1
Natives

13,000 B.C.–A.D. 1492

Temple and cabin of the chief of the Acolapissa, 1732, by Alexandre de Batz. In the lower Mississippi Valley, in the early eighteenth century, French colonizers found vestiges of the Mississippian culture featuring powerful priest-chiefs and elaborately decorated temples.

SCHOLARS USED TO THINK of Native American cultures as relatively static, unchanging for centuries until encountered and overwhelmed by the European invaders after 1492. Those scholars assumed that the descriptions of Indian cultures by early explorers could be read backward to imagine their predecessors from centuries past. With the help of recent archaeology and anthropology, we can now see that the explorers encountered a complex array of diverse peoples in the midst of profound change. Far from being an immutable people, the Indians had a complicated and dynamic history in America long before 1492.

Because so much remains controversial about native origins and so many new discoveries are daily made, all of the statements in this chapter are highly speculative and the dates are approximations. The archaeological evidence is fragmentary and limited, suggesting multiple possibilities. In general, I have favored the more cautious interpretations advanced by the debating archaeologists. And we should bear in mind that many contemporary native peoples entirely reject the scholarly explanations for their origins, preferring instead their own traditions that they emerged in the Americas and so literally belong to this land.

Writing about pre-Columbian America is also fraught with controversy because we often enlist ancient natives in contemporary debates over our own social and environmental problems. To highlight the social inequities and environmental degradation of our own society, some romantics depict the pre-1492 Americans as ecological and social saints living in perfect harmony with one another and with their nature. To refute that critique, more conservative intellectuals eagerly point out every example of native violence, human sacrifice, and environmental waste. By generalizing from such examples, the conservatives revive the mythology of the European colonizers: that Indians were warlike savages with a primitive culture that deserved conquest and transformation. Often the debate deteriorates into a competition over who was innately worse: the Indian or the European. In fact, it would be difficult (and pointless) to make the case that either the Indians or the Europeans of the early modern era were by nature or culture more violent and “cruel” than the other. Warfare and the ritual torture and execution of enemies were commonplace in both native America and early modern Europe.

Without pegging Europeans as innately more cruel and violent, we should recognize their superior power to inflict misery. By 1492 they had developed a greater technological and organizational capacity to conduct prolonged wars far from home. They also possessed imperial rivalries and religious ideologies that drove them outward across the world’s oceans in search of