

## I. VIEWERS & THE VIEWED

### *New Places, New Peoples*

The idea that the islands that Columbus encountered were in fact part of a “new world” was not at all self-evident to early modern observers. Columbus, after all, had not sailed in quest of a new world but of a new route to a familiar one, the Indies. Moreover, at the height of the European Renaissance, the notion that there was anything left to be discovered in the world was heresy to those who worshipped at the altars of antiquity. The wisdom of the ancients made everything after them so much *déjà vu*. It is important to keep this in mind when trying to account for the apparent flatness, the lack of wonder, surprise, and curiosity that characterizes so many early accounts of the Americas and its peoples.

At the same time, it gradually became clear that the Americas were indeed a New World. Here across the Atlantic were new flora and fauna, new species of animals, and above all new peoples with new, sometimes utterly perplexing manners, customs, and beliefs. An older Renaissance hermeneutic that could bend and twist ancient texts to reveal the hidden presence of the New World yielded slowly to the realization that those texts were silent on the subject of the Americas. Beyond the Pillars of Hercules (Gibraltar) lay only the back of beyond for the ancients. Columbus’s New World truly was new to Europeans.

For much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries these two perspectives collided uncomfortably in the minds of many observers. It was rarely an either/or matter, especially when trying to make sense of the indigenous peoples. Tension, ambivalence, and contradiction were the *modi intellegendi*.

Indigenous peoples were no simple “other,” although it is often possible to gain that impression from early observers as well as from their twentieth century interpreters. In fact the peoples of the Americas were as varied and different from each other as those in Europe and Asia. The Caribs that Columbus encountered were very different indeed from the Aztec civilization with which Cortes did battle and from the Maya whom missionaries attempted to convert. So too, the images of the Indians that began to circulate in Europe assumed over time a variety of appearances and representations. These, in turn, required a more nuanced understanding than the term “Indians” seemed to permit. The image of the Indian gradually became images of Indians: savages, barbarians, and pagans; Edenic innocents and blameless children; builders of cities and monuments. These and other representations of indigenous populations created a confusing mosaic for those who insisted on clinging to a totalizing notion of otherness. The Indians slowly became a political, religious, and above all intellectual problem for Europe. While some, like Michel de Montaigne, reconciled themselves to the lack of coherence in human affairs, many others found the skeptic’s option unsatisfying. The belief in an ordered universe demanded reason and intelligibility in human affairs. The New Worlds would be understood.

Christopher Columbus (1451-1506).  
*De insulis in mari Indico repertis.*  
Basel: Johann Bergmann de Olpe, 1494.



*De insulis in mari Indico repertis.*

Peter Martyr d'Angleria (1455-1526).  
*De nuper sub D. Carlo repertis insulis....*  
Basel, 1521.

Peter Martyr d'Angleria.  
*De rebus oceanicis & orbe novo decadas tres.*  
Basel: Johanes Beblius, 1533.

Peter Martyr d'Angleria.  
*Opus epistolarum.*  
Florence, 1535.

Columbus's brief and unaffected letter on his "discovery" of a "new island in the Indian Ocean" reflects the press of business and belies the complex, learned man this Genoese Admiral really was. The apparent simplicity of the letter, its straightforward reportorial style, conceal a host of assumptions that informed Columbus's expedition. He came, he saw, he possessed—in the name of the Spanish Crown. The indigenous peoples are present but almost invisible: simple people ornamenting a landscape. They seem almost incidental to the larger narrative that Columbus brought with him to Hispaniola. That narrative was shaped by his immersion in the literature of late medieval Europe. We know from his journal as well as from descriptions of his library that the Admiral was no roughly-hewn sailor but a learned man steeped in the culture of his time. It was this culture that persuaded him of the geographic possibilities of his voyage, but as importantly it gave him a vision of his momentous work in the context of sacred history. He was doing the work of the Lord at the end of the days. He was sent to possess lands and convert souls in preparation for the return of the Messiah.

The present edition is the second illustrated edition of the letter and the first to contain representations of the New World itself. Leander De Cosco translated it from the Spanish into Latin. Between the first edition of this letter in 1493 and 1500, the letter went through some twenty or so editions.

Like Columbus, Peter Martyr was a transplanted Italian who worked in the service of the Spanish court. Educated as a humanist and thoroughly at home in the traditions of ancient rhetoric and letters, Martyr was appointed by Charles V to write the history of the discovery and conquest of the New World. In effect, he was the New World's first historian. Between 1511 and 1530, he brought out his story in a series of publications that trumpeted the achievements of the Spaniards and paraded the triumphs of the Empire. Although he never crossed the Atlantic, this armchair ethnographer gave Europe its first sustained view of the New World, its peoples and its marvels, in a felicitous, well-honed Latin prose.

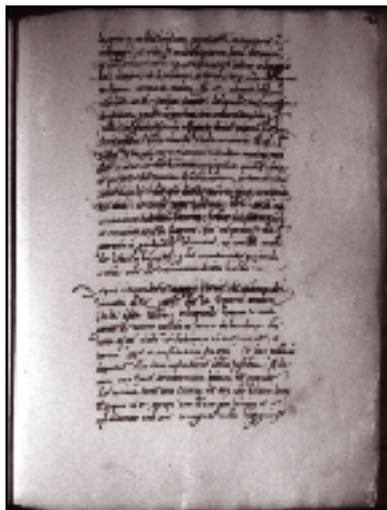
Ostensibly, Peter Martyr took as his paradigm Livy's history of ancient Rome: he organized his account in "decades" and presented his readers with an updated version of the "ab urbe conditu." Moreover, his account of the exotic is stuffed with allusions to classical literature: the indigenous peoples hearken back to the Age of Gold and Columbus becomes a modern Aeneas. While the humanist in him bridled at the thought that ancient cosmography was somehow wanting, he needed to recast his inherited view of the ancients to make room for the triumphs of the



*Opus epistolarum.*

Juan Diaz (1480-1549).  
 “Itinerario del armata del Rey Catolico  
 in India verso la Isola de Iucatan  
 anno M. D. XVIII.”  
 Manuscript in Spanish. Spain, ca. 1550s.

Courtesy of the Jean and  
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Spanish. The New World is new, though the author is cautious about pressing the claim too far. As imperial historian, Martyr had to describe Columbus’s discovery as something other than accidental. The destiny of the Holy Roman Empire of the sixteenth century was no less part of the divine plan than was that of the first Roman Empire.

Martyr’s chronicle of the discovery of the Americas was an episodic creation and a long time in the making. He took advantage of his position to gain access to Columbus’s narratives as well as to other documents reporting to the emperor on events abroad. When his work finally began to appear in print, it quickly became the principal way by which Europeans got their first glimpses of the New World. However, it is easy to overlook the role that personal correspondence played in disseminating information about the Spanish and their conquests. Letter writing was a formal, not a casual, activity for humanists. And for Martyr’s learned correspondents there was no need to wait for the official history to appear. Martyr provided their initial views of the New World directly.

Diaz’s short account of Juan de Grijalva’s discovery of the Yucatan and its Maya inhabitants was first published in 1520. It was probably from this now scarce imprint that the present manuscript was made, thus underscoring another important way in which information about the New World was circulated and transmitted. Copying printed texts was important when other printed copies were not available, when cost was a factor, or when it was necessary to obtain a copy of the work surreptitiously.

Diaz was a cleric who accompanied Juan de Grijalva on his maiden voyage of exploration to the Yucatan for the purpose of locating more gold. His encounters with the Maya and their monuments impressed him—Mayan buildings recalled those of ancient Rome but their customs, human sacrifice in particular, distressed him. In Diaz one senses an uncomfortable wrestling with cultural contradictions: an evidently accomplished civilization that summoned up memories of antiquity which is also a manifestly brutal culture whose vile customs seemed at odds with its embodied intelligence.