



# Maya Kings and Cities

## MAIN IDEA

**RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL SYSTEMS**  
The Maya developed a highly complex civilization based on city-states and elaborate religious practices.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Descendants of the Maya still occupy the same territory.

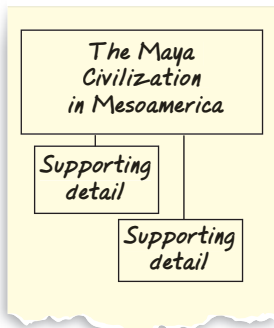
## TERMS & NAMES

- Tikal
- glyph
- codex
- *Popol Vuh*

**SETTING THE STAGE** In the early centuries A.D., most North American peoples were beginning to develop complex societies. Further south, the peoples of Mexico and Central America were entering into the full flower of civilization. A prime example of this cultural flowering were the Maya, who built an extraordinary civilization in the heart of Mesoamerica.

### TAKING NOTES

**Summarizing** Use a graphic organizer to note the major features of the Maya civilization.



## Maya Create City-States

The homeland of the Maya stretched from southern Mexico into northern Central America. This area includes a highland region and a lowland region. The lowlands lie to the north. They include the dry scrub forest of the Yucatán (yoo•kuh•TAN) Peninsula and the dense, steamy jungles of southeastern Mexico and northern Guatemala. The highlands are further south—a range of cool, cloud-wreathed mountains that stretch from southern Mexico to El Salvador.

While the Olmec were building their civilization along the Gulf Coast in the period from 1200 B.C. to 400 B.C., the Maya were also evolving. (See Chapter 9.) They took on Olmec influences, blending these with local customs. By A.D. 250, Maya culture had burst forth in a flourishing civilization.

**Urban Centers** The period from A.D. 250 to 900 is known as the Classic Period of Maya civilization. During this time, the Maya built spectacular cities such as **Tikal** (tee•KAHL), a major center in northern Guatemala. Other important sites included Copán, Palenque, Uxmal, and Chichén Itzá (chee•CHEHN ee•TSAH). (See the map on page 447.) Each of these was an independent city-state, ruled by a god-king and serving as a center for religious ceremonies and trade. Maya cities featured giant pyramids, temples, palaces, and elaborate stone carvings dedicated to the gods and to important rulers. Tens of thousands of people lived in residential areas surrounding the city center, which bustled with activity.

Archaeologists have identified at least 50 major Maya sites, all with monumental architecture. For example, Temple IV pyramid at Tikal stretched 212 feet into the jungle sky. In addition to temples and pyramids, each

▼ Maya jade death mask, seventh century A.D.



## MAIN IDEA

### Drawing Conclusions

**A** What does the ability to construct complex buildings reveal about a society?

Maya city featured a ball court. In this stone-sided playing field, the Maya played a game that had religious and political significance. The Maya believed the playing of this game would maintain the cycles of the sun and moon and bring life-giving rains. **A**

### Agriculture and Trade Support Cities

Although the Maya city-states were independent of each other, they were linked through alliances and trade. Cities exchanged their local products such as salt, flint, feathers, shells, and honey. They also traded craft goods like cotton textiles and jade ornaments. While the Maya did not have a uniform currency, cacao (chocolate) beans sometimes served as one.

As in the rest of Mesoamerica, agriculture—particularly the growing of maize, beans, and squash—provided the basis for Maya life. For years, experts assumed that the Maya practiced slash-and-burn agriculture. This method involves farmers clearing the land by burning existing vegetation and planting crops in the ashes. Evidence now shows, however, that the Maya also developed more sophisticated methods, including planting on raised beds above swamps and on hillside terraces.

**Kingdoms Built on Dynasties** Successful farming methods led to the accumulation of wealth and the development of social classes. The noble class, which included priests and the leading warriors, occupied the top rung of Maya society. Below them came merchants and those with specialized knowledge, such as skilled artisans. Finally, at the bottom, came the peasant majority.

The Maya king sat at the top of this class structure. He was regarded as a holy figure, and his position was hereditary. When he died, he passed the throne on to his eldest son. Other sons of the ruler might expect to join the priesthood.

## Religion Shapes Maya Life

Religion influenced most aspects of Maya life. The Maya believed in many gods. There were gods of corn, of death, of rain, and of war. Gods could be good or evil, and sometimes both. Gods also were associated with the four directions and with different colors: white for north, black for west, yellow for south, red for east, and green in the center. The Maya believed that each day was a living god whose behavior could be predicted with the help of a system of calendars.

**Religious Practices** The Maya worshiped their gods in various ways. They prayed and made offerings of food, flowers, and incense. They also pierced and cut their bodies and offered their blood, believing that this would nourish the gods. Sometimes the Maya even carried out human sacrifice, usually of captured enemies. At Chichén Itzá, they threw captives into a deep sinkhole lake, called a *cenote* (say•NO•tay), along with gold, jade, and other offerings. The Maya believed





that human sacrifice pleased the gods and kept the world in balance. Nevertheless, the Maya's use of sacrifice never reached the extremes of some other Mesoamerican peoples.

**Math and Religion** Maya religious beliefs also led to the development of the calendar, mathematics, and astronomy. The Maya believed that time was a burden carried on the back of a god. At the end of a day, month, or year, one god would lay the burden down and another would pick it up. A day would be lucky or unlucky, depending on the nature of the god. So, it was very important to have an accurate calendar to know which god was in charge of the day.

The Maya developed a 260-day religious calendar, which consisted of thirteen 20-day months. A second 365-day solar calendar consisted of eighteen 20-day months, with a separate period of 5 days at the end. The two calendars were linked together like meshed gears so that any given day could be identified in both cycles. The calendar helped identify the best times to plant crops, attack enemies, and crown new rulers.

The Maya based their calendar on careful observation of the planets, sun, and moon. Highly skilled Maya astronomers and mathematicians calculated the solar year at 365.2420 days. This is only .0002 of a day short of the figure generally accepted today! The Maya astronomers were able to attain such great precision by using a math system that included the concept of zero. The Maya used a shell symbol for zero, dots for the numbers one to four, and a bar for five. The Maya number system was a base-20 system. They used the numerical system primarily for calendar and astronomical work. **B**

**Written Language Preserves History** The Maya also developed the most advanced writing system in the ancient Americas. Maya writing consisted of about 800 hieroglyphic symbols, or **glyphs** (glihfs). Some of these glyphs stood for whole words, while others represented syllables. The Maya used their writing system to record important historical events, carving their glyphs in stone or recording them in a bark-paper book known as a **codex** (KOH•DEHKS). Only three of these ancient books have survived.

Other original books telling of Maya history and customs do exist, however. Maya peoples wrote these down after the arrival of the Spanish. The most famous of these books, the **Popol Vuh** (POH•pohl VOO), recounts the Highland Maya's version of the story of creation. "Before the world was created, Calm and Silence were the great kings that ruled," reads the first sentence in the book. "Nothing existed, there was nothing."

**MAIN IDEA**

**Making Inferences**

**B** How are math, astronomy, and calendars related?

▼ A detail from the Maya Codex Troano

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

Then let the emptiness fill! they said. Let the water weave its way downward so the earth can show its face! Let the light break on the ridges, let the sky fill up with the yellow light of dawn! Let our glory be a man walking on a path through the trees! "Earth!" the Creators called. They called only once, and it was there, from a mist, from a cloud of dust, the mountains appeared instantly.

From the *Popol Vuh*




## Rise and Fall of the Maya

Traits of Civilization	Strength Leading to Power	Weakness Leading to Decline
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Religious beliefs and theocracy</li> <li>Independent city-states</li> <li>Intensive agriculture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>United culture</li> <li>Loyalty to the king</li> <li>Wealthy and prosperous culture</li> <li>Production of more food feeds a larger population</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many physical and human resources funneled into religious activities</li> <li>Frequent warfare occurs between kingdoms</li> <li>Population growth creates need for more land</li> </ul>
<p><b>SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts</b></p> <p><b>1. Recognizing Effects</b> Which trait aids in building a sense of loyalty to the ruler?</p> <p><b>2. Drawing Conclusions</b> How can intensive agriculture be both a strength and a weakness?</p>		

## Mysterious Maya Decline


The remarkable history of the Maya ended in mystery. In the late 800s, the Maya suddenly abandoned many of their cities. Invaders from the north, the Toltec, moved into the lands occupied by the Maya. These warlike peoples from central Mexico changed the culture. The high civilization of Maya cities like Tikal and Copán disappeared.

No one knows exactly why this happened, though experts offer several overlapping theories. By the 700s, warfare had broken out among the various Maya city-states. Increased warfare disrupted trade and produced economic hardship. In addition, population growth and over-farming may have damaged the environment, and this led to food shortages, famine, and disease. By the time the Spanish arrived in the early 1500s, the Maya were divided into small, weak city-states that gave little hint of their former glory. 

As the Maya civilization faded, other peoples of Mesoamerica were growing in strength and sophistication. Like the Maya, these peoples would trace some of their ancestry to the Olmec. Eventually, these people would dominate the Valley of Mexico and lands beyond it, as you will learn in Section 3.

### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Causes

 Why did the Maya civilization go into decline?

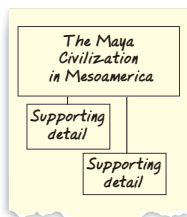
## SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT

**TERMS & NAMES** 1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Tikal
- glyph
- codex
- Popol Vuh*

### USING YOUR NOTES

2. How do the characteristics of Maya civilization compare with the characteristics of a typical civilization?



### MAIN IDEAS

- What was the basis of Maya life?
- Why was the calendar important for the Maya religion?
- What three explanations have been given for the collapse of the Maya civilization?

### CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING

- RECOGNIZING EFFECTS** Why was trade important to the Maya civilization?
- DRAWING CONCLUSIONS** How important do you think the development of advanced mathematics was in the creation of the Maya calendar?
- ANALYZING CAUSES** Which of the causes for the fall of the Maya do you think was most important? Explain.
- WRITING ACTIVITY** **RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL SYSTEMS**  
Imagine that you are a reporter visiting Maya city-states. Write a one-page **news article** that describes various aspects of the Maya religion.

### CONNECT TO TODAY CREATING A MAP

Conduct research to discover the countries in which the modern Maya live. Use your findings to create a **map** showing the areas within these countries occupied by the Maya.