

## Reviews

David S. H. Abulafia. *The Discovery of Mankind: Atlantic Encounters in the Age of Columbus*.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. xxx + 380 pp. + 26 b/w pls. index. illus. map. gloss. bibl. \$35. ISBN: 978-0-300-12582-5.

A couple of scholarly generations ago, courses covering the age of discoveries or the age of European expansion were fairly common in American universities. Such courses have declined or been transformed in recent years, buffeted by attacks on their implicit Eurocentrism and by the confusing legacy of Columbus Quincentenary of 1992, when polemics and political posturing overshadowed a large amount of important scholarship with significant contributions from literary critics, geographers, anthropologists, archeologists, art historians, and historians.

David Abulafia, a historian with a distinguished career studying the late medieval Mediterranean world, has offered *The Discovery of Mankind*, an extended essay on how Europeans, particularly Italians and Iberians, encountered peoples previously unknown to them and tried to fit them into their own intellectual world. It is a book that fits perfectly within the broadening horizons of medieval and early modern studies, in which interests in the wider world engage increasing numbers of scholars.

The author, entering scholarly territory new to him, was obviously fascinated by the material he encountered in the extensive list of primary sources and a relatively few but carefully selected secondary works. His emphasis is on the encounters between Europeans and peoples they considered primitive in the Canary Islands, in the islands of the western Atlantic, and on the American mainland from Brazil to Mexico. The islanders presented the Europeans with problems of definition. The medieval experience had given Italians and Iberians extensive exposure to the Muslims and provided some knowledge of Central Asia and China, all of which had highly developed polities, hierarchical societies, and formalized and articulated religions. People living as hunter-gatherers or simple agriculturists were far less familiar. When they encountered the islanders on both sides of the Atlantic, Europeans were forced back to what mental images they had of the wild men of medieval folklore or the fanciful descriptions of Amazons, dog-headed people, and other aberrational types popularized by John Mandeville and other fabulists of distant travel. For the Europeans of the time, in which religion was paramount in their lives and intellectual orientation, the seeming lack of organized religion among the newly encountered peoples (along with no cities and apparently underdeveloped governments) rendered them both liable to conquest and, even worse, perhaps less than fully human. The Bible had not mentioned them, so were they part of God's initial creation and the children of Adam and Eve, or were they products of another and perhaps inferior creation?

Abulafia begins with the Canary Islands and the interest Boccaccio and Petrarch showed in the latest news about their fourteenth-century rediscovery. He then goes on to their fifteenth-century conquest and the contemporary accounts of their societies, instrumental in shaping a context into which Columbus could fit the islanders he encountered in the Bahamas, Cuba, and Hispaniola. Columbus occupies more space in this book than any other contemporary. His story is compelling and better documented than most of the others in addition to being more complex, as Columbus operated in a number of overlapping contexts: amateur geographer, theorist of religion, capitalist, millenarian, conqueror, failed governor, and exploiter. Abulafia takes the story on to Brazil and its early colonial history and finishes with the conquest of Mexico. Things changed significantly with the expeditions to Mexico, when more highly articulated polities, even an empire, with fully developed religion with priests and places of worship became known and debates emerged over the capacity and legal rights of the now-subject peoples. Of course, there were obstacles to understanding and European repugnance at cannibalism and human sacrifice. Despite the economic exploitation and the coincident but unintended devastation caused by Old World diseases, advocates for the human and political rights of the encountered peoples argued hard and, in the Spanish case, ultimately successfully for their full humanity.

The author chose the title of this book well, for it relates how the events and those who reported and argued over those events expanded the European definition of mankind and how that definition came to include the peoples of the wider world. This is a synthesis in the finest sense. One could quibble over details here and there, but the strong narrative presents Abulafia's arguments in a forceful manner, making this book an important contribution to the field.

WILLIAM D. PHILLIPS, JR.  
University of Minnesota