Letter to King Ferdinand of Spain

Christopher Columbus's historic 1492 voyage was financed by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, who hoped that the explorer would find a new route to the Indies in Asia (see “Challenging Columbus”). Columbus didn’t come close, getting only as far as the Caribbean Sea. But he claimed each island that he reached for the royal couple, including Hispaniola. (Today, that island is divided into Haiti and the Dominican Republic.)

During his trip back to Spain in 1493, Columbus wrote a letter to the king with detailed descriptions of the islands and their indigenous people. He also took at least seven of them with him as captives.

Read an excerpt from Columbus's letter below, following the instructions in the margins. Then answer the questions on a separate sheet of paper.

SIR: Since I know that you will be pleased at the great victory with which Our Lord has crowned my voyage, I write this to you. . . . [In the Indies], I found very many islands, filled with innumerable people, and I have taken possession of them all for their Highnesses, done by proclamation and with the royal [flag] unfurled, and no opposition was offered to me. . . .

Hispaniola is a marvel. The [mountains and the plains] are so lovely and so rich for planting and sowing, for breeding cattle of every kind, for building towns and villages. The harbors of the sea here are such as cannot be believed to exist unless they have been seen, and so with the rivers, many and great, and of good water, the majority of which contain gold. . . .

The people of this island and of all the other islands which I have found . . . have no iron or steel or weapons, nor are they fitted to use them. This is not because they are not well built and of handsome stature, but because they are very marvelously [timid]. . . . They are so guileless and so generous with all that they possess, that no one would believe it who has not seen it. . . .

As soon as I arrived in the Indies, in the first island [San Salvador] which I found, I took some of the natives by force, in order that they might learn and might give me information of whatever there is in these parts. And so it was that they soon understood us, and we them, either by speech or by signs, and they have been very [helpful]. At present, those I bring with me are still of the opinion that I come from Heaven.

Questions

1. What does Christopher Columbus think about the outcome of his voyage? Why does he think the king would be pleased?

2. How does Columbus describe Hispaniola that would make it seem like a suitable “gift” for the royal couple?

3. What key words does Columbus use to describe the character of the indigenous people? How might these characteristics have allowed him and his men to take the islands with “no opposition”?

4. What contradictions might we see between the way Columbus was treated by the people he encountered and the way he treated them?

5. What might have been the purpose of Columbus's letter to King Ferdinand?