

The first Americans

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In this new series we explore the history and culture of the American prairie Indians. The first episode deals with the very earliest times of American population. We will also learn how the earth was created—at least according to an old Indian myth.

THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

"In the beginning Napi created everything: the earth, the moon, animals and people. From the east he went to the west and spread mud in front of him to create the earth and make it huge, so that there would be plenty of space. He went to the south, and as he returned to the north, he created the birds and the animals who could all understand him. He also created the prairie, the mountains, the rivers and the valleys, and he planted trees. He covered the prairie with grass so that the animals should have enough to eat. Then he found some places where roots and berries could grow. Some places he covered the earth with red paint."

- from North American Indian mythology

People started coming from Asia

The Indians came to America walking from Northern Asia across the Bering Strait, which was then covered by ice. This was a very long time ago. A skeleton said to be between 25-60000 years old has been found on the American prairie, and other discoveries suggest that nomadic tribes hunted mammoths during that period.

The first Americans lived in small tribes of 20-50 people, following the herds they were hunting. This meant that they never settled anywhere for long, and their shelters were therefore temporary and rather primitive.

Because the animals they hunted were as large as the mammoth, the hunters often found it easier to hunt these beasts by driving them into swamps or over cliffs, rather than spearing them.

Climatic changes

About 10000 years ago changes in the climate caused the ice to melt. This meant that areas such as the Bering Strait, which had been covered by ice, now came under water again, and the route from northern Asia to America disappeared with it.

In Northern and Eastern America great forests grew up where there had once been grasslands. Small, swift-moving animals lived in these forests. The people we now know as Indians may have started using the bow and arrow at this time because it made a good weapon for hunting the swift woodland animals.

The changes in the climate are believed to be the reason why the mammoth became extinct.

Indian cultures

The Indians spread all over the American continent, from the Arctic region in the north all the way to the southern tip of South America. They spoke hundreds of different languages and led many different ways of life.

Some lived in great cities and others in tiny villages. Impressive civilisations developed, such as those of the the Maya, Inca and Aztec.

Still others kept moving all year long, hunting animals and gathering wild plants.

Philosophical questions

- 1. In this Indian myth Napi—which actually means "Old Man"—created the whole earth and everything in it. Why do you think Napi was a man and not a woman? In your opinion, should the creator of the world be a man or a woman?*
- 2. Why was Napi old? Aren't younger people more creative and more efficient than older people? Is there anything older people are better at? If so, what?*
- 3. If Napi created the world, who then created Napi? And if somebody created Napi, who created Napi's creator? Is there an end to all this? If not, does that mean that we should never have asked who created Napi?*
- 4. We saw that the first "Indians" in America came from Asia. Does this mean that American Indians are American, or are they Asian? And what about black and white Americans of today: are they African and European, or are they simply American? How long do you have to live in a country before you can say that you belong there?*
- 5. When the climate changed, the Indians started a new way of life. We all change our way of life when the climate changes. For example, we do different things in the summer than in the winter. But what if it were summer all year round: what would your life be like then? What if it were winter all year round? What if it always rained? What if the sun did not exist?*