



Maya Cities

The Maya built hundreds of cities across Mesoamerica (the area where Mexico and Central America are now) over hundreds of years. During 200 CE and 900 CE is known as the Classic Period. This was when they built most of their most advanced cities and when their population was at its greatest. During this time, the Maya population reached somewhere near 2 million people.

Most Maya cities were designed in a similar way. They all had a square or plaza where markets could be held. This was an important part of people's lives—it gave them a place to socialise, sell products and buy food. There would also have been a place for the king who ruled over the city. Each city had at least one stepped pyramid that would be used for religious ceremonies, including human and animal sacrifice.

All of the Maya cities were ruled by their own leader. There wasn't a single power that controlled all of the cities, and they often fought against each other. Many Maya used sport as a way to keep healthy and prepare for battle. One of the most popular sports was Pok-A-Tok. Not only was it a popular sport, but it was also a great way to resolve arguments. This meant that noblemen or kings didn't have to fight each other—they could get their sporting heroes to do it for them. However, it seems that the losing team's leader was very often sacrificed to the gods as punishment for losing. It's fair to say they took the game seriously!

It isn't known exactly how Pok-A-Tok was played, but archaeologists have a good idea. Each side of the court had a sloped, stone-covered ramp with a stone hoop mounted at the top. The object of the game seems to have been to hit a hard rubber ball through the hoops; however, players were only allowed to use their hips and thighs to strike the ball! Games often went on for days, and there were no rules stopping your opponents from getting violent on the court. Because it was so important, every city had at least one Pok-A-Tok court.

Most Maya were farmers. Their farmland was often on the outskirts of the city, and they would transport their crops back to the city to sell or trade it. This meant that crops could be grown in



larger areas than would have been possible inside the city limits. One way that the Maya farmed was called slash-and-burn. They would slash down any trees in the area and burn the ground. This created lots of ash which was very fertile. However, this wouldn't have provided enough food to feed them all, so they turned to other methods as well. Where the land was too wet to burn or farm, they constructed enormous raised beds from woven reeds. They also built flat terraces out of the side of hills and mountains. This meant they had much more land to farm on than they would have. It was because of these methods that the Maya could feed so many people and grow so large as a civilisation.



VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. Write another word that could replace the phrase “hundreds of years”.
2. Find and copy a word that means “get together and spend time in a group”.
3. What does the word “resolve” mean?
4. Find and copy a word that tells you the Pok-A-Tok courts weren't all flat.
5. Find and copy a synonym for “built”.

VIPERS QUESTIONS

R

What did the Maya sacrifice?

R

Why did the Maya play sport?

S

How was the game of Pok-A-Tok different to sport today?

R

Which parts of the body could be used in Pok-A-Tok?

I

Why might you have been hurt playing Pok-A-Tok?