Thomas Hariot, A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia, directed to the investors, farmers, and well-wishers of the project of colonizing and planting there (1588)

Sir Walter Raleigh sent long-time associate Thomas Hariot on the first English colonizing attempt in America with directions to categorize the wildlife, observe the native peoples, and, upon returning to England, write his report. Hariot's loyalty to, and financial dependence on, Raleigh ensured that his report would protect Raleigh's stake in the American colony. This excerpt is of interest to anyone who is addicted to tobacco.

There is an herb called uppowoc, which sows itself. In the West Indies it has several names, according to the different places where it grows and is used, but the Spaniards generally call it tobacco. Its leaves are dried, made into powder, and then smoked by being sucked through clay pipes into the stomach and head. The fumes purge superfluous phlegm and gross humors from the body by opening all the pores and passages. Thus its use not only preserves the body, but if there are any obstructions it breaks them up. By this means the natives keep in excellent health, without many of the grievous diseases which often afflict us in England.

This uppowoc is so highly valued by them that they think their gods are delighted with it. Sometimes they make holy fires and cast the powder into them as a sacrifice. If there is a storm on the waters, they throw it up into the air and into the water to pacify their gods. Also, when they set up a new weir for fish, they pour uppowoc into it. And if they escape from danger, they also throw the powder up into the air. This is always done with strange gestures and stamping, sometimes dancing, clapping of hands, holding hands up, and staring up into the heavens. During this performance they chatter strange words and utter meaningless noises.

While we were there we used to suck in the smoke as they did, and now that we are back in England we still do so. We have found many rare and wonderful proofs of the uppowoc's virtues, which would themselves require a volume to relate. There is sufficient evidence in the fact that it is used by so many men and women of great calling, as well as by some learned physicians.

Document Analysis

Why would Hariot praise the virtues of tobacco, claiming medicinal properties? Did tobacco ever bring profit to the later Virginia colony?