

## The Use of Classics by Columbus and Vespucci to Racialize the New World

It is no secret that Classical sources have been utilized to promote racializing beliefs; for example, the interpretation of the *Germania* as a pro-Aryan manifesto in Nazi Germany both polarized and empowered the German people but enforced beliefs of superiority disseminated by the Third Reich (Krebs 2009). In the past thirty years, however, Classicists have begun to seriously question the implications of this practice and how the modern world has been shaped by bigoted interpretations (see the blogs of Bond and Kennedy). Much of this work focuses on white supremacy in general, but I will offer some insights into an unexplored area: the use of Classical sources by Spanish explorers to racialize the New World and the modern ramifications of this.

One form of racism, in the modern sense, began in this initial era of exploration, with the idea of ‘less civilized’ races being popularized in the publications of the journal of Christopher Columbus (1492-1502) and the letters of Amerigo Vespucci (1497-1504). Moreover, the dichotomy of ‘civilized white’ and ‘barbarous other’ is developed in these works. Columbus and Vespucci use classical sources as evidence of this dichotomy, assuming that their beliefs and modes of thought are applicable across both time and space. They heavily rely on Classical imagery rather than factual occurrences. For example, Vespucci narrates an episode in which his sailors are tricked and eaten by giants, a section taken almost directly from Odysseus’ interaction with the Laestrygonians (*Od.* 10.76). By utilizing mythological stories, such as the *Odyssey*, and accounts of sometimes questionable accuracy, like those in Herodotus, Columbus and Vespucci blend the uncertainty and speculation associated with myth and Greek self-identity with what they encounter on their journeys in the New World. I argue that two of the sources which they

draw on for ‘inspiration,’ Herodotus’ *Histories* and Homer’s *Odyssey*, have been misused by these explorers to justify their discriminatory conquests (Dougherty 2001). Neither the *Histories* nor the *Odyssey* contain the explorers’ expressed sentiments, but rather attest to a world in which civil interaction between ‘racial’ groups was not only acceptable, it was expected.

In my paper, I will examine the writings of Columbus and Vespucci and discuss their use of Classical themes to promote their racial dichotomy. Next, I will compare several episodes from these explorers’ tales to the classical sources which they mirror. Finally, I will comment on the implications that Columbus and Vespucci’s reliance on classical sources has on the modern world.

#### Bibliography

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