Chapter 6: Settlement of the Americas and the Pacific Islands: 6-2 The Agricultural Revolution in the Americas
Book Title: World Civilizations
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6-2 The Agricultural Revolution in the Americas

In the New World, ever-drier conditions between c. 9500 and 6000 B.C.E. fostered a gradual transition from hunting and gathering to food production. Archaeological research reveals that the transition to agriculture began independently in Peru and Mexico between about 6000 and 5500 B.C.E. By that time, farmers in the Peruvian highlands were growing potatoes to trade for fishmeal from the Pacific coast and fruit from the Amazon region. Meanwhile, in northeast Mexico people began growing chili peppers and pumpkins to supplement their meager diet of small desert creatures. Next, they domesticated beans and the all-important *maize* (Indian corn). **Maize cultivation** (Known to North Americans as corn, maize was cultivated as one of the staple foods of American Indian civilizations, along with beans and squash.) spread along trade routes that connected Mesoamerica (Middle America) with Peru to the south and with North America. Maize eventually became the staple grain in the Native American diet throughout the Western Hemisphere.

If one considers the limitations of Native Americans' Neolithic technology, the lack of draft animals to haul materials and pull plows, and the absence of wheeled carts and pulleys for hoisting, their agricultural achievements are impressive. Difficult terrain and relatively poor soils challenged farmers to develop innovative agricultural methods in both wet and arid zones. Instead of plowing with the aid of oxen or cattle (as in the Eastern Hemisphere), Native American farmers relied on simpler implements such as planting sticks or foot hoes. In swampy areas near lakes in central Mexico and around Lake Titicaca in South America, they created artificial islands by digging ditches to channel swamp water, then dredging and piling the muck in mounds as stores of new, nutrient-rich topsoil. Complex **irrigation systems** (A network of channels or tunnels that connect a source of water with farms.) turned dry areas into farmland, as in coastal Peru. In mountainous terrain intricate terracing expanded the acreage available for horticulture. Because of measures such as these, archaeologists estimate that Mexican farmers were able to grow in just eight to ten weeks enough corn, beans, squash, and chili peppers to support a small family for up to an entire year.

In Peru, as in Mesoamerica, neighboring peoples within the various microclimates—deserts, rain forests, and mountains—pooled their food resources through trade, thereby ensuring balanced diets and food supplies adequate to feed larger populations that covered a wider area. The main Andean carbohydrate staple, the freeze-dried potato from the highlands, provided more energy per acre than most other crops. For animal protein, Mesoamericans raised turkeys. Andean people raised guinea pigs and ate the meat of **llamas** (A wooly pack animal commonly found in the Andes Mountains of South America and in Argentina. It is related to the camel but has no humps. In addition to transport, llamas provide meat, wool, and hides.) (small camel-like animals). These levels of productivity and nutrition helped

enable the development of the great civilizations of Mexico, Central America, and the Andes Mountains of South America. Finally, in the Amazon rain forest, excavations reveal settlements with managed orchards and the man-made enriched soils that were crucial to rain forest horticulture.

By the end of the Archaic period (2000 B.C.E.), agriculture had been established from Mesoamerica to South America. Other skills that typically accompanied the appearance of food production in world history, such as weaving, basketry, making pottery, and the construction of permanent buildings and villages, had also taken root throughout the Americas. During the early phases of the Neolithic (agricultural) Revolution, Native Americans lived in villages that included a type of dwelling called a **pit house** (A type of dwelling found in some Neolithic civilizations. Early farmers dug oval or rectangular pits into the ground over which they erected walls and roofs from tree branches and twigs, animal bones, animal hides, and mud.) . Although these varied according to available materials, pit houses typically consisted of a framework of wood poles thatched with tree branches and leaves, or animal hides, built over a shallow pit. The dead were carefully buried (or mummified in Peru). There were periodic regional meetings among villages for social, economic, or religious reasons. During the next phase, these meeting places evolved into the great ceremonial centers and trading hubs of the more complex societies: the **Olmec (OHL-mehk) civilization** (The earliest Amerindian civilization in Mexico, c. 1200–300 B.C.E.) in Mesoamerica and the **Chavín (chah-VEEN) civilization** ((900–200 B.C.E.) The earliest and one of the most developed civilizations of the South American Andes Mountains.) in South America. Extensive trade networks disseminated goods and functioned as catalysts for cultural exchange.

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