



PRIMARY SOURCE READING 13

A Letter by Christopher Columbus

As you know, Christopher Columbus was trying to reach China when he "discovered" America and the islands of the Caribbean. On February 13, 1493, he wrote a letter to Santangel, the Spanish government official who had persuaded Queen Isabella to finance his expedition. Below is part of Columbus's letter, followed by an interpretation by modern historian Daniel J. Boorstin.

Guided Reading *In this selection, read to learn Columbus's account of the voyage and compare it to Boorstin's interpretation.*

When I reached Juana [Cuba], I followed its coast to the westward, and found it so large that I thought it must be the mainland,—the province of Cathay [China]; and, as I found neither towns nor villages on the seacoast, but only a few hamlets, with the inhabitants of which I could not hold conversation because they all immediately fled, I kept on the same route. . . .

. . . The lands are high and there are many very lofty mountains. . . . [The islands] are all most beautiful, of a thousand different shapes, accessible, and covered with trees of a thousand kinds of such great height that they seemed to reach the skies. . . . The nightingale was singing as well as other birds of a thousand different kinds; and that, in November, the month in which I myself was roaming amongst them. There are palm-trees of six or eight kinds, wonderful in their beautiful variety; but this is the case with all the other trees and fruits and grasses; trees, plants, or fruits filled us with admiration. It contains extraordinary pine groves, and very extensive plains. There is also honey, a great variety of birds, and many different kinds of fruits. In the interior there are many mines of metals and a population innumerable. . . . The inhabitants of this and of all the other islands I have found or gained intelligence of, both men and women, go

as naked as they were born. . . . They have neither iron, nor steel, nor arms, nor are they competent to use them, not that they are not well-formed and of handsome stature, but because they are timid to a surprising degree.

On my reaching the Indies, I took by force, in the first island that I discovered, some of these natives that they might learn our language and give me information in regard to what existed in these parts; and it so happened that they soon understood us and we them, either by words or signs, and they have been very serviceable to us. . . . I find that they . . . believe that I come from heaven. . . .

They assure me that there is another island . . . in which the inhabitants have no hair. It is extremely rich in gold. . . . Finally, and speaking only of what has taken place in this voyage . . . their Highnesses may see that I shall give them all the gold they require, if they will give me but a little assistance; spices also, and cotton, as much as their Highnesses shall command to be shipped; and mastic [resin used in varnishes], hitherto found only in Greece . . . slaves, as many of these idolators as their Highnesses shall command to be shipped. I think also I have found rhubarb and cinnamon, and shall find a thousand other valuable things.

Boorstin's Interpretation

On shipboard off the Azores in mid-February 1493, returning from his first voyage, Columbus wrote his own report of what he thought, and wanted others to think, that he had accomplished. . . .

Columbus, having convinced himself that a trip across the Western Ocean would take him to

the Indies, now set about convincing a wider audience. He had a heavy vested interest in his destination actually being the Indies. . . . Columbus was careful not to mention disasters or near disasters—the loss of the flagship, *Santa Maria*, the insubordination of Martín Alonso Pinzón, the commander of the *Pinta*, or the



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mutinous spirit of the crew. Following the national-security regulations of his day, he omitted information on the courses taken or the precise distance covered in order to prevent competitors from following where he had led. While Columbus conceded that he had not actually seen the Great Khan or the court of gold-rich Cipangu, he detailed numerous clues reinforcing his belief that he was just off the coast of China. The resplendent Great Khan, he was confident, would be found just a little farther on, doubtless on the next voyage.

Although Columbus was a hardheaded observer of the winds and the waves, on the crucial question of where he had arrived he remained the slave of his hopes. He was determined to find signs everywhere that he had reached the fringes of Asia. Botany, still a vague

wilderness whose images were not yet standardized by printing, was his happy hunting ground. From the moment when he first touched the north coast of Cuba on his first voyage, he had no trouble finding the Asiatic flora. A shrub that smelled like cinnamon he eagerly called cinnamon and so made it a hint of untold spice treasures. The aromatic West Indies gumbo-limbo, he insisted, must be an Asiatic form of the mastic tree of the Mediterranean that yielded resin. . . . The ship's surgeon examined some roots that the men had dug up and obligingly pronounced them valuable medicinal Chinese rhubarb, a strong cathartic [laxative] drug. Actually it was only the common garden rhubarb, that we now use for pies and tarts. . . . But so many false scents somehow seemed to add up the authentic odor of the Orient.

CHAPTER 13

INTERPRETING THE READING

Directions Use information from the readings to answer the following questions. If necessary, use a separate sheet of paper.

1. What impressed Columbus about the land he discovered?

2. Where did Columbus think he had landed?

3. What did Columbus offer to the king and queen of Spain?

4. According to Boorstin, what information did Columbus omit from his letter to Santangel? Why?

Critical Thinking

5. **Evaluating Information** Based on Columbus's letter and Boorstin's comments on it, do you think Columbus really believed he had reached Asia? Explain your answer.
