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## **The Old World Meets the New**

America was not a wilderness in 1492! There were people here. Europeans re-discovered North and South America, Both had been discovered many years before.

### **The First Americans**

Between 2 million and 10,000 years ago the world was in the midst of an Ice Age. The estimate is that temperatures may have been 20 degrees cooler on average. In any case, large glaciers had spread south over much of what is now Canada and the northern portion of the United States, including Michigan and the upper Midwest. In some places, glaciers may have been nearly 2 mile thick and were constantly advancing and receding (thus, the hilly terrain in mid-Michigan).

The water drawn to create these glaciers came from the oceans, which had substantially lower levels (maybe 450 feet lower). Coastlines were much different from today and most importantly, a land bridge formed between Asia (Siberia) and Alaska.

People migrated across this bridge. When? Depends on who you read. Was it 75,000 years ago? Maybe 50,000 or 20,000? Or even longer? Archeologists studying the evidence left behind have found conflicting evidence. The best guess is that between 50,000 and 20,000 years ago, people began to migrate from Asia to the America's. In fact, they may have gone back and forth for sometime, and they probably were not aware that they had discovered anything.

Their migration was part of a long-term process during which humans spread out from Africa and the Middle East to other parts of the world. As part of this process these people, who we'll call Paleo-Indians, eventually went as far south as the tip of South America and also settled the east coast of the United States.

Why did they migrate? They likely followed their food! They were nomadic people and not engaged in agriculture. As the large herds they depended on for food, clothing, shelter and tools moved, the people followed.

Nomadic life is much different than agricultural existence (also known as sedentary). Obviously, it is more mobile and because food supplies are less stable and certain, nomadic people often exist in smaller groups, say a few nuclear families.

Recall that this most recent Ice Age ended about 10,000 years ago. Temperature warmed and the mammals that people depended on eventually moved north, to colder climates. Overtime most of these large mammals

became extinct.

A crisis and subsequent agricultural revolution followed the demise of the herds. People shifted toward cultivation of crops, probably with hunting and gathering as a transition stage, though hunting, fishing and gathering still supplemented the diet of agricultural people. Again, these changes took place over long periods of time.

Once people turned to farming, a social revolution occurred. People were no longer nomadic, but settled into villages that were fixed and near the fields they tended. As people learned the cycles of nature and food supplies became more stable, more people could be fed and population expanded rapidly. Also, people engaged in farming could also feed those who did not farm.

Indeed, one important impact was societies that became more diverse and hierarchical, with different divisions of labor. People freed from the routine of agriculture could develop other things, like religion and art. Additionally, some societies even developed advanced political systems, very accurate calendars, accounting systems, and even architecture. As you read the text, you'll see these developments proceeded at different levels and to different degrees amongst the indigenous people of the Americas. Pay specific attention to the Hopewell people (mounds), and the Mayans and Aztecs.

## **Africans**

Typically, the discussion of contact between the so-called Old World and the New World only addresses European/Native American interaction. Of course, historians also need to consider a third group that figures prominently in the interaction that occurred.

Many of the early migrants coming (nearly always forced) to the Americas came from Africa, especially West Africa. Like the Native American cultures, African culture was diverse and North and East Africa had a long history of contact with Europeans. West African culture revolved around small-scale agriculture in rice and palm oil, as well as other food products. Religion revolved around nature and ancestors and some regions, Ghana for example, had developed civilizations similar to those found in Central America.

## **European Expansion**

Europe has a tradition of expansion and contraction that dates as least as far back as the Roman Empire. The medieval Crusades are an example of expansion, while the Black Plague caused a contraction.

Life in Europe as the medieval period ended was, well, it generally stunk! We

have a saying now, right – Life's a b\*\*\*h, and then you die!

That sums up life in Europe for most people. Life expectancy was low; the life span was around 40 years old. Very few people owned land, and most agricultural workers were peasants and serfs who had an obligation to work the land for a feudal lord. This obligation was not only to farm, but often to fight in wars. People were very local, and few ever left the vicinity of their birth. There was frequent war and famine and much filth and disease. Not very pleasant!

But, the period after 1400 AD saw the beginning of a new period of European expansion that would last for several centuries. Dynamic and driven, Europeans would again expand beyond Europe, largely because of three inter-related events.

National centralization

Commercial innovation and acquisitive spirit

Religious zeal

1) As the major nations, like France, Spain, and England were all concluding long-term processes culminating in internal political centralization, each could focus its wealth and power on exploration.

2) The merchant classes in Europe were driven to expand, largely because the Black Plague had left disposable income for those who survived. Also, nation's depended on trade to relieve the burden of debts incurred during wars, including internal civil wars that were part of the process of centralization.

3) The Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter Reformation rejuvenated religious zeal that included the need to spread Christianity.

Spain was one nation concluding this process of centralization (the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella united the two main kingdoms in Spain), as well as finishing a long war that destroyed the remnants of Muslim rule in Spain. The war was costly, and so when Christopher Columbus approached the Spanish monarchs with his offer to find a shorter trade route to corner the East Indies market, they were interested (unlike the other rulers that Columbus tried to convince).

Was Columbus the only one to think the world was round? NO! Nearly everyone DID think it was round, though there were a few flat earth people around. The knowledge that the world was a sphere was known since antiquity. The issues was how round? And here Columbus was actually wrong. He believed that the Earth's circumference was 16,000-18,000 miles, not the correct 25,000 miles. Thus Columbus thought it was shorter to head west, rather than east. Of course, he didn't account for the American continent!

His rediscovery of America would have a significant impact on the people of Europe, America, and Africa. America initially viewed, as an obstacle would be

seen as a land yielding great wealth and a place of economic, political, and religious conquest.



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