

The Maya

The Maya (sometimes referred to as the Mayan) were a civilisation that rose to power in an area called Mesoamerica. Mesoamerica covers modern-day Mexico and Central America. The Maya were one of the longest-lasting ancient civilisations. They began somewhere before 1000 BCE and continued until 1697 CE. That's a longer period of time than both the Ancient Egyptians and the Ancient Romans. When the Maya started to build their first cities, the Egyptians were at the height of their power, and the Romans hadn't even begun. When the Roman Empire collapsed, the Maya still continued for another 1,200 years.

Unlike the Roman and Egyptian empires, the Maya weren't ruled over by a central government. All of the Mayan cities shared a common culture and religion—they told similar stories and worshipped the same gods—but each one was ruled over by its own king. These kings didn't always get along, and they often went to war with each other over food, riches and prisoners.

An important part of the Maya religion was a human sacrifice to the gods, but no king wanted to sacrifice his own people. Instead, they would invade other cities and kidnap their citizens to sacrifice. The Maya believed that people who died passed into an afterlife. People who were sacrificed or who went off to fight in battle knew that a paradise awaited them if they died.

In many ways, the Maya were an advanced civilisation. They knew how to work with metal, but often didn't as there wasn't much ore (the raw materials needed to make metals). Instead, they use mainly stone. They didn't use or even know of the idea of a wheel, and so anything heavy had to be carried by slaves or on canoes. However, the Maya were exceptional mathematicians. They used the number zero in their counting system, which was very different from systems like Roman numerals. They were also keen astronomers. They studied the night sky and were able to predict solar eclipses. This also meant that they had a very accurate and advanced calendar system—it was one of the most accurate in the ancient world.

Wealthy Maya citizens would have worn brightly coloured clothes made from animal skins, feathers



and dyes. They wore fancy jewellery and headdresses. Poorer people would have worn simpler clothing. Men wore loincloths and women wore long skirts. Both men and women had long hair as part of the culture. When they got married, many men and women were given tattoos to symbolise their union.

Maize (a type of corn) was incredibly important to the Maya. They grew it in huge fields and very advanced farming techniques. They made many types of food from their maize: tortillas, porridge and drinks to name a few. The Maya were also one of the first civilisations to make chocolate. They also introduced the rest of the world to tomatoes, sweet potato and black beans.



RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. Which modern areas does Mesoamerica contain?
2. When did the Maya civilisation end?
3. Who ruled over each city?
4. What is maize?
5. Give one thing the Maya used maize for.

VIPERS QUESTIONS

S

How did kings avoid sacrificing their own people?

S

In what ways were the Maya advanced?

V

Find and copy a word that means “waited for”.

V

What is a culture in this context?

I

Why might it have been hard for the Maya to build large structures?