

The Maya

If YOU were there...

You are a Maya farmer, growing corn in fields outside a city. Often you enter the city to join in religious ceremonies. You watch the king and his priests standing at the top of a tall pyramid. They wear capes of brightly colored feathers and gold ornaments that glitter in the sun. Far below them, thousands of worshippers crowd into the plaza with you to honor the gods.

How do these ceremonies make you feel?

What You Will Learn...

Main Ideas

1. Geography helped shape the lives of the early Maya in Mesoamerica.
2. During the Classic Age, the Maya built great cities linked by trade.
3. Maya culture was influenced by social structure, religion, and achievements in science and the arts.
4. The decline of Maya civilization began in the 900s, for reasons that are still unclear.

The Big Idea

The Maya developed an advanced civilization that thrived in Mesoamerica from about 250 until the 900s.

Key Terms and People

maize, p. 468

Pacal, p. 469

observatories, p. 472



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TAKING NOTES

Use the graphic organizer online to take notes on different aspects of Maya civilization.

Geography and the Early Maya

The region known as Mesoamerica stretches from the central area of Mexico south to the northern part of Central America. It was in this region that a people called the Maya (MY-uh) developed a remarkable civilization.

Around 1000 BC the Maya began settling in the lowlands of what is now northern Guatemala. Thick tropical forests covered most of the land, but the people cleared areas to farm. They grew a variety of crops, including beans, squash, avocados, and **maize, or corn**. The forests provided valuable resources, too. Forest animals such as deer, rabbits, and monkeys were sources of food. In addition, trees and other plants made good building materials. For example, some Maya used wooden poles and vines, along with mud, to build their houses.

The early Maya lived in small, isolated villages. Eventually, though, these villages started trading with one another and with other groups in Mesoamerica. As trade increased, the villages grew. By about AD 200, the Maya had begun to build large cities in Mesoamerica.

READING CHECK **Finding Main Ideas** How did the early Maya make use of their physical environment?

The Classic Age

The Maya civilization reached its height between about AD 250 and 900. This time in Maya history is known as the Classic Age. During this time, Maya territory grew to include more than 40 large cities.

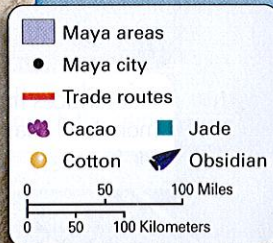
Maya cities were really city-states. Each had its own government and its own king. No single ruler ever united the many cities into one empire. However, trade helped hold Maya civilization together. People exchanged goods for products that were not available locally. For example, Maya

in the lowlands exported forest goods, cotton, and cacao (kuh-KOW) beans, which are used in making chocolate. In return, they received obsidian (a glasslike volcanic rock), jade, and colorful bird feathers.

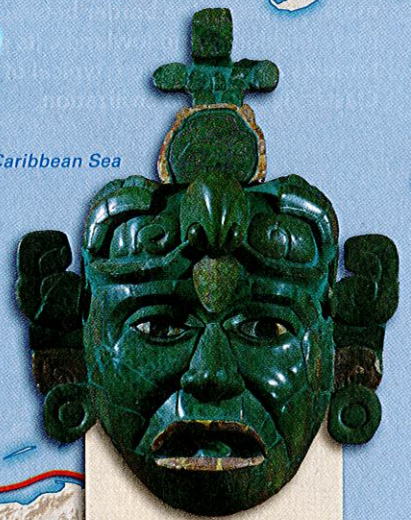
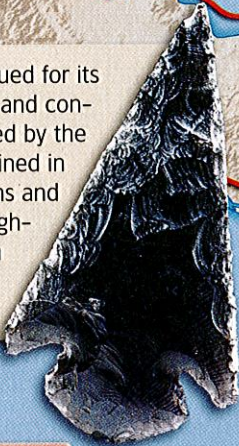
Through trade, the Maya got supplies for construction. Maya cities had grand buildings, such as palaces decorated with carvings and paintings. The Maya also built stone pyramids topped with temples. Some temples honored local kings. For example, in the city of Palenque (pah-LENG-kay), the king **Pacal** (puh-KAHL) built a temple to record his achievements.

hmhsocialstudies.com INTERACTIVE MAP

Maya Civilization



Obsidian, valued for its sharp edges and considered sacred by the Maya, was mined in the mountains and traded throughout the Maya world.



Jade was mined in the mountains and traded to lowland cities.

GEOGRAPHY SKILLS INTERPRETING MAPS

- 1. Movement** What are some natural features that Maya trade routes followed?
- 2. Region** What two resources were mostly found in the lowland region of Maya territory?

In addition to palaces and temples, the Maya built canals and paved large plazas, or open squares, for public gatherings. Farmers used stone walls to shape hillsides into flat terraces so they could grow crops on them. Almost every Maya city also had a stone court for playing a special ball game. Using only their heads, shoulders, or hips, players tried to bounce a heavy, hard rubber ball through stone rings attached high on the court walls. The winners of these games received jewels and clothing.

READING CHECK Analyzing Why is Maya civilization not considered an empire?

Maya Culture

In Maya society, people's everyday lives were heavily influenced by two main forces. One was the social structure, and the other was religion.

Social Structure

The king held the highest position in Maya society. Because he was believed to be related to the gods, the king had religious as well as political authority. Priests, merchants, and noble warriors were also part of the upper class. Together with the king, they held all the power in Maya society.

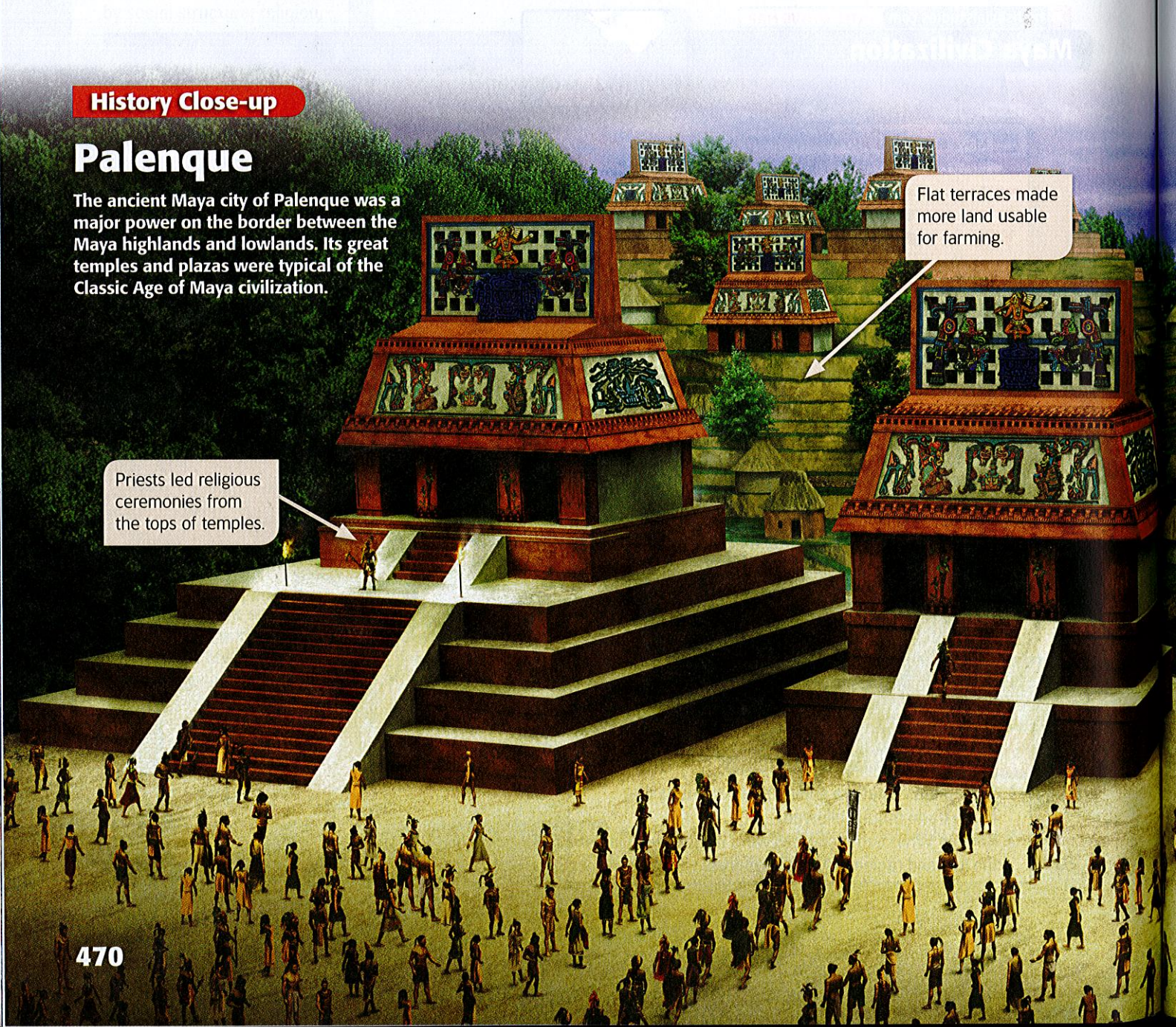
History Close-up

Palenque

The ancient Maya city of Palenque was a major power on the border between the Maya highlands and lowlands. Its great temples and plazas were typical of the Classic Age of Maya civilization.

Priests led religious ceremonies from the tops of temples.

Flat terraces made more land usable for farming.



Most Maya, though, belonged to the lower class. This group was made up of farming families who lived outside the cities. The women cared for the children, cooked, made yarn, and wove cloth. The men farmed, hunted, and crafted tools.

Lower-class Maya had to “pay” their rulers by giving the rulers part of their crops and goods such as cloth and salt. They also had to help construct temples and other public buildings. If their city went to war, Maya men had to serve in the army, and if captured in battle, they usually became slaves. Slaves carried goods along trade routes or worked as servants or farmers for upper-class Maya.

Religion

The Maya worshipped many gods, including a creator, a sun god, a moon goddess, and a maize god. Each god was believed to control a different aspect of daily life.

According to Maya beliefs, the gods could be helpful or harmful, so people tried to please the gods to get their help. The Maya believed their gods needed blood to prevent disasters or the end of the world. Every person offered blood to the gods by piercing their tongue or skin. On special occasions, the Maya also made human sacrifices. They usually used prisoners captured in battle, offering their hearts to stone carvings of the gods.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

aspect
a part of something

Maya temples were shaped like mountains, which the Maya considered sacred because they allowed people to approach the gods.



BIOGRAPHY

Pacal

603–683

Pacal became king of the Maya city of Palenque when he was just 12 years old. As king, Pacal led many important community events, such as religious dances and public meetings. When he died he was buried at the bottom of the Temple of the Inscriptions shown to the near left.

H
HISTORY

VIDEO

Maya: The Disappearance

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Maya buildings were covered with stucco and painted in bright colors.

ANALYSIS SKILL

ANALYZING VISUALS

In what ways might Palenque's setting have helped the city? In what ways might it have hurt the city?

Maya Astronomy and Writing



October 28,
AD 709



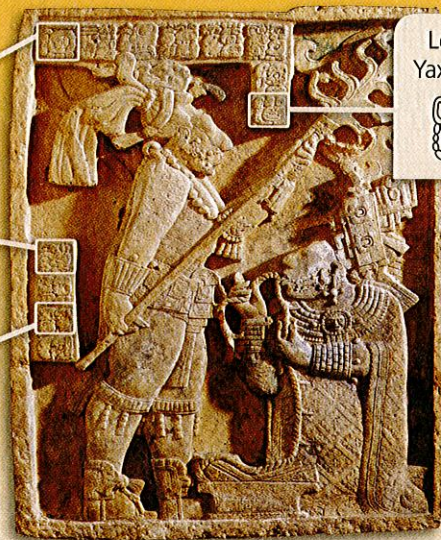
She is let-
ting blood.



Lady Xoc



Lord of
Yaxchilán



This photo (left) shows the observatory at the Maya city of Chichén Itzá. The stone carving (above) is an artistic and written record of a religious ceremony.

Achievements

The Maya's religious beliefs led them to make impressive advances in science. They built **observatories, or buildings from which people could study the sky**, so their priests could watch the stars and plan the best times for religious festivals. With the knowledge they gained about astronomy, the Maya developed two calendars. One, with 365 days, guided planting, harvesting, and other farming activities. This calendar was more accurate than the calendar used in Europe at that time. The Maya also had a separate 260-day calendar that they used for keeping track of religious events.

The Maya could measure time accurately partly because they were skilled mathematicians. They created a number system that helped them make complex calculations, and they were among the first people with a symbol for zero. The Maya used their number system to record key dates in their history.

FOCUS ON READING

Is any information in this paragraph irrelevant?

The Maya also developed a writing system. In a way, it was similar to Egyptian hieroglyphics, because symbols represented both objects and sounds. The Maya carved series of these symbols into large stone tablets to record their history and the achievements of their kings. They also wrote in bark paper books and passed down stories and poems orally.

The Maya created amazing art and architecture as well. Maya jade and gold jewelry was exceptional. Also, their huge temple-pyramids were masterfully built. The Maya had neither metal tools for cutting nor wheeled vehicles for carrying supplies. Instead, workers used obsidian tools to cut limestone into blocks. Then workers rolled the giant blocks over logs and lifted them with ropes. The Maya often decorated their buildings with paintings.

READING CHECK **Categorizing** What groups made up the different classes in Maya society?

Decline of Maya Civilization

Maya civilization began to collapse in the AD 900s. People stopped building temples and other structures. They left the cities and moved back to the countryside. What caused this collapse? Historians aren't sure, but they think a combination of factors was probably responsible.

One factor could have been the burden on the common people. Maya kings forced their subjects to farm for them or work on building projects. Perhaps people didn't want to work for the kings. They might have decided to **rebel** against their rulers' demands and abandon their cities.

Increased warfare between cities could also have caused the decline. Maya cities had always fought for power. But if battles became more widespread or destructive, they would have cost many lives and disrupted trade. People might have fled the cities for their safety.

A related theory is that perhaps the Maya could not produce enough to feed everyone. Growing the same crops year after year could have weakened the soil. In addition, as the population grew, the demand for food would have increased. To meet this demand, cities might have begun competing fiercely for new farmland. But the resulting battles would have ruined more crops, damaged more land, and created even greater food shortages.

Climate change could have played a role, too. Scientists know that Mesoamerica suffered from droughts during the period when the Maya were leaving their cities. Droughts would have made it hard to grow enough food for city dwellers.

Whatever the reasons, the collapse of Maya civilization happened gradually. The Maya scattered after 900, but they did not disappear entirely. In fact, the Maya civilization later revived in the Yucatán

Peninsula. But by the time Spanish conquerors reached the Americas in the 1500s, Maya power had faded.

READING CHECK **Summarizing** What factors may have caused the end of Maya civilization?

SUMMARY AND PREVIEW The Maya built a civilization that peaked between about 250 and 900 but later collapsed for reasons still unknown. In Section 2, you will learn about another people of Mesoamerica, the Aztecs.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

rebel
to fight against authority

Section 1 Assessment



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ONLINE QUIZ

Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People

- a. Recall** What resources did the Maya get from the forest?

b. Elaborate How do you think Maya villages grew into large cities?
- a. Describe** What features did Maya cities include?

b. Make Inferences How did trade strengthen the Maya civilization?
- a. Identify** Who belonged to the upper class in Maya society?

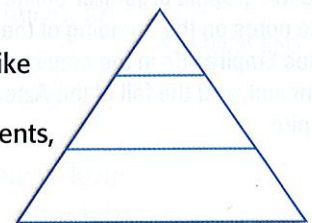
b. Explain How did the Maya try to please their gods?

c. Rank What do you think was the most impressive cultural achievement of the Maya? Why?
- a. Describe** What happened to the Maya after 900?

b. Evaluate What would you consider to be the key factor in the collapse of Maya civilization? Explain.

Critical Thinking

- Evaluating** Draw a diagram like the one to the right. Use your notes to rank Maya achievements, with the most important at the top.



FOCUS ON WRITING

- Gathering Information about the Maya** Part of your article would likely be devoted to the Maya. Use the map and pictures in this section to help you decide which places to write about. How would you describe the land and the Maya cities? What would you add about the history and culture of the Maya?