

Pre-Colombian Mesoamerican and South American Civilizations

The seminar participants will consider the Native American populations from 1500 BC until the coming of Columbus in the region of Mexico through South America. Many important ancient civilizations developed in this area, including the Incas, Moche, Chimu, Olmecs, Zapotecs, Teotihuacans, Mayas and Aztecs. These cultures developed complex societies, reached high levels of technological evolution, built monumental constructions, and shared many cultural concepts. In this seminar we will investigate the peoples and civilizations of the lower Americas before 1500 AD. It will be of interest to explore the emergence of agriculture, the development of village life (cities) and the rise of complex societies (civilizations) as well as their religious and scientific practices. Each participant will choose one of these early civilizations and will learn and convey to the group the prehistorical and cultural activities of these indigenous peoples. Let us try to understand the relationship between the landscape, material culture, architecture and the political organizations of these groups that existed before the 15th century.

American civilizations at the time of European encounter possessed many impressive accomplishments. For instance, the Aztecs built one of the most impressive cities in the world, Tenochtitlan, the ancient site of Mexico City, with an estimated population of 200,000. American civilizations also displayed impressive accomplishments in astronomy and mathematics. So how do anthropologists define civilization, or true states?. Usually this most complex form of political system must be based on agriculture but must also have urban settlements. It must have a centralized leadership and bureaucracy or social hierarchy and usually a centralized religion. There would be expected to be monumental architecture and elaborate engineering developments. There will typically be a market economy with taxes and tribute to pay for it all, a standing military to protect it and a writing system to keep records of it all.

Some of these civilizations had long faded by the time of the first permanent European arrivals (c. late 15th–early 16th centuries), and are known only through archaeological investigations. Others were contemporary with the colonial period, and were described in historical accounts of the time. A few, such as the Maya, had their own written records. Because most Christian Europeans of the time viewed such texts as heretical, they destroyed many of these texts. Only a few hidden documents have survived to today, giving modern historians glimpses of ancient culture and knowledge.

Many available books can be found as well as topics available on the internet. Several resource texts include:

The Four Heavens-A new History of the Ancient Maya: Davis Stuart; Princeton University Press; 2026

A Prehistory of South America; Jerry D. Moore; University of Colorado Press;2014

Ancient Mexico and Central America, Archaeology and Culture History; S.T. Evans; Thames and Hudson; 2008

The Maya World; Scott R. Hutson and Traci Ardern; Routledge Press;2022

The Ancient Americas; by W. Bray, E. Swanson and I. Farrington; Phalcon Press Ltd; 1989

The Ancient Kingdoms of Peru; N. Davies, Penguin Books; 1997

The Incas and their Ancestors; M. E. Moseley; Thames & Hudson; 1997