

Christopher Columbus

Letter from Christopher Columbus (1493) [Abridged]

Letter from Christopher Colom [Columbus]: to whom our age owes much; on the recently discovered Islands of India beyond the Ganges. In the search for which he had been sent out eight months earlier under the auspices and at the expense of the most invincible Ferdinand and Helisabet [Isabella], rulers of Spain: addressed to the magnificent Lord Gabriel Sanchis [Sanchez] treasurer of these most serene highnesses; which the noble and learned man Leander de Cosco translated from the Spanish into Latin on the third day before the calends of May [i.e., 29 April] 1493, in the first year of the pontificate of Alexander VI."

AS I know that it will afford you pleasure that I have brought my undertaking to a successful result, I have determined to write you this letter to inform you of everything that has been done and discovered in this voyage of mine.

On the thirty-third day after leaving Cadiz I came into the Indian Sea, where I discovered many islands inhabited by numerous people. I took possession of all of them for our most fortunate King by making public proclamation and unfurling his standard, no one making any resistance. To the first of them I have given the name of our blessed Saviour, whose aid I have reached this and all the rest; but the Indians call it Guanahani. To each of the others also I gave a new name, ordering one to be called Sancta Maria de Concepcion, another Fernandina, another Isabella, another Juana; and so with all the rest. As soon as we reached the island which I have just said was called Juana, I sailed along its coast some considerable distance towards the West, and found it to be so large, without any apparent end, that I believed it was not an island, but a continent, a province of Cathay. But I saw neither towns nor cities lying on the seaboard, only some villages and country farms, with whose inhabitants I could not get speech, because they fled as soon as they beheld us. I continued on, supposing I should come upon some city, or country-houses. At last, finding that no discoveries rewarded our further progress, and that this course was leading us towards the North, which I was desirous of avoiding, as it was now winter in these regions, and it had always been my intention to proceed Southwards, and the winds also were favorable to such desires, I concluded not to attempt any other adventures; so, turning back, I came again to a certain harbor, which I had remarked. From there I sent two of our men into the country to learn whether there was any king or cities in that land. They journeyed for three days, and found innumerable people and habitations, but small and having no fixed government; on which account they returned. Meanwhile I had learned from some Indians, whom I had seized at this place, that this country was really an island. Consequently I continued along towards the East, as much as 322 miles, always hugging the shore. Where was the very extremity of the island, from there I saw another island to the Eastwards, distant 54 miles from this Juana, which I named Hispana; and proceeded to it, and directed my course for 564 miles East by North as it were, just as I had done at Juana...

In the island, which I have said before was called Hispana, there are very lofty and beautiful mountains, great farms, groves and fields, most fertile both for cultivation and for pasturage, and well adapted for constructing buildings. The convenience of the harbors in this island, and the excellence of the rivers, in volume and salubrity, surpass human belief, unless one should see them. In it the trees, pasture-lands and fruits differ much from those of Juana. Besides, this Hispana abounds in various kinds of species, gold and metals. The inhabitants of both sexes of this and of all the other island I have seen, or of which I have any knowledge, always go as

naked as they came into the world, except that some of the women cover their private parts with leaves or branches, or a veil of cotton, which they prepare themselves for this purpose. They are all, as I said before, unprovided with any sort of iron, and they are destitute of arms, which are entirely unknown to them, and for which they are not adapted; not on account of any bodily deformity, for they are well made, but because they are timid and full of terror. They carry, however, canes dried in the sun in place of weapons, upon whose roots they fix a wooded shaft, dried and sharpened to a point. But they never dare to make use of these; for it has often happened, when I have sent two or three of my men to some of their villages to speak with the inhabitants, that a crowd of Indians has sallied forth; but when they saw our men approaching, they speedily took to flight, parents abandoning children, and children their parents. This happened not because any loss or injury had been inflicted upon any of them. On the contrary I gave whatever I had, cloth and many other things, to whomsoever I approached, or with whom I could get speech, without any return being made to me; but they are by nature fearful and timid. But when they see that they are safe, and all fear is banished, they are very guileless and honest, and very liberal of all they have. No one refuses the asker anything that he possesses; on the contrary they themselves invite us to ask for it. They manifest the greatest affection towards all of us, exchanging valuable things for trifles, content with the very least thing or nothing at all. But I forbade giving them a very trifling thing and of no value, such as bits of plates, dishes, or glass; also nails and straps; although it seemed to them, if they could get such, that they had acquired the most beautiful jewels in the world. For it chanced that a sailor received for a single strap as much weight of gold as three sold solidi; and so others for other things of less price, especially for new blancas, and for some gold coins, for which they gave whatever they seller asked; for instance, an ounce and a half or two ounces of gold, or thirty or forty pounds of cotton, with which they were already familiar. So too for pieces of hoops, jugs, jars, and pots they bartered cotton and gold like beasts. This I forbade, because it was plainly unjust; and I gave them many beautiful and pleasing things, which I had brought with me, for no return whatever, in order to win their affection, and that they might become Christians and inclined to love our King and Queen and Princes and all the people of Spain; and that they might be eager to search for and gather and give to us what they abound in and we greatly need.

They do not practice idolatry; on the contrary, they believe that all strength, all power, in short all blessings, are from Heaven, and I have come down from there with these ships and sailors; and in this spirit was I received everywhere, after they had got over their fear. They are neither lazy nor awkward; but, on the contrary, are of an excellent and acute understanding. Those who have sailed these seas give excellent accounts of everything; but they have never seen men wearing clothes, or ships like ours.

As soon as I had some into this sea, I took by force some Indians from the first island, in order that they might learn from us, and at the same time tell us what they knew about affairs in these regions. This succeeded admirably; for in a short time we understood them and they us both by gesture and signs and words; and they were of great service to us. They are coming now with me, and have always believed that I have come from Heaven, notwithstanding the long time they have been, and still remain, with us. They were the first who told this wherever we went, one calling to another, with a loud voice, Come, Come, you will see Men from Heaven. Whereupon both women and men, children and adults, young and old, laying aside the fear they had felt a little before, flocked eagerly to see us, a great crowd thronging about our steps, some bringing food, and others drink, with greatest love and incredible good will.

In each island are many boats made of solid wood; though narrow, yet in length and shape similar to our two-bankers, but swifter in motion, and managed by oars only. Some of them are

large, some small, and some of medium size; but most are larger than a two-banker rowed by 18 oars. With these they sail to all the islands, which are innumerable; engaging in traffic and commerce with each other. I saw some of these biremes, or boats, which carried 70 or 80 rowers. In all these islands there is no difference in the appearance of the inhabitants, and none in their customs and language, so that all understand one another. This is a circumstance most favorable for what I believe our most serene King especially desires, that is, their conversion to the holy faith of Christ; for which, indeed, so far as I could understand, they are very ready and prone...

I saw no monsters, neither did I hear accounts of any such except in an island called Charis, the second as one crosses over from Spain to India, which is inhabited by a certain race regarded by their neighbors as very ferocious. They eat human flesh, and make use of several kinds of boats by which they cross over to all the Indian islands, and plunder and carry off whatever they can. But they differ in no respect from the others except in wearing their hair long after the fashion of women. They make use of bows and arrows made of reeds, having pointed shafts fastened to the thicker portion, as we have before described. For this reason they are considered to be ferocious, and the other Indians consequently are terribly afraid of them; but I consider them of no more account than the others. They have intercourse with certain women who dwell alone upon the island of Mateurin, the first as one crosses from Spain to India. These women follow none of the usual occupations of their sex; but they use bows and arrows like those of their husbands, which I have described, and protect themselves with plates of copper, which is found in the greatest abundance among them.

I was informed that there is another island larger than the aforesaid Hispana, whose inhabitants have no hair; and that there is a greater abundance of gold in it than in any of the others. Some of the inhabitants of these islands and of the others I have seen I am bringing over with me to bear testimony to what I have reported. Finally, to sum up in a few words the chief results and advantages of our departure and speedy return, I make this promise to our most invincible Sovereigns, that, if I am supported by some little assistance from them, I will give them as much gold as they have need of, and in addition spices, cotton and mastic, which is found only in Chios, and as much aloes-wood, and as many heathen slaves as their majesties may choose to demand; besides these, rhubarb and other kinds of drugs, which I think the men I left in the fort before alluded to, have already discovered, or will do so; as I have delayed nowhere longer than the winds compelled me, except while I was providing for the construction of a fort in the city of Nativity, and for making all things safe....

Therefore let King and Queen and Princes, and their most fortunate realms, and all other Christian provinces, let us all return thanks to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who has bestowed so great a victory and reward upon us; let there be processions and solemn sacrifices prepared; let the churches be decked with festal boughs; let Christ rejoice upon Earth as he rejoices in Heaven, as he foresees that so many souls of so many people heretofore lost are to be saved; and let us be glad not only for the exaltation of our faith, but also for the increase of temporal prosperity, in which not only Spain but all Christendom is about to share. As these things have been accomplished so have they been briefly narrated. Farewell.

Source: The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History Online Portal
<http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/exploration/resources/columbus-reports-his-first-voyage-1493>