

Native American Societies Before European Contact

UNIT 1 • LESSON 2 • TEACHER ANSWER KEY

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did the natural environment shape the economies, settlement patterns, and social structures of the diverse Native American societies of North America before European contact?

DO NOW • SAMPLE RESPONSE

LOOK FOR

The bison hunters and the oyster-eating coastal peoples lived differently because each society built its way of life around the resources its environment offered. On the plains, huge herds of bison rewarded a mobile life organized around the hunt, while a rich coast made it possible to settle in one place and rely on shellfish and the sea. This shows that Native American diversity was not accidental but a set of intelligent adaptations to very different lands.

GUIDED NOTES • FIVE KEYS TO NATIVE AMERICAN DIVERSITY (ANSWER KEY)

1 • Southwestern Farming Peoples

Arid-Southwest societies including the ancestral Pueblo (cliff dwellings at Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde) and the Hohokam (extensive canal irrigation), who farmed maize in a dry land.

2 • Mississippian Culture

A mound-building farming civilization of the Mississippi and Ohio valleys, centered on cities like Cahokia, that combined maize agriculture with large populations and social hierarchy.

3 • Cahokia

The largest Mississippian city, near present-day St. Louis, whose tens of thousands of residents and massive earthen mounds made it one of the great urban centers of the pre-contact Americas.

4 • Potlatch

A ceremonial feast among Pacific Northwest peoples in which leaders gave away or destroyed wealth to display status, reflecting the abundance of a resource-rich coast.

5 • Kinship

Systems of family and clan relationships, sometimes matrilineal, that organized property, leadership, and obligation in many Native societies in place of the property rules Europeans assumed.

ONE CONTINENT, MANY WORLDS

The maize revolution and the Southwest: As maize agriculture spread north from Mesoamerica, it transformed the arid Southwest. Ancestral Pueblo and Hohokam peoples dug irrigation canals to water their fields and built permanent, multi-room settlements such as those at Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde. Farming surpluses supported denser populations, craft specialization, and long-distance trade in turquoise and other goods.

Mound-builders and Eastern Woodlands peoples: In the Mississippi Valley, Mississippian societies built large towns dominated by earthen platform mounds; Cahokia may have held twenty thousand or more people at its height around 1100. Farther east, Woodlands peoples such as the Iroquois combined Three-Sisters farming with hunting and formed confederacies for diplomacy and war. Many of these societies were matrilineal, organizing land and lineage through the mother's line.

Plains, plateau, and the abundant coasts: On the Great Plains, societies hunted the vast bison herds, a way of life balancing mobility with seasonal village farming along the rivers. In the Great Basin, aridity favored small, mobile bands of gatherers. On the salmon-rich Pacific Northwest coast, by contrast, peoples such as the Chinook built permanent plank-house villages, carved great cedar art, and marked rank through the potlatch, proving that complexity did not require agriculture.

Close Read & Apply

UNIT 1 · LESSON 2 · TEACHER ANSWER KEY

ANALYZE: THE JOURNEY OF ALVAR NUÑEZ CABEZA DE VACA (ON THE "COWS" AND THE PEOPLES OF THE INTERIOR)

- Sourcing:** A shipwrecked Spanish official who spent eight years walking across the North American interior, Cabeza de Vaca wrote his account for the Spanish crown; this is the earliest known European description of the American bison, seen through eyes that constantly compare the new to the familiar.
- Context:** He describes societies of the Gulf Coast and the Southwest who depended on the bison, whose herds ranged from the north down to Florida; peoples up and down these valleys, he notes, came to subsist on the animals' flesh and turned their hides into blankets and shoes.
- Claim:** Reaching for Spanish reference points, he calls the bison "cows" and likens their horns to "Moorish cattle," which shows how a European observer made sense of an unfamiliar land by measuring it against home rather than on its own terms.
- Significance:** As evidence, the passage confirms both the central role of the bison in Plains and interior economies and the way even a sympathetic European filtered Native societies through his own culture, reminding us to read such accounts critically.

CONCEPT-APPLICATION FRQ · MODEL RESPONSE

Answer all parts. (a) Identify ONE Native American society or region and briefly describe how its people used their natural environment before European contact. (b) Explain how that environment shaped the society's economy OR social structure. (c) Explain ONE way the diversity of Native American societies challenges the idea that North America was "empty" or "primitive" before 1492.

FULL-CREDIT RESPONSE

(a) In the arid Southwest, Pueblo peoples such as the ancestral Puebloans and Hohokam built irrigation canals to raise maize and lived in permanent multi-room villages of stone and adobe. (b) Because farming in a dry land required stored water and cooperative labor, the environment pushed these societies toward permanent settlement, food surpluses, and the social organization needed to build and maintain canals and towns like those at Chaco Canyon. (c) The sheer diversity of Native societies challenges the "empty land" myth, because a continent that held desert irrigation farmers, the mound-building city of Cahokia, salmon-fishing plank-house villages in the Pacific Northwest, and mobile bison hunters on the Plains was clearly a populated world of sophisticated, adaptive nations, not a wilderness awaiting European improvement.

EXIT TICKET · SAMPLE

In one sentence, explain how environment shaped ONE Native American society before 1492.

LOOK FOR

The salmon-rich Pacific Northwest coast let peoples such as the Chinook build permanent plank-house villages and accumulate wealth without farming, showing how abundant resources shaped a settled, hierarchical society.