

1.1 WHERE DID THE NATIVE AMERICANS COME FROM?

For hundreds of thousands of years human beings have inhabited Africa, Europe and Asia. These people were originally hunter-gatherers. They followed herds of animals for mile after mile across vast open lands.

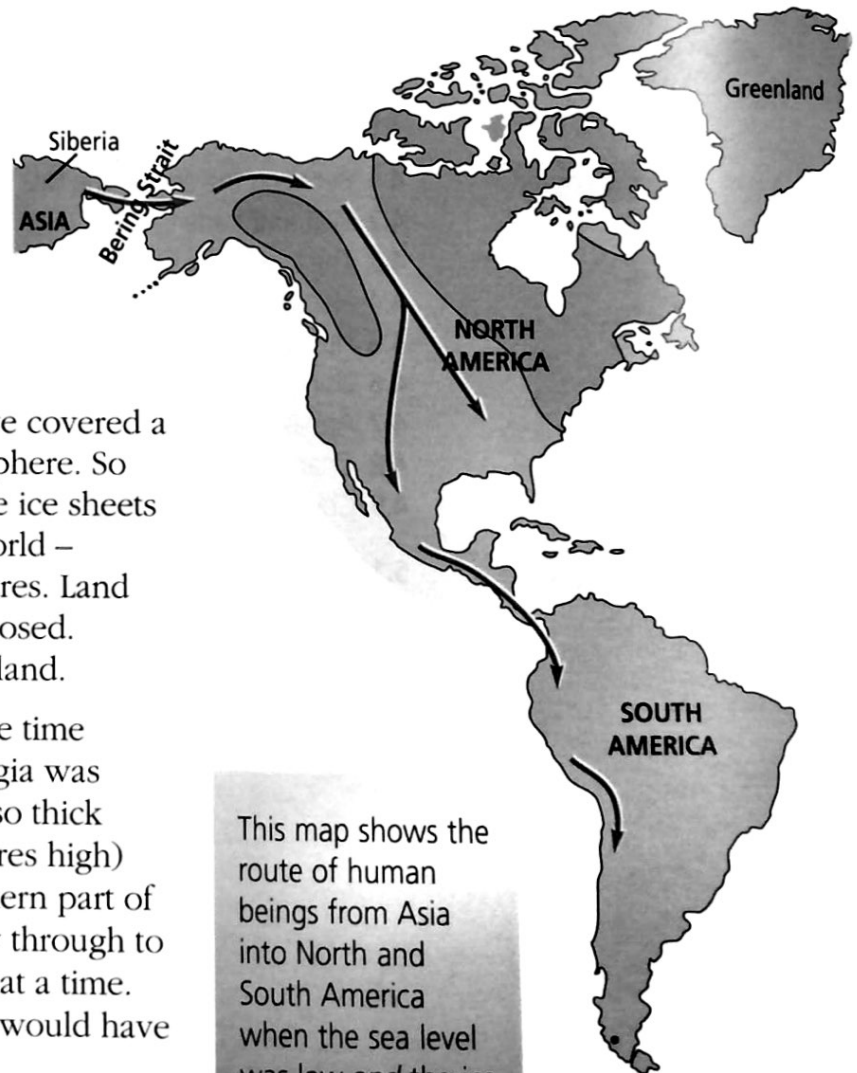
At some time, probably about 20,000 to 40,000 years ago, human beings from the north-east corner of Asia, now called Siberia, carried on following herds of mammoth and bison across a piece of land called Berengia into what is now North America.

Berengia used to link Asia to North America. This was because, at different times throughout history, world temperatures

There were only certain times when the land bridge of Berengia was open and the way south into America was not blocked by ice. Whenever these times were, it is certain that by about 11,000 years ago both North and South America were settled because remains of human settlements have been found in the southern tip of South America.

Archaeologists and language experts have tried to trace the movements of these early settlers in America. Archaeologists have studied stone tools and weapons, animal bones and human bones at different sites. Some stone choppers and scrapers date back about 20,000 to 30,000 years.

- ice sheets
- remains of human settlement 11,500 years ago
- ➔ route of human beings into America



have changed and ice sheets have covered a great deal of the northern hemisphere. So much water was locked up in the ice sheets that sea levels fell all over the world – sometimes by as much as 85 metres. Land that is now under water was exposed. Berengia was one such piece of land.

However, there was a snag. Some time during the Ice Ages when Berengia was exposed, the sheets of ice were so thick (possibly as much as 1.6 kilometres high) that they covered all of the northern part of America. Then there was no way through to the south for thousands of years at a time. Any people hunting in Berengia would have had to turn back into Asia.

This map shows the route of human beings from Asia into North and South America when the sea level was low and the ice sheets had partially melted.



The Bering Strait, in this photograph, is shown a stretch of water that separates Asia from North America where the bridge of Berengia used to be. It was named after Vitus Bering, a Danish navigator who explored the coast of Alaska.

The languages of Native Americans

By the time the Europeans first came to America in the early sixteenth century, there were probably some 200 Native American languages being spoken. Each one was different and one tribe could not understand the language of the neighbouring tribe next door. However, many of the languages were related in the same way that German, Icelandic and English are related. This means that these tribes came originally from the same people.

The Aleut-Inuit languages are very different from other sets of languages in North America. They are spoken by people who settled in the far north of North America and on the edge of Greenland. This is one of the ways we can tell that these people came to America long after the others. Although not all experts studying the languages of the area agree, some of them think that there were three main times (or waves) when people crossed from Asia to America either by walking overland or by sea.

The three main times when people crossed from Asia to America

- First wave (before 11,500 years ago).
- Second wave (about 9000 years ago).
- Third wave – Aleut and Inuit (about 4000 years ago).

Vitus Bering (1681–1741)

Born in Denmark, Bering was a keen sailor and joined the fleet of the Russian Tsar Peter the Great, who sent him on an expedition to find out whether Asia and North America were joined. Bering set sail in July 1728 from Kamchatka in Siberia. Despite bad weather, he sailed north, through the sea now known as the Bering Strait, into the Arctic Ocean. This proved that Asia was not joined to North America. The Tsar was delighted, because it meant that Russian ships could sail from Siberia to China. They would also be able to sail across the Bering Strait and to colonise North America.

Bering was sent on a second expedition, to map the coast of Siberia. He became desperately ill with scurvy, and his ship was wrecked on an island in December 1741. Bering died on the island, which was named after him

When Christopher Columbus landed on an island in the West Indies in 1492, he thought he had landed in India, so he called the inhabitants 'Indians'. In fact he was the first European to set foot in what later became known as the Americas. This is what we today call North America, South America and the islands around those two continents. Other explorers also called the native peoples of the Americas 'Indians', although they in fact lived nowhere near India. Despite what we sometimes say neither Columbus, nor any other European, could actually claim to have 'discovered' America. You cannot discover a continent that is already inhabited. For example, if you were to sail from America to Britain today, you would not be *discovering* Britain because it is already inhabited by people. In this book you will be studying the native peoples of North America, or 'America' as many people call it.

Populations in North and South America

Estimates vary, but many experts think that somewhere between 20 million and 50 million people were living in the Americas by 1492. Some put the estimate even higher. The numbers were a considerable proportion of the entire world population of human beings at this time. For example, there were cities in Mexico – which is in the south of North America – that were far bigger than London and many other European cities.

Civilisations

It was around the area of present day Mexico that the Mayans and the Aztecs lived. The Aztecs built cities, temples and **irrigation works** so that they could farm and support a large population. Further

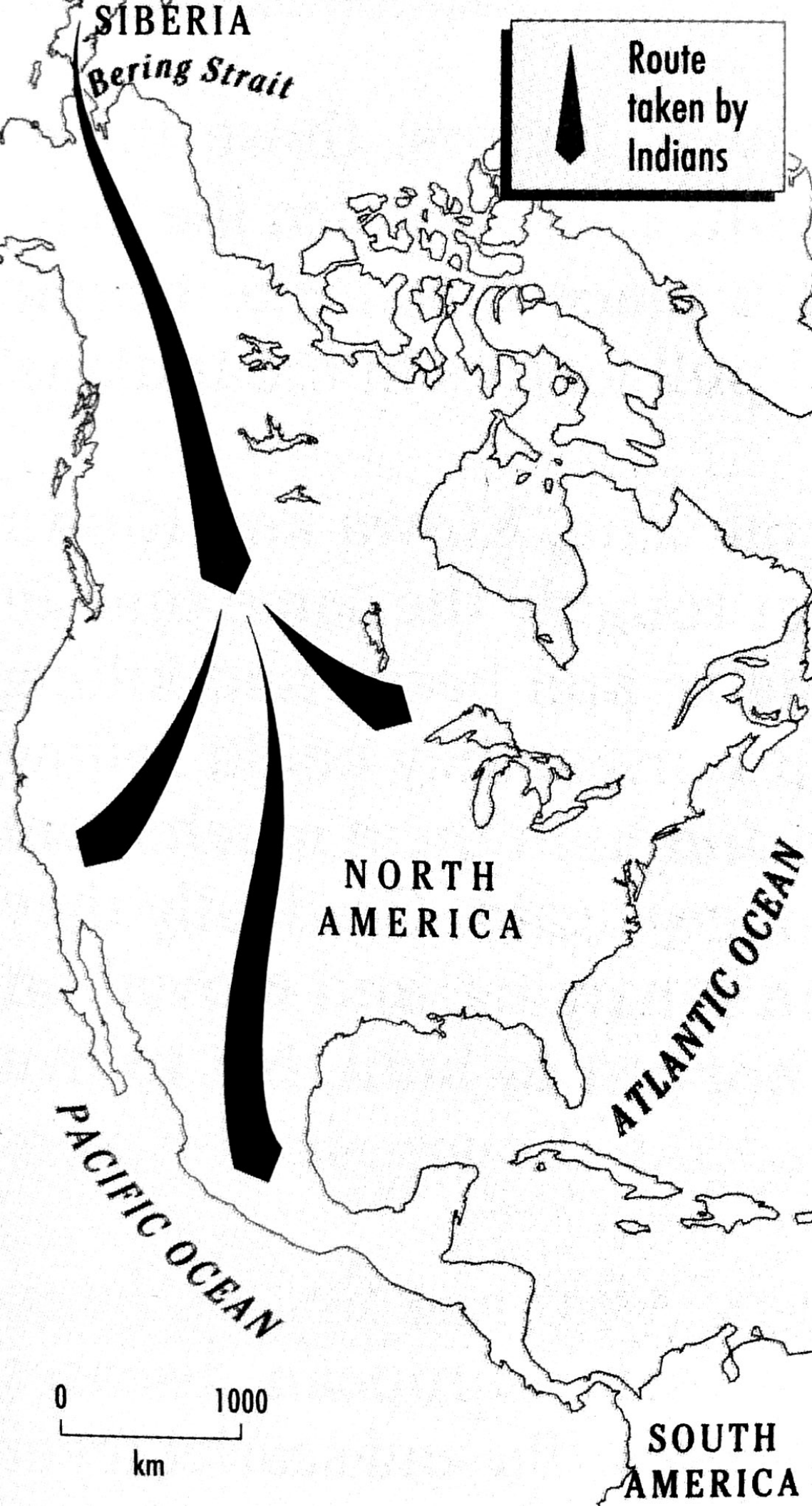
north, in Ohio, the civilisation of the Hopewell people had flourished for hundreds of years before Columbus came to America.

All over the continent there were farmers, hunter-gatherers, fishermen, craftsmen and traders from Alaska to Florida and on to South America. In South America, the Inca people numbered around 12 million. They built 17,000 kilometres of roads; they terraced hillsides for farming; they built canals to irrigate the land: and they used llamas (animals related to camels) to carry their loads over the mountains. They were great organisers and, like the Mayan, they knew a lot about mathematics and **astronomy**.

The wheel and the plough

All of these lands were not empty in 1492. So how was it that the Native Americans did not repel the European invaders? The answer is that their technology was inferior. There were two crucial inventions that did not exist in the Americas: one was the wheel, and the other was the plough.

Both these inventions are at the root of developments in agriculture and in transport that in Europe and Asia led to the growth of powerful civilisations. Early explorers of the Americas said the lack of the wheel and the plough there showed a primitive, less intelligent race. However, there is no point in inventing the wheel (apart from the limited use of a wheelbarrow) unless you have animals, such as horses and oxen, to pull carts – and the same thing goes for the plough. There were no native animals on the American continent capable of pulling ploughs and carts, so the native people had to develop in a different way.



Unit 2 · The Plains Indians

The Indians you will read about in this book are the Plains Indians – mainly the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Comanche, Kiowa and Kiowa Apache on the southern Plains, and the Crows and Sioux to the north. They played an important part in the history of the American West. It was the Plains Indians who fiercely resisted the white people in their attempt to push the frontier westward across the Great Plains to the Pacific coast. It was the Plains Indians who had their way of life altered forever by successive waves of white people, cattlemen and cowboys, pioneers and homesteaders, all of whom wanted to use the Great Plains for their own purposes. It was the Plains Indians who stood in the way of white Americans who believed that America was there to make the white people rich and prosperous.

Where did the Plains Indians come from?

Twenty thousand years ago America was not a separate continent as it is today. It was linked to Asia by land which joined present-day Alaska to present-day Siberia. Archaeologists have found the bones of animals that wandered into America from Asia. They have discovered ancient stone fireplaces and arrow heads which were made by people living many thousands of years ago. The archaeologists worked out that people followed these animals down into the continent of America. The animals moved in large herds and were easy to follow and easy to kill. Men, women and children moved down through America, following the animal trails. As a Sioux Indian explains, land was very important to them.

Source 1

White Thunder, a Sioux Indian, quoted in Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, 1971.

Our land here is the dearest thing on earth to us.

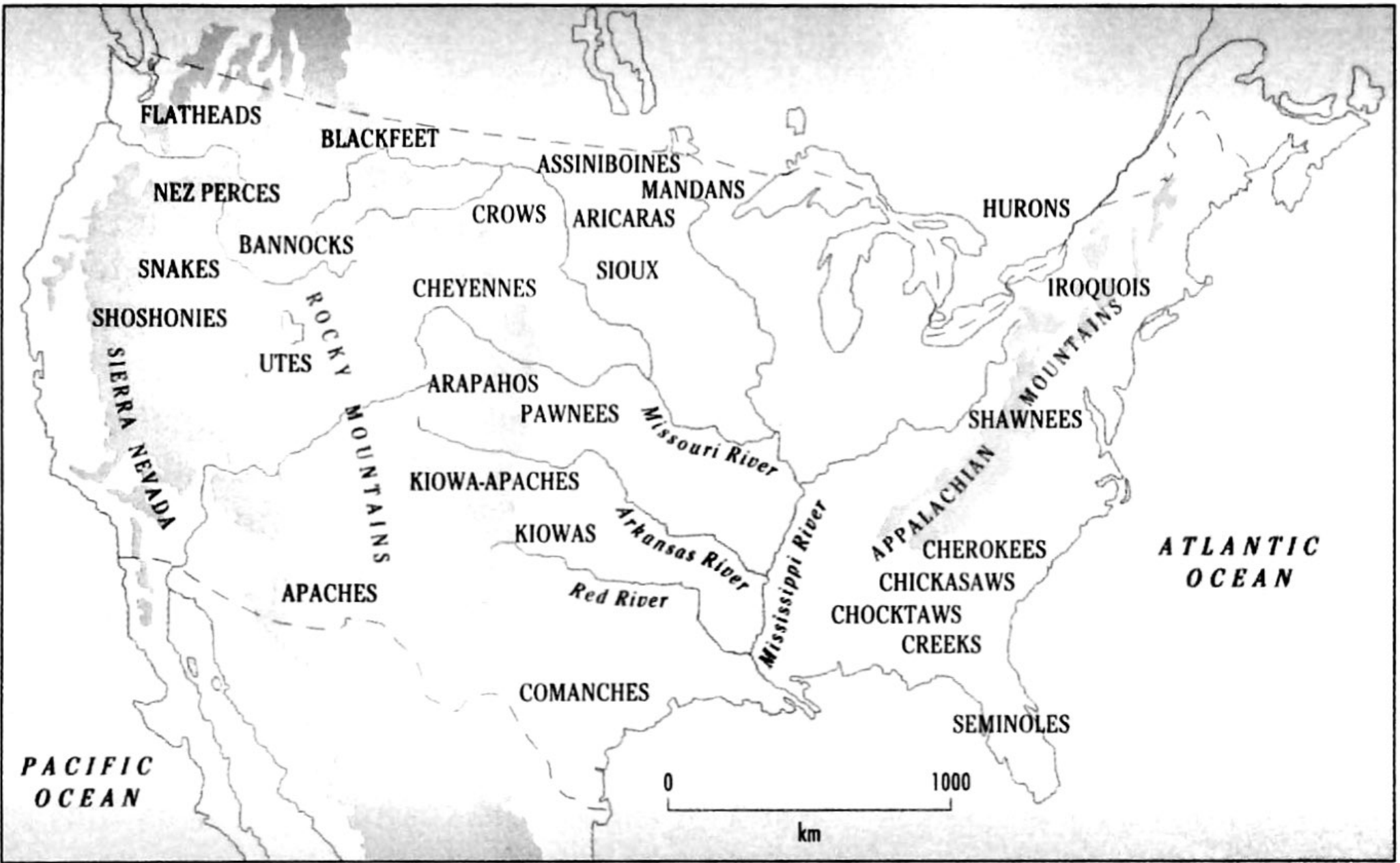
Source 2 on page 9 shows the movement of animals and people between Asia and America. This movement ended when geological shifts in the earth's crust meant that hundreds of square kilometres of solid land finally disappeared underneath the sea and Asia and America were separated. By this time the peoples who Europeans were later to call 'Indians' were firmly established in America. There were many different tribes and nations of Indians living in the rocky mountains, the wooded valleys and the sandy desert fringes (see Source 3). Over thousands of years they adapted their lives to the surroundings in which they lived. The Iroquois in the fertile east, for example, were farmers and fishermen, the Teton Sioux on the plains were hunters, and the Bannock and Ute tribes in the mountain regions lived on berries, roots and grubs.

Southern
This
India
Amer



Source 3

This map shows where the main North American Indian tribes lived.



Horses and hunters

For a long time the Plains Indians were poor tribes, living difficult and dangerous lives, often close to starvation. The Great Plains themselves were bare and empty, except for the herds of buffalo which drifted over the vast empty spaces, grazing wherever the grass was sweetest. The Indians lived on the fringes of the Great Plains. They grew maize and beans, and hunted buffalo on foot when they needed meat. What happened to turn these people into proud chiefs and brave warriors, ready and able to challenge the white Americans who came with their advanced technology, their dreams and their greed? The answer lies in one animal: the horse.

There were no horses in America until about 400 years ago. In the sixteenth century the Spanish conquered the tribes living in Central America and settled there. They built towns and began to farm on a large scale. They bred horses, but always refused to sell any to the Indians. Then, in 1640, the Pueblo Indians rose up against the Spanish. They drove them out and captured their horses. The Pueblo kept some horses for meat and some for breeding. The rest they sold to other Indian tribes.