

Columbus & the QGP

or

The Passage to India

In Portugal and Spain, they have a long history of discoveries. Perhaps we can use some of that to learn things for our explorations. Maybe what we're presently experiencing is just another case of *déjà vu*.

In the year 1493, Columbus was in Lisbon and wrote a letter announcing that he had just discovered the passage to India. The Barcelona Times ran as headline

Columbus Reports on Discoveries of Island of India

Quoniam suscepto prouintile rem perfecta
fuisse gratum tibi fore scio: has constituta
mutatisq; rei in hoc nostro itinere ges-
sioneant: Tricesimo tertio die post Cadizibus
Indica peruenit ubi plurimas insulas innumeri-
mibus reperi: quarum omnium pro felicissim
paxonio celebrato r. uerillis extensis contradice-
fessionem accepit: p. ineq; carum d. m. Saluatoris
subcitus freres aurilio ram ad hanc q; ad ceter
nimo. Sam. Jo. Indi. Guanabaria. vocant. Alii

Christopher Columbus
Epistola de insulis nuper inventis
Printed letter, Rome: 1493
Rare Book & Special Collections Division
Purchased, 1946

In 1493, Columbus wrote a brief report concerning his discoveries of "Islands of India beyond the Ganges." It was intended as a public notice to announce his discoveries and to garner support for another voyage. The first edition of this letter was printed in Spanish in Barcelona in April 1493. Within the month a Latin translation of the letter was published in Rome by Stephan Planck. In its preamble, exclusive credit was given to Fernando of Aragon for supporting the expedition -- omitting Isabel's support. Immediately Planck published a corrected edition, the one on display, and it was this Latin edition that spread the news of discovery throughout Europe.

Additional Views:
In Latin:
[Page 1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#), [8](#)
Translated to English:
[Page 1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#)

As you can see, the main aim of his letter was "to garner support for another voyage". It is amusing to note that already then journalists had a very fine sense for what seemed real and what was just a claim.

Columbus himself wrote in the letter

Having now accomplished the undertaking upon which I set out, I know that it will be agreeable to you to be informed of all that I have done and discovered on my voyage. After the thirty-third day after leaving Cadiz, I reached the Indian Ocean, where I found a great many islands, peopled by innumerable inhabitants, of all which I took possession, without resistance, in the name of our most illustrious king. When we landed upon the island I had named Joanna, I proceeded along the shore, and found it to be of so great an extent, that I conceived it not to be part of an island, but part of the Continent, a province of China. However, you see neither cities nor towns on its shores, only a few villages and rural farms. I could not enter into conversation with the inhabitants. I advanced forward,

thinking that I could find some town - but at length, perceiving that nothing new was likely to appear - I determined to make no further search.

So in spite of some inconsistencies, he was not deterred. What he had found, he was sure, was the “*island of India beyond the Ganges*”.

Before we are lured into drawing dangerous conclusions, let us consider a poetic warning. The German writer Erich Kästner noted


*Auch Fehler haben ihren Wert,
jedoch nur hier und da.
Nicht jeder, der nach Indien fährt,
entdeckt Amerika.*

*Mistakes as such can still bring much,
but do not be misled.
Not all who sail for India
find America instead.*

So what *can* we conclude? Let us continue a little further into the history of the search Columbus was engaged in.

The passage to India was, as you know, found by Vasco da Gama, who made extensive use of the vast preliminary experimental and theoretical work recorded by the PCT* (Portuguese Center for Theoretical Studies) in Sagres, founded by Henry the Navigator. In a step-by-step procedure, the western coast of Africa had been mapped out by Portuguese navigators. They were the first to pass beyond Cape Bojador, where conventional knowledge said that the world would end. The southern tip of Africa was reached by Bartolomeu Dias in 1488, who noticed that the coast further east turned to the north again. Incidentally, none of these navigators ever claimed to have reached India.



 Portuguese explorers moved gradually down the coast of Africa and ultimately reached western India in their search for gold, spices, and slaves.

On the grounds of the information from Dias, the Portuguese King Manuel organized a naval expedition to reach India. The main reason for the whole search was the spice trade, and the spice center of India was known to be the city of Calicut, since a Portuguese traveller (Pedro de Covilhã) had been there on land, disguised as an Arab trader. In 1497, Vasco da Gama’s fleet of four ships started from Portugal, carrying a letter of King Manuel to the Raja of Calicut. They had with them Fernão Martins, who was fluent in Arabic, the ‘lingua franca’ in those parts of the world. The fleet passed the Cape of Good Hope and moved north along the east coast of Africa. In Malindi, Vasco da Gama told local Arab traders that he wanted to get to India. “No problem”, they replied, “straight north-east for three weeks, and you’re there. But we can give you a pilot, if you wish.” They sent him to Ahmed ibn Majid, the greatest nautical expert of the region, and presumably one of his post-docs (it is not clear if Arab or Indian) served as pilot for the Portuguese.

With his help, the Portuguese fleet reached the Malabar coast of India near Calicut on May 18, 1498.

In contrast to Columbus, they could enter into conversation with the natives, who led them to some local spice traders, and the first words the Portuguese heard there were

*Ao diabo que te dou!
Quem te trouxe cá?*

*Go to hell!
Who brought you here?*

And Vasco da Gama noted that

“we were greatly astonished, for we never expected to hear our language spoken so far away from Portugal”.

He asked for, and was granted, an audience with the Raja and presented his letter from King Manuel. So that is how the passage to India was discovered. I find this ending reassuring, inspiring and educational.

