



Giovanni da Verrazzano

Letter to King Francis 1 of France 8 July 1524

reporting on his voyage
to the New World

*Del Viaggio del Verazzano Nobile
Fiorentino al Servizio di Francesco
I, Re di Francia, fatto nel 1524
all'America Settentrionale.*

EXCERPTS



◆ Verrazzano's marginal notes are italicized and bracketed within the text. ◆

Since the storm that we encountered in the northern regions, Most Serene King, I have not written to tell Your Majesty of what happened to the four ships which you sent out over the Ocean to explore new lands, as I thought that you had already been informed of everything — how we were forced by the fury of the winds to return in distress to Brittany with only the Normandy and the Dauphine, and that after undergoing repairs there, we began our voyage with these two ships, equipped for war, following the coasts of Spain, as Your Most Serene Majesty will have heard; and then according to our new plan, we continued the original voyage with only the Dauphine; now on our return from this voyage, I will tell Your Majesty of what we found.

We set sail with the Dauphine from the deserted rock near the Island of Madeira, which belongs to the Most Serene King of Portugal [*at the beginning of 1524*], on the XVII day of January last; we had fifty men, and were provided with food for eight months, with arms and other articles of war, and naval munitions; we sailed westward on the gentle breath of a light easterly wind. In XXV days we covered eight hundred leagues. On the XXIII day of February [*for about 16 hours*] we went through a storm as violent as ever [a] sailing man encountered. We were delivered from it with the divine help and goodness of the ship, whose glorious name and happy destiny enabled her to endure the violent waves of the sea. We continued on our westerly course, keeping rather to the north.

In another XXV days we sailed more than four hundred leagues, where there appeared a new land which had never been seen before by any man, either ancient or modern. At first it appeared to be rather low-lying; having approached to within a quarter of a league, we realized that it was inhabited, for huge fires had been built on the seashore. We saw that the land stretched southward, and coasted along it in search of some port where we might anchor the ship and investigate the nature of the land, but in fifty leagues we found no harbor or place where we could stop with the

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ship. Seeing that the land continued to the south [*so as not to meet with the Spaniards*], we decided to turn and skirt it toward the north, where we found the land we had sighted earlier. So we anchored off the coast and sent the small boat in to land. We had seen many people coming to the seashore, but they fled when they saw us approaching; several times they stopped and turned around to look at us in great wonderment. We reassured them with various signs, and some of them came up, showing great delight at seeing us and marveling at our clothes, appearance, and our whiteness; they showed us by various signs where we could most easily secure the boat, and offered us some of their food. We were on land, and I shall now tell Your Majesty briefly what we were able to learn of their life and customs.¹

They go completely naked except that around their loins they wear skins of small animals like martens, with a narrow belt of grass around the body, to which they tie

various tails of other animals which hang down to the knees; the rest of the body is bare, and so is the head. Some of them wear garlands of birds' feathers. They are dark in color, not unlike the Ethiopians, with thick black hair, not very long, tied back behind the head like a small tail. As for the physique of these men, they are well proportioned, of medium height, a little taller than we are. They have broad chests, strong arms, and the legs and other parts of the body are well composed. There is nothing else, except that they tend to be rather broad in the face: but not all, for we saw many with angular faces. They have big black eyes, and an attentive and open look. They are not very strong, but they have a sharp cunning, and are agile and swift runners. From what we could tell from observation, in the last two respects they resemble the Orientals, particularly those from the farthest Sinarian regions.² We could not learn the details of the life and customs of these people because of the short time we spent on land, due to the fact that there were few men, and the ship was anchored on the high seas.

Not far from these people, we found others on the shore whose way of life we think is similar. I will now tell Your Majesty about it, and describe the situation and nature of this land. The seashore is completely covered with fine sand XV feet deep, which arises in the forms of small hills about fifty paces wide. After climbing farther, we found other streams and inlets from the sea which come in by several mouths, and follow the ins and outs of the shoreline. Nearby we could see a stretch of country much higher than the sandy shore, with many beautiful fields and plains full of great forests, some sparse and some dense; and the trees have so many colors, and are so beautiful and delightful that they defy description. And do not think, Your Majesty, that these forests are like the Hyrcanian Forest or the wild wastelands of Scythia and the northern countries,³ full of common trees; they are adorned and clothed with palms, laurel, cypress, and other varieties of tree unknown in our Europe. And these trees emit a sweet fragrance over a large area [*We smelled the fragrance a hundred leagues away, and even farther when they were burning the cedars and the winds were*

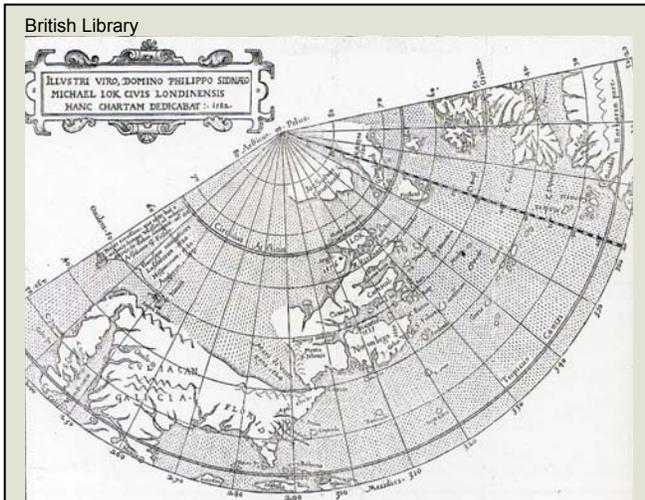
¹ It may now be suggested, but not affirmed, that the landfall was not exactly at 34° on the Georgetown peninsula [SC] nor at Cape Fear [NC] itself at 33° 51', but rather in this last-named latitude on the continental coast west of Cape Fear, near the place where today's boundary line between the Carolinas reaches the sea. [Wroth, *Voyages*, p. 79]

² Sinarian: Chinese.

³ Hyrcanian Forest: in northern Iran. Scythia: ancient region of Eurasia.

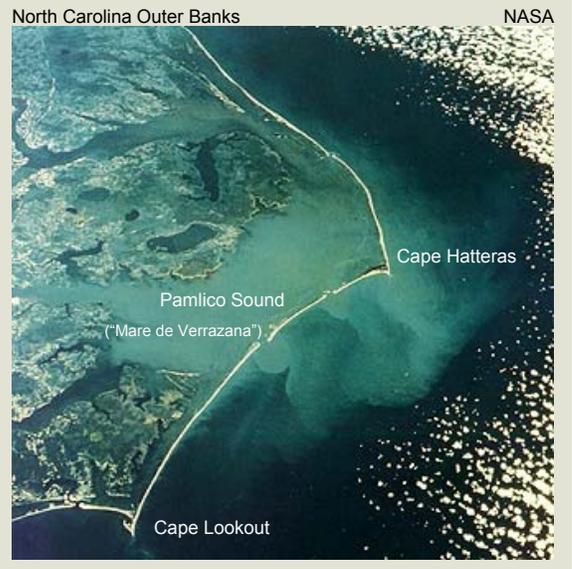
are more clear-cut, their body and other limbs much more delicate and much less powerful, but they are more quick-witted. He saw nothing else.

We left this place [*We called it “Annunciata”⁴ from the day of arrival, and found there an isthmus one mile wide and about two hundred miles long, in which we could see the eastern sea from the ship, halfway between west⁵ and north. This is doubtless the one which goes around the tip of India, China, and Cathay. We sailed along this isthmus, hoping all the time to find some strait ~~to the end~~⁶ or real promontory where the land might end toward the north, and we could reach those blessed shores of Cathay. This isthmus was named by the discoverer “Varazanio,” just as all the land we found was called “Francesca” after our Francis.*] still following the coast which veered somewhat to the north, and after fifty leagues we reached another land which seemed much more beautiful and full of great forests. We anchored there, and with XX men we penetrated about two leagues inland, to find that the people had fled in terror into the forests. Searching everywhere, we met with a very old woman and a young girl of XVIII to XX years, who had hidden in the grass in fear. The old woman had two little girls whom she carried on her shoulders, and clinging to her neck a boy — they were all about eight years old. The young woman also had three children, but all girls. When we met them, they began to shout. The old woman made signs to us that the men had fled to the woods. We gave her some of our food to eat, which she accepted with



Michael Lok, *Illustri Viro*, 1582, depicting the “Mare de Verrazana”

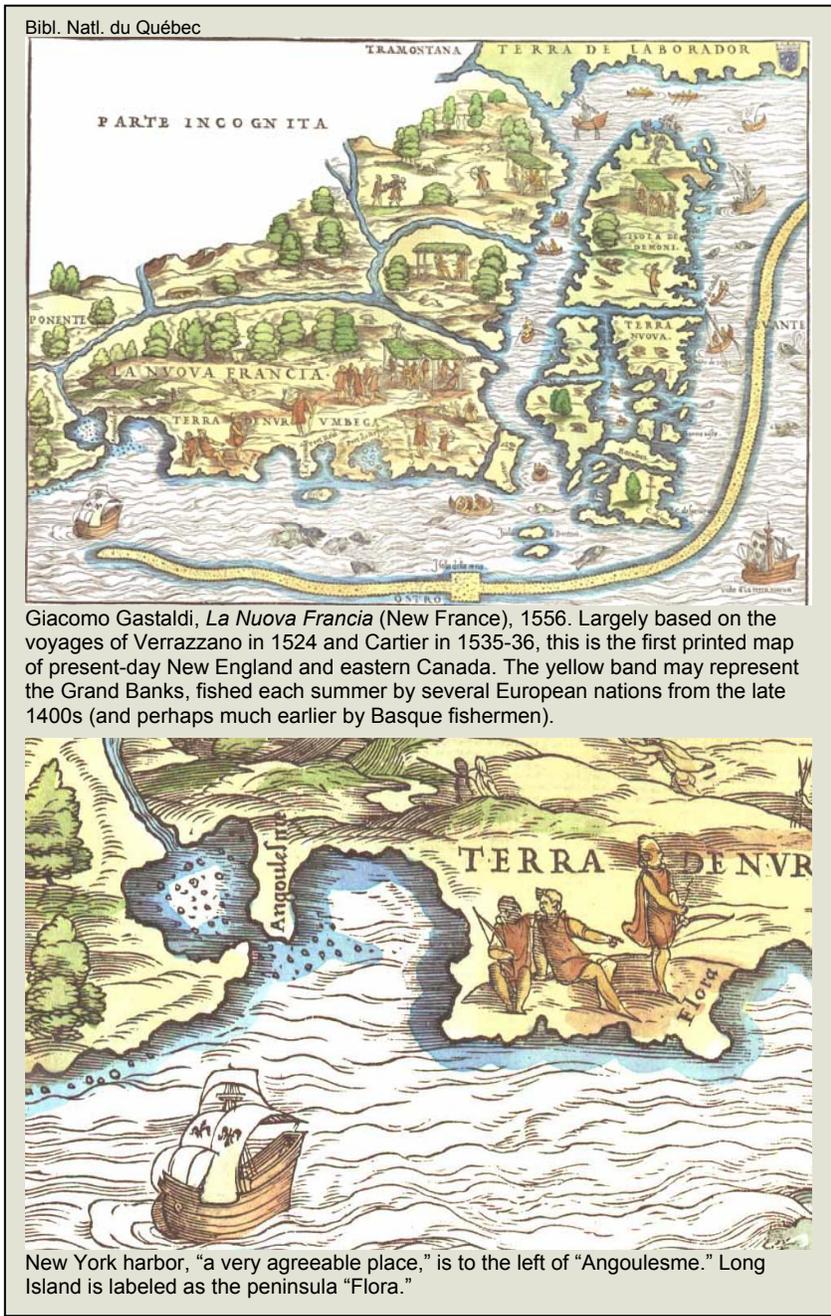
“This is doubtless the one [sea] which goes around the tip of India, China, and Cathay.”
Verrazano, on the “Mare de Verrazana”



⁴ “Annunciata”: Cape Lookout, North Carolina.

⁵ originally “east.” [Wroth, p. 136]

⁶ “to the end of” crossed out. [Wroth, p. 136]



great pleasure; the young woman refused everything and threw it angrily to the ground. We took the boy from the old woman to carry back to France, and we wanted to take the young woman, who was very beautiful and tall, but it was impossible to take her to the sea because of the loud cries she uttered. And as we were a long way from the ship and had to pass through several woods, we decided to leave her behind, and took only the boy. . . .

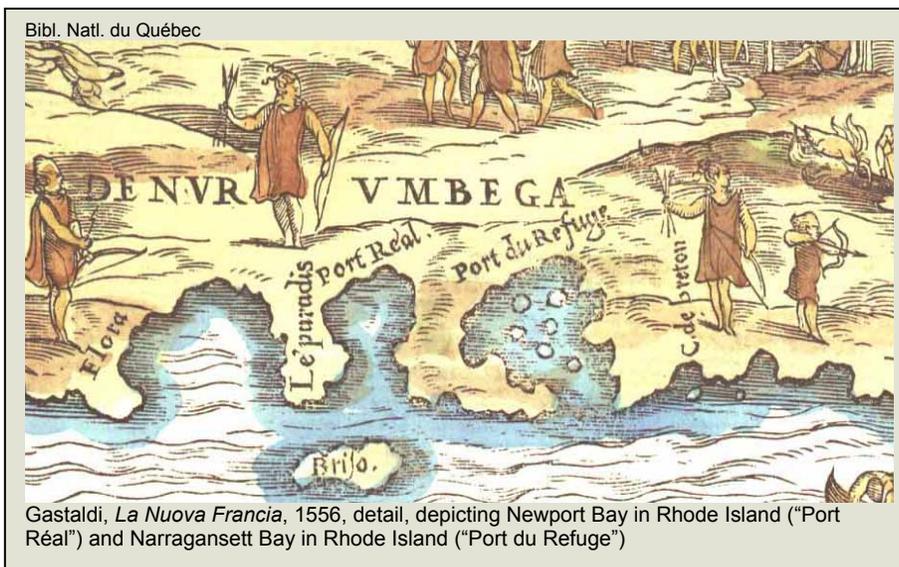
[W]e continued to follow the coast to the northeast [which we baptized "Arcadia" on account of the beauty of the trees. In Arcadia we found a man who came to the shore to see who we were: he stood suspiciously and ready for flight. He watched us but would not come near. He was handsome, naked, with olive-colored skin, his hair fastened back in a knot. There were about XX of us ashore, and as we coaxed him, he approached to within about two fathoms of us, and showed us a burning stick, as if to offer us fire. And we made fire with powder and flint, and he trembled all over with fear as we fired a shot. He remained as if

thunderstruck, and prayed, worshipping like a monk, pointing his finger to the sky, and indicating the sea and the ship, he appeared to bless [?] us.], sailing only during the day and casting anchor at night. [We followed a coast which was very green and forested, but without harbors, and with some pleasant promontories and small rivers. We baptized it the "Costa di Lorena" after the Cardinal: the first promontory "Lanzone," the second "Bonivetto," the largest river "Vandoma," and a little mountain by the sea, "di S. Polo" after the Count.]⁷ After a hundred leagues we found a very agreeable place⁸ between two small but prominent hills; between them a very wide river, deep at its mouth, flowed out into the sea; and with the help of the tide, which rises eight feet, any laden ship

⁷ "Lanzone" may be Cape Henlopen in Delaware, "Bonivetto" may be Cape May in New Jersey, and "S. Polo" may be the Navesink Highlands in New Jersey. [Wroth, p. 85]
⁸ Here indeed, is the first mention in written history of New York Harbor, that place of high destiny in the succeeding centuries. [Wroth, p. 85]

could have passed from the sea into the river estuary. Since we were anchored off the coast and well sheltered, we did not want to run any risks without knowing anything about the river mouth. So we took the small boat up this river to land which we found densely populated. The people were almost the same as the others, dressed in birds' feathers of various colors, and they came toward us joyfully, uttering loud cries of wonderment, and showing us the safest place to beach the boat. We went up this river for about half a league, where we saw that it formed a beautiful lake, about three leagues in circumference. About XXX of their small boats ran to and fro across the lake with innumerable people aboard who were crossing from one side to the other to see us. Suddenly, as often happens in sailing, a violent unfavorable wind blew in from the sea, and we were forced to return to the ship, leaving the land with much regret on account of its favorable conditions and beauty; we think it was not without some properties of value, since all the hills showed signs of minerals [called "Angoleme" after the principality which you attained in days of lesser fortune; and the bay formed by this land we called "Santa Margarita," naming it after your sister, who surpasses all other matrons in modesty and intellect.]

We weighed anchor, and sailed eastward since the land veered in that direction, and we covered LXXX leagues, always keeping in sight of land. We discovered a triangular-shaped island, ten leagues from the mainland, similar in size to the island of Rhodes; it was full of hills, covered in trees, and highly populated to judge by the fires we saw burning continually along the shore. We baptized it in the name of your illustrious mother [Aloysia], but did not anchor there because the weather was unfavorable.⁹



Gastaldi, *La Nuova Francia*, 1556, detail, depicting Newport Bay in Rhode Island ("Port Réal") and Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island ("Port du Refuge")

We reached another land XV leagues from the island, where we found an excellent harbor;¹⁰ before entering it, we saw about XX boats full of people who came around the ship uttering various cries of wonderment. They did not come nearer than fifty paces, but stopped to look at the structure of our ship, our persons, and our clothes; then all together they raised a loud cry which meant that they

were joyful. We reassured them somewhat by imitating their gestures, and they came near enough for us to throw them a few little bells and mirrors and many trinkets, which they took and looked at, laughing, and then they confidently came on board ship. Among them were two kings, who were as beautiful of stature and build as I can possibly describe. The first was about XXXX years old, the other a young man of XXIII, and they were dressed thus: the older man had on his naked body a stag skin, skillfully worked like damask with various embroideries; the head was bare, the hair tied

⁹ There is, it must be said, no island in that area which meets all these particular specifications. . . . The only certainty we have is that as he approached "Refugio," that is, Narragansett Bay, Verrazzano saw briefly an island which he called "Aloysia," described it very badly in accordance with his weakness for overstating size and distance, and left it because of unfavorable weather without anchoring offshore. [Wroth, p. 87]

¹⁰ "Port Réal" (see map above).

back with various bands, and around the neck hung a wide chain decorated with many different-colored stones. The young man was dressed in almost the same way. These people are the most beautiful and have the most civil customs that we have found on this voyage. They are taller than we are; they are a bronze color, some tending more toward whiteness, others to a tawny color; the face is clear-cut; the hair is long and black, and they take great pains to decorate it; the eyes are black and alert, and their manner is sweet and gentle, very like the manner of the ancients. I shall not speak to Your Majesty of the other parts of the body, since they have all the proportions belonging to any well-built man. Their women are just as shapely and beautiful; very gracious, of attractive manner and pleasant appearance; their customs and behavior follow womanly custom as

far as befits human nature; they go nude except for a stag skin embroidered like the men's, and some wear rich lynx skins on their arms; their bare heads are decorated with various ornaments made of braids of their own hair which hang down over their breasts on either side. Some have other hair arrangements such as the women of Egypt and Syria wear, and these women are older and have been joined in wedlock. Both men and women have various trinkets



hanging from their ears as the Orientals do; and we saw that they had many sheets of worked copper which they prize more than gold. They do not value gold because of its color; they think it the most worthless of all, and rate blue and red above all other colors. The things we gave them that they prized the most were little bells, blue crystals, and other trinkets to put in the ear or around the neck. They did not appreciate cloth of silk and gold, nor even of any other kind, nor did they care to have them; the same was true for metals like steel and iron, for many times when we showed them some of our arms, they did not admire them, nor ask for them, but merely examined the workmanship. They did the same with mirrors; they would look at them quickly, and then refuse them, laughing. They are very generous and give away all they have. We made great friends with them, and one day before we entered the harbor with the ship, when we were lying at anchor one league out to sea because of unfavorable weather, they came out to the ship with a great number of their boats; they had painted and decorated their faces with various colors, showing us that it was a sign of happiness. They brought us some of their food, and showed us by signs where we should anchor in the port for the ship's safety, and then accompanied us all the way until we dropped anchor.

We stayed there for XV days, taking advantage of the place to refresh ourselves. Every day the people came to see us on the ship, bringing their womenfolk. They are very careful with them, for

when they come aboard and stay a long time, they make the women wait in the boats; and however many entreaties we made or offers of various gifts, we could not persuade them to let the women come on board ship. One of the two kings often came with the queen and many attendants for the pleasure of seeing us, and at first they always stopped on a piece of ground about two hundred paces away from us, and sent a boat to warn us of their arrival, saying they wanted to come and see the ship: they did this as a kind of precaution. And once they had a reply from us, they came immediately, and watched us for a while; but when they heard the irksome clamor of the crowd of sailors, they sent the queen and her maidens in a light little boat to wait on a small island about a quarter of a league from us. The king remained a long while, discussing by signs and gestures various fanciful notions, looking at all the ship's equipment, and asking especially about its uses; he imitated our manners, tasted our food, and then courteously took his leave of us. Sometimes when our men stayed on a small island near the ship for two or three days for their various needs, as is the custom of sailors, he would come with seven or eight of his attendants, watch our operations, and often ask us if we wanted to stay there any length of time, offering us all his help. Then he would shoot his bow and run and perform various games with his men to give us pleasure.

We frequently went five to six leagues into the interior, and found it as pleasant as I can possibly describe, and suitable for every kind of cultivation — grain, wine, or oil. For there the fields extend for XXV to XXX leagues; they are open and free of any obstacles or trees, and so fertile that any kind of seed would produce excellent crops. . . . When we went farther inland we saw their houses, which are circular in shape, about XIII to XV paces across, made of bent saplings; they are arranged without any architectural pattern, and are covered with cleverly worked mats of straw which protect them from wind and rain. There is no doubt that if they had the skilled workmen that we have, they would erect great buildings, for the whole maritime coast is full of various blue rocks, crystals, and alabaster, and for such a purpose it has an abundance of ports and shelter for ships. They move these houses from one place to another according to the richness of the site and the season. They need only carry the straw mats, and so they have new houses made in no time at all. In each house there lives a father with a very large family, for in some we saw XXV to XXX people. They live on the same food as the other people — pulse¹¹ (which they produce with more systematic cultivation than the other tribes, and when sewing they observe the influence of the moon, the rising of the Pleiades, and many other customs derived from the ancients), and otherwise on game and fish. They live a long time, and rarely fall sick; if they are wounded, they cure themselves with fire without medicine; their end comes with old age. We consider them very compassionate and charitable toward their relatives, for they make great lamentations in times of adversity, recalling in their grief all their past happiness. . . .

We sailed one hundred and fifty leagues [*within this distance we found sandbanks which stretch from the continent fifty leagues out to sea. Over them the water was never less than three feet deep: thus there is great danger in sailing there. We crossed them with difficulty and called them "Armellini."*]¹² and found the land similar in nature, but somewhat higher, with several mountains [*with a high promontory which we called "Pallavisino"*]¹³ which all showed signs of minerals. We did not land there because the weather was favorable and helped us in sailing along the coast: we think [*the people*] it resembles the other. The shore ran eastward. At a distance of fifty leagues, keeping more to the north, we found high country full of very dense forests, composed of pines, cypresses, and similar trees which grow in cold regions.

¹¹ Pulse: legume crops such as beans and peas.

¹² "Armellini": the large shoal east of Nantucket and Cape Cod. [Wroth, pp. 88-89]

¹³ Cape Cod.

The people were quite different from the others, for while the previous ones had been courteous in manner, these were full of crudity and vices, and were so barbarous that we could never make any communication with them, however many signs we made to them. They were clothed in skins of bear, lynx, sea-wolf and other animals. As far as we could judge from several visits to their houses, we think they live on game, fish, and several fruits which are a species of root which the earth produces itself. They have no pulse [legume crops], and we saw no sign of cultivation, nor would the land be suitable for producing any fruit or grain on account of its sterility. If we wanted to trade with them for some of their things, they would come to the seashore on some rocks where the breakers were most violent, while we remained in the little boat, and they sent us what they wanted to give on a rope, continually shouting to us not to approach the land; they gave us the barter quickly, and would take in exchange only knives, hooks for fishing, and sharp metal. We found no courtesy in them, and when we had nothing more to exchange and left them, the men made all the signs of scorn and shame that any brute creature would make [such as showing their buttocks and laughing]. [We are in 43 $\frac{2}{3}$.]¹⁴ Against their wishes, we penetrated two or three leagues inland with XXV armed men, and when we disembarked on the shore, they shot at us with their bows and uttered loud cries before fleeing into the woods. . . .



After sailing CL leagues in a northeasterly direction we approached the land which the Britons once found, which lies in 50 degrees;¹⁵ and since we had exhausted all our naval stores and provisions, and had discovered seven hundred leagues or more of new land, we took on supplies of water and wood, and decided to return to France.

Due to the lack of [a

common] language, we were unable to find out by signs or gestures how much religious faith these people we found possess. We think they have neither religion nor laws, that they do not know of a First Cause or Author, that they do not worship the sky, the stars, the sun, the moon, or other planets, nor do they even practice any kind of idolatry; we do not know whether they offer any sacrifices or other prayers, nor are there any temples or churches of prayer among their peoples. We consider that they have no religion and that they live in absolute freedom, and that everything they

¹⁴ degrees north latitude.

¹⁵ Actually, departure was not taken from this point, roughly the Cape Breton region, but as Verrazzano tells us later in the letter, from "the land which the Lusitanians found long ago," which he identifies in the annotation as "Bacalaia, so called after a fish," that is, Newfoundland. [Wroth, p. 89]

do proceeds from Ignorance; for they are very easily persuaded, and they imitated everything that they saw us Christians do with regard to divine worship, with the same fervor and enthusiasm that we had. . . .

My intention on this voyage was to reach Cathay and the extreme eastern coast of Asia, but I did not expect to find such an obstacle of new land as I have found; and if for some reason I did expect to find it, I estimated there would be some strait to get through to the Eastern Ocean. This was the opinion of all the ancients, who certainly believed that our Western Ocean was joined to the Eastern Ocean of India without any land in between. Aristotle supports this theory by arguments of various analogies, but this opinion is quite contrary to that of the moderns, and has been proven false by

experience. Nevertheless, land has been found by modern man which was unknown to the ancients, another world with respect to the one they knew, which appears to be larger than our Europe, than Africa, and almost larger than Asia, if we estimate its size correctly

All this land or New World which we have described above is joined together, but is not linked with Asia or Africa (we know this for certain), but could be joined to Europe by Norway or Russia; this would be false according to the ancients

I hope that with Your

Majesty's help we shall have more certain knowledge of this; may God Almighty prosper you in everlasting glory, so that we may see the perfect end to our cosmography, and that the sacred word of the gospel may be fulfilled: "their sound has gone out into every land." In the ship "Dauphine" on the VIII day of July.

M.D. XXIII.

Humble servant JANUS VERRAZANUS.

To Leonardo Tedaldi or to Thomaso Sartini, merchants in Lyons. To be forwarded to Bonacorso Ruscellay.

