Kyler Hudson

Title: “Seeing the New World Through the Lens of the Old World: Manifestation of Pre-existing Frameworks in the Travel Writing of Christopher Columbus”

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Richard Weiner

Paper Written For: History J495 (Senior Seminar): Latin America in Foreign Eyes (Fall 2017)

Kyler Hudson is a senior at IPFW, majoring in History and Political Science. His historical interests include presidential politics, rural and agrarian politics, and World War I. He will graduate from IPFW in May 2018 and attend Indiana University in the fall to pursue a PhD in Political Science. Kyler will continue to research rural politics and policy, either in academia or at a public policy research center in Washington D.C.

Abstract

The writings of Christopher Columbus documented one of the most significant eras of human history, as Europeans discovered an entirely new and foreign world. During his historic expeditions, Columbus recorded his experiences in a journal that he presented to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella after his return. Columbus’ journal provides modern historians with a window into the mind of the explorer as he experienced otherworldly phenomena. The journal describes the New World’s plants, animals, peoples, and physical geography. Columbus’ descriptions of the New World reflect the preexisting conceptual framework that he brought with him from the Old World. This conceptual framework manifested itself in Columbus’ journal via four literary devices: the principle of attachment, religious references, citations of earlier Western authors, and allusions to previous travels.

Columbus’ background in the Catholic Church, capitalist enclaves of Southern Europe, and colonies in Africa and the Atlantic colored his perception of the New World. This preexisting conceptual framework affected how he viewed the native phenomena across the Atlantic. In doing so, Columbus translated the exotic into the familiar. For example, Columbus often employed the principle of attachment to compare characteristics of the New World to those of the Old World, which he and his audience would recognize. He compared the Caribbean weather to that of Andalusia, the mountains of Cuba to those of Sicily, native birds to those in Castile, New World palm trees to those in Africa and Europe, and indigenous religions to Catholicism. Columbus also used the Bible to understand his new environment, writing that he had discovered the region of Ophir as described in the Book of Kings. He cited earlier authors like Cardinal Pierre d’Ailly, Pope Pius, Pliny the Elder, and Marco Polo to make sense of his discoveries. For example, after reading Polo’s descriptions, Columbus believed that Cuba was the island of Japan, which Polo named Cipango. Columbus also alluded to his and others’ previous travels to Africa and into the Atlantic. After sailing to Iceland, he learned of Scandinavian expeditions westward and heard of islands in the Atlantic. All of these examples present in Columbus’ writings demonstrate how his Old World conceptual framework affected how he viewed the New World.

This research builds upon the academic scholarship and supports the consensus that travel
literature is inherently subjective and cannot communicate experiences without bias. All travelers begin their journeys with prior ideas and backgrounds that affect how they understand the world. This approach however, with the identification of four literary devices which reflect a preexisting conceptual framework, is unique. The paper uses secondary sources to support specific points and provide background on the state of the academic literature, but relies heavily on primary sources, particularly the journal of Columbus’ first voyage. The conclusions suggest that modern historians should be wary of interpreting travel writing as wholly objective. While it is sometimes the only historical source available, it should not be understood to faultlessly convey reality.

Bibliographical Notes

This research paper relied primarily upon the journal of Christopher Columbus’ first voyage to the New World. The selected translation was edited by Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelley Jr. and included a transcription of the original Spanish text. While this document comprised the great majority of the evidence for the paper, other primary sources from Columbus were used, such as diary entries from later voyages and letters that he wrote to the Spanish monarchy. Secondary sources were used to provide information on Columbus’ background, earlier authors, and the academic literature on travel writing.