

Culture	Area	Date
OLMEC	Gulf Coast (modern Veracruz & Tabasco, Mexico)	1200-500 BC
MAYA	tropical lowlands of Guatemala, Belize, Chiapas, Yucatan	300 BC – AD 900
TEOTIHUACAN	Central Mexico	0-600 AD
AZTEC	Central Mexico and conquered adjacent regions. Mesoamerica's only true empire	ca. 1400–1512 AD (ends with Spanish conquest)

General Mesoamerican Culture Chart (state level societies)

MAYA CIVILIZATION

see attached chronological table of Maya periods (noting a few significant events)

Agriculture

- a combination of *swidden* (slash-and-burn, then plant seeds) and more intensive practices like artificial terraces on the side of hills. Intensive practices appear to be confined to the Classic period (especially the Late Classic, when population pressure must have been great). Terraces were created by making walls at regular intervals to prevent the erosion of soil down-slope (as we saw in the Inca case). The Classic Maya also created small islands in swampy areas by dredging the muck and putting it into piles—effectively creating an “island” on which they could plant crops. This is called raised field agriculture; it was usually done close to rivers. The main crops—like all Mesoamerican Societies—were corn and beans. This is still the case today. Corn was first domesticated in the central highlands of Mexico (recall your mini-assignment on the Tehuacán Valley? Well, that’s the place where corn and beans were domesticated).

Politics & Religion

- unlike many ancient civilizations elsewhere in the world (e.g., Egypt, Inca), the Maya never created an empire controlled by one ruler. Instead, the Maya realm consisted of many “city states”—smallish states controlling the region surrounding them, but limited in terms of expansion by the presence of neighboring states. State level society was achieved during the late Preclassic period (see chronological chart), and accelerated during the Classic period.
- Maya kings were considered semi-divine, in the sense that they formed a conduit between the earthly and supernatural realms. To some extent—at least from a Maya person’s religious perspective—the prosperity and success of the state was predicated on this. They had many gods, both in human, animal, and celestial (e.g., the moon) form, often in

combination. Maya nobles practiced auto-sacrifice—stabbing their penis with a stingray spine or obsidian blade (sometimes being the king is tough), letting the blood drip onto paper, and then burning the paper as an act of reverence to the Gods.

- Maya religious structure was both polytheistic and animistic, as noted above. They also practiced ancestor worship, with one's ancestors receiving reverent treatment. This was most important for nobles, in establishing their right to office, power, and so on. From the Maya perspective, this meant that specific people *needed* to assume and maintain control in order to ensure continued prosperity.

Architecture & Monuments

- Great temple buildings were the central point of all large Maya cities. They were not a Maya invention (temples can be traced back to earlier cultures about 900 BC). The most important Maya people (kings, queens) were buried in these buildings, some of which are absolutely immense. The nobles (about 5% of the population) lived in range-structures, often close to the major temples. Range structures are long rectilinear buildings set on a platform with many rooms. Sometimes they have two or three stories (palaces). In addition, they almost always appear around square plazas, or formal activity areas. This is also true of lesser structures (simple house platforms), which were occupied by commoners. Commoners and other people (like crafts makers and so on) comprised about 95% of the population. Their labor fed the nobles and created all the monuments and architecture.
- The Maya also built roadways, some dozens of miles long, connecting sites. The function of these labor-intensive undertakings is poorly understood, but may have been pilgrimage routes in addition to efficient paths for the movement of goods and people.
- The Maya were fond of erecting upright stone monuments, which are called stelae (pronounced "steel-a"). Along with circular altars, these were set in front of major temples as well as within plazas. They often show kings in action (such as standing on an enemy or sitting on a throne dictating orders). In general, they record dynastic events, such as the accession of a king to the throne, battle with neighboring states, and other related political statements. Common life is seldom recorded, and one wonders how much of the inscriptions are propaganda. Probably, only a very small number of Maya were able to read the glyphs used to record such events. Stelae (plural of stela, and pronounced "steel-lay") monuments usually have a date inscribed on them using the long-count system (see attachment).
- The Maya had the corbelled arch—a way of creating a vaulted ceiling by gradually narrowing the width of the roof. This allowed stone rooms to be created (without having to use wooded beams), but it necessitated a room size that was very narrow (3-4 yards, at most) and long.

Science & Time

- detailed astronomical observations predicated on a solar calendar. The calendar was used to mark celestial events (eclipses and so on). It was also linked to the long-count system, (see handout) used to mark the passage of time. This system was incredibly accurate.
- The Maya numerical system was based on 20 (vigesimal), unlike ours which is based on 10 (decimal). The handout (attached) explains the notation of Maya numbers and how a

Maya date can be read (you don't need to memorize this, but I thought you might like to see how it is done). Also notable was the concept of zero.

- The Maya also wrote books that were made from bark paper, coated with plaster, and then the "words" (glyphs) painted on. These books were quite fancy, often covered in jaguar skin. The subject matter probably included royal events as well as astronomical information and other things. Unfortunately, few have survived—the Spanish priests burned most of them after the conquest. A few (fragments of them) have been found in royal tombs, including fragments of one by me!

Sports

- practiced a highly ritual ball game, played in an alley or court formed by rectangular buildings on both sides. The game is not fully understood, but it was played with a rubber ball and, like soccer, hands were not used. The ball appears to have been bounced back and forth using one's hips, thighs, and so on (no kicking). There are some ancient texts which suggest that the losers were put to death, but this may not always have been the case.

Demographics

- There were millions of Maya people during the Classic period, perhaps more than 5,000,000 occupying the tropical region known as the Maya lowlands.

Collapse

- between about 850-900 AD Maya civilization collapsed—it ended, never to be revived. The reason for this collapse is still not fully understood, but most likely it was a combination of environmental damage (the area probably looked like Ohio farmland by the end of the Classic period, not the lush forest that we see today), the inability of royals to combat declining standards of life, extremely rampant warfare, and so on. In other words, these things were probably all involved and interrelated. At any rate, with the collapse the region was largely depopulated, with Maya folks departing to the northern areas (modern Yucatan) and west (into Chiapas). Maya civilization (city life, and so on) had collapsed, but Maya people survived and continue to live in this region right up to today—millions of Maya are alive and well.

MAJOR CHRONOLOGICAL PERIODS AND EVENTS IN THE MAYA LOWLANDS

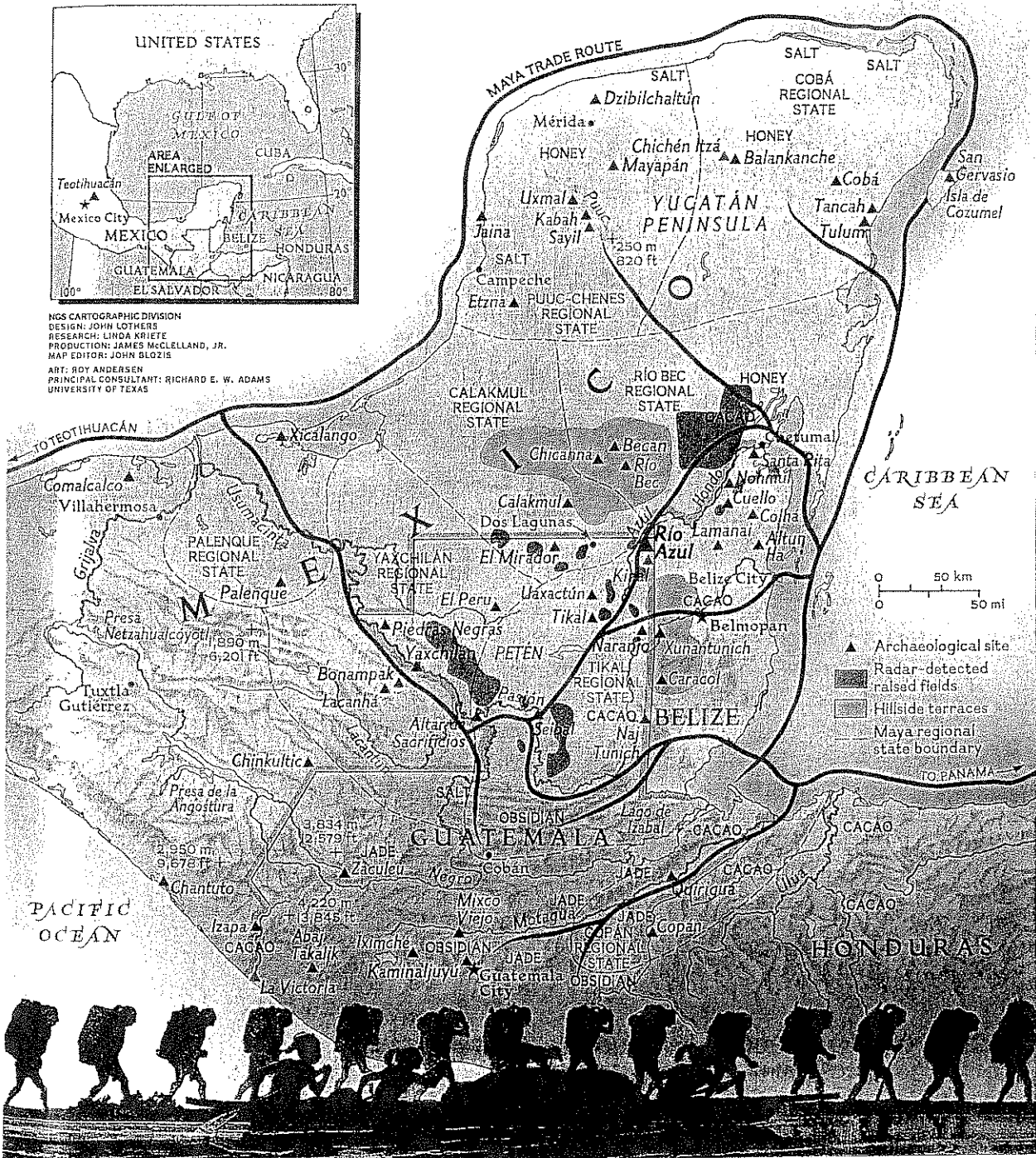
PERIOD NAME	DATES	SOME SIGNIFICANT EVENTS	MAJOR SITES, ETC.
	ca.1520	arrival of Spanish	
POSTCLASSIC		Cultural florescence in Northern Maya Lowlands(Yucatan Peninsula); limited occupation of Southern Maya Lowlands (some small towns and villages)	In North: Chichen Itza, Uxmal, and many others
LATE CLASSIC	900 A.D.	rampant warfare; continued population growth; deforestation; proliferation of stone monuments until ca. 900 A.D.; after 900 region depopulated, states collapse	Cities, towns, villages, and hamlets: Tikal, Uaxactun, Caracol, Seibal, Naranjo, and many, many others
EARLY CLASSIC	600 A.D.	massive population growth; appearance of many city states; leaders buried in pyramids for first time; polychrome (many color) pottery vessels; first datable stela monuments; corbelled arches; palaces; intensive agriculture (terraces, etc.)	Cities, towns, villages, and hamlets: Tikal, Caracol, Uaxactun, Palenque, Dos Pilas, and many, many others
LATE PRECLASSIC	250 A.D. 0	emergence of state political structure; first cities; massive public architecture (temples plazas, etc.); large-scale labor forces; first recognizable defensive structures (walls, ditches); first ball courts	Cities, towns, villages, and hamlets: Tikal, Cerros, El Mirador, Uaxactun, Lamanai, Becan
(Late)	300 B.C.	chiefdoms; first stela monuments showing leaders in ritual acts; modest size pyramids; first celestial observatories or "E Groups"	Towns, villages, and hamlets: Nakbe, Tikal, El Mirador, Cahal Pech
MIDDLE PRECLASSIC	600 B.C.	beginnings of social and political ranking or inequality; ritual use of jade, marine shell, ceramic figurines; contact with distant regions of Mesoamerica; complex symbols	Small villages and hamlets: Tikal, Uaxactun, Cahal Pech, Cuello
(Early)	1000 B.C.	some evidence of forest clearing; small-scale agriculture; stone tools; corn and beans grown by 2,500 B.C. (period extends back to approx. 7,000 B.C.)	Hunter and gather societies; information very scarce
PRECERAMIC			

Realm of the Maya

NEVER a single empire, the Maya raised dozens of great centers in present-day Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. Spreading across some 100,000 square miles, the Maya lowlands

flourished during the Late Classic period, A.D. 600-900, shown here. The cities were supplied by farmers practicing complex agricultural techniques and by extensive trade networks. Goods were transported by canoe and by bearers on packed-dirt paths or sometimes on raised roads. Total population may have

numbered 12 to 16 million. Major cities held sway over neighbors with whom they shared architecture and ceramic styles, according to Dr. Adams. His regional boundaries are based on his estimates of city size and influence. Corridors with no dense settlement fall between his assumed boundaries, like buffer zones.



CONVERTING A MAYA LONG-COUNT DATE INTO A CHRISTIAN (GREGORIAN) CALENDAR DATE

● = 1,  = 5. Combined example:  = 17 (3 bars, 2 dots)

STEP 1

UNIT OF TIME	UNIT OF TIME MULTIPLIED BY # OF DAYS	NUMBER OF DAYS
8 Baktuns	8 X 144,000 (400 yrs)	1,152,000
12 Katuns	12 X 7,200	86,400
14 Tuns	14 X 400	5,600
8 Uinals	8 X 20 (month)	160
15 Kin	15 X 1 (day)	15
TOTAL # OF ELAPSED DAYS = 1,244,175		

Now, ADD the elapsed days from the Maya beginning or "zero" date (3,114 B.C.)—a point in time analogous to our use of A.D. "0"

STEP 2: elapsed days 1,244,175 ÷ 365.25 (1 year) = 3,406 years

STEP 3: 3,114 B.C. (the Maya "Zero Date") + 3,406 years = **292 A.D.**

Note: The number values for each unit of time (Baktun, Katun, Tun, Uinal, and Kin) are "read" from top to bottom on the monument. The Maya also had a symbol for "0" that does not appear on this example. Most often it was a stylized shell...

