

The implications of this edict took their first deadly turn seven years later, on April 19, 1506, during a time of plague and severe drought. Crowds drawn to the Dominican church in Lisbon to witness what they believed to be a miraculous ray of light emanating from a crucifix became enraged when a “New Christian” named Jacob Chaveirol, a tailor, remarked: “How much better it would be if Christ gave us rain instead of fire!” The mob beat him to death—and then, incited by two Dominican friars, proceeded to kill more than 2,000 Jews in a three-day pogrom, burning many of the victims at the stake in Rossio Square. Outraged, King Manuel ordered the monks and about fifty other inciters executed. He then rescinded his order forbidding “New Christians” from leaving the country and outlawed discrimination against them. After Manuel’s death in 1521, however, the mistreatment of converted Jews resumed.

With the arrival of the Inquisition in 1536 during the reign of King John III, violence against the “New Christians” became institutionalized. The torture and autos-da-fé of “New Christians” suspected of secretly practicing Judaism became commonplace in Lisbon’s main square.

The Inquisition in Portugal ended in 1821, but only in recent years has a tiny remnant of “New Christians,” found mostly in Belmonte, who call themselves “Survivors of the Inquisition”—about 200 people—emerged from hiding. Most of the estimated 1,000 Jews in Portugal today are descendants of Jews of Portuguese ancestry who returned to the peninsula from North America and Gibraltar in the early nineteenth century.



**MANUEL’S DECISION TO END** more than eleven centuries of Jewish life in Portugal proved to be a monumental blunder. By outlawing the practice of Judaism and cleansing his realm of Jews, the king essentially exported one of his greatest assets to his competitors. Soon the Dutch and British acquired enough knowledge of navigation and trade to eclipse Portugal as the dominant power in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Perhaps even more devastating to Portugal was the

## Did Columbus Have Jewish Roots?

Many mysteries surround the origins of Columbus. One recurrent claim is the explorer had Jewish roots. The arguments are based on a number of observations or interpretations: First, Columbus was knowledgeable of Jewish history and traditions, such as referring to the Second Temple as “The Second House,” a term used only in Jewish sources. Second, his financial backers were Jews or of Jewish ancestry. Third, he chose Jews and ex-Jews as crewmen, including the Hebrew-speaking interpreter Luis de Torres. Fourth, Columbus encoded his elaborate Christian signature with kabalistic messages concealing a Jewish prayer. Fifth, Columbus placed a cryptic monogram at the top of the page of two letters to his son Diego—a Jewish practice signifying the abbreviated “*baruch hashem*,” blessed be God.

Does this evidence constitute a persuasive argument? While it is true that Columbus received invaluable technical and financial support from Jews and Conversos, and he was no doubt familiar with Jewish culture and traditions, every one of the arguments in support of the Jewish origins hypothesis has been countered with an alternative explanation. The admiral’s familiarity with Jewish customs and lore, for example, would be expected of a man studied in religion who had much contact with Jews and former Jews engaged in the enterprises of exploration and trade. And the cryptic monogram on his correspondence and the symbols in his signature have been interpreted in a variety of ways or are simply too ambiguous to decipher definitively.



*Columbus statue, Madeira, Portugal*

Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal popularized the idea that Columbus may have been a secret Jew. In his 1973 book, *Sails of Hope: The Secret Mission of Columbus*, he wrote that the purpose of the voyage was to find a new Promised Land for the exiled Jews of Spain, accounting for why Columbus concealed his Jewish origins and loyalties. Historian Jacob Rader Marcus disagreed, attributing Luis de Santangel’s support of Columbus to “financial and perhaps patriotic opportunism.” The preeminent historian of Iberian Jewry, Rabbi Meyer Kayserling, rejected the notion that the admiral had the interests of Jews in mind, concluding in his 1907 book, *Christopher Columbus and the Participation of the Jews in the Spanish and Portuguese Discoveries*, that Columbus was a fanatical Christian who felt no sympathy for the Jews being expelled from Spain the very moment he was setting out to sea. Columbus actually profited from the Jewish calamity: the reward he received upon his return and the financing for his second voyage derived from money and jewelry expropriated from the expelled Jews.

The leading Jewish historians who have investigated Columbus’s roots would agree with the *Encyclopedia Judaica*’s conclusion: “The mystery regarding Columbus’s origins is largely the outcome of his own mendacity—and as a result it is equally impossible to exclude or to confirm the hypothesis that he was descended from a Jewish or ex-Jewish family.”

—Aron Hirt-Manheimer