

# EMPIRES IN THE AMERICAS

## The Olmecs

Growing and trading crops helped early Americans form more complex societies. The first American cultures emerged in Mesoamerica and along the western coast of South America. About 1200BC, a people called the Olmec (OHL-mehk) built what may be the oldest culture in Mesoamerica. Based on farming and trade, the Olmecs lasted about 800 years.

The Olmec set up farms in the tropical lowlands along the Gulf of Mexico. They grew beans, produced salt, and traded with people living inland [away from the coast]. They exchanged salt and beans for jade and obsidian, or volcanic glass. Olmec artisans used the jade for jewelry. They made sharp knives from the obsidian. The Olmec created centers for religious ceremonies. In these areas, they built pyramids and other stone monuments.

About 400BC, the Olmec culture collapsed. Historians are not sure why this happened. The causes for decline might have been a severe drought or revolts by populations. Whatever the reason, the cities occupied by the Olmecs were abandoned.

## The Maya

In 1839, an ancient city was discovered by archaeologists. This hidden city was covered by centuries with vines and trees. The people who had built the city were called the Maya. These early Americans were the ancestors of the millions of Maya who live in present-day Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Belize.

About 300AD, the Maya developed a complex culture in parts of southern Mexico and Central America. The ancient Maya faced many challenges in the area that they settled, which was called Peten (peh-TEHN). Thick forests nearly blocked out sunlight, and stinging insects filled the air. Yet, the ancient Maya prospered.

Swamps and sinkholes gave the Maya a year-round source of water. Sinkholes gave the Maya access to a network of underground rivers and streams. The Maya began to develop a society. They worked together to clear forested areas. They planted fields of corn and other crops and built cities under government direction.

About 900AD, the Maya culture collapsed. Historians do not know why this happened. Some evidence shows that conflict and warfare increased among city-states. Also, erosion and overuse of the soil may have caused a drop in food production. Too little food would have led to illnesses and starvation.

## The Aztec

The Aztec came to power in Mesoamerica during the 1300s AD. The early Aztec were hunters and warriors. About 1200AD, they moved into central Mexico. For many years, the Aztec had been searching for a home they believed had been promised to them by their sun god. In 1325,

the Aztec took refuge on a swampy island in Lake Texcoco. Although the land was hardly welcoming, the Aztec chose this site to be their new home, and they built a wondrous city there.

For the next 100 years, Aztec workers built temples, palaces, and homes in Tenochtitlan. The city eventually became the largest city in Mesoamerica. It was the center of a web of trade routes that reached throughout Mexico. By 1500AD, Aztec armies had conquered much of what is today Mexico. The new empire was a collection of partly independent territories governed by local leaders. The Aztec ruler supported these leaders in return for tribute – goods or money paid by conquered peoples to their conquerors.

In the early 1500s, explorers from Spain traveled to the Americas seeking wealth. Hernan Cortes was one of these explorers, and he came upon the Aztec in 1519. Cortes rounded up Native Americans from other civilizations to help him take over the Aztec. He took control of Tenochtitlan in November of 1519. By June of 1521, most of the Aztec had died from warfare or from the spread of smallpox, a disease that Europeans inadvertently [accidentally] spread to the Americas. The capital was burned and the greatly structured Aztec civilization was no more.

## The Inca

In the late 1300s AD, the Inca were only one of many groups that fought over scarce fertile land in the valleys of the Andes Mountains. From their capital of Cuzco, the Inca raided nearby groups and seized territory. Within 100 years, the Inca had created a powerful empire. A series of strong emperors helped build the Inca Empire. Pachacuti (PAH-chah-KOO-tee) was the first of these rulers. In the 1430s AD, he launched a campaign of conquest. The two emperors who followed his reign continued this expansion, building the largest empire in the Americas.

Like Hernan Cortes, a Spanish explorer named Vasco Nunez de Balboa also sailed to the Americas. In 1513, he led a band of soldiers across the mountains of present-day Panama to look for a golden empire. Balboa found a sea, known today as the Pacific Ocean, but he never found the golden empire he was looking for. He was beheaded by a Spanish official. One of Balboa's soldiers, Francisco Pizarro, decided to find the empire that Balboa had sought.

The Inca ruled the empire that Balboa and Pizarro wanted to conquer. By the 1530s, the powerful Inca Empire had become considerably weaker. In 1532, Spanish messengers invited the Inca ruler to meet with Pizarro. At the meeting, Pizarro demanded that the ruler give up his gods. The ruler refused, and Pizarro ordered an attack on the Inca ruler and his 4,000 unarmed bodyguards. The Inca ruler was imprisoned, found guilty by a Spanish court, and sentenced to death.

The Spanish king rewarded Pizarro by making him governor of Peru. Pizarro chose a new emperor for the Inca, who had to follow Pizarro's orders. The Spanish could not gain complete control of the Inca Empire and were still fighting Inca rebels in 1541. The conquest of Peru opened most of South America to Spanish rule, and Spain would eventually create the world's first global empire.