

The mayan civilization in mesoamerica



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This area is geographically varied, ranging from volcanic mountains to limestone, to rainforests. Often, these extremely varied geographic areas are divided into areas known as the Highlands, and the Lowlands, both important to the presence of trade in the Mayan civilization.

The lowlands were a beautiful location, surrounded by the Gulf of Mexico to the north and west, and on the east was the Caribbean Sea. This was an area that was essential in the planting and production of crops such as maize, squash, beans, cotton, and sisal. As you can believe, the lowlands climate was very warm, and even in Rain season provided little rain. The Southern lowlands were home to rainforests and savannahs, where lakes were present and fed by the Usumacinta River. Rainfall was much higher in this area and drained towards the seas, creating essential rivers, (the Usumacinta and the Grijalva) for the Mayan people. These large rivers also provided a means for transportation. The Northern Lowlands were relatively drier, and home to small trees. This area was often an area of slash and burn agriculture.

The Highlands were a more dangerous area, composed of mountains and valleys, and were shouldered on the south by the Pacific. This area was home to dangerous animals, such as Jaguars and poisonous snakes. Even though this area was more prone to natural disasters like earthquakes and volcanoes, the highlands were the Mayans source of precious metals such as obsidian, jade, hematite and cinnabar, which were extremely important in trade relations, as well as value for themselves, as burials of wealthy individuals contain items such as head dresses, necklaces and other items of value made from metals.

The Mayan civilization had many advanced methods of food production. It is now thought that raised fields and terracing, field managing, and wild harvesting were needed in order to support the large populations, which can be seen through aerial photographs, and appear to be connected by man-made canals. Most commonly, maize was their primary staple, but Mayans also grew beans, squash, as well as sisal and cotton for textiles. The wax and honey production from bees was also obtained, and various alcoholic drinks were made from corn.

The Mayan people are most commonly known for their development of a complex writing system, as well as the construction of large, dramatic urban centres for their people past and present. Out of all the Mesoamerican civilizations, Mayan architecture may be the most highly recognized. Definitely the most dramatic, Mayan architecture is known for its huge step pyramids, which were adapted from earlier nearby civilizations. These pyramids were built for honouring gods and past leaders, who are commonly found deep within. Often, these great pyramids were built over with new structures. Other significant buildings of the Maya were often related to religion, administration, observatories, or high ranking citizens. Buildings were created with large, careful stone placement, as well as highly decorated. Understanding this architecture allows us to understand the customs and ways of the Maya civilization.

Building materials often consisted of Limestone, lime stucco, plaster, flint, and cement; as they were readily available and fairly easy to produce. Often, buildings were adorned with murals, sculptures, and short script which expressed activities that were related to the building, often presenting

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mythological features or impressions of their gods. This was all done through man-power, as there were no metal tools, large domesticated animals, or even wheels to move all of these materials for building.

The houses of the Mayan people were located within the city limits, and are often referred to as compounds. These areas consisted of wide open parts in the middle, in which religious ceremonies were held, usually on raised platforms right in the middle, allowing all to see. Also located near the middle were administration and ball courts. Often, people higher on the social ladder were located on the inner parts of the city, closer to amenities, and had much more spacious living quarters than those of commoners.

The Maya people were very interesting in their sense of keeping track of things. Large numbers of administration related buildings, their invention of the calendar, as well as their recordings on stone stelae were the evidence of progression to a real organized state. This helps with the decipherment of how the population lived in every aspect of their lives; who they worshiped and the importance to respect (often in the form of bloodletting), how they were organized as a civilization, as well as their forms of communication. A lot of the historical record of the Mayans was lost during the Spanish rule, which resulted in the burning of Mayan books. These books would have provided a lot of insight into the way they lived, as well as helpful information to deciphering hieroglyphs.

The Mayan Collapse

To this day, there is still a lot of debate on what actually happened in the fall of the Mayan civilization. Around 870 Ad, the southern part of the lowlands

began to collapse. There was no new construction beginning, and the cities gradually became deserted. This was a result of a combination of events, and is still today not definitely answered why this happened. There are many different opinions readily available, but these were some of the most convincing I came across.

One point of view was that warfare was the last string pulled in the collapse. Warfare had become widespread, and some argue that the increasing power of royalty led to a revolt.

Another view was that environmental issues led to the collapse. Over harvesting to feed the growing populations damaged the small area of land that was workable, and eventually draining the nutrients of the land. This put a huge strain on the stability of the community, and the possibility of a few droughts made it inevitable. Stanley believes that the "Maya centres were abandoned, not because of burgeoning managerial costs, peasant revolts, or invasions from the outside, but because of erosion of the systems economic base" (Stanley 149), Basically stating that over-harvesting of land for food every year left infertile soil, in which nothing would grow.

Another view I found interesting was by Crist, where on page 29 he suggests that with a civilization as large as the Mayan come issues such as epidemics such as malnutrition and disease which could be triggered by the infertile land not being able to produce for the ever-growing population of the Maya. I could see this to also be a contributing factor, as they really did not have any way to treat disease, or any solutions to malnutrition when you combine it with the potential environmental issues at the time. I believe that any of the

previous situations could have easily dispersed if not ended the Maya civilization, and a combination of the proposals out there would have definitely been detrimental

In my opinion, the Maya people were extremely advanced people. As a group, they were very knowledgeable farmers, and used their land to their advantage. Their ability to extract gems and metals and create semi-precious pieces that were highly valued really put them on top with trade relations. Although we have seen substantial structures in the past, the Maya structures were enormous, and highly decorated. The power and respect that Nobel's had to construct these types of structures must have been amazing, as well as the respect required for the cooperation needed for the labour of these cities. The Mayan were highly intelligent, as they were able to build on Olmec civilization and come up with their own original calendar system, hieroglyphic writing, as well as astronomy. These three areas are still very much a part of our education today, and I believe that even though it may seem farfetched, that the Maya had a significant impact on how our calendars and interpretation of astronomy was constructed to be what it is today.