



CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS : A DEMYSTIFICATION

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Short Biography

Christopher Columbus was born in Genoa, Italy, in 1451. His original name in Italian was Cristoforo Colombo, and when he later immigrated to Portugal he used the name Christovão Colom and in Spain: Cristóbal Colón.¹ His father, Domenico, was a wool weaver and the education of his son was in the craft guilds' school which offered only rudiments of reading and writing. Since his family was in the wool processing trade, he became involved in it as a boy. Besides seafaring which he practiced like his young mates, he might have worked as a bookshop clerk.

He began his seagoing career at 14 by serving on several ships as sailor, messenger, and more interesting was his participation in August, 1476, in a Genoese expedition to England which would change his life. It was the first voyage that gave him the opportunity to sail in the Atlantic Ocean. However, it was an inauspicious beginning for Columbus as it happened that French privateers attacked them off Cape Saint Vincent near the southwest of Portugal. His ship had been burnt and he had to cling to its wreckage and swim ten kilometers to the Portuguese coast. He

was in Lagos and soon after gaining strength he made his way to Lisbon, where he found a large community of Genoese merchants and shipbuilders. At that time he was 25 and Lisbon was a haven for sailors, merchants, adventurers, entrepreneurs and others whose lives depended on seagoing. His brother Bartholomew was a mapmaker there and sometimes they worked together. In 1478 or 1479 he married Felipa Perestrello e Moniz from a noble family, which would later help him with the court in access to the documents related to sea navigation such as maps, currents, interviews with sailors, etc. The newlyweds went to live in Porto Santo, a city in the Portuguese island of Madeira which was now governed by Felipa's elder brother after the death of her father. It was 1480 or 1481 and there Diego, his first son, was born and Felipa died shortly thereafter.

A year or so later, Columbus sailed to the Portuguese fortress of Elmina in Ghana, where he learnt from local pilots and navigators about winds and currents and became impressed with the riches of Africa and, particularly with gold. It was during his stay in present-day Ghana and the Spanish Canary Islands that he came to learn about the phenomenon of the

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Canaries Current, which is a fast-running current happening in the west of the said islands. This current may have eventually given him the idea of departing to the Indies by sailing west from these islands. The Canary Current was very helpful for the fast-moving of his three ships during his famous crossing of the Atlantic Ocean in 1492.

It is believed that the experiences of these years in the above mentioned areas were the origin of Columbus's plan to reach the Far East by sailing west across the Atlantic. Also contributing to his plan was the amount of information he had gathered from his trips as a sailor to the ports of England, Ireland, Iceland and other ports. He might have heard about stories of the Vikings' descriptions of islands west of Iceland and Greenland, for Vikings settled temporarily in Greenland, Labrador and Newfoundland east of Canada. In addition, he was capable of collecting data from various sources around the Mediterranean (including Arab ones) and combining them to make a buildup of sea navigation knowledge that he would later exploit to carry out his foolhardy "Enterprise of the Indies" as he called it.

Given his poverty, Columbus sought patronage for his passage in 1484 from King John II of Portugal, who showed great personal interest in finding a direct sea route to India and China through the south of Africa. After a short hearing, the King referred him to the royal Council of Geography which dismissed his plan as too expensive, containing wrong measurements and not in conformity with Portugal's plan to reach Asia by sailing around the south of Africa. The refusal was also due to the King's attempt to avoid aggravating the fragile and delicate political relations with Spain,

which was in conflict with Portugal over some possessions in Africa and some islands in the Atlantic such as the Azores and the Canary Islands.

After his disappointment in Portugal, he moved to Spain with his son Diego and stayed first in La Rábida monastery in Palos de la Frontera, where he became acquainted with Friar Antonio Marchera. The latter became his friend and directed him towards writings of the ancients. The latter introduced him to Friar Juan Pérez, who in turn introduced him to Friar Juan Pérez, the confessor of Queen Isabella, who in turn introduced Columbus to the said queen and her husband, King Ferdinand V.

Spanish Monarchs' Sponsorship

Columbus endeavored to expose his plan to the Spanish court in Seville in 1487; however, being at war with the Muslims in Granada, the monarchs could not consider his plan. Finally, a committee of experts met for this effect and after enquiry objected, citing among others, the largeness of the Atlantic Ocean to cross. Disappointed once again, he found refuge in the love of a Spanish peasant woman called Beatriz E. Arana, who gave birth to their son, Ferdinand, without marriage. This was a temporary refuge to while away time in wait of a reply from the court and the end of the war on Granada. In 1492, he appealed to the court for the last time; however, it was rejected once more for the excessive rewards he demanded in the case he managed to reach the Indies. Yet, the monarchs' treasurer, Luis de Santángel, interceded on his behalf after leaving the court, and argued that their investment would look small considering the potential large profits they would be rewarded from his voyage.

After this lengthy retracing of

Columbus's itinerary we arrive at the most important episodes, that is the first signs of his insatiable greed and controversial character of which little is known and, even this small amount is concealed from learners and the public. His demands from the court of Spain were even accentuated later when he and his accompanying men reached the Caribbean. He demanded a payment of the tenth of all the riches from the Indies, the title of admiral, viceroy, governor, etc. In the following quotation, the excessive rewards he sought to secure from the monarchs in order to reach the Indies and claim them for Spain are spelled out in his own words:

... your Highnesses, in the same month of January, ordered me to proceed with a sufficient

armament to the said regions of India, and for that purpose granted me great favors, and ennobled

me that thenceforth I might call myself Don, and be High Admiral of the Sea, and perpetual Viceroy

and Governor in all the islands and continents which I might discover and acquire, or which

may hereafter he discovered and acquired in the ocean; and that this dignity should be inherited

by my eldest son, and thus descend from degree to degree forever.²

At last the Spanish monarchs and Columbus reached a compromise and they put at his disposition three ships to sail to Asia by following a western course across the Atlantic Ocean. The ships were: *The Santa Maria* (under his command), the *Pinta* and the *Niña*. On August 3, 1492, they set sail from the port of Palos in the Canary Islands, and after 33 days they reached the Bahamas. During this journey, the Admiral kept

two logs of it: one for himself in which he recorded the real distance crossed every day, and a second one destined to deceive his men into believing that they had not gone a too far distance from Spain. On October 12, 1492, a sailor called Rodrigo sighted land around two in the morning and cried out, "Tierra! Tierra!" It was the island of Guana Haní (San Salvador) in the Bahamas in the Caribbean Sea.³ History reports that there existed an agreement that the first man who happened to see land would be rewarded 10,000 maravedis a year as a pension for life.⁴ Columbus, however, snatched it from the man by claiming that he had seen light in the evening before. This is his third indication of his true nature and behaviour: greed for gold and deception.

With the Arawak Indians in San Salvador

On approaching this small island the Arawaks came to meet them, offering to share with them whatever they had. To please to their visitors, the Indians brought them parrots, balls of cotton and spears, among others, and showered them with their remarkable hospitality. As the Admiral reported, "[They] are so naïve and free with their possessions that no one who has witnessed them would believe it. To the contrary, they offer to share with everyone..."⁵

While on Guanahani, the Arawaks, or the Tainos as the Spanish called them, offered Columbus and his men whatever they possessed in exchange for glass beads, hawk bells, knitted red caps and trinkets or for nothing. He noticed that they wore golden ornaments in their ears and noses. They also told him through gestures that other tribes on other islands wore gold bands around their legs and arms. This was to have far-

reaching consequences on the natives of the American continent for centuries, as the new comers would commit atrocities to force the natives to provide them with gold.

To reach his aim, the Admiral captured some Indians in his ship and compelled them to guide him to the source of gold in the Caribbean. All through the way he followed their directions and sailed to Cuba, then to Hispaniola (presently Haiti and the Dominican Republic) where he sighted small bits of gold in the rivers and was also presented a gold mask by a local Indian chief. All this fired his imagination and made him dream of gold fields.

In December 1492, during his first voyage, Columbus built from the timbers of his ship on the Island of Hispaniola a fort which he called Villa Navidad (Christmas Town) to accommodate thirty-nine of his men to be left behind while he made preparations to return to Spain. In the view of Howard Zinn, the US historian, this represented the first European military base in the Western Hemisphere. His men left behind on the island had received orders to search for gold and store it. While still on the island, he picked a fight with some Indians who refused to trade arrows and bows with his men. The Admiral's reaction was to stab two men with the sword and leave them to bleed to death. Failing to collect as much gold as he could to impress his King and Queen, he resorted to another kind of loot. He filled his two remaining ships, the *Pinta* and the *Nina*, with Indian slaves and headed for Spain. Many slaves were to die on the ships when the weather grew cold. In Spain, he was welcomed by the monarchs in the Royal Palace in Barcelona and he

ate with them at the same table and told about his adventures in what he thought was India. He showed them the gold he brought in the form of crowns, masks, ornaments, nuggets and dust. Besides, he paraded the naked Indians and their colourful parrots. His report about the first voyage was exaggerated, the fact that paved the way for the accord of Ferdinand and Isabella to sponsor his second voyage and equip it with all that he needed. This time he was offered 17 ships and over 1,200 men and all the supplies he demanded. In the crew were two of his brothers, Bartholomew and Giacomo (Diego in the Spanish version). The displayed purposes of the voyage were to return to La Navidad in Hispaniola to relieve the sailors who remained there, settle the islands and explore and claim other islands for Spain. Yet, Howard Zinn posits that the real goal was to procure gold and slaves.⁶

In late November 1493, the Spanish expedition reached the Antilles and then Hispaniola and fired cannon to announce the arrival. To their horror, the Spaniards received no reply and when they searched the island (Haiti) they realized that La Navidad had been destroyed and burned to the ground. A mass grave of the Spaniards was discovered and the nearby village of Indian chief Guacanagari was found destroyed and burned. Nothing to tell exactly what had happened could be found, but for Howard Zinn the natives did the job out of disgust with the Europeans' greed and avarice. The latter could have had forced the natives to bring them gold and exploited them in work and abused women and children sexually.

The Admiral of the Ocean Sea, as his new title told, undertook to build a

new settlement, Isabella near Navidad in Haiti. Some of the settlers were not pleased with doing manual labor, for they were sick and had come for the aim of searching for gold. To make them happy, Columbus organized an expedition for the search of gold, but none was found and the settlers became restive. In his quest for gold, he threatened the natives to procure a certain amount of gold within three months. Those who could bring their quota were given a copper token to tie to their necks and could have a three-month respite before they were engaged in providing another quota. Nevertheless, those who failed to do so had their arms hacked and bled to death and became an alarming example for the others. The others either delivered gold or escaped to mountains and other regions.

Samuel Eliot Morison, Harvard historian and Columbus' biographer, acknowledged that the latter was responsible for the ghastly system devised to produce gold. The indigenous people who could not deliver the gold, for it was an impossible task, fled to the mountains where they were pursued by the settlers who set hounds loose on them and let starvation and disease do the rest of the job to finish them off. It was an impossible task for which the Spaniards pressured them. The only gold around was in the form of dust garnered from the streams. Driven to desperation, thousands took cassava poison to make an end to their miseries. This was mass suicide.

According to Morison, it was Columbus who started the depopulation process of the terrestrial paradise of Hispaniola. According to a modern ethnologist's estimate, the number of the original inhabitants on this island was

300,000 in 1492. Between 1494 and 1496 one third were killed, and by 1548 only about 500 remained. Bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484 - 1566), Spanish priest, colonist, historian and 16th century human rights activist, put the remaining number at 200. This bishop was the editor of Columbus' journal and he knew the events first hand in the Caribbean, for he was on the spot when the Indians were subdued, exploited and massacred.⁷ In addition, he participated in the expedition on Cuba which became the object of genocidal attacks. As a reward, he was granted a farm within the Spanish agricultural system known as the *Encomienda* in which the natives were, in reality, slaves working on the farms. After realizing that this system was unconscionable, he closed his farm, freed the slaves and joined the Dominican priests who tried hard to denounce the inhuman Spanish practices. De Las Casas wrote his renowned fiery and controversial report "A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies" in 1542 and published it in 1552. In an excerpt, he describes those cruel acts by writing:

...The cause for which the Christians have slain and destroyed so many and such infinite

numbers of souls, has been simply to get, as their ultimate end, the Indians' gold of them, and

to stuff themselves with riches in a very few days, and to raise themselves to high estates without

proportion to their birth or breeding, it should be noted owing to the insatiable greed and

ambition that they have had, which has been greater than the world has ever seen before...

All the Indians of all the Indies never once ...hurt or wrong to Christians, but

rather held them

to be descended from heaven ...until many times they or their neighbors received from

the Christians many acts of wrongful harm, theft, murder, violence and vexation...⁸

More from De Las Casas will be supplied below. Back to the Admiral. When he was unable to get great quantities of gold for their Majesties and his financiers, he decided to capture the natives and force them to build a settlement. This enslavement was not stated as an aim of the voyage and was even offensive to the Queen who opposed it when informed of it. Nevertheless, Columbus justified it on the grounds that it would be profitable.

Columbus adopted a policy of enslavement to fill up the ships with slaves to ship to Spain on his following trip on March 10, 1496. A year before the departure, the Spaniards organized great slave raids in the Caribbean islands. They rounded up 1,500 Arawak men, women and children and put them into pens guarded by men and dogs. Then they selected the best fitting 500 people and loaded them onto ships bound for Spain on the second return voyage. Because of the cold and the disease, two hundred died on route. Later, when they arrived in Spain in 1496 the archdeacon of the town put them up for sale and reported that though they were naked they showed no embarrassment whatsoever.⁹ Columbus who had started this process in the West Indies wrote: "Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold."¹⁰

Getting full from what the Spaniards were perpetrating on them, the Indians tried to resist. However, they found themselves confronted with the

Spaniards armed with armor, muskets, horses and swords. The natives were no fit for them and got mowed down easily. The Spaniards hanged the prisoners they captured or burned them. Unable to face the critical situation, the Arawaks began mass suicide by taking cassava poison and killing their children to save them from the cruelty of the Spaniards. In two years half of the 250,000 inhabitants of Haiti were dead. After the depletion of gold, the natives were forced by the Spanish to work on large farms as slave labour at a neck-breaking pace, which caused them to die in thousands. In 1515 there were probably 50,000 Arawaks on the island; however, by 1650 reports show that they all disappeared.

More testimony of the inhumane treatment inflicted by the Spanish conquerors on the natives of America can be found in Bartolomé De Las Casas' book *History of the Indies* in which ample illustration was made. En passant, it is worth to mention that De Las Casas personally was proprietor of Indian slaves and a conqueror of Cuba and an eyewitness of the genocide lived by that island. He later changed his mind and freed his slaves and proposed the replacement of Indians by black slaves, who were stronger. However, he later opposed it as he saw the effects of European treatment on them. De Las Casas wrote:

Endless testimonies...prove the mild and pacific temperament of the natives...But our work

was to exasperate, ravage, kill, mangle and destroy; small wonder, then, if they tried to kill

one of us now and then ...The Admiral, it is true, was blind as those who came after him

and he was so anxious to please the

King that he committed irreparable crimes against the Indians¹¹

This Spanish Dominican friar reports in the same book that the Spaniards used the Indians as a means of transport. Refusing to walk long distances, they compelled the Natives to carry them on their backs or in hammocks and run in relays. In this case, they were also made to carry big leaves of trees to shade them from the sun while others fanned them with birds' wings.

De Las Casas further attests that the Spaniards were so cruel that they did not refrain from knifing Indians by tens and twenties and cutting slices of their flesh for the sake of testing the sharpness of their swords. He reports that on an occasion two so-called Christians saw two Indian boys with two parrots. Their reaction was to take the parrots forcefully from them and behead them for fun.

The Indians had an unusual enemy to deal with. They tried to defend themselves, but failed and when they ran off into the mountains they were pursued and killed. Becoming resigned, they simply suffered and died in thousands in mines and elsewhere in silence and without any succour.

According to De Las Casas, to extract gold from mines the Indians were set to strip mountains from top to bottom and back. They dig, split rocks, move stones and carry the dirt to other fellows in the river to wash it in search of gold. Those who wash it in the river keep their backs bent all day in a position that ends by breaking them. When the rain falls and the gold mines get invaded by water the arduous task is to scoop up the water and throw it outside. So many people died of exhaustion. After six months or so, which was the period required for obtaining enough gold for

melting, about a third of the labour died.¹² Not even women were spared the exploitation. When the men were sent to work in mines far away from home, women were made to work by digging thousands of hills for cassava plants. According to the said friar, husbands and wives were together only once in nine months and so once met they were exhausted and depressed that they stopped procreating. Worse, the newly born babies died of hunger, because their mothers were overworked and famished and could not provide them with milk. Many mothers drowned their babies out of sheer desperation to feed and tend to them.¹³

In Zinn's view, the Europeans who came to the New World five centuries ago practiced conquest, slavery and death. He further points out that even Samuel Eliot Morison, the distinguished biographer of Columbus admitted that "The cruel policy initiated by Columbus and pursued by his successors resulted in complete genocide."¹⁴ Yet, Morison hides this opinion in the midst of much romance of the exploits of the Admiral and concludes his book with this paragraph:

He had his faults and his defects, but they were largely the defects of the qualities that made

him great-his indomitable will, his superb faith in God and his own mission as the Christ-

bearer to the lands beyond the seas, his stubborn persistence despite neglect, poverty and

discouragement. But there was no flaw, no dark side to the most outstanding and essential of

his qualities - his seamanship.¹⁵

The above paragraph demonstrates how the historians and even the

biographers of Columbus in the USA endeavour to either negate or set to the very margin the dark side of the Spanish and later on the British settlers, and persist in glorifying them as navigators and discoverers. The latter qualities are emphasized and the genocide is deemphasized. This could only be a way to justify genocide of non-European peoples. This attitude only demonstrates that even the elite in the West have the tendency to ignore or justify the genocide of others not belonging to their civilization or ethnicity. This is true of the colonial atrocities in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Although the so-called Israelis bombard the Palestinians and Lebanese unjustifiably, the Western media either justify this aggression as legitimate self-defence or totally ignore it. Thus, we think that the same Western attitude prevails since ancient times.

In the USA the mainstream historians and other intellectuals see Columbus and the early colonists of North America as heroes and, they accept quietly the conquest and murder in the name of progress. For instance, the atrocities committed in Vietnam and Hiroshima were for the sake of saving Western civilization. In Zinn's view, this is an approach to the past from the points of view of governments, leaders and diplomats. He writes, " One reason these atrocities are still with us is that we have learned to bury them in a mass of other facts...We have learned to give them exactly the same proportion of attention that teachers and writers often give them in the most respectable of the textbooks." ¹⁶ We can conclude from this as well as from the colonial writings like the French ones in the case of colonized Algeria, that it is the same strange logic that makes the French

people not fully aware of the genocide committed in Algeria by their troops and, that also makes the successive governments unable to admit officially that they had colonized and fought a barbarous war here.

Spanish Conquest Mexico and Peru

The approach of treatment of the American natives adopted by Columbus and his men in the Bahamas was perpetuated by later Spanish Conquistadores in Mexico, Peru, and by the English settlers in Massachusetts and Virginia. In this article, we will limit ourselves to Mexico and Peru and leave the rest for the next article.

In Mexico conquistador, Hernàn Cortes, conquered a land, a people and made an end to the Aztec civilization for the sake of amassing gold unjustifiably. The Aztec civilization was a culmination of the heritage of the Mayan, Zapotec and Toltec cultures. The development of this civilization in central Mexico started in 1325 and flourished for about two centuries by building huge constructions, inventing a picture writing system, roads, canals, temples, markets, agriculture and religion. As to this latter aspect, the Aztecs sacrificed thousands of people to their idols like the sun-god. Although they were warlike and cruel and thrived by conquering their neighbour tribes and forcing them to pay tribute, they still retained some innocence. Still their misdeeds did not justify the massacres perpetrated by Cortes. When he reached their capital Tenochtitlàn in 1519, Montezuma II, their emperor, sent a hundred runners to welcome him with enormous treasures of gold and silver and begged him to return. Yet, instead of being thankful, Cortes began his death march from town to town, killing and looting in his way without mercy.¹⁷ He

used a strategy to paralyze the will of the population to resist by sudden frightful deadly attacks. In Cholulu, he invited the heads of the nation to a feast, and when they came along with thousands of unarmed people, the Spaniards who were surrounding the square of the said feast suddenly fired cannon into them, attacked them with crossbows and decimated them to the last man. After committing this forfeiture, they looted the town and pursued their way to others to kill more people and collect their gold and silver. After some time, Montezuma was killed after holding him hostage in return for a huge ransom of gold. He was asked to call his people to gather gold to free him, and when done the Spanish took the ransom and killed him and colonized the whole of Mexico.

In Peru, the other Spanish

conquistador Francisco Pizarro adopted the same strategy with the Incas-the local population- and for the same ends. He had come from Spain in search of gold, slaves, agricultural products in order to pay the bondholders and stockholders and finance the schemes of the royal bureaucracy and spur the growth of the new money economy that was rising out of feudalism.¹⁸ For a conclusion, we think that the following citation of Zinn would be the best to qualify the acts of Columbus and other Spanish conquerors of the New World. He maintains that “These were the violent beginnings of an intricate system of technology, business, politics, and culture that would dominate the world for the next five centuries.”¹⁹

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