

Mayan Civilization Fact Sheet

Introduction:

The Maya are probably the best-known of the classical civilizations of Mesoamérica. Originating in the Yucatán around 2600 B.C., they rose to prominence around A.D. 250 in present-day southern México, Guatemala, northern Belize and western Honduras. Building on the inherited inventions and ideas of earlier civilizations such as the Olmec, the Maya developed astronomy, calendar systems and hieroglyphic writing. The Maya were noted for their amazing architecture. They were also skilled farmers, weavers and potters. Around the 300 B.C., the Maya adopted a hierarchical system of government with rule by nobles and kings, and it started to decline around A.D. 900 when – for reasons which are still largely a mystery – the southern Maya abandoned their cities. Although the northern Maya continued to flourish at sites such as Mayapan and Chichén Itza for several more centuries, the Maya dynasty finally came to a close when the Spanish Conquest arrived in the early sixteenth century. Maya history can be characterized as cycles of rise and fall: city-states rose in prominence and fell into decline, only to be replaced by others. It could also be described as one of continuity and change, guided by a religion that remains the foundation of their culture. For those who follow the ancient Maya traditions, the belief in the influence of the cosmos on human lives and the necessity of paying homage to the gods through rituals continues to find expression in a modern hybrid Christian-Maya faith.

The word “Maya” often evokes images of pyramids/temples, ruins, rainforest and, at times sacrifices. Even though most of the focus on education regarding the Maya is about the past, many people forget that the Maya are still alive and well. They continue to preserve many of their cultural traditions.

The Maya civilization is a Mesoamerican civilization, noted for the only fully developed written language of the pre-Colombian Americas, as well as its spectacular art, monumental architecture, and sophisticated mathematical and astronomical systems. Initially established during the Pre-classic Period, they reached their apogee of development during the Classic Period (c. 250 to 900), and some cities continued to flourish throughout the Post-classic Period, after the Classic collapse, until the arrival of the Spanish. At its peak, it was one of the most densely populated and culturally dynamic societies in the world.

The Maya civilization shares many features with other Mesoamerican civilizations due to the high degree of interaction and cultural diffusion that characterized the region. Advances such as writing, epigraphy, and the calendar, did not originate with the Maya. However, their civilization fully developed them. Maya influence can be detected as far as central México. Many outside influences are found in Maya art and architecture, which are thought to result from trade and cultural exchange rather than direct external conquest.

The Maya peoples never disappeared, neither at the time of the Classic period decline nor with the arrival of the conquistadores. Today, the Maya and their descendants form sizable populations throughout the Maya area and maintain a distinctive set of traditions. Many different Mayan languages continue to be spoken as primary languages.

As the largest sub-region in Mesoamerica, it encompassed a vast and varied landscape from the mountainous regions of the Sierra Madre to the semi-arid plains of northern Yucatán. Climate in the Maya region varies tremendously, and the low-lying areas are particularly susceptible to the hurricanes and tropical storms that frequent the Caribbean.

The Maya area is generally divided into three loose zones: The southern Maya highlands, include all of the elevated terrain in Guatemala and the Chiapas highlands. The southern (or central) Maya lowlands, lie just north of the highlands, and incorporate the Petén of northern Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and the southern portions of the Mexican states of Campeche and Quintana Roo. The northern Maya lowlands. Cover the remainder of the Yucatán Peninsula, including the Puuc hills.

History

Pre-classic Period (2,000 BC – 200 AD)

The first clearly “ Maya” settlement, established in approximately 1800 BC in the Soconusco region of the Pacific Coast, was characterized by sedentary communities and the introduction of pottery and fired clay figurines.. Important Pre-classic northern sites: Dzibilchaltun, Komchen, and El Mirador.

Classic Period (200-900 AD)

The Classic Period (c. 250-900) witnessed the peak of large constructions and urbanism, the recording of monumental inscriptions, and a period of significant intellectual and artistic development.

The most notable monuments are the pyramids they built in their religious centers and the accompanying palaces of their rulers, the palace at Cancun is the largest in the Maya area, though the site, interestingly, lacks pyramids. Important remains include carved stone slabs usually called “stelae” (the Maya called them “tetun” or “*tree stones*”), which depict rulers along with hieroglyphic texts describing their genealogy, military victories, and other accomplishments.

The Maya participated in long distance trade with many of the Mesoamerican cultures , including Teotihuacan, the Zapotec, and other groups in central and Gulf-coast México. For example, archeologists found gold from Panama in the Cenote of Chichén Itzá. Important trade goods included cacao, salt, sea shells, jade, and obsidian.

Important classic sites are Tikal, Palenque, Caracol, and Calakmul to mention a few.

The Maya “collapse” (9th century)

Many reasons have been put forward to explain the Classic collapse. But see the National Geographic websites for the most up to date thinking on this subject

The Post-Classic (900-1519)

During the succeeding Post classic period (from the 10th to the early 16th century) characterized by an increasing diversity of external influences, for centuries cities of the northern lowlands continued to flourish such as important sites as Chichen Itzá, Uxmal, Edzná, and Cobá.

Colonial Period

Shortly after their first expedition to the region, the Spanish initiated a number of attempts to subjugate the Maya and established a colonial presence in the Maya territories of the Yucatán Península and the Guatemala highlands. This campaign, sometimes termed “ The Spanish Conquest of Yucatán”, would prove to be a lengthy and dangerous exercise for the *conquistadores* from the outset, and it would take some 170 years before the Spanish established substantive control over all Maya lands.. The *conquistador* forces needed to subdue the numerous independent Maya polities almost one by one, many of which kept up a resistance.

Most of the *conquistadores* were motivated by the prospects of the great wealth to be had from seizure of precious metal resources such as gold, or silver. However, the Maya lands themselves were poor in these resources. This would become another factor in forestalling Spanish designs of conquest, as they instead were initially attracted to the reports of great riches in central Mexico or Peru. .The Maya states were finally subdued by the Spanish in 1697 at Tayasal in Guatemala.

Political Structure

A typical Classic Maya polity was a small hierarchical state (ajawil) headed by a ruler known as an “ajaw.” Such kingdoms, were usually no more than a capital city with its neighborhood and several lesser towns, although there were greater kingdoms, which controlled larger territories and extended patronage over smaller polities. Mayani students have been increasingly accepting a “court paradigm” of classic Maya societies which puts the emphasis on the centrality of the royal household.

None of the Classic Maya cities shows evidence of economic specialization and commerce of the scale of Mexican Teotihuacan .Maya cities could be seen as enormous royal households, the locales of the administrative and ritual activities of the royal court. They were the places where the privileged nobles could approach the holy ruler, and were the sources of social, moral, and cosmic order.