

1491: The Untold Story of the Americas Before Columbus

EPISODE 105 – GOVERNANCE & TRADE

Opening Title Sequence – Narrator - 00:08

We are the First Peoples of the Americas. We have been here from the beginning. Our ancestors navigated by the wind and stars, crossing vast oceans and mountain ranges, searching for new lands. Over thousands of years, our ancestors became astronomers and architects, philosophers and scientists, artists and inventors. We created distinct societies and built the vast trade systems that covered two continents. In 1492, our world was changed forever, but we did not disappear.

Today, the languages and teachings of our ancestors remain, and these are the untold stories of the Americas before Columbus.

The Americas before 14 were home to thousands of societies, each with its own distinct social, cultural, and political structure. Throughout the two continents, Indigenous People formed clans, confederacies, alliances, and even empires. Indigenous People interacted between these communities through a complex network of trade that connected every region of the Americas. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy was formed nearly 900 years ago, making it one of the oldest representative democracies in the world. Before the five founding Iroquoian Nations came together in peace, they were locked in an endless cycle of retribution and intertribal war.

Haudenosaunee Confederacy – Dr. Taiaiake Alfred – 02:16

You had five warring Nations, and the descriptions in the oral histories is very, very explicit in talking about how there was fratricide, there was cannibalism. Basically, human relations had totally broken down in that part of the world amongst their own people. It was all to do with this cycle of revenge.

Narrator – 02:39

Every Iroquoian chief engaged in retaliation. but it was Tadodaho the Serpent Chief who was known throughout the territory for his ruthlessness.

Dr. Barbara Mann – 02:49

This guy was terrifying. He put live snakes in his hair... you know, live and writhing snakes.

Dr. Taiaiake Alfred – 02:56

He's a very powerful spiritual person, whose mind was twisted, so the imagery they have in the stories is his fingers are all twisted and his body's all gnarled, and so forth, and he was able to control the wind and the waters, and he was causing a lot of harm.

Narrator – 03:14

As internal wars continued to tear the five nations apart, an outsider, known as "The Peacemaker," arrived in a stone canoe, and began to share his vision of a society based on harmony and peace. He travelled to every corner of Iroquoian territory, promoting the great law of peace.

Dr. Taiaiake Alfred - 03:35

And the founding of the Confederacy, really, is the story of the Peacemaker, a person from a related Nation, who came into our territory and connected with a leader in our nation, Aionwatha.

Narrator – 03:51

Once part of his Nation's warrior society, Aionwatha had changed his way of thinking and started to promote his own vision of peace. Tadodaho saw this as a betrayal and had each of Aionwatha's daughters killed, one by one. The pain of his loss led Aionwatha to leave his community and isolate himself in the forest.

Dr. Taiaiake Alfred - 04:19

Aionwatha's story is not just Aionwatha. It's the story of him and his daughters, and how the loss of his daughters affected him, and what drove him to do what he did was the loss of his daughters.

Dr. Barbara Mann - 04:29

Your daughters are your posterity, because lineage follows the female line.

Narrator – 04:42

After they met, the Peacemaker convinced Aionwatha that they should become allies in seeking peace among the Nations.

Even though he was overcome with grief, Aionwatha chose to work with the Peacemaker to promote his idea of an intertribal alliance between the five warring Nations. Because of the revered role of women in Iroquoian Nations, Aionwatha and the Peacemaker travelled to the fire of Jigonsaseh to seek her advice on how to bring the Great Law of Peace to the Iroquoian People.

Dr. Taiaiake Alfred - 05:47

In the Iroquois way of thinking, women were on par with men in terms of the authority they wield in the political realm.

The chiefs of the four Iroquoian Nations supported the Peacemaker's vision of the great law of peace.

Dr. Taiaiake Alfred - 07:45

It's important to consider the objective. The objective wasn't to enhance the power of these Nations, or to increase the territory or the wealth. It was to create peaceful, honest co-existence.

Narrator – 08:11

But Tadodaho continued to resist joining the alliance.

Dr. Barbara Mann - 08:37

Not no-how is he gonna agree to this peace, 'cause he'll lose all his power.

Narrator – 09:22

Then something extraordinary happened. Based on astronomical records, a solar eclipse covered the Northeast Region of North America for four minutes, on the afternoon of August 31, 1142. After this historic event, Tadodaho agreed to join the Confederacy. The Onondaga became the keepers of the Central Fire, a role that they hold to this day.

Dr. Taiaiake Alfred - 10:16

1142 would be the founding of the great peace, and so, yeah, Tadodaho then is named the main chief of the Confederacy. He's actually taken as the symbol of the meaning of this message, which is that even the worst person, even the most powerful evil force, can be turned around and made into good. If you think back into terms of what was the first message that was brought by the Peacemaker to our people, it's that you should treat each other kindly, and you should think of each other as one family. That's the central power of his teachings, that you should be treating everyone like your brother and sister. The power of it is extremely long-lasting, it's shown. It's been how many years now? How many generations of people have been bound together by that?

Narrator – 11:09

This ancient Indigenous government continues to be part of Iroquoian society nearly 900 years after its founding.

World View – Narrator #2

The development of large urban centres evolved from small farming villages as mass production of food supported the growth of populations and cities. For centuries, the Meroitic kingdom thrived as it was too distant for foreign nations to conquer it. This Nubian kingdom was surrounded by fertile land and supported a large urban population. For two centuries, the Assyrian empire was a formidable society. Rulers display their power by constructing impressive palaces and temples. Before the empire fell, they had extended their influence over most of the Middle East and Egypt. The Inka empire was the largest civilization in the Americas in the early sixteenth century. In its short existence, the Sapa Inkas ruled a society of millions of people from Ecuador to Chile. Over the past 5,000 years, large city-states with dynamic political and religious rulers emerged, and held power in every part of the world.

Inka Civilization – Narrator – 13:02

The ancestors of the ambitious Inka rulers had humble beginnings as farmers in the Andean Highlands about 900 years ago. The descendants of those farmers founded the largest Indigenous society in the Americas 600 years ago, and like other great civilizations, the Inka Empire began with a vision.

Dr. Gerardo Gutiérrez - 13:24

The Inkas are going to claim that after the creation of the world in Titicaca, some of them took this passage from the lake, and they are going to emerge in Paqariqtampu, the place of their origin.

Narrator – 13:41

According to oral histories, the first Inka family left their birthplace, in Paqariqtampu, in search of the perfect location to establish a homeland.

Dr. Gerardo Gutiérrez - 13:49

They were carrying a golden staff, and they were basically testing the soils, and the idea was that they were going to find a place where that golden rod was going to be able to be sunken into the ground, and that happened in Cusco, in one specific spot, and that's going to be the ushnu, and the ushnu is the centre, where all the vital force of the universe radiates.

Narrator – 14:18

When the Inka arrived in Cusco, it had been the home of the Killke People for hundreds of years.

Dr. Gerardo Gutiérrez - 14:24

The land is already inhabited by those people who have always been there, and they had to come with an idea of dispossess the local inhabitants, and then they becoming the masters of the place.

Narrator – 14:39

In the first of many conquests, the early Inka rulers either ousted or absorbed the Killke People, maintaining Cusco as the logistical, political, and spiritual heart of their new society. 600 years ago, the Inka Empire extended over much of what is today Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Argentina, and was home to 20 million people.

Dr. Gerardo Gutiérrez – 15:04

You're going to have four primary lines, which are going to be the roads of the Tawantinsuyu.

Narrator – 15:10

Cusco itself was organized into four quadrants, and leaders from cities and villages throughout the Empire were required to build a house and live in Cusco part of the year in the quadrant that corresponded to their region.

Dr. Gerardo Gutiérrez – 15:23

And then, based on that, you are going to have all these... close to 80 provinces in an area that basically went all the way from modern Chile to Ecuador.

Dr. Ruben Mendoza – 15:38

All along the Andes, you had these systems that the Inka built upon. Their empire extended in length some 2,000 miles from north to south. This grew in tandem with conquest and population growth.

Narrator – 15:51

To control such a massive territory and diverse population, the Empire's leaders convinced regional chiefs to join the society with promises of material riches and special status, but mandatory allegiance had a cost. Most of the leaders of these small Nations accepted the new government peacefully, but for those who resisted, the Inka's well-trained army forced compliance. The Sapa Inka was the Emperor, a position passed down from father to son. The Sapa Inka's wife, known as the Coya, was typically his sister.

Dr. Gerardo Gutiérrez - 16:27

We can think about the Inkas as an oligarchy of, uh, of ten royal families. Those are the ones who are intermarrying among themselves. Please remember that, according to the old traditions, they have to maintain this dynastic line pure, so they are allowed to marry with their first cousins and, of course, the sisters and brothers.

Narrator – 16:51

In addition to the importance of blood purity, the Inkan royals also believed their emperors were blessed with immortality.

Dr. Gerardo Gutiérrez – 16:58

The emperor never dies. Your body continues to have vital powers that are used for political purposes, because the people who are going to be in charge of keeping the bodies of the Inkas, the mummified bodies of the Inkas, that are called the "panacas", they are going to operate as a small congress that are going... they're going to put checks and balance on the Inka. So they are going to be able to decide and advise and sometimes direct the ideas of the Inka towards its specific purposes, only because the mummy of the deceased emperor, at least some of the relatives can talk with that mummy, and then it's like, "Your grandfather says that you're doing wrong, that you should better think, do this."

Narrator – 17:44

The Inka hierarchy placed the Royal Family at the top, followed by the nobility, including the priests, governors, and tax collectors. Rounding out this social structure were the farmers, herders, servants, and slaves.

Dr. Ruben Mendoza – 17:59

Much of the population consists of the peasantry... agricultural, rural... and then you have the cities, and the cities kind of wield all power, and they extract tax in labour from each of those communities.

Dr. Gerardo Gutiérrez - 18:10

In the case of the Inkas, they want tribute and labour, but they want you to go and work in the land of the Inkas, produce the crops, and then, an Inka officer is going to show up and say, like, "Guys, it's time for us to put all these in the storehouses because we are going to live out of these food if it doesn't rain next year."

Dr. Ruben Mendoza – 18:37

So often, tributaries would pay into the Inka state, and the Inkas would then, through their mit'a tax system, would basically warehouse foods, typically potatoes, maize, and other crops, and they had an incredible abundance of different crops that would be stored, but these allowed armies to be maintained and fed while on campaign, but also for the communities that worked these areas to be able to maintain themselves during periods of drought, for instance. So it was a system that was a give and take, but virtually everything in the Inka empire belonged to the Inka himself.

Maya Trade – Narrator - 19:14

Maya society was made up of city states that dotted the landscape in Mesoamerica. Moving goods and services to a population in the millions was done through a highly evolved system of trade and commerce.

Dr. Ruben Mendoza - 19:27

They were bringing in shell from the Gulf Coast. They were bringing in shell from the West Coast. They were bringing unique and prized green obsidians from the Pachuca sources in Highland Mexico, of basalt, ceramics, even turquoise coming out of the American Southwest. This was travelling over some of the most circuitous and mountainous regions and even Gulf lowland regions, all the way to the Maya area. These are people that they didn't have draft animals. They did not have horses. They did not have cattle, oxen. They didn't have any of these things, so everything had to be ported on foot on the backs of human burden-bearers. In turn, what the Maya were giving back was access to the Motagua River jade source. True jade occurs only in a few places on the planet, and the Maya had access to it, so jade was being moved throughout Mesoamerica, and of course, elites, who identified with jade as related to the earth and to the ancestors, wanted to be a part of that. They began using ritual objects and belief to draw on the interest of outsiders who begin to trade or to pilgrimage to these sites, and so you get some of the earliest pilgrimage centres in these regions.

Narrator – 20:38

Maya trade went well beyond the valuable jade market. Various other commodities were transported in their raw or manufactures state from the Maya region on foot and by boat.

Dr. Ruben Mendoza - 20:50

When the Spanish first arrived, they had encounters with Maya boats or ships, if you will, and these were multiple canoes lashed together into platforms, and they were essentially sailing ships that were travelling up the coast with large quantities of ceramics as well as rubber, copal, chocolate, vanilla, and virtually all of those other things that we as Westerners so much enjoy, which all originated in ancient Mesoamerica.

Narrator 21:17

One of the most important trade items in Maya society was maize. This crop was at the centre of the Maya diet and culture and was in high demand in the urban centres. Eventually, maize moved into North and South America through trade with other Indigenous communities.

Dr. Lorenzo Magzul – 21:34

Considering the importance of corn for people's diet and all that went with corn, it was a valuable food to trade.

World View – Narrator #2 – 21:47

Societies throughout the world have traded, bartered, and sold food for thousands of years. This exchange fostered important businesses and social relationships and contributed to the development of cuisines that were unique to regions and nations. Salt was an essential mineral for African diets, and an important trade item with other nations. Salt cakes were transported by camel caravans, and traded for gold, ivory, and kola nuts across the continent.

Spices have been a major trade item for thousands of years; cinnamon, ginger, and turmeric were exchanged between Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, making spices one of the most important economic, and cultural enterprises in the world. Societies throughout the world have been producing wine for thousands of years as both a religious and social beverage. The earliest wine production was in Armenia 7,000 years ago. After 1492, fruits and vegetables cultivated in North and South America were exported to Europe, Asia, and Africa. Some of the world's most widely used ingredients had their origins among Indigenous societies in the Americas.

Hopewell Exchange - Narrator - 23:24

Around the same time that the Maya were the dominant trading centre in Mesoamerica, Indigenous people in North America were transporting materials by boat and foot, along a trade network known as "The Hopewell Exchange."

Dr. Joe Watkins - 23:38

We had a great deal of trade, and we think a lot of it follows river valleys.

Dr. Dorothy Lippert - 23:44

In my area in the Southeast, people were trading with one another, so there was a lot of contact between different groups, and trade was... and people were trading as far up as the Great Lakes down the Mississippi River into the, you know, Louisiana area.

Dr. Joe Watkins – 24:00

It wasn't a bunch of tiny little groups just living alone and not knowing what someone else is doing just down the street, so to speak.

Narrator – 24:17

The people who travelled from distant territories into the Ohio River Valley area were bringing valuable raw materials from their region to trade with residents, who were turning them into finished products.

Dr. Dorothy Lippert - 24:20

We have these networks already, and it was a familiar way of interacting with another group.

Dr. Joe Watkins – 24:26

In the Hopewell interaction sphere, we have this huge trade network, and we can see where materials are coming from. We know that at least by 700 A.D., there are groups that were bringing obsidian from Wyoming. They were bringing iron ore from Oklahoma up. They were bringing shells from the Gulf Coast. They were bringing mica sheets from North Carolina, and it was all coming up to, basically, the Ohio River Valley.

Dr. Eldon Yellowhorn – 24:54

Catlinite, which is the pipe stone, red pipe stone, that people really prized, and that was traded all over the place, sometimes as nodules, but sometimes as finished products. You know, somebody might carve a nice pipe and then trade that. That gets into the trade route.

Narrator – 25:12

The Hopewell exchange region was populated by agriculture-based communities. The artisans in these communities created intricate art pieces, pottery items, pipes, and tools.

Dr. Joe Watkins – 25:22

And it's surprising that many of them are coming from a thousand miles away. It was there. We recognize that people were interacting on a continental scale.

Cahoka - Narrator – 25:32

The reason for the decline of the Hopewell trading system around 1500 years ago is a mystery. but what is known is that this highway system of rivers and lakes connected the peoples and cultures of the northern continent for over 500 years and was one of the most extensive trade networks in the world.

A thousand years ago, Indigenous People built the largest urban centre north of Mexico near what is now the city of St. Louis. Over several hundred years, Cahokia became one of the most influential trading centres in North America.

Dr. Eldon Yellowhorn - 26:10

There were a whole series of cultures on the Mississippi, and the apex of that was, of course, Cahokia, at the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. So this was a major hub for all people travelling north and south in North America. When people got up on those mounds, that would be the thing that they saw was the river in the distance and another river coming in from the west.

Narrator – 26:40

Maize was introduced to North America from Mexico about 2,000 years ago and eventually moved into the eastern regions of the continent about a thousand years ago.

26:51 – Dr. Ruby Reimer

Archaeological research has currently shown that the development of agriculture in that region occurred a lot earlier than previously believed, and so this further developed over time where we see the development of large towns and even cities at places like Cahokia and many others all across the region, and only now, we are coming to understand those complex sites in more detail.

Narrator – 27:17

Indigenous people in Central and Eastern North America have constructed mounds for burials and ceremonial use for thousands of years. The city of Cahokia has one of the greatest concentrations of mounds in North America.

Dr. Joe Watkins – 27:31

We can follow the evolution, if you will, of mound construction from 300 A.D. on up. We get small mounds. We get a little bit larger. We get mortuary mounds. We get mounds that have houses on top. A lot of these large mound structures seem to be places where a large grouping of people came together.

Narrator – 27:57

Because of its central location along traditional trade routes, Cahokia proved the ideal place to exchange resources. Excavations of Cahokia have revealed a range of treasures, mother-of-pearl from the Gulf of Mexico, silver from Ontario, and copper from Lake Superior. At its peak, Cahokia reached a population of at least 20,000 people, with many more thousands of people living in the farmland nearby.

The centrepiece of the city was a massive, 30-metre-high dirt pyramid, with a base covering five-and-a-half hectares. Found beneath this and many of the other mounds in Cahokia are objects made from materials that originated hundreds and even thousands of miles away.

Dr. Joe Watkins - 28:45

There's such a wide variety of materials that we know it's of importance. We don't know what started it, we don't know what the importance is, but it wasn't just an economic thing. The very important people, the people with status, were using it to identify the fact that, you know, "I'm not having to use just local stone for my projectile points. I have material that comes all the way from a thousand miles away, or 20 days travel. However, they used to measure it. So it was both a status symbol, it was an economic relationship, and it did become ceremonial. It became a point in time where there were materials that are of such beauty that they are not really being used for hunting, they're being used to demonstrate that, "I don't need to use this for hunting. It's so ceremonially important that I don't have to waste it."

The Cahokia itself is sort of seen as one of the mother locations, if you will, of a large number of groups. During the little ice age in 12, 1300s, people started realizing that they could no longer

exist within one large area, that they had to pull apart again, and then, toward the end of the 12th, 13th, 14th century, these people start pulling apart, and they become separate groups, the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, the Muscogee or the Creek peoples.

Narrator – 30:22

The origins of the rulers of Cahokia remains a mystery, but like the Hopewell Exchange before it, this once bustling city was an essential hub for trade connecting every corner of North America.

World View – Narrator #2 – 30:44

Since ancient times, people have traded food, tools, and raw materials that could not be found in their own territories. This was the earliest form of commerce and let the way to the development of trade routes that still exist today. As the Greek civilization began to expand into new territories, food, raw materials, and manufactured goods spread the Greek culture throughout the nations bordering the Aegean and Mediterranean seas. The Vikings were a seafaring people who traded timber, furs, and food with societies throughout Europe and the Middle East. They established a bullion economy, trading silver in the form of coins, ingots, and jewelry for goods. The Maya established extensive trade routes with other societies in Mesoamerica. Maze, jade, fabric, and raw materials were some of the items that formed the basis of the Maya economy over several thousand years. Ancient trade networks were more than a means of exchanging goods. They were central to cultural interaction and the sharing of ideas and technologies between nations.

Aztec Empire – Narrator – 32:21

The Aztec Empire was founded 600 years ago in Mesoamerica, and soon became one of the largest societies in the Americas. The Aztec had complex spiritual beliefs that played a role in every part of their culture and day to day life.

Dr. Gerardo Gutiérrez – 32:38

The Aztecs, in their own words, they are not from Mesoamerica. In their own words, they came from somewhere in the north.

Narrator – 32:49

The founders of the Aztec Empire arrived in a region already settled by major societies. To survive, they had to master the art of conquest.

Dr. Ruben Mendoza - 32:58

The Aztecs were a people having come into the Valley of Mexico and establishing themselves in the 13th century, very quickly found themselves under the auspices of a brutal warlord by the name of Tezozomoc. Eventually, the Aztecs formed a triple alliance with the cities of Tlacopan and Texcoco and Tenochtitlan, and that-- that formation in the 1440s - basically allowed the Aztecs to go up against this kingdom at Azcapotzalco, and they literally annihilated it. Having done that, they then stood up against some 40 other major kingdoms, and they wiped them out as part of that juggernaut of development and expansion.

Narrator - 33:39

Resolved to maintain its status as Mesoamerica's dominant force, the Aztec rulers demanded commitments of military support and resources from each city in its domain.

Dr. Ruben Mendoza – 33:49

You would be assigned the equivalent of an emissary, and that emissary would be assigned to that site, and there would be a companion emissary in the capital to receive the tribute, and as long as you paid tribute, you were allowed the autonomy necessary.

Dr. Gerardo Gutiérrez - 34:03

What the Aztecs are actually promoting in their empire is what we can call an imperial pax, or an imperial peace, which means that, while that tribute is moving, it's moving through safe roads. Whoever there is to steal the tribute is going to be punished.

Dr. Ruben Mendoza – 34:22

And what it allowed was for a mobilization of resources across vast areas while allowing Indigenous autonomy in every community. So long as you paid tribute to the cabecera, or the head, in this case, Tenochtitlan and the Aztecs. You could maintain your system of deities, gods, your system of agriculture, your polity, your kings, etcetera.

Dr. Gerardo Gutiérrez – 34:45

So now I can walk not only to the next town, but I can walk hundreds of kilometres inside the Aztec empire with whatever thing I want to sell and trade. The tribute that is being received by the Aztecs is also being returned to the Mesoamerican economy, and it's going to create growth.

Narrator – 35:05

The capital of the Aztec Empire, Tenochtitlan, was a sprawling city of canals, pyramids, markets, residential neighbourhoods, and artificial islands on what is now the present-day site of Mexico City.

Dr. Gerardo Gutiérrez - 35:19

The Aztecs have the belief that, uh... nothing comes out of nothing. In order to create life, something needs to die, and the most precious life they could give was the life of humans. The energy of the individuals is in the blood, in the fluids, this sacred liquid. Let's put it this way, they created a religious economy in which, basically, lives have to be given to the divinities. So were the Aztecs violent? Yes, but it's organized violence, violence with a purpose.

Potlatch Society - Narrator – 36:04

The Aztec rulers built a society that in many ways was unparalleled in the world. In the Pacific Northwest region of North America, Indigenous People developed a complex society that was governed by the ownership and passing down of songs, dances, titles, and names. These laws and privileges were embedded in a ceremony known as the "potlatch." During the potlatch, people from neighbouring villages were invited to witness a ceremony, and gifts were distributed

as a sign of wealth and power by the host chief and his family. Gatherings of families and communities often took place during the winter months.

Andy Everson - 36:52

During the wintertime is when we held our most important ceremonies, when we'd invite other villages to come to our communities, and we would host them and feed them the whole time that they were there. So they might be there for two weeks, or a month. Our people were very giving of everything that we had.

Beau Dick - 37:13

And that's how you connected with your other villages. That's how alliances, loyalties, and trust was created, through those connections, and it didn't just happen amongst the Kwakwaka'wakw. We were very interactive, and that's a misconception, too, that the Haidas, the Tsimshians, the Tlingits, the Salish, the West Coast people were separate. No. One people, one family. Of course, we spoke different languages, but we shared the same customs. We shared the same blood. When I think of potlatching,

I think of a marriage, which is a sacred union between two people, between two houses. What's really important is the dowry, what the female brings to the husband's family. Validated through potlatching, marriage leads to the birth of children, naming our children, honouring the children when they come of age, lifting them up into adulthood with dignity, with the teachings of their responsibilities. Those sort of things are entrenched into the potlatch system, and that's, again, that connectedness with the other villages and how we interacted on the coast. Alliances were formed for trade, which was... our survival depended on it. You had to get along, and governance systems, protocols. These things have to come into play in order to have harmony.

World View – Narrator #2 – 38:56

Throughout the ancient world, ceremonies were created to birth, marriage, death, and other important social and human transitions. The tea ceremony emerged in Japan as a way to honour different types of teas and to acknowledge the beauty of the items used in their preparation. Incense was a common trade item in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Stone altars were used to hold these aromatic resins as they burned in household and temple rituals. Tobacco and pipes are sacred to the nations living in the central plains of North America. Sharing a pipe was often used to initiate peace talks between warring nations. Ceremonies are part of every society, and many of these rituals still take place in traditional cultures today.

Pipe Ceremony - Narrator – 40:33

From societies as large as the Inca Empire in South America, to the smallest hunting communities on the Great Plains of North America, rituals were created to heal and protect the people, to bring the rains, and to resolve conflicts. For thousands of years, the people of the central plains in North America smoked tobacco, kinnikinnick, and other leaves in ceremonial pipes. This was their link between the earth and the sky, a sacred ritual for connecting the physical and spiritual worlds.

Dr. Eldon Yellowhorn - 41:06

We generally think of Blackfoot people as bison hunters, hunting and gathering cultures, and that's definitely true, but they did take one plant under cultivation, and that was tobacco, and they learned very, very intricate rituals and ceremonies around tobacco. Before tobacco came into Blackfoot culture, they used to have local plants that they would smoke. They would take the leaves of the bearberry and mix them with the inner bark of red osier dogwood... and when tobacco came along, they just added tobacco to the blend. People were smoking before they got tobacco. The earliest pipes we find on the Northern Plains actually come from the era around 5,000 years ago, so smoking and tobacco were not synonymous.

Tobacco moved up the Missouri River probably beginning about the 8th century A.D., and it probably got into the Blackfoot culture by about 900 A.D., and we know that at that period, there was a warm spell in global climates, and a warm spell that lasted for about five or six hundred years, and that probably created the conditions where it was easier to plant the crops and to harvest them. When they are ready to plant their tobacco crops, they would leave it there. After they'd prepared their gardens and put the seeds in, they would leave there, and in their mythology, they said there were these little people who lived in the woods. They lived in little caves, so they were the ones who looked after the tobacco plants while Blackfoot people were out buffalo-hunting, and they had to go off and do their berry-picking or their collecting of other foods, so they can come back and forth.

The tobacco society of the Blackfoot was a horticultural society, and what they curated was the traditional knowledge for how to plant tobacco and how to bring in a crop. They said the little people were very shy, and that they could cause you harm if you saw them, and then, in the fall time, when they were getting ready to harvest the crops and they'd go back there, they always sent a couple of people ahead to make lots of noise and to let the little people know that they were coming back, and then it gives them time to get away. They would leave gifts of, like, food and little clothing, all these things. They would treat them well.

The tobacco smoke is also considered very sacred because it's a visual manifestation of your breath. When people wanted to make an oath, they usually capped it by taking a puff of smoke, or else, if you wanted to solidify a trade deal, you smoked a pipe. If you wanted to end war between your peoples, you smoked the pipe. So there's this very close connection between the spirit of breath and tobacco.

Narrator – 45:27

Blackfoot, Kwakwaka'wakw, Aztec, Inka, and Maya are just a few of the thousands of Indigenous Nations that developed sophisticated political systems and vast trade networks throughout the Americas before 1491. These nations were not only formidable societies of their time. In many ways, their laws, rituals, and beliefs continue to influence our world today.

Dr. Ruby Reimer - 46:45

My Squamish Nation ancestral name is Yumks. I'm an assistant professor at Simon Fraser University in Archaeology and First Nations Studies. We use Time Immemorial now, but within our culture, we have a term for that, and it's called [speaks native language]. And [speaks native language] literally means "We can't remember much or nothing at all from that time period." And that goes back to when the world really began to change, because before the transformers came to our territories. So it's often referred to as a time of chaos. Our territory, the resources, the land, the water, was in such a state of flux. And so I think, as an archaeologist, these are the most ancient times that are associated with changes in sea level, changes with the ice, and the

volcanic eruptions, that occur across our territory. And so many of our oral histories that are associated with [speaks native language] go back to what many other people refer to as Time Immemorial.

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