

PART ONE

BEFORE THE GREAT ENCOUNTER

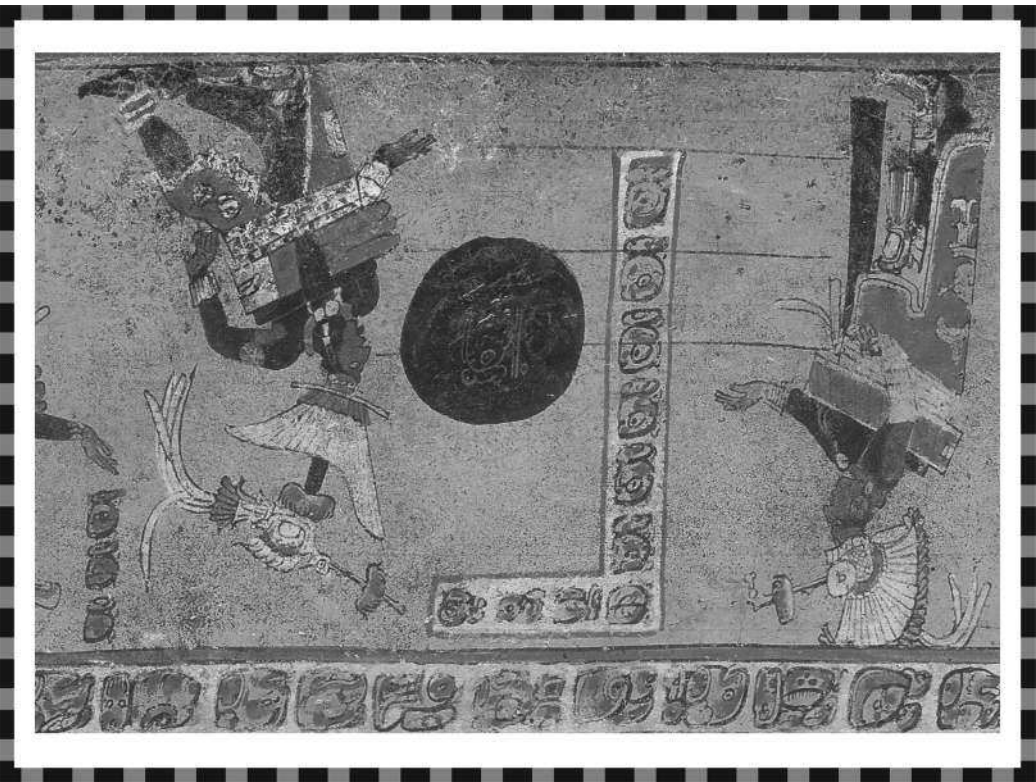
Before turning directly to the great question of how Iberians were able to conquer and colonize Native Americans, we need to know something about the three civilizations that were brought together in the wake of Christopher Columbus' first Atlantic crossing of 1492. Such is the purpose of Part One of this book.

Chapter 1 ("Native America") examines the development of human societies in the Americas from first settlement to the fifteenth century. We look in comparative detail at the two most notable cradles of civilization, Mesoamerica and the Andes. Not all indigenous peoples lived in these two areas, however, and the entire range of native societies present a vast and varied picture; we therefore offer four categories of Native American societies – concentrated, segmented, semisedentary, and nonsedentary.

The pre-1492 background of Spain and Portugal is the subject of Chapter 2 ("Castile and Portugal"). We emphasize the nature of social organization in the Iberian Peninsula, the importance of urban life, and the central role Castile played in Spain's fifteenth-century formation. Above all, our concern is to identify some of the key historical patterns that help to explain what Iberians later did in the Americas.

The societies of sub-Saharan Africa – especially West and West Central Africa – made up the third civilization brought into contact with others as a result of Iberians crossing the Atlantic. Past historians have tended to begin discussion of African roles in the colonial Americas with the Atlantic slave trade. But because people of African descent made major contributions to colonial Latin American societies, we have devoted a full chapter to the African background. Chapter 3 ("Atlantic Africa") traces the development of civilization in the region, focusing on a cultural description of peoples in the two regions from where most African slaves in the Americas originated (West Africa and West Central Africa).

By the end of Chapter 3, the stage is set for the triumphs and tragedies of the dramatic encounter of Iberians, western Africans, and Native Americans in the sixteenth century.



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Native America

On the mainland the Indians eat human flesh. They are more given to sodomy than any other people. There is no justice among them. They go naked. They have no respect either for love or for virginity. They are stupid and silly. They have no respect for truth, save when it is to their advantage.

Letter by a Spanish friar

EARLY IN THE SPANISH INVASION OF THE AMERICAS, a Dominican friar wrote these words to the Council of the Indies, the royal council responsible for colonial matters. Few Spaniards derided native peoples in such hostile terms, especially in official correspondence. Yet although the European discovery of the Americas generated a wide variety of opinion on the nature of Native Americans, including a great official debate on the topic in the sixteenth century, the overwhelming European tendency was to view natives as a single, inferior people. Europeans called them *indios* or *Indians* because the Americas were “the Indies,” a name originally given to East Asia but applied to the Americas after Columbus encountered the New World while looking for a sea route to East Asia.

The name *Indian* is thus a confusing product of the twists of fifteenth-century European history. But it is more than that. It also symbolizes the homogeneous and pejorative identity assigned to Native Americans. To understand the extraordinary encounter that gave rise to colonial Latin America, we must understand the nature of native societies before the European invasion; and to do that, we must see through that “Indian” identity and into the rich and diverse world of precolonial cultures and civilizations. This chapter is an introduction to those cultures and civilizations, placing them briefly in their historical and geographical contexts, and offering some analytical tools to help grasp something of their complexity and diversity (Map 1.1).

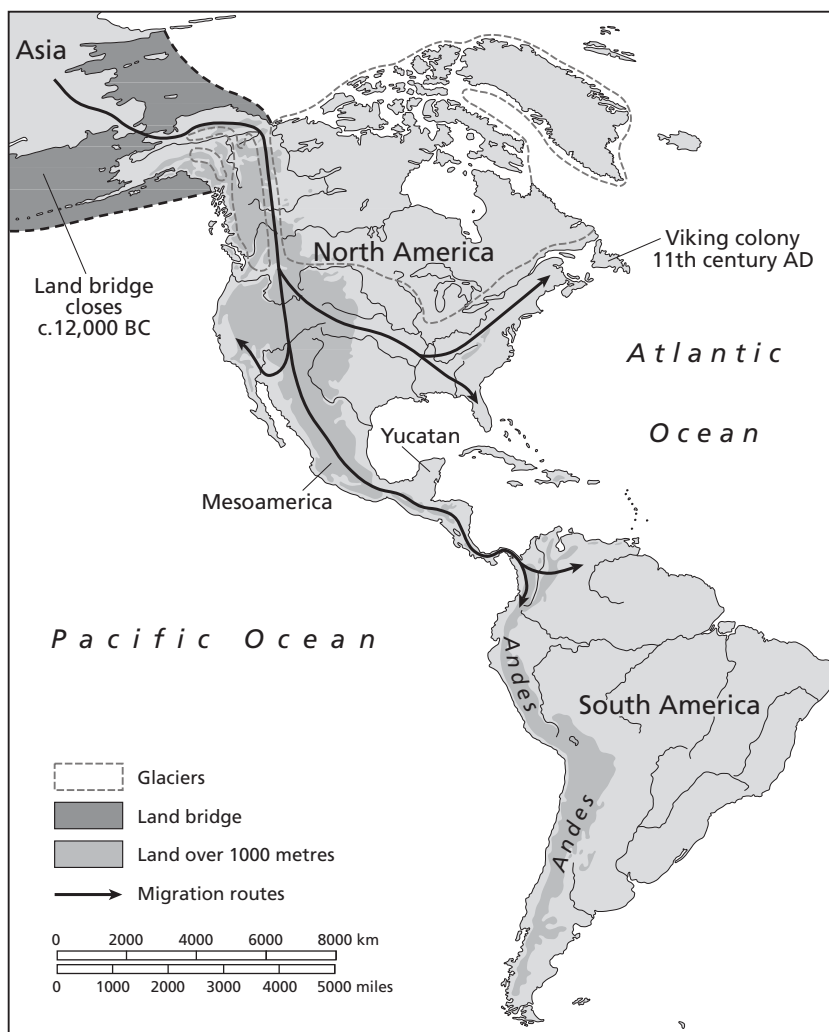
TIMELINE

20,000–12,000 BC: people cross the land bridge from Asia into the Americas

6000–3000 BC: people make the transition from hunting and gathering to sedentary lifestyles in many regions

200 BC–AD 1300: great civilizations develop in Mesoamerica and the Andes

1420s–1520s: the Mexica (Aztec) Empire in Mesoamerica and the Inca Empire in the Andes rise and expand



Map 1.1
 Early Migrations into the Americas

“Aztecs” and “Amazons”: Categorizing Native Americans

Human beings did not evolve independently in the Americas, but human civilizations did. That simple sentence encapsulates much that is important about the Native American past.

Homo sapiens evolved in Africa and began to migrate to Europe and Asia at least 100,000 years ago. Human beings entered North America by walking across a land bridge from Asia more than 20,000 years ago. By at least 12,000 years ago, bands of hunters lived throughout the Americas, from Canada’s Northwest Territories to Tierra del Fuego at the tip of South America. Around that time, rising sea levels at the end of the last Ice Age caused the land bridge from Asia to disappear, leaving the peoples whom we will call Native Americans cut off from the rest of the globe until the European invasion that began in 1492.

Native America

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There were some exceptions to this isolation; around AD 1000, the Vikings, who had shortly before set up outposts in Greenland, planted a settlement in Newfoundland, on Canada's east coast, which survived for several decades. Others may have visited the Americas from Asia, Africa, and Europe prior to 1492, but clear evidence of such voyages, much less their consequences, is sorely lacking. Even the Viking colony in Newfoundland, the only one for which there is firm archaeological and written evidence, seems not to have had any impact on the development of Native American societies. Attempts by scholars and others to show that Native Americans were influenced by other human civilizations have failed to persuade most people.

Still, the notion that Native Americans could not have developed sophisticated civilizations on their own goes all the way back to Columbus and constitutes an important part of the perceptions and misconceptions of native peoples by nonnatives (see In Focus 1.1). Early European travelers to the Americas, from Columbus to Sir Walter Raleigh a century later, brought with them preconceived notions of what natives would look like. As a result, Columbus reported to the Spanish monarchy that one Caribbean island was inhabited by cannibals, another by people with tails, and a third by Amazons – women warriors who lived in communities entirely without men. Raleigh looked in vain for acephali, or headless people, described to him by Spaniards and natives in the Americas as having “their eyes in their shoulders, and their mouths in the middle of their breasts.”

Such human monsters are no longer pursued, yet Native Americans continue to be viewed primarily through the prism of the nonnative imagination; the Mexica, for example, have repeatedly been mythologized as the “Aztecs,” alternately derided as cannibalistic savages and celebrated as symbols of Mexican national glory. Despite the immense amount of knowledge that archaeologists, ethnohistorians, and other scholars have compiled on the native peoples of central Mexico, the popular and common image of them still centers on so-called Aztec human sacrifices – as did the prejudiced first impression by conquistadors such as Hernando Cortés and Bernal Díaz.

The reluctance of sixteenth-century Spaniards to believe that Native Americans built their own civilizations is thus part of a persistent thread of Western thought. In the decades after Columbus, it was argued that American natives were descended from one of the lost tribes of Israel or refugees from Atlantis, or they were “taught” civilization by Egyptians and Carthaginians. We may chuckle at such theories, but they were as popular in their day as were late twentieth-century notions of alien assistance or a lost 10,000-year-old global civilization.

Some sixteenth-century Europeans were willing to credit America's natives with the civilizational developments that were very much still visible

IN FOCUS 1.1



Figure 1.1 From Jan van der Straet, *Nova reperta. Speculum diuersarum imaginum specuatiuarum*, 1638

NOBLE SAVAGERY: EUROPEAN VIEWS OF “INDIANS”

A Dutch artist, Jan van der Straet, engraved the image above around 1575. Titled *America*, it has since been reproduced in numerous books about the New World. The man standing, dressed elaborately and holding an astrolabe and a bannered cross, is Amerigo Vespucci – the Italian navigator after whom the Americas were named. The astrolabe was an instrument used to determine the position and altitude of the sun or of those planets or stars visible to the naked eye. Along with the impressive oceangoing ship in the background, the astrolabe is intended to represent European civilization and the achievement of crossing the Atlantic. Vespucci is thus Western Europe. The naked woman is native America, a representation that is blatantly gendered. The woman and her surroundings convey three related European views of Native Americans: they were innocent (arguably shown in the woman’s pose); they lacked civilization and even culture (reflected in the paucity of material goods, with people depicted as living like the animals among them); and they were barbarous in a highly negative sense (symbolized by cannibalism).

after the Spanish Conquest. One of these was the Franciscan friar Diego de Landa, who asserted that the pyramids and other buildings he saw in the Yucatán “have not been built by any people other than these Indians.” Landa was right. He was referring to the Mayas, but he would have been equally correct making the same observation anywhere in the Americas.

Native America

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Beginning as early as 8,000 years ago, Native American populations began to abandon nomadic hunting in favor of a more settled and permanent existence. The earliest evidence of this transition is found in the Andes region of South America and in Mesoamerica. Beginning about 3000 BC, native peoples in these two regions developed more sophisticated societies and distinctive styles of art and architecture. In this period Andeans developed the great Chavín civilization in the northern Andes, while Mesoamericans produced the great Olmec civilization of Mexico's Gulf Coast. Between 200 BC and AD 1300 a number of distinct civilizations rose and fell in the Andes and Mesoamerica, some of them reaching imperial status and all of them building on and borrowing from their predecessors. Before the period of the Incas, the Moche and the Sicán civilizations stand out in northern Peru, while to the south there rose the Nazca, Huari, and Tiahuanaco. The two greatest civilizations to develop in Mesoamerica before the famous Aztec-Mexica, meanwhile, were Teotihuacán in central Mexico and the Classic Maya. All of these civilizations centered on large, ceremonial cities with substantial stone temple complexes.

Many cultures flourished in Mesoamerica and the Andes in the centuries before Europeans arrived, but it was only in the last hundred years or so before Columbus' first voyage in 1492 that the vast Mexica and Inca empires rose to dominate central Mexico and the Andes, respectively. Their millions of subjects, though diverse, shared many cultural traits as a result of long-standing interregional contacts.

We will return to look at these empires in more detail in Chapter 5. For now, let us get a firmer grasp of the nature of one of the great Native American regional traditions, that of Mesoamerican civilization, by viewing it through ten characteristics or defining features. Those ten features will then be used as a framework for a comparison of Mesoamerican and Andean civilizations (see In Focus 1.2).

Many Mesoamericans lived in cities that featured (1) monumental architecture, in particular pyramids and other massive structures facing large, open plazas. The cities also tended to contain (2) ball courts (see In Focus 1.3) and (3) specialized markets, which operated both at local and regional levels. Such markets featured numerous items, but (4) several items had particular cultural and economic importance – jade (used decoratively), obsidian (used decoratively and to create blades for tools and weapons), and cacao (the chocolate seed used both as money, in bean form, and as a highly prized beverage, in liquid form). Equally significant were the everyday items that formed the basis of the Mesoamerican diet: (5) maize (corn), squash, and beans. Of these, maize was the most important; over millennia, Mesoamericans had not only domesticated maize but also developed a method of preparing it that released niacin, a crucial vitamin.

The Mesoamerican worldview (6) was oriented toward two principles, that of the cardinal directions and that of duality (whereby everything in the

IN FOCUS 1.2

A COMPARISON OF THE TEN MAIN FEATURES OF MESOAMERICAN AND ANDEAN CIVILIZATIONS

Cultural Practice	Mesoamerica	Andes
(1) Monumental architecture	pyramids with plazas	U-shaped temples
(2) Ball game	widespread and important	nonexistent
(3) Public markets	highly specialized	specialized; some suppressed
(4) Precious market goods	jade, obsidian, cacao	shells, textiles, metal goods
(5) Diet base	maize, squash, beans	potatoes, maize, squash
(6) Landscape seen in	terms of cardinal directions	radial terms
(7) Religion	pantheistic, tied to politics	pantheistic, tied to politics
(8) Ritual Executions	of animals; some humans	animals, rarely humans
(9) Planetary knowledge	considerable	considerable
(10) Writing system	complex hieroglyphic writing	quipus, but no writing



Figure 1.2 (a) Tikal (Guatemala), Temple 1; (b) Machu Picchu; (c) Mayan vase depicting a costumed noble; burial offering. Late classical period (AD 600–900) (Copán, Honduras)

universe formed part of a pair, such as day and night, life and death, supernatural and natural, and male and female). These principles were also part of (7) Mesoamerica's complex pantheistic religion (a religion of many gods), which included features such as nature deities, deified royal ancestors, and a multitiered heaven and underworld. At times, human communication with the gods involved (8) sacrificial rituals, ranging from the offering of animals to self-sacrificial bloodletting and the ritualized execution of human captives through decapitation or heart removal.

Related to religious beliefs, but also to Mesoamerican understandings of agricultural cycles, was (9) a sophisticated knowledge of the celestial bodies and their movements. This formed the basis of a complex permutation calendar that featured a long count (rather like our years, centuries, and millennia), a 365-day solar year (like our year), and an additional cycle of 260

IN FOCUS 1.3



Figure 1.3 (a) Four ball-game players in elaborate costumes in front of steps; text mentions the Hix Witz (jaguar mountain) place; (b) Copán ball court

PLAYING BALL

When Spaniards invaded in the sixteenth century, Mesoamericans had been playing rubber ball games for almost three millennia. Ball games were played across a vast region – from Puerto Rico to Honduras, across Mexico to Arizona. Almost 1,600 ancient ball courts have been discovered so far. Called *ullamalitzli* (the ball game) or *tlachtli* (the ball court) by the Mexica and other Nahuas, contests were presided over by Xochipilli, god of the ball game. The game is still played today in northern Mexico, where it is called *ulama*. Hernando Cortés was so impressed by the Mexica game that he took a team of ball-players back to Spain, where they played for Charles V.

The ball game had profound ritual significance in Mesoamerica; it was as important as ball-playing sports are to modern societies. It was also a cosmic ceremony, with the two teams representing life's great dualities. Players struck rubber balls with their hips and buttocks (and, less commonly, arms and elbows), wearing leather hip guards; elite players wore more elaborate gear (as in the illustration here from a Classical Maya pot). Courts varied in shape but typically had two stone sides with a vertical hoop on each side (seen here, from the court at Copán).

days. Calendrical knowledge, religious beliefs, and – above all – political and historical records were all written down on materials ranging from fig-bark paper to bone and stone; for Mesoamericans had developed (10) a complex hieroglyphic writing system – more accurately, a set of three related systems, named after the Mexica (Aztecs), Mixtecs, and Mayas. These systems were partly pictographic and partly phonetic. The most complete system was that of the Mayas, meaning that the literate Maya minority could express anything they wanted in writing. The sophistication and cultural significance of writing also meant that, in the sixteenth century, Nahuas, Mixtecs, Mayas, and some other Mesoamerican groups would easily make the transition to alphabetic writing.

For their part, Andean cities were also carefully planned and oriented, and they contained similarly oriented (1) stone or adobe temples of great size, some of them pyramidal but more often U-shaped. As in Mesoamerica (and unlike ancient Egypt), the enormous monuments served as stages for religious–political drama rather than personal sepulchers for elites – though there were (2) no ball courts to compare to those in Mesoamerica.

Andean cities were also (3) places of material exchange and craft specialization. Items traded over great distances included (4) *Spondylus* and other marine shells, salt, fine textiles, and a variety of utilitarian and decorative metal items. Andean metallurgy was more advanced and widespread than that of Mesoamerica; smiths worked with gold, silver, copper, tin, and even platinum.

The Andean diet varied but core foods included (5) potatoes and other high-altitude tubers, maize, beans, squash, and capsicum peppers. At lower altitudes, manioc (a tuber), seafood, and freshwater fish were equally important. Guinea pigs, or *cuyes*, and llamas, the only domesticated animal of any size in the Americas, were eaten on special occasions; curiously, llamas were never milked. Tobacco was used in ritual healing ceremonies, but from Colombia to Chile, mildly stimulating coca leaves and maize beer were the preferred stimulants. Intensive agriculture entailed complex terraces, aqueducts, and raised fields.

These human-constructed features in the landscape, along with many natural ones, were – like the ubiquitous ancestor mummies (see In Focus 1.4) – regarded as sacred. Unlike Mesoamericans, Andeans conceived of the landscape in (6) radial rather than in cardinal terms. Surviving temples contain sculptures of fierce, semi-human feline and reptilian creatures, suggesting (7) religious themes still evident in lowland South American shamanism. Religion and politics were not separate concerns, however, as Andean temples from the earliest to latest times were clearly the site (like their counterparts in Mesoamerica) of (8) ritual executions, practiced on a relatively small scale (“ritual execution” is more neutral than “human sacrifice,” a phrase that carries much negative, even racist,