

CHAPTER
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CHAPTERS IN BRIEF

The Americas: A Separate World, 40,000 B.C.—A.D. 700

Summary

CHAPTER OVERVIEW Long ago, huge ice sheets cover the land. The level of the oceans goes down, and a once-underwater bridge of land connects Asia and the Americas. Asian hunters cross this bridge and become the first Americans. They spread down the two continents. They develop more complex societies and new civilizations. The earliest of these new cultures are found in central Mexico and in the high Andes Mountains.

1 The Earliest Americans

KEY IDEA The first Americans were separated from other parts of the world. Nevertheless, they developed in similar ways.

North and South America form a single stretch of land that reaches from the freezing cold of the Arctic Circle in the north to the icy waters around Antarctica in the south. Two oceans on either side of these land masses separate them from Africa, Asia, and Europe.

That was not always the case, though. From around 1.6 million to about 10,000 years ago, the earth went through an Ice Age. During this time of severe cold, much water froze into huge sheets of ice called glaciers. With water trapped in ice, the level of the world's oceans went down. The lowered oceans exposed land that is today again covered by water.

One strip of this land, called Beringia, connected Asia and North America. Wild animals crossed this rocky land bridge and entered North America for the first time. Some of the Asians who hunted these animals followed them. Without knowing it, they became the first Americans.

No one knows for sure when these first people reached the Americas. Some historians say it took place as long ago as 40,000 B.C. Others say it happened as late as 10,000 B.C. A recent discovery in Chile suggests that people were well settled in that part of the Americas by 10,500 B.C. Since Chile lies far south of the land bridge, some experts say that people needed many thousands of years to travel that far. For this reason, they think that the first people over the land bridge must have arrived about 20,000 years ago.

Whenever it was that they arrived, these first Americans clearly lived as hunters. One of their favorite targets for the hunt was the huge mammoth. This creature was like an elephant covered

with thick, long hair to protect it from the bitter cold of the Ice Age. It was so large that one animal alone gave enough meat, hide, and bones to feed, clothe, and house many people.

Over time, all the mammoths died, and the people were forced to look for other food. They began to hunt smaller animals such as rabbits and deer and to fish. They also began to gather plants and fruits to eat. Because they no longer had to roam over large areas to search for the mastodon, they settled for part of the year in one spot.

Between 12,000 and 10,000 B.C., the climate changed. The Ice Age ended, and the world warmed up again. The huge sheets of ice melted, and the oceans rose again to cover the land bridge that connected Asia to the Americas. By this time, though, people lived from north to south in the Americas. They lived in many different environments and found special ways of life suited to the place where they lived.

About 7000 B.C., the people living in central Mexico started a quiet revolution—farming. It was the same kind of radical change that had happened in several spots in Asia and Africa. By 3400 B.C., they had several foods that they grew, including squashes, beans, chilies, and the most important one—corn. Corn grew so well that a family of three could, in four months, grow enough corn to feed it for two years.

Over many centuries, the practice of farming spread throughout the Americas. In what is now the eastern United States and in the region of the Andes Mountains, early Americans may have discovered the idea of farming on their own. In central Mexico, farmers became so skilled at growing corn that they could enjoy three harvests each year.

Farming had the same results in the Americas that it did in Asia and Africa. Growing food gave people a more reliable food supply—and more food, too. As a result, more people could be fed,

they were healthier, and they lived longer. The population grew. Because farmers produced so much food, some people could concentrate on other ways of making a living. They began to work in different arts and crafts or to learn how to build buildings. Some people grew to be rich—to own more than others and to enjoy a higher position in society. Some people became rulers, and others became their subjects.

2 Early Mesoamerican Civilizations

KEY IDEA *The Olmecs created the first civilization in the Americas. It influenced later civilizations in the area.*

These changes marked the beginnings of more complex societies. The first of the early American civilizations arose in southern Mexico, an area of hot rain forests. These people are called the Olmecs, and they flourished from about 1200 to 400 B.C. They were an important culture because they had influence on their neighbors and on peoples who lived long after them.

The Olmecs lived along the Gulf Coast of Mexico in a land of dense forests and heavy rains. The land gave them many benefits, though. It had good clay that could be used for pottery, wood and rubber that could be taken from the forest, and stone for building in the mountains to the north. The rivers could be used to move people and goods, and the soil was excellent for growing food.

Archaeologists have found earthen mounds, courtyards, and pyramids built of stones. Standing on top of the mounds were many monuments made of stone. Some are columns, others seem to be altars used in religious ceremonies, and still others are heads. Some of these stone structures are very large and weigh as much as 44 tons.

Researchers are not sure whether the Olmec sites were monuments to rulers or areas important for religious reasons. They do think that the Olmecs had many gods who stood for important forces of nature. The most important god, it seemed, was the jaguar spirit. Many stone monuments show figures that are half human and half jaguar.

The Olmec peoples busily traded with other people to the north and south. In return for the products they made, they received iron ore and different kinds of stone. Along with their trade goods, they spread their culture to other people. For some reason, the Olmecs disappeared around 400 B.C.

Historians still do not understand why. However, their influence lived on.

Another important early culture of Mexico was the Zapotec people. Their home was to the southwest of the Olmecs in a valley that had excellent soil for farming and plenty of rainfall. They began to rise about 1000 B.C. at a site that included stone platforms and temples. A few hundred years later, they developed a kind of writing and a calendar.

About 500 B.C., the Zapotecs began building the first city in the Americas. Called Monte Albán, it grew to hold as many as 25,000 people and lasted as late as A.D. 700. The city was an impressive sight with high pyramids, temples, and palaces made out of stone. It had an observatory that could be used to look at the stars. However, the Zapotec culture also collapsed, and, as with the Olmecs, historians do not know why.

Both of these cultures left their mark on later peoples, though. The jaguar figure of the Olmecs continued to appear in the sculpture and pottery of people who came later. Also, the look of Olmec towns—with pyramids, open space, and huge stone sculptures—was repeated in later times. The Olmecs developed a ritual game played with a ball that also continued to be used in the area.

The Zapotecs also shaped the lives of later peoples. Their way of writing and their calendar—based on the movements of the sun—were taken by other groups. The dramatic and beautiful city of Monte Albán also influenced later peoples, who built their own cities in similar ways. These cities combined religious purposes with the needs of the common people who lived in them.

3 Early Civilizations of the Andes

KEY IDEA *In the rugged landscape of the Andes Mountains, various peoples created their own civilizations.*

Other interesting civilizations arose in the Americas far to the south of the Olmec and Zapotec peoples. This took place in an environment that was very harsh—the high Andes Mountains that snake down the western edge of South America. This range of mountains has many peaks that are more than 20,000 feet high.

Toward the northern part of South America, along these mountains, lies the modern country of Peru. In this area, the mountains are steep and very rocky. The area is also very cold, with many

mountains covered by ice and snow during the entire year. It is very hard to travel this area, and the climate changes quickly from being hot during the day to bitter cold at night. The soil is poor as well, making it hard to grow food.

It was in this difficult land that a new civilization arose in the mountains. That culture is called Chavín. It takes its name from a major ruin, Chavín de Huántar, in the Andes Mountains. At this site, researchers have found pyramids, open spaces, and large mounds made of earth. The Chavín culture was at its height from 900 B.C. to 200 B.C. It is considered the first influential civilization in South America.

Scientists have found objects that suggest that the Chavín culture helped shape other people living to the north and south of this site. In these other sites, they see the art styles and symbols of religion that they had found at Chavín. They think that the main site was not the center of a political empire but was the chief site of a spiritual or religious movement. People from other areas may have made trips to the main site to pay their respects. The Chavín culture, like the Olmecs in Mexico, may have been a “mother culture,” one that gave the first form to the ideas and styles of the area.

Two other important cultures arose in Peru. The Nazca culture developed along the coast of the Pacific Ocean in the south of Peru. It lasted from 200 B.C. to A.D. 600. The Nazca people built large and complex systems to bring water to their farmlands. They made beautiful cloth and pottery.

The Nazca are most famous for another of their features, though. Called the Nazca Lines, they are huge pictures scraped on the surface of a rocky plain. The drawings include a monkey, a spider, some birds, and other creatures. What is most remarkable is that the pictures are so large that they can be seen and appreciated only from high in the air. Some experts think that the Nazca drew these pictures to please their gods.

The other culture of early Peru arose along the Pacific Coast but far to the north. This was the Moche culture, and it lasted from A.D. 100 to A.D. 700. The Moche tapped into rivers that flowed down from the mountains. They built ditches to bring water to their fields, where they grew many different crops. They raised corn, beans, potatoes, squash, and peanuts. They also fished, caught wild ducks and pigs, and hunted deer.

Archaeologists have found some tombs of the Moche people, and they show that the culture had great wealth. They have found jewelry made of gold, silver, and jewels. The Moche people made beautiful pottery that showed scenes of everyday life. So, even though they never had a written language, it is possible to learn much about how they lived.

Eventually, though, the Moche culture also fell. As with the other peoples of the Americas, the reason for this fall is not known. For the next hundred years, other cultures would rise and fall in the Americas. Most of them remained separate from one another, however.

Review

Analyzing Causes and Recognizing Effects

1. What did the first Americans hunt, and what happened when that supply of food disappeared?
2. What happened when the early peoples of America began to farm?
3. ***Drawing Conclusions*** Why were the Olmecs and Zapotecs important?

Determining Main Ideas

4. How was the environment of the Andes Mountains difficult?
5. Write one important thing each about the Chavín, Nazca, and Moche peoples.