

Government

All Maya people shared the same religious beliefs, had the same social structure, and used the same written language. However, they lived in different **city-states** (a Maya city and the land it controlled). Each city-state had its own king or *ajaw* (*ah-HAW*). The Maya believed that the *ajaw* was chosen by and descended from the sun god to rule and that he spoke to the gods for his people. *Ajaws* expected the people of the city-state to serve him. Often, sons ruled after their fathers creating dynasties. Nobles, officials, and priests helped the *ajaw* rule the city-state.

Some city-states were more powerful than others. At times different city-states fought and/or traded with each other. An *ajaw* had to prove that he was a good fighter and war leader. City-states did not have a full-time army. Instead nobles did the fighting. Maya fought hand-to-hand. Their weapons were clubs and stone-tipped spears. They also used daggers and carried hand-held shields. Captured noble warriors were killed or sacrificed. Captured enemy kings were forced to play the ball game at religious festivals. The *ajaw* would make sure that the captured king lost. Ordinary soldiers became slaves.

Often small city-states would need the help of a larger city-state to protect it. Its *ajaw* would have to obey the *ajaw* of the bigger city.

Economy

The Mayan economy was primarily based on farming and trade. Most Mayans were farmers. They lived in villages outside of the city centers. Their chief crops were beans, corn, and squash. Villagers had to grow almost everything they needed. They were also expected to grow enough food to feed the people in the cities also. This was part of their service or duty to the *ajaw*.

Maya city-states traded heavily with each other. Different areas within the civilization offered different resources. Traders would travel between the different city-states. This trade led to wealth. It also led to a sharing of resources and an exchanging of ideas.

Because most villagers made most of the things that they needed, they did not trade very much. However, the skilled craft workers who lived in the cities relied on goods from throughout the civilization. They used raw materials such as feathers, shells, and precious stones brought in by traders to create things for the *ajaws*, nobles, and priests. Traders also brought pottery and jewelry to the cities.

Often to promote trade between different city-states, marriages would be arranged. Royal women from one city-state would marry into the royal family of another city-state. This would increase trade and form an alliance between the two city-states.

Writing and Counting System

The Maya used a form of picture writing called *glyphs* or *hieroglyphics*. The simple pictures represented words or sounds. Most Maya royalty, nobles, and priests could read and write *glyphs*.

The Maya used *glyphs* everywhere. They were carved on altars, buildings, and stelaes or large slabs of stone. (Think Hammurabi's Stela.) The *glyphs* were painted around the edges of pottery. They were also painted on long, folding books called codices. All but 3 of the Maya codices were destroyed by Spanish invaders.

It took a long time to translate the Maya's *glyphs*. Even today, not all social scientists agree about what they mean.

The ancient Maya used just a few symbols for numbers. They based their system on 20 and were among the first people in the world to use the number zero. With these symbols, the Maya could add and subtract. They could record dates on a calendar. They also carved important dates onto buildings and stelas.

Religion

The Maya were polytheistic. They worshipped gods and goddesses of nature. They believed that the gods controlled every part of life, from how the crops grew, to a person's health, to which city-state won a war.

They kept the gods happy by praying and performing dances, music, and plays. They also gave gifts to the gods, including food and often blood. The Maya religion taught that without gifts of blood, the gods would stop the sun and the rain. The people knew that they could not survive without these two things. So a king or priest would give some of his blood in a bowl. However, sometimes, an entire life was required to please the gods. The Maya would offer up animals or even humans to gain the gods favor. They would sacrifice captured enemies or the losing side of a religious ball game.

They also believed that the spirits of dead relatives could affect their daily lives. These spirits needed gifts too. Most Mayans had a special place in their homes where they could pray to their dead relatives.

Sports/Ball Courts

In villages and cities the Maya played a game with two teams and a hard rubber ball on a long, thin court. In the villages ball courts were a straight, flat piece of land. In the cities the game became linked to Maya religious beliefs. So the Maya built stone ball courts near temples.

The ball court represented the Maya world and the ball stood for the Moon and the Sun. The game was seen as a battle between darkness and light and that by playing it they were acting out battles between gods in both the sky and the underworld. At important religious festivals, Maya kings played the ball games to defeat death, darkness, and famine

No one knows exactly how the ball game was played. However, we do know that it was played between two teams in a large ball court with sloped sides. Using only their hips, knees, and elbows, each team tried to keep a rubber ball in the air and pass it through stone hoops that were on the sloped sides. Players could not use their hands or feet.

Captured enemies were often forced to play the game and losing teams were often sacrificed to the gods.

Architecture

Every Maya city had a Great Plaza. This is where the most important temples and the royal palace were built. The rest of the city spread out from the plaza. Big cities had several smaller plazas with temples and other public buildings in them.

Temples were the homes of the gods. They were the tallest buildings in a Maya city, and the Maya called them “mountains”. The temples were several stories high and were built in the shape of pyramids. At the top were shrines. These were believed to be the houses of the god. Unlike most Mayan houses, temples were built of stone. Most Maya cities had sources of limestone nearby.

Most Maya temples were more than they seemed on the outside. There are layers under the temple that cannot be seen. These hide the king’s tomb. Kings were buried under tombs with the things they would need after death, such as clothes and food.

Like temples, the homes of kings, nobles, and priests were made from stone. The walls were usually painted in bright colors. Most Maya lived in villages in one-room rectangular huts. The huts had one door and no windows. The Maya used branches and clay to make the walls. The roof was thatched (made from grass and other plants) and steep.