

Excerpted From:

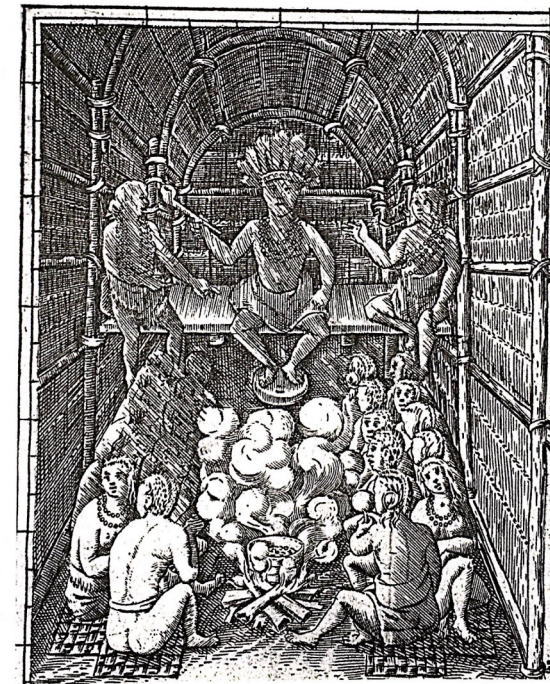
Mann, C. C. (2011). *1493: Uncovering the new world Columbus created*. New York: Knopf.

STRANGE LAND

On May 14, 1607, three small ships anchored in the James River, at the southern periphery of Chesapeake Bay. In movies and textbooks they are often depicted as arriving in a pristine forest of ancient trees, small bands of Indians gliding, silent as ghosts, beneath the canopy. Implicit in this view is the common description of the colonists as “settlers”—as if the land was unsettled before they came on the scene. In fact, the English ships landed in the middle of a small but rapidly expanding Indian empire called Tsenacomoco.

Three decades before, Tsenacomoco had comprised six small, separate clusters of villages. By the time the foreigners came from overseas, its paramount leader, Powhatan, had tripled its size, to about eight thousand square miles. Tsenacomoco stretched from Chesapeake Bay to the Fall Line, the bluffs at the edge of the Appalachian plateau. In its scores of villages lived as many as fourteen thousand people. Europeans would have been impressed by these numbers; Michael Williams, a historical geographer at Oxford, argued that the eastern U.S. forest may have been more populous in 1600 than even “densely settled parts of western Europe.”

The ruler of this land was known by multiple names and titles,



The only known likeness of Powhatan created in his lifetime, this sketch ornamenting a 1612 map by John Smith depicts him in a longhouse, smoking a tobacco pipe while surrounded by wives and advisers.

a hallmark of kings everywhere; Powhatan, the name used most often by the colonists, was also the name of the village in which he was born. Wary, politically shrewd, ruthless when needed, Powhatan was probably in his sixties when the English landed—"well beaten with many cold and stormy winters," according to colonist Strachey, but still "of a tall stature and clean limbs."

His capital of Werowocomoco ("king's house") was on the north bank of the York River, in a little bay where three streams come together. (The York runs more or less parallel to the James and a few miles to its north.) Projecting from the shore was a peninsula dominated by a low rise, twenty-five feet at its highest point, which held most of the village's houses. Behind it, separated by a double moat from the rest of Werowocomoco, was a second, smaller hill, with several structures at its base that combined the function of temples, armories, and treasure houses. Generally closed to commoners, they contained the preserved bodies of important chiefs and priests, mounted on scaffolds and ringed by emblems of wealth and power. Atop the hill was the biggest structure in Tsenacomoco: a great, windowless barrel vault, perhaps 150 feet long, its walls made of overlapping sheets of chestnut bark, with gargoyle-like statues at each corner. At the far end, lighted by torches, was the royal chamber. Inside, the sovereign greeted visitors from a raised, pillow-covered divan, surrounded by wives and advisers, long gray hair tumbling over his shoulders, ropes of fat pearls descending from his neck. Confronted with this regal spectacle, colonist John Smith was awed; the Indian men, who generally had better diets than the English, "seemed like Giants," with deep voices "sounding from them, as a voyce in a vault." Sitting in the center, Powhatan himself, Smith thought, had "such a Majestie as I cannot expresse."