Period 1 OVERVIEW

1491 – 1607

Period 1 focuses on the North American continent from 1491 until 1607, the years from just before the arrival of European explorers to the founding of the Jamestown colony by the British. These years include the initial contacts between American Indians and the earliest explorers, as well as the introduction of West African slaves to the Western Hemisphere.

The overview begins with an examination of the various native populations that migrated to and spread across North America – their origins and the different ways each group adapted to the various conditions they faced in the regions they settled. The American Indian societies that developed shared some common characteristics, but all had to make unique adjustments to the environments they encountered. The result was the creation of societies of varying complexity.

Indians living in present-day Mexico and the American Southwest relied on the cultivation of maize, with the addition of a mix of foraging and hunting to sustain their communities. Settlement of the western Great Plains was limited until the arrival of horses with the Spanish made possible a nomadic lifestyle based on hunting. Those who settled in the Northeast and Southeast relied on both agriculture and hunting, practices that led to more permanent towns and villages.

The arrival of European explorers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries brought significant changes to both the Eastern and Western Hemispheres. The introduction of trade goods and agricultural products, as well as diseases on both sides of the Atlantic, set off a series of changes that had a lasting impact on the entire world. Called the Columbian Exchange, this series of contacts and interactions initiated demographic, social, and economic changes that reshaped the history of all the regions involved. Areas where the Spanish and Portuguese explored saw the emergence of a racially mixed population, one made even more diverse by the introduction of West African slaves. The Spanish justified slavery by labeling it the encomienda system, arguing that offering conversion to Christianity offset the disadvantages of being enslaved. The introduction of horses, pigs, and cattle further altered the economy and lifestyles of those who lived in the Western Hemisphere.

European rivalries led to intense competition for control of the Western Hemisphere. The desire for wealth, the wish to extend political power, and the determination to spread Christianity fueled these rivalries. European nations experienced growth in both population and wealth, furthering the shift from a feudal economy to more modern capitalism. Changes in technology and better business organization also boosted international trade, leading to more rapid changes for the economies of all involved.

Colonization led to significant changes in how Europeans, American Indians, and West Africans viewed each other. Europeans tended to judge all peoples by European standards and saw anyone different from themselves as backward and in need of “civilization.” This belief in white superiority led to the justification and extensive use of slavery and other methods of control, such as forced conversion to Christianity. In spite of these hardships, both American Indians and West Africans managed to adapt to the harsh conditions they faced while still finding ways to maintain cultural and linguistic aspects of their distinct heritages, as well as some measures of autonomy in their daily lives.

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KEY TERMS

Animism

Bartolomé de las Casas

Capitalism

Civic humanism

Columbian Exchange

Cultural autonomy

Demographic change

*Encomienda* system

Feudalism

Maize cultivation

Popé's Rebellion (Pueblo Indian Revolt)

Primogeniture

Three-sister farming

What were the common characteristics of Pre-Columbian Native religions?

How did Native American inhabitants of the Great Basin and Great Plains adapt to the aridity of their environment?

What factors influenced the development of permanent villages in the Northeast, the Mississippi River Valley, and along the Atlantic seaboard?

How did the cultivation of maize and the development of advanced irrigation affect native societies?

What were the motives for European exploration and conquest?

Give an example of demographic, social, and economic change caused by the Columbian Exchange.

demographic

social

economic

Why did the Columbian Exchange bring about the following changes in Europe?

population growth?

shift from feudalism to capitalism?

How did improvements in maritime technology and the development of joint-stock companies change economies in Europe and the Americas?

Describe the caste system established by the Spanish in their New World colonies.

In what ways did American Indians and Africans struggle to maintain their identity and autonomy in the face of Europeans’ attempts to subjugate them?

What shape did Indian resistance take, and how successful was it?

In what ways did overseas expansion change how Europeans viewed Africans and American Indians?