

# Medieval to the Renaissance: High School History

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## Week One: Maya Civilization

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

### Lesson 1: Overview of Maya Civilization



1892 Photo from Chichen Itza

The Maya civilization was part of the Mesoamerica region of the Americas. Mesoamerica is a historical and cultural region that includes central Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and northern Costa Rica. The Mesoamerica region is one of six areas in the world where ancient civilization rose independently. The Mesoamerica term is used to describe the area prior to the Spanish conquest in the 1500s.

The Maya Empire was unlike other indigenous populations during this time as they were concentrated in one region and not scattered. This block of territory included all of 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 Maya 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.

The history of the Maya is broken into three periods of time. The Preclassic period covers 2000 BC to AD 250. The Classic period covers AD 250 to AD 900 and is considered the time when the Maya Empire was at its peak. The Postclassic period covers AD 950 to AD 1539. Each period represents a difference in area, developments, and belief systems for the Maya.

Mysteriously, the Maya civilization collapsed by AD 900. There are several competing theories as to the cause of this collapse. One by one, the strong Classic period cities were abandoned and left to ruin. In the Postclassic period, a few cities in the highlands of the Yucatan flourished.

### Activity

Research and discover the area of the Maya Empire. Shade in the areas on the map that were part of this area. Label the locations of the Maya cities of Palenque, Chichen Itza, and Tikal. Label each Maya city with the period of time it existed (Preclassic, Classic, or Postclassic). Label the modern countries of this area.



## Lesson 2: Maya Culture and Discovery

Archaeologists have learned many important things about Maya history and culture. They made significant discoveries in math and astronomy, including a calendar. They exhibited advanced farming techniques. They developed an advanced form of writing. While they never united under a central government, many of their cities controlled large areas of land surrounding them. We have learned about the Maya through the few writings left after the Spanish conquest. Archaeologists have also studied stelae and hieroglyphs left in the pyramids for clues to Maya life.

### Activity

Read this World Book article on Maya history and culture.

<https://www.worldbookonline.com/student-new/#/article/home/ar350120/outline/h1>

In your journal, write down what you believe to be the five most relevant facts from the article.

## Lesson 3: Three Periods of Maya History



*Classic Period Sculpture*

The Maya civilization is believed to have originated on the Pacific coast of Guatemala. From that starting point, the Maya spread into the mountains and later the lowlands. There are three distinct periods in Maya 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 Maya started expanding. It was also during this time frame that the first major Mesoamerican civilization rose—the Olmecs. The Maya derived things like tradition, religion, a calendar, and a number system from the indigenous Olmec.

### **Classic Period**

The peak of the Maya civilization came during the Classic period. The Classic period started in AD 250 and lasted until AD 900. The Maya Empire expanded to around forty cities. The population of Maya 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 exhibited some advanced agricultural techniques like terrace farming and irrigation. During the Classic period, the Maya developed much of the art and the achievements in mathematics and science that are studied today. Toward the end of this period, competition for resources became fierce, and cities began to fight each other for control of the resources.

### **Postclassic period**

The Postclassic period started in AD 900 and ended in AD 1539. The Postclassic period covers the period of time when the Maya abandoned major cities in the lowlands of Guatemala. They moved north and to the Guatemala highlands. There is still disagreement as to why the people abandoned the cities. During this period, the Maya also shifted from a structure of a single ruler to a council-style rule. They became more sea-faring and developed trade routes, making the cities located on the coast more prosperous.

## Activity

Define, in your journal, the following terms associated with the Maya Empire.

1. Empire
2. Mesoamerica
3. Central America
4. Civilization
5. Preclassic period
6. Classic period
7. Postclassic period
8. Rain Forest
9. Pyramids
10. Limestone
11. Hieroglyphics
12. Stelae
13. Sacrifice
14. Canals
15. Irrigation
16. Terrace Farming
17. Roof Combs
18. Pottery
19. Murals
20. Natural resources

## Lesson 4: The Maya Disappearance

The Maya 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 AD 900, the Maya disappeared from the regions they had inhabited throughout the period. Very few clues have been left as to why the cities were abandoned.

One theory is that drought and deforestation created widespread famine. Archaeologists believe that Maya used a slash and burn farming method. The Maya would deforest a section of land for planting, but instead of allowing the natural vegetation to grow back and replenish the land, they would continue to farm that area and deforest additional areas. This was believed to have contributed to a drought. Lack of water for crops and people would have created famine.

Drought and deforestation do not explain the whole story. Mass graves of the elite Maya have also been found in the cities that disappeared. Possible explanations can include civil war or warring between cities.

## Activity

Research and discover possible theories for the Maya disappearance. Write a paper between 300 and 500 words on why the Maya disappeared and what clues were left by the Maya that might explain what happened. Answer which theory you believe best explains the disappearance.

## Lesson 5: Quiz

1. What is the name of the region the Maya lived in?
2. What is the timeframe for the Preclassic period?
3. What is the timeframe for the Classic period?
4. What is the timeframe for the Postclassic period?
5. What was the government structure during the Classic period?
6. What was the government structure during the Postclassic period?
7. Where was Maya civilization believed to have been started?
8. How many cities were included in the Maya Empire during the Classic Period?
9. What made the coastal Maya cities prosperous during the Postclassic period?
10. What farming method led to deforestation?