



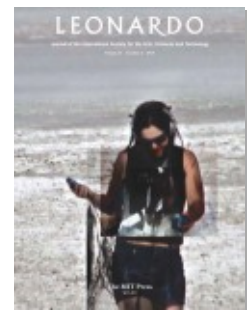
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The Legacy of Columbus

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THE LEGACY OF COLUMBUS

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Abstract

By giving the name "Columbus" to the European Space Laboratory the European Space Agency (ESA) has put itself in the tradition of European explorers and erected a historical monument in space. But this monument is incomplete, since it ignores the high price that humanity has paid for European expansion. If space exploration is really about humanity going to space and not only a few technologically developed nations, as representatives of ESA repeatedly declare, then another monument should be added to the European Space Laboratory.

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The name of Christopher Columbus has a good reputation in the space community. Exploring space is often perceived as a direct continuation of the ventures of European discoverers of the 15th and 16th centuries. A very striking example of this construction of tradition can be seen in the mission patches of the space mission that transported the European space laboratory Columbus to the ISS.

The Shuttle mission STS-122 itself shows in its patch Columbus' flag ship "Santa Maria" directly connected to the Space Shuttle "Atlantis" by three strong, energetic lines. It looks as if the "Santa

Maria" was using the Atlantic Ocean as a runway and while gaining speed it was converting itself into "Atlantis."

The mission patch for the European space laboratory "Columbus" shows a blue circle as a symbol for planet Earth crossed by a white line. This line stands for Columbus' fleet crossing the Atlantic from east to west, as well as for the Space Shuttle crossing it from west to east thereby transporting the new module to the International Space Station ISS.

These pictures are too beautiful to be true. There is not the slightest hint at the ambiguity of the legacy that Columbus and his contemporaries left for us. It looks as if the European discoverers set out for the oceans purely to gain knowledge, to prove that the Earth is round. But that is not the truth. They had massive economic motives: European trading companies were eagerly looking for new trade routes to Asia to counter the Islamic traders who controlled the transport by land.

Portuguese sailors were trying to solve this problem by circling Africa. Their approach appears more application-oriented, going step by step. Actually, they reached the economic goal quicker than Columbus, who set out for the west. This was a fundamentally new approach which paved the way to prove empirically that the Earth really was a globe. In

the long run it turned out to be more successful even in economic terms.

Columbus' discovery brought unprecedented wealth to Europe by opening up the trans-Atlantic trade. Seaport-towns like Liverpool, Bristol, Bordeaux, or Brest blossomed in surprisingly short time by taking advantage of these new business opportunities. But you don't easily find monuments that remind you of how this wealth, which in the long run made a high-tech complex like the ISS possible, was created. This memory is not proudly presented in orbit where everybody could see it. It is shamefully hidden on Earth.

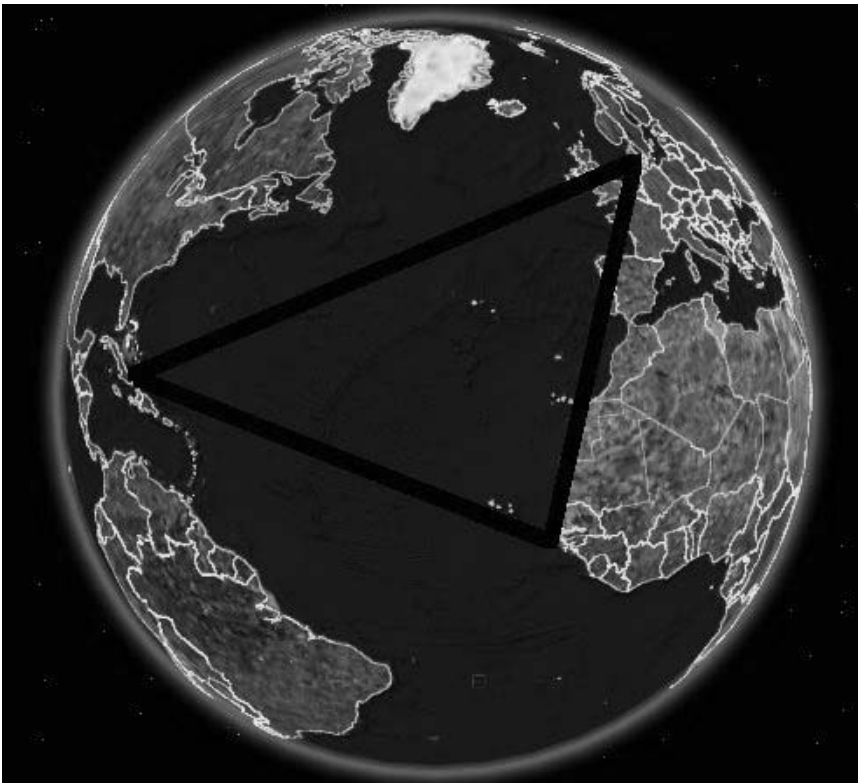
You could find it for instance on an unspectacular traffic island in an unspectacular part of Hamburg where only very few tourists will go. This triangular-shaped traffic island is located near the place where I currently live in a district called Wandsbek. Here, in front of the Wandsbek town hall, the administration decided to erect three bronze sculptures showing important personalities from Wandsbek's past. The one which caused public protests showed Heinrich Carl Graf von Schimmelmann (1724–1782), who in his lifetime was considered the richest man of Europe.

Monuments for Slave Traders

It was the source of Schimmelmann's wealth and the way it was mentioned on a nearby plate that caused the protests. Visitors of the monument could read there: "Schimmelmann . . . is considered as the founder of Wandsbek's economic strength. Under his lordship the region flourished. Also because of the so-called triangle trade (calico and rifles, slaves, sugar-cane and cotton) between Europe, Africa and America he was considered the richest man of Europe." (See Fig. 1.)

Like many other citizens of Hamburg I felt ashamed that my government erected a monument for a slave trader. But before articulating my protest I wanted to know more about this "triangle trade." I learned that it was a kind of inter-continental production chain, arguably the first really global business. Schimmelmann loaded his ships in Europe with cotton products like calico, rifles, and alcohol, which had all been produced in his own manufactures. These goods were transported to the west coast of Africa where they were exchanged for slaves. The slaves were brought to the Caribbean Islands to work on Schimmelmann's own plantations or to be sold in slave markets. Loaded with sugar cane and cotton from the planta-

Fig. 1. The discoveries of Columbus paved the way for the triangular trade which included slaves in unprecedented numbers. (© Hans-Arthur Marsiske, based on a NASA picture.)



tions, the ships went back to Europe, where these goods became raw material for Schimmellmann's manufactures to start the next triangle cycle [1].

Of course, Schimmellmann wasn't the only one engaged in the triangle trade. This business model fueled European wealth for more than 200 years. As Eric William wrote in 1943: "By 1750 there was hardly a trading or manufacturing town in England which was not in some way connected with the triangular or direct colonial trade. The profits obtained thereby provided one of the main streams of that accumulation of capital in England which financed the Industrial Revolution" [2].

I was really shocked. Some abstract knowledge suddenly became very concrete and uncomfortably close. Until then I somehow had believed that the slave trade belonged mainly to other countries like the U.K., Spain, Portugal. I thought it was foreign trading companies like the West India Company or the East India Company that were engaged in this bloody business and thereby laid the foundation for the wealth that European citizens like me are still enjoying today. But now I had to realize that one of the biggest slave traders performed his business in my direct neighbourhood.

On the other hand, I was glad I finally had learned about these things. It is important to know about the foundations you are standing on. In principle, there is nothing wrong with monuments for slave traders. But it should be done properly. It should express a clear position on this kind of business and its implications for the present and the future. And, perhaps most important, it should be erected at a proper location.

In front of the Wandsbek town hall the Schimmellmann sculpture, which subsequently was removed by its owner, Imtech GmbH, did nothing but express pride and appreciation for the achievements of this businessman. There was no irritating element, not the slightest hint of the possible significance of these achievements for our future.

But what about erecting the sculpture at a place where the future really is in the making, where we are preparing for the exploration of new worlds, and where we are at risk to repeat the same mistakes done after Columbus? What about sending the Schimmellmann sculpture to the ISS and erecting it in the Columbus module?

History may not repeat itself, but some well-known constellations can occur again and again. Sending humans to

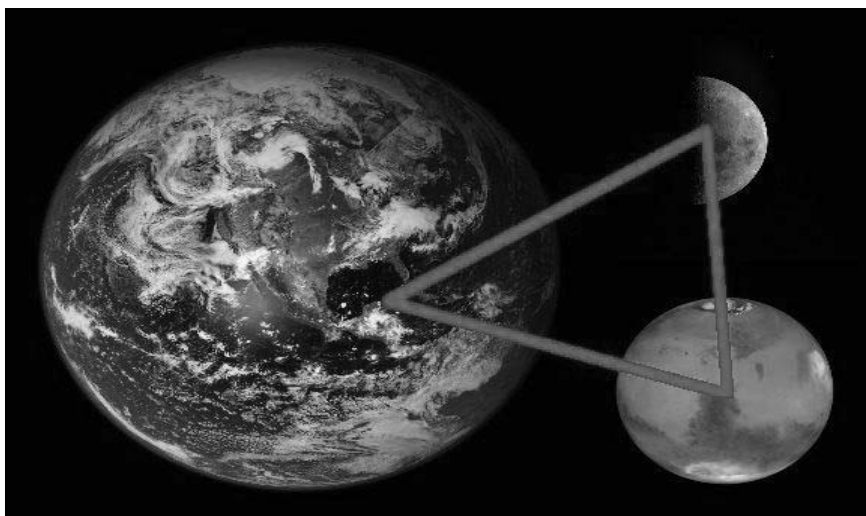


Fig. 2. A new cosmic triangle is taking shape. To avoid repeating the tragedies of the past we have to act now. (Photo © Hans-Arthur Marsiske, based on NASA/ESA.)

Mars puts us in a situation similar to the European explorers. We may find life on the red planet. Do we want to deal with it the same way we did with the natives of Africa and America? Do we want to exploit the new cosmic triangle between Earth, Moon, and Mars (Fig. 2) the same way we exploited the triangle Europe-Africa-America?

A New Triangle

Granted, a heavy bronze sculpture may not be a very practical solution for a space monument. It would be expensive to send it into orbit. What's more, it could be a potential hazard to the astronauts living and working on the space station. But some kind of monument is necessary. Without it a space laboratory with the name of Columbus would not be complete.

We need something clearly visible to the astronauts as well as to people watching from below that reminds us to think ahead before we set foot on other heavenly bodies. Currently the prevailing attitude in Western culture seems to be to apologize later instead of asking for permission. But that is not acceptable when it comes to exploring and settling space. The legacy of Columbus contains a clear imperative: We should not enter any planet that is inhabited, unless we are clearly invited. Even if the Masters of Mars could only be seen with a microscope, we would have to respect them as the owners of their planet.

Of course, we already have entered Mars with our robots. But we should be prepared to stop the landing of further robots and humans in case we encounter life there.

That does not necessarily mean that we have to stop the exploration of the solar system. There are many other worlds to explore and settle. We can even build free-flying space settlements like those envisioned by Gerard O'Neill. And of course, we should establish space stations in Mars orbit to observe how the life on this planet evolves with time. Some day in the future we may even learn to communicate with these life forms so they can finally invite us for a visit. What a fantastic project for a space-faring civilization!

Going to space we have a unique opportunity to upgrade our social operating system. There has never been a better time to change the direction of human evolution. But we need strong symbols to help us to fulfill this enormous task. We need such a symbol especially on the Columbus module. There should be a public debate about how best to commemorate the victims of European expansion. To start the debate I propose that such a monument on board Columbus should have a triangular shape.

References and Notes

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2. Michael Weinzierl: Neuere Forschungsergebnisse über Sklavenhandel, Sklaverei und Abolitionsbestrebungen im britischen Empire im 18. Jahrhundert. In: Grete Klingenstein, Heinrich Lutz, Gerald Stourzh (Hrsg.): Europäisierung der Erde? Studien zur Einwirkung Europas auf die außereuropäische Welt. München (Oldenbourg) 1980, p. 269.

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