

Think About It: How did Europeans Justify Colonization of the New World?

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial goes more deeply into the perspectives of three European nations as they explored and established their empires in the New World. We will analyze a legal treatise from Spain, the diary of a French explorer, and the published account of an English author to be read by those still living in the British Isles as a way to gain insights into how the Spanish, French, and English empires thought about and interacted with the environment and the peoples they came across during their journeys. Each document provides a glimpse of how Europeans justified exploration and colonization in the New World. Each document also sheds light on the different motivations toward these ends held by the Spanish, French, and English, respectively.

Our discussion will break down like this:



THINK ABOUT IT

As you read through these primary source documents, keep these questions in mind:

- How did the Spanish, French, and English discuss religion?
- How did they interact with native populations?
- What was most important to the authors of these three documents? Why? How do these answers reflect their respective justifications for colonization?

(If you have the time, it may be helpful to review our tutorials on Spanish, French, and English colonization before and/or after continuing forward.)

1. The Spanish Perspective

The following is an excerpt from the Spanish *Requerimiento*. (Sourced from Milanich, Hudson, & Jay, 1993). This was a document written by Spanish lawyers in the early 1500s and would have been read to Native Americans by conquistadors, such as Hernando de Soto while he was in Florida. It is important to note here that this would have been read to the native peoples in Spanish or even Latin, not in their native tongues.

Requerimiento

“On behalf of the king and the queen, subjugators of barbarous peoples, we, their servants, notify and make known to you as best we are able, that God, Our Lord, living and eternal, created the heavens and the earth, and a man and a woman, of whom you and we and all other people of the world were, and are, descendants. Because of the great numbers of people who have come from the union of these two in the five thousand years which have run their course since the world was created, it became necessary that some should go in one direction and that others should go in another. Thus they became divided into many kingdoms and many provinces, since they could not all remain or sustain themselves in one place.

One of the past Popes, who succeeded Saint Peter as Lord of the Earth, gave these islands and mainlands of the Ocean Sea [the Atlantic Ocean] to the said King and Queen and to their successors, with everything that there is in them, as is set forth in certain documents which were drawn up regarding this donation in the manner described, which you may see if you so desire.

If you do not do this [submit to Spanish authority], however, or resort maliciously to delay, we warn you that, with the aid of God, we will enter your land against you with force and will make war in every place and by every means we can and are able, and we will then subject you to the yoke and authority of the Church and Their Highnesses. We will take you and your wives and children and make them slaves, and as such we will sell them, and will dispose of you and them as Their Highnesses order. And we will take your property and will do to you all the harm and evil we can, as is done to vassals who will not obey their lord or who do not wish to accept him, or who resist and defy him. We avow that the deaths and harm which you will receive thereby will be your own blame, and not that of Their Highnesses, nor ours, nor of the gentlemen who come with us.”

You should notice immediately the use of harsh and tense language here. The native peoples were called “barbarous,” and threats of violence were being made if the locals did not immediately submit to Spanish authorities. Also, remember that this was considered to be a legally binding document by the Spanish, even though Native Americans would not have understood such a concept or known exactly how binding Spain’s decree was. The fact that this document was orated in Spanish could have caused additional confusion.

Also, notice the role that religion played in Spain’s rationale for New World dominance. True to the Spanish mentality of the time, the Catholic faith was seen as an impetus for dominance and control. For instance, note how the document mentions that the Pope decreed that much of the territory across the Atlantic Ocean belonged to Spain, which was perhaps in reference to the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494).



BRAINSTORM

Observe the conquistadores' status as “servants” to their king and queen, whose role included spreading the absolute authority of the Spanish monarchy to the New World. How did conquistadores use this status to justify their attempts at conquest in the New World?

2. The French Perspective

The next excerpt (sourced from Baxter, Roberval & Alfonse, 1906) comes from the pages of Jacques Cartier’s memoir and diary, written about his time as an explorer in northern North America during the 1530s and early 1540s. In his account, Cartier details his encounters with the local peoples along the St. Lawrence River in

present-day Canada. As you read, pay particular attention to the nature of these interactions.

Memoir of Jacques Cartier

“When we arrived near the town, a great number of inhabitants of it presented themselves before us, who, after their fashion of doing, gave us a good reception ... And, suddenly, a number of men came again, who brought each a square mat in the fashion of a carpet, and spread them out upon the ground in the middle of the sand place and made us rest upon them. After which things were done there was brought by nine or ten men the king and lord of the country whom they call in their language Agohanna, who was seated upon a great skin of a stag ...

After he had made his signs of salutation to the said captain and to his folks, making them evident signs that they should make them very welcome, he showed his arms and legs to the said captain, praying that he would touch them, as though he would beg healing and health from him; and then the captain began to stroke his arms and legs with his hands; whereupon Agohanna took the band and crown that he had upon his head and gave it to our captain ...

Our said captain, seeing the misery and faith of this said people, recited the Gospel of St. John: to wit, the *In principio*, making the sign of the cross on the poor sick ones, praying God that he might give them knowledge of our holy faith and the passion of our Saviour, and grace to receive Christianity and baptism. Then our said captain ... gave to the chiefs hatchets, to the others knives, and to the women paternosters [rosaries] ... This done, the said captain commanded the trumpets and other instruments of music to sound, with which the said people were greatly delighted; after which things we took leave of them and withdrew.”

After reading Spain’s *Requerimiento*, these writings from Jacques Cartier should come across as vastly different. For example, there was no threat of violence or even the mention of subjugation. Cartier and his men also sat with the Native Americans, which could be evidence that Cartier truly wanted to engage with the indigenous peoples in some sort of a negotiation on equal terms.

The fact that Cartier appeared to make attempts to nonviolently understand the people of St. Lawrence could further support this claim. He entertained them, brought them gifts, and even played music for their delight. In fact, gifts were exchanged on both sides, which was crucial in many early negotiations between the French and native peoples in northern North America.

Cartier’s document also references religion and hints at an attempt toward conversion. The passage mentions a captain who recites a gospel from the Bible and prays over sick tribal members, expressing the hope that they convert to Christianity.



THINK ABOUT IT

Why did Cartier make sure to mention that his men “took leave of” the tribe “and withdrew”? What might have been the goal behind such an action?

3. The English Perspective

The last excerpt that we will read comes from a book written by the British entrepreneur Thomas Hariot in 1588, entitled, *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*. He wrote this piece with the idea of having a readership based in the British Isles, describing the flora, the fauna, and the local peoples that populated the area we now know as Virginia. As you read, you may notice what looks like misspellings and odd language being used—this was the normal writing style of the day.

A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia

TO THE ADVENTURERS, FAVORERS, AND WELWILLERS OF THE ENTERPRISE FOR THE
INHABITING and planting in VIRGINIA.

SINCE the first undertaking by Sir Walter Raleigh to deale in the action of discovering of that Countrey which is now called and known by the name of VIRGINIA; many voyages having bin thither made at sundrie times to his great charge, as first in the yeere 1584, and afterwards in the years 1585, 1586, and now of late this last year of 1587. There have been divers and variable reports with some slaunderous and shamefull speeches bruited abroad by many that returned from thence. Especially of that discovery which was made by the Colony transported by Sir Richard Greinvile in the year 1585, being of all the others the most principal and as yet of most effect, the time of their abode in the country being a whole year, when as in the other voyage before they stayed but sixe weekes ; and the others after were only for supply and transportation, nothing more being discovered then had been before. Which reports have not done a little wrong to many that otherwise would have also favoured & adventured in the action, to the honour and benefit of our nation, besides the particular profile and credit which would redound to them selves the dealers therein; as I hope by the sequelae of events to the shame of those that have avouched the contrary shall be manifest: if you the adventurers, favourers, and welwillers do but either increase in number, or in opinion continue, or having been doubtful renew your good liking and furtherance to deale therein according to the worthiness thereof already found and as you shall understand hereafter to be requisite. Touching which worthiness through because of the diversity of relations and reported, manye of your opinions coulde not bee firme, nor the mindes of some that are well disposed, bee settled in any certaintie.

THE FIRST PART, OF MERCHANTABLE COMMODITIES.

Silke of grasse or grasse Silke.

Worme Silke...

Flaxe and Hempe...

Allum...

Pitch, Tar, Rosin and Turpentine...

Sassafras...

Iron...

Walnut...

Squirels...

[etc.]

In respect of us they [natives] are a people poore, and for want of skill and judgement in the knowledge and use of our things, doe esteem our trifles before things of greater value:

Notwithstanding in their proper manner considering the want of such meanes as we have, they

seeme very ingenious; For although they have no such tools, nor any such crafts, sciences and artes as wee ; yet in those things they doe, they shewe excellencie of wit. And by how much they upon due consideration shall finde our manner of knowledges and crafts to exceed theirs in perfection, and speed for doing or execution, by so much more the more is it probable that they should desire our friendships & love, and have the greater respect for pleasing and obeying us. Whereby may bee hoped if meanes of good government bee used, that they may in short time be brought to civility, and the embracing of true religion.”

Notice the primary purpose of Hariot’s writings. Business and trade form the central theme here. He wrote to his English audience in the hopes that they might encourage more voyages to the New World and increase the economic exchanges already beginning to take place. He spent a significant chunk of the piece simply listing the goods available to the English marketplace, including “Squirels” and “Worme Silke.”



THINK ABOUT IT

Why might Hariot have made a reference to pitch, tar, rosin, and turpentine?

In reference to the native peoples of the Virginia region, Hariot held some of the same assumptions as his French and Spanish counterparts. In particular, he saw the natives as religiously backward because they did not worship the same Christian God that the English did. He also viewed them as different because they did not engage in the English style of economic production and because their government did not mimic that of the English.

Unlike the Spanish and perhaps even Cartier, Hariot seemed to express some respect toward native peoples. For instance, he used words such as “ingenious” and “excellencie of wit” when describing some native activities.



BRAINSTORM

Did Hariot assume that native peoples in Virginia were inferior to the English? Why or why not?

Additional Resources

Explore more eyewitness accounts of European exploration of North America at [American Journeys](#), an online archive of primary source documents.



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, we have analyzed three central primary sources in the history of European colonization of the Americas. Each of these documents provides insights into the worldview of the Spanish, French, and English empires as they explored the New World. Each empire had different motivations for exploring and colonizing the New World. Such differences were reflected in the primary sources of the period, especially in observations of New World environments and native peoples.

Source: This tutorial curated and/or authored by Matthew Pearce, Ph.D with content adapted from Openstax “U.S. History”. access for free at openstax.org/details/books/us-history LICENSE: [CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION 4.0 INTERNATIONAL](#)

REFERENCES

Milanich, J. T., Hudson, C. M., & Jay I. Kislak Reference Collection (Library of Congress). (1993).

Hernando de Soto and the Indians of Florida. (pp. 36-37). Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

A brief and True Report, Virtual Jamestown, Virginia Center for Digital History, University of Virginia.
www.virtualjamestown.org/Harriot1.html



DATES TO KNOW

1513

Spain issues its *Requerimiento*.

1534–1541

Jacques Cartier records a journal of his travels through North America.

1588

Thomas Hariot writes *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*.