

## 2 Mayan Kings and Cities

### TERMS & NAMES

- Tikal
- glyph
- codex
- *Popol Vuh*

### MAIN IDEA

The Maya developed a highly complex civilization based on city-states controlled by dynasties of kings.

### WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Descendants of the Maya still occupy the same territory.

**SETTING THE STAGE** In the early centuries A.D., most North American peoples were beginning to develop complex societies. Further south, the peoples of Mexico and Central America were entering into the full flower of civilization. A prime example of this cultural flowering was the Maya, who built an extraordinary civilization in the heart of Mesoamerica.

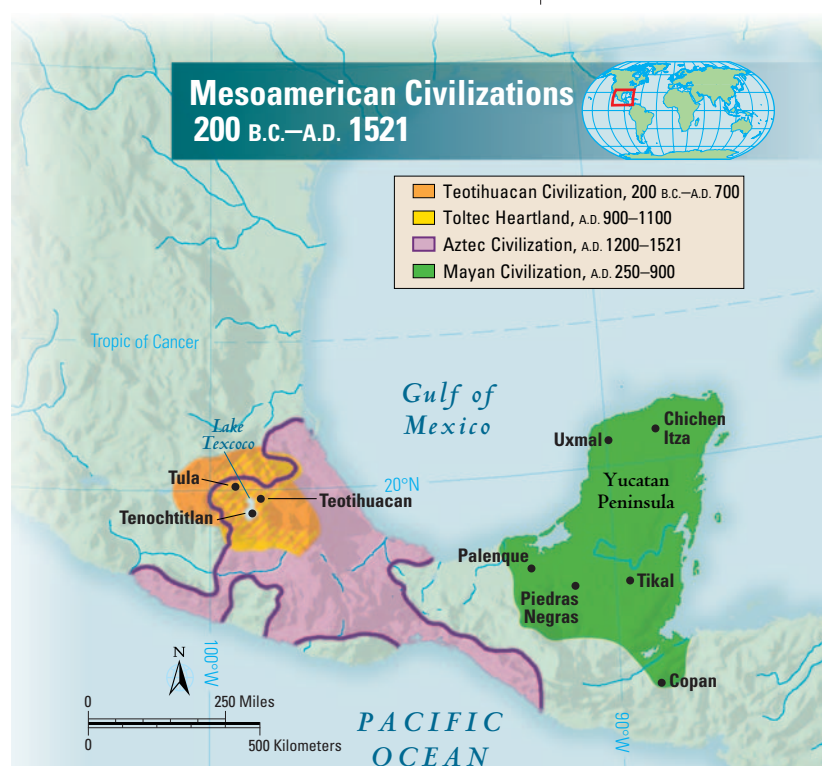
### Maya Create Urban Kingdoms

The homeland of the Maya stretched from southern Mexico into northern Central America. This area includes a highland region and a lowland region. The lowlands lie to the north. They include the dry scrub forest of the Yucatan (YOO-kuh-TAN) Peninsula and the dense, steamy jungles of southeastern Mexico and northern Guatemala. The highlands are further south—a range of cool, cloud-wreathed mountains that stretch from southern Mexico to El Salvador.

While the Olmec were building their civilization along the Gulf Coast in the period from 1200 B.C. to 400 B.C., the Maya were also evolving. They took on Olmec influences, blending these with local customs. By A.D. 250, Mayan culture had burst forth in a flourishing civilization.

**Urban Centers** The period from A.D. 250 to 900 is known as the Classic Period of Mayan civilization. During this time, the Maya built spectacular cities such as **Tikal** (tee-KAHL), a major center in northern Guatemala. Other important sites included Copan, Palenque, Uxmal, and Chichen Itza. Each of these was an independent city-state, ruled by a god-king and serving as a center for religious ceremonies and trade.

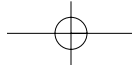
Mayan cities featured giant pyramids, temples, palaces, and elaborate stone carvings dedicated to the gods and to important rulers. Tens of thousands of people lived in residential areas surrounding the city center, which bustled with activity.



### GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Maps

The map shows about 1,700 years of occupation of Mesoamerica. During this time cultures influenced each other through trade and the conquering of lands.

- 1. Region** Which civilization occupied the Yucatan Peninsula?
- 2. Region** What other civilization areas were eventually incorporated into the Aztec area?



Archaeologists have identified at least 50 major Mayan sites, all with monumental architecture. For example, Pyramid IV at Tikal stretched 212 feet into the jungle sky. In fact, the Tikal pyramids were the tallest structures in the Americas until 1903, when the Flatiron Building was built in New York City. In addition to temples and pyramids, each Mayan city featured a ball court. In this stone-sided playing field, the Maya played a game that had religious and political significance. The Maya believed the playing of this game would maintain the cycles of the sun and moon and bring life-giving rains.

**Agriculture and Trade Support Cities** Although the Mayan city-states were independent of each other, they were linked through alliances and trade. Cities exchanged the products of their local environment such as salt, flint, feathers, shells, and honey. Also traded were craft goods like cotton textiles and jade ornaments. While the Maya did not have a uniform currency, cacao (chocolate) beans sometimes served as one.

As in the rest of Mesoamerica, agriculture—particularly the growing of maize, beans, and squash—provided the basis for Mayan life. For years, experts assumed that the Maya practiced slash-and-burn agriculture. This method involves farmers clearing the land by burning existing vegetation and planting crops in the ashes. Evidence now shows, however, that the Maya also developed more sophisticated methods, including planting on raised beds above swamps and on hillside terraces. These methods allowed Mayan farmers to produce large amounts of food to be traded in the cities.

**Kingdoms Built on Dynasties** Successful farming methods led to the accumulation of wealth and the development of social classes. The noble class, which included priests and the leading warriors, occupied the top rung of Mayan society. Below them came merchants and those with specialized knowledge, such as master artisans. Finally, at the bottom, came the peasant majority.

The Mayan king sat at the top of this class structure. He was regarded as a holy figure and his position was hereditary. When he died, he passed the throne on to his eldest son. Other sons of the ruler might expect to join the priesthood.

This is the death mask of a seventh-century ruler of Palenque, a Mayan city-state. The mask is a mosaic of jade with eyes of shell and obsidian.



## Religion Shapes Mayan Life

Religion influenced most aspects of Mayan life. The Maya believed in many gods, who inhabited 13 layers of the sky and the 9 layers of the underworld. There were gods of corn, of death, of rain, and of war. Gods could be good or evil, and sometimes both. Gods also were associated with the four directions and with different colors: white for north, black for west, yellow for south, red for east, and green in the center. The Maya believed that each day was a living god whose behavior could be predicted with the help of an intricate system of calendars.

**Religious Practices** The Maya worshiped their gods in various ways. They prayed and made offerings of food, flowers, and incense. They also pierced their bodies with sharp needles and offered their blood, believing that this would nourish the gods.

Sometimes the Maya even carried out human sacrifice, usually of captured enemies. At Chichen Itza (chee-CHEHN ee-TSAH), in the Yucatan, they threw captives into a deep sinkhole lake, called a *cenote* (say-NO-tay), along with gold, jade, and other offerings. The Maya believed that human sacrifice pleased the gods and kept the world in balance. Nevertheless, the Maya's use of sacrifice never reached the extremes of some other Mesoamerican peoples.

**Math Develops to Support Religion** Mayan religious beliefs also led to the development of the calendar, mathematics, and astronomy. Mayans believed that time was

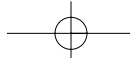
### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

#### A. Drawing

**Conclusions** What does the ability to construct complex buildings reveal about a society?

#### Background

Only the wealthy consumed chocolate as a drink. It was flavored with honey and vanilla.



## HISTORY THROUGH ART: Monumental Architecture

# Chichen Itza

Mayan cities feature very large structures that seem to be designed for ceremonial or religious purposes. Inscriptions on the buildings, the buildings' contents, chambers, and even the locations of the buildings reveal important information about the culture. Chichen Itza, a Mayan city located on the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, has huge buildings to honor rulers, warriors, and gods.

This carved stone throne takes the form of a snarling jaguar, painted red, with eyes and spots of jade and fangs of shell. It represents the jaguar god of the underworld. It sits inside a chamber of a four-sided pyramid. The chambers are parts of a pyramid that occupied the same site at an earlier time. El Castillo, the pyramid below, was constructed over it.



### El Castillo—"The Castle"

This temple, also called the Pyramid of Kukulcan, sat at the top of four spectacular stairways. It was dedicated to the worship of Kukulcan, the feathered serpent god. The stairs to the temple were constructed so that at certain times of the day it looked as if a writhing serpent was crawling up them.



### El Caracol—"The Snail"

Resembling a modern observatory, El Caracol shows the Mayans' knowledge of astronomy. Window-like openings in the tower align with the sunset during both spring and autumn equinoxes. The Maya studied the movements of the sun, moon, and stars because these movements related to the activities of the gods.

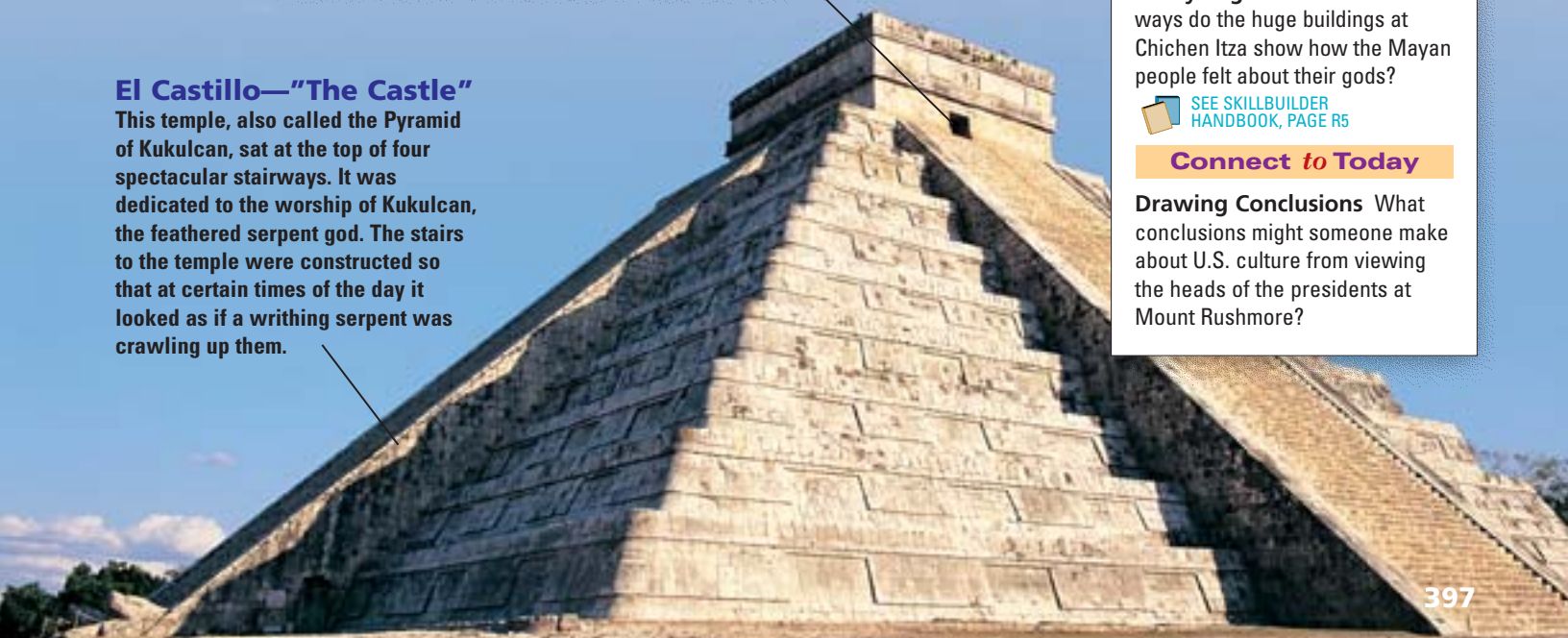
#### Connect to History

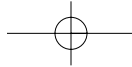
**Analyzing Motives** In what ways do the huge buildings at Chichen Itza show how the Mayan people felt about their gods?

SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R5

#### Connect to Today

**Drawing Conclusions** What conclusions might someone make about U.S. culture from viewing the heads of the presidents at Mount Rushmore?





## SPOTLIGHT ON



### Calendar Glyph

The glyph shown above is the date "9 Zotz" on the 365-day calendar. The symbol stands for the name of the month. The number is represented by the bar, which equals 5, and dots, which together equal 4.

Pictured above is a group of Mayan hieroglyphs from Temple 18 at Palenque. They are undecoded. Like Egyptian hieroglyphics, the glyphs can be grouped into two categories: those that are word signs and those that are syllables. The way the glyphs are translated involves deciding if the sign sets are word pictures or syllables.

Many of the glyphs on stone monuments are records of kings and the history of their rule. Other glyphs provide information on the Mayan gods and religious activities.

a burden carried on the back of a god. At the end of a day, month, or year, one god would lay the burden down and another would pick it up. A day would be lucky or unlucky, depending on the nature of the god. Thus it was very important to have an accurate calendar to know which god was in charge of the day.

The Maya developed a 260-day religious calendar, which consisted of twenty 13-day months. A second 365-day solar calendar consisted of eighteen 20-day months, with a separate period of five days at the end. The two calendars were linked together like meshed gears so that any given day could be identified in both cycles. The calendar helped identify the best time to plant crops, attack enemies, or crown new rulers.

The Maya based their calendar on careful observation of the planets, sun, and moon. Highly skilled Mayan astronomers and mathematicians calculated the solar year at 365.2420 days. (Only .0002 of a day too short!) The Mayan astronomers were able to attain such great precision by using a math system that included the concept of zero. The Maya used a shell symbol for zero, dots for the numbers 1 to 4, and a

bar for 5. The Mayan number system was a base 20 system. They used the numerical system primarily for calendar and astronomical work, not to count people or objects.

**Written Language Preserves History** The Maya also developed the most advanced writing system in the ancient Americas. Mayan writing consisted of about 800 hieroglyphic symbols, or **glyphs** (glihfs). Some of these glyphs stand for whole words, while others represent syllables. The Maya used their writing system to record important historical events, carving their glyphs in stone or recording them in a bark-paper book known as a **codex** (KOH-DEHKS). Only three of these ancient books have survived.

Other original books telling of Mayan history and customs do exist, however. These were written down by Mayan peoples after the arrival of the Spanish. The most famous of these books, the **Popol Vuh** (POH-pohl VOO), recounts the Highland Maya's version of the story of creation. "Before the world was created, Calm and Silence were the great kings that ruled," reads the first sentence in the book. "Nothing existed, there was nothing."

### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Then let the emptiness fill! they said. Let the water weave its way downward so the earth can show its face! Let the light break on the ridges, let the sky fill up with the yellow light of dawn! Let our glory be a man walking on a path through the trees! "Earth!" the Creators called. They called only once, and it was there, from a mist, from a cloud of dust, the mountains appeared instantly.

From the *Popol Vuh*

## Mysterious Mayan Decline

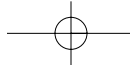
The remarkable history of the Maya ended in mystery. In the late 800s, the Maya suddenly abandoned many of their cities. Some Mayan sites in the Yucatan, such as Chichen Itza and Uxmal, continued to thrive for several more centuries. Invaders

### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

**B. Making Inferences** How are math, astronomy, and calendars related?

### Background

The codex was made of long strips of bark paper that were folded like a fan.



from the north, the Toltec, moved into the lands occupied by the Maya. These warlike peoples from central Mexico changed the culture. The high civilization of Mayan cities like Tikal and Copan disappeared.

No one knows exactly why this happened, though experts offer several overlapping theories. By the 700s, warfare had broken out among the various Mayan city-states. This violence caused some Maya to flee their cities and take refuge in the jungle. Increased warfare disrupted trade and produced economic hardship. In addition, population growth and over-farming may have caused ecological damage, causing food shortages, famine, and disease. All these circumstances probably contributed to the fall of Mayan civilization. By the time the Spanish arrived in the early 1500s, the Maya were divided into small, weak city-states that gave little hint of their former glory.

As the Mayan civilization faded, other peoples of Mesoamerica were growing in strength and sophistication. Like the Maya, these peoples would trace some of their ancestry to the Olmec. Eventually, these people would dominate the Valley of Mexico and lands beyond it, as you will learn in Section 3.



A trio of modern Mayan women sell textiles at the marketplace. The traditional designs on their clothing and the textiles have been used on Mayan fabrics for hundreds of years.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**

**C. Evaluating** Which of the causes for the fall of the Maya do you think was most important? Explain.

**Vocabulary**

**theocracy:** combined state and religious rule

Maya		
Traits of Civilization	Strength Leading to Power	Weakness Leading to Decline
Religious beliefs and theocracy	United culture Loyalty to the king	Many physical and human resources funneled into religious activities
Independent city-states	Wealthy and prosperous culture	Frequent warfare occurs between kingdoms
Intensive agriculture	Production of more food feeds a larger population	Soil depletion and population growth creates need for more land

**SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts**

- Which trait aids in building a sense of loyalty to the ruler?
- How can intensive agriculture be both a strength and a weakness?

**Section 2 Assessment**

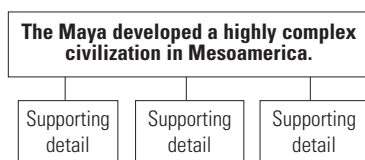
**1. TERMS & NAMES**

Identify

- Tikal
- glyph
- codex
- *Popal Vuh*

**2. TAKING NOTES**

Draw a diagram like the one below and fill in details that support the main idea in the center. You may want to review the characteristics of a civilization found in Chapter 1.



**3. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS**

How important do you think the development of advanced mathematics was in the creation of the Mayan calendar?

**THINK ABOUT**

- how records are kept over long periods of time
- the need for numbers larger than 20
- the need for precision

**4. THEME ACTIVITY**

**Religious and Ethical Systems**

Imagine that you are a reporter visiting Mayan city-states. Write a one-page article that describes various aspects of the Mayan religion.