

Maya civilization

The Maya civilization (/ˈmaɪə/) was a Mesoamerican civilization developed by the Maya peoples, and noted for its logosyllabic script—the most sophisticated and highly developed writing system in pre-Columbian Americas—as well as for its art, architecture, mathematics, calendar, and astronomical system. The Maya civilization developed in an area that encompasses southeastern Mexico, all of Guatemala and Belize, and the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador. This region consists of the northern lowlands encompassing the Yucatán Peninsula, and the highlands of the Sierra Madre, running from the Mexican state of Chiapas, across southern Guatemala and onwards into El Salvador, and the southern lowlands of the Pacific littoral plain. The overarching term "Maya" is a modern collective term that refers to the peoples of the region, however, the term was not used by the indigenous populations themselves since there never was a common sense of identity or political unity among the distinct populations.[1]

The Archaic period, prior to 2000 BC, saw the first developments in agriculture and the earliest villages. The Preclassic period (c.2000 BC to 250 AD) saw the establishment of the first complex societies in the Maya region, and the cultivation of the staple crops of the Maya diet, including maize, beans, squashes, and chili peppers. The first Maya cities developed around 750 BC, and by 500 BC these cities possessed monumental architecture, including large temples with elaborate stucco façades. Hieroglyphic writing was being used in the Maya region by the 3rd century BC. In the Late Preclassic a number of large cities developed in the Petén Basin, and the city of Kaminaljuyu rose to prominence in the Guatemalan Highlands. Beginning around 250 AD, the Classic period is largely defined as when the Maya were raising sculpted monuments with Long Count dates. This period saw the Maya civilization develop many city-states linked by a complex trade network. In the Maya Lowlands two great rivals, the cities of Tikal and Calakmul, became powerful. The Classic period also saw the intrusive intervention of the central Mexican city of

Teotihuacan in Maya dynastic politics. In the 9th century, there was a widespread political collapse in the central Maya region, resulting in internecine warfare, the abandonment of cities, and a northward shift of population. The Postclassic period saw the rise of Chichen Itza in the north, and the expansion of the aggressive K'iche' kingdom in the Guatemalan Highlands. In the 16th century, the Spanish Empire colonised the Mesoamerican region, and a lengthy series of campaigns saw the fall of Nojpetén, the last Maya city, in 1697.

Classic period rule was centred on the concept of the "divine king", who acted as a mediator between mortals and the supernatural realm. Kingship was patrilineal, and power would normally pass to the eldest son. A prospective king was also expected to be a successful war leader. Maya politics was dominated by a closed system of patronage, although the exact political make-up of a kingdom varied from city-state to city-state. By the Late Classic, the aristocracy had greatly increased, resulting in the corresponding reduction in the exclusive power of the divine king. The Maya civilization developed highly sophisticated artforms, and the Maya created art using both perishable and non-perishable materials, including wood, jade, obsidian, ceramics, sculpted stone monuments, stucco, and finely painted murals.

Maya cities tended to expand haphazardly, and the city centre would be occupied by ceremonial and administrative complexes, surrounded by an irregular sprawl of residential districts. Different parts of a city would often be linked by causeways. The principal architecture of the city consisted of palaces, pyramid-temples, ceremonial ballcourts, and structures aligned for astronomical observation. The Maya elite were literate, and developed a complex system of hieroglyphic writing that was the most advanced in the pre-Columbian Americas. The Maya recorded their history and ritual knowledge in screenfold books, of which only three uncontested examples remain, the rest having been destroyed by the Spanish. There are also a great many examples of Maya text found on stelae and ceramics. The Maya developed a highly complex series of interlocking ritual

calendars, and employed mathematics that included one of the earliest instances of the explicit zero in the world. As a part of their religion, the Maya practised human sacrifice.

Mesoamerica

The Maya civilization developed within the Mesoamerican cultural area, which covers a region that spreads from northern Mexico southwards into Central America.[2] Mesoamerica was one of six cradles of civilization worldwide.[3] The Mesoamerican area gave rise to a series of cultural developments that included complex societies, agriculture, cities, monumental architecture, writing, and calendrical systems.[4] The set of traits shared by Mesoamerican cultures also included astronomical knowledge, blood and human sacrifice, and a cosmovision that viewed the world as divided into four divisions aligned with the cardinal directions, each with different attributes, and a three-way division of the world into the celestial realm, the earth, and the underworld.[5]

By 6000 BC, the early inhabitants of Mesoamerica were experimenting with the domestication of plants, a process that eventually led to the establishment of sedentary agricultural societies.[6] The diverse climate allowed for wide variation in available crops, but all regions of Mesoamerica cultivated the base crops of maize, beans, and squashes.[7] All Mesoamerican cultures used Stone Age technology; after c. 1000 AD copper, silver and gold were worked. Mesoamerica lacked draft animals, did not use the wheel, and possessed few domesticated animals; the principal means of transport was on foot or by canoe.[8] Mesoamericans viewed the world as hostile and governed by unpredictable deities. The ritual Mesoamerican ballgame was widely played.[9] Mesoamerica is linguistically diverse, with most languages falling within a small number of language families—the major families are Mayan, Mixe–Zoquean, Otomanguean, and Uto-Aztecan; there are also a number of smaller families and isolates. The Mesoamerican language area shares a number of important features, including widespread loanwords, and use of a vigesimal number system.[10]

The territory of the Maya covered a third of Mesoamerica,[11] and the Maya were engaged in a dynamic relationship with neighbouring cultures that included the Olmecs, Mixtecs, Teotihuacan, the Aztecs, and others.[12] During the Early Classic period, the Maya cities of Tikal and Kaminaljuyu were key Maya foci in a network that extended beyond the Maya area into the highlands of central Mexico.[13] At around the same time, there was a strong Maya presence at the Tetitla compound of Teotihuacan.[14] Centuries later, during the 9th century AD, murals at Cacaxtla, another site in the central Mexican highlands, were painted in a Maya style.[15] This may have been either an effort to align itself with the still-powerful Maya area after the collapse of Teotihuacan and ensuing political fragmentation in the Mexican Highlands,[16] or an attempt to express a distant Maya origin of the inhabitants.[17] The Maya city of Chichen Itza and the distant Toltec capital of Tula had an especially close relationship.[18]

History

The history of Maya civilization is divided into three principal periods: the Preclassic, Classic, and Postclassic periods.[28] These were preceded by the Archaic Period, during which the first settled villages and early developments in agriculture emerged.[29] Modern scholars regard these periods as arbitrary divisions of Maya chronology, rather than indicative of cultural evolution or decline.[30] Definitions of the start and end dates of period spans can vary by as much as a century, depending on the author.[31]