

The First Americans

The Cultures of Prehistoric America

Across from present-day St. Louis stands an earthen mound 100 feet high and covering 15 acres, bigger at its base than the Great Pyramid of Egypt. This mysterious mound is one of literally thousands that early Native Americans built in the Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys, the Great Lakes region, and along the Gulf Coast. Before the 1890s, many authorities refused to believe that Indians could have created these mounds since they lacked horses, oxen, or wheeled vehicles; they thought that the Vikings, the Lost Tribes of Israel, or some long vanished civilization constructed them. We now know that they were built by Native Americans to serve as burial places, as platforms for temples, and the residences of chiefs and priests.

Many of these New World monuments are truly immense. One Ohio mound resembles a huge snake and measures a quarter of a mile long. A Georgia mound has a figure of an eagle across its top. The mounds provide clues to the rich and diverse cultures that Native Americans created during the more than 20,000 years before Europeans reached the New World.

Earthen mounds are not the only magnificent monuments that the Indians produced. On the face of a sandstone cliff in present-day Mesa Verde, Colorado, is a spectacular stone and adobe structure that once housed over 400 people in 200 rooms. Located 100 feet above a nearby plateau, the structure is accessible only by climbing wooden ladders and using toe holds cut in the sandstone. In southern Colorado and Utah, northwestern New Mexico, and northern Arizona, hundreds of similar communal dwellings are located in shallow caves or under cliff overhangs.

The first Europeans to arrive in the Americas in the late 15th and 16th centuries were an arrogant, ethnocentric people who drew a sharp contrast between their societies' technological accomplishments and those of the New World Indians. And while it is true that the Indian peoples had no steel or iron tools, wheeled vehicles, large sailing vessels, keystone arches or domes, digital numbers, coined money, alphabet system of writing, or gunpowder, this does not at all mean that they did not create thriving and inventive societies. For one thing, the Indians were the first people to cultivate some of the world's most important agricultural crops: chocolate, corn, long-staple cotton, peanuts, pineapples, potatoes, rubber, quinine, tobacco, and vanilla. In addition, the New World Indians built cities as big as any in Europe, established forms of government as varied as Europe's, and created some of the world's greatest art and architecture--including temples, pyramids, statues, and canals.

While many Americans are aware of the impressive cultures that thrived in Mexico, Peru, and Guatemala before Columbus's arrival--the Toltec, the Maya, the Aztec, and the Inca--far fewer are familiar with the magnificent ancient cultures to be found north of Mexico. In fact, from the Alaska tundra to the dense evergreen forests of the Pacific Northwest, from the arid deserts of the Southwest to the rich river valleys of the Southeast and the eastern woodlands, prehistoric Native Americans established complex cultures, ingeniously adapted to diverse conditions. The first Americans had to adapt their ways of life to vastly different environments. Before 2000 B.C., the ancestors of the Inuit and the Aleuts arrived on the coast and frozen tundra of western Alaska, where they adapted ingeniously to arctic conditions. Since few plants grew in the harsh arctic climate, the Inuit relied on hunting and fishing. They drew much of their food from the sea, hunting seals, whales, and other marine mammals. The game they hunted not only provided food, but also protection from the extreme cold. The Inuit wore layers of caribou-skinned clothing and constructed heavily

insulated pit houses, dug into the ground and covered with furs and animal skins. The Inuit built sleds for transportation and spread out across the coast. These people were organized in a large number of small bands, which shared certain common cultural patterns while remaining largely autonomous.

Along the Northwest Pacific Coast--an area of dense forests, teeming with caribou, deer, elk and moose, and rivers, rich with sea life-- the ancestors of the Haidas, Kwakiutls, and Tlingits developed a distinctive culture oriented toward the water. The mild climate and the abundant marine life--salmon, sturgeon, halibut, herring, shellfish, and sea mammals-- meant that these peoples could produce food with very little work. Such abundance freed these people to create some of the world's most impressive art forms as well as an elaborate ceremonial life. The people of the Northwest Pacific Coast constructed large, gabled-roof plank houses; carved family and clan emblems on totem poles; made elaborately carved wooden masks, grave markers, and utensils; and constructed great sea-going canoes, some more than 60 feet long. The region's abundant resources also produced a highly stratified society, where a few wealthy families controlled each village. Individuals announced their high social status at a feast called a potlatch. During this ritual, which could last for several days, a host demonstrated his wealth by distributing food and gifts to his guests.

It was in the arid Southwest that some of the earliest farming societies developed. The predecessors of the Pueblo and Navajo Indians were able to flourish in a desert environment by developing complex irrigation systems for farming and by developing structures suitable for vast temperature changes.

Shifts in climate appear to have played an important role in encouraging the development of agriculture in the Southwest. Between three and five thousand years ago, the amount of rainfall in this region increased, encouraging many people to migrate to the area, including some from Mexico already familiar with raising corn, squash, and beans. These people raised crops casually, supplementing a diet that depended largely on hunting and foraging. Around 3,000 years ago, however, the climate grew drier, killing off many of the region's wild game and vegetation. A group of people known as the Mogollon, who lived in permanent villages along the rivers of eastern Arizona and western New Mexico, responded to this change by devoting increased energy to farming, raising beans, squash, and corn. The versatility of the Mogollon is also apparent in the housing they constructed. To cope with the desert extremes of heat and cold, they built pit houses--structures burrowed two or three feet into the ground and covered with woven reeds and plaster made out of mud.

In central Arizona, the Hohokam, a group that had migrated from Mexico, constructed elaborate irrigation systems in order to transform the desert into farm land. They dug wells, built ponds and dams to collect rainwater, and created hundreds of miles of canals and ditches to channel water to their crops. The Hohokam combined farming with trade, which involved luxury goods such as precious stones, ornamental sea shells, and copper bells.

The ancestral Puebloans also used dams and irrigation canals to water their crops. Between 1000 and 1300 A.D., the ancestral Puebloans culture spread across much of northern Arizona, northern New Mexico, southern Colorado, and southern Utah, establishing more than 25,000 separate communities spread over 60,000 square miles connected by a remarkable system of roads. The ancestral Puebloans are best known today for their magnificent cliff dwellings--multi-roomed dwellings built atop mesas or along steep cliffs. By 1300, however, the ancestral Puebloans abandoned these cliff dwellings and moved to the south and east, apparently in response to incursions from hostile Indians and a severe drought that threatened their food supply. The ancestral Puebloans are the ancestors of the

modern day Pueblo Indians.

The arrival of a new people into the Southwest, the Athabascans, created an important challenge to the ancestral Puebloans way of life. About 1000 A.D., bands of Athabascans, the ancestors of the Navajos and the Apaches, began to migrate to the Southwest from what is now Alaska and Canada. Formidable hunters and raiders, the Athabascans possessed the bow and arrow, and during the 14th and 15th centuries, raided ancestral Puebloans farming communities, and by 1500 had taken over the western desert. They lived in settlements consisting of "forked stick" homes, made by piling logs against three poles joined together at their tops, then covering the outside with mud. Later they fashioned hogans, earthen domes with log frames.

Along the lakes and rivers of the Midwest and the Southeast, prehistoric Americans established complex communities based on flourishing trade and agriculture. One of the earliest farming and trading towns arose approximately 1400 B.C., on the banks of the lower Mississippi River near present-day Vicksburg, Mississippi. Known as Poverty Point, the town showed many signs of Mexican influence, including a cone-shaped burial mound and two large bird-shaped mounds, and other huge earthworks. Networks of trade apparently connected Poverty Point with settlements along the Mississippi, Ohio, Missouri, and Arkansas rivers. Thus, thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans, Native Americans were already engaged in extensive trade of flint, copper, and other goods.

From about 100 B.C., a new mound-building culture flourished in the Midwest, known as the Hopewell. These people developed thousands of villages extending across what is now Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Missouri. The Hopewell supported themselves by hunting, fishing, and gathering, and also cultivated a variety of crops, including corn. The Hopewell developed an extensive trading network, obtaining shells and shark teeth from Florida, pipestone from Minnesota, volcanic glass from Wyoming, and silver from Ontario. The Hopewell created stratified societies, and buried their leaders in earthen mounds, filled with art works made of materials imported from areas more than a thousand miles away. The Hopewell built many more mounds than the Adena. A colder climate appears to have contributed to the decline of the Hopewell beginning around 450 A.D..

After 750 A.D., another mound-building culture, known as the Mississippians, emerged in the Mississippi Valley and the Gulf Coast. By cultivating an improved variety of corn, and using flint hoes instead of digging sticks, these people greatly increased agricultural productivity, permitting them to build some of the largest cities in prehistoric North America. The largest that we know about was Cahokia, across from present-day St. Louis, which probably had a population of 20,000. To protect the population from raids from neighboring peoples, many of these cities were protected by stockades. Like the Indians of Mexico, the Mississippians built flat-topped mounds in the center of their cities, where chiefs lived and the bones of deceased chiefs were kept.

The largest of the Mississippian settlements may have become city-states, exercising control over surrounding farm country. Within their towns, the Mississippians created a complex, stratified society, with a distinct leadership class, specialized artisans, an extensive system of trade, and priests. The Mississippians practiced a religion known as the Southern Ceremonial Complex. Somewhat similar to Mexican Indian religions, the "Southern cult," as it is known, provided a set of symbols and motifs of rank and status that recur in Mississippian art, notably a flying human figure with winglike tatoos around the eyes.

The Mississippian cultures grew until the 1500s, when diseases introduced by European

explorers resulted in a sharp decline in population. However, one group of Mississippians, the Natchez, survived into the 1700s, long enough to be described by Europeans.

Native America on the Eve of Contact

When Columbus arrived to the Caribbean in 1492, the New World was far from an empty wilderness. It was home to as many people as lived in Europe--perhaps 60 or 70 million. Between seven and twelve million lived in what are now the United States and Canada. They were not a single, homogeneous population. The people north of Mexico lived in more than 350 distinct groups, spoke more than 250 different languages and had their own political structure, kinship systems, and economies. These divisions would have fateful consequences for the future, permitting the European colonizers to adopt divide-and-conquer policies that played one group off against others.

In each geographical and cultural area were deeply rooted historic conflicts and vulnerabilities that European colonizers would exploit. In the Southwest, many conflicts arose over control of the arid region's scarce resources, as groups like Yaquis and the Pimas struggled over access to water and fertile land. In the northern portion of the Southwest, village dwellers, such as the Hopi and Zuni, coexisted uneasily with migratory hunters and raiders like the Apache. In the southern Southwest, patterns of land use would make the inhabitants especially vulnerable to Spanish encroachment. The dominant groups, the Pimas and the Papagos lived in isolated communities, known as rancherias, spread across a thousand miles along streams and other sources of irrigation. The Spaniards would adopt a policy that sought to "reduce" the dispersed Indian population into supervised towns.

In the Southeast--where the Creeks, the Choctaws, the Cherokees, the Seminoles and other peoples lived--extensive European colonization was delayed until the 17th century because the area lacked precious minerals. Here, Mississippian cultural patterns persisted: towns, with several hundred to a few thousand residents; farming, fishing and hunting; varying degrees of social stratification; and a pronounced tendency toward matrilineality (tracing descent through the mother's family) and matrilocality (newly married couples residing with and working for the mother's family). Forms of political organization ranged from autonomous towns to sets of villages that paid tribute to a dominant town. A history of intertribal warfare in the Southeast led many tribes to band together for protection in confederations.

Stretching from the Atlantic coast west to the Great Lakes and southward from Maine to North Carolina lay the eastern woodlands. The eastern woodland's major groups were the Algonquians, the Iroquois, and the Muskogean. The Algonquians lived in small bands of from one to three hundred members, combining hunting, fishing, and gathering with some agriculture. A semi-nomadic people, who might move several times a year, the Algonquians would plant crops, then break into small bands to hunt caribou and deer, and return to their fields at harvest time. These people lived in wigwams, dome-shaped structures containing one or more families. A wigwam, made of bent saplings covered with birchbark, typically housed a husband and wife, their children, and their married sons and their wives and children.

During the 1600s, the Algonquians and their allies the Hurons fought a bitter war against the Iroquois. Around 1640, the Algonquians were defeated and driven from their territory. This war and epidemics of measles and smallpox reduced the Algonquian population sharply.

The Iroquois were several related groups of people who still live in what is now central New York State. Scholars disagree about whether the Iroquois had long occupied this area or whether they migrated from the Southeast around 1300. What does seem clear is that

beginning in the 14th century, bitter feuds broke out among the Iroquois, which grew particularly intense during the 16th century. According to Iroquois oral tradition, two reformers, Dekanawidah, a Huron religious leader, and his disciple Hiawatha, a Mohawk chief, responded to mounting conflict by proposing a political alliance of the Iroquois tribes. During the 16th century, five Iroquois tribes--the Cayugas, the Mohawks, the Oneidas, the Onondagas, and the Senecas--joined together to form a confederation known as the Iroquois League. A sixth tribe, the Tuscarora, joined the league in the 18th century.

Governing the league was a council, consisting of the chiefs of each tribe and fifty specially chosen leaders called sachems. Some scholars argue that the Iroquois League, which combined a central authority with tribal autonomy, provided a model for the federal system of government later adopted by the United States. Women played a very important role in Iroquois society--a fact that shocked Europeans. Women headed the longhouses that were the basic units of social and economic organization among the Iroquois and were also the leaders of clans, which were comprised of several longhouses. Although women did not sit on the league councils that made decisions involving war and diplomacy, the women who headed the clans did have the power to appoint or remove the men who served on these councils.

Kinship and Religion

Despite differences in language and culture, Native American societies did share certain characteristics in common. Many Indian societies were organized around principles of kinship. Kinship ties--based on bloodlines or marriage--formed the basis of the political, economic, and religious system. Succession to political office and religious positions, ownership and inheritance of property, and even whom one could or could not marry were determined on the basis of membership in a kin group.

Indian kinship systems included an intricate number of forms, with regulations governing marriages, relations with in-laws, and residence after marriage. In patrilineal societies, like the Cheyenne of the Great Plains, land use rights and membership in the political system flowed through the father. In matrilineal societies, like the Pueblo of the Southwest, membership in the group was determined by the mother's family identity. In the Algonquian-speaking tribes of eastern North America, group membership was based on ties among siblings and cousins.

Many Indian peoples placed less emphasis on the nuclear family--the unit consisting of husband, wife, and their children--than upon the extended family or the lineage. On the Northwest Pacific Coast, the household consisted of a man, his wife or wives, and their children or the man's sister's sons. Among the western Pueblo, the nucleus of social and economic organization was the extended household consisting of a group of female relations and their husbands, sons-in-law, and maternal grandchildren. Among the Iroquoian speakers of the Eastern Woodlands, the basic social unit was the longhouse, a large rectangular structure that contained about ten families. One sign of the relative unimportance of the nuclear family as opposed to larger kinship ties is that many Indian societies provided for relatively easy access to divorce.

Apart from a common emphasis on kinship, Native American societies also shared certain religious beliefs and practices. Many European colonists regarded Indian religions as a form of superstition. One Catholic priest, Father Francois du Perron, described Iroquoian beliefs in very negative, but not unusual, terms: "All their actions are dictated to them directly by the devil...They consider the dream as the master of their lives; it is the God of the country."

Far from being "primitive" forms of religion, Indian religions possessed great subtlety and

sophistication, manifest in a rich ceremonial life, an intricate mythology, and profound speculations about the creation of the world, the origins of life, and the nature of the afterlife. Unlike Islam, Christianity, or Judaism, Native American religions were not "written" religions with specific founders; also, they might be termed mystical religions, since they allowed people to have direct contact with the supernatural through "visions" and "dreams."

Despite rich variations in ritual practices and customs, Native American religions shared certain common characteristics, notably an outlook that might be described as "animistic." This is a belief that there is a close bonds between people, animals, and the natural environment, and that all must live together in harmony.

Scholars have identified two dominant forms of Native American religious expression: hunting and horticultural religions. The hunting tradition was distinguished by its emphasis on the human relationship with animals, establishing special rituals and taboos surrounding the treatment of wild animals so as not to offend their spiritual masters. Hunting societies often had a shaman (or medicine man or woman), able to contact supernatural beings on behalf of the community.

The agrarian tradition emphasized fertility, celebrated in a yearly round of special ceremonies designed to encourage rainfall and crop productivity. In contrast to the hunting tradition, which tended to emphasize a single male deity, the agrarian tradition had a larger number of gods and goddesses. Also, unlike the less complexly organized hunting societies, agriculture societies tended to have an organized priesthood and permanent temples or shrines.