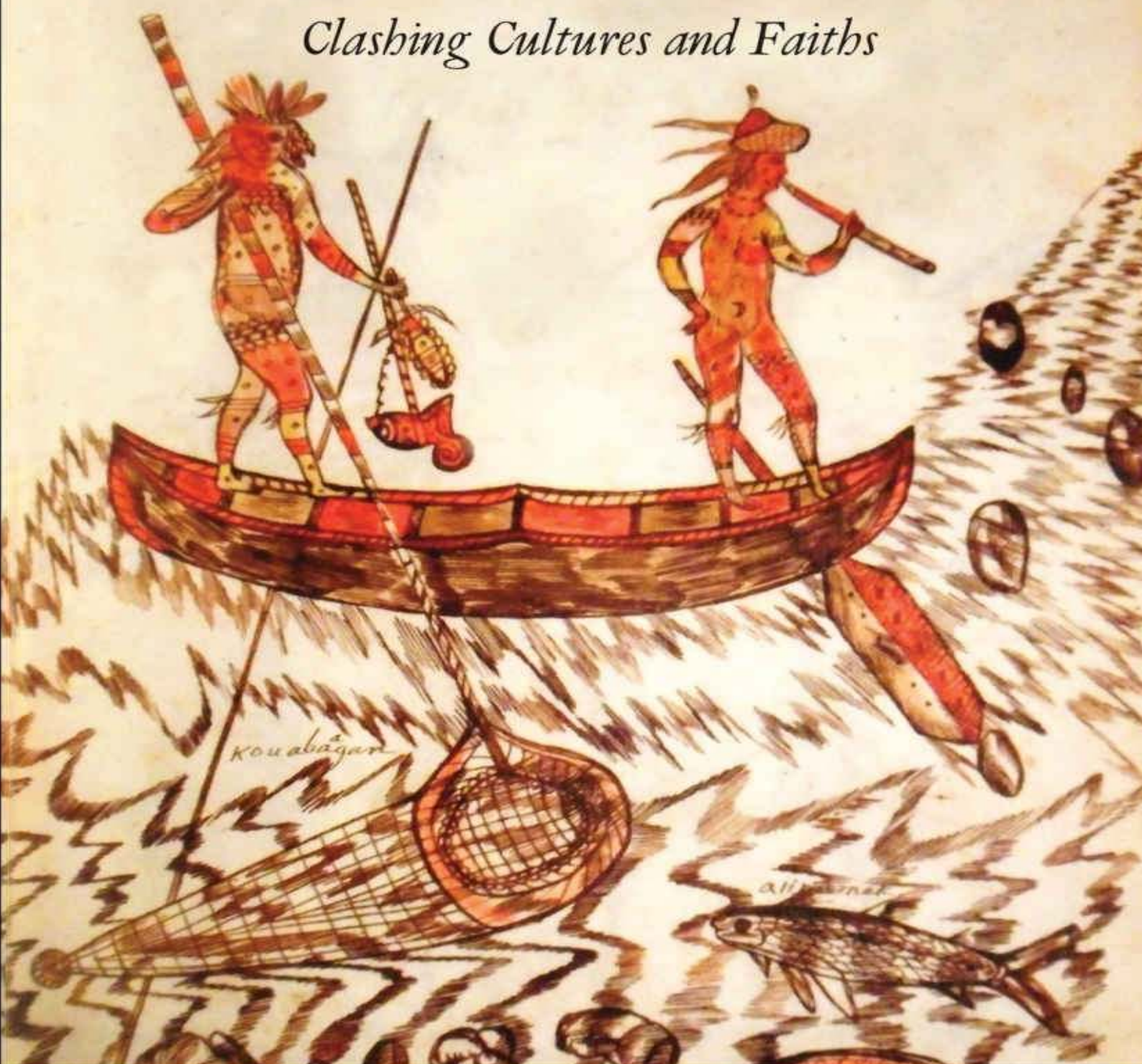


THOMAS S. KIDD

*AMERICAN
COLONIAL HISTORY*

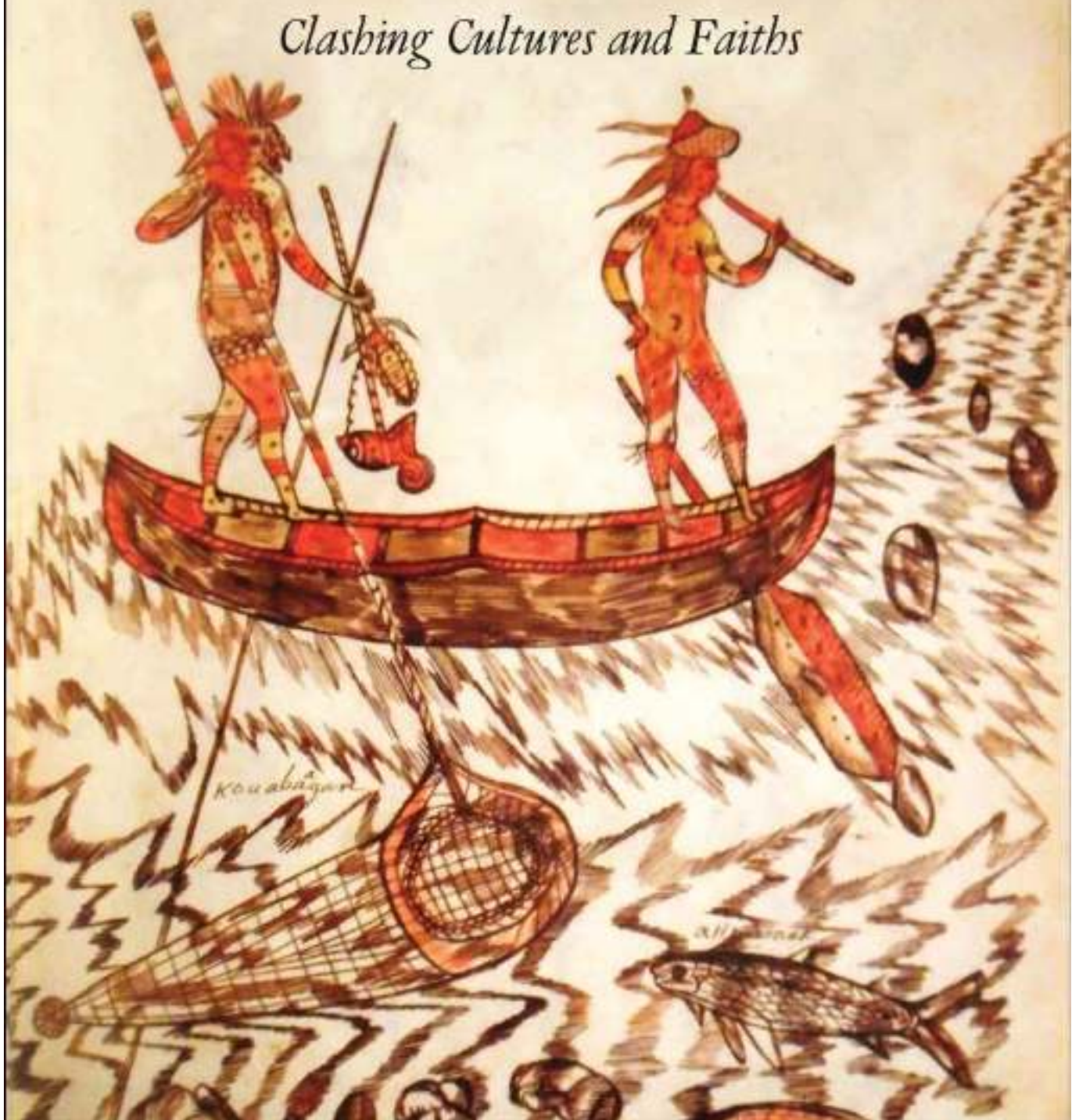
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Thomas S. Kidd

Yale
UNIVERSITY
PRESS
New Haven & London

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Set in Electra type by Integrated Publishing Solutions, Grand Rapids, Michigan.
Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN 978-0-300-18732-8 (paperback : alk. paper)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015951238

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48–1992 (Permanence of Paper).

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INTRODUCTION

About 850 miles west of Jamestown, Virginia, a little south of the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, stands the site of the city of Cahokia. Nine hundred years ago it was the largest city in the region that would become the United States. Cahokia was at least as big as London and Rome during the same period. By the twelfth century C.E., about twenty thousand people lived at Cahokia, which contained 120 ceremonial mounds, some of immense scope. The city spread over five square miles.

Earlier settlements, including a smaller one at Cahokia, had dotted the rich Mississippi river bottoms in the area before the eleventh century, but something changed dramatically to create the new city. The catalyst may have come from a spectacular astronomical phenomenon, a supernova. On July 4, 1054, people around the globe observed what appeared as a daytime star, four times as bright as Venus, resulting from the explosion of a star in its death throes. This kind of brilliant eruption is exceedingly rare — the last observed supernova in the Milky Way happened in 1604.

From China to America, observers noted and etched the phenomenon. At Chaco Canyon, in present-day New Mexico, an artist painted an image of the supernova on sandstone cliffs.¹ The residents of Chaco Canyon also began construction around 1054 on a large new kiva, a below-ground ceremonial building frequently seen at southwestern Indian dwellings.

Around the time of the supernova, the old village at Cahokia virtually vanished. Inhabitants replaced it with a larger complex of houses, plazas, and earthen pyramids. The city surrounded a vast grand plaza, topped at its north end by an astounding clay pyramid, which by the year 1200 towered a hundred feet over the plaza below, making it the third largest structure of its kind in the New World, surpassed only by two pyramids in Mexico. One of these was the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacán, a much older city, which at its height in the fifth century C.E. was one of the largest in the world, with perhaps 150,000 residents.

Cahokia's rapid ascent was led by powerful rulers and created deep social divides. The mounds there have yielded evidence of ritual burial and human sacrifice. One burial temple held the skeleton of a man who was interred on top of a blanket adorned with some twenty thousand shell beads. Close to his body lay four men who had been dismembered. In another nearby pit lay the carefully positioned bodies of fifty-three young women, all of whom presumably died during the same event. Other Cahokia-area excavations have produced hundreds of bodies that display signs of ceremonial killings. Archaeologists have surmised that these people may have fallen victim to rituals surrounding the death of a ruler, perhaps so he could have servants or companions to accompany him into the next life. Or perhaps elites meant to communicate that lowly Cahokians lived only at the rulers' will.

The silent testimonies of these bodies point us to both social and spiritual beliefs at Cahokia. The spiritual world inspired rituals, and influenced even the positioning of mounds and buildings, many of which aligned with vernal and autumnal equinoxes. Many Native Americans were profoundly religious, even if their faith was not as focused on doctrines as that of many Europeans, who would begin arriving in the Americas some three hundred years after Cahokia's heyday.

Things changed often in Native Americans' worlds prior to Columbus. Just as quickly as the city of Cahokia rose, it fell. By the mid-1300s the great complex was essentially abandoned. Cahokia's elite mound builders were probably victims of their own success, as their urban concentration made it difficult to supply the town's needs. Warfare, disease, and political controversy may have also contributed to Cahokia's demise. In any case, when Europeans began visiting the area in the

seventeenth century, the Illini Indians living there did not know much about great Cahokia, its presence signaled only by overgrown mounds dotting the landscape. The mounds were “the works of their forefathers,” some Illini told Revolutionary War leader George Rogers Clark, ancestors who were “formerly as numerous as the trees in the woods.” Adding to a long list of European-American misnomers, French settlers called the ruined city “Cahokia,” after one of the Illini’s major clans.²



Religion indisputably inspired the first European settlement at Cahokia, which arrived with French Catholic missionaries in 1699. The Seminary of Foreign Missions, based in Quebec (some 1,200 miles to the northeast) charged several missionaries to establish a station in the heart of the continent, hopefully even beyond the lands of the Illini. But instead the French priests created a settlement at Cahokia, founding the Mission of the Holy Family. By the 1720s, French and Illini villages adjoined the seminarians’ residence, and French officials in the Illinois country granted the seminarians a vast tract of land amounting to one hundred square miles. Still, a 1723 census registered the presence of only twelve inhabitants of the French village. It did not count the priests, nor Indian or African slaves of which there were probably a few by the early 1730s, as reflected by the construction of slave quarters. The missionaries owned these enslaved people. The Cahokia Indians’ numbers ran well over a thousand, but despite the Europeans’ small number, the French and their livestock had transformed their patterns of land use, leading to resentment against the new European settlers and their priests.³

Few Cahokia Indians converted at the mission, and anger against the French grew. In spring 1733 the priests and French laypeople fled from the mission under the cover of darkness, having heard that the Indians intended to surprise and kill them. (Only three years earlier, local Indians had done this at Natchez, farther down the Mississippi, killing more than two hundred French men, women, and children, and capturing some three hundred black slaves.) Nothing came of the Cahokia panic, but French officials did require the Cahokia Indians to settle further from the French village. They went nine miles away, to the base of the largest Cahokia mound (“Monks Mound,” named later for a group of Trappist monks who farmed it in the early nineteenth century.) There the French established a new mission station for them.

Resentment over land did not just sour French and Cahokian relations; they embittered Fox and Cahokian Indians toward one another, too. This feud culminated in a devastating Fox raid on Cahokia in 1752. Christianized Cahokias were attending a Corpus Christi feast at the nearby Fort de Chartres when the attack came. Many Cahokias died or were taken captive. The raid set the stage for the eventual extinction of the Cahokias, who merged with the Peorias. The U.S. government would relocate the Peorias to Oklahoma following the Civil War.



War and diplomacy imposed a new—if largely nominal — order on Cahokia in 1763. The east bank of the Mississippi became British. The French loss in the Seven Years’ War, and its concluding peace agreement at Paris in 1763, assigned eastern North America to the British. Under the terms of a secret treaty struck in 1762, France agreed to cede its lands west of the Mississippi (the “Louisiana territory”) to Spain. French residents in the area felt they had entered a “political twilight zone,” but some figured that French settlements on the west side of the river were a safer choice, even if they formally stood under Spanish control. With this in mind, French traders established a tiny settlement La Ville de St. Louis des Illinois sur le Mississippi—or just “St. Louis”—in 1764. Soon Catholics began meeting in a tent chapel, which they used whenever itinerant priests crossed the wide river into Spain’s American territory to shepherd the faithful.⁴

No one foresaw the Louisiana territory's 1803 sale to a nation that did not yet exist, or St. Louis's emergence as that nation's fourth largest city by 1900. Few remembered its eleventh-century predecessor across the river, either.



From July 4, 1054—the day of the supernova — to July 4, 1776, North America was in constant motion. Changes in settlements, alliances, culture, and environment were the norm. For America's people, nothing was inevitable or expected, from Columbus's arrival in 1492 to the American Revolution in 1776. Until January 1776, American independence seemed improbable, and few ever gave it a second thought. That is especially the case when you view early America's history from the banks of the Mississippi at Cahokia and St. Louis. The Revolution seemed hardly a consideration there. Even England was not a major consideration, at least until the Treaty of Paris redrew the continent's territorial boundaries in 1763 (with no consultation of most people who actually lived in places like the Illinois country). Yet that treaty remains as good a time as any to mark the end of the colonial era.

Even in the years leading up to 1776, there are other ways of looking at North America's history than the crisis of the British empire that led to the creation of the United States. For example, in 1776 Franciscan priests commissioned by the College of San Fernando in Mexico City founded a presidio and Mission San Francisco de Asís in Alta California, at the northern end of a string of missions that ran south to Mission San Diego (1769). In the coming decades, thousands of California Indians would receive baptism and enter the mission communities. Many would also leave, much to the priests' chagrin. They fled out of frustration and fear. Hundreds of Indians—about a third of the Christian adherents—abandoned Mission San Francisco in 1795, when an epidemic ravaged it, killing another quarter of the native inhabitants. The setting sun of George Washington's presidency was not much on their mind.⁵

Yet for Americans' memory of the colonial past, there is an appropriate concern with the background to the Revolution of 1776. How, in all the varied experiences of Indians, Africans, and Europeans, was the stage set for a sufficient union of American colonists to try to liberate themselves from British rule? *American Colonial History* will seek to answer that question, even if the everyday lives of those living in North America's colonies and the Caribbean reflected almost no concern over that issue, especially until 1763.

The story of America's colonial history is one of clashing and mixing people, meeting under unexpected circumstances in places from Boston to San Francisco to Havana, Cuba. Those already in America, the Indians, found the new arrivals an unwelcome but unavoidable contender for power and trade. Africans and Europeans also brought disease and dislocation to Native American people in ways that no group fully understood. Africans, who composed by far the largest of the groups who immigrated to the Americas in the colonial era, typically came involuntarily as slaves. They found themselves living, working, and dying on new European farms and plantations, but a fraction of Africans found avenues for advancement, prosperity, and freedom. Europeans came for business opportunities, for the chance to own land, and many of them came inspired by religious convictions and the prospect of practicing their vision of full biblical faith in peace, or at least peace for those who accepted that religious vision.

Two major themes organize *American Colonial History*: religion and conflict. The conditions that brought these disparate peoples together almost guaranteed cultural clashes. All of the groups—Indians, Africans, and Europeans—had deep traditions of often-brutal violence among and between their own neighbors before 1492. They extended those traditions of conflict in the destabilized New

World. (The “New World” was every bit as new for the Indians as it was for Europeans and Africans, even though they did not cross an ocean to get there.)

Many Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans engaged in war, torture, and enslavement, before and after the arrival of the New World, practices that most observers today would regard as inhuman and intolerable. Though some of the details of that behavior may be disturbing, this book tries neither to avoid the violence of the cultural clashes, nor to make excuses for the actions of any group. Europeans do carry a disproportionate share of the blame for the violence and dislocation: they initiated colonization, they financed and executed much of slavery’s development in the Atlantic world, they unintentionally introduced the most virulent diseases that ravaged the New World, and they possessed disproportionate power and resources for war-making.

Many in early America interpreted their interactions with their rivals, including violence and enslavement, through the lens of religion and spiritual beliefs. Although individuals varied as to the depth of their religious commitments, all peoples of Native America, Europe, and Africa brought spiritual practices and convictions with them into the colonial arena. Religion in colonial America could inspire everything from exploration to genocidal conquest, idyllic communes to generations of spite, and the dehumanization of entire peoples to advocacy for human rights.

For people in colonial America, religion was not only the path of salvation in the next life, it was a primary way of making sense of what was happening to them in the present life. It inspired groups like the Puritans to come to the New World; it drove the Spanish and French to commission evangelists among Native Americans; it offered Native Americans and Africans a measure of power in a world spinning out of control. The Europeans, most of them at least nominally Christian, sent missionaries to the front lines of empire. Some must have encouraged missions cynically, out of a desire to bolster imperial authority. Others did so out of a conviction that in Jesus, the people of the New World would find true spiritual succor into eternity. But perhaps the most common way religion functioned was to *explain*—explain the uncertain and often violent environment in which Americans found themselves between Columbus’s voyages and the end of the Seven Years’ War.

My hope is that readers of *American Colonial History* will come away with a distinct sense of how pervasive religion was in colonial America, and of the varied functions that religion served in the era—functions that were variously inspiring and appalling. The first two centuries of the American colonial story were indeed “barbarous years,” as historian Bernard Bailyn has put it, although colonial Americans before 1689 (England’s Glorious Revolution) hardly had an exclusive title to conflict and grotesque violence. Much of the story of colonial America, then, is bleak. Not that heroism was absent, but the same figures who sacrificed much to seek opportunity, or to live according to the dictates of their conscience, could also brutally deny opportunity and the rights of conscience to others. Growing institutional and cultural stability did mark the period from 1689 to 1763, but patterns of conflict—often with religious roots—persisted both in settled eastern areas and in the expanding colonial west. The greatest military clash of the colonial era, the Seven Years’ War, encapsulated many of themes of this book: violence rooted in imperial and economic rivalry was explained in religious terms (Catholic versus Protestant power), and intra-European clashes left Native Americans to make difficult decisions about alliances and the elusive possibilities of neutrality. The decisive political outcome of the Seven Years’ War—the expulsion of the French from eastern North America—stabilized the British colonies in the short term. But it left a vacuum in which yet more conflict, the time between British colonists and London-based authorities, would erupt into war and revolution in 1775.



My book depends on decades of excellent work produced by historians of colonial America, including the English, French, and Spanish empires, African American culture and slavery, and Native American history, before and after the arrival of Europeans and Africans. I hope that my notes adequately reflect my debt to these historians and other scholars, and that the chapters may serve as launching points for deeper research for readers wanting to know more.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It has been a great pleasure to work with my Yale University Press editor, Sarah Miller, and the rest of the Yale team who helped bring this book to fruition. Thanks to my Baylor assistants, Tim Grundmeier, Paul Gutacker, and Grace Pak, for their assiduous work; to my friend and literary agent Giles Anderson; and to my colleagues in Baylor's history department and at Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion. As always, I am so thankful for my wife, Ruby, and for my boys, who make all my work worth it.

NATIVE AMERICANS AND THE EUROPEAN ENCOUNTER

Some 15,000 years ago, an ancient North American Indian dropped — or lost, or threw away—a blue-gray piece of carved stone that had served as a cutting tool. It fell along what would become a creek bank in a place later claimed by the Spanish, the Comanches, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, and finally, the state of Texas and the United States of America. Fifteen millennia later, archaeologists dug up the stone tool, along with a trove of more than 19,000 other artifacts, at central Texas’s Buttermilk Creek site. This discovery pushed back the dates of the earliest known settlements in North America by two thousand years. The Buttermilk Creek settlement tells us that “Americans” — meaning people who lived in what would become known as the Americas—have existed for a very long time. Maybe they came millennia earlier than the ancestors of those who migrated to Buttermilk Creek. In any case, human history in the Americas far predated Columbus’s arrival.¹



Well before the Buttermilk Creek resident dropped his tool, the first wave of Paleo-Indians began crossing a land bridge from present-day Siberia to Alaska which ice age conditions had exposed. These Indians were “hunter-gatherers” who traveled in groups of fewer than fifty or so, pursuing game in their wanderings. They established seasonal camps at convenient locations, near watering holes that might supply the Indians and their quarry alike. The quarry they pursued were reminiscent of some modern species, only much bigger: seven-foot-long beavers, and bison with antlers as big as a modern Texas longhorn’s. Mammoths, almost the size of elephants, were twelve-foot-tall, ten-ton behemoths. Some Paleo-Indians may have had to compete for game with predators like the saber-tooth cat. Although the ancient Indians hunted smaller species, too, they especially coveted the bigger animals. A mammoth kill could give them meat for months, because they could dry the animal’s flesh. Some even developed refrigeration techniques, such as filling a mammoth or mastodon’s intestines with meat—like big sausages—and depositing them at the bottom of a chilly body of water, marking the spot and going back as needed.

With this rich bounty of animals and wide open spaces, Paleo-Indians quickly spread through North and South America. Some of the earliest known settlements are quite far south, as far as current-day Peru. Some Siberian migrants may have actually moved south by canoe, along the Pacific coast. In any case, the spread of ancient Indians corresponded with the mass extinction of most of their giant prey. We do not know for sure why this extinction happened, but it seems likely that the new human presence, as well as a pattern of global warming, contributed to the great beasts’ demise. Gone were the mammoths and giant bison, and over time the Indians came to focus on smaller animals as well as other food sources such as nuts and berries. This transition heralded the coming of the Archaic culture of Indians, which lasted until roughly 1000 B.C.E.

Archaic Indians living close to water sources depended on fish, mussels, and oysters for sustenance, sometimes leaving startling evidence of how much they manipulated the environment to catch their prey. More than a century ago, Boston subway workers began excavating thousands of sharpened stakes below Boylston Street in the Back Bay neighborhood. This two-acre area, uncovered during a century of subway and office construction, revealed a four-thousand-year-old series of fish traps. Native fishermen would build brush fences parallel to the shore. High tide waters would go over

the fences, but as the tide receded these fences would trap a number of fish, which the fishermen harvested. The fences also proved a good habitat for oysters. Silting in the Back Bay helped preserve the stakes, but one can imagine similar techniques ancient Americans might have used in other tidal areas.²



Across North and Central America, Native Americans molded the landscape, using controlled burns to clear hunting lands, building traps, and constructing ceremonial mounds, some of which matched the pyramids of ancient Egypt as architectural feats. The Olmec people of the southern Gulf of Mexico coastal plain (now in the Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco) erected impressive platformed cities, including San Lorenzo, which around 1500 B.C.E. became the first complex, large-scale town in Central or North America. The center of the town sat on an enormous terrace built from some three million cubic yards of rock hewn from mountains fifty miles from San Lorenzo. Even more striking were the huge stone monuments placed all over San Lorenzo, featuring huge, lumpy heads with exaggerated lips, or spirit entities such as the “were-jaguar,” an Olmec deity. San Lorenzo fell or went into decline around 1200, but the Olmecs created an even larger center nearby at La Venta, with a one hundred-foot-high clay mound. La Venta has yielded four massive head carvings, each weighing several tons and featuring helmets that look a bit like the leather headgear worn by football players in early twentieth-century America. The heads presumably honored Olmec royalty.³

As remarkable as these Central American sites were, early mounds built in the lower Mississippi River valley probably predated them by a couple thousand years. Native Americans in present-day Louisiana created earthen mounds that radiocarbon testing has dated to about 3500–3000 B.C.E., which means they are older than the Giza pyramids in Egypt. We do not know exactly how the earliest Americans used these mounds, whether as living spaces, ceremonial sites, or both.

The most stunning accomplishment of lower Mississippi mound-building, however, began around 1400 B.C.E., about the same time as San Lorenzo. At Poverty Point, in northeastern Louisiana, residents built a bird-shaped earthen mound, which today stands seventy-two feet high, overlooking the floodplain of the Mississippi Delta. Because it is not built from stone, the mound does not strike visitors to Poverty Point as all that unusual. Indeed, no one recognized what the Poverty Point complex was until aerial photographs in the 1950s revealed a complex pattern of six long, C-shaped ridges flanking a number of mounds. The longer you reflect on the abrupt hill jutting up from the flat delta landscape, the more you begin to appreciate the scale of the project. Scholars estimate that building it required workers to dig and carry a stunning 27 million large baskets of dirt. Given the mammoth scale of the bird mound and other features, archaeologists once assumed that it took the residents of Poverty Point hundreds of years to build the mounds, including the bird mound. Recent analysis of soil erosion, however, has revealed just the opposite: the hunter-gatherers somehow managed to erect the bird mound in less than ninety days, which would have required the labor of at least three thousand workers. But even that number of workers seems impossibly low, if the mound went up that fast. How and why the mound builders — “the Da Vincis of Dirt,” as archaeologists have called them — accomplished this feat remains a mystery.⁴

The mound-builders’ impact on their surroundings was dramatic; less dramatic but more significant was the turn to agricultural crops, including the “Three Sisters”: squash, beans, and corn. Mayan and Olmec peoples began to cultivate native species of maize, or corn, by the middle of the third century B.C.E., and it spread through North America after that. In the second century B.C.E., evidence of large-scale field clearing for maize began to appear among the Olmec. By the opening of

the second millennium C.E., maize accounted for more than 50 percent of the food eaten by commoners in many areas. It suffused not only their diets but their mental worlds. Ears of corn became common symbols in Olmec carvings, in which rulers' headdresses often featured an ear of maize emblazoning the front. Corn came to play a key role in some Native American creation narratives. At Acoma Pueblo in present-day New Mexico, parents of newborn children ritually exchanged gifts with medicine men, who blessed the infant with a spotless ear of corn. Iroquois shamans sometimes wore cornhusk masks when seeking to cure sickness.⁵

The advent of agriculture helps explain the coming of centralized towns (pueblos) among the Hohokam and Anasazi people of the American southwest. They developed elaborate irrigation systems to cultivate maize and other plants in their relatively arid climate. In northwestern New Mexico, the Anasazi built the "great houses" of Chaco Canyon, a major center of trade and religious ceremonies. Trade goods at Chaco Canyon reflect an expansive network that stretched to the Pacific and into the Mayan regions of central America; archaeologists have discovered traces of Mayan cacao (chocolate) in drinking vessels there. The building of Pueblo Bonito, the largest of Chaco Canyon's houses, required some 30,000 tons of sandstone blocks spread over almost two acres. It contained about 650 rooms and stood four stories high. Pueblo Bonito was divided by a central wall aligned to run perfectly north-south, and on each side of the wall stood a great kiva, a ceremonial chamber. As was common for important buildings, the layout accommodated the position of the sun on its solstices.

Two hundred years before a similar decline transpired at Cahokia, the Anasazi center at Chaco Canyon fell into disuse after about 1150 C.E., probably due to drought, soil exhaustion, and resulting political turmoil. One of the new settlements to rise following the demise of Chaco Canyon was Acoma Pueblo, about a hundred miles to the south. Founded around 1300, Acoma is probably the oldest continuously inhabited settlement within what would become the United States.⁶



A French traveler among Canada's Wendats in the early seventeenth century was cooking one evening when he threw some fish bones into the fire. The Indians "scolded me well," he recalled, "and took them out quickly, saying that I did wrong and that I should be responsible for their failure to catch any more, because there were spirits of a sort, or the spirits of the fish themselves whose bones were burnt, which would warn the other fish not to allow themselves to be caught, since their bones also would be burnt."

The Wendats believed the same things about deer, moose, and other game. One day, the French traveler was about to burn a squirrel skin—how else was one to dispose of animal refuse?—but the Indians stopped him and told him to go outside the lodge to dispose of it. Otherwise, they said, the fishnets in the lodge would "tell the fish. I said to them that the nets could see nothing; they replied that they could, and also that they could hear and eat. 'Then give them some of your *sagamité* [porridge], I said. One of them replied to me: 'It is the fish that feed them, not we.'"⁷

Native Americans lived in a world that was more pervasively religious—or spiritual—than Europeans did. Most Native languages did not even have a word for religion. That concept, in western use, can imply a set of beliefs or practices set apart from the rest of life. Separating the sacred and mundane did not make sense in the mental world of Native Americans.

Regional differences mattered, of course, but there were also spiritual commonalities one could find across Indian communities in early North America. The physical world was teeming with spiritual forces. Fish nets might communicate with fish. Humans were not so different from the plants and animals surrounding them, nor from sky, earth, fire, and water. Humans were elemental and sentient, as were their surroundings.

Sensible people would account for spirit beings by honoring and appeasing them. Many early Native American communities depended upon hunting for sustenance, as illustrated by the ever-present arrowheads and other projectile points found in traces of the earliest Indian settlements. But one did not flippantly kill animals; Native Americans engaged in rituals to recognize and honor the spirits that governed the hunt and animated their prey. When the Micmacs of Nova Scotia butchered beavers, for example, they tried not to let a single drop of blood fall to the ground.

Blood mattered. From the Great Lakes to central America, some hunters ritually cut themselves before going out, believing that the shedding of their own blood would bring favor from resident spirits. Hunters treated carcasses with care, believing that callous behavior would earn them poor catches in the future. Some speculate that the reason archaeologists find so many intact spear- and arrowheads at old Native American settlements is (aside from the relative hardness of flint and other rock-hewn materials) that hunters may have sacrificed some of the weapons that killed game in the hunt.

Childbearing and fertility impinged in surprising ways on the hunt. Micmacs forbade menstruating women from eating beaver meat, lest they offend the beaver's spirit. Some Indians excluded pregnant women from hunting grounds, fearing that their mere presence would scatter game. Some prohibited infertile women from lingering when bears were being processed, cooked, and eaten.

Although one can distinguish between the practices of Native American religions and those of Christianity and Judaism, one should also not overstate the differences. Mosaic law had required the ancient Israelites to sequester menstruating women, too, and offered many guidelines on the proper preparation of food. The Bible suggests that we live in a physical world surrounded by "powers and principalities" of both good and evil. Native Americans believed in a multiplicity of spirits and gods, but often believed in a primary spiritual being, one reminiscent of the monotheistic God. Algonquian Indians of New England revered Cautantowwit, their leading deity, as the giver (and withholder) of corn, and believed that the souls of good people went to live in his home after they died. Many buried the dead in a fetal position facing southwest, the presumed direction of Cautantowwit's land.⁸

But the Native American notion of "god" or "gods" was more flexible than the monotheistic view. For Algonquins, signs in nature reflected flashes of *manitou*, or spiritual power. English observers often translated *manitou* as "God." Roger Williams, the founder of Providence, Rhode Island, and a relatively sympathetic observer of native culture, remarked that "there is a general custom amongst them, at the apprehension of any excellency in men, women, birds, beasts, fish, &c. to cry out *Manitoo*, that is, it is a God."⁹

Native Americans also took dreams seriously. Many European Christians did, too, but the world revealed to Indians in dreams seemed more real than the waking world. They sought out shamans to help them interpret dreams; they instigated visions by long fasts and the use of plants with psychoactive properties. Jesuit martyr Jean de Brébeuf was stunned by how literally the Wendats took guidance from dreams. "They look upon their dreams as ordinances and irrevocable decrees. . . . [A dream] is the Mercury in their journeys, their domestic economy in their families. The dream often presides in their councils; traffic, fishing, and hunting are undertaken usually under its sanction. . . . It prescribes their feasts, their dances, their songs, their games—in a word, the dream does everything and is in truth the principal God of the Hurons [Wendats]."¹⁰

Pre-Columbian burial sites can offer clues, like the Algonquins buried facing southwest, regarding early Native American beliefs about life after death. Some of the Mississippian mounds, as we have seen, functioned partly as places of internment. One of the earliest North American burial mounds archaeologists have found, however, was far to the northeast, along the Quebec-Labrador border. There, in a grave carbon dated to 5300 B.C.E., a teenager was buried with hunting tools, a harpoon and

other items that the youth might have been expected to take into the afterlife. The funereal pit also contained a shovel fashioned from a caribou antler.¹¹

Hundreds of miles up the Mississippi from Cahokia, Indians of eastern Iowa and southern Wisconsin built a mysterious series of “effigy mounds.” These constructions probably ended around the time that the building of Cahokia began in earnest, in the mid-eleventh century C.E. One of the most famous collections is at Effigy Mounds National Monument, at a river bluff in eastern Iowa. This site contains about two hundred mounds, including twenty-six in the form of animal effigies. Ten of those are the “Marching Bears,” symmetrically spaced in a head-to-tail lineup. Observers once assumed that these were burial mounds, but most of the mounds contain no skeletons or other funereal deposits. Therefore, the mounds must have had tribal and ceremonial importance; some have suggested that the mounds served as conduits of spiritual power and healing. The Marching Bears mounds also have astronomical significance, as well, since they seem to shadow the Big Dipper as it moves around Polaris, the North Star. It is easy to surmise that these symbolic constructions held religious meaning; it is difficult to articulate exactly what that meaning was.¹²

From the era of European contact, we at least have written descriptions of many Native American ceremonies, but mostly from European perspectives. (A lack of written languages generally leaves knowledge of pre-Columbian native societies to archaeologists and anthropologists.) In spite of their biases, these European sources still offer windows into Indian ceremonies and religious practices. In Ontario, Jean Brébeuf witnessed a remarkable Wendat reburial rite in 1636, their Feast of the Dead. Wendats opened the coffins of relatives initially buried on scaffolds. The bodies of some who had died fairly long ago had decomposed mostly to skin and bones. More recently deceased corpses, Brébeuf noted, stank and teemed with worms, yet the families carefully prepared these bodies for final burial like the others. They cleaned and scraped the bones of any remaining skin and flesh, disassembled the skeleton, and placed it in a beaver skin bag.

This second burial was meant to usher one of the person’s souls (everyone had two souls, the Wendats believed) skyward to the village of souls, where the female moon spirit Aataentsic presided. The other soul lingered near the deceased person’s bones, although some were reborn into infant Wendats. Families held feasts in honor of the dead, accompanied by singing, chanting, and mourning. Then, in the spring of that year, around planting time, hundreds of Wendats from around the region gathered at a central ossuary pit, about ten feet deep and twenty-four feet in diameter. The Indians built a large scaffold surrounding the pit. After displaying the bone bags and funereal gifts at the scaffold, the Wendats deposited them into the common grave. Once the ossuary was nearly full, women placed corn on top of the bones.¹³



For Wendats and the five million or so other Native Americans living north of the Rio Grande in the decades preceding 1492, death came often through war, accidents, and infant mortality. Diseases, such as encephalitis and polio, were significant causes of death, of course, but not in the desolating way they would be after the coming of the Europeans. The epidemic diseases brought by Europeans are perhaps the single most important factor determining the fate of North America after 1492.

The diseases had devastating effects on Europeans, too, especially in the Black Death of the fourteenth century. Contact with unfamiliar peoples may have spread that epidemic, as bubonic plague seems to have originated in Asia and spread among traders on the Silk Road. By the middle of the fourteenth century, the horrific malady had probably killed one hundred million people, or a third of Europe’s population.

Europeans also contracted new diseases as they began to colonize the west coast of sub-Saharan

Africa in the fifteenth century. Malaria and yellow fever proved especially deadly. As Europeans and Africans crossed the Atlantic in ever-greater numbers, those illnesses added to the woes of Native American populations.

Because Native American peoples developed in relative isolation over long periods of time, they experienced different, relatively innocuous disease climates that did not prepare them for the microbiological onslaught precipitated by the Europeans. Virtually no one had the adaptive immunity that came with surviving a bout of European maladies such as smallpox. The epidemics unleashed unfathomable destruction, reminding Christian observers of biblical plagues. John Winthrop wrote in 1634 that “For the natives, they are neere all dead of small Poxe, so as the Lord hath cleared our title to what we possess.”¹⁴

Catastrophic epidemics played out over and over as Native Americans encountered European sailors and traders, who carried strains of disease, including the bubonic plague, the flu, and smallpox. Kiowa Indians told a story about Saynday, a trickster hero, meeting a stranger clothed in black clothes who looked at first glance like a preacher or missionary.

“Who are you?” Saynday asked.

“I’m smallpox,” the stranger replied.

“Where do you come from and what do you do and why are you here?”

“I come from far away, across the Eastern Ocean. I am one with the white men . . . I bring death. My breath causes children to wither like young plants in the spring snow. I bring destruction. No matter how beautiful a woman is, once she has looked at me she becomes ugly as death. And to men I bring not death alone but the destruction of their children and the blighting of their wives. The strongest warriors go down before me. No people who have looked at me will ever be the same.”¹⁵

The initial waves of disease often killed roughly half of the Native Americans affected. The epidemics kept ravaging the same populations, however, and also spread as contact moved through the Americas. More isolated Indians of the Pacific Northwest, the upper Midwest, and the Texas panhandle suffered epidemics well into the nineteenth century. The Mandans, who lived along the Missouri River in North Dakota, had already endured major disease outbreaks in the eighteenth century before another wave of smallpox came in 1837. Because of that epidemic, the Mandans went from about 2,000 people to less than 150.¹⁶

Medical explanations for the catastrophic results of European–Native American contact are important but somewhat elusive. There could have been genetic reasons for a lack of resistance to some of the diseases, but the science behind such explanations remains in flux. A lack of adapted immunity, which some Europeans gained by surviving childhood diseases, makes sense in some instances, such as smallpox. But other maladies like the flu, pneumonia, or diarrhea can repeatedly infect the same person. Some Indians would presumably have adapted to some of the diseases after their first epidemic hit their group, yet they continued to die in great numbers in episodic waves of sickness.

Native Americans also became more susceptible to disease as they contended with the adverse conditions of displacement and conquest. Few Europeans ever *intended* to sicken Indians as a policy of empire (though we will see attempts to do so during the Seven Years’ War), but the Europeans certainly contributed to a social environment more conducive to the outbreaks. Archaeological evidence at pre-Columbian Native American settlements such as Chaco Canyon repeatedly suggest soil depletion as an explanation for decline. If hunger and malnutrition occasionally preceded European contact, they became more pressing problems after 1492. Malnutrition, in turn, adversely affects the immune system. It was no coincidence, then, that the 1837 smallpox outbreak among the Mandans was preceded by famine conditions and extreme cold that forced them to spend most of the

time crowded together in their lodge houses.¹⁷

The context of disease mattered. Europeans also suffered from disease in America, especially when put into biologically stressful, malnourished situations similar to those of beleaguered native peoples. The most obvious example comes from the Jamestown colony, where perhaps 80 percent of all English settlers died in the first fifteen years of settlement, due to disease (especially scurvy and dysentery), malnutrition, and periodic violence between the English and local Indians. American armies in the Revolution and Civil War also struggled terribly with poor supplies, malnutrition, and concomitant outbreaks of disease, including smallpox.



Tres Zapotes Colossal Head 1 (Monument A), Veracruz, Mexico (Museum). Photograph copyright 2009 by HPJD, Wikimedia Commons.

Columbus inaugurated the “Age of Discovery,” although he was hardly the first explorer to come to America. The earliest explorers, as we have seen, came from Asia across the Bering Strait (and perhaps by other Pacific routes) many thousands of years before Columbus. Norse explorers came to the far northeastern North America around 1000 C.E., too. Their icy outpost at Vinland, Newfoundland, did not survive.

The Norsemen hugged the icy north Atlantic coast; five centuries later Columbus crossed the warm equatorial waters of the Atlantic looking for China. He died knowing that he had never quite discovered the trading centers there. Yet he also thought, in spite of their earthly disappointments, that his voyages possessed transcendent significance of biblical proportions. “God made me messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John after having spoken of it through the mouth of Isaiah; and he showed me where to find it,” the Genoese sailor reflected. Perhaps the East Indies were not his God-ordained destination after all.¹⁸

Columbus might well have envisioned 1492 as a year of apocalyptic significance. The year opened with the surrender of Muslim Granada, in southern Spain, concluding the long *Reconquista*, the struggle to subdue the Muslim-controlled territories of the Iberian peninsula. On January 2, Columbus’s patrons, Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, took the Muslim Nasrids’ palaces in an elaborate ceremony, the Muslim ruler Muhammad XI having agreed to relinquish Granada some months earlier. Then, at the height of summer, Spain expelled its remaining Jewish families who had refused to convert to Christianity, many of them leaving from the port of Palos. Just days later, Columbus’s ships, the *Pinta*, *Niña*, and *Santa María*, sailed west from the same town.

Columbus wrote admiringly of Spain’s monarchs, “who love and promote the Christian faith, and

are enemies to the doctrine of Mahomet [the Prophet Muhammad], and of all idolatry and heresy.” They had sent him to the East Indies and its people “to learn their disposition, and the proper method of converting them to our holy faith; and furthermore, directed that I should not proceed by land to the East, as is customary, but by a Westerly route. . . . So, after having expelled the Jews from your dominions . . . ennobled me that thenceforth I might call myself Don, and be High Admiral of the Sea.”¹⁹

Concern for the fate of the Holy Land, and crusading efforts to dislodge Muslims from Jerusalem, stirred the imaginations of European Catholics. Columbus’s voyages not only might bring the gospel to the unexplored lands across the Atlantic, but also might represent the opening of a new eastern front against the Muslim powers, Europe’s Christians believed. Similarly, apocalyptic writers expected that a mass conversion of the Jews would precede the millennial reign of Christ on earth. The expulsion of non-converts could convince wavering Jews to affirm Jesus as messiah.

Columbus anticipated that the riches of the New World might help fund the monarchs’ campaigns against Jerusalem. On the day after Christmas in 1492, he wrote in his journal that he hoped the Spanish would find so much gold that it would supply everything they needed for a decisive crusade to liberate the Holy Sepulcher (the reputed site of Jesus’s burial and resurrection). He recalled a pleasant conversation in which he had discussed this prospect with Isabella and Ferdinand.

These end-times ambitions help explain why Columbus bothered to compile his *Libro de las Profecias (Book of Prophecies)* around 1501. In it, he cobbled together a host of prophetic writings from the Bible and other sources, all of which pointed to the providential significance of his explorations, as well as the coming restoration of the Holy Sepulcher to Christian control. Columbus’s studies suggested to him that once Christians conquered Jerusalem, the stage would be set for Christ’s return. He figured that this consummation of divine history might come within 155 years.



Aerial image of the earthworks at the Poverty Point site, West Carroll Parish, Louisiana, 1960. Aerial photograph CTK-2BB-125.

If religious inspiration prompted Columbus's voyages, so did a bad miscalculation about the length of the western route to Asia. Contrary to common misconceptions today about Columbus's era, most European experts at that time did not believe that the world was flat; they did not expect Columbus's ships to fall off the edge of the world. Indeed, since ancient Greece, some scholars already knew that the world was a sphere, and they had calculated with surprising accuracy the globe's circumference. Columbus was in a minority of those who believed that east Asia was much closer to Europe than it actually was. As a result of his erroneous calculations, Columbus figured that the East Indies were about 3,500 miles west of Europe. When he hit land at 3,000 miles west, he assumed he was somewhere near China or Japan. He persisted in that mistaken assumption until his death in 1506.

Columbus landed first in the Bahamas, and then established a settlement on the island he named Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and Dominican Republic). He named the place La Navidad, because he landed there on Christmas Day. Before the twelve days of Christmas were up, Columbus was back on the *Niña*, getting ready for the trip home. His account of the first voyage caused a sensation in Europe and he made three more trips to the New World during his life.

When Columbus came to Hispaniola in 1492, hundreds of thousands of natives (Tainos) lived there in addition to many others on nearby islands. Because Columbus commissioned Father Ramón Pané to study the Tainos' religious practices, we know quite a lot about them. They called their deities *zemis*, and the two primary deities were Yúcahu—sovereign over the cassava plant and the salty waters of the Gulf—and his mother Atabey, who lorded over fresh water and childbirth. Cassava, a root crop, was the center of the Tainos' extensive agricultural regime. It took the place typically occupied by maize in Native Americans' belief systems. Tainos acknowledged many other *zemis*, including the spirits of the dead and spirits resident in the natural environment.²⁰

The Tainos carved figures of *zemis* and used them in rituals. Pané observed that they used the hallucinogenic plant *cohoba* to facilitate communication with a *zemi*, and that they would “pray to it and to please it and to ask and find out from the aforesaid *zemi* good and bad things and also to ask it for riches.” Leading men would assemble, and a lord would often relate a *cohoba*-induced vision, saying that he had “spoken with the *zemi* and that they will achieve victory, or their enemies will flee or there will be a great loss of life, or wars or hunger or another such thing, according to what he, who is drunk, may relate of what he remembers. You may judge in what state his brain may be,” Pané commented, “for they say they think they see the houses turn upside down, with their foundations in the air, and the men walk on foot toward the heavens.”²¹

The Spanish settlers who came to Hispaniola in the decade after Columbus suffered terribly from disease and malnutrition, with probably two-thirds of them perishing. But the Tainos suffered even more. Within half a century, their numbers plummeted from roughly 300,000 to about 500 survivors, well over a 99 percent decline. Columbus also inaugurated native enslavement, taking dozens of captives for export to Europe on his first visit, and then sanctioning a shipload of 550 Indians for forcible export to Spain in 1495. The Spanish monarchs reportedly balked at the slave trade in Indian but only because Columbus did not have clear legal title to enslave those whom the king and queen now considered their subjects.²²

Before the coming of Europeans, Native Americans lived in a world in flux. Settlements and societies rose, moved, fought, and fell. Yet 1492 remains a fundamental juncture of disruption, beginning a process of massive decline among Native Americans and the emergence of European power in the Americas. Paleo-Indians, and the residents of places like the Buttermilk Creek settlement, had begun forging an American New World many millennia ago; now the disease and death accompanying the Europeans were ravaging and recreating America again.

JESUIT MISSIONARY PAUL LE JEUNE ON THE HURON/WENDAT FEAST OF THE DEAD (1636)

From Edna Kenton, ed., *The Indians of North America*, taken from Reuben Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (New York, 1927), 1: 303–8.

. . . many think we have two souls, both of them being divisible and material, and yet both reasonable; the one separates itself from the body at death, yet remains in the Cemetery until the feast of the Dead, — after which it either changes into a Turtledove, or, according to the most common belief, it goes away at once to the village of souls. The other is, as it were, bound to the body, and informs, so to speak, the corpse; it remains in the ditch of the dead after the feast, and never leaves it unless some one bears it again as a child. He pointed out to me, as a proof of this metempsychosis, the perfect resemblance some have to persons deceased. A fine Philosophy, indeed. Such as it is, it shows why they call the bones of the dead, *Atisken*, “the souls.”

A day or two before setting out for the feast, they carried all these souls into one of the largest Cabins of the Village, where one portion was hung to the poles of the Cabin, and the other portion spread out through it; the Captain entertained them, and made them a magnificent feast in the name of a deceased Captain, whose name he bore. I was at this feast of souls, and noticed at it four peculiar things. First, the presents which the relatives made for the feast, and which consisted of robes, Porcelain collars, and kettles, were strung on poles along the Cabin on both sides. Secondly, the Captain sang the song of the deceased Captain, in accordance with the desire the latter had expressed before his death, to have it sung on this occasion. Thirdly, all the guests had the liberty of sharing with one another whatever good things they had, and even of taking these home with them, contrary to the usual custom of feasts. Fourthly, at the end of the feast, by way of compliment to him who had entertained them, they imitated the cry of souls, and went out of the Cabin, crying *haéé, haé*.

The master of the feast, and even *Anenkhiondic*, chief Captain of the whole Country, sent several pressing invitations to us. You might have said that the feast would not have been a success without us. I sent two of our Fathers, several days beforehand, to see the preparations, and to learn with certainty the day of the feast. *Anenkhiondic* gave them a very hearty welcome, and on their departure conducted them himself a quarter of a league thence, where the pit was, and showed them, with great demonstrations of regard, all the preparations for the feast.



Part of the Serpent Mound (Portsmouth, Ohio). Photograph copyright 1940 by the Department of Agriculture, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. Digitized by [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The feast was to take place on the Saturday of Pentecost but some affairs that intervened, and the uncertainty of the weather, caused it to be postponed until Monday. The seven or eight days before the feast were spent in assembling the souls, as well as the Strangers who had been invited; meanwhile from morning until night the living were continually making presents to the youth, in consideration of the dead. On one side the women were shooting with the bow for a prize—a Porcupine girdle, or a collar or string of Porcelain beads; elsewhere in the Village, the young men were shooting at a stick to see who could hit it. The prize for this victory was an ax, some knives, or even a Beaver robe. From day to day the souls arrived. It is very interesting to see these processions, sometimes of two or three hundred persons; each one brings his souls, that is, his bones, done up in parcels on his back, under a handsome robe, in the way I have described. Some had arranged their parcels in the form of a man, ornamented with Porcelain collars, and elegant bands of long red fur. On setting out from the Village the whole band cried out *haéé, haé*, and repeated this cry of the souls by the way. This cry they say relieves them greatly; otherwise the burden, although of souls, would weigh very heavily on their backs, and cause them a backache all the rest of their lives. They go short journeys; our Village was three days in going four leagues to reach *Ossossané*, which we call *la Rochelle*, where the ceremonies were to take place. As soon as they arrive near a Village they cry again *haéé, haé*. The whole Village comes to meet them; plenty of gifts are given on such an occasion. Each has his rendezvous in one of the Cabins, all know where they are to lodge their souls, so it is done without confusion. At the same time, the Captains hold a Council, to discuss how long the band shall sojourn in the Village.

All the souls of eight or nine Villages had reached *la Rochelle* by the Saturday of Pentecost; but the fear of bad weather compelled them, as I have said, to postpone the ceremony until Monday. We were lodged a quarter of a league away, at the old Village, in a Cabin where there were fully a hundred souls hung to and fixed upon the poles, some of which smelled a little stronger than musk.

On Monday, about noon, they came to inform us that we should hold ourselves in readiness, for they were going to begin the ceremony; they took down at the same time, the packages of souls; and the relatives again unfolded them to say their last adieus; the tears flowed afresh. I admired the tenderness of one woman toward her father and children; she is the daughter of a Chief who died at an advanced age, and was once very influential in the Country; she combed his hair and handled his bones, one after the other, with as much affection as if she would have desired to restore life to him;

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