THE SACRIFICE OF GOD’S GLORY FOR THE SAKE OF GOLD:
BRINGING CHRISTIANITY & HUMANITY TO THE NEW WORLD

By
Mariah Rose Donnelly

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

1492 was a year of triumph for the Spanish kingdom. In this year, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella were able to reclaim Andalusia successfully from its Muslim rulers and inhabitants, thus bringing an end to the nearly 800-year struggle known as the Reconquista. In addition to this, the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus reached the shores of San Salvador later that year on behalf of the Spanish Crown.¹ Not only was the Spanish Crown laying claim to old lost lands but they were also laying claim to newly discovered ones. In 1493, just a year after the Italian’s discovery, the Spanish pope, Alexander VI, issued a bull granting Spain a monopoly on all non-Christian lands west of a line drawn 100 leagues west of the Azores. In effect, this gave sovereignty over all new lands discovered in the Atlantic to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain.² The triumphs continued when veins of silver were discovered in Bolivia and Mexico.³ Meanwhile, reports of the discovery of gold and pearls in these regions were made by men like Amerigo Vespucci, another Italian navigator.⁴

Spain, then, was awash with news about the existence of gold, silver, pearls, and even people in the New World. Accordingly, the crown committed itself to evangelising the newly

³ Alba-Koch, 93.
discovered region, but with the prospect of commercial trade in the background.\textsuperscript{5} To do this required that these new lands first be conquered. The brunt of this work was done by conquistadores (literally conquerors), Spanish men who travelled to the New World to conquer it. However, this sort of work was expensive and very often life-threatening, and so these men expected recompense from the Crown in the form of lands, labour and titles, for this is what their predecessors had received when they fought in the Reconquista.

To reward the conquistadores and settle the lands they conquered, the encomienda system was created. This system was a restructuring of the feudal system that tied labourers and landowners in a mutually obliging contract. In theory, the system was simple: an Indigenous labourer was to give their labour to a landowner, known as the encomendero; in exchange, the encomendero was meant to protect his workers and to ensure their instruction in the Christian faith.\textsuperscript{6} Thus, it would seem on the surface that the Spanish Empire’s intentions were met; conquistadores conquered land and were subsequently rewarded, while the lands’ resources were utilized and its inhabitants cared for and converted.

Amid all of this success of the Crown, bolstered by the triumphalist accounts written by men like Columbus and Vespucci recounting in great detail the gold and profit to be won in this new world, one Spanish clergyman saw things very differently. Bartolomé de Las Casas was born in Seville in 1484 and as a young man immigrated to Hispaniola with his father where he became an encomendero. After being ordained as a secular clergyman at the age of 26 years old,\textsuperscript{7} he came to see what the Spanish were doing in the New World through anything but a

\textsuperscript{5} Valerie I. J. Flint, \textit{The Imaginative Landscape of Christopher Columbus} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 183.
\textsuperscript{6} Alba-Koch, 104-5.
triumphalist lens. Indeed, when he returned to Spain in 1515, he sought an audience with the ageing King Ferdinand. But he did not tell the king tales of great riches and mass evangelisation when he met him. Instead, he described the destruction of these lands and the violent deaths of the native inhabitants, all caused by the Spaniards and their greed. He insisted that countless people had been slaughtered, dying without having received the sacraments or baptism. Spanish greed was thus sending these people to hell. King Ferdinand, far removed from the New World and its problems, referred Las Casas to the Council of the Indies, the council created to handle affairs of the New World. However, when he informed the president of the Council, Bishop Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca, how in only three months, seven thousand children had been slaughtered in Cuba, Fonseca simply replied, “and how does that concern me?” Faced with this indifference, Las Casas took to writing.

The most important of the resulting works composed by Bartolomé de Las Casas is his 1552 *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. It is an analysis of this text that will be considered in great detail in the following pages. But it is clear that the title alone suggests that Las Casas sees a problem. The text is not an heroic account of geographical discovery, tinged with the enticing prospect of the finding of gold. Nor is it an account of the evangelisation of the New World—souls being won for God. Rather, it is an account of the *destruction* of the New World. A thin book of only 130 pages, its chapters are divided according to the regions the author discusses. Going from one kingdom and province to the next, starting with the beginnings of the conquest to present-day 1552, Las Casas describes the peoples, their lands, and the gruesome ways in which the former were slaughtered, and the latter despoiled by the Spanish.

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8 Ibid., xxii-xxiii.
This is quite different from prior accounts of the New World by its explorers and conquerors—it is not the kind of work that the Spanish reading public would have expected. Why is this so?

This thesis, then, will turn to analyse Las Casas’s work in detail. I will examine why Las Casas saw the New World and its inhabitants so differently, and how he drew upon the theoretical premises of geography, natural history and contemporary rhetoric to present a harsh indictment of Spanish attitudes in these newly discovered lands.
CHAPTER II
HISTORIOGRAPHY AND ARGUMENT

Historiography

Scholars who have looked at Spanish activities in the New World have done so through a number of different methodological and theoretical lenses. One such approach is Orientalism, a term coined by Edward W. Said in his 1979 book of the same name. While Said argues that orientalism is a concept that was used throughout several periods of history to come “to terms with the Orient,” many other scholars have expanded upon his critique, taking it as indicative of a European approach to understanding foreign societies and cultures more generally. For Said, orientalism was a product of formal study about the lands Europeans designated as the Orient. That is to say, it was a product of academic institutes and doctrines. It is through this scholarship that European culture could shape the Orient, projecting their fantasies and fears upon it in a fashion that justified settlement and rule. Said essentially sees orientalism and the studies that drew upon it as a method of dominating its place of study and thus gaining knowledge and power over it. Pompa Banerjee, for instance, in her 1999 article on early modern travel narratives to India, draws on the concept of orientalism to discuss how Europeans framed the practices of foreign cultures. In other words, she finds European interpretations of Indian culture as premised upon the idea that their own culture is superior in comparison to others. In this sense, orientalism hinges upon the balance of power between the observing culture and the observed

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2 Ibid., 2-4.
culture: the observing culture observes the observed culture on the basis of its position of power and superiority.

Other scholars have seen the process of description differently, considering it through the lens of assimilation. The historian Michael Ryan in a 1981 article, for instance, argued that the way Europeans framed the Orient or the New World was not solely about power or domination. Rather, they tended to assimilate and domesticate the foreign into the familiar. That is to say, they located the foreign and the exotic against referents from their own culture. In this way, he continues, European scholars were able to blunt the force of discovery of what could have been indecipherable and even frighteningly different cultures and peoples. To do this, Europeans of the Renaissance looked to classical writings. In this respect, it was easy to compare or even equate the gods of exotic peoples, for instance, with the gods of antiquity—gods and pantheons with which European scholars would have been familiar from their reading of the early Christian struggle against traditional religion. Reading the exotic in terms of familiar, historical categories such as paganism or heathenism made the observed culture readily understandable, imaginable. Tying exotic peoples and their religious cultures with paganism located them within a familiar context, one which was known through ancient texts but also rather recent European history. Thus, this lens works within the context that assimilating foreign cultures was not to dominate them, but rather to understand them—and to make them comprehensible to those who had never encountered them.

A third approach used by historians to examine how foreign cultures were understood, described and reported centres upon assessing the advice literature travellers read about travel

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5 Ibid., 528.
6 Ibid., 523-5.
and the art of describing. This is the approach adopted by Justin Stagl in his 1995 work that examines the humanist literature that endeavoured to codify and regularise travel. This arose from the Renaissance desire to collect and distribute scholars’ knowledge to understand the world around them better. This, they argued, should be done by standardising and methodizing the process of knowledge gathering and its dispersal in an effort to control its quality and accuracy. This *Ars apodemica* (the art of travel), as it was called, spawned a number of important manuals intended to describe what and how travellers should describe what they saw. The most important of these was Theodor Zwinger’s 1577 publication *Methodus apodemica* (Method of travel). Works such as this were influential, methodizing travel and its ensuing reports. They tried to make travel an art, like a dance, with very precise steps and tricks.\(^7\) Essentially, Stagl argues that ethnologies and travel reports were not carelessly written; many followed the expected tropes and techniques established by humanist scholars in an attempt to both improve and factualize this literature. To do this, standards were created, and the practice of travel was codified.

All of these approaches have some merit. The writings of men like Vespucci do have an orientalist drift to them in that they are conceived out of dominance—even though they describe the lands of the west. Ryan’s assimilationist approach—which is compatible with that of Stagl—has value, too, for describing the exotic in terms of familiar categories was an important way of making the strange comprehensible to readers, and examples can be found in both Las Casas and the works of those men with whom he takes issue. Accordingly, I will draw to some extent on both these approaches, but they will not be the focus, nor the sole methods I will be utilizing.

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In 1572, the Jesuit Bartolomé Hernández wrote a letter to a fellow ecclesiastic, Juan de Ovando, a member of the Council of the Indies. Here, Hernández questioned the sincerity of the conversions of many Indigenous peoples. “As regards the Indians,” he wrote:

the majority are only Christian in name and external ceremonies, and inwardly they have no notion of the matters of our faith; and, what is worse, they have no affection for them, but they all do whatever they do simply in order to comply, or out of fear of punishment.

The letter is important, for it reflects a broader suspicion about conversion and converts. Hernández is clearly not interested in determining why native populations do not truly understand the Christian faith or why they might fear punishment; rather, he blames them for their ignorance and the superficial state of their faith. In Iberia, a region that had been home to Christians, Jews and Muslims through the Middle Ages but had come to see religious diversity as potentially subversive in the preceding century, this anxiety was deep seated. From the establishment of the Inquisition, Jewish converts to Christianity (so-called conversos) were treated with deep suspicion. Many were believed to be only Catholic in name only and were thought still to be clinging secretly to aspects of their Jewish heritage. As a result, these supposedly superficial converts were treated with suspicion by the greater Catholic community, for such crypto-Judaism was a threat to the religious purity of the Empire.

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10 Ibid., 249.
Because of this general distrust of the convert, when Las Casas turns to describe the Indigenous peoples of the New World in his *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, he is at pains to stress that their apparent unwillingness to take up Christianity was a result of the actions of his fellow countrymen. The Indigenous peoples of the Spanish New World, he wrote in his address to his readers “are naturally so gentle, so peace-loving, so humble and so docile.” Yet through their brutality—through their savage slaughter of so many of these placid peoples—the *conquistadores* were undermining the spread of the faith, and, in the process causing an “infinite number of human souls” to be “despatched to Hell in the course of such ‘conquests’.”

Because they know little of evangelization and sometimes even actively stand in its way, the *conquistadores* cause the loss of many potential Christians—to the great detriment of the faith.

But Las Casas goes further. He argues that the way the *conquistadores* treat Indigenous peoples goes against the very essence of the *encomienda* system in which the *encomendero* was able to harness the labour of his workers in exchange for protection and their instruction in the Christian faith. But for Las Casas, the system had become a pretext to abuse, as it effectively permitted the *encomenderos* to overwork the local inhabitants to death. These “wicked men,” he laments, were “almost all of them pig-ignorant,” and yet they “were put in charge of these poor souls.”

Not only had the *encomienda* system been subverted so that it did not bring potential souls to the Catholic faith, but *conquistadores* often directly interfered with evangelization efforts. In the kingdom of Yucatán, where the inhabitants “seemed the fittest to hear the word of

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11 Las Casas, 6.
12 Alba-Koch, 104-5.
13 Las Casas, 24.
God,” for instance, Las Casas records how a group of five Franciscans, including his friend, Jacobo de Tastera attempted a mission. They found the people to be very receptive to the faith and the promise of one God, especially once they had been reassured that no outsiders would come to them, and no violence would ensue. The people even accepted the missionaries’ request that they burn their old idols. However, shortly after they had completed this work, Spanish “brigands” arrived. They demanded that the people buy idols they had stolen from other nearby villages in exchange for slaves, and threatened violence. The effect of this interference was calamitous for the mission, Las Casas notes. Intimidating the locals, the brigands refused to leave. Consequently, the fragile bond of trust that the Franciscans had been nurturing was broken, as the would-be converts felt betrayed by the missionaries. Because they had been unable to keep the conquistadores away, the Franciscans feared that the people of Yucatán might retaliate against them, and so they had little choice but to abandon the mission.\(^{15}\)

For Las Casas, this and other examples showed that it was not true that the Indigenous were unreceptive or unwilling to accept Christianity—it was clear that the situation was actually quite the opposite. It was the conquistadores who were the problem: they did not have a sophisticated understanding of the faith; they abused their duties as encomenderos; and they interfered violently with mission efforts, undermining the conversion of the local populations. In this, the Indigenous peoples were blameless. Indeed, as Las Casas made clear in his Short Account, the Indigenous peoples were, in fact, eager and receptive to Christianity. In creating an atmosphere of distrust and fear, the conquistadores’ actions were hindering the growth of God’s kingdom.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 71.  
\(^{15}\) Ibid., 75-79.
In sum, there existed a debate over whether or not the inhabitants of the New World were receptive to Christianity and could be converted. Not only this, but the Jesuit Bartolomé Hernández echoed concerns that his fellow Spaniards held over Jewish *conversos*. Namely, could they be trusted? Or would the converted Indigenous peoples be converts in name only? Amidst this suspicion and doubt, Bartolomé de Las Casas gave his answer; they could be successfully converted, but the Spanish themselves were hindering any efforts made in evangelisation missions.

Given this context, I will argue that Las Casas’ text ought not to be construed as a straightforward narrative of events. It is not an attempt to dominate the landscape; nor is it an attempt to explain it to Spanish readers in terms that would have been familiar to them. Rather, it was constructed around a more subtle strategic goal. That is to say, Las Casas sees the Indigenous peoples of the New World as souls to be won for the greater glory of god, and his text is constructed rhetorically in such a way as to convince his readers of this fact. To explore this reading of Las Casas’ text, I will not be examining whether or not the claims or descriptions in his *Short Account* are true or not, for this is incidental to the text’s purpose. Instead, I will focus on Las Casas’ claims and descriptions, assessing how they are being presented and how they align with his goal of convincing his readers that the Indigenous peoples are capable of being converted without force.

I argue that Las Casas crafted the *Short Account* in a specific manner which suited his cause: to demand humane treatment for the Indigenous inhabitants of the New World so as to bring them to the Christian faith—something which he believed Spain neglected. To do this, he used an array of discursive strategies including geography, environmental determinism,
constructions of civility, natural law, and the tools of formal rhetoric to make an argument that urges the Spanish to place the values of evangelisation over profit and exploitation.
CHAPTER III
GARDENS AND GOLD

Of that island, the general character was well-known and observed, that there was in it no gold nor any metal, although for the rest it was a very paradise and to be regarded as more than gold.¹

The clergyman Andrés Bernáldez had never actually visited Jamaica when he wrote these words in his *History of the Catholic Sovereigns* shortly before his death in 1513.² Despite this, his description of the island is full of praise, noting that it is more precious than any gold or any other precious metal. Although he was never destined to set foot on the island’s shores, he relied on the accounts of men who had. These included Christopher Columbus and Dr. Diego Alvarez Chanca, the latter of whom had been part of the Genoese mariner’s 1494 expedition. Bernáldez was not the only one who praised the beauty of the New World. Indeed, many had very positive things to say about the exotic landscapes and the new resources they offered. But if the land was so intrinsically beautiful, if it was so valuable—a very paradise in Bernáldez’s words—how did this perception inform European understandings of these lands? How did they situate them within venerable discourses about the world and its creation? Going further, how did the way they wrote about the place affect the way they understood the inhabitants of these newly discovered regions? Europeans tended to accept if not always articulate directly a fundamental relationship between places and their inhabitants. Thus, in order to understand European

² Bernáldez wrote his work at some point before 1513. However, it was not published until 1856. See Jane, cxlvi, cxlix and cl.
perceptions of peoples, it is important to begin by addressing contemporary understandings of
the places that were proper to them.

This chapter, then, will examine these questions through the writings of various European
authors and explorers. It will analyse the way they framed the New World in the context of
contemporary geographical theory, and the implications this process had for understanding the
nature and character of the region’s populations. It will then turn to examine how Las Casas dealt
with the same issues, and the different treatment he gave to landscape on the basis of his
evangelising concerns.

Los jardines

In the summer of 1498, after the discovery of Trinidad, Columbus reached the Paria Peninsula on
the coast of Venezuela. According to the admiral, its shores were so lovely and filled with fruit
that he referred to them as jardines (gardens).\(^3\) In the subsequent years, many other Europeans
detailed the beauty of the lands and the abundance of natural produce that grew there. Some of
these commodities were familiar to European observers; others were entirely new. The Italian
navigator Amerigo Vespucci was also one such person. In his letter 1503 addressed to Lorenzo
Pietro di Medici, he asserted that although there existed many ugly beasts and peoples in the
New World, the lands were beautiful and fertile. Many trees, he continued, grow to a huge size
without even being cultivated. Of these trees, many “…yield fruits delectable to the taste and
beneficial to the human body; some indeed do not, and no fruits there are like those of ours.”\(^4\)
Fruits and pretty beaches are not all that interested these men, however. It was important to note

\(^3\) Flint, 158-9.
\(^4\) Vespucci, 5 and 8.
the New World’s appearance and to assess the extent to which it was habitable, for this was useful information sought by the Crown.

However, the novelty of these very regions often wore off for European observers quickly. Indeed, after an initial period in which they claimed to be confounded with awe at the beauty of the landscape and its apparent fertility, the new and unique landscapes of these regions were assimilated into a European frame—derived either from scripture or classical natural philosophy—that made it comprehensible and meaningful in a fashion similar to that described by Michael Ryan. Intentionally or not, this was a process which saw Europeans erase the newness the New World by assimilating it into the explanatory frames of the Old.5

After naturalising their initial wonder at what they saw in the New World, what remained for European observers was a firm interest in the regions’ resources; these were usually precious metals and jewels. Indeed, Vespucci made certain to remark that there existed “…a great abundance of gold” and that the local people were “…rich in pearls,” as well.6 This interest in the material things of New World can also be found in Columbus’ journal. With an acquisitive eye, he noted anytime he reached a region which possessed wealth, whether that be it in terms of gold, pearls, or jewels. Indeed, during the conquest and settlement of Hispaniola, Columbus reportedly “…inquired first for gold and for things most precious in our world.”7 This is because, like many others who were to follow the course he plotted, Columbus’ main interest was to find gold for himself but also his Spanish sovereigns.

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5 Elliott, 196-7. See also Ryan, passim.
6 Vespucci, 8.
The Spanish claimed that their expeditions had a double purpose: they were to search for gold and bolster commerce, but they were also to convert any local peoples. However, Columbus and Vespucci, like many others who came after them, quickly lost interest in the spiritual side of their missions, seemingly more interested in the prospects of wealth that the region might afford them. This mad hunt for gold and other “things most precious” meant that any time they were found, admirals, captains and others thought it was worth noting in their journals, letters and diaries. The prospect of stumbling on enormous gold mines was far more attractive than noting the garden-like beaches or the various fruits.

This view of the landscape—seeing it only in terms of the possible veins of gold that might lie hidden beneath its surface—led to atrocities perpetrated against the Indigenous people who inhabited the land. But in a desperate attempt to put a stop to this cruel slaughter, the Franciscan friar Marcos de Niza tried to appeal to the greed of the Spanish in his 1546 letter to the bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumárraga. Senseless slaughter, he argued, could actually lose them access to gold. As he writes:

[the] local people have told me that there is a great deal more gold still hidden away than they have to date revealed, and that they have refused to hand it over to the Spanish and will continue to refuse to do so for as long as they are unjustly treated in this cruel fashion, preferring, indeed, to take the secret to the grave, as have so many before them.

This paints a grim picture of the extent to which the hunt for gold in the New World had reached.

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8 Alba-Koch, 92-3.
9 Flint, 202-4.
10 Las Casas, 110-114.
The friar’s pleas ended up unheeded. Instead, the emphasis that the Spanish placed in their descriptions and testimonies of the New World would go on to popularize the image of the region as being bountiful in wealth and opportunity. In their accounts, it was a landscape to be used and exploited—a place where Spaniards could travel to make their fortunes. The fleets arriving from the New World weighed down with silver and the accounts written by travellers who described the immense wealth of gold waiting to be found only furthered this image and encouraged more Spaniards to search for their fortunes on the new continent.\textsuperscript{11} Thus, tales of these \textit{jardines} filled with gold and precious metals filled Spain with the image of beautiful islands dripping in jewels and gold and furthered Spaniards’ solely economic interest in these places. With their mercantilist eye focused only on the things that they might exploit for profit, it was as if they could not see the people who inhabited the land.

\textit{Potential Paradise}

By contrast, Las Casas showed a consistent interest in the New World’s beauty and what it had to offer. He often remarked upon the wonderfully fertile soils, healthy climates and the densely populated regions of places like Yucatán, Guatemala and Hispaniola, and countless others.\textsuperscript{12} As for the attractiveness of the regions he discusses, Las Casas gives only praise. In reference to Nicaragua, for instance, he says that “[i]t would be impossible to express in words the beauty and fertility of this region.”\textsuperscript{13} Descriptions like these are forms of \textit{paralipsis}, a device used in rhetoric involving the strategic use of omission to emphasise a point.\textsuperscript{14} By omitting specific details about the beauty and fertility of Nicaragua, and by essentially admitting that words do not exist to

\textsuperscript{11} Elliott, 132.
\textsuperscript{12} Las Casas, 20-1, 61-2 and 71.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 37.
describe these properly, Las Casas is amplifying its beauty and fertility through his silence.\textsuperscript{15} In doing so, he is letting his audience know that the region’s beauty is—literally—indescribable, and thus leaving it to his readers’ imaginations to conjure up a mental image of a land beyond description. Indeed, for Las Casas, such was the indescribable beauty of the New World that he believed that to see it “should surely have been a joy and a delight to any true Christian.”\textsuperscript{16}

Another technique that Las Casas uses to enhance the reader’s understanding of the vastness and beauty of these regions is comparison in a way similar to that described by Ryan. By comparing these newly discovered and conquered lands to those that would already be familiar to his European audience, Las Casas is able to bring these otherwise foreign regions to life—making the exotic familiar to a degree. On occasion, the author does this by relying on the bible. Since it was this book that strongly shaped European understandings of their world,\textsuperscript{17} it was only natural for Las Casas to use it and to draw from the tropes and metaphors it provided. For him, then, Puerto Rico and Jamaica were “lands flowing with milk and honey.”\textsuperscript{18} This an allusion to Exodus 3.8, and to the promised land to which the Israelites would be led by Moses once he freed them from Egypt.\textsuperscript{19} In a sense, Las Casas is suggesting that these islands are analogous to the promised land—a place full of untold beauty, teeming with bounty and resources, and opportunity free from oppression.

While biblical tropes and allusions are useful to him in an effort to convey the wonder of the landscape to his Christian readership, more often Las Casas compares the New World to the Old. This is to say, he describes the Americas in European terms. For example, when describing


\textsuperscript{16} Las Casas, 52.

\textsuperscript{17} Flint, 15.

\textsuperscript{18} Las Casas, 26.

\textsuperscript{19} See also Exodus 3.17.
the kingdom of Marién in Hispaniola, he notes that it was “a rich region, larger than Portugal, although a good deal more fertile and far better suited to human habitation.”\(^{20}\) Thus, he is providing his readers with a set of familiar referents allowing them to see the place in terms with which they were familiar: it is a European country, except that it even larger and better suited for people and crops. It is Portugal—but more so and better.

He does much the same when he tries to explain the size of these regions to his readers, for he “measures” them relative to European cities and kingdoms. For example, to help his readers properly imagine the size of Cuba, he notes that “[t]his island ... as we have said, stretched for a distance as great as that which separates Valladolid from Rome.”\(^{21}\) To render the size of Cuba easier to imagine, Las Casas uses the distance between a northern Spanish city and Rome as a familiar method of “measurement.” By doing this, he is able to make the image of the New World far more vivid for his audience, many of whom would have never stepped foot in the newly discovered continent. Las Casas is thus bringing the region to life through a European context—he makes the exotic familiar to those who had never travelled to the region and who likely did not aspire to do so.

*Withered Gardens*

Where there were both beauty and resources, for Las Casas, there was also potential. The Yucatán, for instance, he argued, was “the best suited by Nature to the establishment of towns and cities.”\(^{22}\) This is just a single example. For him, it was a landscape much of which had almost unlimited potential for settlement. Unfortunately, according to Las Casas, this potential was being squandered by *conquistadores*. Cuba, the island which stretched the same distance as

\(^{20}\) Las Casas, 20.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 27.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 71.
from Valladolid to Rome, and which had plentiful resources and was densely populated, was transformed by the arrival of the conquistadores. Indeed, as Las Casas puts it, the carnage inflicted by the Spaniards resulted in the island being “devastated and depopulated… transformed, as it has been, into one vast, barren wasteland.” What was once a large island filled with potential became barren after the continuous slaughter and destruction of the land.

Here, though, Las Casas does not fall back on the tools of formal rhetoric to make his point. He brings forward a document, the signed testimony of the Franciscan friar Marcos de Niza. He uses this to point not just to the destruction wrought by the conquistadores but to show how the devastation would be counterproductive to the Spanish Crown and Empire. Indeed, Fray Marcos made a similar point in 1531, remarking that the destruction of Peru by Francisco Pizarro and his fellow conquistadores was a huge loss, and that

the way the Spanish have behaved has been an offence to God and a disservice to the Crown; the Treasury has been defrauded and, in my opinion, it will be a long and a costly business to recover for the Crown this territory which could easily have provided sufficient food to support the entire population of Spain.

According to both clergymen, potential resources were being wasted, money stolen, and no benefit to god nor the Crown was being achieved. In fact, Las Casas himself estimated that over one million Castilians had been embezzled by conquistadores, with only around three thousand reaching the Crown. The author thus wants his readers to understand what he perceived to be a

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21 Ibid., 27 and 30.
24 Ibid., 107 and 110.
25 Ibid., 114.
26 Ibid., 34.
weighty and wasteful predicament: the New World was being plundered and its potential destroyed as a result of Spanish greed.

*Terrestrial Paradise*

For Las Casas, then, far from realising the Spanish desire that their expeditions would benefit the crown, affording the nation new resources and commercial opportunities, the plundering of the *conquistadores* was actually achieving much the opposite. Not only was their disinterest in the Indigenous peoples counterproductive, but their greed and avarice was depriving the Christian monarchs of what should rightfully belong them. But for him their actions also raised a more profound theological problem stemming from biblical geography.

According to Genesis 2, after the act of creation, God placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. In this terrestrial paradise, God placed every sort of tree “that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food” (Genesis 2.9). Through it flowed four rivers that brought gold and gems to other regions outside the garden (Genesis 2.10-15). Yet Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden as punishment for disobeying god’s command.27 This story is important, for it provided Europeans with a sense of the geography and hydrography of the world as it had originally been designed by God. The four rivers—generally identified as the Tigris, Euphrates, Ganges and Nile—were still visible on the face of the world. Moreover, Eden was never destroyed. Thus, it made sense for many mapmakers to include the garden on their maps even though various theologians debated over its exact placement on earth.

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While there was general agreement based on Genesis 2.8 that God had placed Eden somewhere in the east, Columbus thought that that was precisely where he had sailed. Figure 2 shows a world map that was part of a nautical chart owned by Columbus. It is oriented towards the north but clearly shows paradise as located off the eastern coast of Cathay (i.e. China).

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To some significant extent, Columbus’s voyage to the east via the west complicated the problem of the location of the terrestrial paradise, for it could be argued that it might be found in the New World. Indeed, locating it on a previously unexplored continent also conveniently helped why it had not been found in Asia.

But there was more to this identification that just wishful thinking, for descriptions of the New World were extremely similar to those of the garden. Indeed, according to the myth of the sixth-century St. Brendan, which would have been well known at the time—indeed, Columbus owned a copy—the terrestrial paradise had “[n]o plants… there without its flowers; no tree without its fruit; and all the stones thereon were precious gems,” and “a river flowing from the west towards the east.”\textsuperscript{30} Because of the similarity between the saint’s descriptions of paradise and what he observed in what his map told him was the location of paradise, Columbus was convinced that he had found the terrestrial paradise amongst these islands.\textsuperscript{31} He was not alone in this. Vespucci also believed that “if the terrestrial paradise be in any parts of this earth, I esteem that it is not far distant from those parts.”\textsuperscript{32} This identification was a problem, for if the New World was paradise, then surely it would be wholly inappropriate—or worse—for people to plunder it. It was, after all, made by god for the first two humans.

Las Casas seems certain that the terrestrial paradise is to be found in the New World. Indeed, for him kingdoms like those of Naco and Honduras in México are paradisiacal. He says that they were “once a veritable paradise on earth supporting a denser population than anywhere else in the world.”\textsuperscript{33} These earthly paradises, however, did not last long after the arrival of Hernán Cortés and his \textit{conquistadores}, who slaughtered and destroyed these areas. After these events, Las Casas sadly notes that “one sees nothing but bare, ruined settlement, and the whole melancholy spectacle is enough to melt the hardest of hearts.”\textsuperscript{34} By suggesting that the terrestrial paradise could be found in the New World and that it was being destroyed by the

\textsuperscript{30} Denis O’Donoghue, \textit{Brendaniana: St. Brendan the Voyager in Story and Legend} (Dublin: Browne & Nolan, 1893): 113
\textsuperscript{31} Flint, 168.
\textsuperscript{32} Vespucii, 9.
\textsuperscript{33} Las Casas, 55.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 55.
conquistadores, Las Casas is supporting Fray Marcos’ claims that these men are doing a
disservice to both god and the Spanish Crown. In addition to this, he is appealing to his
Christian readers’ outrage by insisting that the Spanish are not only destroying fertile lands filled
with potential but lands that could potentially be the terrestrial paradise. By using terminology
such as “veritable paradise on earth,” Las Casas is encouraging Christian outrage at the careless
destruction of god’s creation committed by fellow Christian Europeans.

Climatic Theory

Famously, when Christopher Columbus informed Queen Isabella that the rainfall in the New
World caused the trees in Hispaniola to have only shallow roots, she responded that “this land,
where the trees are not firmly rooted, must produce men of little truthfulness and less
constancy.” What was meant by this?

Essentially, Queen Isabella’s statement reflects contemporary notions of climate and its
relationship to things. According to this climatic theory, the nature of a climate zone affects the
temperament of the people, flora and fauna that inhabit it. In its origins, this idea was classical.
It was articulated in the works of authors such as Hippocrates in his fifth century BC Airs,
Waters, Places, and Ptolemy of Alexandria in his second-century Tetrabiblos. The idea was
passed down into the medieval period thanks to Muslim authors such as the eleventh-century
physician Avicenna whose works were translated into Latin in the later twelfth century, and then
in scholastic authors such as Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. According to Hippocrates,
the basic complexion of a people—that is, the balance of the four humours proper to a people as

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35 Ibid., 114.
37 Elliott, 201.
a people—was a function of their environment. Just as blood, phlegm, melancholy and bile were produced by the interaction of two pairs of contrary principles—hotness and cold, and moisture and dryness—so their proportions in the body were affected by the level of heat and moisture in the environment. Thus, a people proper to a climate zone which was intrinsically hot and moist would tend to a complexion that was fundamentally sanguine; similarly, those living somewhere cold and dry would be melancholic. For similar reasons, the complexion of a people would also be affected by terrain and altitude. Mountainous regions being intrinsically cold would produce peoples with complexions that were melancholic and phlegmatic; valleys which would trap heat would produce peoples of the opposite character. Ptolemy expanded upon this Hippocratic sense of the relationship between people and climate by adding an astrological dimension to it. Dividing the inhabited world into four quarters (northwestern, southeastern, northeastern, and southwestern), he claimed that each of these quadrants corresponded to particular astrological signs. In this way, he argued, it was possible to determine the characteristics of the people who inhabited them.

These ideas were best known in the Renaissance through the works of Avicenna and his commentators in the medieval universities. In his *Canon of Medicine*, he borrowed the sense of the humours from Hippocrates directly, noting not just the affect of the two pairs of contraries on the humoral balance of peoples, but their effect on humans’ health and temperament based on their race, climate, geographical location or atmosphere. In a very real sense, the complexion of a people as a people must be in sympathy with the nature of the climate of a region, for it is informed by the actions of heating and drying. For the Muslim physician, this is more than just a

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40 Ibid., 112-3.
curiosity, for he compares Slavs and Hindus. Both of these peoples have very different temperaments as a result of the climate that has nurtured them. But, he argues, if one were to place a Hindu in the climate that has created Slavs, the Hindu will certainly fall ill and perhaps even die because the Hindu’s complexion is no longer in sympathy with its environment. Thus, according to Avicenna, “it seems that the various inhabitants of the earth have received a temperament appropriate for their particular climate.” Based on these teachings, Europeans could pre-determine or reaffirm the characteristics of the Indigenous people of the Americas based on their environment, just as Queen Isabella had done when she was informed of the shallow-rooted trees and excessive rains of the New World.

What then was to be said of the Indigenous peoples based on the climata (climate) and physical environment? The climata of Central and South America would be considered hot and moist according to climatic theory. Thus, according to Hippocrates, peoples who inhabited hot regions that are stifling and have more hot winds than cold, are often “broad, fleshy, and dark-haired.” “Bravery and endurance,” he continues “are not by nature part of their character, but the imposition of law can produce them artificially.” What is interesting to note here is that Hippocrates’ diagnosis coincides closely with the physical description Vespucci gave of the Indigenous people. Reflecting upon their person, he remarked that they had “large square-built bodies… they are colored by the sun. They have, too, hair plentiful and black.” In addition,

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43 Vespucci, 5.
where the land is fertile, well-watered, and moist, “the inhabitants are fleshy, ill-articulated, moist, lazy, and generally cowardly in character.”

In this, classical conceptions of climate and its relationship to peoples tended to work to reinforce Europeans’ often poor opinions of the Indigenous of the New World. One example of this is Padre Luis López, who claimed the following: “The skies over this land conduce to four main vices in every kind of people born in it, namely sensuality, avarice, pride, and instability.” Thus, López is using climatic theory both to explain and accuse the Indigenous peoples of these sins. This theory would also later be used to justify coercive labour systems, including the slavery of the *encomienda* system.

Las Casas would have been fully aware of this form of environmental determinism and how it was being used in regard to the framing of the Indigenous inhabitants of the New World. As a result, throughout his *Short Account*, he is rather careful in how he describes the *climata* of the various provinces and kingdoms. Indeed, although he insists on the fertility of the fields, he does not discuss its heat nor its moisture. Instead, Las Casas focuses on the quality of the climate. For example, when describing regions like the province of Nicaragua and the kingdom of Yucatán he refers to their healthy climate. Thus, Las Casas does not attempt to refute climatic theory, but rather he attempts to twist the theory in favour of the New World’s *climata* and by extension its people. He does this by omitting certain details and focusing on the positive ones. His discourse on climatic theory is not very in depth in his *Short Account*, however, and this is most likely due to its brief nature. Rather, it is his lengthier work the

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44 Hippocrates, XXIV, 137.
45 Elliott, 202.
46 Ibid., 202.
47 See, for example, Las Casas, 21, 37 and 71 and *passim*.
48 Elliott, 201.
Apologetic History of the Indies in which Las Casas is able to focus on this topic. In it he argues that the *climata* of such places as Hispaniola were ideal for developing the human mind,49 once again twisting climatic theory in favour of the New World. In doing so, Las Casas is refuting any claims that specifically use climatic theory as a justification for the mistreatment or enslavement of the Indigenous inhabitants of this newly discovered continent.

In sum, while other accounts of the New World focused solely on the material wealth that it offered, Las Casas remarked upon its loss through the destruction of these lands. Relying upon concepts such as the existence and placement of the terrestrial paradise as well as climatic theory, he offers his readers an alternative understanding of the New World. By detailing the destruction of various kingdoms, while also stating these could have very well been the fabled terrestrial paradise, Las Casas is looking for his readers to determine this destruction as unacceptable from both a practical and moral standpoint. As for climatic theory, Las Casas understood how it was being used to debase the local inhabitants and justify their mistreatment. Thus, he flipped the theory’s use on its head by focusing on the positive aspects of the New World’s climate, and by extension denying any justifications of mistreatment of the Indigenous peoples.

49 Pagden, 137-9.
CHAPTER IV
INDIGENOUS LAMBS, SPANISH WOLVES

Nor are they so unsightly as one perchance might imagine; for, inasmuch as they are plump, their ugliness is the less apparent, which indeed is for the most part concealed by the excellence of their bodily structure.¹

This is the way in which Amerigo Vespucci described the Indigenous women he encountered in the New World. At first glance, it might seem like a strange mixture of both compliments and insults: the women are ugly—although not quite as ugly as one might expect—but are physically well proportioned. But his description is not a straightforward set of observations, for Vespucci was tailoring his rhetoric to readers predisposed to an unfavourable image of Indigenous women, people who thought they knew that such women would be somehow “unsightly.” But why did Vespucci think that his readers would expect Indigenous women to be ugly?

This chapter turns to examine how the Indigenous peoples of the Americas were written about and described. It looks at the image and pre-perceptions that Europeans in general but the Spanish in particular had of Indigenous peoples of the New World. It will analyse and compare general descriptions of these people written for a European audience. To a significant degree, the way Europeans viewed Indigenous people was a function of how they saw the place of these people within the context of God’s creation. Thus, this section will also examine aspects of the debates about the legal status of Indigenous peoples and—by extension—conceptions of their ideal relationship with Spanish conquistadores. To do this, I will consider the writings of various

¹ Vespucci, 7.
Spaniards and other explorers, examining how they spoke about and described the local inhabitants they came across, in order to get a sense of the interpretative frame that conditioned their perceptions. In particular, I will discuss how Las Casas reworked common rhetorical tropes that worked to denigrate Indigenous peoples in the minds of those who read works about the New World. Afterwards, I will consider the very different approach Las Casas adopted when dealing with the subject of Indigenous peoples, looking at his sense of their humanity and its implications for notions of servility and natural rights.

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Before we consider how various Spaniards wrote about the Indigenous peoples of the New World, we must first contextualize them to understand their views better. As previously mentioned, the bible informed much of the European understanding of the world. According to Genesis, all men are descended from Adam and Eve via the three sons of Noah each of whom was responsible for populating one of the three continents: the children of Japhet populated Europe; those of Shem populated Asia, and the children of Ham populated Africa.² Thus, the idea of a fourth, previously unknown continent posed significant problems. Its discovery raised questions about whether or not it was inhabitable and—if it was—the relationship between these people and Noah’s sons.

As difficult as these questions were, more profoundly, the location of the New World also challenged received wisdom, for much of it was below what many mapmakers deemed to be the habitable and passable zone of the globe.

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² Genesis 10.32. See also Flint, 9 and 33.
Following Macrobius’s early fifth-century *On the Dream of Scipio*, they saw the world as divided into five zones defined by their relationship to the sun. To the extreme north and south were two frigid zones. Deprived of the sun’s heat for the whole year, these zones were permanently frozen and uninhabitable. However, the regions between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn saw the sun directly overhead for the entire year. Accordingly, this “burning” or “torrid zone” was uninhabitable on account of the enormous heat. Consequently, all life was confined to two temperate zones—one to the north and one to the south, nestled between the torrid zone and their respective frozen zones (see figure 3). Not only was the burning zone uninhabitable, Macrobius had argued that it was impassable. Thus, when the Spanish found

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creatures not just living but thriving in what should be the burning zone, doubts about their human status were compounded—later coming to be used as an excuse for their enslavement.⁴

Given the challenges their very existence posed for both biblically grounded anthropology and traditional cosmography as suggested by the Macrobian mappa mundi (map of the world), the Indigenous of the New World were in a peculiar position. Uncertain of their status as humans, the Spanish instead graded different Indigenous groups according to their perceived level of barbarism or civility. Borrowing from humanist conceptions of secular development, to most sixteenth-century Spanish thinkers, it was their Christianity and advanced civility that separated them from the average inhabitant of the New World.⁵ Indeed, they argued, it was wholly possible to grade a people’s civility based on important markers such as the length of their hair—or more importantly the length of their men’s hair. The state of their dress or, rather, undress was also a telling marker.

Despite this “grading,” however, the Indigenous peoples of the Americas were often lumped together into a single category: “Indian.” Most Spaniards were not interested in any

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⁴ Elliott, 201-2.
⁵ According to Joannes Boemus’s 1537 Omnium gentium mores (On the customs of all peoples), humanity’s moral and civil development occurred in stages. People began without money or property. They were happy with their lot, living from the fruits of the trees and animal milk, wearing animal skins and “accompanied with one or more wives and their sweet children.” However, after a while, people’s greed got the better of them. Competition with each other for resources, groups came together for mutual defense, dividing territory between them, while erecting fortresses and fences. In these communities, they quickly found the need to regulate behaviour and to develop laws. Quickly, as a result, cannibalism, rape, murder and incest with children fell away. Responsible now for a large growing community of people but confined to a circumscribed area of land, people began to apply reason and practice settled agriculture. They build buildings and the society prospers. At this point, though Satan intervenes, introducing idolatry and the society becomes debased and corrupted. Though steeped in anachronism, Boemus’s text was one of the more widely read works of geography in the sixteenth century, printed in 47 editions between 1535 and 1620. It was translated into five different vernaculars, including Spanish. See Boemus, Manners, laws, and customs of all nations, collected out of the best writers by Ioannes Boemus Aubanus, a Dutch Man, ed. and trans. Edward Aston (London, 1611), “Author’s Preface,” n.p. For the influence of the text see Richard Raiswell, “Medieval Geography in the Age of Exploration: The Fardle of Facions in its English Context,” in Renaissance Medievalisms, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 2009): 249-285 on 249-252.
regional, cultural, ethnic, or linguistic differences within this homogenised group.\textsuperscript{6} This disregard for difference creates an obvious “us” and “them” binary similar to that described by Said. But this binary is not just oppositional; it is hierarchical, too, for it places the Spanish above all Indigenous people, as the former see themselves as Christian and civil. As such, by attempting to understand the people of the New World through the frame of shared and traditional European knowledge, the “Indians” are immediately at a disadvantage. This is because there is not only a debate over their humanity; they are clearly—to Spanish eyes—inferior in terms of civility and morality.

\textit{Man, or Man-Eater?}

The reports about the Indigenous people of the New World could at times be rather conflicting even when they originated from the same author. As Ryan notes, Columbus’ letters are quite remarkable for how little they mention the native people,\textsuperscript{7} and yet, despite this, the Italian’s descriptions are contradictory. According to Columbus writing in his travel journal during the 1490s, the people of Cuba, like other New World peoples, were gentle and mild; elsewhere, though, he claimed that they were without law and simple like savages.\textsuperscript{8} In this sense, it seems, Indigenous people cannot win for losing: for every positive attribute attributed to them—such as gentleness—they are tagged with an array of negative ones, such as baseness and inferiority.

But loaded terms like “savage” imply their opposite. That is to say, following Said, to those who encountered them, the barbarousness of Indigenous peoples only served to accentuate the assumed “civility” of their European observers. In this respect, it is important to read Columbus’s descriptions of Indigenous peoples as self-referential. Thus, in emphasizing these

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{6} Elliott, 154 and 198-200. \\
\textsuperscript{7} Ryan, 519. \\
\textsuperscript{8} Flint, 136 and 206.
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peoples’ lack of civility, remarking upon their lawlessness, their lack of clothing, and the long hair worn by their men, Columbus is also silently highlight Spanish sophistication. To be sure, Columbus does mention their skin colour, noting that while some were pale, others, like those in the more western and hotter islands, were darker. But these observations are of no great consequence to him. This is most likely because Spanish ethnographic discourses tended to stress right religion and degrees of civility over skin colour as critical markers for diagnosing difference. As such, Columbus turns the apparent lack of civility in Indigenous populations and associated inferiority into an implicit assertion of Spanish civility, and, by extension, a rationale for Spanish dominance.

This process can perhaps be most clearly seen through his description of the Taíno of the Caribbean. For him, the Taíno are cowardly and lacking in the knowledge of war, and so best “fitted to be ruled and to be set to work, to cultivate the land and to do all else that may be necessary.” Thus, to Columbus, these people may be timid and ignorant, but their low level of civility means that they ought to be dominated by the more advanced society. Of course, this was a wholly self-serving argument, for it implied that they could be made to benefit the Crown through their physical labour—a situation made doubly desirable by virtue of the fact that because they had no knowledge of war, they would likewise have no knowledge of uprisings or revolts. Interestingly enough, however, despite this framing within the context of discourses of inferiority and servitude, Columbus supposedly insisted that the peoples of the islands and the mainland did possess some level of rationality and acute intelligence, for “they all are pleased and are greatly delighted to learn new things … and that can only arise from a lively and active

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9 Ibid., 136 and 144.
10 Ibid., 144.
11 Ibid., 152.
12 Elliott, 200.
mind.”¹⁴ So, although Columbus sees these people as savage-like and devoid of civility, fit only to serve the Crown through toil as subservient, he also seems to acknowledge their capabilities and intelligence. However, this may simply be an acknowledgment of their capability to understand commerce on Columbus’ part. This renders his opinion of the Indigenous peoples not entirely clear and highlights once again the seemingly conflicting nature of his accounts.

While Columbus emphasized both what he saw as the faults and the usefulness of the local inhabitants, men like Vespucci and Dr. Chanca were far less forgiving. In his letter to the Medici family entitled *Mundus Novus* (New World) published in 1503, Vespucci acknowledges that Spanish sailors had good relations with the local inhabitants and were received by them in a very brotherly fashion.¹⁵ Vespucci also notes their agility in physical pursuits as well as their gentle and kind nature. Despite this, he is most critical of their appearance and the manner in which they live. Like Columbus, Vespucci notes their nudity, their long black hair—common for both women and men—and men’s facial piercings and plugs which he describes as “…so unwonted and monstrous.”¹⁶ As for their conduct, the author has a long list of practices which he ascribes to the Indigenous peoples, ones which bring into question their civility and humanity: they lack government; they do not have a church; and they practice polygamy, divorce, and incest. He claims that the women are “very libidinous” and freely prostitute themselves to Spanish sailors. As for the men, unlike Columbus who claimed that many knew nothing of war, Vespucci asserts quite the contrary: they wage war cruelly and “are beast-like,” for it is their practice to cannibalize the vanquished.¹⁷ By describing their lack of structured political, religious

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¹⁴ Jane, 154-6.
¹⁵ Vespucci, 3-4.
¹⁶ Ibid., 5.
¹⁷ Ibid., 6-7.
and moral institutions, Vespucci is informing his reader that they are devoid of civility and right religion. On the hierarchy of civilization, they rank far beneath the average Catholic European.

But Vespucci goes further, for he frames them as less than human, since they are cannibals. The trope of cannibalism when used to denote the relative civility of outsiders goes back to Greek mythology. The practice is condemned explicitly in the Old Testament.\(^{18}\) In the high Middle Ages, the notion was drawn upon by Christian encyclopaedists in their descriptions of the world and the peoples proper to each region, and it features prominently as a marker of the dangers of the exotic in the enormously popular mid fourteenth-century *Travels* attributed to the English knight, Sir John Mandeville.\(^{19}\) By the end of the fifteenth century, it had become somewhat of an obsession for Europeans and became commonplace in the study and accounts of exotic peoples and lands. Columbus’ own accounts showed his clear interest in cannibalism, for the topic pervades his writing and made him interested in peoples like the Carib-cannibals.\(^{20}\) Indeed, Vespucci was drawing upon this venerable discourse about cannibalism in his *Mundus Novus*. But for him, cannibalism denoted more than a strange and distasteful custom: it was a marker that New World people were less than human. This was an argument that Pliny the Elder made in his *Historia naturalis* (*Natural history*) at the end of the first century. For Pliny, the eating of human flesh was a habit associated with some types of wild beast. That nature had implanted this custom in some populations meant that they were fundamentally animalistic—and

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\(^{18}\) See Micah 3.3–4.

\(^{19}\) *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, trans. C.W.R.D. Moseley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 127, 127 and 187. Though it is based on some contemporary travelogues, *The Travels* is a fiction. There was no knight named John Mandeville, and the text seems to come from the Low Countries and not England. The date of the text’s composition is unclear with some scholars favouring a date in the 1320s, others in the 1340s. It is also not clear if the text was originally written in French or Latin. Nevertheless, it was perceived as a genuine travelogue into the early seventeenth century.

\(^{20}\) Flint, 54 and 141.
so could not be said to be properly human.\textsuperscript{21} As Valerie Flint has argued, by the later fifteenth century, Pliny’s work was a standard part of “the library of any cultivated gentleman.” Both Columbus and Vespucci knew Pliny’s \textit{Historia}—the former’s copy has survived and is heavily annotated in the admiral’s hand.\textsuperscript{22} By accusing them of cannibalism, then, Vespucci is contributing “to the de-humanisation of the outsider, for men who ate other men were never thought to be quite human.”\textsuperscript{23} Thus he framed these people as both monstrous and beast-like in terms of their appearances but also their conduct. As a result, he denied them even their humanity.

As for Dr. Chanca, the physician who accompanied Columbus, in a letter to the city of Seville which was printed in the mid-sixteenth century, he recounted his experiences on the admiral’s second voyage.\textsuperscript{24} He says very little about the peoples of Hispaniola in the letter. But what he does say is just enough to give his reader a sense of his opinion about the local inhabitants, which is entirely negative. Unlike Columbus, he does not seem to believe the Indigenous people of the island have any inkling of knowledge or a spark of intelligence. This is clear, he says, from their abandoned homes, which were “so degraded that they have not intelligence enough to seek out a place in which to live.”\textsuperscript{25} Later, he praises the craftsmanship of their stone hatchets and axes. Yet he does not link the ingenuity underlying the construction of these tools to any form of intelligence. In fact, in the very same paragraph, after mentioning that they eat beasts of the ground, such as snakes and spiders, he concludes that “it seems to me that their degradation is greater than that of any beast in the world.”\textsuperscript{26} To Dr. Chanca, Indigenous

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{21} Pliny the Elder, \textit{Natural History}, trans. H. Rackham (Loeb, 1942), VII:2.18.
\bibitem{22} Flint, 68.
\bibitem{23} Pagden, 80-2.
\bibitem{24} Jane, 20 and cxiIII- cxlIV.
\bibitem{25} Ibid., 52.
\bibitem{26} Ibid., 68-70.
\end{thebibliography}
people are unintelligent creatures—people who are not only less than human but lower even than beasts on the hierarchy of creation.

In contrast to these both conflicting and decidedly negative accounts of the Indigenous peoples of the New World, Las Casas sees them in a more positive light. Unlike Columbus, Vespucci and Chanca, the cleric does not dwell on their appearance. He remarks on it occasionally, mentioning it only if particular peoples are handsome—as he does, for instance, with like the people of Florida.²⁷ Instead, he tends to focus on the nature of their society, and the character and good qualities of the peoples. Politically, he is at pains to describe Indigenous lands as kingdoms, mentioning several times their kings, lords, and caciques (i.e. Indigenous leaders).²⁸ For him, the people he is describing do not live like brute beasts in structureless herds; they have discernible forms of government and a sophisticated leadership structure. Las Casas also highlights their intelligence and describes regions like the Kingdom of Xaraguá in Hispaniola as being culturally and linguistically refined,²⁹ refuting the claims of men like Vespucci. Instead, he refers to many of them as being meek, gentle, docile, virtuous, and generous,³⁰ stating that:

the indigenous peoples of the New World are by nature extremely generous and, in their rush to provide the Spanish with more than they need, often hand over everything they possess.³¹

This does not sound like the unintelligent and savage peoples described by the others. This is deliberate, of course, for Las Casas’ cause would gain nothing by framing them as uncivilized,

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²⁷ Las Casas, 103.
²⁸ See, for example, Las Casas, 7, 19, 54, 105, 126 and passim.
²⁹ Las Casas, 21-22.
³⁰ Ibid., 45, 86 and 116.
³¹ Ibid., 87.
unkind or inhuman. Indeed, he never once refers to the Indigenous peoples as beasts or savage-like. Instead, he insists on their humanity. This is a point that I will develop further in the section entitled *Humanitas*.

That said, Las Casas does describe an instance of cannibalism. This is an isolated instance, for it occurred during a time of absolute desperation in the province of Nicaragua. As he points out, the *conquistadores* had taken for themselves all the crops grown by the local people. As a result, the rest of the population was left to starve to death. In their desperation, at the height of the famine some mothers killed and ate their children.\(^\text{32}\) Las Casas claims that between twenty and thirty thousand people died as a result of starvation. His point is quite different to that of Vespucci. He is not claiming that cannibalism is a normal practice among Indigenous peoples. Rather, it was a consequence of desperation—the result of a famine that was created by the callous indifference of *conquistadores*.

Las Casas is also very careful in his use of language. He avoids such terms as “barbarous” or “savage” when referring to the Indigenous population. As he appreciated, such terms were used to stress a peoples’ uncivility, which was marked by their lack of European religion or way of life.\(^\text{33}\) Thus, as one might expect, Las Casas framed the Indigenous peoples as civilized and goodly people—people who are the fellow-men of Europeans.\(^\text{34}\)

*Familiar Framing*

As Ryan argued, a common tactic in describing “exotic” peoples is to frame them in a way that is familiar to European audiences and which would resonate with them. This is why European

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 39.

\(^{33}\) Pagden, 24.

\(^{34}\) Las Casas, 103.
authors often used the rhetorical tool of comparison. By locating Indigenous people against a type that would have been more familiar to readers, authors hoped that these strange peoples would immediately become comprehensible.

This was certainly the case when the Spanish attempted to describe the local peoples of the New World. Frequently, for instance, authors compare the Indigenous peoples to the Moors, that is, to Muslims of the Iberian Peninsula. In his letters to King Charles V, for example, Hernan Cortés often compares the peoples of Mexico to Moors, referring to Mexican warriors as *perros rabiosos* (i.e. mad dogs). In this, he is appropriating language and images drawn from the *Reconquista* during which Christian knights fought against the Moors. Bartolomé Hernández did much the same in the letter mentioned in the previous section. In this, he stated explicitly that Indigenous peoples were “for the most part… like the Moors of Granada.” In so doing, both authors are endeavouring to place these otherwise new peoples into a familiar context that makes sense to European readers. Spanish readers in particular thought they knew about Moors, and so this was a context that translated the foreign exotic into the well-known image of the warrior infidel.

Although these writers cast Indigenous peoples into a frame that rendered them ostensibly familiar, the frame into which they were put was not a positive one. Indeed, as the sixteenth-century progressed, the image of the Indigenous populations and their prospects of “improvement” became increasingly negative. This becomes evident when we consider Cortés, who was writing at the end of the 1510s and the beginning of the 1520s, and Hernández, who wrote in 1572. While both compared the Indigenous people to Moors, Cortés was, to a certain

35 Ryan, 523.
36 Elliott, 153.
37 Ibid., 199.
38 Ibid., 199.
degree, impressed with the Mexican people, comparing their temples to mosques.\textsuperscript{39} Hernández, on the other hand, was none too pleased with the Indigenous populations and their lack of affection for the Christian faith, lamenting that: “inwardly, they have no notions of the matters of our faith” and “that the majority are only Christian in name.”\textsuperscript{40}

In contrast to this, Las Casas refrains from comparing the local populations to the Muslims of Europe. The only reference he makes to Muslims in his \textit{Short Account} is in comparing the violence of the \textit{conquistadores} to that of the Ottoman Empire.\textsuperscript{41} This is a deliberate choice. As he was aware, were he to link Indigenous peoples to Moors, he would create a distinctly negative image of them in the minds of Spanish readers. But in linking \textit{conquistadores} instead to the Turks, he is associating his countrymen with tropes of Ottoman barbarism. This is a significant turn, for in exploiting the image of Turkish cruelty, not only is he insulating the Indigenous peoples from the negative associations popularly ascribed to Moors and other Muslims, but he is casting them as analogous to the peoples of Eastern Europe who were actively resisting Ottoman advances under Suleiman the Magnificent at just the time he was writing.

Instead, to create a more favourable image of Indigenous peoples in the minds of his readers, Las Casas turns to the bible. While the bible has little directly to say about the geography of the world, as we have seen, it was the first and most important source to which Europeans turned to understand the world around them,\textsuperscript{42} and by extension, the people in it. To readers of the Old Testament, in particular, the story of the construction and collapse of the Tower of Babel and that of Noah’s ark helped to explain humanity’s linguistic and cultural

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 194.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 199.
\textsuperscript{41} Las Casas, 43.
\textsuperscript{42} Flint, 15.
diversity. Moreover, because these biblical stories were described as being played out on the world stage—rather than just on a regional basis—they must have explanatory value as much in the New World as in the Old.⁴³ Indeed, as the historian Anthony Pagden argues in the introduction to A Short Account, Las Casas frequently draws upon the language of the gospels to describe the native peoples. He does this by focusing on their natural innocence and purity, drawing similarities between the desert-dwelling peoples of the Old Testament, who were ignorant of greed and worldly power.⁴⁴ Indeed, Las Casas frames this ignorance of matters of the world in a child-like manner by explaining that “they are no more given to impetuous actions or to harbouring thoughts of retribution than are boys of ten or twelve years of age.”⁴⁵ But he goes further, for he also uses imagery of not just the bible but of religious life to describe the character of the local population. Indeed, he refers to the people of Hispaniola as behaving “…as honourably as might the inmates of a well-run monastery.”⁴⁶ Thus, Las Casas draws from the bible and monastic life to place the Indigenous peoples in a familiar religious context for his European audience, one which harbours no hostility.

Humanitas

In contrast to his contemporaries, Las Casas had stressed the ability of Indigenous peoples to comprehend and accept Christianity. For him, this was an extension of their fundamental humanity. But if the peoples of the New World were fully human—and not bestial—then they had a legal status and rights as vassals of the Spanish Empire.

Authors such as the Augustinian philosopher Alonso de la Vera Cruz argued that the natives of the Americas were by nature defective in many areas, especially when compared to the

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⁴³ Elliott, 196.
⁴⁴ Las Casas, x1.
⁴⁵ Ibid., 23.
⁴⁶ Ibid., 23.
average Spaniard.\textsuperscript{47} This decidedly self-serving view allowed the Spanish to abuse these people, leaning on Aristotle’s doctrine of natural slavery to justify their mistreatment.\textsuperscript{48} According to Aristotle in his \textit{Politics}, “anyone who, though human, belongs by nature not to himself but to another is by nature a slave; and a human being belongs to another if, in spite of being human, he is a possession.”\textsuperscript{49} Thus slaves are indeed human, but despite this humanity, they are possessions and thus different from free men. But Aristotle goes further, distinguishing what he calls “natural slaves” from “slaves by law.” Slaves by law, he argues, are those taken captive in war, for “whatever is taken in war is supposed to belong to the victors.”\textsuperscript{50} The idea of slavery by war he finds controversial, and he counsels against waging war entirely for the sake of acquiring slaves. Natural slaves are a different matter. They are “those persons who exhibit the same wide difference as there is between soul and body or between man and beast.”\textsuperscript{51} These are people intended by nature to be slaves. Thus, it is best for natural slaves to be subjected into slavery, for it is natural for men to rule over them and to be put to work. The situation is analogous, Aristotle argues, to the taming of a wild animal. Properly subjected, a tamed formerly wild animal can be put to use by offering bodily help.\textsuperscript{52} Aristotle also held the view that natural slaves would naturally be built differently from their superiors, as he explains:

\textsuperscript{47} Elliott, 199.  
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 198.  
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 1255a 5-10.  
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 1254b 16-18.  
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 1254b 24-26.
nature’s purpose [is] to make the bodies too of freemen and of slaves different, the latter strong enough to be used for essentials, the former erect and useless for that kind of work but fit for the life of a citizen.  

Columbus was silently drawing on these arguments when he stated that Indigenous people were fit to be ruled, for they could be put to work for their would-be masters in a way that would be beneficial to them. Vespucci, too, seems to have had Aristotle’s conception of slavery in mind when he remarked upon the physical prowess of the Indigenous men. Their physical strength was a sign that they were fit to be “natural slaves” and—by extension—subjecting them to servility would only do them good.

Las Casas, however, denounced and fought against such ideas. He denied the idea that Indigenous peoples were a sub-human species, nature’s natural slaves. Indeed, he states that the peoples of the New World were Europeans’ “fellow men.” “Each of them,” he continued, was “as free as you or me,” for given the Empire’s claim to legitimate suzerainty over much of the Americas, they were in fact vassals of the Spanish Empire. In this, he was echoing the views of the early sixteenth-century Spanish theologian Francisco de Vitoria who asserted that “making war on the Indians was … like making war on the inhabitants of Seville.” In stressing that Spaniards and Indigenous are vassals of the same kingdom and so should be as equally free as each other, Las Casas was making a powerful argument. It was an important counterpoint to his

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53 Ibid., 1254b 27-30.
54 Flint, 189.
55 Vespucci, 5.
56 Las Casas, xxviii.
57 Ibid., 103.
58 Ibid., 41.
59 Pagden, 32-3.
contemporaries who fell back on Aristotle’s conception of natural slavery to justify their brutal
treatment of New World peoples.

But Las Casas’s critique also challenged contemporary conceptions of barbarism and
ethnic inferiority. Ultimately, such views can be traced back to classical Roman and Greek
commentators, although these were often refracted through the lens of some medieval
reworkings of the concept which resituated them in the context of the Christianity and sacred
history. Essentially, those who were non-Christian and who did not conduct their lives in a
seemingly European manner—who were not citizens of apparently “civilized” states—were
deemed inferior or barbaric, and thus savage. Indeed, as Aristotle noted, the state was a pivotal
and natural element of humanity and so “[w]hatever is incapable of associating, or has no need
to [be] ... part of a state; so he is either a beast or a god.” Vespucci seems to have been
following this line of thinking when he remarked upon Indigenous peoples’ lack of government
and societal structures. This is significant, for in drawing attention to the fact that these people
lack a state, he is further strengthening his case that they are beast-like, and, by extension,
naturally set out to be slaves. That Las Casas insists upon the membership of Indigenous
groups in the Spanish kingdom at the same level as any other Spaniard, while denying the fact
that they lack a state, is a direct challenge to the classically grounded arguments that others, like
Vespucci, were using to denigrate them, and affirm their beastliness.

He continues by describing with distaste the way the Spanish barter and brand Indigenous
people, making his countrymen seem more like slavers rather than missionaries or explorers.

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60 W. R. Jones, “The Image of the Barbarian in Medieval Europe,” in Comparative Studies in Society and
62 Vespucci, 6-7.
63 Las Casas, 65, 101.
One important example Las Casas gives is of Beltrán Nuño de Guzmán, a conquistador of New Spain, who once “bartered one mare against eighty locals: against, that is, eighty members of the human race.” It is not clear here whether this number is inflated—something which was not uncommon in these sorts of relaciones—his point is to evoke a sense of the magnitude of the event. As the classical rhetorician Quintilian argued in his Institutio oratio, some embellishment or exaggeration was acceptable as long as it aided the author or orator’s argument. Las Casas would have been familiar with Quintilian’s work as well as the rhetorical technique of inflating numbers practiced by various other authors. In his case, this example and other possibly exaggerated numbers would have been intended to conjure up a sense of outrage in his readers at the scale of the conquistadores’ callous actions. Indeed, the putative readers’ outrage is deserved not only because the Indigenous people were vassals of Spain, but Las Casas asserted, they were “natural masters and dwellers in those vast and marvellous kingdoms.” But he goes further, for he also cites “natural, divine, and Roman law” when insisting that they had the right to defend themselves and their lands from Spanish violence. In a letter to the friars of his diocese of Chiappa, Mexico, he remarked that he had spent 48 years studying law—including Roman law. Thus, he had the expertise to call upon its authority to defend the rights of Indigenous people. In sum, the author is stating that under every type of law—including natural laws—the inhabitants of the Americas are humans, not sub-human slaves. Moreover, they are vassals of the Spanish throne. Accordingly, there could be no legal grounds for their enslavement.

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64 Ibid., 65.
65 Ibid., xxxi-xxxii.
67 Las Casas, 7.
68 Ibid., 70.
**Natural Rights**

Furthermore, equating the Spanish and Indigenous people in this manner—as equally free members of the Empire and fellow men—would have most likely been considered an effective, if controversial, statement. Indeed, many clerics and officials of the New World would have agreed with the philosopher Alonso de la Vera Cruz who described the Indigenous people in this manner: “…even the most outstanding of them, if compared with us Spaniards, are found to be deficient in many respects.”\(^70\) To equate the Spanish and native peoples of the Americas as Las Casas had would certainly spark debates, as it did in 1550, two years before the publishing of the *Short Account*. This debate involved the author himself as well his most ardent rival Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, a humanist and the chaplain to King Charles V of Spain. Sepúlveda’s unpublished *The Second Democrates; Or, The Just Causes of the War against the Indians* was not the first to question the “nature” of the Indigenous people, but it did prompt a debate between himself and Las Casas known as the Valladolid debate (1550-1551). *The Second Democrates* claimed that these people were little men (*homunculi*) with hardly any humanity left within them, that they were pig-like creatures with little to no culture. These were just a few of the debasing descriptions that attempted to justify their enslavement further.\(^71\) During the debate, Sepúlveda’s primary argument relied on Aristotle’s teaching regarding natural slavery, which, as previously mentioned, stated that all barbarians were natural slaves; the Indigenous people were thus naturally intended for slavery since they were evidently barbarians. Las Casas denied this claim by relying on Thomas Aquinas’ comments on Aristotle, which noted that the term barbarian applied to many classes of peoples. Using this interpretation, Las Casas stated that this category could be placed on any cruel person, which included the Spanish because of their cruelties.

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\(^70\) Elliott, 199.

\(^71\) Las Casas, xxviii-xxx and xlii.
towards the Indigenous people.\textsuperscript{72} Thus, the Indigenous peoples were not the barbarians in this situation, and as a result, there was no legal or natural justification for their enslavement, a stance Las Casas kept while writing his \textit{Short Account}. The debate lasted a year but was more of a formality held before the Council of the Indies and thus had no conclusion or outcome. But once it was finished, it was most likely what prompted Las Casas to print the \textit{Short Account} just a year later.\textsuperscript{73} The fact that Sepúlveda was close to the king being his chaplain, as well as the fact that he was not the only person in court who held such views,\textsuperscript{74} was certainly further encouragement for its quick printing.

\textit{Rhetoric}

Along with his insistence on their humanity, Las Casas also stressed the innocence of the Indigenous people of the New World. Indeed, this seems to be a direct challenge to the arguments of men like Sepúlveda, who attempted to justify wars against these people—the subtitle to his \textit{Second Democrates} was \textit{de justis belli causis apud Indos} (i.e. \textit{on the just reasons for war with the Indians}). Rather than make a case for war against them, Las Casas stresses instead that despite the way they had been treated, Indigenous peoples continued in their generosity and kindness towards the Spanish. Indeed, rather than proving that the Spanish had just cause to wage war against the Indians, if anything, Las Casas’s account implies that the Indians had just cause in waging war against the Spanish, for the generosity they displayed towards the Europeans was rarely returned. For example, he describes the situation in the province of Guatemala, where:

\textsuperscript{72} Tierney, 277.
\textsuperscript{73} Las Casas, xxviii-xxx and xlii.
\textsuperscript{74} Indeed, after receiving the news that his \textit{Second Democrates} had been refused publishing, Sepúlveda claimed that his book had previously “been approved by all those learned men who read it without passion.” See Las Casas, xxix.
the natives saw that their deep humility, generosity and submissiveness did nothing to soften the hearts of these ravening beasts, and that the Spaniards were prepared to hack them to pieces for absolutely no reason whatever…

For Las Casas, it was the natives who had a right to retaliate against the Spanish for the violence they inflicted upon them. There has never been an instance, he insists, where Indigenous people have retaliated without initial provocation from Europeans “…from the date of the discovery of the New World down to the present.” For example, Las Casas recounts the tale of Hernan Cortés’ activities in New Spain, which according to the conquistador, led to the slaughter of 3,000 people in the Mexican city of Cholula. It was this brutality that then led to the infamous Noche triste (literally sad night, but known as “The Black Night”), when Cortés had to flee the city, during which many of his men were killed. Las Casas, however, shows the dead men no pity, since the people of New Spain “had every right to [kill the Spaniards], given the attacks we have described that had been made on them.” Indeed, when referring to native violence, the cleric insists that “a reasonable and fair-minded man will see that theirs [the Indigenous] was a defensive action and a just one.”

The effect of his argument is to destroy the Spanish pretense of superiority where theories like that of natural slavery placed them. Indeed, he is stripping the Spanish of their self-proclaimed status as Christian heroes and giving the lie to the notion that they are the wronged victims of Indigenous violence. They are, quite clearly, the unjust instigators of violence. All of this he does to further the narrative that the Indigenous peoples are innocents and victims of unwarranted abuse, and that they are justified in fighting back against the conquistadores.

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75 Las Casas, 58.
76 Ibid., 126.
77 Ibid., 45 and 51-2.
78 Ibid., 52.
By insisting upon the humanity and the innocence of the Indigenous people throughout his *Short Account*, Las Casas is thus able to make their treatment at the hands of the *conquistadores* all the more horrifying. He does this by both repeatedly defending their humanity and innocence, but also by being incredibly detailed in his recounting of the atrocities they suffer. One gruesome example he gives is of the people of the Kingdom of Guatemala, who, to defend themselves, dug pits which they filled with sharp staves and then concealed in order to kill Spaniards. This was an attempt to fight back against the violence and enslavement that had befallen them since the Spanish arrival. However, once the *conquistadores* discovered these pits, they took revenge upon the people:

they decreed that all natives taken alive, of any station and of all ages, should themselves be cast into the pits they had dug, and so it came to pass that all those they captured—pregnant women, mothers of newborn babes, children and old men—were thrown into these pits and impaled on the spikes. The pits, brim-full of their wretched victims, afforded a sorry spectacle, especially as they included women with their children still clutched to their breasts.79

This description of the impaling of the people of Guatemala offers an intensely vivid and horrifying image for the reader. This is deliberate on the part of Las Casas. Indeed, he is attempting to bring the reader into the role of eyewitness to the awful murders of the people whom he defends. This is not a technique of his own invention; rather, Las Casas relied the device of classical rhetoric referred to in the Greek as *enargeia* and the Latin as *evidentia* (i.e. evident or to make clear). This device was used to construct a “vivid and evocative image of the

79 Ibid., 58-60.
things related.”\textsuperscript{80} By doing this, the author is able to capture reality through precise and thorough descriptions which makes the events seem real and by extension evident to the reader.\textsuperscript{81} Las Casas would have been familiar with this technique through works of rhetoric by authors like the great Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus whose 1512 textbook \textit{De copia} explained that “…instead of setting out the subject in bare simplicity, we fill in the colours and set it up like a picture to look at.”\textsuperscript{82} In doing so, the author would be able “…to make it as vivid and clear to the reader as possible.”\textsuperscript{83} For Erasmus, to employ \textit{evidentia} was to employ vividness. This is clearly what Las Casas is doing all through his account. Indeed, rather than simply tell his readers in stripped down prose that the people of Guatemala were impaled, he shows his reader the horrors of such deaths through his vivid and detailed description. Las Casas thus employed \textit{evidentia} in his \textit{Short Account} to further his arguments that the Indigenous peoples of the New World were innocents cruelly harmed and murdered in abhorrent ways by the \textit{conquistadores}.

\textit{Conquistadores}

While Las Casas goes to great lengths to defend Indigenous peoples as brutalised innocents, he is exceptionally harsh in his treatment of the Spanish \textit{conquistadores}. While he is careful to frame the Indigenous as gentle and kind people—peoples whose naturally pacific nature makes them receptive to the teachings of the Christian faith—Las Casas asserts quite bluntly that the \textit{conquistadores} are merely “pretending to be Christians.”\textsuperscript{84} Worse yet, he remarks in his synopsis

\textsuperscript{81} Lancaster and Raiswell, 6.
\textsuperscript{83} Erasmus, 577.
\textsuperscript{84} Las Casas, 12.
that many of those involved with the conquest had “ceased to be men in any meaningful sense of
the term and had become… so totally degenerate.”

That they were faux-Christians is clear from the way Las Casas spared few details in his
description of slaughters and other atrocities committed by these men. One of the first examples,
among countless others, is the slaughter committed in Hispaniola. Here, again, the author uses
the tool of evidentia to detail how the conquistadores strung up the Indigenous people of the
island and then burnt “them alive thirteen at a time, in honour of our Saviour and the twelve
Apostles.” For Las Casas’ audience reading these accounts of atrocities committed by putative
Christians would have been shocking. The effect of this would be all the more jarring given that
one of the primary differences used to distinguish the Spanish from the American Indigenous
people was the former’s Christianity and civility and the latter’s ignorance and barbarity. Thus,
for the conquistadores to act neither in a Christian nor a civil manner towards peoples whom Las
Casas repeatedly described as gentle and friendly would have been appallingly surprising to his
readers.

However, the shock does not end there. To further flesh out this picture of the
conquistadores as immoral, inhuman non-Catholics, Las Casas draws on familiar comparisons
and suggestions. For example, he compares the Spanish who committed the slaughters in New
Spain to the Turks who attempted to destroy Christendom, stating that the actions of the former
were far worse than those of the latter. Indeed, this would paint a vivid picture for Las Casas’
audience, for Islam was viewed as an existential threat to Christendom. Although the

85 Ibid., 3.
86 Ibid., 15.
87 Elliott, 200-201.
88 Las Casas, 45 and 110.
89 Ibid., 43.
Reconquista had come to an end in 1492, the Ottoman Turks were advancing into Eastern Europe. While the threat at the gates of Vienna had been repelled in 1529, the Ottoman threat continued to loom over Europe, later exploding into a three-year war begun in 1570 between the Ottoman Empire and Spain.\textsuperscript{90} Thus, Las Casas was casting his fellow countrymen as equivalent to Christianity’s oldest and most significant threat. By connecting the conquistadores to tropes emanating from European experience confronting Islam, Las Casas made clear their position in terms of the New World’s peoples in a way that was evocative for his readers. Las Casas uses a similar strategy to depict the German governor and conquistador of Venezuela, whom Las Casas does not name and who was most likely Ambrosius Eingher, noting that he was a heretic who showed indications of Protestantism. By using the term luterano (Lutheran) to describe him, Las Casas is stating that the man deviates from Catholic religious orthodoxy and is thus an enemy of the true faith.\textsuperscript{91}

This method of hyperbole and comparison that he uses to describe the conquistadores is once again a tool of rhetoric known as argumentum a contrariis (i.e. an argument made through contraries). This tool is used to emphasize the author’s points through comparisons and contrasts. Las Casas would have been familiar with such a tool thanks to authors of rhetoric like Quintilian, who spoke of the use of comparatives when dealing with relationships between lesser and greater things. That is to say, the classical rhetorician advocates juxtaposing contrary things to increase the rhetorical force of a description.\textsuperscript{92} This is precisely what Las Casas is doing in his description of the conquistadores. He associates them with Turks and Lutherans, but then juxtaposes them with the New World inhabitants these men came across. In this way, the

\textsuperscript{90} Alba-Koch, 90 and 104. \\
\textsuperscript{91} Las Casas, 96, 98. \\
\textsuperscript{92} Quintilian, V.10.86-89.
innocence of the Indigenous is heightened rhetorically when pitched against the inhuman, false Christian *conquistadores*. The effect is biting and extreme. In addition to this, Las Casas further dehumanizes them by refusing to ever name them. While he differentiates the Indigenous peoples’ ethnicities and regions in which they live, he does not once refer to a Spaniard or *conquistador* by name, essentially stripping them of their human identity. Thus, Las Casas frames the *conquistadores* and their actions in a familiar European context while also employing rhetorical tools further to denigrate them in the minds of his readers.

*Greed*

At various points, Las Casas emphasizes that the *conquistadores* do not worship and do not fear the Catholic god—that they even worship a false god. Indeed, if these men are like Turks and Lutherans, both existential enemies of Catholicism, then what god do they worship, if not the Catholic one? To Las Casas, *conquistadores* like Beltrán Nuño de Guzmán, who butchered many in New Spain, went on a “frenzied quest for his great God, gold.”93 Indeed, according to him, the *conquistadores* were more interested in pillaging gold and killing the Indigenous people, than converting them. Of the stolen gold, he states that perhaps only 3,000 Castilians reached royal coffers even though more than a million Castilians had been stolen.94 This he mentions on a few occasions to bring to light European greed—and to point out that this desire for plunder did little for the Spanish kingdom in material terms, and did nothing in terms of advancing the kingdom of god. Indeed, he warns readers of the wrath of god in response to crimes committed out of greed and uses this to discourage such actions. He uses the example of a ship which was lost at sea in 1502 while *en route* to Spain carrying a fortune in gold. As he sees it, “[i]n this way, God passed

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93 Las Casas, 65 and 68.
94 Ibid., 32 and 34.
judgement on the great iniquities committed by the Spanish."\textsuperscript{95} All of this is to emphasize Spanish greed in the New World as well as the little good it is accomplishing for the Spanish Crown and the Empire as a whole. This desire for material wealth distracted the Spanish from what Las Casas believed should be the primary goal of their mission in the New World: conversion of the Indigenous peoples.

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There also seems to be a dual purpose in the way Las Casas chose to frame these men. One could argue that passionate outrage towards the actions of the Spaniards was the cause of such harsh descriptions. This may be, in part, undoubtedly true, but we must not forget that Las Casas wrote the \textit{Short Account} with a specific goal in mind and as a result, the account’s core function is to both inform and convince the reader of something.\textsuperscript{96} As such, this framing of the \textit{conquistadores} in these very negative terms is to convince his readers that they are the violent beasts and to reaffirm that the Indigenous peoples are the innocents being unjustly treated. To accomplish this, Las Casas is using descriptions that previous writers and explorers had employed with the Indigenous people, such as Hernán Cortés, who often compared the Aztecs and their temples to Moors and mosques.\textsuperscript{97} However, Las Casas takes such comparisons and applies them instead to the Spanish in the Americas, thus switching the relatively popular narrative of his period. Also, by doing this, the author manages to both villainize the Spanish while emphasizing the Indigenous peoples’ contrasting kindly and just nature.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 19-20.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., xxi-xxii.
\textsuperscript{97} Elliott, 153.
The second purpose of this framing is to prove that these men do not serve the primary goal of the Spanish Catholic kingdom in the New World: the conversion and saving of souls.\textsuperscript{98} Indeed, although trade was an important factor, the initial and official purpose of the exploration and conquering of the Americas was to spread the Catholic faith.\textsuperscript{99} Thus, by framing the Spaniards as faux-Christians whom most are “pig-ignorant”\textsuperscript{100} and who are ruining the reputation of Jesus Christ and Christianity,\textsuperscript{101} Las Casas appeals to those who have an interest in the saving of Indigenous souls to recognize the conquistadores’ inefficacy in this mission.

In sum, by framing the conquistadores in the same hostile manner that others framed the Indigenous people, Las Casas attempts to convince the reader that the Spaniards’ actions were unjustified and unchristian-like. In doing so, he is able to reinforce his message that the peoples of the New World are like the “lambs” of God, and thus humans who are capable of Christianity,\textsuperscript{102} unlike the conquistadores who had lost “…all fear of God, all love of their sovereign.”\textsuperscript{103} In addition, by noting the fact that these men were false Christians who worshipped not the Catholic god but rather earthly gold—much of which had been embezzled or stolen to the detriment of the Crown\textsuperscript{104}—Las Casas highlights the fact that they are ineffective in converting Indigenous souls, thus damning them to hell,\textsuperscript{105} and hindering the missionizing cause.

\textsuperscript{98} Las Casas, 32.
\textsuperscript{99} Flint, 183-4.
\textsuperscript{100} Las Casas, 24.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 65 and 101.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 101.
Las Casas was writing during a period of debate. This debate centred on whether or not the inhabitants of the New World could be converted to Christianity, and if they converted, whether or not they did so in sincerity. Las Casas gave his answer to this debate: they could be converted—and if they seemed to lack of sincerity, this was due to the failure of the Spanish. Indeed, faced with the reality of the conquest—a reality of slaughter and greed on the part of the Spanish—Las Casas sought to condemn the actions of his countrymen. In his *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, he set out to inform his European audience of the slaughter of the Indigenous people for greed’s sake, and the humanity of those being slaughtered. Indeed, he sought the humane treatment of the Indigenous peoples and the condemnation of Spanish greed. To do this, Las Casas relied upon several tools and tropes.

Firstly, Las Casas focuses on the New World itself. He details its beauty and seemingly infinite resources; however, unlike previous accounts, he also remarks upon how these are being wasted and destroyed. According to him, *conquistadores* are ravaging immense regions in search of gold, and as a result, fertile regions which could feed all of Spain are being destroyed. To further his point, Las Casas relies on the concept of terrestrial paradise. He does this by arguing that the terrestrial paradise could be found in the New World, thus making its destruction even more outrageous to his Christian European audience. In addition to this, Las Casas also uses climatic theory to argue the fact that the New World offers a healthy and good climate, one which produces good people and is a good environment for expanding one’s mind.
Secondly, Las Casas focuses on the people of the New World. He denies any
dehumanising accusations made against them, including the act of cannibalism. While other
authors compared them to Moors in order to frame them in a familiar manner—in this case, a
familiar enemy—to their European audiences, Las Casas framed them in a biblical sense. He did
so by continually throughout his *Short Account* highlighting their innocence, gentleness and
purity. As for their state as humans, Las Casas denied such classic arguments that previous
accounts pulled from authors like Aristotle. Indeed, he denied that the Indigenous people were
natural slaves, stating instead that they were fellow vassals of the Spanish Empire. To further
these arguments, he also heavily relied upon classic concepts of rhetoric, such as *evidentia* and
exaggeration. By using these well-known tools of rhetoric, Las Casas sought to strengthen both
his discourse and his descriptions. He also sought the use of comparison; by juxtaposing the
innocent Indigenous peoples with the greedy *conquistadores*, who consistently acted violently
and as though they were but false Christians, Las Casas reaffirms the humanity of the Indigenous
inhabitants of the New World.

Finally, it is not important to us whether or not Las Casas was entirely truthful nor if he
succeeded in his quest to have Spain denounce its greed and focus on caring for and converting
its new vassals; what matters to us is his intentions. Indeed, *A Short Account of the Destruction
of the Indies* has shown itself not to be a straightforward account of the history of the conquest
spanning from 1492 to 1552. Instead, it has shown itself to be a gruesomely detailed account
with a purpose, that purpose being to convince its readers of the humanity of the New World’s
inhabitants as well as the possibility they present for god’s kingdom. Indeed, Las Casas’ *Short
Account* has proved itself to be quite interesting since it is one clergyman’s demand that his
Empire ceases its single-minded pursuit of gold, and instead embrace a whole new people as fellow Christians.
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