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Ancient America and Africa

American Stories

Three Women's Lives Highlight the Convergence of Three Continents

In what historians call the “early modern period” of world history—roughly the fifteenth to seventeenth century, when peoples from different regions of the world came into close contact with each other—three women played key roles in the convergence and clash of societies from Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Their lives highlight some of this chapter’s major themes, which developed in an era when the people of three continents began to encounter each other and the shape of the modern world began to take form.

Born in 1451, Isabella of Castile was a banner-bearer for *reconquista*—the centuries-long Christian crusade to expel the **Muslim** rulers who had controlled Spain for centuries. When the queen of Castile married Ferdinand, the king of Aragon, in 1469, the union of their kingdoms forged a stronger Christian Spain now prepared to realize a new religious and military vision. Eleven years later, after ending hostilities with Portugal, Isabella and Ferdinand began consolidating their power. By expelling Muslims and Jews, the royal couple pressed to enforce Catholic religious conformity. Isabella’s religious zeal also led her to sponsor four voyages of Christopher Columbus as a means of extending Spanish power across the Atlantic. The first was commissioned in 1492, only a few months after what the Spanish considered a “just and holy war” against infidels culminated in the surrender of Moorish Granada, the last stronghold of Islam in Christian Europe. Sympathizing with Isabella’s fervent piety and desire to convert the people of distant lands to Christianity, after 1493 Columbus signed his letters “Christopher Columbus, Christ Bearer.”

On the other side of the Atlantic resided an Aztec woman of influence, also called Isabella by the Spanish, who symbolized the mixing of her people with the Spanish. Her real name was Tecuichpotzin, which meant “little royal maiden” in Nahuatl, the Aztec language. The first-born child of the Aztec ruler Moctezuma II and Teotlalco, his wife, she entered the world in 1509—before the Aztecs had seen a

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single Spaniard. But when she was 11, Tecuichpotzin witnessed the arrival of the conquistadors under Cortés. When her father was near death, he asked the conqueror to take custody of his daughter, hoping for an accommodation between the conquering Spanish and the conquered Aztecs. But Tecuichpotzin was reclaimed by her people and soon was married to her father's brother, who became the Aztec ruler in 1520. After he died of smallpox within two months, the last Aztec emperor claimed the young girl as his wife.

But then in 1521, the Spanish siege of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec island capital in Lake Texcoco, overturned the mighty Aztec Empire and soon brought Tecuichpotzin into the life of the victorious Spanish. In 1526, she learned that her husband had been tortured and hanged for plotting an insurrection against Cortés. Still only 19, she entered the household of Cortés, living among his other Indian mistresses. Pregnant with his child, she was married off to a Spanish officer. Another marriage followed, and in all she bore seven children, all descendants of Moctezuma II. All became large landowners and figures of importance. Tecuichpotzin was in this way a pioneer of *mestizaje*—the mixing of races—and thus one of the leading Aztec women who launched the creation of a new society in Mexico.

On the west coast of Africa was another powerful woman. Njinga was born around 1582 and so named because she entered the world with the umbilical cord (her name meant “to twist or turn”) wrapped around her neck, which was believed to foretell a haughty character. She assumed the throne of Ndongo (present-day Angola) in 1624, leading a fierce resistance to the Portuguese slave trade and the Portuguese attempts to control Angola. By that time the Portuguese had been active in the region for a century, having converted the Kongolese king Afonso I to Catholicism in the 1530s. Her people were trapped in incessant wars in order to supply slaves to their Portuguese trading partners. Determined to resist the trade, Njinga fought a series of wars. A heroic figure in Angolan history, Queen Njinga's fierce battle cry was, according to legend, heard for miles around.

In opening this book, the stories of Queen Isabella of Castile, Aztec princess Tecuichpotzin, and Angola's Queen Njinga set the scene for the intermingling of Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans. As this historic convergence approached, how did the complex histories of each of these three regions set the stage for the future encounters in the Atlantic world?

In this chapter, we will examine the complexities of West African societies, delve into the societies of some of the peoples of North and South America, and study Western Europeans of the late fifteenth century. In drawing comparisons and contrasts, we better equip ourselves to see three worlds meet as a new global age began.

The Peoples of America Before Columbus

Thousands of years before the European exploratory voyages in the 1490s, the history of humankind in North America began. American history starts with some basic questions: Who were the first inhabitants of the Americas? Where did they come from? How did they live? How had the societies they formed changed over the millennia that preceded European arrival? To what extent can their history be reconstructed?

Migration to the Americas

Almost all the evidence suggesting answers to these questions comes from ancient sites of early life in North America. Archaeologists have unearthed skeletal remains, pots, tools, ornaments, and other objects to set a tentative date for the arrival of humans in America of about 35,000 B.C.E.—about the same time that humans began to settle Japan and Scandinavia.

Paleoanthropologists—scientists who study ancient peoples—generally agree that the first inhabitants of the Americas were nomadic bands from Siberia hunting big-game animals. These sojourners began to migrate across a land bridge connecting northeastern Asia with Alaska. Geologists conclude that this land bridge, perhaps 600 miles wide, existed most recently between 25,000 and 14,000 years ago. Ice-free passage through Canada was possible only briefly at the beginning and end of this period, however. Scholars debate the exact timing, but the main migration occurred between 11,000 and 14,000 years ago, if not earlier. Some new archaeological finds suggest multiple migrations, by both sea and land, from several regions of Asia and even from Europe. Nearly every Native American society has its own story about its origins in the Americas.

Hunters, Farmers, and Environmental Factors

Once on the North American continent, these early wanderers began trekking southward and then eastward, following vegetation and game. Over centuries, they reached the tip of South America. American history has traditionally emphasized the “westward movement” of people, but for thousands of years before Columbus’s arrival, the frontier moved southward and eastward. Thus did people from the “Old World” discover the “New World” thousands of years before Columbus.

Archaeologists have excavated ancient sites of early life in the Americas, tentatively reconstructing the dispersion of these first Americans over an immense land mass. As centuries passed and population increased, the earliest inhabitants evolved separate cultures, adjusting to various environments in distinct ways. Europeans who rediscovered the New World

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thousands of years later would lump together the myriad societies they found. By the late 1400s, the “Indians” of the Americas were enormously diverse in the size and complexity of their societies, the languages they spoke, and their forms of social organization.

Native American history passed through several phases. The Berin-gian period of initial migration ended about 14,000 years ago. During the Paleo-Indian era, 14,000 to 10,000 years ago, big-game hunters flaked hard stones into spear points and chose “kill sites” where they slew herds of Pleistocene mammals. Overhunting and a shift of climate deprived these huge beasts of their grazing environment, bringing them to the brink of extinction. People were forced to kill new sources of food such as turkeys, ducks, and guinea pigs. During the Archaic era, from about 10,000 to 2,500 years ago, great geological changes brought further adaptations. As the massive Ice Age glaciers slowly retreated, a warming trend turned vast grassland areas from Utah to the highlands of Central America into desert. The Pleistocene mammals were weakened by more arid conditions, but human populations ably adapted as they learned to exploit new sources of food, especially plants.

About 9,000 to 7,000 years ago, a technological breakthrough occurred, probably independently in widely separated parts of the world. As humans learned how to plant, cultivate, and harvest—what historians call the **agricultural revolution**—they gained control over once ungovernable natural forces. Agriculture slowly brought dramatic changes in human societies everywhere.

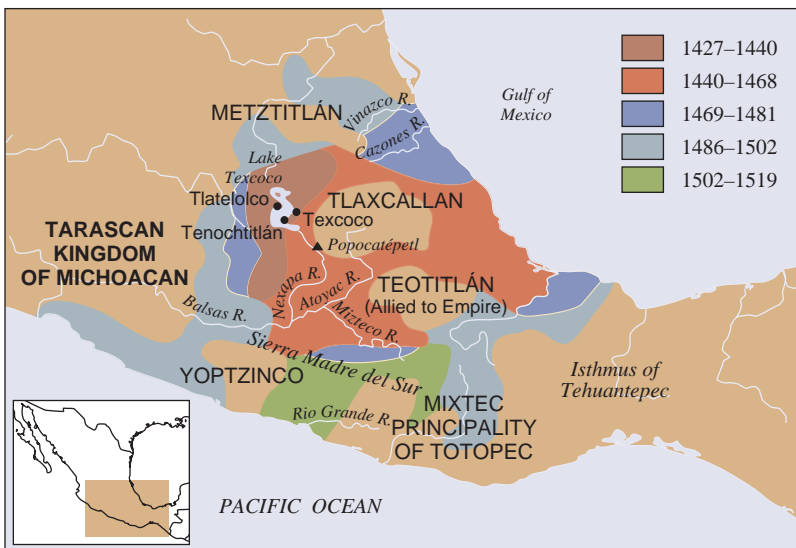
As Native Americans learned to domesticate plant life, they began the long process of transforming their relationship to the physical world. Dating the advent of agriculture in the Americas is difficult, but archaeologists estimate it at about 5000 B.C.E. People already practiced agriculture in southwestern Asia and in Africa, and it spread to Europe at about the time people in the Tehuacán valley of central Mexico first planted maize and squash. Over the millennia, humans progressed to systematic clearing and planting of fields, and settled village life began to replace nomadic existence. Increases in food supply triggered other major changes. As more ample food fueled population growth, large groups split off to form separate societies. Greater social and political complexity developed. Men cleared the land and hunted; women tended crops. Many societies empowered religious figures, trusting them to ward off hostile forces.

Everywhere in the Americas, regional trading networks formed. Along routes carrying commodities such as salt for food preservation, obsidian rock for projectile points, and copper for jewelry also traveled technology, religious ideas, and agricultural practices. By the end of the Archaic period, about 500 B.C.E., hundreds of independent kin-based groups exploited the resources of their particular area and traded with other groups.

Mesoamerican Empires

Of the large-scale societies developing in the Americas during the millennia prior to contact with Europeans the most impressive were in Mesoamerica—the middle region bridging the great land masses of South and North America. The Valley of Mexico, now dominated by Mexico City, became the center of the largest societies that emerged in the centuries before the Spanish arrived. In less than two centuries, the Aztecs, successor to the earlier Olmec and Toltec civilizations, built a mighty empire rivaling any known in Europe, Asia, or Africa by subjugating smaller tribes. By the time of Columbus’s first voyage in 1492, the Aztecs controlled most of central Mexico, an estimated population of 10 to 20 million. Exacting tribute from conquered peoples, the Aztecs built a great capital in Tenochtitlán (“Place of the Prickly Pear Cactus”), a canal-ribbed city island in the great lake of Texcoco. Boasting a population of perhaps 150,000, it was one of the world’s greatest cities on the eve of the Columbian voyages. Aztec society was as stratified as any in Europe, and the supreme ruler’s authority was as extensive as that of any European or African king. Every Aztec was born into one of four classes: nobility, free commoners, serfs, and slaves.

When they arrived in 1519, Spaniards could hardly believe the grandeur they saw. The immense Aztec capital covered about 10 square miles and boasted some 40 towers. They had found their way to the most



Expansion of the Aztec Empire, 1427–1519 In the century before Europeans breached the Atlantic to find the Americas, the Aztecs’ rise to power brought 10 to 20 million people under their sway. How does this compare to empires in other regions of the Atlantic world at this time?

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advanced civilization in the Americas, where through skilled hydraulic engineering the Aztecs cultivated *chinampas*, or “floating gardens,” around their capital city in which a wide variety of flowers and vegetables grew. The Spaniards were unprepared for encountering such an advanced civilization built by what they considered savage people.

Regional North American Cultures

The regions north of Mesoamerica were never populated by societies of the size and complexity of the Aztecs, though some felt their influence. Throughout North America in the last epoch of the **pre-Columbian** (or post-Archaic) era, many distinct societies thrived. In the southwestern region of North America, for example, Hohokam and Anasazi societies (the ancestors of the present-day Hopi and Zuni) had developed a sedentary village life thousands of years before the Spanish arrived there in the 1540s.

By about 1200 C.E., “Pueblo” people, as the Spanish later called them, constructed planned villages composed of large, terraced, multistoried buildings, each with many rooms and often located on defensive sites that would afford the Anasazi protection from their enemies. By the time the Spanish arrived, the indigenous Pueblo people were using irrigation canals, dams, and hillside terracing to water their maize fields. In its



An Anasazi Village The ruins of Pueblo Bonita in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, mark the center of Anasazi culture in the twelfth century C.E. What do you notice about the layout of the town, which was in the San Juan River basin and may have contained 1,000 people? (© David Muench)

agricultural techniques, skill in ceramics, use of woven textiles for clothing, and village life, Pueblo society resembled peasant communities in many parts of Europe and Asia.

Far to the north, on the Pacific coast of the Northwest, native Tlingit, Kwakiutl, Salish, and Haida people lived in villages of several hundred people. They subsisted on salmon and other spawning fish and lived in plank houses displaying elaborately carved red cedar pillars, guarded by gigantic carved totem poles. Reaching this region much later than most other parts of the hemisphere, European explorers were amazed at the architectural and artistic skills of the Northwest indigenous people. These native people defined their place in the cosmos with ceremonial face masks, which often represented animals, birds, and fish—reminders of magical ancestral spirits that inhabited what they understood as the four interconnected zones of the cosmos: the Sky World, the Undersea World, the Mortal World, and the Spirit World.

North and east, Native Americans had lived since at least 9000 B.C.E. From the Great Plains east of the midcontinent to the Atlantic tidewater region, four main language groups had emerged: Algonquian, Iroquoian, Muskhogean, and Siouan. As in other tribal societies, agricultural revolution gradually transformed life, as people adopted semifixed settlements and developed trading networks that linked together societies occupying a vast region.

Among the most impressive of these societies were the Mound Builders of the Mississippi and Ohio valleys. When European settlers first crossed the Appalachian Mountains a century and a half after arriving on the continent, they were astounded to find hundreds of ceremonial mounds and gigantic sculptured earthworks. Believing “Indians” to be forest primitives, they reasoned that these must be the remains of some ancient, non-native civilization that had found its way to North America.

Archaeologists now conclude that the Mound Builders were the ancestors of the Creek, Choctaw, and Natchez tribes. Their societies, evolving slowly over the centuries, had developed considerable complexity by the advent of Christianity in Europe. In southern Ohio alone, about 10,000 mounds, used as burial sites, have been pinpointed, and archaeologists have excavated another 1,000 earth-walled enclosures, including one enormous fortification with a circumference of about 3½ miles enclosing 100 acres, or the equivalent of 50 modern city blocks. From the mounded tombs, archaeologists have recovered a great variety of items that have been traced to widely separated parts of the continent, showing that the Mound Builders participated in a vast trading network linking together hundreds of villages.

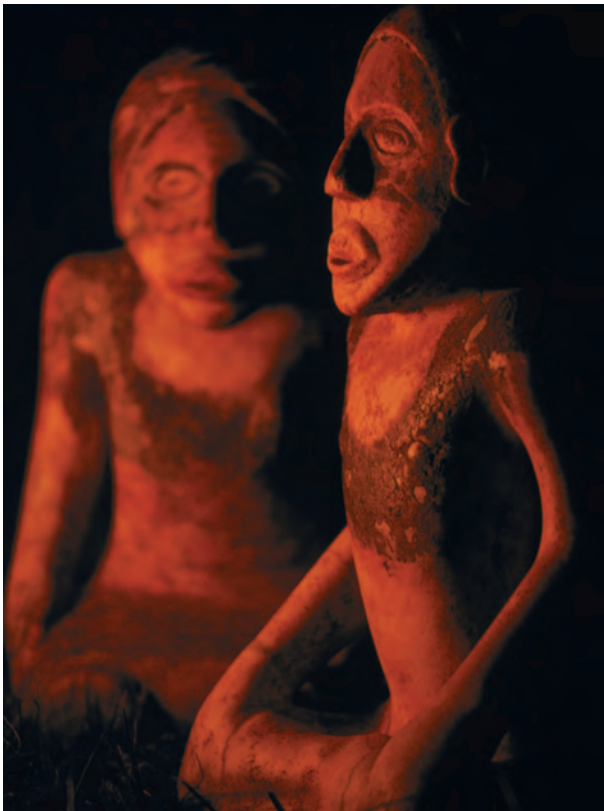
The mound-building societies of the Ohio valley declined many centuries before Europeans arrived, perhaps attacked by other tribes or damaged by severe climatic changes that undermined agriculture. By about 600 C.E., another mound-building agricultural society arose in the Mississippi valley. Its center, the city of Cahokia, with at least 20,000 (and possibly as many as 40,000) inhabitants, stood near present-day St. Louis. Great ceremonial plazas, flanked by a temple that rose in four terraces to a height of 100 feet,

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marked this first metropolis in America. It served as an urban center of a far-flung Mississippi culture that encompassed hundreds of villages from Wisconsin to Louisiana and from Oklahoma to Tennessee. Before the mound-building cultures mysteriously declined, their influence was already transforming the woodland societies along the Atlantic.

In the far north, people lived by the sea and supplemented their diet with maple sugar and a few foodstuffs. Farther south, in what was to become New England, were smaller communities occupying fairly local areas and joined together only by occasional trade. In the mid-Atlantic area were various groups who added limited agriculture to their skill in using natural plants for food, medicine, dyes, and flavoring. Most eastern woodland residents lived in waterside villages. They often migrated seasonally between inland and coastal sites or situated themselves astride two ecological zones. In the Northeast, their birchbark canoes, light enough to be carried by a single man, helped them trade and communicate over immense territories.

The Southeast region housed densely populated, rich and complex cultures that traced their ancestry back at least 8,000 years. Belonging to several language groups, some of them joined in loose confederacies.



Mississippian Culture Shrine Figures Carved from marble seven to eight hundred years ago, these shrine figures, male and female, were found in a tomb in northwestern Georgia. Such artifacts give us insight into the ancient cultures of a region. What do you think can be learned from these Indian carvings, known to us only as part of a South Appalachian Mississippian culture? (*Lynn Johnson/Aurora & Quanta Productions*)

Called “Mississippian” societies by archaeologists, Southeast peoples created elaborate pottery and baskets and conducted long-distance trade. These cultures also were influenced by burial mound techniques, some of which involved earthmoving on a vast scale. A global warming trend helped agriculture flourish in this region, leading in some cases, as with the Natchez, to the development of highly stratified societies. After the “Little Ice Age,” which occurred for several centuries from about 1300, the Southeast peoples abandoned their mounded urban centers and devolved into less populous, less stratified, and less centralized societies.

The Iroquois

Far to the north of the declining southeastern mound-building societies, between what would become French and English zones of settlement, five tribes comprised what Europeans later called the League of the Iroquois: the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Senecas. The Iroquois Confederation began as a vast extension of the kinship group that characterized the northeastern woodland pattern of family settlement. It embraced perhaps 10,000 people by the sixteenth century.

Not long before Europeans began coming ashore in eastern North America, the loosely organized and strife-ridden Iroquois created a more cohesive political confederacy. As a result, villages gained stability, population increased, and the Iroquois developed political mechanisms for solving internal problems and presenting a more unified front to outsiders. They would be prepared to launch a coordinated Iroquois policy when dealing with the European newcomers later.

In the palisaded villages of Iroquoia, work, land use, hunting, and even living arrangements in longhouses were communal. While there might be individual farming or hunting efforts, it was understood that the bounty was to be divided among all. One historian has called this “upside-down capitalism,” where the goal was not to pile up material possessions but to reach the happy situation where individuals could give what they had to others. This Iroquois societal structure would stand in contrast to that of the arriving Europeans, as would Iroquois gender roles, political structure, and familial customs.

Contrasting Worldviews

Having evolved in complete isolation from each other, European and Indian cultures exhibited widely different values. Colonizing Europeans called themselves “civilized” and typically described the people they met in the Americas as “savage,” “heathen,” or “barbarian.” Lurking behind the confrontation that took place when Europeans and Native Americans met were conflicts over humans’ relationship to the environment, the meaning of property, and personal identity.

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Europeans and Native Americans conceptualized their relationship to nature in starkly different ways. Regarding the earth as filled with resources for humans to exploit for their own benefit, Europeans separated the secular and sacred parts of life, and they placed their own relationship to the natural environment mostly in the secular sphere. Native Americans, however, did not distinguish between the secular and sacred. For them, every aspect of the natural world was sacred, and all were linked together.

Europeans believed that land, as a privately held commodity, was a resource to be exploited. They took for granted property lines, inheritance of land, and courts to settle the resulting land disputes. Property was the basis not only of sustenance but also of independence, wealth, status, social structure, political rights, and identity. Native Americans also had concepts of property and boundaries. But they believed that land should be held in common. Communal ownership sharply limited social stratification and increased a sense of sharing in most Native American communities.

There were exceptions. The Aztec and Inca empires in present-day Mexico and Peru were highly developed, populous, and stratified. So, in North America, were a few tribes such as the Natchez. But on the eastern and western coasts of the continent and in the Southwest—the regions of contact in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—lived people whose values differed strikingly.

European colonizers found the **matrilineal** organization of many tribal societies contrary to the European male-dominated hierarchy. Family membership among the Iroquois, for example, was determined through the female line. When a son or grandson married, he moved from his female-headed household to one headed by the matriarch of his wife's family.

Native American women's relationship to politics and the exercise of power differed markedly from that of European women. For example, women were almost entirely excluded from European politics. But in Native American villages, again to take the Iroquois example, designated men sat in a circle to deliberate and make decisions, while senior women of the village stood behind them, lobbying and instructing. Village chiefs, who were male, were chosen by the elder women of their clans. If they moved too far from the will of the women who appointed them, these chiefs were removed.

The role of women in the tribal economy reinforced male-female power-sharing. Men hunted, fished, and cleared land, but women controlled the raising and distribution of crops, supplying probably three-quarters of their family's nutritional needs. When the men were away hunting, women directed village life. Europeans perceived such sexual equality as a mark of "savagery."

In economic relations, Europeans and Indians differed in ways that sometimes led to misunderstanding and conflict. Over vast stretches of the continent, Indians had built trading networks, making it easy for them to incorporate new European goods into their cultures. Indian peoples saw

trade as a way to preserve reciprocity between individuals and communities, while Europeans viewed it mostly as an economic transaction.

The English noted a final damning defect in Native American religious beliefs. Europeans built their religious life around a single deity, written scriptures, a trained clergy, and churches with structured ceremonies. Native Americans were polytheistic, and their religious leaders used medicinal plants and chants to communicate with the spiritual world. For Europeans, the Indians' beliefs were pagan and devilish. European interpretations of Native culture affected their interactions, as well as the assessments of these societies that they recorded for posterity.

Africa on the Eve of Contact

Half a century before Columbus reached the Americas, a Portuguese sea captain made the first European landing on the west coast of sub-Saharan Africa. If he had been able to travel the length and breadth of the immense continent, he would have encountered a rich variety of African states, peoples, and cultures. During the period of early contact, Africa, like pre-Columbian America, hosted diverse cultures with complex histories.

The Kingdoms of Central and West Africa

The region of West Africa, to which Islam was spreading by the tenth century, embraced widely varied ecological zones—including vast desert, grasslands, and tropical forests. Africa experienced an agricultural revolution similar to that which had occurred elsewhere. Most people tilled the soil, using sophisticated agricultural techniques and livestock management. About 450 B.C.E. the Nok, in present-day Nigeria, developed a method of iron production long before Europeans did so. Over many centuries, more efficient iron implements for cultivating and harvesting increased agricultural productivity, in turn spurring population growth, greater specialization of tasks, and thus greater efficiency and additional technical improvements.

Cultural and political development in West Africa proceeded at varying rates, depending on ecological conditions. Regions blessed by good soil, adequate rainfall, and an abundance of minerals, as in coastal West Africa, engaged in interregional trade. Trade, in turn, brought population growth and cultural development. Where deserts were inhospitable or forests impenetrable, social systems remained small and changed slowly. The Sahara Desert had been depopulated by climate changes that brought higher temperatures and lower rainfall. Sahara people moved southward in search of more productive land, eventually settling in the fertile rain forests of the Niger River basin, where they built some of Africa's greatest empires.

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Spread of Islam in Africa, c. 1500 c.e. This map shows the extensive reach of Islam in Africa by 1500. On most of the North African Mediterranean coast and in the powerful Mali and Songhai kingdoms, the Muslim faith predominated. ■ **Reflecting on the Past** Do you think enslaved Africans who had converted to Islam practiced their faith after arriving in the American colonies? How would they do so on slave plantations?

The Ghana Empire The first of these empires, Ghana, developed between the fifth and eleventh centuries. It occupied an immense territory between the Sahara and the Gulf of Guinea and stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Niger River. Though mostly a land of small villages, Ghana became a major empire noted for its extensive urban settlement, sculpture and metalwork, long-distance commerce, and complex political and military structure. With wealth built primarily on trade rather than military conquest, by the late 900s,

Ghana controlled more than 100,000 square miles of land and hundreds of thousands of people. Gold was so plentiful that a pound of it was traded for a pound of salt.

A thriving caravan trade with Arab peoples, fueled by gold, brought extensive Muslim influence by the eleventh century. Gold made Kumbi-Saleh, Ghana's capital, the busiest and wealthiest marketplace in West Africa. By Europe's Middle Ages, two-thirds of the gold circulating in the Christian Mediterranean region was coming from Ghana. Arab merchants came to live in the empire, often serving in government positions. They brought their number and writing systems as well as their Islamic religion.

Islam had spread rapidly in Arabia after its founder Muhammad began preaching in 610 C.E. Rising to global eminence after several centuries, Islam dominated Egypt by the tenth century, and was spreading southward from Mediterranean North Africa across the Sahara Desert into northern Sudan. There it took hold especially in the trading centers. In time, Islam encompassed much of the Eastern Hemisphere and became the main intermediary for exchanging goods, ideas, and technologies across a huge part of the world. In the Ghanaian empire, rulers adapted Arabic script but clung to their traditional religion. Many Ghanaians, especially in the cities, converted to Islam, however. By 1050, Kumbi-Saleh boasted 12 Muslim mosques.

The Mali Empire An invasion of North African Muslim warriors beginning in the eleventh century eventually destroyed the kingdom of Ghana. The Islamic kingdom of Mali, dominated by Malinke, or Mandingo, people, rose to replace it. Through effective agricultural production and control of the gold trade, Mali flourished. Under Mansa Musa, a devout Muslim who assumed the throne in 1307, Mali came to control territory three times as great as the kingdom of Ghana. Famed for his 3,500-mile pilgrimage across the Sahara and through Cairo all the way to Mecca in 1324, Mansa Musa's image on maps of the world for centuries thereafter testified to his importance in advertising the treasures of western Africa. Muslim scholars and artisans who returned to Mali with Mansa Musa were instrumental in establishing Timbuktu, at the center of the Mali Empire, as a city of great importance. Noted for its extensive wealth, Timbuktu also had an Islamic university with a distinguished faculty.

The Songhai Empire After Mansa Musa died in 1332, power in West Africa began to shift to the Songhai, centered on the middle Niger River. A mixture of farmers, traders, fishermen, and warriors, the Songhai declared independence from Mali in 1435 and began a slow ascendancy. By the time Portuguese traders in the late 1400s were establishing firm commercial links with the Kongo, far to the south, the Songhai Empire was at its peak under the rule of Sonni Ali (1464–1492) and Muhammad Ture (1493–1528).

Yet Songhai, too, collapsed, as some tribes that were resentful of Muslim kings began to break away. The most dangerous threat came from Morocco,

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in North Africa, whose rulers coveted Songhai’s sources of salt and gold—two critical commodities in the African trade. Equipped with guns procured in the Middle East, Morocco’s ruler conquered Timbuktu and Gao in 1591. The North Africans remained in loose control of western Sudan for more than a century, as the last great trading empire of West Africa faded. These empires slowly devolved into smaller states. Local conflicts made it easier for European slave traders to convince tribal leaders to send out warrior parties to capture people who could be sold as slaves.

The Kingdoms of Kongo and Benin Farther south along the Atlantic coast and in Central Africa lay the vast kingdom of Kongo. In 1482 the Portuguese ship captain Diego Cao anchored in the mouth of the mighty Kongo River, the first European to encounter these people. Kongo’s royal capital, Mbanza, was a trade center for a kingdom of several million people; Mbanza also became a center of trade with the Portuguese, who by the 1490s were sending Catholic missionaries to the court of King Mani-Kongo. Mani-Kongo’s son was baptized Afonso I, and under Afonso’s rule, in the early 1500s, a flourishing trade in slaves with the Portuguese began.

The kingdom of Benin, which would become important in the English slave trade, formed in about 1000 C.E. west of the Niger Delta. When Europeans



The African City of Loango The city of Loango, at the mouth of the Kongo River on the west coast of Africa, was larger at the time of this drawing in the mid-eighteenth century than all but a few seaports in the British colonies in North America. How does it compare to the Anasazi village ruins shown earlier? (*The Granger Collection, New York*)

reached Benin City hundreds of years later, they found a walled city with broad streets and hundreds of buildings. Thousands of slaves procured in the interior passed through Benin City on their way for exchange with the Portuguese, and later the English, at coastal Calabar, where one of the main slave forts stood.

African Slavery

The idea that slavery was a legitimate social condition in past societies offends modern values, and it is difficult for many Americans to understand why Africans would sell fellow Africans to European traders. But no people identified themselves as Africans four centuries ago; rather, they thought of themselves as Ibos or Mandingos, or Kongolese, or residents of Mali or Songhai. Moreover, slavery was not new for Africans or any other people in the fourteenth century. It had flourished in ancient Rome and Greece, in large parts of eastern Europe, in southwestern Asia, and in the Mediterranean world generally.

Slavery had existed in Africa for centuries. Unlike New World slavery, it had nothing to do with skin color. Like other peoples, Africans understood slavery as a condition of servitude or as a punishment for crimes. Slaveholding was a mark of wealth. African societies for centuries conducted an overland slave trade that carried captured people from West Africa across the vast Sahara Desert to Christian Roman Europe and the Islamic Middle East. The peoples of West Africa held a conception of slavery very different from that which would develop in colonies in the Americas. Slaves in Africa were entitled to certain rights including education, marriage, and parenthood. The enslaved served as soldiers, administrators, sometimes as royal advisors, and even occasionally as royal consorts. The status of slave was not necessarily lifelong and did not automatically pass on to the female slave's children.

The African Ethos

Those who eventually became African Americans made up at least two-thirds of all the immigrants who crossed the ocean to the Western Hemisphere in the three centuries after Europeans began colonizing there. They came from a rich diversity of African peoples and cultures, but most of them shared certain ways of life that differentiated them from Europeans.

As in Europe, the family was the basic unit of social organization. By maintaining intimate family connections, enslaved Africans developed an important defense against the cruelties of slavery. Europeans were patriarchal, putting the father and husband at the center of family life. For Africans, property rights and inheritance were often matrilineal, descending through the mother, a tradition that carried over into slavery. In Africa, identity was defined by family relationships, and individualism was an alien concept.

Africans brought a complex religious heritage to the Americas, which no amount of desolation or physical abuse could wipe out. Widespread across Africa was a belief in a supreme Creator of the cosmos and in a pantheon of lesser deities associated with natural forces that could intervene in human affairs and were therefore elaborately honored. West Africans, like most North American Indians, held that spirit imbued natural objects, and hence they exercised care in these objects' treatment. They also believed in an invisible "other world" inhabited by the souls of the dead that could be known through communications that spiritually gifted persons could interpret.

Africans honored ancestors, whom they believed mediated between the Creator and the living. Relatives held elaborate funeral rites to ensure the proper entrance into the spiritual world. The more ancient an ancestor, the greater that person's power to affect the living. Deep family loyalty and regard for family lineage flowed naturally into this belief system. Spirit possession, in which powerful supernatural forces spoke to men and women through priests and other religious figures, was another widespread practice. While their beliefs differed from those of Europeans, Africans shared some common ground that contributed to a hybrid African Christianity. Extensive contact with the Portuguese had allowed Christianity to graft itself onto African religious beliefs in the kingdom of Kongo and several small kingdoms by the seventeenth century.

Social organization in much of West Africa by the time Europeans arrived was as elaborate as in fifteenth-century Europe. At the top of society stood the king, supported by nobles and priests, usually elderly men. Beneath them were the great mass of people, mostly cultivators of the soil. In urban centers, craftsmen, traders, teachers, and artists lived beneath the ruling families. At the bottom of society toiled slaves.

Europe on the Eve of Invading the Americas

In the ninth century, about the time that the Mound Builders of the Mississippi valley were constructing their urban center at Cahokia and the kingdom of Ghana was rising in West Africa, western Europe was an economic and cultural backwater. The center of political power and economic vitality in the Old World had shifted eastward to Christian Byzantium, which controlled Asia Minor, the Balkans, and parts of Italy. The other dynamic culture of this age, Islam, had spread through the Middle East, spilled across North Africa, and penetrated Spain and West Africa south of the Sahara.

Within a few centuries, an epic revitalization of western Europe occurred, creating the conditions that enabled its leading maritime nations to extend their oceanic frontiers. By the late fifteenth century, a 400-year epoch of militant overseas European expansion was under way. Not until the second half of the twentieth century was this process of Europeanization reversed.

The Rebirth of Europe

The rebirth of western Europe, which began around 1000 C.E., owed much to a revival of long-distance trade from Italian ports on the Mediterranean and to the rediscovery of ancient knowledge that these contacts permitted. The once mighty cities of the Roman Empire had stagnated for centuries, but now Venice, Genoa, and other Italian ports began trading with peoples facing the Adriatic, the Baltic, and the North seas. These new contacts brought wealth and power to the Italian commercial cities, which gradually evolved into merchant-dominated city-states that freed themselves from the rule of feudal lords in control of the surrounding countryside. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, kings began to assert their political authority, unify their realms, and curb the power of the other great feudal lords.



A Procession in Venice Venice's vibrant life along the Grand Canal is apparent in this painting of a procession making its way across the Rialto Bridge toward a balcony. Warehouses and handsome mansions flank the canal. In what ways does this painting reflect the class structure of Venice? (*Scala/Art Resource, NY*)

The **Black Death** (bubonic plague) first devastated China in the early 1330s, wiping out nearly one-third of the population, and then moved eastward following trade routes to India and the Middle East. By the time it reached western Europe and North Africa in 1348, famine and malnutrition had reduced the resistance of millions. Over the next quarter century, some 30 million Europeans died, producing economic disruption. Plague defied class distinction, promoting the unification of old realms into early modern states. Ironically, feudal landlords treated their peasant workers better for a time because their labor, tremendously reduced by the plague, became more valuable.

England, although a minor and relatively weak country within western Europe at this time, adopted significant new practice with implications for the future during this era. First, it developed a distinctive political system. In 1215, the English aristocracy curbed the powers of the king when they forced him to accept the **Magna Carta**. A parliament composed of elective and hereditary members eventually gained the right to pass money bills and therefore act as a check on the Crown. During the sixteenth century, the Crown and Parliament worked together toward a more unified state. Second, England witnessed economic changes of great significance during the sixteenth century. To practice more profitable agriculture, landowners began to “enclose” (consolidate) their estates. Peasant farmers, thrown off their plots, became wage laborers. The formation of this wage-earning class was the crucial first step toward industrial development.

Continental Europe lagged behind England in two respects. First, it was far less affected by the move to “enclose” agricultural land since continental aristocrats regarded the maximization of profit as unworthy of gentlemen. Second, continental rulers were less successful in engaging the interests of their nobles, who never shared governance with their king, as did English aristocrats. In France, a noble faction assassinated Henry III in 1589, and the nobles remained disruptive for nearly another century. In Spain, the final conquest of the Muslims and expulsion of the Jews, both in 1492, strengthened the monarchy’s hold, but regional cultures and leaders remained strong. The continental monarchs would thus warmly embrace doctrines of royal absolutism developed in the sixteenth century.

The New Monarchies and the Expansionist Impulse

In the second half of the fifteenth century, ambitious monarchs coming to power in France, England, and Spain sought social and political stability in their kingdoms. They created armies and bureaucracies to quell internal conflict and to raise taxes. In these countries and in Portugal as well, economic revival and the reversal of more than a century of population decline and civil disorder nourished the impulse to expand. This impulse was also fed by **Renaissance** culture. The Renaissance (Rebirth) encouraged innovation, freedom of thought, and an emphasis on human abilities. Beginning in



Religious Wars Portuguese troops storm Tangiers in Morocco in 1471 as part of the ongoing struggle between Christianity and Islam in the mid-fifteenth century Mediterranean world. Why would such an image be produced? (*Pastrana Church/Dagli Orti/Art Archive*)

Italy and spreading northward through Europe, the Renaissance peaked in the late fifteenth century.

The exploratory urge had two initial objectives: first, to circumvent overland Muslim traders by finding an eastward oceanic route to Asia; second, to tap the African gold trade at its source, avoiding intermediaries in North Africa. Since 1291, when Marco Polo returned to Venice with tales of

RECOVERING *the* PAST

The recovery of the past before extensive written records existed is the domain of archaeology. Virtually our entire knowledge of native societies in North America before the arrival of European colonizers is drawn from the work of archaeologists who have excavated the ancient living sites of the first Americans. Many Native Americans today strongly oppose this rummaging in the ancient ancestral places; they particularly object to the unearthing of burial sites. But the modern search for knowledge about the past goes on.

Archaeological data have allowed us to overcome the stereotypical view of Native Americans as a primitive people whose culture was static for thousands of years before Europeans arrived in North America. This earlier view allowed historians to argue that the tremendous loss of Native American population and land accompanying the initial settlement and westward migration of white Americans was more or less inevitable.

When two cultures, one dynamic and forward-looking and the other static and backward, confronted each other, historians frequently maintained, the more advanced, “civilized” culture almost always prevailed.

Much of the elaborate early history of people in the Americas is unrecoverable. But many fragments of this long human history are being recaptured through archaeological research. Particularly important are studies that reveal how Indian societies were changing during the few centuries immediately preceding the European arrival in the New World. These studies allow us to interpret more accurately the seventeenth-century interaction of Native Americans and Europeans because they provide an understanding of Native American values, social and political organization, material culture, and religion as they existed when the two cultures first met.

One such investigation has been carried out over the last century at the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers near modern-day East St. Louis, Illinois. Archaeologists have found there the center of a vast Mississippi culture that began about 600 C.E., reached its peak about 300 years before Columbus’s voyages, and then declined through a combination of drought, dwindling food supplies, and internal tensions. Cahokia is the name given to the urban center of a civilization that at its height dominated an area as large as New York State. At the center of Cahokia stood one of the largest earth constructions built by ancient humans anywhere on the planet. Its base covering 16 acres, this gigantic earthen temple, containing 22 million cubic feet of hand-moved earth, rises in four terraces to a height of 100 feet, as tall as a modern 10-story office building. The central plaza, like those of the Aztecs and Mayans, was oriented exactly on a north–south axis in order to chart the movement of celestial bodies. The drawing shown on page XX indicates some of the scores of smaller geometric burial mounds near this major temple. Notice the outlying farms, a sure sign of the settled (as opposed to nomadic) existence of the people who flourished 10 centuries ago in this region. How does this depiction of ancient Cahokia change your image of Native American life before the arrival of Europeans?

By recovering artifacts from Cahokia burial mounds, archaeologists have pieced together a picture, still tentative, of a highly elaborate civilization along the Mississippi bottomlands. Cahokian manufacturers mass-produced salt, knives, and stone hoe blades for both local consumption and

Eastern treasures, Europeans had bartered with the Orient via a long eastward overland route. Eventually, Europe’s mariners found they could voyage to Cathay (China) by both eastward and westward water routes.

Prince Henry the Navigator, for whom trade was secondary to the conquest of the Muslim world, led a poor country of only 1 million inhabitants



A reconstructed view of Cahokia, the largest town in North America before European arrival, painted by William R. Iseminger. The millions of cubic feet of earth used to construct the ceremonial and burial mounds must have required the labor of tens of thousands of workers over a long period of time. How does this relate to the population density of their communities? *William Iseminger, "Reconstruction of Central Cahokia Mounds," c. 1150 c.e. Courtesy of Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site.*

export. Cahokian artisans made sophisticated pottery, ornamental jewelry, metalwork, and tools. They used copper and furs from the Lake Superior region, black obsidian stone from the Rocky Mountains, and seashells from the Gulf of Mexico, demonstrating that the people at Cahokia were involved in long-distance trade. In fact, Cahokia was a crucial crossroads of trade and water travel in the heartland of North America.

Some graves uncovered at Cahokia contain large caches of finely tooled objects, while other burial mounds contain skeletons unaccompanied by any artifacts. From this evidence archaeologists conclude that this was a more stratified society than those encountered by the first settlers along the Atlantic seaboard. Anthropologists believe that some of the mystery still remains concerning the fate and cultural diffusion of these early Americans of the Mississippi culture.

Reflecting on the Past: What other conclusions about Cahokian culture can you draw from figures such as these? Are there archaeological sites in your area that contain evidence of Native American civilization?

into the unknown. In the 1420s, Henry began dispatching Portuguese mariners to probe the Atlantic "sea of darkness." Important improvements in navigational instruments, mapmaking, and ship design aided his intrepid sailors.

Portuguese captains operated at sea on three ancient **Ptolemaic principles**: that the earth was round, that distances on its surface could be measured

by degrees, and that navigators could “fix” their position at sea on a map by measuring the position of the stars. The invention in the 1450s of the quadrant, which allowed a precise measurement of star altitude necessary for determining latitude, represented a leap forward in navigation. A lateen-rigged caravel, adapted from a Moorish ship design, was equally important. Its triangular sails permitted ships to sail into the wind, allowing them to travel southward along the African coast and return northward against prevailing winds. By the 1430s, Prince Henry’s captains had traveled to Madeira, the Canary Islands, and the more distant Azores. These islands soon developed as the first European-controlled agricultural plantations.

From islands off the West African coast, Portuguese sea captains pushed farther south, navigating down the west coast of Africa by 1460. While carrying their Christian faith to new lands, they began a profitable trade in ivory, slaves, and especially gold and were poised to capitalize on the connection between Europe and Africa. They did not yet know that a stupendous land mass, to become known as the Americas, lay far across the Atlantic Ocean.

Conclusion

The Approach of a New Global Age

All the forces that have made the world of the past 500 years “modern” began to come into play by the late fifteenth century. As the stories about three important women of this era demonstrate, deep transformations were under way in West Africa, in western Europe, and in the Americas. West African empires had reached new heights, some had been deeply influenced by the Islamic faith, and many had become experienced in transregional trade. Muslim scholars, merchants, and long-distance travelers were becoming the principal mediators in the interregional exchange of goods, ideas, and technical innovations. Meanwhile, the Renaissance, initiated in Italy, worked its way northward, bringing new energy and ambition to a weakened and disease-ridden Europe. Advances in maritime technology also allowed Europeans to make contact with the peoples of West Africa and develop the first slave-based plantation societies in tropical islands off the West African coast. In the Americas, large empires in Mexico and Peru were growing more populous and consolidating their power, while in North America the opposite was occurring—a decay of powerful mound-building societies and a long-range move toward decentralized tribal societies. The scene was set for the great leap of Europeans across the Atlantic, where the convergence between the peoples of Africa, the Americas, and Europe would occur.

TIMELINE

- 35,000 B.C.E.** First humans cross Bering Land Bridge to reach the Americas
- 500 B.C.E.–** Post-Archaic era in North America
- 1000 C.E.**
- 600 C.E.–1100** Rise of mound-building center at Cahokia
- 632–750** Islamic conquest of North Africa spreads Muslim faith
- 1000** Kingdom of Benin develops
- 1000–1500** Kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Kongo in Africa
- 1200s** Pueblo societies develop village life in southwestern North America
- 1300s** Rise of Aztec society in Valley of Mexico
- 1300–1450** Italian Renaissance
- 1324** Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage to Mecca expands Muslim influence in West Africa
- 1420s** Portuguese sailors explore west coast of Africa
- 1469** Marriage of Castile’s Isabella and Aragon’s Ferdinand creates Spain

Questions for Review and Reflection

1. To what do you attribute the remarkable diversity of cultures in the Americas in the centuries prior to contact with Europeans? What are the most marked examples of that diversity?
2. What were the major features of western African society and culture prior to contact with European traders?
3. What were the causes and major consequences of the revitalization of western Europe in the period after 1000 C.E.?
4. Africa, Europe, and the Americas at the start of the “early modern period” are often treated as dramatically different in every way, yet commonalities existed. What were the most striking of these common features?
5. Why did western Europeans expand out of their geographical confines to explore, conquer, and colonize the Americas? What factors were *not* present in Africa or the Americas to foster expansion into the Atlantic basin from those areas?

Key Terms

Agricultural Revolution 4
Black Death 18
Magna Carta 18
Matrilineal 10
Muslim 1

Pre-Colombian 6
Prince Henry 20
Ptolemaic principles 21
Renaissance 18