**Columbus and Racial Stereotyping**

Some of the first written descriptions of Native Americans were by Columbus’s own hand. His encounters with the various tribes of the Caribbean islands are recorded in his travel journal and letters. What follows are two passages from a letter about his first voyage that he wrote to King Ferdinand of Spain. These passages set the basis for future perceptions of hundreds of diverse tribes throughout North, Central, and South America. Columbus wrote of the Indians:

[T]hey are so guileless and so generous with all that they possess, that no one would believe who has not seen it. They refuse nothing that they possess, if it be asked of them; on the contrary, they invite any one to share it and display as much love as if they would give their hearts. They are content with whatever trifle of whatever kind that may be given to them, whether it be of value or valueless. . . .

They do not hold any creed nor are they idolaters; but they all believe that power and good are in the heavens and were very firmly convinced that I, with these ships and men, came from the heavens, and in this belief they everywhere received me after they had mastered their fear. This belief is not the result of ignorance, for they are, on the contrary, of a very acute intelligence and they are men who navigate all those seas, so that it is amazing how good an account they give of everything. It is because they have never seen people clothed or ships of such a kind. . . . In all these islands, I saw no great diversity in the appearance of the people or in their manners and language. On the contrary, they all understood one another, which is a very curious thing, on account of which I hope that their Highnesses will determine upon their conversion to our holy faith, towards which they are very inclined.

In contrast, Columbus wrote of one tribe whose behavior did not conform to this early description:

Thus I have found no monsters, nor had a report of any, except in an island “Carib,” which is the second at the coming into the Indies, and which is inhabited by people who are regarded in all the islands as very fierce and who eat human flesh. They have many canoes with which they range through all the islands of India and pillage and take whatever they can. They are no more malformed than are the others, except that they have the custom of wearing their hair long like women, and they use bows and arrows of the same cane stems, with a small piece of wood at [the] end, owing to their lack of iron which they do not possess. They are ferocious among these other people who are cowardly to an excessive degree, but I make no more account of them than of the rest.

**In your notebook: Find and explain two arguments that the Spanish used to justify their plan to take gold and silver from the native people.**

**\*\*One argument should justify taking riches from the “good Indians” (Indios) and one to justify taking riches from the “bad Indians” (Caribs).**

His entire description of the Carib Indians, their values, beliefs, and institutions, focuses primarily on two elements—ferocity and cannibalism.

This description, too, would later be one frequently and randomly applied to a wide variety of tribes. Somehow, during these early years, the word *cannibal* arose from a Spanish variant of *Carib,* and in the eyes of many Europeans, the term *cannibal,* with all its violent connotations, became synonymous with all Native Americans.

Men, acting under the leadership of Columbus, were described as “debauchees, profligates, thieves, seducers, ravishers, vagabonds . . . given over to violence and rapine: lazy gluttonous, caring only to sleep and carouse”.

Based on this description, what types of men were working with Columbus?

Though Columbus was the leader and governor of these islands, he was rarely there. In his absence, his men forced the native people to find and bring them items of value such as gold.

As Hans Koning notes:

Every man and woman, every boy or girl of fourteen or older, in the province of Cibao (of the imaginary gold fields) had to collect gold for the Spaniards. . . . Whoever [did not] was killed by having his or her hands cut off. There are old Spanish prints that show this being done: the Indians stumble away, staring with surprise at their arm stumps pulsing out blood.

Since no gold fields existed, except in the imagination of the Spaniards, the Indians were doomed. Many preferred mass suicides through poison rather than death by sword. Genocide was the result: “During those two years of the administration of the brothers Columbus, an estimated one half of the entire population of Hispaniola was killed or killed themselves. The estimates run from 125,000 to one-half million”. Within a quarter century, no members of the tribes inhabiting Hispaniola remained alive.

**In your notebook answer the following:**

**Why do you think there is no mention of these atrocities in Columbus’ journals and letters? Do you think he was aware of what his men were doing? Do you think they did this under his direct orders?**