

MAYAN WRITING

The Mayas used the most advanced system of writing of the ancient Americans. They probably borrowed the idea of picture writing from the Olmecs. They then developed their own system of writing based on that.

They did not use an alphabet. Instead, they used a combination of pictures to represent ideas and symbols to represent sounds. The pictures and symbols used in their writing are called glyphs. The Mayas combined glyphs into groups. These groupings have a square or oval shape. We know of about 800 different glyphs.

Scientists study Mayan writing in the few remaining Mayan books and examples carved on stones. Many of these stones are from ancient Mayan buildings. Scientists know the meaning of some of the Mayan symbols. Much of the Mayan writing system still remains a mystery. So far, we know the meaning of fewer than half the glyphs discovered.

Here are some examples of Mayan glyphs:



fish



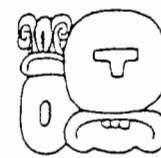
vulture



dog



wife



death

The Mayas had a process for making paper that used fibers from the bark of the ficus tree. They pounded the fibers into a pulp then glued the pulp together with tree sap. When the paper dried, they coated it with white lime. This made a smooth, white surface on which to paint.

The Mayas also made books. The name for a Mayan book is *codex*. Mayas used ficus-fiber paper or deer hide for pages. The pages of Mayan books folded from side to side and unfolded like a screen. They painted colorful glyphs and pictures of gods, animals, and objects on the pages of the codex. The Mayas used decorated boards for covers.

Spanish conquerors found great collections of Mayan books, but according to the beliefs of the Spanish, Mayan books were evil, so the conquerors destroyed most of them. Only three complete Mayan books survive today. They are located in museums in Europe. Only fragments of other Mayan books remain.



This is a page from the Madrid Codex, one of the few remaining samples of Mayan writing.

Name _____ Date _____

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. From whom do experts believe Mayas borrowed their writing?

2. What type of writing did Mayas use?

3. What are Mayan pictures called?

4. How did Mayas make paper?

5. How did they make their paper white?

6. What were Mayan books called?

7. What did Mayas use for book covers?

8. Why did the Spanish destroy Mayan books?

9. How many Mayan books are still in existence today?

10. Where are the Mayan books that have survived?
