# Table of Contents

Why Study Cultures? .................................................. 2

**Traditions**

Family and Weddings ............................................. 3

**Folklore & Language**

The Virgin of Guadalupe .......................................... 7

**Food**

The Flavor of Mexico ............................................. 10

**Cross-cultural Contributions**

Ancient Civilizations ........................................... 14

**Reference Material**

Facts about Mexico ............................................. 18
History and Holidays ........................................... 19
Additional Resources ........................................... 21
Visuals ............................................................. 23
Despite the stereotypical view that Mexico is and always has been a rural and underdeveloped nation, historically it was one of the world’s great empires. Mexico’s ancient civilizations rivaled the Roman Empire in size. Today, Mexicans are proud of their indigenous history and their cultural identity.

Starting Points

1. Make a list of what you see as the five most powerful or influential civilizations of all time. Are there any ancient civilizations of Mexico on your list? Many people do not necessarily think of Mexico as the home of great empires, but the ancient Olmec [ohl-mek] empire, the city of Teotihuacán [teh-oh-tee-wah-cahn], and the Aztec empire that occupied the area prior to the European conquest rivaled ancient Greece and Rome in their size, power, and continuing influence on modern life.

2. Have you heard the legend of Tenochtitlán [ten-oh-ch-tee-tlan]? It has been told for over two thousand years. How do you think most legends are passed down? How will legends be passed down in the future? As you hear the legend of Tenochtitlán, write down reasons why you think this legend has influenced so many lives over the years.

3. What do you know about Mexican culture? Are you familiar with their fiestas or with their religious practices? What factors do you think contribute to the many aspects of the culture? The blending of indigenous and Spanish cultures has helped produce a unique cultural identity.

Information

Ancient Empires
Throughout the course of history, many civilizations have inhabited the region that is present-day Mexico (see Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 1). The three most prominent civilizations were the Olmecs, the mysterious settlers of Teotihuacán, and the Aztecs. The Olmec civilization began around 2000 B.C.E. The city of Teotihuacán was founded around 200 B.C.E. Mexico’s last great pre-Columbian civilization, the Aztec empire, began with the construction of the city of Tenochtitlán in 1325 C.E. over Lake Texcoco [teks-koh-koh].

The Olmecs were the first of Mexico’s ancient civilizations. They are noted for their colossal stone sculptures and complex calendar system, which was later used by the Mayans and the Aztecs (see Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 2). The Olmecs, who originated in what we now call the state of Veracruz [Vair-ah-croose], flourished between 1200 and 400 B.C.E.
The Olmecs constructed ceremonial cities with pyramids and temples built from mud and stone. The precision and exactness with which the pyramids were constructed is amazing, considering the lack of modern tools used to construct them—ancient Mexicans did not even use the wheel. The pyramids in Mexico were symbolic and sometimes used as burial places for important leaders.

The Olmecs were artistic pioneers as well. They produced jade statues and were probably the first muralists and cave painters in Mexico. Typical Olmec art features warriors and jaguars. The Olmecs believed themselves to be descendants of the jaguar and held the animal in high religious esteem.

The site of the ancient city Teotihuacán, about twenty-five miles northeast of present-day Mexico City, is home to the ruins of the largest pre-Columbian city in the Western Hemisphere (see Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 3). The origin of the ancient inhabitants of Teotihuacán is unknown. However, the great civilization of Teotihuacán is believed to have started around 200 B.C.E. It developed into an important city in the first century C.E. and flourished until about 650 C.E. At its peak, it covered about eight square miles and had a population of as many as two hundred thousand people. Its noteworthy monuments include the Pyramid of the Sun, one of the largest structures ever built by Native Americans; the Pyramid of the Moon; and the Avenue of the Dead, a broad thoroughfare flanked by the ruins of temples (see Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 4 and 5). The people of Teotihuacán had close contact with the Mayan culture of Guatemala and Yucatán, and their civilization had an important influence on later Mexican peoples such as the Aztecs.

According to their legends, the Aztecs originated from a place called Aztlán [ahst-lahn], somewhere in northern or northwestern Mexico. At that time, the Aztecs (who referred to themselves as the Mexica [meh-hee-cah] or Tenochca [ten-oh-ch-cah]) were a nomadic tribe living in the margins of civilized Mesoamerica. This tribe spoke Nahuatl [nah-wah-tahl], a language that some people in Mexico still speak today.

Some time in the twelfth century, the Aztecs embarked on a period of migration and settled in the central basin of Mexico in 1325 C.E. The story of this Aztec settlement is known as the Legend of Tenochtitlán. The word “aztec” today is used as a collective term and applies to all the peoples linked to these original Aztec founders by trade, custom, religion, and language.

Fearless warriors and pragmatic builders, the Aztecs created an empire during the fifteenth century that was surpassed in the Americas only by that of the Incas in Peru. Early texts and modern archaeology reveal that the Aztecs contributed many positive achievements in addition to their conquests and religious practices. The Aztecs’ simple lifestyle and seemingly limited understanding of advanced scientific and mathematical concepts make their civilization even more remarkable.

**The Legend of Tenochtitlán**

Legend says that the traditions and customs of the Aztecs were different from other tribes, and they longed to live in a land that they could call their own. The chief god of the Aztecs was named Huitzilopochtli [weet-see-loh-poch-tlee]. One day Huitzilopochtli revealed to the tribe a place where they could live in peace. He
showed the Aztecs a large lake with an island in the middle where a prickly pear cactus grew. An eagle was perched on top of the cactus with a live snake in its mouth (see Flag of Mexico). Huitzilopochtli told the Aztecs that this island was the place in which they could live in peace.

After many years of wandering, the Aztecs found the place that their god had shown them in the vision: a small swampy island in Lake Texcoco. There the Aztecs built the great city of Tenochtitlán, meaning “The Place of the Prickly Pear Cactus.”

Tenochtitlán was the capital city of the great Aztec empire for hundreds of years until Hernán Cortéz and the Spaniards conquered it during the sixteenth century. Today the city is known as Mexico City. It is the capital of Mexico and one of the largest cities in the world (see Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 6). The Mexican flag displays the symbol of the ancient Aztec legend of the founding of Tenochtitlán. It bears the emblem of the eagle with a snake in its beak perched on top of the prickly pear cactus.

Activities

1. Most of what we know about the ancient civilizations of Mexico comes from archaeological discoveries. Create your own ancient Mexican artifacts, such as a plaster tablet or a small pyramid made from paper or blocks. Swap artifacts and try to decipher cultural information from them. If time and materials permit, break and bury the artifacts and have the other groups excavate the “ruin.” Then analyze their discoveries.

2. Research and write about how ancient indigenous cultures have influenced aspects of modern Mexico such as government, religion, or art. Draw conclusions and support them with concrete examples.

3. Watch a video on the ancient civilizations of Mexico (see Additional Resources).

4. Write about a significant contribution from an ancient civilization that benefits you today. Then write about what contributions your society is making that will benefit future generations. Present and discuss your ideas in a small group and create a visual display to share with others.

5. Build a paper maché pyramid like the ancient pyramids of Mexico. Decorate it with paint to look like those made by the Aztecs, the Olmecs, or the people of Teotihuacán.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you think some of the ancient Mesoamerican empires have influenced modern Mexican culture?

2. To what do you attribute the success of the construction of the pyramids?

3. How does learning about ancient civilizations in Mexico affect our perception of Mexico today?

4. How do you think archaeological discoveries have affected Mexicans’ perceptions of themselves and their culture?
5. What are specific characteristics of each ancient civilization discussed in this section that are unique to their society? Are there any similar characteristics?

6. What factors do you think make a society great? Do you think technology is a beneficial or constraining factor when building an empire? Explain your answers.
**Facts about Mexico**

**Official Name:** Estados Unidos Mexicanos (United Mexican States)  
**Capital:** Mexico Distrito Federal (Mexico City)  
**Government Type:** federal republic  
**Area:** 1,972,550 sq km  
**Land Boundaries:** Belize 250 km; Guatemala 962 km; United States 3,141 km  
**Climate:** varies from tropical to desert  
**Terrain:** high, rugged mountains; low coastal plains; high plateaus; desert  
**Lowest Point:** Laguna Salada –10 m  
**Highest Point:** Volcán Pico de Orizaba 5,700 m  
**Natural Resources:** petroleum, silver, copper, gold, lead, zinc, natural gas, and timber  
**Natural Hazards:** tsunamis along the Pacific coast; volcanoes and destructive earthquakes in the center and south; and hurricanes on the Pacific, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean coasts  
**Population:** 107,449,525 (July 2006 est.)  
**Ethnic Groups:** Mestizo (Amerindian-Spanish) 60%, Amerindian or predominantly Amerindian 30%, white 9%, other 1%  
**Religions:** nominally Roman Catholic 89%, Protestant 6%, other 5%  
**Languages:** Spanish, various Mayan, Nahuatl, and other regional indigenous languages  
**GDP:** $1.134 trillion (2006 est.)  
**GDP Per Capita:** $10,600 (2006 est.)  
**GDP Composition By Sector:** agriculture 3.9%, industry 25.7%, services 70.5% (2006 est.)  
**Labor Force:** 38.09 million (2006 est.)  
**Unemployment Rate:** 3.2% plus underemployment of perhaps 25% (2006 est.)  
**Industries:** food and beverages, tobacco, chemicals, iron and steel, petroleum, mining, textiles, clothing, motor vehicles, consumer durables, and tourism  
**Agricultural Products:** corn, wheat, soybeans, rice, beans, cotton, coffee, fruit, tomatoes, beef, poultry, dairy products, and wood products  
**Exports:** $248.8 billion f.o.b. (2006 est.) manufactured goods, oil and oil products, coffee, silver, fruits, vegetables, cotton  
**Imports:** $253.1 billion f.o.b. (2006 est.) metalworking machines, steel mill products, agricultural machinery, electrical equipment, car parts for assembly, repair parts for motor vehicles, aircraft, and aircraft parts  
**Trade Partners:** United States, China, Japan, Canada, Spain  
**Currency:** Mexican peso (MXN)  
**Exchange Rate:** 11.024 MXN = $1 U.S. (2006)