Lesson 4  The Mayan Civilization

MAIN IDEAS
Geography  Mayan civilization rose in Central America as the Maya adapted to both highlands and lowlands.
Culture  Mayan society was divided into classes and shaped by religion.
Culture  The Maya produced beautiful art and made important advances in learning.

The Rise of the Maya

ESSENTIAL QUESTION  Where did Mayan civilization rise?

The Land of the Maya
• As Olmec declined, they influenced the Maya
  - new civilization rose in southern Mexico, northern Central America
  - included northern lowlands, dry forests, dense jungles
  - also, range of mountains from southern Mexico to El Salvador

Early Settlements
• By 1500 B.C., Maya people settled villages, farmed, traded
  - rich villages had religious centers by 500 B.C., became cities

Classic Period
• Classic Period of civilization believed to have been A.D. 250–900
  - Maya built city-states with temples, pyramids, plazas
• Largest city-states included Tikal, Copán, Palenque
  - each was independent, ruled by king
• Cities linked by trade of products such as salt, textiles, jade

REVIEW QUESTION
How did the Maya develop into a great civilization?
Mayan Life

ESSENTIAL QUESTION  How was Mayan society structured?

Daily Life
- Thousands lived in city-states, formed social structure over time
  - king at top, then noble class of priests, leading warriors
  - followed by merchants and artisans, then farmers
  - at bottom were slaves, mostly prisoners of war
- Most Maya were farmers, growing beans, squash, maize—type of corn
  - maize was important—Mayan legends say people were created from it
- Farmers used irrigation—dug canals to carry water to dry fields
  - used rich soil from canal beds to raise up fields
- Built houses on poles to keep dry when rivers flooded
- Nobles lived in stone palaces, wore beautiful clothes, jade beads

Religious Beliefs
- Worshiped many gods—supreme god was lord of fire
  - others were goddess of moon, gods of sun, death, war, corn, rain
- Sacrificed animals, plants, jade, and sometimes humans to gods
- Ritual ball game, played on big court, was believed to bring rains

REVIEW QUESTION
How was Mayan life shaped by religion?
Mayan Culture

ESSENTIAL QUESTION What were Mayan achievements in art and learning?

Art
• Art, learning linked to religion—art created for ceremonies
  - beliefs led to development of calendar, mathematics, astronomy
• Tropical climate caused wooden art to rot long ago
  - only pottery, sculpture, jade, steles survive today
    - steles—carved stone slabs marking religious dates, rulers’ reigns

Achievements in Math and Science
• Like India, Maya developed zero, positions to show number place
• Developed accurate 365-day calendar system
  - used to plan planting, attacks against enemies, religious holidays

Writing
• Developed most advanced writing system in ancient Americas
• Used glyphs—symbolic pictures standing for words, syllables, sounds
  - recorded events in codex—a bark-paper book—using glyphs

Abandoned Cities
• Maya abandoned cities by 900 for unknown reasons
  - warfare in 700s may have caused decline
  - overcrowding, overfarming may have caused food shortages
• Only small, weak city-states remained when Spanish arrived in 1500s
• Mayan peoples still live in Meso-America, speak Mayan languages

REVIEW QUESTION
How were art and learning linked to religion?
Lesson Summary

• The Maya built magnificent cities.
• A clear class structure developed in the Mayan civilization.
• The Maya created lasting artworks, invented a writing system, and made great advances in astronomy and mathematics.

Why It Matters Now . . .

The influence of Mayan culture is found in the United States as a result of immigration from Meso-America.