

CIVILIZATIONS IN CONTACT

The Caribbean

Christopher Columbus never recanted his claim that the Caribbean islands he reached in his world-changing 1492 expedition were on the east coast of Asia. Like the early explorers and colonists who came after him, he interpreted the unfamiliar places and people he encountered in terms familiar to him. He had set out from Portugal believing Japan was less than 3,000 miles away (a quarter of the actual distance) and with expectations of what he would find there that had been shaped by his reading. From the writings of Marco Polo, who had visited Asia in the late thirteenth century, he expected to find the prosperous kingdom of a Great Khan, abundant with spices and gold. In *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (mid-fourteenth century), a widely read travel narrative that merged fact with fantastical fiction, he read of Southeast Asian islands populated by “folk of diverse shape and marvelously disfigured”—one-eyed giants, headless people with eyes in their shoulders, and people with enormous lips or ears. But the *Travels* also described places of great wealth and magnificence, including a Christian empire in India and an “isle, great and good and plenteous” where the people are unfamiliar with Christianity but are “full of all virtue, and they eschew all . . . sins.”

Echoes of the monsters and riches Columbus had read about appear in his accounts of his own travels, including in his personal journal and in his public letter describing his first voyage, both of which are represented in translation below. The letter was published in numerous editions in the 1490s, and its purpose was largely to maintain public support for Columbus’s operations, which were financed with the help of the Spanish queen, Isabella I of Castile. Thus, it reflects the religious and economic goals that Columbus and the monarchy shared. Columbus was invested in the possibility of bringing Catholicism to new peoples, a missionary project he appears to have personally believed in and that provided what was seen as an honorable purpose for his voyages and settlement attempts. Profit was another key motive for his exploration and colonization—a motive that would sometimes complement and sometimes contradict the goal of religious conversion. Belief in the importance of conversion provided justification for Spanish control of the Indigenous people whose labor colonization relied upon, but it also made the exploitation of the Taíno controversial, since many Spanish people, including Isabella I, thought it immoral to enslave those they had converted to Catholicism.

With some exceptions, the Taíno and other Indigenous groups the European crew encountered on the first voyage received them peacefully, though Columbus frequently took Indigenous prisoners. When he departed the island now known as Haiti and the Dominican Republic, he left a fortified encampment occupied by a small number of crew members who were all killed before his return. When Columbus undertook his second voyage in 1494, he returned to the island with a much larger number of settlers, many of whom were prisoners released on the condition of their participation in the colonizing project. He established the colony of Hispaniola with the intention of extracting vast quantities of gold, but the island did not turn out to be the wellspring of gold and other expensive goods that he had expected. He attempted to increase the colony’s profits by exploiting the Taíno people who lived there; clinging to his belief that the island concealed extraordinary gold deposits, he required every Taíno person over 14 to produce a nearly unachievable quota of gold and imposed gruesome punishment on those who refused or failed to comply. Colonists also enslaved Taíno and other Indigenous people to sell in Spain, and many settlers raped or undertook at best dubiously consensual relationships with Indigenous women. In a letter excerpted below, the Italian aristocrat Michele de Cuneo, a friend of Columbus who participated in the second voyage,

offers a chillingly matter-of-fact account of sexual violence and enslavement perpetrated by the colonists.

Conditions for the Taíno worsened in 1499, when Columbus returned to Hispaniola on a third voyage to find the settlers in rebellion against him, forcing him to implement a system whereby control over the land and people was parcelled out to individual settlers. This was soon codified into the *encomienda* system, according to which the Indigenous laborers were nominally free and said to receive the benefits of civilization and Christianity as recompense for their work. But in reality, the system was tantamount to slavery. Columbus himself—never as skilled a leader as he was a sailor—was soon ousted from power altogether and sent back to Spain to face criminal charges. He regained enough status to make one more voyage across the Atlantic, but he was forbidden to return to Hispaniola and instead focused his exploration on the Central American mainland. This expedition was plagued by shipwreck and mutiny, and Columbus spent more than a year stranded on Jamaica before he was finally rescued. His health compromised by the experience, he returned to Spain, where he died two years later. He had explored a remarkable amount of territory, encompassing much of the Caribbean and portions of the South and Central American coast, and he had amassed a great deal of personal wealth, but he continued to resent his loss of authority in Hispaniola.

Another participant in the early settlement of Hispaniola was Bartolomé de las Casas, a Spanish merchant's son who first came to the colony in 1502 and crossed the Atlantic many times in the following decades. Initially a participant in the conquest of the Caribbean and a plantation operator under the *encomienda* system, and also educated as a priest, Las Casas came to believe that the violent and exploitative way the Spanish treated Indigenous people in the colonies was profoundly sinful. He gave up his own *encomienda* and took up a campaign against the oppression he had witnessed and participated in. Las Casas remained focused on this cause for the rest of his life, and in numerous writings and speeches he attempted to convince both colonists and Spanish authorities of the injustice of their behavior toward Indigenous populations. His views intensified as his career progressed: once a proponent of the enslavement of Africans (who were more resistant to European diseases) as a replacement for Indigenous enslavement, he came to oppose slavery altogether, and to advocate not just freedom from slavery but also limited self-governance for colonized Indigenous societies.

Las Casas had some impact on the policies of the Church and of the Spanish state. He joined the Dominican order and took up a leadership role in missionary efforts in the colonies, serving for a time as bishop in the Mexican colony of Chiapas. The pressure he placed on the government contributed to some attempts at political change, the most significant of which was the passage of the New Laws of the Indies (1542). These laws were intended to free most Indigenous people from enslavement and would have substantially reformed settler-Indigenous relations in other important ways, but the reaction to them in the colonies was so forceful that the laws were soon partially repealed. Seeking a wider audience for his appeals, Las Casas published the arguments and testimony he had given in support of the New Laws as *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* in 1552. Presented as an account of Las Casas's personal experience, the book is also a persuasive document intended not only to evoke the extent of the atrocities committed by colonists but also to convince readers of the humanity of the Indigenous victims. For Spanish authorities, it was at this time an open question whether Indigenous people should be considered worthy of the rights accorded to other peoples. In 1550 Las Casas had, at the request of the monarchy, formally debated the theologian Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, who argued that Indigenous people were naturally suited to enslavement, describing them as "*homunculi* in whom hardly a vestige of humanity remains."

As Las Casas hoped, *Destruction of the Indies* was widely read both in Spain and, in translation, in other European countries. It was both influential and controversial. Some considered Las Casas a heretic or a traitor—and, indeed, his forceful condemnation of Spanish actions in the colonies would long be used by Spain's Protestant enemies as fodder for the "Black legend," a distorted narrative that exaggerated the evils committed by the Spanish Empire while downplaying those of Protestant colonizing nations. But Las Casas also found an audience sympathetic to his aims, and

his work is considered an important contribution to the development of the philosophy of universal human rights.

The following section begins with excerpts from Columbus's diary of his first voyage to North America, a document that bears the mark both of Columbus and of Las Casas. While the full, original text of the diary has not survived, a substantial portion of the record is preserved in an abridged copy made by Las Casas, probably several decades after Columbus's death. Las Casas intersperses passages quoted directly from the diary with his own summaries of omitted portions, and scholars continue to debate the extent to which his objectivity as an editor might have been compromised by his own strong views. In the passages included below, direct quotations from Columbus appear in quotation marks.



from Christopher Columbus with Bartolomé de las Casas, *Journal of the First Voyage to America*¹

Friday, 12th of October

The vessels were hove to,² waiting for daylight; and on Friday they arrived at a small island of the Lucayos,³ called, in the language of the Indians, Guanahani.⁴ Presently they saw naked people. The Admiral⁵ went on shore in the armed boat, and Martin Alonso Pinzon, and Vicente Yañez, his brother, who was captain of the *Niña*. The Admiral took the royal standard,⁶ and the captain went with two banners of the green cross, which the Admiral took in all the ships as a sign, with an F and a Y⁷ and a crown over each letter, one on one side of the cross and the other on the other. Having landed, they saw trees very green, and

much water, and fruits of diverse kinds. The Admiral called to the two captains, and to the others who leaped on shore, and to Rodrigo Escovedo, secretary of the whole fleet, and to Rodrigo Sanchez of Segovia, and said that they should bear faithful testimony that he, in presence of all, had taken, as he now took, possession of the said island for the King and for the Queen his Lords, making the declarations that are required, as is now largely set forth in the testimonies which were then made in writing.

Presently many inhabitants of the island assembled. What follows is in the actual words of the Admiral in his book of the first navigation and discovery of the Indies. "I," he says, "that we might form great friendship, for I knew that they were a people who could be more easily freed and converted to our holy faith by love than by force, gave to some of them red caps, and glass beads to put round their necks, and many other things of little value, which gave them great pleasure, and made them so much our friends that it was a marvel to see. They afterwards came to the ship's boats where we were, swimming and bringing us parrots, cotton threads in skeins, darts, and many other things; and we exchanged them for other things that we gave them, such as glass beads and small bells. In fine,⁸ they took all, and gave what they had with good will. It appeared to me to be a race of people very poor in everything. They go as naked as when their mothers bore them, and so do the women, although I did not see more than one young girl. All I saw were youths, none more

¹ Translated by Clements R. Markham, 1893.

² *hove to* I.e., stopped.

³ *Lucayos* Spanish name for the Taíno people who inhabited the islands.

⁴ *Guanahani* The island renamed San Salvador by Columbus.

⁵ *Admiral* Columbus, given the title of Admiral of the Ocean Sea in recognition of his 1492 exploration.

⁶ *standard* Flag.

⁷ *an F and a Y* Signifying King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile, the Catholic monarchs of Spain. The flag described here, featuring a green cross and the monarchs' initials, represented Columbus's fleet.

⁸ *In fine* In short.

than thirty years of age. They are very well made, with very handsome bodies, and very good countenances.¹ Their hair is short and coarse, almost like the hairs of a horse's tail. They wear the hairs brought down to the eyebrows, except a few locks behind, which they wear long and never cut. They paint themselves black, and they are the color of the Canarians,² neither black nor white. Some paint themselves white, others red, and others of what color they find. Some paint their faces, others the whole body, some only round the eyes, others only on the nose. They neither carry nor know anything of arms, for I showed them swords, and they took them by the blade and cut themselves through ignorance. They have no iron, their darts being wands without iron, some of them having a fish's tooth at the end, and others being pointed in various ways. They are all of fair stature and size, with good faces, and well made. I saw some with marks of wounds on their bodies, and I made signs to ask what it was, and they gave me to understand that people from other adjacent islands came with the intention of seizing them, and that they defended themselves. I believed, and still believe, that they come here from the mainland to take them prisoners. They should be good servants and intelligent, for I observed that they quickly took in what was said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, as it appeared to me that they had no religion. I, our Lord being pleased, will take hence, at the time of my departure, six natives for your Highness, that they may learn to speak. I saw no beast of any kind except parrots, on this island." The above is in the words of the Admiral.

Saturday, 13th of October

"... They brought skeins of cotton thread, parrots, darts, and other small things which it would be tedious to recount, and they give all in exchange for anything that may be given to them. I was attentive, and took trouble to ascertain if there was gold. I saw that some of them had a small piece fastened in a hole they have in the nose, and by signs I was able to make out that to the south, or going from the island to the south, there

¹ *countenances* Facial appearances.

² *Canarians* Canary Islanders. In 1492, Castile was in the last few years of a decades-long campaign to conquer the Canary Islands, which the monarchy achieved complete control over in 1496.

was a king who had great cups full, and who possessed a great quantity. I tried to get them to go there, but afterwards I saw that they had no inclination. I resolved to wait until tomorrow in the afternoon and then to depart, shaping a course to the S.W., for, according to what many of them told me, there was land to the S., to the S.W., and N.W., and that the natives from the N.W. often came to attack them, and went on to the S.W. in search of gold and precious stones. ..."

Sunday, 14th of October

"At dawn I ordered the ship's boat and the boats of the caravels³ to be got ready, and I went along the coast of the island and to the N.N.E., to see the other side, which was on the other side to the east, and also to see the villages. Presently I saw two or three, and the people all came to the shore, calling out and giving thanks to God. Some of them brought us water, others came with food, and when they saw that I did not want to land, they got into the sea, and came swimming to us. We understood that they asked us if we had come from heaven. One old man came into the boat, and others cried out, in loud voices, to all the men and women, to come and see the men who had come from heaven, and to bring them to eat and drink. Many came, including women, each bringing something, giving thanks to God, throwing themselves on the ground and shouting to us to come on shore. But I was afraid to land, seeing an extensive reef of rocks which surrounded the island, with deep water between it and the shore forming a port large enough for as many ships as there are in Christendom,⁴ but with a very narrow entrance. It is true that within this reef there are some sunken rocks, but the sea has no more motion than the water in a well. In order to see all this I went this morning, that I might be able to give a full account to your Highnesses, and also where a fortress might be established. I saw a piece of land which appeared like an island, although it is not one, and on it there were six houses. It might be converted into an island in two days, though I do not see that it would be necessary, for these people are very simple as regards the use of arms, as your Highnesses will see from the

³ *caravels* Portuguese sailing ships designed for exploration. The *Pinta* and *Niña* were this type of ship.

⁴ *Christendom* The entire Christian world.

seven that I caused to be taken, to bring home and learn our language and return; unless your Highnesses should order them all to be brought to Castile,¹ or to be kept as captives on the same island; for with fifty men they can all be subjugated and made to do what is required of them. Close to the above peninsula there are gardens of the most beautiful trees I ever saw, and with leaves as green as those of Castile in the month of April and May, and much water. I examined all that port, and afterwards I returned to the ship and made sail. I saw so many islands that I hardly knew how to determine to which I should go first. Those natives I had with me said, by signs, that there were so many that they could not be numbered, and they gave the names of more than a hundred. At last I looked out for the largest, and resolve to shape a course for it, and so I did. It will be distant five leagues² from this of *San Salvador*, and the others some more, some less. All are very flat, and all are inhabited. The natives make war on each other, although these are very simple-minded and handsomely-formed people.”

Tuesday, 27th of November

... The Admiral also says: “How great the benefit that is to be derived from this country would be, I cannot say. It is certain that where there are such lands there must be an infinite number of things that would be profitable. But I did not remain long in one port, because I wished to see as much of the country as possible, in order to make a report upon it to your Highnesses; and besides, I do not know the language, and these people neither understand me nor any other in my company; while the Indians I have on board often misunderstand. Moreover, I have not been able to see much of the natives, because they often take to flight. But now, if our Lord pleases, I will see as much as possible, and will proceed by little and little, learning and comprehending; and I will make some of my followers learn the language. For I have perceived that there is only one language up to this point. After they understand the advantages, I shall labor to make all these people Christians. They will become so readily, because they have no religion nor idolatry, and your

¹ *Castile* Kingdom in Spain at the time of writing.

² *leagues* One league is approximately three miles, and three nautical miles at sea.

Highnesses will send orders to build a city and fortress, and to convert the people. I assure your Highnesses that it does not appear to me that there can be a more fertile country nor a better climate under the sun, with abundant supplies of water. This is not like the rivers of Guinea, which are all pestilential. I thank our Lord that, up to this time, there has not been a person of my company who has had so much as a headache, or been in bed from illness, except an old man who has suffered from the stone³ all his life, and he was well again in two days. I speak of all three vessels. If it will please God that your Highnesses should send learned men out here, they will see the truth of all I have said. I have related already how good a place Rio de Mares⁴ would be for a town and fortress, and this is perfectly true; but it bears no comparison with this place, nor with the Mar de Nuestra Señora.⁵ For here there must be a large population, and very valuable productions, which I hope to discover before I return to Castile. I say that if Christendom will find profit among these people, how much more will Spain, to whom the whole country should be subject. Your Highnesses ought not to consent that any stranger should trade here, or put his foot in the country, except Catholic Christians, for this was the beginning and end of the undertaking; namely, the increase and glory of the Christian religion, and that no one should come to these parts who was not a good Christian.” ...

Sunday, 16th of December

At midnight the Admiral made sail with the land-breeze to get clear of that gulf.⁶ Passing along the coast of Española on a bowline,⁷ for the wind had veered to the east, he met a canoe in the middle of the gulf, with a single Indian in it. The Admiral was surprised how he could have kept afloat with such a gale blowing. Both

³ *the stone* Kidney stones.

⁴ *Rio de Mares* Name Columbus gave to the area surrounding a bay he encountered while exploring Cuba.

⁵ *Mar de Nuestra Señora* Name Columbus gave to a region of numerous mountainous islands.

⁶ *made sail ... that gulf* Due to unfavorable winds, Columbus had struggled to depart from his anchorage near what is now Port-de-Paix, Haiti.

⁷ *on a bowline* With the sails tied so as to move the boat close to the opposite direction of the wind.

the Indian and his canoe were taken on board, and he was given glass beads, bells, and brass trinkets, and taken in the ship, until she was off a village 17 miles from the former anchorage, where the Admiral came to again. The village appeared to have been lately built, for all the houses were new. The Indian then went on shore in his canoe, bringing the news that the Admiral and his companions were good people; although the intelligence had already been conveyed to the village[.] ... Presently more than five hundred natives with their king came to the shore opposite the ships, which were anchored very close to the land. Presently one by one, then many by many, came to the ship without bringing anything with them, except that some had a few grains of very fine gold in their ears and noses, which they readily gave away. The Admiral ordered them all to be well treated; and he says: “for they are the best people in the world, and the gentlest; and above all I entertain the hope in our Lord that your Highnesses will make them all Christians, and that they will be all your subjects, for as yours I hold them.” He also saw that they all treated the king with respect, who was on the seashore. The Admiral sent him a present, which he received in great state. He was a youth of about 21 years of age, and he had with him an aged tutor, and other councillors who advised and answered him, but he uttered very few words. One of the Indians who had come in the Admiral’s ship spoke to him, telling him how the Christians had come from Heaven, and how they came in search of gold, and wished to find the island of Baneque.¹ He said that it was well, and that there was much gold in the said island. He explained to the *alguazil*² of the Admiral that the way they were going was the right way, and that in two days they would be there; adding, that if they wanted anything from the shore he would give it them with great pleasure. This king, and all the others, go naked as their mothers bore them, as do the women without any covering, and these were the most beautiful men and women that had yet been met with. They are fairly white, and if they were clothed and protected from the sun and air, they would be almost as fair as people in Spain. This land is cool, and the best that words

can describe. It is very high, yet the top of the highest mountain could be ploughed with bullocks;³ and all is diversified with plains and valleys. In all Castile there is no land that can be compared with this for beauty and fertility. All this island, as well as the island of Tortuga, is cultivated like the plain of Cordova. They raise on these lands crops of yams, which are small branches, at the foot of which grow roots like carrots, which serve as bread. They powder and knead them, and make them into bread; then they plant the same branch in another part, which again sends out four or five of the same roots, which are very nutritious, with the taste of chestnuts. Here they have the largest the Admiral had seen in any part of the world, for he says that they have the same plant in Guinea. At this place they were as thick as a man’s leg. All the people were stout and lusty, not thin, like the natives that had been seen before, and of a very pleasant manner, without religious belief. The trees were so luxuriant that the leaves left off being green, and were dark coloured with verdure. It was a wonderful thing to see those valleys, and rivers of sweet water, and the cultivated fields, and land fit for cattle, though they have none, for orchards, and for anything in the world that a man could seek for.

In the afternoon the king came on board the ship, where the Admiral received him in due form, and caused him to be told that the ships belonged to the Sovereigns of Castile, who were the greatest princes in the world. But neither the Indians who were on board, who acted as interpreters, nor the king, believed a word of it. They maintained that the Spaniards came from Heaven, and that the Sovereigns of Castile must be in Heaven, and not in this world. They placed Spanish food before the king to eat, and he ate a mouthful, and gave the rest to his councillors and tutor, and to the rest who came with him.

“Your Highnesses may believe that these lands are so good and fertile, especially these of the island of Española,⁴ that there is no one who would know how to describe them, and no one who could believe if he had not seen them. And your Highnesses may believe that this island, and all the others, are as much yours as Castile. Here there is only wanting a settlement and

¹ *Baneque* Indigenous people had told the explorers that a great deal of gold could be found on this island.

² *alguazil* Member of a ship’s crew responsible for policing.

³ *bullocks* Castrated bulls.

⁴ *Española* Hispaniola, now the location of Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

the order to the people to do what is required. For I, with the force I have under me, which is not large, could march over all these islands without opposition. I have seen only three sailors land, without wishing to do harm, and a multitude of Indians fled before them. They have no arms, and are without warlike instincts; they all go naked, and are so timid that a thousand would not stand before three of our men. So that they are good to be ordered about, to work and sow, and do all that may be necessary, and to build towns, and they should be taught to go about clothed and to adopt our customs.”

—WRITTEN 1492–93

Christopher Columbus, *Letter of Columbus to Various Persons Describing the Results of His First Voyage and Written on the Return Journey*¹

Since I know that you will be pleased at the great success with which the Lord has crowned my voyage, I write to inform you how in thirty-three days I crossed from the Canary Islands to the Indies, with the fleet which our most illustrious sovereigns gave me. I found very many islands with large populations and took possession of them all for their Highnesses; this I did by proclamation and unfurled the royal standard.² No opposition was offered.

I named the first island that I found “San Salvador,” in honour of our Lord and Saviour who has granted me this miracle. The Indians call it “Guanahani.” The second island I named “Santa Maria de Conception,” the third “Fernandina,” the fourth “Isabela” and the fifth “Juana”; thus I renamed them all.³

When I reached Cuba, I followed its north coast westwards, and found it so extensive that I thought this must be the mainland, the province of Cathay.⁴ Since there were no towns or villages on the coast, but only

small groups of houses whose inhabitants fled as soon as we approached, I continued on my course, thinking that I should undoubtedly come to some great towns or cities. We continued for many leagues⁵ but found no change, except that the coast was bearing me northwards. This I wished to avoid, since winter was approaching and my plan was to journey south. As the wind was carrying me on I decided not to wait for a change of weather but to turn back to a remarkable harbor which I had observed. From here I sent two men inland to discover whether there was a king or any great cities. They travelled for three days, finding only a large number of small villages and great numbers of people, but nothing more substantial. Therefore they returned.

I understood from some Indians whom I had captured elsewhere that this was an island, and so I followed its coast for 107 leagues to its eastward point. From there I saw another eighteen leagues eastwards which I then named “Hispaniola.” I crossed to this island and followed its northern coast eastwards for 188 leagues continuously, as I had followed the coast of Cuba. All these islands are extremely fertile and this one is particularly so. It has many large harbors finer than any I know in Christian lands, and many large rivers. All this is marvelous. The land is high and has many ranges of hills, and mountains incomparably finer than Tenerife.⁶ All are most beautiful and various in shape, and all are accessible. They are covered with tall trees of different kinds which seem to reach the sky. I have heard that they never lose their leaves, which I can well believe, for I saw them as green and lovely as they are in Spain in May; some were flowering, some bore fruit and others were at different stages according to their nature. It was November but everywhere I went the nightingale and many other birds were singing. There are palms of six or eight different kinds—a marvelous sight because of their great variety—and the other trees, fruit and plants are equally marvelous. There are splendid pine woods and broad fertile plains, and there is honey. There are many kinds of birds and

¹ Translated by J.M. Cohen, 1969.

² *standard* Flag.

³ *The second ... them all* These names reference Catholic saints, with the exception of islands named for King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile, the Catholic monarchs of Spain, who supported Columbus's venture.

⁴ *Cathay* China.

⁵ *leagues* One league is approximately three miles, and three nautical miles at sea.

⁶ *Tenerife* One of the Canary Islands, and the last to be conquered by Castile; its people surrendered to the Castilian monarchy in 1496.

varieties of fruit. In the interior are mines and a very large population.

Hispaniola is a wonder. The mountains and hills, the plains and meadow lands are both fertile and beautiful. They are most suitable for planting crops and for raising cattle of all kinds, and there are good sites for building towns and villages. The harbors are incredibly fine and there are many great rivers with broad channels and the majority contain gold. The trees, fruits and plants are very different from those of Cuba. In Hispaniola there are many spices and large mines of gold and other metals. . . .

The inhabitants of this island, and all the rest that I discovered or heard of, go naked, as their mothers bore them, men and women alike. A few of the women, however, cover a single place with a leaf of a plant or piece of cotton which they weave for the purpose. They have no iron or steel or arms and are not capable of using them, not because they are not strong and well built but because they are amazingly timid. All the weapons they have are canes cut at seeding time, at the end of which they fix a sharpened stick, but they have not the courage to make use of these, for very often when I have sent two or three men to a village to have conversation with them a great number of them have come out. But as soon as they saw my men all fled immediately, a father not even waiting for his son. And this is not because we have harmed any of them; on the contrary, wherever I have gone and been able to have conversation with them, I have given them some of the various things I had, a cloth and other articles, and received nothing in exchange. But they have still remained incurably timid. True, when they have been reassured and lost their fear, they are so ingenuous and so liberal with all their possessions that no one who has not seen them would believe it. If one asks for anything they have they never say no. On the contrary, they offer a share to anyone with demonstrations of heartfelt affection, and they are immediately content with any small thing, valuable or valueless, that is given them. I forbade the men to give them bits of broken crockery, fragments of glass or tags of laces, though if they could get them they fancied them the finest jewels in the world. One sailor was known to have received gold to the weight of two and a half castellanos¹ for the

¹ *castellanos* Castilian gold coins.

tag of a breeches lace, and other received much more for things of even less value. For newly minted blancas² they would give everything they possessed, even two or three castellanos of gold or an arroba³ or two of spun cotton. They even took bits of broken hoops from the wine barrels and, as simple as animals, gave what they had. This seemed to me to be wrong and I forbade it.

I gave them a thousand pretty things that I had brought, in order to gain their love and incline them to become Christians. I hoped to win them to the love and service of their Highnesses and of the whole Spanish nation and to persuade them to collect and give us of the things which they possessed in abundance and which we needed. They have no religion and are not idolaters; but all believe that power and goodness dwell in the sky and they are firmly convinced that I have come from the sky with these ships and people. In this belief they gave me a good reception everywhere, once they had overcome their fear; and this is not because they are stupid—far from it, they are men of great intelligence, for they navigate all those seas, and give a marvelously good account of everything—but because they have never before seen men clothed or ships like these.

As soon as I came to the Indies, at the first island I discovered I seized some natives, intending them to inquire and inform me about things in these parts. These men soon understood us, and we them, either by speech or signs, and they were very useful to us. I still have them with me, and despite all the conversation they have had with me they are still of the opinion that I come from the sky and have been the first to proclaim this wherever I have gone. The others have gone running from house to house and to the neighboring villages shouting: “Come, come and see the people from the sky,” so, once they were reassured about us, all have come, men and women alike, and not one, old or young, has remained behind. All have brought us something to eat and drink which they have given with a great show of love. In all the islands they have very many canoes like oared fustas.⁴

² *blancas* Castilian copper coins.

³ *arroba* Unit measuring weight; the precise weight of an arroba varied by region, but was in the range of two to three dozen pounds.

⁴ *fustas* Long, narrow ships with mast and sails, used by the Portuguese for expedition and cargo.

They are of various sizes, some as large as a fusta of eighteen benches. But they are not as broad, since they are hollowed out of a single tree. A fusta would not be able to keep up with them, however, for they are rowed at an incredible speed. In these they travel and transport their goods between the islands, which are innumerable. I have seen some of these canoes with eighty men in them, all rowing.

In all these islands I saw no great difference in the looks of the people, their customs or their language. On the other hand, all understand one another, which will be of singular assistance in the work of their conversion to our holy faith, on which I hope your Highnesses will decide, since they are very well disposed towards it.

I have already told of my voyage of 107 leagues in a straight line from west to east along the coast of Cuba, according to which I reckon that the island is larger than England and Scotland put together.

One of these provinces is called Avan and there the people are born with tails, and these provinces cannot have a length of less than fifty or sixty leagues, according to the information I received from those Indians whom I have with me and who know all the islands.

The other island, Hispaniola, is greater in circumference than the whole of Spain from Collioure to Fuenterrabia¹ in the Basque province, since I travelled along one side for 188 great leagues in a straight line from west to east.

These islands are richer than I yet know or can say and I have taken possession of them in their Majesties' name and hold them all on their behalf and as completely at their disposition as the Kingdom of Castile. In the island of Hispaniola I have taken possession of a large town which is most conveniently situated for the goldfields and for communications with the mainland both here, and there in the territories of the Grand Khan,² with which there will be very profitable trade. I have named this town Villa de Navidad and have built a fort there. Its fortifications will by now be

finished and I have left sufficient men to complete them. They have arms, artillery and provisions for more than a year, and a fusta; also a skilled shipwright who can build more.

I have established warm friendship with the king of that land, so much so, indeed, that he was proud to call me and treat me as a brother. But even should he change his attitude and attack the men of La Navidad, he and his people know nothing about arms and go naked, as I have already said; they are the most timorous people in the world. In fact, the men that I have left there would be enough to destroy the whole land, and the island holds no dangers for them so long as they maintain discipline.

In all these islands the men are seemingly content with one woman, but their chief or king is allowed more than twenty. The women appear to work more than the men and I have not been able to find out if they have private property. As far as I could see whatever a man had was shared among all the rest and this particularly applies to food.

I have not found the human monsters which many people expected. On the contrary, the whole population is very well made. They are not Negroes as in Guinea, and their hair is straight, for where they live the sun's rays do not strike too harshly, but they are strong nevertheless, despite the fact that Hispaniola is 20 to 21 degrees from the Equator.³

There are high mountains in these islands and it was very cold this winter but the natives are used to this and withstand the weather, thanks to their food, which they eat heavily seasoned with very hot spices. Not only have I found no monster but I have had no reports of any except the island called "Quaris," which is the second as you approach the Indies from the east, and which is inhabited by a people who are regarded in these islands as extremely fierce and who eat human flesh. They have many canoes in which they travel throughout the islands of the Indies, robbing and taking all they can. They are no more ill-shaped than any other natives of the Indies, though they are in the habit of wearing their hair long like women. They have

¹ *Collioure ... Fuenterrabia* Collioure and Fuenterrabia (now Hondarrribia) are today at opposite ends of the border between France and Spain; Collioure is on the east coast, and Fuenterrabia is on the west coast.

² *Grand Khan* I.e., the Mongolian emperor. At the time of writing, Columbus persisted in his belief that he had reached Asia.

³ *despite ... Equator* Reference to longstanding European beliefs that the equatorial region was too hot to allow for human flourishing. Some who held these beliefs thought the region was entirely uninhabitable; others thought it was populated by monstrous or weak and unhealthy races.

bows and arrows with the same canes as the others, tipped with splinters of wood, for the lack of iron which they do not possess. They behave most savagely to the other peoples but I take no more account of them than the rest. It is these men who have relations with the women of Matinino, where there are no men and which is the first island you come to on the way from Spain to the Indies. These women do not follow feminine occupations but use cane bows and arrows like those of the men and arm and protect themselves with plates of copper, of which they have much.

In another island, which I am told is larger than Hispaniola, the people have no hair. Here there is a vast quantity of gold, and from here and the other islands I bring Indians as evidence.

In conclusion, to speak only of the results of this very hasty voyage, their Highnesses can see that I will give them as much gold as they require, if they will render me some very slight assistance; also I will give them all the spices and cotton they want, and as for mastic,¹ which has so far been found only in Greece and the island of Chios and which the Genoese authorities have sold at their own price, I will bring back as large a cargo as their Highnesses may command. I will also bring them as much aloes as they ask and as many slaves, who will be taken from the idolaters. I believe also that I have found rhubarb and cinnamon and there will be countless other things in addition, which the people I have left there will discover. For I did not stay anywhere unless delayed by lack of wind except at the town of La Navidad, which I had to leave secure and well established. In fact I should have done much more if the ships had been reasonably serviceable, but this is enough.

Thus the eternal God, Our lord, grants to all those who walk in his way victory over apparent impossibilities, and this voyage was pre-eminently a victory of this kind. For although there was much talk and writing of these lands, all was conjectural, without ocular evidence. In fact, those who accepted the stories judged rather by hearsay than on any tangible information. So all Christendom will be delighted that our Redeemer has given victory to our most illustrious King and Queen and their renowned kingdoms, in this great

¹ *mastic* Tree resin used to make varnish, as well as for other purposes.

matter. They should hold great celebrations and render solemn thanks to the Holy Trinity with many solemn prayers, for the great triumph which they will have, by the conversion of so many peoples to our holy faith and for the temporal benefits which will follow, for not only Spain, but all Christendom will receive encouragement and profit.

This is a brief account of the facts.

Written in the caravel² off the Canary Islands.

15 February 1493

At your orders
The Admiral

After this was written, when I was already in Spanish waters, I was struck by such a strong south-south-west wind that I was compelled to lighten ship,³ but today by a great miracle I made the port of Lisbon, from which I decided to write letters to their Highnesses. Throughout the Indies, I have always found weather like that of May; I went there in thirty-three days and returned in twenty-eight. I met with no storms except these which held me up for fourteen days, beating about in these seas. The sailors here say that there has never been so bad a winter nor so many ships lost.

Written on 4 March

—1493

from Michele de Cuneo, letter [Concerning Columbus's Second Voyage]⁴ (1495)

... **F**rom [the] island of Guadalupe, which belongs to the Caribs,⁵ we set sail on 10 November and on the 13th of the same month we came to another island of Caribs very beautiful and fertile, and we arrived at a very beautiful harbor. As soon as the Caribs saw us they ran away to the mountains like those of the other island and they emptied their houses, into which we went and took whatever pleased us. In these few days we found many islands where we did not go

² *caravel* Ship.

³ *lighten ship* I.e., throw cargo and other heavy items into the water; a lighter ship can withstand stormy weather more easily.

⁴ Translated by Samuel Eliot Morison, 1963.

⁵ *Caribs* Kalinago people, neighbors and historical enemies of the Taíno people.

ashore. A few times we anchored, that is, for the night; and when we did not anchor we kept the ship hove-to,¹ and this in order not to make any headway and for fear of running afoul of the said islands, to which, because they were close one to the other the Lord Admiral gave the name of Eleven Thousand Virgins; and to the one previously mentioned, Santa Cruz.

One of those days while we were lying at anchor we saw coming from a cape a canoe, that is to say a boat, which is how they call it in their language, going along with oars so that it looked like a well-manned bergantino,² on which there were three or four Carib men with two Carib women and two Indian slaves, of whom (that is the way the Caribs treat their other neighbors in those other islands), they had recently cut the genital organ to the belly, so that they were still sore; and we having the flagship's boat ashore, when we saw that canoe coming, quickly jumped into the boat and gave chase to that canoe. While we were approaching her the Caribs began shooting at us with their bows in such manner that, had it not been for the shields, half of us would have been wounded. But I must tell you that to one of the seamen who had a shield in his hand came an arrow, which went through the shield and penetrated his chest three inches, so that he died in a few days. We captured that canoe with all the men, and one Carib was wounded by a spear in such a way that we thought he was dead, and cast him for dead into the sea, but instantly saw him swim. In so doing we caught him and with the grapple hauled him over the bulwarks of the ship where we cut his head with an axe. The other Caribs, together with those slaves, we later sent to Spain. While I was in the boat I captured a very beautiful Carib woman, whom the said Lord Admiral gave to me, and with whom, having taken her into my cabin, she being naked according to their custom, I conceived desire to take pleasure. I wanted to put my desire into execution but she did not want it and treated me with her finger nails in such a manner that I wished I had never begun. But seeing that, to tell you the end of it all, I took a rope and thrashed her well, for which she raised such unheard of screams that you would not have believed your ears. Finally we came to an agreement in such manner that

¹ *hove-to* With sails positioned to inhibit movement.

² *bergantino* Sailing ship.

I can tell you that she seemed to have been brought up in a school of harlots. To that cape of that island the Admiral gave the name Cape of the Arrow because of the one who had died of the arrow. ...

... Sailing to Hispaniola I was the first to sight land. Therefore the Lord Admiral in that very place ordered us ashore at a cape where there was an excellent harbor and he called it *el cavo de San Michele Saonese*,³ out of respect for me, and this he wrote down in his book. Sailing always along the coast we found mountainous shores and good harbors and several times we landed, and everywhere we found innumerable people of the usual sort. And thus ranging the coast toward our settlement we found not too far from a cape a very beautiful island which also I was the first to sight, the which was some 25 leagues in circumference, and again out of love for me, the Lord Admiral called it *La Bella Saonese*. He gave it to me as a present; and I took possession of it according to the appropriate modes and forms, as the Lord Admiral was doing of the other islands in the name of His Majesty the King, that is by virtue of a document signed by a notary public. On the above mentioned island I uprooted grass and cut trees and planted the cross and also the gallows, and in the name of God I baptized it with the name *La Bella Saonese*. And well it is called beautiful for in it there are 37 villages with at least 30,000 souls; and all this too the Lord Admiral noted down in his book. ...

When our caravels⁴ in which I wished to go home had to leave for Spain, we gathered together in our settlement 1600 people male and female of those Indians, of whom, among the best males and females, we embarked on our caravels on 17 February 1495, 550 souls. Of the rest who were left the announcement went around that whoever wanted them could take as many as he pleased; and this was done. And when everybody had been supplied there were some 400 of them left to whom permission was granted to go wherever they wanted. Among them there were many women who had infants at the breast. They, in order to better escape us, since they were afraid we would turn

³ *el cavo ... Saonese* The cape of St. Michael of Savona. Cuneo was from Savona, in northern Italy.

⁴ *caravels* Ships.

to catch them again, left their infants anywhere on the ground and started to flee like desperate people; and some fled so far that they were removed from our settlement of Isabela 7 or 8 days beyond mountains and across huge rivers; wherefore from now on scarcely any will be had. Among these people who were taken was one of their kings with two chiefs, who it was decided should be killed with arrows on the following day, so they were tied up; but in the night they knew so well how to gnaw one another's ropes with their teeth, that they were freed from their bonds and escaped. ...

Meanwhile I departed for Spain with those caravels. Sailing with terrible and contrary winds we had to turn back thrice so that we spent a month among those islands. Wherefore, seeing the few provisions that we had, we turned north and proceeded in that direction for about 600 Roman miles;¹ and when it pleased God the winds turned favorable to our sails and we passed from the island of Boriquen to the island of Madeira in 23 days. But when we reached the waters around Spain about 200 of those Indians died, I believe because of the unaccustomed air, colder than theirs. We cast them into the sea. The first land we saw was Cape Spartel and very soon after we reached Cadiz, in which place we disembarked all the slaves, half of whom were sick. For your information they are not working people and they very much fear cold, nor have they long life. ...

—1495

from Bartolomé de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*²

[PREFACE]

The Americas were discovered in 1492, and the first Christian settlements established by the Spanish the following year. It is accordingly forty-nine years now since Spaniards began arriving in numbers in this part of the world. They first settled the large and fertile island of Hispaniola, which boasts six hundred leagues³

¹ *Roman miles* Unit of distance slightly shorter than a modern mile.

² Translated by Nigel Griffin, 1992.

³ *leagues* One league is approximately three miles.

of coastline and is surrounded by a great many other large islands, all of them, as I saw for myself, with as high a native population as anywhere on earth. Of the coast of the mainland, which, at its nearest point, is a little over two hundred and fifty leagues from Hispaniola, more than ten thousand leagues had been explored by 1541, and more are being discovered every day. This coastline, too, was swarming with people and it would seem, if we are to judge by those areas so far explored, that the Almighty selected this part of the world as home to the greater part of the human race.

God made all the peoples of this area, many and varied as they are, as open and as innocent as can be imagined. The simplest people in the world—unassuming, long-suffering, unassertive, and submissive—they are without malice or guile, and are utterly faithful and obedient both to their own native lords and to the Spaniards in whose service they now find themselves. Never quarrelsome or belligerent or boisterous, they harbour no grudges and do not seek to settle old scores; indeed, the notions of revenge, rancor, and hatred are quite foreign to them. At the same time, they are among the least robust of human beings: their delicate constitutions make them unable to withstand hard work or suffering and render them liable to succumb to almost any illness, no matter how mild. Even the common people are no tougher than princes or than other Europeans born with a silver spoon in their mouths and who spend their lives shielded from the rigors of the outside world. They are also among the poorest people on the face of the earth; they own next to nothing and have no urge to acquire material possessions. As a result they are neither ambitious nor greedy, and are totally uninterested in worldly power. Their diet is every bit as poor and as monotonous, in quantity and in kind, as that enjoyed by the Desert Fathers.⁴ Most of them go naked, save for a loincloth to cover their modesty; at best they may wrap themselves in a piece of cotton material a yard or two square. Most sleep on matting, although a few possess a kind of hanging net, known in the language of Hispaniola as a hammock. They are innocent and pure in mind and have a lively intelligence, all of which makes them particularly receptive to learning and understanding the truths of our Catholic faith and to being instructed

⁴ *Desert Fathers* Early Christian hermits who lived very austerely.

in virtue; indeed, God has invested them with fewer impediments in this regard than any other people on earth. Once they begin to learn of the Christian faith they become so keen to know more, to receive the Sacraments, and to worship God, that the missionaries who instruct them do truly have to be men of exceptional patience and forbearance; and over the years I have time and again met Spanish laymen who have been so struck by the natural goodness that shines through these people that they frequently can be heard to exclaim: "These would be the most blessed people on earth if only they were given the chance to convert to Christianity."

It was upon these gentle lambs, imbued by the Creator with all the qualities we have mentioned, that from the very day they clapped eyes on them the Spanish fell like ravening wolves upon the fold, or like tigers and savage lions who have not eaten meat for days. The pattern established at the outset has remained unchanged to this day, and the Spaniards still do nothing save tear the natives to shreds, murder them and inflict upon them untold misery, suffering and distress, tormenting, harrying and persecuting them mercilessly. We shall in due course describe some of the many ingenious methods of torture they have invented and refined for this purpose, but one can get some idea of the effectiveness of their methods from the figures alone. When the Spanish first journeyed there, the indigenous population of the island of Hispaniola stood at some three million; today only two hundred survive. The island of Cuba, which extends for a distance almost as great as that separating Valladolid from Rome,¹ is now to all intents and purposes uninhabited; and two other large, beautiful and fertile islands, Puerto Rico and Jamaica, have been similarly devastated. Not a living soul remains today on any of the islands of the Bahamas, which lie to the north of Hispaniola and Cuba, even though every single one of the sixty or so islands in the group, as well as those known as the Isles of Giants and others in the area, both large and small, is more fertile and more beautiful than the Royal Gardens in Seville and the climate is as healthy as anywhere on earth. The native population, which once numbered some five hundred thousand, was wiped out by forcible expatriation to the

island of Hispaniola, a policy adopted by the Spaniards in an endeavor to make up losses among the indigenous population of that island. One God-fearing individual was moved to mount an expedition to seek out those who had escaped the Spanish trawl and were still living in the Bahamas and to save their souls by converting them to Christianity, but, by the end of a search lasting three whole years, they had found only the eleven survivors I saw with my own eyes. A further thirty or so islands in the region of Puerto Rico are also now uninhabited and left to go to rack and ruin as a direct result of the same practices. All these islands, which together must run to over two thousand leagues, are now abandoned and desolate.

On the mainland, we know for sure that our fellow-countrymen have, through their cruelty and wickedness, depopulated and laid waste an area which once boasted more than ten kingdoms, each of them larger in area than the whole of the Iberian Peninsula. The whole region, once teeming with human beings, is now deserted over a distance of more than two thousand leagues: a distance, that is, greater than the journey from Seville to Jerusalem and back again.

At a conservative estimate, the despotic and diabolical behaviour of the Christians has, over the last forty years, led to the unjust and totally unwarranted deaths of more than twelve million souls, women and children among them, and there are grounds for believing my own estimate of more than fifteen million to be nearer the mark.

There are two main ways in which those who have traveled to this part of the world pretending to be Christians have uprooted these pitiful peoples and wiped them from the face of the earth. First, they have waged war on them: unjust, cruel, bloody and tyrannical war. Second, they have murdered anyone and everyone who has shown the slightest sign of resistance, or even of wishing to escape the torment to which they have subjected him. This latter policy has been instrumental in suppressing the native leaders, and, indeed, given that the Spaniards normally spare only women and children, it has led to the annihilation of all adult males, whom they habitually subject to the harshest and most iniquitous and brutal slavery that man has ever devised for his fellow-men, treating them, in fact, worse than animals. All the many and infinitely varied

¹ *Valladolid from Rome* Valladolid, in western Spain, is about a thousand miles from Rome; Cuba is close to 800 miles long.

ways that have been devised for oppressing these peoples can be seen to flow from one or other of these two diabolical and tyrannical policies.

The reason the Christians have murdered on such a vast scale and killed anyone and everyone in their way is purely and simply greed. They have set out to line their pockets with gold and to amass private fortunes as quickly as possible so that they can then assume a status quite at odds with that into which they were born. Their insatiable greed and overweening¹ ambition know no bounds; the land is fertile and rich, the inhabitants simple, forbearing and submissive. The Spaniards have shown not the slightest consideration for these people, treating them (and I speak from first-hand experience, having been there from the outset) not as brute animals—indeed, I would to God they had done and had shown them the consideration they afford their animals—so much as piles of dung in the middle of the road. They have had as little concern for their souls as for their bodies, all the millions that have perished having gone to their deaths with no knowledge of God and without the benefit of the Sacraments. One fact in all this is widely known and beyond dispute, for even the tyrannical murderers themselves acknowledge the truth of it: the indigenous peoples never did the Europeans any harm whatever; on the contrary, they believed them to have descended from the heavens, at least until they or their fellow-citizens had tasted, at the hands of these oppressors, a diet of robbery, murder, violence, and all other manner of trials and tribulations.

HISPANIOLA

As we have said, the island of Hispaniola was the first to witness the arrival of the Europeans and the first to suffer the wholesale slaughter of its people and the devastation and depopulation of the land. It all began with the Europeans taking native women and children both as servants and to satisfy their own base appetites; then, not content with what the local people offered them of their own free will (and all offered as much as they could spare), they started taking for themselves the food the natives contrived to produce by the sweat of their brows, which was in all honesty little enough. Since

what a European will consume in a single day normally supports three native households of ten persons each for a whole month, and since the newcomers began to subject the locals to other vexations, assaults, and iniquities, the people began to realize that these men could not, in truth, have descended from the heavens. Some of them started to conceal what food they had, others decided to send their women and children into hiding, and yet others took to the hills to get away from the brutal and ruthless cruelty that was being inflicted on them. The Christians punched them, boxed their ears and flogged them in order to track down the local leaders, and the whole shameful process came to a head when one of the European commanders raped the wife of the paramount chief of the entire island. It was then that the locals began to think up ways of driving the Europeans out of their lands and to take up arms against them. Their weapons, however, were flimsy and ineffective both in attack and in defence (and, indeed, war in the Americas is no more deadly than our jousting, or than many European children's games) and, with their horses and swords and lances, the Spaniards easily fended them off, killing them and committing all kinds of atrocities against them.

They forced their way into native settlements, slaughtering everyone they found there, including small children, old men, pregnant women, and even women who had just given birth. They hacked them to pieces, slicing open their bellies with their swords as though they were so many sheep herded into a pen. They even laid wagers on whether they could manage to slice a man in two at a stroke, or cut an individual's head from his body, or disembowel him with a single blow of their axes. They grabbed suckling infants by the feet and, ripping them from their mothers' breasts, dashed them headlong against the rocks. Others, laughing and joking all the while, threw them over their shoulders into a river, shouting: "Wriggle, you little perisher." They slaughtered anyone and everyone in their path, on occasion running through a mother and her baby with a single thrust of their swords. They spared no one, erecting especially wide gibbets² on which they could string their victims up with their feet just off the ground and then burn them alive thirteen at a time, in honour of our Saviour and the twelve

¹ *overweening* Overly proud.

² *gibbets* I.e., wooden frames upon which bodies could be hung.

Apostles, or tie dry straw to their bodies and set fire to it. Some they chose to keep alive and simply cut their wrists, leaving their hands dangling, saying to them: “Take this letter”—meaning that their sorry condition would act as a warning to those hiding in the hills. The way they normally dealt with the native leaders and nobles was to tie them to a kind of griddle consisting of sticks resting on pitchforks driven into the ground and then grill them over a slow fire, with the result that they howled in agony and despair as they died a lingering death.

It once happened that I myself witnessed their grilling of four or five local leaders in this fashion (and I believe they had set up two or three other pairs of grills alongside so that they might process other victims at the same time) when the poor creatures’ howls came between the Spanish commander and his sleep. He gave orders that the prisoners were to be throttled, but the man in charge of the execution detail, who was more bloodthirsty than the average common hangman (I know his identity and even met some relatives of his in Seville), was loath to cut short his private entertainment by throttling them and so he personally went round ramming wooden bungs¹ into their mouths to stop them making such a racket and deliberately stoked the fire so that they would take just as long to die as he himself chose. I saw all these things for myself and many others besides. And, since all those who could do so took to the hills and mountains in order to escape the clutches of these merciless and inhuman butchers, these mortal enemies of humankind trained hunting dogs to track them down—wild dogs who would savage a native to death as soon as look at him, tearing him to shreds and devouring his flesh as though he were a pig. These dogs wrought havoc among the natives and were responsible for much carnage. And when, as happened on the odd occasion, the locals did kill a European, as, given the enormity of the crimes committed against them, they were in all justice fully entitled to, the Spanish came to an unofficial agreement among themselves that for every European killed one hundred natives would be executed.

THE KINGDOMS OF HISPANIOLA

... Indeed, they invented so many new methods of murder that it would be quite impossible to set them all down on paper and, however hard one tried to chronicle them, one could probably never list a thousandth part of what actually took place. All I can say is that I know it to be an incontrovertible fact and do here so swear before Almighty God, that the local peoples never gave the Spanish any cause whatever for the injury and injustice that was done to them in these campaigns. On the contrary, they behaved as honorably as might the inmates of a well-run monastery, and for this they were robbed and massacred, and even those who escaped death on this occasion found themselves condemned to a lifetime of captivity and slavery. I would go further. It is my firm belief that not a single native of the island committed a capital offence, as defined in law, against the Spanish while all this time the natives themselves were being savaged and murdered. Despite the enormous provocation, very few of the natives, I hazard, were guilty of even those sins which do not lie within the ambit² of human law but are properly the province of God, such as hatred and anger, or the thirst for revenge against those who committed such enormities upon them. It is my own experience of these peoples, gained over many years, that they are no more given to impetuous actions or to harboring thoughts of retribution than are boys of ten or twelve years of age. I know beyond any shadow of a doubt that they had, from the very beginning, every right to wage war on the Europeans, while the Europeans never had just cause for waging war on the local peoples. The actions of the Europeans, throughout the New World, were without exception wicked and unjust: worse, in fact, than the blackest kind of tyranny.

After the fighting was over and all the men had been killed, the surviving natives—usually, that is, the young boys, the women, and the children—were shared out between the victors. One got thirty, another forty, a third as many as a hundred or even twice that number; everything depended on how far one was in the good books of the despot who went by the title of governor. The pretext under which the victims were parceled out in this way was that their new masters would then be

¹ *bungs* Plugs.

² *ambit* Scope.

in a position to teach them the truths of the Christian faith; and thus it came about that host of cruel, grasping and wicked men, almost all of them pig-ignorant, were put in charge of these poor souls. And they discharged this duty by sending the men down the mines, where working conditions were appalling, to dig for gold, and putting the women to labor in the fields and on their master's estates, to till the soil and raise the crops, properly a task only for the toughest and strongest of men. Both women and men were given only wild grasses to eat and other unnutritious foodstuffs. The mothers of young children promptly saw their milk dry up and their babies die; and, with the women and the men separated and never seeing each other, no new children were born. The men died down the mines from overwork and starvation, and the same was true of the women who perished out on the estates. The islanders, previously so numerous, began to die out as would any nation subjected to such appalling treatment. For example, they were made to carry burdens of three and four arrobas¹ for distances of up to a hundred or even two hundred leagues, and were forced to carry their Christian masters in hammocks, which are like nets slung from the shoulders of the bearers. In short, they were treated as beasts of burden and developed huge sores on their shoulders and backs as happens with animals made to carry excessive loads. And this is not to

mention the floggings, beatings, thrashings, punches, curses and countless other vexations and cruelties to which they were routinely subjected and to which no chronicle could ever do justice nor any reader respond save with horror and disbelief.

It is of note that all these island territories began to go to the dogs once news arrived of the death of our most gracious Queen Isabella, who departed this life in 1504. Up to then, only a small number of provinces had been destroyed through unjust military action, not the whole area, and news of even this partial destruction had by and large been kept from the Queen, because, she—may her soul rest in peace—took a close personal interest in the physical and spiritual welfare of the native peoples, as those of us who lived through those years and saw examples of it with our own eyes can attest. There is one other general rule in all this, and it is that, wherever the Spaniards set foot, right throughout the Americas, they subjected the native inhabitants to the cruelties of which we have spoken, killing these poor and innocent people, tyrannizing them, and oppressing them in the most abominable fashion. The longer they spent in the region the more ingenious were the torments, each crueller than the last, that they inflicted on their victims, as God finally abandoned them and left them to plummet headlong into a life of full-time crime and wickedness.

—1552

Mexico

In 1519, the Aztec² city of Tenochtitlan was the center of an ambitious and complex political network extending coast to coast in central Mexico and as far south as present-day Guatemala, encompassing millions of people and a variety of languages and cultures. The splendor and sophistication of Tenochtitlan were marvelous to the small contingent of Spanish troops, led by the conquistador Hernán Cortés, who visited the city that year—and who, less than two years later, would be responsible for its destruction. The massacre of the city's population was a key turning point in the establishment of New Spain, placing Spain on a trajectory to colonize large swaths of the western hemisphere. Western histories of this important moment in the Spanish conquest have often treated the fall of Tenochtitlan as a foregone conclusion resulting from European technological superiority, but the reality was quite different, as both Spanish and Nahuatl writings suggest.

¹ *three and four arrobas* Around 44 to 60 kilograms.

² The Nahuatl-speaking people who dominated what Western historians later named the Aztec Empire called themselves Mexica. Because the Aztec political system also incorporated numerous other cultures, this anthology uses the familiar "Aztec" in reference to the political system and Mexica in reference to the Mexica people.