

# Pre-Columbian America (before 1492)

## The First Americans

It is believed that the first inhabitants of the Americas were people from [Asia](#), who crossed the Bering Strait (at that time spanned by a thin isthmus of land) into Alaska. The exact time of this migration is unknown, though one may speculate, based on scientific evidence, that it was later than fourteen thousand years ago. These migrants then traveled southward through America, either along the Pacific coast or along the Rocky Mountains.

Originally, theories suggested that the first Americans lived on the continent no earlier than 11,500 years ago. However, recent discoveries have revealed signs of settlement in the Americas at least 1000 years prior to that period. Archaeological finds near the present town of Clovis, New Mexico, reveal that 12,000 years ago a culture existed with the ability to shape flint into arrowheads and spear tips. Some evidence points to the theory that people inhabited the continent even earlier than 13,000 years ago, but this evidence is ambiguous at best.

Such evidence is made even more ambiguous by the traces of DNA that span the Pacific Ocean from Australia to Papua New Guinea, across Micronesia to east Asia. This opens the possibility of sea travel hugging the coast; unfortunately evidence of such a theory that would be left on the shores would be eliminated over time due to sustained coastal erosions and sea level changes. The DNA facts significantly negate, and arguably eliminate, the Bering Strait theory, which is not supported by any conflicting physical evidence. The flint points are used on a flatboard (like bristles on a toothbrush) on the Asian mainland, rather than mounted on spears like the Clovis points, thereby calling into question the idea of tool migration, a major source of this post-Ice-Age migration theory.

Regardless of how they arrived on the continent, or what route they took as they traveled towards Mexico and South America, it is clear that by the time Christopher Columbus "discovered" the *New World* in the fifteenth century, several civilizations existed across the Americas.

## The Mayans

In about [2000 BCE](#), Native Americans were settled in the Yucatán Peninsula of present-day Mexico. The agricultural *Maya* society began to develop a complex culture. Tribal chiefs and elders instituted a system of government. Several other political and religious institutions also developed.

[300 CE](#), the date of the so-called *Classic Period*, is often considered a turning point in the Mayan civilization. Government and society became more complex, with each city having its own king and nobility. A polytheistic (*many-god*) religion also developed, as did the custom of human sacrifices. These sacrifices were conducted by decapitation, by shooting with arrows, or by the cutting open of the body and the removal of the heart.

In addition to politics and religion, science also developed. For example, a 365-day calendar was created. Furthermore, Mayans developed a system of writing known as *hieroglyphics* (distinct from Egyptian writing of the same name).

The Maya civilization remained prosperous until the ninth century CE. The civilization slowly began to disintegrate and finally collapsed in about [900 CE](#). The exact cause is still unknown, but internal strife, rebellion, foreign warfare, and natural disasters could have all aided the downfall.

After the Classic Period, which is considered to have ended in 900 CE, Mayans continued to live in some parts of the Yucatán Peninsula. However, the civilization was never again to be as dominant in Mexico as it once was.

## The Aztecs



☞The Aztecs had a highly developed calendar system based on the sun and represented in these circular tablets

The Mexica, the citizens of the Aztec Empire, are the people after whom *Mexico* is named. In [1325](#), the Mexica created a city called Tenochtitlán near Lake Texcoco, in the Valley of Mexico (the site of present-day Mexico City). Tenochtitlán grew in influence over the next century; in [1428](#), Tenochtitlán led an alliance that conquered much of Mexico.

Just as with the Maya, religion was extremely important in the Aztec Empire. A polytheistic religion was important in several aspects of life, and human sacrifices were very common. It is reputed that in [1487](#), over 80,000 imprisoned enemy warriors were sacrificed. To express their religion, Aztec artists created idols and temples, which often included large amounts of gold and silver.

The Aztec Empire was destroyed by the Spanish invaders. However, thousands of descendants of the Mexica live in present-day Mexico, carrying on some of the traditions of the Aztec culture.

## The Incas

While the Aztec Empire dominated Central America, the Inca Empire dominated South America. Originally, during the thirteenth century CE, the Inca inhabited land near Lake Titicaca in present-day Peru. At its peak, situated along the Andes Mountains and the Pacific

Coast of South America, it included parts of Peru, Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, with the capital at Cuzco, in Peru. It is important that one understand the difference between the Inca and the Aztec. The Aztec Empire was a collection of different cities under the control of one powerful city. The Inca Empire, however, was actually one whole nation.

Religion was significant in Inca life. The royal family were believed to be descendants of the Inca Sun God. Thus, the emperor had absolute authority, checked only by tradition. Under the emperors, a complex political structure was apparent. The Inca Emperor, regional and village leaders, and others were part of an enormous bureaucracy. For every ten people, there was on average one official. The organization of the Empire also included a complex transportation infrastructure. To communicate across the entire empire, runners ran from village to village, relaying royal messages.

The Spanish conquered the Inca just as they had conquered the Aztec. However, millions of descendants of the Inca live in Peru and other parts of the former Inca Empire.

## **North American Cultures**

While the Mayan, Aztec, and Inca cultures can be classified as civilizations, the cultures that lived in the present day United States and Canada cannot, as they lacked written communication, domestication of animals, and government, among other things.

### **Early Natives**

The earliest Native Americans that developed cultures in North America were the Mound Builders of the east. Evidence of their existence has been found as far north as the Great Lakes and as far south as Florida. The mound building first began around 1000 BCE. These people were not one tribe, but they were many different cultures that all had the custom of building pyramid shaped, grass covered hills. The Adena are among the earliest Mound Builders, being hunters and gatherers that prospered in the Ohio River Valley at around 800 BCE. They were followed by the Hopewell, who thrived from 200 BCE. to 500 CE. The Hopewell were traders and farmers, and they also built the famed Great Serpent Mound, which resembles a giant snake. The Mississippians built the largest Mound Builder settlement, Cahokia. Cahokia was home to around 30,000 residents and had many dwellings and pyramids, so it strongly resembled many Mayan cities. The actual origin of the Mound Builders is unknown, but according to Natchez (descendants of the Mound Builders) legend, their people once lived from the mouth of the Mississippi and west, along the shore of what is thought to be the Gulf of Mexico.

Other early Native Americans settled in the desert southwest. The Hohokam came from Mexico at around 300 BCE. and prospered from about 300 CE. to about 1200 CE. in present-day Arizona. The Hohokam were excellent water regulators, and built hundred of miles of irrigation channels. They also left behind carved stone, pottery, and shells. Not much else is known about the Hohokam. The Anasazi also settled the Southwest at about the same time as the Hohokam. These people built pueblos, villages made out of baked earth and clay. In addition, they built cliff dwellings and complex road systems.

## Later Native American Cultures

The [Mound Builders](#), [Hohokam](#), and [Anasazi](#) eventually fell and gave way to new cultures. These cultures still lived in North America at the time that European explorers were first beginning to arrive on the continent.

The cultures of North America can be placed into six distinct cultural regions: the Southeast, the Northeast Woodlands, the Plains, the Northwest Coast, the Southwest, and the Arctic North.

In the Southeast, the [Creek](#), [Chickasaw](#), [Cherokee](#), (and later) the [Miccosukee](#), and the [Seminoles](#) were the major cultures. These Native Americans were primarily farmers, harvesting corn, and tobacco, among other things. They lived in loose communities.

In the Northeast, there were the [Iroquois](#), [Algonquians](#), and others. Interestingly, the Iroquois were five Indian nations that joined together in a loose confederation with leaders elected by the women. The peoples of the Northeast live in long, wooden houses, simply called longhouses, and were mostly hunters and gatherers. They did, however, raise corn (maize), squash and beans (the three sisters) which were a very important part of their diet.

The Plains were home to many tribes, including the [Sioux](#), [Cheyenne](#), [Blackfoot](#), and [Crow](#) tribes. The Plains tribes had a very different way of life than those in the east, due to the abundance of buffalo and deer. The tribes lived in collapsible tipis, which they slept in while following the herds of buffalo, which they hunted for food and clothing.

The Northwest Coastal Indians were fishers. They hunted whale for food and blubber (which they used as oil), and fished in the rivers for the abundant salmon. The [Tinglit](#), [Nootka](#), [Kwakiutl](#) and [Chinook](#) lived here. They were nomadic.

The desert Southwest was home to the [Pueblo](#), [Navajo](#) and [Apache](#) tribe. The Pueblo and Navajo tribes built apartment-type dwellings called pueblos. The pueblos were made out of sun dried earth called adobe. They farmed corn and other crops suitable to the area. The Apache were very different than the Pueblo or Navajo tribes; they never settled down and hunted and stole from neighboring tribes. For this reason, they became known as the "Apache Raiders."

In the northern Arctic, there were a handful of scattered nomadic tribes, including the [Inuit](#) (eskimo) and [Inupiat](#) tribes. These tribes followed many of the same customs as the tribes of the Northwest Coast, but they were better suited for the cold temperatures. For example, these tribes built igloos and followed wolves to find caribou to eat.

Most of these tribes would eventually fade away as Europeans quickly snapped up the area that they had discovered in the early 1500s. As tribes interacted with Europeans, customs and items were exchanged in what came to be known as the [Columbian Exchange](#). Seemingly inevitable were the clashes between European settlers and the various tribes of American Indians. Many of these clashes were in the form of uprisings or outright war.