5. Early Americas

Introduction

When exactly the first people arrived in the Americas is uncertain. It happened before 15,000 BCE, probably many thousands of years earlier. At the end of the last Ice Age people coming from Siberia had probably already crossed the Bering Strait into modern day Alaska. These early people were hunters and gatherers and moved along with the game they hunted. Around 8000 BCE these hunters and gatherers became so efficient at hunting that large animals became scarce. For example, by 7500 BCE some animals like the American horse were hunted to extinction. These people needed to find new ways to feed themselves, and they gradually began to fish and farm. Later, productive agriculture led to the evolution of complex societies in the Americas.

The area between modern day Mexico to Honduras and El Salvador is called Mesoamerica. Within Mesoamerica, agricultural crops like beans, chili peppers, avocados, etc. were first cultivated by the region’s inhabitants between 8000 and 7000 BCE. Around 4000 BCE Maize (corn) became the dominant crop grown in Mesoamerica, along with tomatoes somewhat later. By 2000 BCE agriculture had spread to all parts of Mesoamerica. No large animals, however, were domesticated in Mesoamerica. The reason why no wheeled vehicles were used in Mesoamerica is to be found here: there were no domesticated animals capable of pulling them.

Between 1200 and 1000 BCE large ceremonial centers emerged in these agricultural societies of Mesoamerica. These centers contained structures like pyramids, temples and palaces. They did not replace the agricultural villages, both existed next to one another. Within these ceremonial centers lived some permanent residents such as priests, rulers and some artisans or craftsmen. Occasionally on festive days the people living in the nearby villages would gather in these centers of ceremony, but would return to their homes after the festivals ended. The earliest of these ceremonial centers that we know of is found near the modern city of Veracruz near the Gulf of Mexico, where around 1200 BCE San Lorenzo became the earliest ceremonial center of the first civilization we will discuss in Mesoamerica.
The Olmec Civilization

The Olmec civilization formed around 1200 BCE. San Lorenzo was its capital until 800 BCE. Then the capital was moved to La Venta, which remained the capital for another 400 years (800-400 BCE) until a third capital was established at Tres Zapotes (400-100 BCE). The name Olmec in translation means “rubber-people” because of the abundance of rubber trees found in the region. Historians gave these people the name Olmecs; it is not the term that they actually used themselves. The heartland of the Olmec civilization received an adequate amount of rainfall so that no artificial irrigation systems were needed for agriculture. Rather the opposite was the case: the problem was not bringing water to the crops but removing excess water. The Olmecs required vast drainage systems to remove unneeded water to prevent the flooding of the crops. In fact, the drainage systems of the Olmec became so effective that some are still in use to this day.

The drainage systems of the Olmecs, like many of the complex structures of the centers, were all built by the common subjects living in the villages surrounding the ceremonial centers. These were mostly farmers who usually had to provide agricultural products to the elite living in the centers. In these Olmec centers we often find temples, pyramids, altars and tombs, all built by these subjects as well as skilled artisans who created ornaments. The most famous of Olmec artifacts are the monumental Olmec stone heads, carved out of basalt rock. These stone heads stood roughly 10 feet tall (or 3 meters) and weighed around 20 tons, all made by hand with simple stone tools and moved on rafts by the hands of thousands of subjects to the desired destination. With no wheeled vehicles or big animals to pull these heads or other stone works, the Olmecs relied upon the combined work force of the community of subjects.

The Olmecs expanded their influence in two ways: military power and trade. At the peak of Olmec rule their influence reached modern day Honduras and Guatemala. It should be noted that the Olmecs did not possess the technology to create alloys like bronze to use for tools. Instead they relied heavily on the volcanic rock obsidian found often in Mesoamerica.

Thanks in part to the discovery of pieces of art created by the Olmecs, we are able to learn about certain aspects of their society. For example, some statues show men with
elongated skulls. It seems that the Olmecs practiced skull deformation through artificial means; they used force on the skulls of newborns and children to achieve this desired elongated skull. The Mayas would later use this technique for artificial skull elongation only on noble children.

How the Olmec civilization ended is one of the mysteries of history. Archaeologists discovered that somewhere around 500 BCE the ceremonial centers of La Venta and San Lorenzo were destroyed and subsequently abandoned. Little of the surviving evidence shows signs of invaders, but it is possible that the people revolted and that the Olmecs deliberately destroyed their centers. By 400 BCE the dominance of the Olmecs waned and faded into the shadows of other civilizations of Mesoamerica. The Olmec civilization influenced later civilizations in Mesoamerica heavily by providing them with accomplishments that these successors adopted, such as the cultivation of corn, the ceremonial centers with pyramids, temples, and palaces, the idea of calendars, ball games, and human sacrifice. Around 100 BCE the Olmecs disappeared.

The Mayas

Around 100 BCE the population of Mesoamerica increased, and ceremonial centers appeared in regions far from the Olmec heartland. Real cities also appeared because now people permanently settled down around these centers, building off of them. The immediate successors of the Olmecs were the Mayas. Their territory consisted of regions located in modern Southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. Between 300 and 200 BCE there were Mayan villages with permanent residents in what is now Guatemala. The first ceremonial center, Kaminaljuyu, evolved where modern Guatemala City is now located. Kaminaljuyu remained an influential city until around 400 CE when it came under the dominance of Theotihuacan in central Mexico. After 400 CE the Mayans occupied territory which soon lost its fertility. The Mayas solved this problem by building terraces for farming. They placed these farm terraces along rivers, which passed through them, leaving behind fertile soil. The Mayas harvested mostly corn, but also cultivated cotton, which they used largely to make textiles. These Mayan textiles became a popular trading good throughout the rest of Mesoamerica. The Mayas
also grew cacao, the large bean which only the noble elites used for drinking and chewing because it was a very valuable commodity for the Mayas.

Between the 4th and 9th century CE the Mayan city of Tikal was the most important city, reaching its peak of wealth and population between 600 and 800 CE. At that time nearly 40,000 people lived in the city. Tikal had temples, pyramids, paved plazas, and palaces. The temple of the giant jaguar in Tikal stands 154 feet tall and is a pyramid structure. It symbolized Tikal’s dominance over the surrounding region, in which up to 500,000 people lived. Alongside Tikal there existed other cities, which formed the center of local Mayan city-kingdoms. The local Mayan kingdoms fought constantly against each other. For the Mayas the winning city would usually be expected to destroy the conquered peoples. It was honorable for a Mayan warrior to bring back captives to his city and show them off. Sometimes high-ranking captives were kept alive for years as a kind of living trophy. In the end, however, the captives usually became slaves and were offered as sacrificial victims to the Mayan gods.

The constant fighting between cities prevented the Mayas from organizing a larger united authority and central government like other civilizations did before. However, around the 9th century CE Chichen Itza, the Mayan center on the Mexican peninsula of Yucatan, began to establish a more unified Mayan society. Captives were integrated into Chichen Itza society rather than sacrificed. Between the 9th and 11th centuries CE Chichen Itza was able to organize a loose empire, integrating other Mayan city centers in Yucatan. However, the Mayan centers outside of the Yucatan peninsula were already facing decline, which had set in around 800 CE. Within a little more than one century all these Mayan centers vanished. The reasons for this decline are not exactly known, but possibilities include invasion by foreigners, internal civil strife, ecological problems due to deforestation, earthquakes etc., many of which may have operated together. Whatever the reasons were, the Mayas outside of Yucatan left their cities, and trading between these centers ended. Slowly the jungle consumed what remained of these Mayan city centers.
Mayan Beliefs

Rituals played an important part in Mayan religion and society. The Mayas, like other civilizations, created a myth explaining how everything came to be on earth, a so-called creation myth, which the Mayas called Popol Vuh. Here the Mayas expressed their belief that the gods had created humans out of maize (corn) and water, which became flesh and blood. Mayan priests thought that the gods had to be pleased so that they would continue to sustain the agricultural cycle and keep life going. The way the Mayas sought to please the gods was through the sacrifice of human beings. Blood was essential to the sacrifice; the Mayas thought that shedding blood would make the gods pour rain for the all-important corn. Thus for the Mayas it was necessary to get as much blood from the victim as possible. They would, for example, cut off fingertips before decapitating their human sacrificial victims. Most of these victims were war captives. The Mayas also inflicted wounds on themselves in order to shed ritual blood. This informs us that the Mayan rituals were a necessity according to their beliefs and were not simply acts of cruelty towards captives.

Other important features and achievements of Mayan society were the ball games and the calendar. The Mayan priests created the most elaborate calendar of the ancient Americas. This calendar is based on two cycles: the solar year, which consists of 365 days, and a year of 260 days based on Mayan rituals. After 52 years both cycles would return to their starting point simultaneously. The interpretation of the calendar was an important task of the priests, who had to figure out the possibilities and dangers each day would bring. It is thought that the Mayas patterned their calendar after the calendar of the Olmecs.

The Mayas inherited from the Olmecs a ball game, which grew in popularity under the Mayan civilization. Almost every ceremonial center had a ball court paved with stones where players could play. The sport itself was played sometimes by two men competing against each other, and sometimes by teams of two or four. Players had to put a ball through a ring onto a marker without using hands. The ball was around 20 centimeters in circumference (8 inches) and was made out of solid, baked rubber. As such
the ball was very heavy and hard, and should not be compared with modern day soccer-
or footballs. The sport was played for several reasons: for competitive sport between
individuals, sometimes for the sake of bets placed by the spectators or players, sometimes
to celebrate a political agreement or treaty. Sometimes war captives of higher rank had to
play for their lives in public: the losers were sacrificed immediately after the match.
Alongside some of these courts archaeologists found racks of skulls, most likely the
heads of the losers.

Teotihuacan Civilization

The Mayas were not the only heirs of the Olmecs in Mesoamerica. As mentioned earlier,
the Mayas flourished in Guatemala and in the lower parts of central Mexico, including
the Yucatan peninsula. Further north, in Mexico’s higher regions, the Teotihuacan
civilization developed. This area was for many centuries shaped by several lakes.
However this valley in central Mexico has since lost these lakes because of changes in
the environment and drainage of the waters. During ancient times, however, this region
had a fresh supply of fish and water in abundance, and naturally people came there to
settle in the area.

The city of Teotihuacan was located 30 miles northeast of modern Mexico City.
By around 500 BCE Teotihuacan was a small agricultural village of a couple of hundred
inhabitants, where people had settled permanently and diverted water from the lakes
through channels onto their fields. Within 500 years the population would explode to
50,000 inhabitants. Two major buildings dominated the city of Teotihuacan in 100 CE:
the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon. It should be noted that these names were given to
the pyramids by the Aztecs who visited the place centuries after it had been deserted. We
are not sure what the people of Teotihuacan called these pyramids; yet it is the Pyramid
of the Sun that is the largest single building in Mesoamerica. The population of
Teotihuacan grew even more so that between 400 and 600 CE the city had around
200,000 inhabitants, making it a metropolis in ancient times, with temples, palaces, and
small apartment complexes for the masses. We know little about the Teotihuacan society
since all written books were lost. What we do know we owe to their famous artifacts in
pottery and obsidian. Trade was extensive between the Teotihuacan people and other Mesoamerican societies. Most of the inhabitants worked on the fields surrounding Teotihuacan. Priests played an important role in the everyday lives of the people. Like the Mayas the people of Teotihuacan adopted both the Olmec calendar and ball games. Around 500 CE a period of war with other people started, and by 650 CE the Teotihuacan civilization had entered a period of decline. Shortly afterwards the city was sacked and burned to the ground, causing the loss of all written evidence.

South American Civilizations

Mesoamerica was not the only region in the Western hemisphere to host the emergence of civilizations. Hunters and gatherers came to the area south of Central America, towards the Andes Mountains, around 12,000 BCE. These hunters and gatherers were most likely following the migration of large animals, like the llamas and alpacas that they hunted. The climate within the Andes was perfect for the natural harvesting of crops like wild potatoes. Around 8000 BCE the climate became harsher and drier, making the natural harvesting of crops difficult and forcing these hunters and gatherers to begin to settle down and start farming. The population in the region grew as agriculture in the region flourished, and by 1000 BCE the civilization in the central Andes was comparable to the Mesoamerican civilizations.

What is interesting to note is that the Mesoamerican and the Andes civilizations evolved at the same time, but mostly independently of each other. The reason for this separate evolution was the lack of vehicles and draft animals capable of connecting these civilizations. However the cultivation of maize would eventually make its way to the Andes region, just as Andean techniques of gold, silver, and copper metallurgy would make their way up north to Mesoamerica. Between 2500 and 2000 BCE permanent settlements began emerging in the heartland of the Andes societies, which was located in modern-day Bolivia and Peru. The Andean civilizations began cultivating crops like beans, peanuts, and potatoes along with maize (corn) in the Andean dry highland using irrigation systems. After 2000 BCE the early Andes people also began to build temples, pyramids, and pottery. After 1000 BCE a new organized religion appeared in the region.
called Chavin Cult, named after the city of Chavin de Huantar. As suddenly as this religion appeared it disappeared, roughly around 300 BCE. Little is known about this cult, not even its proper name. What is known is that the city was a place that functioned as a ceremonial center for the people to gather and worship but was not a place of permanent residence like Teotihuacan.

The first real large cities, with populations of around 10,000 inhabitants appeared in the central Andes region around 200 BCE. These large populations needed organization. This led to the rise of regional states, which remained largely independent from each other. These early states appeared on the western side of the Andes Mountains, where each regional state contained economic zones producing goods which, when combined, contributed to the economy of the whole region. The area by the ocean provided a sustainable source of seafood using nets weaved out of cotton; the valleys of the region cultivated the agricultural crops; and the Andes highland provided meat and wool from llamas and alpacas.

The success of these economic zones created wealthy regions; this is significant because this is the only place in the world where this style of economic system was developed on purpose. Unfortunately we do not have any writings from this civilization. Most of our knowledge is based on material remains like the ruins of their cities, centers of worship and pieces of art. One regional state in particular produced many artifacts of beauty and incredible detail. The state of Mochica existed around 300 to 700 CE in modern day Peru and was named after the river which flows in the valley its people inhabited. The Moche state (also known as Mochica) was one of the most powerful states in the area. The art and ceramic works of these people depict heads of their civilization and scenes from everyday life with amazing detail.

There were quite a few regional states in Southern America, but no regional state was able to dominate the others because of the geography of the area, which featured tall mountains separating the valleys.
Conclusion

The separation and distances between cities made contact and unity very difficult in Mesoamerica and the Andes region. The achievements of the region that stand out are the calendars, the ball games and the religious beliefs. We still await more information because little is known, especially concerning the reasons why some civilizations abandoned their cities. The arrival of European colonists in the 15th century permanently changed the western hemisphere thereafter.