

LECTURE 2:
AMERICA BEFORE COLUMBUS

By all accounts, the human history of the Americas, including the area that is today the United States of America, is a relatively brief one. The Americas were last continents to see human habitation. The Americas have traditionally been known as the “New World,” in contrast with the “Old World” of Europe and Asia. The terms are still used today. In the popular mind, American history begins with the voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492, when he sailed west from Spain in an attempt to reach Asia and “discovered” America. When Columbus arrived, he met people – the Native Americans. Believing he had reached India, the Spanish dubbed the people they found “Indians” – a term still in use today.

What kind of societies and cultures did the Native Americans have before Columbus? This is a question difficult to answer. With very few exceptions, the Indians did not leave any written records. To understand Indian society and culture before Columbus, we are dependent on the work of archaeologists to unearth physical clues. Nevertheless, if we want to understand the entire history of human beings in North America, we must discuss the Native Americans and their world before Columbus.

The First Americans

Assuming one accepts the concept of human evolution, human beings, or *homo sapiens*, emerged in East Africa about five million years ago. From there, early humans spread north and east into southwestern and central Asia, and then to Europe and East Asia. During this time, the Americas were cut off from the rest of the world. Not only did the oceans separate Old World from New, but the one geographic location where the continents of Asia and North America were even close to each other was at the far northern region along the Bering Sea in present-day Siberia and Alaska – was a cold, harsh environment that could not support large populations of people.

Humans finally arrived in the Americas, most experts agree, during a geologic period known as the **Ice Age**. During the Ice Age, huge ice sheets descended from the Arctic regions southward into the interior of Europe, Asia, and North America. Exactly why glaciation occurred is debated among geologists today. North America has been through several periods of glaciation – the earliest perhaps two million years ago. The last period of glaciation began only about 30,000 years ago, and is known in North America as the Wisconsin Glaciation. By about 12,000 years ago, the last glaciers started to retreat. What’s the connection between the Ice Age and human migration? Glaciers, of course, are made of water. As the glaciers grew they locked up more and more of the planet’s water supplies. Sea level lowered as the glaciers grew, opening a “land bridge” between

North America and Asia in the Bering Sea – an area known to archaeologists as **Beringia**. This Bering Sea land bridge allowed contact between Asia and the Americas.

At the time of the Ice Age, northeastern Asia was the home of small tribes of hunter-gatherers, who, it is believed, followed hunting opportunities across the land bridge into North America. When the planet warmed and the glaciers melted, those people who had ventured into America were stuck there – cut off from the rest of humanity. These peoples are, of course, the ancestors of the Native Americans – the peoples the Europeans met when they “discovered” America. Exactly when people arrived in North America is not known. Some estimate it may have been 30-40,000 years ago. Others say only about 15,000 years ago. It is not even clear that the first Americans came over the Bering Sea land bridge at all. Some archaeologists theorize that these first Americans may have come from Europe, making their way to the New World in primitive boats along the margins of sea ice. From North America, humans then spread southward into Central and South America, reaching the southernmost tip of South America about 10,000 years ago.

Very little is known about these earliest migrants to America – whom archaeologists refer to as **Paleo-Indians**. They are known to be hunter-gatherers, like those peoples who migrated from Siberia. They seem to have been nomadic, traveling in small bands in search of sustenance on the North American tundra. Their population probably very sparse, as the land was unable to support large population at the time. Archaeological evidence suggests that Paleo-Indians congregated from time to time, probably for trade and to seek marriage outside of their small bands. These people were adept at living and hunting in a cold weather environment. They hunted a variety of animals – some species familiar to modern humans, such as the caribou and the musk ox. Some of the species they hunted are now extinct or no longer living in North America, such as an ancient species of camel, and a giant beaver. They also hunted the mastodon and the woolly mammoth – extinct, cold-weather cousins of modern elephants. Exactly why the mastodon and mammoth disappeared is not entirely known. Some speculate over-hunting by Paleo-Indians, though such great beasts may not have been able to withstand the rapid climate change that occurred as the glaciers melted away.

Evolution of Native American Societies

Over thousands of years American Indian societies evolved and grew more complex. Most Native Americans left the primitive hunting and gathering lifestyle of the Paleo-Indians. As the climate got warmer, the population grew and Indian economies diversified. Many settled in villages. One of the key changes was the development of agriculture. Indians in present-day Mexico began to cultivate crops about 9,000 years ago. Their crops consisted mainly of beans, squash, and maize (known to Americans today as corn) – foods unknown in the Old World at the time. Indians also cultivated tobacco, which was used in ceremonial occasions. Agriculture spread from Mexico other parts of the Americas, including into the present-day United States. Generally speaking, Indians did not divide the land up, clear huge fields, and settle on farms like Europeans would do when they came to America. Rather they cleared small areas of the forest,

farmed them for a few years, and then moved on – a practice known as swidden or “slash and burn” agriculture. One of the common misconceptions of Native American life is that they lived “in harmony” with nature. In fact, Indians often manipulated the physical environment to suit their needs. Burning large areas of the forest, for example, created open spaces where grasses grew, which in turn attracted game animals like deer.

Native Americans manufacturing techniques also became more advanced. Clay pottery and women baskets, for example, grew more complex – both in their functional capacities and their artistic designs. In North America, Indian metal working skills were not very advanced. Indians had learned to use copper for knives and fishhooks. Copper is relatively soft and easy to work. Indians mined the copper by heating it with fire and then suddenly cooling it, causing the rock to crack and split. It was then cold hammered into the desired instruments. Native Americans had not discovered the art of making iron, however, despite available deposits of iron-ore. Extensive trade networks emerged between Native Americans. Archaeological sites in a place like New York may reveal sea shells brought north from Florida. Sites along the Gulf of Mexico might yield copper from the Great Lakes region. No written accounts of this period exist, it is unknown exactly how these networks functioned, or what trade policies and etiquette might have been.

Over thousands of years, various regional, cultural patterns emerged among the Indians of North America. To speak of “Indian culture” is misleading; there were many different cultural and linguistic regions throughout the Americas [see Figure 1]. Despite the great diversity of Indian cultures, it is possible to make some generalizations about North American Indian societies and cultures on the eve of Columbus. In terms of religious beliefs and practices, for example, Native Americans believed that the world was populated with a great number of spirits. Animals had spirits, which hunters were required to honor. So did trees and plants. The sun and the moon were also considered supernatural, as were natural phenomena like thunder, lightning, and wind. Indian peoples conducted dances and other rituals to please the spirits, and carried good luck charms and other personal items to ward off disease and injury. Offerings of tobacco were meant to invoke the intervention of spirits. In addition to good spirits, evil ones also stalked the land, including ghosts, evil water spirits, and tricksters who performed both good and evil. Linking the world together was a “great spirit” – not a God in the Judeo-Christian sense but rather a life force animating the universe. Siouan-speaking people referred to this great spirit as the *wakan tanka*; in Algonkian languages it was the *manitou*. Native Americans believed they could communicate with the spirit world through dreams or by having visions. To induce visions, Indians sometimes fasted, performed exhausting rituals, or even endured ritual torture. The spiritual affairs of the community were the province of a shaman. Because of their great spiritual powers, shamans were often the most important and powerful members of a tribe. The shaman was responsible for the interpretation of dreams and the conduct of dances and various religious rituals.



Figure 1: Pre-Contact cultural regions in North America. (Map from <http://www.kstrom.net>)

The political and social organization of North American Indians was also similar. The Indian tribe is roughly the equivalent to an ethnic identity in a European sense. Each tribe was divided into clans, the members of which were believed descended from a common animal ancestor. Clans typically had a specific function within the larger group. The Menominee Indians of Wisconsin, for example, had 34 clans organized into five major divisions: bear (civil administration), eagle (military affairs), moose (internal security), wolf (hunting), and crane (builders). One's clan was usually determined patrilineally, and people were prohibited from marrying within their own clan. North American Indian nations typically had little in the way of centralized authority. The primary job of the headmen, or chiefs, was to maintain order within the tribe. There were many different kinds of chiefs, including those responsible for civil affairs and those responsible for warfare. Indian chiefs were not kings or princes in the European fashion, but rather ruled only with the consent of tribal members. Major decisions were typically made through tribal councils after thorough deliberations. Tribes often formed alliances

or joined together in confederations, such as the powerful Iroquois Confederacy of New York State. The basic tribal organization of pre-contact tribes remains a part of tribal politics and organization today. Men and women had clearly defined gender roles. Men were responsible for hunting, fishing, and diplomacy with other tribes, including warfare. Women were responsible for child rearing, but also for agriculture and gathering. Though the chiefs were men, women's voices were respected in tribal councils.

Warfare greatly shaped the lives of Native Americans. Conflicts arose frequently between tribes, typically surrounding disputed hunting territories or economic resources. Once a war had been started, warriors sought revenge for losses inflicted on the families and their tribes, making warfare endemic. Such warfare was typically small in scope, and involved small bands of warriors raiding an enemy village. The warrior leading the party had to first obtain permission from the war chief. Native American warfare was much different than it was in Europe. War parties were typically smaller than 50 men who fought as individuals rather than in mass formations. The women and children of the enemy tribe were considered fair targets. An Indian warrior often removed the scalp of an enemy warrior he had killed, which was then displayed in the village of the victor. Warriors who killed an enemy were awarded an eagle feather, which he then wore in his hair. To keep conflicts limited, Indian peoples also sought ways to end the cycle of killing. Under the practice of "covering the dead," the warrior who killed a member of an enemy tribe could offer gifts to the deceased person's family, such as food, clothing, or weapons. If the family accepted the gifts the killing would be forgotten, otherwise the cycle of violence would continue. All of the tribe's adult men were expected to participate in warfare; indeed, a man's social status usually involved his skills in battle. Even today, military service is highly respected among Native American peoples.

In some parts of the Americas, advanced Native American civilizations developed. The **Olmec** emerged in central Mexico about 1000 BCE. They built cities that included large earthen pyramids and developed a form of hieroglyphic writing, but are best known for their colossal stone heads – some of which weigh as much as 40 tons. The Olmec culture is considered by many archaeologists to be the "mother culture" of the later Native American civilizations that would flourish in Mexico and Central America. The **Maya** civilization developed on the Yucatan Peninsula during the first century. The Maya built elaborate cities characterized by large plazas and stepped pyramid temples made of stone [see Figure 2]. They used hieroglyphic writing and also developed a highly accurate calendar that was more precise than those being used in Europe at the time. Mayan civilization had gone into decline after 1000. The reasons for their downfall are not clear. Mayan city-states were known to wage war against one another, although environmental conditions may also have played a role. By the time Europeans arrived in America in 1492, there were two great Native American empires. Along the Pacific coast of South America was the **Inca** Empire. The **Aztecs** controlled most of central Mexico. The Aztec capital city was Tenochtitlan (present-day Mexico City), which in 1500 had an estimated population of 200,000 – larger than any city in Europe at the time. Tenochtitlan was an architectural wonder. Built over Lake Texcoco, the city was located on an island and linked to the mainland by causeways. It had many beautiful gardens and canals. Like the Olmec and Maya, the great city's architecture was

characterized by large plazas and pyramids. The Aztecs were very warlike, constantly subduing their neighbors and putting down rebellions. War captives were used as human sacrifices to their Gods.



Figure 2: Mayan pyramid at Chichen Itza, Mexico

Indian societies in present-day United States did not reach the complexity of the Maya or Aztecs, but some rather sophisticated cultures did emerge. The Hopewell and Adena cultures, for example, emerged in the Ohio River Valley about 500. The Hopewell and Adena are noted for their extensive trade links, creative artistic culture, and massive earthworks. In the deserts of the American West, ancient peoples settled in permanent villages and developed agricultural economies. Villages were often located on steep cliffs protecting the residents from wild animals and enemies [see figure 3]. About 1000, the Hohokam Indians in present-day Arizona had built impressive irrigation works – drawing water from rivers to farm desert lands. Farther to the east, the Mississippian culture also emerged about 1000. Centered in the Mississippi River Valley, this culture was characterized by large stockaded villages and an agricultural economy. The Mississippians also developed vast trade networks that stretched from the Appalachians to the Rockies. The largest center of Mississippian culture was **Cahokia** near present-day East St. Louis, Illinois – at the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. At its height, Cahokia had a population of 20,000, making it one of the largest cities in the world at the time. Some speculate that it may have been the center of the first great empire in North America, though its political structure is unknown. The city of Cahokia was dominated by stepped, flat-top earthen pyramids, suggesting influence from Mexico.

One such pyramid at Cahokia covered 16 acres. Like the Olmec and the Maya, the Hohokam, Mississippians, and other complex Native American cultures in North America also mysteriously declined, leaving no written records and fragmentary physical clues about themselves.



Figure 3: Ancient Native American cliff dwellings in Arizona

North America on the Eve of Columbus

When Columbus arrived in America in 1492, Native Americans in the present-day United States lived in a great variety of cultural and economic situations. In the Arctic regions, the Inuit people (better known as Eskimos) existed hunting whale and other polar animals. Along the coastline of the Pacific Northwest, fishing was a mainstay of the economy. In the Southwest, Indians lived in permanent villages made of *adobe* (dried mud) and known as *pueblos*. The Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico is the oldest continually inhabited place in the United States. Archaeologists estimate that people have lived at Acoma since about 1150. On the Great Plains, the Indian economy revolved around an animal known as the American Bison – better known as the buffalo – huge herds of which roamed up and down the vast American prairies. In the forests of eastern North America, Native Americans survived on a mixed economy of hunting, gathering, and farming. The boundaries of these cultural and linguistic regions were not fixed, but in fact were in constant flux. Indian tribes competed against each other for land and resources, often fighting wars against one another. In the Great Lakes region, for example, the Ojibwe (also known as the Chippewa) were engaged in a long struggle against the Sioux, gradually pushing them onto the Great Plains.

How many people lived in the Americas when Columbus arrived? The question is impossible to answer with any precision. Some scholars have estimated that there were no more than about 13 million people on both continents. In recent years the population estimates have increased dramatically. Some believe that there way have been as many

as 112 million – with 25 million in Mexico alone. This population was not evenly distributed around the continents. The vast majority of native peoples lived in Mexico and Central America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Coast of South America. In the present-day United States and Canada, there was probably about 3-5 million people. The most densely populated areas were in the Southwest, the Southeast, and up the Atlantic seaboard to New England. The Rocky Mountains, Great Plains, and northern forests rather lightly populated.

Native Americans are vital to any understanding of American ethnic history. They were, after all, the very first Americans. Knowledge of Native American societies and cultures also helps to dispel some of the many myths and misconceptions about American history. First is the notion that America was an “empty” continent awaiting human improvement. It was not. Native Americans had lived in the Americas for thousands of years (by way of comparison, it has barely been 500 years since the arrival of Columbus). There were millions of people here already – people who would have to be cleared out of way to create European colonies. Second is the notion that Native Americans were primitive “savages.” A savage, generally speaking, is someone who is uncivilized. Native Americans had not reached Europe’s level of technological sophistication, they were mostly illiterate, and they were not Christian. Europeans saw little in Indian life that fit their own definition of “civilization.” The problem was with the Europeans, however, who shut their eyes to the culture and accomplishments of American Indian peoples.

America before Columbus was not the peaceful paradise that many today imagine it to be – brutal Aztec human sacrifice rituals attest to that. But the societies and cultures of the Native Americans in the New World, as accomplished and imperfect as any in the Old World, would experience a radical transformation with the arrival of Europeans.