

Amerindian Civilizations

Civilizations in America: Pre-Columbian Era

The term “Amerindian” is commonly used to refer to the indigenous civilizations of the Americas, generally in the Pre-Columbian era. The “Pre-Columbian era” is the period of time spanning from the settlement of the first humans in the American continent in the Upper Paleolithic (between 40,000 and 10,000 years ago) and the European conquest after Christopher Columbus’ discovery of America (1492). The Amerindian civilizations in the Pre-Columbian era include the Olmec, Toltec, Teotihuacano, Zapotec, Mixtec, Aztec, Maya, Inca, Moche, Chibcha, and Cañari peoples, among many others cultures.

Current research shows evidence that the earliest humans to have inhabited the American continent, the “Paleo-Indians” (meaning “ancient” Indians) were the descendants of Asian hordes which settled initially in North America and then gradually migrated towards the south. In fact, scientific investigation links indigenous Americans to North Asian populations, specifically eastern Siberian populations, by both linguistic characteristics and DNA; however, dates and routes of this migration are still subject to continuous debate. According to traditional Western theory, the Paleo-Indian migration took place between 40,000 and 12,000 years ago, via the Beringia land bridge, a corridor of over 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) which joined Siberia and Alaska during this time. Another theory claims that using boats, humans migrated down the Pacific Northwest coast to South America.

These early migrants and their descendants moved as nomadic bands throughout the American continent, developing into distinct linguistic, cultural, and territorial groups. Some of them remained as hunter-gatherers, and others formed sedentary agricultural and farming societies, which developed into civilizations with permanent or urban settlements, and hierarchical societies, and in some cases, empires.

By the time Europeans arrived to the New World, Amerindian civilizations had been thriving for more than 15,000 years. Some of these cultures had long disappeared by the time of the European advent and are known only through oral history and archaeological investigations. Others, those contemporary with the European conquest, are also known by their own written records and colonial historical accounts of the time. Some groups, such as the Maya and the Olmec, had their own written texts; however, European colonists viewed them as heretical and destroyed them. In the 16th and 17th centuries Spanish chroniclers documented some of the Native American civilizations they encountered, but their accounts were based on non-scientific conjecture and Eurocentric colonial and religious views. Thus, with only a few hidden documents surviving the Christian pyres and biased colonial accounts, researchers are left with only with glimpses of their culture and knowledge.

Nevertheless, European conquest did not mean that these indigenous groups and their culture disappeared; Native American culture is still very much alive. With a population of over ten million, the Quechua Indians are the largest surviving indigenous group in



the World today. Settled in Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, and Argentina, Quechua language and cultural practices are spoken and followed by millions. In fact, now-a-days still over 1,500 different indigenous languages are spoken in the Americas by nearly a hundred million people.

The great Amerindian cultures furnished civilization with many impressive contributions, particularly in astronomy, mathematics, agriculture, art, and architecture. In the next few pages, we will briefly study some of these civilizations and their particular characteristics and accomplishments.

The Olmecs

The Olmecs, considered by some to be the mother culture of pre-Columbian Mexico, were the first significant civilization to develop in Mesoamerica, lasting from 1200 BC to 400 BC.

Geographical Extent

The Olmecs emerged in the Gulf Coast in the present-day states of Veracruz and Tabasco. The three major locations with remains of their civilization are La Venta, San Lorenzo, and Tres Zapotes.

Culture

The term "Olmec" means "rubber people" in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztec, and was the Aztec name for the people who lived in the Gulf Coast in the 15th and 16th centuries (over 2000 years after the Olmec civilization disappeared). The term refers to the practice of extracting latex from the *Castilla elastica*, a rubber tree in the area, which the Aztecs believed had been discovered and practiced by the Olmecs.

Social Structure

Olmec civilization was a simple agrarian society with a class system of two divisions: the elite who lived in the small urban centers or towns and the common people who lived in the rural areas. Historians and archaeologists believe that there was harmony between both classes.

Religion

Olmec theology and mythology was based on polytheism. They venerated eight different supernatural figures: the Dragon (also known as the Earth Monster); the Maize deity; the Bird Monster; the Rain Spirit; the Were-Jaguar; the Banded-eye God; the



Feathered Serpent; and the Fish/Shark Monster. Religious practices were performed by the rulers and priests.

Art

Olmec art was mostly naturalistic and depicted human and animal like subjects. They used jade, clay, basalt, and greenstone. The most representative Olmec art form was their colossal basalt stone heads measuring eight to nine feet in height and weighing 20-40 tons. It is possible that these monoliths represent rulers, sportsmen, or warriors.

Contributions

The Olmecs developed a calendar system that later was adapted by the Mayans and the Aztecs. The Olmecs are credited for being the first Mesoamerican people to discover the concept of zero, the first conduit drainage system in the Americas, and for creating a hieroglyphic writing system using dots and lines, which was later adapted by the Mayans.

Even though the Olmec civilization did not last for a long period, their influence lasted throughout other civilizations, mainly the Mayans, Zapotecs, Mixtecs, and Aztecs.

The Toltecs

The Toltec civilization emerged in northern Mesoamerica, in the present-day state of Hidalgo, between 800 CE and 1100 CE. They were the forbearers of the Aztecs.

Geographical Extent

Geographically, the Toltec Empire was not very large; at its height it encompassed an area of 386 square miles (around 1000 square kilometers). The center of the Toltec Empire was their capital, Tollan, now-a-days Tula, in the state of Hidalgo.

Culture

The term "Toltec" has several meanings. Originating in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, it derived from the name "Tollan," meaning "place of reeds" or "metropolis," but it was also used to refer to "skilled artists."



The Toltec economy depended upon agriculture and trade. Their main crops were maize (corn), beans, and chili peppers. Toltec artisans used obsidian – volcanic glass similar to granite – to create weapons, which they exported to nearby civilizations. Other exports included textiles and ceramics. Their main imports were beans, cacao, and mushrooms.

Social Structure

All information about the Toltec Empire is shrouded with mystery. Little is known about their social structure, apart from the fact that the Toltec society was militaristic, with a warrior aristocracy. In fact, Aztec kings and aristocracy were “proud” of their Toltec blood, and they used their Toltec descent for their claim to power.

Religion

Toltec theology and mythology were based on polytheism, centered on the deity Quetzalcoatl, “the feathered-serpent,” which later became the central figure of the Aztec pantheon. Their religious ceremonies included human sacrifices.

The Toltecs interacted with most of the societies of Mesoamerica, and it is probable that their religious beliefs were influenced by, and in turn influenced, many other cultures.

Art

As expected of a militaristic society, the most representative art of the Toltecs were the murals that adorned the cities, which depicted gruesome battle scenes and “bird warriors.”

Contributions

The Toltecs used several agricultural techniques including irrigation and hill terracing to grow their crops, which were adapted by the Aztecs. They are said to have discovered *pulque* or *octli*, a traditional Mexican drink made from the fermented sap of the maguey plant.

The collapse of the Toltec Empire is enigmatic. According to legends, the city of Tollan was abandoned because of a civil war; however, other possibilities include agricultural and commercial problems, and overcrowding due to continued immigration. In any case, by 1100 CE the Toltec Empire disintegrated.



Mexica/Aztecs

The Aztecs, a nomadic tribe from northern Mexico, arrived to the Valley of Mexico in the 14th century. The Aztec civilization thrived for centuries, until Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés overthrew the Aztecs by force and captured their capital, Tenochtitlán, in 1521. The Aztecs are considered to have been Mesoamerica's last great native civilization.

Geographical Extent

The Aztecs inhabited the Valley of Mexico in Mesoamerica, present-day Distrito Federal. The Valley of Mexico is a highlands plateau, surrounded by mountains and volcanoes.

At the center of the Aztec Empire was its capital city, Tenochtitlán, which they founded in 1325 CE. Located on an island in Lake Texcoco, within the Valley of Mexico, it was connected to the mainland by causeways and bridges. The city had several markets, numerous public buildings and temples, and it was the site of the royal palace. By the mid-1400s, Tenochtitlán had a population of over 200,000 people.

Culture

The term “Aztec” means “people from Aztlán” in Nahuatl language. “Aztlán” was the mythological homeland of the Nahua or Aztecan people. For centuries, many archaeologists have tried to identify the exact geographical location of Aztlán to no avail.

The Aztecs spoke the Nahuatl language, and they used pictographs to communicate through writing. Some of these pictographs symbolized ideas, but others represented sounds. Some Aztec literature in Nahuatl has survived thanks to being recorded by Spanish priests in the 16th century.

Social Structure

The Aztecs were a complex hierarchical society divided into three classes: the nobility (Pipiltin); the commoners or peasants (Macehualtin); and the slaves (Tlacotin). Aztecs were ruled by a king, who was initially chosen from the sons of the nobility, but later became a hereditary position. The common class was composed of warriors, farmers, and artisans. The third class, the slaves, included prisoners of war and convicted criminals. Some historians include a fourth class, the travelling merchants (Pochteach), who facilitated trade, and on many occasions acted as spies.



Religion

Religion was the center and the cohesive element of Aztec society. Aztecs were deeply respectful of their gods. Even though there were a large number of deities in the Aztec pantheon—nearly a thousand—the most important were: Tlaloc, the god of rain; Quetzalcoatl, the god of civilization and order; and Tezcatlipoca, the god of destiny. These deities were generally represented in human forms; even when the face happens to be of an animal, the body tends to keep the structure of a human body.

All religious practices were conducted by priests. Their religious rites and ceremonies included human sacrifices, mostly slaves, as offerings to the sun god.

Art

Aztec art was mostly an expression of their religion and their daily activities. The most representative Aztec art forms were their limestone sculptures of deities and pictographs. Pictographs were drawings that represented objects and/or sounds. Because their language, Nahuatl, was written in pictographs, this art was also used to conduct business, track their daily activities, and record their history.

Metalworking was another area in which the Aztecs excelled. Gold and other precious metals were abundant in the Aztec empire, but Aztecs did not value gold as money, rather valued gold as a symbol of power, and subsequently they used it for jewelry and decoration for the aristocracy and royalty.

Contributions

The Aztecs are renowned for their contributions and accomplishments in astronomy, in particular for the creation of the “Sun Calendar” (also known as the “Aztec Stone Calendar”). The Sun Calendar was remarkably accurate and rather complex. It is divided in two systems: one calendar called Xihpohualli, which has 365 days and describes the days and rituals related to their agricultural practices; and another called Tonalpohualli, which has 260 days and is the sacred calendar, related to their religious rituals.

Other important contributions include their knowledge of herbal medicine. Aztec cures and remedies are still used to this day.

Mayas

The Mayan civilization emerged in Mesoamerica around 250 BC and thrived until the Spanish conquest (1697 CE). The Mayas are credited with being the longest lasting civilization of the New World.



Geographical Extent

At its height, the Maya civilization encompassed the south of Mexico (including the present-day states of Chiapas and Tabasco, and the Yucatan Peninsula), as well as parts of Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras.

Culture

The term "Maya" was probably derived from the place name "Mayapan," a Mayan city in the Yucatan Peninsula, which comprised a significant proportion of the Maya territory.

The Mayas had a highly sophisticated culture, which included a written hieroglyphic language. Mayan scribes and artisans wrote and carved these hieroglyphs in paper, stone, bone, and pottery. These texts contained religious and astrological information, records of their history, and descriptions of their daily-life. Many of them were destroyed by the European conquerors because of their pagan nature, but three main texts have survived: the Dresden, Madrid, and Paris codices.

Social Structure

The Mayans were a complex hierarchical society divided into four classes: the nobility, the priests, the commoners, and the slaves. Mayans were ruled by a king, which was a hereditary position; however, if there was not an heir, a successor was elected from the sons of the nobility. Priests not only had religious duties, but they also acted as administrators, teachers, and astronomers. The common class was composed of farmers and artisans, and the slave class consisted of prisoners of war, orphans, and convicted criminals.

Religion

Mayan religion was polytheistic. At the top of the Mayan pantheon was Itzamna, the creator deity; followed in importance by Kukulcan, the Feathered Serpent; and Huracan, the god of wind and fire.

All religious ceremonies and practices, which included human sacrifices, were conducted by priests. Mayan rulers played an important role in the religious life of their culture, because they were considered semi-divine, and they acted as intermediaries between the gods and their people.



Art

Mayan art was a reflection of their cultural and religious life. Mayan art has been described as the richest and most complex of the New World because of the variety of patterns and media. Mayan artisans used paper, plaster, wood, obsidian, bone, shells, jade, stone, clay, and semi-precious and precious metals.

Probably the most recognizable form of Mayan art is their architecture. Mayans built impressive limestone temples with stepped pyramids, which were profusely decorated with paintings and stucco sculpture.

Contributions

The Maya civilization excelled particularly in the areas of mathematics and astronomy. Of special importance is the Mayan calendar. In fact, there were many calendars: the Tzol'kin, a sacred 260-day calendar; the Haab, a 365-day calendar; and the "Calendar Round," a 52-Haab cycle calendar, which synchronized both, the Tzol'kin and the Haab cycles. There was also a "Long Count" calendar which commenced in August 13, 3114 BC and terminates in December 23, 2012 CE. This is not a prediction of the end of the world, but the end of a cycle.

Incas

The Inca civilization emerged in the Peruvian highlands in the 13th century and thrived until the Spanish conquest (1533 CE). The Inca Empire was the largest empire in pre-Columbian America.

Geographical Extent

The Inca civilization was centered in modern Peru; however, by peaceful assimilation and conquest, at its height, the Inca Empire also included large parts of Ecuador, Bolivia, Argentina, Chile, and Colombia. The capital of the empire was the great city of Cusco, in southeastern Peru.

Culture

The official language of the Incas was Quechua; however, it was not heterogeneous. Many dialects of Quechua were spoken in the different parts of the empire.

The term "Inca" derives from the title used to refer to the emperor "Inca" (ruler) in Quechua.



Social Structure

The Incas were a complex hierarchical society divided into several classes: the Emperor or “Inca,” who was believed to be a descendant of Viracocha, the creator god; the nobility who mostly worked as administrators for the government; and finally, artisans and farmers.

Religion

Inca religion was polytheistic. Religion and state seem to have been deeply connected. At the top of the Inca pantheon was Viracocha, the creator god, who was followed in importance by the sun god, Inti.

All religious Inca rituals were performed by priests and rulers, and rituals included human sacrificial ceremonies.

Art

The most representative art of the Incas was their metalwork. Inca artisans worked gold and silver, and they lived in special tax free districts. It is believed that for the Inca gold was the symbol of the sun, a gift from the gods. Very few pieces of Inca gold and silver have survived, since they became part of the Spanish conquistadors’ bounty and in many cases were melted.

Contributions

The Inca civilization excelled in the areas of engineering and architecture. A large number of Inca grandiose structures have survived, but of particular importance are Machu Picchu, (“Old Peak”) built in the 15th century, and Sacsahuaman, a fortress that guarded the city of Cusco, the former capital of the Inca Empire. The grandness and structural boldness of these rock buildings finds no rival in the New World.

