



LOCATION Which civilization was located farthest south?

The Olmec and the Maya

Over time, groups began to form civilizations. A **civilization** is a group of people with ways of life, religion, and learning. With a more settled way of life, some civilizations built large cities that became centers of learning, religion, and government.

The Olmec Civilization

The Olmec civilization was one of the earliest in the Americas. From about 1500 B.C. to A.D. 300, the Olmec ruled most of what is now southern Mexico.

The oldest Olmec city that scientists have discovered is **San Lorenzo**. Like

many Olmec cities, it is located near a river. The Olmec used rivers to travel between cities and build a trade system. Olmec artifacts have been found across Mexico.

A strong trade system was just one achievement of the Olmec. They also created systems of writing and counting. These systems helped the Olmec develop a 365-day calendar.

No one is sure why the Olmec fell from power, but we know that they influenced other cultures. Today, some historians call the Olmec the “mother culture” of the Americas. That is because many Olmec customs, or ways of doing things, were continued in later civilizations.

The Mayan Civilization

The Mayan civilization was influenced by Olmec traditions. A **tradition** is a way of life or an idea that has been handed down from the past. Between A.D. 300 and A.D. 900, the Maya ruled much of what is now southern Mexico, Guatemala, and northern Belize.

Like the Olmec, the Maya developed their own writing system. This allowed them to record their history. Their writing system was based on hieroglyphs (HY•ruh•glifs), or picture symbols. The Maya also developed a counting system that included the number zero.

The Maya were divided into social classes. A **class** is a group of people in a society who have something in common. At the top of Mayan society were the

religious leaders. Then came important families, traders, and farmers.

Mayan civilization had no central government. Instead, powerful kings ruled cities and controlled the surrounding areas. The Maya built more than 100 stone cities. The largest was **Tikal** (tih•KAHL), which had as many as 100,000 people. The city of **Copán** (koh•PAHN) was a center of learning and art.

Scientists are not sure why the Mayan civilization fell. Some scientists blame a series of droughts, or long periods with little or no rain. However, even after the Maya fell from power, their cultural influence continued.

READING CHECK ☆ **COMPARE AND CONTRAST**
How were the Mayan and Olmec civilizations alike?

► **MAYAN RUINS** are visited by thousands of people every year. Some places allow visitors to climb to the top of stone pyramids.

