

Document 24: Letter from Christopher Columbus

Background

In 1492, Christopher Columbus set sail for the Indies (India, China, and Japan) but instead landed in the Americas. In March 1493, he arrived back in Spain and immediately put pen to paper. He wrote to Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, who had financed his journey, to describe what he had experienced. Below is a portion of that letter in which Columbus describes the native peoples he'd encountered on several Caribbean islands.

"[The Indians] 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 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. . . . 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 practice 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 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. 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 . . ."

Vocabulary

Trifles - A thing of little value or importance

Trinkets - A small ornament or piece of jewelry of little or no value

Barter - Trade

Conciliate - To stop (someone) from being angry or discontented

Idiots - Derived from the Greek word *idiota*, meaning uninformed person