

Overview: The Pre-Columbian Empires of the Maya, Aztec, and Inca

Mesoamerican and South American civilizations were well established by the time Europeans first made contact with them in the 16th century, though in the case of the Maya the civilization had entered what archaeologists refer to as its “post-classic” phase. In central Mexico, on the Yucatan Peninsula, and along the west coast of South America, native Americans had built spectacular cities, complex systems of political organization, and rich cultures that were distinctly their own.

The “classic” period of Mayan civilization stretched from approximately 250 CE to 900 CE. During this time, the Mayans built up to fifty cities throughout the Yucatan peninsula. They ranged in size from one to approximately 120 square kilometers and included monumental architecture such as the spectacular temples at Tikal. Evidence (including the physical structures at these sites, carved steles, sculpture, glyphs, the contents of tombs, and trade items) suggests that the Maya had hierarchically organized city-states led by royals and supported by early forms of organized agriculture. The Maya developed a complex system of mathematics that included the concept of “zero.” They calculated in base 20 and utilized place values. The Mayans were also extraordinary astronomers who developed two interlocking calendar cycles and kept detailed records of the planet Venus. Unfortunately, after Spanish conquest the vast majority of Mayan written works was thoroughly destroyed, though at least four significant codices survived.

The Aztecs arrived on the central Mexican plateau around 1200 CE. Initially poor nomads, they established a city on Lake Texcoco that was later known as Tenochtitlàn. In Aztec mythology the god Huitzilopochtli directed his people to the lake and instructed them to found a city on this site. Then the Aztec increased their power through formation of the Triple Alliance with neighboring city-states Texcoco and Tlacopan in 1428. A military nobility controlled the conquest of neighboring regions and maintained the flow of tributes to the Emperor at the capital. Priests and other government officials managed the day-to-day affairs of the state, including extensive craft and agricultural production, and trade at centralized markets. By the early 16th century, when the Spaniard Hernan Cortés first laid eyes on Tenochtitlàn, it was quite possibly larger than any European city at the time.

In South America the Inca, like the Aztec, rose to prominence only about 100 years before Spanish conquest. Emperor Pachacuti took the throne in 1438 and began an ambitious expansion campaign. Eventually the Inca—a distinctive ethnic group within the Inca Empire—controlled the majority of the peoples living on or near the Andes mountain chain. The Inca “Land of the Four Quarters” may have included as many as 80 provinces and 16 million people. Inca rulers tolerated religious and cultural diversity within the empire, but required uniform obedience to government officials as well as knowledge of Quechua (the Incan language) and observance of Incan customs. Work groups provided labor tribute (called *mita*) that was coordinated for agricultural and craft production, the construction of thousands of miles of road networks, and mining to supply the temples and royal family with vast quantities of silver and gold.

The splendor of South American civilizations came to a rapid end with the arrival of Spanish Conquistadors, beginning in 1519. By 1521 the Aztecs were defeated; and by 1533 Incan power had been destroyed. The “new” diseases that arrived in the Americas killed many more natives than the guns the Spaniards used. It is estimated that over 90 percent of the native population died of smallpox, typhus, measles, or mumps. Those individuals who survived were subjected to forced conversion to Christianity, forced labor, and other forms of abuse and violence. The ruins of cities like Tikal and Machu Picchu were overgrown with jungle vines, to be forgotten in some cases for hundreds of years. With the rediscovery of these cities in the 19th and 20th centuries, archaeologists and historians have attempted to piece together what information they can about these rich, intelligent, and spectacular civilizations.

In this unit you will study primary sources on many of these topics. Lessons included images of Tikal, Tenochtitlàn, and Machu Picchu, Spanish descriptions of Native American life, Mayan and Aztec myths, and descriptive writing about Aztec and Incan culture written by Spaniards and descendents of these native civilizations in the 16th century. You should complete the unit with new knowledge of these civilizations, and with an improved capacity to interpret primary sources, to form reasonable inferences or hypotheses based on them, and to critically evaluate historical information.

Government Student Page

Introduction:

The Inca Empire extended over two thousand miles along the western coast of South America, encompassing much of the Andes Mountains. An elongated state of this type presents governments with unique opportunities and challenges. One advantage is that an empire of this type generally includes a number of different kinds of natural resources and ecosystems, where a wide variety of agricultural crops and other goods can be produced. A disadvantage is that the central government must devise a strategy for organizing the distribution of important goods in the empire, and the government must maintain order and security throughout all of the empire's territory. In this lesson, you will read primary sources that describe how the Incas accomplished some of these tasks.

Note: All sites in this lesson can be found at
<http://www.socialstudies.com/ancientlinks.html>.

Directions:

Pedro de Cieza de León: *Chronicles*

Go to <http://campus.northpark.edu/history/Classes/Sources/deLeon.html>

Read the text and answer the following questions:

1. How does de León describe the physical geography of the Inca Empire?
2. How does de León describe the cultural geography of the Incan Empire (the different kinds of people and cultures)?
3. What did the King have to accomplish in order to rule the empire successfully?
4. How does de León describe the delegates and governors who were stationed in provinces around the empire?

5. Why might the King have stationed delegates and governors in all the provinces?
6. How did people behave toward the King and his lords? Why did they act in this way?
7. How did the Inca provide for people who lived in “sterile” country (country where it was hard to farm or otherwise make a living)?

Pedro de Cieza de León: Chronicles of the Incas, 1540

Go to <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1540cieza.html>

Read the text and answer the following questions. Note—“tribute” is similar to a tax. When people paid or gave tribute, they delivered money, goods, or other forms of wealth to a ruler. “*Quipus*” are knotted cords the Incas used for record keeping. “Cuzco” was the capital of the Inca Empire.

8. According to the text, what did the rulers of the kingdom have in all the capitals of the provinces?
9. What did villagers send to these provincial capitals as tribute?
10. Describe how the Inca kept track of tribute villagers paid. Was it important that their records be accurate? Explain.

12. When would the Incas draw upon the supplies kept in local storehouses?

13. Who had to work in the Inca Empire?

14. What happened if someone was ill and could not work?

15. In conclusion, write a paragraph in which you describe how the Inca governed their vast Empire. Evaluate the Incan strategies for governing. What were their strengths? What weaknesses can you identify? Explain your thinking.