

Early Civilizations in the Americas

Almanac

Early Civilizations in the Americas Almanac

Volume 2

Sonia Benson

Deborah J. Baker, Project Editor

U·X·L

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Early Civilizations in the Americas: Almanac

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Reader's Guide

Many American history books begin with the year 1492 and the discovery of the Caribbean Islands by Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus (1451–1506). For the great civilizations of Mesoamerica and South America, though, 1492 proved to be the beginning of the end of their civilization. The products of thousands of years of history—the great cities, the architecture, markets, governments, economic systems, legal systems, schools, books, holy shrines—even the daily prayers of the people—were about to be willfully eliminated by the conquering European nations. The rupture would prove so deep that many aspects of pre-Hispanic American culture and tradition were forever deleted from the human memory. Fortunately, some of the important history of the early civilizations has survived and more is being recovered every day.

The three-volume Early Civilizations in the Americas Reference Library provides a comprehensive overview of the history of the regions of the American continents in which two of the world's first civilizations developed: Mesoamerica (the name for the lands in which ancient civilizations arose



in Central America and Mexico) and the Andes Mountains region of South America (in present-day Peru and parts of Bolivia, northern Argentina, and Ecuador). In both regions, the history of civilization goes back thousands of years. Recent studies show that the first cities in the Americas may have arisen as early as 2600 B.C.E. in the river valleys of present-day Peru. The earliest evidence of civilization in Mesoamerica dates back to about 2000 B.C.E.

When the Spanish conquistadores (conquerors) arrived in Mesoamerica and the Andes in 1521 and 1531, respectively, they found many native societies, but they were most amazed by two great empires—the Aztecs and the Incas. In the early sixteenth century the Aztecs and the Incas had spectacular cities that could rival those of Europe in size, art and architecture, organization, and engineering. These capital cities ruled over vast empires—the Aztecs with a population of more than 15 million and the Incas with a population of about 12 million—with remarkable efficiency.

The Spaniards at that time could not have understood how many civilizations had preceded those of the Aztecs and the Incas, each one bringing its own advances to the empires they witnessed. In the Andes, many of the key ingredients of civilization were in place by 2600 B.C.E. in early urban centers. From that time forward, the Andean culture was adopted, developed, and slowly transformed by the societies of the Chavín, the Moche, the Nazca, the Wari, the Tiwanaku, and the Chimú, among many others, before the Incas rose to power. Mesoamerican civilization apparently had its roots in the early societies of the Olmecs and Zapotecs, whose ancestors were living in present-day central Mexico by 2000 B.C.E. The Mayas skillfully adopted the calendars, glyph-writing, art and architecture, astronomy, and many other aspects of these earlier civilizations, adding greatly to the mix. The people of the great city of Teotihuacán and later the Toltecs created vast empires that unified the Mesoamerican culture. Later the Aztecs created a government that encompassed all of these early civilizations.

Early Civilizations of the Americas: Almanac presents the story of this development—the dates, locations, sites, history, arts and sciences, religions, economies, governments, and eventual declines of the great ancient American civilizations. Volume 1 features an overview of ancient civilization

in general and a brief summary of modern theories about the earliest immigrants and early life in the Americas. The remainder of the volume focuses on the rise of the Andean civilization from the early urban centers to the Inca empire. Volume 2 focuses on the rise of the Mesoamerican civilizations from the Olmecs through the Aztecs.

A note about the use of the word “civilization” in these volumes. The word “civilization” is used here to convey the type of organization and the size of a society, and certainly not to make a quality judgment about whether the society was sophisticated or refined. Besides the civilizations that arose in Mesoamerica and the Andean region, there were thousands of indigenous (native) societies throughout the two American continents with varying levels of the kind of organization experts call “civilization.” The civilizations featured in *Early Civilizations in the Americas Reference Library* are the New World civilizations that developed around the same time and with some patterns similar to the first civilizations of the Old World: Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley, and China. Their history has been little known until the last century; indeed, only recent studies have included the Americas in the list of the world’s first civilizations.

Features

Early Civilizations in the Americas: Almanac contains numerous sidebar boxes that highlight people and events of special interest, and each chapter offers a list of additional sources that students can consult for more information. The material is illustrated by 192 black-and-white photographs and illustrations. Each volume begins with a timeline of important events in the history of the early American civilizations, a “Words to Know” section that introduces students to difficult or unfamiliar terms, and a “Research and Activity Ideas” section. The volumes conclude with a general bibliography and a subject index so students can easily find the people, places, and events discussed throughout *Early Civilizations in the Americas: Almanac*.

Early Civilizations in the Americas Reference Library

The two-volume *Early Civilizations in the Americas: Almanac* is one of two components of the three-volume U•X•L

Early Civilizations in the Americas Reference Library. The other title in the set is:

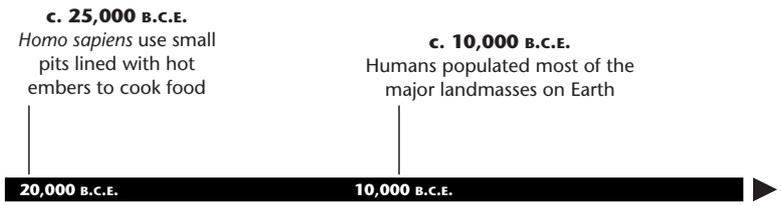
- ***Early Civilizations in the Americas: Biographies and Primary Sources*** (one volume) presents a collection of biographies and primary sources—both text and photographs of artifacts—that provide detailed and focused views of the people of the early American civilizations, the artifacts they left behind, and the sources upon which the history of the early American civilizations are based. The volume is divided into three chapters: the Incas, the Mayas and their Ancestors, and the Aztec Empire. Each chapter is arranged loosely by topic and chronology. The biographies include Inca emperor Pachacutec, Maya king Pacal, and Aztec emperor Montezuma II. The primary sources feature artifacts such as the Inca *quipu*, or knotted counting cords, the Maya sacred calendar, and the Aztec Sun Stone. Also included are excerpts from the memoirs and histories compiled by indigenous writers and Spanish missionaries and conquerors in the decades following the conquest.
- A cumulative index of both titles in the U•X•L Early Civilizations in the Americas Reference Library is also available.

Comments and Suggestions

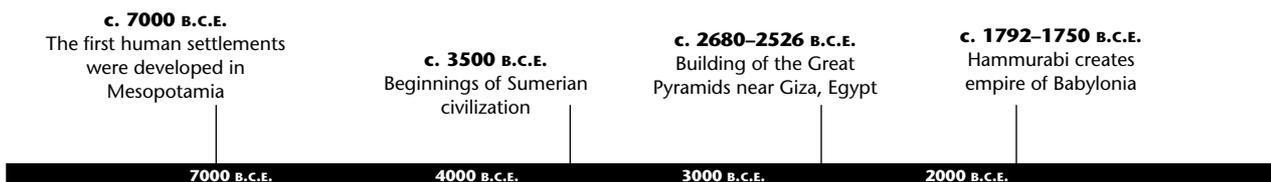
We welcome your comments on *Early Civilizations in the Americas: Almanac* as well as suggestions for other topics to consider. Please write to: Editor, *Early Civilizations in the Americas: Almanac*, U•X•L, 27500 Drake Road, Farmington Hills, Michigan, 48331-3535; call toll-free: 800-877-4253; fax to 248-699-8097; or send e-mail via <http://www.gale.com>.

Timeline of Events

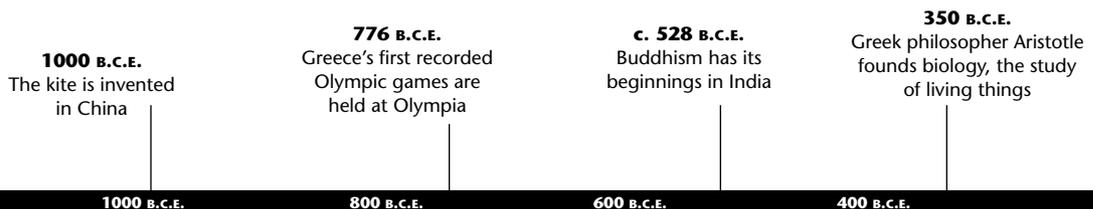
- 40,000–15,000 B.C.E.** The earliest people to settle in the Americas begin their migrations to the North and South American continents.
- c. 15,000–12,000 B.C.E.** People leave behind traces of their life at a camp now called Meadowcroft Rockshelter in present-day Pennsylvania.
- c. 11,000 B.C.E.** People regularly camp at a tiny settlement now called Monte Verde in south-central Chile.
- c. 9000 B.C.E.** A group of hunter-gatherers called the Clovis culture becomes widespread throughout the present-day United States and Mexico.



- c. 7000 B.C.E. Worldwide climate change alters the environments of the Americas.
- c. 7000–3000 B.C.E. Formerly nomadic people in the Andes Mountain region of South America begin to settle into rough homes, gradually forming tiny villages.
- c. 6000–4000 B.C.E. People begin to farm and raise animals in the Andean region.
- c. 5000 B.C.E. Simple farming begins in Mesoamerica.
- c. 3000 B.C.E. The Andean people in a number of different areas begin building very large ceremonial complexes (large, urban centers where people come to practice their religion) and make advances in art, religion, politics, and trade.
- c. 2600 B.C.E. The city of Caral arises in the Supe Valley of Peru. It has thousands of permanent residents, complex architecture, and trade, and small urban centers surround it. Caral may have been the first city of the Americas.
- c. 2500–1600 B.C.E. Mesoamericans in some regions form tiny villages.
- c. 2500 B.C.E. An engraving of an Andean god known as the Staff God is carved on a bowl made from a gourd in Peru. It is the oldest known religious artifact in the Andean region.
- c. 2200 B.C.E. Pottery appears in Mesoamerica.
- c. 1800 B.C.E. Andean societies begin to organize themselves by the river valleys in which they live.
- c. 1600 B.C.E.–150 C.E. Large permanent settlements begin to form in Mesoamerica; in the Oaxaca (pronounced wah-HAH-kah) Valley and the Valley of Mexico.



- c. 1500–1200 B.C.E. The earliest distinct Olmec culture emerges in San Lorenzo, along the Gulf of Mexico, south of Veracruz.
- c. 800 B.C.E. The Chavín people in the northern highlands of Peru begin to build their ceremonial center, Chavín de Huántar (pronounced cha-VEEN deh WAHN-tar). Their religion and culture spreads through a vast area, unifying many communities of the Andes.
- 650 B.C.E. The first known example of writing from the Americas is carved by an Olmec artist onto a ceramic stamp bearing what appears to be a royal seal.
- 600 B.C.E. Another early example of Mesoamerican writing—a glyph, or a figure representing a calendar date was found at a Zapotec site—dates back to this time.
- 500 B.C.E. Building begins on the Zapotec city of Monte Albán in the Oaxaca Valley.
- c. 400 B.C.E. The Olmec city La Venta experiences upheaval and never recovers. The ancient civilization begins a rapid decline.
- c. 200 B.C.E. The Chavín culture in the Andean region collapses.
- c. 200 B.C.E.–200 C.E. The Zapotec city of Monte Albán rules over the Oaxaca Valley.
- c. 150 B.C.E. The Maya cities of Cival and El Mirador arise in the present-day Guatemalan state of Petén.
- c. 100 B.C.E.–700 C.E. The Nazca people make large-scale drawings in the desert sands of present-day Peru.
- c. 1 C.E. The communities of the Andes mountain valleys create armies for defense; military actions become widespread in some parts of the region.



- c. 1 c.E. The Moche people begin to build their state, ruling from Cerro Grande in the southern Andean region and from various northern cities.
- c. 200 City of Tiwanaku arises on Lake Titicaca in present-day Bolivia with a population of about 50,000 and advanced arts and religion.
- c. 250 The classic Maya era begins, in which the cities of Tikal, Palenque, and Copán flourish in the southern highlands of the Maya world.
- 400–700 The city of Teotihuacán in the Valley of Mexico rules over a vast economic empire that includes much of the southern two-thirds of Mexico, most of Guatemala and Belize, and some parts of Honduras and El Salvador. The city reaches its height around 500 c.E. with a population between 100,000 and 200,000 people. It is the sixth largest city in the world at this time.
- c. 500–600 The city of Wari arises in the south-central area of present-day Peru and begins to spread its rule and influence to surrounding regions.
- 615 Maya king Pacal begins his rule of Palenque; the city builds its greatest architecture during his long reign.
- 695 18 Rabbit begins his rule of Copán, bringing about a new age of art and writing in the city.
- c. 700–900 The cities of Tiwanaku and Wari both hold influence over large, but separate, areas of the Central Andes in what may have been the first empire-building era in the Americas.
- c. 750 The powerful city of Teotihuacán in the Valley of Mexico is destroyed and abandoned.



- 850** The Chimú begin to build their capital city of Chan Chan in northern coastal Peru. It will thrive for more than six centuries, with a peak population of 50,000 to 70,000 people.
- c. 900** The classic Maya era ends when the dominant cities of the southern highlands, including Tikal, Palenque, and Copán, are abandoned. The Mayas scatter, but Maya cities in the present-day Mexican state of Yucatán, particularly Chichén Itzá (pronounced chee-CHEN eet-SAH) become powerful in the Maya world.
- c. 968** Toltec ruler Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl (pronounced toe-PEEL-tzin kates-ahl-koh-AH-tul) establishes the Toltec capital at Tula in the Valley of Mexico.
- 1000** A profound Toltec influence takes over Chichén Itzá.
- 1064** After upheaval in the Toltec capital of Tula, most Toltecs abandon the city.
- c. 1100** The Tiwanaku and the Wari abandon their cities.
- 1150** The Chimú begin to expand their empire. By the fifteenth century, it is the largest pre-Inca empire of the Andean region.
- c. 1200** Mayas in the present-day Mexican state of Yucatán shift their capital to the city of Mayapán. Chichén Itzá begins to decline.
- 1200** The Incas rise to prominence in Cuzco, in the highlands of southeast Peru.
- 1325** The Aztecs establish their city of Tenochtitlán (pronounced tay-notch-teet-LAHN) on an island in Lake Texcoco in the Valley of Mexico.



- c. 1350 The Incas begin a series of military campaigns, rapidly conquering the communities around them.
- 1376 The Aztecs select Acamapichtli (pronounced ah-cahm-ah-PEECH-tee) as their first *huey tlatoani* (ruler).
- 1428 The Aztecs are the most powerful group in Mesoamerica. They form the Triple Alliance with Texcoco and Tlacopan and rapidly build a vast empire of an estimated 15 million people.
- 1433 King Nezahualcoyotl (pronounced neza-hwahl-coy-OH-tul) takes the throne in Texcoco in the Valley of Mexico, beginning an era of artistic, educational, and cultural development in that city.
- 1438 Inca Pachacutec successfully fights the invading Chanca army at Cuzco and becomes the supreme Inca leader, or Sapa Inca, starting the one hundred-year Inca empire.
- 1440 Montezuma I becomes the ruler of the Aztecs; the empire expands and Tenochtitlán grows more prosperous.
- 1470 The Incas take control of the Chimú.
- 1471–1493 Pachacutec’s son Tupac Inca Yupanqui rules an ever-expanding Inca empire.
- 1493–1525 Huayna Capac (pronounced WHY-nah CAH-pahk) rules the Inca empire, but takes up residence in Quito (Ecuador), dividing the Incas.
- 1502 Montezuma II takes the throne of the Aztec empire.
- 1517 Mayas successfully fight off the forces of Spanish explorer Francisco Fernández de Córdoba. Soon epidemics of small pox and the measles break out among the Mayas, eventually killing as many as 90 percent of the people.



March 1519 Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés receives a “gift” from the Mayas of a young woman called Malinche. She becomes his interpreter and mistress during the Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlán.

September 1519 Cortés enlists the help of the Tlaxcala, who will be his allies against the Aztecs.

November 1519 Cortés’ expedition arrives at Tenochtitlán. Within a few weeks the Spanish imprison the Aztec ruler, Montezuma II.

June 1520 Montezuma II is killed during an uprising against the Spaniards. The Spaniards flee from Tenochtitlán.

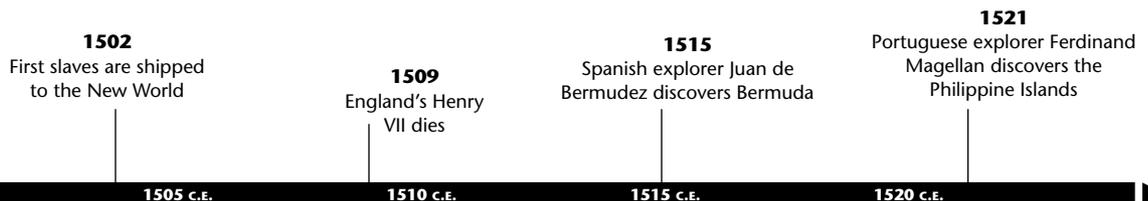
July 1520 Epidemics of smallpox and measles strike the Aztecs at Tenochtitlán and elsewhere. In the twenty years that follow, the Aztec population will be reduced to one-half its former size.

May 1521 The Cortés forces attack Tenochtitlán.

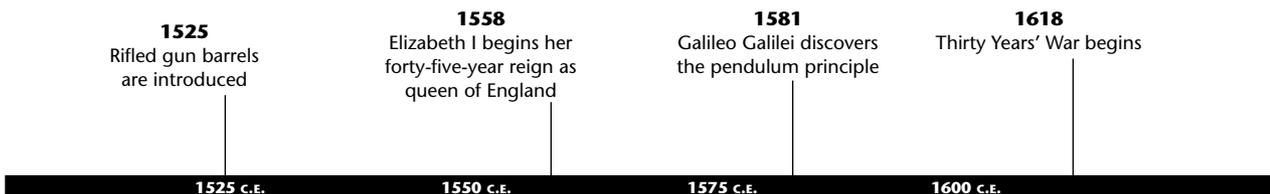
August 1521 The Aztecs surrender to the Spanish. Spanish conquistadores finish destroying the city of Tenochtitlán and begin building their own capital city, Mexico City, on top of the ruins.

1522 Spanish missionaries begin their efforts to convert the native people of Mesoamerica to Christianity. They destroy thousands of Aztec codices, or painted books, and prohibit all religious practice, hoping to break the people’s connections to their religion. Hundreds of thousands of Mesoamericans convert to Catholicism.

1525 Huáscar becomes the Sapa Inca, but his brother Atahualpa continues to rule the armies in Quito.



- 1525 A deadly smallpox epidemic strikes the Inca empire. It will eventually kill an estimated 75 percent of the population of the Inca empire.
- 1526 Another Spanish attack on the Mayas is repelled; once again, the Spanish flee.
- 1529 Civil war breaks out among the Incas, with the forces of Huáscar fighting the forces of Atahualpa.
- 1531 Spanish forces take over the Maya city of Chichén Itzá, but the Mayas rise against them and force them to flee.
- 1532 Atahualpa captures Huáscar and becomes the Sapa Inca.
- 1532 Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro and his expedition arrive at Atahualpa's camp at Cajamarca. The next day they slaughter about six thousand unarmed Incas and capture Atahualpa.
- 1532 Spanish priests establish missions in the Maya world and begin strenuous efforts to convert the Maya to Christianity.
- 1533 Spaniards kill Sapa Inca Atahualpa and take over the rule of Cuzco and the Inca empire.
- 1536–1572 The Incas operate a rebel capital in Vilcabamba, a region northwest of Cuzco.
- 1542 The Spanish set up a capital at Mérida in the present-day Mexican state of Yucatán. Over the next five years they take control of much of the Maya world.
- 1562 Spanish missionary Diego de Landa begins a book-burning campaign, destroying thousands of Maya codices in his efforts to eliminate the Maya religion. Only three known Maya codices survive.



Words to Know

A

aboriginal: Native to the land; having existed in a region from the earliest times.

aclla: A young woman chosen by the Incas to live in isolation from daily Inca life while learning how to weave and how to make *chicha* and foods for festivals; some *acllas* were eventually married to nobles, and others became religious workers.

acllahuaci: A house where young women chosen by the Incas were isolated from daily Inca life; these women were trained in the arts of weaving fine cloth and making *chicha* and foods for festivals, and some went on to become religious workers.

administration: The management and work (rather than the policy making or public relations) of running a public, religious, or business operation.



administrative center: The place in a region or state in which the day-to-day operations of business, government, and religion are carried out.

administrator: A person who manages or supervises the day-to-day operations of business, government, and religious organizations.

adobe: Sun-dried earthen brick used for building.

agriculture: The science, art, and business of cultivating the soil, producing useful crops, and raising livestock; farming.

alliances: Connections between states or other political units based on mutual interests, intermarriage of families, or other relations.

alpaca: A member of the camelid family; a domesticated mammal related to the llama that originated in Peru and is probably descended from the guanaco. The Andeans used the long silky wool of the alpaca in their textiles.

altiplano: A high plateau; also referred to as a puna. In the central Andes Mountains of South America, where early Andean civilizations arose, the altiplano is about 12,000 to 16,500 feet (3,658 to 5,029 meters) high.

Amerindian: An indigenous, or native, person from North or South America.

anthropology: The study of human beings in terms of their social structures, culture, populations, origins, race, and physical characteristics.

aqueducts: Human-made channels that deliver water from a remote source, usually relying on the pull of gravity to transport the water.

archaeological excavation: The scientific process of digging up and examining artifacts, remains, and monuments of past human life by experts in the field.

archaeology: The scientific study of digging up and examining artifacts, remains, and monuments of past human life.

architecture: The art or practice of designing and constructing buildings or other large structures.

Arctic: The areas centered on the North Pole consisting of the Arctic Ocean and the lands in and around it.

artifact: Any item made or used by humans, such as a tool or weapon, that may be found by archaeologists or others who seek clues to the past.

astronomer: A person who studies the planets, sun, moon, and stars and all other celestial bodies.

astronomical observatory: A place designed to help people observe the stars and planets and all celestial phenomena.

astronomy: The science that deals with the study of the planets, sun, moon, and stars and all other celestial bodies.

atlantes: Large stone statues of warriors, often used as columns to support the roofs of Toltec buildings.

atlatis: Spearthrowers.

authoritarian government: Strict rule by the elite; in this type of government, leaders are not constitutionally responsible to the people, and the people have little or no power.

ayllu: A group of extended families who live in the same area, share their land and work, and arrange for marriages and religious rituals as a group; the basic social unit of the Andean peoples.

B

bajo: The Spanish word for “under,” referring to lowlands or swampy depressions in the earth’s surface. In a rain forest, *bajos* are generally wetlands from July to November and dry the rest of the year.

baptism: A Christian ritual celebrating an individual joining a church, in which sprinkling holy water or dunking signifies his or her spiritual cleansing and rebirth.

barbarian: A word used to describe people from another land; it often has a negative meaning, however, suggesting the people described are inferior to others.

basalt: A fine-grained, dark gray rock used for building.

bas-relief: A carved, three-dimensional picture, usually in stone, wood, or plaster, in which the image is raised above the background.

bioglyph: A symbolic animal or plant figure etched into the earth.

burial offerings: Gifts to the gods that are placed with the body of a deceased person.

C

cacao beans: Beans that grow on an evergreen tree from which cocoa, chocolate, and cocoa butter are made.

callanca: An Inca word meaning “great hall”; a place where people gathered for ceremonies and other events.

calpulli: (The word means “big house”; the plural form is *calpultin*.) Social units consisting of groups of families who were either related in some way or had lived among each other over the generations. *Calpultin* formed the basic social unit for farmers, craftspeople, and merchants. The precise way they worked is not known.

camelid: A family of mammals that, in the Americas, includes the llama, the alpaca, the vicuña, and the guanaco.

cenote: Underground reservoirs or rivers that become accessible from above ground when cave ceilings collapse or erode.

ceque: A Quechua word meaning “border”; *ceques* were imaginary lines that divided Cuzco into sections, creating distinct districts that determined a person’s social, economic, and religious duties.

ceremonial centers: Citylike centers usually run by priests and rulers, in which people from surrounding areas gather to practice the ceremonies of their religion, often at large temples and plazas built specifically for this purpose.

chacmool: A stone statue of a man in a reclining position, leaning to one side with his head up in a slightly awkward position; the statue’s stomach area forms a kind of platform on which the Toltecs placed a bowl or plate for offerings to the gods—sometimes incense or small animals, but often human hearts.

chasqui: A messenger who was trained to memorize and relay messages. *Chasqui* posts stood about a mile apart along the road system of the Inca empire. When a message was given to a *chasqui*, he would run to the next post and convey the message to the *chasqui* there, who would then run to the next post, and so on.

chicha: A kind of beer that Andean peoples made from maize or other grains.

chiefdom: A social unit larger and more structured than a tribe but smaller and less structured than a state, which is mainly governed by one powerful ruler. Though there are not distinct classes in a chiefdom, people are ranked by how closely they are related to the chief; the closer one is to the chief, the more prestige, wealth, and power one is likely to have.

chinampa: A floating garden in a farming system in which large reed rafts floating on a lake or marshes are covered in mud and used for planting crops.

chronicler: A person who writes down a record of historical events, arranged in order of occurrence.

city-state: An independent self-governing community consisting of a single city and the surrounding area.

codex: (plural: codices) A handmade book written on a long strip of bark paper and folded into accordion-like pages.

colca: Storehouse for food and goods.

colony: A group of people living as a community in a land away from their home that is ruled by their distant home government.

conquistador: (plural: conquistadores) The Spanish word for “conqueror”; in English, the word usually refers to the leaders of the Spanish conquests of Mesoamerica and Peru in the sixteenth century.

controversial: Tending to evoke opposing views; not accepted by everyone.

coya: The Sapa Inca’s sister/wife, also known as his principal wife, and queen of the Inca empire.

creole: A person of European descent who is born in the Americas; in this book, a Spaniard who is born in Mexico.

cult: A group that follows a living religious leader (or leaders) who promote new doctrines and practices.

cultural group: A group of people who share customs, history, beliefs, and other traits, such as a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group.

culture: The arts, language, beliefs, customs, institutions and other products of human work and thought shared by a group of people at a particular time.

curaca: A local leader of a region conquered by the Incas; after the conquest, *curacas* were trained to serve their regions as representatives of the Inca government.

D

decipher: To figure out the meaning of something in code or in an ancient language.

deify: Place in a godlike position; treat as a god.

deity: A god or goddess, or a supreme being.

drought: A long period of little or no rainfall.

E

egalitarian: A society or government in which everyone has an equal say in political, social, and economic decisions and no individual or group is considered the leader.

El Niño: An occasional phenomenon in which the waters of the Pacific Ocean along the coast of Ecuador and Peru warm up, usually around late December, sometimes bringing about drastic weather changes like flooding or drought.

elite: A group of people within a society who are in a socially superior position and have more power and privileges than others.

empire: A vast, complex political unit extending across political boundaries and dominated by one central power, which generally takes control of the economy, government, and culture in communities throughout its territory.

encomienda: A grant to Spanish conquistadores giving them privilege to collect tribute from Amerindians in a particular region. The *encomendero* (grant holder) had the responsibility to train Amerindians in Christianity and Spanish, and to protect them from invasion. Most *encomenderos*, however, treated the Amerindians under their grants like slaves, forcing them into inhuman labor conditions often resulting in the collapse or death of the workers.

epidemic: A sudden spreading of a contagious disease among a population, a community, or a region.

evolution: A process of gradual change, from a simple or earlier state to a more complex or more developed state.

excavation: The process of carefully digging out or uncovering artifacts or human remains left behind by past human societies so that they can be viewed and studied.

export: To send or transport goods produced or grown in one's home region to another region in order to trade or sell them there.

F

feline: A member of the cat family; or resembling a member of the cat family.

fertility: The capacity of land to produce crops or, among people, the capacity to reproduce or bear children.

frieze: A band of decoration running around the top part of a wall, often a temple wall.

G

geoglyph: A symbolic figure or character etched into the earth.

glyph: A figure (often carved into stone or wood) used as a symbol to represent words, ideas, or sounds.

government: A political organization, usually consisting of a body of people who exercise authority over a political unit as a whole and carry out many of its social func-

tions, such as law enforcement, collection of taxes, and public affairs.

guanaco: A member of the camelid family; a South American mammal with a soft, thick, fawn-colored coat, related to and resembling the llama.

H

hallucinogenic drug: A mind- and sense-altering drug that may create visions of things not physically present.

heartland: The central region of a cultural group where their traditional values and customs are practiced.

hierarchy: The ranking of a group of people according to their social, economic, or political position.

highlands: A region at high elevation.

huaca: A sacred place, usually used for a temple, pyramid, or shrine.

human sacrifice: Killing a person as an offering to the gods.

I

iconography: A method of relaying meaning through pictures and symbols.

idol: A likeness or image of an object of worship.

import: To bring goods from another region into one's home region, where they can be acquired by trade or purchase.

Inca: The word Inca originally meant "ruler" and referred to the king or leader. It is also used to mean the original group of Inca family clans that arose to prominence in the city of Cuzco. As the empire arose, the supreme ruler was called the "Sapa Inca" and members of the noble class were called "Incas."

indigenous: Native to an area.

L

legend: A legend is a story handed down from earlier times, often believed to be historically true.

llama: A member of the camelid family; a South American mammal that originated in Peru and probably descended from the guanaco. Llamas were used for their soft, fleecy wool, for their meat, and for carrying loads.

logogram: A glyph expressing a whole word or concept.

logosyllabic: A mixed system of writing in which some symbols represent whole words or ideas, while other symbols represent the syllables or units of sound which make up words.

lowlands: An area of land that is low in relation to the surrounding country.

M

mammoth: An extinct massive elephant-like mammal with thick, long hair and long curved tusks.

mass human sacrifices: Large-scale killing of people—or many people being killed at one time—as offerings to the gods.

mercenary soldiers: Warriors who fight wars for another state or nation's army for pay.

Mesoamerica: A term used for the area in the northern part of Central America, including Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Belize, and the southern and central parts of present-day Mexico, where many ancient civilizations arose.

mestizo: A person having mixed ancestry, specifically European and Amerindian.

missionary: A person, usually working for a religious organization, who tries to convert people, usually in a foreign land, to his or her religion.

mit'a: A tax imposed on the common people by the Inca government; the tax was a labor requirement rather than a monetary sum—the head of every household was obliged to work on public projects (building monuments, repairing roads or bridges, transporting goods) for a set period each year.

mitima: An Inca resettlement policy that required potential rebels in newly conquered regions to leave their villages and settle in distant regions where the majority of people were loyal to the Inca empire; this policy helped the Incas prevent many uprisings.

monogamy: Marriage to one partner only.

monumental architecture: Buildings, usually very large, such as pyramids or temple mounds, that are used for religious or political ceremonies.

mummification: Preservation of a body through a complex procedure that involves taking out the organs, filling the body cavity with preservative substances, and then drying out the body to prevent decay; mummification can also occur naturally when environmental conditions, such as extreme cold or dryness preserve the body.

mummy: A body that has been preserved, either by human technique or unusual environmental conditions, such as extreme cold or dryness.

myth: A traditional, often imaginary story dealing with ancestors, heroes, or supernatural beings, and usually making an attempt to explain a belief, practice, or natural phenomenon.

N

Nahuatl: The language spoken by the Aztecs and many other groups in the Valley of Mexico.

New World: The Western Hemisphere, including North and South America.

nomadic: Roaming from place to place without a fixed home.

O

observatory: A building created for the purpose of observing the stars and planets.

obsidian: Dark, solid glass formed by volcanoes used to make blades, knives, and other tools.

offerings: Gifts for the gods.

oral tradition: History and legend passed from generation to generation through spoken accounts.

outpost: A remote settlement or headquarters through which a central government manages outlying areas.

P

Paleoamerican: A member of a theoretical first population group in the Americas; scholars use this term to make a distinction between this group and the Paleo-Indians, a later group, who are generally considered to be the ancestors of modern Amerindians.

Paleo-Indian: A member of the group of people who migrated to the United States from Asia during the last part of the Great Ice Age, which ended about ten thousand years ago; Paleo-Indians are thought to be the ancestors of modern Amerindians.

pampa: The partly grassy, partly arid plains in the Andean region.

pantheon: All of the gods that a particular group of people worship.

Patagonia: A vast barren flat-land spreading through Argentina and into Chile between the Andes Mountains and the Atlantic Ocean.

Peninsulares: People living in Mexico who were born in Spain.

pilgrim: A person who travels to a holy place to show reverence.

pilgrimage: A journey to a holy place to show faith and reverence.

plateau: A large, elevated level area of land.

polygamy: Marriage in which spouses can have more than one partner; in Inca society, some men had multiple wives, but women could not take multiple husbands.

pre-Columbian American: A person living in the Americas before the arrival of Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus in 1492.

prehistory: The period of time in any given region, beginning with the appearance of the first human beings there and ending with the occurrence of the first written records. All human history that occurred before there was writing to record it is considered prehistoric.

primogeniture: A system in which the oldest son inherits his father's position or possessions.

Q

Quechua: The Inca language, still spoken by Andean people today.

quetzal: A Central American bird with bright green feathers.

quinoa: A high-protein grain grown in the Andes.

quipu: Also *khipu*. A set of multicolored cotton cords knotted at intervals, used for counting and record keeping.

R

radiocarbon dating: A method of testing organic (once living) material to see how old it is. Radiocarbon dating measures the amount of carbon 14 found in a sample. All plant and animal matter has a set amount of carbon 14. When an organism dies, the carbon 14 begins to decay at a specific rate. After measuring the extent of the decay, scientists can apply a series of mathematical formulas to determine the date of the organism's death—and consequently the age of the organic matter that remains.

rain forest: Dense, tropical woodlands that receive a great quantity of rain throughout the year.

religious rites: Established ceremonial practices.

remains: Ancient ruins or fossils, or human corpses or bones.

ritual: A formal act performed the same way each time, usually used as a means of religious worship by a particular group.

S

sacrifice: To make an offering to the gods, through personal possessions like cloth or jewels, or by killing an animal or human as the ultimate gift.

sacrifice rituals: Ceremonies during which something precious is offered to the gods; in early civilizations, sacrifice rituals often involved killing an animal or sometimes even a human being—the life that was taken was offered as a gift to the gods.

Sapa Inca: Supreme ruler of the Incas.

sarcophagus: A stone box used for burial, containing the coffin and body of the deceased, or sometimes only the body.

scribe: Someone hired to write down the language, to copy a manuscript, or record a spoken passage.

script: Writing.

sedentary: Settled; living in one place.

shaman: A religious leader or priest who communicates with the spirit world to influence events on earth.

smallpox: A severe contagious viral disease spread by particles emitted from the mouth when an infected person speaks, coughs, or sneezes.

stela: (plural: stelea) A stone pillar carved with images or writing, often used to provide historical details or for religious or political purposes.

stonemasonry: The work of a skilled builder who expertly lays cut or otherwise fitted units of stone in construction.

subordinate: Subject to someone of greater power; lower in rank.

succession: The system of passing power within the ruling class, usually upon the death of the current ruler.

surplus: The excess above what is needed; the amount remaining after all members of a group have received their share.

syllabograms: Symbols that represent the sounds of a language (usually a combination of a vowel sound and consonants).

T

terrace: One of a series of large horizontal ridges, like stairs, made on a mountain or hillside to create a level space for farming.

theorize: Create an explanation based on scientific evidence or historical analysis that has not yet been proven.

tlatoani: A Nahuatl word meaning “speaker” or “spokesperson” used by the Aztecs to refer to their rulers, or “they who speak for others.” The Aztec emperor was often called *huey tlatoani*, or “great speaker.”

trance: An altered mental state.

transformation: Changing into something else.

tribute: A payment to a nation or its ruler, usually made by people from a conquered territory as a sign that they surrender to the imposed rule; payment could be made in goods or labor or both.

trophy head: The head of an enemy, carried as a token of victory in combat.

U

urbanization: The process of becoming a city.

ushnu: A large platform in a central part of a city plaza, where the king or noblemen stood to address the public or view public festivities.

V

Valley of Mexico: A huge, oval basin at about 7,500 feet (2,286 meters) above sea level in north central Mexico, covering an area of about 3,000 square miles (7,770 square kilometers) and consisting of some of the most fertile land of Mexico.

vicuña: A South American mammal related to the llama and having a fine silky fleece, often used by the Andeans for making textiles. The early Andeans hunted vicuña for skins and meat.

vigesimal: Based on the number twenty (as a numeric system).

Villac Umu: Inca term for chief priest.

W

welfare state: A state or government that assumes responsibility for the welfare of its citizens.

Y

yanacona: A commoner who was selected and trained in childhood to serve the Inca nobility, priests, or the empire in general; the position was a form of slavery.

Yucatán: A peninsula separating the Caribbean Sea from the Gulf of Mexico, which includes the nation of Belize, the Petén territory of northern Guatemala, and the southeastern Mexican states of Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Yucatán. Yucatán is also the name of a state of Mexico, in the northern portion of the Yucatán peninsula.

Z

ziggurat: A platform or terrace with a tall temple tower or pyramid atop it in ancient Mesopotamia.

Research and Activity Ideas

The following ideas and projects are intended to offer suggestions for complementing your classroom work on understanding various aspects of the early civilizations in the Americas:

Plan a tour of historic Inca sites: Imagine that you are a travel agent and you are preparing a tour for a family that wishes to see the famous historic sites of the ancient Inca civilization in the Andes Mountain region of South America. What Inca cities should they travel to and why? Find a copy of a map of the area of the Inca civilization and plan their tour for them. Make a numbered list of at least six scenic stops they will want to make, marking the map with the corresponding number. Write down the highlights of what they will see there and why it is of interest. When you have completed the Inca tour guidebook and map, you may plan tours for people wishing to see the ancient Maya sites and the ancient Aztec sites as well. Find a map of the Mesoamerican region and start the plans.

Memoirs of a Maya teenager from 750 C.E.: You are a Maya teenager who lives in the year 750. Write an autobio-



graphy: what is your name? What city do you live in? Describe the details of everyday existence. What kinds of clothes do you wear and what other adornments do you use to make you look more attractive? Describe the food you eat, the house you live in, and other interesting facts about things like your religion and school. Please feel free to use your imagination to fill in the facts, but base your report on information you find in this book, other books about the Mayas you find at the library, and web sites about the life of the Maya people.

Discussion panel topic—Cities: Some archaeologists believe there were real cities in the Andes Mountains as far back as 2500 B.C.E. Form a group and try, as a group, to come up with a list of factors that make a city. Why is New York or Chicago a city, for example? Then discuss the evidence archaeologists have found in the Andes that might demonstrate that there were cities in the Americas so long ago. In what ways were the ancient cities like modern cities today? In what ways were they different? Can you imagine what life was like in Caral or in Chavín de Huantár?

Research topic—Pyramids: Write a report on the pyramids of the Americas. Research for your report can begin with this reference set, but it should include a trip to the library to find books on the ancient civilizations of the Americas and pyramids in general. You may also use the Internet for your research. What were the biggest pyramids of the Americas? How large were they? When were they built? How do they compare in size and in the time they were built with the pyramids of ancient Egypt? Who built them and how did the builders accomplish their work?

Travel diary of an Aztec merchant: The year is 1460 and you are a trader who has traveled into the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán for the first time to sell your produce. In an essay, describe how you would get into the city and what you would see when you got there.

Maya glyph poster: Make a Maya glyph poster. First you will need to look at some examples. There are some excellent web sites and books at your library that demon-

strate Maya glyphs and their use. If possible, check out one of the following:

- “How to Write Your Name in Mayan Glyphs” at <http://www.halfmoon.org/names.html>
- Ancient Scripts.com <http://www.ancientscripts.com/maya.html>
- *Reading the Maya Glyphs*, by Michael D. Coe and Mark Van Stone. London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001.

Or find any other resource with pictures of Maya glyphs and explanations of their meanings. Find a glyph or a glyph phrase (your name or the date, for example) that appeals to you and make a poster using the Maya glyph design. Using colored pencils or crayons, draw the glyph and then color it in. Feel free to add your own style to the design. Be sure to label the poster, showing the glyph’s meaning.

Early Civilizations of America Food Festival: Plan an Early Civilizations of America Food Festival. Set up booths for Maya, Aztec, and Inca foods. Make a batch of one kind of food and serve it in small portions so everyone can taste it. Read about the foods you are serving: be prepared to tell visitors to your booth all about the way the foods were prepared and eaten by the Mayas, Incas, or Aztecs. You may make any variety of dishes using corn, tortillas, beans, avocados, chili peppers, squash, pumpkin seeds, or chocolate. Here are some suggestions:

Maya booth:

- Popcorn
- Hot chocolate: Recipe

2 ounces unsweetened bakers’ chocolate, chopped into small pieces

6 cinnamon sticks, broken into several pieces

4 cups water

3 tablespoons honey

Heat one cup of water in a saucepan until hot but not boiling and add the chopped chocolate. Stir until the chocolate melts. Add honey. With a wire whisk, beat the hot chocolate while gradually adding 3 cups of hot water from the tap.

When it's good and foamy, pour small portions into cups with cinnamon sticks in each one and serve.

Inca booth:

- Baked sweet potatoes or baked potatoes, cut into large bite-sized pieces with butter, salt, and pepper served on the side
- Quinoa: Recipe

You will need to purchase a box of quinoa (pronounced KEEN-wah), a grain available in the rice section of most grocery stores. For plain quinoa, simply follow the instructions on the back of the package. For variety, try toasting the quinoa before cooking it. Place 1 teaspoon of vegetable or corn oil on a nonstick frying pan and place over medium heat, stirring constantly until the quinoa is golden brown. Then cook according to package instructions. Try adding canned or frozen corn to the quinoa in the last few minutes of cooking for a real Inca dish.

Aztec booth:

- Corn tortillas (store bought; and cut into pieces) or tortilla chips to serve with refried beans and chilies
- Refried Beans: Recipe

Open two 15-ounce cans of pinto beans. Heat one tablespoon of vegetable oil in a heavy frying pan over medium heat. When it is hot, put several large spoonfuls of beans into the pan, sprinkle lightly with salt and pepper, and then mash them with a fork until they are hot and mashed. Then place them in a covered bowl and do another batch until the beans are used. Serve on tortilla pieces or tortilla chips with diced chilies, if desired.

- Canned chilies, diced into small pieces, served on the side.

Stage a play—The Historic Meeting of 1519: With a team of eight to ten people, write a short play about the first meeting between Aztec emperor Montezuma II and Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés in Tenochtitlán in 1519. First do your research: make sure you know who was there and where the meeting took place. Find out whatever you can about how people were dressed and how they spoke with one another. Write the words that you imagine they spoke. Assign roles

for each member of the group and then enact the scene for your class.

Debate—The acts of the conquerors: After the Spanish conquerors had defeated the Inca and Aztec empires and the Maya societies, they destroyed many important aspects of the native cultures, including the people's books, arts, and religious buildings and shrines, as they attempted to convert the people to Christianity and to educate them in European customs. Were the intentions of the Spanish honorable, and can their actions be justified? Stage a debate over these questions. Split the class in half; one half debates that the Spanish were not justified and the other half argues that they were (regardless of personal beliefs on these issues). Consider how much damage the Spanish did and what possible causes they might have had for their actions.

Early Mesoamerican Peoples

15

Mesoamericans are people who lived in the civilizations that arose in roughly a 400,000-square-mile (1.04 million-square-kilometer) area in the northern part of Central America (the part of North America that extends from Mexico in the north down to the South American continent at Colombia in the south). Mesoamerican civilizations spanned an area that included the present-day countries of Mexico (mainly in its southern and central parts), Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Belize. Some experts believe at one time or another in prehistory (the period of time in human history that occurred before there was writing to record it), some thirty civilizations rose and fell in Mesoamerica. Each one had its own distinct culture, but all shared in many Mesoamerican traditions.

Geography

Mesoamerica is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean on the east and the Pacific Ocean on the west. Its climate and geography are very diverse. The weather is warm and dry on





Words to Know

Archaeological excavations: The scientific process of digging up and examining artifacts, remains, and monuments of past human life by experts in this field.

Artifact: Any item made or used by humans, such as a tool or weapon, that may be found by archaeologists or others who seek clues to the past.

Burial offerings: Gifts to the gods that were placed with the body of a deceased person.

Ceremonial centers: Citylike centers usually run by priests and rulers, in which people from surrounding areas gathered to practice the ceremonies of their religion, often at large temples and plazas built specifically for this purpose.

Elite: A group of people within a society who are in a socially superior position and have more power and privileges than others.

Glyph: A figure (often carved into stone or wood) used as a symbol to represent words, ideas, or sounds.

Hybrid: The offspring that results from breeding plants or animals of different varieties, breeds, or species.

Mammoth: An extinct massive elephant-like mammal with thick, long hair and long curved tusks.

Nomadic: Roaming from place to place without a fixed home.

Obsidian: Dark, solid glass formed by volcanoes used to make blades, knives, and other tools.

Plateau: A large, elevated, level area of land.

Prehistory: The period of time in any given region, beginning with the appearance of the first human beings there and ending with the occurrence of the first written records. All human history that occurred before the existence of written records is considered prehistoric.

Religious rites: Established ceremonial practices.

Rock shelter: A shelter formed by overhanging rocks.

the plains along the majority of both coasts. On a large part of the eastern coast, however, heavy rainfall creates dense tropical jungles. Two large mountain ranges run down the length of the area—the eastern and western Sierra Madre mountains. Between the two mountain ranges lie three plateaus (large, elevated, level areas of land) with fertile valleys running in between.

In one of these plateaus is the Valley of Mexico, the site of modern Mexico City and a major center of Mesoamer-



ican civilizations in former times. In the Valley of Mexico, at an altitude of nearly 7,500 feet (2,286 meters), the climate is generally pleasant and dry except for a few rainy months in the summer. At the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the early 1500s, it is estimated that about 40 percent of the Mesoamerican population lived in the Valley of Mexico.

Map showing sites of ancient civilizations in Mexico and parts of Central America (Mesoamerica).

Map by XNR Productions. The Gale Group.

The first Mesoamericans

At the time the first immigrants arrived in Mesoamerica (the dates of the first migrations are still unknown and open to debate; see Chapter 2 for more information), the climate was very different than today, with heavy rainfall in the Valley of Mexico that created broad, deep lakes and green forests. Ice age mammals such as the woolly mammoth (a now-extinct elephant-like mammal with thick, long hair and long curved tusks) and the horse (which would later become extinct; horses would only reappear in the Americas when

the Spanish brought them) roamed the valleys and plateaus of Mesoamerica in large numbers for thousands of years.

The earliest peoples were hunters of big game, who also gathered plants and hunted rodents, snails, and mussels. Most early Mesoamericans lived in small, nomadic (roaming from place to place without a fixed home) family groups. They set up camps and moved from season to season, unable to find enough food in one place to remain for more than a few months. They usually set up portable, temporary shelters or lived in caves and rock shelters (shelters formed by overhanging rocks). Their belongings consisted of things they could carry as they searched for food.

Desert culture

About 7000 B.C.E. the climate changed worldwide. Lands in Mesoamerica that had once been green and lush became dry and desertlike. Many lakes dried up or became smaller and more shallow. Around this time the large mammals disappeared. Mesoamericans were forced to seek new ways of obtaining food and soon took up what is now called the desert culture. Desert culture required new techniques and tools for hunting small animals like rabbits.

People spread out, still in very small groups or bands so each could exploit large amounts of land for enough food to sustain themselves. In the desert culture, plants became a much more central part of the diet; foraging (searching for food) took up more of the Mesoamerican people's time. Emphasis was placed on preparing and preserving foods, particularly grinding seeds and nuts into flour. The bands relocated by the seasons in search of food, carrying with them their few possessions, including baskets and grinding stones.

As time went on, people in the different regions adapted to their environments, each area producing different diets and lifestyles. With a heavier focus on plant foods, many groups learned to plant the vegetables most important to them. By about 5000 B.C.E. Mesoamericans had begun to grow simple crops of avocado, chili peppers, squash, and a grain called amaranth. They began to trade these for plants grown in other regions. Soon they were planting hybrids (the off-

spring that results from breeding plants or animals of different varieties, breeds, or species) and creating a full set of crops adapted to the weather and soil conditions of each region.

In Mesoamerica, unlike the Andes, few animals were raised for food. Dogs and turkeys were about the only meat regularly eaten. Meat was much less necessary in Mesoamerica by about 4000 B.C.E. because people had cultivated maize, a type of corn, and bean crops. These crops provided most of the nutrients (the elements in food that promote the body's growth and health) the early settlers needed. During the first era of farming, most Mesoamericans remained partially nomadic, leaving their crops for long periods of hunting and only returning in the spring and summer months.

Settling into villages

Although many Mesoamericans had mastered the basics of farming in their region by about 4000 B.C.E. and spent more and more of their time producing and finding plant foods, it was thousands of years before they settled into village life. This significantly separates them from other early civilizations, which went more directly from developing farming techniques to settling into villages.

No one knows why the move to village life was delayed in Mesoamerica. One reason may have been that life was good for the Mesoamericans and they had no real desire to change. From about 5000 B.C.E. to about 2500 B.C.E. most Mesoamericans were growing primary crops—maize, beans, and squash—which they preserved and stored in pits. By about 2500 B.C.E. Mesoamericans spent smaller periods of the year at their hunting camps, and by the end of the era tiny hamlets with about five or ten houses dotted some of the regions.

Pottery

The first practice of firing clay to make pottery in the Americas probably occurred along the northern Caribbean shores of present-day Colombia in about 3100 B.C.E. Pottery's first known appearance in Mesoamerica was around 2200 B.C.E., and its use had become widespread by about 1600 B.C.E. Pottery provided waterproof vessels for food storage; it also aided in cooking and other food preparation, carrying water, and serving.



A display of lifelike figures and objects shows early Mesoamericans cultivating maize in the Valley of Mexico in 3400 B.C.E.

© Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis.

Pottery was easy to make from materials available everywhere. Ceramics arts were also an early and very important form of cultural expression. Pottery was not particularly useful in a nomadic life because it was too heavy to be carried from place to place. Thus the change from nomadic to more settled life went hand in hand with the adoption of pottery in the various regions of Mesoamerica. By 1600 B.C.E. many of the Mesoamericans had settled into village life, but others scattered throughout this vast region had very different lifestyles. The move toward village life did not occur all at once, and many Mesoamericans remained nomadic (roaming from place to place without a fixed home) for centuries.

The pre-Olmec years

Archaeological excavations (the scientific process of digging up and examining artifacts, remains, and monuments of past human life by experts in the field) in

Mesoamerican valleys turned up villages of ever-increasing size that thrived between 1600 B.C.E. and 150 C.E., years when the Olmec (pronounced OLE-meck), the Zapotec, and the city of Teotihuacán (pronounced TAY-uh-tee-wah-KAHN)—were in their infancy. In the Oaxaca (pronounced wah-HAH-kah) Valley of present-day Mexico, archaeologists (scientists who dig up and examine artifacts [any item made or used by humans, such as a tool or weapon, that may be found by archaeologists or others who seek clues to the past], remains, and monuments of past human life) uncovered seventeen permanent settlements from this period.

Most of the settlements were small, but one had a population of about five hundred people in the years between 1300 and 1200 B.C.E. People in the village were farmers living in 20-foot (6.09-meter) rectangular homes. They stored their food in pits and raised dogs and turkeys for meat. Some people in the town clearly had more goods and power than others, which can be deduced from differences in the quality of the food they ate, the homes they lived in, the tools and ornaments they used, and the objects they were buried with. Since some had more than others, scholars believe a class system of some sort existed.

Along with settled life, new cultural traditions developed. In the Valley of Mexico, a town called Tlatilco (pronounced tlah-TEEL-coe) dates back to about 1300 B.C.E. Archaeologists dug up 340 burial sites at Tlatilco. The sites were full of burial offerings (gifts to the gods placed with the body of a deceased person), including artistic objects such as masks and hundreds of small ceramic figurines, mainly in the shape of females. The figurines had unusually elaborate features and hairstyles and were vividly painted in reds, whites, and blacks. The practice of creating elaborate objects and placing them in the grave of the deceased to accompany him or her to the afterlife is evidence of a belief in life after death and of the rise of formal religion as well as an advance in the arts.

By about 1200 B.C.E. the villages in the Valley of Mexico and elsewhere in Mesoamerica were gradually becoming chiefdoms. In these, there was one strong ruler, the chief, who often served as priest or religious leader as well. The chief controlled the food, government, and religion of his people. People most closely related to the ruler had higher



Timeline of Early Mesoamerica

2000 to 1200 B.C.E.: Early pre-Classic era (also called the Pre-Olmec Era). The use of pottery emerges, corresponding to the rise of village life. In San Lorenzo (in the present-day Mexican state of Veracruz), the early Olmec civilization arises with the first real social classes of Mesoamerica. Early Olmec influence spreads to the Pacific Coast of Mexico. The village of San José Mogote dominates the Oaxaca Valley.

1200 to 400 B.C.E.: Middle pre-Classic era (also called the Olmec Era). La Venta, an Olmec civilization, arises in the present-day Mexican state of Tabasco; La Venta's influence spreads throughout Mesoamerica. Monte Albán is created as a capital in Oaxaca Valley. The first lowland Maya (pronounced MY-uh) villages

emerge. The first known Zapotec writings at San José Mogote date back to this era.

400 B.C.E. to 250 C.E.: Late pre-Classic era (also known as Epi-Olmec Era). The two-calendar system featuring the Calendar Round and Long Count calendars and several forms of writing spread throughout Mesoamerica. Construction of the Pyramid of the Sun begins at Teotihuacán. In the Maya lowlands, many pyramids are being built.

250 to 600 C.E.: Early Classic era. City of Teotihuacán is dominant, but Monte Albán shares in influence and trade. The Maya gain influence throughout the large area including present-day Guatemala, Honduras, and eastern Mexico, building new cities of Copán, Tikal, and Kaminaljuyú (pronounced kah-mee-

rank than others, so a few people within these villages were wealthier and more powerful than the ordinary citizens—though rigid social classes had not yet developed.

Burial rituals had become widespread, and the wealthy received more and more elaborate grave offerings as the years passed. Trading, too, gained importance as the Valley of Mexico's villages built a strong trade network, especially in obsidian (dark, solid glass formed by volcanoes used to make blades, knives, and other tools), as well as plants, ceramics, and salt.

As religion spread from village to village throughout Mesoamerica, ceremonial centers arose in strategic locations where they could be reached by several villages. These were places to which people from surrounding areas traveled to

nahl-hoo-YOO) . The period ends with the fall of Teotihuacán. The Monte Albán population scatters.

600 to 900 C.E.: Late Classic era. Southern lowlands Maya civilization flourishes. The great Maya emperor Pacal reigns at Palenque. The period ends with the collapse of the Classic Maya in the southern lowlands. Maya civilization continues in the north in the Yucatán area. Chichén Itzá (pronounced chee-CHEN eet-SAH) is among the important northern Maya sites.

900 to 1200: Early post-Classic era. The Toltecs (pronounced TOHL-tecks) build their capital city of Tula in Mexico and the Toltec states dominate the area. Toltec influences dominate the Maya city of Chichén Itzá in 990. The Toltec

capital of Tula is overthrown at the end of this period.

1200 to 1521: Late post-Classic era. The Maya build a new capital at Mayapán. The Aztecs (Mexicas) create the city of Tenochtitlán (pronounced tay-notch-teet-LAHN) and, under the Triple Alliance with the cities of Texcoco and Tlacopan, build their vast empire.

1521: Spanish Conquest begins. The Spanish destroy the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán in a bloody battle. They go on to destroy the independent governments of fiercely resisting Maya groups in the decades to follow. They also destroy artwork and writings of Mesoamerican peoples, trying to erase the cultural traditions to promote Christianity and European traditions.

perform the rites of their religion under the supervision of the region's great and powerful priests. The centers featured large monuments, public buildings, and large plazas. By about 150 C.E. these religious centers had become widespread throughout Mesoamerica, and they represented some of the area's first cities. The first known Mesoamerican civilization—the Olmecs—arose at the beginning of this period, around 1200 B.C.E.

Connected but distinct

Trade, shared religion, and military conquest ensured that the different cultures of Mesoamerica were in constant contact with each other, so it not surprising they shared



Painting of the Valley of Mexico, with its diverse terrain, in prehistory. *The Art Archive/Museo Ciudad Mexico/Dagli Orti (A).*

many cultural traits. From the time of the Olmecs, Zapotecs, and Teotihuacáns, many of the distinct characteristics of each of the developing civilizations were common to most Mesoamerican civilizations. For example, most cultures had writing and numerical systems, used two calendars, played a ball game in which losers were sacrificed as an offering to the gods, had knowledge of astronomy, built pyramids, ate similar foods, established political structures and sacrificial rites, and worshipped many of the same gods. These ancient Mesoamerican civilizations, however, all notably lacked metal tools, wheels, and beasts of burden, such as horses or oxen, to help do work.

Despite these very important shared traits, the cultures themselves were very distinct, as shall be seen in the Mesoamerican chapters ahead. Looking at the artwork of the various Mesoamerican cultures, differences in style and in the way the people looked and dressed will be quickly recognizable. Differences in what was important to them as a so-

ciety and how they viewed the universe and the spiritual world were sometimes pronounced, and sometimes subtle, but important.

Prehistory with written documents?

Prehistory is defined as the period of time in which there was no writing to record a given society's history. Though ancient Mesoamerica has traditionally been treated as prehistory, the dawn of the historic period of Mesoamerica was actually in about 600 B.C.E. when the earliest known Mesoamerican artifact with writing was found. The writing was in the form of glyphs (drawn or carved figures used as symbols to represent words, ideas, or sounds), found at an ancient Olmec site. One of the artifact's two glyphs represents the word "king," while the other represents "3 Ajaw," the name of a day on the Mesoamerican calendar. Since people were often named after the day they were born, 3 Ajaw is probably the name of the king.

Glyphs found at Zapotec sites a few centuries later represent dates using the Long Count (a method that started at a "0" year of 3114 B.C.E.; see Chapters 17 and 22 for more information), which historians are able to translate into dates on the modern calendar. For the first time, archeologists found artifacts inscribed (written) with dates by their creators. Aside from names and dates, Mesoamerican writing recorded events such as battles or the succession of kings to the throne, and listed Mesoamerican royalty over the generations, with names and important dates.

Although many Mesoamerican societies had glyphs for names, place names, dates, and various other items, only the Mayas developed their writing to cover all of their spoken language. It has taken experts many years to decode the Maya glyphs, but they are now able to read most of the text on the many stelae (plural of stela), or stone pillar monuments, detailing kings and their accomplishments. Histories, using Maya documents, can now be written about the various royal families and the wars and religious practices of Maya cities.

While Maya cities and city-states (self-governing communities consisting of a single city and the surrounding

area) developed independently and were never united, this was not the case with the societies of the Valley of Mexico, where the largest cities and empires arose. (An empire is a vast, complex political unit extending across political boundaries and dominated by one central power, which generally takes control of the economy, government, and culture in communities throughout its territory.) By about 500 C.E. the great city of Teotihuacán was at its peak with a population between one hundred thousand and two hundred thousand people, making it the sixth largest city in the world at the time. Through extensive trade and religion, Teotihuacán unified the many peoples of the valley. Teotihuacán became the holiest of places and was still revered as a sacred place long after its inhabitants had disappeared. The Toltecs (pronounced TOHL-tecks) arrived in the valley by the tenth century and forged another loose empire, gaining the distinction of becoming the “chosen” rulers of the Valley of Mexico.

When a rough group of nomadic northerners known as the Aztecs (Mexicas) arrived in the Valley of Mexico in the twelfth century, they learned the traditions of these former civilizations and built upon them. As they became powerful, the Aztecs adopted the widespread belief that the gods had created the present world at Teotihuacán. They also claimed that their leaders were the descendants of the Toltecs and destined to rule the valley and beyond. From their magnificent city of Tenochtitlán, the Aztecs went on to establish a vast empire of about fifteen million people.

While reading about the Mesoamerican civilizations, it is important to remember that not just one group was responsible for the amazing leaps toward civilization occurring in Mesoamerica before the Spanish conquest. These groups were interconnected from the earliest times and continually built upon one another’s traditions and innovations. As experts learn more about these ancient societies—particularly by studying artifacts and glyphs—they will be able to trace their connections even further. What these Mesoamerican civilizations might have been had they not been so thoroughly disrupted by the Spanish conquistadores (conquerors) and missionaries remains a mystery. It is, nevertheless, worth thinking about.

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Olmec Culture

16

In the early 1900s the Olmecs (pronounced OLE-mecks) were a little known cultural group (a group of people who share customs, history, beliefs, and other traits) of ancient Mesoamerica. Scholars had named the group based on the artistic style of a few of their artifacts (things created or used by humans in past times), but no one knew when they had lived. In fact, most people assumed the Olmecs had lived after the ancient Maya (pronounced MY-uh); some believed they were simply a separate grouping of Maya people. Ignorance about the Olmecs was based in part on the geography of their heartland (the central region of a cultural group, where their traditional values and customs are practiced). The hot and swampy jungles in which the Olmecs had lived were so inaccessible that few had ventured there to seek answers about ancient societies. The jungle forests had long ago engulfed the abandoned cities of the Olmecs, hiding them from sight. Over the centuries the heat and moisture combined forces to decay thousands of artifacts and remains of the once-flourishing society.



It was not until the late 1930s that archaeologist Matthew Stirling (1896–1975), long intrigued by the few known Olmec artifacts, began excavating (digging to uncover artifacts and remains) at a site now known as La Venta in Mexico. Under a deep blanket of jungle vegetation he found an astonishing ancient city. Stirling uncovered artifacts proving that the Olmec were a distinct people with a sophisticated society and advanced arts.

The biggest surprise was that the Olmecs had flourished well before the rise of the Mayas. For scholars, the early existence of the Olmecs was hard to believe because there were no other known complex societies in Mesoamerica before the Maya—it seemed as if suddenly and out of nowhere a highly developed society had simply appeared.

In the 1940s, as they excavated La Venta, Stirling and his wife heard a rumor about a huge eye peering up from beneath a trail in the area of San Lorenzo, south of La Venta. Intrigued, they began an excavation there, turning up the second of the seventeen known Olmec colossal heads. Found at several sites, these mammoth sculptures carved from basalt (a fine-grained, dark gray rock used for building) date between 1200 and 900 B.C.E.

The heads weigh up to 30 tons (27.2 metric tons) and measure from about 5 to 11 feet (1.5 to 3.4 meters) in height. All of the heads, which are presumed to be portraits of Olmec priest/rulers, wear tight-fitting helmets. They have distinctive broad-faced, large-lipped features that have caused some people to theorize (create an unproved explanation based on scientific evidence or historical analysis) that the Olmecs had an African or Asian heritage. The colossal heads have become hallmarks (distinguishing characteristics) of the Olmec culture.

For years ancient historians debated amongst themselves about Stirling's discoveries, but by the 1950s most accepted the Olmec culture as the "mother culture of Mesoamerican civilization," meaning that the most important aspects of all later Mesoamerican civilizations originated with the Olmecs. Controversies about the Olmecs continued, and by the 1990s, most historians were persuaded that the Olmecs had *not* been the mother culture of the Mesoamericans. They argued that the different hallmarks of civilization (such as writing, calendars, a ruling elite, organized religion,



Words to Know

Artifact: Any item made or used by humans, such as a tool or weapon, that may be found by archaeologists or others who seek clues to the past.

Basalt: A fine-grained, dark gray rock used for building.

Ceremonial centers: Citylike centers usually run by priests and rulers, in which people from surrounding areas gathered to practice the ceremonies of their religion, often at large temples and plazas built specifically for this purpose.

Cultural group: A group of people who share customs, history, beliefs, and other traits, such as a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group.

Elite: A group of people within a society who are in a socially superior position and have more power and privileges than others.

Excavate: To dig carefully in the earth to uncover artifacts and remains of life from the past.

Glyph: A figure (often carved into stone or wood) used as a symbol to represent words, ideas, or sounds.

Hallucinogenic drug: A mind- and sense-altering drug that may create visions of things not physically present.

Heartland: The central region of a cultural group, where their traditional values and customs are practiced.

Offerings: Gifts for the gods.

Pilgrimage: A journey to a holy place to show faith and reverence.

Ritual: A formal act performed the same way each time, usually used as a means of religious worship by a particular group.

Script: Writing.

Stela: A stone pillar carved with images or writing, often used to provide historical details or for religious or political purposes.

Theorize: Create an explanation based on scientific evidence or historical analysis that has not yet been proven.

and many others) had arisen at different times and in a variety of independent Mesoamerican cultures, of which the Olmecs were just one.

Discoveries in the early 2000s, though, have persuaded a few experts that the Olmecs were probably the originators of some of the most important aspects of Mesoamerican civilization. Olmec artifacts provide the first evidence of many of the Mesoamerican religious themes and political structures central to later civilizations. The Olmecs seem to have been the first Mesoamericans to build ceremonial cen-

ters (citylike centers usually run by priests and rulers, in which people from surrounding areas gathered to practice the ceremonies of their religion, often at large temples and plazas built specifically for this purpose). From very recent evidence, it seems possible that Mesoamerican ball games, calendars, math, and even written script had their origins in Olmec times. The jungles of Mesoamerica, however, hold many untapped secrets about the ancient past. Future histories of Mesoamerica will undoubtedly present vital new evidence and theories about the origin of its civilization.

Dates of predominance

c. 1200–400 B.C.E.

Name variations and pronunciation

Pronounced OLE-meck. The name means “rubber people” in Nahuatl (pronounced NAH-wah-tul), the language of the later Aztec (Mexica; pronounced may-SHEE-kah) civilization. The name, given to the Olmecs long after the demise of their culture, refers to their production of rubber by tapping rubber trees. The Olmec people called themselves Xi (pronounced shee). The term Olmec usually refers to people who lived in large settlements in the Olmec tropical heartland, but it is also used in reference to the art style practiced in various other highland regions strongly influenced by the Olmecs.

Location

The Olmec heartland was located in swampy jungle river basins in the tropical coastal plains of the modern-day Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco. The three major Olmec centers were San Lorenzo, located on Río Chiquito in southern Veracruz; La Venta, located on an island in the Tonalá River in western Tabasco; and Tres Zapotes (pronounced TRACE sah-POE-tays) at the western foot of the Tuxtla Mountains in Veracruz.

Artifacts resembling Olmec ceramics and sculptures have been found in many other regions of Mexico, particularly in the modern-day Mexican states of Oaxaca (pronounced



wah-HAH-kah), Morelos, Guerrero, and the Federal District, signifying that the Olmecs traded with, or had a high degree of influence over, the people in these highland regions.

Important sites

San Lorenzo

San Lorenzo is the commonly used collective name of three related sites: San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, Potrero Nuevo, and Loma del Zapote. These sites are located in hot, swampy lowlands in the Coatzacoalcos River basin along the Gulf of Mexico, just south of Veracruz. People had lived in villages around the area of San Lorenzo from about 1750 B.C.E., but by sometime between 1500 and 1200 B.C.E. a distinctive Olmec culture had emerged there.

The site lies upon a plateau (large, elevated, level area of land) that rises about 150 feet (45.7 meters) above the sur-

Map showing sites of the ancient Olmec civilization in Mesoamerica. Map by XNR Productions. The Gale Group.

rounding lowlands. When archaeologist Michael D. Coe (1929–) first surveyed the site in the 1960s, he found to his surprise that a large ridge had been built by human labor on top of a natural plateau. By some estimates, the Olmec laborers who built the artificial ridge had carried more than 1.35 million cubic feet of soil in baskets to the plateau.

San Lorenzo was the oldest of the three primary Olmec sites. Based on the artifacts and remains found, archaeologists (scientists who dig up and examine artifacts, remains, and monuments of past human life) believe San Lorenzo was built to be a center for worship and government. Among the buildings at the site are many ceremonial mounds, large earthen platforms that probably had houses or other buildings upon them. San Lorenzo also had elaborate residences for the elite—the rich and powerful ruling families—as well as a separate area for the houses of common working people.

At its height, San Lorenzo is estimated to have had a population of no more than one thousand people. The number of farmers who lived and worked in the surrounding area, however, is estimated between ten thousand and twenty thousand. The site was clearly once the scene of massive public works projects requiring the work of many laborers. Thousands of hours of work went into building the artificial ridge the village was built upon, as well as the network of stone paved roads, the large basalt drainage systems (rocky channels that carried away wastewater or sewage), and at least twenty human-made water-storage ponds in the city. Because the arts found in the city were so advanced, it is likely that an artisan class was supported in San Lorenzo.

Archaeologists unearthed eight of the seventeen known Olmec colossal basalt heads at San Lorenzo. The colossal heads were carved using stone tools—there were no metal tools as yet in Mesoamerica. The rock had been brought in from the Tuxtla Mountains 60 miles (96.5 kilometers) away. Early Americans did not yet use the wheel or beasts of burden, such as horses or oxen, to help do work; it is believed Olmec workers used log rollers to transport the stone through the jungles with great effort, then floated it down the rivers on rafts to the great cities.

Archaeologists are still making discoveries about the Olmec. El Manatí, a site about 10 miles (16.1 kilometers)



away from San Lorenzo, was discovered in 1987, when villagers digging in a fish pond uncovered Olmec artifacts. The findings at El Manatí included a rubber ball still smelling of latex (the milky fluid derived from the rubber tree used in making rubber) after three thousand years, polished stone axe heads, human bones, a footprint carved in greenstone, and wooden busts with characteristic Olmec faces: slanted eyes, full lips, and elongated heads. To the delight of archaeologists, the site had been so waterlogged (saturated with water) by its springs, that many artifacts made from wood and bone had been preserved.

La Venta

San Lorenzo experienced revolution or invasion around 900 B.C.E. and then began steadily losing power. It was abandoned by 400 B.C.E. Sixty miles (96.5 kilometers) southeast of San Lorenzo stood La Venta. Situated on about 2

Giant basalt heads are characteristic of Olmec civilization. © Danny Lehman/Corbis.

square miles (5.18 square kilometers) of land on an island in the swamps near the Tonalá River in Tabasco, the city of La Venta probably controlled a region between the Mezcalapa and Coatzacoalcos Rivers between 1200 and 900 B.C.E. It became the most powerful center in Mesoamerica between 900 and 400 B.C.E., its political and economic influence reaching across Mesoamerica.

La Venta was originally constructed on the site of the one of the oldest known Mesoamerican agricultural villages, which had been occupied from 1750 to 1400 B.C.E. During the period that San Lorenzo was the dominant Olmec center, between 1200 and 900 B.C.E., La Venta served as a small civic and ceremonial center. By 900 B.C.E., however, it had become a major destination for religious pilgrimages (journeys to holy places to show reverence) throughout the region. Although La Venta was probably built primarily as a ceremonial center, it was also a residential center for the elite and a major trade center. After 900 B.C.E. it became a prosperous center of activity for farmers, fishermen, traders, artisans, and sculptors.

The center of La Venta was built on a tall artificial clay mound and featured many temples and a large central plaza for religious gatherings. Two pyramids towered over the other buildings. The larger of these, the Great Pyramid, was about 110 feet (33.5 meters) tall and 200 feet (60.9 meters) in diameter. Though it is now conical (shaped like a cone), it was originally rectangular in shape with step-like terraces. It is one of the first known pyramids of Mesoamerica. The construction of the city was carefully planned with a north-south orientation associated with the path of the sun.

Monuments made of basalt dominated La Venta. Archaeologists found hundreds of offerings (gifts for the gods) and other purposely buried objects under the mounds of the city. Four of the seventeen colossal basalt heads were found in La Venta; a group of jade (a hard mineral that is pale green or white) figurines making up a vivid courtyard scene was among other notable objects discovered at the site by archaeologists. The Olmecs constructed colored floors and platforms in shades of purple, red, and yellow, making La Venta sparkle with bright color. After hundreds of years of prosperity, La Venta fell into decline around 400 B.C.E.



Tres Zapotes

Tres Zapotes, located about 100 miles (160.9 kilometers) northwest of La Venta, flourished around the same time as San Lorenzo and La Venta, but it continued to be occupied well after the fall of La Venta. The site consists of about fifty earthen mounds. Two colossal heads were discovered near Tres Zapotes, including the largest, the Cobata head, which measures more than 11 feet (3.3 meters) tall and about 10 feet (3.04 meters) wide.

Perhaps the most important discovery at Tres Zapotes was Stela C, a carved stone monument from the later days of the Olmecs. Stela C is one of the oldest dated written “documents” of the Americas, dating back to 32 B.C.E. Stela C, along with a few other Olmec artifacts, provides evidence that the Olmecs may have been the creators of Mesoamerican systems of writing as well as the possible originators of a calendar and dating system called the Long Count, which

Olmec jade figurines found in La Venta. *The Art Archive/National Anthropological Museum Mexico/Dagli Orti.*

was used by the Mesoamerican civilizations that followed. Archaeological work around Tres Zapotes is ongoing; several sites have been discovered in the area but have not yet been excavated.

Outlying sites

Archaeologists have found pockets of Olmec or Olmec-influenced artifacts in a wide range of areas, from the modern-day Mexican states of Oaxaca, Morelos, Guerrero, and the Federal District and extending out to places in Guatemala and Honduras. There is plenty of evidence, ranging from weapons to artwork depicting war, that the Olmecs were a warlike society, and it is possible they invaded and ruled over other peoples. Many historians believe, however, that the Olmecs' unquestionable influence over regions near and far was due to three other factors: extensive trade; the efforts of the Olmecs to spread their religious beliefs; and the desire of less-advanced people to acquire or adopt Olmec advances in arts, commerce, and the sciences.

One of the outlying Olmec sites is Teopantecuanitlán (Place of the Temple of the Jaguar Gods), which lies in the hills of Guerrero state at the juncture of the Amacuzac and Balsas Rivers. There, archaeologists have found a sunken courtyard guarded by jaguar heads carved in travertine (a marble-like stone like limestone), as well as early Olmec pottery and figurines. Excavation on this site has revealed that the city's construction began as early as 1400 B.C.E. These early dates have caused some archaeologists to theorize that the Olmecs originated in Teopantecuanitlán and then migrated to their later home in the Olmec heartland.

Another important outlying area with heavy Olmec influence is Chalcatzingo, in the highlands in the eastern part of the modern-day Mexican state of Morales. The ancient city was situated on a stunning cleft (divided in two at the top) volcanic mountain. In the ancient Mesoamerican religions, the cleft mountain was considered the birth place of humans; the great rock cliffs of Chalcatzingo were held sacred. In fact, the name "Chalcatzingo" means "place most revered" in the Nahuatl language.

Chalcatzingo had been occupied by several different groups since about 3000 B.C.E. The Olmec are believed to have had a strong presence there between 700 and 500 B.C.E. Carved into the rock cliffs are spectacular Olmec-style bas-relief (artwork in which part of the design is raised) carvings, providing a wealth of religious imagery that can still be seen today.

It is believed Olmec traders from La Venta used Chalcatzingo as an important outpost and trade center. The city had a great supply of white clay used by the Olmecs in their ceramics. It was also about halfway between the Olmec heartland and mountain sources of obsidian (dark, solid glass formed by lava from volcanoes used to make blades, knives, and other tools) and jade the Olmecs used for their artwork.

History

Because there are no written records from Olmec times to be deciphered and so many artifacts were lost before archaeologists could analyze them, little is known of Olmec history. The earliest Olmec society arose in San Lorenzo in 1700 B.C.E. Most of the common people around the site were maize farmers, but a very profitable trade network was established in San Lorenzo as well. From about 1500 B.C.E. onward, the population grew and so did imports (goods from another region brought into one's home region) of basalt, greenstone, and obsidian from far off places.

As trade grew, it is likely a few family groups profited more than others. These people grabbed the best land for themselves and began to exercise more and more power over others. These few powerful families in San Lorenzo may have formed the first aristocracy (rule by a small, privileged group of people) in Mesoamerica. The amount of strenuous labor it took to build the artificial ridge of San Lorenzo is proof that many laborers were under the control of a governing few.

By about 1250 B.C.E. distinctive Olmec art appeared. Pottery and ceramic figures made from white clay, colossal stone heads and thrones, and many other uniquely Olmec artifacts date back to 1250 B.C.E., and had not appeared before this time. Within a century, San Lorenzo's long-distance trading was flourishing, and the center reigned over a wide area

for centuries. Just prior to this era, in about 1200 B.C.E., something mysterious occurred in San Lorenzo. The great monuments and statues that had been built in the city were purposely smashed up and then buried under the city's artificial ridge. Some scholars believe that there was a violent revolution at this time in which rebels destroyed the Olmec monuments. Others think the deliberate destruction of these highly prized monuments may have been done as a part of an important religious ritual (a formal act performed the same way each time, usually used as a means of religious worship by a particular group). Despite this willful destruction of its treasures, San Lorenzo continued to thrive for centuries.

Olmec power passed from San Lorenzo to La Venta around 900 B.C.E. Around this time, huge temples and plazas for religious worship were built in La Venta. The rulers and priests there performed public ceremonies, drawing great crowds to the city. La Venta became a much grander city than San Lorenzo, extending its power farther into outlying areas. It was undoubtedly a sacred place to many, and it is known for the many buried offerings found there. Then, in about 400 B.C.E., La Venta experienced extreme upheaval. Many of its monuments were destroyed or deliberately disfigured. Unlike the upheaval in San Lorenzo of 1200 B.C.E., La Venta never recovered.

The destruction of both San Lorenzo and La Venta greatly weakened the Olmec society. At the site of Tres Zapotes in southern Veracruz, the Olmecs probably carried on in a much less powerful state amid newly emerging civilizations for several more centuries. Experts do not know what finally happened to the Olmecs.

Economy

The three Olmec heartland centers, San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes, were located in regions with different natural resources and shared these for the mutual benefit of all. San Lorenzo was a farmer's dream. In the lower areas along the river there were flood plains (level land beside a river that sometimes floods) with extremely fertile soil. In the higher areas, with an abundance of rain, the Olmec farmers could produce two maize crops per year on a single piece of land.



With easy access to the rivers, the San Lorenzo Olmecs became able traders. La Venta had access to the resources of the sea (fish, shells, sea animals, and seaweed). La Venta Olmecs probably produced salt, cacao (the dried seeds of an evergreen tree used to make cocoa and chocolate), and rubber. Historians believe the Olmecs were the first to tap rubber trees to make rubber objects. They also extracted basalt from the Tuxtla Mountains near another Olmec center, Laguna de los Cerros. The Olmecs transported the basalt in huge blocks weighing up to 20 tons (18.1 metric tons) to the various ceremonial centers, perhaps by hauling them on log rollers to large wooden rafts and then floating them along the rivers.

The trade of basalt, rubber, shells, and other substances as well as manufactured wares such as the Olmec's fine pottery provided an abundance of goods. Trade extended beyond their own centers. The Olmecs carried on extensive long-distance trade with peoples all over Mesoamerica, including the cities of Monte Albán and Teotihuacán (pro-

The Olmecs transported huge blocks of basalt from outlying areas to create large structures such as this tomb, found at La Venta.

© Danny Lehman/Corbis.

nounced TAY-uh-tee-wah-KAHN), developing alliances and trade relations near and far.

Farmers in Olmec times grew maize, yams, squash, beans, grains, gourds, and avocados, although maize was the principal crop. The Olmecs tamed their tropical coastal environment by using slash-and-burn techniques, a way of clearing the land for cultivation by cutting down all the trees and vegetation and then burning them. This added nutrients from the burned vegetation to the soil and prepared it for new crops.

They also used river levees (embankments or walls built along rivers to prevent or control flooding) like those used in ancient times on the Nile River in Egypt to periodically flood their fields. About 7,000 square miles (18,130 square kilometers) of heartland is estimated to have supported about fifty people per square mile. In addition to their crops, the Olmecs ate deer, wild pigs, and fish from nearby lakes and ponds.

Government: A ruling elite

Some scholars of ancient history theorize that it was the successful farming of the Olmecs that led to a government run by a ruling elite. In earlier times, small groups of several families had owned and farmed the lands communally—sharing the work and benefits, with everyone more or less equal in the process. Michael D. Coe and Richard Diehl believe as a few families gained control of the best farmlands, they became wealthy and were then able to rule over others. From this class of families that had gained control through owning the best lands, a group of rulers and priests emerged. In fact, in Olmec society, rulers and priests were often one and the same; there was little difference between religious and civic rule in the Olmec society. As the power became concentrated, the Olmec society fell under the rule of shaman-kings, or priest-kings, who were also probably members of the powerful extended ruling families that owned the best lands and most of the wealth of the area. These shaman-kings were believed to have divine powers. The complex religious system the Olmecs developed in their early years served to justify the absolute rule of these shaman-kings over their

people by representing their authority as something ordained by the gods.

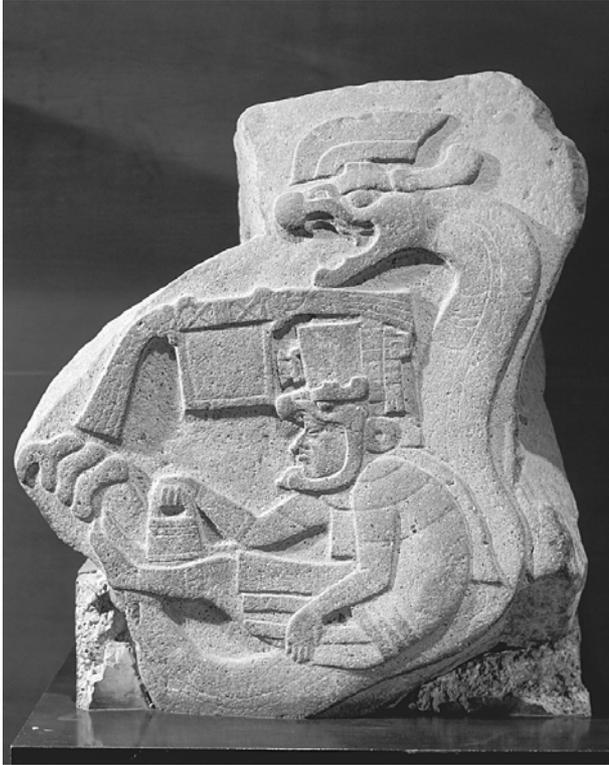
The great cities of the Olmecs housed the elite but not the workers. They served as ceremonial centers with religious temples and palaces and had separate areas for trade. The common people lived separately from the ceremonial centers in surrounding areas and made their living as farmers. They provided labor for the ceremonial centers as well as food and goods to the ruling elite. The farmers gathered periodically in the ceremonial centers for religious or governmental celebrations. The farmers belonged to the lower classes in the newly forming class structure. There was a tremendous gap between their condition and that of the upper classes that is apparent in the difference between the lavish burials of the Olmec elite and humble burials of the farmers.

Religion

The Olmec religion associated nature with the supernatural world. Springs, mountaintops, and caves were considered portals (doors) to the supernatural world. Olmec cities were often constructed near natural features, and buildings were sometimes erected to look like a nearby mountain or volcano.

As in many ancient cultures, Olmec shamans, or priests, were believed to have the power to intervene in the supernatural world for the benefit of their people. The Olmecs viewed their shamans with deep respect and willingly honored their great power. Olmec shamans were said to enter trances (states of altered consciousness) by using hallucinogenic drugs (mind- and sense-altering substances that may create visions of things not physically present) and through bloodletting, a process of piercing their skin, often the tongue, ears, or genitals, and losing much blood in the ritual.

While in such a trance, shamans were said to transform themselves into their *naguals*, or animal spirit companions. In this state the shaman might be able to enter the supernatural world through one of its portals. The Olmecs believed that once the shaman had entered the spirit world he could manipulate the forces controlling rain and the



Carving of an Olmec shaman, or priest, making an offering to the gods.
© Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis.

growth of crops in order to sustain his people. Some archaeological evidence indicates infants, as symbols of the renewal of life, may have been sacrificed to the gods who were believed to control rain.

The most important symbol in the Olmec belief system, and to subsequent cultures throughout Mesoamerica for centuries to come, was the jaguar. The jaguar was considered the most powerful earthly predator. It navigated well on earth, in the air, and in water—the three vital divisions of the Olmec world. According to the Olmec religion, in early times, a human woman and a jaguar bred, creating a *were-jaguar*, or a creature both human and jaguar, who was the ancestor of all Olmecs. The jaguar was the most common *nagual* to the shamans. Mesoamerican art and architecture features many depictions of shamans in various states of transfor-

mation into the *were-jaguar*.

From artwork, archaeologists and historians have been able to piece together some of the framework of the Olmec religion—enough to know that it was highly complex. According to Brian Fagan, in his book *Kingdoms of Gold, Kingdoms of Jade* (1991): “The Olmec took a set of centuries-old tribal beliefs about the spirit world and transformed them into a complex array of beliefs about prestige, success, and control of society that were entirely in tune with American Indian thinking about the nature of the universe. And they, and their successors, ruled with these new beliefs for over 2,500 years.”

The Mesoamerican ball game

The Americas can lay claim to one of the world’s oldest team sports—the Mesoamerican ball game, called *tlachtli* by the Aztec, *pok-a-tok* by the Mayas, and *ulama* by some other Mexican groups. The game, believed to have originated

around 1500 B.C.E., was certainly sport, but it was also an important religious ritual. No one knows whether the Olmecs actually invented the game or if they adopted it from another society, but they were responsible for spreading it to other Mesoamerican cultures. About six hundred ball courts have been found in Mesoamerica, and there are probably many more hidden in the abandoned cities of the jungles.

The ball games were played on large courts with hundreds of spectators watching. The ball courts were often about 120 by 30 feet (36.6 by 9.14 meters) and shaped like the letter I—some courts were even much larger than today's football fields. A big, heavy, solid rubber ball was used, weighing about 6 to 10 pounds (2.72 to 4.54 kilograms). If thrown with force, the ball could seriously injure or even kill a player. Each team tried to score points by getting the ball through stone hoops on the side walls or by causing the other team to drop the ball.

In most versions of the game, only hips, knees, and elbows—no hands or feet—could be used to propel the ball. Players were dressed in uniforms and helmets. At the end of the game, the captain of the defeated team was decapitated (his head was cut off) as a human sacrifice to the gods. The honor to the winning captain was tremendous and evidently made it worth the risk of playing.

The spectators usually made bets on which team would win; sometimes the stakes were very high—people offered themselves or their relatives as slaves if they lost. In some Mesoamerican cultures, the spectators were obligated to give all their clothing and jewelry to the winning team. Thus, when the crowd saw that a team was making the final winning play, they jumped from their seats and ran away so they wouldn't have to give up their belongings.

The Mesoamerican ball game dramatized the religious principles of the Olmecs and the later civilizations who practiced it. The game was seen as a battle between good and evil—the forces of life and death were being played out on the ball court. The human sacrifice at the game's end was viewed as a way to fertilize the earth or to feed the sun with the victim's blood. Sacrifice of all kinds was crucial in the Mesoamerican religion to ensure that the gods were happy and would not destroy life on Earth or cause crop failures, earthquakes, or volcanoes.

Archaeologists have found what may have been Olmec ball courts in the ruins of San Lorenzo and La Venta. Many detailed scenes depicting the game appear in Olmec art, and rubber balls were found in El Manatí. These are the earliest known artifacts of the game.

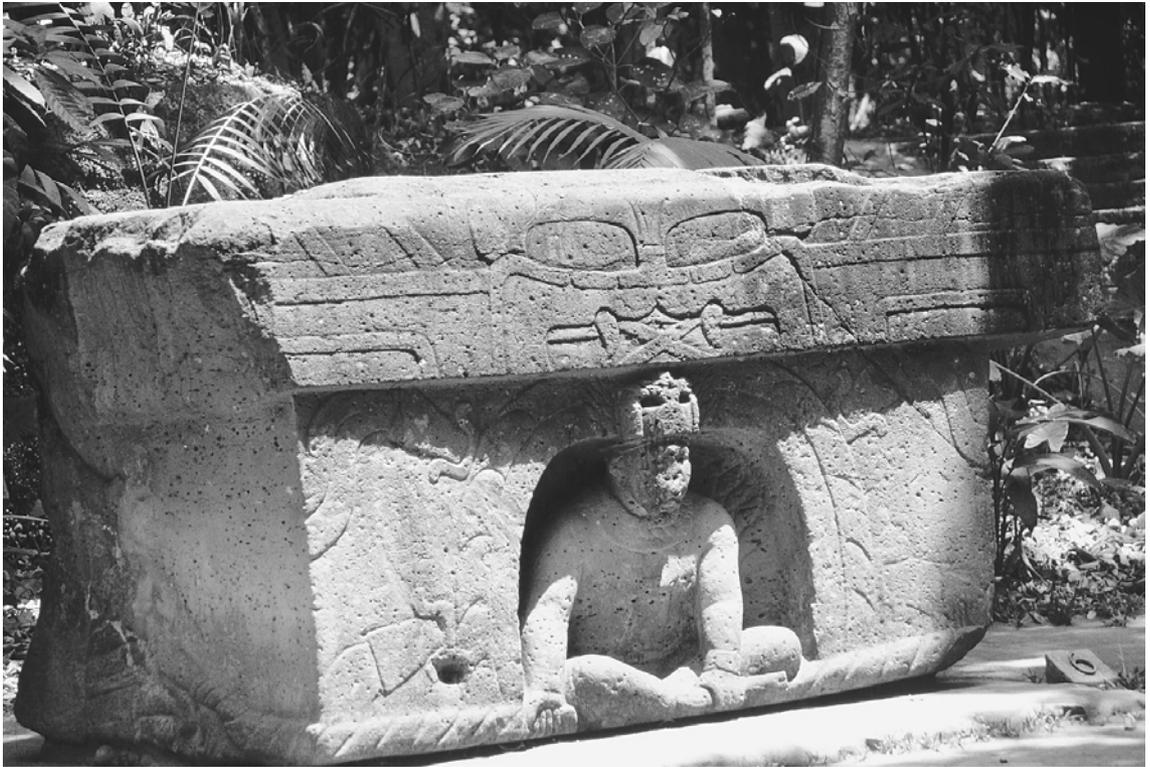
Arts

The major source of knowledge about the hundreds of years of Olmec civilization is through its surviving artwork. The first discovery of Olmec art was a colossal head, found in the area of Tres Zapotes in 1862. As of 2004 seventeen colossal heads have been located in several sites. These, like much Olmec art, were designed to glorify the Olmec rulers. For the Olmecs, art was meant to give power to the shaman or ruler. The massive “altars” made of enormous carved basalt blocks weighing up to 44 tons (40 metric tons), for instance, are believed to have served as thrones for the Olmec kings.

At the bottom and front of each of these altars was a carved niche. A small human figure sits in the niche, holding either a *were-jaguar* on his lap or a cord in his hand, or both. The niche, according to experts, represents a cave, or the entrance to the supernatural world and the ruler’s ties to the gods. The process of entering into the other world—the world of the supernatural—is central to most Olmec art.

Though they were masters at stone carving, the Olmec were also highly skilled potters and stone cutters. Much of their pottery depicts *nagual* transformations—the jaguar in particular, but also the harpy (part bird, part woman), shark, and caiman (a kind of crocodile found in Central and South America). Among Olmec artifacts, archaeologists have found many life-sized ceramic human infants made from white clay. They are realistic portraits and beautifully crafted, but experts are not certain of their significance. They may have celebrated birth but, on the other hand, they may have been portraits of the children about to be sacrificed.

The Olmecs carved some of the hardest stones—jade, serpentine, and jadeite—into figurines, masks, and celts (ground stone axe heads). Because the Olmecs lacked metal tools, the task of carving would have been extremely time



consuming. Jade was especially treasured. One greenstone figurine found in Veracruz is exemplary. The figure is a young man sitting cross-legged with a baby *were-jaguar* lying in his lap. Carved on the young man's shoulders and knees are outlines of the heads of other gods.

Language and writing

Almost everything about the language and writing of the Olmecs is controversial. There are many speculations about the language spoken among the people, but most scholars believe the Olmecs spoke an ancient form of the Mixe-Zoquean language, which is still spoken in some parts of Mexico today.

Most historians at the turn of the twenty-first century believed that writing in Mesoamerica may have started among the Zapotecs around 400–300 B.C.E. But some scholars think the earliest writing may have originated among the

A massive Olmec altar depicts a human sitting in a niche. © Charles & Josette Lenars/Corbis.

Olmecs. The evidence of Olmec script (writing) lies mainly in four artifacts: Stela C, dated by its creator at 32 B.C.E. found at Tres Zapotes; La Mojarra stela, dated May 21, 143, and July 13, 156, C.E. found near San Lorenzo, which may be the longest continuous written text passage of Mesoamerica; the Tuxtla statuette, dated 162 C.E., bearing a series of bar-and-dot numbers; and the most recent find, a cylinder (a solid figure bounded by a curved surface and two parallel circles of equal size on the ends) with carved glyphs (figures used as a symbol to represent words, ideas, or sounds) dating back to 650 B.C.E.

The Olmecs dated these “documents” using a system called the Long Count, which was used by many of the civilizations of lowland Mesoamerica. Long Count was made up of a two-calendar system counting back to a starting date of August 13, 3114 B.C.E. No one knows why this date was chosen. The numerals used to express the Long Count on the monuments found in the Olmec heartland were expressed in the bar and dot system, in which a bar had a value of five and a dot had a value of one. Two bars and a dot, for example, would have had a value of eleven.

Experts in Mesoamerican writing had worked with the abundant Maya script for many years before efforts began to interpret Olmec writing. Several small Olmec artifacts had characters that appeared to be writing of some kind, but there was never enough to try to decode them. Then, in 1986, a 4-ton (3.6-metric ton), 8-foot-wide (2.4 meters) by 5-foot-tall (1.5 meters) basalt stela was found at La Mojarra, near San Lorenzo. (A stela is a stone pillar carved with images or writing, used for religious or political purposes.) One side of the monument, called La Mojarra stela, featured an elaborate carving of an Olmec ruler, and next to him were 21 columns of glyphs. Dates from this text were presented in the bar and dot/Long Count system already known to scholars. They were May 21, 143, and July 13, 156 C.E.

In the 1990s linguist Terrence Kaufman (1937–) and anthropologist John Justeson began the task of trying to decipher the text on the monument. Using a mixture of four languages spoken in Veracruz, Tabasco, Oaxaca, and Chiapas, they began to put together patterns and gradually discerned words and grammar. They found additional glyphs on the Tuxtla statuette, a 6-inch (15.2-centimeter) jade-like figurine of a man with a duck mask on his face.

The Tuxtla statuette contained a series of bar and dot numerals as well as some glyphs. Justeson and Kaufman found identical syllables and words on La Mojarra stela and the Tuxtla statuette. Then they discovered that the back of La Mojarra contained hundreds more glyphs. After years of work Kaufman and Justeson were able to create a translation of La Mojarra: The text describes the deeds and accomplishments of a warrior-king named Harvest Mountain Lord.

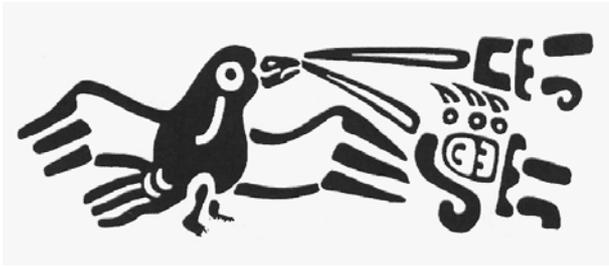
Though the La Mojarra stela, Stela C, and the Tuxtla statuette are all considered to be examples of Olmec writing, the experts have labeled the writing on them as Epi-Olmec script. This is due to their Long Count dates, from 32 B.C.E. to 162 C.E., which all fall well after the decline of the Olmecs from power. The Olmecs still existed at the time but their society had fallen into a greatly weakened state. The Epi-Olmec glyphs show some notable similarities to Maya glyphs, so many questions remained as to which script came first.

Some believe the answer to the origins of Mesoamerican writing may have been found in 2002, when a group of archaeologists working near La Venta found a cylinder with raised carvings containing what appear to be glyphs. The cylinder is believed to have been a royal seal probably used to apply the symbols from its carvings to cloth or ceramics. The artifact was scientifically dated to 650 B.C.E. One of the carvings on the cylinder is of a bird with two symbols shown streaming from its beak. This kind of speech scroll, coming out of the mouth of a human or animal and representing the idea of speech or sound, was used widely in Mesoamerican writing and is not much different than dialogue balloons used in contemporary society's comic books and cartoons.

Many believe this is a sign the symbols in the speech scroll are words. Comparing the two symbols within the speech scroll to other Mesoamerican writing, the archeologists found a



This cylinder with glyph carvings, found near La Venta, Mexico, is considered by many experts to be evidence of the first Mesoamerican writing. *Photograph by Richard Brunck. Courtesy of Dr. Mary Pohl, FSU.*



A drawing of what the Olmec glyphs would look like rolled out, with the “speech” coming out of the beak of a bird. Drawing by Ajax Moreno. Courtesy of Dr. Mary Pohl, FSU.

strong resemblance to Maya glyphs and translated the symbols on the cylinder as “King 3 Ajaw,” which is either the name of a king or a reference to a particular day in the sacred calendar of the Olmec. Because this artifact dates back to pre-Maya times, some believe it is proof the Olmec were the originators of glyph writing in Mesoamerica. The finding remains controversial.

Science

Though there are fewer artifacts to confirm the extent of Olmec knowledge in the sciences than found from other groups, the Olmecs were clearly party to, if not the originators of, the amazing advances in mathematics, astronomy, and time measurement shared by most ancient Mesoamerican societies. The Olmecs, as seen in the dating of their monuments, had a written numerical system in which a bar expressed the number five and a dot expressed the number one. They also used zero, which is considered a very advanced mathematical concept. The bar and dot system of numerals was widespread in later Mesoamerican cultures.

The Olmecs observed and recorded the orbits of the planets. They were able to predict eclipses with accuracy. (An eclipse is a partial or total blocking of light from one celestial body as it passes behind or through the shadow of another.) Like later Mesoamericans, they used a combined two-calendar system, with a 260-day sacred calendar and a 365-day solar calendar. Both the calendars and the numerical systems of the Olmecs were based on the number twenty. It is possible the Olmecs were the originators of the time-measuring system used as the basis of all calendars throughout Mesoamerica for centuries, but only a great deal of further investigation will confirm or negate this possibility.

The Olmecs’ remarkable advances in arts and sciences, the likes of which no known culture before them had come close to achieving, continue to intrigue archaeologists. Fagan observed:

A vast chasm [gap] separates the thousands of farming villages scattered through Central America in 2000 B.C. and the sophisticated

civilizations that arose with dramatic suddenness only 1,500 years later. It is this chasm that fascinates archaeologists as they search for the origins of the Maya and other Mesoamerican civilizations. Was there one ancestral culture that gave rise to later states of even greater complexity, or did these civilizations emerge from many cultural roots? One candidate may be the mysterious Olmec people....

For More Information

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Zapotecs and Monte Albán



The Zapotecs have lived in the Oaxaca (pronounced wah-HAH-kah) Valley of Mexico since at least 500 B.C.E. and are still there today. Most ancient Zapotec history revolves around the capital city, Monte Albán, which many experts consider the first Mesoamerican city. The Zapotecs, like the Olmecs (pronounced OLE-mecks), are regarded by some current scholars as the possible originators of several key features of the great Mesoamerican civilizations that followed. They were one of the earliest societies to produce a written version of their spoken language and they used the vigesimal, or base-twenty, numerical system (as opposed to the decimal, base-ten system used in contemporary society). They also used bar-and-dot numbers and the two-calendar system of tracking time (see the box on pages 306–307). These were all widespread characteristics of Mesoamerican cultures. (Culture is the arts, language, beliefs, customs, institutions, and other products of human work and thought shared by a group of people at a particular time.)

In seeking the origins of Mesoamerican cultural traits, it is important to remember that the Mesoamerican





Words to Know

Ceremonial centers: Citylike centers usually run by priests and rulers, in which people from surrounding areas gathered to practice the ceremonies of their religion, often at large temples and plazas built specifically for this purpose.

Chiefdom: A social unit larger and more structured than a tribe but smaller and less structured than a state, which is mainly governed by one powerful ruler. Though there are not distinct classes in a chiefdom, people are ranked by how closely they are related to the chief; the closer one is to the chief, the more prestige, wealth, and power one is likely to have.

City-state: An independent self-governing community consisting of a single city and the surrounding area.

Elite: A group of people within a society who are in a socially superior position and have more power and privileges than others.

Glyph: A figure (often carved into stone or wood) used as a symbol to represent words, ideas, or sounds.

Human sacrifice: Killing a person as an offering to the gods.

Observatory: A building created for the purpose of observing the stars and planets.

Pantheon: All of the gods that a particular group of people worship.

Propagandists: People who spread information and ideas designed to further their own cause.

Ritual: A formal act performed the same way each time, usually used as a means of religious worship by a particular group.

Tribute: A payment to a nation or its ruler, usually made by people from a conquered territory as a sign that they surrender to the imposed rule; payment could be made in goods or labor or both.

Vigesimal: Based on the number twenty (as a numeric system).

cultures were strongly connected with each other from ancient times forward. The earliest Zapotecs were heavily influenced by the Olmecs, and later enjoyed strong relations with the great city of Teotihuacán (pronounced TAY-uh-tee-wah-KAHN) in the Valley of Mexico. They also had regular contact with the Mayas (pronounced MY-uhs) at Tikal.

The days when the Zapotecs were the predominant force in the Oaxaca Valley ended with the decline of the city of Monte Albán in about 750 C.E. This chapter is about Zapotec culture during the twelve hundred years it ruled over the valley from its capital city.

Dates of predominance

500 B.C.E.–700 C.E.

Name variations and pronunciation

Twenty-first century Zapotec people usually call themselves *Be'ena'a*, or “The People.” In pre-Hispanic times, some of the elite (those who had more power and prestige than others) Zapotecs believed their gods and ancestors lived among the clouds and that, upon death, they themselves would ascend to the clouds. Because of this belief, the Zapotec in some areas were called *Be'ena'a Za'a*, or “Cloud People.”

In the sixteenth century, when the Spanish tried to record information about the Mesoamerican peoples they had conquered, they interviewed the Aztec (Mexica; pronounced may-SHEE-kah) people, who called the Zapotec the *Tzapotecatl*, the Nahuatl (pronounced NAH-wah-tul) language word for “Be'ena' Za'a.” The Spanish misunderstood the word as *Zapoteca*, and from that time the name Zapotec has been used.

Location

Monte Albán (meaning “White Hill” in Spanish) was the Zapotec capital for many years. It is located in the central Oaxaca Valley in the state of Oaxaca in southern Mexico. The area around the Oaxaca Valley is a rugged section of the Sierra Madre del Sur mountains with some of its highest peaks and several volcanoes.

The Y-shaped valley is set on a wide and fertile plateau beneath these peaks and ridges at an altitude of about 1,300 feet (396 meters) above sea level. The three arms of the valley are formed by smaller valleys: the ETLA Valley to the north, the Tlacolula Valley to the east, and the Zimatlán-Ocotlán Valley to the south. The site is 6.2 miles (10 kilometers) west of present-day Oaxaca City.

History

In 1500 B.C.E. the Oaxaca Valley was dotted with small, permanent villages, most of which were made up of



Map showing the sites of the ancient Zapotec civilization in Mesoamerica.
 Map by XNR Productions. The Gale Group.

less than a dozen households. People in the valley grew maize (corn) and beans, hunted rabbit and deer, and collected wild plants. The villages gradually became chiefdoms, in which there was one strong ruler. The people most closely related to the ruler had higher rank than others, but there were not distinct social classes. The chiefdoms scattered throughout the Oaxaca Valley had direct connections with chiefdoms all over Mesoamerica. Trade and intermarriage among chiefs' families reinforced these connections. Early Mesoamerican societies were diverse, with distinct languages and customs. Connections among them, however, made it easy to share advances in science and religious systems, as well as art and architecture.

By 1300 B.C.E. one village, San José Mogote, located in the northern arm of the Oaxaca Valley, had grown larger than the others with a population of over six hundred people. San José Mogote was ruled by a few powerful people who had taken over the best farmland and were able to obtain

tribute (payment to the ruler in goods or labor) from others. The village quickly became a regional center, in which public buildings were erected and sophisticated art and monuments were created. The center had a strong Olmec influence, especially in its form of government and artistic styles.

San José Mogote attracted people from all over the valley and became a busy center for trade and crafts. Other smaller towns developed in the surrounding Oaxaca Valley, though San José Mogote was the largest. Scholars are uncertain when the Zapotecs arrived in the valley or if they had been there all along, but most believe they were a significant presence in the Oaxaca Valley by about 900 B.C.E. San José Mogote is considered the forerunner of the great Zapotec city of Monte Albán, and many of its artifacts are the first indication of the distinctive Zapotec culture. The most famous of the Zapotec artifacts found at San José Mogote was a stone slab with a carving of a dead body, a victim of human sacrifice (someone killed as an offering to the gods). The carving, which dates back to 600 B.C.E., contains the first known example of Zapotec writing with glyphs (figures, often carved into stone or wood, used as symbols to represent words, ideas, or sounds) writing (see the section on Language and writing in this chapter).

Monte Albán

Around 500 B.C.E., at a point where the three arms of the Y-shaped Oaxaca Valley meet, construction began on the mountaintop city of Monte Albán. By this time, most experts believe the Zapotec culture was dominant in the Oaxaca Valley, though the valley's communities probably had independent governments. Apparently the rulers of the different cities and towns all over the valley agreed to this neutral mountaintop space for a capital city of the region. Why these valley rulers decided to build a city so far above the farmlands and water sources is unknown. Some speculate the city was planned for defense against invaders. Others say its majestic mountaintop setting, close to the divine world of the clouds, was in keeping with the Mesoamerican spirit of creating awe by displaying the power and splendor of the valley's rulers. Whatever the purpose, by about 200 B.C.E. the Zapotecs had completed the massive job of flattening the mountaintop on which the city was to be situated. They



Ruins of the ancient Zapotec civilization of Monte Albán in the Oaxaca Valley, Mexico. © Paul Thompson; Ecoscen/Corbis.

eventually built artificial ridges that spanned across to three mountaintops as the city spread out.

Monte Albán was planned from the start as a ceremonial center (a citylike center usually run by priests and rulers, in which people from surrounding areas gathered to practice the ceremonies of their religion, often at large temples and plazas built specifically for this purpose). In fact, the Zapotec name for Monte Albán was *Dani Bīaa*, which means “sacred mountain.” On the leveled mountaintop, laborers erected great pyramids, temples, and plazas. Two miles (3.2 kilometers) of walls were built around the city center, apparently to separate the sacred or elite (ruler-priests) from the rest of the population. The population in 200 B.C.E. had reached an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 people. The hillsides were terraced (huge steps were cut into them), and many of the common people of Monte Albán lived on the hillside terraces, outside the city walls. At its peak, Monte Albán had a population of about 35,000 people.

Perched over magnificent views, a Great Plaza measuring about 1,300 feet (396 meters) long and 650 feet (198 meters) wide expanded across the city center. The sacred and governmental buildings were built low to the ground and set off by sunken courts and stairways, revealing the great sophistication of the city's architects. To the left of the Great Plaza was the ball court, shaped like an I, in which the Mesoamerican ball game was played. Unlike other Mesoamerican courts, the Monte Albán ball court had no stone rings on its side walls; the Zapotecs evidently played a different kind of ball game at the time, as they still do in the twenty-first century (see Chapter 16 for more information).

Also facing the plaza is the Palace of the Danzantes, a large temple built between 500 and 200 B.C.E. In it are stone slabs with carvings of naked men in odd, contorted (twisted or bent) positions. Each slab has a name glyph at the head level of the portrait. At one time archaeologists (scientists who dig up and examine artifacts, remains, and monuments of past human life) believed the slabs depicted dancers: hence the name *danzantes* (dancers). Now most experts agree the carvings represent the dead bodies of captives the Zapotecs had captured in combat and then sacrificed as an offering to the gods. The *danzante* stones are monuments to Monte Albán's military strength and conquests. They are one of the oldest sets of stone carvings found in Oaxaca.

At the southern end of the plaza is Building J, a mound shaped like an arrow pointing to the southwest. It is believed to have been an observatory (a building created for the purpose of observing the stars and planets). On its outer walls, Building J bears about forty carved stone slabs depicting more bodies of sacrifice victims. Glyphs next to the carvings apparently tell the facts of the conquest: the



The Temple of the Danzantes with its stone slab carvings. © Charles & Josette Lenars/Corbis.



The First Mesoamerican Calendar Systems

Based on the evidence available, it appears the earliest writing in Mesoamerica stemmed from attempts to put a date and name on carvings of defeated enemies or victorious battles. No one knows for certain where the first calendar systems arose in Mesoamerica, but two very likely places are the Olmec heartland (the central region of a cultural group, where their traditional values and customs are practiced) and Monte Albán.

Every Mesoamerican society from the Olmecs forward used a calendar system that combined two calendars: the sacred 260-day calendar and the practical 365-day solar calendar. The 260-day calendar was composed of 20 consecutive day-names combined with the numerals 1 to 13. For

example, a given day such as 3 Jaguar was formed of two parts: the numeral 3 with the day-name Jaguar. With the 20 day-names and 13 numerals there was a possibility of 260 combinations before the calendar would have to repeat a combination.

The Mesoamericans used this calendar, usually administered by their shamans (priests) to attempt to control, or simply to try to understand, their fate. They used the calendars for planning certain events or for foretelling the destiny of someone born on a particular date. Many groups, including the Zapotecs, named their children after the day-name of their birth—a child born on 6 Monkey, for example, would bear that name.

date, place, and battle. No one is certain of Building J's true function.

Government and economy

The establishment of the capital city of Monte Albán suggests the chiefdoms of the Oaxaca Valley had created a union or alliance. Some historians believe the leaders wanted a neutral capital from which the administration of the whole valley could be carried out. The capital soon became a growing city-state (an independent political unit consisting of a single city and the surrounding area), with increasing populations in its farming areas.

The rulers at Monte Albán managed the farming operations of the valley, keeping their own power by distributing resources to those who competed for their favor and keeping the best farmlands for themselves. The Zapotec rulers de-

The written form of a day-name consisted of a glyph and a bar and dot numeral. In the bar and dot system, a bar represents the number 5 and a dot represents the number 1. Thus one bar with three dots would signify the number 8. The system was vigesimal, meaning base-twenty. (The numeral system used in the twenty-first century is decimal, or base-ten.) Historians believe the Zapotecs first used the 260-day calendar, but later adopted a combined system using both the sacred and the 365-day year.

The 365-day calendar years (often called “vague years”) used by the ancient Mesoamericans consisted of eighteen 20-

day months with a final 5-day period filling out the end of the year. The calendar was based on the seasons and was useful for farming. When both calendars were used in combination, a new system called the Mesoamerican Calendar Round, emerged. Using both calendars, there were 18,980 possible combinations of dates, making up a unit of 52 solar years.

Mesoamericans viewed time as cyclical. Rather than going forward, they felt they were moving in a large circle that would return to its own beginning. They greatly feared the end of each 52-year unit, believing if the gods were unhappy with humans at that time, they might destroy the world.

manded that the common people pay them tribute, and some farmers were expected to farm the leaders’ lands rather than pay them in goods. The Zapotec leaders at Monte Albán also commanded the huge force of laborers it took to build the great city and maintain its irrigation and drainage systems, probably using the tribute system to obtain the labor.

By 200 B.C.E. Monte Albán had developed into a true aristocratic government in which a few rich and powerful families living in its central area governed tens of thousands of commoners. The gap between the upper class and the peasants was great and particularly obvious in the lavish burials of the rulers—buried with precious jewels, metals, arts, and other extravagant belongings—in contrast to the modest burials of peasants.

Among the Zapotec, as with most ancient American cultures, there was little difference between religion, government, and economy—all three were directed by a powerful



Observatory at Monte Albán. © Danny Lehman/Corbis.

group of elite ruler-priests. Because people believed their ruler-priests were partly divine and could communicate with the gods, they were happy to accept the leadership; if not, they were probably too afraid to do anything about it.

The ruler-priests at Monte Albán were master propagandists (people who spread information and ideas designed to further their own cause) who took every opportunity to glorify themselves in the public eye. Just as the city itself was built high upon a mountaintop to inspire awe and associate it with the supernatural (divine or spiritual) world of the clouds, so the ruler-priests took care that every piece of art and architecture and every ceremony increased their glory and prestige, and linked them with the gods.

Between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. Monte Albán was at its peak and as powerful as Teotihuacán, the enormous new city growing in the Valley of Mexico. Relations were good and trade between two cities was active. It is believed the Za-

potecs occasionally went to war on a small scale, probably for the purpose of capturing prisoners to be sacrificed to the gods. They did not expand into other valleys, but maintained their own power in Oaxaca at a time when Teotihuacán and the early Maya cities were emerging nearby.

Religion

The common people among the Zapotecs believed they had been born from nature itself, directly from rocks, trees, and jaguars. The elite among the Zapotecs believed they had descended from gods who reigned in the world beyond the clouds. They believed their ancestors were in the cloud world and that they, too, would ascend to the clouds upon death.

The sharing of cultures among Mesoamericans meant that more and more gods were introduced to each religion from those of their neighbors. The Zapotec religion had at least fifteen gods in its pantheon (all of the gods that a particular group of people worship) and for each one there were specific rituals (formal acts performed the same way each time). Most of the gods were associated either with farming or fertility. Xipe Totec, “the Flayed One,” was the god of sacrifice. The rain god Cocijo was apparently the primary god in the pantheon.

Like all Mesoamerican religions, the Zapotec religion separated the spirit of living things from nonliving things. Anything that lived, breathed, or moved had a life spirit and was treated with reverence. This included many things, such as light, animals, humans, and calendars. The Zapotec practiced ancestor worship and were particularly concerned with the ancestors of their rulers. They believed the dead ancestors of their ruler-priests had the supernatural ability to change the circumstances—particularly with respect to the weather and other natural phenomena—for the entire society. Therefore, the elite were buried in extravagant ceremonies with many jewels, precious gems, and artwork.

With so many gods and complicated calendars requiring sets of rituals for each calendar day, the Zapotec became increasingly dependent on their ruler-priests to oversee



The stone carvings from the Temple of the Danzantes were long believed to depict dancers, although some experts now think they may represent victims of human sacrifice. © Kevin Schafer/Corbis.

the extensive ceremonies designed to keep the gods happy. Sometimes this included human sacrifice, often the leaders of enemy cities around them.

Arts

Starting with the gruesome slabs lining the Temple of Danzantes, the stone carvings of the early Zapotecs at Monte Albán that adorned walls, stairs, and doors were primarily used to record the great feats and military victories of Zapotec rulers. Along with scenes of sacrifice victims and their decapitated heads, there are many depictions of the actual rulers, dressed in extravagant finery. Glyphs on these stone carvings describe the leaders' achievements, especially in combat. Throughout the history of Monte Albán, this form of commemoration (making a memorial so someone will always be remembered) used either writing or pictures to represent ideas, was stressed in the art and monuments of the city.

The Zapotecs used their arts to commemorate the living and also to accompany the dead to the afterlife. More than 150 elaborate tombs were found within the ruins of Monte Albán. The elite were buried in chambers adorned with painted murals and stone carvings as well as pottery. Archaeologists have found incredible riches in the Zapotec tombs, including jewelry and figurines made of gold, copper, jade, rock crystal, obsidian (dark, solid glass formed by lava from volcanoes used to make blades, knives, and other tools), and turquoise mosaic. Among the burial goods, as elsewhere in Zapotec society, are glyphs to record the name of the ruler being buried and other facts he would have wished to take with him into the afterlife.

Language and writing

Zapotec is a family of languages within a larger framework called the Otomanguan stock. In present-day Oaxaca

more than four hundred thousand people speak some form of the Zapotec language. The language is tonal, meaning that the same word in a different tone will have a different meaning.

In most Zapotec writing, glyphs represented full words, but most experts believe some of the Zapotec glyphs represented sounds, such as syllables or letters. The glyphs were probably read in columns from left to right. From artifacts found in Zapotec ruins, archaeologists have identified more than one hundred glyphs, but still do not know what most of them mean. Those known are mainly day-names from the 260-day calendar. They are easily spotted because they always occur with a bar-and-dot number. Since the Zapotecs often named their children by day-names, most of those found on stone carvings are assumed to represent the name of the person depicted. Most are read in the following manner: 5 Flower; 6 Deer; 1 Monkey.

Archaeologists found an artifact in San José Mogote that many believe is the earliest example of writing in the Americas, dating back to 600 B.C.E. On a stone slab, on the floor of a corridor between two public buildings, is a carving of a dead man with his eyes closed and his mouth open. The man is clearly a victim of human sacrifice, as there is blood flowing out of his chest, indicating his heart had been torn out. At his feet there is a glyph. The glyph is a day-name from the sacred 260-day calendar (see the box on pages 306–307).

The name on the glyph is 1 Earthquake (or, according to some, 1 Motion). The Zapotecs named their children for the day of the year they were born, so the day-name is probably the victim's name, and it is likely he was a chief from a town that the Zapotecs had defeated in a raid or combat. The Zapotecs set the carved slab on the floor to be walked upon by everyone who passed, showing their complete victory over this enemy and glorifying themselves as conquerors.



Gold pendant from Monte Albán. *The Library of Congress.*

Scholars believe Zapotec writing originated in this attempt to record and boast about their victories in battle.

Joyce Marcus, one of the primary scholars of Zapotec writing, notes in *Natural History* that over the years the uses of writing in Monte Albán changed. The early glyphs, such as those on the danzante stones, show defeated and often dead captives, listing their names or the places the Zapotecs conquered. Building J, built sometime between 200 B.C.E. and 100 C.E. also had “conquest slabs” depicting conquered enemy leaders. The glyphs on the mysterious Building J include both calendar dates and other glyphs. Later, sometime between 100 and 300 C.E., the Zapotecs built a pyramid with eight stone carvings. While six of these are “conquest slabs,” the other two depict what may be a diplomatic meeting between the leaders of Monte Albán and Teotihuacán. The last type of glyph writings of Monte Albán before its decline were records of the genealogy (family history) of the Zapotec rulers.

Sciences

The Calendar Round system of tracking time with a combination of two calendars (see the box on pages 306–307) is one of the most noted Zapotec contributions to the Mesoamerican culture. Zapotec artifacts have provided archaeologists with many more samples of their numerical and calendar systems than were available for the Olmec. The Zapotecs clearly used the Calendar Round before the Maya adopted it. Unlike the Olmecs and the Mayas, the Zapotecs did not use the Long Count system of tracking time, a method that started at a “0” year of 3114 B.C.E. (see Chapter 22 for more information).

Some buildings at Monte Albán are thought by scholars to be observatories. They were built in such a way that the sun would strike them at a certain place on a certain day. With these observatories, the Zapotecs could predict solar and lunar eclipses (a solar eclipse is the concealing of the moon by the sun; a lunar eclipse is the concealing of the sun by the moon) and other phenomena in outer space.

Decline

Around 750 C.E. the rulers of Monte Albán lost power for reasons that remain unknown. At about the same time,

the grand city of Teotihuacán collapsed (see Chapter 18). Most of the people of Monte Albán left the city and began living in the surrounding areas of the Oaxaca Valley. About 5,000 people remained in the old city, but it eventually fell into ruin. The Mixtec, another group of people in the Oaxaca Valley, later used the abandoned city as a sacred place in which to bury their own dead. The Zapotecs left their capital city for good, but they did not disappear. Several studies estimate the number of Zapotecs at the time of the Spanish conquest was between 350,000 and 500,000 people.

For More Information

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Teotihuacán

18

According to some Aztec (Mexica; pronounced may-SHEE-kah) legends, the city of Teotihuacán (pronounced TAY-uh-tee-wah-KAHN) was built by giants. Who else could have achieved the immense size and scale of building that occurred there more than two thousand years ago? The founders of Teotihuacán remain unknown in the twenty-first century, and observers still look upon the ruins with the same awe and amazement as the Aztecs. At its height in 500 C.E. Teotihuacán's population was somewhere between one hundred thousand and two hundred thousand people, making it the sixth largest city in the world at the time.

Within Teotihuacán's 8 square miles (20.7 square kilometers) were thousands of public buildings and residences, including six hundred pyramids. Among the pyramids was the enormous Pyramid of the Sun, the majestic Pyramid of the Moon, more than one hundred temples and shrines, and thousands of other ceremonial structures. There were also several huge marketplaces and more than two thousand apartment compounds and palaces.





Words to Know

Artifact: Any item made or used by humans, such as a tool or weapon, that may be found by archaeologists or others who seek clues to the past.

Astronomy: The science that deals with the study of the planets, sun, moon, and stars and all other celestial bodies.

Ceremonial centers: Citylike centers usually run by priests and rulers, in which people from surrounding areas gathered to practice the ceremonies of their religion, often at large temples and plazas built specifically for this purpose.

Colony: A group of people living as a community in a land away from their home that is ruled by their distant home government.

Elite: A group of people within a society who are in a socially superior position and have more power and privileges than others.

Empire: A vast, complex political unit extending across political boundaries and

dominated by one central power, which generally takes control of the economy, government, and culture in communities throughout its territory.

Excavate: To dig carefully in the earth to uncover artifacts and remains of life from the past.

Fertility: The capacity of land to produce crops or, among people, the capacity to reproduce or bear children.

Glyph: A figure (often carved into stone or wood) used as a symbol to represent words, ideas, or sounds.

Obsidian: Dark, solid glass formed by volcanoes used to make blades, knives, and other tools.

Tribute: A payment to a nation or its ruler, usually made by people from a conquered territory as a sign that they surrender to the imposed rule; payment could be made in goods or labor or both.

Most of the early cities in the Americas were ceremonial centers (citylike centers in which people from surrounding areas gathered to practice the ceremonies of their religion, often at large temples and plazas built specifically for this purpose) to which people traveled for special events. While only the ruler-priests and their staffs actually lived within the ceremonial centers, Teotihuacán was a busy metropolis (city) with all classes of people living and working within its borders. The city was carefully planned and highly organized by its rulers. It served as the center of religion and government for a growing empire that included the entire Valley of Mexico and places beyond. Considered the holiest

of places in the world by most Mesoamericans, Teotihuacán had a profound influence over the cultures around it and those that came later.

Although the city of Teotihuacán was vast and its ruins are massive, no significant written artifacts (items made or used by humans that may be found by archaeologists or others who seek clues to the past) have been found there. Some information came from the Aztecs, who reported what they knew about Teotihuacán to missionaries working for the Spanish king in the sixteenth century; many of the names of places in the city are taken from these reports. But even the Aztecs did not have firsthand information since the city had been abandoned centuries before their arrival in the Valley of Mexico. For the Aztecs, the ruins were a sacred part of human history; they believed Teotihuacán was where the gods had created human beings, but they knew little about the actual events that took place in the huge metropolis.

Dates of predominance

150 B.C.E.–750 C.E.

Name variations and pronunciation

Scholars do not know what the people of Teotihuacán called themselves. The name “Teotihuacán” (also Teotihuacan), was the name the Aztecs gave the city. It means either “place of the gods” or “where the men became gods.” The name generally refers to the city but it is also used to refer to the civilization ruled by Teotihuacán, primarily within the Valley of Mexico but in some places extending beyond.

Location

Teotihuacán is located in the far northeast section of the Valley of Mexico about 25 miles (40.2 kilometers) northeast of present-day Mexico City. The Valley of Mexico is an oval-shaped basin set between two coastal mountain ranges on a 3,000-square-mile (7,770-square-kilometer) plateau at an altitude of about 7,200 feet (2,195 meters). Inside the Valley



Map showing ancient Teotihuacán in Mesoamerica. Teotihuacán influence was also strong in nearby Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec empire.

Map by XNR Productions. The Gale Group.

of Mexico there are several large lakes, the largest of which is Lake Texcoco.

Teotihuacán is situated in the Teotihuacán Valley, which is within the larger Valley of Mexico. The Teotihuacán Valley is about 190 square miles (492 square kilometers); about half of this land is good for farming and watered by natural springs.

The site

Besides its enormous size and thousands of buildings, Teotihuacán was unique among ancient Mesoamerican cities in the extremely precise and skillful city planning that went into its layout. The city center was laid out in a gridlike system (a network of evenly spaced horizontal and vertical lines making up a kind of checkerboard) sometime around the first century C.E. The city's layout shows an advanced knowledge of engineering and

may even indicate a detailed knowledge of astronomy (the science that deals with the study of the planets, sun, moon, and stars and all other celestial bodies), according to a few scholars who think the buildings were lined up with the stars and planets above.

Much of Teotihuacán's construction took place between 200 and 300 C.E. The main road running through the city is called the Avenue of the Dead (so named by the Aztecs) and runs north to south for about 3 miles (4.8 kilometers). The Pyramid of the Moon (built around 250 C.E.) is at the northern end of the street, and the Pyramid of the Sun (built around 200 C.E.) is about a half mile to the south.

The four-level Pyramid of the Sun towered over the city. It was more than 200 feet (61 meters) tall and 700 feet (213 meters) wide and is thought to be the ancient world's third largest pyramid. The Pyramids of the Sun and of the Moon were both designed to imitate the look of the moun-



tains surrounding the city. Although they are gray in color today, during the Teotihuacán heyday (its most prosperous and powerful years), they were painted a bright red.

A little farther south on the Avenue of the Dead is the Ciudadela (or Citadel), a sunken plaza measuring about 1,300 feet (396 meters) long, which some believe may once have been the site of the ruler's palace. There are about six hundred small pyramids around the Ciudadela. One of these ceremonial pyramids, found in the city center, is the Temple of Quetzalcoatl (pronounced kates-ahl-koh-AH-tul), the third-largest pyramid in the city, which was built around 200 C.E. This building has six huge steps and is adorned with stone carvings of the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent god who plays a vital role in almost every Mesoamerican religion from the time of Teotihuacán forward.

The Temple of Quetzalcoatl is considered by some to be one of the most beautiful pieces of architecture from the

The site of the ancient city of Teotihuacán. © Charles & Josette Lenars/Corbis.



Sculptures of the god Quetzalcoatl adorn this temple in his honor.

© Charles & Josette Lenars/Corbis.

Mesoamerican era. In all, there were an estimated five thousand ceremonial buildings in the city. Teotihuacán was also considered a sacred burial ground; many tombs have been found and many more are thought to be still hidden within its ruins.

Teotihuacán was undoubtedly a great religious center, but it was also a place of business with a wide variety of products being made and traded. There were several huge, bustling marketplaces, to which goods and food were brought from places near and far. The common people of the city purchased their food at these marketplaces. There were many kinds of workers besides farmers living in the city; they labored in nearby obsidian (dark, solid glass formed by volcanoes used for chipping stone and making blades, knives, and other tools) mines, made crafts or other manufactured goods, or worked on the huge building projects within the city. Artisans were also plentiful in the city; archaeologists have uncovered about five hundred small workshops.



By about 300 C.E. most of the city's residents lived in apartment compounds—large square buildings comprised of sleeping rooms with kitchens. The rooms were connected by alleyways and outdoor patios. The apartment buildings were set around courtyards and surrounded by high walls. Some had common altars (places where people worshipped and made offerings to the gods), suggesting that extended family groupings (such as grandpar-

Interior courtyard of a Teotihuacán palace.

© Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis.

ents, uncles and aunts, and cousins) existed within these large compounds.

About two thousand apartment compounds have been found in the city to date. Within the compounds, archaeologists have found colorful wall murals. It is believed the residential compounds were arranged in neighborhoods, and that some neighborhoods were reserved for certain groups of immigrants from other lands. For example, a Zapotec and a lowland Maya (pronounced MY-uh) neighborhood could have existed within the city.

The wealthy and powerful lords of Teotihuacán lived in elegant palaces. These large compounds had many rooms and were built, like most of the city's buildings (except for its pyramids), all in one story. They usually had many small courtyards in the front, arranged around a central courtyard. The palaces, like the apartment compounds, were decorated with colorful murals.

History

In 1000 B.C.E. the growing populations of the villages and towns in the Valley of Mexico were engaging in profitable trading with the Olmecs (pronounced OLE-mecks) in San Lorenzo (and later La Venta) and with the Zapotecs in the Valley of Oaxaca (pronounced wah-HAH-kah). They were particularly successful trading the abundant obsidian. As this trade continued, two villages in the valley grew to be small cities. Cuicuilco (pronounced kwee-KWEEL-coe), in the southwest part of the valley (now part of Mexico City) grew the fastest, with a population of about ten thousand by 300 B.C.E.

Teotihuacán was smaller by comparison but grew at a healthy pace. Sometime around 100 B.C.E. Cuicuilco was badly damaged by the eruption of a nearby volcano. At that time, Teotihuacán began to grow at an extremely rapid rate. Though the city of Cuicuilco reestablished itself, it never prospered again, and Teotihuacán, for reasons largely unknown, took its place as the leading city in the valley. By about 1 C.E. a large part of the Valley of Mexico's population had moved to Teotihuacán and its leaders began rebuilding their city, basically starting from scratch with all-new city



plans. The reason for this is not known. They may have rebuilt in an attempt to accommodate the expanding population, but that end could have been achieved by building outward from the existing structures. It is more likely that the rulers of Teotihuacán had a new vision of the way the city should be set out. The new city was built quickly and immediately prospered.

Why Teotihuacán was so successful is a matter of much interest to scholars. There are several possible reasons. It was close to the best obsidian sources, which provided valued goods to trade and created a strong demand for workers. Its lower parts were situated on good farmlands, which yielded enough crops to feed its population. It was also situated on a well-established trade route, making it a place Mesoamerican traders from far and wide would stop to do business. Teotihuacán was also a prominent holy place, and many believe it was the city's religious significance that drew people from all over the valley.

The Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacán with its many steps. © Richard A. Cooke/Corbis.



Teotihuacán and the Aztec Legend of the Fifth Sun

In the Aztec religion, it was believed that the world had been created and destroyed four times before the creation of the current world. There are several different accounts of the first four worlds and the people who lived in them. According to one account, the first world was destroyed by jaguars, the second by great winds, the third by fire and volcano, and the fourth by flooding. Each time the world was destroyed, the sun was destroyed with it, and a new sun was needed to create a new world.

In the days after the destruction of the fourth world, the gods met at

Teotihuacán to make their plans for a fifth world. There, they chose two gods—one rich and the other poor and sickly—to sacrifice themselves so the world would be renewed. The two chosen gods fasted and prayed for four days, and then all the gods gathered around a great fire. The rich god threw many of his most precious belongings into the fire as sacrifices. The poor god, having no riches to burn, humbly offered weeds drenched in his own blood. When it came time for the gods to sacrifice themselves, the rich god looked into the fire with the intention of

In 1971 people working in the Pyramid of the Sun discovered the monument had been constructed over a natural, four-chambered cave. Inside the cave they found offerings for the gods dating back to before 150 C.E. In Mesoamerican religions, caves are considered very holy and thought of as portals (doors) between the spirit world of the gods and the human world. Some scholars think the ancient Mesoamericans may have believed this particular cave was the place where the first humans emerged into the world.

It is likely the Teotihuacán area was considered sacred throughout Mesoamerica, and its status as a holy site drew thousands of visitors who wished to participate in sacred ceremonies—long before the city, with its pyramids and monuments, was built. The Teotihuacán leaders may have been responsible for spreading the belief that their city was the place of the world's creation. It would have justified their power and the amazing amount of labor they gathered for the city's construction.

Teotihuacán soon became a major force in long-distance trade, and its influence began to spread to other

throwing himself in, but he could not bring himself to do it. The poor god, when it was his time, jumped straight into the sacrificial fire. Not wanting to be outdone, the rich god finally jumped into the fire as well.

The rest of the gods waited after the two sacrifices, but nothing happened. At last, all the gods, one by one, threw themselves into the fire. After their sacrifices, the renewal began. Out of the sacrificial fire, the poor, sickly god arose in great splendor as the new sun, bringing light and life to the world. Sometime later, the

rich god rose as the pale moon. The age of the Fifth Sun had begun, brought about at the holy city of Teotihuacán by the sacrifice of the gods.

According to Aztec beliefs, human society was then born in the city. The lords of Teotihuacán, who were wise and understood the ways of the gods, assumed the roles of leaders and priests and the city prospered. Upon the deaths of the lords, the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon were built—some said by giants—to serve as their temples.

quarters of Mesoamerica. By the fourth century the rulers of Teotihuacán had begun to look elsewhere for resources, tribute (payment, in goods or labor, to the rulers or conquerors of the state), and markets for their goods. The city's military began to play a stronger role and scenes of war became a common theme of Teotihuacán art.

The leaders of the city had developed a vast economic empire by about 400 C.E., which included much of the southern two-thirds of Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize, as well as some parts of Honduras and El Salvador. Some of the new territories may have been conquered by the Teotihuacán military and then occupied. Scholars believe the manner in which new territories were ruled differed from place to place. Certainly some of Teotihuacán's conquests were gained by military force. Other new regions were probably brought into the empire in a more friendly way, through intermarriage or agreements among the leaders.

In some places, Teotihuacán leaders set up "colonies" (people living in a territory controlled by a central distant power) of their own people in conquered areas. The colonists

oversaw things such as mining resources and tribute payments. Many historians believe the Teotihuacán empire was mainly an economic endeavor; the territories under Teotihuacán control may have paid tribute and become trading allies with the large city but they probably continued to rule themselves. In any case, the influence of Teotihuacán deeply impacted the Mesoamerican civilizations.

Government

To build such a sophisticated and massive city, and to ensure that its huge population received the food and goods it needed, the lords of Teotihuacán must have exerted an extraordinary amount of direction and social control. Most historians believe they ruled with iron fists, demanding hard labor as well as complete loyalty and obedience from their people. But it is also clear that the lords ruled with foresight, planning, and a high degree of organization, because the huge city could not have functioned well without this level of management.

Although little is known about the actual rulers and priests of Teotihuacán, it is clear they had a great deal of control over most aspects of the lives of their people. Scholars are not certain whether the rulers were priests, warriors, or both. Twenty-first century information is limited for two reasons in particular: First, there are no writings among Teotihuacán artifacts; second, the Teotihuacáns did not carve memorials or monuments to their leaders like the Zapotecs.

Teotihuacán rulers, however, were mentioned in a few Maya texts. Some members of the Teotihuacán nobility must have traveled on occasion to Maya cities, since intermarriages between noble families of the two cultures had occurred. One Maya text refers to a Teotihuacán emperor named Spearthrower Owl, who ruled the empire for sixty years.

Economy

Teotihuacán was the center of an amazing amount of trade, producing a wide variety of goods. It is estimated full-time artisans, or craftspeople, working in the city numbered

in the tens of thousands, and there were even more who engaged in trading and related businesses. Obsidian production was the city's biggest industry, requiring numerous laborers for mining. There were also artisans who made obsidian blades and fine knives as well as ornaments. Other crafts included ceramics, sculptures, murals, and carvings.

The city was an international hub with excellent routes to other markets. Within the city, the center of activity was the marketplace with thousands of stalls and numerous items being sold by people from all over Mesoamerica. Food, bird feathers, beads, pottery, jewelry, cloth, and much more were sold daily. The marketplace was a great gathering place, where people from many backgrounds shared ideas and culture.

Although many people worked in production or trade, the majority of the valley's inhabitants were farmers who grew the food that fed the hundreds of thousands of people in Teotihuacán. Farms that surrounded the city grew maize (corn), a grain called amaranth, beans, and cactus, among other crops. Maize was revered as the most central food of the Teotihuacán's diet; almost all of the gods of the Teotihuacán religion had some connection to the healthy growth of maize crops.

Religion

Teotihuacán priests were in charge of the huge religious ceremonies their city was built to accommodate. The priests were known to be very scholarly. They are thought to be the group responsible for the skillful observation of the stars and planets and the keeping of calendars for the city and its colonies.

Most of the gods revered by the Teotihuacáns are also found in other Mesoamerican religions. The goddess leading the Teotihuacán pantheon was the Spider Woman, who appeared in many of the painted murals lining the walls of the city. She is thought to be the goddess of the underworld and had influence over darkness, water, war, caves, and possibly creation.

Spider Woman had a spiderlike appearance, with a yellow-colored body and a rectangular nose piece with three fangs that covered her mouth. Her headdress featured a jaguar image, and her shield was decorated with spider webs.



Mural depicting the rain god, Tlaloc. © Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis.

In many of the murals, there were spiders crawling all over the Spider Woman. Though a goddess of Mesoamerica, Spider Woman can also be found in North America. The Navajo and Pueblo call her Spider Grandmother.

The feathered serpent god of the Teotihuacáns was revered by most Mesoamerican societies under many names and guises. Like the Olmecs, the Teotihuacán artists focused

heavily on the jaguar in their religious themes. They combined images of the jaguar, which probably invoked the concepts of the earth and fertility, with images of serpents and birds. Different combinations of these religious images foreshadowed (gave an indication in advance) the Aztec and Toltec (pronounced TOHL-teck) gods Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, and Tlaloc (pronounced TLAH-lock), the rain god. The sun god and the moon goddess are other important gods within the large Teotihuacán pantheon. Unfortunately, without written documents from the city, the names the Teotihuacáns used for their gods have been lost.

Most of what is known about the religion of the Teotihuacáns comes from the religious scenes in their art. An exception is human sacrifice, which was definitely practiced in Teotihuacán, but does not have a significant place in the city's artwork. The remains of sacrificed people have been found in the city's temples.

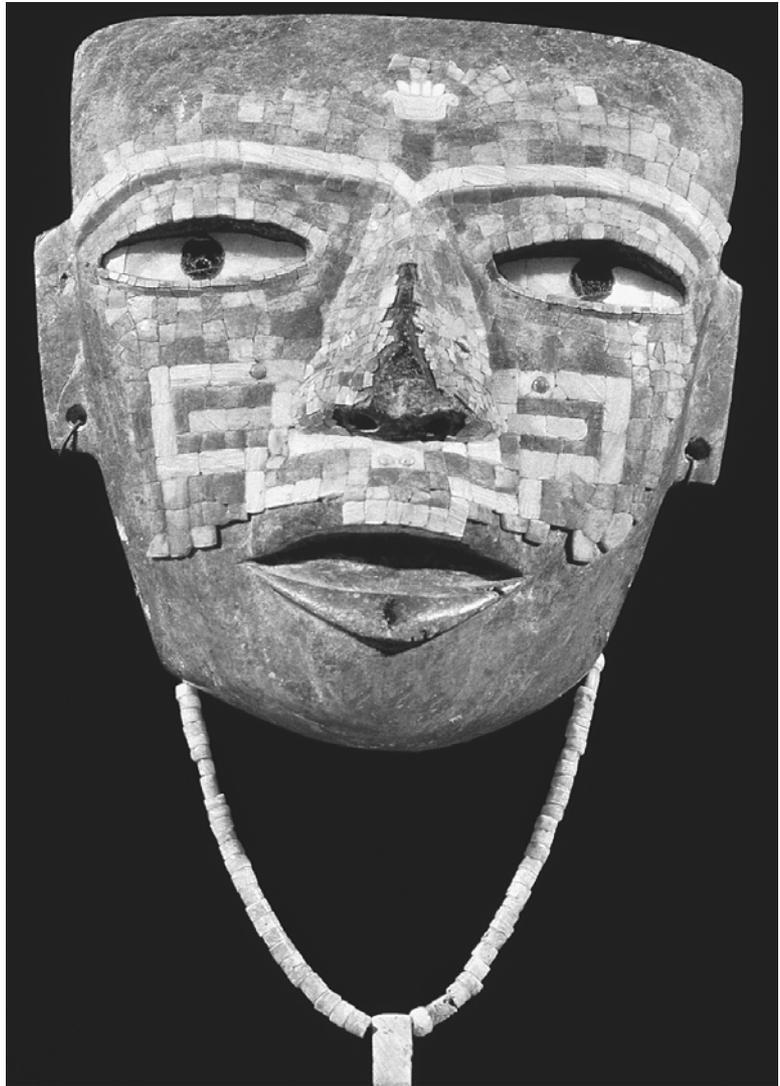
Arts and sciences

The Teotihuacáns were highly skilled and renowned for their arts. Their artistic style was sophisticated and orderly. It was highly influential and has been found throughout Mesoamerica.

Painted murals lined the interior walls of many of the public and residential buildings of Teotihuacán. Until the last few centuries of the city's existence, most of the murals depicted religious subjects and included pictures of the various gods—Spider Woman, the feathered serpent god, and the rain god—or symbols from the Teotihuacán religion, such as jaguars, butterflies, or birds. Some of the murals depicted scenes of trade with foreign people who had different physical traits and dress than the Teotihuacáns.

Unlike the Zapotecs and the Olmecs, whose artwork was meant to aggrandize (give more power or influence to) their rulers, the Teotihuacán artists did not bother to create likenesses of the city's rulers or warriors in their artwork until the latter part of the city's existence. Sometime around 500 C.E., a shift in artistic style took place in Teotihuacán as the military became a stronger force and conquests of new terri-

Mosaics made from precious stones embellish the face of this Teotihuacán mask. © Christel Gerstenberg/Corbis.



tory took center stage. The late Teotihuacán art begins to focus on war and elite warriors and priests.

The Teotihuacán artists produced excellent ceramics, specializing in vessels decorated by cutting away areas and then painting them with religious pictures or symbols. Maize and water, the building blocks of life in Teotihuacán, are frequently depicted in religious scenes on ceramic bowls and vases. Ceramic figurines of humans and animals and ceramic incense burners (objects for burning wood and other sub-

stances that produce a pleasant odor) were also very popular and used as trade items.

Stone sculpture was another specialty of some Teotihuacán artists who excelled in making masks of jade or other precious stones. Using shells and obsidian for eyes, these masks had an eerie but often very beautiful look of realistic human expression. Teotihuacán artists specialized in chipping obsidian to produce knives and blades as well as figurines. There were hundreds of obsidian chipping shops in the city and their products were a Teotihuacán mainstay in trade.

In building design, the Teotihuacáns were brilliant engineers, but also expressive architects. Even the walls of buildings were works of art. The predominant architectural style was called *talud-tablero*, in which rectangular framed panels with carved designs were placed over sloping walls. The walls of the city, including the enormous pyramids, were painted in bright shades of red and even the streets were whitewashed or polished so everything looked bright and clean.

Although not enough Teotihuacán artifacts with writing have been found to allow experts to decode them, most historians believe Teotihuacán had some basic form of writing using glyphs—figures (often carved into stone or wood) used as a symbol to represent words, ideas, or sounds. Like most Mesoamericans, they used the 260-day sacred calendar to track time. The 260-day calendar was composed of 20 consecutive day-names combined with the numerals 1 to 13. For example, a given day such as 3 Jaguar was formed of two parts: the numeral 3 with the day-name Jaguar. With the 20 day-names and 13 numerals there was a possibility of 260 combinations before the calendar would have to repeat a combination.

For numerals the Teotihuacáns used the bar-and-dot system, in which a bar represented the number 5 and a dot represented the number 1. Thus one bar with three dots would signify the number 8. Evidence further indicates the Teotihuacáns, particularly their scholarly priests, were highly skilled in astronomy.

Decline

From its peak as the largest and most influential city of Mesoamerica in the fifth and sixth centuries, Teotihuacán

quickly fell in the seventh century—some say around 650 C.E. Around this time, a fire swept the city. The fire may have been accidental, due to an invasion by enemies, or a strike against the ruling powers from within. The economy may have declined because of bad weather or competition, and perhaps the city's people lost faith in their leaders.

After the initial fire, the people of Teotihuacán began to abandon the city in large numbers. From about 750 C.E. the people who remained participated in ceremonial burnings of the city's temples and monuments. No one tried to restore the destroyed buildings. Before long, the once-great city lay in ruins.

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Mystery of the Maya

19

When the Spanish conquistadores (Spanish word for “conquerors”) arrived in the Americas at the beginning of the sixteenth century, they found a people known as the Maya (pronounced MY-uh) living on the Yucatán peninsula (a large area separating the Caribbean Sea from the Gulf of Mexico, which includes the nation of Belize, the Petén territory of northern Guatemala, and the southeastern Mexican states of Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Yucatán). These lands had been the home of Maya people for thousands of years.

At the time of the Spanish conquest there were hundreds of Maya villages and towns, but the magnificent cities of earlier days—Tikal in northern Guatemala, Copán in northern Honduras, and Palenque, in Chiapas, Mexico, as well as Chichén Itzá (pronounced chee-CHEN eet-SAH) and Mayapán in the Mexican state of Yucatán—had long been abandoned. The once-great Maya civilization had fallen centuries before.

In the years after the conquest of Mesoamerica, the ruins of the ancient Maya were largely forgotten. Some were known to a few experts. Early Spanish conquerors and missionaries reported on the spectacular ruins of some ancient Maya





Words to Know

Amerindian: An indigenous, or native, person from North or South America. The term “Amerindian” is used in place of the terms “American Indian” or “Native American” in these volumes, as the term “Native American” is often associated with the United States and the term “Indian” is offensive to some people.

Archaeological excavation: The scientific process of digging up and examining artifacts, remains, and monuments of past human life by experts in the field.

Archaeology: The scientific study of digging up and examining the artifacts, remains, and monuments of past human life.

Artifact: Any item made or used by humans, such as a tool or weapon, that may

be found by archaeologists or others who seek clues to the past.

City-state: An independent self-governing community consisting of a single city and the surrounding area.

Codex: A handmade book written on a long strip of bark paper and folded into accordion-like pages.

Conquistador: The Spanish word for “conqueror”; in English, the word usually refers to the leaders of the Spanish conquests of Mesoamerica and Peru in the sixteenth century.

Elite: A group of people within a society who are in a socially superior position

cities, but their reports were largely ignored. Maya descendants living near old ruins certainly knew of their existence, but rarely shared this information. The tropical forests engulfed most of the ruins, and the great Maya civilization seemed to disappear.

Rediscovering ancient Maya cities

In 1839 John Lloyd Stephens (1805–1852), a U.S. travel writer and lawyer with a fascination for ancient sites, arranged a trip to Central America with his friend and partner, English architect and artist Frederick Catherwood (1799–1854). The two men had heard rumors of mysterious ancient temples hidden deep within the rain forests (dense, tropical woodlands that receive a great quantity of rain throughout the year) and were determined to find them.

Landing at Belize, Stephens and Catherwood made their way to Guatemala and then traveled by mule across difficult mountain passages to reach the rain forests of northern

and have more power and privileges than others.

Glyph: A figure (often carved into stone or wood) used as a symbol to represent words, ideas, or sounds.

Highlands: A region at high elevation.

Lowlands: An area of land that is low in relation to the surrounding country.

Malaria: A infectious disease transmitted by mosquitoes, causing chills and fever.

Prehistory: The period of time in any given region, beginning with the appearance of the first human beings there and ending with the occurrence of the first written records. All human history that oc-

curred before the existence of written records is considered prehistoric.

Rain forest: Dense, tropical woodlands that receive a great quantity of rain throughout the year.

Stela: A stone pillar carved with images or writing, often used to provide historical details or for religious or political purposes.

Yucatán: A peninsula separating the Caribbean Sea from the Gulf of Mexico, which includes the nation of Belize, the Petén territory of northern Guatemala, and the southeastern Mexican states of Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Yucatán. Yucatán is also the name of a state of Mexico, in the northern portion of the Yucatán peninsula.

Honduras. It was an exhausting trip, traveling through the overgrown, steamy, mosquito-infested tropical jungles. Finally, they reached a small and very humble Amerindian (an indigenous, or native, person from North or South America) village called Copán.

The people of the village told them about a nearby site where there were many piles of stones. Stephens and Catherwood asked some locals to take them there. When they came upon the massive ruins of the ancient Maya city of Copán, with its intricately carved pyramids, sophisticated architecture, and monuments adorned with what appeared to be some kind of picture writing, they were amazed.

Stephens wrote, as quoted in *Early Archaeology in the Maya Lowlands*:

The City was desolate. No remnant of this race [the ancient people of Copán] hangs around the ruins, with the traditions handed down from father to son and from generation to genera-

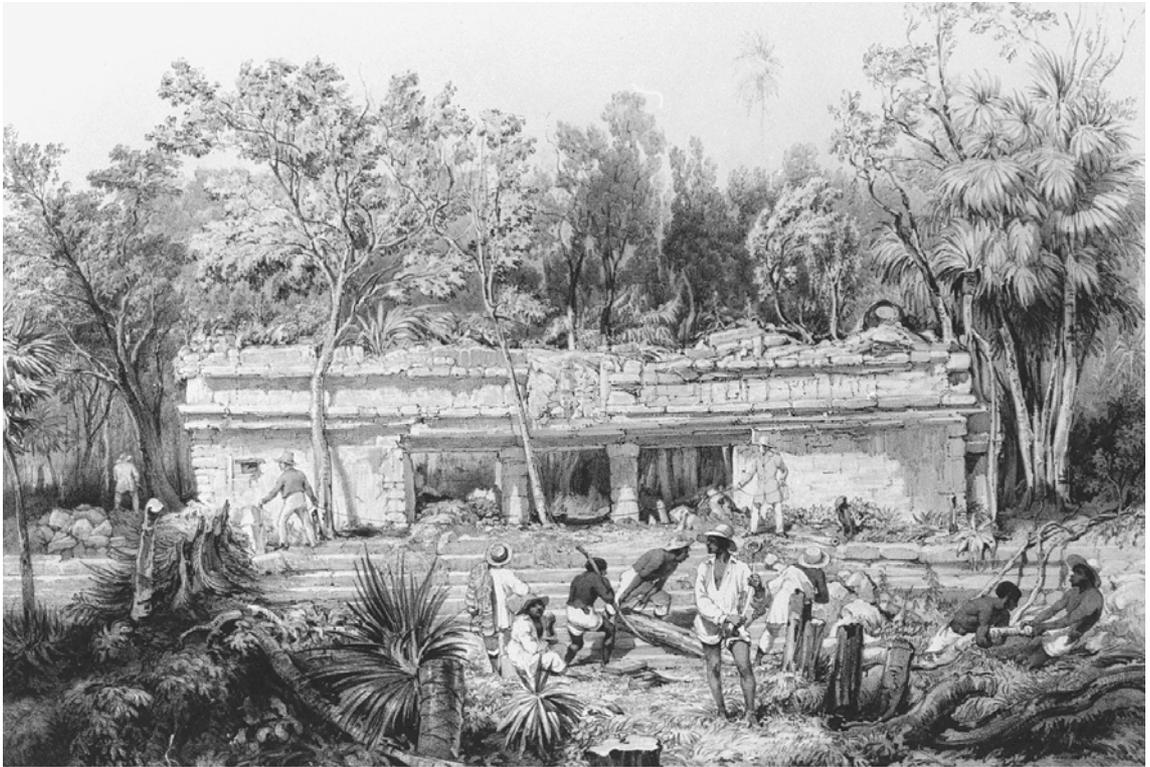


**Maya ruins at Copán,
Honduras.** © Tonay
Arruza/Corbis.

tion. It lay before us like a shattered bark [ship] in the midst of the ocean, her masts gone, her name effaced [erased], her crew perished, and none to tell whence she came ... the place where we were sitting, was it a citadel [fortress] from which an unknown people had sounded the trumpet of war? Or a temple for the worship of the God of peace? Or did the inhabitants worship idols made with their own hands and offer sacrifices to the stone before them? All was mystery, dark impenetrable mystery, and every circumstance increased it.

The two men spent many days among the great stone monuments of the ancient city of Copán—Stephens writing his observations and Catherwood drawing exact copies of the architecture and stone carvings. The jungle made these tasks almost impossible. The mosquitoes devoured them and the heavy vegetation blocked their light and access to monuments. Nonetheless, utterly fascinated with the ancient city, the two men kept at their work.

After their stay at Copán, Catherwood and Stephens searched for other ruins and encountered the ancient city of



Palenque in Chiapas, Mexico. Again, their keen enthusiasm was dampened by the extremely harsh conditions—sweltering heat and humidity, torrential rains, snakes, scorpions—awaiting them each day. They left Palenque for Uxmal (pronounced oosh-MAHL), an ancient site in the Mexican state of Yucatán. There, Catherwood collapsed from malaria (an infectious disease transmitted by mosquitoes, causing chills and fever) and the two had to return to the United States.

Back in New York Stephens wrote and Catherwood illustrated a book chronicling their amazing finds. The two-volume *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatán* appeared in 1841, taking the world by storm. Most scholars and the public were surprised there had been such a highly sophisticated civilization in Central America. Most historians at the time believed civilization was an Old World (Eastern Hemisphere) invention. They viewed the native peoples of Central America with a good deal of prejudice and had trouble believing that Maya ancestors had been re-

Palenque, nestled amidst the harsh tropical jungles of Chiapas, Mexico. *The Library of Congress.*

sponsible for great advances similar to those of ancient Egypt and Greece.

Stephens and Catherwood returned a year later to the Maya world, this time observing ruins at Uxmal, Tulúm, and about forty other sites in the Yucatán. In 1843 they published another very popular two-volume book set about their expedition. It would be their last trip to the ancient Maya sites, but their discoveries had a profound impact on the field of archaeology (the scientific study of digging up and examining artifacts, remains, and monuments of past human life) as a whole. These two amateur archaeologists had introduced the public to the forgotten world of the Maya.

After Catherwood and Stephens paved the way, many explorers traveled to Central America to observe and write about the Maya ruins. Fifty years later, from 1891 to 1895, the first real archaeological excavation (digging up and examining artifacts, remains, and monuments of past human life by experts in the field) of a Maya site took place at Copán. Decades later, from 1926 to 1937, a groundbreaking excavation of the Uaxactún (pronounced wah-shahk-TOON) ruins in the southern lowland (area of land that is low in relation to the surrounding country) region of Guatemala provided information on when and where the cities of the Maya civilization flourished. Universities around the world began to study the Maya and experts began to uncover this magnificent, sophisticated, and long-lasting civilization.

Who were the Maya?

The Maya have lived continuously in the vast Maya regions of Mesoamerica from about 3000 B.C.E. or earlier, right up until today. The Maya had many cultures (arts, language, beliefs, customs, institutions and other products of human work and thought shared by a group of people at a particular time) and never joined together in a unified state. The common people were, for the most part, farmers living in rural areas. During the long history of Maya civilization, a series of powerful and highly sophisticated independent city-states (independent self-governing communities consisting of a single city and the surrounding area) and small cities rose and fell.

Experts believe about four thousand years ago there was a single Mayan language, which they call Proto-Mayan. The

Proto-Mayan-speaking people separated into groups with distinct cultures and, over the years, at least thirty-one distinct Mayan languages developed. These languages were related to each other, but the groups of people who spoke them were always politically independent of each other and sometimes even at war with one another.

Mayan languages were so different from each other that someone from one Maya group could not understand the language of a person from another group. Some of these Maya groups and languages were: Yucatec, Itzá, Lacandón, Mopan, Chorti, Chontal, Chol, Cholti, Tzotzil (pronounced so-TSEEL), Tzeltal (pronounced sel-TALL), Coxoh, Tojolabal, Chuj, Jacaltec, Kanhobal, Mocho, Tuzantec, Mam, Aguacateca, Huastec, Ixil, Quiche, Tzutuhil, Cakchiquel, Uspantec, Achi, Pocomam, Pocomchi, and Kekchi. All of these groups, though distinct, shared religion, arts, and traditions and had similar forms of government.

Name variations and pronunciation

The word “Maya” (pronounced MY-uh) is used as both noun and adjective. It is appropriate to speak, for example, of the Mayas or of a Maya monument. The word “Mayan” refers to the language.

Dates of predominance and location

El Mundo Maya (Spanish for “the Maya world”), was a vast area of about 200,000 square miles (518,000 square kilometers) located mainly on the Yucatán peninsula, a peninsula (a large body of land extending out into the water) that separates the Caribbean Sea from the Gulf of Mexico. On the



Map showing the major sites of Maya civilization in Mesoamerica. Map by XNR Productions. The Gale Group.



A Note about Rain Forests

Most of the Maya civilization arose in rain forest areas. A rain forest is a dense, tropical woodland area that receives a great quantity of rain throughout each year. It is made up of trees with large, broad leaves that form a tent over the entire forest. Under this tent covering, rain forests maintain an even climate—the hot and very humid climate of the tropics—becoming natural greenhouses. Many different kinds of plants can be grown, and all kinds of exotic animals can thrive. The soil, however, is usually poor so only plants with highly developed root structures will survive. It is extremely difficult to clear rain forest land for farming.

The hardships encountered by Stephens and Catherwood in their trips to the Maya world were only small examples of how difficult it is for humans to exist in the environment where the Maya built their world. Throughout history, few civilizations were built in the jungle, but almost all of the Maya's large, urban centers were located in the tropical rain forests.

According to Richard Hooker, as quoted from his Web site *Civilizations in America*, the tropical rain forests were a very significant factor in the shape of Maya civilization:

While plant and animal growth seems almost out of control and the rains never stop, tropical rain forest makes extremely poor agricultural land. As a consequence, a greater amount of area is required to support each person—this encourages population dispersal [spreading out] rather than the concentration [gathering together] necessary to do things like build cities and temples and such.

It has been estimated that there were never more than 30 people per square mile during the Classic period. So the Maya accomplishment is truly awe-inspiring! With a difficult life, with heat and humidity that would melt the hardest North American, and with a very sparse population, the Mayas built incredibly sophisticated urban centers.

The Mayas, like other Mesoamericans, built tall pyramids and other massive structures without the benefit of the wheel or beasts of burden (animals to help with work). In rain forest terrain, though, the wheel would have been quite useless.

peninsula are the southeastern Mexican states of Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Yucatán; the nation of Belize; and the northern Guatemalan state of El Petén. The Maya world extends beyond the peninsula into the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador and into the Mexican states of Chiapas and Tabasco as well.

Modern historians divide the history of Maya societies prior to the invasion of the Spanish in the 1500s into

three eras. During each of these eras, the predominant or most important centers of Maya civilization changed regions, as follows:

- Pre-Classic era: c. 2000 B.C.E. to 250 C.E.—predominant centers were in the southern region, often called the southern highlands (region at high elevation), an area consisting of the highlands in Guatemala extending to the Pacific Coast, the western part of the Mexican state of Chiapas, and the eastern part of El Salvador.
- Classic era: c. 250 to 900 C.E.—major urban centers were in the southern lowlands, particularly in the area surrounding the Guatemalan state of Petén.
- Post-Classic era: 900 to 1521 C.E.—major urban centers were in the northern lowlands of the present-day Mexican state of Yucatán.



Not prehistory, but ...

Of all the fascinating artifacts (items made by humans, such as tools or weapons) left behind by the ancient Maya civilization, perhaps none have held so much interest as the glyphs (figures used as symbols to represent words, ideas, or sounds) found carved into stone monuments and artwork or written in ink in books (see Chapter 22 for more information). The Mayas had a highly sophisticated system of writing and were avid recorders of their own history. Even their calendar system was extremely accurate. So why, with such an advanced system of writing in place, is Maya history so frequently studied as prehistory? (Prehistory is the period of time in any given region, beginning with the appearance of the first human beings there and ending with the occurrence of the first written records. All human history that occurred before the existence of written records is considered

The dense rainforest region of Mexico's Yucatán.

Photograph by Kelly A. Quin.

Copyright © Kelly A. Quin.

A trademark of the Maya civilization is its glyphs, often carved into stone monuments. © Kevin Schafer/Corbis.



prehistoric.) To answer this question, it is necessary to consider some of the effects of the Spanish conquest.

The Bishop Landa

In 1546, after a bitter fight, the Spanish occupied most of the Yucatán. Their treatment of the Mayas was often cruel; some were enslaved or forced into hard labor. The Spanish wanted the land, the gold and precious gems, and to use the Amerindians as slaves. They also wanted to convert the Mayas to Christianity. Many Spanish of the day believed the best way to convert non-Christians to Christianity was to erase their culture and traditions—by brutal force, if necessary.

In 1549 a missionary (someone who works to spread religious beliefs) named Diego de Landa (1524–1579) arrived in the Yucatán, taking up residence in a monastery in the new Spanish capital, Mérida. Like other missionaries, Landa believed it was necessary to wipe out the Maya heritage and

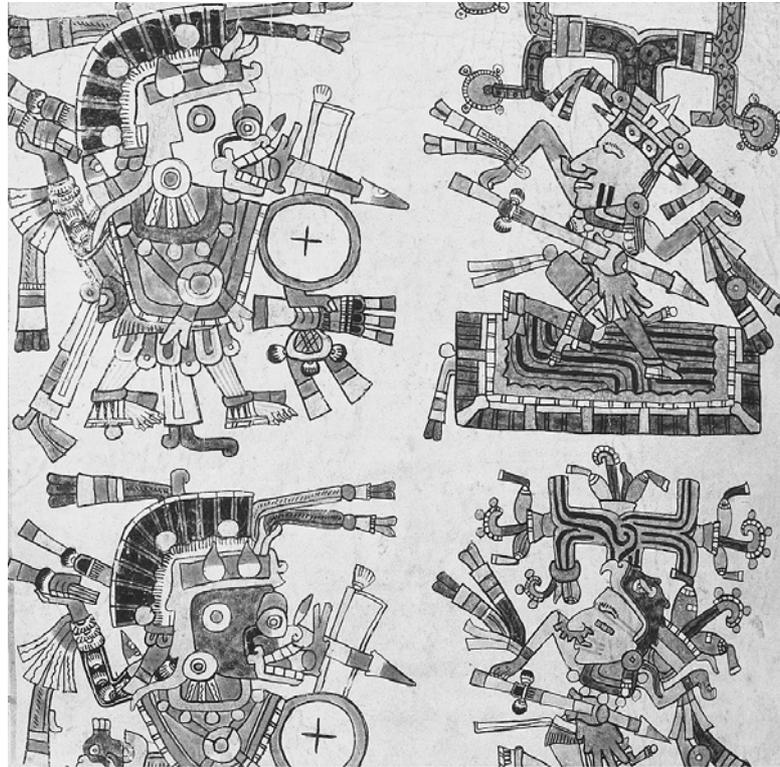
culture in order to convert the Mayas to Christian beliefs. He was ruthless in his pursuit of this goal, beginning with the destruction of hundreds of sacred Maya shrines.

After Landa became the head of the monastery in 1562, he learned some Mayas in a village called Mani were still practicing their traditional religion. Landa had the people of the village put in a prison where they were tortured, and some mutilated, to get them to confess their “sins.” Many died on this terrible day.

As Landa knew, Maya writing was not limited to stone monuments. The Mayas also had beautiful handwritten books called codices (plural of the word “codex”), many of which had been passed down over the generations. The paper for these codices was made from the inner bark of fig trees and then treated with a lime coating. A Maya scribe wrote columns of glyphs on a long strip of this paper with a brush dipped in ink. When the book was done, the paper was folded like an accordion to form pages. Scholars believe these codices contained vast amounts of Maya learning and culture, including history, sciences, literature, and religion.

After Landa had persecuted the people of Mani for practicing their religion, he rounded up all the Maya codices that could be found and threw them into a huge bonfire. In this raid and later ones, it is believed Landa destroyed several thousand Maya books. His own description of this act (as quoted by Brian M. Fagan in *Kingdoms of Gold, Kingdoms of Jade*, 1991) has become known as an example of the worst kind of intolerance and zealotry (fanaticism, or an excess of eagerness in the pursuit of a goal): “We found a great number of books in these characters [Maya glyphs] and, as they contained nothing in which there was not to be seen superstition and lies of the devil, we burned them all, which they [the Mayas] regretted to an amazing degree and caused them affliction.”

Only three (or possibly four) Maya codices survived Landa’s religious purge. If more of the codices had survived, the books probably would have revealed many details of the Maya civilization. Oddly, Landa’s writings, long overlooked, have become one of the sources to which scholars now turn for clues about Maya writing. Landa thought he would be



more effective in his efforts to destroy the Maya culture if he knew more about his target. He began studying the Yucatec language as soon as he arrived in the Yucatán and learned to speak it fluently.

Landa interviewed the locals about their ways of life, their language, and their system of writing. He even attempted to create an alphabet to write down the Mayan language by asking Maya scribes to write symbols to correspond to each of the sounds of the Spanish alphabet. His book about the Maya, *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* (1566; roughly translated as “History of Yucatán Things”) is full of accounts of the culture as described by people who lived it before the Spanish conquest.

Landa’s book also provided some of the greatest clues for deciphering the few Maya glyphs available to historians. Ironically, the man who was most responsible for destroying Maya literature was also partially responsible for its eventual translation by scholars and historians.

The glyphs today

The relentless efforts to convert the Mayas and force them to accept European ways, the destruction of the Maya codices and the looting of their shrines prevented the Maya's written history from enduring after the conquest. Since the days of Stephens and Catherwood's expedition, archaeologists have found about eight hundred different glyphs on stelae (plural of stela; stone pillars carved with images or writing, often used to provide historical details or for religious or political purposes) and other carvings. These remained largely undeciphered (no one was able to read them) for many years. Then, in the 1980s, experts began to crack the Maya code, finally reading a number of the glyphs and opening the door to Maya recorded history.

By the end of the 1990s scientists were able to translate much of the Maya writing that still exists today. The insight gained by reading these documents, many of which present histories of Maya rulers and their deeds, has caused scientists once again to change some of their views about the Mayas. It is important to remember, though, that only the elite (a group of people within a society who are in a socially superior position and have more power and privileges than others) Mayas could write. Most scholars believe the kings frequently required their scribes to write history in a way that justified their power and glorified their deeds. Both archaeological excavations and deciphering Maya codes have continued into the twenty-first century, and will slowly solve some of the many mysteries Stephens and Catherwood uncovered more than 150 years ago.

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The Rise and Fall of Maya Cities

20

The Mayas (pronounced MY-uhs) were never a single group of people. The amazing fifteen-hundred-year civilization consisted of multiple groups who shared religion, arts, writing, scientific advances, and many other cultural traits, but who never lived under one unified government. Rather, the Maya civilization consisted of the rise and fall of a series of independent city-states (independent self-governing communities consisting of a single city and the surrounding area) and smaller cities, each with its own line of rulers. There were many Maya histories rather than just one.

The huge 200,000-square-mile (518,000-square-kilometer) region that makes up the Maya world has remained their home for thousands of years, but throughout history different regions flourished at different times. Large cities like Tikal in the Petén area of Guatemala or Chichén Itzá (pronounced chee-CHEN eet-SAH) in the present-day Mexican state of Yucatán were extremely influential for hundreds of years and then were abandoned.

When the cities of the Petén area were abandoned at the end of the Classic era around 900, a portion of the Maya popula-





Words to Know

Bajo: The Spanish word for “under,” referring to lowlands or swampy depressions in the earth’s surface. In a rain forest, *bajos* are generally wetlands from July to November and dry the rest of the year.

Cenote: Underground reservoirs or rivers that become accessible from above ground when cave ceilings collapse or erode.

Ceremonial centers: Citylike centers usually run by priests and rulers, in which people from surrounding areas gathered to practice the ceremonies of their religion, often at large temples and plazas built specifically for this purpose.

Chiefdom: A social unit larger and more structured than a tribe but smaller and less structured than a state, which is mainly governed by one powerful ruler. Though there are not distinct classes in a chiefdom, people are ranked by how closely they are related to the chief; the closer one is to the chief, the more prestige, wealth, and power one is likely to have.

City-state: An independent self-governing community consisting of a single city and the surrounding area.

Conquistador: The Spanish word for “conqueror”; in English, the word usually refers to the leaders of the Spanish conquests of Mesoamerica and Peru in the sixteenth century.

Equinox: The two times each year—March 21 and September 23—when the sun crosses the equator and day and night are of equal length.

Glyph: A figure (often carved into stone or wood) used as a symbol to represent words, ideas, or sounds.

Observatory: A building created for the purpose of observing the stars and planets.

Rain forest: Dense, tropical woodlands that receive a great quantity of rain throughout the year.

Ritual: A formal act performed the same way each time, usually used as a means of religious worship by a particular group.

Solstice: The two times each year—June 21 and December 21—when the sun is farthest from the equator and days and nights are most unequal in length.

Stela: A stone pillar carved with images or writing, often used to provide historical details or for religious or political purposes.

tion moved to the northern Yucatán. The great Maya cities, however, were principally ceremonial centers, places designed for people to gather to practice their religion, often at large temples and plazas built for this purpose. The rulers, priests, and their staffs lived within the city, but the common people did

not. Frequently, farming communities that supported large cities remained in place even after the city was abandoned.

Pre-Classic era: c. 2000 B.C.E. to 250 C.E.

The earliest evidence of Maya civilization is found around 2000 B.C.E., generally in the southern region, which is often called the southern highlands (a region at high elevation). This area consists of the highlands in Guatemala extending to the Pacific Coast, the western part of the Mexican state of Chiapas, and the eastern part of El Salvador. Because of its altitude, this region is significantly cooler than the other two Maya regions. The highlands feature many large lakes and have ample wildlife and natural resources.

The highlands area was strongly influenced by the Olmec (pronounced OLE-meck). Toward the end of the pre-Classic era, major cities began to develop in the southern lowlands (an area of land that is low in relation to the surrounding country) particularly in the area surrounding the Guatemalan department (state) of Petén. These included Cival and El Mirador (pronounced MEER-a-door) in Guatemala as well as Cerros in Belize and Kaminaljuyú (pronounced kah-mee-nahl-hoo-YOO) in highland Guatemala.

Cival

Excavations beginning in 2001 at Cival, a site in the Guatemalan state of Petén, have revised views about the chronology of the rise of Maya civilizations. Historians had long believed that the pre-classic Mayas—those living before 250 C.E.—were simple folk living in farming villages, without the sophistication of the Olmecs, Zapotecs, and Teotihuacáns (pronounced TAY-uh-tee-wah-KAHNS) who were building cities in other Mesoamerican areas.



Map showing the major sites of Maya civilization in Mesoamerica. Map by XNR Productions. The Gale Group.

Historians previously thought it was only in the Classic era (250–900 C.E.), with the rise of cities like Tikal and Palenque, that the Mayas rose to the height of their great civilization. Reports from Cival and El Mirador, as well as other towns and cities in Petén have shown this to be an error.

Cival thrived as a ceremonial center and city in the years 150 B.C.E. (or possibly well before that) to about 100 C.E. Recent excavations show the urban center was fairly large—extending about a half mile—and the city probably had a population of about ten thousand. Cival had many of the features of later classic Maya civilization: it was ruled by a line of kings and had highly refined arts, organized religion, and complex monumental architecture that included five pyramids (one nearly 100 feet or 30.5 meters tall), a central plaza, and other buildings and palaces.

Cival's ruling class was also advanced in astronomy (study of the planets, sun, moon, and stars and all other celestial bodies). According to archaeologist Francisco Estrada-Belli, who has directed the excavations at Cival, the city's buildings were carefully positioned to face the sunrise around the time of the equinoxes (the two times each year—March 21 and September 23—when the sun crosses the equator and day and night are of equal length) and the solstices (the two times each year—June 21 and December 21—when the sun is farthest from the equator and days and nights are most unequal in length). Estrada-Belli believed the buildings were used to measure time; the Maya were masters with calendars and measuring time and seasons. These discoveries at Cival prove the most fundamental advances of the Maya civilization preceded the Classic era by several hundred years.

During his excavation at Cival, Estrada-Belli made several fascinating discoveries. Under some stairs inside a pyramid the archaeologist found a huge, 15- by 9-foot (4.6- by 2.8-meter) stucco (plaster or cement) mask carved into the shape of the Maya sun god. The face on the mask had one eye visible, and was surrounded by images of cornhusks, connecting it to maize (corn), which was central to the Maya life. The mask had snake's fangs and a square mouth.

Excavators later found a nearly identical mask on the other side of the stairs; some believe there were probably four masks at one time. The masks were probably placed on opposite

sides of the stairs leading into a room where rituals were performed. The masks date back to 150 B.C.E. A stela, or stone pillar carved with images or writing, was found at the center of the pyramid and dated back to 300 B.C.E. On the stela was a carving believed to be the earliest known Maya portrait of a king.

In a recess within one of the pyramid's walls the archaeological team found five jars that seemed to have been smashed deliberately at the time they were placed there. Under one of them there were 120 round and polished pieces of jade, a precious green stone, and five jade axes. These objects date back to 500 B.C.E. and are believed to be artifacts of a ceremony performed as a new king began his reign.

If indeed a royal dynasty had been established as early as 500 B.C.E., it signifies that Maya civilization has been around much longer than has ever been thought. Much more excavation at Cival and in many towns surrounding it will be necessary to find answers to the questions this discovery has raised.

A defensive wall surrounds the city of Cival, indicating that at some point in its history it came under attack from outside. Cival was abandoned about 100 C.E.

El Mirador

The city of El Mirador, deep in the rain forests (dense, tropical woodlands that receive a great quantity of rain throughout the year) in the northern part of Guatemala's Petén area, was the largest of the pre-Classic Maya cities. At its peak, from about 150 B.C.E. to 150 C.E., El Mirador may have had a population of one hundred thousand people. El Mirador covered a 6-square-mile (15.5-square-kilometer) area and is believed to have had the most buildings of any pre-Classic Maya city—about 250 known and probably about one thousand more that have yet to be mapped by archaeologists.

The Mayas of El Mirador built two of the largest pyramids in the Americas. La Danta Pyramid in El Mirador is 230 feet tall (70.1 meters) and El Tigre Pyramid is more than 180 feet (54.9 meters) tall. The latter is set within a notably massive, 57,000-square-foot (5,301 square-meter) complex (about the size of three football fields). Archaeologists have also



San Bartolo

In 2001 archaeologist William Saturno wandered into a tunnel at a small site of ruins called San Bartolo in a very remote and inaccessible part of the Petén region of Guatemala. Trying to escape the oppressive heat of the jungle, he followed the cool tunnel. It brought him to a small room built under an 80-foot (24.4-meter) pyramid. There, by the light of his flashlight, Saturno discovered an ancient but very beautiful Maya mural in excellent condition.

The mural dated back to 100 C.E., making it the earliest Maya wall mural ever found. Excavations have continued at San Bartolo, but so far only a 6-foot (1.8-meter) portion of the mural has been revealed. Archaeologists believe the painting wraps around the entire room. The discovery has been hailed as one of the most important Maya artifacts and many are anxious to see the rest of the mural.

The San Bartolo mural depicts a scene from a Maya creation myth known to scholars only from the artifacts of much later times. A report from Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology describes the exposed scene as follows:

The principal standing figure is the bejeweled Maize God whose distinctive head shape replicates [copies], albeit stylistically, the foliation [leaves] of the corn plant. Arms outstretched, his hands seem to hold an object still hidden by the fill of the tunnel. The Maize God has turned his head and looks over his shoulder at the woman kneeling behind him, who in turn has her arms upraised. Another female figure with flowing black hair "floats" above her. In front of the Maize God is a somewhat obscure [vague or indistinct] figure of a kneeling man, painted black, and other figures seem to be arranged in a procession-like line at left.

Until the San Bartolo mural was found, there were no artistic depictions of Maya mythology or history, nor any storytelling art dating back to this early time. Scholars were surprised to find such sophisticated art from the pre-Classic era. Archaeologist David Freidel, as quoted in *National Geographic News*, calls the painting a "masterpiece," with "fine-line exquisite details all perfectly rendered." The view of experts about the pre-Classic Maya has been greatly revised by this discovery, which proves that the culture was already highly advanced in these early years.

found some of the earliest known examples of Maya writing in the city.

Experts believe that in its earliest phases El Mirador was ruled as a chiefdom (a social unit larger and more structured than a tribe but smaller and less structured than a state, which is mainly governed by one powerful ruler) and was al-

ready well populated by about 400 B.C.E. It was a busy trading center with frequent contact with the highlands, especially in obsidian (a dark, solid glass used for making fine blades and knives). By 150 B.C.E. El Mirador had apparently become a regional center from which a series of very powerful kings oversaw the rule of the city and of the towns and villages surrounding it.

Archaeologists have located more than two dozen towns or settlements near El Mirador that may have been controlled or influenced by its kings, with more settlements in the area yet to be identified. An extensive *sacbe*, or roadway system, connected El Mirador to neighboring towns and centers. For reasons unknown, El Mirador was abandoned sometime before 100 C.E.

Classic era: c. 250 to 900 C.E.

In the southern lowlands, particularly in the area surrounding the Guatemalan department of Petén, the Maya reached the peak of their civilization in the Classic era. This central region also included most of Belize, parts of eastern Honduras, most of the Mexican states of Chiapas and Tabasco, and the extreme southern part of the Yucatán peninsula.

Tropical rain forests spread across the Petén area; the climate is hot and humid and several major rivers flow through the southern lowlands. The region is extremely fertile, with a variety of plants and animals in its forests. Maya cities that flourished during the Classic era include Tikal, Palenque, Copán, Uaxactún (pronounced wah-shahk-TOON), Quiriguá, and Calakmul.

At the height of the late Classic era (600 to 900 C.E.) the total Maya population reached about twenty million. Between 900 and 1000 the populations living in the Classic era cities abandoned them and, in the post-Classic era, many Maya people moved northward up the Yucatán peninsula.

Tikal

There is evidence of human presence at Tikal, a settlement about 60 miles (96.5 kilometers) in northern present-day Guatemala in Petén, as early as 800 B.C.E. During the pre-

Classic years when El Mirador and Cival were at their peak, Tikal was advancing from its origins as a cluster of farming communities. The settlement was built on a series of ridges in the rain forest overlooking the swampy Bajo de Santa Fe. *Bajo*, the Spanish word for “under” refers to lowlands, or swampy depressions in the earth’s surface.

In a rain forest, *bajos* are generally wet from July to November each year and dry the rest of the time. Scientists believe the *bajos* around Tikal and other Maya cities of this region were once wet year-round, making them very useful for farming and obtaining other resources.

By the Classic era, Tikal had become the dominant urban center of the region and the largest Maya city ever to be built. At its peak from about 500 to 899 C.E. Tikal probably had a population of about 60,000 or more within the city. The common people, mainly farmers, lived in rural areas surrounding the city; archaeological excavations have estimated at least about 30,000 people lived around the city during peak times. The population of Tikal and its immediate surroundings was probably between 90,000 and 100,000 people, though some believe it was much higher. From its origins as a farming village to its abandonment in about 899 Tikal endured as a community for an unusually long time—at least fifteen hundred years. Tikal covered about 25 square miles (64.8 square kilometers), with its city center taking up about 6 square miles (15.5 square kilometers). Building, of course, took place over hundreds of years.

A complex called the “Lost World” (named after Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s [1859–1930] 1912 novel about a remote jungle where dinosaurs still roamed), though recently discovered, is the most ancient complex in the city. The Lost World is made up of about forty buildings, including the 100-foot-tall (30.5-meter-tall) Great Pyramid, which was built as long ago as 500 B.C.E. The Great Pyramid has stairways on all four sides with large masks mounted over them. One set of buildings in the Lost World is called the Complex for Astronomical Commemoration. This very early construction was built in connection with the movements of the stars. This structure, like the observatory at Cival, was probably created to calculate the equinox and solstice; such astrological observation served as the basis for the incredibly sophisticated Maya calendar system.



At the very center of the city is the Great Plaza, a huge plaster floor first built in about 100 B.C.E. There are several other large plazas, including the East Plaza and the Plaza of the Seven Temples. All of the plazas feature ball courts for playing the Maya version of the Mesoamerican ball game, which was called *pok-a-tok*. Played by teams on a large court, the purpose of the ball game was to bounce a solid rubber ball through a stone ring without using hands or feet. Maya people took the game very seriously, often betting with high stakes—in many cities, the losers of the game were beheaded as sacrifices to the gods.

The Great Plaza was surrounded by the Central Acropolis, the North Acropolis (“acropolis” is a Greek word that means fortress on a hill or high rock), and hundreds of temples and palaces. One building in the city’s center is believed to have served as a jail, with wooden bars across its windows. Archaeologists are currently aware of about three thousand buildings in the center of Tikal.

The Great Plaza and view of the North Acropolis and Temple at the ruins of Tikal.

© ML Sinibaldi/Corbis.



Large stelae, dedicated to specific rulers of the city, stand in the center of Tikal.

© Arvind Garg/Corbis.

It was not until the last few hundred years of Tikal's history that the enormous temples and pyramids were erected. The tallest of the buildings in the city were the six terraced pyramids with temples built upon their tops. These were built in the last centuries of the city's existence, between 696 and 766 C.E. The largest of these pyramids, called simply Pyramid IV, was 230 feet (70.1 meters) high. Built in 720, it was the largest building in the pre-Spanish Americas.

In its earliest years, Tikal began burying its dead at the North Acropolis, which became a sacred site. As the years went on, the North Acropolis became the burial site for all the city's rulers, and their burials became more and more elaborate, with pyramids or temples built over their tombs. Temples were constructed on top of existing buildings in a process that changed the city's skyline over and over. The pyramids, of course, were only erected for the rulers and other members of the elite (people within a society who are in a socially superior position and have more power and priv-

ileges than others). The people who lived in and around the city generally buried their dead under their houses, often placing everyday objects with them to help in their afterlife. Ceramics found with the dead at Tikal are noted for their craftsmanship and beauty.

The stelae. In the city's main core about two hundred carved stone shaft monuments, known as stelae (plural of stela), have been found. Many were once painted red. A large group of the stelae at Tikal were dedicated to specific rulers of the city. These portraits, showing their subjects in elaborate dress, were carved on one side of the stelae.

The sides and the back of the stelae were often carved with columns of glyphs (figures representing words, ideas, or sounds) presenting the history and genealogy (family descent) of the ruler. Scholars believe the Maya of Tikal had been using carved glyphs to write since about 200 B.C.E., but the earliest dated stela to be found in the city so far is Stela 29, dated by its creator at 292 C.E.

The glyphs on the stelae found at Tikal have been interpreted, for the most part, in recent years. They present the history of at least thirty lords of the city. The founder of Tikal, according to the text on some stelae, was Yax Eb' Xook, or Yax Ch'aktel Xok (First Step Shark) who ruled during the first century C.E. His tomb, Burial 125 in Tikal, has been found in the North Acropolis. Rulers of Tikal were defined by a "successor glyph," which counted the number of successions there had been since the first king, Yax Eb' Xook, founded the royal dynasty.

In its early years, Tikal was just one of many Maya cities in the central Maya lowlands, but by about 500 C.E. it dominated the entire region. The stelae tell of major wars, as well as alliances Tikal formed with other cities.

Decline. During the height of the Classic era, Tikal and the city of Calakmul were frequently at war as the two major powers of the lowland Maya. At the end of the ninth century, however, many of the great Maya cities of the central lowlands were deserted by their inhabitants. In Tikal the abandonment was slow and may have been the result of drought (long period with little or no rainfall), climate changes, or the depletion of soil. It is also likely that many of the trade

networks that had supported the city moved to the coasts. In truth, no one knows what caused the collapse of the city.

Tikal holds a profound place in the hearts of the Maya people. The word “Tikal” means “place of voices” in Mayan; the name was probably given well after the city’s abandonment by the locals who were haunted by the ancient ruins.

By the twenty-first century the rain forests had grown over most of the ancient buildings. From a distance, only the extremely tall pyramids of Tikal are visible; the thick forest canopy hides the rest. The ancient site, though, has captured the imaginations of many over the years. Visiting Tikal in the deep jungle invokes an eerie sensation of the colorful, bustling world that once thrived in its now silent ruins. The site has become a popular tourist spot, and filmmaker George Lucas (1944–) used Tikal’s magical presence as background scenery in his 1977 science fiction classic *Star Wars*.

Palenque

Palenque lies upon a ridge in the foothills in Chiapas, Mexico, overlooking the swampy floodplains (plains bordering a river and subject to flooding) of the Usumacinta River and the tropical plains extending to the Mexican Gulf Coast. Palenque was a medium-sized city, much smaller than Tikal. It is thought to be the most beautiful of Maya ceremonial centers, with some of the finest architecture, sculpture, and bas-relief carvings (three-dimensional pictures, usually in stone, wood, or plaster, in which the image is raised above the background).

Although Palenque’s history goes back to about 100 B.C.E., it did not become a major population center until about 600 C.E. For the next two hundred years the city flourished under very strong leadership, becoming a dominant force in the Maya world.

Probably the best-known Maya king, Pacal (the name means “shield”), began his rule in Palenque in 615 C.E. Normally, Maya kingship was passed from father to son. In Pacal’s case, it was his mother who had ruled the city before him and passed the rule to her son. Pacal justified his unconventional succession to the kingship by claiming his mother was a goddess in human form. As the son of a goddess, he



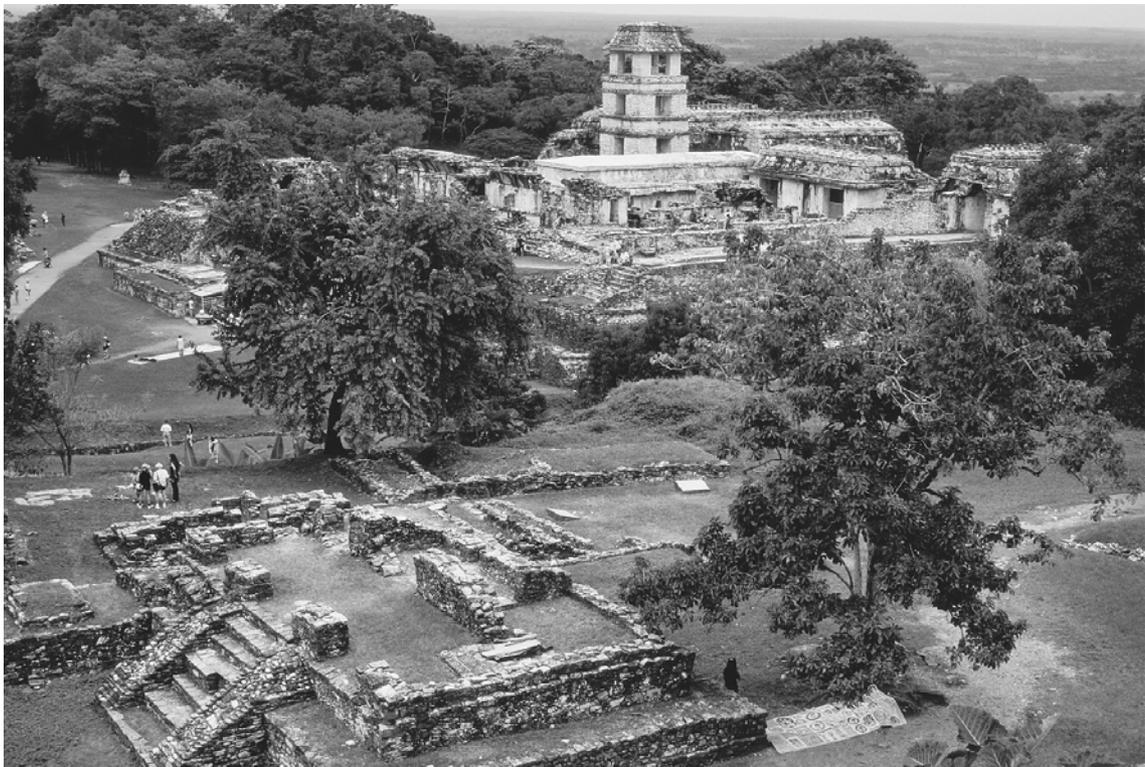
had an absolute claim to be king. During his long rule, which lasted until his death in 695 C.E., Pacal was responsible for the construction of much of Palenque's grandest architecture—his effort, no doubt, to inspire the people in his city with awe and reverence for his power.

Pacal put great care into the building in which he was to be buried. The Temple of Inscriptions, as it came to be called, was a temple set atop a tall step pyramid. Although Pacal built the pyramid and prepared it for his burial, it was his son, Chan Bahlum, who finished construction of the temple at the top of the pyramid. Within two chambers in the temple, archaeologists found three panels carved with columns of glyphs providing a detailed history of the ruling family of Palenque and the Maya people in general.

The Temple of Inscriptions' panels have the second longest series of Maya carvings known to exist (the longest inscription is found on the Hieroglyphic Staircase at Copán).

Temple of Inscriptions in Palenque—burial site of the Maya king, Pacal.

© MacDuff Everton/Corbis.



Ruins of Pacal's palace stand in the background in Palenque. © ML
Sinibaldi/Corbis.

A stairway leading from the temple was found in the 1950s and descends into the pyramid and down to Pacal's tomb. In the tomb is Pacal's huge carved sarcophagus (a stone box used for burial, containing the coffin and body of the deceased, or sometimes only the body).

The massive lid of the sarcophagus is carved with a portrait of the king entering the afterlife and glyphs identifying it as Pacal's tomb. The remains of Pacal's body were still inside; he was wearing an exquisite mosaic jade face mask and an entire suit made of jade pieces held together by gold wires. Surrounding him was a collection of jade burial offerings. In addition, the tomb held the remains of several young people who were probably sacrificed to accompany him to the afterlife. Pacal's tomb represents the most elaborate Maya burial discovered.

Besides building his future place of burial, Pacal also began the construction of a set of connected buildings and

courtyards on top of a mound called the Palace. Pacal's sons and successors, Chan Bahlum and Kan Xul, continued construction on this complex over the next generations. The Palace may have provided residences for the lords or priests of the city, but most experts believe it housed governmental and religious offices.

The Palace has many rooms, all adorned with fine stone or stucco carvings depicting Maya gods, the rulers of the city, and a variety of ceremonies. The Palace stands out from the rest of the city because of its 4-story square tower. Other notable buildings in Palenque's city center are the Temple of the Cross, the Temple of the Sun, and the Temple of the Foliated Cross. All three are set on top of step pyramids and are adorned with stone carvings, many depicting the succession ceremonies of Pacal's two sons, as each one took the throne.

Like other cities at the end of the Classic era, building stopped in Palenque around 800 C.E. The city itself was abandoned sometime later. The farmers surrounding the city continued to live there for a couple of centuries, but then they, too, abandoned the area. No one knows the reasons for these abandonments. Palenque has undergone intensive excavation, but in the twenty-first century only about thirty-five of its buildings have been examined. An estimated five hundred more buildings lie under the rain forest's thick canopy.

Copán

The ruins of Copán (place of the clouds) are located in a fertile valley on Río Copán, in northwestern Honduras near the Guatemala border. The city, which had been populated since about 2000 B.C.E., was situated on an ancient trade route from the Pacific Coast to the Montagua River. Copán did not become a prominent center of art and ceremony until about 465 C.E. Like Palenque, Copán only had few centuries of peak existence before it was abandoned around 800 C.E.

During these peak years, however, the city made remarkable contributions in the arts, astronomy, and architecture. People often call Copán the "Athens of the Maya world," comparing it to the ancient city in Greece where art and astronomy flourished. Copán was the first city John Lloyd

Stephens (1805–1852) and Frederick Catherwood (1799–1854) encountered in the Maya world, and they believed it was the most important of all Maya cities. (See Chapter 19 for more information on Stephens and Catherwood.)

Copán was never a big city like Tikal. At its height it is believed to have supported between ten and twenty thousand residents. Its buildings are not as extravagant as those in Tikal or Palenque, though Copán artists were masters of intricate stone carvings and glyph texts. Their art, which is found throughout the city, tells a very detailed history of the kings, wars, and other events.

Stelae rise up along the walkways of Copán's Great Plaza. Some stelae are as high as 14 feet (4.2 meters) tall. Most were created as portraits of rulers. Accompanying the carved pictures were glyphs telling the names, dates, and historic details of the rulers portrayed in each stela.

Copán had come under the rule of a royal family in 426 C.E. Its first king was named Mah K'ina K'uk' Mo' (Great Sun Lord Quetzal Macaw). In 628 C.E. Copán was ruled by Smoke Imix (Smoke Jaguar), a strong ruler who built the city's economy through trade. Many of the stelae found in the Great Plaza refer to Copán's famous thirteenth king, 18 Rabbit, who ruled from 695–738 C.E.

During 18 Rabbit's long rule, the city became one of the Maya's most sophisticated, especially in terms of its glyphic writing, intricate carving and sculpture, and discoveries in astronomy. Although the specific details are not known, 18 Rabbit was captured by the neighboring Maya city of Quiriguá, perhaps during an armed conflict. Though Quiriguá was a smaller and weaker city than Copán, the great king 18 Rabbit was beheaded as a sacrifice to the gods according to Quiriguá writings.

In 749 C.E. the magnificent Hieroglyphic Stairway was built in Copán. It had been started by 18 Rabbit, but was finished by a king named Smoke Shell after 18 Rabbit's death. The Hieroglyphic Stairway has been called one of the greatest ancient achievements in the world. Its sixty-three steps contain more than one thousand individual Maya glyphs, making it the longest inscription of the Maya civilization. The glyphs describe the royal successions and the deeds of



Relief carving shown on a stela in Copán. © Macduff Everton/Corbis.



Copán's Altar Q, with its detailed carvings. © Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis.

the city's rulers, particularly in battle. Unfortunately, many of the glyph blocks have fallen from the stairway, and it may take experts a long time to determine their order.

The "golden age" of Copán under its succession of kings was beautifully depicted on a large block of carved stone called Altar Q, an artifact that captivated Stephens and Catherwood in 1839. Carvings of four men appear on each of the four sides of the block. These sixteen figures represent the kings who ruled Copán from 426 to about 820 C.E., seated in the order of their reigns. The kings appear to be sitting on their name glyphs. On one side of Altar Q, Copán's founder, Mah K'ina K'uk' Mo', is seen passing the scepter of kingship to Copán's last king, Yax Pasah.

Set between the founder and Yax Pasah is a glyph representing a Maya date of 6 Kaban 10 Mol, or July 2, 763 C.E., which commemorates Yax Pasah's inauguration as king. By showing the founder of the dynasty handing him his power,

Altar Q proves the absolute right of Yax Pasah to rule. Yax Pasah was the last king to rule Copán. No writings explained what happened to the king, or to the city, which had been abandoned by about 820 C.E.

Post-Classic era: c. 900 to 1521 C.E.

The northern lowlands were particularly prominent in Maya history during the post-Classic era. The region consists mainly of the present-day Mexican state of Yucatán. This part of Mexico is flat, dry, and rocky, with few rivers or lakes. Parts of the region are covered with large rain forests. Maya cities that flourished during the post-Classic era were Uxmal (pronounced oosh-MAHL) and Chichén Itzá.

In the early thirteenth century, Uxmal and Chichén Itzá were abandoned and Mayapán became the Maya's capital of the northern lowlands. By this time the northern lowlands were caught up in heavy warfare. Mayapán collapsed in the 1400s and no great cities replaced it before the arrival of the Spanish in the early 1500s.

Chichén Itzá

Chichén Itzá was a city on the northern Yucatán peninsula, far north of Tikal, Palenque, and Copán. Scholars believe a group of Mayas called the Itzá arrived in the Yucatán in about the eighth century C.E. They discovered three cenotes (underground reservoirs or rivers that become accessible from above ground when cave ceilings collapse or erode) at Chichén Itzá and settled there. In this land where there were no above ground rivers, cenotes were important water sources to Mayas and they were also considered sacred places. From Chichén Itzá the Itzá Maya ruled much of the Yucatán peninsula. The name of the city means “mouth of the well of Itzá.”

While Copán, Tikal, and Palenque in the central region to the south flourished during the last two centuries of the Classic era (around 600–800 C.E.), so, too, did Chichén Itzá. The northern city was a center of arts and astronomy, but it also became a very influential religious center. Its buildings—the Red House, the House of the Deer, the Nun-



Ruins of the Temple of the Warriors, at the ancient Maya city of Chichén Itzá.

Photograph by Kelly A. Quin.
Copyright © Kelly A. Quin.

nery and Annex, the Church, the Akab Dzib, the Temple of the Three Lintels, and the House of Phalli—all supported its function as a ceremonial center.

When the cities of the central region began to lose their populations at the end of the Classic era, the people of Chichén Itzá took notice. Maya scholars Linda Schele and David Freidel stated in Martin Gray's *Sacred Sites* Web site:

In the wake of this upheaval, the Maya of the northern lowlands tried a different style of government. They centered their world around a single capital at Chichén Itzá. Not quite ruler of an empire, Chichén Itzá became, for a time, first among the many allied cities of the north and the pivot [central point] of the lowland Maya world.

Historians report a great change in the culture (arts, language, beliefs, customs, institutions, and other products of human work and thought) of Chichén Itzá around 1000 C.E. At that time the Toltecs, who were rising in power in present-day Mexico, began to have a significant influence on the city and



its surrounding areas. Most experts believe the Toltec influence was due to strong trade and diplomatic connections between the Toltec city of Tula and the Maya city of Chichén Itzá.

During this era magnificent new buildings and plazas were erected in the city, all showing a new look, including Kukulcán's Pyramid; the Temple of the Warriors; the Great Ball Court (the largest known in the Maya world) as well as eight smaller courts; the Group of the Thousand Columns; and the Observatory (Caracol; a place used for observing the stars). The best known among these is Kukulcán's Pyramid, a 75-foot (22.9-meter) tall pyramid. The pyramid was built to observe the movements of the stars. The buildings were situated so that during the spring and autumn equinoxes, the sun would cast its shadow down the main stairway, appearing like a snake making its way down the pyramid's steps.

The Toltec religion spread to the city as well, influencing Maya art and religious practices. Some believe the

Kukulcán's Pyramid in Chichén Itzá was built to observe the movements of the stars. *Photograph by Andrea Henderson. Reproduced by permission.*

scale of human sacrifice rose significantly under Toltec influence, although the Mayas had long been accustomed to the practice. The cenote at Chichén Itzá became one of the central places for sacrifice. People threw their most valuable possessions into the cenote, usually in the hopes of convincing the gods to bring rain to their land.

Human sacrifice at the cenote was probably less common, but a regular practice nonetheless. The bones of children, young men and women, and the elderly have been found in the depths under the opening. The Great Ball Court of Chichén Itzá was also the site of many sacrifices, since the losers of the ball game were usually sacrificed.

There is evidence that violence erupted in Chichén Itzá in the early 1200s. Some of the great buildings and markets were burned. Many scholars believe there was a rebellion among the city's people against its rulers. Around this time the new Maya capital of Mayapán, about 70 miles (112.6 kilometers) west of Chichén Itzá, was formed by an alliance (the joining of two or more people or groups for the benefit of all) of Maya lords in the Yucatán.

Mayapán, a walled city of about twelve thousand, was the capital city of the northern lowlands for the next two hundred years, though it was never as grand in the arts and architecture as prior Maya cities had been. People of Chichén Itzá and the neighboring Uxmal gradually abandoned their cities, either moving near Mayapán or to more rural areas. In Chichén Itzá, the only part of the city that remained active was the Sacred Cenote, to which the Maya made frequent pilgrimages (journeys to a holy place to show faith and reverence).

The conquest

When the Spanish arrived in the Maya world in the early sixteenth century, the Maya were in a weakened state. Their large cities had been abandoned and they had divided into small groups who sometimes fought amongst themselves. Despite these skirmishes, the Maya still put up fierce resistance when Spanish explorer Francisco Fernández de Córdoba (c. 1475–1525) arrived in the Yucatán in 1517. De Córdoba wanted to replace slaves who had died during his

travels in Cuba; the Maya resisted and defeated de Córdoba, killing him in battle and forcing his troops to flee.

The Maya victory against the gun-bearing Europeans, however, could not save them from the spread of the terrible diseases these men brought—including smallpox, measles, and influenza. (Smallpox is a severe contagious viral disease spread by particles emitted from the mouth when an infected person speaks, coughs, or sneezes.) The native Mesoamericans had no immunity or resistance to diseases common in Europe. By some estimates, within the next hundred years about 90 percent of the Mesoamerican population had died of disease or were killed in battle.

The Spanish had come to the Americas seeking gold, though the Maya did not have it in vast quantities. For a while, the Spanish troops in Mesoamerica were busy in their efforts to subdue the Toltecs and Aztecs and did not bother with the Maya. Then, in 1526, Spanish conquistador (conqueror) Francisco de Montejo (c. 1479–1548) petitioned for the right to conquer the Yucatán region.

When Montejo arrived, a few Maya chiefs were friendly but most Mayas fled. The Spanish gave chase and the Maya attacked them. Spanish troops killed more than twelve hundred Maya, but the Mayas still did not give up. Though Montejo's expedition was forced to leave the Yucatán, his son renewed the attempt in 1531, taking the city of Chichén Itzá. Once again the Mayas rebelled and the Spanish were forced to flee.

The younger Montejo returned with a larger force in 1542 and set up the Spanish capital city of Mérida. The Maya continued to revolt, but during the next five years the northern Yucatán fell under the control of the Spanish. Mayas in the Petén region, however, resisted the Spanish until 1697, maintaining their own government, culture, and religion. Few expected the Maya could so successfully fight off armed European invaders; only by fierce determination could they have prevailed for so long.

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Maya Religion and Government

21

Like many pre-Hispanic cultures, the Mayas (pronounced MY-uhs) did not distinguish between religion and government. While they considered the gods to be the rulers of their everyday life, they depended on their mortal rulers to ensure that the gods did not destroy the earth or extinguish the life-providing sun. The Maya religion required a highly complicated worship, including bloodletting and sacrifice rituals often fulfilled by the kings and queens. These efforts were believed to “feed” the gods. The rulers were also believed to have the power to pass in and out of the spirit world, where they could communicate with the gods and ask them to bring prosperity to their people. The Maya kings actively promoted themselves as the descendants of the gods in order to maintain and increase their power over the people. These efforts at persuasion resulted in many of the characteristic aspects of Maya culture, from the towering pyramids to the sophisticated methods of writing developed to record the kings’ names and important dates as well as to prove their royal descent stemming from the gods.



Words to Know

Administrator: A person who manages or supervises the day-to-day operations of business, government, and religious organizations.

Charisma: Natural charm and an attractive personality able to persuade, inspire, and win the devotion of people.

City-state: An independent self-governing community consisting of a single city and the surrounding area.

Elite: A group of people within a society who are in a socially superior position and have more power and privileges than others.

Glyph: A figure (often carved into stone or wood) used as a symbol to represent words, ideas, or sounds.

Hallucinogenic drug: A mind- and sense-altering drug that may create visions of things not physically present.

Pantheon: All of the gods that a particular group of people worship.

Primogeniture: A system in which the oldest son inherits his father's position or possessions.

Ritual: A formal act performed the same way each time, usually used as a means of religious worship by a particular group.

Sacrifice: To make an offering to the gods, through personal possessions like cloth or jewels, or by killing an animal or human as the ultimate gift.

Shaman: A religious leader or priest who communicates with the spirit world to influence events on earth.

Stela: A stone pillar carved with images or writing, often used to provide historical details or for religious or political purposes.

Trance: An altered mental state.

Transformation: Changing into something else.

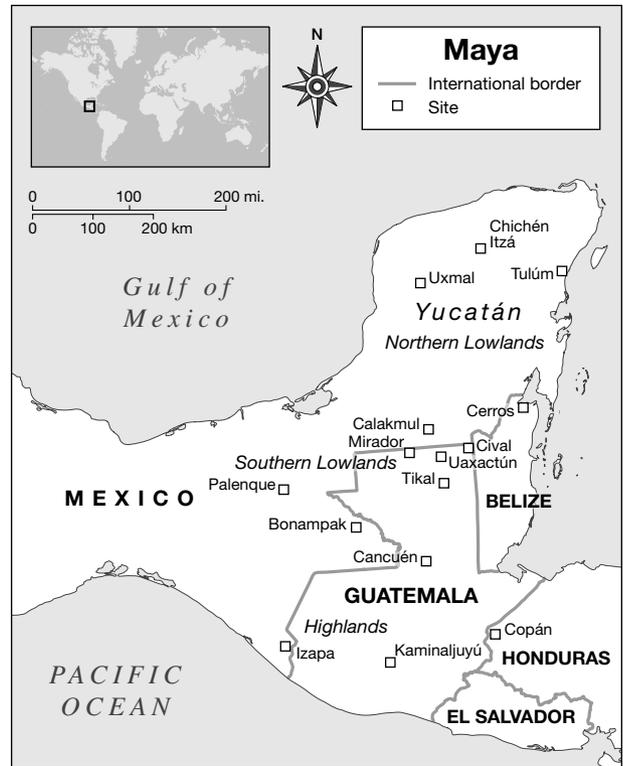
Religion

Government, arts, sciences, and every aspect of daily life in the ancient Maya civilization were determined by the all-encompassing Maya religion. The Maya believed everything in the world had a sacred spirit nature—mountains, rocks, plants, insects, trees, animals, and people. The stars were thought to be manifestations (living symbols or images) of the gods, weather was controlled by gods, and even the maize (corn) that sustained Maya life was represented by a god. The four directions—east, west, north, and south—had gods associated with them; there were gods who reigned over fishing, hunting, weaving, and other daily activities, including gods who represented the days of the month. According

to some accounts, there were at least 166 Maya gods.

Most of the deities of the Maya are difficult to identify individually, especially because the names and faces of certain gods varied from city to city. In addition, most of the gods had more than one face or identity. A few of the best-known gods of the Maya pantheon (all of their gods together) are as follows:

- **Hunab Ku:** (pronounced WAHN-ab kwa) According to some, the supreme god and possibly the creator of the human race. Some scholars believe Hunab Ku was created by the Mayas after the Spanish conquest (the Spanish conquered most of the Maya lands in 1542) and the introduction of Christianity. Others think he might be Itzamná. Others think he might be Itzamná, or possibly his father.
- **Itzamná:** (pronounced eets-ahm-NAH) The supreme god of the Maya, creator of human life, lord of day and night, and the ruler of all gods. Itzamná invented writing and was responsible for Maya science and learning. He was usually associated with the Maya elite (people in a socially superior position who have more power and privileges than others). He was portrayed in two ways: as an old, toothless man with hollow cheeks, and as a reptile. Itzamná was probably the god who came to be known in the post-Classic era as Kukulcán (pronounced koo-kool-CAHN) by the Toltecs (pronounced TOHL-tecks), and as Quetzalcoatl (pronounced kates-ahl-koh-AH-tul) by the Aztecs, or Mexica (pronounced may-SHEE-kah).
- **Ix Chel:** (pronounced eesh SHELL) The wife of Itzamná sometimes depicted as a moon goddess, sometimes as the rainbow goddess. Ix Chel was associated with medicine, childbirth, weaving, and telling the future. She had a mean side, sometimes associated with destruction, and was depicted as an old woman with a serpent in her hand.



Map showing the major sites of Maya civilization in Mesoamerica. Map by XNR Productions. The Gale Group.

Large sculpture of the head of the god Itzamná, depicted as an old man.

© Charles & Josette Lenars/Corbis.



- **Kinich Ahaw:** (pronounced KEE-neesh AH-haw) The sun god; often identified as the father of Itzamná. He was frequently depicted as a firebird (a bright red bird with black wings and tail). The Maya believed the sun underwent a heroic transformation (changing into something else) on a daily basis. Every evening when it set in the west, the sun was thought to pass into the underworld (Xibalbá, pronounced shee-bahl-BAH) where it then

transformed into a jaguar that navigated the evils of the night. At dawn, the sun was resurrected from the underworld (reborn) as it rose in the east.

- **Chac:** (pronounced chahck) The rain god and the god of the farmers, associated with creation and life. Chac was often depicted with a reptile face and fangs, carrying a lightning axe.
- **Yum Kaax:** (pronounced yoom kAHSH) The god of maize and patron of farmers. Yum Kaax was usually depicted as a young man with an ear of corn growing out of his head.

All the Maya gods had their own individual traits but they were also interconnected, coming from a powerful spiritual force. The gods could be kind to human beings, but they could also be vicious or destructive. The Maya believed the only way to save themselves and their world was to soothe the gods by performing specific rituals (formal acts performed the same way each time, usually used as a means of religious worship) at specific times. The most essential part of Maya life was to make the gods happy. A very complicated system of ceremonial rituals was created for this purpose.

Although the Maya gods were very powerful, they needed people as much as people needed them, and the system between gods and humans was one of mutual generosity. When the gods were happy, they brought rain and sun for crops, allowed human beings to give birth to healthy children, and limited earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and disease. The gods desired two things only humans could give them—reverence and blood. The Maya showed their reverence individually through prayers and burning incense (substance, such as wood, that emits a pleasant odor when burned) on a daily basis. They also held large festivals to honor the gods, feeding them the blood they craved (see the box on pages 376–377).

The Maya universe

Maya artists represented the universe in three levels: Xibalbá, the underworld; the earth; and the heavens. They usually depicted the earth sitting atop either a turtle or a crocodile in water. The earth was a large, flat square; each



The Epic Tale of the Hero Twins

The myth of the two ball-playing young men known as the Hero Twins was a major cornerstone of the Maya belief system. The Hero Twins appear frequently in Maya art, and the Maya ball game was considered a reenactment of their deeds. The most complete tales of their adventures are taken from the *Popol Vuh* (Book of Counsel), a book presenting the traditional mythology (traditional, often imaginary stories dealing with ancestors, heroes, or supernatural beings, usually making an attempt to explain a belief, practice, or natural phenomenon) of the Mayas.

The *Popol Vuh* was probably written in glyphs (figures used as symbols to represent words, ideas, or sounds) in the Quiche Mayan language (one of the Mayan language groups) long before Europeans arrived in the Americas. Sometime after the Spanish conquest in 1542, someone copied the original book, still in the Quiche Mayan language, but written in the Latin alphabet. The manuscript was

discovered many years later in a university library in Guatemala.

The tale of the Hero Twins actually begins with their father, Hun Hunapu (pronounced wan wan-a-PWA) who was also a twin. He and his twin brother were playing the Maya ball game one day and disturbed the Lords of Death by making too much noise. The lords called them down to Xibalbá and challenged them to a ball game. When the twins lost, the lords cut off their heads.

Hun Hunapu's head was placed in a tree, where the daughter of one of the Xibalbá lords found it. When she stretched out her hand to it, the head spit into her hand. This made her become pregnant with the Hero Twins. Escaping from the Lords of Death, she went to live with Hun Hunapu's mother until the twins—Hunahpu and Xbalanque (pronounced shpah-LAHN-kay)—were born.

When the twins became young men, they found the ball gear of their fa-

corner had a specific color. There was also a specific god, called Bacad, who ruled each corner of the planet.

According to the Maya, the heavens were comprised of thirteen layers, while Xibalbá, the dark, watery world below, was comprised of nine layers. At the center of all things was the World Tree. Its roots reached deep into the underworld, its trunk rose up to the earth, and its branches soared into the heavens. The tree demonstrated the Maya belief that the three levels of the universe were interconnected and humans could communicate with the spirit world on

ther and uncle and decided to play. Like their elders before them, they disturbed the Lords of Death with their noise. The lords challenged the twins to come to Xibalbá for a ball game. In Xibalbá the lords put the twins through many tests and ordeals, and in some of them the twins died, but they were able to quickly come back to life. Through their quick-thinking, trickery, and courage, the twins outsmarted the Lords of Death several times. In the end they allowed themselves to lose the game, knowing it was their fate to be sacrificed (offered to the gods).

When the lords challenged them to jump over a fire, the twins jumped right into it and burned to death. The lords, delighted to have finally won a victory, took no chances. They ground the twins' bones into powder and threw the bone dust into a river. At the bottom of the river the bones knit together and transformed back into the living twins. Over and over, the Hero Twins used their magic and wits, al-

lowing themselves to be sacrificed in a variety of ways and then coming back to life.

The Lords of Death became so intrigued with the twins' power to defeat death that they asked the twins to show them how it was done. After watching the twins die and come back to life so many times, the lords wanted to try it themselves. The Hero Twins seized the opportunity—they killed the Lords of Death as they had requested, but refused to bring them back to life.

Having defeated death, the twins brought their father and uncle back to life. The Hero Twins then ascended into the sky from the underworld, becoming the sun and the moon, making the maize grow, and bringing balance to the world. Their story brought the message that there is always hope—one may defeat death in the afterlife. Their adventures mirrored the journey of the sun, which disappeared, or died, every night in the underworld and was resurrected each morning to bring light and life to the Maya people.

any of the three levels. This belief was also represented by the worship of caves as sacred portals (doors or gates) leading from the earth to the spirit world.

The Maya religion focused heavily on measuring time. Using earlier Mesoamerican calendars as a base, the early Mayas developed an incredibly accurate three-calendar system. The system combined a 260-day sacred calendar; a solar calendar made of eighteen months of twenty days each, plus five extra days; and a 52-year solar cycle (see Chapter 22 for more information on the calendar system). The primary

purpose of these calendars was to determine the proper times to perform rituals and ceremonies to keep the gods happy.

According to the Maya religion, the world had been created and destroyed several times before the present age. Time was viewed very differently than today—instead of running straight forward into the future, it ran in long cycles that would eventually return to their starting points. The ends of these cycles were greatly feared as a time when the gods might destroy the world.

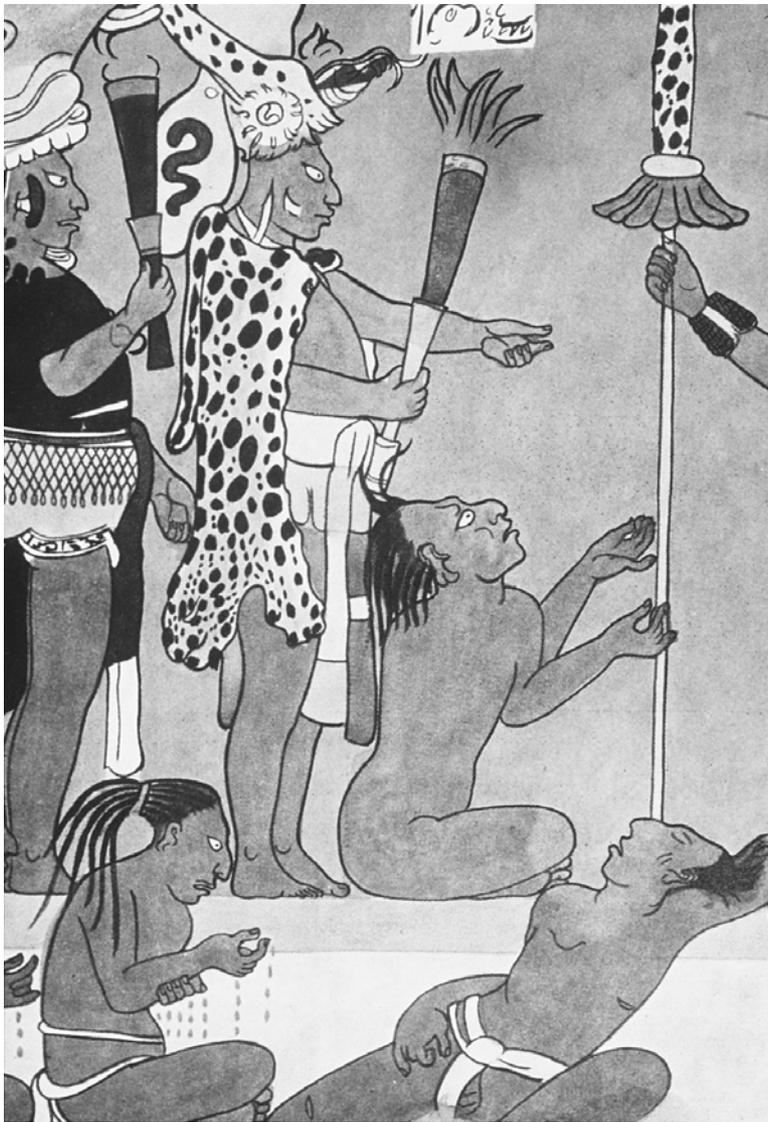
Passing through portals

The complexity of the Maya religion, with its numerous gods and hundreds of rituals, demanded that a group of privileged people spend most of their time learning about the Maya universe and creating ways to communicate with the gods. The people who did this were priests or shamans (religious leaders who communicate with the spirit world to influence events on earth). Most scholars believe these early shamans created the remarkable Maya calendar, numeral, and writing systems. They were also responsible for curing illnesses and healing injuries, listening to confessions, and teaching new shamans. Their most important function, however, was to communicate with the gods—and for this they found several ways to travel through portals and into the spirit world.

The Maya believed every person had an animal companion spirit, a soul identical to his or her own within the body of an animal. The two souls would share the same fate—if the person was killed, the animal would die, and the reverse was true as well. By entering into a trance (an altered mental state), a skilled shaman could transform into his or her animal spirit—good shamans probably had several animal companion spirits—in order to enter the supernatural world.

Sometimes shamans achieved transformations through the use of hallucinogenic drugs (mind- and sense-altering drugs that may create visions of things not physically present) or fasting (not eating for a long period of time). Often, though, the transformations were done along with Maya blood ceremonies.

The Maya believed it was the job of human beings to regularly feed the gods with blood. This was done through bloodletting—piercing one's own skin to draw blood—and



Mural from a Maya temple shows prisoners of war—victims of sacrifice—pleading for their lives. *The Art Archive/Mireille Vautier.*

through sacrifice, either animal or human. The Mayas believed if the gods were properly nourished, the world would be in harmony. This demanded pain and sacrifice on the part of humans.

Nobles and shamans performed bloodletting during ceremonies. Males frequently pierced the skin of their genitals, tongues, or ears to draw blood. They used the spines of stingrays (sea creatures with sharp, barbed tails) or knives made of obsidian (dark, solid glass created by volcanoes and

often used to make sharp instruments). The blood dripped onto strips of paper, which were then burned. The smoke from the bloody paper was believed to bring the blood directly to the gods, along with the Maya people's prayers.

One famous mural depicts the wife of a king pulling a thorny rope through a hole she has pierced in her tongue. The blood flows out of her mouth and onto paper strips in a basket. Bloodletting rituals such as that were sometimes performed in public ceremonies, in which the viewers could watch as the loss of blood induced a trance in the person spilling his or her blood. While in the trance, the bloodletter was believed to be transporting him or herself into the spirit world to communicate with the gods.

Sacrifice to the gods often consisted of offerings, usually of animals, but of human sacrifice, too. The victims of sacrifice were usually prisoners of war. During Classic times (from about 250 to 900 C.E.), wars were waged simply for the purpose of obtaining captives for sacrifice (the Maya tended not to sacrifice people from their own city). The Maya also sacrificed criminals and children, usually orphans, whom they brought from cities nearby.

There were many methods of sacrifice. None were humane (gentle or caring) and some involved unthinkable kinds of torture. The most common sacrifice method was to paint the victim blue and place him or her on a stone altar, with four people stationed to hold down the arms and legs. With a sharp knife a priest then cut open the chest and reached between the ribs to pull out the victim's beating heart and offer it to the gods. The heart was smeared on carved figurines made in the image of the gods and then the corpse was thrown down the temple stairs.

The practice of human sacrifice was important to Maya beliefs. Despite its horror, sacrifice must have seemed necessary to people who felt it was the only way to influence the powerful forces around them. In the Maya set of beliefs, death was required to sustain life.

The institution of *ahaw* kingship

Sometime in the pre-Classic era, the institution of kingship arose. Prior to about 300 B.C.E. experts believe most

Maya people lived in small, egalitarian societies (everyone had an equal say in decisions affecting the community), with perhaps an elder or the head of a large family providing guidance. Toward the end of this period, the Maya were exposed to people from the grand cities of Teotihuacán (pronounced TAY-uh-tee-wah-KAHN) in the Valley of Mexico and Monte Albán in the Oaxaca (pronounced wah-HAH-kah) Valley. These cities were wealthy and advanced, thriving under the direction of very powerful ruler-priests and select noblemen who claimed to have the power to control the forces of good and evil, could monitor time through their elaborate calendar systems, and could record history as they wished.

Near the end of the pre-Classic era, after 300 B.C.E., the focus of art began to change in some Maya communities, particularly those in the southern lowlands (a region that included the area surrounding the Guatemalan department [state] of Petén, most of Belize, parts of eastern Honduras, most of the Mexican states of Chiapas and Tabasco, and the extreme southern part of the Yucatán peninsula).

While art had previously depicted the gods and religious symbols, it began to focus on specific kings, called *ahaws* (pronounced AH-haw, also spelled “ahau”) and their royal family lines.

In particular, portrait stelae (stone pillars carved with images or writing, often used to provide historical details or for religious or political purposes) began to appear in many cities. These featured a carved portrait of the king in elaborate dress on one side, with glyphs representing his name, the important dates of his reign, and other details on the other side. The art signaled a new cult or extreme devotion to the *ahaws*; this intense loyalty formerly reserved for religious figures was instead channeled to one powerful man who the Maya believed descended from the gods and had the power to influence them on behalf of his people.

Soaring city kingdoms

As the power of the kings grew, there was a sudden explosion of building in the Maya cities. The kings were eager to prove their godlike power. The common people were willing to provide the hard labor to fulfill the wishes of the

ahaw, as this was their chance to please the gods and do sacred work. Most of the big building projects did not have a practical function. Some structures served as ceremonial monuments from which the *ahaw* might appear to his people to perform bloodletting and other rituals. Many were simply to glorify the king with their size and artistry. One grand building would serve as the *ahaw's* burial place.

Many scholars believe the development of the powerful and godlike kingship was a major factor in the spectacular rise of Maya civilization that followed. All across the Maya world monuments rose to the heavens to announce the power of the king who had them built. They inspired awe in his subjects and continue to inspire observers in the twenty-first century. The art, the pyramids, the extravagant royal tombs, the stelae with their glyphs—all were constructed through millions of hours of exhausting human labor for the purpose of demonstrating the *ahaw's* immense power.

The *ahaw* and nobility had a price to pay for all their glory. The *ahaw's* role as ruler was to serve as the living World Tree, connecting the three levels of the universe (the underworld, the earth, and heavens). It was up to the nobility to transform themselves to their spirit form so they could communicate with their ancestors and the gods. On significant occasions, of which there were many, the *ahaw* was expected to pass through the portal between the human and the spirit world in order to ensure the outcome of certain events such as military conquests, the growth of crops, or that the sun would return after a solar eclipse (partial or total blocking of light from the sun when then moon crosses its path).

It was also up to the *ahaw* to feed the gods the blood they required. At public ceremonies, the *ahaw* and often his wife, too, would perform bloodletting rituals. According to Linda Schele and Mary Miller in *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (1986), "Blood was the mortar of ancient Maya ritual life. Rulers were viewed as descendants of the gods. It was considered their duty to bleed and mutilate themselves on ritual occasions ... to cement their divine lineage [family line] and sustain the universe." The *ahaws* not only spilled their own blood, but fasted and prayed to communicate with the gods. If the crops failed or a war was lost, it was considered the fault of the *ahaw*.

By the late Classic period, the *ahaws* had become extremely skillful in their leadership. They staged spectacular public ceremonies, drawing people from far and wide to witness bloodletting rituals in festivals featuring magic, music, and sacrifice. The lords sacrificed jaguars, dogs, crocodiles, and many other animals, but human sacrifice was the supreme gift to the gods. They dazzled the common people with these huge festivals of splendor and blood that were surely enough to satisfy the gods.

One of the popular festivities the *ahaws* sponsored was the Maya ball game. The ball game had been part of Mesoamerican life since 3000 B.C.E. Large ball courts shaped like the letter I and measuring about 75-feet (22.9-meters) long and 25-feet (7.6-meters) wide were built for this purpose within the sacred core of every city. Some cities had several courts. The object of the game was to keep a heavy, solid rubber ball in the air without using hands or feet. There were also stone hoops through which to shoot the ball.

Perhaps these games were played for pleasure by the nobles of the city. But from the evidence provided in Maya art, the game was regularly used as a ritual that led to human sacrifice. Maya murals depict the game being played between two teams—both teams could be made up of captives taken during warfare, or one team might be made up of captives and the other of the city's noblemen.

The captives forced to play the game were usually nobles, perhaps even the king, of a defeated neighboring city. In the murals, the members of the losing team are forced to become victims of sacrifice, often by decapitation (having their heads cut off). The ball games were seen as reenactments of the tales of the Hero Twins (see the box on pages 376–377) and considered a sacred ritual that celebrated victory over evil and death.



The Maya ball game involved hitting a hard rubber ball through this stone ring without using hands or feet. This hoop ring is located in the ball court at Chichén Itzá.

Photograph by Deborah J. Baker. Copyright © Deborah J. Baker.

The elite world

The succession of a new king upon the death of the old king was central to the stability of Maya cities. The model for succession in Classic times was primogeniture, a system in which the oldest son inherited his father's position. The success of the Maya *ahaw* system, however, demanded having a ruler who could convince masses of people to do hard labor for the state without being forced into it by the military.

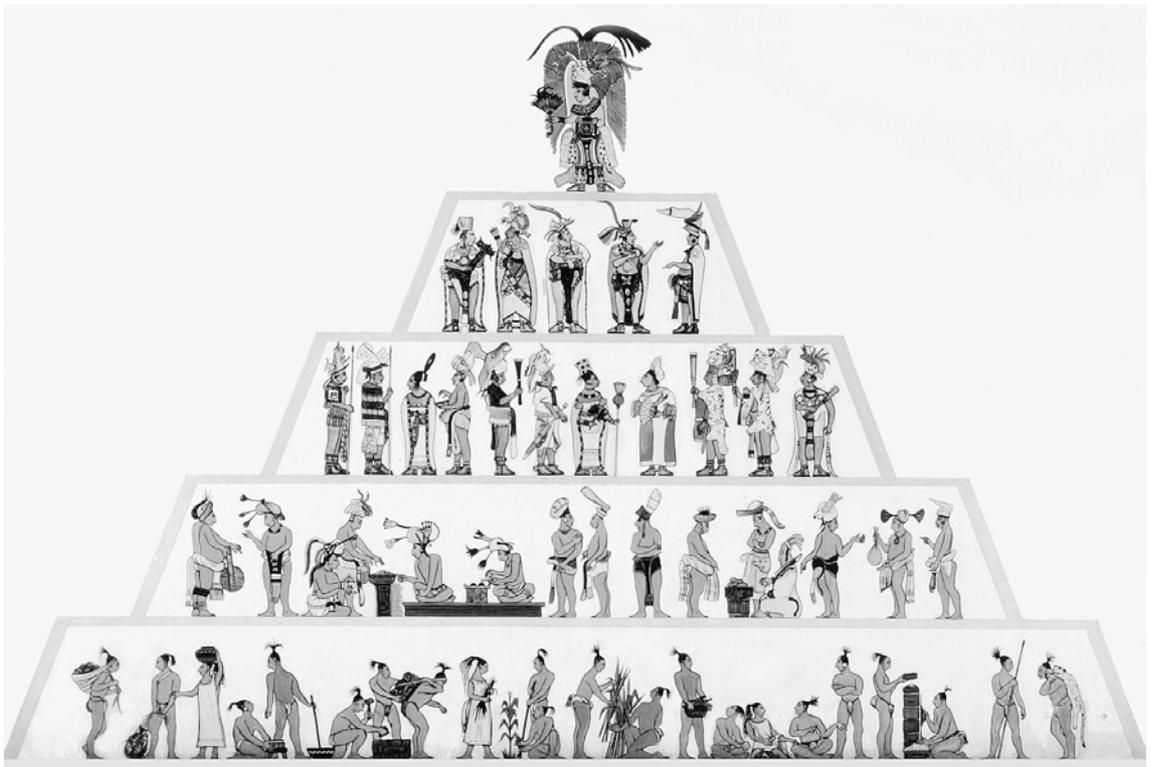
The head of a Maya city needed to have proper lineage as well as charisma—a natural charm and an attractive personality to persuade and inspire people to serve him loyally and without question. Sometimes the more magnetic personalities from the royal families took power. Some royal families created bonds with other cities by arranging marriages among the nobility or royalty, and in some cases, women from the nobility held high offices. In the city of Palenque, for example, two *ahaws* were women.

During the Classic Maya era, the social hierarchy (ranking of people in terms of power, wealth, and prestige) was clear. At the top, there was a king and a small group of nobles. The nobility was a very small group—perhaps 5 percent of the population in the early Classic era. Though the king was generally the supreme ruler over all others, the nobles, too, were considered divine.

Nobles were born into their positions; they ran the governments, ruled cities, led ceremonies, and performed many other jobs. They, too, were responsible for interacting with the spirit world and making sure the gods treated the city and its citizens favorably. In exchange for this, the common people continued to provide unimaginable amounts of labor to build magnificent, massive pyramids, ceremonial buildings, and tombs; to clear jungles for either construction or farming; and to provide food through farming.

From city-state to state

As the city kingdoms became stronger and wealthier during the Classic era, they ruled over larger populations of common people who farmed the lands surrounding the city. Eventually, the larger Maya cities incorporated smaller cities nearby into their rule, becoming city-states.



By the late Classic era, the neighboring cities of Tikal and Calakmul in the Petén region of Guatemala had become regional capitals and ruled over many smaller cities and communities. The Maya lowland civilization had become a patchwork of several very powerful, but independent, city-states that ruled over increasingly extensive areas. The *ahaw* of the large regional centers usually appointed noblemen called *batabs* (meaning axe bearers) to govern outlying cities.

Pyramidal depiction of Maya social organization, with the king and his nobility at the top and the common people at the bottom. *The Art Archive/National Anthropological Museum Mexico/Dagli Orti.*

The end of the Classic era kingdoms

By the end of the Classic era, the numbers of nobility had swelled; they constituted about 25 percent of the population. The nobles served in a wider range of capacities, as regional governors, military commanders, priests, scholars, building project managers, trade regulators, and administrators in the city-state. They lived in luxury and began to build their own stelae, carving their portraits and history

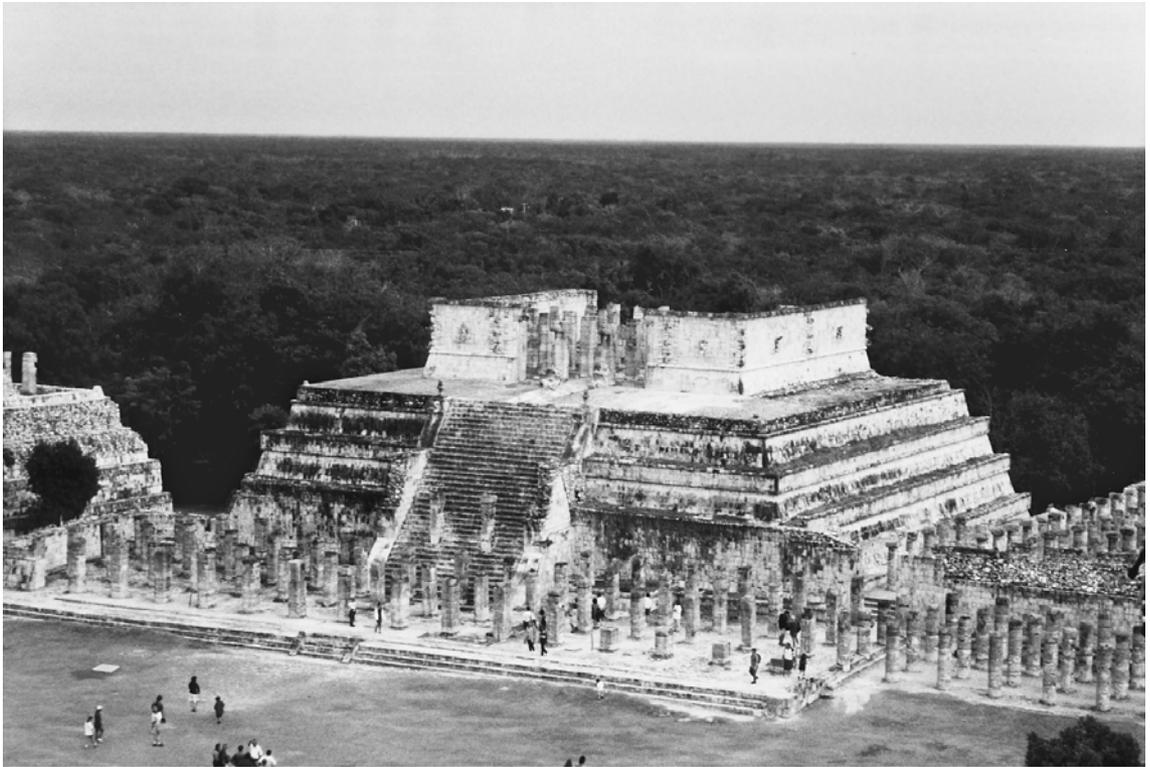
into stone, and built monuments and temples for their own burials. Some scholars believe this rise in power led to divisions within the government and weakened the strength of the *ahaws*.

Warfare became widespread as the Classic era drew to a close. For most of their history Maya warriors from one city would attack another only for the purpose of gathering sacrifice victims. But as time went on, the armies of the big city-states became professional and competitive. Though led by nobles, Maya soldiers in the Classic era were enlisted from among the peasants. They were armed with knives, spears, clubs, and shields.

With large trained armies at their disposal, the nobility began to seek conquests. While earlier warfare had resulted in the death of some captured nobles, warfare after about 750 C.E. caused terrible destruction to cities and surrounding areas. Bitter conflicts between cities could last for decades and result in thousands of lost lives and destroyed homes and crops.

By about 900 C.E., the great cities of the Maya southern lowlands had been abandoned. The populations from the cities and some people of the surrounding farmlands moved north to the northern lowlands in the present-day Mexican state of Yucatán. The exact reasons for this desertion are not known and continue to puzzle historians. It is likely overpopulation—too many people for the land and its farms to support—might have been a factor. Inadequate farming might have contributed as well (see Chapter 23 for more information on the Maya economy), since there is evidence severe drought (long period of little or no rainfall) may have destroyed crops. In some cities there is also evidence of violence from either internal rebellion or raids from outside.

Because the *ahaw* and nobility were responsible for making the gods happy, a natural disaster such as a drought or devastated crops would have been considered a failure to perform their duties. This could have caused an uprising among the common people. Starvation could have forced some Maya to leave their cities long before the final years of abandonment. It is likely many factors contributed to the demise of the Classic era's Maya kingdoms.



Post-Classic governments

During the Classic era, while great cities and states like Tikal, Copán, and Calakmul flourished in the southern lowlands of Petén, cities in the northern highlands of the Yucatán were thriving as well. Chichén Itzá (pronounced chee-CHEN eet-SAH), which had been settled in the sixth century, was by far the most powerful of the northern cities around 1000 C.E., but there were other large cities—Uxmal (pronounced oosh-MAHL), Cobá, and Sayil, to name a few.

Influences from other Mesoamerican peoples, particularly the Toltec, prevailed in the northern cities; their art and architecture differed in many ways from cities in the south. Chichén Itzá, with its powerful military, had probably conquered many of the cities in a large area but they joined together without hostility after the conquests. By 1000, there was a strong alliance among Uxmal, Cobá, and Chichén Itzá.

Ruins of Chichén Itzá's Temple of the Warriors. The city, with its powerful military, ruled the northern lowlands during the post-Classic Maya era.

*Photograph by Kelly A. Quin.
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Chichén Itzá ruled the northern lowlands until about the thirteenth century. Inscriptions on monumental stones at Chichén Itzá relate that the city and its outposts were not ruled by a single *ahaw*, as the southern cities had been. There was apparently a group of five nobles (or possibly more), some or all of whom may have been brothers. These nobles shared the rule of the large kingdom, acting as a supreme council over the strong and expanding military state. Under the council's rule, the cities in the region of the present-day Mexican state Yucatán prospered.

The social hierarchy in the post-Classic era (900 C.E. to 1521 C.E.) was more complex than in the Classic era. There were four basic classes: nobles, priests, common people, and slaves. Nobles were born into their position, and common people were, for the most part, farmers who were required to provide crops and labor to the nobility of the city. Slaves were usually commoners from other cities who had been captured in war. When prisoners were taken during battle, the captives from the nobility were usually sacrificed, while the common soldiers became slaves. Criminals and orphaned children, however, sometimes became slaves as well.

Around 1200 C.E. Chichén Itzá's population began to desert the city for unknown reasons. Many are thought to have moved down to the Petén region of Guatemala—the land of the former Classic civilization. Around this time a smaller city to the west, Mayapán, replaced Chichén Itzá as the capital in the region.

Mayapán was walled, an unusual feature for a Maya city, and an indication warfare was widespread during this era. It had few ceremonial structures, inferior architecture, and was apparently built in a hurry. With rampant warfare, there was little time for feeding the gods, producing great art, writing histories and mythology, and working with the intricate and accurate calendar systems. The hallmarks of the great civilization were rapidly disappearing.

In 1441 C.E. there was a terrible uprising in Mayapán, which destroyed the city. The population of Mayapán scattered; some went to the city of Mani, which became a new capital. Though the Maya survived and went on to new lives, the glory of their civilization was over. About sixteen small city-states remained in the Yucatán area, but they were in

constant warfare with each other. When the Spanish arrived only fifty years after the fall of Mayapán, the Maya put up surprising resistance to the invaders, but had been greatly weakened by the recent collapse of their governments.

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Maya Arts and Sciences



Maya (pronounced MY-uh) mythology (traditional, often imaginary stories dealing with ancestors, heroes, or supernatural beings, and usually making an attempt to explain a belief, practice, or natural phenomenon) features two brothers, Hun Batz and Hun Chuen, who angered the Hero Twins long ago and were transformed into monkeys. These brothers came to be known as the “monkey scribes,” and they were the patrons (supporters) of Maya art and writing—the skills involved in telling the Maya’s story. In the ancient Mayan language, there was no distinction between writing and painting; the word *ts’ib* was used for both.

The Maya scribes created writing and artwork on surfaces all over their cities, particularly in the Classic era from 250 to 900 C.E. Some inscribed (carved) the stone pillar monuments—called stelae—in the plazas, door lintels (horizontal structures over doors), stone or stucco buildings and pyramids, thrones, altars, and even jade jewelry; the painter-scribes worked on wall murals and pottery; those who used a pen worked in handmade books known as codices. Glyph-



Words to Know

Astronomer: A person who studies the planets, sun, moon, and stars and all other celestial bodies.

Bas-relief: A carved, three-dimensional picture, usually in stone, wood, or plaster, in which the image is raised above the background.

Codex: A handmade book written on a long strip of bark paper and folded into accordion-like pages.

Decipher: To figure out the meaning of something in code or in an ancient language.

Elite: A group of people within a society who are in a socially superior position and have more power and privileges than others.

Equinox: The two times each year—March 21 and September 23—when the sun crosses the equator and day and night are of equal length.

Glyph: A figure (often carved into stone or wood) used as a symbol to represent words, ideas, or sounds.

Logogram: A glyph expressing a whole word or concept.

Logosyllabic: A mixed system of writing in which some symbols represent whole words or ideas, while other symbols represent the syllables or units of sound that make up words.

Pre-Columbian American: A person living in the Americas before the arrival of Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus in 1492.

Prehistory: The period of time in any given region, beginning with the appearance of the first human beings there and ending with the occurrence of the first written records. All human history that occurred before the existence of written records is considered prehistoric.

Ritual: A formal act performed the same way each time, usually used as a means of religious worship by a particular group.

Sarcophagus: A stone box used for burial, containing the coffin and body of the deceased, or sometimes only the body.

Scribe: Someone hired to write down the language, to copy a manuscript, or record a spoken passage.

Solstice: The two times each year—June 21 and December 21—when the sun is farthest from the equator and days and nights most unequal in length.

Stela: A stone pillar carved with images or writing, often used to provide historical details or for religious or political purposes.

Syllabograms: Symbols that represent the sounds of a language (usually a combination of a vowel sound and consonants).

Vigesimal: Based on the number twenty (as a numeric system).

writing was almost always accompanied by pictures that added to the meaning of the words.

Maya scribes were members of the noble classes and were treated with great respect. According to Michael Coe

and Mark Van Stone in their book *Reading the Maya Glyphs* (2001), they did more than create art and writing—Maya scribes probably played a role in society similar to priests, and many may have actually been priests. Priests were responsible for many scholarly activities: observing the stars and planets, creating the calendar systems used by the Mayas for timing religious rituals, seeing into the future, and recording Maya history. All of these functions involved the writing and painting done by scribes.

Scribes and priests formed an elite (people within a society who are in a socially superior position and have more power and privileges than others) and educated group who were gifted thinkers, writers, and artists. The scribes were given a good deal of creative leeway and were encouraged to excel in their fields by the ruling class. In the end, however, the purpose of their work was to glorify the Maya gods and kings.

It was in the realm of these elite Maya scribes that the Maya civilization excelled beyond all other pre-Columbian Americans (people living in the Americas before the arrival of Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus in 1492) and many Old World (Eastern Hemisphere) civilizations as well. Though many of the Maya achievements in language, the arts, and science originated in other Mesoamerican societies, no other group put together all the advances so well, or as early, as the Mayas.

Maya glyphs and writing

The Maya glyph system of writing was unique among all the languages of the pre-Columbian Americas in that it could fully reproduce the spoken language. Maya scribes could express abstract thoughts in glyphs without referring to pictures. Their writing reflected the complex grammar of



Map showing the major sites of Maya civilization in Mesoamerica. Map by XNR Productions. The Gale Group.



Deciphering the Work of Scribes

The Maya clearly meant to leave behind full records of their lives, beliefs, customs, and sciences. The scribes had written the story of the Maya everywhere. But between the determination of the Spanish missionaries and conquistadores (conquerors) to eliminate the old, non-Christian traditions and the rapid growth of the jungle forests over abandoned cities, Maya art and writing were lost for centuries. No survivors managed to hang onto the art of reading and writing in the distinctive Maya script.

Attempts to decipher (figure out the meaning of something in code or in an ancient language) Maya glyphs have taken years and are ongoing. British anthropologist J. Eric Thompson (1898–1975) started the process of deciphering Maya writing in the early 1950s when he cataloged all known glyphs into three divisions: main

signs, affixes, and portraits. Thompson believed (incorrectly) that all glyphs were logograms. He also believed Maya writing was religious in nature.

Russian linguist Yuri Valentinovich Knorozov (1922–1999), however, argued correctly that many Maya glyphs stood for syllables. Knorozov worked with Spanish bishop Diego de Landa's (1524–1579; see Chapter 19 for more information) "alphabet." Landa had developed this alphabet soon after the Spanish conquest by asking Maya scribes to write down glyphs for the sounds of the Spanish alphabet. With his understanding of Landa's work, Knorozov was able to identify many syllable glyphs. Unfortunately, most scholars ignored him, and Thompson's incorrect views were accepted for many years.

In the late 1950s German-Mexican Heinrich Berlin (d. 1981) added to the un-

the classic Mayan language—an early version of the language used for most reading and writing even after Mayan broke into more than thirty distinct languages.

A glyph is a symbol that stands for either an entire word or for one of the sound units that makes up a word. Glyphs expressing a whole word or concept are called logograms. Scholars point out that if only logograms were used in any writing system, there would need to be thousands of them—too many for the writing system to function properly. Therefore most writing systems included symbols representing the sounds of the language, either by using an alphabet to represent the individual letter sounds, or using symbols to represent the syllable sounds. Glyphs representing syllable sounds are called syllabograms.

derstanding of Maya glyphs with his observation that some glyphs seemed to be place-names referring to specific cities. He called these emblem glyphs.

In the 1960s Russian American archaeologist Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1909–1985) opened the door for decipherment. In a study of glyphs on Stela 14 at the ancient Maya city of Piedras Negras in Guatemala, Proskouriakoff found patterns of dates that never spanned a period of time longer than a human life. Once she correctly guessed that one glyph, which looked like an upside down frog, stood for birth, she was able to identify birth and death glyphs. Using common sense, she went on to identify the name glyphs of rulers, the royal family lineage, details of war and enemy captives, and other historical details written in glyphs on the stela.

In this manner she was able to identify a sequence of glyphs presenting the historical succession of seven rulers spanning two hundred years. Proskouriakoff had provided an essential key to all who followed—that most of the Maya’s writing was a recording of their history. From there, many more scholars worked together successfully, cracking the Maya code.

After years of treating the Maya’s masterful historians as a prehistoric group (a people whose history occurred before there was writing to record it), archeologists finally had written text to work with. In the last three decades of the twentieth century, most of the Maya glyphs were translated and there are now names and faces for many of the Maya kings and details of the wars, successions, and religious ceremonies which would have been lost forever.

Maya writing was logosyllabic—it used both kinds of glyphs. Many words could be written either way by using a single logogram glyph or by using several syllabogram glyphs to create the sound of the word. For example, if the Maya had a logogram for the word “ladder” it would be a single figure representing the entire word (quite possibly a picture of a ladder). If they wished to write it in syllabograms, there would be a glyph for each of its two syllables, “lad” and “der.”

The Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation’s *Maya Civilization* Web site provides another example: the name of the great king of Palenque, Pacal (603–683 C.E.) means “shield.” Sometimes to write his name the scribes created a picture of a shield; sometimes they wrote it in syllabograms (pah-ca-la; the final, extra “a” sound at the end of the

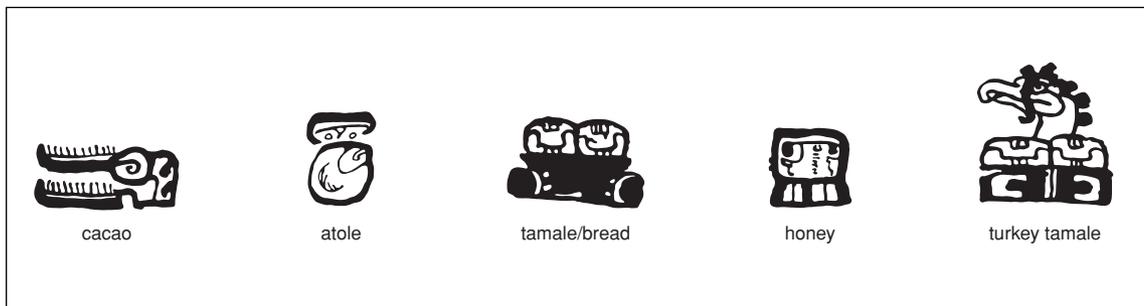


Illustration showing five Maya glyphs: cacao, atole, honey, tamale/bread, and turkey tamale. *The Gale Group.*

word is common in Maya writing—the glyph providing the “l” sound is provided by the full syllable “la”), and sometimes it was written as a combination of pictures and sounds.

Archaeologists believe the earliest Maya glyphs date back to about 400 B.C.E. The first known dated Maya monuments were created in the first century C.E. There are about eight hundred known glyphs in the Maya writing system; about five hundred signs were in common use at any given time.

Glyphs are generally square figures with rounded corners. Although some glyphs are made up of only one element or sign, most have several. The largest element is called a main sign, and the smaller ones are called affixes. The main signs are larger and squarer in shape, while the affixes appear to be squashed onto the main sign. Glyphs were usually arranged within a kind of grid (rows and columns in a checkerboard fashion) in double or paired columns running from top to bottom.

On a grid, a reader would start with the glyph in the left upper corner and proceed to the paired glyph to its right. Then the reader would go to the pair of glyphs directly under the first pair, to the pair of glyphs under it, and so on to the bottom. Then the reader would begin at the top again with the pair of glyphs in the third and fourth position of the top row, and go to the pair directly below. As if this were not complicated enough, each individual glyph, with its main element and affix components, had a reading order as well.

The Maya concept of art

Art and writing were considered one and the same in the Maya world. The Maya probably did not think of art in the way most people in the modern world do. For them, art



Carved glyphs adorn this Maya stone slab, or stela.

© Charles & Josette Lenars/Corbis.

was not an expression of feelings or a personal statement. Most art fell into one of two categories: historical or religious. Historical art depicted kings taking the throne, the bloodlines of the royal families, particularly the descent of the king from the gods, and battles in war and other triumphant historic events (not the defeats, however). Religious art depicted rituals (formal acts performed the same way each time, usually used as a means of religious worship

to make the gods happy), such as human sacrifice, ball games, or bloodletting rituals.

Religious art also depicted the gods and other religious symbols, and gave visual detail to the calendars that dominated Maya life and religion. In the Classic era, art was used to promote the image of the king as a divine or partly divine ruler. In addition, art, like writing, was used to record history. The kings and nobles of the Classic Maya cities in particular tried to make certain that people in future times would know about them.

Stone monuments

The large Maya cities of pre-Classic and Classic times are immediately notable for their huge stone buildings with grand staircases in the front. Most cities had tall pyramids soaring into the skies with brightly painted temples built on top. The pyramids were monuments to the kings who were buried beneath them, often in elaborate tombs with precious jade and stone offerings to the gods.

The plazas, monuments, and buildings in Classic Maya cities were highly decorated, inside and out, with stone carvings of all types, sizes, and shapes. Detailed sculptures of gods, animals, prisoners, and kings stood in the plazas, some made of stone, some made of clay. Bas-reliefs (carved, three-dimensional pictures in which the image is raised above the background) depicting similar subjects lined the walls. Huge carved stone thrones and benches, usually called altars, were another form of monument typically bearing an image of a king or noble conversing in some way with the spirit world.

The age of the stela

One of the main distinguishing characteristics of the Classic Maya era (from about 250 to 900 C.E.) was the stela cult—the widespread creation of carved stone monuments known as stelae. These huge, inscribed slabs or pillars of stone were anywhere from 3 to 35 feet (0.9 to 10.7 meters) tall. Most stelae were carved with the portrait of a ruler or other nobleman dressed in elaborate headdresses and surrounded by symbolic images.

These stelae featured long text passages in glyphs that provided the birth and death dates of the king, as well as relating other information: the history of a significant event

involving him and his achievements or some aspect of the city's history. Stelae were a tremendously important form of communication for rulers, who used them to promote and justify their powerful positions within the city-states (independent self-governing communities consisting of a single city and the surrounding area).

All of the great Maya cities had stone stelae commemorating their rulers and historic events, particularly in the late Classic era. The Maya city Copán, in northwestern Honduras near the Guatemala border, is particularly famous for its stelae. The city's Great Plaza is crowded with the elaborately inscribed pillars, most depicting the king known as 18 Rabbit, who ruled from 695–738 C.E. During 18 Rabbit's long rule, the city became one of the Maya's most sophisticated in terms of its glyphic writing and intricate carving and sculpture.

In 725 C.E., the nearby city of Quiriguá came under the power of Copán. One of its noblemen, Cauac Sky, was appointed by 18 Rabbit to rule the small city. Thirteen years later 18 Rabbit was captured by Quiriguá and beheaded as a sacrifice to the gods. After the death of 18 Rabbit, Quiriguá became a center for beautifully sculptured stelae. One of its stelae, built in 771, is the largest known stela in existence, weighing 65 tons (59 metric tons) and measuring more than 35 feet (10.7 meters) tall.

18 Rabbit was responsible for the construction of the famous Hieroglyphic Staircase in Copán. The giant staircase was comprised of some 1,250 or more blocks inscribed with glyphs. The blocks were arranged on the staircase to commemorate the kings of Copán and their lineage. Unfortunately, the blocks crumbled and fell long before archaeologists found the staircase, and it has been difficult to restore them to their proper order. One of the items the staircase records is the death of 18 Rabbit. A later ruler of Copán,



The architecture of Maya cities was adorned with bas-reliefs. *The Library of Congress.*

Smoke Shell (ruled 749–763 C.E.), was responsible for finishing the project. The stairway is believed to be the longest passage of glyph writing in the Western Hemisphere.

The tomb of Pacal, who ruled from 600 to 683 C.E., is in the city of Palenque, located in present-day Chiapas, Mexico. Its intricately carved sarcophagus (a stone box containing the coffin and body of the deceased) lid are an extravagant example of stone images and glyphs commemorating a Maya king. The image carved on the lid is an illustration of Pacal falling into the jaws of the underworld, which is portrayed as a monster. Pacal is shown falling along the World Tree, an important image of the Maya religion.

The World Tree was the center of all things, with roots reaching deep into the underworld, trunk rising up to Earth, and branches soaring into the heavens. The tree demonstrated the Maya belief that all three levels were interconnected and Pacal, as a partly divine king, could travel between Earth and the spirit world. Along with the images on the sarcophagus lid, there were glyphs providing the dates of Pacal's birth and death and his royal family lineage.

Pacal's tomb is located deep beneath the Temple of Inscriptions in Palenque, a temple set atop a tall step pyramid. Within two chambers of the temple, archaeologists found three panels carved with columns of glyphs, which provided a detailed history of Palenque's ruling family and its people. The panels are the second longest inscription (words carved into something) known to exist from the ancient Maya civilization.

Codices

The cities in the southern lowlands that flourished during the Classic era, such as Tikal, Uaxactún, Palenque, and Copán, were abandoned by about 900 C.E. In the post-Classic era (900 to 1521 C.E.), cities in the northern lowlands of Yucatán became the centers of Maya art. Few stelae, however, were found in the northern cities like Chichén Itzá (pronounced chee-CHEN eet-SAH) or Uxmal (pronounced oosh-MAHL); instead artwork and glyphs were found in Maya codices.

The paper for a Maya codex was usually made from the inner bark of fig trees and treated with a lime coating.

Scribes crafted their glyphs and illustrations onto a long strip of this paper with a brush dipped in ink. When the book was done, the paper was folded like an accordion to form pages.

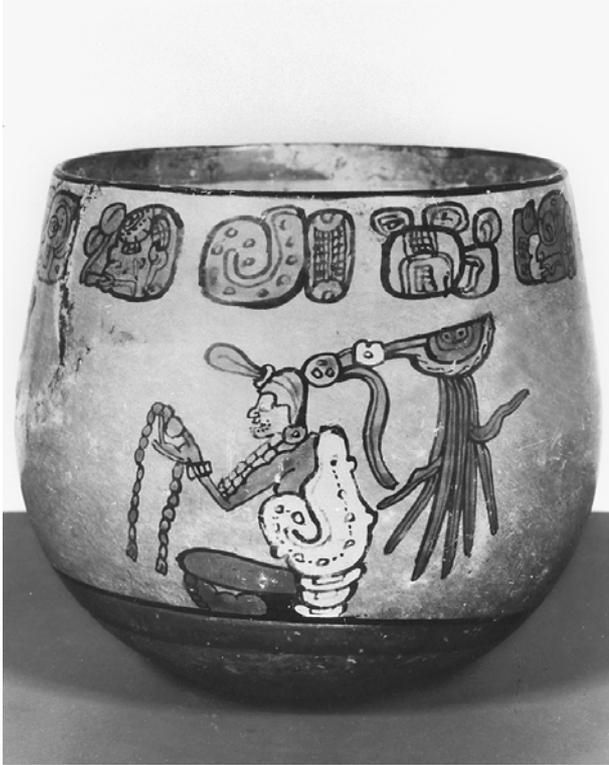
In their attempt to wipe out the Maya religion and its traditions and convert the Mayas to Catholicism, Spanish missionaries—particularly Bishop Diego de Landa—were responsible for burning thousands of Maya codices. Only three or four codices survived, probably because they had been shipped off to Europe before the missionaries got hold of them.

Three of these rare books—the Dresden, Paris, and Madrid codices (all named for the cities in which they are now located)—offer an amazing glimpse into post-Classic Maya life. A fourth codex, called the Grolier, which was found in fragments in Mexico, remains controversial because of its origins. Because the codices were written on paper that could not withstand time and the elements, no other codices have been discovered at Maya excavations. Pictures on ceramics of the Classic era, however, indicate there were codices before 900 C.E., but none have ever been found.

The Maya tradition of commemorating royalty and nobles with art and glyphs disappeared with the Classic era. In the post-Classic cities, priests and scribes used their arts to record the information they needed to conduct Maya rituals in accordance with the Maya calendar. The codices recorded the positions of the sun, moon, and planets and kept track of solar and lunar eclipses (the times when the sun and moon crossed paths and blocked the view of either the sun or the moon for the people on Earth). These books were called “priest’s handbooks” by one scholar. Scholars believe the Maya codices that were destroyed or lost contained vast amounts of learning and culture, including history, sciences, literature, and religion.

Ceramics

Like scribes and stone carvers, Maya potters probably came from the educated elite and were allowed to focus on their arts. They created a great variety of vessels—pots for cooking and storing food; small figurines representing humans, animals, and gods; objects to be placed with a body in



Maya pottery, such as this bowl, was often highly decorated.

© Bettmann/Corbis.

its burial; beverage holders, and much more. The process began with finding the right color and consistency of clay, usually located in riverbeds. The clay was mixed with hard elements, such as rocks or sand, to make it stronger. Then it was kneaded by hand until it was ready to be shaped. Some potters would then create long coiled ropes of clay and smooth them together to make the walls of their pottery pieces. After the vessel was formed, it was allowed to dry.

The Maya mixed clays, minerals, and water to create paints for ceramics. Though some Maya artists preferred to paint only in red and black, their paints could be mixed into a variety of colors—orange, red, purple, and yellow. Certain mixtures would turn into the colors of blue and green during the firing process. Many potters carved designs into their creations as well. The decorations of Maya pottery

ranged from geometric designs to ritual scenes of sacrifice or bloodletting (see Chapter 21 for more information on bloodletting). Maya glyphs frequently appeared on ceramic pots as well.

Maya scribes and artists wrote on a variety of surfaces and objects. Some of the pottery from the Classic era is covered with long columns of glyphs, presenting some of the most sophisticated writing of the era. One such ceramic vessel, a 10-inch (25.4-centimeter) high rectangular object with sides representing the pages of a book, is called the Wright Codex and dates back to about 600 C.E.

Michael Coe and Mark Van Stone noted in their book *Reading the Maya Glyphs* that the text on classic Maya ceramics had “the subtlety and complexity of what may have once been contained in the now-disappeared Maya books of the Classic period.” They also observed that some of this text records the speech of real people, whether a statement by one person or a dialogue between two.



Painted murals

Two sets of Maya painted murals had been found by the early twenty-first century. The famous set of three room-sized murals at Bonampak were found in the 1940s in Chiapas, Mexico. The murals at Bonampak are unique among Maya art in that they depict everyday scenes. These beautifully painted murals date back to about 800 C.E. and have given archaeologists and historians a great deal of information about the details of Maya existence—clothes, music, rituals, courtly life, war, sacrifice, and much more. The three murals, when viewed together, tell a story that moves forward in time (see the box on pages 404–405).

More recently, a far earlier mural was found in the tiny city of San Bartolo in Guatemala dating back to 50 B.C.E. Although the excavation is not yet complete and only portions of the mural have been exposed, the mural appears to be a skillfully painted portrayal of Maya mythology as ex-

This Bonampak mural features a great priest with his attendants. © Charles & Josette Lenars/Corbis.



The Bonampak Murals

In the eastern part of the Mexican state of Chiapas, a group of Maya people known as the Lacandón have managed to live in relative isolation from the modern world, still practicing many of the ancient Maya traditions (see Chapter 23 for more information on the Lacandón). The Lacandón made pilgrimages (journeys to sacred places) to the ancient ruins known in the twenty-first century as Bonampak, which remained unknown to the rest of the world until the 1940s. There is much controversy about who, among non-natives, actually “discovered” Bonampak.

Among many exciting artifacts of the ancient town’s ruins was a small temple with three rooms. Every surface in all

three rooms of the temple was painted. Together, the three murals, each encompassing a room, form a narrative or story. The first mural is a scene at the Bonampak court, centering around what appears to be a supreme ruler and his family. There are also elaborately dressed nobles wearing headdresses and dancers putting on costumes, all seeming to prepare for some kind of ceremony.

In a panel below the elite are warriors and servants, as well as musicians playing drums and trumpets and wearing masks to portray gods. The second mural features a furious battle in which an enemy city is being raided. Warriors in full costume are shown as

pressed in the *Popol Vuh* (title translated as “Book of Council”), which presents the traditional mythology of the Mayas. The art is far more sophisticated than expected, and archaeologists believe there were many other murals from the pre-Classic era that did not survive the centuries of damp, tropical weather. The mural at San Bartolo also contains sixteen glyphs, some of the earliest ever found.

Maya numbers

The Mayas used the bar and dot system of writing numbers, which had been in use among early Mesoamerican peoples for some time. The Mayas were able to express all numerals through three symbols. A shell represented 0, a dot represented the value of 1, and a bar represented the value of 5. Numbers were usually written from bottom up, unlike modern numbers, which run horizontally. For example, to

they attack. The defeated prisoners of the battle are shown on another wall. They have been stripped of their clothing and sit before their judges, who will determine whether they will be sacrificed or become slaves.

The third mural depicts musicians and people dancing in elaborate costumes. A human sacrifice is taking place; a prisoner, apparently already dead, is being held down while his body is being beaten. Men dressed in long white feathered capes look upon the scene.

The murals were painted around 800 C.E. Like many Maya cities, Bonampak had been warring with its neighbor city, Yaxchilan, for centuries, but peace

was established sometime at the end of the eighth century when the king of Bonampak, Chaan Muwan, married a princess from Yaxchilan. The king then commissioned the murals. By the time the murals had been painted, the city of Bonampak, like many other Classic era Maya cities, was being deserted by its people.

The Bonampak murals differ from almost all other Maya art in that they clearly, and in much detail, depict daily life. Most Maya art presents gods, kings, and abstract symbols. In these murals, it is almost as if the painter was recording the reality of life so later generations could see what it was like.

write the number 7 in the Maya system, a bar running horizontally is placed at the bottom; over it are two dots running horizontally. Thirteen would be written with two bars, one on top of the other, on the bottom position, and three dots directly over the bars.

The Maya number system was vigesimal—based on the number 20. Most scholars believe the Mesoamericans chose 20 as their base because people have 20 fingers and toes with which to count. The number system of the modern-day world is decimal-based, or based on 10. In Maya mathematics, numbers larger than 20 were written in powers of 20, just as modern numbers are written in powers of 10.

To illustrate, take the example of the numeral 1,424. In the decimal system, the number at the far right position, 4, is in the ones column ($4 \times 1 = 4$). The number to the left of it, the 2, is in the tens column ($2 \times 10 = 20$). The 4 in the

hundreds column means 4×100 or 400, and the 1 in the thousands column means 1,000.

In the vigesimal system the columns, which go from bottom to top, present ones, twenties, 400s, 8,000, 160,000, and so on. In the number 1,424, the bottom line or ones column would be represented by four dots (representing, in the decimal system, 4). On top of the ones would be the twenties column. This would be two bars and a dot (representing, in the decimal system, $11 \times 20 = 220$). On top of the twenties is the 400s column, in which there would be three dots (representing, in the decimal system, $3 \times 400 = 1,200$). So $1,200 + 220 + 4 = 1,424$.

The number 45 would be represented by a bar on the bottom (1×5) and two dots (2×20) over the bar. It was easy to add numbers written in the Maya bar and dot system. The numbers were set side by side and then combined by columns. Subtraction is a process of eliminating, rather than combining, the dots and bars. The Maya did not use fractions.

In the Maya number system, 80 would be represented by a shell on the bottom row, representing zero ones, and with four dots in the twenties column. The Maya are often credited with being the first people of the world to have created the concept of zero, which is very necessary to complex arithmetic and numeric expression. However, it is possible that the Mayas adopted the concept from the Olmecs (pronounced OLE-mecks) or another earlier Mesoamerican culture. The concept of zero as a placeholder in written numbers did not reach European countries until around 800 C.E. Despite the simplicity of the bar and dot system, the Maya also used glyphs and pictures of gods to express numbers as well. This led to some confusion when scholars deciphered Maya artifacts.

The Maya calendar system

Diego de Landa, the Spanish bishop in Yucatán responsible for the destruction of many Maya cultural objects, was also the author of one of the fullest accounts of Maya culture (for more information on Landa, see Chapter 19: The Mystery of the Maya). In his book about the Maya, *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* (written in 1566; title roughly translated as “History of Yucatán Things”), Landa described the

Maya calendar in detail and included drawings of glyphs. Scholars in the twentieth century used Landa's book to help determine how the Maya calendar system worked.

The priests were the primary calendar experts among the Mayas. They used a combination of three basic calendars: the sacred round, the solar calendar, and the Long Count. The system was based on calendars of other early Mesoamerican groups, such as the Olmec, Zapotec, and Teotihuacáns (pronounced TAY-uh-tee-wah-KAHNS). Scholars believe the Maya system dates back to about 100 B.C.E. It was so accurate that many believe Maya dates were actually more exact than those of contemporary calendars.

The sacred round calendar

The sacred round calendar, or *tzolkin*, which was used to plan religious ceremonies, measured a 260-day year. There were 20 day names and 13 day numbers used for this calendar. Every one of the 260 days in the sacred round had a unique day name/day number combination. The day names, and their possible meanings in English, are as follows:

- Imix: water, wine, or waterlily
- Ik': air, wind
- Ak 'bal: night
- K' an: corn
- Chicchan (or Chikchan): serpent, snake
- Cimi (or Kimi): death
- Manik': deer or hand
- Lamat: Venus or rabbit
- Muluc: water or rain
- Oc: dog
- Chuen: frog or monkey
- Eb: skull or broom
- Ben: reed or cornstalk
- Ix: jaguar, magician
- Men: eagle
- Cib (or Kib): owl or shell
- Caban: Earth
- Etz 'nab: flint or knife

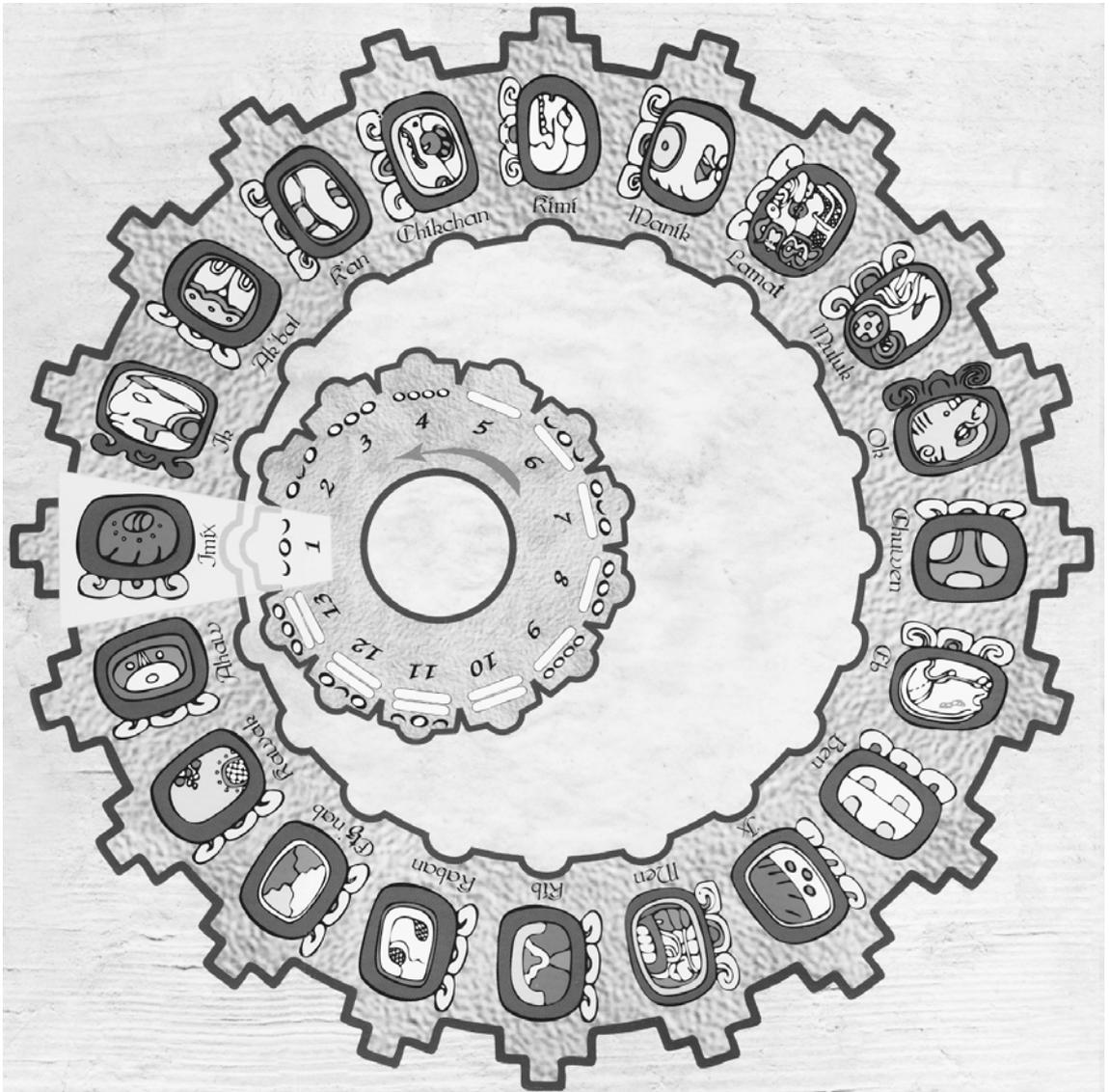
- Cauac: storm
- Ahaw (or Ahau): lord

The first day of the sacred calendar year is 1 Imix. Day 2 is combined with the second day name, and so the second day is 2 Ik', the third day is 3 Ak 'bal, and so forth in the order they are presented in the list. After the first twenty days, the sequence begins again as 2 Imix, 3 Ik', 4 Ak 'bal, and so forth throughout the 260 possible combinations. Each one of these day name/day number combinations was associated with a deity. In the sacred round, every day had meanings and associations used to foresee the future when planning for war, marriage, or large ceremonies. People were named by the day name and day number of the particular day they were born.

The solar calendar

The solar calendar, or *haab* (often called the “vague calendar”), measured a 365-day year. There were eighteen 20-day months, each with a month name and a 5-day period at the end to finish out the year, called Uayeb (Wayeb). This last short period was considered a very unlucky time. The month names and their possible meanings in English are listed below:

- Pop: mat
- Uo (or Wo): frog
- Zip: stag
- Zotz: bat
- Tzec: skull
- Xul: termination or dog
- Yaxk 'in: red or new sun
- Mol: gather or water
- Ch 'en: well or black
- Yax: green
- Sac (or Zac): white
- Ceh: forest
- Mac: cover
- K' ank' in: yellow or skeleton
- Muan: falcon or owl
- Pax: drum



- Kayab: turtle
- Cumhu: dark
- Uayeb (Wayeb, the 5-day period to finish the year): ghost

In the solar year, the days were numbered 0 to 19 and combined with the month name. The first day of the year, therefore, was 0 Pop, then 1 Pop, 2 Pop, and so on through 19 Pop, and then the second month began: 0 Uo, 1 Uo, and

Illustration of the tzolkin, or the Maya sacred round calendar. *Calendario Maya* (www.calendariomaya.com).

so on. 0 Pop, New Year's Day on this calendar, is thought to have been sometime in the month of July. The solar calendar measured seasons and was used primarily for farming.

The 52-year cycle

The Maya priests combined the sacred round calendar and the solar calendar. Every day had two names—its name on the sacred round and its name on the solar calendar. Both names were usually used on stelae. An event, for example, may have happened on 9 Imix 5 Zotz. Using both names of the two calendar systems, it would be 52 years before 9 Imix 5 Zotz, or any other date using both calendars would recur.

For the Maya, history happened in “bundles” of 52 years, like centuries are to us today. If they had just used these two calendar systems, there would have been no way to place their dates in any larger time frame than the 52-year cycles. During a term of two hundred years, for example, there would be three 9 Imix 5 Zotz days and no way to tell which was which. To resolve this problem, the Maya devised a third calendar, called the Long Count.

The Long Count

With the Long Count, the Maya priests devised a way to count back to the beginning of the world. The Maya believed the world had been created and destroyed several times before the present era. For reasons unknown, they placed the first day of the present era on a date that would be August 13, 3114 B.C.E. (some sources say) on the Gregorian calendar (the calendar used by contemporary society). On Maya calendars the first day of creation, or day zero, was expressed as 4 Ahaw 8 Cumhu.

Long Count dates count back to the zero year in special time periods (like twenty-first century months, years, and centuries). These are modified forms of the vigesimal system, as follows:

- 1 kin = 1 day
- 1 uinal = 20 days
- 1 tun = 360 days (approximately 1 year)
- 1 katun = 7,200 days (approximately 20 years)

- 1 baktun = 144,000 days (approximately 395 years)
- 1 pictun = 2,880,000 days (approximately 7,885 years)

A Long Count date was usually expressed from the largest time period (baktun or katun; pictuns were rarely used) to the smallest (kin) using the bar and dot numeral system. After the Long Count date, Maya scribes wrote the sacred round and solar calendar date as well. In an example from the Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation's *Maya Civilization* Web site, a typical Maya date would be 9.10.19.5.11, which is the expression in bar and dot format of 10 Chuen 4 Cumhu.

The numbers relate to the time periods as follows: 9 baktuns (1,296,000 days), 10 katuns (72,000 days), 19 tuns (6,840 days), 5 uinals (100 days), 11 kins (11 days). This adds up to 1,374,951 days, or approximately 3,767 solar years since the first day of creation, and falls at the sacred calendar round day named 10 Chuen, and at the solar day named 4 Cumhu. It would be sometime in the modern calendar year around 651 or 652 C.E.

Astronomy

In order to develop such accurate calendars, Maya astronomers (people who study the planets, sun, moon, and stars and other celestial bodies) had to have an amazing grasp of the movement of the heavenly bodies. Most scholars agree Maya priests obtained this knowledge through a careful study of the cosmos, and particularly its cycles, over long periods of time. The Maya priests were probably not aiming for the kind of accuracy as desired in the twenty-first century. Because they believed time was laid out in a set of interconnected cycles, they wanted to learn about the cycles in the heavens that corresponded to the cycles of their calendars. Many of the Maya's measurements of the heavenly cycles are preserved in the Dresden codex.

The Maya charted their observations and, with tables for the various movements of the stars and planets, attempted to understand the universe with mathematical precision. Among the primary observations made by Maya astronomers was the passage of the sun through its zenith (the point di-



An astronomical observatory used by the Mayas for observing movements of the planet Venus. *Photograph by Deborah J. Baker. Copyright © Deborah J. Baker.*

rectly above them in the sky). In Mesoamerica, the sun could be observed directly overhead two days each year. On those days, no shadows were cast at noon.

The Mayas also charted eclipses of the sun and moon. Many Maya buildings were constructed in such a way to cast certain shadows during the solstices (two times each year—June 21 and December 21—when the sun is farthest from the equator and days and nights are at their most unequal in length) and equinoxes (two times each year—March 21 and September 23—when the sun crosses the equator and day and night are of equal length) each year. The Maya were also extremely interested in Venus, and knew its movements and cyclical positions in relation to the sun and Earth. They also observed the positions of the Milky Way.

The Maya used their knowledge of the cosmos to attempt to see into the future and to time their rituals and ceremonies based on the cycles of the heavenly bodies. For ex-

ample, if the end of a katun, a 20-year calendar period, came at the same time as a particular planetary cycle or position, it might signal to Maya kings that it was time to go to war with a neighboring city. In classic Maya times, the ends of cycles were celebrated with rituals, sometimes involving putting up stelae to commemorate the day and the ruling Maya king.

The discoveries continue ...

From the concept of zero to a writing system that represented a full spoken language to a wide range of advanced artwork to a highly accurate calendar system, the advances of the Mayas in the arts and sciences have never failed to amaze. Scholars have spent lifetimes trying to solve just a few of the mysteries the Mayas left behind. Despite the destruction of the Maya codices and other written and artistic monuments, in recent decades they have made great steps forward in this search to understand the American past. While some Maya experts have made remarkable progress in deciphering the Maya glyphs carved into stelae and painted on ceramics, others have made discoveries like the uncovering of the murals at San Bartolo. Their work will almost certainly continue to shake up the current beliefs about the Maya culture for many years to come.

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Maya Economy and Daily Life



From the Classic Maya (pronounced MY-uh) era, beginning about 250 C.E., Maya artists and scribes (people who wrote glyphs—the Maya writing system using figures for words and sounds—on monuments and in books) focused their writing on the lives of the rich and powerful of their time. Almost all of the writing and art left behind portrays the heroic deeds and courtly lives of the nobles of ancient Maya cities.

The upper classes of Maya society represented only a tiny portion of the population. Most people lived in humble farming villages and towns ruled by one of the large Maya cities. The farmers worked hard to feed themselves and to provide the enormous amount of food, goods, and labor necessary to support the cities and their elite or ruling classes.

With the breakthroughs in deciphering (figuring out the meaning of) Maya glyphs, many historians in the last decades of the twentieth century focused on the royal families whose lives were chronicled by Maya historians. There are many unexplored ancient cities and villages, untouched by modern hands, lying beneath the tropical jungles—especially those without huge pyramids or ornate temples to draw at-



Words to Know

Alliances: Connections between states or other political units based on mutual interests, intermarriage of families, or other relations.

Cacao beans: Beans that grow on an evergreen tree from which cocoa, chocolate, and cocoa butter are made.

Cenote: Underground reservoirs or rivers that become accessible from above ground when cave ceilings collapse or erode.

Decipher: To figure out the meaning of something in code or in an ancient language.

Elite: A group of people within a society who are in a socially superior position

and have more power and privileges than others.

Glyph: A figure (often carved into stone or wood) used as a symbol to represent words, ideas, or sounds.

Milpa: Cornfield.

Obsidian: Dark, solid glass formed by volcanoes used to make blades, knives, and other tools.

Scribe: Someone hired to write down the language, to copy a manuscript, or record a spoken passage.

Stela: A stone pillar carved with images or writing, often used to provide historical details or for religious or political purposes.

tention to them. There is little known about the daily lives of ordinary Mayas: were they poor or comfortable in their lives? How strict was the rule of the royal families? What were the roles of women? How did their economies work?

Many fascinating new clues to the daily existence of the Maya are being discovered as excavations continue in the twenty-first century. In the early 2000s new archeological evidence revealed not only a thriving trade network, but a wealthy merchant class during the Classic Maya era—both of which had been previously unknown to scholars.

Cancuen: Place of serpents

In April 2000, U.S. archaeologist Arthur Demarest and a team of Guatemalan scientists were walking through what they assumed was a small set of ruins in a remote area

of Guatemala's tropical jungles. After some stelae (upright slabs or pillars of stone carved with pictures and glyphs) found in the Maya cities of Tikal and Dos Pilas in the Petén jungles of Guatemala had referred to a great marketplace known as Cancuen (pronounced CAN-coo-win), Demarest and his team led an expedition deep into the jungle to find the site.

As Demarest ascended a hill, he suddenly fell shoulder-deep into a leafy hole, which he quickly realized was a snake nest. Forced to remain perfectly still to avoid being bitten by the poisonous snakes, he had plenty of time to survey his surroundings. He discovered that the hill he had climbed was not a hill at all, but rather the roof of a huge palace completely covered over by the tropical forests. Demarest had stumbled upon the great city of Cancuen, which meant "the Place of the Serpents" in Mayan.

Early investigations proved Demarest had indeed discovered a huge, 3-story palace covering nearly 250,000 square feet (23,250 square meters)—about the size of six football fields. Inside there were nearly two hundred rooms, most with 20-foot-high (6.1-meter) ceilings, and at least eleven courtyards. The palace's solid limestone walls had been well-preserved by the tropical forests, holding up far better than the Maya's usual walls made of concrete and mud.

It was immediately clear that the king who had reigned during the design and construction of the palace must have had great power; the palace would have dazzled any visitors who entered the maze-like building. Outside the palace were houses where artisans (craftspeople) and merchants lived. There were also hundreds of workshops, where the artisans carved jade (a green gemstone) ornaments and jewelry, and made knives and tools out of obsidian (a solid, dark glass created by volcanoes). It is believed that Cancuen's



Map showing the major sites of Maya civilization in Mesoamerica. Map by XNR Productions. The Gale Group.



Ruins of the once three-story palace at Cancuen, Guatemala. AP/Wide World Photos.

population ranged between about one thousand to three thousand people at its peak.

Cancuen was located at the foot of the highlands, on a small natural harbor at the beginning of the Passion River. Its location at the head of the river allowed the city to control trade between the southern highlands of Central America and the Classic Maya city-states (independent self-governing communities consisting of a single city and the surrounding area) of Tikal, Palenque, and Copán further north. The business of trade had been ongoing in Cancuen since 300 C.E. or earlier, making the city and most of its people, both workers and nobles, very wealthy. The city became extremely powerful because it controlled the area's natural resources, such as jade, which was highly valued by the Mayas. (Jade was considered as valuable as gold was to other civilizations.)

In a Public Broadcasting System interview available on the PBS *Online Newshour* Web site in 2000, Demarest described

much evidence of Cancuen's thriving trade, including a 35-pound (16-kilogram) jade boulder used for making plaques and other artifacts, as well as pyrite (fool's gold) and obsidian workshops. According to Demarest, many "of the most precious things in the Maya world were being controlled by [the king of Cancuen]," most of which were then "worked into fine artifacts by his artisans, and then traded down river."

While other Maya cities derived their power from religious activities and warfare, scholars were surprised to find no sign of warfare in Cancuen. Instead, its rulers forged strong trade alliances (connections based on mutual interests, intermarriage of families, or other relations) with other cities throughout the Maya world. Trade, and the wealth it brought, made the city strong until, like other Maya cities in the Classic era, it was abandoned in the ninth century for reasons that remain uncertain.

Trade

In pre-Classic times, before about 300 C.E., scholars believe the Maya probably traded only locally among themselves. By 400, however, the city of Teotihuacán (pronounced TAY-uh-tee-wah-KAHN) in the far northeastern section of the Valley of Mexico (about 25 miles [40.2 kilometers] northeast of present-day Mexico City) had developed a vast economic empire (a vast, complex unit extending across boundaries and dominated by one central power) covering much of the southern two-thirds of Mexico, Guatemala and Belize, as well as some parts of Honduras and El Salvador. The Maya world was strongly influenced by the Teotihuacáns, and the Classic Maya cities were clearly a part of the Teotihuacán trading network for a significant period of time. From then forward, long-distance trade was central to the Maya and remained so until the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century.

The first known encounter between the Mayas and the Europeans provides a view of the trading activities in the Maya world. When Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) and his crew were on their fourth voyage to the Americas (still looking for the Indies, or Asia) in 1502, they spotted a large seagoing canoe off the coast of Honduras. The canoe was very wide and cut from a single, giant tree. It was



Cacao beans were highly prized by the Mayas, both as food as well as a type of money. *Birchbank Press Photo Bank. Reproduced by permission.*

loaded with goods including wooden obsidian-edged swords, copper tools, textiles, embroidered and painted clothing, ceramics, and cacao beans (beans that grow on an evergreen tree from which cocoa, chocolate, and cocoa butter are made). The men and women aboard the canoe were clearly transporting goods for trade. They told the Spaniards they had come from *Maia*, and this is how the Spanish came to call them the “Mayas.”

In the Classic era, trade was central to the economy of the numerous independent city-states. Every region had its own special products to export (sell to other places). Areas that had control of the resources of the highland areas (like Cancuen), exported jade, obsidian, and quetzal feathers (highly valued green tropical bird feathers). The lowlands exported ceramics, honey, and rubber. Coastal Maya traders exported salt, shells, and

dried fish. The exchange of these products usually involved a direct trade of items, such as jade for ceramics. Sometimes, though, Maya merchants paid for goods with cacao beans, which were used as a kind of money.

Cities that did not have direct access to resources like obsidian or jade were still major centers of the large Maya trading network. Tikal, for example, the largest of the Classic era cities, served as a vital trade center where products like salt were brought in from the coast and traded for obsidian brought in from the highlands. Merchants in Tikal purchased raw materials, such as obsidian, and made products to sell, creating a very large and profitable industry in the city. Tikal had about one hundred obsidian workshops, where knives and tools were made, and many other industries as well.

By the post-Classic era after 900 C.E. (when Chichén Itzá [pronounced chee-CHEN eet-SAH], Mayapán, and Uxmal [pronounced oosh-MAHL] in the northern lowlands were



The ruins of Tikal, a once thriving trade center for Maya merchants. © Enzo and Paolo Ragazzini/Corbis.

powerful cities), many scholars believe prosperous long-distance trading had prompted a new class to emerge—a large and strong middle class. In the northern lowlands of Yucatán after about 1000 C.E., a few merchant families grew very wealthy through trade. They often established trading alliances with families in other cities.

Commoners, it seems, were able to rise through the social ranks through successful trade. Soon merchants from both the noble and common working classes came into political power. The middle-class ranks swelled even more in the industrial cities, where craftspeople made up a significant portion of the population and assumed higher status and more wealth than the common workers or farmers.

Traders were highly respected by the Maya people. They were not taxed and were often provided food and lodging by locals while traveling. In ancient Maya times, there were no pack animals to help with transporting goods to far-

away places, so most traders acquired slaves to carry their goods. Slaves were usually people who had been captured during warfare, or sometimes they were criminals or orphans.

The Maya had an excellent road system for traveling between cities. Traders and merchants, as well as their slaves and other people they employed, traveled to cities both within and outside the Maya world. The traders came back with exciting new ideas and many stories to tell. In their travels, they acquired the foods, tools, jewelry, clothing, and arts of the many lands and peoples of Mesoamerica.

Farming

Trade was important to the economy of the Maya city-states, but the single most important economic activity was farming. The city-states could not have survived without enough crops to sustain their people, such as those involved in trade and crafts, as well as construction of city buildings and monuments. The majority of the ancient Maya population was made up of farmers.

Maize (corn) was the primary crop in the Maya world. Maize was considered a gift of the gods to the people. It was part of most Maya religious ceremonies, appeared in much of their art, and even in their personal adornments. Maya headdresses, for example, were often shaped like ears of corn. In stories about the creation of the Maya people, it was believed the gods created humans from maize. Both nobles and common people ate maize on a daily basis, often three times a day with each meal.

Maya farmers also grew other crops: black and red beans, sweet potatoes, squash, pumpkins, cacao, avocados, tomatoes, chili peppers, guavas, papayas, bananas, melons, and cotton. They grew cacao trees for their favorite drink, called *xocoatl*, or chocolate (see the box on pages 430–431), which was generally only available to the ruling classes.

Most Maya farmers lived outside the cities in small villages ruled by local chieftains (leader or head of a group) who were responsible to the nobility of the city-states. The land surrounding these villages was owned by all the people in common. Local leaders, appointed by the nobility, divided

the village land up among families based on need. The farmers received a plot to farm and most had a kitchen garden as well. There was also a communal plot tended to by all of a village's farmers. Village land was not simply to be used for the benefit of the farmers; Maya farmers gave about two-thirds of their crops and much of their labor to the nobility of the nearby city.

Milpa farming

The small plot of land—called a *milpa*, or cornfield—received by each villager was about the right size to provide for their needs. These *milpa* sites were temporary because the Maya use a farming system called “slash and burn” agriculture. Initially, *milpas* were sections of the tropical forest that had not been farmed for many years. Once a family received their *milpa*, they cut down all the jungle growth and the trees, allowing the cuttings to dry out on the land. After burning the cuttings, ashes from the fires provided necessary nutrients to boost the poor soil and farmers could then plant crops on the land.

Farmers usually planted crops during the rainy season, from May to October. After the *milpas* were farmed for a few years, the soil would lose its nutrients and would be abandoned for a time to “rest.” In the Petén area of Guatemala and other parts of the southern lowlands, land was left to rest for about four to seven years; in the northern lowlands of the Yucatán peninsula, where the soil is even thinner, the fields had to be left to rest for about fifteen to twenty years.

When a farmer left a *milpa*, he would clear another section from the forests. Over time, and as the population grew, more and more of the rainforests were cleared for farming to support the needs of the growing Maya world. This rapid clearing may actually have been responsible for climate



Maize, or corn, was the primary crop of Maya farmers. U.S. Agricultural Research Service, USDA.



A field prepared for planting crops by burning, according to the Maya farming custom. © Charles & Josette Lenars/Corbis.

changes in the region, which in turn led to the abandonment of some Classic era cities in the eighth and ninth centuries.

Another challenge faced by Maya farmers was obtaining enough water for their crops. In hilly or mountainous areas of the highlands, the Maya dug terraces (large steps used to create level ground for farming) into the slopes, where water supplies were more plentiful. In some lowland areas where the land was swampy, they developed canal systems in gridlike patterns throughout the farmlands, carrying water, and perhaps even permitting canoe travel, throughout vast areas.

Fields were raised above the canals, receiving a controlled amount of moisture to produce larger crops. In the northern lowlands, villages often formed around cenotes (underground reservoirs or rivers that become accessible from above ground when cave ceilings collapse or erode). The Maya also developed excellent systems for collecting

rainwater, building large tanks to hold water through frequently occurring droughts (long periods of little or no rain). Water was collected during the tropical downpours, which sometimes dumped up to 100 inches (254 centimeters) in a few months.

The Maya did not raise many animals for meat. The exceptions were dogs, kept as pets and sometimes eaten, and turkeys. They did hunt for meat, though, using bows and arrows or blowguns (long narrow pipes through which pellets or poison darts can be blown). Meat gathered from hunting included monkey, deer, iguana, and armadillo. Many Maya farmers also kept bees for honey.

Maya scholar Richard E.W. Adams urged people studying the Maya not to romanticize them. Farmers, under the direction of elite groups in the city, were forced to produce more and more food for the growing populations of the cities. Adams believes—and many other scientists agree—that the Mayas eventually destroyed the tropical rainforest environment, causing the food shortages that marked the end of the Classic era. He described his findings in a 1996 *Cosmos Journal* article:

Maya cities were sustained by large rural populations. Based on intensive ground surveys (mine and others), there were as many as 450 people per square mile. This astounding density is similar to that found today in crowded rural zones.... One current fallacy [something untrue] is that native American populations lived in harmony with nature with relatively little deleterious [bad] effect. It is simply not true for the Maya or many other Mesoamerican groups, nor probably for the New World as a whole. Thirteen hundred years after their entry into the lowlands around 750 C.E. nearly every square meter of land had been modified. This was done first by slash-and-burn farming and later by intensive agricultural systems such as swamp drainage, hillside terracing, and field rotation systems. The vast tropical forests of recent times are a result of 1100 years of recovery after the catastrophic Maya collapse [in] about 840.

Daily life

Marriage, family, and child rearing

Marriage and family were very important to the Mayas. Marriages were often arranged by parents, who would consult a matchmaker with knowledge of the Maya calendar

cycles and the positions of the stars and planets. Couples were matched by their dates of birth. The day of the wedding was also planned around calendar cycles.

The young couple lived with the female's parents for several years after the marriage so the husband could prove his worth to the wife's parents. If the marriage was not working out, it was permissible for the couple to divorce simply by agreeing to it. Both were then free to marry someone else. Among noblemen, it was acceptable to have as many wives as one could afford. Among the common people, however, monogamy (one spouse) was the rule.

The Mayas loved large families. Maya couples greeted the news of a new baby with joy and celebration. Parents would consult a priest when the baby was born to find out about the alignment of the stars and the calendar cycles involved in the child's birth. Priests gave children their names, though children would also get a nickname from their families, and later, a formal name. Male names always began with the prefix *Ah*, which was changed to *Na* after marriage. Female names began with the prefix *Ix*.

When Maya boys reached the age of five, a white shell was braided into their hair. Girls of the same age received a red shell on a string tied around their waists. These symbols of childhood and purity remained in place until the boy was fourteen and the girl reached twelve. At this time, a puberty ceremony was conducted by a priest, assisted by several respected members of the community. After clearing the room of evil spirits, the priest would ask the child to confess any evil acts he or she may have done, and, if all was in order, performed rituals and prayers upon the child ending with the removal of the child's childhood shell. Gifts were exchanged and the adults would then drink *pulque* (pronounced PUHL-kay), a fermented ceremonial drink made from agave cactus, to toast the child's future.

After the puberty ceremony, Maya boys often left home to live in houses with other young, unmarried men. There they learned crafts, played games, and were trained in warfare. They still went daily into the cornfields to work with their fathers. They painted themselves black to show they were single. Boys generally did not marry until the age of eighteen. Girls remained with their parents after puberty, learning

the work they would be expected to perform as wives. They learned to grind maize and cook, spin and weave textiles, sew and embroider, and to do other crafts and household duties. Girls generally were married by the age of fourteen.

When a couple married, they divided the household labor. The man was usually the principal farmer, but the woman worked in the fields too. Men hunted and fished. In the off-seasons, the men were obligated to join huge construction groups who built giant monuments, irrigation canals, roads, and other public works requiring vast amounts of labor.

Women were in charge of home maintenance, cooking, childrearing, and the production of crafts, such as cloth and often pottery. The hardworking Maya women were, for the most part, respected. They were sometimes allowed to own property, and in a few instances, noble Maya women became rulers of the great city-states. Like many societies, however, the Mayas did not treat women as the equals of men. Women were not supposed to look directly at a man, and they were not allowed to eat their meals with men. The women served men their dinners, and ate later.

Houses

When many people think of Maya homes they are likely to think of great palaces or temples. These were the homes of the very small noble class, who lived in the cities. The vast majority of Mayas lived in the outskirts of the cities or in farming villages. Their homes were usually built in complexes, with several homes surrounding a central courtyard. The complex was often made up of the homes of extended family members (the relatives beyond the parents and children, including aunts and uncles, grandparents, and cousins).

The houses of the common people were usually rectangular, with one or two rooms each. They were made from either wood or stone, depending on the materials available. Some houses were made from poles (the trunks of young trees, stripped of their bark) tied together and set on a stone foundation. Most had two doors standing across the house from each other so a breeze could flow through. They did not actually use doors in these doorways, but sometimes hung a blanket across



Mayas still live in houses like this one, similar to those of their ancestors.

© David G. Houser/Corbis.

for privacy. The weather in the tropics was usually warm so there was generally no need to keep out the breezes. Roofs were made of thick palm thatch (plant stocks used for roofing).

There was little furniture in a Maya house. If the house had two rooms, one was used by the whole family for sleeping. Beds were woven straw mats placed on the floor in a low, wooden frame. The other room was used as a kitchen and living room. There were benches and stools along with pottery, baskets, and hanging chili peppers in the room.

Food

In the farming villages and towns throughout the Maya world, women and girls rose very early each day to begin making breakfast, usually with some form of maize. Because maize has tough kernels that are difficult to digest, the Maya women were continually processing it. They soaked the dry kernels in water and lime overnight or longer, then

ground the soaked mixture with stone tools, using a *mano* (a long tube-shaped stone) and a *metate* (a smooth stone surface). This created a thick dough called *zacan*. The Mayas found many ways to use *zacan*. They added water to make *atole*, a thin gruel they drank for breakfast. The women would often put a lump of the *zacan* mixed with a little water into a gourd and send it with the men in the family to eat as a meal while working in the fields.

Maize was also cooked in stews or baked inside corn husks with other ingredients, such as beans, chilies, or turkey meat, to make *tamales*. The most common use for the maize in the twenty-first century is to make the ground meal into tortillas, flat corn pancakes. Many people believe the Mayas have been making tortillas for thousands of years, but some scholars believe the Spanish brought the concept of tortillas to the Americas.

The Maya frequently ate beans with their tortillas, or with *zacan* in soups and stews. The Maya cooks often added hot chili peppers to beans to give them flavor. Beans added important protein to the maize-based diet. Since the Mayas did not eat much meat, protein was very important to their health.

Clothing

For Maya men, the standard item of clothing was the *ex*, a loincloth formed from a long strip of cotton wound around the waist several times and then passed between the legs, with flaps hanging both in front and in back. If the weather was cool, they might also wear a *pati*, a cotton square draped over their shoulders like a cape. Maya women usually wore a short skirtlike garment. Sometimes they wore a shawl, but women were not expected to wear clothing on their upper bodies unless it was cool. Maya women also sometimes wore dresses. Their clothing was often dyed in bright colors and patterns.

Children usually did not wear clothes. Maya people went barefoot much of the time, but they also wore sandals, usually made from deer skin and tied with cords. Jewelry was very common, even among the poor farming people. Most Maya children had multiple body piercings for jewelry—the nose, ears, and various other parts of the face; the holes were gradually enlarged to hold ornamental tubes and plugs.



***Xocolatl*: The Drink of the Gods**

Either the Mayas or the Olmecs (pronounced OLE-mecks) were the probable “inventors” of chocolate. The Mayas have been consuming it as a drink since 100 C.E. or before. The early Mesoamericans discovered the cacao tree, *theobroma cacao* (which means “food of the gods” in Greek), in the tropical forests. At first they removed the pods from the wild trees, but soon the Mayas (in the present-day Mexican state of Tabasco) began transplanting cacao trees to their own land to harvest a steady supply of cacao beans.

Cacao trees produce green pods filled with a wet white pulp and cacao beans. The Mayas removed the seeds

from the pod and allowed them to ferment (a process of breaking down their elements) until they turned dark brown. Then the seeds were dried, roasted, and ground to form a thick paste. For the drink the Mayas called *xocolatl*, meaning “bitter water” (since they usually did not sweeten their cocoa) they added chili and ground maize.

There was no whipped cream in the Maya world, since there were no cows, but the Mayas liked foam on their chocolate. To achieve this, they placed an empty pot on the ground and, from a standing position, poured the chocolate into the pot below. They repeated this, pouring the

All Mayas, except slaves, wore their hair long. Their hairstyles tended to show off the long foreheads specially shaped with the use of boards in infancy. Women wore ponytails gathered at the top of their head, or sometimes they braided their hair using colorful ornaments. Men often burned an area in the middle of their scalp to make it bald, but they let all the hair around the bare spot grow long. They often created elaborate hairstyles with many ponytails, ties, and bands. Huge headdresses were often worn.

Village administration and military duty

By the Classic Maya era beginning in 250 C.E., most villages and farmland were under the rule of one of the large Maya city-states nearby. The king of the city and his priests and nobles were the supreme rulers of the farmers. The laws, taxes, and decisions about war all came from the city. Commoners did not deal directly with the elite; local leaders were



A cacao tree with beans. © Robert van der Hilst/Corbis.

chocolate from pot to pot until there was a good head of foam. They usually drank their chocolate hot.

Chocolate was mainly consumed by the upper class Mayas in the Classic era, but its use probably spread to the common people in later years. Some Maya people drank chocolate with every meal.

Cacao beans were also used as currency, or money, in the Maya world. Bijal P. Trivedi noted a few Maya prices in a *National Geographic* (2002) article stating, “Early explorers to the region found that four [cacao] beans could get you a pumpkin, 10 a rabbit and 100 would buy you a slave.”

appointed by the king to make sure taxes were paid, labor duties fulfilled, and the laws of the city-state obeyed.

Another function of the appointed local leaders was to assemble and maintain local armies. The Maya city-states generally kept their store of weapons in the city, but they took their soldiers from local militias made up of the men and boys of farming towns. The men were trained in hand-to-hand combat, using spears and axes with stone or obsidian blades, and throwing weapons, like lances, slings, and even bows and arrows. Soldiers usually wore a kind of armor made of cotton. In battle, most soldiers painted their faces. Officers of the armies were from the city’s nobility.

Entertainment

Though they worked hard most of their days, farmers and craftspeople who lived outside large city-states were not isolated from the city and its culture (arts, language, beliefs,



In the Eye of the Beholder

The ancient Maya had a strong sense of personal beauty. Some of their standards of beauty and style might stand out in twenty-first-century fashion, but certainly many examples of contemporary fashion would probably have shocked them, too.

- While a Maya baby was still young, its parents placed its head between two boards and then bound them very tightly together. The babies were left like this for a few days. Baby's heads are very soft and quite easy to reshape. This procedure flattened the forehead and caused the head to slope backward, creating the distinctive head shape seen in Maya art. The Mayas found this very attractive.
- The Mayas thought being cross-eyed was very appealing, so mothers of young children tied a bead to a hair or string

hanging between the child's eyes. The eyes, drawn to the bead between them, would cross, and it was every mother's hope her child's eyes would remain crossed.

- Mayas often decorated their teeth. They began by filing the front teeth to a sharp point, then attached small plates of jade or obsidian into holes on the front of the filed teeth.
- Tattoos were also very popular among the Mayas. Both men and women had intricate designs and pictures tattooed all over their faces and bodies. The process was quite painful—after the artist painted the tattoo on the skin with vegetable dyes, he or she would cut into the skin so the tattoo would be permanently absorbed into the skin. This cutting frequently caused infections and illness.

customs, institutions, and other products of human work and thought shared by a group of people at a particular time). Huge festivals were held on a regular basis—generally at the end of every twenty-day month and on other important occasions as well. Thousands of people from miles around would gather in the city's plaza. Religious ceremonies, led by priests in elaborate costumes, usually began the festivities, which often featured ritual bloodlettings or human sacrifice (see Chapter 21 for more information). After the solemn ceremonies, though, there was generally a great deal of music with everyone joining in the dancing and singing. In the plaza, traders would also bring out their goods from far and wide.

Other than festivals, the Maya attended Mesoamerican ball games called *pok-a-tok* in some Mayan languages (see Chapter 21 for more information on the Maya ball game). Maya children played their own versions of the ball game, and played with dolls and board games as well.

The survival of the Maya

Throughout the long history of the Maya, the powerful and wealthy city-states were built through the intense labor of the common workers. The cities thrived, and their people ate the maize and beans the farmers grew. But eventually, one by one, all of the great Maya cities and city-states collapsed and were abandoned. The farmers in many cases were forced to move to another location, mainly to be around a secure water source. In many of the Petén (Guatemala) regions, farming communities were either severely reduced by malnutrition (sickness due to starvation) and disease after the decline of the city-states, or the people simply moved away.

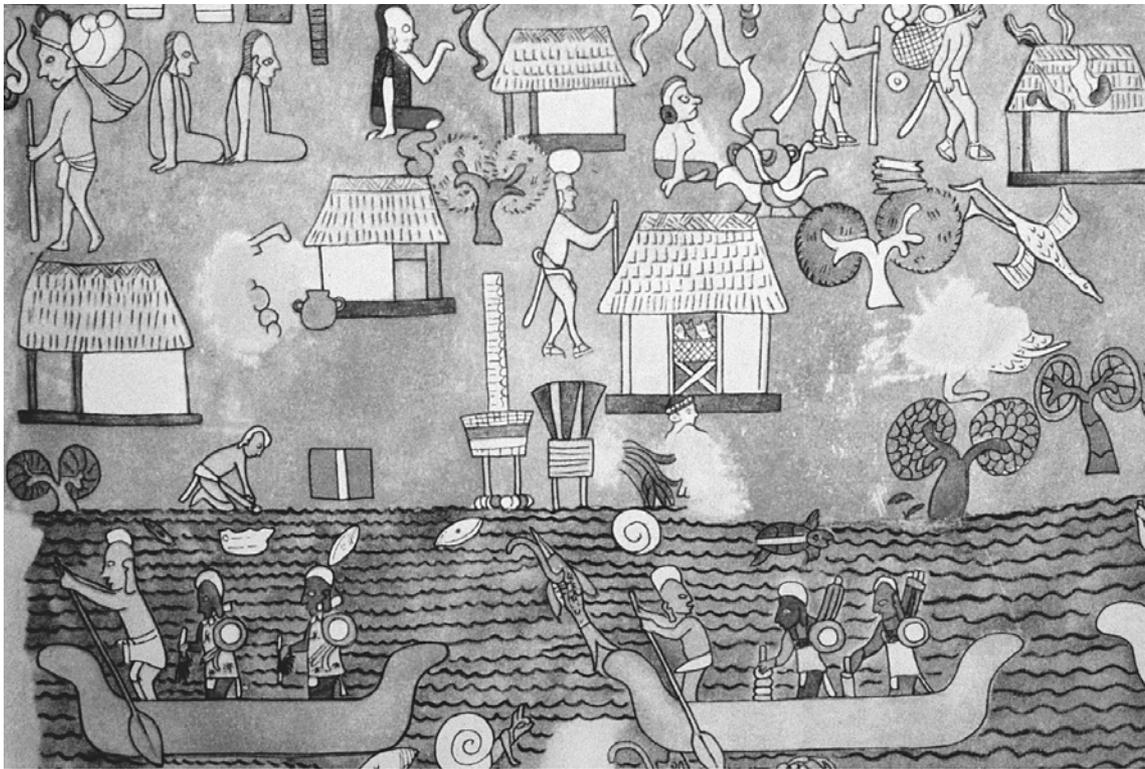
In the northern Yucatán lowlands, and in isolated areas throughout the Maya world, the rise and fall of the Maya city-states may not have had the same devastating impact on farmers' lives. Archeologists have found evidence some farming villages continued to exist in Petén long after the Classic era. At the time of the Spanish conquest in the mid-sixteenth century, many Maya villages were still leading the same lives and practicing the same traditions that had been in existence for many centuries.

The Spanish, in their enthusiasm to convert the Maya to Christianity and to incorporate them into the Spanish culture, caused great changes. The new economic and political systems exploited the native people and caused devastation



Maya sculpture of the head of a man with tattoos.

© Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis.



Painting depicting scenes of daily life in a Maya village.

The Art Archive/Antochiw Collection Mexico/Mireille Vautier.

among the Mayas. When Spanish control ended, the new governments were just as bad or worse. The Maya population and its culture, however, did not disappear. Their culture had been disrupted from outside, but the Maya found ways to live on.

In the early 2000s there were about six million Maya people living in Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. The largest group, the Yucatecs, number around three hundred thousand and live in the Mexican state of Yucatán. Two other large groups, the Tzotzil (pronounced so-TSEEL) and the Tzeltal (pronounced sel-TALL), numbering around two hundred thousand combined, live in the Mexican state of Chiapas. In Guatemala, Mayas make up about half of the population. About 40 percent of the Guatemalan population speaks an Amerindian language (language of an indigenous, or native, person from North or South America)—mostly the Mayan languages—as their first or primary language. The modern Maya religion, however, has become a mix of Christianity and Maya spirituality and traditions.



The Lacandón Maya

The Mayas strongly resisted the Spanish invasion of their lands in the early 1500s. One group of Mayas escaped the Spanish influence altogether, having fled when they learned the Spaniards had arrived. This group hid out in the Lacandón tropical wilderness of Chiapas and lived their lives hidden from the Europeans.

More than two centuries later, in 1790, the Spanish made a last attempt to defeat the Lacandón Maya in order to convert them to Christianity and assimilate them into New Spain. Even then, the Lacandón Mayas were able to resist the Spanish and were left in peace until the mid-twentieth century. They continued to practice Maya traditions and a distinctive form of their religion.

By the 1940s people were coming into the jungles of Chiapas to tap chicle

trees for their rubbery sap, the main ingredient in chewing gum. There were also people seeking to cut down the forests' mahogany trees for their wood. This new invasion of Maya land proved to be a disaster for the Lacandón. The strangers entering their environment exposed the Lacandón to new diseases, causing terrible epidemics that killed many.

For a time in the 1980s, there were only about two hundred surviving Lacandón members, and their forests rapidly disappeared due to growing demands for lumber. Researchers continue to make great efforts to observe the Lacandón Maya in their own environment. Small parcels of forest have been set aside for their use, but rapid deforestation (cutting down the rainforests) threatens the Lacandón Maya and other peoples as well.

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Toltec Culture



Much of what is known about the Toltecs (pronounced TOHL-tecks) comes from the Aztecs (Mexicas; pronounced may-SHEE-kahs), who later succeeded the Toltecs as the rulers of the Valley of Mexico. The Aztecs revered the Toltecs and, when interviewed by the conquering Spanish in the sixteenth century, told a detailed history of Toltec heroism. The Aztecs frequently portrayed the Toltecs idealistically as the great masters of nearly everything they did: architecture, the arts, religious worship, and warfare. In fact, the Aztec reports often credited all the inventions and triumphs of the Mesoamerican past to the Toltecs. Spanish missionary Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (c. 1500–1590), who interviewed the Aztecs and wrote down their stories in the mid-sixteenth century, recorded the words of one Aztec man who summed up the feelings of awe the Aztecs held toward the Toltecs: “The Tolteca were wise. Their works were all good, all perfect, all marvelous ... in truth they invented all the wonderful, precious, and marvelous things which they made” (quoted from Brian M. Fagan’s *Kingdoms of Gold, Kingdoms of Jade*). The advances the Aztecs credited to the Toltecs, such as the invention



Words to Know

Artifact: Any item made or used by humans, such as a tool or weapon, that may be found by archaeologists or others who seek clues to the past.

Atlantes: Large stone statues of warriors, often used as columns to support the roofs of Toltec buildings.

Barbarian: A word used to describe people from another land; it often has a negative meaning, however, suggesting the people described are inferior to others.

Bas-relief: A carved, three-dimensional picture, usually in stone, wood, or plaster, in which the image is raised above the background.

Chacmool: A stone statue of a man in a reclining position, leaning to one side with his head up in a slightly awkward position; the statue's stomach area forms a kind of platform on which the Toltecs placed a bowl or plate for offerings to the gods—sometimes incense or small animals, but often human hearts.

Chiefdom: A social unit larger and more structured than a tribe but smaller and less structured than a state, which is mainly governed by one powerful ruler. Though there are not distinct classes in a chiefdom,

people are ranked by how closely they are related to the chief; the closer one is to the chief, the more prestige, wealth, and power one is likely to have.

Elite: A group of people within a society who are in a socially superior position and have more power and privileges than others.

Mass human sacrifices: Large-scale killing of people—or many people being killed at one time—as offerings to the gods.

Obsidian: Dark, solid glass formed by volcanoes used to make blades, knives, and other tools.

Pantheon: All of the gods that a particular group of people worship.

Quetzal: A Central American bird with bright green feathers.

Sacrifice: To make an offering to the gods, through personal possessions like cloth or jewels, or by killing an animal or human as the ultimate gift.

Tribute: A payment to a nation or its ruler, usually made by people from a conquered territory as a sign that they surrender to the imposed rule; payment could be made in goods or labor or both.

of the calendar and techniques in architecture and the arts, had actually been the work of earlier groups in Mesoamerica—the Olmecs (pronounced OLE-mecks), Zapotecs, Teotihuacáns (pronounced TAY-uh-tee-wah-KAHNS), Mayas (pronounced MY-uhs), and many other societies preceding the Toltecs.

A lack of artifacts (items made or used by humans, such as tools or weapons) from the Toltec empire has made it extremely difficult for archaeologists to restore the ancient sites or learn details about their history. The artifacts they have found, however, seem to conflict with Aztec accounts. While the Aztecs described the remarkable beauty and wonder of the city of Tula, the ancient capital of the Toltecs, archaeologists found little there to inspire such awe. The actual site of Tula was not recognized as the Toltec capital until the 1940s, largely because the ruins were not magnificent at all. Tula was never as grand or as large as the nearby ancient ruins of Teotihuacán. Besides, its ruins were looted by the Aztecs when they were building their own capital city, Tenochtitlán (pronounced tay-notch-teet-LAHN). If there once was great art there, it has long since disappeared.

Nonetheless, the story of the warrior nobles who brought together a diverse and divided empire by waging war and spreading their religion is of monumental importance in the background of ancient Mexico and its people. It is probably important to remember, however, that the Toltec history told by the Aztecs tells us as much about the Aztecs as it does about the Toltecs.

Dates of predominance

c. 900–1200 C.E.

Name variations and pronunciation

Toltec; sometimes Tolteca. Pronounced TOHL-teck. The original name the Toltecs used for themselves is not known. They received the name *Toltecs* from the Aztecs; it means “the artificers” or “master builders” in Nahuatl (pronounced NAH-wah-tul), the language of both the Toltecs and the Aztecs.

The first Toltecs were called the Toltec-Chichimec. During the days of the great Teotihuacán empire, based in the Valley of Mexico from about 400 to 700 C.E., Mesoamericans called the people who lived to the north of the Valley of Mexico the “Chichimecs” and considered them “barbarians”



Map showing the sites of the ancient Toltec civilization in Mesoamerica.
 Map by XNR Productions. The Gale Group.

(a word used to describe people from another land; it often has a negative meaning, however, suggesting the people described are inferior to others) because they were nomads and had not developed a full farming culture.

After the fall of Teotihuacán around 700 C.E., there were invasions into the valley by groups from the north. The earliest was led by the Toltec-Chichimecs, but other groups joined them as they settled in the Valley of Mexico. These groups gradually united as the Toltecs, though their union was not one of culture but of a shared need for a thriving community and the strength it provided for wars or conquests.

Location

The Toltec base was their capital city of Tula, in the far north of the Valley of Mexico in the present-day Mexican

state of Hidalgo, about 50 miles (80 kilometers) north of Mexico City.

There is debate, however, about the extent of the Toltec empire. While some scholars believe the Toltecs ruled only a portion of the Valley of Mexico, others believe the Toltec empire (a vast, complex political unit extending across political boundaries and dominated by one central power) extended from the Chichimec territory to the north down to Monte Albán in the south, with other conquests or areas of influence reaching into the Maya lands at Chichén Itzá (pronounced chee-CHEN eet-SAH) in the present-day Mexican state of Yucatán.

Important Sites

Tula

It is difficult for archaeologists to reconstruct the ruins of the Toltec capital city, Tula. The city was burned and destroyed by the invading Chichimec groups who forced the Toltecs out in the twelfth century. Two centuries later the Aztecs, who were building their capital 50 miles (80 kilometers) away at Tenochtitlán, carried off the artwork and architectural structures of Tula to use in their construction.

Tula was known in the Nahuatl language as Tollan—the Place of Reeds. It was situated on a high rocky promontory (elevated place) protected by steep slopes on three sides. There had been villages located at the site from very early times, and by about 800 C.E. many bands of nomadic peoples had settled in the area. It became a crafts center for making pottery and obsidian (dark, solid glass formed by volcanoes) tools and knives.

The city reached its peak in the tenth century; then, beginning about 950 C.E., the rulers of Tula completely rebuilt the city in a century-long project. By this time Tula's population was somewhere between thirty-five thousand and sixty thousand people, and the city sprawled over about 5.5 miles (8.8 kilometers). During this rebuilding, according to Michael D. Coe in *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs* (1994), all the streets were reoriented from true north to 15° east of north. A large plaza and ceremonial center (place peo-



Ruins of the Toltec city of Tula, Mexico. © *Danny Lehman/Corbis.*

ple gather to practice their religion) were added with ornate pyramids, temples, and ball courts.

The largest structure in Tula is known as Pyramid C. It was so badly vandalized (willfully destroyed or disfigured) that there are no sculptures or artwork left to examine for clues about the culture. The smaller Pyramid B, though, shows why the Toltecs were considered master builders. Pyramid B is a stepped pyramid. Extending from the front is a grand and ornate colonnade (hall with evenly spaced columns); inside the colonnade the walls are lined with bas-relief (carved three-dimensional pictures of stone, wood, or plaster, in which the image is raised above the background) carvings of warriors. A stairway leads to a two-room temple on top of the pyramid. At the doorway to the temple there are two stone columns representing the feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl (pronounced kates-ahl-koh-AH-tul). There are two rooms inside the temple featuring tall pillars in the form of warriors that serve as roof supports. Giant stone fig-



Remains of the “Serpent Wall” in Tula depicting snakes devouring humans.
© Paul Almasy/Corbis.

ures of warriors like these are found throughout Tula, and are called *atlantes*. *Atlantes* are just one of the art forms at Tula demonstrating the Toltec emphasis on the warrior cult.

Another common form of sculpture found within Pyramid B’s temple are *chacmools*, statues of men reclining or lying down at an angle, with their heads up in a slightly awkward position. The stomach area of these statues forms a kind of platform on which a bowl or plate was placed as offerings to the gods—sometimes incense (a substance, such as wood, that emits a pleasant odor when burned) or small animals, but often human hearts. Pyramid B is flanked with bas-reliefs depicting the symbols of warriors, including eagles eating hearts, jaguars, and coyotes.

There are other pyramids, two ball courts, and many colonnades around the plaza. One 130-foot (39.6-meter) wall, called the “Serpent Wall,” gruesomely depicts a serpent eating a human being. A low building at the border of the plaza features a wall called the *tzompantli* (pronounced



Illustration of a Toltec woman. *The Library of Congress.*

tzome-PAHN-tee), a rack on which hundreds of decapitated human heads were mounted, perhaps in association with the sacrifices (offerings to the gods) of the defeated players in the ball games.

People lived in and around the capital city in complexes, or groups of about five houses built together with walls around the grouping. Each complex had a central courtyard and a place of worship. The houses were usually rectangular with several rooms for a family's use.

Archaeologists found the art at Tula focused mostly on the grim subjects of war and sacrifice. The Aztecs, on the other hand, reported a city of incomparable beauty and majesty. Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, in their book *The Course of Mexican History* (1995), sum up the very different views of the city that emerged from the many Aztec reports:

“Palace interiors were decked with the brilliant plumage of exotic birds, while various salons were lined with sheets of gold, jewels, and rare seashells. Residents’ ears were soothed by the sweet singing of pet birds.”

It is likely that a great deal of Tula’s beauty simply did not endure. Many of the adornments that disintegrated over time or were whisked away by looters probably brightened the city and eased the somber tone most people find in its ruins. But Meyer and Williams also caution that the Aztec “version of paradise on earth, in which there was an abundance of all things, was embellished in the retelling over the centuries.”

Toltec influence in Chichén Itzá

Archaeologists have reported a striking similarity between the Toltec capital of Tula and the northern lowlands Maya center of Chichén Itzá (pronounced chee-CHEN eet-SAH). The cities have similar layouts and share many charac-

teristic features. These included architectural style, with rounded temples not seen elsewhere, and features like *atlantes*, *chacmools*, ball courts, and *tzompantlis*.

Though the connection between the post-Classic (900–1521 C.E.) Mayas and the Toltecs is very obvious, the nature of this connection has long been a matter of speculation. To some it seems clear the Toltecs invaded the Maya at Chichén Itzá and ruled the city as a conquest. Others think it is equally likely the Maya traders absorbed some of the Toltec styles during their extensive travels. Some theorize that the Mayas at some point brought the city of Tula under their power.

History

From about 400 to about 700 C.E. the city of Teotihuacán, located in the Valley of Mexico, ruled over a vast economic empire that included much of the southern two-thirds of Mexico, most of Guatemala and Belize, and some parts of Honduras and El Salvador. Teotihuacán was powerful and prosperous and kept the diverse warlike tribes, called the Chichimecs, to the north of the Valley of Mexico from attacking within the empire.

When Teotihuacán fell a turbulent period ensued, lasting from about 700 to 900 C.E. Some have called this period the “dark ages” of Mesoamerica. Most of the cities that had once flourished within the Teotihuacán trade network were reduced to villages, and constant war between small factions made life difficult. There was less expression in the arts and less skill in the crafts. Only a few cities, notably Cholula in the present-day state of Puebla, Xochicalco (pronounced zoe-chee-CAHL-coe) in the state of Morelos, and El Tajín in the northern part of the state of Veracruz, maintained rule over small states.

The ancient Mesoamericans distinguished between the “civilized” area of settled agricultural peoples of the Valley of Mexico and regions to the south and the “barbarians” to the north, where people hunted and gathered and did not live in settled villages or towns. The northerners were called the Chichimecs, a diverse group who, during times of drought (long period of little or no rainfall) or famine in the

past, had attempted unsuccessfully to invade the towns and villages around the Teotihuacán empire.

Without the unifying force of Teotihuacán, there was little to prevent the Chichimecs from invading. Sometime in the early 900s, a group of Chichimecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico and one of their first acts was to invade Teotihuacán. They then burned and destroyed the remains of the abandoned city.

According to Aztec history, a leader from the north named Mixcoatl (pronounced meesh-COE-waht-tul; meaning “Cloud Serpent”) led the invasion of Teotihuacán. He then established a new city in the Valley of Mexico called Culhuacán (pronounced cool-whah-CAHN) around 930 C.E. The people he initially led were the Toltec-Chichimecs, a specific group of Chichimecs who spoke the Nahuatl language and had lived at the borders of the Teotihuacán empire in western Mexico. Later other groups would join the Toltec-Chichimecs to form the group known as the Toltecs.

There are many conflicting stories about Mixcoatl and his military campaigns through Mesoamerica, his death, and the birth of his son, Topiltzin. Topiltzin (his given name, Ce Acatl, means “1 Reed” in Nahuatl) would become the most famous Toltec leader. As a young man he studied in the city of Xochicalco, where he became a high priest in the cult (a group that follows a living religious leader, or leaders, who promote new principles and practices) of Quetzalcoatl, a god whose name he adopted.

Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl rose to power as the king of the Toltecs and began his reign by founding the capital city of Tula around 968 C.E. From Tula, Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl began to establish control over a number of small states of various ethnic origins. According to some historians, he slowly turned his conquests into the Toltec empire. For about two centuries the Toltecs conquered regions throughout Mesoamerica. They either ruled the territories directly or demanded huge tributes (payments to a nation or its ruler made by people from a conquered territory as a sign that they surrender to the imposed rule; payment could be made in goods or labor or both) and took many young men as prisoners of war.

Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl

Legends about the ruler Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl abound. (A legend is a story handed down from earlier times, often believed to be historically true.) Many scholars believe he actually existed (though Mixcoatl's existence is more strongly questioned) and there is evidence he was a very strong and able ruler-priest. Nevertheless, scholars have found that over the years legends about Topiltzin the ruler can no longer be separated from those of the god whose name he took.

The Quetzalcoatl religious cult is believed to have become popular during the dark ages after the fall of Teotihuacán. When Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl became king, he became a holy and moralistic religious reformer for the people of Tula. One of his reforms was to put an end to the practice of human sacrifice—claiming the god Quetzalcoatl wanted nothing more than butterflies or snakes. Tula was full of people from different areas and backgrounds, however, and a large number worshiped the god Tezcatlipoca (pronounced *tez-caht-lee-POE-cah*; meaning “Smoked Mirror” or “Smoking Mirror”). While Quetzalcoatl stood for human life, rebirth after death, culture, and peaceful existence, Tezcatlipoca represented night, death, sorcery, and war.

According to some Aztec accounts, those who worshiped Tezcatlipoca planned an uprising against Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl. They knew that as a priest, Topiltzin had sworn to remain celibate (refrain from sexual relations) and to remain pure in his deeds. They tried to trick the virtuous king into committing shameful acts that would discredit him in front of his people. In one tale Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl is tricked into drinking *pulque* (pronounced *PUHL-kay*), an alcoholic beverage made from cactus juice, and becomes very drunk. In the morning he wakes up next to his sister, apparently having broken his vow of celibacy. Ashamed, he de-



Toltec representation of the god Quetzalcoatl. © Werner Forman/Corbis.

cides he is no longer fit to rule his empire and sails east into exile from his land.

In another tale Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl kills Tezcatlipoca, but the god of sorcery casts a spell on his own body before he dies, making it impossible for the people of Tula to remove the rotting corpse (dead body) from their city. The body begins to smell very badly, and anyone who goes near it dies, but no amount of effort can move Tezcatlipoca's cursed corpse. Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl realizes he has to leave the city to save it from the curse and, again, he sails off to the east.

Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl goes into exile in both tales, sailing off on a raft made of serpents. The exile is said to have taken place, by modern calendars, in the year 987 C.E. The defeated ruler promises to return in the year 1 Reed as a man with fair skin and a beard (most of the natives of the Americas did not have facial hair).

Five centuries later in 1519—the Aztec year 1 Reed—Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés (1485–1547), a man with fair skin and a beard, arrived in Mexico. Aztec leader Montezuma II (pronounced mohk-the-ZOO-mah; 1466–1520; ruled 1502–1520) welcomed Cortés, believing he was the powerful and revered Quetzalcoatl in his predicted return. The lack of Aztec resistance against the Spanish signaled the end of the Aztec civilization.

Another possible historical connection to Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl's exile from Tula involves post-Classic (after about 900 C.E.) Maya history. At the end of the tenth century a conqueror called Kukulcán was said to have invaded the Maya world in the northern lowlands of Yucatán. The Maya had been expecting Kukulcán, the serpent god, to return to them. Many historians believe Kukulcán was none other than the exiled Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl. His arrival may have been the beginning of a Toltec-Maya era at Chichén Itzá.

The warrior empire

According to Aztec legends, Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl died around the turn of the tenth century. After his death, the fierce warlike factions of Tula took power, setting the tone for the four kings who followed him. The empire continued to expand through conquests, but the people under

the Toltec rule were by no means unified. War became standard fare for everyone in Mesoamerica, and it became more vicious and bloody. About a century after Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl's death, the last Toltec king, Huemac, or "Big Hand," took the throne. By most accounts, the worst violence took place during his reign. Famine gripped the Toltec people and fighting broke out among the different factions of Tula. Toltec warriors forced the impoverished conquered nations to pay them tribute. Prisoners of war proved valuable, as Toltec religious practices demanded more and more human sacrifices. It was during this time that mass human sacrifices (killing many people at once as an offering to the gods) first began to take place in Mesoamerica.

By 1064 evidence shows there was rebellion from within the city and probably some invasions from outsiders as well. Most Toltecs had abandoned their capital city and moved to new areas of Mexico. King Huemac and a group of people remaining loyal to him fled and attempted to establish a new city. Unable to stand the shame of his failed reign, Huemac committed suicide. Some Toltecs remained at Tula for a couple more decades, but the government and its kings were gone.

Government

The lack of Toltec artifacts has led to many scholarly debates about the Toltecs and arguments about the range and nature of their government. Some experts believe the Toltec ruled over a large empire in Mesoamerica, either directly through conquest or through their influence as traders. Others believe the Toltec state consisted of only a small area in the northern part of the Valley of Mexico, that the Toltec led violent raids and exacted tribute, but did not rule other regions.

The Toltec people came from a wide variety of backgrounds and practiced different customs. While the early Toltec rulers seem to have adopted the Teotihuacán culture, a later Toltec nation was notably different from the Teotihuacáns and other early Mesoamericans. The Toltecs placed supreme emphasis on war. While rulers of prior Mesoamerican societies often came from the ranks of the priesthood, the elite of the Toltec were always warriors first. Any male in

Atlantes are just one of the forms of Toltec architecture showing the society's emphasis on warfare.

© Paul Almasy/Corbis.



their society, no matter what the background, could succeed only if he had proved himself in battle.

Toltec soldiers were divided up into several military orders: the Coyote, the Jaguar, and the Eagle. Territorial conquests and the bringing of prisoners to be sacrificed to the gods were the measure of worthiness and honor, bringing rewards to the soldier. The major function of the government at Tula may have been to bring together the many different peoples in their region to join in their wars, and to reap the benefit of the tributes or territory gained in this manner.

Economy

Farming in the area around Tula required extensive irrigation because there was little rain. The Toltecs built dams to capture water during the rainy seasons and then moved it to their fields through small canals. Toltec warriors also sent con-

quered peoples to live in well-guarded irrigated lands, where they produced crops for Tula and its warrior elite (people within a society who are in a socially superior position and have more power and privileges than others). Though farming and trade probably produced a good portion of the food and supplies needed by the Toltecs, it is likely they brought in a significant portion by collecting tribute from conquests.

The Aztecs considered the Toltecs master craftspeople. They are said to have been the first metalworkers in Mesoamerica, but none of the metalwork has been found by archaeologists at Tula. The Toltecs controlled some major obsidian mines, and within the city there were hundreds of obsidian workshops in which weapons, knives, and other tools of war were made. Other tools were also made for trade: the Toltecs are believed to have carried on extensive long-distance trade.

Religion

The Toltecs worshiped many gods, but from the later accounts, there were two gods who reigned supreme during the peak years of the empire: Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. The rivalry between these two gods parallels the history of what is known about Tula.

Quetzalcoatl versus Tezcatlipoca

Quetzalcoatl was a god in every Mesoamerican pantheon (all of the gods that a particular group of people worship) and is particularly associated with Teotihuacán, the Toltecs, and the Aztecs, as well as the Mayas in Chichén Itzá. His name literally means “quetzal bird-snake.” Because the quetzal was considered sacred, the name probably means divine serpent, but he is usually referred to as the “feathered serpent.”

To the Toltecs, Quetzalcoatl was the creator god. In one legend, Quetzalcoatl and his friend or twin brother Xoloti, a god with the head of a dog, traveled to the underworld to collect the bones of dead human beings. Quetzalcoatl then dripped his own blood onto the bones, and human beings were restored to life. Quetzalcoatl was also the god of civilization, holiness, and peace. The Teotihuacáns had worshiped



Two Early Societies of the United States

Pre-Columbian societies are groups that existed during the period before Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas in 1492. Using strict standards of classifying peoples as civilizations, the pre-Columbian societies in the area of what is now the United States, no matter how complex, do not exactly fit into the category of “civilization” created by experts in ancient history. Two groups, however, that could be and sometimes are considered to be among the early civilizations in the United States are the Mississippians from the moundbuilding tradition in the southeast and the Anasazi from what is the present-day U.S. Southwest. These two groups also happen to have had regular contact with Toltec traders, according to some experts.

The Moundbuilders

In the East of what is now the United States in around 1500 B.C.E. a series of complex societies known as the “moundbuilders” arose. They had advanced farming skills and the ability to store their grains in pottery. The moundbuilders participated in ritualistic (formal acts performed the same way each time) burial practices that involved building large, intricate earthen

mounds. Over the centuries they built thousands of these mounds throughout the southeast and Mississippi River Valley.

The first moundbuilding societies arose at Poverty Point, located in present-day northeastern Louisiana. The people who built them were hunter-gatherers, but their capacity for trade spread some of their religious and cultural traditions up the rivers through the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys. Eventually, the hunter-gatherers evolved into moundbuilders and flourished as a series of chiefdoms (social units mainly governed by one powerful ruler; the units that are larger and more structured than tribes but smaller and less structured than states) along the Mississippi River from Illinois and Wisconsin in the north down to Louisiana in the south.

Mississippians built several large cities around the great mounds through the years. Because of some uniquely Toltec features found in the design and imagery of some of the moundbuilders’ art and architecture, archaeologist Michael C. Coe stated in *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs*, that these sites, with their “huge temple mounds and ceremonial plazas, and their associated pottery and other artifacts, show Toltec influence.” Throughout the history

Quetzalcoatl alongside their rain god for bringing farming and especially maize (corn) to the people of Mesoamerica. While the Toltecs seem to have initially accepted the Teotihuacán version of Quetzalcoatl, at some point they transformed him from the god of nature and farming into their god of holiness

of archaeological research into Amerindians, there has been speculation that the Toltecs were closely related to the moundbuilders, either as their descendants or their ancestors. One moundbuilder site in Arkansas was erroneously named the Toltec site, though it was later proved that there was no connection to the Mesoamericans. Many current scholars have concluded that the speculations connecting the Toltecs and the moundbuilders are wrong. Any Toltec influence on the moundbuilders that exists probably stems from trade relations.

The Anasazi

The Anasazi emerged in about 400 C.E. in the Four Corners region of present-day Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado. (Meaning “Ancient Ones,” the Anasazi are believed to have been the ancestors of today’s Pueblo Indians.) They were originally hunter-gatherers with a nomadic way of life. But during the first century C.E. they settled down as farmers, raising crops such as maize, beans, and squash. They also became highly skilled artists, making beautiful baskets and pottery with distinctive black-on-white geometric patterns.

Beginning around 1 C.E. the Anasazi developed a highly complex soci-

ety, eventually building great architecture. By the 1100s, at the peak of the Toltec empire, the Anasazi lived in large cliff dwellings and huge adobe apartment buildings, some of which had more than twelve hundred rooms. They had built extensive roads in the canyons and the southwestern countryside, connecting urban populations with villages over a wide area. One of the goods they traded was turquoise (a bluish-green gemstone) in exchange for quetzal (a Central American bird with bright green feathers) feathers and obsidian tools. The Anasazi culture disappeared in about the thirteenth century, about the same time as the Toltecs. Some scholars theorize the end of trade with Mexico may have contributed to the Anasazi’s collapse.

Some experts believe Toltec traders may have ventured as far as the Southwest of the present-day United States, exchanging obsidian with the Anasazi for turquoise. The Toltec’s feathered serpent imagery is still found among some of the New Mexican pueblos. Via another route, the Toltecs may have been trading with the Mississippian moundbuilding tribes of the southeastern United States as well.

and peace. By some accounts the Toltecs associated the god with Venus, the morning star. In one legend, after Quetzalcoatl was driven from Tula, he went into exile on the east coast of Mexico. Promising to return one day, he set himself on fire, and his heart rose as the morning star.

Images of Quetzalcoatl vary, but along with depictions of him as a feathered serpent, Quetzalcoatl was also represented as a human man with a beard. In 1519, by many accounts, Aztec emperor Montezuma II mistook the bearded and fair-skinned Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés for the god Quetzalcoatl and welcomed him into the center of his city.

Tezcatlipoca was the Toltec god who opposed and rivaled Quetzalcoatl, and he probably shared equally in his power over human beings. The shield he carried was a dark mirror with which he could view or reflect human activities, and he may have functioned as a judge who wielded the arm of justice over people. Tezcatlipoca was also the god of night and sorcery, known for his warlike nature. He was said to have the power to destroy the world, and it was considered very dangerous not to worship him. Many credit the god Tezcatlipoca with the introduction of mass human sacrifices. A great deal of what is written about this god has to do with his sending Quetzalcoatl into exile through his sorcery or trickery.

Many scholars believe the accounts of Tezcatlipoca's banishment of Quetzalcoatl follow the historical facts of the Toltec empire. The original group of northerners who arrived in the Valley of Mexico adopted the peaceful ways of the Teotihuacáns—rulers were priests, as they had been in earlier times, and Quetzalcoatl, the peaceful god, was their representative.

As various ethnic groups from the north came upon the city of Tula, however, a more warlike culture arose. These groups were probably responsible for eliminating the ruler-priests and replacing them with warriors. The new, warlike state was represented by Tezcatlipoca. Accounts of the exile of Quetzalcoatl, god and ruler, relate the beginning of a new, more violent and bloody era in the Valley of Mexico.

Arts and sciences

Despite few artifacts to support their views, most archaeologists agree with the Aztecs about the Toltec mastery of arts and crafts. The arts of the Toltecs seem to reflect a major shift from the predominantly religious focus of art in the earlier ages to a focus on war and death. Many observers have no-

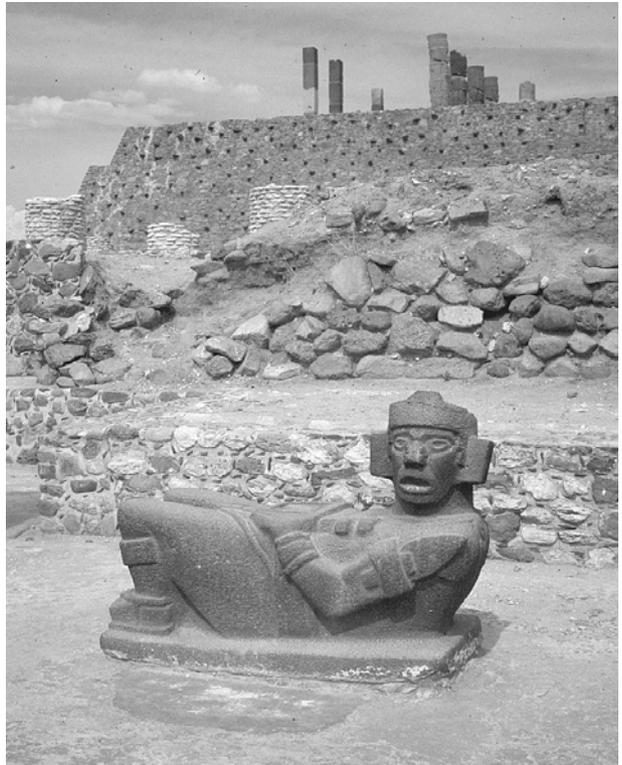
ticed the difference between earlier Mesoamerican architecture, which used sacred imagery and seemed to be reaching up to the gods, and Toltec architecture, which appeared to have been created either to serve its function or to inspire fear in those who beheld it. Such views, however, may be missing the truth—no one knows what may have been taken from Tula by the Aztecs or others many years ago.

Some of the most prominent features of the ruins of Tula are the *atlantes*, colossal stone statues in the form of warriors standing guard over the temple, used to support the temple roof. These warriors also appear in the many bas-reliefs and other sculptures throughout the city. According to Brian Fagen, author of *Kingdoms of Gold, Kingdoms of Jade* (1991): “Everywhere, fierce warriors strut, men carrying feather-decorated *atlatis* (spear-throwers) in their right hands, bundles of darts in the other. They wear quilted armor, round shields on their backs, hats topped by quetzal feather plumes.”

Walls and columns throughout Tula are decorated with carved images of skulls and ferocious animals, such as the jaguar. Snakes are depicted eating humans or their hearts. One distinctive form of art found in Tula and Chichén Itzá is the *chacmool*, a large stone carving of a man lying down with his head up and sometimes holding a tray on his stomach. These are found in front of the temples, and are believed to have been used for offerings, particularly of human hearts in sacrifice ceremonies.

Decline

Sometime during in the 1100s, Tula met a violent and destructive end after famine and factional fighting within the empire. Legends report that Toltec king Huemac fled with those loyal to him, while other city residents moved to other



A Toltec *chacmool* sits in front of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl in Tula. © Paul Almasy/Corbis.

parts of Mexico. Most experts believe a group of Chichimecs invaded and thoroughly sacked the city. This region of central Mexico again entered a dark age, in which no single power was able to unify the different cities and peoples. Warfare was widespread and ferocious, as people competed for scarce resources—this would remain the state of Mesoamerica until the rise of the Aztecs in the fourteenth century.

According to the Aztec legends, only a few noble Toltec families were thought to have remained in the Valley of Mexico after the fall of Tula. Since these Toltecs were said to be descended from Quetzalcoatl, most Mesoamerican rulers after the fall, regardless of their actual background, claimed descent from the Toltec kings whose reputation as gods and warriors could only add to their glory. Despite their relatively short period of time as a major Mesoamerican force, the Toltecs had become a huge presence in the hearts and minds of the Mexicans who came after them.

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The Rise of the Aztecs



The Aztec empire was at its peak when the Spanish conquistadores (conquerors) arrived in 1519. The first soldiers who arrived with the expedition of Spanish commander Hernán Cortés (1485–1547) were amazed by the civilization they found in the Valley of Mexico. The size, magnificence, beauty, wealth, order, cleanliness, and sophistication of the capital city of Tenochtitlán (pronounced tay-notch-teet-LAHN) rivaled the top European cities of the time, and outdid them in many ways.

At the same time, however, the conquistadors were horrified by the massive human sacrifices (killing many people as an offering to the gods) practiced by the Aztecs, usually in very gruesome ways. Many noted (as most people still do today) the odd combination of sophistication and brutality of the Aztecs. Few of the Spanish conquistadores who described the Aztecs noted that they—who were busily recording information about the civilization they had found—had recently killed thousands of Aztec people themselves and were taking part in the destruction of the most cherished



Words to Know

Barbarian: A word used to describe people from another land; it often has a negative meaning, however, suggesting the people described are inferior to others.

Chinampa: A floating garden in a farming system in which large reed rafts floating on a lake or marshes are covered in mud and used for planting crops.

City-state: An independent self-governing community consisting of a single city and the surrounding area.

Codex: A handmade book written on a long strip of bark paper and folded into accordion-like pages.

Empire: A vast, complex political unit extending across political boundaries and dominated by one central power, which generally takes control of the economy, government, and culture in communities throughout its territory.

Mass human sacrifices: Large-scale killing of people—or many people being

killed at one time—as offerings to the gods.

Mercenary soldiers: Warriors who fight wars for another state or nation's army for pay.

Nahuatl: The language spoken by the Aztecs and many other groups in the Valley of Mexico.

Sacrifice: To make an offering to the gods, through personal possessions like cloth or jewels, or by killing an animal or human as the ultimate gift.

Tlatoani: A Nahuatl word meaning “speaker” or “spokesperson” used by the Aztecs to refer to their rulers, or “they who speak for others.” The Aztec emperor was often called *huey tlatoani*, or “great speaker.”

Tribute: A payment to a nation or its ruler, usually made by people from a conquered territory as a sign that they surrender to the imposed rule; payment could be made in goods or labor or both.

parts of Aztec culture (arts, language, beliefs, customs, institutions, and other products of human work and thought).

The Aztec empire arose very quickly, and its reign over Mexico was short-lived. The Aztecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico from humble, nomadic origins (wanderers with no fixed home) and were scorned as ruffians by most of its societies. Their main claim to fame from the beginning was their expertise as warriors. They established their island city of Tenochtitlán in 1325 and spent much of their first century there serving as warriors for another, larger and more power-

ful city-state (an independent self-governing community consisting of a single city and the surrounding area).

Soon the Aztecs' own city grew, and they learned the ways of the valley. By their second century at Tenochtitlán, from about 1428 to 1521, the Aztecs were able to take over as the most powerful group in Mesoamerica and prevailed over an empire of an estimated fifteen million people. (An empire is a vast, complex political unit extending across political boundaries and dominated by one central power, which generally takes control of the economy, government, and culture in communities throughout its territory.) The civilization brought together in this two-hundred-year period was a remarkable accomplishment for this unknown group from the north.

Dates of predominance

1325–1521 C.E.

Name variations and pronunciation

The name “Aztec” was bestowed upon the earliest members of the group at the time they arrived to settle in the Valley of Mexico. It meant “people from Aztlán.” The people of the valley meant the name “Aztec” as an insult, indicating the Aztecs came from remote, humble origins. By the time the first Spanish writers began to describe the Aztecs in the sixteenth century, the name used for them had long been “Mexica” (pronounced may-SHEE-kah), or more specifically Culua-Mexica, which pointed to an association with the Toltec (pronounced TOHL-teck) rulers.

Sometime in the eighteenth century a writer used the word “Aztec” to describe the rulers of Tenochtitlán and the Aztec empire who called themselves Mexicas. Although it is not considered the correct term, since then “Aztec” has been used in many histories and the popular media. Scholars hope that in the not-too-distant future everyone will easily recognize the group by the more appropriate term, “Mexica.” For the sake of recognition and simplicity, this book continues to use the term “Aztec.”

The term “Aztec,” used properly, refers to the peoples in the entire empire the Aztecs conquered, who were associ-



Map showing the sites of the ancient Aztec civilization in Mesoamerica.
 Map by XNR Productions. The Gale Group.

ated with the founders of Tenochtitlán by trade, conquest, or traditions. This included not only the Nahuatl-speaking groups of the valley (pronounced NAH-wah-tul), but also the Zapotecs, Otomí, Mixtecs, and many others.

Location

At its peak, the Aztec empire extended from Guatemala in the south up to northern Mexico, spanning across Mexico from the Pacific Coast on the west to the Gulf of Mexico on the east. The empire included about five hundred cities, some very large, though none were nearly as large as Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztecs and the base of their rule. Tenochtitlán was located on an island in Lake Texcoco in the Valley of Mexico. Present-day Mexico City now occupies this area, as Mexico City was built on top of Tenochtitlán after the Spanish conquered it.

The Valley of Mexico is a huge, oval basin about 7,500 feet (2,286 meters) above sea level. It is set in the middle of the continent, less than 200 miles (322 kilometers) from the coasts to the east and west. It covers an area of about 3,000 square miles (7,770 square kilometers) and consists of some of the most fertile land in Mexico. At the time of the Aztec empire, lakes covered a large area of the basin's floor. A large portion of the Mesoamerican population in the sixteenth century lived in the valley. It was the most densely populated region of Mexico, consisting of groups with many backgrounds.

Tenochtitlán

Tenochtitlán was a huge and magnificent city of about two hundred thousand people at the time the Spanish conquistadors first arrived in 1519. It was one of the largest cities in the world at its peak, and it was compared by the Spaniards to the Italian city of Venice, which was built on canals like Tenochtitlán. Tenochtitlán was built on two small, swampy islands in the middle of Lake Texcoco.

Over several generations the islands had been built up by land refill. The Aztec workers drove long stakes into the bottom of the lake surrounding the island to create foundations. They filled in around the stakes with large rocks dragged in from the lakeshores and covered the rocks with mud they had painstakingly dredged up from the bottom of the lake. After many generations, the island of Tenochtitlán had expanded enough to merge with the island called Tlatelolco, which had been settled by another sect of Aztecs. Both islands together had expanded to be about 5 square miles (13 square kilometers) in area.

In order to support their population, the early settlers in Tenochtitlán needed more land for farming. They solved this problem by digging canals into the islands' salty marshes, cutting back the plants growing in the wetlands, and then piling these reeds on top of each other to form a large raft floating in the shallow water. They then brought mud from the bottom of the swamps to cover the rafts and planted willows underneath to anchor them. These became garden plots, called *chinampas*. With water always available, *chinampas* could produce crops year round. On these fertile floating



Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec empire, with its canals and causeways.

© Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis.

gardens the Aztecs raised maize (corn), beans, chili, tomatoes, squash, and flowers. When enough roots of the plants became established in the lake bottom, the *chinampas* formed small islands. The Aztecs also built light cane and thatch houses on top of *chinampas*.

Making good use of their watery environment, the Aztecs built canals in the city through which canoes could travel, bringing in food and supplies and carrying out waste. Three great causeways (roads built over the water) connected the island to the shore at various points. Each one was several miles long and around 25 or 30 feet (8 or 9 meters) wide. The causeways were constructed of wood beams fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle, and they could be taken apart in a hurry if an enemy approached. Until the Spanish arrived, no one had ever attacked the city.

The emperor Ahuitzotl (pronounced ah-weet-ZOH-tul; ruled c. 1486–1502) decided to thoroughly renovate the

city around 1487. A new city plan was formed. In the massive rebuilding of Tenochtitlán, the Aztecs built the city on a grid (a system of rows and columns creating a checkerboard effect) with perfect, ruler-sharp straight lines in their streets, canals, and buildings. The sacred temple of the city was oriented to the four directions. In the center was Templo Mayor, a great double pyramid, with one tower dedicated to the god of war and sun, Huitzilopochtli (pronounced hweets-ee-loh-PAWCH-tee), and the other dedicated to the rain god, Tlaloc (pronounced TLAH-lock). The steps of Templo Mayor were stained with the blood of thousands of human sacrifice victims. A *tzompantli*, a rack on which the heads of sacrifice victims were mounted and left to rot, stood near the temple, holding about ten thousand mounted human heads when the Spanish arrived. In the city center there were about eighty structures, including a ball court and temples dedicated to various gods such as Quetzalcoatl (pronounced kates-ahl-koh-AH-tul; the feathered serpent and creator god), Tezcatlipoca (pronounced tez-caht-lee-POE-cah; the god of night, sorcery, and war), and Ehecatl (the god of wind).

There were schools for the priests called *calmecac*, and schools for warriors called *telpochcalli*. There were also residences for the five thousand priests who tended Huitzilopochtli's temple. Near the Templo Mayor were the lavish palaces that housed royalty and the highest nobles of Tenochtitlán, complete with exotic flower gardens, parks, and ponds with swans. The architectural style used in the city was borrowed from earlier civilizations, particularly Teotihuacán (pronounced TAY-uh-tee-wah-KAHN).

Tenochtitlán had a local market in each of its four quarters, plus two other huge markets: one in the city center and one in the northern sector of Tlatelolco. All markets operated five days a week. An amazing assortment of foods, crafts, clothing, jewelry, animals, and even slaves were available in these lively markets, with as many as sixty thousand people busily buying and trading their wares on a given day. A constant flow of canoes laden with trade goods came in and out of the canals to the city. There was also heavy foot traffic on the causeways consisting of slaves and traders carrying their goods back and forth between the city and the lake shores.



The ruins of the ancient city of Tenochtitlán stand amidst the buildings of present-day Mexico City.

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Canals led out of the sacred center and into the city districts in each of the four directions. Perfectly parallel to the canals were streets for people on foot. All around these streets and canals there were lush, fragrant flower gardens. There were even zoos, with all kinds of mammals, snakes, and birds.

The city was divided into five districts, each with its own central plaza. The neighborhoods where most of the city's people lived were organized within these districts. The wealthy people lived around the market areas in houses made of stone or stucco (a plaster used to cover exterior walls). The common people lived farther out, usually in adobe (sun-baked brick) houses. All of the houses were painted white. Though its population was dense and traffic was heavy, Tenochtitlán was extremely clean and orderly.

Since the water in Lake Texcoco was salty, the people living in Tenochtitlán could not drink it. For their drinking

water, they built an aqueduct, a pair of pipelines that used gravity to transport water to the island from natural springs near the lake's shores. The Aztecs had also devised an ingenious system of dealing with human waste. Their public latrines (bathrooms) were little huts built on canoes stationed along the canals. The canoes periodically transported the waste to the *chinampas*, where it served as fertilizer.

With its population of about two hundred thousand, Tenochtitlán was far larger than other cities around the Valley of Mexico and Lake Texcoco, but there were many other good-sized cities, and some were highly sophisticated. It is estimated there were about fifty cities in the Valley of Mexico. Just the cities surrounding Lake Texcoco that served as suburbs to Tenochtitlán had a combined population of about one and a half million people. The entire Aztec empire is thought to have had a population of about fifteen million people. Although the rulers at Tenochtitlán did not rule directly over all these cities, they were all related by trade, common religious celebrations, and the payment of tribute (goods or labor paid to a nation or its ruler, usually made by people from a conquered territory as a sign that they surrender to the imposed rule) to the capital.

History

The Valley of Mexico

The Valley of Mexico was called Anáhuac (meaning “near the water”) by the people living there. It had been a center of civilization long before the Aztecs arrived around 1325. The great city of Teotihuacán had flourished from about 500 to 700, ruling its huge empire from the valley (see Chapter 18 for more information). The period that followed the fall of Teotihuacán was chaotic, with the valley's many smaller cities and communities at war with each other, competing for resources and territory.

In about 1000 the militaristic (warlike) Toltec empire, with its strong armies and healthy long-distance trade network, brought unity to Anáhuac for two more centuries (see Chapter 24 for more information). When the Toltecs fell, the Valley of

Mexico became a patchwork of independent city-states, most with only a small amount of surrounding territory.

Ancient Mesoamericans distinguished between what they considered the “civilized” peoples who were settled into agricultural life in the Valley of Mexico and certain areas south of it and the “barbarians” (used to describe people from another land; it often has a negative meaning, however, suggesting the people described are inferior to others) of the area north of the Valley of Mexico, where nomadic people hunted and gathered and did not live in settled villages or towns. These northerners were a diverse group called the Chichimecs.

To the people of the Valley of Mexico, the Chichimecs seemed coarse or uncouth. They did not have the architecture, arts, calendars, writing, and education people in the densely populated valley had known for many centuries. Despite their humble Chichimec roots, however, the Toltecs became legendary rulers of the valley. Both during the Toltec reign and after its fall, many other groups migrated to the valley from the north, including a group of about ten thousand Nahuatl-speaking people known as the Aztecs.

At the time the Aztecs arrived, most of the independent city-states in the Valley of Mexico had similar systems of government. Each was ruled by a supreme leader called the *tlatoani* (pronounced tlah-too-AH-nee), which means “speaker” or “spokesperson” in Nahuatl. Since the fall of the Toltecs, the belief throughout the valley was that the people destined to lead the cities should be descendants of the Toltec royal family. Most *tlatoanis* therefore claimed to be of the ancient royal Toltec descent, although in many cases this was questionable.

Every community in the valley, whether a large city or small town, had its own *tlatoani* and its own supreme gods. People, rich or poor, were fiercely loyal to their communities. The city-states used their armies to force smaller surrounding communities to pay tribute. These were often hostile arrangements; to defend themselves against unwanted conquests, smaller communities sometimes allied themselves with larger ones, willingly paying tribute for defense purposes. As new groups of outsiders settled into the valley, the competition for territory and resources increased.

The Aztec background

Much of what follows is taken from the Aztecs' accounts of their own history as they had learned it and passed it along from generation to generation; however, much of this history may have come from the Spanish conquistadores and missionaries of the sixteenth century. There are many conflicts among the different versions of the history, and yet many of the events described have been verified by other historical and archaeological records.

It is impossible to separate what many people consider the distinct fields of mythology and history included in the accounts. (Mythology is the field of scholarship that deals with the study of myths—traditional, often imaginary stories about ancestors, heroes, or supernatural beings that usually make an attempt to explain a belief, practice, or natural phenomenon.) The ancient historians did not distinguish between religion and fact in the way most historians do in the twenty-first century; their idea of what constituted reality was different than that of contemporary society. In addition, Aztec rulers willfully rewrote Aztec history to unify all groups within their empire. It is helpful to remember that history is never purely factual (based strictly on the facts). It is always shaped by the beliefs and views of the people who tell it. Nevertheless, the Aztec myths and descriptions provide a distinctive portrait of their historical and cultural background.

According to the Aztecs, they arrived on Earth through the openings of seven caves. They later settled on an island in the middle of a large lake called Aztlán (“the place of the white herons” or “the place of whiteness”). The exact location of Aztlán has never been determined. The supreme god of the Aztecs was named Huitzilopochtli; the name means “Hummingbird of the South or Left,” the god of war and sun. Sometime in the twelfth century, the Aztec people set off from Aztlán in search of a new home. Four priests carried Huitzilopochtli, in hummingbird form, and the god occasionally twittered out directions to them as they traveled. The Aztec people wandered into the Valley of Mexico early in their travels and settled there in various places over the years.

One of the places the Aztecs stayed was Culhuacán (pronounced cool-whah-CAHN), which had been an early home of the Toltecs. After their stay, the Aztecs called them-



Two Spanish Sources: Díaz and Sahagún

As a rule, accounts of the defeated by their conquerors should always be viewed with some suspicion. It usually isn't in the interest of the conquerors to present the defeated in a sympathetic light or to portray them as equal in sophistication to themselves. The following writers, Bernal Díaz (del Castillo; pronounced cah-STEE-yoe; c. 1492–1581), a conquistador, and Bernardino de Sahagún (c. 1499–1590), a Franciscan missionary (a person, usually working for a religious organization, who tries to convert people, usually in a foreign land, to his or her religion), were both Spanish eyewitnesses to the Aztec culture around the time of the Spanish conquest. Their works have the biases (partialities or judgments) of their times and circumstances, but both had good powers of observation. Their works have shaped the current understanding of the Aztecs and their history. Some excellent Aztec sources survived the conquest (see Chapter 27 for more information on Aztec books and oral traditions), but the works of these two Spaniards present several central elements of Aztec history and culture not recorded elsewhere.

Bernal Díaz was a Spanish soldier who joined the expedition of Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés in 1519 and took part in the conquest of the native peoples of the Americas. He was in Tenochtitlán when it fell to the Spanish, and Díaz remained in Mesoamerica for the rest of his life. Many years after the conquest, he felt compelled to respond to a book about the conquest published by Cortés's secretary, who overstated the heroism of Cortés and had, in fact, never been to the Americas.

In 1552 Díaz began work on his own account, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de Nueva España* (title translates as *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*). Díaz, however, was not highly educated and his work was considered crude. It was not published during his lifetime. A version of the book was published in Spain in 1632, but only after an editor had considerably altered the text. It was not until 1904 or 1905 that an edition prepared from the original manuscript appeared and somehow survived in Guatemala.

Díaz's history focuses on the events from 1519 to 1521, when the Aztecs were

selves the Culhua-Mexicas to associate themselves with the renowned Toltecs, the chosen rulers of the valley. By this time the Aztecs had aspired to rule the great land they were traversing, even though the other inhabitants of the valley considered them vulgar nomads.

Despite their crude behavior, the Aztecs had gained a reputation as skilled warriors. In several of the places they stayed,

conquered by the Spanish. Though the style is rough and many of Díaz's interpretations seem naïve, the elderly soldier wrote with deep honesty and remarkable memory. In many cases he has provided descriptions of things for which there are no other sources.

In 1529 a young Spanish Catholic missionary, Bernardino de Sahagún, was sent by his church to Mexico, where he taught young native Americans at a missionary school near Tenochtitlán. As he taught his students religion and the arts in Spanish and Latin, Sahagún took pains to learn their language, Nahuatl. He became fascinated by the Aztecs and soon began researching their history and culture.

Sahagún's research began with a series of interviews with the Aztec elders (people who have authority because of their age and experience) in the 1540s. He soon found that the Aztec orators—the people whose job it was to pass on the history of their people from generation to generation—relied on codices (plural of codex), books on birch bark

paper filled with pictures and symbols. Most of the codices in existence at the time of the Spanish conquest in 1521 had been destroyed by the conquerors, who believed the books were full of pagan (non-Christian and therefore evil to them) instruction.

A few surviving codices were brought out for Sahagún, and the elders showed him how they were used. Bit by bit, the elders described the history and traditions of the Aztec people and Sahagún, with the help of Nahuatl-speaking assistants, recorded the words of the elders in their own language. By about 1580, Sahagún's great work, the twelve-volume manuscript of the *Florentine Codex* was complete. Its pages presented a column of Nahuatl text on the right and comments in Spanish in a column on the left. In between were illustrations to accompany the text. The *Florentine Codex* was organized by subject matter, with volumes dedicated to such topics as history, the gods, the calendar, Aztec society, and the Aztec perception of the natural world.

they became mercenary soldiers (warriors who fight wars for another state or nation's army for pay) for rulers in the area. Most of the valley's inhabitants found many Aztec practices revolting, particularly their methods of performing human sacrifices and their habit of raiding other communities to take their women. After several run-ins with other communities, the Aztecs had been chased out of most of the settled areas in the valley.

The story of the founding of Tenochtitlán is depicted in this illustration of an eagle sitting on a cactus. © Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis.



With nowhere else to go, the Aztecs camped out on the marshy shores of Lake Texcoco where no one else considered living. It was there, according to their later accounts, that the Aztecs received a sign foretelling they had found the location of their new home: On a small island on the lake, they saw an eagle perched on a cactus bearing large red fruit; the eagle was eating a snake. The Aztecs settled on the lake island in the year 1325 after wandering for more than two hundred years.

Building a home

As the Aztecs began building their city, sometime around 1345 a conflict erupted, dividing them into two groups. One group settled on the island they called Tenochtitlán, while the other group settled on a nearby island to the north they called Tlatelolco. The two islands eventually merged as the Aztecs built them up with landfill. They quick-

ly outgrew the tiny islands, however, and with amazing resolve and a tremendous amount of labor gathered mud from the bottom of the lake to build up the land area of the islands. They drove long stakes into the lake bottom and filled in the cavities with rocks and mud to make the islands even larger.

As they settled into their new home, the Aztecs began trading with other communities for supplies and protection. Soon young Aztec warriors were hired as mercenary soldiers by the Tepanecs of Azcapotzalco, one of the most powerful communities of the valley. With the help of the fierce Aztec warriors, Azcapotzalco conquered many city-states in the valley and shared their tribute and loot with the Aztecs. The arrangement eventually turned into a partnership between the two groups. The Aztecs learned a great deal about the valley's culture from the Tepanecs; they also learned about building an empire.

By 1375 the Aztecs had built a very large city and had placed their first *huey tlatoani*, or "great speaker," Acamapichtli (pronounced ah-cahm-ah-PEECH-tee; ruled 1376–1396), on the Aztec throne. Neighboring communities feared and respected them.

From independence to empire

In 1427 Itzcoatl (pronounced eetz-coe-WAH-tul; translates to "Obsidian Snake"; ruled c. 1427–1440), a new Aztec *tlatoani*, took the throne. The Tepanecs had begun to fear the great growth of their partner, the Aztecs. Itzcoatl no longer trusted the Tepanecs and decided to crush them. In 1428 the Aztecs formed the Triple Alliance, joining with the nearby cities of Texcoco, ruled by Nezahualcoyotl (pronounced ne-zahwahl-COY-oh-tul; 1403–1473), the poet king, and the city of Tlacopan on the western side of the lake. The three cities joined together to thoroughly destroy the city of Azcapotzalco. Thereafter, the Aztecs had the strongest state in Mexico.

The new ruler, Itzcoatl, decided upon a number of reforms for the Aztec people. He began by changing history. Most of the people of the Valley of Mexico had special orators who were trained to tell their stories. They relied mainly on memory, but they also used books with pictures that served to jog their memories as they related their tales. Itz-



The Man behind the Emperors

The Aztec *huey tlatoanis*, like any other rulers or governments, had trusted counselor/assistants to help them organize their empires and make crucial decisions about trade, law, and war. Many historians believe one such adviser to the Aztec *huey tlatoanis*, Tlacaelel (“Manly Heart”), may have been largely responsible for their remarkable rise to power. Tlacaelel was the nephew of Itzcoatl and the brother of Montezuma I, (pronounced mohk-the-ZOO-mah; c. 1390–c. 1464; ruled 1440–1469) and probably could have taken the post of *tlatoani* had he desired. Instead, he led from behind the scenes, but it was reported that Tlacaelel’s orders were always followed immediately.

Tlacaelel is credited with formulating the plan by which Itzcoatl was able to recreate the empire’s history, imposing a world view in which the Aztecs were the chosen leaders and heirs of the Toltecs. Along with burning the old books for this purpose, Tlacaelel made strong reforms in the workings of the government and transformed the Aztec religion. He is also thought to be responsible for the concept of “flower wars,” battles staged by two cities that agreed to fight for the sole purpose of providing each other with captives for sacrifice. Tlacaelel was also the mastermind behind the Triple Alliance with Texcoco and Tlacopan.

coatl had all the books collected and burned, since they did not tell the story as he wished it to be remembered. He provided orators with a new history of the Aztecs, in which the Aztec rulers were the undisputed descendants of the Toltecs and the only true rulers of Mexico. Part of his new vision of the Aztec people was that it was their duty to provide the hearts and blood of their prisoners of war to the gods so the sun would have the fuel it needed to rise and light up the earth every morning.

In 1440 Itzcoatl was succeeded by his nephew Montezuma I, a renowned general in the Aztec army. Under his leadership, the Aztecs conquered many new lands and put together a central state government to administer all holdings. As the city of Tenochtitlán grew in population, it became more and more dependent on the tribute coming in from the cities defeated by Aztec warriors. The Aztec army attacked cities and communities farther away. From each city they demanded tribute in many forms, bringing wealth to

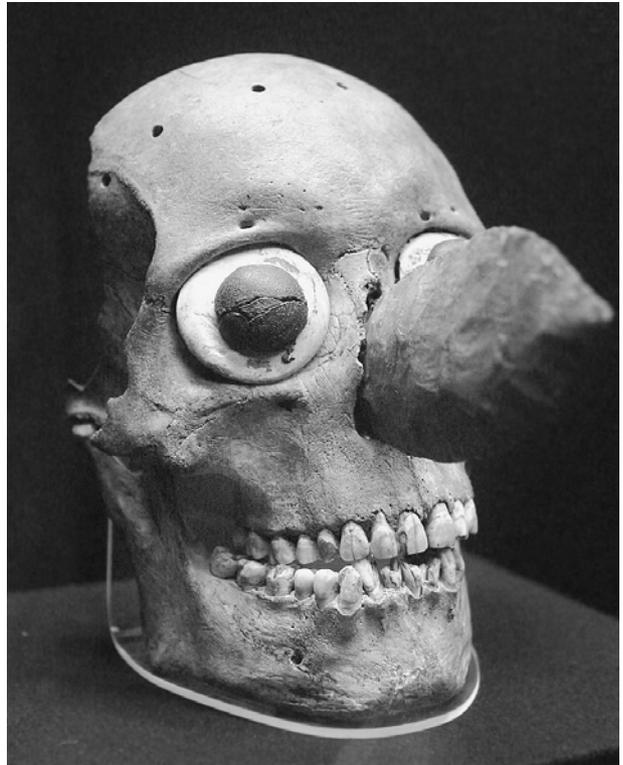
Tenochtitlán. In general, they did not rule the communities they conquered.

An era of mass human sacrifice

In the mid-fifteenth century one catastrophe after another occurred: first, locusts ate crops; then, the lake flooded the fields; and later, frosts killed more crops. Many Aztecs died from hunger and disease while others fled to different regions. During the years of catastrophe, the Aztec priests began to practice human sacrifice on a scale never known before, killing thousands of prisoners of war as offerings to the gods. When the famine ended in 1455, the Aztecs probably reasoned that the sacrifices had worked, and they continued the practice of human sacrifice on a huge and horrific scale from this time forward. From every battle, they captured many soldiers to sacrifice to the gods.

During the occasional periods when there were no wars being fought, the Aztecs would arrange to enter into battles, called “flower wars,” with a neighboring city, usually Tlaxcala. These were staged battles fought solely for the purpose of taking prisoners to sacrifice. Although the arrangement with Tlaxcala was agreed to by both sides, at some point the Aztecs must have angered their partner in ritual war. When the Spanish attacked the Aztecs, an estimated two hundred thousand Tlaxcala soldiers were fighting alongside the Spanish, providing invaluable help in the conquest.

According to the Aztec religion, the world had been created and destroyed four times before the present world. Each of these worlds had its own sun, which died as the world ended. The Aztecs believed their sun—the fifth sun—would be extinguished and the world would end if they did not supply the gods with enough blood and beating hearts from human sacrifice (see Chapter 27 for more information).



The Aztecs killed thousands of prisoners of war as human sacrifices to the gods. This skull was once an Aztec sacrifice victim.

AP/Wide World Photos.

When the emperor Ahuitzotl organized a ceremony to dedicate the building of a pyramid and temple to Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec army, along with its allies from Texcoco and Tlacopan, rode off to start a flower war with the cities of Tlaxcala and Huejotzingo. The war was waged solely for the purpose of bringing sacrifice victims to the dedication ceremony. In 1487 the Aztec army was said to have brought twenty thousand prisoners of war from the battle. The captives were lined up in columns that spanned the long streets of Tenochtitlán as each awaited their turn to be sacrificed on the temple stairs.

The end of the era

Ahuitzotl expanded the empire to its fullest, gaining territory south all the way to Guatemala, and holding most of central Mexico, including large portions of the present-day Mexican states of Oaxaca (pronounced wah-HAH-kah), Morelos, Veracruz, and Puebla. In 1502 Montezuma II (1466–1520; ruled 1502–1520) took the throne. He was known to be a great warrior whose forces were constantly at war, but Montezuma was also a thoughtful and quiet man, with a strong religious sensibility.

According to some, Montezuma II was also quite superstitious. By the time of his reign, there were signs the Aztec people were tiring of constant war and sacrifice. Aztec poetry from the last years of the empire expressed a longing for human kindness and mercy and an end to the blood and violence. On what new paths Montezuma might have led his empire, had it not been invaded by the Spanish, will never be known. The Aztec empire was conquered during Montezuma's reign and he was the last of the great Aztec *huey tlatoanis*.

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Aztec Government and Economy

26

From the time the Aztecs settled in Tenochtitlán (pronounced tay-notch-teet-LAHN) in 1325 until the day the Spanish conquered the city in 1521 was a period of just less than two hundred years. There were two distinct eras of government and economy during this time, each about one hundred years long. During the period from 1325 until 1427, the Aztecs were under the domination of the Tepanecs. As subjects of a more powerful people, they gradually built their monarchy and established an economy at least partly based on the spoils they brought in from the battles they fought with the Tepanecs. In the second hundred years, the Aztecs, under the Triple Alliance formed with the nearby cities of Texcoco and Tlacopan, were the unquestioned military power and dominated the Valley of Mexico.

With their highly skilled military forces, they went on to conquer vast territories beyond the valley, forcing the conquered people to pay hefty annual tribute payments in the form of goods sent to the capital city. (A tribute is a payment by one nation to a conquering nation, often occurring on a regular basis like a tax.) War became an economic neces-



Words to Know

Atlatls: Spearthrowers.

Cacao beans: Beans that grow on an ever-green tree from which cocoa, chocolate, and cocoa butter are made.

Calpulli: (The word means “big house”; the plural form is *calpultin*.) Social units consisting of groups of families who were either related in some way or had lived among each other over the generations. *Calpultin* formed the basic social unit for farmers, craftspeople, and merchants. The precise way they worked is not known.

Chinampa: A floating garden in a farming system in which large reed rafts floating on top of a lake or marshes are covered in mud and used for planting crops.

Empire: A vast, complex political unit extending across political boundaries and dominated by one central power, which generally takes control of the economy, government, and culture in communities throughout its territory.

Hierarchy: The ranking of a group of people according to their social, economic, or political position.

Mercenary soldiers: Warriors who fight wars for another state or nation’s army for pay.

Nahuatl: The language spoken by the Aztecs and many other groups in the Valley of Mexico.

Nomadic: Roaming from place to place without a fixed home.

Subordinate: Subject to someone of greater power; lower in rank.

Succession: The system of passing power within the ruling class, usually upon the death of the current ruler.

Tlatoani: A Nahuatl word meaning “speaker” or “spokesperson” used by the Aztecs to refer to their rulers, or “they who speak for others.” The Aztec emperor was often called *huey tlatoani*, or “great speaker.”

Tribute: A payment to a nation or its ruler, usually made by people from a conquered territory as a sign that they surrender to the imposed rule; payment could be made in goods or labor or both.

sity for the empire (a vast, complex political unit extending across political boundaries and dominated by one central power, which generally takes control of the economy, government, and culture in communities throughout its territory). As the population of Tenochtitlán grew, the resources surrounding it were inadequate to support its people, and the Aztecs became increasingly dependent on tribute payments. The Aztecs were highly successful in maintaining a flow of



materials into Tenochtitlán from afar, though, and their capital city experienced a high level of prosperity.

Government

The early years

During the centuries before 1325, while the Aztecs wandered Mexico in search of a home, they practiced a form of democracy. The elders (people who have authority because of their age and experience) of their group elected a leader on the basis of his power and skills. Accomplishments on the battlefield were always the primary test of a potential leader's strength. In its nomadic times, the Aztec society had only a few powerful people: the leader, some priests, and some war commanders. The rest of the population was made up of peasant farmers and warriors.

In their first hundred years at Tenochtitlán, the Aztecs were subordinate (subject to someone of greater power) to the

Map showing the sites of the ancient Aztec civilization in Mesoamerica.
 Map by XNR Productions. The Gale Group.

Tepanecs, a very powerful group who lived on the west shore of Lake Texcoco in the cities of Azcapotzalco and Tlacopan. The Tepanecs had hired the Aztec warriors as mercenary soldiers (warriors who fight wars for another state or nation's army for pay). When the Aztecs helped the Tepanecs conquer other territories, they were entitled to share in the tribute paid by the defeated cities. During these years, Tenochtitlán and its government grew in wealth and power.

For their first fifty years at Tenochtitlán, the Aztecs were ruled by a chieftain (the leader of a tribe). In 1376 they formed a monarchy, installing a king named Acamapichtli (pronounced ah-cahm-ah-PEECH-tee; ruled c. 1376 to 1395), who claimed descent from the Toltecs (pronounced TOHL-tecks), a group who had ruled the Valley of Mexico from around 900 to 1200. Many people in the Valley of Mexico believed the Toltecs had been chosen by the gods to rule over the valley. In fact, almost all Mesoamerican rulers claimed descent from the Toltec kings, regardless of their actual background. From Acamapichtli's reign until the end of the empire, the supreme leader of the Aztecs was always chosen from this founding royal family.

The Aztec empire: 1427 to 1521

At the end of their first hundred years in Tenochtitlán, the Aztec kings were still under the control of the Tepanec emperors of Azcapotzalco. With the help of Aztec warriors the Tepanecs had become the most powerful people of the Valley of Mexico. The arrangement between the Aztecs and Tepanecs had been satisfactory to both for many years, but as Tenochtitlán grew in power, its leaders wanted to rule the valley. The Tepanec leaders, fearing the increasing power of the Aztecs, tried to suppress them, demanding greater amounts of tribute.

The Triple Alliance

The Alcohuan, a Nahuatl-speaking (pronounced NAH-wah-tul; the language spoken by the Aztecs and many other groups in the Valley of Mexico) people who had migrated to the Valley of Mexico about the same time as the Aztecs, lived on the eastern side of Lake Texcoco. During the four-

teenth century, their city, Texcoco, had grown and thrived independently of the Tepanecs. Under the new name of Texcocans, they were rapidly gaining a reputation for their cultural refinement. When the Tepanecs conquered Texcoco in 1418, they killed its king. His son and heir, fifteen-year-old Nezahualcoyotl (pronounced ne-za-hwahl-COY-oh-tul, meaning “Hungry Coyote”; 1403–1473) was forced to flee. Years later, Nezahualcoyotl returned to claim his position as king, killing the Tepanec lord who had taken his father’s throne.

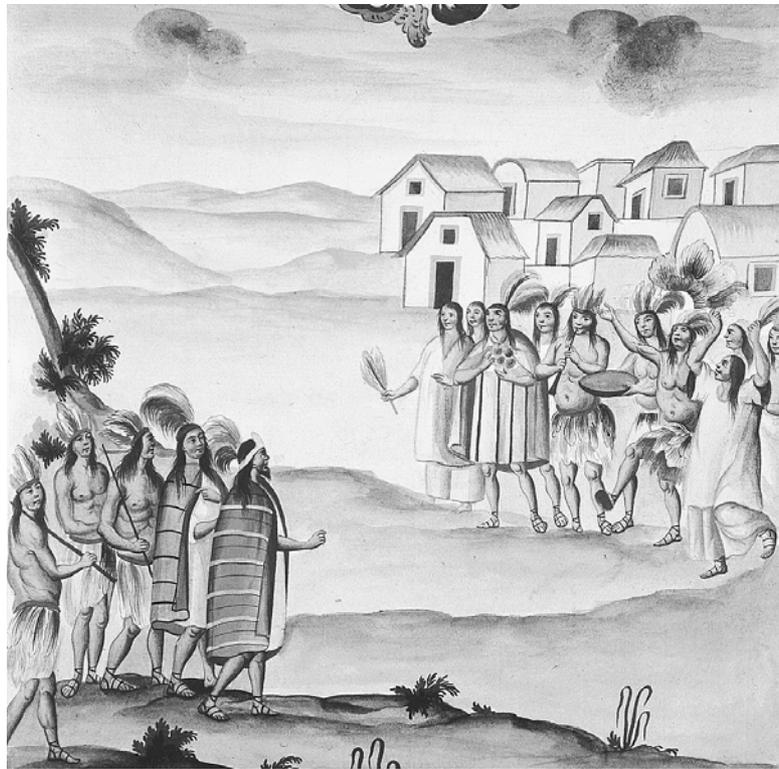
In 1426 Nezahualcoyotl teamed up with the Aztec emperor Itzcoatl (pronounced eetz-coe-WAH-tul; ruled c. 1427–1440) and together they defeated the Tepanec city of Azcapotzalco, killing most of its population. They then formed the Triple Alliance, bringing the formerly Tepanec-dominated town of Tlacopan into the alliance. These triumphs marked the beginning of the Aztec empire, and Itzcoatl became its first emperor, or *huey tlatoani* (pronounced WHO-ee tlah-too-AH-nee; “great speaker”). From this time until the Spanish conquest—nearly one hundred years—the Aztecs were unquestionably the most powerful people in Mesoamerica.

With the Aztecs always in the lead, the Triple Alliance remained intact for years. Texcoco and Tlacopan followed the bidding of the Aztec emperor in Tenochtitlán in matters of war only; they were independent on other matters. The alliance imposed its rule on cities throughout an ever-expanding area of central Mexico, demanding tribute in the form of certain amounts of goods on certain dates. Under their alliance agreement, Tenochtitlán and Texcoco received two-fifths of the tribute, while Tlacopan received one-fifth. The cities became rich and according to Robert Hull in his book *The Aztecs* (1998): “Each year Tenochtitlán received 7,000 tons of corn, 4,000 tons each of beans, chia seeds, and grain, an unbelievable 2 million cotton cloaks, and a huge quantity of war costumes, shields, and feather headdresses.”

Texcoco

Under King Nezahualcoyotl, who ruled from about 1433 to 1470, Texcoco became the second most important city in the Aztec empire. Not long after he recovered the throne of his kingdom, Nezahualcoyotl created a code of laws so well regarded that it became the standard throughout

Illustration of villagers in Texcoco greeting King Nezahualcoyotl. *The Art Archive/National Archives of Mexico/Mireille Vautier.*



the empire. During the ninety-one years in which Nezahualcoyotl and his son, Nezahualpilli (1460–1515) reigned, Texcoco was the legal center for the entire empire. King Nezahualcoyotl was also a great poet, philosopher, biologist, and engineer. With his promotion of culture and education, Texcoco drew great artists—poets, dancers, and musicians—and the top thinkers from all over Mesoamerica, quickly becoming the empire’s center of learning.

Texcoco remained a very strong city during the life of Nezahualcoyotl, but gradually during the reign of his son, Nezahualpilli, Texcoco became increasingly dominated by the powerful Tenochtitlán. Texcoco was not alone in becoming subordinate to Tenochtitlán. When Tenochtitlán had first been established, a sect of the Aztecs broke off from the main group and established their own city on a nearby island they called Tlatelolco. The two cities remained separate and were somewhat hostile to one another for years. In 1473 the Aztecs of Tenochtitlán overthrew the Tlatelolco government

and incorporated the island into their city. One of their largest markets was on Tlatelolco.

Expanding throughout Mexico

The Aztecs were not content to remain in the Valley of Mexico, and within decades of forming the Triple Alliance their armies had conquered most of central and southern Mexico. The Aztecs never controlled any of the Maya (pronounced MY-uh) lands, nor did they ever conquer the southern part of the Mexican state of Veracruz. Nevertheless, their empire covered a vast area compared to the size of many large European nations.

Unlike the European nations, however, the Triple Alliance did not actually rule most of the peoples it conquered. Instead the empire installed an official tax collector in the conquered city or center and expected prompt payment of tribute on a regular basis. Submitting to the Aztecs largely meant making hefty tribute payments and acknowledging their supreme authority in the area. In times of war, the defeated city might also have to send soldiers to fight for the empire.

In general, though, conquered cities and city-states continued to rule themselves. Although they did have to agree to recognize the Aztec war and sun god Huitzilopochtli as the supreme god, they continued to practice their traditional religions. If, however, a conquered people did not send their tribute payments, they would face an army of Aztec warriors in violent combat, and everyone knew the Aztecs excelled most in military matters.

At its height, the empire was a very loose coalition (a union of different peoples under an agreement) of different peoples with vast populations. The people of the empire, according to Michael D. Coe in *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs* (1994) were “held in a mighty system whose main purpose was to provide tribute to the Valley of Mexico.” In all there were probably about fifteen million people in this coalition. Many of them spoke Nahuatl and worshiped, for the most part, the same gods as their conquerors.

There were people of many different backgrounds and languages within the empire. For example, in 1379 the Aztec warriors conquered a non-Nahuatl speaking farming



The Aztec Kings and Emperors, 1376 to 1521

- Acamapichtli (pronounced ah-cahm-ah-PEECH-tee; ruled c. 1376–1395): The founder of the royal Aztec dynasty and the first chieftain of Tenochtitlán. In 1376 the leader of the Tepanecs, Tezozomoc, allowed the Aztec leaders to establish their own monarchy. They elected Acamapichtli as their new leader, whose father was Aztec but whose mother was apparently a direct descendant of the Toltecs. Acamapichtli is said to have taken a wife from each Aztec *calpulli*, or district. With his claim to Toltec blood, his offspring became the new Aztec/Toltec nobility, ready to be rulers of a great empire in Mexico.
- Huitzilihuitl (pronounced wheet-zeel-ee-WHEE-tul; ruled c. 1395–1417): The son of Acamapichtli, Huitzilihuitl married the daughter of the powerful Tepanec king, Tezozomoc.
- Chimalpopoca (pronounced chee-mahl-poe-POE-cah; ruled c. 1417–1427): The grandson of Aztec royal founder Acamapichtli and Tepanec ruler Tezozomoc. Chimalpopoca plotted against the heir to the Tepanec throne, and after Tezozomoc died, the Tepanecs captured and murdered him.
- Itzcoatl (pronounced eetz-coe-WAH-tul; means “obsidian serpent”; c. 1380–1440; ruled c. 1427–1440): An illegitimate son of Acamapichtli (his mother was a slave) and the uncle of Chimalpopoca, Itzcoatl had been prominent in the council and as a warrior for several decades before taking the throne. In his second year as *tlatoani*, the Aztecs overthrew the Tepanecs and formed the Triple Alliance with the cities of Texcoco and Tlacopan. The destruction of Azcapotzalco, one of the most powerful communities of the valley, marked the beginning of the Aztec empire; Itzcoatl was the first of the empire’s six emperors, or *huey tlatoanis*. Itzcoatl’s adviser Tlacaelel is credited (and blamed) for many significant transformations in Aztec life and culture taking place at this time. Tlacaelel also served under Montezuma I (pronounced mohk-the-ZOO-mah), Axayácatl (pronounced ash-eye-AH-catl), and Tizoc (pronounced TEEZ-ohk).

society in the area that is now the state of Morelos. The Aztecs named the people the *Tlahuica* (meaning in Nahuatl, “people who work the land”). The largest Tlahuica cities were Cuauhnahuac (now Cuernavaca) and Huaxtepec. After the Aztecs defeated them in battle, the Tlahuicans were required to pay an annual tribute. According to careful records left behind by the Aztecs, the Tlahuicans sent eight

- Montezuma I, or Montezuma Ilhuicamina (also spelled Moctezuma; ruled c. 1440–1469): Nephew of Itzcoatl and a leading general of the Aztecs, Montezuma I led his armies to many triumphs in the battlefield, greatly expanding the Aztec empire. In the 1450s the Valley of Mexico suffered from heavy flooding that led to crop failures and famine. Montezuma began making conquests in unaffected areas outside of the Valley of Mexico, including Mixtec regions in the present-day Mexican state of Oaxaca (pronounced wah-HAH-cah), and Huastec and Totonac territory on the Gulf Coast.
- Axayácatl (ruled c. 1469–1481): Grandson of Montezuma I, Axayácatl spent much of his reign battling to reconquer rebelling territories; he also added vast areas to the empire. In the course of combat, he lost a leg.
- Tizoc (ruled c. 1481–1486): Grandson of Montezuma I and brother of Axayácatl, Tizoc was known as a weak ruler. During his reign, however, the empire continued to grow.
- Ahuitzotl (pronounced ah-weet-ZOH-tul; ruled c. 1486–1502): Grandson of Montezuma I and brother of Axayácatl and Tizoc, Ahuitzotl was a fierce and warlike emperor, responsible for adding vast regions to the empire. The new territories under his reign ran from Guatemala up the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, doubling the size of the empire. Ahuitzotl undertook a rebuilding of Tenochtitlán, including the building of the Templo Mayor, a set of twin pyramids dedicated to the war god Huitzilopochtli (pronounced hweets-ee-loh-PAWCH-tee) and the rain god Tlaloc. The estimated number of human sacrifices in the four-day dedication ceremony for the new temple was twenty thousand.
- Montezuma II (also Moctezuma Xocoyótzin; ruled 1502–1520): Son of Axayácatl, Montezuma II ruled over the empire for seventeen years. He was responsible for several major advances in the social, political, economic, and cultural arenas. He died in 1520 while battling Spanish conquistadores (conquerors).

thousand sets of clothing, sixteen thousand sheets of bark paper, and twenty thousand bushels of maize to Tenochtitlán annually.

Even though the Tlahuicans were forced to pay hefty tributes for more than a century, they grew wealthy and enjoyed a stable government as part of the Aztec empire. They were strong enough to conquer a few cities around them and

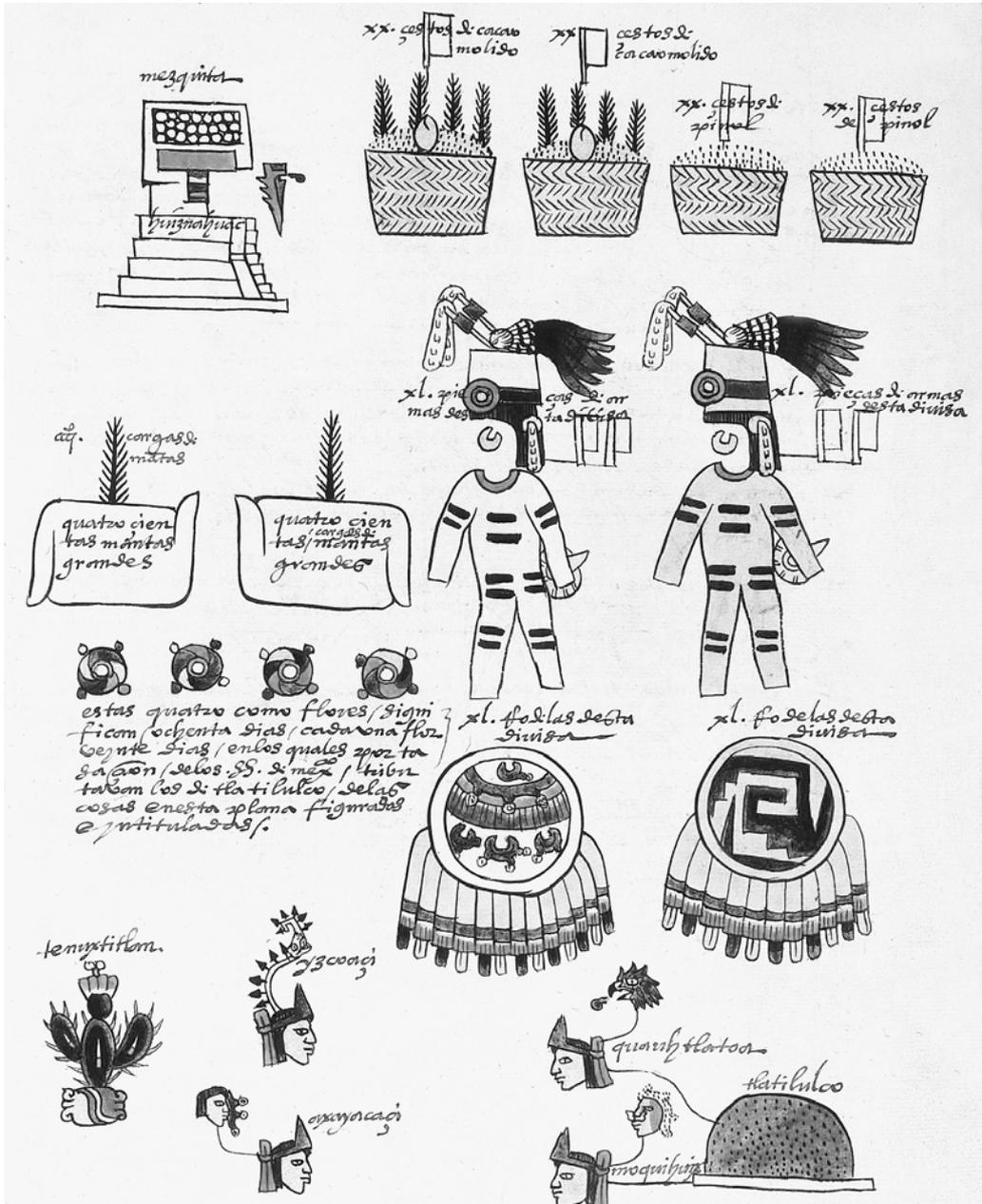
established a very profitable trade business. The Tlahuicans remained loyal to the Aztecs to the end, coming to their defense against the Spanish in 1520. This was not the case with some of the other peoples of the empire. Aztec warriors were continually fighting rebellions from cities and regions that deeply resented paying tribute.

A couple of groups successfully repelled the attacks of the Aztecs. One was the Tarascans, who had settled in Tzintzuntzan, in the present-day Mexican state of Michoán. The city of Tzintzuntzan had a population of about thirty thousand and was advanced in the arts, particularly weaving. The Tarascans were not Nahuatl speakers. In 1479 an Aztec army of twenty-four thousand soldiers under the command of the emperor Axayácatl attacked the Tarascans in their homeland.

The Aztecs probably anticipated an easy success, but over the years the Tarascans had grown very powerful, though they had avoided contact with others. In the long and bloody battle, the fierce Tarascan army slaughtered thousands of Aztecs. The surviving Aztecs retreated, never again trying to conquer the Tarascans.

The Tlaxcalan people lived much closer to Tenochtitlán in the Valley of Mexico. Their territory was surrounded by the empire, but somehow Tlaxcala avoided coming under the rule of the Aztecs. The Tlaxcalans had been allies of the Aztecs off and on during the fifteenth century. During the great famine in the Valley of Mexico in 1454, both societies were running low on victims for sacrifice. The Tlaxcalans agreed to enter into “flower wars” with the Aztec army—wars waged only for the purpose of taking victims to be sacrificed to the gods. These wars were waged with the mutual consent of both groups, and strict rules were followed.

At some point in their history together, the Tlaxcalans began to view the Aztecs as mortal enemies. Perhaps the Aztecs broke the rules or continued the wars after Tlaxcala withdrew its consent, but this is not known. In 1520 after the Tlaxcala fought and lost a battle with the invading Spanish, a huge force of the Tlaxcalan army joined forces with the Spaniards to help defeat the Aztecs.



A record of tribute items—in labor and in goods—given to the Aztec empire from one of its conquered cities. Items include: repairs to a temple, 40 baskets of cacao, 40 baskets of maize flour, and 40 costumes and shields. *The Art Archive/Bodleian Library of Oxford/The Bodleian Library.*

The governmental and social hierarchy

The Great Speaker

The succession (the system of passing power within the ruling class, usually upon the death of the current ruler) of Aztec emperors was a stable process throughout the years of the empire. The rulers and their top lords and priests all came from the royal family and were usually closely related. The Aztecs did not hand the throne to the oldest son as was done in some European countries at the time. Being born into Aztec royalty did not assure one of special privilege; the royal family was huge. Emperors frequently had hundreds of wives and some were said to have thousands of children. Only the top performers in combat and in managing the affairs of the government were considered for top offices.

A council of about thirty nobles chose the emperor from among four nobles who had held the top positions under the deceased former emperor. At the same time they chose a new emperor, the council selected four other royal leaders who were sons, nephews, or brothers of the newly elected emperor. These four lords would maintain their positions until the emperor died, and at that time one of them would be elected to replace him.

The emperors of the Aztec empire were expected to behave in a very dignified manner and live a virtuous life as an example to their people. They were rarely seen in public. Aztec emperors lived in royal palaces in a walled-off section of the Tenochtitlán temple district. Inside the palace compounds were lavish gardens and beautiful buildings filled with gold, arts, and other treasures of the empire. There were about three thousand servants to tend to the palace and the needs of the royal family.

Whenever the emperor appeared, he was dressed elaborately in a headdress made from the brilliant green feathers of quetzal birds. His robes were made from the finest woven textiles and his sandals were made of gold. He was carried by his servants on a litter (an enclosed platform with a couch or bench carried on long poles), and when he stood, cloaks or mats were laid out in front of him so his feet never touched the ground. People around him were expected to bow three times as he passed and were never to look directly into his face.



The nobility

The Aztec emperor's top lords took responsibility for much of the daily management of running the empire. Among the top advisers to the emperor were four army generals, each one in charge of the armies of the four districts of Tenochtitlán. Just under the emperor was the *cihuacoatl* (meaning "Snake Woman," though the position was filled by men), a very powerful adviser who ruled over the domestic affairs of the empire as a kind of deputy to the emperor. Serving the emperor and his top lords was a council of advisers.

Under the top advisers to the emperor was a larger class of nobles of different ranks. These included priests of many ranks and positions. Every city and city-state within the empire had its own *tlatoani*, or supreme ruler, from the Aztec nobility, who reported to the *cihuacoatl*. All of the provinces (territories located at a distance from the capital city) had their own administrators, or *tecuhltlis*, who ran public works, enforced laws, and punished criminals.

Illustration of Aztec nobles. Nobles had to earn their prestige through military feats or proven leadership.
© Stapleton Collection/Corbis.

Though Aztec lords usually came from noble families, being born as the son or daughter of a nobleman was not enough to ensure one's future. The prestige and power of being a noble were given only to those who had proven themselves as leaders, particularly in the military. Nobles, like the emperor, were expected to provide an example for the rest of the population. Good manners, extreme cleanliness, and modesty were standard. The Aztec nobles had changed a great deal since their wandering years, when they were considered ruffians by the other peoples of the Valley of Mexico. In fact, historian Leopold Castedo, as quoted in Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman's *The Course of Mexican History* (1995), observed that "the nobles were so extraordinarily refined that when they were forced to come near the Spaniards, they screened their nasal passages with branches of fragrant flowers," because the smell of the unwashed conquistadores offended them so much.

The *pochteca*

The *pochteca*, Aztec long-distance traders and merchants, held a crucial position within the Aztec empire. Carrying goods made by the artisans (craftspeople) of Tenochtitlán and other cities, they traveled as far south as present-day Guatemala into Maya lands and throughout the Mesoamerican regions, selling their wares. From these distant markets they brought back the materials Tenochtitlán craftspeople needed to make their goods. Without the *pochteca*, the economy of Tenochtitlán would not have prospered.

The *pochteca* were an unusually knowledgeable group who learned the languages and customs of the many peoples on their trade routes. They were also a daring and brave group. As they passed through foreign lands gathering the goods that would bring them wealth in a faraway market, they had to avoid being hit by the spears and arrows of hostile and suspicious peoples. The *pochteca* often served as spies, informing the emperor about the activities and military strength of the peoples in the far reaches of the empire. Because their work was so important to the empire, the emperor gave them military escorts to keep them from harm, but they also had to rely on their wits and charm to survive in dangerous and unknown places.

The *pochteca* usually became exceedingly rich from their trade, but even though they performed a service to all, they were not accepted by the people of Tenochtitlán. The *pochteca* lived together in the sidelines of the city. Perhaps due to fear of robbery or to prevent jealousy, they dressed in ragged clothes and brought their caravans (groups of people traveling together and carrying goods) in and out of the city under the cover of darkness. The children of the *pochteca* married only within the group, and the *pochteca* remained a small but very rich and knowledgeable society unto themselves.

Common folk

The common people of the Aztec empire made up the great majority of the Aztec population. They were mainly farmers, artisans, servants, and other laborers. The Aztecs were organized into social units called *calpulli*, meaning “big house.” *Calpultin* (plural of *calpulli*) were groups of families who were either related in some way or had simply lived among each other over the generations. The precise way a *calpulli* worked is not known, but each *calpulli* generally held land its members used for farming or other industry. Thus, many *calpultin* were divided by the trades of their members, such as farming or pottery-making. In the cities the *calpultin* formed a kind of neighborhood, with the group living within its own district and taking responsibility for the district’s maintenance. The *calpulli* had a leader called the *calpullec*; like the emperor, the *calpullec* worked with a governing council. Each *calpulli* had its own traditions and its people socialized together and usually married within their group. Men in the *calpulli* formed their own military unit, fighting in wars together. The farming *calpultin* gave a proportion of their crops to the emperor as tribute, and the artisan *calpultin* paid a tax on their sales. The *pochteca* formed their own *calpultin*.

Slaves

At the bottom of the social ladder in the Aztec empire were the slaves, who usually worked for nobles in the fields or as servants in their homes. The bonds of slavery were never passed from parents to children, and servitude was often temporary in the Aztec empire. Some of the Aztec

slaves were people who had been taken captive in battles, but there were many other ways for people to become slaves.

An Aztec might become a slave, for example, if he or she fell into debt. Punishment for certain crimes was to serve a term as a slave. Sometimes when people gambled, they pledged themselves as slaves if they lost the bet. People who had no food sometimes sold themselves into slavery out of desperation. Slaves could marry people who were not slaves. It was not, however, customary to treat slaves harshly though they were sometimes used for human sacrifice ceremonies.

War and warriors

Every man in the Aztec empire was expected to fight in the wars, from the emperor down to the common people. Constant war was central to the day-to-day operations of the empire; war was, in effect, the empire's purpose. The economy of Tenochtitlán depended upon the constant receipt of tribute from conquered lands. In addition, the religion of the Aztecs required massive human sacrifice to keep the sun rising and to satisfy the gods to prevent the final destruction of the earth.

Prisoners of war brought home by Aztec soldiers were sacrificed on the temple steps, and they were believed to be vital to the very existence of the Aztec civilization. In early times, Aztecs may have waged wars to conquer new territories and exert their role as the rulers of the empire, but in the later years they were often compelled to fight simply to maintain the status quo (keep things as they were) through more and more human sacrifice.

Every Aztec male was trained to be a warrior. Inga Clendinnen, in her book *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (1991), observed how deeply invested the Aztec society was into its warrior cult:

To be born a male in Tenochtitlán was to be designated a warrior. The attending midwife met the birth of a boy child with warcries, and lifted the baby, still slippery from the birth fluid, away from his mother's body to dedicate him to the Sun, and to the 'flowery death' of the warrior in battle or on the killing stone [where humans were sacrificed].

The Aztec emperor was the chief military commander and often went out into the battlefields to fight with his



armies. If he was unable to go to war himself, he sent one of his top generals, usually a brother, nephew, or uncle. The emperor had the authority to compel all of the cities under his control to send him all their able-bodied men to serve as warriors. It is believed Aztec emperors in the last century of the empire were able to gather an army of about one hundred thousand men at any given time.

Serving under the emperor or his general were the Aztec knights. The knights were members of very prestigious military orders—the Arrow Knights, the Eagle Knights, and the Jaguar Knights. Knights were chosen from among the best warriors and enjoyed the greatest honors. Other commanding officers were usually picked from among nobles, who had extensive military training.

Nobles sent their sons to the *calmecac*, or religious school. Even though the young nobles were taught by priests, the main focus of the education at the *calmecac* was

An Aztec priest performing a sacrificial offering of a prisoner's heart to the war and sun god, Huitzilopochtli.
The Library of Congress.



Aztec warriors, such as those depicted in this illustration, were honored and often rewarded with special gifts for their successes in battle.

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to train them as warriors; by the age of fifteen the boys were in very rigorous military training. After proving their merit in battle, some young nobles would go on to become administrators or government officials. Many, though, would spend most of their lives on the battlefield.

The majority of soldiers were from the common people. They farmed or worked in trades or services until there was a call to war. When the emperor called for soldiers, all males over the age of fifteen marched off with the men of their *calpulli*, and the group would fight together as a unit.

From childhood, Aztec males were taught to dream about the honor they would gain as soldiers in battle. Boys were taught that it was their life's mission to provide captives for sacrifice in order to feed the earth and please the gods. At age ten, boys had their hair cut short except for one

long lock. This lock would only be cut when the boy had brought home his first prisoner of war.

For common people, the military was the only way to rise up in Aztec society. If a common soldier did well in battle, he was rewarded with land, slaves, or loot from the defeated. If he managed to capture several enemies to be offered for sacrifice, he had a chance to become a noble or to join the ranks of the knights. If he died in battle, his family received gifts. As a reward, soldiers who died in battle were thought to go to a special part of the heavens reserved only for them.

Starting wars

The Aztec armies did not attack other peoples without warning. If they decided to conquer a city or region, they sent their ambassadors (diplomatic officials who represent a government or a society) out to the leaders to inform them they were to begin paying tribute. They offered the city their military pro-

tection and the benefits of trading within the empire in return. In some cases, when the ambassadors made these offers to a region's leaders, the leaders responded by killing the ambassadors and mutilating their bodies to show their scorn of the offer.

If the region in question did not accept the Aztecs' offer after a significant amount of talking and threatening, it was time for war. The emperor called on the cities in his realm to send their soldiers. The war drums resounded around the empire, and soldiers everywhere made their way to the arsenals where weapons were stored. There they received a variety of arms. The most deadly weapon was likely a *macuahuitl*, a three-foot combination sword and club with sharp obsidian (dark, solid glass formed by volcanoes used to make tools and weapons) blades set into its edges. Legend has it that the Aztec soldiers were able to chop off a horse's head with just one blow from this mighty club. There were also *atlatsls*, or spear throwers, from which Aztec warriors flung darts and spears at their enemies. Some warriors had bows and arrows.

The Aztec coat of armor was made from tightly fitted quilted cotton that had been stiffened by soaking in salt water. These suits could often stop an arrow or soften the impact of a spear. The army officers had specific ways of dressing, using feathers and certain designs so soldiers would recognize them and follow their lead in battle. Some wore full animal skins complete with the animal's head. The purpose of such costumes was to instill fear in the enemy.

The warriors would arrive in Tenochtitlán in their *calpulli* groupings. There they participated in ceremonies to the gods before embarking on their journey on foot across the land to the enemy region. When they arrived, the knights and other officers ran ahead, leading the attack, followed by massive numbers of soldiers. They usually tried not to kill their opponents in battle. Rather, large groups would try to circle and then surround the enemy to capture and bring them home for sacrifice.

Economy

As it grew, the city of Tenochtitlán, with its population of hundreds of thousands of people, needed more food

and goods than could be grown or found in the area. The island was short of land for farming and there were few sources of metal, stone, feathers, or shells—the commodities craftspeople needed—to be found nearby. The city was forced to wage constant wars to bring in goods in the form of tribute. The *pochteca*, with their extensive long-distance trading were also responsible for bringing in resources from remote places. With these goods, Tenochtitlán developed a very large class of urban (city) tradespeople who made products for use in the city or for export out to distant lands.

***Chinampas* and farming**

For many of the years of Tenochtitlán's existence, local farmers were able to provide the city with most of its food. Around the island city there were many swampy areas, which might have seemed useless to most farmers. Aztec farmers, however, developed an ingenious method for farming in these swamps. They began by digging canals to run from the marshy waters near the shores into the island, then cut down the swamp vegetation and dried it out, creating reeds.

The reeds were woven together into large floating mats. Getting mud from the lake bottom, the Aztecs heaped the mats with the fertile soil, creating raised garden beds. Stakes were often driven into the ground to anchor the floating gardens. Willow trees were then planted around the corners of the mats in the lake bottom to provide permanent anchors. The farmers planted crops on these *chinampas* or floating gardens, including maize (corn), squash, beans, grains, chili peppers, avocados, tomatoes, and flowers. Because the climate was usually good and there was an unending supply of water for irrigation, the *chinampas* usually produced crops year-round.

The lake was just one of the Aztec farming environments. The Aztecs cut terraces (steps to make level fields for farming) into the hillsides to keep the soil from eroding during heavy rains and were able to farm the slopes around them. In the flatlands they engineered irrigation canals for the maximum number of crops possible in the area. Working without metal plows or beasts of burden (such as horses or oxen), the Aztecs used sharp sticks to dig in the soft soil. They used human waste as fertilizer, collecting it regularly



from the city's public "bathrooms," which were set on canoes in the canals for easy transportation.

Farming was done by the common workers. Although they did not own their own land, the land they worked was owned by their *calpulli*, and families were given plots for their use. Each *calpulli* was required to give crops or labor to the empire. The farming goods might be used to feed the huge armies or to fund public projects, such as building of temples, irrigation canals, and causeways. All farmers were expected to serve in the Aztec army as well.

Trade

In its peak years, Tenochtitlán was fabulously wealthy with goods from all around Mesoamerica. Its extensive market system made it the hub of a huge long-distance trading network. By the fifteenth century, the city supported a large population of artisans who created and sold fine cloths, pot-

Aztecs building a *chinampa*, or "floating garden."

© Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis.



Copy of a manuscript showing Aztec farmers cultivating fields. *The Library of Congress.*

tery, baskets, jewelry, feather weavings, and tools. Like farmers, the craftspeople operated in *calpultin*—such as a feather workers' *calpulli* or a house servants' *calpulli*.

These specialist *calpultin* paid their tribute to the government in the form of a tax on their sales. The raw materials the craftspeople needed for their work were generally brought in by the *pochteca* and were available for sale at Tenochtitlán's busy markets. Some of the crafts they made were sold in the city, while others were carried out by the *pochteca* to distant lands and traded for more raw materials. Although there was no coined or printed money, the Aztecs used cacao beans (beans that grow on an evergreen tree from which cocoa, chocolate, and cocoa butter are made), cloth, and salt as mediums of exchange. The trade system and the huge markets of Tenochtitlán operated independently of the government and were highly profitable. Industrious craftspeople and laborers who hired out their services could become wealthy.

The last days

Although they did not directly rule the fifteen million people of their vast empire, the Aztecs brought about some widespread changes. Their military muscle unified the many diverse peoples within their empire. The tremendous tribute payments the Aztecs imposed on these conquered peoples were certainly not agreeable to many of the conquered; yet, the outstanding Aztec trade network brought unexpected prosperity to some of the outlying regions. Aztec military dominance provided political stability as well. The major beneficiaries of the empire, though, were the people in the city of Tenochtitlán. The elite were not the only ones to benefit from the general prosperity of the times. The exchange of goods through trade and tribute payments created an unprecedented class of non-farming urban workers. By the time the Spanish arrived in 1519, according to Clendinnen, “most of the city’s commoners lived by an urban trade: as sandal makers, fuel sellers, potters, mat weavers, carriers, or any of the multitude of services required in a busy metropolis.” Many commoners, who in previous times would have toiled at the same work without hope for anything better, faced a very different world in which wealth and opportunity were within reach of a much larger portion of the population.

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Aztec Religion, Culture, and Daily Life

27

The Spanish conquistadores (conquerors) arriving in Tenochtitlán (pronounced tay-notch-teet-LAHN) in 1521 marveled at the extremely refined and artistic culture they found there. Many claimed that the capital city of the Aztecs surpassed the cities of Europe in architecture, engineering, and the arts. The city's laws were sophisticated and there was little crime. Its markets were orderly and its streets were clean, fragrant, and brightly painted. The Spaniards' first sights, walking down the streets of Tenochtitlán, might have led them to believe they had discovered a serenely peaceful civilization. During the battle for the conquest of the city, however, the Spaniards witnessed some of their fellow soldiers, who had been captured by the Aztec soldiers, being sacrificed to the gods. They looked on as the hearts were torn out of the living bodies of their comrades. Though the Spanish were responsible for burning at the stake those people who did not conform to their religious beliefs during the Spanish Inquisition (1478–34), the sight of these human sacrifices filled the soldiers with utter fear and horror. The two sides of the Aztecs these first Spaniards in Mesoamerica witnessed—the great capacity for beauty, logic,



Words to Know

Amerindian: An indigenous, or native, person from North or South America. The term “Amerindian” is used in place of the terms “American Indian” or “Native American” in these volumes, as the term “Native American” is often associated with the United States and the term “Indian” is offensive to some people.

Aviary: A building where birds are housed.

Calpulli: (The word means “big house”; the plural form is *calpultin*.) Social units consisting of groups of families who were either related in some way or had lived among each other over the generations. *Calpultin* formed the basic social unit for farmers, craftspeople, and merchants. The precise way they worked is not known.

Codex: A handmade book written on a long strip of bark paper and folded into accordion-like pages.

Deify: Place in a godlike position; treat as a god.

Empire: A vast, complex political unit extending across political boundaries and dominated by one central power, which generally takes control of the economy, government, and culture in communities throughout its territory.

Glyph: A figure (often carved into stone or wood) used as a symbol to represent words, ideas, or sounds.

Nahuatl: The language spoken by the Aztecs and many other groups in the Valley of Mexico.

Pantheon: All of the gods that a particular group of people worship.

Ritual: A formal act performed the same way each time, usually used as a means of religious worship by a particular group.

Scribe: Someone hired to write down the language, to copy a manuscript, or record a spoken passage.

Vigesimal: Based on the number twenty (as a numeric system).

and order and the violent culture based on war and “feeding” the gods with the blood of sacrifice victims—were difficult for them to reconcile. Though almost all societies have practiced human sacrifice in their past and many continue to have brutal violence in the present, grasping both of these two contrasting sides of the great Aztec civilization is difficult even today.

Religion

The early Aztecs who wandered the Valley of Mexico before 1325 probably had a much simpler world view than



that of their empire-ruling descendents. (An empire is a vast, complex political unit extending across political boundaries and dominated by one central power, which generally takes control of the economy, government, and culture in communities throughout its territory.) During their travels they learned about the gods of the different peoples living in the valley and, over time, added them to their own pantheon (all of the gods in their religion). Awed by the traditions and the ruins of the valley's ancient cities, they also incorporated much of the region's history and mythology (a collection of myths—traditional, often imaginary stories about ancestors, heroes, or supernatural beings that usually make an attempt to explain a belief, practice, or natural phenomenon).

The Aztecs came to believe that Teotihuacán (pronounced TAY-uh-tee-wah-KAHN) was the birthplace of their gods and the Toltecs (pronounced TOHL-tecks) were the chosen people of the gods. It was not long before the Aztecs cast themselves as the descendants of the Toltecs and the new

Map showing the sites of the ancient Aztec civilization in Mesoamerica.
 Map by XNR Productions. The Gale Group.

chosen rulers of the valley. While the Aztecs adopted traditions and practices from other people, they still maintained many of their own traditions as they adapted to their new home. Their supreme god Huitzilopochtli (pronounced hweets-ee-loh-PAWCH-tee), for example, joined the gods of the valley and eventually earned top status as the sun and warrior god of the Aztec empire.

The Aztec pantheon

There were hundreds of gods in the Aztec pantheon. They all embodied the principles of a world view that began with a creator god named Ometeotl, “the dual god,” who was both male and female. Ometeotl resided above the stars and planets on the uppermost layer of the spirit world. There were thirteen layers of the heavens in the Aztec cosmos, with nine levels of the underworld as well. Residing in the lowest of these was Ometeotl’s dark counterpart (another version of the god, with characteristics exactly the opposite of the heavenly god). Though neither god was considered “bad” or “good,” the heavenly Ometeotl was associated with creation, light, and day, while the underworld Ometeotl was associated with death, darkness, and night.

The Aztec pantheon originated when Ometeotl’s male and female aspects gave birth to the gods of the four cardinal directions (east, west, north, and south). These gods were Black Tezcatlipoca of the north, or “Smoking Mirror,” the powerful god of war, night, and sorcery; White Tezcatlipoca of the west, or Quetzalcoatl (pronounced kates-ahl-koh-AH-tul), the feathered serpent, who was the god of life and holiness; Red Tezcatlipoca of the east, also called Xipe Totec or “god of flayed flesh,” the god of spring and birth; and Blue Tezcatlipoca of the south, or Huitzilopochtli, the “blue hummingbird” and warrior god of the sun.

In the Aztec spiritual world, nature itself was deified (made into gods). The Aztecs considered rain, wind, thunder, and sun actual gods in themselves, not just forces represented by gods. Mountains, rivers, lakes, trees, and rocks were sacred and had spirits. But besides the deified natural world they also had gods that represented the forces of nature, like Tlaloc (pronounced TLAH-lock), the rain god, and Coatlicue,

the earth goddess. There were also gods associated with most of the elements of human behavior—gods of sleep, filth, and drinking, for example—as well as gods associated with the stars, planets, and all natural phenomena. In their pantheon there was room for many representations of the spirit world.

The world of the Fifth Sun

The Aztecs believed there had been four worlds prior to the current world. Each of the former worlds had been completely destroyed by a major catastrophe. With each destruction, the world's sun was extinguished and there was nothing left but darkness. These destructions were due to an ongoing struggle between the dark and warlike Black Tezcatlipoca and holy and peaceful Quetzalcoatl. The Aztecs believed that in each new world, one or the other of these two gods dominated. Neither was considered better than the other.

Each time the world and its sun were destroyed, all of the gods of the Aztec pantheon created a new world with a new sun. After the fourth world had been destroyed by floods, the gods met at the ancient city of Teotihuacán (see Chapter 18 for more information) to make plans for a fifth world. There, they chose two gods—one rich and the other poor and sickly—to sacrifice themselves so the world would be renewed.

When it came time for the gods to sacrifice themselves, the rich god froze. The poor and sickly god, though, jumped straight into the sacrificial fire. Not wanting to be outdone, the rich god finally jumped into the fire as well. The rest of the gods waited after the two sacrifices, but nothing happened. At last, all the gods, one by one, threw themselves into the fire. After all the gods had sacrificed themselves, the new sun arose and the new world of the Fifth Sun



The Aztecs honored many gods that represented the forces of nature. This statue is of Ehecatl, the god of wind. © Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis.

had begun. Because the gods had sacrificed themselves for human beings, the Aztecs believed it was the duty of humans to repay the gods by sacrificing themselves.

The world of the Fifth Sun was believed to be the final world—when it ended there would never be another. Human beings would disappear forever, and time itself would stop. The Aztecs believed the Fifth Sun would eventually be destroyed by earthquakes. Many of their religious practices, particularly human sacrifice, were their attempt to delay this final worldwide destruction. Though they looked to the gods for help, the Aztecs firmly believed that natural forces would eventually destroy them.

The Aztecs followed a complex calendar system (see Science below) to help stage the correct rituals (formal acts performed the same way each time) at the right times to delay the destructive forces of nature and the inevitable end of the world. The basic Aztec system of measuring time combined use of the sacred and solar calendars. Every 52 years all possible combinations of both sacred and solar day-names and numbers had been used, and the cycles would start over. Each period of 52 years was called a “bundle of years” and could be viewed as similar to current centuries. At the end of each bundle, there was a 12-day period before the next one started. These were days that were similar to leap years. By the modern solar calendar, it takes 365.2422 days for Earth to orbit the sun. If there were no leap year, after 100 years the modern calendar would be 24 days ahead of the seasons. Similarly, by the Aztec calendar systems, at the end of each “bundle of years” there was a 12-day period to align the calendar with the seasons.

It was believed that in these 12-day periods the world would be destroyed if the sacrifices and other rituals were not performed. As the end of each bundle approached, Aztecs were filled with dread, fearing that, on the last night of the bundle, the sun might fail to rise. On this night they followed a long ritual called the New Fire Ceremony. As evening approached, the Aztec people in every home broke all their dishes. Every fire in every house, workshop, and temple was put out. On a mountaintop in the Valley of Mexico the priests began an all-night prayer for the sun to rise. In homes throughout the valley, the Aztec people sat awake, praying.

Even children were not allowed to sleep through this night, or else evil spirits might invade their bodies.

All awaited to see if the sun would appear. When it arose, cries of joy and thankfulness filled the whole region. On the mountaintop, a human being was sacrificed to show gratitude to the gods. A fire was lit, and torches taken from this new fire were used to light all other fires. For the Aztecs, it was the beginning of a new century, and the fire gave them hope of survival for another fifty-two-year bundle. The last New Fire Ceremony before the Spanish conquest was in 1507.

The cult of Huitzilopochtli

The chief god of the Aztecs was Huitzilopochtli, their god of war and sun, who was said to have led them, in the form of a hummingbird, to Tenochtitlán. In Nahuatl (pronounced NAH-wah-tul), his name is a combination of *huitzilin*, or hummingbird, and *opochtli*, which means “left.” The Aztecs believed the south was the left side of the earth, so Huitzilopochtli was the hummingbird from the south. In most Aztec art, Huitzilopochtli appears either as a hummingbird or as a blue human with a headdress made of hummingbird feathers.

Many scholars believe Huitzilopochtli may not have been part of the pantheon of Mesoamerican gods until the Aztecs wandered into the Valley of Mexico sometime in the twelfth century. Some have speculated there was an Aztec leader named Huitzilopochtli who was deified by his people after his death. In the early days of settlement in Tenochtitlán, Huitzilopochtli was not the primary god of the Aztecs. When the emperor Itzcoatl (pronounced eetz-coe-WAH-tul; ruled 1427–1440) and his powerful adviser Tlacaelel came into power in 1427, however, they raised the god to the highest position in the pantheon. Worship of Huitzilopochtli became the hallmark (distinguishing characteristic) of Aztec spirituality, and conquered cities and states were forced to worship him. With this elevation of Huitzilopochtli, there was a tremendous increase in the number of human sacrifices in the empire.

In one creation story, Huitzilopochtli was the son of the earth goddess Coatlicue. Coatlicue was made pregnant by a ball of feathers that dropped from the sky. Her children did

Illustration of Huitzilopochtli, the god of the sun and war, and the primary god of the Aztecs.
The Art Archive/National Archives Mexico/Mireille Vautier.



not believe feathers had caused their mother's pregnancy. Ashamed of her behavior, they decided to kill her. As they approached her, a fully armed (and grown up, according to some versions) Huitzilopochtli sprang from Coatlicue's womb and immediately cut off the head of his sister, Coyolxauhqui. He then tossed her head into the air, and it rose as the moon. Huitzilopochtli became the sun.

As the sun god, Huitzilopochtli was reborn every morning to make his mighty trip across the heavens. At night, he was the warrior god, who descended into the underworld to battle death and darkness so he might return to be born and rise again the next morning. The Aztecs believed the only food that could nourish Huitzilopochtli's heroic daily journey was the beating hearts of sacrificed warriors.

Human sacrifice

Human sacrifice was practiced to some extent by all of the ancient civilizations of Mesoamerica. Most historians

believe that before the era of the Aztec empire began in 1427, it was practiced only on a small scale in Tenochtitlán. In one form of the early Aztec practice, a victim was picked from among the top noble warriors a year before the sacrifice was to take place. During the year the young warrior assumed the role of one of the gods. He was given the best of everything, living in a luxurious house with attractive women, fine clothes, and delicious foods. He was honored and worshiped and attended as if he were a god. On the day of his sacrifice, he would dress as a god and walk bravely but sadly to the stone upon which he was to be sacrificed with great ceremony. The Aztec priests gave him final instructions to bring their messages to the gods. He was then killed and his heart cut out by a priest.



The Aztecs viewed their world as a network of potentially bad and destructive forces. The world was a place where things could, and often did, go terribly wrong. Their experiences with nature may have led them to this belief. The Valley of Mexico is the site of volcanic mountains and has experienced many earthquakes. The lakes in the valley dried up at times and flooded at others. Frosts at the wrong times could destroy all crops.

In the year of 1 Rabbit (1454) the Aztecs learned this lesson only too well when a great famine began, set off by untimely rain and floods mixed with frosts. For three years in a row the crops of the valley were ruined and there was little to eat. Many people died. In desperation, the nobles and priests kept increasing their human sacrifice ceremonies. By the third year of the famine they were practicing mass sacrifices on a frequent basis, sometimes with hundreds of victims. When the famine finally ended and healthy crops appeared in the valley, the Aztec priests and rulers believed the sacrifices were responsible for restoring prosperity to the valley. From then on, the Aztec practice of human sacrifice took

Stone representation of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue.
The Library of Congress.



An Aztec sacrificial stone, upon which human offerings to the gods were often made. *The Library of Congress.*

on very large-scale proportions. The exact number of victims per year is still a matter of debate.

In 1487, when the Aztec empire celebrated the completion of the great temple to Huitzilopochtli, thousands of prisoners were brought in to be sacrificed as a dedication to the new building. There were so many victims they formed lines running miles down the four city streets, each of them awaiting his time to die on the temple steps. Some estimate hundreds of thousands of victims were sacrificed in this four-day celebration, but most historians believe about twenty thousand victims died in Tenochtitlán during those four days.

This particular celebration was exceptional and it is estimated that for more common events, fifty or sixty sacrifice victims were usually required. As the number of sacrifices rose, there was less ceremony for individual victims, but many still believed it was a great honor to be sacrificed. Aztecs prepared their male children to die in battle or by sac-

rifice from the time they were born. Sacrifice victims were believed to have their own special section of heaven or, alternatively, they were reborn as hummingbirds and spent the rest of eternity drinking the nectar of fragrant flowers.

Still, the practice inflicted terrible pain and suffering. The sacrifices were not limited to noble warriors—slaves became common victims and women and children were often sacrificed as well, sometimes in nightmarish circumstances. In the most common form of sacrifice, the victim was laid out upon a stone block, with four men holding his or her hands and feet down. A highly trained priest with a very sharp obsidian knife quickly cut open the chest, reached under the ribcage, and pulled out the still-beating heart. The heart was then either burned or smeared on a small statue of a particular god. The victim's head was cut off and mounted on a *tzompantli*, a rack to display sacrificial heads.

The body of a sacrifice victim was thrown down the temple stairs, or sometimes cut up and eaten by the nobles. In some cases, the skin was removed and worn by a priest. Huitzilopochtli was not the only god who required human sacrifices, and the grisly sacrifice rituals to the various gods took a number of different forms. It is important to remember that the Aztecs' view of death was very different than twentieth-century views. Nevertheless, from modern standpoints, the practice of human sacrifice was a horrible one. The mass sacrifices were considered repulsive to many people of the Aztec empire at the time as well.

Science

The Aztec number system, like many other Mesoamerican systems, was vigesimal—based on the number twenty. Most people believe the Mesoamericans chose the base of twenty because it was the number of fingers and toes they had to count with. The primary number system of the modern-day world is decimal—based on ten. In Maya (pronounced MY-uh) mathematics, numbers larger than 20 were written in powers of 20, just as modern numbers are written in powers of 10.

To write their numbers, the Aztecs generally used a system of dots and glyphs. Numbers up to the numeral 20 were



The sacred *tonalpohualli*, an Aztec calendar with a 260-day year. *The Library of Congress.*

represented by sequences of dots standing for numbers (9 dots, for example, stood for the number 9). For numbers above 20, they used glyphs representing multiples of 20. The number 20 was represented by a flag, 400 by a feather, and the number 8,000 was represented by a bag of incense (a substance, such as wood, that omits a pleasant odor when burned). Sometimes the Aztecs used the older bar and dot system, in which a bar had a value of five and a dot the value of one. Three bars and a dot, for example, would have a value of 16.

The calendar system

Religion and science were probably a single concept in the Aztec world, and their complex, three-calendar system is an example of the way they used science to understand and attempt to manipulate the world of the gods. One calendar, the sacred *tonalpohualli* (pronounced toe-nah-poe-WHAHL-lee), had a 260-day year. The days of the year were

made up from a combination of 20 day-names, such as Flint Knife, Rain, Flower, Crocodile, and Wind, and the numerals 1 through 13. Using every combination of the 13 numbers with the 20 day-names in a specific sequence created 260 days of the year. Each of the days was associated with a god and with various traits. If a child was born on day considered unlucky, for example, it was assumed his or her life would be unlucky. The sacred calendar was used by the Aztec priests for seeing into the future and choosing lucky days for weddings, wars, and other important events.

A second Aztec calendar, the *xihuitl* (pronounced shee-WHEE-tul) or solar calendar, was used to measure the agricultural seasons and was more like the Gregorian calendar (the calendar used by contemporary society). It had a 360-day year with eighteen 20-day months. A five-day period at year's end, to finish out the 365-day solar year, was thought to be a very unlucky time. The Aztecs also used a third calendar that marked the rise of Venus, or the Morning Star, every 584 days.

Arts

The modern concept of art as a form of individual expression would not have made much sense to most Aztec artists, particularly those in the visual arts—painting, sculpture, and metalworking. For most Aztec artists—with the exception of Aztec poets—their works were not meant to express feelings or thoughts, nor were they meant to be beautiful or pleasing to view. Art was almost entirely in the service of Aztec religion.

Since the Aztec common people could not read, art was the central means of conveying the ideas and stories of the spirit world and communicating religious truths to them. Of the visual arts, many scholars believe the Aztecs excelled most at sculpture. Sculptures of the gods were necessary for worship. These statues, often made in the detailed image of one of the gods, existed in every Aztec home. There were thousands in temples and in other public places. Drawing on religious themes, some of the sculptures of the gods and events in the spirit world were utterly terrifying or brutal. Most were made from limestone, which was abundant in the

area. Other sculptures were done in basalt (a fine-grained, dark gray rock used for building). Some were tiny, and of course, others towered over the city streets.

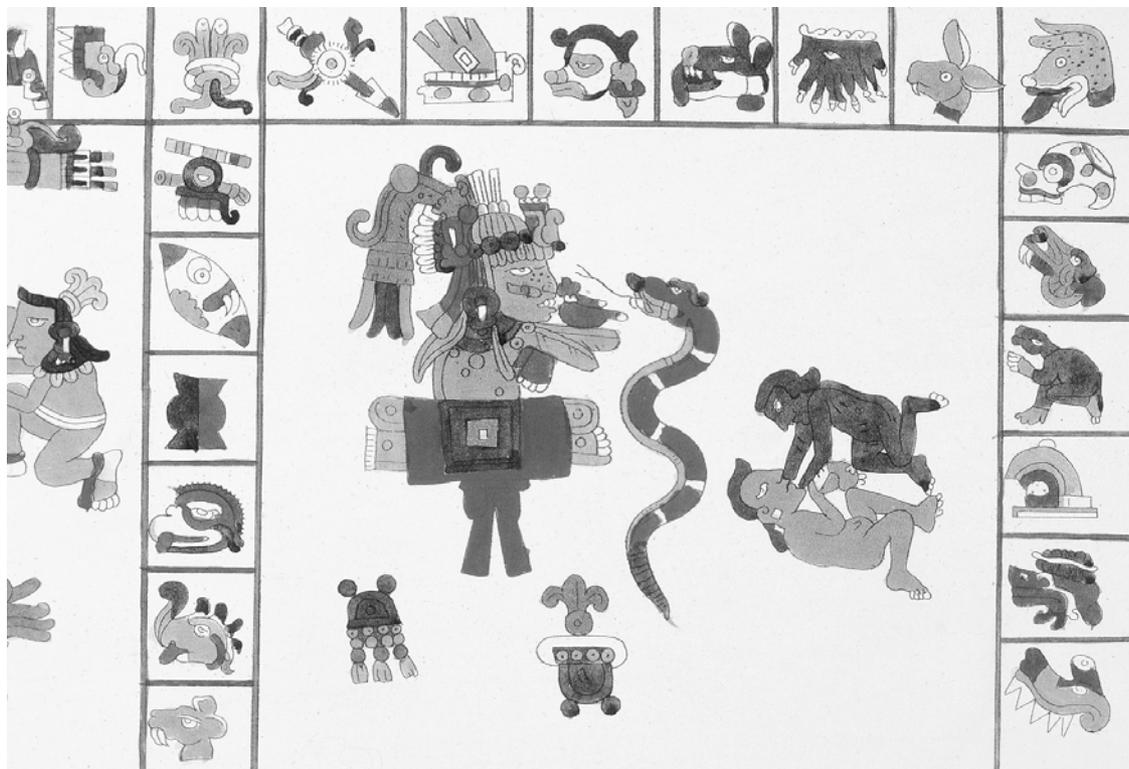
The Aztecs were highly skilled at working with feathers, especially the highly prized bright-green feathers of the quetzal bird. From these they created headdresses, cloaks, and elaborate ceremonial costumes. In Tenochtitlán there was a very large aviary (building where birds are housed), in which thousands of birds were kept and their feathers gathered regularly. Highly skilled workers wove the feathers into intricate costume pieces. Since most of the feathers have long since decomposed, only pictures and carvings of these elaborate feather creations are left. The Aztecs also excelled at painting and weaving baskets, most of which disintegrated.

Although much Aztec art did not survive over the years, the Aztecs did leave behind some exquisite jewelry. They treasured the green gemstone called jade above any other material, including gold. Jade was called *chalchihuitl* (pronounced chahl-CHWEE-tul), or “precious stone.” The Aztecs also fashioned fine metalwork. It is said they brought in metalworkers from distant lands to make fine gold jewelry in Tenochtitlán.

The Aztecs had many festivals throughout the year, and music and dance were an important part of religious rituals. Music, like the other arts, was meant to please the gods rather than the listener. Aztecs learned as children how to dance and play musical instruments, and at the festivals, everyone participated in special dances enacting religious stories or themes. Sometimes there were hundreds of dancers performing the intricate steps. The music was played by a group, many using *huehuetls* (pronounced whay-WHAY-tuls), drums made from logs. Other percussion instruments included gongs, rattles, and bells. Conch shells sounded like trumpets, and whistles and flutes were made out of bones or bamboo.

Language and writing

The Aztecs spoke a version of the language called Nahuatl. Nahuatl belongs to the Uto-Aztecan family of Amerindian languages (languages of the indigenous, or native peoples from North or South America), which also includes the languages of the Shoshone, Comanche, Pima, and To-



hono O'ohdam tribes in the present-day United States. When the Aztecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico, there were already many Nahuatl-speaking groups. There were also people who spoke other languages, such as Otomi, Tarascan, and Totonac.

In the twenty-first century about 1.5 million people in Mexico speak Nahuatl; it is the most widely spoken native language. Though almost all Mexicans speak Spanish, more than five million Mexicans use an Amerindian language in daily life. Besides Nahuatl, those languages include Mayan, Mixtec, Otomi, Tarascan, and Zapotec.

When the Aztecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico, there were already forms of Mesoamerican writing in the area, which they adopted along with other elements of the culture. The Aztec form of writing entailed making pictures as symbols or glyphs, which represented a word or idea. Most of their glyphs were actually illustrations of the word they meant to convey. For example, the glyph for war was a pic-

The Aztec form of writing involves glyphs, pictures or symbols that represent a word or idea, such as the ones shown in this Aztec manuscript. © Historical Picture Archive/Corbis.



Painting depicting Aztec scribes at work. © Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis.

ture of a war club and shield. The glyph for tree was the picture of a tree. The Aztecs had some glyphs representing sounds or syllables, and these could be put together to form the name of a place. They also had a few glyphs that were not illustrations, but stood for ideas or words. The Aztec writing system never reproduced the full spoken language like that of the Maya.

The Aztecs generally did their writing in books called codices (plural of codex). Inside a codex was a very long sheet of paper that had been folded in an accordion-like fashion. The paper was usually made from the bark of fig trees, which was treated with lime and then pounded into a pulp. The pulp was then flattened into thin sheets of paper. Huge quantities of paper were often required as tribute payments from conquered lands in the empire. Strips of paper, sometimes 30 feet (9 meters) long, were glued to wooden book covers. The pages of the codex were marked off by lines and then folded like a fan. The writing and pic-

tures covering both sides of each page were read from the top to the bottom.

Common people in the Aztec empire were not taught how to read or write in school. Most reading and writing in Tenochtitlán and other cities was done by professional scribes (people whose function was to write the language) who were highly skilled in drawing and interpreting the glyphs. When they used glyphs to write on a page, the scribes did not arrange them in the order the reader would read them, but in patterns that would have significance only to a professional reader.

For keeping records and recording the movements of the stars, this writing system functioned fairly well. For telling the history or stories of the empire, however, the system relied on the memory of the person telling the story, as in the old method of relaying oral traditions (passing information or stories by spoken word from generation to generation). The person reading the page would already have committed its contents to memory, but he was able to use the glyphs and pictures to jog his memory as he related the page's meaning.

The Aztec rulers relied heavily on their writing system to manage their empire. The system was extremely useful as a means to record numbers, dates, places, names of people, and many other concepts. Scribes recorded the collection of taxes and the legal proceedings of the Aztec courts. The social units called *calpulli*, groups of families who shared land, kept track of their holdings with land titles and maps. The *pochteca* (merchants) recorded their sales and profits. The Aztec priests relied heavily on books in their observations of the stars and calendar systems. Each temple had a full library of codices with astronomical observations and notes about the movements of the planets and stars.

Nahuatl literature

Sadly, all of the codices of the Aztec world perished. The oldest were lost long before the Spanish conquest. In 1430 Emperor Itzcoatl demanded the burning of all books in his realm, probably so that he could rewrite history to include a more heroic Aztec background. Then, almost one

hundred years later in 1528, Spanish missionaries (people, usually working for a religious organization, who try to convert others, usually in a foreign land, to their religion) piled up all the Aztec codices they could find and burned them in the Texcoco marketplace. Any hidden books that survived the book burnings apparently decomposed over the years.

All knowledge of Nahuatl literature relied on the memories of the Aztec people after the Spanish conquest. Some Aztec priests worked in secret to reproduce their books, but many of the reproduced codices or written recordings were the collaborative projects of Spanish missionaries and Aztec elders (people who have authority because of their age and experience).

Poetry

The magnificent poetry and songs of the Aztecs, some of the supreme cultural artistic achievements of their era, were fading from memory in the turbulent years of the mid-sixteenth century. Still, some of the Aztec elders remembered them very clearly. Fortunately, a few of the early Spanish missionaries attempted to learn as much about the Aztec culture as possible and began to interview the Aztec priests and elders. Some of the missionaries wrote down what the Aztec elders told them about their culture, while others directed the Aztec elders to write down their memories, including what they remembered of poems and literature, themselves. Because there was not a system to write the spoken Nahuatl language, the elders were taught to use the Spanish alphabet and its sounds to write down the Nahuatl language. Although these records of Aztec literature may have picked up some of the interpretations of the missionaries, without them, most Aztec literature would have been lost forever.

Prior to the conquest, poetry was abundant in Aztec life and central to their culture. Poetry was easily learned, since poems and songs were repeated many times at festivals and ceremonies over years and generations. Groups of people chanted together while they danced, or they would sing the poems in a rhythm, as songs. Many poems were directed to the gods and were a central part of Aztec worship. Other poems were more practical; some presented rules for living a moral life, with par-

ents reciting the rules of social conduct to their children. These poems were passed down through the generations.

The Aztecs had an extensive tradition of lyric poetry that expressed the thoughts and feelings of individual thinkers. Many questioned the meaning of life and the fragile existence of human beings. Some of the poems are highly philosophical and at the same time present their ideas in powerful images. These were called “flower and song,” with the flower as a metaphor (a word used to compare two dissimilar things) for art and poetry.

Scholars have noted that the poetry of some nobility in the last decades of the empire indicated they had begun questioning the violence of their culture. Some poetry reflected a desire for a more peaceful and gentler world where mass human sacrifice was not a common event. Many of the poems that survived were collected in *Cantares mexicanos* (Mexican Songs), made up of ninety-one songs gathered for recording by a group of *tlamatinime* (men of words, or the poets and philosophers of the Aztecs) between 1560 and 1580 under the direction of a Spanish missionary. Another collection made at the same time and in a similar manner was called *Romances de los señores de Nueva España* (Romances of the Lords of New Spain).

By far the best known of the many Aztec poets was the king of Texcoco, Nezahualcoyotl (pronounced ne-zah-wahl-coy-OH-tul; 1403–1473). Renowned as a great ruler, scientist, and legal scholar, Nezahualcoyotl is still best remembered for the beauty and wisdom of his poetry. Miguel León-Portilla (1926–), a Mexican historian and anthropologist considered the world’s top authority on Aztec literature, listed some of the most pervasive themes of Nezahualcoyotl’s poetry in his book *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World*. According to León-Portilla, Nezahualcoyotl wrote of “time and the fugacity [lasting only a short time] of all that exists; the inevitability of death ... the beyond and the region of the ‘fleshless’; the meaning of ‘flower and song’ [art]; [and] the possibility of glimpsing something about the Inventor of Himself [God].” Like many artists both past and present, Nezahualcoyotl viewed his artistic endeavors as a way to comprehend life and the gods themselves. His poetry reflected his belief that while human beings die, the art that comes

from deep within the heart endures: “My flowers will not come to an end/My songs will not come to an end....” Nezahualcoyotl says in one of his poems.

Daily life

The Aztecs believed in living orderly, disciplined lives. Their oral literature is full of rules and guidelines of good conduct. Their streets were clean, children were well-behaved, they bathed every day, and there was no drunkenness or adultery. People were expected to conform to a strict code of behavior, and the punishments were very severe if they failed.

Marriage and family

Although the Aztec nobility often had many wives, the Aztec common people were monogamous (had only one spouse). Most Aztec men married by the age of twenty; women usually married at the age of sixteen. The marriages were between people from the same *calpulli*, or group of families living among each other in the same district, and they were usually arranged. Priests were often enlisted to find the correct calendar day for a wedding, one to bring good luck to the couple.

Wedding ceremonies, which took place at night with great festivities, were taken seriously. As part of the ceremony, the bride’s shirt or dress was tied to her new husband’s cloak, indicating the union. Divorce was available if things did not work out, but as in modern times, it was a legal matter. Either partner could apply to the courts and explain his or her complaint to a judge who could end the marriage. If the divorced couple had children, the mother got custody of the girls and the father got custody of the boys. Prior to marriage, each partner listed his or her belongings, so there would be no confusion in case of divorce. Women had significant legal rights, including the right to own property, although many historians note that in practice, women were usually not treated as equals.

After the wedding, the couple lived with the husband’s family for a time and then their families built them a house. If

they were farmers, both the man and the woman would tend to the fields, but the woman had a larger role in maintaining the home, preparing food, and raising children. Women in almost all Aztec homes spent a significant portion of their time weaving cloth. Women also worked making crafts.

Bearing children was a very important part of an Aztec woman's life. If a woman died in childbirth, the Aztecs believed there was a very special section of heaven for her, just as they believed there was a special section of heaven for warriors who died in combat.

Growing up

Aztec parents did not treat their girls the same way they treated their boys. Michael D. Coe, in his book *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs* (1994), noted that even at birth newborn girls and boys received different treatment. The girl was cherished for the comfort she provided and for her beauty. Her fate was to live in her home, and her role was practical and earthly. The male child, on the other hand, was told upon birth "that the house in which he was born was not a true home, but just a resting place, for he was a warrior," whose mission it was to "give the sun the blood of enemies to drink." Boys were considered warriors from the moment they were born.

As one might expect in a rigidly disciplined society, Aztec parents were very strict with their children, demanding them to be obedient, do their share of work from a very early age, stay clean, and show good manners and behavior. The punishments for children who misbehaved were extremely harsh. One method was to hold the child directly over a fire of burning chili peppers so the smoke would sting their eyes and burn their noses and throats. Sometimes the children were whipped with sticks. Parents also expected their children to learn to remain stone-faced when unhappy or in pain.

Prior to going to school, children were trained skills they would need. Mothers and other women of the *calpulli* taught girls weaving and household skills. If they were farmers, fathers taught their sons to work the fields and to hunt and fish. Craftspeople passed their skills onto their children as well. If a child was born to a metalworker, he or she would

become a metalworker in Aztec society, unless special circumstances arose.

The Aztecs had schools for everyone—not just the children of nobles, and not just boys. All children started school at least by the age of fifteen. Children of nobles went to the *calmecac*, a seminary or religious school run by priests. In these schools, boys and girls were separated. Boys studied mathematics, the calendar, law, and astrology, and learned to chant the songs and stories of Aztec history and religion. Girls learned mainly about religion and often spent their hours in silent meditation.

If a male student graduating from the *calmecac* wished to become a priest, he would go on to an upper-level school in which priests trained him further. Most male graduates of the *calmecac* spent time in the military as officers. If they did their military duties well, they might go on to become judges or government officials. Sometimes the son of a family of commoners was allowed to attend the *calmecac* if he was notably intelligent or disciplined.

The children of commoners went to free schools called *tepochcalli*, or “houses of youth.” The girls were separated from the boys and trained in singing, dancing, and religion. The primary training for the boys was in the skills of war, though many learned trades as well. The boys were toughened up through hard work and extremely strict discipline. Some hired themselves out as assistants to army officers going off to battle to learn more about being a soldier. For commoners, there was no better way to rise up the social ladder than by excelling at war.

Houses

The houses of nobles were usually adobe (sun-baked bricks of mud) or made from stone. They were often rectangular and built around a courtyard that featured flower gardens and pools or fountains. Flowers were prized by the Aztecs, and colorful and fragrant blossoms could be found adorning most houses and public paths. Inside the homes of nobles there were many rooms: rooms for dining, sleeping, cooking, receiving guests, and housing the servants. The interiors of the houses were divided by walls; cloth mats were

hung in the doorways for privacy. Most of the houses of nobles had steam rooms similar to modern saunas.

The houses of common workers were much smaller and usually made from either adobe or cane (woody grass stems or reeds) with a thatched roof. In Tenochtitlán the houses of common people were found at the outskirts of the city. They generally had only one or two rooms, with a steam room outside. There was only one door and no windows, and the house was probably smoky from the pine torches used to light it. For beds, the Aztecs used woven mats, and there was little other furniture. The houses, whether adobe or cane, were painted and kept very clean.

Food

As elsewhere in Mesoamerica, maize (corn) was the main staple of the Aztec diet, particularly when it was ground into flour and made into cakes, or tortillas, which were consumed in great quantities. Ground maize was also the main ingredient of *atole*, a corn porridge. Maize flour was placed in cornhusks with other ingredients and baked to make tamales. Other common foods were beans, chilies, squash, melons, and a grain called amaranth.

Commoners often supplemented their diets with insects, frogs, and other small creatures that added protein. Otherwise the Aztec diet had little meat in it, though occasionally hunters would bring in deer or rabbits. The only animals raised by the Aztecs to be eaten were dogs, and dog meat was usually only eaten on special occasions. While the common workers tended to eat many forms of maize, with beans and vegetables on the side, the nobles had a much more varied diet with meat and fish. The nobility were also privileged enough to drink chocolate made from cacao beans, which was considered a delicacy. Most commoners drank water.

The Aztecs made a potent alcoholic beverage from cactus called *pulque* (pronounced PUHL-kay). In theory, Aztecs could only legally drink *pulque* at ceremonies and special celebrations because drunkenness was a crime. The exception was for the elderly, who were allowed to drink as much as they wanted. The first time one was caught drunk the punishment was usually some form of public humilia-



An Aztec farmer harvesting amaranth.

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tion, such as having one's hair cut off. But the second time, the punishment was death.

Clothing and adornment

Aztecs were modest people who did not approve of public nudity, which was commonplace among some tribes around them. Aztec nobles generally dressed in fine cotton adorned with designs made from gold or feathers. The men wore a cotton loincloth, with a cloak and sandals. Male commoners usually just wore loincloths; female commoners wore simple, loose dresses. Commoners made their own clothes from maguey (an agave, a plant with spiny leaves) fibers.

The Aztecs liked to adorn themselves in a variety of ways. Among the commoners, tattoos and stained teeth were considered attractive. Some women dyed their skin to be more yellow. Both sexes wore plenty of jewelry.

Law and order

The Aztecs valued law and order very highly and had an advanced and detailed legal system, which protected their property and safety. The poet-king of Texcoco, King Nezahualcoyotl, created a code of laws that would become standard throughout the empire.

In the Aztec system, the emperor appointed a *cihuacoatl*, an independent judge, for every major city in the empire. The judge had the authority to rule on all of his city's cases, whether civil, such as lawsuits and divorces, or criminal cases. What the judge ordered was law; not even the emperor could change the sentences issued by the judge. The judge also oversaw the administrators who collected taxes in his city. If a lawsuit or criminal case proved to be very difficult, it might be passed to a council of judges in Texcoco, which had the most advanced legal system.

In the Aztec courts, people were expected to behave in an orderly and dignified way. There were no lawyers to represent people, so they represented themselves. The court clerk kept record of the proceedings using Aztec glyphs and illustrations. These records were highly accurate.

Codices clearly spelled out Aztec laws, which were quite harsh. Many crimes were punishable by death, including drunkenness, adultery, and stealing. Aztec nobles received much harsher sentences for breaking laws and standards of conduct than commoners since they were expected to set an example. The laws dictated that all people do their jobs well and honestly. Tax collectors who embezzled (stole money), musicians whose instruments were out of tune, and priests who led immoral lives were all subject to the death penalty. Even the judges were held to the highest standards; if a judge gave favored treatment to a noble over a commoner, it was punishable by death. In many cases, a commoner might only have received a public whipping for the same kind of offense.

Medicine

The Aztecs believed illness came from the spirit world. Sickness was believed to originate in an unlucky calendar day or in the ever-changing temperament of a god. A

healer's first treatment plan for a sick patient was likely to be prayer and possibly the sacrifice of an animal or another offering to the gods.

Over the years, the Aztecs had studied the power of plants to heal and had found hundreds of herbal remedies—some still in use today. Healers knew how to set broken bones and performed some form of brain surgery. While Aztecs did not try to cure diseases, believing they were sent by the gods and could not be cured by humans, they did try to alleviate pain and symptoms of disease.

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The Conquest of the Aztecs



In its two hundred years of existence, the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán (pronounced tay-notch-teet-LAHN) rose out of a rough swampland settlement to become one of the largest and most magnificent cities of its time in the world. In 1325, when the Aztecs settled Tenochtitlán, they had been an egalitarian (everyone had an equal say in political, social, and economic decision making, and no one was considered the leader) and nomadic (roaming) society. As they built their rough houses on the swampy island in Lake Texcoco, they were barely able to feed themselves. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, however, the vast Aztec empire (a vast, complex political unit extending across political boundaries and dominated by one central power, which generally takes control of the economy, government, and culture in communities throughout its territory) encompassed all of what is present-day central and southern Mexico extending all the way down into Guatemala, including the Mexican states of Puebla, Hidalgo, Mexico, Morelos, most of Veracruz, Guerrero, and Oaxaca (pronounced wah-HAH-kah), and parts of Chiapas. The estimated population of the empire was about fifteen million people. The em-



Words to Know

Amerindian: An indigenous, or native, person from North or South America. The term “Amerindian” is used in place of the terms “American Indian” or “Native American” in these volumes, as the term “Native American” is often associated with the United States and the term “Indian” is offensive to some people.

Baptism: A Christian ritual celebrating an individual joining a church, in which sprinkling holy water or dunking signifies his or her spiritual cleansing and rebirth.

Chronicler: A person who writes down a record of historical events, arranged in the order of occurrence.

Creole: A person of European descent who is born in the Americas; in this chapter, a Spaniard who is born in Mexico.

Egalitarian: A society or government in which everyone has an equal say in political, social, and economic decisions and no individual or group is considered the leader.

Empire: A vast, complex political unit extending across political boundaries and dominated by one central power, which generally takes control of the economy, government, and culture in communities throughout its territory.

Encomienda: A grant to Spanish conquistadores giving them privilege to collect trib-

ute from Amerindians in a particular region. The *encomendero* (grant holder) had the responsibility to train Amerindians in Christianity and Spanish, and to protect them from invasion. Most *encomenderos*, however, treated the Amerindians under their grants like slaves, forcing them into inhuman labor conditions often resulting in the collapse or death of the workers.

Hierarchy: The ranking of a group of people according to their social, economic, or political position.

Mestizo: A person having mixed ancestry, specifically European and Amerindian.

Missionary: A person, usually working for a religious organization, who tries to convert people, usually in a foreign land, to his or her religion.

Nomadic: Roaming from place to place without a fixed home.

Peninsulares: People living in Mexico who were born in Spain.

Smallpox: A severe contagious viral disease spread by particles emitted from the mouth when an infected person speaks, coughs, or sneezes.

Tribute: A payment to a nation or its ruler, usually made by people from a conquered territory as a sign that they surrender to the imposed rule; payment could be made in goods or labor or both.

pire was wealthy, and the Aztec armies were strong. Then came the first sightings of ships with bearded, fair-skinned men aboard, and the Aztec empire entered its final years.



The reign of Montezuma II, 1502 to 1520

Montezuma II (pronounced mohk-the-ZOO-mah; the name is more correctly spelled Motecuhzoma Xocoyótzin, meaning Montezuma the Younger; c. 1480–1520) became emperor in Tenochtitlán in 1502. By this time, the empire was well established. Tributes—payments made on a regular basis in goods or labor by the people the Aztecs had conquered—flowed into the capital city of Tenochtitlán, making it a place of incredible wealth, at least for some of its people. Products from all over Mesoamerica abounded in the city’s huge markets, which swarmed with tens of thousands of people, both locals and traders from distant lands.

Impressive pyramids graced the skies, echoing the shape of the mountains surrounding the city. Gold, silver, and jade objects lined the niches in every wall of the grand palaces and homes of the nobles. The city was adorned with exquisite

Map showing the sites of the ancient Aztec civilization in Mesoamerica. Map by XNR Productions. The Gale Group.



Montezuma II, emperor of the Aztec empire when the Spanish arrived in Tenochtitlán.

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art, and fragrant flowers bloomed in its beautifully kept gardens. Bright-colored birds and exotic animals entertained pedestrians passing by the perfectly maintained public grounds and palace courtyards. The nobility lived in luxury, attended by large staffs of servants, living in large homes with the finest food and clothing.

The new emperor exhibited a mixture of strong qualities. Montezuma II's education taught him to excel as both warrior and priest. He was, by most accounts, a good student with a keen understanding of Mexican history and was prone to scholarly or philosophical pursuits. He had trained for the priesthood, had a very successful career as a military general, and also served as the chief priest of the empire before he was chosen to succeed Emperor Ahuitzotl (pronounced ah-weet-ZOH-tul; ruled c. 1486–1502) upon the latter's death.

During the first seven years of Montezuma II's reign, the emperor led his warriors in successful battles at the furthest reaches of the empire, even as far away as present-day Nicaragua. In 1509 Montezuma II apparently decided to give up leading his warriors in battle. According to accounts of the Spanish chroniclers (people who wrote down their accounts of history), the emperor was overwhelmed with a sense of impending disaster and wished to devote himself to worshipping the gods.

The return of Quetzalcoatl

One day a messenger brought Montezuma II a picture, drawn by an eyewitness, of strange occurrences on the eastern coast. The picture showed three white temples built atop three canoes floating on the ocean. This picture was probably the first report to reach Tenochtitlán about the Spanish fleets, which had been sailing off the Mexican coast

on expeditions. More reports of the strange people in large ships continued to arrive over the next few years. Most historians estimate that Montezuma II knew about the arrival of the Spanish in the Caribbean by at least 1513.

As Montezuma II pondered the meaning of the arrival of the intruders, a series of omens (signs of upcoming events interpreted as either good or evil) heightened his sense of doom. He consulted priests, magicians, and oracles (people, usually priests or priestesses, through whom the gods are believed to speak), as well as many of the nobility of Tenochtitlán and other cities around Lake Texcoco. Montezuma II was said to have been utterly ruthless in seeking answers about what it all meant, killing many of the people he consulted.

One factor in Montezuma II's apparent nervousness was shared among the Aztec people. Mesoamerican mythology (traditional, often imaginary stories dealing with ancestors, heroes, or supernatural beings, and usually making an attempt to explain a belief, practice, or natural phenomenon) had long foretold that in the year 1 Reed, or 1519 by the current calendar, a bearded and fair-skinned Quetzalcoatl (pronounced kates-ahl-koh-AH-tul), the creator god of the Toltecs, would return from the east to take over the Aztec world. Quetzalcoatl was a holy and benevolent (kind) god and, according to some of the ancient legends (stories handed down from earlier times, often believed to be historically true), one of the few gods who did not approve of human sacrifice. The legends of Quetzalcoatl varied greatly, however; clearly Montezuma II did not know what to expect of this god.

Quetzalcoatl was regarded as a father to humankind—in one legend he traveled deep into the underworld and retrieved the bones of dead human beings. By spilling his own blood on the bones, he brought humans back to life. In Toltec legend, Quetzalcoatl and the god of darkness, Tezcatlipoca (pronounced tez-caht-lee-POE-cah), had at some time in the past entered into a terrible battle for power. In the time of the Toltec civilization, Tezcatlipoca had won the struggle. Quetzalcoatl is said to have sailed away from the Toltecs on a raft made of serpents after his defeat, promising to return in the year 1 Reed (see Chapter 24 for more information). The promise was not forgotten by the Aztecs as the year swiftly approached.



The Conquistadores

Hernán Cortés and the men who joined him in the expedition to “explore” Mexico were not professional navigators and explorers. They were not soldiers of the Spanish military, nor did they work for the Spanish or provincial New World (the Americas) governments. The expedition was financed privately, and the men who joined it were carpenters, blacksmiths, doctors, and others. Cortés himself was a notary (someone who is authorized to witness signatures and certify documents) by trade.

Although the Cuban governor gave them permission to explore and trade along the coast of Mexico, Cortés and his crew had much more than exploring in mind, as crewmember Bernal Díaz (del Castillo; pronounced cah-STEE-yoe; c. 1492–1584) expressed in his memoirs, *The Conquest of New Spain* (written in 1568; first published in 1632 as *Historia verdadera de la conquista de Nueva España*): “We

came here to serve God and the king, and also to get rich.” At one point in their endeavors in Tenochtitlán, Cortés and his crew were pursued as criminals by the Spanish authorities in Cuba for overstepping their authority. This put them in conflict with their own government as well as the powerful Aztec nation.

Men who would take such risks in an unknown country were certainly daring adventurers, but they were not necessarily law-abiding, responsible, or remotely concerned with the welfare of others. In those days, according to Anna Lanyon in *Malinche’s Conquest* (1999), the word *conquistador* did not exist. The Spanish coined the word in an effort to describe these adventurers in the New World.

The conquistadores, in their quest for the gold and riches of the New World, had proved a powerful force. Their efforts, legal or not, were responsible for the con-

The arrival of the Spanish

Two years after Montezuma II assumed the Aztec throne, Hernán Cortés (1485-1547), a young law student from a poor but noble Spanish family, gave up his studies and shipped out to the Caribbean island of Hispaniola. He settled for a time at the first permanent Spanish New World settlement, Santo Domingo, which had been founded by Bartholomeo Columbus, brother of Christopher, in 1496. In 1511 Cortés accompanied Spanish soldier and administrator Diego Velázquez (1465–1524) in his conquest of Cuba.

Velázquez became Cuba’s governor, and Cortés worked for him in Cuba. In 1518 Velázquez appointed Cortés

quest of Mexico and for the region becoming a province of Spain. In return for their efforts, the conquistadores wanted riches. They looted the treasures of the Amerindian cities wherever they could, but few came away with enough to provide for a lifetime of ease. Adhering to old traditions, the Spanish government reluctantly granted the conquistadores *encomiendas* as rewards for their service to the country. An *encomienda* was a grant giving them the right to collect tribute from the Amerindians who lived in the region they oversaw.

In theory, the Spanish conquistadores were to teach Christianity and European ways in exchange for the tribute. In practice, however, many conquistadores put the natives to work in a system similar to slavery that led to horrible abuses of the workers.

Many of the conquistadores did very well for themselves in New Spain

with the sweat and labor of the natives. Cortés, for example, became very wealthy from looting the treasures of the cities he attacked. Although he did not rise in political power as he had hoped, he settled in Mexico into the life of a wealthy *encomendero* (grant holder). He collected tribute from the Amerindians in his *encomienda* in the form of gold dust, textiles, maize (corn), poultry, and other goods.

Cortés used forced labor to pan for gold and mine for silver. Cortés also raised a large number of cattle and hogs, as well as grew grain, fruits, and vegetables on large diversified estates called *haciendas*, also with the labor of Amerindians. He had become very wealthy by these means by 1528, and by the time of his death in 1547 he was still receiving large amounts of goods and money annually in *encomienda* tribute payments.

to head an expedition to explore the newly discovered Mexican coast. This was the third attempt to explore the Mexican coast—the first two expeditions were failures due to resistance of the Amerindians (indigenous, or native, persons from North or South America). Cortés had heard stories of a magnificent and very wealthy kingdom set on an island in a lake in Mexico. His interest in heading up an expedition was not for the sake of exploration; he wanted to conquer and rule the new territory and get rich in the process.

The crew

The Cortés expedition consisting of eleven ships and about 550 soldiers set off for Mexico near the end of the year

in 1518. One of the soldiers on board was Bernal Díaz (c. 1492–1584), who would write the account of the Spanish conquest most often used by historians in the twenty-first century (*The Conquest of New Spain*). There were also sixteen horses on board, the first to come to the Americas. The ships reached the Yucatán coast in February 1519. As they traveled along the coast to Tabasco, the Spaniards made contact with the Mayas (pronounced MY-uhs) of the region. Early in their travels, the members of the expedition had encountered a fellow Spaniard, Geronimo de Aguilar, who had washed up on the Mexican shores after a shipwreck in 1511. He had been living with the Maya ever since and knew their language. Gratefully joining the expedition, Aguilar served as a translator.

In March the Spanish fleet arrived in the Maya city of Potonchan in Tabasco. As soon as the Spaniards came ashore, the Maya attacked them, but the Spanish won the battle. The Maya nobles then offered the Spaniards many gifts of surrender, including twenty young women. One of these was later baptized Doña Marina, but she has come to be known to many as Malinche (c. 1501–1550).

Malinche spoke two languages, Mayan and Nahuatl (pronounced NAH-wa-tul). Cortés soon realized that since she could translate Nahuatl to Mayan, and Aguilar could then translate Malinche's Mayan into Spanish for him, he was well equipped to converse with the Nahuatl-speaking Aztecs at Tenochtitlán, the island kingdom he was seeking. During the next couple of years Malinche was an able translator, quickly learning the Spanish language. She gained a great deal of respect among the conquistadores for her courage and intelligence. She also became Cortés's mistress and bore his son.

Aztecs and Spaniards make contact

From a Nahuatl-speaking city in Veracruz—one of many cities within the Aztec empire—Cortés sent word to Montezuma II that he wanted to meet with him in Tenochtitlán. Montezuma II had been informed of the Spanish expedition's movements for some time, even getting pictures of their ships. Uncertain if this was an enemy or the god Quetzalcoatl, Montezuma II stalled for time, sending many valu-

able gifts of jade (a green gemstone), cloth, and gold to Cortés along with regrets that he was too ill to make the journey.

Montezuma II had by this time heard many reports of these strangers. He was especially disturbed to hear about their weapons, which seemed to the Amerindian observers to spew fire. Worse yet were the horses, bigger than any animal the Aztecs had ever seen. Montezuma II called together a council to decide how to proceed. While many recommended gathering a full Aztec army to destroy the small Spanish force before they came to the city, others recommended treating Cortés as an honored ambassador (diplomatic official who represents a government or a society) from a great king. Montezuma II remained conflicted. Throughout Cortés's travels toward Tenochtitlán, the emperor continued to send messengers with gifts, hoping he could persuade Cortés not to come to the capital.

Cortés founded a settlement in Veracruz and then continued on with his explorations by land. The Spaniards found friends among the Totonac people at Cempoala (pronounced sem-pwahl-AH) in central Veracruz. The Totonacs were tired of paying tribute to Tenochtitlán and were happy to tell Cortés the route to the city and to describe its great wealth. Cortés shrewdly caused a conflict between the Totonacs and the Aztecs by urging the Totonacs to arrest the Aztec tribute collectors who arrived shortly after he did. He then released the two collectors so they could go back to Montezuma II and report the bad behavior of the Totonacs.

Fearing reprisal, the Totonacs felt they had no other choice but to attack Tenochtitlán before Montezuma decided to attack them. Cortés continued to anger other provinces of the empire as he continued in his travels, gathering allies for the Spanish and making enemies for Montezuma II.

The expedition arrived at the city of Tlaxcala in south-central Mexico in September 1519. The Tlaxcalans were bitter enemies of the Aztecs, but they met the Spaniards in a fierce battle, perhaps believing the Spanish had allied themselves with Montezuma II. After the battle the Tlaxcalans had a change of heart and committed themselves to fighting with the Spanish against Tenochtitlán. This was an important factor in the Spanish conquest, which may well have failed without the alliance of the fierce Tlaxcalans.



Map showing Hernán Cortés's route through Mesoamerica towards Tenochtitlán. Map by XNR Productions. The Gale Group.

When Cortés left Tlaxcala to continue his march to Tenochtitlán, he had one thousand Tlaxcalan allies with him.

Montezuma II's ambassadors asked Cortés to visit the important religious center of Cholula, so the Spaniards camped out there. While they stayed in the city they began to fear an attack. Malinche, in talking to a local woman, learned their fears were justified; the nobles of the city had arranged for a huge army to surround and kill the Spaniards. Cortés led an attack on the Cholulans instead, which turned into a violent massacre of Cholulan men, women, and children.

Back at Tenochtitlán, Montezuma II heard the news of the Cholula massacre with great dread. The Spaniards were only 60 miles (96.5 kilometers) away. Montezuma II finally made a decision. He invited Cortés and his men to be his guests in Tenochtitlán. The emperor could have mustered

a huge army at any time and stopped their approach. His reasons for not doing so may have come from a lingering belief that Cortés was in fact the god Quetzalcoatl, or he may have felt safe in bringing them into the city because his army still greatly outnumbered the Spanish and their allies.

Cortés enters Tenochtitlán

On November 8, 1519, Cortés marched along the longest causeway (a road built over the water; there were three causeways, each over a mile long, leading from the shores of Lake Texcoco to the city) leading into Tenochtitlán. He and his crew were spellbound by the splendor of the city. Cortés described it in a letter to the Spanish king, Charles V (1500–1558; ruled 1516–56), remarking on the great markets, commerce, shops, and very wide and clean streets. He was amazed by the agricultural abundance and variety of goods, and he admitted

his confusion that a non-Christian and such a “barbarous” people could live such a civilized existence.

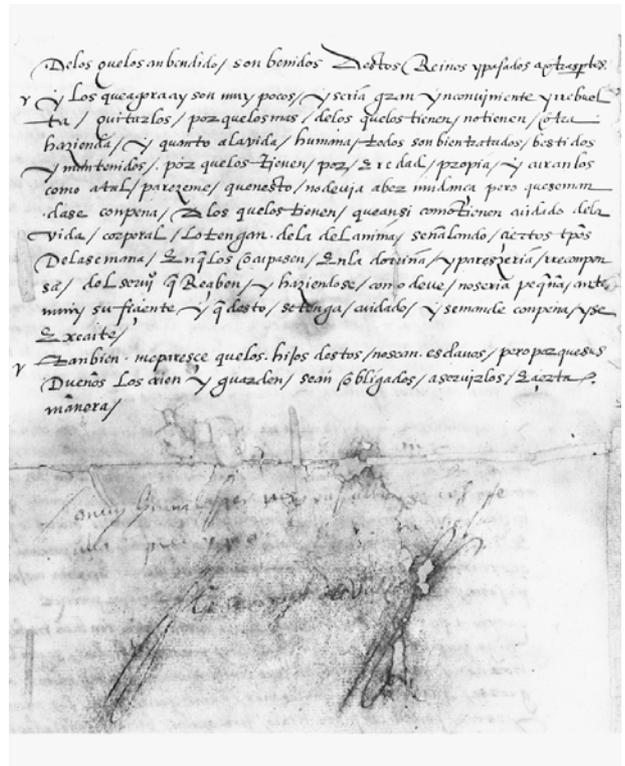
The people of Tenochtitlán and the other cities around Lake Texcoco watched as the strangers approached the city, entering by one of the causeways. In the city, Montezuma II was waiting for them. At the time he was between forty and fifty years old (sources differ on his birth date). He was described as a very courteous and dignified man, of slender build and average height. He wore his dark hair long. Díaz witnessed the meeting between Cortés and Montezuma II, and wrote of the event in his book *The Conquest of New Spain* as follows:

When we came near to Mexico, at a place where there were some other small towers, the Great Montezuma descended from his litter [an enclosed platform with a couch or bench carried on long poles], and these other great Caciques [leaders] supported him beneath a marvelously rich canopy of green feathers, decorated with gold work, silver, pearls, and chalchihuites [various green precious stones, mainly jade], which hung from a sort of border. It was a marvelous sight. The Great Montezuma was magnificently clad, in their fashion, and wore sandals of a kind for which their name is cactli, the soles of which are of gold and the upper parts ornamented with precious stones.... There were four other great Caciques who carried the canopy above their heads, and many more lords who walked before the great Montezuma, sweeping the ground on which he was to tread, and laying down cloaks so that his feet should not touch the earth. Not one of these chieftains dared to look him in the face. All kept their eyes lowered most reverently except those four lords, his nephews, who were supporting him.

Cortés and Montezuma II exchanged necklaces. According to some of the chroniclers, Montezuma II addressed Cortés as Quetzalcoatl and welcomed him home.

The capture and death of Montezuma II

Cortés told Montezuma II that the Spanish king wanted to make Catholic Christians of the Aztecs. Montezu-



A copy of a letter from Hernán Cortés to King Charles V of Spain, 1542, describing his encounter with Aztec civilization. The Library of Congress.



Hernán Cortés and his crew enter Tenochtitlán and are greeted by the emperor, Montezuma II. *The Library of Congress.*

ma II listened politely and presented gifts to Cortés, and then provided them with lodging. The Spaniards, free to roam Tenochtitlán, stared in amazement at what they saw, thinking, as Díaz put it, they must be dreaming.

Although they were treated well, Cortés disliked being surrounded by Aztec warriors. In an utterly bold and daring move, he took the emperor captive. By most accounts, Montezuma II submitted without a struggle and went so far as to calm his people, asking them not to rise up against the Spaniards. If this is true, his motives remain a mystery. Although Montezuma II was in custody, he was allowed to go about his business more or less as usual.

In the midst of the drama in Tenochtitlán, Cortés was forced to leave the city to go back to Veracruz. Velázquez had sent more than one thousand Spanish soldiers to arrest him for going beyond his authority in Mexico (he had only been given the task of exploration and



minor trading; certainly not establishing settlements and taking over kingdoms). After a skirmish with the new arrivals, Cortés persuaded many of the soldiers to join his expedition, promising them the opportunity to share in the vast wealth of Tenochtitlán when it had been conquered. He made his way back to Tenochtitlán with more men than he had arrived with.

About 140 of Cortés's men remained in Tenochtitlán, attending the kidnapped emperor. They were surrounded by thousands of increasingly hostile Aztecs, and it is likely they panicked. As the Aztecs began to celebrate a feast in honor of their god Huitzilopochtli (pronounced hweets-ee-loh-PAWCH-tee), Cortés's lieutenant, Pedro de Alvarado (d. 1541), ordered an attack on them. Two hundred unarmed nobles were brutally murdered. The Aztecs were furious, and Montezuma II appears to have saved the soldiers from immediate death with his influence. Nonetheless, when Cortés returned, the Aztecs began to attack.

Montezuma II being taken prisoner by Spanish conquistadores. *The Library of Congress.*



The Toll of Epidemics on the Native Populations of Mexico

Though violence and warfare claimed many Amerindian lives in the conquest of Tenochtitlán, nothing killed as many of the native peoples as disease. The Europeans brought several deadly diseases with them, but most devastating were smallpox (a severe contagious viral disease spread by particles emitted from the mouth when an infected person speaks, coughs, or sneezes) and measles. The first epidemic of smallpox in Mexico began in 1519 when the Cuban expedition sent to arrest Hernán Cortés landed at Veracruz. One of the soldiers aboard was infected with smallpox. Although he could not have known it, his presence in the New World was probably the most significant factor in the conquistadores' defeat of the Aztecs at Tenochtitlán.

The epidemic that hit the Aztecs after their first battle with Cortés was remembered in the accounts of one of the survivors and appears in Miguel León-Portilla's book, *Broken Spears* (1992). The elder (people who have authority because of their age and experience) describes what he calls "a great plague":

Sores erupted on our faces, our breasts, our bellies; we were covered with agonizing sores from head to foot. The illness was so dreadful that no one could walk or move. The sick were so utterly helpless that they could only lie on their beds like corpses, unable to move their limbs or even their heads. They could not lie face down or roll from one side to the other. If they did move their bodies, they screamed with pain. A great many died from this plague, and many others died of hunger. They could not get up to search for food,

In the ensuing battle, Montezuma II was killed, though no one knows how he actually died. The Spanish said he stood upon a wall to try to talk his people out of attacking the Spaniards. In the chaos, a stone thrown blindly by one of the people accidentally hit him in the head and killed him. Other accounts suggest the Aztec people were fed up with Montezuma II's failure to defend them and killed him on purpose. Many believe it was actually Cortés who had Montezuma II killed. The truth will probably never be known.

On June 30, 1520, a night the Spanish called "La noche triste," Cortés knew his crew could no longer hold out against the increasing attacks of the Aztecs. He ordered his men—some thirteen hundred Spaniards and well over two thousand Tlaxcalans—to secretly prepare to leave. As darkness fell they slipped out and raced toward the causeway. An Aztec guard sounded the alarm, and the Aztecs attacked the

and everyone else was too sick to care for them, so they starved to death in their beds.

Such was the state of the population when Cortés and his one hundred thousand Amerindian allies returned to attack Tenochtitlán. Díaz noted that when the Spanish attacked Tenochtitlán: “all the houses and stockades in the lake were full of heads and corpses. It was the same in the streets and courts ... we could not walk without treading on the bodies and heads of dead Indians. Indeed, the stench was so bad that no one could endure it.”

In 1519 there were an estimated 11 million Amerindians in the region of Central Mexico according to the censuses of the Spanish priests. By 1540 the population had dropped by about one-half to

about 6.4 million. By the end of the century there were only about 2.5 million Amerindians in the same area, and in 1650 there were only 1.5 million. Other factors contributed to the terrible depopulation (decrease in population), particularly the harsh treatment of Amerindian laborers, but the major cause of death was disease—smallpox and the measles.

The effect of these epidemics on the morale of the Aztecs at Tenochtitlán must have been profound. In *Viruses, Plagues and History* (1998), Michael Oldstone comments: “The havoc wrought by smallpox also brought a morbid state of mind to the Aztecs. The only interpretation open to them ... was that they were being punished by angry gods.”

fleeing Spaniards and their allies with full force. Many of the Spaniards were unable to escape because they were so heavily weighed down by the gold and silver they had looted from the city. The Aztecs, who usually tried not to kill their enemies in war so they would have sacrifice victims afterward, fought with an unusual intent to kill. More than 450 Spaniards and one thousand Tlaxcalans were killed or sacrificed that night.

A new king in Tenochtitlán

With Montezuma II dead and the Spanish gone, the Aztecs celebrated their victory. They elected a new emperor, Montezuma II's brother Cuitláhuac. They prepared for an all-out war, determined that if the Spanish struck again, they would attack without moderation.

Sadly, no preparations could have strengthened the Aztecs against the assault of smallpox. Smallpox and the other contagious diseases the Spanish brought with them were new to the Americas. The Amerindians had no resistance to the germs. When smallpox struck, the population of Tenochtitlán was destroyed by the disease. Smallpox took the life of the new emperor, Cuitláhuac, who was replaced during the siege by the last Aztec emperor, Cuauhtémoc.

The fall of Tenochtitlán

After their disastrous flight from Tenochtitlán in July, Cortés and his troops returned to Tlaxcala where they were given refuge as they healed from their wounds and regained strength. Cortés seems to have never doubted his path; he spent the next couple of months preparing for another attack. He contacted and made allies of many different Amerindian groups, in some cases by promising them a share in the loot and an end to the Aztec's reign.

In other cases Cortés resorted to threatening punishment if the native peoples did not join his forces. The fierce Tlaxcalans were determined to destroy Tenochtitlán and were highly persuasive in scaring other groups into joining the Spaniards. One by one, the subjects of the Aztec empire stopped paying tribute to Tenochtitlán.

Since Lake Texcoco provided protection for the island city, Cortés had thirteen boats built for the next attack. These were carried by thousands of Amerindian allies to Lake Texcoco in pieces and then assembled. When they were ready to make a renewed attack on Tenochtitlán, Cortés and his crew numbered about nine hundred Spaniards and as many as one hundred thousand Amerindian warriors. They settled for a time on the shores of the lake, among people who had only recently been loyal to the empire. In May 1521 the conquistadores made their attack.

Cortés had devised a plan of attack in which his forces bore down on the city of Tenochtitlán from every possible entryway—his fleet of ships came in by water and thousands of warriors marched down each of the three causeways leading into the city. Though the Spanish had superior



weapons and some horses, the Aztecs resisted the invasion fiercely, giving little ground.

Spanish soldiers were unable to use their cannons effectively because of the city's tall temples, so they used them to level as many buildings as possible then set fire to the rest. The Spanish also set up a blockade, so no food or water could reach the island from the mainland. Many Aztecs died of starvation or dysentery (an intestinal ailment with diarrhea), and the warriors were weakened. The Aztec warriors, nevertheless, fought on, showing remarkable bravery under terrible circumstances. Slowly the Spanish took possession of more and more of their city.

The siege of Tenochtitlán lasted for nearly three months. The surrender took place on August 13, 1521, when there was no hope left for the Aztecs. Their last elected emperor, Cuauhtémoc, was either captured by the Spanish or surrendered to them, depending on the source. He is remem-

Illustration showing Spanish soldiers and Aztec warriors battling for control of Tenochtitlán. © Corbis.

bered as a brave warrior and a symbol of strength to the besieged people. In some accounts of his surrender, he is said to have grabbed Cortés's dagger (knife) and pleaded to be killed since he could no longer defend his city or his people.

Cortés treated Cuauhtémoc with dignity at the time, but he later had the leader tortured, hoping to force him to reveal the location of more Aztec treasures. Cuauhtémoc gave him no information and was hanged in 1523. After the Aztecs surrendered, the Tlaxcalans, still bent on revenge, slaughtered many defenseless people.

"Broken Spears," one of several Aztec poems recalled by the survivors of the siege and recorded in Spanish in 1528 (published in translation in Miguel León-Portilla's *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*), captured the grief and despair of the defeated Aztecs at Tenochtitlán. Notably, the poem laments the death of the great city as if the violence had been done to the walls rather than the people who built them: "The houses are roofless now, and their walls/are red with blood." The poem goes on to depict the gruesome mutilation of the city and the frustration of a warrior society that could not protect what was held most sacred:

*We have pounded our hands in despair
against the adobe walls,
for our inheritance, our city, is lost and dead.
The shields of our warriors were its defense,
but they could not save it.*

The aftermath

Cortés ordered that a new city be built right on top of the ruins of Tenochtitlán. Mexico City, like Tenochtitlán, was a magnificent city, built by the tremendous labor of tens of thousands of Amerindians working for the Spanish. In Tenochtitlán and the surrounding cities, wherever the Spanish found an Aztec temple, they built a Roman Catholic church right on top of it or, if this was not possible, right beside it. In the twenty-first century, in the heart of Mexico City, people are still finding the ruins of ancient Aztec monuments underneath the early buildings of the Spanish.

The Aztec empire ceased to exist on August 13, 1521. Although it would take the Spanish many more years to

bring all of Mexico under its control, the fall of Tenochtitlán, as the capital of the huge Aztec empire, meant most of the vast empire's people immediately fell under the rule of the Spaniards. The peoples of the empire survived, though their numbers diminished greatly over the next century.

The Spanish were ruthless in killing Aztec priests, who they believed practiced an evil form of black magic. These feelings were strong among those who witnessed some of the soldiers being sacrificed. Of the nobles and warriors who survived the conquest, some managed to escape from Tenochtitlán and disappeared into distant regions of Mexico. The common people had little choice but to remain where they were.

The nobles who remained in Tenochtitlán were treated well by the Spanish as long as they accepted the Christian religion. The missionaries worked with them, teaching them Spanish and even how to raise and breed the animals (cows, sheep, and pigs) being brought into Mexico. These converted nobles then helped the missionaries (people, usually working for a religious organization, who try to convert people, usually in a foreign land, to his or her religion) convert others to their new religion and culture. The increasing numbers of missionaries who arrived in Mexico were very enthusiastic about their work, and immediately began baptizing the Amerindians.

Baptisms are a Christian ritual to celebrate a person joining the church. The sprinkling of or dunking in water signifies the baptized person's spiritual cleansing and rebirth as a Christian. Hundreds of thousands of Amerindians were baptized during the first decades of the new Spanish colony. Soon most of the Nahuatl-speaking people in the empire had adopted the Roman Catholic religion, some just for show, but others embracing it with sincerity.

The missionaries burned all the codices (Aztec books) they could find and eliminated lingering aspects of Aztec culture in their efforts to convert the population. Some Aztecs clung to their own gods, worshiping in private. This private worship kept parts of their religion alive, and it continues among some groups to the present day.

The Spanish king and many of the Catholic missionaries wished to set up a fair and humane government in their new colony in Mesoamerica where the natives could prosper in their new life, but this was not to be. After the conquistadores had defeated the Aztecs at Tenochtitlán, they felt they deserved more wealth and prestige than what they had already stolen from the Aztec cities. The Spanish government reluctantly agreed to the *encomienda* system, in which the conquistadores were paid tribute by the Amerindians of their regions.

According to the government, the *encomendero*, or grant holder, was responsible for training the Amerindians in Christianity and Spanish and for providing protection. The Amerindians, in turn, were to pay tribute to the conquistador. The system, however, never worked in this way and most Amerindians were slaves. When the Spanish found silver mines in Mexico, the *encomenderos* forced the natives to do the mining under terrible conditions. Over the years, some missionaries and the Spanish crown tried to reform the *encomienda* system for the sake of the natives, but little was ever done.

Many Amerindian groups who lived in remote rural parts of Mexico were able to rule themselves, without much interference from the Spanish. In the cities of Mexico, however, the Spanish were in control. Since many of the conquistadores had come over without wives, they often took partners from among the Amerindian women and raised families with them.

The mixing of Spanish and Amerindian blood prompted a new class system in Mexico. At the top of the social hierarchy (ranking of a group of people according to their social, economic, or political position) were the *peninsulares*, people who had been born in Spain. Under the *peninsulares* were the *creoles*, Spaniards who had been born in Mexico. Next were the *mestizos*, people of mixed Spanish and Amerindian ancestry, which were by far the largest group. At the bottom of the social ladder were the Amerindians, who worked the mines or served as laborers on the growing *haciendas*, or ranches owned by the *peninsulares* and *creoles*. Soon, African slaves were brought into Mexico to provide additional labor. In time, they too would intermarry, and their offspring would become *mestizos*.



The descendants

Experts estimate there are about 1.5 million descendants of the Aztec empire living in Mexico in the twenty-first century. Some speak only Spanish, some speak only Nahuatl, and others speak both languages fluently. The Nahuatl spoken in the twenty-first century has been heavily influenced by Spanish, and Spanish has also been influenced by Nahuatl. Many of the customs and arts found in present-day Mexico are also a cross between native and Spanish cultures.

A good example of the blend of Aztec and Spanish cultures is the celebration of the Days of the Dead (in Spanish, “Los días de los muertos”) beginning on October 31 and running through November 2 every year. Days of the Dead traditions go back to the Aztec belief that death was just one phase of a long cycle of life; not an ending but a transition. Each autumn, they and other native people celebrated two feasts for the departed: one for children and one for adults. After the Spanish missionaries arrived, the traditional Aztec

Mexican women celebrating the Days of the Dead, a festival blending Aztec and Spanish cultures.

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two-day feast came to be carried out on All Saints Day and All Souls Day. Many of the Aztec deities were supplanted with Catholic saints. The holiday that evolved is a combination of native and Spanish customs.

In Mexico, the Days of the Dead are a time to rejoice. On October 31, a family goes to the market to buy food, candles, incense, and flowers. They buy, among other things, sugar *calaveras* (“skulls”), sweet breads, and *pan de muertos*—loaves of bread decorated with bones—and a type of marigold called *zenpasuchitl*. At home, the families prepare *ofrendas*, altars filled with offerings of food, candles, and flowers for the departed in their families.

Families go to cemeteries and adorn the graves of their loved ones. After dark, solemnity reigns. Many people remain at the cemetery throughout the night. The overall emotion of the two days—of welcoming the dead—is happiness. Parades run through towns with coffins carrying the “dead” (who sit up and smile and accept the oranges tossed to them). Toys and trinkets abound and bakeries are filled with holiday food. The dead are seen by the living as playful and happy beings who want to be entertained, feasted, and cherished. The holiday celebrates the life of the ancestors, not their passing.

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