

Christopher Columbus (Columbus and the “Discovery” of the New World)

National Approach

Poland’s Perspective

Poland did not participate in great geographical discoveries and as a consequence did not take part in expansion on the newly discovered territories. This fact significantly affects the Polish historians’ (and indirectly history teachers’) perception of the role of Christopher Columbus and the importance of his journey to the history of the world. In the Polish history curriculum, the historical figure of Columbus and the subject of his travel appear as part of a wide problem for expeditions taken by sailors and travellers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries together with their discoveries. While discussing this topic at school, the following issues are emphasized: causes and course of major discovery expeditions; the inventions that made transatlantic travel possible; the factors that determined the decisions of different countries to start expansion to other continents; and finally the social, economic and cultural implications of the discoveries made at the time. So, the figure and biography of Christopher Columbus appear in history books alongside other great explorers and travellers like Marco Polo, Bartolomeu Diaz, Vasco da Gama, Amerigo Vespucci and Ferdinand Magellan. Thus, from the Poland’s perspective, the journeys of Columbus, in the same way as the discoveries made by other sailors, constitute mainly a turning point in the history of world. The expeditions set the end of the Middle Ages and beginning of modern period.

For the European countries (such as Spain, Portugal, England and France) which as a result of discovery began to expand into other continents, the Columbus’ discoveries also mark the beginning of the European colonial period. In Polish publications and textbooks, this subject is much less noticeable. Among the consequences of the discoveries (including the discovery of America), the accent is put primarily to the aspects related to social changes resulted from the great discoveries (in the old continent, as well as in the conquered countries) in the areas of: world view, economic transformations, and political implications on the relationship between the countries participating in the conquest of the newly discovered lands.

Recently, however, somewhat increased interest in the subject of great discoveries and Christopher Columbus can be observed in Poland. This is caused by emerging hypotheses about the supposed Polish roots of the great explorer and his kinship with the Polish King Wladyslaw III of Varna. Such revelations, however, does not have too many supporters among Polish historians.

The disbelief results partly from the lack of convincing evidence to support the thesis of the Polish origins of Columbus and partly from the deeply-rooted image of King Wladyslaw of Varna as a young warrior and defender of the Christian faith, the ruler who died in the Battle of Varna in 1444. Nevertheless, Polish material presented in this training module is related to the subject of various theories concerning the origins of Christopher Columbus.

Polish Material

The discussed text comes from the popular historical magazine entitled "Centuries Speak" aimed primarily at young people. The article by Rafał Jaworski ([*"Christopher Kolumbski, the story of King Władysław on the distant island"*](#)) is a kind of a critical review of the book by Manuel Rosa entitled "Columbus. History unknown" which presents, among others, the theory of Polish roots of the discoverer of America.

TASKS

1. In a few sentences, summarise the content of the article by Rafał Jaworski that you have read.
 - a. How would you interpret the article subtitle "The story of King Władysław on the distant island"?
2. What theories about the origin of Columbus cited in the article?
 - a. What are the sources of difficulties in determining the true origin of Christopher Columbus?
3. What can be learnt from the article you have read about Wladislaw of Varna and the theories about his fortune after the Battle of Varna?
4. What about Christopher Columbus' Polish roots can be learnt from the article? How do the figures of Wladyslaw of Varna and Columbus link together?
 - a. What arguments does M. Rose bring to support the thesis of Christopher Columbus' Polish roots?
 - b. How does the author of the article, Rafał Jaworski, undermine the theory of Polish origins of Christopher Columbus?
 - c. Take part in the discussion: Which of the points of view (presented by M. Rosa or R. Jaworski) regarding the theory of a relationship of Christopher Columbus with Władysław of Varna is more credible and convincing?