

## Introduction to the Maya Civilization, Grade 6-12

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### Lesson Plan Summary:

The Maya are probably the best-known of the classical civilizations of Mesoamerica. In this lesson plan, students will be given a thorough introduction to the civilization of the Mayans. Students will complete a variety of tasks, including the viewing of a PowerPoint presentation, a Spanish vocabulary building exercise, a research activity, a group project, and a written exercise.

### Objectives:

A) To develop the following skills and qualities:

- Critical research skills.
- Information sharing and group cooperation.
- Compare and analyze information.
- Organize and record information from different sources.
- Oral presentation.
- Spanish language practice and vocabulary building.
- Practice written skills.

B) To understand the following aspects of the Mayan civilization, including:

- Its origins;
- Its development and the principal characteristics of the three major periods recognized by archaeologists: Pre-Classic, Classic, and Post-Classic;
- The reasons for the collapse of the Maya at the end of the Classic;
- The fate of the Mayan civilization during the colonial period.

### Materials:

- 1) Maya Civilization PowerPoint and narration sheet
- 2) Worksheet for Maya Civilization (attached)
- 3) Internet access and computers
- 4) Supporting information (attached)

### Activities:

#### 1) Introduction

Use the PowerPoint presentation provided to introduce the Maya Civilization. Narrate and ask questions about the presentation using the Mayan Civilization narration guide.

#### 2) Vocabulary Building

Ask the students to give the Spanish translations for 25 vocabulary words (if students have problems they can use dictionaries; turn this into a competition to see who can answer first).

### 3) Research Task

Students will find answers to the questions on the Mayan Civilization Worksheet using the websites provided.

### 4) Group Work and Class Evaluation

After completing the research task individually, divide the students into groups to compare the answers to the worksheet. The teacher should circulate throughout the classroom and check on the progress of each group. The teacher may use the Mayan Civilization Fact Sheet as support.

### 5) Written exercises

Teachers may wish to set their own written exercises. Some examples might be:

- Write an essay about the Mayan civilization. Use at least 4 paragraphs covering the Pre-Classic, Classic, Post-Classic, and Colonial periods.
- Create a timeline of the Mayan civilization with major events in their history.
- Spanish language activity:

The teacher will ask students to find the meanings of the following words. Then the teacher will ask the students to write an essay about the Maya Civilization in Spanish or, more simply, to write sentences including these words:

ancestros	declinar	evidencia
agricultura	evidencia	cultivo
antiguo	conocimiento	tumba
cambio	invasión	quema
culto	ocupación	edificar
competencia	piedra	construir
conquista	reconstruir	enfrentar
conchas	ritual	ceremonia
comunidad	raíz	misterio
clima	título	reinado
colapsar	ruta	templos
epidemia	sobrevivir	castillos
enfermedad	sagrado	ciudad
geográfico	sangre	maíz
hipótesis	vida	
inscripciones	vecinos	

## Mayan Civilization PowerPoint Narration Guide

Use the PowerPoint presentation provided to introduce the Maya Civilization. Narrate the presentation using these descriptions and questions:

- Slide 1: Chicxulub Impact crater – ask students if they know what this represents.
- Slide 2: Sacred Cenote- ask students if they know what this is and what the relationship is between the cenotes and the Chicxulub impact crater.
- Slide 3: The “Castillo” at Chichén Itzá.
  - First, ask students if they know what civilization this represents.
  - Ask what the connection is between the Mayas and cenotes.
  - Make sure the students know that Chichén Itza is one of the “New Seven Wonders of the World.”
  - Were the Mayans the only civilization that built pyramids?
  - What were the pyramids used for? (Not just for burial but also as observatories.)
- Slide 4: The Observatory at Chichén Itza: tell students that this building was designed as an observatory: It is the Mayan equivalent of a telescope!
- Slide 5: The “Magician’s Palace” at Uxmal. Ask if anyone knows which Mayan city this is. Use the slide to figure out what the students already know about the Maya (What area they lived in/ how long ago/ how they lived etc.)
- Slide 6: Masks of the rain god, Chaac, at Uxmal
  - Ask students if they know what kind of religion the Maya practiced.
  - Tell students they were “polytheistic;” they had many gods.
  - Tell students these masks represent the rain god Chaac. Ask if they know why the rain god was so important to the Maya. (Long dry season, droughts, not all Mayan cities had cenotes – at Uxmal for example they depended on collecting and storing rainwater in underground reservoirs.)
- Slide 7: Detail of decorations at Uxmal. Tell the students that the Maya were expert architects and stone masons and we can learn a lot about their beliefs through the decorations on the buildings.
- Slide 8: The “corbelled” arch. Designers and builders were, however, restricted by the technical limitations of the corbelled arch as compared to the Roman arch. The Roman model features a keystone, which affords wide coverage of space, whereas the corbelled arch contains a capstone, which allows only narrow spaces.
- Slide 9: The “House of the Seven Dolls” at Dzibichaltun in the Yucatan. Tell students that not all the pyramids were as big as Chichén or Uxmal. The earlier

buildings were smaller. This small pyramid is also an observatory – the sun sets through the central doorway during the equinox.

- Slide 10: Some pyramids, like this early example from El Naranjal near Cancun, were little more than small mounds.
- Slide 11: Who are these people and what do they do? Why is it important for us to understand ancient civilizations? What can they tell us about our own civilization?

## Vocabulary Building in Spanish

Ask the students to give the Spanish translations for the following 25 words (if students have problems they can use dictionaries; turn this into a competition to see who can answer first).

pyramid

build

gods

civilization

mask

astronomy

cenote

archaeologist

astronomer

meteor

archaeology

astronomical

impact

archaeological

stars

observatory

stone

planets

observe

excavate

equinox

arch

religion

architect

beliefs

## MAYA CIVILIZATION WORKSHEET

*Use the websites provided to answer the following questions:*

1. How big an area did the Maya civilization cover at its height?
2. What do archaeologists call the geographic region the Maya inhabited?
3. How many countries does this represent today? Find a map of the Maya area, download and print if you are able.
4. What other ancient civilizations flourished in America before the conquest?
5. What does "Pre-Columbian" mean?
6. What things did the Maya excel in?
7. What are the three major periods of the Mayan civilization; give dates.
8. How long ago were the first recognizably Mayan settlements established?
9. When did ceremonial architecture first appear?
10. Name 3 important Pre-Classic sites.
11. What crops did they cultivate?
12. What characterized the Classic Period?
13. In which part of the Maya area did the Classic Maya reach their peak of development?
14. What type of government did they have?
15. Where did the rulers record their victories in battles and other accomplishments?
16. What kinds of trade did the Maya practice and how extensive were these routes?
17. When did the Classic Maya begin to decline?
18. What reasons have been given for the collapse of the Classic Maya? Name at least 6 and explain your answers.
19. What characterized the Post-Classic period?
20. Which parts of the Maya area had important Post-Classic cities?
21. Name 3 important Post-Classic sites.

22. What evidence do archaeologists have that suggest the Maya were influenced by other cultures?
23. When did the colonial period begin?
24. What effect did the arrival of the Spanish have on the Maya and other indigenous groups in Central and South America?
25. How long did it take the Spanish to conquer the Maya?
26. What was the name of the last Maya state to be conquered by the Spanish?
27. What was the name of this place and which country is it found in?
28. Did the Maya disappear completely?
29. How many people speak the Maya language today?
30. Are the Mayas' lives today similar to their ancestors?

### **Recommended Websites for Research**

<http://tides.sfasu.edu:2006/index.php>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya\\_civilization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya_civilization)

<http://www.civilization.ca/civil/maya/mmc01eng.html>

<http://history-world.org/maya.htm>

<http://www.crystalinks.com/mayan.html>

<http://www.kidskonnnect.com/content/view/256/27/>

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761576077\\_1/maya\\_calendar.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761576077_1/maya_calendar.html)

<http://www.mayankids.com/timeline2.htm>

<http://www.hanksville.org/yucatan/periods.html>

<http://www.learner.org/interactives/collapse/mayans.html>

<http://www.learner.org/interactives/collapse/>

<http://www.jaguar-sun.com/>

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2008/02/080229-servir-maya.html>

<http://www.cathalac.org/>

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2007/08/maya-rise-fall/gugliotta-text>

[http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/03/0313\\_030313\\_mayadrought.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/03/0313_030313_mayadrought.html)

[http://www.learner.org/interactives/collapse/mayans\\_sub.html](http://www.learner.org/interactives/collapse/mayans_sub.html)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesoamerican\\_chronology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesoamerican_chronology)

# 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.