

Unit 1: Legacies of the Maya

Narrator: The Maya. They're considered one of the most advanced civilizations to have existed in the Americas before the Spanish conquest. But who exactly were the ancient Maya people, and what led to the collapse of their civilization?

As early as 1800 B.C., the Maya had begun settling in established villages in what is today Mexico and Central America. Maya civilization peaked from 250 to 900 A.D.—during what archeologists call the Classic Period.

More than 40 cities flourished throughout the region, with populations as large as 50,000.

The Maya built magnificent urban centers consisting of stone structures, including pyramid temples that were central to Maya religious practices.

In addition to these impressive city structures, agriculture played a key role in Maya civilization. Corn was one of the predominant crops. The Maya creation story tells of nature gods—the basis of Maya religion—who created humans out of yellow and white corn.

The Maya also made significant advancements in mathematics and astronomy. They invented the concept of zero, and they developed an accurate calendar system. Used to guide the Maya agricultural cycles, the calendar was based on observations of the sun and sky over thousands of years.

The Maya also developed the only known system of writing in Mesoamerica—hieroglyphs. In fact, much of what we now know about ancient Maya civilization comes from deciphering hieroglyphic characters inscribed on pottery, stone slabs, and other ruins discovered at ancient sites.

Hieroglyphs have revealed that, despite the Maya's ingenuity and agrarian lifestyle, conflict was prevalent among some Maya city-states, as they battled for control of the region.

Throughout much of the Classic Period, the city-state of Tikal (located in modern-day Guatemala) reigned as the closest thing to an empire in Maya history. But for a period of

roughly 130 years, the Tikal people were overtaken through force and diplomacy by the Kaanul, a rival kingdom.

Toward the end of the Classic Period, around 900 A.D., most Maya cities had collapsed.

Among the theories are warfare, a volcanic eruption, and, perhaps most likely, drought.

However, archeologists still debate why as new evidence continues to emerge.

Despite the decline of ancient Maya civilization, the Maya people have by no means disappeared. More than seven million Maya are estimated to be alive today in their indigenous homelands and around the world. While they participate in modern global life, they continue to follow agricultural and ceremonial practices of their ancestors.