

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

NORTH AMERICAN HISTORY – Ancient

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The earliest history of people in North America is one of constant movement, adaptation, and exploration. The Ice Age bound up much of the water of the oceans in glaciers, resulting in a land bridge from Asia to North America through the Bering Straits. It attracted a constant stream of emigrants who traveled across, developing hunting techniques and leaving behind artifacts and earth works that we are still uncovering.

POLITICAL HISTORY

GOVERNMENT

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): Small tribal units organized around sustainable levels of population; primarily hunters and gatherers, with a great dependency on turtles.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): There were 70 or more Pueblo villages before the arrival of the Spaniards. Each was politically autonomous, and they were governed by tribal councils. The heads of the councils were also religious leaders. Many of the activities were communal, including farming and rabbit hunts.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): Clans were the smallest organizational unit, and they were grouped by village “bands.” Each village band had a Chief or Headsman, who was a part of the governing family lineage. The Iroquois formed confederacies with the different clans and village bands. The Eastern Algonquians maintained more autonomy. Ancestry was traced back through the females.

Discussion/Questions

The early societies in North America flourished when they had responsive systems of organization that allowed them to be flexible. For example, the clans and tribal groups in the northeast were able to establish confederacies that allowed them to trade with each other and also provide defense against common enemies. Discuss how and why having religious leaders made sense in their agriculturally-based economies.

Readings

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MILITARY

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): Although the main source of information about the Clovis people comes from Clovis, New Mexico, there is evidence of two separate groups of Clovis people who came from Asia across the Bering Strait (which was a land bridge at that time). They were well known for their finely crafted obsidian and flint arrow points, knives, and daggers. Because of the juxtaposition of skeletons and arrow points, there is some evidence that warriors raiding other tribes, stealing resources and potentially kidnapping members for either tribal genetic enhancement or human sacrifice.

Arctic Inuit (The Dorset People): There is evidence that prehistoric Inuit whalers had an impact on Arctic freshwater systems. There is evidence of organized hunts and fishing expeditions. The Dorset people believed in animal spirits who could help them be more effective hunters, and they carved hunting weapons such as harpoons in a way to try to imbue them with magical properties. For example, the harpoon could be carved in the shape of a flying bear, intended to strike the target with a great deal of force. There is no evidence that the harpoons were used against people.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): Cliff dwellers in the American Southwest (Colorado, New Mexico) constructed kivas (living spaces) in the cliffs and they were considered sacred. Each kiva had a separate function, and were inhabited by different types of people. There were tower or citadel kivas where warriors lived. They constructed holes in the walls through which they could shoot arrows, and could follow commands of the warrior in chief. The military function was primarily defensive.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): The Abenaki people were typical of the indigenous peoples living in the eastern woodlands. They practiced subsistence farming in what is now Quebec, Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, and northern New York. They hunted, fished, trapped, picked berries, and grew corn, beans, squash, potatoes, and tobacco. They also wove baskets from local sweet grass. Known as the “People in the Rising Sun,” the Abenaki had no military or warrior classes until the arrival of the French and the English, who wanted their lands, as well as help in obtaining furs and driving away rivals.

Discussion/Questions

The first need for military forces had to do with protection. The protection had to do with

communities, but also with the lifelines, which is to say trade routes. Describe how the early North American civilizations protected their communities and their trade routes.

Readings

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SOCIAL HISTORY

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): The Clovis culture was not as stratified as other cultures, but it did have clear class distinctions. Based on archeological findings and artwork in petroglyphs, cave paintings and geoglyphs, there were several classes, which included warriors, hunters, and that of shaman and religious leader.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC):

The ruling class was that of the religious leader and the medicine men (shaman class). There were also hunters and those who took care of the crops and the harvest. Women stayed in the camps and did not participate as active medicine men or women, but they were considered to have power due to matrilineage

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD):

Society was organized around matriarchies, which were convenient for lineage and family alliances but they were not used for land ownership since all land was owned communally. The leader of the nation or group was also a religious leader. High status was also accorded warriors and hunters.

Discussion/Questions

Religious leaders were an important part of North American civilizations, and they often occupied the top rungs of society. Please reflect on the beliefs held by the early civilizations and explain why the religious leaders might be accorded such a high rung in society.

Readings

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GENDER

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): Based on the nature of the artifacts, it is clear that there were clear roles, which had to do with hunter, fisherman, process or captured prey, and then later of religious or shamanistic ceremonies. It's not clear if there were true gender differentiations, although we tend to think of men as hunters and women as the guardians of hearth and home.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): Gender ambiguity is the dominant characteristic of the pre-colonial Pueblo civilization. The gender-neutral Kokopeli and the trickster were perhaps the most defining element. The rites and rituals related to rain, moon phases, and corn were not necessarily gendered.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1500 AD): Women were important in the Eastern Woodland tribal cultures because they provided clear evidence of genealogy, particularly in a culture that did not necessarily recognize monogamy. The matriarchal culture allowed an understanding of family relationships, but it did not mean that the women held all the power. In fact, men also held positions of power; they just did not preside as head person in a family.

Discussion/Questions

In early traditions, women and men were assigned gender based on their ability to give birth. Lineage and family relations were considered to be most logically traced to the mother, since paternity could always be called into question. One would think that tracing family lineage through the mother would necessitate parallel power structures, but that was not necessarily the case. Discuss the role of gender and cultural power in early societies.

Readings

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ECONOMIC HISTORY

INNOVATION

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): We now know that the waves of people who came across the Bering Strait land bridge during the last Ice Age made their way to all parts of North America came in two distinct pulses. Radiocarbon dated artifacts show that the first group arrived 20,000 years ago, and the Clovis group arrived at around 13,000 years ago. Both groups developed unique spear points made of chert, obsidian daggers and arrow points, bone wrenches, ivory spear bases, and chert cleavers. They formed new techniques for hunting that made it possible to form groups and kill mammoths, bison, and deer. Turtles were, however, the “go-to” food and were used for meat, and their shells for bowls.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): The Pueblo Indians were known for their innovations in communal living. They created elaborate cliff dwellings which were subdivided by purpose. They also developed methods of farming that utilized irrigation and crop rotation to successfully grow enough maize, beans, squash, and gourds to last more than a season.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): The Abenaki, Iriquois, and other Eastern Woodlands peoples developed a system of agriculture that incorporated fertilization (using fishbones and compost). They created a farming system that allowed them to grow crops in grid patterns that circled the longhouses where they lived. There were outlying storehouses that were also used as guard posts.

Discussion/Questions

When Columbus and the other Europeans arrived in the Americas, they did not find a barren wasteland devoid of organization or civilization, although at times it was convenient to depict American indigenous peoples in a negative light. Instead, they found elaborate cities with complex engineering, and systems of agriculture that allowed stable communities to emerge. Describe some of the agricultural and engineering innovations of the peoples in America before the Europeans.

Readings

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TRADE

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): Archeologists have long believed that the first Americans came from Asia across what was then a land bridge across the Bering Strait. Based on arrowhead and other artifact evidence, the Clovis culture extended from northern Canada throughout central America. There were trade networks throughout the settlements, and there was trade with tools (spear points, adzes, axes). The axe heads were often decorated with specific cross-hatching decoration and scoring (to help with better cleaving).

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): The Pueblo Indians who lived in structures in cliffs and also in the desert Southwest established extensive trade networks, which is evidenced by the abalone shells from the Pacific, the flint knives from Alibates (Texas Panhandle), and coral from off the Yucatan Peninsula. The Hohokam of south-central Arizona produced a pottery they decorated with red pigment which can be traced to New Mexico, which indicates trading relationships.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): Trade between the neighboring Eastern Woodlands Algonquian tribes (groups), the Iroquois and other groups formed an important part of the economy. The most important product was the beaver pelt. In addition, some groups traded fish for corn.

Discussion/Questions

Trade networks were well-established early in the history of people in North America, and the evidence comes in the form of shells, pigments, chert, quartz, and other materials found far from their location of origin. Describe some of the trade networks and explain the need for the materials and the trade. How were they deemed necessary for survival?

Readings

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CULTURAL HISTORY

SCIENCE

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): We do not know much about the scientific knowledge of the Clovis culture, but we do know that they studied astronomy and also were students of animal behavior (which allowed them to be effective hunters).

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): The Pueblo Indians studied astronomy and developed complex calendars. In order to survive in an arid climate, they developed many innovative methods of irrigation, including a bar ditch system and aqueducts. They also developed unique hybrid crops, including different types of beans, corn, squash, and chili peppers. They also developed an understanding of geology as they created homes in the mountains, and carved cliff dwellings.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): The Iroquois, Algonquin and other Indian nations practiced precision farming which allowed them to live in small villages and cultivate fields, where they rotated crops and developed practices such as fertilization and natural pest control.

Discussion Question:

Early cultures used science and technology in conjunction with their social, religious, and commercial lives. Describe how astronomy figured into the religious lives of early civilizations in North America. Then, explain how a knowledge of geology and construction science were necessary in the construction of cliff dwellings, ceremonial mounds, and more.

Readings

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RELIGION

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): From what we can tell from artifacts and petroglyphs, the early religion of the Clovis culture was shamanistic, with also an emphasis on the moon, sun, and stars.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): Pueblo Indians. The Pueblo culture is known to us through rock paintings and petroglyphs. In the desert Southwest, near Blythe, California, large geoglyphs of animals, people, and constellations are visible from above, making it possible that there were beliefs here as well as in other American cultures the principle Creation Myth involved contact with beings from the stars.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): The indigenous peoples of the Eastern Woodlands shared a belief in the Great Spirit as the creator of the world, in which the most important feature was the harmonious co-existence between all animals, plants, landforms, and life forms (including people). The spiritual world was believed to interact with the physical world, and that it could be seen in often unexpected manifestations such as messages transmitted by means of animals, etc.

Discussion/Questions

The little we know about the religious beliefs of the early Clovis-era culture often has to do with the petroglyphs found in caves. Consider the types of petroglyphs and carvings that have been found. What are some of the possible religious beliefs represented by hunting scenes and diagrams of constellations, the sun, moon, and geometrical shapes?

Readings

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PHILOSOPHY

Pre-Columbian (Classical)

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): The philosophy of the Pueblo and Southwest Indian cultures was very much aligned with the idea that every act is a sacred one, and that one should respect the gods and seek balance. The key beliefs emphasized the role of “medicine” which is to say spirit, and that the spiritual leaders (medicine men) were a blend of religious leader and teachers of philosophical beliefs, ethics, and ideas about existence.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): For the Native American Indians of the Eastern Woodlands, all of nature and reality is a manifestation of the Great Spirit. Thus, the philosophical emphasis was on not just on existential ideas and ontological issues (beingness), but also in ethics, and that humanity should consider every aspect of the phenomenal world to be one and the same as the Great Spirit. This is a very unifying belief, and one that requires great reverence to nature as well as close regard of occurrences, which could be considered signs useful for decision-making.

Discussion/Questions

The philosophical beliefs of the people in the Americas before the arrival of the Europeans were closely aligned with their religious and social beliefs. For example, ideas about reality and the relationship between humans and Nature were often reflected by the overall cosmology that explained the origin of humans, animals, and the earth vis a vis the gods or the Great Spirit. What are some of the main ideas of the Southwest Pueblo Indians and those of the Eastern Woodland Indians? How do they reflect a relationship between human beings and the world at large?

Readings

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ART

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): The Clovis cultures did not paint, but they were prodigious tool-makers, and fashioned spear points, blades, drills, needles, and scrapers, which they used in foraging for plants, hunting small animals, and fishing. They carved lines and shapes into the walls of caves (petroglyphs), but very little has been found as yet.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): The Pueblo Indians painted their dwellings and also used sand paintings in their ceremonies. Hohokam rock art can be found in the valleys in southern and south-central Arizona, which they turned into an agricultural center by means of irrigation canals. The rock art of the Hohokam included both petroglyphs (designs chipped away on the rock) and pictographs (designs painted on the rock). The designs include abstract art (circles, crosses, spirals, and meandering lines) and also representational art, with birds, snakes, mammals, and humans. It is believed that the art was created in conjunction with ceremonies.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): The Algonquin, Mohawk, Seneca, Abenaki and others of the Northeast decorated their clothing and their wampum belts (belts made of beads shaped from shells). The Eastern Algonquian peoples of Canada and the northern U.S. painted flowers, abstract designs, and figures of people on their belts and clothing.

Discussion/Questions

The earliest inhabitants of North America created artifacts that were highly utilitarian such as finely crafted awls, blades, and spearpoints, and they used their tools to carve glyphs in the walls of caves and on rocks. When we consider that their religion was shamanistic, and it often involved assuming the attributes of an animal. Given the convergence of art and religious beliefs, what are some of the possible ways that art was used in the early civilizations before the arrival of the Spaniards, English, Dutch, and French?

Readings

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LITERATURE

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): There was no literature as we would know it today, although there were signs of the existence of narratives, oral traditions, and religious practices as evidenced in petroglyphs, cave carvings, and geoglyphs (large earthwork design in the desert southwest).

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): There were no written books, scrolls, or codices. However, there was a tradition of sand paintings that told stories. They constituted a type of literature, but it would be more accurate to ascribe them to scripts and oral narrative / folklore.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): Among the civilizations of the Eastern Woodlands, there were no codices or written texts. However, there was a system of communication via wampum, which were patterns in beads. This concept extends the idea of literature – it's more realistically a kind of script.

Discussion/Questions

Early literature in North America was closely connected to religion. However, it was not the formal religion that was to become more prominent in the late 18th century and later. It had to do with a worldview that attempted to instruct the human being where his or her place was in the world and how to maintain equilibrium. Discuss how religion and literature have a close connection in such a world.

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