The Legacy of Christopher Columbus in the Americas
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Columbus’s Appropriation of Imperial Discourse

Christopher Columbus has long been the subject of disagreement among historians. The protracted debate about his origins, whether he was Genoan, Spanish, Jewish, Catalán, etc., is merely the tip of the iceberg that seems to have had a special attraction for the public at large over the years. Beneath that popular debate, there are other disagreements among historians regarding Columbus’s character. Some have emphasized his ardent religious faith, others his scientific curiosity and his skill as a mariner, and still others his drive to acquire wealth and power. In nearly all historical studies, the writings of Columbus are quoted to support the argument at hand. In this book, however, I would like to start by considering how Columbus represented himself in writing over time. He left behind a large corpus of writings in which he portrayed himself and his “enterprise” in a particular and consistent manner. The earliest historiographers who wrote about Columbus, including Peter Martyr, Bartolomé de las Casas, and Columbus’s son Ferdinand, all consulted the corpus of Columbus’s writings. The evidence suggests that the manner in which Columbus portrayed himself in writing influenced those who wrote about him and that they continued, and enhanced, the same characterization that he himself initiated.

Columbus appears to have been very savvy in regard to the politics of self-fashioning. Given his knowledge of court practice and procedure, he was likely aware that after 17 April 1492,
when the king and queen signed the *Capitulaciones de Santa Fe*, the document that officially sanctioned his enterprise, whatever he wrote to the Crown would be preserved in royal archives. In addition, because he was politically astute he probably realized that the manner in which he represented himself would set the tone for future representations written by others. The extant documents in the historical record believed to have been written by Columbus suggest that he employed a very conscious strategy of self-promotion, mutating his persona and the manner in which he portrayed his enterprise in response to the exigencies of the moment. While Columbus modified his rhetorical strategy according to the occasion, we observe at least one constant in his self-representations: he always appears as a loyal servant of Ferdinand and Isabel and their imperial agenda. From 1492 to the end of his career, Columbus portrayed himself and his enterprise as fundamental to Spain’s drive to universal Christian empire.

**The Discourse of Empire in Late Fifteenth-Century Spain**

Before discussing how empire was understood during this period in Spain, it should be noted that no official document issued during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabel refers to their territorial possessions in Europe and the New World as an “empire.” Rather, the preferred term was the “Spanish Monarchy,” which claimed dominion over a number of distinct “kingdoms” that together comprised the composite monarchy commonly known as “las Españas.” Thus Ferdinand and Isabel were officially the “King and Queen of Castile, León, Aragon, Sicily, Granada, Toledo, Valencia [etc.]” Their kingdoms in the New World, incidentally, fell under the authority of the Crown of Castile. Notwithstanding the absence of the term “empire” in official language, the notion of empire was very much present in the Spanish imagination at the end of the fifteenth century. For example, a sonnet written by
a courtier in January 1492, before Columbus left on his first voyage westward, proposed that the “I” in “Isabel” stood for “imperio,” (empire). We also find evidence of the importance of empire in the Spanish worldview commonly repeated in contemporary comparisons of Spain to the Roman Empire.

The Spanish imperial tradition drew its inspiration from both the Bible and imperial Rome, and it was inexorably linked with Spain’s unique crusading tradition. It is in the context of the crusading tradition in Spain, in which the Reconquista was firmly rooted, that Columbus interpreted his enterprise as a contribution to the empire of Ferdinand and Isabel. When European princes launched the Crusades to conquer Jerusalem in the eleventh century, the goal of regaining the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslims, who had occupied it since the eighth century, assumed special meaning. Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636) had already asserted in his *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Wandalorum, et Suevorum*, a book Isabel possessed, that Spaniards were an elect people inhabiting a holy land. This sentiment was pervasive when the Crusades were launched; regaining Spain was viewed as analogous to regaining the heart of Christendom. The kings who led the Iberian reconquest facilitated the conflation of Spain and Jerusalem, and Spain and Christendom itself. After Jerusalem was taken by Muslims in 638, European Christian kings, including those of Castile, became 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. As 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.” In Ferdinand and Isabel’s day, the final goal of the
The reconquest was commonly viewed as regaining Jerusalem. As long as the heart of Christendom was in the hands of the infidel, many believed the Christian Empire would not be complete.

Although the concept of a universal Christian empire was just one of several understandings of empire at the end of the fifteenth century, it was of crucial importance in the dominant political discourse during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabel. The reconquest had been described for centuries in terms of Christendom’s fight against the heathen for universal rule. Ferdinand and Isabel’s final victory over the Moors in Granada in 1492 quickly became one of the seminal symbolic events of their reign; chroniclers declared that they were destined to expand their territory and conquer the infidel outside the peninsula. Many expressed the desire to conquer Africa. Before her death in 1504, Queen Isabel, in fact, stated in her will her desire that the Africa crusade be pursued. Pope Alexander VI had approved of an African crusade in 1494, but no action was taken for a decade, despite the prophecies and stories about it that had been circulating at court even before Granada was seized.

The idea of universal rule is complicit with both biblical and Roman traditions. Alfonso X (1221–84) contended that Spain was heir to the Roman Empire and would rule over the last world empire described in the book of Daniel. In doing so, Alfonso believed, Spain would fulfill Virgil’s prophecy that Rome was destined to rule the world. Alfonso based his claim to empire on the widespread belief in the *translatio imperii* (literally, the transfer of empire), according to which empires move throughout history from east to west. He asserted that the imperial lineage started with Jupiter, passed through Aeneas, Alexander the Great, and the Roman Caesars to the Holy Roman Emperors, Frederick I Barbarossa, and Frederick II, and then ended with himself. Spanish humanist Antonio de Nebrija also expressed the belief in *translatio imperii*, claiming in 1492 that Spain was heir to an empire that had successively moved westward. In the Spanish
context, added to this belief in the \textit{translatio imperii} was a series
of popular prophecies attributed to Merlin and the sibyls, which
foretold of a final emperor who would defeat the Muslims, recap-
ture Jerusalem, and claim world dominion.\textsuperscript{8}

Queen Isabel possessed a compilation of these prophecies,
in addition to Alfonso X’s histories. She promoted the image
of herself and Ferdinand as the heirs who would fulfill Spain’s
sacred destiny. Her doing so was not surprising; her predece-
sors were proclaimed to have had this role as well. Liss stresses
the common belief at the end of the fifteenth century in Spain’s
future universal rule: “Against this extended background, the fall
of Granada in 1492, along with the departure of the Jews and
imperial expansion enabled by Columbus, could not but appear
to confirm Spain as final world empire and ratify the messianic
role of its rulers.”\textsuperscript{9}

Liss surmises in a footnote that an Italian like Columbus
“could be so attuned to providentialist aspects of Isabeline ide-
ology and their scriptural associations” because he would have
been exposed to a “common Western stockpile” of stories regard-
ing the imperial tradition.\textsuperscript{10} There was no doubt a common bank
of ideas, beliefs, and legends about empire, and Columbus clearly
tapped into this discourse. However, as I argue at the end of this
chapter, although Columbus was particularly bold in interpret-
ing his enterprise according to the Spanish imperial tradition, he
does not appear to have been knowledgeable about the \textit{translatio
imperii} tradition. Indeed, Columbus quotes Seneca’s \textit{Medea}, a text
whose imperial meanings were often exploited after Columbus’s
death to promote imperial agendas, but he ignores the text’s
allusions to empire. His appropriation of the imperial tradition
largely honed in on its medieval aspects as they played out on
the Spanish stage. This involved a set of beliefs tied conceptually
to religion and imperial Rome as read through Alfonso X and
patristic thinkers like Augustine and Isidore of Seville. I do not
suggest that Columbus read their works—that is unlikely—but I
believe the manner in which he wrote about his enterprise confirms that he was well versed in a Spanish imperial discourse in which the notion of a universal Christian empire loomed large. To be sure, Columbus was no humanist, and there is no evidence to suggest that he saw his enterprise as it related to the *translato imperii* in the manner that, for example, the Milanese humanist Peter Martyr did, as I discuss in Chapter 2.

**Columbus’s Appropriation of Spanish Imperial Discourse**

During the approximately seven years Columbus spent in Spain lobbying the Court to support his voyage, he appears to have listened attentively to popular narratives about Ferdinand and Isabel’s destiny as rulers who would, after their predicted victory over the Moors in the reconquest, lead a final crusade against Islam, win the Holy Land for Christendom, and establish a universal monarchy. Throughout his career at the Spanish court, starting with his earliest writings, Columbus consistently portrayed his enterprise as an integral part of this narrative, not as a mere commercial venture but as an extension of the victory at Granada and as a further step on the road to achieving universal Christian empire.

Columbus was likely the first to interpret his enterprise as an extension of the reconquest, although it should be noted that this interpretation quickly became common. In fact, it was sanctioned soon after Columbus’s return from the first voyage by no less than Pope Alexander VI whose bull *Inter caetera* (3 May 1493) granted Ferdinand and Isabel ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the newly discovered Indies. Inter caetera frames Columbus’s “discovery” as an extension of the Spanish reconquest. It begins by reviewing the history of Ferdinand and Isabel’s crusade against the infidel. Judging the king and queen to be earnest in their previous battles against the barbarians and declaring them victorious in their seizure of Granada, the bull grants them the authority to
carry Christ beyond the bounds of the peninsula to the Indies. In other words, the reconquest of the peninsula and the conquest of the Indies are interpreted in this papal document as part of the same project, the former serving as the proving ground for the latter. Perhaps the most well-known formulation of this interpretation was penned in the early 1540s by historian Francisco López de Gómara: “Conquests of the Indians began when conquests of the Moors had ended, so that Spaniards might always be at war with infidels.”

Modern scholars have continued to emphasize the connection between the reconquest and the conquest of the Indies—and the sanctioning of Columbus’s voyage in particular. The venerable John Elliott, for example, writes: “The close coincidence between the fall of Granada and the authorization of Columbus’s expedition would suggest that the latter was at once a thank-offering and an act of renewed dedication by Castile to the still unfinished task of war against the infidel.” As James Muldoon and Luis Weckmann have argued, there are more continuities between the medieval and early modern periods than are generally recognized. Spain’s conquest of the Americas is most accurately understood in relation to, not separate from, its recent (and not so recent) historical experience. The invasion of the New World was, in Elliott’s words, a “natural culmination of a dynamic and expansionist period in Castilian history which had begun long before.”

We would do well, however, to remember that in the first moments of the Columbian project—that is, before Columbus set sail in August 1492—there was no explicit or natural connection between it and the reconquest. If we assume that this connection existed since the very beginning of the venture, we risk missing the fact that it was Columbus who first rhetorically hitched his enterprise to the reconquest narrative. While it might have been an obvious association to make, the sovereigns clearly had not made it in 1492. That Columbus managed so skillfully to craft this association when, as Elliott observes, he “himself did not
belong to the tradition of the Reconquista,” points to his savvy as an observer of the Spanish political and rhetorical landscape. That he did so by emphasizing the contributions of his enterprise to the medieval notion of universal Christian empire illustrates Columbus’s medieval mindset. It was left to others, as I shall argue, to reinterpret Columbus’s connection to empire in a manner that revealed the sensibilities of the early modern era.

The Crown did not at first incorporate the Columbian enterprise within its overall strategy and political discourse about universal Christian empire. In fact, it likely rejected Columbus’s interpretation, which did incorporate the enterprise in this manner when he first suggested it. According to the Capitulaciones signed by the king and queen in April 1492, Columbus’s enterprise was strictly a commercial venture that had nothing to do with either religious matters or territorial expansion. Although the formulaic introductory sentence of the Capitulaciones mentions “the help of God,” there is no further mention of God or religious matters in the text that follows. Zamora is puzzled by this omission in light of the religious charge of the dominant political discourse generated by the Crown: “Such silence,” she writes, “is quite perplexing given that these were the official documents by which the Reyes Católicos (Catholic Monarchs) authorized an embassy to foreign lands. For 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.”

Based on the prediscovery documents generated by the Crown, it would appear that the sovereigns viewed Columbus’s venture as separate from their greater imperial strategy. Although the economic and the religious were never separate spheres—indeed, the quest for profit was justified by religious arguments—Castile, Aragon, and Portugal had all been focusing on trade-building ventures before 1492. This is not to say that there was a lack of “missionary purpose” in Ferdinand and Isabel’s
sanctioning of maritime expansion, yet early on in the process of the conquest and colonization of the Indies, the desire to evangelize was not backed up in practice. The material interests of both Spain and Portugal appear to have outweighed their desire to promote the spiritual. As J. R. S. Phillips concludes, Spanish “missionary efforts lacked organization and vigor, and their expansion was essentially opportunistic; they looked for whatever might be found that would be profitable.”

In April 1492, when the sovereigns agreed to support Columbus, no one could have predicted the scope of Columbus’s discoveries or their importance in Ferdinand and Isabel’s reign. If this had been possible, the Capitulaciones surely would have been a different document. But let us not permit our reading of the past to be influenced by our knowledge of the outcome. The Crown had no reason to consider Columbus’s proposed voyage as integral to its overall mission. While it would be a mistake to conclude that the Crown considered Columbus’s project to be unimportant in April 1492, we can conclude that it was not integral to royal strategy or ideology, as had been the campaign to conquer Granada.

It was Columbus who first portrayed his enterprise as something greater than a commercial venture, and it was Columbus who first used the language of the reconquest, a language which drew from the Spanish discourse of universal Christian empire, to describe his venture. We see this rhetorical strategy at work in the document that has long served as the prologue to the Diario. Here, Columbus virtually ignores the commercial purpose of his commission as laid out by the Capitulaciones and instead interprets it as a logical continuation of the reconquest. The prologue was likely written with considerable care, as Columbus surely would have foreseen that it would be stored in royal archives. The notion of Columbus’s deliberateness is important because the most obvious rhetorical strategy of the prologue involves an erroneous chronology that is almost surely no mistake, given that its rhetorical effect is to link Columbus’s 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 sovereigns decided to commission Columbus “in this present year 1492, after your Highnesses concluded the war with the Moors” and “after having expelled all the Jews from your kingdoms and possessions.”

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 sovereigns entered Granada, and the Capitulaciones were signed in April—not in Granada but in Santa Fe. Columbus’s inaccurate version of these events incorporates his enterprise into the 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 a necessary step in the progression of Ferdinand and Isabel’s reign to universal, Christian dominion. As Milhou concludes, “The seizure of Granada, the expulsion of the Jews, and the political and missionary expedition to Cathay are presented in the prologue on the same plane as events of equal importance that all contribute to the extension and triumph of Christendom.”

An additional detail of the prologue that links Columbus’s project to the evangelical mission of the Catholic kings is its description of their reasons for supporting Columbus. While the first royal motive provided in the prologue conforms in spirit to the mercantile expectations of the Capitulaciones (“to see those princes and peoples and lands and their attitudes and everything else about them”), the second motive (“to take stock of how one could go about converting them to our holy faith”) adds an element absent in the Capitulaciones: evangelization. According to the prologue, the sovereigns’ desire to commission Columbus is allegedly tied to their status as “Catholic Christians and princes who love the holy Christian faith and spread it, being enemies of the sect of Mohammed and of all idolatries and heresies.”
The monarchs decided to support Columbus, the prologue states, after he informed them that the Gran Can of the Indies and his ancestors “many times . . . had sent to Rome for men learned in our holy faith who might instruct them in it (yet the Holy Father never provided them, letting so many people go to perdition through falling into idolatries and accepting sects which carry them to ruin).”

Claiming that Ferdinand and Isabel respond to those seeking instruction in the faith and that the pope does not do so, Columbus brazenly insinuates that the Spanish sovereigns are more fit shepherds of Christendom than the pope himself.

The *Diario*, the original log of Columbus’s first voyage, also describes the Columbian enterprise with the language of Spain’s religiously charged discourse of empire. A key passage from the *Diario* that depicts the voyage 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:

The Admiral again writes that he hopes to God that when he returns from Castile, as he intend, he should find a barrel of gold obtained in trade by those he will leave there and that they should have found the gold mine and the spices in sufficient quantity that within three years the Sovereigns could plan and carry out the conquest of the Holy Sepulcher, for, he says, “I swore to Your Highnesses that all profits from this enterprise of mine should be spent for the reconquest of Jerusalem, and Your Highnesses smiled and said it pleased You and that You had already harbored that desire.”

Jerusalem in this passage of the *Diario* is a crucial symbol in the Spanish narrative of universal Christian empire. 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 sovereigns to use the profits of his voyage to
finance a final crusade serves to incorporate it into the already circulating discourse about Spain’s final crusade to Jerusalem.

Columbus also interpreted his enterprise in religious terms and as part of the royal imperial mission in his 4 March 1493 letter to Ferdinand and Isabel. 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’s 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.32

If the March 4 letter is Columbus’s “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’s interpretation—what we might call his “imperial interpretation”—, even rejecting it immediately after the discovery and before the court had devised a comprehensive public relations strategy. If we follow Zamora’s exhortation to consider as dialogic the documents generated by Columbus and the Crown, the Santángel/Sánchez revision of Columbus’s March 4 letter can be understood as a royal response to Columbus that rejected his interpretation of the project.33

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, 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’s voyage as an extension of the reconquest: “That eternal God who has given Your Highnesses so many victories now gave you the greatest one that to this day He has ever given any prince.”34 The reference to “so many victories”
already granted by God 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 as part of the narrative of consolidation of Christian empire. Columbus refers to his own voyage of discovery as “the greatest [victory],” of even greater importance than the victory at Granada. Columbus’s position as the protagonist in this transoceanic expansion of the reconquest is then emphasized by the fact that the next sentence begins with the first person pronoun “I” and that the same “I” is repeated twice more within that sentence. (“I come from the Indies with the armada Your Highnesses gave me, to which [place] I traveled in thirty-three days after I departed from your kingdoms.”)

Not only does the corresponding sentence in the Santángel/Sánchez version de-emphasize the presence of Columbus (while it contains several verbs conjugated in the first person, it contains only one first-person subject pronoun, “yo,” in the original Spanish), it also omits the allusion in the March 4 letter to the reconquest, thus removing Columbus’s innovative “empire frame.” With a businesslike tone that characterizes the whole of the Santángel/Sánchez letter, the first line reads: “My Lord, since I know you will take delight in the great victory Our Lord granted me on my voyage, I am writing you this letter, from which you will learn how in thirty-three days I went from the Canary Islands to the Indies.” While the discovery here is said to be a “great victory” given to Columbus by God, the deletion of the March 4 letter’s reference to the reconquest erases the link established in the original version between this “victory” made possible by Columbus and the imperial agenda of the Catholic kings.

This is not the only instance when an allusion to the expansion of Ferdinand and Isabel’s Christian Empire in the March 4 letter is omitted in the royally sanctioned Santángel/Sánchez version. The March 4 letter contains the following passage
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(unfortunately damaged in the original document) about evangelization that is absent from the Santángel/Sánchez letter: “But Our Lord, who is the light and strength of all those who seek to do good and makes them victorious in deeds that seem impossible, wished to ordain that I should find and was to find gold and mines and spicery and innumerable peoples . . . numbers disposed to become Christians and others so that Christians . . .”

Despite the lacunae in the original document, it is certain that the subject at hand is the conversion of the natives. This is the first mention of evangelization perhaps anywhere in Columbus’s writings. The description of the natives as “disposed to become Christians” 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 Capitulaciones. Although the anonymous editor of the Santángel/Sánchez letter included a slightly modified version of the beginning of the sentence (“the eternal God Our Lord, who gives to all who follow His ways victory in seemingly impossible undertakings”), this version omits the 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 version. 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 underwritten the reconquest.

Also deleted from the letter to Santángel/Sánchez is the passage in the March 4 letter that most stridently incorporates the Columbian enterprise within the narrative 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:
I conclude here: that through the divine grace of He who is the origin of all good and virtuous things, who favors and gives victory to all those who walk in His path, that in seven years from today I will be able to pay Your Highnesses for five thousand cavalry and fifty thousand foot soldiers for the war and conquest of Jerusalem, for which purpose this enterprise was undertaken. And in another five years another five thousand cavalry and fifty thousand foot soldiers, which will total ten thousand cavalry and one hundred thousand foot soldiers; and all of this with very little investment now on Your Highnesses' part in this beginning of the taking of the Indies and all that they contain, as I will tell Your Highnesses in person later. And I have reason for this [claim] and do not speak uncertainly, and one should not delay in it, as was the case with the execution of this enterprise, may God forgive whoever has been the cause of it.39

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 prediscovery documents generated by the Crown and despite a lack of evidence elsewhere in his own writings, that such a religious crusade was the original rationale for his voyage.40 Columbus later repeats this claim in his 1502 letter to Pope Alexander VI.41 In both of these instances, as well as in the prologue to the Diario, Columbus revises history and interprets his discoveries as part of the Catholic kings’ predestined drive to universal empire. In this way, Columbus granted his discoveries more significance than they had previously been granted 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 appreciated Columbus’s bold admonition that it should not dawdle with regard to the crusade to Jerusalem, as it had done with respect to his own voyage. Yet why
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would the Santángel/Sánchez version not include Columbus’s reference to the Jerusalem crusade when this would have granted the discovery more gravitas 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.” 42 It is true that the sovereigns had not yet petitioned the pope for a bull that would grant them dominion in the Indies. Perhaps they were hesitant to publicize Columbus’s voyage in this light, especially given that the right to the territories Columbus found had already been disputed by Portuguese King João II, who was preparing a fleet to find the Indies. 43 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 argues, this omission is puzzling. 44 In effect, the royal editor’s deletion of the March 4 letter’s reference to Jerusalem served as a royal rejection of Columbus’s attempts to interpret his enterprise within the prevailing rhetoric of reconquest and imperial expansion by emphasizing its religious consequences.

Another relevant passage that appears in the March 4 letter to Ferdinand and Isabel but not in the Santángel/Sánchez version portrays the discoveries as a feat to be celebrated by “all of Christianity.” Its subtext emphasizes Columbus’s contributions to the aggrandizement of Christian empire:

Most powerful sovereigns: all of Christendom should hold great celebrations, and especially God’s Church, for the finding of such a multitude of such friendly peoples, which with very little effort will be converted to our Holy Faith, and so many lands filled with so many goods very necessary to us in which all Christians will have comfort and profits, all of which was unknown nor did anyone speak of it except in fables. Great rejoicing and
celebrations in the churches [damaged] . . . Your Highnesses should order that [many] praises should be given to the Holy Trinity [damaged] your kingdoms and domains, because of the great love [the Holy Trinity?] has shown you, more than to any other prince.45

In previous passages of the March 4 text the religious interpretation is tacked on to the commercial. In these instances Columbus first complies 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 and only secondly because he also found desirable material goods.

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:

In this way, then, Our Redeemer granted to our most illustrious King and Queen and to their famous realms this victory in a matter of such great importance, for which all Christendom should rejoice and celebrate and give solemn thanks to our Holy Trinity with many solemn prayers for the great exaltation that will ensue from the addition of so many people to our holy faith and, besides, for the temporal goods, as not only Spain but all Christians will find in it respite and profit.46

This passage declares the significance of Columbus’s enterprise with regard to Christian empire. The exaltation, literally the expansion (enxalçamiento), of Christendom is granted more importance than the temporal benefits of the discovery by the phrase “and, besides,” in that Christendom “should rejoice and celebrate and give solemn thanks” first because so many pagans will turn to Christ, and only thereafter (y después) because of the
“temporal goods” that will result from the discoveries. This may be the first instance in which the Crown can be said to have leaned toward interpreting Columbus’s 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.

It was not until the Crown’s “instructions” to Columbus dated 29 May 1493 that the sovereigns appear to adopt an interpretation of the Columbian enterprise similar to that which had been proposed in Columbus’s 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 the king and queen now saw his venture as part of their greater imperial project:

> Firstly, it hath pleased God, Our Lord, in His abundant mercy to reveal the said Islands and Mainland to the King and Queen, our Lords, by the diligence of the said Don Christopher Columbus, their Admiral, Viceroy and Governor thereof, who hath reported it to Their Highnesses that he know the people he found residing therein to be very ripe to be converted to our Holy Catholic Faith, since they have neither dogma nor doctrine; wherefore it hath pleased and greatly pleaseth Their Highnesses (since in all matters it is meet that their principal concern be for the service of God, Our Lord, and the enhancement of our Holy Catholic Faith); wherefore, desiring the augmentation and increase of our Holy Catholic Faith, Their Highnesses charge and direct the said Admiral, Viceroy and Governor that by all ways and means he strive and endeavor to win over the inhabitants of the said Islands and Mainland to be converted to our Holy Catholic Faith.47

According to this first royal “instruction” dictated to Columbus, the intention of the king and queen “in all matters,” that is with regard to the entire enterprise, is to promote “the service of God, Our Lord, and the enhancement (ensalzamiento) of our Holy
That this differs significantly from the tenor and content of the *Capitulaciones* is surely no coincidence. Alexander VI had just issued the 4 May bull charging the Catholic kings with the responsibility of converting the inhabitants of these new lands. Morison notes that the *Inter caetera* was sent from Rome “to Spain on May 17, and doubtless arrived before the end of the month.”

It is in this context that the sovereigns, in these instructions dated 29 May, attribute their pleasure first and foremost to the fact that the inhabitants of the discovered lands are disposed to convert. And because the sovereigns wish for the “augmentation and increase of Our Holy Catholic Faith,” they authorize Columbus in this document to take whatever measures necessary to convert the foreign peoples he encounters. This first of eighteen instructions establishes evangelization as the highest priority of the Crown with regard to Columbus’s project. It is worth noting, however, that only five clerics (out of a total of approximately twelve hundred people) accompanied Columbus on the second voyage to the Indies, a number that suggests that the sovereigns did not yet fully back up with concrete action their royal rhetoric about the high priority they now granted to evangelization.

Not only was Columbus the first to interpret his enterprise in religious terms, he was also keen to point out the vastness of the territory he had discovered. Territorial expansion, of course, was an essential component of the royal agenda during the reconquest and a requirement for achieving universal Christian empire. While others were encouraging the sovereigns to continue the reconquest by invading Africa or the Levant, Columbus was merely redirecting westward (or, according to Nicolás Wey Gómez, southward) the arrow on the map that pointed to the territory to be incorporated into the empire. In a 1495 letter written to the sovereigns, Columbus suggests that he has discovered the last of the ecumene that had been previously unknown to Europe. Thus he names the easternmost point of Cuba (which he called Juana), Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.
Between this point and the western-most point of Spain, he states, “is contained all the peoples of the world,” a bold claim if one is thinking in terms of universal dominion. Already in a letter dated January 1494, Columbus had promised the king and queen continual territorial expansion: “every year,” he states, “we shall be able to significantly enlarge the map, because new discoveries will continue to take place.” In this same letter, he also stresses the great size of the territory he has discovered, as in his letter to the sovereigns regarding the third voyage, where he writes, “I believe that this land that Your Highnesses have caused to be discovered is huge and that there are many more to the south.” Several passages in his writings dating from the third voyage and after declare that he has made possible unprecedented territorial expansion, the kind never seen by any of the previous Spanish princes, none of whom, he is sure to point out, had ever gained territory outside the peninsula. In 1501, Columbus assures Queen Isabel, “I am inclined with all of my senses to give you rest and happiness and to increase your realms.”

In several instances Columbus compares the territory he won for Castile to that of the Greek and Roman Empires, the paradigmatic empires with which Columbus conceptually competes. Attempting to transcend the classical empires of the past, he defends his venture to the king and queen and against his critics, writing: “I call on he who has read the histories of the Greeks and Romans to testify if with so little effort they enlarged so much their territory as now Your Highnesses have enlarged the territory of Spain with the Indies.” In another instance, Columbus insinuates that because of his efforts, the Catholic kings are achieving what the Romans and the Greeks only strived to do: “I had read that the lords of Castile had never gained lands outside Castile itself, and that this was another world, the one for which the Romans, Alexander and the Greeks strove to gain.” It is in accordance with this line of thinking that Columbus characterizes his journals that he kept about his voyages as being “in the form
and style of Caesar’s Commentaries. On the surface, this comparison refers to the straightforward, unembellished literary style for which Augustus’s work was known. On a deeper level, however, the comparison suggests that Columbus was expanding the empire of Castile just as Julius Caesar had done for Rome.

When Columbus came under increased scrutiny for his maladministration of Spanish settlements in the Indies, he did not waiver in his interpretation of his enterprise in terms of its contribution to the attainment of universal Christian empire. The tenor of his rhetoric, however, intensified as he began to appropriate the prophetic and then the apocalyptic tradition. Before the third voyage (1498–1500), as I have shown, Columbus described his project as an extension of the imperial mission of the Catholic kings who had underwritten the reconquest. He placed his conquests in the Indies on the same ideological level as the conquest of Granada. As the challenge to his privileges and status grew, he escalated the rhetoric he used to describe his venture by resorting to the prophetic tradition, which was well known in Columbus’s day and had been used by many to interpret the reconquest. Based on the common belief that biblical prophecies would necessarily be fulfilled before the end of time, Columbus began in his 1498 relation to the king and queen about his third voyage to argue that his discoveries played a crucial role in the unfolding of God’s divine plan: they were the fulfillment of biblical prophecies regarding the conversion to Christianity of all the peoples of the earth, who would also be incorporated into the Christian Empire.

It is in the *Book of Prophecies*—compiled after Columbus had been arrested on Hispaniola in October 1500 and forcibly returned to Spain in chains—where this strategy of representation reaches an extreme. The original title provided by Gaspar Gorricio, the Carthusian monk who helped draft the document, differs from the collection’s current title (provided by Columbus’s son Ferdinand) and clearly points to the argument at the heart of the document—Columbus’s discoveries had been prophesied and
are, therefore, part of God’s divine plan: “Book or collection of auctoritates (authoritative writings), sayings, opinions, and prophecies concerning the need to recover the Holy City and Mount Zion, and the finding and conversion of the islands of the Indies and of all people and nations.” As Gorricio’s title suggests, the Book of Prophecies is a reprisal of many of the themes that are present in Columbus’s earlier writings, including the final crusade to conquer Jerusalem. According to one of the prophecies cited in the book, “someone from Spain would recover the wealth of Zion.” That Columbus felt this prophecy was important for his self-representation is clear in his repetition of it not only in his 1503 letter to the sovereigns written from Jamaica, but also at the end of his letter that appears to have been meant to introduce them to the Book of Prophecies, where he reminds them that “the Calabrian abbot Joachim said that whoever was to rebuild the temple on Mount Zion would come from Spain.”

Columbus’s self-portrayals as Christ-bearer, promoted by his signing letters “Χριστοφέρος” (Christ-bearer) after he returned to Spain from his third voyage, overlapped toward the end of his career with his self-portrayals as a martyr for the empire of Christendom. With increasing clarity, he represented himself as a victim of his high ideals and the ingratitude of Spaniards. Only God, in Columbus’s ultimate rendering, understands the cost Columbus paid to give an overseas empire to the Crown of Castile. It is in this sense that Columbus cast himself as a martyr. I return to this later, as this self-fashioning was the basis of the so-called “Columbian legend,” which was taken up by Spanish American revolutionaries who eventually advocated independence from Spain. For now, we note that Columbus’s long list of complaints began with his unfair treatment in the Spanish court by those who doubted his plan. For example, in what Consuelo Varela labels a “fragment of a piece of writing in the Log Book,” apparently written after his discovery, Columbus first mentions his “toils and perils” and then says, “May it please God that the
detractors of my honour may be abased, who with so much dishonesty and malice have made a mockery of me and defamed my enterprise without knowing either my statements or what advantages and increase of dominion would accrue to their Majesties.”

This kind of complaint, which appears in many of Columbus’s subsequent writings, emphasizes both Columbus’s loyalty to the Crown, something that had always been subject to question by many Spaniards because he was a foreigner, as well as his dedication to expanding the Crown’s empire.

He complains with increasingly frequency about the character of the Spanish colonists, whom he views as greedy and immoral and who do not, as he does, sincerely support the imperial project of the Catholic kings (i.e., the expansion of Christendom).

As early as January 1494, in the report to the king and queen that he sent back to Spain with Antonio Torres, Columbus requested that Torres, on his behalf, ask them to more carefully select colonists: “Tell Their Highnesses, entreating them as humbly as possible on my account, to have the goodness to consider . . . that for the peace and tranquility and harmony of the people here they appoint in their service people who get along with one another and who value more the reason for which they were sent than their own personal interests.”

Columbus draws a stark contrast between these disloyal settlers and himself, beginning this report by emphasizing his own loyalty to the Crown. Here, he calls Ferdinand and Isabel “my natural sovereigns, in whose service I wish to end my days.”

In contrast, he portrays the Spaniards who come to the Indies as disloyal. For example, in his letter to Doña Juana de la Torre, he describes them as a “dissolute people, who have no fear of God or of their king and queen, and who are full of folly and malice.” The “maintenance of justice and the extension of the [dominions] of [Your] Highnesses,” he complains, “up to now has brought me to the depth.” He also claims in this letter that the Spaniards in Spain, including those at court, misunderstand him. “If I had violently seized the Indies or the
land made holy because in it there is today the fame of the altar of St. Peter, and had given them to the Moors, they could not have shown greater enmity towards me in Spain. Who would believe such a thing of a land where there has always been so great nobility?"72 Columbus argues that instead of seeing him as having conquered a foreign people and established an empire in the tradition of the great imperial conquerors of Rome, Spaniards see him as a small-time governor of a foreign province.73 In what Varela thinks is likely a draft of a letter to the members of the Council of Castile, Columbus’s thoughts on this point are at their sharpest:

I have lost (in these labours) my youth and the part of these things which belongs to me, and likewise the honours; but it should not be [so] outside of Castile where my deeds shall be judged, and I shall be judged, as a Captain who went to conquer from Spain to the Indies and not as a governor of a city or of a people already under government, but to place under the sovereignty of Their Majesties a people savage, warlike and who live among the hills and mountains.74

We note the contrast Columbus draws between how he is perceived in Spain and how he will be perceived outside of Spain. Many American appropriations of Columbus in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries echo this accusation that Spain was unjust toward the admiral.

**Columbus’s Allusions to Seneca’s *Medea***

Although Columbus consistently portrayed himself throughout his career as a figure of empire, no evidence in his writings suggests that he had read or was deeply knowledgeable about the work of authors who articulated the Western tradition of *translatio imperii et studii*. Columbus’s allusions to empire appear
to result from his intuitive apprehension of a popular discourse about empire, as opposed to his conscious desire to invoke this tradition.

An analysis of Columbus’s allusions to Seneca’s tragedy *Medea* supports this point. Although the *Medea* is replete with allusions to empire in its relation of the myth of Jason and the Argonauts, allusions which were later exploited for political purposes in the royal courts of Europe, Columbus’s use of the *Medea* is devoid of any imperial dimension.\(^{75}\)

Here it is appropriate to provide some background about the *Medea* story and how it later played into imperial discourse in Spain. According to the Argonautic legend, Jason and his crew sacked Troy on their way to Colchis, where they would retrieve the Golden Fleece. Virgil incorporated this story about the first destruction of Troy into the *Aeneid*, the canonical foundation story of Rome, rendering it a necessary precursor to the second destruction of Troy, the event that spurred Aeneas to leave that city and fulfill his destiny by founding Rome. In Virgil’s recasting, Jason becomes the precursor of Aeneas, and his return with the Golden Fleece serves as a model for Aeneas’s journey to Rome with the Penates.\(^{76}\) The Fleece that Jason seeks to recapture in the original story is eventually Christianized,\(^{77}\) and during the Crusades it becomes a metaphor for the recapture of Jerusalem. In 1429 Philip the Good of Burgundy formed the Order of the Golden Fleece. Philip’s goal, Tanner writes, was “to unite the flower of knighthood under his leadership for a crusade to Jerusalem to defeat the Turks and recapture the Holy Sepulchre. The duke identified his crusading objectives with the capture of the Golden Fleece that had been accomplished by his mythic ancestors.”\(^{78}\) The Hapsburg Kings Charles V and his son Philip II, both of whom inherited sovereignty of the Order and incorporated an image of the Golden Fleece in their personal devices, relied heavily on Argonautic imagery in justifying their Trojan ancestry and their aspirations to the title of Holy
Roman Emperor. Furthermore, both Charles and Philip implicated Columbus in their versions of the pre-existing Argonautic legend. They portrayed Columbus as the new Argonaut, predicted in Seneca’s *Medea*, who expanded their empire to the New World. Philip ordered that a portrait of Columbus, along with scenes of Jason’s journey, be painted on a ship he named the *Argo*, which was built to lead the ships of the Christian alliance against the Turks in the 1571 Battle of Lepanto. The ship and the story it told provided Philip with an opportunity to articulate what he viewed as his right to the *translatio imperii*.

But Columbus’s citations of Seneca’s *Medea* ignore the imperial dimension of the text. The passage in the *Medea* that Columbus alludes to in three separate cases is found at the end of Seneca’s second chorus (375–79):

> Venient annis saecula seris,  
> quibus Oceanus vincula rerum  
> laxet, et ingens pateat tellus,  
> Tethysque novos detegat orbes  
> nec sit terris ultima Thule.

(There will come an epoch late in time  
when the Ocean will loosen the bonds of the world  
and the earth lie open in its vastness,  
when Tethys will disclose new worlds  
and Thule not be the farthest of lands.)

In the *Book of Prophecies*, in a hand that is believed to be that of Columbus, the lines above are quoted in a slightly modified version. Most notably, “Tethysque” appears as “Tiphysque,” as it does in the 1491 edition of Seneca’s tragedies published in Lyon that Columbus possessed. The protagonist in the version that Columbus cites is not Mother Ocean (“Tethys”), but Tiphys, the pilot of the legendary Argonaut, Jason. James Romm calls this
Diskin Clay observes that “Tethysque is the right reading, but, for the Age of Discovery, Tiphys (or Tiphis) was the only reading possible, for it was not Tethys who was destined to reveal new worlds beyond Thule but Tiphys, the navigator of Jason, audax Tiphys (Medea 345), Tiphys, in primis domitor profundi (Medea 617).”

Columbus’s gloss in the Book of Prophecies of the quote from the Medea suggests that his discoveries have fulfilled Seneca’s prophecy: “During the last years of the world, the time will come in which the Ocean sea will loosen the bounds and a large landmass will appear. A new sailor like the one named Tiphys, who was the guide of Jason, will discover a new world, and then Thule will no longer be the most remote land.”

Columbus also refers to Seneca’s Medea in the letter he wrote in 1503 to the sovereigns about his fourth voyage. Here Columbus describes how he, about to be shipwrecked and desperate for help, heard a voice that consoled him as he slept. It said:

O fool, O man slow to believe in and serve God . . . what more did He do for Moses or David, His servants? From birth He always took great care of you; when He saw you were of an age that seemed right to him, He caused your name to resound marvelously throughout the world. The Indies . . . He gave to you. . . . To you He gave the keys to open the barriers of the Ocean Sea, which were closed with such strong chains.

Columbus’s allusions to the Medea help Columbus cast himself as the “new sailor,” predicted in the 1491 edition of the Medea to break the bonds of the Ocean and “discover a new world.” Rusconi explains that “Columbus was looking for any type of prediction, even in classical texts, that could conceivably refer to him; for this reason he had turned even to Seneca’s Medea, which perhaps had seemed to him to be an account of a sea voyage
toward unknown Asia.” Romm emphasizes the heroic nature of Columbus’s self-characterization via his allusions to Seneca: “Columbus derived from the passage not only a prediction of new discoveries but a celebration of the single, heroic individual who would reveal them.” Yet it is clear that Columbus did not view the mariner pilot in Seneca’s tragedy as anything other than one who broke the “chains” of the ocean and discovered lands previously unknown to Europeans by crossing it. For Columbus, it would seem, this was magnificent enough.

Columbus did not appear to interpret Seneca’s *Medea* as part of the Western canonical narrative of empire. We would, in fact, be surprised if he saw the Argonautic myth in this light because, although Columbus’s education has been disputed by some, most scholars believe that he was self-taught. He likely did not read the major texts of the humanist tradition. It is uncertain how Columbus came across the *Medea*, yet it appears that he simply interpreted this passage as a prediction regarding future ocean exploration. He did not appear to relate it to Virgil’s legendary account of Rome and the Western narrative of *translatio imperii*. It was left to others, like those considered in subsequent chapters of this book, to make these connections. As we shall see, even in the nineteenth century, Seneca’s *Medea* was still being quoted by the likes of Washington Irving, whose biography of Columbus begins with an epigraph quoting the lines from the *Medea* discussed here.

David Brading has noted the distinction “between the conquerors and explorers of the Indies, men more conversant with medieval romances than with the classics, and the humanists who penned the accounts which caught the imagination of the educated classes in Europe.” Brading’s description of conquerors and explorers clearly applies to Columbus. He appropriated the imperial discourse that circulated in Spain to describe his enterprise without acknowledging the pre-existing secular imperial tradition. Rather, he relied on the imperial ideas of Catholicism,
the same ideals that had inspired the Crusades. Columbus, a savvy observer of the political scene in Spain, well knew that using this contemporary imperial discourse to describe himself and his enterprise would enhance his image and status in Spain. And hence he portrayed himself consistently throughout his career as a servant of the universal Christian empire of the Catholic kings.