

Grade 5

Unit 2: *Early American Civilizations*



Use the Interactive Read-Aloud lesson and text on the following page to kick off this unit with your students.

Unit-level Essential Question

What makes a civilization?

Lessons 1-5

Guiding Question: What features defined the Maya civilization?

Writing Prompt: How was the Maya civilization similar to and different from our society today?

Lessons 6-10

Guiding Question: How do the ancient Maya and Aztec civilizations compare and contrast?

Writing Prompt: What factors made the Aztec civilization successful?

Lessons 11-15

Guiding Question: What are the major similarities and differences between the ancient Maya, Aztec, and Inca civilizations?

Writing Prompt: What factors made the Inca Empire the largest and most powerful pre-Columbian empire in the Americas?

Unit 2 Culminating Activity

Your teacher will divide you into three groups for the Maya, Aztec, and Inca civilizations. Create a script for a performance based on a myth from your assigned civilization, which you will then perform for your peers!

GRADE 5 UNIT 2

Read-Aloud

Use the following Read-Aloud to introduce **Grade 5 Unit 2**.

Tell students that throughout this unit, they will think about the following **Essential Question**: What makes a civilization?

Explain that over the next few weeks students will immerse themselves in three civilizations from the Early Americans: the Maya, Inca, and Aztecs. To kick off their study of these civilizations, they will first hear a Read-Aloud that discusses what we can learn about these civilizations from the artifacts we have discovered from them.

Read the Read-Aloud, pausing after each section to discuss the text-based questions.

Aztec, Inca, Maya: Artifacts of Empires

by Elizabeth Wade

If you have ever been to a museum, then you probably know that museums often display more than paintings. They can include sculptures, drawings, and many different kinds of objects, called artifacts. Some of those objects are practical and functional—meaning they were designed to be used rather than displayed—while others are mostly decorative—meaning they are made to be looked at. But have you ever wondered about who makes the items in a museum? Or what these objects can tell us about the cultures or civilizations in which they were produced? These are questions that archaeologists try to answer. Archaeologists are scholars who study people through the tools and objects they made and used. They think about how people lived, what was important to them, and what challenges they faced.

Throughout this unit, we will consider three important civilizations of native people that existed centuries ago in Central and South America: the Aztecs, Inca, and Maya. We will also learn about the way of life and important contributions made by these civilizations. Today, though, we are going to think like archaeologists! We will learn about artifacts from the Maya, the Aztecs, and the Inca and how those artifacts have helped people understand more about the civilizations that made them.

Literal. What do archaeologists study?

» They study people through the tools and objects those people used and made.

Literal. What three civilizations will we study in this unit?

» Aztec, Inca, Maya

We know that all three of these civilizations appeared in Central or South America. The Inca, who were the farthest south, ruled over the lands that stretch along the Andes Mountains and the Pacific Ocean (the present-day countries of Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Chile, and Peru). The Inca were extremely powerful. In fact, they controlled about 2,500 miles of land in South America—about the same distance as if you measured from one side of the United States to the other.

Two kinds of animals—birds and llamas—were very important to the Inca, and we often see them represented in Incan art. While many people use animals such as horses, cows, sheep, or donkeys for transportation and wool, the Inca used llamas. Llamas helped the Inca travel through the steep, tall Andes Mountains. Birds also played an important role in Inca society, as they were sometimes used for food, and their feathers were used both as decoration and as a kind of currency, or money. Both of these animals appear in Incan art. Archaeologists have found bird-shaped jugs and sculptures, images of birds on bowls and other objects, and even a llama made of gold. These artifacts show just how much the Inca valued these special animals, who helped make the Inca civilization possible.

Literal. Where did the Inca live?

- » South America

Literal. What kinds of animals did the Inca often represent in art or other objects?

- » llamas and birds

Inferential. How do we know the Inca valued these animals?

- » They used their image to decorate everyday objects and created special artwork, such as a gold llama, out of them.

Inferential. Why would animals such as llamas and birds be helpful to a civilization?

- » They can provide food, transportation, and currency—all things people need to form a civilization.

Moving north from South America and the Inca, we find the Aztec. The Aztec lived in the area we know today as Mexico; however, other people had lived there for thousands of years before them. The Aztec were influenced by some of those other tribes, so archaeologists and historians have been able to draw connections between the kinds of artifacts they produced and the artistic styles they used. The communities encountered by the Aztec had many gods. The Aztec were also a religious people, and they decided they would also incorporate some gods from other tribes into their own practices.

If you go to a museum, you may see Aztec artifacts that represent Quetzalcoatl. Though Quetzalcoatl was a god of the Toltec people, when the Aztec encountered the Toltec, they adopted Quetzalcoatl for themselves. He was called a feathered serpent, and the Aztecs believed that he protected priests. Many carvings and other artifacts from the Aztec community depict Quetzalcoatl.

Literal. Where did the Aztec live?

- » the area we know today as Mexico

Inferential. How do Aztec art and artifacts reflect Aztec values?

- » These things show figures the Aztec valued. For example, the Aztec were religious, and their artwork often shows gods or figures that protect priests.

The Maya also lived in the area we know today as Mexico and the Yucatán Peninsula of Central America. The Maya were a unique civilization in that they did not have a single ruler, religion, or even economy. City-states, rather, acted independently with their own power structures, laws, religious ceremonies, customs, and economies. The Maya were united, however, through political bonds between those city-states. This structure is reflected in many Maya artifacts; some of the most common things shown in Mayan sculptures or carvings were rulers or gods. In this way, the Maya created images of the people and beings they believed were most important.

Recently a group of archaeologists made a momentous discovery: a Mexican cave containing hundreds of Maya artifacts. Though people living nearby had once known about this cave, it had been sealed long ago, and its artifacts had never been studied. Now that it has been rediscovered, the cave can be properly explored and studied by archaeologists, who will use innovative technology, such as 3-D mapping, to learn more about the cave and its contents. So far they have found decorative boxes, plates, and incense burners—kind of like ancient candle holders. In the years to come, as archaeologists study these objects closely, they may discover new revelations about the Maya civilization.

During this unit we will explore much more about the Aztec, Inca, and Maya, discovering what connects these civilizations and how they differed from one another. You may be wondering, like an archaeologist does, just what else we can learn from these civilizations. You'll soon find out!

Literal. What made the Maya civilization unique?

- » It did not have one ruler, religion, or economy; each city state acted on its own.

Inferential. Why did the Maya likely put gods or rulers on many of their carvings?

- » They had many rulers, and they may have wanted to represent or honor them all. Rulers were also important, so they likely created objects representing them.

Inferential. Why is archaeologists' recent discovery so exciting?

- » The cave contains hundreds of Maya objects, and studying them will help us learn more about the Maya civilization.

Use the following prompts to extend student understanding of the Read-Aloud.

Guiding Question: What can we learn about a civilization from its art and artifacts?

Writing Prompt: Imagine that centuries from now, archaeologists want to learn about your community and its customs. Write about an artifact from your everyday life, explaining how studying it would help teach archaeologists about how you lived and what you valued.