The Pre-contact Amerindian World

Aztec Temple Vessel

This earthenware vessel was used to burn copal resin, the sacred incense of all the Mesoamerican peoples. Copal smoke was considered the medium through which humans communicated with the gods.

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Topics of Consideration

I. Common Misconceptions
II. What Fostered Misconceptions
III. Historical Reassessment
IV. Sedentary Imperial Societies
V. Semi-Sedentary Societies
VI. Nomadic Peoples

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I. Common Misconceptions

A. The first and most pervasive misconception about the pre-contact Amerindian world concerns the land itself.
B. Many Europeans at the time, and many people today, believe that the Americas were a "virgin land" at the time of contact.
C. That there were few -- if any -- people in the Americas, and that those people were somehow "environmentally pure" -- that they did not manipulate their surroundings for their own good.
D. This is simply wrong.
I. Common Misconceptions

E. People had lived in the Americas since at least 12,000 B.C.E., and they had been shaping their environment all that time.
F. By the time Europeans arrived in the western hemisphere in 1492, perhaps 100 million people inhabited the two American continents, with as many as 10 million living in North America.
G. More conservative figures are 70 million and 7 million.

H. You certainly would not understand the size, variety, and complexity of Amerindian cultures by looking at images like the one to your right.
I. And, yet, these images are commonly used to depict “Indian America.”
J. Take a look at the highlighted images on the next slide.
K. What do you see?
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I. Common Misconceptions

L. Where once a seemingly harmless image appeared, you now see close-up depictions of an Eden-like environment.
M. Few people live there.
N. Wild, great, mythical animals inhabit the place.
O. And, of course, there is the natural beauty. The open, park-like abundance of a "virgin land."
P. Images like these helped shape the Americas in the European mind of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Q. The second misconception is a more troubling one.
R. It is the term "Indians."
S. Columbus was the first person to use this word to describe the peoples of the western hemisphere.
T. He based the term on his belief that he had come to islands off the coast of India and China.
U. He was wrong not only in a geographical sense, but in a more complicated way as well.
V. The word "Indians" makes a generalization that cannot be made, since the peoples of the Americas did not -- and do not -- think of themselves as Indians, but as many different peoples.

II. What Fostered Misconceptions

A. Different experiences of the Neolithic Revolution in Eurasia and the Americas
B. Less population density in the Americas because of historic cultural differences and the spread of epidemic diseases.
C. Other reasons: the fact that Amerindians looked quite different than Europeans, the different tools and modes of agriculture, the different housing structures, the different models of dress, the different ceremonial roles and practices.
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III. Historical Reassessment

Historical Reassessment of the Pre-Contact Amerindian World Focuses on the Diversity of Cultures

A. Sedentary Imperial Societies

Mesoamerica: Maya, Teotihuacán, Aztec
South America: Inca
North America: Cahokia

B. Semi-Sedentary Societies

Eastern Woodland Culture Area

C. Nomadic Societies

Atlantic Northeast – See reading

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IV. Sedentary Imperial Societies: Introduction

A. 3,500 years ago sedentary agricultural communities emerged in Mesoamerica
B. Food surplus = full-time craft specialists, transporters and traders, priests, and professional military men.
C. Cities were not unusual. At least two cities with populations over 200,000 arose in Mexico.
D. These societies built monumental architecture – palaces, temples, pyramids, and government centers
E. Three major cultures:
   Classic Maya: 300 CE - 900 CE
   Teotihuacán: 150 CE - 650 CE
   Aztec: 1428 - 1521 CE

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IV. Sedentary Imperial Societies: Mesoamerica - The Maya

A. The Maya never formed a single culture. Instead, between 300 CE and 900 CE, they developed a group of related cultures, something like city states, constantly either at war or in fragile alliances with each other.
B. Devotion to warfare may have been one of the causes of their collapse around 900 CE.
C. At the height of the Late Classic Period (600-900 CE), the total Maya population may have been as high as twenty million.
D. They were agriculturalists, but lived in towns, villages, and cities clustered around paved plazas dominated by high temples. (See the following slides for examples).
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A. The civilization based at Teotihuacán (teh-oh-tee-wah-KAHN) thrived from more than 700 years between 150 BCE & 600 CE.

B. Teotihuacán contained dozens of temple complexes located over 20 square kilometers of territory.

C. Far more than a religious center, the city housed some 200,000 people, who lived in more than 2,200 residential compounds.

Teotihuacán: From a Distance
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IV. Sedentary Imperial Societies: Mesoamerica - The Aztec

A. The Aztecs built great cities and developed a complex social, political, and religious structure.

B. Their capital, Tenochtitlán, was located on the site of present-day Mexico City.

C. An elaborate metropolis built on islands and reclaimed marsh land, Tenochtitlán was home to more than 250,000 people – it likely was the largest city in the world at the time of the Spanish conquest.

D. It featured a huge temple complex, a royal palace, and numerous canals.

Map of Tenochtitlán
A. The Inca Empire was a vast kingdom in the Andes Mountains that was created in the 15th century CE.
B. The Incas built a wealthy and complex civilization that ruled 5 to 11 million people.
C. The Incan Emperor eventually ruled over lands encompassing 350,000 square miles.
D. The Empire was centered on the peaks of the Andes, but extended to the Pacific Coast and the Amazon basin.
E. Inca society was strictly organized. From the emperor down to the peasants.
F. The emperor was believed to be descended from the sun god, Inti, and ruled with divine authority.
G. Below the emperor came the aristocracy.
H. For administrative purposes the empire was divided into regions known as the "four quarters of the world," with Cuzco — the capital — at its center.
I. A blood relative of the emperor served as governor of each quarter.

M. The Incan Empire had a labor tax, which supported the building of forts, roads, and bridges, as well as gold, silver, and gems. It also allowed the emperor to raise large armies.
N. The Inca emperors built a 10,000-mile network of stone roads and suspension bridges to connect the empire.
O. To increase agricultural production, the government commissioned stone terraces in the Andean valleys.
IV. Sedentary Imperial Societies: South America - Inca

U. Agriculture was the basis of the economy, producing almost all the foods in the Inca diet.

V. The inhabitants of the Andean region developed more than half the agricultural products that the world eats today. Among these are more than 20 varieties of corn, 240 varieties of potato, as well as one or more varieties of squash, beans, peppers, and peanuts.

W. The Incas also mined extensive deposits of gold and silver.
IV. Sedentary Imperial Societies: North America - Cahokia

A. No state-organized indigenous societies existed in North America when Europeans made their initial contacts in the sixteenth century.

B. Between 800-1500 CE, however, there had been a series of temple-mound builder cultures throughout the greater Mississippi River Valley.

C. These cultures were characterized by urban sites centered around temple platforms and massive mounds constructed over several decades.

D. The city of Cahokia in southwestern Illinois thrived from 1050 to 1200 CE.

E. Population estimate -- 30,000.

F. This cultural center dominated 50 surrounding communities.

G. The introduction of new varieties of maize and beans from Mexico may have provided the means to grow.

H. Ultimately, poor sanitation and growing numbers may have led to the downfall of Cahokia.
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V. Semi-Sedentary Society: Eastern Woodlands Culture Area

A. A Culture Area is defined by Anthropologists as a region with peoples sufficiently similar to discuss their language types, subsistence patterns, housing structures, marriage customs, gender ways, and artistic motifs.

B. The Eastern Woodlands Culture Area is defined as the area east of the Mississippi River, north of the Gulf of Mexico, west of the Atlantic of the St. Lawrence drainage basin.

Language Groups

1. Algonquian  
   "New England" area

2. Iroquoian  
   Hudson River to Great Lakes

3. Muskogean  
   Southeastern

4. Siouan  
   Southeastern

Language Families – Full Map

Language Families – Full Map
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V. Semi-Sedentary Society: Eastern Woodlands Culture Area

B. Subsistence patterns

1. By 2500 BCE farming: cultivated planting everywhere, diet supplemented by hunting
2. advancement of iron tools
3. no plow; hoes made of shell, stone, or fishbone
4. no draft/domesticated animals
5. no irrigation
6. fertilizers rarely used
7. sea mammal hunting done by harpoon
8. large animal hunting -- sling shot, spear, fire
9. fishing -- hooks, nets, spears, traps
10. cooking: boiling, earth oven, roasting, drying
11. Most evident crops: corn, beans, squash
12. Deer most frequent single animal genus eaten

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V. Semi-Sedentary Society: Eastern Woodlands Culture Area
C. Housing:
1. Algonquin house built of bent poles and bark, with a hole in the top for smoke to escape. There are fires in all of the homes for warmth.
2. At the center of Iroquois society was the longhouse, a wooden structure eighteen feet wide, eighteen feet high, and sixty feet long. Central hall down the center – 6 to 10 ft. wide – on both sides were small booths were individual families lived.

D. Clothing:
1. For the most part, furs were used for clothing.
2. In the South some plant materials were used.
3. Men wore a breech cloth, no shirt.
4. Women were a fur blanket wraparound skirt, no shirt.
5. Men sometimes wore moccasins, women rarely did.
6. Women usually wore long hair.
7. Men shaved head or wore scalp lock.
8. Both sexes pierced their ears.
9. Men tattooed their bodies: pricked skin and pushed soot in for color.
E. Labor

1. Work was strictly gender defined
2. The male's duties entailed travel and "dangerous" work like hunting
3. The female's activities kept the women close to the settlement where they bore and raised children.

G. Property Ownership

1. Ownership of property has three main aspects: a) privilege of use; b) privilege of disposal; c) privilege of destruction. Stages represent increasing control
2. Two types of property: a) real estate (like land and housing) which is permanent b) chattel property (like tools, weapons, and household items) which is movable.
3. Over the first type of property most individual Indians had the privilege of use. This type of ownership is called a usufruct right. The land of a tribe was generally held to be communal and no individual could sell or give it away.
4. Over the second type of property, most individual Indians had all three rights: use, disposal, and destruction.

H. Trade

1. Amerindians did trade "amongst themselves," said Roger Williams, "they trade their Corne, skins, Coates, Venison, Fish, etc." (Cronon, 92).
2. Trade took place within the village and also between villages. The inter-village trade was limited, however, to adjacent villages, and there was no entrepreneurial class specifically focused on the carrying trade within Indian society (Cronon, 92-93).
3. Trade was sometimes facilitated by wampum (marine shells), but was usually done by barter.
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V. Semi-Sedentary Society: Eastern Woodlands Culture Area

I. Religion

1. Animism

2. Religion came from the close relationship Amerindians had with the earth and animals.

3. Life was based fundamentally on farming and hunting or fishing.

4. Amerindians were dependent on these resources for survival and came to spiritualize the hunt or the planting seasons.

5. For more on this important topic see Carolyn Merchant’s ‘Ecological Revolutions.’