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## **Historic Narrative—Section 3**

### **The Power of Powhatan**

Although Powhatan was an imposing and powerful leader, his power was not absolute. It was personal and religious or shamanic, as well as what the English regarded as political or executive. To a certain extent he ruled by consensus, advised by a council of subleaders and religious authorities (“priests”), but he also seemed to dominate the council and could act independently of it. Powhatan was the principal “official” leader, especially when it came to dealing with outsiders, but others such as his brother (or possibly his cousin) Opechancanough were principal war leaders at the time the English arrived.

Powhatan possessed extensive powers of punishment over his people, but he also bore responsibility for their welfare. Some of his power stemmed from the trust of the people: when times were good, when food was abundant, when the Powhatan people competed successfully with those outside the polity, then his personal and shamanic leadership was unquestionably “right” for the people. But in 1607, Tsenacomoco was deep in a drought that would last until 1612 and eventually affect not only crops such as corn and beans but also the wild produce and animals that depended on them. Difficult times lay ahead for the people, even without the arrival of hungry Englishmen.

In part as an assertion of his leadership and also as a hedge against famine, Powhatan received what the English called “tribute,” mostly foodstuffs such as corn and beans, which were placed in storehouses from which they could be drawn for feasts, for trade, for sacred rituals, and for feeding people in times of need. Even in times of relative abundance, seasonal shortages occurred, especially in the spring before wild and domestic crops had ripened. Food was never taken for granted.