

# The Earliest Americans

## What You Will Learn...

### Main Ideas

1. Climate changes allowed Paleo-Indians to begin the first migration to the Americas.
2. Early societies existed in Mesoamerica and South America.

### The Big Idea

Native American societies developed across Mesoamerica and South America.

### Key Terms and People

Bering Land Bridge, *p. 6*  
 Paleo-Indians, *p. 6*  
 migration, *p. 6*  
 hunter-gatherers, *p. 6*  
 environments, *p. 7*  
 culture, *p. 7*

### TAKING NOTES

As you read, take notes on the migrations of early peoples to the Americas as well as their earliest societies and locations.

Early Migrations to the Americas	Early Societies and Their Locations

## If YOU were there...

You are living in North America about 10,000 years ago, close to the end of the Ice Age. For weeks, your group has been following a herd of elk across a marshy landscape. This trip has taken you far from your usual hunting grounds. The air is warmer here. There are thick grasses and bushes full of berries. You decide to camp here for the summer and perhaps stay a while.

## How would settling here change your way of life?

### BUILDING BACKGROUND

The first settlers to the Americas probably came in small groups from Asia. Over thousands of years, they moved into nearly every region of North and South America. In the Americas, these people encountered, and adapted to, many different climates and types of land.

## First Migration to the Americas

Many scientists believe that the first people arrived in North America during the last Ice Age. At the start of the Ice Age, Earth's climate became intensely cold. Large amounts of water froze into huge, moving sheets of ice called glaciers. As a result, ocean levels dropped more than 300 feet lower than they are today. When the sea level fell, a land bridge between northeastern Asia and present-day Alaska was exposed. Geographers call this strip of land the **Bering Land Bridge**. Although no one knows exactly when or how people crossed into North America, evidence suggests that people called **Paleo-Indians** crossed this bridge into Alaska between 38,000 and 10,000 BC.

This **migration**—a movement of people or animals from one region to another—took place over a long time. It is believed that Paleo-Indians traveled south into Canada, the United States, and Mexico following herds of animals. Over time, their descendants went as far as the southern tip of South America. These people were **hunter-gatherers**, people who hunted animals and gathered wild plants for food.

# Land Migrations of Early Peoples



**ASIA**

About 8000 BC, Earth's climate grew warmer, and the Ice Age ended. Rising temperatures melted glaciers. Water levels in the oceans rose, and the Bering Land Bridge was covered with water.

The warmer climate at the end of the Ice Age created new **environments, climates and landscapes** that surround **living things**. Large herds of animals such as buffalo and deer ate new short grasses that thrived in the warm climate. As the number of these animals grew, Paleo-Indians hunted these animals for survival.

Varied environments influenced the development of different Native American societies, or groups that share a culture. **Culture** is a group's set of common values and traditions, including language, government, and family relationships.

Like all societies, Native American groups changed over time. People planted seeds, and eventually they learned to breed animals, farm, and grow plants. Maize, or corn, was one of their most important early crops. Later, they learned to grow beans and squash. Farming allowed people to stop moving around looking for food and to settle in one place. With adequate food supplies, settlements could support larger populations. As populations grew, more advanced societies began to develop.

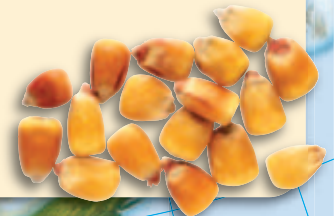
**READING CHECK** Drawing Conclusions How did climate change affect early peoples' migrations?



Mammoth skeleton

**LAURENTIDE ICE SHEET**

Kernels of maize



**NORTH AMERICA**

**MESOAMERICA**



Maya pyramid, Chichén Itzá, Mexico

**SOUTH AMERICA**

## **GEOGRAPHY SKILLS**

### **INTERPRETING MAPS**

- 1. Movement** In what general direction did early peoples migrate?
- 2. Human-Environment Interaction** What natural features affected the route people took from Alaska to southern North America?

## Early Mesoamerican and South American Societies

Some of the earliest American cultures arose in Mesoamerica, a region that includes the southern part of what is now Mexico and the northern parts of Central America.

### ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

**develop** the process of growing or improving

### THE IMPACT TODAY

On the site of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, workers filled the lake to build Mexico City, the modern-day capital of Mexico.

### Olmec and Maya

Around 1200 BC the Olmec developed the earliest known civilization in Mesoamerica. The Olmec are known for their use of stone in architecture and sculpture. They built the first pyramids in the Americas, and they created sculptures of huge stone heads. When their civilization ended around 400 BC, trade had spread Olmec culture throughout the region.

Like the Olmec, the Maya grew maize and other crops and lived in small villages. These villages traded goods with each other, and by about AD 200, the Maya were building large cities.

Maya cities had pyramids, large stone temples, palaces, and bridges. The Maya also paved large plazas for public gatherings and built canals to control the flow of water through the cities.

In the 900s Maya civilization began to collapse. Historians are still not sure what caused this great civilization's decline.

### Aztec

The Aztec were fierce warriors, and their superior military ability was key to their success. Around the mid-1100s AD, the Aztec migrated south to central Mexico. They conquered many towns, made alliances to build their empire, and controlled a huge trade network.

In AD 1325, the Aztec founded their capital, Tenochtitlán (tay-nawch-teet-LAHN), on an island in Lake Texcoco. It became the greatest city in the Americas and one of the world's largest cities. The city's island location made travel and trade difficult, so the Aztec built raised roads to connect the island to the shore.

Trade and tribute paid by conquered people in the form of cotton, gold, and food made the Aztec rich. By the early 1500s, they ruled the most powerful state in Mesoamerica.

### Inca

The Inca began as a small tribe in the Andes Mountains of South America. They named their capital city Cuzco (koo-skoh). In the

The ancient Maya city of Palenque was a major power on the border between the Maya highlands and lowlands. Its great temples and plazas were typical of the Classic Age of Maya civilization.



mid-1400s, the Inca began to expand their territory. By the 1500s the empire stretched along the Pacific coast from what is now northern Ecuador to central Chile. In time, the empire was home to about 12 million people. The Inca formed a strong central government with a king as ruler. The official language of the empire was Quechua. Because there was no written language, records were kept on a system of knotted strings called *quipu*.

The Inca are known for building and for art. Massive buildings and forts were made of huge stone blocks. An advanced system of highways ran the length of the empire. Paved roads and rope bridges connected all parts of Inca territory. This enabled the Inca to communicate with and control their large empire.

**READING CHECK Summarizing** What early civilizations existed in Mesoamerica and South America?

**SUMMARY AND PREVIEW** Early people migrated into North and South America and developed societies. In the next section you will learn about Native American cultures in North America.

## Aztec and Inca Civilizations



## Section 1 Assessment

### Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People

- a. Recall** What was the Ice Age?
  - b. Summarize** Why were early peoples able to use the **Bering Land Bridge**?
  - c. Predict** Why do you think early peoples in the Americas **migrated** south?
- a. Identify** What is the earliest known civilization in the Americas, and where was it located?
  - b. Analyze** How did the Aztec build such a powerful, rich state?
  - c. Draw Conclusions** Which of the four civilizations discussed do you think was the most highly developed?