

The Spanish Crown and Early American Names

JACK A. DABBS

IN THE FIRST YEARS after the discovery of America, compared with economic and social problems, there was relatively little thought and design given to the bestowal of names upon the new lands, and some of the heterogeneity that now plagues us can be traced back to that fact. This does not mean that Spanish officialdom was indifferent to the use and allocation of names. Quite on the contrary, early documents reveal some caution about their use. A few examples will show how they exercised this concern.

The Capitulación de Santa Fe, April 12, 1492, referred to “islands and mainland that are to be discovered.” The royal contracts avoided the name Indies.¹

When Columbus reached land in the New World, although he insisted that he had reached the Indies, where many place names were already known, he nonetheless gave new names to the first islands, following the pattern of the religious and royal hierarchy—San Salvador, Santa María de la Concepción, Fernandina, Isabela, Juana, and then Española,² despite the fact that he had already ascertained from the natives that they called the islands by such names as Guanahaní, Saomete, and Bochiro. There is no documentary evidence that he had specific instructions from the Crown to bestow names. If he did so, he depended on some vague, unwritten law or tradition that seems to give a discoverer or explorer *virtute facto* the right to name his discoveries, a tradition by no means confined to the Spanish world. It is not clear whether tradition confers the right to bestow the name or simply to propose a name subject to some sort of ratification. Moreover, when a new discovery already has a name, and the name is ascertainable, does the discoverer still have the right to discard it in favor of another

of his own choosing? Such questions are always difficult when we deal with tradition or unwritten laws.

Another question, unanswerable at the present time, refuses to be laid aside. Columbus presumably believed that he had reached the Spice Islands or Cathay or Cipango, and it rested on his shoulders to prove that he had. Under these circumstances, why did he not give names that would reflect those lands rather than give religious and royal names?

At any rate in his first voyage Columbus, departing from the systematic order of the first islands, gave other place names, of which 64 are recorded in his chronicles. Sixteen of them were either saints' names or names with religious references; one refers to the royal family; forty-one refer to incidents or characterizations, and six retained what seems to be the local title.³ In view of the ostensible reason for the voyage and Columbus' asseverations, it seems inconsistent that not one of these 64 names smacks of the Spice Islands, Cipango, or Cathay.

The flurry of excitement that followed Columbus' return was directed at political, religious, geographical, and philosophical concepts, very little at onomastics. It is noteworthy, however, that the names bestowed by Columbus carried no weight, and for the next six months documents spoke in the most general terms. The Pope and the Spanish Crown accepted the premise that Columbus had reached the Indies, but with a cautious qualification.

The Bula de Concesión, May 3, 1493, gave the Spanish Kings the right to spread the faith without coercion in any land not already possessed by a Christian prince; but there is no mention of names, nor mention of any part of the New World.⁴

The Bula de Alejandro VI, May 4, 1493, repeated the wording of the previous one except for two places, where the dividing line was set at 100 leagues west of the Azores⁵ and which placed under Spanish jurisdiction the islands and mainland "in the direction of the Indies."

This term "en las partes de las Indias" became fairly standard in the Spanish official papers of the next few months. Seven of the first fifteen documents ordering preparations for the Second Voyage use that term to describe the destination.⁶ Eight of the others are outright admissions that the new islands were in fact

the Indies. However, particularly noteworthy is the fact that in the several dozen communications that preceded the Second Voyage, none of the directions named any island or part of any island by name. This omission, coming from the court several months after Columbus had made his report, can only be interpreted as an indication that the royal couple had not yet accepted any of the names given by Columbus.

A new royal letter of instructions to Columbus on May 28, 1493, formally appointed him to be "Almirante, Visorey, y Gobernador del Mar Océano y de las islas de Tierra firme del dicho mar océano a la parte de las Indias."⁷

A royal letter of instructions to Columbus and Fonseca, May 23, gave specific directions for many activities they were to undertake. Nothing was said about naming places.⁸

Again, five days later another royal letter specified Columbus' powers in the islands, but none were named.⁹

A *cédula*, dated May 29, with further instructions to Columbus enjoined him to send ships to discover what had not been discovered, to engage in trade, and to explore.¹⁰ In view of the detail to which the *cédula* went, it would have been a likely place to confer the right to name places; but names are not mentioned. Moreover, the *cédula* specified that Columbus had no rights beyond those written therein. This provision, however, cannot be taken as a denial of the right to name new places, because if the right were based on tradition or on unwritten law, then we could not expect it to find expression here nor for a general prohibition to affect it.

As preparations for the Second Voyage continued, the Queen grew more impatient with delays, and at last, in September she wrote to Columbus, "Send me the sailing chart as soon as you have it finished, and hurry up and leave."¹¹ This was the last letter before Columbus sailed, and we cannot avoid the impression that he departed without official sanction for any of the names he had bestowed.

The one reference made in that letter to names seems too vague to help with the present problem: "Nos imbiad luego muy complida y escriptos con ella [la carta] los nombres; . . ." which seems to take it for granted that Columbus already had unwritten instruc-

tions, an unwritten right, that his proposals were in order, or possibly that the Queen desired the local names.

That same month, on September 25, the third Bull was issued in Rome, referred to as the Bula de Extensión de la Demarcación. It extended Spanish rights to include *La India*. No other geographical term in the New World was mentioned, nor was *La India* located.¹² The next year, when the Treaty of Tordesillas was signed, July 2, 1494, it set the line of demarcation 270 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands and set up a joint commission of pilots, astrologers, cosmographers, and sailors to determine and mark that line. The only names mentioned were places on the Guinea Coast and in the Cape Verde Islands.¹³

Once back in the islands and having established the colony on Española, Columbus gave instructions to a certain Mosen Pedro Margarite to reconnoiter what he called the Province of Cibao, evidently Cuba. In the letter, dated April 9, 1494, Columbus gave his own title as Visorey e Capitán General de Estas Indias, and he signed the letter El Almirante. But the scribe who put the title on the outside wrote "Almirante mayor del Mar Océano e Visorey e Gobernador perpétuo de la Isla de San Salvador e de todas las otras islas e Tierra firme de las Indias descubiertas y por descubrir e Capitán General del Mar." Reference to the Island of San Salvador, as we have seen, was unauthorized; but it appears several times in correspondence prepared by Columbus. We can only explain it as an effort of the Admiral to establish his own authority more firmly by linking it with some place name more tangible than that of the Indies. The letter instructed Margarite to explore the Province, to erect crosses and benchmarks along the roads and trails, and to put crosses in the trees and to write on some the names of Their Highnesses. The letter was dated Ciudad Isabela, Isla de Isabela en las Indias.¹⁴ There was no mention of giving names to places.

The first ship to return from the Second Voyage brought letters from Columbus to the Queen, describing what he had accomplished, and at the same time brought confirmatory letters from the Queen's own trusted officials. At last we begin to find some official word on names. Her answer, dated August 16, 1494, ex-

pressed her pleasure with what had already been done. Then she went on to say,

But we would like to know something more than you have written. Let use know what islands have been found so far and to which you have given names, and what name for each one. Because although you name some in your letters, they are not all. And [We want to know] for the others what names the Indians call them, how much there is to each of them, and what you have found in them.¹⁵

This letter may be considered the beginning of legislation on names for the New World, meager as it may seem. It contains the elements that were to continue as policy: An assumption that the right to give names remained with the explorer, discoverer, or founder, while the Crown maintained only an indirect interest in the name; a policy for the local names to be reported, though not necessarily applied; and a geographical report of the nature of the discovery. This last report was to be the basis for the great store of geographical information at the disposal of the *Piloto Mayor*.¹⁶

Finally in a *cédula* of April 9, 1495, in a contract with Juanoto Berardi, the term *La Isla de Española* was used, thus accepting it as a true geographical term.¹⁷ Thus for the first time the Crown took official cognizance of the existence of a specific place in the New World by name, fourteen months after the return of Columbus from the First Voyage. Although we can only conjecture on these subjects, it seems that the Queen's cautiousness resulted not from any dissatisfaction with the names or the Admiral's right to give them, but rather a caution about the real existence of the places until her own agents had confirmed them. After that date, however, the name of *Española* frequently appears in official communications of all kinds; but again it was many months before any other place name was used.

On his Second Voyage Columbus named several new islands, one of them the island which the Indians called *Xamaica*, but to which he gave the name *Santiago*. This is a special case because in a contract with Diego de Nicuesa and Alonso de Ojeda in 1508 the king, now Ferdinand alone, referred to the island as *Jamaica*,¹⁸ and yet in 1515 he reversed himself. At that time Governor Velázquez of Cuba had given the name *Santiago* to another island, and in a *cédula* Ferdinand wrote,

I saw the map of the island of Ahao, which you named Santiago, and it looks well to me. You should examine it and find out in what way advantage may be taken of it for our service and the increase of our incomes. Send me a special report on it, because the island which up to now has been called Jamaica we order shall henceforth be called Santiago because the Admiral gave that name when he was on the said island, and to have two islands with the same name would be inconvenient. So I order you to remove the name Santiago which you have given the new island and give it the name of some Saint, whichever you prefer . . . and advise me of the name you give it. And, as you will see, I have ordered that henceforth that island which up to now has been called Cuba be called Fernandina because the name it had was unbecoming [algo fuera de propósito]; henceforth it shall be called by this name. Yo el Rey.¹⁹

This cédula sets an example of another aspect of early place names—the impotence of the Crown to command names in the New World. Although the use of saints' names was encouraged and the King accepted the role of ratifying proposed names, he specifically ordered two particular names for the two islands. Despite the order neither name has survived, proving that the forces which govern the rise of place names are not always amenable to royal edict.

NOTES

¹ Pacheco, Joaquín F., Francisco de Cárdenas, and Luis Torres de Mendoza, (Eds.) *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista, y organización de las antiguas posesiones españolas de América y Oceanía . . .*, (Madrid, 1864-84, 42 vols.), XIX, 432-439.

² Columbus, *Select Letters*, Hakluyt Society, XLIII, 1870, 2nd Ed., Colón al Escribero de Ración, p. 2. The self-assuredness with which Columbus bestowed the names appears in his own words: "A la quinta isla [puse nombre] Juana, et asy a cada una [puse] nombre nuevo."

³ *Ibid.*, 1-18. Also printed in José María Asensio, *Cristóbal Colón, su vida,—sus viajes—sus descubrimientos*. Edición Monumental. (Barcelona, Espasa & Cía., n.d. 1892? 2 vols.) I, Apéndice H, 566-572. For greater detail see the account given by Bartolomé de las Casas in Manuel Fernández de Navarrete (Ed.), *Rélatiions des Quatre voyages entrepris par Cristophe Colomb pour la découverte du Nouveau Monde de 1492 à 1504* (Paris, Treuttel & Würtz, 1828, 4 vols.), II, 1-338. Saints' Names or Religious References: Cabo del Ángel, Cabo de Padre e Hijo, Isla de Santo Tomás ("because tomorrow is the feast of St. Thomas," p. 208), Cabo de San-Theramo, Mar de Nuestra Señora, Monte Cristi, Navidad, Puerto de la Concepción, Puerto Maria, Puerto Sacro, Puerto de San Nicolás, Puerto de Santa Catalina, Puerto Santo, Puerto de la Mar de Santo Thomás ("because today is the feast of St. Thomas," p. 220), Punta Santa, Río de Gracia. The royal family: Puerto del Príncipe. Incidents or Characterizations: Cabo Alto y Bajo, Cabo del Becerro, Cabo Bel Prado, Cabo del Buen Tiempo, Cabo de Campana, Cabo de la Estrella, Cabo del Elefante, Cabo del Enamorado, el Cabo Francés, Cabo Hermoso, Cabo del Isleo, Cabo de la Laguna, Cabo Lindo, Cabo del Monte, Cabo de Palmas, Cabo del Pico, Cabo Cinquin, Cabo Redondo, Cabo de Sierpe, Cabo Tajado, Cabo de Torres, Dos Hermanos, Golfo de las Flechas,

Isla de la Amiga, Islas de Arena, Isla de Plata, Isla de la Tortuga, Monte de Plata, Peña de los Enamorados, Punta Aguda, Punta del Hierro, Punta Lanzada, Punta Pierna, Punta Roja, Punta Seca, Río Guadalquivir, Río de la Luna, Río de Mares, Río del Oro, Río del Sol, and Valle del Paraíso. Local Titles: Cuba, Cabo de Cuba, Golfo de Samaná, Isla Baveque, Monte Carabata, Marinino. Other local names are mentioned but not specified as accepted or used by the Europeans: Babeque, Bofan, Bosio, Cami, Canima, Caritaba, Cavila, Cibao, Coroay, Fama, Fuma, Goanin, Guisay, Isla de Carib, Macorix, Mayonic, Yalnaye.

⁴ Levillier, Roberto, *América la bien llamada* (Buenos Aires, Ed. Kraft, 1948, 2 vols.), I, 243-244.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 245-247. Also in J. M. Asencio, *Cristóbal Colón*, I, 574-577.

⁶ Pacheco & Cárdenas, *Colección de documentos . . .*, XIX, 475, 478, 496, 497, 499, 501.

⁷ *Ibid.*, XXX, 109-119.

⁸ *Ibid.*, XIX, 484-488.

⁹ *Ibid.*, XXX, 120-122.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, XXX, 145-157.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, XXX, 211-215.

¹² Levillier, *op. cit.*, I, 247-248.

¹³ *Ibid.*, I, 248-252.

¹⁴ Pacheco & Cárdenas, *Colección de documentos . . .*, XIX, 521-529.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, XXX, 299-303.

¹⁶ This statement for general policy lasted until the last third of the sixteenth century when the Crown authorized a questionnaire which required a detailed report of each Spanish settlement. These reports now make up one of our best sources of place-name information, since for each populated area, the questionnaire called for the Indian name and its meaning.—*Ynstrucción y memoria de las relaciones que se han de hacer para la descripción de las Indias que Su Magestad manda hazer para el buen Gobierno y ennoblecimiento de ellas*, Pacheco & Cárdenas, *Colección de documentos . . .*, XXI, 240-250.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, XXI, 557-561.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, XXII, 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Segundo Serie, *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y organización de las antiguas posesiones de ultramar* (Madrid, 1885-1928, 21 vols.), I, 56-58.