

# Chapter One:

## United States History Before Columbus

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### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The history of the country that will eventually come to be called the United States begins long before the birth of the nation. Native Americans first inhabited the North American continent some 14,000 years ago, if not earlier. This earliest era is known as the Paleo-Indian era; it is closely identified with one of the most famous archaeological artifacts in the Americas, the Clovis point, which was used to hunt megafauna, the giant animals of the Pleistocene era, such as mammoth or mastodon. The eras following, the Archaic and Woodland, were marked by the development of plant domestication and incipient agriculture, one of the most important developments in human history. Two of the earliest centers for plant domestication were in Mesoamerica and the modern-day Southeastern United States. Finally, the period just before European contact is characterized by the development of many rich and diverse cultures. In the region that was to become the United States, there were some 500 groups, each with its own language, culture, and religion.

#### 1.1.2 Learning Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain the various interpretations, scientific and religious, of the origins of indigenous peoples in the New World.
- Describe the political, cultural, and social differences between the major eras of the prehistoric United States.
- Describe the political, cultural, and social differences between the groups of the major regions of the prehistoric United States.

## 1.2 ORIGINS

When Columbus first encountered the Western hemisphere in 1492, it was inhabited by millions of people. Establishing a firm estimate of the population is troublesome; often such estimates are tinged with the ideological viewpoints of the authors, their cultures of origin, and the eras in which they wrote. Until recent decades, historians and scientists tended to make very low estimates of native populations, as conventional wisdom held that “inferior” indigenous peoples could not sustain the same kinds of dense populations as Europeans. More recently, estimates have soared for a variety of reasons; for example, some scholars speculate that estimates of population have become too inflated because of the desire to emphasize the devastation that European contact caused to the indigenous population.

Current estimates hold that as much as a fifth of the world’s population—43-65 million people—inhabited the Western hemisphere at contact. Estimates of the North American population (excluding Mexico) vary from a low of seven million to a high of eighteen million people.<sup>1</sup>

A great deal of cultural diversity existed amongst this population; hundreds of groups spoke hundreds of languages, organized their society in a myriad of social and political ways, enacted innumerable rituals, and worshiped a multitude of gods.

Another problem we face in examining this early period in U.S. history is one of nomenclature. What do we call the indigenous peoples of the Americas? Every term has its advantages and flaws. Some terms have been dismissed as racist (Red Indian); others have become outdated (Eskimo). Some view terms like Native American or First Peoples (the preferred term in Canada) as so politically correct that they are meaningless. Terms like aboriginal and indigenous assert a global identity for native peoples. However, the term aboriginal has become so closely associated with Australian Aborigines that it seems to exclude others. Moreover, while the notion of a global identity for indigenous peoples is useful in some instances, it is far too broad an idea to be useful in others. In the U.S., many use the term “Native American,” which first came into use in the 1980s as a means to indicate their primacy as the first peoples of the land. In general, the preference of native peoples is to self-identify as their own tribal affinity: Chickasaw, Ojibwa, Arapaho, etc. In terms of a larger, overarching term for the group as a whole, a 1995 survey of native peoples in the United States indicates that the first preference in nomenclature for native peoples is Indian.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, this term will be preferred here.



**Figure 1.1 Spider Gorget** | Ancient shell gorget from Fains Island, Tennessee, depicting a spider.

**Author:** Gates P. Thruston  
**Source:** *The Antiquities of Tennessee*

### 1.2.1 Origin Stories

Indigenous people throughout the Western hemisphere talk of their origins as a people in oral histories, stories, and myths that link them intimately to the places they inhabit. The land, the stories commonly assert, was made for “the people,” and they were made to inhabit the land. Every group has an origin story, and they vary widely and are unique to the group. Sometimes, groups have multiple origin stories that tell differing versions of creation and the founding of the group. Origin stories often begin

with a “First Person” (or First Peoples), a mythical man or woman who founded the group. These First People often are created from, or emerge from, the natural world itself. The first Iroquois fell from the sky; the first Lakota emerged from underground; the first Maya were created from corn. Sometimes, animals appear in origin stories as agents of creation. For example, in the Cherokee creation story, Water-Beetle dives deep into the ocean and brings up the mud that forms the earth. Buzzard then flies over the land, shaping it into mountains and valleys with the beat of his wings. These origin stories explained and shaped the worldview of each group, establishing their people’s purpose in this world as well as their relationship to the gods and the world around them. In other words, origin stories are key to establishing a group identity and a deep connection with the region the people inhabit.

### 1.2.2 Scientific Theories Of Origin

Scientists and archaeologists hold several theories regarding the origins of Indians in the Americas. By far, the oldest and most widely accepted of these theories is the Bering Land Bridge migration model. This theory posits that during the last ice age

#### Sidebar 1.1: Dating and Dates

This book employs three terms in conveying dates. BCE and CE stand for Before Common Era, and Common Era, respectively. These terms coincide exactly with the BC/AD dating system; therefore, 300 BC = 300 BCE, and 1976 AD = 1976 CE. The abbreviation BP stands for Before Present, and indicates “years ago” or years before the present. It is most commonly used by archaeologists in conjunction with radiocarbon dating, a means of determining the age of organic materials by measuring the amount of radioactive decay of carbon-14 in the material.

(approximately 50,000-10,000 BP, or years before the present), humans were able to migrate from Siberia to Alaska, crossing over the land bridge between the continents that had been revealed by dropping sea levels as massive glaciers formed all over the world. During this time, as many as four distinct migrations occurred over the land bridge between about 10,000-14,000 BP. Peoples migrated from Siberia, Eurasia, and coastal Asia, following the megafauna of the Pleistocene, such as mammoth and mastodon. Other megafauna included giant species of animals that are familiar to us today, such as beavers and sloths.

The greatest supporting evidence of this theory is the extensive homogeneity of the North American Clovis culture, so named for the archaeological site at which it was first identified. Clovis peoples were long considered to be the first people to inhabit the Americas. Archaeologists theorize that Clovis peoples came over the land bridge and down a glacier pass to the east of the Rocky Mountains sometime between 12,000-11,000 BCE, eventually spreading through much of North America.

A second theory focuses on Pacific sea travel. The coastal migration theory suggests that some peoples arrived in the Americas through following the coast of land across Asia and the Bering Land Bridge, down the coast of North America, all the way to South America. The coastal migration theory is bolstered by the rich marine environment which would have supported maritime peoples well. Travel by boat would also have been much faster and easier than the route overland, thus allowing peoples to spread throughout the Americas much more quickly. The most compelling evidence supporting the coastal migration theory comes from archaeological sites in South America that predate the North American Clovis sites. Sites like Monte



**Figure 1.2 Clovis Points** | Examples of a Clovis Point from the Rummells-Maske Site (13CD15) Cedar County, Iowa. Clovis was once accepted as a defining characteristic of the first group of humans to come to the Americas, sometime between 10,000-14,000 BP. This assertion has been increasingly questioned as more and more well-documented archaeological sites with older dates have emerged.

**Author:** Bill Whittaker  
**Source:** Wikimedia Commons

Verde in Chile, dated 14,800-12,500 BCE and Taima-Taima in western Venezuela, dated to 13,000 BCE, contradict the notion of “Clovis first.” However, archaeological sites that support coastal migration theory number much fewer than Clovis sites, as the coastline of the Pleistocene era now lies under the Pacific Ocean, due to rising sea levels.

Although the two theories might seem to be at odds with each other, most historians and archaeologists now accept that both theories are probably correct, and that human migration to the Americas occurred over a very long span of time, over land and by boat. Linguistic evidence supports this combination of migration theory, as indigenous coastal languages are very different than interior languages throughout much of the Americas. The two theories also work together in that many South American sites date 500-1,000 years older than the oldest North American sites, a real problem for the Bering Land Bridge theory.

In more recent years, some archaeologists and historians have supported alternate migration theories. These theories are uniformly much more controversial than the Bering Land Bridge and coastal migration theories. One of the more notable theories is the Solutrean hypothesis, or the Atlantic coastal model. This model argues that Clovis peoples came not from Asia over the land bridge, but instead were descended from the Solutrean culture of Europe. Clovis peoples, it asserts, arrived in the Americas through coastal migration, hugging the ice sheet that spanned the ice age Atlantic. A handful of archaeologists support this theory, based on perceived similarities between Clovis and Solutrean points. However, the majority of archaeologists discount the theory, citing the lack of resources to support travelers on the ice sheet and the 5,000 years between the Solutrean and Clovis cultures. Genetic studies of indigenous peoples across the Americas also show the Solutrean hypothesis to be unlikely, as mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) and DNA haplogroups show evidence of multiple migrations from Asia, starting at about 30,000 BP.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, no study has ever shown conclusive proof of European genetic markers among the Native American population before 1492.

Finally, a handful of sites across the Americas have unearthed portions dating 50,000-33,000 BCE, tens of thousands of years before the earliest coastal migration sites were established. These sites, including the earliest components of the Monte Verde site in Chile and the Topper site in South Carolina, are hotly contested by many archaeologists, who claim that the stone tools from the levels attributed to these early dates are not man-made, but natural formations. Moreover, 50,000 years BP stretches the boundaries of radiocarbon dating: as dates go further back in time, dating becomes less and less accurate, leading many more to call these early dates into further

question. For now, these early radiocarbon dates are largely seen as aberrations, which offer no conclusive proof of human existence in the Americas before about 20,000 years ago.

### 1.2.3 Before You Move On...

#### Key Concepts

Current estimates hold that 43-65 million people inhabited the Western hemisphere at contact. There was a great deal of cultural diversity amongst this population, including languages, social and political structures, religious rituals, and deity worship. Each of these hundreds of groups had one or more creation or origin story explaining where they came from as a people as well as their relationship to the world around them. Origin stories help to define groups as a people and form an important part of the culture.

Scientific explanations of the origin of humans in the Americas focus on ways that the first people migrated to the Americas. The two most important and well-accepted of these theories are the Bering Land Bridge and the coastal migration. Most archaeologists now accept that both theories are correct, and date the earliest arrival of humans in the Americas to 20,000-14,000 BP. Each of these theories supports human migration from Asia. The Solutrean hypothesis, a more controversial theory, argues that the first humans of the Americas descended from the Solutrean culture of Europe. Genetic studies of indigenous peoples across the Americas, however, show the unlikelihood of this hypothesis.

#### Test Yourself

1. Origin stories
  - a. explain where a group came from
  - b. explain a group's place in the world and their relationship with it
  - c. promotes a common cultural identity
  - d. all of the above
  
2. Clovis points are most closely identified with which migration theory?
  - a. Bering Land Bridge Theory
  - b. Coastal Migration Theory
  - c. Solutrean Hypothesis
  - d. European origin

[Click here to see answers](#)

### 1.3 THE PALEO-INDIAN ERA THROUGH THE AGRICULTURAL REVOLUTION

This earliest period, from the time that humans entered the Americas until about 8,000 BCE, is known as the Paleo-Indian period. During this time, humans spread throughout the Western hemisphere, supporting themselves with similar subsistence patterns and technologies. Paleo-Indians, including the Clovis culture, were nomadic hunter/gatherers. They moved as frequently as once or twice a week, hunting the big game of the Paleolithic: the megafauna. As previously noted, well-known animals such as the mammoth and mastodon were included among the megafauna. Other North American megafauna included less well-known animals, such as the short-faced bear, and giant versions of animals such as sloth, moose, and beaver. Paleo-Indian technology included knapped, or chipped, stone tools such as scrapers, knives, and projectile points, such as the Clovis point. Throughout the Paleo-Indian era, the spear was the most common weapon. At first, humans used spears as thrusting weapons, which of course required very close range between the hunter and game, a dangerous prospect at best. Sometime during the Paleo-Indian era, humans developed new kinds of technology, including a lighter throwing spear and an implement to propel this spear much farther: the atlatl. The atlatl, or spear thrower, was one of the most important items in the late Paleo-Indian tool kit. It was a long, thin piece of wood with a notch at the end. This notch was designed to receive the end of a spear. The atlatl acted as an extension of the throwing arm, enabling the spear thrower to greatly increase the speed and range of the cast.

Paleo-Indians probably lived in groups that anthropologists call “bands,” small groups of related individuals, typically no bigger than 100-150



**Figure 1.3 Giant Ground Sloth** | The giant ground sloth was one of the many megafauna indigenous to the Americas during the Pleistocene.

**Author:** Flickr user “etee”  
**Source:** Flickr  
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people. This set-up allowed a simple leadership structure, probably with one individual at the head of the group, to be an effective means of control. It also allowed for easy mobility. In terms of possessions, hunter/gatherers such as Paleo-Indians lived with only easily transportable and reproducible possessions. One of the greatest problems of living in such a small group, however, was finding a suitable mate. Anthropologists theorize that regional Paleo-Indian groups came together yearly in the summer months to celebrate



religious rituals, exchange news, and trade women to ensure genetic diversity amongst their groups.

Everything that we know about humans in the Americas from these early eras comes from the archaeological record. Perhaps the most famous Paleo-Indian site is the Blackwater Draw site near Clovis, New Mexico. Blackwater Draw is the archaeological site where the large, leaf-shaped Clovis points were first identified. As many Clovis period sites were excavated in the mid-twentieth century, Clovis points came to be one of the defining artifacts for the Paleo-Indian era in North America, and anthropologists came to regard the Clovis culture as the first firmly established proof of human presence in the Americas. The “Clovis First” hypothesis held sway throughout much of the rest of the century, calling archaeological evidence that dated older than about 10,000 BCE unreliable. However, as more and more sites have produced reliable older dates and the coastal migration theory became more widely accepted, the Clovis First movement has lost favor.

One of the sites that first seriously challenged the Clovis First idea was the Monte Verde site in Chile, which consistently produced well-documented dates at and around 14,800-13,800 BP (12,800-11,800 BCE). Archaeological remains at this site include the evidence of wood and hide shelters, clay-lined fire pits, and dozens of plant materials used in the Paleo-Indian diet, a use supported by the appearance of coprolites, or fossilized human feces. Perhaps the most fascinating artifact from the Monte Verde site is a child’s footprint, preserved in the soft clay surrounding a fire pit.

The Vero Man site, located outside of Vero Beach, Florida, is one of the few sites where human bones have been found alongside megafauna bones, including bison, mastodon, giant sloth, dire wolf, llama, and camel. More gracile, modern animals such as deer remains were also unearthed at the Vero Man site. The site dates roughly around 12,000-14,000 BP. In 2009, a bone with a carving of a mammoth on it was found; testing dates the bone to sometime between 13,000-20,000 BP. This artifact probably represents the oldest artwork ever found in the Americas.

### **1.3.1 The Archaic and Woodland Periods**

From 8,000-7,000 BCE, the Earth’s climate began to warm, and the North American environment changed. Paleo-Indians adapted to the world around them, learning to rely more and more on a diet rich in plant materials, and hunting smaller game such as bison as the megafauna began to die out. In this way, they began to more closely resemble typical hunter/gatherers, whose diet relies up to 90 percent on gathered food rather than on meat. Over the next 6,000-7,000 years, native cultures developed and diversified

during the Archaic and the Woodland periods, 8,000-1,000 BCE and 1,000 BCE -1,000 CE respectively. During this era, the peoples of the Americas also began to domesticate plants, leading to one of the most important transformations in human history: the development of agriculture, known as the agricultural revolution.

In the Americas, the agricultural revolution began in Mesoamerica, the area between Central Mexico and Honduras. The process of domestication began some 10,000 years ago in Oaxaca, Mexico, when people began to tend squash plants in order to use the squash as containers. Eventually, more tender forms of squash became a food source. Following the domestication of

beans at around 6,000 BP, Mesoamerican peoples began to become more sedentary. Finally, maize (or corn) was domesticated sometime around 5500 BP. Corn as we know it today originated as a wild grass called teosinte. Over thousands of years, the tiny teosinte seed pod, measuring about 4 cm long, was transformed through cultivation into much larger, nutritionally rich ears of corn. The domestication of maize completed the Mesoamerican triad, the three staple crops of the Americas. Native American agriculturalists all over the hemisphere grew corn, beans, and squash as the principal foods of their diet until many years after European contact. This combination proved ideally suited in several ways; first, the three foods grew well together. The corn grew tall and provided a “pole” for the beans to vine around and grow up, and the large squash leaves provided shade that retained moisture and inhibited the growth of weeds. Corn strips great quantities of nitrogen from the soil as it grows; beans are “nitrogen fixers” which put nitrogen back into the soil. From a dietary standpoint, the Mesoamerican triad provides an ideal diet, as long as the corn is processed in an alkaline solution. In Mesoamerica, this process involved soaking the corn kernels in a mixture of lime (calcium hydroxide, not the fruit) and ash. Processing the corn in this way unlocks certain proteins from the corn’s endosperm, which allows the human body to digest it.

Agricultural knowledge and techniques spread from the region of Mesoamerica throughout the temperate parts of the Western hemisphere



**Figure 1.4 Teosinte** | Teosinte, the ancestor of corn, is shown on the left. In the middle is a teosinte-maize hybrid. Modern corn is on the right.

**Author:** John Doebley  
**Source:** teosinte.wisc.edu  
**License:** CC-BY 3.0

in a process called diffusion. Although corn and beans probably came from Mesoamerica, the eastern portions of North America might also have been an independent center of plant domestication; cultigens important to the regional diet, such as marshelder, chenopod, squash, and sunflower, appear to have been domesticated first in this region.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most famous Archaic period sites is the Windover site near Titusville, Florida. Windover was a burial site, dated 6,000-5,000 BCE. Individuals were wrapped in a textile and interred in the mucky bottom of a pond. The bog-like conditions of the pond helped to preserve the skeletons and grave goods, artifacts buried with the deceased, such as atlatls and projectile points. Of the 168 individuals excavated at Windover, 90 had preserved brain matter: the oldest preserved human brains. Several of the brains recovered at Windover have been DNA sequenced.

The Head-Smashed-In buffalo jump site in Alberta, Canada first came into use at about 5,700 years ago. Archaic humans used it as a kill site, driving herds of buffalo and bison off of a 35 foot cliff, seriously injuring or killing the game. The bodies would then be drug to a nearby campsite and processed. The site remained in use for thousands of years, into the historic period, when Blackfoot, dressed as coyote and wolves, would drive buffalo along established “drive lanes” to the cliff. Excavations at Head-Smashed-In have unearthed a deposit of skeletons, primarily of buffalo and bison, measuring more than 10 meters (33 feet) deep.

The Poverty Point site in Louisiana (1650-700 BCE) is an important bridge between the Archaic and Woodland periods because it was one of the earliest sites to develop technologies and characteristics that came to define the Woodland period, including the development of pottery and manmade earthworks. Poverty Point has yielded some of the earliest known pottery in North America. Poverty Point is also important because it offers evidence of complex, far-reaching trade networks. Artifacts at the site, including shell, copper, and stone such as red jasper, came from all over the southeastern region. These materials would then be worked into finished, value-added objects and traded out again. Finally, Poverty Point is one of the first sites to exhibit evidence of monumental earthworks and a complex residential settlement, features that would come to define later peoples in the Southeast.

### **1.3.2 Early Agriculturalists in the Southeast and Southwest: The Mississippian and the Anasazi**

The Southeastern portion of North America was an early agricultural center of development. This development fostered the growth of a large,

long-lasting, and influential culture known as the Mississippian (ca. 500-1400 CE). This culture originated in the Mississippi River Valley and spread out to encompass an area which spread all the way to the lower Great Lakes region to the north, the Carolinas to the east, and northern Florida to the south. This culture emerged from the late Woodland Period as agriculturalists that practiced large-scale, corn-based agriculture. The excess agricultural product allowed them to support a dense population with a large group of specialized artisans.

Politically, Mississippians were organized as a chiefdom, a hierarchy of chiefs that pledged allegiance to the leader of the most important group. Within the chiefdom existed a high level of social stratification, with a noble class at the top. Socially, the Mississippians appear to have practiced



**Figure 1.5 Mississippian Cultures** | The extent of the spread of Mississippian culture and the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex

**Author:** Herb Rowe  
**Source:** Wikimedia Commons  
**License:** CC BY-SA 3.0

matrilineal descent patterns. In matrilineal descent, familial relations focus on the mother's family, with property, status, and clan affiliation being conferred through the female line. A person's most important relations were his mother's parents and siblings. The father's relations were relatively unimportant. Boys looked to their mother's brother as an important male figure rather than to their father, and uncles passed political power and possessions to their nephews and maternal relatives rather than to their sons. This system's main advantage is that descent and clan affiliation was beyond a doubt; a child's paternity can be uncertain, but a clan can be sure of a child's maternity. Matrilineality is relatively common among indigenous peoples of North America, and came to be commonplace among Southeastern peoples.

The religion of the Mississippians is known as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. Important religious symbols for the culture included a snake (sometimes depicted as a horned serpent), a cross in circle motif, and Birdman, a warrior/falcon hybrid. These symbols were closely related to not only cosmology, but also the elite and warriors, giving the religion a socio-political aspect that reinforced the social status and authority of the elite—including the high chieftain, his lesser chiefs, and the priests of the cult. These symbols, along with a host of others, appeared multitudinously on a variety of artifacts such as cups and shell gorgets, a type of pendant. Archaeological evidence strongly indicates that only the elite were able to possess these objects, which may have been sacred and therefore viewed as powerful. Additionally, evidence suggests an exchange network of these sacred objects existed among the elite of the Mississippians, fostering not only political alliances, but also trade. Objects inscribed with symbols associated with the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex may have been produced by only a handful of artists; excavation of sites in Missouri and Oklahoma have turned up artifacts so similar that some archaeologists believe the same artist produced them. These sacred objects were buried as grave goods with their owners, indicating the status and power they carried into the afterlife.

One key feature of the Mississippian culture was that they were mound builders. They produced thousands of earthworks used in a variety of manners. Some earthworks were burial mounds for the elite. The chief, his family, and perhaps other members of the elite lived atop some of the mounds. Finally, some of the largest mounds appear to have been centers of worship. The largest and most important towns of the chiefdoms contained the greatest number of mounds.

Some of these chiefdoms produced large and complex settlements that rivaled and surpassed contemporary European cities. The largest and most

important of these was Cahokia (ca 600-1400 CE) in southwestern Illinois, located just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, Missouri. Cahokia was a walled complex made up of 120 mounds that housed perhaps as many as 30,000 people, making it a very large city for its day. Community plazas were located throughout the complex. A woodhenge was built for astrological observations; poles in the henge were marked to indicate the sun's rising point on the solstices and equinoxes. Cahokia's mounds took tremendous effort to build; laborers moved about 55 million cubic feet of earth in construction. The largest of the mounds, today called Monk's Mound, is approximately ten stories high and covers an area of 13.8 acres at the base. The top of the mound, the focal point of the city, housed a huge structure that may either have been a temple or the residence of the paramount chief of the Cahokia chiefdom.

Cahokia came to power in part because of its location near the confluence of the Mississippi, Illinois, and Missouri Rivers. This confluence allowed the chiefdom to control much of the regional trade, giving them access to a great variety of trade items from many regions. Cahokia participated in trade networks stretching as far as the Great Lakes to the north and the Gulf Coast to the south. Cahokia began to decline around 1300 CE and slowly dwindled in size and importance. Scholars have speculated that overhunting, deforestation, and the rise of the Moundville center in Alabama contributed to Cahokia's demise.

### **1.3.3 The Anasazi**

Like the Mississippians, peoples of the southwestern region were also generally agriculturalists, supporting themselves by growing the Mesoamerican triad. One of the earliest Southwest groups was the Anasazi, who emerged in the Four Corners area of the modern United States (Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico) around 700-1300 CE. They are also known as Ancient Puebloans because they are ancestors of the modern Pueblo peoples. The Anasazi grew and stored corn, a practice leading them to build large, complex, and beautiful towns.

These towns were carefully planned communities that provided for the changing needs of the society over time. Anasazi towns, such as the Pueblo Bonito site, were often organized around large, open plazas allowing for community gatherings. Structures were large and multi-storied apartment-like buildings that housed many people and provided a lot of room for storing their yearly harvest. The Ancient Puebloans later built similar structures high on canyon walls or atop mesas and became "cliff dwellers" to protect the population from nomadic raiding groups. Houses were often accessible only by ladder or rope so their inhabitants could easily cut off access.

Another important structure found at all Ancient Puebloan sites is the kiva, the ceremonial center of the village. Kivas, often circular in shape, were dug into the earth and entered from the roof via a ladder. At the center of the kiva lay a small hole in the floor called a sipapu. Modern Pueblo peoples hold that the sipapu symbolizes the navel of the Earth, the place where the ancestors first emerged. Much of what we know about Anasazi religion derives from modern Pueblo peoples, such as the Hopi and Zuni.

In modern Pueblo societies, kivas are associated with the kachina belief system. Kachinas are spirit beings, representations of the life force within all parts of the universe. They may represent a specific place or some aspect of nature: the sun, squash, and animals such as eagle or mountain lion. They may also represent an ancestor (or many ancestors), a historical event, or an idea, such as maidenhood. Kachinas are not worshipped, per se, but are spiritual forces that can use their power to benefit the population. The kachina cult was widespread in the Southwest. Religious ceremonies focused on venerating the kachina. Members of religious societies dressed as some of the more than 400 different kachina, enacting the spiritual being for ritual purposes. Some of the ceremonies took place inside the kiva, some outside in the plaza. Kivas were also put to secular use as gathering places for the community's men and probably houses for visitors to the community, such as traders.

Trade with outlying areas and other peoples through trade networks was central to the Anasazi economy. A large system of roads stretching some 180 miles into the countryside linked the Ancient Puebloan towns and connected the culture to the larger regional economy. Artifacts found at sites like Pueblo Bonito show that the Anasazi possessed many luxury items not found in their native southwest, including macaw feathers and obsidian from Mexico and marine shell from the Gulf Coast. Analysis of wood from the structures also attests to the economic importance of the road, as much of the timber originated at areas quite a distance from the Anasazis.

However, some modern Pueblo peoples, as well as some archaeologists, suggest that the roads also had religious significance for the Ancient Puebloans, as many roads seem to lead to areas of religious significance, such as lakes, mountains, and streams. Some of the major roads, like the Great North Road, were oriented along a north/south axis. This fact, combined with the north/south orientation of many of the kiva and religious structures, suggests a pattern of astrological observances. The Modern Pueblo also speak of the North Road as being the way to the sipapu, the place where the ancestors originated.

No clear reason suggests why the Ancient Puebloan cultures ended. Over the period from around 1150-1300 CE, the Ancient Puebloans underwent

several changes and ultimately abandoned many of their towns. A variety of factors probably contributed to this abandonment. The period was one of dramatic climatic change for North America, the most prominent being the 300 year long Great Drought. During this period, the Anasazi appear to become more insular, engaging in less trade and practicing more intensive agriculture, aided by new irrigation techniques. Archaeological evidence indicates that new peoples were moving into the area, comprising an additional pressure. Finally, religious turmoil seems to have occurred amongst the Ancient Puebloans during this period, as many of the kiva and ceremonial structures at several sites evidence deliberately set fires and boarded up windows and doors. By 1300 CE, many of the towns and villages had been abandoned. While early historians held that the Anasazi “vanished,” modern Pueblo peoples asserted that the Anasazi in fact migrated further south and joined groups that became the modern Pueblo cultures such as the Hopi and Zuni. Archaeological evidence has verified this account.

### 1.3.4 Before You Move On...

#### Key Concepts

The earliest period, from the time that humans entered the Americas until about 8,000 BCE, is known as the Paleo-Indian period. During this time, humans spread throughout the Western hemisphere, supporting themselves as nomadic hunter/gatherers. Native cultures developed and diversified during the Archaic (8,000-1,000 BCE) and the Woodland periods (1,000 BCE -1,000 CE). During this era, the peoples of the Americas also began to domesticate plants, leading to one of the most important events in human history: the development of agriculture, known as the agricultural revolution. Mesoamerica became one of the sites of early plant domestication: corn, beans, and squash, known as the Mesoamerican Triad, became the basis of many agriculturalists’ diets.

The future Southeastern United States was another early site. Important domesticates from the region included marshelder, chenopod, squash, and sunflower. This development fostered the growth of a large, long-lasting, and influential culture, the Mississippian chiefdom (ca. 500-1400 CE), one of the most important in the region. The Mississippians produced thousands of earthworks used in a variety of manners, some as burial mounds, others as Mississippian religious centers, known as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex.

Many of the peoples of the American Southwest were also agriculturalists. One of the earliest Southwestern groups was the Anasazi, who emerged in the Four Corners area of the modern



United States (Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico) around 700-1300 CE. The Anasazi produced large and multi-storied apartment-like buildings that housed many people and provided ample harvest storage space. Another important structure found at all Ancient Puebloan sites was the kiva, the ceremonial center.

### Test Yourself

1. The Paleo-Indian era is most strongly associated with what type of artifact?
  - a. Ceramic pottery
  - b. The atlatl
  - c. Clovis point
  - d. Basketry
2. The Mississippian culture is known for \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. the kiva as the center of religious worship.
  - b. moundbuilding.
  - c. a tradition in whaling.
  - d. hunting megafauna.
3. The region of the present-day Southeastern United States was likely one of the world's independent centers for plant domestication.
  - a. True
  - b. False
4. The \_\_\_\_\_ are ancestors of today's modern Pueblo peoples, and their cultures share much in common.
  - a. Mississippians
  - b. Clovis peoples
  - c. Vero Man peoples
  - d. Anasazi

[Click here to see answers](#)

## 1.4 THE PRE-CONTACT ERA (1000-1492 CE)

In the period before European contact, more than 500 identifiable groups emerged in North America. A tremendous amount of diversity existed amongst these groups; the people of the West Coast had very little in common with the way that the peoples of the Southwest lived. However, groups within each region tended to have more commonalities. For instance, each region of the continent could be typified by the way in which peoples supported themselves, that is, their subsistence strategies. Other similarities might include kinship relations, political structure, and material culture, the objects and artifacts utilized by a people and having social significance to them.

### 1.4.1 The West Coast: The Pacific Northwest and California

Peoples in the Pacific Northwest supported themselves largely through hunting, gathering, and fishing, relying most heavily on salmon fishing. Consequently, the salmon became an important figure in the cosmology of groups like the Tlingit and Haida. The Pacific Northwest region was densely populated and culturally diverse because of the rich natural resources that allowed for a high “carrying capacity” of the land: that is, relatively reliable and plentiful food sources translated into a large population. Most groups lived in large, permanent towns in the winter. These towns formed the basis of the political structure for many Northwestern groups. People identified themselves by their town, and towns organized themselves into larger cultural and political groups through family and political alliances. Each town was led by a secular leader from one of the town’s important clans. Clans are groups of families that recognize a common ancestor and a greater familial relationship amongst the group. Clans were often identified by a symbolic figure or idea important to the region. In the Pacific Northwest, for instance, clans were named for important animals such as raven, salmon, eagle, and killer whale. Society in Pacific Northwest groups was generally highly stratified in a complex system of hierarchy that ranked individuals, families, clans, and towns.

One of the most important ceremonies of the Pacific Northwest groups was the potlatch, a socio-political ceremony that gathered towns together to celebrate important events. Potlatches functioned as a demonstration of the host’s status and importance. The hosts worked hard to ensure that all of the attendees were fed well, received gifts, and entertained; the hosts spent much of their wealth in demonstrating that they were deserving of their rank and societal status. In the Pacific Northwest, wealth was determined by how much individuals shared and gave away, not how much wealth they possessed. A successful potlatch could confer greater status on a person or a family.

One of the most diverse regions of North America was the region that came to be California. Politically, groups were divided into tribes led by chiefs whose title was passed down through families and clans. Economically, California peoples participated in large trade networks that linked much of the region and beyond. In general, they were hunter/gatherers. Acorns were a dietary staple, nutritious and able to be stored for long periods of time. However, they were a very labor-intensive crop, as they had to be pounded into flour and cooked in order to be edible. Agriculture was not completely unknown on the west coast; many groups cultivated tobacco as their sole agricultural crop. Contrary to popular opinion, the switch from hunter/gather to agriculturalist is not a measurement of “progress;” plentiful evidence suggests that hunter/gatherers often were able to live in semi-sedentary villages, complex societies, with even a better diet than agriculturalists. Religiously, the many of the peoples of Northern California participated in Kuksu, a religion that revolved around a male secret society that regulated the people’s relationship with the sacred. The primary goal of this society and religion was to re-create the original, sacred, pure state of the world, in other words, to renew the world.

### 1.4.2 The Plains

Some of the earliest peoples of the Midwest/Great Plains region were agriculturalists, settling in the south and central areas. However, the reintroduction of the horse to North America at European contact transformed Plains life (the ancestor of modern horses was found throughout much of North America in the Pleistocene era, but died out and disappeared from the continent). Groups quickly adopted use of the horse in following and hunting the great bison herds, and many groups, such as the Sioux, comprising the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota, were transformed from farmers to nomadic hunter/gatherers and emerged as one of the most important groups in the northern Plains region. Other important groups include the Crow in the north, the Cheyenne, Pawnee and Arapaho in the central plains area, and the Comanche in the south.

Warfare was endemic on the Plains. War was waged for three main reasons: for prestige, for obtaining goods, and for vengeance. The strategy and tactics of Plains warfare revolved around the concept of counting coup. Coup was an action that demonstrated bravery and skill. The most highly valued coup was to touch a live enemy and live to tell about it. Killing an enemy was coup, too, but demonstrated valor to a lesser degree; after all, the live man is still a threat, while a dead one can do you no harm. Touching a dead enemy was also a lesser form of coup. After a battle, warriors returned to the settlement to recount their stories, or “count coup.” Demonstrations

of skill also conferred honor to the warrior; a successful horse raid from a rival group, for example, showed great skill and bravery.

Politically, Plains groups were led by chiefs and councils. Most groups had a war and a peace chief. Peace chiefs held more power and tended to be older men with more experience. The war chiefs tended to be younger men. In this way, the war chiefs gained political experience that would lend future stability to the government as they aged and went on to become peace chiefs or members of the decision-making councils.

Religious beliefs on the Plains tended to hold the bison as a central figure of the sacred earth. Most groups kept “medicine bundles,” a collection of sacred objects holding symbolic importance for the group. Often, religious celebrations center on the medicine bundle. For instance, the most important medicine bundle for the Cheyenne contains four sacred arrows given to the prophet Sweet Medicine by the Creator, Maheo. Each year, the medicine bundle was celebrated in a five-day ceremony which reenacted the creation of the world. During the ceremony, the arrows were cleansed and the world was renewed. The concept of world renewal was an important one in Plains religion. One of the important world renewal ceremonies celebrated by many Plains cultures was the Sun Dance. The Sun Dance was sponsored by an individual who wished to give to his tribe or to thank or petition the supernatural through the act of self-sacrifice for the good of the group. Celebration of the Sun Dance varied in detail from group to group, but a general pattern holds. The Sun Dance usually occurred in the summer and involved the erection of a large structure with a central pole, symbolizing the Tree of Life, as its dominant feature. Large groups would gather for the celebration, to give thanks, celebrate, pray, and fast. The individual sponsoring the Sun Dance would pray and fast throughout the celebration, which lasted up to a week in duration. He was the celebration’s lead dancer, and the dance would continue until his strength was completely gone. Often, the dance involved some kind of bloodletting or self-torture. Participants might pierce the skin and/or muscle of the chest and attach themselves to the central pole, dancing around or hanging from it until the pins were pulled free. Another variation involved piercing the muscles of the back in a similar way and dragging buffalo skulls behind the dancer until the weight of the skull ripped the pins free. The scars that the dancers carried after the celebration were a mark of honor. At the end of the Sun Dance, the world was renewed and replenished. Finally, another kind of ceremony celebrated by many Plains groups was the smoking of the calumet, often called the “peace pipe.” The smoking of the calumet bonded individuals and groups together. Smoking recognized alliances, formalized ceremonies, and established kin relations between individuals.

### 1.4.3 The Northeast

Northeastern groups were complex in many ways. Economically, they relied on both hunting/gathering and farming. Many participated in a system of exchange with shells as the medium. After the 1600s, groups began manufacturing wampum, made from white and purple shell beads, using them to record important events and to formalize agreements. Exact copies would be made for each party participating in an agreement. Wampum was very highly valued.

Politically, groups were led by men called sachems. Many towns organized themselves into tribes or nations; some tribes further allied to form political confederacies of affiliated nations. The Iroquois, or Haudenosaunee, made up of an association of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca nations, was the largest and most successful of these northeastern confederacies. Confederacies were governed by councils made up of leaders from each of the member tribes; the most influential of these leaders often led the council itself. Among the Iroquois, the council was made up of fifty sachems from each of the Five Nations. Council members were chosen from among families designated to inherit the post.

Warfare played an important role in the Northeast, as it was the chief way to gain power and prestige. Revenge primarily motivated warfare in the region. A cycle of war was ensured because each group sought to avenge those killed in earlier wars or skirmishes in what became called the “Mourning Wars.” Acceptable outcomes of war could take several forms: killing the enemy, taking captives, and taking trophies of some sorts, often in the form of beheadings and/or scalping, a practice that may have been introduced to the region by the French. Captives would be taken back to the victors’ town, where they would be handed over to the women who had lost family members to war. These women led the torture of the captured, which often lasted for many hours or even days. The torture was quite brutal; prisoners were cut, beaten, mutilated, and burned. Ultimately, one of two fates awaited the prisoners. Either they would be tortured to death, or the women might decide that they be adopted by one of the families who had lost men to war. The captive who withstood the torture by showing strength, singing his death song so as to have a good death, would be held in high esteem and sometimes spared. Occasionally, the torturers would consume the flesh of these tortured after their deaths. This might have been a means of ingesting the strength of the enemy; some have suggested that the torture and sacrifice of prisoners was a way to maintain cosmic order through the ceremonies of warfare, torture, and sacrifice.

### 1.4.4 Before You Move On...

#### Key Concepts

During the Pre-contact Era (1000-1492 CE), more than 500 identifiable groups emerged in North America. Although tremendously diverse, the groups within each region of the continent shared many commonalities. Similarities included subsistence strategies, kinship relations, political structure, and material culture.

Peoples in the Pacific Northwest supported themselves largely through hunting, gathering, and fishing, relying most heavily on salmon fishing. The Pacific Northwest region was densely populated and culturally diverse because of the rich natural resources that allowed for a high “carrying capacity” of the land. Most groups lived in large, permanent towns in the winter; these towns formed the basis of many group’s political structure. Society in Pacific Northwest groups was generally highly stratified. The practice of potlatch helped to maintain and reinforce this complex hierarchical structure.

The reintroduction of the horse to North America at European contact transformed the culture of many Plains peoples. Groups quickly adopted use of the horse in following and hunting the great bison herds, and many groups transformed from farmers to nomadic hunter/gatherers. Plains groups were led by chiefs and councils, with most having a war chief and a peace chief. Religious systems in the Plains region were often characterized by the centrality of the bison as an important figure and by the Sun Dance or other world renewal rituals as important ceremonies.

The peoples of the Northeast were both agriculturalists and hunter/gatherers. Many towns organized themselves into tribes or nations; some tribes further formed political confederacies of affiliated nations. An important example of such a confederacy is the Iroquois. Warfare played an important role in the Northeast, as it was the main way of gaining power and prestige. Revenge based warfare ensured a cycle of war as each group sought to avenge those killed in earlier wars or skirmishes in what became called the “Mourning Wars.”

#### Test Yourself

1. The Mourning Wars were associated with what region?
  - a. The Northeast
  - b. California
  - c. The Plains
  - d. The Pacific Northwest

2. The practice of potlatch is associated with what region?
  - a. The Northeast
  - b. The Southwest
  - c. The Plains
  - d. The Pacific Northwest
  
3. Plains groups transformed from agriculturalists to nomadic hunter/gatherers in part because of
  - a. the death of the bison herds.
  - b. the reintroduction of the horse to North America.
  - c. a 100 year drought.
  - d. the European introduction of bison to North America.

[Click here to see answers](#)

## 1.5 Conclusion

Prehistoric North America was home to a numerous and diverse array of peoples, languages, religions, and cultures. Scientific origin theories such as the Bering Land Bridge and the Solutrean hypothesis suggest that the ancestors of these groups arrived in the Western hemisphere at least 14,000 years ago. The origin stories of most of the groups take another view, stressing the intimate relationship between “the people” and the land they lived in; many origin stories state that the land was created exclusively for the group. The earliest groups in the Americas are referred to as Paleo-Indians. Clovis points are one of the most important and closely identified artifacts with the Paleo-Indian era. Changes in the global climate helped to bring the Paleo-Indian period to an end. The death of the megafauna meant that humans had to find new means of subsistence. The Archaic and Woodland periods, the archaeological periods following the Paleo-Indian, are characterized by the development of plant domestication and the beginnings of organized agricultural activities. Many of the groups of North America became agriculturalists, relying primarily on the Mesoamerican triad of corn, beans, and squash. The surplus of food from agriculture enabled the development of complex towns and cities such as the Mississippian Cahokia settlement. Regional geography also played a role in shaping groups; for instance, groups on the Plains came to be characterized by relying on the buffalo as a main source of food and resources for subsistence.

The Native American world that Europeans contacted after 1492 was complex, highly developed, and rich in oral history. The period of contact between Europeans and hundreds of native groups played an important role in shaping American colonies and nations, the United States among them. From the very beginning, Indians played a pivotal role in shaping the future of the nation.

## 1.6 CRITICAL THINKING EXERCISES

- What was the relationship between economic trade and political and social development in societies such as the Mississippian and Anasazi? What kinds of development does trade encourage?
- How are religion, politics, and social formation connected in groups such as the Cheyenne and Iroquois? Are there any kinds of discernible patterns? What are the ties between religion, politics, and social formation in our society?



## 1.7 KEY TERMS

- Agricultural Revolution
- Anasazi (Ancient Puebloans)
- Atlatl
- Bering Land Bridge
- Buffalo Jump
- Cahokia
- Clan
- Clovis
- Coastal Migration Theory
- Counting Coup
- Kachina
- Kiva
- Matrilineal
- Medicine Bundle
- Megafauna
- Mesoamerican Triad
- Mississippians
- Monk's Mound
- Monte Verde Site
- Mourning Wars
- Origin Story
- Paleo-Indian
- Potlatch
- Poverty Point
- Pre-contact Era
- Solutrean Hypothesis
- Southeastern Ceremonial Complex
- Sun Dance
- Vero Man Site
- Woodland Period

## 1.8 CHRONOLOGY

The following chronology is a list of important dates and events associated with this chapter.

Date	Event
14,800-13,800 BCE	Monte Verde site, Chile
14,000-10,000 BP	Bering land bridge migration
12,000-8,000 BCE	Paleo-Indian period
12,000-14,000 BP	Vero Man site
8,000-1,000 BCE	Archaic Period
1,000 BCE-1,000 CE	Woodland Period
10,000-5,500 BP	Domestication of the Mesoamerican triad
500-1400 CE	Mississippian culture
700-1300 CE	Anasazi culture
1000-1492 CE	Pre-Contact era

## 1.9 END NOTES

1 Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History since 1492* (Norman : University of Oklahoma Press, 1987); Henry Dobyns, *Their Numbers Became Thinned: Native American Population Dynamics in Eastern North America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983).

2 Clyde Tucker, Brian Kojetin and Roderick Harrison, "A Statistical Analysis of the CPS Supplement on Race and Ethnic Origin" Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bureau of the Census. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2/gen/96arc/ivatuck.pdf>.

3 Jason A. Eshleman, Ripan S. Malhi, and David Glenn Smith. "Mitochondrial DNA Studies of Native Americans: Conceptions and Misconceptions of the Population Prehistory of the Americas" *Evolutionary Anthropology* 12 (2003), 7-18.

4 Bruce Smith, "Eastern North America as an independent center of plant domestication" *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol.103, no. 33 (August 15, 2006). <http://www.pnas.org/content/103/33/12223.full>.

## ANSWER KEY FOR CHAPTER ONE: UNITED STATES HISTORY BEFORE COLUMBUS

Check your answers to the questions in the Before You Move On Sections for this chapter. You can click on the questions to take you back to the chapter section.

Correct answers are **BOLDED**

### Section 1.2.3 - p. 7

1. Origin stories
  - a. explain where a group came from
  - b. explain a group's place in the world and their relationship with it
  - c. promotes a common cultural identity
  - d. **ALL OF THE ABOVE**
2. Clovis points are most closely identified with which migration theory?
  - a. **BERING LAND BRIDGE THEORY**
  - b. Coastal Migration Theory
  - c. Solutrean Hypothesis
  - d. European origin

### Section 1.3.4 - p. 17

1. The Paleo-Indian era is most strongly associated with what type of artifact?
  - a. Ceramic pottery
  - b. The atlatl
  - c. **CLOVIS POINT**
  - d. Basketry
2. The Mississippian culture is known for \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. the kiva as the center of religious worship.
  - b. **MOUNDBUILDING.**
  - c. a tradition in whaling.
  - d. hunting megafauna.
3. The region of the present-day Southeastern United States was likely one of the world's independent centers for plant domestication.
  - a. **TRUE**
  - b. False
4. The \_\_\_\_\_ are ancestors of today's modern Pueblo peoples, and their cultures share much in common.
  - a. Mississippians
  - b. Clovis peoples
  - c. Vero Man peoples
  - d. **ANASAZI**

### Section 1.4.4 - p. 22

1. The Mourning Wars were associated with what region?
  - a. **THE NORTHEAST**
  - b. California
  - c. The Plains
  - d. The Pacific Northwest
2. The practice of potlatch is associated with what region?
  - a. The Northeast
  - b. The Southwest
  - c. The Plains
  - d. **THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST**

## CHAPTER ONE: UNITED STATES HISTORY BEFORE COLUMBUS

3. Plains groups transformed from agriculturalists to nomadic hunter/gatherers in part because of
  - a. the death of the bison herds.
  - b. **THE REINTRODUCTION OF THE HORSE TO NORTH AMERICA.**
  - c. a 100 year drought.
  - d. the European introduction of bison to North America.