You thought the Aztecs were ancient? A thousand years before them, there were numerous states in Mesoamerica and the Andes. These states formed a variety of kingdoms that traded, fought, and thrived.
City of the gods

The ruins of a huge ancient city lie near Mexico City. The place is an amazing sight. A four-mile-long road runs through the city’s center. It passes by ancient apartments and colorful wall paintings. The road ends up at the foot of a giant pyramid. This amazing structure is more than 700 feet tall and 700 feet wide. Yet, it wasn’t built with modern tools. It’s more than 2,000 years old.

The Aztecs discovered this mysterious city long after it fell. They named it Teotihuacán, or “city of the gods.”

Between 300 and 600 CE, Teotihuacán had great power. It ruled over a 10,000-square-mile area. Around 200,000 people lived within the city itself.

Not much is known about Teotihuacán. There are no surviving written records from the city. But other evidence shows an urban grid and large temples. These must have required a coordinated effort and plenty of money. Teotihuacán must have had a strong government. It must have been very rich.
Stela 31 has been described as the greatest Early Classic sculpture to survive at Tikal. 
A long hieroglyphic text is carved onto the back of the monument. It describes the arrival of Siyaj K’ak’, who some historians believe to be a powerful military general from Teotihuacán. By Greg Willis, CC BY-SA 2.0.

We also know that Teotihuacán traded with other societies. For example, their tools and pots were found throughout Mesoamerica. This is evidence of Teotihuacán’s expansion in the region.

The Maya: Independent city-states
The Maya were another Mesoamerican people. They lived in what is now southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and El Salvador. Maya societies arose in many areas. Some were highly developed city-states.

Maya people settled in what is now Guatemala starting in the 200s BCE, or the 3rd century. The city of Kaminaljuyú arose near modern-day Guatemala City. It contained grand temples. In the fourth century CE, the city was conquered by Teotihuacán.
This Mirror-Bearer figure is the best-preserved example of Maya wood sculpture from the Early Classic period (ca. 250–550 CE). This figure represents a royal court dwarf, which was thought to have divine powers. By The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain.

A zoomed-in map of modern-day southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and El Salvador—the former area of Maya society. 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. By Simon Burchell, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Maya was not as united as most empires. Mountains and rain forests cut cities off from one another. That made it hard to keep the empire together.

The Andes: Innovations in agriculture

The Andes region is now home to Peru and Bolivia. The early communities of the Andes faced some of the same problems the Maya did. The Andes mountain range is towering and difficult to cross. It kept different societies separate. So did the region’s coastal deserts.

The region did have its advantages, though. It had a rich supply of water. Melted snow regularly trickled down from the mountains. This was great for agriculture. The Moche people lived in what is now northern Peru. Moche culture flourished from 100–700 CE. The Moche people developed a successful irrigation system. It delivered water to many kinds of crops. Farmers harvested maize, cotton, beans, and squash.

A picture of terraced farmlands in modern-day Peru shows thirteen tiered rows of farmland that look like grassy steps. A mountain range is in the background. By Alexson Scheppa Peisino, public domain.
Farther east in the northern highlands of the Andes, the Wari built a powerful civilization from 500-1000 CE. The Wari were also masters of agriculture. They planted crops in stepped rows along hillsides. These rows are called tiers. Irrigation was provided by melted snow that flowed down from the mountains. The Wari kingdom also built many roads. These roads connected its major city to trade networks.

Early states in Mesoamerica and the Andes did not create large empires. However, they did build states with many of the complex features we associate with empires.
Sources


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Image credits

Cover: Illustration of Mayan temples © Dorling Kindersley / Getty Images

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. By Daniel Case, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pyramid_of_the_Moon_from_Pyramid_of_the_Sun,_Teotihuacan,_in_sunlight.jpg

For comparison’s sake, the Golden Gate Bridge! Connecting San Francisco to Marin County in California, the bridge is 4,200 feet long and 746 feet tall. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Golden_Gate_Bridge#/media/File:GoldenGateBridge.jpg

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This Mirror-Bearer figure is the best-preserved example of Maya wood sculpture from the Early Classic period (ca. 250–550 CE). This figure represents a royal court dwarf, which was thought to have divine powers. By The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/313256

A zoomed-in map of modern-day southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and El Salvador—the former area of Maya society. 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. By Simon Burchell, CC BY-SA 4.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maya_civilization_location_map_-_geography(1).svg#/media/File:Maya_civilization_location_map_-_geography(1).svg

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