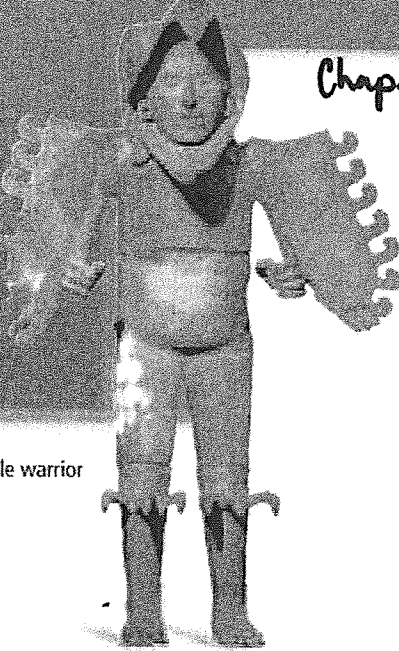


1



Aztec eagle warrior

WITNESS HISTORY AUDIO

Elite Warriors Uphold an Empire

Among the Aztecs, a force of fierce soldiers emerged to aid the ruler in maintaining an empire. The most highly regarded fighters were eagle and jaguar warriors, who wore costumes resembling the honored animals for whom they were named (a tradition in other cultures of the Americas as well). Indeed, Aztec warfare served both a political purpose—defending the empire—and a ritual one. It was the gods whom the Aztec rulers believed granted them the right to rule. Sacrificing humans—the captives of battle—was the leading way to appeal to the gods.

Focus Question What factors encouraged the rise of powerful civilizations in Mesoamerica?

Civilizations of Mesoamerica

Objectives

- Describe when and where people first settled the Americas.
- Analyze the main characteristics of the Olmec and Maya civilizations.
- Outline how the Aztec empire and Aztec society took shape.

Terms, People, and Places

- Mesoamerica
- maize
- Olmecs
- stela
- Valley of Mexico
- Tenochtitlán
- chinampas
- tribute
- Teotihuacán

Note Taking

Reading Skill: Compare and Contrast Use a chart like the one below to take notes on similarities and differences in how early people adapted to climate and geography in different parts of the Americas.

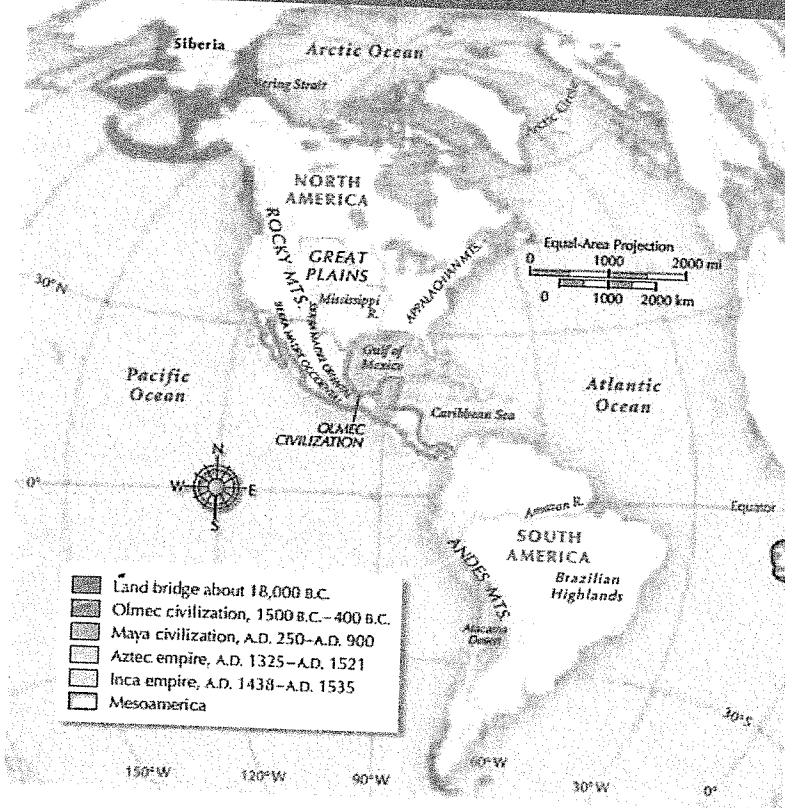
Adapting to the Americas	
Climate	Geography
•	•
•	•
•	•

The Americas include two continents, North America and South America. Within these two geographic regions lies a cultural region called Mesoamerica, which is made up of Mexico and Central America. Some of the earliest civilizations in the Americas developed in Mesoamerica.

People Settle in the Americas

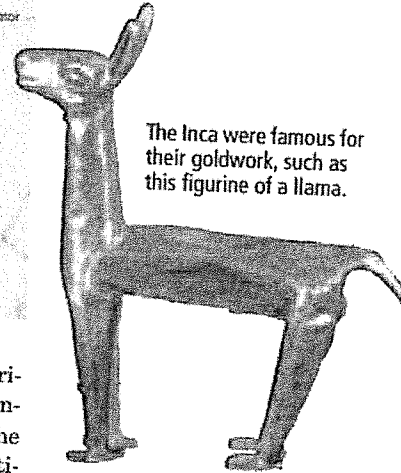
Sometime between 12,000 and 10,000 years ago, most scholars believe, people first arrived in the Americas. Scholars are still trying to understand the details of how this great migration occurred. Originally, it was believed that people came from Asia and entered through Alaska. This migration is thought to have taken place near the end of the last Ice Age, which lasted from about 100,000 years ago to about 10,000 years ago. During the ice age, so much water froze into thick ice sheets that the sea level dropped, exposing a land bridge between Siberia and Alaska in the area that is now the Bering Strait. About 10,000 B.C., Earth's climate warmed and the ice melted. As a result, water levels rose and covered the Bering land bridge.

The earliest evidence supported the theory that hunters followed herds of bison and mammoths across the land bridge and then south through North America, Central America, and South America. Recent data suggest something different—that people migrated to parts of the Americas much earlier and along coastal routes, perhaps paddling small boats. Although neither theory has been proved, researchers now base the dates of migration into the Americas mostly on evidence found at prehistoric sites.



Map Skills The descendants of the first Americans spread throughout the Americas, establishing both small settlements and large civilizations.

1. Locate (a) Bering Strait (b) Gulf of Mexico (c) Amazon River (d) Rocky Mountains
2. Location Which culture bordered the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea?
3. Draw Inferences In what types of environments did the Inca live? The Aztecs?



The Inca were famous for their goldwork, such as this figurine of a llama.

Adapting to New Environments The first Americans faced a variety of environments in which they could settle. For example, great mountain chains—the Rockies, the eastern and western Sierra Madre, and the Andes—dominate the western Americas. In addition, through the continents flow two of the world's four longest rivers, the Amazon of South America and the Mississippi of North America. Far to the north and south of the continents, people learned to survive in icy, treeless lands. Closer to the Equator, people settled in the hot, wet climate and dense vegetation of the Amazon rain forest. Elsewhere, hunters adapted to deserts like the Atacama of Chile, woodlands like those in eastern North America, and the fertile plains of both continents.

People Begin to Farm and Build Villages In the Americas, as elsewhere, the greatest adaptation occurred when people learned to domesticate plants and animals. These changes took place slowly between about 8500 B.C. and 2000 B.C. In Mesoamerica, Neolithic people cultivated a range of crops, including beans, sweet potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, squash, and maize—the Native American name for corn. People in South America cultivated crops such as maize and cassava and domesticated llamas and other animals valued for their wool. By 3000 B.C. in parts of South America and 1500 B.C. in parts of Mesoamerica, farmers had settled in villages. Populations then expanded, and some villages eventually grew into the great early cities of the Americas.

✓ **Checkpoint** How did early Americans adapt to different environments?

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Civilization Arises With the Olmecs

The earliest American civilization, that of the Olmecs, emerged in the tropical forests along the Gulf Coast of Mexico. The civilization lasted from about 1500 B.C. to 400 B.C. Compared to other civilizations, archaeologists know little about the Olmecs. They do not know where the Olmecs came from or what they called themselves. But evidence in the form of temples and large and small pieces of art suggests that a powerful class of priests and nobles stood at the top of society. These elite groups may have lived in ceremonial centers, while the common people lived in surrounding farming villages.

Much of Olmec art is carved stone. The smallest examples include jade figurines of people and gods. The most dramatic remains are 14 giant stone heads found at the major ceremonial centers of San Lorenzo and La Venta. Scholars believe that these colossal heads, which the Olmecs carved from 40-ton stones, are portraits of rulers. No one knows exactly how the Olmecs moved these stones from distant quarries without wheeled vehicles or draft animals.

The Olmecs also engaged in trade, through which they influenced a wide area. The grinning jaguars and serpents that decorate many Olmec carvings appear in the arts of later Mesoamerican peoples. The Olmecs also invented a calendar, and they carved hieroglyphic writing into stone. Because later Mesoamerican peoples adopted such advances, many scholars consider the Olmecs the “mother culture” of Mesoamerica.

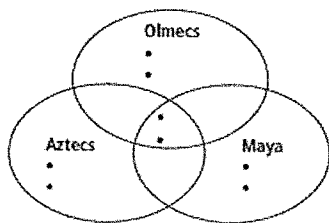
✓ **Checkpoint** What aspects of Olmec culture have archaeologists uncovered?



Colossal Olmec head from La Venta

Note Taking

Reading Skill: Compare and Contrast
Use a Venn diagram to keep track of key similarities and differences among the cultures of Mesoamerica.



The Maya Build Widespread Civilization

Among the peoples the Olmecs influenced were the Maya. By 300 B.C., the Maya were building large cities, such as El Mirador in Guatemala. By about A.D. 250, the Maya golden age—known as the Classic Period—began, with city-states flourishing from the Yucatán Peninsula in southern Mexico through much of Central America.

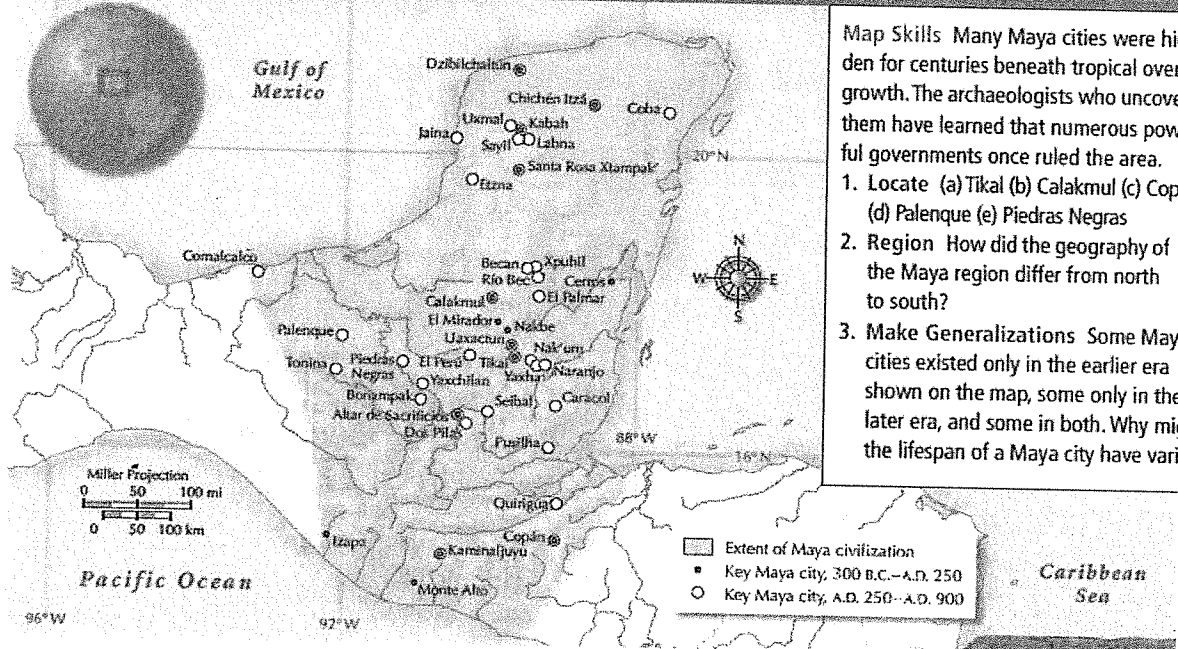
Agriculture Thrives Before the Maya developed large population centers, they lived scattered across the land. They developed two farming methods that allowed them to thrive in the tropical environment. In many areas, farmers burned down forests and then cleared the land in order to plant on it. After a few years, the fields were no longer fertile. The Maya would then abandon these lands until they could be used once again. In the meantime, farmers would burn and clear new lands for farming. In addition, along the banks of rivers, Maya farmers built raised fields to lift crops up above the annual floodwaters. These methods allowed the Maya to produce enough maize and other crops to support rapidly growing cities.

Powerful City-States Emerge The Maya cities that developed before and during the Classic Period never formed an empire. Instead, individual and powerful city-states evolved. The smaller city-states ruled over the people living directly within and near their borders. The largest ones reigned over neighboring areas as well—often requiring nearby cities to show allegiance to their kings and to participate in their ritual activities. Over the course of hundreds of years, many different city-states held

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Cities of the Maya Realm

Geography Interactive
For: Interactive map
Web Code: nap-0612



Map Skills Many Maya cities were hidden for centuries beneath tropical overgrowth. The archaeologists who uncover them have learned that numerous powerful governments once ruled the area.

1. Locate (a) Tikal (b) Calakmul (c) Copán (d) Palenque (e) Piedras Negras
2. Region How did the geography of the Maya region differ from north to south?
3. Make Generalizations Some Maya cities existed only in the earlier era shown on the map, some only in the later era, and some in both. Why might the lifespan of a Maya city have varied?

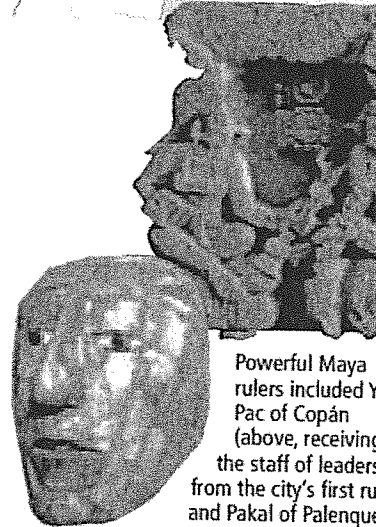
power, with warfare and trade a constant theme of life among them. Cities such as Palenque, Copán, and Piedras Negras all carried great influence in their time, but the largest and most supreme power resided in the rulers of Tikal and Calakmul.

While the Maya were not united politically, city-states maintained regular contact through a system of economic exchange, which generated much wealth. Traders carried valuable cargoes long distances by sea and along roads made of packed earth. Trade goods included items of daily use—such as honey, salt, and cotton—and nonessential but prized items such as feathers, jade, and jaguar pelts. These goods might have been used in ceremonies or to show status.

Structuring Society Each Maya city had its own ruler, who was usually male. Maya records and carvings show that women occasionally governed on their own or in the name of young sons. Nobles served many functions in support of the ruler. Some were military leaders, while others managed public works, collected taxes, and enforced laws. Scribes, painters, and sculptors were also very highly respected. Merchants may have formed a middle class in society, though the wealthiest and most powerful merchants were certainly nobles.

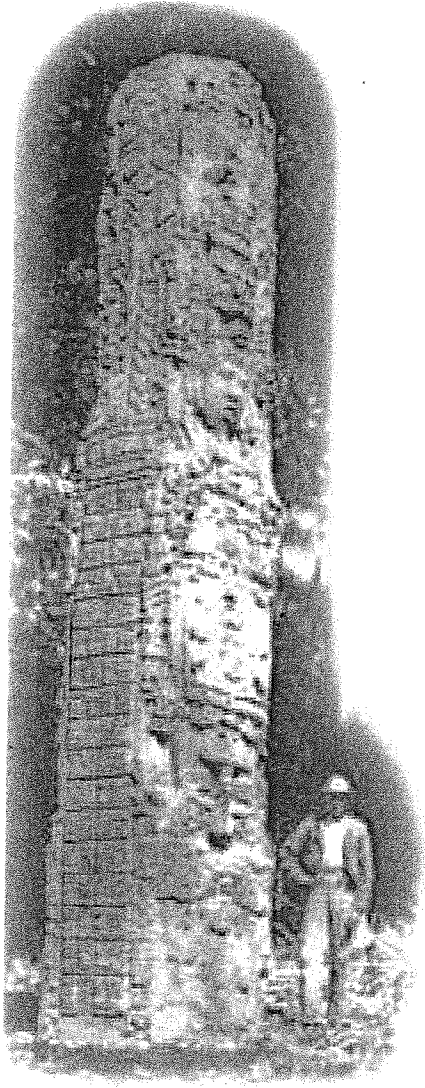
The majority of the Maya were farmers. They grew maize, beans, and squash—the basic food crops of Mesamerica—as well as fruit trees, cotton, and brilliant tropical flowers. To support the cities, farmers paid taxes in food and worked on construction projects. Some cities also included a population of slaves, who generally were commoners who had been captured in war.

✓ **Checkpoint** How did the Maya political structure differ from an empire?



Powerful Maya rulers included Y Pac of Copán (above, receiving the staff of leaders from the city's first ruler) and Pakal of Palenque (who wore the jade butterfly mask at left).

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Photographs From the Past
British archaeologist Alfred P. Maudslay won fame in the late 1800s for his sharp and stunning photographs of Maya ruins, such as this stela showing a ruler from the city of Quirigua.

Cultural Life of the Maya

The cultural life of the Maya included impressive advances in learning and the arts. In addition, the Maya developed a complex polytheistic religion that influenced their cultural life as well as their spiritual beliefs. Many Maya today maintain elements of the traditional religion established by the ancient Maya, such as the belief that each person's spirit is associated with a particular animal.

Sculptors Leave a Legacy in Stone The cities of the Maya are known today for their towering temples and palaces built from stone. Temples rested on pyramid-shaped platforms that were often quite large. Atop the temples, priests performed rites and sacrifices, while the people watched from the plazas below. Some temples also served as burial places for rulers, nobles, and priests. Palaces may have been used as royal residences as well as locations for meetings, courts, and other governmental activities.

The Maya placed elaborately carved sculpture on many of their buildings. They also sculpted tall stone monuments, each of which is called a stela (STEE luh). These carvings preserve striking images of nobles, warriors in plumed headdresses, and powerful rulers. They also represent the Maya gods, including the creator god Itzamna (et SAHM nah), the rain god Chac (chakh), and the sun god K'inich Ajaw (keen EECH ah HOW).

Scribes Record Historical Events The Maya also developed a hieroglyphic writing system, which scholars did not decipher until recent decades. Maya scribes carved inscriptions on stelae that include names of rulers, mentions of neighboring city-states, and dates and descriptions of events. They also wrote about astronomy, rituals, and other religious matters in books made of bark paper. Spanish conquerors later burned most of these books, considering any works that were written by non-Christians to be unacceptable. Three books, however, were taken to Europe and have survived into the present.

Priests Develop Astronomy and Mathematics Maya priests needed to measure time accurately in order to hold ceremonies at the correct moment. As a result, many priests became expert mathematicians and astronomers. They developed an accurate 365-day solar calendar as well as a 260-day ritual calendar. Maya priests also invented a numbering system that included place values and the concept of zero.

Maya Civilization Declines About A.D. 900, the Maya abandoned many of their cities. In the Yucatán Peninsula, cities flourished for a few more centuries, but there, too, the Maya eventually stopped building them. By the time the Spanish arrived in the 1500s, the Maya mostly lived in farming villages. Archaeologists do not know for sure why Maya civilization declined, although theories abound. For example, frequent warfare may have taken its toll on society, or overpopulation could have led to over-farming and exhaustion of the soil.

Throughout the region, however, the remoteness of their jungle and mountain locations allowed many Maya to survive the encounter with the Spanish. Today, more than two million Maya people live in Guatemala and southern Mexico.

Checkpoint What do Maya arts and writing tell us about their religion and history?

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The Aztec Empire Forms in Mexico

Sometime shortly after about A.D. 1200, bands of nomadic people from the north migrated into the Valley of Mexico, which lies in the high plateau of central Mexico. These people identified themselves as separate tribes, such as the Mexica (may SHEE kah), from whom Mexico gets its name. All the tribes spoke one language—Nahuatl (NAH hwaht el)—and believed their origins began in the same legendary birthplace, Aztlan. Together, these tribes are known as the Aztecs.

The Aztecs Settle in the Valley of Mexico In A.D. 1325, the Aztecs founded their capital city, Tenochtitlán (teh nawch tee TLAHN). According to Aztec legend, the gods had told the Aztecs to search for an eagle holding a snake in its beak and perching atop a cactus. When they saw this sign, they would know where to build their capital. Indeed, they finally saw the sign on a swampy island in Lake Texcoco (tesh KOH koh), and there they built their city. Today, Mexico City sits atop this same site.

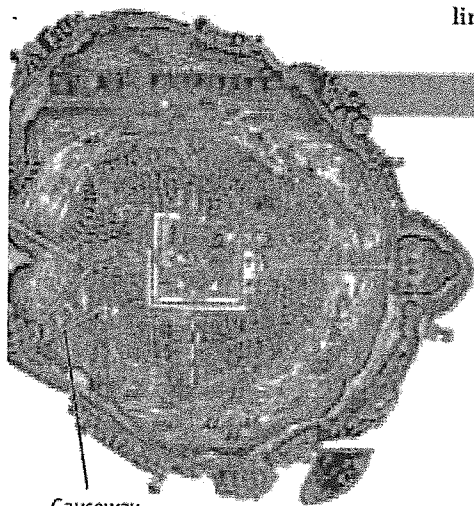
As their population grew, the Aztecs found ingenious ways to create more farmland in their lake environment. They built chinampas, artificial islands made of mud piled atop reed mats that were anchored to the shallow lake-bed with willow trees. On these “floating gardens,” the Aztecs raised maize, squash, and beans. They gradually filled in parts of the lake and created canals for transportation. Wide stone causeways linked Tenochtitlán to the mainland.

Vocabulary Builder

ingenious—(in JEEN yus) *adj.* clever, original, and effective

Tenochtitlán: Building an Island City

The Aztecs built causeways to connect Tenochtitlán to the rural settlements of the mainland. After the Spanish invaded in the 1500s, they drew a map of the city (at left). Although not to scale, it shows the causeways and dense buildings of the large capital. The diagram (below) shows how the chinampas were built. *What engineering skills must the Aztecs have used to build the city?*



Mud-and-reed mat

Willow tree

Maize

Causeway

Woven reed wall

Mud and manure

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The Empire Expands In the 1400s, the Aztecs greatly expanded their territory. Through a combination of fierce conquests and shrewd alliances, they spread their rule across most of Mexico, from the Gulf of Mexico in the east to the Pacific Ocean in the west. By 1517, the Aztec empire numbered an estimated five to six million people.

- ✔ **Checkpoint** What are some advantages and disadvantages of building a city on an island in a lake?

Aztec Society Takes Shape

War brought immense wealth as well as power to the Aztec empire. Tribute, or payment from conquered peoples, helped the Aztecs turn their capital into a magnificent city. From its temples and royal palaces to its zoos and floating gardens, Tenochtitlán seemed a city of wonders. It was also the center of a complex, well-ordered empire.

Structuring Government and Society Unlike the Maya city-states, each of which had its own king, the Aztec empire had a single ruler. A council of nobles, priests, and military leaders elected the emperor, whose primary function was to lead in war. Below him, nobles served as officials, judges, and governors of conquered provinces. Next came the warriors, who could rise to noble status by performing well on the battlefield. The priests were a class apart. They performed rituals to please the gods and prevent droughts or other disasters.

A powerful middle class included long-distance traders, who ferried goods across the empire and beyond. With goods from the highlands such as weapons, tools, and rope, they bartered for tropical products such as jaguar skins and cocoa beans.

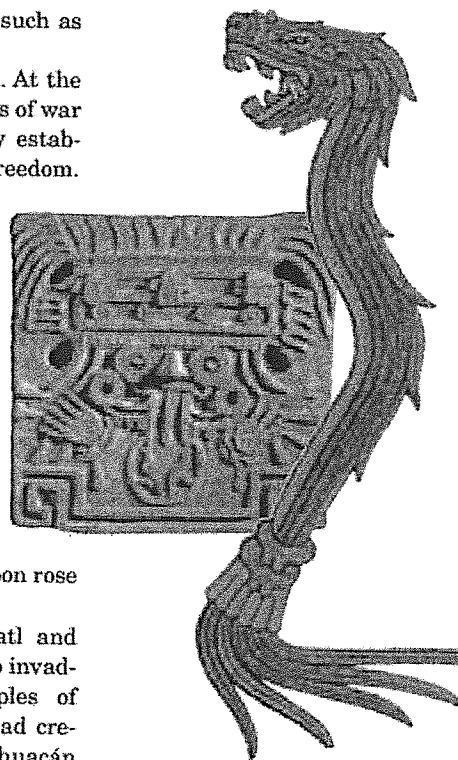
The majority of people were commoners who farmed the land. At the bottom of society were serfs and slaves, who were mostly prisoners of war or debtors. Despite their low status, slaves' rights were clearly established by law. For example, slaves could own land and buy their freedom.

Religion and Mythology Influence Culture The Aztecs believed in many gods, including Huitzilopochtli (weets ee loh POHCH tlee), whom they revered as the patron god of their people. His temple towered above central Tenochtitlán. The Aztecs also worshipped Quetzalcoatl (ket sahl koh AHT el), the feathered serpent who reigned over earth and water, plus the other powerful gods of an earlier culture that had been centered at the city of Teotihuacán (tay oh tee wah KAHN).

Teotihuacán had dominated life in the Valley of Mexico from about A.D. 200 to A.D. 750. The city was well planned, with wide roads, massive temples, and large apartment buildings to house its population of perhaps 200,000. Along the main avenue, the enormous Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon rose majestically toward the sky.

Citizens of Teotihuacán worshiped gods such as Quetzalcoatl and Tlaloc (TLAH lohk), the rain god. After Teotihuacán fell, possibly to invaders, its culture survived and greatly influenced later peoples of Mesoamerica. The Aztecs, for example, believed that the gods had created the world multiple times. In their mythology, it was in Teotihuacán that the gods created the world in which the Aztecs lived.

Representations of Tlaloc (left) and Quetzalcoatl (right)



In this translation from an Aztec text, Nanahuatzin's bravery is underscored as he proves willing to sacrifice himself where another god, the moon, was not.

Primary Source

“It is said that when the [sun] was made, . . . there was fasting for four days. It is said that the moon would be the sun. And when four days were completed, it is said, the [sun] was made during the night. . . a very great fire was laid . . . into which was to leap, was to fall the moon—where he was to gain renown, glory: by which he would become the sun. And the moon thereupon went in order to leap into the fire. But he did not dare do it; he feared the fire. Then all the gods shouted, they said: “When [is this to be], O gods? Let the sun stop!” But little [Nanahuatzin] had already dared; he thereupon had leaped into the fire. Thus he became the sun.


And the moon, when he was deprived of the renown, the glory, was much shamed.”

—Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain*

In Aztec mythology, the gods frequently sacrificed themselves for the good of the people. They believed a god named Nanahuatzin (nah nah WAHTS een) had sacrificed himself to become the sun. To give the sun strength to rise each day, the Aztecs offered human sacrifices. Most of the victims were prisoners of war, who were plentiful because the Aztecs carried on almost continuous warfare.

Aztec Knowledge Expands Priests were the keepers of Aztec knowledge. They recorded laws and historical events in the Aztec hieroglyphic writing system. Some priests ran schools. Others used their knowledge of astronomy and mathematics to foretell the future. The Aztecs, like the Maya, developed a 260-day ritual calendar and a 365-day solar calendar.

Like many other ancient peoples, the Aztecs believed that illness was a punishment from the gods. Still, Aztec priests used herbs and other medicines to treat fevers and wounds. Aztec physicians could set broken bones and treat dental cavities. They also prescribed steam baths as cures for various ills, a therapy still in use today.

 **Checkpoint** How was Aztec society structured?

Looking Ahead

The Aztecs developed a sophisticated and complex culture. But among many of the peoples they conquered, discontent festered and rebellion often flared up. At the height of Aztec power, word reached Tenochtitlán that pale-skinned, bearded men had landed on the east coast. When the armies from Spain arrived, they found ready allies among peoples who were ruled by the Aztec empire. In a later chapter, you will read about the results of the encounter between the Aztecs and the newcomers from far-off Spain.

1 Assessment

Progress Monitoring Online

For: Self-quiz with vocabulary practice
Web Code: naa-0611

Terms, People, and Places

1. For each term, person, or place listed at the beginning of the section, write a sentence explaining its significance.

Note Taking

2. **Reading Skill: Compare and Contrast** Use your completed chart and Venn diagram to answer the Focus Question: What factors encouraged the rise of powerful civilizations in Mesoamerica?

Comprehension and Critical Thinking

3. **Recognize Sufficient Evidence** What types of evidence do you think archaeologists need in order to know for certain when people populated the Americas?
4. **Analyze Information** How do you think archaeologists use public buildings, monuments, and artwork to trace the influence of earlier civilizations, such as the Olmecs, on later people?
5. **Make Comparisons** Compare the Aztec and Maya civilizations. What characteristics do they share the most? In what way(s) do they differ the most?

Writing About History

Quick Write: Choose a Topic When you write a narrative essay, start by choosing a topic. Suppose you want to write a narrative from the perspective of an ancient Maya person. Make a list of topics that interest you, such as a day in the life of a Maya sculptor or an account of a battle between two rival Maya city-states. You may want to do research in books and on the Internet before you settle on a topic.

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