

Negotiating Troubled Waters. Christopher Columbus and the Catholic Monarchs (1485-1492)

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While historians disagree about details concerning the negotiations between Columbus and the Catholic Monarchs, Queen Isabella I and King Ferdinand II, there is a consensus as to the protracted and complex nature of the process, and to a series of events, which form the foundation of this analysis.

KEY WORDS: CONTEXT – NETWORK BUILDING – BATNA – CREATIVE OPTIONS – IMPLEMENTATION

A. Rebounding from a failed negotiation

In 1485, when King João II of Portugal rejected Columbus's proposed expedition to sail "West in order to reach the East and make discoveries along the way", the explorer left Lisbon to begin a new set of negotiations with Queen Isabella I of Castile and King Ferdinand II of Aragon.

It is interesting to speculate why King João dismissed Columbus's "entreprise". One probable explanation for King João's refusal was that the king had already invested in an expedition to find a route around Africa to Asia. Although the results of that expedition were still unknown, if it proved successful, there wouldn't be any perceived need to invest in a redundant exploration, which carried a great deal of risk, and no foreseeable advantages.

But another strong possibility is that Columbus poorly managed a classic dilemma in negotiation. Whereas he was able to "sell his idea" by presenting somewhat plausible maps, he was unable to "sell himself." This is suggested by the fact that King João II agreed to sponsor a, similar, expedition to the West only two years later, when it was pitched by João

Afonso do Estreito and Fernão Dulmo. If the terms that Columbus later demanded from Spain are any indication, it is possible that Dulmo and do Estreito drove a softer bargain, which made their deal more attractive to the king. In 1487, do Estreito and Dulmo sailed westward under the Portuguese flag, but their expedition was unsuccessful, and both men died at sea.

Almost immediately upon João's rejection, Columbus left Portugal with his young son, Diego, to try his luck with "The Catholic Monarchs", Queen Isabella I of Castile I and King Ferdinand II of Aragon. There is some discussion as to whether Columbus's debts in Portugal expedited his departure.

B. Framing a new negotiation context

Upon arriving in the port of Palos in Andalusia, Columbus enrolled his son as a boarding student at the Franciscan monastery, La Rábida, before going on to plead his case with King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella I. This monastery was not only located near Columbus's in-laws, but also proved to be strategic throughout his negotiations.

The prior of the monastery, Fray Antonio de Marchena, was known as the "astronomer priest", because of his interests in astronomy, maritime exploration, and geography, and was able to introduce Columbus to influential and wealthy nobles such as the Duke of Medinaceli. This introduction quickly led to the Duke's decision to equip Columbus's expedition himself, since he possessed his own merchant fleet. Unfortunately, there was a huge structural obstacle. Explorations were "the exclusive prerogative of the Crown". Medinaceli, therefore, deferred to the King and Queen before making a commitment. This time, Columbus had been able "to sell both his idea *and* himself", but to a person who was not a decision-maker.

The response from the Queen was not the one Medinaceli was hoping for – a simple waiver giving him the authorization to finance an expedition on his own – but rather a summons for Columbus to appear before the court. Fulfilling such a command was not simple: upon the marriage of Isabella and Ferdinand, their kingdoms, Castile and Aragon, were united and the court began moving nomadically from one city to another in the expanded realm. Furthermore, the sovereigns were mainly focused on expelling the Moors from their last bastion on the peninsula, the mountain kingdom of Granada. Their active involvement in the military efforts to conquer this territory increased the cadence and unpredictability of their travels.

Making his way through the war's devastation, Columbus arrived at the city of Cordoba, on January 20, 1486, but missed the King and Queen by several weeks, because they had left for Madrid at the end of '85. He stayed in Cordoba to await their return, but it was delayed by the birth of their fifth and last child (Catherine of Aragon, who would eventually become the first wife of Henry VIII of England). The interval between Columbus's arrival, and his actual meeting with the monarchs, which is believed to have taken place in May 1486, proved to be crucial for Columbus both professionally and personally. From a professional point of view, it gave him an opportunity to gain favor with several dignitaries. From a personal one, he also met and fell in love with Beatriz Enriquez de Arana, with whom he had a son, Ferdinand, in 1488. Ferdinand would grow up to become a scholar and his father's most important biographer.

C. Presenting a proposal to the “powers that be”

When Columbus finally did meet the monarchs, he was careful to present his project in terms that reflected their interests: He would establish a route to Asia, which would bypass the Ottoman blockade of the spice trade. This would have the additional advantage of discovering new territories, enhancing the Crown's glory and wealth while opening opportunities for converting their inhabitants to Christianity. The last point was especially compelling to Queen Isabella, who was extremely devout.

Unfortunately, the context and timing of Columbus's pitch were working against him. Isabella and Ferdinand were feeling increasing pressures from their exhausting war against the Moors. Isabella's response to Columbus was to form a royal study committee of theologians, astronomers, and cosmographers. The commission was to be headed by Hernando de Talavera, a prominent political and religious figure, as well as the Queen's confessor, and was to begin its work the next fall. Since there was no deadline established for the committee to reach a conclusion, her action can be considered a stalling tactic.

Time passed. The court continued its peregrinations from place to place, and Columbus continued to establish and work his network among influential people. Although Columbus did meet with the Talavera committee to document and promote his ideas, he faced the predicament later described by his son, Ferdinand, who wrote that his father did not “wish to reveal all the details of his plan, fearing lest it be stolen

from him in Castile as it had been in Portugal”¹. While the Talavera Commission never formally rejected Columbus’s proposal, the explorer learned through his network that the commission was hostile.

At this point, the Queen may have revived Columbus’s hope, without committing herself in any way to the expedition, by putting him on a retainer of about 12,000 maravedís a year to cover his travel and living expenses. One may wonder: Was the Queen trying to buy time, keep him from going abroad to speak with competing monarchs, or even establish a sense of indebtedness toward herself?

Some time between the fall of 1487 and summer of 1488, the royal stipends ceased and Columbus reacted by re-contacting King João II of Portugal, who invited him back to Lisbon, where Columbus’s brother, Bartholomew, was living. The timing and context of this new attempt by Columbus to win King João’s approval were even worse than they had been in 1485, when Columbus had failed. He arrived in Lisbon just in time to witness Bartholomew Dias’s triumphal arrival in December 1488. Dias had succeeded in sailing around the southern tip of Africa – thereby finding Portugal’s long-sought route to Asia and causing King João II to lose all interest in Columbus’s proposal.

With Portugal out of the picture and the years passing, Columbus and his brother decided to negotiate on two tracks at once: Bartholomew would try his luck with King Henry VII of England while Christopher returned to Castile, where he thought the war against the Moors was winding to a close, and the King and Queen would finally be able to focus on his “*empresa*”. While staying a second time at La Rábida, in May 1489, Columbus received a summons from the Queen to appear at the court at Cordoba to renew their discussions. The summons was accompanied by a grant of 10,000 maravedís and a royal warrant for provisions and lodging during the journey. Columbus left La Rábida feeling encouraged.

D. The power of perseverance

At this point in the war, King Ferdinand’s strategy against the Moors was to lay siege to an important frontier post, Baza, which was one of the three most important cities in the Kingdom of Granada. That spring the weather was severe and the roads were washed out by rains and flooding, causing

¹ F. COLUMBUS, *The Life of Christopher Columbus by His Son Ferdinand*, trans. and ed. by B. Keen, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1959, p. 38.

such unsanitary conditions that six times as many Spanish soldiers died from disease as in combat. By the time Columbus arrived in Cordoba, the Queen was so consumed by the task of providing supplies for her husband's army that she had lost interest again in Columbus's project.

Another year passed before Queen Isabella's interest in Columbus's plans rekindled in the spring of 1490, when she convened another jury of experts to examine Columbus's proposal. Once again, though, they were unconvinced. Despite the myth that Columbus had to persuade the Spanish court that the world was round, the actual blocking point was more a question of calculation. The Queen's advisors actually accepted that the world was spherical, but considered that the distance to be traveled by going west to reach India or the East Indies would be too great for contemporary ships to travel, let alone make the return voyage, if the western seas were navigable at all (The fact is that they were right, or at least much closer to reality: it was too far to the East Indies. But, not, as it turned out, to the West Indies, which neither Columbus nor the experts had factored into their calculations). Although the jury rejected Columbus's proposal, for some reason the Queen let Columbus understand that this rejection should not be considered definitive and asked him to wait until the war with the Moors was over.

In the meantime, Columbus's brother, Bartholomew, had been captured by pirates while en route to England. And in Spain, the war with the Moors was dragging on. Finally, after laying siege to Baza for six months, King Ferdinand's forces broke through and went on to attack the last Moorish stronghold, the city of Granada.

In the spring of 1491, Columbus returned to the La Rábida monastery, where he learned that his brother, who had somehow gained his freedom and arrived destitute in England, had been turned away by Henry VII. Bartholomew next went on the French court, where he was not meeting any more success with France's king, Charles VIII.

E. Sending indirect BATNA² signals

At La Rábida, Columbus spoke openly of plans to travel north and personally present his proposal to the French king. Fray Juan Pérez, a former confessor to the Spanish queen and one of her most trusted advisers,

² Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement, Plan B – his best course of action if his negotiation failed.

was also staying at the monastery. Whether through luck, or strategic maneuvering, Columbus managed to let Pérez, and therefore Isabella, know, that she was on the verge of potentially losing her investment and the opportunities that Columbus represented.

Upon hearing of Columbus's plan to exercise his BATNA, Pérez rode off to meet with the monarchs, who were still in the process of trying to conquer Grenada. As soon as Perez had laid out Columbus's supposed plans to take his proposal to the French king, a royal envoy was sent from Granada to La Rábida, not only with an order for Columbus to appear before the king and queen at their camp, Santa Fé, just outside of Grenada, but with 20,000 maravedís for the purchase of appropriate clothes and a warrant permitting Columbus the use of a horse.

By the time the Moors finally capitulated on January 6, 1492, Columbus had reached the royal headquarters and entered Grenada with the rest of the victors. It looked like the stage was finally set for him to succeed in persuading the Catholic monarchs: the war was over, the Queen had not only summoned him, but had invested in improving his stature. Everything seemed favorable for a positive outcome to Columbus's long and painful wait.

F. Terms and conditions are not mere details

The negotiation quickly bogged down, though, as soon as it came to negotiating the terms and conditions of the agreement. It is not clear whether these terms were the same that Columbus had demanded of King João or possibly mentioned in previous discussions with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, but history has preserved Columbus's requirements in Grenada in 1492, which included that he:

1. Would have, for himself, his heirs, and successors in perpetuity, the office of admiral in all the islands and continents which he might discover or acquire in the ocean, with similar honours and prerogatives to those enjoyed by the high admiral of Castile.
2. Would be viceroy and governor-general over all said lands and continents; with the privilege of nominating three candidates for the government of each island or province, one of whom would be selected by the sovereigns.

3. Would be entitled to reserve for himself one tenth of all pearls, precious stones, gold, silver, spices, and all other articles and merchandise, in whatever manner found, bought, bartered, or gained within his admiralty, the costs being first deducted.
4. That he, or his lieutenant, would be the sole judge in all cases and disputes arising out of traffic between these countries and Spain, provided the high admiral of Castile had similar jurisdiction in his district.
5. That he might contribute an eighth part of the expenses in fitting out vessels to sail on this enterprise and receive an eighth part of the profits in perpetuity³.

The Court summarily refused Columbus's terms and Isabella definitively rejected the Enterprise. But was that the end of the story?

Many historians have questioned: Why was Columbus so adamant – so stubborn even – about his terms that he risked losing a long-desired agreement? There has been considerable speculation that he was aware that there was something more in the Atlantic than he admitted. If he believed this and had reason to believe that the monarchs thought so as well, then he might have thought that his position was strong enough to risk a bluff. Finally, it is even possible that he was simply swayed by emotion and felt that he had to extract more from the King and Queen because they had played for so long on his patience and nerves.

Regardless of his motives for being so inflexible, upon being dismissed, Columbus left Santa Fé by taking the northern gate, which is known today as the Columbus Gate, toward France. "Then in the hamlet of Pinos just four miles to the north, where the trail crossed a gorge by way of an ancient three-arched bridge, Christopher Columbus heard the hoof beats of the queen's messenger pounding in hot pursuit"⁴. The Queen had given in to Columbus's conditions.

What happened during the interval? A wealthy and influential lawyer, with whom Columbus had (wisely) cultivated a relationship

³ J. FISKE, *The Discovery of America*, Vol.I, Houghton, Mifflin Company, Boston and New York, 1985, p. 417.

⁴ J. DYSON, *Columbus For Gold, God, and Glory*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1991, p. 93.

during this long and drawn out wait, had intervened. The lawyer, Luis de Santangel, handled the Court's finances and was able to present the queen with a global analysis of the situation, which is outlined in the following chart. Based on the concept of Currently Perceived Choice⁵, Isabella's situation could be seen as follows:

As of: 1492
<p>Currently Perceived Choice of Queen Isabella I of Castile</p> <p>Question faced: "Should I authorize the Columbus expedition and thereby give in to his demands concerning title, role and wealth connected to his possible discoveries?"</p> <p>"If I say 'Yes' to Columbus"</p> <p>And he is successful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I gain wealth, power and access to Asia - I gain the opportunity to spread Christianity - I make a small investment for huge potential gain - Columbus will only gain authority in territories not under my rule <p>And if he is unsuccessful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - My sponsorship could be a useful extension of my policy to explore the Atlantic and exert authority beyond the Canary Islands - I will be involved in a potentially embarrassing scheme - I will waste (some) resources at a time when the royal coffers are empty <p>"If I say 'No' to Columbus"</p> <p>And he is successful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - He may achieve success sailing under another flag, gaining glory and wealth for another crown - I will appear foolish before the other courts of Europe - I will lose an occasion to "catch up" with Portuguese maritime achievements <p>And he is unsuccessful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I will not have invested uselessly

⁵ R. FISHER and W. URY, *Getting to Yes*, Houghton, Mifflin Company, Boston and New York, 1991, p. 45.

Santangel's main conclusion was that the potential gain far outweighed any potential loss, and that there were ways to finance the expedition without costing the kingdom money it did not have. The war against the Moors had emptied the royal coffers⁶.

G. Generating options for mutual gain

Using what we would now call a "creative financial engineering option", Santangel put together the following package to meet both the needs of the Crown to limit expenditure and Columbus's requirement of three fully supplied and manned caravels for his expedition:

1. Santangel suggested that a royal fine that had been imposed on the seaport of Palos in Andalusia for smuggling operations be paid in kind, by obliging the merchants of Palos to put two caravels at Columbus's disposal.
2. Columbus would be able to raise 250,000 maravedís from a Genoese/Florentine merchant group in Seville toward financing the third ship.
3. The remaining 1,140,000 maravedís required for the third ship would come from the Holy Brotherhood⁷, of which Santangel was the treasurer, in the form of a loan to the Crown at 14 % over two years.

H. Contractual agreement vs. actual implementation

Upon reaching this agreement on April 17, 1492, Columbus finally seemed ready to begin preparing his voyage in earnest, but the context and timing still weren't in his favor. While the agreement appeared feasible on paper, neither party had really considered the practical impediments to implementing it.

⁶ The story of Isabella pawning her jewels to finance Columbus is probably a romantic myth. Her jewels had probably been put up as collateral to finance the purchase of supplies for the previously mentioned siege of Baza. That being said, it is interesting to note that putting royal jewels into hock was apparently not rare at that time in history.

⁷ A constabulary created in the late 15th century by the Ferdinand and Isabella to maintain law and order throughout the realm.

The month before, Ferdinand and Isabella had issued the Alhambra Decree, stating that all Jews who had not converted to Catholicism were obliged to leave the Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon and their territories by July 31st. When Columbus arrived in Palos in May and handed the town's officials and merchants the royal order obliging them to supply him with two caravels, equipped with materials and crew within 10 days, they neither acted nor opposed the order. Ten days passed and nothing happened. It seems that most ship owners were focusing their resources on the brisk and secure business of transporting Jewish refugees to destinations around the Mediterranean. Another factor was that Columbus had acquired a kind of "crackpot" reputation with his strange ideas, and sailors preferred to set sail under safer commanders.

It is interesting to note that neither Columbus nor the King and Queen could negotiate for the ship-holders' and sailors' cooperation, but for opposite reasons. Whereas Columbus lacked the clout and stature to even coax agreements from them, the King and Queen were too highly placed to stoop to such transactions. From their regal heights, they supplied Columbus with decrees, but not necessarily the means for implementing them.

It was a highly respected local sea captain and third party in the negotiation named Martin Alonso Pinzón who finally saved the day by vouching for the "empresa" and leveraging his reputation to obtain the ships and recruit the sailors that made the voyage possible. In fact, some versions of the account claim that Pinzón had already made a voyage to the New World in 1488 under the French navigator, Jean Cousin.

The monarchs had also equipped Columbus with a decree granting amnesty for criminal activity for any sailor signing on for the expedition. But, in fact, of the 80 men who did serve on the three ships, only one was a convict – a man, who had killed another man in a fight – while three others were his friends, who were about to be tried for freeing him from prison.

In the end, two small caravels were committed to the expedition. The *Pinta* was commanded by Martin Alonso Pinzón, who obviously had a keen interest in facilitating a solution for Columbus, while the *Nina* was commanded by his brother, Vicente Yanez Pinzón. Given the caravels' modest size, Columbus was obliged to find a freighter to carry supplies for the expedition. In Puerto de Santa Maria, Columbus was

able to negotiate with the captain of a seventy-ton three-master which was probably in port to load wool destined for Flanders. They contracted for a voyage “of 750 leagues (2,400 miles) from the Canary Islands on a course to be advised.” The ambiguity of this agreement makes one wonder how carefully the captain of the ship protected his own interests.

All three ships set sail on August 3, 1492, and the rest is history.

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