

Columbus' letter to the king and queen of spain, 1494



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Part One

Christopher Columbus made landfall on an island which he called Espanola in December 1492, after setting sail from Spain about four months earlier during his first voyage.[1]He continued to explore the Caribbean, taking possession of the islands in the name of Spain, God and his sponsors, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Through his journey, the Italian explorer discovered new people, fertile land and enormous economic potential in the “ New World” that he claimed to have discovered. In addition it was noted that natives of the island Espanola wore gold jewellery, as a result Columbus and his men prioritised the location of the gold deposits on the island.[2]This valuable metal acted as a catalyst for the Spanish exploration and conquests of the Americas.

The ‘ Letter to the King and Queen of Spain’ , written by the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus, is not only a report of discovery and exploration of Espanola but also a reflection on the nature of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. From the analysis of the primary source document, there are three motives to the Spanish expansion; authority, religion and the discovery of gold. There is no exact date for when this document was written but it has been dated back to the years 1493-1494 around two years after his first voyage.[3]The audience of this letter is the Catholic Kings, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. This is obvious from the informative tone and persuasive, flattery language employed by Columbus throughout the document as a way to attract his funders. The document was written with the aim to advise the Spanish monarchy on how to plan and establish the commerce and colonies of Espanola and of the other islands.

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In the first four points of his letter, recommendations were made highlighting the three motives behind the Spanish conquest. Firstly, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain saw their accomplishments in the spreading of the Christian faith. Therefore, when Columbus claimed these lands for the Spanish crown, he sought out to convert the 'Indians' to the Christian religion. In point number four, Columbus wrote: "...parish priests or friars to administer the sacraments, to perform divine worship, and for the conversion of the Indians." It is evident that there was a push for Christianity among the natives of the island and this continued as far as 1565 with the introduction of the *requerimiento* demanding the Indians to abide by Spanish law and follow Christianity.[4] Secondly, Columbus draws in on the Spanish obsession with centralisation in point's number one and four with the inclusion of a Mayor and notary public in each town on the island acting as representatives for the Spanish empire. Columbus knew it was important to the monarchy to consolidate a hierarchical system of government which is why this is mentioned early on in the letter. This system played an essential part to Spain's succession in ending the Muslim regime with the conquest of Grenada resulting in Spanish's territory becoming centralised.[5] Thirdly, the word 'gold' is mentioned seventeen times throughout the letter emphasising the management of the wealth and fortune he is going to add to the Spanish Empire. According to Columbus, the purpose of governing the colonies is to ensure that gold is collected efficiently and with authenticity to guarantee that the Crown and other individuals receive the gold that is rightfully theirs. Columbus wants to regulate the collection and administration of gold, increasing Spanish power and prestige, and converting the native

populations to Catholicism. All of these intertwine the three motives previously mentioned.

Part Two

The Age of Discovery led to a worldwide expansion of European power (mainly between Spain and Portugal) and the ability to exchange information, thanks to the invention of the printing press, with nearly all parts of the world. Explorers like Christopher Columbus and Vasco de Gama attracted many European monarchs and nations who desired to escape the medieval period and its' separation from other societies. The powerful monarchs of Europe had centralized the authority and wealth of each country and used their vast wealth to fund the expeditions of these explorers. Both of which, Columbus highlighted many times in his letter to the King and Queen of Spain as the motives to the exploration. The voyages of discovery laid the basis for a global system of trade, much of it in European hands. The products of other continents - gold and silver, textiles, tobacco and spices - began to pour in through Europe's ports, boosting its wealth and providing the economic basis for a continuing commercial and industrial expansion.[6]Columbus' emphasis on the existence of gold in the Indies and how it should be acquired and processed within the letter tells us a great deal about the overall nature of the Spanish exploration and colonization.

Columbus succeeded in gaining commission from the royal patronage in Spain in 1492, after Queen Isabella conquered Granada from the Muslims whom were an essential part of Medieval Spain, in which the Iberian

Peninsula was under full Catholic control.[7]From this point onwards after the discovery of the Americas, Spain, Portugal and other European countries forced their culture and sought out to convert the natives of the New World to the Christian religion. This highlighted the unmovable dominance of the Catholic Church and its' influence into the decision making emerging from Medieval into Early Modern Europe. The rivalry between Spain and Portugal based on its ownership of conquered lands was commanded by Pope Alexander VI in 1493. This resulted in a division of zones with Portugal claiming ownership of sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Brazil and Spain possessing most of the Americas.[8]This division was set in stone with the agreement of the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 signed by the two crowns.[9]

The last motive to the Spanish expansion, previously mentioned, was religion. The monarchs of Spain saw their accomplishments in light of spreading the Christian faith which Columbus advocated in his letter. However the dispersal of religion had negative connotations. Throughout the age of discovery and the voyages of Columbus, there is debate that explorers acted as both heroes and villains.[10]Their mission was seen as both civilising and religious towards the natives and their islands however it has been argued that it was exploitation and were forced to labour or in some cases sold as slaves.[11]The wheels of civilisation were beginning to turn in the New World and this led to Spain's emergence as a world power portrayed by Columbus in his letter.

European nations competed to take the lead in maritime enterprise and entered the field as competitors for geographical honours. The attraction of the unknown continents, the thirst for expanding knowledge, and the vision

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of an empire gave birth to the greatest period of European exploration. In a larger sense, the Spanish settlement at Hispaniola served as the main source in the evolution of the New World, the European colonization of the Western Hemisphere.

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