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IDÉE FIXE: THE MIND OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS¹

“Whatever is not of Europe or of Africa is of Asia”: so every fifteenth century schoolboy learned his lesson, and so Christopher Columbus must have learned it. Asia, indeed, or rather the Asia that lay beyond Ganges, was wide enough, and vague enough, to embrace all those lands that obstinately remained undiscovered. Here lay that Ophir whence every three years Solomon fetched gold in ships of Tarshish; here lay the Isle of Gold and the Isle of Silver; here lay Cipangu, alluringly described by *Il Milione*; here the Grand Khan and Prester John kept magnificent court; here, for the mystic, was hidden the Paradise Terrestre; while here, too, for the practical man, who deemed these fabled lands as of no account, lay the producing centers of those spices upon which the wealth of such cities as Venice and Genoa was based. And in the half-educated mind, all that lay beyond Ganges was comprehended in the one vague term—the Indies.

The Indies lay at the farthest bounds eastward of the habitable world, or so conventional scholarship demanded, while at its farthest bounds westward lay Portugal and the Land of the Moors. Yet what were these “farthest bounds”

¹ The appearance of two new English translations of Columbian Documents by Cecil Jane, namely, *The Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (Argonaut Press) and *Voyages of Columbus*, 2 Vols. (Hakluyt Society Publications) suggested this brief study of the great admiral in the light of his own words, and of his conversations with Peter Martyr as reported in the *Decades* (Richard Eden's translation).

on which lay Indies and Portugal too? The Ocean Sea? Already the Portuguese sailors had dissipated the legend of the Sea of Darkness, and from a limiting boundary the Ocean Sea was being rapidly transformed into a highway. As a consequence, cosmographers had to add a new category to the Parts of the Earth: besides the Parts of Europe, the Parts of Africa, and the Parts of Asia, there were now the Islands of the Ocean Sea. Catalan and Genoese sailors, it is true, had long known and charted these islands, but only the organized efforts of Prince Henry the Navigator had brought them to the knowledge of the learned world.

From the ocean outpost of the Azores, the Portuguese established a new trade route, northward to Iceland, where Greenland and Vineland were not forgotten, and southward by Madeira and the Canaries, and Morocco and Guinea. Up and down this route, on the business of his employers, traveled Christopher Columbus, still a landsman, and so married a girl of Madeira.

Did his marriage influence Columbus's career? It is impossible to prove it, but certainly he was now in a circle that pored earnestly over charts and globes, that talked eagerly of problems of discovery, of the organization of efforts to discover Antillia, and that listened to the yarns of pilots who declared that they had actually set foot on that island, and could place a cross on its very location on the navigating chart. A man of just such business and travel experience as Columbus, a man, too, who made just such a marriage, this time with a girl of the Azores, was the Nuremberger, Martin Behaim, and the globe which he completed in 1492 must have been just such a one as Columbus would see. If this globe were correct, then a man who was master of Antillia was as near to India beyond Ganges as he was to Europe, and had not Ptolemy himself indicated the margin of a great unknown equatorial land lying east of the Sinus Magnus?

It is to the very vagueness of Columbus's plans, as he laid them before first one and then another, that must be traced

the controversy among scholars as to his objective. But a quite unjustifiable inference has been drawn from the repetition of the phrase "islas e tierra firme" in the negotiations with their Catholic Majesties which eventuated in the epoch-making first voyage. It has been claimed that the words quoted witness to an intention to seek a new continent, but such was not the current meaning of "tierra firme". Reference to textbooks of the period shows that lands were by definition of two kinds, islands such as Sicily and Iceland, or mainlands (tierra firme) adherent to other countries, such as France and Spain. Hence the precise, legal mind of the framer of the capitulations would use the exact phrase "islands and mainlands", rather than the loose term "lands" without any specific implications, or reference to ideas or suggestions as to the particular type of lands intended to be discovered or possessed. Nor is there any force in the often repeated contention that Columbus could not have expected to take possession of parts of India or Cathay known to the world as powerful kingdoms. There were, besides these, unknown islands and mainlands of Asia-beyond-Ganges in plenty.

Nevertheless, the evidence on the whole points to Antillia as the first objective of Columbus when his sixteen years of persistence had been rewarded, and he set a course along the parallel of Gomera. And here comes the first instance of that resilience of mind which shows Columbus to have had a fixed idea of a great discovery to be made by himself, while leaving to Divine Providence what that discovery should be. Antillia could not be found where it was marked on his navigating chart, and almost as soon as he was faced with the fact, his mind was busy upon a fresh goal: it was now Cipangu which he was so certain of reaching, for it lay right across his path. Nevertheless, when, on the 6th of October, he began to feel doubts as to whether the course laid by Pinzón was correct for Cipangu, he had no hesitation in abandoning this too, and prepared to make the mainland of Asia. Then, on

the 12th of the month he actually reached Guanahani Island, and swung back to the belief that he was near Cipangu, which he determined to make the next day. Now the "reduced" reckonings of the ships' run which Columbus says he gave to his sailors to maintain their morale were in fact pretty nearly the correct figures as reckoned by the professional pilots. The longer distances were the expression of his eager mind which must hasten the ship and lessen the way; but even so, and taking his landsman's 56 $\frac{2}{3}$ miles to a degree against the sailor's 70 miles, he had covered a bare quarter of the circuit of the globe from the meridian of Ferro. Even the most optimistic reckoning put Cipangu no farther east than 260°, *i.e.*, 100° west. This was, in fact, the reckoning of the Toscanelli Letter, whatever its provenance, but Columbus's eager faith read into the Indians' gesticulated description of Cuba all the particular notes of Cipangu. On reaching Cuba, his optimism carried him even farther, for he wrote:

I found it to be so extensive that I thought it must be the mainland, the Province of Cathay.

Cathay, however, according to all accounts, was most certainly in middle latitudes, and so strong was the Admiral's will to believe that he could actually perceive a change in the sea, and feel a change in the air, while he read from his quadrant the desired latitude of 42° N. though actually he was 20° farther south.

Some days elapsed, and further exploration suggested doubts: the quadrant, perhaps, was out of order, the city of the Grand Khan was somewhat further afield than he had supposed. But from his very doubts were bred fresh hopes! Cuba was not Cipangu, nor was it Cathay, it was no less than Ophir! Says Peter Martyr:

Turning therefore the sterns of his ships towards the east, he affirmed that he had found the island of Ophir, whither Solomon's ships had sailed for gold. But the description of the Cosmographers well con-

sidered, it seemeth that both these and the other islands adjoining are the Islands of Antillia.

From Cuba (Juana as he called it) Columbus proceeded to an examination of Española, and as he hastened from harbor to harbor, but still found no signs of civilized people, a half despondency overcame him, and he wrote in his Journal:

I do not know the language, and the people of these lands do not understand me, nor do I or any that I have with me understand them.

He longed for learned men to be sent out from Spain "who would understand all". But within a few hours his mind had once more adjusted itself: if not along the coast then inland there *must* (in his own phrase) be "great centers of population" and "innumerable people and things of value" where presently "all Christendom will trade". Of every native he asked news of gold, and always understood them to say that not far away it was to be found in abundance. One mischievous little lad, a "king's nephew" could dictate to him the names of six gold-bearing islands very near at hand, and when the boy left the ship Columbus observed that he was rebuked by his father, nor dreamt that it was for humoring the stranger with fables. In Española, Columbus heard continually of Cipangu, although, as he was forced to confess, "they call it Cibao", but it lay far to the east, in the direction of Spain, and it was time to abandon the search and return home with his news.

Voyaging out for the second time, Columbus had with him educated men and independent pilots and could no longer deceive himself as to the distance of Española westward. It lay only 50° from Ferro, and there must have been many to point out to him the fallacy of his claims as to Cipangu and Cathay. Once back in his "Indies" therefore, he planted a colony on Española, and himself set off thence on a further expedition toward the west. To express his conviction, he named the first cape of Cuba "Cape Alpha and Omega", for it marked

the end of the western hemisphere and the beginning of the east. A careful reading of his own words, and of the comments of his friends Bernáldez and Peter Martyr suggests that on this journey he claimed magic swiftness for his ships. The latter writes:

He sailed toward the west with a prosperous wind, for threescore and ten days; thinking that he had passed so far by the compass of the earth, being underneath us, that he had been near unto the Aurea Chersonese (now called Malacca) in our East India. For he plainly believed that he had left only two of the twelve hours of the sun [*i.e.*, only 30° out of 180°] that were unknown to us; for the old writers left half of the course of the sun untouched, whereas they have only discussed that superficial part of the Earth which lieth between the Islands of Gades and the river of Ganges: or at the uttermost to Aurea Chersonese. Thus he sailed forward, coasting ever by the shore towards the west for the space . . . of about 1300 miles.

But as Bernáldez bluntly remarked to him in discussing the matter, "in the year 1496 when he was my guest", had he traversed the sea for a further 1200 leagues in the direction in which he sought Cathay, he would not have arrived there.

It was not until 1498 that Columbus undertook his third voyage, choosing a new route much farther to the south. Here, he believed, he soon made a truly marvelous discovery. After days of suffering owing to the intense heat in Portuguese waters, the air changed, the stars too took on another order, and the ship began to ascend "the back of the sea, . . . as it were by a high mountain toward heaven". The earth, he concluded, was not perfectly round, as the cosmographers and Ptolemy, who knew only the upper half, had described it. The hemisphere "underneath us" was shaped like the stalk end of a pear, and in Paria, which he presently discovered, he discerned the cupola of the earth, upon which rested the terrestrial paradise. Not only was this a momentous discovery in itself, but it confirmed his belief that he had reached the

bounds of Asia, where, according to the writings of the Fathers, the earthly paradise was to be sought. Thus he wrote in one of his letters, and this he earnestly contended with Peter Martyr, who closes his comments on the matter with the dry remark: "Let us now therefore return to the history from which we have too much digressed".

In his journals, Columbus was always more guarded and restrained than in his letters or his conversations, but even here he emphasizes the fact that "when the point a hundred leagues west of the Azores has been passed", that is to say when his ship entered the half sphere assigned to the crown of Spain, "the sky, the sea and the climate are alike changed", and he adduced the variation of the magnetic needle as evidence of the uniqueness of this far side of the globe that he had revealed.

Meanwhile the royal license to discover was granted to companions of Columbus and others, so that the long stretch of coast running westward from Cape St. Augustine was revealed, and the term "new world", used indeed by Cardinal Ascanius Sforza after the first voyage alone, became general. Columbus, however, clung obstinately to his old beliefs, and on his fourth voyage of 1502 he "steered for Tierra Firme" not southward but westward, thus reaching Central America for the first time. Here, in accordance with his expectations, he "heard of the mines of gold and the provinces of Ciamba, which I was seeking"; he was thinking and planning still in terms of the Far East described by Marco Polo. Forever balked by one mischance and another from following up the information he obtained, he came to the Lagoon of Chiriqui, near to Veragua, where he learned of Ciguare, nine days' journey to the west; there the people went richly clothed, had chairs and tables, guns and armor, ships and fair houses. They had, besides, infinite gold, and knew of pepper. All this he learned, knowing not a word of the language!

Also they say that the sea surrounds Ciguare, and that from there it is ten days' journey to the river Ganges. It appears that these lands lie in respect of Veragua as Tortosa does in respect of Fuen-terabia, or Pisa in respect of Venice.

They lay, in fact, across a neck of land, such as he was in truth exploring. It was the first news of the South Sea, although he did not read it so.

Even as he wrote in this letter of the near neighborhood of Ganges, Columbus must have anticipated the courteous disbelief of a Peter Martyr, the blunt comment of a Bernáldez, for he rushes into a confused farrago of "evidence" for his statement.

In the year '94 [*i.e.*, on the west reconnaissance following the second voyage] I navigated twenty-four degrees to the westward in nine hours, and I cannot be in error because there was an eclipse; the sun was in Libra and the moon in Aries.

Further, Ptolemy had been in error in placing Cattigara (which Columbus undoubtedly identifies with Ciguare) "three lines", *i.e.*, 45°, farther west than Marinus had done, since the letter "is now found to have been very near the truth" Columbus goes on to repeat once more the views summarized in the *Imago Mundi* as to the extent of the land surface, and as to the size of the degree, 56 $\frac{2}{3}$ miles. The latter figure, of course, still found wide acceptance among scholars, and is to be contrasted with the figure of 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ leagues of 4 miles each, that is to say, 70 miles to a degree, as used among sailors, and found in current Portuguese navigating manuals.

Near as he was, however, to Cattigara and Ganges, they remained still beyond reach; every sort of mischance—silted rivers, worms boring the ships' hulls, treacherous Indians, fever and exhaustion—held the Admiral back from his goal. It was then that in a fevered dream he seemed to hear divine words of comfort: "What more did God for Moses", stayed on the very threshold of the promised land? Of necessity

turning back from Veragua, Columbus sailed for Jamaica, since he was forbidden to set foot in Española. On his way, he "reached the province of Mago [or, as he later writes it, Mango], which marches with that of Catayo"; he touched, in fact, the southermost shore of Cuba which, in his determined belief, from its position in respect of Veragua, was part of the mainland of Asia, where Mangi marched with Cathay.

While he waited vainly in Jamaica for assistance, all his thoughts were centered on Veragua, which he saw as the very threshold of the east, of the east with all the gold and jewels, silks and pearls, pepper and spices, which he still believed he was soon to lay at their Majesties' feet. But days of tormenting doubt intervened. Had he completed that third part of the circuit of the globe which even his most optimistic calculations found necessary in order to reach Asia? And to meet these doubts he wrapped about the voyage to Veragua a veil of mystery: the vessels were driven for days before the wind, they were swept forward by powerful currents, no one could say under what part of the heavens they were, and if the pilots aboard should seek Veragua again they would have to discover it as for the first time. Only he, Columbus, held the secret:

There is a method and a means derived from astrology, and certain, which is enough for one who understands it. This resembles a prophetic vision.

Recalling how he had been abused for not fulfilling his promises of bringing treasure from the Indies, Columbus declared that he would put a guard upon himself, and keep his counsel, but even as he wrote the magic of the word "gold", the word of power, caused his pen to run on and to reveal his belief as to Veragua. For if Josephus was correct in saying that it was from the Aurea, the Golden Chersonese, that Solomon fetched gold, then Veragua was the Aurea, since the mines of Veragua, covering twenty miles, were undoubtedly Solomon's mines. "Solomon brought all that gold,

precious stones and silver, and you may command it to be collected there if you wish". Jerusalem and Mount Sion could then be rebuilt with this treasure according to prophecy, and Christian teachers be sent to the emperor of Cathay. "Who will offer himself for this work? If our Lord bring me to Spain, I pledge myself, in the name of God, to bring him there in safety".

The hour of exaltation, in which Columbus saw himself not only as a discoverer, but as an apostle, as the restorer of the holy places, gave way to as deep a despondency, when he recalled the actual facts of his exclusion from the government of Española and Paria, while "All, down to the very tailors, seek permission to make discoveries". His tears and transports of self-pity are such as many ardent, optimistic spirits are betrayed into, and no man should be judged by a letter written in an unguarded hour of emotion. Read in relation to the concepts, to the modes of thought and expression of the day, there is no reason to suggest that this letter is the expression of a mind disordered by privation, of a man "no longer master of his own thoughts".² Columbus was, indeed, under the domination of a fixed idea, and rationalized all his experiences into harmony with his earnest wishes, but did so in a quite normal psychological process. The letter must be compared with the complete and careful written record of this fourth voyage to which Peter Martyr had access, and on which he based the narrative found in the fourth book of his third decade.

According to his own statement, all who crossed the Ocean Sea resorted to Peter Martyr on their return, and he was well equipped to deal critically with the data thus supplied. In an earlier book, he had made the bare statement that Columbus had reached Terra Firma on his forth voyage, 130 leagues west of Cabo Cruz in Cuba, thus there was, in fact, no mystery about the course sailed. In the later book he gives details

² Cecil Jane, *loc cit.*

not to be found in the letter, and discusses Columbus's interpretation of his discovery. It appears that in the account before him, the Admiral had again insisted that Veragua was on a neck of land, as broad as from Venice to Genoa, and that it was joined to India beyond Ganges. He said also that it formed part of a land mass continuous to the Hyperborean Sea, while also widening southward. All this is consistent with a belief that he had found the most easterly peninsula of southern Asia, similar to, but more extensive than, that depicted on a map of the type drawn by Henricus Martellus Germanus in 1492.³

Peter Martyr had had the advantage of examining several charts of the new discoveries, including one begun by Christopher Columbus on the fourth voyage, and added to by his brother Bartholomew, who was with him and who was a trained cartographer. The occasion of this examination was in a conference with the Bishop of Burgos held for the purpose of considering the relationship of the north and south seas according to the reports brought home of what had been ascertained from the natives, before the actual discovery by Balboa. Columbus had stated that the mountains of Veragua were fifty miles high, and that by their "roots" there was a passage from sea to sea, *i.e.*, a land passage, but Peter Martyr held strongly to the view that there must somewhere in that neighborhood be a sea-passage to allow vent for the steady west-flowing current which swept along the whole south shore of the Caribbean Sea. He makes no suggestion, however, that Columbus's views were wild or extreme.

How then is the great Admiral of the Ocean Sea to be understood? Not in the light of modern knowledge of a plurality of continents, for since all mankind was descended from the sons of Noah, and these sons had peopled the three parts of the habitable world, it was the only logical conclusion that when men were encountered neither black nor white

³ This is also clear from the extant map of Bartholomew Columbus.

in the new lands, they must be men of Asia, the land of Shem. True, there were rationalistic thinkers in the fifteenth century, but Columbus was not one of them; true, also, that there were scholars to whom the classical fourth part of the world beyond the equator was a familiar concept, but Columbus was no scholar. His cosmographical ideas were assimilated during the business travels of his young manhood, and when his great projects drove him to more systematic study of standard textbooks, he gathered from them, as is usual with the adult student, only such facts and ideas as fitted in with, or at least did not contradict, his preconceived ideas. Everything that pointed to a small world was seized upon and remembered, everything, too, that told of gold, the sole standard of value of which he was aware, or indeed of which a majority of his contemporaries were aware.

Nor is Columbus to be understood as a professional sailor. His formal knowledge of navigation, like his formal knowledge of cosmography, was acquired late, and his very instruments were subservient to his passionate beliefs, giving him the figures that he desired. If they failed him, he could take refuge from unwelcome figures in mysticism or in rhetoric. At every point, indeed, at which the behavior or words of Columbus are startling, puzzling, or even (to the hero-worshiper) distressing, the explanation is one. He was a man under the powerful dominion of an idea, the idea of his divine destiny to discover and to rule rich lands unknown. And to a Genoese (nor is there really any shadow of doubt as to his native city) rich lands and far eastern lands were synonymous. True that his travels in the Portuguese Atlantic gave him the idea of Antillia as a first objective, but his thoughts reverted rapidly to the El Dorados of his boyhood's dreams, to Cipangu and Cathay, Tarshish and Ophir, the Golden Chersonese and the earthly paradise itself. King Solomon's mines had warrant of holy scripture, and it required only resolution to make them mines of Spain, under the governor-

ship of Christopher Columbus, admiral of the Ocean Sea, the first to search the secrets of the underside of the terrestrial globe.

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