

Reading Essentials and Study Guide

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Pre-Columbian America, 300–1550

Lesson 1 The Peoples of North America and Mesoamerica

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

In what ways were civilizations in early Mesoamerica and South America complex? How were civilizations in early Mesoamerica and South America influenced by previous cultures?

Reading HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

consist to be composed of or made up of

area a geographic region

Content Vocabulary

longhouse an Iroquois house about 150 to 200 feet long built of wooden poles covered with sheets of bark and housing about a dozen families

clan a group of related families

tepee a circular tent made by stretching buffalo skins over wooden poles

TAKING NOTES: *Organizing*

ACTIVITY As you read, use a table like the one below to organize information on the Maya, Toltec, and Aztec.

	Political and Social Structures	Religion and Culture
Maya		
Toltec		
Aztec		

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IT MATTERS BECAUSE

Across the Atlantic Ocean from the great civilizations of the Old World, new civilizations were in the process of forming. Most of these early peoples in the Americas lived by hunting, fishing, or food gathering. The first organized societies started in Central America by 1200 B.C.

The Peoples of North America

Guiding Question *Who were the early peoples of North America?*

A natural land bridge connected the Asian and North American continents during the last Ice Age, which ended about 12,000 years ago. Early hunters used this land bridge when they followed herds of bison and caribou into North America. These hunters became the first people to live in North America.

Eastern Woodlands

Around 1000 B.C., farming villages appeared in the Eastern Woodlands. The Eastern Woodlands covered the land in eastern North America from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. People here grew crops but also gathered wild plants for food. The Hopewell peoples in the Ohio River valley are the best known of the time. They extended their culture along the Mississippi River. The Hopewell people were known as the Mound Builders. They built large, elaborate earth mounds that were used as tombs or for ceremonies. Some were built in the shapes of animals.

In about A.D. 700, cultures shifted to farming full-time. This shift led to a prosperous culture in the Mississippi River valley. This Mississippian culture grew corn, squash, and beans on the same land. These crops worked together by providing nutrients, support, and shade for each other.

Cities began to appear, and some of them had with more than 10,000 people. At Cahokia (kuh•HOH•kee•uh), near the modern city of East St. Louis, Illinois, archaeologists found a burial mound more than 98 feet (30 m) high. It had a base that is larger than the base of the Great Pyramid in Egypt. Cahokia flourished and served as the center of government between 850 and 1150. Cahokia collapsed during the 1200s. The reasons for the collapse are not known.

The Iroquois (IHR•uh•kwoy) lived to the northeast of the Mississippian culture. The Iroquois lived in villages that **consisted** of **longhouses**. These houses were built of wooden poles covered with sheets of bark. Each longhouse was 150 to 200 feet (46 to 61 m) in length and housed about a dozen families.

Iroquois men hunted deer, bear, caribou, and small animals like rabbits and beaver. They were warriors who protected the community. Women took care of the dwellings, gathered wild plants, and grew crops. The most important crops were the “three sisters”—corn, beans, and squash. Women also cooked, made baskets, and cared for the children.

Wars were common, especially among groups of Iroquois who lived in present-day Pennsylvania, New York, and southern Canada. According to legend, the Iroquois peoples were nearly torn apart by warfare during the 1500s. Deganawida, an elder of one Iroquois group, then began to talk about the need for peace.

Hiawatha, a member of the Onondaga (AH•nuhn•DAW•guh) group, listened to Deganawida’s message. The combined efforts of Deganawida and Hiawatha resulted in the Great Peace. The Great Peace created an alliance of five groups called the Iroquois League.

A council of representatives called the Grand Council was created. It had 50 Iroquois leaders that met regularly to settle differences. Representatives were carefully chosen. Each Iroquois group was made up of **clans**, or groups of related families. The women of each clan chose a well-respected

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woman as the clan mother. The clan mothers then chose the male members of the Grand Council. Much was expected of these men. They had to possess patience, firmness, and tenderness for their people. They had to be willing to participate in calm deliberation to settle differences.

Great Plains and Southwest

The Plains Indians lived west of the Mississippi River basin. There they grew beans, corn, and squash along the river valleys of the eastern Great Plains. Every summer the men left their villages to hunt buffalo. Hunters would work together to frighten a herd of buffalo and cause them to stampede over a cliff.

The buffalo was a very important animal to the Plains culture. It was used in many ways by Plains peoples. They ate the meat, used the skins for clothing, and made tools from the bones. They stretched buffalo skins over wooden poles to make circular tents called **tepees**. Tepees provided excellent shelter because they were warm in winter and cool in summer.

The Southwest covers the territory of present-day New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado. Conditions are dry, but there is enough rain in some **areas** for farming. The Anasazi (AH•nuh•SAH•zee) peoples established an extensive farming society there.

Between A.D. 500 and 1200, the Anasazi used canals and dams made of earth to garden in the desert. They were skilled at making baskets and pottery. They built pueblos, or multistoried structures that housed many people, out of stone and adobe (sun-dried brick).

They built an elaborate center for their civilization at Chaco Canyon in northwestern New Mexico. At the heart of Chaco Canyon was Pueblo Bonito. It was a large structure with about 800 rooms, and more than 1,000 people lived there. However, persistent droughts led the Anasazi to abandon it.

The Anasazi culture itself did not die. In southern Colorado, a large community formed at Mesa Verde (MAY•suh VEHR•dee) (today, a national park). Groups of Anasazi built a remarkable series of buildings in the recesses of the cliff walls. However, the Anasazi abandoned the settlement in the late 1200s. Again, the move was due to a long drought.



Reading Progress Check

Making Connections How did the shift to farming contribute to the development of various cultures in North America?

The Maya

Guiding Question *What made the Maya one of the most sophisticated civilizations of the early Americas?*

The areas of Mexico and Central America that were home to civilizations before the arrival of the Spanish are referred to as Mesoamerica. Civilization in Mesoamerica appeared around 1200 B.C. One of the most sophisticated civilizations in the Americas arose on the Yucatán Peninsula. This was the civilization of the Maya. It flourished between A.D. 300 and A.D. 900.

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The Maya built splendid temples and pyramids. They also developed a complicated calendar. It was as accurate as any calendar in the world at that time. Maya civilization covered much of Central America and southern Mexico.

The Maya civilization in the central Yucatán Peninsula began to decline sometime around A.D. 800. Explanations for the decline include invasion, internal revolt, a volcanic eruption, or overuse of the land that led to made it difficult to grow crops. Whatever the reason, Maya cities were abandoned. They were eventually covered by dense jungle. The remains of the Mayan civilization were not discovered until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Political and Social Structures

Maya cities were built around a central pyramid. The pyramid was topped by a shrine to the gods. Nearby were other temples, palaces, and a sacred ball court. Some scholars believe that more than 100,000 people might have lived in Maya urban centers, or cities, such as Tikal in present-day Guatemala.

Maya civilization was made up of city-states. Each city-state was governed by a hereditary ruling class. These Maya city-states often were at war with one another. Ordinary soldiers who were captured in battle became slaves. Captured nobles and war leaders were used for human sacrifice. Their lives were taken to please or appease the gods.

Pacal was the ruler of the powerful city-state of Palenque (pah•LEHNG•kay). He claimed to be descended from the gods, as did other Maya rulers. These rulers were supported by nobles and a class of scribes, who might also have been priests. Maya society also contained peasants and townspeople. The townspeople worked as skilled artisans, officials, and merchants.

Most of the Maya peasants farmed tiny plots of land or terraced hills in the highlands. Houses were built of tree branches packed with mud for walls and thatched roofs. There was a fairly clear-cut division of labor. Men did the fighting and hunting. Women were responsible for homemaking and raising children. Women also made cornmeal, the basic food for much of the population. The Maya also grew cacao trees, which were the source of chocolate. It was used as a beverage by the upper classes.

Religion and Culture

Religion and spiritual beliefs were central to Maya civilization. All of nature was sacred to the Maya, so they sought means of interacting with it rather than forcibly dominating it. Maya artists personified aspects of nature like the Sun, Moon, rain, and lightning. Deities also represented abstract concepts, like Itzamna, the “god of knowledge and wisdom.” Ritual human sacrifice, most often of warriors captured from other groups, was also a common religious practice.

The Maya elite kept records of their dynasties and their relationships to their gods using a hieroglyphic writing system. For most of their record keeping, the Maya wrote on long sheets of paper made from bark, folded like an accordion, and then covered with thin white plaster. Although most of these books deteriorated in the Maya tropical environment, three of these books have survived. Maya scribes also carved or painted hieroglyphic inscriptions into ceramic vessels, jade jewelry, bone, shells, and stone monuments.

During the Colonial period in Latin America, Maya scribes and other Mesoamericans adopted the Latin alphabet to keep their records. Through this transition, the ability to read Mayan hieroglyphs was lost and remained a mystery for centuries. During the 20th century, archaeologists and epigraphers deciphered the hieroglyphic writing system, making their histories available to modern cultures.

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The Maya calendar is often called the Calendar Round, and is made up of two parts: one was based on a solar calendar of 365 days, divided into 18 months of 20 days each and an extra 5 days at the end. The other was based on a sacred calendar of 260 days, divided into 13 weeks of 20 days. The primary unique component was known as the Long Count, which tallied the number of days that had elapsed from a mythological “zero date.” The Long Count was built on a base-20 numerical system and included symbols for zero—a concept developed independently and centuries before European and Asian cultures.

Only trained priests could read and write hieroglyphic texts and use this calendar. These priests also used mathematics for astronomical and religious purposes. Many Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions record important events in Maya history. One of the most important collections of Maya hieroglyphs is located at Palenque. There, archaeologists discovered a royal tomb carved with hieroglyphs and images, recording the accomplishments of the great ruler Pacal.



Reading Progress Check

Drawing Conclusions How did the belief system of the Maya affect their daily life?

The Toltec

Guiding Question *What contributions did the Toltec make to early Mesoamerican culture?*

Around A.D. 1000, new peoples formed civilizations in central Mexico. Most important were the Toltec. The Toltec empire reached its high point between A.D. 950 and 1150. The center of the empire was Tula. This city was built on a high ridge about 43.5 miles (70 km) northwest of present-day Mexico City. The Toltec irrigated their fields with water from the Tula River. They grew a number of crops, including beans, maize, and peppers. This agriculture enabled Tula to support a population of 40,000 to 60,000 people.

The Toltec were a warlike people. Their empire included much of northern and central Mexico. Their conquests extended into the Maya lands of Guatemala and the northern Yucatán. The Toltec controlled the upper Yucatán Peninsula from Chichén Itzá for centuries.

The Toltec also built pyramids and palaces. They brought metalworking to Mesoamerica. They were the first people in the region to work in gold, silver, and copper.

The Toltec empire began to decline around 1125 as a result of fighting among different groups in Tula. Around 1170, the city was sacked, and much of it was burned. After that, there was no single ruling group in the area for nearly 200 years. Then the Aztec Empire emerged, carrying on many Toltec traditions.

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Reading Progress Check

Identifying What caused the decline of the Toltec empire?

The Aztec

Guiding Question *How did the Aztec continue the tradition of building successful civilizations in Mesoamerica?*

The origins of the Aztec are not known. During the twelfth century, they began a long migration that brought them to the Valley of Mexico. They eventually established a capital at Tenochtitlán (tay•nawch• teet•LAHN), now Mexico City.

According to Aztec legends, when the Aztec arrived in the Valley of Mexico, other peoples drove them into a region with a large number of snakes. The Aztec survived, however, and they were strengthened by their belief in a sign. Huitzilopochtli (wee•tsee•loh• POHKT•lee) was their god of war and of the sun. He had told them that when they saw an eagle perched on a cactus growing out of a rock, their journey would end.

In 1325 they were attacked by another group of people, and they were driven into the swamps and islands of Lake Texcoco (tehs•KOH•koh). On one island, they saw an eagle standing on a prickly pear cactus on a rock. There they built Tenochtitlán (or “place of the stone and prickly pear cactus”).

For the next 100 years, the Aztec constructed temples, other public buildings, and houses. They built roadways of stone across Lake Texcoco to the north, south, and west. These roadways linked the islands to the mainland.

The Aztec at Tenochtitlán under Montezuma I formed a Triple Alliance with two other city-states, Tetzco and Tlacopan. This alliance allowed the Aztec to control a vast empire. It included much of today’s Mexico, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean and as far south as the Guatemalan border. This alliance lasted until the reign of Montezuma II and the arrival of the Spanish in the 1500s.

The new Aztec kingdom was not a centralized state but a collection of semi-independent territories that local lords governed. The Aztec ruler supported these local rulers in return for tribute, goods or money paid by conquered peoples to their conquerors.

Political and Social Structures

As many as four million Aztecs lived in the Valley of Mexico and the surrounding valleys of central Mexico by 1500. Like all great empires in ancient times, the Aztec state was authoritarian. The monarch held all the power. He claimed that he was descended from the gods. A council of lords and government officials assisted the Aztec ruler.

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The nobility held positions in the government. Noble male children were sent to temple schools, which stressed military training. Once adults, males of the nobility would select a career in the military service, the government bureaucracy, or the priesthood. Nobles received large estates from the government in return for their services. The rest of the population consisted of indentured workers, slaves, and commoners. Indentured workers were landless laborers who had contracts to work on the nobles' estates. Male and female slaves were sold in markets, and they worked in wealthy households.

Most people were commoners, and many of these commoners were farmers. The Aztec built *chinampas*. These were swampy islands crossed by canals that provided water for their crops. The canals also provided easy travel to local markets. Aztec merchants were active traders. Especially in Tenochtitlán and other large cities, merchants exported and traded goods made by Aztec craftspeople from imported raw materials. The traders exchanged their goods for tropical feathers, cacao beans, animal skins, and gold. When the Spanish arrived in the Aztec Empire, they were astonished to find city markets that were considerably larger and that they had more goods than markets in Spain.

From a young age, boys and girls in Aztec society had very different roles. At a boy's birth, the midwife declared that he would leave home for his true home, which was life as a warrior. At a girl's birth, the midwife declared that the girl would work in the home. Aztec women were not equal to men. However, they could own and inherit property and enter into contracts. These rights were not often allowed to women in other world cultures at the time. Most Aztec women worked in the home, weaving textiles and raising children. However, some were trained as priestesses.

Religion and Culture

Like other peoples in Central America and around the world, the Aztec had a polytheistic religion. That is, they believed in many gods. Huitzilopochtli was the god of the sun and war. He was very important to Aztec warriors as they expanded control over neighboring peoples.

Another important god was Quetzalcoatl. This god had a more direct impact on the lives of the people. According to Aztec tradition, Quetzalcoatl had left his homeland in the Valley of Mexico in the tenth century, and he promised to return in triumph. When the Aztec first saw Spanish explorers in the 1500s, they believed that representatives of Quetzalcoatl had returned.

Aztec religion was based on a belief in an unending struggle between the forces of good and evil throughout the universe. This struggle had created and destroyed four worlds, or suns. People believed they were now living in the time of the fifth sun. This world was destined to be destroyed earthquakes. To postpone the day of destruction, the Aztec practiced human sacrifice. They believed this would appease the sun god Huitzilopochtli.

Religion had a significant influence on Aztec art and architecture. At the center of Tenochtitlán was the sacred district. A massive pyramid dedicated to Huitzilopochtli dominated the district. Aztec architecture blended religious themes with the pyramid's traditional step-pyramid design. At the top of the pyramid was a platform. It contained shrines to the gods and an altar for performing human sacrifices.

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The Aztec also made advances in astronomy, which is evident on the monument known as the Aztec Calendar Stone. It contained pictographs that showed days, months and astronomical constellations. The Calendar Stone also depicted the Creation narrative of the four Ages that were created and destroyed by the gods, before the Fifth Sun under which the Aztecs lived. Like those of the Maya, Aztec priests not only computed the calendar, but also observed the movements of the stars and planets to gain knowledge of the future. They believed that the Fifth Sun would end with catastrophic earthquakes.



Reading Progress Check

Understanding Relationships What factors indicate that the Aztec had an advanced civilization?
