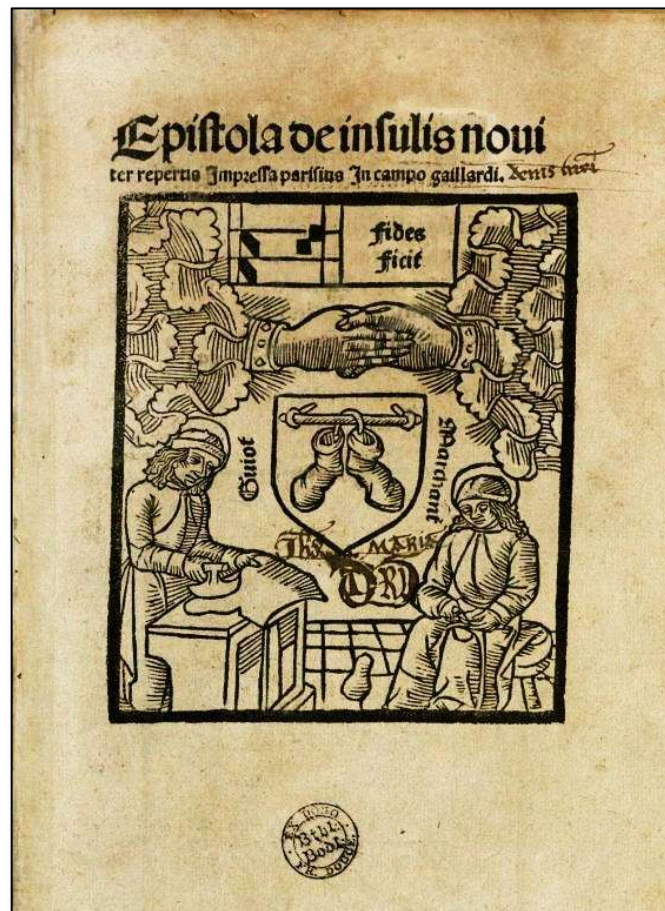


In His Own Words: Christopher Columbus through Primary Sources

A lesson created in collaboration with the UC Berkeley History-Social Science Project.



Christopher Columbus, *Epistola de insulis noviter repertis*, 1492. Printed in Paris in 1493. Houghton Library, Harvard University, <http://library.harvard.edu/a-letter-from-columbus>.

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SOURCE 1: Excerpt from Columbus's Journal, 1492

Friday, October 12. At two o'clock in the morning the land was discovered . . . Arrived on shore, they saw very green trees, many streams of water, and diverse sorts of fruits. The Admiral called upon the two Captains, and the rest of the crew who landed . . . to bear witness that he before all others took possession of that island for the King and Queen. A number of the people of the island gathered together. Here follow the precise words of the Admiral: "As I saw that they were very friendly to us, and knew that they could be much more easily converted to our holy faith by gentle means than by force, I presented them with some red caps, and strings of beads to put around their necks, and many other things of little value, with which they were much delighted, and became wonderfully attached to us. Afterwards they came swimming to the boats, bringing parrots, balls of cotton thread, javelins, and many other things which they exchanged for articles we gave them, such as glass bead, and hawk's bells; which trade was carried on with the utmost good will. But they seemed on the whole to me, to be a very poor people. They all go completely naked, even the women, though I saw but one girl. All whom I saw were young, not above thirty years of age, well made, with fine shapes and faces; their hair short, and coarse like that of a horse's tail, combed toward the forehead, except a small portion which they wear long and never cut. Some paint the face, and some the whole body, others only the eyes, and others the nose. They do not have weapons nor know anything about them, for I showed them swords, they grasped them by the blades, and cut themselves through ignorance. They have no iron, their javelins being without it, and nothing more than sticks, though some have fish-bones or other things at the ends. They are all of a good

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size and stature, and handsomely formed. I saw some with scars of wounds upon their bodies, and I made signs to ask what they were; they answered me in the same way, that people from the other islands came with the plan to make prisoners of them and they defended themselves. . . . It appears to me, that the people are intelligent, and would be good servants and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, as they appear to have no religion. They very quickly learn the words that are spoken to them. If it please our Lord, I plan to carry home six of them to your Highnesses, that they may learn our language." These are the words of the Admiral.

Sunday, October 14. In the morning, I ordered the boats to be readied and coasted along the island to examine that part of it . . . for I wished to give a complete report to your Highness, and also find where a fort might be built . . . I do not, however see the need of fortifying the place, as the people here are simple in war-like matters . . . I could conquer the whole of them with fifty men, and govern them as I pleased.

Christopher Columbus, Extracts from Journal in the Fordham University Medieval Sourcebook,
<http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/columbus1.asp>

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Columbus describe the land when he first sees it?
2. How does Columbus describe the people when he first meets them?
3. Based on his description, how does Columbus think the native people can benefit him?

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SOURCE 1: Excerpt from Columbus's Journal, 1492

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SOURCE 2: Excerpt from Columbus's Letter to Ferdinand and Isabella, 1493

... Thirty-three days after my departure from Cadiz I reached the Indian Sea, where I discovered many islands, thickly peopled, of which I took possession without resistance in the name of our most illustrious Monarch, by public proclamation and with unfurled banners.

... They are all, as I said before, without any sort of iron, and they do not have any weapons, which are unknown to them, and for with they are not adapted: not because of any bodily deformity, but because they are timid and full of terror. They carry, however, canes dried in the sun in place of weapons, upon whose roots they fix a wooded shaft, dried and sharpened to a point. But they never used them; for it has often happened, that when I sent two or three of my men to some of their villages to speak with the inhabitants, a crowd of Indians came forth; but when they saw our men approaching, they speedily took flight, parents abandoning children, and children their parents. This did not happen because we had injured or stolen from them. On the contrary I gave whatever I had, cloth and many other things without expecting anything in return; but they are by nature fearful and timid. But when they see that they are safe and all fear is banished, they are very naive and honest, and very giving of all they have. No one refuses the asker anything that he has; on the contrary they invite us to ask for it. They show the greatest affection towards all of us, exchanging valuable items for things of little value, content with the very least thing or nothing at all. But I forbade giving them items of little or no value . . . because it was plainly unjust; and I gave them many beautiful and pleasing things, which I brought with me, in order to win their affection, and that they might become Christians and love our King and Queen . . .

... On my arrival, I had taken some Indians by force from the first island that I came to, in order that they might learn our language, and communicate to us what they knew about the country; the plan succeeded, and was a great advantage to us for in a short time, either

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SOURCE 2: Excerpt from Columbus's Letter to Ferdinand and Isabella, 1493

by gestures and signs, or by words, we were able to understand each other. These men are still traveling with me, although they have been with us now a long time, they continue to entertain the idea that I have descended from heaven; and on our arrival at any new place they announced this, crying out immediately with a loud voice to the other Indians, "Come, come, you will see Men from Heaven," after which women and men, children and adults, when they got rid of their fear, would crowd the roads to see us, some bringing food, others drink, with astonishing affection and kindness . . .

Finally, to sum up in a few words the results and advantages of our journey, I promise to our most invincible Sovereigns, that if they give me some assistance, I will acquire for them as much gold as they need, a great quantity of spices, cotton, and mastic, and as many heathen slaves as their majesties may choose to demand. I also promise rhubarb and other sorts of drugs, which I believe the men I left behind in the fort have found already and will continue to find; for I stayed no longer than I had to because of winds, except while I was providing for the construction of a fort in the city of Navidad, and for making all things safe for the men I left there . . .

Such are the events that I have briefly described. Farewell.

Lisbon, March 14, 1493

Christopher Columbus

Admiral of the Fleet of the Ocean

Columbus reports on his first voyage, 1493. Gilder Lehrman Collection, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/exploration/resources/columbus-reports-his-first-voyage-1493>

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Columbus describe the people?
2. Based on his description, how does Columbus think the native people can benefit the king and queen of Spain?
3. Complete the comparison chart.

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SOURCE 2: Excerpt from Columbus’s Letter to Ferdinand and Isabella, 1493

Beliefs	Journal	Letter	How are they similar? Different?
How does Columbus describe the natives?			
How does Columbus describe trade with natives?			
What does Columbus believe about the natives’ religion?			
Weapons			
What are Columbus’s plans for the natives?			

4. How are the two documents similar? How are they different?

5. Why do you think he changes his words depending on his audience?

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WRITING STRATEGY: Analyzing and Citing Evidence

Writing Prompt: *What were Columbus's beliefs about the native people of the islands and how did this affect his treatment of them?*

Thesis: _____

Evidence /Facts/Quotes	Analysis This means that ... This shows ...	Source

Thesis Statement: Answers the question or prompt and makes a claim about the issue.

Evidence: Details about the topic: definitions, examples, dates, & names.

Analysis: This answers the question: "So what?" or "Why is this significant or important?"

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OUTLINE *for* EVIDENCE/ANALYSIS PARAGRAPH

Focus Question: *What were Columbus's beliefs about the native people of the islands and how did this affect his treatment of them?*

Title: _____

Thesis Statement: _____

Evidence: _____

Analysis: _____

Evidence: _____

Analysis: _____

Evidence: _____

Analysis: _____

Evidence: _____

Analysis: _____

Concluding Statement: _____

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OUTLINE *for* EVIDENCE/ANALYSIS PARAGRAPH
