

# CHAPTER 1

## *New World Encounters, Preconquest–1608*

---

### CHAPTER OUTLINE

#### *Diverse Cultures: De Vaca's Journey Through Native America*

##### **Native Americans Before the Conquest**

The Environmental Challenge: Food, Climate, and Culture

Aztec Dominance

Eastern Woodland Cultures

##### **Conditions of Conquest**

Cultural Negotiations

Threats to Survival: Columbian Exchange

##### **West Africa: Ancient and Complex Societies**

##### **Europe on the Eve of Conquest**

Spanish Expansion

The Strange Career of Christopher Columbus

##### **Spain in the Americas**

The *Conquistadores*: Faith and Greed

From Plunder to Settlement

##### **The French Claim Canada**

##### **The English Take up the Challenge**

Birth of English Protestantism

Religion, War, and Nationalism

##### **Conclusion: Campaign to Sell America**

## TOWARD DISCUSSION: THE “OTHER”

It is argued that we make sense of important experiences by constructing stories that give them coherence and meaning. The unexpected meeting of Indians, Europeans, and Africans in the Western Hemisphere after 1492 was interpreted differently by each of the parties involved. The Europeans explained it as the triumph of Christianity and progress over ignorance and idolatry. But the European interpretation was only one of the ways in which the events of 1492 were understood. Indians and Africans constructed very different stories.

Literary critics have recently turned their attention to the vast literature that accompanied the first contacts between Europeans and Indians in America. Two aspects of the stories told by both sides seem especially interesting. The first is the conscious construction of histories by the Spanish explorers and *conquistadores* to explain or justify actions that may not have been premeditated. Columbus, for example, was probably not as visionary before 1492 as he later believed himself to be. In the contract he made with Queen Isabella before starting out on his famous voyage, he seems to have expected that he would most likely find, not Asia, but islands like the Canaries and Azores. He may have expected to sail *into* the Ocean Sea, not *across* it. Similarly, the Spanish tale of the conquest of Mexico as a great Christian crusade probably disguises an original intention to establish peaceful trade. Ironically, the conquest narratives may make the Spanish seem more bloodthirsty in intention than they really were.

The second interesting aspect of contact literature is how the Europeans, Indians, and Africans reacted to the “Other.” The concept of the “Other” derives mainly from structuralist theory, which argues that we shape the world through language by use of such polar opposites as “high and low,” “sacred and profane,” “raw and cooked,” “male and female.” One of the most potent of these pairs is “self and other.” It is argued that we construct a sense of self by differentiating ourselves from others, and that we construct a sense of otherness by differentiating others from ourselves. Since we usually impart values to the distinctions we make, the “Other” is never an equal. The “Other” is either vastly superior or grossly inferior, a god or a devil.

Scholars working with such theories have produced interesting analyses of the First Contact period. Tzvetan Todorov, for example, argues that the Spanish victory over the Aztecs was more a triumph of language than of military technology. The Aztecs, in his opinion, used language primarily to communicate with the gods, with the result that their language, and the mental universe formed by language, was highly ritualistic, repetitive, and predictable. Europeans, on the other hand, used language in a more practical way to persuade and manipulate other humans.

In their mental universe, the “Other” was unpredictable but manageable. Upon First Contact, the Aztecs were dumbfounded by an “Other” they found impossible to explain. Montezuma begged the gods to tell him what to do as the Spanish approached, but the gods fell silent. Cortés, however, was able to make false promises, to disguise his intentions, to distort the truth, and even to make seemingly supernatural omens conform to his own intentions. The Spanish defeated the Aztecs because they were more adept at manipulating the signs and symbols that make up a system of communication.

The subject of the “Other” is especially interesting at a time when the possibility of contact with life beyond our planet is the subject of so much speculation. Students should be encouraged to make comparisons between 1492 and that unknowable time when we first encounter extraterrestrials. Much will depend upon whether we first meet a big-eyed, sad-faced ET or a slimy creature baring a full set of razor-sharp teeth, because we too, like the Europeans, Africans, and Indians of 1492, have already met our “Other.”

## RELIVING THE PAST

Columbus recorded his first encounter with the Taíno people on the island they called Guanahani when he first made landfall in the Western Hemisphere. This meeting of two worlds and two cultures proceeded rather peacefully but for a strange incident. Columbus took out his sword to show it to one of the natives who apparently thought he was being offered a gift. He took it and cut his hand. What did a Stone Age people think when they first saw the power of metal? And why had Columbus unsheathed his sword? See the translation of *The Log of Christopher Columbus* by Robert Fuson (Camden, Maine: International Marine Publishing Company, 1987).

The log itself is fascinating, and Fuson fully discusses the controversy over which island in the Bahamas was the one the Indians called Guanahani and Columbus called San Salvador.

One of the most dramatic encounters in American history was the meeting between Hernan Cortés and Montezuma. Both men behaved with solemn courtesy until Cortés attempted to embrace the emperor in the friendly Spanish *abrazo*. Montezuma’s bodyguards grabbed Cortés by the arm and stopped him, explaining that an embrace would greatly insult the emperor. That small episode epitomizes the difficulties Europeans and Indians had in cross-cultural communication (Bernal Diaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*. New York: Penguin Paperback, 1967).

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

### DIVERSE CULTURES: DE VACA’S JOURNEY THROUGH NATIVE AMERICA

The author views some of the first contacts between Europeans and Native Americans in terms of *narratives*. Each side brought preconceptions molded by their long histories into their contacts with other peoples, and each side was molded by contact with the other.

The narrative of the voyages of Christopher Columbus, on the other hand, was told in terms of adventure. This one-sided story can be nuanced by considering contacts as *creative adaptations* to encompass the entire range of experiences on both sides.

## NATIVE AMERICANS BEFORE THE CONQUEST

America was first inhabited some twenty thousand years ago when small bands of nomadic Siberian hunters chased large mammals across the land bridge between Asia and America. During this long migration, the people who became known as the American Indians stopped carrying several diseases, such as smallpox and measles their children thus lost the immunities that would have protected them against such diseases.

### ? **WHAT explains cultural differences among Native American groups before European conquest?**

- Twenty thousand years ago, Paleo-Indians crossed into North America from Asia. During the migrations, they divided into distinct groups, often speaking different languages. The Agricultural Revolution sparked population growth, allowing some groups, such as the Aztecs, to establish complex societies. The Eastern Woodland Indians, who lived along the Atlantic coast, had just begun to practice agriculture when the Europeans arrived.

**The Environmental Challenge: Food, Climate, and Culture:** During the thousands of years before the arrival of the Europeans, the continents of North and South America experienced tremendous geologic and climate changes. As the weather warmed, the great mammals died off, and the Indians who hunted them turned increasingly to growing crops, bringing about an Agricultural Revolution. **View the Map *Pre-Columbian Societies of the Americas* on [myhistorylab.com](http://myhistorylab.com)**

**Aztec Dominance:** In Central America, the Aztecs settled in the fertile valley of Mexico and conquered a large and powerful empire, which they ruled through fear and force.

**Eastern Woodland Cultures:** Elsewhere, along the Atlantic coast of North America, for example, Native Americans lived in smaller bands and supplemented agriculture with hunting and gathering. In some cases, women owned the farming fields, and men the hunting grounds.

## CONDITIONS OF CONQUEST

The arrival of Europeans profoundly affected Native Americans, who could be said to have entered a new world.

### ? **HOW did Europeans and Native Americans interact during the period of first contact?**

- Native Americans initially welcomed the opportunity to trade with the Europeans. The newcomers insisted on “civilizing” the Indians. Neither Christianity nor European-style education held much appeal for Native Americans, and they resisted efforts to transform their cultures. Contagious Old World diseases, such as smallpox, decimated the Indians, leaving them vulnerable to many forms of cultural imperialism. *Thomas Hariot, The Algonquian Peoples* on **Read the Document [myhistorylab.com](http://myhistorylab.com)**

**Cultural Negotiations:** Native Americans were not passive in their dealings with the Europeans. They eagerly traded for products that made life easier, but they did not accept the notion that Europeans were in any way culturally superior, and most efforts by the Europeans to convert or “civilize” the Indians failed.

**Threats to Survival: Columbian Exchange:** Wherever Indians and Europeans came into contact, they exchanged ideas, goods, crops, technologies, and so on. Part of this “Columbian Exchange” included the transmission of diseases, like smallpox and measles. As a result, the Indian population declined rapidly. For example, the Arawak population in Santo Domingo fell from almost 4 million before the arrival of Columbus to just 125 in 1570. An entire way of life disappeared. **View the Map *Native American Population Loss, 1500–1700* on [myhistorylab.com](http://myhistorylab.com)**

#### WEST AFRICA: ANCIENT AND COMPLEX SOCIETIES

Contrary to ill-informed opinion, sub-Saharan West Africa was never an isolated part of the world where only simple societies developed. As elsewhere, West Africa had seen the rise and fall of empires, such as Ghana or Dahomey. West Africa had also been heavily influenced by the coming of Islam. The arrival of Europeans was just the latest of many foreign influences that helped shape African culture. The Portuguese came first, pioneering the sea lanes from Europe to sub-Saharan Africa in the fifteenth century. They found profit in gold and slaves, supplied willingly by native rulers who sold their prisoners of war. The Atlantic slave trade began taking about 1,000 persons each year from Africa, but the volume steadily increased. In the eighteenth century, an estimated five and one-half million were taken away. Altogether, Africa lost almost eleven million of her children to the Atlantic slave trade. Before 1831, more Africans than Europeans came to the Americas.

**? WHAT was the character of the West African societies that European traders first encountered?**

- West Africans had learned of Islam long before European traders arrived looking for slaves. The earliest Europeans encountered powerful local rulers who knew how to profit from commercial exchange. Slaves who had been captured in distant wars were taken to so-called slave factories where they were sold to Europeans and then shipped to the New World. *Ghana and Its People in the Eleventh Century* on **Read the Document [myhistorylab.com](http://myhistorylab.com)**

#### EUROPE ON THE EVE OF CONQUEST

The Vikings discovered America before Columbus, but European colonization of the New World began only after 1492 because only then were the preconditions for successful overseas settlement attained. These conditions were the rise of nation-states and the spread of the new technologies and old knowledge.

## ? What factors explain Spain's central role in New World exploration and colonization?

The unification of Spain under Ferdinand and Isabella, and the experience of the

- *Reconquista*, provided Spain with advantages in its later conquest of the New World. The Spanish Crown supported the explorations of Christopher Columbus, who thought he had discovered a new route to Asia. His voyages gave the Spanish a head start in claiming American lands.

**Spanish Expansion:** Spain first vied as a world power after unification in the 1400s. The united kingdoms took on new life and prosecuted the *Reconquista* more fiercely than ever. Militantly Catholic, the Spanish crown pushed the last Muslim state out in 1492, forcing both Muslims and Jews to flee. The *conquistadores* took this religious war overseas. The Canary Islands were the first overseas possessions taken by the Spanish.

**The Strange Career of Christopher Columbus:** Of Genoese origin, Christopher Columbus helped Spain to capture its American lands. Columbus went first to the Portuguese, but they pursued their goal of reaching the East by rounding the southern tip of Africa. He was more successful in petition the Spanish monarchs and was supplied with a fleet to sail to Cathay in August 1492. Miscalculating the distance required to reach Asia, Columbus sailed west across the Atlantic Ocean. He reached the Bahamas first, convinced that he had reached the East. In spite of three more voyages to the Americas, Columbus died in disgrace, ignorant of the fact that he had found a new continent. Amerigo Vespucci published a fictional account of *his* travels across the Atlantic and convinced Europeans that new lands had indeed been hit upon. His name was given to the Americas. **Watch the Video** *How Should We Think of Columbus?* on [myhistorylab.com](http://myhistorylab.com)

## SPAIN IN THE AMERICAS

Immediately after Columbus's first voyage in 1492, Spain and Portugal quarreled over the hoped-for spoils from what they thought was Asia. The Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) divided the new lands along a line running from north to south through the Americas.

## ? HOW did Spanish conquest of Central and South America transform Native American cultures?

- Spanish *conquistadores* conquered vast territories in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central and South America during the sixteenth century. Catholic missionaries followed the *conquistadors* to convert the Indians to Christianity. Although the Spanish conquerors cruelly exploited the Indians as laborers, intermarriage between the groups soon led to the creation of a new culture blending Spanish and Indian elements.

**The Conquistadores: Faith and Greed:** To expand Spain's territories in the New World, the Crown commissioned independent adventurers (*conquistadores*) to subdue new lands. For God, glory, and gold they came. Within two decades they decimated the major Caribbean islands, where most of the Indians died from exploitation and disease. The Spaniards then moved onto the mainland and continued the work of conquest. Hernán Cortés went to Mexico in search of

legendary treasures. He came up against the Aztec emperor, Montezuma. Helped by tributary tribes, firearms and horses, and seen initially as a god, Cortés destroyed the Aztec Empire in 1521. *An Early European Image of Native Americans* on **View the Closer Look** [myhistorylab.com](http://myhistorylab.com)

**From Plunder to Settlement:** The Spanish crown kept her unruly subjects in America loyal by rewarding the conquistadores with large land grants—*encomiendas*—that contained entire villages of Indians. In spite of these grants, the Spanish crown tried to keep direct control over their American lands. The Catholic Church also became an integral part of the administrative system, and mitigated some of the damage done by the conquistadores. By 1650, about half a million Spaniards immigrated to the New World. Since most were unmarried males, they married Indian or African women and produced a mixed-blood population. Spain’s empire proved to be a mixed blessing. The great influx of gold and silver made Spain rich and powerful, but set off a massive inflation and the Spanish crown became dependent on bullion imports. *Cruel Conquistadors Torturing Native Americans* on **View the Image** [myhistorylab.com](http://myhistorylab.com)

#### THE FRENCH CLAIM CANADA

French kings sent several expeditions to America. Jacques Cartier arrived in the Americas in 1534, and explored the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. The region was settled by Frenchman Samuel de Champlain, who founded Quebec in 1608. The French settlers saw cooperation with Native Americans as the best way to succeed. French *coureurs de bois* traveled deep into Canada searching for furs. This led Jacques Marquette and Sieur de la Salle down the Mississippi, ultimately reaching the Gulf of Mexico. French Catholics had fair success in converting Native Americans. The French empire however, was largely ignored by the French crown. The limited trading was easily controlled in Quebec, hindering economic growth. *Jacques Cartier, First Contact with the Indians (1534)* on **Read the Document** [myhistorylab.com](http://myhistorylab.com)

#### ? **WHAT was the character of the French empire in Canada?**

The French in Canada focused on building a trading empire rather than on settlement. The

- *coureurs de bois* and Catholic missionaries lived among the Indians and learned their languages and customs. French explorers followed the extensive river networks of North America and laid claim to vast stretches of land along the St. Lawrence and Mississippi Rivers.

#### THE ENGLISH TAKE UP THE CHALLENGE

When the Italian John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto), sailing for the English crossed the Atlantic in 1497, England won a claim to the Americas. However, this claim was not pursued until the late sixteenth century. The English crown, though growing in strength under Henry VII and his successors, was not in a position to undertake overseas ventures. An alliance between Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon in 1509 made English forays into what was perceived as the Spanish New World difficult.

## ? WHY did England not participate in the early competition for New World colonies?

During the early 1500s, religious turmoil occupied the full attention of England's monarchs. After ascending the throne in 1558, Queen Elizabeth I ended internal religious struggle by establishing an English Church that was Protestant in doctrine but Catholic in ceremony. Under Elizabeth, English nationalism merged with anti-Catholicism in a campaign to challenge Spanish control of the Americas.

**Birth of English Protestantism:** The *Protestant Reformation* turned England's alliance with Spain into enmity. English Protestant zeal, strengthened by growing nationalism, made England a more notable European power. When Henry VIII broke with the Roman Catholic Church to achieve a divorce from his wife, anticlerical feelings in England led most of his subjects to countenance the split with Rome. In 1534, the Act of Supremacy made the English monarch head of the church and transformed rich church lands into crown lands. A negative consequence of the break with Rome, on the other hand, was sectarian division, which weakened the crown. The Catholic Mary became queen in 1553, bringing a tide of anti-Protestant persecutions. The succession of Elizabeth in 1558 brought a moderate course of compromise between Catholic and Protestant observance. *Henry VII, Letters of Patent Granted to John Cabot* on **Read the Document myhistorylab.com**

**Religion, War, and Nationalism:** Protestantism and nationalism merged in England. Successful minor skirmishes against the Spanish—basically pirate raids—strengthened a growing patriotism. Annoyed by English ambitions, and the Protestant English queen, Philip II of Spain assembled the *Spanish Armada* to attack the English. In spite of its size, the Armada was easily overcome by the English fleet in 1588, and England emerged stronger than ever. Just before, in 1587, Sir Walter Raleigh had established the colony of Virginia.

### CONCLUSION: CAMPAIGN TO SELL AMERICA

Despite Raleigh's failure, Richard Hakluyt kept English interest in America alive by tirelessly advertising the benefits of colonization. His book *The Principall Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation* subtly argued that England needed American colonies. He did not mention, however, that those English people who went to America would encounter other peoples with different dreams about what America should be. *John White, Letter to Richard Hakluyt (1590)* on **Read the Document myhistorylab.com**

### KEY TERMS:

1. Twenty thousand years ago Earth's climate was considerably colder than it is today. Huge glaciers extended as far south as the present states of Illinois and Ohio and covered broad sections of western Canada. Most of the world's moisture was transformed into ice, and the oceans dropped hundreds of feet below their current levels. The receding waters created a land bridge connecting Asia and North America, a region now submerged beneath the Bering Sea that has been named **Beringia**.
2. The **Agricultural Revolution** helped liberate nomadic groups from the insecurities of hunting and gathering. During this period, Native Americans began to produce ceramics, a



valuable technology for the storage of grain. The vegetable harvest made possible the establishment of permanent villages, and as the food supply increased, Native American populations expanded, especially around urban centers.

3. The **Eastern Woodland Cultures** included Indians who lived on the Atlantic coast and supplemented farming with seasonal hunting and gathering. They organized diplomacy, trade, and war around reciprocal relationships that impressed Europeans as being extraordinarily egalitarian, even democratic.
4. Through the ecological transformation known as the **Columbian Exchange**, European conquerors exposed Native Americans to several new and fatal diseases. Some tribes suffered a 90 to 95 percent population loss within the first century of European contact. Beneficial effects included the exchange of plants and domestic animals between the two continents.
5. Sixteenth-century Spanish adventurers known as *conquistadores*, often of noble birth, subdued the Native Americans and created the Spanish empire in the New World. These men were eager for personal glory and material gain, uncompromising in matters of religion, and unswerving in their loyalty to the crown.
6. In 1494 the **Treaty of Tordesillas** between Spain and Portugal divided the entire world along a line located 270 leagues west of the Azores. Any new lands discovered west of the line belonged to Spain. The treaty failed to discourage future English, Dutch, and French adventurers from trying their luck in the New World.
7. The *encomienda system* rewarded Spanish *conquistadores* with control over Indian villages. The people who lived in the settlements (Native Americans) were forced to provide their labor in exchange for legal protection and religious guidance.
8. The figure known as the **Virgin of Guadalupe** is the result of a creative blending of Indian and European cultures, and it served as a powerful symbol of Mexican nationalism in the wars for independence fought against Spain almost three centuries later.
9. Frenchmen who followed Canada's rivers to find fresh sources of furs were known as *coureurs de bois*.
10. With the coming of the **Protestant Reformation**, the English began to consider their former ally, Spain, to be the greatest threat to English aspirations. England became more and more a Protestant society, and the merger of English Protestantism and English nationalism affected all aspects of public life. The Reformation created a powerful sense of an English identity among all classes of people.
11. The failure of the **Spanish Armada's** invasion meant that Spanish hopes for Catholic England were dashed completely.

## ANSWERS TO QUICK CHECK QUESTIONS:

- 1. What was life like for the first humans living in North America and what role did Earth's climate play in shaping their experiences?** Global warming allowed the hunter-gatherers of Asia to cross into North America. Temperature change put many species at risk, while early humans finished off such animals as camels, mammoths, and horses. Many Native Americans combined agriculture with hunting, produced ceramics, and formed permanent villages.
- 2. What most impressed Spanish explorers about Aztec culture?** Spanish explorers were most impressed with Aztec cities, which housed several hundred thousand people.
- 3. How was society structured among the Eastern Woodland Indians before the arrival of Europeans?** Most of the Algonquian peoples that seventeenth-century English settlers encountered were matrilineal farm bands. The women owned the fields and houses, maintained tribal customs, and had a role in tribal government.
- 4. Why did Europeans insist on trying to “civilize” the Indians?** They wanted Native Americans to become more European by adopting their education, customs, and traditions. Of great importance was converting the Indians to Christianity.
- 5. What effect did the introduction of Old World diseases such as smallpox have on Native American societies and cultures?** It decimated their numbers, especially those closer to the coast and within range of initial contact. As much as 90 to 95 percent of some tribes were wiped out and they found their culture unraveling under the strain.
- 6. Who were the *conquistadores*, and what were their motivations in the New World?** The *conquistadores* were men who were eager for personal glory and material wealth. They were rigid in their religious beliefs and loyal to the crown. They were prepared to use fire and sword in any cause authorized by God or king.
- 7. What did educated Europeans believe about the shape and size of Earth prior to 1492?** Educated Europeans of that time believed Earth was round; the problem lay in distance. Columbus and his supporters believed Earth's circumference was only 3,000 nautical miles, but instead it was 10,600 nautical miles—a journey too long for the small ships of Columbus's fleet.
- 8. How did Cortés and his small band of Spanish soldiers manage to conquer the Aztec empire?** Cortés had a technological superiority, but it was the Aztec belief that the Spaniards were gods that gave him a psychological advantage as well.
- 9. Describe the character of Spanish-Indian relations following the conquest of Mexico.** Indians were treated as laborers, sometimes slaves, who lived in villages. They provided labor tribute to *encomenderos* who were usually *conquistadores* given villages by the crown to keep them tied to the state. Their conditions were deplorable with only priests like Fra Bartolomé de las Casas to speak out on their behalf.

10. **What was the impact of the Protestant Reformation on English politics?** Henry VIII and Elizabeth I developed a strong central administration, while at the same time becoming increasingly more Protestant. England was propelled into a central role in European affairs by the merger of English nationalism and Protestantism.
11. **How did Protestantism and English national identity become merged under Queen Elizabeth I?** As each threat to England was put down, English nationalism grew and established deeper roots. The good Englishmen loved the queen, supported the Church of England, and hated Catholics, especially those from Spain. The Armada and other attempts to curb English expansion only helped the roots of English pride grow deeper.