Section I

Imperial Aspirations and the Limits of Colonial Domination

Transatlantic colonization in the Americas followed Iberians’ long history of warfare and trading and territorial claims in Europe and Africa. Europeans’ efforts to circumvent Muslim-dominated routes and establish direct access to the trading centers of the Indian Ocean world helped spark and propel early European expansion and set colonial domination and imperialism in motion. From approximately 1400 forward in Portugal and 1500 in Spain, Christian monarchies gained territorial and political control and sought wealth and power overseas.

Before the overseas expansion began, the Christians fought intermittent wars against the Moors from North Africa, who had conquered virtually all of Iberia between 711 and 718 and after hundreds of years had become Europeans, too. This Reconquest, as it came to be known, began far in the north in 718, often as battles among nobles over serfs, and eventually hardened during 750 years of warfare into a bitter intolerance by Christians of other religions. For centuries, Christians, Jews, and Muslims coexisted successfully in many parts of the peninsula. They lived with certain restrictions and tensions in the same medieval cities and under the same rulers whether Catholic or Muslim. This “convivencia” eventually eroded slowly into distrust, hatred, and pogroms. As the conflict evolved into a clash between two sides (Christian and Muslim), each side developed strategies and institutions to help seize and hold territory and the people living there. As religious militancy and zeal increasingly formed the rationale and motivation for the wars, the advancing Christians became steadily more intolerant of the other religions on the peninsula, including Judaism. By the 1200s, the Moors were expelled from Portugal and confined to the Emirate of Granada in what became Spain under the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabel.

The centuries of wars that Christian Iberians fought to win territory by driving out Muslim rulers gave Spain and Portugal’s overseas expansion the character and justification of crusades, wars to spread the faith and defeat nonbelievers. This sense of a Christian mission helped Iberian monarchs begin to build dynastic states and claim that their diverse subjects—speaking different tongues and equally loyal to regional interests—shared a common Christian bond and obligations to the crusading Crown. In particular, 1492 closed the last chapter of the medieval Christian Reconquest of Iberia, and 1492 proved a decisive year for the religious unification of Spain. From this year forward, all Spanish subjects would be Christians. Isabel and Ferdinand had already established the Spanish Inquisition in 1478 to seek out and punish Jewish converts to Christianity (conversos) who failed to remain true to their new faith. In 1492 after 10 years of fighting to seize

1For a general history comparing Spanish empire building with the British in North America, see John H. Elliot, Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).
control of Granada, the victorious monarchs forced all remaining Jews to convert or face expulsion and permanent exile.\textsuperscript{2} Despite assurances to the contrary given in order to obtain the surrender of Granada, Muslim subjects soon faced the same forced conversions, becoming moriscos. Many moriscos were expelled to North Africa a century later in 1609–1613. Militant Christianity and intolerance of difference came to characterize Iberian unification and subsequent expansion into the Atlantic and the Americas.

In these efforts to spread the faith and Spanish and Portuguese power, service to the monarchy and God could be combined with seeking personal fortune and the enrichment of the state. In fact, the Iberian monarchies depended heavily on the private organization, command, and financing of most of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century expeditions of exploration, trade, and territorial conquest. The monarchs granted permission to specific commanders and financiers to seek lands or trade in the Crown’s name in exchange for a portion of the profits (the royal fifth) and allegiance of both the conquerors and those they conquered. This partnership between individuals and the state, often with papal sanction in hopes of spreading the faith, helped fuel the Spanish and Portuguese conquests of the Atlantic Islands\textsuperscript{3} and the establishment and rapid growth of the Atlantic trade in enslaved Africans.\textsuperscript{4} It also drove colonization of the Americas. Christopher Columbus came to the Americas four times under such an agreement. He first sought trade items and routes to Asia, but later he also labored to colonize and mine gold. In each case, he worked equally for the greater glory of God, the Spanish monarchs he served, and his family name and fortune. The accounts by Columbus and the other Spanish conquerors, called conquistadors, quoted in this section reflect these goals and the struggle to balance these motives with the realities they encountered and the alliances they made in order to succeed.

A strong sense of purpose and justification motivated the Spanish and Portuguese, but they also relied heavily on the aid and participation of both Native American and African peoples to build European empires in the Americas. Columbus, and every Spaniard and Portuguese who followed him, sought allies and laborers among the Native Peoples. Colonial success depended on the extent that Native Peoples could be persuaded or forced to fight against Amerindian rulers, farm the lands, and mine for silver and gold. In the first stage of Spanish expansion, Columbus depended on the native population in the Caribbean; without indigenous laborers the farms and mines could not be worked, and without an indigenous population on the land there was nothing with which to reward loyal followers. In the subsequent stage of Spanish expansion onto the mainland, indigenous peoples played an even larger role. Indigenous allies, prisoners, and slaves made possible the stunning defeats of the Aztecs by Hernán Cortés (1519–1521) and the Incas by Francisco Pizarro (1531–1534). Once the fighting was over, colonists and the Crown alike depended on the productivity of indigenous society to build the cities, feed the colonists, and pay tribute. Native Peoples also sustained the missionaries who evangelized them and kept the mines running. In Brazil, the Portuguese first depended on the Tupi-Guarani people to trade dyewood (Brazilwood) and other items, and they later needed indigenous laborers to start working the first sugar plantations until enough capital could be accumulated to import expensive enslaved African workers. For the first 200 years, Spanish and Portuguese empires in much of the Americas depended in one way or another on the numbers and productivity of Native Peoples.

Africans came to play an equally central role in the drama of conquest and colonization in the Americas because they had already been incorporated into the Atlantic system of trade and labor.\textsuperscript{5} Well before Columbus embarked for the Americas,

\textsuperscript{2}Portugal followed suit with forced conversions and expulsions of Jews in 1497.

\textsuperscript{3}Azores, Madeira, Canaries, Cape Verde, and São Tomé.

\textsuperscript{4}Beginning with sales in 1441, the Portuguese pioneered the slave trade.

\textsuperscript{5}For an overview, see Herbert S. Klein, The Atlantic Slave Trade (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
This 1524 book published in Nuremberg contains the Hapsburg monarchy's coat of arms, a map of the Aztec capital, and the second and third letters sent by the Spanish conquistador Cortés to the Emperor Charles V. The letters provided Europeans with early accounts of Mexican peoples and culture. The map shows the Gulf Coast of Mexico, and the city plan shows a large and complex city, including a temple precinct and causeways to the mainland. What does the map tell viewers about the society Cortés conquered in 1519–1521? This first map and the plan draw on both European and indigenous sources. How does this representation of Tenochtitlán contrast with the second set of images (from 1572) showing Tenochtitlán and the South American Inca capital Cuzco side by side and drawing solely on European sources? What do all three images taken together tell viewers about the interests of the Spanish empire builders?
the Portuguese and then the Spanish launched expeditions into northern and western Africa. Gold and ivory initially attracted raiders and traders who established ports and trading enclaves on the islands in the Atlantic and along the coasts and rivers. However, people soon became the most valuable “commodity.” Iberians enslaved African people and sent them to European cities and to labor on the Mediterranean-style sugar plantations being established on the Atlantic Island colonies like the Canaries, Cape Verde, and São Tomé. Two important results of the early slave trade should be noted. First, in the Atlantic world and in the Americas, the stigma of slavery was attached to Africans. Second, the Iberian trade in slaves taken in Africa as captives, or purchased from African slave traders or rulers, not only became the first step and a testing ground in Iberian expansion overseas, but also profoundly shaped the American experience. From the very beginning, Africans provided both empires with intermediaries, sailors, conquistadors, servants, artisans, and plantation laborers. Of course, Africans served their own interests by carving out spaces for life within colonial society or engaging in anticolonial resistance on the poorly controlled frontiers. In order to marshal this African labor and quell resistance, Europeans exported Iberian institutions and practices and developed new ones.

At first, practices and institutions fostered conquest and holding conquered lands; nevertheless, gradually, the goals shifted to favor royal control and the Church. To encourage conquistadors to invest their money and lives in finding and subjugating populous indigenous societies, victors were entrusted with the native populations of specific towns or attached to specific ethnic chiefs (called caciques or kurakas). These encomiendas allowed the encomenderos, who held them to collect tribute and labor services from Native Peoples in exchange for Christianizing them and caring for their well being. Encomiendas proved tremendously profitable in places where the indigenous population suffered lower mortality from the “Old World.” Several factors came together to bring about the end of the encomienda system: Indigenous peoples opposed the exploitation of encomenderos, the Crown feared encomenderos’ power and autonomy, and missionaries desired better access to the people they aimed to convert. The New Laws of 1542 limited the encomienda system severely, and it was eliminated within a generation or two from most places.

Instead of a society dominated by encomenderos, the Spanish Crown favored direct royal control and laws to incorporate Europeans, Native Peoples, and Africans into a colonial economy and a Christian society. The Crown established cabildos (town councils) to govern the cities that colonists lived in and the towns to which the Indians belonged. Corregidores (rural magistrates) supervised the collection of tribute from Indians and their service in forced labor drafts. To govern all groups and to represent the king, the Crown appointed viceros in Mexico City (1535) and Lima in Peru (1544). A judicial bureaucracy centered on the audiencias (royal high courts) located throughout Mexico and Peru managed disputes within this system and reached all the way back to the Crown’s Council of the Indies established in 1524 to draft laws and hear appeals. The Church, too, expanded its roles as it ministered to a growing colonist and mixed-race population, mainly in cities. Church officials created a system of parish priests throughout the indigenous towns and neighborhoods, and they sent missionaries to convert Native Peoples in more remote regions. Crown and Church officials found that to govern was to mediate among the various levels of administration and the factions within American society. This rule, through negotiation and the need to incorporate Europeans, Africans, and Native Peoples, allowed individuals from these groups to find ways to articulate their interests within royal and Church institutions. The flexibility required by colonial society influenced the operation of the Iberian empires.

The lives of colonial subjects and their direct experience of empire help people today recognize the centrality of indigenous peoples, Africans, and their American-born descendants in the history of Latin America. The term “conquest” typically makes one think of conquerors defeating the Aztec and Inca empires,
whereas “empire building” conjures up images of bureaucrats and missionaries ruling over Native Peoples and slaves. Although it is true that a small number of European men gained the most from building colonial empires, the document excerpts in this section reveal how peoples from many different backgrounds participated in the process of making colonial Latin America. Documents in which Columbus and Bernal Díaz describe their relations with indigenous peoples show that a complex web of enmity and alliances with indigenous peoples made European conquest possible. Indigenous and Afro-Latin American identities and experiences in the early colonial period were likewise much more complex than readers today usually assume. Garofalo’s archival documents explore how Africans living and working in Diaspora on both sides of the Atlantic played key roles in forging empires and founding multiethnic societies. Matthew offers documents that allow readers to explore why a Maya from Guatemala tried to “pass” as a Tlaxcalan Indian in the late sixteenth century, building an identity on claims of military service to the Spanish during the campaigns of conquest that fanned out from central Mexico. Spanish and Portuguese empire building continued into the seventeenth century and often took place at the margins of colonial centers. Reports on the famous Brazilian quilombo of Palmares illustrate the power of maroon societies (runaway communities) to set limits on the reach of European empires. The primary-source documents at the heart of all these chapters relate a variety of personal experiences of conquest, colonization, and empire building in colonial Latin America and help readers to think beyond stereotyped interpretations of colonization.
Chapter 1

Christopher Columbus Evaluates Indigenous Societies

Leo J. Garofalo, Connecticut College

Christopher Columbus recorded his first impressions of the Americas and the Amerindians he encountered in the Caribbean, creating some of the first and most influential accounts of the Americas. His letters and reports directed to the monarchs sponsoring his missions and other highly placed nobles and clergymen began to form Europeans’ image of the “New World.” The documents excerpted here show Columbus evaluating indigenous society and proposing various ways that Europeans could interact with the people he met during his first voyage (1492–1493). The

6Columbus launched three other voyages in 1493–1496, 1498–1500, and 1502–1504.
Spanish monarchy authorized and partially financed Columbus’s explorations. In return, Columbus promised to reach Asia and give Spanish merchants and royal power an opportunity to circumvent the Ottoman-controlled Mediterranean trade routes and the Portuguese maritime routes advancing south along western Africa and around the Cape of Good Hope at the southern extremity of Africa. Not surprisingly, in his report to the Spanish Queen Isabel and King Ferdinand, Columbus discussed the opportunities for trade, the search for valuable exports, the potential for Christianizing local people, ethnic divisions, and slavery. Thus, Columbus sought both to describe the potential of the lands and people before him and to continue his search for a way west. In short, Columbus shaped his report to respond to the expectations of the Crown. These accounts of the first voyage come to readers today further mediated by Bartolomé de Las Casas. This Dominican friar, later famous for his denunciation of Spanish abuses during the conquest (see Chapter 6), made the only surviving copies of the digest of Columbus’s log and perhaps incorporated additional information from a second account also penned by Columbus.

An Italian sea captain from Genoa (1451–1506), Columbus had courted royal backers for a westward voyage to Asia (the East Indies) since 1483. Relying on Marco Polo’s map and miscalculations, Columbus underestimated the world’s circumference and concluded that Japan could be reached by sailing 2,500 miles west of the Portuguese Azores in the Atlantic. Doubling these estimates and unwilling to grant the mariner such a large share of the potential profits (the Spanish Crown allowed him 10 percent of the profits), the Portuguese rejected Columbus’s request for underwriters. In 1488, the Portuguese navigator Bartolomeu Dias sailed around Africa, establishing a Portuguese route to Asia’s trade in spices and other luxuries and consolidating Portugal’s hold on the trade in slaves from western and central Africa. Eager to catch up, the Spanish proved more willing to invest in Columbus’s improbable venture. Even if he fell short of Asia and only secured claims to more islands in the Atlantic, Columbus would advance the Spanish sphere of control further to the west. Newly united by the dynastic marriage between Queen Isabel of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon (1469) and fresh from the victorious conclusion to the campaign to drive Islamic rulers off the Iberian Peninsula (January 1492), the Spanish monarchs met Columbus in the newly conquered city of Granada. By April, they agreed to back his plan to sail west and claim for Spain territories and trade routes to Asia. The monarchs promised him various rewards, including the governorship of his discoveries and the title of Admiral of the Oceans. The chance to outmaneuver Mediterranean enemies and Iberian competitors for trade appealed to the Spanish Monarchs because it offered the chance to expand royal power, carry to new realms their crusade to promote Christianity, and find the resources needed to finance a more powerful state and fight against non-Christian empires. At first, Columbus’s arrival fell well short of fulfilling these goals.

Columbus reached the Bahamas first and other Caribbean islands later and, eventually, the shores of Central America and northern South America. The people he encountered were not Japanese and Chinese; instead, he met and began to kidnap Amerindians. When Columbus arrived, many ethnic groups inhabited the Caribbean, and later researchers came to label them as Arawaks because of similarities with the Indians in northeastern South America. The rapid destruction of these societies in the two decades after 1492 left little information about how Caribbean peoples understood their identities and occupied this broad region. What is known from the surviving documents is that the people who lived in the Bahamas called themselves Lucayo. Puerto Rico’s inhabitants called themselves Borinquen. On the large islands like Hispaniola (modern Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Puerto Rico, and Jamaica, the original population reached into the hundreds of thousands. Perhaps a million people lived in all these Greater Antilles. They lived in permanent villages in thatch and wood houses with roofs that were conical or rectangular in shape, and arranged in irregular fashion around a central space where the ethnic chief or cacique’s house was

---

Some ethnographers divide them into Taínos/Gautíao, Caribs/Caribe, and Guanahatabeyes/Ciboney and assign them geographical locations; Taínos in the Greater Antilles, Caribs in the Lesser Antilles, and Guanahatabeyes/Ciboney in westernmost Cuba.
located. Caciques organized daily activities, rituals, and the storage of food and surplus goods for future use. Islanders cultivated cassava and tobacco for ceremonial use when rolled into large cigars and smoked through the nostrils. On some islands, a hundred people lived in each village. On others, villages might hold 1,000 to 2,000 residents. Likewise, some caciques only controlled their local villages, whereas in other regions they owed allegiance to other caciques and might even have belonged to regional chiefdoms.

Beginning with Columbus, historians treat early reports of cannibalism with suspicion. This label had fateful historical consequences throughout Spanish and Portuguese America. The charge of cannibalism among Amerindians allowed the Iberian colonial regimes to distinguish “good” Amerindian populations from “bad” ones, targeting the latter for punitive violence, even enslavement and extermination. This process of categorizing facilitated and attempted to justify to other Europeans Iberian acts of conquest and colonization. Columbus and the chroniclers and missionaries who followed him promoted a dualistic ethnic typology of “Arawaks” and “Caribs” and spread its use across the Caribbean. They described Caribs as fierce and cannibalistic. They often used this label for any group selected for enslavement or particularly resistant to evangelization. Queen Isabel’s Royal Decree in 1503 legalized the plunder, enslaving, and sale only of “Carib” populations. When combined with European diseases, warfare among Spanish factions, and the exploitation of local populations to mine for gold, the practices of enslavement and raiding
devastated first the Native Peoples of the Greater Antilles and then the Lesser Antilles. Between 1492 and 1514, the population dropped from a million or more to approximately 30,000 (and to only a handful of people by the mid-1500s). Amerindian labor for Hispaniola and Cuba's sugar growing and placer mining was replaced by enslaved people brought from West Africa. Disease and the actions of the first Spanish colonizers in the Caribbean caused this acute labor shortage and a crisis in indigenous society just as the Spanish kingdom was attempting to become an empire and learn to govern new territories.

The Caribbean’s native populations were the first to experience European methods of invasion and colonization and suffer the ecological and demographic consequences. Beginning in 1494, Columbus made Hispaniola the focus of conquest. Following Iberian practice and the model of subjugating the Canary Islanders, Columbus and subsequent explorers and conquerors assigned the native population under specific caciques to individual colonizers as a reward for service during the conquest. However, Columbus proved a poor administrator of colonizing efforts. The Spanish fought fiercely among themselves and so abused and decimated the local indigenous populations that the Crown stripped Columbus of his governorship and sent him back to Spain in chains and disgrace in 1499. Consequently, his family lost most of its privileges and grants. The Crown eventually created the administrative unit of the Audiencia of Santo Domingo to govern the Caribbean Islands and the littoral region of South America occupied by Spain. Colonizing efforts shifted to exploring and conquering the mainlands. Columbus’s accounts, thus, initiated the process of building Spain’s overseas claims in the Americas. The Caribbean became a testing ground for imperial strategies. These original voyages and the attempts to establish a Spanish presence in Hispaniola helped the Spanish Empire shape its view of Native Peoples in the Americas, adapt Iberian institutions to American realities, and determine how to extract benefits from these new claims.

Questions to Consider:

1. How did Columbus describe the Caribbean’s potential and suggest ways to incorporate these new lands and peoples into European imperial and commercial systems?
2. What clues can you find in the letter to suggest what the Native Peoples that Columbus encountered might have thought of the Spanish?
3. What did Columbus write about religion and beliefs? How did Columbus try to take advantage of the Spanish monarchs’ crusading spirit?
4. How did Columbus determine whether some people were more “civilized” than others? Might this letter tell readers today more about Europeans than about indigenous peoples?

Christopher Columbus’s Account of His First Voyage, October 11, 1492 to January 2, 1493

Thursday, 11 October . . . . They reached a small island of the Lucayos, called in the Indian language Guananhanni. Immediately some naked people appeared and the Admiral [Columbus] went ashore in the armed boat, as did Martin Alonso Pinzón and his brother Vicente Yanez, captain of the Niña. The Admiral raised the royal standard and the captains carried two banners with the green cross which were flown by the Admiral on all his ships. On each side of the cross was a crown surmounting the letters F and Y (for Ferdinand and Isabel). On landing they

---

11 Watling Island in the Bahamas, Columbus’s first landfall. From here, he continued through the Bahamas to Cuba and the Island of Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic today).
12 Columbus set out in three ships: the Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria.
saw very green trees and much water and fruit of various kinds. The Admiral called the two captains and the others who had landed and Rodrigo Escobedo, recorder of the whole fleet, and Rodrigo Sanchez de Segovia, and demanded that they should bear faithful witness that he took possession of the island—which he did—for his sovereigns and masters the King and Queen. He further made the required declarations, which are recorded at greater length in the evidence there set down in writing. Soon many of the people of the island came up to them. What follows are the Admiral’s actual words in his account of his first voyage and the discovery of these Indies.13

‘In order to win their friendship, since I knew they were a people to be converted and won to our holy faith by love and friendship rather than by force, I gave some of them red caps and glass beads which they hung round their necks, also many other trifles. These things pleased them greatly and they became marvelously friendly to us. They afterwards swam out to the ship’s boats in which we were sitting, bringing us parrots and balls of cotton thread and spears and many other things, which they exchanged with us for such objects as glass beads, hawks and bells. In fact, they very willingly traded everything they had. But they seemed to me a people very short of everything. They all go naked as their mothers bore them, including the women, although I saw only one very young girl.

‘All the men I saw were young. I did not see one over the age of thirty. They were well built with fine bodies and handsome faces. Their hair is coarse, almost like that of a horse’s tail and short; they wear it down over their eyebrows except for a few strands at the back, which they wear long and never cut. They are the color of the Canary Islanders (neither black nor white). Some of them paint themselves black, others white or any color they can find. Some paint their faces, some their whole bodies, some only the eyes, some only the nose. They do not carry arms or know them. For when I showed them swords, they took them by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane. Some instead of an iron tip have a fish’s tooth and others have points of different kinds. They are fairly tall on the whole, with fine limbs and good proportions. I saw some who had wounded scars on their bodies and I asked them by signs how they got these and they indicated to me that people came from other islands nearby who tried to capture them and they defended themselves. I suppose and still suppose that they come from the mainland to capture them for slaves. They should be good servants and very intelligent, for I have observed that they soon repeat anything that is said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, for they appear to me to have no religion. God willing, when I make my departure I will bring half a dozen of them back to their Majesties, so that they can learn to speak. I saw no animals of any kind on this island except parrots.’ These are the Admiral’s own words.

Saturday, 13 October.14 At daybreak many of these men came to the shore—all young, as I have said, and all of a good height—a very fine people. Their hair is not curly but straight and as coarse as horse hair. All have very broad brows and heads, broader than those of any people I have seen before. Their eyes are very fine and not small. They are not at all black, but the color of Canary Islanders, as could be expected, since this is in the same latitude as the Island of Hierro in the Canaries. They have very straight legs and no bellies, but well-formed bodies. They came to the ship in boats which were made from tree-trunks, like a long boat cut out of a single log. They are marvelously carved in the native style and they are so big that forty or forty-five men came in them. There are others smaller, so small that some carried only a single man. They row them with a paddle like a baker’s shovel and they go wonderfully fast. If one capsizes they all start swimming and right it. They bale it out with gourds which they carry with them. They brought balls of cotton thread and parrots and spears and other things which it would be tedious to mention, and exchange them for anything that was given them. I watched carefully to discover whether they had gold and saw that some of them carried a small piece hanging from

13The Americas. This reference suggests here that Las Casas quoted these passages from Columbus’s own writings.

14Las Casas consulted and incorporated two now lost sets of writings by Columbus. This accounts for the repetitions in the description of the island.
a hole pierced in the nose. I was able to understand from their signs that to the south, either inland or along the coast, there was a king who had large vessels made of it and possessed a great deal. I tried hard to make them go there but saw in the end that they had no intention of doing so. I decided to remain till the afternoon of the next day and then to sail south-west, for according to the signs which many of them made there was land to the south, south-west and north-west. They all indicated that men from the northwest often came to attack them. So I resolved to go southwest to seek the gold and precious stones.

This island is fairly large and very flat. It has green trees and much water. It has a very large lake in the middle and no mountains and all is delightfully green. The people are very gentle and anxious to have the things we bring. Thinking that nothing will be given them, however, unless they give something in exchange, and having nothing to give, they take anything they can, jump into the water and swim away. But they will give all that they do possess for anything that is given to them, exchanging things even for bits of broken crockery or broken glass cups. I saw one give sixteen balls of cotton for a [small copper coin], and in these balls there was more than an aroba [25 pounds] of cotton thread.

I should like to forbid this and let no one take any cotton except at my command; then if there were any quantity I would order it all to be taken for your Majesties. It grows here on this island, but owing to shortage of time I can give no exact account of it. And here too the gold is found that they wear hanging from their noses. But in order not to waste time I wish to go and see if I can strike the island of Chipangu [Japan].

Now when night fell they all went ashore in their boats.

Sunday, 14 October. At dawn I order the ship’s boat and the boats of the caravels [ships] to be made ready, and coasted the island in a northeasterly direction in order to see other and eastward part and to look for villages. I saw two or three, whose people all came down to the beach calling to us and offering thanks to God. Some brought us water, others various sorts of food, and others, when they saw that I did not intend to land, jumped into the sea and swam out. We understood them to be asking us if we came from the sky. One old man got into the boat, and all the others, men and women alike, shouted, ‘Come and see the men who have come from the skies; and bring them food and drink.’ Many men and women came, each bringing something and offering thanks to God; they threw themselves on the ground and raised their hands to the sky and then called out to us, asking us to land. But I was afraid to do so, seeing a great reef of rocks which encircled the whole island. Inside there is deep water which give sufficient anchorage for all the ships in Christendom. But the entrance is very narrow. It is true that there are some shoals within this reef, but the sea is as still as well water.

I went to view all this morning, in order to give an account to your Majesties and to decide where a fort could be built. I saw a piece of land which is much like an island, though it is not one, on which there were six huts. It could be made into an island in two days, though I see no necessity to do so since these people are very unskilled in arms, as your Majesties will discover from seven whom I caused to be taken and brought aboard so that they may learn our language and return. However, should your Highness command it all the inhabitants could be taken away to Castile or held as slaves on the island, for with fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we wish. Moreover, near the small island I have described there are groves of the loveliest trees I have seen, all green with leaves like our trees in Castile in April and May, and much water.

I examined the whole of that anchorage and then returned to the ship and set sail. I saw so many islands that I could not make up my mind which to visit first. The men I had taken told me by signs that there were so many that it was impossible to count them. They mentioned more than a hundred by name. In the end I looked for the largest and decided to go to that one, which I am doing. It is about five leagues from the island of San Salvador, and the rest are rather more or rather less. All are very flat, without mountains and very fertile. All are populated and make war with one another, although the people are very simple and do not look savage.

Monday, 15 October. I stood off that night, fearing to approach land before morning because I did not know if the coast was free from shoals. At daybreak I hoisted
sail. As the island was more than five leagues away—indeed more like seven—and the tide was against me, it was midday when reached this island. I found that the coast which faces San Salvador runs north and south for some five leagues, and the other coast which I followed runs east and west for more than ten leagues.\footnote{Columbus exaggerated many of these estimates.} And as from this island I saw another larger one to the west, I hoisted sail to run all that day till night, since I should otherwise not have been able to reach its western point. I named this island Santa María de la Concepción. And it was almost sunset when I reached this point. I wished to learn whether there was gold there, because the men I had taken aboard at the island at San Salvador told me that here they wore very large gold bracelets round their legs and arms. I thought that this tale was probably a lie told in the hope of getting away. Generally it was my wish to pass no island without taking possession of it. Though having annexed one it might be said that we had annexed all. I anchored and stayed there until today, Tuesday, when at daybreak I approached the shore with the armed boats and landed.

There were many people all naked and like those of San Salvador. They let us go about the island and gave us all that we asked for. But as the wind was blowing from the southeast I did not wish to delay and went back to the ship. A large canoe happening to lie alongside the Niña, a little before midnight one of the men from San Salvador who was in the caravel jumped overboard and went off in it. A few minutes later another threw himself overboard also and swam after the canoe, which went so fast that no boat could overtake it, for it had a considerable start.

So they came to land and left the canoe. Several members of my crew went ashore after them and they ran off like frightened hens. We took the canoe they had abandoned aboard the caravel Niña; it was approached by another small canoe with a man who had come to barter a ball of cotton. Since he would not board the caravel some sailors jumped down and seized him. Having seen all this from the forecastle where I was standing, I sent for him and gave him a red cap and some green glass beads which I put in his arms and two hawk’s bells which I put in his ears. I told the sailors to give him back his canoe which they had taken on to the ship’s boat, and sent him ashore. I then raised sail for the other large island which I saw to the west and ordered that the second canoe which the Niña was towing be set adrift. Shortly afterwards I saw the man to whom I had given these gifts come ashore.

I had not taken the ball of cotton from him, although he wished to give it to me. The people gathered around him and he appeared astonished. It seemed to him that we were good people and that the man who escaped in the canoe must have wronged us or we should not have carried him off.

It was to create this impression that I had him set free and gave him presents. I was anxious that they should think well of us so that they may not be unfriendly when your Majesties send a second expedition here. All I gave him was worth more than four maravedis.\footnote{Worth only a small amount of money.}

So I set sail for the other island about ten o’clock with a southeast wind which veered southerly. It is very large and, according to the signs made by the men we had brought from San Salvador, contains much gold, which they wear as bracelets on their arms and legs and in their ears and noses and round their necks. This other island was about nine leagues west of Santa María, and thus part of its coasts apparently runs from northwest to south-east, for upwards of twenty-eight leagues.

Like San Salvador and Santa María it is very flat with no mountains. All the beaches are free from rocks, although all have submerged reefs near shore, for which reason it is necessary to look carefully before anchoring and not to anchor too near land. The water, however, is always very clear and you can see the bottom. A couple of Lombard shots off land the water is so deep around all these that it cannot be sounded. They are all very green and fertile and subject to gentle breezes. They contain many things of which I do not know because I did not care to land and explore them, being anxious to find gold; and since these islands show signs of containing it—for the natives wear it round their arms and legs, and it is certainly gold, because I showed them some pieces
which I have—I cannot fail, with God’s help, to find out where it comes from.

When I was in mid-channel, between Santa María and this other island which I have named Fernandina [Long Island], I found a man alone in a canoe crossing from one to the other. He was carrying a lump of their bread, about the size of a fist, and a gourd of water and a bit of red earth which had been powdered and then kneaded; also some dried leaves which they must have valued very high since they gave me a present of them. He also carried a native basket containing some glass beads and two blancas [coins], by which I knew that he had come from San Salvador to Santa María and was now on his way to Fernandina. He came alongside and I let him come aboard as he asked. I had his canoe hauled aboard also and all that he carried kept safe. I ordered that he should be given bread and honey and something to drink. I shall carry him to Fernandina and restore all his possessions to him so that he may give a good account of us. Then when, God willing, your Highnesses send others here, we shall be favorably received and the natives may give us of all they possess.

Tuesday, 16 October. Having left the islands of Santa María de la Concepción at about midday for Fernandina, which appeared very large in the west, I sailed for the rest of the day in a calm and could not reach it in time to anchor for the water was not clear enough for me to see bottom and one has to take great care not to lose the anchors. So I lay off all that night and in the morning saw a village off which I anchored. This was the native village of the man I had found on the previous day with his canoe in mid-channel. He had given such a good account of us that canoes swarmed round the ship all that night. They brought us water and something of all they had. I ordered presents to be given to all of them, that is to say, strings of ten or a dozen small glass beads and some brass clappers of a kind that are worth a maravedi each in Castile and leather tags, all of which they value very highly, and when they came aboard I had them given molasses to eat. And afterwards at nine in the morning I sent a ship’s boat ashore for water and they most gladly showed our men where it could be found and they themselves carried the full casks back to the boat. They were delighted to give us pleasure.

This island is very large and I decided to sail round it because as I understand, in it or near it, there is a goldfield. The island is eight leagues west of Santa María and from the cape where I touched, the coast runs north-north-west and south-south-east; I saw quite twenty leagues of it and it still continued. As I write this I have set sail with a south wind intending to push on round the island until I come to Samoet, which is the island or city where the gold is, for all who have come aboard the ship have said so. Both the people of San Salvador and Santa María told us so.

The people here are like the people of those islands; both in language and customs, though here they seem to me rather more civilized, more tractable and more intelligent, for I see they are better able to bargain for the cotton and other trifles which they have brought to the ship than were the other peoples. And I saw on this island cotton cloths made like shawls. The people are more friendly and the women wear a small piece of cloth in front which just hides their private parts.

This island is very green, flat and fertile and I have no doubt that they sow and reap Indian corn and other crops throughout the year.

They have no religion and I think that they would be very quickly Christianized, for they have a very ready understanding.

Wednesday, 17 October. At midday I set sail from the village off which I had anchored and where I had landed and taken water to make a circuit of this island of Fernandina. The wind was southwest and south. It was my intention to follow the coast of this island from where I was to the southeast, since it runs as a whole from north-north-west to south-south-east. I wanted to take my course to the south-south-east, because all the Indians whom I have aboard and others from whom I inquired tell me that southwards from here lies the island they call Samoet, where the gold is. Martin Alonso Pinzón, captain of the Pinta, in which I had placed three of these Indians, came to me and said that one of them had very explicitly given him to understand that the island could be rounded more quickly in a north-north-westerly direction.
I saw that the wind would not help me on the course I wished to steer and that it favored the other course, so I steered north-north-west, and when I was about two leagues from the island's cape (Long Island) I saw a marvelous harbor with an entrance, or rather two entrances, since there is an islet in the middle. Both entrances are very narrow, but it would have been large enough to provide anchorage for a hundred ships if it had been deep and free of rocks and the entrance channels had been deep also. I thought fit to examine it closely and take soundings; therefore I anchored outside and went in with all the ships' boats and we found that it was shallow. When I first saw it I thought it was the mouth of a river, so I had ordered casks to be brought to take water. On land I saw eight or ten men who quickly came up to us and pointed to a nearby village, where I sent my men for water, which they took, some going armed and others carrying the casks. As the village was some distance away I had to remain there for two hours.

During that time I walked among the trees, which were the loveliest sight I had yet seen. They were green as those of Andalusia in the month of May. But all these trees are as different from ours as day from night and so are the fruit and plants and stones, and everything else. It is true that some trees were of species that can be found in Castile, yet there was a great difference; but there are many other varieties which no one could say are like those of Castile or could compare with them. The people were all of the same kind as those already described; their condition was the same; they were naked and of the same height. They gave whatever they possessed for whatever we gave them and here I saw some ships' boys exchanging small bits of broken crockery or glass for spears.

The men who had gone for water told me that they had entered their houses and that they were very clean and well swept and that their blankets are like cotton nets. These houses are like large tents. They are high and have good chimneys. But of all the villages I saw none consisted of more than a dozen or fifteen houses. Here they found that married women wear cotton drawers, but girls do not, until they reach the age of eighteen. Here there were mastiffs and small dogs and here they met one man who wore in his nose a piece of gold about half the size of a castellano$^{17}$ on which they saw letters. I was angry with them because they had not bargained for it and given as much as they were asked, so that we could examine it and see where the coin came from. They answered that they did not dare to bargain for it.

After taking the water I returned to the ship, raised sail and followed a north-westerly course along the shore to the point where the coast turns east-west. Later all the Indians insisted that this island was smaller than Samoet and that it would be better to turn back in order to reach that island sooner. Then the wind fell and began to blow west-north-west, which was unfavorable to the course we had been following. I therefore turned back and sailed all that night in an east-south-easterly direction, sometimes due east and sometimes southeast in order to keep clear of land, because the clouds were very thick and the weather very heavy. The wind was slight and I could not make land to anchor. In the night heavy rain fell from after midnight almost till daybreak and it is still cloudy with more rain to come.

We are now at the southeastern tip of the island, where I hope to anchor until the weather clears, and I can see the other islands to which I am going. It has rained practically every day since I have been in these Indies. Your highnesses must believe me that these islands are the most fertile, and temperate and flat and good in the whole world.

Suggested Sources:

$^{17}$A small coin.
reaction to Spanish colonization. See Neil L.
Whitehead, “The Crises and Transformations of In-
vaded Societies: The Caribbean (1492–1580),” in The
Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Ameri-
cas, ed. Frank Salomon and Stuart B. Schwartz

Sources written in the period also provide valu-
able insights. Ramón Pané compiled the earliest
ethnographic account of Caribbean peoples’ lives
and religion in An Account of the Antiquities of the
Indians: Chronicles of the New World Encounter
(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999). Addi-
tional letters and other documents related to
Columbus are collected in Geoffrey Symcox and
Blair Sullivan, Christopher Columbus and the Enterprise
of the Indies: A Brief History with Documents (Boston:
Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2005). Alvaro Nuñez Cabeza
de Vaca recorded his shipwreck in Florida and his
travels among indigenous groups until reaching
northern Mexico in The Narrative of Alvar Nuñez
Cabeza de Vaca, trans. Fanny Bandelier (Barre, MA:
The Imprint Society, 1972). For a film re-creation,
see Cabeza de Vaca, dir. Nicolás Echevarria
(Mexico/Spain: Producciones Iguana and Instituto
Mexicano de Cinematografía, 1993). The fictional
film Jerico follows a Spanish missionary in this early
period as he abandons a raiding party and joins a
tribe. See Jerico, dir. Luis Alberto Lamata (Venezuela:
Bolivar Films, 1988).