In what ways were the Maya, the Aztecs, and the Inca advanced for their time?

You will read:

THREE INFORMATIVE ARTICLES
- Mayan Civilization
- Aztecs
- The Inca

You will write:

AN INFORMATIVE ESSAY
In what ways were the Maya, the Aztecs, and the Inca advanced for their time?
Long before the rise of the Inca and Aztec Empires, Mayan civilization flourished in Central America. The Maya first settled in the region as early as 1500 BC, growing maize and living in small agricultural communities. But by about AD 200, these villages were becoming cities. At its height, Mayan civilization included more than 40 cities, each with a population of 5,000 to 50,000 people. The cities had huge stone buildings, including palaces, pyramids, and temples. Each city-state was ruled by a king.

**Mayan Society**

Mayan society was hierarchical, divided by both class and profession. Below the king was a class of nobles; a middle class was composed of priests and commoners; at the lowest level were slaves.

The Maya were never an empire. Although the cities shared the same culture, each operated independently. They traded goods with each other, including salt, shells, cotton, corn, rubber, incense, feathers, jade, flint, obsidian, and granite were carried in huge dugout canoes along rivers and around coasts. They also fought wars, but these were on a small scale, one city against another.

**A Time of Prosperity**

For many centuries, the Maya prospered. They studied the stars and developed sophisticated and accurate calendars; practiced elaborate (if gory) religious rituals and worshiped a crowded pantheon of gods and goddesses; they developed complex hieroglyphic writing that they...
used to record historical and religious events; they had a mathematical system based on the unit 20. Their craftsmen and artists produced fine goods made of cotton, feathers, clay, wood, and precious metals and stones, among other materials.

**Decline**

Yet by AD 800, Mayan civilization was in decline. While the reasons are not fully understood, archaeologists believe that the cities had grown so large, there were not enough farmers left to supply them with food. In addition, the farmland was becoming overused, the soil depleted. Food production plummeted, and famine forced people to leave the urban centers.

By AD 950, the great Mayan cities were mostly abandoned, the population dispersed into small agricultural villages. The jungle swallowed up the empty cities. The Mayan people, however, were still around when the Spanish conquistadors arrived. And they are still around today.

Though the Spanish conquered the Maya in the mid-1500s and founded cities on Mayan lands, temples and monuments remain as a testimony to the Mayans’ achievements. These structures attract tourists from around the world, ensuring that the Maya will never be forgotten.

**Close Read**

1. Cite at least two reasons the Maya prospered as a civilization.

2. Explain possible reasons for the decline of the Mayan empire. Cite text evidence in your response.
Source 2: Informative Article

Long ago, around AD 1345, a group of people in central Mexico wandered in search of a new home. These people were the Aztecs, and Aztec legend says that a prophesy led them to a group of islands on Lake Texcoco, in the Valley of Mexico. Their settlement would eventually become the great city Tenochtitlán.

As the last to arrive, the Aztec were at first ruled over by more powerful city-states in the area. But, after making alliances with some of these city-states, the Aztecs were able to defeat their overlords in 1428. Soon they began conquering other tribes across Mexico, and Tenochtitlán became the center of a powerful Aztec empire.

The Great City

At its height in 1519, the city covered about five square miles and had between 250 and 400 thousand inhabitants. It had temples, palaces, a great market, houses, and gardens. Although the city was built on a swamp, the Aztecs were able to adapt. They traveled around and through Tenochtitlán by canoe. Several raised causeways connected the island city to the mainland. They farmed special plots of land called chinampas (also known as “floating gardens”)—raised areas of land built in the lake, separated by canals, where they grew maize and other crops.

Building cities was not the Aztecs’ only accomplishment. They used picture writing to record political and religious history; they used calendars and had a mathematical system based on the number 20. They wove cotton cloth, made pottery, carved in stone and other materials, made musical instruments and elaborate costumes of feathers.
A Hierarchical Society

Aztec society was strictly hierarchical, ruled over by a godlike emperor. Religion was an important part of everyday life, and a gory one, as they believed that human sacrifice was needed to keep the sun alive. The Aztec were harsh rulers; they demanded high tributes and were constantly fighting in order to keep up a steady supply of captives to use as human sacrifice. The harsh way they ruled their empire helped to undermine them in the end.

Decline

In 1519, Hernán Cortés and his army arrived in Tenochtitlán. When the Spanish first saw the city, they thought they must be dreaming. It was larger and more impressive than any Spanish city of the time. Vastly outnumbered, the Spanish conquistador took the Aztec emperor Montezuma II hostage and began a siege in Tenochtitlán that the Aztec could not withstand. Within three years, and with the help of the local Indian tribes who were eager to break away from Aztec rule, Cortes was able to crush the Aztecs and bring about the complete collapse of their empire. The last Aztec emperor surrendered the city to Cortés in 1521, thus ending one of the most famous empires in history.

Close Read

1. Why did the Spanish think “they must be dreaming” when they saw Tenochtitlán? Cite text evidence in your response.

2. Cite two reasons from the text showing how the Aztecs’ harsh rule contributed to the fall of their society.
Sometime in the twelfth century BC, the first Inca ruler is said to have moved his tribe to what is now Cuzco, high in the Andes. Until the fourteenth century, the Inca lived there peacefully with their neighbors. But then they began a campaign of territorial expansion that would eventually make Cuzco the capital of a vast empire.

**Establishing an Empire**

Successive generations of Incan rulers worked to expand Incan territory through war and conquest. At its height, the Inca Empire stretched more than 2,000 miles along the west coast of South America and governed millions of people. The farthest reaches of the empire were connected with well-constructed roads and strong rope bridges. An elaborate system of relay runners enabled messages to be carried 250 miles a day; runners made the 1,250-mile journey from Quito (a city in the far north) to Cuzco in just five days.

Incan society was hierarchical and highly centralized, with the god-like emperor at the top of the social pyramid, followed by provincial governors, local rulers and leaders, and finally the common people. The common people paid taxes and tributes and worked for the central government. The Inca did not have a writing system, but they were able to keep track of trade goods and stockpiles with a special system of knotted strings called a quipu. Religion was an important part of life.
Economy

The Inca were farmers, growing potatoes as well as other crops, often in terraces cut into the high mountainsides. They had llamas to carry loads, for wool, and for meat. They were also skilled craftsmen, building impressive cities of stone, weaving exquisite woolen cloth, and making pottery, jewelry, and many other useful and ornamental objects.

Decline

The Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro arrived in Peru in 1531—a very bad time for the Inca. An emperor had died, and his two sons fought over the succession. In the ensuing war, cities were devastated, the economy was damaged, and the Inca empire was divided. Pizarro used his guns, horses, and some trickery to easily defeat the Inca. New diseases brought to the Americas by the Spanish weakened the Inca as well.

Incan civilization was wiped out, but they left behind plenty of evidence of their achievements. The Incan city of Machu Picchu, for example, was never known to the Spanish invaders, but you can visit it today.

Close Read

1. What was unique about the way that the Inca were able to expand their empire? Cite text evidence in your response.

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________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
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2. Cite evidence of the Incas’ success as a civilization.

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Unit 2: Informative Essay
Respond to Questions on Step 3 Sources

Read the following questions and choose the best answer for each.

1. Which of the following claims applies only to the Aztec civilization?
   a. The Aztec were conquered by the Spanish.
   b. The Aztec were harsh rulers.
   c. The Aztec were skilled boatsmen.
   d. The Aztec were part of an empire.

2. Which text below provides the best evidence to support the claim in Question 1?
   a. “They traveled around and through Tenochtitlán by canoe.”
   b. “The last Aztec emperor surrendered the city to Cortés in 1521, thus ending one of the most famous empires in history.”
   c. “The Maya were never an empire. Although the cities shared the same culture...”
   d. “Incan society was hierarchical and highly centralized, with the godlike emperor at the top...”

3. Prose Constructed-Response  What factors contributed to the decline of each empire? Cite evidence from the selections in your response.

4. Prose Constructed-Response  How was each society organized? Use details from the selections in your response.
Part 2: Write

Assignment
You have read information about the Maya, Aztecs, and Inca. Write an informative essay that discusses why these societies were influential in both the past and the present.

Plan
Use the graphic organizer to help you outline the structure of your informational essay.

- **Introduction and Main Idea**
- **Supporting Details**
- **Synthesizing Sources**
- **Conclusion**
Draft

Use your notes and completed graphic organizer to write a first draft of your essay.

Revise and Edit

Look back over your essay and compare it to the Evaluation Criteria. Revise your essay and edit it to correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors.

Evaluation Criteria

Your teacher will be looking for:

1. **Statement of purpose**
   - Is it clear what the main idea is?
   - Did you support the main idea with details?

2. **Organization**
   - Are the sections of your essay organized in a logical way?
   - Is there a smooth flow from beginning to end?
   - Is there a clear conclusion that supports the main idea?
   - Did you stay on topic?

3. **Elaboration of evidence**
   - Is the evidence relevant to the topic?
   - Is there enough evidence?

4. **Conventions**
   - Did you follow the rules of grammar usage as well as punctuation, capitalization, and spelling?