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 an extension of Europe. You can see this fact 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—all European languages. You probably eat your meal with a knife, a spoon, and a fork, a European custom. 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 so; long before Europeans came to America her people lived here—hundreds of nations of Native Americans. They spoke their own languages and practicing their own customs and cultures. 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. It ended 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 could not read and write. As a result, they could not record their history. This time before writing is called prehistory. To understand it, historians turn to archaeology.

From archaeology’s record, we believe the First Americans came to America c. 30,000 years ago. They may have walked across a land bridge that linked Asia to Alaska or they may have arrived in boats. These people hunted animals like mammoths, mastodon, and the giant bison for food. 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 thousands upon thousands of years.

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, moved on, or went extinct.

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 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. 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 to survive. They began to eat more and more plants. This 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 changed how Native Americans lived. They no longer moved from place to place, rather they stayed in one place as their crops grew. As a result, they built permanent villages, towns, and cities close to their fields.

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

Later, the Aztecs carved out their own empire in Mexico. These fierce soldiers who dressed in suits of padded armor 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 until the Spaniards under Hernando Cortes arrived two centuries later.

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 the pyramids of the 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 city 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.

Christopher Columbus arrived in the West Indies in 1492 C.E. With him, he brought many things from Europe. Chief among these were Old World diseases like small pox, diphtheria, and the measles. These killed off millions of Native Americans and caused their civilizations to collapse. Waves of European settlers and countless wars against the Native Americans 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. These Native American nations 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, a testament to the resiliency of the Native American people.

Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level 8.1

For Further Reading


