THE MAYAS

The Mayan culture spread throughout southern Mexico and Central America. It included the Yucatan Peninsula to the north as well as today’s countries of Honduras, Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala to the south. It stretched from the Gulf of Mexico in the west to the Caribbean Sea in the east. This land included rugged highlands as well as dense swamps.

The Mayan people were short. The average height of the men was just over five feet. The women were about four feet eight inches tall. Mayans had straight black hair, and many painted their bodies black, red, or blue. They also often had tattoos. They valued crossed eyes and tied objects from their infants’ foreheads to encourage their eyes to cross. Some Mayas also tied boards to the heads of their children to flatten their foreheads.

Historians divide the story of the Mayas into three eras: the pre–classic, the classic, and the post–classic. The pre–classic era lasted from about 2,500CE to 250CE. During this time, the Mayans came in contact and traded with the Olmec Indians. The early Mayan settlements were fishing villages along the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Seas; eventually they moved inland when they learned to plant crops.

The Mayan classic era continued from 250CE to 900CE. They built many great cities, most of which had majestic pyramid temples. Tikal, the largest Mayan city, may have had a population of 100,000 or more! During the classic era, the Mayans improved methods of agriculture. They also developed advanced mathematics and astronomy as well as a system of writing.

One of the world’s greatest mysteries is what happened to the Mayan culture. It was the most important civilization in the new world in 900CE. Suddenly, however, the Mayans left their great cities and scattered throughout the countryside. We still do not know why the great Mayan civilization ended.

The post–classic era began with the collapse of the Mayan empire. It lasted until the Spanish Conquest in the 1500s. The Mayans continued to farm and trade in the region after the great cities fell. Christopher Columbus actually met some Mayan traders in 1502. Mayan descendants still live today in the region of their ancestors.
MAYAN RELIGION

Religion was very important in a Mayans life. The Mayans worshipped many different gods. Each day, month, city, and job had its own special god or goddess! The Mayans had a variety of religious festivals and celebrations. Many of these celebrations even included human sacrifice.

The Mayan civilization was divided into many city-states. Each city-state had its own ruler. His title was halach uinic. This meant "the true or real man." The Mayans believed the halach uinic was a living god. He ruled until his death. At his death, his oldest son became the next halach uinic. If the halach uinic did not have a son, the brother would rule. If he did not have a son or a brother, the ruler's council elected a member of his family to serve. Some historians believe that the halach uinic also served as the high priest during religious ceremonies.

The halach uinic dressed in elaborate and colorful clothes. He also wore a very large head-dress. Temple wall paintings show him with large ear decorations, crossed eyes, and many tattoos.

Many other priests served with the halach uinic. These priests, named ahkin performed many duties. They had the knowledge of mathematics and astronomy. Some of the ahkin were considered prophets. Some of them performed religious sacrifices. Other ahkin performed medical rituals. The Mayans believed that only the priests could explain the mysteries of life and death.

The Mayans believed that the earth was flat. Many of them thought it was on the back of a crocodile that floated in a large pond. Other Mayans believed the earth was the floor of a lizard house.

The Mayans’ religion taught that there were 13 layers of heavens above the earth. They also believed there were nine underworlds below. They thought that they lived in the fifth creation of the world. The previous four worlds had each been destroyed by a great flood. At the beginning of the fifth world, the gods had created humans from corn.

Many of the Mayan religious ceremonies included gifts and sacrifices to the various gods and goddesses. The Mayans believed the gods would give favors to them in return for prayers, offerings, and sacrifices. The sacrifices included valuable gifts, their own blood, and human sacrifices.

In many ceremonies, in order to give blood to the gods, the priests cut themselves. The Mayans also had three methods of giving the human sacrifices. Sometimes, the priests took the victim to the altar at the temple. Then the priests cut the heart out of the living victim and presented it to the god. In another method, the priests tied the victim to a wooden pole. Then they threw spears and arrows at the victim’s chest in the area of the heart. In the third type of sacrifice, they threw the victim into a sacred well. The most famous of these wells is the Well of Sacrifice in Chichen Itza. If victims survived the fall and did not drown, the priests pulled them back out of the well. The Mayans believed the gods had chosen to spare these victims. The priests then asked the victims what messages they brought back from the gods. The victims received special treatment from then on since the Mayans believed they had spoken to the gods.
The Mayans also worshipped the dead. They believed the dead became one with the gods. They worshipped their ancestors at many religious ceremonies. They also built pyramids over the sacred remains of their dead rulers.

THE MAYAN GODS AND GODDESSES

The Mayas worshipped many gods. Here are some of the more important ones:

- **Itzamna**: He was the head god, lord of the heavens and lord of night and day. His name meant lizard. Carved pictures show him as an old crossed-eyed man. He had a lizard's body. The Mayans believed he invented books and writing.

- **Kinich Ahau**: He was the sun god. He was also the god of the rulers.

- **Chac**: He was the rain god. Carvings show him as a reptile with a large nose pointing down and curling fangs. He had four aspects:
  - Chac Xib Chac - Red Chac of the East
  - Sac Xib Chac - White Chac of the North
  - Ek Xib Chac - Black Chac of the West
  - Kan Xib Chac - Yellow Chac of the South

- **Yun Kaax**: He is the god of maize (corn). He is also the god of all agriculture. Pictures always show him as a young man. He is either carrying a plant or has a plant as a headdress.

- **Ah Puch**: He is the god of death. Carvings of him show a skull and skeleton.

- **Ek Chaub**: He is the god of trade. Mayan artists painted his face black and he had a drooping lower lip.

- **Ix Chel**: She is the moon and rainbow goddess. She is also the goddess of weaving and childbirth.

- **Buluc Chabtan**: He is the god of war and human sacrifice. Carvings of him show a black line around his eye and down onto his cheek. He is at times shown with a torch or weapon in his hand.
MAYAN CITIES

The ruins of Mayan cities remained hidden for centuries in the dense jungles of Mesoamerica. Scientists are still working today to uncover and study most of these cities, but visitors can now explore the ruins of Tikal, Copan, Chichen Itza, and several other cities.

At first, scientists thought these ancient locations were religious centers only. After further study, they found these were complete cities. The ceremonial center formed the heart of each city. Tall pyramids topped with temples stood in large open plazas, and public buildings, palaces, and ball courts surrounded these plazas.

The rulers and priests likely lived in the city's center. The upper- and middle-class citizens built their homes just outside the city center, and the peasants lived in huts on the edges. Raised roads, called causeways, ran through the city. Mayans built the causeways two to four feet above ground level. Some causeways measured up to 15 feet wide.

The Mayans used carved stone for the main buildings of the city. They carved the giant building stones with simple tools that were also made of stone, since they did not have metal tools. They moved the stones to the building location using man power. They did not use animals or wheeled vehicles to help. A cement made of limestone provided mortar between the stones. The Mayans spread limestone stucco or cement over stones to give the buildings smooth surfaces and then painted the buildings with bright colors.

Tikal, in northern Guatemala, is the largest and perhaps oldest Mayan city. It spread over 50 square miles! Tikal's population may have reached over 100,000 people. The central plaza in Tikal measures 250 by 400 feet. Two of the eight pyramid temples of Tikal face each other across the great plaza. The temple of the Giant Jaguar and its pyramid rise over 150 feet. Scientists discovered a tomb inside one of the pyramids. There they found jade, pearl, and shell jewelry. Inscriptions revealed that it was a tomb containing the skeleton of a ruler named Double Comb.

Copan is the second largest Mayan city. It has five main plazas. The most famous ruin in Copan is the great staircase. It is 30 feet wide and has 63 steps. Picture writing covers each step. Copan also has a perfect example of a ball court.

The ruins of Chichen Itza include several plazas, pyramid temples, and ball courts. The great pyramid of Chichen Itza is visible from miles away. An important ruin is the large observatory tower used by ancient astronomers. Chichen Itza is the location of The Well of Sacrifice. The Mayans threw many live men into the Well as sacrifices to the gods.
MAYAN ARTS AND CRAFTS

Nothing remains of ancient Mayan cloth, feather, or basket weaving. Due to the moist climate, all examples of these crafts have rotted away. However, remaining pictures on murals, vase paintings, and sculptures show what these crafts looked like.

Only the Mayan women did the spinning and weaving. Cotton was the most common fiber used. At times, the women also wove rabbit fur fibers. They made cloth both for home use as well as something to trade for other objects.

Brightly-colored cloth seems to be something the Mayans enjoyed. They used both minerals and vegetables to obtain dyes. Some colors had special meanings: black represented war, yellow symbolized food, red stood for blood, and blue indicated sacrifice.

Many colorful birds living in the area supplied a variety of colorful feathers, and with these the Mayans did fancy feather work. The Mayans used feather weaving to decorate clothing. They also made feather fans and headdresses.

The Mayans wove a variety of baskets from reeds, vines, rushes, and split cane. They also made rush mats and used them for floor coverings. Rope-making was another important product of the weavers.

Numerous examples of Mayan pottery remain today since it did not decay. Shapes and decorations of pottery changed through the years. Scientists use pottery and broken pieces of pottery to decide the age of the piece.

The Mayans did not use a potter's wheel. Instead, they made pottery from clay coils smoothed together. Cut-out molds were pressed onto the pots to create designs. Mayans made a great variety of pottery. Some pieces were as tall as an adult human!

Mayan sculpture has also lasted through time. Limestone was the most often used material for sculpture. Clay and wood carvings were used for decoration. The Mayans never developed metal work. They used stone tools to carve. The most famous Mayan carvings appear on tall stones called stela. Stela still remain in the ruins of many Mayan cities.

Painting was another major Mayan art form. Scientists have discovered brightly colored murals on the walls of Mayan buildings. The murals are called frescoes. The artists applied the paint while the walls were still wet. Mayan murals portrayed everyday scenes as well as religious ceremonies.
MAYAN AGRICULTURE

The Mayans used a variety of methods to obtain food. Which method they used depended on their location. For instance, methods used in the forest regions would not work in the swamps.

The earliest Mayans were hunters and gatherers. They fished and hunted for food. The wild animals they hunted included birds, rabbits, monkeys, and deer. The Mayans also picked or gathered wild fruits, nuts, and vegetables. Unfortunately, hunting and gathering alone could not provide enough food as the population increased. The Mayans then had to learn to plant crops to survive.

A method known as slash and burn is one of the oldest methods of farming. Men cut forests down with stone axes and then let the trees dry thoroughly. The men then burned the dried trees to clear the land. The ashes provided fertilizer for the soil. The Mayans then planted seeds in the ashes using a planting stick. The farmers used the stick to make a hole in the soil and put three or four seeds into each hole.

The slash and burn method wore out the soil quickly. The fields had to be in fallow, or at rest, for two or three years before replanting. In addition to planting field crops, the Mayans also had fruit orchards and vegetable gardens.

Mayans raised a variety of crops. In addition to maize (corn), they grew beans, chilies and other peppers, squashes, tomatoes, avocados, and pumpkins. In some regions at the edges of the civilization, they grew cacao plants. The cacao plant was hard to grow, and its beans were valuable since they could be made into a Mayan delicacy called chocolate. In addition to food crops, Mayan farmers also grew hemp to make rope and cotton to make cloth.

Water for the crops was always a concern. Droughts often destroyed the crops. The Mayans built water reservoirs using man-made dams and created irrigation systems, but these were on a smaller scale than those of the Incas or Aztecs. They also built some terraces to help stop erosion.

The Mayans developed a special way of growing crops in the swampy areas. Workers dug soil up into mounds. They then planted and harvested the crops on the mound areas. The ditches they dug out provided canals around the mounds for irrigation.

Religion played an important part in Mayan farming. The priests chose the special days for planting and harvesting. The Mayans had special celebrations and rituals in honor of Chac, the god of rain. They believed that he would send the much-needed rain if the celebrations pleased him.