

## Lesson 1



Maize was an important staple for early Native Americans, who ate it, made it into flour, and used it for ceremonial purposes.

### **Civilizations of Middle America**

The Americas refers to two continents, North America and South America. Within these two regions is a cultural region that historians call Middle America or Mesoamerica, which is made up of Mexico and Central America. Some of the

earliest civilizations in the Americas developed in Mesoamerica.

## **Civilizations Develop in the Americas**

Scholars disagree about exactly when and how the first people reached the Americas. A common theory held that between 12,000 and 10,000 years ago, Paleolithic people reached North America from Asia. This migration took place during the last Ice Age, which lasted from about 100,000 years ago to about 10,000 years ago. At the time, so much water froze into thick ice sheets

that the sea levels dropped, exposing a land bridge between Siberia and Alaska in the area that is now the Bering Strait.

Early evidence supported the theory that bands of hunters and food gatherers followed herds of bison and mammoths across the land bridge between Siberia and Alaska. They slowly moved south through North America, Central America, and South America. Recent evidence suggests that people may have reached the Americas much earlier. They may have paddled small boats and fished along the coasts. As archaeologists have discovered new evidence, they

have modified their theories. Researchers now base the dates of migration into the Americas mostly on evidence found at prehistoric sites.

## **Adapting to New Environments**

The first Americans faced a variety of environments in which they could settle. For example, great mountain chains—the Rockies, the eastern and western Sierra Madre, and the Andes—dominate the western Americas. In addition, through the continents flow three of the world's five longest rivers, the Amazon of

South America and the Missouri and Mississippi rivers of North America.

Far to the north and south of the continents, people learned to survive in icy, treeless lands. Closer to the Equator, people settled in the hot, wet climate and dense vegetation of the Amazon rain forest. Elsewhere, hunters adapted to deserts like the Atacama of Chile, woodlands like those in eastern North America, and the fertile plains of both continents.

## **Farming Begins**

In the Americas, as elsewhere, the greatest adaptation occurred when

people learned to domesticate plants and animals. These changes took place slowly between about 8500 B.C. and 2000 B.C. In Mesoamerica, or Middle America, Neolithic people cultivated a range of crops, including beans, sweet potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, squash, and maize—the Native American name for corn. People in South America cultivated crops such as maize and cassava and domesticated llamas and other animals valued for their wool. By 3000 B.C. in parts of South America and 1500 B.C. in parts of Mesoamerica, farmers had settled in

villages. Populations then expanded, and some villages eventually grew into the great early cities of the Americas.



## Full Image Description

About 18,000 B.C., the land bridge covered the Bering Strait between



Siberia and North America. From 1500 B.C. to 400 B.C., the Olmec civilization covered a small area in the southern part of what is now Mexico, on the Gulf of Mexico. From A.D. 250 to A.D. 900, the Maya civilization covered an area in Central America extending from the Gulf of Mexico in the north to the Pacific Ocean in the south.

**Analyze Maps** Early people are thought to have crossed the Bering



Strait from Asia to the Americas either on foot or in small boats. What might have been one of the biggest geographic influences on Mesoamerican civilizations?

## **Olmec Civilization Emerges**

Many scholars consider the Olmec the first American civilization; it emerged in the fertile coastal areas along the Gulf of Mexico and lasted from about 1200 to 400 B.C. Compared to other civilizations such as the Maya, Aztec and Inca, archaeologists know little about the Olmec. We do not even

know what they called themselves. In fact, Olmec is the name the Aztecs later used for these people. But rich tombs and temples suggest that they had a powerful class of priests. The Olmec did not build true cities, but rather priests and other leaders may have lived in ceremonial centers, while the common people lived in surrounding farming villages.

## **Olmec Culture and Trade**

Ceremonial centers had large pyramid-shaped temples and other important buildings. Much of Olmec art is carved stone. The smallest

examples include jade figurines of people and gods. The most dramatic remains are 14 giant stone heads found at the major ceremonial centers of San Lorenzo and La Venta.



Archaeologists discovered the giant Olmec stone heads, made of volcanic rock and weighing up to five tons each, during excavations. The Olmec

moved them to ceremonial sites from distant quarries.

Scholars think that these colossal heads, which the Olmec carved from 40-ton stones, are portraits of actual rulers. No one knows exactly how the Olmec moved these stones from distant quarries without wheeled vehicles or draft animals. Still, the evidence shows that the Olmec could mobilize a large labor force.

The Olmec also engaged in trading jade, obsidian, serpentine, mica, rubber, feathers, and pottery; through such trade, they influenced a wide area. The grinning jaguars and serpents that decorate many Olmec

carvings appear in the arts of later Mesoamerican peoples. The Olmec also invented a calendar, and they carved hieroglyphic writing into stone. Recent archaeological excavations in Mexico indicate they may have developed a writing system, which would make them the first Mesoamerican civilization to do so.

## **Influence of the Olmec**

Through trade, Olmec influence spread over a wide area. Archaeologists have identified Olmec religious and artistic

influences on two later Mesoamerican civilizations—the Maya and Aztec.

Both these civilizations built pyramid-shaped temples similar to those of the Olmec. Olmec ceremonial centers had the remains of ball courts linked to religious rituals. Similar ball courts have been found at Maya and later Aztec sites.

The ball game was fast paced and involved great skill on the part of the players. They had to keep a rubber ball in motion and send it through hoops high on a stone wall. The ball was not allowed to touch the ground. Archaeologists do not know



the exact meaning of the game, but it had religious and political importance. It also was a source of entertainment for crowds of spectators.



The grinning jaguars, serpents, and other images that decorate Olmec carvings appear in the arts of later people. A figure similar to the Maya god of maize is found in Olmec paintings on the walls at San Bartolo, and the Olmec snake god is seen in the Maya gods Kukulcan and the Aztec Quetzalcoatl. The Olmec calendar and its number system were passed on to later people. Their most important legacy, however, may have been the tradition of priestly leadership and the religious rituals that were central to later Middle American civilizations.

**Infer** Why don't archaeologists know where the Olmec came from?

## The Maya

Scholars have long thought that among the peoples the Olmec influenced were the Maya. New evidence suggests that the Maya may have developed ceremonial centers about the same time as the Olmec. By 300 B.C., the Maya were

building large cities, such as El Mirador in Guatemala. By about A.D. 250, the Maya golden age—known as the Classic Period—began, with city-states flourishing from the Yucatán Peninsula in southern Mexico through much of Central America.



**Analyze Maps** Maya cities were centered around temples used for ceremonial purposes and for observations of the stars, from which the Maya calculated mathematics and

astronomy. Where were most of the later cities established?

## **Farming Methods**

Before the Maya developed large population centers, like those later constructed by the Inca and Aztecs, they lived scattered across the

land. They developed two farming methods that allowed them to thrive in the tropical environment. In many areas, farmers burned down forests and then cleared the land in order to plant on it. After a few years, the fields were no longer fertile. The Maya would then abandon these lands until they could be used once again.

In the meantime, farmers would burn and clear new lands for farming. In addition, along the banks of rivers, Maya farmers built raised fields to lift crops up above the annual floodwaters. These methods allowed the Maya to produce enough maize

and other crops to support rapidly growing cities.

## **City-States Ruled Over the People**

The Maya cities that developed before and during the Classic Period never formed an empire. Instead, individual and powerful city-states evolved. The smaller city-states ruled over the people living directly within and near their borders. The largest ones reigned over neighboring areas as well—often requiring nearby cities



to show allegiance to their kings and to participate in their ritual activities. Over the course of hundreds of years, many different city-states held power, with warfare and trade a constant theme of life among them. Cities such as Palenque, Copán, and Piedras Negras all carried great influence in their time, but the largest and most supreme power resided in the rulers of Tikal and Calakmul.

While the Maya were not united politically as later Aztec and Inca civilizations came to be, city-states maintained regular contact through a system of economic exchange, which

generated much wealth. Traders carried valuable cargoes long distances by sea and along roads made of packed earth. Trade goods included items of daily use—such as honey, salt, and cotton—and nonessential but prized items such as feathers, jade, and jaguar pelts. These goods might have been used in ceremonies or to show status.

## **Social Hierarchy**

Each Maya city had its own ruler, who was usually male. Maya records and carvings show that women

occasionally governed on their own or in the name of young sons. Nobles served many functions in support of the ruler. Some were military leaders, while some collected taxes and enforced laws. Others managed public works, similar to the way the Olmec used collective labor for monument and temple building. Scribes, painters, and sculptors were also very highly respected. Merchants may have formed a middle class in society, though the wealthiest and most powerful merchants were certainly nobles, as they had been in the Olmec civilization.



Maya temples were built in the shape of pyramids using hand-cut limestone blocks. The interior usually consisted of a few narrow rooms, indicating that

they were intended for ceremonial purposes rather than for the public.

The majority of the Maya were farmers. They grew maize, beans, and squash—the basic food crops of Mesomerica—as well as fruit trees, cotton, and brilliant tropical flowers. To support the cities, farmers paid taxes on food and worked on construction projects. Some cities also included a population of slaves, who generally were commoners who had been captured in war.

**Explain** How did the Maya operate politically without a centralized government?

