

Columbus the cannibal: the discovery of the new world

[Parts of the World](#), [Europe](#)



The letter served as Europe's first introduction to this new land and shaped their views on the indigenous people for many years. Most of Europe thought of the people as barbarians until a French philosopher, Michel de Montaigne, wrote an essay completely rejecting that idea and instead, exposing Europe's own barbarism. Because of Montaigne's views on Native Americans, Columbus's letter would be deemed an unreliable source to him, due to the intended audience, the blinding motives, and the general assumptions. First and foremost, Montaigne wouldn't dismiss how Columbus could've easily fabricated his letter to fit his audience's interests.

When Columbus set off on his journey, he left with the weight of Europe on his shoulders. Their hopes for trade expansion and spread of Christianity was all up to him to fulfill. Because of this pressure, Montaigne would be skeptical. Before Montaigne wrote his "On Cannibals" Essay, he searched for a valid source to learn about the new world. In his search, he described how he ruled out some of the unreliable sources through their actions: "... they cannot help changing their story a little in order to make their views triumph and be more persuasive; they never show you anything purely as it is...

"(Montaigne, 61) So if he came across Columbus's letter he'd definitely see the possibility of Columbus doing the exact same thing. There are too many probable similarities between his unreliable sources and Columbus in that they both had huge audiences to satisfy. Montaigne would also grow more skeptical because of Columbus' continuous attempts to sound like a saint. " I forbade that anything so worthless as fragments of broken platter, and pieces of broken glass, and strap-buckles should be given them;... " " I gave gratuitously a thousand useful things that I carried..."(Columbus, 57) This

proves that pleasing his audience was a big focus throughout his letter and that could've potentially led to him changing what actually happened. Montaigne would definitely doubt because of this. Another thing that would make Montaigne question Columbus' validity was his blinding motives. Columbus came to exploit the land for gold, spices, and the spread of Christianity. And because of these blinding motives he couldn't see the beauty Montaigne saw within these cultures. His view was tainted with greed. " In this, there is incalculable gold;... And I believe that I have discovered rhubarb and cinnamon... discovered a thousand other things of value;... " (Columbus, 59) Once Columbus realized these people weren't a threat and heard of cannibalism, he stopped trying to understand them and labeled them as monsters. Columbus states: "... information on monsters... very ferocious who eat human flesh. " (Columbus, 58) Montaigne defended the Native Americans, completely rejecting the idea that they're barbaric, even going so far as to defend their cannibalism. He talks greatly about their simplicity and sense of community. "... still remaining close neighbours to their original state of nature. " "... a state of nature so simple and so pure..." (Montaigne, 62)

In contrast Columbus thinks of the Natives as cowards and senseless beasts. (Columbus, 58) Because of their opposite views, Montaigne would most likely accuse Columbus of labeling these people too soon before really knowing them. Montaigne explains how there's more barbarity in eating a man alive through torture, how they do in Europe, than in eating him dead. (Montaigne, 64) Meanwhile Columbus remained blind to their own barbarity in Europe

and didn't see anything wrong with their actions. So Montaigne wouldn't trust such a blind source for valid information. Lastly, Montaigne would question the few holes Columbus' letter had. For example, after only being there for such a short time Columbus quotes the Natives many times. "... and others went running from house to house... , with loud cries of come, come to see the people from heaven!"(Colombus, 57)Montaigne would most likely question how Colombus seemed to completely understand their language within just a few days. Maybe all the information he heard and wrote in the letter was inaccurate. Also because they weren't familiar with christianity Montaine might question how they knew of Heaven. These holes would be the last determining factor of Columbus' letter being unreliable. In conclusion, Michel de Montaigne would not take Christopher Columbus' letter on the New World as a credible source. There were too many holes. Columbus had too big of an audience to impress, to many blinding motives to truly understand the Natives, and too many contradictingthat overall would make Montaigne skeptical about the validity of the information.