

I'd like to typeset a book of reddit posts (with Part through Paragraph being used as an index), based on the /r/AskHistorians FAQ as a Christmas present for a family member that loves history but doesn't love the internet.

I'm having some trouble conveying the threaded/conversational nature of posts - the post title is easily conveyed via a Paragraph, but separating the detailed question and background from subsequent answers and related questions is problematic.

My current thought is to convert the HTML to images, which are then inserted, but I feel like that solution isn't very good.

What suggestions do you have for good formatting of reddit posts?

6 points /u/tendertall – Nov 28 2015

I just did a quick mockup using multicolumn tables to convey the threaded nature of the conversation. It's quite clumsy however and will require quite a bit of ctrl c/v, but if you are willing to put in the time I think it works out fairly nicely. Here is a screen shot of what it looks like:

<http://i.imgur.com/Jriu0Wn.png>

Here is the TeX I used to make it.

<http://pastebin.com/wFq45uYL>

I would hold out until someone posts something a little more elegant, but if you're in a crunch this will do the job. I've rarely used latex for more than presentations and a thesis.

3 points /u/S48535 – Nov 29 2015

OP Do you want to just have all comments or are you cherry picking comments/threads

this idea might be easily expandable relatively straightforwardly implemented with custom commands and a page scraper.

2 points /u/tendertall – Nov 29 2015

Sorry for the spam. You intrigued me with page scraping, never written one before. I'm using this thread as a guinea pig and I want to see how reddit handles additional child comments. I may do something similar to OP but for /r/WritingPrompts. (actually a great gift idea). If it get something working I'll post it.

1 points /u/dhiltonp – Nov 29 2015 (edited 19 hours after posting)

Currently I'm just figuring out a proof-of-concept, but I'm going to automatically grab all comments. Ultimately I think some pruning/curation will be desirable to increase quality.

Edit:

Editing as a test.

2 points /u/dhiltonp – Nov 29 2015

Thanks for the idea!

I'm currently looking into mdframed, because I don't love the coding aspect of the table.

1 points /u/dhiltonp – Nov 30 2015

Here's my current project, with some sample output.

There is a problem on page 6 - nested frames don't cross pages.

5 points /u/skier_scott – Nov 29 2015

If you wanted a complete programmatic way to do it, I'd look at PyLatex1. It'd be pretty easy to go to a site, scrape it for the text than put that in LaTeX.

1 points /u/dhiltonp – Nov 29 2015

Thanks for the link! I've been messing around a little bit with urllib and I'm still figuring out how I want to extract/display content (hence this post).

3 points /u/thetoethumb – Nov 29 2015

Definitely use PRAW to grab the data

4 points /u/robinhoodexe – Nov 29 2015

On a side note, that sounds like a really nice project. Do you mind sharing the book with the rest of us? :)

3 points /u/None – Nov 29 2015

Reddit uses a particular flavour of Markdown. You can use Pandoc to convert from markdown into latex (or HTML, or rst, or basically anything else). Alternatively, you can use an online markdown editor like stackedit to export directly into pdf, I think.

I read on a Facebook post that Muslims reached America before Europeans. He was obviously incredibly biased, but I'm curious if there's any grain of truth behind this.

His post follows:

With all of this evidence of Muslim exploration before Columbus's voyage in 1492, is it possible that Columbus himself knew he was not the first? It's more than likely to be the case. Columbus sailed from Spain in the same year the last Muslim dynasty of Iberia was destroyed in the Reconquista. Many of the people of Iberia were still Muslims, and carried with them the knowledge of the Muslim Golden Ages. Numerous people on Columbus's voyage were Moriscos, Muslims who were forced to convert to Catholicism or die. Columbus could have heard from Spain's Muslims of the New World and was thus inspired to go exploring.

Once he got to the Americas, Columbus records numerous examples of Muslims already present. He commented on the gold that the natives had, which was made the same way, in the same alloy, as the Muslims of West Africa did. Furthermore, Columbus records that the native word in that area for gold is *guanin*, which is very similar to the Mandinka word for gold, *ghanin*, which probably comes from the Arabic word for wealth, *ghina*.

In 1498, Columbus recorded seeing a ship loaded with goods, heading towards America, filled with Africans who were probably on their way to trade with Native Americans. Columbus also records in his journal that Native Americans told him of black Africans who came regularly to trade with them.

80 points /u/Reedstilt (Moderator | Eastern Woodlands) – Mar 05 2014 (edited)

Once he got to the Americas, Columbus records numerous examples of Muslims already present. He commented on the gold that the natives had, which was made the same way, in the same alloy, as the Muslims of West Africa did.

The Taino have been producing gold-copper alloys (assuming that is the same alloy used in the West Africa—I'm not certain on that aspect of the claim) for hundreds of years before Contact. Whether they developed the technique locally or imported it from one of the other areas in the Americas that also have long histories of using gold alloys, I can't say, but certainly predates any potential Muslim contact.

Furthermore, Columbus records that the native word in that area for gold is *guanin*, which is very similar to the Mandinka word for gold, *ghanin*, which probably comes from the Arabic word for wealth, *ghina*.

This part is inaccurate. The Taino word for gold is "caona" as seen in Anacaona "Golden Flower", the cacica of the cacicazgo of Xaragua, one of the five cacicazgos that divided up Hispaniola. She was also the wife of the cacique of the Maguana cacicazgo. *Guani'n* appears to actually be a medal worn by high ranking members of Taino society, which was not always made of gold. Etymologically, it's related to the word *guani* which is a social rank beneath cacique / cacica. No reason to speculate that it was a word imported from Arabic via West Africa.

As for the other claims, I'm not sure which 1498 document he's citing. Getting that information would be helpful. The rest is purely speculatively.

Anyhow, he seems to be focusing in on a West African connection to the Americas, in which case we should turn our attention to Mansa Musa of Mali, who famously undertook a hajj to Mecca in 1324. While in Egypt he recounted how he became the mansa. His predecessor, Mansa Abu Bakr II commissioned an expedition to explore the Atlantic in 1310. The exploratory fleet encountered a fierce storm before discovering anything; only one ship survived and immediately returned to Mali. Unsatisfied with this turn of events, Abu Bakr II personally took command of a second expedition in 1311, putting his vizier, Musa, in charge of Mali while he was away. Abu Bakr II never returned and Musa became the new mansa of Mali.

So if any of the Muslim West African nations knew of the Americas, they didn't in 1324, and no later report is known that speaks of Abu Bakr II expedition eventually returning or a later expedition being sent out*. Is it possible that Abu Bakr II actually made it all the way across the Atlantic (assuming his expeditions took place; there's some debate about that)? I suppose it's possible, but we have no evidence to confirm that he did or where he might have landed. But since there's seemingly no report back, even if he did succeed, Columbus wouldn't have heard about it.

*see caustic_banana's mention of Abdul-Hassan for a possible mention of later success. I'd be interested in seeing more detail on that myself.

[deleted]

21 points /u/The_Turk2 – Mar 05 2014

Mansa Musa is a very real person, and was the King of Mali, nominally at its height

8 points /u/Reedstilt (Moderator | Eastern Woodlands) – Mar 05 2014

You seem to be missing a word, but I'll assume you meant something along the lines of "Isn't the story Mansa Musa *told* fictional?" Please correct me if I misjudged your intent.

Assuming I took your meaning correctly, I did mention that there's some debate over whether these voyages actually took place. I ran with the assumption that they did take place here because the OP's Facebook friends seemed to be accepting such sources and I wanted to emphasize the fact that even if one does accept them, those sources don't say the voyages were successful and make no mention of discovering new lands, so they don't support the initial claim (that Iberian Muslims had knowledge of the Americas via West African Muslims).

[deleted]

9 points /u/khosikulu (Southern Africa | European Expansion) – Mar 05 2014

Musa I was a historic figure. His *hajj* was chronicled by others, in particular his rather remarkable arrival in Cairo. If that weren't enough, during the reign of his (half)-brother, Suleiman, Ibn Battuta actually visited Mali. Were Musa fictional, people in the cities he visited would not have treated his enquiries so matter of factly, and he would have certainly pointed that out in the *Rihla*. Beyond that, Mande oral tradition also preserves record of the rulers of Mali, and agree on those. See Levstzion's *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (now a bit old, to be sure) if you want pointers to the original sources. There's probably a fair bit more now, depending on how much of the recently digitized material has been read and transcribed. Mali's Islamic social circles were literate in Arabic, and so did write things down—although most of their output remains untranslated or unknown. Paging /u/Commustar !

[deleted]

2 points /u/khosikulu (Southern Africa | European Expansion) – Mar 06 2014 (edited)

Some of the accounts appear in the Wikipedia article on him, but his arrival in Cairo is one other that I can't quite name at the moment. But yes, there were many eyewitnesses [and some interlocutors!].

7 points /u/Reedstilt (Moderator | Eastern Woodlands) – Mar 05 2014

To the best of my knowledge, Mansa Musa is a historic figure, but admittedly African history is outside my area of study. Checking prior questions about Mansa Musa himself, our African specialists don't seem to mention any debate over whether he existed or whether his hajj occurred. The debate seems to be over whether his hajj actually had the economic impact that its been credited with.

If you want to get our African specialists to weigh in on the topic though, I recommend submitting a question about Mansa Musa, his hajj, and its impact on the economy of the area.

36 points /u/LoneGazebo (Modern Comparative Imperialism) – Mar 05 2014 (edited)

A lot of the commentary here seems to focus on the simplicity of 'traveling west' to get to the Americas. Travel during the age of sail was by no means so simple: knowledge of trade winds, weather patterns, currents and astral navigation were all required if one intended to go into the deep ocean. Furthermore, the harshness of the Atlantic required a much more formidable sailing vessel: taller sides, wider prow, bigger sails, deeper keel, and so on, features that most ships of this era lacked. Wind patterns dictated where you went, and how quickly you got there - trying to sail directly West from the Mediterranean would

most likely get you stuck in the ‘Horse Latitudes,’ so-called because you would eat your horses (or throw them overboard because you can’t feed them) as a consequence of being stuck at sea with no breeze!

In terms of technology in the early Renaissance, natural philosophy and astronomy were more advanced in Islamic regions like the Ottoman Empire than they were in Europe. This does not, however, mean that they had the ship technology, nor the desire, to ‘sail west.’ The former is a consequence of trade, as the Mediterranean, a relatively placid and shallow body of water compared to the Atlantic, could be more easily traversed in a trireme or galley (oars, short keel, etc.). These ‘sea ships’ were superior fighters in the Mediterranean as well: as late as 1571 (the Battle of Lepanto), galleys were still the dominant combat vessel used in the Mediterranean. The reason we see Portuguese and Spanish vessels making the first extended voyages across and around the Atlantic in the 15th century is due in large part to geography: these kingdoms had to develop vessels (like the caravel) that could competently travel in shallower waters as well as the deep, treacherous waters of the Atlantic.

The last point I will make is this: when considering exploration, travel, trade and technology, one must always ask themselves, ‘what would they have gained from this?’ In other words, what was the motivation to explore? To give examples, what would Ottoman explorers, or even North African explorers, have gained, or have even imagined to have gained, from traveling west to get to India? The Ottomans, for example, dominated the East-West trade between Europe and Asia - circumventing their own trade monopoly would not have benefitted them in the slightest. The idea of ‘exploration for the sake of exploration’ does not emerge, in the context of the Atlantic World, until much later (if, debatably, at all). Even if Portuguese fishermen sailed into the Grand Banks, or Norse explorers to Newfoundland, the reality of their contact is, while historically fascinating, not terribly consequential in the grand narrative of the Atlantic World. Why? Because, until the early 16th century, the technology, and desire, to do something with this knowledge was unavailable. Even if the Norse knew what they had found, and wanted it, they lacked the demographics and economic infrastructure to effectively exploit their ‘discovery.’ Even if North Africans somehow managed to go to the Americas and back, the consequences of that contact are marginal at best. In short, we do not discuss Columbus, or 1492, as a consequence of his ‘discovery’ (more aptly, he ‘ran into’ the Americas), we discuss Columbus because Spain had the capacity, and the desire, to act upon his exploits. If Spain had not acted upon Columbus’s dubious voyage to India (as he believed), that moment in history would have been as inconsequential as prior moments of contact.

Like a true lecturer, I have one last point (after my last point): when I teach the ‘Age of Exploration’ to my students, I remind them that such a name is both post-hoc and misleading. The 15-17th centuries were not an age of exploration, as it seems to imply a whimsical desire to seek out new lands for the sake of discovery. No, this age is far more aptly described as an ‘age of desperation,’ or even an ‘age of exploitation.’ Spain, for example, invested in Columbus, and followed up on his voyage, not because they wanted to explore, but rather because they saw, in his plan to reach India via a western route, a means to circumvent the Italian/Ottoman-dominated Mediterranean trade network.

Sources:

- Kamen, Henry. *Empire: How Spain Became a World Power, 1492-1763*. New York: HarperCollins (2003)
- Armesto, Felipe. *Pathfinders: A Global History of Exploration*. W.W. Norton, 2007.
- Crosby, Alfred. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*. Cambridge University Press (1986).

Edit: clarified Horse Latitudes.

4 points /u/LoneGazebo (Modern Comparative Imperialism) – Mar 06 2014

Someone posted a link to a video and asked me to review it. The comment has since been deleted, however I worked up quite the reply, so I’ll post it here. Essentially, the video argued that Columbus was searching for Jerusalem to reconquer it.

Reply: I am by no means a historian of Renaissance theology, but I’ll do my best.

First, I’ve never studied this argument, though I know where it comes from: Carol Delaney’s ‘Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem’ book. I’m not in a position to discredit her work, though I should note that she is an anthropologist by profession, and that, for what it is worth, she only approached this

topic once. That doesn't necessarily mean her argument is wrong, however I haven't seen any specific evidence in my own work to support the idea.

Practically-speaking, Columbus was Genoese, so a Spanish-led crusade would undoubtedly take Spanish troops through Italy and/or Genoese interests. Whether or not Columbus would care is up for debate, however previous crusades had proven to be political liabilities and/or useful means of cutting down a rival (i.e. Venice with the sacking of Byzantium in the Fourth Crusade). Essentially, Columbus would be arming the enemy of Genoa, as Genoa, along with Venice, had a strong grasp on Mediterranean trade at this time. That alone casts doubt on this theory.

I also find this argument worrisome because it places great emphasis on the religiosity of Columbus, almost as if his Catholic views were abnormal and/or eccentric for this era. They weren't. Sure, he had some interesting experiences (such as, for example, seeing visions of angels while sailing), however any concern he had regarding Jerusalem or anti-Ottoman sentiment would have been the norm for people of his culture. Europeans at this time had a relatively good idea of just how far away India was – Columbus, for example, used Arabic maps (famously forgetting to convert the distances to Genoese distances, thus skewing the size of the world to be roughly 30% smaller than normal), which means that he and others had access to maps produced in the Middle East. Many of these maps depict the extent of Islam well into Asia, thus enabling Europeans to understand that Jerusalem and India were not, in fact, close by.

If Columbus sought to reach Jerusalem, it was part of a religious tradition within Catholicism that predates Columbus. In short, a Catholic, in the 15th century, saying that Christians should seek out means to 'retake Jerusalem' is the modern equivalent of wishing for world peace or the end to poverty – it was the end goal, the fulfillment of which would enable the prophecies of Revelation to play out. It was an expression of piety to wish for Jerusalem to once again be Christian, thus Columbus's expressions of interest in this are not unique. If he wanted Jerusalem to be reconquered, it wasn't a drive unique to him.

This argument speaks to a major problem within modern historiography. The emergence of subaltern studies has had a profound positive impact on history - it allows historians to study and give voice to those people, cultures and interests that were removed from agency by the forces of history. Like any model, however, subaltern studies has risks: by encouraging the process of 'reading between the lines' to garner answers to questions and create agency, historians themselves also have a greater amount of agency to over-analyze or distort the past. In other words, what I think happened here is that a historian, reading Columbus's own words, has over-analyzed his interest in Jerusalem and extrapolated it beyond the original meaning.

I'm reminded of another book on Columbus: Anne McClintock's 'Imperial Leather.' I'll spare you the details, but in this work McClintock makes the argument, based on a brief theory postulated by Columbus on one of his later voyages, that he believed the world was shaped like a woman's breast, and therefore his journey to the Americas was actually a breast fantasy and/or a hunt for the 'cosmic nipple' of classical mythology. This nipple was synonymous with the Garden of Eden, thus informing us that exploration journeys were about more than exploration – they were gendered 'exploitations' of the female form. There are some good ideas in this book, however the idea that Columbus was on a 'breast fantasy' adventure does, in my opinion, fit into the category of over-analysis that I discussed above.

Hope this helps!

62 points /u/caustic_banana (Roman Empire | Classical Europe) – Mar 05 2014 (edited)

The information you're friend is posting sounds incredibly dubious and riddled with Facebook-friendly speech, but contains some possible elements of truth.

-It's possible that Columbus did travel with Muslims, given the population he would be drawing his crew from. However, I find it extremely doubtful that he needed secret Abbasid navigational techniques to find the Americas as you literally cannot miss them unless you sail practically straight south.

-Muslim historian Abdul-Hassan wrote that Moors sailed from west Africa and returned from a "Strange land with many riches".

-I've seen a few sources loosely reference that people in Hispaniola had met Africans before and traded with them.

-The 1498 entry sounds like 100% hog-wash for a lot of reasons.

But beneath all that, it's not a good idea to give Columbus credit for "discovering America" in any capacity, as there are several cases, both anecdotal and documented, that other historical persons have run into the Americas before. What he did do, however, was popularize the ideal of colonization and expansion for an ambitious Europe.

I am not an expert on anything even remotely near Columbus, so I will be interested to see if someone else can provide an indepth evaluation of the claims.

EDITS: My source for the Abdul Hassan al-Masudi is the Paul Lunde & Caroline Stone translation for *The Meadows of Gold and Mine of Gems*

I have also seen references to Africans having visited the New World in *Pillars of Hercules, Sea of Darkness* [I think also a Paul Lunde translation], as well as *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic World* by Hyun Park.

15 points /u/Sithril – Mar 05 2014

-Muslim historian Abdul-Hassan wrote that Moors sailed from west Africa and returned from a "Strange land with many riches".

-I've seen a few sources loosely reference that people in Hispaniola had met Africans before and traded with them.

Could anyone please expend on these two, or point me in the direction where I could find more about these topics? Ive always been curious about Old world-American contacts before Columbus, but the only thing Ive heard about were the vikings and *possibilities* that some americans had the tech to cross the Atlantic before Columbus.

... it's not a good idea to give Columbus credit for "discovering America" in any capacity...

Well, wasnt most (if not all) of Europe totally oblivious to the existence of the Americas before Columbus?

13 points /u/jschooltiger (Moderator | Shipbuilding and Logistics | British Navy 1770-1830) – Mar 05 2014

Well, wasnt most (if not all) of Europe totally oblivious to the existence of the Americas before Columbus?

Yes, but this does not mean that he "discovered" America in any true sense (the native Americans living there would dispute this, for example, as would the Norse settlers.) As /u/caustic_banana says, Columbus' contribution was to popularize the notion of travel/colonization in the Americas.

Mark Kurlansky's Cod mentions Portugese fishermen, for example, taking cod from the Grand Banks and drying them on temporary camps set up in Newfoundland. It's not settlement by any means, but it also means that some groups of Europeans were aware of the Americas. Or at least a portion of them.

6 points /u/tsaihi – Mar 05 2014

I've heard stories of Portuguese and Basque fishermen knowing about the maritime provinces but my understanding was that this was far from accepted as fact—is there any strong evidence that Kurlansky's claim is true?

6 points /u/caustic_banana (Roman Empire | Classical Europe) – Mar 05 2014

The writings by Abdul-Hassan I was referencing has been translated into English under the title "The Meadows of Gold", I believe. It is one of the best possible introductions to traditional Arabic history that I can recommend to someone who doesn't specialize in this area, such as myself. I would definitely start there.

11 points /u/primary_action_items – Mar 05 2014

You have to literally go straight south to miss the Americas.

I think this is really the most important point, even though Columbus had been no clue where he was going, he would have still likely wound up in Brazil, Argentina, Nova Scotia, Florida, Louisiana or some piece of the New World simply by not going directly south.

15 points /u/Vioarr – Mar 05 2014

Great post - the only other thing I would add to it is that whilst it's possible that Muslims did voyage to the Americas, unless they arrived before 1000 AD, they were not the first to do so. L'Anse aux Meadows has been confirmed to have been inhabited by Norse explorers and dates to around 1000 AD.

Perhaps the OP's mate is referencing the source maps which were compiled by Piri Reis, into what's widely known as the Piri Reis map? I've tried to track down some more specifics behind the intelligence gathered to make the PR map, but have come up empty handed.

30 points /u/ConanofCimmeria – Mar 05 2014 (edited)

Not to be that guy, but...

there are several cases, both anecdotal and documented, that other historical persons have run into the Americas before.

I'd be very curious to see your sources, if you wouldn't mind too terribly. I've often heard it repeated by people whose opinion I respect that the only firm evidence we have of pre-Columbian contact with the Americas is that of the Norse in the North Atlantic, and very probably Polynesians in South America. As an aspiring folklorist, I've seen a *ton* of stories about paradisaical lands somewhere overseas (Hy-Brasil, Cockaigne, El Dorado and so forth), so my inclination is to wonder if there's a compelling reason to treat similar such descriptions from Muslim or Chinese sources or whatever as anything else.

13 points /u/caustic_banana (Roman Empire | Classical Europe) – Mar 05 2014

Well the easy one is Leif Ericson, whom landed in North America in sometime around 1000 CE in the area around the Gulf of St. Lawrence as well as (possibly) Baffin Island. I can throw a few other ones at you later after I have time to get those sources together, but I wouldn't expect Leif Ericson to be a 'debatable' character.

21 points /u/loyalposition – Mar 05 2014 (edited)

I believe the above commenter mentioned there being firm evidence of the Norse reaching North America.

Edit: gender neutrality

5 points /u/splergel – Mar 05 2014

The "several cases" part is the debatable bit, yes. I don't think anyone seriously questions Leif Ericsson, but to my knowledge that's the only case that's more than speculation. The Norse could come to North America by sailing via the Shetland Islands, Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland, and so never had to cross more than about 300 km of open water. Anyone else would be in for a trip that was at least five times longer.

4 points /u/cloud36 – Mar 05 2014

They have found a Norse settlement in Newfoundland. Its called L'Anse aux Meadows

8 points /u/Aerandir (Bell Beaker Culture | Germanic Iron Age warfare) – Mar 05 2014

I am deleting this comment until you have posted some sources for those statements, please just reply to this message to have me reinstate it when you have done so.

9 points /u/caustic_banana (Roman Empire | Classical Europe) – Mar 05 2014 (edited)

My source for the Abdul Hassan al-Masudi is the Paul Lunde & Caroline Stone translation for *The Meadows of Gold and Mine of Gems*

I have also seen references to Africans having visited the New World in *Pillars of Hercules, Sea of Darkness* [I think also a Paul Lunde translation], as well as *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic World* by Hyun Park.

-I assume the comment about Columbus traveling with Muslims isn't something I needed to cite, as it is demographic in nature and there being post-Reconquista Muslims in Iberia shouldn't be... very contestable. If you'd like me to remove this line, I can.

-I'd also assume that me calling the 1498 reference hog wash shouldn't be a thing I need to cite, as it's an opinion of observation.

8 points /u/Reedstilt (Moderator | Eastern Woodlands) – Mar 05 2014 (edited)

My source for the Abdul Hassan al-Masudi is the Paul Lunde & Caroline Stone translation for *The Meadows of Gold and Mine of Gems*

If you have access to this material, could you provide a quote? I'd be interested in seeing exactly what was said about the matter.

there being post-Reconquista Muslims in Iberia shouldn't be... very contestable

That's not the claim though. The claim is that there were muslims (or recent converts from Islam to Christianity) on the crew. While I wouldn't be terribly surprised to find out that there were, since it's a key facet of the argument, it would need to be demonstrated rather than assumed.

4 points /u/caustic_banana (Roman Empire | Classical Europe) – Mar 05 2014

Explicitly with the quote, I will see what I can do to provide over my lunch break. I'm sorry I cannot attend to this right now but the work day... she is a cruel mistress.

Your point about the crew is a fair one and I will edit my comment about crew composition out as I cannot offer evidence in support at this time.

4 points /u/Reedstilt (Moderator | Eastern Woodlands) – Mar 05 2014

Explicitly with the quote, I will see what I can do to provide over my lunch break.

Thanks. I look forward to it.

7 points /u/caustic_banana (Roman Empire | Classical Europe) – Mar 05 2014

On the limits where these two seas, the Mediterranean and the Ocean join, pillars of copper and stone, have been erected by King Hirakl the giant. Upon these pillars are inscriptions and figures, which show with their hands that one cannot go further, and that it is impracticable to navigate beyond the Mediterranean into that sea (the ocean), for no vessel sails on it: there is no cultivation nor a human being, and the sea has no limits neither in its depths nor extent, for its end is unknown. This is the sea of darkness, also called the green sea or the surrounding sea. Some say that these pillars are not on this strait, but in some islands of the ocean and their coast. Some people consider this sea as the origin of all others.

There are some wonderful stories related respecting it, for which we refer the reader to our book the *Akhbar ez-zaman*; there he will find an account of those crews who have risked their lives in navigating this sea, and who of them have escaped, and who have been shipwrecked, also what they have encountered and seen. Such an adventurer was a Moor of Spain, of the name of Khoshkhash. He was a young man of Cordoba: having assembled some young men they went on board a vessel which they had ready on the ocean, and nobody knew for a long time what had become of them. At length they came back loaded with rich booty. Their history is well known among the people of el-Andalos.

The reference to Akhbar ez-zaman is one which el-Mas'udi uses several times throughout the text and refers to his "History of the times". Sorry for the giant quote, but it is useful in context to explain the mindset about sailing past the Pillars or Hercules and out into the Atlantic.

2 points /u/Tiako (Roman Archaeology) – Mar 06 2014

Great quote, but I am still pretty skeptical. The author is explicitly framing the story within the context of popular mythology—it is a story some tell, not something people know about clearly. The idea of the Pillars of Hercules being a sort of liminal space, and the area beyond it being mystical and fantastic, is a very old trope in Mediterranean cultures, as old as Odysseus. And when you think about it, where would he get the booty for which to load his ship? People are not often in the habit of giving out boatloads of booty to random strangers, and that only enhances the fantastic quality of the story.

6 points /u/Algernon_Asimov – Mar 05 2014 (edited)

My source for the Abdul Hassan al-Masudi is the Paul Lunde & Caroline Stone translation for *The Meadows of Gold and Mine of Gems*

It's worth pointing out that this was written in 947AD - over 500 years before Columbus's time, and during the flourishing of the Islam Golden Age. If there had been a successful trade where the Muslim voyagers "came back loaded with rich booty", this raises the question about why noone tried to duplicate their voyage.

More importantly, this history...

contains both historically documented facts, hadiths or sayings from reliable sources **and stories, anecdotes, poetry and jokes that the author had heard or had read elsewhere.**

We need to be aware that, like many old "histories", there wasn't a lot of fact-checking taking place. So, let's take anything this source says with a large grain of salt. And, according to your quote, what that history *does* say is quite vague, at best:

they went on board a vessel which they had ready on the ocean, and nobody knew for a long time what had become of them. At length they came back loaded with rich booty.

This is why we always treat every source with skepticism.

2 points /u/Aerandir (Bell Beaker Culture | Germanic Iron Age warfare) – Mar 05 2014

Thanks for the references. I found your *Pillars of Hercules* article online as an article in 'Saudi Aramco World', a journal edited by Lunde himself, with a goal statement to 'broaden knowledge of the cultures, history and geography of the Arab and Muslim worlds and their connections with the West.', and is not peer-reviewed. However, the only statements he makes is that Columbus was probably aware of Muslim travels to the Canaries, not that 'Africans having visited the New World'.

As an unrelated footnote: Lunde also makes the statement that 'There is no reason to doubt that [Necho's Phoenician/Egyptian circumnavigation of Africa] took place.'

9 points /u/ElectricGreek – Mar 05 2014

I don't understand why many people insist on trying to belittle the impact of Columbus.

While others (such as Lief Erickson) may have reached parts of the Americas before 1492, the fact is that Europeans had no idea that there were any major landmasses between the west coasts of Europe and Africa and the east coast of Asia. He did not simply "popularize" colonization because without him the Old World wouldn't have known about the Americas for a much longer period of time. Without him there wouldn't have been anything to colonize.

6 points /u/Vioarr – Mar 05 2014

The point is that he wasn't the first to colonize the Americas (as is often taught in US history). Apart from the Native Americans, there are documented sites where Viking colonies existed.

He did popularize the idea of colonization as he was able to report back to Spanish royalty and therefore a much larger audience of people as to the value across the Atlantic. Perhaps its the negative connotation that is being associated with it that you have a problem with?

5 points /u/allak – Mar 05 2014

He did popularize the idea of colonization

This is uselessly reductive.

The Columbus voyages had enormous consequences for the history of the world; they changed the geopolitical realities both in the Americas and in Europe. We are still living with the consequences of his actions.

The presence of the Vikings at the Anse aux Meadows settlement is very interesting from an historical point of view, but did not have any lasting significant impact on either side of the Atlantic.

(That said, of course the Native Americans did colonize the Americas before 1492, but, while I have no idea on how history is taught in the US, I doubt this is forgotten.)

1 points /u/Vioarr – Mar 05 2014

That's just it though - from a very young age, Americans are taught that Columbus was the only person from Europe who voyaged across the Atlantic to the Americas. This statement is categorically false as there were others before him to accomplish this, and there's evidence which supports the claim. Now, if one was to make an argument that he was the one to popularize the idea of colonization, they'd be spot on as this was exactly what he did for in the context of mainland Europe. That's not to his detriment, or in any way reductive to his achievements; but if we're discussing the topic of "who discovered the Americas first" there are many others which should be included.

Understand that I'm simply speaking from the standpoint of timelines for exploration and discovery, not that of efforts to colonize or build lasting settlements.

6 points /u/ElectricGreek – Mar 05 2014

What I have seen a lot is people taking the fact that the Vikings had colonies in northern North America and disregarding the influence and importance of Columbus as such. The Viking colonies had little effect on the greater history of the world, whereas the entire history of of two continents is separated rightfully so into pre and post-Columbian periods.

2 points /u/Smakon – Mar 06 2014

The Viking colonies were not permanent, which is why they had little impact on Europe.

1 points /u/Vioarr – Mar 05 2014

I can understand how one could come to that conclusion, looking over the statements on this thread (and I suppose to a greater degree other discussions on the matter). But let's keep in mind the context of the discussion, and that pertained to the discovery of the Americas, and who the first group was to do so.

Columbus did have a massive impact, both positive and negative, around the world. His actions eventually led to the downfall of civilizations, the creation of countries, and a massive revenue stream for mainland Europe. But he can hardly lay claim to being the sole person to discover the Americas.

4 points /u/None – Mar 06 2014

He is the one responsible for making the existence of the New World known to the people who would eventually dominate it. For all intents and purposes he discovered it. It's either him or the nameless ancient human that first realized you could cross the Bering Strait.

10 points /u/AllUrMemes – Mar 05 2014

There was some discussion about the “Piri Reis map” on this thread: <http://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments>

The map dates to 1513 and has depictions of what some people think might be Antarctica or South America. It’s possible this was somehow made from Columbus’ maps, but when you start digging into this you will find a lot of wild theories about pre-Columbian exploration of the Americas.

It’s very interesting to think about, but something that I think people forget about is how “far away and exotic lands” to older civilizations may not be that far away or exotic to us. By which I mean, for example, Greek colonists sailing around the larger Mediterranean to places like Iberia was an incredibly daring feat given the time, knowledge of the world, and technology. You get crazy stories like the legend of Atlantis and impossible wealth. But to us, it’s not a particularly long or impressive journey. So when we hear these epic stories we think that the culture must have gone all the way to the Americas when maybe they went to the Canary Islands or Western Africa. Just something to keep in mind.

1 points /u/Marcus_Lycus – Mar 06 2014

Minor point, the land you see is actually based on Ptolemy’s idea that the all the oceans were surrounded by land, which you can see here.

1 points /u/AllUrMemes – Mar 06 2014

Well, I guess depending on your conception of space, that’s not an entirely inaccurate worldview.

Like, you might say that the oceans are surrounded by land if, by walking in a straight line forever, I will eventually hit land.

Now if you travel along a line of latitude it would be possible to NOT ever hit land. But then you are really traveling in a circle around the earth.

Actually I’m just going to stop. Non-Euclidean geometry makes my brain hurt.

12 points /u/JesusDeSaad – Mar 05 2014

First time I’ve heard about all this. No sources at all provided on the facebook post?

1 points /u/None – Mar 06 2014

No sources at all, it seems the individual has ties to the Moorish Science Temple on their page as well.

2 points /u/JesusDeSaad – Mar 06 2014

Well in my opinion this is too big a deal to be covered up. This wasn’t a culture like the Vikings, where pretty much only the religious leaders recorded stuff down on runes, the Moors would have had extensive records all over the place.

So when even the Vikings leave behind them stuff that proves their existence, you can be damn sure there would be no doubt at all that Moors would have left pretty damn big signatures of their passing, and numerous books and travel logs about the new lands.

And all this without even asking the natives, who would tell Columbus and Pizarro and the conquistadors, of other travelers from across the ocean.

A quick googling only came up with dubious results like guesswork from complete laymen and/or scientists of unrelated fields, so I’m pegging this down as misinformation stuff, akin to the ancient Greeks landing on the Americas hoax, or the China discovering the entire world before Columbus fiasco.

3 points /u/trolleyfan – Mar 06 2014

Nope. Not really.

And, honestly, why would they bother even heading that way? Columbus did so because Europe was looking for a way to bypass the Muslims who were between them and the riches of the East. Guess what? The *Muslims* didn’t need to do that...they were already there!

And - unlike Columbus - they weren’t in denial about the true size of the Earth and knew quite well that if they tried to “Head West to go East” they’d run out of supplies before they got halfway there. So again, why do that?

And further, taking Columbus's word on what he saw as evidence of Muslims is as amusing as all get out. Columbus *needed* there to be evidence of Muslims... to prove he had reached Asia! Heck, he required his crew to - basically - all line up and say, "yep, Asia all right" when he returned to Spain and he himself apparently went to his deathbed firmly stating he had reached Asia.

Honestly, he is the *least* trustworthy evidence you could find on a Muslim presence in the Americas this side of a personal website.