

Acosta

Consider José de Acosta's XVIth-century account of his "discovery" of the Americas. Acosta (1539-1600), a Spaniard and a Jesuit, resided in Peru and Mexico from 1570 to 1587. In the entry I quote from his chronicles, an early description of the New World initially published in Spanish in 1590, Acosta purports to describe a llama, an animal he has never seen before. In order to do so, he necessarily makes reference to what he already knows: to sheep, calves, and camels. Observe how the unavoidable intrusion of Acosta's pre-understanding entails that he cannot show fidelity to the llama on its own terms.

"There is nothing richer or more profitable in Peru than the livestock of that land, which our people call Indies sheep and the Indians in their language llama [...]. [...] These sheep or llamas are of two species: of one kind are the alpacas, or woolly sheep, while others are smooth or have little wool and are better for carrying loads. They are larger than large sheep and smaller than yearling calves; they have a very long neck like a camel, and they need it because they are tall animals and high in the body and require a long neck in order to graze" [*"Ninguna cosa tiene el Piru de mayor riqueza y ventaja, que es el ganado de la tierra, que los nuestros llamó Carneros de las Indias: y los Indios en lengua general los llaman Llama (...). (...) Son estos Carneros, o Llamas en dos especies: unos son Pacos, o Carneros lanudos: otros son rasos, y de poca lana, y son mejores para carga: son mayores que carneros grandes, y menores que bezeros: tienen el cuello muy largo a semejança de camello, y han lo menester porque como son altos, y leuantados de cuerpo, para pacer requiere tener cuello luengo"*].

José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, ed. by Jane E. Mangan, transl. by Frances López-Morillas (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002 [1604]), bk IV, ch. 41, p. 244.