

Week 4: Extra Reading

As you read these extracts, consider:

- What are Columbus's impressions of the native people?
- How do these impressions or descriptions fit into Spain's colonial project?

1. Las Casas's transcription of the diary of Christopher Columbus's first voyage to the Americas (1492) when he lands on the island of San Salvador.

Wednesday, 10 October

He steered west-southwest; they travelled ten miles per hour and at times 12 and for a time seven and between day and night made 59 leagues; he told the men only 44 leagues. Here the men could no longer stand it; they complained of the long voyage. But the Admiral encouraged them as best he could, giving them good hope of the benefits that they would be able to secure. And he added that it was useless to complain since he had come to find the Indies and thus had to continue the voyage until he found them, with the help of Our Lord.

Thursday, 11 October

He steered west-southwest. They took much water aboard, more than they had taken in the whole [entire] voyage. They saw petrels and a green bulrush near the ship. The men of the caravel *Pinta* saw a cane and a stick, and took on board another small stick that appeared to have been worked with iron, and a piece of cane and other vegetation originating on land, and a small plank. The men of the caravel *Nina* also saw other signs of land and a small stick loaded [covered with] with barnacles. With these signs everyone breathed more easily and cheered up. On this day, up to sunset, they made [covered] 27 leagues.

... Thus put ashore they saw very green trees and many ponds and fruits of various kinds. The Admiral called to the two captains and to the others who had jumped ashore and to Rodrigo Descobedo, the *escrivano* [secretary or ship's clerk] of the whole fleet, and to Rodrigo Sanchez de Segovia; and he said that they should be witnesses that, in the presence of all, he would take, as in fact he did take, possession of the said island for the king and for the queen his lords, making the declarations that were required, and which at more length are contained in the testimonials made there in writing. Soon many people of the island gathered there. What follows are the very words of the Admiral in his book about his first voyage to, and discovery of, these Indies. I, he says, in order that they would be friendly to us - because I recognized that they were people who would be better freed (from error) and converted to our Holy Faith by love than by force to some of them I gave red caps, and glass beads which they put on their chests, and many other things of small value, in which they took so much pleasure and became so much our friends that it was a marvel. Later they came swimming to the ships' launches where we were and brought us parrots and cotton thread in balls and javelins and many other things, and they traded them to us for other things which we gave them, such as small glass beads and bells. In

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sum, they took everything and gave of what they had very willingly. But it seemed to me that they were a people very poor in everything. All of them go around as naked as their mothers bore them; and the women also, although I did not see more than one quite young girl. And all those I saw were young people, for none did I see of more than 30 years of age. They are very well formed, with handsome bodies and good faces. Their hair [is] coarse- almost like the tail of a horse-and short. 'They wear their hair down over their eyebrows except for a little in the back which they wear long and never cut. Some of them paint themselves with black, and they are of the colour of the Canarians, neither black nor white and some of them with red, and some of them with whatever they find.

And some of them paint their faces, and some of them the whole body, and some of them only the eyes, and some of them only the nose. They do not carry arms nor are they acquainted with them, because I showed them swords and they took them by the edge and through ignorance cut themselves. They have no iron. Their javelins are shafts without iron and some of them have at the end a fish tooth and others of other things. All of them alike are of good-sized stature and carry themselves well. I saw some who had marks of wounds on their bodies and I made signs to them asking what they were; and they showed me how people from other islands nearby came there and tried to take them, and how they defended them- selves; and I believed and believe that they come here from *tierra firme* [the mainland] to take them captive. They should be good and intelligent servants, for I see that they say very quickly everything that is said to them; and I believe that they would become Chris- tians very easily, for it seemed to me that they had no religion. Our Lord pleasing, at the time of my departure I will take six of them from here to your Highnesses in order that they may learn to speak. No animal of any kind did I see on this island except parrots.

All are the Admiral's words.

Sunday, 13 October.

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2. A depiction of the early contact between Spaniards and the native Americans in an engraving by the Dutch Protestant artist Theodor de Bry, c. 1590s.

Consider the visual rhetoric of this depiction.

- What is being conveyed or suggested in this depiction about a) the New World b) the Spaniards or c) the native Americans?

