GUIDE TO READING

The BIG Idea
Order and Security The Maya, Aztec, and Inca developed sophisticated civilizations in Mesoamerica and South America.

Content Vocabulary
- tribute (p. 147) - quipu (p. 149)

Academic Vocabulary
- major (p. 144) - region (p. 146)

People and Places
- Mesoamerica (p. 144) - Tenochtitlán (p. 147)
- Yucatán Peninsula (p. 144) - Inca (p. 148)
- Maya (p. 144) - Pachacuti (p. 148)
- Toltec (p. 146) - Ecuador (p. 148)
- Aztec (p. 147) - Cuzco (p. 149)
- Machu Picchu (p. 149)

Reading Strategy
**Summarizing Information** As you read, create a separate chart, like the one shown here, for each of the cultures discussed in this section.

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<th>People</th>
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<tr>
<td>Location</td>
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<td>Religion</td>
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<td>Architecture</td>
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<td>Year/Reason Declined</td>
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Early Civilizations in Mesoamerica

**MAIN IDEA** The Maya and the Toltec ruled Mesoamerica for nearly nine centuries.

**HISTORY & YOU** How would dividing each year into 18 months affect you? Read to learn about the Maya calendar.

The Americas make up an enormous land area, stretching about 9,000 miles (more than 14,000 km) from the Arctic Ocean in the north to Cape Horn at the tip of South America. Over this vast area are many different landscapes: ice-covered lands, dense forests, fertile river valleys ideal for hunting and farming, coastlines for fishing, lush tropical forests, and hot deserts. The peoples of both North and South America created a remarkable number of different cultures. In North America, the Inuit, Mound Builders, Anasazi, Plains Indians, and Iroquois all developed flourishing societies that responded in their own unique ways to the environmental conditions that they faced. The same holds true for the inhabitants of Mesoamerica.

**The Maya and the Toltec**

Signs of civilization in **Mesoamerica**—a name we use for areas of Mexico and Central America that were civilized before the Spaniards arrived—appeared around 1200 B.C. with the Olmec. Located in the hot and swampy lowlands along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico south of Veracruz, the Olmec peoples farmed along the muddy riverbanks in the area. The Olmec had large cities that were centers for their religious rituals. Around 400 B.C., the Olmec civilization declined and eventually collapsed.

Later, on the **Yucatán Peninsula**, a **major** civilization arose—that of the **Maya**, which flourished between A.D. 300 and 900. It was one of the most sophisticated civilizations in the Americas. The Maya built splendid temples and pyramids and developed a complicated calendar. Maya civilization came to include much of Central America and southern Mexico.
Maya cities were built around a central pyramid topped by a shrine to the gods. Nearby were other temples, palaces, and a sacred ball court. Some scholars believe that urban centers such as Tikal (in present-day Guatemala) may have had as many as 100,000 inhabitants.

Maya civilization was composed of city-states, each governed by a hereditary ruling class. These Maya city-states were often at war with each other. Ordinary soldiers who were captured in battle became slaves. Captured nobles and war leaders were used for human sacrifice.

Rulers of the Maya city-states claimed to be descended from the gods. The Maya rulers were helped by nobles and a class of scribes who may also have been priests. Maya society also included townspeople who were skilled artisans, officials, and merchants. Most of the Maya people were peasant farmers.

Crucial to Maya civilization was its belief that all of life was in the hands of the divine powers. The name of their supreme god was Itzamna (eet•SAWM•nuh) or "Lizard House." Gods were ranked in order of importance. Some, like the jaguar god of night, were evil rather than good.

Like other ancient civilizations in Mesoamerica, the Maya practiced human sacrifice as a way to appease the gods. Human sacrifices were also used for special ceremonial occasions. When a male heir was presented to the throne, war captives were tortured and then beheaded. In A.D. 790, one Maya ruler took his troops into battle to gain prisoners for a celebration honoring his son.

The Maya created a sophisticated writing system based on hieroglyphs, or pictures. Maya hieroglyphs remained a mystery to scholars for centuries. Then, modern investigators discovered that many passages contained symbols that recorded dates in the Maya calendar known as the Long Count. This calendar was based on a belief in cycles of creation and destruction. According to the Maya, our present world was created in 3114 B.C.
The world is scheduled to complete its downward cycle on December 23, 2012. The Maya used two different systems for measuring time. One was based on a solar calendar of 365 days, divided into 18 months of 20 days each, with an extra 5 days at the end. The other system was based on a sacred calendar of 260 days divided into 13 weeks of 20 days. Only trained priests could read and use this calendar to foretell the future and know the omens associated with each day.

The Maya civilization in the central Yucatán Peninsula eventually began to decline. Explanations for the decline include invasion, internal revolt, or a natural disaster such as a volcanic eruption. A more recent theory is that overuse of the land led to reduced crop yields. Whatever the case, Maya cities were abandoned and covered by dense jungle growth. They were not rediscovered until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As the Maya civilization declined, new peoples rose to prominence in the central part of Mexico. Most significant were the Toltec. The Toltec Empire reached its high point between A.D. 950 and 1150. The capital of the Toltec Empire was at Tula, built on a high ridge northwest of present-day Mexico City. The Toltec had a flourishing agriculture, which enabled Tula to support a population of between 40,000 to 60,000 people. Another 60,000 people lived in the surrounding territory. The city itself was between 5 and 6 square miles (13 to 16 sq. km). The Toltec were a fierce and warlike people who extended their conquests into the Maya lands of Guatemala and the northern Yucatán.

The Toltec were also builders who constructed pyramids and palaces. They brought metalworking to Mesoamerica and were the first people in the region to work in gold, silver, and copper.

They controlled the upper Yucatán Peninsula from another capital at Chichén Itzá for several centuries, beginning around A.D. 900. The Toltec Empire began to decline around A.D. 1125 as a result of fighting.