

North American Native People



During the **Second-Wave Era** (600 BCE to 600 CE), North America was a continent of diverse cultures and settlements. In the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions of the north and the Great Plains region, nomadic tribes followed migration patterns of animals in order to survive. The Pacific coastal region of North America had become home to complex and settled communities. In the eastern woodlands regions and throughout the Caribbean Islands, the people lived in agricultural village-based societies. Due to environmental and technological limitations, these populations were much smaller than the populations of the Mesoamerican civilizations. There were however, some advanced societies in North America and the following sections examine their ways of life.

The Ancestral Pueblo

Formerly the **Anasazi** of the southwestern United States, the Ancestral Pueblo lived in a region of arid land, mountain ranges, and large land basins. Through cultural diffusion with the Mesoamerican societies, they developed and grew maize and later on beans and squash that allowed them to become a settled agricultural community. The early people of this region (between 600 to 800 C.E.) lived in pit houses with floors sunk several feet into the ground. By 900 C.E. these small settlement grew and the **kivas** (ceremonial pits) were built to honor their belief that humankind emerged into this world from another world below.

The individual settlements were linked to each other in the form of local trading networks. Items such as buffalo hides, copper, turquoise, seashells, macaw feathers, and coiled baskets came from distant locations. Due to the growing dependence on agriculture, increasing populations, and more intense patterns of exchange, larger settlements were built, this time above ground. These structures became known as **pueblos**. The most spectacular of these took shape in **Chaco canyon**, today a region of northwestern New Mexico. In this region, between 860 and 1110 CE, five major pueblos were formed.

The **Chaco Phenomenon** covered 25,000 square miles and inked seventy outlying settlements to the main center. The population was estimated to be around 5,000 people. The largest of these “**great houses**” was called **Pueblo Bonito**. It stood five stories high and contained more than 600 rooms as well as many kivas. Hundreds of miles of roads, up to forty feet wide, spanned out from Chaco. It is to be noted that these people did not have wheeled carts or large domesticated animals. Therefore historians have created the theory that this infrastructure was created as a “**Middle Place**” or an entrance to the underworld?

The Chaco elite were skilled **astronomers** who built an observatory from three large slabs of rock, situated in such a way that it threw a beam of light across a spiral rock during the summer solstice.

By the 11th century, Chaco was the center for making turquoise ornaments, making it a large commercial center that extended into Mesoamerica. Warfare, internal conflicts, cannibalism, and a 50-year **drought** after 1130 C.E. brought this thriving culture by an end in 1200 C.E. The homes and massive structures were abandoned and the people scattered and formed small communities within the southwestern region.

Video (4.42) link: [From Chaco Canyon to Chimney Rock: A Landscape Worth Protecting](#)

The Mound Builders of the Eastern Woodlands

The eastern woodlands region of North America, especially in the Mississippi River valley hosted an independent Agricultural Revolution. By 2000 B.C.E. people in this region had domesticated sumpweed, goosefoot, gourds and squashes. Sunflowers were brought from Mesoamerica and added to the local diets. However these plants were not enough to sustain life so hunting and gathering was still a crucial way of finding food.

A unique architecture of these people was the building of **large earthen mounds**. Some date back as far as 2000 B.C.E. but the most elaborate and widespread were created by the **Hopewell culture** (named after an archeological site in Ohio) during the period 200 B.C.E. to 400 C.E. Some of these mounds are as large as several city blocks. Many of the mounds were elaborate burial sites. However, others have been built to be aligned with the moon with such precision as to mark lunar eclipses. Many diverse objects have been found buried in these mounds, creating the theory of the “**Hopewell Interaction Sphere**” which is from trade and cultural diffusion. For example, some of the artifacts found were mica from the Appalachian Mountains, volcanic glass from Yellowstone, conch shells and sharks’ teeth from the Gulf of Mexico and copper from the Great Lakes region.

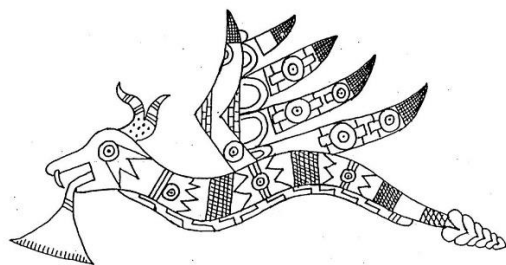
After 800 C.E. a **corn-based agricultural society** developed in the region. Larger populations and more complex societies emerged. The dominant center was **Cahokia**, located near St. Louis, Missouri. This region flourished between 900 and 1250 C.E. The central mound, a four-story pyramid, was 1000 feet long and 700 feet wide and rose to a height of over 100 feet. It is believed that this community had a population of around 10,000 people. Evidence from burial sites and records from the Spanish explorers tell of a structured society led by an elite class who ruled over a large working class. One gravesite found not only contained items previously mentioned but also human remains of sacrificed men and women.

After Cahokia declined and the region was abandoned with the arrival of Europeans, the rigid political structure of the Native Americans still continued. The best evidence is seen with the Natchez people in Southern Mississippi. Chiefs, known as “Great Suns” wore knee-length fur coats and lived in deerskin-covered homes. These honored people were a higher status than the common people, often known as “stinkards.” However, one exception was that a member of the Great Suns had to marry a stinkard.



Despite being independent societies, there were some commonalities within the region. These people shared similar artifacts, symbols, ceremonies, and artistic styles. One such symbol was a horned serpent, sometimes depicted with wings. Ironically, there was no linguistic, cultural, or political unity but it does signify an effective system of exchange, borrowing and cultural adaption across a very large region of North America.

Video (5.22) Link: [Cahokia, The Lost Pre-Columbian American City](#)



The horned serpent symbol drawing and ornamentation on a bowl used for rituals