

Explore More—The Maya

Directions: *Listen to your teacher talk about the achievements of the Maya, their oral, artistic, and architectural traditions, and how their civilization rose and then faded away. Refer to the world map in your Explore Geography Picture Dictionary to locate Mesoamerica, where the Maya civilization flourished. Circle any words in the text that you don't understand. Underline or highlight important ideas in the text. Write notes in the margins to help you understand key points. Then answer the questions in your own words.*

Maya Oral, Artistic, and Architectural Traditions

Each Mesoamerican civilization had its own wealth of oral traditions. One important source for the oral traditions of the Maya is the *Popul Vuh*, which means “Council Book.” The *Popul Vuh* is a 9,000-line poem of songs and stories that describes the Maya belief system and way of life, beginning with their account of creation. The *Popul Vuh* wasn't put down on paper until 30 years after the Spanish arrived in the area.

Read the selection from the Popul Vuh in your historical anthology.

The people of Maya country were very creative. There were Maya craft makers who produced pottery and baskets. Colorful feathers from the quetzal bird were used to decorate Maya shields, headdresses, and other objects. Archaeologists have also found carvings of important people, like Lady Kanal-Ikal, who was aha (ruler) of Palenque, in tombs.

Maya builders created massive and beautiful stone structures, such as the palace in Palenque, without the benefit of iron tools.

Find Palenque on the map in your textbook.

The houses where most people lived were simple one-room dwellings built with palm leaves or other plants. In the center of town, however, were plazas, stone temples, and superb structures where priests and nobles lived.

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Maya Achievements in Astronomy and Mathematics

The Maya had their own numbering system. Unlike our system which is based on the number “10,” the Maya based their system on the number “20.” Traders and merchants used numbers to conduct business. Numbers were also very important to priests, who studied the movements of the stars and the planets to tell the future. This is how they learned so much about astronomy. Priests used various calendars to plan everyday life, to find out what days were lucky or unlucky, and to determine how to please the gods.

One Maya calendar was based on how long it takes the earth to circle the sun. This calendar was 365 days long. There were 18 months in this calendar. Each month was 20 days long. The five extra days at the end of the year were thought to be unlucky. The Maya also recorded dates by using a system they created called the “Long Count.” The date the Maya believed marked the beginning of creation, about 5,000 years ago, was the starting point for calculating the dates of later events.

Maya Knowledge of Seasonal Changes and their Agricultural Systems

Around 2500 B.C., the Maya started to farm.

Point to this date on your class time line.

They began to depend on farming for their food. The Maya learned to understand seasonal changes. By knowing when to plant crops and when to harvest, Maya farmers made the best use of their land and grew bigger crops. In late fall, Maya farmers cut down trees and brush. When the cut trees and brush were dry, the farmers burned them. Then they cleared the land and planted the crops. Between May and September, farmers weeded the fields. They harvested the crops in late fall. Then the planting season started over again. Knowing about seasonal changes helped Maya farmers grow more crops. It also helped them develop agricultural systems.

One agricultural system the Maya used is called “slash and burn agriculture.” Maya farmers would select an area of land in the rain forest, cut down the plants and trees growing there, and then burn them. After everything on the land was burnt, only ashes remained. The ashes made the soil rich and better for growing food. Maya grew maize, beans, squash, and chile peppers. Maize became the most important crop. It was a dependable type of food to grow.

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The Maya Civilization Rises and Then Fades Away

Between 2000 B.C. and A.D. 250, the Maya population grew and people began to live in villages. These villages formed about 50 independent kingdoms by the year A.D. 250. Maya kingdoms were each ruled by an *ahau* (meaning “god-king”). There was never a time in Maya history where one person ruled all of the kingdoms. However, because the Maya people shared the same culture, religion, and language, and the kingdoms traded with each other, all of the kingdoms together are considered the Maya civilization. The Maya civilization thrived and became prosperous between A.D. 500 and A.D. 900.

For some reason unknown to modern scholars, the Maya civilization faded by around A.D. 900. Scholars have theories as to why this might have happened. Some believe that the population grew too big to be supported by the available supply of food. Other scholars think that invaders might have attempted to conquer the Maya and wars may have weakened them. By the time the Spaniards came to Maya country in the early 1500s, the civilization had declined.

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YOUR TURN!

Write your answers to the following questions.

1. Describe Maya artistic, oral, and architectural traditions.

2. Describe a Maya achievement (like their numbering system).

3. Discuss Maya farming techniques.

4. Describe the rise of the Maya. When and why did the Maya fade away?

Questions for further discussion:

- Using your textbook, find information about Maya achievements in astronomy and mathematics. Distinguish relevant from irrelevant information, essential from incidental information, and verifiable from unverifiable information.
- Discuss the sources of historical continuity in Maya country. How did the combination of ideas and events explain the emergence of new patterns in farming?
- Using your textbook, historical anthology, and the *Explore Geography Picture Dictionary*, explain the historical expansion and disintegration of the Maya civilization that you have learned about.
- What would you like to know more about in terms of the oral and artistic traditions of the Maya? Frame questions that you can answer by historical study and research. Conduct this research and discuss your findings.