Lesson 2: The Olmec and the Maya

Directions: Read the summary to reveal how the Olmec and the Maya developed complex civilizations in Mesoamerica. As you read, underline important details in each section that relate to that section’s title. Think about what you already know, what you want to know, and what you have learned after reading the summary.

Vocabulary

**theocracy** a government in which the leader and the ruling classes are believed to represent the will of the gods

**aqueduct** a structure that carries flowing water

**codex** a book with screens that fold together

A Mother Civilization (p. 169)
The Olmec civilization was Mesoamerica’s first great civilization. It lasted from about 1200 B.C. to about 300 B.C. The Olmec lived on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Most Olmec were farmers, but they also hunted and fished. They lived in small houses that surrounded small villages. The Olmec people were divided into social classes based on wealth and power. The Olmec government was a **theocracy**. Priests and government officials made up the most powerful social class. Merchants and craftspeople made up other social classes. Farmers made up the lowest. Olmec villages were connected by roads. The Olmec traveled these roads and traded with other Mesoamerican peoples. The Olmec civilization is often called “the Mother Civilization” of Mesoamerica. This is because the Olmec influenced all of the later Mesoamerican civilizations.

Olmec Accomplishments (p. 170)
The Olmec are most famous for the giant stone heads they made. The huge heads often represented Olmec rulers. The Olmec also made sculptures of their gods. The Olmec developed a number system, a calendar, and a form of writing. Later Mesoamerican civilizations would learn from the Olmec’s developments. No one knows why the Olmec civilization disappeared. Some people believe that the Olmec were the ancestors of the Maya.

The Maya (p. 170-171)
The Maya lived in more than 100 locations in Central America and Mexico. A large part of their civilization was on the Yucatán Peninsula, close to where the Olmec had lived. Mayan civilization was at its strongest about A.D. 250 and continued for another 650 years. The city-state Tikal was once home to nearly 100,000 Maya. More than 3,000 structures were built there. Today this ancient city has ruins of palaces, baths, pyramids, and **aqueducts**. Aqueducts carried running water. As sources of water, cenotes were holy to the Maya. Cenotes were sinkholes that collected water. Like the Olmec, the Maya developed a form of writing and lived in a theocracy. Also both Olmec and Mayan cities were set up to honor the gods.

Time and Numbers (p. 172)
The Maya used calendars to write down birth dates, marriages, dates to honor their gods, and other important information. The Maya actually had two different calendars. One was for the seasons. The other was for religious ceremonies. The Maya used a **codex**, or folding-screen book, to write down information forecasting the future. Codices also contained information about religious ceremonies. A codex was made of fig leaf bark or animal skin. The Maya were great mathematicians. They created their own counting system.

Daily Life (p. 173)
Entire families lived together in Mayan culture. Men farmed and hunted. Women did housekeeping chores and made clothing. Houses were small and made of adobe, or dried mud-bricks. The Maya began to leave their cities about A.D. 900. Today some descendants of the Maya live in Mexico and Guatemala. But no one knows what happened to Mayan civilization.
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The Olmec and Mayan civilizations were both similar and different.

Directions: In the blank beside each description, write an O if the phrase describes the Olmec, an M if it describes the Maya, or a B if it describes both the Olmec and the Maya. You will use your textbook and provide the page number where you found your answer.

Olmec (5) = O O O O O
Maya (5) = M M M M M
Both (4) = B B B B

1. government was a theocracy  B
   p. 171

2. also called the “Mother Culture”  _____
   p. 169

3. raised maize (corn), beans, and squash  _____
   p. 169

4. were skilled mathematicians  _____
   p. 172

5. believed cenotes were a way to communicate with the gods  _____
   p. 171

6. developed a calendar  _____
   p. 170/172

7. constructed giant stone heads  _____
   p. 170

8. built more than 3,000 structures in Tikal  _____
   p. 170

9. lasted from about 1200 B.C. to about 300 B.C.  _____
   p. 169

10. divided into social classes based on wealth and power  _____
    p. 169

11. developed a system of writing  _____
    p. 171

12. built observatories, palaces, plazas, baths, reservoirs, and aqueducts  _____
    p. 170

13. may have disappeared as a result of invasion, crop failures, or civil war  _____
    p. 173

14. may have migrated east  _____
    p. 170