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Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus's "Enterprise of the Indies"

PAULINE MOFFITT WATTS

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

—Revelations 21:1

God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John after having spoken of it through the mouth of Isaiah; and he showed me the spot where to find it.

—Christopher Columbus, 1500¹

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS WANTED TO BE REMEMBERED as the Admiral of the Ocean Sea. It was a formal title that he had struggled to win from his king and queen, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, in recognition of his discovery and exploration of the Indies. And for the last one hundred fifty years scholars have almost without exception elaborated the image of Columbus as the bold and innovative explorer who, armed with a "rational" or "scientific" geography, battled the ignorance and superstition of influential ecclesiastics at the Aragonese court until he finally won royal support for his "Enterprise of the Indies." Samuel Eliot Morison's well-known biography, *The Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (1942), is a prime example of this traditional line of scholarly interpretation.²

Morison's image of Columbus coincides with but one of two images that

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¹ This passage occurs in a letter written by Columbus to a member of the royal court in 1500, after his third voyage when he was returned from the New World Indies to Spain in chains; G. B. Spotorno, *Memorials of Columbus* (London, 1823), 224.

² After almost seven years of petitioning at the Spanish royal court, Columbus won acceptance for his Enterprise of the Indies—his plan to reach the oriental archipelago by sailing west—from Queen Isabella in

Columbus had of himself. The second image tended, particularly in his later years, to take precedence over the first and seemed to consume him. He came to believe that he was predestined to fulfill a number of prophecies in preparation for the coming of the Antichrist and the end of the world. According to his calculations, these events were not far off. This second self-image is epitomized in the signature that Columbus adopted: Christoferens. It is an awkward latinization of his given name and means "Christ-bearer." Until recently, little attention has been paid to Christoferens—that is, to the spiritual dimension of Columbus's personality, to the religious and cultural environment out of which it developed, and to its possible influence on the genesis of his voyages of discovery.³ Yet Columbus's apocalyptic vision of the world and of the special role that he was destined to play in the unfolding of events that would presage the end of time was a major stimulus for his voyages. Moreover, his apocalypticism must be recognized as inseparable from his geography and cosmology if a balanced picture of the historical significance of his Enterprise of the Indies is to be achieved.

The origins and development of the two-fold conception that Columbus had of himself, and of the sense of mission that grew out of it, are not easy to trace. Details regarding his background and education are sparse. According to his son Ferdinand's biography and to Bartolomé de Las Casas's *Historia de las Indias*, the two principal early sources for the mariner's life, Columbus studied for a while at the University of Pavia. There, Ferdinand wrote, he "studied enough . . . to understand the geographers, of whose teaching he was very fond; for this reason he also gave himself to the study of astronomy and geometry, since these sciences are so closely related that one depends upon the other. And because Ptolemy, in the beginning of his *Geography*, says that one cannot be a good geographer unless one knows how to draw too, he learned drawing, in order to be able to show the position of countries and form geographic bodies, plane and round."⁴ Scholars have long doubted that Columbus studied at the University of Pavia. Many follow instead the argument advanced by Cornelio Desimoni in 1894 that Pavia refers not to the famous Italian

1492. For at least a year prior to that acceptance he insisted that he be granted the title Admiral of the Ocean Sea and a generous portion of all future profits from any lands that he might discover as conditions for undertaking his voyage. These demands almost cost him the royal support he so persistently sought. See Ferdinand Columbus, *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus by His Son Ferdinand*, trans. Benjamin Keen (New Brunswick, 1959), chap. 14. It should be noted that this translation was made from the first Italian edition of Ferdinand's biography, published in Venice in 1571; the Spanish original is lost. See Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of The Ocean Sea*, 1 (Boston, 1942), chap. 8. For the texts of the seven documents signed by Columbus and the Spanish monarchs regarding the Enterprise of the Indies, see Samuel Eliot Morison, *Journals and Other Documents on the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (New York, 1963).

³ Columbus first signed himself Christoferens in a 1493 memorandum addressed to Ferdinand and Isabella. On virtually everything he signed from 1493 until his death in 1506 he used the following sigil, which has never been definitively deciphered:

.S.
S. A. S.
X M Y
Xpō FERENS.

On this curious sigil and the various attempts to decode it, see Paolo Emilio Taviani, *Christophe Colomb: Genèse de la grande découverte*, 2 (Paris, 1980), 38–40. Taviani provided an excellent bibliography of the relevant scholarship; *ibid.*, 45. Also see Alain Milhou, *Colón y su mentalidad mesiánica en el ambiente franciscanista español*, Cuadernos Colombinos, vol. 11 (Valladolid, 1983), 59–90.

⁴ Ferdinand Columbus, *Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus*, chap. 3, p. 9. On Columbus's education, compare Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, ed. José Sancho Rayón, 1 (Madrid, 1875), 46.

university but rather to the Vicolo Pavia—an alleyway in Genoa where, in the mid-fifteenth century, the guild of the wool workers ran a well-known school for the children of their members. Columbus's father was a wool maker in Genoa.⁵ While the question of where and when Columbus received his education remains unresolved, evidence regarding some of the more important sources of his thought survives.

Columbus apparently acquired much of his knowledge of geography, cosmology, history, astronomy, and other related subjects from a number of popular and quite widely diffused compilations that he read and annotated. Prominent among them were Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia*, Plutarch's *Lives*, Marco Polo's *Il milione*, the *Historia rerum ubique gestarum* of Pius II, and Pierre d'Ailly's *Imago mundi*. In these works Columbus would have encountered the following names: Aristotle, Averroes, Avicenna, Eratosthenes, Marinus of Tyre, Strabo, Ptolemy, Solinus, Seneca, Julius Capitolinus, Flavius Josephus, Augustine, Ambrose, Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede, Alfraganus, Roger Bacon, John Mandeville, Joachim of Fiore, Thomas Aquinas, Peter Comestor, Nicholas of Lyra, Francis Mayronnes, and Paolo Toscanelli. The depth of Columbus's knowledge of these figures would have varied greatly had it been limited to these compilations; some are barely mentioned, while the views of others are described in considerable detail. Finally, it is important to bear in mind that Columbus, like most Christians of his age, was deeply and thoroughly acquainted with the Old and New Testaments and with the Apocrypha (which would have been included in the Vulgate version of the Old Testament that he used).⁶

Without doubt, Columbus did not have the advanced, specialized education of a professional academic. But he did read and annotate works composed in Latin (for example, d'Ailly's *Imago mundi* and Pius II's *Historia*), Castilian (Alfonso de Palencia's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*), and Italian (Cristoforo Landino's translation of Pliny's *Naturalis historia*). His script was clear and not unsophisticated. As Ferdinand noted and Las Casas repeated, "So fine was his hand that he might have earned his living by that skill alone." His interest in history, geography, astronomy, and cosmology and his readings in these subjects were likely shared by many of the better-educated merchants, navigators, bankers, and business entrepreneurs of his day. And this is precisely what Columbus was—an experienced sailor and sometime merchant who married into a family belonging to the minor nobility of Portugal, a man whose fortunes had prospered on a modest scale.⁷

⁵ Desimoni, *Questioni colombiane*, in Cesare de Lollis, ed., *Raccolta di documenti e studi pubblicati della R. Commissione Colombiana*, pt. 2, vol. 3 (Rome, 1894), 29. For a summary of the debate over whether Columbus studied at the University of Pavia, see Taviani, *Christophe Colomb*, 60–62. Las Casas's history seems to support Desimoni's theory, for Las Casas wrote that Columbus had an elementary rather than an advanced level of instruction. Columbus "estudió en Pavia los primeros rudimentos de letras"; *Historia de las Indias*, 46.

⁶ Columbus's copies of the following works survive: d'Ailly's *Imago mundi* (1480 or 1483), Pius II's *Historia rerum ubique gestarum* (1477), Marco Polo's *De consuetudinibus et conditionibus orientalium regionum* and a restone of it in Italian (*Il milione*) by Pipino of Bologna (1485), Pliny's *Naturalis historia* (the Italian translation by Cristoforo Landino, Venice, 1489), Plutarch's *Lives* (in a 1491 Castilian translation by Alfonso de Palencia), and a fifteenth-century palimpsest of Seneca's *Tragœdies*. On the sources to which Columbus had access, see Ferdinand Columbus, *Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus*, chaps. 6–9; Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, chaps. 6–11; Taviani, *Christophe Colomb*, 231–38; and S. de La Rosa, *Libros y autógrafos de Cristóbal Colón* (Seville, 1891).

⁷ Ferdinand Columbus, *Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus*, chap. 3, p. 9; and Las Casas, *Historia de los*

*Mappemonde du VIII^e siècle qui se trouve dans un beau Manuscrit
d'Isidore de Séville, de cette époque.*

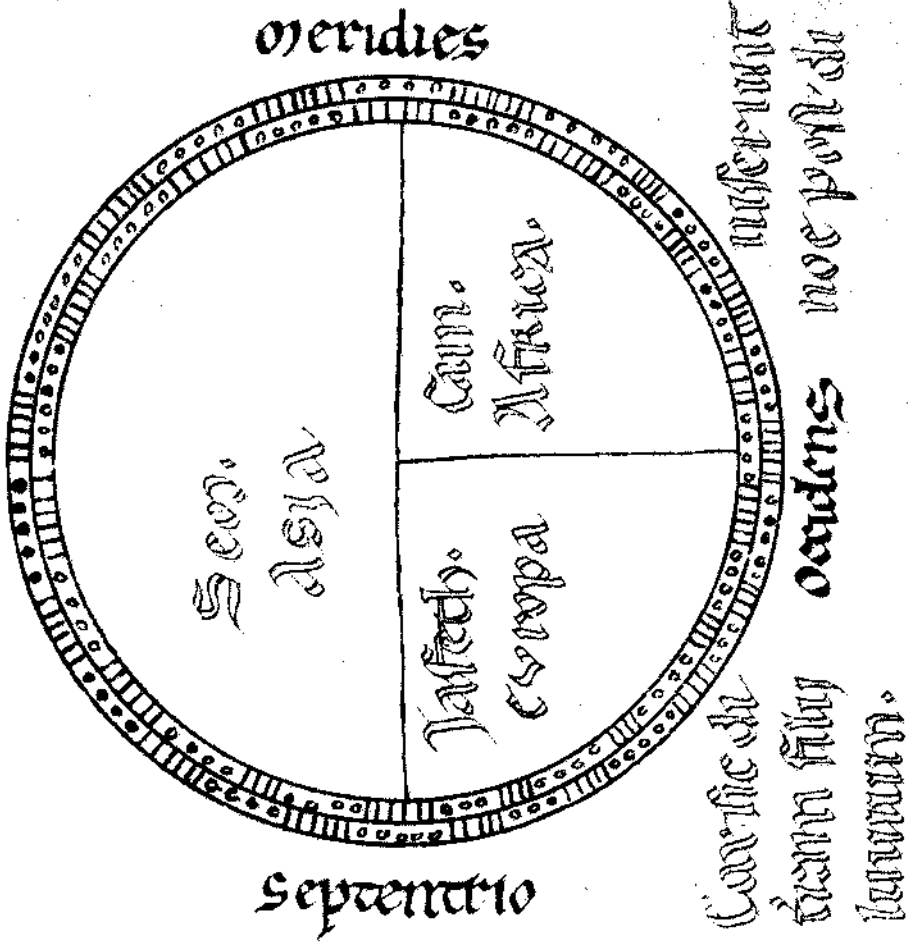


Figure 1: T-O Map of the Thirteenth Century. Diagram reproduced from Vicomte de Santarem, *Atlas composé de mappemondes, de Portulans, et de cartes hydrographiques et historiques depuis le VI^e jusqu'au XVII^e siècle* (Paris, 1849), plate 5, no. 11.

The vision of the cosmos that Columbus shared with many of his contemporaries was derived from a variety of well-known ancient and medieval sources, including many by the authors mentioned above. It seems likely that Columbus's vision came principally from d'Ailly's *Imago mundi* and opuscula and from Pius II's *Historia*. From these works he arrived at a composite picture of a cosmos that was finite and geocentric. The world was located at the center of the seven concentric planetary spheres, themselves enclosed by the outermost shell of the fixed stars. The composition of the heavens and the movements of the planets and stars were permanent and unchanging and could and did influence actions and events on the earth, which was always subject to change—to generation and corruption.

The world itself was commonly depicted as a disk divided into three parts: Europe, Asia, and Africa. This disk was circumscribed by a band of ocean, the impassable sea whose unknown expanses had been feared since antiquity. The tripartite division of the world corresponded to the known land masses and was corroborated by a passage from the Old Testament. "The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. . . . These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled" (Gen. 9:19). Accordingly, the most common form of the medieval *mappaemundi*, the so-called T-O map, was a circle, with the tripartite division resulting from the placing of the "T" within the circle "O." Since Shem was considered to be the eldest of Noah's sons, his domain was the largest of the three land masses, Asia. Ham's portion was Africa, and Japheth's was Europe (see Figure 1).

East was at the top of most medieval *mappaemundi*. There the terrestrial paradise was located, again in accordance with Scripture. "And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden and there he set the man he had formed" (Gen. 2:8). Frequently the terrestrial paradise was depicted as an island, separated from the world by the waters of the flood. On the northern shores of Africa were the "monstrous races," first catalogued by Pliny and subsequently incorporated into various popular medieval Christian legends. Somewhere in the northern stretches of Asia, according to these legends, were the tribes of Gog and Magog, imprisoned within walls constructed by Alexander the Great. These tribes would be loosed upon mankind when the end of the world was imminent, as prophesied in the *Revelation* of John of Patmos and other influential apocalyptic visions, such as that of the pseudo-Methodius. Until these events occurred, the cosmos was the place where men and women were fated to live after Adam and Eve had been cast out of the Garden of Eden. This was the setting of fallen humanity's struggle to redeem itself in the eyes of its Maker and to recover the lost paradise so prominently and so nostalgically depicted on so many *mappaemundi* (see Figure 2).⁸

Indias, 46. On Columbus's knowledge of Spanish, Italian, and Latin, see Taviani, *Christophe Colomb*, 42–43, 45; and V. I. Milani, "The Written Language of Christopher Columbus," in *Forum Italicum* (Buffalo, 1973). On the connections among literary, scientific, and mercantile cultures during the age of discoveries, see J. H. Parry, *The Age of Reconnaissance: Discovery, Exploration, Settlement, 1450–1650* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1981), pt. 1; Boies Penrose, *Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance, 1420–1620* (New York, 1962), chaps. 16–17; Leonardo Olschki, *Storia letteraria delle scoperte geografiche* (Florence, 1937); and Irving Leonard, *Books of the Brave* (New York, 1964).

⁸ On medieval conceptions of geography—"spiritual" and otherwise—and their representations in *mappaemundi*, see Mithou, *Colón y su mentalidad mesiánica*, 403–11; W. G. L. Randles, *De la terre plate au globe*



Figure 2: Ebstorf World Map of the Thirteenth Century.

Facsimile reproduced from Konrad Miller, *Die Ältesten Weltkarten* (Stuttgart, 1895–98), vol. 5

Men saw themselves essentially as *viators*, “strangers and pilgrims” St. Francis called them, journeying through the time and space of a tainted cosmos in search of a redemption that would occur only with the termination of that cosmos. These journeys were individual and collective. Sometimes they were voluntary, sometimes not. The peregrinations of the body were often inextricable from those of the soul. The *ecclesia peregrina* of Augustine’s *The City of God*, the *imvans* of the Irish saints who set themselves adrift at sea, the Crusades, the lengthy pilgrimages undertaken by many thousands of nameless men and women to the grid of sacred sites that

terrestre: Une mutation épistémologique rapide, 1480–1520 (Paris, 1980); George H. T. Kimble, *Geography in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1938), chap. 8; John K. Wright, *Geographical Love of the Time of the Crusades* (New York, 1925), pt. 1, chap. 4; and John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), chap. 3. For two fundamental catalogues of medieval *mappaemundi*, see Konrad Miller, *Mappaemundi: Die Ältesten Weltkarten*, 6 vols. (Stuttgart, 1895–98); and Marcel Destombes, *Mappaemundi, A.D. 1200–1500: Monuments cartographiques anciens* (Amsterdam, 1964).

stretched across Europe to the Holy Land, the deliberate dependence of mendicant orders on the randomly encountered charity of others—all are manifestations of the symbiotic relationship between the internal and external journeys necessarily undertaken by post-lapsarian man.

Guided more often than not by prophecies regarding the appearance of an emperor-messiah, the conversion of all the peoples of the world to Christianity, the final recovery of the Holy Land from the infidel, and the advent of the Antichrist, Columbus and his contemporaries sought to discover and play out their historical roles in a cosmic drama they perceived as inexorably unfolding from the moment that Adam and Eve had been expelled from the Garden of Eden. Their searches and their enactments produced proto-nationalistic “duels of prophecies” and could also result in a civic apocalypticism, such as that of Savonarola of Florence, the quintessential urban prophet. But the drama took place on a larger stage as well, encompassing less particularized experiences of time, space, and place.⁹ The striving to fulfill prophecy on a cosmic or global scale was a major stimulus to travel and discovery, from the early Franciscan missions into Asia to Columbus’s Enterprise of the Indies, which led to his discovery of “a new heaven and a new earth” in the Americas.

MODERN STUDY OF THE ORIGINS of Columbus’s Enterprise of the Indies can be traced back to the first half of the nineteenth century. In the years 1836–39, Alexander von Humboldt published his *Examen critique de l’histoire de la géographie du Nouveau Continent*, an important five-volume study of European discovery and exploration of the Americas during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the first volume of that work Humboldt wrote what remains the classic analysis of how and why Columbus made his famous voyages. Humboldt recognized the “persuasive force” of a “mystical theology,” which increasingly gripped the “great soul” of Columbus, but he was basically puzzled by this “strange combination of ideas and sentiments in a superior man, gifted with a high intelligence and with an invincible courage in adversity, nourished on scholastic theology, very apt, however, in the management of business, of an ardent and sometimes disorderly imagination, unexpectedly ascending from the simple and naive language of a sailor to felicitous poetic inspirations, reflecting in himself at the same time, so to speak, everything sublime and bizarre that the middle ages produced.”¹⁰ In spite of his uncertainties regarding the religious dimension of Columbus’s personality, Humboldt took greater pains to accommodate it than did any of his successors. He argued that the

⁹ On the medieval image of the *viator*, see Gerhart Ladner, “*Homo viator*: Medieval Ideas on Alienation and Order,” *Speculum*, 42 (1967): 233–59; and Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Image of Medieval Religions* (Totowa, N.J., 1975). On medieval apocalypticism, see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York, 1961); Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford, 1969); and Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1979). On “civic” apocalypticism, see Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (Princeton, 1970).

¹⁰ Humboldt, *Examen critique de l’histoire de la géographie du Nouveau Continent et du progrès de l’astronomie nautique aux quinzième et seizième siècles*, I (Paris, 1836), 110.

mariner was heir to a long medieval tradition of a "géographie mystique," which he traced in considerable detail.¹¹ In Humboldt's judgment, Christopher Columbus represented a discomfiting but probably inevitable medieval residue in the great explorer's mind that rose to the surface as his rational powers declined in his unhappy waning years. Humboldt clearly felt most comfortable with the conclusion that Columbus's voyages were actually based on a "scientific" geography gleaned from a variety of ancient and medieval sources.

In writing his account from these sources, Humboldt closely followed chapters 6–9 of Ferdinand's biography in which Ferdinand discussed his father's reasons for believing that he could reach the Indies by sailing west. According to Ferdinand, Columbus believed that the world was a sphere, that it could be circumnavigated, and that the only unexplored region was the area extending from the eastern shores of Asia to the Azores. Following ancient authorities, such as Aristotle, Pliny, Seneca, Solinus, and Julius Capitolinus, Columbus argued that the extent of this unknown region was not as great as commonly supposed. But Ferdinand suggested and Humboldt strove to demonstrate that the most important sources of Columbus's cosmographical knowledge and the principal stimuli for his voyages were *Imago mundi* by d'Ailly, the French cardinal and conciliarist, and two letters purportedly written to him by Paolo Toscanelli, the famous Florentine physician and astronomer.¹²

Two serious problems impede any assessment of the historical significance of the Toscanelli-Columbus correspondence. The first problem concerns the authenticity of the two letters received by Columbus and the dating of the correspondence. The earlier, and by far the more significant, of the two letters is in large part a copy of a letter, dated June 25, 1474, that Toscanelli sent to Alfonso V of Portugal via his friend Ferdinand Martins. It apparently included a map, which remains lost in spite of numerous attempts to locate it. The second letter seems to have been written soon after the first, in response to one that Toscanelli received from Columbus. Considerable controversy surrounds the dating of the letters. Some scholars (for example, Humboldt) have placed them within two years of the Toscanelli letter to Alfonso V. Others, such as Henri Harrisse and Henry Vignaud, have placed them later, in 1480 or 1481.¹³

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 110–206.

¹² For Humboldt's discussion of Toscanelli and Columbus, see *ibid.*, 210–56, esp. 255. Humboldt concluded that Toscanelli "was, as Ferdinand Columbus said, the most powerful cause of the spirit [*anima*] with which the admiral launched himself upon the immensity of an unknown sea; strangely, posterity has almost forgotten the influence of this Florentine mathematician." On Columbus and d'Ailly, see *ibid.*, 60–70. Humboldt began his discussion by stating, "Among the authors that Columbus consulted . . . no one is cited with greater predilection than the Cardinal, Pierre d'Ailly." The statistics bear out Humboldt's assertion; there are 898 annotations on d'Ailly's *Imago mundi* in Columbus's hand, more than he devoted to any other single work; Taviani, *Christophe Colomb*, 233. Humboldt did not know Las Casas's biography, which was not edited until 1875. On Columbus's sources, see Ferdinand Columbus, *Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus*, chaps. 6, 7; and Edmond Buron, *Imago mundi de Pierre d'Ailly*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1930), 1: 206–15. Ferdinand Columbus cited "the conclusion of the second book" of Aristotle's *De caelo et mundo*, the second book of Pliny's *Naturalis historia*, the first book of Seneca's *Quaestiones naturalis*, chapter 68 of Solinus's *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, and chapter 19 of Julius Capitolinus's *Geographia* as sources for Columbus's belief that the extent of the western ocean was not so great as commonly supposed; *Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus*, 17–18.

¹³ For Vignaud's description of the various versions of the two letters and the different dates assigned to them, see his *Toscanelli and Columbus: The Letter and Chart of Toscanelli* (New York, 1902), 9–20. He gave the texts

No originals of the Toscanelli-Columbus correspondence survive. There is a Spanish translation of the letters (which were written in Latin) in Las Casas's *Historia* and a sixteenth-century Italian translation of them based on Ferdinand's lost Spanish text. In 1871 HARRISSE discovered a Latin version of the first letter written in Columbus's own hand on a blank page of his copy of a 1477 edition of Pius II's *Historia*. That Columbus copied out Toscanelli's letter, however, is not proof that Toscanelli actually sent it to him. Because the originals do not survive and there is no other evidence of an exchange of letters between Toscanelli and Columbus, the authenticity of the correspondence has on occasion been hotly contested. The most famous challenge is that of VIGNAUD, put forth in a torrent of articles and several books published around the turn of this century. On the basis of what is currently known, it seems extremely unlikely that Toscanelli and Columbus corresponded directly, although Toscanelli wrote most of the first letter and Columbus no doubt read it.¹⁴

The second problem that arises out of the Toscanelli-Columbus correspondence concerns the content. The letters are general in nature: they evoke the marvels of the East, argue that the Orient can be reached more quickly by sailing westward rather than by traveling overland eastward, and provide various calculations in support of the opinion that the stretches of unknown sea to the west are relatively short. Humboldt's analysis of the correspondence has withstood the test of time. Although he stressed the importance of the Toscanelli letters, Humboldt was careful to point out that Columbus could have gotten virtually all of the information contained in them from other sources available to him, particularly the works of Marco Polo, Nicolò de Conti, and d'Ailly.¹⁵ It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the drama inherent in a direct exchange between two such famous figures on the eve of the discovery of the Americas has hitherto diverted scholars from a sober evaluation of the letters themselves in relation to other sources at Columbus's disposal. Toscanelli's influence on Columbus was probably inspirational or corroborative, perhaps both.

D'Ailly's *Imago mundi*, the other traditional source for Columbus's Enterprise of the Indies, is far from being original or forward-looking. Written in 1410, this work is a compendium of ancient and medieval cosmology and geography, intended for the instruction of the ordinary lay reader, which apparently circulated quite extensively in Western Europe during the fifteenth century. Borrowings from

of each version along with an English translation; *ibid.*, appendixes A–E, pp. 275–327. Taviani provided a clear, balanced presentation of the complicated controversy regarding the Toscanelli-Columbus correspondence and included an extensive bibliography; *Christophe Colomb*, 190–211.

¹⁴ For the Spanish version, see Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, 92 *passim*. For the Italian version, see *Historie del S. D. Fernando Colombo* (Venice, 1571), f. 16r. For a facsimile of the Latin version in Columbus's hand, see HARRISSE, *Bibliotheca Vetusissima, Additions* (Paris, 1872), 16–18; and Cesare de Lollis, *Raccolta di documenti e studi pubblicati della R. Commissione Colombiana*, part 1, volume 3: *Autografi di Cristoforo Colombo* [hereafter, *Autografi*] (Rome, 1892), plate 63. Vignaud's attempt to disprove the authenticity of the Toscanelli-Columbus correspondence is a major theme of his *Toscanelli and Columbus* and his *Histoire critique de la grande entreprise de Christophe Colomb* (Paris, 1911).

¹⁵ Humboldt, *Examen critique*, 213–16. Humboldt thought that Nicolò de Conti might well have been a major source for Toscanelli's account of the "Marvels of the East," either through conversation or through book 4 of Poggio Bracciolini's *Historiae de varietate fortunae*, which contained Nicolò's account of his travels. According to Humboldt, Nicolò is one of the anonymous travelers to the East mentioned in Toscanelli's second letter.

other sources, particularly Roger Bacon's *Opus maius*, are evident throughout *Imago mundi*, and *Opus maius* was itself a compendium of thirteenth-century knowledge. What we have here is not esoterica but a lineage of texts containing well-known and widespread sorts of information.¹⁶

Columbus carefully read and annotated d'Ailly's *Imago mundi*. The incunabulum that he used survives in the Biblioteca Colombina in Seville, Spain. Examination of Columbus's copy of *Imago mundi* reveals that chapter 8, "De quantitate terrae habitabilis," is heavily annotated. For this reason, Columbus scholars have consistently pointed to it as central to an understanding of the intellectual origins of Columbus's project. Humboldt demonstrated that chapter 8 is cribbed from Bacon's *Opus maius*; whether Columbus knew that is unclear. Scholars have long assumed that Columbus did not know of Bacon's existence since he nowhere mentioned him by name. But this assumption is incorrect, for Columbus did mention Bacon in his marginalia to another work by d'Ailly contained in the same incunabulum as *Imago mundi*. Whether he knew that in reading d'Ailly he was frequently reading Bacon is another matter that is difficult, if not impossible, to resolve.¹⁷

The Bacon-d'Ailly argument of chapter 8 that so interested Columbus again concerned the relatively short width of the western ocean. Authorities such as Aristotle, Seneca, and Pliny are cited in support of the conclusion that the ocean does not cover three-fourths of the earth's surface, as some had supposed. Conclusive proof is supplied by a passage from the Apocrypha, where it is written that six-sevenths of the world is dry (therefore inhabitable) and only one-seventh is covered by water (2 Esd. 6:42).¹⁸

Columbus's theoretical basis for the assumption that the western ocean was not vast was borne out by his practical experience as a sailor. According to a note in his own hand in his copy of *Imago mundi*, Columbus navigated by the erroneous calculations of the tenth-century Arabian astronomer Alfraganus. Alfraganus, whose figures were recorded by Bacon in *Opus maius* and incorporated into *Imago mundi* by d'Ailly, underestimated the length of a degree at the equator. Using Alfraganus's figure of 56 $\frac{2}{3}$ land miles per equatorial degree (the correct figure is 60 land miles per equatorial degree), Columbus estimated that he had only to sail approximately twenty-five hundred miles westward from the Canary Islands in order to reach the Orient. In two letters written to Ferdinand and Isabella, one

¹⁶ The text of d'Ailly's *Imago mundi* and Columbus's annotations on it have been edited and translated into French by Buron; *Imago mundi de Pierre d'Ailly*. A facsimile of the incunabulum of d'Ailly's works that Columbus used has been published. See Massachusetts Historical Society, *Imago mundi by Petrus de Aiaco (Pierre d'Ailly) with annotations by Christopher Columbus* [hereafter, d'Ailly, Incunabulum] (Boston, 1927). For a listing of the manuscripts and the incunabulum of the *Imago mundi*, see Ludovico Salembier, *Petrus de Alliaco* (Lille, 1886), xxiii.

¹⁷ Humboldt, *Examen critique*, 60–70; Buron, *Imago mundi de Pierre d'Ailly*, I: chaps. 2, 3. Columbus mentioned Bacon in an annotation on d'Ailly's *Elucidarium astronomice concordie cum theologica et hystorica veritate*; f. 129v; d'Ailly, Incunabulum. In the course of a discussion of the month in which the world was created, d'Ailly remarked that Bacon stated in a letter to Pope Clement that the world was created in October. Columbus noted this, writing in the margin: "Bachon [sic] wrote to Pope Clement that without doubt the world was created in October." For a facsimile of the note, see de Lollis, *Autografi*, series C, plate 91, no. 821.

¹⁸ For the Latin text of chapter 8 of *Imago mundi* and Columbus's annotations on it, see Buron, *Imago mundi de Pierre d'Ailly*, I: 206–15.

from Hispaniola in 1498 and the other from Dominica in 1503, Columbus asserted that his voyages had confirmed the cosmography of *Imago mundi* and the calculations of Alfraganus. In the latter of these two letters describing his fourth voyage, Columbus proclaimed:

The world is but small; out of seven divisions of it the dry part occupies six, and the seventh is entirely covered with water. Experience has shown it, and I have written it, with quotations from the Holy Scripture, in other letters, where I have treated of the location of the terrestrial paradise, as approved by the Holy Church, and I say that the world is not so large as vulgar opinion makes it, and that one degree from the equinoctial line measures fifty-six miles and two-thirds. This is a fact that one can touch with one's own fingers.¹⁹

Columbus's readings and his own testimony indicate that his image of the world was traditional rather than innovative. He did not believe that his Enterprise of the Indies would essentially alter a geography and cosmology that had existed since antiquity; he thought that his expedition would simply fill out that picture.

THE PREVAILING MODERN IMAGE OF COLUMBUS as intrepid sailor and enlightened geographer—the Admiral of the Ocean Sea—does not substantially differ from that established by Humboldt in the 1830s. This image continues to be based on the same slender repertoire of texts: the two letters from Toscanelli, the annotations on *Imago mundi*, and selections from Columbus's letters describing the four voyages of discovery. The works of well-known Columbus scholars, such as Harrisse, Cesare de Lollis, and J. N. Fiske in the nineteenth century and Vignaud and Morison in the twentieth, have not significantly revised the account of the genesis of Columbus's ideas given by Humboldt in the *Examen critique*. None of these scholars took seriously the possibility that Columbus's personal spirituality or the spirituality of his age might also have inspired him to undertake his voyages of discovery.²⁰

John Leddy Phelan—in his pioneering study, *The Millennial Kingdom of The Franciscans in the New World*, first published in 1956—was the first modern scholar to attempt to restore Christofereus to Columbus. In the second chapter of that book, "The Apocalypse in the Age of Discovery," Phelan emphasized the importance of contemporary apocalypticism, specifically Joachimism, to understanding the mentality of Columbus and his motivations for travel and discovery. More

¹⁹ R. H. Major, trans. and ed., *Christopher Columbus: Four Voyages to the New World* (New York, 1961), 177–78. Humboldt considered this citation to be important evidence of "l'impression profonde" that Columbus's reading of chapter 8 of *Imago mundi* had on his voyages of discovery; *Examen critique*, 61. On Columbus as a practical, as distinguished from a theoretical, navigator and geographer, see George E. Nunn, *The Geographical Conceptions of Columbus* (New York, 1977), 1–30. Nunn argued that Columbus used a degree that measured 56 $\frac{2}{3}$ Italian nautical miles, which was not equivalent to Alfraganus's figure, calculated on the basis of Arabian nautical miles. Columbus himself thought that he was navigating according to Alfraganus's figures. In a lengthy note to d'Ailly's *Epilogus mappae mundi*, he wrote: "Observe that in sailing often from Lisbon southward to Guinea, I carefully measured the course . . . and in agreement with Alfragan I found that each degree answered to 56 $\frac{2}{3}$ miles. So that we may rely upon this measure." J. N. Fiske, trans., *The Discovery of America*, 1 (Boston, 1983), 377–78. For the Latin original, see Buron, *Imago mundi de Pierre d'Ailly*, 2: 530–31; d'Ailly, *Incunabulum*, 42; and de Lollis, *Autografi*, series C, plate 82, no. 490.

²⁰ Vignaud's conclusion is representative of this prevailing point of view: "It is also necessary to mention that Las Casas and [Ferdinand] Columbus assigned a fourth source to the grand design of Columbus: divine inspiration. But that is an order of ideas that permits no critical discussion and one into which we need not enter here; it suffices to have mentioned it." *Histoire critique*, 8.

recently, well-known students of apocalypticism such as Morton Bloomfield and Bernard McGinn have pointed out the apparent importance of Joachimism and other apocalyptic movements in the age of discovery and have called for further study in this area.²¹ Only in the past several years have scholars begun to respond to these calls and to the argument that Phelan first sketched almost thirty years ago. In his *Colón y su mentalidad mesiánica en el ambiente franciscanista español*, published in 1983, Alain Milhou presented a much more detailed picture of Franciscanism in fifteenth-century Spain than has heretofore been available and followed Phelan in arguing that it is a principal source for Columbus's "messianic mentality." Although the historical background of Columbus's apocalypticism has become clearer with this study, the apparent paucity of sources that link Columbus's Enterprise of the Indies to contemporary apocalypticism or to the medieval prophetic tradition has remained a serious obstacle. But sources there are.

The incunabulum of d'Ailly's works that came into Columbus's hands was published sometime between 1480 and 1483 by John of Westphalia.²² In addition to *Imago mundi*, it contained a number of other opuscula by the Cardinal of Cambrai and by his contemporary Jean Gerson, the important nominalist and mystic. D'Ailly's opuscula, written in 1414, focused on the problem of the interrelationships between history, theology, astronomy, and prophecy. They included *Tractatus de legibus et sectis contra supersticiosos astronomos*, *Tractatus de concordia astronomice veritatis cum theologia* (known as the *Vigintiloquium*), *Tractatus de concordia astronomice veritatis et narrationis hystorice*, *Elucidarium astronomice concordie cum theologia et hystorica veritate*, *Apologetica defensio astronomice veritatis*, *Secunda apologetica defensio astronomice veritatis*, and *Tractatus de concordia discordantium astronomorum*. These opuscula involved a debate with Gerson over the legitimacy of astrology for forecasting the fulfillment of various biblical prophecies and the end of the world. Columbus read and annotated these short works by d'Ailly and Gerson as well as *Imago mundi*. He seems to have been considerably more interested, however, in d'Ailly's opuscula than in those of Gerson, with which this essay will not deal. Surprisingly, scholars have paid little attention to the content of d'Ailly's opuscula and to Columbus's annotations on them. What follows here is intended to fill in this lacuna, if only in a preliminary way.

Columbus intended to set forth his vision of history and the role that he was

²¹ Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1970), 17–28; Bloomfield, "Recent Scholarship on Joachim of Fiore and His Influence," in Ann Williams, ed., *Prophecy and Millenarianism: Essays in Honour of Majorie Reeves* (Essex, 1980), 37: "The need of investigations of Joachim in the New World is so obvious that it hardly needs saying"; and McGinn, *Visions of the End*, 284: "To those accustomed to seeing the discovery of America as the work of a hard-headed practical seaman flouting the traditions of the past, the picture of Columbus as a religious visionary strongly influenced by centuries of apocalyptic hopes may seem strange, but the existence of this element in the great explorer's personality is undeniable."

²² Buron believed that the incunabulum of d'Ailly's works was published in 1483 and pointed out that Humboldt and others merely repeated the date of 1490 that Jean de Launoy assigned to it. Salembier and de Lollis, refuting Humboldt, gave 1480 or 1483 as the date of publication. Lynn Thorndike used another copy of the same incunabulum that Columbus annotated and dated it "about 1480." Thorndike's discussion of d'Ailly's opuscula and the controversy with Gerson is the most extensive published to date. See Buron, *Imago mundi de Pierre d'Ailly*, 1: 29; Humboldt, *Examen critique*, 62; de Launoy, *Regni navarroe gymnasii parisiensis historia* (Paris, 1677), 477–78; Salembier, *Petrus de Alliaco*, xxiii; de Lollis, *Autografi*, vii; and Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 4 (New York, 1934), 101–31.

destined to play in it in a volume called the *Book of Prophecies*, which he worked on for a number of years, including the period of the last of his four voyages to the New World, but never completed. What survives is a collection of materials assembled by himself and a friend, the Carthusian monk Gaspar Gorricio, that Columbus apparently planned to incorporate into the *Book of Prophecies*. It consists of excerpts from the Bible and from a number of well-known ancient and medieval authors, some fragments of verse in Spanish (most likely not by Columbus), and an incomplete letter (written by Columbus sometime between September 13, 1501, and March 23, 1502, and addressed to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain) that became the preface to the work.²³

De Lollis, who edited the *Book of Prophecies* in 1894, and more recently Phelan, among others, have stressed its importance for understanding Columbus. Because of its incomplete and composite nature, however, the *Book of Prophecies* has defied extensive analysis. This essay contends that it is Columbus's reading of d'Ailly's opuscula that provides the key to his plan for the *Book of Prophecies*. A plan, though latent, can be discerned in the pattern of sources selected by Columbus and Gorricio. Columbus discussed this latent plan more explicitly in the prefatory letter to the *Book of Prophecies* and in other letters describing his voyages to the New World. If the testimony in Columbus's marginalia and his letters is taken into account, these opuscula of d'Ailly played at least as important a role in motivating him to make his voyages of discovery as did his reading of *Imago mundi* and his alleged correspondence with Toscanelli.

When did Columbus read d'Ailly's opuscula? The question is vexing yet crucial for any argument regarding the genesis of the Enterprise of the Indies. It is well known that in a note at the beginning of chapter 8 of *Imago mundi* Columbus referred to a voyage made by Bartolomeu Dias in 1488, which makes that year a *terminus post quem*. But what has not been previously pointed out is a note in Columbus's hand to one of the other pieces in the incunabulum of d'Ailly's works,

²³ For a discussion of the text of the *Book of Prophecies*, see de Lollis, *Raccolta di documenti e studi pubblicati della R. Commissione Colombiana*, part 1, volume 2: *Scritti di Colombo* [hereafter, *Scritti*] (Rome, 1894), lvii–lx. De Lollis found the earliest mention of the *Book of Prophecies* in an inventory of items belonging to Columbus's son, "Admiral Don Diego." The *Book of Prophecies* is listed in a catalogue, compiled by Ferdinand, of Columbus's books, and Ferdinand mentioned it in the biography of his father, including a passage from the beginning of Columbus's letter to Ferdinand and Isabella contained in the *Book of Prophecies*. De Lollis said that this excerpt occurs in chapter 8 of Ferdinand's *Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus*; it is in fact at the beginning of chapter 4. Also see Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, 47–48. In a note at the beginning of the script of the *Book of Prophecies*, Columbus wrote that, while resting from his third voyage to the New World (completed in October 1500), he decided to compile a series of excerpts illustrating "tragic events," which he hoped someday to put into verse, and asked Gorricio to gather other relevant passages. The letter is dated September 13, 1501; de Lollis, *Scritti*, 75. On March 23, 1502, when Columbus was preparing to depart for the fourth voyage, Gorricio sent some additional "jottings" that he had compiled. Columbus's letter to Ferdinand and Isabella intended as the preface to the *Book of Prophecies* can be dated between September 1501 and March 1502, that is, between the third and fourth voyages. Although the date of the prefatory letter has caused controversy, de Lollis believed that the letter is an autograph of Columbus; *Autografo*, xx–xxi. Four hands can be distinguished in the manuscript of the *Book of Prophecies*: Columbus's, Gorricio's, Ferdinand's, and that of Columbus's brother Bartolomeo; de Lollis, *Autografo*, xviii–xxii. De Lollis concluded that the work should be regarded essentially as Columbus's: "Let us repeat: considered in its purpose and its entirety, the *Book of Prophecies* serves marvelously to make sense out of the complex spirit of Christopher Columbus"; *Scritti*, lx. The manuscript of the *Book of Prophecies* is in the Biblioteca Colombina, Seville, Spain. For de Lollis's edited version, see *Scritti*, 75–160. He also published a facsimile of those parts of it that he considered to be in the hand of Columbus; *Autografo*, series F, plates 102–159.

De correctione kalendarii. In chapter 3 of that work, "De errore ex mutatione equinoxiorum et solstitiorum," d'Ailly discussed the problem of accurately determining the date and time of the annual solstices and equinoxes. Using the Alphonsine tables (which Columbus also knew), d'Ailly made calculations for "this year 1411." Columbus followed d'Ailly's notations carefully, paraphrasing them in the margin. At the bottom of the page Columbus, using d'Ailly's figures in *De correctione kalendarii* and others in *De legibus et sectis*, made his own calculation of when the vernal equinox would occur in "this year 1491." On the basis of this note it can be argued that Columbus read *Imago mundi* and the other opuscula prior to his initial voyage of discovery in 1492.²⁴

AS ALREADY SHOWN, d'Ailly's significance as a source for Columbus lies not in his originality as a thinker but in his diligence as a reader and digester of authoritative or influential works by other writers. In composing his opuscula on the interrelationships between history, astronomy, and theology, d'Ailly relied on a number of earlier medieval treatises that discussed the events to occur on the eve of the end of the world and that predicted when they would happen on the basis of planetary movements and conjunctions. Paramount among d'Ailly's sources was book 4 of Roger Bacon's *Opus maius*, especially sections on the application of mathematics to sacred subjects and on astrology. Not coincidentally, this was the same book containing Bacon's discussion of geography, large sections of which d'Ailly incorporated into *Imago mundi*.²⁵

According to Bacon, the patriarchs and prophets discovered mathematics. Citing Josephus, Jerome, and Cassiodorus as his sources, he said that "the sons of Adam discovered geometry, astronomy, arithmetic, and music; and Noah and his sons taught the Chaldeans; then Abraham taught the Egyptians." These ancients applied their knowledge of mathematics to a number of different sacred subjects, including the following: cosmography, which "stirs us to reverence the creator"; geography, "for the whole series of scripture deals with the regions, states, deserts, mountains, seas, and other places of the world"; and chronology, "for the whole course of history is traced through times and generations and ages from the beginning of the world to Christ the Lord, and all things have been set in order on his account, that no other legislator might be expected, but that he alone may be the saviour of the world by his own law."²⁶

²⁴ For the text of Columbus's note to chapter 8 of *Imago mundi*, see Buron, *Imago mundi de Pierre d'Ailly*, 1: 207; d'Ailly, *Incunabulum*, 13; and de Lollis, *Autografi*, series C, plate 70. For Columbus's notes paraphrasing d'Ailly's calculations for the solstices and equinoxes of 1411, see d'Ailly, *Incunabulum*, 60; and de Lollis, *Autografi*, series C, plate 90, nos. 619, 620. Columbus's note to d'Ailly's *De correctione kalendarii* mentioning "this year 1491" reads: "Note that in the calendar, the ascending of the solar year is ten minutes and forty-four seconds in any year, as is demonstrated at the end of the treatise on laws and sects [*De legibus et sectis*]. And it is confirmed that we can designate the vernal equinox of this year 1491 as the eleventh day of March at one hour, thirty-seven seconds, and forty-seven tierces past noon, accepting as a base that in the year 1411 the Sun entered the first point of Aries on the eleventh of March at fifteen hours, fifty-six minutes, seven seconds and forty-seven tierces after noon." D'Ailly, *Incunabulum*, 60; and de Lollis, *Autografi*, series C, plate 90, no. 621.

²⁵ D'Ailly's sources also included Albert the Great, Henry Bate, William of Auvergne, Vincent of Beauvais, Nicholas Oresme, and Henry of Hesse (Henry Langenstein). See Thorndike, *History of Magic*, 103–09.

²⁶ Robert Belle Burke, trans., *The Opus maius of Roger Bacon*, 1 (Philadelphia, 1928), 195–96. On the

The mathematical knowledge of the astronomers was essential to determining the configuration of the planets and hence the time of the year when the world began. From these determinations the dates of other important past events, such as the flood and the birth of Christ, and the time of future events prophesied in Scripture could be calculated. What Bacon particularly wanted to forecast was the coming of the Antichrist, which portends the imminent end of the world.²⁷

In his calculations Bacon relied on the theory of planetary conjunctions set forth by Albumasar, the ninth-century Arabian astronomer. Albumasar argued that the universe is a *sympatheia* in which the terrestrial and celestial worlds are bonded together in a reciprocally harmonious whole, governed by the movements of the planets and stars. Whoever comes to comprehend any part of the universe through the techniques of theurgy and astrology comprehends the whole and can predict the future, for all events are imprinted on the present. Important religious and historical events can be predicted as well as events in an individual's life. Following Albumasar's theory of planetary conjunctions, Bacon (and others) calculated the "horoscopes" of the great religions and empires in much the same way that one would cast a personal horoscope.²⁸

In *De legibus et sectis*, d'Ailly closely followed the theory of conjunctions set forth by Bacon in *Opus maius*. As he had done in *Imago mundi*, d'Ailly incorporated substantial sections of *Opus maius* directly into his own text. And, just as he had done with *Imago mundi*, Columbus carefully annotated *De legibus et sectis*, acquainting himself with Bacon's and d'Ailly's eschatology and theory of conjunctions. According to the ancient tradition expounded by Bacon and d'Ailly, Jupiter, one of two "benevolent and fortunate" planets, occupies the ninth house in the heavens, the "house of peregrinations and journeys of faith and deity and religion." Jupiter can enter into conjunction with six planets (including the sun and moon), each of which reigns over one of the great religions of the world. When one of these planets enters into conjunction with Jupiter, its religion becomes historically ascendant. The conjunction of Jupiter with Saturn signifies the ascendancy of the Jews, with Mars the Chaldeans, with the Sun the Egyptians, with Venus the Saracens, with Mercury the Christians, and with the moon the final sect of the Antichrist. Columbus followed this argument, presented by d'Ailly in chapters 1 and 2 of *De legibus et sectis*, noting that "there are six principal sects from the beginning of the

discovery of mathematics and the sacred subject of cosmology, see *ibid.*, 200–03. On geography, see *ibid.*, 203–08. On chronology, see *ibid.*, 208–32.

²⁷ Burke, *The Opus maius of Roger Bacon*, 276: "By the means offered by mathematics not only are we [theologians] made certain respecting our profession, but we are fortified in advance against the sect of the Antichrist, about which at the same time with the Church of Christ mathematics is concerned. A very excellent examination of this kind is made by considering all the principal sects from the beginning of the world. . . namely Jews, Chaldeans, Egyptians, Agarensians or Saracens, who descended from Agar and Ishmael, the Church of Christ, and the sect of the Antichrist. Nor is it strange if philosophers have spoken regarding these, since they were after the patriarchs and prophets and were instructed by their sons and books, as we have previously shown."

²⁸ Albumasar's major works, *Introductorium maius in astronomiam* and *De magnis conjunctionibus*, were translated into Latin in the twelfth century by John of Seville. Through these translations the so-called "theory of conjunctions" entered the Western tradition of cosmological speculation. See Richard J. Lemay, *Abu Ma'shar and Latin Aristotelianism in the Twelfth Century: The Recovery of Aristotle's Natural Philosophy through Arabic Astrology* (Beirut, 1962); Pierre Duhem, *Le système du monde: Histoire des doctrines cosmologiques de Platon à Copernic* (Paris, 1958), vol. 8, chap. 13; and Eugenio Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance: The Zodiac of Life* (London, 1983), chap. 1.

world: the sects of the Hebrews, the Chaldeans, the Egyptians, the Saracens, Christ, and the Antichrist." "The conjunction of Jupiter with Saturn signifies the law of the Hebrews; if Jupiter is conjoined with Mars, it signifies the Chaldean law, which teaches the worship of fire; if Jupiter is conjoined with the Sun, it signifies the Egyptian law; if it is conjoined with Venus, it signifies the law of the Saracens; if it is conjoined with Mercury, the law of the Christians; if conjoined with the moon, the law of the Antichrist."²⁹

The point of ascendancy of each of these religions and the length of its stay in power is determined by the conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn, which are of three kinds. As discussed by d'Ailly in chapter 4 of *De legibus et sectis*, they are as follows: a "great conjunction," which takes place every twenty years and refers to "the elevation of kings and potentates and to dearness in the cost of provisions, and to the rise of prophets"; a "greater conjunction," which takes place every 240 years and refers to "a sect and to its change in certain regions"; and a "greatest conjunction," which takes place every 960 years and refers to "changes in empires and kingdoms, to impressions of fire in the air, to flood, earthquakes, and dearness in the price of food." The fortunes of a particular sect may shift more quickly or slowly within this framework of great conjunctions depending on "the properties of the planets bearing sway over different regions": Saturn controls India; Jupiter, Babylonia; Mars, Thrace; the Sun, the Romans and their empire; Mercury, Egypt; the moon, Asia. Columbus absorbed this material as well, noting that "there are three kinds of conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn, namely, a great conjunction, a greater conjunction and a greatest conjunction. . . . The greater conjunction takes place every 240 years . . . the greatest conjunction every 900 years," and "Saturn rules over India, Jupiter over Babylonia, Mars over Thrace, the Sun over Rome, Mercury over Egypt, the moon over Assyria."³⁰

Columbus's reading of the first four chapters of *De legibus et sectis* led him to a passage by d'Ailly copied directly from Bacon's *Opus maius*, which was apparently of such significance to him that he included it in the *Book of Prophecies*. Located in chapter 4 of *De legibus et sectis*, the passage concerns the length of time that the law of Muhammad (the law of the Saracens) will last and under what circumstances its demise might be predicted. D'Ailly (following Bacon) noted that "according to what Albumazar said, that law [of Muhammad] cannot last more than 693 years." Columbus marked this passage and copied it out verbatim in the margin. Albumasar, Bacon, and d'Ailly predicted that the followers of Muhammad, the Saracens, would be destroyed by either the Tatars or the Christians. Columbus also marked this passage, saying "the Saracens have already in large part been conquered by the Tatars and their capital, Baldac, and their caliph, 'who was like a Pope to them,' have been destroyed."³¹

²⁹ Burke, *The Opus maius of Roger Bacon*, 276–80. On Jupiter and its conjunctions with each of the other planets signifying the ascendancy of one of the major world religions, compare d'Ailly, *Incunabulum*, ff. 44v–45; and de Lollis, *Autografi*, series C, plate 83, nos. 513–18, 524.

³⁰ Burke, *The Opus maius of Roger Bacon*, 284–87; d'Ailly, *Incunabulum*, ff. 46v–47; and de Lollis, *Autografi*, series C, plate 83, nos. 535–37, 543.

³¹ For Bacon's text, see Burke, *The Opus maius of Roger Bacon*, 287. For a Latin edition, see John Henry Bridges, *The Opus maius of Roger Bacon*, I (London, 1900), 266. For the passage from d'Ailly's *De legibus et sectis*

In *Opus maius*, Bacon noted that these events had taken place only twelve years earlier. In *De legibus et sectis*, d'Ailly lamented the "big lapse since that time," during which the sect of the Tatars had not been finally destroyed. It would be useful for the church, he suggested, to determine when the final destruction of "that sect of perdition" was to come, since, according to "this doctor" [Bacon] and the "astronomers," "no sect comes after the law of Mohammed, only the Antichrist." Using a passage from *Opus maius*, d'Ailly predicted that the advent of this last sect was not far off:

Ethicus, the philosopher, says in his *Cosmography* that a race that has been shut up within the Caspian gates shall burst forth upon the world and meet the Antichrist and call him God of gods. This has already come true, just as he said: Have not the Tartars who were within those gates gone forth from them? For those gates have been broken as some Christians who travelled through the middle of them have returned. Therefore, he introduces this as a sign of the imminent advent of the Antichrist. In conclusion he says, "I know that, if the Church would be willing to unroll the sacred text and the holy prophecies of the Sybilline oracle and of Merlin, of Aquile and Joachim and many others, and besides the histories and the books of the philosophers, and if the Church were to order that the methods of astronomy be considered, it would discover what it needs to know, that is, some idea of greater certainty regarding the time of the Antichrist."³²

This passage was one of five excerpts from d'Ailly's opuscula that Columbus included in the *Book of Prophecies*.

It is significant that in their seminal article, "The Penetration of Joachimism into Northern Europe," Morton Bloomfield and Marjorie Reeves quoted the latter part of this passage (from Bacon's *Opus maius*) as indicative of the thirteenth-century sense "of crisis, of impending doom in history, that turned men's thought towards the Calabrian abbot." This "sense of crisis, of impending doom" still prevailed in the early fifteenth century when d'Ailly picked out the passage from Bacon for inclusion in *De legibus et sectis* and in the late fifteenth century when Columbus chose it for the *Book of Prophecies*. The *fortuna* of this passage from *Opus maius* is evidence of the perennial power of the apocalyptic vision of history derived from the prophetic tradition, regardless of shifting historical circumstances.³³ The extent to which it can be specifically or exclusively associated with Joachimism is problematic. Of this more below.

A second important passage that Columbus marked for the *Book of Prophecies* is located in another of the opuscula, *Tractatus de concordia astronomice veritatis et narrationis hystorice*, which consists of eight preambles, future events that will presage the appearance of the Antichrist. In the left-hand margin at the beginning of the

included in the *Book of Prophecies*, see d'Ailly, *Incunabulum*, f. 47v. For the text edited by de Lollis, see *Scritti*, 105–06. For facsimiles of the two marginal annotations by Columbus, see de Lollis, *Autografi*, series C, plate 83, nos. 544, 545.

³² D'Ailly, *De legibus et sectis*, chap. 4, in d'Ailly, *Incunabulum*, f. 47v; and de Lollis, *Scritti*, 106: "But notwithstanding these matters, and though much time has passed since then, yet experience teaches that the ruinous sect has not yet been destroyed, for, alas, it has often strongly prevailed against the Christians." For the passage that d'Ailly copied from Bacon, which has been slightly edited here, see Burke, *The Opus maius of Roger Bacon*, 289–90. For the Latin text, see Bridges, *The Opus maius of Roger Bacon*, 268–69. For the transcription in the *Book of Prophecies*, see de Lollis, *Scritti*, 106–07.

³³ Bloomfield and Reeves, "The Penetration of Joachimism into Northern Europe," *Speculum*, 29 (1954): 772–93. The passage quoted is on page 786.

passage, Columbus drew a hand whose index finger pointed to the text. He used this common medieval device throughout the incunabulum of d'Ailly's works to mark passages that apparently were of particular significance to him. Accompanying this indicator is a notation in Columbus's hand, "Jerome mentions that Methodius the martyr writes many things concerning the completion of the ages," a reference to Jerome's brief entry on Methodius in chapter 83 of his *Liber de viris illustribus*. The entire passage is marked by a line drawn parallel to it.³⁴

D'Ailly's eight preambles for the advent of the Antichrist are taken directly from chapters 10–13 of the pseudo-Methodius's *Sermo de regno cantium et in novissimis temporibus certa demonstratio*, one of the most influential apocalyptic texts among the many that circulated throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The section that d'Ailly lifted and Columbus took for the *Book of Prophecies* is one of the best-known parts of that well-known work.³⁵

The first preamble describes the coming of the "son of perdition" as predicted by Paul in the second letter to the Thessalonians: "The day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God."³⁶ Paul's "son of perdition" was widely believed in the Middle Ages to be the Antichrist. The second preamble predicts the uprising of the sons of Ishmael, of whom Daniel spoke, against the Roman empire. This will take place in the seventh millennium, on the eve of the end of time. During this millennium, according to d'Ailly's third preamble, the sons of Ishmael, whom he identified with the Saracens, will overrun the promised land of the Christians, which Paul predicted in 2 Thessalonians. On account of their sins, the inhabitants of the promised land will fall victim to other, more horrible perversions—for example, sodomy. The fourth preamble further discusses this period of dissension and torment, saying that the spirit of the faithful will be much diminished and that many will abandon their faith altogether. Preambles 3 and 4 paraphrase chapters 11 and 12 of the pseudo-Methodius's sermon on the end of the world.³⁷

According to d'Ailly's fifth preamble, the sons of Ishmael will celebrate the desolation that they have wrought throughout the world, saying that the Christians will never escape their domination. But suddenly an emperor-messiah, "the king of the Romans," will appear from the "Ethiopian Sea in a great fire" and will conquer the sons of Ishmael, imposing "his yoke upon them seven times as much as their

³⁴ D'Ailly, *Tractatus de concordia astronomice veritatis et narrationis hystorice*, chapter 61, in d'Ailly, *Incunabulum*, ff. 120–120v; and de Lollis, *Scritti*, 108–09. For a facsimile of Columbus's annotation, see de Lollis, *Autografi*, series C, plate 91, no. 795.

³⁵ I used the edition of the pseudo-Methodius's sermon contained in Ernst Sackur's *Sybillinische Texte und Forschungen: Pseudo-Methodius, Adso und die Triburtinische Sibylle* (Halle, 1898). On the place of the pseudo-Methodius in the prophetic tradition, see Paul J. Alexander, "Byzantium and the Migration of Literary Works and Motifs: The Legend of the Last Roman Emperor," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, new ser., 2 (1971): 47–82; Reeves, *Influence of Prophecy*, pt. 3; and McGinn, *Visions of the End*, pt. 1, chap. 7.

³⁶ 2 Thess. 2:2; and Sackur, *Sybillinische Texte und Forschungen*, 78.

³⁷ For the second preamble, see d'Ailly, *Incunabulum*, f. 120; and de Lollis, *Scritti*, 108–09. For chapter 10 of the pseudo-Methodius, see Sackur, *Sybillinische Texte und Forschungen*, 80. For the third and fourth preambles, see d'Ailly, *Incunabulum*, f. 120; and de Lollis, *Scritti*, 109. For chapters 11 and 12 of the pseudo-Methodius, see Sackur, *Sybillinische Texte und Forschungen*, 80–88.

yoke weighed upon the earth." The sixth preamble states that, after the fiery revenge of the "king of the Romans," "there will be a time of great peace and tranquillity upon the earth such as there has never been, for there is nothing like that final peace that is at the end of time." This is the peace of which Paul spoke in the second letter to the Thessalonians. Both of these preambles closely follow the contents of chapter 13 of the pseudo-Methodius and the sequence of his presentation.³⁸

D'Ailly's seventh preamble follows the latter part of the pseudo-Methodius's chapter 13. It predicts, after this period of profound tranquillity, another period of great turmoil during which the forces of Gog and Magog will be unleashed. "The gates of the north will be opened and the strength of those nations which Alexander enclosed within them will go forth." The "enclosed nations" will corrupt the earth for "a week of years," whereupon a divinely sent warrior prince will conquer them in an instant. The eighth preamble, directly quoting the conclusion of the pseudo-Methodius's chapter 13, completes the sequence of events that will precede the coming of the Antichrist. Following the defeat of the "enclosed nations," the "king of the Romans" will live in Jerusalem for ten and one-half years, at which time the "son of perdition" will appear.³⁹

D'Ailly's opuscula also provided Columbus with a larger chronological framework within which to place the rise and decline of the great religions of the world, the defeat of the Saracens by the Christians, and the events leading to the appearance of the Antichrist. In *Vigintiloquium*, d'Ailly discussed the duration of the world. In verbum 11 of that work, he took Augustine as his authority, specifically citing book 22, chapter 30, of *The City of God* and Augustine's sermon on the Sixth Psalm. D'Ailly may himself have selected these texts. The passage from *The City of God*, a succinct summary of the Augustinian periodization of history, was again well known and influential throughout the medieval and Renaissance periods. In it Augustine listed seven ages corresponding to the number of days in the week of creation:

The first age, corresponding to the first day, is from Adam to the flood, the second from then on til Abraham. These are equal, not in years, but in the number of generations, for each age is found to have ten. From this point, as the evangelist Matthew marks off the periods, three ages follow, reaching to the coming of Christ, each of which is completed in fourteen generations: one from Abraham to David, the second from then until the deportation to Babylon, the third from then until the birth of Christ in the flesh. Thus there are five ages in all. The sixth is now in progress and is not to be measured by any fixed number of generations, for the scripture says: "It is not for you to know the times which the Father has fixed by his own power" (Acts 1:17). After this age God will rest, as on the seventh day, when he will cause the seventh day, that is, us, to rest in God himself. . . . This will be our sabbath and its end will not be an evening, but the Lord's day, an eighth eternal day, sanctified by the resurrection of Christ, which prefigures the eternal rest of both spirit and body.⁴⁰

³⁸ For the fifth and sixth preambles, see d'Ailly, *Incunabulum*, f. 120v; and de Lollis, *Scritti*, 109. Also see Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte und Forschungen*, 89–91.

³⁹ For the seventh and eighth preambles, see d'Ailly, *Incunabulum*, f. 120v; and de Lollis, *Scritti*, 109. Also see Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte und Forschungen*, 91–93.

⁴⁰ William M. Green, trans., *Saint Augustine: The City of God against the Pagans*, 7 (Cambridge, Mass., 1972).

D'Ailly also noted that Augustine in his sermon on the Sixth Psalm said that the world would last for seven thousand years, a millennium for each of the seven days in the week of creation. Columbus followed this presentation, noting in the margin next to d'Ailly's text Augustine's reference in the sermon on the Sixth Psalm to "those who believed that there were seven thousand years from Adam to the coming of the Lord to judge." He included the passage from *The City of God* cited above in the *Book of Prophecies*.⁴¹

THESE EXAMPLES SUGGEST THAT D'AILLY (and through him Bacon, the pseudo-Methodius, Augustine, and others) must now be considered a principal source of Columbus's apocalypticism and of his "scientific" geographical knowledge. Put another way, d'Ailly in *Imago mundi* and in the opuscula provided Columbus with summaries of contemporary knowledge about the physical cosmos and about that cosmos's eschatology. It was a cosmos with a mathematically determinable beginning and end, unfolding in time and space according to divine plan. Certain events forecast by the prophets would have to take place in order for that plan to be completed. Through proper application of the mathematical arts, discovered by the patriarchs and prophets, to the sacred subjects of cosmology, geography, and chronology, men could understand the past, present, and future of this divine plan. In the *Book of Prophecies* Columbus intended to set forth that eschatology and to explain his role in it.

Set against the background provided by d'Ailly, the selections from the Psalms and the Old Testament prophets that form a large part of the texts assembled for inclusion in the *Book of Prophecies* begin to manifest certain themes. Two themes emerge consistently in the selections from the Psalms. The first is a virtual obsession with the recovery of Mount Zion, symbol of the Holy Land. A typical example is the following citation from Psalm 2:6–8:

I indeed have anointed my king
On Zion, my holy hill.
Let me tell of the decree of the Lord:
He said to me, "you are my son;
Today I have begotten you.
Ask of me and I will make the
nations your inheritance,
and the ends of the earth your possession.

The second theme that runs through the selections from the Psalms is the conquering and conversion of the heathen, as, for example, in Psalm 18:43–44:

Thou dost establish me as the head of the
nations;
People that I have not known
serve me;
As soon as they hear of me they submit to me.

383–85. The passage from Augustine's sermons on the Psalms to which d'Ailly referred may be found in *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Enarrationes in Psalmos*, in Jacques Paul Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 36, col. 90.

⁴¹ For the text of the passage from d'Ailly's *Vigintiloquium* included in the *Book of Prophecies*, see de Lollis, *Scritti*, 107. For a facsimile of Columbus's annotation, see de Lollis, *Autografi*, series C., plate 88, no. 716.

Another example is Psalm 22:27–28:

All the ends of the earth will remember
and turn unto the Lord;
And the clans of the nations will worship
before him.
For the kingdom belongs to the Lord;
And he rules over the nations.

Many other similar excerpts from the Psalms compiled in the *Book of Prophecies* could be cited.⁴²

The selections from the prophets collected in the *Book of Prophecies* also center on predictions concerning the recovery of Mount Zion by the faithful and the demise of the enemies of God. But there are others foretelling the triumph of Jerusalem following a period of world-wide conflict and the unleashing of Gog and Magog. These events are described in considerable detail in chapters 11 and 12 of the Book of Daniel and chapters 38 and 39 of Ezekiel, all cited in the *Book of Prophecies*. But a briefer and more general prediction from Isaiah, to whom Columbus accorded special status as a prophet in the prefatory letter to the *Book of Prophecies*, is the best example:

For the Lord will have mercy on Jacob, and will yet choose Israel, and set them in their own land: and the strangers shall be joined with them, and they shall cleave to the house of Jacob. And the people shall take them, and bring them to their place: and the house of Israel shall possess them in the land of the Lord for servants and handmaidens: and they shall take them captives, whose captives they were; and they shall rule over their oppressors (Isa. 14:1–2).

As in the case of the Psalms, many similar examples drawn from other prophets were collected in the *Book of Prophecies*.⁴³

Columbus's preoccupation with the final conversion of all races on the eve of the end of the world is also reflected in the particular attention that he paid to John 10:16: "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd." This famous verse, which lay at the heart of so many medieval and Renaissance apocalyptic texts, was quoted in its entirety in the *Book of Prophecies* along with glosses from Augustine, John Chrysostom, Gregory the Great, and Nicholas of Lyra.⁴⁴

The *Book of Prophecies* concludes with what at first seems to be a baffling collection of biblical passages in which the islands of Tarshish, Cathyr, and Ophyr are mentioned. Columbus's fascination with islands might be part of what Leonardo Olschki, the great Italian scholar, has called the medieval "romanticismo insulare" stemming from Marco Polo's *Il milione* and other popular travel literature. It seems

⁴² On the recovery of Mount Zion by the faithful, see, for example, Pss. 2:6–8, 48:1–2, 79:1, 50:1–2, 102:13, 122:1–2. On the final conquest and conversion of the heathen, see Pss. 18:43–44, 22:27–28, 46:10, 57:9–11, 67:3–4, 72:10–11, 86:8–10, 96:1, 106:47, 115:1–6.

⁴³ For other examples, see Isa. 14:1, 25, 35:10, 24:23, 41; Jer. 4:31, Bar. 5, Dan. 11–12, Ezek. 38–39, Joel 2, Amos 9, Micah 4, 5, 6. A greater part of the book of Isaiah is included in the *Book of Prophecies*, which is probably not coincidental. Phelan mentioned that Isaiah was one of the most popular Old Testament prophets among the Joachimites; *Millennial Kingdom*, 135 n.25. Reeves noted that Joachim in *Liber concordiae* made Isaiah the symbol of the second status—the *ordo clericorum*; *Influence of Prophecy*, 18.

⁴⁴ De Lollis, *Scritti*, 105.

more plausible, however, that this fascination is an aspect of his more general interest in the *unum ovile et unus pastor* theme. A passage from Augustine's *De divinatione daemonum* included in the *Book of Prophecies* supports this theory:

God will prevail, it is said, against them and he will wipe out all the gods of the peoples of the earth, and they will adore him, each one from its own place, all the peoples of the islands. And indeed not only the peoples of the islands, but all peoples, so that elsewhere he does not name all the peoples of the islands, but the universal orb of the earth, saying: the universal ends of the earth will remember God and be converted to him and the people of the earth will adore his fatherly aspect since God is king and rules over the people.⁴⁵

Even the most remote, undiscovered islands will be converted to Christianity before the world ends. In the prefatory letter to the *Book of Prophecies* Columbus affirmed his certainty that his own discoveries— islands he thought to be part of the oriental archipelago described by Marco Polo—had greatly accelerated this final process of world-wide conversion.

Against this backdrop of material relating to the universal eschatology that Columbus intended to unfold in the *Book of Prophecies* may be placed a number of selections that appear to be part of the personal role he meant to establish for himself in this drama. A prophetic passage taken from *Soliloquiorum animae ad Deum*, a popular devotional work attributed to St. Augustine, evokes the inevitability of personal destiny in a general sense. "Before you formed me in the belly, you knew me, and before I left the womb, whatever pleased you was preordained for me. And those things that concerned me were written in your book, in the secret of your counsel."⁴⁶ Two others make more specific predictions. Not coincidentally one evokes the achievement of the Admiral of the Ocean Sea and the other, that of Christopher Columbus. The first passage, one of a number of entries under the general heading "de presenti et futuro," is taken from Seneca's tragedy *Medea* (376): "The years will come, in the succession of the ages, when the Ocean will loose the bonds by which we have been confined, when an immense land shall lie revealed, and Tethys shall disclose new worlds, and Thule will no longer be the most remote of countries." This passage is followed by its paraphrase in Spanish. Written next to it in the hand of Ferdinand is the sentence, "My father, the Admiral Christopher Columbus, fulfilled this prophecy in the year 1492."⁴⁷

The second prophecy that can be applied to Columbus is attributed by him to Joachim of Fiore. It predicts that "he who will restore the ark of Zion will come from Spain." Neither Phelan nor Reeves could identify this prophecy, though

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Also see *De divinatione daemonum*, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 36, col. 584. For Olschki's discussion, see his *Storia letteraria*, chap. 2, sect. 3, 38–55.

⁴⁶ This passage is not from Augustine's *Soliloquies* but from *Soliloquiorum animae ad Deum*, one of a triumvirate of popular devotional works widely attributed to him (the other two were known as the *Liber meditationum* and *Manuale*). Marcel Bataillon concluded that these works (translated into Spanish) were extremely widespread and influential in early sixteenth-century Spain, that is, during the period in which Columbus and Gorrício were compiling the *Book of Prophecies*; Bataillon, *Erasmus y España. Estudios sobre la historia espiritual del siglo XVI* (2d edn., Mexico, 1966), 47. For the Latin text of the passage quoted from the *Book of Prophecies*, see de Lollis, *Scritti*, 97. Also see Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 40, col. 884; and Jer. 1:5.

⁴⁷ De Lollis, *Scritti*, 141. Ferdinand also cited this passage from the *Medea* in chapter 8 of his biography and added, "Now it is considered certain that this prophecy is fulfilled in the person of the Admiral"; *Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus*, 18.

Phelan believed that it stemmed from Arnold of Villanova (ca. 1250–1312), a Joachite and diplomat for the brothers James II of Aragon and Frederick III of Sicily. Phelan's guess was correct. In fact, José Pou y Martí had already published (in 1940), in his *Visionarios, beguinos y fraticelos catalanes (siglos XIII–XV)*, the section of Arnold's *De cymbalis ecclesiae* containing the prophecy attributed to Joachim. Pou y Martí's materials and themes were such that he had no reason to make the connection with Columbus, and he did not. But Milhou made the connection in his *Colón y su mentalidad mesiánica*. He has now unveiled the origins of the *Ve mundo* prophecy and its complicated medieval *fortuna*. The *Ve mundo* prophecy circulated in Aragon from Arnold's lifetime onward, being interpreted in various ways according to changing political circumstances. The version of the *Ve mundo* prophecy that Columbus knew was contained in a letter apparently addressed to Ferdinand and Isabella by Genoese legates in 1492 on the occasion of the Spanish capture of Granada from the Muslims. This event was interpreted by Columbus and others as evidence of the key role to be played by the house of Aragon in restoring the "ark of Zion" to the faithful—that is, the recapture of Jerusalem from the infidel. The letter from the Genoese delegates containing the *Ve mundo* prophecy attributed to Joachim was thus probably an example of the curious medieval mixture of political propaganda and eschatology discussed by Milhou.⁴⁸

THE THEMES THAT HAVE EMERGED in this examination of the materials that Columbus and Gorrício gathered for the *Book of Prophecies*—the recovery of the Holy Land and the final conversion of all peoples of the world set against the universal eschatology provided by d'Ailly's opuscula—were pulled together by Columbus in the prefatory letter addressed to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. Somewhat rambling and incomplete, this letter is nonetheless essential for understanding Columbus's self-image as the Christ-bearer.

Columbus began this letter by recalling his lifelong experience as a navigator and mapmaker and his many encounters with learned men:

When I was very young I went to sea to sail and I continue to do it today. This art predisposes one who follows it towards the desire to know the secrets of the world. More than forty years have already passed in which I have engaged in this activity; I have gone to every place that has heretofore been navigated. I have dealt with and held conversations with learned men, ecclesiastics and secular, Latins and Greeks, Jews and Moors, and with many others of other sects. I have found Our Lord very well disposed towards my desire, and I have from him the spirit of intelligence for carrying it out. He has bestowed the marine arts upon me in abundance and that which is necessary to me from astrology, geometry, and arithmetic. He has given me adequate inventiveness in my soul and hands capable of drawing spheres and situating upon them the towns, the rivers, mountains, islands, and ports, each in its proper place.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ For the text of the prophecy as it appeared in the *Book of Prophecies*, see de Lollis, *Scrittà*, 148. For Phelan's discussion of it, see *Millennial Kingdom*, 135–36, and n. 27. Also see Reeves, *Influence of Prophecy*, 316–17. For the text of the *Ve mundo* prophecy contained in Arnold of Villanova's *De cymbalis ecclesiae*, see José Pou y Martí, *Visionarios, beguinos, y fraticelos catalanes (siglos XIII–XV)* (Vich, 1930), 54–55. For Milhou's discussion of the *Ve mundo* prophecy, see *Colón y su mentalidad mesiánica*, 375–483. For the role that Spain and its rulers were destined to play, see Phelan, *Millennial Kingdom*, chap. 1.

⁴⁹ De Lollis, *Scrittà*, 79.

But he explicitly denied that these activities and encounters were what ultimately caused him to succeed in the Enterprise of the Indies. Nor, in fact, did he believe that this enterprise was his final goal:

I spent six years here at your royal court, disputing the case with so many people of great authority, learned in all the arts. And finally they concluded that it all was in vain, and they lost interest. In spite of that it [the voyage to the Indies] later came to pass as Jesus Christ our Saviour had predicted and as he had previously announced through the mouths of His holy prophets. Therefore, it is to be believed that the same will hold true for this other matter [the voyage to the Holy Sepulchre]. If what I myself say does not seem to be sufficient evidence of this, I offer that of the Holy Gospel, which says that everything shall pass save for His marvelous Word. And in saying that, it says that everything must come to pass as it has been written by Him and by the prophets. . . . *I have already said that reason, mathematics, and mappaemundi were of no use to me in the execution of the enterprise of the Indies.* What Isaiah said was completely fulfilled and that is what I wish to write here in order to remind Your Highnesses of it so that you may rejoice when I tell you by virtue of the same authorities that you are assured of certain victory in the enterprise of Jerusalem if you have faith.⁵⁰

It was divine inspiration that Columbus believed had come to him—and to Ferdinand and Isabella—and that urged him on to the final goal—the reconquest of the Holy Land:

Who would doubt that this light, which comforted me with its rays of marvelous clarity . . . and urged me onward with great haste continuously without a moment's pause, came to you in a most deep manner, as it did to me?

In this voyage to the Indies Our Lord wished to perform a very evident miracle in order to console me and the others in the matter of this other voyage to the Holy Sepulchre.⁵¹

And it was the opuscula of d'Ailly, not the "Joachimism" that Phelan suggested but was unable to substantiate, that provided Columbus with the eschatological framework within which to place his Enterprise of the Indies and what he conceived as his final mission.

In the prefatory letter he made this clear, drawing on the references to Augustine and d'Ailly that he had gathered for the *Book of Prophecies* and calculating that the end of the world was but 155 years away:

St. Augustine says that the end of this world will come in the seventh millennium from its creation; the holy theologians follow him, especially the Cardinal Pierre D'Ailly in Chapter XI of his *Vigintiloquium* and in other places, as I will mention below.

From the creation of the world, or from Adam, until the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ are five thousand three hundred and forty-three years and three hundred and eighteen days according to the reckoning of King Alfonso, a reckoning that is held to be the most certain. Pierre D'Ailly, in Chapter X of his *Elucidario astronomice concordie cum theologica et hystorica veritate*, adds to it a little under one thousand five hundred and one years to make altogether a little under six thousand eight hundred and forty-five years.

According to this calculation, there are lacking about one hundred and fifty-five years for the completion of the seven thousand at which time the world will come to an end, as is said in the authorities mentioned above.⁵²

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 80, and 82 [my emphasis].

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 79–80.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 81. A single sentence taken from d'Ailly's *Elucidarium astronomice concordie cum theologica et hystorica*

Columbus went on to refer his monarchs to the last nine chapters of d'Ailly's *Tractatus de concordia astronomice veritatis et narrationis hystorice* for details regarding the coming of the Antichrist. These nine chapters include chapter 63, discussed above, in which d'Ailly presented the eight preambles for the coming of the Antichrist. All of the preambles blended Bacon's theory of planetary conjunctions with the eschatology of the pseudo-Methodius. D'Ailly considered Joachim to have been an important prophet and mentioned him frequently throughout the opuscula, more often than not in a distinguished list that included Hildegard, Merlin, and the Sybilline prophet. But he nowhere discussed Joachim's eschatology in any detail as he did the eschatologies of Bacon and the pseudo-Methodius. So, if Columbus was indeed a "Joachimite," we do not know where he derived his knowledge of Joachim's theory of history and how it figured in his plan for the *Book of Prophecies*. On the other hand, he did read d'Ailly's opuscula, and the evidence suggests that he intended to incorporate the eschatology set forth in them into his own work.⁵³

This eschatological framework was probably already in place when Columbus made his initial voyage of discovery in 1492. In the letter to Ferdinand and Isabella that prefaces the journals of the first voyage and describes events leading up to that voyage, Columbus evoked the intermingled destinies of himself and his monarchs:

Most Christian and most exalted and most excellent and most mighty princes, King and Queen of the Spains and of the islands of the sea, our Sovereigns: . . . in this present year of 1492, after Your Highnesses made an end of the war with the Moors who reigned in Europe, and had brought that war to a conclusion in the very great city of Granada . . . in that same month, on the ground of information which I had given Your Highnesses concerning the lands of India, and concerning a prince who is called "Grand Khan," [and concerning] how many times he and his ancestors had sent to Rome to beg for men learned in our holy faith, in order that they might instruct him therein, and how the Holy Father had never made provision in this matter, and how so many nations had been lost, falling into idolatries and taking to themselves doctrines of perdition, Your Highnesses, as Catholic Christians and as princes devoted to the holy Christian faith and propagators thereof, and enemies of the sect of Mahomet and of all idolatries and heresies, took thought to send me, Christopher Columbus, to the said parts of India, to see those princes and peoples and lands and the character of them and of all else, and the manner which should be used to bring about their

narratione for the *Book of Prophecies* reads: "From the creation of Adam to the time of Christ, according to Alfonso, there are five thousand, three hundred and forty three years and three hundred and eight days"; de Lollis, *Scritti*, 107. Columbus closely followed verbum 9 of d'Ailly's *Elucidarium*, where d'Ailly discussed the duration of the six ages of the world; Incunabulum, ff. 125–26. Columbus annotated it copiously. See de Lollis, *Autografi*, series C, plate 91, nos. 800–07. At the conclusion of d'Ailly's discussion (d'Ailly, Incunabulum, f. 126) Columbus noted, "From the creation of the world up to Christ, according to Alfonso, there are 5,326 years, 3 days, 16 hours, and thirty minutes of the hour, according to one calculation; and according to another, otherwise"; de Lollis, *Autografi*, series C, plate 91, no. 807.

⁵³ The last nine chapters of *Tractatus de concordia astronomice veritatis et narrationis hystorice* are as follows: "De aliis decem revolutionibus saturnalis et postea gestis"; "De his que ante complementum decem zliarum revolutionum gesta sunt"; "De scismatibus ecclesie"; "De magnis ecclesie scismate"; "De octava coniunctione maxima"; "De adventu antichristi et eius secta"; "De sex sectis principalibus secundum astronomos"; "De octo preambulis adventus antichristi secundum methodium"; "De antichristi ortu et fine et de consummatione seculi secundum eundem." On Columbus's "Joachimism," see Phelan, *Millennial Kingdom*, 22, and nn. 25, 26. There is evidence that in his later years Columbus was associated with the Franciscan Tertiaries—the branch of the order open to laymen. According to Las Casas, Columbus appeared in public in Seville dressed in the robes of a Franciscan; *Historia de las Indias*, 89. Columbus's son Diego related that his father was buried in the robes of a Franciscan Tertiary; Phelan, *Millennial Kingdom*, 19, and nn. 6, 7.

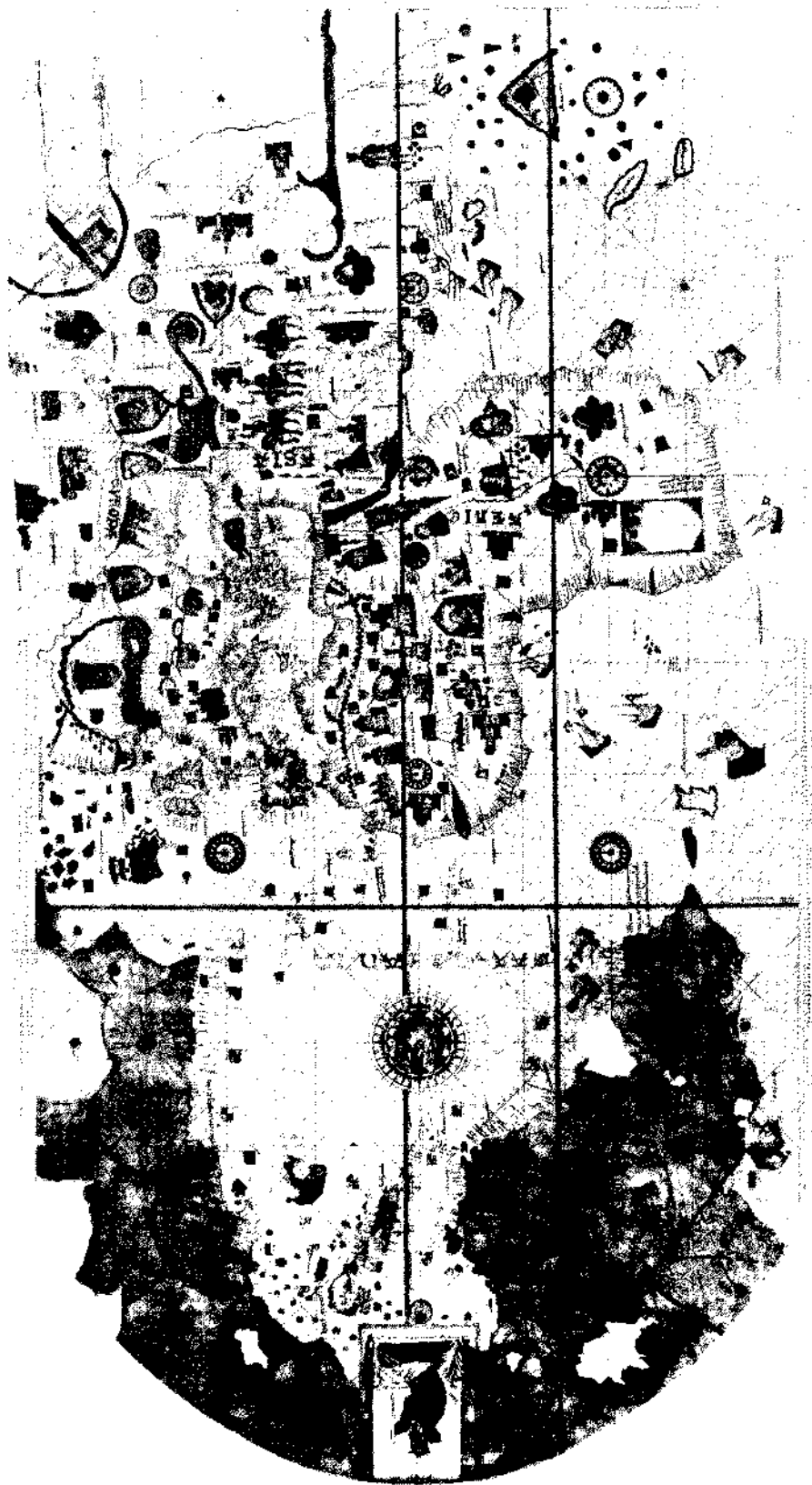


Figure 3. The 1500-05 map of Juan de la Cosa. Reproduction made from a nineteenth-century photolithograph in the collection of the William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Mich. Photograph reproduced courtesy of John Dann, director of the Clements Library.

conversion to our holy faith, and ordained that I should not go by land to the eastward, by which way it was the custom to go, but by way of the west, by which down to this day we do not know certainly that anyone has passed.⁵⁴

Columbus's sentiments echoed those of many of his contemporaries who were convinced that, with the victory over the Moors at Granada, the time when the Spanish monarchy would play a special role in history had arrived. Phelan demonstrated how the ancient emperor-messiah myth, which was an essential part of medieval apocalypticism, was applied to the Spanish monarchy by early Franciscan missionaries such as Gerónimo de Mendieta.⁵⁵ And Marcel Bataillon and Milhou have written about the more general revival of Joachimism and other forms of apocalypticism, particularly among the Franciscans and their Tertiaries, in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain. Events such as the conquest of Granada and the discovery of the Americas fired contemporary expectations that the recovery of Jerusalem from the infidel and the final conversion of all races prophesied in the Apocalypse would soon come to pass.⁵⁶

Columbus clearly shared these expectations. In his letter to Ferdinand and Isabella describing the fourth voyage of discovery, Columbus offered his services for one last journey:

Jerusalem and Mount Zion are to be rebuilt by the hands of the Christians as God has declared by the mouth of his prophet in the fourteenth Psalm (vv. 7–8). The Abbé Joaquim said that he who should do this was to come from Spain; Saint Jerome showed the holy woman the way to accomplish it; and the Emperor of China has, some time since, sent for wise men to instruct him in the faith of Christ. Who will offer himself for this work? Should anyone do so, I pledge myself, in the name of God, to convey him safely thither, provided the Lord permits me to return to Spain.⁵⁷

This was Columbus's ultimate goal, the purpose of all his travels and discoveries—the liberation of the Holy Land.

IN THE FINAL YEARS OF HIS LIFE, with his discovery of the unknown islands of the Indies, Columbus came increasingly to see himself as a divinely inspired fulfiller of prophecy, the one who inaugurated the age of the *unum ovile et unus pastor* forecast by John the Evangelist and John of Patmos. Columbus's vision of himself as the Christ-bearer was depicted by one Juan de la Cosa, who made what is generally considered to be the earliest map of the New World (see Figure 3).⁵⁸ Historians of

⁵⁴ Cecil Jane, trans., *The Journal of Christopher Columbus* (London, 1960), 3–4.

⁵⁵ Phelan, *Millennial Kingdom*, 11. On the emperor-messiah myth, see Reeves, *Influence of Prophecy*, pt. 3, "Joachimist Influences on the Idea of a Last World Emperor," *Traditio*, 17 (1961): 323–70; Franz Kampers, *Die deutsche Kaiser-idee in Prophetie und Sage* (Munich, 1896); and R. Folz, *Le souvenir et la légende de Charlemagne*, (Paris, 1950).

⁵⁶ Bataillon, *Erasmus y España*, 51–61. "Évangélisme et millénarisme au Nouveau Monde," *Courants religieux et humanisme à la fin du XV^e et au début du XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 1959), 25–36; Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain, 1523–1572*, trans. Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966); Adriano Prosperi, "America e apocalisse," *Critica Storica*, 13 (1976): 1–61; and Milhou, *Colón y su mentalidad mesiánica*, pt. 2.

⁵⁷ Major, *Christopher Columbus*, 197–98.

⁵⁸ The map is in the Museo Naval, Madrid, Spain. Whether there is more than one Juan de la Cosa has



Figure 4: Detail of Columbus as Christofereus from the map of Juan de la Cosa. Frontispiece reproduced from R. H. Major, ed., *Select Letters of Christopher Columbus* (London, 1870).

cartography have paid much attention to the configurations of the islands and the coastlines, and other technical details, while ignoring the larger religious and cosmological content of the map.

The map represents, in fact, the dissolution of the world picture presented in the medieval *mappaemundi*. The geometrically proportioned disk composed of Europe, Asia, and Africa surrounded by the ocean is gone. In its place is a much more uncertain picture. To the east is a highly articulated drawing of the coast of Western Europe, yet its overall location remains ambiguous. To the west is the emerging coastline of the New World, which the mapmaker can trace with accuracy in only a few places. The interior is unknown and depicted as a vague, swampy, brown-green land mass on which stands a figure—Columbus—carrying the Christ child on his shoulders. The figure is an adaptation of the ancient image of the converted pagan giant, St. Christopher, who carried the Christ child across a swift river on his shoulders—only now it is Christofereus, the bearer of Christ across the ocean to the unknown shores of the New World (see Figure 4).

Ferdinand put this image into words in the biography of his father. Writing about the “mystery” of his father’s name, symbolic of the role he was destined to play in history, Ferdinand explained that “Columbus” meant dove:

If we consider the common surname of his forebears, we may say that he was truly Columbus or Dove, because he carried the grace of the Holy Ghost to that New World which he discovered, showing those people who knew Him not Who was God’s beloved son, as the Holy Ghost did in the figure of a dove when St. John baptized Christ; and because over the waters of the ocean, like the dove of Noah’s ark, he bore the olive branch and oil of baptism, to signify that those people who had been shut up in the ark of darkness and confusion were to enjoy peace and union with the Church.⁵⁹

And Columbus’s given name linked him with St. Christopher:

We may say that just as St. Christopher is reported to have gotten that name because he carried Christ over deep waters with great danger to himself, and just as he conveyed over people whom no other could have carried, so the Admiral Christophorus Colonus, asking Christ’s aid and protection in that perilous pass, crossed over with his company that the Indian nations might become dwellers in the triumphant Church of Heaven.⁶⁰

In a letter dating from his later years, Columbus himself wrote that he had

caused controversy. A Juan de la Cosa was the owner of the *Santa Maria* and second in command on Columbus’s first voyage. A Juan de la Cosa, a well-known mapmaker, accompanied Columbus on his second voyage and subsequently sailed with Amerigo Vespucci. On the controversy, see Taviani, *Christophe Colomb*, 294–96, 302. On the map itself, see G. E. Nunn, *The Mappemonde of Juan de la Cosa* (Jenkintown, Penn., 1934).

⁵⁹ Ferdinand Columbus, *Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus*, 4. Also see Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, 43.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

discovered the “new heaven and the new earth” prophesied in the Apocalypse: “God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John after having spoken of it through the mouth of Isaiah; and he showed me the spot where to find it.”⁶¹ In his mind then, the New World was identified with the end of the world—the first heaven and earth were passed away, there was no more sea—and the journey of the *viator*, which had begun in the deserts of the Old Testament prophets, was surely almost over.

⁶¹ Columbus, as quoted in Spotorno, *Memorials of Columbus*, 224. Later in the same letter Columbus again spoke of the “New World”: “My confidence in God and her Highness, Isabella, enabled me to persevere. . . . I undertook another voyage to the new heaven and earth, which land, until then, remained concealed”; *ibid.* 225.