

The First Peoples

Long before Christopher Columbus discovered the New World, a variety of peoples lived in the vast territories that would become North America and South America. They were the first Native Americans. The Anasazi people lived in what is now the southwestern United States. The Marizans, Aztecs, and Incas lived in what are present-day Mexico, Central America, and South America.

Anasazi is from a Navajo word meaning “ancient peoples.” The Anasazis appeared about 5500 BC, living in communal dwellings they built from straw and wood or in caves. Over time, the Anasazis developed other dwellings that were groups of stone or adobe apartments carved into cliffs in the desert country they called home. The Spanish invaders called these dwellings *pueblos*, which means “village” or “people.” Some of these pueblos still exist today at Mesa Verde in southwestern Colorado. The Anasazis were also known for basket-weaving.

The Mayans lived in southern Mexico and in what are now Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras in Central America. They kept written historical records. The Mayan culture generally prospered until Spanish invaders entered the area in the sixteenth century. One of the most famous legacies of Mayan culture is its spectacular pyramids.

The Aztec people lived in Mexico. In AD 1325, they built the city of Tenochtitlan, which is on the site of present-day Mexico City. Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, was a magnificent city and unique because it was located on a group of small islands in Lake Texcoco. Tenochtitlan was considered a holy place because it was home to the Aztec emperor, Montezuma II. The Aztecs believed that the ruler was the embodiment of God on earth.

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The Incas lived in what are now Peru and Ecuador, as well as portions of Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina, all in South America. At one time, the Incas ruled more than 12 million people. One of the Incas' greatest accomplishments was the city of Machu Picchu, which was built high in the Andes Mountains. Machu Picchu had extensive agricultural terracing and many stone buildings. The city looked as though it had been carved out of the mountains.

- What do you think has contributed to the longevity of the Native American ruins?

- In the past, cultures have been extinguished by invaders. Could this happen today? Explain.

- When the U. S. started taking over Indian territory, the government confined the Indians to live on the land in remote areas. What effects would this have had on their way of life?