

CHAPTER 17:

HAY NATIVOS

Mesoamerican Civilizations: 1800 BC to 1500 AD

*A lonesome warrior stands in fear of what the future brings,
He will never hear the beating drums or the songs his brothers sing.
Our many nations once stood tall and ranged from shore to shore
But most are gone and few remain and the buffalo roam no more.
— Tommy Flamewalker Manasco*

Looking at America today, it is easy to see the social, cultural, and architectural heritage of the white settlers and their descendants and of the African slaves and their descendants, but it is much harder to find the heritage of the millions of original Americans who populated North and South America. Mostly, this is because huge numbers of those Native Americans were conquered and killed, either by new diseases or European guns. Cultural ignorance and a self-centered worldview allowed the white settlers to dismiss the Native Americans as "savages."

We now know a lot more about the civilizations that lived in America before the land got that name. We know about the many tribes and societies that existed off the rich soil or followed the great herds of buffalo. We know about the three major empires of America – the Maya, Aztec and Inca civilizations. These people built large cities to live in and giant temples to worship their gods. They didn't live in paradise – owning slaves was common in Mesoamerica. But they also demonstrated lots of practical knowledge – from astronomy to farming techniques to medicines. These were the original Americans.

HAY NATIVOS

LYRICS

*Hey boys and girls, today we're
Going to be talking about
Mesoamerica.
After the Ice Age, people began
Moving across the Bering Strait
Into North America. They left
Northeast Asia and migrated
Through what is now Alaska, all
The way down to South America.
By the Middle Ages, these people
Had gotten organized. Some of
These civilizations were far more
Advanced than the Europeans
Would ever imagine.*

*In modern-day Veracruz,
Archaeologists
Pick up a pair of clues.
They saw pyramids
And giant stone heads,
And learned they belonged
To the Olmecs.
They discovered
The mother culture,
The first cities, artisans, sculptors.
Now that's around 1200 BC,
The Maya came next
With similarities.
Advanced agriculturists
In the Yucatan,
With city-states,
The illest that you could plan.
Like Tikal, they found in Guatemala,
They used intercropping and
Reservoirs for water.
They had a calendar
And a writing system.*

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Sometime around 1000 BC, huge earth mounds began to appear in various parts of North America. These were grass-covered structures made of dirt, shaped in a variety of ways – cones, ridges and pyramids. Historians believe they were ceremonial and funeral mounds, and they called the people who built them **moundbuilders**. By about 700 AD most of these peoples had begun to farm, rather than roam as nomads.

The **Puebloans** lived in what is now southwestern United States in the first century AD. They were famous for their ceramics and beautiful wall paintings. But what was perhaps most remarkable about them was the way they built their homes – they carved them right out of the cliffs. People still visit these structures today at places like Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado. Historians remain unsure why the Puebloans abandoned these wall-side villages around 1300.

Archaeologists pick up a pair of clues. They saw pyramids and giant stone heads...

The **Olmec civilization** was a lost, forgotten civilization until 1862. That year, a man named José Melgar y Serrano was wandering around the forest when he stumbled upon a giant head made of stone. Later, many more giant heads were found, as well as some pyramids – the remnants of the Olmec civilization.

FLOCAB SPITS FACTS LIKE AN ALMANAC

Don't have horses, so they run the fastest...

You may have an image in your head of Native Americans riding around on horses. In fact, Native Americans had never seen horses until the Spanish brought them over from Europe. You may also think that Italians have been making pizza for thousands of years. But, no. They didn't have any tomatoes. Just as horses were native to Europe and Asia, tomatoes were native to the Americas. Once the Spanish brought tomatoes back to Europe, though, the Italians began to use it as the basis for lots of their now-famous dishes.



Learned they belonged to the Olmecs. They discovered the mother culture...

The first culture to build cities in the Americas was probably the Olmecs. They lived along the Gulf of Mexico beginning around 1200 BC and built great pyramids in the jungle. The Olmec culture is sometimes called the mother culture of Mesoamerica because they strongly influenced the societies that would follow.

The first cities, artisans, sculptors...

Some of the Olmecs were sculptors and artisans, and some historians believe they created the first writing system in the Americas. They were a ritualistic people, governed by both kings and priests, and they were fascinated with the jaguar, something that many other Mesoamerican cultures would pick up on. They considered this jungle cat a manifestation of God on Earth. They also traded with other peoples, and may even have come up with a calendar. Olmec items have been found in various parts of Central America, but they're most famous for the large **stone heads** they carved. Imagine having to sculpt a rock the size of a car into the likeness of a person without metal tools! Historians don't know as much about them as some other ancient societies.

The Maya came next with similarities...

The next great civilization in the Americas was probably the **Maya**. In fact, archaeologists considered them the first for a long time. They were a farming people who lived on the Yucatan Peninsula between 300 and 900 AD. The Maya bore a lot of similarities to the Olmec.

HAY NATIVOS

LYRICS continued

But a ball game
Where you could die a victim.
Slavery, sacrifice, it was a risky time.
And we don't know why they
Disappeared in 869!

Sudamerica, Centroamerica,
Mesoamerica:
Hay nativos! (There are natives!)
Olmec, Maya, Aztec, Inca,
The original American thinkers.

Sudamerica, Centroamerica,
Mesoamerica:
Hay nativos! (There are natives!)
Tikal, Tenochtitlan,
Machu Picchu: cities of some of
The original people.

Who has next?
Oh, that would be the Aztecs.
Don't have horses,
So they run the fastest.
They kept control of a portion of
The atlas in Mexico,
Around Lake Texcoco.
They're like, "If we roam we might
Not be strong."
So they built a big city,
Tenochtitlan.
A city on a lake.
They bathed twice a day.
Plant corn, grind it up.
Make it into pancakes.
They had schools.
Every kid attended.
They learned how to write.
Yep, also how to fight.
Imagine it one day.
Your teacher was like,
"After math, I'll show you

Advanced agriculturists in the Yucatan...

Most Mayan men lived in villages, and were advanced agriculturalists. We know this because they practiced **intercropping**, where certain crops are planted together, using one to stimulate the growth of the other.

With city-states, the illest that you could plan. Like Tikal, they found in Guatemala...

But they also built huge cities. Some archaeologists estimate that one such municipality, **Tikal**, now found in Guatemala, was home to as many as 100,000 residents at one time. There were more than 3,000 buildings there, some towering high over the jungle. The Mayans were very advanced in mathematics, astronomy and engineering. In Tikal this manifested in their construction of reservoirs to hold water for the city. The water moved between manmade lakes using gravity in such a manner that they must have had a deep knowledge of mathematics.

They had a calendar and a writing system...

Like the Olmecs, the Maya also constructed pyramids, were great artists, created a writing system, and definitely had a calendar (and an accurate one at that). They built actual city-states across Central America complete with temples, palaces and small stadiums.

But a ball game where you could be a victim. Slavery, sacrifice, it was a risky time...

For all of their artistic and scientific sophistication, though, they were a brutal people. They had slaves, and

Floabulary

human sacrifice was common. They played a rubber ball game that usually ended in the losers being ritually killed. And they were fierce warriors. Historians don't know why their culture largely disappeared in 869 AD.

Who has next? Oh, that would be the Aztecs...

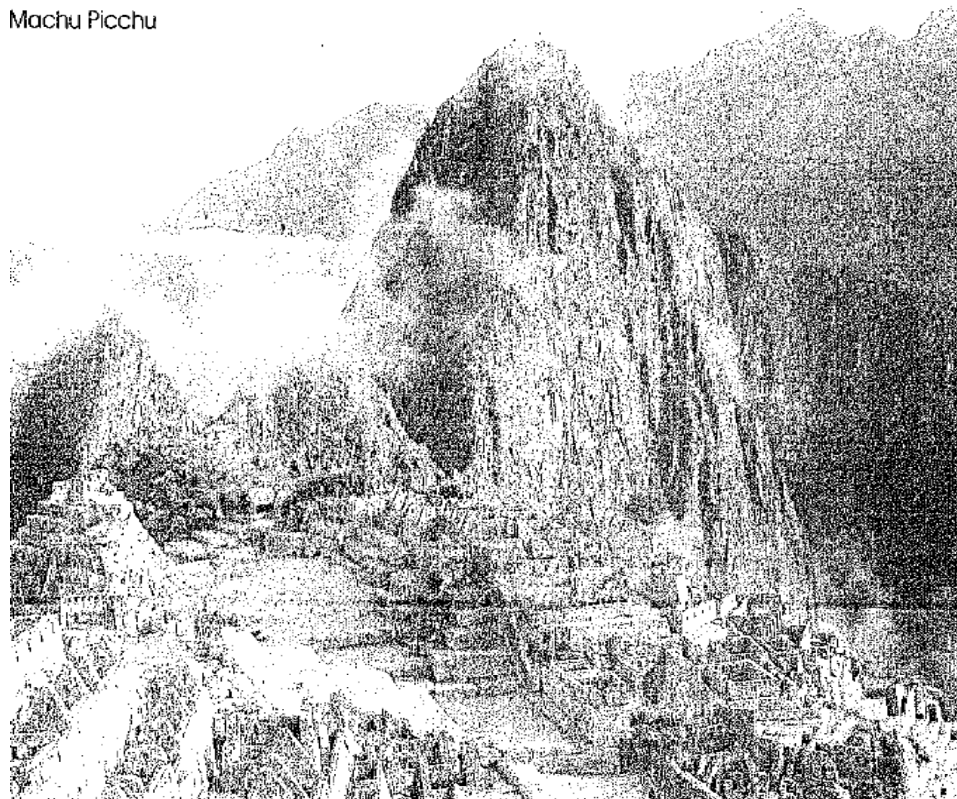
When the Spanish conquistadors smashed their way into the Americas in the 16th century, they were amazed by the **Aztecs**. They were a very sophisticated people. Like the Maya they had a calendar and a writing system, and were religious and warlike.

They built a big city, Tenochtitlan... Sometime between 1200 and 1325,

the Aztec people transformed from nomadic hunters to farmers. The story goes that the Aztec leader at the time was told by their god, Huitzilopochtli, to go to an island in **Lake Texcoco** and set up their homeland. So that's what they did.

They built a large city, **Tenochtitlan**, right on an island in the middle of the lake. They built bridges, or causeways, that connected the island to the mainland. The Aztecs were very clever about using the water all around for *chinampa*, which were small, man-made floating gardens. Historians estimate the population in Tenochtitlan to have been about 200,000 at its height. It's where Montezuma, the famous leader of the

Machu Picchu



HAY NATIVOS

Y Rios continue

How to arrange with an ox
Aztecs would take slaves
And captives from their enemies
That's just part of their tactics
The facts
They were sharper than a cactus
They sacrificed humans
It seemed like madness

Hook

While the Aztecs were in Mexico
The Incas were building a kingdom
Exceptional
At its height in the 12th century
It stretched from Ecuador to Chile
Essentially based at Peru
In the city of Cuzco
To connect various tribes
They used roads
They built aqueducts in the Andes
And they farmed terraces
Y'all, to feed families
We're talking
Over a million residents
They were developing
Some of the best medicines
Plus, the king had style
Machu Picchu
The city of the clouds
But from the ground
It vanished, the secret
Never found by the Spanish
The people asked
Was it used for astronomy?
9,000 feet
And the views are astonishing

Hook

Aztecs when the Spanish invaded, had his palace. His gilded home and the rest of the city were destroyed in 1521 by the Spanish conquistador Hernandez Cortes. But archaeologists have learned a lot about Aztec culture from the ruins of Tenochtitlan, where modern-day Mexico City stands.

They bathed twice a day, plant corn, grind it up, make it into pancakes...

The most common Aztec foods were corn, beans, squash, chilies and tomatoes, all important staples of the Mexican diet to this day. Although they were largely vegetarian, the Aztec people also ate insects like grasshoppers and ants, which are full of protein.

They had schools that every kid attended, they learned how to write, yep, also how to fight...

Through age 14, a child's education was in the hands of his or her parents. Then at 15, every boy and girl was sent to school, though they were taught different things: Girls learned about taking care of the house and raising children, while boys were taught how to read, write and fight.

Aztecs would take slaves and captives from their enemies...

Aztecs seemed to believe that the gods (there were more than 1,000 of them) had sacrificed themselves to create the Earth. So it made sense to the Aztecs that they would have to **sacrifice humans** in order to honor and serve the gods. The Aztecs didn't want to sacrifice the people who lived in their own cities and villages, so they relied on taking slaves and captives from other villages and tribes.

They sacrificed humans, it seems like madness...

The Aztecs took human sacrifice to an amazing level. By their own accounts, they once sacrificed thousands of people in just a few days while they rebuilt a large pyramid. But it wasn't always so bloody. The Aztecs loved gold, and they loved candy – we can thank them for both gum and chocolate.

The Incas were building a kingdom, exceptional...

While the Aztecs ruled what is now Mexico, the Incas were busy in the Andes mountains, where they built the biggest kingdom in all the Americas. Based in **Cuzco, Peru**, the Incan empire, at its height in the 12th century, reigned over a territory spanning modern Ecuador to northern Chile. More than a million people lived in its bounds. And there were supposedly close to 20,000 miles of roads connecting the various tribes who lived under the rule of the Incan king.

They built aqueducts in the Andes...

Incan engineers were as sophisticated as any at the time, building acres of farmland on terraces in the Andes. They constructed forts that still stand today – even though they used no mortar between the blocks. They put up aqueducts, and had some of the best medical techniques of the ancient world.

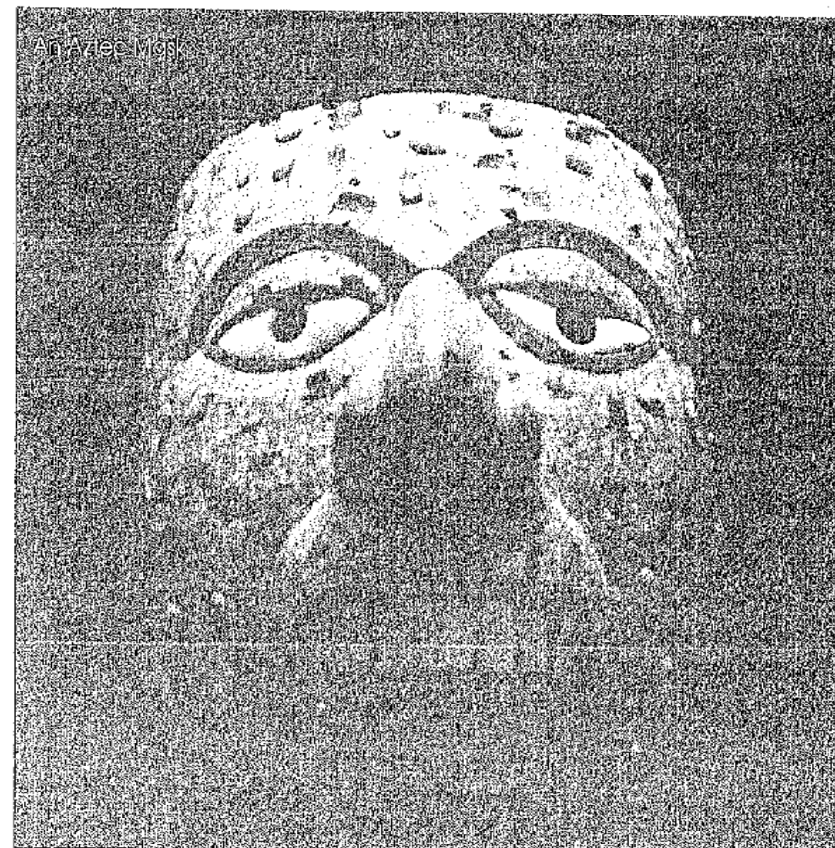
Machu Picchu – the city of the clouds...

Machu Picchu is an extraordinary place for many reasons. It's an ancient city on a 9,000-foot mountaintop with stunning views, but beyond its obvious beauty, it's fascinating because it

cannot be seen from below.

But from the ground, it vanished, The secret, never found by the Spanish...

Historians now think this city from the early 1400s was a secret place. It was home to more than 150 houses and palaces, temples, and baths – all up in the clouds. The buildings were carved out of the granite from the mountain. No one knows for sure what the Incas did there, but it was almost certainly used as an astronomic observatory. The Spanish never found Machu Picchu.



HISTORY SPEAKS

"We are not myths of the past, ruins in the jungle or zoos. We are people and we want to be respected, not to be victims of intolerance and racism."

– Rigoberta Menchú, a Maya, 1992