Activity Introduction

Hey there! Today we’re digging into Andean and Mesoamerican civilizations. What better way to kick things off than with a look at where it all began… the culture hearths of civilization. I bet you think I meant to say hearts… I can see why you would think that… but it wasn’t a mess-up. Lemme explain.

Video 1

Oh hey? Are you here to help?

Well, let me give you a little bit of background. The Inca Empire was one of the most advanced and powerful Native American civilizations before it was conquered by the Spaniards. According to this map, the Inca Empire extended into present-day Peru, Ecuador and Chile. The empire lasted from around twelve-hundred to the mid-fifteen-thirties. That’s when it was conquered by the Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro.

I’m not interested in Pizarro right now, however. I mean, I can give you some background on him later if you want. The Inca built cities and fortresses on the highlands and steep slopes of the Andes Mountains, see. The cities consisted of stone houses and religious buildings.

Now…the Inca didn’t use wheeled vehicles, but they did have a vast network of roads through the Andes paved with flat stones… I figure we may be able to find one of these buried in the rainforest… and yes, this is our mission, the city of Machu Picchu.
Another example of an Incan city is the fortress in Cuzco. That was the capital of the Inca Empire.

The highest point in any village was typically reserved for religious purposes…because it was closest to the sun, which represented their major god, Inti. In case you were wondering, the major Incan gods represented the moon, sun, earth, thunder, and the sea.

Now it’s said that the Sun Temple in Machu Picchu was a religious calendar that marked the summer and winter solstices. So we’ll know when we’ve found it… because you know, it’ll have that going for it.

Just so we’re on the same page here…Inca society was organized into a strict hierarchical structure. The Sapa Inca, or ruler, was at the top. Interesting tidbit…excavations by other archaeologists have found that the bodies of Inca royalty were mummified in some of the Andean peaks. That would have been a cool discovery… but this’ll be my first trip down there soo… you know.

Anyway, under the Inca royalty were the temple priests, architects, and regional army commanders. The lowest classes consisted of artisans, army captains, farmers, and herders. The farmers, though, provided most of the subsistence for the population, but they had to pay taxes in gold, which was then, of course, distributed to the higher classes.

I don’t know if I mentioned this already… I didn’t… but the Inca developed drainage systems and canals for irrigation in the highland areas, and they used that irrigation to grow potatoes, tomatoes, cotton, peanuts, and coca. They used llamas for meat and transportatio…and there really were plenty of resources for everyone. With subsistence levels high like that, the population steadily grew.
Was this briefing complete? Or shall I go over some of it again? Keep in mind, of course… that I’ve still got more to tell you before we go a-searchin’ for the elusive… hidden city of Machu Picchu.

**Video 2**

The Inca also had a strong army, by the way. Yeah. They were actually quite fierce conquerors. Using their hierarchical organization and military might, they were quite possibly the largest Native American empire.

So… I guess I should go ahead and tell you a little something about Pizarro. I don’t really think this’ll help us find Machu Picchu… nonetheless, I don’t want you to be distracted… constantly wondering about Pizarro.

So. The great Inca empire was at its height just before it was conquered. However, it was internal strife that made it possible for the Spanish to enter the empire without opposition.

Anyway… Francisco Pizarro arrived in Hispaniola in fifteen-oh-two and joined an expedition to settle Panama in fifteen-nineteen. While he was in Panama, he heard about the possible existence of a rich empire south of Panama. Naturally, he organized three separate expeditions to find the empire and its riches.

His first expedition wasn’t too successful. His second expedition took him to the northern part of the empire in Tumbes. For his third expedition, he got a contract from the Spanish Crown naming him Governor of Peru; and in fifteen-thirty Pizarro, along with a-hundred-and-eighty men, sailed from Panama to Tumbes.
Now something you should know: the Inca experienced some pretty negative effects from contact with Europeans, even before Pizarro’s conquest of the empire. A smallpox epidemic started spreading through the South American continent.

It was smallpox that killed Emperor Huayna Capac and his heir in fifteen-twenty-seven while they were in the northern part of the Inca empire investigating a rumor about unfamiliar men in the area.

Their deaths resulted in a civil war within the empire between Huayna Capac's remaining two sons, Atahualpa and Huáscar. Atahualpa emerged victorious from the struggle. But before Atahualpa could really savor his victory, he was captured by Pizarro and his men, who carried steel weaponry and rode horses.

Believing the Spanish were only interested in raiding the empire, he offered them a ransom of large amounts of gold and silver for his release. Pizarro was like “yeah. Cool.” But once he got the ransom, his men convinced him it was necessary to kill Atahualpa to prevent the Incan leader’s armies from rallying to support him.

They executed Atahualpa in fifteen-thirty-three. After consolidating his control, in fifteen thirty-five Pizarro established Lima as the new capital city. One of Atahualpa’s half-brothers did try to stage a revolt at one point…but it didn’t work out.

*Obviously* nobody can really know what would have happened if the Inca empire hadn’t been devastated by civil war. Maybe they’d have perceived the threat posed by the Spanish. As it was, the decimated armies were really no match for the less numerous but better-armed Spaniards. Ok… So that’s my Pizarro story.

Ready to move on, or do you need me to tell it again?
Reading Passage Introduction

This probably goes without saying, but the Inca weren’t the only impressive civilization that developed in the Americas!! The Maya, Aztec and Olmec also serve as examples of just how sophisticated early American cultures were. Here. Read this!

Video 3

Ok… Ok… So it turned out that Machu Picchu has already been “discovered” by someone. Yeah… Check out this picture. And this one! You know I swear… you miss one archaeologist’s convention… and you’re the last to know.

Maybe I should just permanently isolate myself; you know? I mean… then at least whatever I know will be unique and remarkable! Like the culture hearths! Ever notice that the Americas were significantly isolated from Eurasia and Africa? Yeah. Unlike the other centers of the postclassical world, American civilizations developed entirely outside the world network. That means that all the animals and geography of that region were separated from Africa and Eurasia. But that’s not all.

The peoples of Africa and Eurasia eventually started coming into contact with each other, spreading religions, ideas, tools and agricultural techniques. All of which, again, the Americas were isolated from.

So…how did that isolation affect the Americas? Well, I’ll tell you what it didn’t do…isolation didn’t prevent the Americas from developing! Not at all.

In fact, civilizations in the Americas became much more sophisticated than their predecessors during the postclassical period and even spread over wider areas of the Andes and Central America. You know, with the Inca in the Andes, and the Maya and Aztec in Central America. They weren’t the only ones of course. There were others,
such as the Olmec, who also developed political organization, religion, trade, agriculture and on and on and on.

What I’m trying to say here is that these isolated civilizations were developing and spreading on their own. That’s what I’m gonna do… isolate myself and grow a bigger brain, and a better sense of direction. Look, I know this isn’t for everyone…

The two main American centers of civilization didn’t have regular contact with each other, and sometimes people like to have contact, like with the increasing contact between regions like the Nile River and Mesopotamia.

For the Americas, the lack of increasing contact and the lack of domesticated animals meant that early American civilizations, though extraordinary in many ways, also lagged behind other societies in the level of technology available.

Sounds like if I want to be like them… I’ll have to lag too. Ok… I’m gonna find something to change out my extension chord and adapter for… let me know if you wanna hear any of this again… or not.

**Video 4**

Yup folks… I’m trading in my extension chord for something more contemplative while I’m in isolation… like this toy. Not necessarily *this* toy… but it could be this one. Might as well be this one. Ok… it’s this one.

This is the closest thing I could find to the little children’s toys of Aztec civilization. Yep… nobody bothered using wheels for transportation… who needs that kind of hustle and bustle? No, wheels were simply used for children’s toys. That’s it. They relied solely on individual human strength for carrying their burdens.
Well, ok… groups in the Andes used the llama for carrying light burdens, but Central Americans had no animals for transport and there weren't any animals usable for plowing anywhere either. You know what else they didn’t do? They didn’t practice ironworking, which was used in Eurasia and was spread across cultures through trade and contact.

These civilizations did, however, develop complex agriculture capable of sustaining large population concentrations…for example, the leading Aztec city was far bigger than European cities at the time and amazed the Europeans who eventually made their way to the Americas.

Now that I think about it…In some ways, these impressive civilizations of the Americas almost resembled the earlier stages in civilizations that arose in Eurasia and Africa. But you know… the resulting differences in religion and technology levels between the Americas and Eurasia and Africa guaranteed significant conflict in later encounters, when the Americas were drawn into worldwide contact for the first time.

Geography always plays a big role in the story of our past. For the Americas, geography meant that early civilizations there would develop separately from the rest of the dominant cultures of the world. Without increased contact or trade with those areas, or the animals and geography of the other regions, the Americas would be in a starkly different place than the Europe that arrived on its shores.

So that settles it. I’m going to go develop my own personal civilization in my own brain. I’m Texarkana Bones… and I’m outta here. …unless you need me to tell you about that stuff again…