NO PREP

Tikal

Superpower of the Maya World

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

Name: Period: Date:

Tikal: Superpower of the Maya World

A City Hidden in Plain Sight

For centuries, the great city of Tikal lay beneath the canopy of the Guatemalan jungle, its pyramids disguised as forested hills. Local people knew the ruins were there — chicleros, workers who harvested chicle sap from sapodilla trees for chewing gum, moved through the jungle and encountered the crumbling monuments regularly. But the outside world had largely forgotten that a city of perhaps one hundred thousand people had once dominated this landscape. The ruins at Tikal were formally documented by Western explorers in 1848, but serious archaeological excavation did not begin until the University of Pennsylvania launched a major project in 1956, work that continued for over a decade and transformed understanding of Classic Maya civilization. What the Penn project revealed was staggering. Tikal was not simply a large ceremonial center — it was a fully functioning city with residential neighborhoods, market areas, reservoirs, causeways connecting different districts, and a population density comparable to many

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The Rise to Regional Dominance

Tikal's rise to power was not inevitable. The site began as a modest settlement around 600 BCE but grew steadily through the Preclassic period. By the Early Classic (250-600 CE), Tikal had established itself as a major political force. Key to this rise was Tikal's location: it sat astride trade routes that connected the Maya highlands to the lowlands, and controlled access to valuable obsidian, jade, and other prestige goods that fueled the political economy of Classic Maya cities. The city's rulers used warfare, diplomacy, and strategic marriage alliances to extend their influence. One

of the most dramatic episodes in Tikal's history came in 378 CE when a warrior named Siyaj K'ak', possibly an agent of the distant city of Teotihuacan in central Mexico, arrived at Tikal and apparently orchestrated the death of the sitting ruler. Within days, a new dynasty aligned with Teotihuacan was installed. This event, now called the 'entrada,' left archaeological evidence in the form of Teotihuacan-style artifacts and architectural elements appearing suddenly in Tikal's material record. It demonstrates how far-reaching political networks were even in the 4th century CE.

The Great Rival: Calakmul

Tikal's most dangerous rival was Calakmul, a massive city in what is now southern Mexico. The competition between these two superpowers shaped the political landscape of the entire Classic Maya world for centuries. Smaller cities were forced to choose sides, forming alliances with either Tikal or Calakmul in a geopolitical rivalry that archaeologists have reconstructed from carved stelae and hieroglyphic inscriptions. In 562 CE, Calakmul led a coalition of cities that inflicted a decisive military defeat on Tikal, a 'Star War' victory recorded on multiple monuments. Tikal suffered a dark period of more than a century during which few monuments were erected and the city's influence contracted sharply. Tikal's recovery came under the warrior-king Jasaw Chan K'awil I, who came to power in 682 CE, launched an extraordinary building campaign, and defeated Calakmul in 695 CE in a reversal that restored Tikal to regional supremacy. Temple I was later built over his tomb. The victory stela shows Jasaw riding above a captive Calakmul ruler: one of the most powerful political images in Classic Maya art.

What LiDAR Revealed About Tikal's True Size

Even after decades of excavation, archaeologists in 2016 thought they had a reasonable picture of Tikal's extent — roughly sixteen square kilometers of mapped ruins. Then a LiDAR survey changed everything. The aerial laser scanning penetrated the jungle canopy and revealed the actual topography beneath: thousands of previously unknown structures, defensive walls, agricultural terraces, and reservoirs covering an area more than twice as large as previously mapped. The population estimates for Tikal were revised dramatically upward, from roughly 60,000 to potentially 100,000 or more people. The LiDAR data also revealed something unexpected: a cluster of structures built in the architectural style of Teotihuacan,

the distant central Mexican city. This physical evidence aligned with the inscriptional record of the 378 CE entrada and showed that the Teotihuacan presence at Tikal was more substantial than anyone had guessed. The discovery underscored a central lesson of modern Maya archaeology: despite generations of fieldwork, the jungle is still hiding enormous amounts of information.

The Great Plaza: Heart of a Civilization

The Great Plaza of Tikal — the open ceremonial space flanked by Temple I and Temple II, bounded by the North Acropolis and the Central Acropolis — was the beating heart of the city. It was here that rulers staged public rituals, received tribute, executed captives, and displayed their power to the population. The stelae arranged across the plaza are a timeline of Tikal's history in stone, recording dates, rulers, wars, and ceremonies stretching back centuries. Beneath the North Acropolis, archaeologists found layer upon layer of earlier construction phases, each royal generation building over the last — the physical accumulation of dynastic ambition rendered in limestone and stucco.

Key Information: Tikal

Detail	Information
Location	Peten region, northern Guatemala
Occupation Period	600 BCE – approximately 900 CE
Peak Population	Estimated 60,000–100,000 (revised upward after 2016 LiDAR survey)
Tallest Structure	Temple IV — 70 meters above the jungle floor
Key Rival	Calakmul (southern Mexico); multi-century political rivalry
Entrada Event	378 CE — possible Teotihuacan intervention; new dynasty installed
Major Excavation	University of Pennsylvania project, 1956 onward
LiDAR Discovery	2016 survey revealed city was more than twice the previously mapped size

Case Study: Marcos and the Stone Face

Marcos Ajú had been working the chicle groves of the Peten for eleven years when he found the face. It was 1953, deep in the dry season, and he had pushed further into the jungle than usual following the sapodilla trees. The face was carved into a stone slab nearly his own height — a Maya ruler, he guessed, staring out from under an elaborate headdress. Around the base of the slab were smaller carvings he couldn't read. Marcos had grown up hearing stories about the 'ancient ones' from his grandfather. He knew the jungle was full of their buildings. But he had never seen anything like this — a carved monument still standing, almost untouched, partially buried in roots. He thought about what to do. Chicleros sometimes sold artifacts to dealers who showed up from the capital city. There was real money in it. But his grandfather's voice was in his head: 'Those are the ancestors. You don't sell family.' Marcos marked the location carefully — a large ceiba tree to the north, a dry creek bed to the east — and when the season ended, he walked into the nearest town and told a schoolteacher what he had found. The teacher wrote a letter to the capital. Years later, when the university archaeologists arrived, Marcos served as their jungle guide. He knew every trail they needed.

1. Marcos faces a choice between selling the artifact and reporting it. What values and pressures are pulling him in each direction, and what does his choice reveal about attitudes toward cultural heritage?

2. How does Marcos's role as guide reflect a pattern discussed in the reading about who holds knowledge of Maya sites, and why is this kind of local knowledge important to archaeology?

Multiple Choice

1. What was the significance of the 378 CE 'entrada' event at Tikal?

    a) The University of Pennsylvania discovered Tikal's buried residential neighborhoods and outer settlement

    b) LiDAR revealed thousands of new structures doubling the known size of Tikal

    c) Tikal defeated Calakmul and became the undisputed ruler of all Maya cities

    d) A possible Teotihuacan-linked warrior arrived and a new dynasty aligned with Teotihuacan was installed

2. What did the 2016 LiDAR survey of Tikal reveal?

    a) That no trade connections existed between Tikal and other regions

    b) That Tikal had been abandoned before the Classic period even began

    c) That the city was more than twice its previously mapped size with thousands of unknown structures

    d) That Tikal's population was smaller than archaeologists had estimated before the 2016 LiDAR survey

3. How did Tikal eventually recover from its defeat by Calakmul in 562 CE?

    a) Ruler Jasaw Chan K'awil I defeated Calakmul in 695 CE and launched a major building program

    b) The Penn archaeological team helped rebuild the city's infrastructure

    c) Tikal formed a strong alliance with Teotihuacan that drove Calakmul out of the entire region

    d) Tikal relocated its capital to the Yucatan Peninsula

Matching

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

Term	Definition
1. ___ Stela	A) Aerial laser scanning technology that penetrates jungle canopy to reveal buried structures
2. ___ LiDAR	B) Tikal's most powerful rival city, located in what is now southern Mexico
3. ___ Entrada	C) A carved stone monument erected by Maya rulers to record historical events and rulers
4. ___ Calakmul	D) A worker who harvested chicle sap from jungle trees for the chewing gum industry
5. ___ Chiclero	E) The 378 CE event at Tikal involving possible Teotihuacan intervention and a new dynasty

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Temple I at Tikal was built over the tomb of the warrior-king _____, who defeated Calakmul in 695 CE.

2. The Great Plaza at Tikal is flanked by Temple I and Temple _____, two of the most recognizable pyramids in the Americas.

3. The University of _____ launched the first major excavation project at Tikal in 1956.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain how the political rivalry between Tikal and Calakmul shaped the broader Maya world. What does this rivalry tell us about how Classic Maya civilization was organized?

2. Why is the LiDAR survey of Tikal considered such a major breakthrough? What specific things did it reveal that excavation had not?

3. What role did trade routes and control of prestige goods play in Tikal's rise to regional dominance? Why would controlling access to jade and obsidian give a city political power?