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## Columbus' First Journey to the West: A Battle with Custom

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Oral Presentation 4.3

**COLUMBUS' FIRST JOURNEY TO THE WEST:  
A BATTLE WITH CUSTOM**

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As Michel de Montaigne's essays, "On Cannibals" and "On the Custom of Wearing Clothes," help us see, a person's customs often shape the way he views the world. By customs, I mean common, unquestioned cultural practices. In these essays, Montaigne explores the customs of cannibalism and nakedness, and he comes to the conclusion that a person should not judge the customs of others against his own customs. Michel de Montaigne's ideas came to mind while reading Christopher Columbus' journal from the voyage of 1492. I realized that many of Montaigne's ideas are directly related to Columbus' interactions with the western natives. Fifteenth-century medieval European culture, especially Spanish culture, played a large part in Christopher Columbus' August 1492 journey. Not only did this culture shape Columbus' motivations for traveling, but it also influenced his treatment of the natives he encountered there. Culture encompasses a large range of ideas, knowledge, and practices. Several important influences for Columbus were medieval maps, literature and sea stories. Not only did these sources provide Columbus with ideas of what he would find in Asia, but they also provided him with several motivations for traveling: exploration; trade with the Great Khan, the leader of India; and the spread of Christianity. Spanish customs had also engrained in his head two important beliefs: one, that Spanish culture was superior to all cultures and, two, that Christianity is superior to all other religions. All of Columbus' expectations and cultural beliefs ultimately influenced his way of thinking and his manner of interacting with the natives. Once Columbus reached what he believed to be Asia, he encountered natives from many different islands who went naked, were cannibals, and were not Christians. Columbus' Eurocentric reaction to the natives' customs is apparent in his journal entries, in which he constantly makes reference to attempts to make the natives look and act like Spaniards. Instead of judging the customs by pondering whether they were reasonable or not, Columbus passed judgment on the foreign customs by placing them in an inferior position to that of Spanish customs.