

Exploration of the Pearl Coast 1499-1505

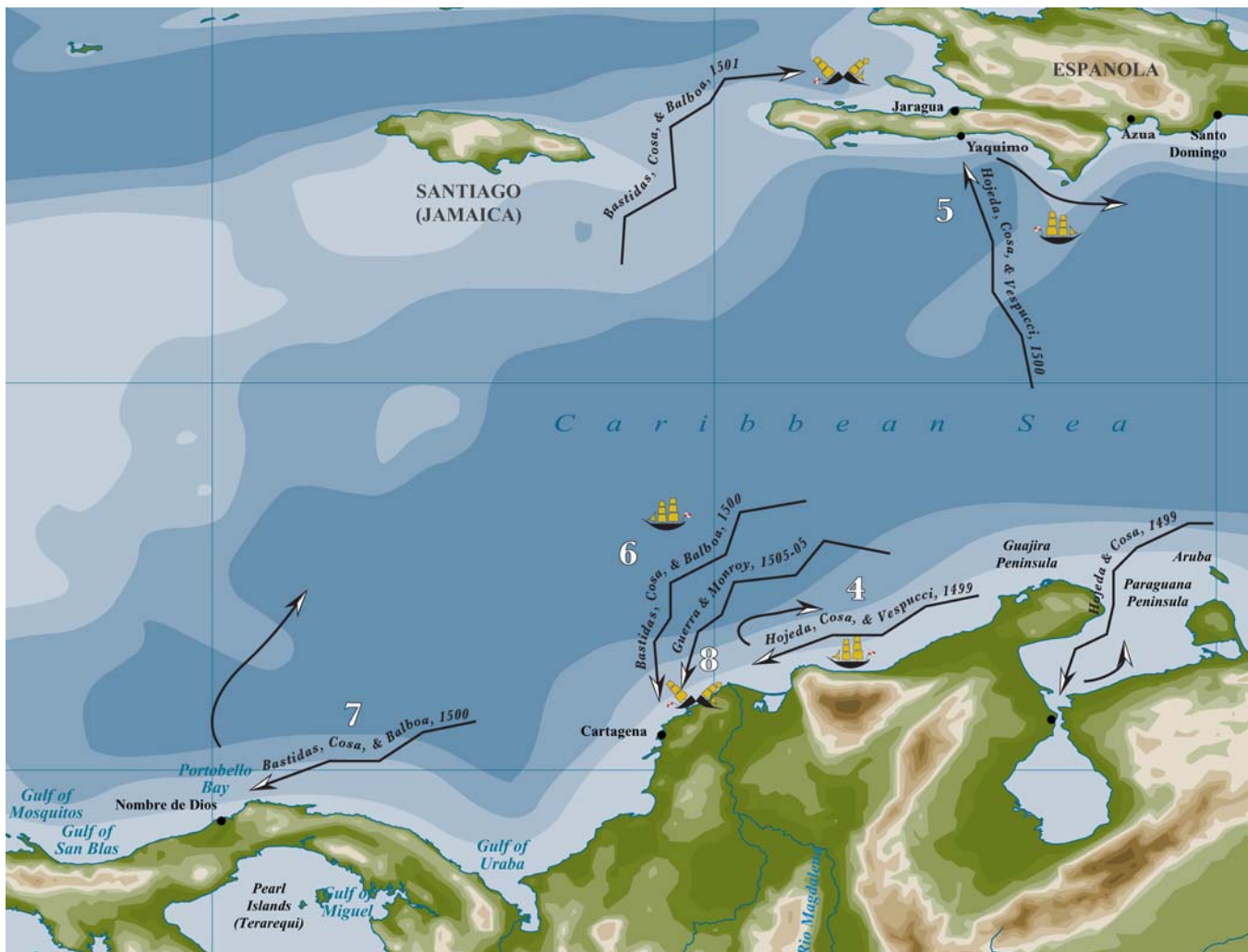


Predictably, other Spanish adventurers followed in Columbus' wake to explore the Caribbean world and make a name for themselves. Until the Casa de Contratacion de Indias (House of Trade in the Indies) was founded in 1503 to regulate Indies settlement, trade, and policy, the opportunities were wide open. All that was required were ships, funding, and men willing to take the risk. The object of most expeditions was, as with Columbus, discovery of new lands and treasure.

1499 In May, Peralonso Nino of Moguer (near Palos de la Frontera), veteran of Columbus' first three expeditions, follows up the Admiral of the Ocean Seas' discovery the previous year of pearls off Margarita Island to explore more of the north coast of South America. Nino does find what he wants south of Aruba Island near

what later becomes Cuagua/Curiana on the Paraguana Peninsula. He realizes that he has come to the shores of a large continent. He makes contact with local Indians and trades as well for gold.

1499 Hot on Nino's heels is Hojeda, his pilot Juan de la Cosa from Cantabria, and Amerigo Vespucci, a Florentine living in Seville and employed by the merchant ruler of Florence Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici. Their four caravels sail from Cadiz through the Canaries to Margarita, then to the Guajiro Peninsula and down to the site of what later becomes Maracaibo in the Gulf of Venezuela.



1499 But Vespucci has broken off with two ships near the island of Trinidad to inspect the mouths of rivers on the coast (of Guiana). He sails up one such river before returning to land on Trinidad and fight a battle with *caribes*, losing two dead but killing 150 of the cannibals and burning their village.

1499-1500 Rejoining Hojeda and Cosa in a quest for pearls and gold, Vespucci sails west along the coast. They find deposits of emeralds and take over 200 Indian prisoners to sell as slaves. Turning back to the islands of Curacao and Aruba, they swell their cargo of human booty. When they make port at Yaquimo on La Espanola, Columbus orders Roldan in Jaragua to confront them. But Roldan is an old friend of Hojeda. The expedition is permitted to sail home via the Azores Islands.

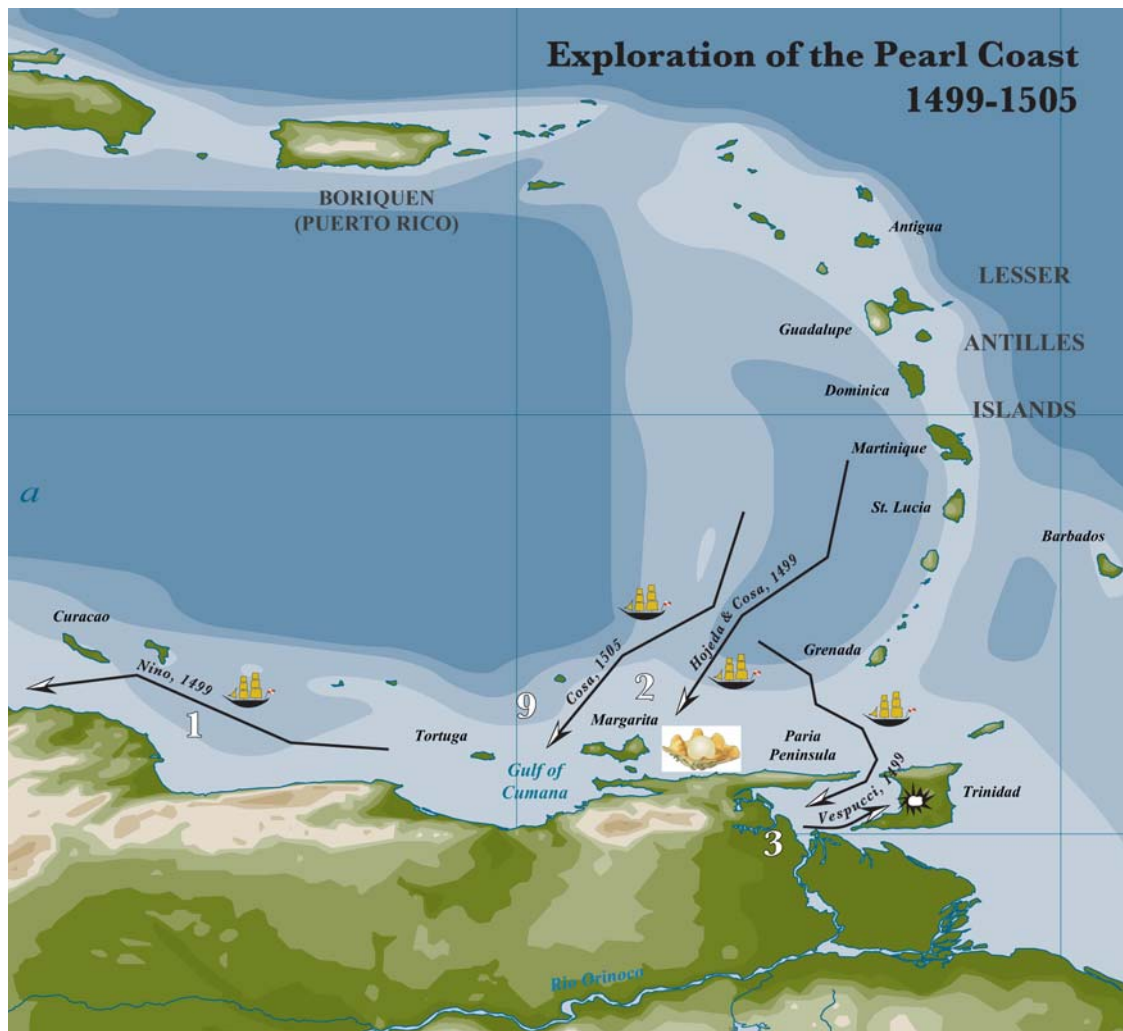
Subsequently, Hojeda, Cosa, and Vespucci please the Spanish court by giving pearls to Queen Isabella. Vespucci makes a map and globe of the world, incorporating what is known about the “new land” for Francesco Lotti, a Florentine in Tuscany. Later in 1507, a revised edition of Martin Waldseemuller’s *Cosmographia* names the new hemisphere west of the Atlantic Ocean “America” in honor of Vespucci. In a revived edition that year of the *Geography* of the ancient writer Ptolemy, the New World is described as being discovered by both

Columbus and Vespucci.

1500 Castilian expeditions to the Brazilian coast of South America occur but are constrained by the superior Portuguese claim. Rather, Spanish explorers prefer the Pearl Coast because of the small but increasing haul of pearls, gold, emerald, and Indian slaves. Thus, Juan de la Cosa, Rodrigo de Bastidas of Triana, and Vasco Nunez de Balboa make straight for the island of Margarita with two caravels. They sail past the Rio de la Hacha (Legend of the Axes), and land at a place they name Cartagena de las Indias (modern Cartagena, Columbia)

1500-01 Subsequently, they investigate new waters by turning west to Nombre de Dios on the isthmus of what later becomes Panama. Although on the return journey they are shipwrecked off Jaragua and have to walk 200 miles to Santo Domingo with Indian bearers, the booty they carry seems a revelation there and back in Spain.

The moment seems propitious for another expedition of conquest, but Columbus’ fall from power in La Espanola and trouble there with the Indians dissuades the Spanish court from backing more ventures. There is a break of several years before new expeditions to the Pearl Coast can be organized and approved by the newly established Casa de la Contratacion.



1504-05 Finally, Luis Guerra of Triana near Seville and his brother Cristobal, a merchant, undertake the challenge. Although Cristobal is killed near Cartagena, Luis steals away with a cargo of Indian slaves and brazilwood.

1505 After Queen Isabella’s death and during a time of transition in Spain, Juan de La Cosa takes four more caravels for La Margarita looking for pearls. He sails on to Cubagua and the Gulf of Cumana to cut brazilwood.

1505 Coming to Cartagena de las Indias, he meets up with Guerra’s expedition and agrees to take cargo back to Spain. Guerra’s lieutenant Monroy,

possible a distant relative of the future conqueror of the Aztec Empire of Mexico Hernan Cortez de Monroy y Pizarro, remains to look for more brazilwood and slaves. But when Monroy is shipwrecked at Cartagena, he must build a temporary town for 200 Spaniards. He keeps his men occupied looking for gold while Juan de la Cosa arranges an evacuation to Santo Domingo with two brigantines.

Accentuating the importance of the Pearl Islands in the eyes of the officials of the Casa de Contratacion is decision by that body in 1505 to name Amerigo Vespucci to the new position of chief pilot. With experience not only along the northern coast of South America but the Brazilian coast, he has the duty of training all Spanish captains and

pilots going to the Indies, awarding official certificates, and making and revising from their reports charts of coastlines and other maps.

Once again, turmoil surrounding the government inhibits the outfitting of new expeditions. Not until King Ferdinand comes back into power with the madness of his daughter by Isabella Juana and the death of Juana's husband Philip of Flanders can the Casa de Contratacion reconsider Indies policy. The New World is still only a minor theater of operation for Ferdinand. With threats from European rivals and the Ottoman Turks to Spain's position in Italy and the Mediterranean, he can ill afford a large drain on the resources of the treasuries of Aragon and Castile.