

Reading the Historical Context



The early years of the European presence in the New World were, from the European perspective, an era of exploration and discovery. The first three selections that follow are by Christopher Columbus, who “discovered” America on his famous voyage of 1492; Thomas Hariot, an early British explorer; and Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, a Spanish explorer who traveled from Florida along the Gulf Coast, through Texas, and south along the Pacific coast of Mexico. From the Native American perspective, the arrival of the Europeans was obviously a very different experience from that of the Europeans. The Iroquois Confederacy document offered here represents the response of one major Native American group. And finally, an excerpt from “The Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson” reveals something of the religious, social, and legal aspects of life in Puritan New England through a courtroom confrontation between Governor John Winthrop, a major pillar of the status quo in Puritan Massachusetts, and Anne Hutchinson, a somewhat reluctant religious reformer accused of Antinomianism—that is, the belief that the “inner light” of spiritual insight provided what was needed for salvation and was thus more important than moral law.

Christopher Columbus 1451–1506

Although he made his discoveries in the name of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Spanish king and queen, Cristoforo Colombo (his name in Italian) remained all his life a citizen of Genoa, Italy, where he was born and where he spent his early years. As a boy, Columbus worked as a weaver, his father's trade, but as he grew older, he followed the custom of other young men of Genoa and shipped out as a seaman on Mediterranean merchant ships. In his early twenties he went to Lisbon, Portugal, then the center of Atlantic merchant shipping and explorations by sea, where his brother had established himself as a maker of maps and nautical charts. Columbus worked briefly at mapmaking, and he sailed as a seaman on trading vessels to the Portuguese islands of the Azores and Madeira. He sailed north to England and perhaps as far west as Iceland. By the 1480s, when he was in his thirties, he had risen to the rank of captain in the merchant service of Portugal.

Columbus was not the first European to discover the continent of America. Vikings had reached the mainland of North America as early as the tenth century. Yet Viking settlement was only temporary, and the Vikings' achievement was preserved largely in fantasies, myths, and sagas. It was Columbus who united Europe and America. He was the greatest of navigators in the greatest age of navigators. No one in history had discovered so much territory unknown to Europeans and had so stirred their imaginations. Columbus laid the basis for Spanish land claims and for the spread of Spanish culture from the Caribbean and Florida across the Pacific to the Philippines. He changed forever the way the world saw itself. And in his reports he first confirmed the age-old dream that there was indeed an idyllic land of beauty and opportunity, a new

land, the great hope of earth, that would, for more than 500 years, draw the people of the world to its shores

TEXT: *Select Documents Illustrating the Four Voyages of Columbus*, ed. C. Jane, 1930

CROSS-REFERENCE (in this volume): See the portrayal of Columbus in sections 3–6 of Walt Whitman's poem "Passage to India."

COLUMBUS'S LETTER DESCRIBING HIS FIRST VOYAGE¹

SIR,² As I know that you will be pleased at the great victory with which Our Lord has crowned my voyage, I write this to you, from which you will learn how in thirty-three days, I passed from the Canary Islands³ to the Indies⁴ with the fleet which the most illustrious king and queen, our sovereigns, gave to me. And there I found very many islands filled with people innumerable, and of them all I have taken possession for their highnesses, by proclamation made and with the royal standard unfurled, and no opposition was offered to me. To the first island which I found, I gave the name *San Salvador*,⁵ in remembrance of the Divine Majesty, Who has marvellously bestowed all this; the Indians call it 'Guanahani.' To the second, I gave the name *Isla de Santa María de Concepción*, to the third, *Fernandina*; to the fourth, *Isabella*; to the fifth, *Isla Juana*,⁶ and so to each one I gave a new name.

When I reached Juana, I followed its coast to the westward, and I found it to be so extensive that I thought that it must be the mainland, the province of Catayo.⁷ And since there were neither towns nor villages on the seashore, but only small hamlets, with the people of which I could not have speech, because they all fled immediately, I went forward on the same course, thinking that I should not fail to find great cities and towns. And, at the end of many leagues,⁸ seeing that there was no change and that the coast was bearing me northwards, which I wished to avoid, since winter was already beginning and I proposed to make from it to the south, and as moreover the wind was carrying me forward, I determined not to wait for a change in the weather and retraced my path as far as a certain harbour known to me. And from that point, I sent two men inland to learn if there were a king or great cities. They travelled three days' journey and found an infinity of small hamlets and people without number, but nothing of importance. For this reason, they returned.

¹The earliest report by Columbus of his voyage to what he believed were the Indies. Printed first in Spanish then in Latin in 1493, the letter was soon translated into the major languages of Europe.

²First printed versions of Columbus's letter (the original has been lost) were addressed to either Raphael (Gabriel) Sanchez or to Luis de Santangel. Both men were officials in the court of Ferdinand and Isabella. Historians have speculated that Columbus sent the letter to Sanchez or to Santangel (or copies to both) in order to ensure its prompt and proper transmission to the king and queen.

³Columbus sailed from Spain first to the Canary Islands where he completed preparations for his voyage.

⁴In Columbus's day the name "Indies" was used for lands east of India, including the Malay Peninsula, China, Japan, and Indonesia.

⁵Spanish: Holy Savior. Watlings Island in the Bahamas has traditionally been accepted as the island on which Columbus first landed, but the actual identity of the island is not known with certainty and remains a subject of historical dispute.

⁶Of the four islands named by Columbus, only Juana (Cuba) has been identified with certainty.

⁷Cathay (China) ⁸Approximately 3½ miles each

world were, from the European first three selections "discovered" America on his father's part; and Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca along the Gulf of Mexico. From the time of the voyage it was obviously a very important discovery for the Roanoke Confederacy and the major Native American aspects of life in Puritan New England between Governor John Winthrop, Massachusetts, and Anne Hutchinson and the doctrine of Antinomianism—that it provided what was a moral law.

1506

Christopher Columbus, *the Spanish sailor who gained all his life a citizen's early years. As a boy, when older, he followed the tradition of his father on Mediterranean voyages, then the center of Atlantic exploration. He had established himself briefly at mapmaking, and discovered the islands of the Azores west as Iceland. By the time he was captain in the merchant*

ship of America. Vikings of the thirteenth century. Yet Viking ships as preserved largely in Norway and America. He was the first to stir their imagination of the spread of Spanish ships to the Philippines. He was the first to confirm the great opportunity, a new

I understood sufficiently from other Indians, whom I had already taken, that this land was nothing but an island. And therefore I followed its coast eastwards for one hundred and seven leagues to the point where it ended. And from that cape, I saw another island, distant eighteen leagues from the former, to the east, to which I at once gave the name "Española"⁹. And I went there and followed its northern coast, as I had in the case of Juana, to the eastward for one hundred and eighty-eight great leagues in a straight line. This island and all the others are very fertile to a limitless degree, and this island is extremely so. In it there are many harbours on the coast of the sea, beyond comparison with others which I know in Christendom, and many rivers, good and large, which is marvellous. Its lands are high, and there are in it very many sierras and very lofty mountains, beyond comparison with the island of Teneriffe.¹⁰ All are most beautiful, of a thousand shapes, and all are accessible and filled with trees of a thousand kinds and tall, and they seem to touch the sky. And I am told that they never lose their foliage, as I can understand, for I saw them as green and as lovely as they are in Spain in May, and some of them were flowering, some bearing fruit, and some in another stage, according to their nature. And the nightingale was singing¹¹ and other birds of a thousand kinds in the month of November there where I went. There are six or eight kinds of palm, which are a wonder to behold on account of their beautiful variety, but so are the other trees and fruits and plants. In it are marvellous pine groves, and there are very large tracts of cultivatable lands, and there is honey, and there are birds of many kinds and fruits in great diversity. In the interior are mines of metals, and the population is without number.¹² Española is a marvel.

The sierras and mountains, the plains and arable lands and pastures, are so lovely and rich for planting and sowing, for breeding cattle of every kind, for building towns and villages. The harbours of the sea here are such as cannot be believed to exist unless they have been seen, and so with the rivers, many and great, and good waters, the majority of which contain gold.¹³ In the trees and fruits and plants, there is a great difference from those of Juana. In this island, there are many spices and great mines of gold and of other metals.

The people of this island, and of all the other islands which I have found and of which I have information, all go naked, men and women, as their mothers bore them, although some women cover a single place with the leaf of a plant or with a net of cotton which they make for the purpose. They have no iron or steel or weapons, nor are they fitted to use them, not because they are not well built men and of handsome stature, but because they are very marvellously timorous. They have no other arms than weapons made of canes, cut in seeding time, to the ends of which they fix a small sharpened stick. And they do not dare to make use of these, for many times it has happened that I have sent ashore

⁹Now known as Hispaniola, the location of the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

¹⁰Largest of the Canary Islands.

¹¹Columbus mistook a New World thrush for the European nightingale. Nightingales did not appear in the New World until they were imported by bird lovers centuries later.

¹²Earliest fifteenth-century estimates placed the population of Hispaniola at three or four million. The true number was probably less than 200,000.

¹³The first of many unsubstantiated conjectures made by Columbus and subsequent New World explorers about the abundance of gold.

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two or three men to some town to have speech, and countless people have come out to them, and as soon as they have seen my men approaching they have fled, even a father not waiting for his son. And this, not because ill has been done to anyone; on the contrary, at every point where I have been and have been able to have speech, I have given to them of all that I had, such as cloth and many other things, without receiving anything for it; but so they are, incurably timid. It is true that, after they have been reassured and have lost their fear, they are so guileless and so generous with all they possess, that no one would believe it who has not seen it. They never refuse anything which they possess, if it be asked of them; on the contrary, they invite anyone to share it, and display as much love as if they would give their hearts, and whether the thing be of value or whether it be of small price, at once with whatever trifle of whatever kind it may be that is given to them, with that they are content. I forbade that they should be given things so worthless as fragments of broken crockery and scraps of broken glass, and ends of straps, although when they were able to get them, they fancied that they possessed the best jewel in the world. So it was found that a sailor for a strap received gold to the weight of two and a half *castellanos*,¹⁴ and others much more for other things which were worth much less. As for new *blancas*,¹⁵ for them they would give everything which they had, although it might be two or three *castellanos*' weight of gold or an *arroba*¹⁶ or two of spun cotton. They took even the pieces of the broken hoops of the wine barrels and, like savages, gave what they had, so that it seemed to me to be wrong and I forbade it. And I gave a thousand handsome good things, which I had brought, in order that they might conceive affection, and more than that, might become Christians and be inclined to the love and service of their highnesses and of the whole Castilian¹⁷ nation, and strive to aid us and to give us of the things which they have in abundance and which are necessary to us. And they do not know any creed and are not idolaters;¹⁸ only they all believe that power and good are in the heavens, and they are very firmly convinced that I, with these ships and men, came from the heavens, and in this belief they everywhere received me, after they had overcome their fear. And this does not come because they are ignorant; on the contrary, they are of a very acute intelligence and are men who navigate all those seas, so that it is amazing how good an account they give of everything, but it is because they have never seen people clothed or ships of such a kind.

And as soon as I arrived in the Indies, in the first island which I found, I took by force some of them,¹⁹ in order that they might learn and give me information of that which there is in those parts, and so it was that they soon understood us, and we them, either by speech or signs, and they have been very

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¹⁴Small, fifteenth-century Spanish gold coin

¹⁵Small, copper Spanish coins of low value

¹⁶A roll of cloth weighing about 25 pounds

¹⁷Spanish ¹⁸Idol worshipers, thought by fifteenth-century Christians to be disciples of Satan

¹⁹Historians have sometimes identified this as the first instance of the European enslavement of Indians. The practice was not unique to New World explorers, for it had long been customary for European discoverers to bring home trophies—among them living human beings—as evidence of their explorations.

serviceable. I still take them with me, and they are always assured that I come from Heaven, for all the intercourse which they have had with me; and they were the first to announce this wherever I went, and the others went running from house to house and to the neighbouring towns, with loud cries of, 'Come! Come to see the people of Heaven!' So all, men and women alike, when their minds were set at rest concerning us, came, so that not one, great or small, remained behind, and all brought something to eat and drink, which they gave with extraordinary affection.

In conclusion, to speak only of that which has been accomplished on this voyage, which was so hasty, their highnesses can see that I will give them as much gold as they may need, if their highnesses will render me very slight assistance; moreover, spice and cotton, as much as their highnesses shall command; and mastic, as much as they shall order to be shipped and which, up to now, has been found only in Greece, in the island of Chios, and the Seignory²⁰ sells it for what it pleases; and aloe wood, as much as they shall order to be shipped, and slaves, as many as they shall order to be shipped and who will be from the idolaters.²¹ And I believe that I have found rhubarb and cinamon, and I shall find a thousand other things of value, which the people whom I have left there will have discovered, for I have not delayed at any point, so far as the wind allowed me to sail, except in the town of Navidad,²² in order to leave it secured and well established, and in truth, I should have done much more, if the ships had served me, as reason demanded.

This is enough . . . and the eternal God, our Lord, Who gives to all those who walk in His way triumph over things which appear to be impossible, and this was notably one; for, although men have talked or have written of these lands, all was conjectural, without suggestion of ocular evidence, but amounted only to this, that those who heard for the most part listened and judged it to be rather a fable than as having any vestige of truth. So that, since Our Redeemer has given this victory to our most illustrious king and queen, and to their renowned kingdoms, in so great a matter, for this all Christendom ought to feel delight and make great feasts and give solemn thanks to the Holy Trinity with many solemn prayers for the great exaltation which they shall have, in the turning of so many peoples to our holy faith, and afterwards for temporal benefits, for not only Spain but all Christians will have hence refreshment and gain.

1493

1493

²⁰Italian officials in control of the trade in mastic (an aromatic resin from mastic trees) on the Greek island of Chios in the eastern Mediterranean.

²¹I.e. only those natives who failed to convert to Christianity would be enslaved.

²²Villa de la Navidad (Spanish: Town of the Nativity) a fortified camp on the island of Hispaniola where Columbus left 21 men (during his first voyage) to trade with the Indians and explore for gold. When Columbus returned on his second voyage, he discovered that the natives had murdered all the Europeans and destroyed the camp.