

Janusz Tazbir

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS IN EARLY POLISH LITERATURE

While Columbus's voyages of discovery, their genesis and results have inspired a great number of writers and scholars, the problem of what subsequent generations thought of the great navigator has been investigated by only a few historians, to mention M. Bataillon, for example, whose *L'entreprise de Colomb défigurée sous Charles Quint* (Paris 1954) described hostile attitudes current in the first half of the sixteenth century. More space has been devoted to the portrayal of Columbus as a person by foreign authors. H. Bédarida has analysed French literature, in particular belles lettres, G. Terlinger has written a study entitled *La sorte di Cristoforo Colombo in Olanda*;¹ E. Wetzel in his *Der Kolumbus-Stoof in deutschen Geistesleben* (Breslau 1935) has collected numerous examples to prove the great interest German writers of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had in the person of the Admiral. German writings concerned with Columbus² have also been analysed by E. Loevinson in a study entitled *Cristoforo Colombo nella letteratura tedesca*, (Roma 1893), which is not, however, available in Poland.

In Poland the problem of Polish attitudes towards Columbus interested the eminent historian of geography Boleslaw Olszewicz. This scholar planned to devote a great part of his large work on Polish-American studies³ to the subject of Christopher Columbus in Polish literature. Unfortunately, the entire material collected by Olszewicz was destroyed by fire during the Warsaw Uprising in August 1944, and only the small part published before the war⁴ has been preserved. In his investigations

¹ Cf. *Studi Colombiani. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi colombiani*, vol. I, Genova 1952, pp. 173 ff. and vol. III pp. 194 ff.

² Cf. also G. Schreiber, *Deutschland und Spanien. Volkskundliche und Kulturkundliche Beziehungen*, Düsseldorf 1937, p. 329.

³ B. Olszewicz, *La Pologne et la découverte de l'Amérique*, "Comptes Rendus de la Société des Sciences et des Lettres de Wrocław," vol. II, 1947, p. 28.

⁴ B. Olszewicz, *Poland and the Discovery of America*. Poznań 1931.

Olszewicz used only source material, as there were no other works in the field. Early Polish authors dealing with Columbus usually wrote for the general public⁵ and do not seem to have been interested in Polish opinions concerning his voyages. A similar lack of interest also characterizes modern editors of Columbus's writings⁶ and of the *Life and Wonderful Deeds of the Admiral*, written by his son, Ferdinand Colon.⁷

The published writings of Olszewicz formed the starting point for my research into the ways in which Columbus was presented by early Polish writers in all field of literature. The first findings were published in my book about the Polish gentry and the conquistadors,⁸ while the present paper sums up further inquiries.

It appears that very little information in the form of direct reports written on the spot concerning Columbus's voyages to the western hemisphere reached the Polish Commonwealth of the Gentry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to Estreicher's *Bibliography* none of Columbus's works were then available in Polish libraries. However, on the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America a letter written by Columbus in Latin to Raphael de Santis on 29 April 1493, in which the Admiral described "the recent discovery of Ganges India," was found in the Library of the Theological Seminary at Włocławek.⁹ This was published in 1892, by both Zygmunt Celichowski¹⁰ and Jan Sobczyński¹¹ independently; their translated versions, however, differ greatly. The number of people who had read this incunabulum could not have

⁵ For example, S. Krzemiński, *Kolumb [Columbus]*, Warszawa 1882 and A. Potocki's booklet with numerous editions, *O Krzysztofie Kolumbie i odkryciu Ameryki [On Christopher Columbus and the Discovery of America]*.

⁶ K. Kolumb, *Pisma [Writings]* ed. by A. L. Czerny, Warszawa 1970.

⁷ H. Colon, *Dzieje żywota i znakomitych spraw admirała don Krzysztofa Kolumba [Life and Wonderful Deeds of the Admiral don Christopher Columbus]*, ed. by A. Dukanovič, Warszawa 1965. The editor's comment in the introduction reads as follows, "Conrad's countrymen readily spoke about the Genoese, starting with Marcin Bielski and Norwid and ending with Tadeusz Peiper" (p. 33).

⁸ J. Tazbir, *Szlachta a konkwistadorzy. Opinia staropolska wobec podboju Ameryki przez Hiszpanię [The Gentry and the Conquistadors. The Early Polish Opinion on the Conquest of America by Spain]*, Warszawa 1969, pp. 62 - 65.

⁹ At present the copies of this incunabulum are kept in the Library of the Theological Seminary at Włocławek and in the Wrocław University Library.

¹⁰ C. Columbus, *List o odkryciu Ameryki ze zbiorów Biblioteki Kórnickiej [A letter on the Discovery of America from the Collection of the Kórnik Library]*, cd. by Z. Celichowski. This letter in the form of a facsimile was acquired by the Kórnik Library as late as the middle of the nineteenth century.

¹¹ "Przegląd Katolicki," Nos. 48 and 49, 1892, pp. 753 - 757 and 769 - 772.

been very great, while the translation into German,¹¹ published as early as 1497, probably enjoyed wider popularity in Royal Prussia.

Original Spanish works concerned with Columbus published in the sixteenth century were also little known in Poland, and while a relatively large body of writings by Las Casas, headed by the famous treaty *Brevisima relación de la destruccion de las Indias*,¹² can be found in Polish libraries, there is hardly any proof that his book *Historia de las Indias*, so fundamental for the study of the expeditions, was ever known in Poland. Las Casas includes a summary of the journal kept by the Genoese navigator during his voyages. Three important books, the popular in the West *Historia del Amirante*,¹³ written by Columbus's son, Don Fernando Colon, Peter Martyr Anghieri's *De orbe novo decades*, which describes the second expedition, and the *Historia general y natural de las Indias* by Hernandez de Oviedo, do not appear to have reached Poland either. On the other hand the history of the new world, *De natura novi orbis libri duo* by Joseph Acosta and *Novae novi orbis historiae* by Girolamo Benzoni seem to have been popular and are still available in Polish libraries.¹⁵

The main source of information on Columbus was, however, provided by two books, which contain a kind of synthetic outline of world history. One was the *Novus orbis regionum ac insularum* written by the German humanist and theologian Simon Grynaeus, and the other the *Relationi universali* by G. Botero. Grynaeus's work served as a basic source for the Polish chronicler Marcin Bielski. His account of the discovery of America is merely a faithful translation, paraphrase or summary of information provided by the German humanist, as has been convincingly proved by Ignacy Chrzanowski.¹⁴ Although in his first edition Bielski described Columbus as a Venetian sent by the Portuguese king,¹⁷ Emmanuel I, to discover new lands, in the next issue (1554) he gave some more accurate and detailed data concerning the history of

¹¹ In 1669 there was a parson in Königsberg whose name was Christopher Columbus. This may be interpreted as an evidence, to a certain extent, of Columbus's popularity in the Duchy of Prussia. Cf. K. E s t r e i c h e r, *Bibliografia polska [Polish Bibliography]*, vol. XIV, p. 328.

¹² Cf. J. T a z b i r, op. cit. pp. 51 - 52.

¹³ Cf. note 7.

¹⁵ Cf. J. T a z b i r, *Zainteresowanie 'Nowym Światem' w miastach Prus Królewskich w XVI - XVIII wieku [The Interest in the 'New World' in the Cities of Royal Prussia in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century]*, "Zapiski Historyczne," 1970, No. 3.

¹⁴ I. C h r z a n o w s k i, *Marcin Bielski. Studium literackie [Marcin Bielski. A Literary Study]*, Warszawa 1926, pp. 57, 298 - 300.

¹⁷ This mistake was also made by Piasecki, cf. J. T a z b i r, *Szlachta a konkwistadorzy [The Gentry and the Conquistadors]*, p. 153, and elsewhere.

the consecutive voyages made by the great Genoese explorer. Bielski repeated after Grynaeus that Columbus had undertaken his voyages "for the glory and to the benefit of his sovereign" and "in order to give his sovereign and the whole world great delight." Columbus, not discouraged by any obstacles, continued to plead until he finally obtained ships and men with whom he discovered new lands. This introduction is followed by a description of all his voyages as well as of the intrigues against him at the Spanish court. Bielski finished this chapter with an account of subsequent explorers, headed by Vespucci.¹⁸ Of all early Polish works on this subject, Bielski's description of Columbus's voyages and his contacts with the natives seem to be the most extensive. The chronicler included various strange incidents in his narrative, likely to appeal to his readers. He appears to have understood contemporary taste and the chronicle enjoyed great popularity not only in Poland, but also abroad, particularly in Eastern Europe, where Bielski's work was the first to supply information on Columbus.

There must have been far fewer readers for a highly specialized work, *Pymander Mercuri Trismegisti*, written by a monk named Hannibal Rosseli, who included quite an extensive section on Columbus in his fifth volume, entitled *De elementis et descriptione totius orbis*. This Bernardine monk of Italian origin lived in Cracow from 1581 till his death, and published his *magnum opus*¹⁹ in that city. The comparison of certain details mentioned by both Grynaeus and Rosseli, leads to the conclusion that the latter also based his writings on the former's work. Rosseli, however, unlike Bielski, greatly shortened Grynaeus text, while retaining the pattern of composition and even certain expressions.²⁰ This can easily be seen as both works were written in Latin.

Rosseli's book was written in a true Catholic spirit and only read by theologians and representatives of various philosophies. Bielski, however, was accused of "heresy" and his work was distrusted in Catholic circles. No wonder that it was soon ousted by the Polish translation of Botero's work, which was reissued three times in the seventeenth century (1609, 1613, 1659). In it there is abundant information on the obstacles that Columbus had to overcome before he started on his first expedi-

¹⁸ M. Bielski, *Kronika wszystkiego świata* [*The Chronicle of the World*], Kraków 1554, fol. 305 - 308.

¹⁹ Cf. also a recent publication on Rosseli by J. Czerkawski, *Hannibala Rosseliego koncepcja "pia philosophia"* [*Hannibal Rosseli's "Pia Philosophia"*], "Archiwum Historii Filozofii i Myśli Społecznej," vol. XV, 1969.

²⁰ H. Rosseli, *Pymander Mercuri Trismegisti* [...] lib. V: *De elementis et descriptione totius orbis*, Cracoviae 1586, pp. 418 - 422.

tion and a detailed account of the expedition itself.¹¹ At the close of the century Jakub Teodor Haur, in his poem devoted to Botero highly praised the informative qualities of the *Theatrum Mundi*.¹² Yet, it was not by chance that in the Renaissance period all information concerning Columbus was provided either by foreign authors (Botero, Rosseli), or by a book (Marcin Bielski's *Chronicle*) based entirely on their works. During the century and more which elapsed between the last edition of Botero's book (1659) and the translation of William Spencer Robertson's *The History of America* into Polish (1789), the Polish reader was completely satisfied with same cursory notices about Columbus. And if research in this field were to be confined only to geographical compendia — as has usually been the case — Polish sources would seem very scarce and incomplete.

Actually, Columbus and his discoveries were mentioned not only in geographical textbooks compiled by such authors as Keckermann, Formankowicz, and subsequently Drews, or in Polish diaries of travels in the Iberian Peninsula, which are mostly in manuscript form and therefore little known. His name occurs also in publications in other fields, such as medicine (e.g. Oczko on syphilis, or Syxtus on hot springs), agriculture (Haur), physics — or what was then understood by the term — (Tylkowski), or even theology *sensu stricto*. Devotional tracts are most surprising in this respect, as Columbus is mentioned not only in accounts of the spread of christianity in the western hemisphere, but also in those dealing with pilgrimages to the Holy Land, in treatises on the crucifix and in lives of the two saints Hyacinthus and Stanisław Kostka.¹³ Although in the field of belles lettres Poland cannot compete with Spain, Italy or even France, where the Genoese navigator was the hero of many plays, however, he did appear, though sporadically, on the Polish stage in a theatre run by the Order of Jesuits (e.g. at Nieśwież in 1723).

Although some passable poems were also written about Columbus (e.g. by M. Ignacy Kuligowski or Dominik Rudnicki), there are also versified descriptions of the new world and its inhabitants (e.g. Haur or Józef Andrzej Załuski), which are complete artistic failures. None of the great poets of the period (Jan Kochanowski in the sixteenth, or Waław Potocki and Zbigniew Morsztyn in the seventeenth century) were

¹¹ G. Botero, *Relatiae powszechne* [General Relations], part V, Cracoviae 1609, pp. 34 - 36.

¹² J. T. Haur, *Merkurius polski* [Polish Mercury], Warsaw University Library, manuscript No. 191, fol. 12 v.

¹³ Writings concerned with St. Hyacinthus in particular quite often point to the manifestations of Columbus's cult in the western hemisphere and his services for the spread of Christianity, cf. for example, the books of the Dominican friar Ruszel.

sufficiently interested in the newly discovered lands to describe the deeds and merits of their discoverer. Yet, at the same time, such famous authors as Lope de Vega and Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote about Columbus. The first move in this direction was made by certain great Polish poets of the nineteenth century. Adam Mickiewicz in his comic poem entitled *Kartofla* (*The Potato*) described a debate held in heaven on whether or not to allow the Genoese navigator to discover America. The final decision was positive for Columbus, as it would enable Europe to discover the manifold advantages gained from the culture of potatoes.¹⁴ Juliusz Słowacki's approach was much more serious. In a poem dedicated to Michał Rola Skibicki, Słowacki said that Columbus's discoveries had opened new vistas for Europe, but these had been misused by the conquistadors to the detriment of the Indians while "European crimes filled the forests."

The erroneous view that the West Indies had been discovered by Amerigo Vespucci was current in Poland, too, for some time and was shared, among others, by Jan of Stobnica and Mateusz Kmita of Szamotuly. Both of them drew their information from Waldseemüller.¹⁵ This is also one of the reasons why the name of Columbus did not appear in Polish literature until 1551 (in Bielski's chronicle). Even Nicolaus Copernicus in his work *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* thought that the newly discovered islands had been named after "the admiral who discovered them."¹⁶ It is predominantly to Bielski we owe the fact that this mistake was later rectified. Jan Brożek, professor of the Cracow Academy, deplored the injustice of fate which had led the newly discovered lands to be named after another person and not the actual discoverer. He even proposed changing the name to "Columbinae."¹⁷ Haur, too, had no doubts that it was Columbus who had discovered the new world.¹⁸ In the next century this information was included in many school textbooks written by such authors as Drews, Łubieński or Wyr-

¹⁴ G. Makowiecka, *Hiszpania u Mickiewicza* [*Spain in the Works of Mickiewicz*], "Przegląd Humanistyczny," 1970, No. 4 *passim*.

¹⁵ B. Olszewicz, *La Pologne et la découverte de l'Amérique...*, p. 28, as well as B. Olszewicz, *Poland and the Discovery...*, pp. 12, 14 and 18. At that time Columbus's fame as the discoverer of America was unrivalled. The possibility of a prior claim of Phoenicians, Vikings or even the legendary John of Kolno was discussed only in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Cf. a recent publication on this subject, K. Ślaski, *Poprzednicy Kolumba* [*Columbus's Predecessors*], Gdańsk 1969.

¹⁶ Nicolaus Copernicus, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, lib. I, Warszawa 1953, p. 55.

¹⁷ J. Brożek, *Arithmetica integrorum*, Cracoviae 1620, p. 178.

¹⁸ J. T. Haur, *Merkurius polski* [*Polish Mercury*], fol. 54.

wicz. The two Polish eighteenth-century encyclopedias, i.e. *Nowe Ateny* (*New Athenes*) and *Zbiór potrzebniejszych wiadomości* (*Collection of More Necessary Information*), in spite of the fact that in many respects their entries differed greatly, are unanimous on the point that Columbus and not Vespucci discovered America.²⁹

Nevertheless Vespucci had his supporters in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well. Jan Stanisław Formankowicz, professor of the Cracow Academy, held that both courageous sailors had made an equal contribution.³⁰ A similar view was expressed by Paweł Piasecki, who wrote in his chronicle that the New World, which included the islands of Cuba, Jamaica, Santo Domingo or Hispaniola, had been discovered [...] by Christopher Columbus, a Ligurian of Genoa, but immediately added that almost at the same time Amerigo Vespucci “made an attempt at reaching the same land, further named after him.”³¹ In 1747 Wojciech Bystrzonowski wrote point-blank that this part of the world had been named “after Amerigo Vespucci, a Florentine, who was the first of all Europeans to discover that land in 1497.” Although he admitted that Christopher Columbus was the first to sail in that direction, he reduced the latter’s achievement to the discovery of Cuba and Jamaica only.³² The name of the great Genoese was quite often quoted together with that of his rival to fame and with those of subsequent discoverers. In many passages concerned with the New World, the name of its first discoverer is not given.

Polish authors writing about Columbus paid greater attention to the description of his expeditions, although even these were often treated rather cursorily. With the exception of Bielski, Botero or later on Robertson, attempts to give the chronological order of Columbus’s consecutive voyages, or a detailed description of the crews and ships were rare. America was seen rather through the eyes of her subsequent conquerors and not through Columbus’s observations, especially as his writings — as I have already mentioned — were unknown in Poland at that time. After Bielski, the reactions and feelings of the great discoverer and his companions were described among others by the Dominican

²⁹ B. Chmielowski, *Nowe Ateny* [*New Athens*], part 2, Lwów 1754, p. 663; I. Krasicki, *Zbiór potrzebniejszych wiadomości* [*Collection of More Necessary Information*], vol. 1, Lwów 1781, p. 457.

³⁰ J. S. Formankowicz, *Geographiae compendium*, Cracoviae 1671, pp. 103 - 104.

³¹ J. Tazbir, *Szlachta a konkwistadorzy...* [*The Gentry and the Conquistadors...*], p. 153.

³² W. Bystrzonowski, *Informacja matematyczna* [*Mathematical Information*], Lublin 1747, pp. 223 - 224.

friar Ruszel. Thanks to the strange workings of Providence it was on St. Dominic's Day (12 October 1492) that Columbus saw "the first insulae or islands of that New World so rich in gold and spices," but where "there was neither bread of wheat or rye or other corn, nor olive oil; the people were strange and naked, defenceless."³³

The view that thanks to Columbus the Spanish Treasury was greatly enriched with gold was widely held at the time.³⁴ W. Łubieński maintained that 60 million pounds of this precious metal³⁵ had flowed into Spain from the islands discovered by the Genoese. Some other writers disclosed that quite a different kind of "cargo" had also been brought by his ships, namely syphilis. Oczko, for example, said that this illness appeared on our continent "immediately after the arrival of those ships on which Columbus, a worthy knight, returned after discovering those lands."³⁶ A similar opinion was expressed by Sebastian Petrycy of Pilzno in his dissertation on syphilis, and by some other writers as well.³⁷ Nobody, of course, thought any the worse of "the worthy knight" on this account.

In accordance with the typical Baroque delight in eccentricities, Polish authors often emphasized with great exaggeration the peculiar phenomena of nature which Columbus observed during his voyages. Tylkowski devoted much space to a description of the temperatures prevailing on the island of St. Joan,³⁸ Syxtus pointed to the similarity between some volcanoes on Tenerife and Etna,³⁹ Drows described a battle with a ship commanded by a savage woman,⁴⁰ and Haur told how a huge serpent had devoured a member of the crew.⁴¹ All these oddities immediately impressed the readers, especially as they took a good deal of the usually short narratives. But space had, of course, to be found for a voracious serpent or a female pirate.

The most interesting part of these narratives are the descriptions of

³³ P. Ruszel, *Tryumph na dzień chwalebny Jacka św.* [The Triumph for the Glorious Day of St. Hyacinthus] Vilna 1641, pp. 65 - 66.

³⁴ Cf., for example, J. I. Petrycy, *Comitia sapientum, pars prima*, Cracoviae 1628, pp. 128 - 129.

³⁵ W. Łubieński, *Świat we wszystkich swoich częściach* [The World in All Its Parts], Wrocław 1740, p. 636.

³⁶ W. Oczko, *Przymiot* [Syphilis], Cracoviae 1581, p. 7.

³⁷ Cf. J. Tazbir, *Szlachta a konkwistadorzy...* [The Gentry and the Conquistadors...], pp. 82 - 83.

³⁸ W. Tylkowski, *Physicae curiosae pars octava*, Oliva 1682, part I, p. 320.

³⁹ E. Syxt, *O cieplicach we skle* [On Hot Springs in Glass], Zamość 1717, pp. 102 - 103.

⁴⁰ J. Drows, *Flos regnorum*, 1744, fol. 17 - 18 (not numbered).

⁴¹ J. T. Haur, *Ekonomika ziemiańska generalna* [General Economics of the Gentry], Warszawa 1757, p. 111.

the character of the Genoese. These stressed, above all, his perseverance and endurance. Botero wrote that there had never been a man "with greater stamina." Although everybody discouraged him from undertaking such a dangerous voyage, and the Portuguese monarchs point-blank refused their support, Columbus never ceased to plead his cause and thought of going to the French or English court, until finally he won. Botero's epic was summarized in a rather bad poem by Józef Załuski some 150 years later. He wrote that "this Columbus [...] was scorned by all and forsaken by the whole world so that an unknown world might be discovered." In the end he was helped by a Franciscan monk, Juan Pérez, the Queen's confessor.⁴² Haur stressed that Columbus "had to combat many difficulties, and was almost scorned [...] by various monarchs," until he managed to "win the support of Spanish Isabella, who pawned her own jewels to raise funds for him."⁴³

Following Botero, Haur emphasized that Columbus had been guided by piety, his main aim being to spread the true creed over other continents. Nobody had any doubt, however, that his voyages had brought advantages not only to the church, but also to the Spanish monarchy. This view was shared even by Catholic writers of the counter-Reformation. Haur called Columbus "the paver of they way [...] for Spanish supremacy;"⁴⁴ his predecessor Andrzej Wargocki maintained that the Spanish king's greed for a larger empire was so strong in 1492 that he "sent Christopher Columbus overseas to discover new lands. And thus, having traversed many seas, he found numerous islands full of riches and people [...], whom he made to render obeisance to his sovereign and on whom he imposed certain contributions; he also built some castles and manned them with his Spanish companions."⁴⁵ Although in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Poland there was no love lost for Spain,⁴⁶ par-

⁴¹ J. Tazbir, *Szlachta a konkwistadorzy...* [*The Gentry and the Conquistadors...*], pp. 157 - 158.

⁴² J. T. Haur, *Merkurius polski* [*Polish Mercury*], fol. 54. At the same time Georg Loth, professor of medicine at the University of Königsberg, wrote that Columbus "appeared unreliable to his Genoese countrymen, ridiculous to Henry of England, stupid and ridiculous to Alfonso of Portugal, because he spoke of the New World," M. Vorbek Lettow, *Skarbnica pamięci* [*Thesaurus of the Mind*], Wrocław 1968, p. 208.

⁴³ J. T. Haur, *Merkurius polski* [*Polish Mercury*], fol. 54.

⁴⁴ Cf. Breidenbach's dedication to Katarzyna Radziejowska of his book *Peregrynacja arabska albo do grobu św. Katarzyny, Panny i Męczenniczki, przekładania X. Andrzeja Wargockiego* [*Travels in Arabia, or to the Tomb of St. Catherine, Virgin and Martyr, translated by Priest Andrzej Wargocki*], Cracoviae 1610.

⁴⁵ Cf. J. Tazbir, *Los conquistadores en opinion de los polacos de los siglos XVI - XVIII*, "Ibero-america Pragensia," vol. III, 1970, *passim*.

ticularly in Protestant circles, there was appreciation for the brave sailors and for their admirable courage and enterprise. In glorifying the greatness of Columbus writers were above all stressing the courage of a European, someone close to them whose deeds and motives they easily understood. His services to the church were perhaps not so obvious, as some members of other denominations even questioned the need for the mission and criticized the compulsory conversion of the Indians. The fact that Columbus had extended the boundaries of the Spanish empire did not greatly appeal to the gentry who did not care for this particular dynasty and was scarcely interested in the colonial conquests of Western Europe.

One achievement, however, that of extending the frontiers of the Christian world, which had already become too small, met with unreserved approval. In his introduction to the first part of Botero's *Relations* the Bernardine monk Paweł Łęczycki called Columbus a "clever and courageous man" because "not contented with the cramped confines of the world, he set out on unknown seas in order to find new lands. And he did find them in 1492, when he discovered such a wide and vast world that it seems larger than ours."⁴⁷ Almost the same words were used at the close of the seventeenth century by Antoni Bykowski⁴⁸ and in the next century by Dominik Rudnicki. In his beautiful poem in praise of Columbus he wrote that the great discoverer "dug the seas with his oars for many a while before, with his Lusitanian fleet, he found Indians digging gold. He wanted to discover a new world and therefore he covered the ocean with his sails and flogged it with his oars to make it surrender new lands [...]"⁴⁹

In all these statements there is one quite important underlying motive. It was widely believed, of course, that Providence had led Columbus to his discoveries to make up for the losses incurred by the church because of the Reformation, with millions of Indian souls gained for the true creed. That is why the emphasis was placed on the number of natives converted even during his first voyages. Columbus was often and readily

⁴⁷ G. Botero, op. cit., part 1, fol. 2, verso 3.

⁴⁸ Cf. A. Bykowski's preface to *Perigrinacia prawdziwego opisania Ziemi Świętej, Betleem i Jerozolimy* [*The True Description of the Holy Land, Bethlehem and Jerusalem*], entitled *Do pobożnego czytelnika* [*To the Devout Reader*], Warszawa 1696. This book was written by the Benedictine monk Anselm, who lived in the fifteenth century. In the preface to its first edition in Poland (this translation was published in 1595) there is no reference to America.

⁴⁹ D. Rudnicki, *Głos wolny w wiązanej mowie ...* [*A Free Opinion in the Form of a Verse ...*], Poznań 1743, pp. 135 - 136.

compared to St. Christopher because "he carried the olive branch and the holy oil across the waters of the ocean" in order to lead the pagan peoples to the church.⁵⁰ At the same time such writers as Haur⁵¹ and Benedykt Chmielowski praised his civilizing mission in the western hemisphere as well as his services rendered to the church. Behind the recognition of the merits of the great Genoese, from which at least benefited Christian Europe if not the human race as a whole, lay an awareness of common interests well served by the discoveries of Columbus, Magellan or Vespucci. In sixteenth-century Poland too one can detect a feeling of enthusiasm for man's limitless opportunities, similar to the reaction of people today to the first space flights.

Quoting among others the example of Columbus, Łączycki stressed in a letter to Stanisław Lubomirski, magistrate of the town of Sącz, that "no man, and undoubtedly not your Grace either, is by nature exempt from the wish to extend his sway over other countries; and that is why the Spanish and the Portuguese have recently gone to new lands." Thanks to Columbus and discoverers like him people felt superior to those who lived in ancient times. Łączycki explained that for 5000 years humanity had been searching for the third part of the world, knowing only Asia and Africa. But it was only "now that the other world has been found and it is almost as vast and as wide as the present one."⁵¹ This feeling of pride was constantly on the upsurge. In the foreword to his poems the Jesuit poet Albert Inez listed many proofs of the superiority of seventeenth-century man over representatives of antiquity, one of them being the discoveries of the new lands and oceans, unknown to ancient man. Wespazjan Kochowski in his comparison of ancient and contemporary sailors stated that the latter were afraid of sailing older ships while those newly built "will safely carry them as far as America."⁵¹ Yet, the other side of this optimistic picture was also presented.

Attention was drawn to the numerous difficulties which Columbus had to combat on the way towards the realization of his most cherished wish, and also to the fact that Spain repaid him with black ingratitude. An anonymous diarist, in his account of travels made at the close of the sixteenth century throughout Italy and the Iberian Peninsula, noted

⁵⁰ J. Tazbir, *Szlachta a konkwistadorzy [The Gentry and the Conquistadors]*, p. 62.

⁵¹ J. T. Haur, *Merkurius polski [Polish Mercury]*, fol. 54.

⁵¹ G. Botero, op. cit., part II, preface.

⁵¹ T. Bieńkowski, *Problematyka nauki w literaturze staropolskiej od XVI do XVIII wieku [Problems of Science in Polish Early Literature from the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century]*, Wrocław 1968, p. 48.

that Christopher Columbus, when he arrived in Barcelona in 1493, had brought King Ferdinand "six Indians, gold, silver, pearls and other objects in large quantities," for which he had initially been rewarded with "honours, an estate, a title, and a coat of arms." This, however, did not bring him good fortune; in return "for all his gifts, in the year 1499, he and his brother were brought home in irons. Like a dog in all his dirt he was taken from the Indies and put before the King, although he was innocent of any crime." This was the fate which met the great explorer, due to the "evil, jealous tongues of people who could not see any good qualities in their fellow creatures."⁵⁴ M. Ignacy Kuligowski came to a slightly more optimistic conclusion. In one of his poems he depicted the miserable end of the evil Francisco de Bobadilla who had caused all these misfortunes. Bobadilla was sent by King Ferdinand of Spain to put in irons the man "whose curiosity had led to the discovery of a new world." In his greed for gold Bobadilla overloaded his ship, and went down with the whole cargo. Columbus regained the favour of the king and won great fame "in successive centuries."⁵⁵ This black ingratitude was described in detail by Robertson, whose book was translated and published in Poland in an abridged version during the Enlightenment period.⁵⁶ J. M. Schroeck, the author of a general history textbook used in Polish schools at the beginning of the nineteenth century expressed the view that "Columbus was treated by the Spaniards with nothing but jealousy, hatred and ingratitude."⁵⁷

The fame surrounding the great Genoese, which in Poland also grew with the centuries, proves that a new type of hero was then emerging. In earlier times heroes were either rulers or saints (often the two combined in one person), famous knights or wise politicians. Columbus was none of these; his family was not rich, he was never canonized, and he discovered kingdoms which were conquered by others. He represents a new, more secular type of hero, whose deeds were of service to the whole of humanity and not only to his sovereign. His growing fame was a sign of the approach of a new era, in which neither knights nor saints, but discoverers, great navigators and scholars were objects of hero-worship. It is not accidental that Brożek, professor of the Cracow Academy,

⁵⁴ *Antologia pamiętników polskich [An Anthology of Polish Diaries]*, ed. by R. Pollak, Wrocław 1966, pp. 157 - 158.

⁵⁵ M. I. Kuligowski, *Demokryt śmieszny albo śmiech Demokryta chrześcijańskiego [Humorous Democritus or Christian Democritus's Laugh]*, Wilno 1699, p. 263.

⁵⁶ W. Robertson, *Historja odkrycia Ameryki przez Kolumba [The Discovery of America by Columbus]*, Warszawa 1789, p. 13 ff.

⁵⁷ J. M. Schroeck, *Historja powszechna [General History]*, vol. III, Wilno 1814, p. 11.

compared Columbus with Copernicus,⁵⁸ and in fact pointed out that Copernicus had more right to fame, as he had moved the earth while Columbus had only enlarged the boundaries of the known world.⁵⁹ In the course of time this fame extended also to include certain mementoes connected with Columbus. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Józef Chłusowicz married and brought to Poland a great great grand-daughter of Columbus. She had in her possession a medallion portraying the Spanish Royal Couple which was issued in honour of her great great grand-father in 1494. When the young couple came to live in the vicinity of Słonim, on the estate of Marshal Wroński, so many people wanted to see the medallion that these visits looked like veritable pilgrimages.⁶⁰

From the beginning of the sixteenth century much more space was devoted to Columbus than to other explorers. In Poland too the conquistadors enjoyed greater popularity than the great admiral. The victorious sword and gleam of gold evoked more emotion than the less exciting voyages of discovery, especially as in Poland there was then little interest in maritime matters and rather more in the conquest of new lands. This particular attitude prevailed for quite a long time and even Heinrich Heine deplored that so much had been written about those scoundrels, the conquistadors, and so little about Columbus.⁶¹

Early Polish writers did not think highly of Pizarro or Cortez, as I have pointed out in other studies, and it seems that nobody, even up to the middle of the nineteenth century, spoke ill of Columbus. This high opinion was formed under the influence of Las Casas, a great enemy of the conquistadors and a friend and almost apologist of Columbus. Sixteenth-century public opinion, which accused the followers of Cortez and Pizarro of exterminating the Indians, generally exempted Columbus from this reproach. Later historiographers, however, often revised this view. "For some Columbus was almost a saint, who should have been canonized, the others saw in him an impostor, a cheat, liar and coxcomb, a bully, a traitor full of greed, almost a murderer and a felon," Anna Ludwika Czerny recently wrote.⁶²

These negative opinions hardly filter through to Polish literature in

⁵⁸ T. Bieńkowski, op. cit., p. 44.

⁵⁹ Z. Słupski in his *Mikołaj Kopernik w związku z Kolumbem* [*Nicolaus Copernicus in Connection with Columbus*], Chicago 1893, makes a similar comparison.

⁶⁰ K. O. Borchardt, *Krążownik spod Somosierry* [*A Cruiser from Somosierra*], Gdańsk 1969, p. 242.

⁶¹ J. Tazbir, *Szlachta a konkwistadorzy* [*The Gentry and the Conquistadors...*], p. 65.

⁶² From the introduction to Columbus's *Writings*, p. 6.

the sixteenth to eighteenth century or even later. The only exception seems to be a novel by Aleksander Tyszyński, entitled *An American Lady in Poland* (1837), in which an Indian, who is the author's mouth-piece, utters the following tirade, "We remember thee well, Christopher Columbus, our first tyrant and executioner." His feelings are shared by a Pole who corroborates his statement as follows, "When for the first time Columbus and subsequently thousands of others bathed in your blood, we heard about it with horror and wept for you."⁶³ During the Congress in Genoa which was convoked to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Columbus's birth (held in March 1951) the Polish representative, Bolesław Olszowicz, stressed that Columbus had been highly appreciated and revered even by those who condemned colonialism and conquests.⁶⁴

As it has been shown by this account, both the interest shown in and information possessed on the great navigator were far less extensive in Poland than in France, Italy or England, not to mention the Iberian Peninsula. Moreover, while the amount of information collected was constantly on the increase in Western Europe, in seventeenth-century Poland a regression was evident in this field, and the significance of the voyages of discovery made by Columbus was hardly appreciated.

This attitude was undoubtedly connected with the fact that the Polish Commonwealth lay far from the route of the great geographical discoveries. Poland was then interested in expanding in an easterly direction and was aware mainly of dangers threatening from that part or from the south. Attention was therefore turned away from the brave navigators crossing the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans. England, Portugal and the Netherlands had to turn to overseas lands in order to find new space for expansion; for Poland and Russia the area for expansion lay in their close vicinity, on their eastern frontier. In France or Spain as little was known of the Ukraine or Siberia, as in Eastern Europe of Brazil or Canada.

The Polish gentry's lack of interest in maritime affairs is a well-known fact. This attitude was clearly visible not only in literary works where the subject hardly ever occurs,⁶⁵ but also in scientific or political writings. Hence Christopher Columbus, who was primarily a great

⁶³ A. Tyszyński, *Amerykanka w Polsce*. Romans [*An American Lady in Poland. A Love Story*], part I, St. Petersburg 1837, pp. 23 - 25.

⁶⁴ *Studi Colombiani*, vol. I, pp. 73 - 74.

⁶⁵ Cf. R. Pollak, *Morze w poezji staropolskiej* [*The Sea in Early Polish Poetry*] in his *Wśród literatów staropolskich* [*Among Early Polish Men of Letters*], Warszawa 1966, p. 309 and *passim*.

sailor remained little known in Poland and neighbouring countries up to the close of the eighteenth century. Perhaps a research into the collection of merchants' letters kept in the Gdańsk Archives will throw a new light on this matter, but this will be a subject of a separate study.

(Translated by Halina Dzierżanowska)