

Columbus and the Natives, 1492-1493

Investigation: Differences as Clues

When people from very different cultures come into contact, each group will react to the differences between their own ways of living and that of the other group. This can provide “windows” through which we can see some of the characteristics of both groups.

Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of the islands of the West Indies was the first contact between the native people and southern Europeans. There are no records from the viewpoint of the natives. However, it’s possible to *infer* much information about both Spaniards (sponsors of the voyage) and the natives from the reports of Columbus to Spanish officials.

Columbus was Italian, but his ideas, beliefs, and way of living were generally very similar to those of the Spaniards.

Part of his first report follows. *Almost every sentence* will allow you to infer something about either:

- Columbus (and most people of Spain and Italy), or
- The native people.

March 14, 1493 [*to Spanish rulers and officials*]

KNOWING that it will give you pleasure to learn that I have brought my undertaking to a successful end, I decided to write you this letter to acquaint you with all the events which have occurred in my voyage, and the discoveries which have resulted from it. Thirty-three days after my departure [*from the Canary Islands*] I reached the Indian Sea, where I discovered many islands, thickly peopled, of which I took possession without resistance in the name of our most illustrious monarch, by public proclamation and with unfurled banners.

(To be continued)

Step 1 *Prepare two lists, one labeled “Inferences about the Spanish,” the other “Inferences about the natives.” (You can safely assume that the opinions of Columbus would have been the same as most Spanish people.)*

Step 2 *Use the following clues to analyze just the second sentence (to find information by inferring), and fill out your two lists. This will work best if you discuss it with others.*

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Thirty-three days after my departure [*from the Canary Islands, possession of Spain*], ...

What does this suggest about the transportation technology of Columbus and the Spanish? What were they using for transportation? Use a globe or map (or Google Earth®) to figure out about how fast they were traveling. (Columbus initially found islands in the Bahamas—scholars disagree about which island he contacted first, but the possible islands are all about the same distance from Spain.)

<http://www.factmonster.com/ipka/A0875904.html>

...I reached the Indian Sea, ...

Europeans knew that India was part of Asia. What does this suggest about Columbus' ideas about the earth?

...where I discovered many islands, thickly peopled, ...

What does this suggest about the transportation technology of the natives? What does this tell you about their population and population density?

...of which I took possession...

What does this suggest about the ideas held by Columbus about the rights of the Spanish and the rights of the natives?

...without resistance...

What does this suggest about the ways of acting of the natives?

...in the name of our most illustrious monarch...

Look up any words you don't understand. What does this suggest about ideas of Columbus and the Spaniards?

...by public proclamation and unfurled banners.

Identify some ways of acting of Columbus and the Spaniards.

Step 3 *Continue by analyzing the rest of the letter. Dig deeply, and spend time thinking about each phrase. If possible, work with others, and discuss each phrase. If you complete this quickly, you probably haven't gone deeply enough in your analysis.*

(Continued from previous)

To the first of these islands I gave the name of the blessed Savior [*San Salvador*], under whose protection I had reached this and other islands. To each island I gave a name, ordering that one should be called Santa Maria de la Concepción, another Fernandina, the third Isabella, the fourth Juana [*later named Cuba*] and so on. . .

As soon as we arrived at the island I named Juana [*Cuba*], I proceeded along its coast a short distance westward. I saw no towns or populous places on the seacoast, but only a few detached houses and cottages. I was unable to communicate with the inhabitants because they ran away as soon as they saw us. I went on further, thinking that I should certainly find some city or village.

(Continued)

Eventually I decided to turn back to a bay that I had observed. I sent two of our men to find out whether there were a king or any cities in that region. These men explored the country for three days. They found many people and great numbers of houses, though small and built without any regard to order.

I sailed toward the east, and I saw another island, 54 miles distant from Juana, to which I gave the name of Espanola [Hispaniola]. I went there and steered my course eastward along the north coast. . .

The inhabitants of both sexes in this island, and in all the others which I have seen or of which I have received information, go around as naked as they were born. The only exception is some of the women, who use the covering of a leaf or small bough or an apron of cotton. None of them have any iron, nor do they have weapons. They do not know about weapons and cannot use them, not because their bodies are deformed (for they are well formed) but because they are timid and full of fear. Instead of weapons, they carry canes dried in the sun, on the ends of which they fix heads of dried wood sharpened to a point, and even these they dare not use habitually. Often when I have sent two or three of my men to any of the villages to speak with the natives, they have come out in a disorderly troop. They ran away in such haste at the approach of our men that the fathers deserted their children and the children deserted their fathers. This timidity did not arise from any loss or injury that they had received from us. I gave to all I met articles I had with me, such as cloth and many other things, taking nothing of theirs in return; but they are naturally timid and fearful.

As soon, however, as they see that they are safe and have laid aside all fear, they are very simple and honest and exceedingly generous with all they have. None of them refuses to give away anything he may possess when he is asked for it, but, the contrary, they invite us to ask them. They exhibit great love toward all others in preference to themselves. They also give objects of great value for trifles, and content themselves with very little or nothing in return. I, however, stopped my men from giving away these trifles and articles of no value (such as pieces of dishes, plates, and glass, keys, and leather straps). Those who obtained these objects imagined themselves to be possessed of the most beautiful trinkets in the world.

It even happened that a sailor received for a leather strap as much gold as was worth three golden nobles [*English gold coin circulated in Europe, one-quarter troy ounce*]. For things of more trifling value offered by our men, especially newly coined *blancas* [*small coin of low value*] or any gold coins, the Indians would give whatever the seller required. For example, some sailors received an ounce and a half or two ounces of gold, or thirty or forty pounds of cotton. Thus they bartered, like idiots, cotton and gold for fragments of bows, glasses, bottles, and jars. I ended this trading by the sailors because it was not fair to the Indians. I myself gave them many beautiful and acceptable articles which I had brought with me, taking nothing from them in return. They practice no kind of idolatry, but have a firm belief that all strength and power, and indeed all good things, are in heaven. They thought that I had descended from heaven with these ships and sailors. They received me with this belief after they had thrown aside their fears. Nor are they slow or stupid, but of very clear understanding; and those men who have crossed to the neighboring islands give an admirable description of everything they observed; but they never saw any people clothed nor any ships like ours.

(Continued)

On my arrival at that sea, I had taken some Indians by force from the first island that I came to, in order that they might learn our language and communicate to us what they knew respecting the country. This plan succeeded excellently and was a great advantage to us, for in a short time, either by gestures and signs or by words, we were enabled to understand each other. These men are still traveling with me, and although they have been with us now a long time, they continue to entertain the idea that I have descended from heaven. On our arrival at any new place they made this known to the local people, crying out immediately with a loud voice to the other Indians, "Come, come and look upon beings of a celestial race." When the people got rid of their initial fear, both women and men, children and adults, young men and old, would come out in throngs, crowding the roads to see us. Some brought us food, others drink, with astonishing affection and kindness.

Each of these islands has a great number of canoes, built of solid wood, narrow and similar to our double-banked boats in length and shape, but faster. They steer them only by the oar. These canoes are of various sizes, but the greater number are constructed with eighteen banks of oars, and with these they cross to the many other islands. I saw some of these canoes that held as many as seventy-eight rowers. In all these islands there is no difference of body form, of ways of acting, or of language, but they all clearly understand each other. . .

As far as I have learned, every man throughout these islands has one wife, with the exception of the kings and princes, who are allowed to have twenty. The women seem to work more than the men. I could not clearly understand whether the people possess any private property, for I observed that one man had the charge of distributing various things to the rest, especially meat and provisions and the like. I did not find, as some of us had expected, any cannibals among them, but, on the contrary, men of great deference and kindness.

This letter is written by Columbus, so it tells about the events only from his point of view. If the story was told by a West Indian native, how might the story be different?

In what ways could the attitudes and motivations of Columbus, and his expectations about the Spanish rulers and officials, have affected what he wrote?

How might your own attitudes and ideas affect what you've inferred from Columbus's Letter? Would others probably come to the same inferences as you? Explain.

Teacher/Mentor Notes:

The mental process used most often for analyzing primary sources is almost certainly *inferring*. Learners coming at this investigation cold will likely find it challenging. Columbus' letter is a complex but rich piece of primary data. Unfortunately, if the traditional sequence of American history topics is followed, this investigation would occur early in the year, before students have had much practice with active learning and the processes of inquiry.

If you use this supplementary unit as part of an American history course, consider delaying it until later in the year, taking it out of sequence. Optionally, you might introduce learners to the process of inferring using investigations suggested in <http://www.marionbrady.com/Americanhistory/AdditionalNotes.pdf>. As with many investigations, that one may be more effective if learners work in small groups, then share their conclusions with the class. We suggest you also use small groups for the initial discussion of Columbus's letter. Analysis of the second sentence should probably be done with a reasonable time limit. Each group should then present its conclusions to the entire class for comparison and discussion.

Analysis of the remainder of Columbus's letter (or assigned parts of the letter) may be done as a small group activity as well. Once learners are comfortable with the inferring process, some later portions of the letter might be assigned as individual work. With some learners, particularly younger ones, the detailed analysis of the first section is sufficient, and the remainder of the letter may simply be read without analysis.

If done properly, in-depth investigations of this sort are unavoidably time consuming. Any teacher expecting to "cover the material" in a typical American history book may be inclined to avoid their use. However, we've learned that once learners get past their initial resistance to doing things differently, most will be (1) more motivated by activity of this sort than by reading and hearing the usual story, (2) will remember far more of the content a year later, and (3) will improve in their mental skills for information processing. *We believe that developing the ability to infer is much more important than learning about the first voyage of Columbus.*

Besides inferring, other mental processes (comparing, math calculation, etc.) are also required by some data and questions, of course.

Additional questions or suggestions that may be used to guide inquiry:

- ***What were the main ideas or goals that motivated Columbus?***
- ***How did these goals affect the Spanish treatment of the natives?***
- ***Compare the tools and techniques—the technology—of the Spanish and the natives. Is one superior to the other? What advantage might each technology have for their users?***
- ***Should people with more powerful technology have the right to control others?***
- ***Should Columbus Day be a national holiday in the United States?***

Of course, the enormous ethical issues raised by the history of the treatment of the natives by Europeans begin here, and continue indefinitely. Columbus and his brothers were later censured by the Spanish authorities for their brutal treatment of the people they encountered and subjugated. A summary, "Brief Account of the Destruction of the

Indies,” written in 1542 by Dominican Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, is readily available in several translations on the Internet.

Robert D. Shepherd summarizes in <https://dianeravitch.net/2018/10/14/bob-shepherd-ruminates-on-the-sad-history-of-columbus-day/>:

“Columbus thought he had landed near Japan. He wrote a letter back home saying that the natives were so “artless” and “generous” that it would be easy to have whatever he wanted of them. He was...looking for a quick and easy route to the Far East so that he could trade in spices, silks, gemstones, and so on. When he didn’t find those, he set up a quota for gold to be delivered to him by every native over 14 years of age. When they didn’t meet their quotas, he cut off pieces of their anatomy—fingers, hands, feet. But there was no gold. [Ed. Note—Hispaniola did have some gold, and the Spanish used natives as slaves to mine it, as stated below.]

“Terrified by the prospect of displeasing his sponsors back home, he hit upon enslaving the natives to work in mines and to produce crops that could be traded or sold. He instructed his overseers to pull one of the enslaved natives from the fields every once in a while and slaughter him or her in full view of the others to encourage them to work harder. He wrote a letter back home telling a friend that it was easy to keep his men in line by rationing out to them the native females for sexual purposes. He said, “THOSE FROM NINE TO TEN are now in demand.” He set armored dogs on the indigenous babies and toddlers for sport. He instituted the first European-run slave plantations in the New World AND the first trans-Atlantic slave trading. In a couple decades, he had almost entirely wiped out the Caribbean Arawaks—an estimated quarter of a million of them.

“We have a contemporary account of these depredations by a priest named Bartolomeo de las Casas who, horrified, witnessed them first-hand and wrote a book to try to get King Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain, to make it stop.

(Excerpt from de las Casas’ account:)

<https://faculty.chass.ncsu.edu/slatta/hi216/documents/dlascasas.htm> ...when the Spaniards saw, they came with their Horsemen well armed with Sword and Lance, making most cruel havocs and slaughters among them. Overrunning Cities and Villages, where they spared no sex nor age; neither would their cruelty pity Women with child, whose bellies they would rip up, taking out the Infant to hew it in pieces. They would often lay wagers who should with most dexterity either cleave or cut a man in the middle, or who could at one blow cut off his head. The children they would take by the feet and dash their innocent heads against the rocks, and when they were fallen into the water, with a strange and cruel derision they would call upon them to swim. Sometimes they would run both Mother and Infant, being in her belly quite through at one thrust. They erected certain Gallowses, that were broad but so low, that the tormented creatures might touch the ground with their feet, upon every one of which they would hang thirteen persons, blasphemously affirming that they did it in honor of our Redeemer and his Apostles, and then putting fire under them, they burnt the poor wretches alive.

Those whom their pity did think fit to spare, they would send away with their hands half cut off, and so hanging by the skin.

(Columbus Day has become a day of celebration of heritage for Italian-Americans, but a movement to replace it with “Indigenous People’s Day” is active. Perhaps a compromise is appropriate, such as “Heritage Day.”)

Expansion: As a possible computer-based expansion of this activity, learners could use Google Earth® and other Internet resources to investigate the question, “Where did Columbus make the first landing?” The traditional location is San Salvador Island (formerly Watling Island) in the Bahamas. It was selected because it’s the closest island to Europe in the approximate path the ships followed, and because some of its geography fits the rather meager description given by those present on the voyage—e.g. the “*lago*” they mentioned may refer to the brackish lake the occupies much of the central part of the island.

Many of those I know who have spent time on San Salvador Island (I’ve been there several times—HB) are skeptical about its being the first landing site. The island is quite small, reducing the odds of encountering it, and the entire east coast is guarded out a half mile or more by large coral heads, each averaging about 20 feet in diameter, closely spaced, with flat tops that are awash at high tide. Columbus is lucky that his ships didn’t encounter this shore at night—the voyage could well have ended in shipwreck. The account stated that his arrival was at the east side of the island, and that sailing along the coast of the island the day after the first landing, he encountered three Indian villages, which comes across as a description of a significantly longer coast than that of San Salvador.

Samana Cay, farther south, has been proposed as a possible site, particularly in a *National Geographic* article several years ago.

For several reasons, I believe that the most logical landing site is on Bahama’s Long Island, west and south of San Salvador. In the first place, it would be difficult to miss, since it really is long, as a look on Google Earth will show. Second, there’s no reef blocking the east coast; there’s deep water up to near the shore, making it easy to land. Third, those recording the voyage mention passing a light in the night, which must have been a fire or torch on an occupied island the ships sailed past. This fire could have been on either San Salvador or Rum Cay. (There’s no candidate island for this light if the ships landed on San Salvador.) Finally, the “*lago*” mentioned in the accounts could either be one of several ponds that are on part of the island, or the shallow lagoon on the west side of the narrow strip of land. [Expansion added by Howard Brady 12/18/14.]

As a “Right Here, Right Now” conclusion to the unit, “Investigation: Checklists” (following, page 9) may be used after completing the historical material. Note that the newspaper-based investigation gives a subtle introduction to elements of the Model that will be developed later.

Note: Introductory activities “Investigation: Drawing Inferences” (three pennies) and “Investigation: What’s Important” (history of learner’s morning) were moved to the

“Additional Notes for Teachers/Mentors” file:

<http://www.marionbrady.com/Americanhistory/AdditionalNotes.pdf>

(Minor changes 5/2/20)

Investigation: Checklists

Newspaper reporters have the same problem as historians. When assigned to report a news event, the reporter's job is to help readers understand a "piece" of reality. And like historians, reporters need to decide what to put in a story and what to leave out.

A long time ago, someone decided that a newspaper story should answer the five questions, "Who, what, where, when, why?" This is a kind of "checklist" that every reporter uses to make sure everything important is included. And, of course, anything that doesn't answer one of these questions clearly and accurately should be left out of the reporter's story.

An even tougher question for the reporter (and for the newspaper's editors) is whether a story is worth reporting in the first place. If they decide it IS, they must then decide whether it belongs on the front page or elsewhere and, if it belongs on the front page, whether to put it above or below the fold. The position of the story in the newspaper, and the amount of space given to it, indicates the importance assigned to the story by the editors.

1. *Obtain the front section of a daily newspaper. Identify the top five news stories, based on location and space given to them.*
2. *For each of these stories, copy the headline, then list the probable reason or reasons why that story was considered important by the newspaper editors.*
3. *Do you agree with the editor's choices about what's important? Why should a news event be considered important? Make a list of reasons that fit any news story, not just the five.*
4. *Choose one story from the five, cut out the story and attach it to blank paper. A colored pencil will help with the next step. Use the reporter's checklist ("Who, what....") to analyze it. Circle words or phrases that answer one of the five questions, draw a line to the margin, and write in the "W" question that the word or phrase answers.*

(Note that not every story will have answers to all five questions. Frequently the "Why?" reasons will not be given, either because it is obvious, or because the reporter doesn't know the answer.)

