Chapter 5

Civilizations of the Americas

(1000 B.C.E. – 500 C.E.)
Civilizations of the Americas

Four advanced civilizations – those of the Olmecs, the Mayas, the Aztecs, and the Incas – developed in Middle and South America. In North America, diverse culture groups emerged.
Geography of the Americas

Some 30,000 years ago, Paleolithic hunters crossed a land bridge to reach North America from Asia.

About 10,000 B.C., global warming killed off game animals and forced the nomadic hunter-gatherers to migrate eastward and southward across the Americas.

The first Americans adapted to a variety of climates and resources, ranging from the hot, wet climate near the Equator to icy, treeless lands in the far north.
Early Inhabitants of the Americas

- Three theories offer explanations on how people originally arrived in the Americas:
  - Land Bridge Theory
  - Coastal Route Theory
  - Atlantic Maritime Theory

- These theories are not exclusive, but explain apparent differences in various archeological sites.
Clovis Culture (10,000 – 9,000 B.C.E.)

- The name comes from the town in New Mexico where the spearheads were first found.
- Clovis points have been found in every region of North America south of the glaciers, including Mexico and Central America.
- Clovis points are found in association with the bones of Ice Age animals and show the importance of big game hunting and effectiveness of Paleo weaponry.
- Distinctive characteristics include a central groove, or flute, along both of its faces and finely worked edges.

- The typical blade measures 10-13 cm in length by 4 cm in width.

- New radiocarbon dating has significantly shortened the time frame in which Clovis people could have spread to South America, suggesting the culture could not have been the first humans to arrive in the New World.
David Yesner, archaeologist with the University of Alaska Anchorage, displays stone tools and a bison jawbone found at Broken Mammoth, Alaska date from 13,800 years ago.

As one of the oldest sites in Alaska, this find supports the **Land Bridge Theory**.

Lower sea levels during the end of the Ice Age revealed a land bridge, known as Beringia.

People crossed from Siberia to Alaska following the animal herds.

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**Down to the Last Bone**

Article by Michael Parfit
Photograph by Kenneth Garrett
Looking for Ancient People

- Archaeologist Rick Knecht searches for evidence of ancient people on Hog Island in Alaska’s Aleutian chain.
- Tools left by people living here indicate that they traveled here when the climate was even colder.
- In the **Coastal Route Theory**, lower sea levels during the last ice age may have let such master mariners kayak eastward from Asia between islands that are now underwater reefs.

Article by Michael Parfit
Photograph by Kenneth Garrett
Tools from Ancient Times

- The tools were made of whale bone, walrus tusk, and bird bone.
- They show how well adapted humans were to the northern climate.
- Tiny needles indicate that people were making water-proof clothing.

Article by Michael Parfit
Photograph by Kenneth Garrett
The Gault site near Austin, Texas has yielded one of the most extensive collections of Clovis tools yet found in the Americas.

These tools differ significantly from those found in Siberia and Alaska.

He has listed some 20 similarities to tools from Europe, suggesting possible connections to the West.

Article by Michael Parfit
Photograph by Kenneth Garrett
The Ultimate Tool Box

- Based on methods used to construct early human tools, Smithsonian archaeologist, Dennis Stanford, proposes the **Atlantic Maritime Theory**, that the first Americans may have come from Europe instead of Asia.

- Others argue that the similarities in tools are possible because different sets of people had the same ideas.

Article by Michael Parfit
Photograph by Kenneth Garrett
The Olmec People

- From about 1400 B.C. to 500 B.C., the **Olmec** civilization flourished along the Mexican Gulf Coast.

- Their society was simple with only two classes:
  - the elite group, who lived in towns;
  - the common people, who lived in rural areas.

- Their religious, scientific, and architectural contributions influenced later civilizations in Mexico.

**Monument 1**, one of the four Olmec colossal heads at La Venta. This one is nearly 3 metres (9 ft) tall.
Olmec Mythology

- Religious activities were performed by full-time priests and shamans.
- Rulers were most important religious figures and were linked to the Olmec deities providing legitimacy to their rule.
- The feathered serpent and rain supernatural later seen in Aztec culture, were already present in the Olmec pantheon.

Las Limas Monument 1, considered an important realization of Olmec mythology. The youth holds a were-jaguar infant, while four iconic supernaturals are incised on the youth's shoulders and knees.
Olmec Innovations

- Writing
- Long count calendar (days are non-repeating)
- Concept of zero
- Mesoamerican ball-game
- Bloodletting and infant sacrificing
Teotihuacán

- Shortly after the Olmec civilization vanished a new civilization arose.

- It was the largest city, not only in America, but in all of the ancient world.

- At its peak, it was a city of over one hundred thousand people.

- The city was well-planned, with wide-roads, massive temples, drainage systems, and large apartment buildings.

- It was the religious center of Mesoamerica.

- Evidence suggests a huge fire destroyed the city in 700 A.D. possibly caused by invaders.
Mayan Civilization

- Mayan civilization flourished form southern Mexico through Central America between A.D. 300 and A.D. 900.
- Mayan culture was largely tribal.
- Cities were central to the religious life.
- They were a literate culture.
- The tropical rain forests of the Yucatán Peninsula, only supported small populations.
- They had the most advanced astronomical science and mathematics in the pre-modern world and a complex writing system.
Mayan Life

- Cities were ceremonial centers where the priests lived, while most of the population lived in small farming villages.
- Mayans used slash-and-burn agriculture.
- The land was infertile requiring a large amount of land to support each family.
- Maize was the principal food and comprised the central economic activity.
- Their social divisions included: rulers, priests, commoners, and slaves.
- The Maya mysteriously deserted their cities by the A.D. 900s.
Mayan Religion

- Its system of city-states supported a complex religious structure.
- The religion grew out of the need for accurate predictions of time and accommodation to the cycles of life in the rain-forest for the purposes of agriculture.
- It claimed that the universe functions in a logical, cyclical, and predictable way.
- They developed numerous calendars to predict these cycles and became the most accurate predictors of time before the modern period.
Mayan Religion

- Religious ceremonies involved dancing, competition, dramatic performances, prayer and sacrifice.
- Sacrifice included food stuffs, blood-letting (in which priests pierced their own tongue, ears, lips, or genitalia), and human sacrifice.
- Most Mayan gods were reptilian with dual (benevolent and malevolent) aspects.
- They believed in an elaborate afterlife in which heaven was reserved for those who had been hanged, sacrificed, or died in childbirth. Everyone else went to hell to be ruled over by the Lords of Death.
# The Olmecs and Mayas

## Olmecs
- Were the earliest American civilization
- Had powerful priests and aristocrats at the top of society
- Built ceremonial centers
- Spread influence through trade
- Developed calendar
- Introduced tradition of priestly leadership and religious devotion

## Mayas
- Developed complex irrigation methods for farming
- Built towering pyramid temples in Tikal
- Traded extensively across Middle America
- Developed hieroglyphic writing system
- Developed accurate calendar and numbering system
- Abandoned cities around A.D. 900
Early South American Cultures - Chavin

- **Chavin** culture was the earliest urban culture in South America.

- It dominated Peruvian culture during a period we call Early Horizon (1000-200 BC) about the same time as the Olmecs.

- The archaeological site of Chavín de Huántar sits at an elevation of 3,177m (10,425ft) above sea level in the Peruvian Andes.

- Chavin once intersected several major trade routes through the Cordillera Blanca mountain range.
Chavín de Huántar

- The site was a ceremonial center of the Chavin, located on a cross-roads between the mountains, the jungle, and the sea.

- The Old Temple was constructed around 1500 BCE in a U-shaped temple and platform, encompassing a Circular Plaza.

- It contained several subterranean galleries used for religious rites, storage and living space for priests.

- Chavin religion influenced later peoples of Peru.
• Like the Olmecs they worshipped a jaguar-man god, suggesting some cultural contact between the two.

• Social instability at Chavín de Huántar occurred between 500 and 300 BCE, the same time that the Chavín civilization began to decline.

Feline, bird and reptile fuse in the disquieting sacred image of the so-called "lanzón monolitic
Later the Moche during the Early Intermediate Period (100-600 AD) dominated the northern Andean highlands and Peruvian coastline.

Scholars believe that the Moche were organized as individual city-states that shared a common elite culture.
Moche Culture

- They are particularly noted for their elaborately painted ceramics, gold work, wood-carving, monumental constructions, and irrigation systems.
- Were skilled farmers who developed methods of terracing, irrigation, and fertilization of the soil
- Organized relay-runners to carry messages
Moche Art and Architecture

- A Pyramidal adobe structure on the Rio Moche, had been the largest pre-Columbian structure in Peru, but was partially destroyed when the Spanish Conquistadores, mined its graves for gold.

- Nearby *Huaca de la Luna* has remained largely intact, containing colorful murals with complex iconography.
"King of Bling" Tomb Sheds Light on Ancient Peru
Early South American Cultures – Nazca

- The **Nazca** lived in the desert of southern Peru during the same period.

- Although some local **geoglyphs** resemble Paracas motifs, scholars believe the Nazca Lines were created by the Nazca culture between 400 and 650 AD.

- The hundreds of individual figures range in complexity from simple lines to stylized hummingbirds, spiders, monkeys, fish, sharks, orcas, llamas, and lizards.
Nasca Culture

- They were known for their complex textiles and pottery.
- They made impressive underground aqueducts that still function today.
- Warriors also took trophy heads from conquered adversaries.

The hole in the forehead was to permit a cord to pass through so the head could be tied to the belt of the possessor.

A mummified Nazca trophy head
Nasca Art

Nazca textiles and pottery
Locations of Early South American Cultures

- **Chavin** culture arose in the highlands of northern Peru around 1000 BC (around the same time as the Olmecs) and lasted until 500 BC.

- Later the **Moche** flourished in northern Peru from 100 AD to 800 AD.

- The **Nazca** lived in the desert of southern Peru.