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Although the monumental civilizations of the Aztecs, Incas, and Mayas furnish historians with points of comparison with the contemporaneous nations of Europe, Native Americans in North America left much sparser evidences of similarities. Especially in the Northeast, the striking differences perceived between white explorers and Indians at initial contact, along with the lack of any written language among the Indians, precluded a serious and nuanced study of the Indian societies. In the absence of any written Indian language, early historical treatments of Indians found themselves restricted in source material to white explorers and settlers’ accounts. Such accounts assume a monolithic precontact history, with the Indians living a static and, from the perspective of early white historians, inferior history. One of the topics most treated by these initial contact accounts, Native American agriculture has experienced vast shifts in historical representation. Since Indian agricultural practices feature prominently even in early American histories redolent of white privilege and hegemony, the Indians’ agricultural process and
ecological relationship with the land have remained central points of investigation and analysis. As historians’ techniques to conduct research on precontact agricultural conditions have expanded over the decades, they have gradually broadened the scope of their studies and integrally improved the historical accuracy of precontact histories. With an increasing recognition of Indians’ societal complexity and the white privilege in constructing history, historians have largely turned from examining Indians of the Northeast and their agriculture as solely relative to European history to engaging in a post-colonial analysis of the intricate patterns of exchange and adaptation in forming agricultural practices before and after European discovery and settlement.

Traditionally American historians viewed American Indian agricultural practices through the lens of their influence upon arriving European colonists. Such a perspective stemmed from Eurocentric conceptions of “civilization” and “progress,” which painted the Indians as barbaric and less evolutionarily developed. In 1895, the American Antiquarian Society published a study of American Indian food and agriculture with the stated objective to “fix the Indian’s place in the scale of civilization.”¹ Their approach to Native American food preparation and agricultural practices emphasizes a constant comparison between Indian and white culture rather than a straightforward examination of precontact agriculture alone. Although their overview seeks to accurately capture Indians’ position in a social hierarchy, they problematically insist upon evaluating the Native American practices through

European standards and a European perspective, which manifest in sharp “us” and “them” divides:

When first known to us, they were hunters, *i.e.*, they were still in the first or lowest stage of existence; for although they cultivated corn, beans, tobacco and other things, and were thus entitled to rank as farmers, yet they had no domestic animals, unless dogs are to be considered as such, and this made them dependent upon the chase for a large part of their food, and, of course, limited or rather prevented their progress beyond the savage condition in which they were found.²

Even as the “us” and “them” treatment of Northeastern Indian agriculture reflects the dominance of nineteenth century white ideology, it also promotes several other popular views and tendencies of the time concerning Indian history. First, through the Society’s framing of Indian agricultural practices as “first known to us,” they disclose a reliance on primary texts written solely by white authors, who often provide uncertain records due to cultural misunderstandings and biases; yet at the time no other avenues of historical record were open to them for a glimpse into precontact North American life. With a lack of time signifiers, the overview of Indian life indicates the period’s customary assumption that Indian history did not exist as such but rather they existed in a static condition. Their simple narrative of Indian life and agriculture also supports the common generalization of Indian culture into a monolithic culture, subordinating individual Native American societies into a larger constructed “Indian” culture. Although the Society’s overview may seem uncomfortably limited by prejudice and the lack of source material, they ultimately conclude in a relative affirmation of Indian agriculture and food preparation as an

² Ibid., 156-57.
indicator of progress toward civilization: “we may safely say that he had reached a degree of progress far in advance of what we understand by the term savage. Indeed,...he had nothing to fear from a comparison with his white neighbor.”

While the American Antiquarian Society largely utilized Native American agriculture as simply an indicator of how far Indians were presumably removed from whites in an evolutionary process of civilization, several early twentieth century historians transformed agriculture and the natural environment into a determinant of Indian culture. With the false combination of Indian inferiority and monolithic culture, historians such as Ellsworth Huntington viewed Indian agriculture as a natural consequence of the environment and material conditions acting upon the passive tribes: “Of course different tribes possessed different degrees of innate ability, but the chief differences in their habits and mode of life arose from the topography, the climate, the plants, and the animals which formed the geographical setting of their homes.”

Although he still carefully emphasizes the idea of “innate ability” throughout his 1919 monograph, Huntington explores how the natural environment, and particularly the climate, hindered Indians’ progress toward civilization even as it spurred European whites to ever greater advances. Amidst the burgeoning industrialization surrounding World War I, Huntington subscribes to the romanticized notion of Native Americans’ deep connection with the land and life in harmony with the natural environment. He expostulates, “It is

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3 Ibid., 188.
generally considered that no race has been more closely dependent upon physical
environment than were the Indians. Why, then, did the energizing effect of climate
apparently have less effect upon them than upon the other great races?” For
contrast to the savagery he perceives in Indian culture, he points to the same
northern climate’s seeming invigoration of early northern European peoples, who,
according to Huntington, have advanced to a higher state of civilization. Instead of
turning to Indians’ clinging to their own cultures to explain their “savage” state, as
the American Antiquarian Society did, he searched for external conditions or
circumstances that might have acted upon the Indians: “That factor was apparently
the condition of agriculture among people who had neither iron tools nor beasts of
burden. Civilization has never made much progress except when there has been a
permanent cultivation of the ground.” Not only do Huntington’s conclusions employ
Eurocentric ideals of civilization, but he also perpetuates the misconception of
Native Americans as passive peoples upon which the environment acts
deterministically. Under this framework, he implies the necessity of a system of
white benevolent paternalism, which has provisioned the Indians with domestic
animals, metal tools, and a religious education that affirms white cultural values.
Ultimately, Huntington demonstrates the increasing urge to ground history
scientifically as a discipline; his theories of climatic influence, assumed from general
knowledge of northern and southern climates, and the Indians’ lack of necessary

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5 Ibid., 124.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 128.
tools, concluded from an examination of white explorers and settlers’ accounts, typify the views on Native American life and history in the lack of information about precontact peoples.

Throughout the rest of the twentieth century, however, historians became increasingly aware of and involved in newly developed means to study precontact events and agriculture, including archaeology and scientific analyses. As historians, with more information from archaeology and other techniques, began to conceive of Indian societies as dynamic non-monolithic cultures, they attempted to treat Indian agriculture as separate from white history and practices. Especially for Indians of the Northeast, Europeans’ written accounts of Indian agricultural practices often remained the only source of information in the lack of Algonquian or Iroquoian written languages. However, historians attempted to use these accounts in conjunction with other information to reexamine Indian agriculture as a developing cultural phenomenon. At first, archaeology constituted the most prevalent means to obtain new information about Indian agriculture in precontact times. As historian Leo Deuel addresses in his 1967 collection of essays about archaeology on Native American sites, archaeological exploration of Indian burial mounds and settlements did not represent a completely new technique.⁸ In fact, he includes an account by Thomas Jefferson on the excavation of a burial mound to demonstrate its prevalence as an entertaining and educational pastime. However, these early instances of archaeological inquiry remained separate from general historical study for

⁸ Leo Deuel, ed., Conquistadors without Swords: Archeologists in the Americas (New York: St. Martin’s, 1967), 238.
centuries. By the 1960s, as Deuel illustrates, historians had begun to embrace the findings of archaeological digs as historical evidence, expanding their knowledge base beyond what white explorers and settlers had observed and recorded. As the wide range of essays that Deuel includes prove, archaeology began to deconstruct the largely monolithic nature of Indian history and culture through the startlingly different findings at scattered sites.

Besides archaeology, scientific developments in chemical and microscopic analysis in the late twentieth century have significantly contributed to more dynamic visions of precontact Indian agriculture. In historian Bruce Smith’s 1992 collection of essays on precontact agricultural developments in North America, he asserts, “The recent increase of essential information on agriculture in eastern North America is in large part attributable to the application of four important technological advances to archaeology, and serves to underscore the important role of instrumentation in guiding and stimulating research.” ⁹ Smith’s extensive treatment of Native American agriculture emphasizes the ecological transitions that occurred, as Indians encouraged plants to adapt from wild forms to domesticated ones. However, rather than assuming a unified process for every area and every Indian society, he relies on these scientific advances to determine important differences between the agricultural practices of various groups. While archaeology provides a glimpse of the surviving artifacts of everyday objects and structures,

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scientific analysis primarily targets human remains and agricultural detritus, as the four main areas of inquiry demonstrate:

Water flotation technology has produced dramatic improvements in the recovery of small carbonized seeds and other plant parts from archaeological contexts...; this technology has allowed the development of detailed temporally long archaeobotanical sequences for different areas of eastern North America...Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) has documented minute morphological changes in seed structure associated with the process of domestication... Accelerator mass spectrometer (AMS) radiocarbon dating has provided, for the first time, accurate and direct age determinations of very small samples of seeds and other plant parts...Stable carbon isotope analysis of human bone...has been a direct means of observing temporal and geographical trends in the relative consumption of maize by prehistoric groups in eastern North America.\textsuperscript{10}

Through Smith’s eager use of such scientific techniques, he fully explored precontact Native American agricultural processes without a reliance on presumably biased primary accounts from white encounters with Indians. Indeed, the findings of scientific undertakings enable historians like Smith to question their inherited historical knowledge about Indian’s agricultural practices and verify its accuracy. Perhaps most importantly, technological advances such as these have established the complexity of agricultural variation from region to region, settlement to settlement, and time to time, leading to the debunking of the belief in a monolithic Indian culture.

In the twenty-first century, with historians’ greater consciousness of postmodern conceptions of cultural pastiche and exchange, they increasingly focus on the blurring and redefinition of Indian culture and agricultural practices throughout their encounters with various tribes and European groups. One of the most

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 267-68.
significant redefinitions involves the continual disproving of the monomyth attached to white history’s conceptions of Native American history. James Axtell, in his 2001 monograph on the cultural practices and descent of early North Americans, reexamines agricultural practices irrevocably associated with histories and lore of early encounters with Native Americans. Among the most iconic historical moments in early American history, Squanto’s assistance in teaching the Pilgrims how to use fish as fertilizer became a component of the monomyth, which resulted in a belief that all Indians used fish as fertilizer. However, James Axtell, like other twenty-first century historians, refuses the monomyth and instead particularizes the use of fish fertilizer as a regional agricultural practice. Through his research, he proposes that only Algonquian peoples actually consistently used fish fertilizer as a component of seasonal agriculture. Others reacted to the depletion of the soil by moving their fields and sometimes even their entire settlement.\footnote{James Axtell, \textit{Natives and Newcomers: The Cultural Origins of North America} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 321-22.} Axtell’s resistance to a tacit acceptance of the monomyth echoes that of many other postmodern historians, who remain concerned about recording multiple perspectives and voices in order to create a “thick” history. Other historians’ responses to claims like those of Axtell’s evince a continual desire to deconstruct historical assumptions and conclusions in order to arrive at a more solid and evidence-supported truth. In Charles Mann’s 2005 response to the fish fertilizer quandary, he further questions the assumptions that underlie the separations between white and Indian cultures. Part of this postmodern questioning, then, involved historians reexamining both Indian and
colonial agricultural practices as not independent of each other but highly dependent on the mutual borrowing and adaptation of techniques: “fish fertilizer may not have been an age-old Indian custom, but a recent invention – if it was an Indian practice at all. So little evidence has emerged of Indians fertilizing with fish that some archaeologists believe that Tisquantum actually picked up the idea from European farmers.”12 Recognizing that every encounter with a different culture necessarily impacts both peoples involved, Mann and other historians have increasingly turned to brief encounters between whites and Indians as more significant cultural shifts than previously acknowledged. Indeed, the reevaluation of each cultures’ traditionally assigned historical roles has largely redefined the study of Native American agricultural practices and consequential ecological impact.

With a more developed postcolonial perspective on Native American affairs, historians have increasingly begun to revoke simplistic accounts of their interactions with agriculture and ecological landscapes. Instead of viewing Indians’ impact on the natural environment around them through the romanticized and overly simplistic ideal of living in harmony with nature, historians attempt to address how their unique cultural views interacted with white perspectives to create practice that sharply diverged from romantic harmony. Daniel Richter describes the initial cultural values Native Americans and Europeans held before encounters with each other: ‘Native communities treated land as a ‘resource,’ which could not in itself be owned... Europeans, by contrast, treated land as a ‘commodity’

that was itself inherently and irrevocably owned, along with all its resources…a fixed feature of the landscape.” Although Richter presents these values as more polarized than most historians might, he analyzes how the Native American fur trade, especially of beaver pelts, introduced a new aspect of commodity to the physical environment that significantly altered the characteristic uses of the natural landscape. In decimating the beaver population, Richter argues that Indians had altered the landscape itself as

[fa]ewer dams meant increased water flows and thus soil erosion, which destroyed complicated habitats and made scarce the deer, fish, and fowl that exploited them – and which had long been important food resources for Native people. Meantime, the expansive meadows left behind when dams disappeared became desirable haying and pasturage lands for the European families who arrived in such great numbers beginning in the 1630s.

In a postmodern refusal to lay the blame for the destruction of Native American landscapes and thus culture solely on whites, Richter empowers Indians through his admission of their own active participation in the historical processes of the time, even those that would ultimately lead to their demise. Since Richter’s constructed history strongly highlights the Native American perspective upon Europeans as invaders and visitors, his version of events provides a transitional account that requires the impetus of European colonization but recognizes the active role that Indians played within such a framework.

Other historians further the postcolonial acknowledgement of Native American culture and its relation to the natural world as whole and well-developed

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14 Ibid., 54.
before European intervention. In contrast to Richter’s still idealized and limited vision of precontact Native American agriculture, Colin Calloway contends that “the idea of America as a pristine landscape before 1492 is a European fiction. In different times and places, Indian peoples had modified the extent and composition of forests, created and expanded grasslands, built towns and earthworks, trails and roads, canals and ditches. They sometimes placed pressure on food sources and occasionally degraded the environment.” 15 In Calloway’s 2004 historical perspective, Native Americans possess a fuller and more realistic ecological culture before any initial contact with Europeans. Rather than solely reacting to European influences, they support legitimate cultures of their own. Thus even as Calloway’s deconstructive approach to misconceptions of Indians’ harmonious existence with nature may seem to yield an unfavorable perspective on Native American agriculture, he supports the recognition of Indians’ cultures as complex and dynamic systems that resist over-generalizations. Likewise, in 2006, Bryan Black, Charles Ruffner, and Marc Abrams employed ecological studies to record the definite impact of millennia of Native Americans on the land. In the forests of the Northeast, they examined the distribution of oak, hickory, and chestnut trees as signals of Indian inhabitance or presence.16 Through this process, they can scientifically prove the ecological impact that continued Native American agricultural practices produced

on the land. Not only does this provide a compelling record that Indians engaged in intensive measures such as burning and girdling trees in their agriculture, but this record also legitimates the history of Native American peoples in the area. As they lack the written records of their histories, the ecological studies provide a means to read a history written in their mark upon the natural world.

As such contemporary historians emphasize the intensive agricultural practices among the American Indians, others explore the highly technical and often scientifically grounded intentionality in Native American agricultural processes, in which the advanced developments in cultivation and horticulture indicate their cultures' serious pursuit of proficiency in agriculture. Indeed, anthropologists David Minderhout and Andrea Frantz classify most Northeastern Indian agricultural processes as horticulture, which implies a greater control over the careful cultivation of individual plants and crop management. In their 2009 summary of the particularity of Native American horticulture, Minderhout and Frantz encourage a refutation of the frequent claim that Indians' agriculture remained rudimentary, savage, or subsistence-based. Instead they provide a rationale for the consideration of Native American agriculture as a highly productive and technically informed process, distinct from the usual agricultural practices of Europeans. Indeed, Minderhout and Frantz even propose that Native American agriculture provisioned the peoples with far more surplus than European agriculture, in which subsistence farming remained all too common; American Indians purportedly amassed

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enormous caches with thousands of bushels of maize, enough to protect against climatic variance or disaster.  

With this perspective on Native American plenty and the complexity of their agricultural processes, historians encourage the wider perception of Indians’ precontact cultures as highly developed, well functioning societies, rather than an outdated acceptance of Native American culture and agriculture as savage.

From history’s initial reliance only on white explorers’ accounts of savages with limited capabilities to subsistence farm, historians have embraced postmodernism and postcolonialism, which, along with archaeology and scientific analyses, provide a new perspective of Native American agriculture as a complex process of exchange and adaptation. Although the privileging of white voices and perspectives still occurs on a consistent basis in history, contemporary historians strive to overcome this historical culture bias in their treatments of American Indians. Rather than the false assumptions about lowered innate abilities and scales of civilization that belonged to the era of Huntington and other nineteenth and early twentieth century historians, today Native American studies supports a nuanced examination of Indian cultures and avoids the monomythic generalizations about Indian agricultural practices.

\[18\] Ibid.