



STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (154)

TEXT: *Verdadera Historia y Descripcion de un Pais de Salvajes Desnudos, Ferozes y Canibales* (1557)

AUTHOR: Hans Staden

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PART 1: CONTEXT & CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The “Land of the Cannibals”: Early 16th-Century Brazil

In the early 16th century, the coast of what was then called the “Land of the Holy Cross” (Brazil) was predominantly inhabited by Tupi-Guarani ethnic groups. While European powers, notably the Portuguese, eventually sought to colonize, early commercial activities along the coast, involving the trade of *pau brasil*, led to Europeans living among indigenous tribes. These interactions included sharing tribal life, its customs, and critically, its ritualistic cannibalism.

Hans Staden's Harrowing Captivity

Hans Staden (born 1525, Homberg) recounts his extraordinary two voyages to Brazil, culminating in his dramatic captivity by the Tupinambas. After a shipwreck near São Vicente during his second journey (1550), he served as an artilleryman in the Portuguese fort of Bertioiga. His subsequent capture by the Tupinambas –an indigenous group often in conflict with Portuguese allies but allied with the French– placed him under constant threat of ritualistic consumption. He survived by claiming to be French and by a combination of luck and perceived shamanic abilities during a devastating epidemic.

Ritualistic Cannibalism and Tupi-Guarani Culture

Staden's narrative offers a unique, first-hand account of Tupi-Guarani society. He meticulously details their semi-nomadic lifestyle, collective organization, and, most importantly, their ritualistic cannibalism. Staden emphasizes that this practice was not for sustenance but a systematic ritual of vengeance, targeting individual captives. The process involved a more or less prolonged captivity, followed by a ceremonial execution using a club (*ivera pemme*), butchering, and communal feasting where every member participated, except the executioner. This ritual, deeply intertwined with warfare and religious beliefs, aimed at annihilating the adversary and incorporating the enemy's virtues.

Ethnographic Document and Adventure Narrative

Verdadera Historia y Descripcion de un Pais de Salvajes Desnudos, Ferozes y Canibales (1557) stands as a foundational work in travel literature and an exceptional ethnographic document. Staden's vivid, unembellished account, complete with detailed woodcut illustrations (likely approved by him), provides crucial insights into Tupi-Guarani society. His testimony, experienced as a potential victim, lends the narrative a dramatic intensity unmatched by other contemporary accounts. The work also indirectly engages with the 16th-century European debate on “barbarism and civilization,” challenging readers to reflect on their own societal values, as famously explored by Michel de Montaigne in his “Of Cannibals” essay.



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PART 2: TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

European Contact and Indigenous Life:

Describe the Tupi-Guarani way of life, social organization, and cultural practices as observed by Hans Staden. How did early European commercial activities impact indigenous societies in 16th-century Brazil?

The Ritual of Cannibalism:

Analyze the Tupinamba ritual of cannibalism as described by Staden. What was its primary motivation (vengeance, religious belief, etc.), and how did it differ from European interpretations of anthropophagy?

Staden's Captivity and Survival:

Discuss the key events and strategies that allowed Hans Staden to survive his captivity among the Tupinambas. How did his identity (German vs. French/Portuguese) and perceived abilities play a role?

Verdadera Historia as a Primary Source:

Evaluate Staden's narrative as an ethnographic document. What makes it a valuable source for understanding early indigenous cultures, and what potential biases might it contain?

“Barbarism” vs. “Civilization” Debate:

How does Staden's account (and subsequent interpretations by figures like Montaigne) contribute to the broader 16th-century European debate on “barbarism” and “civilization”? Who are the “savages” in this context, and what does this reveal about European self-perception?

Iconography and Narrative:

Discuss the role of the woodcut illustrations in Staden's original edition. How do these images complement and enhance the narrative, particularly in depicting Tupi-Guarani rituals and daily life?

PART 3: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- **Staden, Hans.** *Verdadera Historia y Descripcion de un Pais de Salvajes Desnudos, Feroces y Caníbales*. SpanishBookPress Edition.
- **Duviols, Jean-Paul.** “Introducción.” In *Staden, Hans. Verdadera Historia y Descripcion de un Pais....* SpanishBookPress.
- **Montaigne, Michel de.** *Essays* (Specifically the chapter “Of Cannibals”).
- **Léry, Jean de.** *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil*.
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- **Vespucci, Amerigo.** *Mundus Novus*.



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PART 4: QUIZ BANK (Multiple Choice)

1. What was the primary purpose of Tupi-Guarani cannibalism, according to Hans Staden?

- A) To supplement a diet lacking in protein.
- B) As a ritual of vengeance against enemies.
- C) To absorb the spiritual power of the deceased.
- D) To display dominance over neighboring tribes.

Correct Answer: B

2. Hans Staden avoided immediate execution by telling his captors he was of which nationality?

- A) German
- B) Portuguese
- C) Spanish
- D) French

Correct Answer: D

3. Which European author famously used Staden's accounts (and others) to critique European society in his essay "Of Cannibals"?

- A) Christopher Columbus
- B) Amerigo Vespucci
- C) Michel de Montaigne
- D) Jean de Léry

Correct Answer: C

4. Before his captivity, Staden worked as an artilleryman in a Portuguese fort in Brazil, located in:

- A) Rio de Janeiro
- B) São Vicente
- C) Pernambuco
- D) Bertioga

Correct Answer: D

5. What unique detail about the Tupi-Guarani is mentioned regarding their leadership selection?

- A) They chose leaders based on physical strength.
- B) They chose leaders based on oratorical skill.
- C) Leadership was hereditary.
- D) There was no recognized leadership.

Correct Answer: B

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