

3.1 The Maya and the Aztecs

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Main Idea The Mayan and Aztec civilizations made important cultural contributions to Mexico.

Present-day Mexico was settled several thousand years earlier than the United States. About 11,000 years ago, Native American groups lived in the Valley of Mexico, the area around modern Mexico City. They survived by hunting and gathering plants to eat. Around 7,000 years ago, the settlers began growing maize, or corn, which was a native grass. High yields from these crops allowed the population to grow.


The Maya

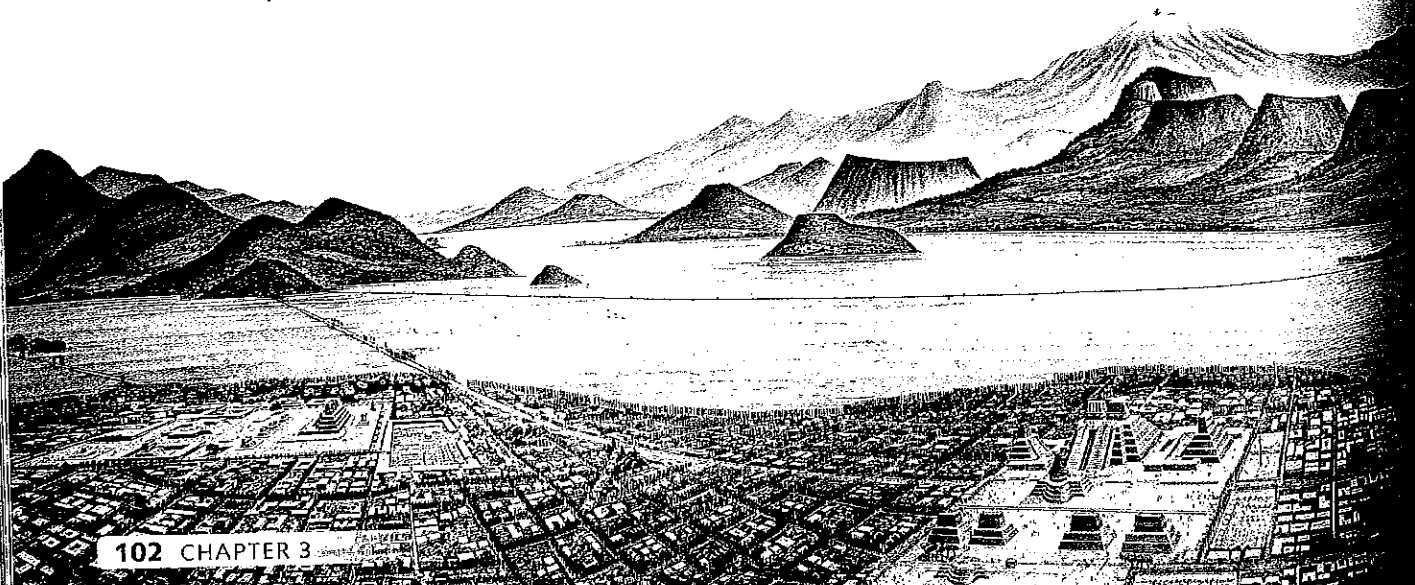
By about 1000 B.C., an organized society called the **Olmec** lived along the southern coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Their culture had a strong influence on later cultures in Mexico, such as the Maya. The **Maya** lived on the present-day Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico and in northern Central America.

Around 100 B.C., the Maya began to develop into a **civilization**, a society with highly developed culture, politics, and technology. Evidence the Maya left behind provides information about their culture, such as their system of writing.

The Maya used **hieroglyphics**, a system of writing that consisted mostly of pictures and symbols—or hieroglyphs—as characters. The recorded history they left behind in hieroglyphic paintings reveals a highly developed written language. The Maya also studied the sun, moon, stars, and planets, which allowed them to develop an accurate calendar. They used the calendar to mark dates that were important in their religion.

After about A.D. 900, Mayan civilization apparently declined. Historians do not fully understand why this happened. Possible theories include violent conflict between cities, overpopulation, or the overuse of land available for farming.

 **Critical Viewing** Tenochtitlán was built on islands within a lake. What might be an advantage of building the Aztec capital city on islands rather than on mainland?



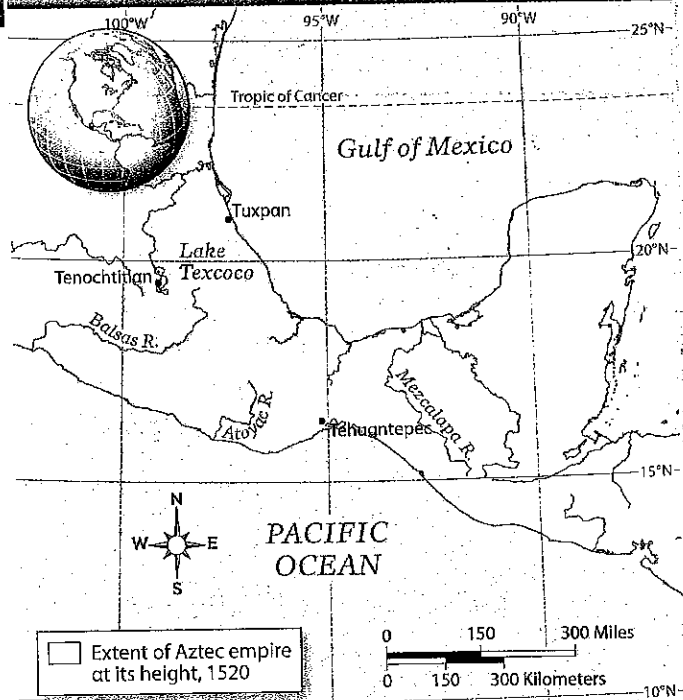
MAYA CIVILIZATION c. 900



MAYA This Maya pyramid is shaped like a cross. In Guatemala, traders and people still perform religious dances with their roots in ancient Maya culture.



AZTEC EMPIRE 1520



AZTEC This Aztec calendar stone is over 12 feet in diameter and 3 feet thick. The symbols represent names of months and numbers of days.



The Aztecs

After the Maya decline, other native groups gained power in Mexico. The dominant group was the **Aztecs**, who settled in the area of modern Mexico City around A.D. 1325. The Aztec people built a city called Tenochtitlán (teh.nohch teet LAHN) on islands in Lake Texcoco. They constructed human-made islands called *chinampas*, or “floating gardens,” on the lake to give them more area to grow food.

The Aztecs built a broad **empire**—an extensive group of peoples governed by one ruler—through military conquest of neighboring lands. They gained further power by enslaving conquered people and using their labor to build more cities. Rulers also collected **tribute**, or fees, in the form of money, crops, or other goods.

The Aztec Empire continued to thrive until Spanish explorers arrived in the 1500s, which changed life in the region.

Before You Move On

Monitor Comprehension What cultural contributions did the Maya and the Aztecs make?

ONGOING ASSESSMENT

MAP LAB

- 1. Interpret Maps** Use directional words to describe the location of the Maya and Aztecs.
- 2. Make Inferences** What might account for so little overlap in the land areas of each group?
- 3. Analyze Visuals** What does the circular shape of the Aztec calendar suggest about the Aztec idea of a year?
- 4. Summarize** How was the Aztec Empire able to gain so much power?