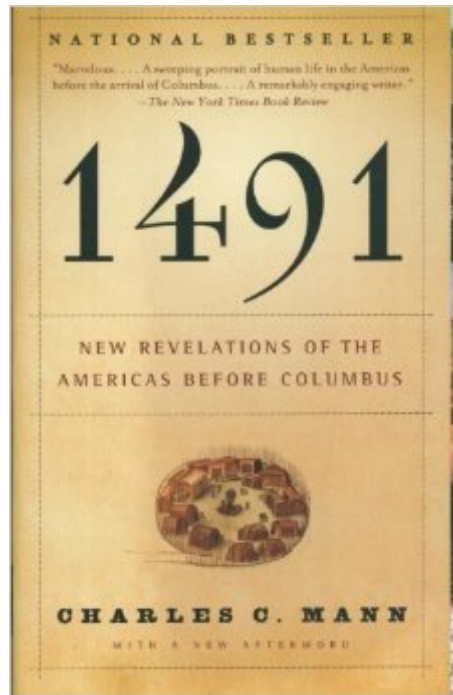


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1491: New Revelations Of The Americas Before Columbus



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

Mann gives the reader a comprehensive overview of the new theories concerning native American societies before the colonial period. The story is intriguing, and the fascinating narrative will hold the reader's complete attention. The assertions made are too numerous and complex to go into in any detail here, but in brief: we are told that the Western Hemisphere was actually much more populous than anyone had imagined previously. Most of the inhabitants were wiped out by plagues brought by the Europeans. Far from being either brutal and child-like, or "noble savages", the native Americans had established sophisticated societies which served large and growing populations, and which had great impact on their natural environments. No small Indian tribes living in a vast,

untamed wilderness! To the contrary, fire was used repeatedly to burn off weeds and undergrowth, extensive mounds and other structures were raised to provide crop land and ponds for fish breeding, and cultivation was widespread. Indeed, Mann asserts that the , far from being the quintessential wilderness most regard it as, is actually a garden gone wild! The tale is breathtaking in its scope. But is it true? The author of 1491 acknowledges that the new theories are controversial. For example: everyone agrees the Europeans brought diseases which wiped out large numbers of Indians. But not all agree that the original population was anywhere near the levels claimed. And many researchers contend that structures claimed to be of human origin, such as the Beni causeways in Bolivia, are actually of natural origin. This reader withholds judgement until a lot more evidence is forthcoming. However, everyone interested in history owes it to themselves to read this spellbinding story of an America that just might have been, and then watch as it is either confirmed or refuted by continuing, widely based research.

I have been a volunteer at Cahokia Mounds for about three years, leading guided tours of the Historic site. I have read extensively about Cahokia's history, attended a few conferences and had access to several of the principal archeologists at the site. I consider myself fairly well informed. Several visitors at Cahokia, and a few of my friends, recommended that I read 1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus, written in 2005, by Charles C. Mann. Mr. Mann relies heavily on the work of Dr William I. Woods, a geography professor at University of Kansas. I have found a book Envisioning Cahokia: a Landscape Perspective, co-authored by Dr. Woods. Not an easy read, but I am currently tackling it to see if I can learn more. I have recently finished 1491 (Vintage Books, second edition, July 2011) and I have a few observations. Some of the things the author states as "facts" about Cahokia are speculation. Some of the things he says are clearly incorrect. This makes me question the rest of the book. The best known landmark at Cahokia is Monks Mound. Standing 100 feet high, with four terraces and a base of 14 acres, Monks Mound is the largest earthen structure in the Americas. Mr. Mann tells us that "the elite revamped Monks Mound. By extending a low platform from one side, they created a stage for priests to perform ceremonies in full view of the public." (pg303) The first terrace of Monks Mound is a late addition and it very well may have been used as a stage to address large gatherings in the forty acre Grand Plaza. I mention this in my tours, but point out that it is speculation. Beyond the apparent acoustics in the Grand Plaza (some archeologist have noted that, in the early mornings, it is sometimes possible to clearly hear the voices of people ascending the mound) there isn't a whole lot of evidence to support the theory. The author tells us that one of the contributing factors to the demise

of Cahokia was the diversion of Cahokia Creek. This provided additional water to the city and allowed logs to be floated downstream, but also caused flooding which destroyed the maize crop. This may well be true, but I have found no other sources that mention this diversion of Cahokia Creek. Most accounts of Cahokia's demise cite an extended drought and, perhaps, a shortened growing season. Mound 72, in my opinion, is the most interesting mound at Cahokia. Excavations in the late 1960s by Dr. Melvin Fowler revealed about 300 burials. The most spectacular was "the beaded burial" an early chief buried on a falcon shaped blanket of 20,000 sea shell beads from the gulf of Mexico. Archeologists estimate that 60% of the burials at mound 72 were ritual killings. Speaking of these Mr. Mann says "Among them were fifty young women who had been buried alive." (pg 298) He may be confusing two or more separate burials. There were about 100 young women who were likely garroted before their bodies were laid out in trenches in neat rows. I am not aware of any evidence that these victims were buried alive. On another occasion, 50 individuals, men and women, were executed, mainly clubbed to death, and haphazardly thrown into a pit. There is evidence that some of these people were still alive when the pit was filled. Sometime around 1150, the people at Cahokia constructed a palisade. Clearly a defensive structure, we do not know who the two mile long fence was intended to keep out. Mr. Mann tells us that the palisade "was also intended to welcome the citizenry - anyone could freely pass through its dozen or so wide gates." (pg 303) Actually, the "gates" into the palisade were narrow, L shaped entryways, situated between bastions, where archers easily could hold off unwanted intruders. We are told "A catastrophic earthquake razed Cahokia in the beginning of the thirteenth century, knocking down the entire western side of Monks Mound." (pg 303) I have a couple of problems with this statement. The first relates to the second terrace of Monks Mound. The official literature at the Interpretative Center states that Monks Mound had four terraces. Some researchers, including Dr. Woods believes that what we now call the second terrace was the result of a massive slumpage along the western side of the mound. They may be correct, but this is still open to debate. If Dr. Woods is correct, might the second terrace of Monks Mound be the result of an earthquake? Perhaps. In 1811/1812, quakes along the New Madrid fault in southern Missouri caused the Mississippi River to run backwards and rang church bells in New York and Boston. Archeologists do speculate whether earthquakes had anything to do with the abandonment of Cahokia. The problem has to do with timing. This summer I attended a Mississippian conference at Cahokia. One of the presentations dealt with this topic. There is evidence that there was a major quake along the New Madrid fault around 1450. Unfortunately this is at least 200 years too late to fit into Mr. Mann's narrative. "The Cahokia earthquake .. must have splintered many of the city's wood-and plaster

buildings; fallen torches and scattered cooking fires would have ignited the debris, burning down most surviving structures. Water from the rivers, shaken by the quake, would have sloshed into the land in a mini-tsunami. ... Meanwhile the social unrest turned violent; many houses went up in flames. There was civil war, ... fighting in the streets. The whole polity turned in on itself and tore itself apart." (pg 304) If this scenario played out, one would expect ample archeological evidence. If it exists, I have missed it. Finally, there are two statements in 1491 I find particularly strange. "Monks Mound opens into a plaza a thousand feet long. In its southwest corner is a pair of mounds, one conical, one square. One day I climbed up their grassy sides at sunset." (pg 289) You are not allowed to climb on any of the mounds except Monks Mound. There are signs posted throughout the site. Perhaps the author had special. "A friend and I first visited Cahokia in 2002 ... The site is now a state park with a small museum." (pg 302) Has Mr. Mann ever actually been to Cahokia? The Historic Site ceased being a state park in 1977. The "small museum" was replaced in 1989 by a 33,000 ft interpretative center that receives hundreds of thousands of visitors each year.

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