

Christopher Columbus, *Journal* (1492)

... This present year of 1492, after Your Highnesses had brought to an end the war with the Moors who ruled in Europe and had concluded the war in the very great city of Granada, where this present year on the second day of the month of January I saw the Royal Standards of Your Highnesses placed by force of arms on the towers of the Alhambra, which is the fortress of the said city; and I saw the Moorish King come out to the gates of the city and kiss the Royal Hands of Your Highnesses and of the Prince my Lord; and later in that same month, because of the report that I had given to Your Highnesses about the lands of India and about a prince who is called "Grand Khan," which means in our Spanish language "King of Kings"; how, many times, he and his predecessors had sent to Rome to ask for men learned in our Holy Faith in order that they might instruct him in it and how the Holy Father had never provided them; and thus so many peoples were lost, falling into idolatry and accepting false and harmful religions; and Your Highnesses, as Catholic Christians and Princes, lovers and promoters of the Holy Christian Faith, and enemies of the false doctrine of Mahomet and of all idolatries and heresies, you thought of sending me, Christobal Colon, to the said regions of India to see the said princes and the peoples and the lands, and the characteristics of the lands and of everything and to see how their conversion to our Holy Faith might be undertaken. And you commanded that I should not go to the East by land, by which way it is customary to go, but by the route to the West, by which route we do not know for certain that anyone previously has passed. So, after having expelled all the Jews from all of your Kingdoms and Dominions, in the same month of January Your Highnesses commanded me to go, with a suitable fleet, to the said regions of India. And for that you granted me great favors and ennobled me so that from then on I might call myself "Don" and would be Grand Admiral of the Ocean Sea and Viceroy and perpetual Governor of all the islands and lands that I might discover and gain and [that] from now on might be discovered and gained in the Ocean Sea; and likewise my eldest son would succeed me and his son him, from generation to generation forever. And I left the city of Granada on the twelfth day of May in the same year of 1492 on Saturday, and I came to the town of Palos, which is a seaport, where I fitted out three vessels very well suited for such exploits; and I left the said port, very well provided with supplies and with many seamen, on the third day of August of the said year, on a Friday, half an hour before sunrise; and I took the route to Your Highnesses' Canary Islands, which are in the said Ocean Sea, in order from there to take my course and sail so far that I would reach the Indies and give Your Highnesses' message to

those princes and thus carry out that which you had commanded me to do. And for this purpose I thought of writing on this whole voyage, very diligently, all that I would do and see and experience, as will be seen further along....

Thursday 11 October

He [sometimes Columbus refers to himself in the third person] steered west-southwest. They took much water aboard, more than they had taken in the whole voyage. They saw petrels and a green bulrush near the ship. The men of the caravel *Pinta* saw a cane and a stick, and took on board another small stick that appeared to have been worked with iron, and a piece of cane, and other vegetation originating on land, and a small plank. The men of the caravel *Nina* also saw other signs of land and a small stick loaded with barnacles. With these signs everyone breathed more easily and cheered up. On this day, up to sunset, they made 27 leagues.

After sunset he steered on his former course to the west. They made about 12 miles each hour and, until two hours after midnight, made about 90 miles, which is twenty-two leagues and a half. And because the caravel *Pinta* was a better sailor and went ahead of the Admiral it found land and made the signals that the Admiral had ordered. A sailor named Rodrigo de Triana saw this land first, although the Admiral, at the tenth hour of the night, while he was on the sterncastle saw a light, although it was something so faint that he did not wish to affirm that it was land. But he called Pero Gutierrez, the steward of the king's dais, and told him that there seemed to be a light, and for him to look: and thus he did and saw it. He also told Rodrigo Sanchez de Segovia, whom the king and queen were sending as *veedor* of the fleet, who saw nothing because he was not in a place where he could see it. After the Admiral said it, it was seen once or twice; and it was like a small wax candle that rose and lifted up, which to few seemed to be an indication of land. But the Admiral was certain that they were near land, because of which when they recited the *salve*, which sailors in their own way are accustomed to recite and sing, all being present, the Admiral entreated and admonished them to keep a good lookout on the forecastle and to watch carefully for land; and that to the man who first told him that he saw land he would later give a silk jacket in addition to the other rewards that the sovereigns had promised, which were ten thousand *maravedis* as an annuity to whoever should see it first. At two hours after midnight the land appeared, from which they were about two leagues distant. They hauled down all the sails and kept only the *tree*, which is the

mainsail without bonnets, and jogged on and off, passing time until daylight Friday, when they reached an islet of the Lucayas, which was called Guanaham in the language of the Indians. Soon they saw naked people; and the Admiral went ashore in the armed launch, and Martin Alonso Pinzon and his brother Vicente Anes, who was captain of the *Nina*. The Admiral brought out the royal banner and the captains two flags with the green cross, which the Admiral carried on all the ships as a standard, with an F and a Y, and over each letter a crown, one on one side and the other on the other. Thus put ashore they saw very green trees and many ponds and fruits of various kinds. The Admiral called to the two captains and to the others who had jumped ashore and to Rodrigo Descobedo, the *escrivano* of the whole fleet, and to Rodrigo Sanchez de Segovia; and he said that they should be witnesses that, in the presence of all, he would take, as in fact he did take, possession of the said island for the king and for the queen his lords, making the declarations that were required, and which at more length are contained in the testimonials made there in writing. Soon many people of the island gathered there.

What follows are the very words of the Admiral in his book about his first voyage to, and discovery of, these Indies. 1, he says, in order that they would be friendly to us -- because I recognized that they were people who would be better freed 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 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.... 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 *tierrafirme* 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...

. . . 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 there a king who had large vessels of it and had very much gold.... This island is quite big and very flat and with very green trees a l and much water and a very large lake in the middle and without any mountains; and all of it so green that it is a pleasure to look at it. 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....

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. ... And I saw a piece of land formed like an island, although it was not one, on which there were six houses. This piece of land might in two days be cut off to make an island, although I do not see this to be necessary since these people are very naive about weapons, as Your Highnesses will see from 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. And later [I noticed], near the said islet, groves of trees, the most beautiful that I saw and with their leaves as green as those of Castile in the months of April and May, and lots of water. I looked over the whole of that harbor and afterward 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. And they named by their names more than a hundred. Finally I looked for the largest and to that one I decided to go and so I am doing. It is about five leagues distant from this island of San Salvador, and tile others of them some more, some less. All are very flat without mountains and very fertile and all populated and they make war on one another, even though these men are very simple and very handsome in body...

Sunday 4 November

... The Admiral showed cinnamon and pepper to a few of the Indians of that place (it seems from the samples that he was bringing from Castile) and he

says that they recognized it; and they said by signs that nearby to the southeast there was a lot of it. He showed them gold and pearls, and certain old men answered that in a place that they called Bohio there was a vast amount and that they wore it on neck and in ears and on arms and legs; and also pearls. Moreover, he understood that they said that there were big ships and much trade and that all of this was to the southeast. He understood also that, far from there, there were one-eyed men, and others, with snouts of dogs, who ate men, and that as soon as one was taken they cut his throat and drank his blood and cut off his genitals. The Admiral decided to return to the ship to wait for the two men whom he had sent and to decide whether to leave and seek those lands, unless the two men brought good news of that which they desired....

Tuesday 6 November

... They saw many kinds of trees and plants and fragrant flowers; they saw birds of many kinds, different from those of Spain, except partridges and nightingales, which sang, and geese, for of these there are a great many there. Four-footed beasts they did not see, except dogs that did not bark. The earth was very fertile and planted with those *manes* and bean varieties very different from ours, and with that same millet. And they saw a large quantity of cotton collected and spun and worked; and in a single house they had seen more than five hundred *arrobas*; and that one might get there each year four thousand *quintales*. The Admiral says that it seemed to him that they did not sow it and that it produces fruit [i.e., cotton] all year. It is very fine and has a large boll. Everything that those people have, he says, they would give for a very paltry price, and that they would give a large basket of cotton for the tip of a lacing or anything else given to them. They are people, says the Admiral, quite lacking in evil and not warlike; all of them, men and women naked as their mothers bore them. It is true that the women wear a thing of cotton only so big as to cover their genitals and no more. And they are very respectful and not very black, less so than Canarians. I truly believe, most Serene Princes (the Admiral says here), that, given devout religious persons knowing thoroughly the language that they use, soon all of them would become Christian. And so I hope in Our Lord that Your Highnesses, with much diligence, will decide to send such persons in order to bring to the Church such great nations and to convert them, just as you have destroyed those that (lid not want to confess the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and that after your days (for all of us are mortal) you will leave your kingdoms in a tranquil state, free of heresy and evil, and will be well received before the

Eternal Creator, may it please Whom to give you long life and great increase of your kingdoms and dominions and the will and disposition to increase the Holy Christian Religion, as up to now you have done, amen. Today I pulled the ship off the beach and made ready to leave on Thursday, in the name of God, and to go to the southeast to seek gold and spices and to explore land. All these are the Admiral's words. He intended to leave on Thursday, but because a contrary wind came up he could not leave until the twelfth of November...

Source: E. G. Bourne, ed., *The Northmen, Columbus and Cabot* (New York, 1906).