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JACQUES CARTIER'S INTERPRETERS

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The history of translation and interpretation in Canada began with the abduction of two Iroquois Indians. When Jacques Cartier and his men were ready to head back to France, they decided to bring some natives with them to present to King Francis I. Domagaya and Taignoagny were two sons of Donnacona, the great chief of Stadacona [Quebec]. The explorers forced the chiefs sons to board the French vessel and went to great lengths to keep the Indians from missing their homeland, so they would stay aboard voluntarily. We cannot dismiss the possibility that the sailors, either intentionally or by excessive zeal, lulled our two fellows into a drunken stupor, so they would not think of returning to land. The Indians arrived in France on September 5, 1534 and would only breathe the air of their country's vast wilderness one year later, when they returned as "mediators," i.e., interpreters.

It was a common practice in the sixteenth century for explorers to abduct natives, and the chief of Quebec's two sons were not the first American Indians to be carried off to Europe. [...] Such captives were uprooted from their native land to prove the authenticity of the seafarers' exploits and were valued as souvenirs and curios.

Cartier, who was planning to return and continue his exploration of New France, thought that Domagaya and Taignoagny could be of great use to him if he trained them as interpreters. Learning the indigenous languages would have been a formidable undertaking, which probably explains, at least in part, why Cartier decided to teach French to Chief Donnacona's two sons, instead of making them language teachers as he had originally planned. Cartier himself learned some rudiments of Iroquois. The few words and phrases he managed to memorize, however, did not allow him to do without his interpreters.

On May 19, 1535, Domagaya and Taignoagny boarded the *Great Ermine* to cross the ocean once again. During their eight months in France, they had managed to acquire an elementary knowledge of French. When they returned to their country, they were living proof to their countrymen that the French could be trusted, as the French had kept their word to bring the great chief's two sons back safe and sound. From then on, a very complex relationship developed between the French and the Iroquois, and interpretation began to play a pivotal role in Franco-Iroquois relations. Their familiarity with the French way of life gave the two interpreters from Quebec an advantage they did not fail to use. They had seen how business was conducted in France and upbraided their countrymen for accepting worthless trinkets in exchange for splendid furs which the French traders resold in Europe at premium prices.

During his second voyage to Canada, Cartier's interpreters taught him even more about the country. Thanks to their information, he navigated the great river [The St. Lawrence River]–which at first he did not even know existed–thus discovering a "great axis of penetration." He also found out that this river was not at all the strait to Cathay, and he learned many other details about the country. Among the invaluable contributions his interpreters made, the most important was without doubt the secret for curing the "great disease," i.e., scurvy. Of the 110 men in his crew, barely ten escaped the disease during the hard winter of 1535-36. It hit the natives as hard as it did the French, and Domagaya was taken ill. Cartier provides us with a description of his sick interpreter: "One of his legs about the knee had swollen to the size of a two-year-old baby, and the sinews had become contracted. His teeth had gone bad and decayed, and the gums had rotted and become tainted." (1)

One day as he wandered outside the fort located on the St. Croix River, despairing over a problem that seemed to have no solution, Cartier chanced upon Domagaya, who had completely recovered. The interpreter then told Cartier how to make a tea from the leaves of the *annedda* tree [*Thuya occidentalis*] and, thanks to this miraculous beverage, all the crew members promptly recovered.

Although Domagaya and Taignoagny had lived for some time like the French, deep down they always remained Iroquois. They never cooperated with the French when the explorers' goals ran counter to Stadacona's goals. They kept a deep and steadfast attachment to their people. As interpreters, the interaction between two civilizations–Europe and the American Indians–hinged on them. To them, "faithfulness" meant remaining loyal to their people. [...] Cartier realized this when he found his two "mediators" involved in intrigues against him and his men.

When the French expressed interest in going to Hochelaga [Montreal] to find out whether there was a route to Asia, the Stadaconans tried everything in their power to dissuade the French from going upriver. To understand their attitude, and the actions of Domagaya and Taignoagny in particular, we must bear in mind that Montreal dominated the St. Lawrence Valley, and Stadacona was dependent on Montreal. Chief Donnacona, a skillful diplomat and businessman, wanted a monopoly on the burgeoning trade with the French and also wanted to shake off the rival village's domination. In league with his sons, he tried to keep Cartier in Quebec, so the chief could continue to be the only intermediary between the "White Flesh" and the valley's "Redskins."

When the Indians' trickery became apparent, the French planned to set out the following day. Since Cartier could not dare to take Domagaya and Taignoagny along by force, he decided to go without them. Without his interpreters, he again had to resort to gestures. He learned very little in Quebec, and what information he did find out was incomplete and vague. The lack of interpreters considerably reduced the scope of this short expedition.

When spring arrived after a hard winter in Fort Sainte-Croix, Cartier thought about setting sail for France. Not wanting to leave intriguers like Domagaya and Taignoagny

behind in New France, he decided to abduct them a second time and exile them once and for all in France. Cartier had no intention of ever letting a chief who had become an unreliable ally return home, let alone two interpreters who had blocked Cartier's projects far too much. On July 16, 1536, the interpreters and their countrymen landed on a continent from which they were never to return.

On his third visit to Canada, Cartier instituted a system that would be used throughout the seventeenth century. The new approach involved sending young Frenchmen to live among the natives to learn the languages of the country. "Since using indigenous interpreters had produced poor results, a different approach was adopted: French interpreters would at first live with a tribe and learn from the natives" (2).

References

(1) Cook, Ramsay. *The Voyages of Jacques Cartier*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press Inc., 1993, p. 79.

(2) Trudel, Marcel. *Histoire de la Nouvelle France:* I–*Les vaines tentatives.* Montreal: Fides, 1963, p. 150.

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