

# Pre-contact Americas

## Overview

- During the classical period, states in Mesoamerica and the Andes were composed of a variety of kingdoms that traded and often came into conflict with one another.
- Some states, such as Teotihuacán near modern-day Mexico City, held more power than others.
- In what is today Peru and Bolivia, Andean states used the mountains, rivers, and coastline to their advantage when farming and creating a food supply for their societies.

## City of the gods

Northeast of Mexico City, surrounded by lakes, the ruins of a once-massive city still inspire awe. A four-mile-long avenue runs through the remains of a complex grid pattern of apartments, colorful murals, a pyramid that's over 700 feet tall and 700 feet wide, and another pyramid that once housed the remains of 200 people, possibly as tributes to accompany a wealthy leader into the afterlife.



A photograph of the Pyramid of the Moon in the ruins of Teotihuacán, Mexico. The pyramid is composed of about three stepped levels plus a multi-tiered mini-pyramid at the entrance. The surrounding countryside is green, covered with trees, with some big hills in the background. Pyramid of the Moon, Teotihuacán. Image credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The city was named [Teotihuacán](#) by the Aztecs who discovered it after its collapse. The name translates roughly to “city of the gods.” Unfortunately, no written records or art depicting specific rulers survive from Teotihuacán itself. We do know, through other archeological methods, that the city center wielded enormous power between 300 and 600 CE. Teotihuacán

likely housed 200,000 people in the city itself, governed the surrounding 10,000 square miles directly, and used its armies to colonize other regions as far as 600 miles away.

What made Teotihuacán so powerful? Despite many unanswered questions about this city, we know that its growth and feats of urban planning wouldn't have been possible without a powerful centralized government. The intricate urban grid and the massive temples must have required a coordinated effort and significant funds.

We also know that there was trade between Teotihuacán and other societies. For example, tools made of obsidian—a black, shiny material made of volcanic glass—were found in Mayan territory. Similarly, Teotihuacán-style pottery has been found throughout Mesoamerica. This serves as evidence of Teotihuacán's reach and expansion in the region.

The city's reach is also evident in documents from the Mayan city of Tikal recording the arrival of the Teotihuacán military in 378 CE. These writings also suggest that Teotihuacán became involved in the local government.

This pattern echoes other examples in the early Americas where leaders sought to build states in order to control resources and create cohesive societies.

### **The Maya: independent city-states**

The [Maya](#), a group of people who inhabited Mesoamerica after the [Olmec](#), lived in what is today southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and El Salvador. Complex Maya societies—including city-states—arose throughout these different areas, and local lords struggled with one another for power and access to trade routes and goods. [Surviving artwork](#) from the time suggests that these rulers held considerable power in their own kingdoms and were possibly seen as divine.

Starting in the third century BCE, Mayan people settled in the fertile highlands of current day Guatemala. One major city, **Kaminaljuyú**, was located near what is now Guatemala City; it boasted impressive temples and access to trade routes into central Mexico. In the fourth century CE, however, Teotihuacán colonized the Kaminaljuyú.

The lack of a cohesive empire across Mesoamerica was probably due in part to the large number of rulers jostling for power and difficult geography. Mayan cities were located in diverse environments ranging from rainforest to highlands, which made governing over multiple cities difficult.



A zoomed-in map of modern-day southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and El Salvador—the former area of Mayan civilizations. The map shows the Guatemalan highlands on the west coast, the Gulf of Honduras to the south, and the Gulf of Mexico to the north. Modern-day map of Mayan civilizations. Image credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

### The Andes: innovations in agriculture

Early societies in the **Andes**, in what is today Peru and Bolivia, faced geographical hurdles just as the Maya did. The towering Andes mountains and coastal deserts made unification difficult, but snow runoff from the mountains trickled into a network of rivers, facilitating agriculture. The **Moche** civilization on the northern coast of Peru developed a successful irrigation system and harvested maize, cotton, beans, and squash.

Farther east, the **Wari** in the northern highlands used the mountains themselves as a means of tiered agriculture; they irrigated the hillsides using the melted snow that flowed down from the mountains. Evidence also shows the Wari kingdom developed city planning and roadways that connected its major city to trade routes.



A picture of terraced farmlands in modern-day Peru shows 13 tiered rows of farmland that look like grassy steps. A mountain range is in the background.

Terraced farmlands in modern-day Peru. Image credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Andean kingdoms sought to control trade and imports such as seafood from the coast and potatoes and quinoa from the high plains. Kingdoms situated their large cities at lower elevations in order to gain access to trade routes and imports more easily.

Although they were not successful in creating expansive empires, early states in Mesoamerica and the Andes did build states with centralized governments; areas with irrigation for crops; roadways for travel and trade to bring wealth back to the capitals; and armies to defend and enlarge their territories. We don't know the full reach of power of cities like Teotihuacán, but we can conclude that their success must have been the result of a centralized government and technology.