

The “Black Legend” and fantasy in the New World

Luis Roberto Torres Escalona*

The discovery, encounter with, or invention of America were cause for controversy and delirium for the Europeans from the beginning. The mentality of the Old World’s inhabitants was filled, in the first place, by fantasies and imaginings about the unknown world. Ancient beliefs flourished in the excited minds of travelers to the New World; as luck would have it, medieval legends, with their dark seas, fountain of eternal youth, antipodes, Amazon women, chimeras, and fantastic beings with terrible, strange and seductive customs, were reflected in the mirror of the Americas. The reality seen or recounted surpassed the improbable, acquiring knightly connotations whose echoes were heard until the last few years of the 18th century.

Together with this romantic idea of the history of the New World there cohabited another, no less controversial one, known as the “Black Legend” —nourished by the supposed atrocities committed by the Spaniards against the Indians at the height of the Conquest and denounced, principally, by the Dominican Fray Bartolomé de las Casas in his distinctive works. The most famous of these, *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the*

Indies, depicts the cruelty, avarice, pillage and extermination that define the barbaric character of the conquistadors, which is still widely discussed today. The Conquest culminated in the last third of the 16th century under the reign of Philip II, when Spain reached the height of its power.

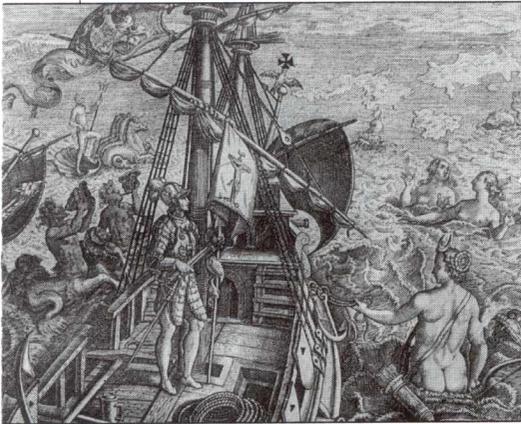
History has so many twists and turns that historical figures and their deeds often do not receive due attention or just recognition. Only the tendentious research of some erudite aficionado or specialist brings back certain forgotten figures, whose image has been censured or eclipsed by

other, perhaps more fortunate personages. Such is the case of Girolamo Benzoni and Théodoro de Bry, unquestionable pillars of the ideas which shaped the fantastic vision of America, as well as the Black Legend, but whom few remember when the theme of the inhumane treatment suffered by the Indians in America arises.

Benzoni authored a chronicle of voyages to the New World which is considered to be an eccentric biography. This work was originally written in Italian under the title *Storia del Mondo Novo* and was published for the first time in Venice in 1565, at



* Department of Artistic and Cultural Goods of UNAM's General Property Office.



Francesco Rampazatto's print shop, under the direction of Gabriel Benzoni. The two most important reprints were made before the end of the century, and the book was translated into Latin, French, Dutch, German and English — Spanish was excluded for obvious reasons.

Théodoro de Bry was a Dutch printer and engraver with considerable talent and a solid reputation in his trade. He was the author of the famous *Collection of Travels Great and Small* in 14 parts, which relates stories of trips to America. This work stands out for the number and richness of its plates. It was published in four languages between 1590 and 1634. In 1597 its engravings were used in the Latin edition of Las Casas' *Brevisima*; they were also used in the three most notable Latin translations of Benzoni's *History*.

Fortunately, the National Library's Reserved Collection safeguards a copy, in three volumes, of the *History of the New World* by Girolamo Benzoni. Each volume was printed in a different year — 1594, 1595 and 1596 — and each has a distinct name: *Americae pars quarta*, *pars quinta*, and *pars sexta*. All of the texts were translated by Urban Chauveton, who, furthermore, is accused of having made changes

in the work in order to accentuate its anti-Spanish character. Théodoro de Bry's printing and illustrations were carried out in Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

The book begins with Benzoni's trip to American soil. It recounts Columbus' discovery of America and his four voyages; describes the beginning of the Indians' enslavement and Las Casas' conduct before Spanish sovereign Carlos V and his attempt to emancipate the Indians. It explains the development and effects of the "Laws of the Indies" promulgated in favor of the Indians in 1542; speaks of the undertakings embarked on by conquistadors Hojeada and Nicuesa in the Darien Gap and Veragua; mentions the discovery of the Pacific Ocean by Núñez de Balboa as well as his death; gives details about the formation of runaway slave territories on the islands as well as the mainland; studies indigenous customs as well as the flora and fauna; reports on incursions by French corsairs; and poses questions regarding the campaigns of Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro. The book ends with Benzoni's return to Italy, among other matters.

With regard to the content of Benzoni's chronicle, Léon Croizat wrote:

"Storia is not the narrative of an eyewitness to more or less significant warlike acts, nor to the political intrigues surrounding a key historic event. Nor is it the stern compendium of a high-ranking personage closely linked to the royal Court, on friendly terms with the foremost figures of his time. Still less is it a compilation of generally reliable works by others, prepared in relative peace, with abundant resources, by someone who stood on the same level as the foremost wise men of the day. Storia is a work of purely journalistic flavor, a report done in order to satisfy

the innumerable curiosities awakened by the Conquest of the New World outside of the confines of Spain and the sphere of its language."

Regarding the illustrations by De Bry that appear in this book, these fantastic evocations cannot fail to astound us. The iconography is extraordinary, saturated with mythological and medieval archetypes. Tritons, sirens, dragons, fabulous monsters, devils, and distinctive deities from demonological sources are combined in a symbiosis of reality and fantasy. For De Bry, the New World became something magical and mysterious, and unconsciously he transformed it into the Christian Hades. In other scenes, the "good savage" is contrasted with cannibalism, sacrifices, the witches' Sabbath and the horrors to which the first missionaries, as well as some conquistadors, were subjected. Images of the Spaniards' "erotic conquest of the Indies" are not lacking. On the other hand, some of the engravings display pathos, particularly those that illustrate the genocide of the original Americans.

As can be appreciated from the above, this work is a document of primary importance for understanding two of the greatest controversies produced by the discovery and Conquest of America. ❧

