

Colonial Exchange during the Age of Discovery

The voyages of the Iberians marked history. The discovery of the new world meant the unification of two old worlds.

These old worlds had different beliefs, attitudes, language, and values. The culture of these two worlds would never be the same.

The native peoples of America at the end of the fifteenth century ranged from the simplest hunting-fishing-gathering societies to highly developed civilizations with urban and peasant components. In spite of these notable differences, they were alike in that they had all developed from the level of pre-bow-arrow hunters without significant contact with other regions. There high civilizations were based on agricultural and trading economies, with craft specialization, large cities, monumental architecture, elaborate politico-religious organizations, and dense populations. Soft metal was worked, writing was being developed, and the idea of the wheel was present in toys.

Until the end of the fifteenth century, the peoples of the Iberian Peninsula were grouped in several politically autonomous units, resulting in significant cultural and social differences. These people shared the same basic cultural history through several millenia, during which time they were exposed to the basic innovations of Western Eurasia and North Africa.

Phoenicians and Greeks brought civilization from the Eastern Mediterranean, and Neolithic farmers from Africa had been followed by Hallstat iron workers from Europe. Six centuries of Roman domination gave the peninsula a common language, unified political control, widespread urbanization, and other forms and values of Rome. Agriculture, medicine, mathematics, and other forms of science was brought in by the Graeco-Roman learning of antiquity during the Moorish invasion.

The first natives Columbus encountered were the Taino branch of the Arawak language on Guanahani. These people grew corn, yams, and other roots for food; they knew how to make cassava bread, to spin and weave cotton, and make pottery. Columbus wrote, "They invite you to share anything that they possess, and show as much love as their hearts were in it". The impression to the European scholars was that the ignorance to money and iron, and their nudity was due to the fact that these people were "holdovers from the golden age".

The Indians were organized into class societies (with few possible exceptions among the more rudimentary societies) and the poor were ground under the heel of the rich. This system was sanctioned by the Indian laws and customs, and based on the inequalities of land ownership. The poor lived in miserable huts, did all the labour, and enjoyed none of the amenities of life, except indulgence in the forms of escape from misery and relief from oppression that characterized many other peoples in Europe and Asia.

The peoples inhabiting America in 1492 were divided into many hundreds of language groups. The following main groups

may be distinguished:

- 1.The Nahua-speaking peoples from Central Mexico to Nicaragua.
- 2.The Maya: Yucatan and Guatemala.
- 3.The Chibchas: Central America, western Columbia, and northwestern Ecuador.
- 4.The Quechuas: the Andean mountains from southern Ecuador to northern Chile.
- 5.The Aymaras: Highlands of Bolivia.
- 6.The Araucanian-Patagonians: southern Chile and the plains of southern Argentina.
 - a. The Machupe: Chile, central valley.
 - b. The Pinchue: North of the Mancupe, now extinct.
- 7.The Guarani and Tupi Indians: the forested portions of northern La Plata basin, and Brazil.
 - a.Tupi: Kamaraiura; Awiti.
- 8.The Caribs and Arawaks: Venezuela, part of the Guianas, Brazil, and the west Indies.
 - a.Carib: Kuikura; Kalapalo; Migiyapei (formerly members of the Jagami and the Wagifiti village groups).
 - b.Arawaks: Waura; Mehinaku; Yawalipit.
- 9.The Trumai: an isolated language once lived in several villages of their own. Today they are represented by a few survivors living at Posta Leonardo, Brazil

While the Indians in several parts of America had made great progress in developing plants, fertilization of soils, and terracing of lands, their food-producing capacity was less than that of the invading Europeans, and their agricultural techniques less advanced. The natives did not use plows or other technical devices.

The ending of the Indian Nations, and the start of the Latin American traditions and customs resulted from hardtimes for the Indians. The Spaniards came to the conclusion that the Arawaks, their first guides, were lazy, barbarian, and perhaps even subhuman because they did not want to work hard gathering gold, "that good for nothing stuff". European raiders made devastating use of their superiority: The horse gave them mobility, speed, and a wide operating range; the shepard's dog made it possible to avoid ambushes and track down and terrorize Indians; and their traditional steel weapons, mainly swords and shields, were far more effective than firearms, which were scarce, expensive, and easily ruined by rust in the tropics. Finally the virulent spread of European diseases was the final blow to the Arawaks, as well as other tribes. Practically all the Arawaks were wiped out before the Caribs could eat them all.

The State's dealing with Indians was both complicated and simplified by the enormous losses in numbers that they suffered during the century after contact with the Europeans. The Native population of the Bahamas and the Greater Antilles disappeared completely during the sixteenth century. The modern boundaries of Peru held as many as nine million people in the early 1520s; by 1620 the number had fallen to about 600,000. Mexico suffered an equal loss. The

population of central and southern Mexico was probably over ten million in the early years of the sixteenth century.

Around 1620 to 1625, the numbers were about 730,000. Because the American peoples, long isolated themselves from

the rest of humanity and its germs, had no resistance to them. Such disease included smallpox, plague, measles, and many more, even the common cold.

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