

CHAPTER 17

Europeans Explore a New World

“We scrambled along through the dense undergrowth, climbing over terrace walls and in bamboo thickets. . . . Suddenly we found ourselves standing in front of the ruins of two of the finest and most interesting structures in ancient America. . . . I could scarcely believe my senses as I examined the larger blocks in the lower course and estimated that they must weigh from ten to fifteen tons each. Would anyone believe what I had found? ”

—Hiram Bingham, describing
his discovery of Machu Picchu,
the lost city of the
Incas, in 1911



Reading for a Purpose

Look for these important words:

Key Words

- Mayas
- maize
- Aztecs
- Incas
- quipu

- llamas
- alpacas

People

- Pachacuti

Places

- Yucatán
- Lake Texcoco
- Tenochtitlán
- Cuzco

Look for answers to these questions:

1. What achievements in math and science were made by the Mayas?
2. How and where did the Aztecs build their capital?
3. How did a strong central government contribute to the success of the Inca Empire?

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Early Civilizations in the Americas

Indian peoples have lived in North, Central, and South America from early times. These peoples and two other groups, Europeans and Africans, are the ancestors of most people in the Western Hemisphere today.

The native peoples of North, Central, and South America developed many kinds of cultures. Some lived simply, hunting and gathering the food they needed. Many others were farmers. Some Indians lived in small groups. Others, especially in Central and South America, formed large empires. They made striking achievements in science, government, and art.

The Mayas

The **Mayas** (MAH-yuhz) were the first great native civilization of Central America. They reached the height of their achievement between A.D. 100 and 900. They lived in the part

of Central America called the **Yucatán** (yoo-kuh-TAN) peninsula. This land is mostly rain forest. Belize, southern Mexico, and part of Guatemala occupy it today.

Most of the Mayas were farmers. Their main crop was **maize** (MAYZ), which we call corn. They also grew beans, squash, peppers, and other vegetables. Flocks of turkeys added meat to their diet.

The Mayas built huge cities of stone. Each city had its own rulers. Large parts of the Mayan cities were devoted to religious worship. Temples rested atop tall pyramids. Stone masks 8 feet (2.4 m) high stood above the temple doors. The masks showed faces with narrow eyes, huge round noses, and feathered headdresses. These giant sculptures were painted in bright colors. The Mayas' love of art also showed in their pottery, feather decorations, and jade jewelry.

The Mayas associated the sun, moon, and other heavenly bodies with their gods. These religious beliefs caused the Mayas to become fine astronomers. Some Mayan buildings were both temples and places to observe the stars.

Mayan religion and astronomy also led them to invent a calendar. Their well-developed mathematics made their calendar far more accurate than those used in Europe at the time. The Mayan calendar could give correct dates for thousands of years into the past or the future. The Mayas also had a system of picture writing that is beginning to tell us more about their culture.

The Mayan civilization ended around A.D. 900. No one knows exactly why. The Mayas left their cities and never returned. The Mayan farmers, however, did not disappear. Many of

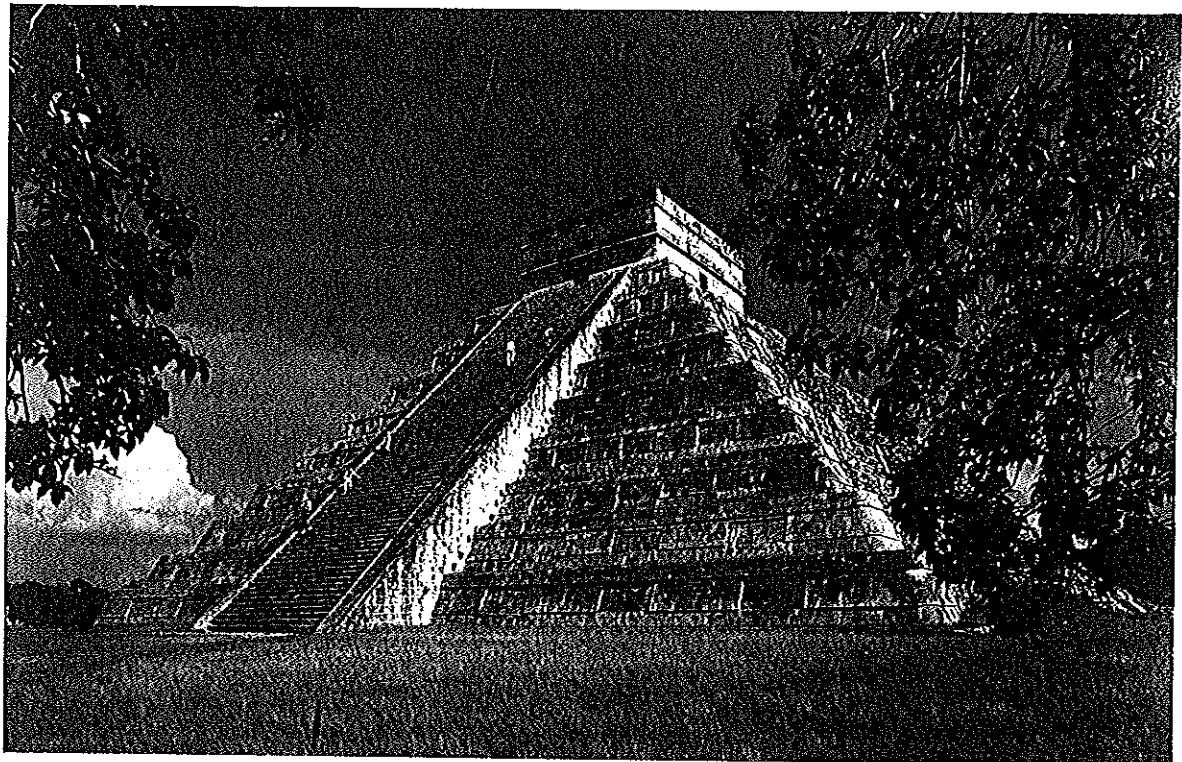
their descendants still live in parts of Central America.

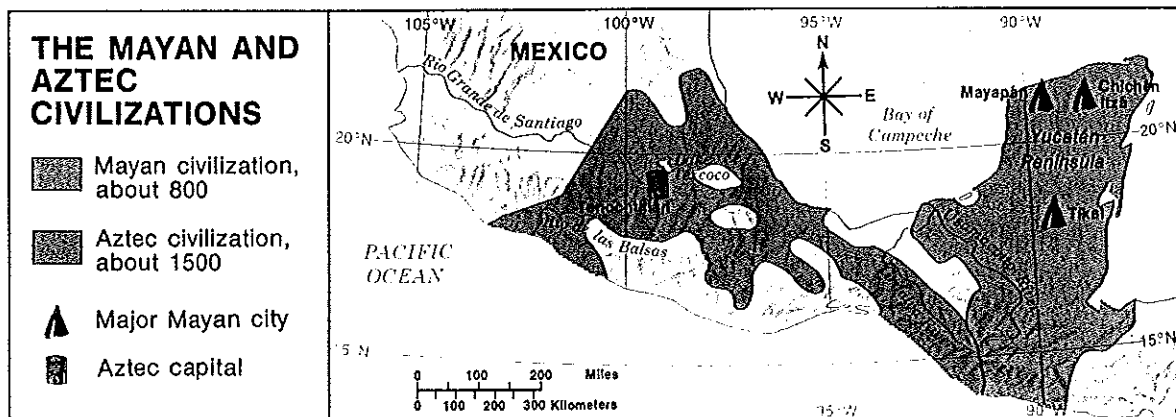
The Aztecs

The **Aztecs** of central and southern Mexico created one of the most powerful Indian civilizations in North America. They conquered much of the land that the Mayas had once ruled. The original homeland of the Aztecs may have been in northern Mexico. Around the twelfth century the Aztec people moved south into the Valley of Mexico. According to legend, their war god predicted that they would find a new home when they saw an eagle grasping a serpent in its mouth.

In 1325 the wandering Aztecs came to a marshy lake, **Lake Texcoco** (tes•KOH•koh), spread across the land.

During a period when the Mayas were ruled by the Aztecs and their allies, pyramids and temples were built at the ancient city of Chichén Itzá.





On an island in the center of the lake, the Aztec leaders saw the eagle with the snake in its beak as promised.

The Aztecs built a beautiful city on islands in the lake. They drove pillars into the soft earth and rested reed houses on them. They built four bridgelike roads across the marsh to connect the city with the mainland. They called their city **Tenochtitlán** (tay·noch·tee·TLAHN), which means "stone rising in water."

Aztec engineers built huge groups of temples and pyramids in Tenochtitlán. As Aztec power grew, priests began to make human sacrifices to the Aztec gods at the tops of the pyramids. Sometimes thousands of people, mostly war captives, were killed in single ceremonies.

Like the Mayas, the Aztecs had calendars and writing. They were wise in the use of plants as medicines. The Aztecs were also skilled metalworkers. Abundant gold and silver lay in their streams and mountains. The Aztecs made beautiful bells, earrings, and animal statues from these precious metals. When the Spanish came to Mexico, these treasures proved to be the Aztecs' downfall.

The Incas

The mountain range called the Andes curves like a backbone down the western side of South America. High in these snow-capped mountains, in the country of Peru, lies a city called **Cuzco** (KOOS·koh). Cuzco was the capital of another native civilization, that of the **Incas**.

In their own time, only the rulers of the empire were called Incas. Today we speak of their whole empire and its people as Incas. Descendants of the Incas live in Peru and Bolivia.

The Inca rulers claimed that they were children of the sun god. Legend says that they came to Cuzco around 1100. In 1438, under a strong king named **Pachacuti** (pah·chah·KVOO·tee), their power began to grow.

By the time Spanish explorers came to South America, the Inca emperors made no idle boast when they called their empire the "Four Quarters of the World." It stretched 2,500 miles (about 4,000 km) along the Andes, from southern Colombia far into Chile. It extended inland more than 300 miles (about 480 km) to include Bolivia and part of Argentina. It held about 7 million people.

To understand better the glory of the Inca empire, read what a young boy of Cuzco might have seen on a festival day at the height of the empire.

Day of the Sun

The chilly early morning was still dark, but already thousands of people thronged Cuzco's ceremonial square. They wore their finest clothes, cotton tunics and brightly dyed shawls of soft wool. On the edge of the crowd, Capac stared around him excitedly. Today the people of Cuzco would celebrate the "return of the sun."

The stone buildings of the Inca capital surrounded Capac, but he had eyes for only one: Coricancha (koh-rih-KAHN-chah), the House of Gold. He

This Inca tapestry was woven during the 1100s. It is an example of the beautifully crafted artwork of the Incas.



knew that inside this great temple, home of the sun god, the Inca was praying.

The broad strip of gold that rimmed the top of Coricancha's outer walls hinted at the beauty inside. Only the priests and priestesses of the sun and the royal family were allowed in the House of Gold. Yet Capac had heard rumors of the treasures it held. A great golden wall ran all through the building, people said. A huge disc of gold showed the sun's face. The temple's courtyard held a fantastic garden of plants and animals made from gold and silver.

Now the eastern horizon was growing lighter and lighter. Suddenly there was a gasp from thousands of throats. Capac shouted with the others as the first rays of dawn appeared. The sun was returning to its people!

A few moments later the huge doors of Coricancha opened. The Inca in all his splendor came out, carried in a litter. Capac and the others bowed to the ground.

A priest met the Inca's litter as it approached the center of the square. The priest and the Inca led the people in ceremonies to welcome the returning sun. Then the Inca went into his palace. Capac joined the crowd for a day full of parades and dancing.

Governing an Empire

The Inca rulers set up a powerful central government. The government's leaders had accurate records of everything in the empire. They knew how many men and women lived in each village, how old they were, and how much food their farms produced.

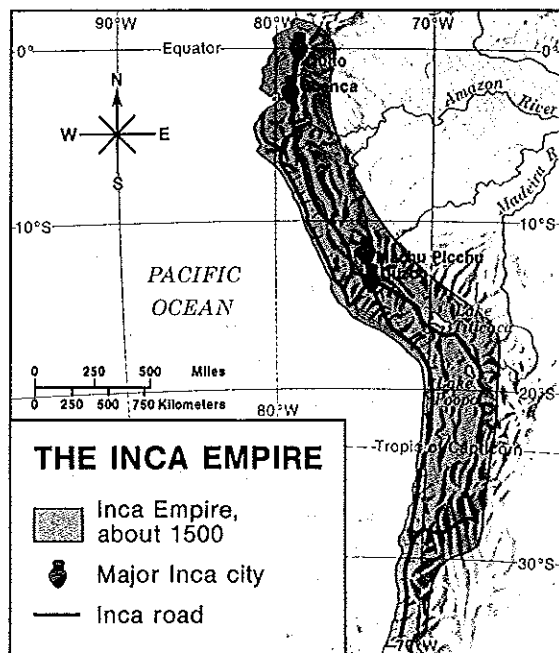
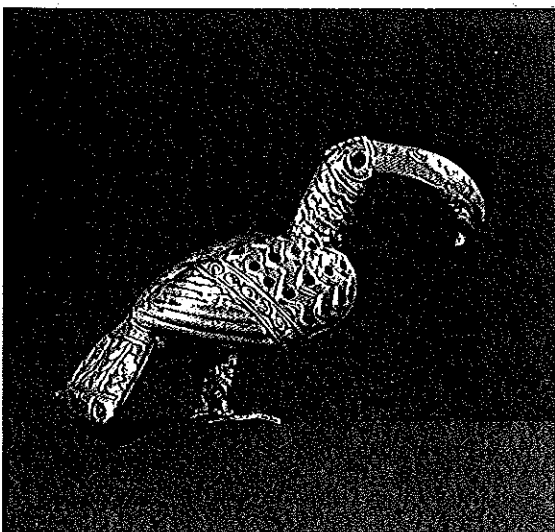
They knew how many workers could be called on to build a new temple or to fight in the army.

The Incas did not write down their records. They kept them by tying knots in colored strings called **quipu** (KEE•poo). In every Inca village one man was responsible for making quipu records for each ten families. The *quipu camayoc* (kahm•ah•YAHK), or rememberer, kept all the important records for the village. Copies were sent to the government in Cuzco. A royal storehouse contained thousands of these knotted strings.

The Incas held their empire together by constructing a system of wide, stone-paved roads. Across high mountain gorges where roads could not go, they built suspension bridges of rope cables. Some cables were as thick as a human body.

The Incas had neither horses nor wheeled vehicles. Instead, fleet-footed runners carried messages along the Inca roads. During their 15-day turns

Gold was highly prized by the Incas. From it they crafted ornamental birds and animals as well as utensils.



on duty, the runners lived in little houses beside the roads. One runner receiving a message would dash about 2 miles (3 km) to the next runner's house. The second runner continued on with the message as soon as it was received. This relay system could carry a message 150 miles (about 240 km) in a day. In time of war, soldiers could march along the roads very quickly, as well.

The people of the Inca empire were excellent farmers. They terraced the hillsides to keep the soil from washing away. Using irrigation and fertilizer, they raised abundant maize, potatoes, squash, and tropical fruits. The Incas were the first people known to cultivate the white potato.

The Inca people herded camellike animals called **llamas** (LAH•muhz) and **alpacas** (al•PAK•uhz). Inca women wove the coarse wool of the llamas and the finer wool of the alpacas into clothing. Llamas could carry fairly heavy loads.



Today as in Inca times, farmers terrace slopes of the Andes Mountains. Llamas, well-suited to the mountain air, are still used as pack animals.

When the animals died, the people used their hides and their meat.

Most of the food and clothing produced in Inca villages was given to the government. It was put in storehouses throughout the empire. Food from these storehouses fed the old, the disabled, and the helpless in each village. It fed the people of villages stricken by floods or earthquakes. It fed the conquering Inca armies. Because of this storehouse system, people almost never went hungry in the Inca Empire.

The Inca rulers expected work in return for the care they gave their people. At dawn on most days, a town crier climbed a high tower near each village and called out the orders of the day. Then the Inca people went to their tasks. Some built roads, temples, or bridges. Some went to the mines to

extract gold or silver. Others toiled in palaces or forts. Most Incas worked together in the fields or guarded the llama and alpaca herds.

Were the Inca people happy with their carefully controlled lives? No one knows. We do know, however, that when a handful of Spanish invaders captured their king and took over their empire in 1532, few Incas resisted.



Reading Check

1. Why were the Mayas interested in astronomy?
2. In which North American country did the Aztecs settle?
3. Which precious metals were used by Aztec metalworkers?

Think Beyond What do you think was the key to governing the huge Inca Empire?

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