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Abstract: The history of Latin America starts with three of the greatest Indian civilizations that have ever existed: the Maya, the Inca, and the Aztec empires. The Mayan civilization inhabited Guatemala and the Yucatan Peninsula during the 4th to the 11th centuries A.D. The Mayans developed a great empire composed of cities and temples. The Mayan culture is present today in their legacy of amazing sculptures, hieroglyphic writing, and pottery found in pyramids and temples around Central America. The Incans are a sophisticated pre-Columbian tribe of Peruvian Indians found in the Andes.

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The History of Latin America

The history of Latin America starts with three of the greatest Indian civilizations that have ever existed: the Maya, the Inca, and the Aztec empires.

Mayas

The Mayan civilization inhabited Guatemala and the Yucatan Peninsula during the 4th to the 11th centuries A.D. The Mayans developed a great empire composed of cities and temples.

In the temple of Chichen Itza, people worshipped the Mayan gods of corn, bean, rain, wind, and cotton. The Mayans burned tobacco in their temples, because they believed that the smell would please their gods. Besides corn, beans, and cotton, the Mayans planted chili peppers, tomatoes, cacao, sweet potatoes, and tobacco.

The Mayans were interested in mathematics and astronomy — the study of the stars, the sun, and the moon. The Mayans also developed their own numerical system. By using their knowledge in mathematics and astronomy, the Mayans created a calendar in the 4th century A.D.

The Mayan culture is present today in their legacy of amazing sculptures, hieroglyphic writing, and pottery found in pyramids and temples around Central America.

Incas

The Incans are a sophisticated pre-Columbian tribe of Peruvian indians found in the Andes. Their holy city, Cuzco, was founded in 1100 A. D. and was the center of their civilization. Only the Incan royal family, the royal priests, and high officials were allowed into this city, except during the Festival of the Sun ("Inti Raymi").

The Festival of the Sun is celebrated during June when the sun is at its farthest point from the equator (also called the Winter Solstice); the sun actually stands still in this descent. The Incans worship the sun as their highest god, so on this day when their sun god is farthest away from them, they dance and sing to call back the sun. The sun must return to them for a successful harvest.

In 1572, the Viceroy Toledo from Spain denounced the Festival of the Sun, saying it was pagan. The Incans could not celebrate their festival again until 1944.

Aztecs

Northern Latin America was a dry land controlled by the oppressive Toltecs. A tribe called the Aztecs eventually broke away from Toltec domination and migrated southward. One Aztec group split off from the rest and changed their name to the Mexicas, taking as their chief god and leader, the sun and war god, Huitzilopochtli.

Huitzilopochtli told them that they would find a place to settle down and they would know that they had reached it when they found an eagle nesting on a cactus growing from a stone. The Aztecs eventually reached the Valley of Mexico, which lies in central Mexico between two great mountain ranges, the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Sierra Madre Oriental.

When the Mexicas arrived in the valley, they saw in its center, a large lake known as Lake Texcoco. Near the western edge of the lake, on an island the Mexicas found a rock with a cactus growing on it. An eagle with a live snake writhing in its beak had perched itself on the cactus. The Mexicas had finally found their sign!

In 1325, the Mexicas began building a city on this island. They called it Tenochtitlán which, translated from the Nahuatl language which they spoke, means "place of the prickly pear cactus." This is the center of modern Mexico City.

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MAP

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