Journal of Christopher Columbus, 1492, (Excerpt)

Italian explorer Christopher Columbus’s voyage to the Western Hemisphere in 1492 was one of the most significant events in modern history, bringing together for the first time the civilizations of Europe and the Americas. He kept a journal of his travels, which was lost upon his death. Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Spanish priest and famous Amerindian advocate, had access to the journal prior to its disappearance and wrote out his own interpretation—the only remaining copy of Columbus’s personal travel records. In it, Las Casas incorporates many direct quotations from “the Admiral,” as Columbus was called. The following are entries from his journal describing Columbus’s first encounter with the Americas and its native peoples:

Wednesday, October 10.

He sailed to the west-south-west and they went at the rate of 10 miles per hour and at times 12, and sometimes 7, and during the day and night they made 59 leagues. He told the people 44 leagues and no more. Here the people could no longer suffer the journey. They complained of the long voyage: but the Admiral encouraged them as well as he was able, giving them good hope of the benefits they would receive, and adding that for the rest it was useless to complain since he had come in search of the Indies, and thus he must pursue his journey until he found them, with the aid of our Lord.

Thursday, October 11.

He sailed to the west-south-west. They had a much higher sea than they had had in all the voyage. They saw petrels and a green branch, near the ship. Those on the caravel Pinta saw a reed and a stick and they took another small stick formed as it appeared with iron, and a piece of a reed and other grass which grows on land, and a small board. Those on the caravel Nina also saw other indications of land and a little branch full of dog-roses. With these signs every one breathed and rejoiced. They went 27 leagues during this day up to sunset.

After sunset he sailed on his first course to the west. They went 12 miles each hour and up to two hours after midnight they went about 90 miles which are 22 1/2 leagues. And because the caravel Pinta was the best sailor and was going ahead of the Admiral, land was discovered by her people and the signs which the Admiral had ordered were made. A sailor called Rodrigo de Traina saw this land first, although the Admiral at 10 o’clock at night being in the stern forecastle saw a light, but it was so concealed that he would not declare it to be land: but he called Pero Gutierrez Groom of the Chamber of the King, and said to him that it appeared to be a light, and asked him to look at it: and he did so and saw it. He also told Rodrigo Sanchez de Segovia, whom the King and Queen sent with the
fleet as Inspector, who saw nothing because he was not where he could see it. After the Admiral told it, it was seen once or twice, and it was like a small wax candle which rose and fell, which hardly appeared to be an indication of land. But the Admiral was certain that they were near land. For this reason, when they said the Salve which all the sailors are in the habit of saying and singing in their way and they were all assembled together, the Admiral implored and admonished them to guard the stern forecastle well and search diligently for land and said that to whomever should first see land he would then give a silk doublet, besides the other gifts which the Sovereigns had promised them, which was an annuity of 10,000 maravedis to whomever should first see land. At two hours after midnight the land appeared, from which they were about two leagues distant. They lowered all the sails and remained with the cross-jack-sail, which is the great sail without bonnets, and lay to, standing off and on until the day, Friday, when they reached a small island of the Lucayas which is called in the language of the Indians, Guanahani. Then they saw naked people and the Admiral landed in the armed boat with Martin Alonso Pinzon and Vincente Yanez, his brother, who was captain of the Nina. The Admiral took the royal banner and the two captains had two banners of the Verde Cruz, which the Admiral carried on all the ships as a sign, with an F. and a Y. The crown of the Sovereigns surmounted each letter and one was one side of the + and the other the other side. Having landed they saw very green trees and much water and many fruits of different kinds. The Admiral called the two captains and the others who landed and Rodrigo De scoredo, Notary of all the Fleet, and Rodrigo Sanchez of Segovia, and told them to bear him witness and testify that he, in the presence of them all, was taking, as in fact he took possession of the said isle, for the King and for the Queen, his Lords, making the protestations which were required, as contained more at length in the depositions which were made there in writing. Then many of the people of the island gathered there. The following is in the exact words of the Admiral in his book of his first voyage and discovery of these Indies:

"That they might feel great friendship for us and because I knew they were a people who would better be freed and converted to our Holy Faith by love than by force,—I gave them some red caps and some glass beads which they placed around their necks, and many other things of small value with which they were greatly pleased, and were so friendly to us that it was wonderful. They afterwards came swimming to the two ships where we were, and bringing us parrots and cotton thread wound in balls and spears and many other things, and they traded them with us for other things which we gave them, such as small glass beads and hawk's bells. Finally they took everything and willingly gave what things they had. Further, it appeared to me that they were a very poor people, in everything. They all go naked as their mothers gave them birth, and the women also, although I only saw one of the latter who was very young, and all those whom I saw were young men, none more than thirty years of age. They were very well built with very handsome bodies, and very good faces. Their hair was almost as coarse as horses' tails and short, and they wear it over the eyebrows, except a small quantity behind, which they wear long and never cut. Some paint
themselves blackish, and they are of the colour of the inhabitants of the Canaries, neither black nor white, and some paint themselves white, some red, some whatever colour they find: and some paint their faces, some all the body, some only the eyes, and some only the nose. They do not carry arms nor know what they are, because I showed them swords and they took them by the edge and ignorantly cut themselves. They have no iron: their spears are sticks without iron, and some of them have a fish’s tooth at the end and others have other things. They are all generally of good height, of pleasing appearance and well built: I saw some who had indications of wounds on their bodies, and I asked them by signs if it was that, and they showed me that other people came there from other islands near by and wished to capture them and they defended themselves: and I believed and believe, that they come here from the continental land to take them captive. They must be good servants and intelligent, as I see that they very quickly say all that is said to them, and I believe that they would easily become Christians, as it appeared to me that they had no sect. If it please our Lord, at the time of my departure, I will take six of them from here to your Highnesses that they may learn to speak. I saw no beast of any kind except parrots on this island." All are the words of the Admiral.

Saturday, October 13.

"At dawn many of these men came to the shore, all young men as I have said and all of good height, a very handsome people. Their hair is not curly but hanging and coarse like horsehair, and all the forehead and head is very wide, more than any other race seen until now, and their eyes are very handsome and not small. And none of them are blackish but the colour of the inhabitants of the Canaries; nor should anything else be expected since this place is on a line east and west with the island of Hierro in the Canaries. Their legs are in general very straight and they are not corpulent, but very well formed. They came to the ship with canoes, which are made from the trunk of a tree, like a long boat and all in one piece, and very wonderfully fashioned for the country, and large enough so that 40 or 45 men came in some of them, and others were smaller, some so small that only one man came in them. They rowed with a paddle and go wonderfully well; and if they upset, then they all commence to swim and bail them out with gourds, which they carry. They brought balls of spun cotton and parrots and spears and other small things which it would be tedious to write about, and gave everything for whatever might be given them. And I was attentive and sought to learn whether they had gold and I saw that some of them wore a small piece suspended from a hole they have in the nose: and I was able to understand by signs that, going to the south or going around the island to the south, there was a King who had large vessels of gold and who had a great deal of it. I tried to have them go there and afterward saw that they were not interested in going, I determined to wait until afternoon of the next day and then leave for the south-west, for according to what many of them showed me, they said that there was land to the south and to the south-west and to the north-west: and that these people from the north-west came to fight them many times and
thus to go to the south-west in search of gold and precious stones. This island is very large and very level and has very green trees and many waters and a very large lake in the centre, without any mountain, and all so green that it is a pleasure to behold it. The people are very mild and on account of desiring our things, believing that they will not be given them without they give something, and they have nothing,—they take what they can, and then throw themselves into the water and swim. But they give all they have for whatever thing may be given them. They traded for even pieces of pitchers and broken glasses so that I saw 16 balls of cotton given for three ceotis of Portugal which are worth one blanca of Castile, and in the balls there would be more than an arroba of spun cotton. I forbade this and would not allow anything to be taken unless I should order everything taken for your Highnesses if there is a quantity. It [cotton] grows here on this island, but on account of brevity of time I could not give an account of everything: and also the gold which they wear hanging at the nose is found here. But in order not to lose time I wish to go and see if I can encounter the island of Cipango. Now, as it was night, all went to land with their canoes."

Sunday, October 14.

"At dawn, I ordered the ship's small boat prepared and the boats belonging to the caravels and went along the island toward the north-north-east to see the other part of it, which was the opposite part from the east and also to see the villages: and I saw then two or three, and the people all came to the shore calling us and giving thanks to God; some brought us water, others brought other things to eat. Others when they saw that I did not care to land threw themselves into the sea and came swimming and we understood that they asked us if we came from heaven. An old man came in to the boat and the others called loudly to all the men and women: Come and see the men who came from heaven: bring them something to eat and to drink. Many came and many women, each one with something, giving thanks to God, throwing themselves on the ground and lifting their hands toward heaven, and afterwards they called loudly to us to go to land; but I was afraid because of seeing a great reef of rocks which encircles all that island and the water is deep within and forms a port for as many ships as there are in Christendom: and the entrance to it is very tortuous. It is true there are some shoals in it, but the sea does not move any more than in a well. And I went this morning in order to see all this, that I might be able to give an account of everything to your Highnesses and also to see where I might be able to build a fortress, and I saw a piece of land formed like an island, although it is not one, on which there were six houses, but which could be made an island in two days. Although I do not believe it to be necessary, because this people are very simple in matters of arms, as your Highnesses will see by the seven which I took captive to be carried along and learn our speech and then be returned to their country. But when your Highnesses order it, all can be taken, and carried to Castile or held captives on the island itself, because with 50 men all can be subjugated and made to do everything which is desired. Then, near the said small island, there were orchards of trees, the most beautiful that I saw, and as green and with
leaves like those of Castile in the months of April and May, and there was much water. I saw all that harbour and afterward I returned to the ship and made sail and saw so many islands that I could not decide which to visit first, and those men whom I had taken, told me by signs, that there were many, and so many that they could not be numbered, and they enumerated by their names more than one hundred. Therefore I looked for the largest and determined to go to it, and this I am doing. It may be five leagues distant from this island of San Salvador, and some of the others are farther from it, some not as far. All are very level without mountains and very fertile and all inhabited, and the inhabitants make war against each other although they are very simple and fine looking men.”

**Citation Information**

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