

Pre-History of American Cultures and Civilizations

Meets Tuesday morning from 10-12 AM at the UMass Renaissance Center in Amherst

This seminar will include many of the civilizations and cultures of the Americas which flourished prior to the European colonization of the Americas. In particular, these pre-Columbian civilizations established characteristics such as permanent or urban settlements, agriculture, and complex societal hierarchies. Anthropologists and archaeologists have attempted to classify these past societies by structure, such as bands, chiefdoms or tribes, etc.

Many of these civilizations had ceased to function by the time of the first permanent European arrivals (c. late 15th - early 16th centuries), and are known only through archaeological investigations. Others were contemporary with this period, and are also known from historical accounts of the time. From both indigenous American and European accounts and documents, American civilizations at the time of European encounter demonstrated numerous achievements such as the most populous city in the world as well as modern theories of astronomy and mathematics.

The seminar participants will consider the Native American populations from about 1500 BC until the coming of Columbus (SAY 1500AD) in the Americas. Many important ancient civilizations developed in Meso and South America, including the Incas, Moche, Chimu, Olmecs, Zapotecs, Teotihuacan, Mayas and Aztecs. In North America these include Ancient Pueblo (Anasazi) culture, Fort Ancient, Hopewell, The Fremont, Mississippians, Hohokam, Cahokia, Oneonta, Athabascan, Mogollon, Iroquoian, Algonquin, Poverty Point culture and Tlingits

These cultures developed complex societies, reached high levels of technological evolution, built monumental constructions, and shared many cultural concepts. In this seminar we will investigate the peoples and civilizations of the Americas before 1500 AD. It will be of interest to explore the emergence of agriculture, the development of village life (cities) and the rise of complex societies (civilizations) as well as their religious and scientific practices. Each participant will choose one of these early civilizations and will convey to the group the prehistorical and cultural activities of these indigenous peoples. Let us try to understand the relationship between the landscape, material culture, architecture and the political organizations of these groups that existed before the 15th century.

There are numerous references to this period in books and on the web. In addition, I have an extensive collection of texts for this period. As background for the seminar all attendees should either have read or will read the following before the seminar starts:

“1491- New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus” by Charles C. Mann, published by Vintage Press, 2006

Relevant Web sites: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pre-Columbian_era

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_pre-Columbian_cultures