A common myth perpetuated in textbooks and other sources is that of the flat earth. The myth is not that some honestly believe the earth is flat, but that it was believed to be flat in the time of Columbus. Jeffrey Russell has researched this myth and reported his understanding of the myth in the book Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians. An understanding of a spherical earth was accepted by Pythagoras in 550 BC and a fairly accurate measurement of its diameter was made by Eratosthenes around 240 BC. This understanding was not lost during the Middle Ages, but was accepted by scholars during this time period. To get a full understanding of this myth and why it persists, I would encourage you to read the whole book. However, for this assignment, I want you to read chapter 1 and answer the following questions. The book can be found in the campus library.


1. According to Joseph Chiari’s play, Christopher Columbus, how did the Prior respond to Columbus’ proposition that the Earth was a sphere? How does this response shape the reader’s view of religious people?

2. What is a geocentric cosmos and why did Copernicus link the notion of a flat earth to geocentricism?

3. Why were Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain willing to take a chance at sponsoring Columbus’ voyage?

4. Scholars opposed Columbus’ plan to sail to the Far East by going west; however, the opposition had nothing to do with a flat earth. Why did they oppose his plan?

5. What information did Columbus present in response to his critics?

6. How far off were Columbus’ calculations for the distance to the Indies?