

THE AMERICAS' INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

By the time of the Age of Discovery, almost the entire world had been settled by humans. If an expedition reached new territory, its members often came into conflict with the people who already lived there. An example of the consequences of these expeditions is the “discovery” of the Americas.

Before the Arrival of Columbus

Before the Italian navigator Christopher Columbus accidentally landed in the Americas in 1492 while searching for a new sea route to Asia, many hundreds of indigenous groups lived throughout the two continents. Each had their own customs and rituals, and many of these cultures were highly concentrated and organized, living on farms or in cities, while others were nomadic peoples who were consistently on the move.

Because the Vikings' records of Vinland had been lost, Europeans were unaware of the existence of the Americas. For this reason, Columbus was long celebrated as the discoverer of the dual continents. Of course, neither the Vikings nor Columbus “discovered” the continents, as people had already been living there for 15,000 years. For the indigenous peoples of the Americas, Columbus's arrival marked the start of a terrible era of suffering.



Cahokia was North America's biggest city before Columbus's arrival. It was located near the Mississippi River and existed from 700 to 1300.



Other Visitors

The West African king Abu Bakr II counts among those from abroad who may have landed in the Americas before Columbus. He is said to have arrived as early as the end of the fourteenth century and spread African culture among the local people he met, although there is no clear evidence that proves this actually took place.

The Polynesians, masters of boatbuilding, may also have reached the Americas earlier than the Italian explorer. A thousand years ago, the sweet potato became a key part of their diet, although it had only previously existed in South America. While the Vikings were building their houses way up north, it is believed that either the Polynesians traveled to South America or indigenous peoples from South America made it all the way to Polynesia. How exactly that could have happened remains a mystery.

The Indigenous Americans and Columbus

When Columbus arrived in the Caribbean, he encountered the Taíno people, who lived in small villages, grew grains, produced gold jewelry, and were considered a peace-loving people. At their first meeting with Columbus, they exchanged cotton for glass beads. When Columbus returned on his second voyage, he began to enslave and murder the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean. Even the Spanish Crown, under whose commission Columbus was traveling, did not approve of these actions, as they saw the local people as possible converts to Christianity. Many of them were violently forced to accept a religion that was not theirs.

Columbus probably died still thinking that he had found the western sea route to India, but this was disproved by the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci a few years later. He realized that Columbus had in fact come across a whole new landmass previously unknown to Europeans, one that now bears Vespucci's name.

