



Unit 4: The Americas





What do you know about the Early Americas? (Mayan, Aztecs, Incas and American Indians)



What do you know about the Spanish colonization of South America?



KWL Chart

- Now we will take a look at the chart on the side of the class.
- Each of you will be given 3 pieces of paper:
 - Each of you will have a choice to write 2 notes for K (What do you know?) and one for W (What do you want to find out?). Or you can do 1 sticky note for K and two for W. It is your CHOICE!
 - Everyday at the end of the lesson you will fill in a note for L (What did you learn?)





Map Activity

- Now we will make a map of Ancient America.
- Throughout this unit you will make multiple maps and learn about different geographical terms.
- Make sure you color it in and make a legend of what each color means.



Map of Americas (Aztec, Inca and Mayans)





Mesoamerica



Main Idea

Civilizations in Mesoamerica were some of the earliest and most advanced in the Americas.

Focus

1. What were the first civilizations in Mesoamerica like?
2. What were some characteristics of Maya civilization?
3. What made the Aztec empire one of the strongest in the ancient Americas?

Main Idea

Elite
codex

Slash-and-burn agriculture
tribute

glyphs
alliance



The First civilizations



Background

- Mesoamerica, a region that includes southern Mexico and northern Central America, was the site of the first farming settlements in the Americas.
- Warm temperatures, plentiful rainfall, and rich volcanic soils made the area ideal for growing crops.





Background

- The first domesticated crop in the Americas, maize, was farmed in the region by around 5000 BC.
- Early Mesoamericans soon learned to farm beans and squash as well.
- Farming allowed some early peoples in Mesoamerica to create large cities and complex social structures and to advance culturally.





Guess: What is maize?

A



B



wiseGEEK

C



EARLY MESOAMERICAN CIVILIZATIONS



GEOGRAPHY SKILLS

INTERPRETING MAPS

- 1. Place** Which civilization built cities on the Yucatán Peninsula?
- 2. Movement** Which three cultures were located in the same area that the Aztecs were located?

- Olmec culture, 900 BC
- Zapotec culture, AD 200
- Toltec culture, AD 900
- Maya civilization, AD 900
- Aztec civilization, AD 1500



Olmecs

- The Olmec lived in the hot, humid, lowlands along the Gulf coast of southern Mexico from about 1200 BC to AD 300.
- They built the first large towns in Mesoamerica.
- The earliest Olmec town contained a large pyramid and a courtyard.





Olmecs

- It also contained eight giant stone heads and several other thronelike monuments.
- A later town, La Venta, had more giant stone heads as well as elaborate tombs and a pyramid.
- Because of the types of structures and monuments in the towns, scholars think Olmec towns served as ceremonial, political, and religious centers.





Olmecs

- The towns may have also been where Olmec rulers and their families lived.
- The rulers led public ceremonies that symbolized their special relationship with the gods.
- People of lower social classes, such as artists and farmers, lived outside the towns and supported the rulers and priests.





Olmecs

- In addition to leading ceremonies, the Olmec elite, or high-ranking members, controlled a large trade network that stretched to central Mexico and along the Pacific coast.
- Olmec traders traveled the network to obtain shells and certain types of valuable stones that could not be found nearby.
- They exported rubber, pottery, furs, and cacao.





Olmecs

- Trade goods were not the only things exchanged along the network of trade routes. Knowledge, beliefs, and art styles spread in this way also.
- For example, the Olmec invented a calendar and were perhaps the first in Mesoamerica to use writing.





Olmecs

- They were also the earliest people in the region to play what became a popular ball game.
- These elements of Olmec civilization can be seen in many later Mesoamerican civilizations.
- As influential as the Olmec were, however, the reason for their decline remains a mystery.





Zapotec

- One later Mesoamerican people that may have had contact with the Olmec were the Zapotec.
- They lived in southern Mexico from about 1500 BC to AD 750.
- In the beginning, the Zapotec were farmers. Around 500 BC, however, they built a capital city, Monte Albán, high above the Valley of Oaxaca (wah-hAh-kah).





Zapotec

- Monte Albán was the first true city in Mesoamerica.
- Its huge main plaza was lined with pyramids, temples, and palaces, some of which were decorated with carvings that showed Olmec influence.
- There was also a large ball court and even an observatory.
- Outside the main area, the city had fifteen residential neighborhoods, each with its own plaza.





Zapotec

- At its height in the 700s, Monte Albán had a population of as many as 35,000 people.
- The city declined rapidly, however.
- Some scholars think that Zapotec leaders probably lost their people's support.
- When this happened, Mesoamerica's first urban population moved from Monte Albán to smaller communities.
- The site, however, was still used for high-status burials.





Toltec

- The Toltec, who lived in the highlands of central Mexico from AD 900 to 1200, formed another urban civilization.
- An early Toltec leader established a capital at Tula.
- Tula's location near obsidian mines made it a major trade center.





Toltec

- Like other early Mesoamerican cities, Tula had pyramids and temples.
- Unlike other cities, however, Tula's art and architecture showed the militaristic nature of its inhabitants.
- Statues and carvings of warriors celebrate the fierce Toltecs, who established military dominance over a large region.
- Toltec dominance did not last, however.
- Some combination of climate change and social conflict led to the abandonment of Tula in less than three centuries.





Homework: Answer the following question

What did the Olmec, Zapotec, and Toltec cultures have in common?



The Maya



The Maya

- The civilizations of the Olmec, Zapotec, and Toltec were small compared to the Maya civilization that developed in Mesoamerica around 1000 BC.
- At its height, Maya civilization consisted of some 10 million people spread among 40 cities.





Early Maya Civilization

- Before they built cities, the Maya lived in small villages where they grew corn, beans, and squash.
- While they benefited from good rainfall and rich soils, their rain forest environment presented some challenges to farming.
- To clear forest land for crops, the Maya practiced slash-and-burn agriculture.
- This method of farming involves burning vegetation to clear land for planting.
- Farmers who lived in the highlands built flat terraces into the hillsides so they could control erosion and more easily grow crops.





Early Maya Civilization

- Farming did not provide everything the Maya needed.
- Villages started trading with one another to get goods such as cotton and jade that came from different parts of Mesoamerica.
- Trade and agriculture helped support larger populations, and the early Maya villages grew into cities.



Maya Civilization



Legend:

- Maya areas
- Maya city
- Trade routes
- Cacao
- Cotton
- Jade
- Obsidian

Scale: 0 50 100 Miles / 0 50 100 Kilometers



Obsidian, valued for its sharp edges and considered sacred by the Maya, was mined in the mountains and traded throughout the Maya world.



Jade was mined in the mountains and traded to lowland cities.

GEOGRAPHY SKILLS

INTERPRETING MAPS

Movement What are some natural features that Maya trade routes followed?



Cities and Government

- The Maya built most of their cities between AD 250 and 900, a period of Maya history known as the Classic Age.
- Maya cities such as Tikal and Copan were some of the most spectacular in Mesoamerica.
- They contained stone pyramids, temples, and palaces.
- Often built to honor gods or rulers, these monumental structures were brightly painted and decorated with stone carvings.





Cities and Government

- Maya cities functioned as city-states. Each had its own ruler and its own government.
- No ruler ever united the many cities into a single empire.
- Even without a central government, however, Maya cities were linked in several ways.
- One link was trade. Cities in the highlands traded local products such as jade and obsidian for cotton, rubber, and cacao from cities in the lowlands.





Cities and Government

- Another link between cities was warfare.
- Neighboring Maya cities were often at war with each other.
- Through bloody battles, kings tried to gain land for their cities and power for themselves.





Society and Religion

- **Kings** had great influence in Maya society.
- The Maya believed kings communicated with the gods.
- The Maya worshipped many gods and believed they influenced daily life.
- To prevent disasters and keep the gods happy, the Maya performed private and public rituals for the gods.
- One common ritual involved offering blood to the gods, usually by piercing the tongue or skin.





Society and Religion

- Another religious ritual involved playing a ball game common in Mesoamerica.
- In this game, players tried to get a heavy rubber ball through a stone ring using only their elbows, knees, or hips.
- Losing teams often lost their lives as well, with their hearts sacrificed to the gods.
- The Maya performed human sacrifice only on certain occasions.





Society and Religion

- Religious ceremonies were led by priests, who were part of the upper class.
- Also part of the upper class were professional warriors.
- They played an important role in Maya religion and society because they were responsible for getting war victims for use in human sacrifice.





Society and Religion

- Just below the upper class in Maya society were merchants and skilled craftspeople.
- Most men and women, however, were members of the lower class.
- They were the farmers and slaves whose labor supported the wealthier classes.
- They supported the upper classes by providing food and labor for public building projects.





Achievements

- Impressive buildings and architecture, including canals, were a major achievement of the Maya.
- In addition, the Maya made advances in astronomy, math, and writing.
- They carefully observed the movements of the sun, moon, and planets.
- Based on what they observed, they created a calendar system.





Achievements

- The Maya had two calendars—a 365-day farming calendar and a 260-day religious calendar.
- Priests consulted the calendars to determine what days would be lucky or unlucky for war, planting, and religious ceremonies.
- In spite of the way the Maya used their calendar system, it was more accurate than that used in Europe at the same time.





Achievements

- To go along with their calendars, the Maya created a number system that included some new concepts in math.
- For example, the Maya were among the first people in the world to use the concept of zero.
- The Maya also developed a complex writing system to keep records.





Achievements

- Their writing consisted of glyphs, or symbols, that represented both objects and sounds.
- The Maya carved their writing into large stone monuments called stelae.
- They also kept written records in a type of bark-paper book later referred to as a codex.





Decline

- A part of Maya history that is not clear from their written records is what caused their civilization to decline.
- Scholars think that a number of factors caused the decline.
- One factor may have been environmental damage from overuse of resources or a drought that made it difficult to feed everyone in the cities.





Decline

- A related theory says that warfare increased over competition for land.
- Increased warfare would have destroyed more crops.
- A third factor in the decline could have been the abuse of power by particularly strong kings, such as Yax Pak of Copán.
- The demands of kings could have caused people to rebel and leave their cities.





Decline

- Although Maya civilization declined around 900, the Maya did not disappear.
- Evidence suggests that the Maya from forest cities moved to new cities, such as Chichén Itzá in the Yucatán Peninsula.
- Those cities remained powerful for several hundred years.
- Eventually, however, the Maya abandoned those cities as well and scattered into small villages in the region.





Homework: Answer the following question

What were the main characteristics of Maya civilization?



The Aztecs



The Aztecs

- About the time that the Maya cities in the Yucatán were declining, a group of people to the north, the Aztecs, began their rise to power.
- The early Aztecs were just a small group of unlucky farmers from northwestern Mexico who were searching for a new home.
- But in little time, they created the most powerful empire in Mesoamerica.





Rise of the Empire

- The Aztecs began as a group of separate tribes from northwestern Mexico.
- These farming tribes were probably subjects of the Toltecs.
- According to legend, the war god told one of the tribes' leaders that they should look for a place where they saw an eagle perched on a cactus eating a snake.
- It was there that they should settle and build a new capital.





Rise of the Empire

- The Aztecs migrated south to the Valley of Mexico in the 1100s.
- When they arrived, they found that other tribes had already taken all the good farmland.
- The Aztecs saw the eagle and the snake on a swampy island in Lake Texcoco.
- They founded a city there and called it Tenochtitlán.
- From there the Aztecs continued their rise to power.





Rise of the Empire

- In addition to being farmers, the Aztecs were also fierce warriors.
- They began fighting to control other towns around Lake Texcoco.
- The Aztecs gained strength in the 1420s when they formed an alliance, or partnership, with two other nearby city-states, Texcoco and Tlacopan.





Rise of the Empire

- This alliance quickly gained control over a huge region that spread far beyond Lake Texcoco.
- The Aztecs came to rule 400 to 500 other city-states.
- At its height, about 5 million people were part of the Aztec Empire.





Rise of the Empire

- The Aztecs required the conquered people of their empire to pay tribute, or a type of tax.
- People in the empire paid tribute in many forms, from feathers and food crops to pottery and blankets.
- This tribute system was the basis of the Aztec economy.
- If any local ruler refused to pay tribute, the Aztecs used their military force to destroy the town.





Rise of the Empire

- The Aztec Empire gained wealth and strength through trade as well as through tribute.
- A system of roads aided trade.
- Merchants traveled throughout the empire to buy and sell luxury goods such as jade and cacao.
- Merchants sometimes acted as spies for the Aztec emperor.
- They could report any trouble they saw brewing in distant parts of the empire.



Life in the Aztec Empire

The famous Mexican muralist Diego Rivera painted this scene of Tenochtitlán in 1945. The title is *La Gran Tenochtitlán: Market Fair at Tenochtitlán*. It now hangs in Mexico City, the city built on the ruins of Tenochtitlán. **How accurately do you think this painting depicts Tenochtitlán?**

La Gran Tenochtitlán, by Diego Rivera, 1945
Courtesy SuperStock, Inc.





Tenochtitlan

- The glory of the Aztec Empire was most clearly seen in the capital city of Tenochtitlán.
- This amazing city covered five square miles and had a population of about 200,000.
- It was one of the largest cities in the world at that time.





Tenochtitlan

- At the center of the city was a huge walled compound that served as the political and religious heart of the entire empire.
- Within the walls rose a huge pyramid with two temples on top.
- The Aztec priests performed religious ceremonies at these temples.
- Other temples, as well as government buildings, palaces, and a ball court, filled the rest of the city center.
- It was such an impressive sight that one of the first Europeans to see Tenochtitlán said the city “seemed like an enchanted vision.”





Tenochtitlan

- Since Tenochtitlán was built on a swampy island in the middle of a lake, there was not much land available for farming.
- To create more farmland for their corn, beans, and squash, the Aztecs built “floating gardens” called *chinampas* (chee-nAhm-pahs) around the edges of the city.
- They did this by piling soil on top of rafts anchored to reeds in the water.
- From the *chinampas*, farmers loaded crops onto canoes and floated them down canals to the market.





Tenochtitlan

- Tenochtitlán was connected by canals and causeways to the empire's biggest market at Tlatelolco, a smaller city just outside the Aztec capital.
- Tlatelolco attracted more than 60,000 people a day.
- Merchants brought goods such as cotton, jaguar pelts, and rubber to trade.
- Since the Aztecs had no coins, they sometimes used cacao beans or goose quills filled with gold as money.
- Vendors at the market had to pay a tax, usually in corn, to support the Aztec army.





Society and Religion

- Just as the economy of the Aztec Empire was highly organized, so was Aztec society.
- It was strictly divided into different social classes.
- At the top of the social order was the king.
- The king was part of a royal family, but he had to be elected by a group of nobles.
- The king displayed his power at his palace in Tenochtitlán, where he had gardens, a zoo, and thousands of servants.
- Certain nobles also served the king as government officials.





Society and Religion

- Just below the king in Aztec society were priests.
- They interpreted calendars and performed religious ceremonies.
- Aztec religious ceremonies were particularly bloody.
- Believing that the gods needed human blood, the Aztecs sacrificed as many as 20,000 victims a year.
- One European observer shared his perspective of a scene in a temple after a sacrifice.





HISTORY'S VOICES

“All the walls of that shrine were so splashed and caked with blood that they and the floor too were black. Indeed, the whole place stank abominably.”

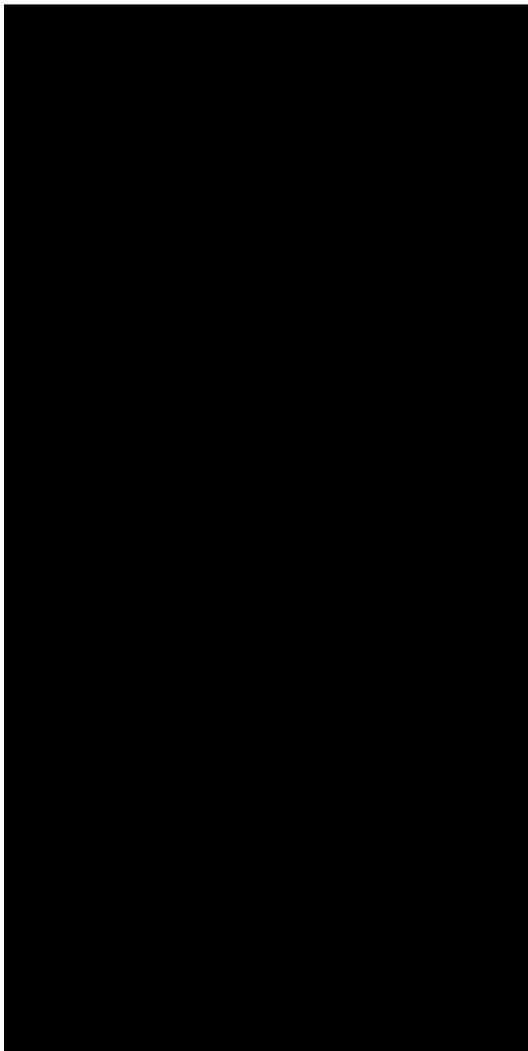
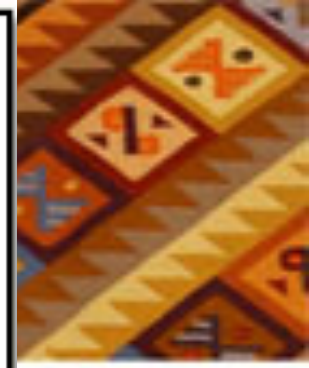
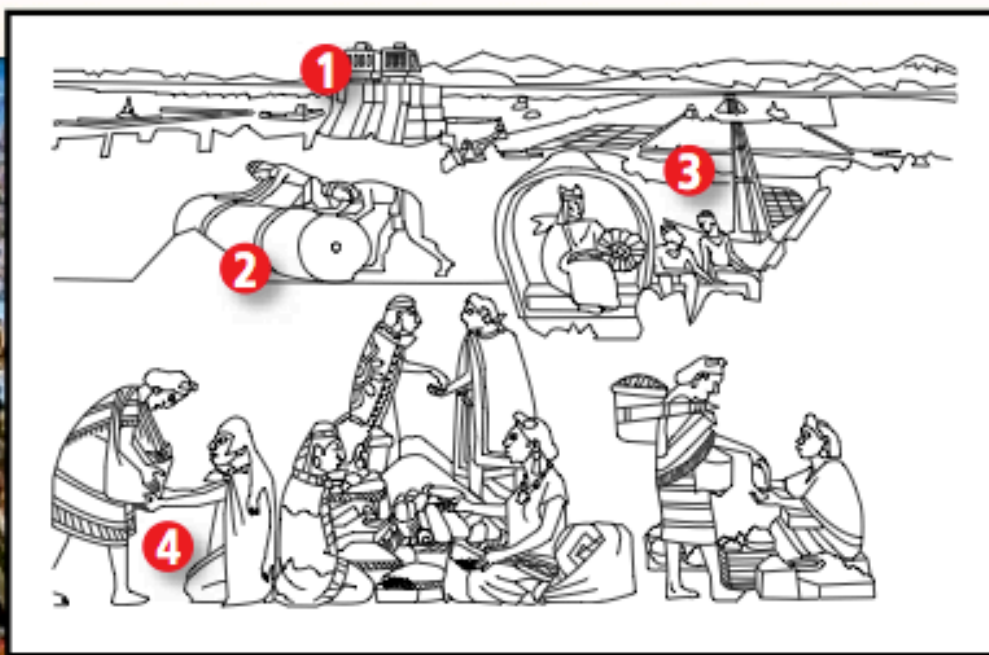
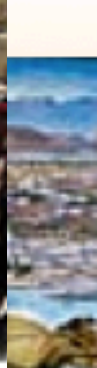
—Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain*,
1568



Society and Religion

- The Aztecs usually used slaves or prisoners of war as sacrifices.
- Warriors were responsible for capturing these victims.
- Because of this tie to religion, certain highly trained warriors were also part of the Aztec upper class.
- Not quite part of the upper class, but respected and wealthy nonetheless, were merchants and artisans.





- 1** The great temple stood in the center of Tenochtitlán. Other temples were scattered throughout the city.
- 2** Slaves provided much of the labor in the Aztec Empire.
- 3** Canals and causeways linked Tenochtitlán to surrounding areas.
- 4** People from all over the empire came to the market to trade goods and food such as corn.



Society and Religion

- Merchants often became rich from trading in luxury goods.
- They lived in grand houses in Tenochtitlán, but they were not as wealthy as the king.
- Artisans were important because they made the goods required for tribute.





Society and Religion

- Most people in Aztec society were farmers.
- They made up the lower class and were very poor.
- They usually did not own their own land.
- They often had to pay so much in tribute that they found it difficult to survive on what was left over.





Society and Religion

- Farmers could improve their lives, however, by becoming warriors or studying at special schools.
- All Aztec boys and girls had to attend school until the age of 15, but some people continued in special schools that enabled them to become government officials.





Society and Religion

- Those in Aztec society who suffered the most were slaves.
- Most slaves were people who had been captured in battle or those who could not pay their debts.
- Merchants also bought slaves from other towns in the region.
- Some slaves worked as farmers or laborers for nobles or merchants, and their children would be born free.
- Others became victims in human sacrifices.





Achievements

- **Like** other Mesoamericans, the Aztecs are known for their achievements in art and science.
- Their artisans made bright feathers into headdresses, shields, and warrior costumes.
- Metalworkers fashioned gold, silver, and copper into jewelry and masks.
- In addition, master stoneworkers decorated temples and other buildings with elaborate sculptures depicting gods and stories from their history.





Achievements

- Like the Maya, the Aztecs kept written records.
- The Aztecs also used glyphs in their writing, but their system was not as advanced as Maya writing.
- The Aztecs used writing to keep track of tax records and business deals. They also composed poetry, riddles, and historical accounts.
- These were passed on orally from one generation to the next as well.





Achievements

- Using their knowledge of astronomy, the Aztecs created a 260-day religious calendar and a 365-day solar calendar much like the Maya calendar.
- They also accurately calculated the movements of some planets.
- Although the Aztec Empire reached new heights of civilization in the Americas, it lasted a relatively short time.
- Tenochtitlán lasted less than 200 years.
- In the early 1500s contact with Europeans would quickly bring an end to the empire.



Aztec Arts

This skull mask is made from turquoise and obsidian. Skulls and gods were common themes in Aztec art.





Homework: Answer the following question

What aspects of the Aztec empire made it the strongest in Mesoamerica?