

The Maya Empire

Source: History.com

The Maya Empire, centered in the tropical lowlands of what is now Guatemala, reached the peak of its power and influence around the sixth century A.D. The Maya excelled at agriculture, pottery, hieroglyph writing, calendar-making and mathematics, and left behind an



astonishing amount of impressive architecture and symbolic artwork. Most of the great stone cities of the Maya were abandoned by A.D. 900, however, and since the 19th century scholars have debated what might have caused this dramatic decline.

Locating the Maya

The Maya civilization was one of the most dominant indigenous societies of Mesoamerica (a term used to describe Mexico and Central America before the 16th century Spanish conquest). Unlike other scattered indigenous populations of Mesoamerica, the Maya were centered in one geographical block covering all of the Yucatan Peninsula and modern-day Guatemala; Belize and parts of the Mexican states of Tabasco and Chiapas and the western part of Honduras and El Salvador. This concentration showed that the Maya remained relatively secure from invasion by other Mesoamerican peoples.

Did you know? Among the earliest Maya a single language existed, but by the Preclassic Period a great linguistic diversity developed among the various Maya peoples. In modern-day Mexico and Central America, around 5 million people speak some 70 Maya languages; most of them are bilingual in Spanish.

Within that expanse, the Maya lived in three separate sub-areas with distinct environmental and cultural differences: the northern Maya lowlands on the Yucatan Peninsula; the southern lowlands in the Peten district of northern Guatemala and adjacent portions of Mexico, Belize and western Honduras; and the southern Maya highlands, in the mountainous region of southern Guatemala. Most famously, the Maya of the southern lowland region reached their peak during the Classic Period of Maya civilization (A.D. 250 to 900), and built the great stone cities and monuments that have fascinated explorers and scholars of the region.

Maya Arts and Culture

The Classic Maya built many of their temples and palaces in a stepped pyramid shape, decorating them with elaborate reliefs and inscriptions. These structures have earned the Maya their reputation as the great artists of Mesoamerica. Guided by their religious ritual, the Maya also made significant advances in mathematics and astronomy, including the use of the zero and the development of complex calendar

systems like the Calendar Round, based on 365 days, and later, the Long Count Calendar, designed to last over 5,000 years.

Serious exploration of Classic Maya sites began in the 1830s. By the early to mid-20th century, a small portion of their system of hieroglyph writing had been deciphered, and more about their history and culture became known. Most of what historians know about the Maya comes from what remains of their architecture and art, including stone carvings and inscriptions on their buildings and monuments. The Maya also made paper from tree bark and wrote in books made from this paper, known as codices; four of these codices are known to have survived. They are also credited with some of the earliest uses of chocolate and of rubber.

Life in the Rainforest

One of the many intriguing things about the Maya was their ability to build a great civilization in a tropical rainforest climate. Traditionally, ancient peoples had flourished in drier climates, where the centralized management of water resources (through irrigation and other techniques) formed the basis of society. (This was the case for the Teotihuacan of highland Mexico, contemporaries of the Classic Maya.) In the southern Maya lowlands, however, there were few navigable rivers for trade and transport, as well as no obvious need for an irrigation system.

By the late 20th century, researchers had concluded that the climate of the lowlands was in fact quite environmentally diverse. Though foreign invaders were disappointed by the region's relative lack of silver and gold, the Maya took advantage of the area's many natural resources, including limestone (for construction), the volcanic rock obsidian (for tools and weapons) and salt. The environment also held other treasures for the Maya, including jade, quetzal feathers (used to decorate the elaborate costumes of Maya nobility) and marine shells, which were used as trumpets in ceremonies and warfare.

Mysterious Decline of the Maya

From the late eighth through the end of the ninth century, something unknown happened to shake the Maya civilization to its foundations. One by one, the Classic cities in the southern lowlands were abandoned, and by A.D. 900, Maya civilization in that region had collapsed. The reason for this mysterious decline is unknown, though scholars have developed several competing theories.

Some believe that by the ninth century the Maya had exhausted the environment around them to the point that it could no longer sustain a very large population. Other Maya scholars argue that constant warfare among competing city-states led the complicated military, family (by marriage) and trade alliances between them to break down, along with the traditional system of dynastic power. As the stature of the holy lords diminished, their complex traditions of rituals and ceremonies dissolved into chaos. Finally, some catastrophic environmental change—like an extremely long, intense period of drought—may have wiped out the Classic Maya civilization. Drought

would have hit cities like Tikal—where rainwater was necessary for drinking as well as for crop irrigation—especially hard.

All three of these factors—overpopulation and overuse of the land, endemic warfare and drought—may have played a part in the downfall of the Maya in the southern lowlands. In the highlands of the Yucatan, a few Maya cities—such as Chichen Itza, Uxmal and Mayapán—continued to flourish in the Post-Classic Period (A.D. 900-1500). By the time the Spanish invaders arrived, however, most Maya were living in agricultural villages, their great cities buried under a layer of rainforest green.

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Vocabulary- Feel free to use a dictionary to help you.

1. What does the word 'indigenous' mean?
2. Look at the final sentence in the first paragraph. What does 'concentration' mean in this context?
3. What is the phrase 'within this expanse' closest in meaning to? A) In the mountains B) Within this area C) Within the houses
4. What does the word 'deciphered' mean?
5. The text describes Teotihuacan of highland Mexico as 'contemporaries of Classic Maya'. What does this phrase mean?

Retrieval- These questions follow chronological order of the text.

1. Look at the first paragraph. List two things that the Mayans 'excelled at'.
2. What is the term used to describe Mexico and Central America before the 16th century Spanish conquest?
3. In the first paragraph of 'Maya arts and culture', can you name one of the significant advances in mathematics and astronomy?
4. What is the name for the Mayan books made of bark paper?
5. Look at the second paragraph in 'Life in the rainforest'. Name two natural resources the Mayans used?
6. When did the Maya civilisation collapse?

Inference

1. The Maya civilization remained in one large area, which helped prevent them from invasion. Why is this?
2. Why is it important to study evidence of ancient civilisation?
3. Why were researchers surprised that the Maya civilisation thrived in the rainforest?
4. How do we know that the Mayan civilization collapsed in A.D. 900?
5. What impression do you get of the Mayan civilisation? Use evidence from the text.