

1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus

By Charles C. Mann



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In this groundbreaking work of science, history, and archaeology, Charles C. Mann radically alters our understanding of the Americas before the arrival of Columbus in 1492.

Contrary to what so many Americans learn in school, the pre-Columbian Indians were not sparsely settled in a pristine wilderness; rather, there were huge numbers of Indians who actively molded and influenced the land around them. The astonishing Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan had running water and immaculately clean streets, and was larger than any contemporary European city. Mexican cultures created corn in a specialized breeding process that it has been called man's first feat of genetic engineering. Indeed, Indians were not living lightly on the land but were landscaping and manipulating their world in ways that we are only now beginning to understand. Challenging and surprising, this a transformative new look at a rich and fascinating world we only thought we knew.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

1491 is not so much the story of a year, as of what that year stands for: the long-debated (and often-dismissed) question of what human civilization in the Americas was like before the Europeans crashed the party. The history books most Americans were (and still are) raised on describe the continents before Columbus as a vast, underused territory, sparsely populated by primitives whose cultures would inevitably bow before the advanced technologies of the Europeans. For decades, though, among the archaeologists, anthropologists, paleolinguists, and others whose discoveries Charles C. Mann brings together in *1491*, different stories have been emerging. Among the revelations: the first Americans may not have come over the Bering land bridge around 12,000 B.C. but by boat along the Pacific coast 10 or even 20 thousand years earlier; the Americas were a far more urban, more populated, and more technologically advanced region than generally assumed; and the Indians, rather than living in static harmony with nature, radically engineered the landscape across the continents, to the point that even "timeless" natural features like the Amazon rainforest can be seen as products of human intervention.

Mann is well aware that much of the history he relates is necessarily speculative, the product of pot-shard interpretation and precise scientific measurements that often end up being radically revised in later decades. But the most compelling of his eye-opening revisionist stories are among the best-founded: the stories of early American-European contact. To many of those who were there, the earliest encounters felt more like a meeting of equals than one of natural domination. And those who came later and found an emptied landscape that seemed ripe for the taking, Mann argues convincingly, encountered not the natural and unchanging state of the native American, but the evidence of a sudden calamity: the ravages of what was likely the greatest epidemic in human history, the smallpox and other diseases introduced inadvertently by Europeans to a population without immunity, which swept through the Americas faster than the explorers who brought it, and left behind for their discovery a land that held only a shadow of the thriving cultures that it had sustained for centuries before. --*Tom Nissley*

A 1491 Timeline

Europe and Asia	Dates	The Americas
	25000-35000 B.C.	Time of paleo-Indian migration to Americas from Siberia, according to genetic evidence. Groups likely traveled across the Pacific in boats.
Wheat and barley grown from wild ancestors in Sumer.	6000	
	5000	In what many scientists regard as humankind's first and greatest feat of genetic engineering, Indians in southern Mexico systematically breed maize (corn) from dissimilar ancestor species.
First cities established in Sumer.	4000	
	3000	The Americas' first urban complex, in coastal Peru, of at least 30 closely packed cities, each centered around large pyramid-like structures

Great Pyramid at Giza 2650

32

First clear evidence of Olmec use of zero--an invention, widely described as the most important mathematical discovery ever made, which did not occur in Eurasia until about 600 A.D., in India (zero was not introduced to Europe until the 1200s and not widely used until the 1700s)

800-840 A.D.

Sudden collapse of most central Maya cities in the face of severe drought and lengthy war

Vikings briefly establish first European settlements in North America.

1000



Reconstruction of Cahokia, c. 1250 A.D.*

Abrupt rise of Cahokia, near modern St. Louis, the largest city north of the Rio Grande. Population estimates vary from at least 15,000 to 100,000.

Black Death devastates Europe.

1347-1351

1398

Birth of Tlacaélel, the brilliant Mexican strategist behind the Triple Alliance (also known as the Aztec empire), which within decades controls central Mexico, then the most densely settled place on Earth.

The Encounter: Columbus sails from Europe to the Caribbean.

1492

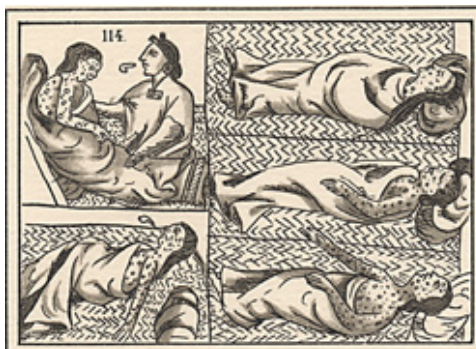
The Encounter: Columbus sails from Europe to the Caribbean.

Syphilis apparently brought to Europe by Columbus's returning crew.

1493

Ferdinand Magellan departs from Spain on around-the-world voyage.

1519



Sixteenth-century Mexica drawing of the effects of smallpox**

Cortes driven from Tenochtitlán, capital of the Triple Alliance, and then gains victory as smallpox, a European disease never before seen in the Americas, kills at least one of three in the empire.

1525-1533

The smallpox epidemic sweeps into Peru, killing as much as half the population of the Inka empire and opening the door to conquest by Spanish forces led by Pizarro.

1617

Huge areas of New England nearly depopulated by epidemic brought by shipwrecked French sailors.

English Pilgrims
arrive at Patuxet, an
Indian village
emptied by disease, 1620
and survive on
stored Indian food,
renaming the
village Plymouth.

*Courtesy Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site, Collinsville, Ill., painting by Michael Hampshire.

**Courtesy Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, Santa Fe, N.M. (Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*, 1547-77).

From Publishers Weekly

This production is—as most nonfiction audios ought to be—a "reading" as distinct from a "performance." Johnson renders this thoroughly researched, well-written history of early North and South American Indian populations in a strong, clear voice, with excellent intonation. His diction is almost too perfect—one occasionally focuses on pronunciation rather than content. Most of the book is written in narrative form that sweeps listeners through an exciting rethinking of all we ever learned about when so-called Indians first inhabited the American continents and how they may have come here, about their numbers, religions, cultures, inventions, social structures and their relations to European invaders and settlers. When Mann relates the internecine battles among schools of anthropologists and archeologists, however, the listener might wish he had the book in hand for clarity. It might be wise from the start to make a list of the numerous Indian and European individuals and groupings. This audiobook is well worth the trouble. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Like all creation myths, the story of America's discovery by Columbus endures no matter how improbable it now seems. Mann, a correspondent for *Science* and *The Atlantic Monthly* and coauthor of four previous books, dives right into this thorny topic—one fraught with political tension and intertwined with a nation's identity—with no agenda other than the journalist's desire to find the truth. Critics were riveted by his rich portrait of the pre-Columbian Americas and compared him favorably to Jared Diamond, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies*. Like a good reporter, Mann seeks out sources that challenge his own views; nonetheless, critics found some of Mann's conclusions short on evidence. In some cases, they questioned whether his journalistic approach did justice to such a complex subject.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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