

Change and Exchange

DOCUMENT 1.4 | CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, Journal 1492

Italian explorer Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) sought a westerly route to Asia but landed in the Western Hemisphere in October 1492. The sovereigns of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella, funded Columbus's voyages in hopes of expanding Spanish trade routes to Asia. This excerpt from his journal is the first recorded contact between Europeans and native peoples.

They are very well made, with very handsome bodies, and very good countenances. Their hair is short and coarse, almost like hairs of a horse's tail. They wear the hairs brought down to the eyebrows, except a few locks behind, which they wear long and never cut. They paint themselves black, and they are the colour of the Canarians, neither black nor white. Some paint themselves white, others red, and others of what colour they find. Some paint their faces, others the whole body, some only round the eyes, others only on the nose. They neither carry nor know anything of arms, for I showed them swords, and they took them by the blade and cut themselves through ignorance. They have no iron, their darts being wands without iron, some of them having a fish's tooth at the end, and others being pointed in various ways. They are all of fair stature and size, with good faces, and well made. I saw some with marks of wounds on their bodies, and I made signs to ask what it was, and they gave me to understand that people from other adjacent islands came with the intention of seizing them, and that they defended themselves. I believed, and still believe, that they come here from the mainland to take them prisoners. They should be good servants and intelligent, for I observed that they quickly took in what was said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, as it appeared to me that they had no religion. . . .

Christopher Columbus, John Cabot, and Gaspar Corte Real, *The Journal of Christopher Columbus (during His First Voyage, 1492–93) and Documents Relating the Voyages of John Cabot and Gaspar Corte Real*, ed. and trans. Clements R. Markham (London: Hakluyt Society, 1893), 38.