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Columbus The Man: A Psychologically Modern Man of the Middle Ages

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INTRODUCTION

During the last five centuries, thousands of books, essays and articles, as well as novels, plays and even operas, have been written about Christopher Columbus and his life. Two works stand out from among the latter that, because they are not tied to historiography, depend exclusively on poetic inspiration. These are *Le livre de Christophe Colomb* by Paul Claudel, and *El Harpa y la sombra* by Alejo Carpentier.

The authors interpret truth in a completely distorted fashion, altering historical data, that, at times, they respect thoroughly. Both Claudel's and Carpentier's books are unparalleled works of art, so that they can stand as jewels of world literature.

Each describes his own version of the "truth": Claudel depicts Columbus as though he were Saint Joan of Arc, hearing voices; Carpentier depicts Columbus as a swindler, a thief and a rogue. The knowledge of Columbus's true personality is irrelevant in the reading of these two artistic interpretations of events. However, in the conclusive chapters of this work, which seeks to be rigorously historiographic, the problems are analyzed on a purely historical level.

Could we say, historically, that Columbus has been a saint? The answer to that is no. And we gave incontrovertible evidence elsewhere to prove that. Nor was Columbus a farsighted politician.

His mishaps cannot possibly be blamed on bad luck, on his enemies, spite, or on those who envied him for the fact that a low-born foreigner could have achieved such honor and privileges.

As we have often pointed out, Columbus's life is fraught with errors and contradictions, although at times he did act properly and with timely cunning; but we cannot say we judge positively Columbus's political qualities on the whole. He was neither a stupid nor an inefficient person, but he

lacked the two qualities that make a man into a true politician: the capacity to make firm decisions for the long run and a profound psychological knowledge of his fellows, which is indispensable for appointing the right man to the right position.

Some have said that Columbus was a man come from the Middle Ages. Others claim that his soul was superior to that of the century in which he lived (Cladera), maintaining that he was a child of Renaissance. In reality, he stood astride the two ages: his theoretical approach to philosophy, theology, and even his scientific concepts were medieval. His eagerness for scientific investigation and keen interest in nature as well as his capacity for accepting facts and phenomena so far unknown were peculiar of the Renaissance.

Psychologically, he was a modern man, practical and concrete to the point of being over-meticulous. His projects were elaborated only after he had acquired direct experience — and his great design was born along those lines.

In conclusion, a psychologically modern man of the Middle Ages.

NOT A SAINT, BUT A DEFENDER OF THE FAITH

The same can be said about his spirituality. He was a Christian and a Catholic in the modern sense, influenced by medieval teachings. His faith was strong, sincere, inexhaustible, free from superstition and hypocrisy, whatever might befall him. Convincing some recalcitrant Indian tribes that a natural event such as an eclipse was instead a sign from God represents the sole exception in the complex and incredible string of adventures that accompanied Columbus's life. Columbus received a rigorously modern and profoundly religious education, which was reflected in his frequent reference to God.

Sometimes he gave into fanaticism, or, as they say today, he was a "fundamentalist". However, his fanaticism never trampled over the principles of both the Christian and Catholic *Weltanschauung* that Columbus always held in high consideration.

He was never particularly fond of the clergy. He did not hesitate to fight against priests, friars and bishops in defense of true Christianity, although throughout his life a few friars and bishops gave him their friendship. The Franciscan Father Antonio Marchena was one of his friends among the clergy. Marchena can be certainly considered, after Columbus, another outstanding leading figure in the history of discoveries.

Unlike Dante Alighieri, when Columbus was faced with the incredible mystery of a fourth continent, he thought better than placing the transcendent Purgatory into the immanent southern hemisphere. He resorted to his idea of an earthly Paradise. Even Amerigo Vespucci, who was very much inclined to skepticism, had to admit that, "if it ever existed, it must have been in those places".

During the terrible storms at sea, Columbus would turn to the Virgin Mary and to the Saints, as Catholics have always done throughout the ages, even in present times.

When he fell victim to men's envy, spite, avarice, wickedness, and, above all, to the King's injustice, Columbus always reacted with Christian humility, with the submission of those who have faith in life after death.

Columbus was particularly devoted to the Virgin Mary and to Saint Francis. He knew by heart all of the New Testament and long passages from the Old. In his never-ending struggle against the Ocean, Columbus — and we have already pointed this out — never asked for miracles of Jesus Christ, but he would look to the Original Source of Christian Truth: "In the beginning there was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God".

This is important in that it proves that Columbus's devotion to the Virgin Mary, which derives directly from his being Genoese, and to Saint Francis, linked to the fact that he was Italian, was not a result of superstition, but fitted in well with his systematic and rigorous spirituality.

We shall point out again that Columbus's continuous and obsessive search for gold and riches had to him a precise purpose: to launch a crusade in order to recover the Holy Land. Such a crusading spirit had nothing to do with that prevailing during the Middle Ages. It had been renewed and revived by the psychological effects of the fall of Constantinople which, with Rome, was the great capital of Christendom. A renewed urge for a crusade did not underlie only an aspiration for the recovery of the Holy Land. It aimed at uniting again what had been split, at bringing the world back to unity. It had been united under the legions of Rome and stayed so, rather consolidated, under the Cross of Jesus Christ. All the barbarians — Germans, Slavs, even Vikings and Tartars — had found a place in Christianity — but Islam had disrupted the world by splitting Christianity.

During Columbus's wanderings in the entourage of the Spanish king, an event occurred that could help to demonstrate the existing link between the war waged against the Moors and the destiny of the Holy Land. In July 1489, two Franciscan friars arrived at the Catholic Royal Court from Jerusalem. They acted as envoys of the Great Sultan of Egypt to the Pope who, in turn, sent them to the King and Queen of Spain. The friars were bearers of a threatening message. The Sultan demanded that the war against the Moors in Spain be interrupted, that all the Muslims of Andalusia be given back their property and freedom — or else he would retaliate against the Christians living in Palestine. Columbus, who was at Court, must have learned of the message and may even have met the two envoys, one of whom was Italian. Some historians note that Columbus probably began to plan a recovery of the Holy Land on that occasion. That idea would never fade from his mind.

We believe that episode certainly affected Columbus, but the link between his projects and his religious plan for a crusade must have had far deeper roots. His profound religiousness which developed in *Genoa*,

explains those roots. The feeling for the necessity of a new crusade originated in Genoa, around the 1450s, in particular when Genoa came into contact with Christians who had escaped from Islam's oppression.

To conclude our analysis of Columbus's religious sentiments, we could say that his personality was primarily based on the Christian-Catholic conception of the world. There is no contradiction between such a statement and the other statement that he was not a saint. To be one, faith, humility and generosity are not enough. We have sufficient proof that indicates his being proud, attached to money and privileges. He was partial to his family and relatives and showed indifference to slavery. The stronger Columbus's "faith" was, the weaker his "charity". Therefore, he was neither a great nor a small saint. He always defended the faith in a convinced, tenacious and profound manner — and that is not to be overlooked: he was a "defensor fidei".

HE WAS NO ADVENTURER

The image of Columbus as an adventurer is false. He never refused to embark on an adventure. He lived through adventures with courage and indifference to dangers, which is peculiar of those who are aware of their own abilities and the helping hand of God.

His first crossing of the Atlantic was certainly a great adventure: but, in a way, his early voyages to Chios, Iceland and Guinea had been adventures. And his third crossing, which saw him through the torturously hot and becalmed waters of the tropics, was an adventure. However, his fourth voyage was certainly his greatest and most daring feat. He undertook it when his fame was already on the wane, with the precise intention of circumnavigating the globe. It ended with just two vessels left, and those all but devoured by ship worms and caught in the shallow waters of Santa Maria of Jamaica for one entire year, on the most open shores found along the entire world's numerous coasts.

However, his adventures did not only take place on the seas. Was it not an adventure to flee from Portugal to reach Spain, where for seven years he incessantly pursued his great design? Even the foundation of San Tomaso, during his land expedition in the Vega Real, a land as unknown as the ocean was, had been a daring feat.

Columbus's whole life was a wonderful adventure, albeit sorrowful at times. But those who accuse him of adventurism do that to belittle his merits, trying to credit sheer luck and chance for the success of a man. In *this sense* Columbus was other than an adventurer. Columbus's merits are certainly to be measured in relation to his success — but they are its cause, not its effect.

HE WAS A GREAT SAILOR

History would be distorted if we were to deny one particular aspect of Columbus's character. He was an exceptionally gifted sailor. We have already demonstrated that in our previous work (*The Genesis of the Great Discovery*); however, we felt it should be pointed out again in our second work, *The Great Discovery*, throughout which we have often offered facts and episodes to support our assertion.

Not only did Columbus discover America, he discovered the route from Europe to the Gulf of Mexico, and vice versa. Until the invention of motor-propelled vessels, any ship sailing from Spain, Portugal, France, or Italy, headed for Mexico, for the mouth of the Mississippi, the Caribbean, Columbia or Venezuela, followed Columbus's routes. On the voyage back, they passed through the Sargasso Sea on the Azores parallel. Even today, those who want to sail through the Atlantic pick the same route as Columbus laid out in his second voyage, that from the Canary Islands to Guadalupe.

The discovery of routes is connected to that of the trade winds. We have already noted that Columbus was the first man who crossed the Sargasso Sea, without fear, who perceived the existence of the Gulf Stream, who discovered the westerly magnetic declination. But, above all, he was the initiator of open sea navigation in the modern era — the first man who had enough courage to navigate with no sight of the coast-line.

He had the exceptional physical fitness of a sailor, his sight and hearing were perfect, his sense of smell was unparalleled. That is easily deduced from all of his writings. Many of those who personally knew him praised his sense of smell and noted his ability to distinguish various perfumes. Some viewed that as an indication of affectedness — it was, instead, an uncommon inborn gift that represented the fundamental component of his sixth sense, the seafaring sense.

Michele da Cuneo wrote: "By a simple look at the night sky, he would know what route to follow or what weather to expect; he took the helm and once the storm was over, he would hoist the sails, while the others were asleep".

Andrés Bernáldez wrote: "He does not consider himself a good navigator and a master who, having to sail from one land to another, with no sight of the coast-line, makes a mistake of ten leagues, even in a voyage of one thousand leagues, unless a very violent storm forced him into erring, preventing him from proving his skill".

The most renowned experts on Columbus — Thacher, HARRISSE, CADDEO, REVELLI, MORISON, MADARIAGA, NUNN, and BRADFORD — fully confirmed Las Casas's judgment: "Christopher Columbus surpassed all of his contemporaries in the art of navigation".

Contrasting opinions on this issue are very scarce. Vignaud was the most drastic critic of Columbus's sailing skills — but, it seems that the former's experiences on a body of water are limited to sight-seeing tours on the river Seine.

The great French explorer Charcot defined Columbus: "A sailor who had 'le sens marin': that mysterious and inborn gift that allows you to pick the right route in the middle of the ocean". "Dogs bark and will continue to bark, but the caravels have sailed past. Christopher Columbus's feat is so great as to arouse all people's enthusiasm". This is a great sailor's judgment of a man, who, with Cook, can be considered the greatest sailor in history.

HE WAS A GREAT SELF-TAUGHT GEOGRAPHER

Columbus was also a great geographer, and, partly, he had taught himself to be one. The fact that he was born in Genoa is not irrelevant, as some say quite thoughtlessly. As a child in Genoa and later in Savona, he had got to know, and become familiar with, the problems of navigation and its techniques, which were traditional in Genoa. Genoa's sea supremacy was unquestioned not only in the Mediterranean but in the whole of Christendom. Later, with the beginning of voyages and the long crossings of the Ocean, geography became very important to good navigation and geographical problems came to be tackled for the first time. Columbus demonstrated in his writings how inclined he was toward geography and how cleverly he often solved problems related to it.

Among Columbus's various traits and personality features, Humboldt points out the cleverness with which Columbus would observe the surrounding environment. Once in a new world and under a new sky, he began to study the land, the local vegetation, the behavior of animals, the variations in temperature and in earth's magnetism. The entries logged in his Journal touch upon the whole range of scientific research that was carried out during the last part of the 15th and throughout the 16th centuries. Although he lacked a solid preparation in natural history, Columbus became a great geographer.

HE WAS A GENIUS

To consider Columbus just a great sailor and geographer would be reductive. He was a genius in the true and full meaning of this term. Not only did he have a seafaring sense and an acute sensitivity for geography, but his faith was indestructible and his hunger for fame bottomless. He was strong-willed, tenacious and almost mulish, as is typical of people from Liguria. He was courageous, patient, imaginative and possessed of an excellent memory. In the decisive moments of his countless adventures, he nearly always managed to mould his intuitions and manifold qualities into effective action which only geniuses can eventually carry out.

This explains how he could conceive of his great design, "buscar el Levante por el Ponente". This explains how he could give up his family, his money, and his most cherished dream, the sea, for years, his best years: from

the age of 34 to 42. This explains how he could manage to fulfill his four Atlantic feats: to lead, order, resist, and keep a lucid mind before both the force of the elements and his mutinous men.

Firmly determined and with unshakable convictions, Columbus had dealt, almost as a peer, with the King of Portugal, the King and Queen of Spain, with Genoese, Florentine and Jewish bankers. He was not conceited. He was perfectly aware of his valor and merits, of the strength of his ideas. If conceited, he would never have won either Father Antonio Marchena's or Father Juan Pérez's friendship. If conceited, he would never have had so many friends, protectors and supports within the Spanish Court. Queen Isabel, an exceptionally intelligent woman, would never have given him her sympathy and her trust. If conceited, he would never have convinced that skilled and shrewd captain Martín Alonso Pinzón, the man who shared the merit and glory of the Great Voyage. It was thanks to this man that Columbus managed to enlist the majority of his crew. And, if he had shown conceit, he would never have always had the prestige and respect from even the most cunning and difficult sailors whom he knew how to make obey and respect him, even when the event of the Santa Gloria turned into a tragedy.

Columbus's intellectual insight has been confirmed despite the fact that his foot-notes on *Milione* were ingenuous. By way of contrast, the foot-notes on *Imago Mundi* show how much the seaman had learned in a few years, perhaps even months. Even if his Latin had a few errors, it is important to recognize all the same the talent of his quasi-classical style of writing, at time reminiscent of Seneca. His skillful memory emerges in the metric faults of Seneca's transcription. It's important to realize that he chose those topics which interested him the most and wrote by sheer memory.

All these aspects confirm the man was an indisputable genius. Christopher Columbus was not a fortunate traveller who became a discoverer over night. He was a discoverer because he was an inventor with his own idea of a new horizon. The man was a genius.

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A. F. F. Roselly de Lorgues, *Les calomniateurs de Christophe Colomb* (Paris, 1898).

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M. Ricard, *Christophe Colomb* (Tours, 1891), pp. 340-343.

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