

Record: 1

Title: The myths of Columbus.

Authors: Sanoff, A.P.

Source: U.S. News & World Report, 10/8/90, Vol. 109 Issue 14, p74, 1p, 1 Color Photograph

Document Type: Article

Subject Terms: SALE, Kirkpatrick

Abstract: Interview with Kirkpatrick Sale, author of 'The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy.' What kind of man was Christopher Columbus; How did the main myths about the man come into being.

Lexile: 1050

Full Text Word Count: 1024

ISSN: 00415537

Accession Number: 9010081358

Database: MAS Ultra - School Edition

Notes: This title is held locally

Section: Science & society; Conversation

THE MYTHS OF COLUMBUS

A new study by Kirkpatrick Sale suggests that the Italian explorer was perhaps the most important and egomaniacal scoundrel in history

What kind of man was Christopher Columbus?

He was unstable, rootless, avaricious and deceptive. My research leads me to conclude, for instance, that the reason we don't know precisely which island he made landfall on was that he felt that if he kept the site to himself, only he would control the routes to the Indies, and only he and the sovereigns would get the gold. The more I read of his letters to the King and Queen of Spain, the more I saw that he was really out for his own glory - and that glory became the obsession of his later years.

Columbus was a man without a center; he could never stay in a place for any length of time. Although it is accepted that he was born in Genoa, in his writings he referred to it only twice and then only glancingly. He never talked about his childhood or family and never compared anything that he saw in the New World to what he knew in Genoa. In about 1479 or 1480, he showed up in Portugal, and by 1485 he was in Spain. From 1485 to 1492 he traveled around Spain, mostly

chasing after the court. Later, after each of his voyages, he continually begged the sovereigns to give him a chance to go out to sea again, because he was not happy with the places that he had found.

What's also striking is that Columbus lacked a settled name. Born with the name Cristoforo Colombo, he became Christobal Colom in Portugal and usually Cristobal Colon in Spain. Before his first voyage he is Xpoual Colon, with the Greek abbreviation for Christ. But starting in 1493, he often chose to sign his name Xpo followed by FERENS [from the Latin for "bearer"]. This was a deliberate reference to the saint whose name he bore and, hence, to his own great accomplishments in carrying Christianity across the ocean, much as St. Christopher had borne the Christ child across the river. He saw his own feat in those cosmic terms.

These personal traits notwithstanding, I regard Columbus as the most important figure in human history. He made it possible for Europe to gain the wealth and power that led to its hegemony over the rest of the world. His discovery led to a phenomenal mixing of plant and animal species, with the species of Europe going to America and those of America to Europe, Africa and Asia. Corn and tomatoes are eaten around the world today because of this. Finally, he brought to the New World the singular European attitude toward nature - that man should dominate - and this attitude has subsequently been imposed on the entire globe.

What are the main myths about the man and how did they come into being?

One is that he wanted to prove that the world was round and another is that he sailed to get spices from China. The fact is that any educated European at the time, and certainly anybody who was engaged in maritime activity, knew that the world was round. Columbus sailed to find riches, but there's no suggestion anywhere that they had to be spices or that he had to find them in China. I'm pretty well convinced that he sailed to find new lands. He thought that they would be somewhere in Asia, and he didn't think that they would already be settled. That's why he took possession of lands continually, without any soldiers and without fear that some established ruler would get after him. My research indicates that four or five years before he died in 1506, he knew that what he had found was not in Asia. He even used the phrase "new world." Columbus thought that he had found a continent of some size: It was South America.

There is also a widespread belief that Columbus was a great navigator and seaman. He was certainly a competent enough seaman, but he lost five ships on his four voyages, largely through carelessness. A lot of his sailing was just madness. He went right into the middle of fierce storms.

Many of these myths date to his son Fernando, who wrote his father's biography, and Las Casas, a friend of Columbus's. They wanted to perpetuate heroic stories about him, and the discipline of history in the 16th century was such that it was permissible to make up myths. Subsequent historians and writers, notably Washington Irving, repeated these tales. Irving went to Spain in

1826 to translate Columbus's journal of the first voyage, which had been found. He ended up writing a multivolume biography that was published in 1828. Irving wrote like a novelist rather than a historian, creating a heroic figure. His portrait infected the entire 19th century. When America sought a personification of itself, it turned to this false image of Columbus, which showed up in countless poems.

When did America start to celebrate him?

There was no celebration of the 200th anniversary of his discovery, but by 1792 the celebrations had begun and by the 400th anniversary in 1892 it had become an enormous phenomenon. President Benjamin Harrison called upon citizens to observe Columbus Day. A statue honoring him was unveiled in New York's Central Park and the area was rechristened Columbus Circle. The following year the World's Columbian Exposition opened in Chicago.

In the final analysis, it is not really so important whether Columbus was a good man. What matters is that he brought over a culture centered on its own superiority. The failings of the man were and remain the failings of the culture - a fact that is worth reflecting on as the quinticentennial of Columbus's landfall approaches.

Drawing: Rootless. And a lousy navigator?, THE GRANGER COLLECTION

~~~~~

By Alvin P. Sanoff

Alvin P. Sanoff is the author of "The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy," Alfred A. Knopf(\$24.95)

---

Copyright 1990 the U.S. News & World Report, L.P. All rights reserved.