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De Orbo Novo Decades

Peter Martyr d' Anghiera

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Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

Peter Martyr d'Anghiera, Decades

In April 1513 Juan Ponce de Leon touched ground in Florida, initiating not only the history of European exploration in the region but the history of a myth as well. Approaching the mainland (although he still believed he was on an island at the time) from Puerto Rico, he sailed from the Atlantic Coast to the Keys, and after political setbacks, he returned again in 1521, when he met his demise in a losing battle to the Calusa Indians. The first reports of Ponce de Leon's discovery, the most famous being the Fountain of Youth, received mention in De Orbe Novo Decades, or simply the Decades, of Italian humanist Peter Martyr d'Anghiera (1457-1526). Erudite and elegant, Peter Martyr's Decades filtered the latest discoveries from America through Renaissance ideas of natural philosophy (as the sciences were then known), medicine, history, and mythology. This cosmopolitan digest, prepared in Latin for court and King, was translated into English several times, and in the subtle changes between published versions, significant variations appear.

Later, more extensive accounts of Ponce de Leon's real and purported discoveries appeared in the 1601 Historia General de los hechos de los Castellanos en las islas tierra firme del mar oceano, by Spanish court historiographer Antonio de Herrera (1559-1625) and in the verse-history "Elegía a Juan Ponce de Leon," by Juan de Castellanos. Today the Fountain of Youth myth survives in various forms, as countless springs, resorts and even a Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum™ in St. Augustine lay claim to Ponce de Leon's legacy. But the process of sifting through, of making sense of strange and unfamiliar events, can be traced back to the highly valued and frequently reprinted Decades of Peter Martyr.

Thomas Hallock, Univ. of South Florida St. Petersburg

Further Reading

Davis, T. Frederick. "Juan Ponce de Leon's Voyages to Florida." *Florida Historical Quarterly* 14:1 (July 1935). 1-67.

d'Anghiera, Peter Martyr. *De Orbe Novo: The Eight Decades of Peter Martyr*. Transl. by Francis Augustus MacNutt. New York: Putnam, 1912.

_____ . *De Novo Orbe, or The Historie of the West Indies* Transl. Richard Eden.
London: 1612.

Peter Martyr d'Anghiera. From *De Orbe Novo: The Four Decades of Peter Martyr*. Transl. by Francis Augustus MacNutt. New York: Putnam, 1912.

Let us add to these immense considerations some matters of less importance. I think that I should not omit mentioning the voyage of Juan Solis, who sailed from the ocean port of Lepe, near Cadiz, with three ships, the fourth day of the ides of September, 1515, to explore the southern coasts of what was supposed to be a continent. Nor do I wish to omit mention of Juan Ponce, commissioned to conquer the Caribs, anthropophagi who feed on human flesh; or of Juan Ayora de Badajoz, or Francisco Bezerra, and of Valleco, already mentioned by me. Solis was not successful in his mission. He set out to double the cape or promontory of San Augustin and to follow the coast of the supposed continent as far as the equator. We have already indicated that this cape lies in the seventh degree of the antarctic pole. Solis continued six hundred leagues farther on, and observed that the cape San Augustin extended so far beyond the equator to the south that it reached beyond the thirtieth degree of the Southern Hemisphere. He therefore sailed for a long distance beyond the Boca de la Sierpe and Spanish Paria, which face the north and the pole star. In these parts are found some of those abominable anthropophagi, Caribs, whom I have mentioned before. With fox-like astuteness these Caribs feigned amicable signs, but meanwhile prepared their stomachs for a succulent repast; and from their first glimpse of the strangers their mouths watered like tavern trenchermen. The unfortunate Solis landed with as many of his companions as he could crowd into the largest of the barques, and was treacherously set upon by a multitude of natives who killed him and his men with clubs in the presence of the remainder of his crew. Not a soul escaped; and after having killed and cut them in pieces on the shore, the natives prepared to eat them in full view of the Spaniards, who from their ships witnessed this horrible sight. Frightened by these atrocities, the men did not venture to land and execute vengeance for the murder of their leader and companions. They loaded their ships with red wood, which the Italians call verzino and the Spaniards brazil-wood, and which is suitable for dyeing wool; after which they returned home. I have learned these particulars by correspondence, and I here repeat them. I shall further relate what the other explorers accomplished.

Juan Ponce likewise endured a severe check from the cannibals on the island of Guadaloupe, which is the most important of all the Carib islands. When these people beheld the Spanish ships, they concealed themselves in a place from which they could spy upon all the movements of the people who might land. Ponce had sent some women ashore to wash some shirts and linen, and also some foot-soldiers to obtain fresh water, for he had not seen land after leaving the island of Ferro in the Canaries until he reached Guadaloupe, a distance of four thousand two hundred miles. There is no island in the ocean throughout the entire distance. The cannibals suddenly attacked and captured the women, dispersing the men, a small number of whom managed to escape. Ponce did not venture to attack the Caribs, fearing the poisoned arrows which these barbarous man-eaters use with fatal effect.

This excellent Ponce who, as long as he was in a place of safety, had boasted that he would exterminate the Caribs, was constrained to leave his washerwomen and retreat before the islanders. What he has since done, and what discoveries he may have made, I have not yet learned. Thus Solis lost his life, and Ponce his honour, in carrying out their expeditions.

Peter Martyr offers no single view of the Fountain of Youth, neither for or against the myth, but rather circles around the topic at several points of the Decades. Below, a sampling of his various reflections:

I shall first speak of a very extraordinary phenomenon, and in this connection I shall first repeat what is related, afterwards the opinion of the philosophers, and finally my own modest opinion. I treat whatever is difficult to understand in this wise.

In my first decades, which have been printed and circulated, I have spoke of a fountain whose waters possess such an extraordinary hidden virtue that when old men bathe therein and drink thereof, they regain their youth. Following the example of Aristotle and our Pliny, I take upon myself to note down and record in my books what men of serious reputation have not feared to advance.

[...]

As for myself, those whose testimony I cite in my work are the dean, whom I have mentioned, the jurisconsult, Ayllon, and the licenciante, Figueroa, sent to Hispaniola to preside over the council, example the accounts, take the residence of the judges, recall the disorderedly to right living, encourage those who behave well, recompense the good, and punish the wicked. These three, without mentioning absent ones whose letters I quote, and men who report verbally to me on their arrival or departure, agree. They have heard the fortifying virtues of this spring mentioned, and have believed the reports made to them, but they have neither seen it nor tested its properties, for the natives of Florida have sharp nails and are energetic defenders of their rights. They do not wish to receive any quests, especially those who intent to suppress their liberty and occupy their native country. The Spaniards, arriving there in vessels native country. The Spaniards, arriving there in vessels from Hispaniola, or more directly from Cuba, have several times sough to conquer them and occupy their territory, but every time they have penetrated inland, they have repulsed, beaten and massacred by the natives who, although naked, fight with different kinds of weapons and poisoned arrows.

[...]

They think it impossible, when one has been ill, to regain his former strength; likewise any one who only believes what is well proven and established, should only ask them the reason of many thing they sustain. Amongst other assertions and argument of the philosophers and ancient sages, is the possible that nature—leaving aside of course all question of miracles—should possess the necessary force to make us younger?

[...]

What shall we say of the eagle, which begins its life anew, or the snake which sheds its old skin, leaving it in the brushwood or amongst the cracks and crevices of the rocks, and recovers its second youth? What of the deer, which after sucking in an aspic through its nostrils, hides itself during bad weather inside enclosing walls or hedges, remaining invisible until the force of the poison has made his flesh as soft as if it had been cooked? He then entirely changes his skin, and renews his flesh and blood; at least, so history tells us. What shall we say of ravens and crows, which stop drinking at the time of the solstice, during the time of the dog-star, when nature teaches them that at that time the waters of springs and rivers issue from a polluted earth and are unwholesome?

[...]

We observe that different effects are produced by the waters flowing through the various regions is of the earth, absorbing tastes, colours, odours, and qualities, and even different bulk; we likewise know that the roots of trees, their leaves, flowers and fruits cure different maladies.

But enough of digressions on this subject. Let each one take or leave what he pleases, for I have composed my writing as best I could, placing them under the patronage of Your Excellency's name and they will soon leave for Rome, where they are desired by high personages.

[...]

A number of sufficiently curious facts are before my mind, which I believe Your Excellency, as well as those of your courtiers who love reading, especially those who are idle, will be pleased to know.

Readers seeking to unpack the Peter Martyr's prevarications regarding the fountain also will take interest in early English translations of the Decades, here from Richard Eden's De Novo Orbe, or The Historie of the West Indies [1612].

.... if we measure certaine lands founde by [the Spaniards] towarde the North side of *Hispaniola*, among the which there is an Ilande about three C. & xxv leagues from *Hispaniola*, as they say which hae searched the same, named *Boiuca* or *Agnaneo*, in which is a continuall spring of running water, of such marveilous vertue, that the water thereof being drunke, perhaps with some diet, maketh olde men young againe. And here must I make protestation to your holynesse, not to think this to bee sayde lightly or rashly, for they have so spread this rumour for a truth throughout al the court, that not onely all the people, but also many of them whom wisdom or fortune hath divided from the common sort, thinke it to be true: but if you shal aske my opinion herein, I will answer, that I will not attribute so great power to nature, but that God hath no lesse reserved this prerogative to himselfe, then to searche the heartes of menne, or to give substance to privation, (that is) beeing, to no being, except wee shall beleve the fable of *Colchis* of *Eson* renovate, to be as true as the writynges of *Sibylla Erythrea*. Albeit perhappes the schoole of Phisitions and natural philosophers, will not much sticke to affirme, that by the use of certain secrete medicines and diet, the accidentes of age (as they call them) may be long hidden & deferred, which they will to bee understoode by the renovation of age. And to have sayd thus much of the length and breadth of these regions, and of the rough and hugious mountains, with their watery caves, also of the divers degrees of that land, I think it sufficient

