

HISTOIRE NATURELLE.

Many early illustrations of exotic species were presented in anthologies of the natural world, often figured and described by Europeans who never saw the animals in life. This page, with the iguana at the bottom, is from L'Abbé Bonaterre's 1789 "encyclopedia of nature."

Iguanas: Early European Impressions and Illustrations

Chuck Schaffer¹ and Rick Schaffer²

¹Turtle and Tortoise Newsletter, Jacksonville, Florida

²Stanton College Preparatory School, Jacksonville, Florida

Although Europeans were certainly not the first people to find (and consume) iguanas, they were the first to commit images to paper. Several depictions appeared in the 16th century, and the number grew over time. However, iguanas were celebrated in clay, island names, and dinner far earlier than that. The name given to the island of St. Lucia by the Kalinago, the last group of indigenous native people before European arrival, was “where the iguana is found.” The Kalinago name *Ioüanááo* is derived from the Arawak for iguana (*yuwána*) as recorded by Père Raymond Breton, a Dominican missionary, who composed a dictionary of the Amerindian languages in the 1660s. Iguana also is thought to stem from the Taino word “higuana.” Part of the word itself may be significant, as the Taino words for gold, parrots, fire, and many of their chiefs contain “gua.”

Utilization of iguanas as food has been documented from as early as 2,700 BP in the Caribbean, but earlier records probably will be found. Archaeologists have excavated iguana and marine turtle bones in middens from throughout the Caribbean and Central America. Images of the marine turtle, another common dietary item, have been immortalized in pottery, along with those of iguanas, as seen below in the three Tolita-Tumaco culture (2,600 and 1,600 BP) pottery effigies from southwestern coastal Colombia and northwestern coastal Ecuador. This culture is well known for its figurines made from light gray clay. Many of these effigy heads are fragments of earthenware. In Tolita culture, the iguana symbolizes the male reproductive

organ and the spikes of its tail are associated with communication and positive interaction. Other New World traditions correlate the iguana with water and rain.

In his popular pieces, journal articles, and Earthwatch Expedition Reports from Grand Turk, Dr. William Keegan of the Florida Museum of Natural History reported a number of faunal finds, many of them of iguana material. The Coralie site on Grand Turk is the oldest archaeological site in the Bahamian Archipelago, with artifacts dated from 1,330–1,100 BP. It is also the only site from this period excavated outside of Puerto Rico. The site is archaeologically significant, as its occupation occurred during a period when sea level was lower and the climate extremely arid. Both of these factors contributed to better faunal preservation. Additionally, the remains are virtually unique when compared to other sites that show significant disturbance. This site was pristine. From the excavations to date, Dr. Keegan has concluded that this site must have been an early colony. The faunal assemblage included sea turtles, iguanas, fishes (many of them very large), and birds. Analyses of these bones suggest that iguanas were once up to a meter or more larger than extant forms. One hearth contained an entire sea turtle carapace together with large fish and iguana bones. Other food items apparently were cooked in the turtle shell along with the turtle itself.

An Italian navigator also wrote of Iguanas. Although the exact site is debated, many authorities believe that, on 12 October 1492, the Lucayo were the first Native Americans to

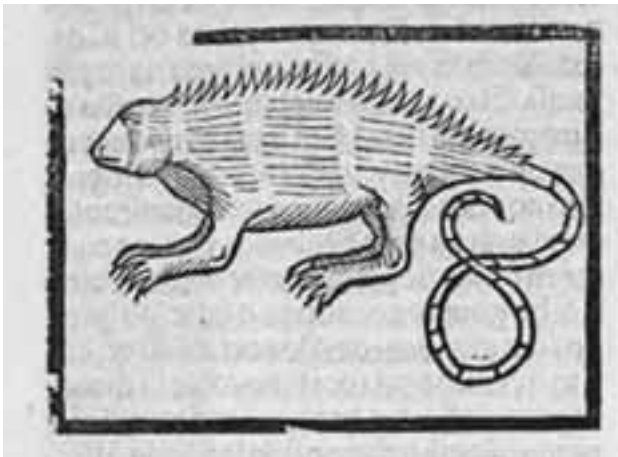


Tolita-Tumaco culture (2,600 and 1,600 BP) pottery effigies from southwestern coastal Colombia and northwestern coastal Ecuador (illustrations after Brezzi).

come in contact with Cristoforo Colombo. Most history books state that the meeting occurred on the island of Guanahani (meaning iguana in their language), which he renamed San Salvador. Columbus wrote of iguanas in his *Journal of the First Voyage of Colon*. Presumably on Watling's Island, he noted, "[t]here are no indigenous quadrupeds larger than a rat, and few reptiles, the largest being the iguana," which he mentioned later. "The sailors killed an iguana here, which they called a serpent ... at a spot now called Frenchman's Wells."

Between 1492 and 1535, the first natural history of the New World was written and subsequently published in Seville by Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdez. Titled *Historia General y Natural de las Indias Occidentales*, it sought to compile both the social and natural history of the "Indies," as the New World was then known. In this work, the iguana was first described and illustrated by Europeans. Oviedo noted that the indigenous people ate iguanas, keeping them in the villages for extended periods without food or water until they were eaten. Some Spaniards enjoyed eating iguana, but they found its appearance repugnant.

Peter Martyr D'Anghera, a contemporary of Oviedo, recorded the Taino cooking method: stewed and served with pepper! "Thirty-two caciques were assembled in the house of



Illustrations of iguanas from Oviedo (1535; top) and Ramusio (1550; bottom).

Anacauchoa, where they had brought their tribute. In addition to what had been agreed upon, they sought to win favour by adding numerous presents, which consisted of two kinds of bread, roots, grains, utias, that is to say, rabbits, which are numerous in the island, fish, which they had preserved by cooking them, and those same serpents, resembling crocodiles, which they esteem a most delicate food. We have described them above, and the natives call them iguanas. They are special to Hispaniola. Up to that time none of the Spaniards had ventured to eat them because of their odour, which was not only repugnant but nauseating, but the Adelantado, won by the amiability of the cacique's sister, consented to taste a morsel of iguana; and hardly had his palate savoured this succulent flesh than he began to eat it by the mouthful. Henceforth the Spaniards were no longer satisfied to barely taste it, but became epicures in regard to it, and talked of nothing else than the exquisite flavour of these serpents, which they found to be superior to that of peacocks, pheasants, or partridges. If, however, they are cooked as we do peacocks and pheasants, which are first larded and then roasted, the serpent's flesh loses its good flavour. First they gut them, then wash and clean them with care, and roll them into a circle, so that they look like the coils of a sleeping snake; after which they put them in a pot, just large enough to hold them, pouring over them a little water flavoured with the pepper found in the island. The pot is covered and a fire of odorous wood which gives very little light is kindled underneath it. A juice as delicious as nectar runs drop by drop from the insides. It is reported that there are few dishes more appetising than iguana eggs cooked over a slow fire. When they are fresh and served hot they are delicious, but if they are preserved for a few days they still further improve. But this is enough about cooking recipes. Let us pass on to other subjects. ... They are not neglectful, however, of hunting, they have, as we have already said, utias, which resemble small rabbits, and iguana serpents, which I described in my First Decade. These latter resemble crocodiles and are eight feet long, living on land and having a good flavour."

The next time that images of an iguana would appear was not until the 1580s, when watercolors were painted by John White. Another image of a "hiogan" (iguana) appeared about 1590 in an anonymous manuscript now known as *Histoire Naturelle Des Indes: Countenant Les Arbres, Plantes, Fruits, Animaux, Coquillages, Reptiles, Insectes, Oyseaux, &c. qui se trouvent dans les Indes...* or the *Drake Manuscript*. The original is housed in the Pierpont Morgan Library, although it has been reproduced in book form in two printings.

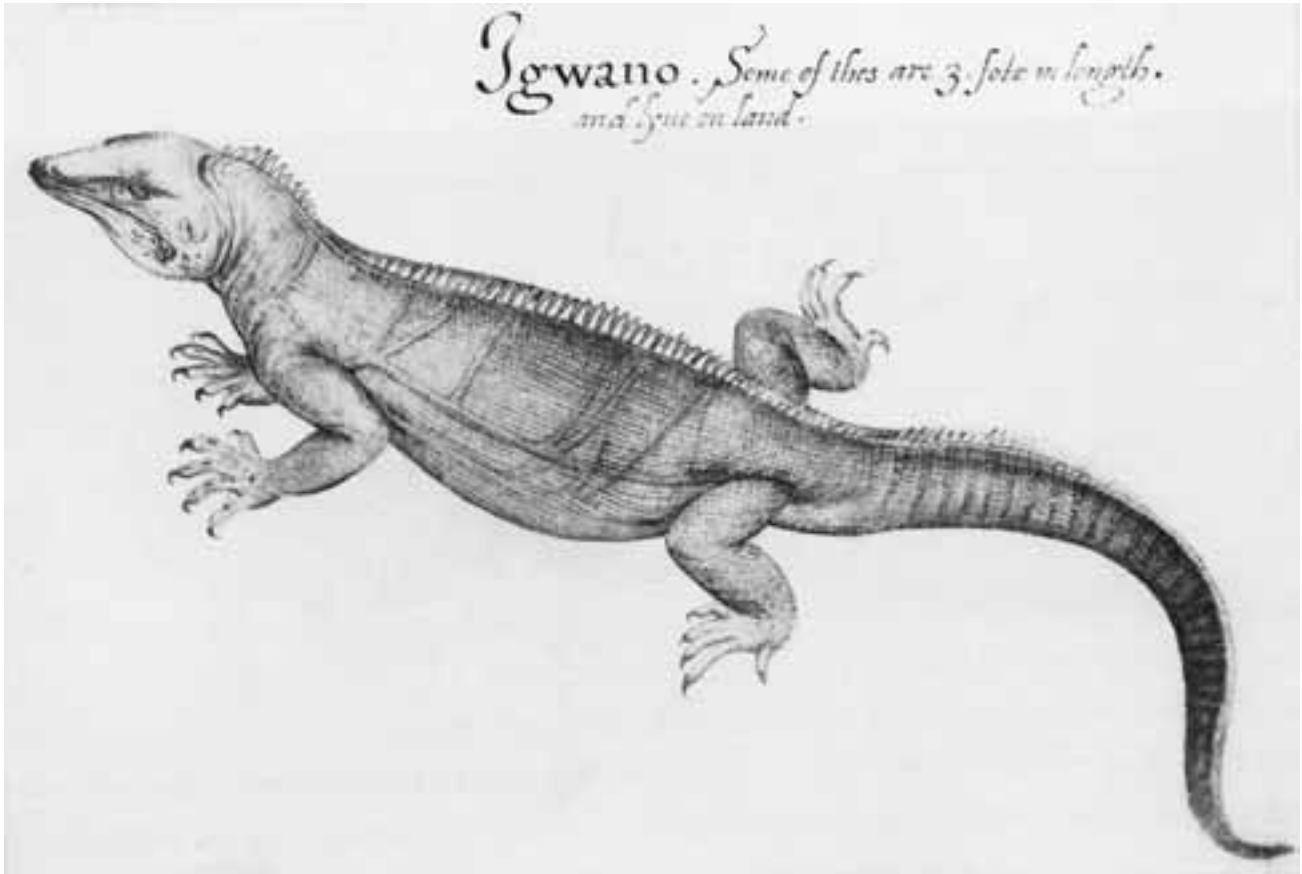
White's original watercolors have been reproduced by the British Museum. They are significant, as numerous early sources based their illustrations on them. These included Harriot, de Bry, Bigges & Croftes, and Catesby. The Boazio plates, which are included in Bigges and Croftes in two sizes in the two editions, made one later contemporary appearance, in de Bry's *Grands Voyages*, Part VIII. (1618, 1619). Those engravings are derived from the smaller engravings (keyed in numerals rather than letters). The figures of the iguana are after drawings by John White, and are in fact the first publication of any of White's illustrations. John White's drawing is likely the first English illustration of the iguana. An early Elizabethan description stated that they are

“caught by the Indian people who sell them to the Spaniards. They are a sad dull green colour, their body of the bigness of a cony (rabbit) in fact bigger. They are eaten by the Indians and Spaniards and so likewise by us for a very delicate meat. In the breeding time the female is full of eggs in great number, and they of all the rest are esteemed the most delicate.”

When Alonso de Ojeda and his crew reached Columbian shores, the Indians fled. The Spanish followed them inland and came upon an Indian settlement where strange animals were being prepared for a feast. Among the items on the menu were

“horrible snakes with feet and wings” (iguanas). This image appeared in de Bry’s *Grand Voyages*, Part X (1618 in German and 1619 in Latin).

The fanciful tales of Philoponus (1627) contained a liberal mix of history and fantasy and told the tale of the Benedictine missionaries who accompanied Columbus on his second voyage to Hispaniola in 1493, and also included descriptions and depictions of iguanas. Quaint copperplate engravings in the style of de Bry (whom the author despised) depicted a variety of scenes ranging from attacks on the Spanish crew by cannibals to



The “Igwano” of White executed in the 1580s (Lorant 1946) and the “Hiogane” (Anonymous 1590).

instances of indigenous hospitality, such as feasts depicting local fruit and an iguana served on European silver.

For nine months in 1725, Mark Catesby visited the Bahama Islands during which time he was the guest of Governor George Phenney and stayed at the Government House. While there, he visited the islands of Eleuthera, Abaco, and Andros. In *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*, he detailed the harsh lifestyle of the early settlers, barely surviving through the collection of ambergris, subsistence farming, fishing, turtling, and hunting birds and iguanas. His text provided most of what we know regarding life at that time, and included descriptions of the iguana and also the crocodiles that once lived in the Bahamas. A number of his illustrations, such as the iguana, are obvious plagiarisms of White.

However, the earliest iguana illustration found to date was produced by Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdes in *Historia General y Natural de las Indias. Islas y tierra firme del mar Océano*. He wrote of the iguana: “This is a serpent or dragon, or such terrestrial animal (or aquatic), that for those who do not know it, is of ugly and frightful view, strange lizard, big, with four feet; furthermore it is larger than the lizards of Spain, because the head is bigger than the fist or closed hand of a man, the neck is short, the body longer than two hand spans, and other two in circumference, and the tail of three and four hand spans long. These measurements are for the larger animals; many of them have shorter tails, I do not know if it is due to cut tails from bites

among each other, or if they shed it. (...) they have on the dorsal midline a line of spines that by itself appears fierce. It has sharp teeth and a dewlap that is long and wide that goes from the chin to the chest, like the ox. And so it is such a quiet animal, that neither shouts, nor moans, nor makes any sounds, and it stays anywhere that they put him, without causing damage nor making any noise, ten or twenty days and more, without eating and drinking any thing, even if you offer it, also it eats a little bread or grass or similar thing, according to what some say. But I have had some of these animals tied in my house some times, and I never saw them eat, and I have watched. And in short, I have not known nor been able to understand what they ate while in my house, and everything that was offered was left whole. In the field I do not know what they eat. The arms, feet, hands, and the nails, all these are like of lizard, and the long nails, but skinny and not of grasping. It is in as much way of terrible appearance, that no man would venture to wait for this animal, if he were not of great spirit, and to eat of it none, unless he was of bad sense or beastly (I say not knowing its being, tameness, and good taste)” (translation courtesy of Dr. Sam Rivera).

Another aspect of Oviedo’s work was the extremely ambitious task of assigning names to the American flora and fauna found in Spanish territories. This was by no means a smooth process, and during the course of this endeavor, he came into conflict with Spanish scientists and administrators. Oviedo attempted to develop a local, rather than imperial approach, undertaking it in the manner of Pliny by telling it as the narrative of a traveling naturalist, often mixing fact with fiction, science with myth. “Escribió Plinio treinta e siete libros en su Natural Historia, e yo en aquesta mi obra e primera parte della, veinte, en los cuales, como he dicho, en todo quanto le pudiere imitar, entiendo hacerlo” (Pliny wrote thirty-seven books in his Natural History, and I in my work ... will attempt to imitate him).

Oviedo the man was more straightforward. He was a Spanish historian, who was born in Madrid in 1478 and died in Valladolid in 1557. He was familiar with the explorations, had met Columbus, his sons, and some of the third voyage’s crew, but did not actually reach the Caribbean until 1513, after which he made a number of journeys. He was appointed governor of La Antigua in 1526 and commander of the castle of Santo Domingo in 1535, remaining in that position until 1545. At that time, he returned to Spain with the appointment of “Historian of the Spanish Indies.” He continued the history that he had begun in 1515, of which a summary had appeared under the title of “La Historia de las cosas sucedidas en mi tiempo en America” (1526). The first substantial portion appeared as *Historia General y Natural de las Indias Occidentales* (1535), and the revision of the entire work was finished in 1548. Its publication, begun in Valladolid in 1550, was interrupted by the author’s death, and the first complete edition was printed by order of the Royal Historical Academy in Madrid in 1851.

This work has been judged harshly due to a number of inaccuracies in the historical portion, and a strong underlying prejudice against Columbus. However, that it is one of the most profound and significant early accounts has become evident, and it certainly qualifies as the first work on the natural history of



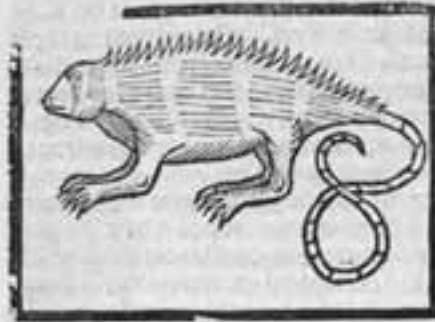
Plate 4 from de Bry (1618 & 1619) and Philoponus (1627).

America. In that respect, the author was eminently qualified. During his journeys in the New World, Oviedo compiled detailed descriptions and illustrations, many of which might

serve as examples to modern naturalists, of products and goods. He introduced Europe to America's natural history, and was the first European to describe iguanas, manatees, and pineapples. He



lagartos que he dicho en cocodrilos. Pero en la vida la y vana/ muy diferente animal es del cocodrilo: y en ninguna cosa a el semejante. Esta que aqui yo pinte quiere al



go semejar ala y vana/ y a la verdad esta forma tienen/ con la pretencion o auiso que al principio deste capitulo se toco: que aqueste animal es como neutral/ y q no se determinan los hombres si es terrestre o de agua porq en la vna y en la otra estimacion se puede sospechar que tiene mucha parte.

Capitulo. iiii. del pez llamado Tibuela y de sus armas.



El pez o pescado llamado tibuela es grande animal/ y la mandibula o hocico alto/ o superior: es una espada oclada de vnos colmillos/ o navajas de vna parte y de otra/ tan luenga como vn brazo de vn hombre y algunos mayores y menores segun la grandesa y cuerpo deste animal que tales armas tiene. Yo le he visto en el darien en la tierra firme tan grande q vn carro con vn par de bueyes tenia harta carga y peso que traer en el desde el agua hasta el puerto. Estas espadas que digo estan llenas de vnas puntas de hueso macizas y rejas y muy agudas/ o punzantes de vna parte y otra dela espada con la qual no se puede pelear delante sin que le mate. y tambien ay estos pescados en las costas de esta y de las otras yslas de las partes. Estos pescados me dicen ami los hombres de la

Libro

mar que los ay en espanya pero sin estas piedras o puas en las espadas/ no se si lo crea porq en algunos templos en espanya las he visto colgadas pero no se de donde las han llevado/ o si las ay en el mar de espanya asisicarias: mas aca en estas mares de las indias y tierra firme muchas destas he visto de la manera q tengo dicho. Son buenos pescados de comer/ por no tales como los pequenos de los mismos/ y de otros de los menores o otras especies / porque por la mayor parte los pescados muy grandes no son tantos aca alo que yo he entendido y las mas veces se come por necesidad/ excepto el Tibunati que aun que son muy grandes son muy buenos y sanos: del qual Tibunati se vna mas adelante en su lugar.

Capitulo. v. De los peces boladores que se hallan en el grande golfo del mar oceano/ y uniendo de Espana a estas indias.



Quanto preguntara la causa por que digo que estos peces boladores se hallan a la venida a estas partes en el grande mar y golfo del oceano: y no dire ala buelta desde aquestas indias a espanya o Europa. y por sacar desta duda al lector/ digo que aun que ala buelta se hallan los mismos pescados / assi como ala venida no son tantos en mucha manera/ ni los nauios bueluen por el mismo rumbo de derrota que aca vinieron/ y ala vanda del norteno ay tantos como por esta otra via hacia el sur o parte de la tierra firme. Hallan se desde tan pequenos como vn Albejonco hasta tamaños como grandes Sardinas. Estos quando las naues van corriendo en su viage y ala vela se leuantan de vna parte y de otra a manadas grandes y pequeñas/ pero en ellos es grandisimo y incontable el numero de estos peces boladores de vn buelo acacese y a caer espacio de doscientos pasos/ y mas/ y menos: acacese algunas veces caer deiro é las naos: y yo los he tenido bidos en las manos y los he comido. y son muy buen pescado al sabor

Oviedo's text page with plate (Fernández de Oviedo Gonzalo, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias*, Selección, Ed. Bruño, 1991, Libro XII, Capitulo VII. P. 122).

also presented an enormous variety of previously unheard of “exotica,” including canoes, smoking tobacco, tamales, and hammocks. Along with Pedro Mártir de Anglería and Bartolomé de Las Casas, Oviedo was one of the first European “chroniclers of the Indies,” having written two comprehensive works on America, including the rare *Historia*.

Partial translations of Oviedo’s work appeared in Italian by Giovanni Battista Ramusio (1550) and in English by Richard Eden (1577). Two works, also translated by Ramusio without giving the author’s name, “Tratado del palo Guayacan y del palo Santo como antidoto contra la sifilis” and “Navegación del rio Marañon,” also are attributed to Oviedo. Ramusio, who was born on 20 July 1485 in Treviso, Republic of Venice (Italy) and died on 10 July 1557 in Padua, was an Italian geographer who compiled an important collection of writings on various travels

in his *Delle Navigazioni et Viaggi (Some Voyages and Travels, 1550–1559)*. The book contained works by over fifty other authors. Ramusio was assisted by the artist Gastaldi in the monumental task of engraving the maps that illustrated the accounts.

Oviedo’s work is quite rare and no recent auction records have been found for the original editions. Later versions (1851–1855) command prices in the range of \$5,000. The work also was reprinted in 1959, 1978, 1986, 1989, 1992, and 2002. Even these editions sell for as much as \$250.

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Page 64 & facing plate. “Lacertus Indicus, Senembi & Iguana dictus: The Guana” and “Anona maxima, foliis latis fructu maximo luteo conoide, cortice glabro” (pp. 64–T 64, from Catesby 1754). This illustration is considered by most authorities to be taken from White. The associated text was on a separate page in English and French (not shown).

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