbus had selected were particularly tempted by the prospect of undergoing interpreter training and being presented to the Spanish monarchs. They were by no means willing to exchange their island for a voyage to Spain, as testified by a logbook entry on October 16; two of the natives Columbus had intended to turn into interpreters jumped overboard. Columbus let them go for fear of losing the natives' friendship.

Less than two weeks later, on October 27, Columbus sighted Cuba (called Cubagua by the natives). On October 29, he reported that another native whom he had intended to take back to

Spain had fled.

On November 1, having reached what is today known as Laguna de Morón, Columbus spotted a sizeable settlement and—by way of sign language—learned from the natives that their king lived somewhere in the center of the island, a four-day journey off. He immediately decided to send two envoys—a sailor by the name of Rodrigo de Jerez and his interpreter, Luis de Torres, who spoke Arabic, Hebrew and Chaldean, in the hope that the "Oriental" ruler of Cubagua would understand one of these languages.

Five days later, the two envoys were back, but their report was disappointing. The logbook entry of November 6 tells of their having encountered a settlement consisting of some fifty huts, where they were given a festive reception by the natives. Luis de Torres talked to them, but nobody understood him. As an interpreter Luis de Torres had clearly failed on that occasion. His mission was not altogether in vain, however. He came back with the first authentic report of a strange habit of the "Indians"—the smoking of tobacco.

On November 12, Columbus described the scenic beauty of the densely populated islands he had discovered since stepping ashore on San Salvador and again commented on the difficulties of communicating with the natives: "Communicating with the natives is difficult because on each of the islands a different language is spoken. The Indians from Guanahaní could not speak a single word with the inhabitants of the island I reached yesterday."

Having realized that the first load of prospective interpreters he had taken aboard on San Salvador might not be sufficient to overcome language barriers in the "Indies," Columbus made sure to recruit additional natives from other islands. Accordingly, on November 21, he noted in his diary: "From the islands I took several natives on board—seven men, seven women and three boys—in order to take them to Spain." Having learned from previous experience, he had the men's wives put aboard the *Santa Maria* to make sure the men would not try to escape.

On December 5, 1492, Columbus reached another large island (Haiti), which he called Hispaniola. Across the harbor Concepción they discovered an island which they called Tortugas, as it was inhabited by thousands of tortoises. There Columbus, when sitting down to dinner on December 16, was informed about the arrival of an Indian "cacique" accompanied by more than two hundred of his subjects. He confided in his logbook that he presented the "cacique" with amber beads and orange-blossom water and showed him coins bearing the images of the Spanish King and Queen as well as the Royal flag and the Holy Cross, ... "but he did not understand me."

On Christmas Eve, the *Santa Maria* was wrecked on the north coast of Hispaniola. Out of the timbers of his wrecked flagship Columbus built Fort Navidad. Leaving about forty men at the

fort to found a colony—the first European settlement in the New World—he sailed home on January 16, 1493, and on March 15, 1493, the *Niña* and the *Pinta* were back in Palos, Spain.

On his subsequent voyages Columbus was to benefit from the interpreting services of one of the natives captured on the first voyage and taken back to Spain—a young man who was christened Diego Colón and was taught to understand and speak Castilian.

References

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