Lesson 3

MAIN IDEAS

1 Geography Mayan civilization rose in what is now Mexico and Central America.

2 Culture Mayan society was divided into classes. Each class had its own way of life.

3 Culture From about A.D. 250 to 900, known as the Classical period of Mayan civilization, the Maya built great cities, produced beautiful art, and made important advances in learning.

TAKING NOTES

Reading Skill: Framing Historical Questions

Framing questions helps focus your reading. In a chart, write several questions on the Mayan civilization, such as the one shown here, that you would like answered. As you read Lesson 3, record in the chart any answers that you find.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Answers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where was the Mayan civilization located?</td>
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Mayan Burial Mask This mask, made of jade and seashells, covered the face of the dead King Pacal of Palenque.

CALIFORNIA STANDARDS

7.7.2 Study the roles of people in each society, including class structures, family life, warfare, religious beliefs and practices, and slavery.

7.7.3 Explain how and where each empire arose and how the Aztec and Incan empires were defeated by the Spanish.

7.7.4 Describe the artistic and oral traditions and architecture in the three civilizations.

7.7.5 Describe the Meso-American achievements in astronomy and mathematics, including the development of the calendar and the Meso-American knowledge of seasonal changes to the civilizations’ agricultural systems.
The Mayan Civilization

Build on What You Know  The Olmec served as the mother culture for civilizations that developed later in Meso-America. One of these, the Maya, was strongly influenced by the Olmec.

Birth of a Civilization

ESSENTIAL QUESTION  Where did Mayan civilization arise?

The Maya consist of groups of Meso-American peoples who speak various forms of the Mayan language. Their culture can be traced as far back as 2000 B.C.

Lands of the Maya  Around 1500 B.C., the Maya began to establish villages in the highlands and lowlands of Meso-America. (See the map on the following page.) Most of their highland villages were located in what is now southern Guatemala. This mountainous region contained many minerals. In general, this area had a dry, cool climate.

The lowland villages of the Maya were located in what is now northern Guatemala, Belize, and the Yucatán Peninsula in southern Mexico. The Yucatán lowlands tended to be hot and dry. Hot, humid rain forests covered the lowlands farther to the south. This area had fertile soil that was good for farming.

Beginnings of the Maya  The development of Mayan society was similar to the development of Olmec society. As farming thrived in the Mayan homelands, the Maya were able to grow more food. With more food, the Maya became healthier and their population grew. In time, some Mayan farming villages grew into great cities.

REVIEW  Where did the Maya establish villages?
Mayan Life

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** Into what social classes was Mayan society divided?

Because the Maya produced a food surplus, some people could focus on tasks other than farming. Some became craftspeople. Others became priests or teachers. This division of labor resulted in the development of a class system.

**Class Structures** Mayan society consisted of four broad social classes. These were the ruling class, the nobility, peasants, and slaves.

The ruling class consisted of kings and their families. Kings governed each of the Mayan cities. Kings also performed the religious duties of priests. The nobility probably included scholars, architects, and merchants. They were educated and wealthy. Many historians believe that Mayan warriors were mostly nobles. Peasants included farmers and laborers. They made up the vast majority of the population. Slaves were mostly criminals and people captured in war. Orphaned children sometimes became slaves.

**Peasant Farmers** Most Mayan peasants worked as farmers. Farm families lived in small villages near the big cities. Their homes were simple buildings made of mud or wooden poles with roofs of palm leaves or grass. Mayan farmers grew maize, beans, squash, chili peppers, avocados, pineapples, and cacao. Maize was the most important crop. In fact, the Maya believed that they had been created out of maize.

Mayan farmers used a variety of techniques to grow their crops. In the rain forests, they used slash-and-burn agriculture.
highlands, they increased the land available for farming by building terraces. (See the Geography feature on page 226, which shows terrace farming in China.) In drier areas, they dug irrigation canals that carried water from streams and rivers to their fields. Some Mayan farmers still use these techniques today.

**The Nobility** Mayan noble families led very different lives from the peasants. Nobles lived in houses built of stone with plastered walls. Often the walls were decorated with *murals*—paintings applied directly to walls. Nobles wore fancy clothes, such as jaguar skins and headdresses decorated with colorful feathers. They also wore jewelry crafted out of jade and shells.

In addition, nobles ate much better than peasants. In fact, some foods were reserved for the nobility. For example, only nobles were allowed to drink chocolate.

**Religious Beliefs** The Maya worshiped more than 160 gods and goddesses. The main god was called ItzamNá. The Maya believed that this god created the world. They also worshiped a sun god, a moon goddess, and the gods of death, war, rain, and maize. The Maya often represented these gods as animals.

To get help from the gods, the Maya fasted, prayed, and offered sacrifices. Most of these sacrifices were animals, such as turkeys or deer. Occasionally, the Maya made human sacrifices. In addition, the Maya expected their rulers to communicate with the gods on their behalf. Unlike the ancient Egyptians, who looked forward to life after death, the Maya viewed the afterlife as an unhappy existence.
Religious Ceremonies  The Maya had many religious festivals and ceremonies. Ruler-priests performed many of these ceremonies on platforms on top of pyramids. However, one important ceremony, the ball game that you read about on pages 364–365, was performed in a ball court. While the ball game was often just a sporting competition, sometimes it had religious meaning. On such occasions, it was played to honor great Mayan heroes. It was also played to celebrate important events from Mayan history.

REVIEW  What were the four classes that made up Mayan society?

Glory and Decline

ESSENTIAL QUESTION  What cultural developments did the Maya achieve during the Classical period of their civilization?

The Maya reached their peak roughly during the years between A.D. 250 and 900. During this time, which was known as the Classical period, the Maya built an advanced civilization that included large cities.

Great Cities  The Maya built more than 40 cities, including Copán, Tikal, Palenque (pah•LEHN•keh), Bonampak, and Chichén Itzá. Mayan cities were notable for their magnificent architecture. Each one contained palaces, plazas, ball courts, and pyramids topped by temples. Many cities also had large stone monuments called steles (STEE•leez). On these monuments, the Maya carved glyphs that represented important dates and great events.

History Makers

Pacal II of Palenque (603–683)

Pacal II was one of the greatest Mayan kings. He took the throne of the city of Palenque in 615 at the age of 12, and ruled for nearly 70 years. During his reign, Palenque reached the height of its power.

Interestingly, Pacal almost did not become king. Pacal’s mother, Lady Zac-Kuk, ruled Palenque as queen. However, according to Mayan tradition, only the son of a king could become king. But Pacal declared that his mother was the living image of the First Mother, a goddess who created the Maya. In other words, Pacal claimed that he was the son of a goddess. With this declaration, Pacal secured his right to the throne.
Cities and Warfare  A king governed each Mayan city and its surrounding area. (The History Makers feature on the previous page is about Pacal II, one of the greatest Mayan kings.) Sometimes kings declared war on neighboring cities. They did this to gain political or economic advantage. For example, if a king won a war, he would gain control of important trade routes. A victory might also win him tribute from other cities.

Advances in Learning  The Maya developed a complex writing system that used glyphs. The Maya carved glyphs on buildings and wrote them on bark paper. This paper was screen-folded to form a type of book called a codex. Few of these books still exist. The most famous is the Popol Vuh (poh•POHL•VOO). It tells the Mayan story of the creation. (See page R43 in the Primary Source Handbook.)

The Maya developed a mathematical system based on the number 20. The Maya did not represent numbers in the same way as we do today. They used a dot to represent 1 and a bar to represent 5. The Maya combined these symbols to show other numbers. Also, the Maya were one of the first people to use the zero.

By using their math system, the Maya made great advances in astronomy. For example, they accurately predicted eclipses of the sun and charted the orbit of the planet Venus. The Maya also used mathematics to produce a very accurate calendar system. This system helped the Maya identify the best times to plant seeds and harvest crops. It also helped Mayan kings make important political decisions, such as when to go to war. Finally, the calendar system enabled the Maya to keep very precise records of events.
A Mysterious Downfall  Beginning in the 800s, the Maya began to abandon their cities in the southern lowlands. At the same time, their population declined sharply. The reasons for these events remain a mystery. Overfarming may have damaged the environment. This may have led to food shortages and famine. Other possible reasons include disease, warfare among the cities, and peasant revolts.

Whatever the cause, Mayan civilization in the southern lowlands began to decline. Some Maya went to the northern lowlands and highland areas, where they built new cities. By the 1400s, however, these cities had been abandoned too.

REVIEW What advances did the Maya achieve in record keeping?

Lesson Summary
- The Maya settled in Meso-America, where they began to develop their civilization.
- Mayan society had four classes—rulers, nobility, peasants, and slaves.
- The Maya built great cities, crafted beautiful art, and made advances in math, science, and record keeping.

Why It Matters Now . . .
More than 800,000 Maya live in Meso-America today.

Terms & Names
1. Explain the importance of Maya stele Pacal II codex

Using Your Notes
Framing Historical Questions Use your completed chart to answer the following question:
2. What was unique about Mayan civilization? (7.7.2)

Questions Answers
Where was the Mayan civilization located? 

Main Ideas
3. How and where did Mayan society develop? (7.7.3)
4. What did the Maya do to get help from the gods? (7.7.2)
5. How was Mayan mathematics different from math today? (7.7.5)

Critical Thinking
6. Making Inferences Why might Mayan kings use warfare to gain prestige? (7.7.2)
7. Understanding Cause and Effect How do you think overfarming could have led to the downfall of the Maya? Explain your answer. (HI 2)

Activity
Writing a Newspaper Article Imagine that you are a reporter visiting a Mayan city. Write a short article that describes the city’s architecture. (7.7.4)