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Letter from Columbus  
to Luis de Santangel

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**C O N T E N T S**

Introduction .....	261
The New Islands Discovered.....	263
Description of their People and Products.....	265
Description of Española.....	268
Value of the Discoveries to Spain .....	268
A Fort built and Garrisoned .....	269
The Customs of the Inhabitants.....	270

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## INTRODUCTION

THIS letter, the earliest published narrative of Columbus's first voyage, was issued in Barcelona in April, 1493, not far from the time when the discoverer was received in state by the King and Queen. The *Escribano de Racion*, to whom it was addressed, was Luis de Santangel, who had deeply interested himself in the project of Columbus and had advanced money to enable Queen Isabella to meet the expenses of the voyage. He, no doubt, placed a copy in the hands of the printer. Only two printed copies of this Spanish letter, as it is called, have come down to us. One is a folio of the first imprint, discovered and reproduced in 1889. Of this the unique copy is in the Lenox Library in New York; its first page is reproduced in facsimile in this volume, by courteous permission of the authorities of the library. The other is a quarto of the second and slightly corrected imprint, first made known in 1852 and first reproduced in 1866. Facsimiles of both are given in Thacher's *Christopher Columbus*, II. 17-20 and 33-40.

Columbus sent a duplicate of this letter with some slight changes to Gabriel Sanxis (Spanish form, Sanchez), the treasurer of Aragon, from whose hands a copy came into the possession of Leander de Cosco, who translated it into Latin, April 29, 1493.

This Latin version was published in Rome, probably in May, 1493, and this issue was rapidly followed by reprints in Rome, Basel, Paris, and Antwerp. It is to this Latin version

that the European world outside of Spain was indebted for its first knowledge of the new discoveries.

A poetical paraphrase in Italian by Giuliano Dati was published in Rome in June, 1493. This is reprinted in Major's *Select Letters of Columbus*. The first German edition of the letter was published in Strassburg in 1497.

In the years 1493-1497 the Santangel letter was printed twice in Spanish, and the duplicate of it, the Sanchez letter, was printed nine times in Latin, five times in Dati's Italian paraphrase, and once in German. Until the publication in 1571 of the *Historie*, the Italian translation of Ferdinand Columbus's biography of his father, which contains an abridgment of Columbus's *Journal*, these letters and the account in Peter Martyr's *Decades de Rebus Oceanicis*, were the only sources of information in regard to the first voyage accessible to the world at large. The translation here given is that contained in Quaritch's *The Spanish Letter of Columbus* (London, 1893), with a few minor changes in the wording. An English translation of the Latin or Sanchez letter may be found in the first edition of Major's *Select Letters of Columbus* (London, 1847). This version is reprinted in P. L. Ford's *Writings of Christopher Columbus*, New York, 1892. By an error in the title of the first edition, Rome, 1493, Sanchez's Christian name is given as Raphael.

The text of the Santangel letter published by Navarrete in 1825 was derived from a manuscript preserved in the Spanish Archives at Simancas. In 1858 the Brazilian scholar Varnhagen published an edition of the Sanchez letter from a manuscript discovered by him in Valencia. Neither of these manuscripts, however, has the authority of the first printed editions.

E. G. B.



Facsimile of the first page of the folio (first) edition of the Spanish text of Columbus's letter to Santangel, describing his first voyage, dated February 15, 1493. From the original (unique) in the New York Public Library (Lenox Building).  
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## LETTER FROM COLUMBUS TO LUIS DE SANTANGEL

SIR: As I know that you will have pleasure from the great victory which our Lord hath given me in my voyage, I write you this, by which you shall know that in thirty-three days I passed over to the Indies with the fleet which the most illustrious King and Queen, our Lords, gave me; where I found very many islands peopled with inhabitants beyond number. And, of them all, I have taken possession for their Highnesses, with proclamation and the royal standard displayed; and I was not gainsaid. To the first which I found, I gave the name Sant Salvador, in commemoration of His High Majesty, who marvellously hath given all this: the Indians call it Guanaham.<sup>1</sup> The second I named the Island of Santa Maria de Concepcion, the third Ferrandina, the fourth, Fair Island,<sup>2</sup> the fifth La Isla Juana; and so for each one a new name. When I reached Juana, I followed its coast westwardly, and found it so large that I thought it might be mainland, the province of Cathay. And as I did not thus find any towns and villages on the sea-coast, save small hamlets with the people whereof I could not get speech, because they all fled away forthwith, I went on further in the same direction, thinking I should not miss of great cities or towns. And at the end of many leagues, seeing that there was no change, and that the coast was bearing me northwards, whereunto my desire was contrary, since the winter was already confronting us, I formed the purpose of making from thence to the South, and as the wind also blew against me, I determined not to wait for other weather and turned back as far as a port agreed

<sup>1</sup> Guanahani in the Journal; see entry covering October 11 and 12.

<sup>2</sup> The original text has *Isla bella*, which was a misprint for *Isabella*. *Cf.* Journal, October 20.

upon; from which I sent two men into the country to learn if there were a king, or any great cities. They travelled for three days, and found innumerable small villages and a numberless population, but nought of ruling authority; wherefore they returned.<sup>1</sup> I understood sufficiently from other Indians whom I had already taken, that this land, in its continuousness, was an island;<sup>2</sup> and so I followed its coast eastwardly for a hundred and seven leagues as far as where it terminated; from which headland I saw another island to the east, eighteen leagues distant from this, to which I at once gave the name La Española.<sup>3</sup> And I proceeded thither, and followed the northern coast, as with La Juana, eastwardly for a hundred and eighty-eight great leagues in a direct easterly course, as with La Juana. The which, and all the others, are most fertile to an excessive degree, and this extremely so. In it, there are many havens on the sea-coast, incomparable with any others that I know in Christendom, and plenty of rivers so good and great that it is a marvel. The lands thereof are high, and in it are very many ranges of hills, and most lofty mountains incomparably beyond the island of Tenerife,<sup>4</sup> all most beautiful in a thousand shapes, and all accessible, and full of trees of a thousand kinds, so lofty that they seem to reach the sky. And I am assured that they never lose their foliage; as may be imagined, since I saw them as green and as beautiful as they are in Spain during May. And some of them were in flower, some in fruit, some in another stage according to their kind. And the nightingale was singing, and other birds of a thousand sorts, in the month of November, there where I was going. There are palm-trees of six or eight species, wondrous to see for their beautiful variety; but so are the other trees, and fruits, and plants therein. There are wonderful pine-groves, and very large plains of verdure, and there is honey, and many kinds of birds, and many various fruits. In the earth there are

<sup>1</sup> *Cf.* Journal, November 2 and 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Cf.* Journal, November 1, for Columbus's strong inclination to regard Cuba as mainland.

<sup>3</sup> *Cf.* Journal, December 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Cf.* Journal, December 20 and note.

many mines of metals; and there is a population of incalculable number.<sup>1</sup> Española is a marvel; the mountains and hills, and plains, and fields, and the soil, so beautiful and rich for planting and sowing, for breeding cattle of all sorts, for building of towns and villages. There could be no believing, without seeing, such harbors as are here, as well as the many and great rivers, and excellent waters, most of which contain gold. In the trees and fruits and plants, there are great diversities from those of Juana. In this, there are many spiceries, and great mines of gold and other metals. The people of this island, and of all the others that I have found and seen, or not seen, all go naked, men and women, just as their mothers bring them forth; although some women cover a single place with the leaf of a plant, or a cotton something which they make for that purpose. They have no iron or steel, nor any weapons; nor are they fit thereunto; not because they be not a well-formed people and of fair stature, but that they are most wondrously timorous. They have no other weapons than the stems of reeds in their seeding state, on the end of which they fix little sharpened stakes. Even these, they dare not use; for many times has it happened that I sent two or three men ashore to some village to parley, and countless numbers of them sallied forth, but as soon as they saw those approach, they fled away in such wise that even a father would not wait for his son. And this was not because any hurt had ever been done to any of them:—on the contrary, at every headland where I have gone and been able to hold speech with them, I gave them of everything which I had, as well cloth as many other things, without accepting aught therefor;—but such they are, incurably timid. It is true that since they have become more assured, and are losing that terror, they are artless and generous with what they have, to such a degree as no one would

<sup>1</sup> The prevalent Spanish estimate of the population of Española at the time of the first colonization was 1,100,000. The modern ethnologist and critical historian, Oscar Peschel, placed it at less than 300,000 and more than 200,000. The estimates of Indian population by the early writers were almost invariably greatly exaggerated. Cf. Bourne, *Spain in America*, pp. 213-214, and notes.

believe but him who had seen it. Of anything they have, if it be asked for, they never say no, but do rather invite the person to accept it, and show as much lovingness as though they would give their hearts. And whether it be a thing of value, or one of little worth, they are straightways content with whatsoever trifle of whatsoever kind may be given them in return for it. I forbade that anything so worthless as fragments of broken platters, and pieces of broken glass, and strap buckles,<sup>1</sup> should be given them; although when they were able to get such things, they seemed to think they had the best jewel in the world, for it was the hap of a sailor to get, in exchange for a strap,<sup>1</sup> gold to the weight of two and a half castellanos,<sup>2</sup> and others much more for other things of far less value; while for new blancas<sup>3</sup> they gave everything they had, even though it were [the worth of] two or three gold castellanos, or one or two arrobas of spun<sup>4</sup> cotton. They took even pieces of broken barrel-hoops, and gave whatever they had, like senseless brutes; insomuch that it seemed to me bad. I forbade it, and I gave gratuitously a thousand useful things that I carried, in order that they may conceive affection, and furthermore may become Christians; for they are inclined to the love and service of their Highnesses and of all the Castilian nation, and they strive to combine in giving us things which they have in abundance, and of which we are in need. And they knew no sect, nor idolatry; save that they all believe that power and goodness are in the sky, and they believed very firmly that I, with these ships and crews, came from the sky; and in such opinion, they received me at every place where I landed, after they had lost their terror. And this comes not because they are ignorant: on the contrary, they are men of very subtle wit, who navigate all those seas, and who give a marvellously good account of everything, but because they never

<sup>1</sup> *Cabos de aguetas*. Rather the metallic tips of lacings or straps. *Agueta* is a leather lacing or strap. The contemporary Latin translator used *bingulae*, shoe-straps, shoe-latchets.

<sup>2</sup> The *castellano* was one-sixth of an ounce of gold.

<sup>3</sup> *Blancas* were little coins worth about one-third of a cent.

<sup>4</sup> The *arroba* was 25 pounds.

saw men wearing clothes nor the like of our ships. And as soon as I arrived in the Indies, in the first island that I found, I took some of them by force, to the intent that they should learn [our speech] and give me information of what there was in those parts. And so it was, that very soon they understood [us] and we them, what by speech or what by signs; and those [Indians] have been of much service. To this day I carry them [with me] who are still of the opinion that I come from Heaven [as appears] from much conversation which they have had with me. And they were the first to proclaim it wherever I arrived; and the others went running from house to house and to the neighboring villages, with loud cries of "Come! come to see the people from Heaven!" Then, as soon as their minds were reassured about us, every one came, men as well as women, so that there remained none behind, big or little; and they all brought something to eat and drink, which they gave with wondrous lovingness. They have in all the islands very many *canoas*,<sup>1</sup> after the manner of rowing-galleys,<sup>2</sup> some larger, some smaller; and a good many are larger than a galley of eighteen benches. They are not so wide, because they are made of a single log of timber, but a galley could not keep up with them in rowing, for their motion is a thing beyond belief. And with these, they navigate through all those islands, which are numberless, and ply their traffic. I have seen some of those *canoas* with seventy and eighty men in them, each one with his oar. In all those islands, I saw not much diversity in the looks of the people, nor in their manners and language; but they all understand each other, which is a thing of singular advantage for what I hope their Highnesses will decide upon for converting them to our holy faith, unto which they are well disposed. I have already told how I had gone a hundred and seven leagues, in a straight line from West to East, along the sea-coast of the Island of Juana; according to which itinerary, I can declare that that island is larger than England and Scotland com-

<sup>1</sup> The first appearance of this West Indian word in Europe.

<sup>2</sup> *Fustas de remo*.

bined;<sup>1</sup> as, over and above those hundred and seven leagues, there remain for me, on the western side, two provinces whereto I did not go — one of which they call Avan, where the people are born with tails<sup>2</sup> — which provinces cannot be less in length than fifty or sixty leagues, according to what may be understood from the Indians with me, who know all the islands. This other, Española, has a greater circumference than the whole of Spain from Col[ibre in Catal]unya, by the sea-coast, as far as Fuente Ravia in Biscay; since, along one of its four sides, I went for a hundred and eighty-eight great leagues in a straight line from west to east.<sup>3</sup> This is [a land] to be desired, — and once seen, never to be relinquished — in which (although, indeed, I have taken possession of them all for their Highnesses, and all are more richly endowed than I have skill and power to say, and I hold them all in the name of their Highnesses who can dispose thereof as much and as completely as of the kingdoms of Castile) in this Española, in the place most suitable and best for its proximity to the gold mines, and for traffic with the mainland both on this side and with that over there belonging to the Great Can,<sup>4</sup> where there will be great commerce and profit, I took possession of a large town which I named the city of Navidad.<sup>5</sup> And I have made fortification there, and a fort (which by this

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Journal, December 23, and note. The reader will observe the tone of exaggeration in the letter as compared with the Journal.

<sup>2</sup> Marco Polo reported that in the kingdom of Lambri in Sumatra “there are men who have tails like dogs, larger than a palm, and who are covered with hair.” Marco Polo, pt. III., ch. XIV. See Yule’s note on the legend of men with tails, Yule’s *Marco Polo*, II. 284. The name Avan (Anan in the Latin letter) does not occur in the Journal. Bernaldez, *Historia de las Reyes Catolicos*, II. 19, gives Albao as one of the provinces of Española. As this name is not found in his chief source, Dr. Chanca’s letter, he may have got it from Columbus and through a lapse of memory transferred it from Cuba to Española.

<sup>3</sup> The area of Spain is about 191,000 square miles; that of Española or Hayti is 28,000. The extreme length of Hayti is 407 miles.

<sup>4</sup> That is, with the mainland of Europe on this side of the Atlantic and with the mainland on that side of the ocean belonging to the Great Can, *i.e.*, China.

<sup>5</sup> *I.e.*, Nativity, Christmas, because the wreck occurred on that day. Cf. Journal, December 25 and January 4, and note to entry of December 28.

time will have been completely finished) and I have left therein men enough for such a purpose, with arms and artillery, and provisions for more than a year, and a boat, and a [man who is] master of all seacraft for making others; and great friendship with the king of that land, to such a degree that he prided himself on calling and holding me as his brother. And even though his mind might change towards attacking those men, neither he nor his people know what arms are, and go naked. As I have already said, they are the most timorous creatures there are in the world, so that the men who remain there are alone sufficient to destroy all that land, and the island is without personal danger for them if they know how to behave themselves. It seems to me that in all those islands, the men are all content with a single wife; and to their chief or king they give as many as twenty. The women, it appears to me, do more work than the men. Nor have I been able to learn whether they held personal property, for it seemed to me that whatever one had, they all took share of, especially of eatable things. Down to the present, I have not found in those islands any monstrous men, as many expected,<sup>1</sup> but on the contrary all the people are very comely; nor are they black like those in Guinea, but have flowing hair; and they are not begotten where there is an excessive violence of the rays of the sun. It is true that the sun is there very strong, although it is twenty-six degrees distant from the equinoctial line.<sup>2</sup> In those islands, where there are lofty mountains, the cold was very keen there, this winter; but they endure it by being accustomed thereto, and by the help of the meats which they eat with many and inordinately hot spices. Thus I have not found, nor had any information of monsters, except

<sup>1</sup> Columbus had read in the *Imago Mundi* of Pierre d'Ailly and noted in the margin the passage which says that in the ends of the earth there "were monsters of such a horrid aspect that it were hard to say whether they were men or beasts." *Raccolta Colombiana*, pt. I., vol. II., p. 468. Cf. also the stories in the *Book of Sir John Mandeville*, chs. xxvii. and xxviii.

<sup>2</sup> Columbus apparently revised his estimate of the latitude on the return, without, however, correcting his Journal; cf. entries for October 30 and November 21.

of an island which is here the second in the approach to the Indies, which is inhabited by a people whom, in all the islands, they regard as very ferocious, who eat human flesh. These have many canoes with which they run through all the islands of India, and plunder and take as much as they can. They are no more ill-shapen than the others, but have the custom of wearing their hair long, like women; and they use bows and arrows of the same reed stems, with a point of wood at the top, for lack of iron which they have not. Amongst those other tribes who are excessively cowardly, these are ferocious; but I hold them as nothing more than the others. These are they who have to do with the women of Martinino<sup>1</sup> — which is the first island that is encountered in the passage from Spain to the Indies — in which there are no men. Those women practise no female usages, but have bows and arrows of reed such as above mentioned; and they arm and cover themselves with plates of copper of which they have much. In another island, which they assure me is larger than Española, the people have no hair. In this there is incalculable gold; and concerning these and the rest I bring Indians with me as witnesses. And in conclusion, to speak only of what has been done in this voyage, which has been so hastily performed, their Highnesses may see that I shall give them as much gold as they may need, with very little aid which their Highnesses will give me; spices and cotton at once, as much as their Highnesses will order to be shipped, and as much as they shall order to be shipped of mastic, — which till now has never been found except in Greece, in the island of Xio,<sup>2</sup> and the Seignory sells it for what it likes; and aloe-wood as much as they shall order to be shipped; and slaves as many as they shall order to be shipped, — and these shall be from idolators. And I believe that I have discovered rhubarb and cinnamon, and I shall find that the men whom I am leav-

<sup>1</sup> See Journal, January 15, and note. The island is identified with Martinique.

<sup>2</sup> See Journal, November 12, and note. The Seignory was the government of Genoa to which Chios [Scio] belonged at this time.

ing there will have discovered a thousand other things of value; as I made no delay at any point, so long as the wind gave me an opportunity of sailing, except only in the town of Navidad till I had left things safely arranged and well established. And in truth I should have done much more if the ships had served me as well as might reasonably have been expected. This is enough; and [thanks to] Eternal God our Lord who gives to all those who walk His way, victory over things which seem impossible; and this was signally one such, for although men have talked or written of those lands,<sup>1</sup> it was all by conjecture, without confirmation from eyesight, amounting only to this much that the hearers for the most part listened and judged that there was more fable in it than anything actual, however trifling. Since thus our Redeemer has given to our most illustrious King and Queen, and to their famous kingdoms, this victory in so high a matter, Christendom should have rejoicing therein and make great festivals, and give solemn thanks to the Holy Trinity for the great exaltation they shall have by the conversion of so many peoples to our holy faith; and next for the temporal benefit which will bring hither refreshment and profit, not only to Spain, but to all Christians. This briefly, in accordance with the facts. Dated, on the caravel, off the Canary Islands,<sup>2</sup> the 15 February of the year 1493.

At your command,

THE ADMIRAL.

#### POSTSCRIPT WHICH CAME WITHIN THE LETTER

After having written this letter, and being in the sea of Castile, there rose upon me so much wind, South and South-

<sup>1</sup> Such writers, for example, as Pierre d'Ailly, Marco Polo, and the author of the *Book of Sir John Mandeville*, from whom Columbus had derived most of his preconceptions which often biassed or misled him in interpreting the signs of the natives.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Journal, Columbus thought he was off the Azores, February 15.

east,<sup>1</sup> that it has caused me to lighten the vessels; however, I ran hither to-day into this port of Lisbon, which was the greatest wonder in the world; where I decided to write to their Highnesses. I have always found the seasons like May in all the Indies, whither I passed in thirty-three days, and returned in twenty-eight, but that these storms have delayed me twenty-three days running about this sea.<sup>2</sup> All the seamen say here that there never has been so bad a winter, nor so many shipwrecks.

Dated the 14th of March.<sup>3</sup>

Colom sent this letter to the *Escrivano de Racion*.<sup>4</sup> Of the islands found in the Indies. Received with another for their Highnesses.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The storm of March 3d; see Journal.

<sup>2</sup> The time of the return voyage, like that of the outgoing voyage, is reckoned as that consumed in making the Atlantic passage from the last island left on one side to the first one reached on the other. Just how the twenty-three days is to be explained is not altogether clear. The editor of Quaritch's *The Spanish Letter of Columbus* supposed Columbus to refer to the time which elapsed from February 16, when he arrived at the Azores, to March 13, when he left Lisbon.

<sup>3</sup> Columbus arrived at Lisbon March 4, and he is supposed by R. H. Major to have written the postscript there, but not to have despatched the letter until he reached Seville, March 15, when he redated it March 14.

<sup>4</sup> The *Escrivano de Racion* in the kingdom of Aragon was the high steward or controller of the king's household expenditures. In Castile the corresponding official was the *contador mayor*, chief auditor or steward. Navarrete, I. 167.

<sup>5</sup> No longer extant. These lines are a memorandum appended to the text by Santangel or the printer, and might have been used as a title, as the similar memorandum was used in the publication of the Latin letter. The Admiral's name is spelled as in the Articles of Agreement "Colom."