

4.1

Civilizations of Middle America

As a Young Historian, I will be able to...

- Explain when and where people first settled the Americas.
- Analyze the rise of the Olmec civilization.
- Describe the major developments of the Maya and Aztec civilizations.
- Explain how prior civilizations influenced the Maya and Aztec.

Land Bridges to a New Land

The background of the slide is a collage of ancient stone carvings. The top right shows a grid of circular motifs. The bottom left features a large carving of a seated figure. The bottom right has a carving of a person on a horse. The carvings are in a warm, brownish-gold tone.

Scholars disagree how people came to the American continents

Some believe that Paleolithic people came to North America from Asia during the Ice Age

They came across a land bridge of ice & exposed earth between Siberia & Alaska

People might have followed Mammoths in the region, helping lead to mass extinctions



Other ideas

Some believe they came via boats to fish along the coast lines of the continent

Some people believe they were always here since the dawn of time

People in the Americas had to face a land of rivers, mountains, deserts, jungles, & wild temperature changes

Neolithic people began to cultivate beans, sweet potatoes, peppers, & [maize](#)- corn

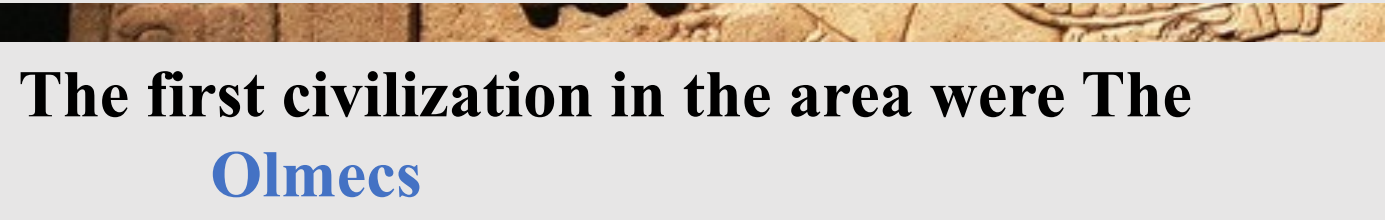
The Olmecs

Soon people began to domesticate animals such as llamas for wool, villages grew, & cities developed

The first civilization in the area were The Olmecs

We know very little about these people, even their names (Aztecs called them Olmecs)

They developed temples & tombs rather than large cities





Olmec Influence

The Olmecs build large pyramid temples, made jade figurines, & famous giant statue heads

The artwork of the Olmecs would go on to inspire future Mesoamerican populations

Olmec trade would scatter across the continent influencing the Aztec & Maya

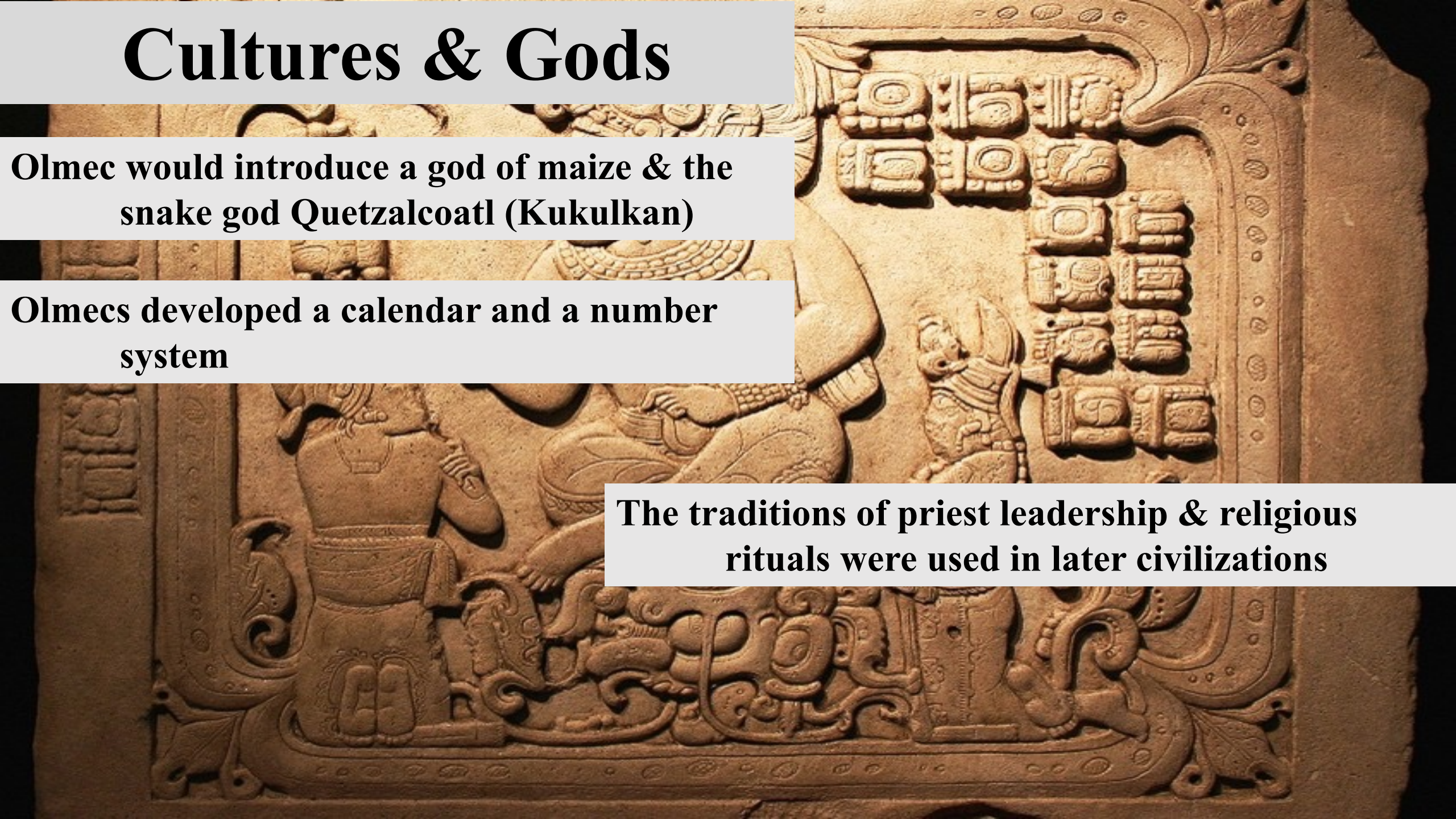
Olmec people even invented a type of ball game that used a heavy rubber ball

Cultures & Gods

Olmec would introduce a god of maize & the snake god Quetzalcoatl (Kukulcan)

Olmecs developed a calendar and a number system

The traditions of priest leadership & religious rituals were used in later civilizations





The Maya

The Maya civilization built large cities such as El Mirador in Guatemala & flourished in the Yucatan Peninsula

The Maya began **slash & burn agriculture**- The cutting down of forests, burning the remains to create farmland

They also developed raised lifts to lift crops out of the annual floodwaters

They never formed an empire, just a collection of small city-states in the region

The Maya

The background of the slide is a detailed stone relief carving from a Maya site. It features a central figure, likely a ruler, depicted in a seated or standing pose with elaborate headdress and jewelry. To the right of the figure is a large, rectangular grid containing numerous hieroglyphs, organized in rows and columns. The carving is set within a decorative frame. The overall color is a warm, aged stone tone.

City-states would maintain contact via economic exchange via the sea or packed earth roads

Women sometimes ruled or maintained leadership in the name of a young son

Most of the Maya were farmers who paid taxes on food & worked on construction projects

Some cities had slave workers who were commoners captured in war

Mayan Culture

Mayans followed a polytheistic religion which included belief that each person's soul is associated with an animal

Palaces & temples served as town centers for rulers & priests to perform rituals

Stela- Tall stone monuments preserving the images of ruler, warriors, & gods

Mayans created a hieroglyphic writing system & books made from bark paper

Astronomy & Decline

The background of the slide is a collage of Mayan stone carvings. The top right shows a close-up of a carved panel with a grid of symbols, possibly a calendar. The bottom left shows a larger carving of a seated figure, likely a deity or ruler, surrounded by intricate patterns and other figures.

Mayans developed astrology & the study of stars, believed the heavens influence humans

They developed a 365-solar calendar & a 260-day religious calendar

Soon the cities would decline & by the time Spain arrived most Mayans were farmers

About 2 million Maya survive in Guatemala & Southern Mexico today

The Aztec

Valley of Mexico- The highest plateau of central Mexico

1325 Aztecs found the city of **Tenochtitlan**, sought for a sign of an eagle eating a snake on a cactus

Built on a swampy island in Lake Texcoco,
Mexico city built there today

Chinampas- artificial islands made of mud
piled on reed mats & anchored to the
lake bed. Used for agriculture



Aztec Empire

Using fierce conquest & alliances, Aztec empire ruled across Mexico with 5-6 million people

Tribute- Payment from conquered people, helped enrich the Aztec capital

City was made up of floating gardens, zoos, palaces, becoming a city of wonder

Aztec had one ruler & a strong social class system for the empire



The background of the slide features several intricate stone carvings from Aztec culture. On the left, there is a vertical column of carved figures. In the upper center, a figure is depicted within a niche. To the right, a large carving shows a figure, possibly a deity, with a prominent headdress and a long, flowing skirt, standing next to a large, stylized feathered serpent. The carvings are set into a light-colored stone surface.

Religion & Mythology

Aztecs believed in many gods, but patron god was Huitzilopochtli

Aztecs also worshiped Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, who ruled over earth & water

Teotihuacan- Massive city built to worship the gods at the Pyramid of the Sun & Pyramid of the Moon

Believed the gods created the world multiple times & offered human sacrifices

Knowledge & Discontent

The background of the slide is a collage of Aztec stone carvings. The top right shows a large, rectangular carved panel with a grid of circular and rectangular motifs. The bottom left shows a carved figure of a person in a dynamic pose, possibly a deity or warrior, surrounded by intricate patterns. The bottom right shows a carved panel with a grid of circular motifs, similar to the top right panel.

Priests were the keepers of knowledge & used knowledge of astronomy & mathematics to tell the future

Built a math system based on 20 & developed a 260 AND 365 calendar systems

Believed illness was a punishment from gods, but still developed major medicines

The hatred that other tribes had towards the Aztecs would help Spain conquer the region