

## 2. Giovanni da Verrazano, Encountering Native Americans (1524)

*Source: From The Voyages of Giovanni da Verrazano, ed. Lawrence C. Wroth, translated by Susan Tarrow pp. 133–34, 137–38, 140–41. Copyright © 1970 Yale University Press. Reprinted with permission.*

One of the first European explorers to encounter the Indians of eastern North America was Giovanni da Verrazano, an Italian-born navigator who sailed in 1524 under the auspices of King Philip I of France. His voyage took him from modern-day Cape Fear, North Carolina, north to the coast of Maine. In the following excerpt from his diary, which he included in a letter to the king, Verrazano tries to describe the appearance, economic life, customs, and beliefs of some of the region's various Native American groups. Some, he reports, were friendly and generous; others warlike and hostile. He is particularly interested in their spiritual beliefs, concluding that they have "no religion." Verrazano found the east coast thickly populated. By the time English settlement began in the early seventeenth century, many of the groups he encountered had been all but destroyed by epidemic diseases.

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... Since the storm that we encountered in the northern regions, Most Serene King, I have not written to tell Your Majesty of what happened to the four ships which you sent over the Ocean to explore new lands, as I thought that you had already been informed of everything—how we were forced by the fury of the winds to return in distress to Brittany with only the *Normandy* and the *Dauphine*, and that after undergoing repairs there, began our voyage with these two ships, equipped for war, following the coasts of Spain, Your Most Serene Majesty will have heard; and then according to our new plan, we continued the original voyage with only the *Dauphine*; now on our return from this voyage I will tell Your Majesty of what we found.

... Seeing that the land continued to the south we decided to turn and skirt it toward the north, where we found the land we had sighted earlier. So we anchored off the coast and sent the small boat

in to land. We had seen many people coming to the seashore, but they fled when they saw us approaching; several times they stopped and turned around to look at us in great wonderment. We reassured them with various signs, and some of them came up, showing great delight at seeing us and marveling at our clothes, appearance, and our whiteness; they showed us by various signs where we could most easily secure the boat, and offered us some of their food. We were on land, and I shall now tell Your Majesty briefly what we were able to learn of their life and customs.

They go completely naked except that around their loins they wear skins of small animals like martens, with a narrow belt of grass around the body, to which they tie various tails of other animals which hang down to the knees; the rest of the body is bare, and so is the head. Some of them wear garlands of birds' feathers. They are dark in color, not unlike the Ethiopians, with thick black hair, not very long, tied back behind the head like a small tail. As for the physique of these men, they are well proportioned, of medium height, a little taller than we are. They have broad chests, strong arms, and the legs and other parts of the body are well composed. There is nothing else, except that they tend to be rather broad in the face: but not all, for we saw many with angular faces. They have big black eyes, and an attentive and open look. They are not very strong, but they have a sharp hearing, and are agile and swift runners. From what we could tell from observation, in the last two respects they resemble the Orientals, . . .

We reached another land 15 leagues from the island, where we found an excellent harbor; before entering it, we saw about boats full of people who came around the ship uttering various cries of wonderment. They did not come nearer than fifty paces but stopped to look at the structure of our ship, our persons, and our clothes; then all together they raised a loud cry which meant that they were joyful. We reassured them somewhat by imitating their gestures, and they came near enough for us to throw them a few little bells and mirrors and many trinkets, which they took and looked at, laughing, and then they confidently came on board ship. Among them were

two kings, who were as beautiful of stature and build as I can possibly describe. The first was about 40 years old, the other a young man of 24, and they were dressed thus: the older man had on his naked body a stag skin, skillfully worked like damask with various embroideries; the head was bare, the hair tied back with various bands, and around the neck hung a wide chain decorated with many different-colored stones. The young man was dressed in almost the same way. These people are the most beautiful and have the most civil customs that we have found on this voyage. They are taller than we are; they are a bronze color, some tending more toward whiteness, others to a tawny color; the face is clear-cut; the hair is long and black, and they take great pains to decorate it; the eyes are black and alert, and their manner is sweet and gentle, very like the manner of the ancients. I shall not speak to Your Majesty of the other parts of the body, since they have all the proportions belonging to any well-built man.

Their women are just as shapely and beautiful; very gracious, of attractive manner and pleasant appearance; their customs and behavior follow womanly custom as far as befits human nature; they go nude except for stag skin embroidered like the men's, and some wear rich lynx skins on their arms; their bare heads are decorated with various ornaments made of braids of their own hair which hang down over their breasts on either side. Some have other hair arrangements such as the women of Egypt and Syria wear, and these women are older and have been joined in wedlock. Both men and women have various trinkets hanging from their ears as the Orientals do; and we saw that they had many sheets of worked copper which they prize more than gold. They do not value gold because of its color; they think it the most worthless of all, and rate blue and red above all other colors. The things we gave them that they prized the most were little bells, blue crystals, and other trinkets to put in the ear or around the neck. They did not appreciate cloth of silk and gold, nor even of any other kind, nor did they care to have them; the same was true for metals like steel and iron, for many times when we showed them some of our arms, they did not admire them, nor ask for them, but

merely examined the workmanship. They did the same with mirrors; they would look at them quickly, and then refuse them, laughing.

They are very generous and give away all they have. We made great friends with them, and one day before we entered the harbor with the ship, when we were lying at anchor one league out to sea because of unfavorable weather, they came out to the ship with a great number of their boats; they had painted and decorated their faces with various colors, showing us that it was a sign of happiness. They brought us some of their food, and showed us by signs where we should anchor in the port for the ship's safety, and then accompanied us all the way until we dropped anchor. . . .

At a distance of 50 leagues, keeping more to the north, we found high country full of very dense forests, composed of pines, cypresses, and similar trees which grow in cold regions.

The people were quite different from the others, for while the previous ones had been courteous in manner, these were full of crudity and vices, and were so barbarous that we could never make any communication with them, however many signs we made to them. They were clothed in skins of bear, lynx, sea-wolf and other animals. As far as we could judge from several visits to their houses, we think they live on game, fish, and several fruits which are a species of root which the earth produces itself. They have no pulse, and we saw no sign of cultivation, nor would the land be suitable for producing any fruit or grain on account of its sterility. If we wanted to trade with them for some of their things, they would come to the seashore on some rocks where the breakers were most violent, while we remained in the little boat, and they sent us what they wanted to give on a rope, continually warning us not to approach the land; they gave us the barter readily and would take in exchange only knives, hooks for fishing and sharp metal. We found no courtesy in them, and when we had nothing more to exchange and left them, the men made all the signs of scorn and shame that any brute creature would make. Against our wishes, we penetrated 2 or 3 leagues inland with 25 armed men, and when we disembarked on the shore, they shot at us with their

bows and uttered loud cries before fleeing into the woods. We did not find anything of great value in this land, except for the vast forests and some hills which could contain some metal: for we saw many natives with "paternostri" beads of copper in their ears. . . .

Due to the lack of [a common] language, we were unable to find out by signs or gestures how much religious faith these people we found possess. We think they have neither religion nor laws, that they do not know of a First Cause or Author, that they do not worship the sky, the stars, the sun, the moon, or other planets, nor do they even practice any kind of idolatry; we do not know whether they offer any sacrifices or other prayers, nor are there any temples or churches of prayer among their peoples. We consider that they have no religion and that they live in absolute freedom, and that everything they do proceeds from Ignorance; for they are very easily persuaded, and they imitated everything that they saw us Christians do with regard to divine worship, with the same fervor and enthusiasm that we had.

### Questions

1. How much do Verrazano's observations seem to be affected by his own beliefs and experiences?
2. Why does he write that Indians live in "absolute freedom," and why does he consider this a criticism rather than a compliment?

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### 3. Bartolomé de las Casas on Spanish Treatment of the Indians, from *History of the Indies* (1528)

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