

Period 1: 1491-1607

AP United States History

Native American Societies Before Contact

Period 1 runs from **1491** to **1607** - from the eve of European contact to the founding of Jamestown. It exists to explain what the Americas were like *before* Europeans arrived, and what happened when three worlds met.

North America in 1491 held hundreds of distinct societies. They differed because they adapted to different environments, and the CED groups them by region:

- In the **Southwest**, the spread of **maize** cultivation northward from present-day Mexico supported permanent settlement, **advanced irrigation**, and greater social complexity.
- In the **Great Basin** and the western **Great Plains**, dry conditions produced largely **mobile lifestyles**.
- In the **Northeast**, the **Mississippi River Valley**, and along the **Atlantic seaboard**, societies developed **mixed agricultural and hunter-gatherer economies**, which favoured permanent villages.
- In the **Northwest** and present-day **California**, abundant ocean resources allowed settled communities without farming.

The pattern to hold on to is **adaptation**: the environment shaped the society, and the society reshaped the environment.

REGION	ENVIRONMENT	WHAT IT PRODUCED
Southwest	maize spreads north from Mexico	permanent settlement, advanced irrigation
Great Basin & western Plains	dry conditions	largely mobile lifestyles
Northeast, Mississippi Valley, Atlantic seaboard	mixed farming and hunting-gathering	permanent villages
Northwest & California	abundant ocean resources	settled communities WITHOUT farming

ADAPTATION — the environment shaped the society, and the society reshaped the environment

The CED's four regional groupings: one mechanism - environment shapes society - with different inputs



Monks Mound at Cahokia - the scale a Mississippian settlement reached without draught animals or the wheel



Cliff Palace at Mesa Verde - permanent settlement where maize agriculture could support it

Why Europeans Crossed the Atlantic

European exploration was driven by a search for **new sources of wealth**, expanded trade routes, and the spread of **Christianity**. Spain and Portugal moved first, and Spain's American empire followed.

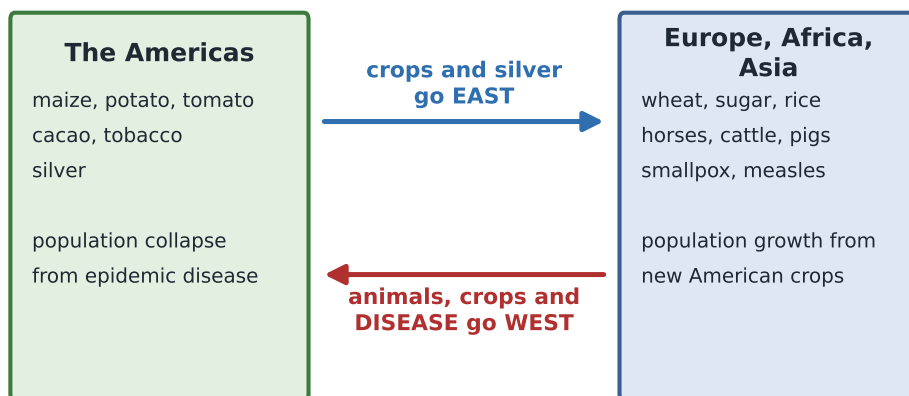
Two changes made the voyages possible: improvements in **maritime technology**, and more organised methods of financing trade, especially the **joint-stock**

company, which spread the risk of a voyage across many investors.



Columbus lands in 1492 (Vanderlyn, 1847): banners of crown and cross together, wealth, rivalry and religion in one scene

The Columbian Exchange



disease → demographic collapse → labour shortage → encomienda → Atlantic slave trade

the causal chain Period 1 exists to explain

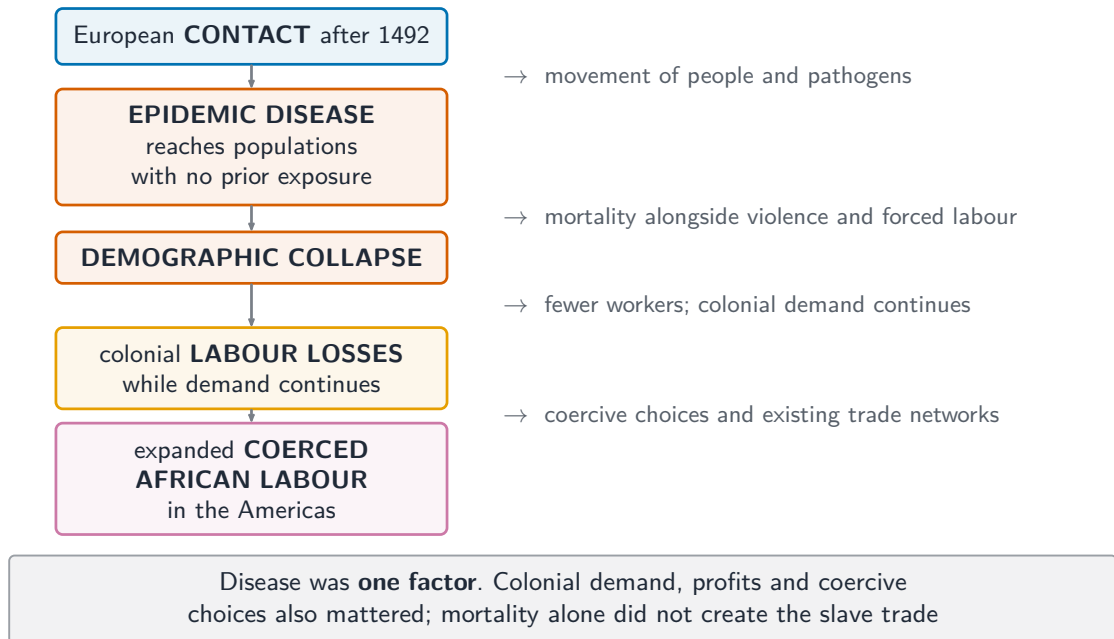
The Columbian Exchange moved crops, animals, people and disease in both directions, with very different consequences on each side

The **Columbian Exchange** is the transfer of plants, animals, people, and diseases between the Americas and the rest of the world. It connected environ-

ments and societies across the Atlantic and changed food supplies, populations and colonial economies.

Moving **east** to Europe: American crops such as **maize** and the **potato** raised nutrition and helped drive **European population growth**. American **silver** reshaped global trade.

Moving **west** to the Americas: European animals, crops, and - decisively - **epidemic disease**. Populations with no prior exposure suffered catastrophic mortality, and this **demographic collapse** accompanied and enabled Spanish conquest.



One causal connection in Spanish colonial labour: population loss, continuing demand and coercive choices

Labour, Slavery, and Caste in Spanish America

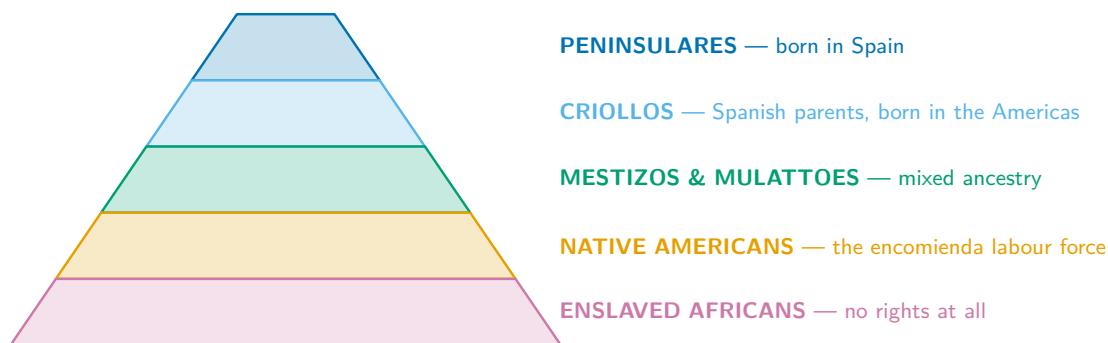
Spanish colonists sought labour for profitable agriculture and mining.

The **encomienda system** granted Spanish colonists the right to extract labour from Native American communities to support plantation-based agriculture and **mining**. Disease, violence and forced labour reduced Native populations, while colonial demand for workers continued. European traders **partnered with some West African groups** who practised slavery to forcibly extract enslaved people for the Americas through the **Atlantic slave trade**. Spanish colonists used enslaved Africans in plantation agriculture and mining. Population loss was one factor; profitable colonial production, coercive decisions and existing trafficking networks also mattered. Do not describe a shortage as making enslavement inevitable,

or *encomienda* as a stage that simply ended before African slavery began.

Spain then organised the resulting society formally. The **caste system**

defined the status of every group - Europeans, Native Americans, Africans, and people of mixed ancestry - and fixed rights and obligations by category.



Your place was fixed by **ancestry**, not by wealth or achievement — and it was written into **law**, which is what makes it a caste system rather than a class system

The Spanish American caste system: status fixed by ancestry and written into law

Worldviews in Conflict

Europeans and Native Americans held **divergent worldviews** on religion, gender roles, family, land use, and power. Two ideas about land were especially incompatible: European **private property** against Native American systems of shared use.

The early years were shaped by **mutual misunderstanding**. As European demands on land and labour grew, Native peoples **resisted** - through accommodation, alliance, trade, and armed conflict.

Contact also started an argument *inside* Europe. Extended contact with Native Americans and Africans fostered a **debate among European religious and political leaders** about how non-Europeans should be treated and what rights they held - a debate that produced justifications for conquest as well as criticisms of it.



John White's watercolour of Secotan, c. 1585: an Algonquian town with fields, houses and a ceremonial ground

Thinking Like a Historian in Period 1

Historical questions can ask you to analyse sources, compare societies, explain causes, describe **context** or develop an argument. Read the task rather than assuming every question tests the same skill.

Contextualization places a development in relevant wider circumstances.

Causation explains how and why a development happened. Both require specific knowledge and an explained connection.

Try it – classify and improve the reasoning. Consider these student statements about colonial labour in Spanish America:

Statement	Student reasoning
A	Colonists sought wealth from agriculture and mining.
B	Disease killed many Native people; labour demands continued.
C	Disease alone created African slavery in the Americas.

Which statement describes a motive or wider setting? Which begins a causal explanation? Which overclaims? Improve B and C by explaining colonial demand, coercive choices and trade networks.

Worked reasoning. A gives an economic setting and motive. B begins to connect population loss with pressure on the labour supply, but needs a further link: colonists still demanded workers for agriculture and mining. C removes human choices and other causes. European traders and colonists forcibly obtained and exploited enslaved Africans through existing networks to serve colonial production. Disease was one factor, alongside violence and forced labour; it did not alone create the trade. Explaining

these choices does not justify them.

Transfer – more than one reasoning process. Compare the Southwest and the Great Basin before contact. Give one difference in livelihood, connect it to an environmental condition, and avoid saying that all Native societies were the same.

Worked answer. In the Southwest, maize agriculture and irrigation supported permanent settlements. In the Great Basin, arid conditions encouraged mobile hunting and gathering. This compares different adaptations and explains a connection to environment; it is not simply a list of dates. Local societies varied within each regional grouping.

Exam-linked practice – contextualization. The 2023 Set 1 long essay, Question 2, asks students to evaluate change from transatlantic trade in British North American colonial society during **1607–1776** (paraphrased). We practise only its context requirement here, not a complete essay.

A student opens with: “Europeans travelled across the ocean. Many things happened before 1607.” Explain why this lacks useful context. Then write a short opening that connects earlier Spanish colonization, the search for wealth and later English colonial investment.

Teacher-written model. Before English settlement at Jamestown, Spanish colonization had brought American resources into European commerce. Profits from earlier colonies encouraged other European powers to pursue American settlements and trade. This competition helps explain the setting in which British colonial society became tied to Atlantic commerce.

Why the revision helps. It describes a wider development and explains its relevance. An earlier date or a passing name alone is insufficient. This is an illustrative response guided by the official rubric, not an official sample or a guaranteed point. A full essay must also make a defensible claim about the specified period and support it with relevant evidence; earlier Spanish context cannot replace that evidence.

Grounding. Course content follows CED Topics 1.3–1.5 and historical thinking skills 4–6. The exam connection is 2023 Set 1 LEQ2, official scoring guidelines, contextualization row. The distinction between earlier African trafficking and later American colonial demand is supported by the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Exam tips

- Period 1 is short but supplies **context** for later questions. Explain how early encounters shaped later Atlantic connections; do more than list dates.
- Explain causal links with qualifications: population loss and continuing colonial labour demand contributed to expanding coerced African labour. Include economic motives, decisions and trade networks; do not claim a single cause.

- Name specific regions when describing Native societies. “Native Americans farmed” is too general; the Southwest, Great Basin, Northeast, and Northwest each had a distinct adaptation.
- Keep the **Columbian Exchange** two-directional. Answers that only describe what Europe gained miss half the concept.
- **Encomienda** is a labour system, not a land grant, and the Spanish **caste system** is a social hierarchy defined by ancestry.
- For any prompt, identify the **task verb** first: describe, explain, compare, or evaluate the extent. Each earns points differently.

Vocabulary card meanings

maize: A grain domesticated in the Americas and central to many Indigenous diets. advanced irrigation: Systems that moved water to crops in dry regions. mobile lifestyles: Ways of living that followed herds or seasons rather than one fixed town. new sources of wealth: Gold, silver, and other riches that drew Europeans across the Atlantic. Christianity: The religion European colonisers sought to spread in the Americas. maritime technology: Ships, instruments, and skills that made long ocean voyages possible. joint-stock company: A business owned by many investors who shared the risk of a voyage or colony. potato: A tuber from the Americas that later supported population growth in Europe. European population growth: A rise in the number of people in Europe, fed partly by American crops. silver: The precious metal mined in huge quantities in Spanish America. epidemic disease: Illnesses such as smallpox that spread rapidly and killed large numbers. demographic collapse: A drastic fall in Indigenous population after contact. encomienda system: A Spanish grant of Indigenous labour to colonists, in theory with duties of protection. Atlantic slave trade: The forced transport of Africans across the ocean into bondage in the Americas. divergent worldviews: Clashing understandings of land, religion, and authority. private property: Land and goods owned by individuals rather than held in common. mutual misunderstanding: Each side misreading the other’s intentions and customs. resisted: Fought back against conquest, labour demands, or conversion. Contextualization: Placing an event in the wider situation that shaped it.