

1492

1992



WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

Celebrate it or bemoan it: the encounter between

No, Columbus didn't discover America. Let's lay to rest that old notion right at the start. First of all, the verb's all wrong for our multicultural, interdependent, ultrasensitive modern world. "Discover" suggests that "we" went out and found a strange and unknown "them." If you

are one of "them," you may justly feel you are being patronized. Then, too, it's pretty clear by now that Columbus was not the first outsider to set foot in the Western Hemisphere. That distinction belongs to the original human settlers, who probably crossed from Asia tens of thousands of years ago. Or, if we're not talking about the aboriginal settlers, claims have been staked for various "discoverers": second-century Jews, a Chinese Buddhist who may have visited Mexico in the fifth century, the Irish monk Saint Brendan, Prince Madoc of Wales and—most likely of all—Leif Eriksson and the Norsemen who landed in "Vinland" in about A.D. 1000. *

*East and West
had vast
consequences
that are still
unfolding today*

But even if they did reach the American continent, none of them made a big deal about it—which Christopher Columbus, in 1492, emphatically did. He left European settlers and animals behind, he brought native people and odd vegetables back. He told tales of rich lands and potential treasure. He inspired a wave of explorers and adventurers to

head west. In short, he had consequences.

That is why, 500 years later, the world still takes notice. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella... the Niña, the Pinta and the Santa Maria... the excited shout from the crow's nest... the men wading ashore on a Bahamian island may all seem the stuff of school pageants—simplistic, ritualized and more than a bit quaint. But they also mark one of the great collisions of human history. Imagine that a gigantic spaceship descended on our planet tomorrow, filled with four-inch creatures of a color not yet imagined by man. That would perhaps be equivalent to the encounter of the world's two hemispheres half a millennium ago.

It was as if scattered pieces of the human puzzle were fitted together at

* All their claims are engagingly described by Donald Dale Jackson in the September issue of Smithsonian magazine.

by **KENNETH AUCHINCLOSS**

American Experience
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The fateful meeting of the Aztec Montezuma and the conquistador Cortes, in a modern Mexican mural

last. Parts became a whole, and life was transformed in a hundred ways. New foods reshaped the diet of both hemispheres; sugar, cattle and pigs moved west, the tomato and the potato, cocoa and corn, moved east. The horse, hitherto unknown in the New World, changed daily existence for the Indians of the North American plains and made possible the world of the gauchos. The wheel, which the pre-Columbian civilizations of the West used only in children's toys, revolutionized work and travel. Written language spread through the continent, replacing either a ponderous system of hieroglyphics or nothing at all.

Inevitably, there was havoc. Diseases against which they had no natural immunity took a terrible toll among the people of the New World; smallpox alone wiped out many millions. Germs were the conquistadors' most devastating weapon; local populations were so racked by illness that they could offer little resistance to the European conquest. Syphilis may have spread in the opposite direction: it first appeared in Europe after the conquista-

dors began returning from the Americas. Tobacco, its delights masking its dangers, was another gift from the New World to the Old.

Not only Europeans came over; soon Africans began arriving in great numbers, as slaves. They were brought in, at first, to work the sugar plantations springing up on the islands of the Caribbean; the local population was found to be unsuitable for the work—or in many instances, had been decimated by disease. Agriculture based on slavery spread both north and south. The Western Hemisphere's natives were thus not the only ones to suffer from the European advance. Columbus and his followers sowed seeds of racial antagonism that tangle life in many parts of the American continent to this day.

Slavery, conquest, disease and humiliation—these are the legacy of Columbus, in the eyes of some people today. They see nothing to celebrate in the 500th anniversary of his crossing; instead, they think it should be an occasion for protest—or at best a vast, doleful silence. Some

American Indians plan to hold vigils for Mother Earth, stage a mock trial of Hernán Cortés or retrace the 500-mile Trail of Tears, the Choctaw Nation's forced walk from Mississippi to Oklahoma in 1831. Many Latin Americans are torn between pride in their Spanish heritage and outrage at the treatment of Native Americans. In Britain, playwright Harold Pinter has formed a group called 500 Years of Resistance to demonstrate against what it sees as a hateful record of oppression. And Kirkpatrick Sale has written a book, "The Conquest of Paradise," indicting Columbus for crimes against nature: inspired by greed. Sale's Columbus launches a campaign of despoliation against the American environment that continues to the present day.

Fair enough—up to a point. Much of the old "Columbus sailed the ocean blue" lore does need refinement. For one thing, some of it is wrong. Past ages tended to define the Admiral of the Ocean Sea in their own image: the rugged individualist, the heroic pioneer, the commoner who bent kings and queens to his will—that was what was celebrated in the United States 100 years ago, in 1892. Past ages, too, have told the story mostly through European eyes: schoolchildren were taught about Columbus as part of the European Age of Discovery, and they learned how treasures from the New World transformed the economy of the Old. The religious mission of the Spaniards and Portuguese, to spread the Christian

Hub cities: Genoa (left) 11 years before Columbus sailed, and Mexico City 80 years after

Gospel to the pagan tribes of the New World, was taken for granted. As more is discovered about the indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere, for whom Columbus's

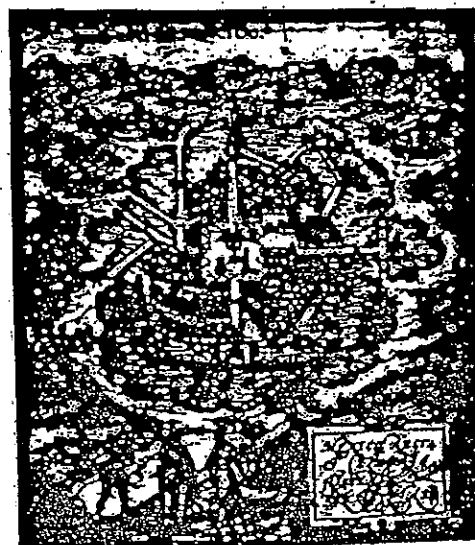
arrival was pretty much a disaster, more of their story can be told.

The problem is that those who denounce Columbus today, like those who used to glorify him, are looking at history through contemporary glasses: For all sorts of reasons, minority populations, non-European cultures and tropical forests enjoy a lot of sympathy these days. If these are your primary concerns, it's fairly easy to paint Columbus and the early explorers as people who oppressed the local residents, smashed alien civilizations and chopped down a lot of trees. It's a damning portrait. But it also leaves a lot out.

Above all, it leaves out the fact that this encounter was inevitable. This is not simply to state the obvious: that if Columbus hadn't set sail in 1492, some other European voyager would have made the trip soon afterward. The key point is that whoever made the first crossing and whenever it occurred, the consequences for the people of the Western Hemisphere would not have been much different. To expect otherwise is to ask that history be rolled back long before 1492 and that its course be plotted along other lines entirely.

In particular, European civilization would have to be recast. What drove Columbus westward was not just a search for a lucrative new trade route to Asia. It is too simplistic to picture him and the other European explorers as mere money-grubbers, early real-estate developers who lucked into an entire continent to subdivide. Money was obviously important to them, but they were also animated by a certain restlessness and curios-

CRITICS FASTE



ity. The voyage into the unknown, after all, had been part of European culture since the days of Odysseus. To some degree this questing instinct was bound up with religious zeal: look, for example, at the search for the Holy Grail and the history of the Crusades. On a more mundane level, it was often a social necessity: families were large, houses were



Worlds apart: A bust of Lorenzo de' Medici of Florence and a figure from Veracruz, Mexico

ture and human sacrifice. There is a danger that this 500th anniversary of the East-West encounter will be just as distorted as past ones—

though in a different way. That will surely happen if it becomes an occasion for pursuing modern political agendas. Better to do as the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History has done with its "Seeds of Change" show: don't look for heroes and villains, look at the vast changes that were wrought. Because of what happened in 1492, life in much of the world has never been quite the same. Not everyone will find this an occasion to celebrate. But it was indisputably one of the great divides in human history, an event to marvel at and to learn from.

Almost 70 years ago, Stephen Vincent Benét wrote "John Brown's Body," an epic poem about another collision that produced tremendous suffering and large consequences, the American Civil War. At the

ON THE INTRUSIVE SPIRIT OF

WESTERN CIVILIZATION. BUT WITH

THAT CAME AN OPENNESS TO NEW IDEAS.

small, land was scarce, and so young people were encouraged to leave home and seek their fortune. Missionaries set out to preach the Gospel. Merchants set out to find new goods and new markets to sell them in. Armies sometimes led this process, sometimes followed. The spread of Western civilization was built on intrusion, intrusion almost as a way of life.

Today, it's fashionable to think of all that as hateful. It is linked with imperialism, colonialism and racism—the great pejoratives of our time. But this intrusive habit is also linked with some qualities that we find more attractive: a fascination with new ideas, a knack for scientific discovery, an ability to adapt and change. The impulses that lay behind the voyage to the New World were by no means so uniformly nasty as they are sometimes portrayed.

By the same token, the civilizations of the Western Hemisphere were not so uniformly admirable. Much is now made of how well native societies were adapted to the environment, how they respected the rain forest and the prairie. Less is made of the more horrific habits of some native societies: endemic warfare, tor-

end of this work, he wrote some lines that might usefully echo through our commemorations of the voyages of Columbus:

*So, when the crowd gives tongue
And prophets, old or young,
Bawl out their strange despair,
Or fall in worship there
Let them applaud the image
or condemn
But keep your distance and
your soul from them...
If you at last must have a
word to say,
Say neither, in their way,
"It is a deadly magic and
accursed,"
Nor "It is blest," but only
"It is here."*



CHAPTER
16**HISTORYMAKERS****Montezuma II**
*Defeated Priest-King***Section 3**

"Throughout all time we have worshipped our own gods and thought that they were good. I do not doubt the goodness of the god whom you worship, but if he is good for Spain, our gods are equally good for Mexico, so do not trouble to speak to us any more about them at present."—Montezuma II, speaking to Hernando Cortés

The Aztecs were powerful people who ruled central Mexico for many decades. Underpinning this society was the people's devotion to their gods. The Aztec emperor not only ruled the empire but also forged this needed religious connection. Montezuma II became that emperor in 1502. He had a profound sense of his responsibility to the Aztecs and dedication to their religion. However, he was unable to meet their greatest challenge and died tragically at their hands.

Montezuma, born around 1480, was trained in both war and the priesthood, the pillars of Aztec society. He proved capable at both. He once captured six enemy soldiers in battle and was devoted to Huitzilopochtli, the war god. He was also appointed the high priest. In 1502, his uncle the emperor died, and Montezuma replaced him. One of the Spaniards who later invaded Mexico described him as "a man of medium stature, with a certain gravity and royal majesty, which showed clearly who he was even to those who did not know him."

Montezuma expanded the areas of Aztec control. He required neighboring peoples to pay heavy tribute to the Aztecs. He also enacted new laws that raised the power of traditional noble families and reduced that of the merchants and common people. He hoped to strengthen the government with these policies. However, they only caused internal and external resentment that would help end the empire.

Both the Aztecs and the deeply religious Montezuma probably looked with anxiety to 1519. That was the year that another god, the fair-skinned Quetzalcoatl, was supposed to return from the east and claim the Aztec Empire. In the ten years preceding this fateful time, several events occurred that offered evil omens for the Aztec people, such as a temple that burned and comets that crossed the sky. In addition, one legend says that when a huge stone was being taken to build a new sacrificial altar, it stopped itself, spoke of disaster to come, and then crashed through the bridge on which it rested.

In 1519, coincidentally, Hernando Cortés and his fellow Spaniards arrived on the coast of Mexico. Many Aztecs, perhaps including Montezuma, felt at first that Quetzalcoatl had indeed arrived. As a result, the emperor tried to prevent the Spaniards from reaching the Aztec capital. He sent gifts made of gold, but those only further convinced the Spaniards of Aztec wealth. Montezuma also attempted an ambush of the Spaniards, but Cortés was warned of the trap. He reached the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán on November 18, 1519.

Montezuma received the Spaniards as guests, but soon the situation soured. Cortés seized Montezuma as a hostage, so he could run the empire through him. Cortés hoped to convince him to adopt the Christian religion, but Montezuma refused. Meanwhile, other Aztecs felt that their emperor was responding too weakly to this foreign threat.

One day Cortés destroyed the face of a statue of Huitzilopochtli. After that, Montezuma joined in the plots against the Spaniards, but it was too late for him. He had lost his people's confidence. In the spring of 1520, while Cortés was away, the man in command ordered Spanish soldiers to attack some Aztecs during a religious ceremony. The massacre provoked a revolt. When Cortés returned, he found his men trapped. He took Montezuma to the walls of the citadel where the Spaniards were surrounded by the angry Aztecs. The emperor, now discredited, was unable to persuade his people to stop. He was struck by the sharp stones they were throwing and three days later died.

Questions

1. **Recognizing Effects** How did Montezuma's efforts to stop the Spaniards work against him?
2. **Drawing Conclusions** Why did the Aztec people not listen to Montezuma?
3. **Making Inferences** What prompted Montezuma to object to Cortés's actions?

CHAPTER
16

HISTORYMAKERS **Pachacuti**
Patience in Adversity

Section 4

"A noble, courageous man is recognizable by the patience he shows in adversity."—saying of the emperor Pachacuti, quoted by Garcilaso de la Vega, in The Incas (1608)

Pachacuti used a combination of bravery and patience to save the great Incan Empire, which was located in the mountains of present-day Peru. By standing courageously when his people met their most serious challenge, he not only rescued them but also won the imperial throne. He then launched a series of conquests that expanded Incan lands and created the basic institutions that the Inca would follow for many decades.

Born around 1448 with the name Cusi, which meant "joy" or "good luck," Pachacuti took the name Inca Yupanqui, or "Honored Inca," when he entered adulthood. He was one of Emperor Viracocha Inca's many sons. Trained in war, Yupanqui was a fierce fighter who was determined to increase his own power and expand the area of Incan control. As he became a young man, his father grew old and tired of war. Viracocha withdrew from active rule without giving up the throne and named another son, Inca Urcon, as the active ruler and heir apparent. Urcon, however, had little interest in leading an empire. He only cared about pleasure.

During this time, the Inca experienced a severe challenge from another people, the Chancas, who had invaded Incan territory. Rather than leading their people, Viracocha and Urcon retreated out of the Incan capital of Cuzco. Staying to defend his land and people, Yupanqui rallied the defenders who remained. He said that he had experienced a divine vision that guaranteed success. The Chancas attacked the next day. Though outnumbered, the Inca managed to hold their own in the first day of battle. After a restless night, reinforcements arrived. During bitter fighting the next day, the Inca managed to break the attack. They then pursued the fleeing Chancas for six miles, killing every last warrior. A year later, Yupanqui led an attack on the remaining Chanca forces. He won a great battle that ensured Incan control over the whole area.

The victory over the Chancas propelled Yupanqui to the throne. His cowardly brother Urcon was killed, and he compelled his father to pass the imperial crown to him. He took the name Pachacuti, which means "Earthshaker." Pachacuti

then launched invasions of neighboring areas. Eventually, he was able to extend Incan territory from Lake Titicaca up to modern Quito, Ecuador.

Other groups in the region saw the Chanca attack as a sign of Incan weakness. Leaders of the Cuyo people tried to kill Pachacuti during a celebratory meal. Attackers gave him a vicious blow to the head, leaving a scar that was later visible on his mummified body. His supporters struck back, however, and destroyed the Cuyo people. This, in combination with the defeat of the Chancas, warned other groups not to fight the rising Incan Empire.

Another challenge confronted the Inca as well. Several years of drought hurt them late in Pachacuti's rule. Because he had created food warehouses, though, the people were able to survive until the rains came again. Pachacuti also took other steps to put the empire on firm footing. He established the royal government, made Quechua the official language, formalized religious practices, and built sacred cities.

Pachacuti even solved the matter of succession. He named one of his sons, Amaru Inca, to follow him. However, Amaru lacked the warlike qualities that Incan nobles wanted in their leader. After five or six years, Pachacuti saw their discontent. He called a meeting of all the nobles and spoke at length about Amaru's good qualities. Nevertheless, they refused to support his son. The emperor sadly withdrew Amaru from the succession. Some years later, Pachacuti found a suitable heir in his last son, Topa Inca. A superb general, he carried on his father's conquests.

Questions

Drawing Conclusions

1. Pachacuti had several names, each with a special meaning. What name do you think is most appropriate? Explain.
2. Is it reasonable to call Pachacuti the founder of the empire? Explain.
3. **Comparing** Compare the way Pachacuti named an heir with how his father did it.

Name _____

Period _____

Bernal Díaz del Castillo, one of Cortés' men, describes Tenochtitlán:

When we saw all those cities and villages built on water; and the other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading to Mexico, we were astounded. These great towns and shrines and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision from the tale of Amadis. Indeed some of our soldiers asked whether it was not all a dream. It is not surprising therefore that I should write in this vein. It was all so wonderful that I do not know how to describe this first glimpse of things never heard or, never seen, and never dreamed of before. ----Bernal Diaz, "The Conquest of New Spain," c.1565

"Fall of the Aztecs." *PBS: Conquistadors*. PBS, n.d. Web. 09 Aug. 2016.

<https://www.pbs.org/conquistadors/cortes/cortes_e02.html>

How does this primary resource relate to our current topic? _____

What new information can you learn from this source? Include a quote from the text. _____

If you were to cite this source in an essay, what would you put in parentheses? (_____)

*What search terms could you use in Google to find more information? _____

Cortes' version of Montezuma's speech on the day the Spaniards entered Tenochtitlan, as he reports in his letter to the King of Spain:

"For a long time we have known from the writing of our ancestors that neither I, nor any of those who dwell in this land, are natives of it, but foreigners who came from very distant parts, and likewise we know that a chieftain of whom they were all vassals brought our people to this region. And he returned to his native land and after many years came again, by which time all those who had remained were married to native women and had built villages and raised children. And when he wished to lead them away again they would not go, not even admit him as their chief, and so he departed. And we have always held that those who descended from him would come and conquer this land and take us as their vassals. So because of the place from which you claim to come, namely from where the sun rises, and the things you tell us of the great lord or king who sent you here, we believe and are certain that he is our natural lord, especially as you say that he has known of us for some time. So be assured that we will obey you and hold you as our lord in place of that great sovereign of whom you speak, and in this there shall be no offence or betrayal whatsoever. And in all the land that lies in my domain, you may command as you will, for you shall be obeyed, and all that we own is for you to dispose of as you choose. Thus now as you are in your own country and your own house, rest now after the hardships of your journey."

The Aztec version of the same speech:

"Our lord, thou hast suffered fatigue, thou hast endured weariness. Thou hast come to arrive on earth. Thou hast come to govern thy city of Mexico, thou hast come to descend upon thy mat, upon thy seat, which for a moment I have guarded for thee. For thy governors are departed - the rulers Itzcoatl, Montezuma the Elder, Axayactl, Tizoc, Auitzotl, who yet a very short time ago had come to govern the city of Mexico. O that one of them might witness, might marvel at what to me now hath befallen, at what I see now that they have quite gone. I by no means merely dream, I do not merely dream that I see thee, that I look into thy face. I have been afflicted [troubled] for some time. I have gazed at the unknown place whence thou hast come - from among the clouds, from among the mists. And so this. The rulers departed maintaining that thou wouldst come to visit thy city, that thou wouldst come to descend upon thy mat, upon thy seat. And now it has been fulfilled; thou hast come. Thou hast endured fatigue, thou hast endured weariness, peace be with thee. Rest thyself. Visit thy palace. Rest thy body. My peace be with our lords."

"Fall of the Aztecs." *PBS: Conquistadors*. PBS, n.d. Web. 09 Aug. 2016.

<https://www.pbs.org/conquistadors/cortes/cortes_e03.html>