



John Cabot—the Anglicized version of Giovanni Caboto's name—is believed to be the first European explorer to visit parts of North America since the Vikings reached what they termed "Vinland" (in the 11th century).

Cabot is also known as Jean Cabot (in French) and Juan Caboto (in Spanish).

Born in Italy, he had moved to Bristol (England) by 1495. (There was a substantial Italian community there.)

Desiring to reach Asia by sailing west, Cabot reached North America instead. He sailed under the commission of King Henry VII of England—via Letters of Patent—and began his discoveries of the continent (on behalf of the King and wealthy merchants of Bristol) in 1497.

When he found land in today's Canada, he thought he was in Asia. He claimed that land for England and Henry VII.

What if Cabot discovered lands owned by others? What if, for example, he found—and claimed for England—lands which had already been found and claimed by another European country (like Spain)?

The King's patent addressed that issue. The document (and the legal authority behind it) gave Cabot, and England, rights to land not already claimed by Spain.

How did the King's patent have the authority to make that happen? Simply by declaring that England's interests would prevail.

Spain, by this time, had already claimed lands in the "New World." Why would anyone in Spain pay attention to a patent issued by the King of another country (such as England)?

They wouldn't - and didn't. And ... of course ... Spain took action. They didn't go to a court of law to resolve any land disputes. Spain went to the sitting Pope, seeking a "Papal Bull"—in other words, a proclamation—that would bar Cabot's expedition, on behalf of England.

Although Henry VII was a devout Catholic, he disagreed that the Pope (who was head of the Catholic Church) had any right to interfere with political matters (including the discoveries of "new" lands).

Thinking about all of these squabbles, between Kings and countries, prompts a different inquiry. What gave *any* King or country, from the "Old World," the right to claim land in the "New World?" What about the ownership rights of the people who actually possessed the New-World lands? What consideration were *they* given?

In any event ... Cabot and Sons, who held the King's Letters of Patent, set off on their journeys. Their first attempt to find Asia, by sailing west, wasn't successful. The Mariner's Museum tells us what happened:

There are few records of Cabot's first attempt at a westward sea route. A letter from Englishman John Day to King Henry in 1496 merely reports the bare facts of a failed voyage. Cabot went with one ship, had a disagreement with the crew, ran into bad weather and food shortages, and turned back. It is probable that John Day also communicated the details of Cabot's misadventure to Columbus, who was in Andalusia at the time, and very interested in the exploits of others engaged in the undertaking of a westward voyage.

Cabot tried again, around the 20th of May, in 1497. Sailing on a ship called *Matthew* (which was the male version of his wife's name), he reached land about a month later:

Cabot left Bristol probably on May 20th, 1497. He had one fairly small ship of about fifty tons. He named the ship after his wife Mattea, but since there is no English feminine version of the name, the male variation Matthew was used. The ship was a navicula or bark. She had a crew of eighteen to twenty men, including two or more Bristol merchants and two friends of Cabot's. It is also possible that Sebastiano, or the English version of his name, Sebastian, who would have been approximately fifteen years old, was also on this voyage.

The Matthew sailed past southern Ireland before turning west. He saw land after a month of sailing and disembarked briefly. He skirted the shore for about 30 days without seeing anyone and returned to England convinced he had reached Asia.

By May of 1498, Cabot was ready to sail west again. This time he had five ships and a year's worth of provisions. No one knows how much he actually accomplished during this expedition, however, because no one ever heard from Cabot, or any of his men, ever again.

This image of Cabot is a detail from "The departure of John and Sebastian Cabot from Bristol on their first voyage of discovery, 1497," by Ernest Board. The oil-on-canvas was created in 1906.

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John Cabot - Celebrated Explorer

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