

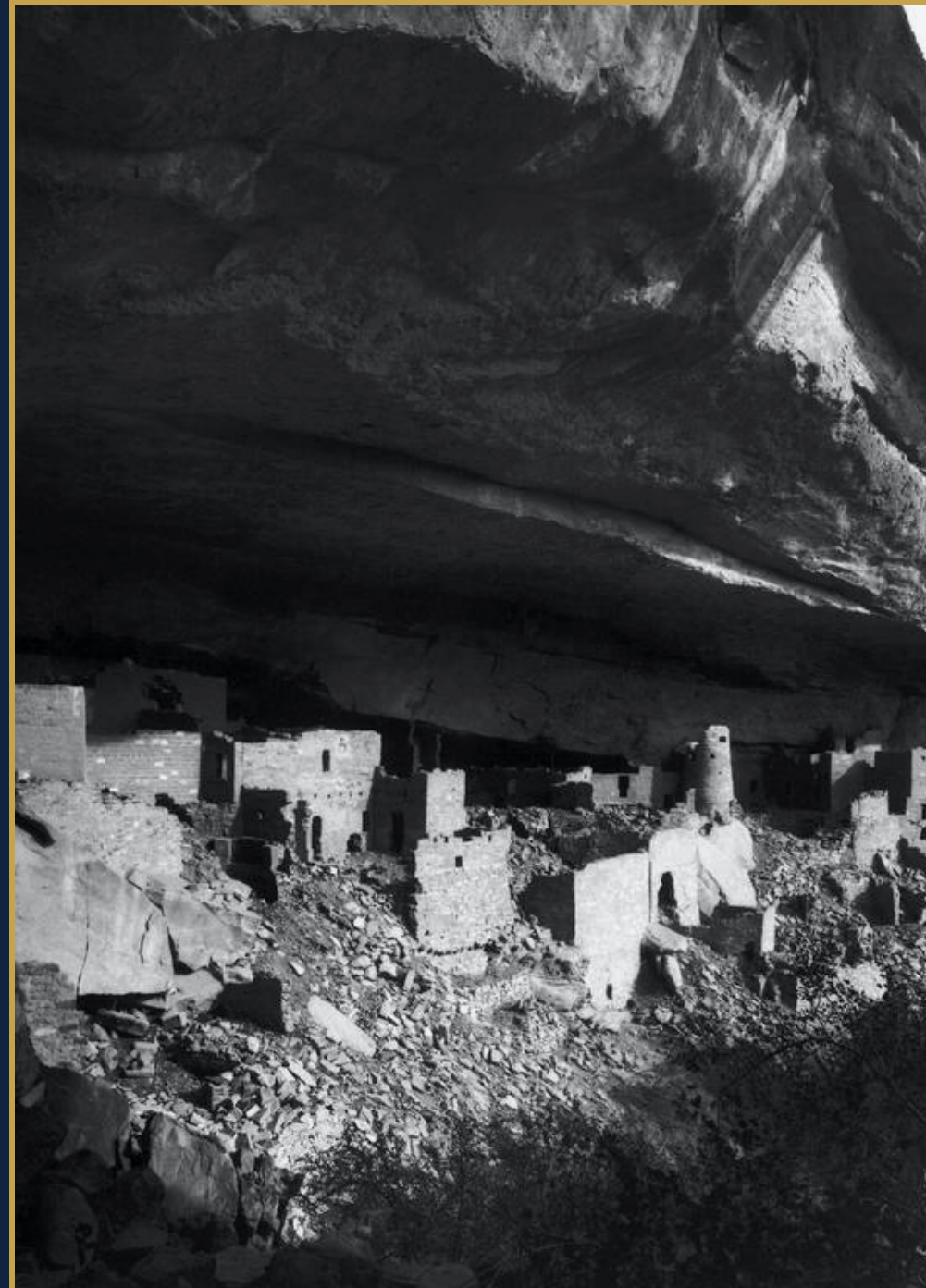
AP U.S. HISTORY • UNIT 1 • LESSON 2

Native American Societies Before European Contact

Environment, Economy, and Diversity in North America, c. 1491

“Here also they come up with cows; I have seen them thrice and have eaten their meat... These cows come from the north, across the country further on, to the coast of Florida, and are found all over the land for over four hundred leagues.”

ÁLVAR NÚÑEZ CABEZA DE VACA, THE JOURNEY OF ALVAR NÚÑEZ CABEZA DE VACA, TRANS. FANNY BANDELIER • 1905



How can a single continent hold desert farmers, ocean-going whalers, mound-building city dwellers, and mobile bison hunters, all at the very same time?

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?

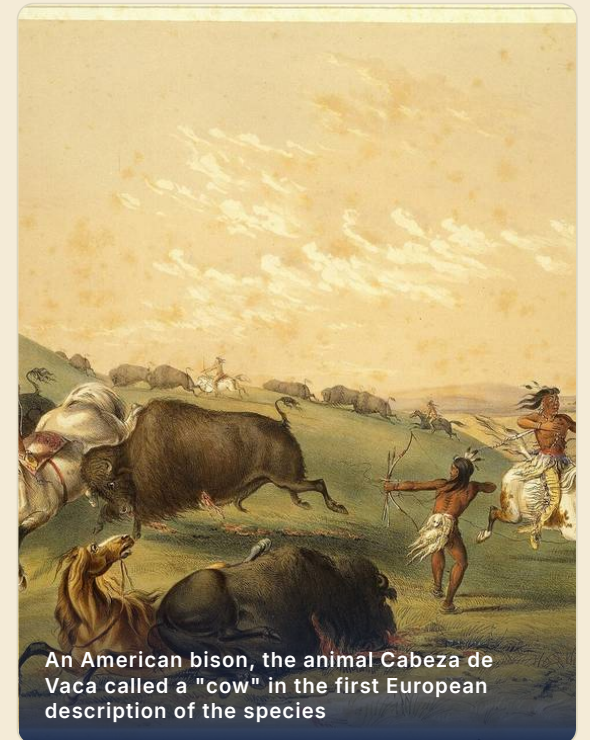
DO NOW

5 min · pen down at the bell

Cabeza de Vaca, shipwrecked and traveling through the interior in the 1530s, described peoples who followed the great herds of "cows" (bison) and others on the coast whose "lodges are made of matting and built on oyster shells." In 2-3 sentences, explain what these two different ways of living suggest about how environment shaped Native societies. Why would coastal and inland peoples live so differently?

TODAY'S PATH

- 1 Anchor the regional diversity of Native North America
- 2 Analyze how environment shaped economy and social structure by region
- 3 Close-read Cabeza de Vaca on the peoples and bison of the interior
- 4 Apply causation to explain environmental adaptation with evidence



An American bison, the animal Cabeza de Vaca called a "cow" in the first European description of the species

Five keys to Native American diversity

01

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.

02

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.

03

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.

04

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.

05

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

Long before 1492, the peoples of North America had shaped ways of life as varied as the continent itself, and each reflected a deep knowledge of local land, water, and climate. In the arid Southwest, Pueblo peoples engineered irrigation to raise maize and built apartment-like villages of stone and adobe. Along the Mississippi and Ohio valleys, Mississippian societies farmed rich bottomlands and raised cities such as Cahokia around monumental earthen mounds, while Eastern Woodlands peoples combined farming with hunting and formed political confederacies. On the resource-rich Pacific Northwest coast, peoples grew wealthy on salmon and cedar without farming at all, and on the Great Plains, mobile societies followed the bison. To study these societies is to see not a single "Indian" people but a hemisphere of distinct, sophisticated nations, each adapted to its environment.

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.



"Pueblo of Zuñi," a 19th-century photograph of a Southwestern adobe village of the kind Pueblo peoples built for centuries

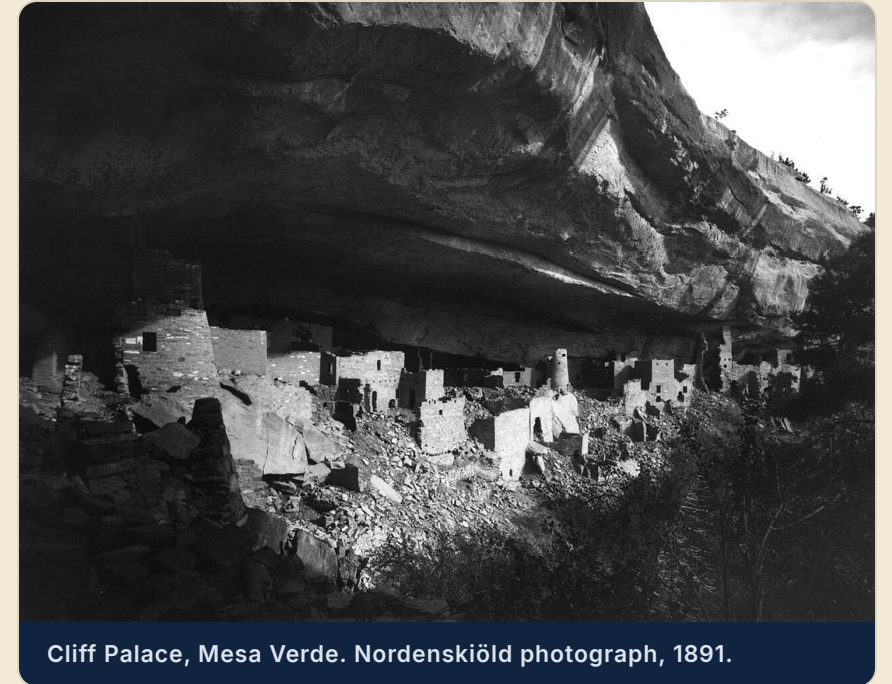
*"The women do the hard work." · Cabeza de Vaca,
The Journey of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, trans.
Fanny Bandelier · 1905*

The Arid Southwest: Pueblo Farming Peoples

In the dry Southwest, farming demanded engineering. Ancestral Pueblo and Hohokam peoples channeled scarce water through irrigation canals to raise maize, and built permanent multi-story towns of stone and adobe, communities whose walls still stand at Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde.

“They all work together to build the villages, the women being engaged in making the mixture and the walls, while the men bring the wood and put it in place. They have no lime, but they make a mixture of ashes, coals, and dirt which is almost as good as mortar.”

PEDRO DE CASTAÑEDA, THE JOURNEY OF CORONADO, TRANS. GEORGE PARKER WINSHIP · 1896
(DESCRIBING RIO GRANDE PUEBLOS, 1540-1542)



Cliff Palace, Mesa Verde. Nordenskiöld photograph, 1891.

The Great Plains: Bison-Hunting Peoples

On the grasslands, everything came from the bison. Plains peoples like the Querechos lived in portable tipis of tanned hide, moved with the herds using dog transport, and tanned robes and skins to trade with the farming towns at the plains' edge.

“These folks live in tents made of the tanned skins of the cows. They travel around near the cows, killing them for food.”

PEDRO DE CASTAÑEDA, THE JOURNEY OF CORONADO, TRANS. GEORGE PARKER WINSHIP · 1896
(DESCRIBING THE QUERECHOS, 1541)



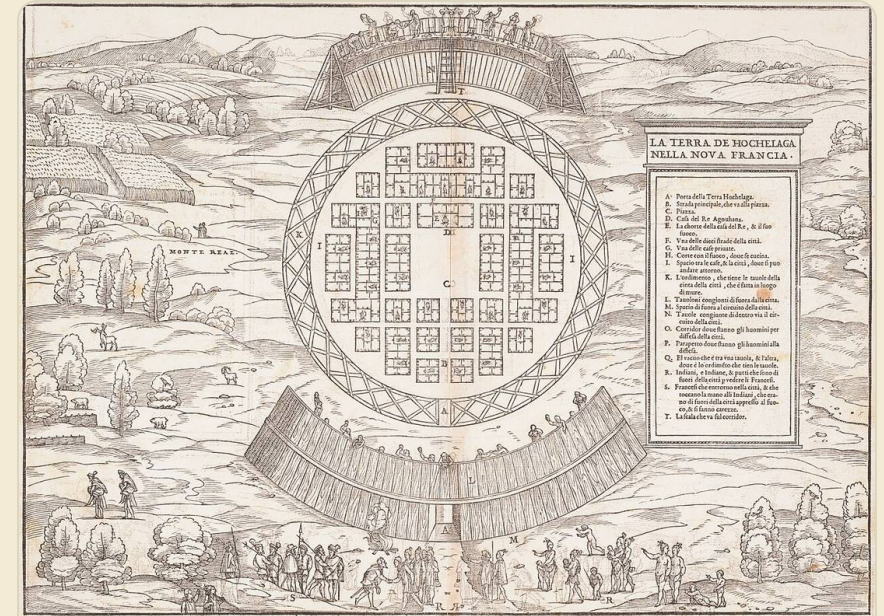
Comanche village, women dressing robes and drying meat.
George Catlin, 1834.

The Eastern Woodlands: Iroquoian Towns

In the Northeast's forests and river valleys, the Three Sisters (corn, beans, and squash) fed large, settled towns. Iroquoian peoples raised bark longhouses fifty paces long and ringed their towns with engineered timber palisades.

“The cite of Hochelaga is round, compassed about with timber, with three course of Rampires, one within another... There are in the towne about fiftie houses, about fiftie paces long, and twelve, or fiteene broad, built all of wood.”

JACQUES CARTIER ON HOCHELAGA (1535), IN RICHARD HAKLUYT'S ENGLISH TEXT • 1600
(SPELLING AS PRINTED)



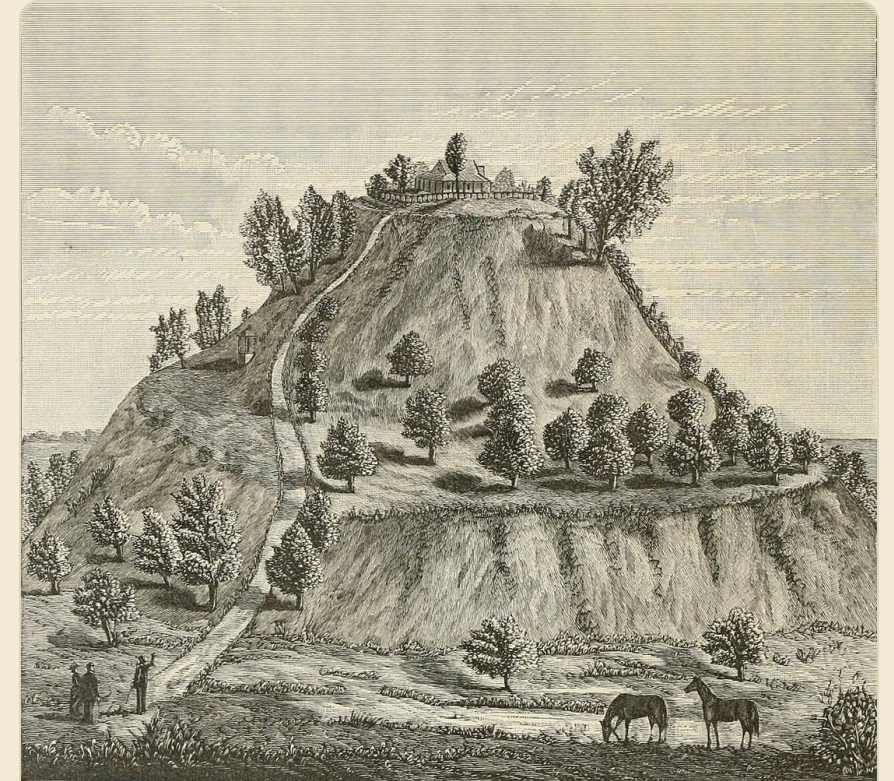
Plan of palisaded Hochelaga with longhouses and fields. Ramusio engraving, 1556.

The Mississippi Valley: Mound-Building Chiefdoms

Rich river bottomlands grew maize surpluses, and surpluses built cities. Mississippian chiefdoms raised monumental earthen mounds as platforms for temples and chiefly houses; at its height around 1100, Cahokia was the largest settlement north of Mexico.

“The town was of seven or eight houses, built of timber, and covered with palm-leaves. The Chief's house stood near the beach, upon a very high mount made by hand for defence.”

THE GENTLEMAN OF ELVAS, TRANS. BUCKINGHAM SMITH · 1866 (DESCRIBING A MOUND TOWN, 1539)



Monks Mound at Cahokia, the largest earthwork north of Mexico. Engraving, 1887.

The Pacific Northwest Coast: Salmon and Cedar

Where salmon ran thick and cedar grew tall, peoples of the Northwest Coast built wealthy, permanent villages without farming at all. Skilled carpenters raised great plank houses and ocean-going canoes, and abundance supported rank, trade, and ceremony.

“The houses are disposed in three ranges or rows, rising gradually behind each other; the largest being that in front... They are built of very long and broad planks, resting upon the edges of each other.”

CAPT. JAMES COOK, A VOYAGE TO THE PACIFIC OCEAN · 1784 (DESCRIBING NOOTKA SOUND IN 1778, THE EARLIEST WRITTEN ACCOUNT)



Inside a cedar plank house at Nootka Sound, fish drying overhead.
John Webber, 1778.

California and the Great Basin: Abundance and Adaptation

California's coasts and oak valleys supported some of the most densely settled and linguistically diverse societies north of Mexico, from acorn economies to the Chumash's plank-canoe maritime trade, while Great Basin peoples mastered mobile desert foraging.

“There came to the ships many very good canoes, each of which held twelve or thirteen Indians... All this coast which they have passed is very thickly settled.”

VOYAGE OF JUAN RODRÍGUEZ CABRILLO, TRANS. IN HERBERT E. BOLTON, SPANISH
EXPLORATION IN THE SOUTHWEST · 1916 (SANTA BARBARA CHANNEL, 1542)



Hupa fisherman with dip net, northwest California. Edward Curtis photograph, 1923.

Reading Cabeza de Vaca on the Interior Peoples

Here also they come up with cows; I have seen them thrice and have eaten their meat. They appear to me of the size of those in Spain. Their horns are small, like those of the Moorish cattle; the hair is very long, like fine wool and like a peajacket... Of the small hides the Indians make blankets to cover themselves with, and of the taller ones they make shoes and targets. These cows come from the north, across the country further on, to the coast of Florida, and are found all over the land for over four hundred leagues.

ÁLVAR NÚÑEZ CABEZA DE VACA, THE JOURNEY OF ALVAR NÚÑEZ CABEZA DE VACA, TRANS. FANNY BANDELIER · 1905 (EVENTS OF 1528-1536)

ANNOTATE underline "cows" and identify the animal · box "the size of those in Spain" and "Moorish cattle" · star how the hides are used · circle every comparison drawn to Europe.

1 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.

2 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.

3 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.

4 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.

Explaining environmental adaptation

CONCEPT APPLICATION · FRQ

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.

Scaffold: name a SPECIFIC society or region in (a) (Pueblo Southwest, Cahokia, Pacific Northwest, Great Plains). In (b) connect the ENVIRONMENT to a result (irrigation to permanent towns; salmon to settled coastal villages). In (c) use the diversity itself as your argument. Each part is 1-3 sentences with specific evidence.

EXIT TICKET

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

*One clear cause-and-effect sentence naming a specific society.
Trade tickets and peer-score against the key.*