

Radical Renaissance Writers – Pre-Class Activities

Week 4: Bartolomé de las Casas (1484 – 1566)

1. How would you feel if it was announced that humans had been found on a continent (or a planet) that you didn't know existed?

- Write down what you would think / feel / do.
- How would this impact your life?



2. Prologue to Las Casas' *History of the Indies*, 1552.

- According to Las Casas, what is the role of a historian? In what sense does the writing of history entail moral concerns?
- How does this early modern historical task compare/contrast with investigative journalism today?

3. The Valladolid debate. In 1550, a debate was held over the treatment and enslavement of the indigenous people of the New World (the Americas) by European colonisers, specifically the Spanish. Sepúlveda defended the Spanish empire's right of conquest, Las Casas disputed this and defended the rights of the 'Indians.'¹

- **Rhetorical strategies.** Annotate anything you find interesting or irritating about the argumentation strategies used by Sepúlveda and Las Casas.
 - Which authorities are used and how?
 - How does Las Casas refute Sepúlveda's arguments?
 - Note down any rhetorical devices that you find effective or *persuasive*.
- **Relevance to today.** How might Las Casas's arguments have seemed radical or controversial at the time? Would these arguments seem radical if applied to any of our global conflicts today?

¹ Columbus carried a passport in Latin from the Spanish monarchs that dispatched him *ad partes Indiae* ("toward the regions of India") on his voyage of 1492. When he inadvertently landed in the Bahamas, he referred to the people he encountered as "Indians", mistakenly believing he had reached the Indian Oceans. This is the name for the indigenous people of the Americas that gets adopted and used by Europeans for centuries after and in our sources here.