**LESSON 1 READING**

**THE FIRST PEOPLES**

*No one knows how farming first started. We do know that in the Americas it started in Mexico. By about 7000 B.C., people in Mexico and Central America were raising three crops—corn, beans, and squash.*

The first people to arrive in Latin America were the ancestors of today's Native Americans. They came thousands of years ago. Some settled and farmed. Eventually some groups developed advanced cultures.

**The Olmec**

The Olmec of southern Mexico built Latin America's first civilization. It lasted from about 1500 b.c. to 300 b.c. Each Olmec city focused on a certain activity and they all depended on one another. Some cities were at the heart of farming areas that grew maize (corn), squash, and beans. Others controlled valued mineral resources, such as **jade,**a shiny green stone, and **obsidian,**a hard, black volcanic glass. Some cities were religious centers, with pyramid-shaped stone temples. The Olmec traded with people hundreds of miles away. As a result, Olmec culture spread along these trade routes to other parts of Mexico and Central America.

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| How did early civilizations grow? |
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| **THE MAYA**Another civilization that grew from trade were Maya. They lived in Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula and surrounding areas from about a.d. 300 to a.d. 900. The Maya built huge stone temples in the shape of pyramids with steps. Skilled at astronomy the Maya used their knowledge of the stars, moon, and planets to develop a calendar. They also had a number system based on 20. Using **glyph**s, a form of writing that uses signs and symbols, the Maya recorded the history of their kings. About A.D. 900, Maya civilization declined. No one knows why, but the Maya left their cities.**Mayan Wealth**Why were the Maya able to develop a great civilization? The Maya grew enough food to feed their people and trade with other groups. This allowed them the wealth and time for other things. They could write about their kings or study stars.**Maya Cities**Ancient Maya cities had palaces, observatories, temple-pyramids, and ball courts built around a central plaza. The Maya knew much about the sun. They built their cities with compass directions so the sun’s rays would shine through small openings on special days of the year. At Chichén Itzá, the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent is placed to show the first days of spring and fall. Sunlight pours through the temple’s openings, lighting up the stairs and making it look like a huge snake.The largest city was Tikal with 60,000 people. Another center of Maya culture was Copán, in what is today Honduras.**Art and Religion**The Maya were talented sculptors and painters. They used symbols as backgrounds for images, such as the sun, moon, and stars. Maya artists were among the few to signed their work at the time.Many Maya artists used images of the maize god in their artwork. The cycle of the maize crop lies at the heart of Maya beliefs. The maize god was an important religious figure.Because religion was so important, religious leaders were at the top of the Maya social pyramid. Religious leaders decided where and when cities should be built. |

**THE TOLTEC AND AZTEC**

As the Mayan civilization declined, the Toltec took over what is now northern Mexico. They built the city of Tula northwest of present-day Mexico City. From Tula, they conquered lands to the Yucatán Peninsula.

Toltec rulers controlled trade. For example, they held a monopoly, or sole right, in the trade of obsidian. Obsidian glass was used to make weapons. This monopoly gave the Toltec power over other groups.

**The Aztecs**

Around a.d. 1200 the Aztec people from the north moved into central Mexico and captured Tula. They adopted Toltec culture and took control of the region’s trade. Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, was a city built on an island in a lake. It held about 250,000 people—a huge population at that time.

Tenochtitlán had huge temples, including one over 100 feet tall. Roads and bridges joined the city to the mainland, allowing the Aztec to bring food and other goods to their busy markets. Aztec farmers grew their crops on “floating gardens,” or rafts filled with mud. After a time, the rafts sank to the lake bottom and piled up, forming fertile islands farmers used to grow crops.

**Then and Now**

The Aztec built Tenochtitlán in 1325 on an island in Lake Texcoco. Later, the Spanish built their own city over the ruins of the Aztec city. Today, Tenochtitlán is part of Mexico City, the 10th largest city in the world, with a population of over 8.6 million.

**Building an Empire**

Like the Maya, the Aztec had a steady food supply that gave them more time to do other things. Aztec culture soon spread. To expand their empire, the Aztec often waged war with other groups.

War was important to the Aztec because they demanded tribute from those they conquered. Tribute was a tax that was paid in goods or services. Tribute often included food, clothing, precious stones, or feathers. People were also taken as tribute. Many were forced into slavery and used as laborers on large building projects.

By the mid-1400s, Tenochtitlán became one of the largest cities in the world. On market day the Aztec and other people met and exchanged news. They also danced, played music, and performed juggling tricks. Many beautiful items were also sold at the market.

Some historians believe the Aztec market was one of the largest in the world. This growth was achieved with the help of workers from groups the Aztec had conquered and enslaved. The Aztec were feared and hated by the survivors of the people they had conquered. In 1521 these groups joined with European invaders to conquer the Aztec.

**Then and Now**

Hernán Cortés would have seen the Aztec empire’s many temples. The Great Pyramid, or Templo Mayor, was the main temple of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. Today, Templo Mayor is a museum with eight halls exhibiting thousands of objects.

**THE INCA**

During the 1400s, the Inca had a powerful civilization centered in what is now Peru in South America. Their **empire**, or many different lands under one ruler, stretched more than 2,500 miles along the Andes. The Inca lived in environments that varied from the desert coastal lowlands to the rugged Andes mountain range.

The Inca rulers founded military posts and put in place a highly developed system of record keeping. Work crews built irrigation systems, roads, and suspension bridges that linked regions of the empire to Cuzco, the capital. You can still see the remains of magnificent fortresses and buildings erected centuries ago by the skilled builders.

**The Inca Capital**

Cuzco served as the center of government, religion, and trade. The temples and government buildings at the center of Cuzco were built of stone blocks. These blocks fit together so well that it is impossible to put a knife between them. They also can withstand earthquakes.

It was from Cuzco that the Inca leader ruled his empire. The Inca leader was an emperor, or an absolute ruler. According to Inca legend, the emperor was descended from the sun. His ancestor was Inti, the sun god. The Inca worshiped many gods, but the sun god was the most important. In fact, all Inca called themselves “Children of the Sun.”

**The Amazing Inca Farmers**

Did you know that the Inca grew more than half the foods people all over the world grow today? Among the many crops they grew were beans, potatoes, corn, squash, tomatoes, and peppers. The Inca also raised llamas for their meat and their wool. Llamas were especially helpful in carrying goods up the steep Andes.

Llamas probably helped workers build the city of Machu Picchu high in the Andes. This town was forgotten until an explorer named Hiram Gingham came across it in 1911. No one knows why Machu Picchu was built high in the Andes or why it was abandoned.