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Early Life in Genoa

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CHAPTER TWO

Early Life in Genoa

I am sure that [God] inspired a little boy, Christopher Columbus, to stand on the quays of Genoa, Italy, and yearn for the sea.

—President Spencer W. Kimball

When he was about 50 years old, Christopher Columbus wrote a letter to the Spanish monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, which contained the following brief sketch of his youth and preparation for life: “At a very early age I began to navigate upon the seas, which I have continued to this day. . . . Such has been my interest for more than forty years. . . . I prayed to the most merciful Lord concerning my desire, and he gave me the spirit and the intelligence for it” (West and Kling 105). Other than this, Columbus wrote very little about his youth in his personal writings; consequently he left to his biographers the task of piecing together the events of his early years. Fortunately, several historians have done admirable work.

When was Columbus born? The exact date of Columbus’ birth is not known because no records have ever been found. However, there are two documents which narrow the possible date of his birth to sometime between 25 August and 31 October, probably in the year 1451. The first document was a deposition dated 31 October 1470 wherein Christopher stated that he was over nineteen years of age. The second is called the

Asserto Document of 25 August 1479, in which he declared that he was twenty-seven years old or thereabouts. If he was older than nineteen and not yet twenty on 31 October 1470, and about twenty-seven on 25 August 1479, Columbus was most likely born between 25 August and the end of October, 1451 (Morison, *Admiral*, 1:10, 23n17; hereafter noted by author and volume: page).

Inasmuch as Columbus became such a famous world figure, writers from many nations have tried to claim him as a native son. Even though all of the reputable historians of his day maintained that he was born in the Italian Republic of Genoa, several authors in the past two centuries have challenged that fact. Motivated primarily by fanatic nationalism, various historians have claimed he was born in such diverse places as Castile, Portugal, France, Germany, England, and even Greece. Still, others have tried to prove he was a Jew of Spanish descent (Morison 1:7–9). The most respected scholars of our day, however, have produced documents that support the original premise that he was born in Genoa. The most important record is a *majorat* or *entail* of his estate that he executed on 22 February 1498. In it, he charged his heirs “always to work for the honor, welfare and increase of the city of Genoa.” A house would be maintained in that city for some member of their family, “so that he can live there honorably and have foot and root in that city as a native thereof . . . *because from it I came and in it I was born.*” Noting “*Being as I was born in Genoa,*” Columbus directed the executors to accumulate a fund in the bank of St. George at Genoa, that “noble and powerful city by the sea” (Morison 1:7; emphasis added; see also Taviani, *The Grand Design*, 15–46, 223–70).

Religious Significance of the Name

Like so many other aspects of his life, even the story behind Columbus’ name carries a certain amount of mystique. His name in Italian was Cristoforo Columbo, by which he was

known until he was an adult. After he moved to Spain, however, his name became the Spanish Cristóbal Colón, by which he is known throughout the Spanish speaking world. English speakers, of course, refer to him as Christopher Columbus, thereby Anglicizing his first name and using the Latin version of his surname.

Christopher's son, Ferdinand, believed that God directed the choice of his father's names. For example, the name Christopher means Christ-bearer. St. Christopher, according to legend, received that name because he carried the Christ-child across a deep river at the peril of his own life. Because of this heroic deed, he became known as the patron saint of travelers. Just as St. Christopher carried the Savior across treacherous waters, Ferdinand reasoned that his father risked his life to carry the message of Christ across the dangerous waters of the Atlantic to the heathens of the New World (Ferdinand Columbus, *Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus* 4-5; cited hereafter as Ferdinand to distinguish him from his father).

The *Columbus* surname was common in Southern Europe, and means "dove." Ferdinand also believed that this name was providential because his father, "carried the grace of the Holy Ghost to that New World . . . showing those people . . . God's beloved son, as the Holy Ghost did in the figure of the dove when St. John baptized Christ" (Ferdinand 4). The religious symbolism of his name does seem significant, considering the Admiral's professed faith and the inspiration to which he attributed his great success.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Columbus' name, however, is the way in which he signed it after he returned home from his first voyage to the New World. Although there were several variations, the most common rendering was as follows:

.S.
.S.A.S.
X M Y
Xp̄o FERENS

The most complete explanation of this curious cryptic autograph by Columbus himself is, at best, vague. In his will, he simply instructed his heirs on the mechanics, spacing, and punctuation of the signature. Though he left no clues as to its meaning, he directed them to use the cryptic signature, thereafter, as their own (Thacher 3:455; this volume has 371 pages on Columbus' handwriting). Scholars generally agree that the signature denotes some kind of tribute to Christianity. On the bottom line, $X\bar{p}\bar{o}$ is Greek for "Christ," and FERENS is Latin meaning "bearer." Many interpretations suggest that the X M Y, one line above, stand for "O Christ, Mary, Joseph!" The top four letters of the pyramid may stand for either, "Save me" or, "I am the servant of the Most High Saviour." According to Thacher (3:456–57), the complete message might well be:

I am the servant of the Most High Saviour
O Christ, Mary, Joseph!
Christ-bearer

Bedini lists several other possible interpretations of the signature (Bedini 628–30). But if Thacher's interpretation is correct, Columbus was far from being timid in declaring his faith in Christ and his divine calling, as he employed variations of this signature in at least 33 existing documents signed after the first voyage (Thacher 3:454). Historians generally agree that Columbus used the signature on most important documents for the rest of his life.

Childhood in Genoa: the Making of a Man

With that, let us now leave the story of Columbus' name and give consideration to his early life. Christopher was the oldest of five children born to Domenico Columbo and Susanna Fontanarossa. He had three brothers: Giovanni Pellegrino, who died when he was a young man; Bartholomew, who helped Columbus plan his Enterprise of the Indies; and Giacomo, better known as Diego (the Spanish equivalent), whom the Admiral took with him on his second voyage to the New World. Chris-

topher only had one sister, Bianchinetta, about whom we know very little.

Christopher's father, Domenico, was a master weaver and merchant. On one or more occasions, when his local political party was in power, he was also appointed keeper of the Olivella Gate on Genoa's east side. This position paid 84 Genoese pounds a year (or about \$160 in gold) from which he was expected to pay his assistants. Inasmuch as Domenico was a master clothier (not just a journeyman weaver) and sometimes the recipient of political patronage, we may assume that he was a respected artisan and businessman of the lower middle class (Morison 1:12–14).

We know that, as an adult, Christopher could read and write, but historians disagree about where he attended school, if he did at all, and the extent of his early education. Ferdinand Columbus unequivocally declared that his father, "learned his letters at a tender age and studied enough at the University of Pavia to understand the geographers, of whose teaching he was very fond" (Ferdinand 9). However, Professor Morison maintained that the well-preserved records of Pavia University do not support Ferdinand's claim (Morison 1:17–18). Dr. Aldo Agosto, director of the provincial archives of Genoa, speculated that Columbus might have been enrolled in a monastery school near Genoa called Paverano, whose name Ferdinand may have confused with "Pavia" (Lyon 12). Others have suggested that Columbus attended a school run by the wool guild of Genoa on Pavia Street (Nader 1:164).

Whatever the truth may be about the location and timing of his early education, we know that by the time Columbus settled in Spain, at age 33, he could read and write Spanish. Even the letters that he sent to business acquaintances and friends in Genoa were written in Spanish. Morison went so far as to propose that Spanish was the language of Columbus' thoughts. The Admiral's written Spanish was littered with Portuguese spellings, a reminder of a decade spent sailing from Portugal before he finally moved to Spain. In addition, he was

able to read Latin and to speak Genoese, an unwritten dialect which differed greatly from Italian. Incidentally, there is no compelling evidence that he ever learned to read or write Italian (Morison 1:18–19).

We have no physical descriptions of Columbus in his youth, but several contemporaries who knew him personally as an adult have left some very helpful verbal portraits of him. Oviedo, the official chronicler of “the Indies,” who witnessed the Admiral’s triumphant entry into Barcelona after his first voyage to America, described him as “taller than the average and strongly limbed: the eyes lively and other parts of the face of good proportion, the hair very red, and the face somewhat ruddy and freckled” (Morison 1:62). Morison quoted Bartolomé de las Casas as saying, “He was more than middling tall; face long and giving an air of authority; aquiline nose, blue eyes, complexion light and tending to bright red; beard and hair red when young but very soon turned gray from his labors” (Ibid 62–63).

His contemporaries also gave a brief glimpse at Columbus’ personality and character. Oviedo claimed he was “fair in speech, tactful and of great creative talent; a nice Latinist and most learned cosmographer; gracious when he wished to be, irascible when annoyed” (Morison 1:62). Ferdinand maintained that his father, “was so great an enemy to cursing and swearing” that he “never heard him utter any other oath than by ‘St. Ferdinand!’” (Ferdinand 9).

It is also vitally important that we understand Columbus’ attitude toward religion. We are indebted to the great priest-historian, Las Casas, and others, for a brief description of the Admiral’s religiosity: “In matters of the Christian religion, without doubt he was a Catholic and of great devotion. . . . He observed the fasts of the Church most faithfully, confessed and made communion often, read the canonical offices like a churchman or member of a religious order, hated blasphemy and profane swearing” (Morison 1:63). The priest further pointed to Columbus’ belief in divine blessings: “he hourly

admitted that God had conferred upon him great mercies, as upon David. When gold or precious things were brought to him, he entered his cabin, knelt down, summoned the bystanders, and said, 'Let us give thanks to Our Lord'" (Ibid).

Las Casas also revealed the Admiral's fervent desire to carry the message of Christ to the world: "He was extraordinarily zealous for the divine service; he desired and was eager for the conversion of these people [the Indians], and that in every region the faith of Jesus Christ be planted and enhanced . . . ever holding great confidence in divine providence" (Morison 1:63–64). From this statement, as well as from others we will later discuss, we see that the Admiral's prime motivation for sailing across the ocean was to help spread Christianity throughout the earth.

The World of Columbus

In the mid-fifteenth century, when Christopher Columbus was growing up, two important events occurred that significantly altered the political, economic, and cultural structure of Europe, and also had a great impact on Columbus. First, the Ottoman Empire attacked and captured Constantinople in 1453. The siege lasted six weeks and is regarded by many historians as one of the most dramatic events in world history. Constantinople had been a Christian stronghold, and its fall to the Muslims signaled a major defeat for Christianity.

European merchants had even greater concern about the loss of the city. From Constantinople, the Turks began to expand into the Aegean and Adriatic Seas, and eventually took the Italian port of Otranto in 1480. This rapid expansion of a force hostile to Genoa's mercantile designs altered the course of activities of her sea-faring merchants. Whereas the Genoese had traditionally traded in the profitable spice and aromatics markets of the eastern Mediterranean, the Ottoman expansion severely restricted Genoese access to these markets and sources of merchandise. By 1475, the Ottomans had captured Caffa,

Genoa's sole remaining trading post in the Black Sea. They eventually conquered Syria, Palestine, and much of Africa, and by the 1520's, controlled parts of Central Europe. Historians suggest that the Ottoman Empire's threat to Genoese autonomy was so great that only an internal power struggle within the Empire in 1481 prevented it from having an even greater effect on the history of Europe, and especially on Renaissance Italy (McKay, Hill, and Buckler 724).

In short, the Ottoman aggression in the eastern Mediterranean significantly restricted European sea expeditions. It should not surprise anyone that Columbus began to visualize a western course to the Indies: such a route would give access to the very profitable eastern markets without having to cross Ottoman territory.

The second development in fifteenth-century Europe which affected Columbus and the rest of the world forever was the invention of the printing press around 1455. Johann Gutenberg, probably with the help of Johann Fust and Peter Schöffer, made the breakthrough that would aid in making books much less expensive to have. By the mid-1400's, paper was widely available in Europe, and printing stimulated the literacy among lay people and, in turn, deeply affected their private lives (McKay, Hill, and Buckler 506). The Gutenberg Bible was printed in 1456, and many other texts appeared soon after.

The invention of the printing press was a key to promoting individual freedom and thought, paving the way for religious freedom and promoting the faith and devotion of lay people like Columbus. With a Bible of his own, Christopher now had instant access to the scriptures, and his personal study of them increased the influence of the Holy Ghost in his life. With this new-found source of freedom and independence in place, it is no wonder that other events which changed the course of history began to take place, including the beginning of the Protestant Reformation only 25 years after Columbus' first voyage.

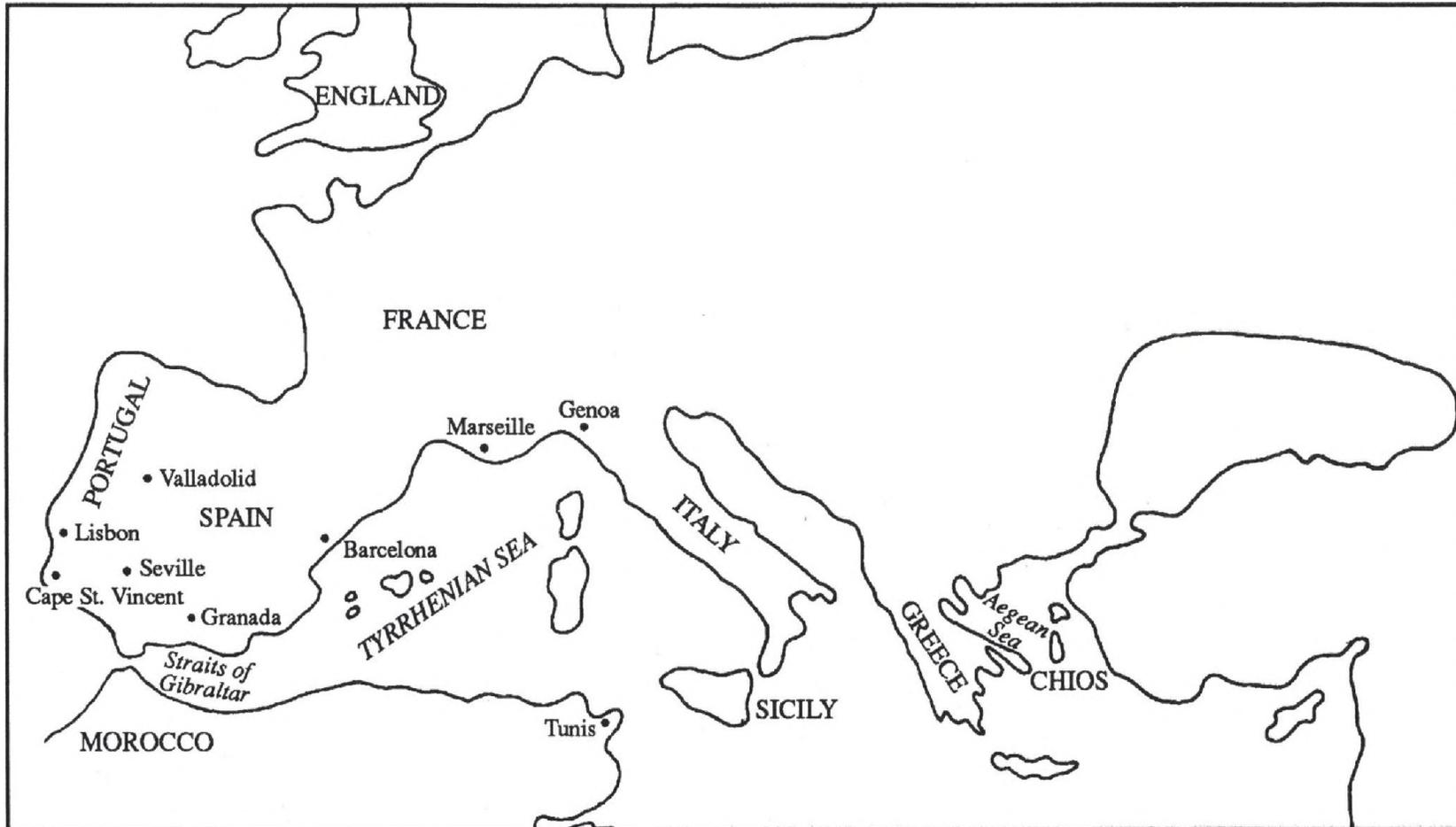
Early Years at Sea

The fact that Christopher Columbus was an accomplished and skillful sailor is well documented. The beginnings of his affair with the sea, however, are not so clear. Still, historians generally agree that his exposure to the maritime world began at an early age. Situated conveniently between surrounding hills and the shore, Genoa had a bustling harbor that was the area's center of attention.

It is likely that Christopher spent a good part of his childhood in and about the port of Genoa, watching ships arrive and set sail again. Because of its deep and protected harbor and its position on the major highway from Italy to France, Genoa had one of the busiest seaports in Europe (Nader 1:167). City workers built and expanded the harbor, dock workers loaded and unloaded cargoes, and the city's shipyards turned out the newest designs in sailing vessels year after year. In the midst of such a flurry of activity, young Christopher probably gained his first view of the seafarer's life and began sailing before adulthood. In fact, Antonio Gallo, a Genoese historian who knew the Columbus family, stated that the Columbus boys began sailing as teenagers (Thacher 1:192–93).

The exact starting date when Christopher began his sailing experience is not known. However, in a 1501 letter to Ferdinand and Isabella, he wrote: "I have passed more than forty years in this business and have traveled to every place where there is navigation up to the present time" (Ferdinand 10). This statement would place his introduction to the sea at around 1461, which would be at about age 10. In another statement to his son Ferdinand, Columbus claimed that he began sailing at age 14, or around 1465 (Ibid 12). In 1492, Christopher wrote in his journal, "I have been at sea 23 years without leaving it for any time worth telling," thus putting the start of his career at age 18 (Dunn and Kelley 253). Columbus' imprecision over when he began his sailing career can be attributed to varying definitions of "going to sea": was he referring to his first experience playing

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with boats, his first overnight journey, or his first long journey? (Morison 1:27). Whatever the exact date, all are agreed that Columbus went to sea early in life, and he apparently never turned from it.

The evidence that Christopher worked as a sea merchant is substantial. Despite a seventeenth-century French attack on Genoa that destroyed many legal and notarial records, several receipts exist that place Columbus in different ports, participating in trade during the 1470's. Documents show that he traded in wine in Genoa on 31 October 1470, and in wool in Savona on 20 March and 26 August 1472 (Morison 1:26, 29; see also Nader 169–70). Columbus also spoke of an early trip to Tunis and Marseilles in the Mediterranean Sea (Ferdinand 11).

We know that Columbus had sailed to the Genoese trading outpost on Chios in the Aegean Sea because when he attempted to describe many of the native plants he saw on his first voyage to the New World, he likened a tree he saw there to the mastic trees he had “seen on the island of Chios” (Dunn and Kelley 145).

By age 25, Columbus had had substantial experience at sea. Historic documents indicate that he was actively involved in Mediterranean trade in his young adult years. These experiences at sea prepared him for even more significant voyages to come.