Changing Climate and Cultures—Anasazi and Cahokia

Before the arrival of Columbus, the largest and most sophisticated civilizations in the Americas were found in Mexico and South America. Nevertheless, hundreds of years before Columbus crossed the ocean, complex communities could be found in the present-day United States—among the ancient residents of Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, known as the Anasazi, and among the Cahokia people of the Mississippi River Valley.

**THE ANASAZI OF THE SOUTHWEST** The Anasazi, or “ancient ones,” began building communities in New Mexico and Arizona perhaps 700 years before the arrival of Columbus. They cultivated crops such as corn (or maize), beans, squash, and chilies that were needed to feed a settled, urbanized community. In time, the Anasazi began developing Chaco Canyon in northwest New Mexico as the hub of a widespread trade and ceremonial-religious network. Chaco Canyon was a large city built of logs and adobe (mud bricks) with buildings as high as five stories. It included more than a dozen pueblos (large buildings) in an area measuring 8 miles by 2 miles. Facing the main plaza, with its underground kivas where religious rites were conducted, Pueblo Bonito contained 800 rooms and may have housed 2,000 people. It was the largest “apartment” building in North America until the 1880s. Roads from Chaco Canyon allowed trade to develop in many directions. Turquoise and other valuable goods were traded, perhaps as far south as central Mexico.

After a prolonged drought in the early 1100s, the Anasazi abandoned Chaco Canyon. Their descendants created small farming communities across the Southwest. Some built the cliff dwellings that can still be seen at Mesa Verde in southwestern Colorado. While smaller than Chaco Canyon, Mesa Verde includes some 200 rooms. Built into the side of the canyon wall, the rooms offered protection

1. **Documentary Analysis**
   How does the story teller explain the migration patterns of his people?

2. **Historical Interpretation**
   What light does the story shed on relations between American Indian peoples before the arrival of Columbus in the Americas?
The Anasazi built housing or palaces into the cliffs to provide protection from the weather and from other tribes who might try to attack.

from enemies, since they could be reached only by ladders. By 1300, the Anasazi, faced with another great drought, also abandoned Mesa Verde and seem to have disappeared from history, though the founders of Acoma Pueblo may have been Anasazi. Acoma, not far from Albuquerque, New Mexico, was established some time in the 1100s. Still functioning today, it may be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the current United States.

Other peoples, known as the Hohokam settled on lands further west near present-day Phoenix, Arizona. While the Hohokam communities existed for hundreds of years, the high point of their civilization is estimated to have been between 1150 and 1450. They developed an extensive agricultural system using canals to irrigate crops that included cotton, tobacco, corn, beans, and squash. But like the Anasazi, they slowly declined. Ruins of Hohokam communities may be seen in Casa Grande, Arizona. Slowly Hopi, Zuni, Pueblo, and Navajo peoples moved into the older Anasazi and Hohokam territory of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado and built the pueblos and villages that the first Spanish explorers encountered in the 1500s.

CAHOKIA AND THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER VALLEY The Cahokia people of the Mississippi Valley, also known as the Mound Builders, created a flourishing culture between 900 and 1350. If one could go back 1,000 years and visit Cahokia, the center of this culture, one would find a city surrounded by strong wooden walls with thatch-covered houses that were home to 20,000 to 40,000 people, near what is now East St. Louis, Illinois. Cahokia was probably the largest settlement in what is now the United States, and 1,000 years ago, its “Mississippian culture” flourished throughout the Mississippi Valley and beyond. Archaeologists have found similar mound-building communities at Coosa and Etowah, Georgia; Moundville, Alabama; and Natchez, Mississippi.
This artist's rendition of ancient Cahokia shows the large city on the banks of the Mississippi River.

At the center of Cahokia, a series of wide earth mounds up to 100 feet high led to the people being called the Mound Builders. These mounds were used to bury the most prominent leaders. Atop the central mound was a temple and a wide plaza used for ceremonies centered on the seasons and the sun. The plaza was located on a perfect north-south axis, and a massive circle of wooden posts functioned as a kind of observatory to trace the sun's path.

Priests and chiefs at Cahokia tracked the sun, conducted rituals, and dispensed gifts that displayed their power, while nearby hamlets grew the food that fed the city's inhabitants. Such large, settled communities were possible because agricultural practices had replaced the earlier hunting and gathering economy and made a differentiated society possible. By about 900, a warming trend in the earth's climate had made new forms of agriculture possible. Instead of being limited to what they could find or hunt to eat, residents of Cahokia were thus able to begin farming. Like the Hohokam of the Southwest, they cultivated squash, corn, and beans, which they could grow on a seasonal basis, store as a surplus through the winter, and thereby support an urbanized culture. When eaten together, maize and beans form a complete protein, and as a result, the population could be well nourished.

In Cahokia, and in most settled Native American cultures, farming was women's work. Men hunted to add animal protein and flavor to the diet. Together, they produced a rich supply of food, enough to sustain not only themselves but a much larger community that included many—priests, chiefs, and the workers who built the mounds—who neither farmed nor hunted.

Quick Review  Describe in what ways the Anasazi and Cahokia cultures changed over time. What unique features did each culture develop? What did they have in common?
THE DIVERSE COMMUNITIES OF THE AMERICAS IN THE 1400s

1.2 Describe the diversity of American Indian cultures in the United States on the eve of their encounter with Europeans.

The native peoples of North America were a remarkably diverse group. They spoke many different languages, some more different from each other than English is from Chinese. These languages were spread among 500 to 600 independent societies with different approaches to hunting and farming, different social structures, varying creation stories, and diverse understandings of the spiritual (see Map 1-2). Nevertheless, Native American tribes

MAP 1-2 North American Culture Areas, c. 1500. The lands that would become the United States include significantly different climate zones, and in the 1500s, when many Native American tribes had their first contact with Europeans, these different climates produced significantly different tribal cultures depending on where the people lived.

*There is considerable debate today about the terms American Indian and Native American. In fact, most of the descendants of the first peoples of North America prefer to be identified by their specific tribe—Navajo or Mohawk or Cherokee or whatever specific group—when possible. When speaking of larger groups of native peoples, some think that Native American is a more respectful term while many others prefer to be called American Indian or Indian. In Mexico most prefer "indigenous" while many Canadian tribes prefer "first nations." In keeping with that diversity of preferences, this book uses tribal names when relevant and otherwise uses the terms American Indian or Indian and Native American interchangeably.
also tended to share some things in common. They tended to live comfortably with nature and in harmony with the sacred, which they found in every aspect of life. They saw time as circular—not a steady line from creation to the present and future, but a reoccurring series of events to be celebrated in rituals that involved the retelling of ancient stories linked to the annual growth of the crops and to animal life. They honored shamans and priests who were considered visionaries and who were expected to have contact with the supernatural and keep the stories alive. These shamans and priests had the special responsibility of helping restore harmony when it was disrupted by disease, war, or climatic changes that brought famine. Most native North Americans saw the community and not the individual as the focus of life and labor. Community members won fame and respect by what they gave away more than by what they kept for themselves. The accumulative spirit of autonomous Europeans, gaining ever more possessions—especially land and the status in European society that came from land ownership—made no sense to most American Indians.

Although precise measurement is impossible, scholars estimate that approximately 7 million Indians lived in what is now the United States and Canada with much larger numbers in Mexico and Central and South America. The total population for all of the Americas was probably 50 to 70 million, perhaps as high as 100 million, when the first Europeans arrived. Europe’s population at the time was approximately 70 to 90 million, and Africa’s population was 50 to 70 million. If these numbers are correct, then although North America was relatively sparsely populated, the Americas as a whole had as many or more people than either Europe or Africa in 1492. Asia, it is worth noting, had a far larger population, perhaps in the range of 200 to 300 million people.

North American Indians also lived in a land of extraordinary physical diversity, from the tundra of Alaska to the forests of New England, from the prairies and grasslands of the Midwest to the lush Pacific Coast and the dry Southwest. In these diverse environments, climatic changes led to seasons of plenty and seasons of famine. Different environments also led to radically different ways of life. While the settled farmers of Cahokia and their descendants in the southeast and the pueblo peoples of the southwest left the clearest records, many nomadic tribes roamed the heart of the continent and the Pacific coast, depending much more on their skills as hunters and their ability to gather abundant plant foods than on settled agriculture. Success and failure in war or the spread of disease caused American Indian populations to ebb and flow long before the first European encounters.

The Pueblo People of the Southwest

Some of the largest American Indian settlements in what is now the United States were in the Southwest. In place of the abandoned Anasazi centers, Pueblo and Hopi people created thriving settlements in New Mexico and Arizona. Taos Pueblo in northern New Mexico, with its multistoried buildings for many families, is still inhabited as are many other Pueblo and Hopi communities in the region.

In the Pueblo and Hopi Southwest, an intricate maze of canals, dams, and terracing allowed agriculture to flourish in a dry climate. Like the Anasazi, the Pueblo and Hopi diet relied on corn, brown beans, and various forms of squash. They had domesticated turkeys and used dogs to hunt, so wild game, in addition to turkey, added animal protein to their diet.

In both Hopi and Pueblo communities, members of special societies wore ritual masks called kachinas and danced in ceremonies designed to connect the community with its ancestors while seeking their presence and blessing on the crops. The Pueblo people eventually spread out over Arizona and New Mexico, speaking different languages yet connected to each other by trade and common religious practices.

The Tribes of the Mississippi Valley

In the mid-1300s, Cahokia and the mound-building culture began to disappear. No one knows all of the reasons for this decline, but climate almost certainly had a role
in it. Around 1350, a relatively rapid colder climate shift known as the "Little Ice Age" began and lasted until 1800. As the climate got colder, agriculture suffered. Europeans abandoned their settlements in places like Greenland. If the power of its priests and kings in Cahokia depended on their seeming control of the sun and the seasons, the Little Ice Age sapped that power. The change in weather drastically reduced the supply of food from oulying hamlets on which their large cities depended. Whatever all the reasons, by 1400, Cahokia was abandoned.

With the decline of Cahokia and the mound-building culture, the population of the Mississippi Valley shrank. The most direct descendants of Cahokia, the people later known as the Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws, settled on the eastern side of the Mississippi River and the southern Appalachian Indians.

Other tribes dominated other parts of Cahokia's former territory. The Cherokees and Tuscaroras settled in parts of Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. They are connected linguistically with the Iroquois of the Great Lakes and New York more than with the Creeks and Choctaws. Yet other tribes dominated the Piedmont of what would be the Carolinas. Whatever their language or background, most of these tribes lived in small communities of 500 to 2,000 people. None lived in cities that were anything like Cahokia. Neighboring villages might exchange corn or meat. Longer-distance exchange—and there was considerable long-distance exchange—was generally limited to things that were rare and easy to carry: copper implements, beads and shells from the Atlantic Coast, or quartz from the Rocky Mountains. Artifacts uncovered in almost any native settlement in North America attest to the lively trade among all of the continent's tribes.

Archeological evidence also suggests that as Cahokia declined, smaller chiefdoms developed and often fought with each other and with other tribes. These communities, sometimes only a few families, built places of refuge throughout the Mississippi Valley. Mississippian villages in the 1400s included a half dozen to several dozen houses with a central field for games or ceremonies, all surrounded by a wooden wall that, if not strong enough to keep out a determined enemy, at least assured against surprise attacks. Several families often shared a single structure. Structures that housed a chief's family were somewhat larger but do not seem to have reflected a grander lifestyle. As weather and war made food scarcer—it was harder to cultivate crops and more dangerous to hunt game if human enemies were lurking nearby. The possibility of starvation increased. Still, the first European explorers who arrived in the 1540s reported finding large settlements in modern South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee with rich well-tended fields and well-designed houses and villages.

The Pacific Coast—From the Shasta to the California Indians

In the Pacific Northwest, the Shasta and other tribes lived in towns of several hundred people, constructing houses as long as 60 feet built of cedar and richly decorated with painting and sculpture. These Pacific Coast Indians lived primarily on the abundant salmon in their rivers, which could be smoked or dried for year-round consumption. As a result of plentiful food and good housing, these tribes developed a settled community life with their own art and culture.

Farther down the Pacific Coast in California, the Yokut, Miwok, Maidu, and Pomo represented one of the largest concentrations of American Indians north of Mexico, perhaps 700,000 or 10 percent of the Indians north of the Rio Grande. These Native Americans lived in clans of extended families rather than larger tribal units. Their economy was based on gathering wild plants and on fishing and hunting. They did not engage in settled agriculture probably because the wild foods in California were so abundant and settled agriculture offered little improvement in their diet or way of life.

The Iroquois Confederacy and the Tribes of the Atlantic Coast

In the Northeast, the original five nations of the Iroquois (or the Haudenosaunee as they call themselves)—the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas—developed
an alliance and a united front against other tribes, an approach that would also serve them well in their encounters with Europeans. The Iroquois Confederacy’s central meeting place and council fire was near present-day Syracuse, New York. In Iroquois communities, several families would live in a single sturdy longhouse made of posts and poles covered with bark, but the house itself and the land around it belonged to the community. As many as 1,000 people lived in some Iroquois towns made up of many longhouses. Iroquois legends tell of a great peace-maker, Dekanawidah, who convinced the warring tribes to live together under the Great Law of Peace. An eclipse of the sun around the year 1142 supposedly strengthened his plea for unity. Clans led by women governed the five nations. The women leaders chose the sachems, male leaders who attended the council meetings and led in war but who were also accountable to the clans.

On the Atlantic Coast and the eastern slopes of the Appalachians were Algonquian-speaking tribes, the largest of which, the Powhatans, may have included 60,000 or more people. For these tribes—some of the first to encounter Europeans—hunting and fishing as well as farming corn, beans, and squash provided the major food sources. They lived in permanent towns and villages. Like other tribes, the Atlantic Coast Indians did not keep written records but even as late as the 1670s an English trader described an Indian town of many houses along crisscrossing streets, surrounded by a stockade 2-feet thick and 12-feet high. Social life centered in the ceremonies of the seasons that gave thanks for the gifts of food, especially the green corn dance held in late summer, which might attract several hundred Indians from surrounding villages, to give thanks for the harvest and to celebrate the start of a new year. Although the description came from the early 1600s, there is no reason to assume that Algonquian community life had changed much since the 1400s.

The Aztec, Mayan, and Inca Empires

Traveling south from the current United States in the mid-1400s, one came to the great Aztec city of Tenochtitlán. With a population of 200,000, it was as large as or larger than any contemporary city in Africa or Europe. The Aztecs founded Tenochtitlán
on an island in the middle of Lake Texococo in 1325, connected it to the mainland by three broad causeways, and supplied the city with fresh drinking water through a carefully designed aqueduct. When the Aztecs first arrived in central Mexico, the people who then ruled the region, known as the Toltecs, looked down on them as barbarians. That soon changed. The Aztecs conquered the Toltecs and destroyed their capital. The Aztec's Tenochtitlan used Toltec designs, but was a new and grander capital. Led by their emperor, Aztec society was highly stratified; the emperor and priests at the top ruled a powerful empire with a population of 10 to 20 million that dominated subdued tribes in surrounding areas.

The huge markets of Tenochtitlan in which 40,000 or 50,000 traders met to exchange gold and jewelry, pottery and baskets, meat, fish, fruit, and vegetables amazed the first Spaniards who described it as “thrice as large as the celebrated square in Salamanca [in Spain].” The Aztecs maintained an extensive trade network with other peoples but also made war on them to expand their empire and ensure a steady stream of prisoners for the human sacrifices they believed their gods demanded. While the Aztecs built their empire by making strategic alliances with other tribes, by the mid-1400s, they relied on their own large army and attacked former allies, creating enemies who would help the Spanish conquer the Aztecs in the early 1500s.

To the east and southeast of the Aztec Empire was the once great empire of the Maya. The Mayan Empire had been at its height long before the Aztecs emerged on the scene. Indeed, the Mayan culture had been developing for thousands of years when they first came into contact with Europeans. The high point of Mayan culture, known as the classical period, entered a period of decline hundreds of years before the rise of the Aztecs, probably due to an extended period of drought and overfarming of the land.

The Mayans dominated what is now the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico and much of modern Honduras, Belize, and Guatemala. The Mayans were the only American culture to develop a fully functional written language. They also developed sophisticated systems of mathematics and a calendar that projected time far into the future. Like the Aztecs, they practiced human sacrifice and subdued other nearby tribes in pursuit of people and goods. They had an extensive agricultural system producing not only food but also cotton, which was a source of trade and wealth.

While in decline, the Mayans, some 800,000 people divided into 16 to 18 independent kingdoms, were still a strong presence in western Mexico and Central America in the 1400s. The remains of their greatest architecture could be seen all around them. They still produced and traded cotton, and their trade routes connected them with the other empires of the Americas.

Further south, the Inca Empire was even larger than that of the Aztecs. It extended along the Pacific coast of South America from southern Colombia to northern Chile, and included almost all of what is today Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia (see Map 1-3). The Incas ruled some 32 million people from their capital of Cuzco, another city of 200,000, in what is now Peru, and from the mountain fortress and religious center of Machu Picchu. The empire had a vast bureaucracy and army as well as 25,000 miles of roads and bridges rivaling those of ancient Rome, all supported by heavy taxes. Incan religion was centered on the sun and its seasons; human and animal sacrifice was common. The Inca emperor and his family were considered divine. Like the Aztecs, the Inca Empire was relatively new when Europeans encountered it in the early 1500s. The main Inca conquests had occurred only in the 1400s.