

Insights on American History

Vol. 1



Norman K. Risjord

INSIGHTS ON AMERICAN HISTORY

VOLUME I

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AMERICAN HISTORY

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PREFACE

This anthology is the product of a cooperative effort by eleven of us at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, who commonly teach the freshman-level American history survey course. A collective teaching experience of more than 200 years informs the effort. The anthology is intended as a supplement to lectures and to a standard textbook in the college-level introductory course in American history.

The choice of materials was based on two criteria: readability and argumentation. We wanted, first of all, to find materials that would catch the attention of students through interesting subject matter and would preserve that attention with smoothly flowing narrative. We held each selection to chapter length, hoping to encourage students to complete each assignment. We felt it equally important, however, that each selection contain enough substance to provoke lively class discussion. While enticing students with readable narrative, we also wanted to challenge them.

We strove for a balance among the various fields of history—political, social/economic, diplomatic—but we also limited the number of selections in each volume to twelve, so the instructor could make additional assignments in fields of special interest or challenge students further with a few full-length monographs. We incorporated a few classic pieces of historical writing, but for the most part we looked for articles and books that were on the cutting edge of historical scholarship, hoping to introduce students to the latest methodologies and interpretations.

In addition to being a cooperative endeavor, this project is an eleemosynary one. All royalties will be turned over to a departmental trust fund managed by the University of Wisconsin Foundation; the proceeds will be used to fund student fellowships. We trust that our numerous friends and alumni, as well as the history profession generally, will respect our motives and appreciate our efforts.

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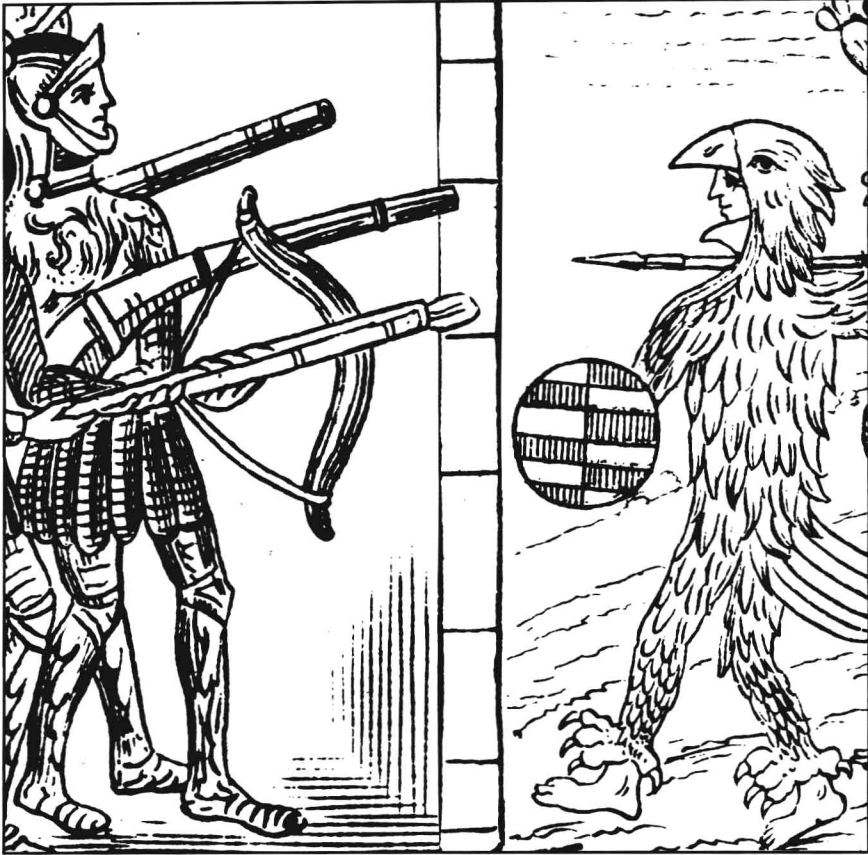
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1



THE COLUMBIAN EXCHANGE

ALFRED W. CROSBY, JR.

Many accounts of European expansion into the Americas tell a gripping but one-sided tale. They explain the outcome primarily in terms of such human factors as the settlers' technological superiority or the natives' inability to offer a coordinated resistance, and they limit the effects of European-Indian contact to the New World. Alfred Crosby views the matter differently. He assumes that microbes, plants, and animals influence historical events as surely as do people, so to the familiar cast of chieftains and conquistadors he adds smallpox, squash, and stallions.

From his perspective, the Europeans' invasion of the Western Hemisphere appears to have succeeded less because of their firepower or the political imbecility of their opponents than because they came trailing clouds of invisible allies, the microorganisms responsible for epidemic disease. This angle of vision also takes in the wider consequences of the Old World's involvement with the New. European exploration changed both the human and natural histories of the Americas, but its impact was hardly confined to one Atlantic shore. America received smallpox but returned the favor, the author asserts, by exporting syphilis. The origins of the "French disease" are still controversial—some recent physical evidence suggests it may have infected Old World populations thousands of years before Columbus sailed—but Crosby's larger point remains valid. New World life forms have had a global impact, particularly foods like corn, potatoes, beans, and manioc that have sustained a centuries-long population explosion. Crosby's final analysis of the "Columbian Exchange," a pessimistic appraisal of its biological effects, implies another disconcerting idea as well. Adventurers seeking only to enrich themselves may ultimately have augmented the world's larder while unwittingly depleting its gene pool. History records the tricks we play on ourselves.

—CHARLES L. COHEN

Why were the Europeans able to conquer America so easily? In our formal histories and in our legends, we always emphasize the ferocity and stubbornness of the resistance of the Aztec, Sioux, Apache, Tupinamba, Araucanian, and so on, but the really amazing thing about their resistance was its ineffectiveness. The Orientals held out against the Europeans much more successfully; they, of course, had the advantage of vast numbers and a technology much more advanced than that of the Indians. The Africans, however, were not “thousands of years ahead” of the Indians, except in possessing iron weapons, and yet the great mass of black Africans did not succumb to European conquest until the nineteenth century.

There are many explanations for the Europeans' success in America: the advantage of steel over stone, of cannon and firearms over bows and arrows and slings; the terrorizing effect of horses on foot soldiers who have never seen such beasts before; the lack of unity among the Indians, even within their empires; the prophecies in Indian mythology about the arrival of white gods. All these factors combined to deal to the Indian a shock as only H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* can suggest to us. Each factor was undoubtedly worth many hundreds of soldiers to Cortés and Pizarro and other great Indian-killers.

For all of that, one might have at least expected the highly organized, militaristic societies of Mexico and the Andean highlands to survive the initial contact with the European societies. Thousands of Indian warriors, even if confused and frightened and wielding only obsidian-studded war clubs, should have been able to repel the first few hundred Spaniards to arrive. And what is the explanation for the fact that Indians were really only a little more successful in defending themselves and their lands after they learned that the invaders were not gods, after they obtained their own horses and guns and developed tactics to deal with the Europeans?

After the Spanish conquest an Indian of Yucatan wrote of his people in the happier days before the advent of the European:

There was then no sickness; they had no aching bones; they had then no high fever; they had then no smallpox; they had then no burning

THE COLUMBIAN EXCHANGE From Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Contributions in American Studies #2, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1972), pp. 35–42, 122–139, 141–146, 165–168, 170–173, 176–179. Copyright © 1972 by Alfred W. Crosby, Jr. Used by permission of the publisher. Portions of the original work previously published under the title “The Early History of Syphilis: A Reappraisal,” reprinted by permission of the American Anthropological Association from *American Anthropologist* 71:2, 1969. Not for further reproduction. Other portions of the original work previously published under the title “Conquistador y Peste: The First New World Pandemic and the Fall of the Great Indian Empire,” in *Hispanic American Historical Review* 47:3, pp. 321–327. Copyright © 1967 by Duke University Press. Reprinted by permission.

chest; they had then no abdominal pain; they had then no consumption; they had then no headache. At that time the course of humanity was orderly. The foreigners made it otherwise when they arrived here.

It would be easy to attribute this statement to the nostalgia that the conquered always feel for the time before the conqueror appeared, but the statement is probably in part true. During the millennia before the European brought together the compass and the three-masted vessel to revolutionize world history, men moved slowly, seldom over long distances and rarely across the great oceans. Men lived in the same continents where their great-grandfathers had lived and seldom caused violent and rapid changes in the delicate balance between themselves and their environments. Diseases tended to be endemic rather than epidemic. It is true that man did not achieve perfect accommodation with his microscopic parasites. Mutation, ecological changes, and migration brought the Black Death to Europe, and few men lived to the proverbial age of three-score years and ten without knowing epidemic disease. Yet ecological stability did tend to create a crude kind of mutual toleration between human host and parasite. Most Europeans, for instance, survived measles and tuberculosis, and most West Africans survived yellow fever and malaria.

Migration of man and his maladies is the chief cause of epidemics. And when migration takes place, those creatures who have been longest in isolation suffer most, for their genetic material has been least tempered by the variety of world diseases. Among the major divisions of the species *homo sapiens*, with the possible exception of the Australian aborigine, the American Indian probably had the dangerous privilege of longest isolation from the rest of mankind. Medical historians guess that few of the first rank killers among the diseases are native to the Americas.

These killers came to the New World with the explorers and the conquistadors. The fatal diseases of the Old World killed more effectively in the New, and the comparatively benign diseases of the Old World turned killer in the New. There is little exaggeration in the statement of a German missionary in 1699 that "the Indians die so easily that the bare look and smell of a Spaniard causes them to give up the ghost."

The most spectacular period of mortality among the American Indians occurred during the first hundred years of contact with the Europeans and Africans. Almost all the contemporary historians of the early settlements, from Bartolomé de las Casas to William Bradford of Plymouth Plantation, were awed by the ravages of epidemic disease among the native populations of America. In Mexico and Peru, where there were more Europeans and Africans—and, therefore, more contact with the Old World—and a more careful chronicle of events kept

than in most other areas of America, the record shows something like fourteen epidemics in the former and perhaps as many as seventeen in the latter between 1520 and 1600.

The annals of the early Spanish empire are filled with complaints about the catastrophic decline in the number of native American subjects. When Antonio de Herrera wrote his multivolume history of that empire at the beginning of the seventeenth century, he noted as one of the main differences between the Old and New Worlds the extreme susceptibility of the natives of the latter to diseases, especially smallpox. Indian women, he wrote, were especially quick to succumb to it, but it rarely infected anyone of European birth. The Indians became so enraged by the invulnerability of the Spaniards to epidemic disease that they kneaded infected blood into their masters' bread and secreted corpses in their wells—to little effect.

The victims of disease were probably greatest in number in the heavily populated highlands of New Spain (Mexico) and Peru, but, as a percentage of the resident population, were probably greatest in the hot, wet lowlands. By the 1580s disease, ably assisted by Spanish brutality, had killed off or driven away most of the peoples of the Antilles and the lowlands of New Spain, Peru, and the Caribbean littoral, "the habitation of which coasts is . . . so wasted and condemned, that of thirty parts of the people that inhabit it, there wants twenty-nine; and it is likely the rest of the Indians will in short time decay."

It has often been suggested that the high mortality rates of these post-Columbian epidemics were due more to the brutal treatment of the Indians by the Europeans than to the Indians' lack of resistance to imported maladies. But the early chroniclers reported that the first epidemics following the arrival of Old World peoples in a given area of the New World were the worst, or at least among the worst. European exploitation had not yet had time to destroy the Indians' health.

The record shows that several generations of Indian contact with Europeans and Africans seemed to lead not to the total destruction of the Indians, but only to a sharp diminution of numbers, which was then followed by renewed population growth among the aborigines. The relationships between these phenomena are too complex to be explained by any one theory. However, their sequence is perfectly compatible with the theory that the Indians had little or no resistance to many diseases brought from the Old World, and so first died in great numbers upon first contact with immigrants from Europe and Africa; and when those Indians with the weakest resistance to those maladies had died, interbreeding among the hardy survivors and, to some unmeasured extent, with the immigrants, led to the beginning of population recovery. . . .

The English were as efficient disease carriers as the Latins. In 1585 Sir Francis Drake led a large expedition against Spain's overseas pos-

sessions. His men picked up some highly contagious fever—probably typhus—in the Cape Verde Islands and brought it along with them to the Caribbean and Florida. The malady spread to the Indians in the environs of St. Augustine and, “The wilde people . . . died verie fast and said amongst themselves, it was the Inglisse God that made them die so faste.”

In 1587 the English founded a colony at Roanoke Island, a few hundred miles north of St. Augustine. The colonists’ diagnoses of their immediate and fatal effect on many of the Indians was similar in medical philosophy to that expressed by the Florida Indians. Thomas Harriot wrote that there was no Indian village where hostility, open or hidden, had been shown,

but that within a few dayes after our departure from everies such townes, that people began to die very fast, and many in short space; in some townes about twentie, in some fourtie, in some sixtie, & in one sixe score, which in trueth was very manie in respect to their numbers. . . . The disease also was so strange that they neither knew what it was, nor how to cure it; the like by report of the oldest men in the countrey never happened before, time out of mind.

The natives of what is now the Atlantic coast of Canada had contact with Europeans—fishermen and fur traders—from very early in the sixteenth century, long before the English attempted colonization at Roanoke, or any other place in America. Depopulation was already apparent among their tribes by the time of French settlement. The *Jesuit Relations* contain a report dated 1616 from which the following paragraph is extracted. The Indians, it states,

are astonished and often complain that, since the French mingle with and carry on trade with them, they are dying fast and the population is thinning out. For they assert that, before this association and intercourse, all their countries were very populous and they tell how one by one the different coasts, according as they have begun to traffic with us, have been more reduced by disease.

These Indians looked south enviously to New England, where tribes were not diminishing. The turn of these Armouchiquois, as the Canadian Indians called them, came in the same year that the above report was written. In 1616 and 1617 a pestilence swept through New England, clearing the woods, in the words of Cotton Mather, “of those pernicious creatures, to make room for better growth.” Whatever the sickness was, Europeans were immune to it. The handful of whites who passed the winter of 1616–1617 with the Indians of coastal Maine “lay in the cabins with those people that died, [but] not one of them ever felt their heads to ache, while they stayed there.” The Massachusetts tribe was nearly completely exterminated, depopulating the area of Plymouth Bay at just about the same time that the Pilgrims were

deciding to come to America. The same epidemic also swept the environs of Boston Bay. A European who lived in that area in 1622 wrote that the Indians had

died on heapes, as they lay in their houses; and the living, that were able to shift for themselves, would runne away and let them dy, and let their Carkases ly above the ground without burial. . . . And the bones and skulls upon the severall places of their habitations made such a spectacle after my coming into those partes, that, as I travailed in the Forrest nere the Massachusetts, it seemed to me a new found Golgotha.



The New World gave much in return for what it received from the Old World. In the writings of Desiderius Erasmus, one can find mention of nearly every significant figure, event, crusade, fad, folly, and misery of the decades around 1500. Of all the miseries visited upon Europe in his lifetime, Erasmus judged few more horrible than the French disease, or syphilis. He reckoned no malady more contagious, more terrible for its victims, or more difficult to cure . . . or more fashionable! "It's a most presumptuous pox," exclaims one of the characters in the *Colloquies*. "In a showdown, it wouldn't yield to leprosy, elephantiasis, ringworm, gout, or sycosis."

The men and women of Erasmus's generation were the first Europeans to know syphilis, or so they said, at least. The pox, as the English called it, had struck like a thunderbolt in the very last years of the fifteenth century. But unlike most diseases that appear with such abruptness, it did not fill up the graveyards and then go away, to come again some other day or perhaps never. Syphilis settled down and became a permanent factor in human existence.

Syphilis has a special fascination for the historian because, of all mankind's most important maladies, it is the most uniquely "historical." The beginnings of most diseases lie beyond man's earliest rememberings. Syphilis, on the other hand, has a beginning. Many men, since the last decade of the fifteenth century, have insisted that they knew almost exactly when syphilis appeared on the world stage, and even where it came from. "In the yere of Chryst 1493 or there aboute," wrote Ulrich von Hutten, one of Erasmus's correspondents, "this most foule and most grevous dysease beganne to sprede amonge the people." Another contemporary, Ruy Díaz de Isla, agreed that 1493 was the year and went on to say that "the disease had its origin and birth from always in the island which is now named Española." Columbus had brought it back, along with samples of maize and other American curiosities.

The most popular theory of the origin of syphilis since the third decade of the sixteenth century has been the Columbian theory, but

popularity has not saved it from disputation. In fact, the matter of the origin of syphilis is doubtlessly the most controversial subject in all medical historiography. It would take months of labor merely to assemble a full bibliography of the subject.

Until the most recent decades there were only two widely accepted views of the provenance of syphilis: the Columbian theory and its antithesis, which stated that syphilis was present in the Old World long before 1493. Now the Unitarian theory has appeared, which postulates that venereal syphilis is but one syndrome of a multi-faceted world-wide disease, *treponematosi*s. But before we examine this newest challenge to the veracity of Ulrich von Hutten and Díaz de Isla and the other Columbians, let us deal with the older argument: was venereal syphilis present on both sides of the Atlantic in 1492 or only on the American?

The documentary evidence for the Old World seems clear. No unequivocal description of syphilis in any pre-Columbian literature of the Old World has ever been discovered. Descriptions of diseases which might be the pox have been uncovered, but they might also be descriptions of leprosy, scabies, or something else. It is especially noteworthy that, in spite of Chinese worship of the ancients and the tradition of quoting from the classics whenever possible, no Chinese writer has ever described syphilis as being mentioned in ancient literature. Galen and Avicenna and other medical writers of ancient and medieval times knew nothing of germ theory or antibiotics, but they were accomplished clinicians and could describe the surface symptoms of a disease as well as any modern physician. If a disease is not mentioned in their writings, we may assume that it had a different character in their time or that they never saw it. This assumption is particularly safe when we are searching for mention of a disease which spreads as widely as syphilis does in nearly every society exposed to it.

The physicians, surgeons, and laymen of the Old World who wrote about venereal syphilis in the sixteenth century recorded, with few exceptions, that it was a new malady; and we have no reason to believe they were all mistaken. From Díaz de Isla to Wan Ki—Spaniards, Germans, Italians, Egyptians, Persians, Indians, Chinese, and Japanese—agreed that they had never seen the pox before. It is very unlikely that they were all mistaken on the same subject at the same time.

Even if no direct statements on the newness of syphilis to the inhabitants of the Old World existed, there is enough linguistic evidence to support that contention. The variety of names given it and the fact that they almost always indicate that it was thought of as a foreign import are strong evidence for its newness. Italians called it the French disease, which proved to be the most popular title; the

French called it the disease of Naples; the English called it the French disease, the Bordeaux disease, or the Spanish disease; Poles called it the German disease; Russians called it the Polish disease; and so on. Middle Easterners called it the European pustules; Indians called it the disease of the Franks (western Europeans). Chinese called it the ulcer of Canton, that port being their chief point of contact with the west. The Japanese called it Tang sore, Tang referring to China; or, more to the point, the disease of the Portuguese. A full list of the early names for syphilis covers several pages, and it was not until the nineteenth century that Girolamo Fracastoro's word, "syphilis," minted in the 1520s, became standard throughout the world. . . .

The most convincing of all evidence for the abrupt arrival of the French disease in the Old World in approximately 1500 is the physical remains, the bones of the long dead. No one has ever unearthed pre-Columbian bones in the Old World which display unequivocal signs of syphilitic damage. Elliott Smith, the famous paleopathologist, tells us that "after examining something like 30,000 bodies of ancient Egyptians and Nubians representing every period of the history of the last sixty centuries and from every part of the country, it can be stated quite confidently that no trace whatever, even suggesting syphilitic injuries to bones or teeth, was revealed in Egypt before modern times." It is nearly certain that if syphilis were present in pre-Columbian Europe, and likely that if it were present in any of the high civilizations of the Old World engaged in long-distance commerce before 1493, one of the bodies examined by Smith would have shown syphilitic lesions.

Several anti-Columbian theorists have brushed aside all the above arguments by hypothesizing that syphilis had existed in the Old World prior to the 1490s, but in a *mild* form. Then, in the 1490s the causative organism mutated into the deadly *Treponema pallidum*, and syphilis began to affect the deep body structures and became a killer. This hypothesis cannot be disproved and it comfortably fits all the facts, but it cannot be proved, either. Microorganisms simply do not keep diaries, so the only way we can "prove" the validity of the mutation theory is by the process of elimination. We must disprove all the other hypotheses, which brings us to a direct consideration of the Columbian theory.

Where did syphilis come from? If it came from America, then we may be nearly certain that it came in 1493 or shortly after. Let us consider the physical evidence first. Is there a contrast here between the Old and New Worlds? The answer becomes more and more unequivocally affirmative as the archeologists and paleopathologists disinter from American soil an increasing number of pre-Columbian human bones displaying what is almost surely syphilitic damage. According