

Topic 1.2

Native American Societies Before European Contact

The American Indian is of the soil, whether it be the region of forests, plains, pueblos, or mesas. He fits into the landscape, for the hand that fashioned the continent also fashioned the man for his surroundings.

Luther Standing Bear, Oglala Lakota Chief, 1933

Learning Objective: Explain how various native populations interacted with the natural environment in North America in the period before European contact.

The original discovery and settlement of North and South America began at least 10,000 and maybe up to 40,000 years ago. Migrants from Asia might have crossed a **land bridge** that once connected Siberia and Alaska (land now submerged under the Bering Sea). Over time, people migrated southward from near the Arctic Circle to the southern tip of South America. As they adapted to the varied environments they encountered, they evolved into hundreds of tribes speaking hundreds of languages. By 1491, the population in the Americas was probably between 50 million and 100 million people.

Cultures of Central and South America

The native population was concentrated in three highly developed civilizations.

- Between the years 300 and 800, the **Mayas** built remarkable cities in the rain forests of the Yucatán Peninsula (present-day Guatemala, Belize, and southern Mexico).
- Several centuries after the decline of the Mayas, the **Aztecs** from central Mexico developed a powerful empire. The Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, had a population of about 200,000, equivalent in population to the largest cities of Europe.
- While the Aztecs were dominating Mexico and Central America, the **Incas** based in Peru developed a vast empire in western South America.

All three civilizations developed highly organized societies, carried on an extensive trade, and created calendars that were based on accurate scientific observations. All three cultivated crops that provided a stable food supply, particularly **corn (maize)** for the Mayas and Aztecs and potatoes for the Incas.

Cultures of North America

The population in the region north of Mexico (present-day United States and Canada) in the 1490s may have been anywhere from under 1 million to more than 10 million.

General Patterns Native societies in this region included fewer people and had less complex social structures than those in Mexico and South America. One reason for these differences was how slowly the cultivation of corn (maize) spread northward from Mexico. The nutrition provided by corn allowed for larger and more densely settled populations. In turn, this led to more socially diversified societies in which people specialized in their work.

Some of the most populous societies in North America had disappeared by the 15th century for reasons not well understood. By the time of Columbus, most people in the Americas in what is now the United States and Canada lived in semipermanent settlements in groups seldom exceeding 300 people. In most of these groups, the men made tools and hunted for game, while the women gathered plants and nuts or grew crops such as corn (maize), beans, and tobacco.

Language Differences Beyond these broad similarities, the cultures of American Indians were very diverse. For example, while English, Spanish, and almost all other European languages were part of just one language family (Indo-European), American Indian languages constituted more than 20 language families. Among the largest of these were **Algonquian** in the northeast, **Siouan** on the Great Plains, and Athabaskan in the southwest. Together, these 20 families included more than 400 distinct languages.

Southwest Settlements In the dry region that now includes New Mexico and Arizona, groups such as the **Hohokam**, **Anasazi**, and **Pueblos** evolved multifaceted societies. Many people lived in caves, under cliffs, and in multistoried buildings. The spread of maize cultivation into this region from Mexico prompted economic growth and the development of irrigation systems. The additional wealth allowed for a more complex society to develop, one with greater variations between social and economic classes.

By the time Europeans arrived, extreme drought and other hostile natives had taken their toll on these groups. However, their descendants continue to live in the region, and the arid climate helped preserve some of the older stone and masonry dwellings.

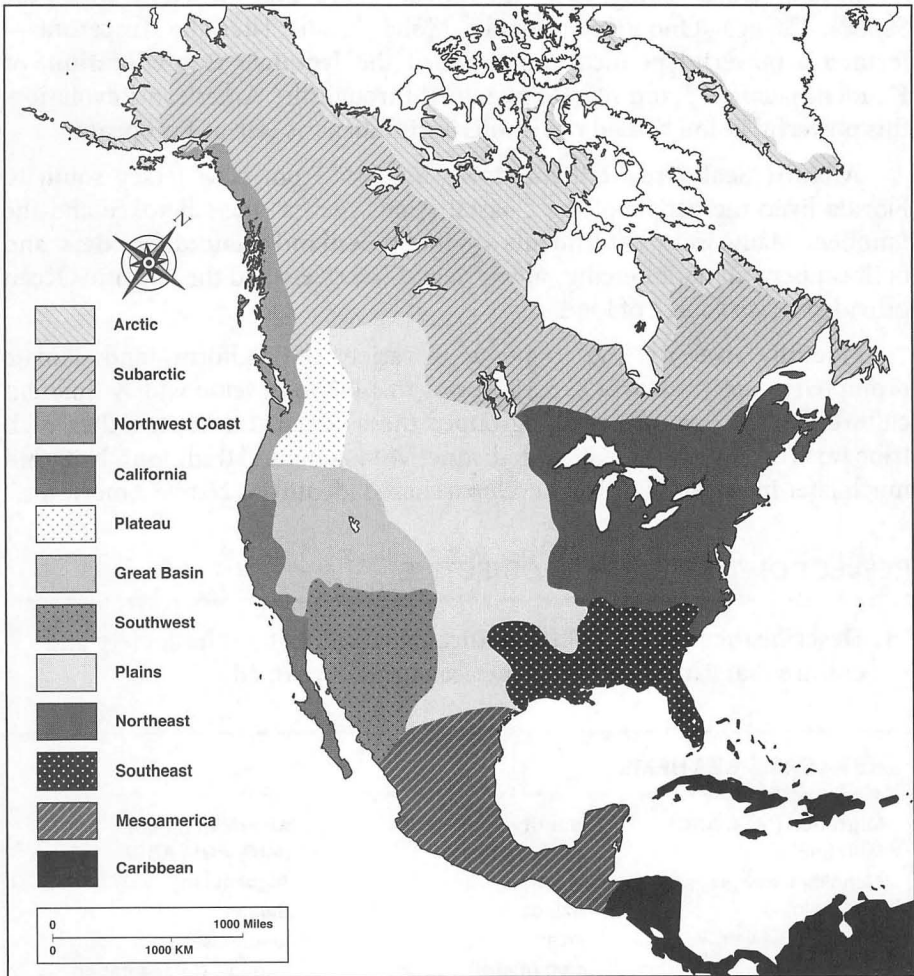
Northwest Settlements Along the Pacific coast from what is today Alaska to northern California, people lived in permanent longhouses or plank houses. They had a rich diet based on hunting, fishing, and gathering nuts, berries, and roots. To help people remember stories, legends, and myths, they carved large totem poles. However, the high mountain ranges in this region isolated tribes from one another, creating barriers to development.

Great Basin and Great Plains People adapted to the dry climate of the Great Basin region and the grasslands of the Great Plains by developing mobile

ways of living. Nomadic tribes survived on hunting, principally the buffalo, which supplied their food as well as decorations, crafting tools, knives, and clothing. People lived in tepees, frames of poles covered in animal skins, which were easily disassembled and transported. Some tribes, though they also hunted buffalo, lived permanently in earthen lodges often along rivers. They raised corn (maize), beans, and squash while actively trading with other tribes.

Not until the 17th century did American Indians acquire horses by trading or stealing them from Spanish settlers. With horses, tribes such as the Lakota Sioux could more easily follow buffalo herds. The plains tribes would at times merge or split apart as conditions changed. Migration also was common. For example, the Apaches gradually migrated southward from Canada to Texas.

NATIVE PEOPLES OF THE AMERICAS, 1491



Mississippi River Valley East of the Mississippi River, the Woodland American Indians prospered with a rich food supply. Supported by hunting, fishing, and agriculture, people established permanent settlements in the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys and elsewhere. The Adena-Hopewell culture, centered in what is now Ohio, is famous for its large earthen mounds, some 300 feet long. One of the largest settlements in the Midwest was Cahokia (near present-day East St. Louis, Illinois), with as many as 30,000 inhabitants.

Northeast Settlements Some descendants of the **Adena-Hopewell** culture spread from the Ohio Valley into New York. Their culture combined hunting and farming. However, their farming techniques exhausted the soil quickly, so people had to move to fresh land frequently. Multiple families related through the mother's lineage lived together in **longhouses** that were up to 200 feet long.

Several tribes living near the Great Lakes and in New York—the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and later the Tuscaroras—formed a powerful political union called the **Iroquois Confederation**, or Haudenosaunee. From the 16th century through the American Revolution, this powerful union battled rival American Indians as well as Europeans.

Atlantic Seaboard Settlements In the area from New Jersey south to Florida lived the people of the Coastal Plains such as the Cherokee and the Lumbee. Many were descendants of the **Woodland mound builders** and built timber and bark lodgings along rivers. The rivers and the Atlantic Ocean provided a rich source of food

Overall Diversity The tremendous variety of landforms and climate prompted people in North America prior to 1492 to develop widely different cultures. While Europeans often grouped these varied cultures together, each tribe was very conscious of its own distinctive systems and traditions. Not until much later in history did they develop a shared identity as Native Americans.

REFLECT ON THE LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Describe the influence of the natural environment on the society and culture that various Native Americans had developed.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

Migration (MIG, ARC)

land bridge
Hohokam, Anasazi, and
Pueblos
Adena-Hopewell
Woodland mound builders

Identity and Politics (NAT, POL)

Mayas
Aztecs
Incas
corn (maize)

American Indians (MIG, POL, ARC)

Algonquian
Siouan
longhouses
Iroquois Confederation
Woodland mound builders

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

Questions 1–2 refer to the following excerpt.

“During the thousands of years preceding European contact, the Native American people developed inventive and creative cultures. They cultivated plants for food, dyes, medicines, and textiles; domesticated animals; established extensive patterns of trade; built cities; produced monumental architecture; developed intricate systems of religious beliefs; and constructed a wide variety of systems of social and political organization. . . . Native Americans not only adapted to diverse and demanding environments, they also reshaped the natural environments to meet their needs. . . . No society had shaped metal into guns, swords, or tools; none had gunpowder, sailing ships, or mounted warriors.”

“Overview of First Americans,” *Digital History*, 2016

1. According to the excerpt, one contrast between Native Americans and Europeans before contact between the two groups of people was that
 - (A) all Native Americans shared a common political system
 - (B) most Native Americans had little trade with other groups
 - (C) some Native Americans had metal tools they used in farming
 - (D) no Native Americans had certain military technologies that were common in Europe
2. What does the source imply was the cause of the “wide variety of systems of social and political organization”?
 - (A) Variations in the moral code
 - (B) Variations in the natural environment
 - (C) Variations in religious beliefs
 - (D) Variations in styles of architecture

SHORT-ANSWER QUESTION

1. Answer (a), (b), and (c).
 - (a) Briefly describe ONE specific difference between the cultures of the indigenous peoples of North America and those in Central and South America in the period 1491–1607.
 - (b) Briefly describe ONE specific similarity between the cultures of the indigenous peoples of North America and those in Central and South America in the period 1491–1607.
 - (c) Briefly explain ONE specific contrast between language families among Native Americans and Europeans in the period 1491–1607.