

Mayan Civilization

Section 1 - Introduction



In this reading, you will learn about some of the most important achievements of the Mayan civilization. This 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. Visitors can still see the ruins of some amazing stone cities built by the Mayas (MY-uhz). The ruins of the ancient city of Tikal (tee-KAHL), shown below lie deep in the jungles of present-day Guatemala.

Picture yourself 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. 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 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 are thousands of small, thatched-roof house-mounds where the peasants live.



Tikal was only one of more than forty Mayan cities. How did the Mayas 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, and agricultural techniques.

Section 2 – Development of Mayan Civilization

The **Mayas** were creating an advanced civilization in the Americas around the same time the Roman Empire was declining in Western Europe. Mayan civilization reached its height between 300 and 900 C.E. During this time, Mayan culture spread over a great deal 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 Mayas lived varied greatly. In the south, pine forests covered the mountain highlands. In the northern and central regions were rainforests, grasslands, and swamps. These regions are known as the lowlands. Thick jungle covered the southern part of the lowlands. Today, this area is called the Petén (pay-TAYN) region of Guatemala. It is the area in which Mayan civilization reached its highest development.



The Origins of Mayan Civilization The Mayas built their civilization, in part, on ideas they inherited from a people called the **Olmecs**. The Olmecs 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 at the time was maize, or corn.

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

By 1400 B.C.E., the Olmecs 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 calendar, or a calendar based on the cycles of the sun. The Mayas would build on all these achievements.

Three Periods of Mayan Civilization Mayan civilization began to develop 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 Mayas 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 Mayas began

constructing public buildings for governmental and religious purposes. Possibly as early as 300 B.C.E., they began to adapt the writing system of the Olmecs and to develop their own system of **hieroglyphic writing** (writing that uses pictures as symbols). Mayan civilization reached its peak during the Classic period, from around 300 to 900 C.E. The achievements you will study in this reading date from this time.

During the Classic period, the Mayas adapted and developed other ideas they had learned from the Olmecs. For example, they improved on Olmec building techniques. Even though the Mayas lacked metal tools and had not discovered the wheel, they built enormous stone cities with elaborate and highly decorated temple-pyramids and palaces. The Mayas also built observatories for studying the sky. 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 included farming communities and one or more cities. At its height, the Mayan Empire included more than forty cities, including Tikal, Copan (kaw-PAHN), Chichén Itzá, and Palenque (pah-LENG-kay).

Around 900 C.E., the Classic civilization collapsed. The Mayas abandoned their cities in the southern lowland area, and the once thriving communities fell into 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 Yucatán (you-kuh-TAN) 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 Mayas continued their warfare and empire building, but they had fewer great artistic and cultural achievements.

Even at the height of their empire, the Mayas were not one unified nation. Instead, they lived in many city-states with their own governments. What united them as Mayas was their common culture: their social system, languages, calendar, religion, and way of life.

Section 3 - Class Structure

Within each Mayan city-state, society was structured like a pyramid. The ruler of each city-state was at the top of this **social pyramid**. The rest of the members of Mayan society were organized into a series of ranks below the ruler.

The Ruler The highest authority in the state was the *halach uinic* (hah-lach WEE-nik), a Mayan phrase that means “true man.” He ruled the state with the help of his advisers. He decided when and with whom 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 another close male relative succeeded him. Mayan rulers were almost always men, but scholars believe that some 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, along with the ruler, were the only members of Mayan society who knew how to read and write.

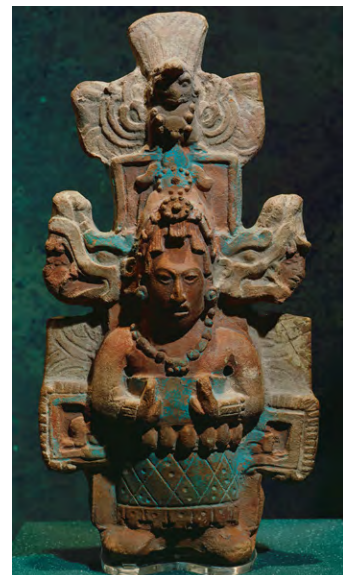
The nobles served as scribes and officials, and oversaw the administration of the states. They gathered taxes, supplies, and labor for projects, such as the construction of temples. Nobles led peasant armies in times of war. During battles, they wore elaborate costumes, including gold jewelry and animal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

Priests were important because it was their job to maintain favor with the gods. Like nobles, priests 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 to 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 Mayas 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 whose shiny green feathers were 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 of Mayan life, important battles, and other major events. They created sculptures for temples and decorative designs on palace walls. The Mayas 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 farming, peasants had to spend 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 to feed the rest of the family. War prisoners of humble origin were enslaved. (Those of higher rank were sacrificed to the gods.) And some people were enslaved as a punishment for serious crimes.

In general, the Mayas did not mistreat slaves. Sometimes, slaves actually had easier lives than peasants, depending on what jobs they did and their owners' social rank. But slaves were not free to come and go as they pleased. Often, they were sacrificed when their owners died.

Section 4 - Family Life

In city-states like Copan, located in present-day Honduras, Mayan peasants lived in one-room huts built of interwoven poles and covered with dried mud. Several family houses were often grouped around a shared courtyard. A separate kitchen building might be directly behind the main house. Peasant families worked hard, but ceremonies and rituals provided a break from work and a chance to celebrate 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* (tawr-tee-uhs), a Spanish word meaning "little breads," or *tamales* (tuh-MAH-leez) and cooked them over the fire. These might serve as the morning meal or they might be saved for dinner. On special days, the family might also have hot chocolate, a drink the Mayas made from cacao (kuh-KAY-oh) 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 in the fields. When they weren't busy with the crops, men and boys hunted and trapped animals.

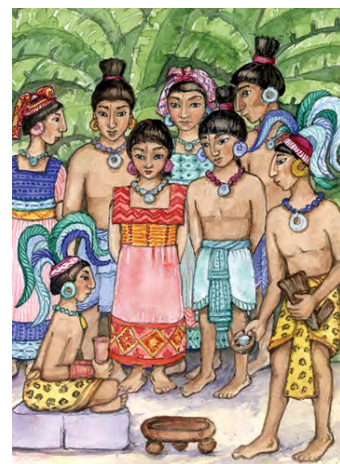
Special Occasions Mayan families took time to celebrate the important events in their lives. The birth of a child was a time for rejoicing. As soon as possible after the birth, the family called in a priest to perform a ceremony much like baptism. The priest forecast the baby's future and gave advice to help guide the parents in raising the child.

At three months of age, girls went through another ceremony. The number three was special to Mayan women because it represented the three stones of the home hearth, or 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 four 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 event in every Mayan child's life was the coming-of-age ceremony. Girls went through this ceremony at age 12, boys at 14. The long ceremony involved confessing, 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 moment in the life of a Mayan youth was marriage. Men usually married around age 20. Women 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. 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 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.

Section 5 - Religious Beliefs and Practices



Religion was very important to the Mayas. They built their cities around religious and ceremonial 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 things they discovered.

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

The Mayas 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 divine 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 Mayas honored their gods with offerings such as plants, food, flowers, feathers, jade, and shells. The Mayas 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, or nobles captured during war.

Human sacrifice also played a role in an ancient Mayan game called ***pok-a-tok***. Every Mayan city had at least one ball court where the game took place. 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 attended the popular games. However, the outcome often had serious results. 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 Mayas used their knowledge of mathematics and astronomy to develop a complex calendar system. They used two main calendars 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 our calendar does.

The second calendar was the sacred, or ritual, calendar. It was called the *tzolkin* (TSAWL-keen), 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 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 still use the 260-day calendar in this way.

Like Mayan art and architecture, the calendar system reflects a highly advanced civilization. This high level of civilization was possible due to the ability of the Mayas to create a stable food supply.

Section 6 - Agricultural Techniques

The Mayas 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 Mayas 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 Mayas 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 flat earthen steps, into the hills to make more land available for planting. In the swampy lowlands, the Mayas constructed raised-earth platforms surrounded by canals that drained off extra rainwater. This technique helped them to grow more food without having to conquer or clear more land.

A different technique was used in the densely forested lowland areas. In city-states like Palenque (in present-day Mexico), the Mayas used **slash-and-burn agriculture**. First, they cleared the land by cutting and burning plants and trees. Then they planted their crops. Unfortunately, this type of farming wears out the soil. Lowland soil was not very rich to begin with, so land that was planted for two to four years had to be left to rest for two to ten 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 Mayas 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 help supplement the food supply.

The End of the Classic Period Creative agricultural techniques were not enough to save Classic Mayan civilization. For about six hundred years, the great cities of the southern lowlands thrived. Then, in the space of fifty to one hundred years, the civilization that supported these centers fell apart. By 900 C.E., the Mayas had abandoned their large cities to the jungle.

The collapse of Classic Mayan civilization is one of the great mysteries of Mesoamerican history. Many theories have been offered 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 caused massive crop failure.

Another possible cause of the Mayas' downfall was uncontrolled warfare. In the centuries after 300 C.E., the skirmishes that were common among city-states grew 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 ended the Classic period. What we do know is that the great cities disappeared. The Mayas 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 two million Mayas still live in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Millions more are spread throughout the Yucatán Peninsula and the cities and the rural farm communities of Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

Summary

In this reading, you learned about the Mayan civilization, which existed in what is now Central America between about 2000 B.C.E and 1500 C.E.

The Development of Mayan Civilization The Mayas' greatest achievements came in the Classic period, between 300 and 900 C.E. With a writing system and building techniques adapted from the earlier Olmecs, the Mayas built complex, stone cities. At its height, their empire consisted of more than forty city-states and covered much of Central America.

Class Structure and Family Life Mayan society was a social pyramid, with the ruler at the top. Most Mayas were peasants. Women and girls cared for small children, kept house, and cooked the meals. Men and boys worked in the fields or hunted. Mayan girls celebrated reaching adulthood at 12; boys at age 14. Marriages were arranged by a matchmaker.

Religious Beliefs and Practices Mayan religion was polytheistic. The gods were forces of nature who could influence or destroy the world. Only priests could understand divine signs and read the sacred calendar, and no decisions were made without first consulting the gods.

Agricultural Techniques Farming techniques, such as terraces, slash-and-burn agriculture, and raised-earth platforms, allowed the Mayas to create a stable food supply.