

# Chichen Itza



Chichén Itzá<sup>[nb 1]</sup> (often spelled Chichen Itza in English and traditional Yucatec Maya) was a large pre-Columbian city built by the Maya people of the Terminal Classic period. The archeological site is located in Municipality, Yucatán State, Mexico.<sup>[1]</sup> Chichén Itzá was a major focal point in the Northern Maya Lowlands from the Late Classic (c. AD 600–900) through the Terminal Classic (c. AD 800–900) and into the early portion of the Postclassic period (c. AD 900–1200). The site exhibits a multitude of architectural styles, reminiscent of styles seen in central Mexico and of the Puuc and Chenes styles of the Northern Maya lowlands. The presence of central Mexican styles was once thought to have been representative of direct migration or even conquest from central Mexico, but most contemporary interpretations view the presence of these non-Maya styles more as the result of cultural diffusion.

## NAME AND ORTHOGRAPHY

### Name

The Maya name "Chichen Itza" means "At the mouth of the well of the Itza." This derives from *chi'*, meaning "mouth" or "edge", and *ch'en* or *ch'e'en*, meaning "well". *Itzá* is the name of an ethnic-lineage group that gained political and economic dominance of the northern peninsula. One possible translation for Itza is "enchanter (or enchantment) of the water,"<sup>[5]</sup> from its (*itz*), "sorcerer", and *ha*, "water".<sup>[6]</sup> The name is spelled Chichén Itzá in Spanish, and the accents are sometimes maintained in other languages to show that both parts of the name are stressed on

their final syllable. Other references prefer the modern Maya orthography, Chich'en Itza' (pronounced [tʃitʃ'en itsáʔ]). This form preserves the phonemic distinction between ch' and ch, since the base word ch'e'en (which, however, is not stressed in Maya) begins with a postalveolar ejective affricate consonant. Traditional Yucatec Maya spelling in Latin letters, used from the 16th through mid 20th century, spelled it as "Chichen Itza" (as accents on the last syllable are usual for the language, they are not indicated as they are in Spanish). The word "Itza'" has a high tone on the "a" followed by a glottal stop (indicated by the apostrophe).

## Political organization

Several archeologists in the late 1980s suggested that unlike previous Maya polities of the Early Classic, Chichén Itzá may not have been governed by an individual ruler or a single dynastic lineage. Instead, the city's political organization could have been structured by a "multepal" system, which is characterized as rulership through council composed of members of elite ruling lineages.[14] This theory was popular in the 1990s, but in recent years, the research that supported the concept of the "multepal" system has been called into question, if not discredited. The current belief trend in Maya scholarship is toward the more traditional model of the Maya kingdoms of the Classic Period southern lowlands in Mexico.[15]

Chichén Itzá was a major economic power in the northern Maya lowlands during its apogee.[16] Participating in the water-borne circum-peninsular trade route through its port site of Isla Cerritos on the north coast,[17] Chichen Itza was able to obtain locally unavailable resources from distant areas such as obsidian from central Mexico and gold from southern Central America.

Between AD 900 and 1050 Chichen Itza expanded to become a powerful regional capital controlling north and central Yucatán. It established Isla Cerritos as a trading port.[18]

### HISTORY, ESTABLISHMENT, ASCENDANCY

## History

The layout of Chichén Itzá site core developed during its earlier phase of occupation, between 750 and 900 AD.[19] Its final layout was developed after 900 AD, and the 10th century saw the rise of the city as a regional capital controlling the area from central Yucatán to the north coast, with its power extending down the east and west coasts of the peninsula.[20] The earliest hieroglyphic date discovered at Chichen Itza is equivalent to 832 AD, while the last known date was recorded in the Osario temple in 998.[21]

The Late Classic city was centered upon the area to the southwest of the Xtoloc cenote, with the main architecture represented by the substructures now underlying the Las Monjas and Observatorio and the basal platform upon which they were built.[22]

Chichén Itzá rose to regional prominence toward the end of the Early Classic period (roughly 600 AD). It was, however, toward the end of the Late Classic and into the early part of the Terminal Classic that the site became a major regional capital, centralizing and dominating political, sociocultural, economic, and ideological life in the northern Maya lowlands. The ascension of Chichen Itza roughly correlates with the decline and fragmentation of the major centers of the southern Maya lowlands. As Chichén Itzá rose to prominence, the cities of Yaxuna (to the south) and Coba (to the east) were suffering decline. These two cities had been mutual allies, with Yaxuna dependent upon Coba. At some point in the 10th century Coba lost a significant portion of its territory, isolating Yaxuna, and Chichen Itza may have directly contributed to the collapse of both cities.[23]

## ACCORDING TO SOME COLONIAL MAYAN SOURCES

### Decline

According to some colonial Mayan sources (e.g., the Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel), Hunac Ceel, ruler of Mayapan, conquered Chichén Itzá in the 13th century. Hunac Ceel supposedly prophesied his own rise to power. According to custom at the time, individuals thrown into the Cenote Sagrado were believed to have the power of prophecy if they survived. During one such ceremony, the chronicles state, there were no survivors, so Hunac Ceel leaped into the Cenote Sagrado, and when removed, prophesied his own ascension.

While there is some archeological evidence that indicates Chichén Itzá was at one time looted and sacked,[24] there appears to be greater evidence that it could not have been by Mayapan, at least not when Chichén Itzá was an active urban center.