

Lesson 1: Geography of Mesoamerica

Vocabulary

peninsula an arm of land sticking into the sea so that it is nearly surrounded by water
cenote a natural well

A Land of Rugged Mountains

Mesoamerica runs from southern North America to the central part of Central America. Jade is a common resource. So are basalt and obsidian, which are types of black rocks formed from lava. Some Mesoamerican peoples carved huge statues out of basalt. Others made arrowheads and knives from obsidian. Mesoamerica is a rugged, or rough, land. There are two mountain ranges in northern Mesoamerica. These are the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Sierra Madre Oriental. The Plateau of Mexico sits between these ranges. A plateau is a high, flat area. Volcanoes are south of the plateau. They produce fertile soil for farming. South of the volcanoes are highlands. This rugged area has ridges and gorges. The climate of Mesoamerica changes depending on where you are. Some places are dry deserts. In other places enough rain falls for crops and forests to grow. Mesoamericans have grown maize (corn), beans, and squash for thousands of years.

A Land of Lush Coasts

The interior of Mesoamerica is a land of rugged mountains and plateaus. Mesoamerica also has long coastlines. No place in Mesoamerica is farther than about 200 miles from the coast. The Gulf of Mexico is to the north. Much of the land near the gulf's coast is covered with tropical rain forest. The climate is hot and humid. There are also grasslands, swamps, and rivers. The Yucatán Peninsula forms the southeastern border of the Gulf of Mexico. A **peninsula** is an arm of land sticking into the sea so that it is nearly surrounded by water. The Yucatán Peninsula

has few rivers. But it does have many underground streams and caves. The roofs of many of these underground streams have collapsed and created **cenotes**, or natural wells. Cenotes were used as sources of drinking water. The southwest coastline of Mesoamerica sits on the Pacific Ocean. It is a mountainous area.

A Land of Many Peoples

Many peoples lived in Mesoamerica. Its different environments and climates helped them develop different cultures. Yet the peoples of Mesoamerica had many things in common. They all had advanced forms of agriculture. They grew crops such as beans, maize, chili peppers, and squash. Many people lived in rural areas. Others lived in cities and towns. Cities contained temple-pyramids and large works of art such as stone monuments. People developed very accurate calendars. They also used hieroglyphic writing different from that of other civilizations.

Lesson 2: The Olmec and the Maya

Vocabulary

theocracy a government in which the leader and the ruling classes are believed to represent the will of the gods

aqueduct a structure that carries flowing water

codex a book with screens that fold together

A Mother Civilization

The Olmec civilization was Mesoamerica's first great civilization. It lasted from about 1200 B.C. to about 300 B.C. The Olmec lived on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Most Olmec were farmers, but they also hunted and fished. They lived in small houses that surrounded small villages. The Olmec people were divided into social classes based on wealth and power. The Olmec government was a **theocracy**. Priests and government officials made up the most powerful social class. Merchants and craftspeople made up other social classes. Farmers made up the lowest. Olmec villages were connected by roads. The Olmec traveled these roads and traded with other Mesoamerican peoples. The Olmec civilization is often called "the Mother Civilization" of Mesoamerica. This is because the Olmec influenced all of the later Mesoamerican civilizations.

Olmec Accomplishments

The Olmec are most famous for the giant stone heads they made. The huge heads often represented Olmec rulers. The Olmec also made sculptures of their gods. The Olmec developed a number system, a calendar, and a form of writing. Later Mesoamerican civilizations would learn from the Olmec's developments. No one knows why the Olmec civilization disappeared. Some people believe that the Olmec were the ancestors of the Maya.

The Maya

The Maya lived in more than 100 locations in Central America and Mexico. A large part of their civilization was on the Yucatán Peninsula, close to where the Olmec had lived. Mayan

civilization was at its strongest about A.D. 250 and continued for another 650 years. The city-state Tikal was once home to nearly 100,000 Maya. More than 3,000 structures were built there. Today this ancient city has ruins of palaces, baths, pyramids, and **aqueducts**. Aqueducts carried running water. As sources of water, cenotes were holy to the Maya. Cenotes were sinkholes that collected water. Like the Olmec, the Maya developed a form of writing and lived in a theocracy. Also both Olmec and Mayan cities were set up to honor the gods.

Time and Numbers

The Maya used calendars to write down birth dates, marriages, and other important information. The Maya actually had two different calendars. One was for the seasons. The other was for religious ceremonies. The Maya used a **codex**, or folding-screen book, to write down information forecasting the future. Codexes also contained information about religious ceremonies. A codex was made of fig leaf bark or animal skin. The Maya were great mathematicians. They created their own counting system.

Daily Life

Entire families lived together in Mayan culture. Men farmed and hunted. Women did housekeeping chores and made clothing. Houses were small and made of adobe, or dried mud-bricks. The Maya began to leave their cities about A.D. 900. Today some descendants of the Maya live in Mexico and Guatemala. But no one knows what happened to Mayan civilization.

Lesson 3: The Aztecs

Vocabulary

mercenary a hired soldier
chinampa a human-made island
causeway a raised bridge made of land
alliance an agreement to work with others

A Mesoamerican Civilization

The Aztec civilization was the last great civilization of Mesoamerica. The Aztec economy was based on farming. The Aztecs built many great structures out of stone. They also were astronomers and developed a form of writing. They worshipped many gods. Unlike other Mesoamerican civilizations, the Aztecs built a great empire.

Early Aztec History

The Aztecs once called themselves the Mexica. At first they were just one of many Mesoamerican peoples. The Mexica sometimes served as **mercenaries**, or hired soldiers. Other times they lived under the rule of others. In the mid-1300s, the Mexica started the city of Tenochtitlan in present-day Mexico. It was built on two swampy islands in the middle of Lake Texcoco. To make more room as the city grew, the Mexica built **chinampas**, or islands. They made chinampas by piling up mud and plants in the lake. The chinampas were used as farmland. The chinampas, natural islands, and the mainland were connected by **causeways**. Causeways are raised bridges made of land. Tenochtitlan soon became a powerful city-state. The Mexica formed **alliances**, or agreements, with neighboring city-states. These alliances helped the Mexica conquer other city-states. The Mexica started calling themselves the Aztecs after their legendary homeland, Aztlán. The Aztec Empire had begun.

The Aztec Empire

At its peak, Tenochtitlan had a population of 300,000 people. The Aztecs controlled many

city-states. The population of the entire Aztec Empire may have been as many as 5 million people. The empire collected taxes from the people it conquered and became rich. The Aztecs gained such a large empire because warfare was a normal part of life for them. All young men were trained to fight in battles. Those who showed bravery in battle became famous.

Life

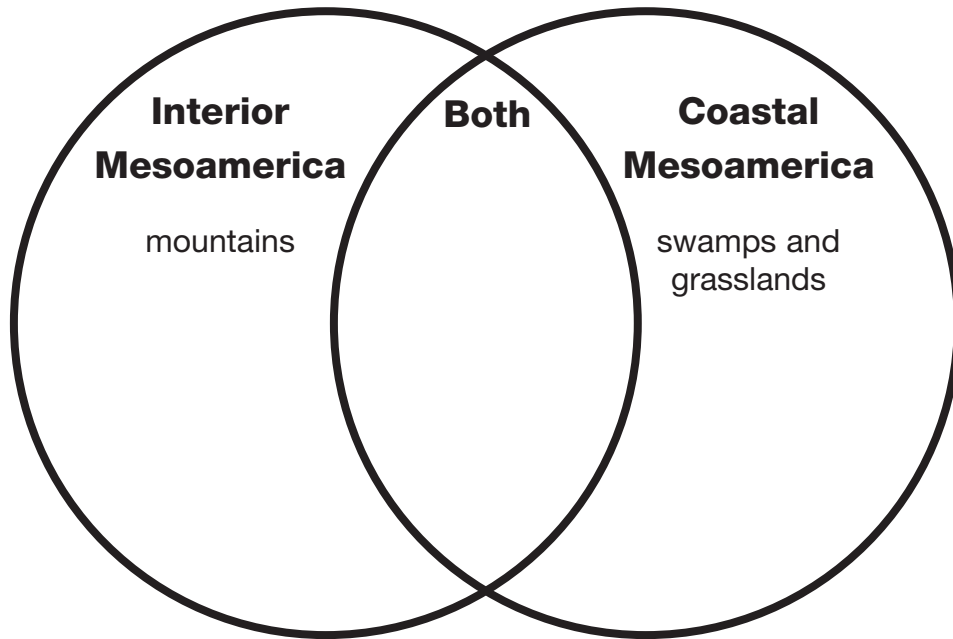
Religion was very important to Aztec life. The Aztecs worshipped hundreds of gods and goddesses. The god Quetzalcóatl was the god of creation. The Aztecs had religious ceremonies that were based on agricultural events. These events included planting and harvesting. The Aztecs performed many human sacrifices to honor their gods. The Aztecs mostly sacrificed people captured in war. Yet they sometimes sacrificed their own people.

A Violent End

The Aztecs were a conquering people. But in the end the Aztecs themselves were conquered. In 1502 Moctezuma II became emperor. For the next two decades, the Aztec Empire was at its height. In 1519 Spanish explorers led by Hernando Cortés marched into Tenochtitlan. The Aztecs did not fight him and his men at first. The Aztecs might have thought he was the god Quetzalcóatl. The Aztecs began to fight when they realized that Cortés wanted to conquer them. But they were not successful. By 1521 the Spanish had conquered the Aztec Empire.

Lesson 1: Review

1.  **Compare and Contrast** Fill in the missing comparisons.




2. Where is Mesoamerica?

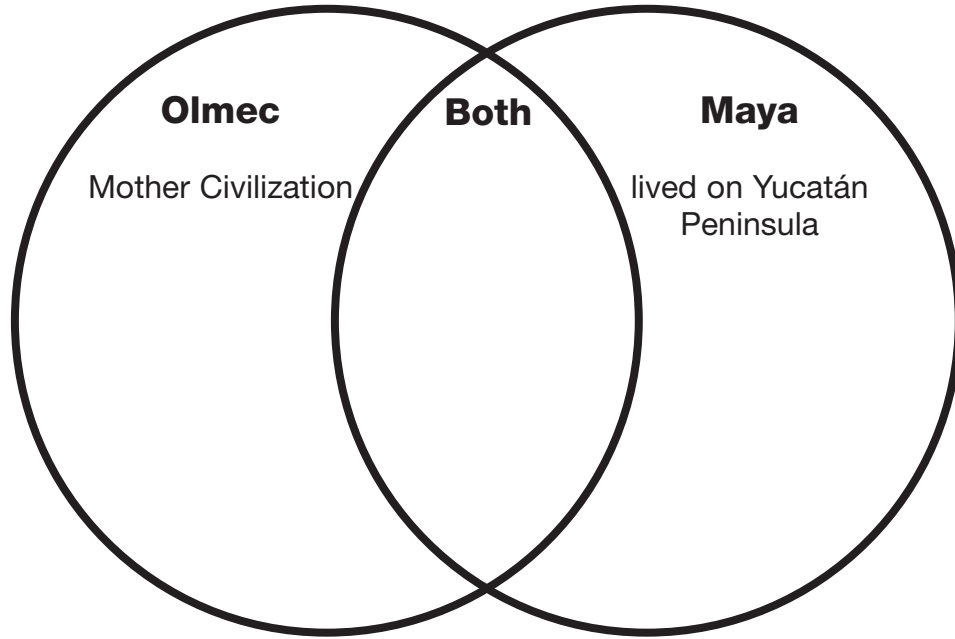
3. What were three crops the Mesoamericans grew?

4. How did the early peoples of Mesoamerica use the natural resources of the region?

5. **Critical Thinking: Make Inferences** How do you think the environments described in this lesson would influence the Mesoamerican peoples? Use the word **peninsula** in your answer.

Lesson 2: Review

1.  **Compare and Contrast** Complete the diagram to compare and contrast the Olmec and the Maya.



2. Why is the Olmec culture called a “Mother Civilization”?

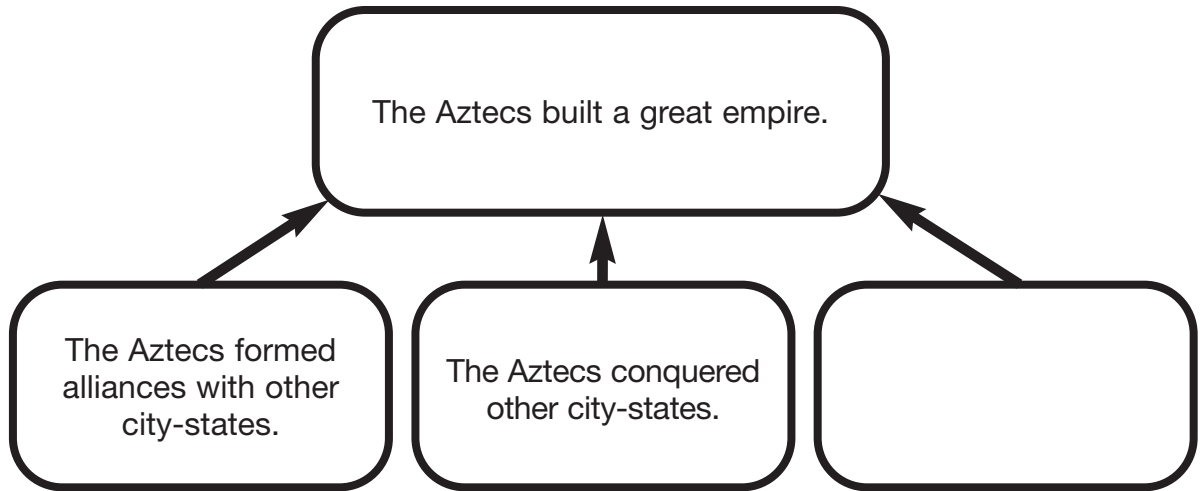
3. Why were cenotes important to the Maya?

4. How were the Olmec and Mayan civilizations organized? Use the word **theocracy** in your answer.

5. **Critical Thinking: Make Inferences** Do you think it is likely that the Olmec were the ancestors of the Maya? Why or why not?

Lesson 3: Review

1. **Main Idea and Details** Complete the diagram below.



2. What was Tenochtitlan?

3. How did the Aztecs use alliances to build their empire?

4. What became of the Aztec Empire?

5. **Critical Thinking: Make Inferences** Do you think the Aztec Empire would have continued without the arrival of the Spanish?
