Shaping Mesoamerica

How land and water influenced Olmec and Maya civilizations

6.C.3.5.C "Explain how the Olmec and Maya adapted to and modified their environment to develop advanced civilizations in Mesoamerica, featuring advancements in science, architecture, the development of a writing system, and regional trade."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one water problem faced by each civilization and circle two ways people changed the land. Write 1 beside an example of science, 2 beside building, 3 beside writing, and 4 beside trade.

Building Where Water Matters

1. Along the Gulf Coast, the Olmec built towns near rivers that flooded during heavy rains. River water helped crops grow, but floods could damage buildings. At San Lorenzo, workers reshaped a high plateau with earth fill for their center. They built places where people gathered and carved huge stone heads. The stone came from distant hills, so moving it took careful planning and many workers. Rivers helped people carry goods, while exchange with other regions brought valued materials such as jade and obsidian to Olmec centers.

2. Farther south and east, Maya communities faced different problems. In many lowland areas, rain fell heavily for part of the year, but dry months followed. Some Maya cities collected rain in reservoirs so people had water between storms. On hillsides, farmers built terraces to slow runoff and hold soil for crops. Food from farms supported workers who built tall limestone temples and other city buildings. Maya observers tracked the sun, moon, and stars to make calendars, while scribes used glyphs, or written signs, to record dates and events.

3. Neither civilization lived apart from its neighbors. Olmec communities exchanged jade and obsidian with distant communities, using river routes where possible. Centuries later, Maya traders carried items such as obsidian, salt, and cacao between regions. Maya cities often stood near useful land or travel routes, and trade brought in goods that were scarce nearby. These exchanges helped large centers grow, but people still had to solve local problems, from too much river water to too little rain. Their buildings, farming methods, records, and trade networks show how people shaped their surroundings.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why was reshaping a high plateau useful for the Olmec at San Lorenzo?

2. How did Maya reservoirs and hillside terraces solve different water problems?

3. How did the Maya use observations of the sky and written signs in different ways?

4. How did travel routes and exchange help both Olmec and Maya centers grow?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine starting a town beside a flood-prone river and dry hills. In four sentences, choose one Olmec-inspired change and one Maya-inspired change to this land, then explain how each could support a different advancement from the passage.

ANSWER KEY

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GRADE 6 · 6.C.3.5.C

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one water problem faced by each civilization and circle two ways people changed the land. Write 1 beside an example of science, 2 beside building, 3 beside writing, and 4 beside trade. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why was reshaping a high plateau useful for the Olmec at San Lorenzo?	**The high center helped protect gathering places and buildings from river floods.**
2	How did Maya reservoirs and hillside terraces solve different water problems?	**Reservoirs stored rainwater for dry months. Terraces slowed runoff and kept soil in place for crops.**
3	How did the Maya use observations of the sky and written signs in different ways?	**They observed the sun, moon, and stars to make calendars. Scribes used glyphs to record dates and events.**
4	How did travel routes and exchange help both Olmec and Maya centers grow?	**Rivers helped the Olmec move goods and obtain materials from other regions. Maya travel routes supported trade that brought in goods scarce nearby.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would raise the town center above the river's floods with earth fill. This could help builders make a lasting place where people gather. I would build terraces on the dry hills to hold soil and rainwater for crops. More reliable crops could support people who study the sky and make calendars.

Accept other passage-supported links between environmental changes and advancements. For the open task, look for two distinct changes, one inspired by each civilization, and an explained benefit for each.