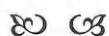


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Letter from Columbus to  
Ferdinand and Isabella  
Concerning the Colonization  
and Commerce of Española

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**C O N T E N T S**

The Regulations proposed for Settlements.....	274
The Regulations for Mining.....	275
The Regulations for Commerce .....	276

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## LETTER FROM COLUMBUS TO FERDINAND AND ISABELLA CONCERNING THE COLONIZATION AND COMMERCE OF ESPAÑOLA<sup>1</sup>

MOST HIGH AND POWERFUL LORDS: In obedience to what your Highnesses command me, I shall state what occurs to me for the peopling and management of the Spanish Island<sup>2</sup> and of all others, whether already discovered or hereafter to be discovered, submitting myself, however, to any better opinion.

<sup>1</sup> The original text of this letter will be most accessible in Thacher, *Christopher Columbus*, III. 100–113. It is there accompanied by a facsimile of the original manuscript and an English translation. The translation here given is a revision of that made by Dr. José Ignacio Rodríguez of Washington and printed in the *Report of the American Historical Association*, 1894, pp. 452–455, as part of a paper by W. E. Curtis on *Autographs of Christopher Columbus*. The text was first printed by Justo Zaragoza in his *Cartas de Indias*, etc. (Madrid, 1877). It was first translated by George Dexter in the *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Vol. XVI. This translation, which contains some errors which seriously affect the meaning, is also to be found in P. L. Ford, *Writings of Christopher Columbus*, pp. 67–74. Zaragoza placed the date of this letter in 1497. It is the opinion of the present editor that it should be placed between the first and the second voyage. The arguments advanced by Lollis in favor of 1493 are conclusive. See *Raccolta Colombiana*, parte I., tomo I., pp. lxxv–lxxx.

The letter is of great importance as the first draft of a systematic colonial policy for the newly discovered islands. Several of its suggestions were incorporated in the letter of instructions which the Sovereigns gave Columbus May 29, 1493, for the second voyage. See Navarrete, *Viages*, II. 66–72. It was supplemented in 1494 by the memorandum which the Admiral sent back to the sovereigns by Antonio de Torres and the two together entitle Columbus to be considered the pioneer lawgiver as well as the discoverer of the New World. Cf. Bourne, *Spain in America*, pp. 204–206.

<sup>2</sup> *La ysla Española*. So translated, for so it would sound to the Sovereigns. There had not been time for Española to sound like a proper name.

In the first place, in regard to the Spanish Island: that there should go there settlers up to the number of two thousand<sup>1</sup> who may want to go so as to render the possession of the country safer and cause it to be more profitable and helpful in the intercourse and traffic with the neighboring islands.

Likewise, that in the said island three or four towns be founded at convenient places, and the settlers be properly distributed among said places and towns.

Likewise, in order to secure the better and prompt settlement of the said island, that the privilege of getting gold be granted exclusively to those who actually settle and build dwelling-houses in the settlement where they may be, in order that all may live close to each other and more safely.

Likewise, that in each place and settlement there be a mayor<sup>2</sup> or mayors and a clerk<sup>3</sup> according to the use and custom of Castile.

Likewise, that a church be built, and that priests or friars be sent there for the administration of the sacraments, and for divine worship and the conversion of the Indians.

Likewise, that no settler be allowed to go and gather gold unless with a permit from the governor or mayor of the town in which he lives, to be given only upon his promising under oath to return to the place of his residence and faithfully report all the gold which he may have gathered, this to be done once a month, or once a week, as the time may be assigned to him, the said report to be entered on the proper registry by the clerk of the town in the presence of the mayor, and if so deemed advisable, in the presence of a friar or priest selected for the purpose.

Likewise, that all the gold so gathered be melted forthwith, and stamped with such a stamp as the town may have devised and selected, and that it be weighed and that the share of that gold which belongs to your Highnesses be given and deliv-

<sup>1</sup> See Bourne, *Spain in America*, pp. 34-35, for the actual equipment of the second voyage.

<sup>2</sup> Alcalde.

<sup>3</sup> *Escribano del pueblo*.

ered to the mayor of the town, the proper record thereof being made by the clerk and by the priest or friar, so that it may not pass through only one hand and may so render the concealing of the truth impossible.

Likewise, that all the gold which may be found without the mark or seal aforesaid in the possession of any one who formerly had reported once as aforesaid, be forfeited and divided by halves, one for the informer and the other for your Highnesses.

Likewise, that one per cent. of all the gold gathered be set apart and appropriated for building churches, and providing for their proper furnishing and ornamentation, and to the support of the priests or friars having them in their charge, and, if so deemed advisable, for the payment of some compensation to the mayors and clerks of the respective towns, so as to cause them to fulfil their duties faithfully, and that the balance be delivered to the governor and treasurer sent there by your Highnesses.

Likewise, in regard to the division of the gold and of the share which belongs to your Highnesses, I am of the opinion that it should be entrusted to the said governor and treasurer, because the amount of the gold found may sometimes be large and sometimes small, and, if so deemed advisable, that the share of your Highnesses be established for one year to be one-half, the other half going to the gatherers, reserving for a future time to make some other and better provision, if necessary.

Likewise, that if the mayors and clerks commit any fraud or consent to it, the proper punishment be inflicted upon them, and that a penalty be likewise imposed upon those settlers who do not report in full the whole amount of the gold which is in their possession.

Likewise, that there be a treasurer <sup>1</sup> in the said island, who

<sup>1</sup> As the King and Queen on May 7, 1493, appointed Gomez Tello to go with Columbus on the second voyage to act as receiver of the royal dues, Thacher argues strongly, on the ground that this recommendation presumably antedates the appointment of a treasurer, that this letter of Columbus's was written earlier than May 7, 1493.

shall receive all the gold belonging to your Highnesses, and shall have a clerk to make and keep the proper record of the receipts, and that the mayors and clerks of the respective towns be given the proper vouchers for everything which they may deliver to the said treasurer.

Likewise, that whereas the extreme anxiety of the colonists to gather gold may induce them to neglect all other business and occupations, it seems to me that prohibition should be made to them to engage in the search of gold during some season of the year, so as to give all other business, profitable to the island, an opportunity to be established and carried on.

Likewise, that as far as the business of discovering other lands is concerned,<sup>1</sup> it is my opinion that permission to do so should be given to everyone who desires to embark in it, and that some liberality should be shown in reducing the fifth to be given away, so as to encourage as many as possible for entering into such undertakings.

And now I shall set forth my opinion as to the manner of sending vessels to the said Spanish Island, and the regulation of this subject which must be made, which is as follows: That no vessels should be allowed to unload their cargoes except at one or two ports designated for that purpose, and that a record should be made of all that they carry and unload; and that no vessels should be allowed either to leave the island except from the same ports, after a record has been made also of all that they have taken on board, so that nothing can be concealed.

Likewise, in regard to the gold to be brought from the island to Castile, that the whole of it, whether belonging to your Highnesses or to some private individual, must be kept in a chest, with two keys, one to be kept by the master of the vessel and the other by some person chosen by the governor and the treasurer, and that an official record must be made of every-

<sup>1</sup> Such an authorization was given by the sovereigns, April 10, 1495, reserving Columbus's rights to one-eighth of the trade. Navarrete, II. 166-167. The Admiral protested that this authorization led to infringement of his rights and it was in so far revoked, June 2, 1497.

thing put in the said chest, in order that each one may have what is his, and that any other gold, much or little, found outside of the said chest in any manner be forfeited to the benefit of your Highnesses, so as to cause the transaction to be made faithfully.

Likewise, that all vessels coming from the said island must come to unload to the port of Cadiz, and that no person shall be allowed to leave the vessels or get in them until such person or persons of the said city as may be appointed for this purpose by your Highnesses go on board the same vessels, to whom the masters must declare all that they have brought, and show the statement of everything they have in the cargoes, so that it may be seen and proved whether the said ships have brought anything hidden and not declared in the manifests at the time of shipment.

Likewise, that in the presence of the Justice of the said city of Cadiz and of whosoever may be deputed for the purpose by your Highnesses, the said chest shall be opened in which the gold is to be brought and that to each one be given what belongs to him.<sup>1</sup>

May your Highnesses keep me in their minds, while I, on my part, shall ever pray to God our Lord to preserve the lives of your Highnesses and enlarge their dominions.

S.

S.A.S.

X.M.Y.

XPO FERENS.<sup>2</sup>

Sent by the admiral.

<sup>1</sup> On the development of the fiscal and commercial regulations of the Spanish colonial administration, see Bourne, *Spain in America*, pp. 282-301 and 337; Moses, *Establishment of Spanish Rule in America*, pp. 27-67.

<sup>2</sup> The formal signature of Columbus which he enjoined upon his heir in his deed of entail, February 28, 1498. See P. L. Ford, *Writings of Christopher Columbus*, p. 90. If this letter was written, as is supposed, in 1493, this is the earliest use of this monogram. Its meaning has never been determined. The various conjectures are presented by Thacher, *Christopher Columbus*, III. 454-458.