



## CHAPTER SEVEN: THE AMERICAS

While civilizations in the Eastern Hemisphere were changing during the era from 600 to 1450 C.E., civilizations in the Western Hemisphere were continuing to evolve along their separate paths. Nomadic groups and subsistence farmers populated North America, and more complex civilizations developed in Mesoamerica and the area around the Andes Mountains in South America. The earlier Olmec society of Mesoamerica had collapsed by 300 C.E. and was replaced by the Maya, the people of Teotihuacan, the Toltecs, and eventually the Aztecs. In South America, the Chavin society was also in decline by 300 C.E., and was replaced by several regional cultures, including the Mochica state and the Chimu state. By the end of the era, the people of the Americas were in their last days of isolation from the east, and most were enjoying halcyon days before the devastation that the 16<sup>th</sup> century would bring to their civilizations.

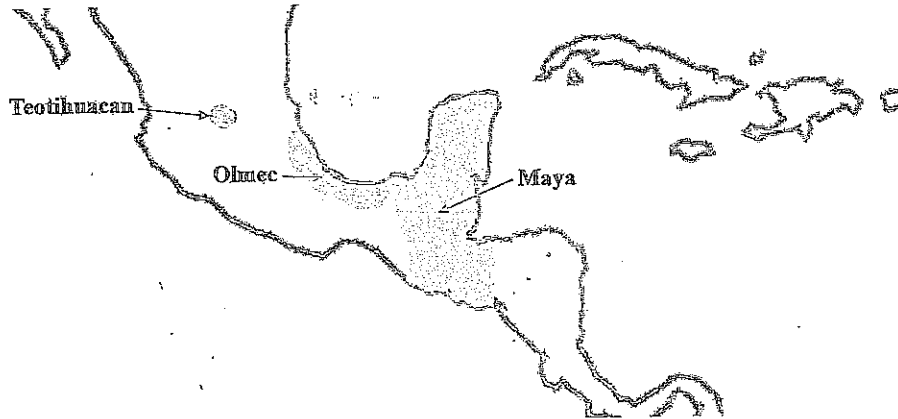
### SOCIETIES IN MESOAMERICA

Scholars usually divide the era from 600 to 1450 C.E. in Mesoamerica into two sub-periods: classical (ending about 900) and post-classical (900 to 1450). Notice that the classical era in Mesoamerica occurred several hundred years after the classical era in the Eastern Hemisphere, reflecting the independent development of the two hemispheres until 1450. Classical civilizations include the Maya and the people of Teotihuacan, and examples of post-classical civilizations are the Toltecs and the Aztecs.

#### Classical Mesoamerica

The Olmec civilization disappeared completely by about 100 B.C.E., but many of their practices and beliefs appear to have been carried on in later civilizations. The earliest heirs of the Olmec were the Maya, who centered their society to the east and south of the Olmec settlements in what is now southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. The first permanent Maya villages appeared during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E. in the highlands of Guatemala, with its fertile soil for agriculture. There they built a ceremonial center, Kaminaljuyu,

that dominated other communities around it. By the 4th century C.E., Kaminaljuyu fell under the control of Teotihuacan, and the Maya moved the center of their civilization to the poorly drained Mesoamerican lowlands. From about 300 to 900 C.E., the Maya built more than eighty large ceremonial centers in the lowlands, all with pyramids, palaces, and temples. These large centers were real cities with tens of thousands of people, but most of the populations were peasant villagers who lived in settlements on the periphery of the cities.



**Early Mesoamericans.** The Olmec civilization was the oldest, and disappeared by 100 B.C.E. Its heirs in the classical era that followed (to 900 C.E.) were Teotihuacan and the Maya.

In these heavily jungled areas, the thin soil quickly lost its fertility, and in the early days the Maya, like many other people who lived in rain forests, practiced slash and burn (or shifting) agriculture. This type of subsistence agriculture would not have been enough to support cities, such as Tikal, Quirigua, and Palenque, so the Maya built terraces that trapped silt carried by the rivers, supported by irrigation and swamp drainage systems. These techniques boosted their agricultural productivity, with Maya cultivators raising maize, cotton, and cacao (for chocolate) in abundance to support their urban populations of 30,000 to 80,000 people. The cities were primarily religious and administrative centers, and trade seems to have been a relatively minor part of Maya life. They varied in size and layout, but almost all included large pyramids with temples on top, complexes of administrative buildings, houses for the elite, a ritual ball court, and often a series of altars and memorial pillars, called stelae. Stelae were built to commemorate great actions of Maya leaders or to mark ceremonial occasions, and they were inscribed with hieroglyphic script.

Maya society had clearly delineated social classes, with rulers and other members of the elite serving both priestly and political functions. They decorated their bodies with paint and tattoos and wore elaborate costumes of textiles, animal skins, and feathers. Although kings were not believed to be divine, they

communicated directly with supernatural beings and deceased ancestors through rituals in which they drew blood from different parts of their bodies and fell into hallucinogenic trances. Vast numbers of commoners were needed to build the elaborate altars and temples, since everything was constructed without the aid of wheels or metal tools.



### CHANGE OVER TIME; CLASSICAL AND POST-CLASSICAL MESOAMERICA

How did Mesoamerica change from the classical era (to 900 C.E.) to the post-classical era (900- 1450 C.E.)? All civilizations had similar religious beliefs and practices, architecture, urban planning, and social organization, but some important changes occurred over time.

CLASSICAL (Maya, Teotihuacan)	POST-CLASSICAL (Toltec, Aztec)
Overall population was lower.	Population density increased, with larger cities, and overall population.
Land was less intensively farmed.	Agriculture intensified, partly because of increased population.
Warfare among groups happened frequently.	Warfare intensified, becoming more frequent and involving more people as competition for land increased.
Small armies, relatively simple forms of government were characteristic.	Centralized, strong governments maintained large armies.

Religion was central to Maya life, with a pantheon of gods important to sustain agriculture, and many of the rituals included human sacrifice. Many victims were prisoners of war, especially defeated elite. Captured commoners were more likely to be used as part of the labor force to construct public buildings and irrigation and drainage systems. Priests had magical powers that gave them access to the underworld, which consisted of nine levels of hell. The gods, like those of Sumeria, were believed to interfere in human affairs, and they possessed both human and animal traits, most frequently those of the jaguar. The Maya believed that it was important to please the gods, who expected honor and

reverence from their human subjects. Bloodletting pleased the gods, so sacrifice victims were often lacerated before being decapitated in order to produce more blood.

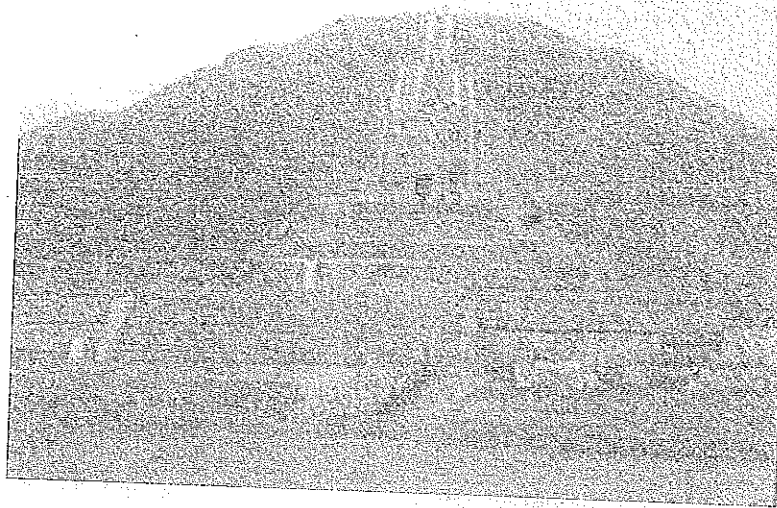
One task of Maya priests was the construction of elaborate calendars, which wove two kinds of years: a solar year of 365 days based on the agricultural cycle, and a ritual year of 260 days. By combining the calendars, each day had specific characteristics that distinguished it from others, and the priests divined what activities could take place and when. Priests also wrote the inscriptions on temples and monuments and produced books on paper made from beaten tree bark or on vellum made from deerskin.

By about 800 C.E., most Maya populations had begun to leave the cities, and within 100 years most of the cities had disappeared. No one knows for sure why the civilization declined, although many theories have been proposed. Some historians have proposed foreign invasion; others say civil war occurred; still others think that epidemic diseases decimated the cities. Gradually, the jungles grew over the cities, temples, and monuments, only to be uncovered by modern archaeologists, although many more are yet to be discovered.

About the time the Maya were reaching their peak, another civilization began to develop in the highlands to the north. The area was the site of several large lakes fed by water from the surrounding mountains, and the earliest settlers channeled the water into their fields to produce an abundance of crops. Their central city was Teotihuacan, which began to grow rapidly after about 200 B.C.E. Like the cities of the Olmecs and the Maya, Teotihuacan was a center of religious rituals and government administration. Their monuments were in the pyramidal form found all over Central America, but the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon are among the largest masonry structures ever built. Some scholars believe that Teotihuacan might have been the first real city of the Western Hemisphere, with a population estimated between 125,000 and 200,000. Just as with the Maya, most of what we know about Teotihuacan must be interpreted from the architecture and art, and the city is unusual in that it laid out barrios, or quarters, for the ordinary people who farmed the fields surrounding the city. It had scores of temples, several palatial residences, busy markets, and hundreds of workshops for craftsmen.

Unfortunately, most of the written records perished when the city itself declined, so the remaining architecture is an important source of our knowledge of the people of Teotihuacan. Paintings and murals suggest that priests were an important part of the elite, just as they were in Maya society. Also similarly to the Maya, priests kept the calendar to ensure that crops were planted at the right time. In contrast to Maya cities, Teotihuacan was a center of extensive trade and exchange, with professional merchants trading their products throughout

Mesoamerica. The city reached its peak during the 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E., although the political leadership is still a mystery. No public art displays or honors individual rulers, as was found in Maya society, but the city was so well-planned that some kind of centralized planning must have taken place. Some have theorized that powerful families ruled cooperatively. The city collapsed around 750 C.E. for unknown reasons, but city walls had been built only about 150 years earlier, suggesting that the early days were more peaceful than the later days were. Some of the murals uncovered by archaeologists suggest that the city's final decades were violent, with most of the important temples in the city center, as well as the houses of the elite, burned down and religious images defaced.



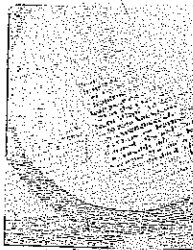
**The Pyramid of the Sun.** This colossal pyramid in Teotihuacan is not as tall as the Great Pyramid of Egypt (constructed much earlier), but it occupies nearly as much space. The main street of the city ran between the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon, with shops and residences lining the street. The stairs to the top of the pyramid probably led to a sacrificial altar.

### Post-Classical Mesoamerica

After the decline of Teotihuacan and the Maya cities, several regional states rose in Mesoamerica, who fought constantly among themselves. These groups illustrate one of the changes from classical to post-classical societies: more emphasis on military organization. Their capital cities stood on well-defended hills, and their art often illustrated warriors. The Toltecs, a group that migrated from northwestern Mexico, were the first to unify central Mexico again after the people of Teotihuacan. Their capital was Tula, northwest of modern Mexico

City, which probably reached a population of about 60,000 between 950 and 1150 C.E. Like the people of Teotihuacan, the Toltecs tapped the waters coming down from the mountains to irrigate crops of maize, beans, peppers, tomatoes, chiles, and cotton.

The Toltecs created their centralized state based on military power, and they conquered lands from Tula south to Central America, including many of the areas formerly controlled by the Maya. Their military orientation appeared in public buildings and temples, which were decorated with representations of warriors or with scenes of human sacrifice. Apparently, the Toltecs had two rulers rather than one, a fact that may have eventually weakened their power. Their most famous ruler was Topiltzin, a priest associated with the god Quetzalcoatl, who was forced into exile in the east, "the land of the rising sun." After his exile, the Toltec state began to decline, to be replaced by the Mexica, more commonly known as the Aztecs.



#### EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE: MESOAMERICAN LEGENDS

Mesoamerican cultures were rich in legends passed down from one group to the next, often by stories told orally, but many were written down in the Aztec pictographic records, or *codices*. The Spanish preserved some of these records, and a Franciscan monk, Bernardino de Sahagun, compiled many others from years of individual interviews with Aztecs. One of the most famous legends is that of Topiltzin, a Toltec priest affiliated with the god Quetzalcoatl ("feathered serpent") who lost a struggle for power with another faction and was forced into exile. When he left, he promised to return, an event so much anticipated that the Aztecs, who followed the Toltecs to power in central Mexico, at first were hospitable to the Spaniards because they believed the Spanish leader to be the exiled hero. The following is one account of Topiltzin's departure:

"Thereupon he [Topiltzin] looked toward Tula, and then wept... And when he had done these things, he went to reach the seacoast. Then he fashioned a raft of serpents. When he had arranged the raft, he placed himself as if it were his boat. Then he set off across the sea."

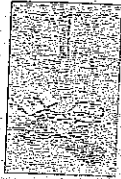
Source: Quoted in Nigel Davies, *The Toltec Heritage: From the Fall of Tula to the Rise of Tenochtitlan*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma, press, 1980), 3.

According to Aztec legend, they built their main city, Tenochtitlan, in a place identified by an eagle perched on a cactus with a snake in its mouth. The city grew to be one of the largest cities on earth, with as many as 300,000 people at its height, positioned on a number of small islands in Lake Texcoco. Several causeways connected them to the mainland, and the city's central marketplace was described by the Spanish as far grander than anything they had ever seen. The area was part of a chain of lakes connected by marshes, and the Aztecs adapted their lifestyles to an aquatic environment. Like the people of Teotihuacan before them, they drained swamps, constructed irrigation works and terraces, and used chinampas, or floating gardens. This unique adaptation consisted of narrow artificial islands constructed by heaping muck from the lakes on beds of reeds anchored to the shores. Chinampas made it possible to sustain urban life by boosting agricultural production. The Aztecs imposed a tribute system on conquered peoples, who had to contribute maize, beans, and other foods to support Tenochtitlan.

Like the Toltecs before them, the Aztecs rose to power through military might, with tough fighting skills and a tendency toward aggressive expansion. By the early 15th century, they emerged as an independent power that dominated their allies. The ruling group among the Aztecs was made up of militaristic aristocrats, whose lives centered on conquest. At the top of the social hierarchy was a semi-divine king, who was selected by election from among the male members of the ruling family. Below him were his officials, who had earned their positions through heroic military leadership and ruled conquered people in the provinces like feudal lords. Next was a class of warriors who were recruited from ordinary freemen, and proved themselves in battle by taking at least four prisoners for sacrifice. Most Aztecs were ordinary free people who tilled the fields, built the buildings and roads, and carried burdens for others. At the bottom were serfs, whose rights and duties were similar to those of medieval European serfs, and the slaves, who were war captives or debtors. Aztec society was patriarchal, but women received high honor for bearing warrior sons, and the spirits of women who died in childbirth were believed to help the sun god in his journey through the sky each day.

The Aztecs also had a large and powerful group of priests. They served as advisers to the king and his officials, and they conducted the elaborate religious rituals that were central to Aztec society. The chief god, Huitzilopochtli, ruled from the position of the sun at noon, and in order to keep him in his proper place in the sky, the Aztecs believed they must feed him human blood. This blood came from frequent human sacrifices on altars that lined the main streets of Tenochtitlan. Although other Mesoamerican groups practiced human sacrifice, the Aztec rituals were particularly bloody, with thousands of victims taken as war captives or tribute for just that purpose. A special part of the ritual was cut-

ting the heart from a live victim's chest, and the heart was then eaten by the Aztec nobility. Priests conducted these sacrifices with large obsidian knives. The fact that the sacrifices were carried out in front of large crowds that included the masses, as well as leaders from enemy and subject states, was a message that almost certainly impressed the viewers with the power of the Aztec elite.



### COMPARISONS: THE CONTINUITY OF THE MESOAMERICAN BALL GAME

Archaeologists have found consistent evidence that all the Mesoamerican groups – from the Olmec to the Aztecs – enjoyed ball games, with most of the civilizations building large courts in their cities. The game was played with a solid rubber ball on slope-sided courts. These ball courts varied considerably in size, but they all featured long narrow alleys, with side-walls for bouncing the balls. The rules of the ball game are not known, but based on its descendent, the modern game of ulama, it was probably similar to racquetball or volleyball, where the object is to keep the ball in play. In the most widespread version of the game, the players would strike the ball with their hips, although sometimes they allowed the use of forearms, rackets, bats, or handstones. The ball was made of solid rubber, with sizes that differed greatly over time or according to the version played. While the game was played casually for simple recreation, including by children and perhaps even women, the game also had important ritual aspects, often featuring human sacrifice. Some representations show balls that closely resemble the human head.

### ANDEAN CIVILIZATIONS

The Chavin, the earliest civilization of the Andes region in South America, declined sometime after about 100 B.C.E., but on its foundations a new group of people, the Moche, built a society that thrived from about 100 to 700 C.E. The Moche built an extensive irrigation system from rivers coming out of the mountains, and cultivated maize, beans, manioc, and sweet potatoes in the lower coastal areas, and coca in the higher elevations. Moche society was highly stratified, with wealth and power concentrated in the hands of priests and military leaders. The wealthy adorned themselves with rich clothing, jewelry, and tall headdresses. Because the Moche had no written records, all that we know about them comes from archaeological evidence, especially from a recently



excavated tomb that revealed masterfully crafted ceramics, gold ornaments, jewels, and textiles. Like so many other ancient people of the Americas, the Moche's decline is not well understood, although it appears to have coincided with a succession of natural disasters, including an earthquake and flood followed by thirty years of drought.



### COMPARISONS: THE UNIQUENESS OF ANDEAN CIVILIZATIONS

The Andean civilizations shared many characteristics with other civilizations of the 600 to 1450 era, but in some ways they were unique, partly because they developed in relative isolation from others. Another factor was their special natural environment that combined dry sea coast, high mountain valleys, and dense jungle. Their only beasts of burdens were llamas and alpacas, animals not found in other areas of the world until they were later exported from the Andes area. Two ways that the Andean civilizations were unique are as follows:

- 1) No written language – None of the Andean civilizations had written languages, a fact that has led some observers to the conclusion that these civilizations were not very advanced. However, in most other areas, they were highly skilled and organized. They kept records with a system of knotted colored cords, *quipus*, that helped government administrators to count population and determine tribute obligations.
- 2) The *mit'a* labor system – Communities were organized into *ayllus*, who were obligated to aid each other in tasks that required more labor than one household could provide. Once kingdoms organized, this mutual obligation system extended to responsibilities to the kings, and a *mit'a* labor system developed for public works. Each *ayllu* contributed a set number of workers for specific tasks each year, including road building and maintenance, and irrigation and drainage projects. Members of *ayllus* also worked the fields and cared for the animals that belonged to the aristocracy.

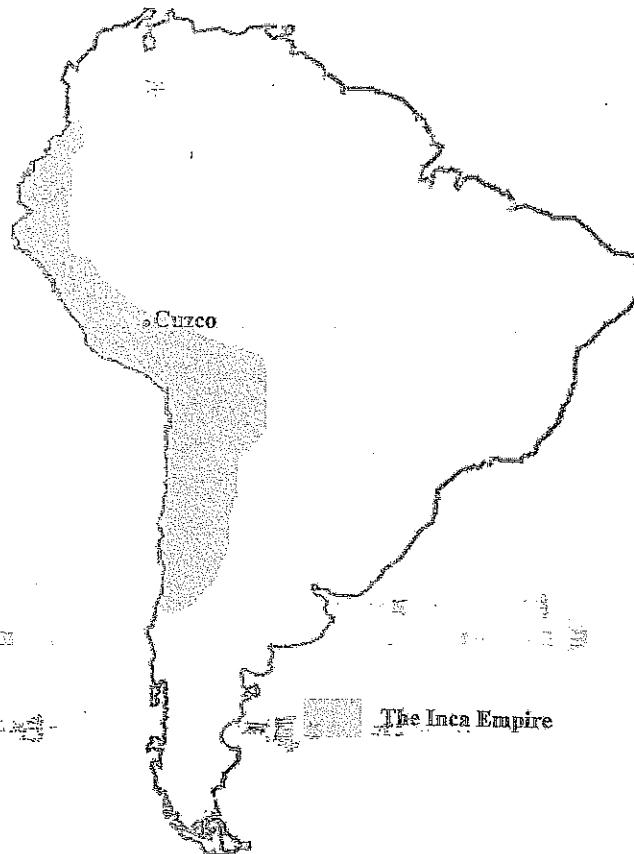
Other people, including the Tiwanaku and Wari, occupied the Andes region after the Moche, but the most powerful and well-organized civilization was the Inca, who formed a vast imperial state during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The Inca began in about 1100 in Cuzco, a town set on a plateau 11,000 feet above sea level. Strong and ambitious leaders consolidated political power during the 1430s and began an aggressive expansion that eventually led them to control a long stretch of land that extended about 2500 miles north to south along the Andes range.

The expansion of the Inca Empire was made possible by agricultural advances that led to an increased food supply. Andean Indians had long understood that different crops grew at different altitudes, and with the help of metal tools, fertilizer, irrigation systems, dams, and canals, they began to store large surpluses to support both a large army and a leisure class. The Inca also built terraces on the steep hillsides so crops could be planted, and the use of llamas and alpacas as beasts of burden gave them an advantage over their contemporaries in Mesoamerica. The cultivators were mostly peasants who worked the lands and gave portions of the products to the aristocrats. Surpluses went into state storehouses to save for times of famine and for those unable to cultivate land for themselves. Under the *mit'a* system, each person owed compulsory labor services to the Inca state, with men doing heavy labor and women making textiles, pottery, and jewelry. With the aid of the *quipu*, a system of cords and beads for counting, Inca bureaucrats kept track of the labor service and tribute owed by local communities, called *ayllus*.

The chief ruler, called the Inca, was considered to be a deity descended from the sun, and his senior wife was seen as a link to the moon. In theory, the Inca owned everything, and he governed as an absolute, all-knowing ruler. Through the bureaucracy, which consisted mainly of aristocrats, the Inca allocated land to his subjects, who farmed it on his behalf. The Inca's status as a god-king was reflected in his elaborate dress, with fine textiles woven just for him. A special group of women made clothing and jewelry for the Inca and his family in ceaseless industry, since each day required new outfits, with those from the previous day discarded, never to be worn again. Inca aristocrats and priests led privileged lives consuming fine foods and dressing in embroidered clothes made by peasant women. The aristocrats wore large ear spools that enlarged the ears so much that the Spaniards later called them *orejones*, or "big ears." Priests were highly educated, and major temples supported hundreds of priests who conducted the many religious rituals. Noticeably absent was a distinct merchant class, since long-distance trade was less important than it was in Mesoamerica, with the Inca emphasizing self-sufficiency and state regulation of production and surplus.

Inca religion was polytheistic, and the most important deity was the god of the sun, with the Inca (the leader) as the sun's representative on earth. Deceased rulers were mummified and then treated as intermediaries with the gods, given food and gifts, and displayed during public festivals. Part of the expansion of the Inca state was encouraged by the belief that each new Inca needed to secure his own land and wealth, so that the dead Inca's mummy could be supported by his cult for eternity. The magnificent Temple of the Sun in Cuzco was the center of the state religion, and the mummies of the past Incas were kept within its walls. The temple is an example of the fine stone buildings of royal Cuzco that

were constructed without mortar, held together by perfectly constructed stones and still standing today. The cult of the sun spread throughout the empire, but local gods were often worshipped as well.

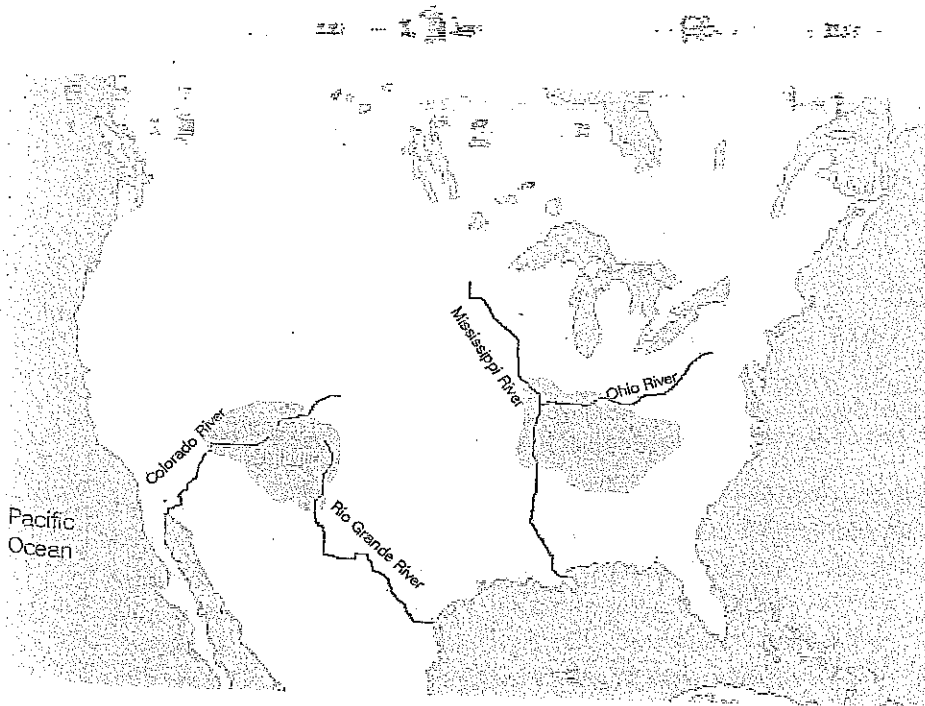


The Inca Empire extended some 2500 miles from north to south and was connected by an estimated 10,000 miles of roads, paved with stone and connected by suspension bridges over mountain gorges and rivers.

The expansion of the Inca state was accomplished by a large and well-organized military, and the empire was held together by a remarkable system of roads running north and south both along the coast and in the mountains. A corps of official runners carried messages along the roads so that the ruler and his bureaucracy could keep in touch with their subjects. The roads also facilitated the spread of the Quechua language and the religious cult of Cuzco. Generally local administrators were left in place when a group was conquered, and they were overseen by Inca administrators drawn from the Inca nobility in Cuzco. Reciprocity based on the mit'a system extended to new subjects, who often benefited from incorporation into the Inca Empire with its roads and sophisticated irrigation and drainage systems.

## THE PEOPLE OF NORTH AMERICA

In contrast to Mesoamerica and the Andes region in South America, no major civilization controlled large amounts of land in North America. Instead a variety of people lived there with many different languages and lifestyles. Many were nomadic, hunting bison or deer, or in the arctic area whale, seals, and walrus. Others gathered nuts, berries, roots, and grasses to supplement fish or meat. In several regions of North America, agriculture allowed settlements in growth. For example, in what is now the southwestern United States, the Anasazi people used river water to irrigate crops of maize, beans, squash, and sunflowers. The hot, dry climate brought periodic drought and famine, but by 700 C.E., they were constructing permanent stone and adobe buildings called pueblos. These multistory stone-and-timber villages were connected by roads to one another, with most pueblos containing ritual enclosures called kivas. The nature of the ceremonies is still not known, but ritual items, including feathers and skeletal remains of macaws from Mexico have been found in the kivas. The Anasazi deserted their dwellings during long droughts and moved to greener pastures, but eventually abandoned the area by about 1300.



**Agricultural People of North America.** Most people of North America during the period from 600 to 1450 C.E. were nomadic, but in two areas, agricultural people built permanent settlements. The Anasazi Culture developed in the southwest in the areas around the Colorado River and the Rio Grande River. The Cahokia Culture used the waters of the Mississippi River and Ohio River to grow their crops.



### COMPARISONS: AZTECS AND INCA

The two great North American empires that were in place at the end of the era from 600 to 1450 C.E. were the Aztecs in Mesoamerica and the Inca in the Andes region of South America. The chart below summarizes some similarities and differences between these two groups.

	Aztecs	Inca
<b>Social</b>	Distinctive social classes with priests important elites; Large middle class of merchants and traders	Distinctive social classes with priests important elites; No real merchant middle class; trade controlled by government
<b>Cultural</b>	Religion central to society; Practiced much human sacrifice; Elaborate calendar, writing system	Religion central to society; Human sacrifice practiced, but less central to rituals; Quechua native language; no written language
<b>Economic</b>	Tenochtitlan - large city and suburbs; Economy based on agriculture; Trade important to economy; Built chinampas ("floating gardens")	Cuzco - small city and suburbs; Economy based on agriculture; Trade not as important to economy; Built elaborate terraces for crops; extensive road system
<b>Political</b>	Powerful elite families who chose the ruler; bureaucracy less elaborate; powerful military	The "Inca" god-king ruled with absolute power and help of large bureaucracy; powerful military

Large-scale agricultural societies also emerged in the woodlands east of the Mississippi River. Like the Anasazi, they cultivated maize and beans, but their natural environment was quite different, with abundant trees and rain. A num-

ber of different groups lived in this area, and the most distinctive feature of their culture was the construction of enormous earthen mounds built as stages for ceremonies, platforms for dwellings, and burial sites. The largest and most important mound-builder settlement of this period was at Cahokia, located near modern-day East St. Louis, Illinois. It appears as if the people who built Cahokia built other settlements around the Mississippi River valley, but Cahokia is the most impressive, with about eighty mounds of different sizes there. The site was abandoned about 1300 for reasons still not understood. Since peoples north of Mexico had no writing, information about their societies comes almost exclusively from archaeological discoveries, and we know little about their political and social organization and religious beliefs. By 1450, most people in the Western Hemisphere lived in small kinship-based groups that spoke a variety of languages and practiced different customs. From Alaska to South America, nomadism was common, as was subsistence agriculture. Two large empires controlled areas that were a considerable distance apart: the Aztecs in Mesoamerica, and the Inca in the Andes region of South America. These two empires were all that stood in the way of Spanish conquerors when they arrived in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

#### IDENTIFICATIONS AND CONCEPTS

ayllus  
 Aztecs  
 Cahokia  
 chinampas  
 classical, post-classical Mesoamerica  
 Inca  
 khipus  
 Maya  
 mit'a  
 Moche  
 Quechua  
 Quetzlcoatl  
 slash and burn (shifting) agriculture  
 stelae  
 Tenochtitlan  
 Teotihuacan  
 Toltecs  
 Topiltzin  
 tribute system