Preclassic

There are traces of early agriculture at the site dating as far back as 1000 BC, in the Middle Preclassic. A cache of Mamon ceramics dating from about 700-400 BC were found in a sealed chultun, a subterranean bottle-shaped chamber.

Major construction at Tikal was already taking place in the Late Preclassic period, first appearing around 400–300 BC, including the building of major pyramids and platforms, although the city was still dwarfed by sites further north such as El Mirador and Nakbe. At this time, Tikal participated in the widespread Chikanel culture that dominated the Central and Northern Maya areas at this time – a region that included the entire Yucatan Peninsula including northern and eastern Guatemala and all of Belize.

Two temples dating to Late Chikanel times had masonry-walled superstructures that may have been corbel-vaulted, although this has not been proven. One of these had elaborate paintings on the outer walls showing human figures against a scrollwork background, painted in yellow, black, pink and red.

In the 1st century AD rich burials first appeared and Tikal underwent a political and cultural florescence as its giant northern neighbors declined. At the end of the Late Preclassic, the Izapan style art and architecture from the Pacific Coast began to influence Tikal, as demonstrated by a broken sculpture from the acropolis and early murals at the city.

Early Classic

Dynastic rulership among the lowland Maya is most deeply rooted at Tikal. According to later hieroglyphic records, the dynasty was founded by Yax-Moch-Xoc, perhaps in the 3rd century AD. At the beginning of the Early Classic, power in the Maya region was concentrated at Tikal and Calakmul, in the core of the Maya heartland.

Tikal may have benefited from the collapse of the large Preclassic states such as El Mirador. In the Early Classic Tikal rapidly developed into the most dynamic city in the Maya region, stimulating the development of other nearby Maya cities.

The site, however, was often at war and inscriptions tell of alliances and conflict with other Maya states, including Uaxactun, Caracol, Naranjo and Calakmul. The site was defeated at the end of the Early Classic by Caracol, which rose to take Tikal's place as the paramount center in the southern Maya lowlands. The earlier part of the Early Classic saw hostilities between Tikal and its neighbor Uaxactun, with Uaxactun recording the capture of prisoners from Tikal.

There appears to have been a breakdown in the male succession by AD 317, when Lady Unen Bahlam conducted a katun-ending ceremony, apparently as queen of the city.

Tikal and Teotihuacan

The great metropolis of Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico appears to have decisively intervened in Tikal politics.

The fourteenth king of Tikal was Chak Tok Ich'aak (Great Jaguar Paw). Chak Tok Ich'aak built a palace that was preserved and developed by later rulers until it became the core of the Central Acropolis. Little is known about Chak Tok Ich'aak except that he was killed on 14 January 378 AD. On the same day, Siyah K’ak’ (Fire Is Born) arrived from the west, having passed through El Peru, a site to the west of Tikal, on 8 January. On Stela 31 he is named as "Lord of the West". Siyah K’ak’ was probably a foreign general serving a figure represented by a non-Maya hieroglyph of a spearthrower combined with an owl, a glyph that is well known from the great metropolis of Teotihuacan in the distant Valley of Mexico. Spearthrower Owl may even have been the ruler of Teotihuacan. These recorded events strongly suggest that Siyah K’ak’ led a Teotihuacan invasion that defeated the native Tikal king, who was captured and immediately executed. Siyah K'ak' appears to have been aided by a powerful political faction at Tikal itself; roughly at the time of the conquest, a group of Teotihuacan natives were apparently residing near the Lost World complex. He also exerted control over other cities in the area, including Uaxactun, where he became king, but did not take the throne of Tikal for himself.Within a year, the son of Spearthrower Owl by the name of Yax Nuun Ayiin I (First Crocodile) had been installed as the tenth king of Tikal while he was still a boy, being enthroned on 13 September 379. He reigned for 47 years as king of Tikal, and remained a vassal of Siyah K'ak' for as long as the latter lived. It seems likely that Yax Nuun Ayiin I took a wife from the preexisting, defeated, Tikal dynasty and thus legitimized the right to rule of his son, Siyaj Chan K'awiil II.

Río Azul, a small site 100 kilometres (62 mi) northeast of Tikal, was conquered by the latter during the reign of Yax Nuun Ayiin I. The site became an outpost of Tikal, shielding it from hostile cities further north, and also became a trade link to the Caribbean.

Although the new rulers of Tikal were foreign, their descendants were rapidly Mayanized. Tikal became the key ally and trading partner of Teotihuacan in the Maya lowlands. After being conquered by Teotihuacan, Tikal rapidly dominated the northern and eastern Peten. Uaxactun, together with smaller towns in the region, were absorbed into Tikal's kingdom. Other sites, such as Bejucal and Motul de San José near Lake Petén Itzá became vassals of their more powerful neighbor to the north. By the middle of the 5th century Tikal had a core territory of at least 25 kilometres (16 mi) in every direction.

Around the 5th century an impressive system of fortifications consisting of ditches and earthworks was built along the northern periphery of Tikal's hinterland, joining up with the natural defenses provided by large areas of swampland lying to the east and west of the city. Additional fortifications were probably also built to the south. These defenses protected Tikal's core population and agricultural resources, encircling an area of approximately 120 square kilometres (46 sq mi). Recent research suggests that the earthworks served as a water collection system rather than a defensive purpose.

Tikal and Copán

In the 5th century the power of the city reached as far south as Copán, whose founder K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' was clearly connected with Tikal. Copán itself was not in an ethnically Maya region and the founding of the Copán dynasty probably involved the direct intervention of Tikal. K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' arrived in Copán in December 426 and bone analysis of his remains shows that he passed his childhood and youth at Tikal. An individual known as Ajaw K'uk' Mo' (lord K'uk' Mo') is referred to in an early text at Tikal and may well be the same person. His tomb had Teotihuacan characteristics and he was depicted in later portraits dressed in the warrior garb of Teotihuacan. Hieroglyphic texts refer to him as "Lord of the West", much like Siyah K’ak’. At the same time, in late 426, Copán founded the nearby site of Quiriguá, possibly sponsored by Tikal itself. The founding of these two centers may have been part of an effort to impose Tikal's authority upon the southeastern portion of the Maya region. The interaction between these sites and Tikal was intense over the next three centuries.

A long-running rivalry between Tikal and Calakmul began in the 6th century, with each of the two cities forming its own network of mutually hostile alliances arrayed against each other in what has been likened to a long-running war between two Maya superpowers. The kings of these two capitals adopted the title kaloomte', a term that has not been precisely translated but that implies something akin to "high king".

The early 6th century saw another queen ruling the city, known only as the "Lady of Tikal", who was very likely a daughter of Chak Tok Ich'aak II. She seems never to have ruled in her own right, rather being partnered with male co-rulers. The first of these was Kaloomte' B'alam, who seems to have had a long career as a general at Tikal before becoming co-ruler and 19th in the dynastic sequence. The Lady of Tikal herself seems not have been counted in the dynastic numbering. It appears she was later paired with lord "Bird Claw", who is presumed to be the otherwise unknown 20th ruler.

Late Classic

Tikal hiatus

The main plaza during winter solstice celebrations

In the mid 6th century, Caracol seems to have allied with Calakmul and defeated Tikal, closing the Early Classic. The "Tikal hiatus" refers to a period between the late 6th to late 7th century where there was a lapse in the writing of inscriptions and large-scale construction at Tikal. In the latter half of the 6th century AD, a serious crisis befell the city, with no new stelae being erected and with widespread deliberate mutilation of public sculpture. This hiatus in activity at Tikal was long unexplained until later epigraphic decipherments identified that the period was prompted by Tikal's comprehensive defeat at the hands of Calakmul and the Caracol polity in AD 562, a defeat that seems to have resulted in the capture and sacrifice of the king of Tikal. The badly eroded Altar 21 at Caracol described how Tikal suffered this disastrous defeat in a major war in April 562.It seems that Caracol was an ally of Calakmul in the wider conflict between that city and Tikal, with the defeat of Tikal having a lasting impact upon the city.Tikal was not sacked but its power and influence were broken. After its great victory, Caracol grew rapidly and some of Tikal's population may have been forcibly relocated there. During the hiatus period, at least one ruler of Tikal took refuge with Janaab' Pakal of Palenque, another of Calakmul's victims. Calakmul itself thrived during Tikal's long hiatus period.

The beginning of the Tikal hiatus has served as a marker by which archaeologists commonly subdivide the Classic period of Mesoamerican chronology into the Early and Late Classic.