



# North America

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about several groups of people that lived in North America before 1500 CE.

Specifically, this lesson will cover:

- [1. Clovis Culture](#)
- [2. Adena/Hopewell Culture](#)
- [3. Ancestral Pueblo Culture](#)

## 1. Clovis Culture

For decades, archaeologists thought that the earliest culture to have inhabited North America was known as **Clovis**, named after a city in New Mexico where their unique stone-chipped spearheads were first found. Clovis points are about 4 inches long and 2 inches wide and made of stone that has been shaped by using another stone to chip off flakes. These points were attached to long wooden spear shafts and used to hunt mammoths and other large animals in North America. Through radiocarbon dating, Clovis points have been found to be approximately 12,000 years old. According to archaeologists, around that time, people from East Asia, most likely Siberia, crossed the land bridge that linked Asia to North America. They then moved across North and South America, spreading their technology in the form of Clovis points, which have been found throughout these two continents. Clovis points have been found as far south as Venezuela.



A few examples of Clovis points

There are a lot of problems with the “Clovis first” understanding of how people first arrived in the Americas. One is that since this theory developed, multiple sites in North and South America have revealed artifacts that predate Clovis. In addition, DNA analysis, achieved by comparing the DNA of Indigenous people from the New World to those living in Siberia, has revealed that it is more likely that people crossed into North America between 25,000 to 19,000 years ago. This is a shocking revelation because, at that time, much of the land that they would have walked across would have been covered in glaciers. In addition, we cannot see the same level of coherence with these sites that is present in the spread of Clovis points throughout the Americas, so we cannot be sure that the same people lived at all of these sites. We do know that there is still a lot to learn about how people first arrived in the Americas.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Clovis

A culture that lived approximately 12,000 years ago in the Americas, marked by its use of a special type of spear tip, referred to as a Clovis point.

## 2. Adena/Hopewell Culture

Adena culture is named after the estate of one of the former governors of Ohio where the Serpent Mound (aka Great Serpent Mound) was found. The people of this culture were hunter-gatherers but also made a series of semipermanent settlements where they grew squash, sunflowers, and beans, and returned throughout the year. This group of people is best known for the Serpent Mound, an enormous earthwork sculpture located inside of a meteorite crater in Ohio. They did not have use of the wheel or of tools to move large amounts of earth, so it is likely that they built the Serpent Mound entirely through moving earth by hand. The mound has been dated to

approximately 1060–1070 CE. There are many different theories regarding what it represents. Is it related somehow to the passing of Halley's Comet, which happened in 1066? Is it a deity of some sort? Archaeologists have observed that the “head” of the serpent aligns with the summer solstice and that the swirls in its body align with the winter solstice and equinoxes.



**The Great Serpent Mound**

Peebles, Ohio

c. 1060–1070

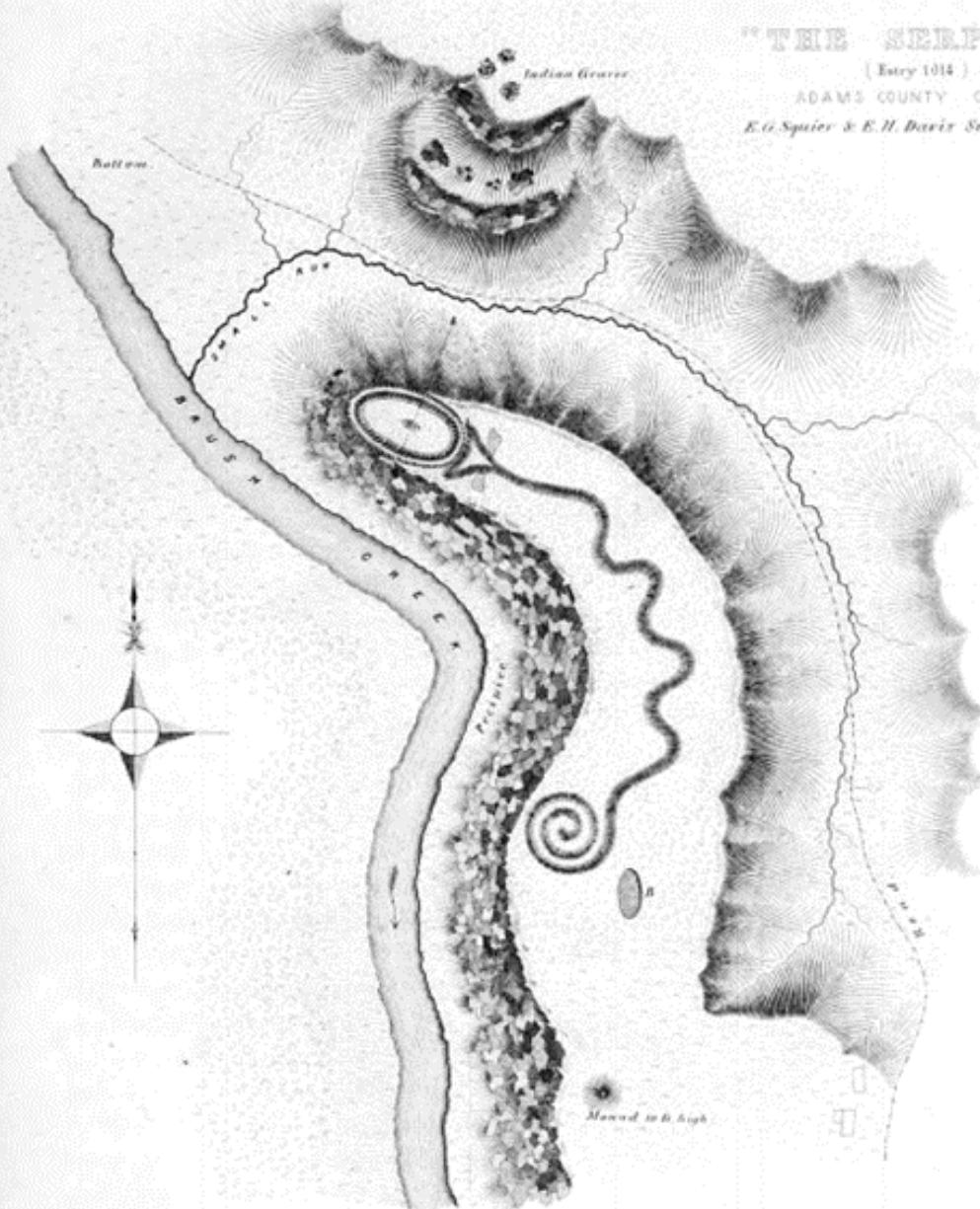
Earthwork

**"THE SERPENT."**

[ Entry 1014 ]

ADAMS COUNTY, OHIO.

E. G. Squier &amp; E. H. Davis Surveyor 1846.



1846.

Plate P. 36.

Lith. by Survey &amp; Major.

Ephraim George Squier and Edwin Hamilton Davis, drawing of what the Great Serpent Mound looks like when viewed from overhead. Published in *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*, 1848.

Unlike many of the other cultures we have studied, the Adena people did not leave behind elaborate tombs. They did not even bury ceramics with their dead. The objects that we have found are simple in terms of their visual style, lacking much detail. Ceramics are in earth tones and lack the beautiful designs of Pueblo pottery, for instance. We know that Adena people worked metal.



An example of Adena pottery



DID YOU KNOW

We think that their culture was widespread throughout the Midwest and southern United States. Some areas have been dubbed “Hopewell” and not Adena, but it is not clear if these different sites truly represent different cultures. We think that at one point in time there may have been hundreds of mounds similar to the Serpent Mound that were flattened by agriculture. There are a lot of unanswered questions regarding the ancient people of North America, due to the lack of information that we have about them.

Archaeologists have recently started using drones to document mounds across the United States. This is an important step in preserving them. At one point in time, there were hundreds of mounds located across the country. Many of them have been destroyed through farming and other activities. One of the problems is that these earthwork/geoglyphs appear quite ordinary when viewed at ground level and much more impressive when viewed from the air. Using drones to photograph mound structures conveys a better sense of the hard work and knowledge that went into their creation, hopefully leading to their future preservation.

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### **3. Ancestral Pueblo Culture**

From 100 to 1600 CE, a group of people that we refer to today as the Ancestral Puebloans lived near the Four Corners area of the southwestern United States. They were the ancestors of the Native Americans who live in the area today, including the Hopi, Zuni, and Acoma peoples. At one time, the common name for this group was the Anasazi; however, this name has fallen into disuse since it means “ancient enemies” in the Navajo language. The people who lived in this area were hunter-gatherers and gradually settled down over time, building a series of permanent settlements establishing agriculture by around 400 CE and building permanent settlements several hundred years later.



The ruins of Pueblo Bonito, the largest settlement in Chaco Canyon



The great kiva at the settlement of Chetro Ketl at Chaco Canyon



The interior of a great house at Chaco Canyon

The area known as Chaco Canyon was the most highly developed of the Ancestral Puebloan settlements, which consisted of enormous buildings 4–5 stories in height, referred to as **great houses**. These buildings could have dozens or even hundreds of rooms and were made out of sandstone, wood, and adobe. Near the center of each settlement was a circular room known as a **kiva** that was used for ceremonial purposes. Originally, the roofs of kivas would have been constructed using wooden beams. It is estimated that over 200,000 trees were used to build these settlements over a period of several hundred years. Any trees in the area near Chaco Canyon were quickly cut down, making it necessary to bring logs from forests 50 miles away or more. Roads were built between settlements, and the Navajo would say that their purpose was to transport wood. Since Chaco Canyon is a remote location in the middle of a desert, this was an incredible achievement.

As the Puebloans adopted a more sedentary, agricultural lifestyle, they began producing pottery, which is renowned today as some of the most beautiful in the world. When they were still nomadic, they used baskets, since they were lightweight and did not break easily. The earliest forms of pottery had textures on their surfaces that made them resemble baskets, reduced cracking when firing, and made cooking easier.



Corrugated jar, Pueblo culture

950–1200 CE

Ceramic



**Bird-shaped effigy jar**

c. 1000–1150 CE

Ceramic

Over time, Indigenous ceramicists smoothed out the surfaces of their pottery and decorated them with geometric designs and images painted in black, white, and red slip. Their pottery had a variety of practical uses, including water jugs and dishes for serving food as well as different types of figurines. Puebloans did not have pottery wheels, so they produced their plates, jugs, and other vessels with rounded shapes by making a coil of clay, winding it around a base, and smoothing out the edges. The ceramics were fired by placing them into a pit and surrounding them with tree branches, leaves, dung, and other combustible materials that would burn at a temperature of around 2000 degrees Fahrenheit. This work traditionally has been done by women. Different patterns are associated with different pueblos, and the same designs have been passed down over generations. During the 1800s, ancient examples of Pueblo pottery were looted from their sites and sold on the black market. Today, the descendants of the Ancestral Pueblo people make pottery for the art market.



Sara Fina Tafoya pit-firing pottery at Santa Clara Pueblo

c. 1900

The people of Chaco Canyon were extremely sophisticated, with advanced knowledge of engineering, astronomy, urban planning, and mathematics. They also developed trade networks with the people of Mesoamerica, who lived hundreds, sometimes more than 1,000 miles away. The bodies and feathers of scarlet macaws have been found at Chacoan archaeological sites, as well as cacao (the beans used to make chocolate) and other materials from Mesoamerica. From around 850 CE to 1150 CE, there was a building boom at Chaco Canyon, and after that, the civilization quickly died out and disappeared. We do not know why. One theory is that a series of droughts forced people to abandon the site for locations where life was not quite so difficult. There is also evidence of cannibalism at Chaco Canyon, but the reasons behind it are unknown. We do not understand if it was ritual, related to war, or for another purpose.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

### **Great House**

In Ancestral Pueblo Culture, a large structure with multiple levels that may have been used as housing for multiple families, or as a religious space.

### **Kiva**

A subterranean room, usually with rounded walls, that had a ceremonial function in Ancient Pueblo Culture.



### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about three different cultures that existed in North America before 1500. Evidence left behind by the **Clovis culture** in the form of spear points shows us how groups of people crossing over from Asia made their way across the continent. Members of the **Adena culture** built enormous earthwork mounds by hand. We are unsure of their function but appreciate the effort it took to create them. Lastly, we looked at the **Ancestral Pueblo culture** and the location where it reached its height, Chaco Canyon. The people of this area built structures that remained the largest in North America until the 19th century.

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