

What did Europeans “see” when they looked at the New World and the Native Americans?

**Documents collected and text updated
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Document 1: From a letter by Christopher Columbus
October 12, 1492

“I gave some of them red caps and gave others glass beads, which they hung about their necks. They liked the cheap gifts very much.

They are all naked. No one looked older than 30. They were handsome and in great shape. I think they would be good servants because they repeat whatever I said to them.”

Document 2: Amerigo Vespucci describes the Indians in a letter, 1502

“We found a land of naked people. They have no laws, and no religion. They just live by nature. They own nothing, and share every thing. They have no country, borders or king. It seems that everyone is his own master.

They live together huts, built without any metal. What a surprise, I have seen houses 220 feet long, and 30 feet wide that can hold 500 people. They sleep in hammocks of cotton; they sit on the ground and eat the roots of herbs, or fruits and fish.

They are cruel people, but I don’t understand why they go to war. They don’t fight for power or to take things from their enemies. When we asked them about this, they said they fought as payback for the murder of their families.”

Document 3: *The Discovery of America*, Jan van der Straet, 1575
Amerigo Vespucci awakens America



America Americus retexit, Semel vocavit inde semper excitam

Document 4: Spanish governor de Soto explored the lands between Florida and Texas in 1539-42. He died during the trip. This report was written by his secretary.

“The next day Governor de Soto came to a river opposite the village. The Indian chief was a young woman. She crossed the river with other Indians in the canoe and spoke to the governor. She took off a string of pearls, which she wore on her neck, and put on the governor as a necklace to show she was a friend.

The Indians spent 15 friendly days with the Spanish. They played and swam with the Spanish and helped them very much in every way.

Later the Spaniards went to another village. They rounded up the Indians and put them in iron collars and chains. They took the Indian prisoners to keep them as slaves. They made the Indians the supplies, and gifts they received from the Indians. Some of the Indian prisoners died, and others ran away or tired out. So the Spaniards took more Indians as prisoners.”

Document 5: Spaniard Cabeza de Vaca describes an attack by Indians. He explored Florida in 1528 with 600 soldiers. Almost all of his group died. He and a few others survived, he wrote this report of his adventures among the Indians.

“On the second day of our journey we came to lake that was tough to cross. When we reached the middle of the lake, we were attacked by many Indians. We didn’t see them because they were hiding behind trees. Some of our men were wounded, and the good armor they wore did not help. The Indians are good at shooting arrows. We even saw arrows go through oak trees that were 8 inches thick.

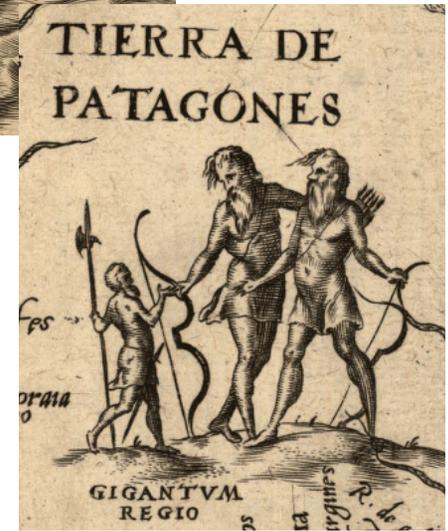
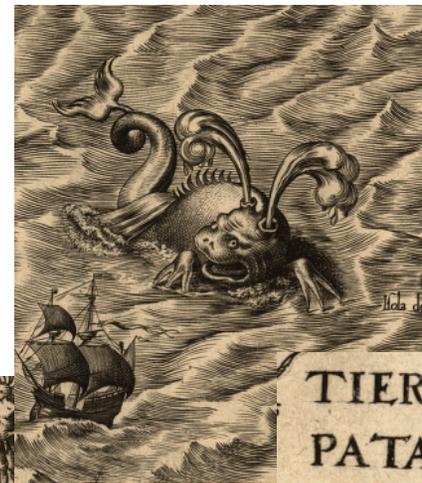
The Indians in Florida go naked, are big and look like giants. The bows they use are as thick as my arm and 6 feet long. They can hit their target from 500 feet away.”



Document 6: *Conquest. Miracle of Santiago* (St. James) From a book written in the 1600's



Document 7: The 1562 Map of America by Diego Gutiérrez
 With three details showing cannibals, giants and a sea monster

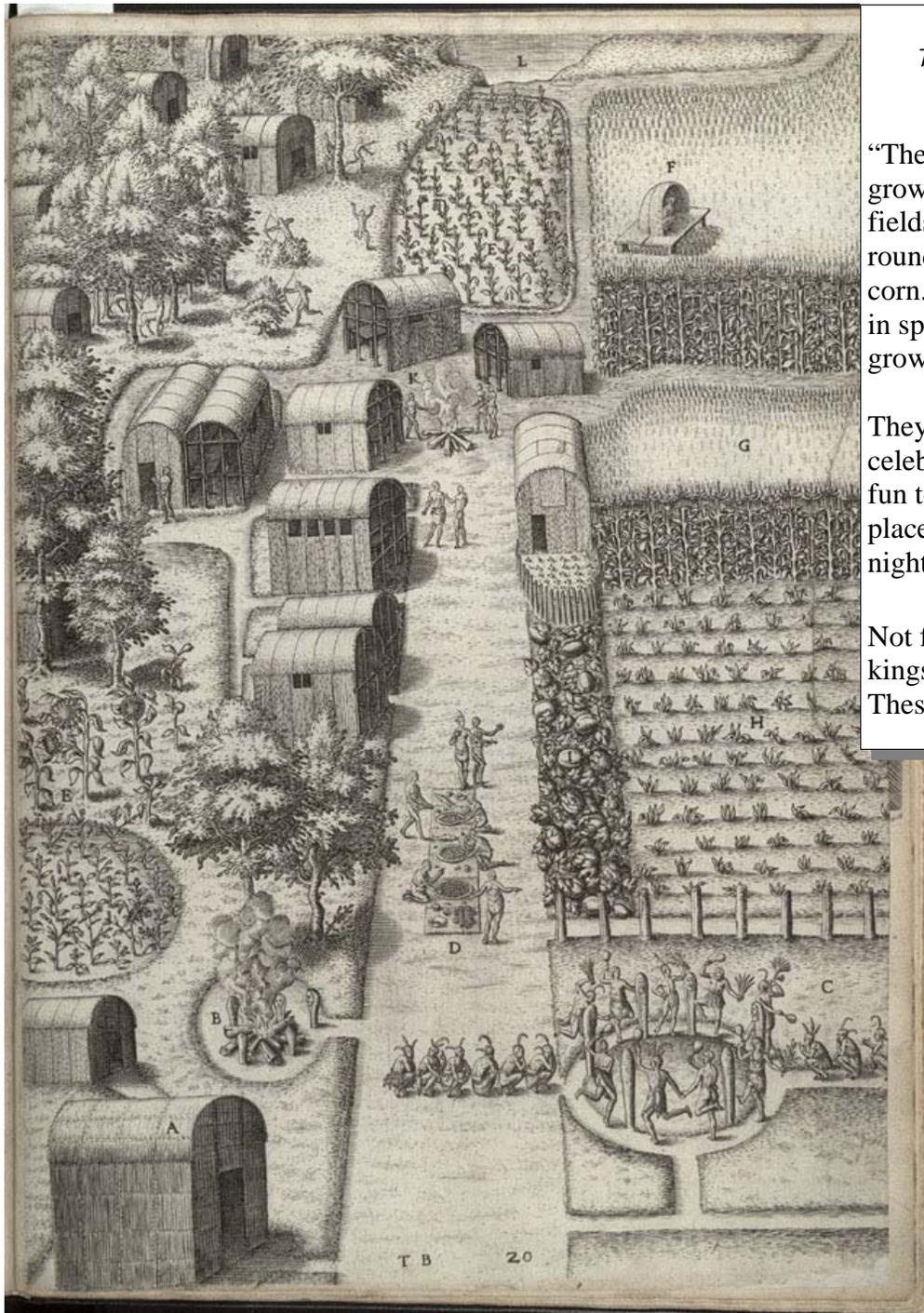


Document 8: Captain John Smith describes Virginia in his book *Historie of Virginia*, 1624

“The land does not have many people and most are women and children. Within 60 miles of James Towne there are about some 5000 people, but only 1500 men to fight their wars. Their hair is generally black; but few have any beards. The men wear half their heads shaven, the other half long. The women use shells to scrape away the hair to any style. They are very strong, fast and in great shape. They can survive winter in the woods under a tree by the fire. Each house has its own land and gardens.

They cover themselves with the animal skins. In winter the skins are thick with fur. In summer the skins are just plain leather. The women wear copper beads and tattoo their legs, hands, breasts and faces. The tattoos of animals and snakes are etched into their flesh with black spots. In each ear they have 3 big holes, where they hang chains, bracelets, or copper.

Their women love children. To make them tough they wash them in the rivers on cold mornings. After year or two, no weather will hurt them. The men fish, hunt, and go to war. They don’t want to be seen doing any woman’s work. Most of the time the men do nothing. The women and children do the rest of the work. They make mats, baskets, and pots. They pound their corn, make their bread, prepare their food, plant their corn, gather their corn, bear all kind of burdens, and such like.”



Document 9: The town of Secotam. From the book *The True Pictures and Fashions of The People In That Part Of America Now Called Virginia*. Engraving by Theodore De Bry 1588.

“The houses are scattered here and there, they have garden (E) where Tobacco grows. They call it Uppowoc. They have groves where they hunt deer, and fields where they grow corn. In their cornfields they build a watch tower with a round chair (F). There are many birds and beasts that would soon eat all their corn. The watchman is always yelling and making noise. They plant their corn in spaced rows (H) so one stalk won’t choke another stalk. This makes the corn grow to full ripeness (G). They have garden (I) where they grow pumpkins.

They have also a several areas (C) where they meet with their neighbors. They celebrate their feasts at a place (D). After they have ended their feast they have fun together. They have another spot (B) where they gather to pray. There is a place (K) where they make a fire at their feasts. They celebrate their feasts at night, and therefore they keep very great fires to avoid darkness.

Not far from place there is a large building (A) that holds the graves of their kings and princes. Near the town is a river (L). That’s where they get their water. These people are not greedy and live happily.”

Document 10: *The Indians Should Be Conquered and Exterminated*

It was written by officials of the Virginia Company of London, the sponsor of the Jamestown Virginia settlement after the 1622 Powhatan Massacre that killed 347 Jamestown residents.

“It will be easier to conquer them, than civilize them. They are a rude, barbarous, and naked people, scattered in small villages. This would help us to defeat them. It would also make it tough to civilize them. We can conquer them all at once. Civilizing them is slow and will take much more effort.

We can have victory over them many ways - by force, surprise, and famine. We can burn their corn, boats, canoes, houses and fishing equipment. We can disrupt their hunting. That’s how they get most of their winter food. We can chase them with our horses and bloodhounds, and our big mastiff dogs will tear them apart.”



Document 11: How They Till the Soul and Plant from the book, *The True Pictures and Fashions of The People In That Part Of America Now Called Virginia* Engraving by Theodore De Bry 1588.

“The Indians till the soil very carefully, using a hoe made from fish bone fitted to wooden handles. This works well since the soil is very light. After the ground has been broken up and leveled, the planting is done by the women, some making holes with sticks, into which the others drop the seeds of beans or maize.

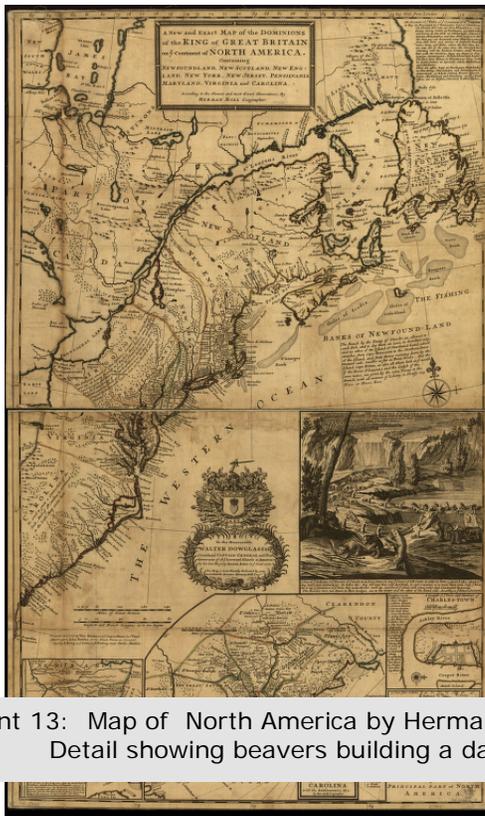
Then the fields are left alone, because the winter months, from December to March are extremely cold. During this time the natives seek shelter in the woods, since they go naked. As soon as the cold winter is over, they return to their homes and wait for the crops to ripen. They gather the harvest and store it all for the rest of the year. None of it is used for trade unless they barter a small amount for some household item.”

Document 12: The Dances They Use at their High Feasts from *The True Pictures and Fashions ...* by Theodore De Bry 1588.

“At a certain time they make a great feast with their neighbors from nearby towns, every man dressed in the strangest fashion. They have marks on the backs to show where they’re from. They meet at a broad plain. Stuck in the ground in a big circle are posts carved with heads like the faces of nuns covered with veils.

They dance, sing, and use the strangest gestures that they can possibly devise. Three of the fairest young girls, are embracing in the middle of the circle. Around them, the others turn about in their dancing. All this is done after the sun is set to avoid of heat. When they are tired of dancing, they go out of the circle.”





Document 13: Map of North America by Herman Moll, d. 1732.
Detail showing beavers building a dam.



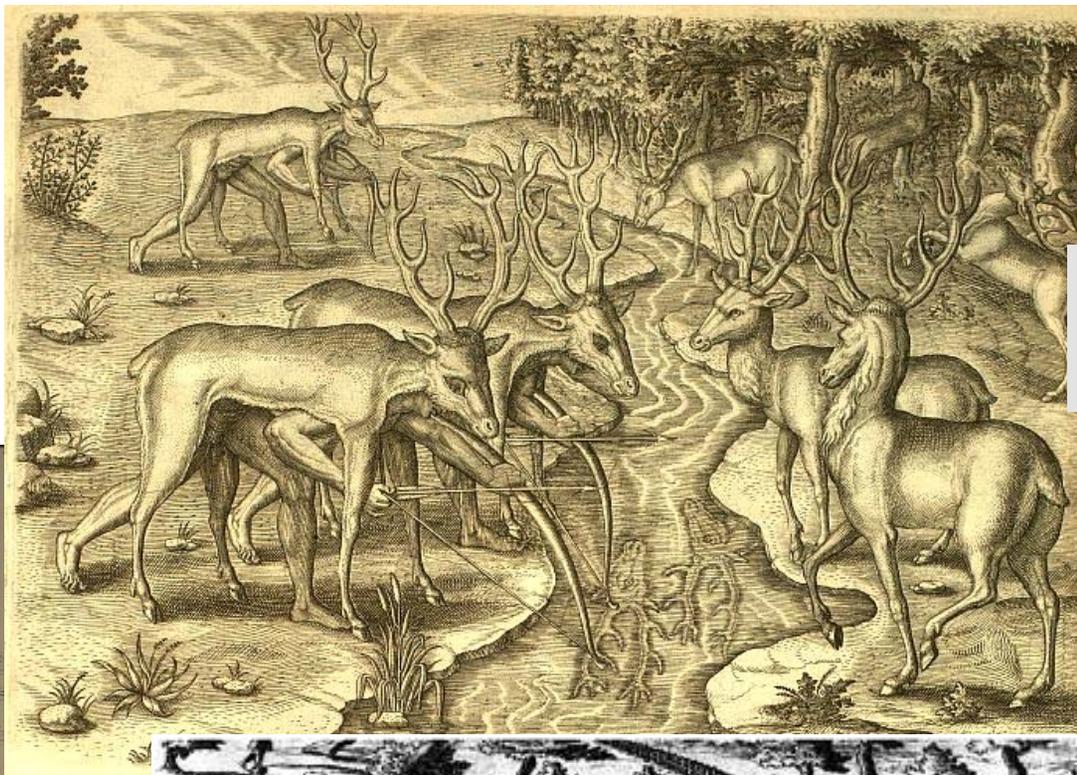
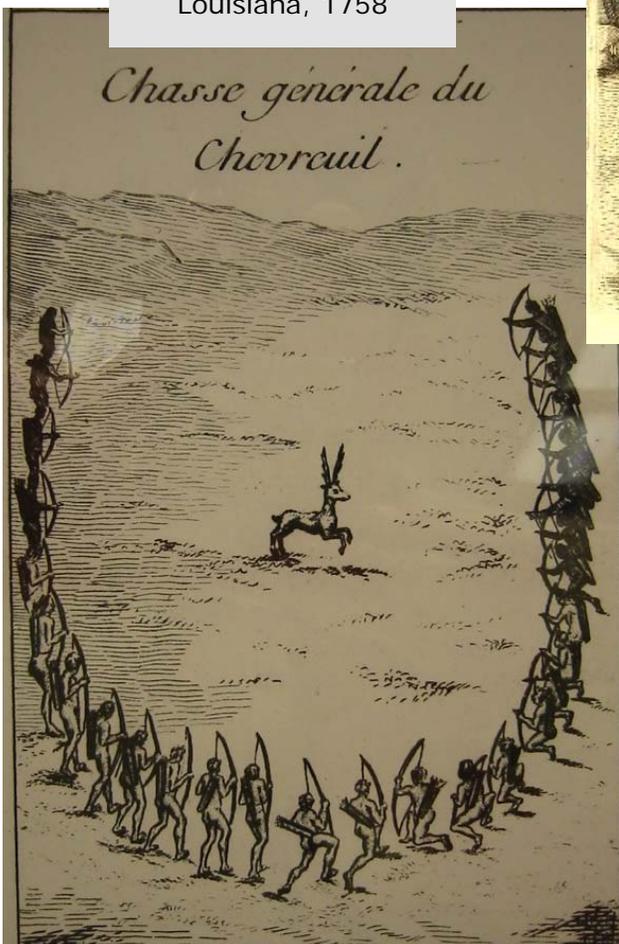
Document 14: Captain John Smith, *A Map of Virginia* 1612.

“Virginia is a Country in America that lies between 34 and 44 north latitude. The bounds on the East side are the great Ocean. On the South is Florida: on the north is New France. As for the West, the limits are unknown. The temperature is comfortable to the English once they get used to it - the summer is hot as in Spain; the winter cold as in France or England. There is one entrance by sea into this country and that is at the mouth of a very large Bay the wideness of nearly 18 or 20 miles.

Virginia has many excellent vegetables and living Creatures. There are few grasses for all the Country is overgrown with trees. A small beast they have, they call the Opassom. It has a head like a pig, and a tail like a rat, and is as big as a cat. Under her belly, she has a bag, where she lodges, carries, and nurses her young. The Beaver is as big as an ordinary water dog, but his legs are very short. His front feet are like a dogs, his hind feet like a swans. His tail is like the form of a Racket. It is bare without hair. The Savages take Beavers with snares, and value the skins as clothes and ornaments. They also eat the Beaver and consider it a special food.

The mildness of the air, the fertility of the soil, and the rivers make it good for pleasure, profit, and mans’ sustenance. In that climate, will live horses, goats, sheep, asses, hens, etc. that were carried there. The waters are full of safe harbors for ships of war or merchandise, for boats of all sorts, for transportation, and fishing. The Bay and rivers have many fish and places fit for salt drying, building ships, making iron.”

Document 15:
Deer Hunt in
Louisiana, 1758



Document 16:
Deer Hunt in
Florida
1564.



Document 17:
Deer hunt
in Canada
1632

Document 18: William Wood describes the health of the Indians north of Massachusetts Bay colony in a book written in 1639

“Most of them are between five or six foot high, straight bodied, smooth skinned, happy face. They have broad shoulders, brawny arms, long and narrow hands. They have small waists, handsome strong legs and small feet.

Most of them get to be fifty before wrinkles or gray hair show their age. They grow so strong and live so long because they are not brought down with difficult labor or bothered with cares. When they change their bare Indian food for the plenty of England's fuller diet, it is so different to their stomachs that death or a desperate sickness immediately occurs. This is why so few of them want to see England.”

Document 20: In 1685 La Salle failed to discover the mouth of the Mississippi River. Three children from his group were captured by Native Americans and spent the next 3 years with the tribes, learning language and customs. Eventually they returned to Europe and told stories of the tribes.

“The European had lived a long time with the Indian tribe and had learned the language perfectly. But he made them angry, so they decided to kill him. He beat them with a trick, which shows his intelligence over the savages. Here it is. He told the natives that they were going to kill a man who loved them so much that he carried all of them in his heart. If they doubted it, he would prove it to them the next day. He would show them his open heart, and all the savages would all see themselves in there.

The savages spared his life until the next day and put him to the test. They came to him very early in the morning in great numbers to see him keep his promise, or kill him if he did not keep it. The European had placed a small mirror just over his heart. The savages, who had never seen a mirror, did not suspect the trick. One after another he said to each Indian, ‘There is my open heart – look and you’ll see yourself.’ And each Indian saw himself in a mirror they were all amazed and allowed him to live and to leave the tribe safely.”

Document 19: Detail from Seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony
1629-1684

Indian saying “Come over and help us.”



Document 21: John Lawson “New Voyage to Carolina” 1709.

“The Indians are really better to us, than we are to them. They always give us food at their homes, and protect us from hunger and thirst. But we do not do the same for them. We let them walk by our doors hungry. We look upon them with scorn and disrespect, and think them, little better than beasts in human shape. If we thought about it we would realize that even with our religion and education, we have more evils than these savages do.

These Indians are the freest people in the world and they are not bothering us. We are the one who left our home to drive them out and take their land. We do not respect their natural character and strange customs. We trade with them, but all we give them is alcohol, and we always cheat them in everything we sell.”

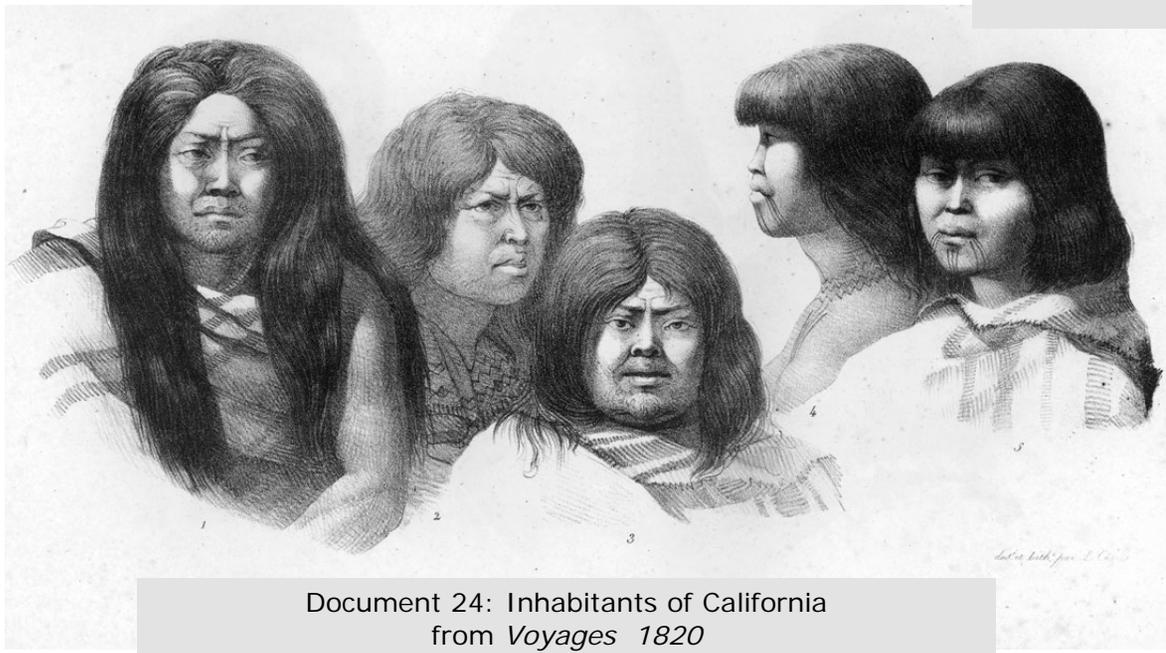
Document 22: A Spaniard reports to the King of Spain on exploration along the California coast at Monterey Bay in 1602

“This region is thickly settled with people whom I found to be gentle, peaceable and obedient. They can be easily be Christianized and ruled by the crown of Your Majesty. Their food consists of seeds which they have in abundance and variety and of the flesh of game, such as deer which are larger than cows.

The Indians are of tall with a fair complexion. The women are smaller than the men and good looking. Their clothing is made of the skins of the many sea-wolves that are there. They tan and make better furs than we have in Spain. They also have lots hemp and cotton, from which they make fishing-lines and nets for rabbits. They have boats of pine-wood that are very well made. They go to sea with fourteen paddle-men on each side, with great skill - even in very stormy weather.”



Bateau du port de S.^t Francisco.
Document 23: Boat in the Port of San Francisco
Voyages, A picturesque tour of the World with Portraits of the Savages of America, Asia and Africa. 1820



Document 24: Inhabitants of California
from *Voyages 1820*

Document 25
A Frenchman describes
Canadian Indians in 1710.

“The care of household and the family work is done by the women. They build and repair the wigwams, carry water and wood, and prepare the food. Their duties and position is like a slave or servant. The hunting and war is done by the men.

This explains why there are not many Indians. Because of the hard work done by the women, they cannot give birth to fully-developed children, or properly nourish them after they have been born. They work so hard carrying water, gathering wood and other tasks. Hardly one infant in thirty lives to childhood.”