



Revista Brasileira do Caribe

ISSN: 1518-6784

revista\_brasileira\_caribe@hotmail.com

Universidade Federal de Goiás

Brasil

Martínez-Fernández, Luis

1492: First encounters, the invention of America and the Columbian Exchange

Revista Brasileira do Caribe, vol. VI, núm. 11, julio-diciembre, 2005, pp. 13-31

Universidade Federal de Goiás

Goiânia, Brasil

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=159113676002>

- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Scientific Information System

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative

## **1492: First encounters, the invention of America and the Columbian Exchange**

*Luis Martínez-Fernández*  
University of Central Florida

### **Resumo**

Este ensaio interpretativo aborda vários temas relacionados com o chamado descobrimento de Cuba. Ele busca recriar o complexo drama de incertezas, confusões y sorpresas que acompanhou este processo tanto para europeus quanto para indígenas cubanos que tentavam entender os acontecimentos a partir de suas respectivas cosmovisões, religiões e de suas limitações lingüístico-conceituais. Este ensaio discute o processo da “invenção da América”, conceito de Edmundo O’gorman, e o “intercambio colombiano”, conceito de Alfred Crosby, utilizando documento, mapas e crônicas da época.

Palavras-chaves: Cristovão Colombo, Cuba, Descobrimento

### **Resumen**

Este ensayo interpretativo aborda varios temas relacionados con el llamado descubrimiento de Cuba. Busca recrear el complejo drama de incertidumbres, confusiones y sorpresas que acompañó al proceso, a medida que tanto europeos como indígenas cubanos intentaban entender los sucesos desde sus respectivas cosmovisiones, religiones y limitaciones lingüísticas y conceptuales. Utilizando documentos, mapas y crónicas de la época, este ensayo discute los procesos de “la

\* Artigo recebido em junho e aprovado para publicação em setembro de 2005

invención de América”, concepto de Edmundo O’Gorman, y el “Intercambio colombino”, concepto de Alfred Crosby.

Palabras claves: Cristóbal Colón, Cuba, Descubrimiento

### **Abstract**

This essay is an interpretative approximation to various topics related to de so-called discovery of Cuba. It seeks to recreate the complex drama of uncertainties, surprises and confusions that characterized the process, as Europeans and Indigenous Cubans tried to make sense of it from their own cosmovisions, religious perspectives and conceptual and linguistic limitations. Based on period documents, maps and chronicles, the essay also discusses the encounter, using the Edmundo O’Gorman’s concept “the invention of America” and Alfred Crosby’s notion of the “Columbian exchange.”

Keywords: Christopher Columbus, Cuba, Discovery

\*\*\*

Al mismo tiempo que Colón y sus compañeros de Europa descubrieron la América, los hijos de ésta descubrieron a Europa.

Fernando Ortiz

Fourteen-ninety-two was a most auspicious year for Spain to embark in search of new navigation routes and new lands to be conquered. In January of that year the Spanish Catholic monarchs Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile entered triumphantly through the gates of the city of Granada, the last stronghold of Moorish domination in the Iberian Peninsula. The fall of Muslim Granada marked the end of seven centuries of the Christian Reconquista. Later that year, the Spanish crown ordered the expulsion of Muslims and Jews who rejected converting to Christianity. Symbolic and symptomatic of Spain’s national cultural integration, was the publication of the first Spanish language grammar by Antonio de Nebrija, also in 1492. Not coincidentally, in

1492 and in the city of Granada, after over eight years of incessant lobbying, Christopher Columbus finally received the crown's sanction and support to "discover and subdue some Islands and Continent in the ocean" (COMMANGER y CANTOR, 1988, p. 1-2) The Capitulations of Santa Fe, as the original contract between the Catholic Monarchs and Columbus came to be known, granted the Genoese mariner the titles of admiral, viceroy, and governor of all territories to be found and conquered. Such titles were awarded in perpetuity to him and his descendants. The agreement also included generous economic provisions that entitled Columbus to keep 10 percent of the profits derived from all goods found and traded in any territories to be discovered and the right to invest up to an eighth in any subsequent enterprise and draw profits proportionately.

While the Capitulations vaguely referred to islands and a mainland, Columbus was convinced that he was headed to the Orient by way of the west. Basing his projected voyage on a mix-and-match of existing estimates and calculations, he took China to be much larger than it was and believed the earth's circumference was about a fourth smaller. Combining these and other miscalculations, he believed that the Indies, as East Asia was known, were reachable by sailing west from Europe. By no means a recognized scientist or cosmographer, Columbus proposed a voyage that generated scorn from Europe's scientific establishment. Years later Columbus reminisced with some satisfaction that everyone laughed at and dismissed his plan". Undaunted, he pursued his plans with the zeal of a crusader, believing that his new route to the Orient would give him and the Spanish monarchs access to the fabled riches and species of Asia and at the same time allow the expansion of Christianity to remote corners of the world.

### **First encounters**

On August 3, 1492 Christopher Columbus and eighty-six other men boarded the *Santa María*, the *Niña* and the *Pinta* on the Port of Palos in southern Spain. The latter two were caravels, newly

developed small, swift, and easy to handle vessels that made long journeys safe and feasible. Several weeks into the voyage, the ships' crews began showing signs of unrest and desperation; mutinous conspiracies were spun which Columbus tried to avert by feeding his men false information about the distance so far traveled. He kept two daily records an accurate one for himself and a false one to share with his fellow sailors: "[September 10] went sixty leagues only reckoned 48" (COLUMBUS, 1987, p. 62). Tensions were somewhat diffused as birds and other evidence of nearby land were sighted. On September 25 and again on October 7, false land sightings were made. According to his grossly inaccurate longitude and latitude calculations vessels were approximating present-day Nova Scotia, an unwelcoming region, to say the least. On October 10, Columbus reported that his men "could stand it no longer" (COLUMBUS, 1987, p. 72). At last, in the early hours of October 12, after seventy days of uncertain navigation, the convoy saw land; Columbus named the island San Salvador. Later that day the explorers had their first contact with frightened natives who fled in terror. As the vessels headed south, the natives told Columbus of a large and bountiful island located further south. On his log entry for October 21, Columbus refers to it for the first time: "they call it 'Colba'" (COLUMBUS, 1987, p. 90). The Admiral's preconceptions and the natives' description of Cuba, as Columbus refers to the island over the next few days, led him to believe that it was Cipangu (Japan). "Indians tell me," he wrote on October 24, "that it is very large and has much trade, and has in it gold and spices and great ships and merchants" (COLUMBUS, 1987, p. 91). Three days later Cuba was within sight.

On October 28 Columbus and his men landed in Cuba, the island, that above all others, captivated his heart and delighted his senses. The startled convoy spent the next five weeks exploring the eastern end of Cuba's northern coast, fathoming the inlets of the jagged coastline. They made several landings along the way, planting a cross and saying prayers at every stopping point; two

members of the expedition, Rodrigo de Jerez and Luis de Torres, ventured inland for several days during which they came in contact with numerous native villages.

What Columbus and his scouts encountered in Cuba failed to approximate the advanced civilization and marvelous riches of Cipangu as described in *The Travels of Marco Polo*; in place of the solid gold roofed palaces which cartographer de Paulo described to Columbus, stood palm-thatched *bohíos* and *caneyes*. The Admiral now struggled to fit Cuba somewhere else within his nebulous notions of the Indies. His native informants also spoke of a nearby Cubanacán, which he took to be the land of the Great Khan, its capital: the legendary Cathay. On November 2, Columbus dismissed the natives' claims to Cuba's insularity. At about the same time, the natives spoke of a large and rich nearby island called Bohío, which now Columbus took, and mistook, for Cipangu. According to the natives it was rich in gold and inhabited by fierce cannibals, two traits included in Marco Polo's description. On December 5, after over a month of coasting, Columbus's vessels headed toward Bohío, which the Admiral renamed Hispaniola. Two surviving vessels, the *Pinta* and the *Niña* left bound for Europe on January 16, 1493, while thirty-nine sailors stayed behind, quartered in the fort of La Navidad, built from the wreckage of the *Santa María*.

Although Columbus failed to bring back to Europe convincing evidence of having reached the prodigiously rich lands of the Orient, the success of his first voyage earned him ample royal support for a second expedition, this time with seventeen vessels and 1,200 people departing Spain on September 26, 1493. A few months earlier, the Spanish-born Pope Alexander VI had issued his famous *Inter Caetera bull*, sanctioning Spain's claims to all lands 100 leagues west of the Azores and granting Portugal equal rights over territories east of that line of demarcation. After making a few short stops in several of the Lesser Antilles ("islands of the Caribs") Columbus's convoy headed toward Hispaniola, where they found that the Spaniards who had been left during the first voyage had been killed.

On April 24, 1494 Columbus sailed toward Cuba on board the *Niña*, still convinced that it was not an island but a projection of the Asian mainland. He made reference to being by the Province of Magó, not far from the Great Khan's Cathay. This time Columbus coasted Cuba's southern shoreline for several weeks, making numerous stops along the way. In his farfetched efforts to sustain the continentality thesis, he sailed west until his convoy reached what later became known as Cortés Bay in Pinar del Río Province. Rather than continue west to prove or disprove Cuba's insularity, he ordered his ships to turn back, not before making his crew take an oath affirming that Cuba was not an island; anyone who claimed that it was would be punished by having his tongue amputated.

Viewing these events armed with over five centuries of accumulated knowledge and the scientific capabilities of the early twenty-first century obscures the fact that for the two sides involved in these first encounters between the Old and New Worlds the early contacts were bewildering, filled with uncertainty, fear and wild speculations. Initial responses ranged from awe and admiration to horror and hatred; they tested the far corners of European and Amerindian imagination. European explorers and natives, alike, scrambled to draw from their respective religions and cosmovisions as they struggled to understand each other and their respective worlds and the new world that both began to create together.

As Columbus's travel logs and other sources attest, he fell in love with Cuba; it was a love at first sight and it was passionate: "I have never seen anything so beautiful" (COLUMBUS, 1987, p. 93) he wrote his first day on the island. The Admiral marveled at its topography, its luscious vegetation and its bays and rivers which he claimed were the finest he had ever seen. A month into his exploration of Cuba he jotted that it looked "like an enchanted land" (COLUMBUS, 1987, p. 119) and days later he wrote in his navigation log that he did not want to leave the place. The weather seemed to conspire along with Cuba's enchantment as the convoy was forced to wait several days for favorable winds for the departure. On his

second voyage, Columbus reiterated his predilection for Cuba, claiming it was “the most beautiful thing that human eyes had ever seen” (COLÓN, 1995, p. 297). He noted on a delightful stop along the south coast on the Day of Pentecost, 1494: “We rested there on that grass next to those water springs and the marvelous aroma of flowers that could be felt, and the sweet singing of a multitude of little birds, under the shade of tall and enormously beautiful palm trees” (COLÓN, 1995, p. 297).

The Genoese mariner described the native inhabitants in praiseful albeit patronizing terms, highlighting their beauty, meekness and friendly character. He remarked their olive skin, their straight jet-black hair and the high cheekbone on their faces. Columbus and other explorers were struck by fact that the islands’ natives wore no clothes, except for married women who covered themselves with small loincloths. Columbus mistakenly reported that the natives had no religion and that they could be easily converted to Christianity and effortlessly subdued: “10 men,” he claimed, “cause 10,000 Indians to flee” (COLUMBUS, 1987, p. 122). He and other contemporaries also commented on the selflessness of the natives and their willingness to share whatever they had and to trade valuables such as gold and woven cotton for trinkets made out of tin or glass. Early European explorers also recounted their first impressions of tobacco smoking, the natives’ use of hammocks, canoes, and *bohíos*, and other curious native cultural practices.

Although Columbus reported to the monarchs that during his first voyage he found “no monstrosities but well formed people” (COLÓN, 1978, p. 144). he conveyed the fact that the natives repeatedly mentioned the existence of fierce cannibals living in nearby islands: “men with one eye and others with dogs’ snouts who eat men” (COLUMBUS, 1987, p. 101). Columbus and his fellow explorers also heard tales of an island to the south east inhabited by Amazons, and of men with tails living somewhere in western Cuba. Later explorers reported visiting villages inhabited by giants; others obsessively searched for the mythical El Dorado and the Fountain of Youth.



Cuba's and the Caribbean's unfamiliar fauna challenged the limits of the European explorers' imagination as strange creatures, large and small, forced the first chroniclers to scramble for words to describe them. Columbus and his fellow seamen saw flying fish and trained fish (*guaicán*) that the Indians used to catch other fish. He saw manatees that he mistook for sirens. The Admiral and his contemporaries also reported on dogs that did not bark, multicolor parrots, dragon-like iguanas, and countless other species the Caribbean's bestiary. Later explorations expanded the catalogue of seemingly monstrous creatures, as Europeans came in contact with anteaters, vampire bats, armadillos, boa constrictors, toucans, electric eels, piranhas, and thousands of other species unlike anything they had seen or imagined before. Columbus was repulsed by the sight of iguanas which the natives found so appetizing: "[the] nastiest thing ever seen ...they were all the color of dry wood, their skin very wrinkled especially around the neck and above the eyes which looked poisonous and horrific" (COLÓN, 1995, p. 293). Peter Martyr d'Anghiera, a few years later, described a new world sea creature: "four-legged in the shape of a turtle, but with scales instead of a shell, with extremely hard skin, to the point that arrows do not scare it, covered with a thousand warts, its back flat, its head like an ox's" (MÁRTIR DE ANGLERÍA, 1944, p. 271). He was describing a manatee. The sights of the New World tested the limits of the explorers' frame of reference and the Castilian language as Columbus and other contemporaries resorted to comparisons with more familiar things. Thus, grass in Cuba was "as tall as in Andalusia," "palms [were different] from those of Guinea and ours" the sea was as "gentle as the river of Seville;" nuts and rats were large "of the Indian kind" (COLUMBUS, 1987, p. 117, 123, 159). *Yuca* plants were like carrots but white and tasted like chestnuts, tobacco leaves resembled lettuce leaves; tomatoes were golden apples and potatoes were earth apples, thus the Italian word *pomodoro* and the French word *pomme de terre*. Puzzled Europeans resorted to hyperbole in their efforts to convey the strange world unfolding before them.

Columbus spoke of Cuban mountains that “appear to reach the heavens” of “flocks of parrots that obscure the sun;” of ocean water white and thick as milk. Before departing from Cuba in his first voyage he jotted in his log: “it seems to me that under the sun there can be no better lands: in fertility and mildness of cold and heat” (COLUMBUS, 1987, p. 105, 155, 185).

As a symbolic act of possession over Cuba, which he named Juana in honor of Prince Juan, Columbus christened coastal points, harbors and rivers as he coasted the island during his first two voyages. He named his landing point San Salvador (Bahía de Bariay); and subsequently dispensed dozens of other places names: Río de la Luna (Bahía de Jururú), Río de Mares or Marte (Bahía de Gibara), Cabo de Palmas (Punta Uvero); Río del Sol (Bahía de Samá); Cabo de Cuba (Punta Lucrecia); Puerto del Príncipe (Bahía de Tánamo); Santa Catalina (Cayo Moa); Cabo del Pico (Punta Guarico); Cabo Campana (Punta Plata); Puerto Santo (Baracoa); Cabo Lindo (Punta Fraile); Cabo del Monte (Punta Rama). During the coasting of the southern shores in 1494, the Admiral continued to hand out names as if he were Adam and Cuba his Paradise. Deeming it the extreme western end of Asia, he named Cuba’s westernmost point Alfa y Omega (Punta de Maisí) and erected two columns and a cross to mark the spot; he later gave the name of Puerto Grande to Guantánamo Bay, and named two constellations of small keys; Jardines de la Reina and Jardinillos. Columbus also named the large island south of Cuba’s southwestern coast San Juan Evangelista (Isla de Pinos and more recently Isla de la Juventud).

Because the extant documentation on the first encounters between the Caribbean’s natives and the European explorers was produced exclusively by the latter, it provides much insight on the European’s perceptions of the natives and their environment but very little information on how the natives perceived the invaders and how they struggled to incorporate them into their Neolithic cosmivision. Had the Tainos been able to record these first encounters we would have a better understanding of how they

grappled with language and cultural limitations to make sense of the shock that turned their world upside-down in 1492. Tainos first saw Columbus's convoy from a distance; the vessels must have seemed large sea monsters: whales or giant manatees. Perhaps they appeared as canoes shaped like *bohíos* with large cotton hammocks blown by Guabancex, the deity that drives the wind and the waves. The experience of seeing white, armed people emerge out of those floating *bohíos* was most terrifying, as evidenced by the numerous accounts of the Tainos' fleeing in terror. The Europeans' metal armors, beards, weaponry, and overall appearance were as, if not more, disconcerting and awe-inspiring to the natives as the natives' nudity, beardlessness, and body ornamentation were to the Europeans. While the Europeans recognized the natives as fellow human beings, baffled natives first deemed the Europeans immortal beings descended from Heaven. According to Fray Ramón Pané's contemporary report on Taino religion, the natives later came to believe that the Europeans were the prophesized, clothed invaders who would rule over them and bring death and destruction. The fact that the first explorers had no women with them must have also puzzled the natives and perhaps led them to suspect that, like the Caribs, they had come to kidnap Taino women to make them their own.

Just as the Europeans commented on how relatively small value the natives placed on gold and how they lusted after beads and hawk bells, the Tainos who greeted Columbus were surprised and amused by the European's obsessive lust for gold and worthless leafs, seeds and pieces of bark. Bartolomé de las Casas reported that natives in Cuba came to believe that the Spaniards worshiped gold as their god. Some of the European imports to the New World, particularly their fierce arsenal, terrorized the natives. Men on horseback were deemed strange human-eating beasts in which horse and rider fused into one, like the centaurs of Greek mythology. European dogs were fierce and barked threateningly, unlike the quiet, playful pets kept by the Tainos. The explorers' muskets and cannon

seemed possessed by the deity of thunder Guataúba, who had seemingly allied itself with the invaders.

### **Inventing America**

So, who discovered Cuba and America? When were they discovered? Every Cuban school child knows the answers: Columbus in 1492. But are those answers correct? It all depends on what one means by discovery. The presence of Viking explorers and settlers in northern North America has been established to date to about 1000 A.D. A recent provocative study by Gavin Menzies claims that in 1421 a large Chinese expedition navigated throughout the Americas including Cuba's shores. The term discovery, itself, is controversial and has in recent years fallen into disuse at the expense of others such as "encounter" and "first contacts". Did the first landing on San Salvador on October 12, 1492 or the sighting of Cuba a few days later constitute discoveries or were these just first steps in a protracted process involving multiple actors engaging in what Edmundo O'Gorman called "the invention of America" (O'GORMAN, 1972) and more recently Eviatar Zerubabel termed the "mental discovery of America" (ZERUVABEL, 1992).

Columbus's voyage of 1492-1493 shook the cosmological, philosophical, and religious foundations of Europe as mariners, cosmographers, cartographers, and theologians scrambled to make sense of the puzzling information and strange artifacts and specimens gradually filtering from half way around the globe. This prolonged drama unfolded in a context of a Europe in transition between the waning Middle Ages and the dawning Renaissance. Columbus was essentially a medieval explorer. A deeply religious man and a crusader at heart, he looked reverently to the Bible and cosmological and philosophical authorities, whose knowledge he used deductively as he tried to understand the world he unwittingly unveiled. Deeply imbedded within his view of the world was the dogma of the Ecumene, that the world consisted of three connected continents

(Europe, Asia, and Africa), and likewise there were three oceans (Atlantic, Mediterranean, Indian), three human races (Caucasians, Africans, Asians), and three religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam); all of this being earthly reflections of the Holy Trinity. Other contemporaries, such as Amerigo Vespucci and Peter Martyr d'Anghiera, as Renaissance men, challenged the ancient authorities and religious texts with scientific observations and experimentation. In Vespucci's own words, experience was worth more than theory. Europe's scientists, scholars at Salamanca among them, were initially skeptical about Columbus's project, insisting that his calculations were inaccurate and that the existing naval technology would not permit a voyage from Europe to the Indies. As seen earlier, Columbus' burdensome philosophical baggage did not allow him to even consider that Cuba and the other lands he found were something other than the Indies he had set out to reach by way of the west. Meanwhile, Renaissance scientists the likes of Peter Martyr were willing to engage in the "mental discovery" of a New World if scientific evidence led them inductively to that conclusion. Martyr was perhaps the first to scientifically embrace the notion that the islands that Columbus had found were not Asia but in fact something new. In a letter dated November 1, 1493 (only seven and a half months after Columbus's return to Castile) Martyr referred to Columbus as "he who discovered the New World" (ZERUVABEL, 1992, p. 71-72). For Martyr, Vespucci, and other scientists the budding idea of a New World was not a dogmatic conclusion but rather a hypothesis to be tested with subsequent voyages and explorations. Over the next few years, Columbus, on the one hand, and Vespucci, on the other, embarked in parallel explorations to determine the nature of the lands that Columbus had taken to be the Indies. During his third voyage (1498-1500) Columbus ventured further south and came in contact with the mainland of South America, the first European to do so. Still convinced that the islands found in his earlier voyages were part of the Indies and Cuba was the Malayan Peninsula, he scrambled to redraw the map of the world and to find

a place for the seemingly continental landmass he found south of the Caribbean. Taken aback by this new finding, which threatened to destroy the idea of the *Ecumene*, Columbus responded with another religiously-based conclusion: he had found the Garden of Eden, located in “a mighty continent that was hitherto unknown” (COLUMBUS, 1978, p. 129-130). The Admiral’s encounter with the splendid Orinoco River flowing off the coast of South America led him to affirm that the earth was not round, as widely believed, but rather shaped like a pear or a woman’s breast. On the earth’s highest point, shaped like a nipple, stood the lost Garden of Eden from which flowed the world’s mightiest rivers. Curiously, the Tainos also associated rivers and women’s breasts, their word “toa” used to refer to both. A few months later, Vespucci coasted over 4,200 kilometers of South America’s northern coast, also concluding that it was a continental mass. At about the same time Pedralvarez Cabral, sailing for Portugal coasted south along the Brazilian coast to about 15 degrees south of the Equator while Gaspár Corte-Real reached Greenland and later Labrador and Newfoundland for the Portuguese crown.

These mystifying encounters with a massive continent located south of the Equator and another large landmass north of the Caribbean, sparked two primary hypotheses to be tested in further explorations. Columbus’s rather farfetched theory sustained that the islands and mainland to the north were Asia, as he had claimed all along, and that the continent to the south was a previously unknown landmass. Vespucci, meanwhile, hypothesized that all of the islands and landmasses constituted a single continent and that the southern part could not be Asia. In a letter of 1502 he spoke unequivocally of the southern continent as a “new land”. Reflecting the mental redrawing of the world, Cantino’s world map of 1502 showed America as separate from Asia; North and South America separate from each other; and Cuba as an island. In 1501 Vespucci set out on a second voyage in search of evidence to support or dismiss his thesis and a few months later Columbus embarked on his fourth

and final voyage in an effort to find new evidence to fit into his latest theory. Vespucci coasted South America's east coast as far south as what later became known as the Río de la Plata, concluding that since that landmass extended south that far it could not be Asia, therefore it, along with the rest, had to be a new continent. Columbus, meanwhile set out toward Central America in search of an oceanic passage separating what he believed was Asia to the north and the new continent to the south; having coasted Central America and not finding the passage he was after, he returned to his earlier thesis that everything was Asia. Unaware of the fact, while coasting the isthmus he was less than one hundred kilometers from the Pacific Ocean; a decade would pass before Vasco Núñez de Balboa discovered the Pacific Ocean. Columbus, thus, revived the Ecumene and found yet another biblical landmark, the Mines of Ophir in Panama, from which the gold to build Solomon's temple had been mined. On his way back to Europe, still thinking it part of Asia, Columbus saw Cuba for the last time in mid-May 1503 as if to bid his beloved Juana one final goodbye. A violent storm pushed his vessels away: "I lost, at one stroke, three anchors; and, at midnight, when the weather was such that the world appeared to be coming to an end, the cables of the other ship broke, and it came down upon my vessel with such force that it was a wonder we were not dashed to pieces" (COLUMBUS, 1978, p. 187-188). This was a far cry from that refreshing afternoon on the Day of Pentecost during his second voyage amidst the aroma of flowers, the sweet song of birds, and the shade of royal palms.

Was the discovery of America and Cuba—if we may use that term—the result of Columbus's medieval crusading zeal or was it the result of the inductive science of Renaissance men like Vespucci and Martyr. Arguably it was neither and it was both. The "invention" and "mental discovery" of America required the mystic zeal of a prodigiously stubborn Columbus, whose deeply religious worldview allowed him to embark in explorations and theories summarily dismissed by his learned contemporaries. Ironically, the

same mindset that pushed him to find Cuba and other islands and continental masses to the west, prevented him from recognizing them as new. While Columbus was the first European to encounter the Caribbean, South America, and Central America, it was Renaissance men of science and their navigators who eventually accomplished the actual “invention of America.” It was a matter of an unwitting collaboration between passionate medieval explorers and detached Renaissance cosmographers. Such convergences of primal passions and intuitions, on one hand, and skepticism and new ideas, on the other, have been at the heart of many of the most dramatic transformations and revolutions in human history. The discovery/invention of America ranks high among these.

Sixteenth-century cartographers, beginning with Martin Waldseemüller, credited Vespucci with the unveiling of a New World, by naming it America instead of Columbia. His famous map of 1507 portrayed North and South America connected to each other and fully insular. In the year 1500, cartographer Juan de la Cosa, one of the men Columbus had forced to swear that Cuba was not an island, produced the first map in which Cuba appeared as an island. Rather than the mighty continental tongue Columbus still believed it was, de la Cosa portrayed Cuba as a curled-up shrimp of an island about to be devoured by a gigantic, green continental mass, the Gulf of Mexico its gaping mouth. Neither de la Cosa nor any of his shipmates had their tongues cut off as their oath prescribed if they ever said that Cuba was an island. As later maps attest, only two of the names that Columbus gave as he sailed past Cuba stuck (Jardín de la Reina and Jardinillos), as bays and capes reverted to their Taino names or later settlers imposed names of their choosing. Not even the name Juana stuck as King Ferdinand ordered it renamed Fernandina soon after Prince Juan died. Fernandina did not stick either; the island came to be known as Cuba, what the natives had first said to Columbus or what he had understood them to say. Havana’s founders, perhaps unwittingly, honored Columbus, when they named what would eventually become Cuba’s capital



San Cristóbal de La Habana. Three centuries later Columbus's ashes were moved from Santo Domingo to Havana's Cathedral, where they remained until Spain lost possession of Cuba in 1898. In a twist of irony, the Cuban territory where Columbus first landed convinced that he was in the Orient, eventually became known as Oriente Province; and 125,000 Chinese contract laborers were imported to Cuba between 1847 and 1873.

### **The Columbian Exchange**

As America was being invented, the Old and New Worlds engaged in what Alfred W. Crosby, Jr. has termed the "Columbian Exchange" (CROSBY, 1972). Previously isolated continents, ignorant of one another, were now linked by travel and trade; and peoples, animals, plants, germs, and precious metals from one continent resettled in new environments across the Atlantic and beyond. While there is no doubt that these early stages of what is now called globalization dramatically transformed the Americas, as the conquests brought about demographic collapses among the natives and as colonists imported plants and animals that replaced those produced by Amerindians, American biological and mineral exports also helped transform all three continents of the former Ecumene. The early Europeans who explored Cuba and other parts of the New World brought with them their domesticated animals and plants, which they hoped would flourish in the American setting. Among the imported animal species were the horse, used for transportation and warfare; the cow, for its meat, hides, and milk; sheep for wool and mouton; the pig, chicken, and goat as sources of food; and the dog as pet and hunting companion. Pigs, cattle, and horses were let loose to multiply, reverting to a state of wildness and causing havoc on native croplands. Food and drink plants imported by the Europeans to satisfy their tastes and to be commercialized included: wheat, melons, onions, garlic, lettuce, grape vines, olives, chick peas, sugarcane, bananas, coffee and tea, among others. Some, like

sugarcane and bananas, flourished in Cuba and the Caribbean to such an extent that they led to the coining of the terms “sugar islands” and “banana republics”. Other European food plants, like olives, grapes, and wheat flourished in the Caribbean only to blossom prodigiously in non-tropical regions of Continental America.

Pre-Columbian Americans had few domesticated animals, among them turkeys, guinea pigs and llamas. Although few animals crossed the Atlantic in the other direction, mostly as specimens such as exotic birds and the like, American plants invaded Eurasia as well as Africa. One of Columbus’s major motivations had been the acquisition of exotic species such as ginger, cloves, nutmeg, peppers, and cinnamon. While disappointed at not finding much in terms of familiar spices, the Admiral and later explorers found a vast catalogue of food plants, many of which they took back to Europe. Cuba’s main pre-Columbian staple, *yuca* and yams, did not make it to Europe’s kitchens but eventually found their way to Africa and Asia, where they became important staples in several nations. While the practice was lost in Cuba, African farmers still cultivate *yuca* in mounds, like the Tainos did five centuries before. Likewise, American corn has reached all corners of the world, its high yields helping nourish millions in China and other nations. Indigenous to South America, the potato found fertile ground in Europe. Originally suspected of causing leprosy, the potato later became the staple crop of several European nations, most notably Ireland, and the main ingredient of Russia’s vodka. Tomatoes also found their way into the European diet, while sweetened chocolate from Central American cacao captivated taste buds in the Old World. Deemed to have aphrodisiac properties, the Jesuit order at one point prohibited its members to consume chocolate, lest the treat conspire against their vow of chastity. Perhaps more sinful was an American plant known as tobacco. In his *History of the Indies*, father Bartolomé de las Casas castigated smoking as useless and hard to quit vice. Its addictive qualities have helped make tobacco a product of vast consumption in all corners of the world. Cuba, were Columbus first

saw tobacco, produces what is widely regarded as world's finest cigars.

The Columbian exchange was also a human drama in which entire populations were destroyed, as others, voluntarily or not, took their place, and new populations emerged as various populations came in contact with one another. In Cuba and much of the Caribbean Amerindian depopulation rates approximated 100 percent in just a few decades after the initial contact with the Europeans; for the entire hemisphere the rate of depopulation surpassed 90 percent. European settlers and their slaves took the place of the natives throughout the Caribbean and elsewhere. Contact between the various racial groups led to miscegenation and the emergence of large mulatto and mestizo populations. Today American nations like the Dominican Republic are essentially mulatto while Mexico, Peru and others are predominantly mestizo. The coming together of Amerindians, Europeans and Africans also generated Creole cultures that combine elements of diverse origins.

Human migrations were accompanied by the migration of germs and communicable diseases. Because the Americas had been isolated from the rest of the world and its germs, the Tainos and other native peoples, had not been exposed to, nor developed immunities against, diseases common in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Smallpox, measles, influenza and other diseases imported by European explorers and settlers caused appalling rates of mortality. African diseases such as malaria and later yellow fever caused havoc not only among Amerindian but also among unacclimated Europeans. In return for such a deadly catalogue of new diseases, America's natives gave Europe syphilis. No evidence of syphilis dating before 1492 has been found outside of the New World; the spread of this venereal disease reached epidemic proportions during the mid-1490s as European armies helped spread it throughout the continent and beyond.

The Columbian exchange also included the mineral kingdom, precious metals to be more precise. In 1592 five times more bullion circulated in the world than a century before. The recorded amount

of gold and silver exported from the Americas to Europe between 1503 and 1660 was an astounding 407, 851 pounds of gold and 35,273,600 pounds of silver.

The Columbian exchange changed not just America, but the entire world, forever. Unwittingly, the stubborn Genovese mariner's vessels led the path to what today we call globalization.

## **Bibliography**

- COLÓN, Cristóbal. *Textos y documentos completos*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1978 y 1995.
- COLUMBUS, Christopher. *Four Voyages to the New World*. Gloucester: Peter Smith, MA, 1978.
- COLUMBUS, Christopher. *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America, 1492-1493*. Edited by Bartolomé de las Casas. Translated by DUNN, Oliver; KELLY, JR. E., James. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987.
- COMMANGER, Henry Steele; CANTOR, Milton (Eds.). *Documents of American History*. 2, V. 10 edición. Englewood, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988.
- CROSBY, Alfred W. *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972.
- MÁRTIR DE ANGLERÍA, Pedro. *Décadas del Nuevo Mundo*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Bajel, 1944.
- MENZIES, Gavin. *1421: The Year the Chinese Discovered the World*. New York: Harper Collins, 2003.
- O'GORMAN, Edmundo. *The Invention of America*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972.
- ORTIZ, Fernando. "Por Colón se descubrieron dos mundos". *Revista Bimestre Cubana*, 50 (2) Sept.-Oct., 1942, p. 180-190.
- ZERUVABEL, Eviatar. *Terra Cognita: The Mental Discovery of America*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992.