

## IANUS VITALIS: *IN CHRISTOPHORUM COLUMBUM* PORTRAIT OF A HERO<sup>1</sup>

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The discovery of the New World at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century tested the traditional assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes of Renaissance Europe. Although the literary response during the 16<sup>th</sup> century showed a great deal of diversity in its appreciation and evaluation of the discovery, the standards and references used were inevitably those derived from an inherited classical and Christian tradition. The discussion below will focus on Ianus Vitalis' poem *In Christophorum Columbum* — a literary example of 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian perceptions and attitudes relating to the discovery of the New World.

Ianus Vitalis (Latin for Giano or Giovanni Vitale), a Sicilian poet, was born in Palermo c. 1485. He settled at Rome from at least 1512 onwards until his death in c. 1560. Though never considered to rank among the greatest of poets, he was known as one of the *poetae urbani* of his time. While he was in orders he wrote hymns and paraphrases of the Psalms, and one long poem, the *Teratorizon*, which has not survived.<sup>2</sup> He is best known for a series of epigrams depicting both his famous contemporaries as well as historical figures from the past.<sup>3</sup> This series was included in the *Elogia* (1546) of Paolo Giovio, bishop of Nocera.<sup>4</sup>

Paolo Giovio (the Iovius mentioned in line 23 of the poem *To Christopher Columbus*) invited Vitalis to compose a poem about the famous discoverer. Bishop Giovio owned a villa at Lake Como where he had built a museum of art, called the *Musaeum*. Here he collected various portraits of famous past and present personalities, including among these, one of Columbus. The bishop had also written

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<sup>1</sup> The present article originates from the research notes of Bert van Stekelenburg † relating to a paper read at the CASA conference in Jan. 1997: *Ianus Vitalis and the literary response of Renaissance Italy to the discovery of the New World*. No copy of the original text could be found, however, some handwritten notes found posthumously among the papers of the author, has been arranged and edited by M Schneider. Additional research or comments that have been added by the editor is indicated by the appearance of (Ed.) in footnotes below.

<sup>2</sup> This hexameter poem by Vitalis laments the manifold portentous and monstrous socio-political dangers that infringed Italy at the time. The title is probably an amalgamation of the Greek τέρας - ατος (a sign, or monster), ὀρίζω (to limit, as a boundary) and the medieval Latin *orizon* (horizon) to emphasise the serious nature of the dangers that lurked beyond Italian borders (Ed.).

<sup>3</sup> For a short biography of Ianus Vitalis see Sparrow 1979:242. As far as I have been able to ascertain, apart from a few lines quoted in Ijsewijn 1990:285, this book is the only modern work where the text of Vitalis' poem *In Christophorum Columbum* can be found. The poem is strangely ignored by all major bibliographical works related to Columbus. It is not mentioned in Nagy 1994, nor in *Bibliografia Colombina 1492 – 1990*, nor in Mele 1931:811.

<sup>4</sup> At Rome he was also known as Paulus Iovius, former physician and ardent historian whose literary endeavours contained various vivid contemporary descriptions, biographies, short sketches and letters. A useful secondary source for Giovio's works is Tiraboschi 1822. An English translation by Gragg 1935 of Giovio's *Elogia Doctorum Virorum* is available at <http://www.elfinspell.com/PaoloStartStyle.html> (Ed.).

several *elogia* in prose on these individuals, and for each he invited a well-known poet, sometimes two, to contribute a short poem in addition to his own *elogium*.

The texts were written on parchment and attached to the corresponding portraits.<sup>5</sup> *Monumentum* in the last line of Vitalis' poem, for instance, probably refers to the portrait of Columbus in the *Musaeum Iovianum* in Como.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 1: The Jovian portrait (left); and a detail from a copy of a wood engraving (right) depicting Columbus in his fifties.

Construction of the *Musaeum* lasted from 1536 until 1539 (*Opera* 8.8–9), but according to Giovio's own testimony, he had started collecting paintings even before 1519 (*Opera* 8.7). The correspondence of the bishop's contemporaries contains several letters with requests by him for these paintings. The majority of these requests dates from the 1540's (*Opera* 8.1–2) when, it seems, Giovio endeavoured to complete his collection while working simultaneously on the publication of the *elogia*. The portraits were divided into four categories: defunct literati; contemporary literati; famous artists (painters, sculptors and others), and "popes, kings and leaders of armies". Giovio was only partially successful with the publication of his *elogia* and

<sup>5</sup> For the "Musaeum Iovianum" and the portraits see Giovio 1972: *Opera* 8.1–9. The *Musaeum* contained works by famous painters, among them Titian, Michelangelo and Raphael.

<sup>6</sup> Contemporary and near-contemporary visual descriptions of Columbus vary considerably, as do the depictions of him in later, so-called original paintings or copies. At present there is no certain evidence that Columbus had ever posed for a painter. Early portraits of the discoverer from the 16<sup>th</sup> century apparently shaped subsequent depictions of which the Jovian portrait is best known. Most European authorities consider the so-called "Giovio portrait", shown above (Fig. 1 left), to be the oldest near-contemporary painting to depict Columbus. The second edition of the *Elogia* published by Petrus Perna in 1557, contained an engraving of Columbus (allegedly a copy of the Jovian portrait) by the Swiss engraver Tobias Stimmer (Fig. 1 right). Cf. Lester 1993 for the continuing controversy relating to artistic depictions of Columbus, and the discussion by De Leon 1893:4–8 of a copy of a wood engraving showing Columbus in his fifties. Thacher 1904 provides illustrations of 39 alleged portraits of Columbus (Ed.).

accompanying poems. He published the *elogia* on defunct literati in 1546, while those from the fourth category limited to military men, appeared in 1551.<sup>7</sup> Ianus Vitalis' poem about Columbus belongs to this category (*Liber quartus, elogium 3, 4*).<sup>8</sup>

The above dates are not much help in establishing the exact time of composition for Vitalis' poem. However, the dating suggests that the poem could have been written before 1551. Was it composed during the late 1530's and the 1540's at the specific request of Giovio when the bishop was building his *Musaeum*, and finalising his collection for publication? Or had Giovio acquired the portrait of Columbus at an earlier stage and had he at that time already asked Vitalis to compose a poem? The former possibility seems to carry more weight. It is, however, also possible that the poem was originally unrelated to the portrait in the *Musaeum Iovianum* and had been one of the many short poems which Vitalis had been composing from at least 1512 onwards. The only references to the portrait are to be found in the final two lines which could easily have been added at a later stage. "Magne Columbe" at the end of line 22 could have provided a fitting dramatic close, and it is not unlikely that the final four lines are a later, rather clumsy addition. The facts at our disposal do not allow us to reach a decision in this matter, though we shall see how other external evidence may enable us to decide upon *c.* 1520 as a year *post quem*, with 1551 the year of publication of the *Elogia*, as an obvious year *ante quem*.

Vitalis wrote his poem in quasi-elegiac distichs of alternating dactylic feet. The hexameters alternate not with pentameters, but with quadrameters and, in line 16, with a trimeter. The poem gives a telescopic view of the discovery and early colonisation period of the New World. It depicts Christopher Columbus as the originator of all subsequent events in the New World, the bearer of civilisation and culture, one whose arrival promised the bestowal of manifold blessings upon the inhabitants:

### *In Christophorum Columbum*

*Tu maris et terrae trans cognita claustra, Columbe,  
vectus nave cita penetrasti  
ignotos populos atque abdita maxima regna  
antipodumque orbem extremorum.  
Hic aliae ventorum animae tua lintea leni  
implerunt Aquilone nec alto  
fulserunt Helices, clarissima lumina, caelo  
nec vertit mare tristis Orion.*

<sup>7</sup> *Elogia virorum bellica virtute illustrium veris imaginibus supposita quae apud Musaeum spectantur*. See Giovio's *Opera* 8.17–19 on the first and subsequent impressions of the *Elogia*. Giovio seems to have begun working on an edition of *elogia* of the second group (living literati) but nothing came of it. As to the third category, the artists, he asked his friend, the painter and architect Giorgio Vasari, to continue his work. This resulted in Vasari's *Lives of the most excellent Italian architects, painters and sculptors* (1550 and 1568), for many generations the main source for the history of Italian art. Cf. Vasari, De Vere, Jacks 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Giovio *Opera* 8.369–371. This modern edition of Giovio's literary output is only concerned with his work and therefore the accompanying poems and portraits have been omitted.

*Hic legem accipiunt mitem Zephyrique Notique,  
aequora nec tolluntur in altum. 10*  
*Tu gentem incultam, quarum vel pomifera arbor  
numen erat vel purpureus flos  
vel fons irriguus liquidis manantibus undis,  
formas vera religione.*  
*Tu vitam humanam instituis, tu moenia et urbes 15*  
*stare doces opulantas  
et parere gravidam non uno e semine terram  
et conubia iungere certa.*  
*Unde etiam extremi laetis cum vocibus Indi 20*  
*te memorant patremque salutant.*  
*Salve, non Ligurum modo, sed decus orbis honorque  
nostri saeculi. magne Columbe,  
cui merito Iovius heroas dedicat inter  
nominis aeterni monumentum.*

(Ianus Vitalis c. 1485 – c. 1560)<sup>9</sup>

### ***To Christopher Columbus***

Sailing on your fast ship, Columbus, you crossed the hitherto known thresholds of the earth and reached nations unknown, vast and hidden realms, and the world of the Antipodeans, furthestmost of men. (1–4)

There, different winds filled your sails with a gentle (northern) breeze and the bright stars of the Great Bear remained invisible in the high heavens, and no angry Orion churned up the seas. There, the (west and south) winds obey gentle rules, and the seas are not brought into turmoil. (5–10)

You instilled a primitive people, whose gods were fruit bearing trees, purple flowers, and springs with clear and flowing water, with one true religion (11–14)

You provided the foundations for civilised life, you taught how to build walls and prosperous cities: you taught the earth to produce from more than one kind of seed and the people to unite in true marriage. (15–18)

Therefore, the Indians from even the farthest regions speak about you with happy voices and call you “Father”. (19–20)

Hail, great Columbus, jewel and honour not only of the Ligurians, but of the whole world and of our era, to whose eternal name Iovius rightly dedicates a monument in the gallery of heroes. (21–24)

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<sup>9</sup> *In Christophorum Columbum* is printed in Gruterus’ *Delitiae Italorum poetarum* 1608, 2:1434 and is repeated in Buonaventura & Bottari 1726:XI. See Perosa & Sparrow 1979:242–243.

The views expressed in Vitalis' poem are not original and are mainly romanticised. By the time the poem must have been composed, already discredited notions of America and its early inhabitants prevailed. Vitalis gives a very typical 16<sup>th</sup> century Eurocentric description of Columbus' discovery and the terminology he uses corresponds with the terminology that occurs in various other contemporary accounts, reactions, reports and early literary works on the subject.

In the first line Vitalis presents Columbus as one who had broken through the traditional geographical barriers of the known world. This image of Columbus as "discoverer" of hitherto unknown worlds was rooted in Renaissance literature by the historian Peter Martyr, who had interviewed Columbus on several occasions.<sup>10</sup> In general most 16<sup>th</sup> century Europeans perceived the event of Columbus' landfall in October 1492 as a "discovery" of unknown regions.<sup>11</sup> Martyr's letters during 1493 state that Columbus' voyage had illuminated the "hidden half of the globe" (October 1493) and the Spanish historian Bartolomé de Las Casas refers to the navigator as one who had discovered "another world" — *otro mundo*.<sup>12</sup>

The age of exploration had an enormous impact on the Western mind. The intellectual language of the 16<sup>th</sup> century rested for the greater part on the authority of classical studies and the Christian faith and these two authorities were confronted with the questions that a new era of navigation and maritime exploration posed. According to 16<sup>th</sup> century humanists, the guide to knowledge was personal experience and direct observation. The voyages of the Portuguese around Africa<sup>13</sup> contributed to

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Martyr (also known as Petrus Martir Anglerius or Pietro Martire d' Anghiera), an Italian humanist at the Spanish court, wrote the earliest edition of a history of the New World: *De orbe novo decades* in 1516 (for the Spanish version, see Martire 1989). This work, together with Amerigo Vespucci's real and faked letters, were the most important sources printed from 1503 onward. Martyr's *Decades* originated from his collections of newsletters, each collection consisting of ten parts. In this work he frequently refers to the Genoese Columbus: *rediit ab antipodibus occidius Christoforus quidam Colonus, vir Ligur ...* (letter May 1493) or *colonus ille novi orbis repertor* (letter Nov. 1493). An Italian version of the first *Decade* appeared in 1504. The complete work, *Decades of the New World* (1530) in Latin, covers eight decades. Cf. Brandon 1986:7 (Ed.).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Pagden 1993:5. The term "discovery" and its various Romance analogues all derive from the late ecclesiastical Latin word *disco-operio*, which means to uncover, to reveal or to expose that which is hidden (Ed.).

<sup>12</sup> Columbus originally referred to the regions that he had discovered as "another world", first during his third voyage, and later in a letter to the nurse of Don Juan of Castile in 1500. Cf. Washburn 1962:19 (Ed.).

<sup>13</sup> Although Portuguese and Spanish explorations dominated the period of discovery, both countries relied heavily on Italian precedents and Italian financial enterprise. Genoese explorations by the Zaccaria family and the brothers Vivaldi (1291), for instance, anticipated the voyage of Columbus nearly two hundred years later, as did the ventures of another Genoese, Lanzarotto Malocello to the Canaries during the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Fernando-Armesto 1995:278–300). During the Middle Ages Italy was a prominent colonising nation, a fact that is underscored by the multitude of literature relating to Portuguese exploration during the 15<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Verlinden 1995:87–99). Italian merchants and explorers also exerted significant influence during the time of Henry the Navigator, when Portuguese voyages around the coast of Africa were just beginning (Russel 1995:100–129). Exploration of the African Atlantic became a springboard for further maritime expansion (Ed.).

a new quest for knowledge that questioned the ancient authority of Ptolemy, Aristotle and others, and set in motion a shift in the learning process.<sup>14</sup> Whereas the voyages around Africa had left the essence of an *orbis terrarum* (known from antiquity as a central landmass located in the northern hemisphere) intact, the discovery of a fourth continent,<sup>15</sup> rocked not only the validity of ancient authority, but also that of the Bible.<sup>16</sup> This new phenomenon which confronted Europeans fell beyond the range of their accumulated experience and expectations.

The ancients had not been hampered by any revelatory tenets in their theorising about the shape of the world. Neither did Greek cosmology reject the idea of other worlds. To the contrary, the Pythagoreans had already accepted the existence of another *oikoumene* on the other, or opposite side of the earth.<sup>17</sup> Whether or not such an antipodal landmass existed remained a major subject of debate and speculation throughout classical and medieval times.<sup>18</sup> During the 12<sup>th</sup> century the

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<sup>14</sup> A transitional period prior to 1492 provided stimuli for new enterprise and is distinguished by the remarkable travels and poetical descriptions of, for instance, Paolo Marsi (1468). Subsequent discoveries challenged the boundaries of scientific knowledge which had previously relied on the authority of antiquity alone. Scepticism and lack of confidence in ancient authority escalated during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In 1517 Erasmus, in a letter to the Dukes of Saxony, observed that the authority of antiquity proved in certain aspects (geographical knowledge, for instance), to have been seriously flawed: *quum prodigosae vanitatis haberetur antipodum mentio, et terra sic crederetur innatare Oceano, quemadmodum si pila innatet aquae, colle tantum aliquo prominente: denique quum hodie reperiantur terrae incognitae, quarum terminos nullus adhuc peruestigare potuit, quum compertum sit eas esse immensae vastitatis* — “just to mention the antipodes then was thought to be a prodigious fallacy, and what is more, the earth was believed to float upon the ocean like a ball on water, high ground projecting merely a hill. Indeed, at present unknown lands are discovered, and although their boundaries as yet are not fully investigated, it is certain that they are of immense vastness” (letter 586:188–193). Cf. Allen 1906–56:2.584; Pagden 1993:89. Note also, the missionary Jean de Léry’s scepticism in 1578 when he revised his former opinion about the authority of Pliny and other ancient writers. Cf. de Léry 1994 (Ed.).

<sup>15</sup> Medieval geographers did not use the term “continent”, but tended to contrast land with ocean and individual zones East with West, or known worlds with unknown worlds. The globe was divided into “parts” rather than “continents”. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century on the term was used indiscriminately to refer to landmasses, insulas or peninsulas (Ed.). Cf. Washburn 1962:2–4.

<sup>16</sup> Christian writers tended to deny the existence of other or unknown inhabited regions not influenced by the gospel. Some biblical texts even precluded the existence of a fourth continent.

<sup>17</sup> Ideas about the other half of the world (“utopian worlds” see note 27 below) appear in Homer’s *Odyssey* (Phaeacia), Theopompus of Chios (the land of Merope) and Plato’s Atlantis. Plato’s account of Atlantis in *Timaeus* 21E–25D and *Critias* 108E–121C is the earliest extant source for the legend of this lost world. See Zangger 1992:17–36 for a literal translation of these passages. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century Prester John, a legendary Christian priest, wrote an account of a fabulous Christian kingdom in the East (cf. Beckingham 1995 for the identity of Presbyter Johannes and his famous letter to the Byzantine emperor). Plato’s account in 350 BC of the legendary island Atlantis, inspired several Renaissance scholars and writers: in 1627 Francis Bacon’s utopian work *New Atlantis* appeared and by 1669 the Jesuit priest Athanasius Kircher published his *Mundus Subterraneus* containing a map (oriented upside down) of Atlantis, situated between Spain and America (Ed.).

<sup>18</sup> According to classical thought, the Antipodes also had to be inhabited by Antipodeans, a term first used by the Pythagoreans and Plato, see Diog. Laert. *Vitae* 8.26. However, no interest is expressed in the qualities of the Antipodeans — see Strabo *Geogr.* 1.4.6, 2.5: “if these regions

cosmographer Vincent de Beauvais re-opened this debate and argued in favour of the existence of an antipodal land mass on the other side of the Atlantic. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century Lorenzo Bonincontri continued to expound Beauvais' theories (Honour 1975:4).

The theme of the Antipodes and its inhabitants, the "Antipodeans" (line 4) certainly did not seem unfamiliar to Vitalis and his 16<sup>th</sup> century audience. Two months after Columbus' return from his first voyage, the concept of the Antipodeans was brought back to life by Peter Martyr. In a letter dated May 14, 1493 he wrote: *rediit ab antipodibus occidius Christoforus quidam Colonus, vir Ligor* (O'Gorman 1961:157). Martyr is sceptical about Columbus' claims to have reached Asia, as are Columbus' patrons, the king and queen of Spain, and the pope, who in a bull of May 3, 1494 (*Inter Caetera*) designates the new discovered regions only as *insulas et terras firmas* (islands and firm lands) located in "the Western parts of the Ocean Sea, toward the Indies" (O'Gorman 1961:82).<sup>19</sup> Despite this initial scepticism it was realised that a very important event had taken place: "This Columbus is the discoverer of a new world" Peter Martyr wrote some months later.<sup>20</sup>

*In Christophorum Columbum* was probably not written by a young Vitalis, who was only twenty-one at the time of Columbus' death.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless the sentiments expressed in the first four lines of the poem were those already expressed by Peter Martyr and others at the time of the discoveries. Columbus had broken through the traditional Western barriers of the known world, once thought of as the Pillars of Hercules and had reached the Antipodes.<sup>22</sup> He had also discovered unknown people and *maxima regna* (vast kingdoms, line 3). Here we have another indication

are inhabited then certainly not by people like us"). A world with not two, but four *oikoumenoi* divided over the four quarters of the world was envisaged by Crates in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and was known in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance mainly through mediation of Macrobius' commentary on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*. The concept of the Antipodes had not only its adherents, but was also ridiculed by some (Lucianus a.o.). However, the myth of the Antipodeans remained popular to such an extent that pope Zacharias officially condemned it in the eighth century. Cf. Kauffmann in Pauly-Wissowa s.v. *Antipodes* 2531–2533. Some 15<sup>th</sup> century world maps (*mappaemundi*) show antipodean lands usually referred to as *Hesperides*. Cf. Durand 1952: plates XIII, XV, XVI.

<sup>19</sup> The papacy, however, had recognised the political significance of the newly discovered territories. The three Alexandrine bulls of 1493 established papal political and spiritual authority over these regions and its inhabitants. Columbus' landfall set in motion a debate which is still current in present day America, calling for the repeal of *Inter Caetera*, which is seen as instrumental to Amerindian oppression. The issue emphasises tensions between competing European powers at the time and questions the legitimacy of colonial claims to the discoveries, the enslavement of indigenous peoples, and a colonisation process that adhered to accepted inherited legal norms relating to territorial acquisition (Ed.).

<sup>20</sup> Pagden 1993:23, 191: *orbis novi repertor*. Martyr can not have meant "new world" in the modern sense, since the realisation that a new continent had been discovered only materialised slowly as the result of expeditions by others than Columbus. It was these later voyages that overshadowed Columbus' initial epoch-making discoveries.

<sup>21</sup> Columbus died in total oblivion in 1506, an event that was noted by not a single chronicler of that time.

<sup>22</sup> Giovio *Hist.* 4.171 p. 369: *ut positor columnis Herculeis terrarum limites invideret* (that he scoffed at the idea that the columns of Hercules were the limits of the world).

for the dating of Vitalis' poem, for *maxima regna* can only refer to the Aztec and Inca empires subdued by Cortez and Pizarro respectively during the twenties and thirties of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

It would be difficult to apply the term *regnum* to the societies with which Columbus and other early travellers had met. According to the early accounts of both contemporary voyagers and historians, such primitive societies were characterised by an unordered state and they were not ruled by either law or government which were perceived to be prerequisites for the concept of *regnum*. Martyr, for instance, writes that the Amerindians are *sine legibus ... sine iudicibus* (Romeo 1971:17), as does Amerigo Vespucci: "They have no laws and live according to nature ... they do know no borders of country or province, they have no kings; they have to obey no one, they are their own masters" (Romeo 1971:13). Although Vitalis pictures the Amerindians as utterly primitive and without *vita humana* (line 15), his use of *maxima regna* indicates his awareness of the different realities.

The next six lines of the poem reiterate contemporary ideas that were based on travel reports of both Columbus himself and of later explorers. Although this lack of originality in the poem is detrimental to its artistic value, it provides an interesting example of 16<sup>th</sup> century European contemporary thoughts and attitudes regarding contact with the New World.

Lines 5 to 10 relate to the physical "otherness" of a new world. In his portrayal of this "other world" Vitalis uses classical terminology to describe the unfamiliar in terms of the more familiar. The nature of the familiar winds and constellations, *Aquilone*, *Helices*, *Orion*, *Zephyrique Notique* mentioned by Vitalis, is transformed and described as being different, they possess *aliae animae*. In this "other world" the natural forces are depicted as *lenes* and they follow a *legem mitem* — in other words, in contrast with the known classical and medieval world, the sea in this new world is always quiet, nature is also not as harsh as it can be in the Old World, but gentle instead. Such adaptation of classical terminology invokes visions of a benevolent climate and a paradisiacal world, a utopia that contrasts with Old World imagery.<sup>23</sup>

The Great Bear (line 7) and Orion (line 8) are both best visible in Southern Europe during winter and therefore traditionally associated with bad weather. Vitalis' claim that the Great Bear is not visible is only partially true, even for South America, because some of its stars can be seen even from the equator. Orion can be seen right overhead. These lines are, however, an echo of the realisation that not only new land had been found but also a new part of the cosmos.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For a more traditional rendering of these classical themes, see Vitalis' depiction in Poem 189 (fo. N-Ni<sup>v</sup> *Coryciana* — see extract on p. 12 below) of a harsh Northern climate, rough and tempestuous seas and angry skies (lines 1–11); a rabid Sirius (12); a raging East wind; a violent North wind (13) and a dashing Northern whirlwind (18) — this is a markedly different and turbulent portrayal of natural forces as opposed to the temperate climate described in the poem above (Ed.).

<sup>24</sup> Pedro Nunes 1537:1.175, royal cosmographer to king João III, declared that the Portuguese had discovered "new islands; new seas; new peoples; and what is more, a new sky and new stars". Uncovering heavens previously unknown to Europeans indicated new astronomical knowledge and signified Portuguese claims of possession (Ed.). Cf. Seed 1995:100–148.



The setting created in lines 11 to 14 is that of an idealised poetic landscape as old as Homer's description of Alkinoos' garden. Nature is depicted in terms of the *locus amoenus* of classical literature. Such idealisation of nature became common features of Medieval and Renaissance poetry.<sup>25</sup> Vitalis' use of it here has, however, more than just poetic fancy for a source. Already Columbus, when stepping ashore on the island of Cuba, described nature in classical terms and other writers followed him.<sup>26</sup> Columbus' depiction of nature and the new landscape he had encountered is reminiscent of other accounts of medieval and Renaissance travellers whose preconceived descriptions of idealised landscapes conveyed strong classical and biblical influence. The gentle climate and fertile soil where everything grows *sponte sua*, are constantly mentioned by Columbus and others to suggest that the Europeans had landed not only in a different, but a better world.<sup>27</sup>

Evident in these early accounts is the lyrical and totally false picture of pre-Columbian civilisation and of the beneficiary effect of the colonisation process that had followed Columbus's discovery. Vitalis' depiction of the Amerindians as a primitive people and even his portrayal of Columbus as not just a coloniser, but also the instigator of civilisation and religion in a new world (lines 11 to 18), conform to the inherited cultural perceptions and spirituality of Vitalis' age.

The first Europeans who had encountered Amerindians did not come mentally unprepared for "the task of classifying and assimilating the unfamiliar" (Mason 1990:41). From ancient times Europeans had known about different people and

<sup>25</sup> See for instance, the late 16<sup>th</sup> century pictorial allegory of America (c. 1578) by Johannes Stradanus (also known as Jan van der Straet 1523 – 1605). Stradanus was of the opinion that Columbus' writings set in motion a process of inventing a new "world" in 16<sup>th</sup> century European consciousness. According to Rabasa 1993, popular New World themes (i.e. exotic fauna and flora, cannibalism) present in contemporary letters, official documents, historical accounts and world atlases, coalesced into a new Eurocentric view of the New World (Ed.).

<sup>26</sup> Peter Martyr's account of the newly discovered lands, then known as the Indies, defined the Eurocentric classical vision of the Americas as a golden world where peace and innocence prevailed and where the inhabitants have had no knowledge of laws. Contemporary writers and poets alike continued to enhance and elaborate this idealistic classical picture. For instance, see Guiliano Dati's versification of Columbus' first letter (first translated from Spanish into Latin, and from the Latin into Italian in 1493). The illustrations used in Dati's poem were from woodcuts previously used with accounts of Mediterranean voyages. Classical imagery and ideas abound in Vespucci's *Soderini letter* (1505) and the later works of, for instance, Thomas More (*Utopia* 1516), Michael Drayton (1606) and Andrew Marvell's pastoral poems during the 1640's. Cf. Honour 1975:6–9 (Ed.).

<sup>27</sup> The idea of an ideal "utopian" existence constantly appears throughout human history. Though the term "utopia", a compound of the ancient Greek οὐ (not), τόπος (place) and εὖ (well) meaning no place or no where, is absent in archaic and classical Greek, "utopian" motifs are present in Greek literature from very early on and usually convey an ideal and carefree existence in conjunction with a perfect political state (cf. Lauriola 2009:109–124). Such non-existent states, or imaginary, exotic projections of ideal states contradict conventional thinking and existing society. The term "utopia" is a modern creation of Thomas More and first appears in 1516 in his account of an imaginary island somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean — an ideal socio-political state that contrasted sharply with the chaos of contemporary England. The discovery of the Americas provided 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe with an opportunity to see itself in relation to a "new world" other than the "old world" of Greece and Rome — a world reminiscent of their own ideal past, innocent and free from vice and greed (Ed.).

different civilizations on the African and Asian continents. They were also familiar with reports relating to imaginary people who were supposedly living at the edge of the world.<sup>28</sup> During the Middle Ages accounts occurred of imaginary people which incorporated, what Mason calls “the internal other”, i.e. “aspects of the European self that self cannot tolerate” (Mason 1990:41), witches, wild men and cannibals, some of which have ancient counterparts like the Cyclops and *homines silvestres*.<sup>29</sup>

Upon meeting Amerindians on the island of San Salvador (Guanahaní), Columbus remarked that the indigenous people were not what many of his contemporaries had expected. In fact, the inhabitants were not monstrous at all, instead they were “well-shaped, and have strong bodies and beautiful faces” (Romeo 1971:9), an observation that would be repeated by many after him.<sup>30</sup> Instead of meeting, for instance, hairy Wild Men according to medieval imagination, he saw “naked people of fine physique” (Romeo 1971:9). In his famous letter to Santángel (a copy of the one sent to the Count) which was the first source of information to the outside world, he repeats that these people are “of fine physique, docile and strong, easy to convert”.<sup>31</sup>

The perceived natural innocence of the Amerindians immediately became a major commonplace in the texts based on Columbus’ reports: pope Alexander VI’s bull *Inter caetera*, for instance, referred to the recently discovered regions as lands where the inhabitants “lived in harmony, led peaceful lives and went about naked”.<sup>32</sup> However, the pope takes the religious inclination of the Amerindians as suggested by Columbus one step further to imply that the indigenous peoples believed in one god above and that it seemed not unlikely to instruct them in civilised morals and convert them to Catholicism.<sup>33</sup> Likewise Giuliano Dati, in his *Lettera*, a versification of

<sup>28</sup> These included people with only one big foot; or headless people with an eye on each shoulder, or with mouths in the middle of their chests; dog-headed people (cf. Hesiodos’ and Strabo’s descriptions of doglike people); mythological creatures like giants, Amazons and hominoids mentioned by Pliny. Descriptions of such marvellous and monstrous human races were familiar to 16<sup>th</sup> century readers in Europe. Popular travel literature included numerous manuscripts and printed copies of, for instance, John Mandeville’s vivid *Travels* written during the later 1300s (Ed.).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Neuber 1988:252–255. Neuber gives a useful discussion of the influence of classical and European representations of, for instance, *homo silvaticus* in text illustrations that depict Amerindians encountered during the early voyages of Vespucci and Columbus (Ed.).

<sup>30</sup> Amongst them was the Florentine explorer Giovanni da Verrazzano, who described the Amerindians in very classical terms as “people with gentle and noble features reminiscent of portraits and sculptures from Antiquity”. See Romeo 1971:15. Verrazzano also wrote very entertaining, but often inaccurate accounts of his explorations. Ironically he fell victim to cannibals of the Lesser Antilles where he was captured and killed in c. 1528.

<sup>31</sup> Romeo 1971:11 *bene formati sed ... timidi ac pleni formidine ... admodum simplices ac bone fidei, et in omnibus que habent liberalissimi ... maximum erga omnes amorem pre se ferunt ... firmissime credunt omnem vim, omnem potentiam, omnia denique bona esse in celo.*

<sup>32</sup> *in quibus quamplurime gentes pacifice viventes et ... nudi incedentes, nec carnibus vescentes, inhabitant.*

<sup>33</sup> Romeo 1971:11,12: *et ... credunt unum Deum creatorem in celis esse, ac ad fidem catholicam amplexandum et bonis moribus imbuendum satis apti videntur.*

Columbus' first letter, has him say: "I did not see anybody claiming something as his property / but everything in life is communal like the God wants it".<sup>34</sup>

Contemporary travellers and their European audience had no difficulty to integrate a recently discovered people who allegedly displayed the characteristics and features as described above, into the framework of their inherited conceptions. Both classical and biblical literature show stages in the development of mankind which are characterised by natural innocence, pacifism and a Golden Age. Subsequent authors either repeat or add to the sentiments expressed above.<sup>35</sup>

Small wonder that the artists at home, in Italy, Spain, France and Germany, who had to provide illustrations for these accounts, took the travellers at their word and showed the public Amerindians who had bodies similar to classical *kouroi* and women like Venuses or Graces.<sup>36</sup> The paradisiacal presentation of a golden era soon had to give way to harsh reality.

Whereas poets, historians and sometimes geographers in general, often borrowed liberally from each other in their renderings of newly discovered lands, eye witness accounts of various explorers revealed an ever widening gap between the Eurocentric perception of a New World and a New World reality.<sup>37</sup> During the Renaissance cultural differences between contemporary peoples became accepted as 16<sup>th</sup> century literature featured various examples which suggested that the influence of actual observation outweighed the importance of literary convention.

In lines 11 to 14 of *In Christophorum Columbum*, for instance, Vitalis chooses to portray Amerindian religion as animistic, a cult of trees, flowers and water. The reason for Vitalis' choice probably was the many poetic opportunities it offered, however, it also gives one an idea of the possible sources at his disposal that had influenced his poetic license. As to the religion of the Amerindians 16<sup>th</sup> century sources seem to be inconsistent. Columbus' original impression of the indigenous people whom he had encountered, was that they had no religion at all. Vespucci was of the same opinion (Romeo 1971:13). According to Columbus' report in his first

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<sup>34</sup> Romeo 1971:12. *Non ho veduto far né tuo né mio; / ma la vita è comun che vuole Dio*. Cf. Donattini 1993:89–90 for the Portuguese humanist Damião Gois' description of the natural innocence of the natives of Lapland in his *Deploratio Lappianae gentis* (1532). His description is literally a paraphrase of Columbus' first letter in which he remarks on both the innocence of and future conversion of Amerindians (Ed.).

<sup>35</sup> According to Romeo 1971:12, Niccolò Scillacio (1496) commented on the Amerindian peaceful nature, their extreme longevity, and low incidence of baldness. Vespucci wrote that they lived to a very high age (one told him to be 132 years) in a country of wonderful beauty, so much so that he was close to paradise (Romeo 1971:13). Peter Martyr in his *De orbe novo* believed, that compared to the Latini in the time of Aeneas, the inhabitants of Haiti lived happier lives – see Romeo 1971:17.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Pagden 1993:43–44, for Jean de Léry's vivid description in 1578 of a Brazilian Tupinamba: nude; body painted; hair shaven off; lips and cheeks slit and adorned with pointed bones. Europeans soon learnt to view Amerindians more realistically.

<sup>37</sup> This reality check was experienced by Columbus on his second voyage in 1493. On his return to Hispaniola, he found that the garrison which he had left behind had been wiped out and that the remaining Europeans had encountered real cannibals. In letters written during 1552 and 1553, the missionary Manuel Nobrega also reported on violent indigenous Brazilian wars and frequent occurrences of cannibalism.

letter, Amerindians, being *tabulae rasae*, could be easily Christianised. However, on another occasion he also remarked that they seemed untainted by religious sects or idolatry, that they perceived the sky to be their source of power and existence, and for *that* reason they were easy to convert. (Romeo 1971:9). In his final years Columbus increasingly envisioned himself as the one who had inaugurated the final phase of the conversion of Amerindians to Christianity. In contemporary literature this apocalyptic view of his discoveries resulted in depictions of him as *Christoferens*, the Christ-bearer in the newly discovered regions (Moffit Watts 1995:221).<sup>38</sup> Subsequently Columbus rendered the “other world” that he had originally set foot on, as a “new world”, to be identified with the biblical “new heaven and earth” of the apocalypse.

The first missionaries in the newly discovered regions were soon to encounter the obstinacy of many Amerindians who had refused to abandon their “heathen” practices for the only “true religion” of Christianity (*vera religione* — line 11). After the discovery of the Aztecs and Mayas whose empires had revealed their own temples and carved images of a variety of deities, the population of the New World could no longer be depicted as totally lacking in religion. Vitalis’ poetic rendering of Amerindian religion clearly suggests his use of other sources in addition to those that were based on Columbus’ original remarks.

Despite the realisation that Amerindians were not living in paradise, or in a golden age; that they were not innocent; or that they had specific social and religious traditions and customs, literary convention dictated that a superficial and very false picture of pre-Columbian Amerindian life was painted. Lines 15 to 18 of Vitalis’ poem clearly reflect this tendency. It was well known in Europe from 1520 onward that there existed important civilisations in the New World which did not need European instruction on “how to build walls or cities” (line 15). During the 1520’s Antonio Allè wrote: “They have cities bigger than those in Europe” (Romeo 1971:18). Bishop Giovio himself records in his *Historiae* that the capital of Mexico, Temistitan equals Venice in number of buildings and inhabitants (Romeo 1971:19). Vitalis’ suggestion that agriculture did not exist or hardly existed (line 17) is contradicted by contemporary sources. The historian Las Casas, for instance, wrote that on Tuesday Nov. 27, 1492, Columbus “saw some lands ... and within it many houses and big villages, and cultivated lands”.

Looking at Vitalis’ poem in general, it appears that the poet’s intention was to present a very early 16<sup>th</sup> century view of the New World and the subsequent colonisation process. The poem still shows traits of a paradisiacal America. Only primitive Amerindians are on display whereas the existence of the great Aztec and Inca cultures are neglected or only hinted at (*maxima regna* line 3). The poem also ignores the cruelties of the invasions and harsh subjugation of their empires under Cortéz and Pizarro. Contemporary sources condemned or criticised Spanish colonial conduct as soon as these cruelties were exposed; the most prominent opposition came from the Spanish historian Las Casas. Contrary to contemporary criticism, Vitalis’ poem showed the world exultant Amerindians who expressed their infinite gratitude

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<sup>38</sup> See for instance the detail of Columbus as *Christoferens* on a map of Juan de la Cosa (1500 – 1505), together with an interpretation of Columbus’ name as “dove” according to his son Ferdinand and the historian Las Casas, in Moffit Watts:1995:222–224 (Ed.).

by addressing the one person whose enterprise proved detrimental to their well-being, as their “father” (line 20).

Italian literature in the New World from after 1520 tends to cling to such early and optimistic descriptions of the New World much more than, for instance, Spanish accounts on the subject. Italian participation in the discoveries was limited to the early years and given prominence mainly by the discoveries of Columbus and Vespucci. With the Spanish conquests by Cortéz this participation ended and Italian interest became less prominent. Few original books or translated works on the subject were printed in Italy between 1520 and 1530. In 1534 Italian publishers displayed a renewed interest in New World exploration. In the wake of reports on the discovery of the so-called fabulous wealth of the Incas, a proliferation of Italian works, including reprints of both Italian and Latin works on the subject, followed.<sup>39</sup> Vitalis’ “patron” Paolo Giovio, for instance, also discusses America in his *Historiarum sui temporis libri*, but mainly with regard to the importance of gold and silver acquisition in the financial policies of Charles V. Giovio was primarily interested in political and military developments in Europe and he intended to draw attention to the fact that the most important discoveries of the time were made by his fellow country-men. In this respect the Genoese Columbus, famous discoverer of a “new world”, admirably fitted the profile of illustrious men whose portraits were required for Giovio’s gallery at Lake Como. Ianus Vitalis’ poetic rendering of Columbus as *the* magnificent Genoese explorer who had discovered a new world (lines 20–22), was intended to enhance Giovio’s memorial of Columbus. Vitalis’ contribution furnished 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy with a heroic monument, an enduring record (line 24) of a world-famous explorer whose heroic enterprise had shaped the course of world history. *In Christophorum Columbum* pays homage not only to the sentiments of Vitalis’ patron, but also to the image of Columbus as visualised by 16<sup>th</sup> century Italians.

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The following excerpts are dedicated to Bert van Stekelenburg, self-confessed traveller, voyager and world-wanderer *par excellence*:

[...] against a blue sky untroubled by any trace of vapour [...] a dazzling light spread through the air [...] and across the surface of an unmoving sea, whose shores were lined with brown pelicans, herons and flamingoes, the splendour of the day [...] was stamped with the great character of nature (Alexander von Humbolt in 1814, viewing for the first time the South American coastline).

[...] it was my purpose to [...] gaze upon new lands, mountain peaks, famous seas, lauded lakes, secluded founts, mighty rivers, and all the world’s varied sites [...] but far enough have I wandered now (Petrarch *Familiars* 15.4).

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<sup>39</sup> The “explosion” of Italian literature relating to the New World presented just a small proportion of a national tendency to publish a plethora of works on European expansion in general. This tendency was driven by political circumstances and Italy’s preoccupation with the perception of a Turkish threat. Giovio’s works reflect a preoccupation with not just Turkish interests, but also various events relating to the history of the Northern countries and the regions around Moscow. His treatment of the Americas appears to be superficial. Cf. Donattini 1993:69–134. A second prolific wave of Italian works followed in 1550 when Ramusio’s *Navigazioni et Viaggi* was published. See Romeo 1971:19 (Ed.).

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