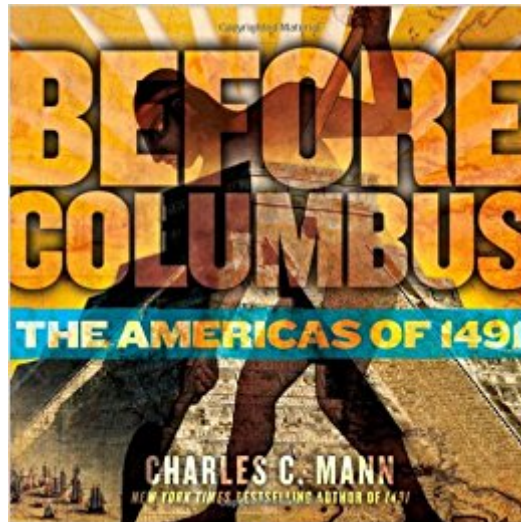




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# Before Columbus: The Americas Of 1491



## Synopsis

A companion book for young readers based on *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*, the groundbreaking bestseller by Charles C. Mann.

## Book Information

Lexile Measure: 1080L (What's this?)

Series: AWARDS: Young Hoosier Middle Grades Awards 2011-2012

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Shipping Weight: 1.7 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 47 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #97,505 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #20 in [Books > Children's Books](#) > Education & Reference > History > Prehistoric #47 in [Books > Children's Books > Education & Reference > History > Exploration & Discovery](#) #75 in [Books > Children's Books > Geography & Cultures > Multicultural Stories > Native North & South Americans](#)

Age Range: 8 - 12 years

Grade Level: 3 - 7

## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Grade 6 Up  
•In this beautifully illustrated and concise adaptation of *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (Vintage, 2006), Mann paints a superb picture of pre-Columbian America. In the process, he overturns the misconceived image of Natives as simple, widely scattered savages with minimal impact on their surroundings. Well-chosen, vividly colored graphics and photographs of mummies, pyramids, artifacts, and landscapes as well as the author's skillful storytelling will command the attention of even the most reluctant readers. Eye-catching sidebars and oversize chapter headings seem to pop from the pages. Mann constructs the narrative around three crucial questions that continue to confound historians today: Was the New World really new? Why were the Europeans successful? What ecological impact did Natives have on their surroundings? From the pre-Columbian genetic engineering of maize to the existence of pyramids older than the Egyptian variety, Mann's lucid answers to these questions

represent current scholarly opinion and point the way toward future exploration and discovery. Students and teachers will benefit greatly from this engaging exploration of America's most overlooked and misunderstood historical periods. — Brian Odom, Pelham Public Library, AL  
END

Charles C. Mann is the author of 1491, which won the U.S. National Academy of Sciences' Keck award for the best book of the year. A correspondent for The Atlantic Monthly, Science, and Wired, he has covered the intersection of science, technology, and commerce for many newspapers and magazines here and abroad, including the New York Times, Vanity Fair, the Washington Post, and more. In addition to 1491, he was the co-author of four other non-fiction books. He is now working on a companion volume to 1491. His website is [www.charlesmann.org](http://www.charlesmann.org).

This book is a wealth of information about Native American civilizations and history which I'd bet the majority of adults are largely unaware. If you ask most adults what is the "cradle of civilization?", they will probably name either somewhere around Mesopotamia or Egypt. If asked about Native American civilization, most will either say that the Indians didn't achieve civilization until much later (and perhaps name the Mayas, Incas or Aztecs), or they might believe that Native Americans were always rather primitive hunter-gatherers who never achieved "civilization". The state of knowledge about pre-Columbian cultures has simply exploded in the last few decades. If you have school aged kids (or even if you don't), I recommend reading this book for yourself and see how it compares not only with what you learned in school, but with what your kids are learning. I am betting you will find it quite eye-opening. The title is rather misleading, however. The book covers civilizations and cultures of the Americas starting way before 1491 and continuing well after the first contacts with the Europeans. For instance, the book opens with the Norte Chico civilization which consisted of a clustering of small cities, complete with pyramids, in the Peruvian desert which pre-dated the Egyptian pyramids. Moreover, scientists were always convinced that agriculture must be the basis of civilization. However, it appears that the Norte Chico civilization was based on trade between the fishermen on the coast and the cotton growers further inland. The book then explores the Olmec society, their relation to the Mayan peoples and their role in developing genetic engineering. It appears that the Olmec people developed maize (corn) by cross-breeding a small maize crop with wild grasses. Furthermore, they farmed this maize with other crops which mutually benefitted each other and therefore did not deplete the soil. This method of farming was the basis of sustenance for

many Native American peoples for centuries to come. Next the book explores the Mayan, Incan and "Aztec" (known to themselves as the "Mexica" people or the "Triple Alliance") cultures and how each of those civilizations engineered their environments to adapt in somewhat unlikely places. Each built large and thriving cities (for example, Teotihuacan in southern Mexico housed approximately 200,000 people at its height), each engaged in trade and warfare with neighboring peoples and each maintained written records and had complex worship systems. The book then explores the impact of the early European explorers/conquerors. It especially addresses the question of how a tiny band of Europeans were able to overcome such a huge population of Indians. The traditional answers - the Europeans' superior arms and armor and their horses - don't appear adequate to fully explain such a massacre, especially since there are documents cases in which the Indians decisively routed the Europeans. At this point, the book takes a bit of a detour to explore how and when the earliest Native Americans came to the "new world". These chapters go into great detail, but it appears that the first migrations came much earlier than was previously thought and perhaps by different routes. But the uptick is basically that because of their migration and because they did not live with domesticated livestock or pets, the earliest Americans escaped many of the diseases that plagued most of the rest of the world. Because they weren't routinely exposed to diseases, the Native Americans did not develop immunity to such diseases as the Europeans had. Furthermore, because many of them originated from a small group of ancestors, those ancestors may not have had the genetic basis to develop certain immunities even with exposure. So while the Native Americans enjoyed their "disease-free paradise" while it lasted, it was a disastrous liability to them when the Europeans brought diseases with them. One thing that struck me was the unintentionality of the disease-spreading process. We've all heard stories about the pioneers deliberately giving smallpox-infested blankets to the Indians, and that certainly happened later on. But initially, the conquerors didn't even realize the role of diseases. They didn't even realize what was happening in between contacts with the natives. Early explorers would describe a new land teeming with villages and people, whereas another explorer only a couple decades later would describe an overgrown wilderness with only small groups of people living in primitive conditions. What the early explorers didn't realize was that the diseases they carried with them had devastated native populations by 90% or more in the interim period, and how fast those diseases had traveled. The story of "Squanto" (real name "Tisquantum") is used as an illustration. Every schoolchild is familiar with the story of how the pilgrims met a "friendly Indian" who taught them how to grow corn and saved them by helping them survive the winter. What gets conveniently overlooked is how Tisquantum was able to communicate with them. In fact, he spoke fluent English

because he'd been kidnapped by previous explorers and conquerors. He eventually earned his passage back on another exploring ship, only to find his entire village and family wiped out by disease. Helping the Pilgrims to survive was probably Tisquantum's best (albeit reluctant) choice for his own survival. Finally, the book addresses the frequent misconception that the Americas were a "vast wilderness" by looking specifically at the Amazon River Basin. Most people, when thinking of the Amazon, think of it as a vast, uncharted, largely uninhabited/uninhabitable wild jungle. But closer examination reveals that it is actually perhaps the world's largest orchard. Typical agriculture would be virtually impossible around the Amazon Basin due to the effort of clearing such large and densely packed trees. What appears to have happened is that the early Americans may have cleared the area one tree at a time and replaced the trees with food-bearing trees. In other words, another example of how "primitive" peoples engineered their environment in advanced ways. This book is beautifully produced with a wealth of pictures, maps and text inserts to enhance the text. Every page is a discovery that presents history in a living and exciting way. The book takes advantage of all sorts of science, anthropology, archeology, and other evidence-based fields of knowledge to flesh out the little that has been known for far too long about the earliest inhabitants of our land. Add it to your child's library (and/or your own) today.

Every school child knows "that Egyptians Built Pyramids, but did you know Native Americans were raising pyramid-like structures nearly five hundred years earlier." This beautifully done National Geographic-like illustrated book is the children's edition of the authors previous best seller "1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus." Coming from the so-called Old World, early and later explorers and settlers who landed on the continents of the Western Hemisphere simply assumed that the land was inhabited by savages because it didn't look like Europe. How arrogant and how wrong these early European explorers along with their descendants were. Modern archaeology and carbon dating has enabled contemporary archaeologists and anthropologists to discover the truth and it will require the rewriting of ancient history. In the oldest cities in the world as old as 5,000 years ago, "the biggest urban center of all might have been a cluster of small cities in the desert of Peru." Francisco Orellana, the conquistador who first floated down the Amazon River looking for the golden cities of Eldorado may have just missed it because of the sheer size of the river--the mouth of the Amazon is wide enough to hold an island the size of Switzerland so it would be easy to miss something on the opposite shore. The modern city of Santarem, Brazil, sits on the south bank of the Amazon in Brazil. "Across the river sandstone buttes rise to heights of 500 feet and more, an usual sight in the flat world of Amazonia. Caves in the buttes show signs of human activity" including cave paintings. Anna

C. Roosevelt has excavated the Painted Rock Cave and found evidence of many civilizations the oldest of which left painted handprints 13,000 years ago. Col. Faucet and his son disappeared into the Jungle in the early part of the 20th Century. He was also searching for traces of the fabled Seven Cities of Gold in the Upper Xingu area where he had found ancient native pottery. He was apparently looking in the right area, just too late. Earthen works of a cluster of ancient, but now buried city settlements with moats, gates and wide highways have been discovered in the area of Lake Lamakuka. These now completely buried cities were apparently thriving at the time Columbus discovered the New World. (Interested readers should check out Michael J. Heckenbergers work in the area.) As children in St. Louis, we often played in the almost flat Mississippi bottomland in the area of East St. Louis. We children loved climbing and then sliding down the many large mounds of dirt sticking up at various unexpected places in the otherwise flat landscape. I don't even remember if we knew our hilly playgrounds were the remains of the local mound building civilization. "Anyone who traveled up the Mississippi River 900 years ago would have seen, looming in the distance, a four-level mound of earth, built by human hands, that was bigger than Egypt's Great Pyramid. Around this huge mound stood more than a hundred smaller mounds...Canals for irrigation and transportation threaded among fields of maize. Wooden houses were covered with red and white plaster. Flags of painted animal skin flapped everywhere. This splendid sight was Cahokia, home to at least 15,000 Native Americans. When we played there many of the mounds had a farm house built on top of it along with a grove of trees. What happened to Cahokia and the other civilizations of the Americas is surveyed in this tome. It's a perfect read for people who don't have the time to read Mann's 500 plus page adult edition. It is also beautifully done. This book will introduce the reader of any age to the basic myths of ancient civilizations in the Americas. Most of those advanced cultures developed independently and earlier than many of the world's other civilizations. This is a marvelous read. I can't imagine anyone not loving this page-turner. It's also amazing to find out how wrong most of what we learned in school is about ancient history in the Americas. The Western Hemisphere has nothing to be ashamed of. The Paleo-indians were apparently practicing genetic engineering with the development of corn, irrigating the desert, mapping the stars, building temples and pyramids to their gods when the rest of the world was just waking up.

The Best

Arrived quickly and as described! no surprises.

## Food for thought

I purchased this after seeing the author, Charles Mann, speak. I read the book 1491 a few years ago, and as I am a teacher I really wanted to make the information in this book accessible to my students. It has a lot of text to read, and has a jumbled up layout on the pages. If students are willing to read that much, they can read the adult book. The size, pictures, layout, etc. remind one of a book made for 12 years old, but there is too much text, at too difficult a reading level, for that age group. In the end, I don't know who would read this - too hard for kids, too kiddish for adults, too disorganized and choppy for an adolescent reader who picks it up because they are interested in non-fiction and the subject matter. I would like a better book to bring this content to my students, because the content is very important and very different than what I learned thirty years ago. All the new research and findings are so exciting, and my students will be part of a generation that discovers more and more about N. America's prehistory.

Outstanding book.

This book is very readable and enjoyable. I bought it for my classroom, even though the reading level is a bit high for fourth grade. Nonetheless, I believe industrious strong readers will enjoy it and learn as I did.

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