

“either to find some food or to die”

Francisco Roldán

Chief Justice of Hispaniola
to

Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros

Archbishop of Toledo

ca. 1499

Magnificent Lord: This letter is to inform Your Reverend Lordship of the things that have happened in the Indies up to the present date, and in the hope of serving you, I humbly beseech you to hear what I have to say. Your Lordship knows that when the Admiral [Columbus] left this island of Hispaniola, he left his brother the *Adelantado* in his place as Governor, leaving me Their Highesses' staff of justice. The *Adelantado* remained in office until the Admiral returned, which was the fifteenth of August in the year 1498.

At this time, while the said *Adelantado* was Governor, he began to act with such severity that he caused the people to fear and hate him; and when I repeatedly took up with him some of the things that I considered improper, he took a dislike to me and appointed another magistrate who would follow his orders. As he went on in this way, all who had supported him became his enemies on account of the bad treatment they received, and they avoided dealing with him since his action seemed wrong to them.

At this time most of the Christians were sick with the general illness that exists here, and at the same time there was a drought that created a great scarcity of food. For this reason, the people were scattered in many areas in order to maintain themselves, which they could not do all together.

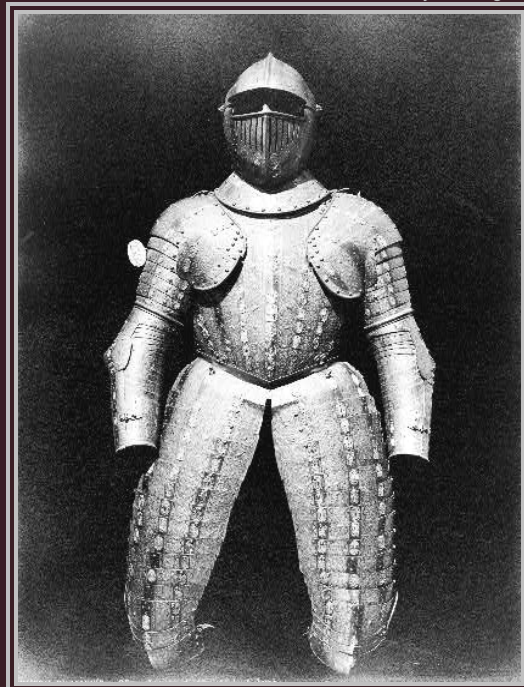
When the Indians saw this, they realized that they had never had such an opportunity to kill us off, and they conspired to put this into effect.

[After Columbus leaves to subdue the Indians in another part of the island, Roldán gathers the Spanish settlers together to resist the Indians' attacks and to gather the little food available. Word gets to Columbus of Roldán's actions.]

After this, I returned to the fortress, and the hunger was so extreme that the thirty of us who were there could not sustain ourselves; so we decided to leave and go six leagues from the fortress, to the village of a cacique named Mar . . . , [ellipses in Parry & Keith] who had food, either to find some food or to die; and as soon as we arrived, a great number of Indians came upon us, besieging us continually for three days and nights and bombarding us with sticks and stones; we fought with them and managed to kill many. Finally they went away and left us alone, and we managed to survive for several days with great difficulty.

While these things were happening, the *alcaide* [governor] of the fortress sent messengers to the *Adelantado*, who said, “There is another governor on the island who gathers together the Spaniards on the

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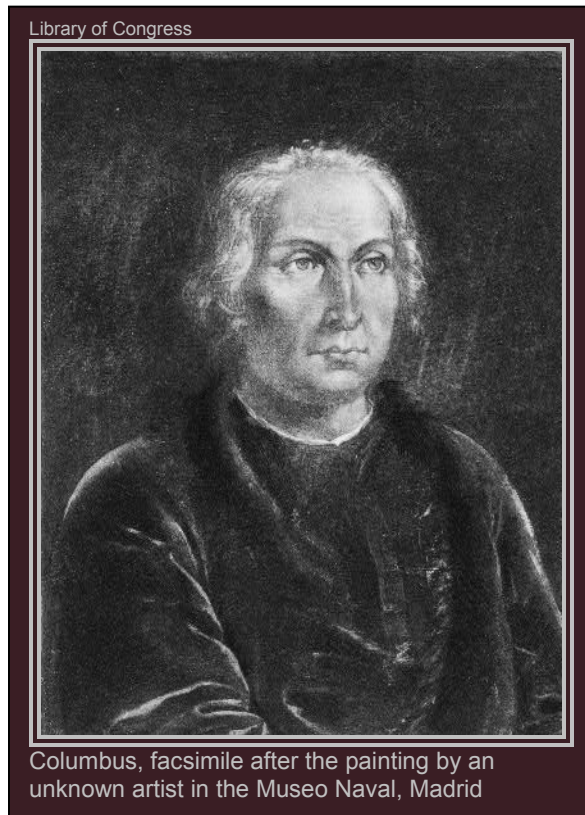
Armor of Columbus, Armeria de Madrid, photographed ca. 1850

estancias [livestock ranches] and governs them; I will go there and cut off his head and those of more than eight others.” As soon as I heard of his intentions, I told my friends, and we agreed that the best thing to do in order to avoid doing anything against Their Highnesses’ service would be to keep away from the *Adelantado* and his wrath until God and Their Highnesses could find a remedy for the situation.

[Columbus’s brother returns to the fortress and demands a meeting with Roldán, who attends with several hundred men. Roldán insists that Columbus allow them to return to Spain and present their case to Isabella and Ferdinand. Columbus refuses and prepares to arrest Roldán and his men, who then remain a distance from the town.]

We stayed there for three days, during which time he refused to send us any food; and since we could not sustain ourselves there without it, we returned to the *estancia* we had come from and where we had left the sick who were being fed by the cacique Diego Colon: and since there was now no food there, not even enough for the cacique, since it had all been used up, he said that he wanted to leave, since he was afraid of the *Adelantado*. I told him not to leave, granting him protection in the name of Their Highnesses, and persuaded him to remain in his house; and I left there with much effort and hunger for the people with me, and we went to Jaragua, thirty leagues away, where there was food. There we stayed, to escape the wrath of the *Adelantado* and provide food for ourselves.

[After several months of negotiation, distrust, and re-negotiation, Roldán and Christopher Columbus (the Admiral) finalize a peace agreement.]



Columbus, facsimile after the painting by an unknown artist in the Museo Naval, Madrid

Before this, when the Admiral had to send off the five ships he had arrived in with Cristobal Quintero, I had to give him a certain number of slaves. And when he learned that I had granted protection in the Name of Their Highnesses to the cacique Diego Colon, as mentioned above, since he had favored us, and supplied us with food until he had no more, thinking he was safe in doing so, he ordered him to be seized, along with his wife, children, and two hundred or more others. And since at the time the articles of peace were concluded, I complained that they were granted protection in the Name of Their Highnesses and that he had unjustly seized them, the said Carvajal argued with me on several points, saying that the Admiral, as Viceroy and Governor, was the only one who could grant protection and no one else had this power; and he told me to speak no more about this matter.

There are still many things of which Your Lordship should be informed, but I leave them unsaid so that I not appear to have written in anger. Besides, Your Lordship will see this from the indictment that has been drawn up again the Admiral and his brothers, and later, in more detail, from the inquiry that will follow.

May Our Lord grant prosperity to Your Most Reverend and Magnificent Lordship. Dated in Santo Domingo on the tenth day of the month of October [ca. 1499]. The servant who very humbly kisses the reverend hands of Your Lordship,

Francisco Roldán