

WINNING ESSAY



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Columbus: The Great Initiator of the Age of Exploration and The Transformer of Economic Theory

Europe in the late 15th century seemed to be itching for something new. The Hundred Years' War between France and England had ended, Constantinople had fallen to the Ottoman Turks, and Aragon and Castille had created a united Spain. All while the Italian states were still fighting amongst themselves, and the Renaissance had begun to blossom. Feudalism was in steep decline, and it is evident in hindsight that a new economic structure, an economic structure that would completely change the world, was on the way. It feels as if Europe was waiting for some spark, and this spark came with Columbus's discovery of the new world. The discovery brought a new age to Europe, one dominated by human potential, and an age that brought the advent of the modern world. Columbus's voyages spurred technological advancements in navigation, and his grandiose reports about what he found in the New World guided the European states into the intense colonial competition of the following decades. His voyages also enhanced mercantilist economic theory, leading to nations such as Spain and England enriching themselves with exports from the New World. This caused the elimination of the political strength of the Maritime Republics while setting the stage for the centuries-long foreign domination over the Italian peninsula.

Columbus's voyages stimulated growth in navigation technology, and his reports about the New World steered the European states into the intense colonial competition of the following decades. Much of the technology used by Columbus, such as the Astrolabe, had been in use for centuries, and the Europeans had understood that one could use the star to navigate since the

Phoenicians, but there was room for much improvement. For example, one of the main reasons why Portuguese explorers made slow progress in finding sea routes was that they feared sea monsters and warm water. On his voyages, Columbus used celestial navigation and a technique called “dead reckoning,” where the navigator measures the distance and course from a specific point, such as the starting port. He would mark the day's endpoint, and this point would serve as the starting point the next day. The main issue was that dead reckoning cannot determine the ship's latitude. The clearest example of an improvement in naval technology was in the ship itself. Carracks became the premier way to traverse long distances, with the carrack being a medley of northern European and Mediterranean ships. The carracks were some of the largest ships ever seen; they reached 45 meters in length and 1000 tons in displacement. Without the carracks, it was impossible to attain the level of dependable travel of the Atlantic necessary to sustain the colonial ventures of the European powers. The evolution of the carrack was directly caused by the success of Columbus's voyages. Without the voyages, the spark that led to these technological advancements would have disappeared, and the level of colonization would have been impossible. Columbus's reports are filled with alluring speech, which directly caused the advent of the Age of Exploration. Columbus calls the natives “guileless” and “timid,” words which would inspire the future colonizers to horribly take advantage of the natives and to make explorations of their own. Columbus makes mention of the resources apparent in the land, claiming that the natives wore gold and that the lands were very fertile and easy to navigate through. All these claims would greatly excite the future colonizers; Columbus made it seem like an easy and fruitful venture, leading to the rush to colonize that the world would see in the following decades. Columbus knew that he and his family would benefit from this rush, and his embellishment led to possibly the greatest societal overturn in centuries.

Economic theory was fundamentally transformed with the onset of the Age of Exploration: mercantilist theory was enhanced due to the abundant resources, leading to the nations that were more naturally able to control a larger piece of the pie, for example, Spain or England, being enhanced, while the nations without access to the new resources, such as the maritime republics, being weakened. In short, mercantilism states that global wealth is finite and that maximizing exports and minimizing imports is critical to maintaining the wealth and power of a nation. Therefore, controlling new lands that are rich in resources to export would enhance this theory and would lead to the European powers

fighting each other over a bigger share of what they believed to be finite wealth. It is no coincidence that the exploratory nations were ardent believers in this somewhat more modern economic theory; the only difference between these nations and the maritime republics, who were also big advocates of mercantilism, is that they had the means to explore, and more crucially to control, vast swaths of lands rich in resources a whole ocean away. With a larger portion of the wealth and resources having been secured, the major European powers were more able to ignore the Mediterranean trade monopolies of Genoa and Venice, and the Mediterranean as a whole would eventually lose its place as the center of the economic world. Unsurprisingly, the decrease in power of what had been the cornerstone of European commerce for thousands of years led to the nations that depended on it weakening. The clearest example of this are the maritime republics, but other examples are the Ottoman Turks and Northern Africa, even though their decline would take much longer. Spain would use this newly-found wealth to dominate Southern Italy for centuries, and their mark would not leave the peninsula until Garibaldi's Expedition of the Thousand in 1860. Inevitably, mercantilist economic policy led to European rivalries augmenting to a previously unheard-of degree. The assumption that wealth is finite enhances the degree of competition between nations; if a rival nation increases its share, your nation will likely lose out. In short, mercantilism states that a nation is either actively winning or losing, which is somewhat analogous to sport. This conditional would lead to centuries of war and hatred between the major powers of Europe, as not being active in advancing your nation's power would be admitting defeat. Colonial wars between Britain and France would only amplify each decade, enhancing the tensions between the two nations, tensions which would not go away until 1905, while nations such as Spain saw the competition for resources blind them, leading to an inevitable fall from grace.

Columbus's importance cannot be understated. Without him, the advancements seen in naval technology were impossible, and his striking words directly led to the rush to colonize. Mercantilist economic theory was boosted, to the great delight of the major powers of Europe and to the great misfortune of those who were unable to access the new resources, namely the Italian states which Columbus himself had come from.

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Biography

Agostino Muzio was born in Genova, Italy to a family with deep roots in the Ligurian Riviera. Both of his parents were from the Tigullio, which spans from Sestri Levante to Portofino and is named after the ancient Ligurian tribe the Tigulli. He spent the first two years of his life living in one of these Tigullian towns, Chiavari. At the age of two, he and his family moved to Shanghai, and after spending four years in China, they landed in Detroit, Michigan, where Agostino lived through his pre-college education with his father, mother, and younger sister.

He has played volleyball competitively for six years, loves to read and write, and is a massive fan of the Italian soccer team Genoa. Each summer Agostino and his family goes back to Genova to spend the summer with his extended family, delighting in Pesto, Pansoti, and Focaccia. He went to high school at Cranbrook Kingswood Upper School, and this fall he began his higher education at Amherst College studying Classics (Latin and Greek) and Economics.