

Post-Classical Mesoamerica

In some ways, the early North American cultures were less developed than those of South America and Mesoamerica. The North American groups created no great empires. They left few ruins as spectacular as those of ancient Mexico or Peru. Nevertheless, the first peoples of North America did create complex societies. These societies were able to conduct long-distance trade and construct magnificent buildings.

Cahokia (Mississippian Mound Builders)

The indigenous American civilization known as Mississippian culture—sprang up in North America in an extensive fertile floodplain along the Mississippi River Valley between about 1000 and 1250 CE. They lived near what is now central and East St. Louis and southern Illinois. This suburban concentration was eclipsed by their greatest achievement: Cahokia (kuh•HOH•kee•uh), dubbed "America's lost metropolis." Cahokia was named for the branch of the Illinois people who occupied the region in the 17th century, long after the mound builders had departed. Since they left no written records, no one knows what they called themselves.

At a time when settlements in the Americas rarely exceeded 400 or 500 inhabitants, the Native American center of Cahokia was as populous as the London of the time, a size that no other city in the United States would attain until the 19th century. The well-organized aggregation of mounds and residential districts had a population estimated at 10,000 to 30,000—some sources claim 40,000. At the heart of the city stood the huge ceremonial embankment that was in itself a stupendous feat of planning and engineering. That these ancient builders could set out their city with its streets aligned to the cardinal compass points and construct such a durable monument over generations, without having a written language or the wheel, makes their accomplishment the more marvelous.



In terms of both agriculture and trade, Cahokia was perfectly located. The predictable annual flooding of farmland enabled planning and replenished the soil so that maize and other crops were sustainable for centuries. The river systems reaching out to much of North America facilitated trade, and there is evidence of commercial traffic over a network that extended from Minnesota in the north to Mississippi in the south; Cahokian traders reached west as far as Kansas and east to Tennessee. Raw materials such as copper, seashells, and mica were imported and processed in Cahokia to be exported as copper ornaments and shell beads—indications of a sophisticated manufacturing industry. It was once believed that this productive economic environment led to



population growth, as Cahokian civilization slowly flowered.

The Middle Mississippian area of which Cahokia forms a large part was under some kind of chiefdom government. This head of the Cahokians, the so-called Great Sun Chief, was the one "who ruled the earth and spoke to the sky". He was given his religious and government control by his birthright. His counselors were members of the elite class that is priests and chieftains.



The Ancestral Puebloans and the Cliff Palaces at Mesa Verde

The Anasazi (AH•nuh•SAH•zee) lived in the Four Corners region, where the present-day states of Utah, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico meet. The Anasazi built impressive cliff dwellings, such as the ones at Mesa Verde, Colorado. These large houses were built on top of mesas—flat-topped hills—or in shallow caves in the sheer walls of deep canyons. By the 900s CE, the Anasazi were living in pueblos, villages of large, apartment-style compounds made of stone and adobe, or sun-baked clay. The imposing sandstone structures in the villages themselves are perhaps the work of the most advanced pre-Columbian culture in North America.

Sometime before 1000, dwellings had advanced from the mud row and pit houses to larger adobe structures. The Adobe structures were often multistoried and had dozens of rooms. This was the predominant village physical and social structure until emergence of Mesa Verde's classical period around 1100.

A shift in population patterns, for which archaeologists have yet to fully account, again altered the architectural design of Anasazi communities. The villages on the plateaus were largely abandoned, and people returned to the rock shelters in the cliff walls. Some scholars believe this move was for defense or religious reasons. Regardless of the reasons, the Anasazi reconstructed their villages on inset ledges of the mesa cliffs. These are the expertly constructed stone "cliff dwellings" for which the Mesa Verde region is famed.

The cliff dwellings were constructed out of single courses of stone designed to fit the alcoves in which they were built. The organization and scale of the cliff villages far surpassed those of their previous villages. There were separate structures for living, cooking, storage, and ceremonial uses. Many of the rooms had plastered walls that were intricately painted with bright pigments. Several series of wooden ladders and rope bridges, as well as natural tunnels, provided access to the mesa top or valley below. The village was kept amazingly clean and free of debris. Refuse (including the dead) was dumped down the cliff. The largest site at Mesa Verde, "Cliff Palace," has 217 rooms, several storage spaces, and 23 kivas. The population of this village alone could have ranged from 200 to nearly 1,000. Architecture and civic planning was perhaps the greatest legacy of the ancestral Puebloans' short golden age at Mesa Verde.

The ancestral Puebloans established an elaborate trade network. They traded agricultural surplus with local neighbors, as well as specialty craft items such as baskets, leather goods, stone tools, and textiles. These specialty items were also used as trade goods on a far grander scale between communities that were geographically further away. Remains of seashells, turquoise, and cotton—all indicative of trade over hundreds of miles—have been excavated at Mesa Verde.

Many Anasazi pueblos were abandoned around 1300, possibly because of a prolonged drought. The descendants of the Anasazi, the Pueblo peoples, continued many of their customs. These nomadic Plains tribes eventually became known by such names as the Comanche, Kiowa, and Apache.

By 1300, the Anasazi had abandoned the spectacular cliff houses 200 years before the first European explorers, who gave Mesa Verde (Spanish for "green table") its name, would visit the region. The area was largely unknown to modern scholars until the American push for western expansion in the mid-nineteenth century. A group of cowboys rediscovered the cliff dwelling villages of Mesa Verde in the

1880s. Almost immediately, the described "cliff palaces" fascinated archaeologists, but despite a century of research, excavation, and discovery, relatively little is known about the Anasazi who built them.

