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TRANSLATIO IMPERII

VIRGIL AND PETER MARTYR’S COLUMBUS

Elise Bartosik-Vélez

The Milanese humanist Peter Martyr d’Anghiera (1457–1526) was the first historiographer to write about Christopher Columbus and to recognize the significance of the first Columbian voyage by coining the term “New World.” His eight-volume account of Spain’s “discoveries” in the Americas, the Decades de Orbe Novo, which he began writing in 1493, was a primary source of information for European princes and elites about the Western hemisphere. While Martyr was instrumental in framing one of the principal discourses about Columbus and the Spanish conquest of the New World, his role in this regard has been overlooked by most scholars. 1

Martyr, who was born in Arona in 1457, was one of the most important representatives of Renaissance humanism living in Spain during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. 2 At the age of twenty, he moved to Rome where he circulated in elite circles and enjoyed the patronage of the cardinals Arcimboldi and Sforza. There he also consolidated his intellectual and cultural foundations in the humanist tradition, studying with the renowned Pomponius Laetus. In 1486 Martyr met the Count of Tendilla, Íñigo López de Mendoza, who had been sent to Rome by Ferdinand and Isabel to officially pledge their obedience to the pope and to negotiate peace between the papacy and the king of Naples. After Martyr wrote a poem extolling the count’s successes, the latter invited Martyr to return to Spain with him in the capacity of a man of letters. To the dismay of Martyr’s friends and patrons, he accepted the invitation, later explaining to Ascanio Sforza in a letter written from Spain that his future there was more promising than it would have been in Italy, where success depended on noble rank and political calamity was imminent.

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559
It is commonly believed that Martyr met Columbus, with whom Martyr said he was “tied in close friendship,” at the royal encampment outside of Granada. Both men witnessed on 2 January 1492 the sovereigns’ triumphant entrance into Granada after it had fallen in the last battle of the Spanish reconquest of Moorish territory. Shortly after being ordained and nominated in March to the post of canon at the cathedral of Granada, Martyr sought and received an invitation to be called back to serve at court. He remained at the court until his death in 1526 during the reign of Carlos V. Martyr had a variety of occupations in the course of his career as royal courtier, including those of professor, special ambassador, member of the Council of the Indies, and advisor on political and family matters. In addition, he also served the court as royal historiographer. The first book of the *Decades de Orbe Novo* was published in 1511 in Sevilla by the Spanish humanist Antonio Nebrija in a compendium of four works by Martyr. In 1516 Nebrija published the first three decades and in 1530 the entire *Decades de Orbe Novo* was published for the first time in Alcalá de Henares.

*Translatio Imperii*

Martyr was the first of many to characterize Columbus by framing him within a preexisting discourse of colonization and imperial transfer. This was the discourse of the *translatio imperii*, the transfer of empire, according to which occidental empire and Western civilization itself was believed to have moved progressively from east to west, first from Asia to Greece and then to Rome (and sometimes to Germany), and thought by Martyr’s time to be anchored somewhere in Western Europe, depending on the national context in which the story of empire was being told. This discourse was Christianized over a period of time, starting in the fourth century with Constantine’s efforts to Christianize Rome. When Charlemagne in 800 was crowned Holy Roman Emperor, the fusion between empire and Christianity was complete. The classic story about the transfer of empire is the *Aeneid*, a foundational text for Renaissance humanists like Martyr who interpreted it through their Christian lens as they sought to know the pasts of Greece and Rome. Martyr’s representations of Columbus in books 1–3 of the first of his eight *Decades de Orbe Novo* are mediated by the *translatio imperii* legend and its narrative par excellence, the *Aeneid*. His earliest portrayals of Columbus are of him as a neo-Aeneas forging an empire for Spain in the New World. In this
way, Martyr followed the Roman and Virgilian model of epic narration of the establishment of empire just as Spain itself followed the Roman model of colonization.

The *translatio imperii* trope had a long-established history by the sixteenth century. Curtius, emphasizing its roots in biblical exegesis and its importance in medieval historiography, explains that “the renewal of the Empire by Charlemagne could be regarded as the transferral of the Roman *imperium* to another people. This is implied in the formula *translatio imperii*, with which the *translatio studii* (transferal of learning from Athens or Rome to Paris) was later co-ordinated.” French historian Jacques Le Goff has observed that this transfer of political power “was above all a transfer of knowledge and culture, a *translatio studii*.” The *translatio imperii et studii* theme is evident in many European texts of the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries, including those of Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), Konrad Celtis (1458–1508), Juan del Encina (1468–1534), and Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533), whose *Orlando furioso* (1516) has been described as “a revival of the medieval idea of the Empire.”

The *translatio imperii* legend was especially current in the Spanish imagination during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabel. Spain’s claim that it was the legitimate heir to Western empire rested on a conglomeration of historical events as interpreted by a religiously charged discourse espoused by the court. These events included the Catholic Kings’ consolidation of power and the unification of Spain’s separate kingdoms, the final defeat of the Moors in 1492, the subsequent attempt to homogenize the population with the expulsion decrees directed at the Jews and the Moors, and Columbus’s discoveries abroad. Martyr’s contemporary, Antonio Nebrija, provides us an example of the argument that Spain was the modern heir to empire when he assures Queen Isabel in the prologue of his *Gramática de la lengua castellana* that, now that the sovereigns have consolidated their empire, the *translatio studii* will occur:

> I assi crecio hasta la monarchia y paz de que gozamos, primera mente por la bondad y providencia divina; despues, por la industria, trabajo y diligencia de vuestra real Majestad; enla fortuna y buena dicha dela cual, los miembros y pedaços de España, que estavan por muchas partes derramados, se redujeron y aiuntaron en un cuerpo y unidad de reino…. Assi que, despues de repurgada la cristiana religion, por la cual somos amigos de Dios, o reconciliados con El; despues delos enemigos de nuestra fe vencidos por guerra y fuerça de armas, de donde los nuestros recebian tantos daños y temian mucho
maiores; despues dela justicia y essecucion delas leies que nos
aiuntan y hazen bivir igual mente enesta gran compañia, que llamamos
reino y republica de Castilla; no queda ia otra cosa sino que florezcan
las artes dela paz.8

[And so it [the Spanish language] was the agent by which the pres-
et monarchy and peace that we enjoy flourished, first due to divine
goodness and providence and then to the ingenuity, perseverance,
and diligence of your royal Highness by which great fortune the
members and various parts of Spain that had been dispersed were
brought together and joined in one body and unified kingdom…. Thus,
after purifying the Christian religion, by which we are [made]
lovers of God to whom we are reconciled; after the enemies of our
faith being vanquished by war and force of arms, by which we suffered
so much harm and feared worse; after the justice and the execution
of the laws that joined us and allowed us to live in this great society
that we shall call the kingdom and republic of Castile, there remains
nothing else than the future flowering of the arts that thrive during
peacetime.]

Nebrija emphasizes the organic rise and fall of empires and the notion that
language (and the translatio studii) has always followed empire: “Siempre
la lengua fue compañera del imperio; y del tal manera lo siguió, que junta
mente comenzaron, crecieron y florecieron, y despues junta fue la caida de
entrambos” (3) [Language was always the companion of empire; it followed
empire so that they together began, grew, and flourished, and then together
they both fell]. Nebrija clearly refers to the westward movement of empire, its
language, and “all the other arts and sciences” in the discussion that follows.
In succession, he describes the rise and fall of the empires and languages of
the Jews, Greeks, and Romans. In each case, when political power reached
its apogee (under Solomon, Alexander, and Augustus, respectively), the
arts and sciences flourished. He suggests to Queen Isabel in his prologue
that although every empire has eventually fallen, this decline perhaps may
be delayed in the case of Spain because of his Gramática—the weapon of
language, the companion of empire:

Despues que vuestra Alteza metiesse debaxo de su iugo muchos
pueblos barbaros y naciones de peregrinas lenguas, y conel
vencimiento aquellos ternian necesidad de recebir las leies quel
vencedor pone al vencido, y con ellas nuestra lengua; entonces, por
esta mi Arte podrian venir enel conocimiento della, como agora
This passage from Nebrija’s prologue alludes to the inherent nature of the drive to conquer as an element of the *translatio imperii et studii*. Regarding this impulse, Richard Waswo writes that “Western Europe decolonized itself culturally from ancient Rome only to imitate it; it contested the model only by becoming it, by imposing on others the cultural alienation it has so long known.” Considered in this light, Nebrija articulates the Spanish commitment to following the Roman model of colonization.

As Nebrija was the major figure of Renaissance humanism in late fifteenth-century Spain, it is no accident that he provides us with this unambiguous example of how the *translatio imperii* trope was used to claim Spain’s status as cultural and political heir to Rome. Many Renaissance humanists were interested in explaining the central move in the plot of the *translatio imperii*. In this respect, they mirrored the Romans whom they studied, who repeatedly were drawn to the topic of the transfer of power and culture from Greece to Rome. Nicholas Horsfall succinctly explains how Virgil himself sought to apply the lessons of Greece to Rome. Virgil, Horsfall says, was especially knowledgeable about “the ideals and practice of Greek colonization” and, in writing his epic, sought to sculpt the preexisting Aeneas legend with the contours of the Greek *ktiseis*, or foundation story. The history of the transfer of power (and knowledge), which is always told in the *translatio imperii* legend from the point of view of the victor, is best understood as a history of appropriation. Part of what made Roman imperialism so effective, both in practice and later as a model, was its productive incorporation of other cultures (including that of Greece). The “founding story” of this cultural appropriation, which as Waswo notes is a result of real conquest and commerce, is “straightforwardly imperialistic,” and it is articulated with clarity in the *Aeneid*. My point here is not to dwell on how humanism was used to justify colonization and conquest in the sixteenth century, but to suggest that it was entirely logical for Martyr to appropriate the stock imperialist narrative about the transfer of empire from east to west as he wrote the first history of Spanish expansion overseas.
Virgil’s *Aeneid* is the classic literary articulation of the legend about colonization and the westward transfer of empire. The epic follows Aeneas, who is destined to found Rome, as he escapes Troy, which falls to invading Greeks. Bringing his household gods, his father, and his son, he leads a group of Trojans as they journey around the Mediterranean in search of the land they are fated to settle. The first six books about Aeneas’s wanderings have long been considered Virgil’s homage to the *Odyssey*. The second six books of conquest and settlement are often described as “Iliadic”; they tell the story of Aeneas’ arrival in Italy and the war between the Trojans and the natives, which the Trojans win. Aeneas is the epic hero because he fulfills his destiny, which is to bring his gods, people, and culture to Italy and found Rome, which in turn is destined to rule the world.

The *Aeneid* was produced during a particular imperialistic moment when the republic had effectively ended and Augustus had assumed power in Rome after a civil war. At the time that Spain was beginning to experience its own imperialistic moment in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the *Aeneid* was probably the best known Latin text in Europe. It had long been the staple model for instruction in Latin; students commonly memorized and copied its verses. Italian humanists like Martyr and the recipients of those of his early letters that were later compiled as the Decades were surely deeply familiar with Virgil’s poem, both with its rhetorical form and its content. Virgil’s status was nearly that of an idol both in literary circles and in the popular imagination where, as Comparetti’s classic study made clear, Virgil’s reputation was larger than life and where he came to be associated with magic and the occult. Throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, Virgil was considered the paradigmatic poet. Poets attempted to emulate the manner in which Virgil’s literary production evolved over the course of his career. The *Aeneid* was certainly well known among the elite in Spain, although Latin literacy was less widespread there than elsewhere in Europe. Nevertheless, Spain’s multicultural history had given rise to a strong translation tradition, and it was there that Juan II, king of Navarre, commissioned Enrique de Villena in 1427 to pen the first translation of the entire epic into a vernacular language.

Martyr’s use of the model of the *translatio imperii* narrative provided by the *Aeneid* in his retelling of the first moments of Spain’s overseas colonization is not surprising. Donna Hamilton notes that even as the *Aeneid* celebrates the reign of the imperialist Augustus, so also is it a colonizing text—indeed the archetypical colonizing
text of all time. As Richard Waswo has argued, no other work has been more important to the process by which the West has naturalized the concept of colonization; its narrative of a great destiny to be fulfilled in the founding of Rome has offered itself to all of Western culture as a paradigm for the expansion and transmission of culture and ideology from one place to another.  

It seems, indeed, that Martyr’s recurrence to the *Aeneid* as a model of colonization at such an early moment in the history of Spain’s conquest of the Indies was likely not an isolated instance. Woodcuts of Columbus’s ships that were originally used to illustrate a 1493 edition printed in Basel of Columbus’s popular “Letter on the Discovery” were reused to illustrate a popular edition of Virgil’s works, first published by Sebastian Brant in Strasbourg in 1502 and reissued in Paris, Lyon, and Venice. A German humanist poet and professor of jurisprudence, Brant was committed to popularizing the works of classical authors. Anna Cox Brinton long ago suggested that Brant’s desire to popularize the classics explains his use of a visual reference to Columbus’s voyage of discovery, a contemporary legend that had inspired so many. “The extraordinary liveliness of the pictures,” writes Brinton, “convinces us that to Brant’s mind at least Aeneas’ voyage was not so much an item of academic interest, as it was a vivid fact of the ancient world comparable only to Columbus’ voyage, which was so vivid a fact of contemporary experience.” Brinton further emphasizes the Aeneas/Columbus analogy:

> Men looked back through the centuries to Aeneas’ westward journey with eyes aglow with the vision of the future that was opened before them by contemporary navigators. The same land that had risen from small beginnings of Trojan colonization to dominate the Old World was now sending its seamen to explore the New World. The “grave and pious” Columbus was the typical Renaissance discoverer as Aeneas had been the voyager par excellence of all antiquity. (83)

Because Brant’s edition of Virgil went through several editions, the woodcuts using Columbus’s ships “dominated Vergil illustration for the first half of the sixteenth century.” David Scott Wilson-Okamura cautiously makes the following observation about the meaning of such a “quotation” of a Columbian ship in a Virgilian text: “This would have given the
Aeneas/Columbus analogy that they encoded a certain currency: as Aeneas colonized Italy, so his descendants were now colonizing the New World.”

The point I would like to emphasize in this discussion is that Martyr’s employment of the Aeneid as an interpretive frame for his history of the Spanish conquest and colonization of the New World is understandable, especially given the common practice during the Renaissance of “creative imitation.” When Martyr first wrote about Spain’s exploits in the New World, he related the details of what seemed a legendary reality in the heroic and epic mold that was at hand on account of his humanist formation and his privileged position as narrator at the center of an expanding power. In this position Martyr narrates the story of Columbus and the Spanish conquest of the New World according to the perspective of the victor and the frame of the translatio imperii. By far the most well-known epic model of colonization and the transfer of empire was the Aeneid, and for a short period of time, for as long as Columbus remained in favor, Martyr cast Columbus in the mold of Aeneas.

The Mythical Columbus

We now turn to the Decades to analyze Martyr’s treatment of Columbus. First we note that the opening sentence of Decade I shines a positive light on the Admiral even before his name is mentioned and before the sovereigns are mentioned in the second sentence. Martyr suggests that those who discover previously unknown territory are exceptional. Ancient peoples, Martyr writes, esteemed as gods “viros, quorum industria et animi magnitudine ignotae maioribus eorum terrae panderentur” (“men by whose industry and greatness of spirit lands unknown to their ancestors were made accessible”). This sentence, which suggests that Columbus is equally remarkable, is followed by one that credits Columbus with the discovery. Martyr writes that “ab ipsius . . . initio rei, ne sim cuiquam injurius, exordiri est animus. Christophorus Colonus, quidam Ligur vir . . .” (“in order to avoid doing injustice to anyone I will then start from the beginning of said venture. A certain Ligurian, Christopher Columbus . . .”). Beginning this second sentence with Columbus’s name, Martyr privileges the Admiral as the most important actor in the discovery of the New World and establishes Columbus as the cornerstone on which Martyr’s account of the discovery of the New World is based. Martyr appears to be partaking in a euhemeristic discourse that
rationalized classical gods as having been in actuality exceptional mortals famous for some particular feat, a discourse popular among early Christian apologists whose work Martyr surely knew well. It is possible, though not certain, that one of these mortals Martyr had in mind was Aeneas whose divination is predicted in the *Aeneid* (12.794–95). So, Martyr’s text could be said to begin by establishing a veiled analogy, one that it later lays bare, between Columbus and Aeneas.

It is in book 2 of the first Decade that Martyr overtly encourages his reader to compare Columbus and Aeneas. Here he juxtaposes the experience of Columbus and that of Aeneas as they arrive at the site of future empire: “Varios ibi esse reges hosque illis atque illos his potentiores inveniunt, uti fabulosum legitimus Aeneam in varios divisum reperisse Latium, Latinum puta Mezentiumque ac Turnum et Tarchontem, qui angustis limitibus discriminabantur et huiuscemodi reliqua per tyrannos dispersita” (240) [“Our people found that there were several kings there, some more powerful than others, just as we read that the mythical Aeneas found Latium divided among the kingdoms of Latinus, Mezentius, Turnus and Tarchon, separated by narrow borders, with the remaining territories distributed among tyrants of the same type” (241)]. Comparing the reality encountered by Columbus and that encountered by Aeneas, Martyr suggests that they both bring their cultures westward to colonize foreign territories previously ruled by many divided kingdoms. The corollary of this comparison, of course, is the prediction that Columbus will defeat and then impose order and unity on these people as he establishes his settlement. Both Aeneas and Columbus establish empires in territory that had once been home to many divided kingdoms.

The “Aeneas frame” that Martyr applies to Columbus is first hinted at, I would argue, well before the passage in book 2, in that first description of Columbus as “a certain Ligurian” in book 1. Scholars have argued that this phrase illustrates Martyr’s desire to disassociate Columbus from Genoa, which was aligned with France against Spain at the time the first Decade was composed. Ernesto Lunardi conjectures that Martyr also may have employed this reference “to emphasize the tradition of industrious and strong people to whom Columbus belongs.” Indeed, Ligurians in the classical tradition are known as tough mountain dwellers. In his *De lege agraria*, for example, Cicero writes: “The Ligurians, being mountaineers, are a hardy and rustic tribe. The land itself taught them to be so by producing nothing which was not extracted from it by skillful cultivation, and by great labour.” Martyr’s description of the explorer as “quidam Ligur vir” therefore stresses Columbus’s fortitude (in addition to Martyr’s knowledge of the classical tradition). More specifically, as Lunardi notes,
the term “Ligur” would likely be recognized by those knowledgeable of
the Latin literary tradition as a reference to Virgil’s phrase in the *Georgics*
(2.168), “adsuetumque malo Ligurem” [“Ligurian inured to trouble”].
I would add that the intertextual relationship between the *Decades* and
the *Georgics* that Martyr establishes with this reference is also significant.
This particular phrase appears in the section of the *Georgics* known as the
*laudes Italiae*, where Virgil glorifies the virtuous people of Italy’s different
regions and then juxtaposes them to the unwarlike foreigner of the East.
He then praises the Emperor Octavian for keeping that foreigner at bay:
“Et te, maxime Caesar, / qui nunc extrems Asiae iam victor in oris /
imbellem avertis Romanis arcibus Indum” [“And you, greatest Caesar, who
now victorious on the furthest shores of Asia, turn away the unwarlike
Indian from the hills of Rome”]. Martyr’s allusion to this imperialistic
passage of Virgil’s poem serves to portray Columbus as a descendant of
the virtuous Italian race, the strength of the Roman Empire founded by
Aeneas.

Martyr’s defense of Columbus’s foreign origins in the first book of
*Decade* I squares with Martyr’s casting of Columbus as a neo-Aeneas, the
protagonist in the story of the *translatio imperii*. This Columbus is not only
a Ligurian, a descendant of the hearty stock praised by Virgil as the strength
of the Roman Empire, but also the agent responsible for the westward
transfer of empire. His loyalty to empire, and in this case to the empire ruled
over by Ferdinand and Isabel, is pure and unquestionable. This comes across
near the beginning of that first book when Martyr rebuts potential objections
to Columbus’s foreign origins. Here mutinous Spanish sailors “se deceptos
uisse ab homine Ligure, in praeceps trahi qua nunquam redire licebit” (212)
[“[felt] that they had been deceived by a Ligurian and were being dragged
headlong to a place from which it would never be possible to return” (213)].
In response to such opposition, Martyr’s Columbus threatens the crew with
the charge of treason: “Proditione quoque taxandos esse a Regibus, si adversi
quicquam in eum molirentur, si parere recusarent, praedicabat” (212) [“He
kept saying that if they attempted anything against him, refusing to obey
him, they would also be accused of treason against their Sovereigns” (213)].
We note that it is Columbus who judges which actions are treacherous, the
subtext suggesting that the Admiral is more loyal to the sovereigns than any
of the Spaniards who accompany him.

Book 1 ends with an unambiguous depiction of Columbus in the
mode of Aeneas, the paradigmatic colonizer. Martyr describes Columbus’s
preparations for a second voyage, providing a laundry list of objects
deemed necessary for starting a colony and conveying the magnitude of
Columbus’s project to found a city for Spain across the sea: “Ad foetus procreandos equas, oves, iuvencas, et plura alia cum sui generis masculis, legumina, triticum, hordeum, et reliqua iis similia, non solum alimenti, verum etiam seminandi gratia Praefectus apparat” (222) [“The Admiral also procured mares, sheep, cows and many other female animals with males of the same species for procreation; legumes, wheat, barley and other similar products, not only for eating but also for sowing” (223)]. In the same section at the end of book 1 Columbus also orders that tradesmen bring “instrumenta omnia fabrilia ac demum alia cuncta, quae ad novam civitatem in alienis regionibus condendam faciunt” (224) [“all the tools needed for his craft and, in addition, all the implements useful for the founding of a city in foreign lands” (225)]. The phrase “for the founding of a city in foreign lands,” with the verb condere (to build, found, or settle), would remind Martyr’s contemporary reader of Aeneas’s destiny, made clear in the famous first lines of the Aeneid:

Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris
Italiam, fato profugus, Laviniaque venit
litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto
vi superum saevae memorem Iunonis ob iram;
multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem,
inferretque deos Latio, genus unde Latinum,
Albanique patres, atque altae moenia Romae. (1.1–7, emphasis added)

[Wars and a man I sing—an exile driven on by Fate,
he was the first to flee the coast of Troy,
destined to reach Lavinian shores and Italian soil,
yet many blows he took on land and sea from the gods above—
thanks to cruel Juno’s relentless rage—and many losses
he bore in battle too, before he could found a city,
bring his gods to Latium, source of the Latin race,
the Alban lords and the high walls of Rome.]24

In a discussion that also cites these lines of the Aeneid, James Morwood observes the importance of the theme of city-building in Virgil’s epic.25 Aeneas may sometimes be seen as an oddly resigned hero—one who merely accepts the fate decreed for him by the gods and thus, in the words of David Quint, is “an instrument of his historical destiny”26—but if there is one action he performs consistently, it is building cities. He begins four times to build cities in the course of the epic. Martyr’s Columbus is also a builder of cities
in the foreign lands of the Indies, particularly in books 2 and 3 of the first Decade. The city that Columbus builds is a symbolic site of the translatio imperii et studii. Consider, for example, the following passage from the end of book 2 which refers to the city of Isabela: “Ipse propinquum portui cuidam editum locum ad civitatem condendam elegit ibique intra paucos dies domibus, ut brevitas temporis passa est, et sacello erectis eo die quo Trium Regum solennia celebramus, divina nostro ritu, in alio, potest dici, orbe, tam extero, tam ab omni cultu et religione alieno, sacra sunt decantata, terdecim sacerdotibus ministrantibus (246) [“He himself chose an elevated place near a port to found a city, and there, in a few days, built some houses and a chapel as the short time allowed. On the day when we commemorate the feast of the Three Kings, the sacred functions were celebrated according to our rite, with thirteen priests attending as ministers, in a world, it could be said, so different, so far away, so alien to all civilization and religion” (247, 249)]. Again we see in this passage the verb used so often in the Aeneid, condere. Martyr emphasizes here that the city is the stage where the culture bringers celebrate their civilization amid a world devoid of culture, “a world . . . so alien to all civilization.” Indeed, the very act of building the city is the colonizer’s first civilizing act. Its significance in Martyr’s narrative is emphasized when he repeats in book 3 that Columbus built the city of Isabela: “Super edito igitur colle a septentrione civitatem erigere decrevit” (252) [“Hence, the Admiral decided to found a city on the northern side over an elevated site” (253)].

The city Columbus builds in Martyr’s account serves as a base for further conquest. This relation between city and conquest is manifest in the details of Martyr’s narration. After recounting the founding of Isabela, Martyr first describes in great detail the fertility of the area and then he records how Columbus sent a group of thirty men to explore the region of Cipango, which he also describes in detail. Then Martyr consciously interrupts himself to return to the topic of the founding of the city: “Sed redeamus ad condendam urbem” (254) [“But let us go back to the founding of the city” (255)]. The sentence that follows begins by describing the construction of the city (noting that the city was fortified with a ditch and with ramparts); it quickly transitions, however, to the topic of Columbus’s further exploration of the interior:

Fossis et aggeribus urbe circumvallata, ut si, eo absente, praelium incolae tentarent, sese qui relinquebantur tutari possint, pridie Idus Martii cum omnibus equitibus, peditibus autem circiter quadringentis, ipsemet ad auriferam regionem recta ad meridiem proficiscitur;
fluvium praeterlabitur, transgreditur planitiem, montem, qui aliud planitiei latus cingit, superat. (254)

[The city having been surrounded with ditches and ramparts so that, if the natives should attack during his absence, those who were left there could defend themselves, Columbus headed due south on 14 March, with all his cavalymen and about four hundred foot soldiers, toward the gold-bearing region; he crossed a river, traversed a plain and climbed a mountain that borders the other side of the plain. (255)]

That constructing a city enables further conquest is underlined in the passage above by the image of Columbus leaving, “with all of his cavalymen and about four hundred foot-soldiers, toward the gold-bearing region.” Surely, this is not a simple reconnaissance mission but a sortie into the unconquered wilderness from the colonizer’s home base, that piece of land that has already been civilized because a “city” has been built on it. From this base, Columbus, in search of booty, embarks on a mission of conquest requiring arms. This message is reiterated shortly after when Martyr writes: “Cum iam secundum et septuagesimum ab urbe lapidem intra regionem auriferam profectus fuisset, . . . condere arcem instituit ut interio- ris regionis secreta inde tuto paulatim scrutarentur” (254) [“When he had advanced into the gold-bearing region seventy-two miles from the city . . . he decided to set up a fortified place so that the recesses of the interior region could be explored little by little in safety” (255)].

Martyr does not mention by name the first New World settlement constructed by Columbus, the ill-fated fortress at Navidad, because it was a failure and does not fit within Martyr’s early casting of Columbus as Aeneas. Martyr refers only to Columbus leaving behind some of his crew (“Octo et triginta viros apud eum regem . . . reliquit” (220) [“He left thirty-eight men with that king” (221)]) and to his attempt to provide for their safety (“De vita et salute ac tutela eorum quos ibi relinquebat, qui- bus potuit modis, egit” (220) [“Columbus made arrangements, as best he could, for the life, health and safety of those he was leaving behind” (221)]). In book 2, when Columbus returns to Hispaniola to find the settlement destroyed and his men killed, Martyr does nothing more than mention the fortress, describing it as “castellum ligneum et casas quas sibi, aggere cir- cunducto, nostri construxerant” (240) [“the blockhouse and the cabins our men had built for themselves, together with a rampart all around” (239)].

The absence of more information about the construction of the first
settlement in the New World (which surely could have been replete with symbolism) might be perplexing if we did not know that Martyr likely spent years editing this first book.\textsuperscript{27} It is probable that after learning of the grisly fate of the settlement at Navidad, Martyr deleted any description of that event that he might have initially included.

Martyr did not long sustain his characterizations of Columbus as an Aeneas. Indeed, after 1500—with the exception of his brief mention of Columbus in a letter dated 18 December 1513—Martyr did not write about Columbus for almost fifteen years, even though Columbus undertook a fourth voyage in 1503 and then died in 1506. When Martyr does return to write about Columbus, he discusses the fourth voyage and then declares his ignorance of Columbus’s fate, a claim that is difficult to believe given Martyr’s privileged access to information.

Martyr stopped characterizing Columbus in the Virgilian mode by book 4 of Decade I, for several likely reasons. As an initial response to a seemingly mythical event, Martyr employed the notable epic tone in the first two books of Decade I. These books, as Ernesto Lunardi observes, “are full of the spirit of adventure and of the discovery of an unexpected reality.”\textsuperscript{28} As the discoveries and conquest of the New World continued, however, Martyr’s attitude changed, and he adopted what Lunardi views as “a more detached tone suited to a work of history” (443). Simply put, as more information was acquired about the New World, it became more of a reality. A second reason Martyr stopped characterizing Columbus in the mode of Aeneas was that it became clear to everyone that Columbus’s career and reputation had been irreparably damaged by allegations of abuse of power and misgovernment made against him. No one, and certainly not Martyr as a foreigner, even if he was favored by the queen, “would have been interested in defending [Columbus’s] position” (Lunardi, 447). Columbus was not deemed a hero in the Spanish court and his playing the role of heroic founder of empire in Martyr’s narrative would have been too far-fetched. Lastly, Columbus simply became less relevant as the Spain’s empire in the Indies grew.

If books 2 and 3 portray Columbus as a colonizer who builds cities in foreign lands, book 4 portrays Columbus instead as a victim of evil enemies. The contrast could not be more apparent between books 2 and 3 on the one hand and book 4 on the other (book 4 begins with Columbus’s return from the second voyage and then covers what occurs on Hispaniola while Columbus is in Spain). Although book 4 briefly mentions that Columbus built the fortress of Concepción, this is the only instance in this book when Martyr refers to Columbus’s role as builder. Instead of representing
Columbus as a city-building colonist in book 4, Martyr depicts him as a man worthy of sympathy because his career and status at court are in jeopardy. He begins book 4 by referring to Columbus’s discovery that Friar Bernardo Buil and Pedro de Margarit have returned to Spain “with wicked intentions.” That first line, then, tacitly suggests that Columbus’ had good intentions. Martyr describes how Columbus returns to the Spanish court “quapropter, ut apud Reges si quid horum relatu male sentirent se expurgaret. . . . Sed quae prius confecerit, breviter enarrabo” (276) [“in order to justify himself before the Sovereigns, in case they had any unfavorable opinions due to the reports of these men [i.e., his enemies]. . . . However, I will report briefly on what he did before leaving” (277)]. Martyr appears sympathetic to Columbus, who here sees the need to “justify himself” to the sovereigns with regard to information related by his enemies. Martyr’s abrupt change of topic at the end of this passage suggests his discomfort with the charges of misconduct brought against his friend and fellow Italian.

That discomfort is apparent later in the same book when Martyr considers the complaint that the quantity of valuable goods brought back from the Indies has been less than expected. Martyr makes a point of emphasizing his objectivity when he writes, “Ad haec quae dederunt, respondebo” (282) [“To these questions I give the answers they gave” (283)]. He then lets Columbus speak for himself:

Praefectus ipse Colonus, super his interrogatus, Hispanos, quos secum duxit, sommo ocioque magis fuisse quam laboribus deditos seditionumque ac novarum rerum studiosiores quam pacis aut quietis aiebat. Ab eo enim pars maior defecit; praeterea non potuisse prius insulares vinci aut domari refert eorumque vires frangi ad imperium insulae libere capessendum. (282)

[Admiral Columbus himself, asked about these things, said that the Spaniards whom he led had been more given to sleep and idleness than to work, more desirous of rebellions and novelties than of peace or tranquility; as a matter of fact, most of them deserted him. Moreover, he reported that before the natives were conquered and subdued and their forces weakened, it was not possible to establish uncontested rule over the island. (283)]

Columbus’s response focuses Martyr’s narrative on the weaknesses of the Spaniards, as opposed to any fault of Columbus. It is difficult to determine where Martyr’s indirect discourse conveying Columbus’s own
defense ends and where Martyr’s direct discourse, that is, his own narrative, begins. The reader cannot be certain whether the second sentence—which observes that “enim” [“as a matter of fact”] most of his men deserted Columbus—is part of the indirect discourse of Columbus’s defense or part of Martyr’s conclusion about the matter. If Columbus was in truth deserted, the reader is persuaded to side with Columbus. Martyr does provide the perspective of Columbus’s detractors, but he quickly returns to Columbus’s defense:

Hispani se impetia eius saeva iniustaque ferre nequivisse multaque in eum commenti sunt; propter quos obiices hactenus vix impensae lucrum respondisse voluit. Hoc tamen anno primo et quingentesimo quo haec, tuo iussu, scribo, intra duorum mensium spacium, circiter ducentas supra mille octunciales libras auri collegerunt. (282)

[On the other hand, the Spaniards argued they could not endure his cruel and unjust orders, and invented many accusations against him; because of these difficulties, the Admiral admitted that up to now the gain had barely met the cost. However, for this year 1501, during which, following your orders, I am writing these comments, the Spaniards collected in two months about twelve hundred pounds of gold of eight ounces each. (282)]

Martyr’s brief acknowledgement of the accusations that were “invented” (“commenti”) by Columbus’s detractors is followed immediately by the insinuation that they are to blame for the small net profit of his enterprise to date. The sentence that follows further distracts the reader from any wrongdoings of Columbus, addressing instead the amount of profit and insinuating that in gross terms it is substantial. And lastly, we again note Martyr’s apparent evasiveness regarding the charges against Columbus: “Sed ad inceptum redeamus. Haec enim, quae per digressionem leviter tetigimus, suo loco diffusius aperientur” (282) [“But let us return to our task. For, these issues, upon which we have touched rather lightly in our digression, will be better clarified at the right time” (283)]. Martyr never does return in the Decades (or elsewhere) to clarify the charges made against Columbus.

Martyr says in book 4 that he is writing in the year 1501. This would have been after Columbus had returned against his will to Spain, having been arrested by Francisco de Bobadilla, who was sent by the sovereigns to Hispaniola to investigate charges against Columbus. This event was the nadir of Columbus’s career in Spain. The sovereigns nominally continued to
support Columbus, but after this, he was in fact a marginal figure in Spain’s involvement in the Indies. It became clear to everyone not only that the exploration, conquest, and colonization of the New World was a project larger than it was initially thought it would be but also that Columbus had indeed abused his power. Martyr could no longer characterize Columbus as a legendary colonizer. By 1516, when Martyr writes Decade III.4, which recounts Columbus’s disastrous fourth voyage, Martyr refers to a different Virgilian character in describing Columbus: Achaemenides, the character who Odysseus had abandoned on the Cyclops’s island and who Aeneas later rescued in the Aeneid (3.613). Martyr writes that Columbus and his crew, shipwrecked on the island of Jamaica, “vitam egere mensibus decem Vergiliani Achemenidis vita” (354) [“lived for ten months a life of the Virgilian Achaemenides” (355)]. Martyr continues to establish classical analogies in his narrative, but Columbus would never again be made to resemble Aeneas. Columbus is no longer even central to his narrative, as is evident in Martyr’s references to “them” (not to Columbus) when he describes the shipwrecked victims. And lest there be any doubt that Columbus was no longer Martyr’s protagonist, we have Martyr’s statement that after Columbus’s rescue, he is ignorant as to Columbus’s fate: “Invalidi omnes et egestate rerum extenuati veniunt ad Hispaniolam. Quid inde illis successerit non intellexi. Ad generalia redeamus” (356) [“Thus, all of them returned to Hispaniola sick and exhausted from lack of food. I do not know what happened to them after that. But now let us go back to the general news” (357)]. Given Martyr’s position within the court and his access to information, his hasty declaration that he does not know what happened to Columbus is simply not believable.

As Martyr stops treating Columbus as a mythical hero, and as more information about the New World becomes available, his judgments of the Admiral’s claims become increasingly severe. In book 1, Martyr gently comments that Columbus’s assertion that he found the mythical Ophir must be mistaken: “Ophiram insulam sese reperisse refert, sed, cosmographorum tractu diligenter considerato, Antiliae insulae sunt illae et adiacentes aliae” (214) [“He claims to have found the island of Ophir, but, considering carefully the cosmographers’ reckoning, it must have been the Antilles and nearby islands” (215)]. Contrast that gentle judgment (that Columbus must have been mistaken) with Martyr’s terseness in correcting Columbus’s astronomical errors in book 6:

\[
de poli etiam varietate quaedam refert: quae quoniam contra omnium astronomorum sententiam prolata mibi videntur, sicco pertingam pede. . . . Sed quomodo fieri possit ut, primo noctis crepusculo, in ea
\]
regione quinque tantum gradus, tempore Iunii, elevetur, stellis autem discendentibus, obvenientes solares radios, sumpto eodem quadrante, quindecim non intelligo; nec rationes quas ipse adducit mihi plane nec ulla ex parte satisfacient... De his satis, quum fabulosa mihi videantur. (320, 322, emphasis added)

[He [brings back] as well some details on the nature of the pole: *since his reasoning seems to go against the opinion of all of the astronomers, I will relate it without compromising myself... Yet I cannot understand why, at twilight in that region, the star rises only by five degrees in the month of June, but when the stars set at sunrise, it rises by fifteen degrees, always in the same quadrant. The reasons he gives do not satisfy me fully or in all respects,... We have talked enough about these things; they seem so incredible to me.*] (321, 323, emphasis added)

Martyr distances himself from the Admiral by stating that he will describe Columbus’s unorthodox reasoning, which he ultimately deems “incredible,” “without compromising [himself].” In Decade III.4, Martyr plainly contradicts Columbus with regard to geography. Martyr’s statements in that book reflect how many of Columbus’s original cartographical beliefs had been rejected by 1511. They also leave no doubt as to Martyr’s stance with regard to Columbus: he no longer sides with him as he did in Decade I.1.

*Martyr’s Strategies*

We do not know whether Martyr’s early characterizations of Columbus were part of a conscious narrative strategy or whether Martyr simply appropriated the character of Aeneas from the Virgilian model of colonization and imperial transfer because it was within easy reach in his narrative “toolbox” (as it was for all Renaissance humanists). It is possible that Martyr recognized that a potential side effect of characterizing Columbus as Aeneas—one that might have benefited himself—was that he could emerge as a modern day Virgil who tells the story of the foundations of the new empire. Martyr, whose political astuteness was undeniable, likely would not have rejected an opportunity to promote himself. And even though Martyr enjoyed the patronage of Tendilla
and the support of the queen, he was conscious of his weak position as a foreigner without a political office in Spain’s royal court. His awareness of the difficulties of being an expatriate in Spain comes across, for example, in Martyr’s letters to the Sicilian humanist Lucio Marineo Sículo, who also resided in Spain. In one missive regarding Sículo’s dispute with Nebrija, Martyr cautioned his fellow Italian to recognize the limits imposed on him by his status as foreigner: “Ille namque procerior, et pluribus amicis fultus, quod civis ipse, tu peregrinus… Sit satis, ubi sis cogita, tutius vitam agit sopita vulpecula, quam ursus hians” (“Moreover, he is more prominent and supported by a great many friends, because he is a citizen, [while] you [are] a foreigner… Let it be enough; consider where you dwell; more safely lives the quiet fox than the bear opening his gaping maw”). In another letter to Sículo, Martyr was even more blunt in describing what was required for an expatriate to be successful in Spain: “Memini me tibi, ni fallor, idem consilium praebuisse, ferendo scilicet ac plaudendo, in alienis praecipue terris, esse vincendum” (“I recall that I offered you the same advice, unless I am mistaken, that especially in foreign countries one must win by enduring and applauding”).

In considering whether Martyr’s early characterizations of Columbus were part of a larger strategy of authorial self-fashioning, we should keep in mind that the political climate in which Martyr wrote may well have motivated him to promote himself as the imperial poet of Spain’s royal court. Lunardi cautions modern readers to remember that just a few years after Martyr began writing Decade I, “the Inquisition went so far as to accuse a man of great learning and exemplary life like Hernando de Talavera, confessor of the Queen and archbishop of Granada, of having little zeal in defending the values of faith” (447–48). In fact, writing about Columbus in the Decades likely presented several difficulties for Martyr. First, both Martyr and his subject were foreigners at a time when non-Spaniards were often distrusted, sometimes especially by highly educated Spaniards in the upper echelons of society. King Ferdinand’s will, for example, advised his grandson and heir to the throne, Carlos: “No trate ni negocie las cosas de los dichos reinos sino con personas de los naturales de ellos. No ponga personas extranjeras en el Consejo ni en el Gobierno y otros edificios sobredichos” (“Do not deal or do business [with] said kingdoms except for with native citizens. Do not put foreigners on the Council nor in the Government or other aforementioned offices”). Both Martyr and Columbus were Italians during a period when their homeland was the subject of intense political conflicts that involved all of the major powers of Europe, including Spain.
Given the challenges that writing about Columbus entailed for Martyr, as well as the latter’s political ambition, I consider it very possible that Martyr consciously flirted with the opportunity to fashion himself as a modern Virgil, poet of empire. If so, Martyr’s characterizations of Columbus as an Aeneas are just as much self-characterizations. In this light, both Columbus and Martyr come across in those first books of *Decade* I less as Italians and more as loyal servants of the Spanish empire. As a poet writing self-consciously in the Latin tradition about the colonization of a new and faraway land, Martyr emphasized his unassailable loyalty to empire and to its modern day incarnation in the imperial crown of Ferdinand and Isabel.

Continuing with this line of reasoning, we may now offer a more nuanced reading of Martyr’s invitation in *Decade* I.2 to “read” Columbus’s exploits in the *Decades* just as we “read” those of Aeneas in the *Aeneid*. This analogy serves as Martyr’s exhortation to the reader not only to compare Columbus to Aeneas but also Martyr to Virgil. Martyr perhaps suggests that by chronicling Columbus’s adventures, he serves the Spanish Empire as imperial poet just as Virgil served the Roman emperor Augustus. If this was Martyr’s conscious strategy of self-fashioning, it was, of course, unsuccessful, and Martyr soon abandoned it. The fortunes of Columbus soon declined, and Martyr ceased to write about him, instead turning to other matters in his account of Spain’s colonization of the New World.

*The Lasting Influence of Martyr’s First Representations of Columbus*

Although Martyr did not sustain his characterization of Columbus as the protagonist in the Christianized classic western narrative of *translatio imperii*, his earliest characterizations of Columbus helped establish an interpretive tradition about him that was perpetuated in Europe and eventually appropriated in the Americas. Consuelo Varela has proposed that Columbus’s family and its associates, among whom she includes Martyr, worked through a complicated web of social relations throughout Europe well through the seventeenth century, acting like a “taller historiográfico” or “historiographic workshop” in order to both promote the most positive version of Columbus possible and to effectively squelch alternate versions. She writes,
La familia supo funcionar . . . con una unidad asombrosa. Se diría que consiguieron crear un “taller historiográfico” que, sin lugar a dudas, dio la visión del descubridor que más le favorecía, silenciando las voces discordantes. El éxito fue tal que esa imagen, alentada por la familia, sería la que perduraría, casi inalterada, durante todo el siglo XVI y buena parte del siglo XVII.\footnote{33}

[The family learned to function . . . with a startling unity. It might be said that they managed to create a “historiographic workshop” that, without a doubt, produced the most favorable image of the discoverer and silenced discordant voices. Its success was such that this image, promoted by the family, would be the one that would last, almost unaltered, through the entire sixteenth and a good part of the seventeenth centuries.]

While I believe Varela overstates the case, especially with regard to the suggestion that there was a coordinated effort for hundreds of years to control Columbus’s image, her underlying emphasis on intertextuality is useful. Representations of Columbus indeed incorporated elements of previous representations of the man, including those of Columbus himself. Martyr’s was one of the most important of these, likely because his epic frame jibed so well with the narrative of conquest that was at the heart of the European colonization of the New World.

Two Italians appear to have been heavily influenced by Martyr’s text: Lorenzo Gambara and Giulio Cesare Stella, both of whom wrote neo-Latin epic poems about Columbus. In a postscript of Gambara’s \textit{De navigatione Christophori Columbi libri quattuor} (first published in Rome in 1581), the author openly acknowledges that his main source was Martyr’s \textit{Decades}. The plot of his poem indeed closely follows Martyr’s narrative. More important, Gambara characterizes Columbus as an alter Aeneas. Gambara’s Columbus, for example, narrates the epic in the first person after being prompted by his banquet host to recount his adventures. This is the same narrative convention Homer employs in books 9–12 of the \textit{Odyssey} and Virgil in books 2 and 3 of the \textit{Aeneid}. Heinz Hofmann painstakingly analyzes this and other details in Gambara’s poem that cast Columbus as Aeneas, details that should remind the reader of the \textit{Aeneid}.\footnote{34} We note in particular the description of Columbus, having finished recounting his story, at the banquet. “The main narrator,” Hofmann writes, “reminds the reader of that setting with phrases that once again evoke the \textit{Aeneid}
and thus stress the fact that Columbus is alter Aeneas” (446). The passage Hofmann refers to is De navigatione 4.527–30:

Sic Ligur inventos intentis omnibus a se  
Oceani tractus nostrisque incognita nautis  
Sidera narrabat positasque per aequora terras,  
Cum tandem tacuit mediaque in nocte quievit.35

[Thus, with everyone hanging on his words, the Ligurian man told about the regions of the ocean he had discovered, and constellations unknown to our sailors, and lands situated across the seas, when finally he fell silent and rested in the middle of the night.]  

Hofmann draws attention to the similarity of the verses by Gambara to those of Virgil describing Aeneas after he finishes telling his story in Dido’s palace at the end of book 3:

Sic pater Aeneas intentis omnibus unus  
Fata renarrabat divom cursusque docebat.  
Conticuit tandem factoque hic fine quievit. (3.716–18)

[So Aeneas,  
With all eyes fixed on him alone, the founder of his people recalled his wanderings now, the fates the gods had sent.  
He fell hushed at last, his tale complete, at rest.] (326)

Clearly, Gambara’s description of Columbus would evoke Virgil’s Aeneas in the mind of his reader. We note too Gambara’s reference to Columbus as “sic Ligur,” perhaps a further illustration of the poet’s debt to Martyr.

Stella’s epic, Colombeidos libri priores duo (first published in London in 1585), also echoes Martyr’s portrayal of Columbus as Aeneas. Hofmann emphasizes the similarities shared by Stella’s Columbus and Aeneas.

It is the aim and destiny of Aeneas to reach the land in the West, to settle there and found a new domicile for his penates and to lay the foundation for an empire that one day will dominate the whole world. The same task is mutatis mutandis set for Columbus; he, too, is in search of a land in the West; he looks for places where his countrymen can settle and found a city (he himself founds a first fortification, and the historical Columbus founded two cities on
Hispaniola: Isabella and San Domingo); he will give the Christian religion (the Christian penates) a place in the New World and his discoveries will lead to Spanish domination in the West that in the days of Stella forms a worldwide empire in which the sun does not set. (472–73)

This description of Stella’s modeling of Columbus on Virgil’s Aeneas describes with precision Martyr’s own early characterization of Columbus. Hofmann acknowledges Stella’s debt to Martyr but only with regard to source material about the New World. It is likely, however, that Stella was also inspired by the style of Martyr’s first books, that is, by Martyr’s initial epic mold. Hence, while Hofmann’s convincing analysis of Stella’s poem supports his argument that it is “the epic in which for the first time Aeneas came to America” (473), I would suggest that Aeneas first came to America in Martyr’s Decades.

The portrayals of Columbus forged by Martyr were far more influential than scholars have acknowledged. Varela maintains, for example, that Martyr and the “workshop” controlled European representations of Columbus well into the seventeenth century, but, in fact, Martyr’s influence is seen in the Americas during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well. The Decades were known by British colonists first through Richard Eden’s 1555 translation of the first three books (known as the The Decades of the Newe World, or West India) and later in Richard Hakluyt’s augmented version (1598–1600) of accounts of New World discoveries entitled The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation. William Bradford, for example, cites Martyr’s Decades in his journal that was eventually published as Of Plymouth Plantation (1622). While the passage Bradford alludes to, in Decade V, does not regard Columbus but the difficult life of early Spanish settlers, the citation indicates that Martyr’s text was read by at least some of the early Puritan settlers of North America.

In the eighteenth century, Columbus was commonly portrayed in literary accounts of the origins of the nation in a manner similar to that employed by Martyr, that is, as the agent of the westward transfer of empire. In Timothy Dwight’s America; or, A Poem on the Settlement of the British Colonies (1771), for example, when Freedom triumphantly addresses America as an empire destined for greatness, the poet invokes Columbus’s name as a symbol of imperial expansion:

Hail Land of light and joy! thy power shall grow
Far as the seas, which round thy regions flow;
Through earth’s wide realms thy glory shall extend,
And savage nations at thy scepter bend.
Around the frozen shores thy sons shall sail,
Or stretch their canvas to the ASIAN gale,
Or, like COLUMBUS, steer their course unknown,
Beyond the regions of the flaming zone,
To worlds unfound beneath the southern pole.  

In this passage Columbus is compared to the “sons” of the future nation who will gain world domination (“thy power shall grow / Far as the seas . . . // Through earth’s wide realms thy glory shall extend”). The conquest of foreign lands is implied in the description of “savage nations at thy scepter bend.” Dwight’s poem predicts the nation itself will be “like Columbus” and the Roman Empire, expanding its domain to new territories:

Earth’s richest realms their treasures shall unfold,
And op’ning mountains yield the flaming gold;
Round thy broad fields more glorious ROMES arise,
With pomp and splendour bright’ning all the skies;
EUROPE and ASIA with surprise behold
Thy temples starr’d with gems and roof’d with gold.
From realm to realm broad APPIAN ways shall wind,
And distant shores by long canals be join’d,
The ocean hear thy voice, the waves obey,
And through green vallies trace their wat’ry way. (12)

The poet declares that America’s future territorial expansion will be analogous to that of Rome. The Appian Way was, of course, the most famous of the Roman Empire’s many roadways that facilitated its imperial conquests. The reference here to “Romes” connected by “Appian ways” that “shall wind” “[f]rom realm to realm” further characterizes America as heir to Western (Roman) empire and Columbus as its founding Aeneas.

Columbus as agent of *translatio imperii* also appears in Joel Barlow’s *The Columbiad*, originally published in 1807. The first lines of this epic poem allude to the first lines of the *Aeneid*:

I sing the Mariner who first unfurl’d
An eastern banner o’er the western world,
And taught mankind where future empires lay
In these fair confines of descending day.  

Barlow’s appropriation of Virgil’s epic formula is charged, as we would expect, with imperial connotations. The description of Columbus spreading “[a]n eastern banner o’er the western world” echoes the geographical east-to-west movement of political power and knowledge implied by the translatio imperii. In Barlow’s poem, Columbus’s pointing out “where future empires lay” serves as the first step in the nation’s journey to fulfilling its future imperial destiny.

Columbus’s status as bringer of empire and civilization to America reached its apogee at the 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition. Numerous speeches and poems delivered at the exposition took up this characterization of Columbus, including Chauncey Depew’s Columbian Oration and Thomas Brower Peacock’s Columbian Ode. At the end of Peacock’s poem, the main thematic concern of which is the United States as the fifth and final empire of world history, the “Star of Empire” unambiguously alights in America after moving west through Asia, Greece, Rome, and Germany. The primary role of Columbus in the transfer of empire to America is alluded to by the poem’s title as well as by the portrayal of Columbus as the national hero who caused nothing less than the rebirth of man and the redefinition of empire itself. The first stanza establishes the importance of “westward movement” out of the grasp of tyranny and toward progress, a sine qua non of the translatio imperii narrative according to which each empire conquers and improves upon the previous empire:

Westward the pilgrim millions go
From out the shadows of the throne—
Far from the lands of legends old they teem,
To bathe and live in Hope’s immortal dream. (5)

The poem then traces the history of empire before Columbus brought it to America. It is a history of war and death, and the situation improves only with the appearance of Columbus, who enters the poem at its midpoint. Peacock insinuates that in bringing empire to America, Columbus is responsible for the rebirth of the individual and his ultimate rise to power. Again, Columbus serves as the protagonist of westward imperial transfer.

**Conclusion**

Not only has Martyr’s influence with regard to his early portrayals of Columbus not been acknowledged by scholars; his depictions of the
Spanish conquistadors as greedy enemies of the imperial project also have not been recognized. In providing such accounts, Martyr is a precursor of Bartolomé de Las Casas. While Stelio Cro acknowledges that the black legend, whose origins are commonly traced in Las Casas, actually “took shape” in the Decades, Cro does not focus, as I do, on the importance of Martyr’s appropriation of the Virgilian model and the narrative of the translatio imperii. Indeed, after Columbus himself, Martyr was the first to condemn the Spaniards who accompanied the Admiral. Las Casas later took up Martyr’s characterization of Columbus (and Columbus’s self-portrayal) as the victim of the conquistadors in his Historia de las Indias, which although unpublished until 1875–1876, circulated in manuscript in both Europe and Spanish America. Las Casas more famously denounced the conduct of the conquistadors in his well-known and widely read Brevisima relación de la destrucción de las Yndias (1552), which was commonly accepted in England and British America, especially by the Puritans. At the same time that the black legend circulated in Anglo-America, it circulated in Spanish America, where it was invoked by protonationalists, like the Peruvian Jesuit Juan Pablo Viscardo y Guzmán, who desired political independence from Spain, which he condemned for not having treated Columbus fairly. According to the patriotic appropriations of the black legend in the Americas, Columbus was perceived as a victim not just of the conquistadors but of the Crown itself. This made possible the adoption of Columbus in the Americas as national symbol of empire. Simón Bolívar, for example, advocated adopting the name “Colombia” for the newly independent Spanish American republic. By honoring Columbus as Spain had failed to do, Bolívar reasoned, Spanish Americans would show themselves worthy of independence. “Llamando nuestra república Colombia, denominando su capital Las Casas, probaremos al mundo que no sólo tenemos derecho a ser libres sino a ser considerados bastante justos para saber honrar a los amigos y bienhechores de la humanidad: Colón y Las Casas pertenecen a América. Honrémonos perpetuando sus glorias” [“Calling our republic Colombia, naming its capital Las Casas, we shall prove to the world not only that we have the right to be free but also to be considered sufficiently just to know how to honor the friends and benefactors of humanity: Columbus and Las Casas belong to America. Let us honor them perpetuating their glory”]. It is no coincidence that Columbus’s name now refers to both a country in Spanish America and the capital of the United States. In both cases, nationalists of the New World, aspiring to the greatness of empire, appropriated the interpretive tradition that Martyr helped
establish according to which Columbus is the protagonist in the classic narrative of *translatio imperii*.

If the influence of Martyr’s early portrayals of Columbus—as both a protagonist responsible for the transfer of empire and as a victim of the conquistadors who did not respect his role as that protagonist—is so wide reaching, why have scholars not considered them more seriously? We can speculate that despite his conversational style, the learned Martyr, who always wrote in Latin (except in his will, which he wrote in Spanish), may simply have been deemed more inaccessible than other chroniclers who wrote about Columbus in the vernacular. In addition, Martyr was not an eyewitness to the events he narrated. The narratives of those who participated in the Spanish conquest, like those of Las Casas, were considered more authentic. Last and probably more important, the story presented by Las Casas, who is usually given credit for starting the black legend and the portrayal of Columbus as a victim, was a page-turning bestseller, a status that Martyr’s narrative never attained. Martyr’s early depictions of Columbus have indeed not attracted the attention of scholars. This should be remedied, as these depictions have had a lasting influence and reflect the seductive power of the Christianized Virgilian model of colonization and conquest, a power that was still seducing Americans in the nineteenth century and continues to do so today.

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**Notes**


3. “scipsit enim ad me Praefectus ipse marinus, cui sum intima familiaritate devinctus . . .” (The Discovery of the New World in the Writings of Peter Martyr of Anghiera, 246). The 1992 Latin–English Nuova raccolta colombiana edition collates the editions published by the following: Antonio de Nebrija (1516), Michael de Eguía (1530), Johann Bebel (1533), and Richard Hakluyt (1587). English translations are based on those provided in the Nuova


14. According to popular belief, it was thought best to follow the path of Virgil’s development as a poet: begin writing eclogues, proceed to pastoral poetry (like the *Georgias*), and finish one’s literary career with the most difficult and lofty poetic genre, the epic. See Patrick Cheney, introduction, in *European Literary Careers: The Author from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. Patrick Cheney and Frederick A. de Armas (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).


20. As Cro has suggested, Martyr’s status as a humanist working in the Spain of Ferdinand and Isabel is crucial (“La ‘Princeps,’” 40).


29. “Vult ergo Almirantus iste a laeva tendentibus ad occidentem, terram hanc India recipi Gangetide . . . ; non autem sepiant aquae terram ipsam, veluti Europa . . . circum ambitur; sed furor delabentis oceani ad occidentem vetat, meo iudicio, clausam esse coniungique septentronialis oris terram illam” (360, emphasis added) [That Admiral means, therefore, that this land includes the Ganges’ India to the left of those traveling West . . . ; the waters, however, do not surround that land in the way that Europe is washed all around . . . ; on the contrary, the strength of the ocean current to the West, in my opinion, prevents that land from being enclosed and joined on the northern coasts] (359, emphasis added).
36. Juan Gil also notes the similarities between Columbus and Aeneas in Stella’s poem. See “La épica latina quinientos y el descubrimiento de América,” Anuario de estudios americanos 40 (1985): 36.
40. In his recent study of the Columbiad, Steven Blakemore notes Barlow’s imitation of, and writing “against,” Virgil’s epic [Joel Barlow’s ”Columbiad”: A Bicentennial Reading [Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007], 37, 231.
