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Primary document analysis

Document: Letter of Samuel de Champlain to the King of France

The author of this document is Samuel de Champlain, he was writing this letter to the King of France, Louis XIII to tell him how his expeditions in New France were going, and that he had a package of new information that he was keen to send him.<sup>1</sup> Beyond what Champlain writes in his letter, this document tells us a lot of other information about what was going on at the time that the letter was written. Champlain was clearly a skilled explorer with a deep need to project himself as a revolutionary pioneer, and be known as the great explorer that he was.

Champlain speaks of the plethora of the knowledge that the King has been able to gather from the other pilots and captains that have come before him during the course of the last 80 years from the descriptions of their journeys, but Champlain has a parcel to be brought to the King containing several maps of different areas of what is now called Canada.<sup>2</sup> As well he has a detailed journal of voyages and discoveries made by himself.<sup>3</sup> Champlain makes it sound as if the King hasn't received detailed maps of New France before this, by referring to his findings as the most useful discoveries made thus far, if he was able to make all of these discoveries that no man before him had ever been able to accomplish, he must have been an adept explorer for his time. This also reveals that there was very little knowledge about New France at the time that

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<sup>1</sup> De Champlain, Samuel, St. Croix Historical Society, *Originally translated by Ganong, W.F.*, 1918

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

this letter was written because Champlain was among the first, if not *the* very first cartographer of New France that the King recognized. Later in the letter he divulges that he has included a list of potential dangers that one might run into when travelling certain routes, and as he had mentioned before, the journal he is sending is an exhaustive description of all of his travels.<sup>4</sup> This leads me to believe that he has experienced the dangerous situations that he's referring to which even reinforces the fact that he is capable at what he does.

In the way that Champlain writes about himself, it is clear that he wanted to portray himself as a superior figure to his fellow explorers in both knowledge and experience. He wants the King to know that he's picked the best person possible for the job, and the overall feeling I get from him in this letter is excitement, Champlain truly believes that he is the best. I think that the reason he feels like he needs to keep the King contented is because during the time period in which this was written, the King would have been funding the expeditions he was going on. He reveals that this is true when he says that his King, as well as his predecessor Henry the Great has commissioned him for the past ten years, and he speaks highly of his relationship with the two of them presumably for the same reason. The choice of words that Champlain uses in his letter really showcases his hunger for the approval of the King, he refers to himself as "most humble, most obedient and most faithful servant and subject", desperately trying to paint a picture of how he wants the King to see him, and his ventures.<sup>5</sup> He is proficient at writing for the time that the letter was written, so I would conclude that Champlain would have been born into

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<sup>4</sup> De Champlain, Samuel, St. Croix Historical Society, *Originally translated by Ganong, W.F.*, 1918

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

either a middle or upper class family. At the time it was rare for people from lower class families to be able to read or write, which means his positive overtone throughout the letter might not be typical for the general population, as quality of life would vary greatly across the different social classes. Additionally he would have been a highly respected explorer to have had two different Kings decide that he was worthy of their backing and support.<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion I think that Samuel de Champlain successfully portrayed himself as a great explorer and a prodigy of his time, and he does so by backing himself up with evidence. He refers to himself as the best because he has completed tasks that none before him could. As mentioned before the overall reaction this letter invokes would be happiness and excitement, and I think that this is heavily dependant on the fact that Champlain is most likely a man of certain social status of his time, which would cause his reality to be very different from those who would have been in a different class. I feel that Samuel de Champlain had a pretty good existence in comparison to his other peers of the 17th century, and that he worked mercilessly to be known, and help in high regard with not only the King, but the entire kingdom.

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<sup>6</sup> De Champlain, Samuel, St. Croix Historical Society, *Originally translated by Ganong, W.F.*, 1918