

# Lesson 4 The Mayan Civilization

## MAIN IDEAS

**Geography** Mayan civilization rose in Central America as the Maya adapted to both highlands and lowlands.

**Culture** Mayan society was divided into classes and shaped by religion.

**Culture** The Maya produced beautiful art and made important advances in learning.

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## The Rise of the Maya

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** Where did Mayan civilization rise?

### The Land of the Maya

- As Olmec declined, they influenced the **Maya**
  - new civilization rose in southern Mexico, northern Central America
  - included northern lowlands, dry forests, dense jungles
  - also, range of mountains from southern Mexico to El Salvador

### Early Settlements

- By 1500 B.C., Maya people settled villages, farmed, traded
  - rich villages had religious centers by 500 B.C., became cities

### Classic Period

- Classic Period of civilization believed to have been A.D. 250–900
  - Maya built city-states with temples, pyramids, plazas
- Largest city-states included Tikal, Copán, Palenque
  - each was independent, ruled by king
- Cities linked by trade of products such as salt, textiles, jade

### REVIEW QUESTION

How did the Maya develop into a great civilization?

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# Mayan Life

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** How was Mayan society structured?

## Daily Life

- Thousands lived in city-states, formed social structure over time
  - king at top, then noble class of priests, leading warriors
  - followed by merchants and artisans, then farmers
  - at bottom were slaves, mostly prisoners of war
- Most Maya were farmers, growing beans, squash, **maize**—type of corn
  - maize was important—Mayan legends say people were created from it
- Farmers used irrigation—dug canals to carry water to dry fields
  - used rich soil from canal beds to raise up fields
- Built houses on poles to keep dry when rivers flooded
- Nobles lived in stone palaces, wore beautiful clothes, jade beads

## Religious Beliefs

- Worshiped many gods—supreme god was lord of fire
  - others were goddess of moon, gods of sun, death, war, corn, rain
- Sacrificed animals, plants, jade, and sometimes humans to gods
- Ritual ball game, played on big court, was believed to bring rains

## REVIEW QUESTION

How was Mayan life shaped by religion?

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# Mayan Culture

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** What were Mayan achievements in art and learning?

## Art

- Art, learning linked to religion—art created for ceremonies
  - beliefs led to development of calendar, mathematics, astronomy
- Tropical climate caused wooden art to rot long ago
  - only pottery, sculpture, jade, steles survive today
    - **steles**—carved stone slabs marking religious dates, rulers' reigns

## Achievements in Math and Science

- Like India, Maya developed zero, positions to show number place
- Developed accurate 365-day calendar system
  - used to plan planting, attacks against enemies, religious holidays

## Writing

- Developed most advanced writing system in ancient Americas
- Used **glyphs**—symbolic pictures standing for words, syllables, sounds
  - recorded events in codex—a bark-paper book—using glyphs

## Abandoned Cities

- Maya abandoned cities by 900 for unknown reasons
  - warfare in 700s may have caused decline
  - overcrowding, overfarming may have caused food shortages
- Only small, weak city-states remained when Spanish arrived in 1500s
- Mayan peoples still live in Meso-America, speak Mayan languages

## REVIEW QUESTION

How were art and learning linked to religion?

## Lesson Summary

- The Maya built magnificent cities.
- A clear class structure developed in the Mayan civilization.
- The Maya created lasting artworks, invented a writing system, and made great advances in astronomy and mathematics.

## Why It Matters Now . . .

The influence of Mayan culture is found in the United States as a result of immigration from Meso-America.