

How new was the “New” World? North America Before and After European Contact

New World Populations

- ✿ Different methods--Bottom-up, Area Modeling & Top-down schools of thought;
- ✿ North American numbers range from 500,000 to 18,000,000
- ✿ Most accepted number is William Denevan’s “consensus count” of **54 million** in the Western Hemisphere, including **3.8 million** Native Americans north of the Rio Grande.
- ✿ Implications of such numbers?
 - ⊕ Pristine Myth?
 - ⊕ Native American Holocaust?

Mississippian Cultures

- ✿ Sometimes referred to as the Moundbuilders.
- ✿ Flourished ~ 900-1350 CE during the “Medieval Optimum,” a global climatic warming trend.
- ✿ Possible because climatic change allowed development of agriculture
- ✿ Major settlements and cities:
 - ⊕ Cahokia near modern-day St. Louis,
 - ⊕ Coosa & Etowah in what is today Georgia,
 - ⊕ Moundville in present-day Alabama, and
 - ⊕ Natchez in Mississippi.

Characteristics of Mississippian Cultures

- ✿ Shift from hunting/gathering nomadism to settled agriculture based on “Three Sisters” (Corn/Squash/Beans);
- ✿ Sustained much larger populations, perhaps 2 million people east of Mississippi in 1492—Perhaps as low as 250,000 by 1750;
- ✿ Highly stratified societies, Chiefdoms with sharp divides between elites and commoners;
- ✿ Specialized gender roles develop—men responsible for hunting (dietary protein), women responsible for agriculture and household;
- ✿ Widespread trading networks developed, including agricultural hamlets that supplied food to urban centers;
- ✿ Religious leaders responsible for seasonal rituals to secure agricultural and military strength; and
- ✿ Specialized artisanry and highly developed symbolic culture, most clearly represented in mounds of elaborate size and shape.

4 Stages of the Native American “New World”

I. World of the Little Ice Age

- ✿ Beginning ~1350 CE temperature declined
- ✿ Impacts:
 - ⊕ Decreased productivity;
 - ⊕ Instability of chiefdoms; and
 - ⊕ Even lack of faith in religious leaders.
- ✿ Large Mississippian communities reach crisis point;
 - ⊕ Urban centers and ceremonial places deserted.
 - ⊕ Mississippian culture decentralizes as population dispersed.

II. Post-Contact Material “New World”

- ✿ Changing Nature of Contact:
 - ⊕ Native Americans often encountered European goods before Europeans themselves;
 - ⊕ European goods were incorporated into Native American trade networks, political dealings and military conflicts; and
 - ⊕ European traders came into contact earlier and more often than European settlers.

III. New World of the Columbian Exchange

- ✿ Contact knit the globe together in a way that had not existed since the separation of Pangea into individual continents
 - ⊕ Distinct difference in “Old” and “New” World biota:
 - ⊕ “Old” World densely populated, and species adapted to such a highly competitive environment.
- ✿ “New” World was sparsely populated, and species had likewise adapted to such an environment.
 - ⊕ When the two come into contact, “Old” World **Weeds, Varmints and Germs** had a competitive advantage over “New” World species.
 - ⊕ “Old” World species gained a foothold without much human intervention.
 - ⊕ “New” World species needed human intervention to gain a foothold in the “Old” World.
- ✿ The nutritive and caloric value of tomatoes, corn and potatoes stimulated population growth in the “Old” World, while the economic value of tobacco, gold and silver stimulated economic growth. Negative impacts consisted of syphilis and inflation.
- ✿ Diseases such as typhus, measles and smallpox; species such as horses, cows, sheep, pigs and sugar cane; trade goods and European migrants utterly transformed the “New” World.

Demographic Collapse

- ✿ Population Estimates--Perhaps 75 million people in North & South America at time of contact (15% of world's population)
- ✿ Decline over centuries--What began in 1492 did not reach its end until 1900
 - ⊕ 80 million people in US & Canada, of which only 400,000 could be considered Native.
- ✿ Death rates as high as 80-90%
- ✿ Primary killer was epidemic disease, but contributing factor was societal & cultural collapse that followed.

IV. Ethnogenesis: Solidifying the New World

- ✿ Creation of new ethnic and cultural units from the remains of those left in ruins by the impact of contact.
- ✿ Continued the process that began during the Little Ice Age.
- ✿ Created the Native Americans groups with whom we are most familiar, as it created:
 - ⊕ Familiar human geography;
 - ⊕ Recognized language and cultural groupings; and
 - ⊕ Coalesced into tribal affiliations.