

Assignment Discovery Online Curriculum

Lesson Title: Ancient American Artifacts

Grade level: 6-8

Subject Area: Geography, History

Duration: Two class periods

Objectives:

Students will do the following:

1. Research artifacts from one of three ancient civilizations: the Mayas, the Aztecs, or Incas
2. Create an artifact representative of one of these three civilizations
3. Identify their classmates' artifacts and determine which cultures they come from

Materials:

- Books and CD-ROMS about the cultures and artifacts of the Mayas, the Aztecs, and the Incas
- Internet access
- Newsprint and markers
- Materials to create representations of ancient artifacts (such as paper, poster board, clay, paint, and markers)

Procedures:

1. Begin the class by providing basic information about ancient American cultures:
 - **The Earliest Americans:** Explain to students that historians believe that people have lived in the Americas since as long as 20,000 years ago, when humans migrated to this continent by crossing the Bering Strait (between what are now Alaska and Russia) when it was frozen over during the Ice Age. Over thousands of years, people gradually moved south—down through North America, into Central America, and even as far south as South America. For many years, people hunted and foraged for food. Around 5000 to 3000 B.C., people began to farm. The first civilization was that of the Olmecs, who flourished from about 800 to 300 B.C. in Central America. In the centuries to follow, other civilizations formed in the Americas.
 - **Three Ancient Civilizations:** Three of the most advanced ancient civilizations in the Americas were those of the Mayas, the Aztecs, and the Incas. Explain that these empires ruled in different regions of Central and South America until they were conquered by the Spaniards in the 16th century. To reinforce when these civilizations flourished and point out their overlaps, draw a time line on a piece of newsprint that shows the time spans of the three civilizations:
 - 1000 B.C.-A.D. 1697: the Maya kingdom
 - A.D. 1325-1519: the Aztec empire
 - A.D. 1438-1538: the Inca empire

- **Where They Ruled:** The Mayas and the Aztecs existed in the region known as Mesoamerica (much of what is now Central America), and the Inca empire stretched along the west coast of South America (much of what is now Peru). Provide a map that shows where each of these civilizations existed. This information should be available in your print resources, or see the map online at <http://library.thinkquest.org/C006206F/images/images/mapa.jpg>.
2. Much of what we know today about the Mayas, the Aztecs, and the Incas comes from artifacts discovered during archaeological digs. Artifacts small and large give clues about a civilization. You may want to use the resources suggested below to show students examples of artifacts, such as religious masks or musical instruments, and to challenge them to determine something about the culture based on the artifacts.
 3. Tell students they will be selecting an artifact to study from one of the three civilizations. To make sure students include a variety of artifacts, you could ask them to “count off” from one to five and assign students different types of artifacts according to their number. For example, you could assign artifacts related to the following areas: (1) religion, including objects related to mythology and gods and goddesses; (2) daily life, including food, houses, tools, pottery, clothing, jewelry, and medicine; (3) arts and entertainment, including sports, dancing, music, and games; (4) war, including weaponry, shields, and the military; and (5) communication, including writing, hieroglyphs, counting, and calendars.

Provide a variety of print and online materials for students to use. The following books and Web sites might be good places to begin:

Books

Eyewitness: Aztec, Inca and Maya by Elizabeth Baquedano (DK Publishing, 2000).

The History Atlas of South America (a Macmillan Continental History Atlas) by Edwin Early, ed. (Hungry Minds, Inc., 1998).

Web Sites

<http://dailynews.yahoo.com/fc/Yahooligans/ancientamericas>

<http://emuseum.mankato.msus.edu/cultural/newworld/index.shtml>

<http://www.anthro.mankato.msus.edu/prehistory/latinamerica/meso/cultures/maya.html>

http://www.anthro.mankato.msus.edu/prehistory/latinamerica/meso/cultures/aztec_empire.html

<http://www.anthro.mankato.msus.edu/prehistory/latinamerica/south/cultures/inca.html>

<http://www.mayankids.com>

<http://members.home.com/urbanlee/MayaWelcome.html>

4. Ask students to choose one Mayan, Aztec, or Incan artifact and answer the following questions in their notebooks. Make sure they don't tell anyone else what artifact they have chosen.

- What is it?
- What is it made of?

- In which category would you place this artifact: religion (mythology, gods and goddesses), daily life (food, houses, tools, pottery, clothing, jewelry, medicine), arts and entertainment (sports, dancing, music, games), war (weaponry, shields, the military), or communication (writing, hieroglyphs, counting, calendars)?
- What was it used for and how was it used?
- Which civilization used it?
- What can you learn about the civilization from this artifact?
- How is it similar to an object used for the same purpose today?

5. Have students create two- or three-dimensional representations of their artifacts. Encourage them to be creative; they could make a clay model, a watercolor painting, a sketch, or a mobile.

6. Have each student present his or her artifact to the class without disclosing its name or purpose. For each artifact, play “20 Questions,” challenging the class to use yes-or-no questions to identify the artifact and its purpose and to determine its culture of origin. Students should ask the presenter questions about the artifact's use, design, and composition.

7. Finally, have students group their artifacts by civilization and discuss what each one reveals about its culture. Ask students to summarize the significant aspects of each culture that they learned through the artifacts.

Discussion Questions:

1. Compare and contrast the Mayan, Aztec, and Incan civilizations. Did they have common beliefs, challenges, and traditions? How were they different?
2. What do you believe were the greatest accomplishments of each civilization?
3. Think of a common object used today that might be discovered as an artifact in the future. What would it reveal about our beliefs or daily lives?
4. Choose one of the ancient civilizations you learned about and hypothesize how its people were affected by their geography.

Evaluation:

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate how well students participate in class discussion, research and write about an ancient American civilization and artifact, complete their artifact representation, and present their artifact to the class:

Three points: participated actively in class discussion, exhibiting strong understanding of ancient civilizations; showed strong research and writing skills; demonstrated above-average creativity and communication skills in their artifact presentations.

Two points: participated to an average degree in class discussion, exhibiting some understanding of ancient civilizations; showed on-grade research and writing skills; demonstrated average creativity and communication skills in their artifact presentations.

One point: participated little in class discussion, exhibiting weak understanding of ancient civilizations; showed weak research and writing skills; demonstrated below-average creativity and communication skills in their artifact presentations.

Extension:

Ancient Calendars

Have students explore and compare the Aztec and Mayan calendars. Divide the students into two groups and assign one civilization to each group. Have each group prepare a poster presentation explaining how the calendar (or calendars) works, identifying important symbols and vocabulary, and giving an example of how that culture would express a specific date. The following Web sites are good starting points:

Maya Calendar

<<http://mayacalendar.com/mayacalendar.html>>

Aztec Calendar

<<http://www.azteccalendar.com/index.html>>

Suggested Reading:

The Encyclopedia of Mummies

Bob Brier. Facts on File, 1998.

Mummies have fascinated people for centuries. Here's a terrific volume of mummy information from A to Z! It's possible to look up specific entries, such as Chinchorro mummies or Juanita, the frozen mummy found in the Andes Mountains, but this is a great browsing book as well.

Mummies have existed all around the world in ancient civilizations and in recent times as well, and this book covers it all. Occasional black-and-white photographs accompany the entries.

Appendices list movies about mummies, museums around the world with mummy collections, and an extensive bibliography.

Mummies, Bones, and Body Parts

Charlotte Wilcox. Carolrhoda Books, 2000.

After death the human body has been preserved in many forms, from mummification to freezing and drying, and these remains allow scientists to learn much about life in past centuries. This interesting book, using illustrations and photographs of preserved bodies and body parts, explains how research has helped answer questions about how ancient people lived, providing information about clothing, food, religion, health, and more. Examples are from around the world and make for absorbing reading.

Vocabulary:

artifact

Definition: Usually a simple object (as a tool or ornament) showing human work and representing a culture or a stage in the development of a culture.

Context: **Artifacts** such as masks, pottery, and weapons can reveal important details about how the people in a culture lived.

civilization

Definition: An advanced stage (as in art, science, and government) of social development; the way of life of a people.

Context: The Mayas, Aztecs, and Incas had sophisticated **civilizations**.

empire

Definition: A major political unit with a large territory or a number of territories or peoples under one ruler who has total authority.

Context: Led by Hernán Cortés in 1519, the Spaniards conquered the Aztec **empire**.

hieroglyphics

Definition: A system of writing mainly in pictorial characters.

Context: The Mayas are known for many great achievements, including accurate calendars, grand pyramids, and sophisticated **hieroglyphics**.

Mesoamerica

Definition: The region in present-day Mexico and most of Central America where civilizations flourished before European contact, as well as the cultures that existed in that region.

Context: The Mayan and Aztec civilizations once flourished in **Mesoamerica**.

Academic Standards:

This lesson adheres to the standards issued by the National Council for the Social Studies for students in grades 5-8:

1. Provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity.
2. Provide for the study of people, places, and environments.

Credit

Joy Brewster, freelance writer and editor of educational material.

This lesson was prepared in consultation with Thomas Malone, a middle school social studies teacher.

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