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The First Interpretations of the Columbian Enterprise*

Partiendo de un análisis del archivo histórico, este artículo se propone demostrar que Cristóbal Colón y no la corona española, fue el primero en interpretar su empresa de acuerdo con la ideología del imperio universal cristiano que sostenía la retórica de la reconquista y la consolidación reciente del poder de Fernando e Isabel. En este estudio también se destacan indicios textuales que sugieren que, aunque la corte llegaría a adoptar la interpretación de Colón, Los primeros intentos de este de representar su empresa según la narrativa del imperio universal cristiano fueron rechazados por la misma. Este artículo presenta una nueva interpretación sobre la persona de Colón que pone el énfasis no solamente en la naturaleza dialógica de su relación con la corona, sino también en su astucia como lector de/panorama político de la época y su cohorte caracter religioso durante el transcurso de su carrera en España.

Shortly after the last Moorish stronghold fell in January 1492 to the armies of Spain, Antonio Nebrija presented to Queen Isabel of Castile a compendium of Spanish grammar, the first of its kind in any of the vernacular European languages. In the prologue dedicated to Isabel and published later, Nebrija recounts what is now a famous scene in Spanish historiography:

cuando en Salamanca di la muestra de esta obra a vuestra real majestad, i me preguntó que para que podía aprovechar, el muy reverendo padre obispo de Ávila me arrebató la respuesta; i respondiendo por mi dixo que después que vuestra alteza metiese debajo de su uego muchos pueblos barbáros i naciones de prernuevas lenguas, i con el vencimiento aquellos tendrían necesidad de recibir las leyes quel vencido; pone al vencido, i con ellas nuestra lengua, entonces por esta mi arte podrían venir en el conocimiento derla, como agora nos otros depredemos el arte dela gramática latina para deprender el latín. (94)

* I thank the editor and the anonymous evaluators of Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispanicos for their helpful comments. I also thank Michael Palencia-Roth, Margarita Zanlón, and Amy Wlodarski for their insightful feedback on previous versions of this essay.
The significance of the Bishop’s comment in the context of the recent and final victory against the Muslims in the Iberian peninsula and the potential for future conquests in Africa and the Atlantic was surely not lost on the Catholic Monarchs. Isabel and Ferdinand had proved especially adept at manipulating language to suit their purposes. In the preceding years, they had systematically appropriated and embellished a religiously charged discourse of holy war, long circulating in Castile and Aragon, in order to whip up support for the Reconquest. This discourse drew on an amalgamation of sources, including Old Testament messianism, the book of Revelation, Daniel’s prophecy about four successive empires, the European crusading tradition, the mystique surrounding the Holy Roman Empire, and common aspirations and prophecies about universal rule. For example, it was then commonly believed that it would only be a matter of time before Spain reclaimed Jerusalem for Christendom and established a universal Christian monarchy; many supporters of the Catholic Monarchs expected that after the defeat of the Moors, they would next extend their conquests to Africa, Constantinople, and Jerusalem (Liss, “Isabel” 64).  

However, when the Catholic Monarchs authorized the Capitulaciones de Santa Fe (17 April 1492) commissioning Christopher Columbus’ first voyage to the west, it seems unlikely that they were considering either territorial conquest or universal monarchy. The available written record suggests that it was more probable that it was Columbus who was thinking in this manner at this early date. It was he who first interpreted his enterprise as a continuation of the Reconquest according to the ideology of religious crusade and territorial expansion that unpinned the Monarchs’ imperial project. While this ideology clearly motivated both Columbus and the Monarchs – indeed, it was part of the cultural fabric of Spain and its royal court – the documents in the historical record that have been uncovered to date illustrate that Columbus was likely the first to articulate in writing his enterprise in these terms, which are most easily identified as “religious” as opposed to “commercial.” Nevertheless, we should not conclude that the Court’s subsequent adoption of a similar articulation necessarily implies that Columbus influenced royal policy; we do not know why the Court changed the manner in which it framed the Columbusian enterprise. Instead, I argue here that a careful reading of the historical record suggests that while the Court eventually came to promote the religious interpretation of the enterprise and thereby incorporate it into its greater imperial agenda, Columbus’ efforts to construe his enterprise in this manner were most likely rejected by the Court at first.

Margarita Zamora (26-27) insists that we read the historical record of documents related to the Columbian enterprise as a dialogue between the Crown and Columbus in which the expectations of both parties and their interpretations of the voyage were negotiated. This kind of dialogic reading of the historical record illuminates Columbus’ boldness and ingenuity in proposing to the Catholic Monarchs a new interpretation of his enterprise.

Beginning with the pre-discovery documents generated by the Crown, we note that none of them – including the Capitulaciones and the Carta de Merced (30 April 1492) – mention an evangelical purpose in Columbus’ voyage. The actions expected of Columbus as specified in the Capitulaciones reflect the extent to which the Catholic Monarchs understood the voyage as a commercial venture: “ganar,” “descubrir,” “regir,” “comprar,” “trocar,” “hallar,” and “haber” (Zamora 27). Although the formulaic introductory sentence of the document mentions “la ayuda de Dios,” there is no further mention of God or religious matters in the text that follows. Some have argued that this is not surprising given the context of the early trade-empire building of Castile, Aragon, and Portugal within which the document was issued. The Capitulaciones can be viewed as a formulaic echo of earlier contracts licensing maritime exploration. Nevertheless, given the religious charge of Reconquest discourse, the lack of references to religious matters in pre-discovery documents is, in Zamora’s words, “perplexing”:

Such silence is quite perplexing given that these were the official documents by which the Catholic Monarchs authorized an embassy in foreign lands. According to medieval kingship theory, Christian kings were expected to be missionaries and crusaders on behalf of the Church, and this was precisely how Ferdinand and Isabella conceived and justified their actions in the Reconquest of the Iberian peninsula from the Moors. (28)  

Given the centrality of religious matters, and of the expansion of Christendom in particular, in royal discourse during the late fifteenth century, why are such matters absent in the Capitulaciones and other pre-discovery royal documents? Why does Columbus appear primarily as a commercial agent in the first official documents generated by the Crown? Before answering these questions, it should be noted that one pre-discovery document, a “Salvoconducto” or Letter of Safe Conduct given to Columbus and signed by the royal secretary on behalf of the King and Queen, refers to a religious purpose of the voyage. Written in Latin, the letter is addressed to the Catholic Monarchs Columbus might encounter and reads in part: “Mittimus in presenciarum nobilem virum Christoforum Colon cum tribus caravis armatis per maria Oceania ad partes Indie, pro alquibus causis et negotiis, servicium Dei ac fidei ortodoxe augmentum, necnon beneficium et utilitatem nostram, concernentibus” (“Salvoconducto” 23). We might wonder why a religious motive would be mentioned in this letter designated for an unknown ruler and yet be absent in the Capitulaciones. A logical answer is that this inconsistency is the result of the Crown’s initial approach to the Columbian enterprise, one that could not, of course, foresee the implications of the voyage in the greater context of Isabel and Ferdi-
nand’s reign. While it would be a mistake to conclude that Columbus’ voyage was considered without importance by the Crown in April 1492, we may conclude that it was not viewed as integral to royal strategy or ideology as had been the campaign to conquer Granada. In fact, it was Columbus who attempted to interpret his discoveries as having the same ideological meaning as the final conquest of Granada (see the discussion below regarding the prologue to the Diario de a bordo).

Because the historical record is incomplete and its chronology unclear, we cannot know with certainty in which document Columbus first discussed his enterprise as an extension of the Reconquest and the expansion of Ferdinand and Isabella’s Christian empire. The three most likely candidates for this distinction are: (1) the so-called prologue to Columbus’ ‘Diario of the First Voyage; (2) the Diario itself; and (3) the March 4, 1493 letter from Columbus to the Catholic Monarchs. I shall consider each document in succession.

Perhaps the document that has long served as the prologue to the Diario is, in fact, Columbus’ initial response in writing to the royal documents that formally dictated the terms of the enterprise. This is the contention of Zamora (28) who asserts that the prologue is actually the first pre-discovery letter that Columbus wrote to the Catholic Monarchs: “It was in fact the first opportunity for Columbus to ‘speak’ directly to the Catholic Monarchs in his official capacity as their envoy in the enterprise of the Indies” (27). In this brief document, likely written with considerable care as Columbus surely would have foreseen that it would be kept in the royal archives, Columbus virtually ignores the commercial purpose of his commission as laid out by the Capitulaciones and, instead, interprets it as a logical extension of the Reconquest. The most obvious rhetorical strategy that is used in the prologue is the well known erroneous chronology, referred to by Alain Milhou as “la forma en que se pióetea la cronología” (174), which serves to link Columbus’ enterprise with the recent victory over the Moors at Granada and the expulsion of the Jews. Columbus repeats several times the year 1492, asserting in one instance that the Catholic Monarchs’ decision to commission Columbus occurred “este presente año de 1492, después de Vuestras Altezas aver dado fin a la guerra de los moros” (Colón 95) and “después de aver echado fuera todos los judíos de todos vuestros reinos y señoríos” (96). According to the prologue, the victory over the Moors, the expulsion of the Jews, and the decision to send Columbus to the Indies all occurred in Granada in January 1492. In reality, Granada fell in January, the expulsion decree was signed in March before the Catholic Monarchs entered Granada, and the Capitulaciones were signed in March not in Granada but rather in Santa Fe. Columbus’ false chronology incorporates his commission into the nationalist narrative of the Reconquest that culminated in the final victory over the Moors and the expulsion of the Jews – a victory that was commonly interpreted as the consolidation of Ferdinand and Isabella’s Christian empire destined for universal dominion. Milhou concludes: “La toma de Granada, la expulsión de los judíos y la expedición política y misionera hacia el Catay se presentan, en el prólogo, en el mismo plano, como sucesos de igual importancia que contribuyen todos a la ampliación y al triunfo de la Cristianidad” (177-78).

An additional detail of the prologue that deepens its religious framing of the enterprise is its discussion of the Crown’s reasons for supporting Columbus. While the first royal motive provided by the prologue conforms to the mercantile expectations of the Capitulaciones (“para ver los dichos principes y los pueblos y las tierras y la disposición d’ellas y de todo” [Colón 95-96]), the second motive adds an element absent in the Capitulaciones: evangelization. According to the prologue, the Catholic Monarchs’ desire to commission Columbus is allegedly tied to their status as “católicos cristianos y príncipes amadores de la sancta fe cristiana y acrecentadores d’ella y enemigos de la secta de Mahoma y de todas idolatrías y herejías” (95). The Monarchs decided to support Columbus, the prologue states, after he informed them that the Gran Can of the Indies and his ancestors “muchas vezes ... avian enbiado a Roma a pedir doctores en nuestra sancta fe porque le enseñasen en ella, y que nunca Sanco Padre le avia proveido y se perdían tantos pueblos, cayendo en idolatrías e resquiendo en si sectas de perdición” (95). By claiming that Ferdinand and Isabel, unlike the Pope, respond to those seeking instruction in the faith, Columbus brazenly insinuates that they are more fit shepherds of Christendom than the Pope himself. Thus whereas the prologue reaffirms the commercially motivated rationale of the Catholic Monarchs for authorizing Columbus’ voyage as stated in the Capitulaciones (“pensaron de enbiarme a mi, Cristoval Colón, a las dichas partidas de India, para ver los dichos príncipes y los pueblos y las tierras y la disposición d’ellas y de todo” [95-96]), it also adds the element of evangelization to the royal motive. It specifically states that the King and Queen sent Columbus to convert these idolaters who had previously gone unheeded by the Pope: “y la manera que se pudiera tener para la conversion d’ellas a nuestra sancta fe” (96).

The claim that the prologue to the Diario is the first document in which Columbus offers a novel interpretation of his voyage is necessarily tentative because we do not know with certainty when the document, which lacks a date, was written. Although the verb tense in the prologue suggests that it was written after Columbus arrived in the Canaries and before his landfall in the Indies, some have argued that it was written after the completion of the voyage and that its emphasis on the evangelical was intended to detract from Columbus’ failure to establish commercial relations of any consequence. It has also been suggested that Las Casas may have modified or even penned the prologue himself. Given these issues that make problematic any discussion of the prologue, let us turn to the hypothesis that Columbus’ original log of the first voyage is
the first text in which Columbus framed that voyage in terms of its contribution to the expanding empire of the Catholic Kings. The difficulty with this hypothesis is that the original log was lost and the only extant version of it is Las Casas' summary of a copy of it. Despite Consuelo Varela's faith in the "overall integrity of Las Casas' text of the Journal" ("Notes" 55) it is impossible to verify how much of the Diario is Las Casas' creation as opposed to that of Columbus. Henry Vignaud and Rómulo D. Carbia are among those who argue that Columbus did not pen the Diario. Others, including Varela ("Notes" 55-58), Juan Gil (30), and Samuel E. Morison ("Texts" 239) maintain that Columbus is the author of the Diario. Henige and Zamora, however, treat the document as a constructed text manipulated and mediated by Las Casas. The latter emphasizes Las Casas' own ideological agenda, reminding us that Las Casas' primary goal was the peaceful evangelization of the natives and asserting that his version of the Diario was likely designed to serve him as an "aide mémoire" (42) in the production of his own writings as opposed to a faithful reproduction of Columbus' original log. Keeping in mind Las Casas' possible intervention in the text, a key passage that reveals how the voyage is portrayed in the Diario as more than a mere commercial venture is found in the entry dated 26 December 1492. In all of the writings attributed to Columbus, this passage probably contains the earliest mention of the reconquest of Jerusalem:

Y díe qu'espera en Dios que, a la vuelta que el entendía hazer de Castilla, avía de hallar un tonel de oro, que avían resgatado los que avía de dextar, y que avían hallado la mina del oro y la espeñería, y aquello en tanta cantidad que los Reyes antes de tres años emprendiesen y adereçassen para ir a conquistar la Casa Sante, que assí, dize el, "proteste a Vuestras Altuezas que toda la ganancia d'esta mi empresa se gastase en la conquista de Hierusalem, y Vuestras Altuezas se rieran y dieron que les plaza, y que sin esto tenian aquella gana." (Colón 18)

Jerusalem is appealed to in this passage of the Diario as a crucial symbol in the narrative of universal Christian empire. As long as the heart of Christendom was in the hands of the infidel, common belief held that the Christian empire would not be complete. After Jerusalem was taken by Muslims in 638, European Christian kings, including those of Castile, had been obsessed to varying degrees with its recapture. The importance of Jerusalem in Spain and its connection to the notion of universal empire within the rhetoric of the reconquest bears repeating (Milhou cap. 3). Peggy Liss notes:

Jerusalem, Christendom's core, [was] often coupled in Castilian prophecies and sermons with Spain's future greatness, even with achievement of world empire. Jerusalem, like Spain having once been destroyed, served as its analogue, the lodestar of Castilian chivalric ideals and messianic hope, the ultimate goal of reconquest. Its restoration to Christian rule was an obligation laid by God upon Castile's monarch. (Isabel 43)

Given the meaning of Jerusalem in the rhetoric of contemporary Spain, the assertion in the Diario (whether it is true or not) that Columbus had already urged the Catholic Monarchs to use the profits of his voyage to finance a final crusade to incorporate it into the already circulating discourse about Spain's final crusade to Jerusalem and its drive to universal empire.

Recognizing the problems regarding authenticity and chronology of both the prologue to the Diario and the Diario itself, let us consider the possibility that the first time Columbus interpreted his enterprise in writing in religious terms and as part of the imperial project of Ferdinand and Isabel was in his March 4, 1493 letter. The imperial frame in this letter is starkly absent in another letter that is often believed to be written by Columbus but is more likely a royally sanctioned revision of Columbus' March 4 letter. According to Demetrio Ramos Pérez and Margarita Zamora, this second letter, addressed to Luis de Santángel and Gabriel Sánchez, was likely composed for purposes of propaganda. If the March 4 letter is Columbus' "original" letter and the Santángel/Sánchez letter is a royally sanctioned revision of that original, a comparison of the two letters suggests that the Court was slow to agree with Columbus' interpretation, even may have rejected it immediately after the discovery and before the Court had devised a comprehensive public relations strategy. Here I discuss the imperial frame in Columbus' March 4 letter in addition to considering how that frame appears to have been removed in the royally edited version (the Santángel/Sánchez letter). Following Zamora's (26-27) exhortation to consider as dialogic the documents generated by Columbus and the Crown, the Santángel/Sánchez revision of Columbus' March 4 letter can be understood as a royal response to Columbus that rejected his interpretation of the project.

The majority of the March 4 letter addresses the mercantile interests of the Crown, as specified in the Capitulaciones, by reporting on the fertility of the land and its general features, the mild nature of the natives and Columbus' encounters with them, the plethora of good harbors, and how best to navigate the area. Several passages in the March 4 letter, however, construe the Columbian enterprise in terms of its contribution to the preexisting royal imperial agenda. The first sentence of the letter, for example, is similar to the prologue of the Diario in that it represents Columbus' voyage as an extension of the Reconquest: "Aquél eterno Dios que a dado tantas victorias a A. Al, agora les dio la mas alta que hasta oy a dado a principes" (Colón 227). The reference to "tantas victorias" already granted by God clearly alludes to the Reconquest, a series of military victories that culminated in the seizure of Granada and the subsequent imposition of religious orthodoxy, both of which were interpreted in religious terms to be part of the narrative of consolidation of Christian empire. Colum-
bus refers to his own voyage of discovery as "la [victoria] mas alta." He con-
stitutes his labors as of even greater importance than the victory at Granada be-
cause it is "la mas alta que hasta oy [dios] a dado" to any prince. Columbus' posi-
tion as the protagonist in this trans-Atlantic expansion of the Reconquest is
then emphasized by the fact that the next sentence begins with the first person
pronoun "Yo," and that the same "yo" is repeated twice more within that sent-
tence: "Yo bengo de las Yndias con el armada que V. Al. me dieron, adonde yo
puse en treinta y tres dias despues que yo parti de vuestros reinos" (227-28; my
emphasis).

Not only does the corresponding sentence in the Santángel/Sánchez ver-
sion de-emphasize the presence of Columbus (while it contains several verbs
conjugated in the first person, it contains only one "yo"), it also omits the allu-
sion in the March 4 letter to the Reconquest, thus removing Columbus' inno-
\vative framing. With a business-like tone that characterizes the whole of the
Santángel/Sánchez letter, the first line reads: "Porque se que avreis plazer de la
gran vitoria que nuestro Señor me ha dado en mi viaje vos escrito esta, por la
cual sabreis como en treinta y tres dias pase a las Indias" (Colón 219-20). While
the discovery here is said to be a "vitoria" given to Columbus by God, the dele-
tion of the March 4 letter's reference to the Reconquest prohibits the link estab-
\lished in the original version between this "vitoria" made possible by Columbus
and the imperial agenda of Ferdinand and Isabel.

This is not the only instance when an allusion to the expansion of Ferdi-
nand and Isabel's Christian empire in the March 4 letter is omitted in the roy-
ally sanctioned Santángel/Sánchez version. The March 4 letter contains a pas-
sage about evangelization that is absent from the Santángel/Sánchez letter. This
is the first mention of evangelization perhaps anywhere in Columbus' writings.
Unfortunately, it appears in a portion of the document that has been damaged
and only part of the sentence at issue is legible (the damaged sections are noted
below by asterisks):

mas Nuestro Señor, ques lumhre y fuerça de todos aquellos que andan a buen fin y les da
victoria de cosas que pareçen y posibles, quiro hordenar que yo hallase y oviere de hallar
oro y minas del y espeír y gente sin numero * * * numero dispuestos para ser christianos * * *
(Quoted in Zamora 185)

Despite the lacunae, it is clear that the subject of the text is the conversion of
the local inhabitants. The description of these people as "dispuestos para ser chris-
tianos" toward the end of a phrase that begins by listing the specific goods that
God wished Columbus to find in the Indies illustrates the manner in which the
March 4 text discursively adds the religious interpretation to the commercial
interpretation of the voyage that had been laid out by the Crown in the Capitu-
laciones. Although the anonymous editor of the Santángel/Sánchez letter in-
cluded a slightly modified version of the beginning of the sentence ("eterno
Dios Nuesto Señor, el cual da a todos aquellos que andan su camino victoria de
cosas que pareçen imposibles" [Colón 225]), this version omits this description
found in the "original" text of the natives as inclined to convert. The subject of
 evangelization thus appears of greater significance in the original March 4 ver-
sion. The omission of the reference to evangelization in the royally sanctioned
Santángel/Sánchez version suggests that the royal editor, and perhaps the Court
itself, was not yet interpreting the Columbian project as part of the same royal
agenda that had pursued the fall of Granada and that saw itself as destined to
unite Christendom under the rule of the Catholic Kings.

Also deleted from the letter to Santángel/Sánchez is the passage in the
March 4 letter that most stridently incorporates the enterprise within the narra-
tive of universal Christian empire. Here Columbus recommends using the
proceeds of his discoveries to finance a crusade in order to wrest Jerusalem
from Islamic control:

Concluyo aqui que, mediante la graça divinal de Aquel qui'es comienço de todas cosas
virtuosas y buenas y que da favor y victoria a todos aquellos que van en su camino, que
de oy en siete años yo podere pagar a V. Al. cinco mill de cavallo y cincuenta mill de pie
en la guerra e conquesta de jherusalem, sobre el cual proposito se tomó esta empresa; y
dende a cinco años otros cinco mill de cavallo y cincuenta mill de pie, que serian diez
mill de cavallo y ciento mill de pie, y esto con muy poca costa que faga agora V.A. en este
comienço, para que se tengan todas las Yndias y lo que en ellas ay en la mano, como
despues dire por palabra a V.A. Y para esto tengo razon y no hablo inicito, y no se deve
dormir en ello, como se a fecho en la esecucion d'esta enpres, de que Dios perdone a
quien a sido causa d'ello. (Colón 323)

In this passage Columbus reinvents his enterprise as integral to Ferdinand and
Isabel's divinely sanctioned plan to regain the symbolic center of Christendom
and establish an imperium sacrum. He even claims, contrary to the terms of the
pre-discovery documents generated by the Crown and despite a lack of evi-
dence elsewhere in his own writings, that such a religious crusade was the origi-
nal rationale for his voyage. Columbus later repeats this claim in his 1502 letter
to Pope Alexander VI (see Colón 481). In both of these instances it seems that
Columbus was revising history, as in the prologue to the Diario, in an attempt
to interpret his discoveries as an integral part of the Catholic Kings' predestined
drive to universal monarchy. By interpreting his project according to the pre-
existing narrative about Ferdinand and Isabel's duty to fulfill sacred history by
creating a universal Christian empire, Columbus rendered it much more sig-
ificant than it previously had been considered by the Crown.

The reason the royal editor of the Santángel/Sánchez version deleted this
passage is a matter of speculation. Obviously the Court would not have appreci-
ated Columbus' bold admonition that there should be no dawdling with regard to the crusade to Jerusalem, as there was with his own voyage ("no se deve dormir en ello, como se a fecho en la escuençón d'esta empresa"). Yet why would the Santángel/Sánchez version not include Columbus' reference to the Jerusalem crusade when this would have granted the discovery more weight given the importance of Jerusalem in the current ideology of reconquest and empire? Zamora conjectures that "the Crown may have felt the commitment to evangelization proclaimed in the letter was sufficient to ensure that the church would be well-disposed toward the enterprise without the additional, and much more costly, commitment to a campaign for the Holy Land" (20). It is true that the Catholic Monarchs had not yet petitioned the Pope for a bull that would grant them dominion in the Indies. Perhaps they were hesitant to publicize Columbus' voyage in this light, especially given the threat that Portugal would compete for territorial rights until they received such a bull. Yet if one of the major purposes of the widespread publication of the Santángel/Sánchez letter was to pave the way for smooth negotiations with the Pope, as Ramos Pérez (66) argues, this omission appears to be a missed opportunity. In effect, the royal editor's deletion of the March 4 letter's reference to Jerusalem served as a royal rejection of Columbus' attempts to interpret his enterprise within the prevailing rhetoric of reconquest by emphasizing its religious consequences.

Another passage that appears in the March 4 letter to Ferdinand and Isabel but not in the Santángel/Sánchez version is one that portrays the discoveries as a feat to be celebrated by "all of Christianity." Its subtext emphasizes Columbus' contributions to the grandeur of Christian empire:

Muy poderosos príncipes, toda la christianidad deve hacer muy grandísimas fiestas y en especial la Iglesia de Dios, por aver fallado tanta multitudumbre de pueblos tan allegados, para que con poco trabajo se tornen a nuestra sancta fee, y de tantas tierras llenas de tantos bienes a nos muy necesarios, en que abran todos <los> cristianos refrigero y ganancia, donde todo estava incognito ni se contava d'ello salvo en manera de fabulas. Grandes alegrías y fiestas en las iglesias y muchas alabanzas a la Sancta Trinidad debe en especial mandar hazer V. Al (en todos) sus reinos y señoríos por el gran amor que les a amostrado, mas a otro príncipe. (232-33)

In previous passages of the March 4 text the religious interpretation is tucked on to the commercial. In these instances Columbus first compiles in writing with the responsibilities assigned to him by the Capitulaciones and only after that does he discuss religious matters that grant his enterprise greater significance. In the passage cited above, however, the religious interpretation appears first: Christendom should celebrate first because Columbus found so many pagans to convert ("por aver fallado tanta multitudumbre de pueblos ... para que ... se tornen a nuestra sancta fee") and only secondly because he also found de-

sirable material goods ("y de tantas tierras llenas de tantos bienes a nos muy necesarios").

The editor of the Santángel/Sánchez version maintained this order of the religious first and then the commercial second in the following key passage near the end of that letter.

Así que, pues nuestro Redentor dio esta victoria a nuestros ilustrísimos Rey e Reina e a sus reinos famosos de tan alta cosa, adonde toda la christianidad deve tomar alegría y fazer muchas grandes fiestas y dar gracias solemnes a la Sancta Trinidad con muchas oraciones solemnes, por el tanto enalçamiento que havran en tornándose tantos pueblos a nuestra sancta fe, y después por los bienes temporales que no solamente a la España, mas a todos los christianos ternan aqui refrigero y ganancia. (226)

This passage declares the significance of Columbus' enterprise with regard to Christian empire. The expansion ("enalçamiento") of Christendom is granted more importance than the temporal benefits of the discovery by the word "después," in that Christendom should "tomar alegría y fazer muchas oraciones solemnes" first because so many pagans will turn to Christ, and only thereafter ("y después") because of the "bienes temporales" that will result from the discoveries. This may be the first instance in which the Crown can be said to have interpreted Columbus' voyage according to the ideology of Christian empire that had propelled the Reconquest and motivated contemporary chroniclers to predict that Ferdinand and Isabel would continue their Christian conquests abroad after the fall of Granada.

If this is the first instance in which the Court interpreted the Columbian enterprise as part of its greater imperial strategy, what explains the Court's failure to do so earlier and more consistently? Indeed, Ferdinand and Isabel's March 30, 1493 letter to Columbus acknowledges their receipt of his correspondence sent after his arrival in Europe (probably his March 4 letter), but their response does not reveal much with regard to the royal interpretation of the voyage's significance. Rather, it simply states that the Monarchs were pleased that "el [Dios] sera mucho servido, y nosotros asimismo y nuestros Reinos recibir tanto provecho" (quoted in Fernández de Navarrete 2: 32). In this same letter, the Catholic Monarchs urge Columbus to hasten to see them at Barcelona and they vaguely confirm the privileges promised him. Nothing in this letter indicates that they viewed Columbus' project as related in any way to the Reconquest or the extension of their empire.

In Columbus' answer to this very business-like response of the Catholic Monarchs to his news, he dropped the "religious" frame of his enterprise. Responding to their request that he write them back immediately ("y escribidnos luego con ese correo que ha de volver presto" [Fernández de Navarrete 2: 32]), Columbus portrayed his enterprise as an almost purely commercial venture. In
the undated memorial probably written, according to Thacher (3: 94-97), between 15 April and 7 May 1493, Columbus outlines his plan for managing the Indies and in doing so he conforms to the commercial spirit of the Capitulaciones. The focus of this memoir is the extraction of gold and its transmission to Spain. It contains eighteen recommendations, eleven of which directly mention gold and two of which regard the security of ship cargoes (and it is assumed this cargo would contain gold although the word is not specifically mentioned in these two recommendations). Columbus first suggests that two thousand settlers populate the Indies in order to secure Spanish control and facilitate trade - "porque la tierra este mas segura y se pueda mejor grangear e tratar, y servira para que se puedan rebover y traten las yslas comarcanas" (De Lollis 1: 136). His fifth recommendation is that there be a church and clergy "para adunyacracion de los Sacramento y cultos divinos y para conversion de los Yndios" (De Lollis 1: 136), but in the rationale provided by Columbus the conversion of the natives is listed second and appears less of a priority than that of the administering the sacraments to the settlers.

Columbus' almost exclusive focus on mercantile matters in this memoir is best understood in light of the dialogic nature of the documents exchanged between himself and the Catholic Monarchs. In his own writings addressed to them, Columbus had proposed an interpretation of his enterprise that went beyond the commercial interpretation set out in the Capitulaciones. However, when he received a measured response from the Catholic Monarchs that did not mirror that novel interpretation, Columbus reverted to the original, commercial representation of the voyage. Hence in the May-April memorial Columbus emphasizes the harvesting of gold in his proposal for settling the Indies.

It was not until their "instructions" to Columbus dated May 29, 1493 that the Catholic Monarchs appear to have adopted an interpretation of the Columbian enterprise similar to that which had been proposed in Columbus' March 4 letter, the prologue to the Diario, and the Diario itself. Their first "instruction" in the May 29 document addressed to Columbus suggests that they now saw his venture as part of their greater imperial project:

Primeramente, pues a Dios nuestro Señor plugo por su alta misericordia descobrir las dichas islas, e tierra-firme al Rey e a la Reina nuestros Señores por industria del dicho D. Cristobal Colon, su Almirante, Visorey, e Gobernador dellas, el cual ha hecho relacion a sus Altezas, que las gentes que en ellas fallo pobladas, conocio del las ser gentes muy apa-rejadas para se convertir a nuestra Santa Fe Catolica, porque no tienen ninguna ley ni se-ta; de lo cual ha plcido y place mucho a sus Altezas, porque en todo es razon que se tenga principalmente respeto al servicio de Dios nuestro Señor, e ensalzamiento de nuestra Santa Fe Catolica: por ende sus Altezas deseano que nuestra Santa Fe Catolica sea au-mentada e acressentada, mandan e encargan al dicho Almirante, Visorey, e Gobernador,
Monarchs’ drive to a universal monarchy. The Catholic Monarchs eventually disallowed the slave trade. Pérez (136-37) suggests that their decision was likely based on both “principios evangélicos” and “motivos económicos,” the latter because Spain was not experiencing a labor shortage that would justify the costs of transporting numerous slaves across the Atlantic. It is certain that, whatever their religious motivations, the Catholic Monarchs’ view of the colonization project in the Indies, and of the natives as vassals in their growing empire, simply did not allow for the enslavement of the indigenous people. That the Crown deemed a crime Columbus’ refusal to permit natives of Hispaniola to be baptized – a crime for which Columbus was tried after his arrest by Bobadilla in 1500 – indicates the extent to which the Crown had come to adopt the same interpretation of the Columbian enterprise that Columbus himself had proposed in 1493.

Tracing the early exchange of documents between Columbus and the Crown leads to compelling new possibilities regarding how we view Columbus and the early history of Spain’s expansion overseas. It seems likely that Columbus, not the Crown, was the first to articulate his project according to the nationalist ideology of Christian empire that sustained Ferdinand and Isabel’s consolidation of power and territorial conquests. While the early documents attributed to Columbus interpret the first voyage as an expansion of the empire – an extension of the victory of the Catholic Kings in Granada to realms beyond the peninsula – the Crown initially addressed the Columbian enterprise as a commercial venture, unincorporated in any greater strategic imperial vision and devoid of courtly rhetoric about religious conquest and expansion. If the Santángel/Sánchez letter is a royally sponsored revision of Columbus’ March 4 letter, the Court may have even deleted Columbus’ imperial frame in an effort to maintain the strictly commercial frame as established in the Capitulaciones. Shortly after Columbus returned from the first voyage, however, royal documents about the enterprise reflect a change in tenor. They began to employ the language of reconquest and evangelization. This modification of royal rhetoric seems entirely logical. As the Catholic Monarchs realized the significance of the Columbian project, they came to see it as integral to their pre-existing political strategy. They would have had little reason to do so earlier. Columbus, however, had less to lose and more to gain in portraying his project as integral to royal strategy. Alain Milhou has argued that Columbus’ “celebración de la grandeza de la monarquía española y su adhesión a las corrientes proféticas que les aseguraban la recuperación de Jerusalén y la monarquía del mundo revelan su participación activa en la mitificación de los Reyes Católicos” (436). It would be facile to conclude that because Columbus employed popular politico-religious rhetoric to describe his own project, he was merely an insincere self-promoter. Milhou offers a similar perspective, speaking particularly about Columbus’ references to Jerusalem: “En mi opinión, me parece casi seguro que Colón utilizó las alusiones a Jerusalén y a su reconquista en esa perspectiva tácita de adulación del monarca. Pero me parece también casi seguro que al mismo tiempo estaba profundamente obsesionado por la suerte de Jerusalén” (440). Indeed, a nuanced approach would have us consider Columbus as both producer and consumer of the religiously charged rhetoric of his day. It would not be inconsistent to argue that the bold way in which Columbus modified the Crown’s interpretive frame of his enterprise reveals not only his efforts at self-promotion, but also his sincere belief in Spain’s destiny to expand the limits of Christianidad.

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NOTES

1. Alain Milhou studies “el ambiente mesiánico” in Andalucía during the battle for Granada, “en especial en la corte real en que circulaban profecías y se componían romances que predicaban la prolongación de la guerra contra el moro hasta el aplastamiento definitivo del Islam, la reconquista de Jerusalén y la monarquía del mundo reservada a los Reyes Católicos” (438).


3. “By these presents we sent the noble Christopher Columbus with three caravels fitted out for the ocean sea toward the regions of India for certain reasons and matters regarding the diffusion of the divine faith as well as for our use and benefit.” I use the translation provided by Paolo Emilio Taviani (77).

4. De Lollis believed that the prologue “fu certo scritto prima che finesse l’anno 1492” (2: viii). Manuel Alvar (173 n1), Henry Vignaud (Histoire 2: 251-61; Le vrai 186-88), and Emiliano Jos (Diario 91) also asserted that the prologue was written after the discovery. Morison argues that the prologue was written after August 3 and likely “at the Canaries.” That it could not have been written much later is shown by the promise in the last paragraph that was not performed: to set down all the “sea and lands of the Ocean Sea in their proper positions under their bearings,” with latitude and longitude (Admiral 156-57).

5. Emiliano Jos (“Génesis” 24) suggests that Las Casas may have modified the prologue. Zamora (201 n3) considers the “unlikely” possibility that Las Casas penned the prologue to the Diario. Gaetano Ferro also considers this thesis, but negates it: “ma in questo caso restano da spiegare le allusioni che più di una volta egli [Las Casas] fa alle incertezze dello ‘scrivano’” (10-11). Varela’s negation is more certain: “We can rule out that [the prologue] is an invention by Las Casas; written
without stop or paragraphing, it reveals in many places the outlook typical of the Genoese: at once mystical and suspicious in defending and proclaiming on every occasion the rights and privileges granted him by the Monarchs" ("Notes" 56).

6 I follow David Henige's (8) suggestion that the original record kept by Columbus, which is now lost, be referred to as the "log" in order to distinguish it from the particular version of the log created by Las Casas.

7 I refer to these letters collectively as "the Santángel/Sánchez letter." The original Santángel and Sánchez letters are lost. Available copies share the same content but different dates (and signatures, probably due to the translators of the letters and/or their publishers). The Santángel letter is dated 15 February 1493 and the Sánchez letter is dated 14 March 1493. While both missives underwent multiple editions, the Sánchez letter was more widely distributed in Europe. See Rumeu de Armas (1:51). The letter most often cited in current scholarship is that addressed to Santángel. For a discussion of the likely dates, locales, and circumstances in which the letters Columbus wrote immediately after the "discovery," including the 4 March 1493 letter to the Catholic Monarchs, see Rumeu de Armas (27-51), and Davidson (196). Regarding the argument that Columbus's March 4, 1493 letter to the Catholic Monarchs is the product of a royal revision of the Santángel/Sánchez letter, see Ramos Pérez and Zamora.

8 De Lollis (r: LXXV-LXXX) dates the memorial April 1493.

9 Las Casas, for example, notes "el ansi a que tenia el almirante de que hobiessen provecho los reyes, para que los gastos que habian hecho rerecompensassen y los que havian no los sientes" (1: CXXII, 465).

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