

Course description: THE AGE OF DISCOVERY: A NEVER-ENDING QUEST

This course will seek to examine and reinterpret some of the major journeys of the Age of Discovery, beginning with Marco Polo's "Travels," and moving in to the two major, history-changing voyages his account inspired, the four voyages of Christopher Columbus, and finally Magellan's ambitious, tragic first-ever circumnavigation. We'll also rely heavily on the accounts of Columbus and his son (and first biographer) Ferdinand, who sailed with his father on the final, reckless voyage, as well as the account of Magellan's voyage written by his chosen chronicler, the Venetian papal ambassador Antonio Pigafetta, one of the few survivors. We know that Magellan and Columbus were profoundly influenced by Polo, and that Magellan sought to correct Columbus's egregious misunderstanding of geography, but exactly how did they influence one another? Why did they all set out on their journeys within a relatively short space of time? How did their travels and accounts influence European history and trade, and global history and trade? Why were they dismissed or considered failures in their tumultuous lifetimes?

We will also take into consideration the distinct ways in which their accounts came into being. Marco Polo dictated his to an amanuensis when they were both confined to jail; Columbus sought to write his own account, but found himself upstaged eventually by his more scholarly son; and much of what we know of Magellan comes from the pen of his chronicler, Pigafetta, who joined the voyage almost by accident and wrote about it from the perspective of a talented amateur rather than professional navigator or mission-driven explorer like Magellan himself. So this course will be in part a study of historiography and the varying ways in which explorers looked at and learned about their world.

If time permits, will jump ahead to our own era and space exploration, in which closely-spaced events also occurred. As it happens, NASA was deeply influenced by these earlier explorers and modeled some of its own recent robotic missions to Mars and other others destinations after them.

Readings will include my own VOYAGE TO MARS: NASA'S SEARCH FOR LIFE BEYOND EARTH (2000), OVER THE EDGE OF THE WORLD: MAGELLAN'S TERRIFYING CIRCUMNAVIGATION OF THE GLOBE (2003), and COLUMBUS: THE FOUR VOYAGES (2011) as well as Marco Polo's own TRAVELS. All are available in paperback. It is strongly suggested that participants read Marco Polo, Magellan, and Columbus by the time we begin our discussions.