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Excerpt

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Part One

The Ocean Shall Unloose the Bonds of Things

There will come an age, in the far-off years
when the Ocean shall unloose the bonds of things,
when the whole, broad earth shall be revealed,
and when Tethys shall disclose new worlds
Thule will not be the Limit of the Land.

Seneca, *Medea*

In retelling the Greek legend of Medea, Seneca “the Philosopher,” writing during Rome’s Augustan age, foretold that Tethys, the wife of Oceanus, would disclose new worlds. He was referring to maritime exploration and distant seafaring. In the story *Medea*, “a force more evil than the sea” had been brought into the Greek world by way of the first overseas voyage. This raised the question that Seneca wanted discussed: would civilized man be better off with or without the winds of the sea? “Now has the sea grown tame,” wrote Seneca in *Medea*, “. . . every small skiff roams at will on the deep.” As far as Seneca was concerned, it would only get worse: “The ocean shall unloose the bonds of things.” In Seneca’s Stoic vision, this future age of discovery would be a cataclysm of moral pollution and decline. “For no purpose did a wise god divide the lands with estranging Ocean,” wrote Horace, “if our impious ships nevertheless race across waters [that] should be left untouched; recklessly braving all, the human race rushes through forbidden sin.”



Figure 1.1. A fanciful engraving of a *nāo* or carrack surrounded by flying fishes. *Pisces in mari alati* (Flying Fishes at Sea), from Theodor de Bry, *Americae tertia pars* (Frankfurt, 1592). Courtesy of the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan.

What was so threatening? “What of the fact,” asked Seneca, “that the winds have allowed all peoples to traffic with one another and has mixed races from disparate locales?” Seneca was concerned as well that crossing the ocean gave an invitation to destruction by enemies because “no land is so far distant that it cannot send out some evil of its own contriving.”

At the time of the Columbian voyages, Spanish scholars pointed with pride to the *Medea* of Seneca for two reasons. First, Seneca was a Roman born in ancient Hispania, thus Spaniards claimed him as a fellow countryman even though in his lifetime neither Spain nor Castile existed. Second, Spanish translators found amazing prescience in the words of their “fellow Spaniard.” They found greatness in the attainment of the prophecy by Spanish navigators and those sailing on behalf of Spain, particularly Christopher Columbus. For discovery-era Spanish intellectuals, Seneca had prophesied the Spanish Empire.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, even more than in the Greek age of “impious ships,” Western Europeans created ships ever more capable of handling the rough seas of the Atlantic Ocean and sailing around the world. Caravels and *nāos* or carracks – like the one so superbly illustrated here by Theodor de Bry – represented the most sophisticated technology of the age. De Bry’s *nāo* shows us the classic

design with three masts, two castles extending from the deck and armed for war or carrying merchandise. Europeans were not the only, and not always the most impressive, shipbuilders around the world. However, they were the most persistent, century after century, in constructing more and better ships than any other maritime culture.

Before the ocean – and European ships – unloosed the bonds of things, the lands and peoples surrounding the Atlantic Ocean were separate and mostly unknown one to the other. These distinct worlds are examined in Chapter 1, “Antecedents: The Americas, Africa and Europe in the Fifteenth Century.” The peoples and cultures of the Americas and Atlantic Africa are not impeached or idealized but prudently studied and compared. Because late medieval Europe was the culture that unloosed the ocean and expanded into the worlds of the Atlantic, an inquiry into the origins of European expansion is warranted. We see a small promontory of Eurasia – as it became more populous, urban and commercial – begin to colonize itself and its margins before it set out to colonize overseas.

As most schoolchildren know, Portugal and Spain’s desire to trade directly with the producers and merchants of Asia for spices, silks, porcelain and other luxury goods aroused the voyages of exploration of the fifteenth century. This is the subject of Chapter 2, “Commencement: The European Opening of the Atlantic Ocean.” This chapter considers the significant role that Italian – particularly Genoese – financiers, merchants, navigators, cartographers and other specialists played when they moved their operations to the western Mediterranean and the near Atlantic in the fifteenth century. They offered their talents to the kingdoms of Portugal and Castile (and others) in return for wealth, status and power. The Iberians and the Genoese explored and commercially exploited Atlantic Africa and then attempted to do the same in the Americas. Explorers and navigators were not always looking for a new route to Asia; many maritime expeditions had less grandiose objectives, such as seeking new coastlines, interim profits and an assured way back to where they came.

No one overriding cause or motive drove the expansion of Portugal and Castile into the Atlantic. It was a process of small and generally uncoordinated steps taken over the course of more than two hundred years. Advances were rewarded by profits sufficient to encourage new efforts. Significant payoffs came rather late in the process: only in the late fifteenth century did the gold trade from Africa to Portugal amount to a significant portion of Portuguese overseas trade and to the income of the Portuguese crown; and only in the mid-sixteenth century were the great silver mines in Spanish America discovered that would enrich the Spanish monarchy and the rest of Europe. The European age of exploration and expansion of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was a continuation overseas of Europe’s internal colonization of its agricultural frontiers during the High Middle Ages and of Christendom’s expansion in Moorish Iberia, in Eastern Europe and in the Holy Land during the Crusades.

As it was the Portuguese and the Castilians who led Europeans into the Atlantic in the fifteenth century, they were the first to trade, create colonies and make alliances with and conquer native states in Atlantic Africa and the Americas. Being the first had great benefits in the early Atlantic World. The making of the Iberian Atlantic is the subject of Chapter 3, “Conquests: Forging the Iberian Empires in Africa and the Americas.” The Portuguese and the Castilians encountered Africans and Native Americans and required their collaboration to create empires of trade and

empires of conquest. In Atlantic Africa, the Portuguese generally obtained African leave to establish trading posts on the coast and, by and large, traded in peace with African chiefs, monarchs and merchants. In the Caribbean, Castilians at first traded peacefully with the Taino. The discovery of gold, and Castilian attempts to force Indians to dig and pan it, led to Indian slavery, resistance and war. The Castilian response was brutal military conquest. While the Portuguese in Africa began and sustained a tradition of peaceful coexistence and trade, the Castilians in America began and continued a tradition of military conquest through a policy of divide and conquer. The Castilians nearly always exploited Indian rivalries and animosities and obtained Indian allies in their military campaigns to conquer Indian states and empires. The Portuguese in Brazil followed the Castilian path rather than their own pattern in Africa. As in the Caribbean, Portuguese efforts to force Brazilian natives to work on sugar plantations prompted Indian rebellions and thus Portuguese reprisals and conquests. The Portuguese in Brazil also followed a divide-and-conquer strategy and obtained Indian allies in their wars against native peoples.

The only sustained Portuguese campaign of conquest in Africa occurred in Angola. There, for more than a century, Portuguese troops and even more African auxiliaries established, with great difficulty, the first European territorial colony in sub-Saharan Africa. Although the Portuguese expected to find wealthy silver mines or to establish a productive plantation sector, neither of these outcomes came to be. For the following three centuries, Angola became the great factory of Portugal's, and later Brazil's, slave trade.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the embryonic Atlantic World was Iberian. This emerging world is described and analyzed in Chapter 4, "Realms: The Overseas Atlantic Empires of Spain and Portugal." All of the outposts and colonies spanning the Atlantic at this time were either Portuguese or Spanish. Portugal essentially monopolized trade with Atlantic Africa from its outposts at Arguim, São Jorge da Mina, São Tomé and Luanda. However, Portugal's position on the coast of Africa was thin and tenuous. Angola was its only mainland colony, but even there few Portuguese emigrated and few enterprises other than slave trading prospered. The Iberian presence in the Americas offered a striking contrast. Spanish America became an impressive outgrowth of Europe. Spanish cities were surrounded by vast Indian populations working silver mines and landed estates. The two centers of Spanish wealth and power in the hemisphere, Mexico and Peru, were the restructured societies of the Mexica and Inka Empires. Spanish-American cities were as impressive as their counterparts in the Iberian peninsula: they possessed brilliant viceregal courts in Mexico City and Lima; they had universities, printing presses and theaters; and they were centers of considerable trade and manufacturing. Mines, haciendas and urban workshops created prosperous societies closely tied to metropolitan Spain and regulated by the crown. Portuguese Brazil was a more rural society. Unlike Spanish America, Brazil was a society concentrated on the Atlantic coast, stretching more than two thousand miles from northeast to southwest. The basic economic as well as social and political institution in society was the sugar plantation. The valuable staple sugar contributed to the formation of a dynamic Portuguese colony in the South Atlantic.

This was the early and first Atlantic World, one dominated and nearly monopolized by Portugal and Spain. Atlantic history, as Bernard Bailyn writes, "is the story of a world in motion." This was no static historical unit that existed for three or

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four centuries. In telling the story of the Atlantic World, Bailyn suggests the historian's job is to describe: "the phasing of the development of this world, its motion and dynamics – to grasp its history as process." The four chapters of Part I seek to do just that. However, as Professor Bailyn notes: "It will not easily be done, the Atlantic world was multitudinous, embracing the people and circumstances of four continents, countless regional economies, languages, and social structures."

Chapter 1

Antecedents

The Americas, Africa and Europe in the Fifteenth Century

Before the fifteenth century, the lands touching the Atlantic Ocean were different worlds, separate and largely isolated, unknown or mostly unknown one to the others. There had been no earlier traveler, no Marco Polo, to demonstrate the connections and networks that could and, in time, would tie these distant lands together. The same ocean that soon became a vast crossroads bringing peoples together had constituted the ultimate barrier for millennia. With the sea at their backs, societies had turned their attention inward, not out. Cultures that one day would cooperate and clash emerged and evolved in different ways on different continents. Their histories followed exceptional courses and their peoples, of course, were unaware of any Atlantic destiny. Out of this diversity, a new circuit would be knitted and forged, the Atlantic World. “The Atlantic, once the end of the world,” writes Barry Cunliffe, “was now the beginning.” To understand the making of the Atlantic World, we must first examine its components and antecedents. We turn to the distant and separate worlds of the Atlantic rim: the Americas, Africa and Europe on the eve of the European voyages of exploration and expansion.

1.1 The Americas

The very concepts of America, Africa and Europe are products of the Europeanization of world geography. Before the Florentine navigator Amerigo Vespucci lent his name to the northern and southern continents of the Western Hemisphere, the native peoples did not conceive of themselves as Americans or Indians. Identity was local or regional and long it had been. Cultural diversity was the overwhelming reality of the peoples of the lands of the western Atlantic in the fifteenth century. There were at least fifty-nine distinct Native American language families with more than a thousand variations and dialects. Farmers predominated across the landscape but hunters and gatherers persisted in naturally rich environments and in the less hospitable regions that were too cold or too dry to cultivate crops. Some peoples lived in

small mobile bands, most in farming villages, others in towns and great cities. There were stateless societies, which became known as tribes and chiefdoms, as well as hierarchical states and empires. For more than ten thousand years, the founders of America made their own history in their own particular and often sophisticated ways.

Native Americans were intelligent and inventive peoples but they were no more or less violent, environmentally destructive or imperialistic than other peoples and cultures around the world. Contrary to popular myths that portray pre-Columbian indigenous peoples as enlightened men and women who lived in peace with one another and in harmony with Mother Nature, Indians shared the same basic human traits possessed by the Chinese, Turks, Ethiopians, Arabs, Europeans and everybody else. They were unimaginably diverse in culture and cultivation, thus making it quite difficult to accurately generalize about Native Americans. One can conclude that pre-Columbian America was no paradise.

By the end of the fifteenth century, two impressive empires, the Mexica and Inka, existed in the Americas and were reaching the crest of their political and cultural development. These two empires were the evolutionary results of ancient civilizations that had seen the rise and fall of several complex cultures over the course of three thousand years. Mesoamerica, homeland of the Mexica, and the Central Andes, cradle of the Inka, witnessed the rise of the first farming villages, labor specialization and social stratification. In these two hearths of civilization, population growth encouraged the development of ever more complex cultures that invented religious ideologies, built cities and monumental architecture and forged complex polities that expanded territorially and ultimately ruled millions of subjects. It is important to realize that what came to know as the New World was, in fact, an old world of ancient civilizations that had risen and fallen before most people in Western Europe had become Christians.

Olmec culture in Mesoamerica and Chavin culture in the Andes are the names scholars have given the first complex societies in the Americas, the “Mother Cultures.” During the first millennium B.C.E., peoples of these cultures formed the first urban centers and states that built the first religious monuments. Scholars named the next stage of cultural evolution in Mesoamerica that took place during the first millennium C.E., the “Classic” era. The classic Maya of southern Mesoamerica built dozens of independent city-states and beautiful stone pyramids and palaces. Central Mexico was dominated politically and religiously by the enormous city of Teotihuacan. Post-classic central Mexico was ruled by the Toltec culture from the city of Tula before the rise of the Mexica. In the Andes, the rise and fall of cultures saw first the Moche on the coast and later Tiahuanaco and Wari in the highlands during the first millennium C.E. After the disintegration of these highland states, the Chimú Empire at its capital of Chanchan unified the northern coast of Peru. While these cultures represented the most powerful and influential of their time and place, additional regional cultures in Mesoamerica and the Andes rose and fell as well. The Mexica and the Inka were merely the most recent cultures and states that had arisen from two ancient, sophisticated and prolific civilizations.

*Document 1.1**Popol Vuh*

Maya-Quiché Creation Myth

In the beginning, everything was in suspense and silence. Only the heavens and waters existed. There were no human beings, animals, birds or fish. There were no valleys, ravines or hills. The surface of the earth was still invisible. But the gods stood out dazzling in clarity against the darkness of the night. And they possessed great sentiments.

The gods conferred and came to a happy agreement. The waters were to remain; they were to irrigate the earth, which was to appear in the form of a plate. Light was to be born in the heavens and on earth, so that food might be planted for the people, who were to express their gratitude for its appearance to the Creators.

The formation of the earth was magical, strange and marvelous. At first, the space was filled with clouds and fog; then the mountains began to appear in the waters; cypresses and pines for the woods, coasts and valleys. Then the gods created the inhabitants for those places.

Afterwards, the Creators talked about their creatures with great satisfaction, designating homes for the animals and the birds. “You, wild beasts of the fields, shall drink from the rivers, sleep in ravines; your bodies shall rest on grass and you shall cohabit and procreate among the banana plants and the bushes; you shall walk on four feet and serve to carry burdens,” they were told. “You birds will be in the branches as we are in our houses; there you shall fecundate and multiply.” Then they all selected their haunts and shelters; the birds began building their nests.

While everything was being arranged for the birds and beasts, the world was still in silence. Afterwards, the gods said to them, “Shout, howl, chirp; speak to one another; understand one another; don’t remain silent. Separate into groups according to your kind and ways. Then say our names, so that we may be honored in heaven, since we are your father and mother.”

But they could not speak like rational beings; they only made gestures and sounds; they cackled, bellowed, and chirped without showing any signs of possessing a language.

When the Creators saw that their creatures did not pronounce their names nor recognize them, they were very sad. And they told the creatures that they would be replaced by others because they could not speak; they could not invoke and adore them. “You shall only serve to obey, and your flesh shall be crushed and eaten. That shall be your destiny.”

The animals and the birds wanted to recover their preponderance, and tried in a new way to express their adoration. But as the gods were unable to understand them, they did not give them any help. So their fate remained as decreed by the gods; they were to be sacrificed, killed and eaten by the intelligent people.

The Procreators and Engenderers consulted once more and made a second attempt at forming creatures who would be impressed with their

greatness. They fashioned them of wet clay, but they soon knew that they were not going to be successful. They dissolved, forming a heap of mire in which could be seen a neck, a very wide mouth, vacant, staring eyes and no head. They could talk but they felt nothing. Because of their constitution, they could not remain in water; they melted immediately; they had no consistency.

The Creators said to the creatures of clay, “Struggle to procreate and multiply but only until the new beings come.” They soon fell to pieces, thus undoing the work of their Shapers.

Again the gods consulted and asked one another, “What shall we do to form people who shall see, understand, and invoke us?” And they asked for a new day of creation. They chose one from among them to obtain the presence of the grandmother of the sun, the grandmother of light, as they were told to do by the Creators. Then all met to discuss the kind of people to create, who should adore them as superior beings . . .

From Pazil and Cayali, the places whence come all good things, came the yellow and white ears of maize. The animals that brought the information about them were the fox, the coyote, the parrot and the crow. These four told the gods about the white and yellow maize which was to form the flesh and blood of the new people, and they showed them the way to Pazil.

The gods rejoiced over finding maize, the cacao, fruits and honey. There were also trees and plants growing there for food and beverages.

Immediately they began to plan how to form our first ancestors. The flesh and muscles were made of the products of the yellow and white maize. Only four were made of this food. They had no father nor mother; they were simply called men. They were not born of woman but were children created by the gods. Their creation was the supernatural and marvelous work of the Creators, who endowed them with the presence and likeness to people. Then these men talked and reasoned, they saw and felt, walked and touched. They were perfect of face and of handsome appearance. They saw and understood what was in the heavens and on the earth.

The new people were questioned by two of the gods. “What do you think of the senses that you have received? Do you not see and know that your language is as good as your way of walking? Then open your eyes, let your glances penetrate, and see as far as you can, even into the mountains and the coasts. Whatever you behold, as far as your eyes can see, you will possess it all,” they said.

After they had seen everything under the heavens, they showed their gratitude to their Creators, giving them thanks two and three times. “You have given us existence, our mouths, and our faces. We speak, hear, feel, move, talk, and possess the perception to distinguish that which is near and far from us. Because of this we can see the big and the little that exists in heaven and on earth. Thanks to you then, our Makers, for having given us life. You are our grand-parents, our ancestors.”

The gods were not pleased; their children knew and saw too much. So they took counsel once more and decided to limit their vision and

understanding, for “would not each one in his wisdom want to come to know and do as much as we have made them comprehend, seeing everything!”

So the Creators veiled the eyes of man, covering them as one’s breath covers a mirror. Their eyes became clouded and they could only see what was near. And their eyes were the same then as now.

Then women were formed, to be companions for these men. He who sees all fulfilled their wishes. It was in a sort of dream that they received, by their word, women full of beauty. When the men saw them, their hearts were filled with joy because they would no longer be alone, they would have mates.

The *Popul Vuh* has often been referred to as a Maya bible, a redaction of the central myths or beliefs of this culture. The *Popul Vuh*, or the Book of Counsel of the K’iche, was written down sometime in the 1550s. It was derived from a codex written in Maya glyphs. *Source: Popul Vuh. Maya-Quiché Creation Myth* (1927). Manuscrito de Chichicastenango, Guatemala. Edited by C. J. Antio Villacorta and M. Flavio Rodas. From Frances Toor, *A Treasury of Mexican Folkways* (1947), pp. 461–7.

The Culhua Mexica were part of the Nahuatl-speaking people who migrated into the central Valley of Mexico in several waves. (They are better known today as “the Aztecs,” which is based on the name of their mythical homeland Aztlán). Over the course of the next three hundred years, these newcomers absorbed the high culture of Mesoamerica, building some fifty city-states in and immediately outside the Valley of Mexico with a population of more than one million. This larger region of the Nahuas was called Anahuac, meaning “in the vicinity of the waters.” The most important cities were located on the shore of several interconnected wide and shallow lakes in the southern reaches of the Valley. Tenochtitlan, the largest and most powerful of these cities, was built on marshy islands within Lake Texcoco and populated by the Mexica, the last of the Nahuatl migrants to enter central Mexico. Tenochtitlan in the early sixteenth century was a city of perhaps seventy thousand to ninety thousand residents covering five square miles. It was divided into four quarters by avenues and canals that converged on a walled sacred precinct containing a great double-stepped stone pyramid, today called the Templo Mayor (“Great Temple”). The ceremonial center contained other temple platforms, a ball court and various shrines and altars. Nearby were the palaces of kings and great nobles. A stone aqueduct carried fresh water to the city from a spring at Chapultepec hill. In the northern district of Tlatelolco, a marketplace held the stalls of hundreds of merchants who traded with thousands of customers. Countless canoes came and went from this city in the lake, making it the hub of trade and communication in the Valley of Mexico (see Map 1.1).

Tenochtitlan, in league with two other city-states, Tetzcoco (today Texcoco) and Tlacopan, formed the Triple Alliance, a confederated empire that dominated much of central Mexico from the Pacific to the Gulf of Mexico.