

Age of Discovery and Expansion: Societies in Central and South America

Key Terms and People

Glyph picture symbol used as part of a writing system	Triple Alliance association of city states that led to the formation of the Aztec Empire	Quipu arrangement of knotted strings on a cord used by the Inca to record numerical information
Codex book with bark-paper pages that can be turned; only three of these ancient Maya books have survived	Quetzalcoatl Toltec god	Pachacuti Ruler under whom the Incan Empire grew quickly
Tikal Maya city in present-day Guatemala	Obsidian hard, volcanic glass used by early peoples to make sharp weapons	Mita requirement for all Incan subjects to work for the state a certain number of days each year
Popol Vuh Book containing a Maya story of creation	Montezuma I ruler of the Aztec Empire from 1440 to 1469 who is known for building up Tenochtitlan	Ayllu small community or clan whose members worked together for the common good
Pacal ruler of Palenque in the 600s; many great buildings were constructed during his reign	Montezuma II ruler under whom the Aztec Empire weakened	

MAYA CREATE CITY-STATES

Who were the Maya?

A great civilization arose in what is today southern Mexico and northern Central America. This was the Maya civilization, which had developed by around AD 250. Between then and 900, the Maya built large cities such as [1], Copán, and Palenque. Each city was independent and ruled by a god-king. For example, [2] ruled Palenque. Each city was a religious center as well as a trade center for the area around it. These cities were large. Tens of thousands of people lived in these cities. The cities were full of palaces, temples, and pyramids. Archaeologists have found at least 50 Maya cities.

Trade linked these cities. Among the trade goods were salt, flint, feathers, shells, cotton cloth, and ornaments made of jade. Cacao beans, which are used to make chocolate, were sometimes used as money. Maize, beans, and squash were the main foods. Maya society was divided into social classes. The best warriors and priests were at the top. The merchants and craft workers were at the next level. Peasant farmers—the majority of the people— were at the bottom.

RELIGION SHAPES MAYA LIFE

How did religion shape Maya life?

The Maya religion was at the center of their society. There were many gods, including one for each day. The actions of the day's god could be predicted, they thought, by following a calendar. The Maya sometimes cut themselves to offer their blood to the gods in sacrifice. Sometimes they killed enemies and sacrificed them.

The Maya religion led to the development of mathematics, calendars, and astronomy. Maya math included the idea of zero. They had two calendars. One calendar was religious, and it had thirteen 20-day months. The other calendar was based on the sun. It had 18 months consisting of 20 days each. The Maya linked the two together to identify days that would bring good fortune.

Maya astronomy was very accurate. They observed the sun, moon, and stars to make their calendars as accurate as possible. They calculated the time it takes the earth to revolve around the sun almost perfectly

The Maya also developed the most advanced writing system in the ancient Americas. Maya writing was made up of about 800 symbols, or [3]. They used their writing system to record important historical events. They carved in stone or recorded events in a bark-paper book known as a [4]. Three of these ancient books still survive. A famous Maya book called the [5] records a Maya story of the creation of the world.

MYSTERIOUS MAYA DECLINE

Why did the civilization decline?

In the late 800s, the Maya civilization began to decline. Historians do not know why. One explanation may be that warfare between the different city-states disrupted Maya society. The wars interrupted trade and produced economic hardship. Another may be that the soil became less productive due to intensive farming over a long time. Whatever the cause, the Maya became a less powerful people. They continued to live in the area, but their cities were no longer the busy trade and religious centers they had been.

THE VALLEY OF MEXICO

What civilizations arose in the Valley of Mexico?

The Valley of Mexico is more than a mile above sea level. It is a good place for people to settle because it has lakes and fertile soil. An early city-state called Teotihuacán (“City of the Gods”) arose in this area in the first century AD. The city had between 150,000 and 200,000 people at its peak in the sixth century.

The city was the center of a major trade network. The most important trade item was [6]. This green or black volcanic glass was used to make sharp weapons. The huge Pyramid of the Sun, which measured some 200 feet high and 3,000 feet around its base, dominated the city. By 750, Teotihuacán was abandoned. The reasons why are not clear.

The next people to dominate the area were the Toltecs. They rose to power around 900 and ruled over central Mexico for about 300 years. The Toltecs were warlike and worshiped a warlike god.

One Toltec king, Topiltzin, tried to replace the warlike god with a different one and change Toltec ways. This god was called [7], the Feathered Serpent. Followers of the warlike god rebelled and chased Topiltzin away. The Toltecs became warlike again. Over time, Topiltzin and Quetzalcoatl became one in Toltec legends. In these legends, someday Quetzalcoatl would return and bring a new reign of peace. This legend lived on in central Mexico for centuries.

THE AZTEC EMPIRE; TENOCHTITLAN: A PLANNED CITY

How did the Aztecs build an empire?

Around 1200, the Toltecs were losing control of the region. But another people—the Aztecs—began to gain power. The Aztecs founded a city and, in 1428, they joined with two other city-states to form the [8]. The Triple Alliance became the leading power of the Valley of Mexico. It soon gained control over neighboring regions.

By the early 1500s, the Aztecs controlled a large empire that included somewhere between 5 and 15 million people. This empire was based on military conquest and collecting tribute from conquered peoples.

Military leaders held great power in Aztec society. Along with government officials and priests, they made up a noble class. Below them were commoners—merchants, craft workers, soldiers, and farmers who owned their land. At the bottom of society were the slaves taken as captives in battle. At the top was the emperor. He was treated as a god as well as a ruler.

The capital city—Tenochtitlán—grew under the emperor [9]. Built on an island in a lake, long causeways connected the city to the mainland. The city contained between 200,000 and 400,000 people. It was well planned and had a huge religious complex at its center.

RELIGION RULES AZTEC LIFE

What role did religion play in Aztec life?

Religion played a major role in Aztec society. Temples were built in cities for the many

different gods. Priests led religious rituals. The most important rituals were for the sun god. Priests made the sacrifice of human blood to make sure that the sun god was happy, and the sun would rise every day. People taken captive in war were sacrificed. The need for a steady supply of victims pushed the Aztecs to fight their neighbors.

PROBLEMS IN THE AZTEC EMPIRE

What weakened the Aztec Empire?

[10] became emperor in 1502. The Aztec Empire began to have problems during his reign. The Aztecs ordered the other peoples they had conquered to hand over even more people to sacrifice. These other peoples finally rebelled against the Aztecs. In the midst of this conflict, the Spanish arrived and made contact with the Aztecs for the first time. Some saw their arrival as the legendary return of Quetzalcoatl.

THE INCA BUILD AN EMPIRE

Who were the Inca?

The Inca civilization arose in the Andes of South America. It was built on the foundations made by several earlier cultures.

The Inca united much of the Andes under their rule. They first settled in the Valley of Cuzco, in modern Peru. They built a kingdom there by the 1200s. The Inca believed that their ruler was related to the sun god, who would bring wealth and power to them. Only men from one of 11 noble families believed to be descendants of the sun god could serve as king.

In 1438, [11] became the ruler of the Inca. He made conquest after conquest. By 1500, the Inca ruled an empire that stretched along the Andes from modern Ecuador all the way south to Chile and Argentina. It held about 16 million people. The empire did not grow only through military conquest. Often the Inca offered new peoples the chance to join the empire peacefully as long as they swore loyalty to the emperor. Many peoples became part of the empire in this way. Even when force was needed, afterward the Inca tried to win the loyalty of the conquered peoples through friendship rather than fear.

INCAN GOVERNMENT CREATES UNITY

How did the government unite the empire?

The Inca had a highly organized system to govern their empire. Small groups of people known as [12] worked together for the common good. For example, they built irrigation ditches together. The Inca applied this idea to their empire. Families were placed in groups of 10, 100, 1,000, and so on. A chief led each group.

The Inca usually let local rulers stay in place when they conquered a people—as long as the conquered people met any Incan demands. The most important demand was for all adult workers to spend some days each year working for the state. They might work on state farms or build state roads or buildings. This payment of labor was known as [13].

The Inca built a complex network of roads. The roads linked all parts of the empire. The Inca also built all government buildings in the same style. This created a common identity for the government throughout the empire. They made all people speak a common language—the Incan tongue, called Quechua.

The Inca controlled the economy. They told people what to grow or make and how it would be distributed. The government also took care of people who needed help, such as the very old or ill.

In spite of all these advances, the Inca never developed a system of writing. All records were kept in peoples' memories. They did have a device for counting. It was a set of knotted strings called a [14]. The Inca also had day and night calendars for information about their gods.

RELIGION SUPPORTS THE STATE; DISCORD IN THE EMPIRE

How were religion and government connected?

The Incan religion played a central role in Inca life. The Inca believed in fewer gods than the peoples of Mexico. The most important of the Incan gods were the creator god and the sun god. Cuzco, the capital, was the most important religious center.

It was decorated with gold and other precious objects.

In the early 1500s, the Incan Empire reached the height of its power under the rule of Huayna Capac. However, he died while traveling

through the empire. After Huayna Capac's death, civil war broke out between his two sons, Atahualpa and Huascar. Atahualpa eventually won, but the war tore the empire apart. When the Spanish arrived, they took advantage of Incan weakness to divide and conquer the empire.

15. What is known about Maya cities?

16. How does Maya writing reflect Maya culture?

17. Name two reasons that may explain the Maya civilization's decline.

18. What was Teotihuacan?

19. How was Aztec society organized?

20. Why and how did the Aztecs sacrifice to the sun god?

21. Why did conquered peoples rebel against the Aztecs?

22. What beliefs and practices related to Inca rulers?

23. What was mita, and what forms did it take?

24. Why did the Incan Empire fall?
