

## Lesson 3 The Mayan Civilization

### BEFORE YOU READ

In this lesson, you will learn about the Maya, one of the most highly developed civilizations in Mesoamerica.

### AS YOU READ

Use this chart to help you learn about the Maya. Enter in the chart several questions about the Mayan civilization that you would like answered. As you read this lesson, record in the chart any answers that you find.

Questions	Answers
Where was the Mayan civilization located?	

### TERMS & NAMES

- **Maya** groups of Mesoamerican peoples who speak various forms of the Mayan language
- **stele** a large stone monument that was often carved with symbols or glyphs
- **Pacal II** king of the Mayan city of Tikal
- **codex** a type of book made out of bark paper that is screen-folded

### Birth of a Civilization

(page 380)

*Where did Mayan civilization arise?*

Today, the **Maya** live in southern Mexico, Guatemala, and northern Belize. Their culture can be traced as far back as 2000 B.C.

Around 1500 B.C., the Maya began to establish villages. These villages were located in the highlands and lowlands of Mesoamerica. The highlands contained many minerals. In general, the highlands had a dry, cool climate.

The lowlands on the Yucatán Peninsula had a hot, dry climate. Hot, humid rain forests covered the lowlands further to the south. This area had fertile soil.

Farming did very well in the Mayan lowlands. Because of this, the Maya were able to grow much food. With more food, the Maya became healthier. As a result, their population

grew. In time, some Mayan farming villages grew into great cities.

1. Where did the Maya establish villages?

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### Mayan Life

(pages 382–384)

*Into what social classes was Mayan society divided?*

The Maya produced more than enough food. Because of this, some people could focus on tasks other than farming. Some became craftworkers. Other became priests or teachers. This division of labor resulted in the growth of a class system.

Mayan society was made up of four social classes. These were the ruling class, the nobility, peasants, and slaves.

## READING STUDY GUIDE CONTINUED

The ruling class was made up of kings and their families. These rulers also performed the religious duties of priests. A king governed each Mayan city. The nobility probably included scholars and merchants. They were educated and wealthy. Peasants included farmers and laborers. Most of the Maya were peasants. Slaves were mostly criminals and people captured in war.

Mayan farmers lived in small villages near the big cities. They lived in simple homes. Mayan farmers grew maize, beans, chili peppers, and cacao. Maize was the most important crop. The Maya believed they had been created out of maize.

Mayan nobles led very different lives from the peasants. They wore fancy clothes and much jewelry. Nobles lived in houses built of stone. They also ate much better than peasants.

The Maya worshiped more than 160 gods and goddesses. The main god was called ItzamNá. The Maya believed this god created the world. To get help from the gods, the Maya often fasted, prayed, and offered sacrifices. Most of these sacrifices were animals. The Maya also offered their own blood as a sacrifice. Occasionally, the Maya made human sacrifices. The Maya expected their rulers to communicate with the gods on their behalf.

The Maya had many religious festivals and ceremonies. One important ceremony was a ball game. It was performed in a large ball court. The ball game may have been played to honor great Mayan heroes. Or it was played to reenact important events from Mayan history. Sometimes it was just a sporting competition.

2. What were the four classes that made up Mayan society?

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## Glory and Decline

(pages 384–386)

*What developments did the Maya achieve during their Classical period?*

The Maya reached their peak roughly during the years between A.D. 250 and 900.

The Maya built more than 40 cities. Each Mayan city contained pyramids with temples on top of them. Many of them also had **steles**. The Maya carved glyphs on these large stone monuments. The glyphs represented important dates and great events.

A king governed each Mayan city and the surrounding areas. One of the greatest Mayan kings was **Pacal II**, who ruled the city of Tikal. Sometimes cities fought each other. The winners gained political and economic advantages. The Maya developed a complex writing system. This system used glyphs. The Maya carved glyphs on buildings. They also wrote them on bark paper. This paper was screen-folded to form a type of book called a **codex**. Few of these books still exist. The most famous is the *Popol Vuh*. It tells the Mayan story of the creation.

The Maya developed a mathematical system based on the number 20. Also, the Maya were one of the first people to use zero. By using their math system, the Maya made great advances in astronomy. The Maya also produced a very accurate calendar system.

Beginning in the 800s, the Maya began to leave their cities in the southern lowlands. At the same time, their population declined sharply. The reasons for these events remain a mystery. By the 1400s, the Maya had left all their cities.

3. What advances did the Maya achieve in record keeping?

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