**Pre-Columbian Native American Tribes**

**I. SOUTHWEST NATIVE AMERICANS**

Through trial and error, over many generations, horticulture evolved from the practices of gathering wild plants, rather than by sudden and conscious invention. As some Indian bands protected, watered, and harvested productive patches of wild plants with edible seeds, they also gradually developed hybrids of increasing reliability and productivity. For example, wild maize has a single inch-long ear with fifty tiny kernels. By 1500 B.C., Indians in central Mexico had learned how to cross maize—“Indian corn”—with other wild grasses to create hybrids with multiple ears, protective husks, and cobs with multiple rows of kernels.

The Indians of central Mexico pioneered the three great crops of North American horticulture: maize, squashes, and beans. As these domesticated plants became more important in their diet, the peoples of central Mexico devoted less time to hunting, gathering, and fishing. Indeed, the expansion of cleared fields and the growth of the human population reduced the habitat for wildlife. By expanding the food supply, horticulture permitted a renewed surge in the human population and a more sedentary life in larger and more permanent villages. Indeed, maize requires permanence, for unless carefully tended, guarded, and watered through its growing season, the crop will succumb to pests, weeds, and drought. As people became dependent on corn, they had to live most of the year in villages near their cultivated fields. The new horticulture also promoted economic differentiation and social stratification as the food surplus enabled some people to specialize as craftsmen, merchants, priests, and rulers.

But the new dependence on horticulture also had negative consequences. The crops were vulnerable to catastrophic collapse from a prolonged drought or infestations of insects and blights. Horticulture also demanded more sustained and repetitive work than did the hunting-and-gathering life, in which temporary bursts of exertion alternated with longer stretches of rest. And a horticultural diet that relies too heavily on one plant, particularly maize, is not as healthy as the diverse diet of hunter-gatherers. The skeletons of early farmers reveal a want of sufficient salt or protein, episodes of early childhood malnutrition, and an overall loss of stature. Moreover, the denser populations of horticultural villages facilitated the spread of communicable diseases, principally tuberculosis, which was less common among dispersed hunter-gatherers.

Consequently, native peoples were often slow to adopt Mesoamerican horticulture. By about 1500 B.C., peoples in the American Southwest and Midwest had begun to cultivate some maize and squash, but only as a minor supplement to their hunting and gathering. Not until about 500 B.C. did native peoples north of the Rio Grande develop strains of maize better suited to their cooler climate and shorter growing season. Thereafter, cultivation spread more rapidly. Between about A.D. 700 and 1200, maize, beans, and squash became fundamental to the native diet in the American Southwest, Midwest, and Southeast and the more temperate portions of the Northeast.

In Mexico and the American southwest, where maize cultivation was most advanced, Indian men reduced their hunting and became the primary cultivators. In those relatively arid regions, maize fields required the laborious construction and maintenance of extensive irrigation ponds, dams, and ditches. In the more humid stretches of central and eastern North America, maize cultivation arrived relatively late and required less labor. Consequently, there the native peoples regarded horticulture as an extension of gathering, which was a female responsibility, while the men remained preoccupied with hunting and fishing.

Horticulture never spread universally among the Indians. Some lived where the growing season was too short: in the vast arctic and subarctic regions of Alaska and Canada or in the high elevations of the Rockies and Sierra Nevada. Or they dwelled where there was too little water: in the western Great Plains and in most of the Great Basin between the Rockies and Sierra Nevada. Where either the growing season was too short or water too scant, the inhabitants continued to live in small, mobile, highly dispersed, and relatively egalitarian groups. Rather than horticulture, the most significant development for these people was their adoption of the bow and arrow after about A.D. 500.

Natives also did not develop horticulture in the temperate and humid coastal zone of California and the Pacific northwest, despite its sufficient growing seasons and abundant water. Along the Pacific coast, the hunting-gathering-fishing complex was so productive that the native peoples did not feel the pressures that elsewhere led to horticulture. In California an abundance of acorns and other edible wild plants supported an especially large population. Similarly, in the mild and rainy Pacific northwest, the people lived plentifully on fish (especially salmon) and sea mammals. Endowed with a bountiful diet and leisure time, the Indians of the northwestern rain coast could develop and sustain elaborate rituals, art, and status hierarchies without developing horticulture.

**HOHOKAM AND ANASAZI**

Between about A.D. 300 and 1100 two especially complex and populous cultures emerged in the American southwest: the Hohokam and the Anasazi. The names are scholarly conventions, for we do not know what those peoples called themselves. “Hohokam” and “Anasazi” signify broad cultural similarities rather than linguistic and political unity. Neither constituted a nation-state, to say nothing of an empire. Instead, both cultures consisted of several linguistic groups and many politically independent villages or towns (later called *pueblos* by the Spanish). Neither the Anasazi nor the Hohokam had beasts of burden (other than dogs), developed a system of writing, or employed the wheel. Nonetheless, both built substantial stone and adobe towns directed by a social hierarchy headed by men who combined the roles of chief and priest.

The Anasazi and Hohokam annually conducted public rituals meant to sustain the harmony and productivity of their world. Far from taking harmony and abundance for granted, they regarded constant ritual exertion as essential to prevent nature’s collapse into chaos. Their arid land of limited resources and competing villages afforded good cause for their existential anxiety.

Both the Anasazi and the Hohokam manifested, to varying degrees, the influence of central Mexico, the preeminent cultural hearth of the continent. In trade with central Mexico, they exchanged turquoise stones for parrots, copper bells, and maize seed. In addition to transmitting their food crops, Mesoamericans taught the Hohokam and Anasazi how to cultivate cotton and to weave cloth. The largest Hohokam villages constructed ball courts and platform temple mounds resembling those of central Mexican cities.

In the arid southwest, horticulture required elaborate systems of dams, reservoirs, and ditches to catch, retain, and channel water to irrigate the plants. In the Gila River and Salt River valleys of southern Arizona, the Hohokam built and maintained over five hundred miles of irrigation canals to water thousands of acres devoted to maize, beans, and squash. To the north, the Anasazi occupied upland canyons that captured more moisture in winter than did the low desert. The Anasazi irrigation system caught and retained winter’s rainwater on the mesa tops for spring and summer release via diversion channels to low-lying fields beside the intermittent streambeds, where the people cultivated their crops.

The irrigation works demanded extensive, coordinated labor to build and maintain, while the abundant crops enabled many people to live clustered together. The preeminent Hohokam pueblo, known as Snaketown, had about a thousand residents living in adobe row houses, some of them two and three stories tall. The Anasazi constructed even larger, rectangular pueblos of mortared sandstone blocks roofed with rafters and adobe tile. The largest pueblo, at Chaco Canyon, required thirty thousand tons of sandstone blocks, stood four stories tall, and contained at least 650 rooms.

During the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, both the Hohokam and the Anasazi experienced severe crises that began in environmental degradation associated with local overpopulation and an excessive reliance on maize. Although highly productive, corn rapidly depletes the soil of nutrients, especially nitrogen. Repeated crops in the same fields led to diminishing yields. In the southwest, between 1130 and 1190, an especially prolonged period of drought years exacerbated the subsistence crisis, setting off a chain reaction of crop failure, malnutrition, and violent feuds.

The Hohokam apparently concluded that their leaders could no longer win favor from the spirits of the plants and the rain. The hard work of supporting their chiefs and priests and maintaining the irrigation systems or the earthworks came to seem futile. During the thirteenth century, most of the Hohokam abandoned their towns and dispersed into the arid hinterland, where they reverted to a mobile strategy of hunting and gathering that shifted with the seasons. They harvested cholla, yucca, saguaro fruit, prickly pear, and mesquite pods, and they hunted for rabbit, deer, and pronghorn antelope. Sixteenth-century Spanish explorers found the probable descendants of the Hohokam divided into many small villages. They called themselves some variant of “O’odham,” which simply means “the people,” but the Spanish named them the Pima and the Papago. Some lived beside the rivers and maintained smaller-scale versions of the ancient irrigation system, but most lived in the hills.

Between 1150 and 1250, the Anasazi responded to their growing violence by shifting their pueblos to more defensible locations atop mesas, which they fortified. Skeletons from this period reveal a surge in violent death, mutilation, and perhaps ritual cannibalism. At the end of the thirteenth century, most of the Anasazi abandoned their homeland and fled south and east, seeking locales with a more certain source of water and with soils not yet exhausted by corn. Some regrouped in western New Mexico and eastern Arizona to build the Acoma, Hopi, and Zuni pueblos. Founded in 1300, Acoma is probably the longest continuously inhabited community within the United States. Other Anasazi traveled still farther east to settle along the upper Rio Grande, which offered sufficient year-round water to sustain irrigation even in drought years. Later collectively called the Pueblo Indians by the Spanish, the Rio Grande peoples in fact belonged to dozens of autonomous villages, and they spoke at least seven different languages. Instead of “collapsing,” the Anasazi culture *moved*, shifting into impressive new pueblos to the south and east of its former homeland. The oral traditions of the Pueblo, Zuni, Hopi, and Acoma agree that their ancestors were uprooted from old homes by a combination of drought, famine, disease, and violence.

**II. MOUND BUILDERS**

In contrast to the arid American southwest, the Mississippi watershed enjoys a humid and temperate climate. The great river collects the waters of wide-ranging tributaries, including the Tennesee, Cumberland, Ohio, Missouri, Arkansas, and Red rivers, to drain an area of nearly 1.25 million square miles. Unlike the Hohokam and Anasazi, the Mississippi people did not need irrigation systems to sustain horticulture. Indeed, the mild and moist conditions probably delayed the advent of horticulture by sustaining the inhabitants with an abundance of wild plants and animals. Beginning about 2000 B.C., Mississippi Valley farmers experimented with the cultivation of marsh elder, goosefoot, sunflowers, and gourds. But they continued to depend upon hunting, fishing, and gathering for most of their diet until about A.D. 800, when they adopted the trinity of maize, beans, and squash. The broad floodplains of the Mississippi Valley proved ideal for the new horticulture: well-watered, well-drained soils easily tilled with stone hoes and replenished with fertile silt by annual spring floods. The highly productive new horticulture permitted the population to quadruple, as the Mississippi Valley became the most densely settled region north of central Mexico.

Drawing upon Mesoamerican precedents, the Mississippian peoples built substantial towns around central plazas that featured earthen pyramids topped by wooden temples that doubled as the residences of chiefs. Like the people of central Mexico, the Mississippians regarded the sun as their principal deity, responsible for the crops that sustained their survival; they considered their chiefs as quasi-sacred beings related to the sun; and they practiced human sacrifice. When a chief died, his wives and servants were killed for burial beside him, as companions for the afterlife.

Paying tribute in labor and produce, common people erected the earthworks, built the towns, and sustained a local chief. In turn, the local chiefs usually paid tribute to a paramount chief, who dwelled on top of the largest pyramid in the region’s largest town.

The great valley was a vibrant and diverse landscape of paramount and local chiefdoms, of rising and falling power, never stable and never united. There was a “cycling” process by which certain towns emerged for a century or two to dominate their region only to decline in favor of a rival chiefdom. The chiefdoms conducted chronic warfare. Burials reveal skeletons scarred with battle wounds; many towns were fortified with wooden palisades, and their art often celebrated victorious warriors displaying the skulls, scalps, and corpses of their victims. Of course, none of this rendered them more warlike than their contemporaries elsewhere in the world; European graves, cities, and art of the same period (“the Middle Ages”) also displayed the prominence of war and the honors bestowed upon victors.

The largest, wealthiest, and most complex of the political and ceremonial centers was at a place now called Cahokia, located near the Mississippi River in Illinois just east of St. Louis. Cahokia arose in the midst of a broad and fertile floodplain, extending over about 350 square miles. In addition to hosting cornfields, the floodplain featured dozens of oxbow lakes and marshes, rich in fish and waterfowl. Located near the junctures of the Missouri, Tennessee, and Ohio rivers with the Mississippi, Cahokia could also dominate both north-south and east-west trade in precious shells and stones.

Developed between A.D. 900 and 1100, Cahokia and its immediate suburbs covered about six square miles and had a population of at least ten thousand (some estimates run as high as forty thousand). Even at the smallest calculation, Cahokia ranked as the greatest Indian community north of Mexico. At its peak, Cahokia contained about one hundred earthen temple and burial mounds as well as hundreds of thatched houses for commoners. The city was surrounded by a stockade, a wall of large posts two miles in circumference with a watchtower every seventy feet. Outside the palisade stood a precise circle 410 feet in diameter, featuring forty-eight large posts. Called “Woodhenge” by archaeologists, this was a calendrical device to determine the solstices and equinoxes—apparently to guide the ritual cycle of the city.

Cahokia’s greatest monument was an immense earthen pyramid containing over 800,000 cubic yards of earth, covering sixteen acres, and rising 110 feet high. The Cahokia pyramid was the third-largest in North America, ranking behind two in central Mexico. The flat top bore a wooden temple with a thatched roof. The temple contained a sacred fire representing the sun, and it housed the chief, along with his family and servants. The chief served as the town’s preeminent priest, responsible for conducting rituals to maintain a spiritual harmony between the people and their cosmos. The inhabitants sought a supernatural security from catastrophic variations in their climate, especially droughts and crop blights. Endowed with great structures, Cahokia appeared as a center of great spiritual and temporal power that must be honored and sustained.

During the twelfth century, however, Cahokia began to decline in population and power, and it was abandoned in the middle of the thirteenth century—at the same time that the Anasazi and Hohokam experienced their crises. As in the southwest, the archaeological evidence suggests that environmental strains initiated the demise of Cahokia. The growing population gradually depleted the local resources, initiating a destructive cycle of malnutrition, disease, demoralization, and infighting. Too many hunters killed the nearby wild animals faster than they could reproduce, reducing animal protein in the people’s diet, which led to an unhealthy overreliance on maize. The people also chopped down most of the nearby forest, exhausting the wood needed for fires and to repair their homes and the defensive stockade. Urban concentration also accumulated the wastes that bred the pathogens of some endemic diseases. The environmental strains became exacerbated into a severe crisis in those years when unusually hot and dry summers withered the crops. As the people’s material circumstances decayed, they doubted the efficacy of the paramount chief in securing favor from the sun. Doubts encouraged dissension and rebellion, especially by the subordinated villages on Cahokia’s periphery. In the elaborate and strengthened stockade there is evidence of growing external resistance. Burials throughout the upper Midwest also indicate a greater frequency of violent death.

Although in decline around Cahokia, Mississippian culture remained vibrant in substantial southern towns, including Moundville in Alabama, Etowah in Georgia, and Spiro in eastern Oklahoma, which surged in size and apparent power after Cahokia collapsed. The southern Mississippian culture survived for description by the chroniclers attached to a Spanish expedition commanded by Hernando de Soto in the years 1540–42. They were impressed by the numbers of the Indians, the extent of their maize fields, the quantities in their storehouses, the dignity and power of their chiefs, and their disciplined warriors. From the top of one town’s temple mound the Spanish could usually see the palisades and mounds of several neighboring towns. “That country is populous and abundant,” concluded a Spaniard.

Soto foolishly claimed that he could command the sun and summoned a paramount chief to his camp. The chief contemptuously replied:

As to what you say of your being the son of the Sun, if you will cause him to dry up the great river, I will believe you: as to the rest, it is not my custom to visit any one, but rather all, of whom I have ever heard, have come to visit me, to serve and obey me, and pay me tribute, either voluntarily or by force. If you desire to see me, come where I am; if for peace, I will receive you with special goodwill; if for war, I will await you in my town; but neither for you, nor for any man, will I set back one foot.

A Mississippian chief could be as imperious as any European warlord. But the arrival of the Europeans, bent on conquest and bearing disease pathogens, introduced a radical and catastrophic acceleration of change. Within a century, European diseases, supplemented by European violence, killed most of the Mississippian peoples and transformed the world of the survivors.

BELIEFS

The Anasazi, Hohokam, and northern Mississippians all put excessive pressure on their local environments, leading to increased violence and the collapse or relocation of their largest communities. Although their experiences contradict the romantic myth of the Indian as environmental saint, it would be equally misleading to depict *all* natives as just as environmentally destructive as their European contemporaries. In their urban concentrations and dependence on maize, the Anasazi, the Hohokam, and the Mississippians were conspicuous exceptions to the general pattern in native America. North of central Mexico, most native peoples lived in smaller, more dispersed, and more mobile bands that placed less of a burden on their local nature. And even the urbanized peoples produced less long-term, accumulative damage than did their European contemporaries. The urban centers tended to collapse within two centuries of their peak, which obliged their inhabitants either to relocate or to revert to a more decentralized and less hierarchical mode of life, which allowed the recovery of wild plants, animals, and soils. Because native peoples more promptly felt the negative consequences of their local abuse of nature (relative to Europeans), they more quickly shifted to alternative environmental strategies.

Natives could and did damage their local environments, but they certainly did less enduring harm than the colonizers who displaced them. By all accounts, the nature found by European explorers was far more diverse and abundant in plants and animals than the nature they had left behind in their Old World. Having depleted the forests and wildlife of Europe, the colonizers came to do the same in their New World.

When the Europeans invaded, the native North Americans painfully discovered their profound technological and epidemiological disadvantages. They lacked the steel weapons and armor and the gunpowder that endowed the invaders with military advantage. Native peoples also could not match the wind or water mills that facilitated the processing of wood and grain. Lacking horses and oxen, native North Americans knew the wheel only in Mesoamerica as a toy. For maritime navigation, the natives possessed only large canoes and rafts incapable of crossing an open ocean in safety. Their lone domesticated mammal was the dog, which provided far less protein and less motive power than the cattle and horses of the Europeans. Only the elites in parts of Mesoamerica possessed the systems of writing that facilitated long-distance communication and record-keeping. Consequently, in the North America of 1492, only the Aztecs of Mexico constituted an imperial power capable of governing multiple cities and their peoples by command. In addition, no Native Americans possessed an ideology that impelled them far beyond their known world in search of new lands and peoples to conquer and to transform. Finally, compared with Europeans, the natives of America carried a more limited and less deadly array of pathogenic microbes.

**III. IROQUOIS**

Far to the north of the declining southeastern mound-building societies, Iroquoian-speaking people were following a contrary path for several centuries before the arrival of Europeans. The most important of those that were beginning a process of growth and consolidation were the Iroquois. Their territory stretched from the Adirondack Mountains to the Great Lakes and from what is now northern New York to Pennsylvania. Five tribes comprised what Europeans later called the League of the Iroquois: the Mohawk (“People of the Flint”), Oneidas (“People of the Stone”), Onondagas (“People of the Mountain”), Cayugas (“People at the Landing”), and Senecas (“Great Hill People”). The Iroquois confederation was a vast extension of the kinship group that characterized the northeastern woodlands pattern of family settlement and embraced perhaps 10,000 people at the time Europeans began to build settlements in the northeastern region of the continent in the sixteenth century. Living across major Indian trade routes in the Northeast, they were positioned between what would become French and English zones of settlement, which would ensure that the Iroquois would be deeply caught up with the onrush of Europeans.

Not long before Europeans began coming ashore in eastern North America, the loosely organized and strife-ridden Iroquois strengthened themselves by creating a more cohesive political confederacy. By learning to suppress intra-Iroquois blood feuds, villages gained stability, population increased, and the Iroquois developed political mechanisms for solving internal problems and presenting a more unified front in parlaying with their Algonquian neighbors for the use of hunting territories to the north or in admitting dependent tribes to settle on their territory. This facilitated the development of a coordinated Iroquois policy for dealing with the European newcomers.

Work in the palisaded villages of Iroquoia, some bustling with more than a thousand people, was performed communally and land was owned not by individuals but by all in common. An individual family might till their own patch of land, but it was understood that this usage in no way implied private ownership. Likewise, hunting was a communal enterprise. Though individual hunters differed in their ability to stalk and kill deer, the collective bounty of the hunting party was brought back to the village and divided among all. Similarly, several families occupied a longhouse, but the house itself, like all else in the community, was common property. “No hospitals [poorhouses] are needed among them,” wrote a French Jesuit in 1657, “because there are neither mendicants nor paupers as long as there are any rich people among them. Their kindness, humanity, and courtesy not only makes them liberal with what they have, but causes them to possess hardly anything except in common. A whole village must be without corn, before any individual can be obliged to endure privation.” One historian has called this “upside down capitalism,” where the goal was not to pile up material possessions but to reach the happy situation where they could give what they had to others.

Out of extended kinship groups, the Iroquois organized village settlements. Like many Africans, the Iroquois had matrilineal families where family membership was determined through the female rather than male line. A typical Iroquois family comprised an old woman, her daughters with their husbands and children, and her unmarried granddaughters and grandsons. Sons and grandsons remained with their kinship group until they married; then they joined the family of their wife or the family of their mother’s brother. If this puzzled Europeans, whose men controlled women strictly, so did the Iroquois woman’s prerogative of divorce; if she desired it, she merely set her husband’s possessions outside the longhouse door.

Iroquois society also invested the community’s women with a share of political power in ways the Europeans found strange. Political authority in the villages derived from the matrons or senior women of the ohwachiras—a group of related families. These women named the men representing the clans at village and tribal councils and appointed the 49 sachems or chiefs who met periodically when the confederated Five Nations met. These civil chiefs were generally middle-aged or elderly men who had gained fame earlier as warriors but now gained their prestige at the council fires. The political power of the women also extended to the ruling councils, where they caucused behind the circle of chiefs and made sure that the tribal council did not move too far from the will of the women who appointed them. The male chiefs were secure in their positions only so long as they could achieve a consensus with the women who had placed them in office.

Power divided between men and women was seen further in the tribal economy and in military affairs. While men did most of the hunting and fishing, the women were the community’s primary agriculturists. In tending the crops, they became vital to sustaining the community. When men were away on weeks-long hunting expeditions, women were left entirely in charge of village daily life. If “the forest belonged to the men,” one historian explains, “the village was the woman’s domain.” In military affairs women played a significant role, for they supplied the moccasins and food for warring expeditions. A decision to withhold these supplies was tantamount to vetoing a military foray. Clan Session Preparation Part 2 Excerpts Unit 1 Pre-Columbian America 46 matrons often initiated war by calling on the Iroquois warriors to bring them enemy captives to replace fallen clan members.

In raising children, Iroquois parents were more permissive than Europeans. They did not believe in harsh physical punishment, encouraged the young to imitate adult behavior, and were tolerant of fumbling early attempts. The mother nursed and protected the infant while hardening it by baths in cold water. Weaning ordinarily began at age three or four. Childhood interest in the anatomy and in sexual experimentation was accepted as normal. All this contrasted with European child-rearing techniques, which stressed accustoming the child to authority from an early age through frequent use of physical punishment, condemning early sexual curiosity, and emphasizing obedience and respect for authority.

The approach to authority in Iroquois society, like most other Indian societies in North America, lacked most of the complicated machinery developed by Europeans to direct individual lives. No laws and ordinances, sheriffs and constables, judges and juries, or courts or jails—the apparatus of authority in Europe—existed in pre-contact North America. Yet the Iroquois set boundaries of acceptable behavior firmly. They prized the autonomous individual yet maintained a strict code of right and wrong. But they governed behavior by imparting a sense of tradition and attachment to the group through communally performed rituals. Europeans dealt with crime through investigation, arrest, prosecution, and sentencing. But in Indian society, those who stole food, to take one example, were “shamed” and ostracized until the culprits atoned for their actions and proved ready for re-entry into village communal life.

Nash et al., 16–18