# 1492: An Ongoing Voyage

HOME - What Came To Be Called "America" - Mediterranean World - Christopher Columbus
Inventing America - Europe Claims America - Epilogue
Exhibition Overview - Suggested Readings - Online Exhibit Credits

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## WHAT CAME TO BE CALLED "AMERICA"

By 1492 people had lived in the Western Hemisphere for tens of thousands of years. For much of this time it is believed that they experienced virtually no recorded, sustained contact with other parts of the world -- Europe, Africa, or Asia.

Millions of people lived in an area some five times the size of Europe. In strikingly diverse habitats and climates they developed possibly the most varied and productive agriculture in the world. Their lifestyles and belief systems differed widely and they spoke hundreds of distinct languages.

Throughout the hemisphere, states and centers of high civilization had risen and fallen. The dynamic Mexica (Aztec) and Inca empires were still expanding at this time and internal migration and warfare were common. The peoples did not see themselves as part of an entity. Only later would this area be given a unifying name - America - and the people labeled "Indians" by Europe.

We have focused on five geographical areas of the region to represent the variety and complexity of peoples and cultures before 1492: the Caribbean, Middle America, the Andean region, the South Atlantic, and North America. In order to understand what came to be called America we are often dependent on European observations.

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## THE CARIBBEAN -- ISLAND SOCIETY

The largest group of people living in the islands of the Caribbean were the Taínos. Their villages were governed by chieftains, or *caciques*, who enjoyed some distinctions of rank but received tribute in times of crisis only. Related families lived together in large houses built of poles, mats, and thatch.

The Taínos were known for their fine wood carving and hammocks woven from cotton. Not a particularly warlike people, they played ceremonial ball games, possibly as a substitute for warfare and as an outlet for competition between villages and chiefdoms.

The other major group living in the Caribbean were the more mobile and aggressive Caribs, who took to the sea in huge dugout canoes. By the late 15th century, the Caribs had expanded into the smaller islands

the sea in huge dugout canoes. By the late 15th century, the Caribs had expanded into the smaller islands of the eastern Caribbean from the mainland, displacing or intermingling with the Taínos.

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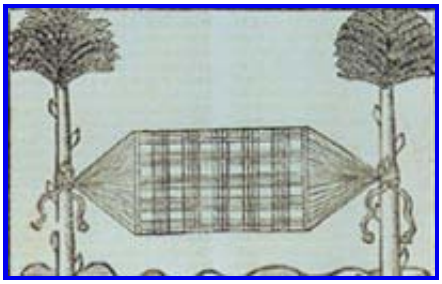

Hammock
In Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés,
*La Historia general y natural de las Indias*... (Seville, 1535).
Rare Book and Special Collections Division

Oviedo came to America in 1514, where for over thirty years he compiled detailed ethnographic descriptions of the goods, products, peoples and customs of the Caribbean and Central America. He introduced Europe to a wide variety of previously unheard of New World "exotica" such as the pineapple, the canoe, the smoking of tobacco, and the hammock.

> *The indians sleep in a bed they call an 'hamaca' which looks like a piece of cloth with both an open and tight weave, like a net ... made of cotton ... about 2.5 or 3 yards long, with many henequen twine strings at either end which can be hung at any height. They are good beds, and clean ... and since the weather is warm they require no covers at all ... and they are portable so a child can carry it over the arm.*

The hammock was perfected in the Caribbean and Brazil and was first introduced to Europeans during Columbus' first voyage of 1492.

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## MIDDLE ATLANTIC CULTURES

Before 1492, modern-day Mexico, most of Central America, and the southwestern United States comprised an area now known as Meso or Middle America. Meso American peoples shared many elements of culture: pictographic and hieroglyphic forms of writing; monumental architecture; a diet primarily of corn, beans, squash and chiles; the weaving of cotton cloth; and extensive trade networks. While most people lived by working the land, many societies also included nobles and priests, warriors, craftsmen, and merchants.

The Mexica (Aztec) had formed a powerful state in the central valley of Mexico and conquered many neighboring states by the late 15th century. The bustling island capital, Tenochtitlan, with a population of perhaps 200,000, was located in the middle of Lake Texcoco. Groups like the Tarascans in the west and Zapotecs to the south, however, remained relatively independent. Even states that had been absorbed by the Mexica retained their rulers as well as their religion, language, and lands.

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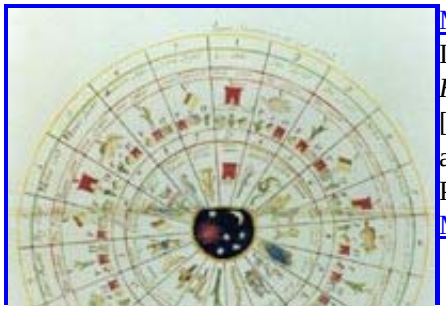

Mexican Calendar
In Mariano Fernández de Echeverria y Veytia,
*Historia del orígen de las gentes que poblaron la America septentrional*
[early 19th century manuscript facsimile]
as Calendar wheel no. 7.
Peter Force Collection,
Manuscript Division

This highly accurate calendar was developed by the people of Mexico prior to 1492. The *tonalpohualli*, or sacred calendar, ruled the life of each Mexica and was consulted on all important occasions. It was made up of 260 days, or 20 months of 13 days.

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Professions of the Tarascan People, Mexico
Occupational Groups. Ink and wash drawing.
In *Relacíon de las ceremonias y ritos y población y gobierno de los indios de la provincia de Mechoacán*
compiled by Fray Jeronimo de Alcala (?).
[19th century manuscript facsimile of the ca. 1540original].
Peter Force Collection,
Manuscript Division

The Tarascans inhabited Michoacán, an area west of Tenochtitlán (present-day Mexico City) and south of Guadalajara. This illustration depicts schematically various occupational groups existing before the coming of the Spanish. Groups of figures sit, each with an object or symbol such as a net, a loom, a bow and arrow, a writing instrument, feathers, etc., that identifies the occupation of a specific group. A couple of figures in the upper part of the illustration sit alone and are identified as being the *Cazonci* and *su gobernador* (their governor).

This well-illustrated manuscript from Mexico chronicles the history and customs of the Tarascan people before as well as during the Conquest in the area of Michoacán. Although written by a Franciscan friar, it is largely based on the accounts of informants among the Tarascan nobility and priests, thus essentially expressing an indigenous point of view. The text and numerous illustrations describe the government, customs, and elaborate society of the Tarascan people.

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Oztoticpac, Mexico, ca. 1540
In *The Oztoticpac Lands Map*. [Mexico, ] ca. 1540.
Manuscript on *amatl* paper.
Geography and Map Division

The Oztoticpac (Mexico) Lands Map is a central Mexican pictorial document with Spanish and Nahuatl writing showing litigation surrounding the Oztoticpac estate within the city of Texcoco, ca. 1540. Its glyph, a symbolic figure, corresponds to the name "above the caves" (*oztotl*,cave; *icpac*, above), a hill stylized in the shape of a woman. The document on pre-European *amatl* paper involves the land and property ownership of the ruler of Texcoco who was executed during the early days of the Spanish Conquest in the Central Valley of Mexico. The execution left in its wake litigation involving ownership of properties claimed by various sons of Nezahualpilli, the lords of Texcoco.

Most of the drawings on the map are plans of fields with indigenous measurements and place glyphs. Near the upper left is the plan of several houses within a precinct. On the upper right is a map showing about seventy-five plots of land. Additional fields are drawn at the lower right. Nahuatl and Spanish descriptions as well as three long Nahuatl texts include mention of Tollancingo, Oztoticpac, Tezcuco, Don Carlos, and Don Hernando.

In the lower left of the map are depictions of tree grafts showing European fruit tree branches grafted to indigenous tree trunks, uniquely displayed among all known Mexican Indian pictorial documents. Twenty trees, identified as pomegranates, quinces, apples, pears, etc., are shown. Also, as far as it is known, this is the earliest recorded lawsuit or conflict in horticultural literature anywhere in the world.

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## THE ANDES -- LIFE IN THE HIGHLANDS

Organized states and advanced cultures had long flourished in the Andean mountain region. The semi-arid highlands were the center of the far-flung Inca empire, *Tahuantinsuyu*, that extended from today's Chile to Colombia. Cuzco, the capital, was located at 10,000 feet above sea level.

Impressive adaptations to this unique environment allowed civilizations to thrive at higher altitudes than anywhere else in the world. The Andean peoples had learned to freeze-dry foods by taking advantage of the daily extremes of temperature at high altitudes. They kept herds of llamas and alpacas in the *altiplano*, weaving textiles from the wool. Using irrigation and terracing, they developed varieties of potatoes at high altitudes; grew corn and coca at lower levels; and raised cotton in the lowlands. They were knowledgeable miners, fine metalworkers, and great builders.

A rotating system of labor for public works that was traditional among Andean peoples was used to construct thousands of miles of roads. These roads greatly facilitated the movement of troops, peoples, and goods.

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Sacsahuaman, Peru
Photoreproduction from original photograph.
Prints and Photographs Division

The huge fortifications surrounding the Incan capital of Cuzco, built to protect and to solidify Incan control, are outstanding examples of the advanced engineering techniques of Andean peoples. Stones of several tons in weight were precisely cut and placed in jigsaw-like fashion, without the aid of mortar, to form massive walls. These stone structures have withstood numerous earthquakes during the intervening centuries.

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Ruins at Machu Picchu, Peru
Photoreproduction from original photograph.
Prints and Photographs Division

This magnificent center of Incan culture, high in the Andes, is testimony to the extraordinary construction capability of Andean peoples (i.e., intricate stone construction without the aid of mortar) before the arrival of the Spanish in the early 16th century.

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## SOUTH ATLANTIC PEOPLES

The coastal areas of eastern South America and the interior of the Amazon basin were home to several million people at the end of the 15th century. This enormous area, bordering the Andes mountains on the west and the Atlantic Ocean on the east, extends from present-day Argentina to the Guianas.

Socio-political structures were usually not highly developed in this area. The Tupí-speaking groups lived in villages in which related families resided together in large houses. They practiced slash-and-burn agriculture, and hunted and fished using blow guns and poison-tipped arrows. Manioc, a tuber, was their staple crop. They engaged in warfare and some groups practiced ritual cannibalism. Tupí groups eventually overcame the Tapuyas, mobile hunters and gatherers.

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# NORTH AMERICA -- DIVERSE SOCIETIES

In the 16th century, North America -- occupied today by Canada and most of the United States -- was home to hundreds of groups speaking a striking variety of languages and dialects. They lived in diverse settings, from the Algonquian of the eastern woodlands, to the Caddo and Wichita of the grassy Midwestern plains, and the Taos of the arid southwest.

Some North American tribes, like the Iroquois, were organized into large political confederations. Extensive trade networks - sometimes operating over long distances - allowed for the exchange of products such as animal skins, copper, shells, pigments, pottery, and foodstuffs. Housing styles varied from covered wood to multilevel dwellings constructed of stone and mud, and transportable shelters made of poles and animal hides. Many tribes played games such as lacrosse and stickball. Religion was an integral part of daily life, tying them to the land, to other living things, and to the spirits that animated their world and provided order to social relations.

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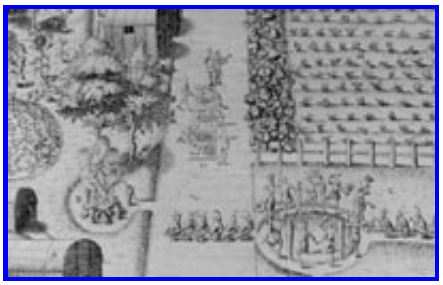

Secotan Village Showing Space Utilization
In Theodor de Bry,
*Americae pars decima*
Openheim, 1619, as Indian village of Secotan.
Rare Book and Special Collections Division

The people of Secotan lived in permanent villages near today's North Carolina Outer Banks. Like the northern Algonquians, they farmed collectively in the growing season and dispersed into family units to hunt during the colder months.

The engraving, based on a drawing made by John White in the 1580s, shows careful management and use of the land. Crops include tobacco and pumpkins, corn in three stages of growth, and sunflowers, while domesticated deer graze in the adjoining woods. The buildings include family units and storehouses for the surplus corn.

The Secotan traded with other groups like the powerful Mandoag of the Piedmont area of North Carolina, who acted as middlemen in the copper trade.

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