

OHIO ATLATL ASSOCIATION BOOK REVIEW

1491 New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus by CHARLES C. MANN

(Review by Ray Strischek)

This book is a seriously well crafted and choreographed collection of current archeological insight into the nature of Native Americans of North and South America prior to 1492, or European Contact. The information is presented as an update and/or replacement of earlier concepts by a new generation of archeologists, ethnologists, biologists and so forth, all throughly condemned by the previous authors of the updated and/or replaced information. Yes, this book is as full of political and scholarly controversy as it is new information, and unavoidably so.

The painful message here is two fold.

1. European contact, mostly, largely, was conquest by small pox, killing off at least half if not more of all the Native Americans in North, Central, and South America, within a 50 to 100 mile radius of where ever a European happened to be standing at any given time, and thus caused, often without the European ever realizing it, a major crash of all the existing, advanced Native American cultural societies. This conquest by disease started with the first individual contacts with most of the destruction being accomplished well ahead of the arrival of post conquest, European colonizers. And, it went down hill from there.

2. The Native Americans, long thought to have existed in perfect balance with nature (the noble savage), actually practiced incredibly inventive, complicated, and productive forms of “distant” animal husbandry and land/resource management, but, sometimes laid a rather heavy thumb on the scales, and, in several instances, over played their hand with disastrous results.

The author, Charles C. Mann, fairly, dutifully, presents the proponents and opponents points of view on every concept presented, but, wants you to know up front, and reminds the reader periodically throughout the text, that he sides with the new generation of thinkers, primarily because the new information presents a much clearer, more human and believable representation of the Native American.

Charles C. Mann wants you to know, that in his opinion, the new evidence clearly shows that the birth of civilization took place first in Peru, not Mesopotamia.

1491 is not focused on 1491. In fact, the book touches base with the Ice Age beginnings, and proceeds with the cultural developments (advancements and/or dead ends/ and/or European destruction) made over time by each of the major cultural centers of North, Central, and South America) up through and beyond 1491. This is a good book; spell binding, yet impossible to read or take in, in one setting. Be prepared to read and enjoy this one over an extended period of time.

There is so much information presented that it is impossible to comment on it all here. Instead, I want to point out a few things which I found exceptionally interesting.

1. North American “distant” animal husbandry, and land/resource management, by fire.

The time period between Ice Age discovery/colonization of the Americas (40000 to 15000 BC) and the era of the farmer/hunter Mound Builders (5000 BC - 1000AD), allows for, at the very least, about 10000 years of nomadic, semi-nomadic hunter/gatherer rule over the North American landscape.

Presumably, along the Pacific and Atlantic coasts, along the major rivers and lakes, and in the swamps, there was a lot more fishing and a lot less hunting to go along with the gathering, but primarily, it was a semi-nomadic life, often with separate winter and summer habitations, periods of large gatherings and small group isolations, and well established long distance trade relations and networks which expanded and contracted depending on circumstances beyond and under the control of the parties involved.

According to Charles C. Mann’s people,(see the index in the back of the book for the hundreds of foot noted providers of information), Native Americans used fire to turn as much of the North American landscape into Bison and Elk suitable property, as humanly possible, expanding the range of these herd animals into New York, Maryland, Virginia, Georgia, Alabama in the east, and Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and most of southern Canada, in the north, and all the land between the Mississippi River and Rocky Mountains in the west. Per Mann and company, Native Americans spent a great deal of time setting fire to everything, in a planned, well reasoned, and systematic manner for the sole purpose of increasing herd size and range.

2. Park America.

During the same period of time (post Ice Age, pre-Mound Builder), Native Americans purposely thinned the forests creating large tracts of park like areas rich in nut bearing Chestnut, Oak, and Hickory trees spaced well apart from each other, with nothing but grass in between. Between the forest tracks were open spaces of heavily controlled growth of black berry, blue berry, and, cranberry growth, and/or fruit trees.

3. Mound Builders.

The two points above overlapped and were both in place when Mound Building (and farming) came along. Before Mound Building, there existed a slow, steady growth in population, and apparently, a steady, relatively prosperous, more or less peaceful way of life. With the coming of Mound Building (and farming), population boomed, trade networks boomed, ideas and interaction spheres boomed, and apparently, so did social friction, strife, warfare, and during seasons of bad weather, so did population bust. Mound Building stopped, not all at once everywhere, but at different times everywhere, it did stop, all at once, for reasons not clear, known, or understood. Native Americans in North America, fell back on the two major themes that did work, fire to control herd animal increase, and thinning the forests to increase nut and berry production, and, in addition, farming within well established regional areas controlled locally by locally controlled leaders who knew their place, and did not strive to become the-above- it- all leaders represented by Mound Builders.

4. Here come the Europeans, there goes the neighborhood.

The early “explorers” reported that all along the Atlantic coast, the villages and populations of North America were numerous to the point of there being hardly anyplace along the coast where there were not villages and populations of Native Americans. Inland, the early “explorers” reported hearty,

healthy, happy, friendly, Native Americans in neat, well laid out villages of water proof and winter tight housing, surrounded by fields of corn, squash, and beans, racks of drying meat. Beyond the fields were the forests, park like, full of chestnut, hickory, and oak spaced out wide enough that Europeans boasted that whole armies could march through, or carriages driven through, or horses ridden through, at full speed in straight lines, head held high, not a problem.

Fifty to a hundred years later, when “colonists” arrived all along the Atlantic coastline, The Europeans reported coastlines almost completely devoid of people, and inland, forests so thick with underbrush that no one could pass without aid of ax and sword in constant hacking motion.

Where Native Americans could be found, the villages were still orderly and neat, and surrounded by fields of corn, squash, and beans, but eventually, after extended European contact, these villages were racked by a second wave of small pox and European greed, to the point, that who ever was left, generally got up and moved away, taking the small pox with them, to their relatives more inland.

Per Mann and company, the cycle of European “discovery”, small pox, “colonization”, more small pox, and then “hostile European conquest” resulting in the forced evacuation/extermination of the Native North Americans continued in one form or another, from 1492 to the beginning of the 20th Century.

4. Welcome to the Amazon.

When Francisco Pizarro defeated Atawallpa, (Inca, Peru) he did what every other conqueror did before him, to secure his position as top dog. He sent his best captains away, far away, to conquer their own lands. One of the captains Pizarro got rid of, was his brother, Gonzalo, along with 280 Spaniards, 4000 highland Indians, and 2000 pigs. Gonzalo headed for the Amazon, of course, looking for gold, glory, and El Dorado, which ever came first. Instead, not long after starting, all his Indians ran away, the pigs died, and Gonzalo and his men were reduced to starving beggars in rags holding rusty swords. They decided to “cobble together a crude boat” and have the boat forge ahead with part of crew while the rest stumbled along the bank trying to catch up. Gonzalo put Francisco De Orellana in charge of the boat. Orellana promptly deserted with the boat and headed down the Amazon to the Atlantic, from there north, then catching a ride to Spain where he promptly claimed all of South America’s Amazon Basin as his own, for King and God.

Along the Amazon, Francisco De Orellana or his scribes reported a river lined on both sides with endless populations of villages and people, good looking, well fed, and not particularly friendly. He also reported a nation of bare breasted women who occasionally foraged for men for sex only, giving up the male babies, keeping the females.

Because of the bare breasted female saga, and because the entire Pizzaro clan wanted Orellana dead, Orellana was not much believed even in his own time (except by the King who gave him money for an expedition that failed before it got started), and certainly not believed by any scholars until recently. Discounted along with the bare breasted female warriors were the 1200 miles of uninterrupted Indian villages along the Amazon, because, from the time of colonization till about 1990, no evidence of any vast population along the Amazon could be found.

Per Charles C. Mann and company, Orellana’s crew spread small pox with every stop they made, and, by the time Spain and Portugal got around to turning bits and pieces of South America into actual colonies, the entire cultural and social structure of the Amazon River Basin and its people, had been more or less completely wiped out.

Recently, however, scholars have been looking into **TERRA PRETA DO INDIO**. (Indian Dark Earth), circa 360 BC to 1400 AD.

Terra Preta Do Indio is a man made (obviously) built up level of very rich soil made up of multiple layers of dirt, charred wood, fish bones, human waste, and pottery. It is estimated that between .1-.3 percent and 10 percent of the entire Amazon River Basin is covered with these raised up flat mounds of super nutrient rich soil, built up and used for centuries, before the coming of Orellana/small pox.

“As a rule, Terra Preta has more plant-available phosphorus, calcium, sulfur, and nitrogen than is common in the rain forest; it has much more organic matter, better retains moisture and nutrients, and is not rapidly exhausted by agricultural use when managed well. The key to Terra Preta’s long term fertility is charcoal; Terra Preta contains up to 64 times as much charcoal as surrounding red dirt” of the typical rain forest. “Organic matter sticks to charcoal”.

“Most big terra preta sites are on low bluffs at the edge of the floodplain. Typically, they cover five to fifteen acres, but some encompass seven hundred acres or more. The layer of black soil is generally one or two feet deep but can reach more than six feet.”

The number of pottery plates, bowls, and cups, needed for the average sized terra preta site is “forty million pot sherds.”

Besides planting manioc and other annual crops, the people planted selected tree crops. Of the more than 138 known domesticated plant species in the Amazon, more than half are trees which include sapodilla, calabash, tucuma, babcu, acai, wild pineapple, cocopalm, American-oil palm, and Panama-hat palm, and Peach Palm; a virtual wealth of fruits, nuts, and palms. Just as their North American relatives had turned the forest into chestnut, hickory, and oak plantations, the South American did the same in the Amazon.

The estimate of the number of people these Terra Preta Do Indio plazas along the Amazon River Basin could support is between 200000 to 400000 people.

Some researchers believe the entire South American rain forest landscape, just as is the case with North America’s landscape, was man created, controlled, managed, and conserved, and only went wild because Europeans and small pox killed off all the Native American park rangers.

5. Peru, the birth place of civilization.

Peru is very dry. Weather from the Amazon, which could supply rain, dumps it all on the east side of two mountain ranges, the white and the black, which hug the western coast of the South America. Weather from the Pacific Ocean which could supply rain is forced north by the south to north Humboldt Current which blocks any Pacific’s moisture from ever reaching Peru. Therefore, agriculture in Peru is limited to narrow strips of land on both sides of more than fifty east to west flowing meltwater rivers racing from the mountains to the sea. In the winter, many of those rivers are reduced to a trickle. No melt, no river. Fog accounts for almost all of the area’s two inches of annual rain.

Charles C. Mann and company, think people started coming in to Peru about 15000 years ago, and very soon fell into hunter/gatherer mode, splitting their time between the marine life bounty on the coast and the animal bounty in the hills. Sorry, no Clovis points. At about 5000 BC, those Marine

bound dwellers began to make mummies (Chinchorro). Between 3500 BC and 3200 BC, the inhabitants of Norte Chico began building coastal platform mounds and platform mound complexes as well as inland cities; at least 25 complexes and cities altogether.

To build such complexes and cities, some form of government would have to have had to exist. Unlike in later times in other places in South and Central America, these complex/cities did not have defensive walls or evidence of any warfare, mutilation of bodies or burned buildings.

As it turns out, mutually beneficial trade pattern developed between the fish and marine life people on the coast, and animal and vegetable eating peoples in the hills. The key was cotton and irrigation. Cotton grown inland, gets traded as cloth and string for shells and sea food from the coast.

They did have religion and religious practices, of which, their main god, seen standing and holding a staff, would eventually transform (be adapted) into a supreme god, the Corn God of Maya, the Inca, the Aztecs and nearly every Native American people south of the Rio Grande River.

This is controversial. Civilization, so the European controlled definition of civilization goes, belongs only to those who grow food. (Mesopotamia, Barley. China, rice. Egypt, wheat. Europe, swords and small pox, apparently.) For the modern generation of archeologists to suggest that civilization can be defined by the appearance of cities and platform mound complexes in which fish and cotton are the key building blocks is, well, utterly rejected by the, well, mostly white people north of the Mexican border and their sword and small pox ancestors in Europe. Thus, even though the Peru got off the ground before Mesopotamia, Peru doesn't count because Peru didn't use a breakfast cereal to get started.

6. Milpa.

Milpa is an agricultural practice of planting maize (corn), squash, beans, and other vegetables (melons, avocados, tomatoes, chilies, sweet potato, jicama, amaranth and mucuna) in the same field. Maize lacks the amino acids lysine and tryptophan, which the body needs to make proteins and niacin. Beans have both lysine and tryptophan, but no amino acids cysteine and methionine. Squashes provide vitamins, avocados provide fats.

Beans provide nitrogen to the soil, much needed for maize growth. Milpa fields, planted correctly, have been planted in Meso America, continuously, for four thousand years and are still productive.

Unlike Mesopotamia (barley), China (rice), Egypt (wheat), where the grain grew wild and had merely to have its range and yield expanded, Maize has no wild yet edible counterpart. As a food stuff, maize had to be literally invented, engineered out of next to nothing, and into something.

Milpa fueled all the "advanced" civilizations of Native Americans; Inca, Aztec, Mound Builder, all of them.

This book is full of amazing (ok, also controversial) information and serves to update, or at least to put current theories on notice that new information exists and the time has come to discuss it and stop trying to hide it, suppress it, or ignore it. Change happens. Deal with it. Ray Strischek

