NO PREP

The Maya

An Overview

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

The Maya: An Overview

A Civilization Built in the Jungle

When most people think of the Maya, they picture crumbling pyramids swallowed by tropical vines and a civilization that mysteriously vanished. Both parts of that image are wrong in important ways. The Maya did build extraordinary pyramids, but their civilization never vanished — it transformed. Today, more than seven million Maya people live across Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador, speaking dozens of Maya languages and maintaining cultural traditions that stretch back thousands of years. Understanding the Maya means setting aside the myth of disappearance and looking at what the archaeology actually shows. Maya civilization developed in Mesoamerica, the cultural region that stretches from central Mexico to the northern tip of Central America. The heartland of the ancient Maya world included the lowland jungles of what is now Guatemala's Peten region, the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, and the highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala. This was not an easy environment to build a civilization in — the jungle is hot, humid, and prone to

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Three Great Periods: Rise, Peak, and Transformation

Archaeologists divide Maya history into three major periods: the Preclassic, Classic, and Postclassic. The Preclassic period runs roughly from 2000 BCE to 250 CE. This is when the foundations of Maya civilization were laid: early farming villages grew into towns, writing systems began to develop, and the first large ceremonial centers appeared. The site of El Mirador in present-day Guatemala was one of the largest cities in the ancient world during this period, with pyramids that rival those of Egypt in sheer volume. The Classic period (250 CE to 900 CE) is the era that most people associate with the ancient Maya. This was the time of great city-states like Tikal, Palenque, Calakmul, Copan, and Quirigua. Population estimates for the Maya lowlands during this period once ranged from five to ten million people, and LiDAR surveys

since 2018 have revised them upward, to 10 to 15 million or more. Monumental architecture, elaborate tomb burials, carved stone monuments called stelae, and the flowering of Maya writing all characterize this era. The city-states of the Classic period were not unified under a single ruler: they competed, traded, allied, and warred with one another in a constant political dance. The Postclassic period (900 CE to 1521 CE) began after most of the southern lowland cities were abandoned. Power shifted north to cities on the Yucatan Peninsula, including Chichen Itza, Uxmal, and later Mayapan. The Postclassic Maya continued to trade across long distances, build impressive architecture, and maintain complex religious and political systems. When Spanish conquistadors arrived in the early 1500s, they encountered living, thriving Maya city-states, not ruins.

A World of City-States, Not an Empire

One key to understanding the Maya is recognizing that they never formed a single empire. Instead, Maya political organization resembled ancient Greece more than ancient Rome. Individual city-states, each ruled by a divine king called an ajaw, controlled surrounding territory and competed with their neighbors for dominance. Cities formed alliances and engaged in warfare, but no single Maya city ever conquered and unified the entire Maya world. This political fragmentation has important archaeological implications. It means that Maya culture showed significant regional variation. The glyphs used at Palenque in Chiapas differ in style from those at Copan in Honduras. Architectural styles varied by region. Trade goods moved across the entire Maya world, but local traditions remained strong. Archaeologists studying the Maya must always keep in mind which city-state, which region, and which time period they are looking at.

Geography: The Jungle as Home

The lowland Maya built their cities in one of the most challenging environments imaginable. The tropical jungle receives enormous amounts of rainfall during the wet season, but the limestone bedrock drains quickly — leaving the Maya dependent on seasonal rains, natural sinkholes called cenotes, and elaborate water storage systems. Managing water was central to Maya political power: rulers who could guarantee water supply held the loyalty of their people. The highlands of Guatemala and Chiapas provided different resources: obsidian for tools and trade, volcanic stone for grinding corn, and access to the Pacific coast. Trade routes connected the

highlands and lowlands, moving jade, obsidian, cacao, salt, feathers, and cotton across hundreds of miles. The Maya world was deeply interconnected despite its political fragmentation.

The Maya Today: Not a Lost Civilization

Perhaps the most important thing modern students need to understand about the Maya is that they are not a past civilization — they are a present one. The K'iche' Maya of Guatemala have kept their ceremonial calendar running continuously for over a thousand years. Maya communities across the region fought to preserve their languages and traditions through centuries of colonial suppression. Maya archaeologists and scholars are increasingly central to the study of their own ancestors. When news stories describe ancient Maya discoveries, they are describing the heritage of people who are alive today and who have strong opinions about how that heritage should be treated, studied, and shared.

Key Information: Maya Civilization

Detail	Information
Geographic Region	Mesoamerica: Yucatan, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, Chiapas
Preclassic Period	2000 BCE – 250 CE; early farming villages, El Mirador pyramid city
Classic Period	250 CE – 900 CE; peak of Tikal, Palenque, Calakmul, Copan
Postclassic Period	900 CE – 1521 CE; northern Yucatan cities, Chichen Itza
Political Structure	City-states (not empire); each ruled by a divine king (ajaw)
Key Features	Pyramids, glyphs, stelae, Long Count calendar, cenotes
Spanish Contact	1521 CE; Maya city-states still active at time of conquest
Maya Today	7+ million Maya people alive; dozens of languages spoken

Case Study: Diego's Field

Diego Coc is a 34-year-old corn farmer in the Peten region of Guatemala, about twelve kilometers from the ruins of a major Maya site that tourists visit by the busload. His family has farmed this land for as long as anyone can remember. The milpa — the corn field — is cleared by hand the same way it has been for generations. Last dry season, a team of archaeologists showed up at Diego's door. They had been using LiDAR aerial surveys and had identified what looked like ancient causeways and agricultural terraces running through the farmland Diego's family works. They needed access to conduct ground surveys. Diego remembered his grandfather's stories about the 'old people' who built everything around here. His grandfather called them ancestors, not ruins. 'My grandfather said we come from them,' Diego told the lead archaeologist. 'You are here to study them like strangers. We have been living with them this whole time.' The archaeologists explained that the terrace systems they found might be 1,500 years old. Diego pointed out that he had been farming around those same earthworks his whole life, had noticed they held moisture better than the surrounding land, and had wondered why. He had never thought to call a university — who would he call? He just farmed.

1. How does Diego's relationship to the Maya ruins near his farm differ from how outside archaeologists approach the same sites? What does this difference reveal about who 'owns' archaeological knowledge?

2. The reading states that the Maya 'never vanished.' How does Diego's story illustrate this point, and why does the myth of Maya disappearance matter to living Maya people today?

Multiple Choice

1. What political structure characterized the ancient Maya world?

a) A single empire ruled by one supreme king

b) Tribal confederacies without permanent cities or centralized authority

c) Independent city-states that competed and allied with one another

d) A federation of democratic city-states

2. Which of the following best describes the Classic period of Maya civilization?

a) The period from 250 CE to 900 CE marked by great city-states and monumental architecture

b) The earliest period of Maya farming villages and first ceremonial centers for ritual use

c) The era when Spanish conquistadors arrived and conquered Maya cities

d) The Postclassic era when power shifted to Chichen Itza

3. Why is the term 'Maya collapse' considered misleading by modern archaeologists?

a) Because LiDAR proved all cities were occupied continuously over many centuries

b) Because Spanish colonizers preserved all Maya institutions

c) Because millions of Maya people are alive today and their culture continued

d) Because no Maya cities were ever abandoned

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Mesoamerica	A) The era from 250 CE to 900 CE when great Maya cities like Tikal and Palenque flourished
2. ___ City-state	B) The cultural region stretching from central Mexico through northern Central America
3. ___ Classic period	C) The Maya word for a divine ruler or king who governed a city-state
4. ___ Stela	D) An independent political unit centered on a city that controls surrounding territory
5. ___ Ajaw	E) A carved stone monument erected by Maya rulers to record history and victories

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The ancient Maya never formed a single _____; instead their political organization consisted of competing city-states.

2. Natural sinkholes called _____ were critical water sources for Maya lowland cities built on limestone bedrock.

3. Archaeologists divide Maya history into three periods: the Preclassic, the _____, and the Postclassic.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain why geography — specifically the jungle environment and limestone bedrock of the Yucatan — made water management so central to Maya political power.

2. How does the archaeological evidence challenge the popular idea that the Maya 'mysteriously disappeared'? What does the archaeological record actually show happened after 900 CE?

3. The reading compares Maya political organization to ancient Greece rather than ancient Rome. What does this comparison tell us about how Maya archaeology must be approached differently from studying a unified empire like Rome?