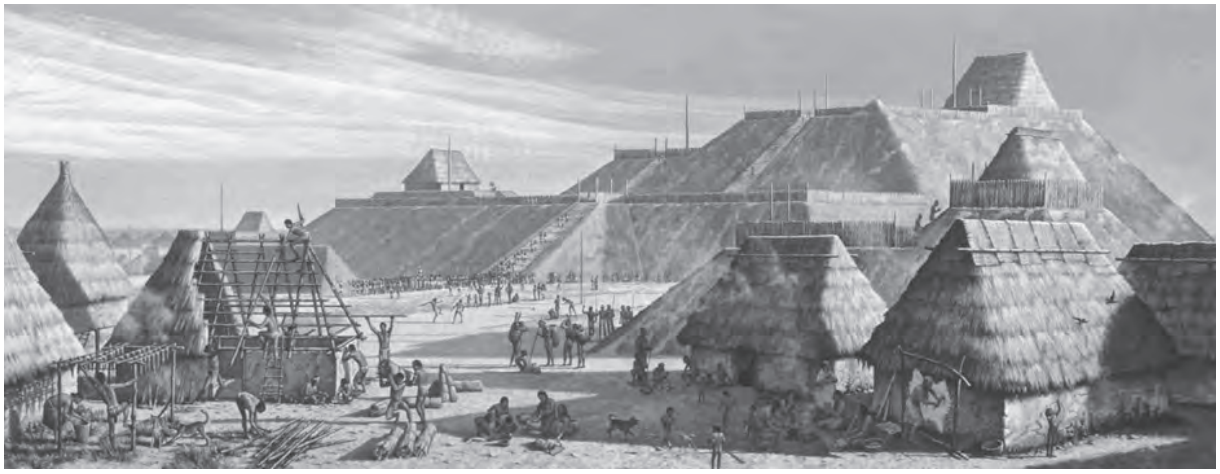


Cahokia, as it may have appeared around 1150 CE. Painting by Michael Hampshire for the Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site.

1

The New World

I. Introduction

Europeans called the Americas "the New World." But for the millions of Native Americans they encountered, it was anything but. Humans have lived in the Americas for over ten thousand years. Dynamic and diverse, they spoke hundreds of languages and created thousands of distinct cultures. Native Americans built settled communities and followed seasonal migration patterns, maintained peace through alliances and warred with their neighbors, and developed self-sufficient economies and maintained vast trade networks. They cultivated distinct art forms and spiritual values. Kinship ties knit their communities together. But the arrival of Europeans and the resulting global exchange of people, animals, plants, and microbes—what scholars benignly call the Columbian Exchange—bridged more than ten thousand years of geographic separation, inaugurated centuries of violence, unleashed the greatest biological terror the world had ever seen, and revolutionized the history of the world. It began one of the most consequential developments in all of human history and the first chapter in the long American yawp.

II. The First Americans

American history begins with the first Americans. But where do their stories start? Native Americans passed stories down through the millennia that tell of their creation and reveal the contours of indigenous belief. The Salinan people of present-day California, for example, tell of a bald eagle that formed the first man out of clay and the first woman out of a feather.[1] According to a Lenape tradition, the earth was made when Sky Woman fell into a watery world and, with the help of muskrat and beaver, landed safely on a turtle's back, thus creating Turtle Island, or North America. A Choctaw tradition locates southeastern peoples' beginnings inside the great Mother Mound earthwork, Nunih Waya, in the lower Mississippi Valley.[2] Nahua people trace their beginnings to the place of the Seven Caves, from which their ancestors emerged before they migrated to what is now central Mexico.[3] America's indigenous peoples have passed down many accounts of their origins, written and oral, which share creation and migration histories.

Archaeologists and anthropologists, meanwhile, focus on migration histories. Studying artifacts, bones, and genetic signatures, these scholars have pieced together a narrative that claims that the Americas were once a "new world" for Native Americans as well.

The last global ice age trapped much of the world's water in enormous continental glaciers. Twenty thousand years ago, ice sheets, some a mile thick, extended across North America as far south as modern-day Illinois. With so much of the world's water captured in these massive ice sheets, global sea levels were much lower, and a land bridge connected Asia and North America across the Bering Strait. Between twelve and twenty thousand years ago, Native ancestors crossed the ice, waters, and exposed lands between the continents of Asia and America. These mobile hunter-gatherers traveled in small bands, exploiting vegetable, animal, and marine resources into the Beringian tundra at the northwestern edge of North America. DNA evidence suggests that these ancestors paused—for perhaps fifteen thousand years—in the expansive region between Asia and America.[4] Other ancestors crossed the seas and voyaged along the Pacific coast, traveling along riverways and settling where local ecosystems permitted.[5] Glacial sheets receded around fourteen thousand years ago, opening a corridor to warmer climates and new resources. Some ancestral communities migrated southward and eastward. Evidence found at Monte Verde, a site in modern-day Chile, suggests that human activity began there at least 14,500 years ago. Similar evidence hints at

human settlement in the Florida panhandle at the same time.[6] On many points, archaeological and traditional knowledge sources converge: the dental, archaeological, linguistic, oral, ecological, and genetic evidence illustrates a great deal of diversity, with numerous groups settling and migrating over thousands of years, potentially from many different points of origin.[7] Whether emerging from the earth, water, or sky; being made by a creator; or migrating to their homelands, modern Native American communities recount histories in America that date long before human memory.

In the Northwest, Native groups exploited the great salmon-filled rivers. On the plains and prairie lands, hunting communities followed bison herds and moved according to seasonal patterns. In mountains, prairies, deserts, and forests, the cultures and ways of life of paleo-era ancestors were as varied as the geography. These groups spoke hundreds of languages and adopted distinct cultural practices. Rich and diverse diets fueled massive population growth across the continent.

Agriculture arose sometime between nine thousand and five thousand years ago, almost simultaneously in the Eastern and Western Hemispheres. Mesoamericans in modern-day Mexico and Central America relied on domesticated maize (corn) to develop the hemisphere's first

Prehistoric settlement in Warren County, Mississippi. Mural by Robert Dafford, depicting the Kings Crossing archaeological site as it may have appeared in 1000 CE. Vicksburg Riverfront Murals.

settled population around 1200 BCE.[8] Corn was high in caloric content, easily dried and stored, and, in Mesoamerica's warm and fertile Gulf Coast, could sometimes be harvested twice in a year. Corn—as well as other Mesoamerican crops—spread across North America and continues to hold an important spiritual and cultural place in many Native communities.

Agriculture flourished in the fertile river valleys between the Mississippi River and the Atlantic Ocean, an area known as the Eastern Woodlands. There, three crops in particular—corn, beans, and squash, known as the Three Sisters—provided nutritional needs necessary to sustain cities and civilizations. In Woodland areas from the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River to the Atlantic coast, Native communities managed their forest resources by burning underbrush to create vast parklike hunting grounds and to clear the ground for planting the Three Sisters. Many groups used shifting cultivation, in which farmers cut the forest, burned the undergrowth, and then planted seeds in the nutrient-rich ashes. When crop yields began to decline, farmers moved to another field and allowed the land to recover and the forest to regrow before again cutting the forest, burning the undergrowth, and restarting the cycle. This technique was particularly useful in areas with difficult soil. But in the fertile regions of the Eastern Woodlands, Native American farmers engaged in permanent, intensive agriculture, using hand tools rather than European-style plows. The rich soil and use of hand tools enabled effective and sustainable farming practices, producing high yields without overburdening the soil.[9] Typically in Woodland communities, women practiced agriculture while men hunted and fished.

Agriculture allowed for dramatic social change, but for some, it also may have accompanied a decline in health. Analysis of remains reveals that societies transitioning to agriculture often experienced weaker bones and teeth.[10] But despite these possible declines, agriculture brought important benefits. Farmers could produce more food than hunters, enabling some members of the community to pursue other skills. Religious leaders, skilled soldiers, and artists could devote their energy to activities other than food production.

North America's indigenous peoples shared some broad traits. Spiritual practices, understandings of property, and kinship networks differed markedly from European arrangements. Most Native Americans did not neatly distinguish between the natural and the supernatural. Spiritual power permeated their world and was both tangible and accessible. It could be appealed to and harnessed. Kinship bound most Native North

American people together. Most peoples lived in small communities tied by kinship networks. Many Native cultures understood ancestry as matrilineal: family and clan identity proceeded along the female line, through mothers and daughters, rather than fathers and sons. Fathers, for instance, often joined mothers' extended families, and sometimes even a mother's brothers took a more direct role in child-raising than biological fathers. Therefore, mothers often wielded enormous influence at local levels, and men's identities and influence often depended on their relationships to women. Native American culture, meanwhile, generally afforded greater sexual and marital freedom than European cultures. Women, for instance, often chose their husbands, and divorce often was a relatively simple and straightforward process. Moreover, most Native peoples' notions of property rights differed markedly from those of Europeans. Native Americans generally felt a personal ownership of tools, weapons, or other items that were actively used, and this same rule applied to land and crops. Groups and individuals exploited particular pieces of land and used violence or negotiation to exclude others. But the right to the use of land did not imply the right to its permanent possession.

Native Americans had many ways of communicating, including graphic ones, and some of these artistic and communicative technologies are still used today. For example, Algonquian-speaking Ojibwes used birch-bark scrolls to record medical treatments, recipes, songs, stories, and more. Other Eastern Woodland peoples wove plant fibers, embroidered skins with porcupine quills, and modeled the earth to make sites of complex ceremonial meaning. On the Plains, artisans wove buffalo hair and painted on buffalo skins; in the Pacific Northwest weavers wove goat hair into soft textiles with particular patterns. Maya, Zapotec, and Nahua ancestors in Mesoamerica painted their histories on plant-derived textiles and carved them into stone. In the Andes, Inca recorders noted information in the form of knotted strings, or *khipu*.[11]

Two thousand years ago, some of the largest culture groups in North America were the Puebloan groups, centered in the current-day Greater Southwest (the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico), the Mississippian groups located along the Great River and its tributaries, and the Mesoamerican groups of the areas now known as central Mexico and the Yucatán. Previous developments in agricultural technology enabled the explosive growth of the large early societies, such as that at Tenochtitlán in the Valley of Mexico, Cahokia along the Mississippi River, and in the desert oasis areas of the Greater Southwest.

Native peoples in the Southwest began constructing these highly defensible cliff dwellings in 1190 CE and continued expanding and refurbishing them until 1260 CE before abandoning them around 1300 CE. Andreas F. Borchert, *Mesa Verde National Park Cliff Palace*. Wikimedia. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Germany.

Chaco Canyon in northern New Mexico was home to ancestral Puebloan peoples between 900 and 1300 CE. As many as fifteen thousand individuals lived in the Chaco Canyon complex in present-day New Mexico.[12] Sophisticated agricultural practices, extensive trading networks, and even the domestication of animals like turkeys allowed the population to swell. Massive residential structures, built from sandstone blocks and lumber carried across great distances, housed hundreds of Puebloan people. One building, Pueblo Bonito, stretched over two acres and rose five stories. Its six hundred rooms were decorated with copper bells, turquoise decorations, and bright macaws.[13] Homes like those at Pueblo Bonito included a small dugout room, or *kiva*, which played an important role in a variety of ceremonies and served as an important center for Puebloan life and culture. Puebloan spirituality was tied both to the earth and the heavens, as generations carefully charted the stars and designed homes in line with the path of the sun and moon.[14]

The Puebloan people of Chaco Canyon faced several ecological challenges, including deforestation and overirrigation, which ultimately caused the community to collapse and its people to disperse to smaller settlements. An extreme fifty-year drought began in 1130. Shortly thereafter, Chaco Canyon was deserted. New groups, including the Apache and Navajo, entered the vacated territory and adopted several Puebloan customs. The same drought that plagued the Pueblo also likely affected the Mississippian peoples of the American Midwest and South. The Mississippians developed one of the largest civilizations north of modern-day Mexico. Roughly one thousand years ago, the largest Mississippian settlement, Cahokia, located just east of modern-day St. Louis, peaked at a population of between ten thousand and thirty thousand. It rivaled contemporary European cities in size. No American city, in fact, would

match Cahokia's peak population levels until after the American Revolution. The city itself spanned two thousand acres and centered on Monks Mound, a large earthen hill that rose ten stories and was larger at its base than the pyramids of Egypt. As with many of the peoples who lived in the Woodlands, life and death in Cahokia were linked to the movement of the stars, sun, and moon, and their ceremonial earthwork structures reflect these important structuring forces.

Cahokia was politically organized around chiefdoms, a hierarchical, clan-based system that gave leaders both secular and sacred authority. The size of the city and the extent of its influence suggest that the city relied on a number of lesser chiefdoms under the authority of a paramount leader. Social stratification was partly preserved through frequent warfare. War captives were enslaved, and these captives formed an important part of the economy in the North American Southeast. Native American slavery was not based on holding people as property. Instead, Native Americans understood slaves as people who lacked kinship networks. Slavery, then, was not always a permanent condition. Very often, a former slave could become a fully integrated member of the community. Adoption or marriage could enable a slave to enter a kinship network and join the community. Slavery and captive trading became an

An artist's rendering of Cahokia as it may have appeared in 1150 CE. Prepared by Bill Isminger and Mark Esarey with artwork by Greg Harlin. From the Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site.

important way that many Native communities regrew and gained or maintained power.

Around 1050, Cahokia experienced what one archaeologist has called a "big bang," which included "a virtually instantaneous and pervasive shift in all things political, social, and ideological."[15] The population grew almost 500 percent in only one generation, and new people groups were absorbed into the city and its supporting communities. By 1300, the once-powerful city had undergone a series of strains that led to collapse. Scholars previously pointed to ecological disaster or slow depopulation through emigration, but new research instead emphasizes mounting warfare, or internal political tensions. Environmental explanations suggest that population growth placed too great a burden on the arable land. Others suggest that the demand for fuel and building materials led to deforestation, erosion, and perhaps an extended drought. Recent evidence, including defensive stockades, suggests that political turmoil among the ruling elite and threats from external enemies may explain the end of the once-great civilization.[16]

North American communities were connected by kin, politics, and culture and sustained by long-distance trading routes. The Mississippi River served as an important trade artery, but all of the continent's waterways were vital to transportation and communication. Cahokia became a key trading center partly because of its position near the Mississippi, Illinois, and Missouri Rivers. These rivers created networks that stretched from the Great Lakes to the American Southeast. Archaeologists can identify materials, like seashells, that traveled over a thousand miles to reach the center of this civilization. At least 3,500 years ago, the community at what is now Poverty Point, Louisiana, had access to copper from present-day Canada and flint from modern-day Indiana. Sheets of mica found at the sacred Serpent Mound site near the Ohio River came from the Allegheny Mountains, and obsidian from nearby earthworks came from Mexico. Turquoise from the Greater Southwest was used at Teotihuacan 1200 years ago.

In the Eastern Woodlands, many Native American societies lived in smaller, dispersed communities to take advantage of rich soils and abundant rivers and streams. The Lenapes, also known as Delawares, farmed the bottomlands throughout the Hudson and Delaware River watersheds in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. Their hundreds of settlements, stretching from southern Massachusetts through Delaware, were loosely bound together by political, social, and spiritual connections.

Dispersed and relatively independent, Lenape communities were bound together by oral histories, ceremonial traditions, consensus-based political organization, kinship networks, and a shared clan system. Kinship tied the various Lenape communities and clans together, and society was organized along matrilineal lines. Marriage occurred between clans, and a married man joined the clan of his wife. Lenape women wielded authority over marriages, households, and agricultural production and may even have played a significant part in determining the selection of leaders, called sachems. Dispersed authority, small settlements, and kin-based organization contributed to the long-lasting stability and resilience of Lenape communities.[17] One or more sachems governed Lenape communities by the consent of their people. Lenape sachems acquired their authority by demonstrating wisdom and experience. This differed from the hierarchical organization of many Mississippian cultures. Large gatherings did exist, however, as dispersed communities and their leaders gathered for ceremonial purposes or to make big decisions. Sachems spoke for their people in larger councils that included men, women, and elders. The Lenapes experienced occasional tensions with other indigenous groups like the Iroquois to the north or the Susquehannock to the south, but the lack of defensive fortifications near Lenape communities convinced archaeologists that the Lenapes avoided large-scale warfare.

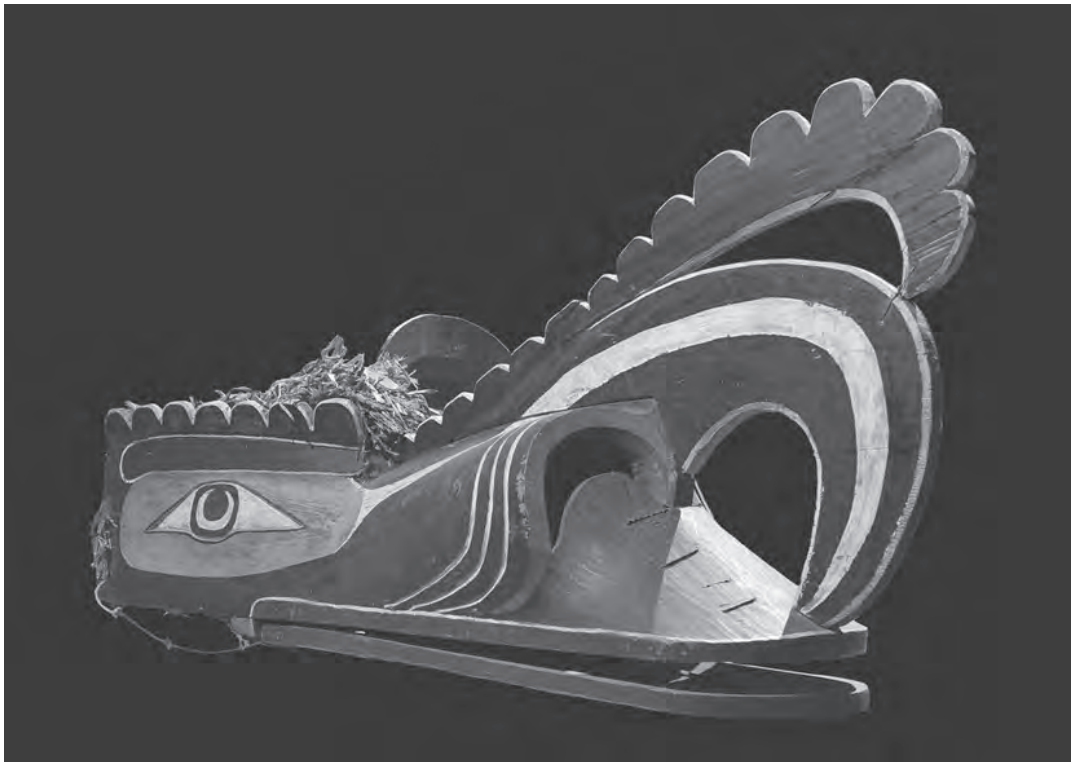
The continued longevity of Lenape societies, which began centuries before European contact, was also due to their skills as farmers and fishers. Along with the Three Sisters, Lenape women planted tobacco, sunflowers, and gourds. They harvested fruits and nuts from trees and cultivated numerous medicinal plants, which they used with great proficiency. The Lenapes organized their communities to take advantage of growing seasons and the migration patterns of animals and fowl that were a part of their diet. During planting and harvesting seasons, Lenapes gathered in larger groups to coordinate their labor and take advantage of local abundance. As proficient fishers, they organized seasonal fish camps to net shellfish and catch shad. Lenapes wove nets, baskets, mats, and a variety of household materials from the rushes found along the streams, rivers, and coasts. They made their homes in some of the most fertile and abundant lands in the Eastern Woodlands and used their skills to create a stable and prosperous civilization. The first Dutch and Swedish settlers who encountered the Lenapes in the seventeenth century recognized Lenape prosperity and quickly sought their friendship. Their lives came to depend on it.

In the Pacific Northwest, the Kwakwaka'wakw, Tlingits, Haidas, and hundreds of other peoples, speaking dozens of languages, thrived in a land with a moderate climate, lush forests, and many rivers. The peoples of this region depended on salmon for survival and valued it accordingly. Images of salmon decorated totem poles, baskets, canoes, oars, and other tools. The fish was treated with spiritual respect and its image represented prosperity, life, and renewal. Sustainable harvesting practices ensured the survival of salmon populations. The Coast Salish people and several others celebrated the First Salmon Ceremony when the first migrating salmon was spotted each season. Elders closely observed the size of the salmon run and delayed harvesting to ensure that a sufficient number survived to spawn and return in the future.[18] Men commonly used nets, hooks, and other small tools to capture salmon as they migrated upriver to spawn. Massive cedar canoes, as long as fifty feet and carrying as many as twenty men, also enabled extensive fishing expeditions in the Pacific Ocean, where skilled fishermen caught halibut, sturgeon, and other fish, sometimes hauling thousands of pounds in a single canoe.[19]

Food surpluses enabled significant population growth, and the Pacific Northwest became one of the most densely populated regions of North America. The combination of population density and surplus food created a unique social organization centered on elaborate feasts, called potlatches. These potlatches celebrated births and weddings and determined social status. The party lasted for days and hosts demonstrated their wealth and power by entertaining guests with food, artwork, and performances. The more the hosts gave away, the more prestige and power they had within the group. Some men saved for decades to host an extravagant potlatch that would in turn give him greater respect and power within the community.

Many peoples of the Pacific Northwest built elaborate plank houses out of the region's abundant cedar trees. The five-hundred-foot-long Suquamish Oleman House (or Old Man House), for instance, rested on the banks of Puget Sound.[20] Giant cedar trees were also carved and painted in the shape of animals or other figures to tell stories and express identities. These totem poles became the most recognizable artistic form of the Pacific Northwest, but peoples also carved masks and other wooden items, such as hand drums and rattles, out of the region's great trees.

Despite commonalities, Native cultures varied greatly. The New World was marked by diversity and contrast. By the time Europeans were poised to cross the Atlantic, Native Americans spoke hundreds of lan-



Intricately carved masks, like the Crooked Beak of Heaven Mask, used natural elements such as animals to represent supernatural forces during ceremonial dances and festivals. Nineteenth-century brooked beak of heaven mask from the Kwakwaka'wakw. Wikimedia. Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported.

guages and lived in keeping with the hemisphere's many climates. Some lived in cities, others in small bands. Some migrated seasonally; others settled permanently. All Native peoples had long histories and well-formed, unique cultures that developed over millennia. But the arrival of Europeans changed everything.

III. European Expansion

Scandinavian seafarers reached the New World long before Columbus. At their peak they sailed as far east as Constantinople and raided settlements as far south as North Africa. They established limited colonies in Iceland and Greenland and, around the year 1000, Leif Erikson reached Newfoundland in present-day Canada. But the Norse colony failed. Culturally and geographically isolated, the Norse were driven back to the sea by some combination of limited resources, inhospitable weather, food shortages, and Native resistance.

Then, centuries before Columbus, the Crusades linked Europe with the wealth, power, and knowledge of Asia. Europeans rediscovered or adopted Greek, Roman, and Muslim knowledge. The hemispheric dissemination of goods and knowledge not only sparked the Renaissance

but fueled long-term European expansion. Asian goods flooded European markets, creating a demand for new commodities. This trade created vast new wealth, and Europeans battled one another for trade supremacy.

European nation-states consolidated under the authority of powerful kings. A series of military conflicts between England and France—the Hundred Years' War—accelerated nationalism and cultivated the financial and military administration necessary to maintain nation-states. In Spain, the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile consolidated the two most powerful kingdoms of the Iberian peninsula. The Crusades had never ended in Iberia: the Spanish crown concluded centuries of intermittent warfare—the Reconquista—by expelling Muslim Moors and Iberian Jews from the Iberian peninsula in 1492, just as Christopher Columbus sailed west. With new power, these new nations—and their newly empowered monarchs—yearned to access the wealth of Asia.

Seafaring Italian traders commanded the Mediterranean and controlled trade with Asia. Spain and Portugal, at the edges of Europe, relied on middlemen and paid higher prices for Asian goods. They sought a more direct route. And so they looked to the Atlantic. Portugal invested heavily in exploration. From his estate on the Sagres Peninsula of Portugal, a rich sailing port, Prince Henry the Navigator (Infante Henry, Duke of Viseu) invested in research and technology and underwrote many technological breakthroughs. His investments bore fruit. In the fifteenth century, Portuguese sailors perfected the astrolabe, a tool to calculate latitude, and the caravel, a ship well suited for ocean exploration. Both were technological breakthroughs. The astrolabe allowed for precise navigation, and the caravel, unlike more common vessels designed for trading on the relatively placid Mediterranean, was a rugged ship with a deep draft capable of making lengthy voyages on the open ocean and, equally important, carrying large amounts of cargo while doing so.

Blending economic and religious motivations, the Portuguese established forts along the Atlantic coast of Africa during the fifteenth century, inaugurating centuries of European colonization there. Portuguese trading posts generated new profits that funded further trade and further colonization. Trading posts spread across the vast coastline of Africa, and by the end of the fifteenth century, Vasco da Gama leapfrogged his way around the coasts of Africa to reach India and other lucrative Asian markets.

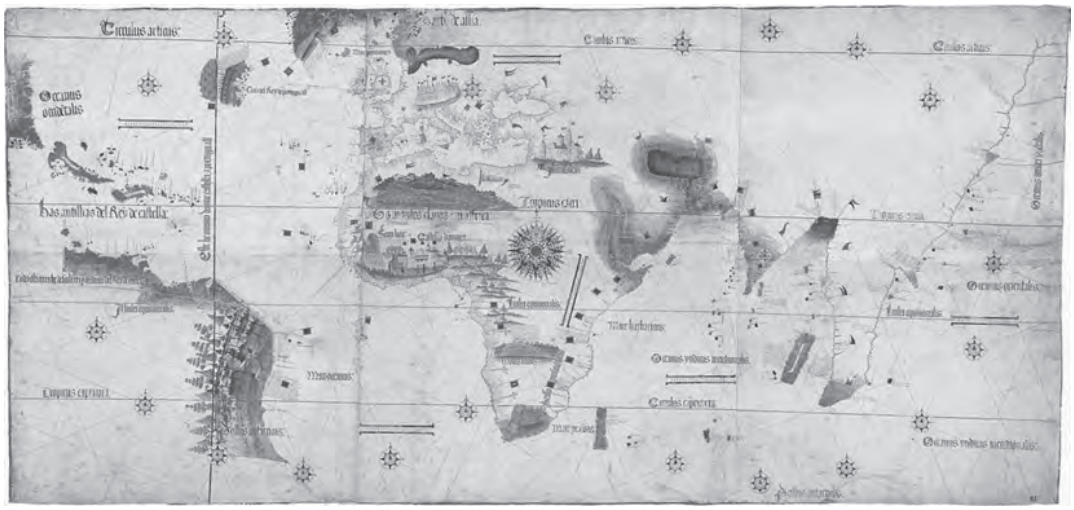
The vagaries of ocean currents and the limits of contemporary technology forced Iberian sailors to sail west into the open sea before cutting back east to Africa. So doing, the Spanish and Portuguese stumbled on

Engraving of sixteenth-century Lisbon from Civitatis Orbis Terrarum, *The Cities of the World*, ed. Georg Braun (Cologne: 1572). Wikimedia.

several islands off the coast of Europe and Africa, including the Azores, the Canary Islands, and the Cape Verde Islands. They became training grounds for the later colonization of the Americas and saw the first large-scale cultivation of sugar by enslaved laborers.

Sugar was originally grown in Asia but became a popular, widely profitable luxury item consumed by the nobility of Europe. The Portuguese began growing sugarcane along the Mediterranean, but sugar was a difficult crop. It required tropical temperatures, daily rainfall, unique soil conditions, and a fourteen-month growing season. But on the Atlantic islands, the Portuguese had found new land to support sugar production. New patterns of human and ecological destruction followed. Isolated from the mainlands of Europe and Africa for millennia, island natives—known as the Guanches—were enslaved or perished soon after Europeans arrived. Portugal's would-be planters needed laborers to cultivate the difficult, labor-intensive crop. Portuguese merchants, who had recently established good relations with powerful African kingdoms such as Kongo, Ndongo, and Songhai, looked then to African slaves. Slavery had long existed among African societies. African leaders traded war captives—who by custom forfeited their freedom in battle—for Portuguese guns, iron, and manufactured goods. From bases along the Atlantic coast, the largest in modern-day Nigeria, the Portuguese began purchasing slaves for export to the Atlantic islands to work the sugar fields. Thus were born the first great Atlantic plantations.

Spain, too, stood on the cutting edge of maritime technology. Spanish sailors had become masters of the caravels. As Portugal consolidated control over African trading networks and the circuitous eastbound sea route to Asia, Spain yearned for its own path to empire. Christopher



By the fifteenth century, the Portuguese had established forts and colonies on islands and along the rim of the Atlantic Ocean; other major European countries soon followed. An anonymous cartographer created this map known as the Cantino Map, the earliest known map of European exploration in the New World, to depict these holdings and argue for the greatness of his native Portugal. *Cantino planisphere* (1502), Biblioteca Estense, Modena, Italy. Wikimedia.

Columbus, a skilled Italian-born sailor who had studied under Portuguese navigators, promised just that opportunity.

Educated Asians and Europeans of the fifteenth century knew the world was round. They also knew that while it was therefore technically possible to reach Asia by sailing west from Europe—thereby avoiding Italian or Portuguese middlemen—the earth's vast size would doom even the greatest caravels to starvation and thirst long before they ever reached their destination. But Columbus underestimated the size of the globe by a full two thirds and therefore believed it was possible. After unsuccessfully shopping his proposed expedition in several European courts, he convinced Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain to provide him three small ships, which set sail in 1492. Columbus was both confoundingly wrong about the size of the earth and spectacularly lucky that two large continents lurked in his path. On October 12, 1492, after two months at sea, the *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa María* and their ninety men landed in the modern-day Bahamas.

The indigenous Arawaks, or Taíno, populated the Caribbean islands. They fished and grew corn, yams, and cassava. Columbus described them as innocents. "They are very gentle and without knowledge of what is evil; nor the sins of murder or theft," he reported to the Spanish crown. "Your highness may believe that in all the world there can be no better people. . . . They love their neighbors as themselves, and their speech is