

# Early Mexico

The Indians of Middle America were the first farmers of the New World. As early as 5000 B.C., farmers began cultivating corn, beans, avocados, tomatoes, peppers, and squash. They raised turkeys for food as well. By 1500 B.C., people began settling in villages. And, without the need to constantly hunt for food, the people had time for arts, crafts, trade, and building. The Maya and Aztec became two of the most advanced civilizations in the Americas and helped lead to the development of Mexico.

## The Olmec—1200 B.C. to 200 B.C.

The first major civilization was the Olmec, which developed along the lowlands of eastern Mexico. The Olmec people built cities, established trade with other native groups, and developed a calendar and

a counting system. Sculptors carved massive stone heads as large as 9 feet (2.7 meters) tall and weighing as much as 15 tons! They may have worshiped a god that was part human and part jaguar. Jade figures and examples of beautiful pottery have been found in the ruins of an Olmec pyramid and ceremonial center at La Venta.



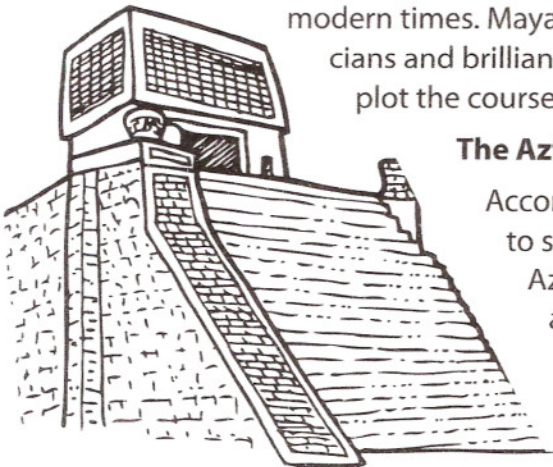
## The Zapotecs—500 B.C. to A.D. 900

The Zapotecs lived in the eastern half of what is now the state of Oaxaca. They were fierce warriors and builders of great pyramids. To build their religious center at Monte Alban, Zapotec engineers and builders flattened an entire mountain top and pulled all the materials

for the pyramids and temples up the sheer mountain wall! This advanced culture studied the stars and developed the first writing system in the Americas, using hieroglyphics (word pictures) to record their history on stone tablets.

## The Maya—300 B.C. to A.D. 900

The Maya people built a magnificent civilization in southern Mexico as well as other parts of Central America. These native Americans produced remarkable architecture, sculpture, painting, and pottery. They devised a calendar more accurate than any used up to modern times. Mayan priests were both mathematicians and brilliant astronomers who were able to plot the course of the planet Venus with amazing accuracy.



## The Aztec—A.D. 1200 to A.D. 1520

According to legend, the Aztec were instructed by their sun god to settle on an island in Lake Texcoco. By the 1400s, the mighty Aztec armies had built an empire that covered much of central and southern Mexico. There they built the magnificent island city of Tenochtitlán, home to 100,000 people! Its major streets were canals, which were spanned by drawbridges. At the center of the city rose massive pyramids topped with temples where thousands of human sacrifices were made.