The Mayan People

Looking Back, Looking Ahead
In Section 1, you read about the rise of the Maya. They had to use whatever natural resources the land had to offer in order to survive and prosper. As a result, they developed a culture suited to where they lived.

Focusing on the Main Ideas
• The Maya created a civilization of city-states and thrived in Mesoamerica’s rain forest. (page 318)
• The Maya developed a society of city-states and a culture based on their religion. (page 320)

Locating Places
Petén (peh•TEHN)

Meeting People
Jasaw Chan K’awiil I (KAH•WEEL)

Content Vocabulary
sinkhole (SIHINGK•HOHL)
alliance (uh•LY•uhns)

Academic Vocabulary
access (AK•SEHS)
predict (prih•DIHKT)

Reading Strategy
Organizing Information Use a web diagram like the one below to record Mayan achievements.

Mayan Achievements

A.D. 400
C. A.D. 500
Mayan civilization reaches its peak

A.D. 700
C. A.D. 682
Jasaw Chan K’awiil I begins to rule Tikal

A.D. 1000
C. A.D. 950
Mayan cities abandoned

History Social Science Standards
WH7.7 Students compare and contrast the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the Meso-American and Andean civilizations.
The Mayan People

Main Idea: The Maya created a civilization of city-states and thrived in Mesoamerica’s rain forest.

Reading Connection: What would it be like to live in a jungle? Read to learn how the Maya adapted to life in the jungles of Mesoamerica.

In A.D. 1839 an American lawyer named John Lloyd Stevens and an English artist named Frederick Catherwood slashed their way into the tangled Yucatán rain forest. There they found the vine-covered ruins of an ancient city.

Stevens and Catherwood learned that the people who had built the city were called the Maya. The Maya are the ancestors of millions of Native Americans who still live in present-day Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Belize.

At first glance, it looked like the Maya had settled in one of the worst spots on Earth. They picked the Petén (peh•TEHN), the Mayan word for “flat region.” Located in present-day Guatemala, the Petén’s dense forests nearly blocked out the sun.

The Maya saw what others missed. Swamps and sinkholes gave them access to a year-round source of water. The sinkholes (SIHNGK•HOHLZ)—areas where the earth has collapsed—connected the Maya with a huge system of underground rivers and streams.

Even with a ready water supply, only an organized culture could have succeeded in building cities and fields in the Petén. The effort required cooperation among many people, which could only be accomplished by having an organized government.

The Maya set up city-states. In each city-state, kings such as Jasaw Chan K’awiil I (KAH•weel) of the city-state of Tikal supplied the leadership. They led the armies and organized great building projects. Leadership passed from one king to the next, and the city-states often fought with each other.

Reading Check Identify What was the main advantage of living in a tropical rain forest?

The City of Tikal

The city of Tikal was one of the largest and oldest Mayan cities. Huge temples and monuments were spread throughout the city. The area which you see here was the main religious center of the city. What Mayan leader built Tikal?
JASAW CHAN K’AWIIL I
Ruled A.D. 682–734

When Jasaw Chan K’awiil I began his rule in A.D. 682, the Mayan city-state of Tikal was weak and struggling. Its temples and other buildings were falling into disrepair, and the people were dominated by their great rival city, Calakmul.

Things began to improve in A.D. 695 when Jasaw defeated the armies of Calakmul in battle. Jasaw held a celebration a month later to honor the gods and himself. Tikal began to prosper again, and Jasaw spent the next 40 years rebuilding and strengthening his city-state.

Although Jasaw had been victorious, he spent only part of his time expanding his control over the region. Instead, most of his efforts went toward helping his people and restarting building projects in Tikal.

Jasaw’s efforts teach us a great deal about Mayan art, architecture, and customs. For example, he built the famous pyramid in Tikal. The huge structure was 154 feet (47 m) in height, and served as both a temple and as Jasaw’s tomb. In the room at the top of the structure, carvings depicted Jasaw’s victories and mythological scenes. Jasaw wears clothing similar to the ancient leaders of Tikal to show that he was as great as they were. Other images were carved on bones and on other buildings. They show events from Mayan mythology and history praising Tikal’s rulers.

One piece of art was of great importance: the effigy, or image of the god that armies carried into battle. This god was supposed to be the special god of that city. When Jasaw defeated Calakmul, he captured the image of their city’s god. The people of Tikal thought this meant that the god of Tikal was more powerful than the others. Jasaw ordered the story of this great accomplishment to be carved on his pyramid so everyone would remember what he had done.

Jasaw began to rebuild Tikal during his reign, but most of the great building projects and military expansion of the city occurred under the reign of his son.
Mayan Ball Game  Mayan cities had many ball courts. In a Mayan ball game, teams of two or three players tried to drive a hard rubber ball through a decorated stone ring. Players wore helmets, gloves, and knee and hip guards made of animal hide to protect themselves against the hard rubber balls. They were not allowed to use their hands or feet to throw or bat the ball. They had to use their hips to drive the ball through the stone rings.

Scholars think that a Mayan ball game was more than a sport or contest. It had a religious and symbolic meaning—as well as deadly results. Crowds rewarded the winners as heroes and gave them gifts. However, the losing team was sacrificed to the gods in a ceremony after the game.

Connecting to the Past
1. How did a player score in a Mayan ball game?
2. Why was losing especially painful for a team?

The Way It Was
Sports & Contests

Mayan Culture
Main Idea The Maya developed a society of city-states and a culture based on their religion.

Reading Connection Did you ever wonder why people need calendars? Read to learn how the Maya developed calendars and math to help them farm.

The rulers of Mayan city-states said they were descended from the sun. They claimed to rule as god-kings and expected people to build huge monuments to honor them. A good example of this is the pyramid built for Jasaw Chan K’awiil I at Tikal.

Life in Mayan Cities As god-kings, Mayan rulers taught their subjects how to please the gods. One way was human sacrifice. When the Maya marched into battle, they wanted captives more than they wanted land. During times of drought, Mayan priests sacrificed captives to Chac, the god of rain and sunlight. The Maya typically only sacrificed captives from the ruling group of a conquered society. Most captives were kept enslaved and put to work.

The Maya believed that the gods controlled everything. As a result, religion was at the core of Mayan life. A huge pyramid with a temple at the top towered over every city. Priests, who claimed to know what the gods wanted, set up a strict class system in which everyone had a place.

Royal Mayan women played an important role in their society. They often married into royal families in other Mayan city-states. This helped form alliances (uh•LY•uhns•uhns).
Alliances are political agreements between people or states to work together. In some city-states, such as Calakmul, women occasionally served as all-powerful queens.

**Mayan Science and Writing** Both queens and kings turned to Mayan priests for advice. The priests thought gods revealed their plans through movements of the sun, moon, and stars, so they studied the sky closely.

The Maya also needed to know when to plant their crops. By watching the sky, the priests learned about astronomy and developed a 365-day calendar. They used it to predict eclipses and to schedule religious festivals, plantings, and harvests. To chart the passage of time, the Maya also developed a system of mathematics.

The Maya also invented a written language. Like the Egyptians, the Maya used a type of hieroglyphics. Symbols represented sounds, words, or ideas. Only nobles could read them, however. After the Mayan civilization collapsed, nobody could read Mayan hieroglyphics. Only recently have scholars learned how to read them.

**What Happened to the Maya?** The Mayan civilization reached its peak in the A.D. 500s. Over the next 300 years, the different Mayan city-states began to collapse. No one is sure why this happened. Some experts say overpopulation drained the cities of food and resources. Others blame a long drought, or period without rain. Still others say that in city after city the poor people rebelled against their rich rulers. Whatever the reason, the Maya began abandoning their cities, and by the A.D. 900s, the cities lay deserted.

**Reading Check** Explain How did the Maya treat enslaved people?

**What Did You Learn?**

1. In what country were Mayan ruins first found?
2. What was the relationship between government and religion in Mayan society?

**Critical Thinking**

3. Organizing Information
   Draw a diagram like the one below describing the geography of the region in which the Maya lived.

   ![Diagram of Maya Geography]

4. The Big Ideas
   How did astronomy and mathematics help Mayan society?

5. Writing a Journal
   Imagine you are an archaeologist who has found lost Mayan ruins. Write a journal entry describing your discovery.

6. Analyze
   Why do you think only nobles could read the Mayan language?

7. Analysis
   Understanding Beliefs
   Write an essay explaining how the Maya tried to please their gods. What did the Maya hope to receive in return?
The Rain God’s Heaven

The people of Teotihuacán believed that people went to heaven after they died. The following song explains some of these beliefs.

Thus they said:
“When we die,
truly we die not,
because we will live, we will rise,
we will continue living, we will awaken.
This will make us happy.”

Thus the dead one was directed, when he died:
“Awaken, already the sky is rosy,
already sing the flame-colored guans,
the fire-colored swallows,
already the butterflies fly.”

—Michael D. Coe and Rex Koontz,
Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs
Welcoming a New King

This Mayan painting comes from a Mayan tomb. It shows a procession of musicians playing various instruments and people celebrating the choosing of the heir to the throne.

Mayan Warfare

This image of Mayan warriors in a battle comes from the same tomb that has the painting of the procession. The man wearing the jaguar suit standing over the fallen enemy is the king.

The Rain God’s Heaven
1. What does the song tell you about the beliefs of the people of Teotihuacán.
2. What does the image show you about the place people go to after they die?

Welcoming a New King
3. What kinds of instruments do you think the musicians are playing?
4. Why do you think someone would place this image in a tomb?

Mayan Warfare
5. What kinds of weapons do the warriors have?
6. How can you tell who the winner is?

Read to Write
7. Compare the images from Teotihuacán and the Mayan tombs. How are they different? What is the goal of the images on the Mayan tombs compared to the Teotihuacán image? Why do you think the Mayan rulers preferred such images?
Review Content Vocabulary

Match the definitions in the second column to the terms in the first column. Then write a sentence for each of the words. Use information from the text to help you properly use the words.

1. glacier  a. areas of collapsed earth
2. sinkhole  b. an agreement between people or groups
3. alliance  c. large sheets of ice

Review the Main Ideas

Section 1 • The First Americans
4. When did the first people arrive in the Americas? On which continent did they live originally?
5. How did farming lead to the rise and development of civilizations in present-day Mexico, Central America, and Peru?
6. What were some of the goods traded by the Olmec people?

Section 2 • The Mayan People
7. Where did the Maya build their civilization?
8. How did the Maya honor their kings?
9. What role did royal Mayan women play in society?

Critical Thinking

10. Analyze How did the Mayan people make use of the geography of their region?  CA CS3.
11. Predict How might ancient America have been different if the Ice Age had not ended when it did?  CA HI2.
12. Explain What were some of the possible outcomes of playing the Mayan ball game?  CA 6RC2.0
13. Describe What was the role of Mayan priests in government? How did these priests use the stars and sky?  CA 6RC2.3

Geography Skills

Study the map below and answer the following questions.

14. Place Look at a map of modern-day Central America. What countries occupy the former area of the Maya?  CA CS3.
15. Location About how far is Teotihuacán from the Olmec civilization?  CA CS3.

Read to Write

17. The Big Ideas Persuasive Writing Historians are not sure why the Mayan civilization declined. Select one of the theories described on page 321 and do research to find support for that theory. Write an essay persuading others that your theory is correct.  CA 6WA2.5

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18. **Using Your Foldables** Create an outline map of Mesoamerica on poster board. It should be big enough for the entire class to work together. Label each country and the location of each civilization using information from the chapter. Then use your foldables to write facts about each civilization on the map. **CA 6RC2.4** **CA 6S3.1**

**Using Academic Vocabulary**
Match each word below with the definition that best fits it.

19. **expose**
   a. to guess about what might happen in the future
   b. to uncover something or put it on display
   c. to judge the approximate size or quantity of something
   d. the ability to make use of something

20. **estimate**
21. **access**
22. **predict**

**Linking Past and Present**
23. **Making Connections** The people of ancient American civilizations built many different types of monuments to honor their gods and their leaders. What kind of monuments do we use in the United States today? Who do we honor with these monuments? How are these monuments similar to those of the ancient Americans? How are they different? Write a short essay explaining the role of monuments in our world today. **CA 6RC2.2**

**Reviewing Skills**
24. **Taking Notes** Use your local library to find a book with information on the history of the Moche people. Read the information, taking notes as you go. Use these notes to write a summary of the Moche civilization and its important events and people. **CA 6WA2.3**

25. **Understanding Chance** The discovery of an ancient Mayan city in the Yucatán rain forest led to new information and understanding of the Maya. Use your local library and the Internet to research the impact of the discovery. What new things did the world learn about the Maya? How did the chance discovery change the way historians view ancient American civilizations? Write a newspaper article that explains the significance of this discovery. **CA HI4.1, HI5.1**

**Standards Practice**

Use the map below to answer the following question.

26. Which area of the map is known as Mesoamerica?