

Chapter Two To the Indies

"As a young man I was drawn to the sea and to the Indies," Las Casas might have written, if ever given to autobiography, which he was decidedly not. Like so many before and since, the sea was a broad road to adventure and foreign lands. It sounds almost banal to describe those feelings in such shopworn terms, but, for young men, the promise of foreign adventure is heady stuff. When one adds in the promise of gold, and the opportunity presents itself to both sail to foreign lands AND to get rich, the pull is powerful. So it proved to be for Bartolomé as the old century waned and gave way to the sixteenth since the coming of Christ.

Bartolomé too followed in the wake of Columbus. And, like Columbus, Bartolomé embodied in his nature some contradictory motives that spanned the spectrum from the spiritual and near mystical to the worldly and near base. Columbus never really put one aside and he died a contradictory figure, then, as he remains today. Las Casas did otherwise, but his decision was not made until he had become a veteran settler in the Indies.

Getting to the Indies was, however, not a simple task. Over the next half century, Las Casas made at least four, if not five, transatlantic crossings, each one a journey of proportions that the modern traveler would surely label as "epical!" when measured against the ease of the jet age. The trip was made by few men who did not already possess a hardy spirit, so the conquistador class was exceptional, made so by the process of natural selection. Las Casas belonged to this group, and he proved to be one of the hardiest of the lot over the course of his long life. His supporters thanked God for his longevity and health; his detractors wondered perhaps if Las Casas' life was not some sort of Godly retribution for past sins.

Before taking a look at the sea and its travelers as the age of exploration got underway, let's follow Bartolomé's life until 1502 when he first embarked at Seville for the long voyage across the Atlantic. The details are sketchy in the extreme. They open up questions that only a novelist would enjoy answering, for a biography based on what we know reads as follows.

His father returned from the Indies in 1498. He brought an Indian friend for Bartolomé who then may or may not have gone to study law at the University of Salamanca for a year or two. In 1499-1500 a rebellion of Moors erupted in the mountains around Granada and Bartolomé may or may not have gone with a troop of Sevillian militia to help quash that rebellion. On February 13, 1502 he sailed for Santo Domingo in the fleet of Nicolas de Ovando, arriving off the coast of Santo Domingo April 15, a voyage of two months. Bartolomé may or may not have already taken on minor orders in the church and received the tonsure by 1502. Period.

Not much for the biographer, but rich for our imagination as we create what MIGHT have gone on in his life. The details that do surface from a reading of Las Casas' monumental histories do not tell of Bartolomé directly, but they do tell us something of himself.¹

¹ As I compose this chapter, I can look over on my bookshelf at the SIXTEEN volume Obras completas (Complete Works) of Las Casas published in the mid-1990s by Alianza Editorial of Madrid. Some of these volumes number well over 1000 pages each. While not all are Las Casas' works (the entire first volume, for

Occasionally he mentions that "I witnessed this" or "I saw him" personally, endowing those passages with an authenticity that colors in a small piece of the complex tapestry of his life, adding richness and depth to the otherwise skeletal framework.

In the summer of 1493, Columbus passed through Seville again on his way to Cadiz to organize the sailing of his Second Voyage to the New World late in September. He brought with him detailed instructions from the Sovereigns, and, in his entourage, at least one monk and several secular friars. Las Casas remembered them well--as composed his History of the Indies in the late 1520s, or more than thirty years after the fact.

Friar Bernado Buil, a Catalan, was a monk of the order of Saint Benedict and was appointed by Isabelle and Ferdinand when they held court in Barcelona.² Buil had been Ferdinand's secretary and he was instructed by the Pope to take missionaries with him. A Hieronymite friar, Ramón Pané, several Mercedarians, and at least three Franciscans also traveled with Columbus.³ Las Casas never met Buil since he only stayed in Santo Domingo for a short while. On the other hand, Las Casas did get to know two of the secular Franciscans, Juan de la Duella, whose nickname was Juan the Red, "because he was," and Juan de Tisin.

The two Franciscans were French, from Picardy or Burgundy. They were moved to travel with Columbus "only by their zeal for conversion of these souls," which must have impressed the boy Bartolomé if he saw them when they came through Seville with Columbus. Everyone else on the grand expedition in the making, which included an impressive fleet of seventeen vessels and over 1500 gentlemen, farmers, royal officials, arms, and horses, was intent on getting gold.

The contrast between the humble, although learned, Franciscans and the dress and demeanor of the Sevillian gentlemen may have caught the attention of Bartolomé. The Franciscans he came to know well, "in friendship and conversation" over the years, and he admired them for their humility. Indeed, it was because of this very quality that "they choose not to become priests." On the surface, this may be a strange statement. Why remain "secular" friars and not become priests? What difference did it make if friars, monks, and priests were all equally devoted to God? Recall, however, the worldly, almost imperious, face of the Church in late Medieval Spain, or throughout Europe for that matter. Cardinal Cisneros fought off the corruption of power and the ornaments and dress of authority. In fact, the contrast between a wealthy priest, enjoying the benefits of concubines and fat living, compared with the Spartan life of the mendicant Orders, such as the Franciscans, was radical. And, it was not lost on the boy Las Casas.

Buil also carried with him a gift from the beloved and pious Queen Isabelle. She sent some crimson materials for the churches to be established in these new lands discovered by Columbus--perhaps an image of the Virgin on a cloth to cover the communion table--from her own chapel.

"I saw it," Bartolomé later wrote, "and it lasted many years. It wasn't moved or repaired for it almost became a religious relic, having been the first and given by the

example, is a biographical study by Alvaro Huerfano) and many include his works in Spanish and Latin, side by side, the output is IMPRESSIVE.

² LC, Historia de Indias [hereafter HI], I, chapter 81, in Obras., IV, 844; Phillips and Phillips, World of Columbus, p. 192.

³ Liss, Isabel, pp. 296-297.

Queen. It finally fell apart from age." Curiously, he writes this tender detail in parenthesis, as if a simple, extraneous afterthought.

His uncle Francisco de Peñalosa, brother of his father, also sailed on that Second Voyage of Columbus' with the gentlemen, farmers, and friars. Peñalosa occupied an important position as captain of the guard. He was a soldier. Although there were few "soldiers" as we know them today on board, virtually all the men bore arms and many had served the Queen and King in military campaigns.

If the humble Franciscans served Bartolomé as one model, so his Uncle Francisco must have gone before him as another for the young and impressionable nephew. In 1496 Peñalosa returned to Castille. Did Bartolomé see him then? Three years later Peñalosa, very favored by the Queen, was appointed captain-general of a naval expedition led by Alonso Fernández de Lugo to conquer the Moors of Cape Aguer and Azamor on the north African coast of Morocco.⁴

Lugo had earlier finished the long conquest of the Canary Islands by Castile that had begun as early as 1404. Lugo conquered the islands of La Palma and Tenerife in 1493 and by 1496, in a fierce warfare, brought the last of the Canary islanders, the Guanches, on Gran Canary Island under subjugation. Many were enslaved; many more perished from the shock of warfare and new diseases. Did Bartolomé see some of these Canary islanders, chained and bent down, being marched through the streets of Seville or Cadiz, on their way to a life of bondage on the estates of Andalucia?

Bartolomé's paternal grandfather may have been a Canary islander. Other of his relatives were possible Guanches, and we know that some of his Castilian relatives, Francisco de Peñalosa for one, may have been with Lugo in his final conquest of the islands. The Guanches are now extinct, like the native Amerindians of Hispaniola and Cuba. Was there in young Bartolomé a predisposition towards conquered peoples? Did he see in the simple Tainos that Columbus displayed on his triumphal return from his First Voyage an innocent people, like the Guanches? Were they victims? Was he a descendant of one of them?⁵ Whatever Bartolomé may have felt for the Guanches and Tainos, we know he was immensely proud of his uncle.

By the mid 1490s, Castile already had a toehold on the north African coast at a watchtower called Santa Cruz del Mar Pequeña, the term used to describe the body of water between the Canary Islands and Africa. From there they traded for Sudanese gold coming from Melilla further inland. To strengthen these inroads into Moorish Africa, the monarchs commissioned Lugo in 1499 to expand the beachheads.

The Spanish knights landed on the coast, with Peñalosa in the lead, but the Moorish army was waiting. They struck in overwhelming numbers and slaughtered the Christians on the beaches. The mere survival of the expedition was in the balance. Peñalosa gathered around him twenty knights into a circle, "swearing that he would lance anyone who left." Thus, they made their last stand.

⁴ Probably Cape Azemmour and Cape Ghir, lying along the north African coast, roughly parallel to the Cape Canary Islands. Azemmour is about 75 Km SW of Casablanca and Ghir nor the city of Agadir. These details kindly provided by Henrique Jorge of Portugal, a member of the ESFORA-L@raven.cc.ukans.edu list. Jorge's email address is "Henrique Jorge" <henrique@mail.eunet.pt>

⁵ Helen Rand Parish is now finishing a biography of Las Casas, "The Untold Story of Bartolomé de las Casas." She graciously shared with me the hypothesis in narrative above shedding light on Las Casas' possible Canary island connection.

"They fought so bravely," Las Casas recorded, "that they broke the force of the Moorish assault." The rest of the Castilians fled in their boats to the ships offshore. Bartolomé's uncle Francisco, along with his twenty comrades, "were cut to pieces."⁶ "And, while some favor may come my way," Bartolomé wrote, "although all the glory belongs to God, said Francisco de Peñalosa was my uncle, brother of my father."

Fate, fortune or providence placed Las Casas in Seville, the quiet medieval port of Andalucia that was rapidly being transformed into the entrepot of the Indies. While most of the early sailings to the Indies issued from ports along the Atlantic coast--Cadiz, Huelva, Sanlucar de Barrameda for example--after the turn of the century, Seville was more and more preferred for assembly and dispatch of the fleets.

The enterprise of the Indies, however, was but one of many irons in the fire for Isabelle and Ferdinand. Spain was on the move, and she faced east to the Mediterranean and south to Africa with much more interest than across the vast Ocean Sea to Columbus' islands. This was the beginning of Spain's rise to world power as Castile propelled her knights and faith beyond the Iberian peninsula. From her Mediterranean coastline she sent her armies into Italy where they competed with the French for control in that political archipelago of kingdoms and principalities. Expeditions into Africa pushed the Reconquest along a natural route south and east. If Islam had spread like a wildfire across North Africa, then Christianity would do the same. Always on Isabelle's mind was the possible recovery of the beloved Holy Land, the spiritual center of Christianity. Beyond Greece lay the rising Ottoman Empire. Turkish armies, emboldened by the capture of Constantinople in 1453, spilled across southern Europe, across the Balkans, across the Aegean and into Italy itself on several occasions in the 1480s. For the next century, especially with the rule of Suleyman I, styled "the Magnificent," [1520-1566], the competition between Christian and Muslim waxed hot. Suleyman pushed the Ottoman Turks far into Europe, capturing Hungary and almost Vienna itself in 1529. Christian civilization itself seemed to hang in the balance.

Crusades against the infidels--whether the Moors of Granada or the Turks advancing across the Mediterranean--always were guaranteed to raise not only the passion of Spaniards to defend the faith, but income for the crown as well. Key taxes, such as the crusada and the subsidio, were collected to either defend Christendom or renew the assault on the infidels.

In this heady atmosphere where opposites tug at the reader--vicious war and pacific hermits, cupidity and nobility, avarice and sacrifice, Italy or the Indies--Las Casas came to manhood. News of returning fleets from the islands commingled with the decrees of new crusades. In 1500, for example, the Moors of Granada, under the increasingly oppressive boot of Cardinal Cisneros, revolted. He wanted more conversions, less heresy (by the new converts), more conformity, and grew increasingly less tolerant. He was backed by the sovereigns Isabella and Ferdinand who sensed that the Moors of Granada, and to a lesser extent those of Castile and Aragon where they existed in smaller numbers, represented a Fifth Column. If Spain were ever invaded from Africa, where would the loyalty of these Moors lie?

The Moors rose in rebellion out of frustration and disgusted with the perfidy of the Christians who spoke tolerance, but demanded conversion. The campaigns were brutal and effective. Ferdinand himself joined the fray in March, 1500, slaying all the

⁶ HL, I, 82, in Obras, 4, 847-848.

inhabitants in some villages, claiming with an astonishing satisfaction that in Lanjerón "the occupants were baptized before perishing."⁷ Did Bartolomé witness the rebellion firsthand? Did he march with militia from Seville dispatched in 1500 to Granada to assist in suppressing the Moorish rebels? Some of the evidence suggests so.

Fifty-five years later, when writing about the appearance of Tlascala 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 ["que se parece yendo de hacia 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," Las Casas reminds us.⁸ Did Bartolomé carry arms? Perhaps a small sword or dagger? Did he witness the slaughter at Lanjerón or other villages? If he did, we have no idea what he thought. More than likely, his overland trip to Granada was in the company of his father, who had returned from the Indies a couple of years earlier, in 1498.⁹ Being a merchant, they may have been only lightly armed and witnessed nothing more than an uneasy province, cold glances from Moorish villagers, mounted Christian knights thundering by on veteran war horses.

We are not used to such a private person in today's age when memoirs bombard us like mosquitoes in August. Everyone thinks they have something important to say, illustrated, of course, by their life experience. Seldom has so much been bared with so little to be learned. Las Casas, on the other hand, deflected attention away from himself to the circumstances he witnessed. He was not given to introspection and self-study, although he underwent a profound period of reflection and study in the years after 1522 when he entered a Dominican monastery.

He was, in his own words, a person of choleric temperament, which George Sanderlin, a student of Las Casas, rendered quite correctly I think as "passionate, energetic, quick to react."¹⁰ Another biographer, Juan Pérez de Tudela, strung together a flattering portrait: Las Casas was "preeminently a man of action--tenacious, courageous, with great foresight and self-confidence; at the same time...he was gifted with a fertile imagination, reasoning ability, scientific curiosity, and a remarkable memory."¹¹ Later on in Las Casas' life, a fellow historian/chronicler, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, thought Las Casas was bossy and domineering, and "wished to rule."¹²

One of his most perceptive and thorough biographers, Henry Raup Wagner, observed that "from the very beginning, he was self-confident and had a good opinion of

⁷ Liss, Isabella, p. 331, quoting from Pedro Mártir, Epistolario, epís. 215.

⁸ LC, Apologética Historia Sumaria, cáp. 49, Obras, VII, 540.

⁹ So speculates Alvaro Huerga in his biography, Vida y Obras, vol. 1 of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, Obras completas, p. 40.

¹⁰ George Sanderlin, Bartolomé de las Casas: A Selection of His Writings (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), pp. 6,7.

¹¹ Juan Pérez de Tudela, "Estudio Crítico Preliminar," in Bartolomé de las Casas, Obras escogidas, edited by Pérez de Tudela (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, 1957-1959), I, xxix. Quoted by Sanderlin, Bartolomé, p. 6.

¹² Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, Historia general y natural de las Indias, ed. Juan Pérez de Tudela (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, 1959), II, 199. Also quoted in Sanderlin, Bartolomé, p. 6,7.

himself.¹³ That he did. It would hold him in good stead as he choose the path of truth and justice each time he came to a fork in the road, to a decision he had to make on where to go, what to say, how to stand.

"He was a bundle of energy," Wagner also observed, and he had "a penetrating mind, and phenomenal physical endurance." He certainly needed the latter just to make all those trans-Atlantic voyages where the water was foul, the food wormy, the company close, and seasickness the incessant companion of the landsman.

"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."

I am always a bit distrustful of strings of adjectives in rendering a portrait of a person's nature or character. After all is said and done, as Wagner put it, "we must turn rather to the actions of the man himself" for judgement.¹⁴ But we do come away with an impression of a self-confident teenager of fifteen or sixteen in 1500, cocky to the point of brash perhaps. He knew his destiny was beyond his hometown. But where? With a man like his uncle Francisco to Africa to pillage Moors and bring the faith? To Italy with the soldiers of his Queen? To the exotic islands of the Indies? The coming and going of ships and small fleets quickened as the century came to an end. Spain joined Portugal on the eve of the greatest age of seaborne exploration the world was to know.

The return of his father in 1498 from Santo Domingo pointed to the Indies. Like so much of Bartolomé's personal history, however, the next few years are murky. We know his dad returned on a small fleet that sailed from Santo Domingo October 18, 1498. Three hundred Taino Indian slaves also traveled on those ships. One of them, renamed Juanico, was given to Bartolomé by his father who in turn had received him as a gift from the Admiral himself.¹⁵ In fact, Columbus had given the slaves to each of the Spaniards returning from the islands. When the Queen, then in Seville, heard the news, she hit the roof.

"What right does the Admiral have to give my vassals to anyone?" she asked indignantly and rhetorically. Isabella, of course, was in a position not only to query the rectitude of such an impertinence on the part of the Admiral, but to take action.

She ordered all the Indians returned to their homes in Santo Domingo, "so pena de muerte," [on pain of death] as Las Casas recalled many years later while composing his history.¹⁶ Las Casas was surprised at the severity of her reaction.

"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." Here was the clear logic of Las Casas. Why get so angry over something that already had been apparently acceptable? It did not follow.

Bartolomé couldn't think of any other "reason, other than perhaps the Queen thought that the previous Indians brought over had been enslaved in a just war." In his

¹³ Henry Raup Wagner, in collaboration with Helen Rand Parish, The Life and Writings of Bartolomé de las Casas (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1967), p. 16.

¹⁴ Wagner, Bartolomé, p. 16.

¹⁵ HI, cap. 176, Obras completas, 4, pp. 1243-1244. See also Parish, The Life, pp. 12-13; Giménez Fernández, "Life of Las Casas," p. 70.

¹⁶ HI, cap., 176, Obras, 4, p. 1243.

Historia Las Casas then proceeded to dismantle the whole argument of a just war, but we will return to this in later chapters.

In 1499, when the Queen so angrily took Columbus to task, Bartolomé too may have wondered about the entire propriety of enslaving Indians. Perhaps he was jostling along with the rest of the crowd, buzzing in the square where the edict was published.

"What right has the Queen to take our property!"

"We fought for these heathen fair and square!"

"Bah, they are worthless. They die faster than fish out of water."

Who knows what was heard by Bartolomé. His Indian friend Juanico was returned in the June, 1500 fleet to Santo Domingo commanded by Francisco de Bobadilla, a famous knight commander in the recent wars against the Moors, who was sent by the monarchs to investigate charges of mismanagement and corruption leveled against Columbus.

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 long 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 his ignoble state and, hopefully, be shamed by his condition.

It worked. Soon after landing at Cadiz in November, the sovereigns ordered his chains struck and commanded Columbus to Granada. Did Bartolomé witness any part of this? He must have, since he not only recalled that the king and queen sent Columbus a nice chunk of money--two thousand ducats--to make the trip to Granada, but also the details of Columbus' dramatic appearance at court have a ring of authenticity only coming from an eye-witness.¹⁷

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."¹⁸

"We never ordered you arrested or jailed our dear Admiral," Isabella told him.

Columbus dropped to his knees, tears welling up and his bent body convulsed by sobs. He could not talk.

"Everything taken will be restored Admiral," Ferdinand continued, perhaps embarrassed by the contrite petitioner before him. "All your privileges and rewards, they will all be restored," Ferdinand added.

"Stand Admiral," Isabelle said softly.

¹⁷ HI, cap. 182, Obras, 4, 1274.

¹⁸ Ibid.

"You majesties," Columbus began, rising to feet, "nothing I ever did was done other than to serve you with complete loyalty."

Not a whisper could be heard, although the room was full. Everyone strained to hear the Admiral.

"If, through some error or failing, my acts be judged, let them not be judged in any other light than I was always reaching for more, always doing what I thought was right, and," and here Columbus, proud and swelling again with a sense of his old dignity, added, "and, in doing so, I was right."

Columbus was fully vindicated. Bobadilla was never punished by the king and queen, but was drowned instead in a massive hurricane in late June, 1502, as the fleet he sailed on was caught by the storm just as they sailed from Santo Domingo bound for Spain.

"Some say it was divine justice," Las Casas later commented on Bobadilla's demise. "But," he added, as he wrote in the late 1520s, already a priest and Dominican and much wiser in the ways of God and man, "this is not certain. Divine justice is profound and considers the lives of men very differently from the way they see themselves."¹⁹

Released by the King and Queen, Columbus eventually made one last fourth voyage to the Indies in 1502.

Meanwhile Bartolomé and Juanico became friends. Some biographers write that Las Casas now traveled to the University of Salamanca far to the north in the high plains of Castile where he studied law, or philosophy, or theology, or a mixture of all three. He graduated with the degree of "licentiate" which has no comparable title in the English/American experience. A licentiate, or *licenciado*, could be a lawyer or simply someone who finished the final degree in a course of study. No matter. Other biographers say rubbish. There is paltry to no evidence that Bartolomé ever went off to the famed Salamanca in 1499 or 1500.

Did he, or did he not? It is highly unlikely that he did, for a couple of reasons. Although Las Casas was silent about much of his life, he was powerful and persuasive in his later defense of the Indians. He used all the weapons at hand--drawing upon such widely disparate sources as pagan philosophers (Plato, Aristotle) and Pauline letters (the epistles of the New Testament by the Apostle Paul) to make his case. Surely a degree from the ancient and prestigious Salamanca would have constituted a formidable weapon in his quiver. When he took on the most prestigious scholars, historians, and defenders of the conquest in Spain, he rarely pulled his punches. His intellectual strength would derive from his own massive reading. One of his biographers wrote he had a "lot of the autodidact" to him.²⁰ His spiritual strength would come from the church and Scripture. And the long experience he would have in the Indies gave him a formidable platform to blast away at his enemies. It is hard to believe that he wouldn't have named a prestigious degree from Salamanca as another legitimizing factor as he pushed for moral and ethical ascendancy over opponents.

By 1500 and 1501 he was actually traversing the mountainous kingdom of Granada with his father, not studying canon law in the cloistered environs of Salamanca.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1273.

²⁰ Huerga, *Vida y obras*, p. 37, quoting V. Carro, "Los postulados teológico-jurídicos de B. de las Casas," VV.AA., *Estudios lascasianos*, Sevilla, 1966, pp. 139-140.

When Isabella and Ferdinand contracted with Nicolás de Ovando on September 3, 1501, in Granada to replace Governor Bobadilla, the Las Casas were there.²¹ Bartolomé's father Pedro signed on with Ovando's expedition. Ovando, a Cistercian friar with long experience fighting Moors with the Queen's armies, sailed for Santo Domingo from Sanlúcar de Barrameda (the roadstead where the Guadalquivir River joins the Atlantic Ocean) on February 13, 1502 with a fleet of thirty-two ships and 2500 men. Bartolomé was on board, on his way to a journey of a lifetime.

Ovando was dispatched by the Sovereigns to replace Bobadilla because Columbus had complained so bitterly of the injustices and injuries to his command and his person. So Isabella and Ferdinand, always sympathetic to their Admiral of the Ocean Sea, turned to Ovando, a friar-warrior, member of the military order of Alcántara, and proven leader. Ovando governed Santo Domingo for the next eight years and set the stage for the establishment of royal government in Spain's New World colonies.

By late 1501, Bartolomé was back in Seville with his father. The events in Granada had fascinated him. Punishing Moors in rebellion was certainly not routine, but it was so wrapped into the national psyche of Reconquest Spain as to be almost a coming-of-age passage for young men. Witnessing a royal audience, or--at the least--hearing about it firsthand, between the king and queen and the Admiral of the Ocean Sea was not routine.

Columbus was the leading edge of Spain's soon-to-be explosive burst into the Americas. An excitement followed the man. Part adventurer, part prophet, part dreamer, part autocrat, he conveyed a desire to be part of his dream, itself a complicated mixture of many elements. While the teenager Bartolomé de Las Casas did not yet appear in court, in less than two decades he would be arguing his case before Ferdinand himself, perhaps with the memory of what an impassioned, dramatic appeal could make on kings and queens.

In the winter of 1502, he packed his bags, said his goodbyes, and made ready to leave home on a long journey. This moment, for all young men, is both ebullient and bittersweet. One is looking both forwards and backwards, the call of manly things usually far outweighing the security of home.

The fleet--thirty two vessels large and small--was put together in Seville and dropped down the River Guadalquivir early in February, to rendezvous at Sanlúcar de Barrameda at the mouth of the river. Twenty five hundred men, many of them nobles, gentlemen and principal people made up the expedition. Included were twelve Franciscan friars.

"We sailed from San Lucar on the thirteenth day of February," Bartolomé wrote, "the first Sunday of Lent, in the year 1502." In little more than a week they were out of the cold winter latitudes and nearing the Canary Islands, usually the first and last stop of fleets enroute to the Indies. The air grew balmy and men traded the heavy woollens of winter living in Spain for lighter clothes, although Europeans were a long time in making a reasonable adoption of their clothes to the tropics.

On the second Sunday of lent, the wind started to pick up from the south.

"Not a good sign," one of the sailors told Bartolomé as the breezes quickened and the masters ordered sails shortened. Dozens of sailors climbed up the rigging like

²¹ Huerga, *Vida y obras*, p. 40. Liss, *Isabel*, p. 302.

monkeys, shouting, in high spirits or from fright, one found it hard to tell from the passengers' point of view, most of them landsmen, few of them experienced in sea travel.

"Storm?" asked the young Las Casas.

"A vendaval coming up."

A vendaval?

Yes, from the south señor. I trust you are in good graces with God. We'll be needing all the grace we can get the sailor said, as he left Bartolomé holding on to the railing, his face turned away from the biting sea spray

There was nothing to do but run before the winds. The sky darkened and winds churned up the sea. Foam blew off the tops of waves, growing in size like great breakers, pitching and tossing the small vessels and their passengers on them, each minute bringing all closer to God. The Franciscans were called upon to pray and intercede, but most of those poor souls, like so many of the landlubbers, were below decks, violently ill from the brutal tossing and turning. Even a week at sea had not conditioned them for this.

"None of the thirty two vessels thought they would survive," Bartolomé recalled.

Lighten ship! the masters ordered their crews, shouting into the gale. With so much luggage, water barrels and wine casks on deck, the ships were top heavy and more prone to roll into what naval engineers call an "upsetting moment." For those nautically-challenged, that means the ships were prone to capsize from the unequal distribution of weight. So, everything that could be moved was thrown overboard.

Las Casas, writing more than two decades after the storm, remembered the details with clarity. Few who have weathered a storm at sea are prone to forget.

"All thirty one ships were scattered about, losing sight of each other, lighting the ship--which is throwing clothes, wine and water carried on the top decks overboard--to save our lives."²²

The Rábida foundered in the storm, taking with her one hundred and twenty passengers, not including her crew. Miraculously, the rest of the fleet, scattered over the ocean, survived. Some were blown onto the North African coast near Cape Aguer, "land of Moors" as Las Casas recorded; others made it to safe harbor in the many islands of the Canaries: Tenerife, Lanzarote, la Gomera, and Gran Canaria, wherever they could find haven.

Two caravels that sailed from the Canaries for Spain, loaded with sugar and other merchandise, were not so lucky. They, along with the Rábida, were blown north and east by the storm and broke up in the violent seas, spilling their baggage, sugar boxes, barrels, and splintered timbers into the ocean. Much of it washed ashore along the southeast coast of Andalusia, grim evidence to those on shore of the storm's devastating power. Most thought the entire fleet had perished.

The news quickly traveled to the king and queen still at Granada. Devastated by the misfortune, the monarchs went into seclusion for eight days, seeing no one, talking to no one. At least, that's what Las Casas heard and recorded in his history. Perhaps. Perhaps the queen and king didn't withdraw so completely from affairs of state but declared a day or two of mourning for their lost subjects--not to speak of lost royal ducats expended on the fleet, presumably now slowly sinking into the depths of the ocean as well.

²² HI, Book 2, cap. 3, Obras, 4, p. 1298.

Winston Churchill, as a young journalist reporting on the Boer War in South Africa in 1899, said that nothing is quite so exhilarating as being shot at, and missed, or something to that effect. Perhaps he had never been in a raging storm at sea, and come out at the other end, tired, perhaps bruised and hurt, but alive as the sun broke through the night, and the dark clouds vanished, and peace once again reigned over the seas.

The fleet, scattered by the storm, was reunited in the harbor of Gomera. To the thirty one vessels was added one other with people wishing to sail to the Indies. Governor Ovando divided his fleet into two divisions; one made up of faster sailers; a second squadron under the command of Antonio de Torres. The fast division made the crossing in two months, arriving at the port of Santo Domingo April 15. Torres' convoy came in twelve days later.

How does one describe a sea voyage of two months? One traveler later in the century likened it into a descent into hell.²³ Later on we shall take up Bartolomé's life at sea. It included other storms, shipwrecks and assorted tragedies. What made it all endurable--the seasickness, the foul food and water, the close, almost fetid, quarters--was what lay ahead at the other end of this transit.

As one nears land, life quickens aboard any ship. At a distance, the dark brown, islands of the West Indies first appeared on the horizon as smudges, not very different from from low lying clouds. Was it land? More clouds? Did one's eyes and mind tease you?

From previous voyages, the sailors knew the islands appeared after forty or fifty days. The pilot's knowledge was more precise. Names were attached to specific islands, many bestowed by Columbus himself.²⁴ Antonio de Torres was an experienced navigator and commander at sea, having crossed the Atlantic in the service of Columbus at least three times before this trip. Although the Ovando squadrons headed straight for Santo Domingo, Columbus had already on his Third Voyage, 1498-1500, 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 Columbus speculated that he may 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.²⁵ Writing almost three decades later, Las Casas gently chided the speculation of the Admiral, based on a rather skimpy knowledge of Scripture and much conjecture. But Columbus may have had other reason to speculate, and here we can see with Bartolomé's eyes as he 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," Bartolomé thought as he recreated, in his own mind's eye, the end of a long sea voyage.²⁶

²³ J. H. Parry, The European Reconnaissance, see the description by an oidor of the audiencia of Santo Domingo on his way to the Indies. Article entitled, if I remember correctly, "The Minor Perils of the Sea."

²⁴ See Samuel Eliot Morison's magisterial biography of Columbus, Admiral of the Ocean Sea for the details, from a sailor's perspective, of the Columbian voyages, naming of islands, navigation, etc.

²⁵ HI, I, cap. 141, Obras, 4, 1082ff. Also Philips and Philips, Columbus, pp. 220-221.

²⁶ HI, I, cap. 141, Obras, 4, 1082.

He certainly must have also recalled his first view of the islands, the brown smudges slowly metamorphing into rich, deep greens of tropical forests. His small ship plows on through, as she has for weeks in the monotonous rhythm of the crossing, in and out of deep blue waters. Plumes of water kicked up by strong breezes glint in the midday sun. One has to squint, narrow your eyes into slits, to see as the tropical sun strikes the sea into a million discs of light.

Finally the great bulk of the island of Española rises to the west as the ships skirt the southern shore of the westernly-trending island. Instead of ocean all around them and islands passing by, land occupies their starboard side for as far as they can see as they approach the port of Santo Domingo.



Copy of a map of Santo Domingo, circa 1516.

The chatter of the crew increases, lowering sails, making ready to let go the anchor, preparing for the arrival. And, after waiting for a change in the tide, the ship slips 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 entertain Las Casas' senses. This is a world so different from the dry, ascerbic plains of Andalucia as to constitute, truly, a "new" world. It is an arrival by sea; it is like no other. It means a connection has been made. Las Casas would make many over his long career.

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