

The Maya



A Mayan warrior



We know that the Mayans lived on the Central American mainland and that they chiefly occupied the Yucatan Peninsula. Unlike the Tainos and Kalinagos they built most of their settlement inland. Why?

1. They could get vast expanse of land to build their large and magnificent temples.
2. They had easy access to limestone for building.
3. There was an extensive trade network in the interior.
4. There was much fertile land for agriculture.
5. Rivers were located inland so they were also near water supply.

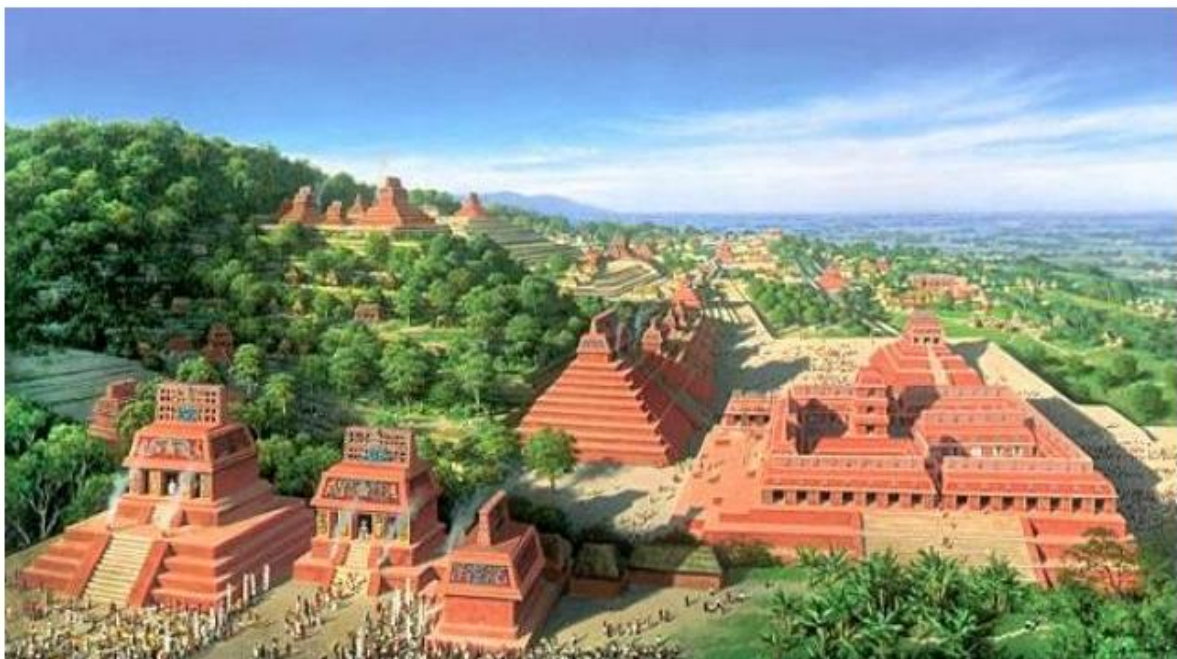
Political Organization

Of the three groups the Mayans were the most advanced. They built vast empires and independent city states. As such, they had a fairly elaborate and rigid system of government. Each independent city state was ruled by a **Halach Uinic**. This was a hereditary position. It was passed down from father to son only. His powers were wide. He was almost an absolute ruler. He had the final say in all matters. He had various civil, military and religious duties to perform.

He designed all domestic policies and foreign affairs. Remember that we are dealing with a very large area when compared to the Caribbean region occupied by the Tainos and Kalinagos. Belize alone is twice the size of Jamaica.

The states were divided into villages which were ruled by **batabs**. There were all chosen from the noble class so this post was also hereditary. They were to see to it that the laws and policies were enforced.

Because the Mayans were constantly engaged in defending themselves from neighboring invaders, the war chiefs or **nacoms** were also an important part of the government. They were however elected for three years. During their term of office they were not allowed to drink any strong drink! They were responsible for providing and training soldiers.



A Mayan city

Social Organization

Not surprisingly therefore the society was also organized along rigid class lines. These ranged from the royal family, the nobles: those who held top ranking government positions as well as the scribes, the priests, the merchant class, the farmers and craftsmen and the slaves. The Mayan society was a complex one. They were very intelligent and therefore the society accommodated these privileged people in the noble class. Usually though the astronomers and astrologers and mathematicians were from the priesthood.

A list of the various occupations that existed will help us to understand the various groups of people that made up the Mayan society.

1. Engineers
2. Architects
3. Priests
4. Teachers
5. Mathematicians
6. Astronomers
7. Scribes
8. Merchants
9. Traders
10. Farmers
11. Miners
12. Those who worked in the Forest industry
13. Craftsmen or artisans



A picture showing Mayan hierarchy in society

Religious Beliefs and Practices

The Mayans were polytheistic. They believed in as many as 166 gods! They had too had a number of myths to explain the mysteries of life including earth and the creation of man.

They believed in:

- The forces of good and evil
- Life after death
- Heaven and hell
- The underworld
- There is punishment in the afterlife for those who lived an evil life
- There is reward in the afterlife for those who lived a good life.
- Confessing to the priest on one's death bed.
- Offering human sacrifices to the gods, especially virgin girls!
- Using incense in the process of communicating with the gods
- Having birthday festivals and celebrations in honor of the gods
- Keeping the gods happy (appeasing the gods)

Mayan Gods of Rain, Sun, Maize, Death and the Goddesses of death



Gender Relations

In Mayan society, the women played a subservient role. Mayan women were not allowed to drink at functions. They were supposed to take their drunken husbands home!

They could not hold public office. Their main functions were child bearers and home makers. In fact, a Mayan man could divorce his wife if she did not bear him any children.

They were also given specific roles. They worked to pay the tribute tax. Weaving and pottery were done exclusively by the women.

There were more recreational activities that the men were allowed to participate in. for example there was only one dance in which the men and women were allowed to dance together. All other dances were done by the men together. The men also participated in bow and arrow contests.



Modern day Mayan women

What were the MAIN activities that they did to produce their basic needs?

1. Trade

They traded within the mainland. They traded by land and sea. There was a day set aside for market day and there established market centers. The highlands had goods that the lowlands did not have. They used the rivers and the long coastline as sea routes to get from one city state to another. This way too, they could carry a large volume of goods in the large canoes that they built instead of a limited amount on their heads over long distances.

They also traded obsidian and flint. The flint was in great demand for fire purposes but was only plenty in a certain area. Other precious metals and stones

were traded to be used for ornamental or religious purposes. For that same reason they traded feathers.

We already know that they traded with the people of the Greater Antilles.

The merchants and traders were known as **ppolms**. They were often used as and suspected of being spies who carried information from one city to another.



Mayan Jade was believed to bestow greenness and fertility to the land around it.

2. Farming

They practiced slash and burn, terracing and raised field farming techniques. They grew a wider variety of crops to include starch and vegetables. Maize (corn) was also their favourite starch. Among the list of foods, we find squash, pumpkin and of course cacao. They too had cotton, cassava, papaya and sweet potatoes.

3. Hunting

The Tainos and Kalinagos only knew two animals. The wild forests of the Central American mainland were the natural habitat of many animals such as a number of birds, deer, and the jaguar. They too hunted the agouti.

4. Animal Husbandry

They reared a wide variety of animals in order to provide meat for their families and for sale in the market. Examples of these are rabbits and the tapir.

5. Mining

This was very important to Mayan society and politics. There were large deposits of **limestone** to be found along the Central American mainland. Using their slave labor they extracted huge blocks of limestone for the construction of their cities, temples and pyramids.

How did they manage to earn the title of the most advanced civilization?

Technology

1. We will do **engineering and architecture** as a separate item since this was a very important part of Mayan religion and society. Using their limestone and mortar the Mayans constructed the following to create their magnificent empires:

- Corbelled arch
- Roads and bridges
- Causeways
- Massive temples with staircases for worship
- Entire cities with huge pyramids were constructed of stones, like Chichen Itza and Tikal.
- Large public buildings made of limestone and mortar
- Stone stelae with their history depicted on them

2. They were skilled in **Mathematics**

3. They practiced a form of **writing** known as **hieroglyphics**.

4. They had **books** made from the bark of trees.

5. They created a **Calendar** very similar to ours with 365 days in a year and leap as well!

6. They practiced **astrology**. They observed the stars and planets and used these to determine the 'right' time to plant, reap and even marry!

7. They had **three farming techniques** to include the slash and burn method

- They had a form of currency. Cocoa beans was used for money
- They used irrigation methods
- They used dams and wells to ensure water supply

-They knew and used the art of dyeing



Mayan tools