

The Maya and Central America

Mexico and Central America

Advanced civilizations began to appear in the Americas after 1200 BCE. The oldest and most sophisticated were in Mexico and Central America, where a succession of cultures, each influencing the ones that followed it, emerged. The first major society was the Olmec (ca.1200-400 BCE). Located in east-central Mexico, on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, the Olmec created what is considered to be the “mother civilization” of Central America. The Olmec were clever mathematicians and astronomers who made accurate calendars. They also were excellent farmers, and had a well-developed irrigation system located in the empire. Although their written language remains a mystery to modern scholars, it is clear that the art (consisting mainly of large heads carved from stone), architecture, and religion of the Olmec had an impact on the peoples that came after them.

1. Why were the Olmec the Mother of Central American civilization?

The Maya: Religion, Lifestyle and Achievements

The next major society in the region was the vast city of Teotihuacán, founded between 150-100 BCE, near modern-day Mexico City. With a population around 200,000, Teotihuacán was one of the world’s largest cities at the time and were soon eclipsed by the Maya. The Maya flourished from 250-900 CE. The Mayan civilization was located in the Yucatan Peninsula. There was no single nation, instead independent city-states ruled over the Mayan lands.

The elaborate religion of the Maya, which included large scale human sacrifice and the worship of serpent gods and jaguar deities, seems to have derived from the Olmec and Teotihuacán cultures. Like the Teotihuacán, the Maya built huge terraced pyramids, such as Chichen Itza, primarily for religious reasons. The Maya were able to perform complex mathematical and astronomical calculations because of their understanding of the concept of zero. They had an unusual calendar system that was surprisingly accurate. They developed the most advanced system of writing in the Americas, using glyphs or symbols to represent words. They were also gifted architects, as their pyramids and other buildings show. A combination of disease and environmental factors brought about the decline of the Maya and their civilization. Agriculture formed the basis of Mayan life, with maize, beans, and squash as the main crops. The various independent city-states were connected by trade, especially in jade, salt, flint, honey, feathers, and shells. Sometimes cacao beans were used as currency.

The Mayan version of the story of creation can be found in the *Popol Vuh*, one of their books. Like many of the societies of Mesoamerica, the Maya believed in the legend of Quetzalcoatl, a god who would one day return to rule his people in peace. The Mayan people were polytheistic, sometimes practicing human sacrifice to appease their gods. The Maya also played a ballgame that was believed to satisfy the gods so that the natural order would be maintained.

Mayan Families were patriarchal, although the wealthier and more prominent families traced their lineage through parallel descent. Women of the elite classes retained some rights and were considered important to the society. The majority of women however, performed the traditional roles of homemaker and child bearer. By the 800s, many of the Mayan cities were suddenly abandoned. This may have been the result of warfare, or perhaps soil depletion from improper land usage. Whatever reasons the Maya fell, by the 900s the once glorious civilization of the Maya had been reduced to a number of small city-states.

1. Describe the Mayan religion.

2. Describe the Mayan social lifestyle.
3. What were some major achievements of the Maya?

The Toltec

After the fall of many Central American civilizations, a new one appeared in Central Mexico in 900 CE, the Toltec. They lasted from 968-1156 CE. The Toltec rose to power and established a capital at Tula. Like others before them, the Toltec adopted many of the cultural practices and beliefs of the earlier Mesoamerican people. They constructed temples and pyramids; they also spread the legend of Quetzalcoatl.

The Toltec Empire was the first of the extreme militaristic cultures in the region that used their might to dominate their neighbors, a trend associated with the later cultures. They also sacrificed people to their gods to appease them. Toltec influence spread beyond central Mexico, reaching the former Mayan city of Chichen Itza. Some historians believe that the Toltec may have traded obsidian from northern Mexico for turquoise from the Anasazi in North America. Around 1200 the Toltec Empire collapsed, but not before it passed some of its culture to the Aztecs.

1. What did the Toltec adopt from other cultures?
2. How did they gain control of their land?

Andean Societies and North American Cultures

In the northwest portion of South America, several civilizations rose up in the peaks and valleys of the Andes. The first civilization was in central Peru around 2600 BCE. Most Andean cultures were skilled at weaving, pottery and metalworking. Their most important domesticated animal was the llama. The oldest of these societies was the Chavin (900-250 BCE). Also prominent were the Moche 200-700 CE, the Tiahuanaco and Huari both 500-1000 CE, and the Chimu 800-1465 CE. The South American plains gave rise to nomadic herders. The rain forests of the Amazon basin were home to many tribes.

To North America, advanced social structures came very late. A number of tribes began to form together in river valleys and forests on the eastern part of the continent. The first society was the Adena 500-100 BCE, which was followed by the Hopewell 100-400 CE, and Mississippian 700-1500 CE. All three spread out along the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys. They were loose confederations rather than actual nations, and they built few large urban centers. The most significant find about these ancient civilizations were the giant earth mounds, built for ceremonies and religious reasons.

Around 700 BCE, a civilization in North America's desert Southwest began to reach its peak. This was the Anasazi. Small settlements date back to 450 CE, but the Anasazi may have appeared in the area many years before that. The Anasazi and the people who followed are famous for their elaborate cliff dwellings, made of clay and rock, perched hundreds of feet above the canyons and deserts below.

1. What were some characteristics of the Andean Societies and North American cultures?

In the 1500s during the Spanish conquests many new cultures were introduced to the Europeans. One culture that managed to survive in the Yucatan of Mesoamerica was the Mayans. Even though their civilization disappeared centuries before, their culture still survived. A Spanish Friar Diego de Landa from his work translated, *The Yucatan Before and After the Conquest* was one of the men who observed the Mayan culture. These descriptions that follow are what he witnessed and observed.

“So many idols did they have that their gods did not suffice for them, there being no animal or reptile of which they did not make images, and these in the form of gods and goddesses. They had idols of stone, others more numerous of wood, but the greatest number of terra cotta. . . .The most idolatrous of them were the priests, the sorcerers, and the physicians. It was the office of the priests to discourse and teach their sciences, to indicate calamities and the means of remedying them, preaching during the festivals, celebrating the sacrifices and administering their sacraments.”

“These people also used certain characters or letters, with which they wrote in their books about the antiquities and their sciences; with these, and with figures, they understood their matters, made them known, and taught them. We found a large number of books in these characters and, as they contained nothing in which were not to be seen as superstition and lies of the devil, we burned them all, which they (the Maya) regretted to an amazing degree, and which caused them much affliction.”

“At times they sacrificed their own blood, cutting all around the ears in strips which they let remain as a sign. At other times they perforated their cheeks or lower lip; again they made cuts in parts of the body, or pierced the tongue crossways and passed stalks through, causing extreme pain; this was done to praise their Gods.”

“The people have always believed in the immortality of the soul; they believed that after death there was another life better than this, which the soul enjoyed after leaving the body. This future life they said was divided into good and evil, into pains and delights. The evil life of suffering was for the vicious, and the good and delectable for those who had been good. The delights they said would come into if they had been of good conduct, were by entering a place where nothing would give pain, where there would be abundance of food and delicious drinks, and a refreshing and shady tree beneath whose branches and shade they might rest and be in peace forever.”

“The torments of the evil life which they said awaited the wicked, lay in going to a place below the other, and which they called Mitnal, meaning hell, where they were tormented by demons, by great pains of cold and hunger and weariness and sadness. They said there was in this place a chief demon whom all the rest obeyed and whom in their language they called Hunhau; also they said that these good and evil after-lives had no end, because the soul itself had none.”

“Their custom of preparing for baptism was as follows: the Indian women raised the children to the age of three, placing for the boys a small white plaquet, fastened to the head in the hair of the tonsure; the girls wore a thin cord tied very low about the waist, to which was attached a small shell over the private parts; to remove these two things was regarded among them as a sin and disgraceful, until the time of the baptism, which was given between the ages of three and twelve; until this ceremony was received they did not marry.”

1. The Spanish were Christians, based on this reading what did they oppose about Mayan culture?
2. Did he see any similarities between Mayan culture and Christianity?