

NATIVE AMERICA, 1491 A.D.

1491

*New Revelations of the Americas
Before Columbus*



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but did not employ it for any purpose other than children's toys. Those looking for a tale of cultural superiority can find it in zero; those looking for failure can find it in the wheel. Neither line of argument is useful, though. What is most important is that by 1000 A.D. Indians had expanded their Neolithic revolutions to create a panoply of diverse civilizations across the hemisphere.

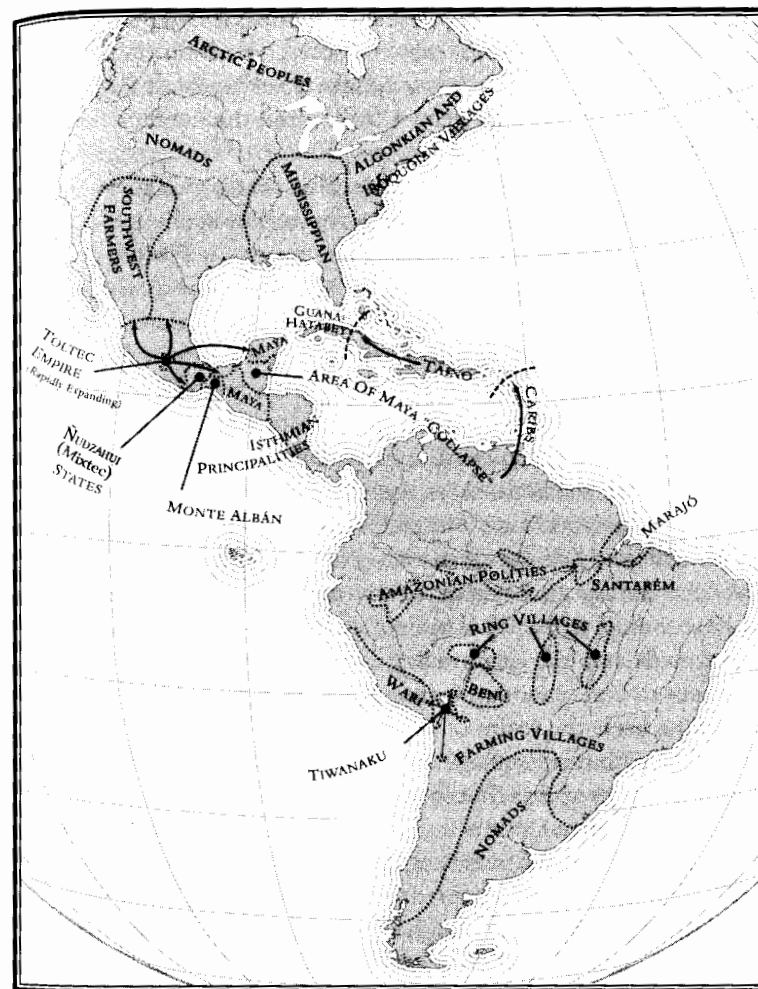
Five hundred years later, when Columbus sailed into the Caribbean, the descendants of the world's Neolithic Revolutions collided, with overwhelming consequences for all.

A GUIDED TOUR

Imagine, for a moment, an impossible journey: taking off in a plane from eastern Bolivia as I did, but doing so in 1000 A.D. and flying a surveillance mission over the rest of the Western Hemisphere. What would be visible from the windows? Fifty years ago, most historians would have given a simple answer to this question: two continents of wilderness, populated by scattered bands whose ways of life had changed little since the Ice Age. The sole exceptions would have been Mexico and Peru, where the Maya and the ancestors of the Inka were crawling toward the foothills of Civilization.

Today our understanding is different in almost every perspective. Picture the millennial plane flying west, from the lowlands of the Beni to the heights of the Andes. On the ground beneath as the journey begins are the causeways and canals one sees today, except that they are now in good repair and full of people. (Fifty years ago, the earthworks were almost completely unknown, even to those living nearby.) After a few hundred miles the plane ascends to the mountains—and again the historical picture has changed. Until recently, researchers would have said the highlands in 1000 A.D. were occupied by scattered small villages and one or two big towns with some nice stonework. But recent archaeological investigations have revealed that at this time the Andes housed two mountain states, each much larger than previously appreciated.

The state closest to the Beni was based around Lake Titicaca, the 120-mile-long alpine lake that crosses the Peru-Bolivia border. Most of this region has an altitude of twelve thousand feet or more. Summers



NATIVE AMERICA, 1000 A.D.

are short; winters are correspondingly long. This "bleak, frigid land," wrote the adventurer Victor von Hagen, "seemingly was the last place from which one might expect a culture to develop." But in fact the lake is comparatively warm, and so the land surrounding it is less beaten by frost than the surrounding highlands. Taking advantage of

~~Maya ruins were well known forty years ago, to be sure, but among them, too, many new things have been discovered. Consider Calakmul, the ruin that Peter Menzel and I visited in the early 1980s. Almost wholly unexcavated since its discovery, the Calakmul we came to lay swathed in dry, scrubby vegetation that crawled like a swarm of thorns up its two huge pyramids. When Peter and I spoke to William J. Folan of the Universidad Autónoma de Campeche, who was just beginning to work at the city, he recommended that we not try going to the ruin unless we could rent a heavy truck, and not even to try with the truck if it had rained. Our visit to Calakmul did nothing to suggest that Folan's advice was wrong. Trees enveloped the great buildings, their roots slowly ripping apart the soft limestone walls. Peter photographed a monument with roots coiled around it, boa constrictor style, five or six feet high. So overwhelming was the tropical forest that I thought Calakmul's history would remain forever unknown.~~

~~Happily, I was wrong. By the early 1990s Folan's team had learned that this long-ignored place covered as much as twenty-five square miles and had thousands of buildings and dozens of reservoirs and canals. It was the biggest ever Maya polity. Researchers cleaned and photographed its hundred-plus monuments—and just in time, for epigraphers (scholars of ancient writing) had in the meantime deciphered Maya hieroglyphics. In 1994 they identified the city-state's ancient name: Kaan, the Kingdom of the Snake. Six years later they discovered that Kaan was the focus of a devastating war that convulsed the Maya city-state for more than a century. And Kaan is just one of the score of Maya settlements that in the last few decades have been investigated for the first time.~~

~~A collection of about five dozen kingdoms and city-states in a network of alliances and feuds as convoluted as those of seventeenth-century Germany, the Maya realm was home to one of the world's most intellectually sophisticated cultures. About a century before our imaginary surveillance tour, though, the Maya heartland entered a kind of Dark Ages. Many of the greatest cities emptied, as did much of the countryside around them. Incredibly, some of the last inscriptions are gibberish, as if scribes had lost the knowledge of writing and were reduced to meaningless imitation of their ancestors. By the time of our overflight, half or more of what once had been the flourishing land of the Maya was abandoned.~~

~~Some natural scientists attribute this collapse, close in time to that of Wari and Tiwanaku, to a massive drought. The Maya, packed by the millions into land poorly suited to intensive farming, were dangerously close to surpassing the capacity of their ecosystems. The drought, possibly caused by a mega-Niño, pushed the society, already so close to the edge, over the cliff.~~

~~Such scenarios resonate with contemporary ecological fears, helping to make them popular outside the academy. Within the academy skepticism is more common. The archaeological record shows that southern Yucatán was abandoned, while Maya cities in the northern part of the peninsula soldiered on or even grew. Peculiarly, the abandoned land was the wettest—with its rivers, lakes, and rainforest, it should have been the best place to wait out a drought. Conversely, northern Yucatán was dry and rocky. The question is why people would have fled from drought to lands that would have been even more badly affected.~~

→ And what of the rest of Mesoamerica? As the flight continues north, look west, at the hills of what are now the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Guerrero. Here are the quarrelsome city-states of the Ñudzahui (Mixtec), finally overwhelming the Zapotec, their ancient rivals based in the valley city of Monte Albán. Further north, expanding their empire in a hot-brained hurry, are the Toltec, sweeping in every direction from the mile-high basin that today houses Mexico City. As is often the case, the Toltec's rapid military success led to political strife. A Shakespearian struggle at the top, complete with accusations of drunkenness and incest, forced out the long-ruling king, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, in (probably) 987 A.D. He fled with boatloads of loyalists to the Yucatán Peninsula, promising to return. By the time of our plane trip, Quetzalcoatl had apparently conquered the Maya city of Chichén Itzá and was rebuilding it in his own Toltec image. (Prominent archaeologists disagree with each other about these events, but the murals and embossed plates at Chichén Itzá that depict a Toltec army bloodily destroying a Maya force are hard to dismiss.)

Continue the flight to what is now the U.S. Southwest, past desert farms and cliff dwellings, to the Mississippian societies in the Midwest. Not long ago archaeologists with new techniques unraveled the tragedy of Cahokia, near modern St. Louis, which was once the greatest population center north of the Río Grande. Construction

began in about 1000 A.D. on an earthen structure that would eventually cover fifteen acres and rise to a height of about a hundred feet, higher than anything around it for miles. Atop the mound was the temple for the divine kings, who arranged for the weather to favor agriculture. As if to lend them support, fields of maize rippled out from the mound almost as far as the eye could see. Despite this apparent evidence of their power, Cahokia's rulers were setting themselves up for future trouble. By mining the forests upstream for firewood and floating the logs downriver to the city, they were removing ground cover and increasing the likelihood of catastrophic floods. When these came, as they later did, kings who gained their legitimacy from their claims to control the weather would face angry questioning from their subjects.

Continue north, to the least settled land, the realm of hunters and gatherers. Portrayed in countless U.S. history books and Hollywood westerns, the Indians of the Great Plains are the most familiar to non-scholars. Demographically speaking, they lived in the hinterlands, remote and thinly settled; their lives were as far from Wari or Toltec lords as the nomads of Siberia were from the grandees of Beijing. Their material cultures were simpler, too—no writing, no stone plazas, no massive temples—though Plains groups did leave behind about fifty rings of rock that are reminiscent of Stonehenge. The relative lack of material goods has led some to regard these groups as exemplifying an ethic of living lightly on the land. Perhaps, but North America was a busy, talkative place. By 1000 A.D., trade relationships had covered the continent for more than a thousand years; mother-of-pearl from the Gulf of Mexico has been found in Manitoba, and Lake Superior copper in Louisiana.

~~Or forgo the northern route altogether and fly the imaginary plane east from the Beni, toward the mouth of the Amazon. Immediately after the Beni, one encounters, in what is now the western Brazilian state of Acre, another society: a network of small villages associated with circular and square earthworks in patterns quite unlike those found in the Beni. Even less is known about these people; the remains of their villages were discovered only in 2003, after ranchers clearing the tropical forest uncovered them. According to the Finnish archaeologists who first described them, "it is obvious" that "relatively high population densities" were "quite common~~

~~everywhere in the Amazonian lowlands." The Finns here are summing up the belief of a new generation of researchers into the Amazon: the river was much more crowded in 1000 A.D. than it is now, especially in its lower half. Dense collections of villages thronged the bluffs that line the shore, with their people fishing in the river and farming the floodplains and sections of the uplands. Most important were the village orchards that marched back from the bluffs for miles. Amazonians practiced a kind of agro-forestry, farming with trees, unlike any kind of agriculture in Europe, Africa, or Asia.~~

~~Not all the towns were small. Near the Atlantic was the chiefdom of Marajó, based on an enormous island at the mouth of the river. Marajó's population, recently estimated at 100,000, may have been equaled or even surpassed by a still nameless agglomeration of people six hundred miles upstream, at Santarém, a pleasant town that today is sleeping off the effects of Amazonia's past rubber and gold booms. The ancient inhabitation beneath and around the modern town has barely been investigated. Almost all that we know is that it was ideally located on a high bluff overlooking the mouth of the Tapajós, one of the Amazon's biggest tributaries. On this bluff geographers and archaeologists in the 1990s found an area more than three miles long that was thickly covered with broken ceramics, much like Ibibate. According to William I. Woods, an archaeologist and geographer at the University of Kansas, the region could have supported as many as 400,000 inhabitants, at least in theory, making it one of the bigger population centers in the world.~~

And so on. Western scholars have written histories of the world since at least the twelfth century. As children of their own societies, these early historians naturally emphasized the culture they knew best, the culture their readership most wanted to hear about. But over time they added the stories of other places in the world: chapters about China, India, Persia, Japan, and other places. Researchers tipped their hats to non-Western accomplishments in the sciences and arts. Sometimes the effort was grudging or minimal, but the vacant reaches in the human tale slowly contracted.

One way to sum up the new scholarship is to say that it has begun, at last, to fill in one of the biggest blanks in history: the Western Hemisphere before 1492. It was, in the current view, a thriving, stunningly diverse place, a tumult of languages, trade, and culture, a

of the rise of the United States — “marginal people who were losers in the end,” as James Axtell of the College of William and Mary dryly put it in an interview. Vietnam War-era denunciations of the Pilgrims as imperialist or racist simply replicated the error in a new form. Whether the cause was the Pilgrim God, Pilgrim guns, or Pilgrim greed, native losses were foreordained; Indians could not have stopped colonization, in this view, and they hardly tried.

Beginning in the 1970s, Axtell, Neal Salisbury, Francis Jennings, and other historians grew dissatisfied with this view. “Indians were seen as trivial, ineffectual patsies,” Salisbury, a historian at Smith College, told me. “But that assumption — a whole continent of patsies — simply didn’t make sense.” These researchers tried to peer through the colonial records to the Indian lives beneath. Their work fed a tsunami of inquiry into the interactions between natives and newcomers in the era when they faced each other as relative equals. “No other field in American history has grown as fast,” marveled Joyce Chaplin, a Harvard historian, in 2003.

The fall of Indian societies had everything to do with the natives themselves, researchers argue, rather than being religiously or technologically determined. (Here the claim is not that indigenous cultures should be blamed for their own demise but that they helped to determine their own fates.) “When you look at the historical record, it’s clear that Indians were trying to control their own destinies,” Salisbury said. “And often enough they succeeded” — only to learn, as all peoples do, that the consequences were not what they expected.

This chapter and the next will explore how two different Indian societies, the Wampanoag and the Inka, reacted to the incursions from across the sea. It may seem odd that a book about Indian life before contact should devote space to the period after contact, but there are reasons for it. First, colonial descriptions of Native Americans are among the few glimpses we have of Indians whose lives were not shaped by the presence of Europe. The accounts of the initial encounters between Indians and Europeans are windows into the past, even if the glass is smeared and distorted by the chroniclers’ prejudices and misapprehensions.

Second, although the stories of early contact — the Wampanoag with the British, the Inka with the Spanish — are as dissimilar as their protagonists, many archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians have recently come to believe that they have deep commonalities

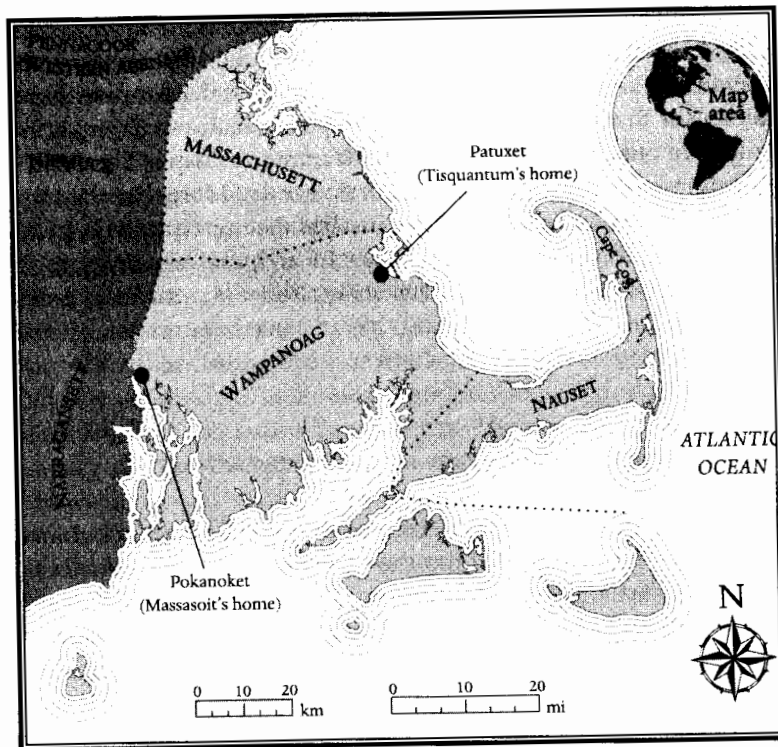
And the tales of other Indians’ encounters with the strangers were alike in the same way. From these shared features, researchers have constructed what might be thought of as a master narrative of the meeting of Europe and America. Although it remains surprisingly little known outside specialist circles, this master narrative illuminates the origins of every nation in the Americas today. More than that, the effort to understand events after Columbus shed unexpected light on critical aspects of life before Columbus. Indeed, the master narrative led to such surprising conclusions about Native American societies before the arrival of Europeans that it stirred up an intellectual firestorm.

COMING OF AGE IN THE DAWN LAND

Consider Tisquantum, the “friendly Indian” of the textbook. More than likely Tisquantum was not the name he was given at birth. In that part of the Northeast, *tisquantum* referred to rage, especially the rage of *manitou*, the world-suffusing spiritual power at the heart of coastal Indians’ religious beliefs. When Tisquantum approached the Pilgrims and identified himself by that sobriquet, it was as if he had stuck out his hand and said, Hello, I’m the Wrath of God. No one would lightly adopt such a name in contemporary Western society. Neither would anyone in seventeenth-century indigenous society. Tisquantum was trying to project something.

Tisquantum was not an Indian. True, he belonged to that category of people whose ancestors had inhabited the Western Hemisphere for thousands of years. And it is true that I refer to him as an Indian, because the label is useful shorthand; so would his descendants, and for much the same reason. But “Indian” was not a category that Tisquantum himself would have recognized, any more than the inhabitants of the same area today would call themselves “Western Hemisphereans.” Still less would Tisquantum have claimed to belong to “Norumbega,” the label by which most Europeans then referred to New England. (“New England” was coined only in 1616.) As Tisquantum’s later history made clear, he regarded himself first and foremost as a citizen of Patuxet, a shoreline settlement halfway between what is now Boston and the beginning of Cape Cod.

Patuxet was one of the dozen or so settlements in what is now



MASSACHUSETT ALLIANCE, 1600 A.D.

eastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island that comprised the Wampanoag confederation. In turn, the Wampanoag were part of a tripartite alliance with two other confederations: the Nauset, which comprised some thirty groups on Cape Cod; and the Massachusetts, several dozen villages clustered around Massachusetts Bay. All of these people spoke variants of Massachusett, a member of the Algonquian language family, the biggest in eastern North America at the time. (Massachusett thus was the name both of a language and of one of the groups that spoke it.) In Massachusett, the name for the New England shore was the Dawnland, the place where the sun rose. The inhabitants of the Dawnland were the People of the First Light.

Ten thousand years ago, when Indians in Mesoamerica and Peru

were inventing agriculture and coalescing into villages, New England was barely inhabited, for the excellent reason that it had been covered until relatively recently by an ice sheet a mile thick. People slowly moved in, though the area long remained cold and uninviting, especially along the coastline. Because rising sea levels continually flooded the shore, marshy Cape Cod did not fully lock into its contemporary configuration until about 1000 B.C. By that time the Dawnland had evolved into something more attractive: an ecological crazy quilt of wet maple forests, shellfish-studded tidal estuaries, thick highland woods, mossy bogs full of cranberries and orchids, fractally complex snarls of sandbars and beachfront, and fire-swept stands of pitch pine—"tremendous variety even within the compass of a few miles," as the ecological historian William Cronon put it.

In the absence of written records, researchers have developed techniques for teasing out evidence of the past. Among them is "glottochronology," the attempt to estimate how long ago two languages separated from a common ancestor by evaluating their degree of divergence on a list of key words. In the 1970s and 1980s linguists applied glottochronological techniques to the Algonquian dictionaries compiled by early colonists. However tentatively, the results indicated that the various Algonquian languages in New England all date back to a common ancestor that appeared in the Northeast a few centuries before Christ.

The ancestral language may derive from what is known as the Hopewell culture. Around two thousand years ago, Hopewell jumped into prominence from its bases in the Midwest, establishing a trade network that covered most of North America. The Hopewell culture introduced monumental earthworks and, possibly, agriculture to the rest of the cold North. Hopewell villages, unlike their more egalitarian neighbors, were stratified, with powerful, priestly rulers commanding a mass of commoners. Archaeologists have found no evidence of large-scale warfare at this time, and thus suggest that Hopewell probably did not achieve its dominance by conquest. Instead, one can speculate, the vehicle for transformation may have been Hopewell religion, with its intoxicatingly elaborate funeral rites. If so, the adoption of Algonquian in the Northeast would mark an era of spiritual ferment and heady conversion, much like the time when Islam rose and spread Arabic throughout the Middle East.

Hopewell itself declined around 400 A.D. But its trade network remained intact. Shell beads from Florida, obsidian from the Rocky Mountains, and mica from Tennessee found their way to the Northeast. Borrowing technology and ideas from the Midwest, the nomadic peoples of New England transformed their societies. By the end of the first millennium A.D., agriculture was spreading rapidly and the region was becoming an unusual patchwork of communities, each with its preferred terrain, way of subsistence, and cultural style.

Scattered about the many lakes, ponds, and swamps of the cold uplands were small, mobile groups of hunters and gatherers—"collectors," as researchers sometimes call them. Most had recently adopted agriculture or were soon to do so, but it was still a secondary source of food, a supplement to the wild products of the land. New England's major river valleys, by contrast, held large, permanent villages, many nestled in constellations of suburban hamlets and hunting camps. Because extensive fields of maize, beans, and squash surrounded every home, these settlements sprawled along the Connecticut, Charles, and other river valleys for miles, one town bumping up against the other. Along the coast, where Tisquantum and Massasoit lived, villages often were smaller and looser, though no less permanent.

Unlike the upland hunters, the Indians on the rivers and coastline did not roam the land; instead, most seem to have moved between a summer place and a winter place, like affluent snowbirds alternating between Manhattan and Miami. The distances were smaller, of course; shoreline families would move a fifteen-minute walk inland, to avoid direct exposure to winter storms and tides. Each village had its own distinct mix of farming and foraging—this one here, adjacent to a rich oyster bed, might plant maize purely for variety, whereas that one there, just a few miles away, might subsist almost entirely on its harvest, filling great underground storage pits each fall. Although these settlements were permanent, winter and summer alike, they often were not tightly knit entities, with houses and fields in carefully demarcated clusters. Instead people spread themselves through estuaries, sometimes grouping into neighborhoods, sometimes with each family on its own, its maize ground proudly separate. Each community was constantly "joining and splitting like quicksilver in a fluid pattern within its bounds," wrote Kathleen J. Bragdon, an anthropologist

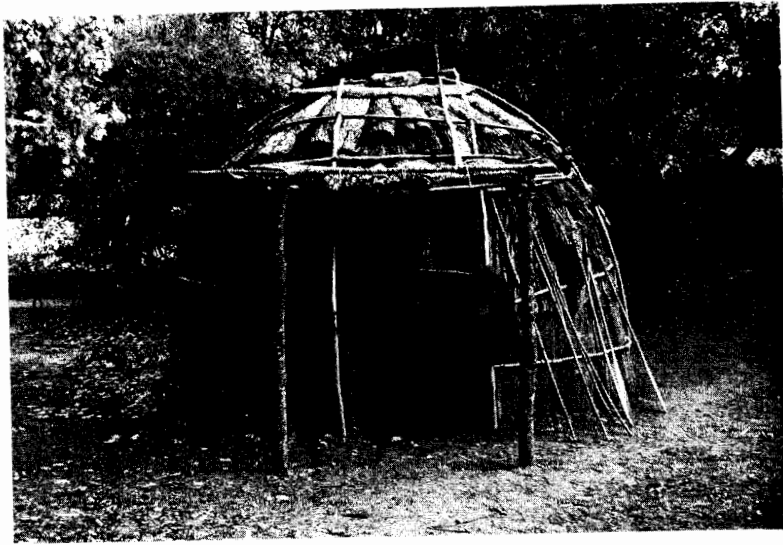
at the College of William and Mary—a type of settlement, she remarked, with "no name in the archaeological or anthropological literature."

In the Wampanoag confederation, one of these quicksilver communities was Patuxet, where Tisquantum was born at the end of the sixteenth century.

Tucked into the great sweep of Cape Cod Bay, Patuxet sat on a low rise above a small harbor, jigsawed by sandbars and shallow enough that children could walk from the beach hundreds of yards into the water before the waves went above their heads. To the west, maize hills marched across the sandy hillocks in parallel rows. Beyond the fields, a mile or more away from the sea, rose a forest of oak, chestnut, and hickory, open and park-like, the underbrush kept down by expert annual burning. "Pleasant of air and prospect," as one English visitor described the area, Patuxet had "much plenty both of fish and fowl every day in the year." Runs of spawning Atlantic salmon, short-nose sturgeon, striped bass, and American shad annually filled the harbor. But the most important fish harvest came in late spring, when the herring-like alewives swarmed the fast, shallow stream that cut through the village. So numerous were the fish, and so driven, that when mischievous boys walled off the stream with stones the alewives would leap the barrier—silver bodies gleaming in the sun—and proceed upstream.

Tisquantum's childhood *wetu* (home) was formed from arched poles lashed together into a dome that was covered in winter by tightly woven rush mats and in summer by thin sheets of chestnut bark. A fire burned constantly in the center, the smoke venting through a hole in the center of the roof. English visitors did not find this arrangement peculiar; chimneys were just coming into use in Britain, and most homes there, including those of the wealthy, were still heated by fires beneath central roof holes. Nor did the English regard the Dawnland *wetu* as primitive; its multiple layers of mats, which trapped insulating layers of air, were "warmer than our English houses," sighed the colonist William Wood. The *wetu* was less leaky than the typical English wattle-and-daub house, too. Wood did not conceal his admiration for the way Indian mats "deny entrance to any drop of rain, though it come both fierce and long."

Around the edge of the house were low beds, sometimes wide



In the *wetu*, wide strips of bark are clamped between arched inner and outer poles. Because the poles are flexible, bark layers can be sandwiched in or removed at will, depending on whether the householder wants to increase insulation during the winter or let in more air during the summer. In its elegant simplicity, the *wetu*'s design would have pleased the most demanding modernist architect.

enough for a whole family to sprawl on them together; usually raised about a foot from the floor, platform-style; and always piled with mats and furs. Going to sleep in the firelight, young Tisquantum would have stared up at the diddering shadows of the hemp bags and bark boxes hanging from the rafters. Voices would skirl up in the darkness: one person singing a lullaby, then another person, until everyone was asleep. In the morning, when he woke, big, egg-shaped pots of corn and-bean mash would be on the fire, simmering with meat, vegetables or dried fish to make a slow-cooked dinner stew. Outside the *wetu* he would hear the cheerful thuds of the large mortars and pestles in which women crushed dried maize into *nokake*, a flour-like powder "so sweet, toothsome, and hearty," colonist Gookin wrote, "that an Indian will travel many days with no other but this meal." Although Europeans bemoaned the lack of salt in Indian cuisine, they thought it nourishing. According to one modern reconstruction, Dawnland diet

at the time averaged about 2,500 calories a day, better than those usual in famine-racked Europe.

Pilgrim writers universally reported that Wampanoag families were close and loving—more so than English families, some thought. Europeans in those days tended to view children as moving straight from infancy to adulthood around the age of seven, and often thereupon sent them out to work. Indian parents, by contrast, regarded the years before puberty as a time of playful development, and kept their offspring close by until marriage. (Jarringly, to the contemporary eye, some Pilgrims interpreted this as sparing the rod.) Boys like Tisquantum explored the countryside, swam in the ponds at the south end of the harbor, and played a kind of soccer with a small leather ball; in the summer and fall they camped out in huts in the fields, weeding the maize and chasing away birds. Archery practice began at age two. By adolescence boys would make a game of shooting at each other and dodging the arrows.

The primary goal of Dawnland education was molding character. Men and women were expected to be brave, hardy, honest, and uncomplaining. Chatterboxes and gossips were frowned upon. "He that speaks seldom and opportunely, being as good as his word, is the only man they love," Wood explained. Character formation began early, with family games of tossing naked children into the snow. (They were pulled out quickly and placed next to the fire, in a practice reminiscent of Scandinavian saunas.) When Indian boys came of age, they spent an entire winter alone in the forest, equipped only with a bow, a hatchet, and a knife. These methods worked, the awed Wood reported. "Beat them, whip them, pinch them, punch them, if [the Indians] resolve not to flinch for it, they will not."

Tisquantum's regimen was probably tougher than that of his friends, according to Salisbury, the Smith College historian, for it seems that he was selected to become a *pniese*, a kind of counselor-bodyguard to the sachem. To master the art of ignoring pain, future *pniese* had to subject themselves to such miserable experiences as running barelegged through brambles. And they fasted often, to learn self-discipline. After spending their winter in the woods, *pniese* candidates came back to an additional test: drinking bitter gentian juice until they vomited, repeating this bulimic process over and over until, near fainting, they threw up blood.

Patuxet, like its neighboring settlements, was governed by a sachem, who upheld the law, negotiated treaties, controlled foreign contacts, collected tribute, declared war, provided for widows and orphans, and allocated farmland when there were disputes over it. (Dawnlanders lived in a loose scatter, but they knew which family could use which land—"very exact and punctuall," Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island colony, called Indian care for property lines.) Most of the time, the Patuxet sachem owed fealty to the great sachem in the Wampanoag village to the southwest, and through him to the sachems of the allied confederations of the Nauset in Cape Cod and the Massachusett around Boston. Meanwhile, the Wampanoag were rivals and enemies of the Narragansett and Pequots to the west and the many groups of Abenaki to the north. As a practical matter, sachems had to gain the consent of their people, who could easily move away and join another sachemship. Analogously, the great sachems had to please or bully the lesser, lest by the defection of small communities they lose stature.

Sixteenth-century New England housed 100,000 people or more, a figure that was slowly increasing. Most of those people lived in shoreline communities, where rising numbers were beginning to change agriculture from an option to a necessity. These bigger settlements required more centralized administration; natural resources like good land and spawning streams, though not scarce, now needed to be managed. In consequence, boundaries between groups were becoming more formal. Sachems, given more power and more to defend, pushed against each other harder. Political tensions were constant. Coastal and riverine New England, according to the archaeologist and ethnohistorian Peter Thomas, was "an ever-changing collage of personalities, alliances, plots, raids and encounters which involved every Indian [settlement]."

Armed conflict was frequent but brief and mild by European standards. The *casus belli* was usually the desire to avenge an insult or gain status, not the wish for conquest. Most battles consisted of lightning guerrilla raids by ad hoc companies in the forest: flash of black-and-yellow-striped bows behind trees, hiss and whip of stone-tipped arrows through the air, eruption of angry cries. Attackers slipped away as soon as retribution had been exacted. Losers quickly conceded their loss of status. Doing otherwise would have been like failing to resign after losing a major piece in a chess tournament—a social

irritant, a waste of time and resources. Women and children were rarely killed, though they were sometimes abducted and forced to join the winning group. Captured men were often tortured (they were admired, though not necessarily spared, if they endured the pain stoically). Now and then, as a sign of victory, slain foes were scalped, much as British skirmishes with the Irish sometimes finished with a parade of Irish heads on pikes. In especially large clashes, adversaries might meet in the open, as in European battlefields, though the results, Roger Williams noted, were "farre less bloody, and devouring then the cruell Warres of Europe." Nevertheless, by Tisquantum's time defensive palisades were increasingly common, especially in the river valleys.

Inside the settlement was a world of warmth, family, and familiar custom. But the world outside, as Thomas put it, was "a maze of confusing actions and individuals fighting to maintain an existence in the shadow of change."

And that was before the Europeans showed up.

TOURISM AND TREACHERY

~~British fishing vessels may have reached Newfoundland as early as the 1480s and areas to the south soon after. In 1501, just nine years after Columbus's first voyage, the Portuguese adventurer Gaspar Corte-Real abducted fifty-odd Indians from Maine. Examining the captives, Corte-Real found to his astonishment that two were wearing items from Venice: a broken sword and two silver rings. As James Axtell has noted, Corte-Real probably was able to kidnap such a large number of people only because the Indians were already so comfortable dealing with Europeans that big groups willingly came aboard his ship.*~~

~~The earliest written description of the People of the First Light was by Giovanni da Verrazzano, an Italian mariner-for-hire commis-~~

*The first Europeans known to have reached the Americas were the Vikings, who appeared off eastern Canada in the tenth century. Their short-lived venture had no known effect on native life. Other European groups may also have arrived before Columbus, but they, too, had no well-substantiated impact on the people they visited.