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978-1-108-00799-3 - Select Letters of Christopher Columbus: With Other Original Documents, Relating to His Four Voyages to the New World

Christopher Columbus

Excerpt

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FIRST VOYAGE OF COLUMBUS.

A Letter addressed to the noble Lord Raphael Sanchez, Treasurer to their most invincible Majesties, Ferdinand and Isabella, King and Queen of Spain, by Christopher Columbus, to whom our age is greatly indebted, treating of the islands of India recently discovered beyond the Ganges, to explore which he had been sent eight months before under the auspices and at the expense of their said Majesties.

KNOWING that it will afford you pleasure to learn that I have brought my undertaking to a successful termination, I have decided upon writing 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

EPISTOLA CHRISTOFORI COLOM.

Cui atas nostra multum debet, de Insulis Indiæ supra Gangem nuper inventis, ad quas perquirendas, octavo antea mense, auspiciis et ære invictissimorum Ferdinandi ac Elizabeth Hispaniarum Regum, missus fuerat: ad magnificum Dominum Raphaellem Sanxis, eorumdem Serenissimorum Regum Thesaurarium, missa: quam generosus ac litteratus vir Leander de Cosco ab hispano idiomate in latinum convertit: tertio Kalendas Maii, MCCCXCIII, Pontificatus Alex. VI, anno I.

QUONIAM susceptæ provinciæ rem perfectam me consecutum fuisse gratum tibi fore scio, has constitui exarare, quæ te uniuscujusque rei in hoc nostro itinere gestæ inventæque admoneant. Tricesimo tertio die postquam Gadibus discessi, in mare indicum perveni, ubi

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my departure from Cadiz¹ 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 the first of these islands, which is called by the Indians Guanahani, I gave the name of the blessed Saviour (San Salvador), relying upon whose protection I had reached this as well as the other islands; to each of these I also gave a name, ordering that one should be called Santa Maria de la Concepcion,² another Fernandina,³ the third Isabella,⁴ the fourth Juana,⁵ and so with all the rest respectively. As soon as we arrived at that, which as I have said was named Juana, I

plurimas insulas innumeris habitatas hominibus reperi, quarum omnium pro felicissimo Rege nostro, præconio celebrato, et vexillis extensis, contradicente nemine, possessionem accepi: primæque earum Divi Salvatoris nomen imposui, cujus fretus auxilio tam ad hanc quam ad ceteras alias pervenimus; eam vero Indi Guanahanyn vocant. Aliarum etiam unamquamque novo nomine nuncupavi: quippe aliam insulam Sanctæ Mariæ Conceptionis, aliam Fernandinam, aliam Isabelam, aliam Joannam, et sic de reliquis appellari jussi. Quamprimum in eam insulam (quam dudum Joannam vocari

¹ A strange mistake has crept into the Latin versions of this letter; in all the editions of which it is stated that Cadiz was the point from which Columbus sailed on his first voyage. In the journal of that voyage, published by Mr. Navarrete, as well as in the accounts given by Don Fernando Columbus, and all other historians, it is distinctly said that he sailed from *Palos*, on the third of August. The question is important, not simply as affecting the correctness of the letter, but also the length of time in which the voyage was accomplished; for as Columbus reached the island of St. Salvador, or Guanahani, on the morning of the twelfth of October, it is apparent, that more than twice the number of days here mentioned, transpired between his leaving Spain and arriving at the West Indies. The mistake evidently consists in the word "Gadibus" having been by some circumstance, at which we can only guess, carelessly exchanged for Gomera, whence Columbus started, according to the journal, on the eighth of September, which leaves an interval exactly coinciding with the thirty-three days here mentioned.

² North Caico.³ Little Inagua.⁴ Great Inagua.⁵ Cuba.

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proceeded along its coast a short distance westward, and found it to be so large and apparently without termination, that I could not suppose it to be an island, but the continental province of Cathay. Seeing, however, no towns or populous places on the sea coast, but only a few detached houses and cottages, with whose inhabitants I was unable to communicate, because they fled as soon as they saw us, I went further on, thinking that in my progress I should certainly find some city or village. At length, after proceeding a great way and finding that nothing new presented itself, and that the line of coast was leading us northwards (which I wished to avoid, because it was winter, and it was my intention to move southwards; and because moreover the winds were contrary), I resolved not to attempt any further progress, but rather to turn back and retrace my course to a certain bay that I had observed, and from which I afterwards dispatched two of our men to ascertain whether there were a king or any cities in that province. These men reconnoitred the country for three days, and found a most numerous population, and great numbers of houses, though small, and built without any regard to order: with

dixi) appulimus; juxta ejus litus occidentem versus aliquantulum processi, tamque eam magnam nullo reperto fine inveni, ut non insulam sed continentem Cathai provinciam esse crediderim; nulla tamen videns oppida, municipiave in maritimis sita confinibus, præter aliquos vicos et prædia rustica, cum quorum incolis loqui nequibam; quare simul ac nos videbant, surripiebant fugam. Progredebatur ultra, existimans aliquam me urbem villasve inventurum: denique videns quod longe admodum progressis nihil novi emergebat, et hujusmodi via nos ad septentrionem deferebat (quod ipse fugere exoptabam, terris etenim regnabat bruma), ad austrumque erat in voto contendere, nec minus venti flagitantibus succedebant; constitui alios non operiri successus: et sic retrocedens, ad portum quemdam, quem signaveram, sum reversus; unde duos homines ex nostris in terram missi, qui investigarent, esset ne Rex in ea provincia, urbesve aliquæ. Hi per tres dies ambularunt, inveneruntque innumeros populos et habitationes, parvas tamen et absque ullo

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which information they returned to us. In the mean time I had learned from some Indians whom I had seized, that that country was certainly an island: and therefore I sailed towards the east, coasting to the distance of three hundred and twenty-two miles, which brought us to the extremity of it; from this point I saw lying eastwards another island, fifty-four miles distant from Juana, to which I gave the name of Española.⁶ I went thither, and steered my course eastward as I had done at Juana, even to the distance of five hundred and sixty-four miles along the north coast.⁷ This said island of Juana is exceedingly fertile, as indeed are all the others; it is surrounded with many bays, spacious, very secure, and surpassing any that I have ever seen; numerous large and healthful

regimine; quapropter redierunt. Interea ego jam intellexeram à quibusdam Indis, quos ibidem susceperam, quod hujusmodi provincia insula quidem erat: et sic perrexi orientem versus, ejus semper stringens litora, usque ad milliaria CCCXXII, ubi ipsius insulæ sunt extrema. Hinc aliam insulam ad orientem prospexi, distantem ab hac Joanna miliar. LIV, quam protinus Hispanam dixi, in eamque concessi, et direxi iter quasi per septentrionem, quemadmodum in Joanna ad orientem, milliaria DLXIV. Quæ dicta Joanna et aliæ ibidem insulæ quam fertilissimæ existunt. Hæc multis atque tutissimis et latis, nec aliis quos unquam viderim comparandis portibus est circumdata: multi maximi et salubres hanc interfluunt

⁶ Hispaniola, or San Domingo.

⁷ Naverrete, the learned and industrious compiler of these original letters, in his translation of this first letter from the Latin into the Spanish language, has mistakenly attributed to the preposition "per" the sense of the Spanish word "hacia" (towards), a meaning which can under no circumstances be given to the word, but in this case renders the passage unintelligible. The editor has translated "per septentrionem" "along the north coast" of the island, such a rendering of the preposition being perfectly grammatical, while it gives to the whole sentence a meaning consistent with the course which Columbus in reality took. There are, moreover, two sentences in the immediate context of the original, where, when the sense of "towards" is intended to be expressed, it is unmistakably given by the words "versus" and "ad".

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rivers intersect it, and it also contains many very lofty mountains. All these islands are very beautiful, and distinguished by a diversity of scenery ; they are filled with a great variety of trees of immense height, and which I believe to retain their foliage in all seasons ; for when I saw them they were as verdant and luxuriant as they usually are in Spain in the month of May,—some of them were blossoming, some bearing fruit, and all flourishing in the greatest perfection, according to their respective stages of growth, and the nature and quality of each : yet the islands are not so thickly wooded as to be impassable. The nightingale and various birds were singing in countless numbers, and that in November, the month in which I arrived there. There are besides in the same island of Juana seven or eight kinds of palm trees, which, like all the other trees, herbs, and fruits, considerably surpass ours in height and beauty. The pines also are very handsome, and there are very extensive fields and meadows, a variety of birds, different kinds of honey, and many sorts of metals, but no iron. In that island also which I have before said we named Española, there are mountains of very great size and beauty, vast plains, groves, and very fruitful fields, admirably adapted

fluvii : multi quoque et eminentissimi in ea sunt montes. Omnes hæ insulæ sunt pulcherrimæ, et variis distinctæ figuris, perviæ, et maximâ arborum varietate sidera lambentium plenæ, quas nunquam foliis privari credo : quippe vidi eas ita virentes atque decoras, ceu mense Maio in Hispania solent esse ; quarum aliæ florentes, aliæ fructuosæ, aliæ in alio statu, secundum uniuscujusque qualitatem vigeant. Garriebat philomela, et alii passerres varii ac innumeri, mense Novembri, quo ipse per eas deambulabam. Sunt præterea in dicta insula Joanna septem vel octo palmarum genera, quæ proceritate et pulchritudine, quemadmodum ceteræ omnes arbores, herbæ fructusque, nostras facile exsuperant. Sunt et mirabiles pinus, agri, et prata vastissima, variæ aves, varia mella, variaque metalla, ferro excepto. In ea autem, quam Hispanam supra diximus nuncupari, maximi sunt montes ac pulchri, vasta rura, nemora, campi feracissimi, seri pascique et condendis ædificiis aptissimi :

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for tillage, pasture, and habitation. The convenience and excellence of the harbours in this island, and the abundance of the rivers, so indispensable to the health of man, surpass anything that would be believed by one who had not seen it. The trees, herbage, and fruits of Española are very different from those of Juana, and moreover it abounds in various kinds of spices, gold, and other metals. 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 always naked as they were born, with the exception of some of the women, who use the covering of a leaf, or small bough, or an apron of cotton which they prepare for that purpose. None of them, as I have already said, are possessed of any iron, neither have they weapons, being unacquainted with, and indeed incompetent to use them, not from any deformity of body (for they are well-formed), but because they are timid and full of fear. They carry however in lieu of arms, 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; for it has often occurred when I have sent two or three

portuum in hac insula commoditas et præstantia, fluminum copia, salubritate admixta hominum, quod, nisi quis viderit, credulitatem superat. Hujus arbores, pascua et fructus multum ab illis Joannæ differunt. Hæc præterea Hispana diverso aromatis genere, auro metallisque abundat. Hujus quidem et omnium aliarum, quas ego vidi et quarum cognitionem habeo, incolæ utriusque sexûs nudi semper incedunt, quemadmodum eduntur in lucem; præter aliquas feminas, quæ folio frondeve aliqua aut bombycino velo pudenda operiunt quod ipsæ sibi ad id negotii parant. Carent hi omnes (ut supra dixi) quocumque genere ferri: carent et armis, utpote sibi ignotis, nec ad eas sunt apti, non propter corporis deformitatem (quum sint bene formati), sed quia sunt timidi ac pleni formidine; gestant tamen pro armis arundines sole perustas, in quarum radicibus hastile quoddam ligneum siccum et in mucronem attenuatum figunt, neque his audent jugiter uti: nam sæpe evenit, quum miserim duos vel tres homines ex meis ad aliquas villas, ut cum eorum

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of my men to any of the villages to speak with the natives, that they have come out in a disorderly troop, and have fled in such haste at the approach of our men, that the fathers forsook their children and the children their fathers. This timidity did not arise from any loss or injury that they had received from us; for, on the contrary, I gave to all I approached whatever articles I had about 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 liberal with all they have; none of them refusing any thing he may possess when he is asked for it, but on the contrary inviting us to ask them. They exhibit great love towards 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 forbade that these trifles and articles of no value (such as pieces of dishes, plates, and glass, keys, and leather straps) should be given to them, although if they could obtain them, they imagined themselves to be possessed of the most beautiful trinkets in the world. It even happened that a sailor

loquerentur incolis, exisse agmen glomeratum ex Indis, et ubi nostros appropinquare videbant, fugam celeriter arripuisse, despretis à patre liberis, et è contra; et hoc non quod cuiquam eorum damnum aliquod vel injuria illata fuerit, immo ad quoscumque appuli, et quibuscum verbum facere potui, quidquid habebam sum elargitus pannum aliaque permulta, nulla mihi facta versura; sed sunt naturâ pavidi ac timidi. Ceterum ubi se cernunt tutos omni metu repulso, sunt admodum simplices ac bonæ fidei, et in omnibus quæ habent liberalissimi: roganti quod possidet inficiatur nemo, quin ipsi nos ad id poscendum invitant. Maximum erga omnes amorem præ se ferunt: dant quæque magna pro parvis, minima licet re nihilove contenti. Ego attamen prohibui, ne tam minima et nullius pretii hisce darentur, ut sunt lancis, paropsidum vitrique fragmenta: item clavi, lingulæ; quamquam si hoc poterant adipisci, videbatur eis pulcherrima mundi possidere jocalia. Accidit enim quemdam

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received for a leather strap as much gold as was worth three golden nobles, and for things of more trifling value offered by our men, especially newly coined blancas, or any gold coins, the Indians would give whatever the seller required; as, for instance, an ounce and a half or two ounces of gold, or thirty or forty pounds of cotton, with which commodity they were already acquainted. Thus they bartered, like idiots, cotton and gold for fragments of bows, glasses, bottles, and jars; which I forbade as being unjust, and myself gave them many beautiful and acceptable articles which I had brought with me, taking nothing from them in return; I did this in order that I might the more easily conciliate them, that they might be led to become Christians, and be inclined to entertain a regard for the King and Queen, our Princes and all Spaniards, and that I might induce them to take an interest in seeking out, and collecting, and delivering to us such things as they possessed in abundance, but which we greatly needed. They practise no kind of idolatry, but have a firm belief that all strength and power, and indeed all good things, are in heaven, and that I had descended from thence with these ships and sailors, and under this impression was I received after they

navitam tantum auri pondus habuisse pro una ligula, quanti sunt tres aurei solidi, et sic alios pro aliis minoris pretii, præsertim pro blanquis novis, et quibusdam nummis aureis, pro quibus habendis dabant quicquid petebat venditor, puta unciam cum dimidia et duas auri: vel triginta et quadraginta bombycis pondo, quod ipsi jam noverant. Item arcuum, amphoræ, hydriæ, dolique fragmenta bombyci et auro tamquam bestię comparabant; quod quia iniquum sane erat, vetui, dedique eis multa pulchra et grata, quæ mecum tuleram, nullo interveniente præmio, ut eos mihi facilius conciliarem, fierentque Christicolæ, et ut sint proni in amorem erga Regem, Reginam Principesque nostros, et universas gentes Hispaniæ, ac studeant perquirere et coacervare, eaque nobis tradere quibus ipsi affluunt et nos magnopere indigemus. Nullam hi norunt idololatricam, immo firmissimè credunt omnem vim, omnem potentiam, omnia denique bona esse in cœlo, meque inde cum his navibus et

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had thrown aside their fears. Nor are they slow or stupid, but of very clear understanding; and those men who have crossed to the neighbouring islands give an admirable description of everything they observed; but they never saw any people clothed, nor any ships like ours. 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; which 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 travelling 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; and on our arrival at any new place they published this, crying out immediately with a loud voice to the other Indians, "Come, come and look upon beings of a celestial race": upon which both women and men, children and adults, young men and old, when they got rid of the fear they at first entertained, would come out in throngs, crowding the roads to see us,

nautis descendisse; atque hoc animo ibi fui susceptus postquam metum repulerant. Nec sunt segnes aut rudes, quin summi ac perspicacis ingenii; et homines, qui transfretant mare illud, non sine admiratione uniuscujusque rei rationem reddunt; sed nunquam viderunt gentes vestitas, neque naves hujusmodi. Ego statim ac ad mare illud perveni, é prima insula quosdam Indos violenter arripui, qui edicerent à nobis, et nos pariter docerent ea quorum ipsi in hisce partibus cognitionem habebant, et ex voto successit: nam brevi nos ipsos, et hi nos, tum gestu ac signis, tum verbis intellexerunt, magnoque nobis fuere emolumento. Veniunt modo mecum, tamen qui semper putant me desiluisse è cœlo, quamvis diu nobiscum versati fuerint, hodieque versentur, et hi erant primi, qui id quocumque appellebamus nunciabant, alii deinceps aliis elata voce dicentes, Venite, venite, et videbitis gentes æthereas. Quamobrem tam feminæ quam viri tam impuberes quam adulti, tam juvenes quam senes, deposita formidine paulo ante concepta, nos certatim visabant magna iter

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some bringing food, others drink, with astonishing affection and kindness. Each of these islands has a great number of canoes, built of solid wood, narrow and not unlike our double-banked boats in length and shape, but swifter in their motion: 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 other islands, which are of countless number, to carry on traffic with the people. I saw some of these canoes that held as many as seventy-eight rowers. In all these islands there is no difference of physiognomy, of manners, or of language, but they all clearly understand each other, a circumstance very propitious for the realization of what I conceive to be the principal wish of our most serene King, namely, the conversion of these people to the holy faith of Christ, to which indeed, as far as I can judge, they are very favourable and well-disposed. I said before, that I went three hundred and twenty-two miles in a direct line from west to east, along the coast of the island of

stipante caterva, aliis cibum, aliis potum afferentibus, maximo cum amore ac benevolentia incredibili. Habet unaquæque insula multas scaphas solidi ligni, etsi angustas, longitudine tamen ac forma nostris biremibus similes, cursu autem velociores: reguntur remis tantum modo. Harum quædam sunt magnæ, quædam parvæ, quædam in medio consistunt: plures tamen biremi qua remigent duodeviginti transtris majores, cum quibus in omnes illas insulas quæ innumeræ sunt trajicitur, cumque his suam mercaturam exercent, et inter eos commercia fiunt. Aliquas ego harum biremium seu scapharum vidi, quæ vehebant septuaginta et octoginta remiges. In omnibus his insulis nulla est diversitas inter gentis effigies, nulla in moribus atque loquela, quin omnes se intelligunt adinvicem, quæ res perutilis est ad id quod Serenissimum Regem nostrum exoptare præcipué reor, scilicet eorum ad sanctam Christi fidem conversionem, cui quidem, quantum intelligere potui, facillimi sunt et proni. Dixi quemadmodum sum progressus antea insulam Joannam per rectum tramitem occassus in orientem milliar. cccxxii. Secundum quam viam et intervallum itineris possum dicere hanc Joannam esse ma-