



IMAGINING A DISTANT NEW WORLD

"HISTORY," said Beard's contemporary Carl Becker, is "an imaginative creation."¹ Perhaps no historical subject requires more imagination than the effort to reconstruct the period when Indian country first became aware of a new world across the ocean. All we have to go on are oral traditions of Indians who lived generations after the events described, written accounts by European explorers who misunderstood much of what happened in brief face-to-face meetings with Native people, and mute archaeological artifacts that raise more questions than they answer. Hard facts are very difficult to come by. Yet this very lack of information places us in much the same situation as most eastern North American Indians during the era of discovery. They probably heard mangled tales of strange newcomers long before they ever laid eyes on one in the flesh, and, when rare and novel items reached their villages through longstanding channels of trade and communication, they discovered European *things* long before they confronted European *people*. Rumors and objects, not men and arms, were the means of discovery, and we can only imagine how Native imaginations made sense of the skimpy evidence that reached them.

On the coast of what will one day be called either Newfoundland or Labrador, Native hunters find that several of the traps they had set are missing, along with a needle they need to mend their fishing nets. In the place where these items had been is a smoothly polished upright timber crossed near the top by a second piece of wood, from which hangs the carved

effigy of a bleeding man. Flanking this remarkable construction are two other poles from which pieces of some woven substance flap in the breeze: one is white with two strips of red, mimicking the shape of the crossed timbers; the other bears an image of a four-footed, two-winged beast holding something in its paw. The hunters puzzle over two things left on the ground. One is clearly recognizable to them as a fishhook. The other has a sharp edge and a chunky shape. Both are made of a black substance covered with patches of reddish powder. The largest item is picked up by one of the hunters, who will, when he gets home, use stone tools to pound it into several small amulets, most of which he will give to his village headman. Over the next few years, the headman will redistribute them to honored visitors, who will carry them to their homes far in the continental interior.

Somewhere near the mid-Atlantic coast, an old woman hides in the woods with her daughter and several grandchildren. Both women scream as some twenty pale, bearded men, sweating in heavy armor and helmets, stumble upon them. The elder's suspicions abate a little when the men courteously offer her something to eat, but the younger disdainfully flings the food to the ground. As the women try to fathom the strange sounds issuing from what they consider to be incredibly ugly hairy faces, the men suddenly snatch one of the male children away from the grandmother and lunge for the young woman, who flees screaming into the forest, never to see her nephew again.

*In an Indian dwelling, a woman tells her granddaughter about the first meeting between Native people and Europeans. One day, she says, a floating island appeared on the horizon. The beings who inhabited it offered the Indians blocks of wood to eat and cups of human blood to drink. The first gift the people found tasteless and useless; the second appallingly vile. Unable to figure out who the visitors were, the Native people called them *ouemichtigouchiou*, or woodworkers.*

These three scenes are imagined, but they are rooted in verifiable historical events. The hunters' missing traps were purloined in 1497 by explorer John Cabot and his crew; the mid-Atlantic child was snatched from his kinswomen in 1524 by a detachment of Giovanni de Verrazano's mariners; and the tale of sailors who ate sea biscuits and drank wine was told to a French missionary in 1633 by a Montagnais who in turn had heard it from his grandmother years earlier.² This much we know from surviving documents, which also explain the nature of what the Europeans left behind and took with them. Cabot's crucifix and flags were sacred symbols that laid legal claim to the land for, respectively, his God (whose Son was portrayed dying on the wooden cross), his English sponsors (whose patron, Saint George, was evoked on the kingdom's white banner by a red cruciform), and his home republic of Venice (whose patron, Saint Mark, was represented on its flag by a winged lion bearing a book of the Gospel). To convince his royal sponsor, Henry VII of England, that a land in which "he did not see any person" was indeed populated, Cabot collected "certain snares which had been set to catch game," along with a large, red-painted wooden "needle for making nets."³ Similarly, Verrazano justified taking "a child from the old woman to bring into France" in terms of his need to bring his sponsor, Francis I, living proof of his exploits and a potential interpreter to aid future travelers.⁴

Documentary evidence illuminates the European cast of characters, yet only imagination can put Indians in the foreground of these scenes. There is no proof that Cabot's men—largely fishermen from Bristol—dropped a fishhook or broke a rusty iron axe as they erected their crucifix and flags, or that the items they left behind were found and reprocessed in the way we have envisioned. Nonetheless, these things *might* have happened, because artifacts that archaeologists have unearthed from sites scattered across eastern North America attest to similar chains of events on subsequent occasions.⁵ Similarly, there is no record of what happened to Cabot's crucifix and flags. Yet we know that if the Indians who owned the missing snares and needle had come upon them, they would not have found the idea of symbolic memorials to important events unfamiliar: northeastern Native people sketched elaborate pictographs in their houses or on the bark of living trees to record the success of war parties, hunting expeditions, and other exploits, and they carved images that they either raised on poles or affixed near the entrances to their houses.⁶ Still,

what might these particular oddly wrought symbols have meant to them? And on what rumors or personal experience did the young mid-Atlantic woman base her distrust of Verrazano's men, a distrust so richly confirmed by her narrow escape and the disappearance of what we presume was her nephew? And why, years later, did sea biscuits and wine, of all possible commodities, figure so prominently in a tale told not just in that one Montagnais house but widely among various peoples of eastern North America? Generations later, was the grandmother—who by then knew perfectly well what ships, biscuits, wine, and Holy Communion were—chuckling at the confused efforts of her ancestors to incorporate novel things into such familiar categories as islands, wood, and blood?

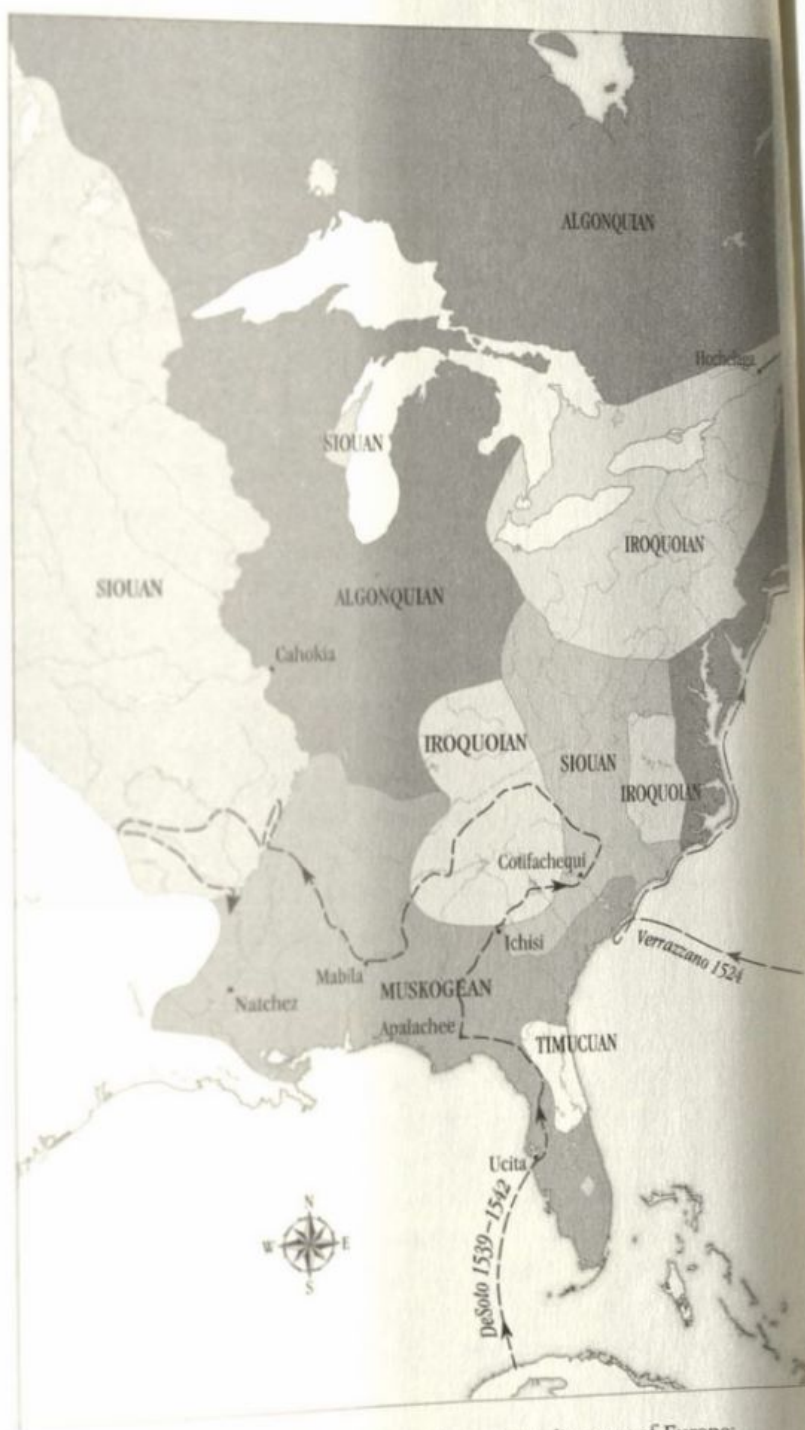
As we try to pierce the shadows for a clearer view of how Indian country made sense of the discovery of Europe, it helps to consider what written sources and oral traditions from later periods tell us about Native ways of conceptualizing relationships with outsiders. For eastern Indians, the world was a morally neutral universe of potentially hostile or potentially friendly spiritual forces—some human, most other-than-human—with whom one had to deal. People, animals, and spirit forces were all, in a sense, persons with whom one dealt in much the same way. No one could go it alone: human persons needed to band together in families, clans, and villages; they relied on animals and plants voluntarily to give themselves up to them as food; they hoped that more powerful beings such as the sun or the wind could be convinced to work on their behalf instead of against them. All of these relationships depended on reciprocal exchanges of goods and obligations, material or ceremonial. Especially when dealing with beings whose power was greater than one's own, it was important to fulfill ceremonial obligations that demonstrated not only reciprocity but respect.⁷ A tale told among seventeenth-century Mohawks drives home the lesson. Natives canoeing on Lake George traditionally stopped to burn an offering of tobacco at a rock that housed the other-than-human person who controlled the winds. In 1667, when crossing the lake with some Indian companions, the prominent Dutch colonist Arent van Curler drowned in a storm. The story goes that the tempest came up in retaliation after the Dutchman had mocked the tobacco ritual "and in derision turned up his back-side towards the rock."⁸

In light of this emphasis on ceremonial reciprocity and respect, the ex-

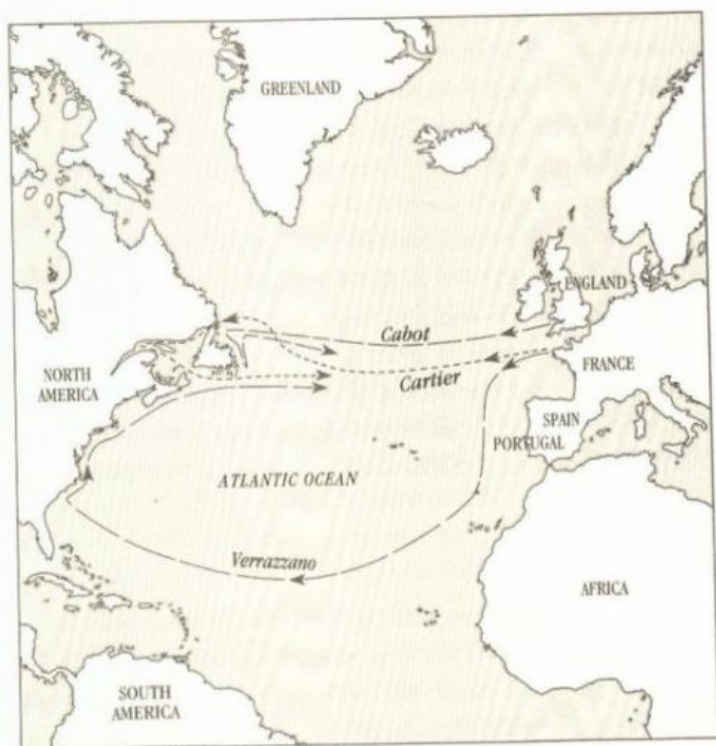
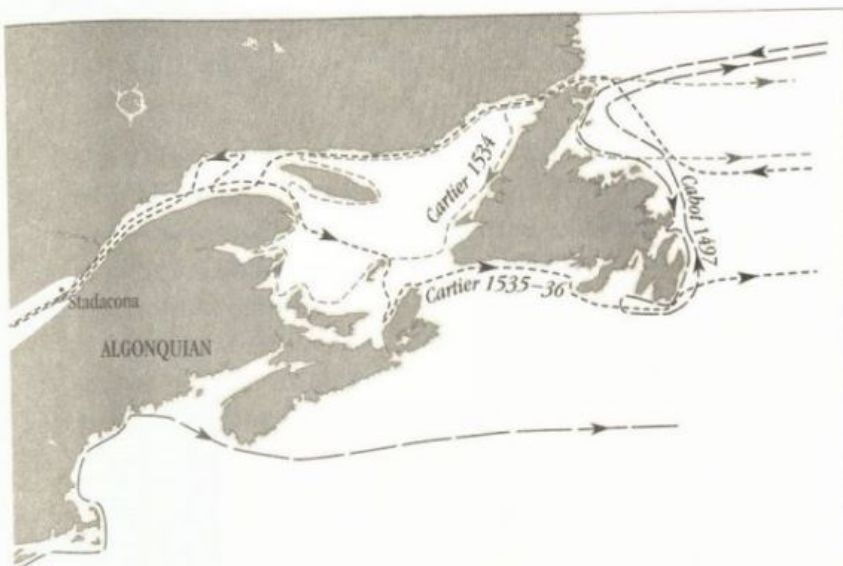
change of goods—giftgiving—becomes a dominant motif in each of our three scenes. Yet the gifts are always unanticipated, if not disrespectful. To our conjectured hunters, the unseen Cabot apparently reciprocated for a red needle an incomprehensibly abstract red-and-white symbol, and for an animal trap an image of a strange beast. The crucifix he also left behind was carved with a degree of detail inconceivable to people unfamiliar with iron tools, but it clearly represented a man enduring torture. What kind of gift was this? And what kind of giftgivers were Verrazano's men, whose unexpected behavior lay not in the matter-of-fact arrogance with which they seized a child (Indian war parties routinely took captives of all ages), but in their offering of food, which deceived the grandmother into believing they were allies rather than enemies? And gifts of food also define the unanticipated in the story of the floating island: the wood was worthless, the blood inhumane.

The gifts defined the givers. Montagnais people, the grandmother said, called Europeans "woodworkers"; elsewhere in eastern North America, Indians commonly described them as "clothmakers," "metalworkers," or "axemakers."⁹ The gift axe that Cabot's men may have left behind would have been recognized as a cutting implement, for in size and shape it resembled a stone celt. Yet the hunters who discovered it would have been far more impressed with its texture and colors: it was clearly a mineral, in its blackness something like the spiritually charged mica or coal they prized in long-distance trade, in its rusty patches resembling the red ochre that many Native cultures associated with death and burial and that the Beothuks of Newfoundland—to whom our hunters may have belonged—daubed liberally on their bodies and tools.¹⁰ No doubt a gift from powerful spirit beings, the axehead was far too valuable to be used to chop trees. And so it slipped easily into ancient patterns of long-distance North American trade, steeped in spiritual significance and valued for its raw material rather than for its culturally irrelevant finished form. Whoever the bestowers of such things were, they seemed—initially at least—to come from a world quite unlike that in which ordinary human persons lived.

In the early decades of the sixteenth century, as fishers from Bristol, from Portugal, from France, and from the Basque country followed Cabot's route to the cod-rich waters off what they called Newfoundland,



Eastern North America and the sixteenth-century discovery of Europe: approximate distribution of major Native American linguistic families and routes of principal European incursions.



and as the Spanish developed their empire in the West Indies and Central America, European ships regularly converged on the Atlantic coast from two directions. Sometimes they stopped to trade with the Natives; when Verrazano in 1524 reached the shore of what later would be known as New England, he found Indian people ready and waiting with the furs they already knew that the newcomers coveted.¹¹ At other times, particularly on the vast coastline of the territory the Spanish called *la Florida*, which stretched from the peninsula northward to Chesapeake Bay, raiders such as Ponce de León in 1521, Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón in 1526, and Pánfilo de Narváez in 1528 came ashore to seek gold or slaves to work in the mines of Cuba and elsewhere. Sometimes they met violent resistance from Native people. More often, starvation and ill health killed them off. An occasional castaway or newcomer taken in battle learned a Native language and provided the first firm clues about the customs and intentions of the invaders. Among such newcomers were probably Africans with firsthand knowledge of the Spanish slavery into which some captured Native Americans were being sold; one African woman may even have found her way as far inland as today's western New York, where she died and was buried at the end of the sixteenth century. Welcome or unwelcome, the travelers left behind weapons, tools, jewelry, and clothing that fell into the hands of Indian people. On other occasions storms drove ships ashore and littered the beach with gifts of iron, of silver, of brass much like native copper, and of glass that resembled quartz and seashells. These, too, entered ancient trade networks and spread throughout Indian country to substantiate wild stories about the existence of new lands across the sea.¹²



On two extended occasions during the 1530s, flesh and blood replaced rumors and things in the North American discovery of a new European world. Because the Europeans involved in these contacts wrote about their experiences, we have slender platforms from which to observe the events and—reading against the authors' grain—to imagine how the arrival of Europeans might have looked from a perspective in Indian country.¹³ Transporting ourselves to the shores of Tampa Bay on the Gulf coast of Florida on Sunday, 25 May 1539,

we barely see the sails of nine Spanish ships anchored three miles or so off the coast to avoid the treacherous shoals closer in. It is the Roman Catholic festival of Pentecost, commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit on Christ's disciples. A party of ten Timucuan-speaking natives watching with us know nothing of that, but they are familiar enough with Spanish sails to know that these are no floating islands and that although their inhabitants may wield considerable spiritual power, their disembarkation is unlikely to be beneficial. As the first small boats set out for shore, they send word for those women and children not already dispersed to spring fishing or hunting camps to abandon their villages, and they set signal fires to warn others at a greater distance. The wisdom of those preparations becomes clear when the scouts encounter a Spanish advance party and find themselves in a skirmish. The Timucuas kill a pair of Spanish horses before being forced to retreat, but they leave two of their own people dying on the ground.

We are not sure if this is the first time these particular Florida natives have encountered horses, but we are certain they have never seen so many of the great beasts: more than two hundred land in the first boats. During the next week some six hundred men follow with a contingent of dogs trained for war and with at least thirteen pregnant sows. In command of this assemblage—which far outnumbers the force any village in the area can mount—is Hernando de Soto, the recently appointed governor of Cuba and *adelantado* of *la Florida*. As *adelantado*, de Soto bears royal authority to invest his considerable personal fortune (acquired when he accompanied Francisco Pizarro in the conquest of Peru and gained a reputation as a man “very given to hunting and killing Indians”)¹⁴ in an effort to conquer the people and presumed riches of southeastern North America. Within a week his army takes over an abandoned village named Ucita or Ozita and rechristens it *Spiritu Sancto*, “Holy Spirit.” As the *adelantado* ensconces himself in the chief's residence, his men dismantle the

remaining houses and destroy a temple topped by a carved wooden bird, salvaging the materials to build barracks for themselves. Meantime they brutally seize replacements for four previously captured Timucuan men brought with them to serve as interpreters and guides. When three of these in turn escape, a Native woman who supposedly helped them is thrown to the dogs. The same fate meets the remaining interpreter when he proves a less than cooperative guide.¹⁵

In a village a couple of days' journey inland are two people who regard the Spaniards' arrival more positively than do the kin of the Ucita victims. One used to call himself Juan Ortiz, although now he uses a Timucuan name, bears the tatoos of his adoptive clan and village on his legs and chest, and has nearly forgotten the language of his native Seville. A dozen years earlier he was captured on the coast by the people of Ucita, who nearly executed him and for three years barely tolerated his presence. Subsequently he escaped to the rival town of a headman named Mocoço. There he abandoned any real hope of seeing Spaniards again, despite his host's repeated assurances "that, if at any time, Christians should come to that land, he would release him freely and give him permission to go to them."¹⁶ The promises were neither empty nor disinterested. Mocoço apparently hopes his guest will broker an alliance with the Spanish that will help him defeat his coastal enemies of Ucita and three other towns and, presumably, open a channel of trade with the newcomers previously blocked by his inland location.

When word of de Soto's landing reaches Mocoço, therefore, he sends Ortiz along with a reception committee that, taking no chances in enemy territory, travels well armed. The Timucuans show themselves to the mounted Spanish, but before any pleasantries can be exchanged, the invaders' horses charge and send the Native people fleeing into the woods. Ortiz barely escapes death at the point of a Spanish lance by making the sign of the cross and shouting the name of the Virgin and a few other remembered Castilian words. This vio-

lent encounter exposes the futility of Mocoço's dreams of alliance with the powerful newcomers. A few days later de Soto will dismiss the headman with a suit of European clothes and a vague promise of protection.

To the *adelantado*, Ortiz, with his mastery of two Timucuan dialects and his knowledge of Indian culture and diplomacy, is a welcome discovery, yet little else seems promising. The small coastal villages of Tampa Bay hoard no gold or silver and, particularly in the spring well before harvest time, do not even contain enough stored maize to feed his troops. In what seems like a deliberate attempt to protect their immediate neighborhood, both Ortiz and Mocoço deny any knowledge of the wealth the Spanish desire, but they speak vaguely of a much larger town a hundred miles or so to the north, where a chief with the hereditary title of Paracoxi extracts tribute from all the villages in the region and where the land is "more fertile and abounding in maize."¹⁷ So, taking Ortiz along as interpreter, the army vacates Tampa Bay, and a pattern is established: No, one set of Native leaders after another tells the invaders, there is no gold and little food here, but if you travel farther inland or over the mountains (into what just happens to be the country of my enemies), you might find what you seek. Thus, when de Soto is disappointed at the town of the Paracoxi, his destination becomes Anhaica Apalachee (modern-day Tallahassee). To that southernmost of the surviving Mississippian cities, his army fights its way by late October. There and in its satellite communities, de Soto finds sufficient food to support his men and settles in for the winter, apparently only slightly inconvenienced by Native raiding parties that attack work details or set fires in the town. The families of Apalachee's hereditary chiefs evidently abandoned their capital on the Spaniards' approach. We do not know if they will ever return.

By March, with messages dispatched to Cuba, with his troops somewhat refreshed, and with his herd of pigs increased to a self-propelled foodstore three hundred strong,

Desoto's exploration

de Soto is ready to resume his quest. His entourage plods northeastward through present-day Georgia, perfecting tactics first used in the previous year's march through the Florida peninsula. Occasionally, when traversing the wide forested regions separating heavily populated areas, the Spaniards capture a hunting party and, if the Indians fail to provide satisfactory information on what lies ahead in words Juan Ortiz can fathom, throw a victim to the dogs or burn him alive to encourage others to talk. More often, when traversing settled districts de Soto goes through the motions of Mississippian diplomatic ritual; the *adelantado* even carries a chair in which to seat himself during ceremonies with chiefs carried on their retainers' shoulders. Invariably the formalities end when, one way or another, leaders agree to provide several hundred men, who are shackled together to haul the army's equipment. Also likely to be requisitioned are several dozen women, who, after a hasty baptism by one of de Soto's four priests, will satisfy what one Spaniard describes as the soldiers' "lewdness and lust."¹⁸ To preclude trouble, the chief and his retinue are held hostage until the army—pillaging corn supplies, burning the occasional refractory village, and planting crosses on temple mounds—reaches the territory of the next chiefdom, when the cycle begins again.

Complete lack of cultural awareness / ethnocentric behavior of Europeans

"Who are you? What do you want? Where are you going?" a chief from the town of Ichisi, in present-day northern Georgia, asks during one of these encounters. De Soto replies that he is "a Captain of the great King of Spain; that in his name he came to give them to understand the sacred faith of Christ, and that they should know him and be saved, and give obedience to the apostolic church of Rome and to the Supreme Pontiff and Vicar of God who resides there, and that in the temporal world they should recognize as king and lord the Emperor, king of Castile . . . and that they would treat them all well, and with peace and justice, like his other Christian vassals" if—but only if—they submit. This is an abbreviated version of the *Requirimiento*, a document that Spanish bureau-

crats insist should be read to Indians about to be conquered. Like some sixteenth-century Miranda warning, it explains the Indians' limited rights and confirms the legality of their slaughter should they choose to resist.¹⁹

Whatever they make of such speeches, Native leaders repeatedly claim that the riches the Spanish seek lie farther on, in the chiefdom of Cofitachequi. In May 1540, near present-day Camden, South Carolina, de Soto's army finally reaches a spot directly across the Wateree River from its capital. The town's inhabitants are already familiar with Spanish goods, if not with Spanish people; they not only have carefully preserved glass beads and metal items but have fashioned leather helmets, armor, and footwear in styles that seem strikingly familiar to the Castilians. We watch as a young female leader—the Spanish call her “The Lady of Cofitachequi”—is ceremonially carried to the riverbank in a white-cloth-draped litter, from which she enters a canoe graced by a canopy of a similar material. When she reaches de Soto's side of the stream, she removes a string of freshwater pearls from her neck and places it over the *adelantado's* head. Gifts of blankets and skins, turkeys and other foods, follow.

De Soto rends the ceremonial drama with a blunt inquiry about where more of the pearls might be found. The Lady directs him to one of several nearby towns abandoned two years earlier when “a plague in that land” forced the inhabitants to seek new homes.²⁰ There, he and his officers personally loot a mortuary temple of more than two hundred pounds of pearls preserved in the body cavities of the deceased; the desecration comes easily to de Soto, the bulk of whose Peruvian wealth was acquired in much the same way.²¹ The corpses also yield European glass beads, rosaries and crucifixes, and “Biscayan axes of iron,”²² which no longer seem to the Cofitachequis quite such mysterious gifts from another world. The pearls (de Soto finds their quality poor, but they are virtually the only valuables he has located in a journey now approaching a thousand miles in length) are loaded with other booty on the backs

Spanish goods
preceded
them on journey



Cofitachequi as it might have appeared to the de Soto expedition in 1540: conjectural diorama of the Mulberry Site, Camden, South Carolina.
Courtesy of South Carolina State Museum.

of the inevitable requisition of Cofitachequi porters, and the army sets off again holding the Lady hostage.

And so we follow de Soto's trek: across the Appalachian Mountains into the modern states of North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia again, and Alabama, always chasing reports of wealth in the town over the next hill or down the next river. Armed resistance builds steadily until, in October, the Spaniards' luck runs out in the Tascaloosa city of Mabila, in what will later be called western Alabama. Despite a warning from his spies that something is up, de Soto insists on entering the town's heavily fortified walls to demand the right to spend the night there, because he is "tired out with sleeping in the open field."¹⁰ Several thousand warriors hide inside Mabila's houses as a ceremonial welcome for de Soto and his advance party provides cover for Indians waiting in ambush. When the attack

comes, several Spaniards die before the remainder flee the town and regroup for a daylong battle that culminates in ruthless slaughter. When it is over, Mabila lies in smoking ruins. Inside are the bodies of perhaps two thousand Tascaloozas, along with the ruins of all the pearls and other treasure de Soto has collected. Twenty or so Spaniards, including de Soto's nephew, are dead. The wounds of some of the nearly two hundred invaders who are seriously injured are treated with the fat of their slaughtered enemies.

For nearly a month de Soto's now ragged army, reduced by cumulative losses to closer to four hundred than six hundred men, tries to recover strength. It sets off again and huddles for a brutally cold winter in a small abandoned village in what will be known as northeastern Mississippi. In March 1541 the town's former inhabitants burn the Spanish camp, and with it most of the invaders' remaining saddles and padded armor. Still the Spanish plod on, in a journey as increasingly nightmarish for them as for the Indians whose countries they continue to pillage and whose people they continue to enslave when they can. They move across the Mississippi River and into the country of the Caddos in modern-day Arkansas, another winter comes and goes, and in March 1542 Juan Ortiz dies after a brief illness. In May, in the Natchez country, when disease also claims the *adelantado*, his men sink the corpse in the Mississippi River to protect it from the indignities they are sure Indians will perpetrate on it. At last, after the survivors wander through much of what will later be Arkansas and east Texas, they improvise a forge on the banks of the Mississippi and pound the chains of their slaves into nails and hardware for boats. In June 1542 they board the seven vessels they have been building and float out of sight, down the river to the Gulf and the Spanish settlements on the Mexican coast. As they fade from view, a few of the pigs they leave behind—later residents of the area will call their descendants “razorbacks”—remain with us on the shore,

but surviving documents reveal nothing about how, if at all, Native people recovered from the devastation the conquistadores left behind or what stories they told themselves to make sense of invaders from another world.



As de Soto lay dying in the spring of 1542, far to the north, in what is now called St. John's Harbor, Newfoundland, Frenchman Jacques Cartier prepared to head home, convinced that he had found not only the gold the *adelantado* had been looking for, but diamonds too. This was Cartier's third voyage to a country he called "Canada," a word for which scholars have proposed at least two origins. The most likely supposes that, when the French used gestures and a few mutually intelligible words to ask the Natives what they called the place, the response in an Iroquoian language was something to the effect of "This is our village." To French ears it sounded like *Canada*, and the word for "a town" was so defined in a glossary attached to a printed account of Cartier's exploits.²⁴ The other explanation, which is almost certainly apocryphal, derives the term from the Spanish phrase *acá nada*, or "nothing is here."²⁵ This folk etymology nonetheless seems appropriate in light of the fact that, when Cartier returned to France, experts confirmed that his ship contained nothing but iron pyrite ("fool's gold") and commonplace quartz crystals.²⁶

In search of how Cartier and his entourage may have looked to the people of Canada, we might travel backward in time to July 1534, when the Frenchman arrived on the first of his three voyages.²⁷ Standing on the southern coast of what is now called the Gaspé Peninsula,

we see forty to fifty canoes full of Micmacs abandoning their fishing as two ships come into view. Hoisting the skins of furbearing animals aloft on pieces of wood, they try to lure the newcomers ashore to trade. Inexplicably to the Indians, Cartier's ships turn about and sail for the opposite shore. Micmac canoeists give chase and surround the ships, waving and shouting "We wish to have your friendship!"²⁸ but two panicky musket shots drive them off. Shortly, however, they re-

he recreates
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account

turn and get close enough to be struck by a pair of lances wielded from the decks before they have to retreat again. The next day, when the Europeans' nerves have calmed and they have found safe anchor for their ships, they send two men ashore with a load of knives, hatchets, and beads. Soon some 300 Micmac men and women are wading through the shallows dancing and singing and rubbing the arms of Cartier's crew as a sign of welcome. Trading proceeds until the Indians have "nothing but their naked bodies" left to exchange.²⁹

That the Natives have clearly come to trade demonstrates that European ships are already familiar sights to the people of territories ringing what Cartier labels the Gulf of St. Lawrence—the Micmacs (whose villages extend from the Gaspé southward through present-day New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and Cape Breton), the Montagnais of Labrador, and the Beothuks of Newfoundland. Fifty miles or so to the northeast, on the Bay of Gaspé, however, a group of St. Lawrence Iroquoians from the interior is far less well acquainted with floating islands, although they almost certainly have heard of their existence. Later in the month, as the Iroquoians, fishing for mackerel, look up to see Cartier's vessels approach, they therefore hesitate before surrounding the ships with their canoes. The now more experienced Europeans almost immediately toss them iron knives, glass beads, and other small items, but the Iroquoians are prepared with nothing to exchange for these gifts.

As the French get ready to sail on, they erect a thirty-foot wooden cross, in the center of which they place a shield decorated with fleur-de-lis and letters spelling out *Vive le roi de France*. The Iroquoians' leader boards a canoe with his brother and three sons and follows the Europeans to their ships. Remaining a safe distance away, he makes a lengthy speech, during which he points to the cross, imitates its shape with his fingers, and gestures toward the surrounding land. The French, who understand none of his words, assume that he is asserting claims to the country and announcing that they

"should not set up any cross without his leave."³⁰ We are less certain of what the words mean, but we can see what happens next. Luring the canoe closer with a gesture that promises an iron axe in exchange for the bearskin the headman wears, the Europeans drag the whole party on board. By gestures, Cartier assures the Indians that he means them no harm and offers them food and drink. The cross, he dissimulatingly explains, stakes no claim to their territory; it is merely a marker to allow the French to find the spot again when they return with a "good store of iron wares and other things"—along with two of the headman's sons, who will be taken home to be trained as interpreters.³¹ How much of the message gets through clearly is uncertain, but, after an additional bestowal of iron gifts and brass necklaces, the headman, his brother, and one of the young men return to shore reasonably amicably. The others, named Taignoagny and Domagaia, remain on deck wearing ill-fitting French shirts, coats, and caps. The next day their kinsmen paddle out to say their farewells and to assure them they will not tear down the cross that promises their return.

Cartier and—perhaps more astonishingly to their kin—Taignoagny and Domagaia return to Canada within the year, this time with three ships and plans to stay the winter. We know almost nothing about the intervening experiences of the two Iroquoians in Cartier's home port of St.-Malo in Brittany or other European locales they may have visited. During those months, however, they apparently learned enough French, and their hosts enough St. Lawrence Iroquoian, to communicate some important pieces of information about their native land. Their home village (or at least the principal of the five communities that spoke their language) lies far inland along a broad river (the St. Lawrence), whose entrance Cartier had missed in his survey of the gulf. From that village of Stadacona (the word means "here is our big village"), on the site of present-day Quebec City, the river continues much farther to a large town called Hochelaga ("place at the mountain") at modern Montreal, and thence far onward, perhaps to-

ward a passage to Asia.³² In answer to what must have been endless questions about the location of rich cities and hoards of gold, Taignoagny and Domagaia also speak vaguely about what the French understood to be a fabulously wealthy "Kingdom of Saguenay," located far to the north and west along a river flowing into the St. Lawrence. In part, the tale probably reflects the Iroquoians' own hazy knowledge of the source of the native copper that is among the riches their people most prize. But doubtless it also includes wishful thinking on the part of Cartier, a desire to please (or dupe) their hosts on the parts of Taignoagny and Domagaia, and the same kind of rumor of riches over the next hill that de Soto chased through the southeast.

As the fleet casts anchor near what the French would christen the Île d'Orléans, a few miles down the St. Lawrence from Stadacona, Taignoagny and Domagaia struggle to make themselves recognized in their strange clothing and the long hair that has replaced the partially shaved heads with which they left home. When the confusion is cleared up, a group of women dances, sings, and brings all the visitors fish, maize, and melons. The next day Donaconna, the principal headman of Stadacona, leads a fleet of canoes to conduct a welcoming oration; Cartier reciprocates with the ubiquitous sea biscuits and wine, carried to Donaconna's canoe. In light of the long year the kin of Taignoagny and Domagaia have waited for their return and of the importance Donaconna's people attach to the arrival of men promising unprecedented riches from another world, this should be only the beginning of the celebration. According to the region's diplomatic customs, the visitors should debark from their vessels for additional ceremonies outside the village gates and then enter the town to take up lodging in the houses of its leaders. Days of feasting, speeches in council, and exchanges of gifts should follow to seal the alliance.³³

None of this happens. Instead, Cartier finds a harbor for his two larger ships at the Île d'Orléans, and, before even visiting

the village itself or distributing more than a few token metal items, he demands that Taignoagny and Domagaia guide his third craft on to Hochelaga. Not surprisingly, after an evening of consultations with Donaconna and other village leaders, the two weary Native travelers lose their enthusiasm for the voyage and offer excuses, warnings, and ruses designed to prevent the French and their precious cargo from going to a rival town. Donaconna, with the same purpose in mind, ceremoniously gives three children to the French for adoption; one is his own niece, another Taignoagny's brother. Cartier reciprocates with a gift of swords and brass bowls, but, despite a visit the next day from three masked shamans bringing warnings from the spirit world of dangers upriver (and a similar call from Taignoagny and Domagaia, who deliver messages allegedly from Jesus and Mary), he persists in his design. Without Native guides, Cartier and some of his men set off for a short visit to Hochelaga and several villages and fishing camps along the way, where, they tell us when they return in mid-October, they invariably received warm ceremonial receptions, were introduced to sacred shell beads, heard more stories of the origins of copper in Saguenay, and planted a cross.

Donaconna is less than enthusiastic in welcoming Cartier back. Before the Frenchman's rude departure, his peaceful intentions had already become suspect because he insisted on wearing a sword whenever he went out in public. While their leader was gone, the French had constructed a trench, palisade, and artillery emplacements to protect the ships on which they continued to sleep and eat. Two days after Cartier's return, tensions ease somewhat when he emerges from his amphibious fortress "with all his gentlemen and fifty mariners well appointed" at last to pay a proper ceremonial visit to Stadacona.³⁴ There will be *only* visits, however. Spurning their hosts' hospitality, the Europeans settle in for the winter behind their trench and palisade on the Île d'Orléans. While to all appearances most of the Stadaconans nonetheless interact with the French "with great familiarity and love," a minority, led by

Taignoagny, expresses considerably less pleasure with their ill-mannered guests.³⁵

In December Cartier forbids all contact with Stadaconans of both factions, when he learns that disease has killed some fifty villagers. Despite the precautionary quarantine, the French are soon falling desperately ill as well. By March 1536, 25 of the 110-member crew have died, and only a handful can walk. We do not know what is killing the Stadaconans, but the French ailment is an uncontagious nutritional disorder, *scurvy*. Were Cartier not so intent on concealing from his Native hosts the extent of his men's weakness (on one occasion he has them throw stones at Stadaconans who get too near, and on another he orders the few who are able to lift tools to make a furious racket to suggest that the entire crew is busily preparing the ships for departure), he might learn far sooner from Domagaia that a concoction brewed from the vitamin-C-rich bark and leaves of the white cedar would restore his men to health.³⁶

Good relations with the Stadaconans will not be revived as easily as the Frenchmen's strength. During the winter the French, shivering in their sickbeds, remain incommunicado for weeks on end, encouraging their hosts to suspect the worst of them. In April Donnacona and Taignoagny, having left to hunt deer with many of their villagers two months earlier, bring several hundred newcomers to Stadacona. Perhaps this is a normal seasonal migration of the sort typical among many of the Iroquoians' Algonquian-speaking neighbors, whose small winter communities commonly join much larger agglomerations for the spring and summer. Or the newcomers may be allies whom Taignoagny has convinced Donnacona to recruit for an assault on guests who have long overstayed their welcome. We will never be sure, because, under cover of a friendly council, Cartier takes Donnacona, Taignoagny, Domagaia, and two other leaders prisoner. In a replay of events in 1534, Cartier then assures his prisoners, and the women who bring strings of shell beads to redeem them, that he will restore them safely the next year. Donnacona publicly

pledges to return in a few months, and the ships set off downriver.

Five years, not one, pass before we see Cartier's ships at Stadacona again. With him in 1541 are several hundred prospective French colonists but none of the Iroquoians who left Canada in 1536. When Donaconna's successor inquires after their fate, Cartier admits that the chief has long since died in France, but then claims that the others "stayed there as great lords, and were married, and would not return back into their country."³⁷ In fact all but Donaconna's niece have perished, and she has been prevented from returning to keep the distressing news secret. The Stadaconans, who remember Taignoagny's less-than-enthusiastic tales of Brittany, no doubt suspect as much, but their new headman welcomes Cartier nonetheless, by placing his headdress on the Frenchman's brow and wrapping shell beads around his arms. Cartier reciprocates with "certain small presents," promises more to come, and partakes of a feast.³⁸ Next day he heads upriver in search of a spot to settle his colonists and establish a base for further explorations of the countries of the Hochelagans and Saguenay. At a place he calls Charlebourg-Royal, some nine miles above Stadacona, at the mouth of the Cap Rouge River, the French build a fort, plant a crop of turnips, and find their worthless fool's gold and quartz crystals. As the colonists settle into Charlebourg-Royal for the winter,

our ability to imagine the scene suddenly ends. The published narrative left by a participant ends abruptly with the words "The rest is wanting."³⁹

Yet other sources reveal that Cartier's people—or most of them—survived until spring, as increasingly unwelcome guests. Not only had they settled in the Stadaconans' territory without permission, but they had done so at an upstream location likely to cut the town off from any trade benefits the Hochelagans and other inland peoples might enjoy. Come spring, Cartier, having lost perhaps thirty-five men in skirmishes with his hosts, packed up his colonists and sailed for home. In the Newfoundland waters where we first imagined meeting him, he encountered a fleet bear-

ing more colonists under the command of Jean François de la Roque, seigneur de Roberval, who replaced Cartier at Cap Rouge. We know few details of the reception this party encountered except that, after a punishing winter during which untreated scurvy killed at least fifty of their number, in 1543 they too abandoned Canada. As far as we know, no Europeans traveled up the St. Lawrence River for another forty years.⁴⁰



For most of that time, our view facing east from the continental interior becomes almost entirely obscured by lack of documentary sources. Nonetheless, archaeological evidence demonstrates that dramatic events were occurring. In the southeast and the Mississippi Valley—the most densely peopled portion of the continent—nearly all the remaining great chiefdoms collapsed. Most of their mounded cities and ceremonial centers, from Cahokia to Apalachee, were abandoned in favor of smaller, more decentralized, and less hierarchically organized communities that were the ancestors of Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws; in many cases, however, the precise ethnic links between older and newer configurations are unclear.⁴¹ In the north, meanwhile, among the Iroquoian-speaking peoples of the interior, a contrary trend proceeded, as small groups coalesced into fewer and larger communities. North and south of Lake Ontario, two large leagues of Iroquoian-speaking nations formed, of the Hurons and of the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois, respectively. Many of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians were evidently absorbed by components of these two groups. Other Iroquoian-speakers—the Susquehannocks—moved south, from scattered small villages in the present-day border region between New York and Pennsylvania to a few large towns in the lower Susquehanna and Potomac River watersheds, where they displaced an indigenous population known to us only as the Shenks Ferry people. These consolidations of Iroquoian-speaking peoples left vast swaths of territory, including much of the St. Lawrence Valley and what is today southern New York State and northern Pennsylvania, largely empty of permanent human inhabitants.⁴²

The extent to which these widespread population movements resulted from the Indian discovery of Europe (much less from the particular phase

Archaeological evidence

in that discovery represented by de Soto and Cartier) is difficult to measure. Both the northern and southern settlement trends had been gradually under way for centuries. Since about A.D. 1000, when the agricultural revolution first reached the northeast, the tendency among Iroquoian speakers had been toward ever larger and ever fewer communities. By contrast, many of the Mississippian chiefdoms had been in demographic decline since the Little Ice Age began in the mid-fourteenth century. Still, even after we make full allowance for these long-term trajectories, the accelerated pace of change in the decades after de Soto and Cartier remains striking. In a few cases the transformations can be linked directly to the European incursions. The Tascaloosa chiefdom, for instance, apparently never recovered from its army's defeat in the battle of Mabila and disappeared from the map as a recognizable entity. De Soto's enslavement of thousands of Native men and women—many of whom died under their burdens or were abandoned deep in enemy territory—must have had a deep effect on communities already in demographic and political flux. His confiscations of what may have been many towns' entire harvests perhaps added a season of famine to the effects. And it is likely that his looting of mortuary temples, his planting of crosses on sacred mounds, and his humiliation of chiefs whose claims to divine status were literally brought to ground when he displaced them from the shoulders of their retainers and made them walk powerlessly through their domains, all dealt severe blows to the religious beliefs that held together Mississippian cultures and chiefdoms.⁴³

The "plague" in Cofitachequi, the feverish death of de Soto on the Mississippi, the scurvinous winters the French spent on the St. Lawrence, and the mysterious ailment that killed fifty Stadaconans during Cartier's winter sojourn might suggest that disease played a large role in the reorganization of sixteenth-century populations. For more than ten thousand years, North Americans had been isolated from the microbial environment common, and deadly, to the peoples of Europe, Asia, and Africa. In the Eastern Hemisphere those millennia had seen the development of a variety of viral "childhood" diseases, among them smallpox, measles, mumps, and chicken pox. Most European adults retained immunity from youthful bouts with the microbes, and dense urban populations provided sufficiently large pools of young victims to keep the viruses alive. Among

Western Hemisphere peoples with no immunities from prior exposure, viruses were likely to strike nearly everyone and to kill, directly or through secondary respiratory infections, as many as half. In the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America, wherever the Spanish settled in large numbers, cumulative epidemics slashed Native populations by 75 to 95 percent during the sixteenth century.⁴⁴

Yet for eastern North America, the evidence for early to mid-sixteenth-century catastrophic diseases is far from conclusive. Archaeologists have found in Florida at least one mass grave dating from the de Soto period, but the same site also preserves the bones of people who appear to have been slain by metal weapons, suggesting that disease was not the killer. For the more interior locale of Cofitachequi, the "plague" that de Soto's anonymous chronicler described was said to be "in that land," not necessarily among its people, who may have moved elsewhere because of crop failures rather than human illness. Moreover, the person who wrote the story down did so years after the event, elaborating—perhaps even fictionalizing—an original text of uncertain authorship. Even if authentic, the account of the plague would have had to rely on words that Juan Ortiz interpreted into Spanish from a Timucuan translation of a story re-lated by someone whose first language was Siouan or Muskogean; so it is difficult to place much weight upon it.⁴⁵ Nor should the vaguely described "fevers" from which Ortiz, de Soto, and many of their compatriots died necessarily be taken as evidence of diseases previously unknown in North America. The ailments could have been caused by almost anything, but after several years trooping through the interior, the Spaniards almost certainly did not perish from viruses they brought from Europe.⁴⁶ Similar uncertainty exists for Canada. If the Stadaconans knew the cure for scurvy (caused by a vitamin deficiency, not a microbe), presumably their deaths in the winter of 1535–36 were from some other malady, but there is no positive archaeological or other evidence that viruses struck their region during this period. Without discounting the possibility of localized epidemics and while giving full weight to the possibility that crop failures and political disorganization provoked deadly (but indigenous) opportunistic infections, we must consider the role of disease problematic for most of sixteenth-century eastern North America.⁴⁷

More likely factors in the population movements were rivalries over ac-

Irony
Killer
it
No clear evidence
that disease was primary
but we must "consider" it

cess to the material objects by which the existence of Europe had first become known. For most of the century, such items remained exceedingly rare, and thus had effects out of proportion to their scanty appearance in the archaeological or documentary record. In this light, one of the greatest results of the de Soto and Cartier expeditions may have been the refuse they left behind. Like vast inland shipwrecks, they provided favored inland peoples an unprecedented source of wealth, perhaps for years to come. For other groups not so blessed by luck or geography, a relative handful of scavenged iron nails or glass beads may well have been worth fighting and dying over, particularly when access to them was controlled by longtime enemies. Wars over access to European goods probably explain the southward migration of the Susquehannocks to locations nearer the mouth of Chesapeake Bay in the period around 1580. In the southeastern interior as well, as the Mississippian chiefdoms collapsed, some groups seem to have begun moving closer to the coastal sources of European goods. That the process was not entirely peaceful is suggested by a simultaneous trend for communities to resettle in defensible inland locations. That something profound was happening to spiritual beliefs and cultural identity is suggested by the fact that few of the societies that replaced the Mississippians had anything like their hierarchical social systems and elaborate burial rituals.⁴⁸

All of these elements provide clues, but for the most part the middle years of the sixteenth century remain a historical mystery. We just do not know exactly how people redrew the map of eastern North America, how they redefined their relationships with one another, and how they fitted their discoveries of Europe into those processes—if at all. In the absence of hard evidence, we are thrown again upon our imaginations if we are to make sense of what was happening in Indian country. If we could transport ourselves back to 1570 and visit three places we have been before, might we overhear people telling stories such as these?

Stadacona: Long before the woodworkers arrived, times had been very hard. Each year, it seemed, summers had turned cooler and shorter, and, often as not, corn, beans, and squash refused to support us. None of the shamans could find the

right ceremonies to encourage the Three Sisters to reciprocate by feeding us well. In fact the people who were sick when Cartier was here died either of hunger or because the Three Sisters were angry at them and struck them down in some other way. The shortage of food made some lineages give up and move to the countries of the Hurons and Mohawks, where people spoke something like the real language, where the land yielded better crops, and where villages grew stronger because they banded together into confederacies and practiced new rituals that brought them power. Our enemies took many other people away, either as captives or by killing them. Two hundred died at the hands of the Micmacs the same summer that Cartier first arrived. The Hurons and, especially, the Mohawks also started raiding us constantly, and the attacks only got worse after some of our people had joined them voluntarily. "We have told you three times about the Great Law of Peace," said the Mohawks, "and if you do not join our League we will have to knock you on the head."⁴⁹

As all this was happening, our people ceased listening to the hereditary chiefs. Donnacona not only failed to return from France; he failed in his promise to make a firm alliance with the woodworkers that would give us access to their weapons and their many other gifts from the Underwater Grandfathers. These, he had said, would give us the power to triumph over our enemies. After Cartier went away for the last time, Donnacona's lineage never recovered from the embarrassment, and no one listened to the nephew and grandnephew who succeeded to his title. Instead, every young man who got his hands on a few of the glass beads and pieces of copper that come from France began to think he was a chief, and he could give enough of these things to his followers to make them go along with him. The quarrels among these so-called chiefs caused more and more people to leave our town for elsewhere, and we became defenseless against our enemies. Last week the Mohawks finally came as they said they would. They

Use of imagination see p. 36, written in 18th person
"Speculative" accounts of what might have been going on in these communities

burned Stadacona to the ground and took nearly everyone they found alive captive. Most of our lineage escaped, but we cannot stay here any more. This is Mohawk country now.

Cofitachequi: The Great Sun (the woman the invader called "the Lady of Cofitachequi") returned home after she was captured by the Spanish, but the shamans told some of the young men that they must put her to death. For a woman to be the Great Sun, they argued, threw the world out of balance. True, in the past it had happened on rare occasions that a woman had become paramount chief when there were no men of the right age and talents in her lineage to inherit the title, but no Great Sun had ever brought such disaster on the people. *She* was the one who told us we must stop wearing the kind of headdress and moccasins that had always helped us know who the real people were. *She* was the one who insisted instead that we must restyle them to look like those worn by the Spaniards she once saw on the coast. *She* was the one who said we should hoard all those beads, "iron," "crucifixes," and other things she said were gifts from spirit beings who would make us powerful. The stranger with the dark skin and the curled hair tried to tell us that she was terribly wrong—that the Spaniards would take us from our land as they had done with him and make us work in their "sugar" fields—but she had him killed for his sacrilege. Soon thereafter the plague struck the land, the corn failed us, and hundreds of people died in that village nearby. Then the invader arrived, and we knew that what the stranger had told us was true.

No one lives here now. The land is dead, and the temple mound is defiled. Families went off in all directions to live with other people who spoke something like the real language. Many people say they will never again live under a paramount chief, never again live in a village where people who have reached a certain age and have some wisdom are not considered equals.

Cahokia: Has anyone ever lived here? Although there are stories that this is a spiritually powerful spot, and occasionally bands from the north and west come to bury their dead or burn tobacco to please the spirit beings who must have raised these oddly shaped grass-covered hills above the floodplain, no one has any memory of human persons who might have called this place home. And no one has yet heard anything but rumors about visitors from another world.



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 The last imagined tale—the least speculative of the three—reminds us that the great changes occurring in Native American life during the sixteenth century were not all, or even primarily, set in motion by Europeans.⁵⁰ Indian country had its own historical dynamics, its own patterns of population movements, conquests, and political and cultural change that had been going on for centuries. Cahokia disappeared from the map sometime around 1400, long before even the first rumor of Europe arrived on Native shores, and it is quite possible that Stadacona and even Cofitachequi would also have disappeared even if Cartier or de Soto had never existed. Europeans, the things they brought with them, and the rumors that spread about them in Native communities had important effects as they entered the existing framework of North American history. Still, 1492 did not rend the fabric of the continent's time. The sixteenth century remained rooted in all that had gone before, and it owed more to the agricultural revolution and the Little Ice Age than to the bearers of Christian flags.

If anything else emerges from the shadows of the sixteenth-century Indian discoveries of Europe, it is a persistent theme of conflict and distrust. But the nature of that conflict bears close attention, for its most remarkable aspect is not the violence that erupted between Natives and newcomers. Cartier clearly wore out his welcome, and nothing can be said in defense of the vicious de Soto. Nonetheless, almost everywhere they went, these Europeans found people trying to make some kind of alliance with them, trying to gain access to the goods and power they might possess,

here
 Richter calls these
 "imagined tales"

✱ trying to make sense of their flags and their crucifixes, their *Requirimientos* and their sea biscuits. These efforts to reach out to people of alien and dangerous ways are more striking than the fact that, in the end, enmity won out over friendship. But most striking of all is the way in which the arrival of the newcomers exacerbated conflicts of one Native group with another: Mocoço versus Ucita, Micmacs versus Stadaconans, Stadaconans versus Hochelagans; everyone discouraging advantageous Europeans from traveling to the next town, but encouraging dangerous ones to pay their neighbors a visit. Both within and among Native communities, contact with the new world across the seas inspired bitter conflicts over access to what the aliens had to offer—conflicts that would spiral to unimaginably deadly levels in the decades ahead. Perhaps that Montagnais grandmother wasn't chuckling after all when she told the story of strangers who offered her people blocks of wood to eat and cups of blood to swallow.