

# 1

## The Era of Columbus and the “Discoverers”

Christopher Columbus arrived in Las Casas’s hometown of Seville on Palm Sunday, March 31, 1493. The Admiral was on a triumphal passage through Spain on his way to meet the sovereigns, Isabel and Ferdinand, in Barcelona after returning from his historic first voyage. Columbus was expected for High Mass at the cathedral, and Sevillans gathered in the center of the city to get a good view of the Admiral and his entourage.

With Columbus marched eight to ten Taino Indians captured in the Caribbean. Dressed in their native feathers and fishbone and gold ornaments, they drew curious stares from the onlookers, as much impressed by the accompanying parrots as the strange “Indians.” Young Bartolomé de las Casas, then eight years old, witnessed the procession into the city. The procession could hardly have been missed. Even in Spain, where the horse was the fastest form of transportation, the news of the Admiral’s return from his voyage spread rapidly through the many kingdoms of medieval Spain—Castile, León, Aragón, Valencia—united by the marriage of King Ferdinand of Aragón and Queen Isabel of Castile in 1469. Early modern Spain was emerging as these two forged the links of a powerful monarchy, but a Spaniard of the age of the Crusades hundreds of years earlier would have recognized his land and its people easily. Change came about slowly in the medieval world, but the first voyage of

Columbus detonated an explosion of knowledge that transformed that world.

Columbus had sailed west and discovered some islands on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Las Casas's father, Pedro de las Casas, a small merchant with large ambitions, joined Columbus on his second voyage in 1493, while two uncles, Francisco de Peñalosa and Juan, soon also became involved with the Admiral, as Columbus was now being called. The Genoese explorer's star rose rapidly through the ranks of Spanish sailors and merchants ever since the King and Queen had summoned him to Barcelona and granted him the privileges and rank he desired.

Columbus continued from Seville on his triumphant trip to Barcelona, mobbed by curious sightseers and well-wishers, to say nothing of potential gentlemen adventurers seeking favor and a place on the next voyage. The news of the Admiral's voyage rapidly spread across the plains and mountains of the many kingdoms of Spain. Only one year previously the Queen and King had finally defeated the last Moors (Muslims from Africa) of Spain in Granada and completed the centuries-long Reconquest of Spain for Christendom. The men of Castile dreamed of being knights in the Queen's Castilian army, charging into battle with the standards of the great Spanish warrior saint, Santiago, unfurled in the wind, to slay infidels in the name of the true Holy Catholic faith. That they also were most interested in gaining wealth and honor in a decidedly secular fashion, even while making their way up in the spiritual hierarchy of Christendom by slaying Moors, was just as true. The Reconquest was a way of life in which one gained prizes, wealth, slaves, land, titles, and honor through war.

This long Reconquest rises above all other affairs at the end of the fifteenth century. As mentioned in the Introduction, in AD 711, a wave of Muslims crossed the eight-and-a-half-mile strait dividing Africa from Europe. Commanded by Tariq ibn Ziyad, these 12,000 invaders soon conquered almost all of Iberia. Gibraltar (Jabal al Tariq, or the mount of Tarik) still bears the imprint of this long-ago invasion. For a few hundred years, an uneasy but prosperous peace ensued in Iberia among Christians, Muslims, and Jews.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, a bright center of civilization sparkled around the caliphate and city of Córdoba in southern Spain. Córdoba became the richest and most powerful state in all Europe. Around the year 1000 AD, the Reconquest of the peninsula began in

earnest, led by small Christian kingdoms in the north that had survived the Muslim invasion.

The Reconquest stamped Spain with a martial culture. After nearly five hundred years of intermittent warfare, the only surviving Moorish kingdom was Granada on the southeastern corner of the Iberian peninsula, and Granada fell in January, 1492. The triumph of Ferdinand and Isabel was a triumph of the militant Church, and the two—Christianity and arms—were indelibly linked in the Spanish consciousness of the age.

But Columbus, who emerges preeminent in the history of the period, was no warrior.<sup>2</sup> He represented a different, powerful tradition in Europe emerging in the fifteenth century, led by Portuguese explorers and merchants. Driven by commercial desire to expand the boundaries of trade beyond the Iberian peninsula, and with increasingly effective technological developments in the tools of navigation and sailing, the Portuguese pushed down the African coast for most of the fifteenth century until they rounded Cape of Good Hope in 1488, opening the way for sailing into the Indian Ocean and beyond by the end of the century.<sup>3</sup> Columbus sailed for a number of years in the service of Portugal into the ports and harbors of the Atlantic—all the way from Iceland to Africa—during this period of expansion. This move from the relative provincialism and insularity of the European medieval period into a dynamic epoch of exploration, discovery, and trade has usually been labeled the era of “early modern Europe.” The stage for the emergence of early modern Portugal or Spain was the Atlantic world, another modern paradigm which emphasizes the growing connectivity among islands and continents bordering the great Atlantic Ocean. And Columbus was the quintessential navigator, merchant, explorer, and discoverer of this age.

In his life we see converging all of these different elements that contributed to the making of early modern Spain. Among these were the mercantile tradition, the technological advantages in sailing and navigation, the powerful religious dimension, and, perhaps underscoring them all, the entrepreneurial spirit of change that drove these communities of navigators, merchant princes, bankers, and kings and queens to push beyond the old geographical and cultural boundaries of Europe into the Atlantic world.

The religious fervor of the Reconquest, seen as carrying over into and deeply influencing the later conquest of the Americas, has long received

the most attention by historians. In a spate of religious zealotry, Jews were expelled (unless they chose to convert) from Spain in 1492, and ten years later all Moors were forced to convert to Christianity or choose exile, the same as the Jews. Ethnically and racially this was an intolerant society. The Spanish Inquisition was established precisely at that time to ensure Christian orthodoxy and stamp out heresy and apostasy.

Columbus shared this religious passion with his sponsors, especially the pious Queen Isabel. He promised to turn over much of what he stood to earn by his voyages to the Queen and the Church for the restoration of Christianity in the Holy Land and to crush the infidels. These were grandiose visions when one considers the boundaries of the world inhabited by Columbus, until one recalls that in his commercial voyages in the service of Portugal, he already had reached probably as far north as Iceland and had visited the African coast far to the south before taking off on his voyage of discovery in August, 1492. Columbus, the religious zealot, was also Columbus the merchant and experienced explorer. Other events also drove Europeans farther into the Atlantic world.

When in 1453 Constantinople fell to the Turkish Ottomans, the orientation of European trade shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, with Portugal leading the way down the African coast and into the Atlantic islands. The profitable trade in African slaves grew as Portuguese explorers pushed down the coast of West Africa, while other trade between Portugal and Africa was equally lucrative. Horses, saddles, stirrups, cloth, caps, hats, saffron, wine, wheat, salt, lead, iron, steel, copper, and brass all moved south and east from Portugal to be traded for African slaves, gold, animal skins, gum arabic, cotton, malagueta pepper, parrots, and even camels. It remained for the visionary Columbus to challenge the Portuguese crawl down around Africa on their way to Asia by proposing to sail directly west across the Ocean Sea (the Atlantic) to reach the East. That was his Great Enterprise that he had presented to Isabel and Ferdinand as early as the 1480s, but only received his commission and their blessing after the fall of Granada.

Columbus had actually presented the idea to the Portuguese court earlier, but a learned and experienced commission appointed by the King rejected both Columbus's premise and his plan. The commission said he had grossly underestimated the actual circumference of the globe and that the voyage he was proposing—from the Atlantic coast of the Iberian

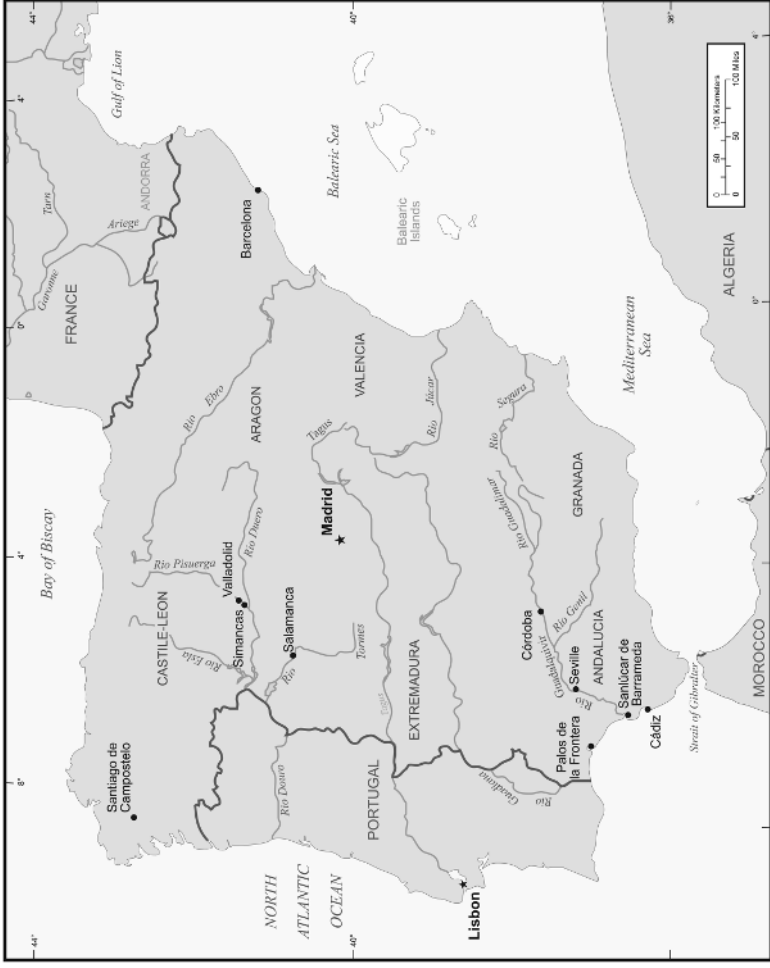


**Figure 1.1** Painting (Detail) from 1882: Boabdil confronted by Ferdinand and Isabel after the Fall of Granada, 1492. The capture of Granada in 1492 completed the Reconquest of Spain for Christendom. Here King Ferdinand of Aragón and his wife, Queen Isabel of Castile, receive the surrender of Muhammad XII, Abu ‘abd-Allah Muhammad XII (1460–1533), known as Boabdil (a Spanish corruption of the name *Abu Abdullah*).

peninsula to the islands off the Chinese coast—was impossible given the distance and time that would have to be spent at sea. It could not be done. And the commission was right on both counts. What neither the commission nor Columbus accounted for was the existence of the American continents about 3000 miles to the west, blocking the passage to the East.

The Portuguese continued to explore down the coast of Africa, looking for a way to round that continent and then sail to India, for the capture of Constantinople earlier in the century by the Turks had made the search for alternate lines of trade to the great emporiums of Asia even more urgent for European merchants long dependent upon the overland route to India and the East.

Over the next several decades Seville, the quiet medieval port of the province of Andalucia, was rapidly transformed into the entrepôt of



**Map 1.1** The Iberian peninsula, showing Spain and Portugal and many of the cities and provinces where Las Casas lived and worked.

seaborne traffic with the Indies. While some of the early fleets to the Indies sailed from ports along the Atlantic coast—Cádiz, Huelva, Sanlúcar de Barrameda, for example—after the turn of the century, Seville was more and more preferred for assembly and dispatch of the fleets.

These were exciting times. News of returning fleets from the islands Columbus had discovered commingled with the decrees of new crusades. In 1500, for example, the Muslims of Granada, under increasingly oppressive Christian rule, revolted. The primate of Spain, Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros (1436–1517), wanted more conversions, less heresy (by the new converts), and more conformity, and grew increasingly intolerant. He was backed by Isabel and Ferdinand, who sensed that the Muslims of Granada, and to a lesser extent those of Castile and Aragón, where they existed in smaller numbers, nonetheless represented a suspicious minority. If Spain were ever invaded again from Africa, where would the loyalty of these Muslims lie?

The Muslims of Granada rebelled out of frustration and disgust with the perfidy of the Christians who spoke tolerance, but demanded conversion. The campaigns of subjugation were brutal and effective. King Ferdinand himself joined the campaign in March, 1500, slaying all the inhabitants in some villages, claiming with an astonishing satisfaction that in Lanjerón “the occupants were baptized before perishing.”<sup>4</sup> Las Casas—then about 15 or 16—may have witnessed the rebellion at first hand and perhaps even marched with militia from Seville dispatched in 1500 to Granada to assist in suppressing the Muslim rebels.

Fifty-five years later, when writing about the physical appearance of the city of Tlaxcala in Mexico in his *Apologética Historia Sumaria* (a treatise on the Indians of America), he remembered Granada.

“From a distance and below,” Las Casas wrote, “Tlascala looks like nothing less than Granada, in Spain, which appears that way coming from Archidona if my memory serves me because it has been more than fifty-five years since I saw so much of that city, like the Alhambra, which is the royal house.”<sup>5</sup> More than likely, his overland trip to Granada was in the company of his father, who had returned from the Indies two years earlier, in 1498. Being merchants, they may have been only lightly armed and witnessed nothing more than an uneasy province, cold glances from Moorish villagers, and mounted Christian knights thundering by on veteran war horses.

If by 1500 Columbus was a seasoned explorer, navigator, and governor of Spain's growing claims on the islands he discovered, the young Las Casas was just beginning his career. He was bright, curious, and energetic, and probably already possessed the quick temper he became so famous for. He had studied Latin and theology with his uncle in the Cathedral school in Seville and was an apt learner. He could size up situations and people rapidly, had a rather good opinion of himself, and did not suffer from a lack of confidence. In addition to abundant energy and a penetrating mind, he possessed a phenomenal physical endurance. He certainly needed the latter just to survive the eight trans-Atlantic voyages he made during his lifetime where the water was foul, the food wormy, the company close, and sea sickness the incessant companion of the landsman.

We come away with the image of a self-confident teenager of 15 or 16 in 1500, cocky to the point of brash. "Bold to the point of temerity, sharp-witted and eloquent . . . he was always to command respect, though in the case of his numerous enemies this was sometimes mingled with fear."<sup>6</sup>

The coming and going of ships and fleets quickened as the century neared an end, and the return of his father in 1498 from Santo Domingo pointed him in the direction of the Indies. His father had returned to Seville on a small fleet that sailed from Santo Domingo on October 18, 1498. Three hundred Taino Indian slaves also traveled on those ships. One of them, renamed Juanico, was given to Las Casas by his father who had received Juanico as a gift from the Admiral—Columbus himself. In fact, Columbus had given slaves to each of the Spaniards returning from the islands. When the Queen, then in Seville, heard the news, she exploded in anger.

"What right does the Admiral have to give my vassals to anyone?" she asked indignantly, and rhetorically. Isabel, of course, was in a position not only to question such impertinence on the part of the Admiral, but also to take action. She ordered all the Indians returned to their homes in Santo Domingo, "on pain of death" as Las Casas recalled many years later while composing his history of the Conquest. Las Casas was surprised at the severity of her reaction.<sup>7</sup>

"I don't know why the Queen so angrily and emphatically demanded that these three hundred Indians which the Admiral had enslaved be



returned, especially when she'd said nothing about others the Admiral had sent."<sup>8</sup> Las Casas could not think of no other "reason, other than perhaps the Queen thought that the previous Indians brought over had been enslaved in a just war."<sup>9</sup> Whatever he may have thought, his new Indian friend Juanico was returned in the June, 1500 fleet to Santo Domingo commanded by Francisco de Bobadilla. This famous knight commander who had served the Queen in the recent wars against the Muslims was sent to investigate charges of mismanagement and corruption leveled against Columbus by Spanish settlers on the island.

Bobadilla's fleet arrived in the harbor of Santo Domingo on August 23, 1500. While he waited for the tide to change to enter the harbor, he was shocked to see seven corpses swinging from the gallows. Going ashore, the knight commander discovered five more Castilians waiting to swing, sentenced to death by Columbus for insurrection and treason. Bobadilla did not tarry very long to investigate the matter, one that had been simmering between Columbus and the Spanish-born settlers who resented the Genoese mariner for his high-handed ways. The Admiral of the Ocean Sea was arrested and shackled. Bobadilla returned him to Spain on a small fleet that sailed in October, 1500. The master of the ship offered to release the Admiral for the long voyage, but Columbus refused. The Queen and King would have to face him in his ignoble state and, hopefully, be shamed by his condition. It worked.

Soon after he came ashore at Cádiz in November, the sovereigns ordered his chains struck and commanded that Columbus travel to the court then in Granada. Las Casas witnessed much of this. He not only recalled that the King and Queen sent Columbus a generous allowance—two thousand ducats—to make the trip to Granada, but also recounted the details of Columbus's dramatic appearance at court with an eye-witness's ring of authenticity.

Las Casas must have been in the city of Granada when Columbus presented himself—the injured martyr, unjustly jailed, abused in language and body—before the King and Queen for justice. The scene is one of the most remarkable in the age of exploration. The Queen was especially compassionate and loving. Ferdinand joined with his wife in expressing sorrow at the unfortunate turn of events, but "in truth, she always favored and defended him [Columbus] more than the King," remarked Las Casas.<sup>10</sup> Once Columbus was exonerated and in the good

graces of his sovereigns again, he made one last voyage—his fourth—to the New World in 1502.

While Columbus was fully vindicated by Isabel and Ferdinand, Bobadilla, on the other hand, was never punished for arresting Columbus and returning him to Spain in chains so ignominiously. Instead he drowned in a massive storm in late June, 1502, when his fleet was caught by a hurricane just as they sailed from Santo Domingo bound for Spain.

In 1500 and 1501, Las Casas criss-crossed the mountainous kingdom of Granada with his father, traveling as merchants. When Isabel and Ferdinand contracted with Nicolás de Ovando on September 3, 1501, in Granada to replace Governor Bobadilla, the Las Casas, father and son, were there. Las Casas's father Pedro signed on with Ovando's expedition. Ovando, a Cistercian friar with long experience fighting Muslims in the Queen's armies, put together a fleet of 32 vessels in Seville and dropped down the River Guadalquivir early in February to rendezvous at Sanlúcar de Barrameda at the mouth of the river. Some 2500 men, many of them nobles, gentlemen, and principal people, made up the expedition. Included were 12 Franciscan friars. The fleet sailed for Santo Domingo from Sanlúcar on February 13, 1502. Las Casas was on board Ovando's fleet which arrived off the coast of Santo Domingo on April 15 after a voyage of two months.

Ovando was dispatched by Isabel and Ferdinand to replace Bobadilla because Columbus had complained so bitterly of the injustices and injuries to his command and his person. The Spanish sovereigns, always sympathetic to their Admiral of the Ocean Sea, appointed Ovando, a member of the military order of Alcántara, and a proven leader. While Columbus was the leading edge of Spain's explosive burst into the Americas, Ovando governed Santo Domingo for the next eight years and set the tone for the establishment of royal government in Spain's New World colonies. The pattern for the exploration and conquest of the Americas was being set.

Following the "discovery" of the New World by Columbus there came the other explorers and conquistadors, often one and the same. The conquistadors swept over the islands—Española [modern Dominican Republic and Haiti], followed by Puerto Rico and then Cuba—and over the next half century they gradually mapped the dimensions of the New

World, beginning with the islands of the Caribbean and, after “reducing” the Amerindians to obedience, went on to explore and conquer great portions of the mainland: North America, Central America, and South America.

## Modern interpretations

In modern interpretations, sharply different points of view have emerged about this unique moment in history, when peoples from two different worlds—those from the Eurasian and African continents (largely the Spaniards and Portuguese in these early stages) and those in the Americas—first came into contact. As noted in the Introduction, the Spanish called this era the Conquest. The “Encounter” has been substituted in modern times to emphasize not the dominance of one culture over another, but the meeting of different cultures without necessarily assigning superiority of one over another. “Contact” period has also been applied to the early period of exploration and discovery, for similar reasons. After all, the Amerindians were not “lost,” nor in fact “discovered” except from a very narrow European point of view, expressing “Eurocentrism.” And some of the severest critics of the Conquest/Encounter have substituted “invasion” as a descriptor of the era, as in the *Invasion of America*. In this scenario, Amerindian culture was disrupted and destroyed by invading Europeans, much as the barbarians—Huns, Goths, Celts—invaded and finally destroyed the Roman Empire.

While we need to be aware of the new labels, we need not get lost in a semantic labyrinth. One of the principal reasons for much of the newer interpretations or labeling was to recover the voice of the Amerindians, lost in the traditional literature of the Encounter/Conquest, which was largely generated, of course, by Spanish chroniclers and historians themselves. Ironically the one major source for the voice of the “other,” another label to describe peoples or classes of people who traditionally did not keep written records, was Las Casas himself. We shall revisit these issues below. In 1502, he was still a young man on his first voyage to the New World and the wonder of it no doubt transfixed him as it did many voyagers after a long crossing of the high seas.

As one nears land, life quickens aboard any ship. The first land one sees after crossing the Atlantic in these equatorial latitudes are the Windward Islands, which stretch in a great semi-circle to the north and west from the coast of South America to the larger islands of Puerto Rico and Española. At a distance, the Windward Islands first appear on the horizon as dark brown smudges, not very different from low-lying clouds. From previous voyages, the sailors knew the islands appeared 40 or 50 days from the Canaries. Names were attached to specific islands, many bestowed by Columbus himself.

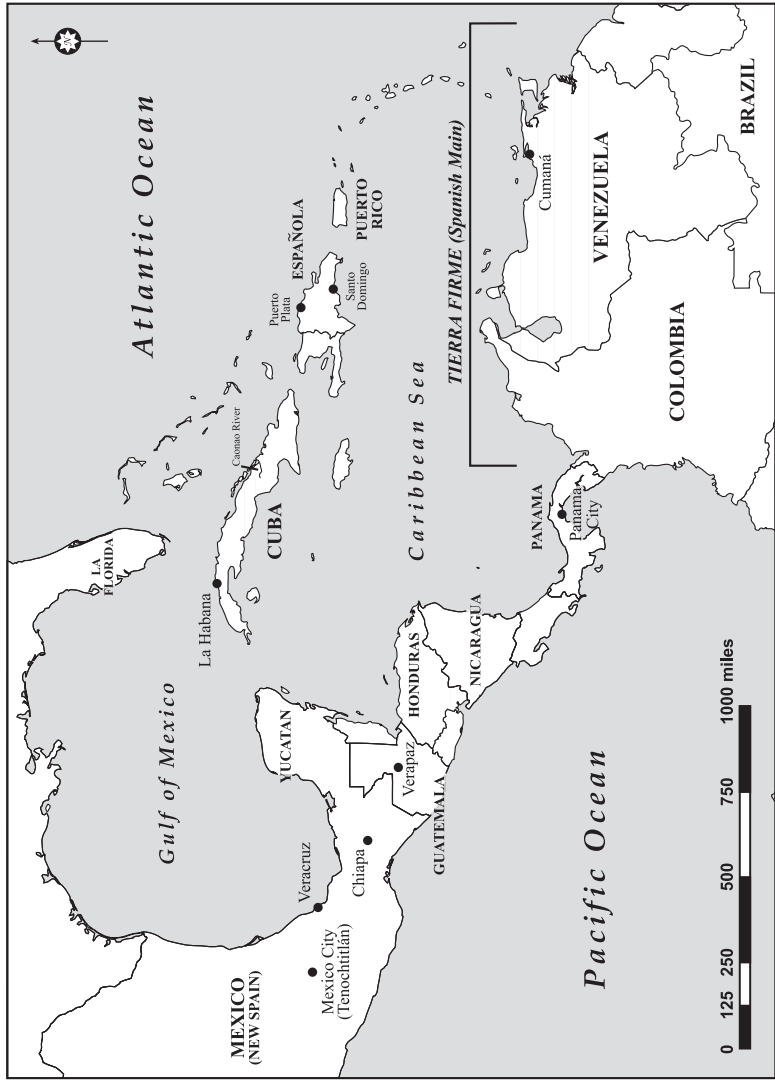
On his third voyage, 1498–1500, Columbus had discovered the mainland of South America. He skirted and named the island of Trinidad in honor of the Holy Trinity, and sailed past the mouth of the mighty Orinoco River, its fresh water flowing far out to sea. From this fact Columbus speculated that he might be near the Earthly Paradise, for it was thought to be the source of the four greatest rivers in the world, the Ganges, Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile. Writing almost three decades later, Las Casas gently chided the naïveté of the Admiral, based on a rather skimpy knowledge of Scripture and much conjecture. But Columbus may have had other reasons to speculate, and here we can see through Las Casas’s eyes as Columbus approached the islands for the first time.

“That the admiral thought he may be nearing the terrestrial paradise is not without some good reason,” Las Casas wrote, “especially when one considers the soft, gentle breezes, the fresh, green beauty of the trees, and the joyful quality of the land.”

“Each part and parcel of the land seems like paradise,” Las Casas remembered, as he recreated, in his mind’s eye, the end of a long sea voyage.<sup>11</sup>

His small ship plowed on through, as she had for weeks in the monotonous rhythm of the crossing, in and out of deep blue waves. After five or six weeks, everyone was looking for signs of land. Las Casas recalled his first view of the islands, the brown smudges slowly giving way to the rich, deep greens of tropical forests, high mountains, some volcanic, rising from beneath the sea. They passed by some of the islands of the Windward chain already named by Columbus, *Maria Galante*, *Dominica*, *Guadalupe*. Many still preserve the same names today.

Then the fleet turned north once in the Caribbean and headed for the large island of Española. Instead of ocean all around them and small



**Map 1.2** The Indies of Bartolomé de las Casas, showing the relationship of the major islands of the Caribbean (the Greater Antilles) and the Viceroyalties of New Spain (Mexico and Central America) and of Peru. Source: Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *El padre las Casas, su doble personalidad* (Madrid: Espasa-Calipe, S. A., 1963), map between pp. 40–41 which appeared originally in a book by same author, *Imagen del mundo hacia 1570* (1944), on p. 87 as “Los virreinos y audiencias.” His map in *El padre las Casas*, covers two pages, as noted, and the detail is excellent.

islands passing by, land occupies their starboard [right] side for as far as they can see as they approach the port of Santo Domingo from the south and east.

The chatter of the crew increases, lowering sails, making ready to let go the anchor, preparing for the arrival. With a full tide the ships slip into the harbor of Santo Domingo, the verdant colors of the tropics, the smells of anchorage and quayside, redolent of tropical plants, spiced with the pungent effluvia of human occupation, all brighten a weary traveler’s senses. It is an arrival by sea; it is like no other. It means a connection has been made. Las Casas made many over his long career.

## Conquest of La Española

But the island paradise which he thought he arrived at was in fact being turned into a living hell by his fellow countrymen. Las Casas lived on the island for the next ten years and witnessed the brutal treatment and exploitation of the Taino people by the Spanish settlers.

Las Casas later recorded what he witnessed in those ten years and that account appeared in his little book, *A Brief History of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552). From *A Brief History* the Black Legend was spun, portraying the Spanish as uniquely cruel and barbaric in the conquest and settlement of the Americas, and it has developed into one of the most controversial of the many *puntos de vista*, or viewpoints, covered in this series of books.

As the Introduction noted, the Black Legend is at the center of one of the major historiographical issues of the Encounter, and, indeed, of western civilization: were the Spanish indeed uniquely cruel and barbaric in their encounter and conquest of Amerindians, or were they simply behaving in a norm that reflected current values and practices across the European world of the epoch? Las Casas’s eyewitness account is both powerful and heartrending. It is one of the best examples of the power and immediacy, not to speak of authenticity, of the eye witness, of original documentation in the study and interpretation of the past.

The competing theory that arose to counter the Black Legend—the White Legend—tends to whitewash the Spanish behavior as nothing more than a people acting within the norms and principles of the time.

Later arrivals to the Americas—the English, French, and Dutch, for example—were themselves equally guilty of devastating and diminishing the Amerindians. Las Casas's arrival at Santo Domingo, however, was not concerned with the stuff of legends and history, but with the excitement of a young man finally reaching port after a long sea voyage.<sup>12</sup>

No sooner had Las Casas's ship arrived in the harbor of Santo Domingo than the excited inhabitants tumbled out from shore in boats and crowded around the ships shouting questions. "What's the news? Who is coming to govern?"

"Good news!" shouted the passengers, leaning over, watching the sailors lower the ship's own boats. "The Queen and King send us the gentleman of Lares [Nicolas de Ovando] of the Order of Alcántara, and all is well at home."

Usually the next question is "What's happening here?"<sup>13</sup>

"Great news! Lots of gold to be found! Huge nuggets! And just the other day the Indians rebelled! We've already captured hundreds and enslaved them." That meant more Indians to work the mines, more Indians to be returned to Castile to be sold as slaves.

Gold fever infected the new arrivals. Loading their backpacks they set off like an army of ants for the mines. Those without servants carried their tools with them. Greed had an equalizing effect even on this rigid old medieval society now newly transferred to the islands of the New World.

Gentleman and craftsmen, grandfathers and teenagers, they all worked like men possessed, Las Casas later recalled in his *History*. Digging and eating, digging and eating, until they finally ran out of their stale food and gave up, returning to Santo Domingo, really still no more than a village, and poor itself. Hungry, disillusioned, and feverish, they died by the hundreds that first month. More than a thousand perished, so fast that the few priests could barely keep up with the burials. Las Casas watched—and later recorded—it all in astonishment. He noticed that the few Spaniards devoted to a semblance of farming and pig herding made out quite well in this hothouse of overheated expectations, easy gold (for some at any rate), and outrageous prices, especially for food.

Some on the fleet had brought with them a large supply of merchandise such as clothes and tools, and they made small fortunes, especially

among the inhabitants who had gold, but whose clothes were in tatters. Provisioning the incoming settlers and the outgoing fleets produced a decent living for Las Casas's father, Pedro. Young Las Casas was soon also farming land given to his family by Columbus, as well as moving around the island acquiring provisions to sell to outgoing fleets.

"It's almost a rule around these parts," Las Casas wrote, "that all those given to mining were always in need, and even in debtors' jail."

"On the other hand, those given to farming and ranching were much better off."<sup>14</sup>

Earliest relations between Spaniards and Tainos were mixed. In the very early period, or the interregnum between Columbus's first voyage and the arrival of Las Casas on the island in 1502, both invaders and residents co-habited and mixed as much as they fought and competed.<sup>15</sup> It was by no means idyllic, but the sexual overtures of the early Spaniards for example were received quite well by the Tainos, who gave the first visitors—sailors in Columbus's fleet—women to celebrate the visit of such important personages. The aggressive Spaniards figured this habit was shared by all Tainos and proceeded to take more women, many against their will. The upshot was the massacre of those Spaniards which Columbus left behind in 1493 in a tiny settlement named La Navidad when he returned to Spain after his first voyage.

When Columbus returned in his second voyage in late 1493, all the Spaniards were gone. He quickly ascertained that the lust for women and gold had provoked the first Indian "uprising" in the Americas, although in truth it was not an uprising or revolt. It was simply a defiant expression of Taino independence and unwillingness to submit to such blatant avarice and covetousness.

By the time Las Casas arrived, some Tainos, especially women, had adapted to the Spanish presence, entered into unions with them—inside or outside the boundaries of marriage—and the first generation of *mestizos* came into existence, part Spaniard, part Taino, the genesis of a new people. Las Casas had reason later in his life to encourage these relations between Spaniards and Indians as a means of overcoming the distance growing between conquistador/invaders and the Amerindians of the recipient cultures.

But even as Spaniards and Tainos had relations—forced or otherwise—and thus forged the beginnings of a new civilization in the Americas,



many of the conquistador/settlers imposed themselves on the simple Tainos with shocking barbarity.

In a story recounted by Las Casas, some Spanish settlers—armed with swords and accompanied by their war dogs—went to the island of Saona to get provisions. The dogs were “fierce beasts, trained to tear apart Indians, who rightly feared them more than their own devils.”<sup>16</sup> The Tainos on the island made haste to load the boat to transport the cassava bread to the caravel. They were urged on by their *cacique*, or local leader, who encouraged them to work rapidly for the Spaniards.

One of the Spaniards had a dog on a leash. The dog watched the *cacique* moving his staff up and down as he encouraged his people to work faster to please the Spaniards. The dog growled and pulled hard on the leash wanting to get at the Indian. His master was having trouble controlling him.

He said to a companion, “Hey, I wonder what would happen if we let the dog loose?”

Thinking they could restrain him, the two Spaniards yelled, “Sic ‘em,” in jest, thinking they could hold the dog.

The dog went wild upon hearing the command and lunged at the *cacique*, dragging the Spaniard who finally had to let go of the leash. The dog struck the Indian in the stomach and tore out his entrails. Mortally wounded, the Indian fled holding his guts as the dog played with the bloody prize.

Hearing of this outrage, a *cacique* named Cotubanamá from the nearby province of Higüey swore revenge and shortly thereafter the Tainos ambushed and killed a party of eight Spaniards who had gone ashore during another voyage.

Las Casas thought the eight deserved to die, even if they were not among those who had allowed their dog to disembowel the Taino earlier. The Indians were rendering justice and they could, and should, hold Spaniards accountable. A sympathy for, and ability to see the Indian point of view, became an early hallmark of Las Casas as he recorded many examples of brutal exploitation on the island that he witnessed over the next ten years.

Las Casas’s concern with the “other,” or the voices of those in history traditionally without a voice, emerges in this period. Since history is mostly based on written documents, the “other” has to be “heard” by

alternative means: oral records, testimony of sympathetic observers (such as Las Casas obviously), by a sophisticated analysis of language and the symbolism of words and phrases (semiotics) to discover the "voices" of the other. Perhaps the other was an Indian culture (such as the Taino) which had no written language. Or the other could be slaves not permitted to learn to read and write. Or, in a society that kept women largely away from learning, the other could be women, especially the vast majority in the peasant and lower classes. Yet, the growing compassion and sympathy of Las Casas for the Tainos were not the norm. In fact, relations between Spaniards and Tainos had early on begun to harden into the conquerors and the conquered, a distinction that came to characterize early society in Latin America.

Indians who had been enslaved, or those assigned to individual settlers supplied the principal labor for Spaniards. The *encomienda* (which has no proper English translation) was a feudal institution imported into the island by some of Columbus's early settlers from Castile. It resembled the medieval relationship between landlord and peasant. Indians in towns and villages were distributed in *encomienda* to individual Spaniards, the *encomenderos*, who extracted tributary labor (such as working in the mines) from them. The Indians, in turn, were to be protected, civilized, and Christianized by the *encomenderos*.

Another institution, the *repartimiento* (which can be roughly translated as the "distribution" or "apportionment"), was closely associated with the *encomienda*. It too demanded tributary labor, but the resources (the Indians) were usually distributed by royal officials or their representatives. Both institutions evolved closely in the next half century but the bottom line was that Indians were assigned to work for Spaniards, regardless if Indians were assigned to a specific settler, the *encomendero*, or were assigned by the *repartimiento* for specific tasks and at specified times of the year. In each case, both were forms of tributary labor.

The Tainos of Española were distributed in *encomienda* early on by the Spanish governors—Columbus, Bobadilla, Ovando. The *encomienda* became the central instrument of Indian exploitation on the island and it was exported to other islands and finally to the mainland as the Spanish conquest advanced in the next half century. Las Casas soon learned to his horror how Spaniards treated *encomienda* Indians. Over the next several years Las Casas witnessed other atrocities, or heard of them from

first hand testimony, which seared his senses and became imbedded in his memory.

Between 1502 and 1506, numerous Spanish expeditions were launched from Santo Domingo across the island to control the Indians. Las Casas went on some of these expeditions; others he heard about. Taken together with the brutal exploitation of forced Taino labor in the gold mines, the experiences formed the basis for his life's work: defending the Indians within his growing understanding of biblical, legal, and ethical principles.

Yet, even amidst the savagery of the first few years of the Spanish occupation of Española, instances of accommodation and adaption were not unusual. The Tainos, and later other Indian peoples across the Americas, first resisted and then accommodated themselves to the Spanish invasion as it swept across the Caribbean islands, and then spilled onto the mainland and into the heart of great Amerindian empires, such as that of the Aztec in Mexico and the Inca in Peru. But in those later instances of the Conquest, the Indian populations numbered in the tens of millions and the sheer size of the populations buffered the devastating effects of the Spanish invasion, especially as European epidemic diseases spread among an Amerindian population which had no immunities to these diseases new to the Americas.

There still exists (and always will, given the paucity of evidence) different interpretations and points of view on the actual effects of diseases on the process of the Conquest. Without a demographic baseline (the actual size of the population of the Americas at the commencement of European contact, for example), it is hard to determine the extent of dislocation and death that entered with European diseases such as measles, bubonic and pneumonic plague, typhus, and smallpox.<sup>17</sup> That Indian populations were devastated is true. By the middle of the sixteenth century, there were virtually no Tainos left on Española. And "General Smallpox" is generally credited with giving Hernán Cortés a hand in defeating the Aztecs in 1521. While the experience of Spaniards and Tainos on the island of Española was not exactly replicated by the rest of the encounter between Europeans and Amerindians across the Americas, it did prefigure in a significant way the refashioning of life.

Las Casas traveled widely through the island between 1502 and 1509. He ate and stayed with the Tainos occasionally and observed, rather

sarcastically, that they were not, as rival historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo wrote, savages living in caves, but rather they lived in villages and towns and were governed as any other civilized people. They worked their fields and gardens like any other farmers.<sup>18</sup>

Las Casas also witnessed many scenes of brutality and savagery. Swords slashing through Taino bone and flesh, the splash of blood, the boasts and boots of the Spaniards; those images were burned into his life forever. The blood-spattered rocks and trails where the Indians sought to escape, the pleas for help, the innocent being slaughtered, these and other scenes run through his writings like an awful refrain.

Some battles lasted all day and into the night, the Tainos fleeing their villages into the mountains and forests where they had hidden the women and children. The Spanish invariably pursued them, determined to capture the chiefs and *caciques*, and make examples of them. No matter how stealthily and quietly the Tainos made their way through the forests, the Spaniards followed the trails. Catching one Indian, they would torture him for information. Catching groups of cowering natives, they would put them to the sword—men, women, and children—to terrify and terrorize the rest into submission.<sup>19</sup>

"The Spaniards bragged about their various cruelties, each trying to top the others on novel ways to spill blood," Las Casas recorded.<sup>20</sup>

Three Tainos were tied together and slowly strangled "in honor of Christ, our Redeemer, and of his twelve Apostles." Before dying, the Spaniards tried out their cutting skills, some showing off their reverse strokes, opening the Tainos from chest to groin, their entrails spilling out. Some, still alive, were then thrown into pits and burned. Two small boys, no more than two years old, were stabbed through the throat and cut open, and then thrown from the cliffs.

"I saw all this, and more, so foreign to human nature. I shudder to tell it. Perhaps it was a nightmare. I can hardly believe it myself," Las Casas wrote sadly. "Even though other cruelties were perpetrated in these Indies, some worse and infinitely larger, I don't think I will ever forget these." He never did.

The island was "pacified, if 'pacified' we can in truth call it," Las Casas wrote with bitter sarcasm, "seeing as how the Spaniards were at war with God, free now to oppress these people with great liberty, and nobody, great or small, to resist them." Las Casas wrote of these atrocities in the

mid-1520s. The native population had been decimated by then, so that those who arrived at the island asked if the Indians there were whites or blacks, referring to the growing African slave presence.<sup>21</sup>

This was a very fluid period in the relations between Europeans and Indians. When 18-year-old Las Casas landed in the Indies in 1502, few laws or regulations existed for governing the Indians or the Indies. It was natural that Governor Ovando establish some firm, recognizable order. Those, in fact, were his instructions, and Isabel and Ferdinand expected him to comply. In doing so, he set the pattern for the future conquest and settlement of the Americas.

In a chapter of his *History* entitled "The Creation of the *Encomienda*," Las Casas described in detail how Ovando organized the Tainos to labor for the Spaniards. It is one of the most biting passages in Las Casas's writings, filled with ridicule when he is not lamenting the tragedy.<sup>22</sup> In theory, the Spanish were to instruct, indoctrinate, and convert the Indians. Las Casas recorded his own view of what in fact Governor Ovando did in this area. "In the nine years of his government of this island, he was no more interested in the indoctrination and salvation of the Indians than if they were sticks and stones, or cats and dogs."

Las Casas's record of events on the island reads like a legal indictment. Who did Ovando put to work? Men certainly, but he also ordered children and old people, nursing women and pregnant women, chiefs and common people and the very lords and natural kings of the towns and lands, into the mines and fields of the Spaniards. "This distribution among the Spaniards of the Indians was called the '*repartimiento*.'"<sup>23</sup> In this way, all the Tainos were distributed to the Spaniards, "condemned to service forever where, in the end, they died. This was the liberty which the *repartimiento* secured."

Men were forced to work 10, 20, 30, 40, and even 80 leagues away from their homes in the mining of gold. Exhausted from these labors, beaten down and starving, the men returned to their homes unable to consummate their marriages. In this manner, a generation was lost and never replaced. Babies were born puny and tiny and perished for lack of milk. The women, overworked and underfed, dried up. Some mothers drowned their babies out of desperation. Others, pregnant, took herbs to abort and cut short their pregnancies.

The Spanish overseers used whips and canes to keep the pace up, berating the Indians as "dogs." Those poor souls who escaped the hell were chased down and returned. Some Spaniards were designated *visitadores*, or inspectors, by Ovando and put in charge of villages. They were given an extra 100 Tainos in addition to their original *encomiendas*. When escaped Tainos were returned, they had to stand judgment before the *visitador*.

The trial and punishment were swift and cruel. Tied to a post, they were whipped with a lash dipped in tar. The famished, thin Tainos were lashed to a bloody pulp and usually left for dead. "I saw this many times with my own eyes," Las Casas later recorded. "And God is my witness that many fell on those poor lambs ..." The metaphorical substitution of lambs for Indians clearly showed how Las Casas viewed these victims, for lambs were often the sacrificial animals of the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Jesus himself assumed the role of the lamb of God who sacrificed himself to atone for the sins of man. Jesus, conversely, is sometimes portrayed as the shepherd, a tender, loving guardian of the flock. What of these Spanish shepherds on the island? Las Casas disabused the reader of any notion that they were shepherds in the Scriptural sense, but more like wolves who prey on the flock. In each instance, a metaphor for the predator, rather than the guardian, is drawn by Las Casas.

Las Casas pounded away in his indictment of Spanish behavior. The Spanish were contemptuous of the Indians, treating them worse than the beasts of the field. His comparisons are direct, his language unforgiving. "And even the beasts usually have some liberty to go graze in the pastures, a liberty which our Spaniards denied the poor miserable Indians. And so, in truth, they were in perpetual slavery, for they were deprived of their free will to do but like beasts whose owners keep them tethered."

To do this to human beings was contemptible.

When the famished and sickly Indians could no longer work, they were allowed to go home. "The poor souls went, usually falling into the first ravines, dying from desperation. A few made it to their homes. And I came upon some of the dead on the roads, and others under the trees, gasping; and others groaning in the pain of death. A few saying 'Hungry! Hungry!'"<sup>24</sup>

To escape the hunger and pain, many chose suicide, drinking the poisonous juice from the cassava plant. “This was the liberty and good treatment and Christianity given these people by the *Comendador Mayor* [Governor Ovando].”<sup>25</sup> The governor was held strictly accountable by Las Casas, for while governors and viceroys were held in high esteem, much was expected from them as well. The prophetic nature of Las Casas’s character rises and is clearly evident.

A wrong, a terrible injustice, had been perpetrated and Ovando did not intervene to stop it. His guilt was incontrovertible to Las Casas. Ovando was guilty not only before man, but also before God. “Before God,” Las Casas wrote “because throwing rational, free men into such a cruel and hellish captivity constituted an evil and went against divine and natural law, even more so when experience showed clearly what was happening.” Las Casas recounted horror after horror, sometimes repeating himself, to drive home the message.

The scenes that unfolded before his eyes (so at odds with the teachings of Jesus Christ), led to a decision he eventually had to make as a Christian: to take up the cause of the Indians and so to enter through the small gate and take the straight and narrow road to life, salvation, and justice, or pass through the wide gate and follow the broad road to destruction.