

# ON HENRY VII

Pedro López de Ayala (–1513), Spanish Envoy to England

to Ferdinand II (1452–1516) and Isabel (1451–1504), monarchs of Castile and Aragon

25 July 1498

I think Your Majesties have already heard that the King of England has equipped a fleet in order to discover certain islands and continents which he was informed some people from Bristol, who manned a few ships for the same purpose last year, had found. I have seen the map made by the discoverer, who is another Genoese, like Columbus, and who has been in Seville and in Lisbon asking assistance for his discoveries.

The people of Bristol have, for the last seven years, sent out every year two, three, or four caravels in search of the island of Brazil<sup>1</sup> and the seven cities,<sup>2</sup> according to the fancy of this Genoese. The King determined to send out ships because, the year before, they brought certain news that they had found land. His fleet consisted of five vessels, which carried provisions for one year. It is said that one of them, in which one Friar Buil<sup>3</sup> went, has returned to Ireland in great distress, the ship being much damaged. The Genoese has continued his voyage.

I have seen, on a chart, the direction which they took and the distance they sailed, and I think that what they have found, or what they are in search of, is what Your Highnesses already possess. It is expected that they will be back in the month of September.

I write this because the King of England has often spoken to me on this subject and he thinks that Your Highnesses will take great interest in it. I think it is not further distant than four hundred leagues.<sup>4</sup> I told him that, in my opinion, the land was already in the possession of Your Majesties; but though I gave him my reasons, he did not like them.

I believe that Your Highnesses are already informed of this matter, and I do not now send the chart or *mapa mundi* which that man has made and which, according to my opinion, is false, since it makes it appear as if the land in question was not the said islands.

The King of England is less rich than is generally said. He likes to be thought very rich, because such a belief is advantageous to him in many respects. His revenues are considerable, but the custom house revenues, as well as the land rents, diminish every day. As far as the customs are concerned, the reason of their decrease is to be sought in the decay of commerce, caused partly by the wars, but much more by the additional duties imposed by the King.

There is, however, another reason for the decrease of trade, that is to say, the impoverishment of the people by the great taxes laid on them. The King himself said to me that it is his intention to keep his subjects low, because riches would only make them haughty. The rents of the domains which he has confiscated to the Crown have much diminished. The reason is that the nobles had administered them.

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<sup>1</sup> Pedro Álvares Cabral, the first European to site Brazil, landed in April 1500, though rumors had long circulated of a great coastal land in the southern western hemisphere.

<sup>2</sup> An eighth-century Iberian legend tells of Antilia, the Isle of the Seven Cities, lying far off in the western sea. Seven bishops, fleeing the Muslim invasion of Spain, sailed with their congregations to a distant island, where each prelate founded a city.

<sup>3</sup> Bernat Boil (c. 1440–1509), a Spanish priest who sailed with Columbus on the latter's second voyage and whom Pope Alexander VI named Vicar Apostolic to America

<sup>4</sup> 300 nautical leagues equals roughly 1000 miles

His Crown is, nevertheless, undisputed, and his government is strong in all respects. He is disliked, but the Queen<sup>1</sup> beloved, because she is powerless. They love the Prince<sup>2</sup> as much as themselves, because he is the grandchild of his grandfather.<sup>3</sup> Those who know him love him also for his own virtues.

The King looks old for his years, but young for the sorrowful life he has led.

One of the reasons why he leads a good life is that he has been brought up abroad. He would like to govern England in the French fashion, but he cannot. He is subject to his Council, but has already shaken off some and got rid of some part of this subjection.

Those who have received the greatest favours from him are the most discontented. He knows all that. The King has the greatest desire to employ foreigners in his service. He cannot do so, for the envy of the English is diabolical and, I think, without equal.

He likes to be much spoken of and to be highly appreciated by the whole world. He fails in this because he is not a great man. Although he professes many virtues, his love of money is too great.

He spends all the time he is not in public or in his Council in writing the accounts of his expenses with his own hand.

He desires nothing more in this world than the arrival of the Princess of Wales<sup>4</sup> in England. Though it is not my business to give advice, I take the liberty to say that it would be a good thing if she were to come soon, in order to accustom herself to the way of life in this country and to learn the language. On the other hand, when one sees and knows the manners and the way of life of this people in this island, one cannot deny the grave inconveniences of her coming to England before she is of age. Your Highnesses know the reasons; they are many. But the Princess can only be expected to lead a happy life through not remembering those things which would make her less enjoy what she will find here. It would, therefore, still be best to send her directly, and before she has learnt fully to appreciate our habits of life and our government.

The King is much influenced by his mother<sup>5</sup> and his followers in affairs of personal interest and in others. The Queen, as is generally the case, does not like it. There are other persons who have much influence in the government as, for instance, the Lord Privy Seal and the Bishop of Durham,<sup>6</sup> the Chamberlain,<sup>7</sup> and many others.

G.A. Bergenroth, ed. *Calendar of Letters, Despatches, and State Papers Relating to the Negotiations Between England and Spain* (London: Longmans, 1862), I:176–178.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth (1466–1503), wife of Henry VII and daughter of Edward IV

<sup>2</sup> Arthur (1486–1502), Prince of Wales

<sup>3</sup> Edward IV (1442–1483), King of England (1461–1470, 1471–1483), first English ruler from the House of York

<sup>4</sup> Catherine of Aragon (1485–1536), daughter of Ferdinand and Isabel. In 1488, she was betrothed to Prince Arthur and the English began referring to her as Princess of Wales even though she did not marry Arthur until 1499.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Beaufort (1443–1509), mother of Henry VII

<sup>6</sup> Richard Foxe (c. 1448–1528), Bishop of Durham (1494–1501) and Lord Privy Seal (1487–1516)

<sup>7</sup> Giles, Baron Daubeney (1451–1508), Lord Chamberlain (1494–1508)