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Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title

Testimonies from the Columbian Lawsuits (review)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4t703608>

Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 32(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

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Publication Date

2001-10-01

Peer reviewed

REVIEWS

William D. Phillips, Jr., ed., *Testimonies from the Columbian Lawsuits*, trans. William D. Phillips, Jr. and Anne-Marie Wolf, Mark D. Johnston, philological ed., *Repertorium Columbianum* 8 (Turnhout: Brepols 2000) 506 pp.

Although Christopher Columbus made four voyages to the Americas accompanied by hundreds of individuals, generally it is his voice alone that testifies to the discoveries made on those trips. However, in *Testimonies From the Columbian Lawsuits* the voices of his companions not only speak out to address the issue of what Columbus discovered, but they also provide additional information that is not necessarily found in the pages of Columbus's account. At the heart of this volume are the testimonies, presented and recorded as a result of various lawsuits between the Spanish crown and Columbus's family to determine what claims, if any, Columbus had in the discovery of the mainland of the West Indies. Those who came forward to offer their testimony in support of Columbus or against him "... included those who had participated in the events of the Columbian voyages, those who had heard about the events from the participants, those who had witnessed the beginning or the end of the voyages, and others who had made different, non-Columbian voyages to the Americas" (3). What makes this volume exemplary is the accessibility of the text, presented in Spanish with an excellent English translation, and the variety of witnesses and accounts.

As William D. Phillips, Jr. states in the introduction, because of these testimonies "... we can see details of the first voyage and read alternative narratives of the discovery" (18). These documents add another dimension to the image of Columbus and his accomplishments in the New World. Their importance is emphasized when studied along with Columbus's own accounts:

The Columbian lawsuits, then, are not pristine documents containing only unalloyed truth. They must be interpreted and each assertion must be assessed for plausibility. They must be compared with the other parts of the documentary record, including Columbus's own writings and those of his contemporaries. Taken together, nonetheless, they offer valuable information about the events of what is perhaps the most pivotal period in world history ... (22)

The testimonies illustrate the loyalties of the witnesses, whether to Columbus or the Spanish crown, and provide additional clues as to what exactly was being encountered in the New World by those who participated in these early voyages.

Aside from the concise historical and biographical information provided in the introduction, Phillips offers a brief overview of the testimonies and insight into the type of information that can be extracted from the language of these documents. Mark D. Johnston further discusses the innovation of language in his "Philological Commentary," but what is particularly enlightening about his presentation is the discussion of the impact of Antonio de Nebrija's *Gramática castellana* on the enterprise of the Indies. He states that these documents support Nebrija's claim that Spanish was a "language of empire":

Indeed, the Columbian *pleitos* offer excellent evidence in support of Nebrija's judgment regarding the development of Spanish; by 1500 this language had become a very capable medium of government and justice, largely displacing Latin for these purposes. Now it was also ready to serve as a vehicle for disseminating knowledge about Spain and its new overseas empire. (26)

The ensuing discussion about issues ranging from the format of the examinations to specific phonological and orthographic features, emphasizes this notion of Spanish as an appropriate language to communicate personal accounts as well as judicial issues.

The accounts reiterate information found in Columbus's chronicles of his travels, such as the discovery of gold and pearls as well as encounters with the Indians. Many of the testimonies recall how the Indians were in awe of the Spaniards, thinking them to be heaven sent, as evidenced by the account of Rodrigo de Escobar: "... this witness ... heard how the Indians asked the Christians if they had come from heaven and that this witness asked the Indians if they had seen other Christians and people of his sort and they said no" (55). The ability to communicate with the Indians was not difficult according to this informant because he "understood the language of the Indians and he heard them say that that land was endless" (55). The ease with which the Spaniards and the Indians moved about the lands and communicated with one another is of interest to the modern student of these texts, for it echoes claims made in Columbus's own accounts. According to various testimonies the encounter with the Indians appears not to be as

complicated as the question of who discovered their land later would become.

The testimonies of individual witnesses follow a basic pattern, a series of questions followed by a series of answers, all transcribed in the third person. The stories told within their texts are captivating. For example, the question of whether or not Columbus deserves credit for discovering these new lands is answered according to one's loyalty. The testimony of don Bartolomé Colón states that Columbus was the first to discover the disputed lands on the mainland, from Paria to Darién, evidently because "this witness traveled with the admiral don Cristóbal Colón ... and because the admiral was the first to discover these lands and Paria and no one else had ever come until then" (65). The opposing view, voiced by loyalists to the Spanish crown, claimed that Columbus would never have arrived on the mainland had it not been for Martín Alonso Pinzón, who encouraged the admiral to continue his quest and not return home too hastily. The testimony of Fernán Pérez Camacho attests to this notion in a brief dialogue that reiterates the importance of Pinzón:

... having traveled far out at sea that Colón had already had enough and had told Martín Alonso Pinzón and Vicente Yáñez, "Captains, what do you think we should do? For we have traveled far and not found land," and that Martín Alonso Pinzón said then to Colón, "My lord, we came here to serve God and the king and we don't have to turn back until we find land or die," and that after Colón had seen the will and determination of Martín Alonso Pinzón and Vicente Yáñez he had determined out of good will to continue the voyage and they kept it up until they found land ... (231–232)

Both accounts establish the authority of the witness, either through eyewitness testimony or second-hand accounts from a participant in the voyages. What is intriguing is the fact that there are different portrayals of Columbus instead of the mere acceptance of the admiral as the one who discovered these new lands. Columbus and his role in history becomes more complex because of the variants in testimony.

The contribution of *Testimonies From the Columbian Lawsuits* is that it enhances the study of Christopher Columbus and the early explorations of the Indies. In offering the testimonies of various eyewitnesses, this volume expands the scope of the discovery to include those whose names have become lost over time. These accounts emphasize the fact that Columbus did not work alone but rather was aided by hundreds of men. Whereas many accounts highlight only the contributions

of the admiral, the alternative narratives here reveal the discovery through the eyes of those who helped Columbus at every stage of his journey.

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