Columbus Describes
His First Encounter with "Indians"

Columbus kept a diary or log of his first voyage to the New World. He used the diary to record details of navigation and, once he arrived in the Caribbean, to note the people and places he observed. When Columbus returned to Spain, he presented his diary as a gift to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. The monarchs arranged to have a copy made of the diary. The original diary disappeared, but in the 1530s a priest had access to the copy, which he transcribed, summarized, and occasionally quoted. The copy then vanished, but the priest's manuscript has survived. In the quoted passage from the priest's manuscript, excerpted here, Columbus describes his first encounters with indigenous Americans. Columbus's remarks illustrate the understandings and misunderstandings as Europeans and native Americans "discovered" one another.

The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America, 1492–1493

Thursday, 11 October. . . . What follows are the very words of the Admiral [Christopher Columbus] in his book about his first voyage to, and discovery of, these Indies. I, he says, in order that they would be friendly to us — because I recognized that they were people who would be better freed [from error] and converted to our Holy Faith by love than by force — to some of them I gave red caps, and glass beads which they put on their chests, and many other things of small value, in which they took so much pleasure and became so much our friends that it was a marvel. Later they came swimming to the ships' launches where we were and brought us parrots and cotton thread in balls and javelins and many other things, and they traded them to us for other things which we gave them, such as small glass beads and bells. In sum, they took everything and gave of what they had very willingly. But it seemed to me that they were a people very poor in everything. All of them go around as naked as their mothers bore them; and the women also, although I did not see more than one quite young girl. And all those that I saw were young people, for none did I see of more than 30 years of age. They are very well formed, with handsome bodies and good faces. Their hair [is] coarse — almost like the tail of a horse — and short. They wear their hair down over their eyebrows except for a little in the

back which they wear long and never cut. Some of them paint themselves with black, and they are of the color of the Canarians, neither black nor white; and some of them paint themselves with white, and some of them with red, and some of them with whatever they find. And some of them paint their faces, and some of them the whole body, and some of them only the eyes, and some of them only the nose. They do not carry arms nor are they acquainted with them, because I showed them swords and they took them by the edge and through ignorance cut themselves. They have no iron. Their javelins are shafts without iron and some of them have at the end a fish tooth and others of other things. All of them alike are of good-sized stature and carry themselves well. I saw some who had marks of wounds on their bodies and I made signs to them asking what they were; and they showed me how people from other islands nearby came there and tried to take them, and how they defended themselves; and I believed and believe that they come here from tierra firme to take them captive. They should be good and intelligent servants, for I see that they say very quickly everything that is said to them; and I believe that they would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to me that they had no religion. Our Lord pleasing, at the time of my departure I will take six of them from here to Your Highnesses in order that they may learn to speak. No animal of any kind did I see on this island except parrots. All are the Admiral’s words.

Saturday 13 October As soon as it dawned, many of these people came to the beach — all young as I have said, and all of good stature — very handsome people, with hair not curly but straight and coarse, like horsehair; and all of them very wide in the forehead and head, more so than any other race that I have seen so far. And their eyes are very handsome and not small and none of them are black, but of the color of the Canary Islanders. ... All alike have straight legs and no belly but are very well formed. They came to the ship with dugouts that are made from the trunk of one tree, like a long boat, and all of one piece, and worked marvelously in the fashion of the land, and so big that in some of them 40 and 45 men came. And others smaller, down to some in which came one man alone. They row with a paddle like that of a baker and go marvelously. And if it capsizes on them they then throw themselves in the water, and they right and empty it with calabashes that they carry. They brought balls of spun cotton and parrots and javelins and other little things that it would be tiresome to write down, and they gave everything for anything that was given to them. I was attentive and labored to find out if there was any gold; and I saw that some of them wore a little piece hung in a hole that they have in their noses. And by signs I was able to understand that, going to the south or rounding the island to the south, there was a king who had large vessels of it and had very much gold. I strove to get them to go there and later saw that they had no intention of going. I decided to wait until the afternoon of the morrow and then depart for the southwest, for, as many of them showed me, they said there was land to the south and to the southwest and to the northwest and that these people from the northwest came to fight them many times. And so I will go to the southwest to seek gold and precious stones. ... And these people are very gentle, and because of their desire to have some of our things, and believing that nothing will be given to them without their giving something, and not having anything, they take what they can and then throw themselves into the water to swim. But everything they have they give for anything given to them, for they traded even for pieces of bowls and broken glass cups. ... And also the
gold that they wear hung in their noses originates here; but in order not to lose time I want to go to see if I can find the island of Cipango [Japan]. Now, since night had come, all the Indians went ashore in their dugouts.

Sunday 14 October As soon as it dawned I ordered the ship’s boat and the launches of the caravels made ready and went north-northeast along the island in order to see what there was in the other part, which was the eastern part. And also to see the villages, and I soon saw two or three, as well as people, who all came to the beach calling to us and giving thanks to God. Some of them brought us water; others, other things to eat; others, when they saw that I did not care to go ashore, threw themselves into the sea swimming and came to us, and we understood that they were asking us if we had come from the heavens. And one old man got into the ship’s boat, and others in loud voices called to all the men and women: Come see the men who came from the heavens. Bring them something to eat and drink. Many men came, and many women, each one with something, giving thanks to God, throwing themselves on the ground, and they raised their hands to heaven, and afterward they called to us in loud voices to come ashore.

... [T]hese people are very naive about weapons, as Your Highnesses will see from the seven that I caused to be taken in order to carry them away to you and to learn our language and to return them. Except that, whenever Your Highnesses may command, all of them can be taken to Castile or held captive in this same island; because with 50 men all of them could be held in subjection and can be made to do whatever one might wish. ... I returned to the ship and set sail, and I saw so many islands that I did not know how to decide which one I would go to first. And those men whom I had taken told me by signs that they were so very many that they were numberless. ...

Tuesday and Wednesday 16 October. ... I came to a village where I anchored and to which had come that man whom I found mid-sea yesterday in that dugout. He had given so many good reports about us that during the whole night there was no lack of dugouts alongside the ship, to which they brought us water and of what they had. I ordered something given to each one, that is to say ten or twelve little glass beads on a thread, and some brass jingles of the sort that in Castile are worth a maravedi each, and some metal lace-ends, all of which they considered of the greatest excellence. And also I ordered them given food, in order that they might eat when they came to the ship, and molasses. And later I sent the ship’s boat to shore for water. And the natives very willingly showed my people where the water was, and they themselves brought the filled barrels to the boat and delighted in pleasing us. This island is exceedingly large and I have decided to sail around it, because according to my understanding, on or near it there is a gold mine. ... These people are like those of the ... [other] islands in speech and customs except that these now appear somewhat more civilized and given to commerce and more astute. Because I see that they have brought cotton here to the ship and other little things for which they know better how to bargain payment than the others did. And in this island I even saw cotton clothes made like small cloaks, and the people are more intelligent, and the women wear in front of their bodies a little thing of cotton that scarcely covers their genitals. ... I do not detect in them any religion and I believe that they would become Christians very quickly because they are of very good understanding. ...
Monday 22 October All this night and today I stayed waiting [to see] if the king of this place or other persons would bring gold or something else of substance; and there came many of these people, like the others of the other islands, naked and painted, some of them with white, some with red, some with black, and so on in many fashions. They brought javelins and balls of cotton to barter, which they traded here with some sailors for pieces of broken glass cups and for pieces of clay bowls. Some of them were wearing pieces of gold hanging from their noses, and they willingly gave it for a bell of the sort [put] on the foot of a sparrow hawk and for small glass beads; but it is so little that it is nothing. For it is true that any little thing given to them, as well as our coming, they considered great marvels; and they believed that we had come from the heavens.

Q U E S T I O N S  F O R  R E A D I N G  A N D  D I S C U S S I O N
1. What features of native Americans did Columbus notice? How did he believe they compared with Europeans? Why did he conclude that “they were a people very poor in everything”?
2. Why did Columbus think Indians were friendly? Can you detect hints of what the Indians might have thought about Columbus and his men? How did the two groups communicate with each other?
3. What did Indians believe, as far as Columbus could tell? Why did he assume that Indians thought he and his men came from the heavens?
4. If a diary had been kept by one of the Indians who came aboard Columbus’s ship, what might it have said about the Europeans?