

ALLA CORRENTE

Giovanni Caboto (John Cabot)

John Cabot was probably born in Genoa around 1450 and died at sea sometime around 1499. Like other Italian explorers and seamen, he sailed under the flag and auspices of another country. Columbus had sailed for Spain; Cabot sailed for England. He was a navigator and explorer whose voyages in 1497 and 1498 helped lay the groundwork for the later British claim to Canada. Unlike Columbus, however, the exact details of his life and of his voyages are still subjects of controversy among historians and cartographers.

Cabot moved to Venice in 1461, or possibly earlier, and became a citizen of that city in 1476. He assumed a Venetian dialect form of his name “Zuan Cabotto” and became a prominent citizen of this city-state. While employed by a Venetian mercantile firm, he traveled to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean and visited Mecca, a great trading center where Oriental and Western goods were exchanged. He became skilled in navigational techniques and seems to have envisaged, independently of Christopher Columbus, the possibility of reaching Asia by sailing westward.

Cabot’s whereabouts and activities from the mid-1480s to the mid-1490s are in doubt, but historians believe that he moved with his family to England and took up residence in Bristol by the end of 1495. Just a few months later, on March 5, 1496, King Henry VII of England issued letters patent to Cabot and his sons (Ludovico, Sebastian, and Sancto) authorizing them to set out on voyages in search of unknown lands, to return their merchandise by the port of Bristol, and to enjoy a monopoly of any trade they might establish there. The news of Columbus’ recent discoveries on behalf of Spain was a spur to English action and secured some support for Cabot from Bristol merchants.

In 1496 Cabot made a voyage from Bristol with one ship, but he was forced to turn back because of a shortage of food, inclement weather, and disputes with his crew. In May 1497, however, he set sail on a second expedition from Bristol in the small ship *Matthew* with a crew of 18 men.

He proceeded around Ireland and then north and west, making landfall on the morning of June 24. The exact landing place has never been definitely established: it has been variously believed to be in southern Labrador, Newfoundland, Cape Breton Island or even Maine. (Cape Bonavista in Newfoundland is the location recognized by the governments of Canada and the United Kingdom as being Cabot’s “official” landing place). On landing, he noticed signs indicating that the area was inhabited but saw no people.

Cabot is only reported to have landed just this once during the expedition and he did not advance “beyond the shooting distance of a crossbow.” Historians generally agree that no contact was made with any native people, but they found the remains of a fire, a human trail, nets and a wooden tool. The crew only appeared to have remained on land long enough to take on fresh water and to raise the Venetian and Papal banners and claim the land for the King of England. By so doing they claimed the land in the name of England, while recognizing the religious authority of the Roman Catholic Church. After this landing, Cabot spent some weeks “discovering the coast.” He conducted explorations from the ship along the coastline, naming various features Cape Discovery, Island of St. John, St. George’s Cape, the Trinity Islands, and England’s Cape. These may be, respectively, the present Cape North, St. Paul Island, Cape Ray, St. Pierre and Miquelon, and Cape Race, all in the area of Cabot Strait.

John Day (a Bristol merchant writing to Christopher Columbus) in a letter dated 1497-98 says that “most of the land was discovered after turning back”, which suggests the landfall was some way to the west and

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south of the most easterly point of North America. Both Day's letter and that of Raimondo de Raimondi de Soncino, (the Milanese ambassador in London writing to the Duke of Milan on December 18, 1497) comment on the vast multitude of codfish in the sea. Soncino reported that "the sea there is swarming with fish, which can be taken not only with the net, but in baskets let down with a stone, so that it sinks in the water." John Day's letter states that the expedition left the New World once it reached a cape said to lie "1800 miles west of Dursey Head, which is in Ireland". Given that the latitude of Dursey Head is 51° 35' N, this implies that, wherever Cabot made landfall, his departure point was at the northern tip of the Great Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland (51° 36' N). On the homeward voyage Cabot's crew incorrectly thought they were going too far north, so they took a more southerly course and reached Brittany instead of England.

Making the same mistake that Columbus had made, Cabot believed that he had reached the northeast coast of Asia. When he finally returned to Bristol from Brittany on Aug. 6, 1497, he reported that the land was excellent, the climate temperate, and the sea covered with enough fish to end England's dependence on Icelandic fish.

Back in England, Cabot appears to have ridden directly to see the King. On 10 August, 1497, he was given a reward of £10 — equivalent to about two years' pay for an ordinary labourer or craftsman. The explorer was initially feted; Soncino wrote on August 23 that Cabot "is called the Great Admiral and vast honour is paid to him and he goes dressed in silk, and these English run after him like mad." Such adulation was short-lived, for over the next few months the King's attention was occupied entirely by the Second Cornish Uprising of 1497, led by Perkin Warbeck. Once Henry's throne was secure he gave some more thought to Cabot. In December, 1497 the explorer was awarded a pension of £20 per year, and in February 1498 he was given a patent to help him prepare a return expedition. The Great Chronicle of London reports that Cabot departed with a fleet of five ships from Bristol at the beginning of May, one of which had been prepared by the King. Some of the ships were said to be carrying merchandise, including cloth, caps, lace points and other "trifles." This suggests that the expedition hoped to engage in trade. The Spanish envoy in London reported in July that one of the ships had been caught in a storm and been forced to land in Ireland, but the other ships had kept on their way.

No news was received about Cabot's whereabouts or the fate of the other ships of the expedition following this report of damage and anchorage. So, by 1499 Cabot was considered lost at sea. The overall effect of Cabot's efforts was to demonstrate the viability of a short route across the North Atlantic. This would later prove important in the establishment of British colonies in North America.

-Dr. James J. Boitano
(Adapted from Biography.com and Wikipedia.com)