

Columbus: A Tragic Hero

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On October 12, 1492, Christopher Columbus stepped forth onto a land previously unknown to Europeans. Columbus was sailing under commission of the Spanish king and queen, and therefore claimed this island—which he called San Salvador—in the name of the Spain. This event sparked what has historically been called “The Age of Discovery;” however, many contemporary works have renamed this time “The Age of Conquest.” From this point on the world would be different. Suddenly after 20,000 years of separation we were one world. We would grow and develop from one another. The repercussions of this event are innumerable, but what about the man himself? Was he a villain out to destroy those he encountered or a trader who happened to find himself in the wrong place?

There has been much contention as to whether Columbus should be regarded—as he has historically been—as a hero or—as modern revisionists have charged—a villain. The fact is that Columbus is a man; he is not solely responsible for the transgressions that occurred after two worlds met. When evaluating Columbus one must consider Columbus as a man and not a superhuman that single-handedly discovered America or is solely responsible for the exploitation of the New World. Christopher Columbus—the man—can be seen as a modern tragic hero; not for boldly going where no man had gone before, but for overcoming great personal challenges and changing the way that men thought. Columbus was a good man, and he set out to do the thing most men do: make money. Though he is not of high birth—as a classical tragic hero must be—he rose up to accomplish many things, but was fallen by his own shortcomings. Columbus’ tragic flaw was the same as many the tragic hero of many tragedies—hubris. Columbus’ own excessive pride—in dealing with the implications of what he had found and his own administrative skills—led to his downfall.

Some of the founding fathers—including Benjamin Franklin—wrote essays glorifying Columbus. A three-volume biography portraying Columbus as a misunderstood genius written by Washington Irving in 1828 popularized the view of Columbus as hero in the United States (Keddie); this is the account used by most textbooks of the day. The height of the view of a heroic Columbus was reached in the 19th Century United States. “Americans appointed Columbus as a symbol of everything they admired in themselves as a nation” (Philips 4). Americans esteemed Columbus for what they saw as the inventor of new ideas and pictured him as standing alone against the prejudices of those in charge. Though this is a greatly idealized myth about Columbus, it has some basis in the truth. In an essay on the Quincentennial, Philips suggests that, “the historic Columbus was much more complex, and certainly more human, than simple heroic legends portray” (Philips 8). Columbus was born the son of a wool weaver in Genoa, Italy. He had little or no formal education. He worked for his father until the age of 22, at which time he took up sailing. In 1476 a Genoese merchantman on which Columbus was sailing came under attack. The ship sank and Columbus swam to the shore. Columbus made his way to Portugal where he eventually settled. From the humble beginnings, Columbus rose to become Admiral of the Ocean Sea. Columbus overcame great personal challenges in his life (Philips 4-5).

The first scholarly accounts of Columbus’ life began to be written in the end of the 19th Century. One of Columbus’ main detractors was Jason Winsor. Winsor pointed out that Columbus grossly underestimated the circumference of the Earth, was not a very learned man, had very fanciful ideas, and was an incompetent administrator. As early as Columbus’ first voyage he proposed using gold found in the New World to recapture Jerusalem in a new crusade. Columbus died believing that the land he had

found was indeed part of Asia and not a new continent, as most scholars of the time had accepted. Columbus lived his final days following the King's court trying to regain his titles and rights (Philips 4-5). Columbus' excessive pride about his own "discoveries" blinded him from seeing the truth—the land he had found was a previously unknown continent. He followed the King until his last days try to gain an audience, but now that Columbus was the person still holding tightly to old ideas, the King refused to grant an audience.

The entire story of Columbus is one of many misunderstandings and embellishments. Columbus himself is responsible for much of this misinformation. It is widely known that Columbus kept records of his navigation on his first voyage. Others have proven that many of Columbus' own writings were falsified (Keddie). Widely held misconceptions about Columbus help to portray Columbus as a villain. For instance, many people imagine Columbus encountering a peaceful group of individuals living in a Utopian society—the idea of the noble savage; however, this is a case in which myth has blended with the truth. The idea of noble savages first appeared in the Greek writing more than 2000 years before Columbus' "discovery" (Brandon 21). Though accounts of Columbus' letters to the royalty of Spain portray the natives—in this case the Tainos—as being Utopian, these accounts are regarded as simply propaganda on Columbus' part to encourage the monarch that all would go well on his next voyage. In fact the letters do not fit in with Columbus' day-to-day journal of encounters with the Tainos (Kallendorf 460). Some modern scholars are so eager to portray Columbus as a brute that they use Columbus' writings against when it is widely held that these letters were false. In an article on the Dominican view of the Tainos, Hilaire Kallendorf says this about such scholars, "These desires to transform Tainos into Noble Savages form part of the psyche

of scholars operating within 'a set of historically determined Euro-centered ways of seeing and imagining' who set out to demonstrate their 'political correctness' by telling Dominicans how noble the Tainos were" (Kallendorf 449).

Though admittedly the conquistadors were not the most benevolent of explorers there is evidence that much of their negative image was myth. The Spanish were in control of the largest empire ever created. "Fearful and envious of Spain but poorer and militarily inferior, rival European nations resorted to a paper war, the first modern propaganda campaign. Throughout the century and beyond it, pamphleteers from London to Frankfurt made malice toward the Spanish a byword of patriotism. Their tracts depicted the Spanish as a people inherently barbaric, corrupt and intolerant; lovers of cruelty and bloodshed" (Cerio 14).

The time of the Quincentenary was viewed as a time in which one could come to create a more balanced of Columbus—a time when the myths surrounding Columbus could be removed and the truth revealed; however, much of the writing of the time focused on defaming Columbus. Jan Eliot—the editor of an anti-Columbus newspaper—said, "Celebrating Columbus' 'discovery' of America is analogous to celebrating Hitler's holocaust," and that, "Columbus makes Hitler look a juvenile delinquent" (Kleinberg). The fact that following the "discovery" a lot of atrocities occurred is really trivial. Columbus, the man, cannot be blamed for things he did not do. Columbus' intentions were economic. He set sail for India in hopes of establishing trade routes, not with then intention of killing those he found there (Childs 760). As Howard Kleinberg points out, "No civilization in the history of this planet is without its transgressions." Kleinberg goes onto state that blaming Columbus for all of the problems of the New World would be like blaming Frederick the Great for Auschwitz. "Certainly,

those who followed Columbus to what became known as the New World are responsible for the horrors visited upon the natives of today's North, Central and South America but this took place over hundreds of years. Some of the worst years for the North American Indian came in the 19th century, 400 years after Columbus died" (Kleinberg). Others expressed similar displeasure with the contention that Columbus was the cause of so much evil. "Susan Milbrath, a Florida museum curator whose recent Quincentennial exhibit was greeted with pickets, asks why people concentrate on the morality of Columbus and the Spanish: 'The big question to me is, are human beings good?'" (Ceiro 51).

All but certainly, if Columbus had not made a voyage to the New World someone else would have. Europe was in a maritime golden age. There were known trade routes throughout the Atlantic Ocean and there was a slow westward expansion. Eventually someone would have encountered the land to the west (Childs 756). A story goes that Columbus faced this same criticism:

Sometime during 1493, (4 to 6 weeks after his return from his first voyage) Columbus was at a party. One member of the group said to him, "If you had not undertaken the expedition, someone else from Spain would have". Columbus made no reply but took a hard boiled egg and said, "Gentlemen, you make it stand here without support, as I will, who was the first to discover the Indies." The egg was passed around the table, each person attempting to make it stand without support. No one succeeded. When the egg came to Columbus' hands, by bearing it down on the table he fixed it, having crushed a little of one end, making the point to the confused dinner partners that, after the deed is done, everybody knows how to do it. That they first should have sought the Indies and not laugh at him who had done it and showed them how. (Eckelman)

It is unknown whether this story is true; however, it still makes a clear point: Columbus was the first to make this voyage and deserves some respect for this accomplishment. "Those who argue that if Columbus had not reached the western Atlantic someone else

would soon have done so are undoubtedly right, but thus should not detract from the courage of those who in fact made the first return journey across the Atlantic" (Childs 757).

In modern times, people are still inspired by the life of Christopher Columbus. The United States still celebrates a national holiday on October 12th in recognition of Columbus. One of the best examples of what the modern view of Columbus is comes from the Presidential Declaration declaring Columbus Day 1997:

The life and achievements of Christopher Columbus demonstrate how powerful and lasting an influence one individual can have on the course of human history. Although great explorers reached the shores of this continent both before and after Columbus, few have captured the American imagination as he has. Perhaps because we have always been an adventurous people, eager for challenge and change, we feel a special affinity for this extraordinary man who left the safety of known waters to pursue his vision across the ocean to the threshold of a New World.
(Clinton 1547-1548)

Columbus is best thought of as a modern tragic hero. He overcame almost overwhelming odds to make a name for himself, but Columbus' hubris caused his downfall during his life. Today we should view Columbus as a man, and not a mythical hero. Though those who followed him may have been responsible for many a transgression it is unfair to blame these problems on him. To have come from the place that he did, and overcome the challenges that he faced, Columbus accomplished wonders. "What Columbus did was boldly sail a course that no man had sailed before. In the process, he irrevocably linked two worlds, willingly or unwillingly, that were separated by continental drift eons before. The world is still trying to sort out the consequences" (Dvorchack 2).

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