CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter surveys the development of civilization in the Americas from prehistoric times to the arrival of European explorers in the fifteenth century C.E. The two most prominent centers of civilization in this region were Mesoamerica, in what is today Mexico and Central America, and the Andean region of South America. At the time of the European conquest of the Americas in the sixteenth century, both regions were dominated by powerful expansionist empires—the Aztecs, or Mexica, in Mesoamerica and the Inca in the Andes. In both regions, Spanish conquerors obliterated the native empires and nearly succeeded in obliterating native culture. But in both, native American traditions have endured, overlaid and combined in complex ways with Hispanic culture.

The chapter then gives a detailed account of the four periods of Mesoamerican history before the Spanish conquest, and initially focuses on the emergence of the Olmec culture that was centered on the lowlands of Mexico's Gulf coast. Most of what is known about the Olmecs comes from the archaeological sites of San Lorenzo and La Venta, flourishing between about 1200 and 400 B.C.E. Probably the best known Olmec works of art are the massive stone heads, some more than twenty tons, that have been found at both San Lorenzo and La Venta. Thought to be portraits of Olmec rulers, these were carved from basalt and transported by raft to the centers. After the Olmec civilization faded after about 400 B.C.E., other regions were rising to prominence. These included the thriving site of Monte Alban that served as the capital of a state that dominated the Oaxaca region.

The Classic Period (150 C.E.- 900 C.E.) was a time of cultural fluorescence in Mesoamerica. In Central Mexico, it saw the rise of Teotihuacan, a great city that rivaled the largest cities of the world at the time. In southern Yucatan, the Maya developed a sophisticated system of mathematics and Mesoamerica's most advanced hieroglyphic writing. Indeed, Classic Period urban life in Mesoamerica was richer and on a larger scale than in Europe north of the Alps at the same time. The chapter continues with a detailed accounting of each of these important civilizations. Classic Period cities, with their many temples, plazas, and administrative buildings, were religious and administrative centers whose rulers combined secular and religious authority. It was once thought the Classic Period society was composed of peaceful theocracies, without the chronic warfare that characterized Mesoamerica at the time of the Spanish conquest. It is now clear, however, that warfare was common during the Classic Period and that rulers did
not hesitate to use force to expand their influence and maintain their authority. The ritual sacrifice of captive enemies was also a feature of Classic Period societies.

Between 800 and 900 C.E., Classic Period civilization collapsed in the southern lowlands. The ruling dynasties came to an end, as did the construction of monumental architecture. By about 900 C.E. a people known as the Toltecs rose to prominence. Their capital, Tula, is located near the northern periphery of Mesoamerica. Aztec mythology glorified the Toltecs, seeing them as the fount of civilization and attributing to them a vast and powerful empire to which the Aztecs were the legitimate heirs. Toltec iconography, which stresses human sacrifice, death, blood, and military symbolism, supports their warlike reputation. This civilization was short-lived. By about 1100, Tula was in decline and its influence gone.

The people commonly known as the Aztecs referred to themselves as the Mexica, a name that lives on as Mexico. Because of the dramatic clash with Spanish adventurers that brought their empire to an end, we have more direct information about the Aztecs than any other pre-conquest Mesoamerican people. Aztec conquests ultimately included almost all of central Mexico. After a conquest, the Aztecs usually left the local elite intact and in power, imposing their rule indirectly. But they demanded heavy tribute in goods and labor. Tribute imposed on defeated tribes undermined the stability of the Aztec empire by creating hatred and dissent. The Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, was wealthy, but ultimately at risk, since it was "a beautiful parasite, feeding on the lives and labor of other peoples and casting its shadow over all their arrangements." The chapter continues to discuss Aztec society in some detail.

The Andean region of South America—primarily modern Peru and Bolivia—had, like Mesoamerica, a long history of indigenous civilization when Spanish Conquerors arrived in the sixteenth century. The chapter then details the seven periods of Andean civilization from 3000 B.C.E. to the destruction of the Inca Empire in 1532. Of particular interest are the coastal cultures at Chavin de Huantar about 800 B.C.E., the Nazca culture, which flourished from about 100 B.C.E. to about 700 C.E., and the Moche, which flourished from about 200 to 700 C.E. on the north coast of Peru. The Moche were the most sophisticated smiths in the Andes. They developed innovative alloys, cast weapons and agricultural tools, and used the lost-wax process to create small, intricate works.

By the early sixteenth century, the Incas, expanding from their highland center in Cuzco, had established the most extensive native empire the continent ever saw and ruled several million native Americans over territory that now includes portions of Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Chile. The Incas were not so numerous a people as the Aztecs, nor did they possess so large a military. Instead, the Incas were masters of organization. They compelled conquered tribes to fight for
them by richly rewarding successful warriors and by treating well the conquered tribes who aided them. In this regard the Incas frequently ruled indirectly by coopting local rulers into their service. The Incas sent colonists of their own into conquered regions and undertook resettling some conquered peoples. They required resettled peoples and the elites of conquered peoples to speak Quechua, their own unwritten language, with the result that it remains spoken extensively event today among Indians of the Andean region. A relatively large bureaucracy helped the Incas to institute these policies effectively. By the time the Spanish arrived, the Incas were engaged in a civil war between rival claimants to the throne. The chapter goes on to discuss the agricultural and engineering achievements of the Incas, as well as the Incan economy, society, and political administration, all supported by an extensive network of roads.

**KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS**

1. **Problems in Reconstructing the History of Native American Civilization**: Several difficulties confront scholars trying to understand these ancient civilizations. One is simply the nature of the evidence. Andean civilizations never developed writing, and in Mesoamerica much of the written record was destroyed by time and conquest, and what remained was until recently undeciphered. Archaeology has been successful at teasing out many details of the American past, but we fortunately have narrative accounts of the history and culture of the Aztecs and Inca from Spanish missionaries and officials in the wake of the conquest. But it is almost impossible to know how much they are colored by the conquest and the expectations of the conquerors. Indeed, scholars seeking to understand preconquest Native American civilization and reconstruct its history have had to rely on the language and categories of European thought to describe and analyze peoples and cultural experiences that had nothing to do with Europe.

2. **The Mesoamerican Calendar**: The Mesoamerican calendar and the earliest evidence of writing has been found in the Valley of Oaxaca at Monte Alban. The calendar is based on two interlocking cycles, each with its own day and month names. One cycle of 365 days was tied to the solar year and the other of 260 days when combined produced a "century" of fifty-two years. At the time of the Spanish conquest, all the peoples of Mesoamerica used this fifty-two year calendrical system. Only the Maya developed a
calendar based on a longer time period, anchored--like the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim calendars--to a fixed starting point in the past.

3. **The Collapse of Mayan Civilization**: The cause of the collapse of Classic Period Mayan civilization about 800 C.E. has long been a subject of intense speculation, but the factors that may have contributed to it are becoming clearer. Among them are intensifying warfare, population growth, increased population concentration, and attempts to increase agricultural production that ultimately backfired. Since ambitious building projects continued right up to the collapse, some scholars believe that as a growing proportion of the population was employed in these projects, fewer were left to produce food. Over-farming may then have led to soil exhaustion. Clearly the Maya exceeded the capacities of their resources, but exactly why and how remain unknown.

4. **Aztec Religion and Human Sacrifice**: Human sacrifice on a prodigious scale was central to Aztec ideology, since Huitzilopochtli, the sun god, required the sustenance of human blood to sustain him as he battled the moon and stars each night to rise again each day. On major festivals, thousands of victims might perish. Small children were sacrificed to the rain god Tlaloc, who, it was believed, was pleased by their tears. Although human sacrifice had long been characteristic of Mesoamerican societies, no other Mesoamerican people practiced it on the scale of the Aztecs. Human sacrifice certainly must have intimidated subject peoples and may also have had the effect of reducing the population of fighting age men from conquered provinces, and with it the possibility of rebellion. Together with the heavy burden of tribute, human sacrifice may also have fed resentment and fear, explaining why so many subject people were willing to throw in their lot with Cortes when he challenged the Aztecs.

5. **Ancient Civilizations of the Americas in World Perspective**: Civilization in the Americas before 1492 developed independently of civilization in the Old World. While King Solomon ruled in Jerusalem, the Olmec were creating their monumental stone heads. As Rome reached it apogee and then declined, so did the great city of Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico. As Islam spread from its heartland, the rulers of Tikal brought their city to its greatest splendor before its abrupt collapse. Mayan mathematics and astronomy rivaled that of any other peoples of the ancient world. The encounter between Old World and New, however, would prove devastating for American civilization. The
technology that allowed Europeans to embark on the voyages of discovery and fight destructive wars among themselves caught the great native empires unprepared. Uncertain how to respond to these aggressive foreigners, they succumbed.