

Re-assessing impact: from travel writing to books about new worlds

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One of the classic debates about Europe's discovery of America concerns the cultural and intellectual impact of the event. Traditional historiography on this issue, especially the idea of a 'blunted impact', has been influenced by what printed books declared, or failed to, in relation to the Columbian discovery and subsequent events. There are reasons to question the picture that has emerged as a result, as I have recently argued in a number of pieces, where I focused in particular on the need to consider non-American encounters alongside accounts of the 'New World', and on the role of humanistic culture in the mediation of the 'impact'. In the context of this conference, I would like to develop in detail one further theme, which is the distance that separated the written word from the printed word. Considering what was written, what was printed, and what circulated extensively, can lead to different answers to the question. By considering all these together, I believe that it is possible to reach a more compelling answer. In order to do so I will identify a number of key printed texts and identify their written sources and contexts of reception. I will devote special attention to the accounts by Boemus, Martyr, Gómara, and Barros.