

SECTION 2

The Americas

Guide to Reading

Main Ideas

- Because of the variety of climate and geographic features, many different cultures emerged in the Americas.
- The Maya, Aztec, and Inca developed sophisticated civilizations in Mesoamerica and South America.

Key Terms

Mesoamerica, epidemic

People to Identify

Hernán Cortés, Montezuma, Pachacuti, Francisco Pizarro

Places to Locate

Gulf of Mexico, Yucatán Peninsula, Tikal, Chichén Itzá, Tenochtitlán

Preview Questions

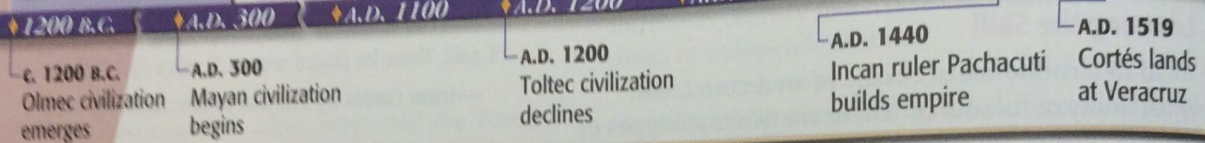
1. Who were the first inhabitants of the Americas?
2. What forces ended the Aztec and Incan civilizations?

Reading Strategy

Summarizing Information Create a chart describing the characteristics of Mayan, Aztec, and Incan cultures.

People	
Location	
Religion	
Architecture	
Year/Reason Declined	

Preview of Events



Voices from the Past



Sioux warrior shirt with beads and fringe

One Sioux sacred woman said:

“All of this creation is sacred, and so do not forget. Every dawn as it comes is a holy event, and every day is holy, for the light comes from your Father Wakan-Tanka, and also you must always remember that the two-leggeds and all the other peoples who stand upon this earth are sacred and should be treated as such.” A Native American song says, “The whole Southwest was a House Made of Dawn. It was made of pollen and of rain. The land was old and everlasting. There were many colors on the hills and on the plain, and there was a dark wilderness on the mountains beyond. The land was tilled and strong and it was beautiful all around.”

— *The Native Americans: An Illustrated History*,
Betty and Ian Ballantine, eds., 1993

As these words illustrate, the first peoples who inhabited North America had great respect for the earth and its creatures.

Early Americans

The Americas make up an enormous land area, stretching about nine thousand miles (more than fourteen thousand km) from the Arctic Ocean in the north to Cape Horn at the tip of South America. Over this vast area are many different landscapes: ice-covered lands, dense forests, fertile river valleys ideal for hunting and farming, coastlines for fishing, lush tropical forests, and hot deserts.

Between 100,000 and 10,000 years ago, the last Ice Age produced low sea levels that in turn created a land bridge in the Bering Strait between the Asian and North American continents. Many scholars believe that small communities of people

from Asia crossed this land bridge. Most likely, they were hunters who were pursuing the herds of bison and caribou that moved in search of grazing land into North America as the glaciers receded. These people became the first Americans.

The peoples of North America created a remarkable number of different cultures. Inuits, Mound Builders, Anasazi, Plains Amerindians, and Iroquois all developed flourishing societies that responded in their own unique ways to the environmental conditions that they faced.

Reading Check Summarizing According to scholars, why did hunters cross the land bridge into North America?

The Maya and Toltec

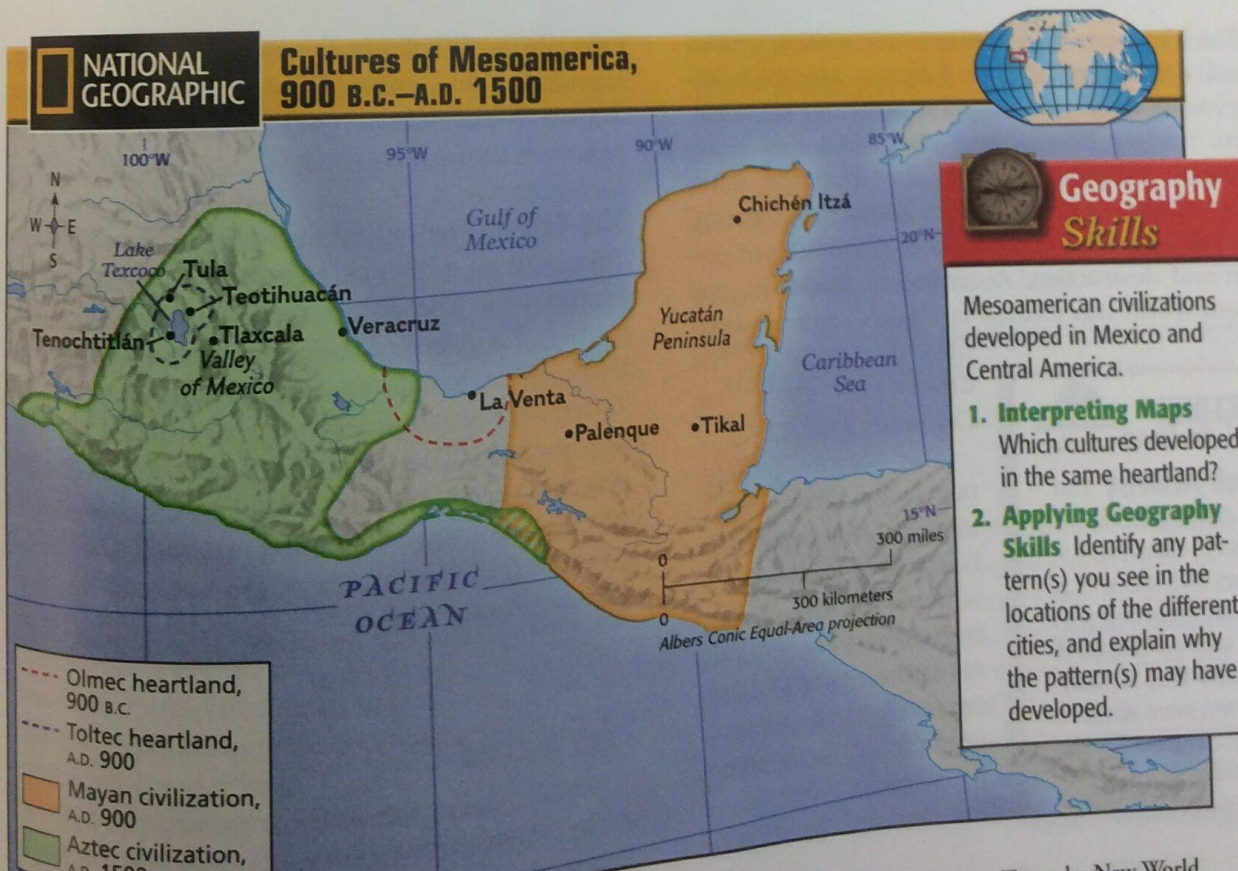
Signs of civilization in **Mesoamerica**—a name we use for areas of Mexico and Central America that were civilized before the Spaniards arrived—appeared around 1200 B.C. with the Olmec. Located in the hot and swampy lowlands along the coast of the **Gulf of Mexico** south of Veracruz, the Olmec peoples farmed along the muddy riverbanks in the area. The Olmec had large cities that were centers for their religious rituals. Around 400 B.C., the Olmec civilization declined and eventually collapsed.

The Maya Later, on the **Yucatán Peninsula**, a major civilization arose—that of the **Maya**, which flourished between A.D. 300 and 900. It was one of the most sophisticated civilizations in the Americas. The Maya built splendid temples and pyramids and developed a complicated calendar. Mayan civilization came to include much of Central America and southern Mexico.

Mayan cities were built around a central pyramid topped by a shrine to the gods. Nearby were other temples, palaces, and a sacred ball court. Some scholars believe that urban centers such as **Tikal** (in present-day Guatemala) may have had a hundred thousand inhabitants.

Mayan civilization was composed of city-states, each governed by a hereditary ruling class. These Mayan city-states were often at war with each other. Ordinary soldiers who were captured in battle became slaves. Captured nobles and war leaders were used for human sacrifice.

Rulers of the Mayan city-states claimed to be descended from the gods. The Mayan rulers were helped by nobles and a class of scribes who may also have been priests. Mayan society also included townspeople who were skilled artisans, officials, and merchants. Most of the Mayan people were peasant farmers.



SPORTS & CONTESTS

The Deadly Games of Central America

Mayan cities contained ball courts. Usually, a court consisted of a rectangular space surrounded by walls with highly decorated stone rings. The walls were covered with images of war and sacrificial victims. The contestants tried to drive a solid rubber ball through these rings. Ball players, usually two or three on a team, used their hips to propel the ball (they were not allowed to use hands or feet). Players



donned helmets, gloves, and knee and hip protectors made of hide to protect themselves against the hard rubber balls.

Because the stone rings were placed 27 feet (more than 8 m) above the ground, it took considerable skill to score a goal. Some scholars believe that making a goal was so rare

This Mayan athlete is shown wearing protective padding.

The Maya created a sophisticated writing system based on hieroglyphs, or pictures. Mayan hieroglyphs remained a mystery to scholars for centuries. Then, modern investigators discovered that many passages contained symbols that recorded dates in the Mayan calendar known as the Long Count. This calendar was based on a belief in cycles of creation and destruction. According to the Maya, our present world was created in 3114 B.C. and is scheduled to complete its downward cycle on December 23, 2012.



Web Activity Visit the *Glencoe World History—Modern Times* Web site at wh.mt.glencoe.com and click on **Chapter 4—Student Web Activity** to learn more about early civilizations in the Americas.

The Mayan civilization in the central Yucatán Peninsula eventually began to decline. Explanations for the decline include invasion, internal revolt, or a natural disaster such as a volcanic eruption. A more recent theory is that overuse of the land led to reduced

crop yields. Whatever the case, Mayan cities were abandoned and covered by dense jungle growth. They were not rediscovered until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Toltec The capital of the Toltec Empire was at Tula, built on a high ridge northwest of present-day Mexico City. The Toltec were a fierce and warlike people who extended their conquests into the Mayan lands of Guatemala and the northern Yucatán. The Toltec were also builders who constructed pyramids and palaces. They controlled the upper Yucatán Peninsula from another capital at **Chichén Itzá** for several centuries, beginning around A.D. 900. In about 1200 their civilization, too, declined.

Reading Check **Describing** How was Mayan civilization organized and governed?

The Aztec

The origins of the Aztec are uncertain. Sometime during the twelfth century A.D., however, they began a long migration that brought them to the Valley of

that players were rewarded with clothing and jewelry from the watching crowds.

The exact rules of the game are unknown, but we do know that it was more than a sport. The ball game had a religious meaning. The ball court was a symbol of the world, and the ball represented the sun and the moon. Apparently, it was believed that playing the game often would produce better harvests. The results of the game were deadly. The defeated players were sacrificed in ceremonies held after the end of the game. Similar courts have been found at sites throughout Central America, as well as present-day Arizona and New Mexico.



A present-day soccer match featuring Brazil and Canada

CONNECTING TO THE PAST

1. **Summarizing** Why was great skill required of the athletes who played the Mayan ball game?
2. **Describing** Explain the symbolism of the Mayan ball game.
3. **Writing about History** Research the gladiatorial contests of ancient Rome. How were those contests similar to the Mayan ball games?

Mexico. They eventually established their capital, beginning in 1325, at **Tenochtitlán** (tay•NAWCH•teet•LAHN), on an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco, now the location of Mexico City.

For the next hundred years, the Aztec built their city. They constructed temples, other public buildings, and houses. They built roadways of stone across Lake Texcoco to the north, south, and west, linking the many islands to the mainland. While they were building their capital city, the Aztec consolidated their rule over much of what is modern Mexico.

By 1500, as many as four million Aztec lived in the Valley of Mexico and the surrounding valleys of central Mexico. Power in the Aztec state was vested in the hands of the monarch, who claimed that he was descended from the gods.

At the center of the capital city of Tenochtitlán was a massive pyramid dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, god of the sun. A platform at the top held an altar for performing human sacrifices.

In 1519, a Spanish force under the command of **Hernán Cortés** landed at Veracruz, on the Gulf of Mexico. Cortés marched to Tenochtitlán at the head

of a small body of troops (550 soldiers and 16 horses). The Aztec monarch **Montezuma** (also spelled Moctezuma) offered gifts of gold to the foreigners when they arrived.

Eventually, tensions arose between the Spaniards and the Aztec. Within a year, the forces of Cortés had destroyed the Aztec pyramids, temples, and palaces. Tenochtitlán was no more.

Reading Check Identifying What was the capital of the Aztec civilization? What is the name of the modern-day city located there?

The Inca

In the fifteenth century, another remarkable civilization—that of the **Inca**—flourished in South America. In the 1440s, under the leadership of the powerful ruler **Pachacuti**, the Inca launched a campaign of conquest that eventually brought the entire region under their control.

Pachacuti and his immediate successors, Topa Inca and Huayna Inca (the word *Inca* means “ruler”), extended the boundaries of the Incan Empire as far as



The 50-foot-tall stone walls of Cuzco were built without mortar by the Inca.

Ecuador, central Chile, and the edge of the Amazon basin. The empire included perhaps twelve million people. At the top of the system was the emperor, who was believed to be descended from Inti, the sun god.

The Incan state was built on war, so all young men were required to serve in the Incan army. With some two hundred thousand members, the army was the largest and best armed in the region.

The Inca also built roads. A system of some 24,800 miles (around 40,000 km) of roads extended from the border of modern-day Colombia to a point south of modern-day Santiago, Chile. Two major roadways

extended in a north-south direction, one through the Andes and the other along the coast, with connecting routes between them.

The Incan Empire was still flourishing when the first Spanish expeditions arrived in the central Andes. In 1531, **Francisco Pizarro** and a small band of about 180 men landed on the Pacific coast of South America. Pizarro brought steel weapons, gunpowder, and horses. The Inca had none of these.

The Incan Empire experienced an **epidemic** (an outbreak of disease that spreads rapidly) of smallpox. Like the

Aztec, the Inca had no immunities to European diseases. All too soon, smallpox was devastating entire villages. Even the Incan emperor was a victim. Armed only with stones, arrows, and light spears, the Incan soldiers were little challenge to the Spaniard's charging horses, guns, and cannons.

Pizarro and his soldiers, aided by Incan allies, marched on Cuzco and captured the Incan capital. By 1535, Pizarro had established a new capital at Lima for a new colony of the Spanish Empire.

Reading Check **Describing** What were the accomplishments of Pachacuti and his immediate successors?

SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT

Checking for Understanding

- Define** Mesoamerica, epidemic.
- Identify** Maya, Toltec, Aztec, Hernán Cortés, Montezuma, Inca, Pachacuti, Francisco Pizarro.
- Locate** Gulf of Mexico, Yucatán Peninsula, Tikal, Chichén Itzá, Tenochtitlán.
- Explain** how Mayan hieroglyphics have helped us to understand Mayan culture.
- List** the accomplishments of the Aztec peoples.

Critical Thinking

- Analyze** Why would the Inca have found it important to build an extensive road system?
- Summarizing Information** Create a table like the one below listing the major civilizations and principle cities that developed in Mesoamerica.

Mesoamerica	
Civilizations	Cities

Analyzing Visuals

- Examine** the sculpture of a Mayan athlete on page 142. What inferences can you draw about the status of athletes in Mayan culture from examining this sculpture?

Writing About History

- Expository Writing** Using the Internet or library sources, research the political system of the Incan rulers. Write an essay in which you explain the advantages and disadvantages of the Incan political system.