

## Reader's Guide

**M**any 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 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 two regions of the American continents in which two of the world's first civilizations developed: Mesoamerica (the name for the lands in which ancient civi-



lizations 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 cases, 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.

The year 1492 has traditionally been used to mark the division in the American past between history and prehistory. The historic times came after the Spanish arrived in 1492 with their writing systems and began to record events. Prehistory is defined as the time before there was writing to record history. We now know that it is incorrect to use the word “prehistory” for some of the ancient civilizations of Mesoamerica, which developed writing systems long before the Spanish arrived. But the written records left behind by the early civilizations are scarce and often difficult to decipher. Most historians also rely on evidence from the field of archaeology, the scientific recovery and study of artifacts, or objects made or used by humans of earlier times. By examining artifacts, archaeologists have been able to reconstruct parts of the daily lives of the people of early cultures. Analyzed in laboratories, artifacts can be accurately dated and provide a useful timeline for early civilizations.

Historians have accumulated many more details about the Incas, the Aztecs, and the Mayas, groups who were still around in large numbers when the Spaniards arrived, than they have for groups who lived in earlier times. We have many accounts from the conquistadores, the soldiers who overthrew the native civilizations, describing the people and their habits. We also have accounts written by indigenous (native) survivors of the Spanish conquest of the Inca empire in 1531 and the Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire in 1521. Many accounts by these survivors were narrated to Spanish missionaries who wrote them down. Some survivors, or their children in the next generation, were able to write or collect their own histories of the ancient civilizations.

The twenty-three biographical and primary source entries in *Early Civilizations in the Americas: Biographies and Primary Sources* are based on sources from all of the categories

mentioned above: the early writing systems, archaeological artifacts, Spanish accounts, and the accounts of native people who told their experiences to the Spaniards or wrote in the Spanish language.

The biographical information about people who existed before the Spanish arrived usually comes from oral traditions, the memorized stories handed down generation to generation. The story of Pachacutec, the remarkable founder of the Inca empire, for example, comes to us through hundreds of years of spoken transmission. Some of the biographies may arise from archaeological discovery, such as the biography of Pacal, the Maya king who went to great lengths to leave behind his story on an elaborate, inscribed tomb that reveals much to experts about his rule.

Primary sources from the early American civilizations are a combination of artifact and text. Included in this volume are many photographs of artifacts: from *quipus*, the knotted cord counting devices used to keep track of the vast holdings of the Inca empire, to the Maya stelae, the inscribed and sculpted stone pillars with their written histories, to the Aztec Sun Stone, a monument or time piece with hundreds of symbols, glyphs, and pictorial representations on its thirteen-foot face. To help the reader understand the writing systems of Mesoamerica, the volume includes diagrams and illustrations of glyphs, calendars, and numbering systems, and selections from the codices (painted books). The volume's textual documents are the writings of witnesses to the Spanish conquest of the American civilizations or people in direct communication with people who were there. Each primary source entry is accompanied by a detailed introduction to the source and many points for consideration or research.

**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 societies throughout the two American continents with varying levels of the kind of organization experts call “civilization.” The civilizations featured in Early Civilizations of the Americas Reference Library are the New

World civilizations that developed around the same time and with some patterns similar to those 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: Biographies and Primary Sources* is divided into three chapters: the Incas, the Mayas and their Ancestors, and the Aztec Empire. Each chapter contains both biography and primary source sections and is arranged loosely by topic and chronology. In addition, a timeline for each specific civilization is included in each chapter. Sidebar boxes that highlight people and events of special interest are sprinkled throughout the text, and each entry offers a list of additional sources that students can consult for more information. The material is illustrated by 63 black-and-white photographs and illustrations. The volume begins with a “Words to Know” section that introduces students to difficult or unfamiliar terms, and concludes 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: Biographies and Primary Sources*.

## Early Civilizations in the Americas Reference Library

*Early Civilizations in the Americas: Biographies and Primary Sources* 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: Almanac*** (two volumes) presents the story of the development of early American civilizations from the earliest known societies to the Spanish conquest—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 focus-

es on the rise of the Andean civilization from the early urban centers to the Inca empire, including the societies of the Chavín, the Moche, the Nazca, the Wari, the Tiwanaku, and the Chimú. Volume Two focuses on the rise of the Mesoamerican civilizations, including the Olmecs and Zapotecs, the people of the great city of Teotihuacán, the Toltecs, and the Aztecs.

- 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: Biographies and Primary Sources* 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>.