

Concerning the Islands Recently Discovered in the Indian Sea: Columbus' First Letter from the Americas, 1493.

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Annotation by Dr. Catherine Denial, Knox College, August 2009.

| original document | annotation |
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| <p>Letter of Christopher Columbus, to whom our age owes much, concerning the islands recently discovered in the Indian sea.</p> | <p>Columbus knew the world was round, but did not yet know that North and South America stood between the Caribbean and Asia. He believed himself to be in the Indian Ocean, rather than still in the Atlantic.</p> |
| <p>For the search of which, eight months before, he was sent under the auspices and at the cost of the most invincible Ferdinand, king of Spain. Addressed to the magnificent lord Raphael Sanxis, a treasurer of the same most illustrious king, and which the noble and learned man Aliander de Cosco has translated from the Spanish language into Latin, on the third of the kalends of May, 1493, the first year of the pontificate of Alexander the Sixth.</p> | <p>The mention of a king tells us that the Spanish system of government was a monarchy; the reference to a lord suggests that there is also an aristocracy in Spain. Alexander the Sixth is the Pope – the fact that Columbus dates his voyage by the year of the Pope's reign suggests how important Catholicism was in Europe, and how it helped to order the world of Europeans.</p> |

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| <p>Because my undertakings have attained success, I know that it will be pleasing to you: these I have determined to relate, so that you may be made acquainted with everything done and discovered in this our voyage. On the thirty-third day after I departed from Cadiz, I came to the Indian sea, where I found many islands inhabited by men without number, of all which I took possession for our most fortunate king, with proclaiming heralds and flying standards, no one objecting.</p> | <p>There seem to be rules here about how to claim 'new' lands – Columbus carries the flag of Spain, and both he and others loudly proclaim that the lands have now changed ownership. There is opportunity for someone to object to this – but of course for that system to work, both parties must be equal in power, and both must speak the same language.</p> |
| <p>To the first of these I gave the name of the blessed Saviour, on whose aid relying I had reached this as well as the other islands. But the Indians call it Guanahany. I also called each one of the others by a new name. For I ordered one island to be called Santa Maria of the Conception, another Fernandina, another Isabella, another Juana, and so on with the rest.</p> | <p>The names Columbus gives to the island relate both to Catholicism (the blessed Saviour; Santa Maria (the Virgin Mary)), and to the monarchy of Spain (Ferdinand is King of Spain, Isabella the Queen, and Juana their daughter).</p> <p>Guanahany is an island in the present-day Bahamas; Juana is present-day Cuba.</p> |
| <p>As soon as we had arrived at that island which I have just now said was called Juana, I proceeded along its coast towards the west for some distance; I found it so large and without perceptible end, that I believed it to be not an island,</p> | <p>This suggests that islands of Europe are not so large as those in the Caribbean.</p> |
| <p>but the continental country of Cathay;</p> | <p>Cathay is the name Europeans used to use for</p> |

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| | China. It's possible Columbus means to reference the whole of what, to him, is the Far East. |
| seeing, however, no towns or cities situated on the sea-coast, but only some villages and rude farms, with whose inhabitants I was unable to converse, because as soon as they saw us they took flight. | That Columbus expects to see towns and cities at the coast suggests that he's used to seeing those things in Europe – that harbors and ports are urban areas. |
| I proceeded farther, thinking that I would discover some city or large residences. | Again, this tells us what life is like in Europe – that you wouldn't travel far without seeing a city or "large residence." Some of the homes in the Caribbean were quite large – the issue is not actually one of size, but of Columbus' expectations; he's looking for houses that look the same as those he left behind in Europe, probably built of stone. |
| At length, perceiving that we had gone far enough, that nothing new appeared, and that this way was leading us to the north, which I wished to avoid, because it was winter on the land, and it was my intention to go to the south, moreover the winds were becoming violent, I therefore determined that no other plans were practicable, and so, going back, I returned to a certain bay that I had noticed, from which I sent two of our men to the land, that they might find out whether there was a king in this country, or any cities. These men traveled for three | When Columbus says there is no government, he means no government that he can recognize – no monarchy, no recognizable aristocracy. What constitutes a city, in any age, is a matter of debate – but Columbus certainly sees nothing that matches his understanding of a city as he experienced it in Europe. |

days, and they found people and houses without number, but they were small and without any government, therefore they returned.

Now in the meantime I had learned from certain Indians, whom I had seized there, that this country was indeed an island, and therefore I proceeded towards the east, keeping all the time near the coast, for 322 miles, to the extreme ends of this island. From this place I saw another island to the east distant from this Juana 54 miles, which I called forthwith Hispana; and I sailed to it; and I steered along the northern coast, as at Juana, towards the east, 564 miles.

And the said Juana and the other islands there appear very fertile. This island is surrounded by many very safe and wide harbors, not excelled by any others that I have ever seen. Many great and salubrious rivers flow through it. There are also many very high mountains there. All these islands are very beautiful, and distinguished by various qualities; they are accessible, and full of a great variety of trees stretching up to the stars; the leaves of which I believe are never shed, for I saw them as green and flourishing as they are usually in Spain in the month of May; some of them were

Hispania, or Hispaniola, is the island on which present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic are found.

Everything in this paragraph reflects those natural resources most prized in Europe at the time – fertile agricultural land; natural harbours; waterways; a long growing season. We learn that Europe is usually cold in November, that birds don't sing in that season; and that European trees bloom in May. This continues in the next paragraph, which is full of information about the resources that Columbus values as a native of Europe.

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| <p>blossoming, some were bearing fruit, some were in other conditions; each one was thriving in its own way. The nightingale and various other birds without number were singing, in the month of November, when I was exploring them.</p> | |
| <p>There are besides in the said island Juana seven or eight kinds of palm trees, which far excel ours in height and beauty, just as all the other trees, herbs, and fruits do. There are also excellent pine trees, vast plains and meadows, a variety of birds, a variety of honey, and a variety of metals, excepting iron. In the one which was called Hispana, as we said above, there are great and beautiful mountains, vast fields, groves, fertile plains, very suitable for planting and cultivating, and for the building of houses. The convenience of the harbors in this island, and the remarkable number of rivers contributing to the healthfulness of man, exceed belief, unless one has seen them. The trees, pasturage, and fruits of this island differ greatly from those of Juana. This Hispana, moreover, abounds in different kinds of spices, in gold, and in metals.</p> | <p>Spices, gold, and metals were important in Europe, as articles of trade. The more of each you had, the greater your social standing.</p> |
| <p>On this island, indeed, and on all the others which I have seen, and of which I have knowledge, the</p> | <p>The fact that this is notable to Columbus suggests that men and women did not go about naked in</p> |

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| <p>inhabitants of both sexes go always naked, just as they came into the world, except some of the women, who use a covering of a leaf or some foliage, or a cotton cloth, which they make themselves for that purpose.</p> | <p>Europe. These last two paragraphs also harken back to the idea of Eden – a land overflowing with resources; a man and woman naked in a garden with no need to cover themselves. These images would have been familiar to Europeans via reference to the book of Genesis, and iconography in churches.</p> |
| <p>All these people lack, as I said above, every kind of iron; they are also without weapons, which indeed are unknown; nor are they competent to use them, not on account of deformity of body, for they are well formed, but because they are timid and full of fear.</p> | <p>Bodily deformities were a fact of life in Europe, thanks to malnutrition and disease, and were often associated in religious thought with sin or punishment.</p> <p>Consider reinforcing your science goals related to nutrition by reference to this passage, and others like it in the letter. Why would the diet of Europeans have led to deformity? Using Columbus' description of the plants and fruits of the Caribbean, how might we understand why the people of those communities were stronger, healthier, and had better muscle tone than the people Columbus knew back home?</p> |
| <p>They carry for weapons, however, reeds baked in the sun, on the lower ends of which they fasten some shafts of dried wood rubbed down to a point;</p> | <p>A couple of lines before, Columbus said that "these people . . . are also without weapons." Here, he says they carry weapons. How to reconcile the two?</p> |

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| | <p>Columbus' first mention of weaponry – the lack of it – relates to the weapons he is most used to using. The islands lack iron; there are no guns among the Caribbean people. This constitutes a "lack" of weapons to Columbus, even though he must recognize that sharp, pointy sticks could be used to wound someone.</p> |
| <p>and indeed they do not venture to use these always; for it frequently happened when I sent two or three of my men to some of the villages, that they might speak with the natives, a compact troop of the Indians would march out, and as soon as they saw our men approaching, they would quickly take flight, children being pushed aside by their fathers, and fathers by their children. And this was not because any hurt or injury had been inflicted on any one of them, for to every one whom I visited and with whom I was able to converse, I distributed whatever I had, cloth and many other things, no return being made to me; but they are by nature fearful and timid.</p> | <p>Columbus appears to have no conception of how unusual his appearance would be to the people of the Caribbean – he was likely wearing full body armor, had facial hair, and probably hadn't bathed in a while. It seems that he's used to interacting with people who do not find him fearful, but who understand who he is, and what he represents.</p> |
| <p>Yet when they perceive that they are safe, putting aside all fear, they are of simple manners and</p> | <p>Columbus' interpretation of this exchange is based on equating value with monetary gain. To him,</p> |

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| <p>trustworthy, and very liberal with everything they have, refusing no one who asks for anything they may possess, and even themselves inviting us to ask for things. They show greater love for all others than for themselves; they give valuable things for trifles, being satisfied even with a very small return, or with nothing; however, I forbade that things so small and of no value should be given to them, such as pieces of plates, dishes, and glass, likewise keys and shoelace tips although if they were to obtain these, it seemed to them like getting the most beautiful jewels in the world.</p> | <p>exchange is about profit; to the communities of the Caribbean, exchange was an opportunity to establish a relationship – to set up an obligation between two people in which they recognized, respected and honored each other.</p> |
| <p>It happened, indeed, that a certain sailor obtained in exchange for a shoelace tips as much worth of gold as would equal three golden coins; and likewise other things for articles of very little value, especially for new silver coins, and for some gold coins, to obtain which they gave whatever the seller desired, as for instance an ounce and a half and two ounces of gold, or thirty and forty pounds of cotton, with which they were already acquainted. They also traded cotton and gold for pieces of bows, bottles, jugs and jars, like persons without reason</p> | <p>To Columbus, giving without reference to profit was unreasonable. In Europe, a man or woman who acted in this fashion would be considered wasteful, or even out of their mind.</p> |
| <p>which I forbade because it was very wrong; and I gave to them many beautiful and pleasing things</p> | <p>Although Columbus says that he wants to establish friendship, he has other motivations – to secure the</p> |

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| <p>that I had brought with me, no value being taken in exchange, in order that I might the more easily make them friendly to me, that they might be made worshipers of Christ, and that they might be full of love towards our king, queen, and prince, and the whole Spanish nation; also that they might be zealous to search out and collect, and deliver to us those things of which they had plenty, and which we greatly needed.</p> | <p>allegiance of the local communities to the King and Queen, and to have the local people turn over those things that are most valuable to Europeans. This is not an exchange without obligation.</p> |
| <p>These people practice no kind of idolatry; on the contrary they firmly believe that all strength and power, and in fact all good things are in heaven, and that I had come down from thence with these ships and sailors;</p> | <p>Idolatry, to Columbus, means anything that directly contravenes Christian principles. He sees no evidence of a religious system that worships multiple gods, for example – instead he maps the belief system of these Caribbean communities onto the belief system he holds. Whatever deity they worshipped becomes, to him, related to a Christian God – "all good things are in heaven."</p> |
| <p>and in this belief I was received there after they had put aside fear. Nor are they slow or unskilled, but of excellent and acute understanding; and the men who have navigated that sea give an account of everything in an admirable manner; but they never saw people clothed, nor these kind of ships. As soon as I reached that sea, I seized by force several Indians on the first island, in order that they might</p> | <p>While the language here seems conciliatory, note that Columbus is explicitly saying that he kidnapped people and took them into slavery.</p> |

learn from us, and in like manner tell us about those things in these lands of which they themselves had knowledge; and the plan succeeded, for in a short time we understood them and they us, sometimes by gestures and signs, sometimes by words; and it was a great advantage to us.

They are coming with me now, yet always believing that I descended from heaven, although they have been living with us for a long time, and are living with us to-day. And these men were the first who announced it wherever we landed, continually proclaiming to the others in a loud voice, "Come, come, and you will see the celestial people." Whereupon both women and men, both young men and old men, laying aside the fear caused a little before, visited us eagerly, filling the road with a great crowd, some bringing food, and some drink, with great love and extraordinary goodwill.

On every island there are many canoes of a single piece of wood; and though narrow, yet in length and shape similar to our row-boats, but swifter in movement. They steer only by oars. Some of these

It's possible that Columbus was welcomed happily – it's also possible that he put the best spin on things so to paint a pleasing picture for the King of Spain. It's *also* possible that he misunderstood what was happening – we can't say for sure from this source alone.

It seems highly unlikely, however, that Columbus could translate the local language so quickly and with such fluency as to know he was being called "celestial."

Here, Columbus notes the technical expertise of the local people, and their ability to trade. Trade is a recurrent theme in this letter – the importance of waterways and harbours is also linked to a hope for

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| <p>boats are large, some small, some of medium size. Yet they row many of the larger row-boats with eighteen cross-benches, with which they cross to all those islands, which are innumerable, and with these boats they perform their trading, and carry on commerce among them. I saw some of these row-boats or canoes which were carrying seventy and eighty rowers.</p> | <p>increased trade</p> |
| <p>In all these island there is no difference in the appearance of the people, nor in the manners and language, but all understand each other mutually; a fact that is very important for the end which I suppose to be earnestly desired by our most illustrious king, that is, their conversion to the holy religion of Christ, to which in truth, as far as I can perceive, they are very ready and favorably inclined.</p> | <p>To Columbus, the people of the Caribbean would have seemed similar in appearance and language because they differed so significantly from him. Imagine the perspective of the people of the Caribbean if they met Columbus and an Englishman and a Frenchman in this era – they too would seem similar in appearance, even though Columbus would have thought of himself as very different from each.</p> |
| <p>I said before how I proceeded along the island Juana in a straight line from west to east 322 miles, according to which course and the length of the way, I am able to say that this Juana is larger than England and Scotland together;</p> | <p>Columbus has knowledge of other European countries, including their relative size – his worldview is bigger than just Spain.</p> <p>Consider using the distances Columbus mentions, here and in other places in his letter, to reinforce math goals in your classroom – can your students</p> |

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| | <p>plot Columbus' travels on a modern map? Considering the number of days he says he spent in each place, can you calculate the speed at which he traveled?</p> |
| <p>for besides the said 322 thousand paces, there are two more provinces in that part which lies toward the west, which I did not visit; one of these the Indians call Anan, whose inhabitants are born with tails. They extend to 180 miles in length, as I have learned from those Indians I have with me, who are all acquainted with these islands.</p> | <p>This is all hearsay – but Columbus' religious worldview may have predisposed him to believe in the concept of people with tails, as the Devil and demons were regularly portrayed as having tails in religious iconography.</p> |
| <p>But the circumference of Hispana is greater than all Spain from Colonia [Catalonia] to Fontarabia [Fuenterrabia]. And this is easily proved, because its fourth side, which I myself passed along in a straight line from west to east, extends 540 miles. This island is to be desired and is very desirable, and not to be despised; in which, although as I have said, I solemnly took possession of all the others for our most invincible king, and their government is entirely committed to the said king, yet I especially took possession of a certain large town, in a very convenient location, and adapted to all kinds of gain and commerce, to which we give the name of</p> | <p>Again, Columbus appears to contradict himself – where once he could find no large towns, now he takes possession of them for the King. What reads as contradiction is actually the tension between what Columbus believes is important (for example, large urban areas built of stone) and what he sees (which he calls a town for want of other vocabulary to explain the settlements in the Caribbean.)</p> |

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| <p>our Lord of the Nativity.</p> | |
| <p>And I commanded a fort to be built where forthwith, which must be completed by this time; in which I left as many men as seemed necessary, with all kinds of arms, and plenty of food for more than a year. Likewise one caravel, and for the construction of others men skilled in this trade and in other professions; and also the extraordinary good will and friendship of the king of this island toward us.</p> | <p>It's notable that Columbus orders a fort to be built after maintaining that he believes the local people to be friendly and timid. This may mean several things – that he fears competition from other European powers (especially Portugal), and/or that building a fort is the established pattern for European nations after acquiring new territory. In either instance, we see the importance of military matters to exploration.</p> <p>Although Columbus at first said he couldn't find "any government" he's now identified a king. Rather than suggesting he really did find a local king, this suggests he imposed the naming system of Europe onto the cultural system of the islands.</p> |
| <p>For those people are very amiable and kind, to such a degree that the said king gloried in calling me his brother. And if they should change their minds, and should wish to hurt those who remained in the fort, they would not be able, because they lack weapons, they go naked, and are too cowardly. For that reason those who hold the said fort are at least able to resist easily this whole island, without any imminent danger to themselves, so long as they do</p> | <p>Again, this information constitutes a list of things that are important in Europe – marriage, aristocratic leadership, private property, and a set work role for men and women.</p> |

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| <p>not transgress the regulations and command which we gave.</p> <p>In all these islands, as I have understood, each man is content with only one wife, except the princes or kings, who are permitted to have twenty. The women appear to work more than the men. I was not able to find out surely whether they have individual property, for I saw that one man had the duty of distributing to the others, especially refreshments, food, and things of that kind.</p> | |
| <p>I found no monstrosities among them, as very many supposed, but men of great reverence, and friendly.</p> | <p>A monstrosity would have been anything that did not agree with the Christian world-view – cannibalism, for example (which comes up in a moment), but also acts that the Europeans thought were sexually deviant.</p> |
| <p>Nor are they black like the Ethiopians.</p> | <p>Columbus shows an awareness of different colored skin here, and suggests that the local people are different to everyone else he's encountered – the only alternative to his own skin tone he can offer is that of an Ethiopian, and that doesn't fit. His comment also suggests that Europe and Africa are in contact with one another.</p> |
| <p>They have straight hair, hanging down. They do not</p> | <p>Again, we learn much here about Europe – it is not</p> |

remain where the solar rays send out the heat, for the strength of the sun is very great here, because it is distant from the equinoctial line, as it seems, only twenty-six degrees. On the tops of the mountains too the cold is severe, but the Indians, however, moderate it, partly by being accustomed to the place, and partly by the help of very hot victuals, of which they eat frequently and immoderately.

And so I did not see any monstrosity, nor did I have knowledge of them any where, excepting a certain island named Charis, which is the second in passing from Hispana to India. This island is inhabited by a certain people who are considered very warlike by their neighbors. These eat human flesh. The said people have many kinds of row-boats, in which they cross over to all the other Indian islands, and seize and carry away everything that they can. They differ in no way from the others, only that they wear long hair like the women.

They use bows and darts made of reeds, with sharpened shafts fastened to the larger end, as we have described. On this account they are considered warlike, wherefore the other Indians

particularly hot, nor particularly cold, and people do not seem to eat spicy food "frequently" or "immoderately"; if they did, Columbus would have little reason to comment on these things as unusual or noteworthy.

We also learn something about the way in which men and women look in Europe. If the men of this Caribbean community all had long hair, then they were wearing their hair long like *men*, not like women, as Columbus suggests. What Columbus is really saying is that only women had long hair in Europe – his personal sense of masculinity cannot encompass long-haired men.

This again tells us something about the gender roles in Europe. It may well be that it was perfectly usual for a woman of this community to take up weapons to hunt or defend herself. Columbus,

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| <p>are afflicted with continual fear, but I regard them as of no more account than the others. These are the people who visit certain women, who alone inhabit the island of Mateunin, which is the first in passing from Hispana to India. These women, moreover, perform no kind of work of their sex, for they use bows and darts, like those I have described of their husbands; they protect themselves with sheets of copper, of which there is a great abundance among them.</p> | <p>however, believes such acts are not womanly – a conclusion that's based on what women do and do not do in Europe.</p> |
| <p>They tell of another island greater than the aforesaid Hispana, whose inhabitants are without hair, and which abounds in gold above all the others. I am bringing with me men of this island and of the others that I have seen, who give proof of the things that I have described.</p> | <p>Once again, Columbus references "men of the island" who are now part of his retinue. Considering his earlier comments about kidnapping and enslaving local people, it's worth considering that these men were also enslaved.</p> |
| <p>Finally, that I may compress in a few words the brief account of our departure and quick return, and the gain, I promise this, that If I am supported by our most invincible sovereigns with a little of their help, as much gold can be supplied as they will need, indeed as much of spices, of cotton, of mastic gum (which is only found in Chios), also as much of aloes wood, and as many slaves for the navy, as their Majesties will wish to demand.</p> | <p>Columbus is making a sales pitch – if the King of Spain will only continue to support his explorations, the rewards (in every thing that Europeans value most) will be exceptional.</p> |

Likewise rhubarb and other kinds of spices, which I suppose these men whom I left in the said fort have already found, and will continue to find; since I remained in no place longer than the winds forced me, except in the town of the Nativity, while I provided for the building of the fort, and for the safety of all. Which things, although they are very great and remarkable, yet they would have been much greater, if I had been aided by as many ships as the occasion required.

Truly great and wonderful is this, and not corresponding to our merits, but to the holy Christian religion, and to the piety and religion of our sovereigns, because what the human understanding could not attain, that the divine will has granted to human efforts. For God is wont to listen to his servants who love his precepts, even in impossibilities, as has happened to us on the present occasion, who have attained that which hitherto mortal men have never reached. For if anyone has written or said anything about these islands, it was all with obscurities and conjectures; no one claims that he had seen them; from which they seemed like fables.

Therefore let the king and queen, the princes and

There's a certain irony to Columbus' words here, for while he says that others who have written of "these islands" before wrote only fables, his own words are more or less the same. Conditioned by the culture from which he came, Columbus wrote less about what he saw in front of him than about the world he'd left behind. In addition, his division of the Native people of the Caribbean islands into 'good' and 'bad' groups (the first timid and welcoming, the second demonic and flesh-eating) became such a long-lasting trope that it still pervades the stories non-Indian people tell about Indians to this day.

their most fortunate kingdoms, and all other countries of Christendom give thanks to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who has bestowed upon us so great a victory and gift. Let religious processions be solemnized; let sacred festivals be given; let the churches be covered with festive garlands. Let Christ rejoice on earth, as he rejoices in heaven, when he foresees coming to salvation so many souls of people hitherto lost.

Let us be glad also, as well on account of the exaltation of our faith, as on account of the increase of our temporal affairs, of which not only Spain, but universal Christendom will be partaker. These things that have been done are thus briefly related. Farewell.