

# The American Nation

## *Chapter 2 / Section 1*

### *Before the First Global Age – Prehistory – 1600*

#### *The First Civilizations of the Americas*

##### **I. Reaching the Americas.**

Like other early people around the world, the first Americans left **no written records** to tell us where they came from, or when they arrived. However, scientists have found evidence to suggest that the first people reached the Americas sometime during the **last Ice Age**. The last Ice Age occurred between **100,000 and 10,000 years ago**

##### *A. Crossing the land bridge.*

Glaciers locked up water from the oceans, causing sea levels to fall and **uncovering land** that had been under water. In the far north, a land bridge joined **Siberia in northeastern Asia to Alaska in North America**. Most scientists think that bands of hunters reached North America across this land bridge. These hunters **tracked herds** of grazing animals.

##### *B. Adapting to New Conditions*

About 12,000 years ago, the last Ice Age ended. As temperatures rose, the **glaciers melted**. The land bridge between Siberia and Alaska disappeared under the Bering Strait. About the same time, some types of **large animals** died out. This forced hunting bands to **adapt to new conditions**. Smaller animals, wild berries, nuts, grains, and fish became a larger part of their diets.

About 5000 years ago, people in Central America learned to **grow crops** such as **corn, beans, and squash**. Farming brought great changes to those who practiced it.

## II. Olmec Civilization

Farming was a **key advance**. In time, some farming communities in Central America grew enough **surplus**, or extra, food to support large populations and the first cities emerged. **Cities** marked the rise of the first civilizations in the Americas. A civilization is a society that has certain **basic features**. Among these are, **cities**, a **well-organized government**, **different social classes**, **a complex religion**, and some method of **record keeping**.

The earliest known civilization in the Americas was that of the Olmecs in Central America. The Olmecs lived in the lowlands along the Gulf of Mexico, about 3,500 years ago.

## III. The Mayas

The Olmecs **influenced** many later peoples, including the Mayas. The early Mayas lived in the **rain forests** of what are today Guatemala and Mexico. About 3,000 years ago, they began **clearing the rain forest** and **draining swamps** to create farmland. As Mayan **population grew**, cities began to spring up from Central America to southern Mexico.

### A. Social Classes

**Priests** held great power in Mayan Society. Nobles enjoyed **high status** also. Near the bottom of the Mayan society were **laborers and farmers**.

Below them were **slaves**, most of whom were prisoners of war or criminals.

### ***B. Advances in Learning***

Mayan Priests had to know exactly when to honor the many gods who were thought to **control the natural world**. Priests made impressive advances in **astronomy and mathematics**. They learned to predict eclipses and created an accurate, **365-day calendar**.

Around A.D. 900, the Mayans **abandoned** their cities. Historians are **not sure** why. Although Mayan cities decayed, the **Mayan people survived**. Today more than **2 million** people in Guatemala and southern Mexico speak Mayan languages.

## **IV. The Aztecs**

Long after the Mayan cities were abandoned, a new civilization rose **far to the north**. Its builders were the Aztecs. The early Aztecs were **nomads**, people who moved from place to place in search of food.

### ***A. Tenochtitlan***

On an **island** in the middle of the lake, the Aztecs built their **capital**, Tenochtitlan. They constructed a series of **causeways**, or raised roads made of packed earth. The causeways **linked the capital** to the mainland. With riches from **trade and conquest**, Tenochtitlan prospered.

## ***B. Religion***

Like the Mayans, Aztec priests studied the **heavens** and developed complex **calendars**. Such calendars gave them the ability to tell their people when to plant or harvest. The Aztecs payed special attention to the **sun god**. They believed the sun required **human sacrifice** in order to rise each day. The Aztecs therefore sacrificed **thousands** of captives **each year** to please this powerful god.

## ***C. A Powerful Empire***

By 1500, the Aztecs ruled a huge **empire**. It stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean and included millions of people. The Aztec world was far from peaceful, however. Heavy **taxes** and the **sacrifice of** huge numbers of prisoners of war sparked many revolts. Across the empire, people conquered by the Aztecs were eager for **revenge**.

## **V. The Incas**

Far to the south of the Aztecs, the Incas built one of the largest empires in the **Americas**. By 1500, their empire stretched from almost **2,500 miles** along the west coast of South America. The center of the Inca Empire was the magnificent capital at **Cuzco**, located high in the **Andes**. Cuzco was a **holy city** to the Incas. From Cuzco, the emperor ruled more than **10 million people**.

To unite their empire, the Incas maintained a **system of roads** that covered more than 10,000 miles. Teams of runners quickly spread **royal orders** across the empire using these roads.

The Incas were skilled engineers. They built massive stone temples and forts. They became experts at creating **terraces**, or wide steps of land, out of steep mountainsides.

## **VI. Early Cultures of North America**

Scholars have found evidence of Mayan and Aztec ideas among some groups of people farther north. **Traders and migrating people** carried foods, goods, arts, and beliefs from Central America and Mexico to the early people of North America. This flow of products and ideas helped lead to the development of **many distinct cultures** in North America. A **culture** is the entire way of life of a people.

### ***A. People of the Southwest***

At least 3,000 years ago, knowledge of farming **spread northward**.

Gradually, farming societies emerged in what is today the American southwest. They included the Hohokams and Anasazis.

The Hohokams lived in present-day southern Arizona. The Anasazis lived in the Four Corners region, where Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona meet. Both of these tribes used **irrigation** to be able to farm in the desert.

### ***B. Anasazi Houses***

The Anasazi built large houses with walls of stone and **adobe**, or sun dried brick. When the Spanish later saw these houses in the early 1500s, they called them **pueblos**, the Spanish word for “village.”

### *C. Mound Builders*

To the east, other farming cultures flourished in North America. Among them were the **Mound Builders**, various cultures that built large earth mounds beginning about 3,000 years ago. The best-known groups of Mound Builders were the **Hopewell's** and the **Mississippians**. Between A.D. 700 and 1500, the Mississippians built a large city at Cahokia in present day Illinois. As many as **30,000** people may have lived there.