

The Mystery of the Mayas



*What happened to the
Mayas?*

What happened to the Mayas?

- ◇ The culture of the Mayas of the classic period was very advanced.
- ◇ Mayan society was very stable.
- ◇ They developed art, writing, mathematics, astronomy, agriculture, and architecture.

Nevertheless...

- ◇ This advanced civilization disappeared before the arrival of the Europeans.



Why were the Mayan cities abandoned before 900 BC?

When?

- ◇ 200-600 Construction of the great stone cities
- ◇ 300-700 Development of the culture, a time of great prosperity
- ◇ 700-800 Demographic explosion, population reached 3 million



Where?



Introduction to the Civilization of the Classic Period (200-900)



- ◇ They constructed impressive cities with temples, palaces, and great plazas.
- ◇ They developed a society with hierarchical social classes.
- ◇ They developed an effective, precise calendar.
- ◇ They created a writing system to record historical dates.
- ◇ They created sculptures, ceramics, and other ornamentations.
- ◇ They developed marketing routes to distant places.
- ◇ They sold food products, ceramics, textiles, and luxury products.
- ◇ They developed an advanced agricultural system.

The Mayan society was divided into well-defined, hierarchical classes.

- ◇ The ahau, or king, representative of the gods on Earth
- ◇ The priests
- ◇ The nobility
- ◇ The warriors
- ◇ The artisans
 - The architects
 - The sculptors
 - Artists with ceramics
- ◇ The peasants
- ◇ The servants
- ◇ The slaves



Beliefs and Religious Rites

- ◇ Religious rites maintained the equilibrium of the cosmos.
- ◇ Religion played an important role in the daily lives of the Mayas.
- ◇ The king and the priests were the only ones who could direct the religious rites and ceremonies.
- ◇ The king spilled his own blood to feed the gods and to determine their will.
- ◇ The Mayas practiced human sacrifice to honor the gods.
- ◇ The gods distributed good harvests and success among the different cities.
- ◇ The Mayas played a ball game in a large field to maintain the equilibrium of the cosmos.



Chichén Itzá:
Cancha de Pelota

Gods: The Mayas worshipped several gods at the same time, such as...



Hunab Ku

Creator

Ah Puch

God of Death

Chak

God of Rain

Itzamná

God of Priestly Knowledge

Ik

God of Wind

Yum Kax

God of Corn

Ix Chel

Goddess of the Moon and Fertility



War

- ◇ Success in war depended on special rites to honor the gods.
- ◇ The king determined the proper moment to begin a war.
- ◇ The warriors fought for the honor of the city.
- ◇ After winning a battle, a city could demand tribute from the conquered peoples.

Architecture

- ◇ The Mayas constructed more and more elaborate temples to honor the gods.
- ◇ They built new temples above the old ones.
- ◇ They built great palaces decorated with sculptures for the kings.
- ◇ They also constructed ornate tombs with inscriptions for the kings.



Science



- ◇ The priests controlled all knowledge.
- ◇ They created astronomical observations to calculate the movement of the planets and stars.
- ◇ They developed mathematical concepts.
- ◇ They developed a precise calendar.

Political Structure



- ◇ Each city constituted an independent state.
- ◇ They never consolidated the cities into an empire.
- ◇ Many cities formed alliances for politics or commerce.

Commerce

- ◇ They sold products throughout all of Mesoamerica.
- ◇ Cities competed with each other to dominate commercial routes.
- ◇ Commerce extended the culture throughout the entire region.



Agriculture

- ◇ There was a great diversity of edible resources in the region.
- ◇ The state organized and directed agricultural work and products.
- ◇ The Mayas developed irrigation canals and elevated farms.
- ◇ They had abundant agricultural products, enough to export.
- ◇ The success of the agricultural system brought a demographic explosion.



Nevertheless, the agricultural system failed due to environmental pressures.

- ◊ They destroyed the trees in great sections of the jungle.
- ◊ They used up the land.
- ◊ A drought ravaged the land.

Due to the drought, there was not enough food for the population.



The War Changes Things 700-800

- ◇ It created competition to dominate the mercantile routes.
- ◇ It dramatically increased the frequency of war.
- ◇ They captured more victims for human sacrifice.
- ◇ Kings were captured and assassinated.
- ◇ People began to leave the cities.
- ◇ Historical records were no longer kept in some cities.



When?



761	Dos Pilas: Last inscription
799	Palenque: Last inscription
819	Copán: Last inscription
859	Tikal: Last inscription
879	Caracól: Last inscription
890	Drought throughout the region, failure of harvest

Some Theories about the Decline of the Civilization



- ◇ Environmental pressures and natural disasters that caused the failure of the agricultural system...
- ◇ The failure of the agricultural system brought competition to dominate commercial routes.
- ◇ Wars increased.
- ◇ The population decreased due to hunger.
- ◇ The assassination of the kings brought the decay of the society.
- ◇ The nobles fought among themselves to control society.
- ◇ The balance of the cosmos was disturbed.
- ◇ The population rose up against the higher class.

People abandoned the cities to live in small groups in the jungle.



The civilization and culture were saved until today.

The Mayas survived the decay of their civilization by keeping their traditions.



- ◇ They practice ceremonial planting and harvesting.
- ◇ They mix ancient religious rites with Christianity.
- ◇ They demonstrate their values in their art.
- ◇ They speak their languages.