

The Americas to 1620

by Christopher L. Miller



Petroglyphs in Petrified Forest National Park (NPS photo)

At the end of the first millennium, most people in the Eastern Hemisphere had a firm sense of how the world was arranged, who occupied it, and how they had come to be where they were. Various sacred texts as well as long-standing folk beliefs suggested a virtually eternal order of things, instilling a sort of reassuring confidence in a stable and entirely predictable existence. However, forces were emerging that would open up new possibilities and engender a new restlessness that would shatter provincial confidence and stability as a new more cosmopolitan world emerged. A new era of American history was about to spring from the most unexpected of places.

This part of the story began, not in the Americas, nor in Europe, but in the Middle East. Carrying the message of the new prophet Mohammed out of the Arabian Peninsula, Muslims began making major inroads into western Asia and northern Africa in the seventh century, eventually encroaching on Europe's southern and eastern frontiers. In 1095, Pope Urban II responded to a request for aid from the Byzantine emperor, whose dominions were under attack by Muslim invaders, launching the era of the Crusades. For two centuries, European-based Christians battled with Muslims in the Holy Lands and elsewhere. For the elite classes who engaged in crusading, provincialism died away, replaced by new information and contacts in the wider world. Soon Europeans would begin turning this new knowledge and these new tools against the people from whom they were appropriated.

Iberians led the way, launching a *Reconquista*, an effort to break Islamic rule on the peninsula. With the aid of crusaders, Portugal attained independence in 1147. By 1380 Portugal's King John I had united that country's various principalities under his rule. In Spain, unification took much longer, but in 1469 Ferdinand and Isabella, heirs to the rival thrones of Aragon and Castile,

married and forged a united Spanish state. Twenty-three years later, in 1492, the Spanish subdued the last Moorish stronghold on the peninsula, completing the *Reconquista*. At the same time, other European states were also waking up to new realities. Consolidation began in France in around 1480, when Louis XI took control of five rival provinces to create a unified kingdom. Five years later in England, Henry Tudor and the House of Lancaster defeated the rival House of York in the Wars of the Roses, ending nearly a century of civil war. As in Spain and Portugal, the formation of unified states in France and England opened the way to new expansive activity.

Europeans had learned through their crusading experience that Muslim merchants had access to enormous trading networks that brought volumes of valuable goods into their markets. To the east, Muslim caravans carried silks, spices, and precious metals out of India, China, and Central Asia along the Silk Road, an arduous and expensive route. And to the south, North African Berbers had taken advantage of contacts with fellow Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula to introduce camels that allowed regular trading ventures across the forbidding Sahara Desert. From such remarkable cities as Timbuktu, the capital of Mali, merchants returned with gold, ivory, beautifully worked copper, and, significantly, slaves.

During the thirteenth century, Italian merchants sought to break into these monopolies. With convenient ports on the Mediterranean Sea, Italian city-states like Venice and Genoa gradually edged their way into the broadening trading world, attaining a virtual monopoly over the European consumer market for exotic goods. Coming into their own, however, the newly emerging consolidated states in Europe were not satisfied with dependence on Mediterranean merchants and sought their own access to exotic markets. Portugal's John I encouraged exploration by establishing a school of navigation on his kingdom's Atlantic shore. By the 1430s, the Portuguese had discovered and taken control of islands off the west coast of Africa, and within thirty years had pushed their way to Africa itself, opening relations with the Songhai Empire.

The Songhai Empire was typical of the sub-Saharan trading states that emerged through Muslim contacts. Its capital, Gao, was a key trading hub where African and Islamic influences met. From Gao, Songhai traders had shipped valuable trade goods across the Sahara by caravan. The Portuguese, however, offered speedier shipment and higher profits by carrying trade goods directly to Europe by sea. By the end of the fifteenth century, Portuguese navigators had gained control over the flow of prized items such as gold, ivory, and spices out of West Africa, and Portuguese colonizers were growing sugar and other crops on the newly conquered Azores and Canary Islands. Meanwhile, the Portuguese sought to divert the Silk Road traffic by rounding the Cape of Good Hope and sailing on into the Indian Ocean.

England, Spain, and France were also interested in finding a short, cheap, and safe sea route between Europe and Asia. As latecomers, Spain and England could not afford to take Portugal's conservative approach to exploration. One ambitious sailor from the Italian port city of Genoa, Christopher Columbus, approached several European governments looking for support for a voyage westward, across the Atlantic, where he was convinced he would reach the East Indies. Initially he found no one willing to take the risk. Finally, in 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella's successful reconquest of Spain provided Columbus with an opportunity. Having just thrown off Islamic rule in the coastal province of Granada, the joint monarchs were eager to break into overseas trading. Ferdinand and Isabella agreed to equip three ships in exchange for a new route

to the Orient. After more than three months at sea, Columbus finally made landfall. He thought he had arrived at the Indies, but in fact he had reached the islands we now call the Bahamas.

England, too, was jealous of Portugal's trade monopoly, and in 1497 Henry VII commissioned another Italian mariner, Giovanni Caboto, to search for a sea route to India. John Cabot, as the English called him, succeeded in crossing the Atlantic. Shortly thereafter, another Italian, Amerigo Vespucci, sailing under the Spanish flag, sighted the northeastern shore of South America and sailed northward into the Caribbean in search of a passage to the East. Finally, in 1524, Giovanni da Verrazano, sailing for France, charted the entire Atlantic coastline of North America. It was by then apparent that this was not Asia, but an entirely new world. And the people there were not Asians; they were an entirely new people, though in their ignorance the newcomers insisted on calling them Indians, a name that stuck.

At first, European monarchs greeted the discovery of a new world as bad news: they wanted access to the riches of Asia, not contact with some undiscovered place. But gradually Europeans learned that the new land had attractions of its own. Columbus found gold on his voyages, leading to the suspicion that the wealth in the New World might dwarf that of the Indies. Ambitious adventurers from Britain, France, and Iberia also began exploring the fertile fishing grounds off the northern shores of North America. As the Indians and the fishermen came to know each other, they began to exchange goods. Apparently the trade grew quickly. By 1534, when Jacques Cartier made the first official exploration of the Canadian coast for the French government, he was approached by party after party of Indians offering to trade furs for the goods he carried. He could only conclude that many other Europeans had come before him.

The presence of explorers such as Verrazano and Cartier and of unknown numbers of anonymous fishermen and part-time traders had several effects on the native population. The Mi'kmaq, Hurons, and other northeastern Indian groups approached the intruding Europeans in friendship, eager to trade and to learn more about the strangers. In part this response was a sign of natural curiosity, but it also reflected some serious changes taking place in the Native world of North America. Beginning in the mid-fourteenth century, the climate in North America underwent significant cooling. As the climate grew colder, both hunter-gatherers like the Mi'kmaq and agriculturists like the Iroquois had to expand their subsistence territory, and in doing so they came into conflict with their neighbors. As warfare became more common, groups increasingly formed alliances for mutual defense—systems like the Iroquois League and Powhatan Confederacy. And Indians found it beneficial to welcome European newcomers into their midst—as trading partners bearing new tools, as allies in the evolving conflicts with neighboring Indian groups, and as powerful magicians whose shamans might provide explanations and remedies for the hard times that had befallen the Indians.

The existence of America—and even more the presence of people there—further challenged European provincialism, though as the newcomers came to understand that America was a new land and that the Indians were a new people, they attempted to fit both into the cosmic map outlined in the Bible. To Columbus, for example, Indians represented mankind before the fall of Adam, noble savages of whom he wrote, “Of anything that they possess, if it be asked of them, they never say no; on the contrary, they invite you to share it and show as much love as if their hearts went with it.”[1] Vespucci, in contrast, found them to be the most fallen of all mankind, true savages who “marry as many wives as they please,” and among whom the “son cohabits

with mother, brother with sister, male cousin with female, and any man with the first woman he meets.”[2] Such portrayals, which were repeated over and over again by explorers and early settlers, established a sort of dichotomous mythic identity for American Indians that continues to affect non-Native perceptions of them through the present day.

In some ways, the arrival of Europeans may have been easier for American Indians to understand and explain than the existence of Indians was for Europeans. To Indians, the world was alive, animated by a spiritual force that was both universal and intelligent. Social ties based on fictive kinship and reciprocal trade linked all creatures—human and nonhuman—together into a common cosmos. These connections were chronicled in myth and maintained through ritual, which often involved the exchange of ceremonial items believed to have spiritual value. In the pre-Columbian trading world, such prized goods passed from society to society, establishing a spiritual bond even if the two groups never met. Europeans and European goods slipped easily into this ceremonial trading system. The trade items that the Europeans generally offered to American Indians on first contact—glass beads, mirrors, brass bells—resembled closely the items that the Indians traditionally used to establish friendly spiritual and economic relations with strangers. The perceived similarity of the trade goods offered by the Europeans led Indians to accept the newcomers as simply another new group in the complex social cosmos uniting the spiritual and material worlds.

Europeans, to the contrary, perceived such items as worthless trinkets, valuing instead Indian furs and land. This difference in perception became a major source of misunderstanding and conflict. To the Indians, neither furs nor the land was considered “property”; according to their beliefs, all things had innate spirits and belonged to themselves. Beavers, for example, gave their fur to people in exchange for spiritual gifts, and when the Native Americans passed the furs along to Europeans they were simply extending the social connection that had brought the furs into their hands in the first place. Similarly, the land was seen as a living being—a mother—who feeds, clothes, and houses people as long as she receives proper respect. When Europeans offered spiritually significant objects in exchange for land on which to build, farm, or hunt, Indians perceived the offer as an effort to join an already existing social relationship, and not as a contract transferring ownership.

Another source of tension stemmed from the fact that the natural environments of the Old and New Worlds were different, and the passage of people, plants, and animals among Europe, Africa, and North America instigated profound changes in all three continents. This long-term process has been labeled the Columbian Exchange.

From Africa, exotic plants such as bananas, sugar cane, and rice were imported to Iberian-claimed islands such as the Canaries and eventually to America, where, along with cotton, indigo, coffee, and other imports, they would become cash crops on European-controlled plantations. European plants such as wheat, barley, and rye were readily transplanted to some areas in North America, as were grazing grasses and various vegetables, including turnips, spinach, and cabbage. North American plants also traveled from west to east. Leading the way in economic importance was tobacco, a stimulant used widely in North America for ceremonial purposes and broadly adopted by Europeans and Africans as a recreational drug. But two American plants were of world-altering significance: corn and manioc. These were immediately

transplanted from South America and the Caribbean into Africa, where they helped lead to a population explosion that funneled millions of Africans into the slave trade.

The most tragic trade among the three continents was literally invisible: bacteria and viruses wreaked havoc among populations that had never been exposed to them before. It appears that Europeans acquired a New World bacterium that evolved into syphilis, infecting thousands. And, it would appear, Africans brought various bacteria to the New World that developed into different strains of malaria. Africa, itself, was largely spared from new diseases because most contact with Europeans was sporadic in the early days. But in the Americas, where sustained contact occurred from the very beginning, the impact of both European and African diseases was devastating. There is no way of knowing the full impact of imported diseases among Native Americans, though some studies have found that the death rate during the first century of contact was over 90 percent.

The ecological changes and the creation of markets brought about by the Columbian Exchange would drive Atlantic enterprise for nearly three hundred years following Columbus's geographical blunder. While exchanged diseases were killing many millions of Indians and lesser numbers of Africans and Europeans, the transplantation of North American plants significantly expanded food production in what had been marginal areas of Europe and Africa. At the same time, the environmental changes that Europeans wrought along the Atlantic shore of North America permitted the region to support many more people than it had sustained under Native cultivation. The overall result in Europe and Africa was a population explosion that eventually spilled over to repopulate a devastated North America.

As Europeans struggled to wrest a profit from a rugged, and now underpopulated, New World, they found the prospect of enslaved African labor irresistible. Europeans equipped aggressive tribes on Africa's western coast with firearms and encouraged large-scale raiding deep into the Niger and Congo river regions. These raiders captured millions of prisoners, whom they herded back to the coast and sold to European traders to supply labor for mines and plantations in the New World. In exchange, they received more firearms and other weapons as well as manufactured goods from Europe crafted largely from raw materials imported from the Americas. They also received rum made from the sugar grown by Africans for Europeans in the Caribbean, converted into alcohol in both North America and Europe, and then exchanged for more slaves to be fed into the cane plantations. Tobacco followed the same route with the same results. This never-ending circle of trade followed the natural course of wind and ocean currents that, until steam power revolutionized shipping in the mid-nineteenth century, dictated patterns of motion and commerce in the Atlantic World.

At any given location in this great wheel of activity, conditions on the ground could vary significantly. The Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch, British, and other exploiters of the newly emerged Atlantic World each had their own style and strategies for extracting resources, exploiting natives, and making profits. Indigenous peoples from Africa to the Atlantic archipelagos to the Caribbean and all the Americas also adopted unique strategies for dealing with these invaders. But for more than half a millennium, the great wheel itself continued to spin and the patterns set down in the first era of American history continued to drive it.

Christopher L. Miller is an associate professor of history at the University of Texas-Pan American. He is the author of Prophetic Worlds: Indians and Whites on the Columbia Plateau (repr. 2003) and co-author of Making America: A History of the United States, now in its sixth edition (2012), Making America: A History of the United States, Brief Fifth Edition (2011), and Making the American Constitution (2006). Dr. Miller is also active in contemporary Indian affairs, having served as a participant in the American Indian Civics Project funded by the Kellogg Foundation. He has been a research fellow at the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History at Harvard University and was the Nikolay V. Sivachev Distinguished Chair in American History at Lomonosov Moscow State University (Russian Federation).

[1] Christopher Columbus, “A Letter sent by Columbus to [Luis de Santangel] Chancellor of the Exchequer [of Aragon], respecting the Islands found in the Indies, enclosing another for their Highnesses,” in *Select Letters of Christopher Columbus: with Other Original Documents, Relating to His Four Voyages to the New World*, trans. & ed. R. H. Major, 2nd ed. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1870), 7.

[2] Amerigo Vespucci, *Vespucci Reprints, Texts and Studies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1916), 5:6.