

The Maya: History, Culture & Religion



A temple in Tikal, one of the Maya city states.

The Maya refer to both a modern-day people who can be found all over the world as well as their ancestors who built an ancient civilization that stretched throughout much of Central America, one that reached its peak during the first millennium A.D.

The Maya civilization was never unified; rather, it consisted of numerous small states, ruled by kings, each apparently centered on a city. Sometimes, a stronger Maya state would dominate a weaker state and be able to exact tribute and labor from it.

Mayan calendar

A system of writing using glyptic symbols was developed and was inscribed on buildings, stele, artifacts and books (also called codices).

The Maya [calendar system](#) was complicated. "By some 1,700 years ago speakers of proto-Ch'olan, the ancestor for three Maya languages still in use, had developed a calendar of 18 20-day months plus a set of five days," wrote Weldon Lamb, a researcher at New Mexico State University, in his book "The Maya Calendar: A Book of Months" (University of Oklahoma Press, 2017)

This calendar system also included what scholars call a "long-count" that kept track of time by using different units that range in length from a single day to millions of years (the unit in millions was rarely used).

Contrary to popular belief, this system did not [predict](#) the end of the world in 2012, the unit in millions of years providing evidence of this.

Also, contrary to popular belief, the Maya civilization never vanished. While many cities were abandoned around 1,100 years ago, other cities, such as [Chichén Itzá](#), grew in their place.

When the Spanish arrived in Central America in force in the 16th century, the diseases they brought devastated the Maya. Additionally, the Spanish forced the Maya to convert to Christianity, going so far as to burn their books (the reason why so few of them survive today). However, it is important to note that the Maya people live on today and can be found all over the world.

"Millions of Maya people live in Central America and throughout the world. The Maya are not a single entity, a single community, or a single ethnic group. They speak many languages including Mayan languages (Yucatec, Quiche, Kekchi and Mopan), Spanish and English. However, the Maya are an indigenous group tied both to their distant past as well as to events of the last several hundred years," wrote Richard Leventhal, Carlos Chan Espinosa and Cristina Coc in the April 2012 edition of Expedition magazine.

Maya origins

While hunters and gatherers had a presence in Central America stretching back thousands of years, it was in what archaeologists call the Pre-classic period (1800 B.C. to A.D. 250) that permanent village life really took off, leading to the creation of early Maya cities.

"Really effective farming, in the sense that densely inhabited villages were to be found throughout the Maya area, was an innovation of the Pre-classic period," wrote Yale University Professor Michael Coe in his book "The Maya" (Thames and Hudson, 2011).

Coe said farming became more effective during this period, likely because of the breeding of more productive forms of maize and, perhaps more importantly, the introduction of the "nixtamal" process. In this process, the maize is soaked in lime, or something similar, and cooked, something that "enormously increased the nutritional value of corn," writes Coe. Maize complemented squash, bean, chili pepper and manioc (or cassava), which were already being used by the Maya, a 2014 Journal of Archaeological Science study shows.

During this time, the Maya were influenced by a civilization to the west of them known as the Olmecs. These people may have initially devised the long count calendar that the Maya would become famous for, Coe writes. Additionally, the [discovery of a ceremonial site dated to 1000 B.C.](#) at the site of Ceibal sheds more light on the relationship between the Maya and Olmecs, suggesting that it was a complex one.

Archaeologists have found that early Maya cities could be carefully planned. Nixtun-Ch'ich, in Peten, Guatemala, had pyramids, temples and other structures built using a [grid system](#), a sign of urban planning. It flourished between 600 B.C. and 300 B.C.

Maya civilization at its peak

Coe writes that the ancient Maya reached a peak between A.D. 250 and 900, a time that archaeologists call the "Classic" period when numerous Maya cities flourished throughout much of Central America.

The civilization "reached intellectual and artistic heights which no other in the New World, and few in Europe, could match at the time," Coe writes. "Large populations, a flourishing economy, and widespread trade were typical of the Classic ..." he said, noting that warfare was also quite common.

The Maya civilization was influenced by the city of [Teotihuacan](#), located farther to the west. One of their early rulers, named Siyaj K'ak, who may have come from [Tikal](#), ascended the throne on Sept. 13, A.D. 379, according to an inscription. He is depicted wearing feathers and shells and holding an atlatl (spear-thrower), features associated with Teotihuacan, wrote researcher John Montgomery in his book "Tikal: An Illustrated History of the Mayan Capital" (Hippocrene Books, 2001). A [stela recently discovered](#) at El Achiotal, a site near Tikal, also supports the idea that Teotihuacan controlled or heavily influenced Tikal for a time.

The numerous cities found throughout the Maya world each had their own individual wonders that made them unique. Tikal, for instance, is known for its pyramid building. Starting at least as early as A.D. 672, the city's rulers would construct a twin pyramid complex at the end of every K'atun (20-year period). Each of these pyramids would be flat-topped, built adjacent to each other and contain a staircase on each side. Between the pyramids was a plaza that had structures laid out to the north and south

Human sacrifices

Sharer wrote that human sacrifices were made on special occasions. "Among the Maya, human sacrifice was not an everyday event but was essential to sanctify certain rituals, such as the inauguration of a new ruler, the designation of a new heir to the throne, or the dedication of an important new temple or ball court." The victims were often prisoners of war, he noted.

At [Chichén Itzá](#), victims [would be painted blue](#), a color that appears to have honored the god Chaak, and cast into a well. Additionally, near the site's ball court, there is a panel that shows a person being sacrificed. This may depict a ball-player from either the winning or losing team being killed after a game.

Writing & astronomy

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Sharer noted that record keeping was an important part of the Maya world and was essential for agriculture, astronomy and prophecy. "By keeping records of the rainy and dry seasons, the Maya could determine the best times to plant and harvest their crops," Sharer wrote.

Additionally, by "recording the movements of the sky deities (sun, moon, planets, and stars), they developed accurate calendars that could be used for prophecy," Sharer wrote.

"With long-term records, the Maya were able to predict planetary cycles — the phases of the moon and Venus, even eclipses," he said. "This knowledge was used to determine when these deities would be in favorable positions for a variety of activities such as holding ceremonies, inaugurating kings, starting trading expeditions, or conducting wars."

The movements of the planet Venus appear to have played a particularly important role in Maya religion. Both the [Dresden](#) and [Grolier](#) codices contain detailed records of the movements of the planet. The ancient Maya "were probably doing large-scale ritual activity connected to the different phases of Venus," said Gerardo Aldana, a science historian in the department of Chicano studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Recent research reveals that at least some of the writers of Maya codices were part of "a specific cohort of ritual specialists called *taaj*," wrote a team of researchers in a 2015 *American Anthropologist* article. The team studied a room containing murals with inscriptions on them at the site of Xultun, Guatemala, and found that the writing of codices took place in the room and that the "*taaj*" wrote them.

Economy & power

Sharer wrote that while agriculture and food gathering were a central part of daily life, the Maya had a sophisticated economy capable of supporting specialists and a system of merchants and trade routes. While the Maya did not develop minted currency, they used various objects, at different times, as "money." These included greenstone beads, cacao beans and copper bells.

"Ultimately, the power of kings depended on their ability to control resources," Sharer wrote. "Maya rulers managed the production and distribution of status goods used to enhance their prestige and power. They also controlled some critical (non-local) commodities that included critical everyday resources each family needed, like salt," he said noting that over time Maya rulers managed ever-larger portions of the economy. The Maya rulers did not rule alone but were served by attendants and advisers who [occasionally](#) appear in Maya art.

Sharer also notes that Maya laborers were subject to a labor tax to build palaces, temples and public works. A ruler successful in war could control more laborers and exact tribute on defeated enemies, further increasing their economic might.