The inspirational, schoolchild version of the myth centers upon Columbus, who supposedly overcame the calumny of assembled clerics at Salamanca to win a chance from Ferdinand and Isabella. Consider this version of the legend, cited by Russell from a book for primary-school children written in 1887, soon after the myth’s invention (but little different from accounts that I read as a child in the 1950s):

“But if the world is round,” said Columbus, “it is not hell that lies beyond that stormy sea. Over there must lie the eastern strand of Asia, the Cathay of Marco Polo” … In the hall of the convent there was assembled the imposing company-shaved monks in gowns … cardinals in scarlet robes. … “You think the earth is round … Are you not aware that the holy fathers of the church have condemned this belief … This theory of yours looks heretical.” Columbus might well quake in his boots at the mention of heresy; for there was that new Inquisition just in fine running order, with its elaborate bone-breaking, flesh-pinching, thumb-screwing, hanging, burning, mangling system for heretics.

Dramatic to be sure, but entirely fictitious. There never was a period of “flat earth darkness” among scholars (regardless of how many uneducated people may have conceptualized our planet both then and now). Greek knowledge of sphericity never faded, and all major medieval scholars accepted the earth’s roundness as an established fact of cosmology. Ferdinand and Isabella did refer Columbus’s plans to a royal commission headed by Hernando de Talavera, Isabella’s confessor and, following defeat of the Moors, Archbishop of Granada. This commission, composed of both clerical and lay advisers, did meet, at Salamanca among other places. They did pose some sharp intellectual objections to Columbus, but all assumed the earth’s roundness. As a major critique, they argued that Columbus could not reach the Indies in his own allotted time, because the earth’s circumference was too great. Moreover, his critics were entirely right. Columbus had “cooked” his figures to favor a much smaller earth, and an attainable Indies. Needless to say, he