

## THE LEGACY OF COLUMBUS

Hans-Arthur Marsiske, Writer and Journalist, Hamburg, Germany.  
E-mail: <mail@hamarsiske.de>.

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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.)



