



# Hans Staden's True History: An Account of Cannibal Captivity in Brazil

By Hans Staden, Neil Whitehead

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In 1550 the German adventurer Hans Staden was serving as a gunner in a Portuguese fort on the Brazilian coast. While out hunting, he was captured by the Tupinambá, an indigenous people who had a reputation for engaging in ritual cannibalism and who, as allies of the French, were hostile to the Portuguese. Staden's *True History*, first published in Germany in 1557, tells the story of his nine months among the Tupi Indians. It is a dramatic first-person account of his capture, captivity, and eventual escape.

Staden's narrative is a foundational text in the history and European "discovery" of Brazil, the earliest European account of the Tupi Indians, and a touchstone in the debates on cannibalism. Yet the last English-language edition of Staden's *True History* was published in 1929. This new critical edition features a new translation from the sixteenth-century German along with annotations and an extensive introduction. It restores to the text the fifty-six woodcut illustrations of Staden's adventures and final escape that appeared in the original 1557 edition.

In the introduction, Neil L. Whitehead discusses the circumstances surrounding the production of Staden's narrative and its ethnological significance, paying particular attention to contemporary debates about cannibalism. Whitehead illuminates the value of Staden's *True History* as an eyewitness account of Tupi society on the eve before its collapse, of ritual war and sacrifice among Native peoples, and of colonial rivalries in the region of Rio de Janeiro. He chronicles the history of the various editions of Staden's narrative and their reception from 1557 until the present. Staden's work continues to engage a wide range of readers, not least within Brazil, where it has recently been the subject of two films and a graphic novel.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

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“In this superb new English translation of his account, Whitehead and Harbsmeier make it possible for a new generation of US students to learn of Staden's travails. A sophisticated essay that places Hans Staden in his proper historical context serves as the introduction to the translation. . . . Highly recommended.” - R. M. Delson, *Choice*

“The book is a critical edition. . . . The book has become a cornerstone for discussion concerning native practices of cannibalism, but at the same time it is one of the earliest accounts available describing Brazil. Thus Whitehead and Harbsmeier seek to ransom the book from its place in the debate over cannibalism and place it rather within the literature of European contact with the native peoples of the Americas.” - John F. Schwaller, *The Americas*

“This new translation into English of Hans Staden’s *Warhaftige Historia*, or *True History*, originally published in 1557 in Marburg, will fill a gap in the study of both European colonialism and travel literature. . . . Illustrated with plentiful woodcuts and underscored by ethnographic descriptions, Staden’s book is a keystone to the history of colonial Brazil and of Tupi-Guarani societies, as well as to current refashionings of the colonial past. . . . Despite its exceptional quality among early colonial texts, there has not been an English-language version since Malcolm Lett’s edition of 1928. Whitehead’s and Harbsmeier’s accurate transcription and annotated translation of Staden’s first edition remedy this neglect. Moreover, their introductory study not only reconstructs the text’s legacies in a variety of contexts and disciplines, but also demonstrates its persistent appeal for current debates.” - Luciana Villas-Bóas, *Colonial Latin American Review*

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“I was quite astonished to find out that no version of Hans Staden’s account had been printed in English since 1929. Not only is it the earliest eyewitness narrative of the Tupi peoples written by a European; it deals

with the heated and enduring debate about the role of cannibalism in human experience.”—**Irene Silverblatt**, author of *Modern Inquisitions: Peru and the Colonial Origins of the Civilized World*

“Neil L. Whitehead’s introduction contextualizes Staden’s account with amazing richness. This is the definitive English edition.”—**Mary Louise Pratt**, Silver Professor, Department of Spanish and Portuguese Languages and Literatures, New York University

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