

# Medieval to the Renaissance: Elementary History

By Melissa Bontadelli

## Week One: Mayan Civilization

Objective: to learn the history, development, and disappearance of the Mayan people

### Lesson 1: Overview of Mayan Civilization



1892 Photo from Chichen Itza

Before the Spanish conquered Central America in the 1500s, the Central American area was known as Mesoamerica. One of the biggest groups of people living there were the Mayan people. Most of the people in this area were scattered groups, but the Mayans were mostly together in one region.

The Mayan territory included all the Yucatan peninsula, modern-day Guatemala, modern-day Belize, the western part of Honduras and El Salvador, and parts of the Mexican states of Tabasco and Chiapas. The concentration of the empire helped it remain relatively secure from invasion from other Mesoamerica peoples.

The Mayan civilization was one of the dominant societies in the Mesoamerica region. They developed accurate calendars and made advancements in mathematics and astronomy. They produced great art, sculptures, and architecture. They were among the first people in the western hemisphere to develop an advanced form of written language.

As we study the Mayan people, we find that we can break down their civilization into three different time periods. Each of these time periods represents different stages of development for them as a people. The early Mayans were primarily small farming villages. The middle time period shows the Mayans developing cities and structured government. The last time period for the Mayans happened after they abandoned their cities in the lowlands and moved.

Around 900 AD, the strong Mayan cities in the lowlands were abandoned. No one knows for sure why the Mayans left these cities.

## Activity

Research and discover the area of the Mayan empire. Shade in the areas on the map that were part of the Mayan empire.



## Lesson 2: Mayan Culture and Discovery



Mayan glyphs or hieroglyphics

Archaeologists have learned many important things about Mayan history and culture. The Mayans developed an advanced form of writing. They used hieroglyphics to write. Hieroglyphics are symbols that represent words and sometimes sounds. The Mayans put important dates and events on large stone monuments called stelae. The Mayans also made books made out of paper from fig tree bark. Most of the books were destroyed, but a few survived to give us clues about the Mayans.

The Mayans made significant discoveries in math and astronomy. They even invented an accurate calendar. The calendar had 365 days just like ours. The Mayans broke those days down into eighteen months of twenty days each, which left five days at the end of the year. They considered those five days to be very unlucky; during those days they fasted and made sacrifices.

Entire families lived together. The grandparents, parents, and children all shared a house. The farming and hunting were done by the men in the family while the women cooked, raised children, and made clothes. There were several Mayan festivals in a year that families would attend. The festivals included feasts and dancing and a special Mayan game that is similar to basketball, except they would hit the ball with their hip.

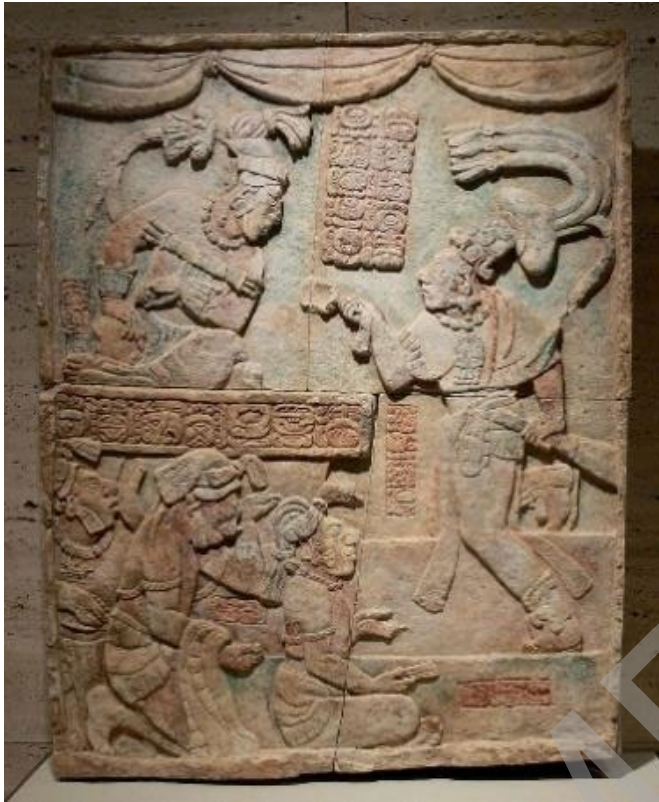
The Mayans worshipped many gods; one Mayan document says it was 160 gods. They had many festivals to honor their gods, and every day had religious importance. Animals were often sacrificed to the gods to bring favor, such as rain, from the gods. They also fasted and held ceremonies to gain favor.

## Activity

Create your own hieroglyphics in the space below and write out what it represents.



## Lesson 3: Three Periods of Mayan History



*Classic Period Sculpture*

The Mayan civilization is believed to have originated on the Pacific coast of Guatemala. From that starting point, Mayans spread into the mountains and later the lowlands. There are three distinct periods in Mayan history.

### **Preclassic period**

The Preclassic period covers 1800 BC until AD 250; the people during this period were agricultural. It wasn't until the middle of the Preclassic period that the Mayan people started expanding.

### **Classic period**

The Classic period started in AD 250 and lasted until AD 900. The Mayan Empire expanded to around forty cities. The population of Mayan cities during this time ranged from 5,000 to 50,000 people, with a total population believed to be around 2 million. The cities were surrounded by farmers who used some advanced agricultural techniques like terrace farming and irrigation.

### **Postclassic period**

The Postclassic period started in AD 900 and ended in AD 1539. The Postclassic period covers the period of time when the Mayan people abandoned major cities in the lowlands of Guatemala. The Mayan people moved north and to the Guatemala highlands.

## Activity

Define the following terms associated with the Mayan Empire.

1. Empire
2. Mesoamerica
3. Rain Forest
4. Pyramids
5. Limestone
6. Hieroglyphics
7. Stelae

SAMPLE

## Lesson 4: Mayan Disappearance



*Castillo at Chichen Itza*

The Mayan Empire was in its golden age during the Classic period. Cities grew, and the people developed complex language and mathematical concepts. At the end of the Classic period, around 900 AD, the Mayans disappeared from the regions they had inhabited throughout the period. Very few clues have been left as to why the cities were abandoned.

The Mayans had been cutting down lots of trees for farming. Some scientists believe that by cutting down so many trees it created a drought. A drought is where little or no rain falls, and water levels get very low. This would have caused the Mayan crops to not grow. If the people had no food and were in a famine, they might have moved out of the lower areas to find food.

Scientists also have found some clues that say the Mayans were at war. They believe that there were civil wars within some groups of Mayans, while others fought each other over resources like food.

### **Activity:**

Complete the word search on the next page.

## Mayan Civilization

### Words to find:

MAYAN

FARMING

STELAE

GLYPH

EMPIRE

MESOAMERICA

RAINFOREST

PYRAMIDS

LIMESTONE

CLASSIC

FAMILY

FESTIVALS

SACRIFICE

CALENDAR

MATH

CULTURE

DISCOVERY

M E S A G L Y P H B C M N A B O P C D E F  
 R Q D I S C O V E R Y R S T G H F I J K A  
 A L M A B C N S A C R I F I C E E F G H R  
 I O P F A R S T L E M A Y F A R S S T E M  
 N G L Y E M P M I E S O E R A I T N P Y I  
 F R M A Y A N A M L I M M E C L I A F A N  
 O M A F E S T S E A C C P A L M V A C T G  
 R C T U L D I S S M A Y I F A R A S A T E  
 E G H L Y E M P T M E S R O R A L I L N F  
 S A N M I N G L O A E P E H I R S E E O A  
 T M E R N F O R N A M I D S E S T O N N E  
 S S I C I L Y T E I V A P Y R A M I D S L  
 S R I F I F C E E N D A R H T U R E A C O  
 V S T E L A E E R Y M A Y F A R S T R E G  
 L Y E M P M M E S R A C L A S S I C I P Y  
 R L I M C I L A F A M F E S S A C C A L M  
 A T C U L L D I S M Y A C U L T U R E F A  
 R M S T E Y G L Y E M P M E S R A I P Y R  
 L I M C L M E S O A M E R I C A A S S F A

