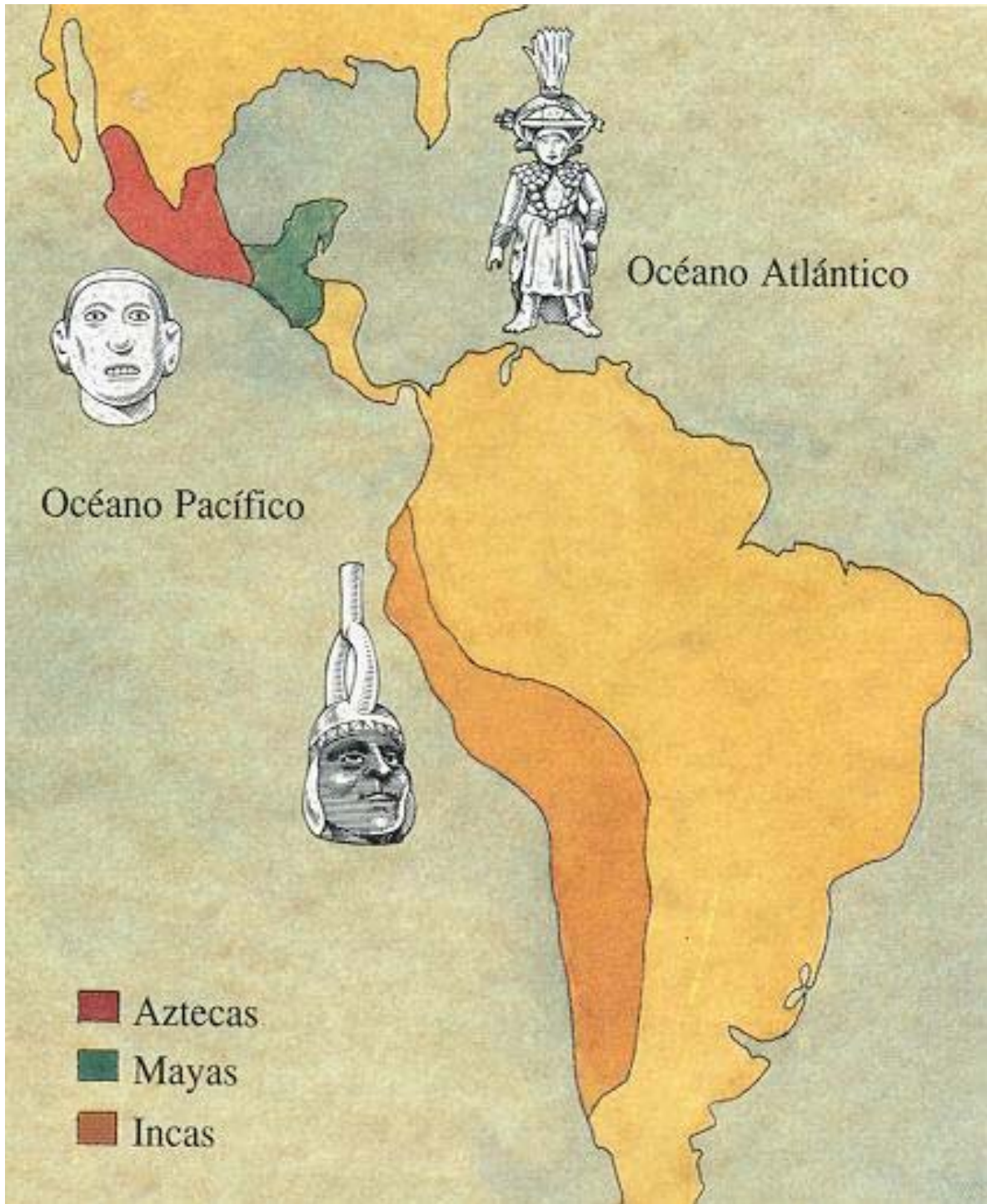


Map of Mesoamerican Civilizations



Mesoamerican Civilizations: The Mayans



The Mayans were an indigenous Mesoamerican civilization that peaked from about 300-900 CE. The bulk of the empire was centered on the Yucatan Peninsula, where modern-day Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador are located. The majority of the empire was broken up into independent city-states that were run by kings.

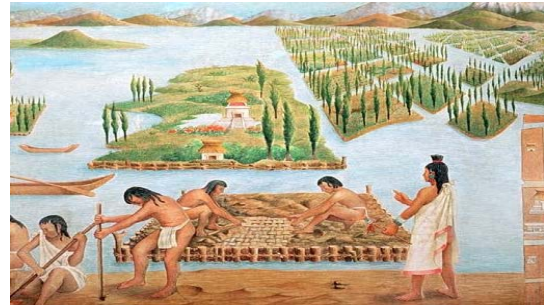
Mayan culture was centered around their polytheistic religion and the hundreds of different gods they worshipped. They believed that pleasing the gods was the key to a pleasant afterlife. Temples and pyramids were built for human sacrifice, bloodletting practices, and worship rituals to honor their gods.

The Mayans were excellent astronomers who charted the movement of the planets, moon, and sun in order to develop accurate calendars. They excelled at agriculture, pottery, and hieroglyph writing and left behind an astonishing amount of impressive architecture and symbolic artwork.

They built major cities and large stone structures, including Tikal & Chichén Itzá. The structures of Chichén Itzá still stand in Yucatan, Mexico, and they offer a glimpse into the Maya's daily life. These structures include a ruler's residence, multiple temples to various gods, and a ball court for pok-a-tok, an early form of soccer. Most of the great stone cities they built were abandoned without explanation by 900 CE, however, and scholars have debated about what might have caused this dramatic decline ever since.

Mesoamerican Civilizations:

The Aztecs



The Aztecs originated as a nomadic tribe in Central America. Legend has it that the Aztecs were marching through the deserts of Mexico to find their new home when a vision appeared, telling them to look for an eagle clutching a snake in its talons, perched on a cactus. This would be a sign from the gods that they had found their new home. After wandering for many days, the Aztecs found the sign they were looking for- but the cactus the eagle perched on was in the middle of a lake- Lake Texcoco.

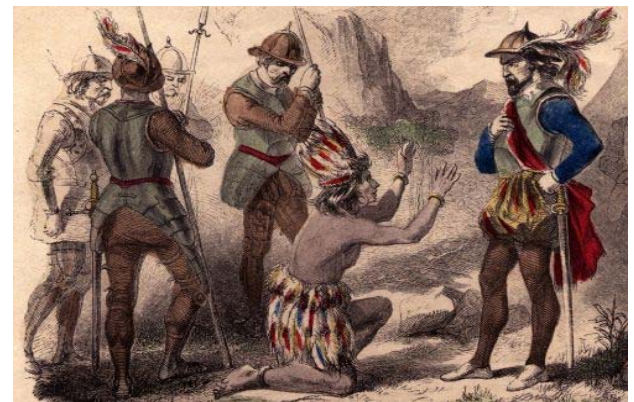
The Aztecs built their major city, Tenochtitlan, in the middle of the lake. The city was surrounded by floating islands called *chinampas*, where they grew their crops. Their economic activities were based mostly on agriculture and possessions they seized from the various groups that they conquered in war.

The Aztecs are probably best known for their exceptional warfare tactics, which helped them unify neighboring city-states and smaller tribal groups into their empire. Eventually, their culture evolved to include some of the traditions the groups they conquered had observed. For example, the Aztec polytheistic religion included ritual, religious practices and mythology that the Toltecs originally worshipped.

The empire flourished from 1200-1524 CE. The Aztec civilization had recently welcomed foreigners into their capital city, Spanish explorers led by Hernan Cortes. According to Aztec folklore, they were awaiting the reincarnation of their god Quetzalcoatl, who was supposed to return as a light-skinned human. Cortes took advantage of this belief, and collected tribes who were hostile to the Aztec to join him in conquering them. After Aztec emperor Montezuma II was taken hostage by the Spaniards, the rest of the empire died out from warfare or from diseases they contracted from the conquerors.

Mesoamerican Civilizations:

The Incas



The Inca lived in the Andes Mountains of modern-day Peru from 1400 to 1532 CE. Just like the Maya and Aztec, the Incas also worshipped many different gods, including a creator god named Viracocha and Apu Illapu, the rain god. Impressive shrines were built throughout the kingdom, including a massive Sun Temple in Cusco that measured more than 1,200 feet in circumference. They also built major cities like Machu Picchu, which still exists today in Peru.

Incan farmers modified their environment by cutting farming terraces into the steep mountainsides in order to grow crops. They developed the coca plant, used today in recipes for Coca-Cola, and complex road systems to move their crops from the terraces to markets. They were among the first civilizations to practice surgeries and mix herbal medicines. Histories, legends, and folklore were recorded in *quipus*, stringed knot necklaces whose patterns represented an alphabet and language.

The Incan empire had a strong central government, but a war between emperor Atahualpa and his brother weakened the empire severely. When the Europeans arrived in the New World, the empire could not defend itself. They were conquered by Francisco Pizarro in 1532 CE, and most of the Inca died from exposure to smallpox.