A few short passages from Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo, *Natural History of the Indies* (1535)

Oviedo (1478-1577) traveled back and forth across the Atlantic numerous times in the early years of the Spanish colonization of the Caribbean and South America. He wrote a long account of everything he saw there; some of it was published in Spain in 1535. These are just a few very short excerpts to give you the flavor of Oviedo’s work.

*Natural History of the Indies*

I, however, compiled what I here write from two hundred thousand hardships, privations, and dangers in the more than twenty-two years that I have personally witnessed and experienced these things.

[On jaguars]: In my opinion these animals are not tigers, nor are they panthers or any of the numerous known animals that have spotted skins, nor some new animal that has a spotted skin and has not been described. The many animals that exist in the Indies that I describe here, or at least most of them, could not have been learned about from the ancients, since they exist in a land that had not been discovered until our own time. There is no mention made of these lands in Ptolemy’s Cosmography, nor in any other work, nor were they known until Christopher Columbus showed them to us.

... There are some little birds so small that they are no larger than the end of the thumb... Not only is this bird exceptionally small, but it is so swift in flight that it is as impossible to see its wings as it is those of a beetle or bumblebee. Everyone who sees it fly thinks it is a bumblebee.

What mortal understanding can comprehend such diversity of languages, habits, and customs among the people of the Indies? Such variety of animals, from domestic to wild and savage? Such an unutterable multitude of trees, some laden with diverse kinds of fruit and others barren, both those which the Indians cultivate and those produced by Nature’s own work without the aid of human hands? How many plants and herbs that are useful and beneficial to man? How many innumerable others unknown to him, whose flowers and sweet fragrances are so different from the ones he knows? . . . How many mountains more astonishing and frightening than Etna or Mongibel, Vulcan and Strogol, with one and all under your rule?