



World History (High School) Lesson 2

The Early Americas

Lesson 2



MAIN IDEAS

1. Geography affected early Maya civilization.
2. The Maya Classic Age was characterized by great cities, trade, and warfare.
3. A complex class structure shaped roles in Maya society.
4. The Maya worshipped many gods and believed their kings communicated with them.
5. The Maya culture made great achievements in art, science, math, and writing.
6. Maya civilization declined, and historians have several theories for why.

Key Terms and People

obsidian a sharp, glasslike volcanic rock found in Mesoamerica

Pacal Maya king who dedicated a temple to record his achievements as ruler

observatories buildings designed to study astronomy and view the stars

Popol Vuh a book containing legends and some history of the Maya civilization

Lesson Summary

GEOGRAPHY AFFECTS EARLY MAYA

The Maya (MY-ah) civilization developed in the lowlands of Mesoamerica around 1000 BCE. Forests were a source of many resources for the Maya. They lived in villages and traded such items as woven cloth and **obsidian**. By 200 CE, the Maya were building large cities in the Americas.

What were the Maya doing by 200 CE?

MAYA CLASSIC AGE

Maya civilization reached its height between 250 and 900 CE, a period called the Classic Age. Large stone pyramids, temples, and palaces were built to honor local kings like **Pacal** (pah-KAHL). The Maya also built canals to bring water to the cities. Hillsides were shaped into flat terraces so crops could be grown on them. The Maya did not have a central government. Cities often fought each other over territory and resources. This warfare was violent and destructive.

Underline two sentences that tell how the Maya was affected by having no central government.

Lesson 2, *continued*

ROLES IN MAYA SOCIETY

Kings held the highest position in Maya social structure. Priests, warriors, and merchants made up the upper class. The Maya believed that their rulers were related to the gods. Most Maya belonged to lower-class farming families. Slaves held the lowest position in Maya society.

Who made up the upper class in Maya society?

RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

The Maya believed that their kings spoke with the gods. Each god represented a different area of life. The Maya believed the gods could either help them or hurt them, and the gods needed blood. Special rituals of blood giving were held at births, weddings, and funerals. The Maya made human sacrifices to the gods as well.

What did the Maya believe their gods needed?

CULTURAL ACHIEVEMENTS

The Maya built **observatories** for their priests to study the stars. They learned that the year had about 365 days. They developed a number system and a calendar to record important events. Maya legends and history were written in a book called the *Popol Vuh* (poh-pohl VOO).

MAYA CIVILIZATION DECLINES

Maya civilization began to collapse in the 900s. Historians are not sure why. Some believe that fewer crops grew because of weakened soil and drought. Others think that the Maya people got tired of working for the kings and rebelled.

What are two reasons why historians think Maya civilization might have collapsed?

Lesson 2, *continued*

CHALLENGE ACTIVITY

Critical Thinking: Evaluate Which of the Maya's achievements do you think has had the greatest influence on history? Write a paragraph to explain your answer.

DIRECTIONS Read each sentence and circle the term in the word pair that best completes each sentence.

1. _____ is a book containing legends and some history of the Maya civilization. (**Pacal/Popol Vuh**)
2. Priests studied the stars in buildings called _____. (**obsidian/observatories**)
3. A Maya king named _____ dedicated a temple to record his achievements as ruler. (**Pacal/Popol Vuh**)
4. The Maya traded _____, which are sharp, glasslike volcanic rocks. (**obsidian/observatories**)