PROLOGUE

Beginnings

ANTICIPATION/REACTION

Directions: Before you begin reading this chapter, in the column entitled “Anticipation” place a check mark beside any of the following four statements with which you now agree. When you have completed your study of this chapter, come back to this section and in the column entitled “Reaction” place a check mark beside any of the statements with which you then agree. Note any variation in the placement of check marks from anticipation to reaction and explain why you changed your mind.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anticipation</th>
<th>Reaction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. _____ The first humans to arrive in North America came from northern Siberia.</td>
<td>_____ 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. _____ The ancient peoples’ transition from a hunting-gathering to a predominantly agricultural way of life first occurred in North America.</td>
<td>_____ 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. _____ The first true urban center in what is now the United States was established by the Spanish in the sixteenth century.</td>
<td>_____ 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. _____ When they came in contact with each other, the peoples of North America were decimated by infectious diseases carried by Europeans.</td>
<td>_____ 4</td>
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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading the Prologue you should be able to:

1. Account for how ancient Clovis people became such successful hunters and for their eventual demise.
2. Assess the effect of the Neolithic revolution on the peoples of North America.
3. Compare and contrast the European and North American societies on the eve of contact between them.

PROLOGUE OVERVIEW

Passage to Alaska

As the supply of wooly mammoths grew scarce elsewhere, ancient hunters pursued them into northern Siberia. Around 1000 B.C.E., during the Ice Age, some of these hunters crossed what is now the Bering Strait to Alaska, and then moved east and south to the grassy northern Great Plains, where large and smaller mammals abounded.
The Demise of the Big Mammals

These Clovis people who entered the Great Plains had developed an advanced spear technology that enabled them to hunt numerous large animals nearly to extinction. The resulting absence of large mammals in the Americas had a profound effect on the subsequent course of human events.

The Archaic Period: A World Without Big Mammals, 9000 B.C.E.—1000 B.C.E.

The early Archaic period descendants of the Clovis hunters were compelled to find new sources of food, clothing, and shelter. Faced with scarcity, they adapted themselves to a particular habitat, but had to search for game continuously. Gradually, as they became more knowledgeable about local food sources, they traveled less frequently and developed a far-ranging trading system. They became the first inhabitants of what is now the United States to domesticate plants (around 2500 B.C.E.). Archaic period women conceived late and had children infrequently, so there was a steady but fairly low population growth.

The First Sedentary Communities, 1000 B.C.E.

Archaic peoples in the Pacific Northwest and in New England survived on plentiful fish and shellfish and were not compelled to move often in search of food. One of the sedentary communities in the Mississippi flood plains (Louisiana) also became adept at fishing with nets. With a hierarchical social structure and strong leaders, the people of this culture at Poverty Point built enormous earthen mounds. Other mound-building cultures developed later in the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys. The impermanence of these communities suggests the fragility of sedentary life.

Corn Transforms the Southwest

About two thousand years ago, urban civilizations emerged in the central valley of Mexico and the Peruvian Andes and the cultivation of corn was the life-blood of these Aztec and Incan peoples. It made possible the transition from a hunting-gathering to a predominantly agricultural way of life—the Neolithic revolution. Eventually, the peoples of Arizona and New Mexico acquired corn and it became the focus of their religious beliefs and the key to political power in their culture. These corn-growers overcame formidable environmental challenges to build their villages, roads, and irrigation systems.

The Diffusion of Corn

Some hunting and gathering tribes viewed corn cultivation as subsidiary to the hunt and, with its unrelenting demand for labor, a task best relegated to women. Gradually, however, as an alternative to starvation, corn cultivation spread east and north from the Southwest.

Population Growth After 800

The cultivation of corn stimulated population growth. Corn growers did not have a particularly nutritious diet, but they were less likely to starve than hunting and gathering peoples. They also had more children—a high caloric corn diet promoted fertility. For a time, hunters and corn
growers engaged in mutually advantageous trade, but eventually they came into conflict and the more populous corn-growers prevailed.

**Cahokia: The Hub of Mississippian Culture**

By 1000 Cahokia (near present-day St. Louis) had emerged as the largest and most important of the mound-building corn-cultivating communities. It was a major center of trade—the first true urban center in what is now the United States. Sharp class distinctions and a ruling elite characterized Cahokian society. Although it had a defensive palisade, Cahokia was predominantly a cultural and religious center rather than a fortress.

**The Collapse of Urban Centers**

By 1500, the urban centers of the Mississippi Valley and the Southwest were abandoned—victims of droughts, deforestation, soil exhaustion, and other environmental damage associated with large population growth. In addition, the recurrence of famine and disease undermined the credibility of ruling elites, and warfare became endemic. The collapse of the cities disrupted the trade networks and encouraged the breakup of large groups and tribes.

**American Beginnings in Eurasia and Africa**

By 1500 the peoples of Eurasia had domesticated scores of nutritional cereal crops, vegetables and fruits, and a variety of animals. Consequently, the Eurasian population increased rapidly and many road networks and large cities appeared. Unfortunately, poor sanitation gave rise to recurrent plagues that swept across Eurasia, but those who survived acquired biological resistance to further infection.

West Africa evolved differently. Just south of the Sahara desert, a trans-Sahara trade in gold, salt, and slaves spawned great kingdoms. The relatively insulated peoples of the West African coast mostly kept to themselves. But their lives were about to change.

**Europe in Ferment**

By 1500, population pressure in Europe was acute and hunger riots destabilized the political order. A shortage of land uprooted peasants and caused warfare to become constant. Improvements in metallurgy produced larger and more expensive weaponry. Warfare now depended on the resources of entire nations.

New ideas further unsettled European society. Books made by moveable type advanced new ideas and weakened the hold of traditional ones. Books also excited the imagination of men like Christopher Columbus, who devoured books on geography and navigation.

By 1500 Europe was in ferment. A hunger for land, a population made resistant to diseases from recurrent exposure to them, an explosion in communication and knowledge, acceptance of new technologies of warfare, and the emergence of powerful monarchs all gave European society a fateful dynamism. Still, Europe had problems: Population growth exceeded the food supply, and poverty and war undermined political order.
There were problems in North America as well. Hunting-gathering cultures were vulnerable to starvation and the encroachment of corn-growers, and urban centers had faded so no national political organization existed to support broad enterprises. Also, no military technology comparable to Europe’s existed, and North Americans lacked immunity from the infectious diseases that were about to arrive from Europe. At this point, adept European sailors were about to cross the Atlantic Ocean and bridge the European and American worlds, and sub-Saharan West Africa as well.

**PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THINGS**

*Define the following:*

sedentary  

endemic  

*Describe the following:*

Bering Strait/Beringia  

Azatlan  

Cahokia  

Mesoamerica  

Neolithic revolution
Identify the following:

Cro-Magnon man

Clovis culture

Archaic peoples

mound-builders

Anasazi

Eurasians

Leif Ericson

SELF-TEST

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. The earliest of the ancient peoples who “most resemble us in their aptitude for tools and facility with language” were the
   A. Clovis.
   B. Cro-Magnon.
   C. Neolithic.
   D. Archaic.

2. The first humans to arrive in North America did so by crossing the
   A. Pacific Ocean.
   B. Arctic ice cap.
   C. Bering Strait.
   D. Isthmus of Panama.
3. The Archaic peoples in North America were mostly
   A. hunters and gatherers.
   B. corn farmers.
   C. traders.
   D. bandits and raiders.

4. North American mound-building cultures included all the following EXCEPT
   A. Poverty Point.
   B. Cahokia.
   C. Anasazi.
   D. Hopewell.

5. Cahokian culture was characterized by
   A. a large, well-trained army.
   B. respect for preserving the natural environment.
   C. hunting and gathering.
   D. sharp class divisions.

6. Compared to Europeans at the time, the people of North America in 1500 had
   A. “national” political organization.
   B. more and larger cities.
   C. well-developed military technology.
   D. low immunity to infectious diseases.

**Essay Questions**

1. Explain how ancient Clovis hunters contributed to the destruction of their own culture.

2. Evaluate the impact of the adoption of corn cultivation on the early peoples of North America, especially on population growth.

3. In what ways were European and North American societies similar on the eve of the Atlantic crossings by European sailors? In what ways were they different?