

Mayans, incas, and aztecs

[History](#), [Ancient History](#)



The Three Great American Cultures Central and South America is said to have been first discovered in the late fifteenth century; however, to say that the land before this time was unknown to all of humanity would be a fallacy and a great insult to the three great ancient cultures that ruled before their European conquest. The Aztecs, Incas, and Mayans were three distinct groups of people that thrived in the Americas prior to their “discovery” and all have a diversely rich background full of people, tradition, and culture.

Recorded Aztec history begins at the start of the twelfth century when the Aztec people first moved out in search of a new homeland. In 1325 they founded their new home with the creation of Tenochtitlan, a large city which is now the location of common-day Mexico City. The life of the Aztec people was multifaceted – filled with school systems, laws, clothing fashions, and traditional food. They had different scholastic buildings in place for children depending on their economic and noble rank among the people.

Noble children would attend a school called a calmecac that would teach them history, religion, and the ways to govern. Meanwhile, the common children could go to a telpochacalli where they would learn aspects of war and trade work, but if a child showed enough promise and intelligence he or she could be sent up to one of the calmecacs to prepare for a higher future career. Crime and punishment was a severe topic for Aztecs; the breaking of many of their laws resulted immediately in death, some of which included: adultery, treason, theft, drunkenness, and even cutting down a living tree.

Interestingly as well, if a commoner were to wear cotton clothing (something reserved only for nobility) they too would be put to death. Nobles dressed most lavishly among their people, opting for the brightest colors, and often used bird feathers to make headdresses that indicate their high status. The staple food for the Aztecs was corn. They also ate tomatoes, avocados, and tamales. Aztecs ruled for hundreds of years up until their peak in 1502 under their ruler Moctezuma II. The Spanish first arrived in 1519 with the conquistador Hernando Cortez, and by 1522 all the Aztecs once celebrated in Tenochtitlan was destroyed.

Toward the south during the same time as the Aztec people, the Incas were also in their peak from 1200 until 1535. They lived in what is now Peru and Chile, and before their fall had massed the largest Native American society. Part of the reasoning behind why the Incas became such a large tribe comes from their dominance in battle and their desire to conquer the neighboring tribes. During their peak, the Incan army had over forty thousand troops, patrolling in their lands. Living in the Andes mountain range also made for some interesting architecture.

The Incas made large fortresses on the sides of steep mountains in order to protect their people and also see enemies if they were attacking from afar. Arranged as they were on the sides of mountains, Incan cities lead themselves to be hierarchically and religiously symbolic. The tallest point of their cities were reserved for religious practices, often in adoration for their sun god. Along with their buildings, the Incas had advanced drainage systems

used for irrigation to grow many of the crops the Aztecs did such as tomatoes, corn, cocoa, and cotton.

Sadly the Incans shared more with the Aztecs than just their mutual crops; in 1535 they too were conquered by Spanish forces. While the Aztecs and Incas had much in common, perhaps the most different of the three great American societies were the Mayans found in the southern tip of common day Mexico and Guatemala. Unlike their neighbors to the north and south, the Mayans did not govern its people under a single ruler. Instead, the Mayans were comprised of smaller local city-states that ruled independently of one another. Each had its own ruler that was believed to be a descendant of the gods.

But while they were independently ruled, the city-states all shared a common written language, religious beliefs, and a calendar system. The Mayans are the only known Native American culture that developed a written language, of which there are four existing books along with countless murals and wall writings. Much like the Aztecs and Incas, the Mayans practiced human sacrifices. Because they believed that their nobility were decedents of the gods, it was customary for a city-state's ruler to partake in ritual bloodletting along with sacrificing rival neighboring nobles.

They also followed their ritual calendar that was comprised of a thirteen month and twenty day cycle. It marked the passing of planets, stars, and allowed the people to know when the proper time was to plant and harvest. Perhaps these calendars helped them predict other things as well because unlike the Aztecs and Incas, the Mayans were never conquered by Spain

because of their mysterious disappearance around the sixteenth century.

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