

Reader's Guide

Many American history books begin with the year 1492 and the discovery of the Caribbean Islands by Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus (1451–1506). For the great civilizations of Mesoamerica and South America, though, 1492 proved to be the beginning of the end of their civilization. The products of thousands of years of history—the great cities, the architecture, markets, governments, economic systems, legal systems, schools, books, holy shrines—even the daily prayers of the people—were about to be willfully eliminated by the conquering European nations. The rupture would prove so deep that many aspects of pre-Hispanic American culture and tradition were forever deleted from the human memory. Fortunately, some of the important history of the early civilizations has survived and more is being recovered every day.

The three-volume Early Civilizations in the Americas Reference Library provides a comprehensive overview of the history of the regions of the American continents in which two of the world's first civilizations developed: Mesoamerica (the name for the lands in which ancient civilizations arose



in Central America and Mexico) and the Andes Mountains region of South America (in present-day Peru and parts of Bolivia, northern Argentina, and Ecuador). In both regions, the history of civilization goes back thousands of years. Recent studies show that the first cities in the Americas may have arisen as early as 2600 B.C.E. in the river valleys of present-day Peru. The earliest evidence of civilization in Mesoamerica dates back to about 2000 B.C.E.

When the Spanish conquistadores (conquerors) arrived in Mesoamerica and the Andes in 1521 and 1531, respectively, they found many native societies, but they were most amazed by two great empires—the Aztecs and the Incas. In the early sixteenth century the Aztecs and the Incas had spectacular cities that could rival those of Europe in size, art and architecture, organization, and engineering. These capital cities ruled over vast empires—the Aztecs with a population of more than 15 million and the Incas with a population of about 12 million—with remarkable efficiency.

The Spaniards at that time could not have understood how many civilizations had preceded those of the Aztecs and the Incas, each one bringing its own advances to the empires they witnessed. In the Andes, many of the key ingredients of civilization were in place by 2600 B.C.E. in early urban centers. From that time forward, the Andean culture was adopted, developed, and slowly transformed by the societies of the Chavín, the Moche, the Nazca, the Wari, the Tiwanaku, and the Chimú, among many others, before the Incas rose to power. Mesoamerican civilization apparently had its roots in the early societies of the Olmecs and Zapotecs, whose ancestors were living in present-day central Mexico by 2000 B.C.E. The Mayas skillfully adopted the calendars, glyph-writing, art and architecture, astronomy, and many other aspects of these earlier civilizations, adding greatly to the mix. The people of the great city of Teotihuacán and later the Toltecs created vast empires that unified the Mesoamerican culture. Later the Aztecs created a government that encompassed all of these early civilizations.

Early Civilizations of the Americas: Almanac presents the story of this development—the dates, locations, sites, history, arts and sciences, religions, economies, governments, and eventual declines of the great ancient American civilizations. Volume 1 features an overview of ancient civilization

in general and a brief summary of modern theories about the earliest immigrants and early life in the Americas. The remainder of the volume focuses on the rise of the Andean civilization from the early urban centers to the Inca empire. Volume 2 focuses on the rise of the Mesoamerican civilizations from the Olmecs through the Aztecs.

A note about the use of the word “civilization” in these volumes. The word “civilization” is used here to convey the type of organization and the size of a society, and certainly not to make a quality judgment about whether the society was sophisticated or refined. Besides the civilizations that arose in Mesoamerica and the Andean region, there were thousands of indigenous (native) societies throughout the two American continents with varying levels of the kind of organization experts call “civilization.” The civilizations featured in *Early Civilizations in the Americas Reference Library* are the New World civilizations that developed around the same time and with some patterns similar to the first civilizations of the Old World: Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley, and China. Their history has been little known until the last century; indeed, only recent studies have included the Americas in the list of the world’s first civilizations.

Features

Early Civilizations in the Americas: Almanac contains numerous sidebar boxes that highlight people and events of special interest, and each chapter offers a list of additional sources that students can consult for more information. The material is illustrated by 192 black-and-white photographs and illustrations. Each volume begins with a timeline of important events in the history of the early American civilizations, a “Words to Know” section that introduces students to difficult or unfamiliar terms, and a “Research and Activity Ideas” section. The volumes conclude with a general bibliography and a subject index so students can easily find the people, places, and events discussed throughout *Early Civilizations in the Americas: Almanac*.

Early Civilizations in the Americas Reference Library

The two-volume *Early Civilizations in the Americas: Almanac* is one of two components of the three-volume U•X•L

Early Civilizations in the Americas Reference Library. The other title in the set is:

- ***Early Civilizations in the Americas: Biographies and Primary Sources*** (one volume) presents a collection of biographies and primary sources—both text and photographs of artifacts—that provide detailed and focused views of the people of the early American civilizations, the artifacts they left behind, and the sources upon which the history of the early American civilizations are based. The volume is divided into three chapters: the Incas, the Mayas and their Ancestors, and the Aztec Empire. Each chapter is arranged loosely by topic and chronology. The biographies include Inca emperor Pachacutec, Maya king Pacal, and Aztec emperor Montezuma II. The primary sources feature artifacts such as the Inca *quipu*, or knotted counting cords, the Maya sacred calendar, and the Aztec Sun Stone. Also included are excerpts from the memoirs and histories compiled by indigenous writers and Spanish missionaries and conquerors in the decades following the conquest.
- A cumulative index of both titles in the U•X•L Early Civilizations in the Americas Reference Library is also available.

Comments and Suggestions

We welcome your comments on *Early Civilizations in the Americas: Almanac* as well as suggestions for other topics to consider. Please write to: Editor, *Early Civilizations in the Americas: Almanac*, U•X•L, 27500 Drake Road, Farmington Hills, Michigan, 48331-3535; call toll-free: 800-877-4253; fax to 248-699-8097; or send e-mail via <http://www.gale.com>.