

The Americas Before 1492

A. Paleo Indians

- a. Beringia
 - i. Ice bridge during the last major glacial period covering the Bering Strait.
 - ii. The “first” Americans arrived as far back as 40,000 years ago.
 - iii. The last wave was the Inuit population around 4,000 years ago.
- b. Hunter Gatherers
 - i. Mammoth, Bison and other large game.
 - ii. Animals had never encountered humans.
 - iii. 11000 BCE
- c. Mass Extinction
 - i. Humans were skillful hunters most of the large game had become extinct by 9000 BCE.
- d. Migration and Regional Development
 - i. From 8000-1500 BCE Native Americans were spreading out among the two continents
 - ii. Although genetically homogenous, they had very diverse languages and cultures.
 - iii. They learned to use the local resources effectively
 - iv. As population increased larger and more complex communities developed
- e. Early Trade in the Americas
 - i. Trade networks were extensive
 - ii. Generally nonperishable materials were traded
 - iii. Many items carried religious significance
 - iv. The continental trade networks would slowly carry the new diseases across the continent

B. The Development of Agriculture

- a. East vs West
 - i. Agriculture began in Modern Iraq around 9000 BCE
 - ii. In the Americas, Agriculture began in modern day Mexico in 3000 BCE
- b. Crops
 - i. Maize, potatoes, legumes,
 - ii. Very few domestic animals or beast of burden
- c. Cities
 - i. Agriculture allowed for the development of cities
 - ii. It also led to the creation of advanced crafting and astronomy

C. Typologies

- a. You could divide them by language groups, level of political organization, or as their relationship to the ecological systems, we will use ecological categories.
- b. Non-sedentary or nomadic peoples
- c. Semi-sedentary people
- d. Sedentary people –
 - i. Mastery of domesticated animals and plants
 - ii. These settlements had sizeable populations and diverse social structures.

D. Mesoamerican Civilizations

- a. These cultures were the largest and most complex in North America
- b. Periods
 - i. Paleoindian – where peoples settled and began making tools
 - ii. The Archaic Period – (8000 to 2500 BCE) which are denoted by the first signs of agriculture, and the domestication of maize and potatoes
 - iii. The Classical Period - From 2500 BCE onward, saw sophisticated irrigation and agriculture

E. The Mayans

- a. Among the many cultures that developed in Central Mexico the Maya were the first
- b. The Maya settled the Yucatan Peninsula beginning around 1800 BCE
- c. The Mayan Classical Period
 - i. From 250 CE to 900 CE
 - ii. Large scale construction of stone works, developed art and calendars as well as an advanced writing system
- d. The Mayan Empire
 - i. Mayan power was held through numerous city-states, which expanded through conquest.
 - ii. In the classical period, Mayan conquest began in Guatemala
- e. The decline of the Maya
 - i. Many cities in the southern lowlands were abandoned around 900 but there are many theories on what caused it.
 - ii. Overpopulation, collapse of trade routes and climate change are all proposed theories.
- f. Post-Classical and Colonial Periods
 1. Many parts of Maya civilization survived the collapse, located in the Northern Lowlands
 2. The Spanish first came in contact with the Maya in 1502

F. Aztecs

- a. Origins
 - i. The Aztecs, early on, were a nomadic tribe from Northern Mexico
 - ii. In the 6th century they began migrating southward mixing with other peoples
 - iii. More than likely they formed alliances with local tribes as mercenaries
 - iv. After further migration they settled near modern Mexico City.
- b. Aztec Culture
 - i. Language Nahuatl, these people are better known as Mexica or Nahuas
 - ii. They had a complex religion which required the human sacrifice to the god Huitzilopochtli.
 - iii. Pursuit of sacrificial victims accompanied the process of empire building.
 - iv. Human Sacrifice
 1. Human sacrifice was a key ritual in MesoAmerican religion.
 2. In Aztec legends, the gods sacrificed themselves so that mankind could live.
 - a. Tonacayotl – “spiritual fleshhood of earth”

- b. Everything that exist because of the sacrificed gods
 - 3. Mayan Creation Myth – Quetzalcoatl – offered blood from his own genitals to give life to humanity.
 - 4. Festivals – Aztecs had 18 yearly festivals, one for each 20 day month
 - a. During which thousands of people and animals could be sacrificed.
 - c. Tenochtitlan and the Triple Alliance
 - i. The Aztec capital Tenochtitlan founded in 1325.
 - ii. Triple Alliance – Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan
 - 1. Three Mexica cities united and became the most dominate power on the Peninsula
 - 2. Eventually Tenochtitlan dominated the other cities.
- G. North American Cultures
 - a. Early Inhabitants of North America
 - i. Farming and Fishing by 1500 BC
 - ii. Very diverse cultures and multitudes of languages.
 - b. Anasazis
 - i. Origins
 - 1. Settled in the four corners region of the US from 700 – 1130 CE.
 - 2. They grew very rapidly, due to increased birthrates and migration of other peoples into the region.
 - ii. Migrations
 - 1. 12th and 13th centuries they left the region.
 - a. No one knows for sure why they left, there are possible theories
 - i. Climate change
 - ii. Deforestation
 - iii. Invasion
 - b. It was not unusual for their villages to be abandoned and moved due to changing climate patterns.
 - iii. The Great Drought
 - 1. Approximately 1150 – began a three hundred year drought
 - a. Caused the collapse of Ancient Pueblo civilization.
 - b. They abandoned the sites and more than likely joined with surrounding communities.
 - c. Mississippian Cultures
 - i. There were different Mississippian cultures who lived in different regions on the Mississippi river and its tributaries
 - 1. They were all known for building large earthen work mounds
 - 2. Maize- Based agriculture which supported large communities.
 - 3. They had no writing or stone architecture
 - ii. Periods of Mississippian Culture
 - 1. The early period - 1000-1200 CE
 - a. Abandoned tribal life and settled permanently
 - 2. Middle Mississippi Period – 1200-1400 CE

- a. Expansion of cities and building of larger mounds like Cahokia
- 3. Late Mississippi Period – 1400-1540 CE
 - a. Increased warfare , turmoil and migrations
 - b. Cahokia population dispersed
 - c. Decline in mound building