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'Since This is a Horrible Thing to Think About': European Perceptions of Native American Cannibalism

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Abstract

Contemporary Italian playwright Dario Fo wrote a satirical play entitled *Johan Padan and the Discovery of the Americas* which purported to be the account of one Johan Padan, a contemporary of Columbus, who journeyed to the New World, was shipwrecked, and rescued by some friendly Indians. At one point, Padan and a group of his fellows discussed the hospitality of the Indians, who were quite generous. One of them expressed the fear that the Indians simply care for them so that they will make a splendid feast. Another man remarked, quite scathingly, "This is the third voyage I've made to the Indies and I've never met Indians with pieces of arms and legs hung up to dry in their huts, like those charlatans Amerigo Vespucci and Alfonso Gamberan talked about ... They just told those stories to have an excuse for treating the Indians like animals: They're cannibals, so we can make them slaves." Although Fo is more concerned with literary conventions than with factual and historical accuracy, he succeeds in tapping into one idea which partially explains the proliferation of European literature about the Indians and their cannibalism, namely that cannibalism became a means whereby Europeans could justify their enslavement of the Indians. However, to say that the practice of cannibalism was simply used as justification for the enslavement of the Indians would be a grievous understatement, because cannibalism represented so much more to the Europeans. What was noted down originally as a new, curious, and revolting but fascinating practice, gradually transformed into a justification for enslavement of the Native Americans, a method of persuasion, and a device by which some Europeans critiqued their own countries.

Keywords

Native Americans, European perceptions, cannibalism

'Since This is a Horrible Thing to Think About:'
*European Perceptions of Native American Cannibalism*¹

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Contemporary Italian playwright Dario Fo wrote a satirical play entitled *Johan Padan and the Discovery of the Americas* which purported to be the account of one Johan Padan, a contemporary of Columbus, who journeyed to the New World, was shipwrecked, and rescued by some friendly Indians. At one point, Padan and a group of his fellows discussed the hospitality of the Indians, who were quite generous. One of them expressed the fear that the Indians simply care for them so that they will make a splendid feast. Another man remarked, quite scathingly, "This is the third voyage I've made to the Indies and I've never met Indians with pieces of arms and legs hung up to dry in their huts, like those charlatans Amerigo Vespucci and Alfonso Gamberan talked about...They just told those stories to have an excuse for treating the Indians like animals: They're cannibals, so we can make them slaves."² Although Fo is more concerned with literary conventions than with factual and historical accuracy, he succeeds in tapping into one idea which partially explains the proliferation of European literature about the Indians and their cannibalism, namely that cannibalism became a means whereby Europeans could justify their enslavement of the Indians. However, to say that the practice of cannibalism was simply used as justification for the enslavement of the Indians would be a grievous understatement, because cannibalism represented so much more to the Europeans. What was noted down

¹ The first part of this title is derived from an account written by Simone dal Verde. I wish to acknowledge Magdalena Sanchez for providing me with the opportunity to explore this topic, and Brian Matthew Jordan for his editorial guidance.

² Dario Fo, *Johan Padan and the Discovery of the Americas*, (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 28.

originally as a new, curious, and revolting but fascinating practice, gradually transformed into a justification for enslavement of the Native Americans, a method of persuasion, and a device by which some Europeans critiqued their own countries.

A Practice Most Revolting

Europeans had always been fascinated with what they considered the marvels of the east, with its exotic and mysterious locales and inhabitants. Historian Ronald Fritze discussed several of the races of marvels which Europeans believed abounded in Africa and Asia. There were the Gymnosophists, who “stood on one leg and worshipped the sun;”³ the Bragmanni who were “eastern wise-men who went naked and lived in caves;”⁴ the Amazons, a fell group of female warriors, the Cynocephali, who had “dogs’ heads and human bodies;”⁵ the Cyclopes, who were “one-eyed giants of a surly nature;”⁶ the Monoculi who were about the size of a regular human but only had one eye; the Unipeds who “had one leg and moved about by hopping;” and the grotesque Blemmyae who “had no heads and instead had their faces in their chests.”⁷ Fritze also discusses the Anthrophagi who feasted on human flesh and who were well known in the Europeans. Fritze maintained that “Columbus and other explorers/.../were traveling to the geographical fringes of the earth, at least from their point of view. They were taught/.../to expect abnormally behaving humans in such regions. So, it is not surprising that Columbus would return from his first voyage with reports of cannibals.”⁸ In Fritze’s mind, the cultural mindset under which the Europeans operated, in essence the idea that they were going to the

³ Ronald H. Fritze, *New Worlds: The Great Voyages of Discovery 1400-1600*, (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2003), 9.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 9-11.

extreme edges of the world and therefore would be surrounded by grotesque marvelous races, informed their perceptions about the Indians and may have been responsible for their avid recording of sightings of cannibalism. It is also very likely that the Europeans also recorded these events out of a sheer sense of curiosity, or because they were fascinated by what they considered a revolting practice.

Several entries in the log from Columbus's first voyage demonstrate that the admiral did indeed note the presence of cannibals, though some of the comments were little more than cursory notations. On Sunday January 13th, the account noted, "the admiral judged that he must have been one of the Caribs, who eat people."⁹ On Tuesday, January 15th, the account noted, in regards to exploration, "it will be difficult on Carib, because that nation, he says, eat human flesh."¹⁰ On Wednesday, January 16th, in a slightly lengthier description of the Caribs, the log observed, "in order to go, he says, to the islands of Carib; where the people were of whom all those islands and lands were in such fear, because, he says, with their innumerable canoes they used to go around through all those seas, and (he says) eat the people they could catch."¹¹ An entry on Wednesday, December 26th, noted the complaint of a local chief, or cacique, to Columbus, "he complained to the admiral about the Caribs, who enslaved his people and carried them away to eat."¹² Compared to later accounts, which virtually oozed with gruesome anecdotes and gory description, these small, almost insignificant mentions of the cannibalistic Caribs hardly seem worthy of the time spent reading them. However, these mentions of cannibalism were so important because they represented the seeds of European thought.

⁹ Francesca Lardicci, ed., *Repertorium Columbianum Volume 6: A Synoptic Edition of the Log of Columbus's First Voyage* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1999), 116.

¹⁰ Lardicci, 118.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹² *Ibid.*, 163.

Columbus and his men went expecting to see cannibals and Columbus duly noted the alleged presence of cannibals, thus planting the seeds which would, in due time, flourish and produce the fruit, or the later accounts which drip with stories of cannibalism.

Next to the notations Columbus made in his log, one of the earliest known reports of Indian cannibalism exists in a letter written to the mayor of Seville by Dr. Diego Alvarez Chanca, a royal physician who accompanied Columbus on his second voyage. Chanca wrote, “we went ashore, exploring all dwellings and villages that lay along the coast where we found quite a few human bones and skulls hanging inside the houses and used as containers to hold things.”¹³ He then began another gruesome yarn, how “women also reported that the Caribs act with unbelievable but true cruelty, eating the offspring generated with the imprisoned women while raising only those conceived by women of their own kind. The men they are able to capture alive are brought into their huts for slaughtering and immediate consumption. They claim flesh is so exquisite that a similar delicacy does not exist in the world.” As if the reader was not already sickened, Chanca felt it necessary to add, “there, in one of the huts, a human neck was found boiling in a pot.”¹⁴

This letter to the mayor of Seville was an important addition to the nebulous school of thought concerning the New World, and was therefore disseminated widely throughout Europe. Traces of Chanca’s description can be seen in various other accounts. As Anna Unali notes, it is important to bear in mind that Chanca, unlike Columbus, “was less prone to idealize what he had observed.”¹⁵ This tendency partially explains the fact that Columbus offered a few mentions of

¹³ Diego Alvarez Chanca, “Letter to the Mayor of Seville,” in *Christopher Columbus’s Discoveries in the Testimonials of Diego Alvarez Chanca and Andrés Bernáldez*, ed. Anna Unali (Rome: Instituto Poligrafico E Zecca Della Stato - Libreria Della Statu, 2000), 21.

¹⁴ Chanca, 23.

¹⁵ Anna Unali, “Diego Alvarez Chanca’s letter,” in Unali, 241.

cannibalism, in the midst of a glowing description of the new lands, where Chanca's focus on cannibalism bordered on an obsession. Chanca did not, as the expression goes, pull any punches and he did not try to minimize what he saw. In explaining the differences between Chanca and Columbus, other factors do come into play, such as the fact that Columbus put a positive spin on events because of the very nature of his mission, where Chanca was under no such obligation. Another difference lies in the fact that Columbus did not have any substantial firsthand contact with the cannibals; he generally learned of them through secondhand rumors, where Chanca actually explored a cannibal village. As time passed, it would be Chanca's style of describing events which would be adopted, that is to say, a blunt style, which pulled no punches, and was quite realistic. Descriptions such as Chanca's and the subsequent ones modeled on his, would shock and disgust Europeans, but at the same time fascinate them.

Andrés Bernáldez, the parish priest of Los Palacios, a town near Seville, also commented on the presence of cannibalism in the New World. He described the discovery of some abandoned dwellings, "Of everything he took a bit, including three or four human arm and leg bones. After seeing the latter, they understood these were Carib islands."¹⁶ In a section which is rather similar to Chanca's writing, Bernáldez wrote, "These Carib men showed great cruelty toward them to a seemingly incredible degree, in fact they reached the point of eating the children conceived by them [the captive women] while raising only the ones born from their women. The men they are able to capture are taken into their huts and slaughtered at their whim, whereas those killed in action are eaten immediately. They claim human flesh is so good that no other thing in the world is better."¹⁷ The fact that Bernáldez offered an account which was

¹⁶ Andrés Bernáldez, "Memoirs of the Catholic Sovereign's Reign," in Unali, 87.

¹⁷ Bernáldez, 93.

reasonably similar to that of Chanca demonstrated that Dr. Chanca's brutal descriptions were already beginning to be circulated among Europeans.

Questions of Authenticity

Though all but an exceedingly small number of Europeans appeared to have accepted the fact that the Indians were cannibals, perceptions have a way of evolving over time. Today, the opinion among scholars is more balanced over the idea of cannibalism. Many scholars believe that the Indians were not cannibals and often reference Fritze's argument that Columbus and his men were conditioned to expect to see cannibals and therefore made cannibals, even if none existed, to justify their perceptions.

However, there are other reasons why authors feel that the cannibalism should be stricken from the historical record. One author mused, "as to the truthfulness of these accounts, one cannot help wondering whether they really were cannibals—the Canibas or Caribs they had been warned about during the first voyage—or whether Columbus and his men used this to justify what would ensue. Slaughtering cannibals would be fulfilling God's wrath/.../demonization of the victims was a way of justifying genocide,"¹⁸ Still another author opined, "the evidence that these bones and this flesh were of humans is weak. Could sailors from Seville have told the difference between the flesh of men and that of monkeys?"¹⁹ Of course, other authors do take the opposite stance: that cannibalism was indeed prevalent among the Indians. This position is quite appealing, because there are strong pieces of evidence, such as the fact that Dr. Chanca, a respected physician, did accompany the soldiers into the abandoned village and it stands to

¹⁸ Klaus Brinkbäumer and Clemens Höges, *The Voyage of the Vizcaína: The Mystery of Christopher Columbus's last Ship* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2004), 155.

¹⁹ Hugh Thomas, *Rivers of Gold: The Rise of the Spanish Empire, from Columbus to Magellan* (New York: Random House, 2003), 133.

reason that he would have been able to differentiate among the different types of flesh. These authors also point to the fact that too many credible writers make mention of and describe cannibalism with a high level of consistency; therefore arguing that it is highly unlikely that cannibalism was a mere figment of the European imagination.²⁰

Of course, in reality it is very difficult for 21st century scholars to form a definitive consensus on the prevalence of cannibalism, because there is no possible way for scholars to rewind time and test the contents of the pots in the village Chanca visited, or perform forensic tests upon the bones which were allegedly gnawed. And, in reality, the central point here is that both sides are right and wrong. Cannibalism was probably not as pervasive as the Europeans would have their readers believe, but there is no doubt that it was a real presence. This realization that the European accounts are most likely truthful, but perhaps exaggerated, or perhaps simply repeat someone else's assertions, can inform and allow the reader to think and read them more critically.

The News Was Going Out All Over Europe

Of course, the observations of cannibalism did not stay confined within the reports of Bernáldez and Chanca. Two letters, one written by Giambattista Strozzi, the other by Giovanni de' Bardi, offer further proof that the ideas of Chanca, and other explorers were beginning to permeate European consciousness. Strozzi, who "describe[d] the cannibals in terms like those used by Chanca"²¹ said, "many brown men with wide faces like Tartars, with hair extending to

²⁰ For several examples of credible writers, please consult Jean de Léry, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Otherwise Called America*; Hans Staden, *Hans Staden: The True Account of His Captivity, 1557*; André Thevet, *The Singularities of Antarctic France, also called America*; and Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*.

²¹ Giambattista Strozzi, in *Repertorium Columbianum Volume 10: Italian Reports on America-1493-1522: Letters, Dispatches, and Papal Bulls*, ed. Geoffrey Symcox (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2001), 15.

the middle of their shoulders, large and very quick and fierce, and they eat human flesh and children and castrated men whom they keep and fatten like capons, and then they eat them; the aforesaid are called Cannibals.”²² De’ Bardi also “recalls Chanca’s account.”²³ He wrote, “the said caravels carry twenty-six Indians of diverse islands and languages; it is true that they are almost the same height, among whom are three cannibals of whom those who live on and eat human flesh, and they are of the same type as the Indians, save that they are stronger and fiercer than the others.”²⁴ De’ Bardi also made sure to impart to his reader the grotesque details of the castration process, “and later they [the Spaniards] were on land at their houses, and they found they [the cannibals] kept certain slaves, whom they had castrated so they could fatten them up to eat them; and he came back with three of them, that is two whose virile members had been cut off, and one whose testicles had been cut off, so that you would judge them to be women. And they found many heads and bones in their houses; they say that they have eaten them all.”²⁵

The news continued to spread all over Europe, most likely due to the fact that all of Europe was in a tizzy about the discovery of the New World; everyone wanted to know the latest information, what was going on, what had been discovered, and various and sundry other details such as these. Agents of dukes and lords wrote to their masters, to keep them informed, as did Francesco Cappello, the ambassador from Venice to Spain. He wrote, in a report which was subsequently read before the Venetian Senate, “The king [from the islands] said that it seemed to him that he was in Paradise; this one, as it is said, had 2000 persons who ate under him, and in their country they eat human flesh, that is of executed criminals.”²⁶ That news such as this

²² Strozzi, 43.

²³ Symcox, “Introduction,” in Symcox, 15.

²⁴ Giovanni de’ Bardi, in Symcox, 44.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Francesco Cappello, in Symcox, 49. Please consult the footnotes on page 48 to see the source of my information about Cappello.

would be read before the Senate of the Republic of Venice indicated that the New World and its cannibalistic inhabitants had grabbed hold of the European mind and consciousness.

Before proceeding to other letters, it is important to recognize that Chanca's report was not the only one which influenced the letters and correspondence of the Europeans. Another report had as much significance as Chanca's letter, the report of Michele da Cuneo, an Italian "who accompanied Columbus on his second voyage in 1493,"²⁷ and who "reports what he saw and did simply and directly—even crudely."²⁸ Cuneo, who became famous for his lurid description of his rape of a female cannibal, wrote, in reference to the men Columbus left at Hispaniola to form the nucleus of a new colony, "we thought the islanders had eaten them, for as soon as they have killed anyone, they immediately gouge out his eyes and eat them."²⁹ He also made sure to discuss the fact that "the Cannibals, when they capture some Indians, eat them like we eat young goats, and they say that the flesh of a boy is much better than that of a female. They have an insatiable appetite for that human flesh."³⁰ Written roughly around the same time as Chanca's letter, Cuneo's report was equally influential.

Simone dal Verde, a merchant living in Valladolid, also wrote a letter to his village discussing the difference between the Tainos, whom the Europeans stereotyped as the friendly group of Indians and the Caribs.³¹ He noted "for while the latter [the Tainos] were meek and trusting, these [the Caribs] were suspicious and cruel, for they eat human flesh, as you will

²⁷ Geoffrey Symcox, "Introduction," in *Repertorium Columbianum Volume 12: Italian Reports on America-1493-1522: Accounts by Contemporary Observers*, ed. Geoffrey Symcox, (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2002), 10-11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Michele da Cuneo, in Symcox, 52.

³⁰ Da Cuneo, 57.

³¹ Symcox, "Introduction," in Symcox, 31.

hear.”³² Dal Verde also noted what was becoming more and more common in the reports, a description of the castration process, “they found in the houses two young girls and two young boys approximately fifteen years of age who had been taken from the other islands. The genital member of the male was cut away close to the pubis: they say they fatten them up for eating. They say that they do not eat the females but keep them, as was said, as slaves.”³³ Dal Verde was different than many of his fellow Europeans, who often gullibly accepted things at face value, and he informed his village, “since this is a horrible thing to think about, let alone assert that it actually happens, I have made every effort to obtain reliable information, and I find it without any doubt to be true. They say that these people venture forth 300 leagues during the summer, going from island to island, navigating for plunder. They eat the men and keep the women, as was said.”³⁴ He averred that “the captain of those caravels that returned certified to me that very many bones of the dead were found in their houses, and in one house human flesh was roasting and a man’s head was on the coals; and those things were brought to the admiral so he could see them. I do not know if this is true, given the facility that those men have for telling lies. What I do believe, based on what everyone says, is that they eat human flesh; and the inhabitants of the other islands say the same thing.” Dal Verde proved himself to be unusually inquisitive, as he related that he had “spoken with one of the men they brought back, who understands a little of our language, and learned from him that it was true: it appears that over here he is ashamed of it and shows signs of regret.”³⁵ Although Dal Verde’s letter was atypical in the sense that he went to great lengths to discover if his information was true, he nevertheless came to the conclusion that the reports were true and that cannibalism was indeed wicked.

³² Simone dal Verde in Symcox, 32.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 32.

³⁵ Ibid.

Nicolò Scillacio, an educated Italian humanist in the service of the duchy of Milan, wrote to his master, Duke Ludovico Sforza and described how the people who live on the islands inhabited by cannibals “are ferocious and unconquered, and live on human flesh, and so I may rightly call them anthropophagi.”³⁶ Scillacio narrated how “they wage war constantly against the Indians, who are gentle and timid people, to get their meat: that is their conquest and prey. They ravage, plunder, and plague the Indians without mercy and devour the un-warlike people. They do not eat one another, but spare other Cannibals.”³⁷ He offered the testimony of an acquaintance to buttress his story, “Pedro Margarit, a very reliable Spaniard who went to the east with the admiral, drawn by a desire to see new regions, says that he saw there with his own eyes several Indians skewered on spits being roasted over burning coals as a treat for the gluttonous, while many bodies lay around in piles, with their heads removed and their extremities torn off.”³⁸ In a tone of shocked self-righteousness, Scillacio declared, “the Cannibals do not deny this, but openly admit they eat other humans.”³⁹ He alluded to the idea of castration, “when they capture male infants or boy-slaves, it is their custom to castrate them and fatten them up like capons. They stuff the scrawny ones with food as well as those whose meagerness holds them back, like young lambs: soon when they are fat and delicious they are greedily devoured.” Finally he described how the cannibals would “give the women they captured to their wives as servants, or keep them for their own lust. If any of these women happen to give birth, they eat the child as they do the other captured children.”⁴⁰ Scillacio’s condemnation of the brutality of the cannibalism is implicit in his phraseology, a condemnation which would be echoed over and over again, even in the accounts of Columbus’s voyages.

³⁶ Nicolò Scillacio in Symcox, 34.

³⁷ Scillacio, 38.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Scillacio, 40.

In his account of Columbus's second voyage, the defender of the Indians, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas wrote, "They managed to lay hands on two young men who indicated in sign language that they were not from the island, but rather from Boriquén, the island we know today as San Juan de Puerto Rico. They also managed to convey by using sign language and with their eyes and by gesture that the inhabitants of the islands were Caribs and that they had been captured and brought here from Boriquén to be eaten, eating people being a custom of the Caribs."⁴¹ Las Casas continued, saying "it soon became apparent that one of the Indians had his privy member cut off and the Christians concluded that this was in order that he could be fattened up, like a capon, and then eaten by the Caribs."⁴² Las Casas took pains to describe how Columbus addressed the caciques, or the chiefs of the Tainos, "he went on to explain that he had been sent by a great king and queen, rich and powerful, who were his sovereigns and ruled over the kingdoms of Castile, in order to explore and learn about these lands, and in particular to discover whether there were any people in the region who harmed others—for he had heard a rumor to the effect that, somewhere in these waters, there lived a people know as cannibals or Caribs who harmed others,"⁴³ Here it is possible to see how Columbus "establishes subtle distinctions between innocent, potentially Christian Indians and idolatrous Indians, practicing cannibalism."⁴⁴ These distinctions would prove to be of paramount importance, particularly when it became permissible to enslave Indians who were cannibals.

⁴¹ Bartolomé de Las Casas, "Las Casas on Columbus," in *Repertorium Columbianum Volume 7: Las Casas on Columbus: Background and the Second and Fourth Voyages*, ed. Nigel Griffin (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1999), 91-92.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1982), 46.

In his account of Columbus's third voyage, Las Casas wrote, concerning the hospitality of the Indians, "he ordered them to barter for whatever they needed whenever they stopped off for fresh supplies, saying that, no matter how little what they offered the Indians, the Indians, with the exception of the cannibals who were reputed to eat human flesh, would have what they wanted,"⁴⁵ Las Casas described how the men asked the Indians about gold and "they said, according to what they could understand by means of signs, that there were some islands where there was a lot of that gold, but that the people were cannibals."⁴⁶ Though Las Casas does not provide disturbing pictures of Indian cannibalism, it can be inferred, from reading these excerpts, that the cannibals were, at this point, an undefined threat, that they existed and that the Europeans should be wary of them.

For all that Las Casas chose not to go into gory details, (as he did in his *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las indias*), the notorious explorer Amerigo Vespucci made many gruesome mentions of cannibalism. In a letter to Lorenzo Pietro Francesco Di Medici concerning his first voyage, Vespucci wrote, "they eat little flesh, unless it be human flesh, and your Magnificence must know that they are so inhuman as to transgress regarding this bestial custom. For they eat all their enemies that they kill or take, as well females as males, and with so much barbarity that it is a brutal thing to mention, how much more to see it, as has happened to me an infinite number of times. They were astonished at us when we told them that we did not eat our enemies."⁴⁷ Though Vespucci considered his information both important and

⁴⁵ Bartolomé de Las Casas, "Las Casas on Columbus: The third Voyage," in, *Repertorium Columbianum: Volume 11: Las Casas on Columbus: The Third Voyage*, ed. Geoffrey Symcox, (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2001), p. 22.

⁴⁶Ibid., 36.

⁴⁷ Amerigo Vespucci, "Letters of Amerigo Vespucci to a 'Magnificent Lord: First Voyage,'" in *The Letters of Amerigo Vespucci and Other Documents Illustrative of his Career*, ed. Clements R. Markham, (New York: Burt Franklin Publisher, 1894), 11.

accurate, he nevertheless managed to make quite a serious error. In almost every other account, the writer has stated explicitly that the women were never eaten; they were used as slaves or as objects of sexual desire for the men. That Vespucci did not know this is, in and of itself, a very telling sign, and it casts doubt onto his other letters, so when the next account is presented, it must be read, as the saying goes, with a grain of salt.

In a letter to Soderini, Vespucci wrote, “he went among the women and they all began to touch and feel him, wondering at him exceedingly. Things being so, we saw a woman come from the hill, carrying a great stick in her hand. When she came to where our Christian stood, she raised it, and gave him such a blow that he was felled to the ground. The other women immediately took him by the feet and dragged him towards the hill.”⁴⁸ Vespucci described how, “at last four rounds from the bombard were fired at them, and they no sooner heard the report than they all ran away towards the hill, where the women were still tearing the Christian to pieces. At a great fire they had made they roasted him before our eyes, showing us many pieces, and then eating them. The men made signs how they had killed the other two Christians and eaten them. What shocked us much was seeing with our eyes the cruelty with which they treated the dead, which was an intolerable insult to all of us.” He related, quite angrily, “having arranged that more than forty of us should land and avenge such cruel murder, and so bestial and inhuman an act, the principal captain would not give his consent.”⁴⁹

In another letter to Lorenzo di Medici, Vespucci wrote, “They slaughter those who are captured, and the victors eat the vanquished; for human flesh is an ordinary article of food among them. You may be the more certain of this, because I have seen a man eat his children

⁴⁸ Amerigo Vespucci, “Third Voyage of Amerigo Vespucci: Letter to Pietro Soderini,” in Markham, 37.

⁴⁹ Vespucci, 38.

and wife; and I know a man who was popularly credited to have eaten 300 human bodies.”⁵⁰ He also related how “I was once in a certain city for twenty-seven days, where human flesh was hung up near the houses, in the same way as we expose butcher’s meat. I say further that they were surprised that we did not eat our enemies and use their flesh as food, for they say it is excellent.”⁵¹ Again, it must be remembered that Vespucci is not necessarily the most reliable witness, but these stories are sensationalistic and disgusting nonetheless.

Switching from the explorer to a different figure, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, the author of *La Historia General y Natural de las Indias*, also wrote about the cannibals. “In these islands they eat human flesh, except in Boriquén; also in many places of Tierra Firme, as will be seen. Pliny says the same of the anthropophages of Scythia; besides eating human flesh, they drink from the skulls of dead men and weak necklaces of their teeth and hair. I have seen such necklaces in Tierra Firme.”⁵² Gaspare Contarini an ambassador to Emperor Charles V and Pope Clement VIII and subsequently a cardinal who led a reform faction, also recorded an interesting description of the cannibalism.⁵³ “The inhabitants are very civilized, except in religion, because they are idolaters and sacrifice men to their idols; they follow also this savage custom, that when they fight with their enemies, they eat all their enemies who die in battle.”⁵⁴ Contarini continued, “these marks of a high culture, however, stood in glaring contrast to the human sacrifice and cannibalism practice by the inhabitants.”⁵⁵ Here it would be helpful to note that

⁵⁰ Amerigo Vespucci, “Letter on his Third Voyage from Amerigo Vespucci to Lorenzo Pietro Francesco Di Medici,” in Markham, 47.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, “La Historia General y Natural de las Indias,” in *Repertorium Columbianum: Volume 9 Oviedo on Columbus*, ed. Jesús Carrillo, (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2001), 58.

⁵³ Gaspare Contarini, in *Repertorium Columbianum: Volume 10 Italian Reports on America-1493-1522: Letters, Dispatches, and Papal Bulls*, ed. Geoffrey Symcox, (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2001), 84.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Symcox, “Introduction,” in Symcox, 21.

Contarini was talking about the Aztec culture, not the Caribbean Indians, but his condemnation of cannibalism was certainly no less vociferous.

Many people discussed and disseminated information about cannibalism, not just the cultural elites and explorers. This included Marcantonio Coccio, “an instructor of literature at the school of San Marco in Venice.”⁵⁶ He wrote, “they are a cruel, hateful people: they feed on human flesh, which makes them a source of terror to their neighbors. They travel far and wide, robbing and looting, and killing their male captives, along with the children, and eating the flesh of their newly-slaughtered victims sprinkled with salt.” He stressed the idea that “the women are kept for breeding, and the Cannibals serve their still-nursing children like lambs or kids at their horrible banquets.”⁵⁷ He concluded with a graphic analogy, “the Spaniards found visible proof of these reports when they broke into the houses which the Cannibals had abandoned: the tables were set, and on them were bowls like ours, filled with parrots, other birds the size of pheasants, and human flesh. Nearby hung a human head, still dripping blood.”⁵⁸ Antonio Gallo commented, “some of them are inhabited by certain wild men, called Cannibals, who live on human flesh.”⁵⁹ Agostino Guistiniani, “a Genoese prelate and scholar, [who] was an authority on Eastern studies,” decided to offer his proverbial two cents as well.⁶⁰ He decreed, “it was discovered that several of these islands were inhabited by uncivilized men called cannibals, who showed no distaste for human flesh as food.”⁶¹

⁵⁶ Marcantonio Coccio, in *Repertorium Columbianum: Volume 12 Italian Reports on America-1493-1522: Accounts by Contemporary Observers*, ed. Geoffrey Symcox, (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2002), 68.

⁵⁷ Coccio, 69.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵⁹ Angelo Trevisan, in Symcox, 71.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

The continual discussion of cannibalism drew into the fray, Angelo Trevisan, a “secretary to the Venetian ambassador.”⁶² Trevisan described, quite luridly, “they castrate the boys they capture, just as we castrate animals, so that they will grow fatter for eating; and the mature men as soon as they are taken are killed and eaten, and they eat the intestines and the extremities raw. They salt the rest and serve it when it is ready, as we do with hams.”⁶³ Trevisan offered a description closely akin to those of Chanca and Bernáldez, “entering their houses, our men found that they had stone vessels of every kind like our own, and in the kitchen they found boiled human flesh together with parrots, and geese and ducks that were on a spit for roasting. Around the house they found bones of human arms and thighs which they keep to make the tips of their arrows, for they have no iron. They also found the head of a boy, not long dead, which was attached to a beam, still dripping blood.”⁶⁴

Another contemporary observer, Alessandro Geraldini, was a man who “believed them [the Indians] innocent and noble, free of greed and covetousness stemming from a sense of private property and eager to embrace Christianity.”⁶⁵ Nonetheless, “he was horrified by the other side of the Indians’ nature, exemplified by the Caribs he met—or claimed to have met—on his voyage to Hispaniola. Because of their cannibalism Geraldini refused to accept them as fellow human beings.”⁶⁶ Concerning their cannibalism, Geraldini wrote, “they ate human flesh, and claimed the mountainous places as their own, where they brought their booty of human captives, and constantly waged war with strong men who abstained from such food, and lived reverently and kindly according to the true laws of nature.” He continued, “the Caribs eventually took the bodies of those they had captured in war and, if they were plump, they roasted them

⁶² *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶⁵ Geoffrey Symcox, “Introduction,” in Symcox, 12.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

hanging from large trees on poles, or boiled them in large pots made of clay, first cutting off their heads and discarding them; if they were too thin, they stuffed them with various rich foods, as we do with fowls we are saving for a feast-day.” He wrote, in great horror, “something must be said about captive children: the pitiless men make them eunuchs immediately, and after they have fattened them up, they gather them on a holiday of their country and make them sit in the middle of their circle, the poor crowd of children, the wretched troop of humans fatted for food.” Geraldini continued to describe this atrocious practice, “with a single slash of his wooden sword, which is as sharp as if it were made of hard steel, he cuts off the heads of this one or that, as many as he pleases or has been decided on by the whole group. Then as a great cheer from the abominable men follows, they celebrate a feast-day, a day filled with pleasure, on the flesh of children fattened beyond what is human.” He ended with a earnest supplication, “I pray all pious mortals and implore the whole race of humane humanity to refuse their service entirely, to avoid the service of men swollen with the flesh of other humans.”⁶⁷ Geraldini, later Bishop of Santo Domingo, certainly had the ability to distinguish between the Tainos and the Caribs, but that did not lessen or diminish his disgust and hatred of the cannibalism of the Caribs.

Peter Martyr, the famous Italian humanist wrote, in his book *De Orbe Novo*, about the cannibalism of Indians. Martyr proclaimed, “they learned by hearsay that not far from those islands are the islands of wild men who feed on human flesh. They mentioned that this was the reason why they had fled in such panic at our arrival; they thought we were cannibals.”⁶⁸ He touched on the familiar theme of castration, “they castrate the boys they catch, in the way we cook chickens or pigs, if we want to rear them to be fatter and more tender for the table; when as

⁶⁷ Geraldini, 119.

⁶⁸ Peter Martyr, “De Orbe Novo,” in *Repertorium Columbianum: Volume 5 Selections from Peter Martyr*, ed. Geoffrey Eatough, (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1998), 46.

a consequence the boys have become large and fat, they eat them. When fully mature men come into their hands, they kill them and divide them into portions; they make a feast of their guts and their extremities while they are fresh; they pickle their limbs in salt, as we do hams, and preserve them for later occasions.”⁶⁹ He added, for good measure, a description similar to that of Chanca, “entering the houses they discovered that they had pots of every kind/.../and in their kitchens human flesh, some boiled along with flesh from parrots and ducks, some fixed on skewers ready to be roasted/.../they realized the bones from human arms and shins were being very carefully kept in their homes to manufacture arrowheads/.../they throw away the other bones when they have eaten the flesh off them. They also found the head of a youth recently killed hanging from a beam, still dripping with blood.”⁷⁰ Martyr concludes, somewhat self-righteously, “there is no one who saw them, who did not confess that a kind of shudder clawed at his stomach, so savage and hellish is the look implanted by nature and by their own brutality.”⁷¹

From the information presented in these various primary sources, it is easy to see the Europeans had very negative conceptions about the cannibalism of the Indians; some even going so far as to regard it as the work of Satan. Soon the idea of cannibalism was so sunk into European culture and thought, that during the Colombian lawsuit, there is one interesting consistency in the questions put before the witnesses. In the evidence of the Admiral of the Indies given in Puerto Rico on 30 September 1514, this question appeared. “Also, if the know, believe, or heard it said and it is public and well known that the admiral discovered the islands that are more easterly than the islands of Española, which are called the Cannibals.”⁷² In the evidence of the Admiral of the Indies given in Puerto Rico on 12 February 1515, this question

⁶⁹ Ibid., 46.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 51.

⁷¹ Ibid., 53.

⁷² “Evidence of the Admiral of the Indies. Puerto Rico, 30 September 1514,” in *Repertorium Columbianum Volume 8: Testimonies from the Colombian Lawsuits*, ed. William D. Phillips (Turnhout, Brepols Publishers, 2000), 79.

was posed: “Also, if the know and believe and have heard it said and it is public and well known that the admiral don Cristóbal Colón discovered many islands that are to the east of Española, such as San Juan and Santa Cruz, including the islands of the Cannibals.”⁷³ In the evidence of the Admiral of the Indies taken in Puerto Rico on 15 February 1515, two witnesses were examined. The first one was “Bartolome Colín, citizen of this town, a witness sworn and presented in the stated cause was asked the general questions.” He provided the information that “he said that he knows that the admiral don Cristóbal Colón, deceased, discovered the islands of San Juan and the cannibals and Santa Cruz.”⁷⁴ The second witness, “Andrés Martín de la Gorda, citizen of this town, sworn, judged, and brought in the same case, was asked the general questions.”⁷⁵ He answered, “he knows it, he said because this witness in company with the late admiral went to discover the cannibals and the other islands contained in the question.”⁷⁶ In every question the islands were referred to as the islands of the cannibals, thus invariably linking them with the presence of the cannibals, which is how they would be remembered for a long time. Now that it is patently obvious that Europeans had negative perceptions of cannibalism and that they believed it flourished throughout the New World, it is time to analyze the repercussions, both positive and negative, of these perceptions.

Enslaving the “Cannibals”

Since Spain, through Admiral Columbus, had discovered the New World, the Catholic Kings, Fernando of Aragon and Isabel of Castile bore the onus of creating all of the policies which dealt with the newest part of their empire. However, for all that they created many new policies for the New World; it would be a more sensible idea to look at the policies of the crown

⁷³ “Evidence of the Admiral of the Indies, Puerto Rico, 12 February 1515,” in Phillips, 97.

⁷⁴ “Evidence of the Admiral of the Indies, Puerto Rico, 15 February 1515,” 108.

⁷⁵ “Evidence of the Admiral of the Indies, Puerto Rico, 15 February 1515,” 109.

⁷⁶ “Evidence of the Admiral of the Indies. Puerto Rico, 15 February 1515,” 110.

regarding the enslavement of the Indians and what role the negative perceptions of the cannibalism of said Indians made in the decision. Ultimately, Columbus himself forced the hands of the monarchs, in terms of their policies regarding slaves, when he transported slaves back from the New World to the Old World, as a reward to the men who had accompanied him on his voyage. Slavery was usually regarded “as an evil, a sort of living death, employed as the only alternative to killing war captives.”⁷⁷ After all, “it was one thing to sell Muslims taken captive in war, quite another to enslave the queen’s willing subjects, as Columbus had described them.”⁷⁸ And when Queen Isabel found out that Columbus had brought back slaves from the earthly paradise he discovered, “she became very angry saying, ‘What right does the admiral have to give my vassals to anybody?’ and other such things.”⁷⁹ Obviously Isabel was angry at Columbus not only for trying to influence policy-making decisions, but also for the fact that he had the effrontery to enslave her subjects! Isabel then “had it announced in Granada and in Seville, where the court currently resided, that anyone to whom the admiral had given Indians, and who had brought them to Castile, must return them or send them back on the first ships, under pain of death.”⁸⁰

One author concluded that the arrival of the slaves “confronted the Spanish government with a grave moral dilemma. Finally the queen ordered that the Indians be freed, since as subjects of the crown they could not be legally enslaved. The issue raised here formed the starting point for the long debate on Indians’ rights and the crown’s responsibilities for them,

⁷⁷ Helen Nader, “Introduction,” in *Repertorium Columbianum Volume 2: The Book of Privileges Issued to Christopher Columbus By King Fernando and Queen Isabel 1492-1502*, ed. Helen Nader (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 35

⁷⁸ Nader, 35.

⁷⁹ Las Casas, “Las Casas on Columbus: The Third Voyage,” in *Repertorium Columbianum Volume 11: Las Casas on Columbus: The Third Voyage*, ed. Geoffrey Symcox, (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2001), 121.

⁸⁰ Las Casas, 121.

which would continue for decades in Spain.”⁸¹ Another author duly noted, “The queen’s moratorium on the sale of enslaved Indians remained in force for the rest of her life, and most later rulers confirmed it for centuries.” Columbus tried a variety of strategies to “make the idea of enslaving Indians more palatable to the monarchs,” even going so far as to offer a proposition to “limit slave hunting to the Caribs, whose supposed cannibal habits, as he described them, excluded them from human society.” The Spanish monarchs remained firm and the royal policy against enslaving the monarchy’s Indian subjects remained the law.” Unfortunately, “the royal policy did not end enslavement of the native population.” Like Columbus, “other Spanish explorers also sent enslaved Indians to Seville, always claiming they were cannibals or had been taken prisoner in just war.”⁸²

When Columbus proposed to start trading in slaves, he “was planning to turn the earlier, unsystematic capture and sale of Indians into a regular commerce, harvesting them to make the colony economically viable. By making the enterprise of the Indies seem an attractive financial proposition, he could disarm his critics and back up the theological arguments he was constructing around his tales of an earthly paradise.”⁸³ Unfortunately for him (but not for all the Indians), the crown did not want to be involved with the slave trade, so they tried a variety of different strategies. In 1498, the government established *encomiendas*, where a certain number of Indians would work for a landowner and the owner would provide them with the essentials of life and give them religious education. Though the theory was sound, *encomiendas* were not

⁸¹ Symcox, “Introduction,” in *Repertorium Columbianum Volume 11: Las Casas on Columbus: The Third Voyage*, ed. Geoffrey Symcox, (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2001), 15.

⁸² Nader, 35.

⁸³ Symcox, “Introduction,” in *Repertorium Columbianum Volume 11: Las Casas on Columbus: The Third Voyage*, ed. Geoffrey Symcox, (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2001), 12.

such a wonderful idea in practice, because the Indians became the virtual slaves of the landholder and rarely received instruction in the faith and rarely had their basic necessities of life met.⁸⁴

However, in “1503 Queen Isabel authorized the capture of those in the Caribbean who were considered ‘cannibals.’ The legal basis of this decision rested on the right to enslave captives in a just war; therefore, it affected those Indians who were perceived as a threat to the colonization effort.”⁸⁵ One author noted that, “in the case of the Caribs, the association between the habit of eating human flesh and their sustained resistance to the Spanish invaders served as a basis for the decision to declare them slaves.”⁸⁶ In addition to using cannibalism as the justification for the enslavement of the Caribs, “both cannibalism and sodomy continued to be justifications for the kidnapping of *any* [emphasis added] Indian by any Spaniard.”⁸⁷

Modern authors, for the most part, tend to agree that negative perceptions of cannibalism had a strong role in justifying enslavement. One author wrote, “reports of cannibalism provided the means of justifying the enslavement and deportment of those creatures so clearly beyond the pale of God’s favor that they could be rightfully regarded as beasts,”⁸⁸ Another wrote, “one cannot help wondering whether they really were cannibals/.../or whether Columbus and his men used this to justify what would ensue. Slaughtering cannibals would be fulfilling God’s wrath/.../demonization of the victims was a way of justifying genocide.”⁸⁹ The negative perceptions of the cannibalism of the Indians had a great effect because even humanists like Martyr and Scillacio and educated men like Geraldini condemned the cannibals for their

⁸⁴ Thomas, 180.

⁸⁵ Cristián Roa-de-la-Carrera, *Histories of Infamy: Francisco López de Gómara and the Ethics of Spanish Imperialism*, (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2005), 112.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Thomas, 427.

⁸⁸ Sale, 34.

⁸⁹ Brinkbäumer and Höges, 155.

behavior and regarded it as low, inherently unworthy of human beings, and the mark of a savage people who could be enslaved. Unfortunately, one of the legacies of the decision to allow the enslavement of the cannibals was the fact that the slave traders then began to call everyone a cannibal and enslave them. King Fernando attempted to provide some protection for the Indians under the Laws of Burgos, which stated, in part, “We order that these Indians be treated without the rigor and harshness of slaves elsewhere, but rather with love and gentleness, to incline them more effectively to the practices of our Faith.”⁹⁰ The King would discover, however, that just as he could not control the colonists who branded innocent Indians as cannibals and subsequently enslaved them, he could not enforce the Laws of Burgos from over three thousand miles away, so the laws remained little more than a dead letter.

Using Cannibalism to prove a Point:

In the later part of the sixteenth century, three famous writers utilized the cannibalism of the Indians either to prove a specific point or as a method of critiquing their own society. These three writers were Hans Staden, Michel Montaigne, and Jean de Léry. Staden, a German mercenary, fell in with the Portuguese in the Brazil, and was subsequently captured by the anti-Portuguese and pro-French Tupinambá tribe of Indians. Though he was forced to remain the “guest” of the Tupinambá for many months, Staden eventually was liberated with the help of some of his fellow Europeans and when he returned to his native Germany, he wrote an account of his trials and tribulations. The book was mainly published because Staden, who “was a very pious Lutheran and was ready to see the hand of God stretched out for his special safety in every

⁹⁰ “From The Laws of Burgos (1512-1513), Royal Ordinances for the good Government and treatment of the Indians,” in *An Account, Much Abbreviated of the Destruction of the Indies*, ed. Franklin W. Knight (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2003), 91.

disturbance of nature,”⁹¹ wanted to show “how much we owe to God who is with us always to protect us from the day of our birth onwards.”⁹² In order to disseminate to a large audience the debt humans owe to God for his constant vigilance, Staden wrote what would become a popular, simply written account of his captivity with the Tupinambá people. His book was divided into two parts, the first of which is a sketch of his time with the Tupinambá and the second part analyzes certain facets of their culture and behavior.

Even though Staden began his narrative with quiet praise of God, “God is a ready helper in time of need,”⁹³ he did not spend much time extolling the virtues of God, but moved into his capture. After being captured, the warriors, Staden wrote, “commenced to quarrel over me.”⁹⁴ The reason for this quarrel, according to Staden was because all of the warriors were “demanding a piece of me and clamoring to have me killed on the spot.”⁹⁵ Staden described how they “stood round me and boasted they would eat me.”⁹⁶ In what must have been quite a humiliating experience, Staden was forced to walk naked through the village yelling “I your food have come.”⁹⁷ He discussed how the villagers would say “here comes our food hopping towards us.”⁹⁸ Staden informed the reader that the villagers “began to walk around me, tearing at my flesh, one saying the skin on my head was his, another claiming the fat on my legs.”⁹⁹ However, even though it looked as though Staden was in imminent danger of being eaten, a series of miraculous events saved his life; not only did he get a toothache, which was so painful that he

⁹¹ Malcolm Letts, ed. *Hans Staden: The True Account of His Captivity 1557* (London: George Routledge & Sons, LTD, 1928), 11.

⁹² Hans Staden, “Hans Staden’s Farewell, The Concluding Address,” in Letts, 169.

⁹³ Staden, “Staden’s Narrative: Book 1,” 48.

⁹⁴ Staden, 62-3.

⁹⁵ Staden, 64.

⁹⁶ Staden, 67.

⁹⁷ Staden, 70.

⁹⁸ Staden, 80.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

was not able to eat, but the chief and his family sickened and while Staden could not heal some members of the family, he said some words over the sick chief, who was subsequently healed. He became, in a sense, a member of the Tupinambá tribe, though he continued to be revolted by many of their practices.

Staden described how, on one excursion to another village, there “was a boy with us who had a piece of the leg-bone of the dead slave with some flesh upon it, which he was eating. I told the boy to throw it away, but he grew angry, as did the others, saying that it was their proper food.”¹⁰⁰ Staden also described one of several death scenes, quite graphically, “they dragged him in front of the hut of the king Vratinge, while the two men held him, although he was so ill that he did not know what they were doing. Then the man came up, to whom the Cario had been given, and beat out his brains, after which they left him lying before the huts ready to be eaten.”¹⁰¹ Staden evinced disgust at the practiced air with which the process took place, and described how “one [man] came from the huts where I was and called the womenfolk to make a fire beside the body. Then he cut off the head...and throwing away the head, he singed the body at the fire. After this he cut him up and divided the flesh equally, as is their custom, and they devoured everything except the head and the intestines.”¹⁰² With barely concealed nausea, Staden told the reader, “as I went to and fro in the huts, I saw them roasting here the feet, there the hands, and elsewhere a piece of the trunk.”¹⁰³

On another occasion, Staden happened to be with a hunting party, who attacked a settlement and took prisoners. He described their fate, “those that had been badly wounded they carried up to the land, where they were killed at once and cut up and roasted/.../the other was

¹⁰⁰ Staden, 93.

¹⁰¹ Staden, 99.

¹⁰² Staden, 100.

¹⁰³ Staden, 100.

called Hieronymus. He had been captured by a native belonging to my hut, whose name was Parwaa, and this man spent the whole night roasting Hieronymus, scarcely a step from where I lay.”¹⁰⁴ Staden had the unfortunate job of informing two of the living prisoners that “their cousin Hieronymus/.../lay by the fire roasting, and that I had seen a piece of Ferrero’s son being eaten.”¹⁰⁵ During this macabre ordeal, Staden approached a chief who “had then a great vessel full of human flesh in front of him and was eating a leg which he held to my mouth, asking me to taste it. I replied that even beasts which were without understanding did not eat their own species, and should a man devour his fellow creatures? But he took a bite saying... ‘I am a tiger, it tastes well’ and with that I left him.”¹⁰⁶ Staden would not soon be rid of the evidence of the cannibalism, because “the flesh of Hieronymus remained in the hut where I was, hanging in the smoke, in a pot over the fire for three weeks, until it was dry as wood.”¹⁰⁷ Staden would only be able to leave the Tupinambá when a ship from Europe sailed in to trade with the village and the sailors helped rescue Staden.

In the second portion of his narrative, Staden devotes more attention to the description of individual facets of life with the Tupinambá. He portrayed the Tupinambá as people who “treat their enemies with great cruelty and receive the same treatment when they are captured. For example, such is their hate that they often cut off an arm or leg from a living prisoner. Others they kill, before they cut them up for eating.”¹⁰⁸ He noted “among certain of the savages it is the custom to set up the heads of the men they have eaten on the stockade at the entrance to the

¹⁰⁴ Staden, 108.

¹⁰⁵ Staden, 109.

¹⁰⁶ Staden, 110.

¹⁰⁷ Staden, 112.

¹⁰⁸ Staden, “Staden’s Narrative: Book 2,” p. 131. For more information, see footnote 68 on page 179 for further instances of brutality, “Not only did they cut off the limbs of their living victims, but they roasted and devoured them before their eyes.”

huts.”¹⁰⁹ Staden explained that the Tupinambá and their foes engage in cannibalism not “from hunger, but from great hate and jealousy...all this they do from their great hatred.”¹¹⁰ Staden described how they are practical, in a macabre sense, “if they take a prisoner who is badly wounded they kill him at once and carry home the meat roasted. Those that are unwounded they take back alive and kill them in the huts.”¹¹¹ He offered select details about the death ritual, “these women are painted and ready to take his four quarters when he is cut up, and run with them round the huts, a proceeding which causes great amusement to the others.”¹¹² Staden described the post-mortem activity, “the women seize the body at once and carry it to the fire where they scrape off the skin, making the flesh quite white, and stopping up the fundament with a piece of wood so that nothing may be lost. Then a man cuts up the body, removing the legs above the knees and the arms at the trunk, whereupon the four women seize the four limbs and run with them round the huts making a joyful cry. At this they divide the trunk among themselves, and devour everything that can be eaten/.../when this is finished, they all depart, each one carrying a piece with him.”¹¹³

It should be quite apparent that Staden did not have an overwhelmingly positive view of the cannibalism of the Indians; in fact it would be quite correct to say that Staden had quite a negative attitude towards said cannibalism. However, his purpose was not to express his anger and negativity towards the cannibalism, but to use it to prove his point that people who trust and believe in God, will be protected from any harm. And, it was a very convincing story. Staden was, literally, helpless in the hands of the Tupinambá, but he triumphed over all the odds and managed to survive. In Staden’s narrative, cannibalism became a force whereby he could prove

¹⁰⁹ Staden, 133.

¹¹⁰ Staden, 152.

¹¹¹ Staden, 153.

¹¹² Staden, 158.

¹¹³ Staden, 161-162.

to people that he survived living among people who voraciously ate others, therefore, God must be strong and powerful indeed.

The second writer, Michel de Montaigne, also used cannibalism, but rather than using it to prove a point, Montaigne critiqued his society. In his famous essay *Of the Cannibals*, Montaigne contrasted the uncivilized cannibals with the civilized Europe and found that Europe came up short. He wrote, in a description of the death ritual for a condemned enemy of the Tupinambá, “He ties a rope to one of the prisoner’s arms, by the end of which he holds him, a few steps away, for fear of being hurt, and gives his dearest friend the other arm to hold in the same way; and these two, in the presence of the whole assembly, kill him with their swords. This done, they roast him and eat him in common and send some pieces to their absent friends. This is not, as people think, for nourishment, as of old the Scythians used to do; it is to betoken an extreme revenge.”¹¹⁴ Clearly Montaigne felt that it was very important to mention that the Tupinambá were engaging in a ritualistic cannibalism, and did not eat human flesh for nourishment.

Montaigne then contrasted the cannibals with the Europeans. “I am not sorry that we judge the barbarity of such acts, but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own.”¹¹⁵ He continued with a list of faults, including his opinion that, “there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; and in tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling, in roasting a man bit by bit, in having him mangled and bit by dogs and swine (as we have not only read but seen within fresh memory, not among ancient enemies, but among neighbors and fellow citizens, and what is worse, on the pretext of

¹¹⁴ Michel de Montaigne, “Of the Cannibals,” in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, ed. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1943), 155.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

piety and religion) than in roasting and eating him after he is dead,”¹¹⁶ Part of the reason why Montaigne chose to compare the two societies was because “he regarded cannibals as beings who had not been shaped by the human spirit and still lived in a state of nature.” As one author noted, Montaigne was very troubled by “the course his world was taking, so he used the case of cannibals to illustrate that his society’s way of life was unnatural and corrupt.”¹¹⁷ Far from being brutal savages and corrupt deviants, cannibals became the embodiment of the free spirit, who were not plagued by the cares of the civilized Europeans.

Unlike Staden who used cannibalism to illustrate the power of God; unlike Montaigne who targeted all of Europe; the third writer, Jean de Léry, a French Huguenot, focused his attack on one specific country, France, and a specific religious group within that country, Catholics. Léry wrote in an attempt to help people realize their own hypocrisy, “nevertheless, so that those who read these horrible things, practiced daily among these barbarous nations of the land of Brazil, may also think more carefully about the things that go on every day among us.”¹¹⁸ He reasoned, “In the first place, if you consider in all candor what our big usurers do, sucking blood and marrow, and eating everyone alive—widows, orphans, and other poor people, whose throats it would be better to cut once and for all, than to make them linger in misery—you will say that they are even more cruel than the savages I speak of.”¹¹⁹ Léry enjoined the people not to “abhor so very greatly the cruelty of the anthropophagous—that is, man-eating—savages. For since there are some here in our midst even worse and more detestable than those who, as we have seen, attack only enemy nations, while the ones over here have plunged into the blood of their

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Roa-de-la-Carrera , 9.

¹¹⁸ Janet Whatley, ed. *Jean de Léry. History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Otherwise Called America* (Berkeley: University of California press, 1992), 131-132.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

kinsmen, neighbors, and compatriots, one need not go beyond one's own country, nor as far as America, to see such monstrous and prodigious things,"¹²⁰

Léry also attacked Catholics using the idea of cannibalism, "furthermore, if it comes to the brutal act of really (as one says) chewing and devouring human flesh, have we not found people in these regions over here, even among those who bear the name of Christians, both in Italy and elsewhere, who, not content with having cruelly put to death their enemies, have been unable to shake their bloodthirst except by eating their livers and their hearts?"¹²¹ He went further and insulted the Catholics by comparing them to the Ouetaca, a tribe of people so primitive that they do not even cook the cannibalized flesh, "nevertheless they [Villegagnon and Cointa] wanted not only to eat the flesh of Jesus Christ grossly rather than spiritually, but what was worse, like the savages named *Ouetaca*, of whom I have already spoken, they wanted to chew and swallow it raw,"¹²² All in all, it is not a surprise that Léry would do this, because he was part of a group of Huguenots who wrote around "two contemporary themes: 1) a denunciation of the crimes of the Spanish Conquest, using for support the *Brevíssima relación* of Bartolomé de Las Casas, which was everywhere translated and accessible; 2) a defense of the free and happy savage, whom the bloody conquerors should have left to his native ignorance, even at the risk of his eternal damnation."¹²³ In the eyes of de Léry, Montaigne, and Staden, cannibalism, was not necessarily something to be condemned or praised outright, but rather a manner whereby they could critique their own society or prove their own point.

Conceptions and Perceptions

¹²⁰ De Léry, 133. Consider, for instance, the lurid spectacles during the Catholic-Huguenot strife in France in the 1570s.

¹²¹ De Léry, 132.

¹²² De Léry, 41.

¹²³ Frank Lestringant, "The Philosopher's Breviary: Jean de Léry in the Enlightenment," in *New World Encounters*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 128.

Throughout the course of the late fifteenth and sixteenth century, Europeans experienced a cultural revolution and paradigm shift when they came into contact with the Indians in the Americas. Not only were many of the ideas of the Europeans shattered, such as their theory that there were three continents which represented the three sons of Noah, but the Europeans also had to determine what the status was of the Indians. Were they human? Did they have souls? To a twenty-first century observer, these questions seem silly and the answers obvious, but to the Europeans they were baffling. It is certain that the cannibalism which the Europeans attributed to the Indians helped to play a part in convincing the invaders that these people were primitive savages and that it would be perfectly permissible to enslave them. While there is no doubt there were other factors at play: the Indians also worshipped multiple gods, there were no impressive cities in the Caribbean, and they went around naked; these factors could have been an indication of an earthly paradise. However, the presence of cannibalism proved to be sufficiently gruesome and allowed the Europeans to enslave the Indians with justification. For the sins of a few cannibals, an entire native population would pay the price: they would be branded cannibals and enslaved. Cannibalism would be an excuse, a justification, and later in the century, a method by which writers critiqued their own society or proved their points. In one last irony, the “gentle natives” who were so scared of the cannibalistic Caribs were branded cannibals and enslaved along with them proving that sometimes there is no justice to be found in this world.