

The Ancient Americas

SECTION 1
Cultures of
Middle America

SECTION 2
The Incas

SECTION 3
Cultures of
North America



MAP ACTIVITIES

In ancient times, several different civilizations and cultures developed in North and South America. To help you to get to know the names and locations of these civilizations and cultures, do the following activities.

Locate a civilization

Find the areas labeled North America, Middle America, and South America. Which civilizations and cultures developed in each area?

What country is it today?

Find the locations of these civilizations and cultures on the maps in the Atlas in the back of your book. In what present-day countries were these cultures located?

Cultures of Middle America

SECTION

1

**BEFORE
YOU
READ**

Reach Into Your Background

Think about your own culture. How have your grandparents

contributed to your way of life? What about your parents? What can you pass on to the next generation?

Questions to Explore

1. What did the Mayas accomplish?
2. What made the Aztecs powerful?

Key Terms

maize
slash-and-burn agriculture
hieroglyph
causeway
aqueduct
artisan

Key Places

Tenochtitlán
Lake Texcoco

In about A.D. 1325, the Aztec people of central Mexico began looking for a place to build a new capital city. Legend says that they asked Huitzilopochtli (hwits il uh PAWCH lee), their god of war, where they should build. He told them to build the city at the place where they saw an eagle perched on a cactus and holding a snake in its beak.

When the Aztecs found the sign their god had described, they were dismayed. It was such an unlikely setting for a city. The eagle was perched on a cactus growing on a rocky outcrop in a swamp. But their god had given them this sign. Therefore, they built Tenochtitlán (tay nawch tee TLAHN), the world's finest city of the time, on a swampy island at the center of Lake Texcoco.

The Geographic Setting

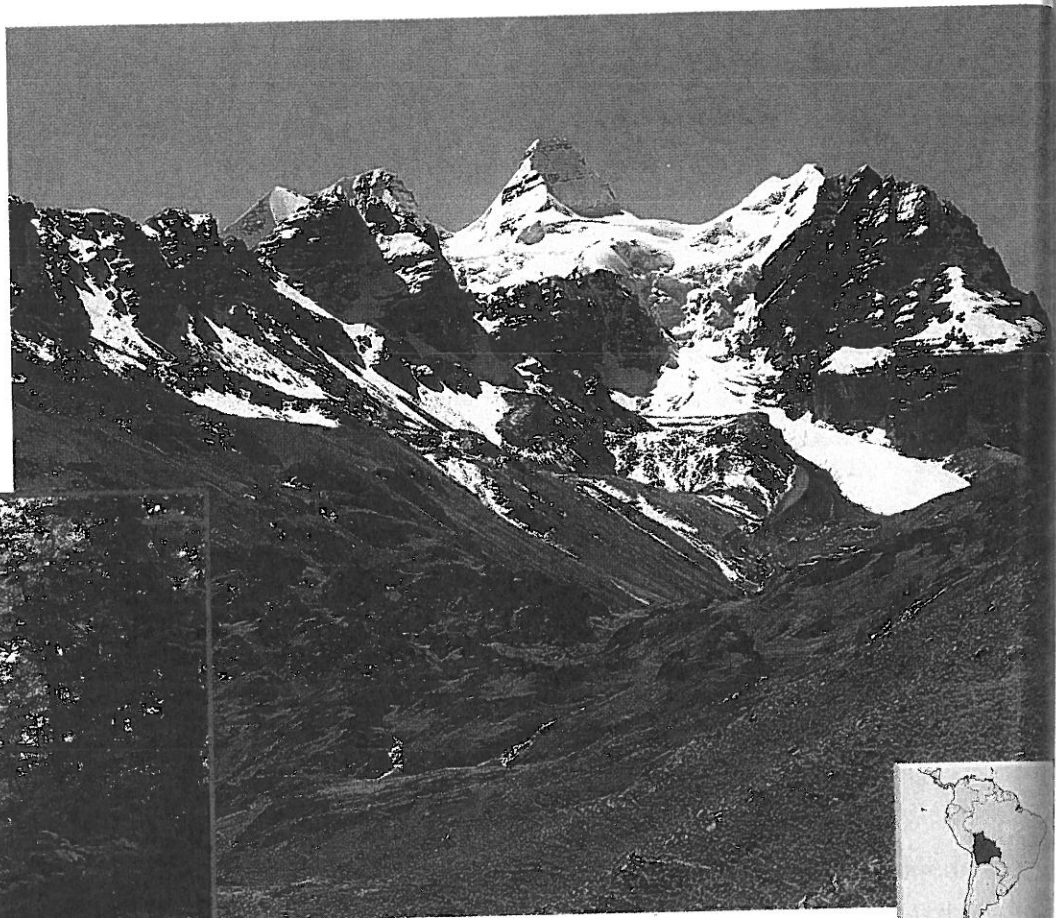
The Aztecs were not the first civilization or culture to develop in the Americas. Many Native American peoples had lived here for thousands of years. These various peoples developed ways of life that fit their geographic setting.

The land in the Americas has great variety. Rugged mountains and highland plateaus stretch from the icy north of North America all the way down the spine of South America to the tip of the continent. Other parts of the two continents are covered by vast plains or deserts.

▼ This carving shows the sign that told the Aztecs where to build their capital. Legend says that they were told to build where they saw an eagle perched on a cactus and holding a snake in its beak.



▼► The first people who settled the Americas lived in many different natural settings. Some groups made their homes in dense woodlands (below). Other groups settled the high plateaus of South America (right).



Play Ball! The Mayas were enthusiastic ballplayers. On a court about the size of a football field, they played a game rather like soccer and basketball put together. The ball was a hard piece of rubber. The players could hit the ball with their elbows, wrists, shoulders, and hips but not with their hands or feet. And the ball could not touch the ground. To score, a player had to pass the ball through one of two stone hoops set high on walls.

The Americas also have many different climates. North American climates range from extreme cold in the far north to hot, almost tropical, in the south. Middle and South American climates also vary, but the most common climate is tropical.

The Mayas

It was in the tropical climate of southern Mexico and Central America that one important civilization, the Mayas, developed. The Mayan way of life, which was based on farming, flourished from about A.D. 300 to 900. Today, descendants of the early Mayas still live in Mexico and Central America. Many still practice some of their ancient traditions.

A Farming Culture Mayan farmers grew many different crops, such as beans, squash, peppers, avocados, and papayas. But **maize**, or corn, was their most important crop. They held maize in such high regard that they worshipped a god of corn.

To plant their corn, the Mayas first had to clear the land. They cut down the trees. Then they burned the tree stumps, later using the ash as fertilizer. Finally, they planted seeds. After a few years, the soil was worn out. The Mayas then chose a new area to clear and plant. This technique is called **slash-and-burn agriculture**.

Religion and Cities Crops need the sun and the rain to grow. It is not surprising then, that the Mayas worshipped the forces of nature as well as a corn god. To honor their gods, the Mayas held great festivals.

The Mayas conducted the most important of these festivals in large temples. The temples stood atop soaring pyramids in the centers of Mayan cities. Each Mayan city had one ruler, who governed the city and the area around it. Priests and nobles assisted him. These people of power and high position lived in large houses that surrounded the temples. The ordinary people lived on the outskirts of the city. Beyond the city limits lay the farms.

Mayan Achievements Mayan priests created a calendar to plan when to hold important religious festivals. The Mayas also developed a system of writing using signs and symbols called **hieroglyphs**.

About A.D. 900, the Mayas suddenly left their cities. No one knows why. Crop failures, war, disease, drought, or famine may have killed many Mayas. Or perhaps people rebelled against their leaders. When the Mayas left their cities, their civilization declined.

An Accurate Calendar

The Mayas were great astronomers. They watched the skies and plotted the movements of the sun, moon, and stars. Using their observations, they designed a calendar of 365 days. It had 18 "months," each of which was 20 days long. The extra five days fell at the end of the year. These were considered bad luck days.

Mayan Wall Paintings



This picture shows one of the murals, or wall paintings, found in a Mayan temple in Bonampak, Mexico. The murals were painted in the late A.D. 700s, probably to celebrate the birth of a prince. This mural portrays a battle scene. The

figure on the right is wearing a jaguar headdress. The jaguar was one of the Mayan gods of war. **Critical Thinking** Why do you think the Mayas included battle scenes among pictures celebrating the birth of a prince?

The Aztecs

Another ancient civilization of Middle America was that of the Aztecs. They arrived in the Valley of Mexico in the A.D. 1100s. Within 100 years, they controlled all the land in central Mexico between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. In the center of their empire was Tenochtitlán, the capital they had built on Lake Texcoco.



Visualize Picture the city of Tenochtitlán. How would this city built in a lake look unusual?

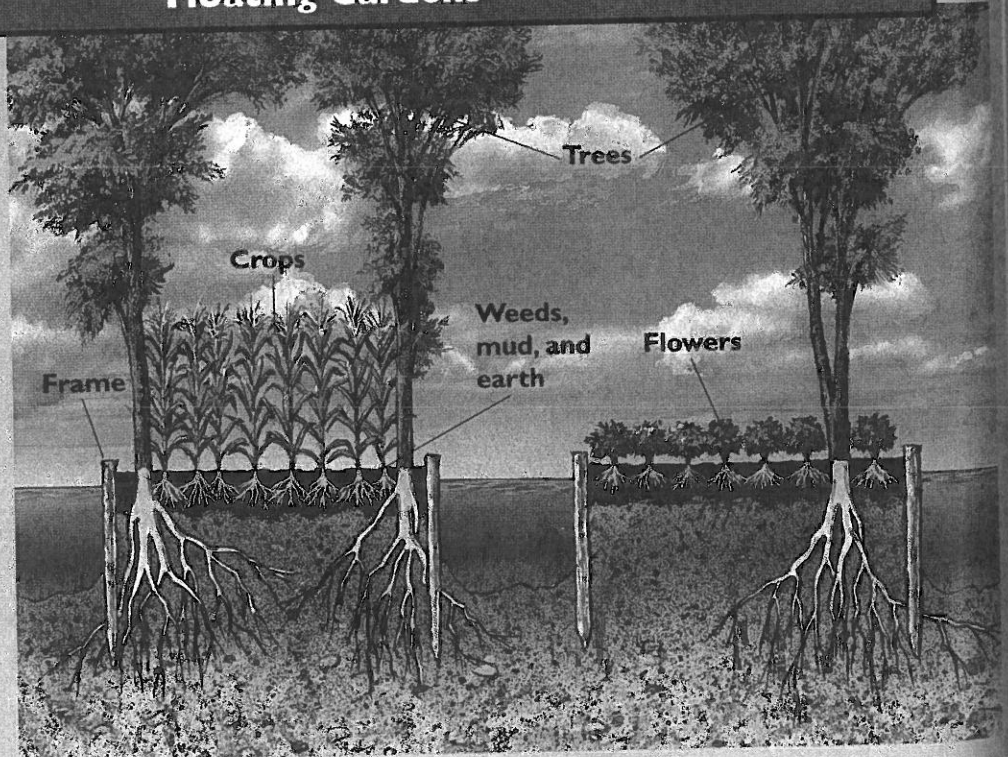
Tenochtitlán: City in the Lake You have already read about how the Aztecs chose a spot for their capital. In spite of its swampy location, Tenochtitlán was a magnificent city. At the center was a huge square. All around it stood pyramid-temples, palaces, and large stone houses. Canals crisscrossed the city. People used the canals to transport goods and to move about the city. **Causeways**, or raised streets of hard earth, connected the city to the mainland.

As the city grew, the Aztecs realized that they needed more farmland. Their answer to the problem was to build “floating gardens.” These were islands the size of football fields. The Aztecs made them by piling rich earth from the bottom of Lake Texcoco onto rafts made of wood. After a while, the roots of plants and trees grew down to the lake bottom, anchoring the rafts.

In addition, the Aztecs built **aqueducts**, pipes or channels designed to carry water from distant sources. These carried fresh springwater from the mainland to storage areas in the city.

Floating Gardens

The Aztecs began building a floating garden by driving a wooden frame into the lake bed. Next, they placed a raft of reeds or wood inside the frame. Then, they piled layers of weeds, mud from the lake bottom, and earth on the raft. They planted trees to root the raft to the lake bed and to provide shade for the garden. Over time, mud and earth fell through the raft filling the space underneath. **Critical Thinking** Why did the Aztecs need to build floating gardens?



The Aztec Way of War



This modern painting of a battle between the Tlaxcaltecs and Aztecs illustrates an almost constant part of Aztec life—war. Most Aztec men were expected to serve as soldiers. They were well trained and well equipped. They had armor of quilted cotton, swords, and bows and arrows. After military training, young men's heads were shaved, except for a strand of hair at the nape of their necks. Only after a soldier took a captive in war could the strand be cut. **Critical Thinking** How did the Aztecs treat the people they defeated in war?

A Warlike Way of Life Although Tenochtitlán was a peaceful place, the Aztecs themselves were a warlike people. In the 1400s, Aztec warriors began conquering the other people in the region. Soon, the Aztecs controlled a huge empire. One ruler, the emperor, ruled over all the Aztec lands.

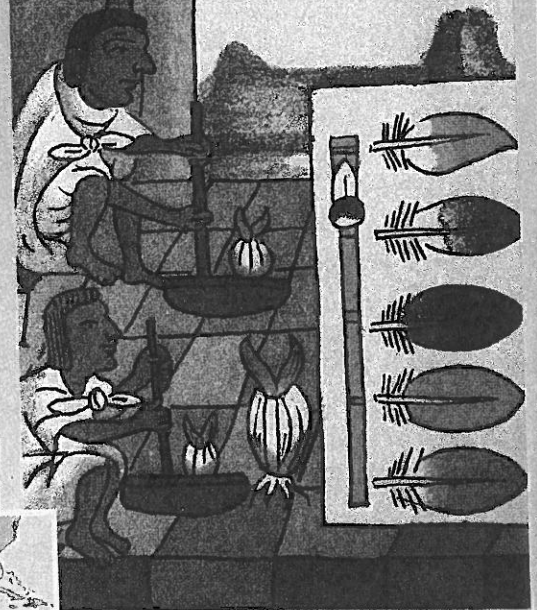
The Aztecs forced the people they conquered to pay tributes, or taxes, in the form of food, gold, or slaves. They also took thousands of prisoners of war to serve as human sacrifices. The Aztecs believed that they had to sacrifice humans so that the sun would have enough strength to rise every day. Human blood was what gave the sun strength. If the sun did not rise, crops could not grow, and the people would starve. Priests made the offerings daily. In very bad times, members of noble Aztec families were sometimes sacrificed to please the sun god.

Because of their respect for war, it is not surprising that the upper class of Aztec society was made up of military leaders as well as members of the royal family, priests, and nobles. The next class of

The Role of Aztec Women

In these paintings, made during the 1500s, Aztec mothers teach their daughters to grind corn into flour (right and far right) and to weave cloth (right). In Aztec society, girls of 13 were expected to grind flour, make tortillas, and cook meals. By the time they became adults, they had to be skilled at weaving. Some of the cloth they wove was made into capes and used for trade. Some was used to decorate temples. The finest cloth went to make clothes for the nobles to wear.

Critical Thinking How did the skills required of Aztec men and Aztec women differ?



society was made up of warriors. Below them came artisans and traders. **Artisans**, or skilled workers who practice a trade, created jewelry, garments, pottery, sculptures, and other goods. Most people, however, were farmers. Slaves—most of whom were prisoners captured in battle—were at the bottom of Aztec society.

Aztecs spent much of their time in religious practices. Like the Mayas, they worshipped hundreds of gods and held many religious ceremonies. The main purpose of these ceremonies was to win the favor of the gods and bring about good crops or a victory in war.

SECTION 1 REVIEW

- Define** (a) maize, (b) slash-and-burn agriculture, (c) hieroglyph, (d) causeway, (e) aqueduct, (f) artisan.
- Identify** (a) Tenochtitlán, (b) Lake Texcoco.

- What were some of the achievements of the Mayas?
- What do you think made the Aztec empire strong?

Critical Thinking

- Making Comparisons** In what ways were the Mayan and Aztec empires alike?

Activity

- Writing to Learn** List the three features you found most interesting about Mayan or Aztec life. Use these to write a poem about either the Mayas or the Aztecs.