

Italian American Civic Club of Maryland Inc.
Founded in 1943 by the Honorable Thomas D'Alessandro, Jr.
1214 Saint Paul Street - Baltimore, MD 21202

February 29, 2020

To The Honorable Shane E. Pendergrass
Chair, House Health and Government Operations Committee,
and other esteemed committee members,
House Office Building, Room 241
6 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Chairperson Pendergrass and Members of the Committee:

We are writing to vehemently **OPPOSE** both the HB868 and HB895 Bills, which pertain to the designation and observance of state and public school holidays, and the rule of interpretation and replacement of Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples' Day. We cannot express our opposition in any greater terms, and are prepared to mobilize to stop them any way we can to the best of our ability and resources.

The Italian American Civic Club of Maryland, founded in 1943 by the Honorable Thomas J. D'Alessandro, Jr. (the father of Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi), is the oldest and largest organization of civic-minded Italian Americans in the State of Maryland. Our mission is to promote the Italian culture, heritage, and contributions that our ancestors have made to this great state, country, and the world. Especially mentioned in our very Mission Statement from our inception is promoting the commemoration of Columbus Day as a day of Italian Heritage and pride. In this opposition to the two misguided and reprehensible Bills, we are in total agreement and solidarity with the Commission for Social Justice, the anti-defamation arm of the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA), other Italian American Organizations in the state, and the National Christopher Columbus Association.

The Board of Governors and membership of The Italian American Civic Club would like to respectfully bring to your attention a few important matters and facts about the issue. We deem this both urgent and valuable for all of Maryland's citizens and especially for those of Italian ancestry (whose settlement in Maryland dates back to at least 1648), and who honor and celebrate the memory of the Great Admiral of the Ocean Seas, Christopher Columbus.

First, we are outraged about the possibility of substituting or repealing Columbus Day with any other celebration (as proposed by HB0868). We strongly oppose such a suggestion because of the historic significance of Columbus Day, and the profound meaning it has for the Italian American community, who embraced Columbus as the symbol of their struggles against hatred, prejudice, and violence in America. After the 1891 violent lynching of eleven innocent Italians at New Orleans (the largest mass lynching in U.S. history), local Italian-American communities funded and celebrated Columbus Day through the building of monuments and celebrations throughout Baltimore and the United States. From 1892 and on, Columbus Day became the central celebration by local Italian communities to never forget the New Orleans mass lynching of our Italian ancestors, and to express their worth as both Americans and human beings during a divisive time when immigrants were the target of assassination and treated as criminals. Like our forefathers, here again we stand in front of Columbus to protect our Italian Heritage and we are appalled by the idea that such past struggles could be erased from history by any sort of "rededication" of this crucial cultural celebration to any other designation – no, we will not stand for this situation. For some it might be a simple change of names, but for all of us it would be an unjust suppression of our own history, identity, perseverance, and accomplishments, which we have struggled to earn through our contributions to Maryland by our honest work and integrity.

Secondly, in the city of Baltimore, Maryland, three monuments commemorating Christopher Columbus, one of which (the Obelisk on Harford Road) is the oldest standing Columbus monument in the U.S.A., and in the world. In 2017, the Obelisk was brutally vandalized [<https://www.wbaltv.com/article/police-investigating-vandalism-of-christopher-columbus-monument/12041383>]. If State legislators were to pass either the HB868 or HB895 Bills, they would be rewarding and directly supporting the continuance of violence perpetrated by those same criminals who are still at large, who attacked and destroyed with sledgehammers, the Columbus Obelisk. To protect these treasures in the future, we are currently investigating the procedures for having our monuments designated by UNESCO as World Heritage monuments. We ask you and all people of good will, why should we let our treasured memories and our dignity be obliterated in such a callous and violent way? We shall not let this stand! We stand together against all senseless acts of violence that evoke the grim shadow of the murders perpetrated against innocent Italians in New Orleans, Tampa, and the other places where our ancestors became victims of lynching, oppression, and maltreatment through evil prejudice.

Furthermore, since 1937, Columbus Day has been, and continues to be, a federal holiday which is also observed in other nations as well (i.e., Spain, Italy, Central and South America, etc.). For us and others of good will, it is a crucial acknowledgment of the important contribution of Italian Americans in the making of our nation, and also commemorates the important historical and cultural relationship we have established with our Italian ancestry. The annual Columbus Day Parade in Baltimore is now established as the nation's *oldest* continuously existing celebration in the country. The decision to replace Columbus Day with another holiday, will result in the brutal amputation of an essential living iconic limb of our Italian American heritage and history. This cannot be tolerated for any reason. It is never good to hurt others to please the spirit of the age or changing social interests.

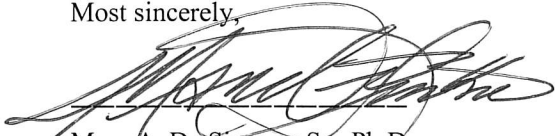
Since 1731, the Thirteenth Colonies that became the original United States of America have been (and continue to be) collectively known colloquially as “Columbia.” During the American Revolution, colonists continued to use the name “Columbia” because they built their identity and ideals upon those of the great voyager and brave explorer, Christopher Columbus. This continued after the Declaration of Independence, when the district of our national capital (the District of Columbia) was named after Christopher Columbus in the 1790s. Our very Pledge of Allegiance to our nation was written in 1892 in honor of the 400th anniversary of his first voyage. “Columbia” is the term used to personify America and was used also by abolitionists and antislavery groups to promote their cause. The personified Columbia figure was used exclusively from the Revolution to WWI to signify the United States, and indeed persists until the current day. The French sculptor (of Italian descent), Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, not only created the Statue of Liberty, but also the historic statue of Columbus in Providence, Rhode Island. Numerous cities, towns, rivers, lakes, universities, and even state capitals throughout the United States have been named after Christopher Columbus (i.e., Columbus in Ohio; Columbia in SC and MD, the Columbia River, Columbia University, etc.).

For the record, on August 9, 1994 the United Nations introduced the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, which is now observed worldwide as the annual commemoration of indigenous people and endures as a crucial festivity in its own right. Indigenous People Day could more effectively be observed in Maryland as an autonomous celebration on August 9, instead of erasing Columbus Day, or perhaps the day after Thanksgiving Day (as it is done in most places – including the State of Maryland). In this way, both “Columbus Day” and the celebration of “Indigenous People Day” will BOTH receive the respect that they BOTH deserve. Adding a new holiday is better than destroying one in favor of another!

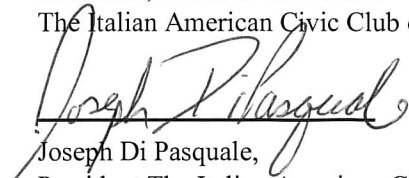
That is why we implore you to help us preserve our history. Let us keep what we have so we can better understand who we are, where we all have come from, and discuss lessons that we have learned. Let us keep Christopher Columbus Day in Maryland - not only just for our Italian American community, but also for all Americans of different heritages, for all immigrants that are still coming from Europe, South America, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and everywhere in the world, for all those who see Columbus as a symbol of courage, hope, exploration, perseverance, and bold new connections and new beginnings. And as we look back to our common past properly interpreted without quasi-historical misrepresentations for political reasons (please review the attachments) we can see more clearly our goals for a better future; a future of honesty, unity, and mutual respect. We are confident that our concerns will not go unheard. This is why we oppose any changes to the Columbus Day holiday in Maryland, and we hope that we will be able to attain a constructive solution for all.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration of this important matter.

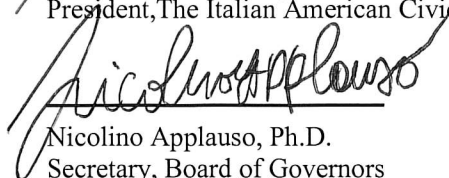
Most sincerely,



Marc A. De Simone, Sr., Ph.D.,
Chairman, Board of Governors
The Italian American Civic Club of Maryland, Inc.



Joseph Di Pasquale,
President, The Italian American Civic Club of Maryland, Inc.



Nicolino Applauso, Ph.D.
Secretary, Board of Governors
The Italian American Civic Club of Maryland, Inc

ATTACHMENT:

October 12, 1950. The Columbus Obelisk in Baltimore, MD (which was recently vandalized) receiving a wreath of honor from the Mayor of Baltimore, Thomas D'Alesandro Jr., during an official public ceremony which included the then 10-year old Nancy (D'Alesandro) Pelosi, current Speaker of the House, his daughter (young girl to the right).



Bartolomé De las Casas's writings regarding Columbus

José G., Historical Researcher of Spanish and Caribbean History

Most of the narrative you may be aware of regarding Christopher Columbus actually comes from the pen of Fray Bartolomé De Las Casas- the Archbishop of Chiapas greatly recognized for his advocacy of the Indigenous peoples of America. It is through this window of text that people cast their opinions about the historical personage of Columbus.

Understanding this, when people say "Columbus's own letters" what they are really referring to is De las Casas's transcription of some of Columbus writings missing since 1522. The remaining sources of the Columbian narrative come from a much more important work of De las Casas, 'Historia de las Indias' (1527 to 1559)- a three-volume work splayed across 18,340 pages of writings. Different iterations recorded within his text exist with dual perspectives because De las Casas alternated his writing from "these are the Admiral's words" to "this I saw". This style of writing -De las Casas's prose- also formulated many thoughts into each of his sentences to project a multi-dimensional context of what he either witnessed or read from other text sources (including some writings of Columbus himself, once housed at the Columbian Library in Seville and curated by his son Hernando). So, because all of this inherent impreciseness lodged into his writings one should avoid shortening sentences or omit full paragraphs that appear in his text. It is also best to study the history interwoven into the redaction in order to gain a broad insight of what the friar was attempting to frame.

What follows then are poor examples of interpretations found today within U.S. circulating texts attempting to incorrectly decipher what De las Casas wrote: out of context meanings, grave omissions and mistranslations that have permeated into his writings, because of the improper manner (intentional or not) they approached his manuscripts:

Example 1: When De las Casas mentions Columbus's description of the Lucayans he first encountered in Guanahani-

Columbus wrote in his journal: "...they would make good servants ...With fifty men we could subjugate them..."

['A People's History of the United States', Howard Zinn- Ch. 1: Columbus, The Indians, and Human Progress, rev. 1999]

Besides this quote being actually two separate sentences joined by ellipses (making it of ambiguous source), you must inspect this interpretation by reading from the beginning of the paragraph where he asks the Lucayans about the scars he visibly saw on their arms and legs. That whole sequence of sentences was all a singular thought:

The Lucayans told him neighboring peoples were trying to take them as prisoners but they fended them off; Columbus thought the others must see them as good servants. Since the Lucayans also repeat back everything they are told, with those qualities and little struggle they could eventually become good Christians. This can be observed by examining the manuscript facsimile from 1556, focusing on the sentence flow and punctuation compared for clarity (see Exhibit A):

"I saw some who had signs of wounds on their bodies and I pointed to what those were: they showed me how people from other islands that were nearby came by but wanted to kidnap them so they defended themselves and I believed and still believe that they came from the mainland to take them as captives. They must be good servants and of good wit for I see they very quickly say everything that I say to them: and I think that lightly they will become Christians because I believe they do not have a religion."

[Relaciones y cartas de Cristóbal Colón', Librería viuda de Hernando Colón 1892]

Many writers have translated this text into English substituting “must be” with “would” or “should”, changing the context to appear as if Columbus was only interested in the Lucayans’ potential for being slaves. His comment was a first impression on how they appeared to him on two counts and why. Do not forget, he also just finished meeting the new Americans for the first time.

Example 2: Another popular “interpretation” made from De las Casas’s writings is on Columbus’s interaction with the island Indigenous later in his second voyage. This paragraph is often quoted as depicting his treatment of the people known as Taíno and it is part of a text from a very popular book found in schools throughout the U.S.:

“In the province of Cicao on Haiti, where he and his men imagined huge gold fields to exist, they ordered all persons fourteen years or older to collect a certain quantity of gold every three months. When they brought it, they were given copper tokens to hang around their necks. Indians found without a copper token had their hands cut off and bled to death.”

[‘A People’s History of the United States’, Howard Zinn- Ch. 1: Columbus, The Indians, and Human Progress, rev. 1999]

There are multiple problems with this text, the most important one being that the actual historical document DOES NOT MENTION NOR IMPLY CUTTING HANDS or leaving people to bleed to death (this is also mentioned in his other work, ‘Brevisima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias’). Here is the actual translation of the text (see Exhibit B):

“The Admiral then imposed to all residents of the province of Cibao and Vega Real -and all close to the mines of fourteen years above -of three in three months- to collect a Flanders' hawksbell, and I say the hollow of the hawksbell full of gold...” “He ordered afterwards to make copper or brass coins with which to make a sign, and this was exchanged in each tribute so that each Indian in the tributary would bear it around his neck, because with this it was known who had paid tribute and who had not; so that he who did not bear one was to be punished- although he said that moderately- for not having paid tribute.” “Then the Admiral recognized that most of the Indians -in truth- could not comply, so he agreed to cut the hawksbell collection in half; some of them did this, and others still could not, and thus, falling into a sad life escaped to the mountains ...”

[‘Historia de las Indias’, Bartolomé De las Casas, Tomo II, p. 623-624]

Furthermore, this book (and others published in the U.S.) omit further information that can help understand what was happening in the island prior to the above incident and why these people were being subjugated in such a manner:

Columbus had erected a makeshift Fort (La Natividad) in Hispaniola on January 1493 and left for Spain leaving behind 39 of his crew members. As they navigated home they were intercepted by 50 Indians (believed to be Caribs) who surprise-attacked the crew as they had stopped for supplies and traded with the local Taíno; they hastily left the area without a fight. Later, upon Columbus’s return to the island on November 1493 he finds the fort destroyed. The few corpses he found of the left-behind crew hinted as to how this massacre may have occurred, something which also impacted him personally (a friend’s nephew was one of the victims). He still decided to veer northeast not wanting to make war with the Caribs and established a settlement elsewhere- founding ‘La Isabela’ and two other settlements by January of 1494. One of these settlements was attacked immediately by the Taíno on April 1494 (after a reported incident of abuse in that area). Uncertain of the nature of these attacks Columbus did nothing, however later he is informed that the attacks were led by Caonabó -the highest cacique (chief) in Hispaniola- suspected of leading the earlier Fort Natividad massacre. Caonabó was also said to be on his way to attack La Isabela and kill Columbus.

With this, the settlers endured a total of four unprovoked attacks (including the burning of a makeshift hospital where 10 colonists lay ill and were unable to move). Stirred-up, all these aggressions boiled-up into a major confrontation known as "La Batalla del Santo Cerro"- a conflict where 220 European colonists and Taíno allies defended themselves from approximately 2,500 besieging Taíno in an attack that lasted a week. It was only after this battle that the above incident occurred, the defeated Taíno being made prisoners of war and the neighbors subjugated in retaliation for their aggressions made against the colonists (see Exhibit C).

Example 3: Yet another "interpretation" of De las Casas's passages that is very popular claims that Columbus engaged in the trafficking of sexual slavery and routinely gave subordinates women to rape as a "reward":

"A hundred Castellanos are as easily obtained for a woman as for a farm, and it is very general and there are plenty of dealers that who go about looking for girls; those from nine to ten are now in demand."

[Snopes.com fact-check, Dan MacGuill May 2018]

The problem with this paragraph is in the mistranslation of the Spanish language provided by John Boyd Thacker in his 1847 book 'Christopher Columbus, his life, his Works', the source of this quote. Thacker translated the word "labranza" as meaning "farm" (insinuating a value upon women); however, here's how the text actually reads in 'Historia de las Indias' (see Exhibit D):

"Por una mujer también se hallan cien castellanos, como por una labranza, y es mucho en uso, y ha ya hartos mercaderes que andan buscando muchachas; de nueve a diez son ahora en precio, de todas edades ha de tener un bueno."

===== † =====

"For a woman [to purchase as a slave] you can get one for a hundred Castellanos as for a tillage, and it is much a purposeful sale. And there are many merchants looking for younger girls; from nine to ten are now of good price, but of all ages you can get a good one."

[Historia de las Indias', De las Casas, Tomo II, p. 506]

The first definition for the word "labranza" in the Royal Spanish Academy Dictionary (RAE) refers to "tillage"- laboring of a field or task. The Castilian Dictionary of XV Century Vocabulary Terms (Universitat de Barcelona) also concurs with this definition being related to laboring and agriculture. And once more, it is critical to understand the circumstances of what was happening in Hispaniola in 1500 to appreciate which definition applies here and why:

At a time when the colonists were being issued plots of land to develop (encomiendas, which could not be bought), one of the crops popular to cultivate was wheat; the island colonists needed food resources and this is what was most popular and available that could also generate an income). And unlike today, wheat threshing was done by hand-

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjLCqahK2XY>]

The outlook of the encomenderos was that it made more sense to purchase a young girl to thresh their fields as they were more energetic and would not complain or run away as the older women were doing. This paragraph does not compare a girl's material value as property, it simply defines the reason they were of interest in the first place. That this form of slavery is still poignant to one's perspective today, it is. However, food was a primary need for both colonists and slaves at that time, so the solution reached was what history tells us happened during these harsh times.

IMPORTANT: This passage's origin comes from a letter Columbus wrote in 1500 to one of Queen Isabela's royal governesses whom he knew very well. Columbus was complaining about what he had heard was happening in Hispaniola after he was imprisoned in Spain, by then he was not involved in the affairs of the colony.

Nevertheless, if one realizes the letter was intended exclusively for a monarch's attention, why would Columbus (or anyone else for that matter) implicate himself to discuss personal slave-trading activities (which were already forbidden to him), let alone sex-trading ones? This makes no sense and it shows the exaggeration made out of this historical incident.

And addressing the charges of Columbus "giving his subordinates women to rape" - he was a fervently religious person with an outrageously strict zeal. He also had women passengers travelling along his second voyage to Hispaniola and it would have not been plausible for such an event to occur in front of these compatriots. In fact, one episode of Columbus rescuing Taíno women in his second voyage involved these European women and De las Casas recorded nothing sordid about the episode which happened in the island of Guadalupe.

This allusion results from conflating the narrative of Michel De Cuneo (whom detailed such an episode he partook in) into the general narrative of Columbus. If Columbus was complicit of anything it was of steering the woman (part of a group of Caribs that had attacked them) towards De Cuneo implying to take her away as a slave. Columbus had no control over what Cuneo would perpetrate later nor should he be held accountable for that unfortunate event.

Example 4: Other public interpretations made about the Columbian narrative make issue of him having been imprisoned for "extreme crimes". The precise reason Columbus was imprisoned is commented in Bartolomé de las Casas 'History of the Indies' as well as in the Francisco de Bobadilla inquest: he was charged for exacting judicial sentences upon the colonists without effecting established judicial procedure (what we call today due process). He overreached the powers bestowed to him by the Spanish Crown since only they had the authority to administer severe punishments to their vassals. Even as governor, he was still limited to jailing transgressors and commence judiciary proceedings against them (or send them back to Seville for trial), a task he did not perform in many cases.

Also, the punishments that are decried as a sample of his sadism (cutting people's ears and noses, etc.) where standard forms of punishment meted out upon law breakers in European society during Columbus's time period, they were not his personal inventions.

In fact, such judicial retributions were rooted in the principles of 'Lex Talionis', which borrowed from the 'Codes of Hammurabi' instituted in ancient Babylonian culture. Even English Common Law (the legal structure that we derive our U.S. law system from) borrowed from these codes. But to give historic examples of this:

-in Elizabethan England, many offences were punished by the pillory; however, if the public felt deeply about the offense the offender might not finish his sentence alive as one or both of the offender's ears were nailed to the pillory or were sometimes cut off anyway. ('Crime and punishment in Elizabethan England', Liza Picard-British Library, 2016)

-stealing over the value of nine pence was punishable by tying the person by the feet, cutting their tongue and in extreme cases throwing them to sea ('Pena de muerte: La crueldad legislada', Elías Neuman, Editorial Universal Buenos Aires 2004)

De las Casas also devoted a long paragraph to address the charges brought against Columbus by the colonists, defending him from the exaggerated views Bobadilla and the other colonists seemed to inject into their grievances:

"They accused him of bad and cruel treatments that he had done upon the Christians [colonists] in La Isabela when he lived there, making them work by force without giving them food, sick and skinny [they were made] ... that he ordered many men confronted and flogged for light things such as stealing a celemín [5 litres] of wheat or dying of hunger because they looked elsewhere for food."

['Historia de las Indias', Tomo II, p. 492]

The above relation is interesting not only because of how the accusations paint a negative character upon Columbus but it contrasts with the level of exaggerations made by the colonists themselves (De las Casas's perspective). One particular complaint that was made over and over during the inquest was that the colonists felt Columbus favored too much the Taíno natives, this shown by the following examples as testified by the colonists:

"(All by order of Columbus) Naked, hands tied and thrown to a rope around his neck, Montoya's corpse [a Spanish colonist] was walked [paraded] through the streets of La Isabela. Mateo testified that when they crossed the river near Cibao -which was very grown in level- Montoya struck a blow with his sword onto an Indian that was carrying him across [the river], cutting a gash in his head."

['La Caída de Cristóbal Colón- El Juicio de Bobadilla' Marcial Pons Publishing Ch. VI, No. 8: Punishing minor infractions, p.209-210]

and...

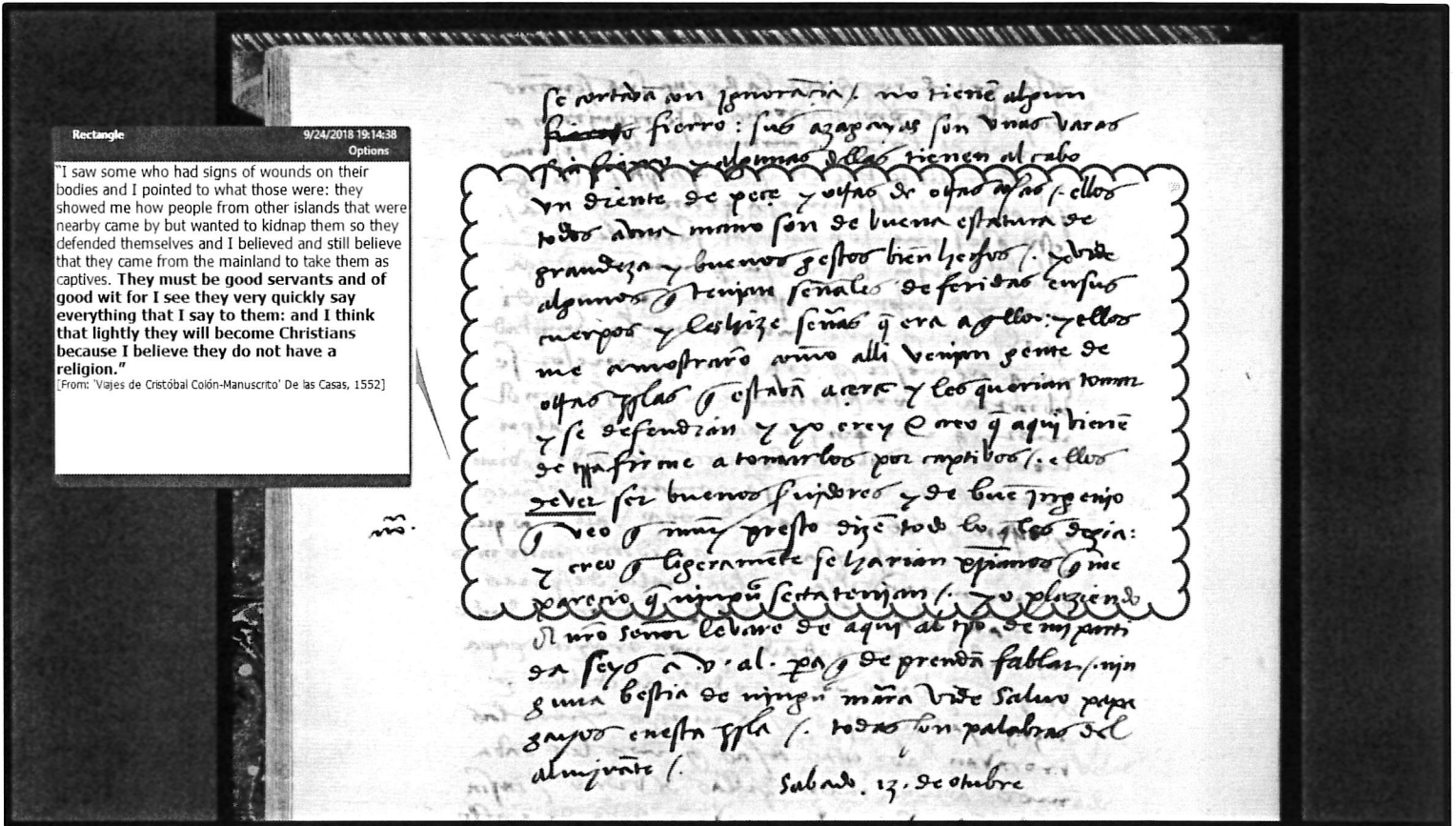
-Gilberto and Antón de Cózar were sentenced to hang for killing the dogs of a Taíno cacique to later eat them. Their sentence was commuted once they paid back the value of the dog back to the cacique.

['La Caída de Cristóbal Colón- El Juicio de Bobadilla' Marcial Pons Publishing Ch. VI, No. 2: Persecution of Bernal Diaz, p.208]

At the end of the day, there are so many ways one can deride different interpretations positive or negative about De las Casas's text regarding many of his narrations- the figure of Columbus being one of those popular topics.

But as stated before, De las Casas's text is a tedious and complicated one to read and understand. Before pre-judging its context, it would be prudent to gather a lot of supplemental resources (which also involve lots of reading) to frame and understand properly this narrative. Only then can one ultimately make light of this very interesting glimpse of life in the Caribbean during the Spanish colonization of America in the XVI century.

Exhibit A:



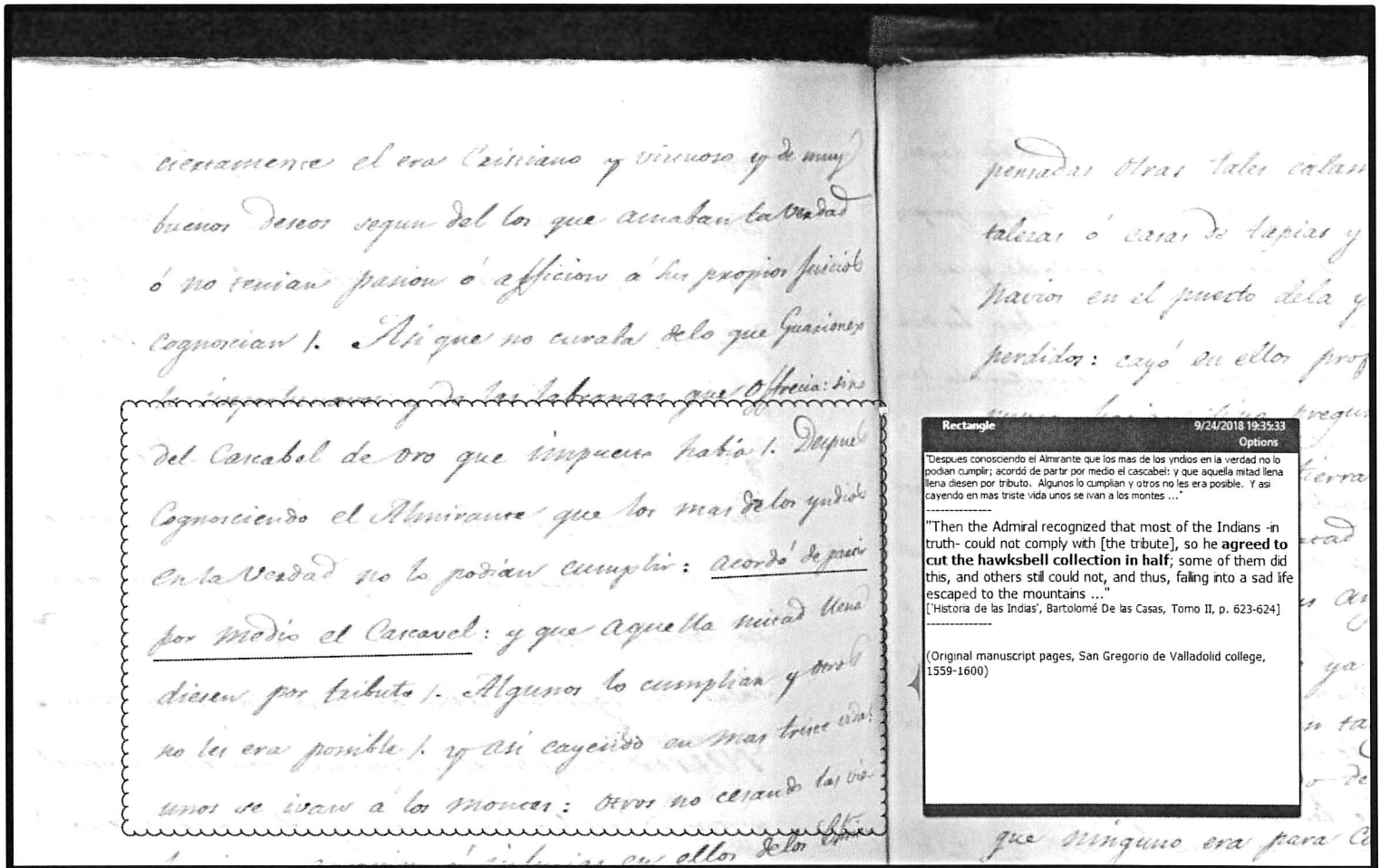
'Diario de abordo del Primer Viaje de Cristóbal Colon', 12th of october entry
 Facsimile of Manuscript, 1552 Biblioteca Nacional Hispánica

You can see in the original manuscript that there is no comma nor partition of the sentence in question making the whole sentence a complete thought. Perhaps this is an optical aberration, the flair in the word "veo" (below the red line) might appear as a separation of words; but looking at details such as this are critical to understand how De las Casas conveyed his narration within the text.

[Typical English translation of Columbus's Journal using the word "should": (Hakluyt Society 1893)]

[English/Spanish online translation for the word "deben"- Merriam-Webster version]

Exhibit B:



'Historia de las Indias', Bartolomé de las Casas
Facsimile of Manuscript, 1559 Biblioteca San Gregorio de Valladolid

The underlined words state "...he agreed to cut the hawksbell collections in half..." This may be a possible source of the misunderstanding in interpreting the use of the word "cut" in its English translation. This word was used in regard to the amount of collections themselves that were imposed upon the Taíno as a form of punishment, not a reference about violent acts perpetrated upon them. On the contrary, the paragraph explains that their work was actually "cut" in half!

NOTE: It is interesting that in the Internet it is very hard to find an English-translated version of "Historia de las Indias" (History of the Indies). Regarding the above passage, the one place of all that you can find a translation equal to what is shown in the original De las Casas manuscript shown is the relation Washington Irving wrote in 1828-
[The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus by Washington Irving: Vol. 2, Volume 2]

Exhibit C:

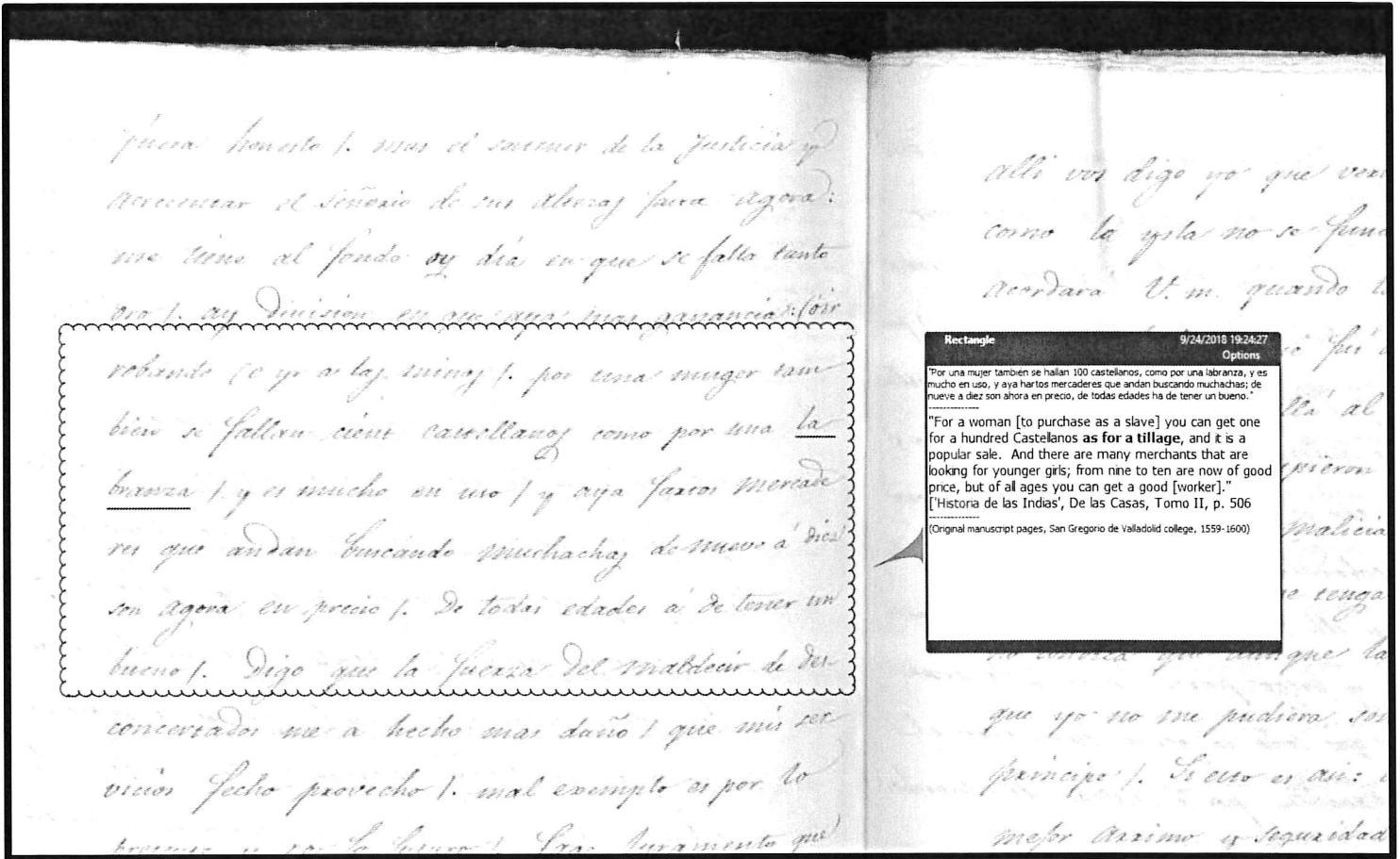


“La batalla en la Vega Real”

From the work “Historia General de Las Indias, Década Primera” by Antonio de Herrera (1601)”

This illustration depicts the “Batalla del Santo Cerro en la Vega Real” as it was redacted in Herrera’s chronicle of the late XVI century. The book consists of the history of the discoveries, conquests and settlements of America in a narrative that spans over 100 years from the time of its publication. De las Casas also narrated the events that took place in Vega Real in several chapters of his ‘Historia de las Indias’ work.

Exhibit D:



'Historia de las Indias', Bartolomé de las Casas
Facsimile of Manuscript, 1559 Biblioteca San Gregorio de Valladolid

The correct translation of the word "labranza" in this paragraph is "tillage". Consulted dictionary search results:
-[Royal Spanish Academy Dictionary \(RAE\)](#)
-[Castilian Dictionary of XV Century Vocabulary Terms](#) (under Dictionary/Search by lemma/labrança)

DEFINITION: LABRANZA = LABRANÇA

(Derived from Latin LABORARE, 'to work'. Nebrija [Antonio de]* [c.1492]: Agricolaris. by way of tillage. Farming. ae. for laboring the field. Culture. ae. by the work. Epistles. ae. by the operator of tillage.

Nebrija [Antonio de]*[ca. 1495]: Art of laboring the earth. rustic. Farming of land [in Greek]. georgicon. Labrança cultus .us. cultio .onis. culture.

[*Original definitions from Antonio de Nebrija's work- 'Grammatica Antonii Nebrissensis' (1492)]