Organize your reading of what follows around this question: Which view of Columbus is accurate? Should we remember him as a heroic architect of the modern world or a villainous exploitive hack? We’re going to have a little debate about that.

... and, while we’re on the subject,

Which view of Columbus should children be exposed to in school?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO</th>
<th>WHAT</th>
<th>WHERE</th>
<th>WITH THE GOAL OF …</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRINCE HENRY THE NAVIGATOR</strong></td>
<td>Portuguese Prince who sponsors naval expeditions</td>
<td>around the African coast</td>
<td>getting to India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BARTOLOME DIAZ</strong></td>
<td>explorer working for Henry who makes it to</td>
<td>the southern tip of Africa in 1488</td>
<td>going around it to India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VASCO DE GAMA</strong></td>
<td>same as Diaz</td>
<td>getting to India</td>
<td>trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FERDINAND AND ISABELLA</strong></td>
<td>King and Queen of Spain who eventually fund Columbus voyage to “Japan”</td>
<td>reaching the east by sailing west</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COLUMBUS</strong></td>
<td>explorer working for Ferdinand and Isabella who sails west to reach</td>
<td>the Orient</td>
<td>trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AMERIGO VESPUCCI</strong></td>
<td>merchant and mapmaker who probably never came to</td>
<td>the “New World”</td>
<td>selling his maps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PEDRO CABRAL</strong></td>
<td>explorer for Portugal who claimed</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>getting it before the Spanish did</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>POPE</strong></td>
<td>Powerful man with impressive head-gear who divides</td>
<td>the New World</td>
<td>between Spain and Portugal in 1493 (Tordesillas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CORTEZ</strong></td>
<td>explorer working for Spain who</td>
<td>conquers the Aztecs in modern-day Mexico</td>
<td>acquiring gold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PIZARRO</strong></td>
<td>explorer working for Spain who</td>
<td>conquers the Incas in modern-day Peru</td>
<td>acquiring gold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BALBOA</strong></td>
<td>explorer working for Spain who</td>
<td>crosses Panama finding gold, but instead “finds”</td>
<td>the Pacific Ocean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PONCE DE LEON</strong></td>
<td>explorer working for Spain who</td>
<td>lands in modern-day Florida</td>
<td>acquiring gold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CORONADO</strong></td>
<td>explorer working for Spain who</td>
<td>explores the American southwest and travels as far north as Kansas</td>
<td>finding lots and lots of gold</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Jerry: So I guess it’s fair to say you’ve set different goals for yourself than say, Thomas Edison, Magellan, these types of people.

George: Magellan? You like Magellan?

Jerry: Oh, yeah! My favorite explorer — around the world. Come on. Who do you like?

George: I like DeSoto.

Jerry: DeSoto? What did he do?

George: Discovered the Mississippi.

Jerry: Oh … like they wouldn’t have found that, anyway.

**SOME COLUMBIAN DATA**

Disease — (Old to New): bubonic plague, cholera, influenza, measles, scarlet fever, smallpox, tuberculosis, typhoid, yellow fever — (New to Old): potentially syphilis and some strains of yellow fever

Population — Scholars have never been able to hit upon a fixed number for the native population before Columbus initiated Europe’s permanent encounter with the Americas, but the low figure comes to 8.4 million, the highest estimates to 113 million. Whatever this figure may have been, greater consensus exists about the impact of the European presence in the New World on population change in the Americas — namely an 80% decrease. For example, those of Mayan ancestry today number 6 million. That’s the estimated Mayan population level in the 1480s before Columbus’s voyage. Put another way, it’s taken five centuries for the Mayans to “get back” to where they were.

Perceptions — Columbus, by the time of his second voyage awarded the title of admiral, did not hesitate to interact with native peoples as little more than chattel property. Michele de Cuneo, a Ligurian nobleman on Columbus’s second voyage, wrote in 1495, "While I was in the boat I captured a very beautiful Carib woman the said Lord Admiral [Columbus] gave to me, and with whom, having taken her into my cabin, she being naked according to their custom, I conceived desire to take pleasure. I wanted to put my desire into execution but she did not want it and treated me with her fingernails in such a manner that I wished I had never begun. But seeing that (to tell you the end of it all), I took a rope and thrashed her well, for which she raised such unheard of screams that you would not have believed your ears. Finally we came to an agreement in such manner that I can tell you that she seemed to have been brought up in a school of

As you begin to wrestle with the “Columbian Question,” remember that while analogies and informed speculation have their place, nothing can substitute for EVIDENCE. An argument with facts always clobbers one built upon mere opinion alone.

In that spirit, here’s some raw data …

**Animal species** — (Old to New) camel, cattle, donkey, fowl, goat, horse, pig, rabbit, sheep — (New to Old): alpaca, guinea pig, raccoon, llama, turkey

**Fruits and vegetables** — (Old to New): bananas, barley, beans, cabbage, coffee, cotton (short staple Egyptian), citrus, peaches, sugar cane — (New to Old): avocado, beans, cocoa, modern cotton varieties, peanut, pineapple, potato, pumpkin, squash, sunflower, strawberry, tobacco, tomato
harlots." Columbus’s defenders have argued that in the rigidly hierarchical society from which he came, there was nothing to question in his behavior using the moral standards of the day, particularly considering that unChristianized natives were assumed to be damned.

**Columbus’s Role in Managing Spain’s First Colonies** — In terms of broader, institutional slavery, forced conversion, or other Spanish policies in the Americas, neither Columbus nor his brothers played any role in the governorship of the territories he had discovered after 1500. His son Diego did serve in this capacity for a time.

**What They (Didn’t) Know When the Two Cultures Met** — The germ theory of disease first postulated by Girolamo Fracastoro did not appear until 1546, more than a half-century after Columbus’s voyage, and Anton van Leeuwenhoek would not perfect the optical lenses we would today consider a microscope until the 1660s and 1670s.

**But We Have a Columbus Day!** — None of Columbus’s voyages to the New World, beginning with his landfall on October 12, 1492 in what we now call San Salvador in the Bahamas, brought him to territory that is now or ever was in the past part of the United States (with the possible exception of the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba)

**Paradise?** — The native cultures encountered by Columbus and those who followed in his wake varied widely. While the Tainos Columbus met in the Bahamas seemed to inhabit an idyllic, almost Eden-like utopia, other peoples like the Incas and Aztecs were known throughout the region for ritualistic mass murder and slavery.

**Discovery?** — When Columbus died in the summer of 1506, he still believed he had reached a string of islands just beyond the waters of India.

**Proved the World Was … Wet?** It was widely understood in the 15th century, particularly among the literate and those engaged in navigation and mapmaking, that the earth was round.

**Courage … and Secrecy** — In an era where a ship’s food supplies could be expected to sustain a crew for a 5,000-mile voyage, Columbus knew he was potentially asking for far more than that. Scientific estimates of the world’s circumference ranged from about 17,000 to 23,000 miles, and the known eastward distance to the coastal waters of Asia came to 8,000 miles. Thus to reach the same waters sailing out of the east and into the west, Columbus would need to sail between 9,000 and 15,000 miles. He expected (gambled) that he would find islands suitable for re-supply before embarking on the final leg to India. On board, Columbus kept two logs — one secret, one shared with the crew. He dramatically understated the daily mileage in the crew log.

**Context** — Other explorers from Asia (the Chinese under Admiral Zheng in 1421) and Europe (Erik the Red’s Norse settlements in Greenland in the 12th century) had visited the New World before Columbus, but only Columbus’s voyages made the link among the three continents permanent.

> A happy childhood is poor preparation for human contacts.
> — Colette

**THE TROUBLE WITH COLUMBUS**

By Paul Gray of *Time*

As the 500th anniversary of his New World voyage approaches, a fundamental argument about its significance is growing in stridency …

**BY PAUL GRAY**

Planned more than a century ago as a tribute to the landfall of Christopher Columbus in 1492, a five-story lighthouse now, finally, thrusts itself into the sky over Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic. Aggressively supported by the nation’s octogenarian President Joaquin Balaguer, the project will cost, when all the finishing touches are completed, about $20 million. It will also, when the switch is pulled, put on quite a show: 147 giant beams projecting a cross of light 3,000 ft. into the Caribbean night. The lighthouse comes equipped with its own power generators, which was a prudent idea on someone’s part. The Dominican Republic’s electricity system has virtually collapsed for lack of funding. Like the rest of the country, the neighborhoods surrounding this soaring beacon are routinely blacked out 20 hours a day.

The grandiose new lighthouse already looks like an anomaly, while the old poverty huddling at its edges seems all too contemporary. Overarching light and enforced darkness, cheek by jowl. The Manichaean contrast is altogether fitting for this, the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ world-shattering voyage, which is itself increasingly seen in opposing terms of black and white. The Columbus quincentennial officially kicks off this Columbus Day, Oct. 12 — but it has even now
generated enough contrast and controversy to outlast its appointed year and, quite possibly, this decade.

At the heart of the hubbub lies a fundamental disagreement, not so much about Columbus himself as about the Columbus legacy. What, in other words, did the enigmatic Genoan set in motion when he first reached the New World?

ON THE ONE HAND …
In one version of the story, Columbus and the Europeans who followed him brought civilization to two immense, sparsely populated continents, in the process fundamentally enriching and altering the Old World from which they had themselves come.

Among other things, Columbus’ journey was the first step in a long process that eventually produced the United States of America, a daring experiment in democracy that in turn became a symbol and a haven of individual liberty for people throughout the world. But the revolution that began with his voyages was far greater than that. It altered science, geography, philosophy, agriculture, law, religion, ethics, government — the sum, in other words, of what passed at the time as Western culture.

… BUT THEN AGAIN
Increasingly, however, there is a counterchorus, an opposing rendition of the same events that deems Columbus’ first footfall in the New World to be fatal to the world he invaded, and even to the rest of the globe. The indigenous peoples and their cultures were doomed by European arrogance, brutality and infectious diseases. Columbus’ gift was slavery to those who greeted him; his arrival set in motion the ruthless destruction, continuing at this very moment, of the natural world he entered. Genocide, ecocide, exploitation — even the notion of Columbus as a “discoverer” — are deemed to be a form of Eurocentric theft of history from those who watched Columbus’ ships drop anchor off their shores.

Not surprisingly, those who see Columbus’ journey as a triumph of the human progress toward perfection and those who view the same event as a hemispheric rape do not have many kindly things to say to one another. But they are shouting a lot, and this clamor, so far, has defined the ceremonies to come.

Outwardly, at least, the planned hoopla looks much the same as that attending other big-bow-wow anniversaries, such as the bicentennials of the U.S. Declaration of Independence in 1976 or of the French Revolution in 1989. Columbus will be given the now obligatory PBS documentary series for important occasions: Columbus and the Age of Discovery will spread seven hours over four nights, beginning Oct. 6, with the whole shebang to be repeated on Columbus Day. Furthermore, those hungering for Columbus T-shirts, watches or other memorabilia should not have to search far to satiate themselves. The spirit of good old-fashioned boosterism in pursuit of tourist revenues is alive and well wherever a claim can be laid to Columbus.

Starting next April 20, Spain will stage Expo ’92, billed as the largest World’s Fair in history. The host city is Seville, which is not far from where the explorer set out on the ocean blue, and the extensive plans for the event include three replica ships — of the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria — to be moored in a re-creation of a 15th century port. Another set of three replica ships will sail from Spain Oct. 12 and retrace Columbus’ first voyage to the New World. In Columbus, Ohio, “the largest city in the world bearing the explorer’s name,” yet another replica of the Santa Maria will be christened Oct. 11 and then docked on the Scioto River downtown. The city’s year-long schedule of events includes performances of new works by its orchestra, opera, ballet and theater groups, not to mention an educational exhibit called ”500 Years of Accounting” to commemorate the Italian invention of double-entry bookkeeping.

And so it will go, in both hemispheres. A 14 1/2-ft. fiber-glass statue of the explorer has gone up in Columbus, Wis. Club Med is struggling to complete a new getaway retreat on the Bahamian island of San Salvador, one of the many spots that claim to be the place where the explorer first landed. Commercialism does, of course, entail risks. Genoa, Columbus’ birthplace, confidently expects at least 2 million visitors to attend its “Man, the Ship and the Sea” extravaganza, which begins May 15, amid rampant rumors in Italy of corruption and misuse of funds by the planners.

The grandiloquently named Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission, established by Congress in 1984, has also run into some fiduciary problems. Its first chairman, Miami developer and Republican fund raiser John Goudie, resigned last year amid complaints of mismanagement.

Meanwhile, the U.S. recession has put a crimp in the commission’s ability to obtain public and private donations. In Florida three separate state commissions have sunk on a lack of money.
This rain on the Columbus parade is nothing, though, compared with the storm of outrage that the prospect of quincentennial partying has unleashed among the anti-Columbians. “Our celebration is to oppose,” says Evaristo Nuguagu, a member of the Aguaruna people, who is president of the Coordinating Body for the Indigenous Peoples’ Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA), an umbrella group in Lima, Peru. On Oct. 7, in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, about 1,000 members of COICA and other groups, representing 24 countries in the Western Hemisphere, will gather at a “Continental Encounter” meeting. One of the purposes is to determine strategies to counter the 1992 Columbus celebrations, including the establishment of an “alternative Seville” at a yet-to-be-chosen site in Mexico. Nuguagu thinks such an antimainstream World’s Fair can be an occasion for reflection rather than celebration: “We want to recover our history to affirm our identity, to achieve true independence from exploitation and aggression and to play a role in determining our future.”

Similar protests have been percolating, or even boiling, for some time. When it opened at the University of Florida’s Museum of Natural History two years ago, an exhibit called “First Encounters: Spanish Explorations in the Caribbean and the United States 1492-1570” drew spirited opposition from Native American activists, including Russell Means of the American Indian Movement.

“Columbus makes Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent!” yelled demonstrators. COLUMBUS MURDERED A CONTINENT read one of the placards. Last July a group of protesters dressed as South American Indians appeared unannounced in Spain, wearing loincloths, their faces and bodies painted. The invaders peacefully entered the shrine of the nation’s patron saint at Santiago de Compostela. They left flowers and other offerings and a message to ask “forgiveness for those who used his name to conquer, murder and destroy peoples.”

Anti-Columbus sentiments are by no means restricted to the descendants of those who were on hand when the Genoan first showed up. Last year the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S. adopted a resolution suggesting how 1492 should be commemorated: “For the descendants of the survivors of the subsequent invasion, genocide, slavery, ‘ecocide’ and exploitation of the wealth of the land, a celebration is not an appropriate observance of this anniversary.”

The charge that Columbus’ arrival instigated genocide has become a major weapon in the anti-Columbian arsenal. George Tinker, a Native American who teaches at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, says of the quincentennial plans: “We’re talking about celebrating the great benefit to some people brought by the murder of other people.” Further to Columbus’ discredit, at the bar of contemporary judgment, is his identity as a white European male. Across the U.S., academicians will be jetting to innumerable conferences where they will give papers on the colonial depredations and horrors that Columbus inaugurated. Author Hans Koning, who has written a scathing biography titled Columbus: His Enterprise (Monthly Review Press; $8.95), sums up this school of scandalized thought: “It’s almost obscene to celebrate Columbus because it’s an unmitigated record of horror. We don’t have to celebrate a man who was really — from an Indian point of view — worse than Attila the Hun.”

Granted, as less vitriolic modern historiography makes clear, Columbus was not the gem of the ocean, the flawless hero of so many earlier hagiographies. But was the historic figure whose name was adopted by a South American republic, the District of Columbia and countless other places and entities, really worse than Hitler or Attila the Hun? What in the New World is going on around here?

For all its intensity, the Columbus controversy has very little to do with 1492 and almost everything to do with 1991. The peoples of the New World, the land that Columbus made inevitable, are engaged in another convulsive attempt to reinvent themselves, to conceive a version of the past that will justify the present and, if possible, shape the future. In older, fixed civilizations, this sort of cultural enterprise would be all but inconceivable. History is what happened and what everyone is stuck with — “a nightmare,” as James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus described it, “from which I am trying to awake.” But bad dreams have never been popular, particularly in the U.S., where it has been assumed they can be erased by a different way of seeing the things that caused them.

 Ironically, Columbus drew much of his stature from one such national mind-change. Prior to the War of 1812, he did not figure large in the U.S. imagination. But after that conflict, American patriots felt an urgent need to link the national cause with non-British heroes: the New World needed new ancestors. Washington Irving’s 1828 A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher
Columbus glorified a commanding character with an Italian name and sailing under a Spanish flag who nonetheless displayed virtues and characteristics that U.S. citizens, most of them from northern Europe, could admire. Thus did the heyday of Columbus idolatry begin — in an early attempt to provide the nation with the icons of multicultural diversity.

That idolatry is now guttering out — inconveniently, by many people’s lights — for several reasons. The U.S. population is not what it was during the first decades of the 19th century; it now includes a higher percentage of people, and a number of far more vocal people, who feel they have a historic grievance against Columbus and the European invasion he represented. These include, most prominently, Native Americans, many of whom have joined hands with their coevals in Latin and South America to take a stand against a long-ago uninvited guest; and African Americans, whose forebears were packed into slave ships and sent across the Atlantic because the Europeans needed their labor to replace that of the decimated indigenous populations. Their toppling of the Columbus icon represents, at its best, a bid to construct a new national mythology — an urge they paradoxically share with the patriots after the War of 1812.

At the same time, what Columbus actually wrought by bringing Europe into the Americas is being assessed with increased historical sophistication. Two worlds collided nearly 500 years ago, and none of the fallout from that impact now seems as simple as it was once portrayed. Textbooks on American history once began with Columbus’ arrival, as if nothing that had happened before bore mentioning. Those careful enough to note that the explorer found people already living where he touched down did not go on to say very much about them.

Yet there is much to say, as archaeologists, anthropologists and ethnographers have known for a long time. The prospect of the Columbus quincentennial not only lent new urgency to scientific research already under way about the land that the Italian encountered, but also suggested an expanded context in which discoveries could be viewed. “The impetus has changed,” says archaeologist Jerald Milanich, “from a celebration of Columbus and the triumph of European civilization to a new theme: the people that discovered Columbus. There’s a huge amount of research focusing on the impact of native Americans.”

It has never been a secret that the Americas and Europe reciprocally influenced each other, although the focus in much traditional history was on how the colonializers tamed — or exterminated — the natives and resettled the land along European models. The process worked both ways. The New World galvanized the European imagination; knowledge of its existence and its peoples was an important factor in the explosion of the Renaissance, which involved not only the reappropriation of classical learning but also the heady sense of a future yet to be discovered. In “To His Mistress Going to Bed,” written roughly a century after Columbus’ landing, the English poet John Donne describes his lover’s disrobing until her final article of clothing is cast off and then exclaims, “O my America! my new-found land.”

In the current politically correct climate, Donne’s rapturous recognition can easily be dismissed as a typically white European male response toward unclaimed territory, combining voyeurism, sex and predatory aggression. This reading filters out all the fun and, more important, the awe and wonder that the Americas sparked in European minds. And the New World fed Europe more than literary tropes, intellectual excitement and a whiff of the exotic. It fed Europe . . . food, stuff that native Americans had been cultivating for thousands of years and that Europeans had never heard of: peppers, paprika, potatoes, corn, tomatoes.

A wider understanding of this transfer of knowledge from the New World to the Old should by fostered by the Smithsonian Institution’s “Seeds of Change,” the largest exhibition ever mounted at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington. Opening Oct. 12 and running through April 1993, the Smithsonian exhibit sets forth five “natural” elements — sugar, disease, maize, the potato and the horse — the exchange of which has profoundly altered both the New and Old Worlds in the 500 years since Columbus’ first voyage.

The Smithsonian show and much of the other serendipitous scholarly digging in preparation for the Columbus quincentennial actually work quietly against the more extreme positions staked out by those who hate or love what transpired 500 years ago. Thank goodness. Because it is impossible, even with the best will in the world, to find a simple common ground between the contending notions of Civilization or Genocide, Progress or the Cyclical Harmony of the Seasons, Mastering the Land or Living with the Bounty That the Land Will Provide on Its Own.
Impossible, because all these abstractions belong more to the world of morality plays than to the messy arena of history as it occurs. The vast amount of new information being discovered about the New World, both before and after 1492, actually points the way toward a genuinely harmonious understanding of the present moment and how it was achieved. The Columbus quincentennial deserves some credit for focusing this energy and attention. But the worry is that if the debate grows louder and more strident, it could obscure this increasing pool of common knowledge in a shouting match of cliches.

If any book can be said to summon up the passions of this moment, it is Kirkpatrick Sale’s The Conquest of Paradise, (Knopf; $24.95). Published last year, the 453-page popular history has become a call to arms for the anti-Columbians; it is also the book the traditional Columbus faction most loves to hate. Sale is a social historian whose research into Columbus’ life and travels and the explorer’s contemporary world is impressive; his narrative, especially when he joins Columbus aboard the Santa Maria, is gripping. Sale persuasively describes what it must have felt like for the explorer to stumble upon an unimagined world, peopled, as the author notes, by the tribe known as the Tainos, a European name attached to them that was taken from their own word for “good.”

Sale goes on to note that “the Tainos’ lives were in many ways as idyllic as their surroundings, into which they fit with such skill and comfort. They were well fed and well housed, without poverty or serious disease. They enjoyed considerable leisure, given over to dancing, singing, ballgames, and sex, and expressed themselves artistically in basketry, woodworking, pottery, and jewelry. They lived in general harmony and peace, without greed or covetousness or theft.”

Never mind the aesthetic objection that Sale makes these people sound suspiciously like a bunch of New Agers vacationing in the Bahamas. Discount the fact that Sale does not mention evidence of the Tainos’ hierarchic social structure, which included, at the bottom level, slaves.

The deepest problem is that Sale, like others who idealize the people whose fate was sealed by the explorer’s arrival, actually does them another kind of injury. The perfect island race of Sale’s imagination is denied its commonality with the rest of humanity. Father Leonid Kishkovsky of the Orthodox Church in America, who chaired the National Council of the Churches meeting at which the controversial Columbus quincentennial resolution was debated, is one of those who question the notion implicit in Sale’s work that evil was something imported exclusively from Europe: “In a certain sense this is patronizing; it’s as if native indigenous people don’t really have a history, which includes civilization, warfare, empires and cruelties, before white people even arrived.”

Lurking behind Sale’s argument and that of many other vociferous critics is a prelapsarian myth: the world was once perfect and now it isn’t, so someone or something must have ruined it. Many cultures possess a form of this myth; it is particularly strong in Western thought because of the Adam and Eve story in the Old Testament. In the 18th century, Jean Jacques Rousseau popularized a secular version of that Eden story with his writings about the Noble Savage. And part of his inspiration for this concept came from his knowledge of the New World. Even Sale’s anti-Columbian ideas, it seems, owe more to Columbus than some of his readers might imagine.

Mythology is a closed system, a revolving circle of self-reinforcing perceptions. The true history of 1492 and ever after occurred in a different plane of existence, where questions like “were savages noble?” are either meaningless or susceptible to proof. For too long, the American myth demonized or ignored the people whom Columbus encountered on these shores. Must people now replace this with a new myth that simply demonizes Columbus and Europeans? It is easy to see why former victims might like their turn as heroes. But if that is all the quincentennial produces, an important opportunity for self-reflection will have been wasted.

Celebrate Columbus? Not if that simply means backslapping and flag waving. But it can mean more: taking stock of the long, fascinating record, noting that inevitable conflict resulted in losers as well as winners and produced a mixture of races, customs and habits never before seen in the world. Columbus and all he represents may simply provide an excuse for finger shaking. But perhaps it is possible to celebrate Columbus by trying harder to understand each other and ourselves.
SOME UPDATES …

CHINESE COLUMBUS
by Alphone Vinh (NPR)

Christopher Columbus was merely a latecomer. The descendants of the Vikings have known this for quite some time. But now the entire world is about to learn much more about the Chinese Columbus. Admiral Zheng He, a Muslim eunuch, served under several powerful Chinese emperors. Undoubtedly China’s greatest maritime explorer, he has been almost unknown in the West.

That, too, is about to change.

At a March meeting of the Royal Geographic Society, a quiet, unassuming retired British naval officer and historian named Gavin Menzies presented stunning evidence that Zheng and his Chinese fleet not only discovered America 72 years before Columbus, but also circumnavigated the world much earlier than Portugal’s Ferdinand Magellan.

Menzies’ book 1421: The Year China Discovered the World draws on 14 years of research in more than 100 countries Zheng appears to have visited. Menzies uses maps from pre-Columbian times and astronomical maps dating from Zheng’s era to build his case. An expanded American edition will be published in January.

A stone inscription at the Palace of the Celestial Spouse at Chiang-su and Liu Shia-Chang — dated 1431 — says: “We, Zheng He and his companions, at the beginning of Zhu Di’s reign received the Imperial Commission as envoys to the barbarians. Up until now seven voyages have taken place and, each time, we have commanded several tens of thousands of government soldiers and more than a hundred oceangoing vessels. We have…reached countries of the Western Regions, more than three thousand countries in all. We have…beheld in the ocean huge waves like mountains rising sky-high, and we have set eyes on barbarian regions far away, hidden in a blue transparency of light vapours, whilst our sails, loftily unfurled like clouds, day and night continued their course, rapid like that of a star, traversing those savage waves.”

62 flag ships of the expeditionary fleet were roughly 475 feet long and 193 feet wide, holding a crew of 1,000. Columbus’ flagship Santa Maria was 75 feet by 25 feet.

The Official Ming History (6 volumes, 4,128 pages and a 317-page index) mentions visits to Java, Sumatra, Vietnam, Siam, Cambodia, the Philippines, Ceylon (where the Chinese made an apparent “regime change”), Yemen, India, Bangladesh, Arabia, Somalia, and mention of “Franca” — the Chinese name for France and Portugal — and Holland.

1421: The Year China Discovered the World was published to extraordinary interest. Television rights for a planned documentary of Commander Menzies’ expedition to retrace Zheng’s voyages went for an estimated 3 million pounds. Menzies received a hero’s welcome in Nanjing, where he was the guest of the general secretary of the Communist Party at a conference of 69 Chinese academics.

According to Commander Menzies’ research, Admiral Zheng’s fleet split up into several groups and various ships went to Arabia, the Cape of Good Hope, the Carribbean, South America, the South Pacific, Australia and the west coast of North America.

Menzies has backing to build a replica of Zheng’s flagship junk. He will return to China in December to lay out his plan to drain the great docks at Nanjing — departure point for the immense fleet of 450-foot teak-and-mahogany junks which set sail in 1421 to encounter the world. Once the junk is built, Menzies plans to leave from those docks on a global voyage in Zheng’s historic wake. The crew will live and eat the in the fashion of the admiral’s sailors, and plans to return to China before the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

China in 1421 was the most refined, most splendid and most scientifically advanced civilization in the entire world. But following those extraordinary voyages, the heir to Zheng’s imperial masters turned his back on the sea and suspended Chinese naval expeditions abroad. China then turned inward with disastrous results for herself and the world.

The heart-broken Zheng was appointed garrison commander in Nanjing, and given the sad task of disbANDING his sailors and soldiers. His high stature earned the old Muslim commander one last expedition in the winter of 1431. He visited Mecca
and once again travelled to the states of Southeast Asia, India, the Persian Gulf, East Africa and the Red Sea. But he returned to die in relative obscurity.

Menzies’ book is a corking good read and should delight all professional and armchair sailors and sea historians with exciting narratives of places Menzies has travelled in the sea paths of the great Chinese admiral. His many maps, both modern and ancient, are equally wonderful.

And here are his last words for an ancient hero:

“Zheng He’s tomb on Bull’s Head Hill in the west of Jiangsu province is... neglected, weed-choked and covered in graffiti, and his museum has been closed for lack of interest. These great men must have their reward in heaven.”

COLUMBUS: INTREPID EXPLORER OR ACCIDENTAL NAVIGATOR?
by Steve Almasy (CNN)

(CNN) — Christopher Columbus never thought — even to the day he died — that he helped “discover” the Americas, two continents thousands of miles from his intended destination of Asia.

Imagine his surprise, then, if Columbus knew the United States had a holiday honoring him — even though he never actually set foot in any of the now superpower’s 50 states.

“In a sense, we remember him because he’s a guy that made a mistake but had good luck,” said Patricia Seed, a history professor at Rice University and author of “Ceremonies of Possession in Europe’s Conquest of the New World.” Seed said Columbus miscalculated the distance between Europe and Asia. “But he happened to run into Caribbean islands [full of] gold,” said Seed, the financial windfall soon overriding concerns that he didn’t reach his planned goal. “The gold had actually come to the surface and was in the rivers. It was very easily accessible.”

For better or worse, Christopher Columbus has come to symbolize the bridge between the “New World,” defined by the Americas, and the “Old World,” generally seen as Europe. His accidental “discovery” has reshaped the course of history in the more than five centuries since.

Few deny his courage in setting out on a then unprecedented, dangerous journey and — while others may have reached America before him — of charting a bold cross-Atlantic course that helped open up, and therefore transform, modern civilization.

“It is nearly impossible to over-exaggerate the historical significance of Christopher Columbus,” former Millersville University professor Thomas Tirado wrote in 2000, crediting the navigator for helping set the stage for an intellectual revolution. “The ultimate expression of the Columbian Legacy has been nothing less than global in its impact.”

A BOLD REQUEST
Columbus and his men had high hopes when they departed from Spain on August 3, 1492. What exactly happened after — in terms of the famed navigator’s actions, intentions and importance — has been subject to intense debate for centuries. In that time, it has become even more difficult to separate the real Columbus from the legend.

Most historians agree Columbus was a risk-taker and a brave man. To sail west, deep into unchartered waters of the Atlantic, in the late 15th century was no small undertaking, given the huge element of the unknown.

Still, contrary to some assertions, Columbus and his crew didn’t fear falling off the edge of the Earth.

“It is true that a lot of ordinary people thought the world was flat,” Seed said. “But in Portugal [where Columbus trained as a sailor] the first thing that they did was a little demonstration to prove that the Earth was round. All of the scientists and intellectuals believed that the Earth was round.” Now monsters were a different story.

“There were all kinds of things that lived in the ocean,” Seed said. “They were also out there for the first time in a area that hadn’t been mapped before. They were understandably fearful.”

Columbus had ample experience sailing, having taken many trips — including some tied to the slave trade — along the Western coast of Africa. Of course, he had never sailed west across the Atlantic, and could only speculate about how long it would take to reach Asia or exactly what lay in the way. Using calculations by Paolo Toscanelli, a mathematician and geographer from Florence, Italy, Columbus thought there were about 2,800 nautical miles between the Canary Islands and Japan — short by about 9,000 miles, according to Seed.
FATEFUL VOYAGE
Portuguese King João II, thinking that such a westward route was extremely long, rejected Columbus’s first request — made in 1484 — to fund such a trip.

Columbus moved to Spain in 1485, a nation far behind its neighbor in exploration. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella denied his first appeal for backing, instead focusing their efforts on ending the 700-year rule of the Moors in Spain, and driving them from their last foothold in the country.

But by 1492, major changes gripped Europe, and particularly Spain, according to Seed. The Moors surrendered in January, returning to North Africa. In his third attempt, Columbus finally received approval to make the voyage west to India. The about 100-man crew of the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria set sail that summer.

On October 12, 1492, a crewman spotted land in what is now the Bahamas. Exactly where he set foot remains a subject of much contention, but he named the island San Salvador.

Columbus called the native inhabitants of the islands Indians, under the belief he had reached Asia, or “The Indies” as it was then known. On what is now Hispaniola, he made first contact with the Taino Indians.

He would return to the area on three more voyages.

INTENSE CONTROVERSY
Eventually Columbus was named governor of the area, a short-lived and ill-fated venture. In the summer of 1500, Spanish authorities removed him from his post after the queen sent an administrator to check on complaints about his governance.

This history — as well as the deaths, mainly by disease brought over by European settlers, of hundreds of thousands of Native Americans since 1492 — has made Columbus a villain to some. In recent years, many Columbus Day celebrations have been accompanied by protests, many led by American Indians and their supporters who link Columbus with the decimation of their people.

“They want to celebrate Columbus,” Lisa Simms, who helped organize an anti-Columbus march in Denver, told The Associated Press in 2002. “We are here to commemorate the lives of our ancestors, the indigenous people who were already here.”

Yet not all Native Americans condemn Columbus. Conservative commentator David Yeagley, who traces his lineage to Comanche warrior Bad Eagle, calls him “really just a front man.” “Columbus was simply a courageous man,” Yeagley wrote in a 2003 edition of FrontPage, a conservative online magazine. “Columbus was willing to go to a place where, as far as he knew, no man had gone before. This is momentous. This is all I see in Columbus. This is all I need to see.”

MIXED LEGACY
Columbus died in Spain in 1506 and within 50 years of his death, his name vanished into obscurity.

In the United States, American writer Washington Irving brought Columbus into the spotlight with his 1828 biography of the explorer, written while Irving was living in Spain.

It wasn’t until 1937 that the United States, under President Franklin Roosevelt, declared October 12 Columbus Day. President Nixon made Columbus Day a national holiday in 1971. Columbus lives on in America’s classrooms, street names and institutions, with both the positive and negative aspects of his voyage and its repercussions spurring the debate. “It has to be done carefully,” said noted historian Howard Zinn, author of A People’s History of the United States — 1492-Present, of the challenge of properly explaining to students Columbus and the effect European exploration had on the Americas. “You don’t want to crowd into their minds horrible pictures of violence and blood,” he said. “And yet at the same time, we must not hide the truth.”
TOP TEN THINGS COLUMBUS WOULD SAY ABOUT AMERICA IF HE WERE ALIVE TODAY

#10
“I discovered the New World, but who discovered these delicious Cinnabons?”

#9
“Hey, my fo’shizzle thing finally caught on!”

#8
“Flu outbreaks, political chaos, vermin — this place hasn’t changed a bit!”

#7
“It’s humbling to realize that because of me Americans are getting 20% off on a mattress.”

#6
“How did you come to choose the leader you call ‘Oprah?’”

#5
“It’s nice to see Cher is still around …”

#4
“As a fellow man of the sea, I join you in mourning the death of Gilligan.”

#3
“The finest chefs in Italy can’t compare to Olive Garden.”

#2
“I discovered the continent and the only thing named after me is a city in Ohio?”

#1
“Those Desperate Housewives babes remind me of Queen Isabella, if you know what I mean.”

We solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God, and one of another, covenant and combine ourselves together in a civil body politic.
—Mayflower Compact

AFTER COLUMBUS: THE EUROPEAN REACTION

COLUMBIAN LEGACY
In 1504, Columbus completed his fourth and final trip to the New World. On the eve of his death two years later, he still believed his voyages had penetrated the margins of east Asia, an article of faith still embraced by the English crown when it sponsored the 1497 mission of Italian navigator John Cabot to finish what Columbus had started and find a passage to the riches of the east by sailing west.

However, because of Columbus’s apparent difficulties in warmer waters to the south, Cabot tried to find a “northwest passage” to Asia instead, sailing around modern-day Newfoundland and Maine in search of an inlet of water that would deliver him to the seas surrounding China and Japan. Failing in his first attempt, Cabot’s second effort in 1498 may have taken him as far south as the Chesapeake Bay (between modern-day Virginia and Maryland). Then he disappeared.

To the south, the Spanish forged ahead with the administration of their existing territory under the mantle of a papal treaty. This agreement, the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) between Portugal and Spain, divided the western hemisphere along a line of longitude that cut through the western edge of modern-day Brazil (reserving it for Portuguese colonization). The treaty set aside any new discoveries west of the line for Spain. Wasting no time, in the fifty years following Columbus’ original 1492 voyage …

⇒ Cortez conquered the Aztecs in modern-day Mexico.
⇒ Pizarro conquered the Incas in modern-day Peru.
⇒ Balboa crossed the Isthmus of Panama — and “discovered” the Pacific Ocean.
⇒ Ponce de Leon explored Florida — and claimed it for Spain.
⇒ Hernando de Soto used Florida as a staging ground to explore the modern-day American Midwest and Mississippi River valley.
Coronado explored the modern-day American southwest — and seems to have made it as far north as Kansas.

WRAPPING UP: BIG IDEAS, WHAT WE NEED TO REMEMBER

So, to take a quick timeout here, we’ve now arrived at a short list of motives driving Europeans into the Americas. The first involves finding something that has … well, nothing to do with America at all, really! That would be a water passage to Asia. The second springs from what, for lack of a better term, we would call “superpower competition” for territory and resources. Initially those resources would involve gold and silver, but in time Europeans would find themselves fighting over everything from sugar to slaves. But this somewhat more sophisticated, “productive” economic motive — more sophisticated than chaining hapless natives to stream beds to pan for gold, at any rate — is still not the whole story.

We also have to consider questions of belief and religious philosophy.

Or put another way, having argued about Columbus, it’s time for a detour — to consider how these 16th and 16th century Europeans saw their religion, their faith, their flag, and their future. As you’ll soon see, questions of piety and politics that we separate today were fully intertwined four centuries ago and would play an important role in the colonization of the Americas.