



The Discovery and Rediscovery of the Americas

The first inhabitants of North and South America came in four waves of migration across the Bering Sea land bridge to where Wisconsin would be during the last Ice Age, which ended some 10,000 years ago. At the time of this migration, the world blood grouping was just Type 0, which is the oldest type, followed by Type A and then Type B. The wave of Native Americans carrying the Type A blood grouping is found in Alaska and in a few localized groups lower on the continent. The Blackfoot tribe in Canada, referred to as the Blackfeet in the United States, have Type A blood. There was no Type B blood in Native American populations before 1492. Each wave of migrants competed for hunting grounds and new brides as each new group moved into the local territory.

By 1492, the golden age of North American natives had passed. Gone were the Anasazi of the South West, the Hopewell peoples of the Eastern Woodlands and the Mound Builders of the Mississippi Region. Out of the collapse of these ancient cultures, new tribal confederations were forming, such as the Iroquois Confederation in the northeastern United States and Canada. Trade was conducted over vast areas of the continent, with trails across the continent. Reciprocal gift giving was an important method of controlling disputes. This was the practice that if a gift was given, one must be given in return. There were constant disputes over hunting grounds, brides and other disputes that could be settled with gifts.

Before 1492, there is speculation and evidence of other groups arriving in the Americas—the Viking sagas of Leif Erikson, of Chinese ships off the west coast, or of Pacific Islanders reaching American shores before Columbus. If and when they did, they had no real impact on the environment like that of the arrival of Columbus.

When the Europeans arrived with new technology, Native Americans saw an advantage to be used against their enemies. Hernando Cortes landed with fewer than 1,000 individuals and set off to conquer an empire. He did this with the help of thousands of Native Americans that saw Cortes as a means to the end of Aztec rule. When Lewis and Clark crossed the American continent, native tribes that saw that these new people might help in the destruction of the controlling Blackfoot Nation that dominated the territory.

The culture clash had negative and positive impacts, as is seen in the Columbian Exchange. The horse allowed Native Americans to hunt without driving whole herds of buffalo off cliffs. The Spanish explorers in California were amazed that they could ride through the woodlands with ease. Native Americans, to collect nuts and other foods, would set fires to burn off the underbrush. The basic food supply was double in the world—wheat and rice from the Old World and potato and corn from the New World. Each would grow in different areas, and that allowed food supply to double.

Each new wave of people had an impact on the development of the Americas. Nothing stays the same but becomes a blend of change. The discovery of the Americas becomes important not for who we are but because it allows us to see who we are and how far we have come.

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