

Ancient Americas

The Aztecs

When reading about the Aztecs, you may come across the term Mexica (Me-she-ka). Mexica was the name that the Aztecs called themselves. It's also where the word Mexico—the modern day name for the country in which they lived—comes from.

Farming, Crops, Hunting, and Fishing

The capital of the Aztec world was called Tenochtitlán (Te-nosh-TEET-lan). It was built on an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco (Tesh-coco). All of the structures on the island left little room for farmers to grow their crops. Land was at a premium for housing and ceremonial structures.

To get around this, farmers created space for farming on the perimeter of the island, in the water. They created large reed mats and piled them high with mud and silt from the bottom of the lake. Compost, manure, and rotten vegetation were also mixed in.

A kind of wooden fence surrounded the mats, and trees were planted around their edges so their complex root systems would hold the soil in place. Crops were then planted on these mats with an unlimited supply of water coming from the lake. This type of manmade floating garden is called a Chinampa. Crops that were grown using this method included corn, tomatoes, potatoes, chilli peppers, and squash.

To supplement these crops in their diet, fishermen would make nets out of the Maguey cactus fibre and use them to catch fish, turtles, ducks, and frogs.

Founding of the Capital

There are many stories and myths associated with the Aztec culture, which were often created to explain interesting things about the culture and people. One of the most famous stories is about the founding of the city of Tenochtitlán.

The Aztecs were nomadic people living in small cities and villages throughout Mexico. They wanted to come together as a group to build a large capital city. But they wondered where they should build it.

Huitzilopochtli (Weet-seal-oh-POACHED-lee), a very important Aztec god, communicated with the Aztec people and told them to build Tenochtitlán, when they saw an eagle perched on a cactus with a snake in its beak.

Many years later in 1863, once Mexico had gained its independence from Spain, the symbol of the eagle, cactus, and snake became part of the country's official flag.

Language

The Aztec spoke Náhuatl, an indigenous language from which several English words originated. Here's a list of some common words that are used today.

Náhuatl	English
Tomatl	Tomato
Xocolatl	Chocolate
Chilli	Chile
Ahuacatl	Avocado
Chilpotli	Chipotle
Coyotl	Coyote
Ocelotl	Ocelot
Tamalli	Tamale
Ahuacomolli	Guacamole

Children and School

If a child was born into the nobility, they attended a school called a Calmecac. Girls and boys studied separately, and their schools were usually attached to a temple. They learned about religion, astronomy, architecture, math, and history, as well as how to rule or govern. The children had to study very hard.

The children of tradespeople attended a local school called a Telpochcalli. They learned occupational skills, good citizenship, and warfare. If a child was an excellent student, they were given the opportunity to attend the Calmecac, thereby increasing their status in society.

Disobedient Children

We can learn a little bit about how children were punished by looking at the images in the codices (books) that were made by the Aztecs and Spanish conquistadores. One shows a disobedient child being held over a fire of burning chillies and forced to inhale the smoke. Other punishments included being woken up in the middle of the night to clean, and having to lie flat on a mat for hours in the intense heat.

The Maya

While reading about the Maya people online, you may come across the terms Mayan as Mayan Civilization. This is a common error, as the term Mayan should only be used when referring to the languages of the Maya people.

Regions

The Ancient Maya lived in cities and villages that spanned a vast geographical region. They were known to occupy the modern countries of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The Maya lived in the highlands and lowlands of these countries and practiced agriculture, hunting and gathering, astronomy, crafts, religion, and politics.

Trade Goods

Trade between different groups of Maya people was an important part of their civilization. With many people spread over a large geographical area, there were opportunities for exchange between the highland and lowland groups, as well as the inland and coastal groups. Popular trade items included salt, obsidian, jade, quetzal feathers, jaguar pelts, fish, shells, cotton, and cacao. Many of these items were prized by the Maya elite and used to adorn kings and queens.

Cacao beans were ground to make a variety of chocolate drinks. Highly decorated cylindrical vessels for holding these beverages were made out of clay and used by the elites during ceremonies. They were also buried with the dead so they could be taken to the afterlife.

Cacao beans were sometimes used as currency.

Hieroglyphic Writing and the Calendar

Scientists are learning more and more about the ancient Maya people, their rulers, and the battles they fought. A lot of this information comes directly from the Maya people, who wrote things down in hieroglyphics on pottery, stone, wood, and bark.

The people who study hieroglyphs, called epigraphers, have deciphered many of these glyphs and discovered their meanings. Maya hieroglyphs are called logogram, which means that each glyph is created to either represent an object, a sound, or a combination of both.

Because of the complex nature of the glyphs, it took scientists a long time to figure out their meaning, and sometimes they translated them incorrectly. In Belize, there's an ancient city called Lamanai. When translated into English, Lamanai means "Submerged Crocodile", which is fitting since there are many crocodiles in the area; however, scientists originally translated incorrectly as "drowned insect".

Hieroglyphs also contain many important dates, including when rulers were born, died, and ascended to the throne. The Maya had two calendars to which they referred: the 260-day sacred calendar called the Tzolk'in (*zol-keen*) and the 365-day solar calendar called the Haab (*hab*).

The Maya marked time by using something called a Calendar Round made up of 3 interlocking cycles that rotated together and generated the names of the days. The first cycle was based on the 365 day solar calendar, the second was made up of 20 names, and the third was made up of 13 numbers. It took 52 years cycle through every combination on the calendar, at which point it started again.

The Inca or Inka

Regions

The very powerful Inca Empire occupied a huge part of the western coast of South America. They called themselves Tihuantinsuyu, which translates to “land of four quarters”. Their territory covered the modern countries of Peru and Bolivia, as well as parts of Ecuador, Argentina, and Chile.

Within this area, you can find deserts, mountains, jungles, and many fertile river valleys. The variation in these environments reflects to people’s diversity and suggests that the Inca were a very adaptable ruling people. They demonstrated their power by controlling a variety of cultures through their efficient administration systems. Some of the peoples whom the Inca conquered were living independently in the western valleys for thousands of years before the Inca arrived. Many of these lesser known cultures are represented in the Gardiner’s ceramics collection.

Farming, Hunting, and Irrigation

Throughout the territory of the Inca Empire, there is evidence of terraces that were created down the sides of hills and mountains. These terraces were created to maximize the amount of space available for growing crops, and helped stop erosion along the village perimeters.

The Inca also created elaborate and sophisticated irrigations systems that allowed them to control the water needed for crops, drinking, and bathing. Channels and baths can still be observed in cities like Machu Picchu.

Some of the more important crops at the time were potatoes, chilli peppers, quinoa, squash, manioc, lupin, and maize. We can perhaps thank the people of the Ancient Americas for the potato most of all—they grew thousands of different varieties!

The Inca people also fished and hunted and for their food using sling stones and bolas. Small round river stones measuring about 2-5 centimetres in diameter were placed in a sling made from braided llama fur or animal skin. The sling and stones were then swung around over the head and released in the direction of the target.

While similar, bola stones have a groove running around their circumference. Two or more stones are tied together, swung around the head, and aimed at the animal's feet when released, with the aim of tripping it. Both types of stones can be found at fortresses and villages as they were also used as weapons against approaching enemies.

Some of the animals that the Inca raised for food include the llama, alpaca, and cuy (koo-ee) or guinea pig. Llamas and alpacas were also used for carrying heavy loads, and their fur was used for weaving cloth.

Stone Masons

The Inca were incredible stone masons. Stone structures such as houses, religious centres, storage houses, and fortresses are spread throughout the Inca Empire. These structures are still some of the most incredible works of architecture to this day. The stones were cut so precisely that there was no need for cement or grout between the blocks. Some of the best examples can be found at Ollantaytambo (oh-yawn-tay-tambo), Sacsahuaman (sack- say- wo-man), Cuzco (Cooz-ko), and Machu Picchu (Ma- chew Pea-chew).

Quipu (Key-Poo)

The Inca did not have a written language, but they did use an elaborate system of strings and knots to keep track of certain things. These groups of knotted cords are known as quipus. It's believed that quipus were used to record tribute payments from conquered groups. The type of knots, cords, colours, and length of string all represented different calculations. Because quipus were made from animal and plant materials, not all have survived.

Mummies and Sacrifices

Like many other cultures, the Inca practiced sacrifice and mummification. Among the types of sacrifice performed were llama, alpaca, guinea pig, and human. Human sacrifice, which was for very special occasions, involved children and young women.

Mummification was usually reserved usually for a Sapa Inca, or someone of high status. It was practiced because the Inca believed that the body needed to stay intact in order for the soul to exist in the afterlife. The mummies were often entombed in temples and caves on sides of cliffs. During celebrations and special events, they were brought down from their tombs and paraded in the streets by their living descendants. For these events, the mummies would be dressed in new clothing and special jewellery.

Archaeologists

One way that we can learn about the Gardiner's collection is from archaeologists. But what is an archaeologist and what do they do? Archaeologists are scientists who excavate, or dig, in the ground to look for clues about the past. They search for objects that can tell us who people from the past were, where they lived, and what they ate, as well as many other fascinating things. The objects found by archaeologists are called artefacts, ecofacts, and material culture remains. Some of the tools they use include a measuring tape, a trowel, a notebook, and a screen.

Videos

Intro to Mesoamerica

Intro to Andean Cultures

What's in my Field Bag?

What does an Archaeologist Do?

Activities

Archaeology Crossword Puzzle

Count Like a Maya

Colour the Collection – Owl bottle with stirrup-spout