



Journal of Columbus's first voyage to the Americas (1492-1493)

During his first voyage to the Americas, Columbus kept a journal, which he afterward handed over to the Spanish monarchs. The full text of the journal has not survived; but in the 1500s, Catholic priest Bartolomé de las Casas, who wrote a disapproving history of Spanish conquests in the Americas, took detailed notes from a copy of Columbus's journal, and those notes have survived. The following selections come from Las Casas's notes. The first selection is a reportedly verbatim copy, made by Las Casas, of Columbus's prologue to the journal, addressed to the king and queen of Spain. The second selection is Las Casas's summary of two journal entries describing how an indigenous Taíno community aided Columbus ("the Admiral") and his crew after the largest of their ships, the Santa María, was wrecked just off the coast of the island of Hispaniola.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ:

Whereas, most Christian, high, excellent, and powerful princes, king and queen of Spain and of the islands of the sea, our sovereigns, in this present year, 1492, after Your Highnesses had terminated the war with the Moors reigning in Europe, the same having been brought to an end in the great city of Granada, where on the second day of January, this present year, I saw the royal banners of Your Highnesses planted by force of arms upon the towers of the Alhambra, which is the fortress of that city, and saw the Moorish king come out at the gates of the city and kiss the hands of Your Highnesses and of the prince, my sovereign—

In that same month, in consequence of the information which I had given Your Highnesses respecting the countries of India and a prince called Great Can,^a which in our language signifies "king of kings," how, at many times, he and his predecessors had sent to Rome, soliciting instructors who might teach him our holy faith, and the Holy Father had never granted his request, whereby great numbers of people were lost, falling into idolatries and believing in doctrines of perdition—

Your Highnesses, as Catholic Christians and princes who love and promote the holy Christian faith and are enemies of the doctrine of Mahomet and of all idolatries and heresies, determined to send me, Christopher Columbus, to the above-mentioned countries of India, to see the said princes, peoples, and territories, and to learn their disposition and the proper method of converting them to our holy faith; and furthermore directed that I should not proceed by land to the east, as is customary, but by a route to the west, in which direction we have hitherto no certain evidence that anyone has gone.

So after having expelled all the Jews from the entirety of your dominions, Your Highnesses, in the same month of January, ordered me to proceed with a sufficient armament to the said regions of India; and for that purpose granted me great favors and ennobled me, that thenceforth I might call myself *don* and be high admiral of the ocean sea and perpetual viceroy and governor in all the islands and continents which I might discover and acquire, or which may hereafter be

^a Can = *Khan*

discovered and acquired in the ocean sea, and that this dignity should be inherited by my eldest son and thus descend from generation to generation, forevermore. [...]

* * *

Tuesday, Dec. 25. Christmas. Last night they kept along the coast, with a light wind [...] As the sea was calm, the man at the helm left his place to a ship's boy and went off to sleep [...] But as it pleased Our Lord, at midnight [...] the current carried the ship toward one of the shoals that were there, upon which she struck [...], and presently she opened between the ribs. [...]

The Admiral [...] sent [...] Diego de Arana [...] and Pero Gutiérrez [...] to alert the king who, on Saturday, had sent him the invitation to anchor his ships at his residence, which was about a league and a half ahead of the shoal where the ship lay. They say that upon hearing the news, the king shed tears and dispatched all the people of the town, with many very large canoes, to unload the ship; and with their assistance, the decks were cleared in a very short time. Such was that king's great readiness and diligence! He himself, with his brothers and relations, [...] took care that all the goods should be safely brought to land and carefully preserved. From time to time, he sent one of his relations to the Admiral, weeping and consoling him and entreating him not to be afflicted at his loss, for he would give him all he had.

The Admiral here observes to the king and queen that in no part of Castile would more strict care have been taken of his goods; not the smallest trifle was lost. The king ordered several houses to be cleared for the purpose of stowing the goods, and he set armed men around them to stand watch through the night. "He and all his people wept," says the Admiral. "Such a loving people they are, without covetousness and amenable to anything, that I declare to Your Highnesses that I believe there is not a better people nor a better country in the world. They love their neighbors as themselves, and their speech is the sweetest in the world, gentle and accompanied always by laughter. They all, both men and women, go about as naked as they were born, but Your Highnesses may be assured that they possess very commendable customs [...] What fine memories they have, and how eager they are to see everything, inquiring what it is and what is its use." These are the words of the Admiral.

Wednesday, Dec. 26. At sunrise, the king of the country visited the Admiral on board the *Niña* and, with tears in his eyes, entreated him not to indulge in any grief, for he would give him all he had; that he had assigned to the Christians on shore two very large houses and, if necessary, would give them more [...] While the Admiral was conversing with him, a canoe arrived from another place, bringing pieces of gold which they wanted to exchange for a hawk's bell, for there is no other thing they desire so greatly; before the canoe reached the vessel, they called out, showing the gold and crying, "*Chuq, chuque*," for the hawk's bells, and seemed ready to go mad after them. Having seen this, as those canoes from elsewhere were departing, some called to the Admiral, beseeching him to reserve a hawk's bell for them, saying they would bring him, the following day, four pieces of gold as big as his hand. This intelligence gave him great joy; and there presently came from ashore a sailor, who informed the Admiral that the Christians there were carrying on a wondrous traffic, purchasing pieces of gold worth more than two *castellanos* for a strap of leather, and that this was nothing to what it would be in a month. [...]

The king took a meal on board the caravel with the Admiral and then accompanied him to shore,

where he treated the Admiral with much honor, feasting him with two or three sorts of *ajes*,^b shrimps, game, and other viands, and with their bread, which they call *caçabi*^c [...] The meal completed, he went down to the shore with the Admiral, who sent for a Turkish bow and some arrows. These he gave to one of the crew, who was expert in their use, and the exhibition of them astonished the king, who knew nothing of weapons, his people neither using nor possessing them, although some discourse had been held about the people of Caniba, whom they call Caribes; these, they stated, were accustomed to come and attack them with bows and arrows [...] The Admiral then gave the king to understand, by signs, that the sovereigns of Castile would send people to destroy the Caribes and bring them all prisoners, with their hands tied. By order of the Admiral, a *lombarda* and an *espingarda*^d were fired; seeing what effect their force produced and what they could penetrate, the king was struck with new wonder, and at the sound of the shots, all his people fell upon the ground.

A large mask was brought, with great pieces of gold at the ears, eyes, and other places; this was given to the Admiral, along with other jewels of the same metal, which the king himself placed upon the Admiral's head and neck. Many other presents were made to other Christians with him. All these things gave the Admiral much pleasure and consolation and assuaged his grief for the loss of the ship, and he became convinced that Our Lord had caused the shipwreck in order that he would make a settlement there. "And to this end," says he, "[...m]any of my crew have solicited me for permission to remain, and I have today ordered the construction of a fort, with a tower and a great trench, all to be well built—not that I deem such a fortification necessary as a defense against this people, as I have already stated that with my present crew I could subjugate this whole island, which I believe to be larger than Portugal and twice as populous, for they are naked and unarmed and unalterable cowards; but that I judge it proper [...] so that this people may know the genius of the people of Your Highnesses and what they are able to perform, so that they may be held in obedience by fear as well as love [...]"

[...] The Admiral relates many other things by way of showing that it was a piece of good fortune and the specific will of God that the ship should be wrecked there, so that some of the crew should remain [...] He adds that he hopes to God to find, at his intended return from Castile, a *tonel*^e of gold collected by them in trading, and that they will have succeeded in discovering the mine and the spices, and all these in such abundance that before three years, the king and queen may undertake the conquest of the Holy Sepulcher. "For I have before protested to Your Highnesses," says he, "that all the profits of my enterprise should be employed in the conquest of Jerusalem, at which Your Highnesses laughed and said you were pleased and had the same desire."

^b *ajes* = *yams*

^c *caçabi* = *cassava*

^d *lombarda*, *espingarda* = *two types of cannon*

^e *tonel* = *a unit of shipping capacity equal to over 50 cubic feet (Picture a crate that measures between 3½ and 4 feet on all of its sides.)*

Source: [Samuel Kettell, trans.], *Personal Narrative of the First Voyage of Columbus to America* (Boston: Thomas B. Wait & Son, 1827), 9-11, 165-175, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044011557550>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Extensively emended based on comparison to the original Spanish as reproduced in Cesare De Lollis, ed., *Scritti di Cristoforo Colombo*, part 1 of *Raccolta di documenti e studi pubblicati dalla R. Commissione colombiana* (Rome: Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 1892-94), 1:1-2, 78-83, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo.31924005676105>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Checked against the more recent transcription of Las Casas's manuscript in Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelley Jr., trans., *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America, 1492-1493*, by Bartolomé de las Casas (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 16-18, 276-290.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Frequent emendations have been made by Duffy to Kettell's translation in order to reflect more accurately or clearly the original Spanish; to reduce textual clutter, such emendations have not been marked with square brackets. The clauses translated *These are the words of the Admiral* and *for they are naked and unarmed and unalterable cowards* are entirely missing in Kettell. Footnotes in Kettell omitted. Additional paragraph and sentence breaks inserted for readability. Spelling, punctuation, and typography (small caps, italics) corrected, modernized, Americanized, or otherwise emended. Dates of journal entries have been slightly reformatted for modernization and placed in bold italic type for visibility.

The capitalizing or lowercasing of most governmental and religious titles (including *king, queen, don, high admiral, viceroy, governor, Your Highnesses, Holy Father, and Our Lord*) and of directional terms (*east, west*) has been emended from Kettell to match the usage of the Spanish as presented in De Lollis. A prominent exception is *the Admiral*, which substitutes for Columbus's name and has therefore been left capitalized here, as in Kettell, although it is lowercase in De Lollis.

These edited excerpts from Columbus's journal are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite one of the source publications listed above.



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