

## The First Americans

### Lesson 2 Cities and Empires

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

*How do civilizations rise and fall?*

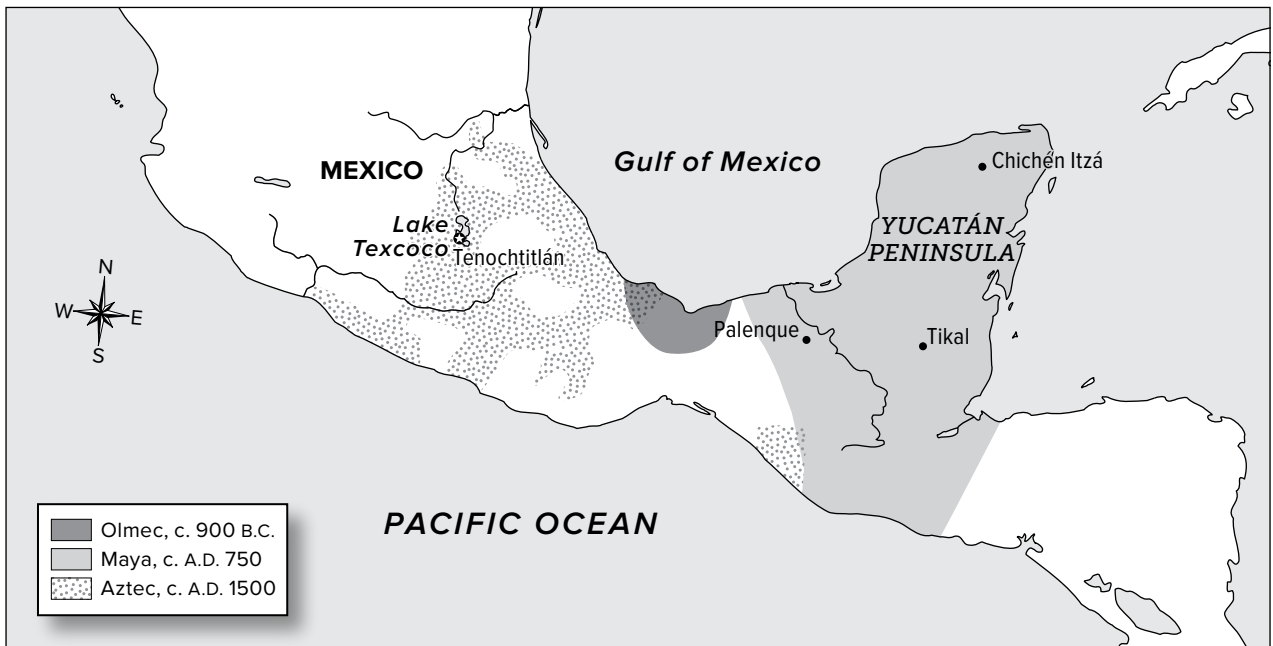
#### GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. *What civilizations in Mexico, Central America, and South America predated the arrival of Europeans?*
2. *Why were the Inca considered a highly developed culture?*

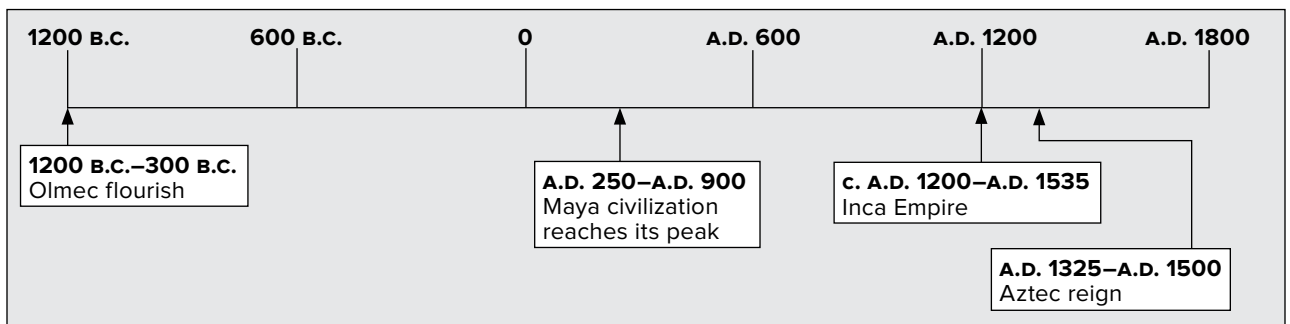
#### Terms to Know

**civilization** highly developed society  
**theocracy** a society ruled by religious leaders  
**hieroglyphic** a form of writing that uses symbols or pictures to represent things, ideas, and sounds  
**terrace** broad platform of land cut into a slope

### Where in the world?



### When did it happen?



## The First Americans

### Lesson 2 Cities and Empires, *Continued*

## Great Civilizations of Mexico, Central America, and South America

Hundreds of years before European explorers arrived, there were great **civilizations** in Mexico, Central America, and South America. Each civilization controlled large areas and had millions of people. They built cities in forests and on mountains. They created great art and advanced tools. This included complex, or very detailed, ways to track time, count, and write.

The largest and most advanced civilizations were:

- the Olmec
- the Maya
- the Aztec
- the Inca.

The Olmec civilization flourished between 1200 B.C. and 300 B.C. They lived along the Gulf Coast in today's Mexico. The Olmec built stone houses, monuments, and drainage systems. Olmec farmers grew enough food to feed thousands. The Olmec civilization eventually died out. Why this happened is still a mystery.

The Maya came after the Olmec. Between A.D. 250 and A.D. 900, they lived in areas that now make up Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize. They built many large cities in the rain forests there. At one time, there may have been as many as 2 million Maya.

Maya civilization was a **theocracy**. This means it was ruled by religious leaders. Each Maya city had at least one stone pyramid, topped with a stone temple. This temple served as a center of religion and government.

The Maya believed the gods were visible in the stars, sun, and moon. Maya priests studied astronomy and advanced mathematics. They used their knowledge to predict eclipses and develop a 365-day calendar. To write, they used **hieroglyphics**. Hieroglyphics are symbols or pictures used to represent things, ideas, and sounds.

The Maya fed a large population with extensive farming. They grew maize, beans, squash, and other vegetables. They would trade their food crops at city markets for things like cotton cloth, pottery, deer meat, and salt. The Maya had many roads, but they did not have horses or the wheel. Traders carried goods—like jade statues, turquoise jewelry, and cacao beans (for making chocolate)—on their backs or by canoe up and down the east coast of Mexico.



### Identifying

1. List two facts about the great civilizations before the Europeans arrived.

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### Mark the Text

2. Draw a circle around the four most advanced civilizations.



### Examining Details

3. Where did the Olmec live?

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### Mark the Text

4. Underline the definition of *theocracy*.



### Listing

5. List two accomplishments of the Maya that were based on their knowledge of astronomy and advanced mathematics.

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**The First Americans**

**Lesson 2** Cities and Empires, *Continued*



**Describing**

6. How did the Aztec know where to settle down?

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**Reading Check**

7. Name the capital city of the Aztec Empire, and describe its location.

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**Explaining**

8. How did the Aztec treat the people they conquered?

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**Making Connections**

9. How were the Inca like the Aztec?

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Eventually the Maya civilization declined. No one knows why. One idea is that the soil grew weak and could not produce enough food for the population. Its once-great cities were nearly empty by 1200. The descendants of the Maya still live in Mexico and Central America.

Many centuries later, another great civilization arose in central Mexico—the Aztec. An Aztec legend said that a god would send them a sign to tell them where to build their permanent home. In 1325, a group of Aztec hunters saw that sign on an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco: an eagle with a snake in its beak sitting on a cactus.

The Aztec built their capital city on the island and called it Tenochtitlán. It was a wonder of construction. Workers dug soil from the bottom of the lake to build bridges between the city and the shore and to make fields for crops in the lake. Tenochtitlán became an important trade center. It was the largest city in the Americas and one of the largest in the world.

In the 1400s, the Aztec used their military to conquer many other groups. They forced conquered people to give them food and goods and to work as slaves. They also sacrificed prisoners of war to their gods to ensure rich harvests. Their empire was still strong when the Europeans came.

	Location	Accomplishments
<b>Olmec</b>	Gulf Coast of Mexico	Built stone houses, monuments, and drainage systems Grew crops to feed thousands
<b>Maya</b>	Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize	Could predict eclipses Developed 365-day calendar Wrote with hieroglyphics Grew crops to feed millions
<b>Aztec</b>	Central Mexico	Built Tenochtitlán Conquered large empire

**The Great Inca Civilization**

The largest early American empire developed in western South America—the Inca. Like the Aztec, the Inca had a powerful military and conquered many neighboring groups.

