

Welcome to AP US History!

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Summer Assignment

1. Read Chapter 1 of your textbook (which is included in this file, you will get your actual textbook in the fall) and take notes. Be sure to follow the helpful hints below and make sure you have included the main ideas and key terms within your notes. **Please send your first page of chapter notes to my email by July 21st! DO NOT TYPE YOUR NOTES!**
 - *You will have chapter notes and quizzes weekly, this first set of chapter notes will give you an idea about how your notes can work best for you! (This assignment should take about an hour)*
2. Read the article “The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race” by Jared Diamond. Annotate the article and answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper:
 - What is the claim made by Jared Diamond and how does he support his claim?
 - Do you agree or disagree with Diamond’s claim? Why or why not?
 - *We will discuss this article on the first day of class and compare Diamond’s claims with another historian (This assignment should take you 20-30 minutes)*
3. Make sure you have access to your College Board account. It will be imperative that you have access at the beginning of next year!

Both assignments are **due the first day of class (August 28th)!**

Helpful hints for Chapter Notes

1. Read the chapter to understand!
2. Reread the chapter and take detailed notes.
3. Use your own words to help remember it.
4. Highlight and explain the significance of key terms
5. For every 10 pages of reading, write at least 2 pages of notes.

A Guide to Chapter 1: Colliding Worlds 1491-1600

1. Getting Started: Read Pages 6-36 and take notes

2. Did you Find the Main Ideas?

1. How did Native societies respond to their environments?
2. How did different Native groups establish varied economies, political systems, and societies?
3. Why did the Native societies of the Great Basin and the Great Plains develop largely mobile lifestyles?
4. Why did societies in the Native societies in the Northeast, Mississippi River Valley, and along the Atlantic seaboard develop more permanent villages?
5. How did the resources of the ocean influence the development of Native societies in the Northwest and present-day California?
6. What was the relationship between European traders and West Africa?
7. How did disease impact the ability of the Spanish to conquer Native cultures in the Americas?
8. How did contacts among Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans alter the economies of the three continents?

3. Highlight the Key Term

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|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Smallpox | 11. Great Plains |
| 2. Hunters and gatherers | 12. Steppe |
| 3. Semi sedentary societies | 13. Stratification |
| 4. Mississippian Culture | 14. Protestant Reformation |
| 5. Algonquian cultures/language | 15. Counter Reformation |
| 6. Iroquoian cultures/language | 16. Christopher Columbus |
| 7. Iroquois Confederacy | 17. Hernan Cortes |
| 8. Conquistador | 18. Moctezuma |
| 9. Hiawatha | 19. Pedro Alvarez Cabral |
| 10. Great Basin | 20. Plantation System |

The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race, Jared Diamond, 1987

Jared Diamond is an American scientist, who is best known for his book *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which assesses why Eurasian peoples conquered or displaced Native Americans, Australians, and Africans, instead of vice versa. Diamond uses various fields including, anthropology, ecology, geography, and biology to support claims made in his work.

To science we owe dramatic changes in our smug self-image. Astronomy taught us that our earth isn't the center of the universe but merely one of billions of heavenly bodies... Now archaeology is demolishing another sacred belief: that human history over the past million years has been a long tale of progress. In particular, recent discoveries suggest that the adoption of agriculture, supposedly our most decisive step toward a better life, was in many ways a catastrophe from which we have never recovered. With agriculture came the gross social and sexual inequality, the disease and despotism that curse our existence. At first, the evidence against this revisionist interpretation will strike twentieth century Americans as irrefutable. We're better off in almost every respect than people of the Middle Ages, who in turn had it easier than cavemen, who in turn were better off than apes. Just count our advantages. We enjoy the most abundant and varied foods, the best tools and material goods, some of the longest and healthiest lives, in history. Most of us are safe from starvation and predators. We get our energy from oil and machines, not from our sweat. What neo-Luddite among us would trade his life for that of a medieval peasant, a caveman, or an ape?

For most of our history we supported ourselves by hunting and gathering: we hunted wild animals and foraged for wild plants. It's a life that philosophers have traditionally regarded as nasty, brutish, and short. Since no food is grown and little is stored, there is (in this view) no respite from the struggle that starts anew each day to find wild foods and avoid starving. Our escape from this misery was facilitated only 10,000 years ago, when in different parts of the world people began to domesticate plants and animals. The agricultural revolution spread until today it's nearly universal and few tribes of hunter-gatherers survive.

From the progressivist (**a scientist who believes that society is constantly moving forward/improving**) perspective on which I was brought up, to ask "Why did almost all our hunter-gatherer ancestors adopt agriculture?" is silly. Of course they adopted it because agriculture is an efficient way to get more food for less work. Planted crops yield far more tons per acre than roots and berries. Just imagine a band of savages, exhausted from searching for nuts or chasing wild animals, suddenly grazing for the first time at a fruit-laden orchard or a pasture full of sheep...The progressivist view is really making a claim about the distant past: that the lives of primitive people improved when they switched from gathering to farming. Archaeologists can date that switch by distinguishing remains of wild plants and animals from those of domesticated ones in prehistoric garbage dumps.

How can one deduce the health of the prehistoric garbage makers, and thereby directly test the progressivist view? That question has become answerable only in recent years, in part through the newly emerging techniques of paleopathology, the study of signs of disease in the remains of ancient peoples...For example, archaeologists in the Chilean deserts found well preserved mummies whose medical conditions at time of death could be determined by autopsy ... And feces of long-dead Indians who lived in dry caves in Nevada remain sufficiently well preserved to be examined for hookworm and other parasites.

...One straight forward example of what paleopathologists(**an anthropologist who studies disease in ancient times through fossils and other remains**) have learned from skeletons concerns historical changes in height. Skeletons from Greece and Turkey show that the average height of hunter-gatherers toward the end of the ice ages was a generous 5' 9" for men, 5' 5" for women. With the adoption of agriculture, height crashed, and by 3000 B. C. had reached a low of only 5' 3" for men, 5' for women. By classical times heights were very slowly on the rise again, but modern Greeks and Turks have still not regained the average height of their distant ancestors.

Another example of paleopathology at work is the study of Indian skeletons from burial mounds in the Illinois and Ohio River valleys. At Dickson Mounds, located near the confluence of the Spoon and Illinois rivers, archaeologists have excavated some 800 skeletons that paint a picture of the health changes that occurred when a hunter-gatherer culture gave way to intensive maize farming around A. D. 1150. Studies by George Armelagos and his colleagues show these early farmers paid a price for their new-found livelihood. Compared to the hunter-gatherers who preceded them, the farmers had a nearly 50 per cent increase in enamel defects indicative of malnutrition, a fourfold increase in iron-deficiency anemia a threefold rise in bone lesions reflecting infectious disease in general, and an increase in degenerative conditions of the spine, probably reflecting a lot of hard physical labor. "Life expectancy at birth in the pre-agricultural community was about twenty-six years," says Armelagos, "but in the post-agricultural community it was nineteen years. So these episodes of nutritional stress and infectious

disease were seriously affecting their ability to survive." The evidence suggests that the Indians at Dickson Mounds, like many other primitive peoples, took up farming not by choice but from necessity in order to feed their constantly growing numbers. "I don't think most hunter-gatherers farmed until they had to, and when they switched to farming they traded quality for quantity," says Cohen, co-editor with Armelagos, of one of the seminal books in the field, *Paleopathology at the Origins of Agriculture*. "When I first started making that argument ten years ago, not many people agreed with me. Now it's become a respectable, albeit controversial, side of the debate."

There are at least three sets of reasons to explain the findings that agriculture was bad for health. First, hunter-gatherers enjoyed a varied diet, while early farmers obtained most of their food from one or a few starchy crops. The farmers gained cheap calories at the cost of poor nutrition, (today just three high-carbohydrate plants -- wheat, rice, and corn -- provide the bulk of the calories consumed by the human species, yet each one is deficient in certain vitamins or amino acids essential to life.) Second, because of dependence on a limited number of crops, farmers ran the risk of starvation if one crop failed. Finally, the mere fact that agriculture encouraged people to clump together in crowded societies, many of which then carried on trade with other crowded societies, led to the spread of parasites and infectious disease. (Some archaeologists think it was the crowding, rather than agriculture, that promoted disease, but this is a chicken-and-egg argument, because crowding encourages agriculture and vice versa.) Epidemics couldn't take hold when populations were scattered in small bands that constantly shifted camp. Tuberculosis and diarrheal disease had to await the rise of farming, measles and bubonic plague the appearance of large cities.

Besides malnutrition, starvation, and epidemic diseases, farming helped bring another curse upon humanity: deep class divisions. Hunter-gatherers have little or no stored food, and no concentrated food sources, like an orchard or a herd of cows: they live off the wild plants and animals they obtain each day. Therefore, there can be no kings, no class of social parasites who grow fat on food seized from others. Only in a farming population could a healthy, non-producing elite set itself above the disease-ridden masses.

Farming may have encouraged inequality between the sexes, as well. Freed from the need to transport their babies during a nomadic existence, and under pressure to produce more hands to till the fields, farming women tended to have more frequent pregnancies than their hunter-gatherer counterparts -- with consequent drains on their health. Women in agricultural societies were sometimes made beasts of burden. Thus with the advent of agriculture and elite became better off, but most people became worse off. Instead of swallowing the progressivist party line that we chose agriculture because it was good for us, we must ask how we got trapped by it despite its pitfalls.

One answer boils down to the adage "Might makes right." Farming could support many more people than hunting, albeit with a poorer quality of life. (Population densities of hunter-gatherers are rarely over one person per ten square miles, while farmers average 100 times that.) Partly, this is because a field planted entirely in edible crops lets one feed far more mouths than a forest with scattered edible plants. Partly, too, it's because nomadic hunter-gatherers have to keep their children spaced at four-year intervals by infanticide and other means, since a mother must carry her toddler until its old enough to keep up with the adults. Because farm women don't have that burden, they can and often do bear a child every two years.

As population densities of hunter-gatherers slowly rose at the end of the ice ages, bands had to choose between feeding more mouths by taking the first steps toward agriculture, or else finding ways to limit growth. Some bands chose the former solution, unable to anticipate the evils of farming, and seduced by the transient abundance they enjoyed until population growth caught up with increased food production. Such bands outbred and then drove off or killed the bands that chose to remain hunter-gatherers, because a hundred malnourished farmers can still outfight one healthy hunter. It's not that hunter-gatherers abandoned their life style, but that those sensible enough not to abandon it were forced out of all areas except the ones farmers didn't want.

At this point it's instructive to recall the common complaint that archaeology is a luxury, concerned with the remote past, and offering no lessons for the present. Archaeologists studying the rise of farming have reconstructed a crucial stage at which we made the worst mistake in human history. Forced to choose between limiting population or trying to increase food production, we chose the latter and ended up with starvation, warfare, and tyranny. Hunter-gatherers practiced the most successful and longest-lasting life style in human history. In contrast, we're still struggling with the mess into which agriculture has tumbled us, and it's unclear whether we can solve it.

Chapter 1: Colliding Worlds

1491–1600

In April 1493, a Genoese sailor of humble origins appeared at the court of Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon along with six Caribbean natives, numerous colorful parrots, and “samples of finest gold, and many other things never before seen or heard tell of in Spain.” The sailor was Christopher Columbus, just returned from his first voyage into the Atlantic. He and his party entered Barcelona’s fortress in a solemn procession. The monarchs stood to greet Columbus; he knelt to kiss their hands. They talked for an hour and then adjourned to the royal chapel for a ceremony of thanksgiving. Columbus, now bearing the official title *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, remained at court for more than a month. The highlight of his stay was the baptism of the six natives, whom Columbus called Indians because he mistakenly believed he had sailed westward all the way to Asia.

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In the spring of 1540, the Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto met the Lady of Cofachiqui, ruler of a large Native American province in present-day South Carolina. Though an [epidemic](#) had carried away many of her people, the lady of the province offered the Spanish expedition as much corn, and as many pearls, as it could carry. As she spoke to de Soto, she unwound “a great rope of pearls as large as hazelnuts” and handed them to the Spaniard; in return he gave her a gold ring set with a ruby. De Soto and his men then visited the temples of Cofachiqui, which were guarded by carved statues and held storehouses of weapons and chest upon chest of pearls. After loading their horses with corn and pearls, they continued on their way.

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A Portuguese traveler named Duarte Lopez visited the African kingdom of Kongo in 1578. “The men and women are black,” he reported, “some approaching olive colour, with black curly hair, and others with red. The men are of middle height, and, excepting the black skin, are like the Portuguese.” The royal city of Kongo sat on a high plain that was “entirely cultivated,” with a population of more than 100,000. The city included a separate commercial district, a mile around, where Portuguese traders acquired ivory, wax, honey, palm oil, and slaves from the Kongolese.

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Three glimpses of three lost worlds. Soon these peoples would be transforming one another’s societies, often through conflict and [exploitation](#). But at the moment they first met, Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans stood on roughly equal terms. Even a hundred years after Columbus’s discovery of the Americas, no one could have foreseen the shape that their interactions would take in the generations to come. To begin, we need to understand the three worlds as distinct places, each home to unique societies and cultures.

CHAPTER CHRONOLOGY

As you read, ask yourself why this chapter begins and ends with these dates and then identify the links among related events.

c. 13,000–
3000 B.C.

Asian migrants reach North America

c. 6000 B.C.

Domestication of maize begins in Mesoamerica

312

Roman emperor Constantine converts to Christianity

c. 600

Pueblo cultures emerge

632

Death of Muhammad

632–1100

Arab people adopt Islam and spread its influence

c. 800

Ghana Empire emerges

c. 1000

Irrigation developed by Hohokam, Mogollon, and Anasazi peoples

c. 1000–1350

Development of Mississippian culture

c. 1050

Founding of Cahokia

1096–1291

Crusades link Europe with Arab trade routes

c. 1150

Chaco Canyon abandoned

c. 1200

Mali Empire emerges

c. 1300–1450

The Renaissance in Italy

c. 1325

Aztecs establish capital at Tenochtitlán

1326

Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca

c. 1350

The Black Death sweeps Europe; Cahokia goes into rapid decline

c. 1400

Songhai Empire emerges

1435

Portuguese trade begins along West and Central African coasts

c. 1450

Founding of the Iroquois Confederacy

1492

Christopher Columbus makes first voyage to America

1497–1498

Portugal's Vasco da Gama reaches East Africa and India

1500

Pedro Alvares Cabral encounters Brazil

1513

Juan Ponce de León explores Florida

1517

Martin Luther sparks Protestant Reformation

1519–1521

Hernán Cortés conquers Aztec Empire

1532–1535

Francisco Pizarro vanquishes Incas

1536

John Calvin publishes *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

1540

De Soto meets the Lady of Cofachiqui; founding of the Jesuit order

1578

Duarte Lopez visits the Kongo capital

The Native American Experience

When Europeans arrived, perhaps 60 million people occupied the Americas, 7 million of whom lived north of Mexico. In Mesoamerica (present-day Mexico and Guatemala) and the Andes, empires that rivaled the greatest civilizations in world history ruled over millions of people. At the other end of the political spectrum, [hunters and gatherers](#) were organized into kin-based bands. Between these extremes, [semisedentary societies](#) planted and tended crops in the spring and summer, fished and hunted, made war, and conducted trade. Though we often see this spectrum as a hierarchy in which the empires are most impressive and important while hunter-gatherers deserve scarcely a mention, this bias toward civilizations that left behind monumental [architecture](#) and spawned powerful ruling classes is misplaced. To be fully understood, the Americas must be treated in all their complexity, with an appreciation for their diverse societies and cultures.

The First Americans

[Archaeologists](#) believe that migrants from Asia crossed a 100-mile-wide land bridge connecting Siberia and Alaska during the last Ice Age sometime between 13,000 and 3000 B.C. and thus became the first Americans. The first wave of this migratory stream from Asia lasted from about fifteen thousand to eleven thousand years ago. Then the glaciers melted, and the rising ocean submerged the land bridge beneath the Bering Strait ([Map 1.1](#)). Around eight thousand years ago, a second movement of peoples, traveling by water across the same narrow strait, brought the ancestors of the Navajos and the Apaches to North America. The forebears of the Aleut and Inuit peoples, the “Eskimos,” came in a third wave around five thousand years ago. Then, for three hundred generations, the peoples of the Western Hemisphere were largely cut off from the rest of the world.

Migrants moved across the continents as they hunted and gathered available resources. Most flowed southward, and the densest populations developed in central Mexico — home to some 20 million people at the time of first contact with Europeans — and the Andes Mountains, with a population of perhaps 12 million. In North America, a secondary trickle pushed to the east, across the Rockies and into the Mississippi Valley and the eastern woodlands.

Around 6000 B.C., Native peoples in present-day Mexico and Peru began raising domesticated crops. Mesoamericans cultivated maize (corn) into a nutritious plant with a higher yield per acre than wheat, barley, or rye, the staple cereals of Europe. In Peru they also bred the potato, a root crop of unsurpassed nutritional value. The resulting agricultural surpluses encouraged population growth and laid the foundation for wealthy, urban societies in Mexico and Peru, and later in the Mississippi Valley and the southeastern woodlands of North America.

American Empires

In Mesoamerica and the Andes, the two great empires of the Americas — the Aztecs and Incas — dominated the landscape. Dense populations, productive agriculture, and an aggressive **bureaucratic** state were the keys to their power. Each had an impressive capital city. Tenochtitlán, established in 1325 at the center of the Aztec Empire, had at its height around 1500 a population of about 250,000, at a time when the European cities of London and Seville each had perhaps 50,000. The Aztec state controlled the fertile valleys in the highlands of Mexico, and Aztec **merchants** forged trading routes that crisscrossed the empire. Trade, along with tribute demanded from subject peoples (comparable to taxes in Europe), brought gold, textiles, turquoise, obsidian, tropical bird feathers, and cacao to Tenochtitlán. The Europeans who first encountered this city in 1519 marveled at its wealth and beauty. “Some of the soldiers among us who had been in many parts of the world,” wrote Spanish **conquistador** Bernal Díaz del Castillo, “in Constantinople, and all over Italy, and in Rome, said that [they had never seen] so large a market place and so full of people, and so well regulated and arranged.”

Ruled by priests and warrior-nobles, the Aztecs **subjugated** most of central Mexico. Captured enemies were brought to the capital, where Aztec priests brutally sacrificed thousands of them. The Aztecs believed that these ritual murders sustained the cosmos, ensuring fertile fields and the daily return of the sun.

Cuzco, the Inca capital located more than 11,000 feet above sea level, had perhaps 60,000 residents. A dense network of roads, storehouses, and administrative centers stitched together this improbable high-altitude empire, which ran down the 2,000-mile-long spine of the Andes Mountains. A king claiming divine status ruled the empire through a bureaucracy of nobles. As with the Aztecs, the empire consisted of subordinate kingdoms that had been conquered by the Incas, and tribute flowed from local centers of power to the imperial core.

Chiefdoms and Confederacies

Nothing on the scale of the Aztec and Inca empires ever developed north of Mexico, but maize agriculture spread from Mesoamerica across much of North America beginning around A.D. 800, laying a foundation for new ways of life there as well.

The Mississippi Valley

The spread of maize to the Mississippi River Valley and the Southeast around A.D. 800 led to the development of a large-scale northern Native American culture. The older Adena and Hopewell cultures had already introduced moundbuilding and distinctive pottery styles to the region. Now residents of the Mississippi



River Valley experienced the greater urban density and more complex social organization that agriculture encouraged.

The city of Cahokia, in the fertile bottomlands along the Mississippi River, emerged around A.D. 1000 as the foremost center of the new [Mississippian culture](#). At its peak, Cahokia had about 10,000 residents; including satellite communities, the region's population was 20,000 to 30,000. In an area of 6 square miles, archaeologists have found 120 mounds of varying size, shape, and function. Some contain extensive burials; others, known as platform mounds, were used as bases for ceremonial buildings or rulers' homes. Cahokia had a powerful ruling class and a priesthood that worshipped the sun. After peaking in size around 1350, it declined rapidly. Scholars speculate that its decline was caused by a period of ruinous warfare, made worse by environmental changes that made the site less habitable. It had been abandoned by the time Europeans arrived in the area.

Mississippian culture endured, however, and was still in evidence throughout much of the Southeast at the time of first contact with Europeans. The Lady of Cofachiqui encountered by Hernando de Soto in 1540 ruled over a Mississippian community, and others dotted the landscape between the Carolinas and the lower Mississippi River. In Florida, sixteenth-century Spanish explorers encountered the Apalachee Indians, who occupied a network of towns built around mounds and fields of maize.

Eastern Woodlands

In the [eastern woodlands](#), the Mississippian-influenced peoples of the Southeast interacted with other groups, many of whom adopted maize agriculture but did not otherwise display Mississippian characteristics. [Algonquian](#) and [Iroquoian](#) speakers shared related languages and lifeways but were divided into dozens of distinct societies. Most occupied villages built around fields of maize, beans, and squash during the summer months; at other times of the year, they dispersed in smaller groups to hunt, fish, and gather. Throughout the eastern woodlands, as in most of North America, women tended crops, gathered plants, and oversaw affairs within the community, while men were responsible for activities beyond it, especially hunting, fishing, and warfare.

In this densely forested region, Indians regularly set fires — in New England, twice a year, in spring and fall — to clear away underbrush, open fields, and make it easier to hunt big game. The catastrophic population decline accompanying European colonization quickly put an end to seasonal burning, but in the years before Europeans arrived in North America, bison roamed east as far as modern-day New York and Georgia. Early European colonists remarked upon landscapes that “resemble[d] a stately Parke,” where men could ride among widely spaced trees on horseback and even a “large army” could pass unimpeded (AP[®] America in the World).

Algonquian and Iroquoian peoples had no single style of political organization. Many were chiefdoms, with one individual claiming authority. Some were paramount chiefdoms, in which numerous communities with their own local chiefs banded together under a single, more powerful ruler. For example, the Powhatan Chiefdom, which dominated the Chesapeake Bay region, was made up of more than thirty subordinate chiefdoms, and some 20,000 people, when Englishmen established the colony of Virginia. Powhatan himself, according to the English colonist John Smith, was attended by “a guard of 40 or 50 of the tallest men his Country affords.”

Elsewhere, especially in the Mid-Atlantic region, the power of chiefs was strictly local. Along the Delaware and Hudson rivers, Leni Lenape (or Delaware) and Munsee Indians lived in small, independent communities without overarching political organizations. Early European maps of this region show a landscape dotted with a bewildering profusion of Indian names. Colonization would soon drive many of these groups into oblivion and force survivors to coalesce into larger groups.

Some Native American groups were not chiefdoms at all but instead granted political authority to councils of sachems, or leaders. This was the case with the [Iroquois Confederacy](#). Sometime shortly before the arrival of Europeans, probably around 1500, five nations occupying the region between the Hudson River and Lake Erie — the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas — banded together to form the Iroquois.

These nations had been fighting among themselves for years. Then, according to Iroquois legend, a Mohawk man named Hiawatha lost his family in one of these wars. Stricken by grief, he met a spirit who taught him a series of condolence rituals. He returned to his people preaching a new gospel of peace and power, and the condolence rituals he taught became the foundation for the Iroquois Confederacy. Once bound by these rituals, the Five Nations began acting together as a political confederacy. They made peace among themselves and became one of the most powerful Native American groups in the Northeast.

The Iroquois did not recognize chiefs; instead, councils of sachems made decisions. These were [matriarchal](#) societies, with power inherited through female lines of authority. Women were influential in local councils, though men served as sachems, made war, and conducted diplomacy.

Along the southern coast of the region that would soon be called New England, a dense network of powerful chiefdoms — including the Narragansetts, Wampanoags, Mohegans, Pequots, and others — competed for resources and dominance. When the Dutch and English arrived, they were able to exploit these rivalries and pit Indian groups against one another. Farther north, in northern New England and much of present-day Canada, the short growing season and thin, rocky soil were inhospitable to maize agriculture. Here the Native peoples were hunters and gatherers and therefore had smaller and more mobile communities.

The Great Lakes

To the west, Algonquian-speaking peoples dominated the [Great Lakes](#). The tribal groups recognized by Europeans in this region included the Ottawas, Ojibwas, and Potawatomis. But collectively they thought of themselves as a single people: the Anishinaabe. Clan identities — beaver, otter, sturgeon, deer, and others — crosscut tribal affiliations and were in some ways more fundamental. The result was a social landscape that could be bewildering to outsiders. Here lived, one French official remarked, “an infinity of undiscovered nations.”

The extensive network of lakes and rivers, and the use of birchbark canoes, made Great Lakes peoples especially mobile. “They seem to have as many abodes as the year has seasons,” wrote one observer. They traveled long distances to hunt and fish, to trade, or to join in important ceremonies or military [alliances](#). Groups negotiated access to resources and travel routes. Instead of an area with clearly delineated tribal territories, it is best to imagine the Great Lakes as a porous region, where “political power and social identity took on multiple forms,” as one scholar has written.

The Great Plains and Rockies

Farther west lies the vast, arid [steppe](#) region known as the [Great Plains](#), which was dominated by small, dispersed groups of hunter-gatherers. The world of these Plains Indians was transformed by a European import — the horse — long before Europeans themselves arrived on the plains. Horses were introduced in the Spanish colony of New Mexico in the late sixteenth century and gradually dispersed across the plains. Bison hunters who had previously relied on stealth became much more successful on horseback.

Indians on horseback were also more formidable opponents in war than their counterparts on foot, and some Plains peoples leveraged their control of horses to gain power over their neighbors. The Comanches were a small Shoshonean band on the northern plains that migrated south in pursuit of horses. They became expert raiders, capturing people and horses alike and trading them for weapons, food, clothing, and other necessities. Eventually they controlled a vast territory. Their skill in making war on horseback transformed the Comanches from a small group to one of the region’s most formidable peoples.

Similarly, horses allowed the Sioux, a confederation of seven distinct peoples who originated in present-day Minnesota, to move west and dominate a vast territory ranging from the Mississippi River to the Black Hills. The Crow Indians moved from the Missouri River to the eastern slope of the [Rocky Mountains](#), where they became nomadic bison hunters. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, they became horse breeders and traders as well.

In some places, farming communities were embedded within the much wider territories of hunter-gatherers. The Hidatsa and Mandan Indians, for example, maintained settled agricultural villages along the Missouri River, while the more mobile Sioux dominated the region around them. Similarly, the Caddos, who lived on the edge of the southern plains, inhabited farming communities that were like islands in a sea of more mobile peoples.

Three broad swaths of Numic-speaking peoples occupied the [Great Basin](#) that separated the Rockies from the Sierra Mountains: Bannocks and Northern Paiutes in the north, Shoshones in the central basin, and Utes and Southern Paiutes in the south. Resources were varied and spread thin on the land. Kin-based bands traveled great distances to hunt bison along the Yellowstone River (where they shared territory with the Crows) and bighorn sheep in high altitudes, to fish for salmon, and to gather pine nuts when they were in season. Throughout the Great Basin, some groups adopted horses and became relatively powerful, while others remained foot-borne and [impoverished](#) in comparison with their more mobile neighbors.

The Arid Southwest

In the part of North America that appears to be most hostile to agriculture — the canyon-laced country of the arid Southwest — surprisingly large farming settlements developed. Anasazi peoples were growing maize by the first century A.D., earlier than anywhere else north of Mexico, and Pueblo cultures emerged around A.D. 600. By A.D. 1000, the Hohokams, Mogollons, and Anasazis (all Pueblo peoples) had developed irrigation systems to manage scarce water, enabling them to build sizable villages and towns of adobe and rock that were often molded to sheer canyon walls. Chaco Canyon, in modern New Mexico, supported a dozen large Anasazi towns, while beyond the canyon a network of roads tied these settlements together with hundreds of small Anasazi villages.

Extended droughts and soil exhaustion caused the abandonment of Chaco Canyon and other large settlements in the Southwest after 1150, but smaller communities still dotted the landscape when the first Europeans arrived. It was the Spanish who called these groups Pueblos: *pueblo* means “town” in Spanish, and the name refers to their distinctive building style. When Europeans arrived, Pueblo peoples, including the Acomas, Zuñis, Tewas, and Hopis, were found throughout much of modern New Mexico, Arizona, and western Texas.

The Pacific Coast

Hunter-gatherers inhabited the Pacific coast. Before the Spanish arrived, California was home to more than 300,000 people, subdivided into dozens of small, localized groups and speaking at least a hundred distinct languages. This diversity of languages and cultures discouraged intermarriage and kept these societies independent. Despite their differences, many groups did share common characteristics, including clearly defined social hierarchies separating elites from commoners. They gathered acorns and other nuts and seeds, caught fish and shellfish, and hunted game.

The Pacific Northwest also supported a dense population that was divided into many distinct groups who controlled small territories — both on land and on the sea — and spoke different languages. Their **stratified** societies were ruled by wealthy families. To maintain control of their territories, the more powerful nations, including the Chinooks, Coast Salishes, Haidas, and Tlingits, nurtured strong warrior traditions. They developed sophisticated fishing technologies and crafted oceangoing dugout canoes, made from enormous cedar trees, that ranged up to 60 feet in length. Their distinctive material culture included large longhouses that were home to dozens of people and totem poles representing clan lineages or local legends.

Patterns of Trade

Expansive trade networks tied together regions and carried valuable goods hundreds and even thousands of miles. Trade goods included food and raw materials, tools, ritual artifacts, and decorative goods. Trade enriched diets, enhanced economies, and allowed the powerful to set themselves apart with luxury items. In areas where Indians specialized in a particular economic activity, regional trade networks allowed them to share resources. Thus nomadic hunters of the southern plains, including the Navajos and Apaches, conducted annual trade fairs with Pueblo farmers, exchanging hides and meat for maize, pottery, and cotton blankets. Similar patterns of exchange occurred throughout the Great Plains, wherever hunters and farmers coexisted. In some parts of North America, a regional trade in war captives who were offered as slaves helped to sustain friendly relations among neighboring groups. One such network developed in the Upper Mississippi River basin, where Plains Indian captives were traded, or given as diplomatic gifts, to Ottawas and other Great Lakes and eastern woodlands peoples.

Rare and valuable objects traveled longer distances. Great Lakes copper, Rocky Mountain mica, jasper from Pennsylvania, obsidian from New Mexico and Wyoming, and pipestone from the Midwest have all been found in archaeological sites hundreds of miles from their points of origin. Seashells — often shaped and polished into beads and other artifacts — were highly prized and widely distributed. Grizzly bear claws and eagle feathers were valuable, high-status objects. After European contact, Indian hunters often traveled long distances to trade for cloth, iron tools, and weapons. Historians debate the extent to which such long-distance connections helped to create deeper cultural ties (AP[®] Interpreting the Past).

Powerful leaders controlled much of a community’s wealth and redistributed it to prove their generosity and strengthen their authority. In small, kin-based bands, the strongest hunters possessed the most food, and sharing it was essential. In chiefdoms, rulers filled the same role, often collecting the wealth of a community and then

redistributing it to their followers. Powhatan, the powerful Chesapeake Bay chief, reportedly collected nine-tenths of the produce of the communities he oversaw — “skins, beads, copper, pearls, deer, turkeys, wild beasts, and corn” — and then gave much of it back to his subordinates. His generosity was considered a mark of good leadership. In the Pacific Northwest, the Chinook word *potlatch* refers to periodic festivals in which wealthy residents gave away belongings to friends, family, and followers.

Sacred Power

Most Native North Americans were animists who believed that the natural world was suffused with spiritual power. They interpreted dreams and visions to understand the world, and their rituals appeased guardian spirits to ensure successful hunts and other forms of good fortune. Although their views were subject to countless local variations, certain patterns were widespread.

Women and men interacted differently with these spiritual forces. In farming communities, women grew crops and maintained hearth, home, and village. Native American ideas about female power linked their bodies’ generative functions with the earth’s fertility, and rituals like the Green Corn Ceremony — a summer ritual of purification and renewal — helped to sustain the life-giving properties of the world around them.

For men, spiritual power was invoked in hunting and war. To ensure success in hunting, men took care not to offend the spirits of the animals they killed. They performed rituals before, during, and after a hunt to acknowledge the power of those guardian spirits, and they believed that, when an animal had been killed properly, its spirit would rise from the earth unharmed. Success in hunting and prowess in war were both interpreted as signs of sacred protection and power.

Ideas about war varied widely. War could be fought for geopolitical reasons — to gain ground against an enemy — but for many groups, warfare was a crucial rite of passage for young men, and raids were conducted to allow warriors to prove themselves in battle. Motives for war could be highly personal; war was often more like a blood feud between families than a contest between nations. If a community lost warriors in battle, it might retaliate by capturing or killing a like number of warriors in response — a so-called mourning war. Some captives were adopted into new communities, while others were enslaved or tortured.

Western Europe: The Edge of the Old World

In 1491, Western Europe lay at the far edge of the Eurasian and African continents. It had neither the powerful centralized empires nor the hunter-gatherer bands and semi-[sedentary](#) societies of the Americas. Western Europe was, instead, a patchwork of roughly equivalent kingdoms, duchies, and republics vying with one another and struggling to reach out effectively to the rest of the world. No one would have predicted that Europeans would soon become overlords of the Western Hemisphere. A thousand years after the fall of the Roman Empire, Europe’s populations still relied on subsistence agriculture and were never far from the specter of famine. Moreover, around 1350, a deadly plague was introduced from Central Asia — the Black Death — that killed one-third of Europe’s people. The lives of ordinary people were afflicted by poverty, disease, and uncertainty, and the future looked as difficult and dark as the past.

Hierarchy and Authority

In traditional hierarchical societies — American or European — authority came from above. In Europe, kings and princes owned vast tracts of land, forcibly conscripted men for military service, and lived off the peasantry’s labor. Yet monarchs were far from supreme: local nobles also owned large estates and controlled hundreds of peasant families. Collectively, these nobles challenged royal authority with both their military power and their legislative institutions, such as the French *parlements* and the English House of Lords.

Just as kings and nobles ruled society, men governed families. These were [patriarchies](#), in which property and social identity descended in male family lines. Rich or poor, the man was the head of the house, his power justified by the teachings of the Christian Church. As one English clergyman put it, “The woman is a weak creature not imbued with like strength and constancy of mind”; law and custom “subjected her to the power of man.” Once married, an Englishwoman assumed her husband’s surname, submitted to his orders, and surrendered the right to her property.

Men also controlled the lives of their children, who usually worked for their father into their middle or late twenties. Then landowning peasants would give land to their sons and [dowries](#) (property or money given by a

bride's family to her husband) to their daughters and choose marriage partners of appropriate wealth and status. In many regions, fathers bestowed all their land on their eldest son — a practice known as primogeniture — forcing many younger children to join the ranks of the roaming poor. Few men and even fewer women had much personal freedom.

Powerful institutions — [nobility](#), church, and village — enforced hierarchy and offered ordinary people a measure of security in a violent and unpredictable world. Carried by migrants to America, these security-conscious institutions would shape the character of family and society well into the eighteenth century.

Peasant Society

Most Europeans were [peasants](#), farmworkers who lived in small villages surrounded by fields farmed cooperatively by different families. On [manorial](#) lands, farming rights were given in exchange for labor on the lord's estate, an arrangement that turned peasants into serfs. Gradually, obligatory manorial services gave way to paying rent or, as in France, landownership. Once freed from the obligation to labor for their farming rights, European farmers began to produce surpluses and created local market economies.

As with Native Americans, the rhythm of life followed the seasons. In March, villagers began the exhausting work of plowing and then planting wheat, rye, and oats. During the spring, the men sheared wool, which the women washed and spun into yarn. In June, peasants cut hay and stored it as winter fodder for their livestock. During the summer, life was more relaxed, and families repaired their houses and barns. Fall brought the harvest, followed by solemn feasts of thanksgiving and riotous bouts of merrymaking. As winter approached, peasants slaughtered excess livestock and salted or smoked the meat. During the cold months, they threshed grain and wove textiles, visited friends and relatives, and celebrated the winter solstice or the birth of Christ. Just before the cycle began again in the spring, they held carnivals, celebrating with drink and dance the end of the long winter.

For most peasants, survival meant constant labor, and poverty corroded family relationships. Malnourished mothers fed their babies sparingly, calling them “greedy and gluttonous,” and many newborn girls were “helped to die” so that their brothers would have enough to eat. Half of all peasant children died before the age of twenty-one, victims of malnourishment and disease. Many peasants drew on strong religious beliefs, “counting blessings” and accepting their harsh existence. Others hoped for a better life. It was the peasants of Spain, Germany, and Britain who would supply the majority of white migrants to the Western Hemisphere.

Expanding Trade Networks

In the [millennium](#) before contact with the Americas, Western Europe was the barbarian fringe of the civilized world. In the Mediterranean basin, Arab scholars carried on the legacy of Byzantine civilization, which had preserved the achievements of the Greeks and Romans in [medicine](#), [philosophy](#), mathematics, astronomy, and geography, while Arab merchants controlled trade in the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Near East. This control gave them access to spices from India and silks, magnetic compasses, water-powered mills, and mechanical clocks from China.

In the twelfth century, merchants from the Italian city-states of Genoa, Florence, Pisa, and especially Venice began to push their way into the Arab-dominated trade routes of the Mediterranean. Trading in Alexandria, Beirut, and other eastern Mediterranean ports, they carried the luxuries of Asia into European markets. At its peak, Venice had a merchant fleet of more than three thousand ships. This enormously profitable commerce created wealthy merchants, bankers, and textile manufacturers who expanded trade, lent vast sums of money, and spurred technological [innovation](#) in silk and wool production.

Italian moneyed elites ruled their city-states as [republics](#), states that had no prince or king but instead were governed by merchant [coalitions](#). They celebrated civic humanism, an [ideology](#) that praised public virtue and service to the state; over time, this tradition profoundly influenced European and American conceptions of government. They sponsored great artists — Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and others — who produced an unprecedented flowering of genius. Historians have labeled the arts and learning associated with this cultural transformation from 1300 to 1450 the Renaissance.

The economic revolution that began in Italy spread slowly to northern and western Europe. England's principal export was woolen cloth, which was prized in the colder parts of the continent but had less appeal in southern Europe and beyond. Northern Europe had its own trade system, controlled by an alliance of merchant communities called the Hanseatic League. Centered on the Baltic and North seas, it dealt in timber, furs, wheat and rye, honey, wax, and amber.

As trade picked up in Europe, merchants and [artisans](#) came to dominate its growing cities and towns. While the Italian city-states ruled themselves without a powerful monarch, in much of Europe the power of merchants stood in tension with that of kings and nobles. In general, the rise of commerce favored the power of kings at the expense of the landed nobility. The kings of Western Europe established royal law courts that gradually eclipsed the manorial courts controlled by nobles; they also built bureaucracies that helped them centralize power while they forged alliances with merchants and urban artisans. Monarchs allowed merchants to trade throughout their realms; granted privileges to guilds or artisan organizations that regulated trades; and safeguarded commercial transactions, thereby encouraging domestic manufacturing and foreign trade. In return, they extracted taxes from towns and loans from merchants to support their armies and officials.

Myths, Religions, and Holy Warriors

The oldest European religious beliefs drew on a form of animism similar to that of Native Americans, which held that the natural world — the sun, wind, stones, animals — was animated by spiritual forces. As in North America, such beliefs led ancient European peoples to develop localized cults of knowledge and spiritual practice. Wise men and women created rituals to protect their communities, ensure abundant harvests, heal illnesses, and bring misfortunes to their enemies.

The [pagan](#) traditions of Greece and Rome overlaid animism with elaborate myths about gods interacting directly with the affairs of human beings. As the Roman Empire expanded, it built temples to its gods wherever it planted new settlements. Thus peoples throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Near East were exposed to the Roman pantheon. Soon the teachings of Christianity began to flow in these same channels.

The Rise of Christianity

[Christianity](#), which grew out of Jewish monotheism (the belief in one god), held that Jesus Christ was himself divine. As an institution, Christianity benefitted enormously from the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in A.D. 312. Prior to that time, Christians were an underground sect at odds with the Roman Empire. After Constantine's conversion, Christianity became Rome's official religion, temples were abandoned or remade into churches, and noblemen who hoped to retain their influence converted to the new state religion.

For centuries, the Roman Catholic Church was the great unifying institution in Western Europe. The pope in Rome headed a vast hierarchy of cardinals, bishops, and priests. Catholic theologians preserved Latin, the language of classical scholarship, and imbued kingship with divine power. Christian dogma provided a common understanding of God and human history, and the authority of the Church [buttressed](#) state institutions. Every village had a church, and holy shrines served as points of contact with the sacred world. Often those shrines had their origins in older, animist practices, now largely forgotten and replaced with Christian ritual.

Christian doctrine penetrated deeply into the everyday lives of peasants. While animist traditions held that spiritual forces were alive in the natural world, Christian priests taught that the natural world was flawed and fallen. Spiritual power came from outside nature, from a supernatural God who had sent his divine son, Jesus Christ, into the world to save humanity from its sins. The Christian Church devised a religious calendar that transformed animist festivals into holy days. The winter solstice, which had for millennia marked the return of the sun, became the feast of Christmas.

The Church also taught that Satan, a wicked supernatural being, was constantly challenging God by tempting people to sin. People who spread [heresies](#) — doctrines that were inconsistent with the teachings of the Church — were seen as the tools of Satan, and suppressing false doctrines became an obligation of Christian rulers.

The Crusades

In their work suppressing false doctrines, Christian rulers were also obliged to combat [Islam](#), the religion whose followers considered Muhammad to be God's last prophet. Islam's reach expanded until it threatened European Christendom. Following the death of Muhammad in A.D. 632, the newly converted Arab peoples of North Africa used force and fervor to spread the Muslim faith into sub-Saharan Africa, India, and Indonesia, as well as deep into Spain and the Balkan regions of Europe. Between A.D. 1096 and 1291, Christian armies undertook a series of [Crusades](#) to reverse the Muslim advance in Europe and win back the holy lands where Christ had lived. Under the banner of the pope and led by Europe's Christian monarchs, crusading armies

aroused great waves of popular piety as they marched off to combat. New orders of knights, like the Knights Templar and the Teutonic Knights, were created to support them.

The crusaders had some military successes, but their most profound impact was on European society. Religious warfare intensified Europe's Christian identity and prompted the persecution of Jews and their [expulsion](#) from many European countries. The Crusades also introduced Western European merchants to the trade routes that stretched from Constantinople to China along the Silk Road and from the Mediterranean Sea through the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean. And crusaders encountered sugar for the first time. Returning soldiers brought it back from the Middle East, and as Europeans began to conquer territory in the eastern Mediterranean, they experimented with raising it themselves. These early experiments with sugar would have a profound impact on European enterprise in the Americas — and European involvement with the African slave trade — in the centuries to come. Although Western Europe in 1491 remained relatively isolated from the centers of civilization in Eurasia and Africa, the Crusades and the rise of Italian merchant houses had introduced it to a wider world.

The Reformation

In 1517, Martin Luther, a German monk and professor at the university in Wittenberg, took up the cause of reform in the Catholic Church. Luther's *Ninety-five Theses* condemned the Church for many corrupt practices. More radically, Luther downplayed the role of the clergy as mediators between God and believers and said that Christians must look to the Bible, not to the Church, as the ultimate authority in matters of faith. So that every literate German could read the Bible, previously available only in Latin, Luther translated it into German.

Meanwhile, in Geneva, Switzerland, French theologian John Calvin established a rigorous Protestant regime. Even more than Luther, Calvin stressed human weakness and God's omnipotence. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) depicted God as an absolute ruler. Calvin preached the doctrine of predestination, the idea that God chooses certain people for salvation before they are born and condemns the rest to eternal damnation. In Geneva, he set up a model Christian community ruled by ministers who prohibited frivolity and luxury. "We know," wrote Calvin, "that man is of so perverse and crooked a nature, that everyone would scratch out his neighbor's eyes if there were no bridle to hold them in." Calvin's authoritarian doctrine won converts all over Europe, including the Puritans in Scotland and England.

Luther's criticisms triggered a war between the Holy Roman Empire and the northern principalities in Germany, and soon the controversy between the Roman Catholic Church and radical reformers like Luther and Calvin spread throughout much of Western Europe. The [Protestant Reformation](#), as this movement came to be called, triggered a [Counter-Reformation](#) in the Catholic Church that sought change from within and created new monastic and [missionary](#) orders, including the Jesuits (founded in 1540), who saw themselves as soldiers of Christ. The competition between these divergent Christian traditions did much to shape European colonization of the Americas. Roman Catholic powers — Spain, Portugal, and France — sought to win souls in the Americas for the Church, while Protestant nations — England and the Netherlands — viewed the Catholic Church as corrupt and exploitative and hoped instead to create godly communities attuned to the true gospel of Christianity.

West and Central Africa: Origins of the Atlantic Slave Trade

Homo sapiens originated in Africa. Numerous civilizations had already risen and fallen there, and contacts with the Near East and the Mediterranean were millennia old, when Western Europeans began sailing down its Atlantic coast. Home to perhaps 100 million in 1400, Africa was divided by the vast expanse of the Sahara Desert. North Africa bordered on the Mediterranean, and its peoples fell under the domination of Christian Byzantium until the seventh century, when Muslim conquests brought the region under Islamic influence. In its coastal seaports, the merchandise of Asia, the Near East, Africa, and Europe converged. South of the Sahara, by contrast, the societies of West and Central Africa bordering on the Atlantic were relatively isolated. After 1400, that would quickly change.

Empires, Kingdoms, and Ministates

West Africa — the part of the continent that bulges into the Atlantic — can be visualized as a broad horizontal swath divided into three [climatic](#) zones. The Sahel is the mostly flat, semiarid zone immediately south of the Sahara. Below it lies the savanna, a grassland region dotted with trees and shrubs. South of the savanna, in a

band 200 to 300 miles wide along the West African coast, lies a tropical rain forest. A series of four major watersheds — the Senegal, Gambia, Volta, and Niger — dominate West Africa ([Map 1.3](#)).

Sudanic civilization took root at the eastern end of West Africa beginning around 9000 B.C. and traveled westward. Sudanic peoples domesticated cattle (8500–7500 B.C.) and cultivated sorghum and millet (7500–7000 B.C.). Over several thousand years, these peoples developed a distinctive style of pottery, began to grow and weave cotton (6500–3500 B.C.), and invented techniques for working copper and iron (2500–1000 B.C.). Sudanic civilization had its own tradition of monotheism distinct from that of Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Most Sudanic peoples in West Africa lived in stratified states ruled by kings and princes who were regarded as divine.

From these cultural origins, three great empires arose in succession in the northern savanna. The first, the Ghana Empire, appeared sometime around A.D. 800. Ghana capitalized on the recently domesticated camel to pioneer trade routes across the Sahara to North Africa, where Ghana traders carried the wealth of West Africa. The Ghana Empire gave way to the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century, which was eclipsed in turn by the Songhai Empire in the fifteenth century. All three empires were composed of smaller [vassal](#) kingdoms, not unlike the Aztec and Inca empires, and relied on military might to control their valuable trade routes.

Gold, abundant in West Africa, was the cornerstone of power and an indispensable medium of international trade. By 1450, West African traders had carried so much of it across the Sahara that it constituted one-half to two-thirds of all the gold in circulation in Europe, North Africa, and Asia. Mansa Musa, the tenth emperor of Mali, was a devout Muslim famed for his construction projects and his support of mosques and schools. In 1326, he went on a pilgrimage to Mecca with a vast [retinue](#) that crossed the Sahara and passed through Egypt. They spent so much gold along the way that the region's money supply was devalued for more than a decade after their visit.

To the south of these empires, the lower savanna and tropical rain forest of West Africa were home to a complex mosaic of kingdoms that traded among themselves and with the empires to the north. In such a densely populated, resource-rich region, they also fought frequently in a competition for local power. A few of these coastal kingdoms were quite large in size, but most were small enough that they have been termed ministates by historians. Comparable to the city-states of Italy, they were often about the size of a modern-day county in the United States. The tropical ecosystem prevented them from raising livestock, since the tsetse fly (which carries a parasite deadly to livestock) was [endemic](#) to the region, as was [malaria](#). In place of the grain crops of the savanna, these peoples pioneered the cultivation of yams; they also gathered resources from the rivers and seacoast.

Trans-Saharan and Coastal Trade

For centuries, the primary avenue of trade for West Africans passed through the Ghana, Mali, and Songhai empires, whose power was based on the monopoly they enjoyed over the trans-Saharan trade.

Their [caravans](#) carried West African goods — including gold, copper, salt, and slaves — from the south to the north across the Sahara, then returned with textiles and other products. For the smaller states clustered along the West African coast, merchandise originating in the world beyond the Sahara was scarce and expensive, while markets for their own products were limited.

Beginning in the mid-fifteenth century, a new coastal trade with Europeans offered many West African peoples a welcome alternative. As European sailors made their way along the coast of West and then Central Africa, they encountered a bewilderingly complicated political landscape. Around the mouths of the Senegal and Gambia rivers, numerous Mande-speaking states controlled access to the trade routes into the interior. Proceeding farther along the coast, they encountered the Akan states, a region of several dozen independent but culturally linked peoples. The Akan states had goldfields of their own, and this region soon became known to Europeans as the Gold Coast. East of the Akan states lay the Bight of Benin, which became an early center of the slave trade and thus came to be called the Slave Coast. Bending south, fifteenth-century sailors encountered the Kingdom of Kongo in Central Africa, the largest state on the Atlantic seaboard, with a coastline that ran for some 250 miles. It was here in 1578 that Duarte Lopez visited the capital city of more than 100,000 residents. Wherever they went ashore along this route, European traders had to negotiate contacts on local terms (AP® Thinking Like a Historian).

The Spirit World

Some West Africans who lived immediately south of the Sahara — the Fulanis in Senegal, the Mande-speakers in Mali, and the Hausas in northern Nigeria — learned about Islam from Arab merchants and Muslim leaders called imams. Converts to Islam knew the Koran and worshipped only a single God. Some of their cities, like Timbuktu, the legendary commercial center on the Niger River, became centers of Islamic learning and instruction. But most West Africans acknowledged multiple gods, as well as spirits that lived in the earth, animals, and plants.

Like animists in the Americas and Europe, African communities had wise men and women adept at manipulating these forces for good or ill. The Sudanic tradition of divine kingship persisted, and many people believed that their kings could contact the spirit world. West Africans treated their ancestors with great respect, believing that the dead resided in a nearby spiritual realm and interceded in their lives. Most West African peoples had secret societies, such as the Poro for men and the Sande for women, that united people from different lineages and clans. These societies conducted rituals that celebrated male virility and female fertility. “Without children you are naked,” said a Yoruba proverb. Happy was the man with a big household, many wives, many children, and many relatives — and, in a not very different vein, many slaves.

Exploration and Conquest

Beginning around 1400, the Portuguese monarchy propelled Europe into overseas expansion. Portugal soon took a leading role in the African slave trade, while the newly unified kingdom of Spain undertook Europe’s first conquests in the Americas. These two ventures, though not initially linked, eventually became cornerstones in the creation of the “Atlantic World,” which connected Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

Portuguese Expansion

As a young soldier fighting in the Crusades, Prince Henry of Portugal (1394–1460) learned about the trans-Saharan trade in gold and slaves. Seeking a maritime route to the source of this trade in West Africa, Henry founded a center for oceanic navigation. Henry’s mariners, challenged to find a way through the treacherous waters off the northwest African coast, designed a better-handling vessel, the caravel, which was rigged with a lateen (triangular) sail that enabled the ship to tack into the wind. This innovation allowed them to sail far into the Atlantic, where they discovered and colonized the Madeira and Azore islands. From there, they sailed in 1435 to sub-Saharan Sierra Leone, where they exchanged salt, wine, and fish for African ivory and gold. Henry’s efforts were soon joined to those of Italian merchants, who were being forced out of eastern Mediterranean trade routes by the rising power of the Ottoman Empire. Cut off from Asia, Genoese traders sought an Atlantic route to the lucrative markets of the Indian Ocean. They began to work with Portuguese and Castilian mariners and monarchs to [finance](#) trading voyages, and the African coast and its offshore islands opened to their efforts. European voyagers discovered the Canaries, the Cape Verde Islands, and São Tomé; all of them became laboratories for the expansion of Mediterranean agriculture.

On these Atlantic islands, planters transformed local ecosystems to experiment with a variety of familiar cash crops: wheat, wine grapes, and woad, a blue dye plant; livestock and honeybees; and, where the climate permitted, sugar. By 1500, Madeira was producing 2,500 metric tons a year, and Madeira sugar was available — in small, expensive quantities — in London, Paris, Rome, and Constantinople. Most of the islands were unpopulated. The Canaries were the exception; it took Castilian adventurers decades to conquer the Guanches who lived there. Once defeated, they were enslaved to labor in the Canaries or on Madeira, where they carved irrigation canals into the island’s steep rock cliffs.

Europeans made no such inroads on the continent of Africa itself. The coastal kingdoms were well defended, and yellow fever, malaria, and dysentery quickly struck down Europeans who spent any time in the interior of West Africa. Instead they maintained small, fortified trading posts on offshore islands or along the coast, usually as guests of the local king.

Portuguese sailors continued to look for an Atlantic route to Asia. In 1488, Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope, the southern tip of Africa. Vasco da Gama reached East Africa in 1497 and India in the following year; his ships were mistaken for those of Chinese traders, the last pale-skinned men to arrive by sea. Although da Gama’s inferior goods — tin basins, coarse cloth, honey, and coral beads — were snubbed by the Arab and Indian merchants along India’s Malabar Coast, he managed to acquire a highly profitable cargo of

cinnamon and pepper. Da Gama returned to India in 1502 with twenty-one fighting vessels, which outmaneuvered and outgunned the Arab fleets. Soon the Portuguese government set up fortified trading posts for its merchants at key points around the Indian Ocean, in Indonesia, and along the coast of China ([Map 1.4](#)). In a transition that sparked the momentous growth of European wealth and power, the Portuguese and then the Dutch replaced the Arabs as the leaders in Asian commerce.

The African Slave Trade

Portuguese traders also ousted Arab merchants as the leading suppliers of African slaves. **Coerced** labor — through slavery, serfdom, or indentured servitude — was the norm in most premodern societies, and in Africa slavery was widespread. Some Africans were held in bondage as security for debts; others were sold into servitude by their kin in exchange for food in times of famine; many others were war captives. Slaves were a key **commodity**, sold as agricultural laborers, concubines, or military recruits. Sometimes their descendants were freed, but others endured hereditary bondage. Sonni Ali (r. 1464–1492), the ruler of the powerful Songhai Empire, personally owned twelve “tribes” of hereditary agricultural slaves, many of them seized in raids against neighboring peoples.

Slaves were also central to the trans-Saharan trade. When the renowned Tunisian adventurer Ibn Battuta crossed the Sahara from the Kingdom of Mali around 1350, he traveled with a caravan of six hundred female slaves, destined for domestic service or concubinage in North Africa, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire. Between A.D. 700 and 1900, it is estimated that as many as nine million Africans were sold in the trans-Saharan slave trade.

Europeans initially were much more interested in trading for gold and other commodities than in trading for human beings, but gradually they discovered the enormous value of human trafficking. To exploit and redirect the existing African slave trade, Portuguese merchants established fortified trading posts like those in the Indian Ocean beginning at Elmina in 1482, where they bought gold and slaves from African princes and warlords. First they enslaved a few thousand Africans each year to work on sugar plantations on São Tomé, Cape Verde, the Azores, and Madeira; they also sold slaves in Lisbon, which soon had an African population of 9,000. After 1550, the Atlantic slave trade, a forced **diaspora** of African peoples, expanded enormously as Europeans set up sugar plantations across the Atlantic, in Brazil and the West Indies.

Sixteenth-Century Incursions

As Portuguese traders sailed south and east, the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile financed an explorer who looked to the west. As Renaissance rulers, Ferdinand (r. 1474–1516) and Isabella (r. 1474–1504) saw national unity and foreign commerce as the keys to power and prosperity. Married in an arranged match to combine their Christian kingdoms, the young rulers completed the centuries-long *reconquista*, the campaign by Spanish Catholics to drive Muslim Arabs from the European mainland, by capturing Granada, the last Islamic territory in Western Europe, in 1492. Using Catholicism to build a sense of “Spanishness,” they launched the brutal Inquisition against suspected Christian heretics and expelled or forcibly converted thousands of Jews and Muslims.

Columbus and the Caribbean

Simultaneously, Ferdinand and Isabella sought trade and empire by **subsidizing** the voyages of Christopher Columbus, an ambitious and daring mariner from Genoa. Columbus believed that the Atlantic Ocean, long feared by Arab merchants as a 10,000-mile-wide “green sea of darkness,” was a much narrower channel of water separating Europe from Asia. After six years of lobbying, Columbus persuaded Genoese investors and Ferdinand and Isabella to accept his dubious theories and finance a western voyage to Asia. Columbus set sail in three small ships in August 1492. Six weeks later, after a perilous voyage of 3,000 miles, he disembarked on an island in the present-day Bahamas. Believing that he had reached Asia — “the Indies,” in fifteenth-century **parlance** — Columbus called the native inhabitants Indians and the islands the West Indies. He was surprised by the crude living conditions but expected the Native peoples “easily [to] be made Christians.” He claimed the islands for Spain and then explored the neighboring Caribbean islands, demanding tribute from the local Taino, Arawak, and Carib peoples. Columbus left forty men on the island of Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and returned triumphantly to Spain ([Map 1.5](#)).

The Spanish monarchs supported three more voyages. Columbus colonized the West Indies with more than 1,000 Spanish settlers — all men — and hundreds of domestic animals. But he failed to find either golden treasures or great kingdoms, and his death in 1506 went virtually unnoticed.

A German geographer soon named the newly found continents “America” in honor of a different explorer. Amerigo Vespucci, a Florentine explorer who had visited the coast of present-day South America around 1500, denied that the region was part of Asia. He called it a *nuevo mundo*, a “new world.” The Spanish crown called the two continents *Las Indias* (“the Indies”) and wanted to make them a new Spanish world.

The Spanish Invasion

After brutally subduing the Arawaks and Tainos on Hispaniola, the Spanish probed the mainland for gold and slaves. In 1513, Juan Ponce de León explored the coast of Florida and gave that peninsula its name. In the same year, Vasco Núñez de Balboa crossed the Isthmus of Darien (Panama) and became the first European to see the Pacific Ocean. Rumors of rich Indian kingdoms encouraged other Spaniards, including hardened veterans of the *reconquista*, to **invade** the mainland. The Spanish monarchs offered successful conquistadors noble titles, vast estates, and Indian laborers (AP[®] Analyzing Voices).

With these inducements before him, in 1519 Hernán Cortés (1485–1547) led an army of 600 men to the Yucatán Peninsula. Gathering allies among Native peoples who chafed under Aztec rule, he marched on Tenochtitlán and challenged its ruler, Moctezuma. Awed by the Spanish invaders, Moctezuma received Cortés with great ceremony. But Cortés soon took the emperor captive, and after a long siege he and his men captured the city. The conquerors cut off the city’s supply of food and water, causing great suffering for the residents of Tenochtitlán. By 1521, Cortés and his men had toppled the Aztec Empire.

The Spanish had a silent ally: disease. Having been separated from Eurasia for thousands of years, the inhabitants of the Americas had no immunities to common European diseases. After the Spaniards arrived, a massive smallpox epidemic ravaged Tenochtitlán, “striking everywhere in the city,” according to an Aztec source, and killing Moctezuma’s brother and thousands more. “They could not move, they could not stir.... Covered, mantled with pustules, very many people died of them.” Subsequent outbreaks of smallpox, influenza, and measles killed hundreds of thousands of Indians and sapped the survivors’ morale. Exploiting this advantage, Cortés quickly extended Spanish rule over the Aztec Empire. His lieutenants then moved against the Mayan city-states of the Yucatán Peninsula, eventually conquering them as well.

In 1524, Francisco Pizarro set out to accomplish the same feat in Peru. By the time he and his small force of 168 men and 67 horses finally reached their destination in 1532, half of the Inca population had already died from European diseases. Weakened militarily and divided between rival claimants to the throne, the Inca nobility was easy prey. Pizarro killed Atahualpa, the last Inca emperor, and seized his enormous wealth. Although Inca resistance continued for a generation, the conquest was complete by 1535, and Spain was now the master of the wealthiest and most populous regions of the Western Hemisphere.

The Spanish invasion changed life forever in the Americas. Disease and warfare wiped out virtually all of the Indians of Hispaniola — at least 300,000 people. In Peru, the population of 9 million in 1530 plummeted to fewer than 500,000 a century later. Mesoamerica suffered the greatest losses: in one of the great **demographic** disasters in world history, its population of 20 million Native Americans in 1500 had dwindled to just 3 million in 1650.

Cabral and Brazil

At the same time, Portuguese efforts to sail around the southern tip of Africa led to a surprising find. As Vasco da Gama and his contemporaries experimented with winds and currents, their voyages carried them ever farther away from the African coast and into the Atlantic. On one such voyage in 1500, the Portuguese commander Pedro Alvares Cabral and his fleet were surprised to see land loom in the west. Cabral named his discovery *Ihla da Vera Cruz* — the Island of the True Cross — and continued on his way toward India. Others soon followed and changed the region’s name to Brazil after the **indigenous** tree that yielded a valuable red dye; for several decades, Portuguese sailors traded with the Tupi Indians for brazilwood. Then in the 1530s, to secure Portugal’s claim, King Dom João III sent settlers, who began the long, painstaking process of carving out sugar plantations in the coastal lowlands.

For several decades, Native Americans supplied most of the labor for these operations, but African slaves gradually replaced them. Brazil would soon become the world’s leading producer of sugar; it would also devour

African lives. By introducing the [plantation system](#) to the Americas — a form of estate agriculture using slave labor that was pioneered by Italian merchants and crusading knights in the twelfth century and transplanted to the islands off the coast of Africa in the fifteenth century — the Portuguese set in motion one of the most significant developments of the early modern era.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the European colonization of the Americas had barely begun. Yet several of its most important elements were already taking shape. Spanish efforts demonstrated that densely populated empires were especially vulnerable to conquest and were also especially valuable sources of wealth. The Portuguese had discovered the viability of sugar plantations in the tropical regions of the Americas and pioneered the transatlantic slave trade as a way of manning them. And contacts with Native peoples revealed their devastating vulnerabilities to Eurasian diseases — one part of the larger phenomenon of the Columbian Exchange (discussed in [Chapter 2](#)).

SUMMARY

Native American, European, and African societies developed independently over thousands of years before they experienced direct contacts with one another. In the Americas, residents of Mesoamerica and the Andes were fully sedentary (with individual ownership of land and intensive agriculture), but elsewhere societies were semisedentary (with central fields and villages that were occupied seasonally) or nonsedentary (hunter-gatherers). West and Central Africa also had a mix of sedentary, semisedentary, and nonsedentary settlements. Western Europe, by contrast, was predominantly sedentary. All three continents had a complex patchwork of political organizations, from empires, to kingdoms and chiefdoms, to principalities, duchies, and ministates; everywhere, rulership was imbued with notions of spiritual power. Ruling classes relied on warfare, trade, and tribute (or taxes) to dominate those around them and [accumulate](#) precious goods that helped to set them apart from ordinary laborers, but they also bore responsibility for the well-being of their subjects and offered them various forms of protection.

As sailors pushed into the Atlantic, they set in motion a chain of events whose consequences they could scarcely imagine. From a coastal trade with Africa that was secondary to their efforts to reach the Indian Ocean, from the miscalculations of Columbus and the happy accident of Cabral, developed a pattern of transatlantic exploration, conquest, and exploitation that no one could have foretold or planned. In the tropical zones of the Caribbean and coastal Brazil, invading Europeans enslaved Native Americans and quickly drove them into extinction or exile. The demands of plantation agriculture soon led Europeans to import slaves from Africa, initiating a transatlantic trade that would destroy African lives on both sides of the ocean. And two of the greatest empires in the world — the Aztec and Incan empires — collapsed in response to unseen biological forces that acted in concert with small invading armies.