Crossing to the Americas

MAIN IDEA
Ancient peoples came from Asia to the Americas and over time developed complex civilizations.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW
Archaeologists and other scientists continue to make new discoveries about these ancient people.

TERMS & NAMES
archaeologist
domestication
artifact
civilization
migrate
irrigation
culture
Mound Builders

ONE AMERICAN’S STORY
For many years, Solveig Turpin has searched Texas for paintings that ancient people drew on rock walls. Turpin is an archaeologist. That is a scientist who studies the human past by examining the things people left behind. Turpin believes that one of the paintings she found shows a religious leader who turned himself into a panther.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST
This is the Shaman [religious leader] who transforms into the largest and most powerful animal here. . . . I like to call [the shamans] supramen because they were over everything.
Solveig Turpin, quoted in In Search of Ancient North America

Archaeologists make theories about the past based on what they learn from bones and artifacts. Artifacts are tools and other objects that humans made. Section 1 discusses some theories about early Americans.

The First People in America
As many societies do, many Native Americans have stories explaining the origin of their people. Some believe the gods created their ancestors. Others believe their ancestors were born of Mother Earth. In contrast, scientists think that the first Americans migrated, or moved, here from Asia. But scientists disagree about how and when this move took place.

Some ancient people may have crossed a land bridge that joined Asia and North America during the last Ice Age. The Ice Age was a time of extreme cold that lasted for thousands of years. Glaciers trapped so much water that ocean levels dropped. A bridge of land, now called Beringia, appeared where the Bering Strait is now. (See map, page 28.) When the earth grew warm again, the glaciers melted and flooded Beringia. Some scientists who hold this theory believe the earliest Americans arrived...
Early Migration to the Americas

12,000 years ago. Other scientists believe humans came to the Americas much earlier. They have found artifacts in South America that tests show to be 30,000 years old. These scientists believe that people came to the Americas by many routes, over thousands of years. Some came by boat, sailing short distances from island to island. This theory may also change as scientists find more evidence of ancient Americans.

Agriculture Leads to Civilization

A culture is a way of life shared by people with similar arts, beliefs, and customs. The first Americans lived in hunting and gathering cultures. They hunted small animals, such as rabbits, and large animals, such as the woolly mammoth. They gathered wild seeds, nuts, and berries.

In time, people started to plant the seeds they found. This was the beginning of agriculture. About 5,000 years ago, humans began domestication. Domestication is the practice of breeding plants or taming animals to meet human needs. By trial and error, people in central Mexico learned which seeds grew the best crops. By selecting the right seeds, they improved the quality of maize, or corn, until its ears were large. Dried and stored for future use, corn became a main food source.

Knowledge of agriculture spread throughout the Americas. Having a stable food supply changed the way people lived. Once they no longer had to travel to find food, they built permanent villages. Farmers were able to produce large harvests, so that fewer people needed to farm.

GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Maps

1. Movement The oldest artifacts have been found in Chile, in western South America. Which set of migrations probably led to human settlement there?
2. Human-Environment Interaction What geographic feature, shown on the map, do you think motivated ancient people to keep moving south?
Some people began to practice other crafts, such as weaving or making pots. A few people became religious leaders.

Slowly, some cultures grew complex and became civilizations. A civilization has five features: (1) cities that are centers of trade, (2) specialized jobs for different people, (3) organized forms of government and religion, (4) a system of record keeping, and (5) advanced tools.

**Early Mesoamerican Civilizations**

About 1200 B.C., an advanced civilization arose in Mesoamerica, a region that stretches from central Mexico to present-day Nicaragua. For 800 years, a people called the Olmec thrived along the Gulf of Mexico. The Olmec set up a network of trade routes and constructed earthen mounds shaped like pyramids. They built large, busy cities like La Venta.

**A VOICE FROM THE PAST**

La Venta was not just an empty ceremonial spot visited by Olmec priests and nobles but a prosperous community of fishers, farmers, traders, and specialists, such as the artisans and the sculptors.

Rebecca González, quoted in “New Light on the Olmec,” *National Geographic*

Around 400 B.C., the Olmec abandoned La Venta and other cities. Scientists don’t know why. By then, Olmec culture had spread along trade routes and influenced others. Later people in Mesoamerica adapted Olmec religious practices and carved designs inspired by Olmec art.

By A.D. 250, about 650 years after the Olmec vanished, the Maya had developed a great civilization. Their cities were in southern Mexico and Guatemala, where they built pyramid mounds topped by temples. From artifacts, archaeologists know that the Maya had an accurate yearly calendar. They were the first people in the Americas to create a number system using zero. Their written language used picture symbols.

By 900, the Maya had abandoned many of their cities. Scientists think that revolts, disease, or crop failures may have caused their society to fail.

**The Hohokam and the Anasazi**

During the Mayan period, an agricultural people inhabited the American Southwest. The Hohokam lived in what is now Arizona from about 300 B.C. to A.D. 1400. That desert region has little rain, so farming is difficult. But the Hohokam altered their dry environment. They dug hundreds of miles of canals to carry river water to their crops. The practice of bringing water to crops is called irrigation.

The Hohokam raised corn, beans, and squash. They also gathered wild plants and hunted animals. They traded widely—with people in Mexico, the Southwest, and California. Hohokam pottery and religious practices show the influence of Mesoamerican cultures, which they learned about through trade.
The Mound Builders

During the 1700s, Europeans discovered several mysterious earthen mounds in what is now the American Southeast and Midwest. They believed a lost civilization had built the mounds. Historians now know that different Native American groups, known as the Mound Builders, built these structures. The builders may have used the mounds for burial tombs, as a tribute to their gods, or for some other religious purpose. One famous mound is the Great Serpent Mound in present-day Ohio. The Adena, Fort Ancient, or Hopewell cultures possibly built it. An aerial photograph of the Great Serpent Mound is shown below.

The ancient builders carefully outlined the shape of the serpent using rocks and clay mixed with ashes. This allowed them to design the image accurately and to give it a strong foundation.

Workers dug with large, flat stones and shoulder-blade bones from deer and elk. They used about 300,000 baskets of soil to build the mound. Construction most likely took between five and ten years and required hundreds of laborers.

The mound is a quarter mile long, averages 20 feet wide, and is about 5 feet high.

CONNECT TO HISTORY
1. Drawing Conclusions Review the five characteristics of a civilization on page 29. Which of these characteristics would a culture need to be able to build something like the Great Serpent Mound?

CONNECT TO TODAY
2. Researching How do modern monuments to the dead differ from those constructed by the Mound Builders?

For more about Mound Builders . . .
Beginning about A.D. 100, the Anasazi lived in the area where Utah, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico now meet. Scientists don’t know their origin. Like the Hohokam, the Anasazi were mainly farmers who also traded widely.

The Anasazi built houses with hundreds of rooms and many stories. For protection, they placed some buildings against overhanging canyon walls. The 800-room Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, housed perhaps 1,000 people. In the 1500s, when Spanish explorers first saw these houses, they called them pueblos, meaning villages. Around 1300, drought or warfare caused the Anasazi to leave their homes.

The Mound Builders

In the eastern part of what is now the United States lived several groups of people called Mound Builders. The Mound Builders were early Native Americans who built large earthen structures.

The two oldest Mound Builder societies were the Adena and the Hopewell. Archaeologists know little about the Adena. The Hopewell, located in what is now the Midwest, lived from 400 B.C. to A.D. 400. Like the Hohokam, they grew corn. Artifacts show that they had a large trade network. It stretched from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains, and from the Great Lakes to Florida. Hopewell mounds served as burial sites. Their tombs contained jewelry and other gifts for the dead.

The last group of Mound Builders, the Mississippians, lived from A.D. 800 to 1700. They built some of the first cities in North America. For example, Cahokia in Illinois has more than 100 mounds. One of them, Monks Mound, rises 100 feet and covers 16 acres. In some cities, the Mississippians built flat-topped, pyramid-shaped temple mounds.

By the 1700s, most of the Mississippian had died from diseases they caught from Europeans. But many Native American groups continued to thrive throughout the United States, as you will read in Section 2.