

Aztecs, Incas & Mayans

The Mayans

The Mayan civilization was the oldest of the three largest civilizations in South and Central America. The empire lasted from about 300 A.D. to 900 A.D.

While Europeans were in the midst of the Dark Ages, Mayans never stopped learning. They tried out new farming methods. They rotated their crops so the soil would last longer. They only farmed crops on the same field once every three years or so. Turkey and ducks were tamed and kept on Mayan farms. That way, Mayans wouldn't have to worry about hunting or trapping food.

The Mayans also learned to make paper out of the bark of the fig tree. They had an advanced writing system. In their system, word-pictures stood for different syllables and ideas. Mayan writing did much more than just record dates and information. The writing told stories about life. The Mayans were good mathematicians. They came up with the principle of "0" as a number. They also studied the stars and had very advanced calendars. The Mayan calendar was based on the movement of the sun and the stars. It had 365 days just like ours!

The Mayan civilization was very organized. Each city had a king and everyone had their position from stonecutter to nobleman. You were born into your position in life. If your father was a stonecutter, you would cut stone too. Nobles lived in beautiful houses. Their architecture was splendid. White limestone covered the walls and the floors. The inside walls were painted with murals.

Most Mayans were **peasant**¹ farmers. They had to give more than half of their crops to the nobles and their king. They farmed corn and beans. Mayans also grew cacao or chocolate. The first hot chocolate actually came from the Mayans! They made their hot chocolate by mixing water, cacao (like cocoa), and chili peppers. The Spanish people who conquered the Yucatan **peninsula**²

¹ **peasant** – a person who owns or works on a small farm

² **peninsula** – a piece of land that is surrounded by water on 3 sides

learned of chocolate from the descendents of the Maya. The Spanish took chocolate back to Europe. In the Mayan empire, chocolate wasn't just a food or drink. Cocoa beans were used as currency, or money. People would trade their goods for cocoa beans!

No one knows exactly why the Mayan civilization came to an end. By the time Europeans arrived in the New World, the civilization had already crumbled. One idea is that the kings started fighting against each other until all of the peace and wealth ended. Another thought is that the Mayan farms could no longer make enough food for everyone. In a time of extreme **drought**,³ peasants might have refused to give the little food that they had to the nobles. Whatever happened, the Mayan empire was long past its peak by the time Europeans arrived. In its height, the empire was active and full of the spirit of learning similar to many countries in Europe at the same time.

³ **drought** – a period of time when there is little or no rain

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. The Mayans discovered or invented all of the following except:
 - a. chocolate.
 - b. rotating crops.
 - c. the wheel.
 - d. the use of the number "0".

2. How long did the Mayan Empire last?
 - a. It lasted over 2,000 years.
 - b. It lasted less than 100 years.
 - c. It lasted approximately 3,500 years.
 - d. It lasted about 600 years.

3. What did the Mayans use as currency?
 - a. Cocoa beans
 - b. Maize
 - c. Beads
 - d. Coins

4. After reading about everything that the Mayans invented, which of the following words best describe the Mayan people?
 - a. Curious and intelligent
 - b. Sad and lonely
 - c. Greedy and selfish
 - d. Thoughtful but mean

5. What did the word-pictures used in the Mayan writing system represent?
 - a. Numbers and letters
 - b. Syllables and ideas
 - c. Pictures and numbers
 - d. Shapes and places

6. What do you think were the two greatest accomplishments of the Mayan civilization? Explain your opinion fully, using details from the text.

7. What did the Mayans use as a guide while creating their complex calendars?

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Mayans often tried new farming methods, _____ rotating crops, in order to preserve their soil and make it fertile longer.

- a. however
- b. such as
- c. as long as
- d. finally

9. Answer the following question based on the sentence below.

When the Spanish conquered the Yucatan peninsula in search of wealth they discovered the Mayans' invention known as hot chocolate and other cultural achievements.

Who? the Spanish

(discovered)What? _____

Where? _____

10. **Vocabulary Word:** drought: a period of time when there is little or no rain.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: _____

Teacher Guide and Answers**Passage Reading Level:** Lexile 730**Featured Text Structure:** Descriptive – the writer explains, defines or illustrates a concept or topic**Passage Summary:** The Mayan civilization was one of the three largest and most advanced civilizations in South and Central America.

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Suggested answer: Answers will vary, but could include the following: farming practices, taming animals, writing, or mathematics. Answers should also include reasoning as to why the accomplishments chosen were the greatest. Students should refer to two accomplishments in their answer.

7. What did the Mayans use as a guide while creating their complex calendars?

Suggested answer: In order to create their advanced calendars, which consisted of 365 days, the Mayans used the movement of the sun and the stars.

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

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(discovered)What? **hot chocolate and other cultural achievements**

Where? **Yucatan Peninsula**

10. **Vocabulary Word:** drought: a period of time when there is little or no rain.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: answers may vary.