

The Ancient Maya Empire: It Flourished and Mysteriously Ended

By History.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.16.17

Word Count **706**

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The ruins of the ancient Maya city of Tikal located in present-day Guatemala. Photo from Wikimedia

The center of the Maya Empire was in modern-day Guatemala, in Central America. This ancient society reached its peak about 1,500 years ago. The Maya were good at agriculture, pottery, writing, calendar-making and math. They left behind many amazing buildings and works of art. Most of the great stone cities of the Maya were abandoned by the year 900, though. Scholars still debate why that happened.

The Spanish conquered Mexico and Central America in the 1500s. The term "Mesoamerica" is used to describe this area before that time. The Maya people were one of the most dominant societies of Mesoamerica. Other societies were scattered around the area. The Maya, however, were together in one block. It covered parts of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador.

Within that region, the Maya were grouped in separate areas. Each had its own environmental and cultural differences. They built the great stone cities and monuments that have amazed explorers and scholars.

Great Maya cities and pyramids

The earliest Maya communities date to nearly 4,000 years ago. They grew crops such as corn, beans and cassava, which is a root vegetable.

The first major Mesoamerican society was the Olmecs. They appeared about 3,000 years ago. The Maya borrowed a number of cultural traits from the Olmec. The Olmec also influenced the Maya number system and famous calendar.

In addition to agriculture, the early Maya also built pyramids and cities and inscribed stone monuments.

The early Maya city of Mirador was one of the greatest cities ever built in the early Americas. Its size shows that the Maya were successful centuries before the Classic Period.

The Maya were very skilled at farming and building

The Classic Period began around the year A.D. 250. It was the golden age of the Maya people. Classic Maya had about 40 cities. Each city had between 5,000 and 50,000 people. At its peak, the Maya population may have reached 2 million.

The Maya had palaces, temples, pyramids and courts for playing important ball games. Farmers lived outside the cities and were very advanced for their time.

The Maya worshiped different gods related to nature. Maya kings claimed to be related to gods. The Maya believed the kings helped people talk to the gods.

Many Classic Maya temples and palaces were shaped like triangles. The Maya were the first to use the number zero. They also developed a new calendar system. It was based on 365 days, like the one we use today.

Society used natural resources well



The Maya also made paper from tree bark and wrote in books made from this paper.

The Maya built their great society in a tropical rain forest. This makes the Maya different from other ancient civilizations. In other societies, centralized management of water resources through irrigation and other techniques formed the basis of society.

In the southern Maya lowlands, however, there were few rivers useful for trade and transport. Being in the rain forest meant there was no obvious need for an irrigation system.

The Maya took advantage of the area's many natural resources. These included limestone, salt, and the volcanic rock obsidian for tools and weapons.

Mystery of the Maya disappearance

Something unknown happened to the Maya. One by one, the classic cities were abandoned. By the year 900, most Maya communities had disappeared, and no one knows why. Scholars have come up with several ideas, though.

Some believe that by the 800s, the Maya had used the environment around them to the point that it could no longer support a very large population. Other Maya scholars argue that constant war among competing cities led the alliances between them to break down. Finally, some major environmental change, like a long period of drought, might have wiped out the classic Maya people.

All three of these things—overpopulation and overuse of the land, war and drought—might have played a part in the downfall of the Maya people. By the time the Spanish invaders arrived, most Maya were living in agricultural villages. Their great cities were buried under a layer of rain forest green.



Quiz

- 1 Which of the following answer choices BEST describes the structure of the article?
 - (A) compare and contrast
 - (B) chronological order
 - (C) question and answer
 - (D) problem and solution

- 2 Select the paragraph from the section “Society used natural resources well” that uses compare and contrast in its structure.

- 3 Use the map and information from the article to select the TRUE statement.
 - (A) The Maya population reached its peak in the Postclassic period.
 - (B) There were about 40 Maya Postclassic cities.
 - (C) The Classic cities had populations of 5,000 – 50,000.
 - (D) Postclassic cities were abandoned in the year 900.

- 4 Which selection from the article is BEST illustrated by the map?
 - (A) Each had its own environmental and cultural differences. They built the great stone cities and monuments that have amazed explorers and scholars.
 - (B) The early Maya city of Mirador was one of the greatest cities ever built in the early Americas. Its size shows that the Maya were successful centuries before the Classic Period.
 - (C) The Classic Period began around the year A.D. 250. It was the golden age of the Maya people. Classic Maya had about 40 cities. Each city had between 5,000 and 50,000 people.
 - (D) One by one, the classic cities were abandoned. By the year 900, most Maya communities had disappeared, and no one knows why.

Answer Key

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- Paragraph 14:**
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