



## Chapter 3: Columbus' Interactions with Muslims in America

**Objective:** Students will describe how Columbus interacted with Muslims in Spain and the Americas, and will describe the context of the state of Muslims during the time when Columbus sailed to America.

**Vocabulary:**

**Rodrigo De Triana** – The first person on Columbus ships to have sighted land. He later became Muslim.

**Luis de Torres** – An Arabic speaking Jewish man that Columbus brought with him on his trips to be a translator.

**Piri Reis Map** – The oldest map found to depict the Americas, written in 1513. This map was remarkable because an Ottoman, rather than a European, drew it.

**Sea of Darkness**- The term Arabs used to refer to the Atlantic Ocean.

### **The State of Muslims in 1492**

Most Americans associate the year 1492 as the year Columbus discovered America. However, 1492 was also the year of the Inquisition. The Inquisition was an edict made by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain to rid the Iberian Peninsula of Muslims. Before the rise of Catholic Spain and the Crusades, most people in the Iberian Peninsula were Muslims and many of them spoke Arabic. With the Inquisition, Muslims were forced to leave the Iberian Peninsula, convert to Catholicism, or be killed. Many of them were put in galleys, which were like prisons and sold as slaves to traders of other countries.

Muslims had ruled most of the Iberian Peninsula from 711 until 1492, which is over 700 years. Not only were the Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula a strong presence, Muslims in the Ottoman Empire were also a dominant force from the year 1299. Therefore, Columbus and other Spaniards were surrounded by Islamic culture. Most Spaniards were familiar with Muslim traditions and many Arabic

words became part of Spanish vocabulary. Columbus actually wanted to find a route to the Indies that did not require him to go through Arabia because the Arabs had dominated the trade routes for so long. The first topic mentioned in Columbus' journal states that he watched the "Moorish King come out of the gate of the city and kiss the hands of your highness." So, it would be reasonable to conclude at the very least that Columbus did have interactions with Muslims, and that they did have some kind of influence on him.

### **Rodrigo de Triana**



The most widely accepted story regarding Columbus' interactions with Muslims has to do with the story of Rodrigo de Triana. Rodrigo de Triana sailed with Columbus on the *Pinto*. Columbus sensed that they may be approaching land because he had seen some lights. He told his shipmates to fire a cannon if land was sighted. In the middle of the night, Rodrigo De Triana climbed the mast of the ship and sighted land. He shouted, "Tiarra, Tiarra" ("land, land") and a cannon was fired. Although he was believed to have been Christian

at the time, upon his return to Europe, he is known to have traveled to Africa and converted to Islam. He made statements to indicated that he was bitter that he never received the proper credit for being the first onboard to have sighted the new land (Quick, 2007).

### **The the Mosque on the Hill**



Columbus kept extensive journals about his travels. Many Muslim refer to Columbus' journal entry for October 21, 1492, in which he describes the coast of Cuba. In this entry Columbus described the hills as having, "a little peak like a pretty little mosque," located on beautiful and lofty mountains." While

some Muslim historians use the quote indicated that there were Muslims in the America's when Columbus came in 1492, most other historians say that Columbus

was using a metaphor and simply comparing the hills to a mosque (Colavito, 2015). Proof for this claim comes from both a close evaluation of the language used in the quote and the fact that no artifacts of mosques have been found in Cuba. However, the original documents of Christopher Columbus' journal have not survived, and only a transcription of the journal written by a man named Bartolome de Las Casas survives today (Colavito, 2015).

On November 22, 2014, the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, quoted a Muslim linguist named who reported that Muslims discovered America about 300 years before Columbus sailed to America. The president's quote sent historians and journalists to make several rebuttals to this claim. Many from the international media mocked the president for his comments, but he refused to recant what he had said, claiming the west does not give due credit for Muslim accomplishments (Tharoor, 2014).

### **Columbus Brought an Arabic Translator**

**Luis de Torres** was likely born of Jewish descent, and hired as a translator on his



trips to the new world. Because of the Inquisition, he, like the Muslims, had to convert to Catholicism. He was able to speak Aramaic, Spanish, Hebrew, Portuguese, French, and Arabic. Columbus brought him on the trip because he thought he would meet the Great Khan of Tartary, which is a land that would now be considered to be China and Japan. Columbus did not have any interpreter for the East Asian languages, but at the time was certain that most places round the world had people who knew Arabic. The

fact that he brought an Arabic translator shows the influence Arabs had on the Europeans of the time. Torres tried to speak to the local people in Arabic. Not knowing where they were, or what language the people of the land spoke, Columbus tried Arabic first, thinking that some native might understand Arabic. Thus the first word spoken in to the natives of the Americas was in Arabic.

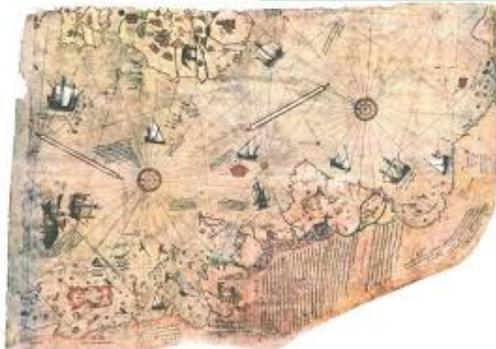
However, Luis de Torres was horrified when the native people could not speak Arabic, and he told Christopher Columbus that the people were simple and could easily be taught to be Christian (Abraham, 2015).

## **Evidence of Arab or African Influence on the Natives**

There are several examples of instances when Columbus' interactions with natives hint that the natives had interacted with Arab or African Muslims before Columbus arrived. For example, the natives were using a metal alloy called *Guanin*, which comes from the Arabic word for, "wealth." Some narratives of interactions between the natives indicate that the people of *Hispanola* (Haiti) told Columbus of people who had come to their islands before Columbus and had brought this metal from their countries to them (Wiener, 2012). There are other examples of Arabic words found among the natives as well. For example, Columbus reported seeing dark skinned natives in Trinidad wearing clothes that resembled the cloth made by Africans and used mostly by Moors in Guinea. The fabric was called *Almayzar*, which is an Arabic word for, "cover," which they used as a headdress (Cesari, 2007). Again, none of these examples give solid proof of the arrival of Africans and Moorish Muslims in the Americas before Columbus; however, they do warrant further research and historical study.

## **The First Map of America Was From the Ottomans, not the Europeans**

Although Christopher Columbus is given credit by European sources to be the first person to have discovered America, the oldest map found depicting



America was by a Muslim named **Piri Reis** from the Ottoman Empire. Piri Reis' map of America is said by cartographers and historians today to be surprisingly accurate for its time in its depiction of several features of the world land formations. For example, it depicts a coast of Antarctica and North and South American continents

(McIntosh, 2012). Piri Reis notes on his map that he used several maps from many sources, these included ancient Greek and modern Portuguese sources. Many believe that Piri Reis used Columbus' maps as well. In studying other works by Piri Reis, it has been noted that Piri was the nephew of Kemal Reis, who reported to have captured seven Spanish ships in 1501. On one of the ships, he spoke with a prisoner who said claimed that artifacts on the boat, which included a map of newly land newly discovered by

Columbus. He reported to Kemal Reis that he had sailed with Columbus on three trips into lands in the Sea of Darkness, a term used by Arabs to refer to the Atlantic Ocean (Lunde, 1992). However, at the time that the map was drawn, Columbus had only landed on islands in the Bahamas. Therefore the depiction of North and South America as drawn on the map had to have come from other sources as well. These could have likely have been sources from Muslim cartographers such as Al-Idrisi, Al-Buruni, and Al-Masudi as well as European cartographers. This map is considered by many to be proof that Columbus was not the first to have sailed to America.



#### Questions:

1. Describe the controversy surrounding the reference to the “mosque on the hill.”
2. Describe the importance of Rodrigo de Triana’s sighting of land.
3. Why did Columbus take an Arabic translator with him on his first voyage?
4. What other article in this book speaks of Africans coming to America before Columbus. Describe how these people came to the Americas.
5. What evidence is there that Columbus may have interacted with Arab cartographers and geographers? If he did interact with them, with whom did he likely interact and what knowledge was likely shared?

#### Activities:

1. Research the list of Statements below and create a foldable that lists the facts on one side and the myths on the other side. Write each statement under a flap and draw a related picture on the cover of each flap.

Columbus proved that the world was not flat.

Before leaving for the voyage, Columbus stayed in the Canary Islands where he fell in love.

Columbus returned to Spain in shackles in 1500.

Columbus landed in North America 1492.

Columbus was Italian.

Columbus was told that his calculations were wrong before he left. The names of Columbus' ships were the Pinta, Nina, and Santa Maria. Columbus was the first person to sail from Europe to America. Columbus didn't know anything about Islam.

2. Create a picture time line with the following events from Christopher Columbus' voyage:

- 1487 Columbus submits plans for a voyage to the King of England, but he refuses to fund the trip.
- 1491 Columbus appeals to King Ferdinand to fund the voyage, but he refuses.
- 1492 Columbus's first voyage to the Americas.
- 1493 The second voyage included 16 ships and landed in Hispanola (Jamaica).
- 1498 The third voyage contains 6 ships and they landed on the Cape Verde Islands near Trinidad.
- 1500 Columbus is imprisoned and sent back to Spain by Francisco Bobadilla, who thinks that Columbus is trying to become the ruler of the new world.
- 1502 Columbus takes the fourth voyage with four ships.

3. Pretend that you are on one of the voyages with Columbus. Write a journal entry about your experiences. Include an interaction with Columbus, an interaction with the natives, and an interaction with one of the other crewmates. Tell what you ate, and where you slept.