



## STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (161)

**TEXT:** *Usos y Costumbres de los Salvajes de Virginia*  
(*A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia and De Bry's Americae pars I*)

**AUTHOR:** Thomas Hariot / images by John White, engraved by Theodor de Bry

**EDITOR:** Jean-Paul Duviols (Université de Paris-Sorbonne)

### PART 1: CONTEXT & CRITICAL ANALYSIS

(Based on Duviols' introduction, bibliography, and Hariot's text)

#### EARLY ENGLISH VENTURES AND THE “LOST” VIRGINIA COLONIES

##### *Geopolitical background:*

In the second half of the 16th century, England sought to challenge Spain's monopoly in the Americas, justified by the papal bulls of Alexander VI. Religious conflict after the English Reformation, combined with naval rivalry (e.g., Hawkins at San Juan de Ulúa and Drake's circumnavigation), pushed Elizabeth I's government and private adventurers toward North America.

##### *From exploration to colonization:*

Humphrey Gilbert and Walter Raleigh received royal patents authorizing them to “conquer and occupy all pagan lands not possessed by Christians.” The 1584 reconnaissance by Amadas and Barlow produced an idyllic report: a fertile land, “peaceful, loving, faithful” inhabitants living as in a new Golden Age. Elizabeth I named the region “Virginia,” the land of the Virgin Queen.

##### *Roanoke and failure:*

In 1585 Richard Grenville brought about 180 colonists, including Governor Ralph Lane, mathematician Thomas Hariot, and artist John White, to Roanoke Island. Obsessed with finding gold, the colonists neglected agriculture, depended on Algonquian maize, and quickly strained relations. Hunger, hostility, and the delayed return of supplies led many to abandon the colony with Francis Drake in 1586. Grenville later found Roanoke deserted, left 15 men, and departed. A second colony (1587) under John White also vanished—the famous “Lost Colony.”

##### *Propaganda and justification:*

The main tangible “profit” from this failed enterprise was Hariot’s text, *A Briefe and True Report...* (1588), written to persuade investors and “favourers” that Virginia was fertile, strategically located, and worth colonizing despite rumors and failures. It became a foundational English colonial document.

#### HARIOT’S “TRUE REPORT”: SCIENCE, PROPAGANDA, AND COLONIAL MENTALITY

##### *A scientific observer in service of empire:*

Thomas Hariot (c. 1560–1621), a mathematician and astronomer educated at Oxford and later in Raleigh’s household, joined the 1585–1586 expedition as surveyor, cartographer, and interpreter. He learned Algonquian, drafted a grammar (now mostly



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lost), produced maps, and observed flora, fauna, and people with a systematic curiosity rare for the time.

**Structure and aims of the text:**

Hariot explicitly organizes his report in three parts:

1. Natural resources and commodities (plants, minerals, animals, fisheries) useful for settlers and profitable for trade.
2. “Resources” in terms of human relations—how to deal with the indigenous population and how they might be governed.
3. Building materials, carpentry, and, finally, an outline of indigenous “nature and manners.” He presents Virginia as exceptionally fertile, capable of multiple harvests per year, with abundant maize, beans, roots, timber, iron ore, possible copper and silver, and promising cash crops (silk plants, sassafras, tobacco/uppowoc, dyes). The text repeatedly counters “false reports” and “envy” from discontented colonists by offering a rational, measured defense of the colony’s potential.

**Paternalism and superiority:**

Hariot’s ethnographic passages reveal a paternalistic “colonizer’s gaze.” He praises Algonquian ingenuity in agriculture, fishing, and craft, yet firmly asserts English superiority in arts and industry. The “common people” among the “savages” are said to have “weak minds” compared with the English and to value trifles more than truly valuable objects. He concludes that, eager for English friendship and benefit, they would “diligently seek to please and obey us.” In religious matters, he interprets their beliefs (multiple gods, an afterlife of bliss or torment, a place of punishment called Popogusso) as a *parparatio evangelica*: evidence that they can be easily converted to Christianity.

## EPIDEMIC, VIOLENCE, AND THE THEOLOGY OF COLONIALISM

**Disease as “miracle” and punishment:**

One of the most revealing (and disturbing) parts of Hariot’s account is his description of mysterious epidemics that devastated Algonquian villages after the English departure, sometimes killing 40, 60, or 120 people in small communities. He notes that these outbreaks occurred specifically in settlements that had plotted against the English, always after the colonists had left, and that native healers had no remedy. Friends like the weroans Wingina interpreted these deaths as the English God’s punishment, believing the English could cause death at a distance with “invisible bullets” or through prayer.

**Colonial theology of power:**

Although Hariot stops short of claiming agency for the English, he does not explicitly reject the idea that God favored them. The epidemic’s selective impact (on natives, not on Englishmen) is presented as providential, reinforcing awe and fear. This dynamic—unintentional epidemiological catastrophe interpreted as divine sanction—becomes part of the ideological foundation for English rule: the “weak” are punished, the “favored” prosper.



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### *Ambivalence and missed possibilities:*

At the same time, Hariot insists that the Virginians are “no ill people,” often honest, peaceful, capable of friendship, and eager to learn. His narrative oscillates between genuine respect for their intelligence and skill, instrumentalizing their labor and land for English profit, and sincere (if paternalistic) missionary hope that they will accept the “true religion.” This tension sits at the heart of early English colonial discourse.

## **DE BRY, JOHN WHITE, AND THE “VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY” OF VIRGINIA**

### *The Great Voyages and visual colonialism:*

The 1590 Frankfurt edition of Hariot’s report, published by Theodor de Bry as *Americae pars I* with engravings after John White’s watercolors, inaugurated the famous Protestant series of “Great Voyages.” It was the only part published simultaneously in Latin, German, and French, giving the Virginia material wide European circulation. De Bry’s originality lay in systematically adding visual testimony: carefully composed images of bodies, villages, rituals, and tools that fixed “the Indian” in the European imagination.

### *John White’s watercolors and ethnographic gaze:*

White, who lived a year in Roanoke and visited Algonquian villages such as Pomeiooc and Secotan, produced detailed watercolors of men, women, priests, “noble maidens,” fishing techniques, cooking, dance, temples, burials, and mapped the region. Duviviers stresses that, thanks to relatively friendly relations and the absence of strong preconceived “American” models, White’s gaze was unusually direct and “naïve.” The engravings—despite some stylization—offer exceptional documentation of Powhatan-Algonquian dress, body painting, adornment, architecture, agriculture, and ritual at the moment of first English contact.

### *Picts and comparative “savagery”:*

At the end of the Virginia series, De Bry adds a surprising set of “imaginary” reconstructions of ancient Picts and Britons, based on an old English history. The pictorial contrast and parallel are deliberate: just as Virginia Algonquians live today in a “natural” state once shared by the ancestors of the English, so British antiquity can be re-imagined ethnographically. This comparative evolutionist thinking—different “ages” of a universal humanity—leads to a relatively “respectful” view: “savages” are not inherently inferior, but at an earlier stage of development. It also underpins the idea that, through guidance and Christianization, they can eventually reach a European “level of civilization.”

## **COLONIALISM, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE “GOOD SAVAGE” MYTH**

### *From admiration to appropriation:*

Hariot and White simultaneously admire Algonquian skills and lifestyles—efficient agriculture, remarkable fishing, communal sobriety, apparent health—and treat these same traits as resources to be catalogued and appropriated. The description of an “easy life,” abundant food, and a mild climate aims to attract English settlers and investors; the portrayal of natives as both noble and malleable serves to justify occupation.



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***The “good savage” and its limits:***

De Bry's elegant, idealized bodies (especially in White's portraits of nobles and “noble matrons”) and the Edenic framing (the very first engraved plate shows Adam and Eve) counter earlier demonizing images and support a softer “good savage” stereotype. Yet beneath this aesthetic lies a clear colonial hierarchy: English rationality, technology, and religion are placed above indigenous knowledge; the “good savage” is valued chiefly as a potential convert and laborer within an English colonial project.

***Visual and textual legacy:***

For more than two centuries, European representations of North American Indians drew heavily on the White–De Bry images of Virginia Algonquians and Florida Timucua. These images shaped European expectations and “scripts” for contact with Native peoples far beyond the specific region described. In this sense, *Usos y Costumbres de los Salvajes de Virginia* is not only a report on one colony, but a powerful instrument in the long history of visual and textual colonialism.

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## PART 2: TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

***1. Science and Empire:***

How does Hariot use the language of observation, measurement, and classification to make a case for colonization? In what ways does his role as mathematician, cartographer, and “ethnographer” serve Raleigh’s political and economic interests?

***2. “True Report” vs. Failed Colony:***

The Roanoke colonies failed dramatically, yet Hariot insists on the fertility and promise of Virginia. How does he explain or downplay the failures of the colonists? How do hunger, conflict with Algonquians, and dependence on indigenous food systems appear in his narrative?

***3. Disease, Providence, and Responsibility:***

Examine Hariot’s account of epidemics that strike only Native communities, especially those who had plotted against the English. How does he (and how do the Algonquians) interpret these events? What are the ethical implications of presenting catastrophic disease as divine favor?

***4. Visualizing the “Savage”: White, De Bry, and Picts***

Compare one or two De Bry engravings (e.g., “A noblewoman of Secotan,” “Priest of Secotan,” “Pomeiooc village”) with their accompanying commentary. How do composition, pose, and landscape contribute to the idea of the “good savage”? What is the effect of juxtaposing Virginia Indians with “ancient Picts” of Britain?

***5. Religion and Conversion:***

How does Hariot describe Algonquian beliefs about gods, soul, afterlife, and moral punishment? In what ways does he emphasize similarities to Christianity? What strategies does he propose (or imply) for converting “savages,” and how does this relate to his broader colonial agenda?



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## 6. Comparing Colonial Narratives:

Within the Colonialism Chronicles bundle, how does Hariot's English perspective on Virginia compare to other texts (French Florida, Spanish "cannibal" accounts, etc.) in terms of tone, representation of indigenous peoples, and justification of conquest?

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## PART 3: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary editions of Hariot's work

- Hariot, Thomas. *A Briefe and True Report of the Newfound Land of Virginia*. London, 1588. Extremely rare; only six copies known.
- Facsimile (with introduction by Luther S. Livingston): *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1903.
- Facsimile: *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*. New York: The History Book Club, 1951.
- (With De Bry's engravings) Latin, French, and German editions, Frankfurt, 1590:
- *Merveilleux et estrange rapport, toutefois fidele, des Virginia...* (French)
- *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia...* (Latin / English)
- *Wunderbarliche, doch warhafftige Erklärung...* (German), with later reprints in 1600, 1608, 1620, and 1634 (Merian).

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## PART 4: QUIZ BANK (Multiple Choice)

*What was the primary purpose of Thomas Hariot's A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia?*

- A) To provide a personal spiritual diary of his conversion
- B) To entertain English readers with fantastic tales of monsters
- C) To persuade investors and "favourers" to continue supporting the Virginia colonial project by describing its resources and potential
- D) To argue for abandoning all colonial efforts in North America **Correct Answer: C**

*Which two figures collaborated, directly or indirectly, to create the classic visual record of the Virginia Algonquians?*

- A) Humphrey Gilbert and Francis Drake
- B) John White and Theodor de Bry
- C) Richard Hakluyt and Martin Frobisher
- D) Walter Raleigh and Jacques Le Moigne **Correct Answer: B**

*How does Hariot describe the indigenous people's intellectual and technical abilities in relation to the English?*

- A) As naturally superior in all respects
- B) As equal in arts and industry, but morally inferior
- C) As having no skills at all
- D) As ingenious and capable, but materially and technically behind the English, who therefore appear superior and better equipped to lead **Correct Answer: D**

*How do many Algonquians interpret the epidemics that follow English contact, according to Hariot?*

- A) As evidence that their own gods are stronger than the English God
- B) As random natural events with no spiritual meaning
- C) As punishments inflicted by the English God for plotting against the English
- D) As the result of bad weather and eclipses only **Correct Answer: C**

*Why does De Bry include engraved figures of ancient Picts and Britons at the end of the Virginia series?*

- A) To mock the English as more "savage" than Americans
- B) To suggest that Europeans and Native Americans share a comparable "primitive" past and that "savagery" is a historical stage, not a racial essence
- C) To advertise Scottish independence
- D) To fill extra pages left blank in the volume **Correct Answer: B\*\***

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