

# Who were Elizabeth I's 'Sea Dogs'?

Enquiry: Why was the world 'opening up' to Elizabeth I and her people?

Ms Apps



# Sir Francis Drake and Diego

Christopher Columbus arrived in America (in what we know now as the Caribbean) in 1492. His journey of discovery for the Spanish crown led to a century of expansion for the Spanish Empire. The Spanish established colonies throughout the New World – in particular in central and south America. By 1513 Panama had become an important crossroads of the Spanish Empire. Gold and silver mined by enslaved indigenous peoples and later Africans in Peru were loaded onto ships and sailed up the west coast to the **isthmus of Panama** (a thin strip of land between the Atlantic and Pacific ocean). The treasure was then loaded onto donkeys and brought along the Camino Real (Royal Road). This was a difficult and long trek overland. Then the gold and silver were loaded onto ships on to take directly back to Spain.



By 1572 Sir Francis Drake was a skilled and experienced Privateer. He was employed by Elizabeth I. Drake and his sailors started raiding Spanish ships and colonies in the New World. He became known as 'Francisco Drago' (the dragon) due to the ferocity with which he fought and plundered Spanish treasure.

In 1572 Drake developed a plan to gain revenge on the Spanish for an attack off the coast of Mexico. He sailed to the **isthmus of Panama** in the hope that he could steal Spanish gold and silver as it was transported by donkey along the Camino Real from Panama City to Nombre de Dios. A plan was set – his men were to lay in wait before seizing the town and the treasure. At three o'clock in the morning, under a bright moon on the 29<sup>th</sup> July 1572, Drake's men waited for the sign to attack.



Yet the peace of the night was broken by the sound of a foreign voice calling out in English. It was Diego, a local Cimarron (one of a community of around 3,000 escaped Spanish slaves who lived in the hills and mountains around the Spanish port of Nombre de Dios). Diego wished to join the English and warn them that there were many Spanish soldiers near.

The raid went ahead with Diego's help but failed – the treasure ships had already left that year! All hope though was not lost. Diego introduced Drake to local Cimarron leaders. They told him they were delighted at his arrival. They knew he was a great enemy of the Spaniards and had heard of his previous voyages. They promised they would do anything to help him in any plan against the Spanish .



The bond forged by Diego between Drake and the local Cimarrons led to the capture of over 150,000 pesos of Spanish silver and gold during a joint raid on Nombre de Dios in February 1573. The success confirmed Drake's legend. He was made **Ambassador** to the Cimarrons and Diego joined him on his later voyages, even coming to England. Following this adventure, Diego returned to Plymouth with Drake. From here they set sail together again once more to **circumnavigate** the globe (go around) in 1577 on the Golden Hinde.

Diego travelled around the world with Sir Francis Drake. Diego sailed with Sir Francis Drake around the tip of South America, saw California and sailed across the Pacific coming close to Australia. He would die of wounds suffered in a fight on the island of Moluccas in the Pacific and was buried at sea.



## Sir Francis Drake's fellow 'Sea Dogs'

Sir Francis Drake was not the only English **privateer**. In fact he had followed his own cousin, Sir John Hawkins, into the career. Drake had helped Diego to escape Panama where he might be re-captured and forced into slavery by the Spanish. Yet Drake and his cousin had been involved in voyages to the coast of West Africa in the 1560s. In West Africa, they had raided and kidnapped people before attempting to sell them into slavery in the Spanish empire.

The story of Diego and Drake is therefore complex. Sir Francis Drake was able to happily be involved in slave trading, whilst also later accepting Diego into his crew not as an enslaved person, but instead as a free man.



# Glossary

Ambassador - Representative of a leader/Queen.

Circumnavigate - To go around the globe.

Colonisation - When one nation/kingdom takes over another's land.

Colonists - English (or Spanish) people who went to take land and settle in the 'New World'.

Indigenous - The original people of a region.

Isthmus - A small strip of land between bodies of water that connects larger areas of land.

'New World' - The name given to America and the Caribbean.

Privateer - A sailor with a 'Letter of Marque' from the Queen given permission to attack enemy ships and colonies.



# Comprehension Questions

1. What is an isthmus?
2. Why was Panama important to the Spanish?
3. What did Sir Francis Drake steal in Panama?  
*In 1573 Sir Francis Drake stole...*
4. Why were the Cimarron happy with Sir Francis Drake's arrival?
5. What happened to Diego after the Panama raid?
6. Challenge yourself: Why is it difficult for historians to understand Sir Francis Drake's relationship with Diego?

