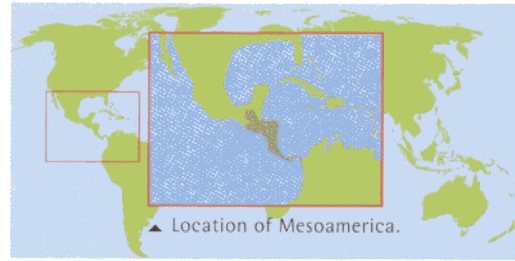


# Ancient Americas

Middle America, also called Mesoamerica, is the region that stretches from central Mexico to northern Honduras. In ancient times, it was home to some highly developed civilizations like the Maya and the Olmec. These civilizations prospered until the arrival of the European settlers in the sixteenth century.



▲ Location of Mesoamerica.

## Quick Q's:

1. What type of gods did Mesoamericans believe in?

Ancient Mesoamerican gods were part human and part animal. They represented natural elements like the Sun and the Moon, rain, lightning and the various planets.

2. Who discovered the cocoa that we all love?

The Maya loved to drink hot cocoa. They believed cocoa was a gift from their snake god Quetzalcoatl and that it could cure them of illness. Chocolate is made from cocoa.

3. Why did the Mesoamericans bury jewelry with their dead?

The Mesoamericans believed in life after death. They buried their dead with jewelry, vases and toys they thought were needed in the afterlife. The Mayans believed that ordinary people went to the underworld when dead, but when kings died, they went to heaven and were reborn as kings in another world. When rich people died, they were buried under their own homes, while kings had elaborate tombs.

**Q** How did the various civilizations in Mesoamerica develop?

**A** Farming in Mesoamerica goes back to 5000 BC. Various tribes knew each other and traded in food, animal skins and jewelry. Sometimes their armies raided each other's villages. Gradually, large cities with big palaces, temples and flat-roofed pyramids were built for the rich. The rulers were also the priests. The workers grew crops, built houses for the rich and fought as soldiers.

**Q** Besides farming, what were the other kinds of work in Mesoamerica?

**A** People wove cloth and made rope, baskets and fishing nets. Traders took their wares to other villages. Huge temples, pyramids and tombs were built. Artisans carved and painted designs on their walls.

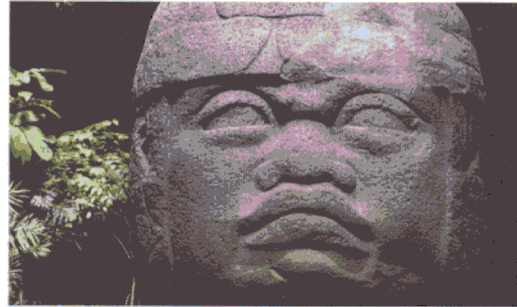
### ▼ Stepped pyramid

The huge stepped pyramid built by the Maya at Chichen Itza (Mexico).



**Q** Who were the Olmec?

**A** The Olmec were the first group of people to arrive and settle in Central America. They made the area their home by 1200 BC. They had a calendar and calculated time by studying the stars and a written language which they engraved on stone. Later civilizations learned many things from them, such as how to build houses. This is why they are the mother culture of Mesoamerica.



### ▲ Big heads

Enormous statues of helmeted heads are the best-known examples of Olmec art. Some were 3 meters (10 feet) tall.

**Q** Why are the Maya special?

**A** The Maya took the study of astronomy and mathematics much further than the Olmecs had done. They built huge observatories to study stars. They were excellent artists and built grand structures like palaces and ceremonial platforms. They made tools and weapons from volcanic glass.