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# WHAT COLUMBUS SAW ON LANDING IN THE WEST INDIES

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to recognize and to explain the reaction of Columbus to the natural and human aspects of the small islands he visited after his first landfall at the Bahamas.

This task suggests a minute and thorough interpretation of the fragments of his *Journal* which contain the account of his first experiences in the New World. The scanty details described by Columbus in these notes obtain a new expressiveness if they are considered as symptoms for his personal or objective interest in the singularities of the newly discovered land.

The investigation of the impulses, emotions and influences which determined the characteristic selection of the things observed and described immediately after this landfall contributes essentially to our understanding of the complex personality of Columbus and to the clarification of the still discussed objective of his enterprise.

In this way it is possible to establish the intellectual attitude of the Admiral toward the reality of exotic life and nature as observed in an unusual geographical environment.

On the other hand it is through this verification of Columbus's reactions and opinions that it is possible to demonstrate the authenticity and reliability of the *Journal* handed down by Bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas.

THE question of what Columbus saw on landing in the West Indies may appear an idle one, in view of the fact that we have his letters to Luis de Santángel as well as many fragments of his *Journal*, which contain, together with authentic records of the events of his voyages, the account of his experiences and the direct expression of his opinions and feelings.<sup>1</sup> Thus it might seem that we would be justified in believing that by reading these documents we could grasp the impressions gained by the Admiral during his first contacts with the men and countries of the New World.

But if we give our critical attention to his notes and reports we soon recognize the error in this assumption. For if these were indeed as exhaustive and as reliable as has been supposed, then there would be no "Columbus Question" that becomes more and more intricate as the result of incessantly changing interpretations that teem with more or less fanciful hypotheses.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Samuel E. Morison, "Texts and Translations of the Journal of Columbus's First Voyage" in the *Hisp. Amer. Hist. Rev.*, XIX, 1939, N. 3.

<sup>2</sup> A bibliographical and critical survey of the present state of the Columbus question is contained in an article of Charles E. Nowel in the *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, XLIV, 1939, N. 3, p. 802 sq.

The insufficiency of the details and the clearly erroneous or inaccurate statements contained in the documents just mentioned reduce the value even of their positive data, and this has given room for doubt as to Columbus's reliability, honesty and good faith.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, from his letters and from the *Journal*, arguments have been drawn that call into question both his geographical knowledge and his nautical capacity—that is, the fundamental conditions of his unprecedented enterprise.

Thus such a distinguished scholar as the late Dr. Cecil Jane sought to demonstrate that at the date of his first voyage Columbus was an illiterate who did not acquire the ability to write until the period between the discovery and the year 1497.<sup>4</sup> If his letter sent to Luis de Santángel in March 1493 does indeed bear in itself, as Dr. Jane assumed, all the marks of having been the work of a clerk who gave literary form to materials supplied to him, then it will be impossible any longer to consider this incomparable document as an exact and personal expression of Columbus's actual opinions.

These far-reaching skeptical conclusions suggest the fitness of a re-examination of the whole question of the literacy of Columbus and of the authenticity of his reports. Recently the expedition organized and led by Professor Samuel E. Morison of Harvard University braved the perils of the ocean and the risks of war, following the track of Columbus's voyages in an effort to check through nautical experience and observation the statements and descriptions handed down by Bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas. Our task is much less pretentious; we simply ask ourselves what Columbus saw in the islands he discovered on his first voyage; we limit our investigations to his first impressions as these are described in the presumably authentic fragments of his *Journal*. In this way we shall not be able to compare his descriptions with the natural and human aspects of the countries he visited. But this restriction of our interest in the documents of Columbus's landfall and discoveries does not necessarily ex-

<sup>3</sup> Especially in the works of H. Vignaud, *Histoire Critique de la Grande Entreprise de C.C.*, 2 vols., Paris, 1911, and R. D. Carbia, *La Nueva Historia del Descubrimiento de America*, Buenos Aires, 1936, intended to prove that the *Journal* of C.C. handed down by Bartolomé de Las Casas is a deliberate falsification.

<sup>4</sup> Cecil Jane, "The Question of the Literacy of C.C." in the *Hisp. Amer. Hist. Rev.*, X, 1930, p. 500 sq. and the Introduction to his edition of *Select Documents Illustrating the Four Voyages of C.C.*, London, Hakluyt Society, I, 1930.

clude the attainment of some positive conclusions of a wider historical and geographical interest.

Thus we are led to turn aside from the facts described and to give our attention to Columbus's personal reactions rather than to the objective reality of the nature and peculiarities of the Indies. His impressions are revealed by his words and his style, so that the geographical reality still lives in the form in which he saw it during his astonishing experiences and with the features fixed after repeated observations, and his expressions still have the power to evoke the images of a world long ago vanished and entirely faded from men's memory.

Spanish colonization and the influence of European civilization have thoroughly transformed the natural aspects of the Bahamas and the Antilles that Columbus described. The introduction of a new flora and fauna of European or exotic origin, of field labor, trade and industry, have extensively changed the nature of the soil and the conditions of life in all these islands. There is no trace left of the original Indian natives who were taken away from their native soil and disappeared a few decades after the conquest. Only the larger natural scenery of the mountains, seas, rocks, plains, lakes and rivers, still remains as a stable frame of a human activity which transformed within a short lapse of time a rudimentary stone-age society into a lively colonial organization.

Within these islands very little remains from the age of their first colonization. Furthermore, Columbus's own laconic and summary descriptions of landscapes, localities and events render even more difficult (sometimes indeed impossible) their exact recognition and complicate the attempts to verify his statements by a comparison with the geographical reality and the topographical peculiarities of the islands. It must be borne in mind that the identification of Guanahanì (or, San Salvador) with the Watling Island of the Bahamas was for a long time the result of a compromise reached after inconclusive discussions and accepted in general rather as a provisory and conventional solution than as an established fact.<sup>5</sup>

This uncertainty is due to the circumstance that the terms used by Columbus in describing the island are few and devoid of

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. the article of R. T. Gould on "The Landfall of C." in the *Geograph. Journal*, London, LXIX, 1927, p. 403 sq.

exactness or color. And it must be added that at this time, and at this stage of nautical science, the exact calculation of the geographical position of newly discovered lands was not within the reach of even the most skillful navigator. All measurements taken in those uncharted waters with the rudimentary instruments then in use could be only approximate and of small practical value.

This fact may explain why the Admiral undertook an astronomical and geodetical determination of his geographic position only in exceptional cases; for the most part he trusted in his own "sens marin" and in the customary tricks of nautical routine. In his *Journal* and in his letters figures are rarely used. The extent of a country, the circumference of an island, the altitude of a mountain are seldom stated in numerical terms, but are generally designated by means of paraphrases, epithets, or apparently insignificant expressions.

Consequently Columbus's descriptions of the lands discovered in all his voyages are to be considered not merely as geographical documents but, at the same time, as literary monuments containing the expression of an individual attitude toward man and nature, science and experience. If we accept this point of view we are protected against every disappointment that might arise from the scientific deficiencies of these reports. At the same time our interest is directed towards the personality of the author, as we try to see with his eyes what the discoveries revealed to him.

After a thirty-six days' voyage from the Canaries, Guanahani appeared to Columbus at the dawn of October 12<sup>th</sup> as both a concrete reality and a land of mystery. The small island rose before him as the end, toilsomely attained, of an exciting if uneventful passage and, at the same time, as a starting point toward a land of hope, if not of promise. There he spent two days and two nights, that is, time enough to obtain an exact picture and to gather a comprehensive impression of the country. An unabbreviated portion of the *Journal* containing both the records of these memorable days and the description of the island had been preserved by Bartolomé de Las Casas in a form sufficiently reliable for us to recognize in these fascinating pages the authentic expression of Columbus's first experiences in the New World, and of his reactions thereto.

The greatest part of the description of Guanahanì is contained in the passage written by the Admiral on the evening of the second day (Saturday the 13<sup>th</sup> of October) in a mood of composure and meditation, when all the natives had gone ashore in their boats.<sup>6</sup> At this very moment he decided to continue his journey in search of the island of Cipango, thereby renouncing all attempt to ascertain whether the cotton and the gold used by the natives were produced on the spot. But in spite of the two days spent at Guanahanì his knowledge of this island was summary and superficial. The (oft-quoted) words devoted to it describe it as "rather large and very flat, with very green trees, many waters, and a large lake in the centre, without any mountain, and the whole land so green that it is a pleasure to look on it."<sup>7</sup>

The only distinguishing feature mentioned in these lines is the lake referred to in the midst of an enumeration of vague and general details. The next day he admired, on the other side of the island to the East, "gardens of the most beautiful trees he ever saw, and with leaves as green as those of Castile in the month of April and May, and much water";<sup>8</sup> but these additional, indistinct, impressions serve to reveal Columbus's feeling for the picturesque aspects of the country rather than to add any new element to the scanty remarks written a day before.

Compared with his more detailed and increasingly enthusiastic descriptions of the islands discovered later among the Bahamas and the Antilles, these first impressions of landscape and vegetation appear even more desultory and conventional. Obviously the Admiral took some time in becoming familiar with the natural peculiarities of the West Indies. These were, on the one hand, strange and baffling to him, but on the other they were not unaccessible to a navigator with some knowledge

<sup>6</sup> *Raccolta di Documenti e Studi pubbl. dalla R. Commissione Colombiana*, Parte I, vol. I, p. 18, 128/29.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18, 115 sq.: "Esta ysula es bien grande, y muy llana, y de árboles muy verdes, y muchas aguas, y una laguna en medio grande, sin ninguna montaña, y toda ella verde, que es plazer de mirarla." In the English translations the word "laguna" is rendered sometimes by "lake," sometimes by "lagoon." It must be kept in mind that, while lagoon denotes in English an area of salt or brackish water (cfr. *Murray's Dictionary*), the Spaniards use "laguna" to designate lake-like stretches of sweet water. Speaking of the Lake Texcoco surrounding the city of Tenochtitlan, the actual Ciudad de Méjico, in his letter to the Emperor Charles V of the 30th of October, 1520, Fernán Cortés emphasized that that capital was "fundada en esta laguna salada."

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. the records of October 14th, *Raccolta* etc., p. 19, 120 sq.

of exotic countries and climates. Taking up again his navigation, now directed toward the legendary island of Cipango, he seems to have been especially interested in the nautical and strategic aspects of Guanahanì rather than in its landscape and vegetation. For the first time after the discovery he took into consideration the practical benefits of the island calculated from the standpoint of a colonist and exploiter.

After having ascertained that the East shore of the small island was surrounded by an extensive reef of rocks making an anchorage impossible and coasting very dangerous, he recognized behind them "a port large enough for as many ships as there are in Christendom", protected by a narrow entrance and by a landtongue which he thought might be fortified and "converted into an island within two days."<sup>9</sup> The extent of this harbour is just as greatly exaggerated as is the number of the islands constituting the archipelago of the Bahamas, which he imagined to be innumerable after the natives who were taken on board his ships "gave him the name of more than a hundred."<sup>10</sup> Likewise he overrated all the distances between the Bahamas visited by him or lying within his sight.

These exaggerations of lengths, quantity, and extent may be explained by the atmospheric conditions of a tropical archipelago that alter the proportions of the objects which are observed and the outlines of the natural scenery. Furthermore, exaggerations of this kind are the consequence of psychological illusions of which Columbus had been the victim in many cases, as had been many other navigators and explorers before him of equal experience. He shared this tendency with Marco Polo, for example, who estimated that the Yang-tse-Kiang carried more shipping than all the waterways of Christendom of his day<sup>11</sup> and that the Eastern "Sea of Chin" in the proximity of Cipango contained 7459 islands frequented by mariners and traders of those parts.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.6-14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.25.

<sup>11</sup> *The Book of Ser Marco Polo* trans. and ed. by Col. Yule, 3rd edition, New York, 1929, II, p. 170 and the corresponding passages of the critical edition of L. Foscolo Benedetto, *Il Milione*, Firenze 1928 (Franco-italian version), and of C. Moule and P. Pelliot, *Marco Polo: The description of the World*, 2 Vols. London 1938/39 (Latin version and English translation *variorum*).

<sup>12</sup> Yule, II, p. 264.

Nevertheless, the insufficiency of details, as well as his exaggeration of dimensions and proportions, reveal that the natural aspects of the newly discovered islands did not especially attract the attention of the Admiral. This impression is confirmed by the fact that, on the contrary, he has been very meticulous and exhaustive in giving a very detailed report of the appearance of the natives, their customs and peculiarities, depicting their life and habits with a keen and expressive realism.

Although never considered before as representing a particular problem, the remarkable disproportion between his descriptions of the natural aspects of the island on the one hand, and of its inhabitants on the other, is somehow striking and enigmatical. Against this conventional background, rapidly sketched, of "very green trees, and much water, and fruits of diverse kinds" was described this simple and friendly people, "going naked as when their mothers bore them", represented as "very well made, with handsome bodies, and very good countenances". Again and again, with full details, and sometimes interrupting the account of the events, Columbus mentions the features of these people, the color of their skin, their beautiful eyes and their short, coarse hair "brought down to the eyebrows, except for a few locks behind, which they wear long and never cut". He observes the broad foreheads, the variously painted faces, the straight legs, and the good stature of these "handsome, very well formed people", among whom he noticed no paunchiness, and no physical defects other than the marks of wounds received in fighting foreign invaders. He attributed an especial importance to these witnesses of war and invasion, immediately deducing therefrom that the enemies must "come here from the mainland to take them (the natives) prisoners". This was an entirely unfounded conviction which indirectly reveals the Admiral's opinion about the geographical situation and the political conditions of the islands that were supposed to be in the vicinity of the Asiatic continent and within the reach of the Grand Khan's predatory incursions.<sup>13</sup> These conclusions, drawn from the scars observed on the natives' bodies, are substituted for indications as to the geographical position of the island.

<sup>13</sup> On November 1st Columbus noted in his *Journal*: "I believe that all these islands are at war with the Gran Can". *Raccolta etc. l.c.*, p. 34, 1.9/10.



Columbus was no less impressed by the moral qualities and intellectual capacity of these good-natured savages, and he stresses their harmlessness and docility, noting that, being ignorant of the use of iron, they cut themselves by touching the swords of the Spaniards. On the other hand he was surprised by their vivid receptivity, as well as by the kindness with which they were ready to give away their whole property and their childish happiness in receiving the trash that was distributed among them. His description of the "wonderfully worked" canoes of various kinds and sizes, and of the natives' dexterity in propelling and steering them, betrays the anxious interest with which Columbus observed the lively scenes taking place between the shores and the caravels.

Nevertheless he was not inclined to overrate or to idealize these naive islanders. They soon appeared to him for what they really were—that is, "a race of people very poor in everything" and having no religion, though at his departure they all came to the shore "calling out and giving thanks to God" as a farewell to "the men who had come from Heaven". Later on Columbus corrected these impressions of the natives' religious feelings and conceptions, and he added new details concerning their life and habits, carefully noting the differences between the inhabitants of the other West Indian islands with whom he came into closer and closer contact.

But the impressions gathered at Guanahanì were decisive and lasting. Although there were no more surprises or special events before his landing at Española, he kept alive his interest in the natives, and his curiosity as to their nature; these natives remained for a long time the most important object by far of his penetrating attention. Evidently at Guanahanì and the adjacent islands he was principally concerned with matters of human interest, neglecting the panoramic and natural attractions, and even renouncing his search for the gold mines supposed to be in the vicinity.

If we remember that the exploitation of the natural wealth of the West Indies became soon after an important aim of his voyage, and that the search for gold obsessed him as a fixed idea, we may perhaps suppose that Bartolomé de Las Casas, the apostle and protector of the Indians, extracted from Columbus's *Journal* those passages which especially concern the natives,

reducing, in his abstract of the same *Journal*, the records devoted to nautical or natural subjects. In fact, one of the last scholars who sailed in the Admiral's wake for the purpose of establishing the course of the caravels among these islands, suspected that Las Casas failed to include in his précis the astronomical observations of Columbus, probably in the belief that they would not be of interest to the general public.<sup>14</sup>

Such a hypothesis may easily be accepted in our day because of the growing tendency to call into question, not only the reliability, but also the honesty and good faith of this noble, courageous and most certainly conscientious prelate. The trustworthiness of his précis and the authenticity of his quotations are proved, in this case, by the fact that the letter of Columbus to Luis de Santángel resuming his experiences of the first voyage is devoted chiefly to the subject of the natives, and reveals the same lively interest and vigilant care in giving, with more and more details, a complete image of their life and customs. As in the *Journal*, the description of natural scenery takes up only a limited space, while the geographical data appear, for the most part, reduced to the enumeration of names and the—always exaggerated—measures of distances and areas.

As Columbus wrote this letter on February 15<sup>th</sup>, 1493 "off the Canary Islands" on his return from the West Indies, he already believed that these natives whom he was watching with so much solicitude and benevolence would be sent to Spain as slaves—"as many as their Highnesses (the Catholic sovereigns) shall order to be shipped and who will be from among the idolators".

It is not to be wondered at that for a long time he had had the intention of developing, on a large scale, the slave trade. At that time some of the sailing men were specializing in this kind of traffic, which represented one of the most lucrative branches of the colonial enterprises.<sup>15</sup> The Catholic sovereigns rejected all suggestions to that effect, and the enslavement of the Indians which took place later on was kept within the limits of their own countries.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. R. Cronau, *The Discovery of America and the Landfall of Columbus*, New York, 1921, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Gold and slaves were the first cargo brought home by Antão Gonçalves from West Africa in 1441. Cfr. Samuel E. Morison, *Portuguese Voyages to America in the Fifteenth Century*, Cambridge, Mass., 1940, p. 11.

Yet these intentions and actions fail to explain the intense and lasting interest which the Admiral felt for the predestined victims of his undertaking. It is impossible to suppose with any degree of likelihood that his insistent expressions of warm appreciation of the handsome figures and the good nature of these poor savages might have been intended as enticing sales's talks on the part of a slave-dealer anxious to place his wares.

The question of the prevailing human interest of the discovery, apart from its as yet incalculable consequences, becomes even more intricate and important when we take into closer consideration the fact that the reports of Columbus's second voyage deal with the problems pertaining to the first colonial settlement, or with the manners and customs of the Indians, but lack full information about the Lesser Antilles, or about the Admiral's nautical and geographical experiences.<sup>16</sup>

Obviously, we do not possess his own account of the entire voyage, but the *Memorandum* delivered to Antonio de Torres, Captain of the caravel Maria-Galante, as a memorial to the Catholic sovereigns, may be considered as an authentic document written or dictated by the Admiral on January 30, 1494. The most complete account of the whole expedition we owe to Dr. Diego Alvares Chanca, the surgeon of the fleet, whose most valuable information, sent to the Cabildo of Seville in February 1494, is concerned with the Indians of the Lesser Antilles, betraying little interest in the geographical, nautical and natural aspects of the country. Consequently we are even less informed about this voyage than about the first one, although the deficiencies of the two principal documents are made up for by other indirect sources of various origin.

Nevertheless it is difficult to recognize the course taken by that gallant fleet of seventeen sea-worthy vessels, or to identify all the islands mentioned or described in Dr. Chancas's account. His whole attention is directed to their inhabitants. Professor Morison, who recently sought to check the route followed by Columbus between the Lesser Antilles, supposed that the one-sided interest shown by the physician of the fleet for the manners and customs of the Indians was due to the fact that this subject matter was "better calculated than courses and distances, winds

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. Samuel E. Morison, *The Second Voyage of C.C. etc.*, Oxford, 1939, p. 10.

and currents, to amuse his municipal correspondents, from whom he expected certain favours and services".<sup>17</sup>

But it would be difficult to accept the fact that the doctor wrote his very serious and instructive, even if unsatisfactory, narrative mainly for the entertainment of the highest municipal authority of the most important seaport of southern Spain. Nor is it probable that his duties as physician of the fleet prevented him, on the one hand, from following the course of the fleet with the eye of a navigator, and as a scholar, but, on the other hand, allowed him to make precise and detailed ethnological observations. It is more probable that like other navigators, professional or occasional, Dr. Chanca paid no particular attention to the geographical details or the natural and nautical aspects of the country, and that he confined his interests to the life and doings of the natives, as he observed them continuously through direct experience intentionally undertaken.

The predominance of human interest in both the reports of Columbus and those of Dr. Chanca is not a mere coincidence; this is proved by the fact that the same peculiarity is to be observed in the presumably authentic (as well as probably spurious) letters of Amerigo Vespucci. It is not within the scope of our present task to discuss whether the more detailed accounts printed during the life of the latter are forgeries made up from the data of the shorter, and allegedly genuine, letters addressed to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici. But it is an established fact that the great part of the narratives attributed to Vespucci is taken up with more or less extensive accounts of the manners and customs of the natives of the South American mainland and islands, while descriptions of a geographical nature are almost non-existent, and the few that are to be found are still more meagre and perfunctory.

Moreover, it is incontestable that his calculations of geographical position are erroneous or self-contradictory and, at the best, careless and unreliable. His estimates of distances reveal the same tendency toward exaggeration that is recognizable in the accounts of Columbus, while all his remarks concerning the celestial phenomena are sheer nonsense. Nevertheless, all these deficiencies have failed to affect his renown among his

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

contemporaries, or to restrain the learned cosmographer Waldseemüller from glorifying Vespucci in books and maps.

This conformity of interest to be observed with all navigators of the Columbian era in regard to the aspects of the newly discovered lands goes to prove that the same vivid curiosity linked together the Spanish sovereigns, the members of the Cabildo of Seville, several of the Florentine notables, and the scholars of the Court of King René. In other words, it corresponded with the general tendencies of this epoch, and induced the voyagers to describe the life of the natives with considerable detail, and to neglect the scientific questions connected with the discoveries. Consequently they paid merely a cursory attention to the nautical problems and scientific attainments of their enterprises.

We cannot believe that there was a discrepancy between these general inclinations and the particular interest of the travellers and navigators. It is impossible, or at least improbable, that the latter should have kept to themselves the fruits of their nautical experiences and the results of their astronomical observations, making known only what they supposed to be of wider popular interest. In reality, Columbus, as well as the other navigators of his time, did not see, observe and record in a quite different manner the facts and events which they related, considering these to be essential and the most valuable apart from the practical purpose of their explorations. The time had not yet come when scientific interest was so predominant that the desire for knowledge and understanding would attempt to comprehend the reality of earth and heaven by means of objective measurements and exact calculations alone. These explorers were men whose main intellectual interest, aside from the commercial profit of their enterprises, was concerned with human beings and human peculiarities, just as was the imaginary and symbolic Ulysses of Dante, who crossed the ocean in a spirit of self-sacrifice, desiring

to be experienced of the world  
and of the vice and virtue of mankind.<sup>18</sup>

It was still the spirit of adventure that prompted and informed the enterprises of Columbus and Vespucci, though of course there were also colonial interests and religious aims in-

<sup>18</sup> *Inferno*, XXVI, v. 98/99.

volved in such expeditions. Astronomy and cosmography were considered to be useful, but not indispensable, for successful navigation into unknown zones. The resources of these sciences were exhausted in the preparations undertaken for the expeditions. The main objective of the Portuguese astronomers, cartographers, and sailors cooperating in the "Villa do Infante" after 1420, was the realization of the nautical policy of Henri the Navigator, but the attempt which he inspired to establish geographical controls of the expeditions was without scientific method or aim. Astronomy and cosmography still belonged to the "liberal arts" and were cultivated in a speculative spirit, independently of the "mechanical arts" and of the necessities of practical life and specific professions.

This separation of empirical routine and theoretic speculation, of professional tasks and scientific problems, was characteristic of all arts and disciplines of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, although successful attempts to overcome the traditional autonomy of both authority and experience were not lacking on either side. The history of medicine, physics and mathematics reveals similar tendencies that represent the typical attitude and the characteristic state of mind prevailing during the epoch of the great discoveries.<sup>19</sup>

Before this period there is no record of a naval expedition that included a cosmographer or mathematician charged with the calculation of geographical positions. Portulans and other maps of navigation were at this time still based on the results of empirical routine, and on nautical traditions which had nothing in common with erudition or science.<sup>20</sup> It was long after the discovery and colonization of the West-African coast that Master Joseph, a physician and cosmographer, with a nautical astrolabe of new construction, executed in Guinea several valuable astronomical observations which were mentioned with appreciation by Columbus in his autographical notes to Piccolomini's celebrated *Historia*.<sup>21</sup> But this same Joseph,

<sup>19</sup> These aspects of the History of Science of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance have been considered in the writer's *Geschichte der Neusprachlichen Wissenschaftlichen Literatur*, especially in Vol. I, Heidelberg, 1919, and II. Leipzig, etc. 1922.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. the author's *Storia Letteraria delle Scoperte Geografiche*, Firenze, 1937, p. 143 sq.

<sup>21</sup> "Rex Portugalie misit in Guinea A.D. 1485 magister Jhosepius, fixicus eius et astrologus, [com] piendum altitudinem solis in tota Guinea; qui omnia adimplevit et

together with his colleague Roderigo and Diego Ortiz, Bishop of Ceuta, was responsible for the rejection of Columbus's first official project of an oceanic navigation, which in 1482 he submitted to King João II of Portugal.<sup>22</sup> In the course of the following ten years the famous "junta" of Salamanca and a *primariorum hominum consilium*, composed of Spanish theologians, scholars and sailors, refused to accept his arguments in favor of his enterprise.<sup>23</sup>

Its successful realization did not depend on the assistance of scholars and men of science; in the long years of struggle and preparation Columbus found among intelligent and cultivated men of practical experience the understanding and the support which the representatives of official science had denied him. Thus, returning to Spain, after his third voyage, as a prisoner of Bobadilla, the Admiral haughtily refused to be judged by the "Caballeros de Letras"—i.e., those suspect knight of the quill that had always denied him their aid.<sup>24</sup>

Active cooperation between navigators and cosmographers began shortly after these successful oceanic enterprises in order to give a systematic basis to the nautical art. The correspondence between Columbus and Toscanelli (if this be authentic) anticipated this development to some extent, but in any case the Genoese sailor did not expect, nor did he receive, from the Florentine scholar, anything more than statements and deductions of a purely speculative character.<sup>25</sup> He believed these to be sufficient to convince the sceptics of the Portuguese and Spanish courts with the force of the theoretical arguments contained therein; as is well known, the results failed to match his expectations.

It is now understandable that, after such experiences, Columbus engaged no scholars, scientists, or priests to join his first expedition; all his companions and subordinates were sail-

renunciavit dito serenissimo regi, me presente etc., et hoc cum maxima diligentia procuravit." *Raccolta* etc. P.I, Vol. 2, p. 369, § 860. Master Joseph is mentioned again in the marginal notes to Peter d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi* in connection with the measurement of the degree. *Raccolta* etc. l.c., p. 407, § 490.

<sup>22</sup> For more details cfr. Cesare de Lollis, *C.C. nella Leggenda e nella Storia*, 3th ed., Roma (1923), p. 73 sq.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81 sq. and 95 sq.; J. B. Thacher, C.C., I, 1903, p. 417 sq.

<sup>24</sup> Letter to the Nurse of Prince Juan. *Raccolta* etc., P. I, Vol. 2, p. 73, l.6; Thacher, *op. cit.*, II, p. 423.

<sup>25</sup> The text of the Letters in *Raccolta* etc., P. I, Vol. 1, p. 364 sq.; Thacher, I, p. 300 sq.

ors and routine men of different practical professions.<sup>26</sup> And, probably for the same reason, he refused to engage a competent astronomer as navigating officer for his second voyage and, at the end of his career, expressed the belief that he was directed in his discoveries by prophetic visions and by the will of God. This certainly was not his opinion during the period of his supposed correspondence with Toscanelli, when he was seeking to gather from various sources scientific evidences as an aid for his projected voyage.<sup>27</sup> Nor could it have been his belief to be "a man sent from God" that determined him to refuse the mathematician suggested by the Queen; undoubtedly he was convinced that the assistance of this learned astronomer would have been devoid of practical benefit. As the objective of his enterprise was to reach an (undisclosed) section of Eastern and Southern Asia vaguely designated as Indian and described by classical authors as well as by Marco Polo, Mandeville, and Toscanelli, it is probable that Columbus had in mind the remarks of Solinus concerning the navigation in those waters, where, as the Latin geographer affirms, observation of the stars was useless or even impossible.<sup>28</sup> Through Peter d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi* he had learned of this passage of Solinus,<sup>29</sup> whose statements of a descriptive and imaginary character were propagated in all the works of scholarly and popular geography of the period.<sup>30</sup> In any case, neither Columbus nor Vespucci—a less pious Florentine and a man inclined to an even more realistic evaluation of such expeditions—engaged cosmographers or mathematicians to

<sup>26</sup> The names of Columbus's companions and of the members of his crew are mentioned—in Alicia B. Gould y Quincy's "Nueva Lista Documentada de los Tripulantes de Colón en 1492" in *Boletín de la R. Academia de la Historia*, Madrid, 1924–1928.

<sup>27</sup> The late Dr. Cecil Jane insisted on the assertion that Columbus considered his enterprise, since the beginning, as a divine mission directly inspired by God. Cfr. the Introduction to *Select Documents* etc.

<sup>28</sup> "Nulla in navigando sidera observatio, utpote ubi septentriones nequaquam videntur vergiliaeque numquam apparent". (C. Julii Solini, *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, ed. Th. Mommsen, Berlin 1864, p. 218.) "Observatione itaque navigandi nulla suppetente, ut ad destinatum pergentes locum capiant, vehunt alites etc." (*ibid.*).

<sup>29</sup> E. Buron, *Ymago Mundi de Pierre d'Ailly*, Paris 1930, II, p. 395. The passage was partially underlined and annotated by Columbus (*Raccolta* etc., P. I, II, p. 395, § 320).

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. Ch. V. Langlois, *La Connaissance de la Nature et du Monde au Moyen Age*, Paris 1927. Mandeville (*Travels*, Chapt. XXXIII) affirms that "in those islands (*i.e.* of Taprobane and the East Indies) men see there no stars so clearly as in other places. For there appear no stars, but only one clear star that men clepe Canopus".



assist them in their navigation. Evidently the confidence of these men in the resources of science was limited, being confined to the theoretical premises of their undertakings. They were adventurers who trusted in their experience, intelligence, and endurance, expecting to find wonders and adventures—and profits—in unknown lands.

The reports of all mediaeval travellers show an identical standpoint as regards the selection and description of the facts that were taken into closest consideration. Their interests were directed mainly to earth and man, occasionally to beasts and monsters, sometimes to supposed wonder-working enchantments. The increase of realism in the accounts of the travellers after the Franciscan missions in Asia during the 13<sup>th</sup> century did not affect this general tendency. In reports of this type, as well as in all fiction and poetry of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Nature constitutes an accessory element of the narrative, being merely a frame for human life, activity, and events. For example in the romance of *Amadis*, where the principal events take place in imaginary islands of phantastic archipelagos, landscape and natural scenery appear exclusively in this function. And they are represented with no more words and in no different terms than those which Columbus, at the same time, used to describe the natural aspects of the Bahamas, observed by him immediately after his landing at Guanahani. It seems that, at the beginning, he gave no great attention to them, so that these first descriptions are lacking in color and detail.

This attitude toward Nature and the natural landscape was characteristic not only of all the explorers of Africa and America during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but also of Marco Polo and the travellers before and after him. The essential difference between the oceanic navigators and these continental travellers lies in the fact that the latter came into contact with highly civilized peoples or with nations influenced by such peoples, while the others discovered primitive or savage tribes who lived in a state of nature.

If we compare, for instance, the account of Aloise da Cadamosto's voyages to the western coast of Africa with Columbus's *Journal* and Letter of the first voyage, or with Dr. Chanca's report, we shall find a similar state of mind revealed, according to which the purport and the substance of their records are

limited to a few arguments of an analogous nature.<sup>31</sup> On his voyage from Cape Saint Vincent in March 1455 to the Canaries and thence along the African coast as far as Senegal, the Gambia, and the Cape Verde Islands, the young Venetian nobleman and trader was particularly interested in the inhabitants. The emphasis of his narrative is placed on the description of their stature, appearance, life, customs, houses, markets, products, and beliefs; this is followed by a vivid and detailed enumeration of the strange animals living in that region. But the geographical details are limited to cursory remarks and to the names of countries, islands, capes and rivers; the whole is just sufficient for a rapid orientation. Nor is there a word concerning the change of the stars or the aspect of the sky.

A century before, Giovanni Boccaccio had given, in the same style, a colorful description of the natives of the Canary Islands, availing himself of the information which had reached Florence from Seville and which concerned the expedition organized in 1341 by Niccoloso da Recco and Angiolino de' Corbizzi.<sup>32</sup>

Taking a broad view of the evolution of travellers' accounts, as representing a particular branch of the literature of the late Middle Ages, we may infer from all these coincidences that the records of Columbus do not deviate substantially from a tradition which had been kept alive by a lasting spiritual attitude and which corresponded with the culture, the education and the interests of all prominent voyagers of the epoch of the great discoveries.

It is possible to draw some important conclusions from this statement, but first we must abandon the general opinion which presupposes the existence of a certain discrepancy between the voyagers as authors and the public as readers. The *Journal* of Columbus was not composed with the intention of impressing the sovereigns and the court with tempting prospects of further expeditions even more successful; on the contrary, it must be understood as representing a series of monologues of a vivid and intense spirit approaching a new field of experience and disclosing his impressions and emotions in frank words, genuine and unadorned. Thus, from time to time, there is in his descrip-

<sup>31</sup> R. Caddeo, *Le Navigazioni Atlantiche di A. da Cà da Mosto* etc., 2nd edit., Milano 1929. English translation with Introduction and notes by G. R. Crone, *The Voyages of Cadamosto*, London, Hakluyt Society, 1937.

<sup>32</sup> Caddeo, *op. cit.*, p. 141 sq.

tions and pictures a lyrical note arising, on especial occasions, to higher accents, in which a sympathetic sensitivity may recognize a poetical vein and an aspiration toward a nobler and more artistic style.<sup>33</sup>

This unmistakable ring of Columbus's prose, as well as the bulk of the positive remarks contained in the *Journal*, prove the genuineness and the reliability of Las Casas's quotations and abstracts. Nothing essential has been left out in the latter's précis—at least, in the passages concerning Columbus's landfall and his navigation among the Bahama Islands, nor did the original contain more details of his navigation than those revealed by the unabbreviated or the integral passages of the *Journal*.

It was not until his third voyage that Columbus, sailing near the equinoctial, undertook a more systematic observation of the position of the stars, each night "marvelling at such a change in the heavens".<sup>34</sup> At this point Las Casas referred to the Admiral's astronomic observations as carried out, it would seem, in a poetical mood rather than with scientific procedure. This does him more credit than if he had taken calculations, and made observations, which would inevitably have turned out to be erroneous and misleading. For the rest, he was a man of his time, accustomed to consider the world "sub specie humanitatis" in spite of his religious piety and exalted devotion. He followed the anthropocentric tendencies of his epoch, which transformed the earth into a stage displaying a gay tableau of various human singularities.

While the geography of scholarly tradition still peopled the exotic regions of the earth with all sorts of imaginary monsters, Columbus looked upon this "handsomely formed people" of the Lucayos with the delight and the appreciation of an artist of the Renaissance. Vespucci did the same a few years later, expressing his admiration for the well proportioned bodies of the South American natives, whose barbarous customs he described with keen interest but less benevolence.

<sup>33</sup> Alexander von Humboldt pointed out repeatedly, and with admiration, the peculiarities of Columbus' style, generally disregarded by the Admiral's biographers. (Cfr. *Examen Critique de l'Histoire de la Géographie du Nouveau Continent*, passim, and especially Vol. III, Paris 1837, p. 227 sq. and *Cosmos*, II, A, Chap. 1.)

<sup>34</sup> *Raccolta* etc. P. I, Vol. II, p. 24, l. 10 (Las Casas précis of Columbus' narrative of the third voyage).

During his cruise from island to island Columbus's attitude seems to have changed very slowly. The adjustment of his mind to the unusual aspects of the country was generally cautious and groping, and he was seldom dazzled by his enthusiasm, in spite of the exaggerated expectations which he held to tenaciously during the whole way.

If we consider the notes of the *Journal* in themselves, avoiding the common tendency of his biographers to make an epic or a dramatic paraphrase out of his own unadorned and dispassionate expressions, then we may recognize, through Columbus's words, what actually went on in his mind, influencing his decisions and inspiring his opinions. In this way we become able to fix the limits of his imagination and to measure the extent of his sense of realism.

Sailing between the Bahamas or along the shores of Cuba and Haiti, Columbus steadily developed his ability of distinguishing the different aspects of their landscapes and exotic vegetation, as each newly discovered land seemed to him more beautiful than the one last described. It is an extremely interesting task to follow the different stages of this spiritual conquest of the New World as it progressed, day by day, in the Admiral's consciousness. This, however, should be the subject of a special investigation; at present we are concerned only with his first impressions, considered as the starting point of his gradually widening interest in the islands and as a reliable measure for the increasing dimensions of his intellectual horizons. His concluding remarks about the landscape and vegetation of the Bahamas prove that his discernment and penetration in experiencing and observing the New World failed fully to reveal themselves in sight of its natural aspects.

On October 15 Columbus landed at Santa Maria de la Concepción, which is supposed to be the Rum Cay of the Bahamas; he went through the island paying attention mainly to the actions of the natives as observed in his intercourse with them. As for the landscape he notes only that "these islands are very green and fertile, and the breezes very soft", deducing (on more than one occasion) from this fact that they might be hiding many valuable but unknown things.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, P. I, Vol. I, p. 21, l.16, The passage reads in the Spanish text, "ayres muy dulces".

The description of the island points out no distinctive traits, and the terms employed seem to be even poorer and emptier than those used a few days earlier in reference to the shores and the "gardens" of Guanahani. But after the statements and comments above, it would be an error of historic perspective to ask for more objective details and personal impressions, or to infer from the deficiencies of the descriptions that Columbus was indifferent to the charms of the West Indian landscape.<sup>36</sup> In reality we can easily establish that, in the further course of his explorations, his descriptions became more and more eloquent, circumstantial and lyrical, as the natural aspects of the islands visited by him seemed more and more to be in harmony with ideal landscapes of poetical features, animated by lofty mountains, gleaming rivers, evergreen trees, and singing night-ingales.<sup>37</sup>

But obviously, though considered as belonging to "India", the two islets first discovered in the Bahamas seemed still to be far from Ophir, Paradise, and the enchanted wonderlands of the East. To Columbus these small, flat, green islands were pleasing and curious indeed, but evidently not as attractive or tempting as the larger Bahamas, Cuba or Haiti appeared to him later. And in the course of his cruise Columbus's appreciation was quite justified, revealing by this graduation of impressions and expressions the sincerity of his emotion and the honesty of his words.

In spite of the pleasure he took in looking upon them, these islands inhabited by "a people poor in everything", were not sufficiently valuable or promising to detain the ambitious Admiral and his escort of unsentimental sailors and adventurers. Therefore he left to go about seeking traces of the things he was expecting to find in the discovered region. The vegetation, though consisting "of the most beautiful trees he ever saw", seemed to promise little as to the value of their produce. The small bundles of cotton offered by the natives hardly represented precious merchandise, nor could the tiny pieces of gold which

<sup>36</sup> Cfr. Cesare de Lollis, *op. cit.*, p. 138, and R. Menéndez Pidal's remarkable article on "La Lengua de Cristóbal Colón" in *Bulletin Hispanique*, Bordeaux, 1940, p. 1 sq.

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. the *Storia Letteraria delle Scoperte Geografiche* quoted above (n. 20), p. 11 sq.

he saw dangling from the noses of some of the natives have given him proof of the supposed vicinity of Cipango.

Consequently, what Columbus saw on landing in the West Indies, though perhaps sufficient to confirm a preconceived opinion about the exotic countries he expected to discover, could, by itself, certainly not have been able to inspire the visions which he had of the riches and wonders of Eastern Asia. This proves the groundlessness of Vignaud's assumption that it was only when he was in sight of the Bahamas that Columbus decided to direct his expedition toward Cipango and the empire of the Grand Khan. No less untenable, from this angle, appears the opinion of Dr. Jane, that the great enterprise of crossing the ocean was without a definite geographical objective.<sup>38</sup>

From the first impressions gathered soon after his landfall, we are able to recognize the circumstances which induced Columbus to believe that he had reached the borderlands of the Asiatic continent for which he had set sail more than three months before. Beholding the seemingly innumerable islands of the Bahama group, he certainly identified them as belonging to the huge insular region so impressively described by Marco Polo and indicated in the map which the Admiral carried on board.<sup>39</sup> Besides the general impression he received of the fertility of the soil, the luxuriant vegetation, the apparently evergreen trees, and the "very soft breezes" seemed to correspond with the widespread image of India and the Far East, as sketched by all the ancient and mediaeval authors dealing with geographical matters familiar to Columbus, and irrefutably confirmed by Marco Polo's enthusiastic descriptions.<sup>40</sup> These were the inducements which stimulated the Admiral to start immediately his search for gold, even though the condition of the natives seemed not very en-

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. the Introduction to his edition of *Select Documents* etc. and to the English translation of *The Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, London, The Argonaut Press, 1930).

<sup>39</sup> It was only on November 14th that Columbus expressed the belief that he discovered "those innumerable islands that are depicted on the maps of the world in the Far East" (*Raccolta* etc., P. I, Vol. I, p. 42), but the mention of Cipango immediately after the discovery of the Bahamas (*ibid.*, p. 18) proves that he certainly included the latter in the same region of Eastern Asia represented in the maps of Fra Mauro and Martin Behaim, and in that of Toscanelli supposed to have been on board of Columbus's caravel.

<sup>40</sup> Cfr. Peter d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi*, ed. E. Buron, Vol. I, Ch. 15 and 16, p. 258 sq.; Mandeville's *Travels*, Ch. XXXII sq. and the treatises condensed and annotated by Ch. V. Langlois, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

couraging for this purpose. His confidence of success came from the expectations which he and his companions brought with them from Spain. These were all men who had grown up and been educated in an epoch when logical deductions drawn from supposedly indisputable premises still were, at the least, as conclusive as practical experiences.

As the natural aspects and the lovely climate of the country seemed to confirm their belief that they had landed in a country belonging to "India", the existence of gold somewhere in the immediate geographical neighborhood was assured for them all by simple and uncontestable implication, in spite of the fact that the traces of the precious metal were insignificant, and the gold mines themselves invisible.

The discrepancy between Columbus's increasing confidence in his excited search for gold, and the disappointing lack of signs indicating its actual existence in the newly discovered islands, has given rise to unfounded and misleading speculations which have deeply affected the opinion of his character and personality and which, at the same time, have altered and entangled the essential historical problems connected with his achievements. It is out of these assumptions that the doubts as to his reliability and good faith have grown up in recent literature devoted to the Admiral, who is represented in biographies, fiction and essays as a fraudulent adventurer, a greedy pirate, an exalted fool, a professional impostor or, in the best of cases, as an anticipated Don Quixote of the Ocean.

Placing his emphasis on this striking contradiction between actual experience and wishful interpretation of facts, even the best informed of the Italian biographers of Columbus overlooked, minimized, or denied all the other interests of the discoverer in the natural aspects of the islands;<sup>41</sup> consequently he considered Columbus's descriptions of landscape merely as rhetorical padding or as irrelevant and conventional utterances. In a book as eloquent as it is unconvincing, Salvador de Madariaga recently expressed the belief that the intense and tenacious greediness of Columbus for gold represented a typical manifestation of the Jewish character; in accordance with this ancient prejudice he concluded that the Admiral was the scion

<sup>41</sup> Cesare de Lollis, *op. cit.*, p. 12 sq. and 138.

of a Spanish family of *conversos* who had emigrated to Genoa in the fourteenth century.<sup>42</sup>

All these authors ignore the fact that a thirst for gold and similar visions, more or less ecstatic, of wealth and lustre, constituted, in the age of the discoveries, the principal economic inducement that inspired the Portuguese navigations to the West African coast and India, the Spanish conquest of the New World and, a century later, the expedition of Sir Walter Raleigh to Guiana. Columbus started from Spain with just such visions and expectations in his mind, and no premature disappointment was able to shake his confidence or the power of his arguments based on old traditions and authoritative premises. Gold represented the only profit immediately realizable of such costly enterprises, and provided the most direct means of financing an oceanic expedition in this critical epoch of Spain's economic life. This is the simple and the true reason for the predominance of the gold-motif in Columbus's *Journal*, quite apart from pretended racial influences or personal instincts.

It is a matter of fact that, shortly after landing at Guanahani, he "was attentive and took trouble to ascertain if there was gold",<sup>43</sup> and that the search for it became even more intensive during the course of the cruise. In all places, his eyes were directed toward every thing which might have the glittering appearance of gold. We may admit that, at the period of the great discoveries, this was the common attitude of all the explorers and conquerors in search of riches in three different continents. But before Columbus none of them wrote a *Journal* revealing, day by day, their reactions and expectations. His records prove that, from the time of his departure from Palos, Columbus had been certain of his geographical goal, and aware of the incomparable importance of his expedition, directed toward a country partly real, partly fabulous. Consequently, the interplay between ex-

<sup>42</sup> The other allegedly Jewish traits discovered by Madariaga in Columbus's character are his "bargaining sense" and a "typically Jewish mobility". Apart from the fact that the pretended Jewish origin of Columbus could never explain his personality and his achievements, one must deeply deplore that such perfunctory commonplaces, used by unscrupulous agitators for the purpose of religious and racial persecution, are employed now by talented and non-sectarian authors as a standard for the interpretation of historical personalities and events. Cfr. Samuel E. Morison's book review of Madariaga's biography of Columbus (New York, 1940) in the *American Historical Review*, XLV, 1940, N. 3, p. 653 sq. A few lines in R. Menéndez Pidal's article quoted above (n. 36) are sufficient to undo Madariaga's speculations about the supposed Jewish origin of the Admiral.

<sup>43</sup> October 13th, *Raccolta*, etc., P. I, V. I, p. 18, l. 6.



perience and imagination which is revealed in his records and observations, was determined by his expectations as well as by his vivid and enthusiastic spirit. He was not the only victim of such visions and phantoms. Fascinated by the records of the *Journal* his biographers have too often overlooked details which were more consistent and more valuable, preferring rather to hunt out his alluring and misleading illusions than to consider the progress of his personal experiences. But every cautious reader of these records is able to state that the horizon of Columbus's interests increased simultaneously with his sense of realism, in proportion as the gold mines of Cipango and Babeque vanished in the background of the amazing and troubling West Indian scenery.

The different attitudes of the Admiral in regard to empirical reality and remote possibilities, are already recognizable a few days after his first landing. His principal reactions may be observed in the direct and simple expression of his opinions and in the description of incidental events. For example, as he anchored, on October 15<sup>th</sup>, at Santa Maria de la Concepción, a few miles distant from Guanahanì, he wanted to ascertain if the island contained gold—for he had been told by the natives taken on board that “there they wore large bracelets on the legs and arms”.<sup>44</sup>

After some doubts, at first, as to the veracity of such reports, he continued to entertain the idea of people going laden with gold and jewels, an idea which confirmed and enhanced his hope and confidence in the success of the expedition.<sup>45</sup> It can be taken for granted that this enticing picture corresponds rather with popular ideas of Oriental wealth and luxury prevailing in Mediterranean tales, than with the imagination of the simple West Indian natives. Nor is there need to remind ourselves that neither Columbus nor any other explorer of America was able to find, in any place, people wearing such kinds of ornaments. The Admiral who interpreted in this manner the unintelligible talk of his Indians was the victim of the same psychological illusions that lead us to hear sweet melodies in the chime of church-bells, or to discover in the clouds familiar features or impressive images of phantastic shapes.

<sup>44</sup> Oct. 15<sup>th</sup>, *ibid.*, p. 20, l.5 sq. and 21, l.5 sq., 18 sq.

<sup>45</sup> A month later (12<sup>th</sup> of November) the Admiral was quite convinced “that in these islands there are places where they (*i.e.* the Indians) dig out gold, and wear it on their necks, ears, arms, and legs, the rings being very large.”

In dealing with his search for Cipango and with all the phantoms which lured him, the biographers of Columbus have generally emphasized, and indeed excessively, the power of these deceptive images and the consequences of his misinterpretation of reality. But it is no less significant for his character, and no less interesting for the history of his enterprise, that such winged illusions did not hinder him from observing and describing, though with apparently insignificant details, the impressive facts and events of his discoveries. We have eloquent proof of this assertion shortly after his arrival in the West Indies.

It must strike every attentive reader of his *Journal* that, after having consistently evoked the phantastic image of a people covered with gold from head to foot, he immediately begins to give an impressive graphic description of an Indian coming "alone in a boat on his way from the island of Santa Maria to that of Fernandina, carrying with him a piece of their bread, about as large as the fist, and a gourd of water and a piece of brown earth, powdered and kneaded".<sup>46</sup> Columbus also noticed "some dried leaves—probably tobacco—which must be a thing highly prized among them"; this he had already observed at Guanahani. But the only objects of value owned by the man were a string of beads and two small Spanish silver coins worth less than a dime each and "kept in a basket of their making".<sup>47</sup> This poor treasure of the lonely savage was taken along with him as evidence, as he went in his boat from island to island announcing the arrival of "the men who have come from heaven". A scene no less pathetic and impressive than are some of the more glorious episodes of Columbus' adventurous life.

There is an affecting contrast between his visionary expectations and the unadorned reality which he describes with such symptomatic details. A small piece of gold hanging from a hole which some of the natives had in the nose was for him, on the first day of his stay in the West Indies, indisputable proof of the existence in that country of the precious metal. And on the other hand, the entire equipment of the Indian errant in his boat was sufficient to reveal to the Catholic sovereigns and to every reader of the *Journal* the poverty and frugality of these new subjects of the Spanish crown.

<sup>46</sup> October 15th, *Raccolta* etc., *loc. cit.*, p. 21, 1.20-30.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

Thus we see that it was far from the Admiral's intention to mislead his sovereigns by creating false impressions; we must recognize that he composed his *Journal* in a spirit of perfect sincerity. Wishful interpretation of the objects to which his attention was attracted may have stimulated his enthusiasm and his energy, but this was without self-deceit, and without any intention to fool his companions, the rulers of Spain, or the public. Against the golden background of the marvels of Cipango this precise observation of the smallest details of an apparently trivial incident of his voyage is exceedingly eloquent and significant. We may deduce from this first instance that his mind embraced, with an energy of effective comprehension, the suggestions of imagination as well as the appearances of reality. Sometimes these two tendencies may have interfered and led him to false interpretations and erroneous judgments. But without this power of imagination he never would have been able to discover something in the reality of exotic life and nature.

These tendencies were correlative, complementary, and not opposed the one to the other as so many biographers have represented them, thereby creating, and inflating with ingenious dialectical artifices, dramatic contrasts. It was this permanent intentness of his intellectual power that transformed the optical perceptions into exact, purposive observations, the range of which gradually extended. He looked at reality with a spiritual eye and with a breadth of interest and a multifariousness of impressions that has no parallel in the history of voyages and discoveries. And it is in consequence of this wide extension of his impressionable spirit that Columbus was a great man and not alone an able navigator and explorer.

Likewise in Galileo's life and achievements there have to be considered not only his exciting discoveries in the heavens, and his dramatic, if not scientifically unobjectionable, defense of the Copernican system; conversely, his stupendous observations and speculations concerning apparently more trivial phenomena (*e.g.* the fall of bodies, the oscillations of the pendulum) should be valued and studied with no less admiration—both in themselves and as the starting points of a new spiritual evolution of science and mankind.

It is time now to detach Columbus's figure from the golden background against which he is wont to be painted, and to con-

sider him in the midst of the reality he described, described with personal accents, it is true, but none the less, with an increasing insight into the peculiarities of life and nature in the islands he visited. Thereby he became an explorer who extended his discoveries to new spheres of human experience and knowledge. The illusions that possessed him were founded on an authority which owed itself to the unshakable mediaeval belief in religious dogmatism and bookish traditions. The lack of scientific details, the erroneous statements of a geographical or astronomical nature, and his neglect of the aspects of life and nature represent the limits of his receptivity and of the intellectual and cultural horizons of his time. But his independent approach to the natural aspects, the landscape, the vegetation, the climate, the birds and animals of the West Indies, is personal and original, on the one side influenced by a poetical temper, on the other determined by an uncommon power of realistic observation.

His descriptions of men and beasts, of trees and rocks, of mountains and harbors, of forests and rivers, must be considered in connection with the entire evolution of travel narratives and descriptive literature. In this way all the apparently unconnected and necessarily imperfect observations undertaken by the Admiral after his landing in the West Indies appear as slow and circumspect steps directed toward the spiritual conquest of the New World. Thus, even the small and incidental descriptive details concerning the natural aspects of the islands, which are contained in the *Journal* and the Letters of Columbus, gain an increased significance, and may claim a thorough and minute investigation of their intrinsic and comparative value.

For such an investigation, only the fragments of his *Journal* possess a documentary interest. The indisputable authenticity of the passages devoted to his landing in the West Indies furnishes the criterion for the reliability of Las Casas' *précis* and quotations. Even in this form the *Journal* serves to reveal to us that this New World disclosed itself to the eyes of Columbus little by little, as he learned to distinguish, in his emotional and intellectual reactions, the characteristic marks of this unfamiliar environment. And, therefore, what he saw and what he failed to see on landing in the West Indies is equally significant for an understanding of the Admiral's personality and of the results of his fateful enterprise.