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Christopher Columbus and the Enterprise of the Indies

A Brief History with Documents

Geoffrey Symcox

and

Blair Sullivan

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CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS AND THE ENTERPRISE
OF THE INDIES by Geoffrey Symcox and Blair Sullivan

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Foreword

The Bedford Series in History and Culture is designed so that readers can study the past as historians do.

The historian's first task is finding the evidence. Documents, letters, memoirs, interviews, pictures, movies, novels, or poems can provide facts and clues. Then the historian questions and compares the sources. There is more to do than in a courtroom, for hearsay evidence is welcome, and the historian is usually looking for answers beyond act and motive. Different views of an event may be as important as a single verdict. How a story is told may yield as much information as what it says.

Along the way the historian seeks help from other historians and perhaps from specialists in other disciplines. Finally, it is time to write, to decide on an interpretation and how to arrange the evidence for readers.

Each book in this series contains an important historical document or group of documents, each document a witness from the past and open to interpretation in different ways. The documents are combined with some element of historical narrative—an introduction or a biographical essay, for example—that provides students with an analysis of the primary source material and important background information about the world in which it was produced.

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Natalie Zemon Davis
Ernest R. May
Lynn Hunt
David W. Blight

Preface

Columbus is a historical figure of incontrovertible importance. He was long hailed as the “discoverer” who brought Christianity and European civilization to the American continent. But political and cultural developments, particularly the breakup of European colonial empires after World War II, led scholars to raise serious questions about Columbus’s motives and methods, and about the impact of Spanish colonization on the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Although they still recognize the unparalleled historical significance of his voyages, and pay tribute to the courage and technical skill that made them possible, most scholars today have adopted a more critical stance toward Columbus and what he did. As editors of the *Repertorium Columbianum*, a multivolume collection of contemporary sources bearing on Columbus’s voyages, we have set out to convey to a nonspecialist audience some of the results of the current scholarly debates and recent research on Columbus and his voyages.

The introduction to this volume provides a narrative of Columbus’s extraordinary career. Born to a humble family in the great mercantile city of Genoa, Columbus went to sea at an early age. A decade of residence in Portugal perfected his seafaring skills and planted the seed of his plan to sail west in search of a shortcut to the fabled wealth of Asia. In 1492, as every schoolchild knows, he secured support from the Spanish monarchs for his venture, sailed across the Atlantic, and reached a group of islands, which he claimed for the Spanish crown. Believing he had reached the eastern coast of Asia, he mistakenly named them the “Indies,” and their inhabitants “Indians.”

Columbus’s voyage marked the beginning of what would come to be called Spain’s “Enterprise of the Indies”—the colonization and evangelization of the new lands. In 1493 the Spanish crown sent Columbus on a second voyage to establish a permanent settlement in the Indies. But the new colony was soon beset by dire problems: disease, famine,

strife among the settlers, and warfare against the indigenous population. For the inhabitants of the Indies, the arrival of the Europeans was catastrophic. It disrupted their traditional way of life and condemned them to extinction within a few decades. Columbus did nothing to prevent the colonists' brutal exploitation of the indigenous population; in fact, he actively participated in it. Meanwhile he embarked on another voyage of exploration in 1498 and became the first European to reach the South American continent, giving further proof of his brilliance as a navigator. But as a colonial governor he proved a failure, and the Spanish monarchs recalled him in disgrace in 1500. They still prized his nautical skills, however, and sent him on another voyage of exploration in 1502–4, in the course of which he reached the coast of Central America. Columbus died in 1506, bequeathing to his sons the titles and the wealth he had accumulated as the reward for his exploits.

The introduction concludes by examining the controversies that have grown up around Columbus and the impact of his voyages, tracing how his reputation has waxed and waned, especially in the United States. The introduction also includes a table listing the main crops, animals, and diseases that were exchanged among Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas after 1492 in the so-called Columbian Exchange. This was perhaps the most important—although unintended—consequence of the contact that Columbus initiated between what Europeans soon came to call the “Old World” and the “New.” In addition, the introduction includes a genealogical table of the Columbus family and several maps depicting the voyages Columbus undertook.¹

Following the introduction is a series of contemporary documents that describe Columbus and his four voyages. These documents include excerpts from the log of his first voyage and a wide variety of other materials: official documents like legal records relating to his family's activity in Genoa, his agreements with the Spanish crown, and papal bulls demarcating the nascent colonial empires of Spain and Portugal; accounts of Columbus's three later voyages, some by eyewitnesses; the first European descriptions of the Indies, of their flora and fauna, of their inhabitants and their culture; and judgments by contemporaries of Columbus and his achievements.

A vast range of materials has been unearthed and analyzed since serious scholarly research on Columbus and his voyages began two

¹Place names appear in Spanish where applicable, for consistency with the names used in the documents.

centuries ago. We have selected the sources included here to give an idea of the wealth of documentation that exists for studying the man and his career. To make the documents easily intelligible, we provide short commentaries that situate them in their context and gloss notes that explain any obscure terms they may contain. Our aim is to present a balanced view of Columbus and his achievements. We hope our readers will evaluate these documents for themselves and come to their own conclusions about the nature, purpose, and impact of Columbus's voyages, always remembering that research continues, that interpretations constantly change, and that there are no final, definitive answers to the questions the documents raise. Concluding this volume are a chronology to help readers follow Columbus's life and his four voyages, a glossary of terms, a list of questions for further consideration, and a selected bibliography of primary and secondary sources related to Columbus.

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Geoffrey Symcox
Blair Sullivan

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