

STATION 1 & THE OLMECS

The mysterious Olmec civilization prospered [succeeded] in Mesoamerica from 1200BC to 400BC. The Olmecs are considered the first of all Mesoamerican cultures including



the Maya and Aztecs. Centered in the Gulf of Mexico in present-day Mexico, their influence and trade activity spread from 1200BC, even reaching as far south as present-day Nicaragua in central America.

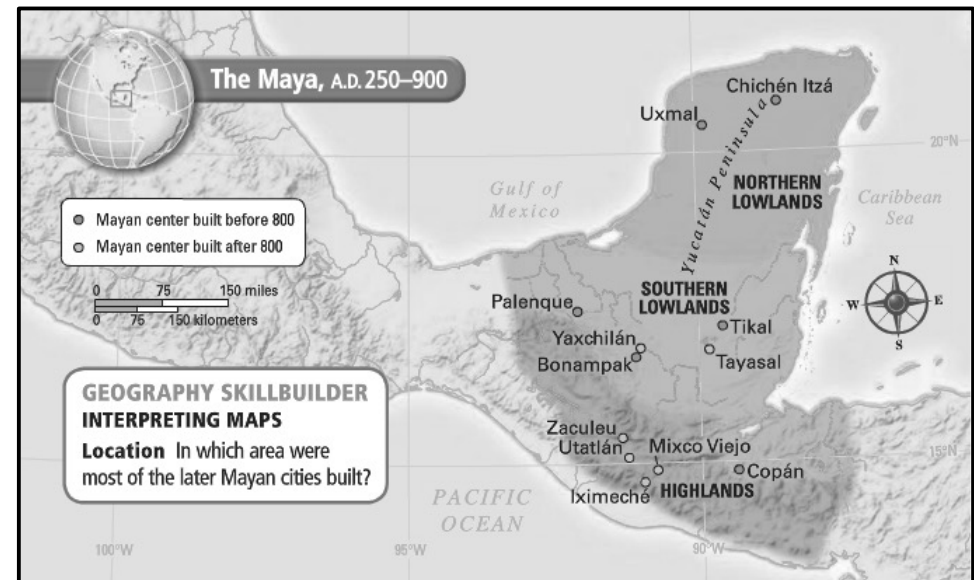
The Olmecs used a code to record their gods and religious practices using symbols. These practices, including details of priesthood, sacrifice, cave rituals, offerings, and pyramids, were passed onto other civilizations in Mesoamerica until the Spanish conquest of the 16th century.

The geography of the Olmec civilization allowed these people to prosper. They benefited from the fertile soil and well-watered coastal areas of the Gulf of Mexico and planted many crops including corn and beans which provided a surplus of food. No doubt, the Olmecs probably also survived on the local supply of plant food, palm nuts, and sea-life, including turtles and clams.

While we don't even know what the Olmecs called themselves ('Olmec' was their Aztec name and means "rubber people") and we are not sure of their ethnic origins or the location of many of their settlements, the Olmecs did leave behind many clues about their culture so that we can learn about them today.

STATION 2 & THE MAYA

The Maya consist of groups of Mesoamerican peoples who speak various forms of the Mayan language. Their culture can be traced as far back as 2000BC. Around 1500BC, the Maya began to establish villages in the highlands and lowlands of Mesoamerica. Most of their highland villages were located in what is now southern Guatemala. This mountainous region contained many minerals. In general, this area had a cool, dry climate. The lowland villages of the Maya were located in what is now northern Guatemala, Belize, and the Yucatan Peninsula in southern Mexico. The Yucatan lowlands tended to be hot and dry. Hot, humid rainforests covered the lowlands farther to the south. This area had fertile soil that was good for farming.



The development of Mayan society was similar to the development of the Olmecs. As farming thrived in the Mayan homelands, the Maya were able to grow more food. With more food, the Maya became healthier and their population grew. In time, some Mayan farming villages grew into great cities.

STATION 3 & THE



AZTECS

The Aztecs were nomadic hunter-gatherers who lived in what is now the northwest desert of Mexico. In the late 1200s, they began to move south. Eventually, they came upon the Valley of Mexico, a mountain basin about 7,500 feet above sea level.

When the Aztecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico, there was no major power in the region, but it contained a number of small city-states ruled by various peoples. These city-states held the most fertile land, so the Aztecs had to settle for what was left. A legend says that the Aztec sun and war god told them they would find a new home where they saw an eagle sitting on a cactus. In 1325, they found such a place. It was a small island in a large lake (later called Lake Texcoco). There they built the city of Tenochtitlan (teh-NOHCH-tee-TLAHN). This is the site of Mexico City today.

The Aztecs adapted their swampy environment to suit their needs, building raised garden beds on the lake to grow crops. This innovative people group would grow to boast a population between 200,000 to 400,000 people.

STATION 4 & THE INCAS

The Inca learned to live in the high and rugged terrain of the Andes Mountains in what is now Peru. They built their empire in South America around the same time the Aztecs were establishing themselves in Mesoamerica.



The central Andes are a region of geographic extremes, from tropical rain forests and fertile valleys to some of the highest mountains in the world. The Inca settled in a fertile mountain valley about 11,000 feet above sea level sometime before 1200. There they founded their capital city of Cuzco (KOOZ-koh).

The geography of the Andes made life challenging for the Inca people. Farming was difficult because much of the land was high and steep. Incan farmers had to cut flat terraces into the sides of mountains to get the most out of their land. They also developed

irrigation systems to bring water to their fields.

In fertile land areas, farmers grew crops such as corn and potatoes and raised animals. In land areas that were too cold and dry for crops, the Inca grazed llamas and alpacas, which are small animals related to the camel. They were an important source of wool and meat for the Inca civilization.

Geography of the Americas

Directions. Using each station's text and maps, complete this graphic organizer. Draw an illustration for each group below.	Where was this people group located? (include bodies of water, landforms, and climate)	What is the present-day location of this ancient civilization?	How did this civilization adapt their geographical environment to meet their needs?	What food sources did this civilization use in order to survive?
Olmecs				
Mayans				
Aztecs				
Incas				