

Mysteries of the Mayas

Scientists dig up paintings and unlock clues in Mexico.



Leigh Haeger

Deep in the jungle of southeastern Mexico, archaeologists stumbled upon an unexpected surprise. They spotted what appeared to be a mound-like shape peeking out from the ground. Curious, the archaeologists began to dig.

As the team chipped away at the earth, the mound became larger and more incredible than the scientists had expected. They soon realized they had found an ancient pyramid! What's more, it was decorated with dozens of murals unlike any they had seen before.



Calakmul Archaeological Project/R.
Carrasco, V. Vázquez, S. Martin
This close-up view of a mural shows
Mayas eating and preparing food.

Clues to the Past

Today, those old paintings are helping experts unlock a mystery about people from long ago.

Experts say the art—and the pyramid—belonged to the Mayan **civilization**. A civilization is a society. The Mayas were Native Americans who lived more than 1,000 years ago in what is now Mexico and Central America.

The murals are about 1,350 years old. So far, experts have **excavated**, or dug up, about 30 of them in Calakmul, Mexico. They **depict**, or show, scenes from everyday Mayan life. It's a side of the Mayas that has rarely been seen before, even though researchers have studied the civilization for about a century, says expert Michael Coe.

"We never had anything like this before," Coe explained to *WR News*. "This is something that's completely new to us."

Most Mayan art shows how rulers and royalty lived. The newly discovered murals are of regular citizens doing ordinary things, such as shopping and eating. One painting shows a woman selling tamales to a crowd of customers. Another is of people eating maize. Other murals show Mayan goods being transported to market.

"Mostly you get the murals ... that show gods and kings, never anything about daily life," Coe says. "This is like walking into a Maya supermarket."

A-Maya-Zing People

The Mayas were more than just painters. They developed their own form of math. They also studied science and the universe.



Calakmul Archaeological Project/R.
Carrasco, V. Vázquez, S. Martin
The Mayan murals included these
hieroglyphics, or picture symbols.

The Mayas were writers, as well. They made books out of the bark of fig trees. The civilization also came up with its own form of **hieroglyphics** (above). That is a type of writing that uses pictures instead of letters.

Some of the recently uncovered murals include hieroglyphics that label the people and objects pictured. Thanks to the paintings, researchers have learned a few new hieroglyphics, including those for the words *maize* and *salt*.

Simon Martin is one of the experts studying the symbols. "Some of the [hieroglyphics] are still very hard to understand," he explained. "I will be working on those and hope to **decipher** them." To decipher is to make sense of something.

Digging for Answers

Scientists are busy excavating the rest of the pyramid. They're not sure why the Mayas created the structure or the murals on it, but they hope to learn more as they continue to dig.

Martin believes there are at least a dozen murals left to be discovered. The work will be slow going though. The ancient paintings must be treated with care so they're not damaged.

"It's rare to find paintings like these in such good condition," Martin told *WR News*. "But we know that there are more still to be uncovered."

Rise and Fall

The ancient Mayan civilization existed for about 2,500 years. That's a lot of time to paint murals!



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Pre-Classic Period 1000 B.C. to A.D. 250

The first Mayas settled in what is now Guatemala around 1000 B.C. They lived in villages, hunted food, and raised crops. The Mayas built their first pyramids during this period.



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Classic Period 250 to 900

The Mayan population grew. The Mayas built cities and studied math and science. Toward the end of the period, cities fought one another for land and other resources.



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Post-Classic Period 900 to 1697

Chichén Itzá, in what is now Mexico, was the most powerful Mayan city. In the 1500s, the Spanish began to invade. They took over the last Mayan city in 1697.

Save the Date The Mayas used a special calendar. They divided the year into 18 months of 20 days each, plus five days at the end of the year. The Mayas considered those five days unlucky.



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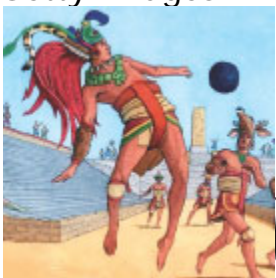
Dress Up Mayan men wrapped themselves in strips of cloth, while women wore face paint and long, loose dresses. Both men and women wore necklaces and



Getty Images

earrings.

Game Day During Mayan religious festivals, the Mayas ate and danced. They also played a sport that involved trying to hit a rubber ball through a stone ring using one's hips.



Getty Images

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What did archaeologists discover in the jungle of southeastern Mexico?
 - A skeletons of the Mayas
 - B several Mayan books explaining their way of life
 - C an ancient pyramid with murals depicting scenes from everyday Mayan life
 - D animal fossils

2. Why was this discovery unlike anything experts have ever seen before?
 - A Experts had never found an ancient Mayan pyramid before with murals on it.
 - B Experts had never seen Mayan hieroglyphics before this discovery.
 - C Unlike most Mayan art which shows regular citizens doing ordinary things, the newly discovered murals depict how rulers and royalty lived.
 - D Unlike most Mayan art which shows how rulers and royalty lived, the newly discovered murals are of regular citizens doing ordinary things.

3. What can you conclude about the Mayas based on the information in this passage?
 - A The Mayas did not create a lot of art.
 - B The Mayas were a well-developed people that created many things.
 - C The Mayas only cared about painting royalty and rulers.
 - D The Mayas were not interested in math and science.

4. Read the following sentence: "Some of the recently uncovered murals include hieroglyphics that label the people and objects pictured."

In the passage, the word **hieroglyphics** means

- A a form of writing that uses pictures instead of words
 - B a way to build pyramids
 - C a game the Mayans invented
 - D a name of a Mayan town

5. This passage is mostly about
 - A recently discovered Mayan murals that reveal a new side to the Mayans
 - B a trip archaeologists took to Mexico
 - C the culture of Mayan rulers
 - D how the Mayans used art to decorate their pyramids and their homes

6. What do the newly discovered murals show that has not been seen in Mayan art until now? Give examples.

7. What might be a reason that expert Michael Coe compared these murals to “walking into a Maya supermarket”?

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

The Mayan paintings are in good condition _____ they must be treated with care and not damaged.

- A until
- B while
- C so
- D after

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

The archaeologists discovered unusual Mayan murals in an ancient pyramid in Mexico.

Who? archaeologists

(did) What? _____

Where? _____

Directions: Read the vocabulary word and definition below to complete questions 10a, 10b, and 11.

Vocabulary Word: **invade** (in · vade): to enter by force in order to disturb or take over.

10a. Read the sentences below and underline all forms of the word **invade**.

1. The small countries suffered major damage after the superpowers invaded and took control.
2. The people were scared of being invaded when they saw the enemy's planes fly by.
3. Lisa was annoyed with her brother who always ran into her room and invaded her privacy.
4. The German forces invaded Poland with army attacks in 1939 which sparked the start of World War II.
5. After the neighboring country invaded my country, I knew our people would never trust their government again.

10b. Which photo shows something more likely to be used to invade a country?



11. If our military goes to provide help to a country after a natural disaster, is that an act of invading? Explain your answer.

Teacher Guide and Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 820

Featured Text Structure: Descriptive - the writer explains, defines or illustrates a concept or topic

Passage Summary: Murals decorating a recently discovered ancient Mayan pyramid depict the Mayas in their daily lives, providing more insight into how these ancient people lived.

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- C the culture of Mayan rulers
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6. What do the newly discovered murals show that has not been seen in Mayan art until now? Give examples.

Suggested answer: They show regular citizens doing ordinary things, such as shopping and eating. One painting shows a woman selling tamales to a crowd of customers and another shows Mayan goods being transported to market. [paragraph 7]

7. What might be a reason that expert Michael Coe compared these murals to “walking into a Maya supermarket”?

Suggested answer: These murals focus on regular Mayan people doing ordinary things, and not on royalty and rulers whose lives are far removed from scenes depicted in the murals. Just like in a supermarket where people buy, sell and make things, the regular Mayas in these paintings are doing the same activities. Coe is describing a relatable setting that has not been seen in Mayan art until now and which illustrates another aspect of Mayan life. [paragraph 7-8]

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

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The archaeologists discovered unusual Mayan murals in an ancient pyramid in Mexico.

Who? archaeologists

(did) What? **discovered unusual Mayan murals**

Where? **in an ancient pyramid in Mexico**

To the Teacher: ReadWorks recommends that you teach this vocabulary word to the whole class out loud using the four steps listed below.

Vocabulary Word: **invade** (in · vade): to enter by force in order to disturb or take over.

Step 1: Introduce the word

- a. Teacher writes the word on the board and divides it into syllables: (in · vade)
- b. Teacher says: “This word is invade. What is the word?” [All students reply together out loud: “invade.”]

Step 2: Provide a child-friendly definition

- a. Teacher says: “Invade means to enter by force in order to disturb or take over. The word invade is usually used to talk about military forces that enter another country without permission when they want to take over the land and the people.”
- b. Teacher says: “In this passage, it is explained that the Spanish forces started to invade Mayan cities in the 1500s.”
- c. Teacher says: “What is the word?” [All students reply together out loud: “invade.”]

Step 3: Practice the word

Teacher provides examples and additional opportunities to repeat the word. Read the first sentence out loud to your students. Begin reading it again and when you come to the vocabulary word prompt students to say the vocabulary word out loud. Then, finish reading the sentence out loud to your students.

Directions: Read the vocabulary word and definition below to complete questions 10a, 10b, and 11.

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Step 4: Check for student understanding

To the Teacher: This step can be completed as a whole class activity or as an independent practice.

10b. Which photo shows something more likely to be used to invade a country?



11. If our military goes to provide help to a country after a natural disaster, is that an act of invading? Explain your answer.

Suggested answer: No because it would most likely be the case that the country affected by the natural disaster needs help recovering from the disaster and would welcome aid efforts.

Suggested Additional Vocabulary: civilization, decipher, depict