



## The Maya

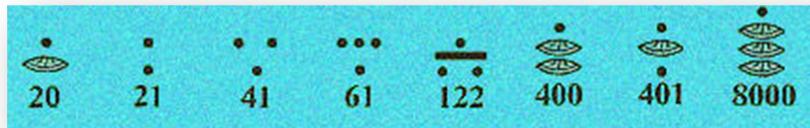
AD 250-900

The Maya lived in the south-east of **Mexico** and in some areas of present day **Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador** and **Belize**. Like the Aztecs, they warred with other peoples and forced their defeated enemies to pay them in goods or services. However, the Maya stand out from other cultures for to their advanced levels of knowledge.



### Maya Knowledge

The Maya had their own calendar, their own writing system, and kept records of births, marriages and military victories. They also created literature, such as the famous *Popol Vuh* and the *Chilam Balam*. They were also excellent mathematicians. One of the Maya's greatest achievements is in this area: **they invented the zero**.



The Maya developed positional numeration, which had not even been discovered by the Romans. Their writing was in the form of a picture language (pictographs) carved into stone, painted on walls, bark, deerskin and pottery. As further examples are being discovered, these pictographs are still being deciphered and translated so that knowledge of the Maya grows every day.



Their astronomers calculated the length of the solar year with amazing accuracy and the **Dresden Codex** contains precise lunar tables and a method to predict lunar eclipses.

## Art and Architecture

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The Maya were accomplished architects who built cities of pyramids, temples, palaces, ball courts, sweat baths and market places. The limestone they used for building came from the area they inhabited: the Yucatán Peninsula. Here they also found flint for stonework.

The Maya liked to design and paint pottery, and made figures carved from stone and wood. The decoration of their pottery varied from simple decorative motifs to more complicated, elegant and brightly coloured images of animals and people. A green precious stone, called Jade, was used for decorative ornaments.



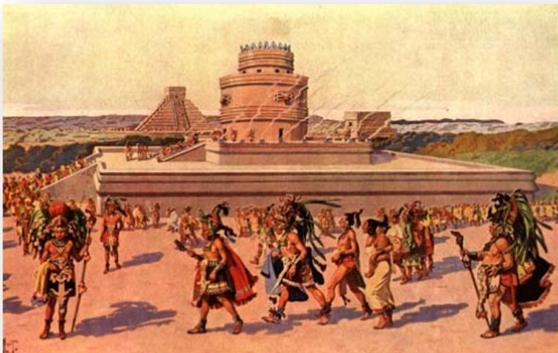
## The People

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Physically, the Maya were usually short in height with wide heads and sparse, straight hair. They had wide and prominent cheek bones with well defined lips and slanting eyes. They tied two wooden planks on the front and back of the heads of newly born babies, which produced the classic Maya profile.



They made their clothes with cotton and animal skins. The clothing of the different classes can be seen in sculptures and clay figures from the Maya period. For decoration, they wore enormous feather headdresses, necklaces, earplugs, nose plugs, rings and bracelets. For their jewellery, they used jade, shells, bone, obsidian, gold and copper.



The Maya ruling class included high priests and noblemen. The Mayans were farmers, craftsmen, warriors and merchants.

## Religion

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Religion played a very important part in the life of the Maya, and their ceremonies were full of music and dance. They believed that life was controlled by the gods, who gave them everything, from crops to good health and rain.

They believed that man was created from maize. Their most important God was *Itzamná* who was the original creator and lord of fire. The Maya also worshipped the Feathered Serpent who they knew as "*Kukulcán*" and the Aztecs knew as "*Quetzalcóatl*". The God of rain was called *Chac*.

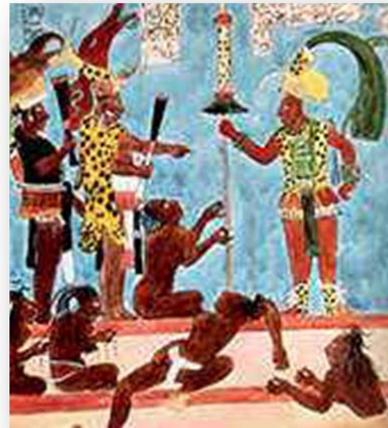


To please their gods they fasted and made sacrifices, which were offerings of food or objects, although later in their history the Maya did make human sacrifices, probably influenced by other cultures. One form of sacrifice was

to

throw their victims through openings called ***cenotes*** into deep underground rivers, together with offerings of copper, gold and jade. They believed this would bring rain.

As another way to please their gods, they practiced self-sacrifices by bleeding certain parts of their own bodies as an offering to the gods, as can be seen in the mural at *Bonampak*.



They thought that their own blood was the best thing they could give. To make themselves bleed, they used obsidian knives, pointed bones and shark's teeth to puncture their tongue, ears or other body parts.

## What Happened to the Maya?

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The end of the Maya civilisation came during the 8th and 9th centuries, and its causes are still a mystery - perhaps it was a result of tribal wars, or an epidemic disease. The Mayas disappear for many

centuries, until explorers and archaeologists discovered part of the remains of the Maya cities in the jungles of Mexico.

These cities include **Palenque**, **Copan**, **Chichen-itzá**, and **Uxmal**.



Many of today's inhabitants of the Yucatán Península are proud to be descended from the Maya.

### The Maya Glyph Game

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The Maya recorded important events and dates in their history using glyphs (or pictographs), instead of letters. Sometimes they carved them into a slab of stone, called a *stela*, like the example on the left.

However, this is not a real stela! Six of the glyphs here are not genuine. Can you find them?

*Clue:* they contain images of modern day things which the ancient Maya would not have recognized.