

The Ancient Maya Civilisation

Mesoamerica 2000 BCE to 1500AD

An informative book



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The Ancient Maya



Who?

The ancient Maya were a civilisation that lived between 2000 BCE to around 1500AD. They lived in Mesoamerica, which is now known as Southern Mexico and Central America (above). They were an extremely successful civilisation and were highly advanced in writing, art and science for a people living back then. Temples and pyramids can still be seen today in the jungles of Central America.

Mesoamerica was made up of mountains, coasts and rainforests. The lowlands were near the sea and the highlands were in the mountains. It was not until 250 BCE that the Mayas began to settle around the lowlands more.

Modern Mayas

Today, there are millions of people who are descendants of the ancient Maya living in Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. Their ancient Mayan heritage is still present in the languages that they speak and they are not completely westernised, despite the Spanish conquest of the Yucatan in the late 1600s.

Hieroglyphs



The Maya writing system is made up of logograms and phonetic symbols. Phonetic symbols are pictures that represent a sound made in the language.



It is believed that there are over 1,000 Mayan glyphs, though no more than 500 were ever used together in one single Mayan language, as there were many.



The Olmecs

The Olmecs were a people who lived hundreds of years before the Maya, in Mesoamerica. It is possible that the ancient Maya writing system was influenced by the writing of the Olmecs. The Spanish conquest of the Maya brought the use of the hieroglyphs to an end.

Scripts have been found written on stone monuments, tablets and ceramic pottery. There have also been examples found on a form of paper, made from the bark of fig trees.

Above: Hieroglyphs in stone
Right: an ancient Maya calendar with writing around the outside.

Calendar

The Mayas had managed to measure their years pretty accurately, as their calendars show. They used two different calendars; one for religion, which had 260 days a year and one for farming, which had 365 days a year.



Ancient Maya Codices



Maya codices are books that have been found (above), made from the inner bark of fig trees. The Mayan word for 'paper' was 'huun'. The codices were the works of professional scribes who wrote of gods, war and history.

Mayan Meanings

						
Mayan:	chan	winik	witz	k'in	b'alam	k'ak'
Meaning:	sky	person	mountain	sun	jaguar	fire
						
Mayan:	bak	way	juun	ja'	ajaw	muyal
Meaning:	bone	spirit	book	water	lord	cloud
						
Mayan:	ix	ch'am	k'uk'	chan	ch'ul	chok
Meaning:	woman	to grab	quetzal	snake	holy	to scatter
						
Mayan:	jaab	yax	pakal	tok	naj	k'al
Meaning:	year	blue/green	shield	flint	house	twenty

Lives of the Ancient Maya

The great monuments and cities of the ancient Maya were created over thousands of years. Farming was the first step towards this. The Maya learned how to clear forests in order to turn it into farmland. The forests were burned and the nutrients created from the ash turned the soil into highly fertile land. This farming method is called 'slash and burn' and is still used in agriculture today. Because of this, the Maya became very successful farmers.

Crop of Life

Though the Maya grew numerous crops such as squash, avocados and beans, their staple crop and a huge part of their diet consisted of maize or corn. Corn was very important to the Maya and their creation story even goes to say that the first successful humans were made of corn! Corn was consumed in different ways. It was ground and made into flat breads, which have become today's tortillas and it was also made into porridge and fermented into a type of beer.



It was mainly the job of the Maya peasants to clear forests for farming. The corn ears would have to be tipped upside down in case of any rainwater collecting in it as the water would cause the corn to rot.



Precious Cacao

One of the many crops that the Maya farmed was the fragrant cacao bean. These beans grew on trees from the soils of el Salvador, Guatemala and Belize.

They were a precious crop, prized for their chocolatey flavour and used in drinks for the rich and noble. Unsweetened cacao is deeply bitter and the Maya would spice it up with some chillis, this is a drink still enjoyed today.



By the Sea

The Maya people living by the coast would source things such as fish, turtle shells and salt from the sea. The diet of the Maya was made up mostly of fruits, nuts and grains so salt was quite important for them since they hardly ate any meat. Salt was also used for trading.

Below: A carving showing a Maya bloodletting ritual



Turtle shells were collected for making into instruments that were played with antlers and conch shells were blown into and used as horns.

Spines from stingrays were also collected by Maya priests and rulers for bloodletting and piercing their tongues and body parts with. This was a way to win favour with the Maya gods. Even the common people did this.

Mayan Fashion

The Maya grew cotton in the Yucata`n and other settlements. As a result, this was the choice of material for basic garments. The basic garment for the common peasant (far right) would be a a loincloth made from a long strip of cotton called an 'ex'. They would usually be barefoot.

Maya women wore cotton skirts or simple cotton dresses, called a 'huipil'. Both males and females would also cover their shoulders with a square of cotton or animal skin.

Dressing for Society

Around the Classic period of the Maya civilisation (200AD), social hierarchy became much more important and the rich and royal started to dress more and more elaborately.

They would adorn themselves with items that peasants could never hope to afford, such as huge, fancy headdresses made with the feathers of macaws and quetzal birds. Quetzal feathers were highly precious.

Skins of ocelots, jaguars and other large predators were made into clothing and footwear for the elite. They also wore huge earplugs and facial ornaments made from bone, shell or jade. Body paint was also used for markings and they even filed their teeth into sharp points and put jade mosaics on the front of them!



Above: A quetzal bird



Left: Maya priest
Right: warrior

Maya Beauty

The Maya idea of beauty was for a person to have a strong, large nose and sloped forehead. Crossed eyes were seen as beautiful too. In all Maya classes, it was custom to bind the heads of children between two flat boards in order to give them the desired shape of forehead. A bead on a string was also attached to boards so that it would make the child look inwards and become cross-eyed.

The evidence for this is found in carvings of the rich and royal, who all seemed have these traits. Some ancient Maya were even known to make their noses appear bigger with clay!

Though beauty and society were very important, the most important part of life was religion. Pleasing the gods was vital to the Maya and this was because the gods had reign over all aspects of life, from birth to death and crops to wealth.

Below: A carved Maya figure showing a highly elaborate headdress.



The Maya Gods and Religion

Maya gods were gods of nature. One of the most respected was the maize god, Hun Ixim (below), since maize was their main crop.

The maize god would decide whether a crop would fail or succeed that year. After a war, the Maya would capture the enemy survivors and bring them home as prisoners or even sacrifices to the gods to please them.

Popul Vuh

The 'Popul Vuh' was almost like a bible of the ancient Maya. Stories of creation and life are written in this book. This book was found in the 1500s before the Spanish conquest.

The picture below shows the only two gods that existed before the world was created, Tepeu the Maker and Gucumatz the Feathered Spirit, both glittering in the dark.



The Maya Creation

There were 2 stages of creation in the Maya story. The first creation was of a world with animals and the second with humans.

In the world of animals created, the gods were unsatisfied that the animals could not speak and wanted to make some better beings that could worship them properly and speak to them. So they tried to make some out of clay.



But the clay men were soon rained on and they all melted. They then tried using wood but that made some really empty, cold men. On their third attempt, the gods decided to use some paste made from some maize and water (maize for the flesh and water for the blood) and the men turned out to be perfect! This is very symbolic of how maize was a staple part of the Maya diet.



The Maya Universe and Gods

According to the Maya, the universe was made up of a square and flat Middleworld that rested on the back of a huge turtle like creature.

The four directions of the Earth are associated with colours. The East is red, where the rising sun is. The South is yellow and the right hand of the sun.

The white North is associated with dead ancestors and the West is black, connected to death and the Underworld.

A giant tree stands in the centre of the Middleworld, with its roots reaching into the awful underworld, called 'Xibalba'.

The evil gods dwelled in this dreaded place.



The Gods

Name: Ek Chuaj

Description: A supreme god, he was the creator of mankind and had invented writing and learning. He was depicted as a toothless old man and was always kind, unlike some other gods.



Name: Ix Chel

Description: The wife of Itzamnaaj. She is the goddess of childbirth, healing, weaving and the moon. She has a snake in her hair and her toes are like jaguar claws.



Name: Chac

Description: A descendant of Itzamnaaj and Ix Chel. He is the god of storms and rain. He is usually a man with the fangs of a reptile and a curling snout.



Name: Hun Ixim

Description: The maize god. From his head sprouted an ear of corn and he is very important to the Maya people. Another child of Ix Chel and Itzamnaaj.



Name: Kukulcan

Description: Known as 'The Feathered Serpent', he is the god of the four elements, water, air, fire and earth.



Name: Kinich Ahau

Description: The sun god or sun faced lord, travels across the sky during the day. But at night, he becomes the fearful Jaguar god and enters the Underworld.



Name: Ah Puch

Description: The god of death, the most gruesome god as he has a skeletal nose, jaw and spine and his body is covered with hideous spots.