

Contrary to Expectations

History is full of incidents that have unexpected consequences. I do not think for one moment that Gavrilo Princip expected his assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife Sophie, in Sarajevo on 28th June 1914 would precipitate thirty years of turmoil in Europe with the slaughter of millions in two wars, the rise of bolshevism, the rise and defeat of fascism and the near extermination of European Jewry. Clearly Putin's invasion of Ukraine is not the consequence he expected; but what the eventual consequence will be is yet to be seen.

But I shall consider an much earlier event and go back several centuries to 1492 when, in the words of an old song, "Columbus sailed the ocean blue." But let us first dismiss the modern urban myth. The unexpected consequence was *not* that three ships reached land instead of sailing over the edge of the world to plunge into the cosmic abyss, for the simple fact that in the 15th century it was believed that earth was a sphere; indeed, people had believed this for more than a one and half millennia before. In the 3rd century BC the Greek mathematician, Eratosthenes, had calculated the diameter of the earth with surprising accuracy. In the 2nd century BC Ptolemy had divided the earth into three hundred and sixty degrees of meridian. Church fathers such as Augustine of Hippo, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas knew very well that the earth was spherical; and any school boy or girl can work out that if Dante, of the late 13th and early 14th century, entered the funnel of Hell, travelled downwards to the centre of the earth and then found himself *climbing* to emerge on the other side to see unknown stars at the foot of Mount Purgatory, then Dante must have known that the earth was spherical.

The modern urban flat-earth myth is due largely to the propaganda of 19th century secularists, their main evidence being the writings of Lactantius under the Emperor Constantine and the text of a 4th century Byzantine geographer, Cosmas Indicopleustes. But, as Umberto Eco observes in his book 'Serendipities: Language and Lunacy': "The fact is that Christian culture, in the early years and in the Middle Ages, left Lactantius to stew in his own juice, and the text of Cosmas, written in Greek and therefore in a language the Christian Middle Ages had forgotten, was revealed to the Western world only in 1706, in Montfaucon's *Nova Collectio patrum et scriptorum graecorum*."

But let us forget modern urban myths and return to actual history. During the 13th and 14th centuries under the Mogul Empire, Europeans had enjoyed safe passage along the Silk Road to China, other parts of the far East and to Maritime East Asia, i.e. what in the 16th century was known as the "East Indies" and what we now call Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and East Timor. But with the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire in 1453, the Silk Road became closed to European traders. In 1474 the Florentine astronomer Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli had suggested to King Alfonso V of Portugal that sailing west across the Atlantic would be a quicker way of reaching China, Japan and the "Spice Islands" (the Moluccan archipelago in eastern Indonesia). Alfonso was not persuaded. However, the idea was clearly in the air, so to speak, and in the 1480s Columbus and his brother, Bartholomew, who was a cartographer working in Lisbon, proposed a plan to reach Maritime East Asia by sailing west.

It is thought that Columbus actually corresponded with Toscanelli and received a copy of Toscanelli's map showing that the westward route to Asia was possible. Toscanelli, however, had under-estimated the distance between Ptolemy's meridian lines and over-estimated the size of Asia as well as the distance between China and Japan. On his map he showed Japan more or less where the western part of Mexico is (the rest of Mexico being shown as part of the Atlantic ocean). On this map Japan was within reach of 15th century sailing ships. Columbus reckoned it to be only 2,400 nautical miles (4,400 kilometres) from the Canary Islands to eastern Japan. The actual

distance, however, is 10,600 nautical miles (19,600 kilometres) and no ship of the 15th century could possibly have carried enough food or fresh water for such a journey.

Columbus was convinced that he could reach Japan or the Spice Islands but he needed financial backing. Therefore, in 1484 or thereabouts he proposed his planned voyage to King John II of Portugal; the king put this to his advisors who rejected it, quite correctly, on the grounds that the distance was four times that estimated by Columbus. In 1488 Columbus appealed again to King John; but when, shortly afterwards, Bartolomeu Dias returned to Portugal with news of his successful rounding of the southern tip of Africa near what is now the Cape of Good Hope, the king lost all interest in Columbus' proposal.

Meanwhile in 1486 Columbus had sought an audience with King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile who, by marrying, had become joint monarchs, ruling the greater part of Spain. Queen Isabella referred the proposal to a committee who, like King John's Portuguese advisors, said Columbus had grossly underestimated the distance to Japan and pronounced the proposal as impractical. The two monarchs, however, did make Columbus an allowance of money and furnished him with a letter telling all towns and cities in their dominions to provide Columbus with food and lodging at no cost. Probably they did not want Columbus to take his ideas elsewhere and it allowed them to keep their options open. Indeed, Columbus did try to contact King Henry VII of England and, after Queen Isabella had again been advised that his voyage was implausible, set out for France. In the end, however, to stop him taking his ideas elsewhere, the two monarchs agreed to back him.

Thus on the evening of the 3rd August 1492 Columbus departed from Palos de la Frontera with three ships: a carrack named Santa Maria, and two smaller caravels, the Pinta and the Niña. They sailed first to the Canary Islands to restock provisions and on the 6th September they sailed west from San Sebastián de la Gomera to arrive in the Bahamas on the 12th October. Columbus spent some time visiting other islands, including the larger islands of Hispaniola and Cuba, before returning to Spain on the 13th January 1493. When eventually he arrived back at Palos on 15th March he was given a hero's welcome.

Thus contrary to the expectations of many of the learned people of Portugal and Spain, Columbus and his crew did not run out of provisions and fresh water to die, leaving the three ships adrift in the western Ocean; he did find land and returned to Spain.

Contrary to Columbus's expectation, however, he had not sailed to Japan or any of the islands of Maritime East Asia; he had sailed to the Caribbean. But although Columbus subsequently made three more return voyages to the Caribbean, setting foot in his 3rd voyage on the continent of South America and in his 4th and final visit setting foot on the mainland of Mesoamerica, and in spite of the growing contrary evidence of other explorers, Columbus remained convinced that he had reached the islands of Maritime East Asia and always referred to the inhabitants of those lands as 'Indos' (Indians). It is perhaps for that reason that the new continent was not named after him but after the Florentine merchant and explorer, Amerigo Vespucci (or, in Latin, Americus Vespucci) who, between 1497 and 1504, took part in at least two voyages of discovery and came to recognize that south America was a continent, new to Europeans, which he called the "New World."

So while Columbus did find new lands across the Atlantic and the learned men of Portugal and Spain were correct in saying that Columbus's ships would never reach Japan or any of the islands of Maritime East Asia, the expectations of both were not fulfilled.

But what were the consequences of Columbus's voyages? New diseases such as influenza, measles and chicken-pox, were brought from Europe to the Americas which had devastating effects as the natives of the Americas did not have any immunity against those diseases. Europeans became colonizers, bringing slavery and exploitation. There were benefits also. The horses, goats, sheep, pigs and cattle have been beneficial and the native Americans especially took to horse riding, and new food such as potatoes and tomatoes were introduced to Europe. Eventually new nations grew up there and without the United States of America the outcome of the wars in Europe of the early 20th century, to which I referred in my first paragraph, would have been very different.

Some of those consequences, such as slavery and exploitation, you may say would sadly not be unexpected. But the dominant role of the USA in the modern world could surely not have been expected.

It is possible the first European to set foot on the American continent was Leif Erikson and his band of Vikings around 1000 AD; but the only clear archaeological evidence of Norse settlement is on the island of Newfoundland. Also Leif Erikson's expedition did not lead to the discovery of an hitherto unknown continent. You may also argue that sooner or later the American continent would have been discovered anyway. That is certainly so; but it was Columbus's voyages that actually opened the way.