
Book Review

The 'Toscanelli Project' factor in the Christopher Columbus story

by Mark Burdman

Christopher Columbus: The Grand Design
by Paolo Emilio Taviani
Orbis Publishers, London, 1985 (Italian, 1974)
£17.50, 573 pages.

Christopher Columbus, The Dream and the Obsession: A Biography
by Gianni Granzotto
Collins Publishers, London, 1986 (Italian, 1984)
£13.95, 300 pages.

Two books that appeared in English-language editions during 1986, will hopefully reawaken interest in the "forgotten story" about how the continent we now call the Americas, was discovered, or actually rediscovered, in the late 15th century, even if the authors of these editions feel uncomfortable about the full implications of this "forgotten story."

Paolo Emilio Taviani is an Italian parliamentarian and former cabinet minister from Genoa who was, at the time of English-language publication of his study in 1985, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Italian Senate; Gianni Granzotto was president of Italy's largest news agency until his death in 1985. Both books were originally issued in Italian.

The "forgotten story" has to do with the role of the scientists, artists, and philosophers of the 15th-century Golden Renaissance, including Nicolaus of Cusa, Enea Silvio Piccolomini, and, especially, Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli, in creating the circumstances which led to Columbus's famous trans-Atlantic expeditions, beginning in 1492, and continuing almost until his death in 1506. Although, for different reasons, both authors might object to the idea, the proof they offer in their books about the background to the Columbus expeditions, might well justify the suggestion, that the main 500th anniversary celebrations of the "Discovery of America," be held under the Dome of the great Cathedral of Flor-

ence, which was built by Toscanelli student Filippo Brunelleschi.

The issuance, in English, of the studies by Taviani and Granzotto, can be expected to be only the first couple, in what should become a flood of new books, reprints, monographs, gift volumes, and so on, between now and the 1992 festivities. As we look forward to this international extravaganza, especially we who are citizens of the United States of America, who celebrate the arrival of Columbus in America every Oct. 12, should ask ourselves the following question: How many of us, have ever heard of Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli? It would greatly surprise this writer, if a census of the American population would uncover more than a few thousand, who would reply in the affirmative. Columbus, by contrast, has become more than a household word: Countries, cities, towns, are named after him. The favored spaceship project of the European Space Agency is named after him.

This review is not meant to denigrate Columbus, or argue that his reputation is undeserved. After all, the image of Columbus making his perilous trip across the Atlantic, stirred a poet of the rank of Friedrich Schiller to write a poem, using Columbus to celebrate the strengthening of nature by genius. One of the U.S.A.'s early poet-politicians, Joel Barlow, wrote his epic poem, *Columbiad*, in honor of Columbus. Moreover, the story of Columbus could well stir the imagination of young children to become future space-colonizers, developing the courage to travel into distant and unknown regions—even if the actual Columbus, at least as represented in Granzotto's account, had some character traits that one would hardly regard as desirable.

In the usual commemorations of Columbus, the problem is more one of omission than commission, although the former must necessarily color the latter. As long as the responsibility of the great thinkers of the Florentine Renaissance for the discovery/rediscovery of America, in all its dimensions and beauty, is not widely known, then the human race is deprived of the historical, cultural, and scientific tools that are needed today, for creating the culture necessary for exploration of outer space.

The alert reader's understanding of this will be improved by reading the books of Granzotto and Taviani, even if both authors shrink away from the implications of their own historical proofs. In Taviani's book, the proofs are reinforced by an interesting array of illustrations, including maps, details of paintings, and the like.

The 'Discovery of America' controversy

The 500th anniversary in 1992 of Columbus's first expedition, is enormously controversial. Of purely secondary importance is the matter of what we might call "patrimony," who should assume the mantle and honor, if not title, to the Americas. Spain, which sponsored Columbus's expeditions, and the Italian city of Genoa, where Columbus was born and whose bankers funded many of his activities throughout his life, have always been in peaceful and not-so-peaceful competition, while a bevy of other claimants (for example, in recent years, Israel, on the strength of a never-proven claim that Columbus was either Jewish, or of a family of converted Jews) is usually around, to put forward a claim. Some astute investigator, expert at uncovering the roots of political and historical intrigue, might even figure out the circumstances leading up to the February 1986 assassination of the then-living descendant of the original Christopher Columbus.

But the patrimony question is only a secondary, and less important, level of the controversy. The underlying issues are much more important, and are, from a negative standpoint, seen in the outrage expressed by individuals ranging from Fidel Castro to Henry Kissinger, about the "discovery of America." Castro went so far as to threaten, during Spanish Prime Minister Felipe González's state visit to Cuba last year, that he, Castro, would lead a large-scale international campaign against Spain, should it go ahead with plans for massive Columbus commemoration ceremonies leading up to and including 1992!

Castro charged that the only importance of Columbus's expedition, was that it led to genocide against Indian populations in the American hemisphere. Similar diatribes were published, during late 1984, in the magazine of the pro-Nazi Islamic-fundamentalist Ahmed Ben Bella. And, in the latter part of 1986, a group representing European regionalist-separatist movements in France, Spain, Italy, and Great Britain, announced that it would begin, long before 1992, to organize protest movements against the 500th anniversary celebrations.

Kissinger, in his 1950s *A World Restored* doctoral thesis celebrating the 1815 Congress of Vienna and the diplomacy of Austrian Count Metternich, commented with praise, on Metternich's contention, that it was the "discovery of America," that accounted, in large part, for the problems faced by the European aristocracy in the periods leading up to 1815.

Similarly, Granzotto presents examples, including a competition sponsored by the French Academy in 1792, for the best essay in response to the question, "Has the discovery

of America been helpful or harmful to humankind?" The winner of the contest claimed that the discovery of America was "dramatically destructive" in its moral consequences!

What unites this oddball coalition, against the "discovery of America"?

The answer to this question is partially, of course, that this oddball coalition shares hatred for a major *result* of the discovery/rediscovery, namely the American Revolution that happened on the continent that Columbus and friends "found." Without going into the heart of the matter in the brief space available here, the American Revolution was brought about by the republican elites of Europe, such as the group around John Milton in 17th-century Britain, who saw the "New World" across the seas, as the target-area for "republican colonization." These elites, in turn, were the continuation of the tradition of the 15th-century Golden Renaissance; there is a connection, understood negatively by those who own Kissinger, Castro, Ben Bella, et al., between the Golden Renaissance and the American Revolution, mediated by the Columbian expeditions, if the latter are properly understood.

Columbus's "discovery" was actually a "rediscovery." He was not, entirely, voyaging into the "unknown." The Columbus Project was one important product of the greatest project known to humanity, the Florentine-centered, but European-wide Renaissance. And, as "Renaissance" means being "reborn," an investigation of the Columbus Project shows that those, like Toscanelli, who caused his expedition to happen, were busy, for decades before the expeditions—even before Columbus was born!—regathering, reevaluating, recreating, and recomposing the evidence of great thinkers of time past, about "crossing the ocean," while making the breakthroughs in perspective, geography, cartography, navigation, astronomy, mathematics, painting, and so on, that would provide the body of knowledge for Columbus to embark on his adventure.

If anything, the "Columbus Project" was, fundamentally, a "Toscanelli Project," a historical fact which makes both Taviani and Granzotto quite uncomfortable, in the end.

Toscanelli and Columbus

In an empirical sense, we will never have the answer, since almost all of Toscanelli's works, including but not exclusively, on geography, were, through one means or another, destroyed. Some knowledge of him is available in English-language studies of the Columbian expeditions, but the most thorough studies, by the Florentine historian Uzielli, were also crimped by this extraordinary "disappearance" of the writings of one of humanity's most important figures.

A full commemoration of the discovery/rediscovery of America, would have to take into account, three periods.

First, there would be the period 1418-20, when Toscanelli, Nicolaus of Cusa, and the future master of geometry and perspective, Leon Battista Alberti, were all young students in Padua. The seeds of the Renaissance, in significant

part, were planted there, at that time. Toscanelli's tutelage of Brunelleschi, in the necessary mathematical principles to build that glorious edifice to human creativity, the Dome of Florence Cathedral, is one manifestation of that Padua period, available for all, today, to see.

Second, there would be the Council of Florence, of 1438-43. Partial accounts of this appear in the Taviani and Granzotto studies, but a much fuller account is needed. Toscanelli and others spent hours, literally debriefing the delegation of Gemisthos Plethon from Byzantium, and travelers from different parts of the globe, recreating the geographical conceptions of the ancient Greek geographer Strabo, the geographical and geometrical conceptions of Plato, and so on. Certainly, in the milieu of the Council of Florence, the ancient idea of the "fourth continent" was re-awakened for the conscience of the 15th century. Even if Granzotto and Taviani stick with the more-common hypothesis, that Toscanelli was recreating the idea of an oceanic route to Asia—still a breathtaking idea, comparable to the conquest of space in this century—enough evidence has been compiled by collaborators of this reviewer, in published and unpublished studies, to provisionally prove that it was the "Fourth continent" idea, which actually catalyzed this circle.

The third moment would be, as Taviani writes, "perhaps at the bedside of the dying Cardinal Cusano" (Nicolaus of Cusa), ca. 1464. Taviani suggests that it was here that Toscanelli (the executor of the great Cusano's will) would have engaged in "long nocturnal discussions" with Portuguese Canon Martins, about the "astounding idea" of traversing the ocean, to reach "the Indies, where the Spice is produced."

This brings us close to the heart of the matter. On June 25, 1474, Taviani reports, a letter from Toscanelli reached Martins, "a confidant of the King of Portugal." The letter presented the case, as worked out by Toscanelli and friends, for the plausibility of crossing the ocean. According to Taviani, this letter reached Columbus in 1480—12 years before the ocean crossing!

To Taviani's credit, he spends a good deal of energy debunking the attempts of various historians to claim that the Toscanelli letter was somehow forged, perhaps by Columbus himself. One of the interesting points here, is that Columbus carried around a copy of that letter, re-written in his own handwriting, in the folds of his own copy of a book written by Enea Silvio Piccolomini of Siena, the man who became Pope Pius II, and who was another of the Cusan Golden Renaissance circle in Europe.

Granzotto reports that Portugal's Canon Fernando Martins had met Toscanelli—"one of the greatest scholars" of the time—and had reported on Toscanelli's ideas to Portuguese King Alfonso V, who, in turn, requested answers to certain thorny problems in geography and exploration. This request led to the 1474 Toscanelli letter to the King. Granzotto also reports speculation that Martins may have been a relative of Columbus. He writes: "It is quite likely that Mar-

tins himself, whose probable relative Columbus had become through marriage, allowed America's future discoverers to consult Toscanelli's papers under a pledge of secrecy. Columbus probably even copied them, since they can be found reproduced in detail on the flyleaves of his copy of Pope Piccolomini's *Historia rerum*, which Columbus took with him on all of his voyages, and which today is in the library of Seville."

Granzotto presents fascinating leads on the direct relation of Toscanelli's work to Columbus's expedition, but he has a peculiar hesitation to draw the right historical conclusions from these leads. For different reasons, the same might be said about Taviani.

'Inventing the future'

Because of what is, ultimately, a fallacy-of-composition fixation on Columbus as subject and not predicate of something much more gigantic and breathtaking, the reader cannot derive the right conclusions from reading this book at face-value. Again looking at Granzotto—whose book, in style, at its better points, has the pace and interest of a suspense-thriller, in contrast to the more-systematic, and often ponderous, all-points-covered-until-1492 thoroughness of Taviani—we note his coverage of Columbus's early life, in 1470s Lisbon, in which city an important and dense milieu of seafarers, geographers, etc., were significantly connected to Florence. Granzotto writes:

"Everyone who had anything to do with the sea—sailors, scientists, astronomers, merchants—was involved in a kind of hand-to-hand combat with the ocean. For them, too, the best was yet to come, for the world was beginning to break out of its age-old insularity and take to the sea. The Portuguese and the others living there were the first to believe that somewhere beyond the ocean, unknown lands existed. In Lisbon, this was all anyone talked about. It was the reason that maps were continually being remade and revised to conform to the new developments and discoveries made by cosmographers and navigators. What can be more contagious than excitement? Like flocks of birds in migration, some of the sharpest minds in the world—German, Italian, Jewish and Arab mathematicians, geographers, and scientists—gathered in Lisbon. They were inventing the future. And amid all this excitement, Columbus's own imagination thrived."

Indeed, a beautiful passage, with many a beautiful idea! Would that the history now be written, that deals with "inventing the future," as subject, in which the expedition which the authors see as "the immortal voyage," as perhaps the greatest discovery in the history of the human race, be shown to be the necessary product of one of history's greatest processes, the Renaissance—admittedly through the mediation of a hero, however flawed, like Columbus. Would that that history, would create new discoveries—and new Renaissances.