

3. Thomas Harriot's Observations at Roanoke

By the 1580s, Spain had many successful colonies in the Americas; other European nations dreamed of catching up with them. Spain had managed to impose a kind of labor tax over the Indians, requiring individuals to work for part of each year for the European to whom their village had been assigned. As the English began to explore North America, they hoped they would soon be able to do the same. In 1585, an experimental colony was planted at Roanoke, an island off the coast of today's North Carolina. Later, all traces of the colonists would disappear, but not until after men in the first boatload had made careful observations of what they found and brought their records back to London. John White painted the land and people (see Chapter 1, section 4), and Thomas Harriot, a talented linguist and mathematician, did his best to learn an Algonkian language and talk to the people. He later published A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia, which was published along with engravings made from White's paintings and became a bestseller by sixteenth-century standards.

In respect of us they are a people poore, and for want of skill and judgement in the knowledge and use of our things, doe esteeme our trifles before things of greater value: notwithstanding, in their proper maner (considering the want of such meanes as we have), they seem ever ingenious. For although they have no such tooles, nor any such crafts, Sciences and Artes as wee, yet in those things, they doe, they shew excellence of wit. And by how much they upon due consideration shall finde our maner of knowledge and crafts to exceede theirs in perfection, and speede for doing or execution, by so much the more is it probable that they should desire our friendship and love, and have the greater respect for pleasing and obeying us. Whereby may bee hoped, if meanes of good government be used, that they may in short time bee brought to civilitie, and the imbracing of true Religion.

... Most things they sawe with us, as Mathematicall instruments, sea Compasses, the virtue of the load-stone in drawing yron, a perspective glasse whereby was shewed many strange sights, burning glasses, wilde firewoorkes, gunnes, hookees, writing and reading, springclockes that seeme to goe of themselves and many other things that wee had were so strange unto them, and so farre exceeded their capacities to comprehend the reason and meanes how they should be made and done, that they thought they were rather the workes of gods then of men, or at the leastwise they had bene given and taught us of the gods. Which made many of them to have such opinion of us, as that if they knew not the trueth of God and

Religion already, it was rather to bee had from us whom God so specially loved, then from a people that were so simple, as they found themselves to be in comparison of us. Whereupon greater credite was given unto that wee spake of, concerning such matters.

Source: Thomas Harriot, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1590), in Peter Mancall, ed., *Envisioning America: English Plans for the Colonization of North America, 1580–1640* (Bedford/St. Martin's, 1995).

Study and further exploration: Harriot's rich text has been interpreted in widely different ways. Compare the use which Stephen Greenblatt makes of it in *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (University of Chicago Press, 1991) and *New World Encounters* (University of California Press, 1993) with that of Joyce Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676* (Harvard University Press, 2001).