

Christopher Columbus' raincoat

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Two films on Columbus are to come out in 1992, one directed by George Cosmatos, with a script by Mario Puzo and Timothy Dalton as the Genoese navigator, and the other directed by Ridley Scott, with Gérard Depardieu as the Admiral. So far, it appears that in both films Columbus is a man of action, in contrast to his character in the 1985 six-hour television series directed by Alberto Lattuada, which focused on the navigator's mysticism. In that production Columbus was played by Gabriel Byrne, a little known Irish actor.

Paolo Emilio Taviani, an Italian historian and senator, was production advisor to the series. His wise piloting steered the production clear of anachronisms such as palm trees waving in the Caribbean breeze: palm trees were first brought to the New World many years after Columbus. But even Taviani lets a shot of a eucalyptus tree get through at one point.¹

Taviani himself remarked that the Columbus in the series "seems somewhat toned-down, and is probably a pleasanter person than he really was. Historically speaking, of course." He agrees with the script-writers Adriano Bolzano and Tulio Pinelli, and with Lawrence Heath's conception of the

Admiral as deeply religious, but he doesn't think he was so friendly with Indians. "He had faith, but he was not charitable." Nor was he so considerate in his family relationships as the TV series would have us believe. Hopefully the new films will offer us a more realistic portrait of the navigator and that, at the very least, he won't be wearing a raincoat.

During his return voyage to Spain, Columbus was nearly shipwrecked when he was surprised by an unexpected storm near the Azores on the 3rd of March, 1493. As Father Las Casas mentions with sailorly brevity in his *Diario*, "A storm came that broke the sails, and we were in great peril, but God was good enough to free us from it." In the TV series we see Columbus and

his sailors on the *Niña* protecting themselves during the storm with hooded black apparel that seemed to be made of plastic. A flagrant anachronism.

In search of an explanation, I consulted the *History of Technology* by T.K. Derry and Trevor I. Williams. They state that "in the 13th century articles made of rubber were in common use among the Mayas and the Aztecs, among which one might mention rubber balls for the *juego de pelota*. The Spaniards learned of this material during the time of Cortés and Pizarro [some thirty years later than Columbus's return journey]." According to these authors, by 1615 at latest the Spaniards were using rubber to waterproof their military cloaks. The

What *did* Columbus mean by "mile"?

This is, in fact, a matter of debate among scholars. Morison was so sure Columbus meant the Roman mile, of 4,850 feet, that he translated *millas* as "Roman miles" throughout his version of the *Diario*. Others assert that Columbus's mile is a shorter unit, of 5,000 palms, equivalent to about 4,060 English feet, or five-sixths of a Roman mile. All Iberian sailors of Columbus's time recognized 4 Roman miles as the equivalent of 1 Portuguese maritime league.

A study by James Kelly, *In the Wake of Columbus on a Portolan Chart* (1983), maintains that Las Casas may have misunderstood what Columbus was doing when he told his crew a smaller number of leagues made good than those he recorded privately. Instead of lying to the crew, Columbus was converting his 5,000 palm miles to the equivalent Portuguese maritime league of 4 Roman miles, a unit with which he and all his crew were familiar. Las Casas thought the larger figure was the Admiral's "true" reckoning and the smaller one a "false" figure provided to allay the fears of the crew.

Source: *The Diario of Christopher Columbus' First Voyage to America 1492 - 1493*, Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelley Jr., University of Oklahoma Press.

¹ Something much more obvious, to my way of thinking, took place in *Aguirre, La cólera de Dios*, directed by Werner Herzog, in which the protagonists sack an Indian village and find, among other things, some bananas. I remember having read a review of the film entitled "Aguirres Bananen" which identified several anachronisms.

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evidence is rather scanty, but at least it is clear that Columbus and those who accompanied him on his first voyage didn't have raincoats.

One must also consider the sailors' inability to foresee the conditions of the journey. In 1833, the French daughter of a Peruvian went to claim her inheritance from her Peruvian relatives. She travelled from Bordeaux to Callao on *Le Mexicain*, which went round the Horn. Named Flora Tristán and about 33 years old, she was no ordinary woman. She became an active reformer and a grandson of hers became famous as a painter: his name was Paul Gauguin.

In her travel journal Flora states that "the sea near Cape Horn is appalling. There are nearly always adverse winds; the cold paralyzes even the strongest of our crew. To make things worse these poor sailors haven't a quarter of the clothing they need." She says that some of them wore "woollen shirts" and trousers so frozen that they couldn't

move "without the ice scratching bodies already numbed with cold." She mentions that one sailor had only a "pink shirt and a pair of canvas pants."

She asked the Ministry of the Navy to oblige both the commissaries of the French ports and the ships' captains to make sure that crews had sufficient clothing. Observing that on navy ships sailors had to pass inspection and were given the clothing they lacked (the price being discounted from their wages), she proposed that the same be done on all ships. She sagely pointed out that "if the men were well clothed, if they had a *waterproof cape* to protect their woolen clothing from damp, they could, with suitable food, withstand the rigors of the temperature."

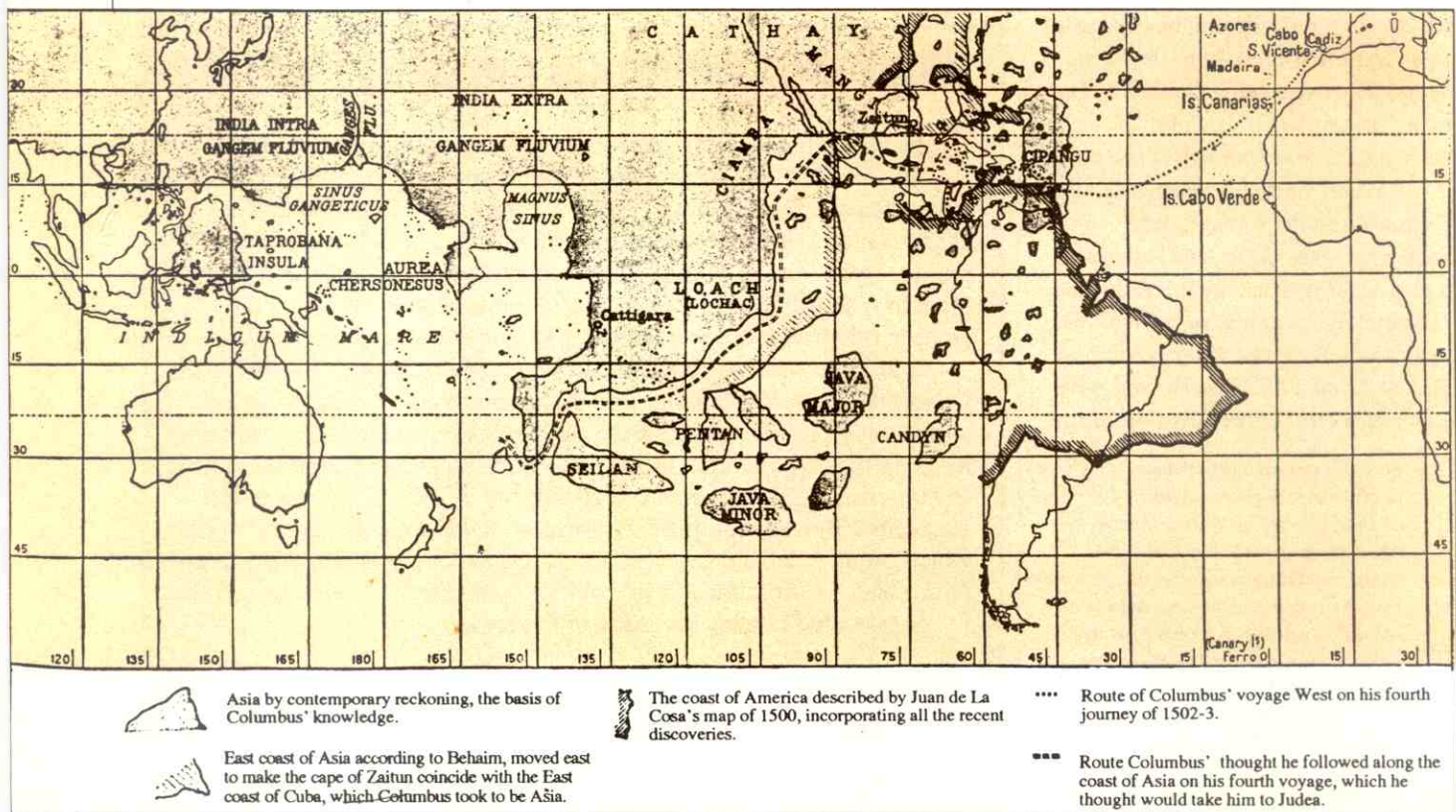
I also had the opportunity to look at some articles and texts used for the TV series, among which was an interview with Taviani in which he praises the costumes made by Enrico Luzzi and María de Matteis

for their accuracy. "One has only to see the improvised raincoats made of felt used by Columbus and the crew during the storm scene," he says, "they are copied exactly from paintings of that time."

The series was nominated for an Emmy for the costumes, but didn't get it. In any case, I don't think that the sailors from Palos who went with Columbus on his first voyage across the Atlantic had raincoats, either of felt or any other material, and it is not likely that Spaniards in the late 15th century would have had more foresight and been less ragged than Frenchmen in the 19th century, who, as we have seen, went to the famously nasty Cape Horn with only a shirt on their backs. ❧

Bibliography

- * T.K. Derry and Trevor I. Williams, *Historia de la tecnología*. Siglo XXI, Mexico City, 1981.
- * "Leading Columbus Expert Says Series is Mostly Exact", *Variety*. April 17, 1985.
- * Flora Tristán, *Les pérégrinations d'une paria*. Maspéro, Paris, 1979.



Columbus' notions of Asian geography as he embarked upon his fourth voyage.