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Abstract: Argues that although adventurers may have landed in America before him, Christopher Columbus' crossings are what changed the world. Easy enough to be cynical about him nowadays; Assertion that Columbus is a figure of unique importance; Columbus' devotion to promoting his `Enterprise of the Indies'; Details of his voyages; Interactions with the natives in the areas he landed; Trouble with the Santa Maria on shoals off Haiti's coast; More details.

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COLUMBUS AND HIS FOUR FATEFUL VOYAGES

A few adventurers may have landed before him. But these were the crossings that changed the world.

Marooned on Jamaica, ailing and out of favor, with perhaps two embittered years of life remaining to him, Christopher Columbus dispatched to his monarchs a rambling, semicoherent letter invoking at one point a tribute to himself, written as if it were meant to be sung by angels:

"When He saw thee of an age with which He was content, He caused thy name to sound marvelously in the land. The Indies, which are so rich a part of the world, He gave thee for thine own ... Of the barriers of the Ocean Sea, which were closed with such mighty chains, He gave thee the keys..."

It was an encomium he could no longer expect from the world. Returning from his epic first voyage, Columbus had been welcomed with honors, a triumphal march, a summons to dine with the king and queen. By the time he died 13 years later, many of his rights and titles had been stripped away, and the crown barely acknowledged his existence. He had become an

embarrassment, blamed for instigating a ruthless slave trade in the New World and making a botch of the settlements he established there. To a large extent, this extraordinary reversal of fortune was brought on by his own blundering greed. Yet the fault was not entirely his. Above all, perhaps, he was guilty of having been too faithful to his mission, an endeavor launched "in the name of Jesus," but more palpably driven by the quest for gold. Columbus was first and foremost a man of his time, the product of an ethos shaped as much by commerce as by Christianity, in which it seemed equally the work of the Lord to find the gold and propagate the faith.

It's easy enough to be cynical about him nowadays. Over the centuries, his reputation has tended to expand and deflate like some unruly Thanksgiving Day parade balloon. Yet in the broad sweep of history, most scholars agree, Columbus is a figure of unique importance. If his landing on American soil was not the first by a European (that distinction probably belongs to the Norseman, Leif Eriksson, who is believed to have touched somewhere on the Newfoundland coast around 1000), it was the most decisive. It marked the beginning of sustained contact between the Old World and the New--the beginning, really, of the world we know. "The likelihood of transatlantic voyages before Columbus was so great, you can probably say it did happen, but there was no impact, no consequence," says historian William McNeill. "What makes Columbus's voyage important was the response of Europe to the news of the discovery. Europe was poised to follow up."

Europe had been seeking some such expansion of its horizons for centuries. By the Middle Ages, Europeans were already beguiled by the opulent East, which remained, however, veiled in mystery. The elite could purchase precious silks, carpets and spices from Genoese, Venetian or Pisan merchants, who got them from Turkish traders at Alexandria, Aleppo or Damascus. But, for the most part, they were blocked from venturing any farther eastward. "This was the Iron Curtain of the late Middle Ages," writes Daniel Boorstin, author of "The Discoverers." Then, observes Boorstin, "for a single century, from about 1250 to about 1350, that curtain was lifted, and there was direct human contact between Europe and China."

The brief opening arose courtesy of Genghis Khan, who led his Mongol armies down to Beijing in 1214 and spent the next 50 years expanding his empire across much of Eastern Asia and Eastern Europe. The khan may have been looked on as a barbarian, but he and his heirs encouraged free commercial trade by offering the Europeans well-policed roads with low customs fees. One taker was the adventurous 17-year-old Venetian named Marco Polo, who made the overland trek to China with his father and uncle and returned 24 years later with tales of unbounded wealth and luxury. Observes Boorstin: "Without Marco Polo, who stirred the European imagination with impatience to reach Cathay [the khans' capital city], would there have been a Columbus?"

The Chinese conquest of the Mongols in 1368 rang down the curtain on land travel to the East again, shifting momentum to the search for a sea route. No one pushed this quest more zealously

than the Portuguese. Historians believe the Portuguese launched several forays westward on the Atlantic in the decades before 1492, but their main thrust was toward the southern tip of Africa. Portuguese ships kept inching down the west coast of the continent until a skipper named Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope and confirmed the existence of a water connection to the Indian Ocean. Forced to turn back by his men in the face of threatening seas, Dias returned to Lisbon with the news just in time to squelch the patiently nurtured ambitions of a Genoese named Columbus.

Picture the Discoverer at this moment in his life: an obscure navigator nearing 40, deeply in debt, sustained only by a daring notion of sailing west to reach the East and a cockeyed idea of how much ocean he must cross to get there. When Dias's storm-battered caravels limped into the harbor of Lisbon in December 1488, Columbus is thought to have been in Portugal trying for the second time to wangle King Joao II's backing for a westward expedition. With the eastward passage around Africa now feasible, Columbus's project was judged superfluous.

But the navigator was used to rejection. Since 1484, Columbus had devoted himself to promoting his "Enterprise of the Indies," first in Portugal and then in Spain. Now, like some wild-eyed adventurer in a Robert Louis Stevenson novel, Columbus petitioned Ferdinand and Isabella, flourishing a map that he had modified with the dubious geographic calculations of Ptolemy and Marco Polo. In 1491, a special commission, headed by Isabella's confessor, rendered an unfavorable opinion of the plan; in the spring of 1492, a second commission dismissed it anew. But after 10 years of war, Spain succeeded that spring in liberating Granada from the Moors, freeing the monarchs to turn to other matters. A last-ditch effort by Columbus's supporter Luis de Santangel, the king's financial adviser, convinced them that they might gain huge influence from Columbus's venture at relatively small cost. After eight desperate years, the plan was at last approved.

On the whole, Columbus is probably given less credit than he deserves for his almost fanatical persistence. Given that he was an impecunious foreigner with an uncertain grasp of geography, he "had to have been a very convincing public-relations man," says McNeill. "That a foreigner would be able to sell that bill of goods to the Spanish crown is really quite amazing."

After all the struggle and rejection, Columbus at last had a contract in his pocket, signed by the Spanish monarchs. In the Capitulation's of Santa Fe, as the document was called, the crown agreed to grant him noble status, together with the offices of admiral, viceroy and governor in all the islands and mainland's that he might claim for Castile in the Atlantic. As for profits from the venture, one tenth, plus some investment options, would go to Columbus and the rest to the crown. "Here he was, an outsider from Genoa who was promised one tenth of all the riches and who managed to get himself classified as a noble in Spanish society," notes McNeill. "Columbus did extremely well for himself."

Finally, the great voyage of discovery got underway. The day before Columbus set sail was also the deadline for all Jews to leave the country. The same tide that bore him seaward carried the last of Spain's estimated 100,000 Jews into centuries-long exile. Samuel Eliot Morison, the patrician yachtsman-historian who wrote what has become the standard reference work on Columbus, imagined the embarkation scene as it might have been painted by El Greco: "One of those gray, calm days" under motionless cloud masses, "when the sea is like a mirror of burnished steel." The three square-rigged sailing vessels--the largest, the Santa Maria, was no bigger than a tennis court--begin moving down the Salts River at about 5:15 a.m. It is Friday, Aug. 3, 1492. Not a leaf stirs as the men pull the oars. Morison even hears the friars chanting their morning prayer in the monastery of La Rabida on a cliff overlooking the harbor: "The Captain General, who often had joined in that hymn during his stay at La Rabida removes his hat; seamen who are not working follow his example ..." It's a scene of hushed, poetic piety, one we almost want to believe--because history, in fact, is about to take one of its great leaps.

But between the embarkation and the sighting of land in the Americas, there was almost no drama. There were no storms or prolonged calms; the winds were brisk and steady. Compared with what later befell explorers Vasco da Gama and Ferdinand Magellan, or some of Columbus's own subsequent crossings, it was practically a luxury cruise. The days were balmy, the men went swimming at times in the glassy sea; at night they slept on deck.

Not all was serene, even so. Columbus kept a detailed journal of the voyage, which comes down to us in the form of an abstract by a Dominican monk, Bartolome de Las Casas, sometimes in Columbus's words, more often in his own. From the journal and other sources it emerges that, experienced though they were, the crew were scarcely eager to sail off into a limitless sea. It was a measure of their uneasiness that little more than a week after they left the Canary Islands the voyagers began seeing signs of land on every side: "Friday, September 14th: The crew of the Nina stated that they had seen a tern and a tropic bird; and these birds never go more than twenty-five leagues from land."

"Monday, September 17th: They saw much vegetation and it was very delicate and was weed from rocks... They concluded that they were near land."

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By Oct. 8, they did seem to be nearing something. "Thanks be to God," wrote Columbus, "the breezes were softer than in April at Seville... they are so laden with scent." And still there was no land. "Here the men could now bear no more; they complained of the long voyage." By some accounts, the crew wanted to turn back, but Columbus pleaded, if they didn't reach land in two or three days, "cut off my head and you shall return."

It was not until two hours past midnight on Oct. 12 that a lookout on the Pinta actually saw what looked like a line of white cliffs to the west. Ten weeks after he embarked from Palos de la Frontera, Columbus landed on an island he christened San Salvador. Scholars still debate whether this was Samana Cay, San Salvador (Watlings Island) or any of a number of small islands in the Bahamas. What we do know is that after Columbus landed, his explorations took him to several other islands, including Cuba and Hispaniola (today, the Dominican Republic and Haiti). On Christmas Eve, 1492, the Santa Maria ran aground on shoals off Haiti's coast and had to be abandoned. Columbus had to leave 39 men behind in a colony he named La Navidad (for Christmas). Not to waste an opportunity, he ordered them to trade goods with the natives in exchange for gold.

The hope of finding some putative mother lode of gold drove Columbus relentlessly through the islands. Gold danced before his eyes, in the necklaces, bracelets and nose rings the natives wore: "October 13th:... So I resolved to go to the south-west to seek the gold and precious stones." October 23rd: I did not delay longer here [on Cabo del Isleo] since I see that here there is no gold mine." In "The Conquest of Paradise," author Kirkpatrick Sale, a dedicated Columbus revisionist, counts no fewer than 140 uses of the word oro (gold) in Columbus's journal of the first voyage. He apparently could not admire the lush beauty of the islands without also estimating their potential value. "Here was a true son of Renaissance materialism," Sale snorts. Historian Carla Phillips demurs. Columbus, she argues, was desperate to justify the costs of the enterprise. "It's important for him to find vast harbors and rich mines in order to confirm his theories about what is out there."

Toward the natives, Columbus behaved with a kind of schizoid duplicity. From the moment he beheld them he saw an attractive, peaceable and friendly people who would make good Christians and "good servants." He rewarded their generosity with hawk bells, glass beads and other "trifles of small value," and periodically took them captive. And sometimes he dropped all pretense of good will: "... these people are very unskilled in arms.., when Your Highnesses so command, they can all be carried off to Castile or held captive in the island itself, since with fifty men they would be all kept in subjection and forced to do whatever may be wished." Given the attitude of their visitors, it's not surprising the natives grew hostile--so that before he left for home, Columbus felt obliged to fortify La Navidad settlement, which was nevertheless wiped out to the last man by the islanders.

Meanwhile, Columbus grew increasingly anxious about finding the mainland. He still seemed to believe Cipango (Japan) or Cathay (China) was just around the next cove. But there were only more islands. (On his second voyage, still thwarted in the search, he would take depositions from his crew declaring Cuba to be part of the Asia mainland.) He sailed home, finally, aboard the Nina, picking up the westerlies he needed by heading north from Hispaniola, and arriving on March 15, 1493, 32 weeks after he left, without having lost a man at sea. "He was a very

competent seaman," says McNeill.

When Leif Eriksson reached the North American continent the news fell like a tree in the forest; almost no one heard it. When Columbus announced his discovery, in a letter to Luis de Santangel written during his return voyage, the word spread quickly, thanks to an already vigorous printing industry. Though some challenged Columbus's assertion that he had reached the Indies, the impact on the European imagination was profound, providing a forward thrust to the whole enterprise of New World exploration.

In response to his famous missive, Columbus received a letter from Ferdinand and Isabella, commanding him to court and addressing him as "Don Cristobal Colon, their Admiral of the Ocean Sea, Viceroy and Governor of the Islands that he had discovered in the Indies." He would never again experience anything like the grand reception he was accorded, first at Cordoba, then at Barcelona, where he created a sensation by presenting to the monarchs seven natives of "the Indies," along with gold artifacts and samples of allegedly rare spices. "It would have been well for him had he then taken his profits and retired with honor, leaving to others the responsibility of colonization," observes Morison. Instead, he embarked westward again, this time in the panoply of 17 ships, with 1,500 crewmen, soldiers and colonists and the requisite plants, domestic animals and tools for a permanent settlement. But the cresting hopes that rode with him were doomed to failure. From the moment of his return, the arc of the admiral's career sweeps downward. His relations with the natives rapidly descended into a kind of Kurtzian darkness.

With La Navidad destroyed, Columbus founded a new colony at La Isabela, closer to the rumored source of gold. But it was plagued by illness and rebellion. The admiral had no gift for administration; he could not control hundreds of Spaniards avid for conquest. There were repeated episodes of rape, pillage and murder by marauding bands of Spaniards. Returning from a trip to find a mutiny brewing, Columbus placed all munitions on board his flagship under command of his younger brother Diego. But when Columbus was away, the violence erupted again. Later, several of the troublemakers seized some caravels that Columbus's other brother Bartolome had brought from Spain and sailed home, where they circulated slanders against the Columbus brothers.

Historians say Columbus may have made a fatal mistake at this point when he ignored a summons from Ferdinand and Isabella to come home. Instead of appeasing the monarchs and silencing the slanders, he decided to deal with the turbulent situation at La Isabela and try to begin regular exports to Spain. As a first step, he rounded up about 1,600 Tainos who had been resisting the Spaniards and crammed 550 of them aboard four ships, to be transported home as slaves. Then he and his brothers set about subjugating all of Hispaniola to reap its gold, with the use of slave labor.

They did, finally, find a rich vein of gold in the southern part of the island; eventually, the gold strike made Columbus rich and repaid the crown some of its initial investment. He nevertheless returned home under a cloud, still having failed to establish a stable colony. What's more, he had angered the monarchs by enslaving people now regarded as Spanish subjects. It was more than a year before the crown would outfit another voyage. On this third crossing, he managed at last to reach mainland America-Venezuela, as it happened. Ill at the time and slipping into what some historians think was a half-mad mysticism, he speculated that he had found the Garden of Eden itself. Phillips insists he was sane. "He had a very firm belief that he was chosen by God," she argues. "His whole mental map was Biblical."

Meanwhile, conditions on Hispaniola had grown worse under Diego, who had been left in charge. Because of the negative reports filtering back, Ferdinand and Isabella ordered an investigation, which ended with all three Columbus brothers shipped home in chains. The monarchs appointed a new governor of the islands, Nicolas de Ovando, who set sail with a fleet twice the size of Columbus's largest. When Columbus embarked on his fourth and final voyage in 1502, still hoping to find a direct passage from Cuba to Asia, he was reduced to four small ships and a kind of renegade status, barred from the colony at Santo Domingo. His worm-eaten boats, barely afloat, had to be grounded on a Jamaican reef. A caravel rescued the expedition a year later, but after his return to Spain in November 1504, the admiral never sailed again.

Columbus spent the rest of his life lobbying to have his grants and titles restored. On May 20, 1506, he died at 55, feeling betrayed by the monarchs he thought he had served with the steadfastness of a Job. The glory passed to those who came after him. After Amerigo Vespucci reached the mainland of the New World, the German cartographer Martin Waldseemueller named it America on his famous map of 1507, in Vespucci's honor. Europe, at any rate, remained less interested in settling the Americas than finding ways around them. Just before the end of the 15th century, a Portuguese named Vasco da Gama completed the trip that Bartolomeu Dias had begun, sailing around the tip of Africa to Calicut, on the southwest coast of India. By 1515, the treasures of India, China and Japan were coming to Europe around the Cape of Good Hope on Portuguese ships.

In 1513, another explorer searching for gold in the Americas, Vasco Nunez de Balboa, climbed a peak on the Panamanian isthmus and beheld the mighty Pacific, the first European to do so. And in 1519, Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese of aristocratic birth, sailing for the Spanish crown, undertook the most extraordinary voyage of all. Setting out with five barely seaworthy ships, racked by violent storms, near starvation and a mutiny, he managed to find a passage from the east coast of South America to the Pacific through the straits that now bear his name. His ships, or what was left of them, then completed a three-year circumnavigation of the globe that Magellan himself did not survive.

Yet it is the comparatively idyllic first voyage of Columbus that has come down to us, in almost folkloric colors, as the great voyage of discovery. We know little of what the Vikings felt as they sailed to Vinland in the icy dawn of modern history. But it is Columbus, pressing confidently into uncharted seas, leaning forward to catch the first spice-laden scent of a continent he never doubted he would find, who speaks to the voyager in all of us.

MAP: THE VOYAGES OF COLUMBUS

MAP: Da Gama's passage to India

MAP: Magellan's circumnavigation

MAP: The world according to Behaim, 1492

PHOTO (COLOR)

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