

that as Humphrey Gilbert's ship sank, he was last seen on the quarterdeck joyfully reading to his men from More's *Utopia*.

In the following passage from his book, Conquest of Paradise, Kirkpatrick Sale provides a fiercely revisionist view of Christopher Columbus and his first encounter with the New World. Columbus comes across as a typical fifteenth-century European, uninterested in nature, culturally provincial, and, above all, avaricious. Columbus and his fellows looked at the Americas, with their flora and fauna, primarily as sources of wealth, as resources for personal and national exploitation. Native Americans, in Sale's account, come across as inhabitants of an Edenic world free of conflict and perfectly attuned to nature.

1492-93

Kirkpatrick Sale

Admiral Colón [Cristobál Colón, i.e., Christopher Columbus] spent a total of ninety-six days exploring the lands he encountered on the far side of the Ocean Sea—four rather small coralline islands in the Bahamian chain and two substantial coastlines of what he finally acknowledged were larger islands—every one of which he “took possession of” in the name of his Sovereigns.

The first he named San Salvador, no doubt as much in thanksgiving for its welcome presence after more than a month at sea as for the Son of God whom it honored; the second he called Santa María de la Concepción, after the Virgin whose name his flagship bore; and the third and fourth he called Fernandina and Isabela, for his patrons, honoring Aragon before Castile for reasons never explained (possibly protocol, possibly in recognition of the chief sources of backing for the voyage).

It was not that the islands were in need of names, mind you, nor indeed that Colón was ignorant of the names the native peoples had already given them, for he frequently used those original names before endowing them with his own. Rather, the process of bestowing new names went along with “taking possession of” those parts of the world he deemed suitable for Spanish ownership, showing the royal

banners, erecting various crosses and pronouncing certain oaths and pledges. If this was presumption, it had an honored heritage: it was Adam who was charged by his Creator with the task of naming “every living creature,” including the product of his own rib, in the course of establishing “dominion over” them.

This business of naming and “possessing” foreign islands was by no means casual. The Admiral took it very seriously, pointing out that “it was my wish to bypass no island without taking possession” (October 15) and that “in all regions [I] always left a cross standing” (November 16) as a mark of Christian dominance.

But consider the implications of this act and the questions it raises again about what was in the Sovereigns' minds, what in Colón's. Why would the Admiral assume that these territories were in some way *unpossessed*—even by those clearly inhabiting them—and thus available for Spain to claim? Why would he not think twice about the possibility that some considerable potentate—the Grand Khan of China, for example, whom he later acknowledged (November 6) “must be” the ruler of Española—might descend upon him at any moment with a greater military force than his three vessels commanded and punish him for his territorial presumption? Why would he make the ceremony of possession his very first act on shore, even before meeting the inhabitants or exploring the environs, or finding out if anybody there objected to being thus possessed—particularly if they actually owned the great treasures he hoped would be there? No European would have imagined that anyone—three small boatloads of Indians, say—could come up to a European shore or island and “take possession” of it, nor would a European imagine marching up to some part of North Africa or the Middle East and claiming sovereignty there with impunity. Why were these lands thought to be different?

Could there be any reason for the Admiral to assume he had reached “unclaimed” shores, new lands that lay far from the domains of any of the potentates of the East? Can that really have been in his mind—or can it all be explained as simple Eurocentrism, or Euro-superiority, mixed with cupidity and naiveté?

In any case, it is quite curious how casually and calmly the Admiral took to this task of possession, so much so that he gave only the most meager description of the initial ceremony on San Salvador. . . . We are left only with the image of a party of fully dressed and armored Europeans standing there on the white sand in the blazing morning heat while Escobedo, with his parchment and inkpot and quill, painstakingly writes down the Admiral's oaths.

Once safely “possessed,” San Salvador was open for inspection. Now the Admiral turned his attention for the first time to the “naked people” staring at him on the beach—he did not automatically give them a name, interestingly enough, and it would be another six days before he decided what he might call them—and tried to win their favor with his trinkets.

They all go around as naked as their mothers bore them; and also the women, although I didn't see more than one really young girl. All that I saw were young people [*mancebos*], none of them more than 30 years old. They are very well built, with very handsome bodies and very good faces; their hair [*is*] coarse, almost like the silk of a horse's tail, and short. They wear their hair over their eyebrows, except for a little in the back that they wear long and never cut. Some of them paint themselves black (and they are of the color of the Canary Islanders, neither black nor

white), and some paint themselves white, and some red, and some with what they find. And some paint their faces, and some of them the whole body, and some the eyes only, and some of them only the nose.

It may fairly be called the birth of American anthropology.

A crude anthropology, of course, as superficial as Colón's descriptions always were when his interest was limited, but simple and straightforward enough, with none of the fable and fantasy that characterized many earlier (and even some later) accounts of new-found peoples. There was no pretense to objectivity, or any sense that these people might be representatives of a culture equal to, or in any way a model for, Europe's. Colón immediately presumed the inferiority of the natives, not merely because (a sure enough sign) they were naked, but because (his society could have no surer measure) they seemed so technologically backward. "It appeared to me that these people were very poor in everything," he wrote on that first day, and, worse still, "they have no iron." And they went on to prove their inferiority to the Admiral by being ignorant of even such a basic artifact of European life as a sword: "They bear no arms, nor are they acquainted with them," he wrote, "for I showed them swords and they grasped them by the blade and cut themselves through ignorance." Thus did European arms spill the first drops of native blood on the sands of the New World, accompanied not with a gasp of compassion but with a smirk of superiority.

Then, just six sentences further on, Colón clarified what this inferiority meant in his eyes:

They ought to be good servants and of good intelligence [*ingenio*]. . . . I believe that they would easily be made Christians, because it seemed to me that they had no religion. Our Lord pleasing, I will carry off six of them at my departure to Your Highnesses, in order that they may learn to speak.

No clothes, no arms, no possessions, no iron, and now no religion—not even speech: hence they were fit to be servants, and captives. It may fairly be called the birth of American slavery. . . .

To be sure, Colón knew nothing about these people he encountered and considered enslaving, and he was hardly trained to find out very much, even if he was moved to care. But they were in fact members of an extensive, populous, and successful people whom Europe, using its own peculiar taxonomy, subsequently called "Taino" (or "Taíno"), their own word for "good" or "noble," and their response when asked who they were. They were related distantly by both language and culture to the Arawak people of the South American mainland, but it is misleading (and needlessly imprecise) to call them Arawaks, as historians are wont to do, when the term "Taino" better establishes their ethnic and historical distinctiveness. They had migrated to the islands from the mainland at about the time of the birth of Christ, occupying the three large islands we now call the Greater Antilles and arriving at Guanahani (Colón's San Salvador) and the end of the Bahamian chain probably sometime around A.D. 900. There they displaced an earlier people, the Guanahacabibes (sometimes called Guanahatabeys), who by the time of the European discovery occupied only the western third of Cuba and possibly remote

corners of Española; and there, probably in the early fifteenth century, they eventually confronted another people moving up the islands from the mainland, the Caribs, whose culture eventually occupied a dozen small islands of what are called the Lesser Antilles.

The Tainos were not nearly so backward as Colón assumed from their lack of dress. (It might be said that it was the Europeans, who generally kept clothed head to foot during the day despite temperatures regularly in the eighties, who were the more unsophisticated in garmenture—especially since the Tainos, as Colón later noted, also used their body paint to prevent sunburn.) Indeed, they had achieved a means of living in a balanced and fruitful harmony with their natural surroundings that any society might well have envied. They had, to begin with, a not unsophisticated technology that made exact use of their available resources, two parts of which were so impressive that they were picked up and adopted by the European invaders: *canoas* (canoes) that were carved and fire-burned from large silk-cotton trees, "all in one piece, and wonderfully made" (October 13), some of which were capable of carrying up to 150 passengers; and *hamacas* (hammocks) that were "like nets of cotton" (October 17) and may have been a staple item of trade with Indian tribes as far away as the Florida mainland. Their houses were not only spacious and clean—as the Europeans noted with surprise and appreciation, used as they were to the generally crowded and slovenly hovels and huts of south European peasantry—but more apropos, remarkably resistant to hurricanes; the circular walls were made of strong cane poles set deep and close together ("as close as the fingers of a hand," Colón noted), the conical roofs of branches and vines tightly interwoven on a frame of smaller poles and covered with heavy palm leaves. Their artifacts and jewelry, with the exception of a few gold trinkets and ornaments, were based largely on renewable materials, including bracelets and necklaces of coral, shells, bone, and stone, embroidered cotton belts, woven baskets, carved statues and chairs, wooden and shell utensils, and pottery of variously intricate decoration depending on period and place.

Perhaps the most sophisticated, and most carefully integrated, part of their technology was their agricultural system, extraordinarily productive and perfectly adapted to the conditions of the island environment. It was based primarily on fields of knee-high mounds, called *conucos*, planted with *yuca* (sometimes called manioc), *batata* (sweet potato), and various squashes and beans grown all together in multicrop harmony: the root crops were excellent in resisting erosion and producing minerals and potash, the leaf crops effective in providing shade and moisture, and the mound configurations largely resistant to erosion and flooding and adaptable to almost all topographic conditions including steep hillsides. Not only was the *conuco* system environmentally appropriate—"conuco agriculture seems to have provided an exceptionally ecologically well-balanced and protective form of land use," according to David Watts's recent and authoritative *West Indies*—but it was also highly productive, surpassing in yields anything known in Europe at the time, with labor that amounted to hardly more than two or three hours a week, and in continuous yearlong harvest. . . .

In their arts of government the Tainos seem to have achieved a parallel sort of harmony. Most villages were small (ten to fifteen families) and autonomous, although

many apparently recognized loose allegiances with neighboring villages, and they were governed by a hereditary official called a *kaseke* (*cacique*, in the Spanish form), something of a cross between an arbiter and a prolocutor, supported by advisers and elders. So little a part did violence play in their system that they seem, remarkably, to have been a society without war (at least we know of no war music or signals or artifacts, and no evidence of intertribal combats) and even without overt conflict (Las Casas reports that no Spaniard ever saw two Tainos fighting). And here we come to what was obviously the Tainos' outstanding cultural achievement, a proficiency in the social arts that led those who first met them to comment unflinchingly on their friendliness, their warmth, their openness, and above all—so striking to those of an acquisitive culture—their generosity.

"They are the best people in the world and above all the gentlest," Colón recorded in his *Journal* (December 16), and from first to last he was astonished at their kindness:

They became so much our friends that it was a marvel. . . . They traded and gave everything they had, with good will [October 12].

I sent the ship's boat ashore for water, and they very willingly showed my people where the water was, and they themselves carried the full barrels to the boat, and took great delight in pleasing us [October 16].

They are very gentle and without knowledge of what is evil; nor do they murder or steal [November 12].

Your Highnesses may believe that in all the world there can be no better or gentler people . . . for neither better people nor land can there be. . . . All the people show the most singular loving behavior and they speak pleasantly [December 24].

I assure Your Highnesses that I believe that in all the world there is no better people nor better country. They love their neighbors as themselves, and they have the sweetest talk in the world, and are gentle and always laughing [December 25].

Even if one allows for some exaggeration—Colón was clearly trying to convince Ferdinand and Isabella that his Indians could be easily conquered and converted, should that be the Sovereigns' wish—it is obvious that the Tainos exhibited a manner of social discourse that quite impressed the rough Europeans. But that was not high among the traits of "civilized" nations, as Colón and Europe understood it, and it counted for little in the Admiral's assessment of these people. However struck he was with such behavior, he would not have thought that it was the mark of a benign and harmonious society, or that from it another culture might learn. For him it was something like the wondrous behavior of children, the naive guilelessness of prelapsarian creatures who knew no better how to bargain and chaffer and cheat than they did to dress themselves: "For a lace-point they gave good pieces of gold the size of two fingers" (January 6), and "They even took pieces of the broken hoops of the wine casks and, like beasts [*como bestis*], gave what they had" (Santangel Letter). Like beasts; such innocence was not human.

It is to be regretted that the Admiral, unable to see past their nakedness, as it were, knew not the real virtues of the people he confronted. For the Tainos' lives were in many ways as idyllic as their surroundings, into which they fit with such skill

and comfort. They were well fed and well housed, without poverty or serious disease. They enjoyed considerable leisure, given over to dancing, singing, ballgames, and sex, and expressed themselves artistically in basketry, woodworking, pottery, and jewelry. They lived in general harmony and peace, without greed or covetousness or theft. In short, as Sauer says, "the tropical idyll of the accounts of Columbus and Peter Martyr was largely true." . . .

It is perhaps only natural that Colón should devote his initial attention to the handsome, naked, naive islanders, but it does seem peculiar that he pays almost no attention, especially in the early days, to the spectacular scenery around them. Here he was, in the middle of an old-growth tropical forest the likes of which he could not have imagined before, its trees reaching sixty or seventy feet into the sky, more varieties than he knew how to count much less name, exhibiting a lushness that stood in sharp contrast to the sparse and denuded lands he had known in the Mediterranean, hearing a melodious multiplicity of bird songs and parrot calls—why was it not an occasion of wonder, excitement, and the sheer joy at nature in its full, arrogant abundance? But there is not a word of that: he actually said nothing about the physical surroundings on the first day. . . .

Eventually Colón succumbed to the islands' natural charms as he sailed on—how could he not?—and began to wax warmly about how "these islands are very green and fertile and the air very sweet" (October 15), with "trees which were more beautiful to see than any other thing that has ever been seen" (October 17) and "so good and sweet a smell of flowers or trees from the land" (October 19). But his descriptions are curiously vapid and vague, the language opaque and lifeless. . . .

You begin to see the Admiral's problem: he cares little about the features of nature, at least the ones he doesn't use for sailing, and even when he admires them he has little experience in assessing them and less acquaintance with a vocabulary to describe them. . . .

Such was his ignorance—a failing he repeatedly bemoaned ("I don't recognize them, which gives me great grief," October 19)—that when he did stop to examine a species he often had no idea what he was looking at. "I saw many trees very different from ours," he wrote on October 16, "and many of them have branches of many kinds, and all on one trunk, and one twig is of one kind and another of another, and so different that it is the greatest wonder in the world how much diversity there is of one kind from the other. That is to say, one branch has leaves like a cane, and another like mastic, and thus on one tree five or six kinds, and all so different." There is no such tree in existence, much less "many of them," and never was: why would anyone imagine, or so contrive, such a thing to be? . . .

This all seems a little sad, revealing a man rather lost in a world that he cannot come to know, a man with a "geographic and naturalistic knowledge that doesn't turn out to be very deep or nearly complete," and "a limited imagination and a capacity for comparisons conditioned by a not very broad geographic culture," in the words of Gaetano Ferro, a Columbus scholar and professor of geography at the University of Genoa. One could not of course have expected that an adventurer and sailor of this era would also be a naturalist, or necessarily even have some genuine interest in or curiosity about the natural world, but it is a disappointment

nonetheless that the Discoverer of the New World turns out to be quite so simple, quite so inexperienced, in the ways of discovering his environment. . . .

MONDAY, 15 OCTOBER: And so I departed when it was about 10 o'clock with the wind southeast shifting to the south, to go to the other island, which is very big, and where all those men that I am taking from San Salvador make signs that there is a lot of gold and that they wear it in bracelets on their arms and their legs and their ears and their noses and their chests. . . . I do not wish to delay but to discover and go to many islands to find gold. And since the people make signs that they wear it on their arms and their legs, and it is gold because I showed them some pieces that I have, I cannot fail with Our Lord's help to find out where it comes from.

One measure that Colón could make, and did so frequently, was the utilitarian: if he was not up to describing natural beauty or distinguishing trees, he was a master at determining the potential use and value of all that he saw, even when (as so often) he was deluding himself. Nature for him was all one form of treasure or another, whether aloes, mastic, spices, cinnamon, nutmeg, dyes, or medicines, or gold and silver and pearls—it hardly mattered as long as it could be sold in Europe. "Columbus's attitude to nature," says the Italian scholar Antonello Gerbi in his authoritative study *Nature in the New World*, "is strictly subordinated to his ambitions," ambitions largely of riches; or, as the Spanish scholar Ramón Iglesia has put it somewhat more starkly, Colón was nothing more than "a businessman" describing resources for potential markets. . . .

But the treasure that Colón wanted most of all—and kept convincing himself he was on the verge of discovering—was gold. Following the Admiral on his three rather cursory days on San Salvador and then on his fruitless rounds of one Bahamian island after another, one feels it was nothing less than an obsession. There were 16 references to gold, some of them lengthy, in the two weeks he spent on these first islands, another 13 during his coasting of Cuba, and finally no fewer than 46 during his scant five weeks on Española. (The word *oro* is used in these references 23 times in the outislands, 19 times along Cuba, and 98 times in Española.) It was the one constant of his *Journal*, the one recurrent goal, and on some days he seemed hardly able to get it out of his mind.

The fixation was evident from the start. On his second day, tiring of the gifts of cotton and parrots and "other trifles" the Tainos lavished on him, he "worked hard to know if there was any gold," and finally noticed that "some of them wore a little piece" in their noses; in the next breath he somehow understood the islanders to say that to the south "there was a king there who had great vessels of it and possessed a lot." Never mind that for the next eight weeks he did not find more than scattered tiny bits of gold jewelry ("so little it amounts to nothing at all," October 22), he interpreted every sign, every conversation in tongues he knew not, as telling him that on the next island "there is a lot of gold . . . there is a mine of gold. . . ."

One might even say the Admiral was driven by this quest, and at times he was even apologetic about it: "There may be many things that I don't know, for I do not wish to delay but to discover and go to many islands to find gold" (October 15); "I

will not delay here any longer . . . [or] go to the town . . . so as not to delay much, since I see that there's no mine of gold here" (October 23). . . .

The Admiral then ordered that there should be no trading with those who came out to the ships in their canoes with cotton skeins and "other little things," in order that "they might surmise that the Admiral wanted nothing but gold" (November 11). Still no treasures appeared. Hearing tales of people who "gather gold on the beach by candles at night" (November 12), Colón headed off on a long journey to the southeast, but as he went along not only was there no gold to be found, there were not even any people: all fled their villages at the first sight of the three white men's ships. Frustration mounted still further.

By the middle of December, after two full months of exploring the islands, Colón had found no more than the smallest traces of gold, nothing more than a few grains worn as decorations, and he seemed on the verge of despair: "The breezes were like April in Castile," he reported on December 13, grasping at atmospheric straws, "the nightingale and other little birds were singing as in that month in Spain. . . . They saw many mastic trees and aloes and cotton trees," he went on, but—one feels it was painful to record—"gold they found not." . . .

Even the golden trinkets and little pieces Colón did find, given to him freely by the obliging Tainos if he did no more than admire them, were never enough in themselves: each one in his eyes betokened vast mines and hoards of gold somewhere else, beyond, in the river farther east, in the interior, on the next island, around the next promontory. Gold, there must be gold here, there *had* to be—and when, at one point, the Tainos saw how joyous the Admiral became with their little gifts of gold ("they rejoiced much to see the Admiral merry"), they reassured him that farther inland "there was a great quantity of gold. . . and told him that there he would find as much as he might want" (December 26).

Alas, they had no idea, and it would be a few years before they found out, that there was in truth no such quantity.

SUNDAY, 21 OCTOBER: I sought here to fill up all the containers on the ships with water . . . and afterwards I will depart for another very large island that I believe must be Cipango according to the description of these Indians whom I carry. . . . But in any case I am determined to go to the mainland and to the city of Quisay [Quinsay] and to present Your Highnesses' letters to the Grand Khan, and to ask for a reply and come home with it.

It was on October 17, after nearly a week in the islands, that Colón first declared that he was somewhere in "the Indies" (all earlier references being clearly Las Casas's words), and not until October 21 did he put forth the idea that he was somewhere in the vicinity of the Grand Khan. It was patent by then that he was not actually in Marco Polo's Orient of marble and gold nor in the fabled islands of monsters and treasures, but he must have been genuinely perplexed as to where he really was. Under the circumstances he no doubt figured that a vague unspecified "the Indies" would do for his crew, and his journal.

But it did present something of a dilemma. How was he going to justify this expensive voyage to the Spanish court and the financiers who had put up the money,

some of it personally to him, if there was nothing here of the "Pearls, Precious Stones, Gold, Silver," etc., he was sent to find?

His first thought was that he might be in the vicinity of the Grand Khan, that one of these large islands, in fact, was part of the Chinese mainland, and so twice he sent missions inland to make contact with what he hoped would be the court of Quinsay. The reports back not only were negative but must have convinced him that such an idea was fanciful, for after no more than a week he gave up the search for the Chinese ruler—the last reference is on November 1—and soon merely suggested that the cities of the Grand Khan "doubtless will be discovered" (November 12).

His next thought was that if he wasn't on the mainland he must be among the thousands of outlands in the China Sea—"all these islands of India," he decided on November 12—and that it would be simplicity itself on the next voyage to visit the court of the Khan, for "from here to *tierra firme* [the mainland] was a journey of ten days" (October 28). All very well and good, but what then had that left him for *this* voyage? No king, no palace, no great cities—and no gold—but the Admiral finally perceived now that these islands were not nearly so poor as they seemed to be at first, and in fact held hidden wealth, hidden possibilities for Spanish grandeur. The Admiral thus began to discover "a thousand kinds of fruit . . . and all should be very profitable" (November 4), trees "that he recognized . . . to be mastic" (November 5), a "very fine" cotton tree that "gives fruit the year round" (November 6), "tremendous quantity of mastic . . . a great quantity of cotton . . . an endless quantity of aloes" (November 12), not to mention magnificent harbors, lofty hills, "immense riches and precious stones and spiceries" (November 14), and of course, just over the next hill, gold mines of great munificence. After a month in the islands, in fact, Colón made but one more glancing reference to the Grand Khan and did not mention China or its ruler again, even dropping the use of "Indies" entirely until the journey home. . . .

So much for the Grand Scheme. He had not reached Asia, if that's what he had sought, but only the route thereto "over there"; he had not found much treasure to speak of, only uncertain promises of it everywhere; and there was no mainland of any kind, eastern or southern, only a string of small, green islands. The rest of his life—with three more journeys and some seven years in these islands—would be spent trying to justify this strange, uncharacterizable discovery: to himself, to his Sovereigns, to his countrymen, to Europe.

MONDAY, 5 NOVEMBER: At dawn, he ordered the ship and the other vessels to be pulled out ashore [for cleaning and pitching], but not all at the same time, so that two should always remain in the place where they were for security; although he says that these people were very safe. . . . He says further that this harbor of Mares is among the better ones in the world and has the best breezes and the most gentle people, and because it has a cape of high rock, where a fortress could be built, so that if that trade became a rich and great thing, the merchants would all be protected there from other nations, and he says that Our Lord, in whose hands are all victories, leads the way to all things that will be done in His service.

One of the alternative possibilities for future Spanish glory in these none too promising islands suggested itself to Colón almost from the first. On his third day of exploration—a Sunday at that—he had set out to see "where there might be a fortress [built]" and in no time at all found a spit of land on which "there might be a fortress"—and from which "with fifty men they [the Tainos] could all be subjected and made to do all that one might wish" (October 14). Now, during the second leg of exploration along the north coast of Cuba, this grew into a full-blown fantasy of a colonial outpost, complete with a rich trade and merchants. . . .

Now there was no particular reason to go about constructing fortresses—"I don't see that it would be necessary, because these people are very unskilled in arms" (October 14)—but that was the way his architectural imagination, suffused with his vision of colonial destiny, seemed to work: a spit of land, a promontory, a protected harbor, and right away he saw a fort. Such was the deeply ingrained militarism of fifteenth-century Europe, in which fortresses represent edifices more essential to civilization even than churches or castles.

It may have been that Colón began his explorations with nothing more than an idea of establishing some sort of entrepôt in these islands, a fortress-protected trading post rather like the one the Portuguese had established, and Colón had perhaps visited, on the Gold Coast of Africa, at El Mina. But as he sailed along the coast of Cuba he seems to have contrived something even grander, not just a trading port but an outright colonial settlement, an outpost of empire where Spaniards would settle and prosper, living off the labor of the natives ("Command them to do what you will," December 16) and the trade of the Europeans. . . .

It may fairly be called the birth of European colonialism.

Here, for the first time that we know, are the outlines of the policy that not only Spain but other European countries would indeed adopt in the years to come, complete with conquest, religious conversion, city settlements, fortresses, exploitation, international trade, and exclusive domain. And that colonial policy would be very largely responsible for endowing those countries with the pelf, power, patronage, and prestige that allowed them to become the nation-states they did.

Again, one is at a loss to explain quite why Colón would so casually assume a right to the conquest and colonialization, even the displacement and enslavement, of these peaceful and inoffensive people 3,000 miles across the ocean. Except, of course, insofar as might, in European eyes, made that right, and after all "they bear no arms, and are all naked and of no skill in arms, and so very cowardly that a thousand would not stand against [aguardariá] three" (December 16). But assume it he did, and even Morison suggests that "every man in the fleet from servant boy to Admiral was convinced that no Christian need do a hand's turn of work in the Indies; and before them opened the delightful vision of growing rich by exploiting the labor of docile natives." The Admiral at least had no difficulty in seeing the Tainos in this light: "They are fit to be ordered about and made to work, to sow and do everything else that may be needed" (December 16); "nothing was lacking but to know the language and to give them orders, because all that they are ordered to do they will do without opposition" (December 21). . . .

SUNDAY, 9 DECEMBER: This day it rained and the weather was wintry as in Castile in October. . . . The island is very big, and the Admiral says it would not be surprising if it is two hundred leagues around. . . . This harbor at its entrance is a thousand *pasos* wide, which is a quarter of a league. . . . Facing it are some plains [*vegas*], the most beautiful in the world, and almost like the lands of Castile; rather, these are better, for which he gave the name to the said island *la Ysla Española*.

Rain and cold were no doubt fitting companions for the Admiral's mood, which must have been dark indeed as he came to his sixth and (what would turn out to be) last island, *Española*. For after two months of exploration, there was virtually nothing to show for it, and the whole voyage was likely to be written off by the Sovereigns, and history, as a foolish and expensive profligacy. The Indians were singularly uncooperative, most of them running away as soon as they saw the European ships put in. The weather was rotten and the seas so high and winds so strong that Colón dared not leave his harbor here for days on end. And to top it off, Martín Alonso Pinzón had abruptly deserted the fleet two weeks before, with no explanation and not so much as a *by-your-leave*, taking the *Pinta* off to the east as the Admiral was sailing on a tack north of Cuba—and what if he were the one to find gold and pack on sail to get back to Palos and win all the glory? Island plains, however beautiful—one so lovely that Colón would name it, tellingly, *Valle del Parayso*—were surely scant recompense.

The depleted fleet finally resumed its coasting after five days of this miserable weather, putting into this harbor and that along the north coast of Colón's *Ysla Española*. And then, finally, on December 17, *gold*, or at least enough of it for a gold leaf "as big as a hand" and some small pieces, and signs that there would be more, "and the Admiral believed that he was very near the source, and that Our Lord would show him where the gold came from." . . . So, at last, the justification for all the hardship, all the peril, seemed to be at hand.

The Admiral was in a most expansive mood. "Your Highnesses may believe," he wrote on December 24, "that in all the world there can be no better or gentler people":

Your Highnesses should take great joy because soon they will become Christians and be instructed in the good customs of your realms, for neither better people nor land can there be. . . . All are of the most singular loving behavior and speak pleasantly, not like the others [unspecified] who it seems when they speak are making threats; and they are of good stature, men and women, and not black. . . . And the houses and villages are so pretty [*hermosos*] and with government in all, such as a judge or lord, and all obey him so that it is a marvel. And all these lords are of few words and very attractive manners; and their commands are for the most part effected by signs of the hand, so soon understood that it is a marvel.

So expansive indeed, that he ordered that these people be entertained on board the ships ("more than a thousand persons had come to the ship" by canoe, and "more than five hundred came to the ship swimming for want of canoes") and after due celebration he even decided that he would sail on that night to visit Guacanagari,

just down the coast, and see what his promises of gold were all about. It was Christmas Eve.

The wind was light and the seas calm—as "in a porringer," the Admiral noted—and the clear skies above showed the crescent of a new moon low on the horizon, as the two ships, the *Niña* in the lead, made their way slowly along the coast. . . .

Not long after midnight, with the groomet at the helm and the Admiral asleep, the *Santa María* hit a coral reef a few miles from the shore and "went upon it so gently that it was hardly felt." The boy "gave tongue," the Admiral leapt from his bed, the sailors whose watch it was ran on deck. Colón gave orders for the longboat to carry an anchor astern to try to ease the ship off, but once set free of the flagship the sailors in the longboat unaccountably made for the *Niña*, sailing nearby—perhaps to alert it to the grounding and enlist its aid, or perhaps, so the Admiral says, "they cared for nothing but to flee to the caravel" (though if that was really the case he inexplicably did nothing thereafter to chastise or punish the deserters). In any case, the ship was quickly fixed firmly on the reef, her stern swung around so that the whole beam drove against the coral, and each wave lifted her up and down on the hard, sharp extrusions of the rock. Within hours "the planking opened" and she took in so much water that she was listing hopelessly into the surf. The Admiral ordered his flagship abandoned and watched in the light of the dawn as she began to break up and sink. . . .

There seemed to be nothing for it but to begin the colonial strategy immediately: there were something like sixty men or more with but a single small caravel at their disposal, so obviously some would have to be left behind and become the willy-nilly beachhead of the imperial project. Colón gave "orders to erect a tower and fortress, all very well done, and a great moat, not that I believe it to be necessary for these people. . . . But it is right that this tower should be built, and that it be as it should be, being so far from Your Highnesses, that they may recognize the skill [*insenio*] of Your Highnesses' people and what they can do, so that they may obey them with love and fear." There can be no irony in this, yet when Colón returned eleven months later the tragic nuance of those words would be all too clear: by then "these people" had certainly seen what the Spanish colonists could do.

In spite of what he recorded as "the anguish and pain which he had received and kept from the loss of the ship," Colón took considerable consolation from the prospect of establishing his new colony, which he named *La Navidad* in honor of the Day of Nativity on which its inadvertent founding took place. Naturally he thought he detected God's hand in all this—he "recognized that Our Lord had caused the ship to run aground there, in order that he might found a settlement there" (December 26)—and even declared that "it is the best place in all of the island to make a settlement" (January 6), despite the fact that it was a patently poor harbor, fully exposed to northern storms, perhaps as ill chosen a spot as could be found along that coast. Using the timber salvaged from the *Santa María*, and with the help of the willing *Tainos*, in a few days the Spaniards had constructed the essential buildings of the village. The first structure erected by Europe in the New World was a fortress. . . .

Originally, so he tells us (October 19), Colón had planned to return to Castile sometime in April, when, he presumably knew from his earlier travels, the North

Atlantic would be past its winter storm season. But now, after the wreck of the *Santa María* and with news that the *Pinta* was not far away, he apparently decided to sail back immediately. It was a risky decision and most unseamanlike—as he would soon discover, when he was blown off course and almost capsized by two fierce storms in February and March—that leads one to assume that the Admiral's need was dire. Yet all he ever said, a few days later, was that he intended to head back home "without detaining himself further," because "he had found that which he was seeking" (January 9) and intended "to come at full speed to carry the news" (January 8).

Strange locutions, those, and never explained: what, after all, *had* he found, and why exactly did he have to go at full speed, and why was he determined to set sail into the Atlantic in midwinter? There is a likely answer, but since it is never stated outright we are forced to tease it out from the few suggestions the *Journal* offers.

It was on the day that news came that Pinzón and the *Pinta* were farther down the coast of Española that the Admiral first decided to depart, and it was three days after he finally met up with Pinzón on January 6 that he spoke of having found "that which he was seeking." Could it be that on his detour Pinzón had actually found "the mines of gold" in the interior of Española, and had first conveyed that and then demonstrated it to the Admiral? Certainly he had put in at some harbor closer to the interior mountains of Española, where there were in fact gold nuggets to be found—Colón confirmed this on the Second Voyage—and where several of the rivers actually do wash gold dust down from the mountains—as Colón confirmed on January 8, when he explored one such river and called it Rio del Oro because its sand was "all full of gold, and of such quality that it is marvelous." . . .

And if so, might that not be the reason Colón wanted to get back to Castile in such unseemly, such unseamanly, haste, so that the crafty Pinzón might not go off by himself again and, supported by all his friends from Palos, claim to Castile that he was the one who really found all that was worth finding in the islands? And also the reason Colón never came right out and gave Pinzón due credit for his crucial discovery, instead burying it in such confusing prose that most historians to this day have concluded, quite wrongly, that there was scant gold on Española and Pinzón, the deserter, had no part in finding it anyway. . . .

Whatever the reasons for his haste, the Admiral certainly made his way along the remainder of the island's coast with great alacrity, and little more than a week after he met up with Pinzón, the two caravels were off on the homeward leg. Only one notable stop was made, at a narrow bay some 200 miles east of La Navidad, where a party Colón sent ashore discovered, for the first time, some Indians with bows and arrows.

The Admiral having given standing orders that his men should buy or barter away the weaponry of the Indians—they had done so on at least two previous occasions, presumably without causing enmity—these men in the longboat began to dicker with the bowmen with the plumes. After just two bows were sold, the Indians turned and ran back to the cover of the trees where they kept their remaining weapons and, so the sailors assumed, "prepared . . . to attack the Christians and capture them." When they came toward the Spaniards again brandishing ropes—almost certainly meaning to trade these rather than give up their precious bows—

the sailors panicked and, "being prepared as always the Admiral advised them to be," attacked the Indians with swords and halberds, gave one "a great slash on the buttocks" and shot another in the breast with a crossbow. The Tainos grabbed their fallen comrades and fled in fright, and the sailors would have chased them and "killed many of them" but for the pilot in charge of the party, who somehow "prevented it." It may fairly be called the first pitched battle between Europeans and Indians in the New World—the first display of the armed power, and the will to use it, of the white invaders.

And did the Admiral object to this, transgressing as it did his previous idea of trying to maintain good relations with the natives so as to make them willing trading partners, if not docile servants? Hardly at all: now, he said, "they would have fear of the Christians," and he celebrated the skirmish by naming the cape and the harbor de las Flechas—of the Arrows. . . .

WEDNESDAY, 16 JANUARY: He departed three hours before daybreak with the land breeze from the gulf which he called Golfo de las Flechas. . . . He . . . turned to the direct course for Spain northeast by east. . . . After losing sight of the cape that he named San Theramo on the Island Española, which was sixteen leagues to the west, he made twelve leagues to the east by north, accompanied by very fine weather.

Thus ended that most portentous event, the first encounter of the Old World with the New, though the representatives of neither one would have known to call it that, any more than they could have begun to imagine its consequences. The depleted fleet, now with about fifty crewmen and perhaps two dozen Taino captives, both ships taking on water, set their prows to the north and to the latitude where the Admiral believed he would find the westerlies that would take him back to Spain.

January was an especially fitting month for this crossing, for it is the month named for the god Janus, in ancient times the god of the doorway, and hence of beginnings, of both time and place, of which there has never been a more consequential example. It was after that same god that the first king of Italy was named, the great-grandson of Noah, so it is said . . . and the founder of Genoa.

SUGGESTED READINGS

General

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