Research and present a Native American Culture assignment

All groups:

Form a group of 2-3 people and choose a culture. Then choose 1-2 jobs per person:

Facilitator (clarify directions, keep group on task, keep time)

Artist (Create an image to share with the class)

Writer (take notes, create a 1 paragraph write-up to share with the class)

Presenter (Speak for the group in front of the class)

Use the 2 textbooks and your packet to learn about your assigned cultures
Then create a visual, written, and spoken presentation to share with the class

Be sure you include key information:
Team member names and class period
P- political systems (who is in charge)
E-economic systems (how do they make money or make a living)
R- religion (what do they believe)
S-social (how do they relate to each other and to neighbors)
I- intellectual (the artistic, scientific, or architectural achievements)
A- area (where and when did the civilization exist)

AN stands for our American Nation textbook (that we rarely use)
AJ stands for our American Journey textbook (that we use daily)

Some web links contain videos, all contain the text copied below them
THE MOUND BUILDERS
East of the Anasazi were groups of early Americans who became known as Mound Builders, after their habit of erecting large earthworks that served as tombs and foundations for temples and other public buildings.

One group, known as the Woodland Culture, was centered in Ohio and spread east. Their mounds, which took decades to build, reached more than seven stories in height and were surrounded by earthwork walls as long as 500 yards. The largest of these mounds was near what’s now the southern Ohio town of Hopewell.

The largest Mound Builder settlement was on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River, about 8 miles from what’s now St. Louis. It was called Cahokia. At its zenith, around AD 1100, Cahokia covered 6 square miles and may have been home to as many as 30,000 people.

To put that in perspective: Cahokia was about the same size as London was in 1100, and no other city in America grew to that size until Philadelphia did, 700 years later.

The residents of Cahokia had no written language, but they had a knack for astronomy and for building. Their largest mounds, like the pyramids of cultures in Mexico, were four-sided, had a flat top, and covered as much ground as the biggest pyramids of Egypt.

The Cahokia Mound Builders also had a penchant for constructing stout, wooden stockades around their city. In doing so, however, they apparently cut down most of the trees in the area, which reduced the amount of game in the region and caused silt to build up in nearby waterways. The city also may have suffered from nasty air pollution because of the wood fires that were constantly burning.

By 1200, people were leaving Cahokia and its suburbs in large numbers. By 1400, the city was abandoned, an early victim of the ills of urban growth.
The Hohokam

200 B.C. -- 1450 A.D.
The Hohokam peoples occupied a wide area of south-central Arizona from roughly Flagstaff south to the Mexican border. They are thought to have originally migrated north out of Mexico around 300 BC to become the most skillful irrigation farmers the Southwest ever knew.

Hohokam farm
The ingenious Hohokam developed an elaborate irrigation network using only stone instruments and organized labor. Before modern development obliterated this system, their predecessors commonly referred to them as the Canal Builders.

The Hohokam were creative artisans who became famous for their intricate work with shells obtained from the Gulf of California and the Pacific coast. They created a coiled pottery finished with a paddle and painted with red designs. They retained a great deal of Mesoamerican influence as can be seen in their use of ball courts and decorative feathers.

They also became entrepreneurs in a thriving trade with their neighbors, the Anasazi and the Mogollon. Their fate is unclear, but they seem to have disappeared from the archaeological record between the first half of the 15th century and the time when the Spanish first came upon their descendants, Pima-speaking Indians still using the ancient irrigation techniques. Some of their original irrigation canals are still being used in the Phoenix area today!
THE ANASAZI
One of the earliest cultures to emerge in what’s now the United States was the Anasazi. The group’s name comes from a Navajo word that has been translated to mean “ancient people” or “ancient enemies.” Although they were around the southwestern United States for hundreds of years, they flourished from about AD 1100 to 1300.

At their peak, the Anasazi built adobe-walled towns in nearly inaccessible areas, which made the communities easy to defend. The towns featured apartment houses, community courts, and buildings for religious ceremonies. The Anasazi made highly artistic pottery and tightly woven baskets. The baskets were so good that the culture is sometimes referred to as the Basket Makers.

Because of the region’s arid conditions, the Anasazi people couldn’t support a large population and were never numerous. But just why their culture died out so suddenly around the beginning of the 14th century is a puzzle to archaeologists.

One theory is that a prolonged drought simply made life unsustainable in the region. A more controversial theory is that marauding Indians from Mexico conquered the Anasazi or drove them off. However the Anasazi’s demise came about, their culture was developed enough to continue, in many ways unchanged, and is evident in some of the Southwest tribes of today.
THE ARCTIC
The Arctic culture area, a cold, flat, treeless region (actually a frozen desert) near the Arctic Circle in present-day Alaska, Canada and Greenland, was home to the Inuit and the Aleut. Both groups spoke, and continue to speak, dialects descended from what scholars call the Eskimo-Aleut language family. Because it is such an inhospitable landscape, the Arctic’s population was comparatively small and scattered. Some of its peoples, especially the Inuit in the northern part of the region, were nomads, following seals, polar bears and other game as they migrated across the tundra. In the southern part of the region, the Aleut were a bit more settled, living in small fishing villages along the shore.

The Inuit and Aleut had a great deal in common. Many lived in dome-shaped houses made of sod or timber (or, in the North, ice blocks). They used seal and otter skins to make warm, weatherproof clothing, aerodynamic dogsleds and long, open fishing boats (kayaks in Inuit; baidarkas in Aleut).

By the time the United States purchased Alaska in 1867, decades of oppression and exposure to European diseases had taken their toll: The native population had dropped to just 2,500; the descendants of these survivors still make their home in the area today.

THE SUBARCTIC
The Subarctic culture area, mostly composed of swampy, piney forests (taiga) and waterlogged tundra, stretched across much of inland Alaska and Canada. Scholars have divided the region’s people into two language groups: the Athabaskan speakers at its western end, among them the Tsattine (Beaver), Gwich’in (or Kuchin) and the Deg Xinag (formerly—and pejoratively—known as the Ingalik), and the Algonquian speakers at its eastern end, including the Cree, the Ojibwa and the Naskapi.

In the Subarctic, travel was difficult—toboggans, snowshoes and lightweight canoes were the primary means of transportation—and population was sparse. In general, the
peoples of the Subarctic did not form large permanent settlements; instead, small family groups stuck together as they traipsed after herds of caribou. They lived in small, easy-to-move tents and lean-tos, and when it grew too cold to hunt they hunkered into underground dugouts.

The growth of the fur trade in the 17th and 18th centuries disrupted the Subarctic way of life—now, instead of hunting and gathering for subsistence, the Indians focused on supplying pelts to the European traders—and eventually led to the displacement and extermination of many of the region’s native communities.
THE SOUTHWEST
The peoples of the Southwest culture area, a huge desert region in present-day Arizona and New Mexico (along with parts of Colorado, Utah, Texas and Mexico) developed two distinct ways of life.

Sedentary farmers such as the Hopi, the Zuni, the Yaqui and the Yuma grew crops like corn, beans and squash. Many lived in permanent settlements, known as pueblos, built of stone and adobe. These pueblos featured great multistory dwellings that resembled apartment houses. At their centers, many of these villages also had large ceremonial pit houses, or kivas.

Other Southwestern peoples, such as the Navajo and the Apache, were more nomadic. They survived by hunting, gathering and raiding their more established neighbors for their crops. Because these groups were always on the move, their homes were much less permanent than the pueblos. For instance, the Navajo fashioned their iconic eastward-facing round houses, known as hogans, out of materials like mud and bark.

By the time the southwestern territories became a part of the United States after the Mexican War, many of the region’s native people had already been exterminated. (Spanish colonists and missionaries had enslaved many of the Pueblo Indians, for example, working them to death on vast Spanish ranches known as encomiendas.) During the second half of the 19th century, the federal government resettled most of the region’s remaining natives onto reservations.

THE GREAT BASIN
The Great Basin culture area, an expansive bowl formed by the Rocky Mountains to the east, the Sierra Nevadas to the west, the Columbia Plateau to the north, and the Colorado Plateau to the south, was a barren wasteland of deserts, salt flats and brackish lakes. Its people, most of whom spoke Shoshonean or Uto-Aztecan dialects (the Bannock, Paiute and Ute, for example), foraged for roots, seeds and nuts and hunted snakes, lizards and small mammals. Because they were always on the move,
they lived in compact, easy-to-build wikiups made of willow poles or saplings, leaves and brush. Their settlements and social groups were impermanent, and communal leadership (what little there was) was informal.

After European contact, some Great Basin groups got horses and formed equestrian hunting and raiding bands that were similar to the ones we associate with the Great Plains natives. After white prospectors discovered gold and silver in the region in the mid-19th century, most of the Great Basin’s people lost their land and, frequently, their lives.

CALIFORNIA
Before European contact, the temperate, hospitable California culture area had more people—an estimated 300,000 in the mid-16th century—than any other. It was also more diverse: Its estimated 100 different tribes and groups spoke more than 200 dialects. (These languages derived from the Penutian (the Maidu, Miwok and Yokuts), the Hokan (the Chumash, Pomo, Salinas and Shasta), the Uto-Aztecan (the Tubabulabal, Serrano and Kinatemuk; also, many of the “Mission Indians” who had been driven out of the Southwest by Spanish colonization spoke Uto-Aztecan dialects) and Athapaskan (the Hupa, among others). In fact, as one scholar has pointed out, California’s linguistic landscape was more complex than that of Europe.

Despite this great diversity, many native Californians lived very similar lives. They did not practice much agriculture. Instead, they organized themselves into small, family-based bands of hunter-gatherers known as tribelets. Inter-tribelet relationships, based on well-established systems of trade and common rights, were generally peaceful.

Spanish explorers infiltrated the California region in the middle of the 16th century. In 1769, the cleric Junipero Serra established a mission at San Diego, inaugurating a particularly brutal period in which forced labor, disease and assimilation nearly exterminated the culture area’s native population.

THE NORTHWEST COAST
The Northwest Coast culture area, along the Pacific coast from British Columbia to the top of Northern California, has a mild climate and an abundance of natural resources. In particular, the ocean and the region’s rivers provided almost everything its people
needed—salmon, especially, but also whales, sea otters, seals and fish and shellfish of all kinds. As a result, unlike many other hunter-gatherers who struggled to eke out a living and were forced to follow animal herds from place to place, the Indians of the Pacific Northwest were secure enough to build permanent villages that housed hundreds of people apiece. Those villages operated according to a rigidly stratified social structure, more sophisticated than any outside of Mexico and Central America. A person’s status was determined by his closeness to the village’s chief and reinforced by the number of possessions—blankets, shells and skins, canoes and even slaves—he had at his disposal. (Goods like these played an important role in the potlatch, an elaborate gift-giving ceremony designed to affirm these class divisions.)

Prominent groups in the region included the Athapaskan Haida and Tlingit; the Penutian Chinook, Tsimshian and Coos; the Wakashan Kwakiutl and Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka); and the Salishan Coast Salish.
THE PLAINS
The Plains culture area comprises the vast prairie region between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, from present-day Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. Before the arrival of European traders and explorers, its inhabitants—speakers of Siouan, Algonquian, Caddoan, Uto-Aztecan and Athabaskan languages—were relatively settled hunters and farmers. After European contact, and especially after Spanish colonists brought horses to the region in the 18th century, the peoples of the Great Plains became much more nomadic. Groups like the Crow, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Comanche and Arapaho used horses to pursue great herds of buffalo across the prairie. The most common dwelling for these hunters was the cone-shaped teepee, a bison-skin tent that could be folded up and carried anywhere. Plains Indians are also known for their elaborately feathered war bonnets.

As white traders and settlers moved west across the Plains region, they brought many damaging things with them: commercial goods, like knives and kettles, which native people came to depend on; guns; and disease. By the end of the 19th century, white sport hunters had nearly exterminated the area’s buffalo herds. With settlers encroaching on their lands and no way to make money, the Plains natives were forced onto government reservations.

THE PLATEAU
The Plateau culture area sat in the Columbia and Fraser river basins at the intersection of the Subarctic, the Plains, the Great Basin, the California and the Northwest Coast (present-day Idaho, Montana and eastern Oregon and Washington). Most of its people lived in small, peaceful villages along stream and riverbanks and survived by fishing for salmon and trout, hunting and gathering wild berries, roots and nuts. In the southern Plateau region, the great majority spoke languages derived from the Penutian (the Klamath, Klikitat, Modoc, Nez Perce, Walla Walla and Yakima or Yakama). North of the Columbia River, most (the Skitswish (Coeur d'Alene), Salish (Flathead), Spokane and Columbia) spoke Salishan dialects.
In the 18th century, other native groups brought horses to the Plateau. The region’s inhabitants quickly integrated the animals into their economy, expanding the radius of their hunts and acting as traders and emissaries between the Northwest and the Plains. In 1805, the explorers Lewis and Clark passed through the area, drawing increasing numbers of disease-spreading white settlers. By the end of the 19th century, most of the remaining Plateau Indians had been cleared from their lands and resettled in government reservations.
THE NORTHEAST
The Northeast culture area, one of the first to have sustained contact with Europeans, stretched from present-day Canada’s Atlantic coast to North Carolina and inland to the Mississippi River valley. Its inhabitants were members of two main groups: Iroquoian speakers (these included the Cayuga, Oneida, Erie, Onondaga, Seneca and Tuscarora), most of whom lived along inland rivers and lakes in fortified, politically stable villages, and the more numerous Algonquian speakers (these included the Pequot, Fox, Shawnee, Wampanoag, Delaware and Menominee) who lived in small farming and fishing villages along the ocean. There, they grew crops like corn, beans and vegetables.

Life in the Northeast culture area was already fraught with conflict—the Iroquoian groups tended to be rather aggressive and warlike, and bands and villages outside of their allied confederacies were never safe from their raids—and it grew more complicated when European colonizers arrived. Colonial wars repeatedly forced the region’s natives to take sides, pitting the Iroquois groups against their Algonquian neighbors. Meanwhile, as white settlement pressed westward, it eventually displaced both sets of indigenous people from their lands.

THE SOUTHEAST
The Southeast culture area, north of the Gulf of Mexico and south of the Northeast, was a humid, fertile agricultural region. Many of its natives were expert farmers—they grew staple crops like maize, beans, squash, tobacco and sunflower—who organized their lives around small ceremonial and market villages known as hamlets. Perhaps the most familiar of the Southeastern indigenous peoples are the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek and Seminole, sometimes called the Five Civilized Tribes, who all spoke a variant of the Muskogean language.

By the time the U.S. had won its independence from Britain, the Southeast culture area had already lost many of its native people to disease and displacement. In 1830, the federal Indian Removal Act compelled the relocation of what remained of the Five
Civilized Tribes so that white settlers could have their land. Between 1830 and 1838, federal officials forced nearly 100,000 Indians out of the southern states and into “Indian Territory” (later Oklahoma) west of the Mississippi. The Cherokee called this frequently deadly trek the Trail of Tears.
The Maya Empire, centered in the tropical lowlands of what is now Guatemala, reached the peak of its power and influence around the sixth century A.D. The Maya excelled at agriculture, pottery, hieroglyph writing, calendar-making and mathematics, and left behind an astonishing amount of impressive architecture and symbolic artwork. Most of the great stone cities of the Maya were abandoned by A.D. 900, however, and since the 19th century scholars have debated what might have caused this dramatic decline.

LOCATING THE MAYA
The Maya civilization was one of the most dominant indigenous societies of Mesoamerica (a term used to describe Mexico and Central America before the 16th century Spanish conquest). Unlike other scattered indigenous populations of Mesoamerica, the Maya were centered in one geographical block covering all of the Yucatan Peninsula and modern-day Guatemala; Belize and parts of the Mexican states of Tabasco and Chiapas; and the western part of Honduras and El Salvador. This concentration showed that the Maya remained relatively secure from invasion by other Mesoamerican peoples.

Within that expanse, the Maya lived in three separate sub-areas with distinct environmental and cultural differences: the northern Maya lowlands on the Yucatan Peninsula; the southern lowlands in the Peten district of northern Guatemala and adjacent portions of Mexico, Belize and western Honduras; and the southern Maya highlands, in the mountainous region of southern Guatemala. Most famously, the Maya of the southern lowland region reached their peak during the Classic Period of Maya civilization (A.D. 250 to 900), and built the great stone cities and monuments that have fascinated explorers and scholars of the region.

EARLY MAYA, 1800 B.C. TO A.D. 250
The earliest Maya settlements date to around 1800 B.C., or the beginning of what is called the Preclassic or Formative Period. The earliest Maya were agricultural, growing crops such as corn (maize), beans, squash and cassava (manioc). During the Middle Preclassic Period, which lasted until about 300 B.C., Maya farmers began to expand their presence both in the highland and lowland regions. The Middle Preclassic Period
also saw the rise of the first major Mesoamerican civilization, the Olmecs. Like other Mesamerican peoples, such as the Zapotec, Totonac, Teotihuacán and Aztec, the Maya derived a number of religious and cultural traits—as well as their number system and their famous calendar—from the Olmec.

In addition to agriculture, the Preclassic Maya also displayed more advanced cultural traits like pyramid-building, city construction and the inscribing of stone monuments.

The Late Preclassic city of Mirador, in the northern Peten, was one of the greatest cities ever built in the pre-Columbian Americas. Its size dwarfed the Classic Maya capital of Tikal, and its existence proves that the Maya flourished centuries before the Classic Period.

CITIES OF STONE: THE CLASSIC MAYA, A.D. 250-900
The Classic Period, which began around A.D. 250, was the golden age of the Maya Empire. Classic Maya civilization grew to some 40 cities, including Tikal, Uaxactún, Copán, Bonampak, Dos Pilas, Calakmul, Palenque and Río Bec; each city held a population of between 5,000 and 50,000 people. At its peak, the Maya population may have reached 2,000,000.

Excavations of Maya sites have unearthed plazas, palaces, temples and pyramids, as well as courts for playing the ball games that were ritually and politically significant to Maya culture. Maya cities were surrounded and supported by a large population of farmers. Though the Maya practiced a primitive type of “slash-and-burn” agriculture, they also displayed evidence of more advanced farming methods, such as irrigation and terracing.

The Maya were deeply religious, and worshiped various gods related to nature, including the gods of the sun, the moon, rain and corn. At the top of Maya society were the kings, or “kuhul ajaw” (holy lords), who claimed to be related to gods and followed a hereditary succession. They were thought to serve as mediators between the gods and people on earth, and performed the elaborate religious ceremonies and rituals so important to the Maya culture.
The Classic Maya built many of their temples and palaces in a stepped pyramid shape, decorating them with elaborate reliefs and inscriptions. These structures have earned the Maya their reputation as the great artists of Mesoamerica. Guided by their religious ritual, the Maya also made significant advances in mathematics and astronomy, including the use of the zero and the development of a complex calendar system based on 365 days. Though early researchers concluded that the Maya were a peaceful society of priests and scribes, later evidence—including a thorough examination of the artwork and inscriptions on their temple walls—showed the less peaceful side of Maya culture, including the war between rival Mayan city-states and the importance of torture and human sacrifice to their religious ritual.

Serious exploration of Classic Maya sites began in the 1830s. By the early to mid-20th century, a small portion of their system of hieroglyph writing had been deciphered, and more about their history and culture became known. Most of what historians know about the Maya comes from what remains of their architecture and art, including stone carvings and inscriptions on their buildings and monuments. The Maya also made paper from tree bark and wrote in books made from this paper, known as codices; four of these codices are known to have survived.

LIFE IN THE RAINFOREST
One of the many intriguing things about the Maya was their ability to build a great civilization in a tropical rainforest climate. Traditionally, ancient peoples had flourished in drier climates, where the centralized management of water resources (through irrigation and other techniques) formed the basis of society. (This was the case for the Teotihuacan of highland Mexico, contemporaries of the Classic Maya.) In the southern Maya lowlands, however, there were few navigable rivers for trade and transport, as well as no obvious need for an irrigation system.

By the late 20th century, researchers had concluded that the climate of the lowlands was in fact quite environmentally diverse. Though foreign invaders were disappointed by the region’s relative lack of silver and gold, the Maya took advantage of the area’s many natural resources, including limestone (for construction), the volcanic rock obsidian (for tools and weapons) and salt. The environment also held other treasures for the Maya, including jade, quetzal feathers (used to decorate the elaborate costumes
of Maya nobility) and marine shells, which were used as trumpets in ceremonies and warfare.

**MYSTERIOUS DECLINE OF THE MAYA**

From the late eighth through the end of the ninth century, something unknown happened to shake the Maya civilization to its foundations. One by one, the Classic cities in the southern lowlands were abandoned, and by A.D. 900, Maya civilization in that region had collapsed. The reason for this mysterious decline is unknown, though scholars have developed several competing theories.

Some believe that by the ninth century the Maya had exhausted the environment around them to the point that it could no longer sustain a very large population. Other Maya scholars argue that constant warfare among competing city-states led the complicated military, family (by marriage) and trade alliances between them to break down, along with the traditional system of dynastic power. As the stature of the holy lords diminished, their complex traditions of rituals and ceremonies dissolved into chaos. Finally, some catastrophic environmental change—like an extremely long, intense period of drought—may have wiped out the Classic Maya civilization. Drought would have hit cities like Tikal—where rainwater was necessary for drinking as well as for crop irrigation—especially hard.

All three of these factors—overpopulation and overuse of the land, endemic warfare and drought—may have played a part in the downfall of the Maya in the southern lowlands. In the highlands of the Yucatan, a few Maya cities—such as Chichén Itzá, Uxmal and Mayapán—continued to flourish in the Post-Classic Period (A.D. 900-1500). By the time the Spanish invaders arrived, however, most Maya were living in agricultural villages, their great cities buried under a layer of rainforest green.
The Aztecs, who probably originated as a nomadic tribe in northern Mexico, arrived in Mesoamerica around the beginning of the 13th century. From their magnificent capital city, Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs emerged as the dominant force in central Mexico, developing an intricate social, political, religious and commercial organization that brought many of the region’s city-states under their control by the 15th century. Invaders led by the Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes overthrew the Aztecs by force and captured Tenochtitlan in 1521, bringing an end to Mesoamerica’s last great native civilization.

EARLY AZTEC HISTORY
The exact origins of the Aztec people are uncertain, but they are believed to have begun as a northern tribe of hunter-gatherers whose name came from that of their homeland, Aztlan (or “White Land”). The Aztecs were also known as the Tenochca (from which the name for their capital city, Tenochtitlan, was derived) or the Mexica (the origin of the name of the city that would replace Tenochtitlan, as well as the name for the entire country). The Aztecs appeared in Mesoamerica—as the south-central region of pre-Columbian Mexico is known—in the early 13th century. Their arrival came just after, or perhaps helped bring about, the fall of the previously dominant Mesoamerican civilization, the Toltecs.

Did You Know?
The Aztec language, Nahuatl, was the dominant language in central Mexico by the mid-1350s. Numerous Nahuatl words borrowed by the Spanish were later absorbed into English as well, including chile or chili, avocado, chocolate, coyote, peyote, guacamole, ocelot and mescal.

When the Aztecs saw an eagle perched on a cactus on the marshy land near the southwest border of Lake Texcoco, they took it as a sign to build their settlement there. They drained the swampy land, constructed artificial islands on which they could plant gardens and established the foundations of their capital city, Tenochtitlán, in 1325 A.D. Typical Aztec crops included maize (corn), along with beans, squashes, potatoes, tomatoes and avocados; they also supported themselves through fishing and hunting.
local animals such as rabbits, armadillos, snakes, coyotes and wild turkey. Their relatively sophisticated system of agriculture (including intensive cultivation of land and irrigation methods) and a powerful military tradition would enable the Aztecs to build a successful state, and later an empire.

THE AZTEC EMPIRE

In 1428, under their leader Itzcoatl, the Aztecs formed a three-way alliance with the Texcocans and the Tacubans to defeat their most powerful rivals for influence in the region, the Tepanec, and conquer their capital of Azcapotzalco. Itzcoatl’s successor Montezuma (Moctezuma) I, who took power in 1440, was a great warrior who was remembered as the father of the Aztec empire. By the early 16th century, the Aztecs had come to rule over up to 500 small states, and some 5 to 6 million people, either by conquest or commerce. Tenochtitlán at its height had more than 140,000 inhabitants, and was the most densely populated city ever to exist in Mesoamerica.

Bustling markets such as Tenochtitlan’s Tlatelolco, visited by some 50,000 people on major market days, drove the Aztec economy. The Aztec civilization was also highly developed socially, intellectually and artistically. It was a highly structured society with a strict caste system; at the top were nobles, while at the bottom were serfs, indentured servants and slaves. The Aztec faith shared many aspects with other Mesoamerican religions, like that of the Maya, notably including the rite of human sacrifice. In the great cities of the Aztec empire, magnificent temples, palaces, plazas and statues embodied the civilization’s unfailing devotion to the many Aztec gods, including Huitzilopochtli (god of war and of the sun) and Quetzalcoatl (“Feathered Serpent”), a Toltec god who served many important roles in the Aztec faith over the years. The Aztec calendar, common in much of Mesoamerica, was based on a solar cycle of 365 days and a ritual cycle of 260 days; the calendar played a central role in the religion and rituals of Aztec society.

EUROPEAN INVASION & FALL OF THE AZTEC CIVILIZATION

The first European to visit Mexican territory was Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba, who arrived in Yucatan from Cuba with three ships and about 100 men in early 1517. Cordobars reports on his return to Cuba prompted the Spanish governor there, Diego Velasquez, to send a larger force back to Mexico under the command of Herman Cortes. In March 1519, Cortes landed at the town of Tabasco, where he learned from
the natives of the great Aztec civilization, then ruled by Moctezuma (or Montezuma) II. Defying the authority of Velasquez, Cortes founded the city of Veracruz on the southeastern Mexican coast, where he trained his army into a disciplined fighting force. Cortes and some 400 soldiers then marched into Mexico, aided by a native woman known as Malinche, who served as a translator. Thanks to instability within the Aztec empire, Cortes was able to form alliances with other native peoples, notably the Tlascalans, who were then at war with Montezuma.

In November 1519, Cortes and his men arrived in Tenochtitlan, where Montezuma and his people greeted them as honored guests according to Aztec custom (partially due to Cortes’ physical resemblance to the light-skinned Quetzalcoatl, whose return was prophesied in Aztec legend). Though the Aztecs had superior numbers, their weapons were inferior, and Cortes was able to immediately take Montezuma and his entourage of lords hostage, gaining control of Tenochtitla. The Spaniards then murdered thousands of Aztec nobles during a ritual dance ceremony, and Montezuma died under uncertain circumstances while in custody. Cuauhtemoc, his young nephew, took over as emperor, and the Aztecs drove the Spaniards from the city. With the help of the Aztecs’ native rivals, Cortes mounted an offensive against Tenochtitlan, finally defeating Cuauhtemoc’s resistance on August 13, 1521. In all, some 240,000 people were believed to have died in the city’s conquest, which effectively ended the Aztec civilization. After his victory, Cortes razed Tenochtitlan and built Mexico City on its ruins; it quickly became the premier European center in the New World.
The Inca first appeared in the Andes region during the 12th century A.D. and gradually built a massive kingdom through the military strength of their emperors. Known as Tawantinsuyu, the Inca state spanned the distance of northern Ecuador to central Chile and consisted of 12 million inhabitants from more than 100 different ethnic groups at its peak. Well-devised agricultural and roadway systems, along with a centralized religion and language, helped maintain a cohesive state. Despite their power, the Inca were quickly overwhelmed by the diseases and superior weaponry of Spanish invaders, the last bastion of their immense empire overtaken in 1572.

The Inca first appeared in what is today southeastern Peru during the 12th century A.D. According to some versions of their origin myths, they were created by the sun god, Inti, who sent his son Manco Capac to Earth through the middle of three caves in the village of Paccari Tampu. After killing his brothers, Manco Capac led his sisters and their followers through the wilderness before settling in the fertile valley near Cusco circa 1200.

The Inca began expanding their land holdings by the reign of their fourth emperor, Mayta Capac. However, they did not truly become an expansive power until the eighth emperor, Viracocha Inca, took control in the early 15th century. Bolstered by the military capabilities of two uncles, Viracocha Inca defeated the Ayarmaca kingdom to the south and took over the Urubamba Valley. He also established the Inca practice of leaving military garrisons to maintain peace in conquered lands.

When the rival Chancas attacked circa 1438, Viracocha Inca retreated to a military outpost while his son, Cusi Inca Yupanqui, successfully defended Cusco. Taking the title of Pachacuti, Inca Yupanqui became one of the Inca’s most influential rulers. His military campaigns extended the kingdom to the southern end of the Titicaca Basin, and hundreds of miles north to subject the Cajamarca and Chimu kingdoms.

The expanding reach of the Inca state, Tawantinsuyu, prompted strategic logistical considerations. Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui is believed to have been the first Inca emperor to order forced resettlement to squash the possibility of an uprising from one
ethnic group. In addition, he established the practice in which rulers were prevented from inheriting the possessions of their predecessors, thereby ensuring that successive leaders would conquer new lands and accumulate new wealth.

Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui also focused his efforts on strengthening Cusco, the center of the empire. He expanded Sacsahuaman, the massive fortress that guarded the city, and embarked on an expansive irrigation project by channeling rivers and creating intricate agricultural terraces.

Although Tawantinsuyu was comprised of more than 100 distinct ethnic groups among its 12 million inhabitants, a well-developed societal structure kept the empire running smoothly. There was no written language, but a form of Quechua became the primary dialect, and knotted cords known as quipu were used to keep track of historical and accounting records. Most subjects were self-sufficient farmers who tended to corn, potatoes, squash, llamas, alpacas and dogs, and paid taxes through public labor. A system of roadways adding up to approximately 15,000 miles crisscrossed the kingdom, with relay runners capable of advancing messages at the rate of 150 miles per day.

The Inca religion centered on a pantheon of gods that included Inti; a creator god named Viracocha; and Apu Illapu, the rain god. Impressive shrines were built throughout the kingdom, including a massive Sun Temple in Cusco that measured more than 1,200 feet in circumference. Powerful priests depended on divination to diagnose illness, solve crimes and predict the outcomes of warfare, in many cases requiring animal sacrifice. The mummified remains of previous emperors were also treated as sacred figures and paraded around at ceremonies with their stores of gold and silver.

Upon ascending to the throne in 1471, Topa Inca Yupanqui pushed the southern border of the empire to the Maule River in modern-day Chile, and instituted a tribute system in which each province provided women to serve as temple maidens or brides for celebrated soldiers. His successor, Huayna Capac, embarked on successful northern campaigns that carried to the Ancasmayo River, the current boundary between Ecuador and Colombia.
Meanwhile, the arrival of Spanish explorers had already triggered the collapse of the state. The Spanish carried such alien diseases as smallpox, which wiped out a huge chunk of the population before killing Huayna Capac and his chosen successor around 1525. That sparked a civil war as would-be emperors battled for power, with Atahualpa eventually outlasting his half-brother, Huascar, to grab the throne.

Enamored by the stories of Inca wealth, Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro lured Atahualpa to meeting for a supposed dinner in his honor and kidnapped the emperor in November 1532. Atahualpa was executed the following summer, and although the Spanish were far outnumbered by the locals, they easily sacked Cusco in late 1533 with their superior weaponry.

Attempting to keep the peace, the Spanish installed a young prince named Manco Inca Yupanqui as a puppet king, a move that backfired during a spirited rebellion in 1536. However, Manco Inca Yupanqui and his men were eventually forced to retreat to the jungle village of Vilcabamba, which remained the last stronghold of the empire until 1572.

As the only written accounts of the Inca were composed by outsiders, its mythology and culture passed to successive generations by trained storytellers. Traces of its existence were mainly found in the ruins of cities and temples, but in 1911 archaeologist Hiram Bingham discovered the intact 15th century mountaintop citadel of Machu Picchu, its magnificent stone structures reflecting the power and capabilities of this massive Pre-Colombian state.