

The Significance of 1492

More than five hundred years after the first Spaniards arrived in the Caribbean, historians and the general public still debate Columbus's legacy. Should he be remembered as a great discoverer who brought European culture to a previously unknown world? Or should he be condemned as a man who brought devastating European and Asian diseases to unprotected native peoples, who disrupted the American ecosystem, and who started the Atlantic slave trade? What is Columbus's legacy -- discovery and progress or slavery, disease, and racism?

To answer such questions, one must recognize that the encounter that began in 1492 was one of the most influential events in world history. This collision created extraordinary changes in the natural environment and human cultures of both the New World and the Old World. These changes would affect millions of people and alter the course of entire continents.

New foods reshaped the diets of people in both areas. Tomatoes, chocolate, potatoes, corn, green beans, peanuts, vanilla, pineapple, and turkey transformed the European diet, while Europeans introduced sugar, cattle, pigs, cloves, ginger, and almonds to the Americas. Global patterns of trade were overturned, as crops grown in the New World -- including tobacco, rice, and greatly increased sugar production -- fed growing consumer markets in Europe.

Even the natural environment was transformed. Europeans cleared large tracks of forested land and unintentionally introduced Old World weeds. The introduction of cattle, goats, horses, sheep, and pigs also transformed the ecology as grazing animals ate up many native plants and disrupted native systems of agriculture. The horse, extinct in the New World for 10,000 years, transformed the daily existence of many native peoples. The introduction of the horse encouraged many farming peoples to become hunters and herders.

Death and disease were also consequences of contact. Diseases against which native peoples had no natural immunities caused the greatest mass deaths in human history. Within a century of contact, smallpox, measles, mumps, and whooping cough had reduced native populations between 50-90 percent (killing millions of Native Americans). From Peru to Canada, disease reduced the resistance that Native Americans were able to offer to European intruders and paved the way for European conquest.

