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Gregory Feldmeth

Assistant Head of School
Instructor, AP United States History
Polytechnic School
Pasadena, CA

Gary Piggrem, Ph.D.

Professor of History
DeVry Institute of Technology
Columbus, OH

Jerome McDuffie, Ph.D.

Professor of History
University of North Carolina at Pembroke
Pembroke, NC

Steven E. Woodworth, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of History
Toccoa Falls College
Toccoa, GA



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Chapter 1

PRE-COLUMBIAN CULTURES (12,000 B.C.E.–1492 C.E.)

While historians disagree as to when the first Americans reached the Western Hemisphere, there is no disagreement as to where: the Bering Strait between Siberia and Alaska. Most scholars place the arrival at between 15,000 and 30,000 years ago; it appears that the receding waters exposed enough of a land bridge over the 56 miles that separate North America and Asia for groups to migrate across on at least two occasions. The Asian immigrants probably followed large game animals, such as mammoths, bison, and giant ground sloths. The small groups gradually spread across North and South America, and there is evidence that some reached the tip of South America by 9000 B.C.E.

2,000 SEPARATE CULTURES

The three most advanced civilizations of the more than 2,000 separate cultures that developed in the New World were the Incas, the Mayas, and the Aztecs.

Around 1000 C.E. the Incas successfully conquered neighboring tribes and eventually controlled an area more than 2,500 miles in length. By 1500 the Incas were the largest and richest of the ancient empires of the Americas. The Incas built palaces surrounded by high walls in Peru and connected a series of mountain towns and villages with an elaborate network of roads. They developed a system of terraces to effectively farm on the steep hillsides and used canals and aqueducts to irrigate crops. The potato and the tomato were two of the Incan contributions to world diets. Despite the lack of a written language, the Incan governmental system was well-organized when Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro and his brothers Juan, Gonzalo, and Hernando arrived in 1532 with fewer than 200 soldiers. The Pizarros defeated the Incan army and executed their king, Atahualpa, who had allowed the Spaniards to enter the city because he did not sense a threat from their small force against his 80,000-member army. The Pizarros then captured the capital of Cuzco and looted its wealth of silver and gold.

The Mayas built temples and pyramids surrounding broad plazas in the mountains, deserts, and rain forests of what is now Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and the Yucatán region of Mexico. The Mayas also constructed observatories, developed accurate calendars, knew of the mathematical concept of zero, and invented their own writing system, which used both syllables and single written characters, known as glyphs. Most of the written record of the Mayas was destroyed by Spanish invaders. The first ceremonial buildings appear to have been constructed about 1000 B.C.E. The Mayas were sophisticated farmers and used raised fields to plant maize, the cereal grain that is the ancestor of modern corn. The Mayas went into a decline in around 800 C.E. and were ruled as smaller city-states when the Spanish conquest began in the 1520s.

HIGHLY ORGANIZED SOCIETY

The Aztecs were the latest of the three advanced civilizations to develop, having arrived at what is now Mexico City (Tenochtitlán) in the thirteenth century C.E. The city, featuring elaborate temples and canals and boasting a population of over 100,000, was the center of a large empire. The Aztecs developed a highly organized society ruled by a king and included a class of priests and tax collectors, a warrior elite, and an active merchant class. The Aztecs were a warlike people, exacting tribute from other tribes and capturing prisoners for the human sacrifice that was central to their religion. The Aztecs were conquered shortly after the arrival of Spaniard Hernán Cortés in 1519, and their king, Moctezuma, was killed. The Spaniards' accounts say that Moctezuma's attempts to address his subjects, who took a dim view of their leader's submission to Spanish forces, resulted in his being attacked with stones and arrows that inflicted fatal wounds. But the Aztecs' belief that their king had been murdered at the hand of the Spaniards caused the Cortés force heavy loss of life and treasure as it tried to leave the Aztec capital under cover of darkness.

By the time the Aztecs were conquered by the Spanish, the population of Mexico may have numbered 25 million people. Farther north, in what is now the United States and Canada, there were only about 1 million Indians. Most of the inhabitants were nomadic tribes subsisting as hunters or gatherers. Very few, mostly in the American Southwest, settled in one location as farmers.

The Anasazi built five-story pueblos in Chaco Canyon and cliff dwellings in what is now Arizona and New Mexico, and created a system of roads that reached villages 400 miles away. They watered their crops with a system of irrigation canals. But their canals, even combined with other techniques to counter lengthy dry seasons, were not enough to overcome the prolonged drought of the thirteenth century. This drought, the effects of which were compounded by attacks by neighboring tribes, contributed to their decline.

Pueblo peoples also used cliff dwellings (some survive to this day at Mesa Verde, Colorado) that were built during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Pueblos adopted architectural and religious practices from the Anasazi and, in addition, used plants that were more drought-resistant.

Indian tribes that lived in the Mississippi Valley found conditions that were much less harsh and thus more favorable to continued settlement. The area provided rich soil and a network of rivers that allowed for fishing, hunting, and trade. Beginning about 800 C.E., immigrants to the area, perhaps from the Yucatán Peninsula, planted new strains of maize and beans. The largest settlement, Cahokia, near present-day St. Louis, may have included as many as 40,000 people in the thirteenth century. Even though, as for almost all other New World groups, no written records exist, huge earthen pyramids reveal a sophisticated religious system. Cahokia featured more than 100 of these temple mounds. The main pyramid at Cahokia covers over 15 acres and extended over 35 feet high. Residents traded with groups throughout the eastern half of what is now the United States, including tribes on the Atlantic coastline. As with the Anasazi, the people of Cahokia disappeared for unknown reasons sometime in the fourteenth century, though it is thought that overpopulation, warfare, and urban diseases such as tuberculosis took huge tolls.

One group of Mississippi Valley residents that survived well past the arrival of whites were those known as the Natchez. Their ruler, known as the Great Sun, presided over a class-based society. Advisors to the Great Sun comprised the noble class and served as chiefs of villages. The mass of peasants, called Stinkards, cultivated the land. The Natchez were warlike and practiced torture and human sacrifice. Organized into confederacies of local farming villages, they proved unable to resist the diseases and conquests of the invading Europeans.

The Eastern Woodland Indians of North America occupied the lands east of the Mississippi River. They usually lived in small, self-governing clans of related families and were governed by clan elders. Unlike the Aztec or Mayan rulers, however, these kinship-based systems used consensus, rather than coercion, to govern. The peoples of this region spoke a wide variety of languages belonging



Cahokia Mounds

Cahokia Mounds, the site of the largest pre-Columbian Indian city north of Mexico. This painting, by L. K. Townsend, shows central Cahokia circa 1150 to 1200 B.C.E. Courtesy Cahokia Mounds Historic Site.

to a few language groups. Most of the Indians living between the St. Lawrence River and Chesapeake Bay (Pequots and Delaware, for example) spoke Algonquian languages. The area between the Hudson River and the Great Lakes was home to the Five Nations of the Iroquois (Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, and Mohawk), who spoke Iroquoian languages. The tribes in the Southeast, such as the Choctaw and Creek, spoke Muskogean language dialects.

Most Eastern Woodland tribes did not live in permanent settlements, though tribes claimed territorial lands as their own. Groups moved about seasonally, gathering berries and seeds, fishing and hunting, and settling in the summer on fertile lands. While men were responsible for hunting and fishing, women controlled agricultural production. In some tribes, such as the Iroquois, the eldest women selected the clan chief, and inheritance of goods was matrilineal, with rights to land and other property passing to daughters from mothers. The economic nature of Eastern Woodland life was primarily one of subsistence agriculture, and these groups never developed large urban centers that the Native Americans of Mexico inhabited.

The arrival of Europeans on the American continent greatly affected Native American cultures. The tribes along the Atlantic Coast were pressured almost immediately to adapt to the white settlers and traders. Some very early contact was peaceful. Trade seemed to be the main interest of many. Whites provided metal tools and weapons in exchange for beaver and other pelts, which were in abundant supply to the Indians.

Often, trading encounters led to efforts of the Europeans to civilize the Indians, attempting to persuade them to live in permanent houses, learn to read and write, and, almost always, to accept Christianity. Jesuits and Franciscan priests and missionaries accompanied Spanish explorers in the American Southwest, and French fur traders in what is now Canada were closely followed by Jesuits who sought to convert the Indians they encountered.

SOME NATIVE TRIBES RENDERED NEARLY EXTINCT

The interaction between the natives and the new immigrants was largely, but not always, negative. Horses, which had first evolved in the New World, returned with the Spanish in the 1500s and became central to the lives of many peoples, particularly those who lived in the Great Plains. While nomadic before the horse's re-introduction to the continent, they now could range much farther and develop new means of hunting and fighting other tribes. In sum, however, the benefits of the contact with whites were drastically outweighed by the devastation caused by conquest and disease. Superior European weapons resulted in many decisive defeats for Indian groups throughout the Americas. In addition, illnesses such as measles, typhus, and smallpox ravaged Indian groups that had

developed no immunities. Within 50 years of Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean, some native tribes on the islands were virtually extinct. On the island of Hispaniola, the population dropped from approximately 1 million to just 500 by 1600. In Peru the population dropped from 9 million in 1530 to 500,000 in 1630. Some historians estimate that in some regions as much as 95 percent of Indian groups died of European diseases in the first century after contact.

In this Columbian exchange, whites fared much better than Indians. While sexually transmitted diseases were carried by sailors returning to Europe, other New World contributions were of great positive value. New agricultural techniques and new crops, such as tomatoes, potatoes, pumpkins, beans, and squash, enriched European diets. Maize (corn), which Columbus brought back to Spain after his first voyage, became an important part of European diets.

In sum, the contact with European civilizations proved disastrous for the Indian residents of the New World. They were devastated by conquering armies and by disease, and made to work as slaves. While vestiges of their cultures have survived to the present day, most of their traditions, cities and villages, and populations have been wiped out.

← HISTORICAL TIMELINE →
Pre-Columbian Cultures (12,000 B.C.E.–1492 C.E.)

ca. 12,000 B.C.E.	Asians begin several migrations over Bering Strait
5000 B.C.E.	Maize cultivation begins in southern Mexico
700 B.C.E.	Olmec people flourish along Gulf of Mexico
100 C.E.	Hopewell culture sets up massive trading network
300	Mayan city of Tikal features 20,000 residents and many temples
500	Teotihuacán's population reaches 100,000 at peak of culture
600	Hohokam civilization develops in present Arizona and New Mexico
800	Collapse of many Mayan cities
900	Anasazi build cliff villages in American southwest
1000	Leif Ericson and Norsemen settle Vinland in current Newfoundland
1125	City of Cahokia (near present-day St. Louis) has 15,000 residents and 100 temple mounds
1325	Aztecs build Tenochtitlán on site of current Mexico City
1438	Incas begin conquest of Andean region of South America
1492	Columbus lands at San Salvador in Bahamas