

## THE MAYAS

The Mayan culture spread throughout southern Mexico and Central America. It included the Yucatan Peninsula to the north as well as today's countries of Honduras, Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala to the south. It stretched from the Gulf of Mexico in the west to the Caribbean Sea in the east. This land included rugged highlands as well as dense swamps.

The Mayan people were short. The average height of the men was just over five feet. The women were about four feet eight inches tall. Mayas had straight black hair, and many painted their bodies black, red, or blue. They also often had tattoos. They valued crossed eyes and tied objects from their infants' foreheads to encourage their eyes to cross. Some Mayas also tied boards to the heads of their children to flatten their foreheads.

Historians divide the story of the Mayas into three eras: the pre-classic, the classic, and the post-classic. The pre-classic era lasted from about 2,500 B.C. to A.D. 250. During this time, the Mayas came in contact with and borrowed from Olmec Indians. The early Mayan settlements were fishing villages along the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Seas; they moved inland when they learned to plant crops.

The Mayan classic era continued from A.D. 250 to A.D. 900. They built many great cities, most of which had majestic pyramid temples. Tikal, the largest Mayan city, may have had a population of 100,000 or more. During the classic era, the Mayas improved methods of agriculture. They also developed advanced mathematics and astronomy as well as a system of writing.

One of the world's greatest mysteries is what happened to the Mayan culture. It was the most important civilization in the new world in A.D. 900. Suddenly, however, the Mayas left their great cities and scattered throughout the countryside. We still do not know why the great Mayan civilization ended.

The post-classic era began with the collapse of the Mayan empire. It lasted until the Spanish Conquest in the 1500s. The Mayas continued to farm and trade in the region after the great cities fell. Christopher Columbus met some Mayan traders in 1502. Mayan descendants still live in the region of their ancestors.



The Mayas created sculptures on large stone slabs called stela. These carvings reveal much about the Mayan people.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. What geographical features did the Mayan lands include?

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2. Give a description of what a Maya might have looked like.

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3. Why did Mayas tie objects from their infants' foreheads?

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4. Why did some Mayas tie boards to their children's heads?

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5. What did early Mayas eat?

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6. List the three Mayan eras, including their beginning and ending dates.

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7. What did the Mayas develop in the classical era?

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8. What was the largest Mayan city in the classical era? How large was its population?

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9. What is the great mystery of the Mayas?

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10. Who met Mayan traders in 1502?

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