

Ancient Times:
The Story of the First Americans
By Suzanne Strauss Art

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Around 5500 BCE, someone living in the [Tehuacan] valley figured out that seeds would produce new plants if they were put in the ground and watered. Most likely a woman made this discovery, since women did most of the food gathering. Perhaps she accidentally dropped a few seeds into some damp soil and, noticing the new plants sprouting a few days later, made the connection. However it happened, this discovery had mind-boggling implications. Now, instead of constantly searching for nuts, roots, and berries, families could produce a fairly dependable supply of plant food. And growing crops made it possible for large numbers of people to survive even when game was limited.

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Archaeologists discovered the grave of an old man...he wore a cloak made of golden eagle down and cotton...a single ear of corn rested on his chest. Around him were a large, powerful bow, a wood-tipped arrow, five pottery jars, and four woven baskets containing pinyon nuts, beans, salt, and cornmeal. The most amazing part of the find was a huge amount of cotton yarn wound in thick skeins. There were more than two miles of it! Beside the yarn lay a wooden spindle. The grave is a virtual time capsule of Chaco culture. Just think of all the clues it provides us with about their food (they grew corn, gathered nuts, hunted animals, and even flavored their meals with salt), their crafts (they were skillful potters, weavers, and basket-makers), and their views of the afterlife (they expected the old man to continue his weaving in the next world).

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The Mayan priests preserved their knowledge of political and religious events by carving glyphs on rows of free-standing stone pillars called stelae. Every five years they had a new one shaped and carved with glyphs to describe the latest happenings.

Hundreds of glyphic inscriptions appear on the walls of monuments, too. In recent years, scholars have learned to translate about 80% of them.

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The Zuni people had a myth that explained the abandonment of Mesa Verde. It told how a giant, called Cloud-Swallower, consumed the "cloud-breaths" of the gods, which were the source of moisture from the sky. Snow ceased in the north and the west, rain ceased in the south and the east. The mists of the mountains and the waters of the valleys dried up. Then the twin gods of war destroyed the evil giant. But fearing that the water would never again freshen the fields, the cliff dwellers fled away to the distant lands. Only those who had perished during the drought remain, "dried, like their withered cornstalks." And those dried remains have lasted all these years to provide us with clues to some of the mysteries of Mesa Verde.

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In winter the [Inuit] hunters stalked the caribou, which provided them with nearly everything they needed to live. They used the hides for winter clothing - leggings, shirts, hooded parkas, mittens, and moccasins - as well as tent covers, and they twisted strips of leather to make snares for catching small game. The bones and antlers were fashioned into ax handles, fish-hooks, and other useful tools. Of course, the tasty meat of the caribou provided the families with food. A special treat was the half-digested mass of lichens still in the stomach. It was roasted whole over a fire.