

# THE MAYANS

The Mayan civilization was the earliest of the three early American civilizations. The Mayan culture emerged around 50 BC. The Mayans created their empire starting around 200 AD. The empire lasted until around 900 AD. At this time, the Mayan civilization began to decline.

The Mayans were a peaceful, agricultural people. They lived in parts of present-day Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, and Belize. The Mayans continued to flourish in many areas until the mid-1500's, when they were conquered by the Spanish.

## MAYAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE:

Mayan society was divided into social classes which consisted of the following: the king, nobles and priests, warriors, merchants, artisans, and farmers. At the bottom of society were the slaves. People became slaves by being captured in war, by being born into slavery, or by being orphaned. The king, who was a monarch, ruled the empire. A **monarchy** is a system of government in which a king or queen holds power. A **slave** is a person who is the property of another and under their control.

## MAYAN RELIGION:

The Mayan had a nature-based, polytheistic religion. A **polytheistic** religion is a religion in which there is more than one god. A **monotheistic** religion is a religion in which there is only one god. They believed that all things in the universe had a spiritual component. People needed the gods in order to survive and prosper. To ensure that the gods would be good to the people, honor and sacrifice had to be made in the form of celebrations, bloodletting, and offerings of food or human life.

## MAYAN CITIES:

Tikal was the primary city and trading center of the Mayan for about 400 years. At its height it was home to an estimated 50,000 inhabitants. The population lived mainly in and around the cities. Family compounds were too close together to permit farming near the urban center.

## MAYAN ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

The Mayan civilization contributed outstanding examples of architecture, city design, art, sculpture, pottery, carving, precious stone jewelry, painting, writing, books, math, calendars, and astronomy. The Maya created the first writing system in the Americas and wrote their hieroglyphs on buildings, bones, pottery, stone, and even in books. They also made great discoveries in mathematics. They created a system for counting using a base of twenty; it used a symbol for zero along with dots and lines. Time was extremely important to the Maya and they invented complex and accurate calendars.

The Maya used astronomy to influence the design, relationship, and placement of their cities and buildings to reflect the happenings in the heavens over the solar year.

## **THE AZTECS:**

The Aztec civilization centered on Lake Texcoco in the central valley of Mexico in what is now Mexico City. The Aztec civilization began in 1300 AD and ended with the Spanish conquest in 1535.

### **AZTEC CITIES:**

Founded around the year 1345 AD, Tenochtitlan was the capital city of the Aztecs. It was located in Lake Texcoco on a series of natural and man-made islands connected to the shore by causeways. The city originated in the 1100's when, according to Aztec belief, a god commanded the Aztecs to travel south. They reached their destination in the Valley of Mexico in 1248 AD and settled where they saw an eagle on a cactus, holding a snake in its mouth. Conflicts with other peoples caused some inhabitants of the valley to move to the island in the middle of the lake. The formal city of Tenochtitlan was founded between 1300 and 1375. The city flourished and grew very prosperous. It was protected from floods by dams. An aqueduct system brought fresh water from the mainland. Three causeways connected it to the mainland. The Aztecs placed flat reed mats on shallow areas of the lake, covered the reeds with soil, planted crops, and then farmed. Chinampa is a method of ancient Mesoamerican agriculture. Most of the city's population was farmers, who left the city to farm and returned to the city to live. Craftspeople specialized and traded at a large central market. Large temples, pyramids, and other structures were built.

### **AZTEC SOCIETY:**

The Aztecs had a highly developed social structure made up of three classes. Each class was then broken down into groups according to their occupations. The three classes were the upper class, the middle class, and the lower class. The lower class or commoners made up the majority of the population. Nobles, high priests, military officers, and government leaders were considered to be upper class. The Aztec ruler, called the Great Speaker, or Tlatoani, was chosen from a select group of princes. Farmers, laborers, craftspeople, servants, and vendors were members of the middle class. The lower class was made up of those who worked the fields and those who worked for wages. There were also some slaves, but their status was mostly temporary; most were paying off debts or serving a sentence for a crime. The upper class lived in or near the cities. Members of the middle class and specialists clustered where there was work or the potential for income. The serfs lived on the farmland surrounding the urban centers. Slaves were used for cheap labor, and for sacrifices. All non-noble men of the upper and middle classes had to serve in the military for several years. All classes with property or income had to pay taxes.

### **AZTEC RELIGION:**

The religion of the Aztecs was polytheistic and based on the religions of the various peoples they had conquered or assimilated. The foundation was their natural environment, and each component of the environment had its own set of gods and, for the Aztecs, its own priestly order and organization. Natural events were the result of actions or conflicts of the main gods and many lesser ones. The calendar was designed to honor the many gods and was filled with celebrations. Sacrifices, including human sacrifices, made in order to gain the gods' favor were an important part of the celebrations. Human sacrifice and bloodletting were often practiced by believers, and captured enemies were offered as human sacrifices.

### **AZTEC ACCOMPLISHMENTS:**

The Aztec civilization was able to develop a number of advances in the arts, sciences, politics, and agriculture. These developments could not have happened without a strong, wealthy central government. Accomplishments in the arts included sophisticated sculpture, architecture, fresco work, pottery, and precious-metal work. Their system of writing included pictorial hieroglyphics as well as abstract symbols. These were applied to astronomy and calendar use to record and predict historical and natural phenomena. The astronomy component dictated the layout and location of

their great cities and the structures within. In the cities, the Aztecs practiced medicine and had running water. Politically, the Aztecs used an autocratic central government as a means to conquer and control surrounding peoples for the benefit of the Aztecs. To support this large society, the Aztecs created new methods for farming in their environment and introduced new domesticated plants to feed their people. Domesticate means to tame something for human use.

## **THE INCAS:**

The Incan civilization was centered in the Andes Mountains in what is now Peru, South America. The civilization extended from the Isthmus of Panama to the Amazon Basin southwest to modern-day Chile. The Incas' control of this area began in 1200 AD and ended with the Spanish conquest in 1535.

### **INCAN SOCIETY:**

The society of the Incas was highly ordered and rigidly structured. At the top of society was the emperor, or *Sapa Inca*, who was believed to be the son of the sun god. Just below the Sapa Inca and his wife were the chief administrators of the empire. They were usually related to the emperor and were also considered part of the nobility. Next were the lesser administrators, military leaders, judges, and high civil servants. Under this privileged class were the specialized craftsmen and lesser local officials. At the lowest level were the farmers, who made up the largest portion of the Incan population. Conquered peoples became fiefs of the Sapa Inca and were taxed as such.

### **INCAN RELIGION:**

The Incan religion had a variety of gods headed by the Creator. Under him in importance were gods who were responsible for the Sun and the Moon. Because the world around them was filled with gods, accurate calendars of the timing and sequence of repeating natural events were developed by the priests so that celebrations and sacrifices could be timed precisely so as not to offend any particular god. Sacrifices could be in the form of animals, food, material goods, or humans. The Sapa Inca was the political and religious leader of the culture and his brother was usually designated the high priest. Women also played important roles in the Incan religion. The older women trained the young girls to perform their jobs.

### **INCAN ACCOMPLISHMENTS:**

The Incas constructed temples, palaces, fortresses, stone buildings, and a network of stone roads, connecting all parts of the realm. These structures were precise in their measurements and proportion.

The Incas built cities and monumental structures from carefully carved rock, fitted together so expertly that a knife could not fit between the stones.

Bridges, irrigation canals, and aqueducts were also among their achievements. Bronze was used for making weapons, tools, and ornamentation. The Incas were successful farmers, builders, scientists, astronomers, artists, potters, and metallurgists. They developed a method of growing plentiful crops on steep, high land by terracing and irrigating.

**Irrigate** means to bring water to crops. Dozens of varieties of potato, corn, squash, and pepper were grown.

They performed medicine and surgery. The Incan calendar had twelve 30-day months, each divided into three 10-day weeks. The remaining five days were used for festivals. Weaving, pottery, and metalwork were produced for functional, decorative, and religious purposes. Woven and dyed cloth was made from alpaca, llama, and vicuna wool and cotton. Only the Incan ruler could use gold, and it had to be of the finest workmanship. Gold and silver were formed into masks, statues, plates, goblets, ceremonial knives, and earplugs. Copper and bronze were used for some tools and weapons.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**EARLY CIVILIZATIONS OF THE AMERICAS**

**DIRECTIONS:** Fill in the chart below for the 3 early American civilizations.

	MAYANS	INCAS	AZTECS
<b>LOCATION:</b> (Where did they live?)			
<b>DATES:</b> (When did the civilization exist?)			
<b>GOVERNMENT:</b> (What type of government?) (Who ran the government?)			
<b>SOCIAL CLASSES:</b> (List the social classes that they had.)			
<b>RELIGION:</b> (What type of religion did they have?) (What were the names of their god(s)?) (Who ran the religion?) (What types of rituals/ceremonies did they perform?)			
<b>ACHIEVEMENTS:</b> (What did they create, invent, or do that helped others?)			