

### **Dr. Chanca's Letter**

*(The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus, edited and translated by J.M. Cohen, Penguin Books, 1969, pages 129-157.)*

...The fleet [of seventeen ships] which, by God's will, the Catholic Kings, our lords, sent to the Indies under the command of Christopher Columbus, their Admiral of the Ocean Sea, left Cadiz on 25 September 1493.

...At about daybreak on Sunday, 3 November, the first after All Saints, a pilot of the flagship cried out claiming a reward: 'Land in sight!' All the men were so delighted that it was marvelous to hear their shouts and cries of pleasure. They had good reason, for they were so exhausted by their privations and pumping out water that they all longed most fervently for land.

...The captain went ashore in the boat and visited the houses, whose inhabitants fled as soon as they saw him. He went into the houses and saw their possessions, for they had taken nothing with them. He took two parrots, which were very large and very different from any previously seen. He saw much cotton, spun and ready for spinning, and some of their food. He took a little of everything, and in particular he took away four or five human arm and leg bones. When we saw these, we suspected that these were the Carib islands, whose inhabitants eat human flesh. For following the indications of their position given him by the Indians of the islands discovered in his previous voyage, the Admiral had set his course to discover them, since they were nearer to Spain and lay on the direct route to the island of Hispaniola, where he had left his men on the previous voyage. By the goodness of God, and thanks to the Admiral's skill and knowledge, we had reached them as directly as if we had been following a known and familiar course.

This island [Guadaloupe in the Lesser Antilles] is very large, and on this side the coast appeared to be twenty-five leagues in length. We sailed along it for more than two leagues looking for a harbor. On the side we approached there were very high mountains, and on the side from which we left wide plains appeared. On the seashore there were some small villages, and at the sight of our sails all the people fled. When we had gone two leagues and it was quite late, we found a harbor. That night the Admiral decided that some men should land early next morning and hold conversation with the natives, to find out what people they were, though he already suspected that they were Caribs and the people whom he had seen running away were naked, like those he had seen on his previous voyage.

Certain captains set out in the morning and some returned at dinnertime bringing a boy of about fourteen, who later told us that he was one of these people's captives. The other captains went in various directions. A few men returned with a boy whom a man had been leading by the hand, but had abandoned at their approach. Only these few were detached to bring him back, the rest remaining behind. These captured some women of the island, and also brought back other women who were prisoners and came of their own accord. One captain separated himself from the party with six men, not knowing that any information had been gained. He and his companions got lost and could not find their way back until, after four days, they struck the coast, which they followed until they rejoined the

fleet. We thought that they were dead and eaten by the Caribs, for there seemed no other explanation for their disappearance, since among them were pilots, sailors capable of making the voyage to and from Spain by the stars, and we didn't think they could get lost in so small a space.

On the first day of our landing, many men and women walked along the seashore, gazing on the fleet and marveling at the strange sight. And when a boat put ashore to speak with them saying '*Tayno Tayno*', which means *good*, they waited so long as our men did not come ashore, remaining at the water's edge, ready to escape at any moment. Consequently none of these men could be taken, either by force or by persuasion, except two, who grew confident and were captured a little later. In addition to the two who were taken by force, more than twenty of the women prisoners and some other natives of the island came of their own accord. Some boy prisoners also fled to our men, escaping from the natives of the island who were guarding them.

We remained in this harbor for eight days because of the loss of the captain I have spoken of, and landed several times on the island, visiting the dwellings and villages on the coast, where we found great numbers of human bones and skulls hanging in the houses as vessels to hold things. Very few men appeared and the reason was, as we learned from the women, that ten canoes had gone to raid other islands. These people seemed to us more civilized [advanced] than those elsewhere. All have straw houses, but these people build them much better, and have larger stocks of provisions, and show more signs of industry practiced by both men and women. They have much cotton, spun and ready for spinning, and much cotton cloth so well woven that it is in no way inferior to the cloth of our own country. We asked the women who were held prisoners on this island what kind of people these were; and they replied that they were Caribs. When they understood that we hated these people on account of their cannibalism, they were highly delighted; and after that, if any Carib man or woman was brought in, they quietly told us that they were Caribs. For even here, where all were in our power, they showed the fear of a conquered people, and thus we learnt from the women which were Caribs and which were not. The Caribs wore round their legs two rings of woven cotton—one below the knee and one at the ankle. In this way they make their calves large and constrict the knee and ankle. They seem to regard this as attractive, and by this feature we distinguished the Caribs from the others.

The customs of these Carib people are beastly. There are three islands. This one they call Turuqueira; the first that we saw is Ceyre and the third Ayay. [Guadeloupe plus two other islands, whose identity is uncertain but are also part of the Lesser Antilles].

The people were all friendly to one another as if of one family. They do not harm each other but all make war against the neighboring islands. They travel 150 leagues to make raids in their canoes, which are hewn out of a single tree. Instead of iron weapons they use arrows—for they have no iron. Some of their arrows are tipped with tortoise shell, but others on another island use fish bones that are naturally serrated like very strong saws. For an unarmed people [no armor], which they all are, they can kill and do great injury with these weapons, which are not very terrible, however, to men of our nations.

These people raid the other islands and carry off all the women they can take, especially the young and beautiful, whom they keep as servants and concubines. They had carried off so many that in fifty houses we found no males and more than twenty of the captives were girls. These women say that they are treated with a cruelty that seems incredible. The Caribs eat the male children that they have by them, and only bring up the children of their own women; and as for the men they are able to capture, they bring those who are alive home to be slaughtered and eat those who are dead on the spot. They say that human flesh is so good that there is nothing like it in the world; and this must be true, for the human bones we found in their houses were so gnawed that no flesh was left on them except what was too tough to be eaten. In one house the neck of a man was found cooking in a pot. They castrate the boys that they capture and use them as servants until they are men. Then, when they want to make a feast, they kill and eat them, for they say that the flesh of boys and women is not good to eat. Three of these boys fled to us, and all three had been castrated.

...The difference in appearance between...[Caribs and other Indians] is that the Caribs wear their hair very long and the others have it cut irregularly and decorate their heads in a great number of different patterns, each according to his fancy. They make these patterns—crosses and such-like devices—with sharpened reeds. Both the Caribs and the others are beardless; only very rarely will you find anyone with a beard. The Caribs who were captured there had their eyes and brows stained, which I think they do for show. It makes them look more terrifying.

...in the evening of the next [day we] came in sight of another island called Burenquen [Puerto Rico] whose coast we followed for the whole of the next day. The island was reckoned to be thirty leagues long on this side. It is most beautiful and appears to be very fertile. The Caribs have come here on raids and have taken many of the people. The natives have no canoes and no knowledge of navigation, but according to the Caribs whom we captured they use bows like their own, and if they manage to capture any of the raiders they eat them in the same way as the Caribs themselves. We stayed in a harbor on this island for two days, and many of our men landed, but we were never able to have speech with the people, for they were terrified of the Caribs and all fled.

...We sailed along the coast of this island [the next island, Hispaniola] for about a hundred leagues, to the place where the Admiral had left his people, which must have been about halfway along the [northern coast of the] island.

...We sailed continuously along our course until we reached a harbor called Monte Christi, where we stayed two days to inspect the ground because the Admiral did not think that the place where he had left his people was suitable for a settlement. There was a large river of very good water, but the land around is all swampy and unsuitable for habitation. During their inspection of the river and the land some of our men found two corpses at a place near the bank, one with a noose round his neck and the other with his feet tied. This was on the first day. On the next they found two other corpses further upstream, one of which was so well preserved that it was possible to see that he had been heavily bearded. Some

of our men suspected the worst and with justification, for the Indians have no beards, as has already been observed.

This harbor was two leagues away from the place where the Admiral had left his people and two days later we set sail for it. The Admiral had left them in the company of a king called Guacamari, who was I think one of the principal kings of this island. That day we arrived off the place, but it was already evening and because of the shoals on which the Admiral's ship [the Santa Maria] had been lost on the previous voyage we did not dare to go inshore and enter the harbor until the next day, when soundings could be taken and we could do so in safety. We remained that night rather less than a league from shore.

...After we had anchored offshore that evening, the Admiral ordered that two cannons should be fired in hope that the Christians who had remained with Guacamari would reply, for they also had cannons. But there was no reply and no sign of fires or houses in that place. This greatly disturbed our people, who drew the natural conclusion and were very sad.

Four or five hours after nightfall... [a canoe appeared]. The Indians shouted to the captain of the first caravel they approached, asking for the Admiral. ...One of them was a cousin of Guacamari... When the Admiral asked them about the Christians and how they were, Guacamari's cousin answered that they were all well, although some of them had died of disease and others of quarrels that had arisen among them. He said that Guacamari was lying at another village with a wound in his leg and for this reason had not come, but that he would come the next day. He said that two other kings, Caonabo and Mayreni, had attacked him and burned the village. And they went ashore later saying that they would return the next day with Guacamari, and so they left us comforted for that night.

Next morning we were waiting for Guacamari to come, and in the meantime several men landed, on the Admiral's orders, and went to the place where they had often been in the past. They found the palisaded blockhouse in which the Christians had been left, burnt, and the village demolished by fire... The Indians whom they had met there went about very warily and did not dare to come near us, but ran away. This seemed a bad sign, for the Admiral had told us that on our arrival so many canoes would put out to come alongside and see us that we should not be able to fend them off, as had been the case on the previous voyage. When we saw that they were now very shy with us, we came to the worst conclusions.

Nevertheless that day we made advances to them and threw them some small things, such as hawks' bells and beads, in order to reassure them. Two or three of them, including Guacamari's cousin, became sufficiently confident to enter the boat and came aboard ship. When asked about the Christians, they answered that they were all dead... Guacamari's cousin was asked who had killed them. He replied King Caonabo and King Mayreni and that they had burnt down the village. He said that many Indians had been wounded and that Guacamari himself had a wound in the thigh and was at present at another village...

There are many opinions among us. Some of us suspected that Guacamari had taken part himself in the betrayal or murder of the Christians. Others thought not, since it was his village that had been burnt down.

...they [the Indians] had pointed out where eleven Christians lay covered with grass that had grown over them. They all told us through an interpreter that Caonabo and Mayreni had killed them, but complained at the same time that the Christians had taken three or four women apiece, from which we concluded that they had been murdered out of jealousy.

...a canoe had come out...with two Indians, one of them Guacamari's brother... They then said that Guacamari invited them to land and come to a village of some fifty houses where he was staying. The Spaniards [not including Columbus] landed in the boat and went to the place where Guacamari was, and found him on his bed apparently suffering from a serious wound. They spoke with him and asked about the Christians, and he answered, telling the same story as the others, that it was Caonabo and Mayreni who had killed them, and that they had wounded him in the thigh, which he showed them bandaged...

Next morning the Admiral decided to go to that village. ...earlier in the morning before we set out Guacamari's brother had visited the Admiral urging him to hasten his visit to Guacamari. The Admiral and all the chief officers landed so richly dressed that they could have graced a capital city. He took some presents, since he had already received a considerable amount of gold from Guacamari and it was right that he should respond to this demonstration of goodwill. Guacamari had himself prepared a further present for the Admiral and on our arrival we found him stretched on his bed, which was of their native kind, made of woven cotton mesh and hung above the ground [a hammock]. He did not get down but from his bed made the best gestures of courtesy that he could. He showed great feeling for the death of the Christians; the tears sprang to his eyes as he began to talk, demonstrating as best he could how some had died of disease and others had gone to Caonabo in search of the goldfield and had been killed there and how the rest had been killed in his own village. To judge from the condition of the bodies this had happened less than two months ago.

...The Admiral said that we had knowledge of men's ailments and asked him to show us his wound. ...Guacamari told the Admiral he had been wounded by a stone. When the bandages were off we began to examine him, and it was quite obvious that he was no more wounded in this thigh than in the other, although he made a cunning pretense of being in great pain.

What had occurred remained uncertain, for the facts were still not known, though there were many undoubted signs that some hostile people had attacked Guacamari. Consequently the Admiral could not decide what to do. He and many others thought that for the present and until the facts were better known it would be best to dissemble. When they learned the truth they could demand whatever reparation they chose from him.

That evening Guacamari accompanied the Admiral to the ships, where he was shown the horses and everything aboard, which greatly astonished him as things never seen before.

He took supper on the ship and later in the evening returned to his house. The Admiral said that he wished to settle with him and build houses, and Guacamari replied that this would please him but that the place was unhealthy because it was very damp, which it certainly was. All this conversation was conducted through two Indian interpreters, the only survivors of the seven who had been taken to Castile on the previous voyage. Five of them died on the way back and these two almost did so.

Next day we remained at anchor in that harbor and Guacamari inquired when the Admiral intended to depart. A reply was sent that we would leave on the following day, and on that day Guacamari's brother and some others came to the ship bringing gold for barter. This next day a fair amount of gold was exchanged.

There were ten women on board, who had been rescued from the Caribs, most of them from the island of Boriquen, and Guacamari's brother talked with them, and I think instructed them to do what they did that night, which was quietly to jump overboard during the first watch and swim ashore. By the time they were missed they had swum so far that only four were taken by the boats and not until they were just coming out of the water. They had swum a good half league. Next morning the Admiral went to Guacamari demanding that he should return the women who had escaped during the night, and sent to look for them immediately. When his messengers arrived they found the village deserted—not a person remained in it. Many people then reaffirmed their suspicions; others said that Guacamari had merely moved on to another village, as was their custom.

...Since we understood them so little and their equivocal statements were so obscure, we have not yet been able to determine the truth about the death of our men...

The Admiral decided that we should return up the coast in the direction from which we had come because he had news that there was gold there. But the weather was so much against us that to sail back thirty leagues was harder than to come from Castile. Indeed, it was so bad and the voyage so long that it was a full three months before we landed.

...In their neighborhood there are many goldfields, none of which, according to their reports, is more than twenty or twenty-five leagues away...

These Indians seem so well disposed that they could be converted if we had an interpreter, for they imitate everything that we do. They bend their knees at the altars, and at the *Ave Maria* and other moments, and cross themselves. They all say that they wish to be Christians, although actually they are idolaters. There are idols of all kinds in their houses. When I ask them what these are they answer that they belong to *Turey*, that is to say the sky. I once made a show of wanting to throw these in the fire, which so upset them that they were on the point of tears. They also think that whatever we bring comes from the sky, for they call it all *Turey*, that is to say sky.

Although, on account of the many cases of sickness among his people, the Admiral had previously decided to postpone the search for the goldfields until he had dispatched the ships that were to go to Castile, he now resolved to send two parties under different captains, one to Cibao and the other to Niti, the residence of Caonabo. They went and

returned, one on 20 January and the other on 21 January. The captain who went to Cibao found gold in so many places that no one dared to guess the number. Indeed, they found it in no more than fifty streams and rivers, and on dry land also. He says that wherever you look, anywhere in this province, you will find gold. He brought samples from many parts from the sand of rivers and from springs on land. It is believed that, if we dig as we know how, it will be found in larger pieces, for the Indians cannot mine, since they have nothing with which to dig more than eight inches deep. The other captain who went to Niti also brought news of much gold in three or four places, and he too brought a sample.

Our sovereigns therefore can certainly consider themselves henceforth the richest and most prosperous on earth, for nothing comparable has ever been seen or read of till now in the whole world. On the next voyage that the ships make they will be able to carry away such quantities of gold that anyone who hears of it will be amazed. Here I think it will be well to end my story. I believe that those who do not know me and hear all this will consider me longwinded and exaggerative. But as God is my witness I have not departed one iota from the truth.