

Developments in the Americas

*I love the song of the mockingbird,
Bird of four hundred voices,
I love the color of jade
And the intoxicating scent of flowers,
But more than all I love my brother, man!*

—Nezahualcoyotl (1402–1472), Aztec poet

Essential Question: What states developed in the Americas, and how did they change over time?

Following the decline of the Olmecs in Mesoamerica and the Chavin in the Andes, new civilizations, such as the Mayans, the Aztecs, and the Incas rose in the same regions. In addition, the first large-scale civilization in North America developed. As in Afro-Eurasia, several of these civilizations developed strong states, large urban centers, and complex belief systems. Current knowledge about these civilizations combines archaeological evidence, oral traditions, and writings by Europeans who came to the Americas after 1492. One poem recorded by the Spanish was the one above from an Aztec writer.

The Mississippian Culture

The first large-scale civilization in North America emerged in the 700s or 800s in what is now the eastern United States. Since it started in the Mississippi River Valley, it is known as the **Mississippian** culture. While other cultures built monumental buildings, Mississippians built enormous earthen mounds, some of which were as tall as 100 feet and covered an area the size of 12 football fields. The largest of these mounds is **Cahokia**, located in southern Illinois.

Government and Society The Mississippian society had a rigid class structure. A chief called the Great Sun ruled each large town. Below the Great Sun was an upper class of priests and nobles and a lower class of farmers, hunters, merchants, and artisans. At the bottom were slaves, who usually were prisoners of war. In general, women farmed and men hunted. The Mississippians had a **matrilineal society**, which means that social standing was determined by the woman's side of the family. For example, when the Great Sun died, the title passed not to his own son, but to a sister's son.

The Decline of Mississippian Civilization People abandoned Cahokia around 1450, and other large Mississippian cities by 1600. Historians disagree on why the Mississippian people moved. One theory posits that flooding or other weather extremes caused crop failures and the collapse of the agricultural economy needed to sustain the populations of the large cities. Another theory suggests that diseases introduced by the Europeans decimated the population.

Chaco and Mesa Verde

Soon after the rise of the Mississippian Civilization, various cultures emerged in what is now the southwestern United States. Living in a dry region, people developed ways to collect, transport, and store water efficiently. In addition, because of the climate, trees were small and scarce, so people had little wood to use to build homes. Two cultures became well-known for their innovations:

- The Chaco built large housing structures using stones and clay, some of which included hundreds of rooms.
- The people of Mesa Verde built multi-story homes into the sides of cliffs using bricks made of sandstone.

Both groups declined in the late 13th century as the climate became drier.

The Maya City-States

Mayan civilization reached its height between 250 and 900 C.E. Mayans stretched over the southern part of Mexico and much of what is now Belize, Honduras, and Guatemala. Most lived in or near one of the approximately 40 cities that ranged in size from 5,000 to 50,000 people. At its peak, as many as 2 million Mayans populated the region.

Mayan Government The main form of Mayan government was the **city-state**, each ruled by a king and consisting of a city and its surrounding territory. Most rulers were men. However, when no male heir was available or old enough to govern, Mayan women ruled. Wars between city-states were common. At times, city-states were overthrown. However, Mayans rarely fought to control territory. More often they fought to gain tribute—payments from the conquered to the conqueror—and captives to be used as **human sacrifices** during religious ceremonies.

Each Mayan king claimed to be descended from a god. The Mayans believed that when the king died, he would become one with his ancestor-god. The king directed the activities of the elite scribes and priests who administered the affairs of the state. Royal rule usually passed from father to son, but kings who lost the support of the people were sometimes overthrown. The common people were required to pay taxes, usually in the form of crops, and to provide labor to the government. City-states had no standing armies, so when war erupted, governments required citizens to provide military service. No central government ruled all Mayan lands, although often one city-state was the strongest in a region and would dominate its neighbors.

Mayan Religion, Science, and Technology The Mayans were innovative thinkers and inventors. For example, they incorporated the concept of zero into their number system, developed a complex writing system, and learned to make rubber out of liquid collected from rubber plants.

Mayan science and religion were linked through astronomy. Based on the calendar, priests decided when to celebrate religious ceremonies and whether to go to war. As a result, keeping an accurate calendar was very important. Although the Mayans had no telescopes, they made very precise observatories atop pyramids such as the one at Chichen Itza. Their observations enabled priests to design a calendar more accurate than any used in Europe at the time.

One task of priests, who could be either male or female, was to conduct ceremonies honoring many deities. Among the most important deities were those of the sun, rain, and corn. Mayans made offerings to the gods so prayers might be answered. War captives were sometimes killed as offerings. (Connect: Compare the political structures of the Mayans with the political structures of South Asia. See Topic 1.3.)



Source: Thinkstock

Mayan pyramids, with steps going up the side, were similar to Mesopotamian ziggurats. Similarly shaped architecture can be found from Spain and Algeria to China and Indonesia.

The Aztecs

The Aztecs, also known as the **Mexicas**, were originally hunter-gatherers who migrated to central Mexico from the north in the 1200s. In 1325, they founded their capital Tenochtitlán on the site of what is now Mexico City. Over the next 100 years, they conquered the surrounding peoples and created an empire that stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean.

Capital City The Aztecs located Tenochtitlán on an island in the middle of a swampy lake in order to protect it from attacks. Tenochtitlán grew to almost 200,000 people, making it one of the largest cities in the world. To provide water for the city, they built a network of aqueducts. At the center of the city, the Aztecs built a pyramid that rose 150 feet into the air. This Great Pyramid and other pyramids, temples, and palaces were made of stone. On Lake Texcoco, the Aztecs built floating gardens called *chinampas* to increase the amount of space for food production. The Aztecs dug ditches to use lake water to irrigate their fields and to drain parts of the lake for more land.



Source: DEQ/G DAGLIORTI/ Granger, NYC

The construction of chinampas in Mesoamerica was one way people expanded the land on which to grow crops.

Government, Economy, and Society As the Aztecs conquered much of Mesoamerica, they developed a tribute system that insured their dominance. Conquered people were forced to pay tribute, surrender lands, and perform military service. Tribute included practical goods such as food, cloth, and firewood, as well as luxury items such as feathers, beads, and jewelry. The Aztecs allowed local rulers to stay in their positions to serve as tribute collectors. This allowed Aztec political dominance without direct administrative control. In exchange, the conquered people were extended Aztec protection.

To administer the empire, the Aztecs grouped city-states into provinces. They moved warriors and their families to each province's capital to make sure the province remained under Aztec control. In addition, an Aztec official was stationed in each capital to collect tribute from local officials.

Aztec government was a **theocracy**, which is rule by religious leaders. At the top was the emperor, known as the Great Speaker, who was the political ruler as well as a divine representative of the gods. Next in the social hierarchy were land-owning nobles, who also formed the majority of Aztec military leadership. Next in rank were scribes and healers, followed by craftspeople and traders. A special merchant class called *pochteca* traded in luxury goods. Below the traders were the peasants and soldiers. Aztec people could be enslaved as well, usually because they did not pay their debts or were being punished for crimes. Besides being used for labor, enslaved people were also offered up as sacrifices in religious ceremonies.

Religion The intricate and complex religion of the Aztecs was central to their society. They worshipped an ever-evolving pantheon of hundreds of deities, many of whom were considered to have both male and female aspects.

Worship among the Aztecs involved a great many rituals and feast days as well as human sacrifices. The Aztecs believed that the gods had sacrificed themselves in order to create the world—thus human sacrifice and blood-letting was a sort of repayment and atonement for human sin. Human sacrifice probably had a political component, in the sense that it demonstrated the great might of the Aztec Empire in dramatic fashion. The number of human sacrifices may never be known. Much of the information about Aztec society comes from Spanish invaders, who may have exaggerated the extent of human sacrifice in order to make the Aztecs seem more deserving of conquest.

Role of Women Women played an important role in the Aztec tribute system since they wove the valuable cloth that local rulers demanded as part of the regular tribute. As the demand for cloth tribute increased, an Aztec husband might obtain more than one wife in order to be able to pay the tribute. While most Aztec women worked in their homes, some became priestesses, midwives, healers, or merchants. A few noblewomen worked as scribes to female members of royal families. Therefore, at least these few women knew how to read and write.

The Decline of the Aztecs By the late 15th century, the Aztec Empire was in decline. The Aztecs' comparatively low level of technology—such as the lack of wheeled vehicles and pack animals—meant that agriculture was arduous and inefficient. The Aztecs' commitment to military victory and the constant desire for more human sacrifices induced the leadership to expand the empire beyond what it could reasonably govern. Finally, the extraction from conquered people of tribute and sacrifice victims inspired more resentment than loyalty. Because of this resentment, many tribes ruled by the Aztecs were ready to rebel if they thought they had an opportunity to succeed. This opportunity would come later, when Spaniards arrived in 1519.

The Inca

In 1438, a tribal leader who called himself **Pachacuti**, which means “transformer” or “shaker” of the earth, began conquering the tribes living near what is now Cuzco, Peru. His military victories, followed by those of his son, combined the small tribes into a full-fledged state, the **Incan Empire**. It extended from present-day Ecuador in the north to Chile in the south. By 1493, Pachacuti's grandson, Huayna Capac, ruled the empire. He focused on consolidating and managing the many lands conquered by his predecessors.

Government, Economy, and Society In order to rule the extensive territory efficiently, the Incan Empire was split into four provinces, each with its own governor and bureaucracy. Conquered leaders who demonstrated loyalty to the empire were rewarded. In contrast to the people living under the Aztecs, conquered people under the Inca did not have to pay tribute. Rather, they were subject to the **mit'a system**, mandatory public service. Men between the ages of 15 and 50 provided agricultural and other forms of labor, including the construction of roads.

Religion The name Inca means “people of the sun,” and Inti, the sun god, was the most important of the Incan gods. Inca rulers were considered to be Inti's representative on the earth. As the center of two critical elements in Incan religion—honoring of the sun and royal ancestor veneration—the **Temple of the Sun** in Cuzco formed the core of Incan religion.

Royal ancestor veneration was a practice intended to extend the rule of a leader. Dead rulers were mummified and continued to “rule” as they had in life and were thought to retain ownership of their servants, possessions, and property. Thus, Incan rulers could not expect to inherit land or property upon assuming power. This practice was a partial motivator for the constant expansion of the empire.

Priests were consulted before important actions. To the Inca, the gods controlled all things, and priests could determine the gods' will by studying the arrangement of coca leaves in a dish or by watching the movement of a spider. Priests diagnosed illnesses, predicted the outcome of battles, solved crimes, and determined what sacrifices should be made to which god. Serious events such as famines, plagues, and defeat in war called for human sacrifices—although scholars do not believe that human sacrifice was practiced with the same frequency as it probably was with the Aztecs.

Inca religion included some **animism**—the belief that elements of the physical world could have supernatural powers. Called *huaca*, they could be large geographical features such as a river or a mountain peak. Or, they could be very small objects such as a stone, a plant, or a built object, such as a bridge.

Achievements In mathematics, the Inca developed the *quipu*, a system of knotted strings used to record numerical information for trade and engineering and for recording messages to be carried throughout the empire. In agriculture, the Inca developed sophisticated terrace systems for the cultivation of crops such as potatoes and maize. The terraces utilized a technique called *waru waru*, raised beds with channels that captured and redirected rain to avoid erosion during floods and that stored water to be used during dry periods.

The Inca were especially good builders of bridges and roads. Using captive labor, they constructed a massive roadway system called the **Carpa Nan**, with some 25,000 miles of roads used mainly by the government and military. In a mountainous region, bridges were particularly important.

Decline Upon the arrival of Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro in 1532, the Incan Empire was in the midst of a civil war of succession after the death of emperor Huayna Capac. Some scholars believe that the civil war weakened the Incan army, making it easier for Pizarro's forces to prevail. Others believe that other factors such as diseases introduced by the Europeans led to the decline. In 1533, the Spanish conquered the core of the empire, although outposts held out until 1572. Today, the Inca ruins at Machu Picchu are one of the most-visited sites in the world.

Continuities and Diversity

Historians have debated how closely Mesoamerican cultures are related to one another. Many argue that most are based on the Olmec civilization, since many later cultures adopted some of its features. For example, the Olmecs' feathered snake-god became fundamental in both the Mayan and Aztec religion. The subjects depicted on Olmec pottery have been found in pottery in other civilizations. The Olmecs' ritual sacrifices, pyramids, and ball courts were also continued in other cultures. Other historians argue that different cultures developed complex civilizations more or less independently.

Comparing Three American Civilizations			
	Maya	Aztec	Inca
Region	Mexico/Central America	Central Mexico	Andes in South America
Period	400–1517	1200–1521	1200–1533
Crops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corn • Beans • Squash 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corn • Beans • Squash • Tomatoes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corn • Cotton • Potatoes
Trade	• Moderate	• Extensive	• Limited
Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polytheistic • Some human sacrifice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polytheistic • Some human sacrifice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polytheistic • Some human sacrifice
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organized city-states, each with a king • Wars for tribute 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Powerful king • Wars for captives • System of tribute 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Powerful king • Wars for conquest • Mit'a system
Technology and Thought	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing • Step pyramids • Accurate calendar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step pyramids • Chinampas • Accurate calendar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waru waru • Roads • Masonry
Reasons for Decline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drought • Deforestation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European diseases • Subjects rebelled • Spanish attacks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European diseases • Civil war • Spanish attacks

KEY TERMS BY THEME		
<p>CULTURE: North America</p> <p>Mississippian</p> <p>matrilineal society</p> <p>TECHNOLOGY:</p> <p>Mound-Building</p> <p>Cahokia</p> <p>CULTURE: Mayan</p> <p>city-states</p>	<p>GOVERNMENT: Aztec</p> <p>Mexica</p> <p>theocracy</p> <p>RELIGION: Aztec</p> <p>human sacrifice</p>	<p>GOVERNMENT: Inca</p> <p>Pachacuti</p> <p>Incan Empire</p> <p>mit'a system</p> <p>TECHNOLOGY: Inca</p> <p>Carpa Nan</p> <p>RELIGION: Inca</p> <p>Temple of the Sun</p> <p>animism</p>