

The Earliest Americans

© Student Handouts, Inc.
www.studenthandouts.com

Paleo-Indians

○ Paleo-Indians

- *Paleo* from *palaios* (“ancient” in Greek)
- *Indians* from Columbus’ mistake

○ Beringia

- Ice sheet across the Bering Strait that connected what’s now Russia (Siberia) and Alaska
- Paleo-Indians crossed Beringia circa 12,000 years ago
- Spread quickly throughout the Americas

○ Anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians look at artifacts, blood types, genes (DNA), and languages

Clovis People

- Identified by their style of spear point
- Plentiful circa 11,500 years ago
- Hunter-gatherers—mammoth, mastodon, etc.
- Circa 11,000 years ago—large animals became extinct
 - Unknown if extinctions caused by climate change, natural causes, or over-hunting
- Clovis culture disappeared with big game

Cultural Change

- ◉ Post-Clovis artifacts reveal hooks for fishing and spear points for killing smaller game
- ◉ Farming culture developed
- ◉ Domestication of plants
 - Circa 5,000 years ago—maize (corn) cultivated in Mexico
 - Stable food supply

Civilization

- ◉ Stable food supply = permanent settlements
- ◉ Excess food supply = job specialization
 - Builders, leaders, organizers, potters, weavers, etc.
- ◉ Civilization—complex culture, centered around cities, with people working at specialized occupations who operate under complex government

The Olmec

- ◉ Developed circa 1500 BCE along the Gulf of Mexico
- ◉ Mesoamerican civilizations' "mother culture"
- ◉ Earthen temple mounds
- ◉ Earliest American written language
- ◉ Cultural diffusion through trade

The Maya

- Developed in modern-day Guatemala
- Civilization but **not** an empire—each religious center (city) independent
- Achievements
 - Knowledge of astronomy—developed a calendar
 - Mathematics—invented a symbol for zero
 - Religiously significant rubber ball game with stone-walled playing courts
- Declined circa 900 CE but culture survived throughout Central America and Yucatan

Review Questions

1. How and when did Paleo-Indians first arrive in the Americas?
2. What tools and evidence do historians use to understand the past in the absence of written records?
3. Who were the Clovis people?
4. When and where was maize (corn) first cultivated?
5. How does agriculture lead to civilization?
6. What did the Olmec contribute to civilization?
7. What did the Maya contribute to civilization?

Teotihuacán

- Built circa 300 CE in the Valley of Mexico
 - Planned city was one of the world's largest
 - Neighborhoods arranged by societal role, etc.
- Political and religious structure
 - Priest-rulers
 - Numerous gods, such as Quetzalcóatl
 - Sacrifices of agricultural products, animals, and humans
- 750 CE—city ended violently

Aztecs

- Invaders from what is now northern Mexico
- Circa 1325—settled on Lake Texcoco
- Aztec empire covered most of what is now central Mexico
- 1450—period of drought and famine brought on massive amounts of human sacrifice
- By 1500—recovery with population of approximately 250,000—world's most populous city

Hohokam

- ◉ Located in the southwestern American desert
- ◉ Irrigation—dams collected water and canals carried water to crops
- ◉ Agriculture—“Three Sisters”—beans, corn, and squash
- ◉ Declined circa 1300

Anasazi

- ◉ Located on the Colorado plateau
- ◉ Practiced irrigation farming alongside hunting and gathering
- ◉ Towns built into sides of canyons
 - Pueblo Bonito in what is now Chaco Canyon, New Mexico—trading center
- ◉ Declined circa 1300

Hopewell

- ◉ Located in North American Eastern Woodlands
- ◉ Circa 500 BCE-700 CE—Hopewell culture in Ohio Valley
- ◉ Mound-builders—leaders buried in large earthen mounds
- ◉ Circa 700 CE—large defensive earthworks last evidence of this culture

Mississippian Culture

- Developed in Mississippi Valley and southeast portion of what is now the United States, along flood plains
- Distinctive feature—flat-topped mounds
- Cahokia
 - Located in modern-day western Illinois
 - Over 100 mounds
 - Population approximately 30,000
- Remnants of Mississippian culture survived to 1700

Review Questions

1. What was Teotihuacán and how did it operate?
2. Describe the world's most populous city in 1500 and the people who lived there.
3. What were the "Three Sisters"?
4. Describe the towns of the Anasazi.
5. Where was the Hopewell culture located?
6. Describe Cahokia and the people who lived there.
7. Based on your knowledge of Native American cultures, what causes cultures and civilizations to rise and fall? Explain.