

A **History** of the **Canadian Peoples**



J.M. Bumsted

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Major Events in the Early History of the First Nations

- 12,000 BC** Mammal retaining stone weapon killed in New Mexico.
- 11,000 BC** Glacial retreat escalates with warming trend.
- 10,000 BC** Continued warming alters physical environment as ice retreats.
- 9000 BC** Fluted Point people spread across North America.
- 7000 BC** Maritime Archaic culture develops the harpoon.
- 5500 BC** Maritime Archaic culture develops burial mounds. Mound at L'Anse Amour is filled with harpoon and walrus tusk. Notched projectile points appear in British Columbia.
- 3000 BC** Forest reaches its northernmost extension.
- 2000 BC** Paleo-Eskimos and other Archaics begin displacing Maritime Archaics on eastern seaboard and Arctic regions.
- 1000 BC** Ceramic pottery appears in Great Lakes area and spreads east.
- 500 BC** Dorset people appear in Arctic Canada. Climate deteriorates.
- AD 500** Maize cultivation begins in southern Ontario. Climate begins improving.
- 600** Beothuk culture replaces the Dorset Eskimos in Newfoundland.
- 1000** Norse settle in eastern North America.
- 1150** Dorset culture is replaced by Thule culture among Inuit.
- 1350** Squash and bean cultivation are added in southern Ontario.
- 1498** First Europeans since Vikings reach northern North America.
- 1634ff** Beginning of the destruction of the Huron nation.
- 1730** Horses reach the northern great plains.

Major Events in the Early European Exploration of Northern North America

- 982–5** Eric the Red explores Greenland.
- c. 1000** L'Anse aux Meadows is established by the Vikings.
- 1497** John Cabot sights Newfoundland.
- 1500** Gaspar Corte-Real lands at Tierra Verde (Newfoundland).
- 1501** Gaspar Corte-Real brings the first Aborigines to Europe.
- 1534** Jacques Cartier erects a cross in Gaspé Harbour on his first voyage to the St Lawrence.
- 1576** Martin Frobisher's first voyage to Baffin Island.
- 1585** John Davis enters Davis Strait.
- 1611** Henry Hudson enters Hudson Bay.
- 1615** Étienne Brûlé investigates New York and Pennsylvania.
- 1616** Robert Bylot sails through Davis Strait.
- 1651** Pierre Radisson is captured by Mohawks.
- 1659** Radisson begins partnership with Médard Chouart Des Groseilliers.
- 1660** Radisson and Groseilliers return from Hudson Bay with a rich haul of furs.
- 1669** René-Robert Cavelier de La Salle heads out on his first expedition.

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The Beginning



Once upon a time, a history of Canada would typically begin with the arrival of the European ‘discoverers’ at the end of the fifteenth century. These events at best mark only the moment at which the land and its people enter the European historical record, not the beginning of its history. Thousands of years of human development had preceded the Europeans’ appearance. The Native inhabitants of North America have their own history. The work of countless modern specialists, chiefly linguistic scholars and archaeologists, has only begun to touch the bare outlines of the pre-European period. The record of human settlement clearly does not begin with the Europeans.

THE FIRST IMMIGRANTS

Unlike other continents on this planet, North America did not produce indigenous archaic human forms going back thousands of generations. No evidence suggests that any of the many ancestors of *Homo sapiens* developed on this continent. There was no Old Stone Age as in Africa, Asia, or Europe. Instead, the first humanlike inhabitant of North America was *Homo sapiens* herself, arriving as an immigrant in the New World during the last Great Ice Age—which ended 10,000 years ago—probably across a land bridge stretching between what is now Siberia and Alaska.

The 30,000 years or more of the human occupation of the North American continent before the arrival of the Europeans around 1500 was, until very recently, usually labelled as ‘prehistoric’. The term has now fallen out of common usage, however, because it produces so many misconceptions. There may have been no written record of North American development before the Europeans, but to assume that ‘history’ begins only with writing is totally misleading. Plenty of earlier records of human activity exist. From them a fascinating picture of the early history of what is now Canada can be created. That picture is hardly a static one. Instead, it is one of constant movement, adaptation, and change. These early people did not attempt to modify their environment so much as adapt to it. That environment was continually shifting, perhaps not over a single season but over several generations.

One of the chief factors influencing the early inhabitants of North America was climate. Until very recently—as the history of the planet goes—most of

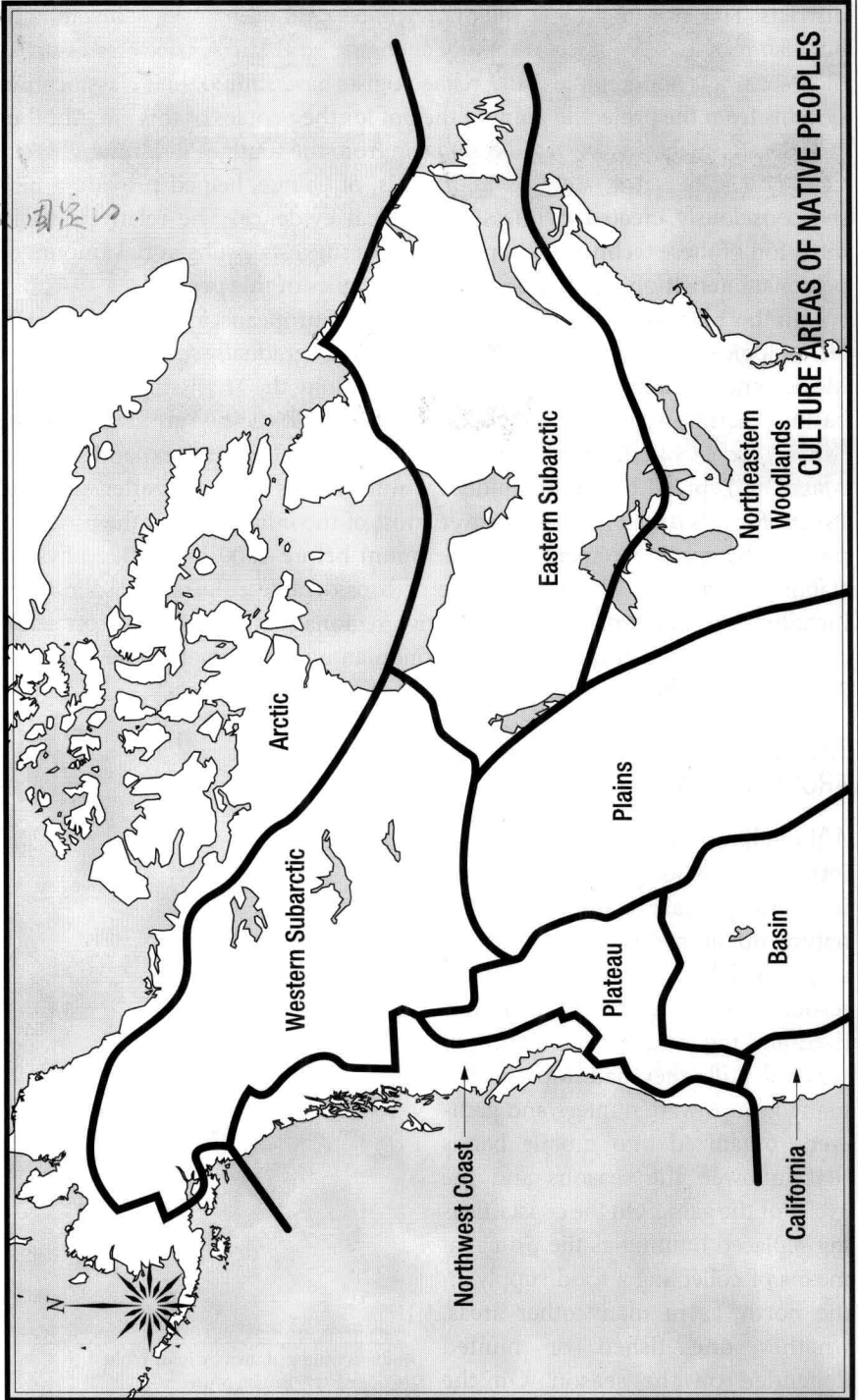
what is now Canada was covered with glacial ice, which began retreating about 10,000 years ago. There were several ice-free corridors running from Alaska south, through which the first immigrants from Asia probably travelled into the warmer regions of the continent. While some inhabitants adapted to ice and snow, most people began moving northward as the ice began melting. By the time of Christ around 2,000 years ago, most of Canada had acquired a natural environment recognizable to us today. The land had also acquired permanent Native inhabitants. What we know about these people and their history comes to us in the form of physical artefacts, chiefly bones and tools or weapons.

Because of the limited nature of the evidence, the early history of humankind in Canada is usually described in terms of the surviving tools and weapons, especially projectile points. Archaeologists can infer much from tool-making technology and its geographical spread across the continent. Using various dating techniques, including laboratory testing of organic substances to determine what remains of a radioactive carbon isotope called carbon-14, it has been possible to provide some overall sense of chronological development. The first incontestable evidence of human habitation in North America comes in the form of fluted projectile points chipped from various rocks by taking long flakes (or flutes) from the base to the tip. Between 9500 and 8000 BC people using these points spread from Alaska through the central plains and eastern woodlands. They were hunters and gatherers who lived in small units, although not in total isolation from neighbours. There is evidence of trade and exchange of goods.

As the ice melted and the glaciers moved northward, the hunters who made the fluted points spread more widely across the continent. These people have come to be known by archaeologists as the Plano People because of their distinctive projectile-point technology. They flourished from 8000 to 6000 BC. By 4000 BC a number of regional offshoots from the Plano People had developed. Over the next 3,000 years these cultures stabilized to some extent, although there was still substantial physical movement. On the western plains, a culture organized around communal bison-hunting emerged, perhaps as early as 3000 BC. The High Arctic was occupied by Paleo-Eskimos, who gradually moved to the south into the Barren Lands west of Hudson Bay. The northeastern seaboard was occupied between 2000 and 1000 BC. On the West Coast, a semisedentary lifestyle based on the salmon had developed by 2000 BC.

From 1000 BC to AD 500, substantial cultural changes occurred across North America. Once we stop trying to compare these developments with what was going on in Europe and see them instead in their own terms, we can appreciate how substantial the technological innovations of this period were. The bow and arrow spread rapidly, for example, completing altering hunting techniques. In the same years, pottery making moved from the Yukon to eastern

永久凍土帶



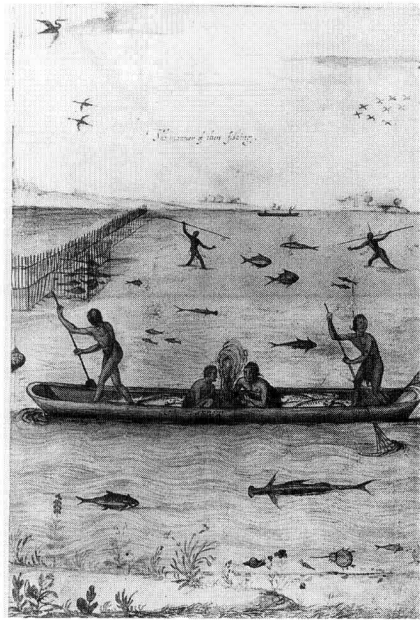
Source: R.B. Morrison and C.R. Wilson, *Native Peoples: The Canadian Experience* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995): frontispiece.

districts. The introduction of the pot changed food preparation substantially, but also provides evidence of rapidly changing aesthetic sensibilities as ornamentation was added to design. Archaeologists have shifted their classification systems from the projectile point to the pot for the peoples of this era. Another new development was the rapid expansion from the south of new funeral practices, chiefly burial in large mounds. This, of course, helped provide a new self-consciously created richness of physical evidence. The relatively rapid diffusion of these technologies and aesthetics suggests a substantial amount of personal interaction and trade among the peoples of this period.

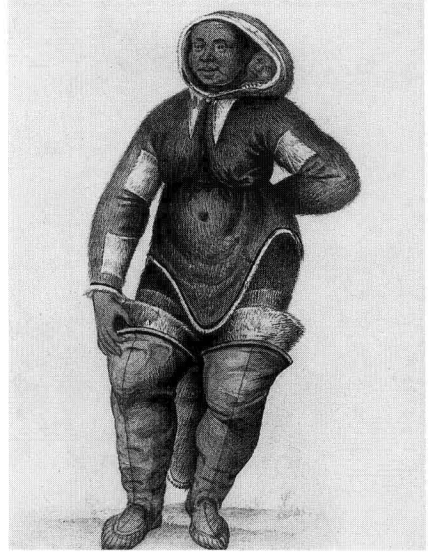
In the 1,000 years before the arrival of the Europeans, another substantial technological leap occurred. Cultivation of plants gradually spread north from Mexico and was adopted in southern Ontario along the Mississippi River water basin sometime after AD 500. Corn was rapidly followed by sunflowers, beans, squash, and eventually tobacco. In the north, the Thule culture expanded out of Alaska and spread relatively rapidly eastward across the Arctic after AD 1000. Except for this development, however, most of the inhabitants in the northern part of the continent spent the millennium before 1500 in relative physical stability. As a result, the era was one of considerable cultural consolidation, including the development of distinctive regional languages based on a few common language groups, chiefly Algonquian and Iroquoian in the east and Athapaskan in the northwest.

THE ABORIGINAL POPULATION AROUND 1500

Although on the eve of European intrusion all Aboriginal peoples lived in a reciprocal relationship with nature, not all had the same relationship. Much depended on the resources of the region in which they lived and the precise combination of survival skills they had. Most of the many groups were hunters and gatherers, organized into mobile bands that followed the seasons and the cycles of the game. On the coasts, fishing replaced hunting as the principal means of collecting a food supply. In the north, as in many other areas, whether one fished or hunted depended on the season. On the



Indians fishing, drawn by John White
(Copyright © British Museum).

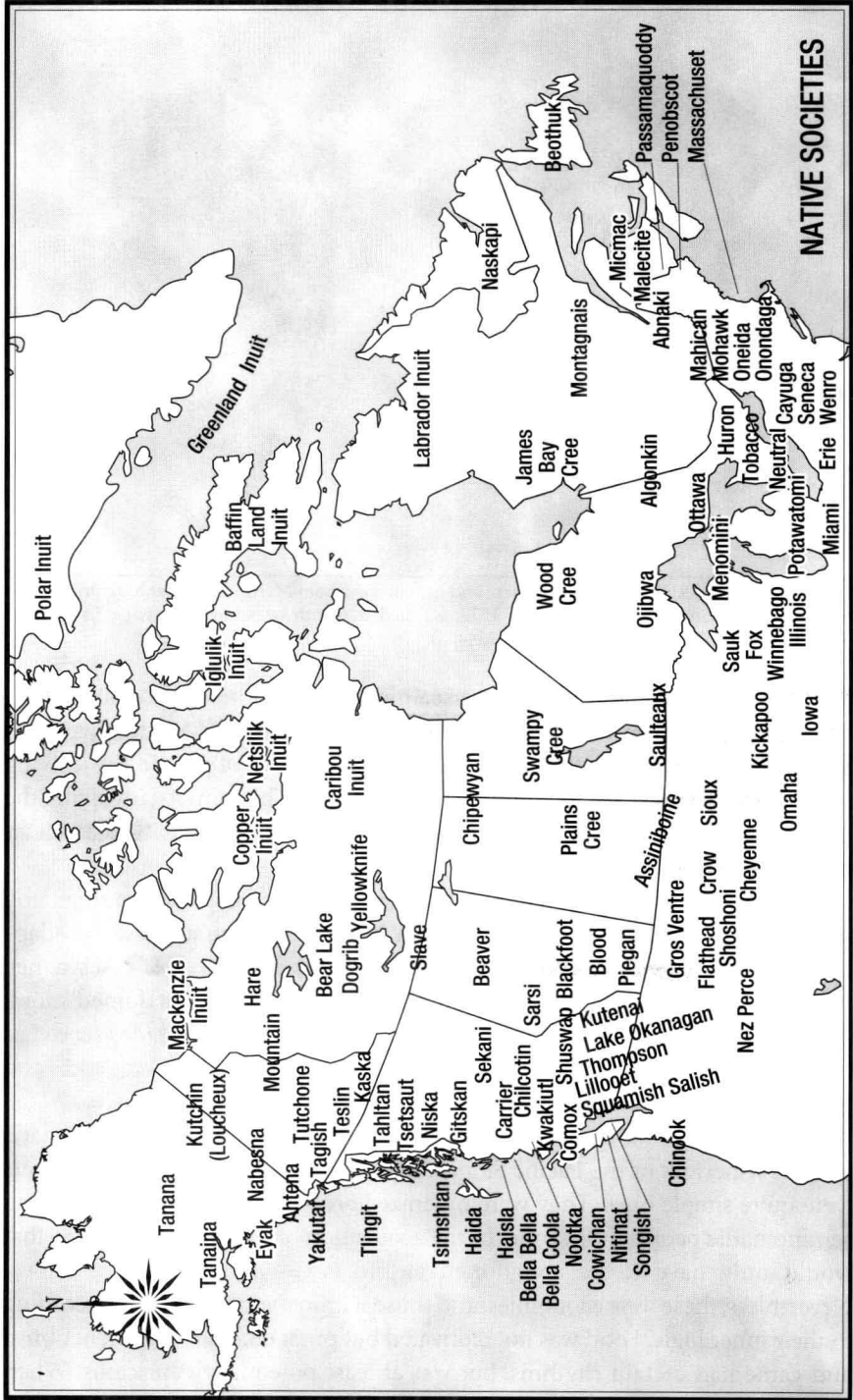


Three Baffin Island Inuit—a man, a woman, and her child—whom Martin Frobisher took prisoner on his second expedition to the Arctic in 1577, all died a month or so after arriving in England (Copyright © British Museum 205220 and 234062).

Pacific Slope, the rich resource base of salmon and cedar made possible considerable accumulations of wealth. The Pacific peoples demonstrated that it was not essential to farm in order to prosper. Only one group of people, those living in the area of the Great Lakes, pursued horticulture. This activity, involving the planting of corn, tobacco, beans, squash, and sunflowers, led to the establishment of semipermanent villages.

Despite the differences in their lifestyles, all Native peoples were singularly ingenious at adapting to their environment. None were more successful at adaptation than the Inuit, who inhabited an ice-bound world in the north. At sea they used the speedy kayak and on land the dog-sled. They lived in a domed snow-hut (the igloo) in winter and in skin tents in summer. Caribou hides served as the basic clothing material. The Inuit were extremely skilful at making tools and weapons. Their use of bone and ivory for such equipment was extensive.

With the possible exceptions of the horticulturalists of southcentral Canada and the fisherfolk of the Pacific Slope, the economies of the Native inhabitants were quite simple ones. They were organized around the food supply, offering seminomadic people little scope for the acquisition of material possessions that would only have to be abandoned at the next—and imminent—move. Nevertheless, these were economies, and those within them functioned according to their inner logic. Food was not cultivated but pursued. The movement of fish and game had certain rhythms, but was at least potentially capricious. When



Source: J.A. Price, *Indians of Canada: Cultural Dynamics* (Toronto: Prentice-Hall, 1979): viii-ix.

food was available, the population galvanized into action, gathering as much as possible and consuming it almost immediately. When food ran out, energetic questing for new supplies did not necessarily begin immediately. The people knew the general patterns of the wildlife and vegetation they sought, and hurry often did little good. It was, for example, useless to hunt for berries in February. In any event, these economies put no premium on the disciplined pursuit of goals, or on the deferral of expectations. Nor did they encourage the sort of unremitting hard labour familiar to the European newcomers.

The numbers of Aborigines living in Canada on the eve of European intrusion has become the subject of considerable debate. One point seems clear. The Native population, lacking immunities to a variety of European diseases, was quickly decimated by epidemics, which spread silently across the land, often in advance of the actual appearance of a European carrier. Measles, small-pox, typhus, typhoid, venereal disease, and tuberculosis were as much European imports as the gun, the horse, and the wheel. The size of the population observed by the first European arrivals may have already been considerably modified by disease brought by the earliest fishermen, who may well have preceded the recorded explorers. The indigenous precontact population of Canada was probably substantially larger than the most generous estimates of all the first-contact observers.

THE FIRST INTRUDERS

As every schoolchild now knows, Norsemen made the first documented European visitations to North America. There is contemporary evidence of these visits in the great Icelandic epic sagas, confirmed in our own time by archaeological excavations near L'Anse aux Meadows on the northern tip of Newfoundland. The sagas describe the landings to the west of Greenland made by Leif Ericsson and his brother Thorvald. They also relate Thorfinn Karlsefni's colonization attempt at a place Leif had called Vinland, an attempt that was thwarted by hostile Aborigines labelled in the sagas as 'Skraelings'. It is tempting to equate Vinland with the archaeological discoveries, although there is no real evidence for doing so.

Later Greenlanders may have timbered on Baffin Island. They may also have intermarried with the Inuit. Attempts have been made to attribute the Thule culture of the Inuit to such racial mixings. But Greenland gradually lost contact with Europe, and the Icelandic settlement there died away in the fifteenth century. For all intents and purposes, the Norse activities became at best part of the murky geographical knowledge of the late Middle Ages.

In our own time the uncovering of a world map executed in the mid-fifteenth century, showing a realistic Greenland and westward islands including inscriptions referring to Vinland, created much speculation about Europe's geographical knowledge before Columbus. This Vinland map has never been