

Obviously, the collapse of Olmec civilization did not signal an end to developments elsewhere. The decline of one region typically was followed by first the gradual, then the extraordinary, development of others. Contemporaneously, native peoples across Mesoamerica were capitalizing on their rich local soils as well as the intellectual and technological legacy of the Olmecs. Smaller in scale but no less important in Mexico's central zone were sites of industry, trade, and other activities at Cuicuilco, Chupícuaro, and Tlatilco. Archaeologists number such sites in the hundreds. Essentially, this was a time of transition, marking the end of the formative era. Likewise, new social groups were establishing centers in new regions that included increasing numbers of subject populations. Eventually, grandiose political capitals such as Teotihuacan, El Tajin, Monte Albán, Tikal, and Kaminaljuyu began to dominate their respective landscapes, signifying the beginning and later heyday of the classic era in Mesoamerican history.

Already in southern Mexico and lowland Guatemala numerous Maya societies were actively involved in consolidating into regional kingdoms. Surely refugee Olmecs or colonists from the Gulf Coast influenced local inhabitants at some point. Over time, these settlements had refined their techniques for land use, especially for food production. In some Maya regions, swidden, or slash-and-burn agriculture in which short-term growing plots are produced by burning off the land, was practiced, and soil fertility was thus short-lived. Depending upon the terrain, fields were left fallow for anywhere from 2 to 20 years. In other regions, raised fields were formed in areas of wetlands, or the latter were drained for more efficient crop management. Here, as elsewhere in Mesoamerica, with the use of a wooden digging stick called a *coa* (*huictli*) fields of maize, beans (small black ones for the Mayas), squash, and chiles produced such quantities as to generate and support an entire hierarchy of rulers, priests, and other specialists. Orchards of fruit, copal (a resin), and cacao were also products natural to the Mayas' farms. Cacao, in particular, was unique to a very select zone of early Maya habitation and thus became the special preserve of the nobility.

During the early classic period, Maya kingdoms such as Tikal (about A.D. 375–600) and Kaminaljuyu (about A.D. 400–650) enjoyed authority over numerous subject populations in the hinterlands of their capitals. Society was essentially made up of two classes: the nobility and the commoners, with slaves as a special category. Along with their role in food production, Maya commoners and slaves

were responsible for myriad tasks, not the least of which was the construction and maintenance of sky-soaring pyramid-like temples of stone as well as palaces and other ceremonial structures. Additionally, some of the Maya nonelite worked as artisans and merchants. However, the great majority of any Maya kingdom was made up of commoners, who tended their fields to provide sustenance for all.

The Maya rulers' authority was conveyed through their lineage, advantageous marriages with the right royal partner being secured through traditional succession practices. Additionally, since polygyny (having multiple wives) was practiced by the male nobility, royal heirs who were not in a direct line for succession often optimized their situations by marrying the offspring of political allies, which served to further unite the kingdom. Both the royal daughters and the royal sons, it seems, participated in the politically motivated practice of making marriage alliances.

In some Mesoamerican monarchies, women succeeded to the office of and officiated as queens. Moreover, Tikal's and Kaminaljuyu's positions were enhanced due to their trade affiliation with the thriving kingdom of Teotihuacan in central Mexico. It is possible that the exchange of noble brides served, at least initially, to enhance this long-distance relationship. But obsidian was the principal commodity, and whether by means of warfare or by holding a monopoly on the product, merchants from Teotihuacan made a lasting impression on the highland Mayas. In addition to making biological contributions to the Maya gene pool through bride exchange, Teotihuacan contributed deities and art and architectural styles that were incorporated into Tikal's and Kaminaljuyu's public space and became a very real part of Maya culture.

In turn, because of their enhanced wealth and power, the local Maya rulers waged war successfully on neighboring kingdoms, thus adding to their dependencies. Tikal's and Kaminaljuyu's holds would wane only with the decline of Teotihuacan and the loss of resources from central Mexico. Already, though, major dependencies like Yaxchilan and Copan (Copán) had become dominant hegemonic capitals in their own right. Numerous other Maya kingdoms would flourish at about the same time, especially in the tropical forests of the Peten (Petén), in present-day Guatemala.

Lineage and territory were integral to classic Maya kingdoms. Boundaries were known, warfare a fact of life as rulers ruthlessly waged war against neighboring polities for booty and probably slaves. Conquered kingdoms were not necessarily destroyed but rather became new dependencies obligated to pay tribute. But each entity was essentially ethnically self-centered and autonomous, with its own state hierarchy, congeries of subject peoples, and local customs.

Empire formation, for both social and geographic reasons, seems not to have been practicable. Certainly, the extremes of topography—namely mountain ranges, forests, lakes, and swamps—played a role in limiting the political unification of the region. More likely, however, empires did not arise simply because of the prevailing sociopolitical practices. Warfare was the province of a kin-linked nobility whose entitlement limited the number privileged to engage

in battle as well as the distribution of the spoils. Not only did the Maya aristocracy comprise an exclusive warrior corps but they dominated trading ventures as well. Therefore, opportunities for the nonelite to profit through warfare or commerce and thus to advance socially apparently did not exist. Although everyone in the polity considered themselves kin, however distant, and thus fellow citizens and patriots, control of each kingdom's resources was vested in a cohort of more closely related elite men and women. Because of this exclusivity, imperial pretensions were self-limited. The royal policy of reciprocating prosperity and protection for the nonelite must have been enough to warrant their continued collective allegiance.

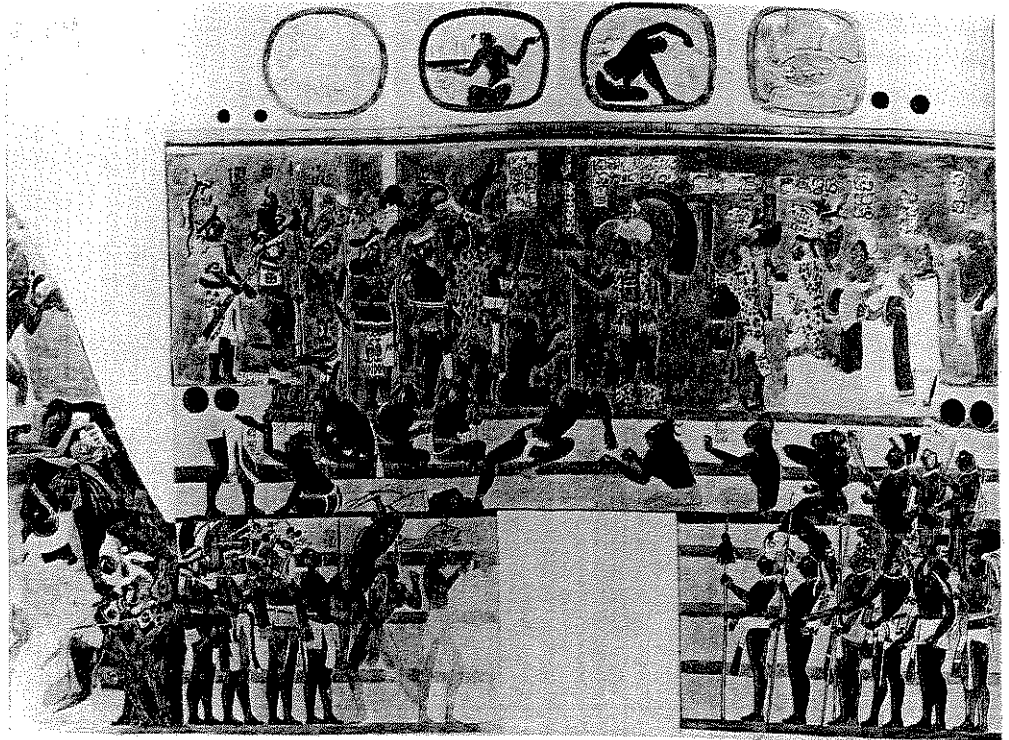
The fact of political independence is not to suggest either simplicity or stasis, though, for the Mayas enjoyed unparalleled intellectual achievements during this period. Their trade networks among their own kingdoms as well as abroad to central Mexico also expanded significantly in these same years. Maya luxuries—feathers, pottery, animal skins, salt, chocolate, jewelry, and slaves—continued to be exchanged for obsidian, shells, rock crystal, alabaster, and other exotica from distant trading entrepôts. In addition, ideas and language accompanied these goods as they moved through the trade corridors. As the Maya kingdoms increased in grandeur, the inclination was for them to compete and to fight one another. But none apparently ever had a grander objective whereby a ruler prevailed by subjecting and integrating all the others beyond his sphere.

There are further remarkable features that characterize the classic Maya kingdoms. One of the first that must be emphasized is the quality of their workmanship in stone, which nearly exceeds imagination. Following Olmec precedents, Maya architects and engineers in places like Palenque, Copan, Yaxchilan, and Piedras Negras, to name a few, designed and constructed enormous pyramids and palaces, many of which were truly magisterial. Craftsmen typically built these structures with dramatic frontal staircases ascending steeply to sculpted roof-comb temples at the top. At Copan a staircase was added faced with intricately worked hieroglyphs now thought to have been a piece of historical propaganda on the part of the ruler to assuage the feelings of Copan's citizens for a recent loss in battle.

Buildings' facades were embellished with handsome portrayals of royalty in high and low relief. Lintels, altars, stelae, and statuary were exquisitely carved and documented with relevant inscriptions in the form of epigraphic, or hieroglyphic, texts, all as part of the court complex. Characteristically for the Mayas, arches took the form of a pointed corbel vault. A corbel arch, a diagnostic of this culture, is a pointed vault used as a roof, often but not always to cover a burial chamber.

Both the exteriors and interiors of Maya buildings were painted, sometimes as fresco, and the walls of inside rooms might be covered with murals depicting Maya life. Of all extant Maya wall paintings, those in three rooms at Bonampak are the most exciting, for these brilliantly painted murals portray the cycle of Maya kingship—from the presentation of a male child as heir to the court and

The discovery of Bonampak in 1946 included this brightly painted mural from Room 2 at the classic Maya site in Chiapas. The image from c. A.D. 800 depicts the victorious aftermath of battle. At the top of a stepped temple Maya rulers are shown in all their jaguar finery, jade jewelry, and magnificent headdresses. Women and numerous high-ranking men, identified by the inscriptions above their heads, form part of the retinue. Captives have been stripped. At least one is dead, and the others, wounded and bleeding, wait to learn their fate.



the murderous warfare necessary to secure that office, to the majesty of rulership in the aftermath of victory.

From these paintings and the enormous variety of stone carvings that have survived we can also determine the appearance of upper-class Mayas and observe what they wore. The nobility of this era enjoyed many luxuries, which included beautifully fashioned jade jewelry in the form of earrings, labrets, necklaces, bracelets, and rings. Their clothing consisted of finely woven and decorated cotton hip- and loincloths for men as well as pectorals, belts, sashes, capes, robes, sandals, and feather-and-jewel headdresses of such variety and magnificence that they practically defy description. The women dressed well, too, and wore a great variety of blouses, skirts, capes, and long gowns, some even brocadelike in their design and texture; nor did they want for fine jewels and beautiful hairpieces.

Beauty truly was in the eye of the Maya beholder. But surely the finest adornments were little appreciated if the wearer had not paid careful attention to the physical as well. Maya aesthetics required that the cranium be molded in a certain manner. Ideally, the forehead was flattened to be in line with the plane of the nose. Crossed eyes were thought to be attractive, especially for women, and both men and women pierced their noses, earlobes, and lips to display precious gems. Tattooing, or face painting, on the cheeks and chin was another cosmetic device, and one's smile was considered beautiful only if the teeth had been filed with ridges or drilled and inlaid with exquisite jewels. Hair was done up and often

covered with an elaborate headdress. At other times women wore it tied or hanging long and straight down their backs.

Most Maya elites were trim and stately, although some of the men were definitely hefty, with large potbellies. Seniority did not exclude one from the court, for elders were valued for their wisdom. Rulers sat on jaguar-skin-covered thrones in their palaces with staffs of authority and other royal paraphernalia about. They were attended by an elaborate retinue of regal lesser nobles, each with his or her own insignia, many if not all no doubt related in some manner. When the king left the palace on official occasions, he was usually transported in a litter. His wives, who were an important part of the court, too, were usually close by, fixing him a drink of chocolate, fanning themselves, or looking admiringly in mirrors. Female slaves taken in raids or battle were likely responsible for attending to a range of domestic duties on behalf of the nobility.

The Mayas' cuisine was based on corn (maize), beans, and a variety of other vegetables, along with as much meat and fish as local hunters could supply. The comal for preparing tortillas did not exist in Maya households. No one knows exactly why the Mayas did not use the comal. Rather, it is thought that tamales and maize-based gruels and stews were preferred dishes. Banquets and feasting were an important part of ceremonies, whether social or religious. After successful battles, rulers typically shared some of their goods, including food, with their subordinates, who presumably distributed what was left among the commoners. Women were the cooks and servers, and royal women most often dined apart from men.

*Balche*, an intoxicating beverage made from local bee's honey fermented with bark, was consumed by nobles and commoners alike. However, following a meal, only royalty partook of the frothed chocolate beverage thought to be such a delicacy. Drunk from a ceramic vessel designed especially for the occasion, and sometimes seasoned with chile powder, *achiote* (similar to allspice), or vanilla, chocolate in all its consummate elegance completed the repast. Other stimulants and intoxicants, such as nicotine and local hallucinogens, might also be taken on ceremonial occasions as inhalants or instilled as colonics.

Music was always a part of Mesoamerican pageantry, and professional musicians as composers and instrumentalists doubtless enjoyed special status and rewards for their contributions. It seems to be the case that they were members of an aristocratic subculture along with advisors, scribes, priests, and other artists and craftspeople. Mayan musical instruments were of two genres, wind and percussion, with song and dance a part of every performance. At Bonampak, drums, trumpets, and gourd and tortoise-shell rattles were played in heraldic concert, but whistles, flutes, rattles, and rasps—ingeniously fashioned from shell, bone (sometimes human), wood, and clay—were also among Mesoamerica's musical instruments.

Kingship was the centerpiece of Maya life and empowerment derived from history, which was understood as local sacred knowledge invested in and manipulated by the ruler. Sacred knowledge included understanding time and the

universe and the Mayas' relationship to both. Over the centuries, most Mesoamericans had worked out for themselves a nearly exact calendar system with a 52-year count based on astronomical observations and mathematical calculations. Very likely because of their need to determine optimal periods for planting and harvesting crops, indigenous scientists devised a means to reckon time based upon two calendar cycles.

One cycle was of 260 days, organized in a series of months from 1 to 13, each with 20 named days. The second cycle was of 365 days (the solar year) with 18 named months of 20 days each, followed by 5 "unlucky days" at the end. These calendars operated like two wheels of days, one somewhat larger than the other, that moved together and past each other in a steady rhythm. A given day in the 260-day calendar also had a position in the 365-day count, and every 52 years the two would coincide.

Maya intellectuals kept careful track of these time spans and elaborated their calculations in a long count that allowed them to date events of the past, present, and future with great accuracy. Reckoning by vigesimal multiples, or the counting by units of 20, rather than the more familiar decimal multiples, or units of 10 familiar today in the United States, they also established a sophisticated number system and used dots (one equal to 1) and bars (one equal to a count of five) to quantify Maya time and material culture.

The march of time for the Mesoamericans was intimately related to their cosmology, in which both the deities and men played vital roles. Months were named and had specific characteristics. Moreover, each month was associated with a particular deity whose duty it was to bear the burden of that period of time from beginning to end. Prophecy played a major role in interpreting time and the significance of the date of one's birth could prognosticate one's entire future. Celestial and environmental phenomena such as comets, earthquakes, floods, and famines were recorded and juxtaposed with other historical events.

The Mayas' religion was complex, for there was a full pantheon of deities to be reckoned with on a regular basis. The Maya world was divided into three horizontal strata. A series of layers of heavens lay uppermost. This sphere was followed by a middle one with all the trees and earthly things the Maya knew so well. Below that was an underworld, Xibalba, of nine planes. These three zones were sacred and connected with one another, but only Mayas who died in battle, while giving birth, or as victims of sacrifice were exempted from the dreaded Xibalba. All the others, as in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, were consigned to descend to the underworld and meet again forever in a Mayan afterlife.

The Mayas believed the creator of man to be an entity they called Hunab Ku, an abstract, elusive deity. He was the father of almighty Itzamna, god of the sky, the day, and the night. But the cosmos was not all beyond the reach of ordinary Mayas, for they believed that four *batabob* (lords) representing the cardinal directions and sacred colors (east—red; west—black or blue; south—yellow; north—white) held up the sky. A fifth direction, the center, was green. The sun, above all, literally, with its many theological attributes, was life and renewal as it

made its daily round, cutting through all the spheres while keeping the Maya world whole.

Information about the kingship, time, and their deities was made available to the Maya public on the facades of palaces, temples, and stelae. Sacred knowledge was also recorded as history in codices, or books, with beautifully executed inscriptions and other images on screenfold (long sheets that were folded together as one does a screen or stretched open for reading) pages of bark or deerskin, which were paperlike products. Such sages as priests, kings, and scientists hoarded these books and copied and elaborated on their texts according to the occasion.

The Mayas had a rich syllabary language that greatly facilitated their production of written texts. Spoken words could be elaborated with signs, or logographs. Many such literary or spoken devices were inordinately complex in meaning, and not all of the texts have been translated even today. And doubtless not all Mayas could read these histories at the time they were produced, but their significance would have been made known to everyone at ceremonies when the kings and queens came before their fellow Mayas.

Ancestral privilege, prescribed as sacrosanct in the texts, conferred divine authority. Maya rulers drew upon these histories for consolation in periods of hardship and for inspiration when it was time to wage war. Invoking their subjects and their deities by means of gruesome self-mutilation—drawing blood with razorlike slashes on their ears, tongue, and penis—along with the intensity of ritual song and dance, burning torches and incense, and dramatic rhetoric, Maya rulers became the kingdom incarnate through blood sacrifice. Even commoners in locales too distant to permit firsthand participation at royal performances knew the ceremonies, understood that they were presented on their behalf, and felt their membership in the body politic to be secure.

Nevertheless, some things, such as a shift in economic power that occurred during the later years of the classical era in central Mexico, were beyond the control of the Maya kings, and by the end of the ninth century their influence was declining. Theories abound regarding reasons for the “classic Maya collapse,” including epidemic disease, invasion, soil exhaustion and drought prompting agricultural collapse, and internal upheaval. Even a shift from the use of overland trading routes to new commercial waterways may have contributed to the Mayas’ downfall. At any rate, the centers of the great Maya ethnic states were gradually abandoned one after the other, never to flourish again. The surviving Mayas dispersed, some emigrating to join native groups on the Yucatan Peninsula, which became the locus of control for trade between Mexico and areas south to Panama. Other Mayas moved into the volcanic highlands.

By the 11th century, well into what is described as the postclassic era, Maya settlements came under the influence of a series of invaders from various regions in central Mexico: the Chontal Mayas, Putuns, Toltecs, and others. Presumably, peninsular and highland Mayas had been trading with many of these groups for centuries. But exactly what prompted their large-scale move into the region is not

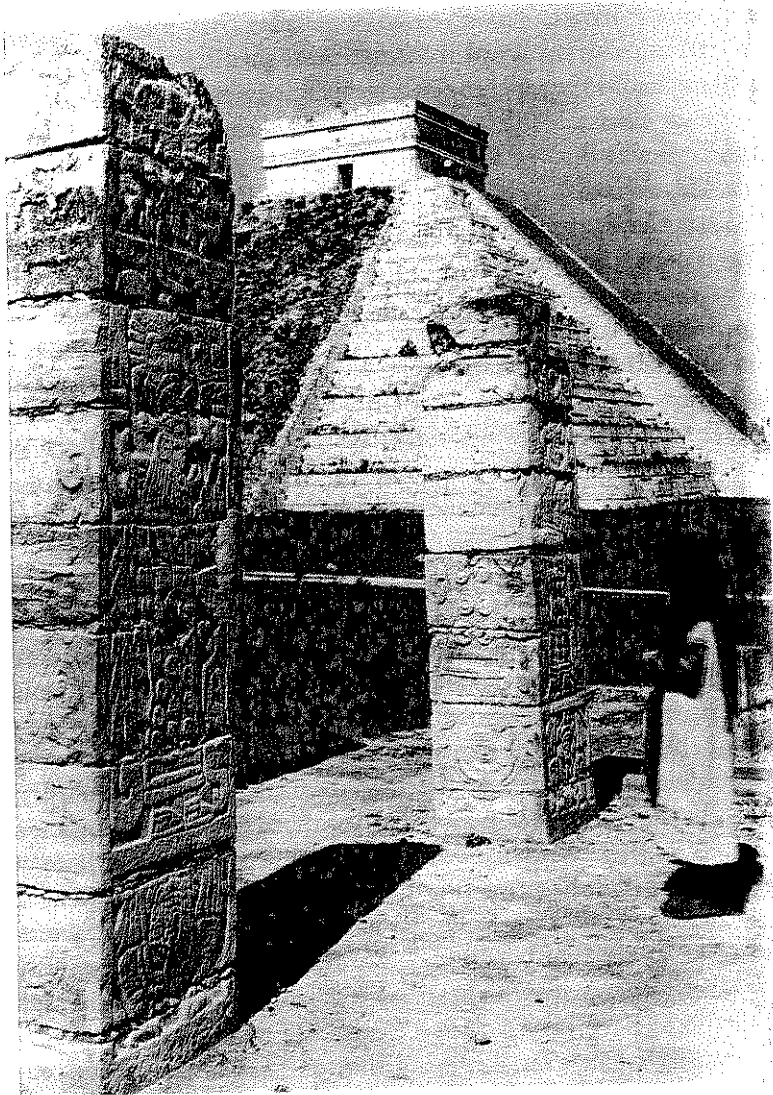
This is a masterpiece of classic Maya stone carving from a lintel at Yaxchilan, in lowland Guatemala, c. A.D. 725. King Shield Jaguar holds a burning torch while his kneeling queen, Lady Xoc, passes a thorn-embedded rope through her tongue as a blood offering. The finery of her robe, heavy jade pectoral, and bracelet and the elaborate headdresses of both rulers are especially ornate details. Hieroglyphic inscriptions record the names and titles of the individuals, the date (28 October A.D. 709), and the event.



known. In Yucatan, the newcomer Itzas established their capital at Chichen Itza (Chichén Itzá), which is distinguished by its stunning architecture, stelae, ball courts, feathered serpent motif, and other features that are close in style partly to postclassic period structures at Tollan (believed to be modern-day Tula) in central Mexico but overall in most ways now considered to be distinctively Maya. Ethnically far more heterogeneous than any classic Maya rulership, and thus able to take great advantage of a range of innovative social and political practices, the Itzas would hold sway in northern Yucatan for close to two centuries.

Ultimately, however, the ancient tradition of Mayan lineage-based kingship prevailed. An alliance of dominant kin groups asserted itself and in 1221 successfully overthrew the Itzas. Centralized authority thus shifted from Chichen Itza to Mayapan (Mayapán), where several royal lineages that were in league, yet borrowing innovations from Chichen Itza, changed the prevailing art and architectural styles once again while they revitalized historical writing practices in the form of hieroglyphic inscriptions.





The *castillo* from the Temple of the Warriors is one of the most impressive structures at Chichen Itza, a Maya site. The Mayas dominated Yucatan for nearly two centuries until losing authority to Mayapan in 1221.

Thus, from 1221 to 1440 classic-style Maya lineages enjoyed dominance in Yucatan, at least until one group overthrew the others, shattering the confederacy. Subsequently, the governance of Yucatan broke into some 16 warring factions that fought one another for control of such local resources as salt and cacao but probably also continued to participate in long-distance trade networks. In the Maya highlands, the Quiche and Cakchiquel peoples claiming descent from central Mexico's much mythologized Toltec ancestors developed into formidable warring kingdoms, unifying and dominating the region until the 16th century.

It is about these Mayas that the Spaniards first wrote home, and it was Tulum's towers and palaces high on the cliffs above the Caribbean, one of the trade centers that succeeded Mayapan, that so impressed them. Appalled though they were at some of the Mayas' religious and social practices, the Spaniards nevertheless (and

perhaps inadvertently) wrote favorably of the native peoples they met. It is from these reports that we cull critical historical information regarding the lives of the ordinary Mayas: their household living compounds; sizable, well-organized towns with adjacent cultivated fields; local government; cuisine; dress; tools and weapons; language, and, above all, their inordinate hospitality. Cycles of conquest were nothing new to Maya history. The Maya peoples still cherished and consulted their codices. That the Spaniards had similar sources of sacred knowledge seemed not to have been particularly remarkable to these Mesoamericans who had long perfected their own to rationalize nearly all the phenomena in the cosmos.