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At the Beginning

Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 serves as a point of departure to discuss the complex history of First Peoples in Canada from different perspectives. The chapter can be divided into five main themes: migration patterns and settlement; cultural adaptations related to resource management (plant domestication and animal resource management); the role of geography and adaptation; social organization; and patterns of trade and warfare. The chapter begins with an overview of migration patterns, which flowed from east to west and north to south. There is a brief overview of the development and sophistication of early technology such as the fluted points and the marvel of early engineering projects in the Americas.

Additionally, the chapter traces the development of plant and animal domestication and, in the process, identifies plant and animal life unique to the Americas. Indigenous Peoples of the Americas had a very extensive knowledge of plant domestication, and their uses are exemplified by the medical application of these plants, which account for more than 500 present-day drugs. This chapter also stresses the uniqueness and diversity of cultures that existed at the time of contact, demonstrating how the geography of the land and the resources available from the land directly influenced the cultures that would develop within specific geographic areas. In addition to the variations in economic and geographic influences, social development across the Americas also varied. This social development resulted in societies that were either egalitarian or hierarchical, although some societies borrowed from both. Depending on the makeup of the particular society, this highly influenced the selection of leaders and the political organization of particular societies. This provides clear evidence of the diversity of Indigenous societies at the time of contact.

The chapter concludes by discussing the roles of trade and gift diplomacy in various types of interactions such as alliances and treaties. In this context, the significance of access to natural resources as a central factor in facilitating trade and also contributing to warfare, is an important perspective underlying these types of interaction between groups.

Learning Objectives

- To understand general migration within the Americas.
- To understand the adaptability of Indigenous cultures to specific environments.
- To recognize the role of geography and other relevant factors in the transition from hunter-gatherer economy to that of agricultural incorporation.
- To understand the differences between egalitarian and hierarchical societies and the ecological factors that contributed to the development of each one.
- To understand the ecological basis behind the trading relationships which developed and the impact on economic, social and political aspects of the relationships that were forged.

Key Terms, Figures or Sites

chiefdoms: Societies where a (usually hereditary) chief is the head and where delineated class structures exist. (p. 34)

egalitarian societies: Communities characterized by a lack of distinction of social ranks, in which leadership is often assumed temporarily and for a specific purpose, and where social status does not accrue to material wealth. (p. 32)

fluted points: Stone points with flutes (round grooves) around the edge used as spear or arrow heads. (p. 21)

gift exchanges: Diplomatic ritual involved in the sealing of agreements between First Nations and, later, between New France and Indigenous people through the trade of goods or hostages, which resulted in blood ties. (p. 36)

Head-Smashed-In: Bison jump site in present-day southern Alberta in use for more than 5,000 years. It was also a trade centre for the nations that used the site. It was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981. (p. 27)

hunter-gatherer: An economic strategy that involves hunting wild game and gathering wild berries, roots, and the like, as opposed to a more sedentary agriculture-based lifestyle for providing the required food for a community. (p. 23)

Sioui, Georges: Born in Wendake in 1948; an associate professor in the Department of Classics and Religious Studies and the Coordinator of Aboriginal Studies Program at the University of Ottawa. He was the first person from a First Peoples community to be awarded a doctorate in history in Canada. He wrote *Les Hurons-Wendats: une civilisation méconnue* (Laval University Press, 1994), which provides much-needed balance to the history of the Wendat people. (p. 31)

taiga: Subarctic coniferous (evergreen) forest; boreal forest. (p. 21)

“three sisters”: Corn, squash, and beans, the three crops central to Indigenous agriculture in the Great Lakes region. They complement each other nutritionally and agriculturally, with the beans

adding nitrogen to the soil, corn providing support for the beans, and squash providing ground cover to prevent weed growth and soil erosion and to preserve soil moisture. (p. 23)

Wendake: Territory in present-day south-central Ontario extending eastward from Georgian Bay that was controlled at the time of early European contact by a confederacy of Iroquoian-speaking communities whom the French called Huron but who called themselves Wendat. Known as Huronia in Euro-Canadian historiography. (p. 37)

Study Questions

1. What is unique about the status of early technology in the Americas?
2. Name at least two significant achievements which resulted from early engineering technology/skill in the Americas.
3. Contrary to popular belief, why has the development of agriculture *not* always been the primary factor behind the process of more permanent settlement in one place?
4. What particular environmental aspect might have triggered the domestication of plants?
5. What are the “three sisters”?
6. What type(s) of contribution can be seen today, which is a direct result of Indigenous Peoples’ knowledge of plants?
7. Name two key points of significance behind the Head-Smashed-In buffalo jump site in southern Alberta.
8. Although it appears that European domestication of animals surpassed that of Indigenous Peoples, this does not suggest that Indigenous Peoples did not control animals in a variety of ways. Identify and explain ways in which Indigenous Peoples managed animal resources.
9. Define both egalitarian society and hierarchical society. Provide an example of each.
10. Rather than being undertaken for purely economic reasons, what social functions did trading practices fulfill? Further, what were the primary functions of gift-giving? Why was ‘exchange’ also important for treaty agreements?
11. What are the key differences when it comes to identifying and comparing concepts of ‘wealth’ and wealth accumulation practices of Indigenous societies during the time period covered in this chapter and those of modern Canadian society today?
12. What was the approximate population and geographical size of the Wendat Confederacy? What was the primary factor behind their disintegration?
13. What is another well-known name for the Haudenosaunee Confederacy?

14. When it came to warfare, how would you compare the underlying factors between Indigenous warfare and that between European nations at the time?

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the development of the “three sisters” and the benefits of growing these three plants together. Be specific, and include dates.

The cultivation of squash was introduced in the Northeastern Woodlands c. 4,300 years ago. Corn, the first cultivated food crop, reached southern Ontario around 500 ACE. Beans followed sometime after 1000 ACE.

The triad of corns, beans, and squash was being grown throughout North America by the sixteenth century. The combination of the three being grown together provided permanence and sustainability by reinforcing each other in both their production and nutritional value. Specifically, beans provide nitrogen to her sisters, squash roots prevent soil erosion, and corn provides protection from the elements namely hail, wind, and sunlight. These three vegetables also provide a more balanced nutritional diet when eaten together. (pp. 23-24)

2. Identify three environmental biomes and explain which Indigenous Peoples adapted their lifestyles to these specific biomes and how.

Examples can include any of the following:

Far North: tundra (pp. 27-28): Inuit adaptations (p. 30)

Hudson Bay Lowland (biotic province) (p. 28): Dene/Cree/Inuit/Innu adaptations (p. 30)

Boreal Forest: taiga (pp. 29-30): Ojibwa/Odaawak/Wendat adaptations (pp. 30-31)

Grasslands: Prairie ecozone (p. 30): Siksikawa/Nakoda/Dakhóta adaptations (p. 32)

moderate Pacific maritime region (p. 32): Haida adaptations (p. 32)

3. Interaction based on ‘exchange’ was a key factor in various types of relationships among Indigenous Peoples. Access to natural resources played major roles in trade, political strength and also warfare. Discuss the nature of these interactions and their association with access to natural resources.

As an economic relationship, interactions based on trade became a natural occurrence due to the uneven distribution of resources. In eastern Canada, trading dates back to around 6000 years ago. There was much variation between hunting and gathering societies and those who picked up aspects of agricultural cultures. This created notable difference in resource strengths and needs, which in turn, contributed to trade and cooperative interaction between various groups. For example, the domestication of the ‘three sisters’ in eastern Canada allowed groups such as the Wendat Confederacy to trade with Northern Tribes, supplying them with corn, beans, squash and also twine for fish nets. In return, they received meat, hides and furs, which were especially plentiful in the areas of Boreal Forest and Plains. (p. 37)

In addition to food and related material goods, other popular items such as obsidian rock for tools, and various kinds of shells for personal adornment also became important trade items between more distant groups, with these products travelling far from the geographic regions in which the raw materials were found. Little is known about the trade of perishable goods, but oolichan oil was another item which facilitated long distance trading relationship. It originated from the Pacific Coast, therefore travelling along thousands of miles of trade routes into the interior of the continent. (p. 36)

Politically, the strength of the Wendat Confederacy was also a direct result of its geographical location along major trade routes which facilitated the exchange of goods between different cultural groups, thereby, giving them the ability to trade extensively with allied groups surrounding the rival Haudenosaunee Confederacy. However, it appears that the political strength of the Wendat would have been bolstered by the fact that their extensive cornfields formed a surrounding belt around several villages in Wendake territory and this allowed all Wendat people to understand each other through use of the same language throughout the northern trade networks. (p. 37)

The significance of natural resources also played a role in conflicts and their resolution. Conflicts between groups such as the Haudenosaunee and other peoples of the Great Lakes were always resolved via the re-establishment of a trading relationship. Conversely, in this region, wars were also begun when there was a great scarcity of game animals that forced rival groups to trespass into another's hunting territory. Overall, organized warfare was more characteristic within sedentary communities and it took place to avenge fallen members of a group, but also to protect natural resources. The centrality of natural resources remains to the nature of these relationships continue for some time; even after contact with Europeans, an underlying cause of conflict continued to be over concern with natural resources. (pp. 38-39)

Additional Resources

Further Readings

Bruchac, Joseph. *Native Plant Stories*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1995.

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Websites

- Five Indigenous Farming Practices Enhancing Food Security.
<http://www.resilience.org/stories/2017-08-14/five-indigenous-farming-practices-enhancing-food-security/>
- The Trade Network – Trading Ideas, Virtual Museum of Canada.
<http://www.letrocdesidees.ca/en/commercial-network.php>