

A World Apart

Summary Analysis

In the words of historian Gerald Danzer, "History is a great integrating discipline." It helps us realize that things do not exist in isolation or at random. It puts things together. It helps us see life as a whole.

Video: "We Have a Great Deal to Learn..."

As you watch the last video in this lesson, consider the overall status of the more than 500 unique Native American cultures that inhabited the North American landscape prior to European contact in 1490s. What is the legacy of the indigenous peoples of ancient America?

Video script:

Music introduction

Narrator: On the eve of Columbus' arrival, North America was a thriving web of approximately 500 Native American societies, each one a unique adaptation to its surroundings, and a unique expression of culture.

Brian Fagan: The most striking characteristic of Native American cultures in 1492 was that they had been changing and constantly changing long before Europeans came.

Alex Barker: We tend to think of native North America as what was seen by Europeans after 200 years of depopulation and disease and it's a very biased view. A thousand years ago, native North America had a very large population. It had large towns, complex political systems, complex economies, trade routes rivaling anything seen during the roman period, a very complex civilization that's almost completely lost.

Brian Fagan: We have an enormous amount to learn about human biological and cultural diversity from them. We have a lot to learn from them about relationships with the environment. We have a great deal to learn from them about spirituality, about alternative ways of looking at the world.

Alex Barker: In the past ten years, our view of native American history has changed radically and that's a view that's only now becoming informed by native American testimonies. If you also include all the new archaeological work that's been done in the past 20 years, I suspect that in the next decade or two, we'll have a completely different view of what native America looked like in the century before European contact.

End of video.

Lesson Study Questions

To evaluate your understanding of the lesson topics and prepare for tests, consider how you would answer these questions:

1. Explain the following statement in reference to archaic Americans: The absence of written sources means that ancient human beings remain anonymous.
 - How do we learn about cultures that did not use written languages?
 - What can we learn about those cultures?
 - What elements do written sources bring to our knowledge about people?
2. What were the similarities of the cultures of indigenous peoples in America in 1492, and how did they differ from the culture of Europe at the time?
 - Consider the adaptations to the environment in order to survive.
 - Are social and political organizations similar? How did various cultures communicate?
 - Contrast indigenous cultures with European technology and domesticated animals, etc.
3. What were the main features of the Mexica culture prior to European contact?
 - What was the extent of their empire in the Americas?
 - How was their society structured?
 - What role did tribute play in their empire?
4. Describe and explain the characteristics of the pre-Columbian indigenous cultures that existed in the Pacific Northwest, the California coastal region, the Southwest, the Mississippi Valley, the Southeast, and the Northeast. What is the legacy of these cultures?
 - Consider how the environment affected the economy of each culture.
 - How did they organize their communities?
 - Identify at least one feature of each culture.
 - What can we learn from them?