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The historical context

In 1492, the Genoese entrepreneur and pious Christian Christopher Columbus directed three caravels across the Atlantic Ocean toward what he assumed would turn out to be a new route to Asia. Although he did not publish a full account of his motives, the notations he made in his books and private journals tell us that he wanted to make enough money for a new crusade against the Ottoman empire, which controlled the Christian Holy Land. Columbus succeeded in making money for himself and for Isabel and Ferdinand, his royal sponsors and monarchs of the newly-formed Spain. But he relinquished his crusade plans to subdue the “pagans” he encountered in the Caribbean Sea islands. Investigation of the Columbian beginnings to the creation of the Atlantic rim shows us some of the motivations and methods of the Europeans who helped create new societies in that region.

Earlier Teaching Units have introduced ideas about the cultural **syncretism** and borrowing that enabled the Portuguese to develop a new sailing technology enabling them to travel to eastern Atlantic islands—the Madeira, Canary, Azores, and Cape Verde islands. In addition to maps, astrolabes, and compasses, Columbus took with him to America sugar cane plants from his mother-in-law’s plantation in the Madeira Islands. It seems clear that Columbus thought he might encounter natural environments similar to that of the Atlantic islands. He could therefore start his own sugar plantation, using slave labor, as planters in the Madeiras and Canaries did. The early and intimate connection Columbus made between travel, trade, and profits informed much of the new societies that developed over the following three hundred years.

The migrations of peoples across the Atlantic led to the foundation of new kinds of societies in the Americas. For many Europeans, the migration was temporary. Like Columbus, they were anxious to make enough money to change their socio-economic status back home. Many other Europeans had no choice; they were transported to the Americas as punishment for greater and lesser crimes and sent to work as slaves or **indentured servants** on sugar plantations. For example, a few hundred European Jews and Muslims ended up as galley slaves in the Caribbean. A larger number of Europeans indentured themselves to gain passage to the Caribbean or North America to work in colonial enterprises.

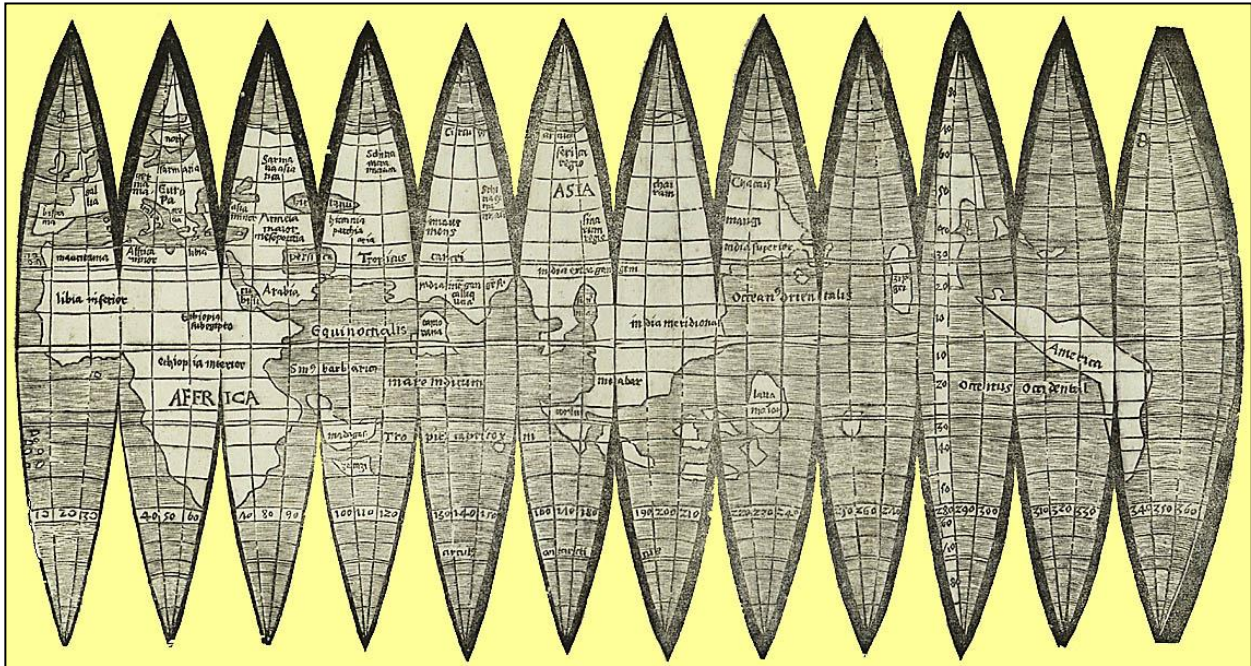
During the first hundred years of European contact with the peoples of the Americas, the Aztec and Inca empires were conquered and millions of native peoples died, many of them owing to their lack of immunities to what had become common childhood diseases in Afroeurasia. In the Western Hemisphere, the demographic collapse among **Amerindians** (Native Americans) was especially catastrophic in places that had high, dense populations. These places included the Caribbean islands, central Mexico, the Mayan highlands of southern Mexico and Central America, and the Andes Mountains. The “**Great Dying**,” the most devastating epidemiological event known in world history, was set off when Spanish and Portuguese

invaders, followed by other immigrants from Europe and Africa, introduced disease pathogens to Amerindian populations as part of the Columbian exchange of numerous organisms. (Recently, the Mexican epidemiologist Rodolfo Acuña-Soto has presented evidence that epidemics in Mexico in 1545 and 1576 may have been caused by an indigenous virus carried by rats.¹) Owing to the long separation between the Western and Eastern Hemispheres, these populations did not evolve significant natural immunities to Afroeurasian infections, which included measles, smallpox, influenza, typhus, and tuberculosis.

Millions of African men and women were transported unwillingly across the Atlantic to work in the production and sale of sugar, silver, and other commodities. European sea merchants transported these Africans, who had been captured and enslaved in their homelands. Between 1450 and 1810, 10 to 12 million enslaved Africans arrived in the Americas. A majority of the total, about 6 million, crossed the Atlantic from 1700 to 1807. Beginning in 1897, the British navy began to intercept ships transporting slaves from Africa. Historians have estimated that 42 percent of these men and women were taken to the Caribbean, 38 percent to Brazil, and only 5 percent to North America. The trade was disastrous for some parts of tropical Africa. African slave traders aimed to capture and sell mainly young women and men because they were the age group best fit to work and reproduce. The trade therefore drained African societies of millions of productive people. The slave trade's effect on **demography** was not uniform, though. The transfer of slaves from region to region affected the size of populations, and the new crops from the Americas, notably cassava and maize, contributed to higher birth rates. The population of sub-Saharan Africa in 1900 was about 95 million. If the Atlantic slave trade had not occurred, it might have been much higher.

In the Americas between 1500 and 1800, the proportion of people of African origin in the overall population steadily grew. From a demographic perspective, the Americas were becoming increasingly “Africanized.” However, Europeans continued to arrive in the Western Hemisphere as well, about 2 million of them during those 300 years. After 1800, European migration to the Americas began to surge. It was in the next era (Big Era Seven) that the demographic “Europeanization” of the Americas really took off.

¹ Rodolfo Acuña-Soto, David W. Stahle, Malcolm K. Cleaveland, and Matthew D. Therrell, “Megadrought and Megadeath in 16th Century Mexico,” *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 8: 4 (April 2002).



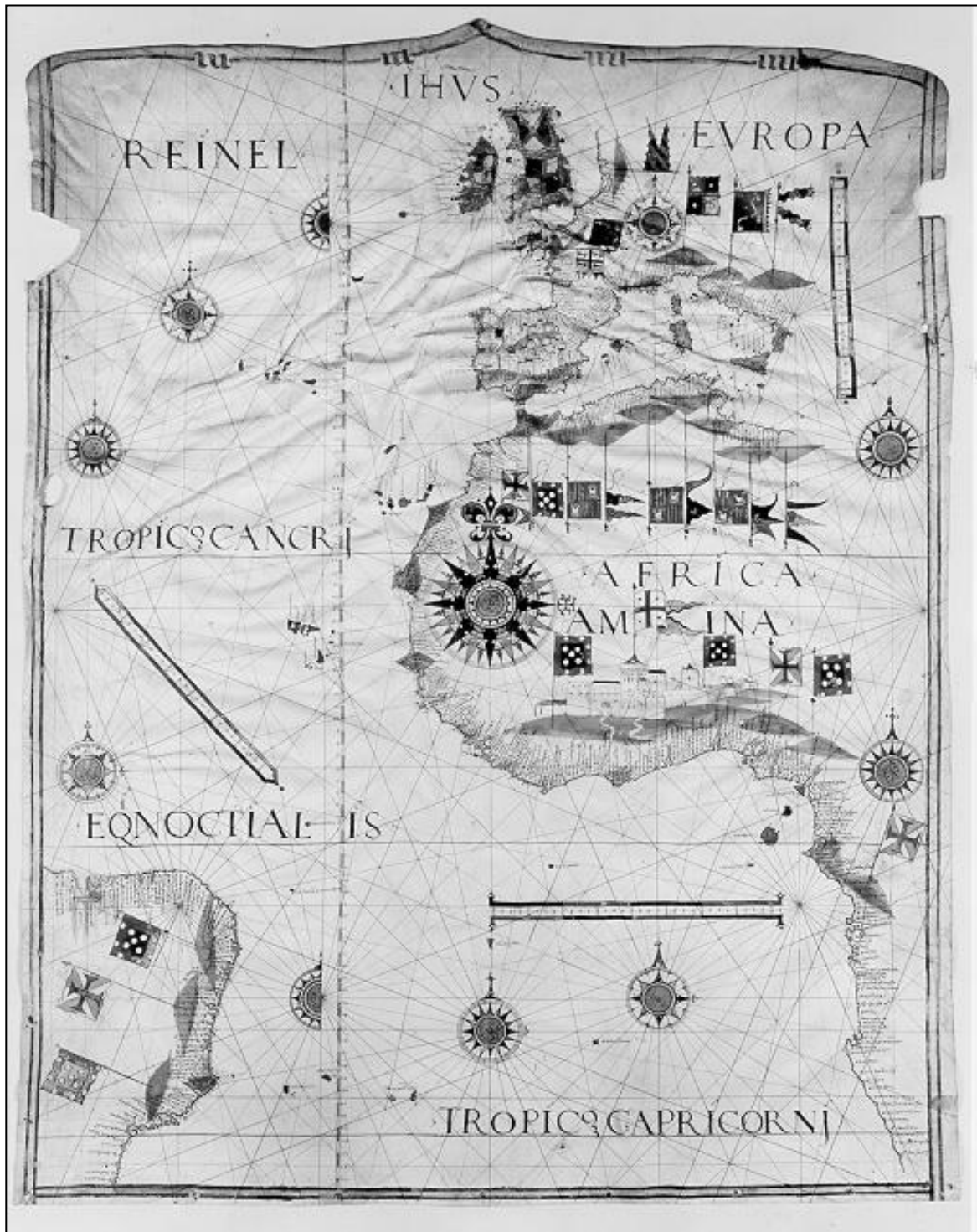
Martin Waldseemüller

The 1507 Globular Map of the World

This is the first globular map to use the term “America” in designating the continents of the New World. It was originally published to accompany Waldseemüller’s *Cosmographiae introductio*.

James Ford Bell Library, University of Minnesota

<http://gallery.lib.umn.edu/exhibits/show/maps-and-mapmakers--martin-wal>

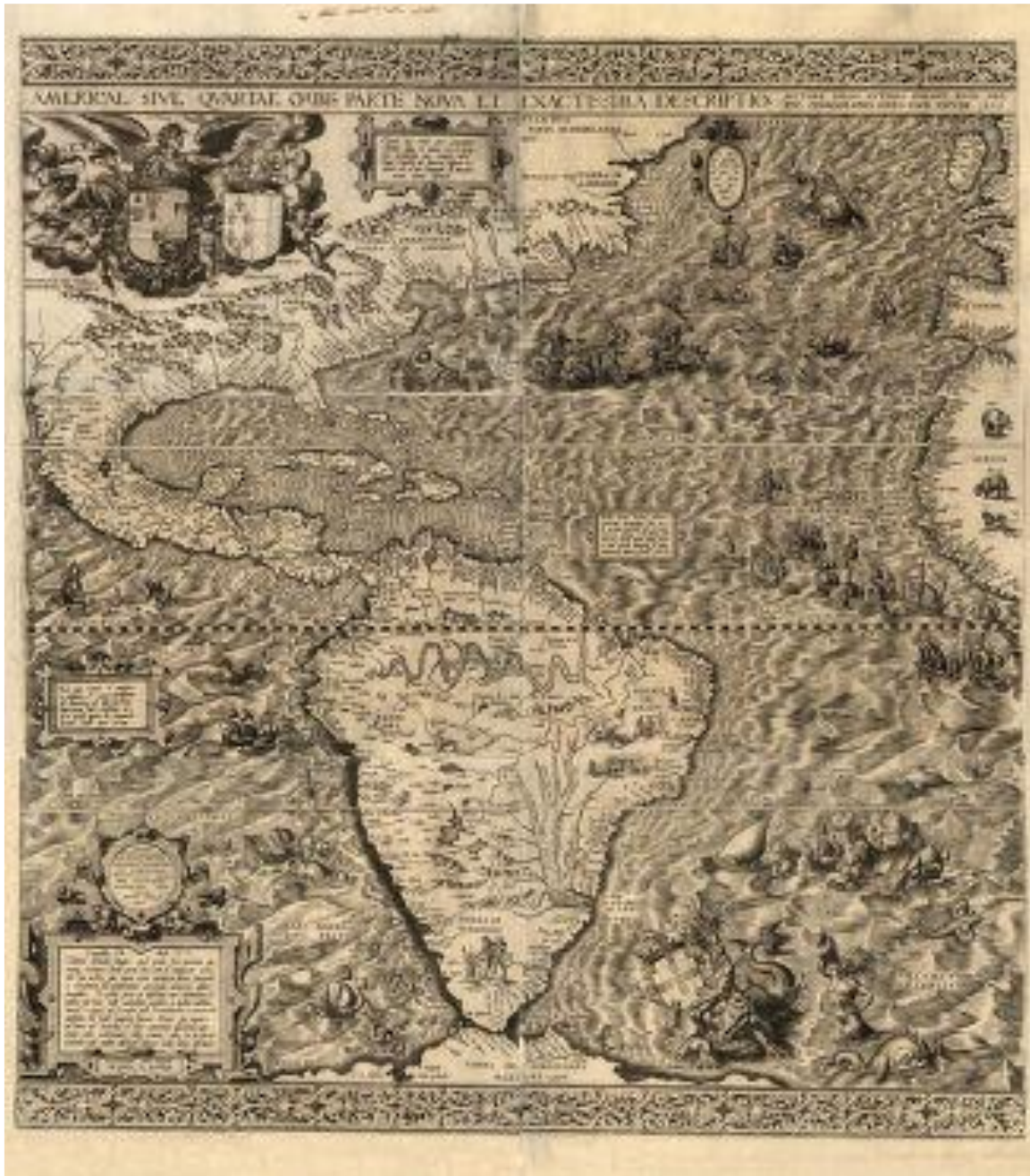


Jorge Reinel, Portolan chart of the Atlantic Ocean, Portugal, ca. 1534

This map focuses on the triangle of navigation between Europe, Africa, and Brazil.

James Ford Bell Library, University of Minnesota

<https://www.lib.umn.edu/bell/maps/reinel>

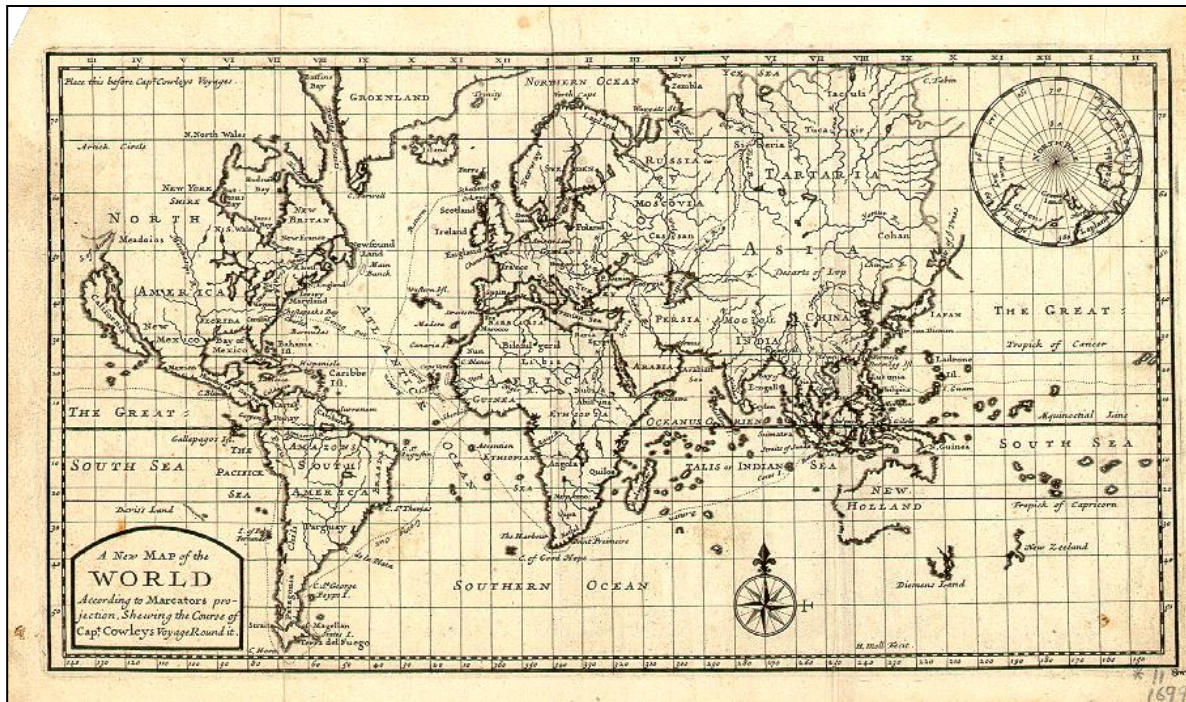


Map of America by Diego Gutiérrez

1562

Library of Congress, Geography and Maps, Concordance of Images

<https://www.loc.gov/rr/geogmap/guide/gm029001.j>



A New Map of the World, According to Mercator's Projection, Showing the Course of Capt. Cowley's Voyage Round it, London, H. Moll, 1699

The Map Collection, Yale University



<https://www.library.yale.edu/MapColl/oldsite/map/wrld1699.htm>

Johann Baptist Homann

*Totius Africae nova repraesentatio qua praeter diversos in ea status et regiones,
etiam origo Nili ex veris rr. pp. missionariorum relationibus*

ostenditur / à Io. Baptista Homanno Norimbergae

Nürnberg : s.n., 1707

James Ford Bell Library, University of Minnesota

<https://primo.lib.umn.edu/primo->

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Lesson 3

Student Handout 3.1—Biography of Doña Marina or La Malinche

Chroniclers used the names Doña Marina and La Malinche to identify the woman who helped the Spanish conquer the Aztec empire. After the death of her father (whom legend identifies as a noble of an enemy group of the Aztecs), her mother remarried and had a son with her new husband. Her mother claimed to her neighbors that her daughter died, but she really gave her away to some traveling merchants, who sold her as a slave to the Maya living in Tabasco. By the time Cortés arrived, she had learned the Mayan dialects used in the Yucatán but was still a native speaker of Náhuatl, the language of the Mexica and other non-Mayan-speaking peoples in the empire. She was in a group of young women given to Hernán Cortés as slaves by the Chontal Mayan ruler (cacique) of Tabasco in 1519.

She was baptized Marina and eventually became a consort of Cortés. Before meeting her, Cortés had relied on a Spanish priest, Gerónimo de Aguilar, to speak with the Maya who lived along the coast. After being shipwrecked off Cozumel, Aguilar learned to speak some Mayan languages. Aguilar was unable to speak Náhuatl, however, so Cortés began using Marina and Aguilar as an interpreting team. Doña Marina learned Spanish quickly, becoming the sole interpreter for the Spanish conquistadors in communicating with the Aztec ruling elite. Bernal Díaz, one of Cortés' soldiers and author of *The True History Conquest of New Spain*, confirmed that Marina directly interpreted for Cortés. Their son became a colonial official but was accused of being a traitor in 1548 and was executed by the Spanish colonial government. The term La Malinche could mean “the woman of Malinche.” Malinche meant “captain,” a title that Hernán Cortés used for himself during the conquest of the Aztec Empire.

Source: Nancy Fitch, “The Conquest of Mexico,” American Historical Association, Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age: Reconceptualizing the Introductory Survey Course, <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/the-history-of-the-americas/the-conquest-of-mexico>.

Lesson 3

Student Handout 3.2—Second Letter from Hernán Cortés to King Charles I

This is the second letter from Cortés to the Spanish King Charles I, 1519. It was published in Hernán Cortés, *Cartas y relaciones de Hernán Cortés al emperador Carlos V*, ed. Pascual de Gayangos (Paris: A. Chaix, 1866).

During the three days I was there, they provided very poorly for our wants, and each day worse than the former one; and the nobles and principal men of the city very seldom came to see or to speak to me. Being somewhat perplexed by this treatment, the female interpreter [Malinche] that I had, who was a native of this country, and whom I obtained at Putunchán on the Rio Grande, (as I have already mentioned in my former dispatch), was informed by another female, a native of this city, that a numerous force of Moctezuma lay very near the city, and that the inhabitants had carried out their wives and children and wearing apparel, as an attack was meditated that would destroy us all; and that if she wished to save herself, she should go with her, as she could protect her. My interpreter told this to Gerónimo de Aguilar, another interpreter, whom I had obtained in Yucatán, of whom I also wrote to your Highness, and he gave me the information; when I took one of the natives of the city, and drew him aside privately so that no one saw me, and interrogated him on the subject, this man confirmed all that the Indian women and the natives of Tlaxcala had stated. Judging from this information, as well as the signs that I had observed, I determined to anticipate their movements, in order to prevent being taken by surprise; and sent for the nobles of the city, to whom I said that I wished to speak with them, and shut them in a room by themselves.

Source: American Historical Association, Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age: Reconceptualizing the Introductory Survey Course, Nancy Fitch, *The Conquest of Mexico, Cortés Meets Cholulans*, pp. 68-69, <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/the-history-of-the-americas/the-conquest-of-mexico/letters-from-hernan-cortes/cortes-meets-cholulans>.

Lesson 3

Student Handout 3.3—Fifth Letter from Hernán Cortés to King Charles I

This is the fifth letter from Cortés to the Spanish King Charles I, 1526-1527. It was published in Hernán Cortés, *Cartas y relaciones de Hernán Cortés al emperador Carlos V*, ed. Pascual de Gayangos (Paris: A. Chaix, 1866).

He [the Amerindian Canec] answered that until then he had served no overlord nor knew of any whom he ought to serve, although it was true that five or six years ago people of Tabasco had passed that way and told him how a captain with certain people of our nation had entered their land and three times defeated them in battle, and afterwards had told them that they were to be vassals of a great lord, and all the other things which I was now telling him. He therefore wished to know if this great lord of whom I spoke were indeed the same. I replied that I was the captain of whom the people of Tabasco had spoken, and that if he wished to learn the truth he had only to ask the interpreter with whom he was speaking, Marina, who traveled always in my company after she had been given to me as a present with twenty other women. She then told him that what I had said was true and spoke to him of how I had conquered Mexico and of all the other lands which I held subject and had placed beneath Your Majesty's command. He appeared very pleased to learn of this and said that he also wished to be Your Majesty's subject and vassal, and that he considered himself most fortunate to be under the sway of a prince so powerful as I told him Your Highness is.

Source: American Historical Association, Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age: Reconceptualizing the Introductory Survey Course, Nancy Fitch, The Conquest of Mexico, Cortés on Malinche, <http://www.historians.org/tl/LessonPlans/ca/Fitch/cortes7.html>.

Lesson 3***Student Handout 3.7—Biography of Pocahontas***

Matoaka was the daughter of the ruler of the Powhatans. Her father ruled over thirty other Algonquin-speaking tribes along the Tidewater coastal region. She also was named Pocahontas, which means “mischief” in the Algonquin language. Pocahontas was taken prisoner by the English colonists in 1612 for ransom and in order to have some leverage over Matoaka. During her captivity she became a Christian and was baptized Rebecca. In 1614, she married the English plantation owner, John Rolfe, and had a son named Thomas Rolfe. They went to England in 1616 to help promote the tobacco-producing colonies of the Virginia Company. They enjoyed being the favorite guests among the rich and famous of London, including the British King James I. On the voyage back to Virginia in 1617, Pocahontas died of a pulmonary disease, possibly pneumonia or tuberculosis.

Lesson 3***Student Handout 3.8—Primary Source from John Smith***

Having feasted him [Smith] after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan: then as many as could laid hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beats out his braines, Pocahontas the King's dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her armes, and laid her own upon his to save him from death; whereat the Emperour was contented he should live to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper. . .

Source: John Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England & the Summer Isles, Together with The True Travels, Adventures and Observations, and A Sea Grammar*, Vol. 1 (Glasgow: J. MacLehose and Sons, 1907), 101.

Lesson 3

Student Handout 3.11—Secondary Sources on Pocahontas

According to Captain John Smith, the leader of the English group determined to claim and colonize Virginia through a settlement at Jamestown. In 1607, the eleven-year-old Pocahontas saved him from being killed by her father. Historians now suggest that Smith's ordeal was part of a Powhatan ritual to include him as a member of their community, and Pocahontas played a pre-determined role in pleading for his life. According to Smith's account in his book published 17 years later, Pocahontas also brought needed food supplies to him and the other Jamestown residents during the subsequent winter. Smith left Powhatan land and went back to England for recovery from an accidental gunpowder wound in 1609. Smith mentioned the 1607 incident in one of several chronicles he composed about his New World expeditions over the course of two decades. For reasons that form the crux of the "great debate," Smith apparently chose to suppress the 1607 episode in his early chronicles, including *A True Relation*, published in 1608, and his 1612 *Map of Virginia*. While he alluded to the event briefly in a 1622 publication, the first complete account appeared in 1624, seventeen years after the fact, in Smith's *Generall Historie of Virginia, the Summer Isles, and New England*. Like many of Smith's chronicles, the rescue story is narrated in the third person. The scene took place about one month after a group of Powhatans captured Smith while he was exploring the Chickahominy River.

Along with this captivating recollection, Smith included in the *Generall Historie* a copy of a letter he claimed to have sent Queen Anne in 1616, the year in which Pocahontas traveled to England after marrying colonist John Rolfe. The letter commended her to the queen with what was apparently Smith's earliest reference to the rescue. The original letter was lost and became known only by its inclusion in the *Generall Historie*.

Alden Vaughn, in his book *American Genesis: Captain John Smith and the Founding of Virginia*, sums up the relationship between Smith and Chief Powhatan as follows: "Throughout his stay in Virginia, John Smith and Powhatan jostled for power. They had a grudging admiration for each other, and at times exhibited a superficial cordiality. But each considered the other his prime adversary, to be destroyed if necessary."

In *Powhatan's World and Colonial Virginia: A Conflict of Cultures*, Frederic Gleach goes further, postulating the groups' mutual ulterior motives in their dealings with each other: "Through actions that were largely misunderstood by the other group, each group initially sought to demonstrate its superiority in the relationship and to persuade the other to adopt 'appropriate' ways of living. . . Both employed trade, negotiation and military strength in the pursuit and demonstration of advantage, each group in its own terms. All can be seen as attempts to bring the other to civility."

Source: Helen Mondloch. "Rescue and Redemption: The Great Debate over Pocahontas and John Smith," *The World & I* 17: 9 (Sept 2002), 173.