Primary Source: Amadas and Barlowe Explore the Outer Banks

On April 27, 1584, Captains Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlowe left the west coast of England in two ships to explore the North American coast for Sir Walter Raleigh. The party of explorers landed on July 13, 1584, on the North Carolina coast just north of Roanoke Island, and claimed the land in the name of Queen Elizabeth. Captain Barlowe’s report describes the land and the people he encountered.

The second of July we found shole water, when we smelt so sweet, and so strong a smel, as if we had bene in the midst of some delicate garden abounding with all kinde of odoriferous, flowers, by which we were assured, that the land could not be farre distant: and keeping good watch, and bearing but slacke saile, the fourth of the same moneth we arrived upon the coast, which we supposed to be a continent and firme lande, and we sayled along the same a hundred and twenty English miles before we could finde any entrance, or river issuing into the Sea.

The first that appeared unto us, we entred, though not without some difficultie, & cast anker about three harquebuz-shot within the havens mouth on the left hand of the same: and after the ships, this given to our safe arrivall ther, we set our boates, and went to view the land next adjoynynge, and to take possession of the same, in the right of the Queenes most excellent Majesty.

How much land they thought they were claiming is uncertain — probably they themselves had no good idea. And it doesn’t seem to have concerned them when, a few days later, they met the brother of the king who already ruled the land they had just claimed. Since he was not a Christian monarch, his claim to the land was irrelevant to them, and rightfull Queene, and Princess of the same, and after delivered the same over to your use, according to her Majesties grant, and letters patents, under her Highnesse great seale. Which being performed, according to the ceremonies used in such enterprises, we viewed the land about us, being, whereas we first landad, very sandie and low towards the waters side, but so full of grapes, as the very beating and surge of the Sea overflowed them, of which we found such plentie, as well there as in all places else, both on the sand and on the greene soil on the hills, as in the plains, as well on every shrubbe, as also climbing towards the tops of high Cedars, that I think in all the world the like abundance is not to be found: and my selfe have seene those parts of Europe that most abound, find such difference as were incredible to be written.

We passed from the Sea side towards the toppes of those hilles next adjoyning, being but of meane hight, and from thence we behelde the Sea on both sides to the North, and to the south, finding no ende any of both ways. This lande lay stretching it selfe to the West, which after we were found to bee but an Island of twenty miles long, and not above sixe miles broade. Under the banke or hill whereon we stode, we behelde the vallyes replenished with goody Cedar trees, and having discharged our harquebuz-shot, such a flocke of Cranes (the most part white), arose under us, with such a cry redoubled by many ecchoes, as if an armie of men had shewte all together.

This Island had many goodly woodes full of Deere, Conies, Hares, and Fowle, even in the midst of Summer in incredible abundance. We remained by the side of this Island two whole daies without seeing any people of the Countrie: the day we espied one small boate rowing towards us having in it three persons: this boat came to the Island side, foure harquebuzz-shotted from our shippes, and they two of the people remaining, the third came along the shoreside towards us, and wee being then all with boorde, he walked up and downe upon the point of the land next unto us: then the Master and the Pilot of the Admiral, Simon Ferdinando, and the Captaine Philip Amadas, my selfe, and others rowed to the land, whose comming this fellow attended, never making any shewe of feare or doubt. And after he had spoken of many things not understood by us, we brought him with his owne good liking, aboard the ships and gave him a shirt, a hat & some other things, and made him taste of our wine, and our meat, which he liked very wel: and after having viewed both barks, he departed, and went to his owne boat againe, which hee had left in a little Cove or Creeke adjoyning: assoone as hee was two bow shot into the water, hee fell to fishing, and in lesse then halfe an houre, he had laden his boate as deep as it could swime, with which hee came againe to the point of the lande, and there he divided his fish into two partes, pointing one part to the ship, and the other to the pinnesse, which, after he had, as much as he might, required the former benefits receivde, departed out of our sight.

The next day there came unto us divers boates, and in one of them the Kings brother, accompanied with fortie or fiftie men, very handsome and goodly people, and in their behaviour as mannerly and civil as any of Europe. His name was Granganime, and the king is called Wingina, the countrie Wingandacooa, and now by her Majestie Virginia. The manner of his comming was in this sort: hee left his boates altogether as the first man did a little from the shippes by the shore, and came along to the place over against the shippes, followed with fortie men. When he came to the place, his servants spread a long mattone upon the ground, on which he sate downe, and at the other ende of the mate foure others of his shippe did the like, the rest of the men stood round about him, somewhat a farre off: when we came to the shore to him with our weapons, hee never moveth from his place, nor any of the other foure, nor never mistrusted any harme to be offered from us, but sitting still he beckoned us to come and sit by him, which we performed: and being set hee made all signes of joy and welcome, striking on his head and his breast and afterwardes on ours to shew wee were all one, smiling and making shewe the best he could of all love, and familiaritie. After hee had made a long speech unto us, wee presented him with divers things, which hee received very joyfully, and thankefull. None of the company durst speake one worde all the time: only the foure which were at the other ende, speake in the others eare very softly.

The King is greatly obeyed, and his brothers and children reverenced the King himself in person was at our being there, sore wounded in a fight which hee had with the King of the next countrie, called Wingina, and was shot in two places through the body, and once cleane through the thigh, but yet he recovered: by reason whereof and for that hee lay at the chief towne of the countrie, being sixe daies journey off, we saw him not at all.

After we had presented this his brother with such things as we thought he liked, wee likewise gave somewhat to the other that sat with him on the matte: but presently he arose and tooke all from them and put it into his owne basket, making signes and tokens, that all things ought to bee delivered unto him, and the rest were but his servants, and followers. A day or two after this, we fell to trading with them, exchanging the matte: but presently he arose and tooke all from them and put it into his owne basket, making signes and tokens, that all things ought to be delivered unto him, and the rest were but his servants, and followers. A day or two after this, we fell to trading with them, exchanging the matte: but presently he arose and tooke all from them and put it into his owne basket, making signes and tokens, that all things ought to be delivered unto him, and the rest were but his servants, and followers.

The rest of her women of the
Barlowe refers to the people wearing the copper jewelry as people “of the better sort.” In England, people “of the better sort” were of the upper classes — the nobility, which was mostly hereditary. Barlowe, seeing native men and women wearing extra jewelry, assumes that they are “of the better sort” and “noble” as well. We know that the copper jewelry was a mark of status, but does Barlowe’s assumption that they were “noble” seem reasonable to you? Are there other explanations for their special dress? What roles might these men and women have played in native society?; he himselfe had upon his head a broad plate of golde, or copper, for being unpolished we knew not what mettal it should be neither would he by any means suffer us to take it off his head, but feeling it, it would bow very easily. His apparel was as his wife, only the women weare their hairre long on both sides, and the men but on one. They are of colour yellowish, and their hairre black for the most part, and yet we saw children that had very fine aburne and chesnut coloured hairre.

After that these women had bene there, there came downe from all parts great store of people, bringing with them leather, corall, divers kindes of dies, very excellent, and exchanged with us: but when Grananimo the kings brother was present, none durst trade but himselfe: except such as weree red pieces of copper on their heads like himselfe: for that is the difference betweene the noble men, and the governours of countreyes, and the meaner sort. And we both noted there, and you have understood since by these men, which we brought home, that no people in the worldc care more respectfull to their King, Nobilitie, and Governours, then these doe. The Kings brothers wife, when she came to us, as she did many times, was followed with forty or fifty women alwayes: and when she came into the shipphe, she left them all on land, saving her two daughters, her nurse and one or two more. The kings brother alwayes kept this order, as many boates as he would come with to the ships, some tyme three would make on the shore a faire sight to the end we might understand with what strength and company he approached.

Their boates are made of one tree, either of Pine or of Pitch trees: a wood not commonly knowen to our people, nor found growing in England. They have no edge-tooles to make them withall: if they have any they are very feewe, and those it seemsse they had twentie yeres since, which, as those two men declared, was out of a wrake which happened upon their coast of some Christian ship, being beaten that way by some storme and outrageous weather, whereof none of the people were saved, but only the ship, or some part of her being cast upon the sand, out of whose cast shee they made their best instruments, and with those they made thei newe navilies. The manner of making their boates is thus: they burne downe some great tree, or take such as are winde fallen, and putting gume and rosen upon one side thereof, they set fire into it, and when it hath burnt it hollow, they cut out the coale with their shels, and ever where they would burne it deeper or wider they lay on gums, which burne away the timber, and by this means they fashne very fine boates, and such as will transport twentie men. Their oares are like scoopes, and many times they set with long poles, as the deep serveth.

The Kings brother had great liking of our armour, a sword, and divers other things which we had: and offered to lay a great boxe of pearle in gage for them: but we refused it for this time, because we would not make them knowe, that we esteemed thereof, untill we had understood in what places of the countreye the pearle grew: which now your Worshippe doeth very well understand.

He was very just of his promise: for many times we delivered him merchandize upon his word, but ever he came within the day and performed his promise. He sent us every day a brase or two of fat Bucks, Conies, Hares, Fish and best of the world. He sent us divers kindes of fruits, Melons, Walnuts, Cucumbers, Gourdes, Pease, and divers roots, and fruits very excellent, and of their Countrye corne, which is very white, faire and well tasted, and groweth three times in five monethes: in May they sow, in July they reap, in June they sow, in August they reap: in July they sow, in September they reap: oney they cast the corne into the ground, breaking a little of the soft turfe with a wooden mattock, or pickaxe; our selves proved the soile, and put some of our Pease in the ground, and in tenne dayes they were of fourteenth ynes high: they have also Beanes very faire of divers colours and wonderfull plentie: some growing naturally, and some in their gardens, and so have they both wheat and oates.

The soile is the most plentiful, sweete, fruitfull and wholesome of all the worlde: there are above fourteene several sweete smelling timber trees, and the most part of their underwoods are Bayes and such like: they have those Okes that we have, but faire greater and better. After they had bene divers times aboard our shippes, my selfe, with seven more went twentie mile into the River, that runneth towards the Citie of Skicoak, which River they call Occam: and the evening following wee came to an Island which they call Roanoak, distant from the harbour by what places of the countrey the pearle grew: which now your Worshippe doeth very well understand.

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In stories of the Golden Age, as in the story of the Garden of Eden, humans lived in paradise until they tried to know too much and to become like gods — and then were thrown out and forced to work and suffer. In both stories, too, when humans “fell” they took up the trappings of the better sort and “noble” as well. We know that the copper jewelry was a mark of status, but does Barlowe’s assumption that they are “of the better sort” and “noble” as well. We know that the copper jewelry was a mark of status, but does Barlowe’s assumption that they are “of the better sort” and “noble” as well. We know that the copper jewelry was a mark of status, but does Barlowe’s assumption that they are “of the better sort” and “noble” as well.
breake them, and withall beate the poore fellowes out of the gate againe. When we departed in the evening and would not tary all night she
was very sorry, and gave us into our boate our supper halfe dressed, pottes and all, and brought us to our boate side, in which wee lay all
night, removing the same a prettie distance from the shoare: shee perceiving our jealousie, was much grieved, and sent divers men and
thirtie women, to sit all night on the banke side by us, and sent us into our boates five mattes to cover us from the raine, using very many
wordes, to entreat us to rest in their houses: but because wee were fewe men, and if wee had miscarried, the voyage had bene in very great
danger, wee durst not adventure any thing, although there was no cause of doubt: for a more kinde and loving people there can not be found
in the worlde: as tarry as we have hitherto had triall.
Engraving of American Indians fishing, based on John White's drawings.

An Indian elder or chief wearing copper ornaments.
This engraving shows how the Indians of the Outer Banks made dugout canoes.

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