

Early Migration and Geography of Central and South America

E.Q. How did geography influence the development of the Aztec, Mayan and Incan civilizations?

Social scientists are not sure exactly when the first people arrived in the Americas. However, the oldest artifacts found date from between 12,000 – 15,000 years ago. They believe that these earliest Americans migrated across a land bridge during the last Ice Age. This land bridge connected North America to Asia. As the ice melted, the land bridge was slowly covered by water. Today, this area is the Bering Strait.

In a process that took thousands of years, the first Americans migrated from the Arctic areas of North America to the tip of South America. They moved in small hunting groups. They followed wild herds of big game like mastodons and mammoths. As the big-game herds died out, they turned to hunting smaller animals like bison, rabbits, and deer. They supplemented their diet with plants, nuts, berries, and roots that were gathered.

Eventually some of these hunter and gatherer groups learned agriculture. Agriculture is the growing of food and the domestication of animals. Historians call this period the Neolithic Revolution. Agriculture brought tremendous changes to the ways of life of these people. Farming produced a surplus of crops. This allowed some people the time to learn new jobs. Groups no longer had to move with the herds and villages began to develop. From that, came cities and civilizations.

The Mayan civilization developed into the largest civilization in Mexico and Central America. The Mayan homeland covered an area of approximately 120,000 square miles. Much of this was located on the Yucatan Peninsula of southern Mexico. It also included land that is part of the present-day countries of Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. The lands where the Maya lived were covered with forest, bushes and grass. In the south, lay high mountains and thick rain forests. In the north, on the Yucatan Peninsula, brush and scrubs grew thickly. The weather in the rain forest areas was very hot and humid. While the other areas experienced warm weather year round. There was plenty of rain throughout the area.

The Aztec civilization developed into one of the most advanced civilizations in the world. They lived in an area centered in the Valley of Mexico. This is a huge oval region of fertile land surrounded by mountains and volcanoes. The climate in this region is warm and mild. There is large system of lakes in the middle of the valley. The Aztecs built the center of their empire, the city of Tenochtitlan (*tay nohch Tee tlahn*), on an island in the center of Lake Texcoco (*taysh KOH koh*).

The Inca lived in an area stretching 2,500 miles along the western border of South America (present-day Peru). Most Incan people chose to live in the high, steep plateaus of the Andes Mountains and in the many mountain valleys. Rain was plentiful and the mountains had plenty of streams. The mountains were bordered by the Amazon jungle on the east and the desert coastline to the west. As the empire grew, the Incans also lived along the desert coastal

areas. The Incas chose not to live in the jungle. However, they did use the many resources that the jungle had to offer.

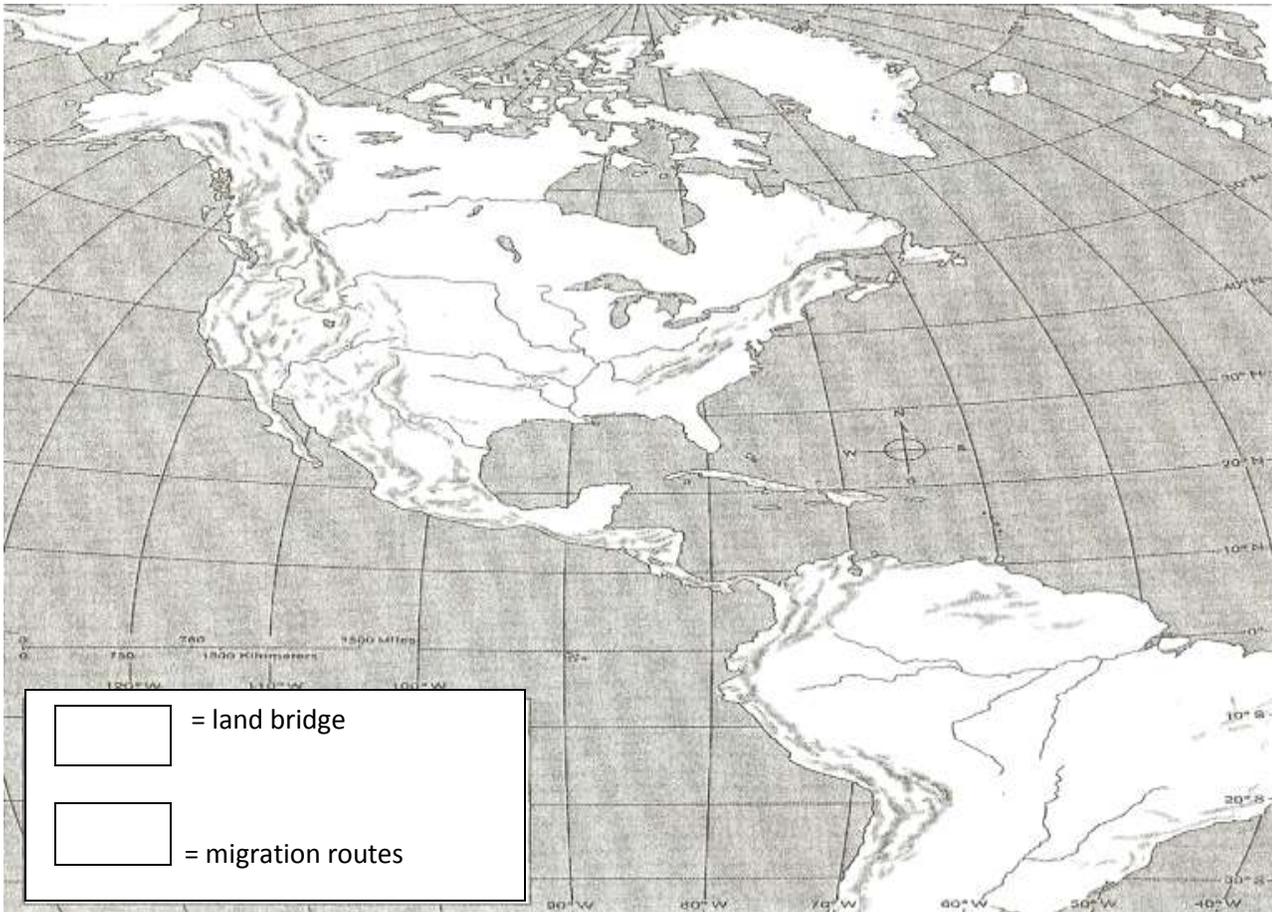
1. Locate and label the following geographic features.

North America South America Asia Pacific Ocean Atlantic Ocean Bering Strait

2. Use a colored pencil to shade in the area where a land bridge was exposed during the last ice age.

3. Draw the routes taken by ancient people who crossed the land bridge from Asia to North and South America.

4. Complete the key.



Complete the cause and effect activity below.

CAUSE

EFFECT

*Early humans crossed a land bridge into the Americas.

*Hunter and gatherers learned agriculture.
