

No one knows exactly how Columbus looked. The earliest extant portrait hangs in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, painted in 1519 by Sebastiano del Piombo, 13 years after Columbus' death. Perhaps the painter directly observed the explorer's features but no evidence confirms this. According to Columbus historian Salvador de Madariaga in *Christopher Columbus* (Macmillan, 1940), this portrait could suggest Jewish features, specifically the hair, nose, lower lip and face structure. Other descriptions of Columbus speak of a long face, ruddy complexion and red hair.





n August 3, 1492,

Christopher Columbus set sail for India, searching for a new route to the Orient. But unlike most ship captains, he did not permit his sailors one last night carousing on the town before their long journey into the unknown. Atypically, Columbus demanded that all crew members board his three ships by 11:00 P.M., the day before sailing—on August 2. It just so happens that after midnight on August 2, it became illegal for a Jew to remain on Spanish soil. By order of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the Spanish expulsion of the Jews began one hour after Columbus ordered his men to be on board—the day *before* sailing. A coincidence? Perhaps. But those who believe that Columbus—and members of his crew—were Jewish believe there was “method in his madness.” He took no chances. He was out by the deadline. So was his crew.

Was Columbus a Jew—or a descendent of Jews—searching not for treasures from the Orient to fill Spanish royal

# Was the Discoverer Of America Jewish?

**NEWTON FROHLICH**



Throughout the ages Columbus has been represented in many ways—as a noble hero, a brooding philosopher, a Christian savior. These ever changing images of Columbus say more about how we view history and the man than about how he actually looked.

Confessor to Queen Isabella and ruthless Inquisitor General of Spain, Tomas de Torquemada proclaimed, "One people, one kingdom, one faith," as he zealously excluded, tortured and murdered Jews. Ironically his grandmother was a converso, a Jew who converted to Christianity. Yet Torquemada harbored tremendous hatred against Jews in Spain, convinced that as long as practicing Jews lived there, conversos would return to Judaism.



coffers but for a safe haven in which his coreligionists could live? Some say he even expected to meet up with the 10 lost tribes of Israel, who had reportedly fled east to India and the Orient.

Strangely, although he was "world-famous" in his own day, Columbus, the itinerant traveler, has left us no record of his birth. Italy, Spain and "even the Jews," wrote Harvard professor Samuel Eliot Morison, claim Columbus as their own. Many scholars agree with Spanish Christian historian Salvadore de Madariaga's assertion that Columbus was probably a *marrano*, a third-generation descendent of Jews who had converted to Christianity during Spain's antisemitic riots of 1391.

The evidence—documents, diaries, letters, events that coincide—not only support de Madariaga's conclusion but also clarify who financed Columbus' voyage and why. But in Inquisition Spain, Columbus was forced to hide his Jewish origins.

**I**n the late fourteenth century—less than a century before Columbus' most famous voyage—the population of Spain numbered nine million. Approximately 10 percent—one million—were Jews. Then, an outbreak of antisemitism swept the land, and a third of the Jews fled—to live elsewhere, either as Jews, or, in the case of Columbus' forebears, as converted Christians. But two-thirds remained in Spain. Of these, approximately half continued to live as Jews; the other half converted to Christianity and were referred to as New Christians or conversos.

By publicly denying their roots in order to maintain their status as leading lawyers, bankers, doctors and government advisers, the New Christians continued to prosper and occupy many of the best homes in the urban centers of Spain. But this infuriated the Old Christians who thought the brutal riots—for example, in Seville, in which a quarter of the Jewish population was killed—had gotten rid of the Jews.

By maintaining relationships with Jewish friends who hadn't converted and continuing to share many of the Jewish customs (like secret Shabbat observance), health standards (like avoidance of pork), eating habits (Jewish foods) and even prayers, the

New Christians signaled to their Old Christian contemporaries that their profession of a new faith was less than sincere. Soon, Old Christians began to refer to them as *marranos*, swine.

Tension increased as thousands of Christian farmers streamed into the cities of Europe—including Spain's—seeking a place in the emerging urban economy, competing for jobs, financing and space. Frustration led to confrontation and the Jews were seen as an easy scapegoat.

The marriage of Isabella, Queen of Castile, to Prince Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Aragon, became the catalyst for harsher treatment of Jews in Spain. Ironically, the union was arranged by leaders of the Jewish community, who perhaps merely wished to ingratiate themselves with the young royal couple. Or perhaps they earnestly desired to contribute to the stability of their country by uniting the ruling fami-



Ferdinand and Isabella's 1469 marriage, arranged by leaders of the Jewish community, united the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile into an unprecedented political and economic power. During nearly seven years Columbus petitioned the royal couple to grant support for his voyage. Isabella granted him a modest living stipend during the years of his wait. Finally, a *marrano* banker and financial adviser to Ferdinand, Luis de Santangel, offered to lend the court money for Columbus' venture. Terms of the loan required the court to repay Santangel only if the voyage was a success and to grant immunity from prosecution by the Inquisition to the Santangel family.



Garbed in humiliating pointed caps, terrified people suspected of being secret Jews face a court of the Inquisition. As confiscation of possessions, torture, imprisonment and death spread throughout the kingdom, Columbus prepared to embark on his first voyage of discovery. More than 300 years after these events occurred, the Spanish artist, Francisco Goya painted this scene (c. 1812-1814).

lies of two large kingdoms on the peninsula. Whatever their intention, the marriage set in motion a political/religious power that destroyed the Jewish community.

First, Isabella and Ferdinand turned on the Arab kingdom of Granada. Remnant of the once mighty Moslem state that had ruled much of Iberia, Granada occupied a strategic corner of what is now Spain. In a vision of national greatness, uniformity and order, the royal couple set out to eliminate the Moslem element that, with the Christian and the Jewish, formed the tripod on which Spain was based.

But war against the well-entrenched, wealthy Arabs was expensive—and promised to be more so if Cairo, Baghdad and Damascus sent help to their Moslem brothers. To enhance their royal money chest, Isabella and Ferdinand turned on the second element of the Spanish tripod—the insincere, high profile, wealthy New Christians.

**R**esurrecting a little used institution of the Catholic Church, the Inquisition, they converted it into an instrument of national power and economic gain. Under the guise of examining the sincerity of the New Christians' faith, the king and queen commenced a massive investigation and inventory of every piece of property held by New Christians. Seeking penance and punishment, the Inquisitors tortured, imprisoned and killed the New

Christians, confiscating their homes, banks, loan portfolios, businesses and possessions—all with approval of the church.

By the time Isabella and Ferdinand defeated the Arab army of Granada in 1492, they had not only killed thousands of New Christians, they had catalogued and confiscated much of their wealth. But the *marranos* persisted in their hyphenated ways and maintained many of their "harmless" Jewish customs.

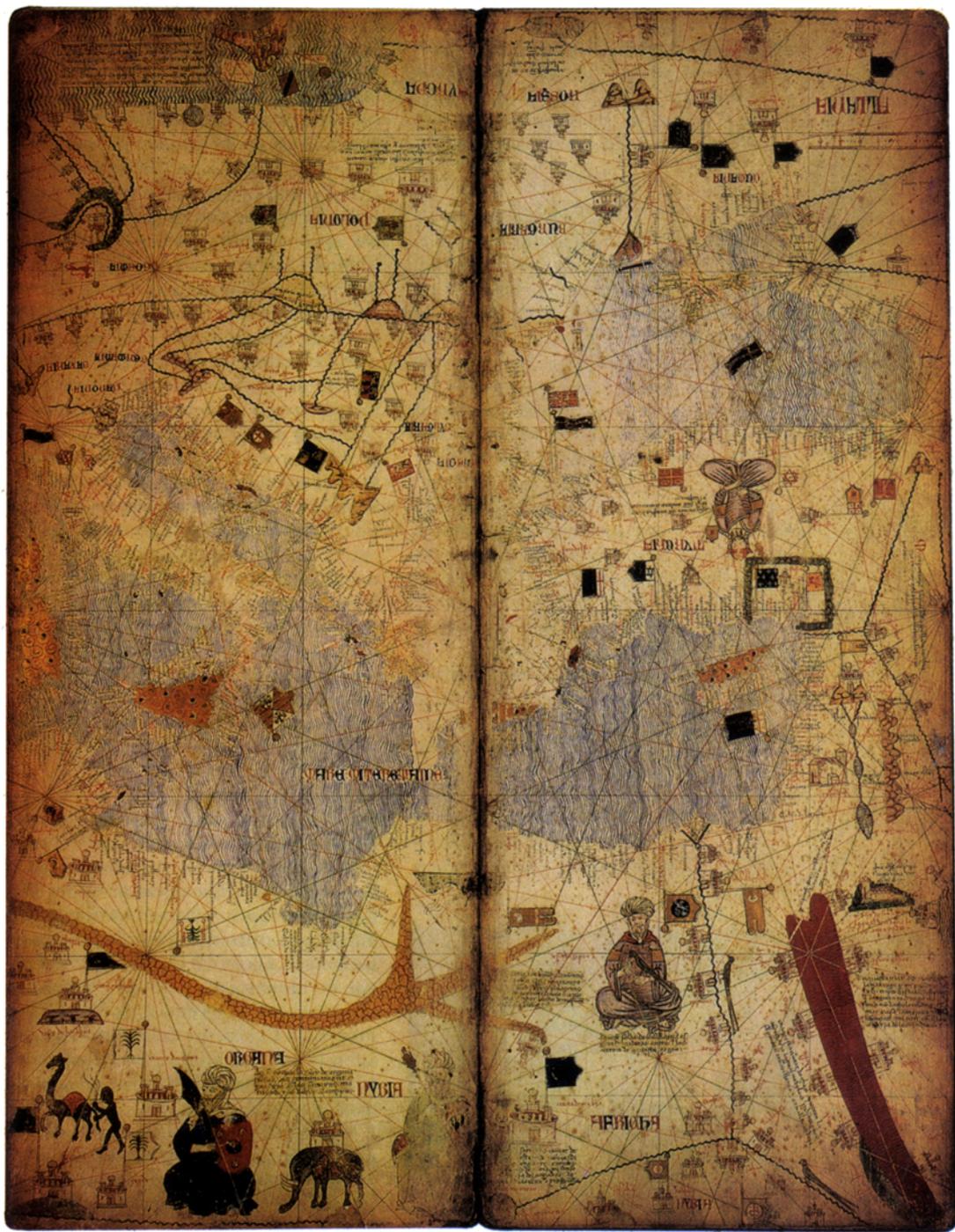


BETH HATIFRITSOTH, THE NAHUM GOLDMANN MUSEUM OF THE JEWISH DIASPORA

The royal edict expelling Jews from Spain. According to this decree, signed here on its last page by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, all Jews must leave Spanish soil by midnight July 31, 1492. A two-day extension changed the expulsion order to August 2.

Was it merely coincidence that Columbus ordered his crew to be on board by 11:00 P.M. August 2? Or was he protecting some of his Jewish crew, and, perhaps, himself?





Abraham Cresques, a prominent Jewish mapmaker from the island of Mallorca, created the seven-panel *Atlas Catalan* in 1375 showing the world as it was then known. The Near East panel (above) depicts details culled from the Bible, apocalyptic writings, ancient and medieval literature and Arab traders' descriptions. These maps, prepared from information from Marco Polo and Arab

traders, were the most realistic representations of the east at the time. While it is not known with certainty if Columbus actually saw the *Atlas Catalan*, the information derived from it would have been available and most likely influenced him—perhaps convincing Columbus that the Orient could be reached by sailing west.



Christopher Columbus

owned by noblemen who raided merchant ships. On one of these voyages, his ship was destroyed. He made his way to Lisbon, where his brother, Bartolomeo, was employed by a Jewish firm that made maps.

**C**artography and astronomy were Jewish professions during Columbus' time. Majorca, a Spanish island, served as the center of mapmaking and related sciences. The interest in voyages of discovery by the ruling heads of state was economic and expansionist: The discovery of new lands opened up new products for trade, new material resources to exploit and a new people and land over which to exercise dominion. Cartography was a highly regarded science supported by courts that hungered to expand their rule. Portugal's King John II even established a scientific institute—the Academy for Cosmographs in Sagres, Portugal—specifically to chart the course of new world exploration. The head of the academy, Jehuda Cresques, was a Jew from Majorca.

One of the new discoveries was a method to determine a ship's position by the angle formed between the sun and the horizon. A group of Jewish scientists, including Abraham ibn Ezra, Jacob Carsoni and Jacob ben Machir, collaborated to improve navigation instruments. The government of Portugal invited sea captains and foreign scientists to their country on what today

would be called academic exchanges. Perhaps Columbus benefited from these scientific laboratories. He had contact with a Jewish astronomer, Abraham Zacuto, who had prepared astronomical tables for sailors that proved very helpful for Columbus' voyage.

In Portugal, Columbus also executed the first of his name changes, adopting the local approximation, Christovao Colom. There he was introduced to Filipa Moniz y Perestrello, a daughter of the first governor of the Madeira island, Porto Santo. Past marriage age, Filipa was residing in a convent. Columbus married her and the couple lived in the Madeiras, where he sailed commercial vessels down the coast of Africa.

During those voyages, Columbus discovered a hint of the trade winds, the constant easterly winds that blow across the Atlantic. With his sailor's instinct, he believed the winds could enable him to reach the Orient by sailing west around the world. He went to Lisbon to obtain royal sponsorship for such a voyage, but would not reveal his insight for fear others would steal his idea. Instead, Columbus invented a theory that the shape of the world was oblong and the distance between Portugal and Japan only 2,500 miles. On hearing this theory, the royal Committee of Mathematicians understandably rejected his petition.

After Filipa's death, in 1481 or 1482, Columbus moved with their young son, Diego, to Spain, where he hoped to secure backing for his plan. When he arrived in Palos, the Inquisition was arresting New Christians, imprisoning and torturing them until they confessed to "Judaizing practices." He lodged Diego in La Rabida, the Franciscan monastery, perhaps to counter suspicion and continue a family tactic of survival. In Genoa, the Colombos had found safety by residing on the grounds of a monastery, San Stefano. In Castile, he used the same approach.

He also changed his name again—to the more Spanish-sounding Cristobal Colon. Then, he sought out someone to back his voyage. He found a rich *marrano*, Don Luis de la Cerda, the Duke of Medina Celi, the owner of several corsairs, who agreed to build and provision the ships. But Columbus realized he would never achieve what he wanted if he only obtained financing and not royal sponsorship as well. Without

Columbus' first audience with Ferdinand and Isabella occurred in 1486. At that time the royal court was occupied with the war against the Moslems in Granada and could not afford the cost of an expensive voyage. Isabella's royal advisory committee, headed by Friar Hernando de Talavera, looked into Columbus' exploration proposal and stated, "We can find no justification for their Highnesses' supporting a project that rests on extremely weak foundations." Columbus waited nearly seven years for approval from the Spanish sovereigns.



it, he could forget any claim to profits from future voyages, not to mention the honor of being granted a title. Once his trade winds idea was in the public domain, he would be just an outsider who had found a route.

In January 1486 the Duke of Medina Celi helped Columbus obtain an audience with Isabella. She and Ferdinand were preoccupied with their military effort to expel the Moslems from Granada while simultaneously conducting the Inquisition. The lengthy war had financially strapped the Spanish kingdom. Despite their preoccupations, however, Isabella listened to Columbus' proposal. She ended up granting him a small pension to sustain him until she made a decision, referring the matter to her advisers on scientific matters. Unfortunately, she was unable to make the investment in unexplored territory at the same time as the war in Granada was draining her coffers.

Almost seven years of waiting followed. During this period, Columbus was comforted by Beatriz Enriquez de Harana, his Jewish mistress. Although he dared not marry her in Inquisition Spain, he lived with her until he died. In 1488, they had a son whom they named Fernando, after the king.

**I**sabella's royal advisers recommended against the voyage Columbus proposed. Isabella herself, without funds for speculative projects—she had even pawned her fabled jewels to finance the war against the Moslems—did not reject the idea, however. Columbus then sought the help of Don Luis de Santangel, a *marrano* banker from one of the wealthiest families in Aragon who advised Ferdinand on financial matters.

Santangel proposed to the court that the court underwrite the venture through a loan from Santangel. If Columbus failed, the court need not repay Santangel; but if Columbus succeeded, the court not only had to repay the loan, it also had to grant the Santangel family immunity from prosecution by the Inquisition. Several Santangels had been convicted of Judaizing by the Inquisitor's Office and had received heavy sentences—fines and imprisonment. Other Santangel family members had been hunted down and burned at the stake. The

## Do We Really Want to Claim Columbus?

The *New York Times* no longer permits references to Columbus as the "discoverer" of America, as we have done in the title of the accompanying article, more for reasons of rhythm than historical conviction.

The reason for the *New York Times* rule—and other publications—is that from the viewpoint of native Americans who had lived here for hundreds, if not thousands, of years Columbus certainly did not discover the place.

For the native population, Columbus' "discovery" was disastrous. Within a half century, the three million Tainos Indians who lived in the Caribbean area virtually disappeared, victims of European diseases like smallpox, to which their immune system was unusually susceptible, and the harsh conditions under which the Spanish colonists required them to work. The Arawak Indians, too, were simply wiped out—for similar reasons.

In the current reconsideration of the "glories" of Columbus' "discovery," Columbus himself has also come under sharper scrutiny. Before embarking on his famous voyage to America, he had sailed to Africa to bring back slaves for the Europeans.

When the gold he anticipated in the New World failed to materialize, he turned to slave trade as a source of income both for his royal patrons and for himself. "I will give [their highnesses]...slaves, as many as they shall order to be shipped," Columbus wrote to the king and queen describing the discoveries from his first voyage.

Columbus detailed how best to teach the natives Spanish, which would ease their subsequent conversion to Christianity. But on his second voyage, Columbus wrote that the colonists needed cattle and other work animals and suggested "payment for these things could be made...in slaves, from among these cannibals, a people very savage and suitable for the purpose, and well made and of very good intelligence."

In his new Columbus biography, *The Mysterious History of Columbus* (Knopf, 1991), *New York Times* science correspondent John Noble Wilford concludes that Columbus "had a bloodied hand in the brutalization of the native people and in the start of a slave trade."

On his second voyage, Columbus sent back as slaves 550 Tainos Indians who had been captured in a "rebellion." The rebellion was sparked when Spanish settlers gleefully watched a dog attack and disembowel a native. To the Spaniards who brutally suppressed the rebellion and provided Columbus with native slaves to send back to Spain, it was a "just war," thus permitting the enslavement of the rebels.

A sixteenth century historian, Bartolome de Las Casas, used Columbus' original papers to write his *Historia de las Indias*. Las Casas is harshly critical of the slave and taxation practices that Columbus instituted and from which subsequent colonists continued to profit.

However harsh Columbus was as a governor, those who followed him were clearly worse. Las Casas details accounts of pillage, murder, rape and decapitation of the native populations at the hands of the Spaniards.

Whether better or worse, Columbus was clearly a man of his time. But that is an explanation, not an excuse. He was also, however, an explorer with a single-minded vision. And his "discovery" marks the beginning of western civilization in America—a mixed blessing, but one to which we are all heirs.

Inquisitors' hunger for Jewish blood and the money that resulted from confiscating Jewish possessions made the Santangel family a prime target of the Inquisitors' ruthless tactics. Ferdinand accepted Santangel's proposal and Santangel lent the court 17,000 ducats, interest free. In return for his support, on May 30, 1497, Santangel received a special charter protecting him and his descendants from the Inquisition.



Christopher Columbus

When Columbus returned from his voyage, he sent his first report of his successes to Santangel, who had made Columbus a partner in the venture. (Santangel had persuaded the royal court to grant Columbus' demand for 12.5 percent of the gross of any resulting trade in the newly discovered territories.) Santangel secured the appointment of Columbus as viceroy of all the lands he discovered and admiral of all the seas he crossed—the latter a title descending to his and his descendants' firstborn sons, forever. Columbus also received the right to 10 percent of the net profits on all resulting commerce and on any other merchandise that might be bought and sold within the confines of his new admiralty.

On his voyage to the new world, Colum-

bus took with him Luis de Torres, an interpreter who spoke Hebrew. De Torres was a Jew who was baptized shortly before Columbus' mission so he would be eligible to participate. If Columbus brought a Hebrew interpreter, he must have expected to encounter Hebrew-speaking people along the way—perhaps members of the 10 lost tribes. Perhaps the hunted Jews of Spain could then find a haven with their co-religionists in the "Orient."

Whether the first words spoken to Native Americans in the new world were Hebrew will never be known, but after meeting the native people, Columbus appointed de Torres as ambassador on a six-day mission inland to visit what was described by the natives' hand gestures as a great city. Later, de Torres was one of the first Europeans to settle in the new world, where he became a wealthy land owner and lived out his life on a royal pension from Spain.

In his later years, security, wealth and fame made Columbus less cautious. Although he continued to hide the clues to his identity, nevertheless, like pieces of a puzzle, they begin to lock together. For example:

He put some strange markings above the first word of 12 letters he wrote to his son, Diego, 10 written between November 21, 1504, and February 24, 1505. Some scholars claim they are the Hebrew letters *bet* and *hey*, for *be'exrat hashem*—with the help of God—customary markings on letters written by observant Jews.

In a letter Columbus wrote to the governess of Prince Juan, cited in the biography of Columbus written by his son Fernando, Columbus said:

[L]et them call me by any name they want, for after all, David, a very wise king, tended sheep and later was made king of Jerusalem; and I am a servant of that same Lord who raised David to that state.

On his final voyage to America, when he was ill with fever and hallucinating, Columbus wrote to Isabella and Ferdinand about voices that had called to him:

Oh, fool, man slow to believe and to serve thy God, God of all! What more did He do for Moses or for David his servant?...

[W]hen he saw thee of an age that satisfied

## Saint Columbus?

In Christianity a saint is a person who practiced Christian virtues to a heroic degree and has been proclaimed by the church as a model of Christian living. Since the twelfth century, official recognition of a saint comes only in the form of canonization, a legal process directed by papal authority. The person must have displayed heroic virtues in life and left evidence of miracles after death.

Was Christopher Columbus such a person? As immigrants began flooding America's shores at the end of the nineteenth century, the Columbus legacy took on mythic proportions. He became a colonist in the best sense of the word: heroically discovering the new world, teaching the natives the customs of European civilization, cultivating the land and converting the Indians to Christianity. Columbus, a national icon on a par with George Washington, was idolized by various ethnic groups for his vision and bravery. His legacy lives on in the naming of our nation's capital, the District of Columbia, as well as in New York City's Columbus Circle and Columbia University, which was formerly known as King's College.

The fraternal organization of the Knights of Columbus, begun in 1882 by a group of Irish Catholic immigrants, called Columbus "a prophet and a seer" and exhorted each member to strive to be a better person in Columbus' image. The group sought Columbus' canonization.

In France another group of Catholics, led by Count Roselle de Lorique, a French nobleman, organized itself to seek the canonization of Columbus stating that he brought Christianity to half the world. In 1866, Pope Pius IX asked that proceedings commence on the matter. Both he and his successor, Pope Leo XIII, seemed to favor the plan, but eventually, after a papal committee scrutinized Columbus' life, the application was rejected. Grounds for the rejection were said to be blemishes on Columbus' private life, namely his relationship with Beatriz Enriquez de Harana, his Jewish mistress and the mother of his son, Fernando. The committee also found no evidence that Columbus performed a miracle.

In Simon Wiesenthal's study of Columbus, *Sails of Hope* (Macmillan, 1973), the author tries to investigate the matter further, stating that many other powerful church dignitaries had official mistresses and illegitimate children. He writes, "When I inquired in Rome I was informed that the Vatican's documents on Columbus are not accessible." He then adds, "Can other reasons have decisively affected the Vatican's decisions, reasons based on documents being withheld from scholars....If some day the secret archives of the Vatican are opened...new facts may be brought to light."

It would be ironic, indeed, if Columbus were a Jew who almost achieved sainthood.

Him, marvelously did He make thy name resound in the earth....What more did He do for the people of Israel when He led them out of Egypt? Nor for David, whom from a shepherd He raised to be king of Judea?

In his will, Columbus bequeathed money "to a Jew who was living at the entrance of the ghetto in Lisbon." He also asked his elder son, Diego, to whom he left the bulk of his estate, to take care of the Jewess, Beatriz, whom he had been unable to marry for reasons that were "well-known" to Diego.

Diego had become experienced in the ways of the royal court and had attained a position first as the queen's personal guard and then, later, as the king's personal guard. Before Columbus' death, Diego often argued his father's case regarding duties and other money owed to him by the royal court. After his father's death, Diego was briefly appointed governor of Santo Domingo.

Columbus' other son, Fernando, who wrote the biography of his father, *History of the Life and Deeds of Christopher Columbus*, first published in Venice in 1571, 65 years after Columbus' death, was an avid book collector. Fernando's library contained more than

15,000 volumes on science, navigation, geography and travel; some of these volumes were from his father's collection. Fernando bequeathed his library to the Dominicans of the Monastery of San Pablo in Seville, where it serves as a base for the Biblioteca Colombina, the Columbus library in Seville.

Columbus' signature on his will is intriguing. Instead of signing it with any of the names he had taken in his lifetime, he used a coded signature:

.S.  
S.A.S.  
X M Y  
:Xpo FERENS./  
El Almirante

While some scholars argue that the triangular pattern represents a Catholic prayer, there would have been no reason for Columbus to hide evidence of his Catholic faith. A more compelling hypothesis is found in the writings of those scholars who maintain that, during the Inquisition, cryptic messages were often utilized by *marranos* and that the letters stand for a Latinized Hebrew prayer: *Sanctus. Sanctus, Adonai, Sanctus. Chesed Moleh Yehovah* (God, God, Lord, God, Lord, God. Lord grant mercy). The last two lines are said to be Columbus' signature: *Xpo FERENS* has been translated as a Greco-Latin form of his name and *El Almirante* means "the admiral."

If, as Columbus directed, his firstborn descendants would forever use this signature in all writings, then he had created a vehicle that enabled them to fulfill—without danger of self-revelation—a central commandment of the Jewish tradition, that every son should pray for the soul of his deceased father. (M)

25 de Julio 1505

A puzzling marking appears in the upper left corner of 12 letters Columbus wrote to his son, Diego. One is shown above. Some scholars, including Salvador de Madariaga and Simon Wiesenthal, believe these marks are the Hebrew letters *bet* and *hey*, standing for *be'ezrat hashem*, with the help of God. This abbreviation, used by observant Jews on all written materials, might have been for Columbus a reminder to his son of their secret Jewishness. Columbus' cryptic signature (below) may also encode a Jewish message. Those scholars who support the thesis that Columbus was of Jewish descent speculate that the triangular formation of the letters has a hidden kabbalistic meaning: "God, God, Lord, God. Lord grant mercy."

.S.  
S.A.S.  
X M Y  
XPO FERENS



Columbus' letter of discovery, in a rare 1493 Florentine edition, is illustrated with an Italian woodcut depicting his landfall (above). On Columbus' return from his first voyage he wrote a letter to Luis de Santangel, royal financial adviser and Jewish backer of the voyage, describing his new world discoveries. The letter, intended for the king and queen, was published shortly after in Barcelona, Rome and Florence.

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