CHAPTER THREE

THE NATIVE WEST BEFORE 1700

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A Plains Indian warrior sits astride his pony, face painted, wearing beaded buckskin finery and a feathered war bonnet, with lance and shield in hand. It is a romantic and iconic image familiar to nearly every American, and for some it is all they know of the continent’s Native peoples or their histories. In the popular imagination the Plains Indian has become the “real” American Indian. Yet in 1492 no Native person in the American West looked anything like that Plains warrior. By 1700, only a handful of Native peoples had begun to embrace an equestrian life, and the golden age of Plains culture that followed would last slightly more than a century and a half. And so, the Plains Indian stereotype, as noble as it may be, must be set aside in order to grasp the historical processes that shaped the Native West before 1700 and, by extension, the American West as a region.

First, we must acknowledge that the “American West” as defined in this volume had no meaning for the region’s aboriginal inhabitants. Defining the boundaries of the American West has produced years of spirited and sometimes acrimonious debate among historians. Yet, no matter which set of borders one accepts, none have meaning outside the context of European colonization, and even then only in relation to histories of the USA and Canada (for Mexico, the West is “El Norte”). The region called the “West,” then, is largely an historical creation, and to fully understand that history we must begin with its first human inhabitants. While this essay focuses on the North American continent stretching from the tall grass prairies to the Pacific coast, the narrative ranges east to the Mississippi valley, where the great city of Cahokia peaked around 1300 and served as a nexus for far-reaching trade networks, to the south into central Mexico where the domestication of corn transformed indigenous lifeways beginning perhaps 9,000 years ago, and to the far north, from where waves of human migrants likely first entered the American continents. Notwithstanding the human migrations and historical changes described in the following pages, American Indians were, and remain, essentially placed-based peoples with strong cultural and spiritual ties to their homelands. It should always be remembered that their lands were not their “West,” but rather their center place, their home.

Counter to any static or monolithic image, the Native West was a diverse and dynamic place, home to hundreds of distinct peoples who spoke different languages, practiced different religions, and employed countless ways to make a living from the land. The story of the West’s Native peoples was always about more than horses and buffalo. In a very real
sense, America’s Native peoples have been colonized by history. Rather than being treated as real people who faced choices and made decisions that shaped the course of history, they have more often appeared as tropes—literary devices that alternately critique or justify conquest. Images of the “noble savage” (simple, honorable, close to nature, yet destined for extinction in the face of superior civilization) or the “ignoble savage” (cruel, bloodthirsty, barely human) have filled the pages of countless volumes. In neither case were Native cultures accorded their own logic or their own histories. To the contrary, the Native West was the product of thousands of years of human decisions and actions before any European ever set foot there. Simply put, Native peoples were not sitting around in the Americas waiting for Europeans to arrive in order for history to “start.” This chapter explores the histories of the West’s Native peoples, how they shaped the region before contact, and how they understood and survived the early years of conquest.

THE FIRST AMERICANS

The Native peoples of the West understand their origins and that of the Earth in culturally meaningful ways. For the Zuni people, life began in the undermost world within the Earth Mother where all the people and animals lived in darkness and confusion. The Sun Father created twin sons and instructed them to bring all of his children into the daylight world. The twins travelled west to the Grand Canyon and then, using lightning arrows, they opened a path into the Earth Mother and descended to First World. The twins made fire and planted a pine tree from the north and led the people upward to the second “Water Moss World.” A spruce tree from the west provided a path to the Mud World above, while an aspen from the south allowed them to climb to the fourth “Wing World.” There, the twins instructed the people in sacred knowledge before leading them up a silver spruce to the daylight or outer world. In each world along the way the people acquired the knowledge necessary for life in the next. Once on the surface they eventually set off to find the “middle of the world.” After an arduous journey, the people came to that middle place, where the Zuni Pueblo still stands. Many other Native groups, especially in the Southwest, similarly understand their origins in terms of emergence from chaos into light.

In other cultures, creation is explained as a process of making the Earth itself. Among the Shoshone-Bannock people of Idaho, it is explained that originally the world was covered with water. Apa, the creator, had three water children: the Beaver, the Otter, and the Muskrat. One day, Apa decided that if there was dry land there could be many other creatures, and so he asked his children to help him find out what was under all that water. While Beaver and Otter were at first doubtful, the Muskrat suggested they all try to find the bottom. Beaver dove first and remained under for a very long time but returned to the surface gasping for breath without finding the bottom. Otter went next but also failed. At last, Muskrat dove straight and deep and ignored the fish that called out his name. In short order he returned to the surface with a ball of mud upon his nose. (In most versions of the “Earth Diver” story, the smallest and weakest creature eventually succeeds.) Apa took the mud and breathed on it. He rolled it around in his hands, and it grew until it became the Earth that all live upon today.

Another common Shoshonean tale explains the creation of human beings and the origins of ethnic difference. The central figure in this story is the Trickster, Coyote. Tricksters are often comic figures that embody the ambiguities of life. They often bring great things but are also regularly responsible for misery and despair. Shoshone people in the Great
Basin tell how Coyote followed two women to their home on an island in a large body of water. He spent many days with the women, and both began to give birth at an astounding rate. They put all the babies in a woven water jug and told Coyote he must go home, carrying the basket with him. The women also warned Coyote to be careful to keep the lid in place, lest any of the babies escape. But the jug was heavy, and whenever Coyote put it down to rest he let his curiosity get the better of him and lifted the lid to look inside. Each time some of the babies escaped. Some became the Shoshones, while others became the Utes, Paiutes, Bannocks and Gosiutes. They all spoke different languages and were of the land where they lived. In Skull Valley, Utah, it is said that the last baby to emerge was “covered with dust. He was the Gosiute. He is tougher than other people.” Like the Zuni story that told of a voyage to the center place of the Earth, the Shoshone Coyote story explains the origins of a people and how they came to occupy their rightful place in the world.

The scientific and scholarly community explains the origin of American Indian peoples in a very different manner. For some Native people, the widely accepted theory that their ancestors migrated to the Americas from Asia is offensive. It suggests that their origin stories are mistaken or that in some way their ancestors were little different than European conquerors. Other Native people and groups, however, accept, or even embrace the migration theory. Visitors to the Mashantucket Pequot museum in Connecticut, for instance, begin their tour by descending an escalator through a faux glacier, suggesting the Ice Age passage of Native peoples to the Americas. Nor is the scholarly and scientific community of a single mind concerning the process and the implications of the human settlement of the Americas, although the premise that the migration from Asia was the final stage in the human colonization of the planet is not disputed. Still, in the past quarter century new discoveries, theories, and methodologies have produced a far more complicated picture of the early human habitation of the American continents.

For generations, schoolchildren were taught that the peopling of the Americas took place in a fairly uniform and rapid fashion at the close of the last Ice Age. As early as 1590, the Jesuit Joseph de Acosta theorized that American Indians had migrated from Asia. Two centuries later, when Thomas Jefferson wrote that the “resemblance between the Indians of America and the Eastern inhabitants of Asia, would induce us to conjecture, that the former are the descendants of the latter” he was expressing a fairly common belief. It was not until archeological discoveries in the 1920s and 1930s, however, that the modern “Bering Strait theory” gained prominence. In its basic form, the theory posits that the first Americans arrived some 12,000 to 14,000 years B.P. as falling sea levels exposed a 1,000-mile-wide land bridge between Siberia and Alaska. The migrants then followed the McKenzie Basin corridor, an ice-free passage between the ice sheets that paralleled the Rocky Mountains. Once clear of the ice, these “Paleoindians” rapidly populated both North and South America.

The theory meshed well with mid-twentieth-century understandings of North American archeology that were based, in large part, on discoveries made at Folsom and Clovis, New Mexico. In 1926, archeologists working near Folsom uncovered a distinctive set of fluted stone projectile points in close proximity to the remains of an extinct species of bison. Other sites with Folsom points were discovered later, and all have been dated between 9,000 and 10,500 B.P. In the mid-1930s, slightly over 200 miles south of Folsom, an even older stone tool tradition, which eventually took its name from the nearby town of Clovis, was identified. The bifacial, fluted “Clovis points” were not as finely made as the Folsom points, but generally dated to 13,000 B.P. For decades, Clovis points stood as the
The Native West before 1700

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oldest evidence of human habitation in the Western Hemisphere, and the phrase “Clovis First” came to neatly summarize archeological orthodoxy. Taken together, the Clovis and Folsom discoveries were interpreted as evidence that Paleoindians migrated to the Americas rapidly at the end of the Ice Age, bringing with them a fairly uniform and specialized big game hunting culture.7

The rapid extinction of some thirty-five genera of North American megafauna—including mammoths, mastodons, camels, ground sloths, dire wolves, saber-toothed tigers, and the earliest horses—approximately 11,000 years ago has been proposed as both confirmation of the Bering Strait/Clovis First orthodoxy and the first great consequence of human presence in the Americas. Paul S. Martin, the original proponent of the “Pleistocene Overkill” theory, argued that the changing climate at the end of the Ice Age would not account for the mass extinctions. Instead, he proposed that nothing less than a “blitzkrieg” of Clovis hunters emerged from the ice sheets to make easy prey of the lumbering beasts.8 Critics of the overkill theory have pointed out that many species that were not subject to human predation also went extinct while others that were, such as the bison, survived. The absence of kill sites for all but two of the vanished species raises further questions. Critics have also argued that the overkill thesis has become a “faith-based” creed, kept alive by popular authors who use the theory as a cautionary tale of the ecological consequences of human rapaciousness. Current consensus in the scientific community is that human predation may well have been a contributing factor but was not the principal reason for the mass extinctions.9

Since the 1970s, new archeological discoveries have proven a far more serious challenge to the “Clovis First” orthodoxy than the eclipse of the Pleistocene overkill theory. In all, some twenty-six sites in North America and nine in South America have yielded pre-Clovis dates.10 In 2008, researchers announced that they had recovered the oldest strain of human DNA yet found in the Americas at Paisley Caves in southeast Oregon. At 14,300 years old, it is at least 1,000 years older than the Clovis artifacts.11 By far the most famous, controversial, and consequential find has proven to be Monte Verde in southern Chile. The site contained a pole frame structure, bone and stone tools, bits of rope, a child’s footprint, and other evidence of human occupation dated to at least 12,800 years B.P. The initial dating of the Monte Verde artifacts, reported in the late 1970s, met great skepticism within the archeological community. Clearly, a pre-Clovis site so old and so far to the south raised a serious challenge to the traditional Bering Strait theory. As more evidence came to light, however, the antiquity of Monte Verde became widely accepted, although a few dissenting opinions can still be heard.12

The presence of so many pre-Clovis sites not only pushed back the timeline for human arrival in the Americas, it also led some scholars to conclude that the first Americans had followed a very different route, one along the Pacific coast. Water travel would have been easier and faster than the arduous continental route. Moreover, groups such as Australia’s Aborigines made substantial open-water crossings in at least 40,000 B.P. Several important archeological finds as well as circumstantial evidence also lend weight to the coastal migration theory in the Americas. Paleo-ecological evidence indicates that glaciers retreated from the Northwest Pacific coast some 16,000 years ago, while an abundance of coastal plant and animal life could have supported human residents. And, while rising sea levels have submerged the vast majority of the archeological evidence for human presence, there is hard evidence that some Paleoindian peoples possessed a developed maritime culture. The partial skeleton of “Arlington Springs Man” (anthropologists have debated the
gender of the remains for decades) recovered on Santa Rosa Island off the Southern California coast is at least 11,000 and perhaps 13,000 years old. The presence of these remains, which are contemporary with Clovis, on an island that could only be reached by boat even during the period of lowest sea levels indicates that the earliest Californians possessed watercraft and the skills to navigate coastal waters. Thousands of miles to the south, two fishing and sea-bird-hunting campsites of similar antiquity have been excavated in Peru, and in 2008 researchers at Monte Verde reported that ancient seaweed recovered there confirmed human occupation more than 14,000 years ago and indicated that residents had much stronger ties to the Pacific Coast (some 35 miles away) than previously suspected. For many, the weight of the evidence suggests that the human migration to the Americas began at least 16,000 years ago, well before the retreat of the continental glaciers, and most likely followed a Pacific coastal route. ¹³

Coastal-migration theories, however, are not limited to the Pacific. Based on an analysis of lithic technology, Dennis Stanford of the Smithsonian Institution and Bruce Bradley of Exeter University have proposed a second Ice Age migration to North America, this one of European peoples along the Atlantic coast. Arguing that no clear antecedents for the Clovis tradition have been found in Asia, and the many similarities between Clovis points and the projectile points produced by the Solutrean Culture of southwestern Europe (ca. 15,000–20,000 B.P.) they believe that at least some of the earliest migrants to the Americas arrived via a treacherous passage along the Atlantic ice shelf. They contend that the transitional stone points found in pre-Clovis sites such as Meadowcroft and Cactus Hill illustrate the evolution of the Solutrean tradition into the Clovis. The “Solutrean hypothesis” remains highly controversial. Critics point out that, in addition to the overwhelming physical difficulties of the proposed journey, there are actually vast differences between Clovis and Solutrean traditions. The latest Solutrean points are thousands of years older than the earliest Clovis points. Moreover, there is no evidence that Solutrean peoples possessed watercraft or the fishing technology that would have made the voyage even possible. ¹⁴

Since the 1980s, the study of genetics has also entered the debate. Using mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA), which is only passed down through one’s mother, molecular geneticists and anthropologists have sought to trace human lineages. Genetic researchers have found consistent links between modern American Indian and Asian populations through four principal genetic lineages that they have labeled A through D. Based on this data, linguist Joseph Greenberg and others theorized that there were three principal migrations from Asia. Each migration corresponded to an over-simplified classification of all indigenous American languages into three large groups: Amerind, Na-Dene, and Eskimo-Aleut. Later, a fifth lineage common in western Eurasia, marked X, caused a furor when it was discovered among some North American Native populations. Some theorized that this was evidence that European peoples had indeed migrated to the Americas in ancient times. ¹⁵ Later studies have dismissed this suggestion. One recent report concluded that all five lineages were present in a single pre-Clovis population and interpreted this finding as evidence for a rapid settlement of the Americas along a Pacific coastal route. ¹⁶

The discovery of some two dozen sets of ancient human remains have further complicated the story and in some cases have had real political implications for modern American Indian communities. The 1996 discovery of “Kennewick Man” along the Columbia River in Washington state sparked the greatest controversy. The remains were over 9,000 years old but, according to some physical anthropologists, exhibited “Caucasoid” features. Kennewick Man quickly became a media event as the remains, combined with the recent
discovery of the genetic lineage X, became evidence in the popular press for a prehistoric European colonization of the Americas. The case turned political when an alliance of five tribes sued for custody and reburial of the “Ancient One” under the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). The Act was meant to redress the centuries of shameful treatment American Indian peoples had suffered at the hands of Western science. Several prominent anthropologists won a counter suit, arguing that the remains could not be linked to any modern Native population and therefore could not be subject to NAGPRA. Most scientists, who view Kennewick Man as a key to understanding the early human settlement of the Americas, hailed the decision. For many Native people, however, the treatment of the “Ancient One” (who today lies in court-ordered storage at the Burke Museum in Seattle) was simply another in a long line of injustices.17

What then is to be made of the conflicting theories concerning human migration to the Americas? It is clear that the traditional Bering Strait theory—a single, rapid migration of peoples through an ice-free corridor in the center of the continent—is no longer defensible. While scholars may interpret the evidence in differing and sometimes contradictory ways, the preponderance of that evidence suggests a far more complicated story. It is likely that the First Americans began their journeys before the end of the last Ice Age, 16,000 or perhaps more than 20,000 years ago; that more than one wave of peoples came to the American continent; that many followed Pacific coastal routes to the South; and that, in addition to a big-game hunting tradition, they brought with them and developed diverse ways of life, including a maritime culture.

PEOPLES AND CIVILIZATIONS IN MOTION

From the end of the Paleoindian period to the time of the Spanish entrada (an official Spanish term denoting formal entrance into a new land), the natural and human landscape of the Native West was repeatedly transformed. Hunting, fishing, and gathering peoples developed new technologies and methods as they adapted to changing environmental conditions and exploited new opportunities. The rise of agriculture was even more consequential, and peoples formed powerful and populous societies. Finally, Native Peoples in the pre-contact West did not sit still but participated in great migrations, some spanning half a continent. At times, the result was conflict, but just as often these migrations revealed new patterns of trade and cultural exchange.

Archaeologists refer to the time between 10,000 B.P. and 3,000 B.P. as the Archaic period. Both the diversification of hunting cultures and the growing reliance on plant foods differentiate the Archaic from the earlier Paleoindian period, yet there is not a single defined sequence of these events throughout North America. Instead, scholars have defined several regional traditions. As the climate warmed on the Great Plains, bison herds filled the niche left by extinct Ice Age mammals and became the principal subsistence of numerous small bands known collectively as the Plano culture. Plano hunters used atlatls, spear throwers, to make their hunts more deadly. In later periods, Plains hunters used various methods to take buffalo including impounds and buffalo jumps. Farther to the west, the Desert Archaic tradition emerged in the Great Basin, where smaller game, including waterfowl, was just as important. Desert Archaic peoples also used seed-grinding tools to process wild grass seeds and pine nuts. Likewise, adaptations for big-game hunting were not particularly evident along the coast. In the Pacific Northwest, for instance, a coble tool tradition (simple stone hand tools modified mostly through use) and a focus on maritime resources
distinguished life during the Archaic period. Late in the Archaic, Native peoples in the southwest began to produce pottery and to cultivate plants, developments that foreshadowed great changes to come.18

The rise of agriculture provided the engine for even greater social and cultural change in Archaic Native America. Wild-plant management was the earliest form of agriculture. Weeding out unwanted species facilitated the growth of favored plants, while broadcast-sowing wild seeds improved harvests. True agriculture—the dedicated planting, tending, and harvesting of a crop—began perhaps in 9,000 B.P. in the Tehuacán Valley of central Mexico when farmers began raising bottle gourds both as a food source and as storage containers. Similar developments occurred independently in other locations in Mesoamerica. The domestication of the most important crop of all, corn or maize, took place perhaps as early as 8,700 B.P. in the Balsas River Valley in central Mexico.19 Between 7,000 and 5,000 B.P., agriculture became more elaborate as farmers cleared lands and grew a wide assortment of crops including chili peppers, beans, avocados, and squashes. While corn became the cornerstone of farming, Native peoples never practiced a monocrop system. Throughout much of North America, people planted the “three sisters”—corn, beans, and squash—together. The three plants enjoy a symbiotic relationship. Beans fix nitrogen, the principal nutrient for the other two crops, in the soil. Corn stalks provide the beans with a structure to climb, while the squash vines fill the garden floor, monopolizing the sunlight and keeping weeds to a minimum. The system was highly effective but appeared chaotic to early European observers accustomed to straight plowed furrows and monocrop fields. Moreover, in most Native societies women carried out the daily agricultural labor, the opposite of the European sexual division of labor. Regardless of the cultural biases that allowed Europeans to dismiss the ingenuity and productivity of Indian farming, agriculture transformed Native North America in the millennia before contact. In some cases, agriculture resulted in soil erosion and the forced abandonment of village sites. The social and cultural impacts of agriculture included greater population densities, longer-term residence in a single location, specialization of labor, and eventually, in certain cultures, the emergence of a stratified social order.20

Agriculture fueled the rise of great population centers in the Mississippi and Ohio river valleys as well as in the desert southwest. Around 1,900 years ago, or A.D. 100, the Hopewell culture arose in the Ohio River country and flourished for the next four centuries. Hopewell peoples (the cultural complex was not limited to a single ethnic or linguistic group) practiced a mixed economy of agriculture, hunting, and trade. Corn was introduced into the region in approximately A.D. 200, but sunflowers, squash, and various native grasses were more important. Earthen enclosures built in geometric patterns, surrounding burial and ceremonial mounds characterize Hopewell sites. Burials contained everyday items as well as exotic trade goods such as shells, copper, obsidian, and grizzly-bear teeth, indicating that Hopewell peoples lived at the nexus of trade networks stretching from the Atlantic coast to the Rocky Mountains and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. In about A.D. 400 the culture began a decline that ended with the abandonment of all the towns by A.D. 550. Some scholars theorize that more intensive localized cultivation of corn undercut the focus on trade. It is also possible that ecological changes and new hunting technologies, such as the bow and arrow, contributed to the eclipse of the Hopewell tradition.21

Within two centuries of the Hopewell collapse, a far more widespread and long-lasting agricultural society began its rise. The Mississippian cultural complex eventually influenced most of what is today the USA south of the Great Lakes from the Mississippi val-
ley to the Atlantic Ocean. Several theories suggest that Mississippian culture drew some traditions from the Hopewell culture. Mississippian villages first appeared around A.D. 700 and, within a century and a half, the culture was evident throughout the region. The culture peaked between 1100 and 1300. Large platform mounds sat at the center of Mississippian towns and were often surrounded by densely populated residential areas. Corn was the principal crop, and long-distance trade networks were central to Mississippian life. The largest and most elaborate Mississippian sites were constructed in the middle Mississippi and Ohio river valleys. Further to the south, towns appeared to be more ceremonial than residential. Later Mississippian settlements that developed southeast of the Appalachians were generally smaller and less elaborate than those found in the Mississippi and Ohio valleys. While the largest towns of the Mississippian core were abandoned by 1500, some chiefdoms in the southeast survived into the post-contact era. Evidence suggests that the Mississippian social order was highly stratified with religious and political power resting in the hands of an elite chiefly class. Mississippian also produced a distinctive iconography which archeologists labeled the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex, or more simply, the “Southern Cult.”

The pinnacle of Mississippian culture was the great city of Cahokia situated near the confluence of the Illinois and Mississippi rivers. The fertile lands surrounding the site, known as the American Bottom, had been settled perhaps as early as A.D. 600. Small farming villages existed in the area for the next four centuries. Around 1050, environmental conditions changed, allowing full-scale corn agriculture to begin, and the population swelled. The construction of massive mounds began, and, eventually, the Mississippian built over 100 major earthworks on the 6-square-mile site. The largest earthen structure in pre-contact North America, Monks Mounds, was the centerpiece of a ceremonial plaza completed around 1300. Densely populated residential districts surrounded the city center. The population of Cahokia probably peaked at between 30,000 and 40,000, making it in 1300 equal in size to London and the most populous city north of Mexico at any given time until Philadelphia grew larger in 1800. While corn agriculture allowed such population densities, far-reaching trade networks, extending from the Atlantic coast into the Native West, brought wealth and exotic trade goods to Cahokia. Some of the obsidian uncovered in Cahokia, for instance, had been quarried in what is today Yellowstone National Park. Elaborate burials that included human sacrifice, and the apparent segregation of residential districts indicate a stratified social order. Around 1300, Cahokia began to decline in size and importance. Some scholars argue that resource exhaustion was the principal reason for the decline, but the increasing number of stockades built during the era also suggests growing conflict. Regardless of the reasons for Cahokia’s decline, it was not the end for the Mississippian. After 1300, smaller Mississippian towns appeared in the southeast, and the cultural complex influenced Caddoan peoples farther to the west.

During the same centuries that saw the arc of Hopewellian and Mississippian cultures, four distinctive agricultural societies arose in the desert Southwest: the Patayan, the Hohokam, the Mogollon, and the Ancestral Puebloans popularly known as the Anasazi. All emerged from the hunting and gathering southwestern Archaic tradition, and all depended upon agriculture to varying degrees. Yet each was distinctive in material culture and agricultural adaptations. The Patayan culture, sometimes referred to as Hakataya, covered a vast area of modern western Arizona, southern California, and northern Baja California from 700 to 1500. It is the least studied and least well understood of the four Southwestern cultures. Patayan culture has been termed “rock-oriented” due to
the emphasis on stone construction techniques and rock shrines and trail markers found throughout the area. The use of inundation agriculture (the reliance on seasonal flooding) instead of irrigation was another characteristic of Patayan life.24

To the east of the Patayans, the Hohokam people wrested a living from the Sonoran desert of Arizona. They practiced ingenious methods of dry farming but are best known as the architects of the largest irrigation system in pre-contact North America. By the 500s the Hohokams began building canals to deliver water from the Gila and Salt rivers to their fields. Between 800 and 1300 they built ever-more-elaborate irrigation systems. Two-thirds of the canals were built along the Salt River, where more resistant bedrock meant shallower channel cuts and the easier diversion of water. Along the Salt, the Hohokams constructed 350 miles of main canals and over 1,000 miles of feeder canals to water perhaps 10,000 acres. Hohokam crops included corn, drought-resistant beans, squashes, tobacco, cotton, and agave. Irrigated agriculture probably supported 50,000 people in the Salt River Valley and a regional population of 130,000. Although earlier theories that the Hohokams themselves were immigrants from the south are today generally dismissed, cultural connections with Mesoamerica are evident in Hohokam sites. Ball courts, on which a pre-contact ritual sport was played throughout Mesoamerica, first appeared in Hohokam villages around A.D. 700, and by 1000 they were present in nearly every village. In later phases the Hohokams also built large rectangular platform mounds and central plazas in the largest towns.25

By 1450, however, the Hohokam had abandoned their towns and canals and “disappeared.” Controlling water in an arid environment was the basis of Hohokam success, but water was also a likely cause of the decline. A massive flood had struck around A.D. 900 but the people rebuilt and expanded their canal network. A second devastating deluge in the 1350s, however, destroyed much of the canal network, and this time there was no recovery. Although it cannot be proven, increased salinity in the soil as a result of inadequate drainage was probably also a contributing factor to their decline. After centuries of intense irrigation, Hohokam fields simply could no longer support the people. For some, the story of the Hohokam provides evidence that, contrary to popular beliefs, the First Americans were not the “first environmentalists.” Drawing such a conclusion is both an example of presentism and the power of popular stereotypes. No human society in 1400 understood ecology in modern scientific terms, and no human being alive could be considered an “environmentalist.” Nor did the Hohokam vanish mysteriously. The abandonment of towns and whole regional systems was a repeated phenomenon in the pre-contact Southwest as peoples adapted to changing social and environmental conditions. It meant the end of one possible adaptation, not the end of an entire people. The Hohokams were likely some of the ancestors of the modern Akimel O’odham and Tohono O’odham peoples.26

South and east of the Hohokams, the Mogollon people covered a vast area that straddles the modern US–Mexican border. The earliest Mogollon sites date to around A.D. 200 and were characteristically small pit-house communities located on ridges and bluffs above good agricultural land. Floodwaters provided irrigation for Mogollon fields. Between 950 and 1150 major changes came to the Mogollon world. The population increased substantially and the people began to build above-ground masonry Pueblos and produce more refined black-and-white pottery similar to the Ancestral Puebloans to the north. Indeed, there were many connections between the two cultural traditions. Between 1275 and 1400, for instance, the Mogollon population increased again, and it is likely that the increase was partially due to the upheavals and abandonments that took place to the north during this period. Mogollon people abandoned their villages in Arizona and New Mexico by 1450.
and migrated in search of new farming lands. Some undoubtedly were ancestors of the modern Pueblo peoples.²⁷

North and east of the Mogollon homeland was the fourth, and best known, cultural tradition in the pre-contact Southwest. For decades these peoples were known as “Anasazi,” with the term popularly translated as “ancient ones.” In fact, Anasazi is a Navajo word that literally means “ancestors of our enemies.” Today, many scholars refer to these peoples with the less colorful but more accurate and respectful term “Ancestral Puebloans.” (The Mogollon culture was also ancestral to some modern Pueblos, but for the purposes of this essay the term is applied more narrowly.) About 2,000 years ago, Native peoples began inhabiting caves and rock shelters in southwestern Colorado and adjacent areas of New Mexico and Arizona. In around A.D. 400 the area’s residents began to construct pit houses, often on mesa tops, and to produce a simple gray pottery. Hunting and gathering supplemented agriculture and sustained the people. The next several centuries saw the intensification of agriculture, a shift toward above-ground masonry structures, and more elaborate forms of pottery. Around A.D. 800, as populations increased in both upland and canyon settlements, shared “community houses” increasingly replaced pit houses. What many scholars deem the zenith of Ancestral Puebloan culture came next: the Chaco Canyon period.²⁸

Chaco culture thrived from A.D. 850 to 1150. Dozens of “great houses,” or major towns, were constructed early in the period. The Chacoans oriented the great houses with solar and lunar observations as well as with the cardinal directions. With 700 or more rooms and over three dozen kivas (circular underground ceremonial rooms), the magnificent Pueblo Bonito sat at the center of the Chacoan world. Four hundred miles of engineered roads connected Pueblo Bonito and the other great houses to other towns throughout the region as well as with the San Juan River, Mount Taylor, and the Chuska Mountains. The roads ran for great distances in nearly straight lines, leading many archeologists to believe they held great ceremonial and symbolic meaning. They also likely served a practical purpose as much of the corn consumed at Pueblo Bonito as well as the vast majority of the over 1 million stones used in the town’s construction were brought from upwards of 50 miles away. Like the Hohokam, the Chacoans built water-control structures that enabled agriculture in the arid canyon. Chaco also sat at the nexus of a regional trade network, and the great houses of the canyon produced vast quantities of finished turquoise jewelry. By 1050, Chaco Canyon was a ceremonial and political center with a population of between 5,000 and 15,000 that dominated a vast area, yet within a single century the great houses would be abandoned. Environmental changes were likely one root cause of the Chaco decline. Around 1100, a half-century-long drought struck the region, and within two decades construction in Chaco Canyon had ceased. The depletion of local resources surely magnified the drought’s impact, but some scholars argue that the collapse of a discredited political and religious elite was also a contributing factor.²⁹

In the popular imagination, the “Anasazi” world was a peaceful and egalitarian place. Many archeologists argue instead that the evidence suggests a highly stratified and centralized sociopolitical structure characterized by planned settlement patterns, substantial labor investment in the construction of the great houses and water-control structures, mortuary customs, and differing access to material goods. More controversial is the theory proposed by a smaller number of scholars that chronic violence, including incidents of cannibalism, enforced this social order. Supporting evidence for the theory—burned structures, haphazardly buried or unburied bodies, and telltale damage to human remains—has been found in dozens of sites either spatially or temporally associated with Chaco. Anthropologists
Christy Turner and Jacqueline Turner have even suggested that the “rapid development of things Chacoan,” was directly linked to the arrival of peoples from central Mexico who “used cannibalism not only for ritual purposes but also, in their homeland, as an element of intimidation and social control.” Their theory is highly speculative, and no concrete evidence for a physical migration of peoples from the south exists. It does present an intriguing, if unsettling, theory for the rise and the fall of Chaco culture, as environmental conditions could have intersected with the violent excesses attributed to the ruling elite.

What is certain is that after 1150 the population shifted from Chaco Canyon and other low basins toward higher country. The lands north of the San Juan River including Mesa Verde saw substantial population growth. Great houses generally gave way to smaller structures, although after a half-century hiatus, magnificent buildings such as Yellow Jacket and Aztec were once again built. Continued evidence of violence suggests that regional conflict had not ended with the Chaco collapse. Large or small, community houses were no longer built in exposed open country but rather in more easily defended sites. Mesa Verde’s Cliff Palace and Balcony House were built within seemingly inaccessible cliff overhangs. Like Chaco, the upland sites experienced a rapid depopulation. Chronic violence may have been a factor, but changing environmental conditions certainly contributed to the decline. Between 1200 and 1250, ample rainfall led to more reliable corn harvests, expanding trade networks, and a growing population. When the rains and crops once again failed after 1260, however, the Pueblos quickly felt the impact of over-hunting and resource depletion. The drier, west-facing, and fortified mesa-top sites failed first. By 1300, only the best-watered eastern-facing villages remained in the region. Soon, they too would be abandoned as the people moved southeast to Pueblos along the Rio Grande, or south and west to the Zuni or Hopi mesas. The Pueblo world that the Spanish would encounter in the sixteenth century was beginning to take shape.31

Just as the impact of Mississippian societies was felt beyond the Mississippi valley, the agricultural traditions of the Southwest also influenced peoples throughout a larger region. The Fremont culture, centered in the modern state of Utah, was very likely a local adaptation of resident hunting-and-gathering peoples to the northward spread of agriculture around 500. Fremont agriculture depended on one variety of corn, known as Fremont dent. Hunting and gathering also remained relatively more important among the Fremont than other groups. Villages were generally small collections of pit houses along with associated storehouses and granaries. The ultimate fate of the Fremont people is poorly understood, although the migration of Numic peoples into the region may have led to the amalgamation of some groups and the migration of others to the South.32

Great human migrations, then, such as the movement of Numic-speaking (Shoshone, Paiute, and Ute) peoples across the Great Basin and into the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains, were another factor that shaped the pre-contact Native West. Archeology, linguistics, and oral traditions all provide evidence for the Numic migration, but scholars disagree on its timing. Beginning in the 1930s, some archeologists began documenting a Numic expansion that began some time between A.D. 800 and 1000. Later anthropologists used linguistics to build upon these findings and to argue that the “Numic spread” took place very rapidly and fairly late in the pre-contact period. By the time of sustained European contact, however, Numic languages, with relatively few dialectical differences, were spoken across a vast arc stretching from the Western Basin across the present states of Nevada, Oregon, Idaho, Utah, Colorado, and Wyoming. Advocates of the “Numic spread” theory argued that this fact is indicative of a migration that took place so rapidly that numerous
dialectical differences simply had no time to develop. They propose that the migration began sometime after A.D. 800 and that Shoshonean peoples may not have reached the Snake River region until after the fourteenth century, but more recent archeological work in the Snake River area suggests that Shoshonean peoples have resided there for at least 3,500 to 4,000 years. Whatever the case, Numic peoples moved into areas once occupied by groups of the Fremont and Mountain traditions, either absorbing or replacing those peoples. Moreover, the great Numic migration did not end with contact; rather, the new opportunities presented by an equestrian life spurred further expansion. Some Shoshones would move as far north as the plains of Alberta and Saskatchewan by the early 1700s while others moved onto the Southern Plains where they became known as Comanches.33

Sometime between the Puebloan abandonment of the upland sites and the Spanish entrada, Athapaskan-speaking ancestors of the Apaches and Navajos moved into the Rio Grande and Colorado Plateau region after a long migration south along the flanks of the Rocky Mountains. Their migration likely began sometime around A.D. 200 in what is today northwestern Canada and Alaska. Bringing with them a hunting technology that included the bow and arrow and the distinctive Avonlea projectile point, Athapaskans may have arrived in modern Montana and Wyoming soon thereafter. Some scholars believe Athapaskans were in northwestern New Mexico as early as A.D. 700, while others place their arrival far later, within a century of Spanish contact. Some of the Athapaskans became the Lipan, Mescalero, Jicarilla, Chiricahua, and Western Apaches. Into the historic period they maintained an economy based upon hunting, gathering, and raiding. Others became the Navajos, or Diné, who may have resided in the Four Corners region by the mid-1400s and who developed a complex relationship with the Pueblos marked by warfare and raiding as well as intermarriage and cultural borrowing.34

THE NATIVE WEST IN 1492

Anthropologists have employed the “culture area” concept to understand and compare Native cultures in North America. For the most part, culture areas are defined by environment and economics. Diverse environments posed unique challenges and presented distinct opportunities, and within a given area Native cultures exhibited general similarities in regard to economic strategies and expressions of material culture.35 On the northwest coast, for example, salmon fisheries and other marine resources were central to the economic lives of all Native peoples, and this fact was evident in their rich material cultures. One must be aware, however, of the concept’s limitations. First, a rigid application of the concept obscures the great diversity—religious, linguistic, and even economic—that could occur within a single culture area, particularly on its geographic margins. Second, there is a danger that over-reliance on the culture-area concept can create a static and environmentally deterministic view of Native cultures. Because one group adapted to a given environment at a specific time did not make that adaptation inevitable or unchanging. One final note: the group names used below generally reference linguistic divisions and are included to give the reader a point of reference. In nearly every case, the modern tribal peoples who emerged from pre-contact groups had yet to develop distinct sociopolitical identities and would not have referred to themselves by these names before contact. With those caveats in mind, a survey of culture areas in 1492 provides vivid illustration of the diversity of Native North America at the time of contact.

California was the most populous and linguistically diverse of the pre-contact culture
areas. Approximately 300,000 people lived in permanent settlements concentrated along
the coasts and rivers. They spoke at least eighty mutually unintelligible languages, further
divided into hundreds of dialects. Along the northern coast were Pomo, Yokuts, and Sink-
yones. Nisenan, Miwok, and Yokuts speakers lived in the Sacramento and San Joaquin
valleys and the Sierra foothills. Chumash people occupied a large portion of the coast in
the Santa Barbara area as well as the Channel Islands. Yet with all this linguistic diversity,
California Indians practiced similar subsistence strategies made possible by the richness
of their environment. Men fished and hunted small and large game. Women collected
and processed acorns from the oaks that covered the hillsides to make gruels and breads.
California Indians actively husbanded many other varieties of “wild” medicinal and food
plants. They used fire to clear underbrush, promote fruit production, and create the edge
habitat favored by deer, while broadcast-scattering of seeds ensured sustained growth of
grasses and other semi-domesticated plants. There were, of course, regional variations.
Coastal people such as the Chumash could harvest shellfish and marine mammals not
available to inland peoples. The intricate trade ties that rounded out the California Indian
subsistence strategies, however, brought products not locally available to peoples through-
out the region.36

Like California, the Pacific Northwest coast provided an incredible natural bounty,
and the peoples who lived from northern California to southeastern Alaska developed
perhaps the richest material culture in pre-contact North America. As in most other cul-
ture areas, linguistic diversity was the rule. Along the Oregon coast, tongues from at least
nine language families could be heard. Numerous dialects of Coast Salish were spoken
around Puget Sound and north into modern British Columbia. Farther north were Haida,
Tsimshian, and Tlingit speakers. Autonomous villages were the essential political unit on
the northwest coast, but intricate kinship ties bound numerous villages together in trade
and social networks. While hunting and gathering of berries and other wild-plant foods
were important, marine resources were the heart of the economy. Coast Indians possessed
an elaborate material culture to take and process fish, shellfish, and marine mammals.
Some peoples, such as the Makah, went to sea in large dugout canoes to hunt whales. Most
important of all, however, were the salmon that ascended the region’s rivers by the millions
in every season but winter. The fish were speared, netted, and trapped in weirs at stations
usually placed at falls. Salmon was eaten fresh, and millions of pounds were dried on racks
for later consumption.37

The region’s wealth was reflected in the peoples’ material culture as well as a highly
stratified and hierarchal social order that included an indigenous form of slavery. North-
west coast peoples generally lived in large multi-family log and cedar plank homes. From
Puget Sound to the north, elaborate carved totem poles recounting clan lineages and
group history stood at the entrance of the houses. A stratified social order and the cul-
tural importance of wealth were unique features of northwest-coast life. At the top of the
social order was a wealthy elite made up of the chiefs and their lineage members. Below
the elites were the “commoners,” and at the bottom of the order were slaves. Slaves could
either be purchased or captured and were subject wholly to their master’s will. Social status
came through birth, but the acquisition and redistribution of wealth was also a cultural
imperative that gave rise to the region’s most distinctive ritual: the potlatch. Kin-groups’
leaders hosted these elaborate give-away ceremonies, where property that was accumulated
over months was gifted to invited guests. Anthropologists have long debated the myriad
cultural meanings applied to the potlatch, but most agree that its central purpose was to
raise the status of the hosts and their children. In some very rare cases it was possible for commoners to overcome their birth status and to become a member of the elite through careful potlatching.38

Salmon was also central to the economic lives of the peoples who lived east of the Cascade Mountains on the great plateau drained by the Columbia River and its tributaries. The northern reaches of the plateau were home to Interior Salish speakers such as the Shuswap, Lillooet, Coeur d’Alene, and Okanagan. In the more arid lands on the southern plateau, Salish gave way to Sahaptin peoples such as the Yakama, Nez Perce, Walla Walla, and Umatilla. (Other peoples such as the Cayuse and the Klamaths spoke unrelated languages.) Plateau peoples lived in a diverse landscape that ranged from high, forested mountains to vast rolling plains, to the rugged volcanic “scablands.” Despite this physiographic diversity, rivers were the lifeblood of the people. Plateau peoples generally wintered in semi-permanent villages. Large mat-covered lodges housed multiple families. At other times of the year the people were on the move, either to the fisheries during the great salmon runs or in search of terrestrial game and wild-plant foods. Fisheries were situated at the base of falls, and plateau groups possessed an impressive array of fishing technologies that included weirs and traps as well as spears with detachable barbed tips. Over thirty varieties of root vegetables, including camas, wild onions, bitter-root, and biscuit-root, were of particular importance in the plateau diet. People traveled long distances to access critical resources at specific times of the year. Compared with the salmon-fishing peoples of the coast, plateau peoples held far fewer material possessions and placed far less cultural emphasis on the accumulation of goods. In the post-contact era, the Nez Perce and other plateau groups expanded their travels even farther, incorporating equestrian bison hunting east of the Rocky Mountains as yet another part of their subsistence cycle.39

South of the Columbia plateau, the vast inland Great Basin between the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada was unique among culture areas as the majority of its residents spoke dialects of one or more related Numic languages: Shoshone, Ute, and Paiute. Paiute groups lived throughout what is today western Nevada and into eastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho. Shoshones lived across the northern half of Nevada, southern Idaho, and northern Utah, and some were already pressing out onto the plains of Wyoming. Ute speakers occupied the majority of modern Utah as well as the western half of Colorado. The Great Basin has been the most misunderstood and stereotyped of the culture areas. Basin peoples faced comparatively harsh environments and developed numerous strategies to wrest a living from the arid landscape. Many mid-twentieth-century anthropologists minimized this diversity and posited a direct connection between the harsh environment and an overly simplified vision of basin life marked by small kin-based social units, low population densities, and a simple subsistence culture focused on sheer survival. They treated the Great Basin as an ethnological laboratory to study the most “primitive” and “simple” of American Indian peoples and, as a result, created a static, ahistorical vision of its peoples.40 In their works, they privileged the piñon nut harvest, the collection of grass seeds and other wild-plant foods, and the taking of small game as indicative of basin subsistence and consequently obscured the great variations that existed throughout the region. Fishing was of critical importance to some groups, most notably the Paiutes of western Nevada and the Shoshone and Paiute speakers of the Snake River plain. The collection of camas and other root vegetables took place on the high prairies at the foot of the mountains, while some Shoshones, known as Tukudika or “Sheep-eaters,” relied upon big-game hunting at even higher elevations north of the Snake River. Like the peoples of the plateau,
many basin groups practiced a complex annual subsistence cycle that only became more expansive with the acquisition of horses in the post-contact period.41

The culture area most associated with horses is, of course, the Great Plains. But in 1492 the most numerous and prosperous Plains peoples were horticulturalists who lived in earth-lodge villages along the river courses. Caddoan speakers, including the ancestors of the modern Caddo, Wichita, Pawnee, and Arikara, moved north and west from their homelands in the lower Mississippi valley, beginning around A.D. 900. They brought with them corn agriculture and elements of the Mississippian cultural complex. They settled first along the well-watered and more humid tributaries of the Missouri and Mississippi, including the Arkansas River where the Caddos made their home. The Pawnees’ and Arikaras’ migrations continued further, out onto the more arid plains of modern Kansas and the Dakotas. Another population center was along the middle Missouri River in present-day North and South Dakota, where Siouan-speaking Mandans and Hidatsas established permanent villages in around 1100. Later Siouan arrivals to the eastern margins of the Plains included the ancestral Otoes, Iowas, Omahas, and Poncas. Earlier attempts to grow corn on the arid Western prairies ended with the sustained drought around the beginning of the thirteenth century, but, as conditions got better, people again moved west and resumed agriculture. By the 1400s, the Pawnees were farming along the Loup and Republican rivers in Nebraska and Kansas.42 With regional variations, all of these peoples came to practice mixed economies that combined a central focus on agriculture with hunting and gathering of wild food crops. Gardens were situated in alluvial river bottoms. Women carried out the majority of the agricultural labor, and, in many groups, such as the Arikara, they owned the fields and the crops. Men helped at harvest time, hunted, and fished. Bison presented an attractive source of protein on the hoof, but hunting on foot was an arduous task restricted to times that the herds came near the villages. The acquisition of horses, beginning in the later half of the seventeenth century, allowed a growing focus on buffalo hunting among the Pawnees and other Plains earth-lodge peoples.43

Away from the rivers and farther west, more nomadic groups already depended upon the bison herds. Kiowa oral traditions, for instance, indicate they migrated east across the Plains toward the Black Hills in the centuries before contact. The Crows also began to move, splitting off from the Hidatsas sometime after 1450 and making their way toward the Bighorn Mountains. Pre-horse Plains peoples pursued the bison herds on foot and, like, the river people, used bison jumps and impounds. Like the later peoples of the region, they lived in skin lodges. Their principal beasts of burden, however, were dogs, which limited the loads that could be carried and the distances that could be covered. Conspicuously absent from the Great Plains in 1492 were many of the iconic peoples who came to define the equestrian Plains culture, including the Comanches, Cheyennes, Lakotas, and Blackfeet. The people who later would be known as Comanches were part of the great Numic migration across the Intermountain and Rocky Mountain West and had yet to develop a distinct social and political identity. Both the Cheyennes and the Lakotas were peoples of the Great Lakes woodlands and prairie margins. Their migrations to the west were one of the great consequences of contact as the expansion of the fur trade and of peoples farther east pushed them west at the same time as new opportunities presented by the equestrian culture pulled them toward the Plains. Similar forces motivated the Blackfeet migration out of the woodlands and onto the plains of Alberta sometime before 1700.44

The Southwest was perhaps the most diverse region of the Native West. To the north and east along the Rio Grande River and on the Colorado plateau, sedentary Pueblo horti-
culturalists and nomadic Athapaskans had developed a complex set of social and economic relations. By 1492, the ancestors of the Apaches and Navajos had resided in the Southwest for around two centuries. They had adapted to the land and the opportunities and limitations it presented. For the most part, they subsisted through hunting and gathering, supplemented by a cycle of trading with and raiding the Pueblos. This pattern became more pronounced during the historical period and incorporated intermarriage and cultural borrowing. Eventually, a limited number of Athapaskans adapted some Pueblo horticultural methods, and, in the post-contact era, the Spanish distinguished them from other Athapaskan speakers as the Apaches de Navajo: the “Strangers of the Cultivated Fields.”

While the Spanish deemed the sedentary peoples they found in New Mexico “Pueblo” (or village) Indians, they were a diverse group defying simple generalizations. Upwards of 60,000 people lived in over ninety permanent towns at the end of the fifteenth century. At the time of contact, Pueblo peoples spoke languages from four language groups. Most of the Rio Grande Pueblos spoke Tanoan languages (Tiwa, Tewa, and Towa). A few others, as well as the central Pueblos of Acoma and Laguna, spoke Keresean tongues. Hopi is a Uto-Aztecan language, while Zuni has no known cognates. Socially, politically, and religiously, the Pueblos also exhibited great diversity. Along the Rio Grande, most groups were patrilineal and lived in bilateral family households. Summer and winter moieties (dualistic social and kinship subdivisions within a community) were responsible for the ceremonial needs of the community, and politics tended to be more centralized in the hands of a cacique (chief) and council. Farther west, in the more isolated mesa villages, such as Hopi, Zuni, and Acoma, people lived in matrilineal households. Politically, the western Pueblos operated more as a theocracy, with public opinion enforcing the consensus of leaders. Yet, with all these differences, the Pueblo peoples had more in common with each other than with the Athapaskan-speaking Apaches and Navajos who migrated into the southwest in the centuries before the Spanish arrival.

West of the Pueblos lived many other peoples who developed their own unique ways of living in a desert country. In the lands where the Hohokam culture had flourished several centuries before, the Piman-speaking ancestors of the modern Pimas and Tohono O’Odhamss made their homes. Living in the valleys of the Gila and Salt rivers, the Pimas relied heavily on agriculture, supplemented by hunting and gathering. Corn and cotton were their principal crops, and the Pimas were renowned for their basketry and cotton blankets. The Tohono O’Odhamss (Papagos) lived to the south and east, in some of the driest reaches of the Sonoran desert. They knew the desert country intimately and collected a wide range of edible plants, including the fruit of the saguaro cactus, and took game large and small. North and west of the Piman homelands ranging to the Colorado River and beyond were numerous Yuman-speaking groups ancestral to the modern Havasupais, Yavapais, Hualapais, Mohaves, Quechans (Yumas), and Maricopas. With regional variations, these peoples farmed maize in the bottomlands of watercourses and supplemented that diet through hunting and gathering. Their lands ranged from low deserts to high mountains and included the Havasupai and Hualapai homelands, the spectacular country along the south rim of the Grand Canyon.

For the past century, scholars have hotly debated pre-contact population numbers for the Americas. Estimating a population without extensive historical documentation is an inexact science based on a range of methodologies. The earliest estimates failed to account fully for the impact of the epidemics and therefore were far too low. In 1939, for instance, A. L. Kroeber, using older estimates and assumptions about environmental “carrying
capacity” drawn largely from North America, proposed a total pre-contact population of 8.4 million for the entire Western Hemisphere. The number was ridiculously low considering the massive populations documented in Central and South America. Henry Dobyns was the first to seriously consider the impact of post-contact epidemics. Using known depopulation figures from Central America as well as carrying capacities, he estimated 112 million for the same area. Estimates for North America range from under 1 million to over 10 million. Currently accepted figures tend to fall somewhere in the middle with Cherokee demographer Russell Thornton estimating a population of 72 million hemisphere-wide, 7 million north of Mexico and slightly over 5 million within the modern borders of the coterminous USA in 1492. Narrowing the demographic focus to the Native West is even more problematic. Sixteenth-century population estimates are rudimentary and limited to the Pueblos of New Mexico. All later population estimates came after a relentless cycle of depopulation had already begun. While exact numbers may elude demographers, the most densely populated regions of the Native West were certainly those with the richest resources bases: California, the Northwest Coast, the Southern Plains, and the Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico. California alone may have been home to nearly one-third of the 1 million or so residents of the pre-contact Native West.

THE IMPACT OF COLONIZATION AND CONQUEST

In 1700, the vast majority of Native peoples in the American West had yet to meet a European, but their lives had already seen great changes as a result of the colonizers’ presence in the Americas. The effects of conquest radiated outward from the first European settlements like shockwaves radiating from the epicenter of an earthquake. Most American Indian peoples first felt those waves through interactions with other indigenous groups. In some cases, factors largely beyond Native peoples’ control, such as epidemic diseases and the resulting demographic collapse, were the catalysts of change. Yet Native peoples were not simply the passive victims of colonization. They remained agents in their own history and in many instances shaped or even initiated change in order to exploit new opportunities or to meet new challenges. The adoption of the equestrian lifestyle epitomizes this second course. The America West in 1700, then, was not a pristine aboriginal landscape, but it was one still largely of Native making. The two centuries that followed Columbus’s voyages were a critical period that revealed historical patterns and processes that would shape the future American West.

The beginning of the European conquest marked the beginning of the greatest biological exchange in human history. For millennia, separate flora and fauna had developed in the New World and the Old. In the years following Columbus’s arrival, plants, animals, and pathogens made their way from one hemisphere to the other, in the process transforming life and ecosystems on a global scale. American food crops proved particularly advantageous for the Europeans. Avocados, chili peppers, cocoa, peanuts, pineapples, pumpkins, strawberries, and tomatoes all enhanced Old World diets. Potatoes and the most important of all American crops, corn, quickly became global staples that improved standards of living throughout Eurasia and Africa. Less advantageous was another American import: tobacco. The Europeans brought with them apple, peach, and pear trees; a range of grains including wheat, barley, millet, and rye; lettuce, cabbage, carrots, and other vegetables. Cotton and sugarcane were two Old World plants that became the staple crops of colonial plantation economies throughout the Americas. Before contact, the Native peoples of the
Americas had domesticated very few animals: dogs and turkeys in North America; llamas, alpacas, and guinea pigs in South America. By contrast, the colonizers brought with them a whole host of domesticated animals—including cattle, horses, sheep, goats, swine, and fowl—in addition to unwelcome pests such as brown and black rats. Old World flora and fauna aggressively colonized the American landscape alongside their human benefactors, making life as the Europeans knew it easier and Native ways more difficult. Environmental historian Alfred Crosby deemed this process “ecological imperialism.”

The most deadly of all European imports could not be seen: the microbes that caused smallpox, measles, plague, yellow fever, and a host of other epidemic diseases for which America’s Native peoples possessed relatively weak immunity. “Virgin-soil epidemics,” so called because they strike populations without previous exposure, have occurred throughout human history and across the globe. The most famous of all virgin-soil epidemics, the “Black Death” (most likely bubonic plague), carried away approximately one-third of the European population between 1347 and 1352. In the four centuries following Columbus’s first voyage, a relentless succession of pandemics ravaged the Native population of the Americas. They were a primary factor in a catastrophic hemispheric population decline. The Arawak population of the Caribbean, by many estimates nearly 4 million people before contact, all but disappeared within a century. Declines of 80 to 90 percent among many Native groups became commonplace. Any understanding of the impact of the European conquest of the Americas must then begin with a consideration of the epidemics.

The Americas in 1492 were not a disease-free paradise. Analysis of pre-contact skeletal remains suggests that a virulent form of syphilis may have been present, as was chicken pox and some other viral maladies. Yet the worst killers—smallpox, measles, influenza, and plague—arrived with the Europeans. Why then were there apparently so few destructive pathogens present in the Americas before the beginning of sustained European contact? One theory is that the strenuous migration to the Americas through a frozen unforgiving landscape functioned as a “disease filter,” with only the healthy surviving to populate the Americas. More important was the relative absence of domesticated animals in the Americas. New diseases emerge most readily where large human populations are in close daily contact with large numbers of domesticated animals. In such situations, the chances of a viral or bacterial mutation spreading to a human population are exponentially greater. Europe, Asia, and Africa were, in a sense, one large disease community. Epidemics arose, killed many, and then subsided, leaving behind a population with developed antibodies better able to survive the next appearance of that particular disease. By the time of European contact, however, the Americas had seen thousands of years of relative isolation from the Old World disease community. Circumpolar contact had been constant but was limited to small groups of people (including the Norse), who apparently did not introduce devastating epidemics. While American Indians were not “biologically defenseless,” as many historians have suggested, their lack of exposure to European diseases left them more vulnerable.

Historians must then move beyond biology alone to understand and explain the devastation that the epidemics wrought. Whereas a single virgin-soil epidemic might kill between 30 and 40 percent of an affected population, many American Indian groups experienced losses at double those rates or more. Certainly the sheer number of new diseases that struck in relentless succession was a factor, but even that cannot explain the human toll. American Indian peoples experienced the epidemics against a backdrop of warfare, slave raids, and social dislocation. Native healing methods such as sweat baths
were not suited for treating the infections, and some historians believe they may have actually increased mortality rates. Historian and physician David S. Jones has argued that a range of contingent factors including poverty, malnutrition, and environmental stresses were just as important as genetic or developmental susceptibility to infectious disease for understanding the course of the epidemics. The impact of the epidemics transformed Native life beyond simple demographics. So many deaths meant the loss of knowledge and economic productivity, and, while the epidemics did not cause dependency on European manufactured goods, they very likely increased the pace of the process. The first scholars to emphasize the impact of the epidemics also theorized that the inability of Native healers to cope with the new illnesses led to a wholesale decline in Native spiritual practices. But here again, the process was complex, and at least among some southeastern Indians, innovative spiritual and medical practices helped keep mortality rates down and illustrated cultural resilience.

What is not debated is that the epidemics spread from one group to another so rapidly that they reshaped the human landscape of the Americas long before most Native peoples ever laid eyes upon a European. Archeologist Anne Ramensky used an analysis of the number of settlements, total settlement area, and the roofed area of earth lodges in villages on the middle Missouri River to estimate pre-contact population sizes and decline. She concluded that the first epidemics brought a “catastrophic loss of population” sometime between 1612 and 1680, coinciding with the “appearance of European trade goods in the region” but preceding the arrival of Europeans themselves by decades. Because the epidemics nearly always preceded sustained contact, the first Europeans to enter any given area usually found a Native population that had been radically reduced from its pre-contact numbers, yet they assumed these populations to be the historic norm. Such assumptions helped to shape the invaders’ attitudes about Native peoples and have had political implications to this very day. The first Puritan colonists of New England in the 1620s and 1630s generally viewed the epidemics as a sign of “providential destruction” whereby God had cleared the land for their taking. The comparatively sparse (by European standards) Native populations played into Puritan justifications of conquest. John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts Bay colony, employed a doctrine he called vacuum domicillium—literally “empty house”—to argue that the Indians’ small numbers and “uncivilized” land-use patterns did not warrant their vast estate. “Civilized” Europeans, on the other hand, put the land to higher use and were therefore justified in their actions. Ideas such as Winthrop’s have echoed through American history: from Thomas Jefferson to Frederick Jackson Turner to the western films of John Wayne, the North American continent was a “virgin land” open to settlement and a guarantee of the nation’s future greatness. Native peoples were but an anachronistic and minor obstacle to that destiny. But, as the historian Francis Jennings reminds us, America was not an “empty continent,” it was a “widowed land.”

Yet, not all things that the Europeans brought were detrimental, and, more than any other, horses represented the opportunities that Native peoples seized in the post-contact era. The earliest horses evolved in the Americas but had gone extinct at the end of the Pleistocene. Horses returned to the American mainland with Hernán Cortéz’s 1519 invasion of Mexico. The Spanish also brought with them a highly developed equestrian culture. Early theories explaining the acquisition of horses by peoples in North America focused on strays that had escaped from the De Soto and Coronado expeditions. Yet the herds in question were quite small, suffered few reported losses, and were made up largely of geldings. Furthermore, the “stray” theory could not account for the transfer of the knowledge nec-
necessary to care for and use horses. Native peoples acquired horses, then, not from far-flung expeditions but from Spanish settlements and ranches, first in northern Mexico and later in New Mexico. Although official Spanish policy made it illegal to teach an Indian to ride, in practice the conquerors had little choice but to teach their workers the skill. The process began as a trickle as Indian laborers escaped on horseback. That trickle became a flood with the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. And as more peoples acquired horses, the Spanish herds in New Mexico, Texas, and northern Mexico became the target of constant raids.57

Once out of Spanish hands, horses entered a distinctly Native trade network. Following pre-existing routes that paralleled the Rocky Mountains, Utes, Comanches, and others traded horses to the north. The diffusion of the animals as well as the knowledge for their care and use took place rapidly. Annual trade fairs, part of what John C. Ewers called the “aboriginal intertribal trade pattern,” became the nexus of the horse trade. The Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara villages on the Missouri River became an important conduit of horses for peoples to the north and east.58 West of the Rockies, a particularly important trade fair took place each summer at a place that the Newe, or Shoshone, called sehewooki: “willows standing in rows like running water.” Today, it is known as Idaho’s Boise valley. Utes most likely brought the first horses to the region as early as 1690. Many Newe quickly embraced the equestrian lifestyle as well as the horse trade. At sehewooki they provided the Nez Perce and other Columbia plateau tribes with their first horses. From that beginning the Nez Perce built massive herds and practiced selective breeding that resulted in a distinctively American breed, the Appaloosa.59

European ideas would impact Native peoples and cultures, particularly in regard to land tenure, economic exchange, and gender relations. In very general terms, European notions of property emphasized individual, exclusive ownership as opposed to the often communal and usufruct systems of American Indians. As Native economies engaged and were eventually absorbed by the European market economy, corresponding shifts took place within Indian societies. One result was economic dependency—the state where customary Native economies were no longer viable. American Indians would increasingly be forced to conform to European concepts of economic exchange. In many matrilineal Native groups, for instance, women saw a relative decline in their status and power. On the Great Plains, the demands upon women’s labor increased exponentially as their peoples became enmeshed in the trade. Whereas a man hunting from horseback could kill many more bison with a minimal increase in effort, the greater number of hides still had to be tanned in a laborious process that took from three to ten days. In some hunting groups, polygamy also increased along with the demands of the market. Yet the apparent decline in the status of women did not happen quickly nor did it affect all Native peoples evenly.60

The imperial policies of three principal European powers—Spain, France, and Great Britain—also shaped the Native West (Russian imperial policy had a more limited influence among Alaskan Native peoples). The conversion of American Indians to Catholicism was the official goal of the Spanish Empire, but military and economic conquest more often took precedence. The Spanish sought to incorporate Native peoples at the bottom of their social order as the labor necessary in the fields and mines. To this end, the Spanish employed a series of institutions to manage and distribute Indian labor: first the encomienda (a hereditary grants of Indian labor), and later the repartimiento and the hacienda. The Spanish also created an elaborate racial/social hierarchy that incorporated Indian peoples as well as the mixed-race peoples (mestizos, mulattos, etc.) that made up a growing segment of the colonial population. The French colonial effort was never as well financed or manned and,
as a result, relied heavily upon far-reaching Native alliances established via the fur trade for its survival. As in the Spanish Empire, mixed-race peoples and Catholic missionaries played major, albeit quite different, roles. And while the French are usually portrayed as more sympathetic toward Native peoples, their strategies reflected their relative weakness rather than a greater respect for Native cultures. British Indian policy, on the other hand, was not based on the incorporation of Native peoples into their society. Indians could be allies in war and trading partners in peace but essentially had no official place within the borders of established colonies or the colonial social order unless they rejected their own cultures and adopted British ways. For instance, Puritan “praying towns” such as Natick Massachussets were founded as a means to culturally reeducate Native peoples. In practice, however, Indians continued to live widely dispersed throughout the British settlements, working as laborers and often acting as intermediaries between their peoples and the English. By the eighteenth century, the imperial policies of Britain and France began to impact the lives of Native peoples in the West, but before 1700 it was the expansion of the Spanish Empire that brought the most consequential changes to the Native West.61

SPAIN AND THE NATIVE WEST, 1500–1700

The first Spaniard to see and report his observations of the Native West was truly an accidental tourist. Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca accompanied Pánfilo de Narváez’s ill-fated invasion of Florida in 1528. When the expected resupply ships failed to arrive, the Spaniards built boats and set off for Mexico. They made it as far as the Texas coast near Galveston Bay. Narváez and most of the party set off again to an unknown fate. Cabeza de Vaca and a handful of others remained among the Karankawa Indians and other Native groups for the next six and a half years in various forms of captivity. In the summer of 1535, Cabeza de Vaca and three others, including a Moorish slave named Estavanico, made good their escape and struck out, hoping to reach the Spanish settlements overland.62 Cabeza de Vaca and his companions were the first non-Natives to encounter the American Indian peoples living on the southern margins of what we have defined as the American West. They also gained an understanding of the vastness of North America’s bison herds and their importance to Native groups. Cabeza de Vaca reported that the “cows” had short horns like “Moorish cows,” but long shaggy fur. He found their meat better tasting and more plentiful than that of Spanish cattle. Vast herds extended hundreds of miles along their route, and de Vaca wrote, “the people who inhabit [the valleys] come down and sustain themselves on them, and they supply the land with a great quantity of hides.” As the group made its way northwest, the Native dependence on bison became ever-more apparent. At the confluence of the Rio Conchos and Rio Grande, near present-day Presidio, Texas, the travelers first met the “People of the Cows,” who may have been the Jumanos. They lived in permanent earthen houses and gave their visitors beans, squash, and corn. By the time they approached the area around modern-day El Paso, the Native people were dependent almost entirely upon meat. There had not been consistent rain for two years and so they had not planted. They told the travelers of two roads, one to the west where they would find corn, and one to the north into the heart of the buffalo herds. Cabeza de Vaca and his men chose the western road, and their grand voyage came to a conclusion in April 1536 when they reached the Spanish settlements in Sinaloa.63

Tales of Cabeza de Vaca’s journey swept through the Spanish colony and set plans in motion to exploit the imagined wealth of the north. Some Spanish believed that the fabled
“Seven Cities of Cíbola,” supposedly founded by seven Catholic bishops who had fled the Moors, must lay just to the north of where Cabeza de Vaca changed course. Reports obtained through Native trade networks of the Rio Grande Pueblos further fueled Spanish desires. Fray Marcos de Niza led a reconnaissance from New Spain in 1539, with Estavanico acting as the party’s guide. As Marcos journeyed north he heard more tales of Cíbola, a city of many streets and plazas with some houses reaching ten stories into the sky. Estavanico reached “Cíbola”—in reality the small Zuni town of Hawikuh—in advance of the friar and the others. His overbearing demands for women and turquoise, or perhaps the Zuni perception that he was a spy, got him killed. Two survivors of his party brought word of Estavanico’s death back to the main party. Marcos continued on, he claimed, until Cíbola was within view. “It has the appearance of a very beautiful town,” he wrote, “the best I have seen in these parts.” The friar also estimated that the Pueblo was “bigger than the city of Mexico,” and reported that several Indians accompanying him swore that it was the “least of the seven cities.” Back in Mexico City his account provided all the confirmation necessary that large, wealthy cities lay to the north.64

Francisco Vásquez de Coronado led the “multi-ethnic invasion force” that returned to conquer “Cíbola” in 1540. Like Hernando De Soto who had launched an invasion of the southeast a year earlier, Coronado believed he could replicate the success of Cortez and Pizarro by conquering massive native empires. Over 300 Europeans accompanied the expedition, but Mestizos and Mexican Indians, numbering between 800 and 1,000, made up the bulk of Coronado’s army. On July 7, 1540, the expedition arrived at “Cíbola” and began to curse Fray Marcos, for they found not a city of gold but what expedition chronicler Pedro de Castañeda de Nájera called a “small, rocky Pueblo, all crumpled up.” The Spanish had arrived in the midst of the Zunis’ summer-solstice ceremonies. Zuni warriors blocked the road, and Bow Priests spread cornmeal across the Spaniards’ path as a symbolic warning not the enter the Pueblo. Instead, Coronado ordered an attack, and, after a brief, desperate battle, the Spanish took possession of Hawikuh. Despite the disappointment, the Spaniards’ dreams of wealth were stoked by new rumors of wealthy native provinces. Before leaving Zuni in November, Coronado dispatched a small contingent led by Pedro de Tovar and the Franciscan, Juan de Padilla, to explore the northwestern province of “Tusayan.” The group sacked one of the Hopi Pueblos and became the first Europeans to peer into the Grand Canyon but found no great wealth.65

Coronado’s interests then turned to the east. A delegation from Pecos Pueblo, led by a chief the Spanish called Bigotes, offered to guide them to the Rio Grande and beyond. Hernando de Alvarado and Fray Padilla led a small detachment east to survey the route. When they reached Pecos, Alvarado purchased a Plains Indian slave, likely a Pawnee or Wichita, as a guide and interpreter. The man was dubbed El Turco, “The Turk,” due to his appearance, but historian James Brooks argues that the moniker also reflected Mediterranean systems of captivity familiar to the Spanish. His presence at Pecos, among the easternmost of the Pueblos, also illustrated the far-reaching trade and social ties between the Pueblo world and the Native peoples of the Great Plains. The entire army followed by December and occupied Tiguex Pueblo, near modern-day Albuquerque, as the Spanish headquarters. Spanish–Pueblo relations quickly deteriorated. Coronado began to distribute Indian labor and tribute among his loyal Spanish followers. Alvarado returned to Pecos to recover gold that the Turk said had been taken from him and hidden from the Spanish. As a result, Bigotes, the Pecos leader who had befriended the Spanish, was taken prisoner, tortured, and held captive for six months before being allowed to return to his people. Alvarado’s
actions resulted in widespread mistrust and growing displays of hostility toward the Spanish. A Spaniard’s rape of a Pueblo woman proved to be the final straw, and outright war between the invaders and the twelve Tiwa-speaking Pueblos of Tiquex followed. The war dragged on into the spring of 1541. Rather than surrender, the Tiquex people fled into the mountains and refused to return until the Spaniards had left their country.

The Turk’s fanciful tales of his homeland of “Quivira” finally induced the Spanish to leave. Far across the Plains to the east, he claimed, were large towns along a great river. The nobles of Quivira were said to travel in massive sail canoes manned by twenty oarsmen, and gold and silver was everywhere for the taking. Driven by the insatiable thirst for gold and glory, the Spanish suspended their doubts and plunged east into the heart of Great Plains. Travel across the vast and seemingly featureless Llano Estacado (“staked plain”) of the Texas panhandle terrified the Spanish. About two weeks’ travel from Pecos the expedition encountered a rancheria (village) of “Querechos,” most likely Plains Apaches. The foot-going buffalo hunters possessed many dogs, and Castañeda reported that they “live in tents made of dressed skins of the cattle [bison].” “When they move from place to place,” Coronado wrote, “they load the dogs with their tents, poles, and other things.” The Coronado expedition thus provided some of the earliest descriptions of Plains Indian life before the acquisition of horses. Farther out on the Llano Estacado were the “Teyas,” who may have been another Apache group or, just as likely, Caddos to Jumanos. Like the Querechos, they traveled the Plains using dogs as pack animals. It was among the Teyas that the Spanish first heard inklings that the Turk’s stories and directions were not accurate. After wandering northeast for over two months, the Spanish arrived at Quivira, near what is today the Kansas–Nebraska border. They found no cities of gold, only the earth-lodge villages of Caddoan speakers. An enraged Coronado demanded answers. The Turk confessed that it was a plan hatched at Pecos to lead the Spanish astray on the Plains and to weaken them, “believing that they would not know how to hunt or survive without maize,” so when they returned to the Pueblos they could be easily destroyed. The Turk paid for the deception with his life, and the expedition began retracing its steps. Unrest among the Native peoples of northern Mexico demanded a precipitous withdrawal from the region. Coronado’s army met constant harassment as it passed through Pueblo lands. By June 1542, Coronado was back in Mexico and facing trial for mismanaging the expedition. From the Spanish perspective, the expedition had been an abject failure. Intermittent trade and contact with the Pueblos continued, and various missionaries made their way north, yet over half a century would pass before the Spanish returned to the upper Rio Grande valley in force.

Juan de Oñate led the Spanish return to New Mexico in 1598. Unlike Coronado’s expedition, which one historian characterized as a pack of bandits with no intention of creating a “permanent Kingdom,” Oñate brought with him the means to establish a permanent colony among the Pueblos. He also held a real commitment to Spain’s imperial goal of Christianizing America’s Native peoples. Oñate organized his entrada at Zacatecas, the heart of Mexico’s silver-mining region where his family had grown wealthy. He recruited 129 soldier-settlers (the only individuals recorded on the official muster roll) and their families. Along with Indian servants and ten Franciscan missionaries, the company numbered over 500. The column that rumbled north in the spring of 1598 was nearly 2 miles long and included eighty wagons and carts, three small artillery pieces, and 7,000 head of livestock.

If Oñate’s goals were different, his tactics proved to be as heavy-handed and violent as his predecessors. Adhering to the colonial policies and expectations established during the conquest of Mexico and Peru, Oñate expected Native peoples to provide the colonists
with tribute and sustenance. On the march north he dispatched advance parties to forcibly extract foodstuffs from the Pueblos. Once he had arrived in the upper Rio Grande valley, Oñate occupied the Tewa-speaking Pueblo of Yunge, which he renamed San Gabriel, as the Spanish capital. It lay directly across the river from its larger sister Pueblo of Okhay Owingeh, commonly known as San Juan until its residents reasserted its indigenous name in 2005. Erasing Native placenames was a more subtle, yet effective and persistent form of colonialism that all European powers employed to some extent. Oñate’s other actions were far more overt. He distributed *encomiendas* to his followers and demanded tribute from neighboring Pueblos. He demanded that Pueblo people accept Christianity and admit the Franciscans to their villages. And he made war upon those who resisted. His treatment of the Acoma Pueblo was particularly ruthless. In December 1598, a small detachment arrived at the Pueblo and demanded supplies for a larger expedition heading toward Zuni. The Spaniards became abusive and were taken captive. When a relief party arrived, things turned violent, and eleven Spaniards were killed, including the expedition’s commander. Oñate’s retaliation was swift. He demanded the surrender of Acoma’s leaders and that the people abandon the fortress-like Pueblo and accept missionaries. On January 22, 1599, after the Acoma people refused the demands, the Spanish stormed the Pueblo. The Indians fought with “determination and fury,” and the battle stretched into the next day. Perhaps 800 died while nearly 600 were taken captive and an unknown number of others escaped. Oñate convened a court to try the survivors and to make an example of Acoma. Twenty-four men over the age of twenty-five were condemned to have one foot cut off and to spend twenty years in personal servitude. The males between twelve and twenty-five, as well as all females over twelve were also made servants for twenty years. Children under twelve were turned over to the Church for a “Christian upbringing,” and as many as sixty young girls were sent off permanently to the convents of Mexico City. Finally, two Hopi men captured among the Acomas each had one hand chopped off and were returned to their people as a warning. Within a year, nearly all of the Acoma prisoners escaped servitude and returned to rebuild the Pueblo where their descendants still live. Oñate remains a controversial historical figure, celebrated in some segments of the Hispanic community as the founder of New Mexico and reviled in the Pueblos as an invading butcher.69

Despite Oñate’s hopes and extravagant claims that great mines would make New Mexico a thriving colony, the province faltered, and only the intercession of the Franciscans prevented its abandonment. With no source of wealth beyond the production of the Pueblos, the Spanish burden on the Native population grew steadily worse. Demands for tribute and food pushed some Pueblos to the brink of starvation and disrupted established trade patterns between the Pueblos and their Athapaskan and Numic neighbors. Following the pattern set at Acoma, Pueblo resistance was met with brutal retaliation. Mineral wealth remained elusive, and, while Oñate explored neighboring areas, the Spanish population began to desert New Mexico. In 1606, the Viceroy recalled Oñate to Mexico City to face charges of misconduct and cruelty. In 1608, he was found guilty and forced to resign as governor. The Council of the Indies then recommended that the colony be abandoned. Fray Lázaro Ximénez, pleading the Franciscans’ case before the Viceroy, claimed that the order had converted over 7,000 Indians and thousands more awaited baptism. The friar’s report swayed King Philip III, who transformed New Mexico into a royal mission colony in 1609. A new governor, Pedro de Peralta, arrived and established a new Spanish capital at Santa Fe, which remained the only Spanish community in New Mexico for the rest of the seventeenth century.70
The Pueblos suffered most intensely from colonization during the seventeenth century. From a pre-contact population of perhaps 60,000, only around 17,000 survived by the 1670s. Aside from the thousands who died or fled as a direct consequence of the invasion, epidemics carried away many more. Spanish slave raids against neighboring peoples led to retaliation and greater stress on the Pueblos’ already-diminished ability to sustain themselves. The Spanish also moved to impose their own social, political, and legal systems as well as their religion. Secular Spanish officials appointed governors to handle civil affairs for each Pueblo while the Franciscans appointed *fiscales* from among their converts to ensure that Christian discipline was enforced. Unlike some Catholic orders that attempted to use Native languages and cultures to convert Indians (most famously the Jesuits in New France), the Franciscans approach was heavy-handed and rigid. The most zealous of the order believed that Christianity could only be renewed through severe discipline, obedience, and poverty. They also viewed martyrdom as a supreme act of obedience to God akin to Christ’s crucifixion. Often with the support of soldiers, the friars forced Indians to build churches and to attend services. Native ceremonies were banned and sacred objects destroyed. The friars also tried to remake Pueblo gender roles and attitudes about sexual relations that they deemed sinful. In some cases, such as at Zuni in 1631 and Taos in 1639, the people rose up and killed the missionaries. Still, thousands accepted baptism because the Church offered protection and food. Moreover, thousands of Pueblo converts created a syncretic form of Catholicism that blended the power of the invaders with elements of Pueblo religion. Meanwhile, traditional beliefs survived by remaining underground in the kivas. While some Pueblo people resisted alien ways, others adopted and adapted them, and the cultural differences between Spaniard and Indian in New Mexico began to blur.71

The impact of the Spanish conquest, however, was not limited to the Pueblo world. It radiated outward from New Mexico, creating a political economy of violence that rearranged relations between Native groups and eventually shaped a hybrid society in New Mexico. Spanish slaving was at the heart of the process. In Iberian culture as well as among some Native groups, captivity held both social and economic meanings and offered a gendered path to social status based upon the control of women and children. While historians disagree over the nature of pre-contact Native captivity and its impact on the evolving institution, women and children were clearly the focus of Spanish raids, and acts of sexual violence against Native women became commonplace throughout the region. Moreover, the scale of Spanish slavery was unlike anything seen before. In 1637, Governor Luis de Rosas, ignoring Franciscan complaints that slaving hindered the missionary effort, launched an “unjust war against the ‘Utaca’ nation,” bringing back eighty captives. Kinpeople of these Ute prisoners soon launched retaliatory raids, and in the decades that followed the Utes adapted to Spanish presence by becoming slavers in their own right and displacing the violence onto the Numic peoples of the Great Basin. Some of the enslaved were sent south to labor in the mines, but many remained as servants in New Mexico. This burgeoning population of detribalized Indian slaves became known as *genizaros*, a term derived from the Ottoman word “janissary,” meaning “new troops.” *Genizaros* served as military auxiliaries, carrying out slave raids and defending the province, and by the eighteenth century *genizaro* communities such as Abiquiu served as buffers between New Mexico’s Hispanic towns and the Utes, Comanches, Navajos, and Apaches.72

By the 1660s and 1670s, drought, crop failures, and the growing weight of Spanish colonialism drove the Pueblos toward rebellion. The increasingly oppressive actions of the Franciscans as well as a growing public rift between civil and religious authorities eroded Pueblo
respect and obedience. Governor López de Mendizábal was openly hostile to the Franciscans and even allowed the public performance of some Pueblo ceremonies. In response, in 1661 the friars prohibited Katchina dances, raided the kivas, and destroyed thousands of sacred objects. The next year, their complaints led to Mendizábal’s removal as governor. The dispute was indicative of the rapacious competition between the secular and religious segments of Spanish society to extract labor and tribute from the Pueblos. As a result, the Pueblos had little or no surplus to trade with the Navajos, Apaches, Utes, and Plains groups, and raiding rather than trade increasingly characterized intertribal relationships. The power of the Franciscans was further diminished by their personal behavior. Contrary to their vows of chastity, many carried on sexual relations with Native women and fathered numerous children. In the words of one historian, they were no longer viewed as “supermen.” Nor were the secular Spanish, whose drab villages and dress appeared more Indian and less powerful as the years passed. As cultural differences in New Mexico blurred, Spanish authority declined. By 1680, this complex series of factors reached a breaking point, and the Pueblos rose in rebellion and drove the Spanish from New Mexico.73

The Pueblo Revolt of 1680 was the result of a remarkable inter-Pueblo alliance. Popé, a spiritual leader from Okhay Owingeh who had been arrested and whipped as part of a 1675 crackdown on Pueblo religion, was a principal leader of the rebellion. Luis Tupatú of Picuris and El Jaca of Taos, along with leaders from Santo Domingo, Jemez, San Lazaro, and Keres, joined Popé at Taos to plan the revolt. Runners carrying a knotted cord were sent to each of the Pueblos with instructions to untie one knot each day. When last knot was undone, the attack would commence. After two young men were captured and revealed the plot to the Spanish, Popé ordered the plan set in motion one day early, August 10, 1680. Two dozen Pueblos rose as one. In some cases, such as at Tanos, the people revolted even though their leaders opposed the plan. As far away as Hopi and Zuni, the Spanish were killed or driven out. Many of the marginalized mixed-blood people known as castas also joined in the rebellion. Of the approximately 2,500 Spanish residents of New Mexico, over 400 died in the attack, including nineteen priests and two lay brothers. The survivors gathered at Santa Fe and Isleta Pueblo, one of the few Pueblos that had not revolted. Thousands of Indians besieged the capital, forcing Governor Antonio de Otermín and his followers to fight their way out before fleeing south to the vicinity of El Paso. While the Pueblo Revolt is rightly celebrated as the first successful Native anti-colonial movement in American history, it was in fact part of an “epidemic of rebellions” against Spanish colonization mounted by Native peoples in the northern reaches of the empire in the seventeenth century.74

A new Pueblo golden age did not follow the Spanish departure. Popé and other revolutionary leaders set out to erase all evidence of the Spanish presence. Churches were burned, all crosses and rosaries were to be destroyed, and the Spanish language was forbidden. The official Spanish archives were piled up in the Santa Fe plaza and burned. Christian marriages were to be dissolved, and European goods and tools were to be shunned. But the Pueblo world in 1680 was radically different to that of 1598. Social and cultural changes meant that many Pueblo people had internalized Spanish ways and were loath to follow Popé’s dictates. The unity that had made the revolt successful was short-lived. Civil war between the Pueblos followed hard times and increased raiding by Numic and Athapaskan groups. A political struggle between Popé and Luis Tupatú increased discord by the mid-1680s. Meanwhile, the Spanish launched expeditions to retake the province in 1681, 1688, and 1689. All failed, but they destroyed numerous Pueblos, cost hundreds of lives, and further reduced the Pueblo ability to resist the eventual reconquest.75
What Diego de Vargas intended to be only a preliminary reconnaissance in 1692 has become known as the “bloodless” reconquest of New Mexico. The small military expedition met only limited resistance, and Vargas’s promises of peace and a pardon for all who lay down their arms gradually won over the suspicious, including Luis Tupatú. In return, he promised to help the Spanish re-establish peace and Christianity. Vargas then journeyed west to Zuni and Hopi before returning to El Paso to mount a much larger colonizing expedition in the fall of 1693. It was then that the reconquest turned bloody. Indians at Santa Fe resisted the Spaniards, and Vargas resorted to typically ruthless tactics. Once the resistance was broken he ordered the execution of seventy young men and the distribution of 400 women and children to his followers as slaves. By September 1694, he had succeeded in reconquering all of the Pueblos with the exceptions of Taos and Picurís in the north and Zuni and Hopi in the west.76

Vargas’s peace was only temporary, and the Pueblos launched one more attempt to drive out the Spanish. There were already rumors of a second revolt in the summer of 1695. A severe winter increased hardships on both the Indians and the Spanish, and by the spring of 1696 the missionaries suspected that a revolt was imminent. The attack came on June 4. Five Franciscans and twenty-one other Spaniards were killed. But, unlike 1680, the rebellion was poorly coordinated, and divisions between the Pueblos turned to civil war. Warriors from Zia and other Pueblos joined the Spanish. Vargas prosecuted a vigorous campaign to put down the rebellion while promising pardons to those who surrendered. In July, Lucas Naranjo, whom the Spanish viewed as the principal rebel leader, died in battle. After laying siege to Acoma in August, Vargas marched north against Taos and Picurís. The people abandoned the villages and fled into the mountains. With the onset of winter there was no choice but to surrender or to flee west, where some found refuge among the Hopis. In the aftermath of the Pueblo Revolt of 1696, the Spanish not only strengthened their military presence but also relied more upon diplomacy. The missionaries also adopted a less intrusive stance toward their Pueblo charges. After 1700, Pueblo–Spanish relations became more stable and never again was the presence of the colonizers challenged so directly.77

Ten years after the second Pueblo uprising Spanish officials noted the presence of a new and expanding people to the north. In their native Shoshonean tongue they were the Numunu, the “people,” but the Spanish called them komántcia, a Ute word for foreigner or enemy. Their lives had been shaped by the actions and decisions of countless generations before a European ever set foot on the American continents, as well as by European colonization. Their journey from the Great Basin had begun centuries earlier as part of the great Numic migration. They acquired horses around the time of the Pueblo Revolts and became an equestrian people. In 1706, they were new arrivals on the Southern Plains, and for roughly the next century and a half they, and many other peoples, would use the power of the horse to carve out their own lives and empires on the Great Plains.78

The emergence of the Plains equestrian culture was not, however, the inevitable culmination of the historical processes explored in this essay. It was just one possible outcome. In the decades and centuries that followed 1700, the Native West remained a diverse and dynamic place. Horse ownership was a single factor that transformed the lives of many peoples but affected others in far more limited ways. Many peoples strived to make a living from the earth in ways they always had: farming, fishing, gathering, and trading. But ultimately none could escape the myriad effects of the European conquest. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the pace and gravity of changes increased. Still, Native nations
and individuals would endure and leave their imprint on the region and its future course. The Native West, what would become the American West, was never a pristine land inhabited by timeless peoples but the product of a dynamic and diverse human history of migration, adaptation, and colonization. Just as the region’s history did not begin with European contact, the importance of Native peoples to its history would not end with conquest.

NOTES


23. Pauketat, Ancient Cabokia and the Mississippians; Calloway, One Vast Winter Count, pp. 98–104.


32. Cordell, Prehistory of the Southwest, pp. 96–98.


35. Here I have adopted the culture areas as defined in the HNAI that are specific to the American West: northwest coast, California, southwest, Great Basin, Plains, and plateau.

36. HNAI 8: California; Calloway, One Vast Winter Count, pp. 50–51.

37. HNAI 7: Northwest Coast.


41. HNAI 11: Great Basin.


45. HNAI 10: Southwest. Southwest peoples are treated in two volumes, with Vol. X devoted to Athapas-kan- and Piman-speaking peoples and Vol. IX focused on the Pueblos.

46. HNAI 9: Southwest.

47. HNAI 10: Southwest.


49. Thornton, American Indian Holocaust and Survival, pp. 28–32.


61. See chapters on “National Policies” in HNAI 4: History of Indian–White Relations.
68. George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey (eds.), Don Juan de Oñate: Colonizer of New Mexico, 1595–1628 (Albuquerque, N. Mex.: University of New Mexico Press, 1953); Marc Simmons, The Last Conquistador: Juan de Oñate and the Settling of the Far Southwest (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), pp. 91–97.
76. Espinosa, *The Pueblo Indian Revolt of 1696*.