Transatlantic Encounters: 
Eyewitness Testimony and Spain’s 
First American Possessions, 1492-1536

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Abstract
We have eyewitness testimony from scores of the participants in the four voyages of Christopher Columbus as they gave depositions in the famous series of lawsuits between the Spanish crown and the Columbus family. Through these accounts, we can see a slowly developing picture of the lands and shores the witnesses had seen. We can observe the ceremonies the Spaniards used as they claimed possession of the lands they reached. We also catch glimpses of the reactions of the people they encountered in the Americas. The depositions also provide information about the later lives of the witnesses, many of whom left Europe and settled in the islands of the Caribbean, becoming citizens of the first European towns in the Caribbean and on the mainland of the Americas.

Keywords
Columbus family, lawsuits, ceremonies of possession, Caribbean, Atlantic, eyewitness accounts

Christopher Columbus’s transatlantic voyage of 1492 was one of the last and certainly one of the most fateful of the medieval encounters. Rather than something new and unprecedented, it was a logical outcome of events and actions stretching back at least to the thirteenth century. From that time, Europeans had been trying to find a maritime route to what they knew were the riches of Asia. The earliest recorded effort was that of the Vivaldi brothers in the 1290s. Among the last of these medieval endeavors were the voyages

of the Portuguese Bartolomew Dias, who reached the southern tip of the African continent and the southwestern reaches of the Indian Ocean in 1487-88. A decade later his countryman Vasco da Gama made the first round-trip voyage to India between 1497 and 1499.\(^2\) Between the two came Columbus’s initial voyage, in which he famously failed to discover a westward passage to Asia.

That voyage reached the Americas. Its participants and those of subsequent voyages followed medieval precedents as they explored, settled, and exploited.\(^3\) They drew on much experience of conquests in lands in Iberia, confrontations with Muslims in the western Mediterranean, settlement of islands in the Atlantic, and expeditions down the Atlantic coast of Africa. In the first decades of European exploration and settlement in the Americas following Columbus’s first voyage, European knowledge of and imprint on the Caribbean islands and the nearby mainland gradually became apparent. If we look at the maps, it may seem as though the process was straight-line progress and clear. If we read the major sources, especially those of Columbus himself, we see it was a slow process, a piecemeal operation in which eyewitnesses could not agree on what they had found.

Columbus himself was always clear about what he thought he had found. He assumed it was Asia, in some part inexplicably not described by Marco Polo and the other sources of Asian lore and geography upon which he relied. His aim was to have the lands he found be pinned down carefully on the expanding map of European understanding as part of his increasingly desperate efforts to demonstrate the immediate profitability of such lands. The most ludicrous episode unfolded on the second voyage, when Columbus had his men swear that the Cuban coastline that they had been following for weeks was part of China. On his fourth voyage, he sought a strait in Central

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