Ancient America

Study Guide Learning Goals: “How do you make a timeline from written historical sources?” (15)

Directions: Read the following excerpt. Then, construct a timeline from what you have read. You should find ten events within the text for your timeline.

If you consider our nation carefully, America today can be seen as a cultural extension of Europe. You can see this fact each night when you sit down at the dinner table. More than likely, you converse with your family about the day’s events in English, Spanish, or French—all of which happen to be European languages. You probably eat your meal with eating utensils like knives, spoons, and forks, a custom developed by the Europeans during the Renaissance. Even many of the foods you eat, like wheat bread, pork chops, and apple pie, were cultivated in Europe for thousands of years before they reached American shores.

But the American continents have not always been bastions of European culture. To the contrary, long before Europeans came to uniquely American people lived here—hundreds of nations of Native Americans. They spoke their own unique languages, practiced their own customs and cultures, and worshiped their own deities. They ate foods unknown to the people of Europe like maize, cacao, quinoa, and potatoes.

The era before Europeans first arrived America is called the Pre-Columbian Era. It started 30,000 years ago when humans first set foot in America, ending only when Columbus “discovered” America 500 years ago.

The mists of history often obscure this era from our view. For thousands of years, the people who lived here had not developed the technology of reading and writing. As a result, they could not record their history as the Europeans could for centuries. This time before writing is called prehistory, and to understand it historians turn to archaeology.

From archaeology’s record, we believe the First Americans came to America c. 30,000 years ago, though the precise date of their arrival may have been thousands of years before. They may have walked across a land bridge that linked Asia to Alaska or they may have arrived in boats like kayaks and umiaks. As hunter-gatherers, these people hunted animals like mammoths, mastodon, and the giant bison for protein. They also probably gathered wild berries, seeds and roots. When they used up food resources in one area, they moved on in search of food in other areas. The First Americans lived this way for uncounted millennia.

Around 11,000 B.C.E., the world began to change. The planet grew warmer as the Ice Ages ended. Seas rose as the ice sheets melted, flooding the land bridges which connected Asia to America. Forests sprang up on the prairie, and deserts swallowed up woodlands in other areas. Animals in these areas adapted, migrated elsewhere, or went extinct in the aftermath of this environmental disaster.

The Great Extinction followed hard on the heels of this era of climate change. During this time, the animals the First Americans once hunted for food like the Columbian mammoth, horses, and giant ground sloths went extinct. When the last of the mammoths died out in America c. 9,000 B.C.E., the First Americans had to adapt to the new circumstances, changing their diets or going extinct themselves.

To survive the Great Extinction, the First Americans looked for other sources of food. They hunted smaller animals like deer, antelope, and even field mice to survive the years of famine when the megafauna of America died off. They also began to eat more and more plants, a trend led to a technological discovery that changed them forever.

About 7,000 years before the birth of Christ, the Native Americans of ancient Mexico made a great discovery—they learned...
how plants grew from seeds. Soon, they learned how to cultivate crops like maize, tomatoes, chilies, beans, and potatoes.

The discovery of agriculture fundamentally changed Native American culture. They no longer moved from place to place in the endless search for food; rather they stayed in one place as their crops grew. As a result, they built permanent villages and towns close to their fields.

Great civilizations developed from these humble roots. The Mayan culture was among the first, building cities in the jungles of Central America like Chichén Itzá, Palenque, and Lubaantun. There, these technologically advanced people developed art, literacy, and mathematics, building great pyramids of masonry to honor their ancient deities. The Mayan city-states reached their zenith in about 600 C.E.

Later, the Aztecs carved out their own empire in the Valley of Mexico. These fierce soldiers who dressed in suits of padded armor founded the city of Tenochtitlán on an island in Lake Texcoco. Like the Mayans, they built great temple pyramids of stone in their capital. From there, they conquered and ruled much of central Mexico centuries until the Spaniards under Hernando Cortes arrived to in turn overpower them two centuries later.

Other great civilizations also flourished in North America. The Mound Builders constructed their cities along the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. Chief among these was the metropolis of Cahokia, built c. 1050 C.E. There, the Mound Builders built great pyramids of earth that bore a striking resemblance to the stone pyramids of the ancient Maya. Many historians believe that their culture was strongly influenced by the people of ancient Mexico.

The Ancestral Pueblo produced their own culture in the American Southwest. They built a great religious and economic center in present-day New Mexico called Pueblo Bonito around 800 C.E. Faced with a long and devastating drought, they abandoned the city and others like it some five centuries later, becoming the modern Pueblo people of the American Southwest.

Christopher Columbus arrived in the West Indies on October 12, 1492 C.E. Much of Europe landed on American shores on that day. Chief among these were Old World pestilences like small pox, diphtheria, and the measles, all of which swept through the native populations like wildfire. These killed off millions of Native Americans, causing their civilizations to collapse. Waves of countless European settlers and innumerable wars against the Native Americans finished what he started.

Even so, Native American cultures still flourish in America. Around 1570 C.E., the Five Nations joined to form the Iroquois Confederacy, thus creating one of the first democracies on American soil. These Native American nations (the Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, Oneida, and Mohawk) and their government persist to this day on their lands in New York, a testament to the resiliency of the Native American people.

Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level 9.6

For Further Reading


