

ANTHROPOLOGY

Picturing the Pre-Columbian Americas

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American Indians have inhabited the continents of the Western Hemisphere for fourteen, give or take a couple, millennia, having arrived from northeastern Asia as very small, biologically modern human populations. At the time, humans everywhere lived in simple hunter-gatherer societies, although their languages and intellectual capabilities were equivalent to those of anyone living today. The subsequent cultural evolution of American Indians took many of them along developmental paths to tribes, chiefdoms, states, and empires that paralleled cultural developments on most of the other inhabited continents. Farming, writing, music, arts, crafts, politics, war, and all the other traits that make up human culture were as much a part of this process in the Americas as anywhere else. Still, everything changed for them with the advent of globalization, for which 1492 is a convenient benchmark.

The long history of the American Indians from their first arrival to the first voyage of Columbus is important to their living descendants because it is their heritage. It is inherently important to other modern Americans because it is embedded in the landscape we all share. And it is important to science because in 1491 the societies of the Americas, from the simplest to the most complex, were remarkably like those of what we still like to call the Old World, despite their virtually complete mutual isolation since well before the end of the Pleistocene. Were it not for the American Indians, we could never be quite sure that things like urbanism, state religion, literacy, and empire were all elements of universal but latent human potential back when nobody had so much as dreamed of any of them.

Native Americans were at an adaptive disadvantage in their collision with European, African, and Asian cultures in what Columbus called the “Other World.” The Americans lacked the wide range of grains, vehicles, domesticated animals, and (ironically) the diseases that gave Europeans the edge. Epidemics

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decimated the Americans ahead of the inexorable European conquest, a process so pervasive that many modern Americans are unaware of what Native Americans were like before 1492. It is this ignorance that Charles Mann has sought to rectify with *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*.

That is a noble purpose, and Mann (a contributing correspondent for *Science*) is an able writer, but there are potential pitfalls. Most of the long history of American Indians is known mainly through the incomplete record of archaeology—with epigraphy, genetics, historical linguistics, oral traditions, and a few other subjects providing additional lines of evidence. Scientific inference from these clues entails its own hazards, and in a popular book

there is the additional constant risk of overstatement when one’s purpose is to convince the reader that credit has not been given where it was due. There is also the temptation to proffer as “new revelations” findings that have been known and written about for decades. Mann has sidestepped some, but not all, of these pitfalls.

The author’s approach is anecdotal, covering subjects that interest him and about which he has acquired a reasonably deep knowledge. His chapters touch on New England, Peru, Mexico, eastern Brazil, the Mississippi Basin, Guatemala, the Amazon lowlands, and the lower Great Lakes, sometimes repeatedly and in no particular order.

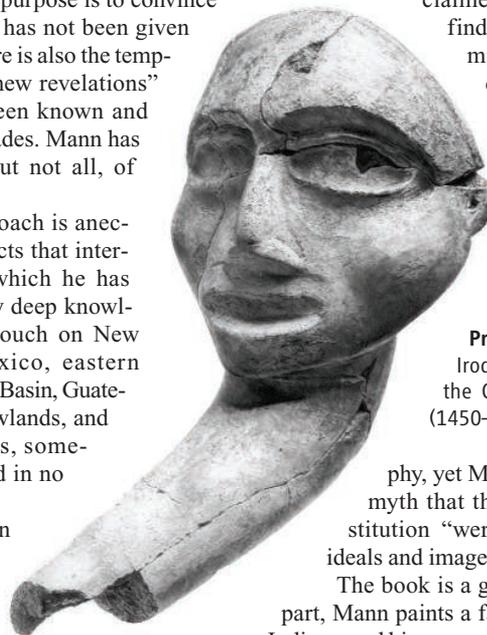
Along the way, Mann shoots down popular misconceptions that have been previously refuted by various authorities. I will cite just a few. Tisquantum (Squanto) was a skilled and well-traveled politician, not an innocent dupe of the New England Pilgrims. Surprisingly simple hunting societies encountered in interior South America were the scattered remnants of more complex societies that had been devastated by epidemics, not pristine survivors from the stone age. Pizarro and Cortés

defeated American Indian empires because they had guns, cavalry, and germs on their side, not because the Incas and Aztecs were hobbled by superstition and other forms of inferiority. The American landscape was an anthropogenic one for millennia, which reverted temporarily to wilderness between the epidemic decline in Indian populations and resettlement by expanding Europeans. Deep anthropogenic soils and other archaeological evidence in the Amazon lowlands indicate that before 1492 Indian populations were much larger there than previously suspected. The last finding was particularly inspiring for the author.

Unfortunately the book also contains overstatements, errors, and speculations of the kinds that creep in when an author’s purpose is to make a strong case for a thesis. Again, I will cite just a few. It is unnecessary to argue that Europeans were “unbearably dirty” to make the case that Indians were not filthy savages or to repeat Henry Dobyns’s wildly inflated population estimates to make the case that colonial era epidemics were unprecedented in their devastation—everybody was smelly in 1491, and 60% mortality is horrendous no matter what the absolute size of the population. Older is better in popular books, and Brazil’s Lagoa Santa skeletons are dusted off again. But none

of the surprisingly early dates claimed for these and other finds in eastern Brazil meet minimum scientific standards for reliability. The Great Law of the Iroquois is very different from the U.S. Constitution. The framers of the latter were inspired mainly by European philoso-

Pre-contact pipe. A Mohawk Iroquois effigy pipe found at the Otstungo, New York, site (1450–1525).



phy, yet Mann repeats the modern myth that the framers of the Constitution “were pervaded by Indian ideals and images of liberty.”

The book is a good read. For the most part, Mann paints a fair picture of American Indians, and his account is largely free of fawning political correctness. But readers who know the subject well will question the polemics, erratic organization, and various factual statements. Critical readers should use *1491* only as a starting point, following the author’s excellent notes and bibliography to explore more specific topics in the vast literature pertaining to Columbus’s Other World.

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1491

New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus

by **Charles C. Mann**

Knopf, New York, 2005. 478 pp. \$30, C\$40. ISBN 1-4000-4006-X.

Ancient Americans

Rewriting the History of the New World

Granta, London, 2005. £20. ISBN 1-86207-617-0.