The Italian Renaissance and Columbus

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The year 1492 has been looked at in different ways at different times. The older generation of European historians on whom I was brought up tended to see this year as the one in which Spain's rise to European power was signaled by the conquest of Granada and the subsequent expulsion of the Jews and many of the Muslims from Europe, as a result of the bureaucratic and military regime built up in Castile and Aragon, and coordinated by the twin talents of Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus and his tiny expedition were relegated to a sideline (in fact its small size and unimportance was noted by a three-volume history of medieval Spain completed as late as 1986). But since the 1970s professional historians over most of the world (not to mention the popular preparations to use the occasion of the quincentenary in 1992 as an opportunity to enhance their pride or riches) have been considering the facts and assumptions which can seriously be derived from the background of 1492 in the history of the Atlantic Ocean and what flowed from the discovery of 1492. North American historians, it is true, have tended to be obsessed with fining down the precise site of the landfall which Columbus made on 12 October 1492, the end result of which has been, on the part of the most thorough of them, to have returned a verdict of non-proven since the surviving documents are not sufficient to allow of a definitive result (in spite of the popular acceptance of San Salvador, ex-Watlings Island, as the location): or on the other side, in America North and South, to lead the historians of Native Americans to see Columbus as the first exploiter, the man who introduced the genocidal practices of the early conquerors and whose successors did little to maintain the societies which had evolved over some 300 centuries over a vast area, and left the remnants of them poor and to this day unprivileged. On the other hand, there has been a school of European historians, Charles Verlinden of Belgium, Jacques Heers of France, and most recently Felipe Fernández Armesto, who have tried to

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2 D. Henige, In Search of Columbus: The sources for the first voyage (Tucson, Ariz., 1991), is dismissive of the many attempts to locate Columbus' landfall on 12 October 1492. The most eloquent on the indigenous side has been Kirkpatrick Sale, The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy (New York, 1991).

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probe into what has hitherto been accepted as the story of the Atlantic lands, especially on Italian expansionist influences in Spain and Portugal, to bring more light on the beginnings of a process which was, through the almost casual events of 1492, to transform Europe's concern with most of the remaining parts of the globe and to contribute so substantially to the formation of our modern world history. This has clarified, especially, the spread of European commercial imperialism from the eastern Mediterranean by the Italian city-states to influence the Iberian outlook on the Atlantic and to alter the perspective of Atlantic Europe in the period from the late thirteenth to the sixteenth century. In the course of this the placing of the venture of 1492 in a more intelligible context and applying more stringent critical standards to Columbus' achievement has meant, for example, that early sections of the great work of S. E. Morison on the Columbus of the 450th anniversary in 1942 no longer fit the perspectives of the 1990s. 

About some of the matters recently discussed there is bound to be continuing controversy in 1992 and after, and in one sense, the scholarly one, the more the merrier so long as it flows along rational paths and does not exist merely to feed national or sectional prejudices. One thing does seem to be well established and this is that Italians, and specifically the Genoese, for some two centuries before 1492 had inserted themselves into the commercial life of the Iberian peninsula and that their enterprise as adventurers and bankers, as well as technicians, had played a primary part in the development of the Atlantic policies and expansionist tendencies of the Iberian states into the Atlantic area. This was most significant in the case of the Spanish states, most particularly in the Spain whose crowns were united for the first time in 1479. In this case the Genoese frequently played a primary part. In the case of Portugal their influence appears to have been more secondary than primary. The Italian contribution to the Portuguese progress down the shores of Africa was secondary, though the acquisition of a manuscript of Marco Polo as early as 1428 and of the Fra Mauro map from the Venetian master-cartographer Fra Mauro in 1459, showing that Africa could be turned and that the

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5 J. W. Blake, *West Africa: Gold and Slaves, 1454–1578* (London, 1977), 17, 37, 40, 57, 62, indicate the appearance of individual Genoese on several Portuguese Guinea voyages, but fail to indicate that any Genoese-owned ships took part, even though they were envious of the gold trade. I am not aware that the crown borrowed from Genoese financiers, though it may, at times, have done so.


7 It was commissioned by Affonso V. J. B. Harley and David Woodward, *The History of Cartography*, 1 (Chicago, 1987), 315. The map was reproduced by T. Gasparini Leporace, *Il mappamondo di Fra Mauro* (Rome, 1956).
road to Asia was open, were influential behind the scenes. But so far as Atlantic islands were concerned it was in dominating their economic development, when they had been begun to be colonized by Portugal, that they exerted their influence decisively.

It may be useful to point to what the Genoese did in this sphere before considering their more significant influence on the political expansion of Spain. To Madeira they introduced sugar cultivation from the Algarve (where they had established it earlier), so that Madeira became the main producer of sugar for western Europe in the later fifteenth century, visited by scores of ships from many lands. They also brought the Malvoisie grape from the eastern Mediterranean to give Madeira the characteristic wine the commerce in which long outlasted that in sugar. To the Azores (to which the Portuguese sent Flemish colonists through their trading contacts with Bruges) they brought woad, concentration on which may have been attracting ships from as far afield as Bristol by the 1480s, and it should be remembered that Portugal, having found the western isles of the group in 1452, a thousand miles from Europe, might well have succeeded in being first across the Atlantic, though their attempts to do so, so far as is known, all failed.

The influence of the Genoese on the moves to the south-west by the Spanish kingdoms in the Atlantic went back to the late thirteenth century. Then, Malacello was the first to lead Spanish vessels to the Canary Islands in the 1330s and begin the intermittent attempts by the Spanish and Portuguese to colonize, enslave and, intermittently and unsuccessfully, to evangelize the islands in the fifteenth century. These attempts were, in most cases, financed and participated in by the Genoese, more particularly those of Seville where they had their own district (barrio). It was the Genoese who supplied Guanche slaves from the Canaries to the Madeira sugar plantations by the mid-fifteenth century. Their economic and financial commitment to the Canaries reached its height during the period from 1479 to 1492 when the islands had fallen to a united Spain by the Treaty of Alcaçovas which barred them from Portuguese West Africa. Genoese finance was largely behind the conquest of most of the islands from 1480 onward. Some Guanches had been converted by Franciscans in the eastern islands, some others were willing to accept baptism peacefully if they were allowed to do so, but in all the islands some Guanches held out and it took years of fighting to reduce the resisting population, which was either enslaved or killed off. Alonso de Lugo was...

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8 C. Verlinden, 'Les débuts de la production et l'exploration du sucre à Madère, Quel rôle jouèrent les Italiens', Studi in Memoria de Luigi del Pane (Bologna, 1982), 301-10; Fernández Armesto, Before Columbus, 198-9.
supervised by the royal official who raised the money for the conquest, that of Gomera being only completed in 1492 and that of Tenerife four years later. This man was Alonso de Quintanilla whose backers were mainly the Genoese merchants Francesco Pinelli and Francesco de Rivalrolo, their object being to get sugar plantations established in suitable islands. These were just being created by 1492. Behind the scenes, when Columbus had accumulated enough backers, Quintanilla and Pinelli raised some of the money to speed him on his way. By 1492, also, the administration of the newly conquered islands, divided into fiefs and supervised by royal officials, was a foretaste of what was soon to be transported to Hispaniola and thence farther west. From what Sir Raymond Carr has called 'their flourishing Atlantic base, with its “colonies” in Andalusia and Lisbon', the Genoese had impelled the Spanish outward to Atlantic empire, using their men and ships to prepare the way for their Atlantic empire, just as they were using the Portuguese settlements in Madeira, the Azores and, more recently the Cape Verdes to foster their commercial ambitions. Columbus, from the aspect, was the final instrument in their hands for the transition across the Ocean ahead of the Portuguese.

This might seem very much detached from Italy. But, though some Genoese assimilated into Spanish, Portuguese and even English backgrounds, the majority kept their close ties with the trading clans in Genoa from which most of them had sprung. Columbus, even if he never returned to Genoa after 1478, as far as is known, retained the Bank of St George in Genoa as his main financial agency throughout his life, and in 1506 left legacies to members of the trading clans which had remained in Genoa and with whom he had retained contact. The Genoese commercial empire in the Iberian lands had not ceased to keep up its ties with Renaissance Italy, even if Genoa was not in the mainstream of the literary and artistic milieu which made Italy unique in the Europe of his time, 1451–1506, which comprehended the period when so many of the outstanding achievements of the Renaissance took place.

The links which bound Renaissance Italy to the Columbian episode of 1492 are twofold. On the one hand, there was the cosmographical speculation and experiment which provided theoretical and practical innovations which contributed to make the mastery of Ocean sailing less impossible than it had hitherto been, and, on the other hand, the use that Columbus made of Renaissance-produced cartographical and literary resources in the formation of his successive plans for an expedition of striking novelty to the west. I am inclined to say that without the

11 Fernández Armesto, Before Columbus, 153–92, 207–12, is our only full account in English.  
12 Fernandez Armesto, Before Columbus, 45–65. This is a crucial revision of earlier reconstructions.  
13 'The real Columbus', TLS, 1 Nov. 1991, 1–3.  
14 City of Genoa, Christopher Columbus: Documents and Proofs of His Genoese Origin (1932).
intellectual and practical achievements of the Italian Renaissance Columbus’ venture might never have taken place.

At one level the links which bound him to the centres of Renaissance learning were practical ones. The medieval mappae mundi were religious symbols of the Christian world. The portolans or sea charts developed in Italy were practical demonstrations of linear coastlines, drawn from written observations, corrected by compass bearings. The earliest surviving portolan, the carta pisana, is pre-1300 and is thought to be of Genoese origin, but Venice was soon to become the centre of innovation as new knowledge flowed into Italy. The extension of charts to cover western Europe was probably the work of Venetian galley pilots on their way to England and the Netherlands, and was perfected in the early fourteenth century. Through the Iberian lands, and largely from Genoese hands, came accurate information by mid-century of the Canary Islands so far discovered, together with islands farther out in the Ocean seen on return journeys by Genoese and other voyagers which appear to be those of Madeira and the Azores. Over a period of time many mythical islands, associated with St Brendan, St Ursula and others, appear also, and the space given to the Ocean was steadily widened. Though the charts used at sea have mostly disappeared, the Venetians, in particular, specialized in portolans which were decorated with illustrations, mostly mythical, for the use of merchants and nobles as a minor branch of Renaissance art. In the fifteenth century the process went on. The island of Antilia, far to the west, first appeared on the portolan by Zuane Pizzigani, clearly a Venetian, in 1424, and through the successive discoveries of islands which the Portuguese occupied, Madeira, 1419–39, and the Azores, 1427–52, a thousand miles from Europe, Antilia (or mythically the Island of the Seven Cities) continued to appear farthest to the west, usually placed in the latitude of the Canaries about 28°N. This was to provide a starting-point for Columbus’ speculations. After his first exploring voyage to England and Iceland with the men of Bristol in 1477, which led him to eschew the far-northern seas, he concentrated on the area opposite Morocco and Portugal. Venice too helped to revise the old mappae mundi by more realistic representations of the known land mass, culminating in Fra Mauro’s map of 1459 (with its indication of a route round the north to Cathay and its depiction of Africa as capable of being rounded on the way to Asia) which was sent to Portugal in 1459. Venice

12 Ibid. 371–463 (by Tony Campbell).
13 I have not see the portolan considered as an art form contributing to the survival of a significant number of those we have (cf. my ‘Artists and illustrators in the early mapping of North America’, in Explorers and Colonies: America, 1500–1625 (London, 1990), 47–69).
was also the source of Marco Polo's *Il milione*, which circulated widely in manuscript and could be read, as Columbus was to read it, as indicating that Asia stretched farther into the west than other sources allowed, and that his Quinsay (Hangchou) being 1,500 miles from Cipangu, taken as lying due east from Cathay, furthered this notion radically.

It was in Florence, however, that most of the intellectual contributions to the Columbus theories originated. The translation of the second-century *Geography* of Ptolemy from the Greek by Jacopo Angelo da Scarperia of Florence in 1410, was followed by further translations and by wide circulation in manuscript with and without maps, until the first printing in 1477, and again (twice) in 1482 made available an influential text and a view of the land mass in Roman times (with a closed Indian Ocean soon repudiated). The text provided two projections for a plane surface which could be used to bring some more uniform scale to the portolans, and a grid of latitude and longitude to ensure that areas could be mapped more precisely (vitiated by the fact that longitude could not be obtained at sea, though latitude could be established approximately). Ptolemy maintained that an ancient Greek estimate equivalent of about 20,000 of our miles was the circumference of the globe at the equator, as against Marinus of Tyre's 18,000. It was this latter point which Columbus seized on and 'improved' in his search for a smaller globe. Though Ptolemy too held that the land mass extended to only 180 degrees of the circumference, the world map in the *Geography* ended unfinished at the limit of his estimate and so could assist, perhaps, the conclusions that might be drawn from Marco Polo. This was to lead Columbus to propose smaller and smaller limits to the width of the Atlantic Ocean. Finally there were the literary sources Pierre d'Ailly's *Imago mundi*, of about 1515, first printed about 1480, which had indicated the belief that the approach to the east from the west was shorter than previously maintained, and this was echoed in Italy's own Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (subsequently Pope Pius II), *Historia rerum* (printed in 1471). All these sources were acquired by Columbus and the surviving ones (apart from the Ptolemy), generously annotated by him, still, we hope, surviving in Seville.

Florence, too, at least from 1439, when the General Council there had brought much discussion of distant lands in the East, had become a centre for cosmographical study and research. Active in it for some forty years was Paolo Pozzo del Toscanelli, the scholar-physician. The

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23 G. Uzielli, *La vita ed i tempi di Paolo Pozzo Toscanelli* (Rome, 1894), still remains the essential starting-point for the study of his career.
elongated (*mandorla*) map of 1457, known as the Florence Map, appeared to justify a narrower Atlantic Ocean, and may have been inspired by him. In his old age he was in contact with Affonso of Portugal and in 1474 sent him a map of his view of the Ocean, which proposed that the distance from the Canary Islands of Polo’s Cathay was the equivalent of not more than 5,000 nautical miles, and Cipangu no more than 2,000 miles, from Antilia ‘which is known to you’ (even if it was not). This covering letter was sent to Fernão Martins, who was his channel of communication with the king. The letter was dated 14 June 1474, and Affonso may have reacted to it by instructing Fernão Telles on 10 November 1475 to attempt to find Antilia and other inhabited islands although he did not succeed in doing so. A copy came into Columbus’ hands in the early 1480s. It was accompanied by a letter from Toscanelli, enclosing a copy of the 1474 material, and by a subsequent letter commending Columbus’ plans to make a western voyage (this would be in 1480 or 1481, if the documents accompanying the 1474 letter are authentic which has been challenged). However, they formed the basis for the ultimate conclusion of Columbus that Cipangu was only 2,000 miles west of Gomera and Cathay another 1,500 miles beyond that. How long it took Columbus to reach this conclusion and how far it appeared in his successive approaches to Portugal and Spain between 1484 and 1492 is not clearly established: even his final grant from Ferdinand and Isabella spoke only of the discovery of ‘mainland and islands’ in general terms.

Columbus was a self-taught, amateur scholar of considerable perspicacity, but of considerable vanity too and a desire for wealth and fame, combined with a touch of eloquent mysticism. He taught himself Latin and collected a library. This is most likely to have been brought to fruition during the years before 1485 when he joined his brother Bartholomew as a cartographer and bookseller in Lisbon and would, almost certainly, be handling the printed texts among the sources indicated above, while the brothers would also have made a collection of portolans, Genoese and Venetian in origin, from which their cartographical work would derive. In his studies he was aided, of course, by his practical experience in seamanship which he had built up from early youth and by wide-ranging voyages, 1478–83, yet his theories appear to be wholly based on his use of materials derived from Renaissance Italy and not available from any other source.

24 In Florence, See C. Crino, *Come se scoperta l’America* (Milan, 1943), even if his claims are exaggerated.
25 Quinn, *New American World*, I, 82–4. The 1474 letter is now generally accepted: the correspondence with Columbus is somewhat suspect.
This is as far as it seems necessary to go. The traditional story worked out by himself, his son Fernando and Bartolomé de las Casas about the last-minute intervention of Queen Isabella, and so on, will probably have to be modified substantially. Columbus had been building up an elaborate array of sponsors and patrons, besides the queen’s treasurer Santangel. That they included the financial overseer of royal rights in the Canaries, Quintanilla and his Genoese associate Pinelli, seems to have been established by Fernández Armesto, so that even down to the final launching of the 1492 enterprise Genoese money and influence were at work. This puts a rather different complexion on the traditional story and shows Columbus as the experienced influence-buyer and intriguer as well as the literate seaman with the fantasy of finding Asia within reach of Europe.26

Liverpool

26 Ibid. 45-65.