

10

The Americas

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10.1 CHRONOLOGY

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|---------------------|---|
| 18,000 – 15,000 BCE | First humans migrate to the Americas |
| c. 13,000 BCE | Big game hunters inhabit the Great Plains |
| c. 10,000 BCE | Mesoamericans begin to cultivate squash |
| 10,000 – 3,500 BCE | Paleo-Indian Period |
| 5600 – 3000 BCE | Early Plains Archaic Period |
| 2000 BCE – 250 CE | Preclassic or Formative period in Mesoamerica |
| c. 1900 BCE | Mesoamericans begin to make pottery |
| 1800 – 800 BCE | Late Initial Period in Peru |
| 1500 – 400 BCE | Middle Formative Period in Mesoamerica. Peak of Olmec statue carving |
| c. 1000 BCE | Maize becomes widespread in North America |
| 400 BCE – 100 CE | Late Formative Period in Mesoamerica |
| 200 BCE | The Moche begin their conquest of Peru's north coast |
| 200 BCE – 400 CE | The Hopewell culture flourishes in North America |
| 100 BCE – 600 CE | The Nazca culture flourishes in Peru |
| 400s CE | Tiwankau founded |
| 550 CE | Teotihuacán reaches 125,000 residents |
| 700 CE | The Huari Empire reaches its height |
| 700 – 1400 CE | Cahokia |
| 750 CE | Tikal reaches 80,000 residents |
| 800 CE | The Toltec city of Tula reaches a population of 35,000 |
| 1000 CE | The Chimú establish the capital city of Chan Chan |
| 1050 CE | The population of Chaco Canyon's five great pueblos reaches 5,000 inhabitants |
| 1325 CE | Tenochtitlán founded |
| 1471 CE | Death of Inca Pachacuti |

10.2 INTRODUCTION

This city has many public squares, in which are situated the markets and other places for buying and selling. There is one square twice as large as that of the city of Salamanca, surrounded by porticoes, where are daily assembled more than sixty thousand souls, engaged in buying, and selling; and where are found all kinds of merchandise that the world affords, embracing the necessaries of life, as for instance articles of food, as well as jewels of gold and silver, lead, brass, copper, tin, precious stones, bones, shells, snails, and feathers. ...There is also an herb street, where may be obtained all sorts of roots and medicinal herbs that the country affords. There are apothecaries' shops, where prepared medicines, liquids, ointments, and plasters are sold; barbers' shops, where they wash and shave the head; and restaurateurs, that furnish food and drink at a certain price. There is also a class of men like those called in Castile porters, for carrying burdens....Painters' colors, as numerous as can be found in Spain, and as fine shades; deerskins dressed and undressed, dyed different colors; earthenware of a large size and excellent quality; large and small jars, jugs, pots, bricks, and an endless variety of vessels, all made of fine clay, and all or most of them glazed and painted; **Maize**, or Indian corn, in the grain and in the form of bread, preferred in the grain for its flavor to that of the other islands and terra-firma; pâtés of birds and fish; great quantities of fish, fresh, salt, cooked and uncooked; the eggs of hens, geese, and of all the other birds I have mentioned, in great abundance, and cakes made of eggs; finally, everything that can be found throughout the whole country is sold in the markets, comprising articles so numerous that to avoid prolixity and because their names are not retained in my memory, or are unknown to me, I shall not attempt to enumerate them.¹

The above is from Hernán Cortez's description of **Tenochtitlán**, the Aztec capital he and his Tlascalan allies conquered in 1521. As the Spanish explorers in the Americas, and later the French, English, and Dutch, saw monetary gain from reporting their exploits to their respective monarchs, we often end up with a stilted or incomplete version of the Americas before 1500. Part of this can be attributed to the bias of European explorers, and misinterpretation of Native American beliefs and practices.

Undoubtedly the most misunderstood practice was that of human sacrifice witnessed by the Spanish conquerors of the Aztec Empire. Among Mesoamerican and Andean peoples alike there was a belief that all life, cosmic, human, animal, and plant alike, grew beneath the soil and sprung forth above the surface. Furthermore, humans had a role in nurturing that life cycle. In many of the cultures we will discuss, shamanism was an important religious tradition whereby shamans or religious specialists could control the forces of the natural world. Often shamans would conduct ceremonies requiring sacrifice from members of his community to ensure cosmic and earthly order. While the Spanish (and Hollywood) tend to focus on more dramatic ceremonies where hearts are

¹ Hernán Cortez. Second letter to Charles V, Mexico, 1520. <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/classroom-content/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/the-conquest-of-mexico/letters-from-hernan-cortes/cortes-describes-tenochtitlan>

cut from living warriors, other kinds of sacrifices in Mesoamerica and the Andes were integrated in hundreds of ways into daily life. For many cultures ritual bloodletting was a widespread practice, but one where the injured party survived to perform the ceremony the next year. Often times, human-shaped grain cakes would serve as stand-ins for actual human participants. Most sacrifices in fact were actually offerings or prayers to Mesoamerican or Andean deities. For example a Nahua newborn might be named in honor of Maya rulers. Or the first corn tortilla of the day might be consumed in honor of the sun.² These beliefs would eventually be manifest in physical structures like a cave under Teotihuacán's Pyramid of the Sun in Mexico or sunken plazas at Chavín de Huantar in Peru and Tiwanaku in Bolivia. These sacred spaces were constructed beneath the earth's surface to allow the cultures aboveground easier access to the Earth's creative capacity.

As historians, it also is helpful to point out some of our myopic tendencies regarding the peopling of the Americas. In Chapter One we talked about discrepancies regarding the date at which *Homo sapiens* arrived in the Americas. While there is evidence supporting an overland migration from Beringia, and geographically speaking the Beringia migration is the most logical explanation, some scholars argue that this approach has become “dogma” and even “ideology,” leaving no room for evidence that may challenge this explanation. While we cannot argue that we are close to abandoning the Beringian migration as the most likely theory, there is mounting evidence that suggests a seaborne migration from Asia or even a “Solutrean” migration from Europe ten thousand years before an ice-free corridor opened up in North America.³ Considering new theories may help us explain how the Americas came to be populated and how civilizations developed so quickly here.

A third weakness in our narrative of the Americas involves the demographic collapse of the indigenous population that occurred after the arrival of European diseases. Especially in the Circum-Caribbean, millions of indigenous peoples succumbed to European disease and overwork in the first decades of the sixteenth century, giving them little opportunity to construct their own historical narrative apart from the one that Europeans were writing.

Keeping these limitations in mind, our task in this chapter is to admire a pre-Columbian history where in a little over 15,000 years migrants from Asia (probably) populated the Americas by foot, built hundreds of major cities, supported a population in the tens of millions, and constructed two of the most impressive empires the world has ever known. Fortunately recent advances in archaeology and calendrics have helped us uncover much of this pre-Columbian past that had been largely clouded by our obsession with the triumph and tragedy of the European conquest.

10.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. What crops were first domesticated in the Americas and where?
2. What did we learn from the **Olmec** about the transition from chiefdoms to states?
3. How did the Maya support such rapid urbanization?

² Kay Almere Read and Jason J. Gonzalez, *Handbook of Mesoamerican Mythology* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2000), 25-26.

³ Bruce Bradley and Dennis Stanford, “The North Atlantic Ice-Edge Corridor: A Possible Palaeolithic Route to the New World,” *World Archaeology* 36:4 (December 2004):460.

4. What were some of the features of urban life in **Teotihuacán** and **Tenochtitlán**?
5. How did **The Moche**, **Huari**, and **Chimu** build their regional influence?
6. How did the Inca use local resources to build their empire?
7. What was the role of Macchu Picchu within the Inca Empire?
8. How were cultures of the North American West able to overcome limited rainfall?
9. What traits did mound building cultures of North America share?

10.4 KEY TERMS

- Aspero
- Ayllu
- Cahokia
- Chaco Canyon
- Chan Chan
- Chavín de Huantar
- Chiapas
- Chumash
- Coricancha
- Cuzco
- Great Bison Belt
- Hopewell
- Huaca de la Luna
- Huaca del Sol
- Huari
- Huayna Capac
- La Venta
- Machu Picchu
- Maiz de Ocho
- Maize
- Mesoamerica
- Norte Chico
- Olmec
- Pachacuti
- Pithouses
- San Lorenzo
- Tenochtitlán
- Teotihuacán
- The Aztec Empire
- The Chimu Kingdom
- The Moche
- The Nazca
- Tikal
- Tiwanaku
- Toltec

10.5 MESOAMERICA

This discussion of the Americas before 1500 begins in the “middle.” Although scholars believe that man migrated to Beringia and hence North America first, **Mesoamerica** was the first section of the Americas where scholars have found evidence of large settlements, agriculture, and unique

cultural traditions, so this chapter starts there. The Mesoamerican culture area is found in what are now the modern countries of Guatemala, Mexico, Belize, El Salvador, and eastern Honduras. The region's frequent volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and hurricanes gave it quite a staggering amount of ecological diversity including mountains, coastal plains, and a peninsular limestone platform (the Yucatán). The region's climatic diversity is attributable to the fact that it sits in both tropical and subtropical latitudes.

Less is known about migration to Mesoamerica than for North and South America during the Paleoindian period, but many scholars put people in the region by 15,000 BCE. These early residents hunted large and small game alike and consumed a wide range of plant resources. The Archaic period in Mesoamerica stretched from 8000 to 2000 BCE, during which scores of cultures adapted to the region's ecological diversity by domesticating wild food sources like "beans, squash, amaranth, peppers, and wild Maize (*teosinte*)."⁴ The maize of large kernels of today took thousands of years of domestication for Mesoamericans to produce, but by the formative period it was a staple crop supporting tens of thousands. Groups living closer to the coast could also take advantage of wetland crops, such as manioc.

10.5.1 Early Farming in Mesoamerica

Just as early farmers in Southwest Asia turned wild plants into domestic crops, so too did their contemporaries in Mesoamerica with maize, squash, and tubers. Foragers in the southern Mexican highlands lived on a diverse diet of plants and animals, including cactus fruit, corn, squash, beans, fish, deer, and rabbits. Their contemporaries in the tropical lowlands further south consumed tubers like manioc, sweet potato, arrowroot as well as fruits like avocados. While Mesoamericans did domesticate most of these crops, they did so before becoming sedentary, a fact revealing the existence of regional variations in the path to agriculture. Around 10,000 years ago, Mesoamericans began to cultivate squash, both as a food source and as storage containers. Rather than staying near their cultivated land, however, early planters formed mobile "agricultural bands" that still hunted and would return to harvest mature squash or chilies. Over time, these bands planted more and hunted less until eventually they formed sedentary agricultural villages. But that process took at least 2,000 years. In fact, it may have been in the much denser tropics in and around Panama where residents first left foraging behind for agriculture. Around 10,000 BCE, after the extinction of megafauna, these tropical peoples began to cultivate their forest environment. Tropical cultivation tended to be cramped, but tropical residents did manage to domesticate the tubers like manioc, sweet potato and arrowroot that we mentioned above.⁵

Over the next several centuries, village dwellings themselves revealed a growing emphasis on permanence and increasing sophistication. Brick walls and plaster floors began to replace hides and sticks. Unlike round huts, new rectangular houses allowed for expansion by extending walls and adding a perpendicular end wall. Expanding permanent dwellings allowed villages to grow through natural population increase. Permanent dwellings also helped establish distinc-

4 Michael E. Smith and Marilyn A. Masson, eds., *The Ancient Civilizations of Mesoamerica: A Reader*, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 8.

5 Ristvet, 43-46.

tions between public and private space and public and private activities, effecting communal and private property. Not only did villages have to decide where and how to build, they also had to organize around when to plant, where to settle, when to harvest, and where to store the food. The invention of pottery during this period served storage needs tremendously. Tasks in construction, gathering, defense, and food production became more specialized and supervised, leading to the beginnings of class. The elite developed, a strata usually comprising warriors, priests, and administrators.

10.5.2 The Formative Period

By the beginning of the Formative Period around 2000 BCE, most residents of Mesoamerica were sedentary, many living in small bands that moved only seasonally.⁶ However, by 300 CE many of these small bands had been replaced by quite common large urban centers. This was a rapid transition, to say the least. This rapidity was possible because of greater use of domesticated crops and storage and improved technology, like pottery vessels. Pottery appeared between 1900 BCE and 1750 BCE on the Pacific coast of **Chiapas** in highland valleys and on the Gulf coast. After about 1400 BCE, scholars start to see widespread sharing of obsidian, shell, jade, and iron artifacts, a sharing which denotes significant interaction by this point. A social hierarchy also began to develop in Chiapas, where there was a two-tiered settlement hierarchy of small centers and villages. In other words, the elite had bigger houses. Over time and in more areas, plastered floors and dirt floors appeared in different dwellings and altars in others. Burials too indicated social differentiation.

The **Olmec** were the earliest civilization in Mesoamerica and, therefore, drove much of this rapid development. The Olmec developed along the Gulf of Mexico and flourished during the Early Formative and Middle Formative (1500 – 400 BCE), while the Late Formative (400 BCE – 100 CE) saw their evolution and transformation. Scholars use this timeline with the caveat that Mesoamerica houses a number of unique cultural traditions, and there are variations within this timeline in terms of when they developed urbanization, states, agriculture, and certain technologies. The Olmecs' most



notable accomplishment was their monumental stone sculpture. Other Mesoamerican cultures had stone monuments, but the Olmec versions were unique in their sophistication, size, and number. A common theme occurs during the coherent tradition spanning 1400 BCE to 400 BCE. Statues were carved out of thrones or in low relief on stelae. The largest of them weighed over forty tons. Stones had been transported as much as ninety km from their sources. The labor required to do this demonstrates the power of these rulers. Aside from statue carving, Olmec elites also commissioned carved columns, drains, and embellishments in large houses. An inordinate amount of iron trade also occurred, and objects like polished iron mirrors were found in the tombs of high-ranking individuals. The import of jade sculptures was perhaps even more prominent with thousands of tons of “serpentine blocks” buried in massive offerings at the Olmec center of **La Venta** in southern Mexico.⁷

Many of these monuments were commissioned by or for elite members of an increasingly sophisticated socio-economic hierarchy first seen in the Early Formative Olmec of **San Lorenzo**. San Lorenzo itself stood at the apex of a three- or four-tiered settlement hierarchy which included subordinate centers, villages, and special purpose sites. This increasing sophistication became solidified through Olmec politics as well. Early in the Formative Period most groups were organized in tribes, but the Olmec soon began to form a set of chiefdoms that allowed for organized leadership across generations, albeit through kinship ties. The Olmec also became the first civilization in the region to develop a state, where the same hierarchy became more stratified and institutions became more specialized.

Some scholars even call the Olmec an “empire,” but most say it falls short for a few important reasons. First, the Olmec never had a large enough population at their disposal to form a conquering army. Second, while there existed a number of significant urban Olmec sites, such as La Venta and San Lorenzo, none of them has been identified as an Olmec capital. Finally, the art and archeological records of surrounding societies don’t indicate an Olmec domination but rather the existence of something of a theocratic state, as elites seemed to have both political and religious authority and a considerable amount of influence.

Final questions related to our understanding of the region are: Why did the Olmec evolve at all, and why did they evolve when they did? One theory involves the ecological relationship to Mesoamerica’s lowland environment. Another holds that increasing productivity led to high population growth, which caused a pressure to organize politically. Control of these resources as well as the limited use of warfare accounted largely for the authority of individual chieftains. Other scholars have added to this observation, pointing out that the abundance but lack of diversity of Olmec area agriculture forced them to develop a competitive advantage vis-à-vis societies that lived closer to obsidian, salt, and stone deposits. (The Olmec would need to trade for these resources that were central for hunting and food production). A more sophisticated society would have that advantage.

Once the Olmec did manage to organize as states, they began to plan for their permanence. From the above-mentioned stone deposits, the Olmec produced their cultural hallmark: monumental stone sculpture. Around 1650 BCE, the Olmec began to produce stone effigy bowls, but these are much smaller than the monumental sculptures that followed. Over 200 known monumental

7 Pool, 15.



Figure 10.1 | Olmec Colossal Head, La Venta, Mexico

Author: User "Hajor"

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stone sculptures remain; one-third are from San Lorenzo and the surrounding area. The colossal heads are the largest; some stand up to three and a half meters tall. Each head is unique, containing its own ear ornaments, headdress, specific facial features, and expressions. Most scholars think they are portraits. Table top altars have been found in a range of sizes across Olmec sites. Most now believe they served as thrones but others believe they served as altars as well. They often show humans emerging from a niche in front of the monument. The Olmec also crafted smaller sculptures in the round. These sculptures incorporated human and supernatural themes or humans in ritual or symbolic postures. A fourth sculptural style, one that corresponds to later periods, was stelae. These stelae often depicted supernatural beings and elaborately dressed individuals engaged in specific actions. These stone

sculptures would be impressive for modern humans to achieve but are made more impressive considering the fact that the Olmec possessed no metal tools with which to cut them.

The purpose behind these sculptures, outside of their artistic value, seems to have involved monumentality. Stone as a whole gave a sense of order, stability, and equilibrium. The harmonic proportions in the works enhanced those ideas. The sculptures also contained a good enough mix of naturalism and abstraction to give a nod to the spiritual world as well. For the Olmec as shamanists, a direct connection existed between order on earth and order in the spiritual world. Olmec shamans, through ritual and through the assistance of their *nagual* (also referred to as *nagualo*) or “animal spirit companions,” could travel to the supernatural world or guard against spirits who desired them harm.⁸ Therefore, a number of altars and smaller sculptures show human-jaguar or human-dragon anthropomorphs, particularly those that reflect the existence of a gateway or portal between worlds. La Venta Altar 4, for example, had an earthly purpose as a throne and a symbolic one as a cosmological model. When the Olmec ruler sat on the throne he could be present in both the natural and supernatural realms. This journey between worlds was aided by the intercession of the ruler’s animal spirit companion (in this case a jaguar).⁹

The Olmec undoubtedly left a lasting legacy on the Caribbean coast of Mesoamerica, but the legacy can be difficult to trace, as much of it has been subsumed into a debate about its being a “mother” culture for the Aztec and Maya. (Recent scholarship has given less credence to the

8 F. Kent Reilly III, “Art, Ritual and Rulership in the Olmec World,” In Smith and Masson, eds., 374.

9 Ibid., 393.

Olmec as a “mother culture” and argues that it developed independently of Maya and Valley of Mexico cultures). Hopefully as scholars and students examine the Olmec as an independent cultural entity, its legacy will continue to become clearer.

10.6 THE MAYA

The importance of the influence of the Olmec on the Maya may seem superficial, but it is quite important, as the Maya’s rise to sophistication was so fast and so complete that it almost defies explanation. After settling at the base of the Yucatán Peninsula around 1000 BCE, the lowland Maya learned how to deal with drought, feed tens of thousands of people, and organize politically—all before 250 BCE.

The Late Classic period was one of tremendous growth. The city of **Tikal**, in present day Guatemala, had reached a population of 80,000 by CE 750, while the population of its rival Calakmul reached 50,000. To support these large populations, the Late Classic Maya had almost a totally engineered landscape that included water management projects, flattened ridge tops, and terraced hillsides. The population was fairly dense in cities and in surrounding countryside. Their leaders had tombs built in their honor, imported luxury items like jade statues, feathers, cacao, and other items from the Mexican Highlands. These activities all demonstrate real sophistication.

The Late Classic Maya also had an advanced numerical annotation system of dots and bars and used zero. Maya writing began as pictographs and blended into quite artistic symbolism. In addition to their more than seven hundred carved monuments, the Maya culture produced wooden carvings, incised jades, and pottery.

Politically speaking, the Maya were never unified under one ruler or even a set of rulers. Instead, the Maya were a civilization that shared a set of cultural traits, a language family, but no single ruler or sense of common identity. Individual Maya Kingdoms rose and fell, but none was ever able to dominate the entire Maya area.

While their rule was perhaps not widespread, Maya rulers did hold tremendous power and prestige within their kingdoms. Rulers were kings at the top of a “steep” social hierarchy that was reinforced by religious beliefs. The king was a hereditary ruler chosen by the gods and a member of one of several elite bloodlines. The Maya priestly class organized a complex pantheon of both gods and deified ancestors.

This ancestor worship required not only ceremony and temple building, but a complex understanding of calendrics as well. Both the Maya and the Olmec



Figure 10.2 | Mayan Stela | Stela with Mayan Script, Anthropological Museum in Mexico City.

Author: User "Wicki"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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understood time as “a set of repeating and interlocking cycles instead of the linear sequence of historical time,”¹⁰ much as the concept is understood today. Long cycles alternated with short cycles; the long periods involved the repeated creations and destructions of the world in their creation stories—with an emphasis on repeated. Since cycles are by definition repeated, certain dates are more important than others because they are attached to good and bad events in the past. Calendar priests determined what those dates were and so had considerable power. They also had the power to rewrite the course of events if this benefited the ruler.¹¹

10.6.1 Teotihuacán and the Toltec

While the Olmec and Maya accomplished incredible things, urbanization to the north in Mexico’s central valley may have left the most permanent legacy. To the north of the Maya culture area, the Valley of Mexico was the most “agriculturally desirable” zone in Mesoamerica. Climate was temperate, and rainfall, although not abundant, was predictable—in contrast to the drenching rains of tropical Mesoamerica. Lesser amounts of rainfall of course required aqueducts, reservoirs, and canals if a city were to thrive. Cuicuilco was such a city that rose to prominence in the Valley of Mexico by 150 BCE, only to be badly damaged by a volcanic eruption around 400 CE. The subsequent decline of Cuicuilco allowed a competing city, **Teotihuacán**, to rise to prominence in the area, and by 100 CE, its population reached 60,000 inhabitants. By 550 CE, Teotihuacán was one of the six largest cities in the world, with a population of 125,000. Teotihuacán covered more than 20 square kilometers, had a marketplace, an administrative center and several different types of housing. Its largest buildings seem to have had both a functional and a spiritual use. The Pyramid of the Sun, the largest building in the city was built over a sacred cave likely connected with creation myths. By the fourth century CE, Teotihuacán had the modern equivalent of neighborhoods; new houses were laid out on a rough grid with many homes organized into apartment compounds.¹² The dwellings were constructed of volcanic rock, mortar, and wood for the roofs. The compounds also had a system of underfloor drains. Many of the dwellings in these complexes are decorated with “polychrome wall murals” containing multiple religious themes and military themes, some depicting play or everyday life, while others being much more abstract.¹³

To support its massive population, Teotihuacán needed to secure supplies and tribute from surrounding areas. Many neighboring areas were conquered through a combination of trade and military conquest. Force was used to secure trade routes to the south and thus have access to goods as diverse as cacao beans, tropical bird feathers, salt, medicinal herbs, and honey. Once the city’s influence had expanded and they had become the region’s undisputed merchant power, its subsistence base increased to include the entire Basin of Mexico and some neighboring peoples like Tlazcala. The reach of Teotihuacán’s leadership even extended into Maya kingdoms like Tikal where it influenced, and may have even ousted, a Maya ruler in the late

10 Matthew Restall and Amara Solari, *2012 and the End of the World: The Western Roots of the Maya Apocalypse*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011).

11 Ibid.

12 Adams, 46-49.

13 Ibid.

fourth century. Tikal's position within its own region may in fact have been strengthened by this subordination to Teotihuacán.¹⁴

Teotihuacán was able to sustain impressive growth and expansion for more than five centuries, but ultimately its size and complexity seemingly contributed to its decline. At about 650 CE, roughly half of Teotihuacán's public buildings and a number of temples, pyramids, and palaces were burned. Many were knocked down and torn apart as well. This does not seem to be the work of invaders, but instead internal and external groups who attacked declining symbols of power.

The Late Classic Maya would also experience a collapse of their cultural systems around 840 CE. Years of population growth and demands on and from the elite came to a head with a period of prolonged drought in the early ninth century. Resulting famines and infighting caused population losses in Maya settlements nearing eighty-five percent and in many areas abandoned farmlands were retaken by the forest.¹⁵

While many of these Late Classic Maya sites would never recover from their demographic decline, Mesoamerica remained fertile and southern Mexico remained temperate, so a number of polities rose to prominence in the area after the abovementioned declines. Tula, which had been founded by Teotihuacán leaders as an administrative center, emerged in the Valley of Mexico after 650 CE. Tula would become the capital of the Toltecs, who saw their principal city grow to a population of 35,000 by 800 CE. Like all Mesoamerican cities at the time, Tula would expand its influence through trade. Toltec ceramics were found in regions ranging from Costa Rica to Guatemala; while Toltec style I-shaped ball courts and rain dances were adopted by cultures like the Anasazi and Hohokam in modern day Arizona and New Mexico. One of these ball courts still sits near the modern city of Phoenix, Arizona.¹⁶ While much of the Hohokam culture area sits in what is now the United States, it was heavily influenced by the culture of Mexico. Not only did the Hohokam build ball courts, they also erected platform mounds and dug irrigation canals like those found in Mexico.

One important difference that the Toltec developed from their predecessors was their desire to conquer. Perhaps influenced by the rapid decline of Teotihuacán, the Toltec wanted to rise to prominence quickly. Their construction of Tula was hasty and conflict with neighbors went beyond typical captive taking or territorial gain. The Toltec viewed their conquest as a "sacred war" where man would aid the gods in their fight against the powers of darkness. The Toltec eventually merged their sacred war with that of the northern Maya in the Puuc Hills of the Yucatán. The northern Maya elites had already adopted "divine war" when the Toltec invaded the Yucatán city of Chichén. Chichén would become the Toltec administrative center in the peninsula in the late tenth century but they did not completely drive out the city's Maya founders. In fact, the Itza Maya ruled the region under the Toltec and continued to do so well into the post-Columbian period.¹⁷

14 Adams, 48-49.

15 Ibid., 60-65.

16 Ibid., 69-71.

17 Ibid., 69-75.

10.7 THE AZTEC

While the Itza were one of the last unconquered native civilizations in the New World, another post-classic kingdom drew the most attention from Mexico's Spanish conquerors: the Aztec. The Aztec capital was the magnificent city of **Tenochtitlán**, founded around 1325 CE by a Nahuatl-speaking, previously nomadic group called the Mexica. Tenochtitlán was composed of a network of dozens of smaller city states who used the lake environment to plant wetland gardens and used raised causeways to separate the gardens and move around the city. Some fields were raised as well, a feat which drained them and helped them contribute to supporting a population that totaled around 300,000 people (including the population of the neighboring city of Texcoco). Eventually a network of canals was created that drained fields, fed crops, and provided for navigation with canoes. Not only were these raised fields a source of multiple crops, but also the lake provided wildfowl, salamanders, and algae.

However, as the population grew to over a million, other means of support were needed, so the people looked to outside tribute. Beginning in 1428, the Mexica sought independence from their Tepanec patrons and allied with other outlying towns to form the Triple Alliance, which



Figure 10.2 | Map of Tenochtitlán and Gulf of Mexico | Drawn by member of Hernán Cortés expedition, 1524.

Author: User "Lupo"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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by 1431 dominated the basin where they made their home. The unified Aztec people were led by the Mexica ruler Itzcoatl and his advisors. In making an alliance with Texcoco, the Aztec were able to build a causeway between the cities and help improve the infrastructure of Tenochtitlán. They then began construction on the Great Temple, a central market, and a larger network of gardens or *chinampas*. The Great Temple would become the orienting point for the entire city and would become the site of thousands of human sacrifices.



The Aztec are perhaps best known, and may even have grown infamous (like the Toltec and others before them), for practicing human sacrifice. However, the context in which these sacrifices take place reveals that they were not conducted in a wanton or random manner. First of all, for the new Aztecs, there was little tradition of and, therefore, little opportunity for community building to draw upon. Their rise to power had to have been quick and dramatic. Furthermore, they possessed a worldview that held that even though they had achieved greatness, decline was inevitable. This view was present in their philosophy and their ceremonies—including those of sacrifice. This view was also important for ritual victims, because upon their death, they believed that they would be freed from the burdens of the uncertain human condition and become a carefree hummingbird or butterfly.

For the Aztec, ritual provided a kind of protection against excess; there was order in it, even if it was violent. Men had no independent power, and gods were very abstract in their doling out of gifts. Finally, in the Mexica worldview, the earth receives rather than gives, much like it does in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Through fertility and death, humans satisfy that hunger. The process of birth and death is not “dust to dust” but the transition from one form of flesh to another. All man can do is order his portion of this natural cycle.

10.8 EARLY ANDES

Humans arrived in South America after migrating through North and Mesoamerica; they began to craft small campsites and fishing villages along the Pacific coast. Around 3,000 BCE, the small campsites villages were replaced by residential and ceremonial centers. This transition was made possible through a new focus on irrigation and communal agriculture.

These Pacific coast and Andean cultures left an incredible amount of material culture (much of it well-preserved because of the dry climate) for archeologists to analyze. Their work shows that parts of the Classical Andes—modern Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Colombia—possessed the same level of cultural complexity as did China, Persia, and India during the same period. Through this material culture, the Classical peoples begin to separate themselves from their ancient and often less complex ancestors.

While it is tempting to lean heavily on artifacts for knowledge of the period, there is a danger of overreliance. For example, pottery of the Moche culture (see Figure 10.3) is well known for its often quite graphic images of female fertility and sexuality. These pieces are important works for archaeologists and historians alike, but one must keep in mind that little is known about how much these representations of Moche female sexuality in art actually tell us about gender relationships in their society. In other words, “shock value” or aesthetic quality should not be confused with universality.

This section begins with the end of the archaic period and the rise of a group of civilizations referred to as the **Norte Chico**.

10.8.1 Norte Chico

The Pacific coast developed large ceremonial and residential centers, which were organized around distinct status and rank among citizens. This area resembles other “crucible” areas like the Deh Luran Plain of Iraq, the Nile in Egypt, and the Olmec heartland. While similarities with the aforementioned early civilizations exist, the Norte Chico stands out for three reasons. First, it was politically “pristine.” Scholars find no evidence that any outside polity influenced its development. Second, it endured for more than 1,300 years. This longevity gave the Norte Chico great influence in what would ultimately become a distinct Andean civilization. For example, large platform mounds of Norte Chico would also appear later in the highland center of **Chavín de Huantar**. The final reason Norte Chico stands out from other early civilizations is its development happened very quickly. By 2800 BCE, there were a number of similar large sites all with residential complexes, plazas, and platform mounds.¹⁸

The **Aspero** site is the archetype of these large sites. It covers fifteen hectares and contains six platform mounds. While there are a number of large sites like Aspero, there doesn’t seem to have been a central Norte Chico chiefdom or state. There was no Norte Chico capital and no real evidence of conflict or warfare. This absence of conflict may be connected with the fact that scholars find no indication of differentially-distributed sumptuary goods, such as jewelry, clothing, and exotic trade materials, in Norte Chico. Even shell beads and stone are extremely rare to find in these sites so near to the Pacific.

Usually a cultural area requires some centralization and large scale agriculture before scholars refer to it as a civilization. The Norte Chico earns that distinction, however, because the level of cultural complexity indicates that they at least tried to centralize. Complexity is tricky. In the Norte

¹⁸ Jonathan Haas and Winifred Creamer, “Crucible of Andean Civilization: The Peruvian Coast from 3000 to 1800 BC” *Current Anthropology* 47:5: October 2006, 746.



Chico, there occurred episodic attempts at non-egalitarianism which were eventually abandoned. Many scholars also argue that Norte Chico did in fact become sophisticated and sedentary, not through agriculture but through fishing; this argument is known as the maritime theory. While unique, the maritime theory has trouble supporting the idea that the Norte Chico advanced merely through fishing, as insufficient archaeological evidence of communal labor sites centered on fishing exists to support it. Instead, a more likely explanation of Norte Chico complexity involves agriculture and fishing meeting at the middle, in a “shared labor” theory. A number of coastal sites contain not only remnants of cotton fishing nets, but other inland products like avocados and corn as well. These remnants mean that the canal building that took place between 4,000 and 3,000 BCE in the interior was likely only possible with the assistance of the coast’s more plentiful labor force. This assistance was paid for with cotton nets and other agricultural products that in turn helped the coastal population feed itself and grow year after year. A larger temporary labor force would produce more

canals and aqueducts, a cycle that explains much of the Norte Chico’s economic expansion. Some of this cooperation may have even taken the form of pilgrimages to Norte Chico sites and the construction of monuments within Aspero, Caral, and other sites to commemorate them. The dry season of July and August presented a lull that would have been a good time for such pilgrimages. Evidence of communal cooking and eating exists, along with that of communal building.

10.8.2 Chavín de Huantar

While the Norte Chico is the oldest identifiable civilization along the Pacific Coast, Chavín de Huantar has also captured much attention as a crucible site for Andean culture. **Chavín de Huantar** is the iconic representation of The Late Initial Period (1800 – 800 BCE), where Peru saw the beginnings of a mix of Andean, coastal, and Amazon cultures. Chavín is located at an altitude of more than 3,000 meters in the Callejón de Conchucos, the easternmost basin between the Cordilleras Negra and Blanca in the Peruvian Andes. It is also midway between the coast and jungle, giving it access to the culture and resources of the greater Andean region. This access made it a pilgrimage center, an importer of luxury goods, and a disseminator first unifying Andean style.¹⁹ Chavín’s “Old Temple” is 330 feet across the back and more than fifty feet high at its highest. The

19 Rebecca R. Stone, *Art of the Andes: From Chavin to Inca*. 3rd ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012).

temple is U-shaped with a sunken court in the middle, and harpy eagle, jaguar, and parading shamans surround it. The temple is also built around the *lanzón* (great lance) which was a kind of supernatural conduit. The *lanzón* is similar in style to the Tello Obelisk which was found in a corner of the Old Temple courtyard. The obelisk contains carvings on all of its sides, carvings which primarily represent tropical and mythical origins or “gifts of the cayman.”²⁰ Many dualities appear on the obelisk: male-female, plant type, ecological zone, sky-water, life-death, etc. These dualities and their meaning were reinforced by the pilgrimages made to Chavín and the ceremonies contained within them. It seems that Chavín architects used all of the symbolic value of the site available to them. The mixed human-animal features of the sculptures, the ingestion of hallucinogenic San Pedro cactus (also represented in sculpture), and even including acoustic symbolism were all important parts of the pilgrimages. Archaeologists have found marine shell trumpets in the tunnel complex under the city and have attempted to replicate how sound would contribute to the mind-altering rituals undertaken at the complex.²¹

The images and rituals at this site help establish what scholars refer to as the “Chavín cult.”²² The Chavín cult presents a universalist message based on the combined elements of coast and highlands that helped bring people to sites like this for ceremony and construction. In other words, these ideas helped move the Andes into the state phase. At Chavín, it also seems that there was a leader/priest, like in Egypt. It was, therefore, through spiritual power that the state congealed and grew, as well.²³

10.8.3 Moche

Chavín de Huantar was not a developed civilization, but it did help create the importance of religion and ceremonial life in the Andes, both in every day practice and in sacred sites. Later, other groups in Peru, groups like the **Moche**, would build on religion and ceremony to help with state formation. The Moche began to conquer the North coast valleys in 200 BCE and, by 250 CE, had begun to construct the **Huaca del Sol** or temple of the sun and the **Huaca de la Luna** or temple



20 Rebecca R. Stone, *Art of the Andes: From Chavin to Inca*: 3rd ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012).

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

of the moon at their capital, which bore the same name. The Huaca del Sol seems to have been a royal residence and the Huaca de la Luna a place of worship. The Huaca del Sol contained over 143 million bricks, arranged into columns and marked with symbols perhaps of who made them.²⁴ Each column probably represented a tax-paying **Ayllu** (kinship-based community), meaning that the Huaca or temple was a literal representation of how the empire was held up by its individual units.

There is still some debate about how much centralization there was at the upper echelons of Moche politics, but there was undoubtedly a leadership class with several administrative levels. The first administrative level was that of the divine kings who are depicted in murals and ceramics from this period. The second was of noble administrators. Below that were bureaucrats who organized the already extant clan system. Below them were the long-standing clan leaders. The lowest level was composed of commoners, many of whom lived in single story adobe houses. Most commoners mastered some craft like metallurgy or weaving. Others were highly skilled and perhaps worked exclusively for the rulers.

Residents living outside of the capital were almost exclusively farmers who lived along the Moche's extensive irrigation canals—in the Chicama Valley, there is a 120 km long canal still in use today. The Moche found a very practical application of the previously mentioned coastal-mountain symbiosis through the llama. The llama is a domesticated mountain pack animal that the Moche used to journey to the coast and gather guano at the Chincha Islands for fertilizing their valley farms.

By 600 CE, the city of Moche covered an area of a square kilometer and probably had a population of 15,000. Each conquered valley outside of the capital had its own huaca, and each one was connected to Moche by relay runners who carried messages written in the form of lines and dots on Lima beans.

Perhaps the most notable Moche legacy was their art. Their buildings, their murals, and their pottery alike reflected their great skill and the high level of societal stratification. The Huaca del Sol at Cerro Blanco for example contained millions of bricks and more than 100 types of geometric symbols. Moche murals contained a unique series of squares depicting both abstract and mythological concepts involving themes of creation, combat, sacrifice, and men-jaguars. As already mentioned, this sacrifice may not have always been violent, may not have been literal, and always has a functional explanation. In this case, sacrifice is designed to terrify or at the very least impress a subject population. While it is important to contextualize this sacrifice, we must also remind ourselves that this is not a modern civilization with a middle class or even a democratic tradition. It was archaic in the sense that a small group of people was supported by a large population underneath them. This kind of relationship required brutality.

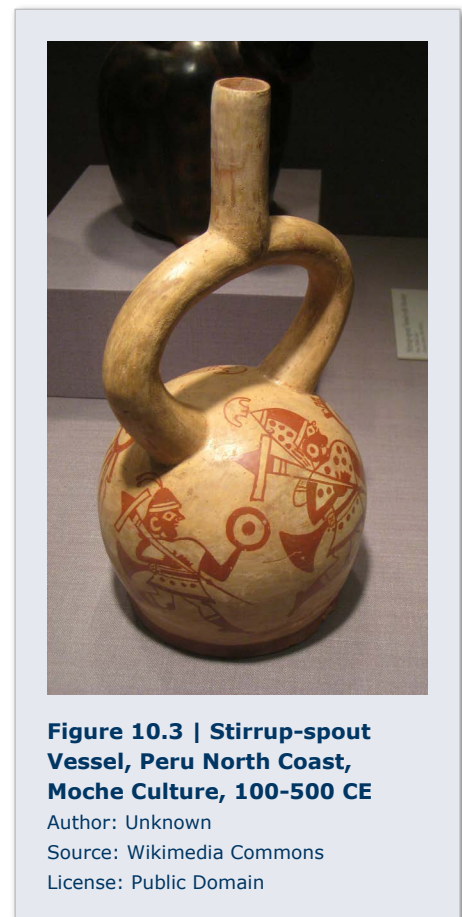


Figure 10.3 | Stirrup-spout Vessel, Peru North Coast, Moche Culture, 100-500 CE

Author: Unknown

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

24 Adams, 106.

10.8.4 Huari

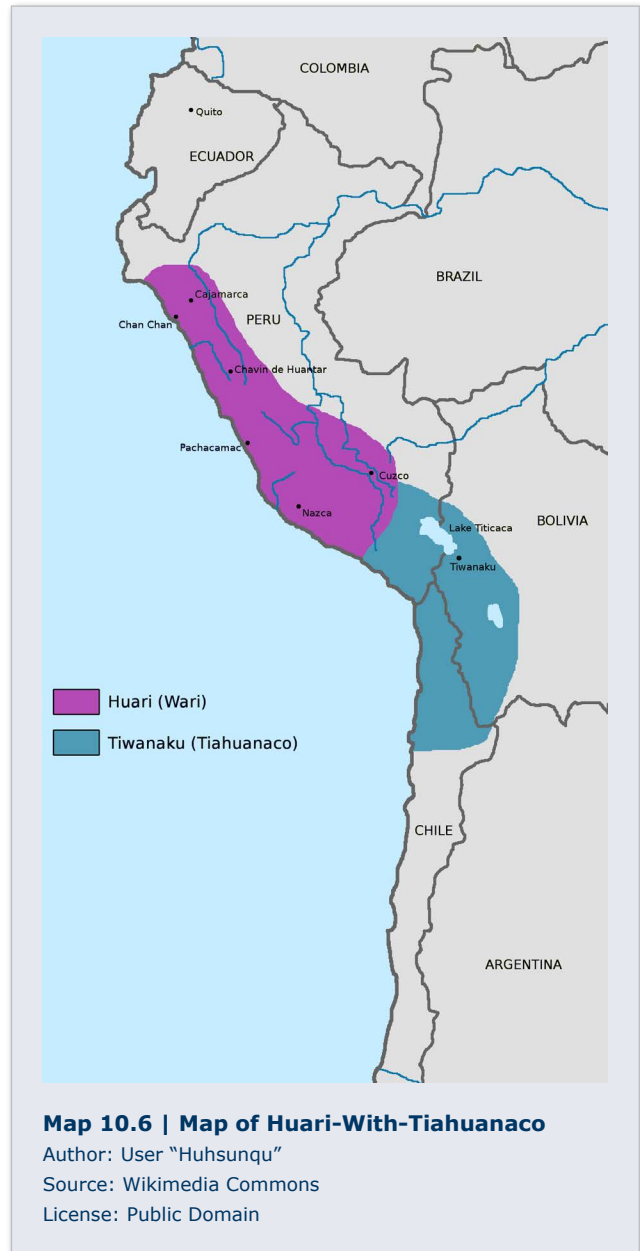
While the Moche were notable because of their art and material culture, their use of violence to achieve and hold power threatens to cloud our image of the north coast peoples. The **Huari**, on the other hand, were able to build a successful empire in nearby areas combining intimidation and militarism with diplomacy, trade, and ideology. The Huari ruled over more territory than any previous Andean polity, partially by coopting neighboring groups through taxation, distribution of goods, feasting and religious ceremonies. There is also evidence that the Huari used sacred mummy bundles or trophy heads to incorporate outgroups and maintain a ritual relationship with these outgroups. Huari textiles and ceramics were found far from the capital, and Huari architecture was highly influential throughout the region.²⁵ The Huari Empire carved out a centralized state in a region where none had previously existed by coordinating local irrigation and labor systems. By 700 CE, Huari maintained a population of 25,000 and an over 700 kilometer-wide “zone of influence” connected by a road network that may have been the model for the Inca road system. In fact, it was ultimately Huari diplomacy and organization, rather than Moche violence in ritual killings, that provided a more useful precedent for the Inca.²⁶

10.8.5 Chimu

The **Chimu** Kingdom was perhaps influenced more directly by remnants of the Moche, occupying as they did more or less the same geographic area. The Chimu capital of **Chan Chan** was established at about 1000 CE. Through their system of split inheritance, the Chimu forced the newly-ascended ruler to build his own material wealth. This expectation meant conquest of new territory and an increase in taxes. It also meant the construction of a new palace where each ruler would be buried along with hundreds of his attendants and llamas who were sacrificed to accompany him in the afterlife. A Chimu ruler was

²⁵ Tiffany Tung, *Violence, Ritual, and the Wari Empire: Bioarchaeological Interpretations of the Human Past: Local, Regional, and Global Perspectives* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2012), 24-25.

²⁶ Adams, 113.



also buried with a sample of the wealth he had accumulated in his lifetime in the form of textiles, wood carvings, pottery, or jewelry. While earthquakes meant that the Chimú had to work hard to reclaim or make any use at all of Moche irrigation canals, they did manage to revive and extend the Moche system to eventually provide Chan Chan with diverse agricultural products from maize to cotton to peanuts. The Chimú also employed violence in their rise to power; however, their conquest by the Inca cut short any means for scholars to see if they intended to follow or rather eventually break from the Moche legacy.²⁷

10.8.6 South Coast peoples

The south coast of Peru developed somewhat distinctly because it is extremely arid. In certain areas along the coast there has never been recorded rain. Surviving there meant accessing and controlling Andean runoff that sometimes went underground. As a result, the south coast's population was much smaller, but in many ways was culturally richer.

The **Nazca** carved out their civilization along the south coast between 100 BCE to 600 CE. There was a large center at Cahuachi as early as 200 BCE, but it was largely ceremonial rather than residential. Forty huacas were also built in the areas surrounding Cahuachi but also were without large permanent populations. The Nazca maintained a regular pilgrimage to Cahuachi involving music, feasts, and fertility rites. There was some captive sacrifice, but it is not clear of whom. Nazca leadership was probably a confederacy of clans, making the forty huacas the hubs of political and sacred activities. Huacas are further explained in section 10.8.8.

The Nazca are well known for their pottery and textiles. Their pottery depicted mythical feline or otter figures, many of which were associated with water and fertility—in this climate, water essentially is fertility. The same figures are represented on the Nazca lines/geoglyphs that were created by clearing the desert floor of stone and leaving the motifs. The straight lines were probably “ritual walkways.” Others argue that the Nazca Lines were an astronomical calendar centered around the agricultural cycle. Overall, the Nazca had an impressive but brief florescence which came to an abrupt end after a prolonged drought in the 550s CE.²⁸

27 Adams, 114-116.

28 Adams, 109.



Figure 10.4 | Nazca Lines Hummingbird

Author: Unukomo

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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10.8.7 Tiwanaku

Tiwanaku was a ceremonial center and administrative city near Lake Titicaca established in the fifth century CE. At its height, more than 40,000 people lived in the city itself; they were supported by a population of 365,000 in the subjected outskirts. Surrounding farmlands produced high crop yields with abundant quinoa and potatoes supported by meat and legumes. They used canals, ridged fields, and raised fields, and they even created a series of ditches that created fog and prevented frost in the colder months.

In the city itself, several large platform mounds connected by causeways were used by the administrators of this complex system. From subordinate colonies hundreds of miles away, they received corn, coca, tropical birds, and medicinal herbs. Many of these goods were carried by llamas. Alpacas also provided high grade wool for textiles.

Tiwanaku contained many ethnic and linguistic zones and “vertically integrated” many areas of the Andes for the first time. Tiwanaku was relatively stable until its downfall around 1,000 CE, perhaps falling victim to its own success. Saline deposits from long term irrigation may have reduced the fertility of the soil, leaving Tiwanaku without its most distinct advantage.

In general, comparing these three more recent civilizations to the first civilizations of Norte Chico reveals increased complexity in all cases with class structure developing, warfare, and religion, even though their methods of survival were quite different.

10.8.8 The Inca

The Huari and Tiwanaku built on local resources to construct their states. While the Inca are the best known of these Andean civilizations, they began in the same way by building on the Ayllu kinship system.

In some ways, the Ayllu system was ready-made for empire. Ayllus were networks of families and individuals who traded in labor and subsistence and ritual activities.²⁹ This system meant built-in labor obligations existed, as did rules about marriage and ancestor worship. All of these rules were reinforced through ritual, allowing the Inca to build upon Ayllu rituals to increase his power, authority, and divine claim to the throne. Future Incas were only eligible to rule if they descended from the royal allyu.

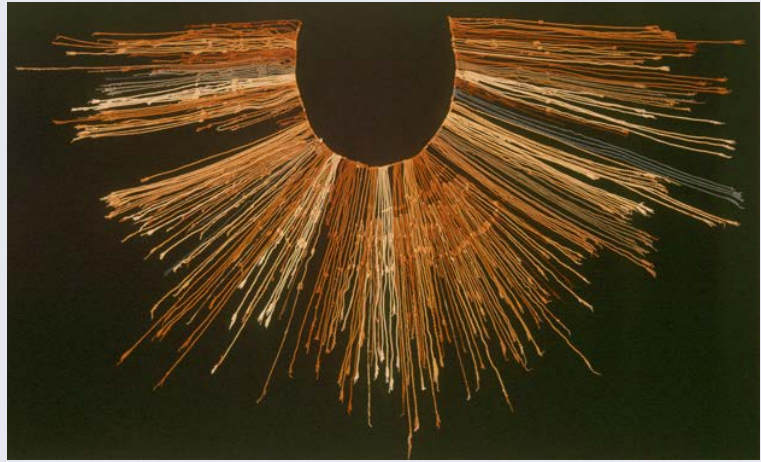


Figure 10.5 | An Inca Quipu, from the Larco Museum in Lima

Author: Clause Ableiter

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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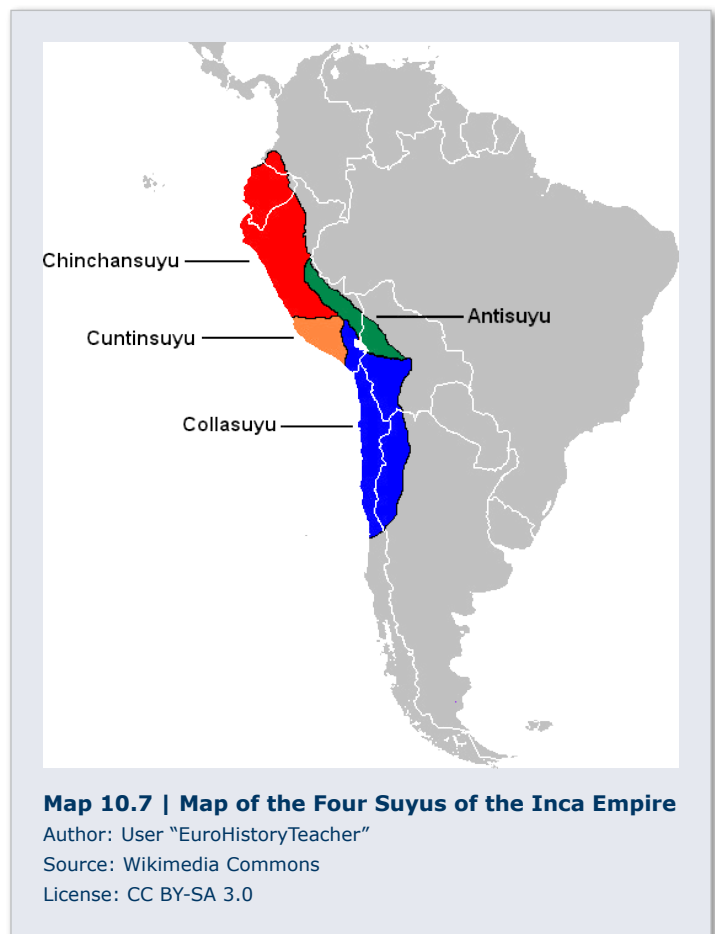
29 Michael A. Malpass, *Daily Life in the Inca Empire, 2nd ed.* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), 32.

After the Inca had established their legitimacy, their expansion would begin during the reign of **Pachacuti**. By the time of his death in 1471, he conquered not only the Chanca and Quechua ethnicities of the southern Andes, but also the coastal Chimu. Topa Inca continued his father's conquests; he was succeeded by **Huayna Capac**. The Inca used **Cuzco** as their imperial capital, expanding it around several huacas into the shape of a puma. They also built the Sun Temple in honor of the god Inti who was all-powerful, benevolent and from whom Inca rulers claimed to descend.

Not only did the Ayllu help the empire take shape, but it also became its main administrative units once it had expanded. Local Ayllu nobility reinforced their connection to the empire through the mummification and consecration of ancestors. Mummies or other sacred bundles would become "huacas," venerated in Cusco by Inca nobility to establish a sacred connection between local Ayllus and the empire. (See map for the connections between Cuzco and surrounding areas). Labor obligations were the primary form of taxation organized through the Ayllu and closely recorded on quipus. Through Ayllu labor, the Inca were able to collect taxes, store and distribute food, and build their road system. The Inca road system eventually covered over 5,500 kilometers, stretching from Ecuador to Chile. Counting all of the sub-systems, the roads covered brings that amount closer to thirty-two thousand aggregate kilometers. The roads varied in sophistication and width, depending on conditions and need, but could include staircases, causeways, and suspension bridges. This complexity had added elements of efficiency through the Inca network of messengers that would operate twenty-four hours a day and carry a message from one location in the empire to another in a matter of a few days.

The Inca also used religion extensively to keep their empire strong. Each Ayllu had a huaca connected to it with multiple meanings, including as an origin point. The sun, on the other hand, was the royal progenitor, and the temple Coricancha located in Cuzco was the most important temple to the sun. From Coricancha radiated forty-one sacred lines or ceques connected to 328 huacas in the Cuzco valley. Many huacas were connected to water or rain, giving a sacred importance to some drains, fountains, baths, and libations.

An empire of this size would not have been possible without an effective army as well. Inca arms reflected the landscape. Their armor was light, they used lots of projectiles, and they protected their fortresses with boulders that could be rolled down hills.



All these defenses used the advantages the mountains offered. Some archers were even recruited from the Amazon. Their strength was in their combination of mobility and superior numbers. There was very little siege tradition; battles would commence as soon as the armies arrived.

All empires would collect taxes, have armies, and build temples. The Inca were so successful, it seems, because they considered the most fundamental elements of Andean culture to strengthen their hold on power. Pre-Inca Andean society was a uniquely parallel one in which both men and women were important contributors to Andean religious, economic, and political life. In forming their empire, the Inca were very cognizant of Andean understanding of gender. To garner the support of the female sphere (some scholars say to undermine it), the Incas *created* a revered class of *aclla* women; these were attractive girls who would represent their newly conquered home Ayllu as elites of the glorious Inca Empire. These “chosen women” not only solidified Inca imperial bonds through marriage, converting a political entity into a family, but also expanded Inca religious legitimacy when a chosen few were periodically sacrificed and converted into the “divine custodians” of their communities.

10.8.9 Machu Picchu

Nestled in the Peruvian Andes, **Machu Picchu** is undoubtedly the most well-known Inca site by modern tourists. The site is located at 8,000 feet above sea level, in a forested area. It is framed by the Urubamba River and sits on a ridge between two peaks. The site itself must have been spectacular before construction began, but the complex itself is nothing short of extraordinary.³⁰



Figure 10.6 | Peru Machu Picchu at Sunrise

Author: Allard Schmidt

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Despite its iconic status, much less is known about its fifteenth century role. Its construction seems to have been ordered by Pachacuti, who used it as a royal retreat of sorts from Cuzco. The most attractive time for travel would have been during the winter when Machu Picchu was much warmer than Cuzco. There is evidence of the same skilled craftspeople and retainers that accompanied the Inca in Cuzco maintaining a presence in Machu Picchu as well. Machu Picchu did have tracts of surrounding land to feed the court, the emperor, and visiting dignitaries, and to supply the ceremonies connected with their arrival. However, this was not a city. Only a few year-round residents inhabited it, and even at its

30 Ibid., 108-09.

seasonal height, the population only reached about 750. There are agricultural terraces which grew potatoes and maize, and a spring for bathing and drinking that was connected by aqueducts to a fountain between the Temple of the Sun and the residences. There are one hundred and seventy-two structures at the site in total, including residences for the Inca's elite retinue and smaller dwellings for the servants. Also thirty buildings are dedicated to ceremonial purposes, including the Temple of the Three Windows; the Intihuatana, an oblong rock at the head of a large staircase; and The Temple of the Condor. The construction is not only visually impressive, but also structural engineers have remarked at its sophisticated drainage and foundation work that have allowed it to stand mostly intact for more than 500 years³¹.

10.9 NORTH AMERICA

While most evidence points to human migration through North America to South America, the hallmarks of civilization would arrive later in what are now the United States and Canada. Many of us refer to the areas connected by Panama simply as “The Americas,” but the Panamanian land bridge first linked the two continents only two million years ago. This was prior to human arrival in the Americas, but this separate development meant that North and South American flora and fauna experienced millions of years of separate development and evolution. This distinct development would influence the pace and patterns of human settlement in the Americas a great deal.

10.9.1 The West

The arrival of maize, beans, and squash from northern Mexico helped mark the transition to sedentary culture in the Southwest of what is now the United States. There is some evidence of primitive maize dating back to the middle of the second millennium BCE, but it would not become widespread until about 1000 BCE. A newer, drastically different maize, “**Maiz de Ocho**,” is believed to have been the key to the flourishing of sedentary villages across the Southwest and to the eventual appearance of large pithouse villages around 500 BCE. **Maiz de Ocho** is better suited to arid conditions and yields larger kernels which are more easily milled. **Pithouses**, dwellings whose name indicates that its walls were in fact the sides of an excavated pit, became widespread across the Southwest because they were “thermally efficient.” They lost less heat than aboveground structures in winter and, as they were built into the ground, were cooler in the summer. Pithouses remained in wide use in the area until about 700 CE, when more complex exchange networks and social organization led to more diverse settlement patterns.³²

One of these new settlement patterns was the “great pueblo” that appeared as part of the “Chaco Phenomenon” around 900 CE. To deal with unpredictable summer rainfall, the Chaco Anasazi people of New Mexico built three “great houses”—Peñasco Blanco, Pueblo Bonito, and Una Vida,” a large structure situated at natural drainage junctions. The semi-circular town of Pueblo Bonito grew out of a pithouse village to eventually form a semi-circular network of more than 600 rooms and reached a height of five stories along the canyon's rear wall. The complex's walls were built of

31 Ibid., 112-114.

32 Brian M. Fagan, *Ancient North America: The Archaeology of a Continent*, 3rd ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 306.

sandstone blocks whose surfaces and cracks were smoothed and shored up by a clay-sand mortar. Construction of the high ceilings also involved complicated ashlar masonry patterns that could be covered with “adobe plaster or matting.”³³

Each of the larger **Chaco Canyon** sites also had at least one great kiva. Kivas were subterranean gathering places which were used by individual kin groups for work, for education, and for ceremonies. Larger kivas were gathering places for more formal ceremonies where political decisions affecting the entire community were often made.

By 1050 CE, five great pueblos in Chaco Canyon supported a total population of around 5,000 people. While most lived within the relatively compact canyon area, the influence of this populace reached well beyond the immediate pueblo complex. Evidence indicates that the Chaco Canyon people may have had exclusive access to sources of turquoise all over New Mexico and used the stone in their workshops where they produced vases, human effigy vessels, incense burners, bells, trumpets and painted tables. By the early twelfth century, Chaco Canyon’s influence extended to much of northwest New Mexico and southern Colorado, where more than seventy outlying sites contained kivas, Chaco pottery, and similar architecture to what was found in Pueblo Bonito. The Chaco also developed a road system that may have been for the distribution of resources or pilgrimages. Either way, the road construction involved considerable cooperation to craft, at different stages, stairways and ramps carved out of bedrock and other pathways lined with boulders. After 1130 CE, drought and growing population densities led to a 100-year decline of the Chaco sites. By the 1200s most of the pueblos of the Chaco system were empty, their population dispersed and away from the canyon.³⁴ While this was the height of Anasazi village life, they continued to thrive culturally and are recognized as the precursors of the modern Pueblo peoples.

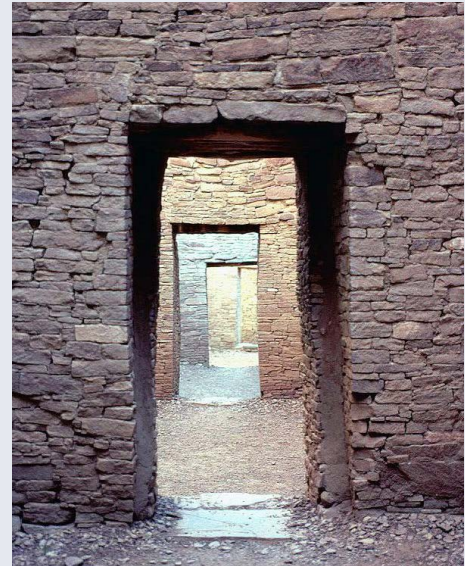


Figure 10.7 | Chaco Canyon Pueblo Bonito Doorways

Author: User “Saravask”

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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10.9.2 The Pacific coast

Further west, cultures along North America’s Pacific coast were also sedentary, but did not derive their existence from farming. Instead, multiple Pacific coast cultures took advantage of abundant ocean resources, such as various fish species, sea mammals, timber, shellfish, waterfowl, game, and wild plants. The abundance of these resources often suggests that coastal cultures were less complex than their contemporaries in the interior, but the ravages of climate required tremendous adaptation over time. During the Late Holocene period alone, from 2000 BCE to the present, periodic colder episodes may have led to consequences as disparate as lakeside flooding, lowering

³³ Ibid., 301.

³⁴ Ibid., 323-329.

of tree lines, drought, and a reduction of available marsh areas. Northwestern Coastal peoples, for example, addressed this volatility by never putting their eggs in one basket. While they may have primarily eaten acorns or salmon, they made sure to always maintain a secondary food source. Further south, the **Chumash**, a people inhabiting the central and southern California coast, developed ceremonial centers, provinces incorporating several villages, sophisticated “watercraft,” and vibrant trade with the interior. In fact, this trade helped the Chumash avoid scarcities as well.³⁵

10.9.3 The Plains

The Great Plains represented perhaps the largest area of pre-Columbian North America, but it is also one of the least understood. The Wild West shows of the nineteenth century produced the lasting yet erroneous impression that the Plains Indian culture remained unchanged for centuries. Big game hunters in the Clovis Culture first inhabited the area as early as 13,000 years ago. As big game became extinct around 9000 BCE, Paleo-Indian groups on the plains turned to foraging and fishing in river valleys and to hunting of primarily bison as well as deer and fowl. By 9000 BCE, the Ice Age had left behind a vast expanse of “arid grassland” from Alaska to the Gulf of Mexico, an expanse known as the “**Great Bison Belt**.” Long before European explorers introduced horses, people on the Great Plains had developed sophisticated processes of hunting bison on foot that involved some hunters disguised as bison, others orchestrating movements among hunting groups, and others shouting to drive the bison toward pre-selected “traps” or “jumps.” Dozens of bison would fall over a precipice to their deaths. By 6000 BCE, plains hunters had more sophisticated projectiles that could penetrate the skin of a surrounded animal or one that had become stuck in mud or sand. Findings at the



Map 10.8 | Monks Mound in July

Author: User “Before My Ken”

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Olsen-Chubbock site in Colorado indicate that by 6500 BCE, Paleo-Indians had also begun to butcher seventy-five percent of the animals they killed, which could sustain a group of 100 people for more than a month.³⁶ Early Plains Archaic (5600 – 3000 BCE) activity, while still largely dependent on bison, shows some increasing reliance on fish, fowl, and berries, possibly indicating warmer and drier conditions that “diminished grass cover throughout the Central Plains.” Middle Plains Archaic peoples (2900 BCE to 1000 BCE) adapted their bison hunting to allow for a more sedentary existence, returning to the same hunting ground year after year, and making much of

35 Ibid., 222, 248.

36 Ibid., 93-96.

the bison meat into pemmican (a brick of pounded flesh and fat), that could be stored for seasons when bison were less plentiful (Fagan 123). By 550 CE, the Late Plains Archaic people had fully incorporated the bow and arrow into their hunts, which tended to be less frequent but more productive, often incorporating “mass kill sites” that were used for hundreds of years in some cases.³⁷

10.9.4 The Eastern Woodlands

The term ‘Middle Woodland’ is occasionally used to refer the period between 200 BCE and CE 400; this coincided with the influence of the **Hopewell** culture over much of eastern North America. Previous to the Hopewell ascendance, the Adena people built hundreds of burial mounds in and around central Ohio (2300 – 2100 BCE). Accompanying the burials were dozens of types of “grave goods” including spear points, stone pipes, and sculptures of animals and human hands. Hopewell mound building (1000 – 200 BCE) and culture as a whole certainly had antecedents in the Adena and early Woodland cultures as a whole, but the Hopewell tradition stands out in its grandiosity. With their center in the Ohio Valley, the Hopewell created hundreds of hectares of earthworks with regionally specific styles of craftsmanship. Copper, shells, obsidian, and shark and alligator teeth were all used to create personal adornments, containers, pipes, and figurines. Much of this artifact diversity can be attributed to the size and vitality of the Hopewell exchange zone which extended across much of eastern North America from Florida to the Great Lakes. While there is evidence that areas as far away as North Dakota participated in this exchange network, the so-called “core areas” were in the Mississippi, Illinois, Scioto, and Miami river valleys in Illinois and Ohio. As trade picked up, so did the ceremonial and political significance of the artifacts received by local leaders and ultimately included in burial mounds. Some artifacts were buried with their owners at death as symbols of their power in life. The expansion of ceremony through these objects also meant that many of the Hopewellian centers shared physical characteristics such as both platform and conical mounds, structures for cremation, and burial vaults. The local populations who participated in these ceremonies seem to have lived near, but not in, the ceremonial centers themselves in single or multiple family households. Although close to other residents, Hopewell communities were scattered across the area, subsisting through a mix of foraging and horticulture.³⁸

10.9.5 Cahokia

Other North American mound builders established their center at **Cahokia**, across the Mississippi River from present day Saint Louis. Cahokia was inhabited from about 700 to 1400 CE. At its peak, the city covered nearly six square miles and 10,000 to 20,000 people lived there. Over 120 mounds were built over time, and most of the mounds were enlarged several times. Houses were arranged in rows and around open plazas, and agricultural fields were cultivated nearby. Other mound centers and communities were located in the contiguous “American Bottom” region. Centralization and the beginning of the Mississippian period happened around 1050 CE, and the transition to the Moorehead phase—marked by decreasing mound building—happened about 1200.³⁹

37 Ibid., 122-127.

38 Ibid., 417-422.

39 Mary Beth D. Trubitt, “Mound Building and Prestige Goods Exchange: Changing Strategies in the Cahokia Chiefdom,”

What scholars still don't know about Cahokia is why there was decreased mound building after 1200, during the so-called Moorehead Phase. While scholars usually associate decreased construction with societal decline, recent scholarship suggests that the opposite may be true for Cahokia. Instead of declining, Cahokia might have gone through a transition to a lesser focus on staples and storage and greater focus toward prestige goods and economic power. Their decreased mound building may have coincided with their energy being more focused on controlling trade across the Mississippian Southeast. Scholars see evidence of this shift with an increase in nonlocal raw materials and "prestige goods" at Cahokia during this period, such materials and goods as minerals, igneous rock for axeheads, ceramics, marine shell, quartz crystal, and copper.⁴⁰



Figure 10.8 | Monks Mound in July

Author: User "Skubasteve834"

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American Antiquity 65:4 (Oct., 2000): 669-690

40 Ibid.

10.9.6 The Arctic

The Arctic's harsh climate meant that it was one of the last areas in the Americas to be permanently settled. The first Paleo-Eskimo populations appeared around 4,000 years ago emanating from Eastern Siberia. They were left behind by the original American colonists. The Arctic colonists expanded rapidly across Alaska, through Canada, and into Greenland as they all possessed arctic small tool kits including the important toggle headed harpoons to kill walrus and seal. In general, their evolution was from reindeer hunters to seal hunters, but both types of societies continued to exist side by side.

10.10 CONCLUSION

Humans migrated to the Americas by 15,000 BCE and perhaps as many as 3,000 years before. The earliest recognizable civilizations in the Americas were in Mesoamerica and began during the Archaic period, ten thousand years ago. Farmers in Mesoamerica began to cultivate crops such as corn, squash, beans, chilies, manioc, and sweet potatoes. During Mesoamerica's more recent Formative Period, the rise of the Olmec Civilization occurred. They would be followed by several others, most notably the Maya, and further to the north the Aztec Empire that was at its height when the Spanish arrived in 1519.

Around 3,000 BCE, small campsites and fishing villages began to appear in Peru. These were eventually replaced by more permanent structures and agriculture communities which would be the antecedents to the incredibly complex cultures of the Classical Andes in Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Colombia. Among these Pacific Coast cultures were the Moche, the Huari, the Chimú, and the Nazca. Many of these cultures had their political and cultural centers in large urban areas like Tiwanaku, which had a population of about 40,000 people around 100 CE. More than 1,000 years later, it was the Inca Empire that would build on these cultural traditions, extending its rule over more than 5,000 kilometers from Ecuador to Chile.

Sedentary culture first began in North America when people in the desert southwest of the continent began to cultivate maize about three thousand years ago. Groups like the Chaco Anasazi in New Mexico would eventually construct massive complexes of aqueducts, homes, and ceremonial spaces by about 1000 CE. There were other major cultural areas all over North America, from Florida to the frigid Arctic.

Despite (or perhaps because of) their late arrival in the Americas, humans developed at an incredible pace all across the region. The residents of the Americas developed remarkable political sophistication, infrastructure, religion, art, economic integration, and technology that Europeans marveled at when they arrived in the late fifteenth century.

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10.12 LINKS TO PRIMARY SOURCES

Mesoamerica

The Aztecs and the Making of Colonial Mexico

<http://publications.newberry.org/aztecs/>

Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: The Ancient Codices

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Popul Vuh: Creation account of the Quiché Mayan People

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Machu Picchu

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North America

Chaco Canyon

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Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks

<http://worldheritageohio.org/hopewell-ceremonial-earthworks/>

Cahokia Mounds

<http://cahokiamounds.org/explore/>