

In *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (2nd edition, 553pp, Vintage Books, 2011) Charles C. Mann overturns long-held beliefs about the Americas and Native Americans before European contact.

There were many, many more of them, they'd been here longer, their cultures were much more sophisticated, and they'd had an enormously greater influence over the environment than previously thought.

In 1491 the Inka of Peru ruled the greatest empire on earth, bigger than any European state. By then, many societies, including the Maya of southern Mexico, had already flourished, peaked, and collapsed. The entire shore of New England, 200 miles long and 40 miles deep, was filled with villages – and so on, south.

Farther inland, the Mound people had thrived for centuries, creating tens of thousands of mounds. Cahokia alone, near present-day East St. Louis, supported 15,000 people from the 10th to the 13th centuries – a city the size of then contemporary London. The Great Plains were a “giant game farm.” In the Northwest, nets crossed nearly every salmon stream, and the coast of California was heavily settled.

When Cortez landed in 1519, 2.5 million people lived in central Mexico. Thanks to ingenious fish weirs, native fruit and nut orchards, and their homemade fertile topsoil (*terra preta*), thousands lived in the Amazon basin, for thousands of years. In short, when Columbus sailed, more people lived in the Americas than in Europe – though the numbers continue to be debated.

And they'd been here longer. Most scholars agree that Native Americans arrived across a Siberian land bridge about 15,000 B.C. and spread throughout the Americas. Now there's evidence they may have been here for 20,000 - 30,000 years. And since Europe became ice-free and thus habitable beginning about 18,000 B.C., maybe we should call it "the new world."

People may have lived in the highlands of Peru as early as 9,200 B.C. – many centuries before Sumer. The Mound people of the Midwest and Southeast had settled there by 3,400 B.C. The Mayans engaged in European-style dynastic wars and coups a thousand years before Europeans; Amazonians built their elaborate jungle civilization beginning 3,000 years ago.

More heavily populated, older – and considerably more sophisticated than we learned in school.

The Neolithic revolution – the invention of agriculture – occurred in the Fertile Crescent about 11,000 B.C. Mann details a second, independent Neolithic revolution in Mesoamerica about 10,000 B.C., sending such crops as corn and potatoes throughout the Americas and, eventually, worldwide. Those the Pilgrims met had better diets, were healthier and stronger than plague and pox scarred Europeans.

The Inka created a 25,000 mile road system, from the seacoast to the high Andes, exchanging goods so all could thrive, in spite of local lacks. The Aztecs ruled an empire of satellite states; the Maya, like ancient Greece, engaged in constant conflict among city-states with a sophisticated shared culture. The Haudenosaunee (the Five Nations) of New England developed a form of democratic self-

government which may have influenced theorists worldwide.

Technically, many Native American societies could deal with European invaders – the Inka with their superior cloth armor and slingshots that could fell horses, for instance. But they couldn't deal with European diseases.

Between the arrival of Columbus and the first permanent North American settlements, perhaps 75% of all Native Americans died of European diseases, against which they had no immunity.

Thus the wilderness which the Pilgrims found had been largely European-created, by killing off those who had kept the landscape under control through fire, agriculture and hunting. This allowed the land to re-wild, and animal populations, like the Passenger pigeon and the bison, to explode.

If you wanted a “wilderness” like the one Native Americans lived in for centuries before 1491, Mann says, you'd have to create the world's largest garden.

A must read for anyone seriously interested in who we are and how we got here.