

Interpreting a Primary Source: A Letter from Columbus

excerpted and adapted from

Letter from Christopher Columbus to Luis de Sant Angel, 1493

As I know you will be overjoyed about the great success I have had in my voyage, I write this to tell you how, in thirty-three days, I sailed to the Indies with the fleet that the King and Queen, our Sovereigns, gave me. I discovered a great many islands, inhabited by huge numbers of people; and I have taken possession of all of them for our rulers by proclamation and display of the national flag. There has been no opposition. I named the first island I discovered San Salvador, in commemoration of His Divine Majesty. The Indians call it Guanham. The second I named the Island of Santa Maria de Concepcion; the third, Fernandina; the fourth, Isabella; the fifth, Juana; and thus to each one I gave a new name....

I heard from other Indians that this land was an island, and thus followed the eastern coast for one hundred and seven leagues, until I came to the end of it. From that point I saw another island to the east, eighteen leagues away, to which I gave the name of Hispaniola. I went there and followed its northern coast one hundred and seventy-eight leagues to the east, as I had done in Juana. This island, like all the others, is most extensive. It has many ports along the sea-coast excelling any I have ever seen-and many fine, large, flowing rivers.

The land there is elevated, with many mountains and peaks far higher than in the center island. They are most beautiful, of a thousand different forms, accessible, and full of many kinds of trees, so high that they seem to touch the sky. I have been told that they never lose their foliage. I saw them as green and lovely

as trees are in Spain in the month of May. Some of them were covered with blossoms, some with fruit, and some had another appearance altogether. The nightingale and other small birds of a thousand kinds were singing in the month of November when I was there. There were palm trees of six or eight varieties, each one of them graceful and admirable in its own way, as are the other trees, fruits and grasses. There are wonderful pine woods, and very extensive ranges of meadow land. There is honey, and there are many kinds of birds, and a great variety of fruits. Inland there are numerous mines of metals and innumerable people....

At every point where I landed, and succeeded in talking to them, I gave them cloth and many other things without receiving anything in return. Of course, they are a hopelessly timid people. It is true that since they have gained more confidence and are losing this fear, they have no suspicions and are so generous with what they possess that no one would believe it who had not seen it. They never refuse anything when you ask for it. They even offer it themselves, and they show so much love that they would probably give their hearts if they could. Whether it be anything of great or small value, with any trifle of whatever kind, they are satisfied. I did not allow worthless things to be given to them, such as bits of broken bowls, pieces of glass, and old straps, although they were so pleased to get them, you would have thought they were the finest jewels in the world....

They firmly believed that I, with my ships and men, came from Heaven. People everywhere have received me this way, since they stopped being scared of me. They are, however, far from ignorant. They are most ingenious men, and they sail these seas in a wonderful way, and describe everything well. However, they never saw people wearing clothes before, or ships like ours