

The Maya: What Was Their Most Remarkable Achievement?

History is rich with stories of great human achievement. Consider the Egyptians, who built the pyramids; the Greeks, who invented and practiced democracy; the Chinese, who conceived and constructed the Great Wall. In the Western Hemisphere, no early civilization was more remarkable than the Maya.

Mesoamerica is that part of modern-day Central America that includes southern Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras. This region has been the Mayan home for 3,000 years. Until 500 years ago, the Maya lived in isolation from the rest of the world, practicing **slash-and-burn agriculture** and raising crops such as corn, beans, and squash. They also hunted animals in the surrounding rainforest. As their culture developed, especially during the **classic period** of 250 to 900 CE, the Maya built magnificent cities with stone plazas, royal palaces, ball courts, and temple-topped pyramids. Unfortunately, Mayan **city-states** often warred against each other, and alliances constantly shifted. As a result, the Mayan people were never unified under a single government the way many other ancient societies were.

Despite this conflict, the various Mayan groups shared cultural similarities. They used a common writing system and organized their lives around a complex calendar that tracked religious ceremonies honoring the many Mayan gods. In one of their most important **rituals**, religious and political leaders – including the king – would pierce themselves with stone knives and offer their blood to feed the gods. Like the Aztecs, who flourished centuries later, the Maya practiced human sacrifice and torture as a way to keep the gods satisfied.

Sometime around the year 900 CE, the Maya abandoned many of their cities and moved to the highlands of modern-day Central America.

Scholars still don't know why this happened; it may have been because of overpopulation, overuse of the land, disease, or warfare. Whatever the reason, jungle soon covered the thousands of Mayan buildings and farms left behind. A great society appeared to go silent. When the Spanish arrived 600 years later, they did make some effort to preserve the surviving Mayan languages in dictionaries, but did little else to save the ancient culture.

It is important to say that the people never did disappear. About five million Mayans still live in Mesoamerica, speaking more than two dozen dialects of the Mayan language and

practicing some of the old ways. Though the ancient Maya long remained a nearly-forgotten, mysterious people, in more recent years ignorance and neglect of the culture

have changed to keen interest. Archaeologists have done much to find and uncover ancient temples and tombs, farmlands and town sites. Artists and experts in ancient language have managed to crack the code of Mayan writing. Armed with their new ability to read ancient **glyphs**, historians are bringing the lost Maya to life. For so long a mystery, the ancient Maya are emerging as a real, full-blooded people.

What follows are several documents showing Mayan accomplishment. To measure these accomplishments, and to help make your thinking more precise, pay special attention to four criteria for judging remarkableness:

Scale: how big was the accomplishment?

Genius: how brilliant or cutting-edge was it?

Effort: how hard was it physically or intellectually?

Significance: what was its impact on society?

Then, using these criteria, answer the question posed by this Mini-Q: *The Maya: What was their most remarkable achievement?*

