**Pre-Columbian Societies**

Hold onto your hats, because we're about to blow your mind: Indian societies existed in the Americas *before* Europeans arrived. Who would have guessed? All of you out there in cyberspace are smart enough to know that Native Americans didn't magically pop into existence as soon as Columbus's boots touched American soil, but with the way history is taught in most American schools, it might as well be the story.

In reality, America had tons of people tens of thousands of years before Columbus arrived. According to the **land bridge theory**, Native Americans hailed from Siberia and traveled over the frozen Bering Strait through Alaska and into Canada. Others believe early settlers arrived by boat. In any case, everyone agrees not only that Native Americans are actually descendants of *Asian*tribes, but also that they came over some 20,000-40,000 years ago.

And, there were a lot of them: around 20 to 25 million people in North America alone. And, of course, they didn't call themselves "**Indians.**" Columbus gave them that name because he was stupid. Too harsh? Fine. He wasn't stupid, per se—he was simply ignorant of the size of the Earth and thought that he had reached India. How was he to know that there was a great lump of America between Spain and Asia? Unfortunately, the mix-up stuck, and indigenous Americans are still called "Indians," even though tribes clearly have names for themselves.

People in present-day Canada and the United States were mostly organized into nomadic tribes. The people were usually hunter-gatherers or agriculturalists who stayed within small family groups and migrated, depending on the locations of the animal herds.

Native peoples were also organized into great, powerful, and complex societies. You may know the powerful and advanced civilizations of the **Maya**, the **Aztec**, and the **Inca** of Mexico and South America, but what about the **Ancestral Pueblo** people of the American Southwest, or the **Cahokia** civilization of the Ohio Valley?

The Pueblo, for example, had large communities of apartment houses with complex irrigation systems. The Cahokia built massive **mounds**(we're talking a hundred feet tall) that historians think served a religious purpose. The Pueblo also had giant plazas the size of multiple football fields that may have been used for public meetings, festivals, ceremonies, markets, and sports.

Artifacts from these locations show that they were in contact with each other and with cultural epicenters like Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital. These two civilizations had disappeared by the time Europeans arrived, but we can still see the adobe pueblos and mounds hanging around today.

Mostly, though, the tribes in the present-day United States and Canada were not unified. They didn't think of themselves as one people, just like Europeans have never thought, "Oh, yeah, we're all *exactly the same* because we live on the same continent."

Because the tribes were scattered all over the place, they had a seriously hard time unifying when the European invaders arrived, especially since the arrival of the conquistadors didn't seem like that big of a deal at first. They were just some weirdly pasty dudes with shiny clothes and hats, a penchant for furs, and an interest in yellow rocks in the ground. No biggie.

That mindset was most popular when the Native Americans themselves were quite numerous. But, it wasn't the *Europeans*who did all the dirty work when it came to wiping out the Native Americans; it was their diseases. Epidemics like **smallpox**killed a full 90 percent of all Native Americans in the present-day United States. Think about that for a second: 9 out of 10 of your friends, here one day and gone the next. It was like someone pulled the plug on the continent, and the entire Indian population went down the drain.

New settlers stepped in to fill the continent again, but that is a story for the next section.