

THE DISCOVERY OF EUROPE

It was the smell.

Before anything else, before sight or sound of anything other than waves breaking on the shore, the smell was the first thing they sensed. Strong, overpowering even the fresh scent of salt water. Revolting waves of stench rolled stronger than the Atlantic swells, a stink that bore death and misery, decay.

The Black Death, the Plague, the End of Days – the European continent had been so utterly devastated, so brutally ravaged by their undoing that those who had lived through it had no need to know its name other than to curse it silently, wordlessly in their final thoughts and forsaken prayers. The strange doctors with their beaked helmets and leather robes had tried everything from leeching the afflicted to amputating their limbs before they, too, were consumed by the epidemic, their efforts spent in vain, their various peoples and cultures drowning in the mire of pestilence.

So it was that no political or religious leaders, no great armies or local militias stood on the beaches to witness the arrival of the very first exploration fleet from the American continent. It was history in the making with hardly a soul to see, apart from the Sioux braves standing on the weather-beaten decks of the first vessel cutting sleekly through the frothy tide.

The leader jumped lithely from the prow of the long, narrow boat to alight on the sand. Not thirty seconds walk from the shore was the first body, a black and swollen husk, home to maggots hatching in what was left of the flesh. The stink.

There were only three hundred men and women on the expedition, and they came armed and wary, but needn't have worried. The village they arrived at had ten dead for every living resident, perhaps one hundred wretched survivors in total.

The second in command was cautious. "There is a great sickness upon these people, chieftain... I don't know if we should go any further..."

The leader gazed down his long nose at the people suffering in front of him, cowering in rags at the sight of the healthy warriors.

"Not sick", he uttered softly. "Starving."

He was right. The people were skin and bones, skeletal figures of pity and hopelessness, a mockery of human life. There were no farms to be seen of any consequence, and the only wild animals in sight were dogs and rats.

"Have they no bison? No pigs? Where is all the food?"

The leader looked around once more at the village. Shacks cobbled together with driftwood, clothes made of poorly woven reeds and plants. Cloth seemed to be in short supply. No weapons, no handmade items of any beauty. Sea shells and smooth stones from the shore.

"They do not know how to farm, I think. Look at how they live."

The man's heart was heavy with the sight of the wretched waifs skulking in front of them, too

scared to approach, no signs of communication of any kind other than some sort of superstitious hand motion, crossing up, down, and side to side in front of their gaunt faces.

"Look at how they act." He sighed, long and slow.

"These people are savages."