

New England Indians in the Sixteenth Century
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- 12:45-1:30 Indian-European Encounters in the Sixteenth Century (see Timeline)
1:30-2:00 Three small group discussions of document and questions
2:00-2:45 Reconvene to hear group reports; general conclusions

The document we are reading today is an excerpt from a long letter from Giovanni da Verrazzano to King Francis I of France, written in 1524. Francis had commissioned Verrazzano to explore and map the North American Atlantic coast between the two regions where Europeans had been active since the 1490s—the Caribbean and the Newfoundland-Gulf of St. Lawrence region. France’s primary goal was to find a “northwest passage” that would enable its merchant ships to reach Asia, and to do so ahead of Spain and England (which dispatched similar expeditions during the following three years). As a corollary of this goal it anticipated establishing trade relations and/or colonies in North America that would reinforce its control of such a passageway.

Prior to reaching New England, the expedition had had several encounters with Native peoples to the south that were, like those depicted here, a mix of friendly and hostile. During one hostile encounter they had kidnapped a Native boy who remained on board during the stay at “Refugio.”

The excerpt you are reading covers Verrazzano’s two stops in New England in June 1524, the first (pp. 137-40) at “Refugio,” the site of modern Newport, RI, where the French remained for two weeks among Narragansetts, the second (pp. 140-41) a brief encounter with Abenaki people at Casco Bay on the Maine coast.

Consider the following questions as you read:

1. What kinds of assumptions and biases does Verrazzano bring to his descriptions of Native Americans? How does he interpret their appearance and behavior?
2. What evidence does his text provide of Native values and practices that we might interpret differently than he does?
3. What does the letter indicate, either implicitly or explicitly, about the larger purposes of the expedition?
4. Considering the timeline as well as the text, why do you think that the Narragansetts and Abenakis reacted so differently to Verrazzano’s arrival in their homeland?

Additional Readings

- Robert J. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*. Alfred Knopf, 1978
- Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of America, 900-1900*. Cambridge University Press, 1986
- David B. Quinn, *North America from Earliest Discoveries to First Settlements: The Norse Voyages to 1612*. HarperCollins, 1977
- Neal Salisbury, *Manitou and Providence: Indians, Europeans, and the Making of New England, 1500-1643*. Oxford University Press, 1982