

## Outline/Summary I: Pre-Contact Civilizations

This chapter begins with an overview of ancient American culture from civilizations which existed before European colonists arrived and which, in some cases, existed at roughly the same time as neolithic, Sumerian and ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman civilizations existed – periods we don't usually study in classes related to American history and culture. The authors of your book make the point that in the case of these early civilizations, we are studying “pre-contact” civilizations by which they mean that these cultures existed approximately 3000 years before any contact with European civilization took place. This is an important point because the theme of encounter, which is the central theme of the book, has a slightly different meaning in this case. We are not speaking of encounters between European and American cultures or civilizations but encounters between civilizations about which we know very little, have few artifacts or ruins to learn from, and which, in quite a few cases, died out of existence before European colonists came to this country. Yet, not all of them did, and one of the unstated questions in this case concerns the question of lingering influences. Are there characteristics of these early and indigenous cultures which continue to inform American culture centuries later? And if there are, do these characteristics become part of what we think of American culture or do they always retain some suggestion of the exotic and unfamiliar?

As your book describes these early American civilizations, it points to an important difference between these native American civilizations and those which were developing at the same time or earlier in Europe, the middle East and Asia: the absence of large cities, palaces, and kingdoms such as one would find in ancient Egypt. In particular, indigenous American communities relied on transient or at least perishable architecture for domestic and administrative functions, with most monumental structures being devoted to spiritual or ceremonial purposes and often resembling mountains or mounds, and therefore not clearly distinguishable from the surrounding land without the advantage of being able to fly overhead and look down. Many of them were not seen by humans until the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it was possible to fly over them and photograph them.

### I. Archaic Period cultures (6000 BCE - 500 BCE): Poverty Point, LA, ca 1700 BCE

early societies were usually egalitarian in structure; over time, they began to become more hierarchical, reflecting wealth, status, and power in terms of objects owned and used by individuals and increasingly in terms of living arrangements.

Poverty Point may be the earliest example of a hierarchical society in the archaic period:

- Ceremonial enclosure: 6 concentric C-shaped rings, overlooking a floodplain of the Mississippi
- diameter at top = approx 4000 feet

- small houses faced the open plaza
- avenues radiated from the plaza through the rings
- some animal-shaped effigy mounds can still be seen; these mounds, in fact, were so characteristic of the Eastern Woodland cultures that they have often been called “mound cultures”

II. Eastern Woodland cultures such as the Hopewell culture began building ceremonial earth structures in the form of mounds, placed in circles or ovals, approximately 3000 years ago

- the earliest mounds (for which we still have evidence) were about 25 feet high;
- second phase of mound building, which included the use of mounds as platforms, began about 1500 years after that and continued for about 1000 years
- used as burial and ceremonial markers although some were used as fortifications and in some cases, the mounds provided a base for buildings constructed on top of them
- although associated with the Eastern Woodlands, they were also common in the Mississippi valley

Cahokia was one of the earliest of these and was the largest

- example of a mound culture which existed in the 11<sup>th</sup> century for about 200 years
- the largest population of any site north of Mexico city at that time and was the center of a network of approximately 20 towns
- six square miles, >100 mounds, four large plazas in the center
- everything is oriented in the cardinal directions
- Monks Mound, the largest of all and located at the crossing of the four plazas, was more than 100 feet high
- woodhenges, or circular areas with cedar posts, created additional ceremonial plazas

Archeological evidence suggests that some later Cahokian houses had “pre-fabricated” mud walls as trenches built around the houses indicate an entire wall may have been lifted into place in the trench

III. the Southwest “basketmakers” and the Anasazi culture

- ca 300 bce, Mexican immigrants settled a region which today is in southern Arizona, and founded a village called Snaketown

- the Hohokam culture was based on agriculture for sustenance, built irrigation systems, and constructed shallow pit houses; they had a strong pottery-making tradition
- approx 500 years later, after contact with Mesoamerican cultures, the Hohokam culture adopted traditions which had been associated with Mexican cultures (platform mounds and Meso-American cosmic baseball)

The Anasazi culture, geographically close to the Hohokams, adopted some of their building strategies but added the development of the pueblo, a word which means “town.”

- Three periods of pueblo/Anasazi culture: 1050-1300; 1300-1700; 1700-present
- their architectural contribution = large settlements of closely packed houses with masonry or adobe walls
- Chaco Canyon: in New Mexico, 12 large towns, numerous smaller ones, a total of more than 15,000 people, constructed in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries;
- clearly intended as a dwelling site, with multiple structures
- buildings were interspersed with round spaces (the ceremonial kivas)
- typical building: approx 88 rooms set in stepped terraces sloping away from a central plaza, about 4 or 5 stories high at the back
- some kivas are/were underground; the Great Kiva at Chaco was not underground and thought to be a site of performance
- the stone masonry was exceptionally well-crafted: courses of carefully cut and squared stones were laid with 3 or 4 courses of extremely thin stone between them; slivers of rock were used to fill in any irregularities in the courses,
- the Chaco system collapsed around 1150 for unknown reasons which probably include drought and/or social disruption; the villages and pueblos were abandoned

IV. Mimbres painters and pottery makers: another Southwestern culture, famed for their pictorial vocabulary which united geometric design and figural forms representing mythological beliefs and beings

- the ritual figure from the Salado region, referred to as a “birdman,” represents both the mythological bird man and the performance in which a man dressed as a bird becomes a falcon as he dances

- many of the pots which have been found contain composite figures which appear in pueblo pottery from slightly later periods, suggesting a process of absorption of one culture into another, while the images on Mimbres pottery likewise reflect influences from ancient Mexican cultures. In all cases, they also reflect beliefs about the relationship of this world to the next – either through the images or the places where they were found and used: inverted over the heads of corpses, with a hole in the bottom signifying the place where the soul passes from one world to another

All of these examples raise certain points:

- a deliberate orientation to cosmology and a world view characterizes these cultures and their creations, whether art or architecture: is this an example of archetypal thinking or does it reflect interaction between cultures?
- the earliest examples of built structures were generally not intended as domestic shelter or not exclusively intended as such
- all made use of native or local materials