

Excerpts from Spanish Explorers' Tales



EXCERPT FROM THE JOURNAL OF COLUMBUS IN HIS VOYAGE OF 1492

Saturday, 13 October. "At daybreak great multitudes of men came to the shore, all young and of fine shapes, very handsome; their hair not curled but straight and coarse like horse-hair, and all with foreheads and heads much broader than any people I had hitherto seen; their eyes were large and very beautiful; they were not black, but the color of the inhabitants of the Canaries, which is a very natural circumstance, they being in the same latitude with the island of Ferro in the Canaries. They were straight-limbed without exception, and not with prominent bellies but handsomely shaped. They came to the ship in canoes, made of a single trunk of a tree, wrought in a wonderful manner considering the country; some of them large enough to contain forty or forty-five men, others of different sizes down to those fitted to hold but a single person. They rowed with an oar like a baker's peel, and wonderfully swift. If they happen to upset, they all jump into the sea, and swim till they have righted their canoe and emptied it with the calabashes they carry with them. They came loaded with balls of cotton, parrots, javelins, and other things too numerous to mention; these they exchanged for whatever we chose to give them. I was very attentive to them, and strove to learn if they had any gold. Seeing some of them with little bits of this metal hanging at their noses, I gathered from them by signs that by going southward or steering round the island in that direction, there would be found a king who possessed large vessels of gold, and in great quantities. I endeavored to procure them to lead the way thither, but found they were unacquainted with the route. I determined to stay here till the evening of the next day, and then sail for the southwest; for according to what I could learn from them, there was land at the south as well as at the southwest and northwest and those from the northwest came many times and fought with them and proceeded on to the southwest in search of gold and precious stones. This is a large and level island, with trees extremely flourishing, and streams of water; there is a large lake in the middle of the island, but no mountains: the whole is completely

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covered with verdure and delightful to behold. The natives are an inoffensive people, and so desirous to possess any thing they saw with us, that they kept swimming off to the ships with whatever they could find, and readily bartered for any article we saw fit to give them in return, even such as broken platters and fragments of glass. I saw in this manner sixteen balls of cotton thread which weighed above twenty-five pounds, given for three Portuguese ceutis. This traffic I forbade, and suffered no one to take their cotton from them, unless I should order it to be procured for your Highnesses, if proper quantities could be met with. It grows in this island, but from my short stay here I could not satisfy myself fully concerning it; the gold, also, which they wear in their noses, is found here, but not to lose time, I am determined to proceed onward and ascertain whether I can reach Cipango. At night they all went on shore with their canoes.



HERNAN CORTÉS: FROM SECOND LETTER TO CHARLES V, 152

His great city contains a large number of temples, or houses, for their idols, very handsome edifices, which are situated in the different districts and the suburbs; in the principal ones religious persons of each particular sect are constantly residing, for whose use, besides the houses containing the idols, there are other convenient habitations. All these persons dress in black, and never cut or comb their hair from the time they enter the priesthood until they leave it; and all the sons of the principal inhabitants, both nobles and respectable citizens, are placed in the temples and wear the same dress from the age of seven or eight years until they are taken out to be married; which occurs more frequently with the first-born who inherit estates than with the others. The priests are debarred from

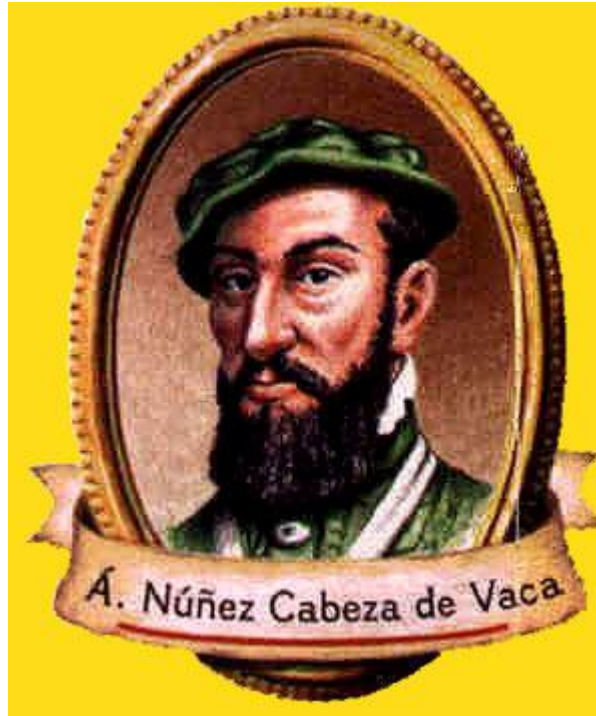
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female society, nor is any woman permitted to enter the religious houses. They also abstain from eating certain kinds of food, more at some seasons of the year than others.

Among these temples there is one which far surpasses all the rest, whose grandeur of architectural details no human tongue is able to describe; for within its precincts, surrounded by a lofty wall, there is room enough for a town of five hundred families. Around the interior of the enclosure there are handsome edifices, containing large halls and corridors, in which the religious persons attached to the temple reside. There are fully forty towers, which are lofty and well built, the largest of which has fifty steps leading to its main body, and is higher than the tower of the principal tower of the church at Seville. The stone and wood of which they are constructed are so well wrought in every part, that nothing could be better done, for the interior of the chapels containing the idols consists of curious imagery, wrought in stone, with plaster ceilings, and wood-work carved in relief, and painted with figures of monsters and other objects. All these towers are the burial places of the nobles, and every chapel in them is dedicated to a particular idol, to which they pay their devotions.

Three halls are in this grand temple, which contain the principal idols; these are of wonderful extent and height, and admirable workmanship, adorned with figures sculptured in stone and wood; leading from the halls are chapels with very small doors, to which the light is not admitted, nor are any persons except the priests, and not all of them. In these chapels are the images of idols, although, as I have before said, many of them are also found on the outside; the principal ones, in which the people have greatest faith and confidence, I precipitated from their pedestals, and cast them down the steps of the temple, purifying the chapels in which they had stood, as they were all polluted with human blood, shed in the sacrifices. In the place of these I put images of Our Lady and the Saints, which excited not a little feeling in Moctezuma and the inhabitants, who at first remonstrated, declaring that if my proceedings were known throughout the country, the people would rise against me; for they believed that their idols bestowed on them all temporal good, and if they permitted them to be ill-treated, they would be angry and without their gifts, and by this means the people would be deprived of the fruits of the earth and perish with famine. I answered, through the interpreters, that they were deceived in expecting any favors from idols, the work of their own hands, formed of unclean things; and that they must learn there was but one God, the universal Lord of all, who had created the heavens and earth, and all things else, and had made them and us; that He was without beginning and immortal, and they were bound to adore and believe Him, and no other creature or thing.

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CHAPTER 39: Indian Warfare

ALL THESE [plains] tribes are warlike, and have as much strategy for protection against enemies as if they had been reared in Italy in continual feuds. When in a part of the country where enemies might attack, they place their houses on the skirt of a scrub wood "forest," the thickest and most tangled they can find, and dig a ditch in which they sleep. The warriors cover themselves with small brush, leaving loopholes, and are so camouflaged that, if come upon, they are not discovered.

They open a very narrow pathway into the interior of the scrub stand, where a spot is prepared for the women and children to sleep. At nightfall they kindle fires in their lodges to make possible spies think the tribe is inside them. Before daybreak they relight these fires. Should an enemy come to assault the lodges, the defenders in the ditch sally out and inflict much injury before they are seen or located. When no timber presents itself for this kind of shelter and ambush overnight, they arrange themselves on selected open ground and invest it with trenches covered with brush, spacing apertures to shoot arrows through.

Once while I was with the Aguenes [Doguenes], their [Quevene] enemies fell upon them suddenly at midnight, killed three, and wounded many. The Aguenes ran from their houses into the fields facing. When they perceived their assailants had retired, they went back to pick up all the arrows the latter had shot and followed after them so stealthily that the aggressors did not suspect their arrival in the village that night. At 4 A.M. the Aguenes attacked, killed five, and wounded quite a few. The Quevenes fled from their houses, leaving their bows and all they owned behind. In a little while, the

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wives of the Quevene warriors came to the Aguenes and made a treaty of friendship. The women, on the other hand, sometimes are the cause of war.

All these nations, when they have personal enmities and are not related, assassinate at night, waylay, and inflict gross atrocities on each other.

They are the most vigilant in danger of any people I ever knew. If they fear an enemy, they stay awake all night, each warrior with a bow and a dozen arrows at his side. If one inclines to doze, he tests his bow and gives the string a twist if it is not taut enough.

Warriors often issue from their houses bending to the ground so they cannot be seen, peering all around to catch every object. If they detect anything suspicious, they at once are in the bushes with their bows and arrows, and remain there all day, running from place to place--where they think they need to be or where they think the enemy lurks. With daylight they unbend their bows until they go out to hunt. The strings are deer sinews.

The way they battle is to bend low to the ground, constantly speaking [yelling], and leap from one point to another, avoiding the shafts shot at them. Their maneuvering is so effective that a crossbow or musket does them little damage; they rather scorn them, especially when they can move nimbly about on an open field. Our weapons are, however, good for defiles and in water. Everywhere else, the horse will best subdue, being what the natives universally dread [to generalize from Spanish experience in Florida, Mexico, and the West Indies].

Whoever fights them must show no fear and no desire for anything that is theirs. While a war is on, they must be treated with utmost rigor; for if they detect the slightest timidity or covetousness, they are a race who readily note and exploit opportunities for vengeance. They draw strength from any weakness in their adversaries.

When they exhaust their supply of arrows in battle, each side withdraws his own way, neither following the other even if preponderant, such being their custom. At times an Indian will be run through by an arrow; but if it does not hit the entrails or heart, he recovers.

I believe these people see and hear better and have keener senses in general than any in the world. They know great hunger, thirst, and cold, as if they were made for enduring these more than other men, by habit and nature.

I have wanted to say this much, not merely to indulge the curiosity of humans about each other, but to impart a knowledge of usages and artifices which would be of value to those who might sometime in the future find themselves among these people.

CHAPTER 41:

A Smoke; a Tea; Women and Eunuchs

EVERYWHERE they produce a stupor with a smoke [of, presumably, *peyote* cactus, imported from tribes of the Río Grande valley and southward], for which they will give whatever they possess.

They drink a yellow tea made of leaves from a holly-like shrub [*Ilex cassine*] which they parch in a pot; then the pot is filled with water while still on the fire. [This became popularly known elsewhere as "black drink" and "Carolina tea."] When the beverage has boiled twice, they pour it into a jar and thence into a half gourd. As soon as

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it is frothy, they drink it as hot as they can stand. From the time it is poured from the pot to the time of the first sip, they are shouting, "Who wants to drink?"

When the women hear these shouts, they stand motionless, fearing to move. Even if heavily laden, they dare not budge. Should a woman make a motion, they dishonor her, beat her with sticks, and in great vexation throw out the liquor that is prepared. Those who have drunk any of it regurgitate, which they do readily and painlessly. They say they do this because a woman's movement when she hears the shout causes the tea to carry something pernicious into the drinker's body which will presently kill him.

At the time of boiling, the pot must be covered. If it happens to be open when a woman passes, the rest of that potful is thrown out. The village is three days drinking this tea, eating nothing the whole time. Each person has an arroba and a half [about five or six gallons] a day.

When the women have their indisposition, they seek food only for themselves; no one else will eat of what they bring. In the time I was among these people, I witnessed a diabolical practice: a man living with a eunuch. Eunuchs go partly dressed, like women, and perform women's duties, but use the bow and carry very heavy loads. We saw many thus mutilated. They are more muscular and taller than other men and can lift tremendous weight.