

## THE TROPICS OF EMPIRE: WHY COLUMBUS SAILED SOUTH TO THE INDIES

Nicolás Wey Gómez, *The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2008, 592 pp.

I recently gave my students an exam in which they had to compare the voyages of Cristóbal Colón and the Chinese admiral Zheng He in the fifteenth century. Several insisted that Colón sailed west from Spain in 1492 to prove that the world was round, not flat. Others claimed that one of the legacies of his voyages was the founding of the United States. I mention these comments not to mock my students but to raise a point about the study of Colón and his voyages: all sorts of misunderstandings accrue to his intentions and actions, including his link to countries to which he had none whatsoever, like the United States. Writing about Colón thus requires cutting through assumptions and interested claims that have accumulated over the centuries. Few have navigated this treacherous passage as carefully as Nicolás Wey Gómez. His explorations of the intellectual and geo-political scaffolding of Colón's worldview will surely transform the way we think about the early history of Iberian expansion and conquest, beginning with the most fundamental question of the very direction of Colón's first voyage.

The author recasts our perception of the Enterprise of the Indies by showing that Columbus sailed not only west from Spain but also south: «our understanding of Columbus's enterprise can be greatly enhanced by according *latitude* . . . the same importance we have accorded his idea of reaching the East by way of the West.» (43, emphasis in the original) The south bore strong associations of wealth, barbarism, and empire in the late medieval European imagination. Many believed that precious metals and gems were to be found only in the warmer climes south of Europe. Columbus decided to explore further in that direction on this third voyage because of advice from the cosmographer Jaume Ferrer de Blanes, who told him that the bounty he sought, and which the Reyes Católicos coveted, would be found around the equator. Columbus was well aware of this set of associations binding latitude, climate, natural bounty, and the people who inhabited these lands. Wey Gómez convincingly details the Admiral's familiarity with medieval cosmography and its mapping of particular physical, political, and cultural capacities onto the peoples of the globe. He closely scrutinizes influential figures in Columbus's circle, including his brother Bartolomé, the learned and influential Dominican friar Diego de Deza who possibly introduced the Admiral to the writings of the Dominican Albertus Magnus (mentor of Thomas Aquinas and expert on Aristotelian philosophy and geography), and the cosmographer Ferrer. From his extensive readings and

conversations, Columbus learned of the supposedly tripartite division of the globe and its peoples. To the north lay the frigid zone, inhabited by people characterized by great strength and courage but weak intelligence. Latin Europe lay squarely in the temperate zone, the most perfect climate, which produced people of moderation and intelligence fully capable of self-governance. The frigid and temperate zones had their reflections on the other half of the globe, the antipodes. Between them lay the vast torrid zone, completely uninhabitable according to some classical and medieval cosmographers. Others believed, however, that the torrid zone was densely populated by people who were weak and cowardly, though intelligent and sensitive. Their weakness made them suitable for enslavement and foreign domination, natural slaves to the natural masters of the temperate climes.

With this understanding of Colón's cosmography, Wey Gómez delves into the geopolitics of exploration and dominion. Colón could plausibly believe that he had reached the Indies because there was widespread speculation that an Indian archipelago extended far to the south and east from the subcontinent. Tellingly, Europeans imagined this archipelago reaching into the torrid zone, making its islands and inhabitants potential sources of wealth and of conquest. Attitudes toward China were quite different, partly because of the wide reception of Marco Polo's travel accounts, which provided learned European readers with images of tremendous wealth and refinement, military power, and political and intellectual sophistication. Also important was the location of China within the tripartition of the world; like Europe, China (and parts of India) was squarely in the temperate zone and thus outside the area of direct conquest. Were Colón to have sailed west only, his ambitions would have been limited to trade and perhaps a military alliance with the Great Khan against Islam. But by sailing south, toward the projected Indian archipelago, he was also keeping alive the vision of mineral wealth and territorial dominion.

My favorite chapters in this beautifully written and illustrated work concern the Castilian rivalry with Portugal for exploration and control of the south and how the first voyage transformed this competition. Wey Gómez alerts us to the importance of the Treaty of Alcáçovas (1479-80), a prelude to the more famous Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), by which the Iberian monarchies divided the Canary Islands and Atlantic Africa, the former falling to the Castilians, the latter to the Portuguese. After the Treaty took effect, the sound between the Canaries and Cape Bojador became the contested doorway to further southerly exploration and conquest. Colón and his family were well aware of how politically sensitive this region was through their own experience in Portugal's eastern Atlantic possessions. Voyages to the Portuguese factory at Mina on the African coast had a significant impact on how Cristóbal and Bartolomé thought about the products and peoples of the torrid zone.

When Colón returned to the Iberian Peninsula in 1493 from his first voyage to the Indies, the Reyes Católicos and their advisors were acutely aware that Portugal might lay its own claim to the islands that the Admiral had explored. As Wey Gómez convincingly shows, «the real bone of contention between the two kingdoms was the zone of expan-

sion below the entire latitude of the Canaries.» (327). In other words, the route to the South, not to the West (and implicitly the East), was a source of conflict between Castile and Portugal. The reception of Colón and of his reports had an immediate impact on the Court and its geo-political ambitions: «a new paradigm seemed to be gaining ground in Barcelona. Perhaps it was time to listen to those who had long argued that the torrid zone was not the generally forbidding wasteland so many had claimed.» (329) The Columbian enterprise thus quickly assumed new proportions: the precious mineral wealth and the meek peoples of the supposed Indian archipelago would be the fruits of conquest. Verticality and tropicality became the guiding lights of exploration and expansion; south from the Canaries, not west from the Guadalquivir was the jumping off point.

The book's final chapter is a brilliant rereading of Colón's *Diario* from his first voyage. Wey Gómez expertly shows how Colón sought to fit the Antilles into his global scheme. Was the Caribbean temperate or torrid? Empirical evidence indicated the former. But other details pointed to the latter, as did Colón's overriding commitment to the tripartite division of the world and its imperial implications. The Taíno were clearly people of a torrid climate in his view: intelligent but servile, dark-skinned, and lacking in the spirit that characterized the more robust people of the frigid and temperate zones: «it was the deep and resilient *logic* that had let Mediterranean thinkers long view their neighbors in the hotter latitudes of the globe as natural subordinates. The newly discovered peoples in the high Atlantic were recognizable to Columbus as human, but *nature* had prevented them from acting as anything but 'children'» (409, emphasis in the original).

Colón's tropical reading of the lands and people he encountered took hold in Spain but not without opposition. Indeed, the very terms that justified the new wave of expansion and conquest became weapons against empire in the writings of Colón's most vigorous critic (and champion): Bartolomé de las Casas. Las Casas, of course, is always present in any evaluation of the Columbian enterprise, especially because his digest of Colón's *Diario* is our only version of that foundational source. Wey Gómez's own reading of the early Columbian documents is heavily indebted to Las Casas's gloss, as he acknowledges. (44)

In particular, Las Casas asserted the centrality of Albertus Magnus, the most influential theorist of the tripartite world, to Colón's cosmography, even though the evidence that Colón read Albertus is indirect. Las Casas used the categories refined by his medieval Dominican predecessor to subvert the vision of the Indies that had emerged from the early voyages and settlements in the Caribbean. For instance, the Bishop of Chiapa insisted that the Indies were *temperate*, not *torrid*. He could draw upon his own experience as a colonist to make this argument; he could also find ample proof in the ambiguous, even confused, descriptions in the writings of Colón. The implications of his refutation of the tropicality of the Indies were profound: «if the Indies were as temperate as, or more properly temperate than, Mediterranean Europe, then the Indians were *not* 'by nature' Europe's subjects or slaves» (399, emphasis in the original).

The lifelong effort of Las Casas to invert the pro-conquest arguments of other Spaniards is familiar to any reader of the *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* and other works: in his renderings, Spaniards, not Indians, were barbaric and even cannibalistic; human sacrifice in the Indies was not a sign of diabolical possession but of an incomplete striving toward the true Christian God. Yet Wey Gómez has added something genuinely new to how we understand the polemics over conquest, colonization, and conversion through his rigorous exploration of late medieval cosmography and geo-politics. Most significantly, the Colón that emerges from his research is not the messianic religious zealot or the savvy (but slightly obtuse) Mediterranean mariner that historians have recently presented to us. He is a learned and ruthless advocate of conquest whose ambitions and achievements dovetailed with the leading intellectual pa

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