

Manners & Customs

If they thought about New World peoples at all, most Europeans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, did so vaguely or in gross categorical terms that seemed to correspond to the utter remoteness of the Americas. However, there were also serious efforts to assimilate the various Indian groups into the lexicon of European culture. Who in fact were the Indians? Where did they come from? Why had the ancients not noted them? How did their histories relate to those of Europe? If it was in some sense obvious that these peoples were different, it was not at all clear how far or deep that difference extended. Missionaries in particular often faced a familiar conundrum: missions were predicated on the convertibility of the other, on the other's place in the divine economy of salvation. Yet, reality often seemed to belie that position; conversions were difficult, maybe impossible. As important as difference, indeed, was similarity: how did these peoples resemble Europeans past and present? To begin to plot the lines of similarity was to begin to incorporate the Indians into the conceptual universe of early-modern observers. To understand how they truly differed from Europeans, the latter had first to try to integrate them into some larger framework. If they fit, so much the better; if not, the nature of difference came more sharply into focus and the template was possibly altered.

Thinking and writing about the New World peoples often occurred in the context of reflections about the sheer variety of peoples known to have existed around the world. The voyages of the Iberians, and later the Dutch, French, and the English, had opened the floodgates of information about many new worlds. As time went on and more and more information accumulated, it became critical to give some shape and coherence to the data. Few could, with Montaigne, revel in the chaos of peoples and customs. That was too destabilizing an option. Thus the Jesuit José de Acosta organized the gentiles of the world into three layers: at the top are those with the arts, sciences, reason, and political life (Chinese, Japanese, and the Syrians); next are those with polities and laws but no arts, letters, and sciences (Incans and the Aztecs); and finally there are the nomadic savages, who lived more like animals than men. Acosta's trinitarian hierarchy is early evidence of the sort of classificatory ranking of peoples that would characterize much ethnology through the nineteenth century.

Bringing the manners and customs of the peoples of the world into focus meant squaring them with tradition, understanding them in terms of inherited vocabularies of experience, and establishing zones of affinity and comparability.

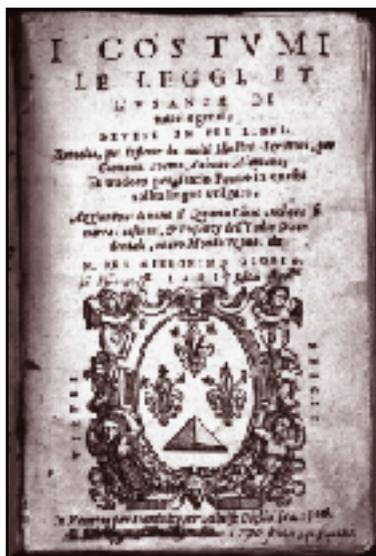
Bartolomé de las Casas (1474-1566).
“Apologética historia sumaria.”
Manuscript, early nineteenth century.

Arguably one of the truly major pieces of ethnology to come out of the Spanish experience in the Americas, Las Casas’s huge work, almost 4,000 pages in the present version, remained unpublished until the twentieth century. It is a dense, prolix, and fascinating attempt to present a systematic reading of Indian culture in the New World and to defend that culture against its glib detractors. It is the Dominican’s summa, his last word on the essential humanity of the Indians and their ways of life. In it, he flinches from nothing not even the practice of human sacrifice and ritual cannibalism, both of which he audaciously compares with Christ’s death and the Eucharist. There is nothing so bizarre or revolting among the Indians that the friar cannot find some analogue in Spanish/Catholic or classical culture.

The present manuscript was probably made for Lord Kingsborough, whose arms are on the binding.

Johannes Boemus (1485-1535).
I costumi e leggi e l’usanze di tutte le genti.
Venice: Dominico & Alvise Giglio, 1558.

Boemus’s little tome was one of the most popular books of its ilk in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, going through numerous editions and translations. First published in Latin in 1520, the book was an early attempt to collect in one place the rituals, practices, and customs of peoples ancient and modern. It was a book that inevitably grew as more information became available as a result of discoveries abroad. Editors or translators would add supplements to it, especially concerning the New World. Thus, the fourth book of this Italian translation includes new material on Florida, the Caribbean, Mexico, and parts of South America. None of this material is new in any absolute sense; it is liberally cribbed from earlier voyage accounts and chronicles. However, the mere fact of its being included in the volume hints at the process of intellectual assimilation in which the peoples of the New World become standard features of works not focusing specifically on the New World. What this volume allows us to see is how the Indians became part of the intellectual furniture of early modern observers. Like the curiosity cabinets of the time, Boemus’s text was literally a collection of customs, and one in which the Indians found a home.



Claude Guichard (d. 1607).
*Funerailles et diverses manières d'ensevelir
des Romains, Grecs, & autres nations,
tant anciennes que modernes.*
Lyon: Jean de Tournes, 1581.

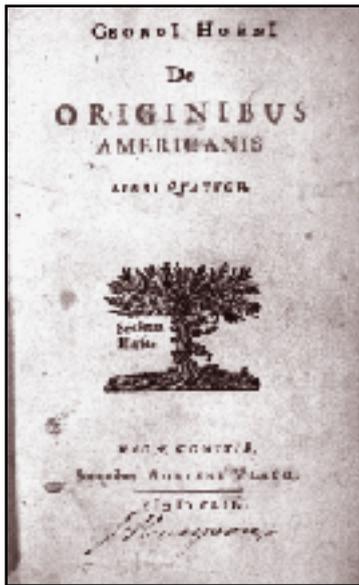
Courtesy of the Jean and
Jay I. Kislak Collection



Guichard's nicely illustrated tour of burial customs ancient and modern must surely be one of the earliest books dedicated solely to funereal practices. While Renaissance antiquarians had studied such things among the ancients, Guichard expanded the range to include New World customs. In doing so, he opened the door to an extremely fertile strategy for making sense of the Indians and their customs: the search for ancient sources and surviving antiquities art, coins, etc. for comparisons that make Indian practices less exotic and more intelligible in terms of traditional antiquarian inquiries. Burial customs were among the dozen or so categories typically covered by travelers to other places, so that Guichard had sources at hand for Peru, Mexico, Florida, and even Canada.

Georg Horn (1620-1670).
De originibus americanis.
The Hague, 1652.

Who were the Americans really? To ask that question in the seventeenth century was to venture into genealogy: where did they come from? who were their parents? and ultimately, how did they fit into the Genesis narrative? If all men and peoples descended from one of Noah's three sons, how did the Indians get from the Old World to the New? The latter question threatened to complicate the ancients vs. moderns debate: if it took Christian Europe so long to voyage to the New World, how had the Indians done so before them? None of these were trivial questions for a culture that revered origins, and early-modern Europe was keenly sensitive to beginnings. In the early seventeenth century, the distinguished scholar and statesman Hugo Grotius publicly proposed that the learned give more attention to the question of the Indians origins, and, in turn, he suggested a hypothesis himself. Among those who took up Grotius's challenge was Georg Horn, whose *De originibus americanis* was probably the most thorough attempt to get the Indians from the Old World to the New. Shown here in its only edition, Horn's book argued imaginatively and persuasively that the only way the Indians could have reached America



long ago was via the Bering Strait. This scenario not only preserved, at least implicitly, the Biblical template, but it also secured the reputation of the moderns, for whom the Bering Strait would not have been a navigable option.

Bernard Picard (1673-1733).
Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses des peuples idolâtres.
Amsterdam: J. F. Bernard, 1723.

Courtesy of the Jean and
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Among the several folio sets that Bernard Picard produced in the early eighteenth century, none was as well thumbed as his six massive tomes on the religious customs and ceremonies of people around the world, including both the ancients and the Indians of the New World. The text and illustrations are largely derivative, but therein is their importance. Picard condensed a huge amount of information into easily accessible pieces; he summarized material that had been available and hence was familiar. The appeal of the set must have been both its breadth and the familiarity of the stories and the images. At the same time, he made it a point to compare practices wherever he could. It is in volumes such as this that one begins to sense the extent to which the peoples of the New World had been intellectually domesticated.