BACKGROUND

Europeans during the era of exploration and expansion were surprised and intrigued by what their mariners, merchants, and missionaries encountered in Asia and Africa, but nothing prepared them for their explorers’ discoveries across the Atlantic. No one knew what to make of two vast continents filled with strange plants and animals and, even more intriguingly, peoples whose values, beliefs, customs, crops, clothes, weapons, and appearances differed from anything they had experienced or even imagined. The result was an outpouring of published books, treatises, and commentaries that catered to Europeans’ interest in the Americas. Some read these books out of simple curiosity or because they were titillated by tales of nudity and cannibalism. Others, however, sought answers to weightier questions. Were the Indians, as Columbus called them, fully human? Did they have souls and the gift of reason? Or were they essentially savages, who by their very nature were inferior to Europeans and other inhabitants of the Old World? Finding answers to these questions was important because such perceptions greatly influenced how the Native Americans were treated once they came under the political control of Spain and Portugal and later France, England, and the Netherlands.

Finding answers was difficult, however, for there was little consensus among European writers about the Native Americans’ essential characteristics. This is hardly surprising, given the many differences among the Native Americans themselves. What one writer said about the Aztecs — whose agrarian-based economy supported a capital city, Tenochtitlán, with a population between 200,000 and 250,000 — would be far different from another writer’s commentary on Native Americans who lived in small bands of hunters, fishermen, and foragers. Views of the Native Americans also depended on an author’s individual experiences and perspective. Many writers made pronouncements about Native Americans and many artists depicted them in paintings, woodcuts, and engravings without having stepped foot in the Americas. They relied on others’ firsthand accounts and interpreted those accounts in ways that reflected what they knew of “different” peoples of Africa or Asia or what they had read in medieval travel literature or ancient geographies. Even those who encountered Native Americans in person drew conclusions about their characteristics that were affected by the observers’ backgrounds, expectations, and self-interest.
THE SOURCES

Fittingly, the first excerpt comes from a letter written by Christopher Columbus. It was written to Luis de Santangel, a counselor to King Ferdinand of Aragon, who, along with Queen Isabella of Castile, had sponsored Columbus’s first transatlantic voyage in 1492. Columbus, who composed this letter during his return trip to Europe in January 1493, was eager to convince his readers that his discoveries would pay rich dividends in gold, spices, and converts to Christianity. As a result, his letter exaggerates the wealth of the newly discovered islands, and it ignores the fact that he had lost his flagship, the Santa Maria, when it was wrecked on a reef off present-day Haiti. You can judge if he also describes the native peoples he encountered in such a way that his royal patrons would hear what they wanted to hear.

The next source is a woodcut, believed to have been printed by the Froschauer publishing firm of Augsburg, Germany, in 1505. The first printed illustration of Native Americans, it was published not as part of a book, but as a broadsheet—a single page that was sold for a few pennies. No one knows who carved the woodcut, but it probably was based on two recently published letters ascribed to the Florentine merchant, explorer, and cartographer Amerigo Vespucci, after whom the Americas are named. Vespucci made two documented trips to the east coast of South America between 1499 and 1502 and claims to have made two more. If Vespucci’s writings did indeed inspire the woodcut, then the people depicted are probably the Tupinamba of Brazil.

The next two excerpts were written by participants in a famous debate before King Charles I of Spain in 1550 over the true nature of Native Americans and whether the Spaniards were justified in enslaving them. The Spanish scholar and philosopher Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda argued in the affirmative. Born in 1490 into an aristocratic family, Sepúlveda studied at the University of Alcalá and then pursued an academic career in Italy. He spent his last years in Spain, where he was court historian for King Charles I and his son Philip II. He was famous for his studies of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who had written in the Politics, “Where then there is such a difference as that between soul and body, or between men and animals . . . the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master.” Sepúlveda first stated his position on the treatment of Native Americans in 1547 in Democrates Secundus, or The Just Causes of War Against the Indians.

Arguing against Sepúlveda was Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566), a Spanish Dominican friar famous for defending Native Americans’ rights. Las Casas had been a soldier before sailing to Hispaniola in 1502 in the entourage of Nicholas de Ovando, the new Spanish governor of the island. He received grants of land from the governor and fought in the Spanish conquest of Cuba between 1511 and 1515, but in 1515 he returned to Spain, where he lobbied for more humane treatment of the Indians. In 1519, with royal approval, he established a cooperative Spanish-Indian farming community in Venezuela, which he hoped would be a model for similar collaborative experiments. After his farm failed, he became a Dominican and dedicated himself to writing and working on behalf of the Indians. His many books revealed (and probably exaggerated) the Spaniards’ cruelties in the New World. His views so struck the conscience of Charles I that the king arranged the
Las Casas–Sepúlveda debate in 1550. The following excerpt is drawn from Las Casas’s response to Sepúlveda in the debate. Entitled In Defense of the Indians, it was circulated as a manuscript in the 1500s but was not published until the twentieth century.

The final source is an engraving by Theodore de Bry (1528–1598), who produced many hundreds of illustrations of New World scenes in dozens of books, all of which were published by him or his descendants. Born into a Protestant family in Liège, a city in present-day Belgium, he fled to Germany in 1567 to escape religious persecution. In the late 1580s, he began a project of publishing illustrated editions of explorers’ narratives. Only six volumes of The Grand Voyages had been completed at the time of de Bry’s death, but the project was continued by his descendants, who published the fourteenth and final volume in 1634. Never having visited the Americas, de Bry based his illustrations strictly on the words of the explorers whose memoirs he was publishing. Several of the works he published contributed to the so-called Black Legend — the idea especially popular among Protestant writers and some Catholic missionaries that Spanish interaction with Native Americans was characterized by cruelty, intolerance, greed, and fanaticism. The engraving shown here, which illustrates Columbus’s first interaction with Native Americans, appeared in the first volume of The Grand Voyages.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. For each of the written sources and woodcuts, what point or points was the author or artist trying to make about Native Americans?
2. How many different “interpretations” of Native Americans’ essential characteristics can you discover?
3. In each case, how might the author’s or illustrator’s views have been affected by his background, prejudices, or ambitions?
4. How might each of the opinions represented in these sources have been used to justify the way Native Americans were treated by Spanish authorities?

I Christopher Columbus, A LETTER CONCERNING RECENTLY DISCOVERED ISLANDS

The people of this island, and of all the other islands which I have found and of which I have information, all go naked, men and women, as their mothers bore them, although some women cover a single place with the leaf of a plant or with a net of cotton which they make for the purpose. They have no iron or steel or weapons, nor are they fitted to use them, not because they are not well built men and of handsome stature, but because they are very marvelously timorous. They have no other arms than weapons made of canes, cut in seeding time, to the ends of which they fix a small sharpened stick. . . .

It is true that, after they have been reassured and have lost their fear, they are so guileless and so generous with all they possess, that no one would believe it who has not seen it. They never refuse anything which they possess, if it be asked
of them; on the contrary, they invite anyone to share it, and display as much love as if they would give their hearts, and whether the thing be of value or whether it be of small price, at once with whatever trifle of whatever kind it may be that is given to them, with that they are content. . . .

And they do not know any creed and are not idolaters; only they all believe that power and good are in the heavens, and they are very firmly convinced that I, with these ships and men, came from the heavens, and in this belief they everywhere received me, after they had overcome their fear. And this does not come because they are ignorant; on the contrary, they are of a very acute intelligence and are men who navigate all those seas, so that it is amazing how good an account they give of everything, but it is because they have never seen people clothed or ships of such a kind. . . .

In all these islands, I saw no great diversity in the appearance of the people or in their manners and language. On the contrary, they all understand one another, which is very curious thing, on account of which I hope that their highnesses will determine upon their conversion to our holy faith, towards which they are very inclined. . . .

In these islands I have so far found no human monstrosities, as many expected, but on the contrary the whole population is very well-formed, nor are they negroes as in Guinea. . . .

As I have found no monsters, so I have had no report of any, except in an island "Quaris," the second at the coming into the Indies, which is inhabited by a people who are regarded in all the islands as very fierce and who eat human flesh. They have many canoes with which they range through all the islands of India and pillage and take as much as they can. They are no more malformed than the others, except that they have the custom of wearing their hair long like women, and they use bows and arrows of the same cane stems, with a small piece of wood at the end, owing to lack of iron which they do not possess. . . .

In conclusion, to speak only of that which has been accomplished on this voyage, which was so hasty, their highnesses can see that I will give them as much gold as they may need, if their highnesses will render me very slight assistance; moreover, spice and cotton, as much as their highnesses shall command; and mastic, as much as they shall order to be shipped . . . ; and aloe wood,¹ as much as they shall order to be shipped, and slaves, as many as they shall order to be shipped and who will be from the idolaters. . . .

¹Mastic and aloe wood are aromatics (fragrant materials used for making scents) that were prized in Europe.
... Now compare these qualities of prudence, skill, magnanimity, moderation, humanity, and religion with those of those little men of America in whom one can scarcely find any remnants of humanity. They not only lack culture but do not even use or know about writing or preserve records of their history — save for some obscure memory of certain deeds contained in painting. They lack written laws and their institutions and customs are barbaric. And as for their virtues... what can be expected of men committed to all kinds of passion and nefarious lewdness and of whom not a few are given to the eating of human flesh. Do not believe that their life before the coming of the Spaniards was one of... peace, of the kind that poets sang about. On the contrary, they made war with each other almost continuously, and with such fury that they considered a victory to be empty if they could not satisfy their prodigious hunger with the flesh of their enemies... But in other respects they are so cowardly and timid that they can scarcely offer any resistance to the hostile presence of our side, and many times thousands and thousands of them
have been dispersed and have fled like women on being defeated by a small Spanish force scarcely amounting to one hundred.

So as not to detain you longer in this matter, consider the nature of those people in one single instance and example, that of the Mexicans, who are regarded as the most prudent and courageous. . . . Cortés for his part, after taking possession of the city [Tenochtitlan], held the people’s cowardliness, ineptitude, and rudeness in such contempt that he not only compelled the king and his principal subjects, through terror, to receive the yoke and rule of the king of Spain, but also imprisoned King Moctezuma himself. . . . This he could do because of the stupor and inertia of the people, who were indifferent to the situation and preoccupied with other things than the taking up of arms to liberate their king. . . . Could there be a better or clearer testimony of the superiority that some men have over others in talent, skill, strength of spirit, and virtue? Is it not proof that they are slaves by nature? For the fact that some of them appear to have a talent for certain manual tasks is no argument for their greater human prudence. We see that certain insects, such as the bees and the spiders, produce works that no human skill can imitate. . . .

How can we doubt that these people — so uncivilized, so barbaric, contaminated with so many impurities and obscenities — have been justly conquered by a nation excellent in every kind of virtue, with the best law and best benefit for the barbarians? Prior to the arrival of the Christians they had the nature, customs, religion, and practice of evil sacrifice as we have explained. Now, on receiving with our rule our writing, laws, and morality, imbued with the Christian religion, having shown themselves to be docile to the missionaries that we have sent them, as many have done, they are as different from their primitive condition as civilized people are from barbarians, or as those with sight from the blind, as the inhuman from the meek, as the pious from the impious, or to put it in a single phrase, in effect, as men from beasts.

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4 ▪ Bartolomé de las Casas, IN DEFENSE OF THE INDIANS

From the fact that the Indians are barbarians it does not necessarily follow that they are incapable of government and have to be ruled by others, except to be taught about the Catholic faith and to be admitted to the holy sacraments. They are not ignorant, inhuman, or bestial. Rather, long before they had heard the word Spaniard they had properly organized states, wisely ordered by excellent laws, religion, and custom. They cultivated friendship and, bound together in common fellowship, lived in populous cities in which they wisely administered the affairs of both peace and war justly and equitably, truly governed by laws that at very many points surpass ours, and could have won the admiration of the sages of Athens. . . .

The Indian race is not that barbaric, nor are they dull witted or stupid, but they are easy to teach and very talented in learning all the liberal arts, and very ready to accept, honor, and observe the Christian religion and correct their sins. . . . Once priests have introduced them to the sacred mysteries and taught them the word of God. They have been endowed with excellent conduct, and before the coming of the Spaniards, as we have said, they had political states that were well founded on beneficial laws.

Furthermore, they are so skilled in every mechanical art that with every right they should be set ahead of all the nations of the known world on this score, so very beautiful in their skill and artistry are the things this people produces in the grace of its architecture, its painting, and its needlework. . . .

In the liberal arts that they have been taught up to now, such as grammar and logic, they
are remarkably adept. With every kind of music they charm the ears of their audience with wonderful sweetness. They write skillfully and quite elegantly, so that most often we are at a loss to know whether the characters are handwritten or printed. . . .

Again, if we want to be sons of Christ and followers of the truth of the gospel, we should consider that, even though these peoples may be completely barbaric, they are nevertheless created in God’s image. They are not so forsaken by divine providence that they are incapable of attaining Christ’s kingdom. They are our brothers, redeemed by Christ’s most precious blood, no less than the wisest and most learned men in the whole world. . . .

5 ▲ Theodore de Bry, COLUMBUS GREETED BY NATIVES