




# ¿Columbus Day? Yes, please.

Practical guide to understanding  
the figure of Cristopher Columbus



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As a historian, I have witnessed for some years now, with some trepidation, a kind of iconoclastic fury that has targeted **the representations of Christopher Columbus in American territory**. Why are statues of Columbus being removed from their location, covered or damaged with fury?

The statues erected to Christopher Columbus throughout the world, **especially in Italy, Spain, Latin America and the United States**, are intended to extol the historical contribution of the character.

It is not a matter of paying homage to the person, but to his deeds. And the facts, beyond the figure of the honored, are those related to **his contribution to the history of humanity**. We would obviously disagree to erect statues to someone who has made inventions or contributions in the field of science, technology, sports... if that person had contributed to acts contrary to human rights. **Is that the case with Columbus?** Is the recognition of scientific contribution voided, because it is neutralized by the perversity of his decisions?

We might think so, if we take into consideration the claims of certain political leaders, such as **Mitch O'Farrell**, who go so far as to claim:

*“Christopher Columbus’ legacy of extreme violence, enslavement, and brutality is not in dispute. Nor is the suffering, destruction of cultures, and subjugation of Los Angeles’ original indigenous people, who were here thousands of years before anyone else”.*

It is therefore unquestionable -in O'Farrell's words- that Columbus' legacy in America boils down to extreme violence, slavery and brutality. The consequences of his arrival in America range from the destruction of Caribbean cultures to the disdain and oppression of the native peoples of California, specifically Los Angeles. As I have pointed out on some occasions, for the Californian politician, **Columbus' shadow turns out to be very, very extensive**.

The council member from Los Angeles, who has undertaken admirable campaigns to preserve the environment and other campaigns in defense of indigenous peoples, in this case, is mistaken in his means. He seeks a confrontation between two realities that are very far apart in time: the Native American of today and **the arrival of Columbus in America more than 500 years ago**.

The argument used by the instigators of the anti-Columbus campaign does not seem to be directed **against the life and actions of the navigator**, of whom they



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provide hardly any data. The objective of this hatred seems to be more directed towards the process carried out by Spain and the Columbus journeys. It projects, on Columbus' figure, an attitude of radical, violent and total rejection of Spain's actions in America.

And the intention -apparent at least- is more than commendable: to vindicate the rights of contemporary indigenous populations, marginalized over decades; victims of persecution and plunder **since the founding of the United States** and even before, when the Thirteen British Colonies constituted a small strip on the nowadays East Coast.

## **Is there a cause-and-effect logic between the life of Christopher Columbus and the marginalization of the so-called "Native peoples" of the United States?**

This study seeks to provide historical data that will allow us to reach reasoned and reasonable conclusions. Therefore, this work has little to do with ideological arguments or fluctuating sensibilities.

History is what it is. It is up to us to know it and explain it, **not to change it or interpret it by adapting it to changing ideological interests** that are not always well-intentioned. Our aim is for the reader to reach his or her own conclusions, after **presenting the facts as they were**. We flee both from dark legends and sweetened myths, **both equal enemies of true history and distant from scientific rigor**.

Answering the question that gives this report its title, about whether or not to celebrate Columbus Day, may seem simple, **but it is not**.

First of all, it is necessary to spot the mistake into which some politicians or propagandists have fallen: **the obligation**



**to choose a single valid option between two supposedly opposing and incompatible parties.** Was it necessary to choose between celebrating Columbus Day or Indigenous Peoples' Day? This is the path that some try to take us down.

The sensible answer is to conclude that everyone fits, that one should not be forced to choose one option over the exclusion of the other.

It's been years since the UN universally instituted the International **Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, which we celebrate every year on August 9.** Furthermore, the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples aims to apply the 1948 Declaration on Human Rights **to the particularities of indigenous peoples around the world,** who remain particularly vulnerable groups and frequent victims of exclusion and discrimination.

One of the causes to which the United Nations attributes this situation of vulnerability **is colonial history,** which has led to them being "dispossessed of their lands, territories and resources, preventing them from exercising, in particular, their right to development in accordance with their own needs and interests".

Today, the statement that recognizes "the urgent need to respect and promote the rights of indigenous peoples affirmed in treaties, agreements and other constructive arrangements with States" is found to be fully justified.

Moreover, in the same document, **the United Nations** makes a statement:

*"Convinced that control by indigenous peoples over developments affecting them and their lands, territories and resources will enable them to maintain and strengthen their institutions, cultures and traditions, and to promote their development in accordance with their aspirations and needs".*

**(Introduction to the Charter on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. United Nations General Assembly, 2007).**

Based on the anthropological bases indicated in the Introduction, the Charter details, in 46 articles, the determinations that States must currently carry out **to protect and encourage the full inclusion of these peoples** without forcing them to renounce their own identity and idiosyncrasies.

In our opinion, when the symbols associated with Spanish colonization, as embodied in the images of Christopher Columbus, are attacked, a colossal error is made in trying to apply **judgments issued with criteria and values of our time -in a completely anachronistic manner- to events that took place more than five hundred years ago.**

The way in which indigenous rights are recognized and applied today **should not involve the demolition of symbols that remind us of what happened in the 15th century.** In fact, it seems like a crude and superficial exercise that in no way contributes to improving the situation of the current native populations of the American continent.

Perhaps those who demolish statues or cover paintings need to **ask themselves about a much more recent past** or, more practically, about the measures that should be taken today **to protect the rights of these groups of people.**

To justify actions against the images of Columbus, it is said that it offends the descendants of the peoples to be able to contemplate symbols of their ancestor's repression. That consideration does not resist any **scientific argument about**

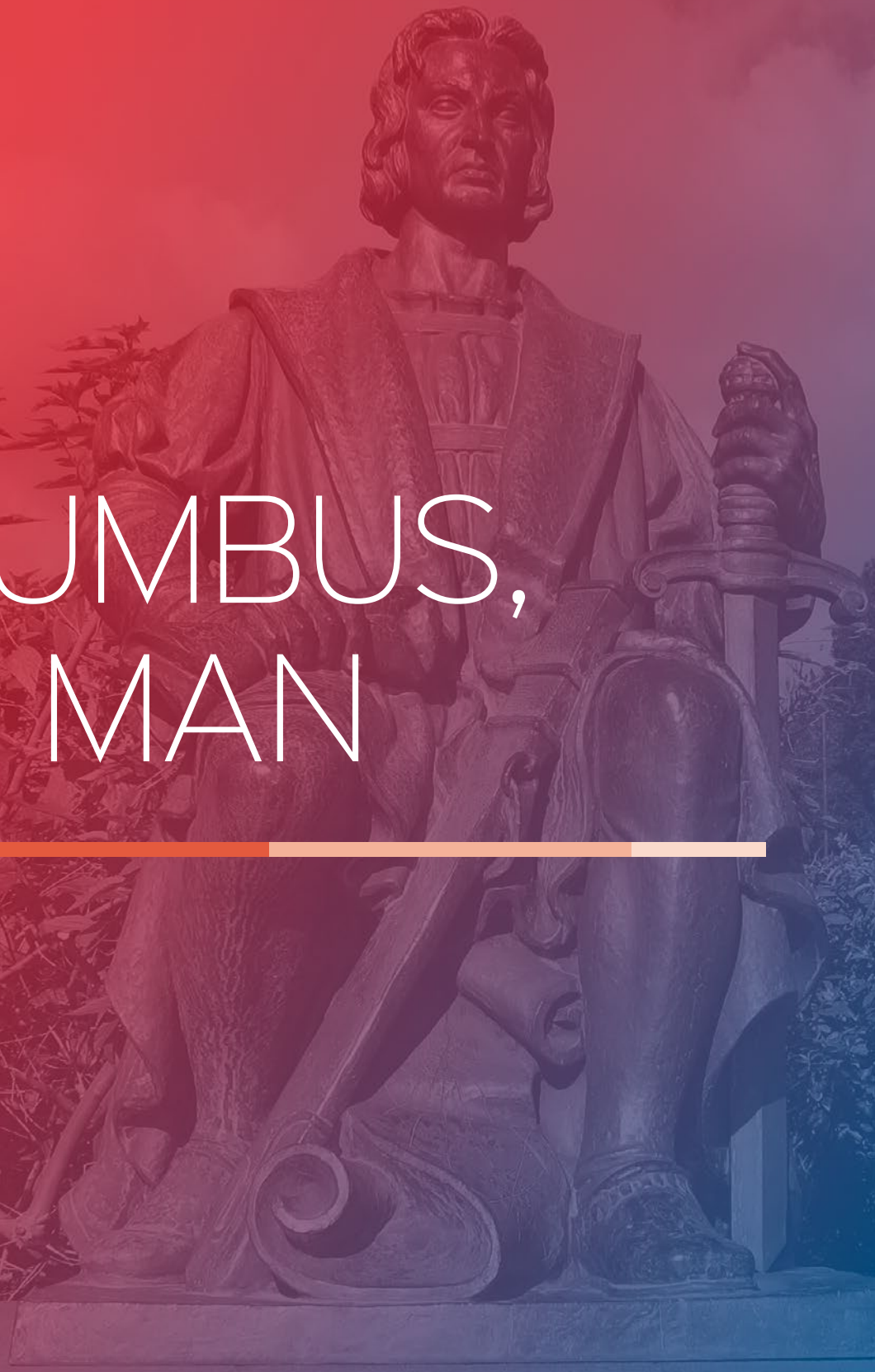
**the history of America.** In the case of those colonized by Spain, which in its day -and over three centuries- were part of the Hispanic Monarchy, just looking at images of contemporary reality should be enough to realize that **the *mestizaje* denies any claim in defense of the existence of a genocide.** In the same sense, we can consider the existence of numerous indigenous communities **that today preserve their languages of pre-Hispanic origin.**

Perhaps a quick visual comparison of the populations of Latin America and the United States was enough to **refute the fallacy of the indigenous genocide initiated by Christopher Columbus.** But to avoid falling into the same mistakes of anachronism, superficiality and lack of historical perspective that we detected in that false *indigenism*, **we will provide some ideas and historical data** on which readers can make a correct and informed decision about whether or not to celebrate Columbus Day.



# COLUMBUS, THE MAN

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## A contradictory figure

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*"Columbus is a disturbing character. After all, he performed the most remarkable deed in the history of mankind, yet multiple mysteries surround him".*

(Hugh Thomas, prologue to *Christopher Columbus*, by Felipe Fernández Armesto, 2004).

*"Distinguished men are composed of qualities great and small. Much of their greatness is born of the struggles they wage against the imperfections of their nature, and their noblest actions are the result of the collision of their virtues with their weaknesses. Columbus possessed a vast and inventive ingenuity. The operations of his mind were energetic but irregular, sometimes rising with that irresistible force that characterizes the intelligences of this order. His mind embraced all sorts of knowledge about his occupations, and though his knowledge may seem today to be quite limited, and some of his errors palpable, it is because his particular branch of science was hardly developed when he was alive. His own discoveries partly dispelled the ignorance of that age, guided conjectures to certainty, and vanished numerous errors that he himself had to fight".*

(Washington Irving, *Vida y viajes de Cristóbal Colón*, Madrid 1832 p. 203).

These two quotations, the first from one of our contemporary Hispanists, and the second from an American romantic who idealized so many aspects of Spanish life, serve to introduce an essential theme of this report on Christopher Columbus: **the enormous complexity of the character.**

When statues of Christopher Columbus are knocked down or damaged, **the interpretation of such behavior seems unequivocal: it is ominous to pay homage to the Genoese.**

But the matter becomes much more complex when we ask ourselves: **Which Columbus do we want to make disappear from the public square?** The man? The navigator? The colonizer and merchant? The servant of the Castilian monarchy? The Catholic who sought the conversion of the inhabitants of America to Christianity?

And it is in trying to answer this question when the need to clarify what seemed simple arises. **Columbus was a man with multiple facets, both personal and professional.** And many of those who seek to remove his trace are deeply

unaware of almost all of those facets. Or at least, they do not appear in the proliferation of arguments against the figure of the navigator. **There is talk of Columbus as the initiator of a great genocide**, which extends to the entire American continent as a result of the arrival of three ships captained by him on October 12th, 1492 to a small island in the current archipelago of the Bahamas.

During his lifetime, Christopher Columbus was a controversial figure, **who generated strong phobias and phobias among those who surrounded him**, and even among many who did not get to know him personally.

He is possibly one of the main characters in history that has been **the subject of multiple biographies and memoirs**, and even so, we cannot say that all the questions about his life and personality have been answered. Columbus himself, and his son Hernando, biographer of the

Admiral, **sought to generate a certain kind of hermeticism and enigmatic perception** of the reality that surrounded the story of the discoverer of America. That is why over the years **so many conflicting -and sometimes truly crazy- statements have been made about his life**. One palpable manifestation is that, despite the almost absolute certainty of his Genoese origin, defenders of his Majorcan, Catalan, Galician and French origins continue to appear... all these statements based on clues that are the result of interpretations of ambiguous texts authored by the navigator and his son.

However, there are many assertions that **most specialists agree in pointing out as true**. Let's address some of them, to avoid elaborating anachronistic judgments or judgments based on unproven speculations.

## Brief biographic profile

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Cristoforo Colombo, who adapted his name and surname to Spanish, **was born near Genoa around 1451**, into a family with notable lineage that had come down (Varela, 22). His father, Domenico Colombo, was in **the textile manufacturing business** and, with his

wife, Susana Fontanarosso, he was the father of five children. For Columbus, family was **one of the fundamental pillars** of his life, with two of his brothers, Bartolomé and Diego, **who participated in the Indian companies**, playing a special role.

### The Portuguese stage

Columbus sailed the Mediterranean while collaborating in the family business. By a series of different events, he ended up in Portuguese lands. There he married **Felipa Moniz de Perestrello**, daughter of the governor of the small island of Porto Santo, in the archipelago of Madeira. This fact is fundamental for following **the Columbian trajectory**.

Portugal was then the leader in Atlantic navigation. **The Portuguese sailors explored different routes**, from the peninsula and the archipelagos they had been conquering for the Portuguese crown. At that time, the navigation priority was to find a passage to Asia and the islands of the spice industry

that would be **an alternative to the Mediterranean and the land route**, both of which were impossible to travel through, due to Islamic presence. In this way, the Portuguese expeditions would advance along the African coast, **looking for the end of the continent** that, if existed, would communicate them with the Indian Ocean and finally take them to Asia.

In this process, some Portuguese factories had been installed on the African coast, among which **the Fort of San Jorge de la Mina, founded in 1482 by John II**, main enclave for the trade of African products (mainly gold) to Portugal, should be highlighted.



**Columbus, with striking insistence, intended to present his project to any king who was willing to sponsor it. His homeland was the sea; his patron, whoever accepted his offer.**

On the other hand, remains of vegetation typical to non-European locations had accidentally reached the coasts of Madeira and the British Isles. Some sailors even spoke of **having crossed the Atlantic in strange boats** captained by men who were physically comparable to an idea of the Asians. We know that Marco Polo's exaggerated descriptions had flooded the Europeans' fantasies of magical places dominated by the Great Khan, where gold, silk and exotic animals inhabited lands **where the palaces and luxury of their rulers multiplied.**

It is within this framework that Columbus conceived his project: he was **trying to find an alternative route to reach Asia by sailing westward.** That would be the project to be presented to King John II of Portugal, which after being reviewed by a board of experts, would be rejected.

Why did the Portuguese technicians reject Columbus' project? **They agreed with him that the earth was round, something that was known from the classical world.** And theoretically it was an alternative route to the African one to reach the desired Cathay (China), which would be preceded by the Cipango archipelago (Japan).

**Why then halt this option?** The first answer is that, although the project made sense, Columbus' calculations, based in part on those of the Italian cosmographer Paolo del Pozzo Toscanelli, were seriously flawed: speaking in today's terms, the distance between Europe and Asia, according to Columbus, would be 30,000 kilometers, **some 10,000 less than there really is.** This miscalculation was detected in the Portuguese court.

What neither Columbus nor the experts knew was that, **between Europe and Asia, there was an entire continental**

**mass.** There were legends about the Antillean, an island that **could serve as a stopover on the way**, but these were only far-fetched ideas that in no case allowed a glimpse into the success of the expedition proposed by the Genoese. **In addition, there was another problem:** after the war of succession in Castile, in which Portugal had supported Princess Joanna against Isabella, both kingdoms signed a series of treaties (Alcaçovas-Toledo) **specifying the navigation rights of both crowns.** Portugal did not want to risk colliding with Castile, when in that treaty it had been agreed that the navigation "*ayuso contra Guinea*" -towards

the south, through Africa- would be exclusively Portuguese.

Far from being discouraged, Columbus, with striking insistence, **intended to present his project to any king who was willing to sponsor it.** He travels to Castile, a widower with his son Diego, while his brother Bartolomé goes to England to begin negotiations there. **This has nothing to do with alleged loyalties or disloyalties.** It was usual for sailors to work for anyone who wanted to pay for their services. **His homeland was the sea; his patron, whoever accepted his offer.**

## In Castile

When Columbus arrived in Castile, in 1485, Queen Isabella was determined, in full harmony with her husband, Ferdinand of Aragon, to finish the reconquest and **expel the Muslims from the Nasrid kingdom of Granada.** The Genoese made arrangements at Court, sought support from well-connected people, and managed to meet with the kings. The result was the same as in Portugal. **The project was not viable.** Furthermore, the Granada objective

is a priority that does not allow the Crown's efforts to be distracted by other campaigns.

But Columbus is tenacious, and finally, supported by the Franciscans of the Rábida Monastery and by officials of the Crown, he manages to get the Catholic Kings to approve the expedition shortly after the fall of Granada, **its conditions being signed in the Capitulations of Santa Fe, on April 17, 1492.**

Many pages have been written about the certainty with which Columbus defended his project, **and the causes that prompted the Queen to trust him and the advice of his experts.** From the hypothesis of a "proto-discovery", according to which Columbus received the data for the return voyage from a pilot who had just arrived from the Caribbean (believing that he came from Asia) and who practically died

in his arms after entrusting him with his navigation charts, to the insistence of the nobles who saw **a possible business at the risk of losing little if the expedition failed.** There is also talk of a special intuition of the Queen, who perceived in the security and aplomb of Columbus, a secret that the Genoese was hiding and that implied more knowledge than he claimed to have.

### A fortunate mistake

Whatever the cause, the truth is that **on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1492, an expedition left the Port of Palos towards the unknown.** Three ships (the Santa María and two caravels, the Pinta and the Niña) entered the Atlantic, with more fear and doubts than certainties, but also with a characteristic of the sailors of that time: the risk could turn into failure, but it could also generate a radical and favorable change in their lives. **This was the spirit of the men of the sea.** After a stopover in the Canary Islands, Columbus decided with an impressive certainty the course to follow, **taking advantage of the currents produced by the trade winds.**

After several weeks of uncertain navigation, attempted riots, and considerable distrust of the crews in front of this foreign captain, **in the early morning of October 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> they finally notice land ahead.** They approach the island that the natives called Guanahaní, where they find friendly people who welcome them very well. Columbus baptizes the island of the current Bahamas **with the name of San Salvador.** For the moment, no gold, spices or silk...they would have to keep looking, but the danger of dying without reaching land had already been avoided.

It is a matter of time before the **nearest islands and Asia are reached**. Navigation continues through what we know today as the Caribbean, then arriving at the island of Cuba, which Columbus named Juana in honor of the Castilian heiress, **and then to Santo Domingo, baptized as Hispaniola**. They are well greeted by the natives there, who bear them various gifts. A strange barter then begins between the Spaniards and the natives, who hand out small gold objects, among other things, **seeing the interest that this metal generates among the newcomers**. We know that, on the other hand, Columbus realizes that the trinkets from Spain were very well valued by the natives (new items always attract), and so they give them necklaces made of cheap beads, shoes, cloth hats... **the beginning of the relationship between the Spanish and the Antilleans could not have started better**.

On Christmas Eve of 1492, the Santa Maria, ran aground on the coast of Hispaniola because of an oversight by a sailor (it seems he was a cabin boy) who was on duty. Columbus sees in this accident a providential sign, to raise with the remains of the ship, **the first Spanish settlement in those lands**. Fort Navidad is built, where 39 Spaniards would remain while

the rest return to the peninsula in the two surviving caravels. The situation of those who remain does not seem risky, and Columbus thus guarantees the safety of **a return expedition sent from Castile**.

Since little has been found so far to justify the venture, Columbus decides that the kings and his court must be convinced of **the importance of the discovery**. And to make sure, he decides to take with him the little gold they have obtained, some

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exotic birds...**and above all, promises; the illusion of a world full of possibilities to improve the living conditions** of those who travel, and to contribute to heal the battered economy of the Crown with a new commercial route. In addition,

on this first trip he embarked ten natives (according to him, those who wanted to board the ships voluntarily), to show the newly discovered population, and to teach them Spanish, baptize them and that **in the future, they could serve as interpreters.**

## Explorations continue

Back in Spain in 1493, the kings greet Columbus in Barcelona, **congratulate him on the outcome of the expedition**, name him Viceroy, Admiral, Governor and Judge as had been promised in the Capitulations of Santa Fe. **Preparations for a second trip begin.**

This time, along with Columbus, **a man trusted by the kings would be at the head of the endeavor: Juan Rodriguez de Fonseca.** Contrary to what happened in the first trip, for which it had been difficult to recruit a crew, the good news given by expeditionaries -somewhat exaggerated- **generate a strong enthusiasm to embark on this new adventure**, the second Columbian trip (1493-1496). This time, **seventeen ships would leave Cadiz**, and it would no longer only be seafarers who embark. **About 1500**

**people would go**, among them, a large number of farmers and their wives and also clergymen, changing the objective of the trip with respect to the first one: it is no longer just a matter of discovery, but of settling and evangelization. When they arrive at Hispaniola, they find an unfortunate spectacle: **Fort Navidad has been razed to the ground and all the Spaniards had died at the hands of natives.**

Meanwhile, problems arise in the peninsula. **The Portuguese king claims for himself the islands discovered by Columbus.** He appeals to the papal arbitration, which grants the islands and the mainland to be discovered (and not in the hands of a Christian prince) to the Catholic Kings, with the express condition that they promote the evangelization of

their inhabitants. From the Alexandrine Bulls that provide these instructions, the **Treaty of Tordesillas is signed in 1494**. Contrary to what has been said sometimes, a division of lands between Spain and Portugal wasn't included in it. **The Treaty established the limits of navigation, exploration and conquest** that corresponded to both kingdoms in the Atlantic. The partition was established by a line that divided the terrestrial globe in two halves, and that was located "three hundred and seventy leagues from the Azores and Cape Verde Islands". **To the east of this line, navigation would be Portuguese, and to the west, it would be Spanish**. The conquest, colonization and evangelization of the **New World** would begin.

The conqueror of that New World did not recognize such a discovery. Hocked on the content of the agreement he had reached with the kings, **Columbus always defended having built the route to Asia from the west**. Two more journeys would be made by the Genoese in the name of Castile.

The third journey (1498-1500) took him to the coast of Venezuela, **where he was amazed at the Orinoco deltas**. The Europeans were not prepared to contemplate that spectacle of nature, in which the fresh water met the sea in a strong current. **This fact would give them the certainty of having reached a great continental mass**.

## The end of the Admiral of the Ocean Sea

Since his arrival in Castile in 1485, Columbus made friends and enemies at court. Moreover, contrary to what he announced on his first journey, it didn't seem that in the new lands it was possible to find **that desired change of life that would fill the pockets of the colonists**. Hunger, attacks by the natives, illnesses,

confrontations between the Spaniards themselves... are the realities that accompanied the new lives of those who had crossed the Atlantic. Columbus and his brother Bartolomé **were revealed as terrible rulers**, to the point that some of the duties awarded to him were withdrawn. Discouragement was by then rampant, and





the third expedition fails to gather much support, making it necessary to recruit prisoners who, in this way, at the service of the crown, would shorten their sentences. If on the first trip, four were redeemed, the number would then increase, **with ten imprisoned by murder having their sentences shortened.**

A last trip made by Columbus (1502-1504) **takes him to the coasts of Honduras.** In the Admiral's mind, the need to sail to Asia still weighs heavily, **and he is determined to find the passage that would open that route for him.** But he doesn't find it, and after touching ground at Jamaica he ends up returning to Spain, without going through Hispaniola, since it had been forbidden by the kings as a result of his unfavorable management.

He returns to Sanlúcar in November 1504. **A few days later, Queen Isabella, his great protector, died** and he, sick and discouraged (although not poor, as some assure), **died in Valladolid on May 20, 1506.**



## A contrasting personality

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Knowing the fundamental facts of the life of Christopher Columbus in what refers to America, **we will approach his psychological profile**, to try to better understand what moved the sailor who refused to recognize that the failure of his project was **the first great triumph of the Modern Age**, from the scientific point of view. As it has been pointed out, Columbus showed himself tremendously enigmatic all his life, and the writings about him confirm it, as far as his personal life is concerned.

Through his writings, as well as those of his son Hernando, and the work of Bartolomé de las Casas, **we can get a little closer to his complex personality**. The Dominican Las Casas, known by his zeal in the defense of the indigenous populations, had in his hands several of Columbus' writings, which he inserts in an almost literal way in his great work, *History of the Indies*.

## A well cultured man

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A relevant aspect of the discoverer is one that refers to his intellectual preparation. Columbus did not attend University, his school was life and his readings, which made him a well cultured man for his time. **He was especially interested in treatises on navigation, astronomy and cartography**. He read and commented Marco Polo's work; he knew Ptolemy's Geography, had read some classics such as Pliny's *Natural History*, had a deep knowledge of the Bible, and works of Fathers of the Church. In addition,

more contemporary readings, which led him to develop his project, such as the *Historia Rerum* by Aeneas Silvio Piccolomini (future Pius II) or the *Imago Mundi*, by French Cardinal Pierre D'Ailly. As it has been pointed out, **the letter that Paolo del Pozzo Toscanelli wrote to the King of Portugal** enclosing his image of the earth is fundamental for his project, and it made him conceive the oceanic space between Europe and Asia much smaller than it really is.

On the other hand, his stays in Portugal and Seville familiarized him with the discoveries and cartographic techniques of the time, making him a well-known cartographer.

**He was an extraordinarily providentialist man, capable of transforming a defeat or misfortune into a divine manifestation on his actions in America.**

**His readings were partly defining of his personality** for they provided him, as has been pointed out, with a fairly complete level of culture, at least in the subjects that interested him. As an example of his astronomical knowledge and the use

he made of it, we can recall **an episode of his relationship with the natives in Jamaica**, during his last trip. He was travelling along the coast, when the natives who provided them with food rebelled. Then he used a stratagem: **he announced that the sky would be cloudy as a sign of punishment for their ungenerous attitude**; an eclipse occurred, and the attitude of the natives changed radically. Columbus knew about this eclipse thanks to Abraham Zacuto's perpetual almanac that he always carried with him. This trick shows to what extent he was interested in astronomical science, **besides being a sign of the Genoese's wisdom.**

An interesting chapter is the biblical influence on his life. He knew many passages of Scripture, which in his writings, began to have a growing presence. He was an extraordinarily providentialist man, **capable of transforming a defeat or misfortune into a divine manifestation on his actions in America.** After the destruction of the Santa Maria, in his first trip, he concludes that it is a divine sign for the construction of a first settlement, **indicating that God wants the presence of Spaniards in those lands.**

## The Columbian messianism

This providentialist sense leads him to **adapt his own life to a growing messianism**. Even more so, in his writings he describes himself as a man destined to fulfill a mission from the Almighty.

On the other hand, in the face of illness (he always had poor health), difficulties arising from nature or the mistreatment of men, **he tends to compare himself to biblical figures, such as Job or Jeremiah**.

As for the character of the Genoese, **we enter another world of paradoxes**. We know that he made enemies easier than he made friends. But at the same time, we have testimonies about **his loquacity when he wanted to please someone**, a quality that he put into practice especially before the kings, who must have enjoyed listening to the story of his adventures. And at the same time, we see **an arrogant and haughty Columbus at times**, like when he is about to get the kings fed up with his excessive demands for privileges,

or when he mistreats his men in word and deed.

On the other hand, a quality that stood out in him was his tenacity. **He had an immense capacity to overcome difficulties**.

This was amply demonstrated in his efforts to convince people of the possibilities of his project in Portugal and Castile, and we know that he would have tried to do so in England and France.

His perseverance in each of his ventures is explained by an iron will, **especially in the four trips he made to the Indies**. He also had the necessary sagacity to persuade and convince those who were beginning to lose faith in him, sometimes making up data that gave false hope to those close to him. **But the key to his success was that he ended up achieving what few believed in**.



# THE KEY QUESTIONS

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As we pointed out at the beginning, we are dealing with **a man of many different facets, and throughout history**, only some of the multiple characteristics that make the Genoese navigator unique have been taken into consideration or have been excessively emphasized.

**Cultured, a lover of the sea, idealistic and at the same time enterprising, visionary**, with a changing character, a lover and undying protector of his family, sometimes an irreconcilable enemy of those who wanted to oppose his theories or stop his projects. To which of these facets were the statues raised, and which facets do they try to repudiate when seeking that his image disappears from public space?

I think this is not the right question. **It does not address the navigator, the explorer of new worlds**, the first one who arrived in America from Europe and then returned to tell all about it.

What is really being questioned is **the legacy of Columbus and the consequences that his Atlantic endeavors brought to the development of humanity**.

Statues were erected to the navigator; but it is images of the "genocide" that are attacked. This is the question. What is intended to bring down, is not the discovery and its consequences from the scientific and technical point of view (that nobody would question), but what came after.

In the following paragraphs, we will try to answer the questions that seem appropriate in order to make **a solid and honest judgment about the celebration of Columbus Day**. We have tried to address the questions of those who doubt if there is something to celebrate every October 12<sup>th</sup>, or if the figure of the Genoese is totally repugnant and unworthy of commemorative acts.



## Was Columbus a supporter of slavery?

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We could answer that yes, he was, like the vast majority of people in the “Old” and “New World”, before and after 1492. Let us remember that slavery in Western society **did not disappear until the nineteenth century**, and in the American continent it was an equally common practice.

Europe had evolved from its classical past, where Greece and Rome supported their economy on a slave-owning society, where the slave was an object, a property, without legal entity. **Christianity makes this situation evolve with a new anthropological vision**, which takes an important step, as it considers that the baptized are all sons of God, therefore equal and should not be enslaved. It would still take centuries for new approaches -largely driven by Christianity as well- to come to a deep understanding that **no human being has a right to the property of another human being**.

In the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern Age, which is when the discovery takes place, **man’s still imperfect perception of mankind continues to evolve**.

Columbus, a man of his time, takes for granted that one of the possible benefits of every conquest was the possibility of obtaining slaves for sale. This was being done with Africans, **and there was no reason to change this practice with the newly discovered lands**. And it is precisely the lack of material wealth that prompted the Admiral to send indigenous people that could be sold as slaves, to the peninsula. In Castile, this practice was not strange, **just as it was normal in other European kingdoms** (and also Asian, African... and even in the recently discovered New World).

The doctrines of “just war”, which justified the enslavement of prisoners of war, were as common in Europe as in American territories, **to a greater extent in those that were constituted as large states**, such as that of the Aztec confederation.

And yet, it is precisely Columbus’s discovery, the fact that **will generate a turning point in this usual practice**. We notice it when we analyze the facts related to the dispositions of Queen Isabella concerning this reality. On his second voyage, Columbus sent ships with cargoes

of human beings for sale. **Queen Isabella, in a letter to Juan Rodriguez de Fonseca dated 1495, said:** "the Indians who come in the caravels seem to us that they could be sold better in Andalusia than elsewhere" and so "you must sell them as you see fit".

Such an attitude responded to the laws of war regarding enemies and rebels, and the origin of these laws are to be found in medieval tradition. But soon doubts arose, **and that is when a radical turn happened.** Better advised, the queen decides to prudently wait and four days later, she writes the following to the same addressee:

*"... because we would like to be informed about lawyers, theologians and canonists if with a good conscience these can be sold. And this cannot be done until we see the letters that the Admiral writes to us, to know why he sends them here as captives".*

The sale is stopped. Years later, the queen herself, after consultations and forming her own opinion on the matter, orders that the slaves already sold shall be freed, and that those who are still alive should be shipped again to the Indies. An expedition was being organized with an investigating judge, Francisco de Bobadilla, who goes

to Hispaniola in 1500 to investigate the situation on the island, **as news of disorders and mismanagement by the Columbus brothers are known.** In that same expedition, the queen orders her confessor, Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, to make arrangements so that **those indigenous people who were brought by Columbus as slaves returned to their land.** Thus, in the company of a group of Franciscans, it is 14 Native Americans, eleven men and three women who travel in this expedition.

Therefore, after a few years of hesitation about bringing Indians to sell them as slaves, the queen's decision would be forceful. Where Columbus saw a traditional business, **the queen declared the natives free subjects and potential baptized Indians.** The first measures were somewhat timid and the prohibition of slavery was easily violated.

In successive royal decrees, **the queen limited the practice of slavery in the Indies.** In this way, authorizing the slavery of certain groups of Indians: the anthropophagous (1503), those who had been obtained in just war (1504), or those who were already slaves of other people (this provision is ordered in 1506, after the



death of the queen). We would have to wait for the reign of her grandson, Charles I, **for slavery to be legally eradicated from Spanish territories.**

Thus, we can conclude that slavery was considered as a possibility in the Caribbean, coinciding with the general practices of the time. However, the commitment acquired after the Alexandrian Bulls to evangelize the natives obliged **legislation to be passed, with some exceptions, in the defense and freedom of Native Americans.** Laws are one thing and their enforcement is another. We could consider Spanish legislation then, using contemporary terms, as one that **clearly guaranteed the rights of the natives.**

It can be concluded that, if we remove all the images of Christopher Columbus because he was a supporter of slavery, **we practically should not leave standing any monument to sailors, politicians, writers or anyone who promoted or tolerated a society with slaves.** We could start by tearing down the statues of the last Aztec emperor, Cuauhtemoc, and those of any of the pre-Civil War American presidents, since they either encouraged slavery or lived with it without any scruples.

## Was Columbus the instigator of the American genocide?

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Let's remember the words of O'Farrell or the statement of the president of the University of Notre Dame, **when he covered some murals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century representing Columbus** in different moments of his life. In some of the images there were natives portrayed with typical stereotypes of the time they were painted. In this case, it is argued that they show the tyrannical

character of the navigator, and how ominous it would be for future generations if those murals were still in public view.

These are just two examples of **what is happening in different parts of the United States.** Sometimes the statue is not torn down, but it may appear damaged, like the morning when the statue of Columbus

in Central Park appeared **with its hands stained with red paint, simulating a vision of a discoverer with blood on his hands**. Similar to the latest statue teardowns we've also witnessed in other States.

The first question we must ask ourselves to try to find out the cause of these actions is: **did genocide happen in Spanish America?** The Royal Spanish Academy of the Language defines the term genocide:

*"Systematic extermination or elimination of a human group because of race, ethnicity, religion, politics or nationality".*

**This is not at all fitting with the objectives of colonizers in the Indies.** First, we must understand that one of the appeals of America was precisely the labor force needed to work the new lands that were discovered. As we have seen before, that labor force was free; and as such, it was not in the interest of the monarchy to exterminate the population of the New World.

Another argument, of greater significance in my opinion, is that **the justification with which Spain maintained its presence in the Indies was precisely the obligation to evangelize its inhabitants**. It did not make sense, therefore, to kill them, since any

justification for the Spanish presence in the discovered territories would be lost.

This is why we believe that **Columbus was not a genocide, or the origin of a genocide ... because there was no such event, at least not in Spanish America.**

**Wasn't the native population drastically reduced with the arrival of the Spanish?**

This statement is completely true, although we cannot provide specific figures, as demographers cannot agree on the number of pre-Hispanic population, **and therefore cannot currently have exact amounts of the decline of that population**. But the data that we do have allows us to estimate that the Caribbean population decreased by 90% in the first years of the conquest.

This reality has been studied by specialists in history of medicine, and it seems clear that **the first reason for this massive death of Antilleans was an outbreak of influenza**. We cannot be surprised by the figure, if we remember the terrible epidemic of plague that in the 14th century reduced the European population by half.

Therefore, **what killed the natives of the Caribbean environment was not the**

**gunpowder or the sword, but the viruses that were deadly**, because of their novelty in America during the first decades when the Indians did not have the antibodies to combat this terrible enemy. Flu is not the only deadly disease. Smallpox and measles epidemics join as other causes of mortality, already beyond the Caribbean area. In fact, the siege of the city of Tenochtitlán by Cortés, after the Spanish victory in Otumba, **ended up with a Spanish triumph because smallpox had become rampant among the besieged population**, causing

the death, among others, of the successor to the Emperor Moctezuma.

Although diseases the main cause of death among American peoples during the first years of the conquest, they were not the only one. Although proportionally in much lower terms, the conquest fights, and the excessive labor imposed on Caribbean populations, were other mortality factors. **However, this does not justify the accusation of genocide in any way.**

## Did Columbus really “discover” America?

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One of the reasons given by those who reject the celebration of Columbus Day is that the **"myth that Columbus discovered America" must be dispelled**. For decades now, some have wanted to engage in a terminological battle that is not so much about the accuracy of the use of words, **but about their supposed ideological charge**.

Such discussion was especially evident in the wake of the commemoration of **the V Centennial of Columbus' arrival to the Caribbean in 1492**. Until then,

without entering into further disquisitions, it had been called a discovery, and it did not seem offensive to anyone. But it was precisely around the event that was to have a global visibility and scope, **when certain sectors of indigenous people began to point out as offensive the term "discovery"**, since they saw in it a Eurocentric conception of America as a land without inhabitants, which Spain wanted to assimilate into its domains. We must recall that 1992 was the year in which the indigenous leader **Rigoberta Menchu**, defender of the rights of the Mayan people

in Guatemala, received the Nobel Peace Prize, and in her speech of appreciation noted the following:

*"It is comforting to see this growing attention, even if it comes 500 years later, to the suffering, discrimination, oppression and exploitation that our people have suffered, but which, thanks to their own worldview and conception of life, they have managed to resist and finally see with promising prospects. How, from those roots that they wanted to eradicate, they now germinate with strength, hope and representation for the future".*

*"Who can predict what other great scientific conquests and what development these peoples would have achieved if they had not been conquered by blood and fire, objects of an ethnocide, which reached almost 50 million people in 50 years?"*

*"We must not forget that when the Europeans came to America, thriving civilizations were flourishing. You cannot talk about the discovery of America, because you discover what is ignored or hidden. America and its native civilizations had discovered themselves long before the fall of the Roman Empire and the European Middle Ages. The scope of their cultures is part of the heritage of humanity and continue to amaze their scholars".*

**(Rigoberta Menchú, Stockholm December 10, 1992).**

We can appreciate in this speech **all the typical features of the movement that resists to talk about Discovery** and emphasizes the genocidal character of the arrival of the Spaniards in America.

Spain did not discover America, according to Menchú, because "America and its native civilizations had discovered themselves". This statement, which may seem simply descriptive, hides half-truths (**which is the best way to build a credible lie**). If we talk about the settlement of the New Continent, we must obviously go back thousands of years before the arrival of Columbus, but does that imply that "America knew itself"? We enter into the more complex part of this question. **Did America exist as a concept -even if it was not named- before the arrival of the Spanish?** I think it can be said that it didn't. What are we basing this on?

On the concept of discovery as "invention", in the sense that the classics used this word. **The continent existed, and was populated by hundreds of communities that spoke different languages**, possessed different cultures, some had developed various types of writing, worshipped different deities... all this is true indeed. We can compare it to the reality of the Iberian Peninsula before the arrival

of the Romans: could one speak then of Spain? Was there some kind of bond that united the various peoples settled on the peninsular site? **Clearly, the answer is no.**

It was precisely **the conquest and colonization of Rome, which created Hispania**, that gave the Hispanic peoples a common identity and an awareness of belonging to a common whole. If we go back to 1492, we can say that **America did not know itself -or did not conceive itself- as a whole**. That vast continent was inhabited by peoples as different as the Inuit, the Quimbayas, Mexicas, Chachapoyas, Mayas, Quechuas, Aymaras ...

Each of these were aware of themselves and those who lived around their land. **However, in no case did this awareness of being part of a whole, existed for them**. Cuzco was the "navel of the world", but what world? The American? Not at all: **it was considered by the Quechuas as the neuralgic center of the Andean space**. They were willing to expand their domain at the expense of neighboring peoples, like the Aymaras of present-day Bolivia, or the Cayambis of Ecuador. **Therefore, we don't think it's pertinent to talk about an America that had discovered itself**.

**If we go back to 1492, we can say that America did not know itself -or did not conceive itself- as a whole. That vast continent was inhabited by very different peoples.**

How about the use of the expression "**Encounter between two worlds**", to apparently respect the equal dignity of the inhabitants of the old and the new continent? Of course, no one who uses the term discovery intends to undermine the dignity of the native inhabitants of America. However, there is a reality: **the Spanish were the ones who left their environment to discover new lands**. The inhabitants of the so called Old World were aware of themselves as part of the European continent, while they knew of the existence



of a larger whole that encompassed them, and that was formed by the three parts of the world known to them: Europe, Asia and Africa. They had heard of a *Quarta orbis pars*, but around it there were more myths and legends than actual geographical knowledge.

For this reason, although Columbus systematically rejected having reached a continent other than Asia, the truth is **that successive expeditions continued to draw the American geography**. And the Spanish government ruling over those lands gave them a common identity.

The name of America was hardly used in the modern age. They spoke of the "Spanish Indies". Then, the knowledge of the different parts of America, with their respective inhabitants, was expanded. **Who had a first awareness of the all-American continent?** It was the Spanish rulers, who built on that site a linguistic, legal and religious world. The diversification in viceroyalties responded to the need for an effective government, but that was configured as something unitary. **Throughout the three centuries of Spanish history, the American identity would be developed**, and it was crafted based both on European contributions and the pre-Hispanic reality, in those aspects

that would be compatible with the Christian tradition.

**It was the Spaniards who gave the Andean languages the tool of writing, which is fundamental to their preservation.** Let us remember that one of the first books published in Peru was a catechism written in the three languages of the viceroyalty: Quechua, Aymara and Spanish. The same happened in Mexico with bilingual works in Nahuatl and Spanish. In the north of the isthmus, forms of writing had been developed which were applied to the codices or "painted books", as the Spaniards called them. On the other hand, many oral traditions were put into writing when the Spaniards arrived, **and we have come to know about them in this way.**

This way of seeing the reality of the discovery is supported by **the thought of Simón Bolívar**, who was not precisely a great defender of the Hispanic monarchy. Bolívar's dream was the creation of "Great Colombia", a new state that would combine the current states of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Panama. What was the identity basis of such a political construction? **Precisely the common traits inherited from Spain.** There is an interesting text that points out the perception that Bolívar himself had of the discovery, and

which is quoted on very few occasions. In the document known as "**Letter from Jamaica**", Bolivar exposes to an English addressee his political program for the new state, as he points out:

*"The New Grenada will join Venezuela, if it is agreed to form a Central Republic whose Capital is Maracaibo, or a new city that, with the name of Las Casas (in honor of this hero of philanthropy) merges between the confines of both countries, in the superb port of Bahiahonda. This position, although unknown, is more advantageous in all respects. Its access is easy, and its situation so strong, that it can become unassailable. It has a pure and healthy climate, a territory as suitable for agriculture as for cattle raising, and a*

*great abundance of construction wood. The Savages who inhabit it would be civilized, and our possessions would increase with the acquisition of the Guajira. **This Nation would be called Colombia, as a tribute of justice and gratitude to the breeder of our hemisphere**."*

(Simon Bolivar, Kingston September 6, 1815).

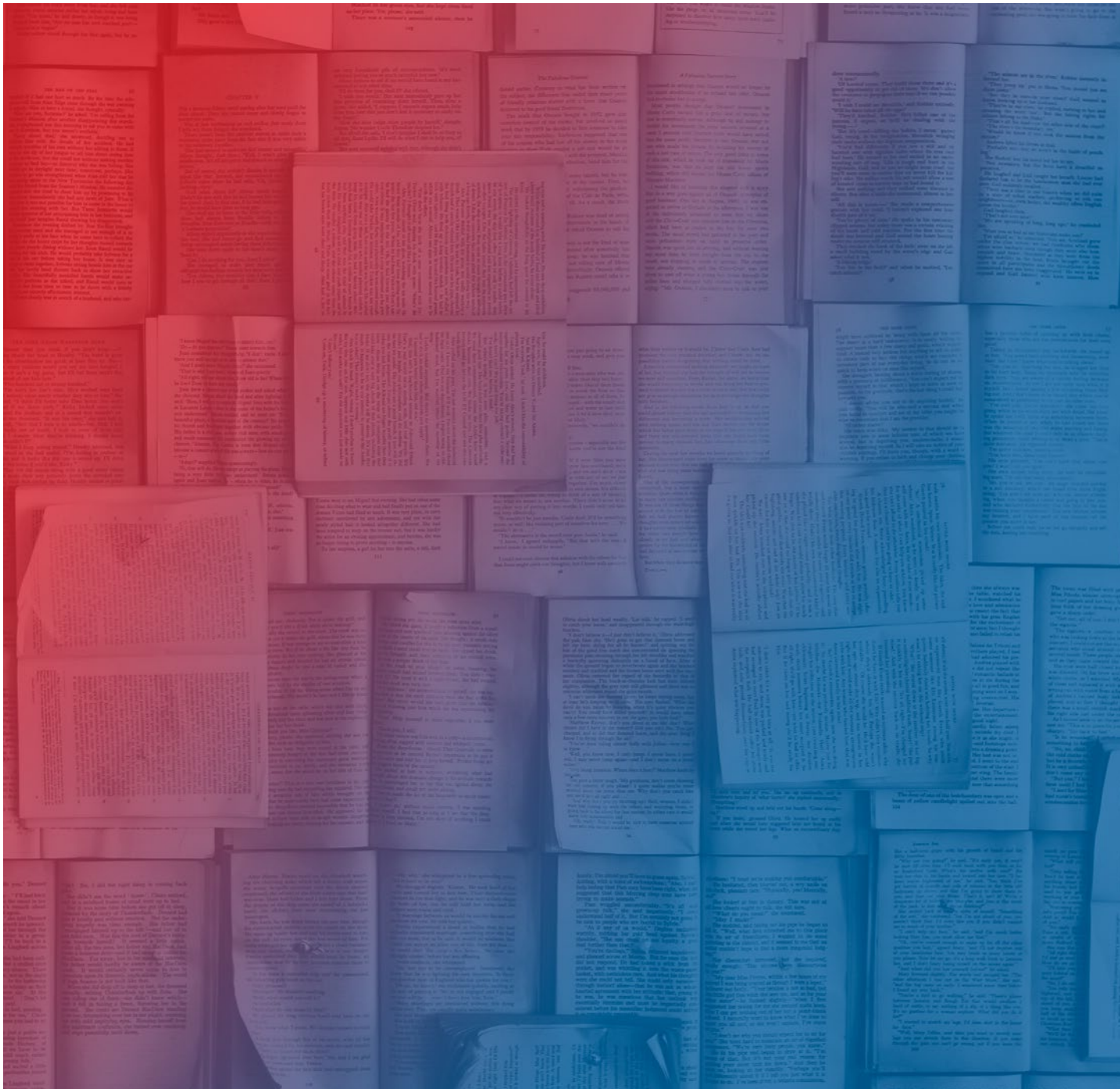
In his words Bolivar recognizes, beyond ideological interpretations, **the importance of Columbus in the discovery of America**, even though intellectually he was not the father of the new political and human reality, which caused the name of the Indies to be taken from another navigator, Americo Vespucci, who did speak of a "New World".

## Can the Spanish legacy be summarized as a process of ethnocide?

There are many, or perhaps very loud, voices that are raised to claim that Spain committed a true ethnocide in America, since it not only encouraged the disappearance of the original populations, **but wanted to destroy all traces of pre-Hispanic culture**.

It would be five centuries ahead of its time if Spaniards **adapted to the reality they found in the New World**, considering they came from a society that accumulated elements inherited from the classical world, from the Middle Ages when universities and great cathedrals emerged and from the Renaissance.





## ¿Columbus Day? Yes, please. Practical guide to understanding the figure of Cristopher Columbus

Let's remember that the Caribbean region may have seemed to the Spaniards a reality assimilable to our pre-Roman past from a cultural point of view. Later, the great states would arrive, **creators of important civilizations and builders of spectacular cities**. From the point of view of Europeans, what had been achieved in fifteen centuries of evolution was simply better than what they were finding. Added to this perception was the fact that one of the reasons why Spain settled in the Indies was **the evangelization of the pre-Hispanic peoples**.

And yet, even taking into account these premises, there is no systematic extermination of the cultural world before 1492. **Rather, we should speak of a process of inculturation:** a civilization is adapted in order to assimilate, as far as possible, achievements that are not incompatible with it. Within its evangelizing enthusiasm, there certainly are acts that today seem excessive, such as the burning of Mayan codices by Friar Diego de Landa, or the destruction of Tenochtitlán by order of Cortés, **a considerable loss for the historical heritage of humanity**.

Was it possible to demand a different attitude from those men who came from a Christian and Renaissance Europe?

**According to today's logic and our system of values, it would be desirable;** according to the parameters of that time, it was unthinkable. Let us remember that archaeology emerged as a science at the end of the 18th century. Until then, the interest in knowing and protecting the ancient cultural heritage, unless it was seen as a model to imitate (this happened in the Renaissance with respect to classical Rome), was practically non-existent.

Continuing with the proposed comparison, in the process of Romanization of the Mediterranean, we would find it hard to imagine that the Romans, with their elaborate urban culture, **would consider respecting the cultural achievements of the peoples they conquered**.

And yet, in the case of the "Hispanicization" of America, **many elements are detected that make the colonization process novel**. In the first place, the ethnological interest that moves soldiers and missionaries to write, while possibly in Spain they would not have developed such activity. The existence of the chronicles of the Indies is a clear example of the extent to which intellectual curiosity led them to **leave a written record of the ways of life**, cultural and religious elements, and features of those peoples and lands.

We have already said that, in the Andean space, where before the arrival of the Spaniards no type of writing had been developed, **the Latin alphabet serves as a vehicle to perpetuate the languages and traditions of the different peoples.**

With **the creation of the academic centers**, in a parallel way to the advance of evangelization, chairs of indigenous languages are created, and missionaries are required to learn the languages of the places where they are going to preach, since it will be much easier for Christianity to take

root if it is spoken in the language of the listeners rather than if they are forced to learn Spanish. **Many of these languages have been maintained until today.**

Therefore, while there is no doubt that the Spanish considered their civilization advanced enough to project it (and sometimes impose it) on the discovered lands, it is no less true that to the extent they considered possible, **they respected and transmitted the cultural elements of the inhabitants of those lands.**

## Are there reasons to celebrate the 12<sup>th</sup> of October?

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We have arrived at the question that needs to be asked after learning about some of the historical aspects surrounding the life of Christopher Columbus. It was essential to **address these aspects from a historical point of view**, in order to try to answer the question posed by this paper. We have tried to carry out this work in a rigorous way and respectful of the truth.

We thus undertake the task we set out at the beginning: **understanding the reason behind why some people try to put**

**an end to the presence of images of Columbus** in some places in the Spanish and Anglo-Saxon America. Overcoming myths, putting emotions aside, and establishing guidelines that allow us to discern a current issue in a historical way, has been our purpose when tackling this topic.

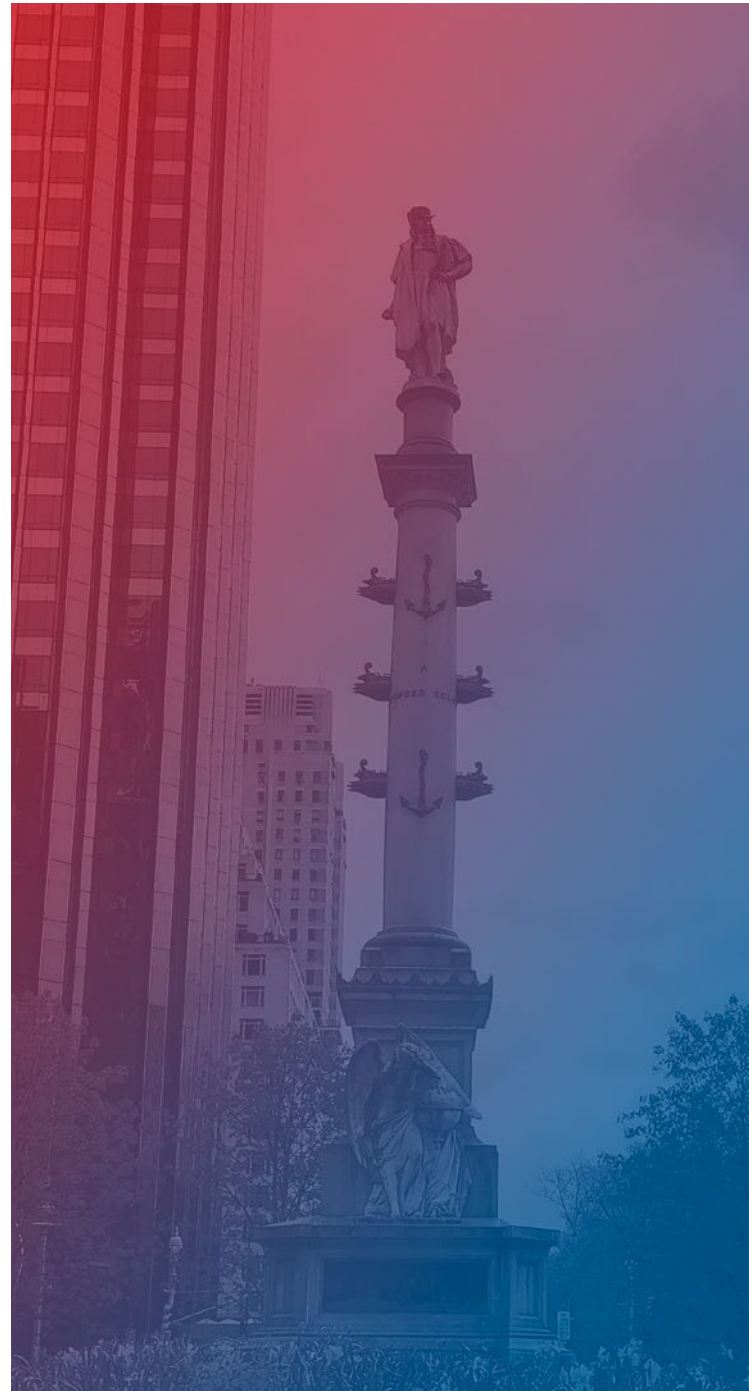
**The attacks on Columbus, as we have pointed out, are not directed to the life of the discoverer, but to his legacy.** Those who want to erase his presence in public or private spaces mention few details of



the navigator's life. They limit themselves to project in time (even making him responsible for events of the 21st century) the consequences of his arrival in America.

We have pointed out several of the consequences of that event of October 12, 1492. Perhaps the most striking of all is the brutal decline of the pre-Hispanic population, mainly due to epidemics. **This was a completely unwanted consequence.** It would have occurred at the moment when, as a result of the explorations or some fortuitous event, the American populations, isolated in time for thousands of years, would have come into contact with Old World viruses for which they were not prepared. The passage of at least one generation was necessary so that at a continental level, the antibodies were generated to avoid that diseases like the flu or measles **would be deadly for the Amerindians.**

And as for the alleged ethnocide and cultural devastation, perhaps we must look with historical honesty what the Spanish left in America over three centuries. Remember that those territories were kingdoms of the Hispanic monarchy. They formed a whole with the peninsular kingdoms. And, logically, **there is a trade-off of resources between all the Hispanic territories.** The gold and silver mines were certainly exploited without



any consideration, practically until the extinction of precious metals; it was the logic of the moment: if that is as Spanish as Castile, let us obtain resources for the benefit of all.

There is less talk, in that exchange and flow of resources, **of the investment made by the Crown in the Indies**. Gold and silver came from there, but missionaries, teachers, architects, doctors came from the peninsula... and as a result, a whole hospital and educational network was established that reached the places furthest away from the viceroyalty centers. The way to visualize the Spanish presence in the land of conquest was the construction of cities. And in these cities, next to the houses of government, the church, the hospital, the schools... The convents, as they were in the Middle Ages, became **centers for the diffusion of knowledge, for Spaniards and natives**.

Another medieval legacy is the construction of universities. Let us remember that the first center, **the University of Santo Tomás in Hispaniola, dates back to 1538**; not fifty years had passed since the discovery. And that center will be followed by almost thirty universities founded before the independence. The same can be affirmed by looking at the great assistance network built up as the colonization advanced: hospitals for natives, houses for poor or abandoned

women, schools for the children of caciques or mixed, **where Spaniards, natives and mestizos were formed together**. It is worth remembering at this point that the integration of both populations was sought. Possibly as a consequence of her demanding morality, Queen Isabella ordered her rulers in America: **"Marry Spaniards with natives and natives with Spaniards"**. This is how the new face of America arises, which is neither Spanish nor Native: it is mestizo, and the current demographic and social composition of the old Spanish America is an example of this.

**There is less talk, in that exchange and flow of resources, of the investment made by the Crown in the Indies. Gold and silver came from there, but missionaries, teachers, architects, doctors came from the peninsula...**



## A new era of knowledge

And what to say from the scientific and knowledge point of view. The arrival of Columbus in America would eventually be **an unstoppable driver for the advancement of geographic, anthropological, scientific, technical, and botanical knowledge**. Humanity would benefit from the advances made not only by Spaniards, but also by the inhabitants of the four continents then known, who, supported by the first discoveries, will be able to go much further. The knowledge of the **Old and New World would merge in subjects as diverse as medicine, biology,**

**languages, ethnology, architecture...** in the same way that knowledge crosses the Atlantic in both directions, **there is also a flow of products that will enrich both**. If wheat, vines, horses (extinct for centuries in the new continent), pigs and printing presses come to America from Europe, the same goes other way round for the hammock, which awakened so much pleasure in the first sailors, to **products that today are basic as tomatoes, potatoes, quinoa, chocolate...** we also must remember that the cultivation of potatoes saved Europe from many famines in the Modern Age.

## The Laws of the Indies

Finally, it is worth considering another topic that has emerged in these pages: the Indian legislation. **The Laws of the Indies**, promoted by the Catholic kings, and complemented in part by the advanced School of Salamanca, constitute a true juridical monument, **in many aspects**

**ahead of its time**. In modern times there was no declaration of human rights (it would be anachronistic to pretend that it existed), but **a legal basis was developed to ensure the protection of the most vulnerable groups**, in this case the native populations. They were not always

complied with, and the famous saying "you abide, but you don't comply with them" applied to Crown officials in America went hand in hand with a reality more frequent than kings would like. However, **mechanisms were also developed to ensure compliance**, and the honesty of those who wielded power in the Indies.

Such is the case of the residency trials, an inspection that was carried out on the actions of the authorities once they left office. Such inspection was made on the basis of questions to witnesses, **and like any trial, could end with a sentence of guilt or innocence in the use of power.**

## Bartolomé de las Casas speaks about Columbus

It is frequent that those who criticize the Spanish performance in America **raise the work of the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas as a flag.** The writings of the friar, which had a huge diffusion in the centuries after the colonization process, and are still frequently cited today, **are a great weapon of anti-Spanish propaganda**, and source of very negative views of the colonization of America. However, few stop to consider what Las Casas wrote about Christopher Columbus. To elaborate his work on the **History of the Indies**, the Dominican used, among many other sources, the writings of Columbus himself. In fact, we owe it to Las Casas to have

preserved these copied texts, since many of the originals disappeared.

Bartolomé de las Casas, who is excessive in his descriptions, **was a true admirer of Queen Elizabeth and Christopher Columbus.** Let's see some of the paragraphs he dedicates to the navigator:

*"The time of God's merciful wonders has come, when in these parts of the earth (where the seed or word of life has been sown) the undying fruit of the predestined was to be taken from this orb, and the greatness of divine riches and infinite goodness, after being more widely known, was to be magnified, The divine and highest*

*Master chose the illustrious and great Columbus from among the sons of Adam that were on Earth in these times of ours, and it is convenient to know, first, about his name and his work as a settler, and then about his virtue, intelligence, industry, works, knowledge and prudence, to entrust one of the divine heroic deeds that he wanted to do in his world in this century".*

And he adds a little further on:

*"He was a man of great courage, of great effort, of high thoughts, naturally inclined to what can be inferred from his life and deeds and writings and conversation, to undertake deeds and works that were both ecclesiastical and marked. Patient and much suffered (as it will seem below), forgiving of insults, and who wanted nothing else, as he is told, but that those who offended him should know his errors and that criminals should be reconciled with him. Very constant and adorned with longevity in the works and adversities that always occurred to him, which were incredible and infinite, he always had great trust in the Divine Providence, and truly, to what I understood from him, and from my own father, who was with him when he returned with people to populate this*

*Spanish island in the year 93, and from other persons that accompanied him and others that served him, he had a dear fidelity and devotion and always kept the Kings".*

**(Bartolomé de las Casas, History of the Indies).**

As we see, the Dominican who persevered for decades urging the Spanish rulers to stop the excesses in the Indies, and even to abandon them, **elaborates a sweetened portrait of Columbus, idealistic as few, and full of admiration** for the work he carried out, considering him a brilliant instrument of providence chosen to bring faith to those lands.

Today we know that Bartolomé de las Casas **is excessive in all his descriptions**, and especially in his judgment of people linked to the American colonization. In the same way that we cannot accept as historical many of the data that he provides in his work about the numbers of deaths as a result of the wars of conquest, we will not take for granted the image he presents of the Genoese. It illustrates something very simple: **when we lose perspective, we do not contrast the data**, and we get carried away by enthusiasms that can be

commendable, it is easy to fall into a rash judgment. That is why the amendment to the totality of a figure, or a historical fact is produced, and the serene and rigorous approach to actions of the past that, like everything that men do, **are composed of lights and shadows**, is impossible.

The combination of these moves us away from those golden or black legends that prevent us from being honest in **assessing and understanding our history**, especially that legacy we share with the American continent.



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**Página web Mitch O'Farrell:**

<https://cd13.lacity.org/>

**Página web Premios Nobel:**

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**PARES (Portal de Archivos Españoles):**

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**Organización de Naciones Unidas, Declaración de Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas:**

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenous-peoples-es/declaracion-sobre-los-derechos-de-los-pueblos-indigenas.html>

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