

AMERICAN LITERATURE OF PRECOLUMBIAN AND COLONIAL PERIODS

Early American Period: Native oral
literature

- Amerindians' background;
- Peculiarities of native literature.

- ▣ The distant ancestors of Amerindians (or “native Americans”) had come to America from Asia during the earth’s last ice age. At that time a bridge of ice joined Asia to America across what is now the Bering Strait. Hunters from Siberia crossed this bridge into Alaska, and then moved south and east across America. About 12 000 years ago, descendants of these first Amerindians were crossing the isthmus of Panama into South America. About 5000 years later their camps fires were burning on the frozen southern tip of the continent, now called Terra del Fuego – the Land of Fire.



- ▣ - American literature begins with the orally transmitted myths, legends, tales, and lyrics (always songs) of Indian cultures;
- ▣ - North American peoples did not use a written alphabet – had *oral literature*;
- ▣ - types of native Amerindian literature depended upon peculiarities of the tribes' religion, politics, economics, etc.: Kwakiutl *winter ceremonies*, Winnebago *trickster tale cycles*, Apache *jokes*, Hopi *personal naming and grievance chants*, Iroquois *condolence rituals*, Navajo *curing and blessing chants*, and Chippewa *songs of the Great Medicine Society*;

- ▣ - a few literary generalizations: reverence for nature as a spiritual as well as physical mother; nature is alive and endowed with spiritual forces; main characters may be animals or plants, often totems associated with a tribe, group, or individual;
- ▣ - literary genres: lyric, chants, myths, fairy tales, humorous anecdotes, incantations, riddles, proverbs, epics, legendary histories, vision or healing songs, and tricksters' tales.

The Literature of Exploration

- ▣ - adventurous seamen;
- ▣ - first American writers.
- ▣ 1. The Old Norse *Vinland Saga* and Leif Ericson
“Lucky Leif”, a Viking sailor from Iceland.



- 2. Christopher Columbus (1451 – 1506) , an Italian explorer .



- ▣ 3. Bartolome de las Casas (1474 – 1566):
- ▣ *History of the Indians* is the richest source of information about the early contact between Amerindians and Europeans; criticizes their enslavement by the Spanish



- 4. Thomas Hariot
(1560- 1621): *A Brief and True Report of the New - Found Land Of Virginia* (1588) gives much information about the flora and fauna, the Amerindians, difficult relationships between Europeans and native people, “fierce” dealings with Wingina’s people, ample evidence that diseases imported by the English had already begun to decimate Amerindians.



- 5. Captain John Smith (1580 – 1631): *True Relation of Virginia* (1608) are fascinating “advertisements” which try to persuade the reader to settle in the New World: *His General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624) contains the story of his rescue by a beautiful Indian princess, *Pocahontas*.
- Many Virginians today claim to be descended from Pocahontas and her son.



Conclusion: The early literature of exploration, made up of diaries, letters, travel journals, ships' logs, and reports to the explorers' financial backers – European rulers or, in mercantile England and Holland, joint stock companies – gradually was supplanted by records of the settled colonies. Because England eventually took possession of the North American colonies, the best – known and most – anthologized colonial literature is English. It is important to recognize its richly cosmopolitan beginnings.