




Colossal Olmec head from La Venta

## Civilization Arises With the Olmecs

The earliest American civilization, that of the **Olmecs**, emerged in the tropical forests along the Gulf Coast of Mexico. The civilization lasted from about 1500 B.C. to 400 B.C. Compared to other civilizations, archaeologists know little about the Olmecs. They do not know where the Olmecs came from or what they called themselves. But evidence in the form of temples and large and small pieces of art suggests that a powerful class of priests and nobles stood at the top of society. These elite groups may have lived in ceremonial centers, while the common people lived in surrounding farming villages.

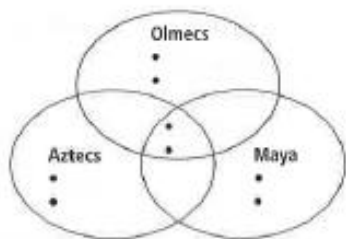
Much of Olmec art is carved stone. The smallest examples include jade figurines of people and gods. The most dramatic remains are 14 giant stone heads found at the major ceremonial centers of San Lorenzo and La Venta. Scholars believe that these colossal heads, which the Olmecs carved from 40-ton stones, are portraits of rulers. No one knows exactly how the Olmecs moved these stones from distant quarries without wheeled vehicles or draft animals.

The Olmecs also engaged in trade, through which they influenced a wide area. The grinning jaguars and serpents that decorate many Olmec carvings appear in the arts of later Mesoamerican peoples. The Olmecs also invented a calendar, and they carved hieroglyphic writing into stone. Because later Mesoamerican peoples adopted such advances, many scholars consider the Olmecs the “mother culture” of Mesoamerica.

 **Checkpoint** What aspects of Olmec culture have archaeologists uncovered?

### Note Taking

**Reading Skill: Compare and Contrast**  
Use a Venn diagram to keep track of key similarities and differences among the cultures of Mesoamerica.



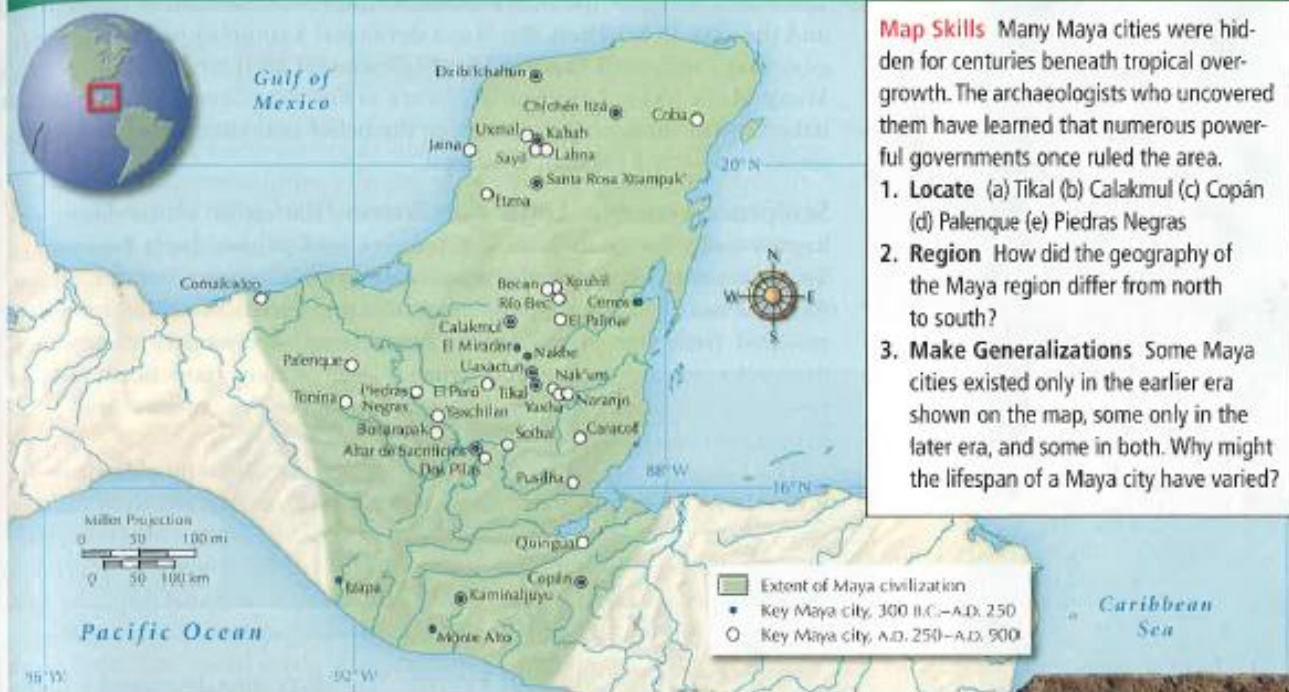
## The Maya Build Widespread Civilization

Among the peoples the Olmecs influenced were the Maya. By 300 B.C., the Maya were building large cities, such as El Mirador in Guatemala. By about A.D. 250, the Maya golden age—known as the Classic Period—began, with city-states flourishing from the Yucatán Peninsula in southern Mexico through much of Central America.

**Agriculture Thrives** Before the Maya developed large population centers, they lived scattered across the land. They developed two farming methods that allowed them to thrive in the tropical environment. In many areas, farmers burned down forests and then cleared the land in order to plant on it. After a few years, the fields were no longer fertile. The Maya would then abandon these lands until they could be used once again. In the meantime, farmers would burn and clear new lands for farming. In addition, along the banks of rivers, Maya farmers built raised fields to lift crops up above the annual floodwaters. These methods allowed the Maya to produce enough maize and other crops to support rapidly growing cities.

**Powerful City-States Emerge** The Maya cities that developed before and during the Classic Period never formed an empire. Instead, individual and powerful city-states evolved. The smaller city-states ruled over the people living directly within and near their borders. The largest ones reigned over neighboring areas as well—often requiring nearby cities to show allegiance to their kings and to participate in their ritual activities. Over the course of hundreds of years, many different city-states held

## Cities of the Maya Realm



power, with warfare and trade a constant theme of life among them. Cities such as Palenque, Copán, and Piedras Negras all carried great influence in their time, but the largest and most supreme power resided in the rulers of Tikal and Calakmul.

While the Maya were not united politically, city-states maintained regular contact through a system of economic exchange, which generated much wealth. Traders carried valuable cargoes long distances by sea and along roads made of packed earth. Trade goods included items of daily use—such as honey, salt, and cotton—and nonessential but prized items such as feathers, jade, and jaguar pelts. These goods might have been used in ceremonies or to show status.

**Structuring Society** Each Maya city had its own ruler, who was usually male. Maya records and carvings show that women occasionally governed on their own or in the name of young sons. Nobles served many functions in support of the ruler. Some were military leaders, while others managed public works, collected taxes, and enforced laws. Scribes, painters, and sculptors were also very highly respected. Merchants may have formed a middle class in society, though the wealthiest and most powerful merchants were certainly nobles.

The majority of the Maya were farmers. They grew maize, beans, and squash—the basic food crops of Mesamerica—as well as fruit trees, cotton, and brilliant tropical flowers. To support the cities, farmers paid taxes in food and worked on construction projects. Some cities also included a population of slaves, who generally were commoners who had been captured in war.

**Checkpoint** How did the Maya political structure differ from an empire?





#### Photographs From the Past

British archaeologist Alfred P. Maudslay won fame in the late 1800s for his sharp and stunning photographs of Maya ruins, such as this stela showing a ruler from the city of Quirigua.

## Cultural Life of the Maya

The cultural life of the Maya included impressive advances in learning and the arts. In addition, the Maya developed a complex polytheistic religion that influenced their cultural life as well as their spiritual beliefs. Many Maya today maintain elements of the traditional religion established by the ancient Maya, such as the belief that each person's spirit is associated with a particular animal.

**Sculptors Leave a Legacy in Stone** The cities of the Maya are known today for their towering temples and palaces built from stone. Temples rested on pyramid-shaped platforms that were often quite large. Atop the temples, priests performed rites and sacrifices, while the people watched from the plazas below. Some temples also served as burial places for rulers, nobles, and priests. Palaces may have been used as royal residences as well as locations for meetings, courts, and other governmental activities.


The Maya placed elaborately carved sculpture on many of their buildings. They also sculpted tall stone monuments, each of which is called a **stela** (STEE luh). These carvings preserve striking images of nobles, warriors in plumed headdresses, and powerful rulers. They also represent the Maya gods, including the creator god Itzamna (et SAHM nah), the rain god Chac (chakh), and the sun god K'inich Ajaw (keen EECH ah HOW).

**Scribes Record Historical Events** The Maya also developed a hieroglyphic writing system, which scholars did not decipher until recent decades. Maya scribes carved inscriptions on stelae that include names of rulers, mentions of neighboring city-states, and dates and descriptions of events. They also wrote about astronomy, rituals, and other religious matters in books made of bark paper. Spanish conquerors later burned most of these books, considering any works that were written by non-Christians to be unacceptable. Three books, however, were taken to Europe and have survived into the present.

**Priests Develop Astronomy and Mathematics** Maya priests needed to measure time accurately in order to hold ceremonies at the correct moment. As a result, many priests became expert mathematicians and astronomers. They developed an accurate 365-day solar calendar as well as a 260-day ritual calendar. Maya priests also invented a numbering system that included place values and the concept of zero.

**Maya Civilization Declines** About A.D. 900, the Maya abandoned many of their cities. In the Yucatán Peninsula, cities flourished for a few more centuries, but there, too, the Maya eventually stopped building them. By the time the Spanish arrived in the 1500s, the Maya mostly lived in farming villages. Archaeologists do not know for sure why Maya civilization declined, although theories abound. For example, frequent warfare may have taken its toll on society, or overpopulation could have led to over-farming and exhaustion of the soil.

Throughout the region, however, the remoteness of their jungle and mountain locations allowed many Maya to survive the encounter with the Spanish. Today, more than two million Maya people live in Guatemala and southern Mexico.

 **Checkpoint** What do Maya arts and writing tell us about their religion and history?