

## Cristo-Ferens Colón – The Eschatological Mission of Christopher Columbus

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*Articolul se concentrează asupra ideilor religioase ale lui Cristofor Columb și a convingerii sale că Providența însăși i-a încredințat misiunea eshatologică de a pregăti cea de a doua venire a lui Cristos. Aceasta avea să se facă prin descoperirea unei rute vestice spre India și prin sprijinirea financiară a Cruciadelor împotriva islamului. Astfel, pentru Columb, descoperirea Americii a avut în primul rând un rol spiritual, religios, și nu unul material sau profesional.*

**Motto:** “In the carrying out of this enterprise of the Indies, neither reason nor mathematics nor maps were any use to me: fully accomplished were the words of Isaiah<sup>1</sup>.”

According to Kirkpatrick Sale, “the standard historians’ line that the European conquest of America was driven by *God, gold and glory* would seem to be pretty much on the mark<sup>2</sup> in Columbus’ case. The order God-gold-glory in itself happens to be highly significant. Although concerned about his fame and sensitive to financial matters, Columbus was obviously a religious man in a religious age. We see him manipulating the credulous Indians by means of a *miraculous* moon eclipse, and we notice him use religious zeal to cover his interests, his faults, or his future hopes, but still we cannot doubt his major and crucial belief: Columbus was certain that the *Spiritual Intelligence*, as he called it, had ordained him as its Chosen.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher COLUMBUS, a letter to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella (1502), in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Chicago, 1966, vol. 6, p. 111.

<sup>2</sup> Kirkpatrick SALE, *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*, New York: 1990, p. 17.

For the medieval man, the end of the world was a concrete and shortly anticipated reality. The “miserable corruption of the whole Christendom, of all praiseworthy customs, rules and laws, the wretchedness of all classes, the many pestilences, the changes in this epoch and all the strange happenings“, as Joseph Grünpech<sup>3</sup> would enlist them, all pointed in the same direction – the approaching end of this world and the Second Coming of Christ.

The millenarian vision was mostly spread and supported by the Franciscan friars, partly based on John’s Revelation, partly as heritage from Joachimo da Fiore, but nevertheless perfectly fitting the whole atmosphere of the time – the economy, the politics, Islam, the dawn of Renaissance. For the same set of reasons, the discovery of America became imminent: the successful Spanish Reconquista and the zealous desire to recover Christianity’s Holy city, Jerusalem; the merchants’ pressing need to reach the Far East by a more convenient route; and, last but not least, the general interest in digging out the less-known Classical sources, combined with an ever bolder confidence in disputing the traditional authorities.

In the Medieval tradition, the Second Coming of Christ had to be preceded by the fulfilment of a certain set of conditions. Elements such as *translatio*, the ends of the earth, the Last World Emperor, the defeat of the Antichrist (on Mount Zion), the recovery of Jerusalem, or the *Universal Church* (led by an Angelic Pope) were all crucial compounds of the eschatological plot. “It is not your present sabbaths that are acceptable (unto Me)“, says the Lord in the Epistle of Barnabas, “but the Sabbath which I have made, in which, when I have set things at rest, I will make the beginning of the eighth day which is the beginning of another world“.

Columbus was fully aware of the intricate net of symbols and prophecies that were current in his age and, as Miles H. Davidson comments, “it was not only natural (...) to believe in these things but it would have been heretical for him to think otherwise“<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, besides taking them seriously into account, Columbus strove to fashion his whole life, personality and writings according to them.

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<sup>3</sup> K. SALE, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>4</sup> Miles H. DAVIDSON, *Columbus then and now: a life re-examined*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1997, p. 419.

In *The Mystical Ark of Noah* (4.9), Hugo of St. Victor wrote:

“The order of place and the order of time seem to agree almost completely in the course of events. Thus it appears to be established by divine providence that what was done at the beginning of the ages, at the outset of the world, took place in the East, and finally, as time runs along to its End, the completion of events should penetrate even as far as the West. Hence we may acknowledge that the End of the world approaches because the sequence of events has reached the geographical end of the world. The first man was placed in the East, in the Garden of Eden, already prepared, so that from this source his posterity might spread throughout the world.”

Djelal Kadir explains: “By the twelfth century, the theme of *translatio* we now call *westerling* itself becomes subsumed by those conventions as a metaphor for a special displacement, a geographical corollary through a spiritual pilgrimage leads this world to its appointed end, transporting its expectant faithful from the unregenerate Old World to the promised millennial New World<sup>45</sup>.”

Columbus had studied Cardinal D’Ailly’s *Imago Mundi* which faithfully incorporated Roger Bacon’s set of Classical arguments supporting the possibility of reaching Asia through a westward route.

“Aristotle says that there is not much ocean between the western parts of Spain and the eastern parts of India. He thinks that more than a fourth part of the globe is habitable. Averrhoes confirms this. Seneca says that this sea might be crossed in a few days with a favourable wind. Pliny says that people have actually sailed from the Arabian Gulf to Cadiz. Now, the Arabian Gulf is a whole year’s voyage from the Indian Sea, so that it is clear that the eastern extremity of Asia cannot be a long way from us. The sea between Spain and Asia at any rate cannot possibly cover three-fourths of the surface of the globe. Besides, it is written in the fourth Book of Esdras that six parts of the earth are habitable, and the seventh is covered with water. (...)Therefore I say that, though the oikoumene of Ptolemy be confined within one-fourth of the globe’s surface, more of that surface is really habitable. Aristotle

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<sup>5</sup> Djelal KADIR, *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth: Europe’s Prophetic Rhetoric as Conquering Ideology*, University of California Press, Oxford, England, 1992; p.29.

must have known more than other people, because by Alexander's favour he sent out two thousand men to inquire about these matters. So must Seneca; for the Emperor Nero sent out people to explore in the same way. From all this it follows that the habitable surface of the earth must be considerable and that which is covered with water but small<sup>6</sup>.

This excerpt – or its version as read in *Imago Mundi* – must have confirmed for Columbus two major ideas: first, that sailing westwards one can reach the east; and second, that the Ocean Sea can be actually crossed. As Phillips remarks, “Columbus was not the only man of his time to believe in the plausibility of finding lands in the Ocean Sea and a western passage to India. (...) What set Columbus apart from the others was a single-minded dedication to his grand design, once the first kernel of the idea had occurred to him<sup>7</sup>.”

Together with such texts as the one previously quoted from Roger Bacon, there was also another major source of influence that must have affected Columbus' decision. As a merchant mariner and sociable person, he had access to an unlimited stock of sea tales out of which several told of strange, alien objects, plants and even corpses floating in the sea. They all appeared to have come from the other side of the ocean, and bore – it seems – the stamps of an unknown, possibly Asiatic civilisation. All this aroused the interest and intrigued many sailors, among which Columbus himself. As Phillips comments, “in this atmosphere of restless voyaging and speculation, it was only a matter of time before someone put together the evidence from the tales and conceived a voyage westward to reach Asia<sup>8</sup>.”

However, as one can easily notice, the whole problem was about reaching Asia, and the only novelty consisted in the direction of the route itself. For us today it sounds somehow peculiar, but then, for Columbus, there must have been at least the following three reasons<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Andrew MIKKELSEN, *Church and State. Columbus and America*, The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1892, pp.12-13.

<sup>7</sup> William D. PHILLIPS, JR. and CARLA RAHN PHILLIPS, *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992; p.111.

<sup>8</sup> PHILLIPS, *op. cit.*, p.104.

<sup>9</sup> In his *Universal History*, Aeneas Sylvius PICOLomini (POPE PIUS II) mentioned the scholars' controversy “over the possible existence of an unknown continent“. However, after he “reviews all the evidence (...) and appears inclined to accept it, (...) stops short to point out that a Christian should believe that there is only one fully emerged, continuous land-mass, comprising Asia, Africa and Europe and that all the rest is covered, save for the few islands, by sea“. (Felipe Fernandez-ARMESTO,

First, sailors were already aware of the possible existence of unknown islands in the Atlantic Ocean, and Columbus' notion of discovering new lands was probably limited to those islands. Second, the theory of an unknown continent separated from the others by a never crossed sea was still considered heretical. It would have been in direct contradiction with St. Augustine's opinion that there cannot be any *antipodes* as long as the Apostles had already preached the Gospel throughout the whole world. Third – and I believe the most important one – Asia would have meant the end of the earth, while America was just the other hemisphere. Even when Columbus himself suspected the truth, he officially continued to insist that he had reached the Indies.

*Translatio*, the East, the end of the earth, all have lost in time their significance and weight; but for the Medieval ideology they were crucial realities. „The promised time of a thousand-year bliss before the Last Judgement“<sup>10</sup> was expected as imminent. The end of the earth meant actually the Garden of Eden, and implicitly, the first piece of land inhabited by man. It also meant the end of man's movement westwards, the completion of a full circle, and the apocalyptic arrival at the Edenic starting point of mankind, both in spatial and spiritual terms. The shores of Asia counted as the western extremity of the West overlapping with the eastern extremity of the East, thus representing the line between the end of the Old, mortal, corruptible World and the beginning of the New, everlasting, incorruptible one, such as prophesised in plenty of eschatological texts.

However, this spacio-spiritual fulfilment also had in the Medieval tradition an ecclesiastico-political counterpart. On the one hand, a Last World Emperor had to engage and defeat the Antichrist on Mount Zion, recovering thus the Holy City, Jerusalem; on the other hand, the end of the world was to be preceded by the conversion of all nations to the Christian faith. The whole mankind would be united in one single Universal and Renovated Church under the leadership of an Angelic Pope, as the last and ideal Vicar of Christ. Thus, the promise in John 10:16 – *unum ovilem et unus pastor* – was eventually to come true.

Therefore, a westward route to Asia would have been much more important for Columbus than the discovery of an intermediate unknown continent populated by ordinary ignorant savages. Asia meant the

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*Columbus and the Conquest of the Impossible*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974; pp. 40-41.).

<sup>10</sup> D. KADIR, *op. cit.*, p.32.

fulfilment of the most impressive eschatological prophecies; piles of gold, precious stones, pearls and spices; and a possible alliance with the powerful Great Khan against a common enemy – the Islam. Implicitly, as Columbus thought, the riches of Asia, and especially those of Japan according to Marco Polo's accounts, could have easily supported a numerous and well-equipped army under the leadership of King Ferdinand. Spain had already defeated the Moors in the Successful Reconquista and still further victories were planned. As Phillips remarks, „many Franciscans were coming to believe that the kings of Spain were ordained by God to carry out that worthy task [the conquest of Jerusalem] and to preside over the conversion of the world's peoples to Christianity. The universal empire of Spain would thereby usher in the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ.(...) [Columbus'] subsequent contacts with friars and clerics helped to intensify his religious convictions and his own millenarian and apocalyptic beliefs“<sup>11</sup>.

Consequently, in the camp of Santa Fe, Columbus not only laid the fruits of his future discoveries at the feet of his financial sovereigns Ferdinand and Isabel, but also insisted that they should serve to cover the costs for their further crusades. He was so confident about his design that he did not even hesitate to present the Kings lower figures and unrealistic calculations. Their opinion or fears hardly had any importance for him – the success was undoubtedly his and what he thought to be the actual numbers could not discourage him. He must have been as certain about his providential role and divine election, as he was *innocent* about the real breadth of the Atlantic Ocean or the existence of an obstacle-continent between Spain and India. Even Paolo Toscanelli, the Florentine physician, astronomer and mathematician, had assured him that between the Canary Islands and Cipangu could not be more than about 3000 miles. (He had also encouraged the Genoese mariner by sending him maps and charts together with a letter praising his design).

At first, Columbus resorted to the Portuguese crown. According to Bartolome de Las Casas, “he proposed the project to the King [John II] which was as follows: that going by way of the west towards the south he would discover great lands, gold and silver, pearls and precious stones, and an infinite number of people...”<sup>12</sup> As Ernle Bradford comments, “It was Cipangu as Marco Polo had described it with its

<sup>11</sup> PHILLIPS, *op. cit.*, p.174.

<sup>12</sup> Ernle BRADFORD, *Christopher Columbus*, Amilcare Pizzi, Milano, 1973; p.59.

temples and palaces of gold, an island rich in all precious metals and precious stones which stirred Columbus' imagination"<sup>13</sup>. However, „many details in Marco's description (...) seemed unbelievable to Venetians, and he was derided by many as *Marco Millions* for what they thought were his exaggerations or outright lies"<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, the Portuguese King, far from being impressed by Columbus' plans, dismissed him as „boastful about his accomplishments“ and „full of ideas and fancies about his island of Cipangu“<sup>15</sup>.

However, after months of detailed discussions and scholarly debates, Columbus could eventually find suitable Patrons in the Spanish monarchs Isabel of Castille and Ferdinand of Aragon. On 17 April 1492, still at the military camp of Santa Fe de la Vega, Columbus' new sovereigns finally agreed to sign the famous and crucial Capitulaciones. As Djelal Kadir explains, “although Columbus and the Catholic monarchs had a general idea of the prestige attached to the title [Admiral], it is less than likely that either party had complete appreciation of the legal rights and the extent of statutory privileges it entailed. Simply put, it automatically gave Columbus civil and criminal jurisdiction over the entire sea-born empire, to be discovered and conquered, over all ports and territories touched by the Ocean Sea; over the entire fleet system; over the value of one-third of all maritime cargo, one-third of all income from the fleet's activities, and one-third of the royal fifth accruing from private expeditions“<sup>16</sup>.

Probably the most impressive feature of Columbus' personality was his unflinching determination to reach the end of the earth, strengthened by his equally obsessive belief that he had been invested with a specific eschatological role. He obviously felt himself connected with the providential preparation for the Second Coming of Christ as much as the ends of the earth were identified with Asia, with the Earthly Paradise and the end of the world . As Todorov explains, “there is nothing of the modern empiricist about Columbus: the decisive argument is an argument of authority, not of experience. He knows in advance what he will find; the concrete experience is there to illustrate a truth already possessed“<sup>17</sup>. When he set out for India, he knew he would find it; and

<sup>13</sup> BRADFORD, *op. cit.*, p.55.

<sup>14</sup> PHILLIPS, *op. cit.*, p.46.

<sup>15</sup> J. de BARROS, *Da Asia*, Lisbon, 1552 (quoted in Bradford, p.59).

<sup>16</sup> KADIR, *op. cit.*, p.73.

<sup>17</sup> DAVIDSON, *op. cit.*, p.419.

when he came across what he expected to be Cipangu, he knew it was Cipangu. Even when he himself was starting to doubt he furiously kept on searching for proofs against his own doubts.

The theoretical scheme must have been quite simple: the end of the world is the end of the earth. Therefore, if it is to be Eden, it has to be Asia; and likewise, if it has to be Asia – be it Cipangu or India – it must be the Earthly Paradise and its surroundings such as described in the Bible.

Consequently Columbus' attitude was highly ambiguous. Both natives and landscape were now associated with the Earthly Paradise, now with the Antichrist and the Evil. On the one hand, he remarks their friendliness, innocence, generosity, together with the Edenic features of the landscape; on the other hand, he perceives them as ignorant and infidel savages, while the nature seems to display its most fierce spectacles. As Kadir summarises it, "the fury of the eddies provokes monstrous associations in Columbus' exalted mind. He dubs the tempestuous passage between Trinidad's Punta Arenal (Icacos Point) and the eastern shore of Isla Gracia (Paria Peninsula) "boca del Sierpe" (the Serpent's Mouth), and a high wave on 4 August 1498 that floats his ship into frightful high like insignificant jetsam in the Serpent's Mouth produces visions of Leviathan, the *tanin* or sea-monster of Isaiah (27:1). On 12 and 13 August he enters and exits what tidal treachery leads him to call "Boca del Drago" (the Dragon's Mouth)"<sup>18</sup>. Kadir comments: "Columbus' Adamic nominalism betrays his prophetic consistency in the face of adversity as well. (...) Clearly, a divine mission like his to land's and time's ends could not countenance adversarial contests except with foe and tribulation matchingly supernatural and fittingly apocalyptic"<sup>19</sup>.

The fate of the natives is equally unfortunate, and the generous and friendly Indians, who in the beginning had been perceived as mild Edenic inhabitants, would soon be turned into the image of the Antichrist himself and butchered by Columbus' men accordingly. Thus, if at first they served Columbus to fulfil the eschatological prophecies concerning the ends of the earth and the re-discovery of the Earthly Paradise, later, the same Indians proved equally suitable for performing the role of the Antichrist in the Great Battle scene of Columbus' self-staged drama.

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<sup>18</sup> KADIR, *op. cit.*, p.147.

<sup>19</sup> KADIR, *op. cit.*, p.147.



However, it seems that Columbus was not the only one who believed in his providential mission and in the legitimacy of his actions. The Dominican Father Bartolome de Las Casas, commenting on the symbolism of his name, wrote: “the name of Cristobal Colon, as the admiral is called in Spanish, becomes emblematic and prophetically foreordained for the task divine election has dictated for him”<sup>20</sup>. Thus, if Las Casas is inclined to speculate on his family name, Columbus himself prefers to interpret his Christian name. Accordingly it appears that his strong belief in his eschatological role also affected his signature. Apart from dividing his name into its etymological components “Christo-Ferens” – the Bearer of Christ / of the Messiah – Columbus also preceded it with a set of initials, “which he commanded his heirs to use, but never explained”<sup>21</sup>.

The letters “.S. / .S. A .S.” could mean “Sum Servus Altissimi Salvatoris” or “Sum Sancti Adiuto Sepulchri”; while the following line “X M Y “ might have stood for “Christ, Maria, Joseph”. As Fernandez-Armesto comments, “the tripling of signs and letters perhaps represents his cult of the Holy Trinity. (...) Among some spiritual millenarians, there was held to be a correspondence between the members of the Holy Family, the Persons of the Trinity and the three ages of the world, of which the last was shortly anticipated”<sup>22</sup>.

Therefore, it seems that Columbus must have been really convinced about the part he played in preparing the Second Coming of Christ. By all signs, the end of the world was drawing closer and closer – the western extremity of the West had already been touched, the Earthly Paradise re-entered, the Gospel was being preached to all nations, and the Spanish King Ferdinand was eventually able to recover Jerusalem and destroy the power of Islam.

As Fernandez-Armesto mentions, “towards the close of his life he adopted a way of referring to King Ferdinand as *Chief of the Christians*, which evokes the millennial prophecies, current at the time, of the Last World emperor”<sup>23</sup>. On his deathbed, still wearing his Franciscan habit, Columbus must have counted himself as a Medieval-Renaissance Job, righteous yet afflicted, destitute but still faithful.<sup>24</sup> From his point of view, God made him “the messenger of the New Heaven and the New

<sup>20</sup> KADIR, *op. cit.*, p.114.

<sup>21</sup> FERNANDEZ-ARMESTO, *op. cit.*, p.200.

<sup>22</sup> FERNANDEZ-ARMESTO, *op. cit.*, p.200.

<sup>23</sup> FERNANDEZ-ARMESTO, *op. cit.*, p.199.

Earth of which He spoke through St. John in the Apocalypses, after having spoken of it through Isaiah“.

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<sup>24</sup> Kirkpatrick SALE comments: “It was perhaps inevitable (...) that such conspicuous attention should culminate in an attempt actually to have Colón recognized as an official saint by the Catholic Church. This move was largely initiated by a French writer, Antoine F.F. Roselly de Lorgues, with his *Christophe Colombe* in 1856, made more explicit in his *L'ambassadeur de Dieu et le Pape Pie IX* in 1874, and fastened upon as a worthy cause by various groups particularly in Italy and in the United States, including an alliance of civic-minded American Catholics who established themselves as the Knights of Columbus in New Haven in 1882.” ( *op. cit.*, pp. 348-349).

**Christo-Ferens Colón sau Misiunea eshatologică a lui  
Cristofor Columb**  
(Rezumat)

La cumpăna dintre două epoci, Cristofor Columb a fost prin excelență atît produsul mentalității medievale, profund religioase, cît și cel al spiritului independent, entuziast și inovator adus de Renaștere. În sine, descoperirea Americii își are valoarea sa intrinsecă, dar viața și personalitatea omului Columb nu pot fi înțelese decît în contextul care le-a generat inițial și alimentat mai apoi pînă la sfîrșit. Este remarcabilă flexibilitatea cu care Columb a răspuns printr-o atitudine categoric renescentistă unor probleme tipic medievale în care crezul său eshatologic are o importanță cu greu de imaginat în vremea noastră.

Pentru creștinul Evului Mediu, Parusia avea să fie precedată de un anumit set de semne bine stabilit printre ale cărui elemente principale se numărau *translația*, Ultimul Împărat al Lumii, înfrîngerea Anticristului pe muntele Sion și recucerirea Ierusalimului. Aceste patru elemente atît de strîns corelate au marcat în permanență evoluția și faptele lui Columb așa cum reiese sistematic din scrisorile și jurnalele sale. Ceea ce a stat la baza întregii sale activități a fost convingerea că *Inteligența Spirituală* – așa cum obișnuia el să o numească – îl alesese ca trimis al său, cu misiunea certă de a înlesni împlinirea condițiilor ce aveau să marcheze apropierea Sfîrșitului Lumii și a celei de-a doua Veniri a lui Cristos. Prin ceea ce mai tîrziu s-a numit *descoperirea Americii*, Columb a încercat de fapt să completeze procesul de *translație*, contribuind concomitent la victoria Ultimului Împărat asupra Anticristului și la recucerirea Orașului Sfînt. *Translatio* însemna migrația neamului omenesc dinspre est spre vest. Dacă primul om fusese așezat la est, în Eden, și omenirea se deplasase neconținut spre vest, sfîrșitul timpurilor ar fi fost implicit precedat de atingerea extremității vestice a pămîntului, care în această viziune se confunda deplin cu extremitatea sa estică.

După îndelungi peregrinări, omul ar fi regăsit astfel grădina Edenului, reintrînd în Paradisul Terestru atît din punct de vedere geografic, cît mai ales spiritual. Pentru Columb, ca pentru mulți dintre contemporanii săi, Regele Spaniei, Ferdinand de Aragon, devenise personificarea Ultimului Împărat al Lumii, în timp ce islamul, oponentul principal al creștinismului, reprezenta Anticristul. Prin încercarea sa de a atinge extremitatea vestică a lumii, Columb nu numai că spera să completeze drumul omenirii spre vest, ci cu fabuloasele bogății ale Indiei și Japoniei - așa cum le reprezentase Marco Polo - era hotărît să-l sprijine financiar pe monarhul spaniol în

cruciadele pe care acesta și le propusese, facilitând astfel înfrângerea islamului și eliberarea Ierusalimului.

Convingerea că Providența însăși îl alesese pentru îndeplinirea acestor misiuni l-a împins să vadă în locuitorii țărmurilor nou descoperite popoarele asiatice la care dorise de atîta vreme să ajungă, în timp ce însemnările privind natura și relieful capătă un ton din ce în ce mai apocaliptic. Denumiri ca „Boca del Sierpe“ („Gura Șarpelui“) sau „Boca del Drago“ („Gura Dragonului“) sînt relevante pentru atitudinea lui Columb față de locurile prin care trece.

Încrederea de neclintit în rolul său eshatologic i-a afectat în cele din urmă chiar și semnătura. În ultima parte a vieții, un set enigmatic de inițiale a început să-i precedă numele, redactat de altfel în forma sa inițială „Cristo-Ferens“ – „Purtătorul de Mesia“ sau „Aducătorul de Cristos“. Inițialele „S. / .S. A .S.“ sînt de obicei interpretate ca „Sum Servus Altissimi Salvatoris“ sau „Sum Sancti Adiuto Sepulchri“, deși sensul lor adevărat rămîne un mister. În mod similar, literele „X. M. Y.“ ar putea semnifica membrii Sfintei Familii.

Astfel, articolul pune în lumină o fațetă mai puțin cunoscută a omului Columb și a vieții sale, remarcînd intensa religiozitate și pasiunea cu care s-a dedicat unui țel, la vremea aceea, suprauman – traversarea pentru prima dată a Oceanului Atlantic. Inspirat și hrănit de idealul său spiritual, Columb a izbutit, împotriva tuturor calculelor științifice ale Evului Mediu, să iasă victorios din această încercare considerată pînă atunci imposibilă.

Christopher Columbus, master navigator whose four transatlantic voyages opened the way for European exploration and colonization of the Americas. Christopher Columbus, Italian Cristoforo Colombo, Spanish Cristóbal Colón, (born between August 26 and October 31?, 1451, Genoa [Italy] died May 20, 1506, Valladolid, Spain), master navigator and admiral whose four transatlantic voyages (1492–93, 1493–96, 1498–1500, and 1502–04) opened the way for European exploration, exploitation, and colonization of the Americas. He has long been called the “discoverer” of the New World, although Vikings such as Leif Eriksson had visited North America five centuries earlier. According to that eschatological vision, Christendom would