

The Tradition of the Apotheosis in Early Spanish America

PEOPLES OF THE AMERICAS AND EARLIEST CONTACTS WITH EUROPEANS

The hemisphere into which Europeans erupted after 1492 was characterized by a highly complex mosaic of ethnic groups, certainly more complex than Europe, since Native American ethnic identities had been less widely subsumed into larger political and cultural units (Griffiths 2017: 45). “Perhaps the lands we call the Americas had been occupied for a shorter time in terms of millennia, but the variety of their peoples, languages, ecologies, economies, and socio-political systems was so great as to invite comparison with all of Eurasia or all of Africa” (Lockhart and Schwartz 1991: 31).

Although sweeping generalizations regarding perhaps some 60 million Indigenous people (population estimates vary widely) should be avoided, at the same time some attempt has to be made to categorize Native Americans. Despite the great variety of ethnic groups, there were essentially three types of native societies. One was *non-sedentary* (entirely migratory), relying on hunting, fishing, and gathering for subsistence, and characterized much of North America west of the Mississippi River (typically the peoples of the Great Plains), the small islands in the Caribbean, the peoples of dense tropical forests, and those in the least fertile parts of South America, most notably the pampas of Argentina. A second type depended primarily on agriculture for subsistence and could be *sedentary* (with permanent dwellings) or *semi-sedentary* (who moved every few years). These peoples dominated the eastern half of North America – especially the temperate forested areas, such as the

Eastern woodland cultures – parts of the North American Southwest, the large islands of the Caribbean, and much of central and eastern South America. The third type featured dense, *sedentary* populations, surplus agricultural production, greater specialization of labor and social differentiation, and large-scale public construction projects. These complex “high civilizations” were located only in Mesoamerica (the Aztecs and Mayas) and the Andean zone (the Incas). Mesoamerica is the term used to define a culturally unified geographic area that includes central and southern Mexico and most of Central America north of the Isthmus of Panama.¹ The Andean Zone encompasses the mountain highlands and adjacent coastal lowlands that extend from present-day Colombia into northern Chile. The peoples of the high civilizations and the Europeans tended to have more in common with each other than either had with other peoples indigenous to the Americas (Burkholder and Johnson 1998: 1–3; Kicza 2003). Native peoples included in this book range from the peoples of the high civilizations through to the decentralized semi-sedentary tribal groups of the extremes of the Americas, such as the Algonquian and Iroquoian peoples of Northeast America. The distinction between the small-scale, nonliterate societies of the first two types of native societies and the complex, large-scale, imperial societies of the third type is important.

The earliest contacts between Native Americans and Europeans date from 1492 when Genoese mariner Christopher Columbus’s first expedition on behalf of the Castilian Crown (Spain was divided between the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon) made landfall. The Europeans landed first in the Bahaman archipelago and subsequently in the Antilles islands of the Caribbean – Cuba and Hispaniola (the latter island known by Spaniards as La Española and today divided between the states of the Dominican Republic and Haiti). On these islands, the expedition made contact with the amiable and peaceful Taínos (or Arawaks, though strictly the latter name applies to the inhabitants of the Guianas and Trinidad) (Thomas 2003: 98). Thereafter, Spanish exploration and settlement was an extensive process, though to call it a “conquest” disguises its

¹ While *Middle America* is a *geographical* zone encompassing the region from the Isthmus of Panama in the south through the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts of northern Mexico and the U.S. Southwest, *Mesoamerica* is a *culture* area, defined by shared features of Indigenous cultural adaptation. Mesoamerica only extends over part of Middle America, covering that contiguous area where cultivation of maize (corn) brought reliable harvests.

(Evans 2013: 19; and maps on pp. 18 and 20)

piecemeal, gradual, and ultimately incomplete character (Restall 2003). For the first quarter century, Spanish activity was confined to the islands of Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Cuba, as well as some scattered points on the coast of the South American mainland. In 1519, there was a “quantum leap” in Spanish expansion. In that year, conquistador Hernando Cortés departed Cuba for the Mexican mainland; Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan set sail on a Spanish expedition intending to discover if a sea passage existed round the bottom of South America and into the recently discovered ocean to the west of the American mainland (which conquistador Vasco Núñez de Balboa had been the first European to spot, from the Isthmus of Panama in 1513); and the city of Panama was founded on the Central American coast of that same ocean, soon to serve as the launching pad for exploration of South America.

After 1519, expeditions in the New World were continuous (Kamen 2002: 87). From the moment of Cortés’s arrival on the coast of Mexico, massive exploration and full-scale war on the continent was undertaken. His breathtakingly bold expedition into the Mexican interior led to the defeat and collapse of the Aztec Empire by 1521. The famous encounter between the Spanish conquistador and the Aztec Emperor Moctezuma is the major subject of Chapter 2. From their new capital of Mexico City, established on the ruins of the capital of the Aztecs, Spaniards spread through the former Aztec domain and beyond into Central America. Although control was established over the strategic center of Mexico, it took decades to subdue the many outlying and peripheral regions. Spanish warfare against native peoples ended by the 1570s, but although subject peoples acknowledged Spanish sovereignty and agreed to provide tribute and labor, most did not consider themselves “conquered.”

The sustained and successful defeats of Indigenous populations in Mesoamerica can be attributed to the spread of European diseases, the piecemeal nature of Spanish war on different peoples, the divisions between native ethnic groups, and especially the participation of Indigenous allies, such as the peoples of Tlaxcala, Huejotzingo Cholula, Cempoala, and others who made up a considerable part of Spanish military campaigns, to the extent that historians now speak of “Indian conquistadors.” “Spanish military success was made possible only by the help of Native Americans. The conquest of some Indigenous Americans by others laid the basis of the Spanish empire” (Kamen 2002: 113). This was true both of the subjugation of the Aztecs and of other native peoples across Mesoamerica. Tlaxcalan soldiers aided conquistador Pedro de Alvarado in Guatemala in 1524 and Beltrán Nuño de Guzmán in western

Mexico in 1530. Cortes's expedition to Honduras in 1524 included 3,000 Tlaxcalans (Kamen 2002: 113–15).

While Cuba was the starting point for exploration of Central and North America, the newly founded city of Panama served as a base for expeditions into South America. From the 1520s, Spaniards sailed along the shores of the northwest of the continent and made contact with subject peoples of the Inca Empire. Conquistador Francisco Pizarro seized the Inca ruler Atahualpa at Cajamarca (Peru) in 1532 and toppled the empire. The encounter of Andeans and Spaniards is the subject of Chapter 3. The foundation of Lima as the new Spanish capital of Peru (and cities like Quito in Ecuador, built atop native towns) provided alternatives center to Panama for subsequent exploration and war on the native inhabitants, across a vast swathe from modern-day Colombia to modern-day northern Chile and north-western Argentina. Like the advance in Mesoamerica, this was a piecemeal, gradual and incomplete process lasting decades. And similarly, Spanish success in the Andes can also be attributed to the assistance of Indigenous armies. The Cañaris, Huancas, and Chachapoyas peoples rendered indispensable support in the subjugation of Andeans allied to the Inca warlord Atahualpa, as did partisans of Huascar, the latter's defeated brother and rival for the rulership. Conquistador Diego de Almagro's expedition to Chile in 1535 was made possible by the 12,000 Andean warriors he took with him from the area of Cuzco and Charcas (Kamen 2002: 115).

All of these expeditions gave rise to contacts which have been called "first encounters," in which traditionally it is alleged that the apotheosis of Europeans occurred.

THE ROOTS OF THE APOTHEOSIS

Europeans had precedents for apotheosis within their own history. Hellenistic kings and Roman emperors received divine honors from their subjects. The first case of divine cult of a living human may have been that of Lysander, the Spartan general, who won the Peloponnesian war with his victory at Aegospotami in 405 BC and who allegedly received cult on the island of Samos in the eastern Aegean (though this is disputed; see Badian 1981: 44). In the fourth century BC, divine cult was offered to Alexander (the Great) of Macedon in his lifetime, in the Greek cities of Asia Minor (Price 1984: 25–26). Alexander's successors also had dedicated cults, temples and altars during their lifetime and after their death. Demetrius Poliorcetes, king of Macedon, was the recipient of a cult at

Athens on the spot where he descended from his chariot on his arrival in 304 BC (Weinstock 1971: 288–89). The deification of Roman rulers began with Julius Caesar in 42 BC (and continued under Roman emperors beginning with Augustus, though not all his successors). Although the terminology suggests that Caesar's position was presented in divine terms through the granting of exceptional honors during his lifetime, the surviving sources suggest that he was not actually made a god until after his death (McIntyre 2016: 21). From the death of Julius Caesar to the death of Constantine, more than sixty individuals were officially deified in the city of Rome, almost half of whom were not emperors, but their close relatives (McIntyre 2016: 1). As well as official deification, some individuals were hailed as gods, for example King Herod Agrippa, by the people in Caesarea (Acts 12:22). But the tradition of apotheosis died out in late antiquity; Roman Emperor Constantius II was perhaps the last European to be deified in AD 361.² More than 1,000 years would pass before the prospect of apotheosis of Europeans arose across the Atlantic.

The roots of the apotheosis of Europeans in the Americas lie in the writings of Christopher Columbus (Restall 2003: 111). The Genoese explorer gave birth to the enduring notion that native peoples believed that Europeans came from “heaven” (or “the heavens”). The first such mention occurs in Columbus's journal for his first transatlantic voyage in the entry for October 14, 1492, on which date he sailed along the island in the Bahamas where he had made first landfall (which he called San Salvador, probably the island now known as Watling Island) and met inhabitants whom the Europeans “understood to be asking *if we had come from the heavens*” (my italics; Dunn and Kelley 1989: 75). Subsequently the journal described the native reaction to two of his men whom he had sent into the interior of Cuba: “the Indians touched them and kissed their hands and feet, marveling and believing that the Spaniards came from the heavens, and so they gave them to understand” (November 6, 1492; Dunn and Kelley 1989: 137). On the island of Hispaniola, a native acting as a translator informed some others, who

² There are instances of the divine attribution in European literature, though the famous ones found in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (in which Caliban asks Stephano, “Hast thou not dropped from heaven?”), and Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen* date from the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century, much too late to have inspired late-fifteenth-century seamen. It is true that in the works of Petrarch, Dante, and Ariosto, which predate voyages to America, women are compared to goddesses, but this is the rhetoric of romance (Hamlin 1994: 415–16).

had fled their village for fear of the newcomers, that the Christians were not their Indian enemies “but instead were from the heavens and that they gave many nice things to all those whom they found” (December 13, 1492; Dunn and Kelley 1989: 223; Hamlin 1994: 427). Later, when Columbus explained that the Spanish monarchs were the greatest in the world, the Indians refused to abandon their belief that the Spaniards came from the heavens and that the monarchs’ kingdoms were also located there and were not of this world (December 16, 1492; Dunn and Kelley 1989: 235). Returning to Europe in 1493, Columbus wrote in his *Letter to Santángel* (Luis de Santángel was Columbus’s sponsor) that the natives

do not hold any creed nor are they idolaters; but they all believe that power and good are in the heavens and were very firmly convinced that I, with these ships and men, came from the heavens, and in this belief they everywhere received me after they had mastered their fear. This belief is not the result of ignorance, for they are, on the contrary, of a very acute intelligence . . . It is because they have never seen people clothed or ships of such a kind. (Columbus 1968: 196; see Hamlin 1994: 426)

The clue to the meaning of “from the heavens” may lie in its application to things never seen before. The exact words uttered by the native people in their own language were not recorded. The Spanish word used in the record is *cielo* which means both “heaven” and “sky.” Columbus wrote in the original “los hombres que vinieron del cielo,” or “men who came from the sky.” This is likely to be a Spanish translation of a native idiom meaning “origin unknown” (Adorno 1991: 184). Columbus never used the word *dioses* (“gods”) (Restall 2003: 111). To write that it was believed that the Spaniards came from “heaven” is clearly to impute a Christian notion to native peoples; to write that they came from “the sky” is simply to describe a physical place of origin. The implications are very different.

Influential interpreters of Columbus’s text, including Dominican Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas and the Genoese navigator’s own son Hernando Colón, claimed that the natives meant the Spaniards “came down from heaven.” It should be remembered, though, that Columbus had no experience of the native languages in which these ideas were expressed. It was much too early for reliable translators to exist. On December 18, 1492, the navigator wrote in his logbook, referring to a visit aboard ship by a native ruler and his counsellors from the island of Tortuga, that “they did not understand me nor I them,” yet immediately in the next sentence, “I gathered that he told me that if something from this place pleased me that the whole island was at my command” (Dunn and Kelley 1989: 243; Greenblatt 1992: 13). Like almost all European voyagers, Columbus

believed he could communicate across the chasm of understanding through the giving of gifts and display of items such as the portrait of the king on a gold coin, royal banners and the cross. One historian has commented: "How Columbus ascertained the religious values and property customs of the islanders must be left to his imagination" (Berkhofer 1978: 21). Contrast this easy confidence with the attitude of some later chroniclers. The sixteenth-century royal chronicler known as Oviedo, the first official chronicler for King Charles in the Indies, recognized explicitly the difficulty that Spaniards and others encountered in distinguishing the many different Indigenous peoples of Venezuela, for example, whose language and cultures they only partially understood. German explorer Nikolaus Federmann remarked on the difficulties of communication with natives because of the need to translate into five different languages and vouchsafed his certainty that most of his intended meaning had been lost (MacCormack 1999: 148, 151).

Furthermore, Columbus's surviving text is not the original journal, which was lost during the sixteenth century, but a copy, extracted, corrected and annotated by Las Casas (a great supporter and publicist of the Genoese navigator), then transplanted into his own book *History of the Indies*, composed between 1527 and 1560, but only published in the nineteenth century (Jara and Spadaccini 1992: 4, 17). The main text attributed to Columbus, the marginal comments and the numerous revisions are all in Las Casas's hand. Furthermore, most Spanish editions and all English ones published since then suppress Las Casas's contribution, giving the illusion of pristineness and the absolute authority of Columbus's voice. In fact, Las Casas's text is a highly manipulated version of a copy of whatever Columbus may have written. The Dominican transcribed some first-person passages but about eighty per cent of the text is paraphrased. Not only this, but Las Casas summarizes and corrects errors in Columbus's text, questions Columbus's perceptions and judgments, and makes comments on the basis of his own experience in the Indies. Not all of his commentary resides in the margins; some is embedded almost seamlessly in the paraphrase (Zamora 1992: 187–89, 190, 195 n. 15). Unfortunately, the navigator's *Letter to Santángel* is also only preserved in edited form and the extent of the editing cannot be determined. There is no original of this letter, which has been reconstructed from four Spanish versions as well as three Italian versions and one Latin version. The report of the first contact between Columbus and the Indigenous peoples is, then, contained in a lost document. This situation is not unusual for the early modern period (Hart 1994: 62–63).

A further complication lies in the fact that Las Casas's representation and interpretation of "men who came from the heavens" may be determined by his own religious beliefs. Columbus was the man who enabled the spread of Christianity to the Americas and so, for Christians, was part of the divine plan. Las Casas had a strong interest in interpreting "men who came from the sky" as a sign of recognition of divine origin. In short, we cannot be sure that Columbus's first encounters are faithfully represented. The Dominican's writings and Columbus's original words may truthfully represent the reactions of Native Americans, or they may not (one historian refers to "an improvisatory lie" on Columbus's part; Greenblatt 1992: 174). There can be no certainty (Hamlin 1994: 431).

One historian summarizes the difficulty most succinctly:

Lamentably, we can never recover the terms in which the vast majority of Native Americans represented the Europeans' arrival to themselves; what we have are the terms in which the Europeans represented what the natives thought – and (...) these inevitably embody distorting viewpoints and thus must be accepted only with considerable caution. (Hamlin 1994: 434)

Other key texts, by Jeronymite Friar Ramón Pané and by humanist intellectual Fernán Pérez de Oliva, make no reference to *cielo* as the Spaniards' origin (or attribute it only to one individual; see below). Yet these less widely publicized texts are informed by a greater knowledge of the Taínos of Hispaniola (Adorno 1991: 183). Pané learned about the Taínos when he accompanied Columbus on his second transatlantic voyage of 1493 and remained behind to live among them. Later he wrote an ethnographic text about what he had learned about their beliefs, *An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians* (ca. 1498). He made no reference at all to a supposed heavenly origin for the Spaniards; indeed, the only reference in his work to "heaven" was in a description of Taíno "idols" (*zemi*) which native people believed to be "in heaven" and to be immortal (Pané 1999: 3). In Pané's text, the identification of the bearded strangers is not based on their being "from heaven" but rather their being the source of destruction (Adorno 1991: 197 n. 57).

Pérez de Oliva wrote a treatise, *History of the Invention of the Indies* (c. 1525), about Columbus's voyages (based on the writings of the Milanese humanist Peter Martyr, who in turn used Pané's account) in which there was only one relatively insignificant reference to *cielo*. Pérez de Oliva's descriptions of the important initial encounters between Europeans and natives make clear that the strangers were seen as men. On landing on the north coast of Hispaniola, on the second voyage,

Columbus's party witnessed locals fleeing to the woods out of fear that the newcomers, *like their enemies* the Caribs, would kill and eat them (my italics; Pérez de Oliva 1965: 46). When the expedition arrived on Cuba, the local chief brought food and he and his people " marvelled at such *strange people*" who were very happy to be their friends (my italics; Pérez de Oliva 1965: 76). Here the reactions of natives are described in quite a realistic way, with no element of worshipping gods. In a matter of fact way, the account does report that one old Indian on Cuba gave the admiral a small basket of fruit and asked him if he was sent from the sky. This is the only reference in the treatise to this notion. The interpreter replied by explaining about "our princes and the noble things of Spain" (Pérez de Oliva 1965: 79). The notion that the Spaniards should come from the sky (with only a geographical connotation) is quite logical. This did not mean, however, that they came from the place of the origin of creation or of the after-life; the Taínos located the sites of before-life and after-life on their own landmass. However, the European identification of sky and heaven allowed this notion of "from the sky" to become a divine attribution (Hamlin 1994: 434).

Further light can be shed on the meaning of "from the sky" by considering the case of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, a Spanish conquistador and explorer who, as one survivor of a failed expedition to Florida, spent eight years (1528–36) trekking east to west across the southern part of the present-day United States and northern part of Mexico. Eventually his party was reduced to four: three white men and one black. The Spanish chronicler Oviedo wrote in his *General History of the Indies* (1535) that the Indians who came into contact with Cabeza de Vaca's party believed that they were "gente del cielo" – either "people from heaven" or "people from the sky" (Adorno 1991: 182; Fernández de Oviedo 1851–55 III: 610). On their arrival, native people greeted the Spanish party with sacred ceremonial gourds, which they said had special powers and also "came from the sky." These gourds were not from their own region, nor did they know their origin; they found them floating in rivers. Not knowing the ultimate origin of the gourds, they said they came from the sky. Here is an important indication that "coming from the sky" is a way of expressing "origin unknown" (Adorno 1991: 177).

Indeed, Cabeza de Vaca himself observed the true meaning of the phrase in the original text of his *Account* of 1542, in a sentence which was omitted in the 1555 edition and all subsequent editions: "Among all these peoples, it was held for very certain that we came from the sky because about all the things that they do not understand or have

information regarding their origins, they say that such phenomena come from the sky" (fol. 55v). The omission of this section from later editions perhaps accounts for the misunderstanding about the meaning. This casts a very different light on the natives' apprehension of the Spanish party. "Coming from the sky" continues to have a magical connotation since both gourds and strange men have extraordinary powers. But any sense of premonition or intuition of Christianity through the interpretation of the concept as "heavenly" or "divine" in the Christian sense must be set aside. Cabeza de Vaca makes no such claim and is careful to give as precise a meaning as possible to the notion of sky origins. It can only be speculation but perhaps Cabeza de Vaca's clarification about the meaning of "from the sky" was omitted in later editions precisely because it undermined the idea that native peoples were yearning for the advent of Christianity. At the Yaqui River, the Spanish party found, for the first time on their trek, evidence of Europeans: a buckle from a sword belt with a horseshoe nail on a native's neckpiece. Asked where it came from, one Indian said some men with beards like the Christians had come from the sky and arrived at that river and killed the Indians with their lances. The question of "unknown origin" is again handled by natives through attribution to the sky (Adorno 1991: 183–84). It seems fair to conclude that, when Indians said the Spaniards came from the sky, this was because they said this about all things that they did not understand, or had no information about (Wogan 1994: 421). Nothing in Cabeza de Vaca's account suggests that he and his companions were treated as "gods."

For every reference in Spanish accounts of first encounters in the Americas that suggests that Europeans were seen as divine, there are many more which refute the idea. True, Cabeza de Vaca and his companions were taken as "children of the sun" (*hijos del sol*) which might suggest the concept of the sun as a deity and the Spanish party as divine (Adorno 1991: 173, 196 n. 34; Cabeza de Vaca 1999 I: 165). In stark contrast with Columbus, this explorer spent many months at a time among native peoples, on whom he relied for his survival; he therefore had a strong interest in understanding the language and perspective of his hosts. And the Mayan Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel (one of many post-conquest Indigenous histories produced in northern Yucatán) also describes white men as "children of the sun." "Red were the beards of the children of the sun, the bearded ones from the east, when they arrived here in our land" (Roys 1967: 147–48).

But, conversely, the Chibcha (Muisca) native leader, Tundama (in modern-day Colombia), said to conquistador Baltasar Maldonado in

1539: “You well know that my people were bred with no fewer natural privileges than yours; we now know that you are not immortal or descended from the sun.” He refused to serve “someone who serves his king so badly” and still less those he considered more barbarian than his bitterest enemies for bathing their horses’ mouths in his people’s blood. The Spaniards may have defeated neighboring peoples, but Tundama warned: “Note well the survivors who await you, to undeceive you that victory is always yours” (Fernández de Piedrahita 1973: 400, translation by Brotherston 1979: 47–48; Hamlin 1994: 431).

How are we to explain these highly varied responses? There are two ways of looking at early native reactions. The first is that native peoples, in the beginning, were dazzled and viewed Europeans as something close to divinity, but then changed their minds with closer contact. According to this view, only upon the earliest exposure to Europeans did native societies entertain notions that the foreigners might be spiritual beings. Historian James Axtell, for example, comments how quickly Indian awe of Europeans in North America was replaced by concern about these very human newcomers:

As the initial honeymoon of contact gave way to conflict and the eruption of irreconcilable differences, naïve preconceptions gave way to more realistic notions, at once more complex and less optimistic. In Indian eyes, the strangers in their midst devolved fairly quickly from beneficent “gods” dropped from “the heavens,” to dangerously powerful “spirits” or shamans, and finally to all-too-human or even sub-human “enemies” who deserved to be killed before they did irreparable harm. (Axtell 1992: 73; as cited in Kicza 2003: 104)

Even then, to provoke initial awe, the Europeans had to display remarkable military capacity and perhaps the ability to target disease and death. But no Indian culture retained such a belief for long (Kicza 1994: 395). Whatever natives initially believed about Europeans and their trade goods, it did not take long after the development of reasonably regular direct contact for them to conclude that Europeans were human beings like themselves, or at least mortal (Trigger 1991: 1211). So, according to this interpretation, the first impressions natives had of Europeans and the initial strategies that they devised for dealing with them may have been strongly influenced by traditional *religious* beliefs, and where contact remained limited or indirect, these interpretations persisted without modification for long periods. But where relations became direct and increasingly intense, these interpretations were rapidly altered by *rational* assessments of what the Europeans were like and what they had to offer

(Trigger and Swagerty 1996: 375). While cultural beliefs may have significantly influenced Indian reactions in the early stages of their encounters with Europeans, in the long run *rationalist* calculations came to play the preponderant role (Trigger 1991: 1196).

The second way of looking at early native reactions is that, *from the start*, native peoples saw Europeans as more-than-human “beings of extraordinary power” rather than as anything approaching the divine, and therefore there was no great shift from cultural/religious interpretations to rational ones, but simply a growing awareness of the nature of their power. According to this view, it is misleading to distinguish too sharply between religious and rational considerations. The distinction is a Western perception, and both could exist alongside one another. Native rationality was present from the beginning in dealing with Europeans, in the sense that natives used their own understanding of the world, and their own thoughtful conclusions drawn from close observation of the newcomers, in order to fit them into the familiar. This view would emphasize the need to reject dichotomies in which Europeans are perceived as *either* humans *or* gods (Wogan 1994: 422). It is my belief that the evidence supports this second way of looking at the issue.

The place of the European stranger shifted in Indigenous cosmology but probably not as rapidly as some have suggested (e.g., Trigger 1991). Indigenous and European peoples did not have a spiritual view of each other at one moment and a rational view the next, nor did they have to choose between one and the other. In most cases, “mythic and historical modes of consciousness complement rather than oppose each other” (Hill 1988).

In general, the early chronicles portray native relations with Europeans as governed *from the start* by practical, pragmatic concerns. This does not mean that these relations were devoid of spiritual significance, but rather that both religious and pragmatic concerns coexisted. What is clear is that there is no evidence that native peoples were so overwhelmed on religious grounds by Europeans that they submitted to them or bowed before them as gods. As early as 1502, Spanish navigator and explorer Alonso de Ojeda, who had been authorized by the Crown to found a colony on the present-day Guajira Peninsula (between the extremities of present-day northeast Colombia and northwest Venezuela), on the coast which he had explored and charted on a previous voyage, established the first Spanish settlement on the mainland. But within three months, he was driven out not only by rebellion among his men but also by the Indigenous peoples who treated him not as a god but as a threat to be

resisted. A later attempt by Ojeda to establish a colony in the Gulf of Urabá, and by his associate Diego de Nicuesa at Nombre de Dios (Panama), in 1508–10 ended in ignominy and serious defeat at the hands of the Indigenous inhabitants.

Other explorers fared little better. In 1513, the same fate befell Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León, one of the first to record contacts with Indians on the coast of Florida (Trigger and Swagerty 1996: 373). In his first encounter, the locals tried to steal his boat and arms, fired arrows at his party and wounded two Castilians. Ponce's second voyage to Florida in 1521 was a total failure that ended in tragedy, when the conquistador was wounded in a skirmish with Indians and subsequently died on Cuba. Similarly, Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón's expedition to North Carolina in 1524 ended with an Indian attack and the death of most of the Spaniards, although their leader escaped (Fuson 2000: 106, 159, 179). Pánfilo de Narváez's initiative of 1528 to found a colony in North America (this was the expedition from which Cabeza de Vaca was one of the few survivors) laid waste to different parts of Florida before collapsing in disarray, with most of its participants lost to the sea or native attack (Hudson 1997: 38).

When, in 1539, Spanish conquistador Hernando de Soto's expedition landed on the Florida coastline in the region of Tampa Bay, it was immediately attacked by locals who had been given good reason by Narváez's expedition to fear and detest Spaniards (Narváez had thrown the chief's wife to the dogs and cut off the tip of his nose). The local presence of a Spanish captive, Juan Ortiz, who after twelve years was nativized and incorporated into Indian war parties contributed to familiarity with and contempt for the Spaniards (Hudson 1997: 66, 80–81). A common native attitude was expressed to Soto by the chief of Ocale:

I have long since learned who you Castilians are...through others of you who came years ago to my land [i.e. Narváez]; and I already know very well what your customs and behavior are like. To me you are professional vagabonds who wander from place to place, gaining your livelihood by robbing, sacking, and murdering people who have given you no offense. I want no manner of friendship or peace with people such as you, but instead prefer mortal and perpetual enmity. Granted that you are as valiant as you boast of being, I have no fear of you, since neither I nor my vassals consider ourselves inferior to you in valor. (Hudson 1997: 103)

The chief promised to make war upon the Spaniards as long as they remained, and mocked their desire to settle since they had brought no women with them. Despite remaining largely confined to camp by this hostility, the Spaniards still lost several men to the local Indians, who dug

up the corpses at night, cut them up and hung the body parts in trees. In retaliation, the newcomers managed to kill very few Indians. No sign of native veneration of Spaniards here. Even stiffer resistance lay ahead as Soto penetrated inland across the lower Mississippi River. One Indian chief, Aguacaleyquen, captured by the Spaniards, sent a message to another, assuring him that the newcomers could not be defeated in war for they were “sons of our own gods, the Sun and the Moon,” and begging him not to resist. But the recipient chief scoffed at a chief who was now a slave of the same people who had committed such cruelties in the past, and who were demons, not sons of the sun and moon, since they went about killing and robbing (Hudson 1997: 109–10). This exchange illustrates an important point, confirmed in many examples, that the language of “sons of gods” was a product of defeat and an expression of submission rather than an assessment independent of and prior to combat.

If native leaders provided food and shelter for Spanish intruders, it was because they heard that this was the most expedient way of getting rid of the invaders (Trigger and Swagerty 1996: 373). Even the official account reported that, when *caciques* (chiefs) wished to show Soto respect, he was addressed only as “powerful Lord” or “powerful and excellent Lord,” which suggests not deification but a proportionate sense of the conquistador’s status (Quinn 1979 II: 117, 139). Soto’s attempt to dominate the first really strong Indian group he met, the Choctaws and their chief Tascalusa, failed, and it was he and his men who were surrounded and burned out of the Choctaw town of Mabila (Quinn 1979 II: 90–91). The fierceness with which the Indians fought and the resultant casualties demoralized Soto and his remaining men to the extent that the viability of a successful colony was thrown in doubt (Hudson 1997: 248).

In the Guachoya area, near the Mississippi River, two different chiefs both rejected Spanish claims that Soto possessed spiritual powers or immortality. In 1541, frustrated in his attempts to discover the proximity of the sea, and on the verge of falling seriously ill, Soto sent an emissary to try to impress Quigaltum, the greatest chief in the region, who presided over what survivors of the expedition believed to be the richest and most important province they had encountered, informing him that:

He was the son of the sun and that wherever he went all obeyed him and did him service. He requested him to choose his friendship and come there where he was, for he would be very glad to see him and in token of love and obedience that he should bring him something of what was most esteemed in that land. By the same Indian, he [Quigaltum] answered him saying that with respect to what he said

about being the son of the sun, let him dry up the great river and he would believe him. With respect to the rest, he was not accustomed to visit any one. On the contrary, all of whom he had knowledge visited and served him and obeyed him and paid him tribute, either by force or of their own volition. Consequently, if he wished to see him, let him cross there. If he came in peace, he would welcome him with special goodwill; if he came in war, he would await him in the town where he was, for not him or any other would he move one foot backward. (Hudson 1997: 341; Quinn 1979 II: 139)

Soto was enraged by this reply but was too sick to react. When he died of a viral ailment shortly after, his men buried him in the Mississippi River to prevent local Indians from learning about his mortality. When a local lord, the chief of Guachoya, who was encouraging the Spaniards to attack Quigaltum, asked where the conquistador was, the new Spanish commander, Luis de Moscoso, told him that the conquistador had not died but had only gone to the sky for a few days, as he had often done before, to confer with the gods. The cacique, however, believed that he was dead and ordered two young Indians to be killed to accompany him on his way, an act which was traditional in that area at the funerals of chiefs. Moscoso insisted that since the commander was not dead, the two Indians should be set free (Hudson 1997: 350–51; Trigger and Swagerty 1996: 372; Quinn 1979 II: 141).

There was invariably a political aspect to native expressions of belief or disbelief in the special powers of Europeans. When the cacique of Naguatex came to beg pardon of Moscoso for having attacked his men, he humbly asserted: “I believe that you and your men must be immortal and that your Lordship is Lord of the realm of nature, since everything submits to and obeys you, even the hearts of men” (Hudson 1997: 362; Quinn 1979 II: 144). Such a statement is very rare. It is hardly merited either, simply by defeat in one battle. If uttered, the words were flattery. Mistranslation is also a likely possibility. It should also be borne in mind that speeches put into the mouths of native elites like Naguatex were written after the fact, in this case, by the Portuguese author called “the gentleman of Elvas” whose identity is unknown but who accompanied Soto’s expedition and published his account in 1557, almost twenty years later. The speech may be little more than a narrative device created for European readers. It seems reasonable to conclude, though, that Soto was treated as a powerful chief with whom an alliance might be desirable or to whom submission might be inevitable (Trigger 1991: 1211). Similarly, when the expedition arrived at the Mississippi River, it encountered the great chief of Aqijio who arrived with a fleet of 200 canoes and possibly

as many as 7,000 Indians. This chief told Soto he had come to serve him because he had heard he was the greatest lord on earth. This was pure flattery that was almost immediately replaced by threats and arrows launched at the Spaniards (Hudson 1997: 284–85).

In declaring that he was the “son of the sun,” Soto engaged in self-apotheosis (Trigger and Swagerty 1996: 372). It has been suggested that the divine attribution may have originated from the Europeans themselves as much as from the Indians. Certainly Soto was not unique. Even more blatant was conquistador Fernando Alarcón, who in 1540 captained a reconnaissance expedition on the west coast of Mexico, as one part of an expedition sent by Viceroy Mendoza. While the main party under the command of Francisco Vázquez de Coronado traveled by land, Alarcón, with two ships, took a supposedly parallel course along the Pacific coast, hoping ultimately to establish contact with Coronado, and to find a water route which might lead to the legendary cities of Cíbola of northern Mexico and beyond, perhaps to the Atlantic Ocean (Elsasser 1979: 9; Hamlin 1994: 432–33, 1996: 421). He found the mouth of the Colorado River and sailed up it for over two weeks. The Indians encountered almost undoubtedly were Cocopas, of the Yuman linguistic stock, while the Spaniards’ interpreter was perhaps Pima or Papago (Uto-Aztecan stock) (Elsasser 1979: 32 n. 5). The newcomers often relied on interpreters for whom neither of the two languages being translated was a native tongue. In his account, Alarcón outlined in unambiguous detail his attempt on this trip to encourage and to exploit native belief in his divinity and superhuman power. By means of “signs,” he fathomed that locals revered the sun, whereupon he indicated that was his place of origin, and was rewarded with a gift of large amounts of food. Further up the river, one of his Indian interlocutors “understood the language of the interpreter” and sought detail about the origin of the Spaniards. The interpreter told him that their Captain was “the child of the Sun, and that he was sent of the Sun to them, and they would have received him for their king.” The Indian wanted to know “what nation we were, and whence we came, and whether we came out of the water, or out of the earth, or from heaven.” Alarcón answered that they were Christians, sent by the sun. Asked how this could be so, since the sun was high in the sky and never stood still, and had never before sent anyone, the conquistador agreed this was so, but at sunrise and sunset, the sun came near the earth, where his dwelling was, and made Christians there. Alarcón had been sent, he said, to make friends with this native people, provide things they lacked, and discourage them from making war on each other. The Indian

asked why he had not come sooner, since the wars had lasted a while, to which the conquistador responded that at that time he was only a child. Asked whether he had come to be their lord and expected them to serve him, Alarcón, “supposing that I should not please him if I should have said yea [yes]” answered that he came not to be their Lord, but their brother, and to give them what he had. Asked whether he was the sun’s kinsman or his son, he replied he was his son; and whether the other Spaniards were also the children of the sun, he answered no, but that they were all born in the same country as him.

Then he cried out with a loud voice, and said, seeing that you do us so much good, and will not have us to make war, and are the child of the Sun, we will receive you for our Lord, and always serve you. Therefore we pray that you will not depart hence nor leave us. Suddenly he turned to the people and began to tell them that I was the child of the Sun, and that therefore they should all choose me for their Lord. (Hakluyt³ 1598–1600 IX: 287; as quoted, with spelling modernized, by Elsasser 1979: 18; see also Hamlin 1996: 421)

The account should be approached with caution since we only have Alarcón’s word for it that this conversation took place, and in these words. One historian judges that Alarcón was presumably putting most of the content in the mouth of the interpreter, while perhaps also trying to make it sound as if the interpreter was answering for himself. Certainly the Indians farther to the north and perhaps these Indians too probably had some awareness of Alarcón’s true mission, which was to pacify the inhabitants so that they could be exploited with a minimum of trouble (Elsasser 1979: 33 n. 24). It should also be borne in mind that the translation itself may not necessarily reflect well the original. Although we should be cautious about what it reveals about native thinking, we are on more solid ground regarding what it reveals about the conquistador. He is happy to admit that he intended to engage in an act of self-apotheosis. Insofar as it tells us something about native peoples, it shows that they ask pragmatic, rational questions, within a mental framework that accepts the possibility that a man may also be a child of the sun. Even here, the natives understand that Alarcón is human. No matter how

³ The Hakluyt edition is used despite its age since there is no surviving original Spanish version. Alarcón’s full account of his expedition has never been found. A summary or paraphrase of the full account was printed in Italian in 1556. It cannot be known whether the Italian version is an accurate translation or transcription of the Spanish original since the latter is lost. The historian cited here considers this version as good as translations of the twentieth century (Elsasser 1979: 8).

powerful Europeans were understood to be in spiritual terms, they did not cease to be men.

* * *

THE EUROPEAN MYTHOLOGY OF THE INDIES I

The Myth of the Earthly Paradise and the Myth of the Reconquest of Jerusalem

The greatest achievement of Christopher Columbus, who sailed west in order to make landfall in Asia by a shorter route, was permanently to connect the Old World of the Eurasian and African landmass with the New World of the American continents. And yet the navigator's sights had always been set on a higher prize: to make contact with wealthy and powerful rulers in East Asia (or the "Indies," the name then given to the region east and southeast of India) who would assist the Europeans to retake Jerusalem for Christianity and usher in the end times prophesied in the biblical Book of Revelation. This objective was inspired by traditional mythologies about the East which included legendary rulers such as the priest-king Prester John, and the Grand Khan of China described by the thirteenth-century Venetian explorer Marco Polo, as well as biblical concepts such as the Earthly Paradise, the Garden of Eden, and the Fountain of Youth. The great navigator's thinking was inspired as much by messianic prophecy and by late antique and medieval mythology as it was by scientific method.

The key both to Columbus's greatest achievement – locating and understanding the significance of the new continent – and to his greatest ambition – recovering Jerusalem and fulfilling biblical prophecy – lay in the significance of the Orinoco River. Approaching the South American mainland (as opposed to the islands of the Caribbean) for the first time during his third voyage to the New World, he came upon the delta of that vast river. Observing the immense volume of fresh water that poured into the Atlantic Ocean, he wrote in his journal, on August 13, 1498: "I believe this is a very large continent which until now has remained unknown." Hitherto, Columbus had maintained the Asiatic nature of the new lands that he had discovered. Now, realizing that such quantities of water could only have originated in a continent, and knowing that there was no scope for an extension of the Eurasian land mass in his present location – the Gulf of Paria, between Venezuela and Trinidad – he concluded that the continent upon which he had stumbled must be

distinct from Asia (Fernández Armesto 1992b: 127–28). Yet as he sailed away, Columbus remained more interested in the exciting implications of this discovery for his greater ambition, in which spiritual concerns took precedence over material ones: he believed he was close to discovering the location of the Garden of Eden. He wrote in his journal: “The Holy Scriptures record that Our Lord made the Earthly Paradise, and that He planted in it the Tree of Life, and from that spot there issues a fountain. From this place the four principal rivers of the world take their courses.” He continued that neither the Greeks nor the Romans had documented the actual site of the Earthly Paradise, “nor have I ever found it to have been placed upon any world maps – except that I do know that it is to be found here,” referring to Paria. The same voluminous waters of the Orinoco River which had convinced Columbus of the continental nature of his discovery now confirmed that he had found the location of the infinitely more exciting Earthly Paradise. “I also believe that the waters [of the Orinoco] which I have been describing must issue from that place [Paradise] even though their sources are far away (...) I have never either read, nor even heard of fresh water arriving in such huge streams and then mixing with seawater” (Las Casas 1989: 189–90; Moffitt and López 1996: 18–19). The fresh water and the extremely mild temperature of the Gulf of Paria, which seemed unnaturally perfect, appeared to confirm the theory. The river mouths of the Orinoco, like those of Paradise, were four in number (Genesis 2:10–15 named the Four Rivers of Paradise; Moffitt and López 1996: 27). Tradition located Eden in the extreme east, and Columbus was sure that he was at “the end of the Orient” (Fernández Armesto 1992b: 129–31; Jara and Spadaccini 1992: 14). Remarkably, determined to have succeeded in his quest for the Earthly Paradise, Columbus turned his back on the idea of a new continent. Instead, he subsequently reaffirmed the Asiatic nature of his discoveries, to which hypothesis he remained committed until the end of his life. This extraordinary “sleight of mind,” or manipulation of his own thinking, may be attributed to the powerful mythology that held him in its thrall.

*

The process of the European discovery and interpretation of America has often been portrayed as the act of scientific, rational, modern Europeans, who imposed themselves on myth-bound, irrational, premodern Indigenous peoples. It has been supposed that the moment of contact brought together Europeans who made interpretations based on reason

and rational enquiry, and non-Europeans who made interpretations based on mythology. But this dichotomy is too starkly drawn. Indigenous peoples also used reason in their assessments of the newcomers, while Europeans made sense of the Americas in terms of their own mythology. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Europeans employed, both in early encounters and later, interpretations that were almost entirely mythological. If this fact is appreciated, it comes as less of a surprise to learn that, as well as a man of science, Columbus was a mystic, moved by a deep spiritual purpose, rooted in Christian and biblical myth and tradition.

The great explorer was a complex personality whose expectations were grounded in contemporary scientific theory, in his own experiences, and in legendary, visionary and allegoric geography characterized in ancient and medieval didactic treatises and maps. Geographic myth guided the Admiral of the Ocean Sea as often as did actual experience and scientific knowledge. (West 1992: 519)

Columbus's way of thinking, like that of his contemporaries, was as much medieval as modern. The motives behind the ocean-going voyages of discovery of the fifteenth century were: to gain access to alternative trade routes to the East; to find the source of the gold of North Africa (particularly for Portuguese explorations which charted the western coast of Africa); to convert pagans to Christianity; and to make contact with legendary Christian rulers who might be found in the East. These motives were essentially medieval, not modern. Columbus explicitly acknowledged in his written contracts with the sponsors of his voyages, Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, that his principal objectives were not only to discover new trade routes and new lands, but to make contact with eastern potentates, such as the Grand Khan of China, who might assist western Christians in retaking Jerusalem.

One of the most potent myths that inspired fifteenth-century voyages of exploration was that of Prester (Presbyter) John, the supposed ruler of a Christian realm of immense power and wealth located somewhere beyond the Muslim lands in Asia or Africa (this was possibly a reference to the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia or else the Nestorian Christians, a fifth-century break-away sect which spread in Persia, China, and Mongolia). From the twelfth century a letter (c. 1165), purportedly sent by this mythical figure to the Byzantine emperor Manuel Comnenus, circulated widely in Europe, and nourished the conviction that Prester John was willing to act as a potential ally for Christian Europe against Islamic powers. His wish-fulfilling spectral presence in the European

imagination came to influence the attitudes of the Western world towards Asia (and eventually the Americas) well into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Medieval prose narratives also told of the exploits, including a journey to Paradise, of the fourth century BC king of Macedon Alexander the Great. According to legends, the great hero had come upon a large river in India, which was called either the Ganges or the Phsyon (the latter was one of the four rivers of Paradise in Genesis). Setting sail on this river to find the Earthly Paradise, the king arrived at the walls of what he thought was a great city, where he received a magical stone with occult properties. On his return, he learned that Paradise, where he had been, was not a city but a walled garden, where the Day of Universal Judgment would take place. These narratives became a major source for the credibility later accorded to the legendary Prester John, whose letter appeared to situate his Edenic kingdom alongside the banks of the Indus River, which supposedly had its source in Paradise. Here too was the Fountain of Youth, a spring which, once tasted, would permanently confer on a man the age of thirty-two years. By the time of Marco Polo, Eden was supposed to be located in Ceylon or in tropical islands further into Southeast Asia (Moffitt and López 1996: 41–42, 45).

Still older mythologies surrounded Christian communities supposedly founded on the south coast of India by the Apostle St. Thomas, who had been chosen by Jesus to spread the Gospel to the furthest reaches of the known world. Without St. Thomas as the forerunner of the co-religionist communities of potential allies whom the Europeans hoped to find in the east, Prester John would have been impossible. Stories about the mission of St. Thomas were central to the Portuguese understanding of the Indies. The voyage of Vasco da Gama, who reached India by the sea route round the Cape of Good Hope in 1498, was initially motivated by the desire of the Portuguese King John II to find Prester John. As this legendary ruler had, by this time, been clearly identified as an African king, any Asian Christians were understood to be the descendants of those to whom the apostle had preached. Da Gama believed that all non-Muslim Asian peoples and polities were Christian, and he brought home to Portugal descriptions of the existence of Christian kingdoms across the whole of South and Southeast Asia, including Sumatra, Siam, and Pegu (Burma). His confusion of an image of the Hindu goddess Kali with the Virgin Mary in Calicut in 1498 emphasizes how the St. Thomas mythology influenced what he thought he saw in India. The dream of assistance by a distant Christian king against Muslim lands in the Eastern

Mediterranean foundered on the reality of the Christian communities of the Indian Ocean, which, with no particular state of their own, did not live up to Portuguese expectations. However, this did not diminish the enthusiasm of John II's successor, King Manuel I, who had been imbued with millennial, eschatological theology from an early age (Knobler 2017: 1, 2, 57–61; Moffitt and López 1996: 43, 54).

“Eschatology” refers to conceptions of the last things and of the end of time. “Millennial” refers to the belief held by some Christians, on the authority of the Book of Revelation 20: 4–6, that, after his Second Coming, Christ would establish his kingdom on earth and would reign over it for 1,000 years (the millennium which gives its name to the movement) before the Last Judgment. According to the Book of Revelation, the citizens of that kingdom will be Christian martyrs, who are to be resurrected for the purpose 1,000 years in advance of the general resurrection of the dead. In general, Christian millenarians (those who believe in the millennium) have interpreted that part of the prophecy in a liberal rather than literal sense: they have equated the martyrs with the suffering faithful – themselves – and have expected the Second Coming in their lifetime. The Book of Revelation makes extensive use of visions, symbols, and allegory, especially in connection with future events, which allows considerable room for different interpretations. Millennial movements that emphasize the participation of a divine savior in human flesh are termed “messianic.” Much millenarian thought is also “apocalyptic,” which is to say imbued with considerable urgency exerted by the conviction that the end of time is imminent. Hence, the title of the Book of Revelation in Greek is the *Apocalypse of John*; the word “apocalypse,” from the Greek, literally means “revelation,” “that which is uncovered” (Cohn 1970: 31; Graziano 1999: 7–8; Griffiths 2017: 383–84; Vanderwood 1992: 232). It signifies “the disclosure of the hidden divine purpose in history, to which common usage has added the dimension of imminent crisis” (Reeves 1984: 40; as quoted in Delaney 2012: 254 n. 10).

Speculation about the last things and the end of time was acute in the fifteenth century. An important concept with eschatological meaning was that of the “Last World Emperor,” a mythical figure dating from medieval Christian writings, supposed to be a king who would unite all Christian realms under his rule in preparation for the final conflict with the Antichrist before Jesus's Second Coming. This role was projected onto several kings over the centuries, including Iberian kings of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. One of these was Manuel I of

Portugal, for whom the recapture of Jerusalem and assumption of the title “Emperor of the East” or “Last World Emperor” was as important a motive for voyages of exploration as any economic or mercantile enterprise. Another king who was the subject of eschatological expectations was Ferdinand II of Aragon, the sponsor of Columbus.

Spanish explorations, no less than Portuguese, aimed to situate what was discovered across the Atlantic into a preexisting cosmology of fantastical people and places. Columbus’s mythologies and the search for allies in crusading endeavors led him to conceive his plans for his voyages within a larger, more mystical scheme for Spanish domination of the world. Spanish expansion in the Western hemisphere, like Portuguese voyages to the east, began as a continuation of the search for allies in Central Asia, such as Prester John and his Mongol successors, for which reason Columbus left Spain in 1492 carrying letters destined for such figures. His initial search was akin to earlier efforts to make contact with the “khans of China.” According to Marco Polo, whom Columbus had read, the khans had always been inclined toward friendship with Christian rulers, and held a close association with Prester John. Despite the fact that, by 1492, the Yuan dynasty and its khans had not ruled China for over a century, the Grand Khan was a clear object of Columbus’ mission, mentioned, as he is, no less than eighteen times in Bartolomé de Las Casas’s rendition of Columbus’s own journals (Knobler 2017: 2, 4, 70, 71).

Much of the millennial speculation surrounding Spanish exploration derived from the writings of the thirteenth-century Catalan scientist and mystic Arnau de Vilanova, who prophesied that “he who will restore the ark of Zion will come from Spain.” After their conquest of Granada in 1492, anticipation of the millennial role of the Spanish monarchs was heightened. Sixteenth-century Franciscan missionary in New Spain (the Spanish name for Mexico), Gerónimo de Mendieta, came to see the Spanish as the new chosen people of God, in a parallel to the patriarch Abraham. According to an old tradition, The Last World Emperor was supposed to come from hiding to unite the world under a single, Christian banner, fight the Antichrist and restore Jerusalem and the Holy Places to Christianity, then abdicate his role to God, for whom he had been regent. Over a dozen writers declared various Spanish monarchs to be the Last World Emperor in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Poets and mystics made the connection between the New World conquests and the possibility of a crusade to the Holy Land palpable: Spain was destined

to capture Jerusalem, with its king destined to lead his people and, indeed, all Christendom, to their final eschatological salvation (Knobler 2017: 72). This was indeed a “mythology of the Indies.”

Columbus was obsessed with the recovery of Jerusalem and wrote of it on many occasions, including in his letter of March 1493 to the Spanish monarchs; in his so-called *Book of Prophecies* (see below); and in a letter of February 1502 addressed to Pope Alexander VI. He even provided a fund for its recapture in his will (Sweet 1986: 381). His intention was for the Spanish monarchs to use the profits of the New World for crusading.

And he [Columbus] says that he hopes to God that on his return . . . there would be found a cask of gold . . . and that they would have found the mine of gold . . . and that in so great quantity that the Sovereigns within three years would undertake and prepare to go and conquer the Holy Sepulcher; “for so,” says he, “I declared to your Highnesses that all the gain of this my Enterprise should be spent on the conquest of Jerusalem. (December 26, 1492; Columbus 1963: 139)

His claim that in the Gulf of Paria he was near the Earthly Paradise linked the New World to eschatological prophecies regarding Castilian divine election; the conquest of Paradise would allow the final crusade to come to pass (Knobler 2017: 73).

Columbus’s apocalyptic vision of the world and of the special role that he was destined to play in the unfolding of events that would presage the end of time was a major stimulus for his voyages (Moffitt Watts 1985: 74). His strong conviction that he was predestined to fulfill a number of prophecies in preparation for the coming of the Antichrist and the end of the world is revealed in what historians have called his *Book of Prophecies*, but which he entitled a *Notebook of authorities, statements, opinions and prophecies on the subject of the recovery of God’s holy city and Mount Zion, and on the discovery and evangelization of the islands of the Indies, and of all other peoples and nations*. His title establishes the link in his mind between his discoveries in the Indies, the evangelization of the entire world, and the recovery of Jerusalem. It was a commonplace at this time to refer to Mount Zion, on top of which sits the Holy Temple, as a symbol of the Holy Land. The *Book of Prophecies*, compiled during the years 1501–02, was intended as material for a poem to be addressed to the Spanish monarchs as an explanation of his vision (West and Kling 1992: 86). Columbus collected prophetic and millennial writings and biblical passages regarding two major themes: the salvation of the world;

and the recapture of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Holy Temple (Knobler 2017: 74). Essentially it is an assembly of every passage in the Bible, as well as in other classical and medieval writings, including the Church Fathers, that could have been construed as prophesying the discovery of America; and more specifically that he, Columbus, had been chosen by God as His instrument to bring to completion the ancient prophecies for the rescue of Christianity before the Apocalypse, which was only 155 years away by his calculations. Evident was his great sense of self-awareness as a man of destiny who had made it possible that even the most remote, undiscovered islands would be brought into the Christian fold before the world ends. His own name – Cristoforo or, in Latin, Cristo-ferens, “Christ-bearer,” “the Messenger of God” – indicated his divinely ordained mission to fulfill all that the biblical prophets had foretold. It was he who had helped expand Christendom to all the heathen in the world and provide the gold needed to finance the great crusade that would recapture the Holy Sepulcher from the infidels and allow its rebuilding, so that thanks to his discoveries, Christians from a now entirely converted world could assemble there, in a prelude to the Last Days (Jara and Spadaccini 1992: 16; Moffitt Watts 1985: 93–94; West and Kling 1992: 2–5, 8).

The *Book of Prophecies* demonstrates that for Columbus, biblical truths held an equal place with scientific knowledge (West and Kling 1992: 9). He included quotes from the Psalms and the biblical prophets Daniel, Ezekiel, and Isaiah, and cited the twenty-fifth chapter of the prophecy of Jeremiah, which predicted the destruction of Jerusalem, and foresaw the final, universal divine judgment upon all nations. Columbus was heavily influenced by the eschatology of fourteenth-century French Cardinal and theologian Pierre d’Ailly, whose work *Picture of the World* (1410) (a compendium of medieval geography and cosmology) had led him to believe that he would find the Terrestrial Paradise in a temperate zone beneath the equator (Moffitt Watts 1985: 97; Pagden 1993: 22). Evidence of the role that the House of Aragon was to play in the recapture of Jerusalem lay, according to Columbus, in the teaching of the twelfth-century Italian theologian Joachim of Fiore that the age of renewal, the restoration of Zion, was to begin in Spain (in fact, as noted above, Arnau de Vilanova was the source of this idea) (Moffitt Watts 1985: 95; West and Kling 1992: 82). In King Ferdinand (one of whose titles was “King of Jerusalem”) he saw a new David, whose mission was to rebuild the Temple, a prerequisite for Christ’s return.

The navigator's understanding of his own role is revealed in the letter from his fourth voyage, wherein he quoted the following lines of first-century AD Roman philosopher Seneca's *Medea*:

There will come an age in the far off years when the Ocean shall unloose the bonds of things, when the whole broad earth shall be revealed, when Tethys shall disclose new worlds and Thule not be the limit of the lands. (Seneca 1960: 260–61)

He also wrote in his later years (in a letter of 1500):

God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth about which Our Lord was speaking through St. John in the Apocalypse [chapter twenty-one] after having spoken of it through the mouth of Isaiah. He made me His messenger, and He showed me that place. (West 1992: 521–22)

This belief that Columbus had located the Garden of Eden and unveiled a new continent rendered the journeys of immense and immediate eschatological moment. If the dawning of the millennium were impossible before the diffusion of the gospel throughout the world, and now suddenly the concealed areas of the world were disclosed, then the millennial morn was not far off, awaiting only the conquest of the New World, the conversion of the heathens, and the deliverance of Jerusalem. (Sweet 1986: 379–80)

The framework of interpretation established by Columbus was set at an early stage and was not easily abandoned. His *idée fixe* of the Earthly Paradise was formed soon after the first discoveries. The first reference to the newly discovered lands as the Earthly Paradise was dated February 21, 1493, in reference to the island of Cuba, five full years before he identified the Gulf of Paria as the site of Eden (Moffitt and López 1996: 17, 53). Another *idée fixe* was the expectation of finding the legendary mines of King Solomon, the American location of which changed in a similar fashion to that of the Earthly Paradise. The navigator assured Pope Alexander VI that it was on Hispaniola that he had located the legendary mines (Pagden 1993: 19). Conversely, when on his fourth voyage along the coasts of Central America he found evidence of abundant gold in Veragua, he claimed that this province was the biblical Ophir, the mines from which Solomon had taken the gold to build the temple at Jerusalem. The location might change but the concept did not. Las Casas emphasized the idea that Columbus had discovered the Earthly Paradise, which became a standard motif in the representation of America. Amerigo Vespucci also claimed that the Earthly Paradise was to be found in the New World.

This framework reveals how Europeans integrated what was new and strange about America into the context of the familiar and known. As one

historian says, “the first Europeans to reach America expected to find there things that they already knew” (MacCormack 1995: 79). Columbus’s descriptions of Caribbean islanders, for all their sharpness, still convey classical and biblical overtones. It was not the innocent but the selective eye which first viewed America (Elliott 1976: 17). There never was an innocent eye, an empty mirror that reflected simply what was “out there.” When Columbus arrived in the Caribbean, he brought with him an entire set of preconceived ideas, and he described what he saw in the light of long-established European notions about cultural difference and about the nature of human society (MacCormack 1995: 79). His encounter was “the product of expectations conditioned by imaginary worlds conjured up long before his arrival” (Lutz 2007: 2; as quoted in Fenton 2020: 11).

This means that America and its inhabitants were not so much “discovered” as gradually “invented” (O’Gorman 1961). The Old World came to impose its own values, perceptions and prejudices upon things and peoples belonging to the New World (Moffitt and López 1996: 103–4).

Their immediate reaction was to evaluate America and the Americans – actually to “invent” them – according to certain culturally enshrined patterns that seemed most natural or logical to them. Their initial perceptions directly, almost inevitably, arose from what the Europeans already brought with them in their heads: a fixed content, a psychological baggage of hoary myths and legends, many of them dealing with India and the Asiatic Indians. If one doubted in particular the enduring power of those pre-established Gangetic images, one need now only recall how Native Americans are still, most tenaciously, called “Indians.” (Moffitt and López 1996: 4–5)

The continued use even today of the term “Indians” to refer to descendants of the Indigenous inhabitants of the Americas testifies to the staying power of the early mythology of the Indies.

The Myth of the Marvelous East and the Myths of the Classical Tradition

There were two sources of received wisdom which were applied to the Americas: the “marvelous east” and the classical tradition.

Extraordinary tales about the Far East were familiar in late fifteenth-century Europe, spread by medieval travelers and traders, the most important of whom was the Venetian Marco Polo who visited India and China (known in medieval Europe as Cathay) in the last quarter of the

thirteenth century. The author who penned Marco Polo's *Travels* (c. 1299) on his behalf famously included colorful and fantastical passages, such as the sight of dog-headed men on the Andaman Islands (Robinson 1993: 9). The most widely circulated work of travel writing in the medieval period was the fictional *Travels* (c. 1357) of the fictitious English knight Sir John Mandeville, written by an unknown author, who may have been a French cleric, but who never visited any of the lands described in his account, instead making use of a variety of sources, mixing both real and imaginary journeys (Phillips 1996: 28). His famous work survives in nearly 250 manuscripts and was one of the first books to be printed (1470) (West 1992: 525). Mandeville excited his readers by offering vivid and fantastical descriptions of marvelous realms, among them the kingdom of Prester John. He also played up the prevalence of monstrous humans in the extremes of the world: in the islands surrounding the Indies, there were supposedly giants with one eye only, in the middle of their foreheads; people without heads who had eyes in each shoulder, and mouths in their chest; and dog-headed men and women. In Columbus's time, such monstrous humans of the islands of the Indian Ocean were depicted in humanist⁴ Hartmann Schedel's illustrated world history *Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493). Citing the first-century AD Roman scientist Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (c. 77 AD), Church Father St. Augustine's *City of God* (426) and seventh-century Bishop Isidore of Seville's *The Etymologies* (c. 615–30) as sources, Schedel depicted and described some of the inhabitants of India, including dog-headed men who talked by barking; men with only one eye in the forehead; men with no nose and otherwise flat faces; individuals with half the form of men, and half that of horses (centaurs); women with beards down to the breast, but no hair on their heads; and one-legged men whose feet were so large that they could be used as parasols. These illustrations were published in 1493 before any European could have had the opportunity to see authentic pictures of Native Americans (Moffitt and López 1996: 85–86, 94–95, 121).

Columbus, at times, attributed to Native Americans fantastic attributes that can only have come from his reading of classical sources and of

⁴ Humanism was a system of education and mode of inquiry that originated in northern Italy during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and later spread through continental Europe and England. The term is applied to a variety of Western beliefs, methods, and philosophies that place central emphasis on human rather than transcendental values. Classical history and literature were appreciated as a source of inspiration and as a vehicle for conveying new ideas. www.britannica.com/topic/humanism.

medieval literature dealing with the “marvelous east.” Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* was an important source of information on human populations, and an important part of his legacy was the fascination with the monstrous and fabulous at the expense of systematic inquiry into the normal functioning of ordinary, if foreign, societies. Pierre d’Ailly’s *Picture of the World* preserved the lists of monstrous populations from Pliny into late medieval times, and was read and annotated by Columbus, and led him to seek one-eyed or dog-headed races of men (Léry 1990: xxii). Schedel’s *Nuremberg Chronicle* was published at almost the same time as the composition of Columbus’s *Letter to Santángel*, written on the navigator’s return in 1493 from his first transatlantic voyage and which was the first source of public information about the Americas. In November 1492, he wrote in his journal about an island inhabited by people with only one eye in their forehead, in other words the classical Cyclops. His assumption that these people must be cannibals fits with Mandeville’s description of one-eyed cannibal giants in Asia. Columbus also wrote about people born with tails and others with dog-like snouts, both of whom were described by Pliny the Elder and by Mandeville (Moffitt and López 1996: 123). This mythological mindset extended beyond Columbus. The Governor of Cuba, Diego Velázquez, later told Hernando Cortés to watch out for dog-headed people on his voyage in 1519. In the late sixteenth century, English explorer Walter Raleigh (Raleigh) reported news that he received of headless humans with their faces in the middle of their chests. Such a creature had been spoken of by Pliny the Elder and by Isidore of Seville as a monster native to Libya; Mandeville had placed them in India (Moffitt and López 1996: 124–25).

Although Columbus was the first to write about the Americas, he was not the most important influence on the thinking of contemporaries, since his writings were not widely publicized. Instead, it was others who took up the baton – in particular Amerigo Vespucci, a Florentine explorer who offered his services as navigator to both Spain and Portugal; and Pietro Martire d’Anghiera (Peter Martyr), a Milanese humanist resident at the Spanish court, who never set foot in America. So first-hand accounts provided by eyewitnesses were supplemented and often superseded by commentaries by copyists or interpreters, who lacked personal direct experience. It was Martyr’s *Decades of the New World*, the first comprehensive published history of the Americas, originally written in Latin in the form of a collection of letters, which made Columbus’ discoveries widely known to literate Europeans. Begun as early as 1493, as soon as the great navigator returned, and not published in full until 1530 (though

parts appeared as early as 1511), it included material based on extensive interviews with the actual explorers, including Columbus himself (Moffitt and López 1996: 19). Martyr's writings, strongly influenced by the Italian Renaissance, were suffused with classical references. He characterized the inhabitants of the Indies in terms taken from classical literature; they went naked, living in a Golden Age, without knowledge of money, and without laws. They lacked all knowledge of writing, and practiced primitive communism, with no private property, and no sense of "mine" and "yours." This was one of the first expressions of an image of Indigenous peoples as the "ideal savage," living in some prelapsarian (i.e., characteristic of the time before the Fall of Man; innocent and unspoiled) stage of human existence. The lost Golden Age, the springtime of the human race, as described by first-century BC Roman poets Horace and Ovid, was both a place and a time; a place where land was so fertile that corn, vines, and figs grew spontaneously, and men had no steel or iron to make weapons, and did not make war on each other; and a time when the innocent human race lived on acorns and honey, and trees bore fruit all year round (Léry 1990: xxiii). This notion of the Golden Age from classical antiquity merged with the Christian concept of Paradise and the biblical Garden of Eden to become a principal part of the framework to explain American realities (Moffitt and López 1996: 68). The idea which so captivated Columbus, that Paradise was located in a very temperate zone in the Far East, became widely known due to publicity by Martyr (Moffitt and López 1996: 19). Even so, Martyr's image was not an unadulterated utopia; he admitted the prevalence of warfare between villages and expressed repugnance at reports of cannibalism (Brading 1991: 16).

The second major figure in the propagation of the image of America was Florentine merchant and navigator Amerigo Vespucci, whose writings became bestsellers, particularly his *New World* (1503), a letter recounting his second voyage. Publication of this work was far more widespread than Columbus's *Letter* and his description of Indian customs was far more detailed and vivid. The Florentine adventurer's account was also much longer than the Genoese navigator's and its illustrations were more striking. Whereas Columbus wrote in a somber, sparse, and disjointed style, Vespucci's writings were coherent and lively, like novels, even sensationalist. His letters were printed in numerous translations and were included in big literary compilations as well as reproduced in broadsheets. It was Vespucci who created the image of America as the realm of cannibal feasts and sexual orgies. A shadow has been thrown over the Florentine as a source because of the questionable authenticity of both

some of the letters attributed to him and of some of his claimed navigations. Vespucci came to Spain in around 1492 and soon after, he participated in some of the early voyages of discovery made by the Spaniards to the New World. His claim to have been on a voyage which touched the coast of Central America in 1497 (which would have meant he set foot on the mainland before Columbus) has been contested. What is certain is that, beginning in 1501, Vespucci offered his services to Portugal and he participated in at least two Portuguese voyages – in 1501 and 1504 – that reached America. Vespucci omits mention of the actual captains of his voyages, and gives the false impression that he himself commanded all the voyages he mentions in his letters. In fact, he was a subordinate pilot on the Portuguese expeditions (Moffitt and López 1996: 145, 146, 266). However, his real achievement was essentially literary. *New World* is a Renaissance fable; it was as if the poetic accounts of classical authors, such as Lucian and Virgil, concerning the Golden Age of the first men living in the woods was now found to exist in reality across the Atlantic (Brading 1991: 15).

The Myth of the Amazons

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and beyond, scholars and other learned observers drew parallels between the still living civilizations and religions of the Americas and those of the Greco-Roman Mediterranean of antiquity (MacCormack 1995: 79). A potent example is the classical myth of the Amazons, a community of bellicose women, descendants of the god Mars by a nymph, who lived in female-only communities and reproduced by infrequent contact with male strangers. Their male offspring were blinded, crippled, or killed while females were trained for warfare, undergoing mastectomies as adolescents so as not to hinder use of the bow. The word “Amazon” may be derived from Greek *a* (without) and *mazos* (breast); or else from the Semitic word *amazo* meaning “strong mother.” In Greek mythology, Heracles engaged in combat against Amazons; and Pliny described Amazons who lived beyond the Ganges (Magasich-Airola and de Beer 2007: 101). Marco Polo and Mandeville both referred to bands of female warriors in the East. Mandeville located them on an island surrounded by water, and repeated the legend of cutting off the breast as an aid to warfare. The location of Amazons in India and the East paved the way for their discovery in the Americas. Columbus explicitly looked for them, and as early as January 1493, he wrote of news that there was an island

inhabited only by women, whose male offspring were sent to another island only of men (the reference is lifted almost verbatim from Mandeville). Martyr repeated the stories of women-only islands, though he wrote that the inhabitants may be closer to nuns or Vestal Virgins than Amazons, before dismissing it as a fairy tale (Moffitt and López 1996: 207–12).

The origin of the name of the Amazon River lies in the account given by Dominican friar Gaspar de Carvajal (1542) who accompanied explorer Francisco de Orellana in that year on his search for a river with an eastern outlet opening into the Atlantic. The expedition followed what is now called the Amazon River for nine months through thick jungle, during which members claimed they came across bellicose women warriors. Carvajal reported that the women got together with white men from the neighboring province in order to mate, then killed or sent away male offspring and only raised females. There were seventy different tribes of such women, all described as tall and pale like Europeans, and all ruled over by one queen (Moffitt and López 1996: 213). Unlike other accounts of Amazons in America, Carvajal gave direct testimony of having fought personally against the female warriors, leading to the loss of one of his eyes (Magasich-Airola and de Beer 2007: 109). In a narrative of his explorations in South America (1557), German explorer Ulrich Schmidel wrote how he heard about native Amazons on his trip up the Paraguay River on a Spanish expedition, though he did not see them himself. His version contained all the classic elements – the exile of male issue, the cutting off the breast, even the fact that the women lived on an island surrounded by water – indicating that the tale derived from ancient European legend. In Guiana, English explorer Walter Raleigh repeated the myth of the Amazons, who were said to live upstream on the Orinoco River, just as he repeated the tale of headless natives (Moffitt and López 1996: 217).

The Dual Image: Soft and Hard Primitivism

Vespucci popularized the motifs of the Terrestrial Paradise, the sexual freedom and the lack of private property and of laws, which were to become characteristic of the image of America. However, he also conceded that the inhabitants of the New World, lived a “barbarous” way of life, took pleasure in making war on each other and on Europeans, and consumed the flesh of their captives. From the beginning, then, two diametrically opposed images of Native Americans coexisted: one,

innocent of civilization; the other, savage, in a state of enmity (Moffitt and López 1996: 11). It has become customary as a tool of analysis to call these two images “soft primitivism” (utopian) and “hard primitivism” (anti-utopian) – though it should be borne in mind that these are categories created in the twentieth century, and were not part of sixteenth-century thinking (Lovejoy and Boas 1935: 10). In soft primitivism, the pre-Columbian period was defined by effortless plenty, peace, innocence, generosity, nakedness, and easy happiness. Hard primitivism, on the other hand, denigrated the Indians as in thrall to the devil, and as lustful (often hairy) men and women, who had lost their primeval knowledge of God; or as ignorant, bestial, almost subhuman, living in terror of the elemental forces of nature. Cannibalism was one of its most notorious facets, together with idolatry, human sacrifice, sexual deviance, and licentiousness. The two images, soft and hard primitivism, utopian and anti-utopian views, coexisted uneasily and inconsistently in European writings (Moffitt and López 1996: 96, 97, 100, 252; Washburn and Trigger 1996: 63).

The Myth of the Great Southern Land (the Pacific)

The two vast continents of the Americas gave more than enough opportunities for Spanish expansion and settlement. Even so, as early as 1519, Spanish expeditions sought to find a route beyond the Americas, inspired by Columbus’s original goal of reaching the east by sailing further west. The search for an alternative route to the Spice Islands prompted Magellan’s passage across the Pacific in 1519 and the subsequent completion of the first circumnavigation of the globe in 1522 by the expedition he had commanded when it set sail. The great navigator also laid the foundation for future Spanish dominance over the Philippines, which he discovered, and where he died as a result of the fatal mistake of getting involved in local politics (Gascoigne 2014: 30–31). In 1542, Spain named the islands after Philip, the heir to the Spanish throne and from 1564 established settlement there. A regular trade route was established between Manila and Acapulco from 1565, but Spain was unable to conduct regular exploration in the Pacific (Kamen 2002: 210). For the rest of the colonial era, Spain ploughed a regular route across the Pacific without exploring further afield in the great ocean.

The one exception was the voyages of Alvaro de Mendaña and Pedro de Quirós. In 1567, Mendaña sailed from Peru intending to reach Maluku (inspired, like Columbus, with finding a route to the Spice

Islands), and came upon an archipelago which he named the Solomon Islands (another reference to the search for the biblical Ophir; West 1992: 533 n. 30). A subsequent revisit in 1595 with the aim of settlement failed with the death of Mendaña (Gascoigne 2014: 34; Kamen 2002: 211). Attempts by this expedition's Portuguese pilot Pedro de Quirós to colonize parts of the Solomon Islands in 1605–6 were no more successful. He tried to establish a colony on what he called La Austrialia del Espíritu Santo (the island of Vanuatu) – which he hoped was part of the fabled Great South Land or *Terra Australis*, which Europeans had believed in since the time of Ptolemy, the Alexandrian geographer (second century AD) who argued that the vast landmass of the northern hemisphere must be balanced by an equivalent in the south. Quirós's visionary hopes for the Pacific fanned into life renewed European enthusiasm to find this Great South Land. In his keenness to interest Spanish King Philip III, Quirós described it as filling a quarter of the world, much larger than the Americas, and revived the mythology of the early years of exploration by referring to it as “an earthly paradise.” Once again, mythical geography inspired real-world exploration. Spain did little to follow up these Pacific explorations. The only real seventeenth-century expansion was, from 1667, the incorporation of the Mariana Islands, which served as a port for refreshment for the Manila fleet (Gascoigne 2014: 34–35). In the absence of any other center of settlement in the whole Pacific, the Manila galleons were the only lifeline between New Spain and the Philippines. However, the flurry of interest in the Great South Land set a precedent which would be followed up with much greater prominence in the eighteenth century (see Chapter 6). The development of the European mythology of the Indies in the later-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries will be considered in Chapter 4.