

### Excerpt from Hernan Cortes' *Letters* (Second Letter, sent 1522)

The people who inhabit this land, from the island of Cozumel and the cape of Yucatan to the place where we are now, are of medium height and of well-proportioned bodies and features, save that in each province their customs are different; some pierce their ears and put very large and ugly objects into them; others pierce their nostrils down to the lip and put in them large round stones which look like mirrors, and others still split their lower lips as far as the gums and hang there some large stones or gold ornaments so heavy that they drag the lips down, giving a most deformed appearance. The clothes they wear are like large, highly colored yashmaks; the men cover their shameful parts, and on the top half of their bodies wear thin mantles which are decorated in a Moorish fashion. The common women wear highly colored mantles from the waist to the feet, and others which cover their breasts, leaving the rest uncovered. The women of rank wear skirts of very thin cotton, which are very loose-fitting and decorated and cut in the manner of a rochet.

The food they eat is maize and some chili peppers, as on the other islands, and patata yuca, just the same as is eaten in Cuba, and they eat it roast, for they do not make bread of it; and they both hunt and fish and breed many chickens such as those found on Tierra Firme, which are as big as peacocks.

There are some large towns and well laid out. The houses in those parts where there is stone are of masonry and mortar and the rooms are small and low in the Moorish fashion. In those parts where there is no stone they make their houses of adobes, which are whitewashed and the roofs covered with straw. There are houses belonging to certain men of rank which are very cool and have many rooms, for we have seen as many as five courtyards in a single house, and the rooms around them very well laid out, each man having a private room. Inside there are also wells and water tanks and rooms for slaves and servants of which they have many. Each of these chieftains has in front of the entrance to his house a very large courtyard and some two or three or four of them raised very high with steps up to them and all very well built. Likewise they have their shrines and temples with raised walks which run all around the outside and are very wide: there they keep the idols which they worship, some of stone, some of clay and some of wood, which they honor and serve with such customs and so many ceremonies that many sheets of paper would not suffice to give Your Royal Highnesses a true and detailed account of them all. And the temples where they are kept are the largest and the best and the finest built of all the buildings found in the towns; and they are much adorned with rich hanging cloths and featherwork and other fineries.

Each day before beginning any sort of work they burn incense in these temples and sometimes sacrifice their own persons, some cutting their tongues, others their ears, while there are some who stab their bodies with knives. All the blood which flows from them they offer to those idols, sprinkling it in all parts of the temple, or sometimes throwing it into the air or performing many other ceremonies, so that nothing is begun without sacrifice having first been made. They have a most horrid and abominable custom which truly ought to be punished and which until now we have seen in no other part, and this is that, whenever they wish to ask something of the idols, in order that their plea may find more acceptance, they take many girls and boys and even adults, and in the presence of the idols they open their chests while they are still alive and take out their hearts and entrails and burn them before the idols, offering the smoke as sacrifice. Some of us have seen this, and they say it is the most terrible and frightful thing they have ever witnessed.

This these Indians do so frequently that, as we have been informed, and, in part, have seen from our own experience during the short while we have been here, not one year passes in which they do not kill and sacrifice some fifty persons in each temple; and this is done and held as customary from the island of Cozumel to this land where we now have settled. Your Majesties may be most certain that, as this land seems to us to be very large, and to have many temples in it, not one year has passed, as far as we have been able to discover, in which three or four thousand souls have not been sacrificed in this manner. Let Your Royal Highnesses consider, therefore, whether they should not put an end to such evil practices, for certainly Our Lord God would be well pleased if by the hand of Your Royal Highnesses these people were initiated and instructed in our Holy Catholic Faith, and the devotion, trust and hope which they have in these their idols were transferred to the divine power of God; for it is certain that if they were to worship the true God with such fervor, faith and diligence, they would perform many miracles. And we believe that it is not without cause that Our Lord God has been pleased that these parts be discovered in the name of Your Royal Highnesses so that Your Majesties may gain much merit and reward in the sight of God by commanding that these barbarous people be instructed and by Your hands be brought to the True Faith. For, as far as we have been able to learn, we believe that had we interpreters and other people to explain to them the error of their ways and the nature

of the True Faith, many of them, and perhaps even all, would soon renounce their false beliefs and come to the true knowledge of God; for they live in a more civilized and reasonable manner than any other people we have seen in these parts up to the present.

To attempt to give Your Majesties all the details about this land and its people might lead us to make some mistakes in our account, for there is much we have not seen but only heard from the natives, and therefore we venture only to render account of those things which Your Majesties may hold to be most true and certain. Your Majesties may, if You see fit, send a report to the Holy Father, so that diligence and good order may be applied to the work of converting these people, for it is hoped that much may be gained thereby; also that His Holiness may permit and approve that the wicked and the rebellious, after having first been admonished, may be punished as enemies of our Holy Catholic Faith. This will be the occasion of a fearsome warning and example to those who are obstinate in coming to the knowledge of the truth; and the great evils which they practice in the service of the Devil may be prevented. For in addition to those which we list above, of the children and men and women which they kill and offer in their sacrifices, we have been informed, and are most certain it is true, that they are all sodomites and practice that abominable sin." In all of which we entreat Your Majesties to provide as You judge most fitting to the service of God and Your Royal Highness and that we who are here in Your service be favored and rewarded.

Among other things which we are sending to Your Highnesses by way of these, our representatives, are instructions that they beseech Your Majesties on no account to give or grant concessions to Diego Velazquez, the admiral's lieutenant in the island of Fernandina, of adelantamiento or governorship in perpetuity (or of any other kind) or judicial powers; and if any shall have been given him, that they be revoked, for it is not to the benefit of the service of Your Royal Crown that the aforementioned Diego Velazquez, or any other person, should have authority or be granted any concessions, whether in perpetuity, or of any other kind, in this new land of Your Highnesses, unless it be by the express will of Your Majesties, for it is, as far as we are able to judge or have reason to hope, very rich. And, moreover, were the aforementioned Diego Velazquez granted some office, far from benefiting Your Majesties' service, we foresee that we, the vassals of Your Royal Highnesses, who have begun to settle and live in this land, would be most ill used by him, for we believe that what we have now done in Your Majesties' service, namely to send You such gold and silver and jewels as we have been able to acquire in this land, would not have been his intention, as has been most clearly demonstrated by four servants of his who passed this way; for, when they saw our intention to send it all to Your Royal Highnesses, they proclaimed publicly that it would be better to send it to Diego Velazquez; and they said other things to prevent it being sent to Your Majesties. For this we had them seized, and they are still in custody awaiting sentence; and when that has been carried out we shall inform Your Majesties of what we have done with them." And for what we have seen of the doings of Diego Velazquez and our experience of them, we are afraid that if he should come to this land with some commission he would treat us badly, as he did on the island of Fernandina when he had charge of the government, dealing justice to no one except as it pleased him, and punishing those whom he chose out of anger or animosity rather than justice or reason; in this manner he has ruined many good men and reduced them to great poverty by refusing to give them Indians as servants, taking all for himself, and likewise by taking all the gold which they have collected, without giving them any part of it: for this purpose he has bands of outlaws at his command; also as he is governor and repartidor, no one dare oppose him for fear that they may be ruined. Of this Your Majesties know nothing, nor has any account of it been sent to You, for the representatives who have gone to Your Court from that island are all of the same die, or his servants, and he keeps them contented giving them Indians whenever they ask; and the representatives who come to him from the towns on matters concerning the communities do always as he wishes, for he rewards them with gifts of Indians. When these representatives return to their towns and are ordered to give an account of what they have done, they complain that poor people should not be sent, for by giving them a single Indian chieftain, Diego Velazquez can have them do as he wishes. Furthermore, as all the alcaldes and regidores who own Indians fear that Diego Velazquez will take them, they dare not reprove the representatives who have done what they ought not to have done in order to please Diego Velazquez; and in this respect and in many others he is most cunning. By which Your Majesties may see that all the accounts which the island of Fernandina has submitted on behalf of Diego Velazquez, and the favors which they ask for him, are in exchange for the Indians which he gives to the representatives and not because the communities are satisfied and so desire it; indeed they would rather such representatives were punished. As the above-said is well known to all the citizens and inhabitants of this town of Vera Cruz, they had a meeting with the representatives of this council and begged and required us by a signed petition that, in their name, we should beseech Your Majesties not to grant the aforementioned concessions, nor any others to Diego Velazquez, rather to order him to submit to a residencia and deprive him of the governorship of the island of Fernandina; for by such a residencia the truth of our account would be plainly seen. For which purposes we therefore entreat Your

Majesties to send a judge to investigate all we have reported to Your Royal Highnesses, not only as concerns the island of Cuba but also in other parts, for we believe we can prove accusations whereby Your Majesties may see whether it is just or right that he hold Royal commissions in these parts or in those others where he at present resides.

The representatives, inhabitants and citizens of this town-) have likewise asked us, in the aforementioned petition, to entreat Your Majesties on their behalf to order and provide a decree and letters patent in favor of Fernando Cortes, captain and chief justice of Your Royal Highnesses, so that he may govern us with justice until this land is conquered and pacified, and for as long as Your Majesties may see fit, knowing him to be a person well suited for such a position. Which petition and request we send to Your Majesties with these our representatives and humbly supplicate Your Royal Highnesses to grant us this and all the other favors which in the name of this council and town may be asked of You by the aforementioned representatives, and that You hold us as Your most loyal vassals, as we have been and always shall be.

The gold, silver, jewels, buckles and garments which we are sending to Your Royal Highnesses with these representatives, over and above the one-fifth which belongs to Your Majesty, Fernando Cortes and the council of this town offer in Your service, and are sending together with a list signed by the same representatives as Your Royal Highnesses may observe. From the Rica Villa de la Vera Cruz, the tenth day of July, 15 19.

The gold, jewels, precious stones and articles of featherwork which have been acquired in these newly discovered lands since our arrival here, which you, Alonso Fernandez Puerto Carrero and Francisco de Montejo, who go as representatives of this Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz to the Very Excellent Princes and Most Catholic and Very Great Kings and Sovereigns, the Queen Dofia Juana and the King, Don Carlos her son, are the following:"

First a large gold wheel with a design of monsters on it and worked all over with foliage. This weighed 3,800 pesos de oro. From this wheel, because it was the best that has been found here and of the finest gold, a fifth was taken for Their Highnesses; this amounted to two thousand castellanos which belonged to Them of Their fifth and Royal privilege according to the stipulation that the captain Fernando Cortes brought from the Hieronymite Fathers who reside on the island of Hispaniola and on the other islands. The eighteen hundred pesos that remained and all the rest that goes to make up twelve hundred pesos, the council of this town bequeath to Their Highnesses, together with everything else mentioned in this list, which belonged to the people of the aforementioned town.

Item: Two necklaces of gold and stone mosaic, one of which has eight strings Of 232 red jewels and 163. green jewels. Hanging from the border of this necklace are twenty-seven small gold bells; and in the center of them are four figures in large stones inlaid with gold. From each of the two in the center hang single pendants, while from each of the ends hang four double pendants. The other necklace has four strings Of 102 red jewels and 172 which appear to be green in color; around these stones there are twenty-six small gold bells. In this necklace there are ten large stones inlaid with gold from which hang 142 pendants.

Item: Four pairs of screens, 12 two pairs being of fine gold leaf with trimmings of yellow deerskin, and the other two (pairs) of fine silver leaf with trimmings in white deerskin. The remainder are of plumes of various colors, and very well made. From each of these hang sixteen small gold bells, all with red deerskin.

Another item: One hundred pesos de oro for melting, so that Their Highnesses may see how the gold is taken from the mines here.

Another item: In a box, a large piece of featherwork, lined with animal skin which, in color, seems like that of a marten. Fastened to this piece, and in the center of it, is a large disk of gold which weighed sixty pesos de oro, and a piece of blue and red stone mosaic in the shape of a wheel, and another piece of stone mosaic, of a reddish color; and at the end of the piece there is another piece of colored featherwork that hangs from it.

Item: A fan of colored featherwork with thirty-seven small rods cased in gold.

Another item: A large piece of colored featherwork to be worn on the head and encircled by sixty-eight small pieces of gold, each of which is as large as a half cuartos Beneath them are twenty little gold towers.

Item: A miter of blue stone mosaic with a design of monsters in the center of it. It is lined with an animal skin which by its color appears to be that of a marten, and has a small piece of featherwork which, together with the one mentioned above, is of the same miter.

Item: Four harpoons of featherwork with their stone heads fastened by a gold thread, and a jeweled scepter with rings of gold and the rest of featherwork.

Item: A bracelet of blue jewels and, in addition, a small piece of black featherwork and with other colors.

Item: A large pair of sandals of leather whose color resembles that of a marten. The soles are white and sown with gold thread.

Furthermore, a mirror set in a piece of blue and red jewelry, with a piece of featherwork and two strips of red leather attached to it, together with a skin which seems to be from those same martens.

Item: Three pieces of colored featherwork that belong to a large gold head which seems to be that of an alligator.

Item: Some screens of blue stone mosaic, lined with a skin which by its color seems to come from a marten; and from each one of them hang fifteen small gold bells.

Another item: A mantle of wolfskin with four strips of leather that look like martenskin.

Another item: Some fibers placed in some colored feathers; the which fibers are white and look like locks of hair.

Another item: Two pieces of colored featherwork that are for two helmets of stone mosaic which are mentioned below.

Furthermore, two pieces of colored featherwork which are for two pieces of gold, made like large shells and worn on the head.

Furthermore, two birds with green plumage and their feet, beaks and eyes made of gold. These are put on one of those pieces of gold that resemble shells. Also, a helmet of blue stone mosaic with twenty small gold bells hanging round the outside of it with two strings of beads above each bell: and two ear ornaments of wood with gold plates.

Also, a bird with green plumage and with feet, beak and eyes of gold.

Another item: Another helmet of blue stone mosaic with twenty-five little gold bells and two beads of gold above each bell, which hang round it, with some wooden ear ornaments with gold plates; and a bird with green plumage and feet, beak and eyes of gold.

Another item: A reed container with two large pieces of gold to be worn on the head; they are made like gold shells with ear ornaments of wood with gold plates. Also two birds with green plumage and feet, beaks and eyes of gold.

Also, sixteen bucklers of stone mosaic with pieces of colored feather-work hanging round the outside of them, and with a wide-angled board of stone mosaic with its pieces of colored featherwork. In the center of this board is a cross inside a wheel made of the same stone mosaic, and lined with leather the color of martenskin.

Furthermore, a scepter of a red stone mosaic, made to resemble a snake with head, teeth and eyes in what seems to be mother-of-pearl. The hilt is adorned with the skin of a spotted animal, and beneath this hilt there hang six small pieces of featherwork.

Another item: A fan of featherwork in a reed adorned with the skin of a spotted animal, in the manner of a weathercock. Above it has a crown of featherwork and finally many long green feathers.

Item: Two birds made of thread and featherwork. The quills of their wings and tails, the claws of their feet, their eyes and the tips of their beaks are of gold, each placed in its respective gold-covered reed. And below some feather down, one white and the other yellow, with some gold embroidery between the feathers; and from each of these hang seven strands of feathers.

Item: Four pieces made after the manner of skates, placed in their respective gold-covered canes. Their tails, gills, eyes and mouths are of gold; below, on their tails, are some pieces of green featherwork, while toward their mouths each has a crown of colored featherwork, and in some of the white feathers there is some gold embroidery, and beneath the handle of each one hang six strands of colored featherwork. Item: A small copper rod lined with a skin in which is placed a piece of gold in the manner of a piece of featherwork, which has some pieces of colored featherwork above and below it.

Another item: Five fans of colored featherwork, four of which have ten small quills covered with gold while the fifth has thirteen.

Item: Four harpoons of white flint, fastened to four rods of featherwork.

Item: A large buckler of featherwork trimmed on the back with the skin of a spotted animal. In the center of the field of this buckler is a gold plate with a design such as the Indians make, with four other half plates of gold round the edge, which together form a cross.

Another item: A piece of featherwork of various colors made in the manner of a half chasuble, lined with the skin of a spotted animal. This, the lords of these parts, which we have seen up to now, hang from about their necks. On the front it has thirteen pieces of gold very well fitted together.

Item,: - A piece of colored featherwork, made in the manner of a jousting helmet, which the lords of this land wear on their heads. From it hang two ear ornaments of stone mosaic with two small bells and two beads of gold; and above there is a piece of featherwork of broad green feathers, while below hang some white hairs.

Furthermore, four animal heads, two of which seem to be wolves, the other two tigers, with some spotted skins: from these heads hang some small bronze bells.

Item: Two animal skins of spotted animals, lined with some cotton mantles: these skins appear to be those of a mountain cat.

Item: The red and gray skin of another animal, which seems to be a lion, and two deerskins.

Item: Four skins of small deer from which here they make small tanned gloves.

And, moreover, two books which the Indians have: also half a dozen fans of colored featherwork and a perfume container of colored featherwork.

Furthermore, a large silver wheel which weighed fortyeight silver marks, and also some bracelets, some beaten [silver] leaves; and one mark five ounces and forty adarnes of silver; and a large buckler and another small one of silver, which weighed four marks and two ounces; and another two bucklers which appear to be silver and which weighed six marks and two ounces; and another buckler, which likewise appears to be of silver, which weighed one mark and seven ounces, which is in all sixtytwo marks of silver.

#### [COTTON CLOTHING]

Another item: Two large pieces of cotton richly woven in white, black and tawny.

Item: Two pieces woven with feathers and another piece woven in various colors; another piece woven in patterns of red, black and white, and on the back these patterns do not show.

Item: Another piece woven with patterns and in the center a black wheel of feathers.

Item: Two white cotton cloths woven with some pieces of featherwork.

Another cotton cloth with some white cords(?) attached. A peasant smock.

A white piece with a large wheel of white feathers in the middle.

Two pieces of gray cord with some wheels of feathers, and another two of tawny cord.

Six painted pieces; another red piece with some wheels and another two pieces painted blue; and two women's shirts.

[Twelve veils.]

Item: Six bucklers, each one with a gold plate covering the whole buckler.

Another item: A half miter of gold.

The which things, and each one of them, as is laid down and established by these declarations, we, Alonso Fernandez Puerto Carrero and Francisco de Montejo, the abovementioned representatives, do acknowledge that it is true that we have received them and that they were entrusted to us to take to Their Highnesses, from you, Fernando Cortes, chief justice for Their Highnesses in these parts, and from you, Alonso de Avila and Alonso de Grado, treasurer and veedor for Their Highnesses. And because it is true we sign it with our names. Dated the sixth day of July in the year 1519.

– PUERTO CARRERO, FRANCISCO DE MONTEJO.

The things above-mentioned in the said memorial, with the aforementioned letter and account sent by the municipal council of Vera Cruz, were received by the King Don Carlos, Our Sovereign, as already stated, in Valladolid, in Holy Week, in the beginning of the month of April of the year of Our Lord, 1520.