**CHAPTER 1**

**Three Societies on the Verge of Contact**

**Learning Outcomes**

* 1. Explain current beliefs about how the first peoples settled in North America, and discuss the ways in which they became differentiated from one another over time.

**Objectives**

1. Describe the routes by which the first peoples dispersed throughout North America.
2. Describe the diversity in the lives of the Paleo-Indians.
3. Explain the changes that took place during the Archaic era in regard to the development of agriculture.
4. Discuss the importance of the Maya, Aztecs, and Incas in Central and South America.
5. Compare and contrast the Anasazi and Mississippian cultures of North America.
6. Describe life in North America in 1492, and discuss regional variations among the native groups.
   1. Describe the African societies that existed at the time the first Africans were brought to the New World as slaves.

**Objectives**

1. Describe the three major kingdoms of West Africa.
2. Explain the significance of the cultural systems and religious practices that existed in West Africa prior to the appearance of Europeans there.
3. Describe life in West Africa in 1492.
   1. Describe Europe’s experiences during the last centuries before Columbus made his first voyage to the New World in 1492.

**Objectives**

1. Describe the feudal system as it existed in Europe during the Middle Ages.
2. Discuss the causes for the decline of feudalism in Europe.
3. Explain the changes in the European Catholic Church during the 1500s.
4. Describe life in Europe in 1492, on the verge of the era of exploration and discovery.

**Chapter Summary**

The first settlers of the Americas seem to have appeared in what is called the Paleo-Indian era. For a long time, archeologists believed that the first people came not for fame, fortune, or freedom, but simply because they were hungry. According to this theory, about 12,000 years ago, thousands of young adults and their families left their homes in Asia and crossed a narrow passage of iced-over land called Beringia, southwest of today’s Alaska. Recent evidence casts doubt on this theory. Carbon dating suggests that the first people on the continent were probably here much earlier than 12,000 years ago. This has prompted a reevaluation of the Beringia theory, with some scholars suggesting that the first settlers came on boats, either following whales across the Pacific from Asia, or coming from Europe, along Greenland, in search of fish, or following the Pacific coast of today’s Alaska, British Columbia, and Washington State. As these migrants moved from region to region across North America, they adapted their lifestyle according to the climate and the land.

During the Archaic era, agriculture, not hunting, gradually became the primary source of sustenance for most of the people of Native North America. Maize, a form of corn, was one key element of this existence. The Mesoamerican civilization, founded and developed by the Olmec people, thrived in today’s Mexico and served as a precursor to the many maize-based societies that developed throughout North America.

Of all the people living in North America before contact with Europeans, historians know the most about the people of the pre-Columbian era (500 B.C.E.–1492 C.E.). The largest Indian civilization in this period was that of the Incas, who lived on the western coast of South America, from the equator to the southern tip of Chile. Other impressive pre-Columbian societies include the Maya, who, with their step-tiered temples, dominated southern Guatemala and the Yucatan Peninsula (in present-day Mexico) from the fifth to the eighth centuries until an internal civil war weakened the civilization so much that it dissipated.

In the present-day United States, two of the largest pre-Columbian cultures were the Anasazi and the Mississippians. By the late 1400s, then, North America was home to numerous civilizations and tribes, some of which were sizeable, dominating large swaths of land. More than two hundred languages were spoken, among hundreds of different tribes.

By the time of the first sustained contact with Europeans, in the 1400s and 1500s, some African societies had developed vast civilizations, as trade routes wound through the continent’s various regions. The kingdom of Ghana ruled West Africa from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, beginning a tradition of expansive trade throughout western Africa using horses, camels, and advanced iron weapons to transport goods and ideas. But the kingdom’s extensive trade routes caused its eventual demise.

Mali, a flourishing Islamic kingdom, rose in power as Ghana declined. Islam spread slowly in the southernmost part of Mali. This southernmost part, called Lower Guinea, was the home of the majority of the Africans who came to America. This meant that many of the Africans who were forced to come to North America via the slave trade maintained their tribal religions rather than Islam.

As with many North American tribes, family descent in Lower Guinea was typically matrilineal. The Africans of Lower Guinea also possessed slaves—usually captives from wars or debtors who had sold themselves into slavery to pay off their debt. Some of its people were extremely skilled in the arts, and a class of intellectuals existed who were positioned in houses of learning and supported by kings. Politicians advanced in large kingdoms that oversaw and protected their citizens and that allowed for expansive lines of trade.

By the late fourteenth century, the forces of economic expansion and the development of urban life allowed for a high level of material well-being in the great European cities and the general decline of closed-off feudal living. It was this wealth and expansive mindset that engendered the Renaissance, an intellectual and artistic reconnection to the age of Greco-Roman antiquity, when humankind was considered to be more cosmopolitan and not merely a source of labor for feudal fiefdoms.

By the first quarter of the sixteenth century, two impulses—the rise of Christian humanism and corruption within the Catholic Church—sparked the Protestant Reformation. At its core, the Reformation was a movement that challenged the Catholic Church to return to its unornamented origins.

The Reformation was important for at least two reasons. First, the Reformation hastened the development of nationalism by fragmenting the unity of Catholic authority over Europe. This led to the Age of Discovery and sustained contact with both Africa and the New World. Second, the Protestant Reformation triggered several vicious and bloody battles over religion, many of which bled over into the New World and provoked people to leave Europe in search of greater religious freedoms.

By 1942, Europe was a dramatically different continent from that of just a century earlier. Spain was the most powerful nation in Europe at the time, France was the largest, and Portugal had the advantage of superior nautical craftsmanship. England was not as powerful as most of the rest of the countries at the time, mainly because it had been divided by internal religious wars for several decades, as Catholics and Protestants brutally vied for control of the country. It became a powerful force only later, after Queen Elizabeth muted religious conflict, stabilized the economy, and prepared the country to challenge Spain as the most powerful nation in Europe.

At the end of the fifteenth century, three societies, long separated from one another and uniquely developed, stood on the verge of sustained contact. The location of this contact became the “New World,” which included Native North America, as well as Central and South America.

**Chapter Outline**

I. Native America

* 1. The Paleo-Indian Era: The First Settlers (10,000–15,000 Years Ago)

1. Arrival

2. Expansion and Development

* 1. The Archaic Era: Forging an Agricultural Society (2,500–10,000 Years Ago)
  2. The Pre-Columbian Era: Developing Civilizations (500 B.C.E.–1492 C.E.)

1. The Anasazi

2. The Mississippians

* 1. North America in 1491

1. Some Social Similarities of Native North Americans

2. Regional Variations

1. The Northeast
2. The Mid-Atlantic
3. The Southeast
4. The Prairies
5. The High Plains
6. The Southwest
7. The Northwest

3. Intertribal Harmony and Hostility

II. Africa

* 1. Politics
     1. Ghana
     2. Mali
     3. Songhay, Benin, and Kongo
  2. Society
  3. Religion and Thought
  4. Africa on the Eve of Conflict

III. Europe

* 1. Europe Up to 1492
  2. The Decline of Feudalism
     1. Society
     2. The Renaissance
  3. The Decline of Catholic Europe
     1. Change
     2. The Reformation
  4. Europe in 1492

IV. Looking Ahead

**Suggested Lecture Topics**

**Lecture Topics**

1. Theories on the Arrival of the First People in the Americas
2. The Development of Agricultural Societies in the Americas
3. The Pre-Columbian Era: From Aztecs to Anasazi
4. North America in 1492: A Comparison of Various Regions
5. The Diversity and Achievements of West African Nations
6. Africa and the Development of the Slave Trade in the Americas
7. Major Changes for Europe: The Middle Ages, The Renaissance, and the Reformation
8. Europe on the Eve of Exploration: Why Then? Why There?

There were four causes for the decline of feudalism:

a. Expanding trade

b. The Crusades

c. The Black Death

d. The Hundred Years’ War

Divide students into groups of 2–4 members each and ask them to discuss which of the four reasons they believe most greatly led to the decline of feudalism. After each group has reached a conclusion and the primary cause has been determined, initiate a classroom debate based on this topic.

**The Reasons Why…**

**Research Topics—Projects and Papers**

Students might choose to complete a project to be presented in class or to write a more traditional research paper. Or instructors could decide which they prefer to have students do. Below are a few topics that are relevant to this chapter. Instructors may also choose to develop their own topics.

1. Theories on the Arrival of the First People in the Americas.
2. Kennewick Man: Delve into the discovery of Kennewick Man and bring up to date information on the find.
3. Development of Agriculture in the Americas: Select one region and trace its agricultural development up to 1492.
4. The Olmec People of Mexico: Trace the influence of the Olmec people of Mexico on others who followed them.
5. Matrilineal Clan Systems of North America: Choose one of the many tribes that flourished in North America during the Pre-Columbian Era. Conduct a more in-depth study on the tribe of your choice. You could also study matrilineal systems in North America overall.
6. West African Empires—Source Area for American Slaves: Select one of the empires discussed in the text and research its history.
7. The European Feudal Manor: Examine a typical English manor as it would have operated under the feudal system.
8. Renaissance or Reformation: Which of the two movements—Renaissance or Reformation—had the greater impact on Europe on the start of colonization?

**Additional Resources**

*Who Were the Anasazi?* U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, Colorado. <http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/fo/ahc/who_were_the_anasazi.html>

*The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record.* Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library. Authors: Jerome S. Handler and Michael L. Tuite, Jr.

<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/index.php>

*The Black Death, 1348*. EyeWitness to History.com

<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/plague.htm>

Academic Gaming Review. This website offers a series of in-class historical simulations from the feudal era including Kings and Commerce, and Renaissance Princes.

<http://home.earthlink.net/~pdr4455/index.html>

**Primary Source Discussions**

**Assignment Name: Meet Kennewick Man**

*Introduction*: Since the discovery of Kennewick Man’s remains in 1996, several Native American tribes have sought to obtain his remains and rebury them without allowing scientists to do any further study. After years of wrangling in the courts, the tribes lost and the scientists won. Kennewick man also found a home at the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, located on the campus of the University of Washington in Seattle. At the present time, DNA testing is unable to give us more precise answers about his origin, but scientists hope that this will change within a few years. Meanwhile, we can continue to investigate this fascinating discovery, and we can continue to speculate about his, and our own, past.

*Visit URL*:

[Read about Kennewick Man](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/tech/meet-kennewick-man.html) and then take the brief quiz to check your understanding.

*Reflection Questions*:

1. Study the photo of Kennewick Man’s facial approximation. What background would *you* give him? Discuss specific details that support your theory.

2. What makes the Gerasimov school of facial approximation better for recreating a facial view from very old skulls? What makes the American school more effective for determining the identity of a decomposed body?