

# The Maya

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**A Resource to Accompany**

*History Alive! The Ancient World*

***TCI***

Teachers' Curriculum Institute

# Introduction

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**M**ayan civilization lasted 3,500 years, from about 2000 B.C.E. to 1500 C.E. At its peak, it included present-day southern Mexico and large portions of Central America. In this reading, you will learn about some of the most important achievements of the Mayan civilization.

You can still see the ruins of some amazing stone cities built by the Maya. The ruins of the ancient city of Tikal lie deep in the Guatemalan jungle.

Imagine standing at the heart of this city in the year 750 C.E. You are in a large, open plaza surrounded by eight soaring temple-pyramids. They reach into the sky like mountains. On the ground, as far as you can see, are structures on raised platforms. The structures are painted in bright colors. Nearby, in the center of the city, you see large palaces made of hand-cut limestone blocks. These palaces are the homes of the ruler, priests, and nobles. Farther out are the stone houses of the merchants and artisans. At the very edge of the city, you glimpse thousands of small, thatched-roof house-mounds where the peasants live.

Tikal was only one of the more than 40 Mayan cities. How did the Maya create such great cities and such an advanced civilization? In this reading, you will trace the development of Mayan civilization. Then you will take a closer look at several aspects of Mayan culture, including class structure, family life, religious beliefs and practices, agricultural techniques, and achievements.

# Geography of the Americas

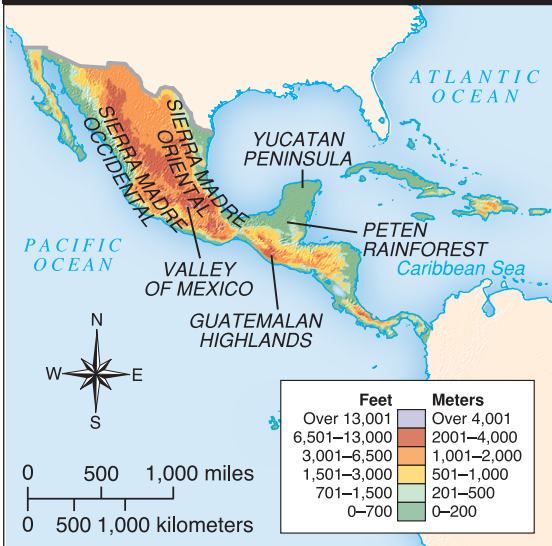
**The Mayan Civilization**



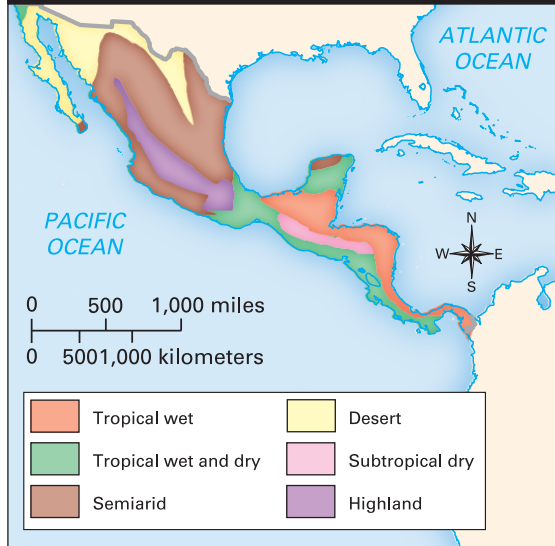
**Mayan Civilization, About 900 C.E.**



**Physical Features of Central America**



**Climate Regions in Central America**



**Questions**

1. In which modern countries did the Mayan civilization exist?

2. What are three important physical features found in southern Mexico and Guatemala?
3. In which climate zones did the Maya live?

# The Development of Mayan Civilization

**W**hile the Roman Empire was declining in western Europe, the Maya were creating an advanced civilization in the Americas. Mayan civilization reached its height between 300 and 900 C.E. During this time, Mayan culture spread over much of Mesoamerica, including part of present-day southern Mexico, Belize, most of Guatemala, and parts of Honduras and El Salvador.

The landscape in which the Maya lived varied greatly. In the south, pine forests covered the mountain highlands. In the northern and central regions were rainforests, grasslands, and swamps. These areas are known as the lowlands. Thick jungle covered the southern part of the lowlands. This is where Mayan civilization reached its highest development. Today this area is called the Peten region of Guatemala.

**The Origins of Mayan Civilization** The Maya built their civilization in part on ideas they inherited from a people called the Olmec. The Olmec lived in the jungle areas on the east coast of Mexico. Their civilization reached its peak between 1200 and 500 B.C.E.

Like early civilizations in other parts of the world, the Olmec civilization was based on agriculture. By 2000 B.C.E., people in parts of Mexico had turned from hunting and gathering to farming as their main source of food. A particularly important crop was maize, or corn.

Farming allowed the Olmec to create permanent settlements. The Olmec established farming villages throughout the region. They also created trade routes that stretched for hundreds of miles.

By 1400 B.C.E., the Olmec had a capital city that boasted palaces, temples, and monuments. They were the first Mesoamericans to develop large religious and ceremonial centers. They were also the first to use a solar (sun) calendar. The Maya would build on all these achievements.

**Three Periods of Mayan Civilization** Mayan civilization began to arise in eastern and southern Mexico around 2000 B.C.E. Historians divide the history of Mayan civilization into three main periods: Pre-Classic, Classic, and Post-Classic.

The long Pre-Classic period lasted from about 2000 B.C.E. to 300 C.E. During this time, the Maya farmed the land and lived in simple houses and compounds, or groups of buildings.

Gradually, Mayan culture became more complex. As the Mayan population grew, settlements became larger. The Maya began constructing public buildings for governmental and religious purposes. About 50 B.C.E., they began to adapt the writing system of the Olmec and develop their own system of hieroglyphic writing. Mayan civilization reached its peak during the Classic period, from around 300 to 900 C.E. The achievements you will study in this chapter date from this time.

During the Classic Period, the Maya adapted and developed ideas they had learned from the Olmec. For example, they improved on Olmec building techniques. Even though the Maya lacked metal tools and had not discovered the wheel, they built enormous stone cities that boasted elaborate and highly decorated temple-pyramids and palaces. The Maya also built observatories for studying the heavens. They charted the movements of the moon, stars, and planets. They used their knowledge of astronomy and mathematics to create complex and highly accurate calendars.

Mayan society during the Classic period consisted of many independent states. Each state had farming communities and one or more cities. At its height, the Mayan Empire included over 40 cities, including Tikal, Copan, Chichen Itza, and Palenque.

Around 900 C.E., the Classic civilization collapsed. The Maya abandoned their cities in the southern lowland area, and the great cities fell into

# The Development of Mayan Civilization

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ruin in the jungle. No one knows for certain why this happened. At the end of this reading, we will look at some theories that may explain the mystery.

To the north, on the Yucatan Peninsula, Mayan cities continued to prosper during the Post-Classic period. This period lasted from about 900 C.E. to 1500 C.E. During this time, the Maya continued their warfare and empire building, but they had fewer great artistic and cultural achievements.

Even at the height of their empire, the Maya were not one unified nation. Instead they lived in many city-states with separate governments. What united them as Maya was their common culture: their social system, languages, calendar, religion, and way of life. Let's take a closer look at some aspects of Mayan culture, starting with class structure.

## Questions

1. What were some of the significant achievements of the Olmec? How did they influence the Maya?
2. What were key characteristics of Mayan civilization in the Pre-Classic, Classic, and Post-Classic periods?
3. What were some important Mayan cities?
4. What aspects of culture did Mayan city-states share?

# Class Structure

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**D**uring the Classic period, the Maya lived in independent city-states, like Tikal. Within each state, Mayan society was structured like a pyramid. The ruler of each city-state was at the top of the social pyramid. The rest of Mayan society was organized in a series of layers below him.

**The Ruler** The highest authority in the state was the *halach uinic*, a Mayan word that means “true man.” He ruled the state with the help of his advisors. He decided when and where to go to war.

The Mayan ruler was considered a god-king. During religious ceremonies, he wore a headdress that was as tall as a person. When he died, a son or other close male relative succeeded him. Mayan rulers were almost always men, but scholars believe that women had considerable influence, probably through family relationships.

**Nobles and Priests** The next layer in the social pyramid was made up of nobles and priests. They were the only members of Mayan society who knew how to read and write.

The nobles served as officials, and oversaw the administration of the states. They gathered taxes, supplies, and labor for projects like the construction of temples. Nobles led peasant armies in times of war. During battles, they wore elaborate costumes, including gold jewelry and animal robes made from the skin of jaguars.

Priests were important because they maintained favor with the gods. Like nobles, they inherited their position from their fathers. Priests led rituals, offered sacrifices, and foretold the future. They were consulted to determine the best days for going into battle. In addition to their religious duties, priests were often mathematicians, astronomers, and healers.

**Merchants and Artisans** Although the Mayan economy was based mostly on farming, trade and

crafts were also important. These functions were carried out by merchants and artisans.

The Maya were accomplished traders. They traveled by sea, river, and well-constructed roads to trade with other city-states. Merchants in the lowlands imported valuable products from the highlands. These products included stones such as obsidian and jade; *copal*, a tree sap that the Maya used as incense during religious ceremonies; and *quetzals*, birds with shiny green feathers used in headdresses.

Mayan artisans made a wide variety of objects, many of them designed to pay tribute to the gods. They painted books on paper made from the bark of fig trees. Artists painted murals, or wall paintings, of Mayan life and important battles. They created sculptures for temples and decorative designs on palace walls. The Maya were also skilled weavers and potters.

**Peasants** The peasants were the backbone of Mayan society. They worked hard on the land, growing maize, squash, beans, and other crops to feed the population. During the growing season, men spent most of the day in the fields, farming with wooden hoes. Women usually stayed closer to home, preparing food, weaving, and sewing.

When they were not working on the land, peasants spent time building pyramids and temples. In exchange for their work, they sometimes attended royal weddings and religious events. Peasants also served as soldiers during wars.

**Slaves** At the bottom of the social pyramid were the slaves. Slaves performed manual labor for their owners. Some were born into slavery, but free people sometimes became slaves. Some children became slaves when their parents sold them for money to feed the rest of the family. War prisoners of humble origin were made slaves. (Those of higher rank were sacrificed to the gods.) And

# Class Structure

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some people were made slaves as a punishment for serious crimes.

In general, slaves were not treated badly. Sometimes they actually had easier lives than peasants, depending on what job they did and where their masters lived. But slaves were not free to come and go as they pleased. Often they were sacrificed when their masters died.

Now that we've looked at the Mayan class structure, let's take a look at what daily life was like for the majority of Maya: the peasants.

## Questions

For each class, list at least three interesting or important details about that group's duties, work or lifestyle:

- ruler
- nobles and priests
- merchants and artisans
- peasants
- slaves

# Family Life

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In city-states like Copan (in present-day Honduras), Mayan peasants lived in one-room huts built of interwoven poles covered with dried mud. Several family houses were often grouped around a courtyard. A house containing the kitchen was often placed directly behind the main house. Peasant families worked hard, but ceremonies and rituals provided a break from work and a chance to honor important events.

**Duties of Family Members** Life for Mayan peasant families was not easy. Mayan women rose before dawn to get the fire burning in the fireplace. With the help of her daughters, a Mayan woman cleaned the corn that had been boiled and left to soak and soften overnight. Then she set to work at the grinding stone, pounding corn into meal. She patted the meal into *tortillas* (a Spanish word meaning “little breads”) or *tamales* and cooked them over the fire. These might serve as the morning meal, or they might be saved for dinner. On special days, they might also have hot chocolate, a drink the Maya made from cacao beans.

During the day, women and older girls cared for small children and for the family’s few animals, like ducks and turkeys. They swept their homes, and they gathered, spun, and wove cotton into cloth.

Mayan fathers and sons ate their morning meal quickly before leaving to work the fields. When they weren’t busy with the crops, men and boys hunted and trapped animals. They also helped construct large buildings such as palaces and temples. In times of war, peasant men served as soldiers.

**Special Occasions** Although Mayan families worked hard, they also took time to celebrate the important events in their lives. The birth of a child was a time of rejoicing. As soon as possible after

the birth, the family called in a priest to perform a ceremony much like baptism. The priest forecast the baby’s future and gave advice to help guide the parents in raising the child.

At three months of age, girls went through another ceremony. The number 3 was special to Mayan women because it represented the three stones of the fireplace. In the three-month ceremony, the baby girl was introduced to the tools she would use throughout her life. Small items were placed in the baby’s hands, such as tools for spinning and weaving, carrying water and cooking, and soaking and grinding maize.

A similar ceremony was held for boys at four months of age. The number 4 was special to Mayan men. It represented the four sides of the plot of land where a boy would spend his life. The baby boy was given farmer’s tools, such as axes and planting sticks, and the spears, knives, and traps of a hunter.

Another important ceremony in every Mayan child’s life was the coming-of-age ceremony. Girls went through this ceremony at the age of 12, boys at 14. The long ceremony involved confessions, cleansing with water, and reciting the rules of behavior. Finally, the priest cut a white bead from the boys’ hair and removed a string of red shells from around the girls’ waists. Boys and girls had worn these symbols of innocence since they were quite young.

**Marriage Customs** The next big event for a Mayan youth was marriage. Men usually married around the age of 20. Girls married when they were as young as 14.

The bride and groom did not choose each other. Instead, marriages were negotiated by the village *atanzahab*, or matchmaker. These negotiations were not simple. Families had to agree on how much food and clothing would be given to the bride’s family. They also had to agree on the



# Family Life

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number of years a young man would work for his new wife's family.

Once the details of a marriage were worked out, the villagers built a hut for the couple behind the home of the bride's parents. When the home was ready, the bride and groom put on clothing woven for the occasion. After a priest blessed the marriage, the villagers celebrated.

Clearly, rituals and ceremonies were an important part of daily life to the Maya. Let's look more closely at Mayan religious beliefs and practices.

## Questions

1. What were the main duties of Mayan women and girls?
2. What were the main duties of Mayan men and boys?
3. What were some of the special occasions in Mayan civilization?

# Religious Beliefs and Practices

**R**eligion was very important to the Maya. The Maya built their cities around ceremonial and religious centers. Their magnificent temple-pyramids rose high above the jungle canopy, like mountains reaching into the sky. Temple plazas provided gathering places for people to attend rituals and ceremonies.

Scholars have learned about the Mayan religion from studying present-day Mayan practices, ancient artifacts, and documents written during the Post-Classic period. Here are some of the things they have discovered.

**Beliefs and Rituals** The Mayan religion was polytheistic, which means it included many gods. In fact, the Maya believed in more than 160 gods. The primary Mayan gods were forces or objects in nature that affected people's daily lives, like the god of rain, the god of corn, and the god of death. Many gods had animal characteristics. The jaguar was especially important to the Maya.

The Maya believed that the gods had created the world and could influence or even destroy it. The same god that sent life-giving rain could also ruin the crops with hailstones. So, it was extremely important to honor the gods.

According to Mayan beliefs, only priests could explain signs and lead people through rituals aimed at pleasing the gods. Priests performed sacrifices and conducted ceremonies. They consulted sacred books, read omens, interpreted signs, and predicted the future. No decision was made without seeking the gods' advice. No action was taken without first honoring the gods.

The Maya honored their gods with offerings such as plants, food, flowers, feathers, jade, and shells. The Maya believed that blood gave the gods strength, so they also made blood offerings by sacrificing animals and, sometimes, humans. The people who were sacrificed were usually orphans, slaves, and nobles captured during war.

In the ancient city of Chichen Itza, on the Yucatan Peninsula, humans were sacrificed by being thrown into a sacred well whose water level was 60 feet below the ground. Any victims who survived the fall were pulled from the water and asked what message they had brought back from the gods.

Human sacrifice played a role in an ancient Mayan game called *pok-a-tok*. Every Mayan city had at least one ball court where the game was played. Scholars believe that there were two teams of nobles. Players tried to hit a solid rubber ball through a stone ring by using their leather-padded elbows, wrists, and hips. People from all levels of Mayan society watched and placed bets on the outcome of the game. Slaves, land, and homes could be won and lost during a game. Surviving art from the ball courts shows members of the losing team being sacrificed and the captain of the defeated team being beheaded.

**The Sacred Calendar** The Maya used their knowledge of mathematics and astronomy to develop a complex calendar system. Two main calendars were used for religious and other purposes. The first was a daily calendar, based on the solar (sun) year. It divided the year into 18 months of 20 days each, plus 5 "unlucky" days. This totaled 365 days, as in our calendar.

The second calendar was the sacred or ritual calendar. It was called the *tzolkin*, or Sacred Round. The Sacred Round was based on 13 months of 20 days each, making 260 days in all. It had two cycles that worked together to identify a particular day. One cycle was made up of the numbers 1 to 13. The other cycle was a set of 20 day names. Each of the day names represented a particular god. Every 260 days, a given combination of numbers and day names, such as 1 Ik, would occur.

Only priests could "read" the hidden meaning

# Religious Beliefs and Practices

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of the Sacred Round. Priests used the sacred calendar to determine the best days to plant, hunt, cure, do battle, and perform religious ceremonies. To this day, there are calendar priests in southern Mexico who use the 260-day calendar in this way.

Like Mayan art and architecture, the calendar system reflects a highly advanced civilization. This civilization was made possible by the ability of the Maya to create a stable food supply. Next you'll learn about the agricultural techniques the Maya used to ensure that they had sufficient food.

## **Questions:**

For each aspect of Mayan religious beliefs and practices, list at least two important pieces of information:

- Mayan gods
- offerings and sacrifices
- pok-a-tok
- the Sacred Round

# Agricultural Techniques

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**T**he Maya were creative, skillful farmers. They used their knowledge of calendars and seasonal change to help them become even better at growing food. But Mayan farmers faced many challenges. In the end, crop failure may have played a key role in the collapse of the Classic Mayan civilization.

**Challenges Facing Mayan Farmers** The primary Mayan food was maize, or corn. Other typical Mayan crops were beans, squash, and chili peppers. Fortunately, beans and squash, when eaten with corn, supply people with a naturally healthful and balanced diet.

One of the most difficult challenges the Maya faced was how to grow enough food to feed their growing population. Farming was not easy in the regions where they lived. Their land included dense forests, little surface water (such as lakes or streams), and poor soil.

The Maya responded to this challenge by developing different agricultural techniques for the various environments in which they lived. In the mountainous highlands, they built terraces, or earth steps, into the hills to create more flat land for planting. In the swampy lowlands, the Maya constructed raised-earth platforms surrounded by canals that drained off extra water. This technique helped them to grow more food without having to increase the amount of land they used.

A different technique was used in the densely forested lowland areas. In city-states like Palenque (in present-day Mexico), the Maya used slash-and-burn agriculture. First they cleared the land by cutting and burning plants and trees. Then they planted their crops. Unfortunately, this kind of farming wears out the soil. Lowland soil was not very rich to begin with, so land that was planted for 2 to 4 years had to be left to rest for 2 to 10 years. Slash-and-burn farmers had to have a lot of

land, since each year some areas were planted while others were recovering.

The Mayan agricultural system worked as long as settlements were spread out and not too large. As populations increased, the Maya had trouble raising enough food to feed everyone. In the constant quest for land, they drained swamps and cleared hillsides. They also used household gardens in the cities to increase the amount of land available for growing food.

**The End of the Classic Period** Creative agricultural techniques were not enough to save the Classic Mayan civilization. For about 600 years, the great cities of the southern lowlands thrived. Then, in the space of 50 to 100 years, the civilization that supported these centers fell apart. By 900 C.E., the Maya had abandoned their cities to the jungle.

The collapse of the Classic Mayan civilization is one of the great mysteries of Mesoamerican history. Many theories have been proposed to explain what happened. Some historians believe that the populations of the cities grew faster than the Mayan farming systems could sustain them. Scholars have also proposed that long periods of drought, or dry weather, caused massive crop failure.

Another possible cause of the Maya's downfall was uncontrolled warfare. In the centuries after 300 C.E., the skirmishes that were common among city-states escalated into full-fledged wars. A final possibility is that invaders from central Mexico helped to destroy the Mayan city-states.

Perhaps a combination of factors brought an end to the Classic period. What we do know is that the great cities disappeared. The Maya migrated away from the old Mayan heartland and returned to village life. Stone by stone, the jungle reclaimed the great pyramids and plazas.

Although the great Mayan cities are ruins today, Mayan culture lives on. About 2 million

# Agricultural Techniques

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Maya still live in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Millions more are spread throughout the Yucatan Peninsula and the cities and rural farm communities of Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

## Questions:

1. What crops did the Maya grow?
2. For each environment of the Mayan civilization (mountainous highlands, swampy lowlands, forested lowlands), describe the agricultural technique the Maya used.
3. What are three theories for the decline of Mayan civilization? Which one do you think was most responsible for the decline?

# Achievements of the Maya

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**M**any of the greatest achievements of the Maya date from the Classic Period. Hundreds of years later, their ideas and practices continued to influence other Mesoamerican groups.

**Science and Technology** The Maya made important breakthroughs in astronomy and mathematics. Throughout Mayan lands, priests studied the sky from observatories. They relied on simple methods, such as looking through a forked stick. Still, they were able to track the movements of stars and planets with striking accuracy.

The Maya used their observations to calculate the solar year. The Mayan figure of 365.2420 days was amazingly precise.

These calculations allowed the Maya to create their solar calendar of 365 days. Recall that they also had a sacred 260-day calendar. Every 52 years, the first date in both calendars fell on the same day. This gave the Maya a longer unit of time that they called a Calendar Round. For the Maya, this 52-year period was something like what a century is to us today.

Mayan astronomy and calendar making depended on a good understanding of mathematics. In some ways, the Mayan number system was like ours. The Maya used place values for numbers, just as we do. However, instead of being based on the number 10, their system was based on 20. So instead of place values for 1s, 10s, and 100s, the Maya had place values for 1s, 20s, 400s (20 times 20), and so on.

The Maya also recognized the need for zero—a discovery made by few other civilizations. In the Mayan system for writing numbers, a dot stood for one, a bar for five, and a shell for zero. To add and subtract, people lined up two numbers and then combined or took away dots and bars.

**Arts and Architecture** The Maya were equally gifted in arts. They painted using colors mixed from minerals and plants. We can see the artistry of Mayan painters in the Bonampak murals, which were found in Chiapas, Mexico. The murals show nobles and priests, as well as battle scenes, ceremonies, and a human sacrifice. These pictures have helped scholars learn about Mayan life.

The Maya also constructed upright stone slabs called *steles*, which they often placed in front of temples. Most steles stood between 5 and 12 feet tall, although some rose as high as 30 feet. Steles usually had three-dimensional carvings of gods and rulers. Sometimes the Maya inscribed them with dates and hieroglyphics in honor of significant events.

Another important art was weaving. We know from steles and paintings that the Maya wove colorful cloths in complex patterns. Women made embroidered tunics called *huipiles* and fashioned lengths of cloth for trade. Mayan women use similar techniques today. They still make their huipiles in traditional designs. People from different towns can be distinguished by the colors and patterns of their garments.

In architecture, the Maya built temple-pyramids from hand-cut limestone bricks. An unusual feature of Mayan buildings was a type of arch called a *corbel vault*. Builders stacked stones so that they gradually angled in toward each other to form a triangular archway. At the top of the arch, where the stones almost touched, one stone joined the two sides. The archway always had nine stone layers, representing the nine layers of the underworld (the place where souls were thought to go after death).

# Achievements of the Maya

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**Language and Writing** The Maya developed the most complex system of writing in the Americas. They used hieroglyphics to represent sounds, words, and ideas. Hieroglyphic inscriptions have been found on stoneware and other artifacts dating from as early as 50 B.C.E.

Over time, the Maya created hundreds of glyphs. Eventually, scribes could write down anything in the spoken language. They often wrote about rulers, history, myths and gods, and astronomy.

Not all Mayan groups shared the same language. Instead, they spoke related dialects. Today, about four million Mesoamericans still speak one of 30 or so Mayan languages.

## Questions

1. For each area, list the Mayan achievements:
  - science and technology
  - arts and architecture
  - language and writing
2. Complete this phrase, “Mayan achievements such as \_\_\_\_\_ are still important today because \_\_\_\_\_.”  
\_\_\_\_\_.

# Summary and Processing Assignment

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## **Summary**

In this reading, you read about the rise of the Mayan civilization. This great civilization was developed in three main periods: Pre-Classic, Classic, and Post-Classic.

The Maya's greatest cultural achievements came during the Classic period. In studying this period, you explored the Maya's complex social structure and their family life, religion, and farming techniques.

## **Processing Assignment**

Create a cover for an issue of *The Mayan Monthly* to highlight Mayan civilization. Your cover must include the following:

- an imaginative subtitle
- visuals of at least three artifacts that represent Mayan civilization
- brief captions that explain what each artifact is and what it reveals about Mayan civilization
- other clever and creative touches



# Guide to Questions

## Geography of the Americas

1. In which modern countries did the Mayan civilization exist?

*The Mayan civilization existed in the modern countries of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador.*

2. What are three important physical features found in southern Mexico and Guatemala?

*The Guatemalan Highlands, Yucatan Peninsula, and Peten Rainforest are found in southern Mexico and Guatemala.*

3. In which climate zones did the Maya live?

*The Maya lived in the tropical wet, tropical wet and dry, subtropical dry, and semiarid climate zones.*

## The Development of Mayan Civilization

1. What were some of the significant achievements of the Olmec? How did they influence the Maya?

*The Olmecs learned to farm maize. They created trade routes and permanent settlements. They also developed religious centers and used a solar calendar. The Maya adopted and built on all of those achievements.*

2. What were key characteristics of Mayan civilization in the Pre-Classic, Classic, and Post-Classic periods?

*In the Pre-Classic period, the Maya farmed and lived in simple houses. During the Classic period, Mayan civilization reached its peak. The Maya created writing, developed ideas in astronomy and mathematics, and lived in independent city-states. In the Post-Classic period, Mayan cities collapsed in the southern lowlands but continued to prosper on the Yucatan*

*Peninsula. There were fewer artistic and cultural achievements.*

3. What were some important Mayan cities?

*Tikal, Copan, Chichen Itza, and Palenque were important Mayan cities.*

4. What aspects of culture did Mayan city-states share?

*Mayan city-states shared the same social system, languages, calendar, religion, and way of life.*

## Class Structure

*Possible answers:*

### Ruler

- called the *halach uinic*, or “true man”
- decided when and where to go to war
- was considered a god-king
- could be influenced by female family members

### Nobles and Priests

- only Mayans who knew how to read and write
- gathered taxes, supplies, and labor for important projects (nobles)
- led peasant armies in times of war (nobles)
- led rituals, performed sacrifices, and foretold the future (priests)
- were mathematicians, astronomers, and healers (priests)

### Merchants and Artisans

- traveled by sea, river, and roads to trade with other city-states (merchants)
- traded obsidian, jade, copal, and quetzal feathers (merchants)
- painted murals of Mayan life and important battles (artisans)
- painted books on fig tree bark (artisans)
- were skilled weavers and potters (artisans)

# Guide to Questions

## Peasants

- *were the backbone of Mayan society*
- *men worked in the fields*
- *women prepared food, wove, and sewed*
- *built temples and pyramids and served as soldiers*
- *sometimes attended royal weddings and religious ceremonies*

## Slaves

- *some born into slavery, some sold as children, some captured in battle, some enslaved as punishment*
- *some had easier lives than peasants*
- *often sacrificed when their masters died*

## Family Life

1. What were the main duties of Mayan women and girls?

*Mayan women and girls cooked meals, and cared for small children and the family's animals. They cleaned the home, and gathered, spun, and wove cotton into cloth.*

2. What were the main duties of Mayan men and boys?

*Mayan men and boys worked in the fields, and hunted and trapped animals. They also helped construct large buildings such as palaces and temples. In times of war, peasant men served as soldiers.*

3. What were some of the special occasions in Mayan civilization and how were they celebrated?

*At the birth of a child, there was rejoicing and the baby's future was forecast by a priest. At three months, a ceremony was held for girls to introduce them to the tools they would use in*

*their lives. A similar ceremony was held for boys at four months. Boys came of age at 14 with a special ceremony where a symbol of innocence was removed from them, and girls did the same at age 12. When a bride and groom married, a hut was built for the couple behind the bride's parents' home. The bride and groom wore special clothes, a priest blessed the marriage, and the villagers celebrated.*

## Religious Beliefs and Practices

*Possible answers:*

### Mayan Gods

- *The Maya believed in more than 160 gods.*
- *Primary gods were the god of rain, the god of corn, and the god of death.*
- *The jaguar was an important animal in the Mayan religion.*
- *Gods had created the world and could influence or destroy it.*

### Offerings and Sacrifices

- *The Maya made offerings of plants, food, flowers, feathers, jade, and shells.*
- *Animals and sometimes humans were sacrificed.*

### Pok-a-tok

- *The game was played by two teams of nobles.*
- *Players tried to hit a rubber ball through a stone hoop using their elbows, wrists, and hips.*
- *All levels of Mayan society watched and bet on the game.*
- *Members of the losing team may have been sacrificed.*

### The Sacred Round

- *The Maya's knowledge of astronomy and math allowed them to develop a complex calendar system.*

# Guide to Questions

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- *The Sacred Round was made up of two cycles. One cycle was made up of the numbers 1 to 13; the other had 20 day names.*
- *The Sacred Round was used to determine the best days to plant, do battle, perform religious ceremonies, and many other activities.*
- *Only priests could interpret the Sacred Round.*

## Agricultural Techniques

1. What crops did the Maya grow?

*The Maya grew maize, beans, squash, and chili peppers.*

2. For each environment of the Mayan civilization (mountainous highlands, swampy lowlands, forested lowlands), describe the agricultural technique the Maya used.

*In the mountainous highlands, the Maya used a system of terraces to create more flat land on which to farm. In the swampy lowlands, they used raised earth platforms surrounded by drainage canals. In the densely forested lowlands, they used slash-and-burn agriculture to clear land for farming.*

3. What are three theories for the decline of Mayan civilization? Which one do you think was most responsible for the decline?

- *The population of Mayan cities grew faster than their farming systems could sustain.*
- *Drought caused massive crop failure.*
- *There was uncontrolled warfare.*
- *Groups from central Mexico invaded Mayan city-states.*

## Achievements of the Maya

1. For each area, list the Mayan achievements:
  - Science and technology: *astronomical observations, accurate calendar, understanding of mathematics, use of zero*
  - Arts and architecture: *murals, steles, weaving, corbel vault*
  - Language and writing: *hieroglyphics, around 30 Mayan languages*
2. Fill in this phrase, “Mayan achievements such as \_\_\_\_\_ are still important today because \_\_\_\_\_.”

*Possible answer:*

*Mayan achievements such as Mayan languages are still important today because... about four million Mesoamericans still speak one of the 30 or so Mayan languages.*