

The Mayas

The Territory of the Mayas

The Mayan culture spread throughout southern Mexico and Central America. It included the **Yucatan Peninsula** to the north as well as today's countries of Honduras, Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala to the south. It stretched from the Pacific Ocean in the west to the Caribbean Sea in the east. This land included rugged highlands as well as dense swamps.

The Mayan People

The Mayan people were short. The average height of the men was just over five feet. The women were about four feet eight inches tall. Mayas had straight black hair, and many painted their bodies black, red, or blue. They also often had tattoos. They valued crossed eyes and tied objects from their infants' foreheads to encourage their eyes to cross. Some Mayas also tied boards to the heads of their children to flatten their foreheads.

Mayan History

Historians divide the story of the **Mayas** into three eras: the pre-classic, the classic, and the post-classic. The **pre-classic era** lasted from about 2,500 B.C. to A.D. 250. During this time, the Mayas came in contact with and borrowed from the Olmecs. The early Mayan settlements were fishing villages along the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea; they moved inland when they learned to plant crops.

The Mayan **classic era** continued from A.D. 250 to A.D. 900. They built many great cities, most of which had majestic pyramid temples. **Tikal**, the largest Mayan city, may have had a population of 100,000 or more. During the classic era, the Mayas improved methods of agriculture. They also developed advanced mathematics and astronomy as well as a system of writing.

The **post-classic era** began with the collapse of the Mayan empire after A.D. 900. It lasted until the **Spanish conquest** in the 1500s. One of the world's greatest mysteries is what happened to the Mayan culture. It was the most important civilization in the new world in A.D. 900. Suddenly, however, the Mayas left their great cities and scattered throughout the countryside. We still do not know why the great Mayan civilization ended. The Mayas continued to farm and trade in the region after the great cities fell. Christopher Columbus met some Mayan traders in 1502. Mayan descendants still live in the region of their ancestors.



The Mayas created sculptures on large stone slabs called stela. These carvings reveal much about the Mayan people.

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Map Follow-Up

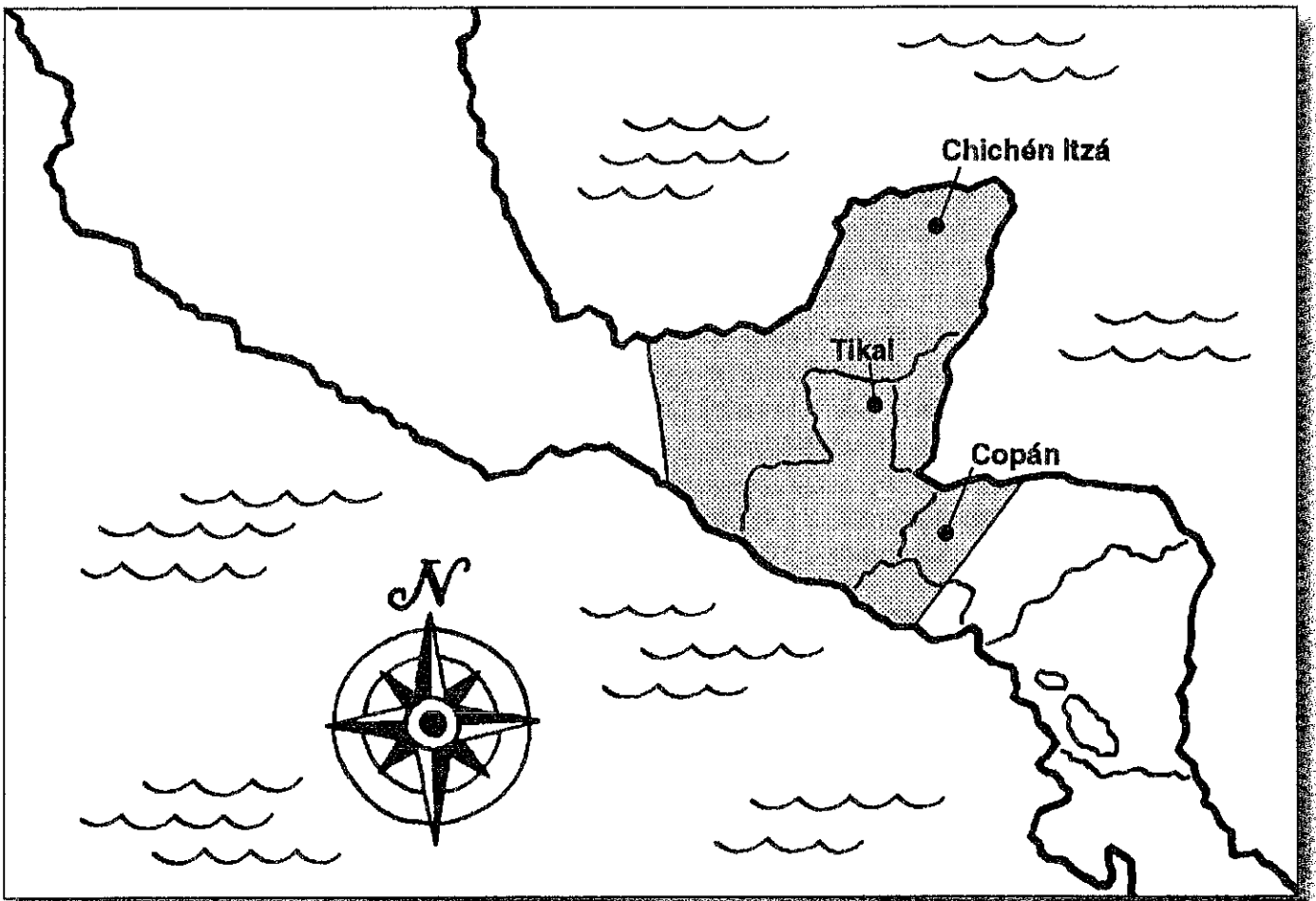
The shaded area of the map below shows the ancient Mayan empire and the Mayan cities of Chichén Itzá, Tikal, and Copán. Use a globe or atlas and write in the names of the modern locations listed.

Belize
Mexico
El Salvador
Nicaragua

Gulf of Mexico
Caribbean Sea
Yucatan Peninsula

Honduras
Pacific Ocean
Guatemala

The Mayan Empire



Mayan Religion

Religion was important to every part of Mayan life. The Mayas worshipped many different gods. Each day, month, city, and occupation had its own special god or goddess. The Mayas had a variety of religious festivals and celebrations. Most of these celebrations included human sacrifice.

Halach Uinic: Ruler and Priest

The Mayan empire was divided into many city-states. Each city-state had its own ruler. His name was *halach uinic*. This meant “the true or real man.” The Mayas believed halach uinic was a living god. He ruled until his death. At his death, his oldest son became the next halach uinic. If the halach uinic did not have a son, his brother would rule. If he did not have a brother, the ruler’s council elected a member of his family to serve. Some historians believe that the halach uinic also served as the high priest during religious ceremonies.



Each Mayan city-state had a ruler called the halach uinic. He may have also served as the high priest during religious ceremonies.

The halach uinic dressed in elaborate and colorful clothes. He also wore a very large head-dress. Temple wall paintings show him with large ear decorations, crossed eyes, and many tattoos.

Mayan Priests

Many other priests served with the halach uinic. These priests, named *ahkin*, performed many duties. They had the knowledge of mathematics and astronomy. Some of the ahkin were prophets. Some of them performed the religious sacrifices. Other ahkin performed medical rituals. The Mayas believed that only the priests could explain the mysteries of life and death. The Mayas believed that the earth was flat. They thought it was on the back of a crocodile that floated in a large pond. At another time they believed the earth was the floor of a lizard house.

Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld

The Mayas’ religion taught that there were 13 layers of heavens above the earth. They also believed nine underworlds were below. They thought that they lived in the fifth creation of the world. The previous four worlds had each been destroyed by a great flood. At the beginning of the fifth world, the gods created humans from corn.

Sacrifices to the Gods

Many of the Mayan religious ceremonies included gifts and sacrifices to the various gods and goddesses. The Mayas believed the gods would give favors to them in return for prayers, offerings, and sacrifices. The **sacrifices** included valuable gifts, their own blood, and human sacrifices.

In many ceremonies, the priests cut themselves to get blood to present to the gods. The Mayas had three methods of giving the human sacrifices. Often, the priests took the victim to the

altar at the temple. Then the priests cut the heart out of the living victim and presented it to the god. In another method, the priests tied the victim to a wooden pole. Then they threw spears and arrows at the victim's chest in the area of the heart. In the third type of sacrifice, they threw the victim into a sacred well. The most famous of these wells is the Well of Sacrifice at Chichén Itzá. If victims survived the fall and did not drown, the priests pulled them back out of the well. The Mayas believed the gods had chosen to spare these victims. The priests then asked the victims what messages they brought back from the gods. The victims received special treatment from then on since the Mayas believed they had spoken to the gods.

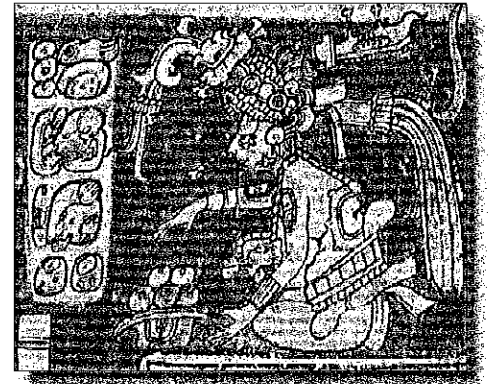
Worshipping the Dead

The Mayas also worshipped the dead. They believed the dead became one with the gods. They worshipped their ancestors at many religious ceremonies. They also built pyramids over the sacred remains of their dead rulers.

The Mayan Gods and Goddesses

The Mayas worshipped many gods. Here are some of the more important ones:

Itzamná: He was the head god, lord of the heavens and lord of night and day. His name meant lizard. Carved pictures show him as an old crossed-eyed man. He had a lizard's body. The Mayas believed he invented books and writing.



Kinich Ahau: He was the sun god. He was also the god of the rulers.

Chac: He was the rain god. Carvings show him as a reptile with a large nose pointing down and curling fangs. He had four aspects:

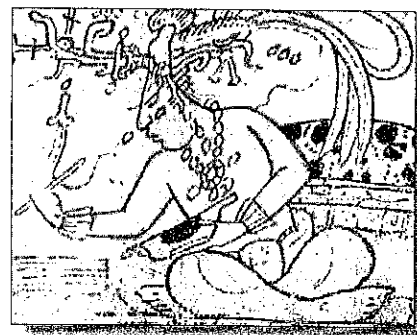
Chac Xib Chac
Sac Xib Chac
Ek Xib Chac
Kan Xib Chac

Red Chac of the East
White Chac of the North
Black Chac of the West
Yellow Chac of the South



The Mayan Gods and Goddesses (cont.)

Yun Kaax: He is the god of maize (corn). He is also the god of all agriculture. Pictures always show him as a young man. He is either carrying a plant or has a plant as a headdress.



Ah Puch: He is the god of death. Carvings of him show a skull and skeleton.

Ek Chaub: He is the god of trade. Mayan artists painted his face black and he had a drooping lower lip.



Ix Chel: She is the moon and rainbow goddess. She is also the goddess of weaving and childbirth.

Buluc Chabtan: He is the god of war and human sacrifice. Carvings of him show a black line around his eye and down onto his cheek. He is at times shown with a torch or weapon in his hand.



Mayan Cities

The ruins of Mayan cities remained hidden for centuries in the dense jungles. Scientists are still working to uncover and study most of these cities, but visitors can now explore the ruins of Tikal, Copán, Chichén Itzá, and several other cities.

How Mayan Cities Were Organized

At first, scientists thought these locations were religious centers only.

After further study, they found these were complete cities. The ceremonial center formed the heart of each city. Tall pyramids topped with temples stood in large open **plazas**, and public buildings, palaces, and **ball courts** surrounded the plazas.

The rulers and priests likely lived in the city's center. The upper- and middle-class citizens built their homes just outside the city center, and the peasants lived in huts on the edges. Raised roads, called **causeways**, ran through the city. Mayas built the causeways two to four feet above ground level. Some causeways measured up to 15 feet wide.

Construction Materials and Methods

The Mayas used carved stone for the main buildings of the city. They carved the giant building stones with simple tools that were also made of stone, since they did not have metal tools. They moved the stones to the building location using man power. They did not use animals or wheeled vehicles to help. A cement made of limestone provided mortar between the stones. The Mayas spread a limestone stucco or cement over stones to give the buildings smooth surfaces and then painted the buildings with bright colors.

Tikal

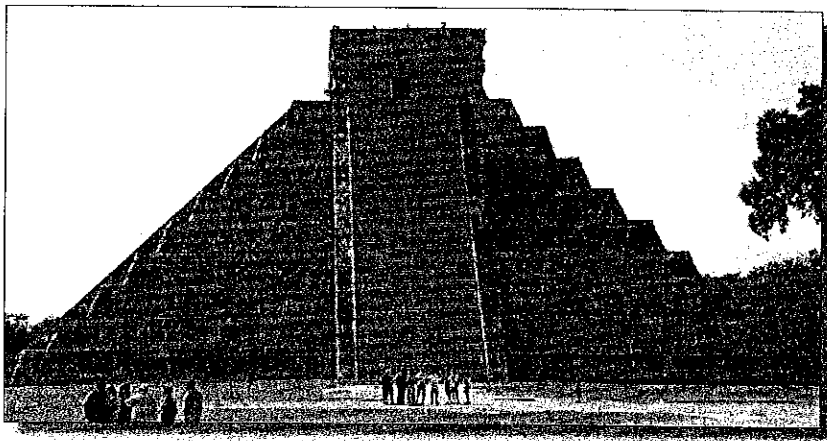
Tikal, in northern Guatemala, is the largest and perhaps oldest Mayan city. It spread over 50 square miles. Tikal's population may have reached over 100,000 people. The central plaza in Tikal measures 250 by 400 feet. Two of the eight pyramid temples of Tikal face each other across the great plaza. The temple of the Giant Jaguar and its pyramid rise over 150 feet. Scientists discovered a tomb inside one of the pyramids. There they found jade, pearl, and shell jewelry. Inscriptions revealed that it was a tomb containing the skeleton of a ruler named Double Comb.

Copán

Copán is the second largest Mayan city. It has five main plazas. The most famous ruin in Copán is the great staircase. It is 30 feet wide and has 63 steps. Picture writing covers each step. Copán also has a perfect example of a ball court.

Chichén Itzá

The ruins of **Chichén Itzá** include several plazas, pyramid temples, and ball courts. The great pyramid of Chichén Itzá is visible from miles away. An important ruin is the large observatory tower used by ancient astronomers. Chichén Itzá is the location of **The Well of Sacrifice**. The Mayas threw many live men into the well as sacrifices to the gods.



The Pyramid of Kukulcan at Chichén Itzá

Mayan Writing

Glyphs

The Mayas used the most advanced system of writing of the ancient Americans. They probably borrowed the idea of picture writing from the Olmecs. They then developed their own system of writing based on that.

They did not use an **alphabet**. Instead, they used a combination of pictures to represent ideas and symbols to represent sounds. The pictures and symbols used in their writing are called **glyphs**. The Mayas combined glyphs into groups. These groupings have a square or oval shape. We know of about 800 different glyphs.

Understanding the Glyphs

Scientists study Mayan writing in the few remaining Mayan books and examples carved on stones. Many of these stones are from ancient Mayan buildings. Scientists know the meaning of some of the Mayan symbols. Much of the Mayan writing system still remains a mystery. So far, we know the meaning of fewer than half the glyphs discovered.

Here are some examples of Mayan glyphs:



fish



vulture



dog



wife



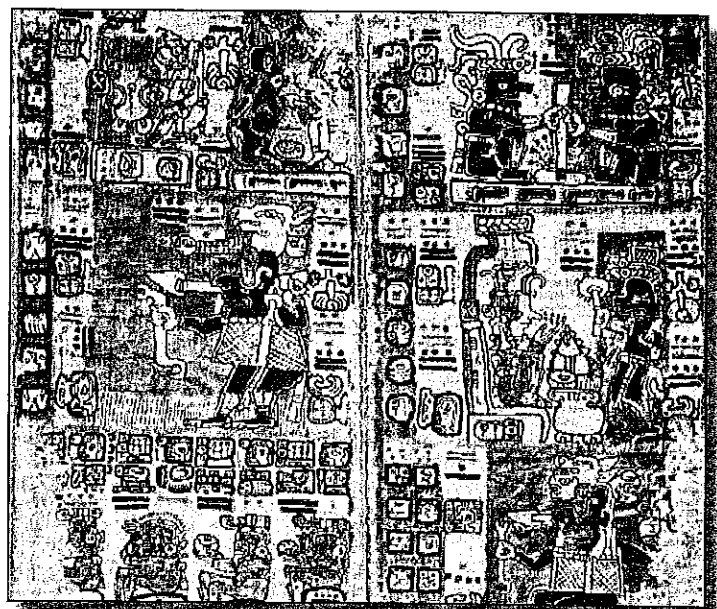
death

Paper and Books

The Mayas had a process for making paper that used fibers from the bark of the **ficus tree**. They pounded the fibers into a **pulp** then glued the pulp together with tree sap. When the paper dried, they coated it with white lime. This made a smooth, white surface on which to paint.

The Mayas also made books. The name for a Mayan book is **codex**. Mayas used ficus-fiber paper or deer hide for pages. The pages of Mayan books folded from side to side and unfolded like a screen. They painted colorful glyphs and pictures of gods, animals, and objects on the pages of the codex. The Mayas used decorated boards for covers.

Spanish conquerors found great collections of Mayan books, but according to the beliefs of the Spanish, Mayan books were evil, so the conquerors destroyed most of them. Only three complete Mayan books survive today. They are located in museums in Europe. Only fragments of other Mayan books remain.



These are pages from the Mayan Codex in Madrid, one of the few remaining samples of Mayan writing.