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 think of it one way, America today is just an extension of Europe. You can see it each night when you sit down at the dinner table. More than likely, you talk to your family about the day’s events in English, Spanish, or French. Those are all European languages. You probably eat your meal with a knife, a spoon, and a fork. That’s a European custom. Even the foods you eat—like wheat bread—in part came from Europe.

But America has not always been that way. Before Europeans came to America, other people lived here. They spoke their own languages. They had their own customs. They had their own cultures. The time before Europeans first came to America is called the Pre-Columbian Era. It started 30,000 years ago when humans first set foot in America. It ended when Columbus found his way here 500 years ago.

That era can be hard to see. For thousands of years, the people who lived here could not read or write. They had not invented it yet. This time before writing is called prehistory. To understand it, historians have to do a lot of digging and a lot of guessing.

From archaeology’s record, we think the First Americans came to America c. 28,000 B.C.E. They may have walked across a land bridge that linked Asia to Alaska. They also may have arrived in boats. These people hunted animals like the mammoth and the giant bison for food. They also gathered seeds and roots. They had to move often as they searched for food. The First Americans lived this way for a very long time.

Around 11,000 B.C.E., the world began to change. The earth grew warmer as the Ice Ages ended. Seas rose as the ice sheets melted. They flooded the land bridges which connected Asia to America. Forests sprang up on the prairies. Deserts swallowed up woodlands in other areas. This changed the balance of life for the animals that lived there.

The Great Extinction followed. During this time, the animals the First Americans once hunted for food died out. When the last of the mammoths died out in America c. 9,000 B.C.E., the First Americans had to change. They had to change their diet or go 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. They also began to eat more and more plants. This trend led to a 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. Soon, they learned how to plant and tend crops. Among these crops were maize, potatoes, and tomatoes.

The discovery of farming changed how they lived. The Native Americans no longer moved from place to place. They had to stay in one place as their crops
grew. They built lasting villages, towns, and cities close to their fields.

Great civilizations grew from these roots. The Mayan culture was among the first. They built their cities in the jungles of Central America. There, they developed art, writing, and mathematics. They built great pyramids of stone to honor their gods. The Mayan city states reached their peak in about 600 C.E.

Later, the Aztecs carved out their own empire in Mexico. These fierce soldiers founded the city of Tenochtitlán c. 1325 C.E. Like the Mayans, they built great temple pyramids of stone in their capital. From there, they conquered and ruled much of central Mexico centuries.

Other great civilizations also thrived in North America. The Mound Builders built their cities along the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. Chief among these was the city of Cahokia, built c. 1050 C.E. There, the Mound Builders built great pyramids of earth that resembled ancient Mexican pyramids. Many historians believe that they came from ancient Mexico.

The Ancestral Pueblo produced their culture in the American Southwest. They built a great city in present-day New Mexico called Pueblo Bonito around 800 C.E. They abandoned the city and others like it after a long drought some five centuries later.

Christopher Columbus arrived in the West Indies in 1492 C.E. With him, he brought many things. Chief among these were Old World diseases. They killed off millions of Native Americans and caused their civilizations to collapse. Waves of settlers and countless wars finished what he started.

Even so, Native American cultures still exist in America. Around 1570 C.E., the Five Nations joined to form the Iroquois Confederacy. This nation created a democracy long before Europeans came to their homeland. This nation and its government persist to this day on their lands in New York.

Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level 6.4

For Further Reading


