

Mesoamerica

"Hay Nativos"

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

Lyric: Intro



The Americas highlighted in green

*A lonesome warrior stands in fear of
what the future brings,
He will never hear the beating drums or
the songs his brothers sing.
Our many nations once stood tall and
ranged from shore to shore
But most are gone and few remain and
the buffalo roam no more.
- Tommy Flameworker Manasco*

Notes

Looking at America today, it is easy to see the social, cultural and architectural heritage of the white settlers and their descendants and of the African slaves and their descendants, but it is much harder to find the heritage of the millions of original Americans who populated North and South America. Mostly, this is because huge numbers of those Native Americans were conquered and killed, either by new diseases or European guns. Cultural ignorance and a self-centered worldview allowed the white settlers to dismiss the Native Americans as "savages."

We now know a lot more about the civilizations that lived in America before the land got that name. We know about the many tribes and societies that existed off the rich soil or followed the great herds of buffalo. We know about the three major empires of America: the Maya, Aztec and Inca civilizations. These people built large cities to live in and giant temples to worship their gods. They didn't live in paradise; owning slaves was common in Mesoamerica. But they also demonstrated lots of practical knowledge, from astronomy to farming techniques to medicines. These were the original Americans.

Lyric: Archaeologists pick up a pair of clues. They saw pyramids and giant stone heads,

Notes



The Olmec civilization was a lost, forgotten civilization until 1862. That year, a man was wandering around the forest when he stumbled upon a giant head made of stone. Later, many more giant heads were found, as well as some pyramids. These were the remnants of the Olmec civilization.

Lyric: learned they belonged to the Olmecs. They discovered the mother culture,

Notes



A map of the ancient Olmec civilization. Yellow dots were villages and towns, and red dots mark where artifacts or art have been found.

The first culture to build cities in the Americas was probably the Olmec. They lived along the Gulf of Mexico beginning around 1200 BC and built pyramids in the jungle. The Olmec culture is sometimes called the Mother Culture of Mesoamerica because they strongly influenced the societies that would follow. It is possible that the Olmec were the first civilization in the Western Hemisphere to develop a system of writing.

Lyric: first cities, artisans, sculptors.

Notes



Colossal Head 3

Some of the Olmecs were sculptors and artisans. They were a ritualistic people, governed by both kings and priests, and they were fascinated with the jaguar, something that many other Mesoamerican cultures would pick up on. They considered this jungle cat a manifestation of God on Earth. They also traded with other peoples and may even have come up with a calendar. Olmec items have been found in various parts of Central America, but they Olmec are most famous for the large stone heads they carved. Imagine having to sculpt a rock the size of a car into the likeness of a person without metal tools! Historians don't know as much about the Olmec as they know about some other ancient societies.

Lyric: The Maya came next with similarities.

Notes



A reconstruction of the Maya city of Tikal in the 8th century AD

The next great civilization in the Americas was probably the Maya. In fact, archaeologists considered them the first for a long time. They were a farming people who lived on the Yucatan Peninsula between 300 and 900 AD. The

Maya bore a lot of similarities to the Olmec.

Lyric: agriculturists in the Yucatan,

Notes



The Maya called the Yucatan Peninsula their home

Most Mayan men lived in villages and were advanced agriculturalists. We know this because they practiced intercropping, where certain crops are planted together, using one to stimulate the growth of the other.

Lyric: city-states, the illest that you could plan. Like Tikal, they found in Guatemala,

Notes



The Maya archaeological site of Tikal

The Maya also built huge cities. Some archaeologists estimate that one such municipality, Tikal, now found in Guatemala, was home to as many as 100,000 residents at one time. There were more than 3,000 buildings there, some towering high over the jungle.

The Mayans were very advanced in mathematics, astronomy and engineering. In Tikal this manifested in their construction of reservoirs to hold water for the city. The water moved between manmade lakes using gravity in such a manner that they must have had a deep knowledge of mathematics.

Lyric: They had a calendar and a writing system,

Notes



Temple of Kukulkan at Chichen Itza

Like the Olmecs, the Maya were an advanced civilization. They constructed great structures, including pyramids, temples, palaces and small stadiums in their city-states across Central America. Chichen Itza was one Mayan city

centered in Mexico. The Temple of Kukulkan, known as El Castillo, is one of the great stone structures of the city. The Maya were also smart when it came to sciences and writing. They created a writing system and an accurate calendar. The Temple of Kukulkan has 365 steps to represent each day of the year. The Maya calendar, similar to the one used today, shows how skilled the Mayans were in astronomy.

**Lyric: But a ball game where you could die a victim.
Slavery, sacrifice, it was a risky time,**

Notes



For all of their artistic and scientific sophistication, though, they were a harsh people. They had slaves, and human sacrifice was common. They played a rubber ball game that usually ended in the losers being ritually killed. And they were fierce warriors. While their ancient culture largely disappeared in 869 AD, the Maya still live in their

ancestral homelands in southern Mexico and northern Central America.

Lyric: Who has next? Oh, that would be the Aztecs,

Notes



When the Spanish conquistadors smashed their way into the Americas in the 16th century, they were amazed by the Aztecs. They were a very sophisticated people. Like the Maya, they had a calendar and a writing system and were religious and warlike.

Lyric: they built a big city, Tenochtitlan.

Notes



Sometime between 1200 and 1325, the Aztec people transformed from nomadic hunters to farmers. The story goes that the Aztec leader at the time was told by their god, Huitzilopochtli, to go to an island in Lake Texcoco and set up their homeland. So that's what they did.

They built a large city, Tenochtitlan, right on an island in the middle of the lake. They built bridges, or causeways, that connected the island to the mainland. The Aztecs were very clever about using the water all around for *chinampa*, which were small, man-made floating gardens. Historians estimate the population in Tenochtitlan to have been about 200,000 at its height. It's where Montezuma, the famous leader of the Aztecs when the Spanish invaded, had his palace. His gilded home and the rest of the city were destroyed in 1521 by the Spanish conquistador Hernandez Cortes. But archaeologists have learned a lot about Aztec culture from the ruins of Tenochtitlan, where modern-day Mexico City stands.

Lyric: they'd bathe twice a day, Plant corn, grind it up, make it into pancakes.

Notes



The most common Aztec foods were corn, beans, squash, chilies and tomatoes, all important staples of the Mexican diet to this day. Although they were largely vegetarian, the Aztec people also ate insects like grasshoppers and ants, which are full of protein.

Lyric: schools every kid attended, They learned how to write, yep, also how to fight.

Notes



Through age 14, a child's education was in the hands of his or her parents. Then at 15, every boy and girl was sent to school, though they were taught different things: Girls learned about taking care of the house and raising children, while boys were taught how to read, write and fight.

Lyric: Aztecs would take slaves and captives From their enemies;

Notes



Wooden handled Aztec sacrificial knife

Aztecs seemed to believe that the gods (there were more than 1,000 of them) had sacrificed themselves to create the Earth. So it made sense to the Aztecs that they would have to sacrifice humans in order to honor and serve the gods. The Aztecs didn't want to sacrifice the people who lived in their own cities and villages, so they relied on taking slaves and captives from other villages and tribes.

Lyric: They sacrificed humans, it seemed like madness.

Notes



The Aztecs took human sacrifice to an amazing level. By their own accounts, they once sacrificed thousands of people in just a few days while they rebuilt a large pyramid. But it wasn't always so bloody. The Aztecs loved gold, and they loved candy - we can thank them for both gum and chocolate.

Lyric: The Incas were building a kingdom, exceptional.

Notes

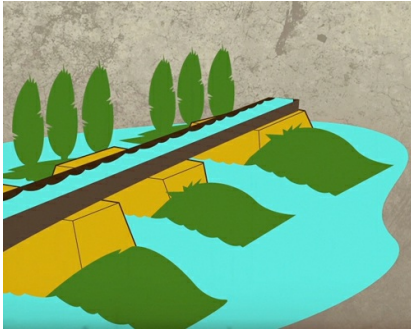


While the Aztecs ruled what is now Mexico, the Incas were busy in the Andes mountains, where they built the biggest kingdom in all the Americas. Based in Cuzco, Peru, the Incan empire, at its height in the 12th century, reigned over a territory spanning modern Ecuador to northern Chile. More than a million people lived in its bounds. And there

were supposedly close to 20,000 miles of roads connecting the various tribes who lived under the rule of the Incan king.

Lyric: They built aqueducts in the Andes,

Notes



Incan engineers were as sophisticated as any at the time, building acres of farmland on terraces in the Andes. They constructed forts that still stand today - even though they used no mortar between the blocks. They put up aqueducts, and had some of the best medical techniques of the ancient world.

Lyric: Machu Picchu – the city of the clouds.

Notes



Machu Picchu is an extraordinary place for many reasons. It's an ancient city on a 9,000-foot mountaintop with stunning views, but beyond its obvious beauty, it's fascinating because it cannot be seen from below.

Lyric: from the ground, it vanished, The secret, never found by the Spanish.

Notes



Historians now think this city from the early 1400s was a secret place. It was home to more than 150 houses and palaces, temples, and baths - all up in the clouds. The buildings were carved out of the granite from the mountain. No one knows for sure what the Incas did there, but it was almost certainly used as an astronomic observatory. The Spanish

never found Machu Picchu.

Lyric: Columbian Exchange

Colombian Exchange

You may have an image in your head of Native Americans riding around on horses. In fact, Native Americans had never seen horses until the Spanish brought them over from Europe. You may also think that Italians have been making pizza for thousands of years. But, no. They didn't have any tomatoes. Just as horses were native to Europe and Asia, tomatoes were native to the Americas. Once the Spanish brought tomatoes back to Europe, though, the Italians began to use it as the basis for lots of their now- famous dishes.

Notes

Lyric: History Speaks

"We are not myths of the past, ruins in the jungle or zoos. We are people and we want to be respected, not to be victims of intolerance and racism." - Rigoberta Menchú, a Maya, 1992

Notes

Lyric: Discussion Question

Describe some of the similarities between the various ancient peoples of Central America.

Notes