Indigenous Pre-Columbian Civilizations in Central and South America
Origins of the Early Americans

Different theories:

1. Migration from Asia over Beringia land-bridge sometime between ca 40,000 BCE-12,000 BCE (Clovis Man paradigm)

2. Journey from Asia to Pacific coast of South America via small boats (see Thor Heyerdahl and the 1947 Kon-Tiki expedition)

3. Louis Leakey: First humans may have arrived 100,000 years ago (see tools found at Calico Hills, CA)
Thor Heyerdahl and the Kon-Tiki; the 4,300 mile-voyage took 101 days
Civilizations of note

I. The precursors:
- Olmecs
- Zapotecs
- Toltecs

II. The Big Three:
- The Maya
- The Aztecs
- The Incas
Meso-American civilizations: Location
The Olmecs: Meso-America’s mother culture

- Based in Meso-America (i.e., from central Mexico to northern Honduras)
- Inhospitable climate (hot, humid lowlands – swamps and jungle)
- Hunted; fished; grew corn, beans; traded jade, crops
- No wheel; no horses or other draft animals
- Flourished ca 1200 BCE-400 BCE
- Ceremonial centers: La Venta, Tres Zapotes and San Lorenzo
- Pyramids, monumental sculptures (Jaguar motif, e.g.); had hieroglyphics (not yet deciphered) but no written records
Mysterious decline of the Olmecs

- Ceremonial centers are destroyed
- No evidence of warfare
- Revolution? Civil War?
The Classic Mayan civilizations

- Large cities discovered in the 19th century
- Civilization flourished from 300 B.C.E.–900 C.E.
- **Decentralized** political structure (city-states) led by god-kings (Pacal, e.g.)
- Area was rich in game and building materials (limestone and hardwood); **obsidian** also
- Terrace farming
- **Cacao** beans
  * Hot chocolate drink
  * Used as currency
- Major ceremonial centers at **Tikal**, **Copan**, and **Palenque**
- No metal; water supply was uncertain; communication was difficult
Mayan Warfare

- **Purpose of warfare?** To take territory and capture enemy soldiers
- **Ritual sacrifice of enemies**
- **City-states and small kingdoms engage in constant conflict**
- **But the Maya conduct warfare and human sacrifice on a smaller scale than did the Aztecs**
Mayan Mathematics and their Ritual Calendar

- **Complex math**
  - Invention of “zero” concept
  - Base 20 system
- **Solar Calendar** of 365.242 days (only 17 seconds off!)
  - Eighteen 20-day months, with a separate period of 5 days at end
- **Religious calendar** of 265 days
  - Twenty 13-day months, with 5 days at end
- These two calendars meshed as if they were a pair of wheels
- Management of calendar lends authority to priesthood
  - Need to choose auspicious moments for planting crops, attacking enemies, installing new rulers

![Mayan positional number system]
The Mayan calendar is based on careful observations of the planets, sun, and moon (see e.g. El Caracol, “the Snail” observatory at Chichen Itza)
Mayan Language and Religion

- Most advanced writing system in the Ancient Americas – about 800 hieroglyphic symbols, or **glyphs** (they stood for whole words or syllables)
- Most bark-paper books (or codices) destroyed by Spanish conquerors (see Bishop Diego de Landa) but 3 survived
- Deciphering began in the 1960s
- *Popol Vuh*: Mayan creation myth
- **Itzamna** – Lizard House (the supreme god)
- Bloodletting rituals: removal of fingers, piercing to allow blood flow; self-mutilation by kings also
The Mayan Ball Game (Pok-a-tok)

- A sacred ritual
- High-ranking captives, prisoners of war were contestants
- Execution of losers immediately after the match
- Human sacrifices to please the gods
Post-Classic Mayan Civilization

• Centered on the Yucatan peninsula (9th-12th centuries CE)
• Farming is difficult (soil is thin) but water is available from cenotes (sinkholes created by the collapse of underground caverns)
• Heavily influenced by the Toltecs of Central Mexico (caused mostly by waves of immigrants from Tula)
• Kukulcan (“feathered serpent”) – Toltec leader in Chichen Itza
• Violent, warlike
• Had human sacrifice (see Chac Mool)
• Main centers: Chichen Itza and Uxmal
Why did the Mayan Civilization come to an end?

Various theories:
1. Increased warfare among Mayan city-states disrupted trade and caused population to flee to the jungle
2. Agricultural production could not keep up with population growth; therefore people moved away from urban centers
3. Ecological damage from over-farming, etc.?
4. Famine and disease?
Teotihuacan Culture

- Produced great architectural structures in the highlands of Mexico
- Flourished between 100-700 C.E.
- Lakes in area of high elevation
- Village of Teotihuacan, expands to become America’s first metropolis (200,000 inhabitants by 500 C.E.) and important ceremonial center (see Teotihuacan “Street of the Dead”)
- Creation of chinampas – swampy islands enlarged to become floating gardens
- Extensive trade network, influence on surrounding areas
- It begins to decline ca 650 C.E.; is sacked in the middle of the 8th century, and its massive library is destroyed
Chinampas
The Aztecs

-Poor nomadic people who left desert in northern Mexico and emigrated to crowded Valley of Mexico ca 1000 C.E.
-Shunned by other peoples because of their practice of human sacrifice
-Gained wealth and power by serving as mercenaries
-established city of Tenochtitlan on an island ca 1350 C.E. and enlarged it by dredging part of Lake Texcoco (a large salt lake surrounded by freshwater lakes); city connected by causeways
-population: +500,000
-Hieroglyphs but no written literature
Tenochtitlan (as imagined by the muralist Diego Rivera)
Mexico City today
Aztec Politics and Society

Politics
• Monarch
• Confederation of localities
• Tribute (gold, maize, cacao beans, cotton, jade, slaves)
• Calpulli = kinship groups

Religion
• Huitzilopochtli, Quetzalcoatl
• Ometeotl = guiding deity
• Art and sculpture:
  see e.g., the Disc of the Fifth Sun (its image is to the left)

Destruction: Hernan Cortes and Spaniards defeat Emperor Montezuma II and the Aztecs in 1521 with help from Tlaxcallan
Andean Societies

• Migration into South America ca 12,000 B.C.E.
• Climate improves ca 8,000 B.C.E.
• Largely independent from Mesoamerica
• Highly individualized due to geography
• Remarkable cities, towns despite jungle, mountains (see e.g. Machu Picchu)
• Chavin, Moche, Chimu, Huari, Inca
Chavin Culture

- Primarily a religious civilization which develops in the central Andes (Peru), 900 – 200 B.C.E.
- Little is known about the particulars of the religion
- Intricate stone mounds/carvings/textiles
- Probably had shamans
- Cf. Nazca peoples in western Peru
The Moche Culture

- Based in the Moche River Valley, it dominated northern Peru from circa 300-700 C.E.

- Built impressive **irrigation systems** for farming

- Beautiful **jewelry**, metalwork, pottery and other treasure survive (see e.g. the **Lord of Sipan treasure** (ca 400 C.E.); cf. the King Tut archaeological find)

- One of many states in region; none of them were able to consolidate their power enough to establish an empire

- May have been ended by severe flooding or desertification
The Incas

- Empire lasted less than 100 years
- Started by Pachakuti (r.1438-1471); grew more under Topa Inca Yupanqui (r.1471-1493) through war, diplomacy
- Eventually controlled over 2,500 miles of Pacific coastline, Andes Mountains
- Highly centralized state, built by forced labor (or mita)
- Great road builders
- No wheeled vehicles
- Split inheritance, custom of worshipping mummified dead rulers
- Orejones (“Big Ears”) – only one of these 11 noble lineages could inherit throne
- Inti = the Sun god
- Ayllu = kinship unit
- Little private commerce or trade
- An early socialist state?
- Strictly regulated marriage
- No written records (used quipu instead)
- Quechua = language
- Last emperor, Athahualpa, defeated by Pizarro in 1532
- Incas devastated by civil war, exposure to European disease
Atahualpa’s death (see Guaman Poma’s late-16th-century illustration)