

Early Americas

Maya Civilization



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Aztec Empire

Inca Empire

Thematic Icons



Economics



Geography



Historical concepts



Government

Icons



Flash activity (these activities are not editable)



Teacher notes included in the Notes page

For more instructions, see the *User Guide*.



Where was the Maya Civilization?



Development of the Maya civilization

The Maya developed their civilization in Central America, in the area called **Mesoamerica**. It is now made up of Belize, Guatemala and parts of southern Mexico.



Early Maya settled in small villages along rivers and coasts. They built up trade relationships and eventually began building more permanent city settlements.

Some of the cities built by the Maya are still standing today.

Can you find Central America using a globe or map of the world?





The terrain in Mesoamerica differed dramatically between the southern highlands and the more central lowlands.

Early Maya people settled in the lowlands, where there were tropical rainforests and swamps, fed by the **Usumacinta** and **Grijalva** rivers.

The lowlands were **fertile** and good for growing crops such as beans and maize (corn). In the highlands, people mined precious stones such as **obsidian**, which was used for weapons and decoration.



How do you think the rivers affected life in the lowlands?





The Maya civilization



By 600 BC, Mesoamerican peoples had developed their own systems of **agriculture**. These involved clearing sections of rainforest in order to plant crops.

With the development of farming, the population boomed. By 200 AD, the Maya were building large cities that could house thousands of people.

These new cities traded their local resources with each other and established a **common culture**.

One such city was **Tikal**, which became one of the most important Maya cities from c.200–900 AD.



Why is the Maya civilization not considered an empire by historians?





The development of city-states

With the development of an **agrarian** (agriculture-focused) civilization, the population of Central America grew rapidly. Individual cities, such as Teotihuacan in the north and Tikal in the south, became very powerful and influential.



These cities controlled the territory around them, becoming **city-states**.

Each city-state had its own ruler and was governed separately. The Maya were never united into one empire. Sometimes wars broke out between city-states and power frequently changed hands.

One common factor that linked the Maya city-states together was the need for **trade**.



Trade relationships were an important part of the Maya economy, which was based on **bartering**. Hematite, jade and obsidian were mined in the highlands and traded for cotton and cacao beans from the lowlands.

Trading with other city-states gave people access to resources they could not find locally. Traded resources were therefore highly valuable.

For example, in some cities, only royalty were allowed to wear colorful bird feathers that were brought from the rainforests by traders.





The Mayan Classic Period

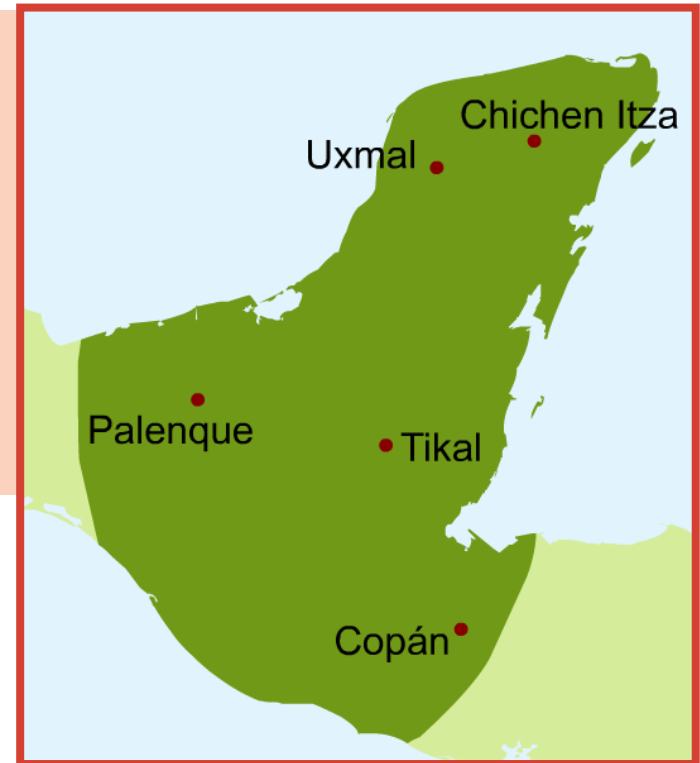


The period from 250 AD to 900 AD is referred to by historians as the Maya **Classic Period**. During this time, the Maya civilization flourished and became very powerful.

Maya culture was influenced both by earlier civilizations and also by other Mesoamerican nations.

Trade with nearby cities such as **Teotihuacan** in the west helped to facilitate the spread of ideas.

This sharing of ideas between different city-states helped create a unique Mayan culture.



Can you think of any distinctive characteristics of Maya culture?





Maya cities were arranged around a central hub, which usually included a grand **palace** for the city's ruler. The city and its surrounding territory were governed from this center.

Other key buildings in cities included:

- sacred temples, where priests would honor the gods by performing various rituals, including human sacrifices
- ball courts, which were used for popular (and possibly ritual) ball games
- residential buildings, where Maya people lived.

Wealthy and important people lived in the city center, and poorer people lived further away. Maya cities grew rapidly and the biggest ones housed thousands of people.



For the Maya, social class was important. Priests, scribes and the bravest warriors could become rich and powerful.

However, most people were **commoners**. Farmers lived on plots of land surrounding the city and grew maize, potatoes, and other crops. Others might make a living catching fish or hunting deer and turkeys for meat.

Maya children would play with simple toys made of wood or stone. Religious **rituals** also provided a form of entertainment: people would gather to watch a sacrifice or dance and sing in order to please the gods.



How do you think this hoop was used?

Most Maya cities included at least one large open space with steep stone sides. These served as playing courts for a popular ball game, sometimes known as **pok-a-tok**.

People gathered to watch two teams score points by putting a rubber ball through a hoop without using their hands. The games may also have had a ritual meaning: some art shows the losing team being sacrificed to the gods!



For most women, life was centered on the home. They spun and wove cloth, prepared meals and raised children. Historians believe that in Maya society, women's roles were seen as equal to men's, although they were different.

Some women, however, became great rulers in their own right. These include **Lady Xoc**, who is shown on this stone tablet taking part in a bloodletting ritual.

At this time, pregnancy held many risks. Women who died in childbirth were believed to have gone to the next life without having to pass through **Xibalba**, the Maya underworld.

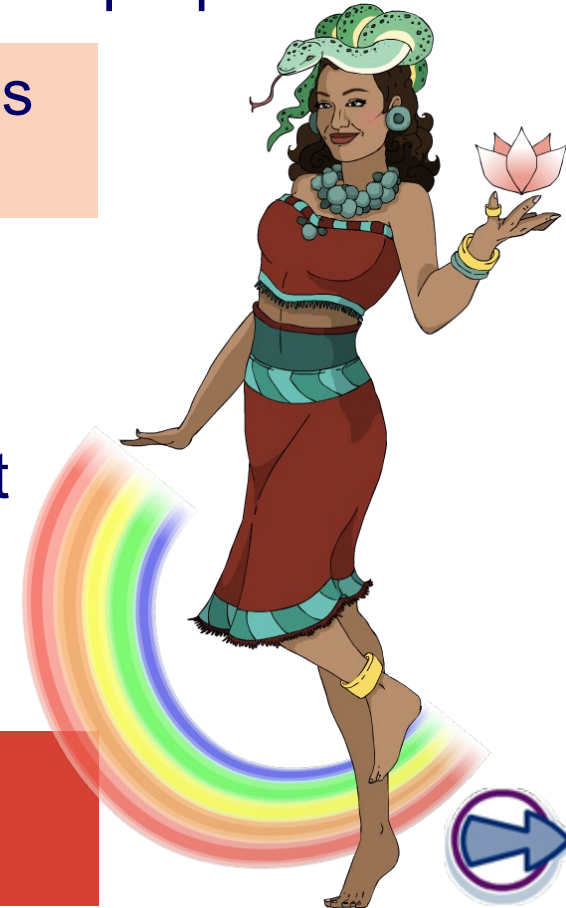


The Maya believed that the world was created by the gods. Plants and animals were created first, but the gods were not pleased with them as neither could speak to praise and honor them. Humans were created to fulfill this purpose.

Maya people worshiped lots of different gods and goddesses. Some of these included:

- Huracán, god of the sky, who formed the first people out of maize dough
- Hun H'unahpu, god of fertility, who taught humans how to grow and cultivate maize
- Ix Chel, goddess of rainbows and fertility.

What do you think the Maya believed about rainbows?



Important Maya buildings were made of stone. Locally sourced materials such as limestone or sandstone were used for the main structure.

Outer walls were covered in plaster, called **stucco**, and were often painted in bright colors. Inside, murals decorated the walls, showing scenes from Maya mythology or history.

For most of the population, houses were built of wood, mud and **wattle** (woven branches). They had simple thatched roofs and were positioned around the edge of the city.

The Maya also built paved limestone walkways between different parts of the central city complex. Some cities were also linked by paved roads known as **sacbeob**.





Maya pyramids



Huge pyramids were built to honor the gods. Some were also built by Maya rulers and used as tombs, so that people would remember their wealth and power.

Maya pyramids were typically **step pyramids**, with steep staircases leading up to a sacred temple room at the top. Only priests were allowed to climb these stairs, and rituals such as sacrifices took place at the top.

Pyramids were carefully positioned. They were built to align with the arrangement of the sun and stars at specific times of year, such as the seasonal solstices and equinoxes.



The Temple of Kukulcan

This is a photograph of **El Castillo** (the Temple of Kukulcan) in Chichen Itza during the March equinox.

What do you notice about the way the sunlight falls?

What might this have symbolized to the Maya?





Maya rulers were considered to have been appointed by the gods, and were therefore **infallible**. Each city had its own ruler, usually a king, who made laws and acted as a judge.

The king would have a group of advisors: usually nobles or priests. Priests were the voice of the gods and would make predictions about the future to help the king decide what to do in a crisis.

Kings were one of the few people who could afford a hot drink made from ground cacao beans mixed with water and flavored with honey, vanilla or herbs. It was very valuable and used as a status symbol by rich Maya to show how wealthy they were.



Do you know what this drink was?

The Maya city-states were often at war with one another. There was no formalized military, so cities rallied soldiers when they were needed. Any able-bodied man could be called upon to fight.

As well as religious and legislative leaders, Maya rulers were expected to be skilled warriors. The king would personally lead his army into battle with a neighboring tribe or city.

After a battle, the victors often **looted** the losers' city and took anything valuable. It was also common for the enemy king to be sacrificed to the gods. Enemy soldiers would be taken captive as slaves or for future sacrifices.

Historians believe that securing captives was one of the main reasons for Maya wars.

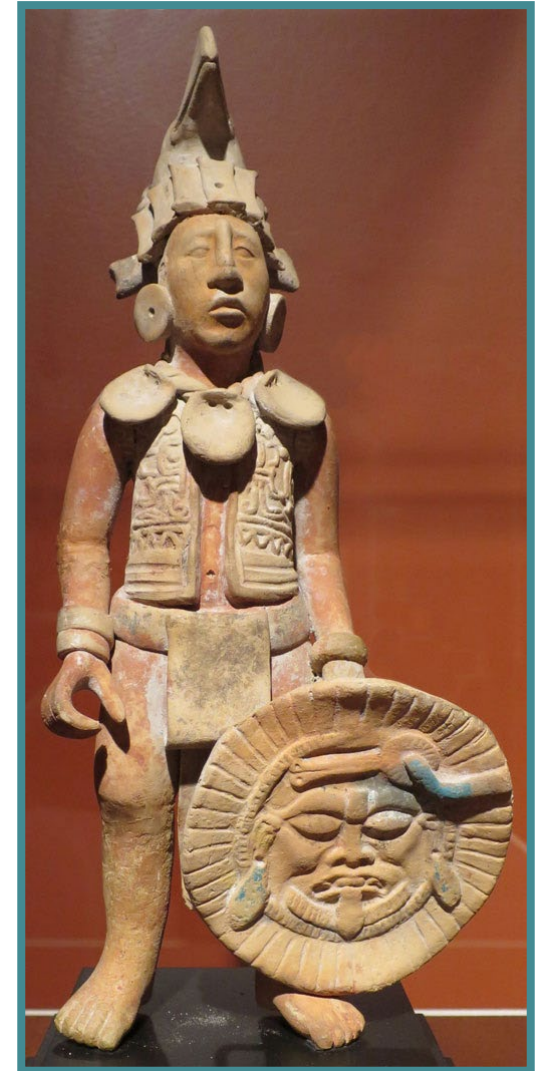




The Maya did not have metal weapons. Warriors carried obsidian-tipped spears and had thick cotton armor that had been soaked in salt water for added resilience. Spear-throwers were known as **atlatl**.

Some warriors used **blowpipes** to shoot darts at their enemies. In times of peace, blowpipes were also used for hunting.

Shields were made of wood or animal hide, and were sometimes decorated with feathers. Warriors did not wear helmets, but would wear symbolic decorative headdresses to show their status.



What do you notice about this warrior?

Scribes were an important part of society. The Maya believed that writing was given to them by the god Itzamna, and scribes were revered for their ability to write.

Most Maya writing that has survived today is carved into stone or painted on pottery. However, three books still exist, handwritten on folded bark paper. These are called **codices**.

Words were written using **glyphs**, which could symbolize an object or a sound. Numbers used dots and lines, where a dot represented one and a line represented five. The Maya were one of the first peoples to have a symbol for **zero**.



Can you figure out the last Maya number?



The Maya calendars

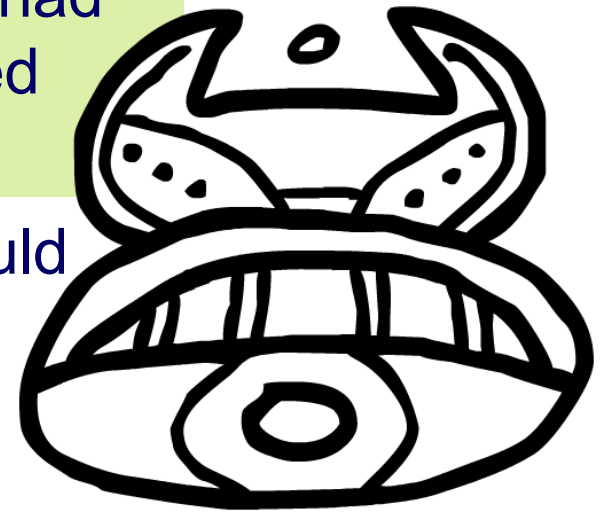


The Maya had two different kinds of calendar: the solar **Haab'** and the sacred **Tzolk'in**.

The Haab' was a solar calendar, based on the cyclical movement of the sun. It had 18 months of 20 days each, and then an extra 19th month with 5 days, to make a total of 365. **Wayeb**, the last month, was considered unlucky.

The Tzolk'in was a sacred calendar that had 260 days and shorter months. It was used to determine religious events.

Every 52 years, these two calendars would align and begin a new year on the same day. The Maya celebrated this as a festival of new beginnings.



The collapse of the Maya civilization

By 900 AD, many of the southern Maya city-states were declining and some sites had been completely abandoned. Archaeologists have different theories about why this happened, although there is not one definitive answer.

- Some cities may have been subject to **foreign invasion** and declined due to failed wars and lack of secure trade.
- The Maya may have suffered **epidemics** of disease.
- Severe **drought** may have hit the region, causing crop failures and subsequent famine.

Although the Classic Period came to an end around 900 AD, city-states in the north continued to prosper for hundreds of years afterwards, including Chichen Itza.



Keywords

