

# The Ancient Maya Of Belize

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*(Following are excerpts taken from the above publication and do not constitute the book in its entirety. Persons who reserve the Chabil Mar "Maya – Be in Belize! Vacation package receive the book with our compliments.)*

## **Were the Maya the first people to move into Belize?**

No. The first people who lived in Belize are known as Paleo-Indians (Paleo means ancient or old). Paleo-Indians moved into Central America just before the end of the Pleistocene ice age, sometime between 10,000 and 7,000 B.C. Some of their tools, and fluted projectile point that they used for hunting, have been discovered around Ladyville, near the Philip Goldson International airport, and around Big Falls in the Toledo District.

## **So when did the Maya first come to Belize?**

Present evidence suggests that people of Maya culture first settled in Belize between 2000 and 1200 B.C. They likely migrated into the area from the highlands of Guatemala or from southern Chiapas in Mexico. They built their earliest communities along the valleys of the Belize, Hondo and New Rivers, and farmed the rich alluvial soil of the region. Evidence of these first Maya villages has been discovered at Cahal Pech and Blackman Eddy in the Cayo District, the Cuello and Colha in Orange Walk, and at Santa Rita in Corozal.

## **What Mayan language was spoken in Belize before the arrival of the Spanish?**

Epigraphers and historical linguists believe that two major languages were spoken in Belize during the Classic period (A.D. 300-900) of Maya civilization. Yucatec was spoken in the northern two thirds of the country, and Cholan was the common language of the people who lived in the south. Cholan speakers are now only found in Guatemala and in the state of Chiapas in Mexico.

## **What Mayan languages are spoken in Belize today?**

Today Yucatec is still spoken by the Maya who live in the villages of San Antonio and Succotz in the Cayo District, and by people in the Corozal and Orange Walk Districts. Mopan, which is spoken in San Antonio Village in the Toledo District, is a dialect of Yucatec. Other Maya communities in the Toledo District are Kekchi speakers. Kekchi originated in the Alta Verapaz region of Guatemala.

## **When was Maya civilization fully established?**

In the past scholars believe that Maya civilization was not fully established until about A.D. 300, at the start of the Early Classic Period. Recent research, however, has provided conclusive evidence that ancient Maya civilization was actually in full bloom by at least 100 B.C. in the late Pre-classic period. By this early date the Maya were already carving stelae on altars, conducting long distance trade, utilizing mathematical and calendrical systems, and constructing monumental architecture.

## **Who were the actual rulers and what was their primary role in May society?**

Rulers were generally male individuals of elite status. They predominantly inherited their lofty position from their father. Despite this norm there are known rulers who succeeded to power because of their elite matrilineage (mother's elite status). Referred to as "Ahuob" (Lords), rulers were deified and expected to serve as intermediaries between their people and the gods. They often offered their blood in sacrifice to petition gods for bountiful harvests, rain, and success in conflicts. They waged war with neighbours and formed political alliances with other city states.

## **Did women enjoy any high status roles in Maya society?**

Their depiction on carved monuments, polychrome pottery, and mural paintings, plus their representation on figurines, suggest that elite women played important roles in courtly life. Other images portray them as wives and mothers of rulers, and there is even the rare representation of female ballplayers. . . In Maya religion, female gods, like Ixchel the moon goddess, were also believed to influence activities related to daily life, fertility, and healing.

What kind of religion did the Maya practice?

Maya religion was polytheistic and it was animistic. This means that they believed in many gods, in the power of ancestral spirits, and that both inanimate objects and living beings had an inner force or spirit. They believed in cyclical creations and that the universe had been created four times. The present cycle will end on 23 December in the year 2012 A.D. The Maya also believed that humans were created three times. . .

## **How did the Maya perceive their universe?**

They perceived their world as having three levels: the heavens, earth and underworld. The heavens were subdivided into thirteen levels and the underworld into nine levels. At the center of the universe was the sacred Ceiba tree whose limbs touched the heavens and roots descended into the underworld. Heaven was the adobe of sacred gods and deified ancestors. Earth was the home of humans, the forests, and all other creatures. The underworld was a place of death and diseases, and home of the Bolontiku (nine evil gods).

## **Who were the priests in Maya culture?**

Maya priests were members of the elite class, often the second or third sons of rulers, or male children of other priests. They were generally referred to as Ah Kin (He of the Sun) and were responsible for the celebration of important rituals, and for overseeing calendrical and astronomical events. During other key ceremonies they assisted rulers in the celebration of holy rites and bloodletting ceremonies. . .

## **Did the Maya actually sacrifice people?**

Human sacrifice was an important aspect of ancient Maya ritual. People were sacrificed and placed as offerings during the commemoration of monumental buildings. They were sometimes sacrificed during the funeral rites of rulers, during ceremonies that celebrated victory in war, and to appease the gods. They were also sacrificed in caves when the community petitioned their gods for rain, bountiful harvests, and continued sustenance.

## **Where did they bury their dead?**

The Maya did not use cemeteries like we do. Instead they buried their dead beneath the floor of their homes or in family shrines that were constructed on the eastern side of their homesteads. The rulers and members of elite families were interred in tombs within their temples and places. The deceased were often buried with offerings and grave goods that could be used in the afterlife.

## **Did the Maya live in caves?**

Despite the fact that we find artifacts in just about every cave in Belize, the Maya did not live in these dark and humid places. Caves were considered sacred and the Maya only visited them periodically to conduct important ceremonies and rituals. In Highland Guatemala the underworld was known as Xibalba. The Yucatec speaking Maya of Belize and Mexico called it Metnal.

## **What were the greatest scientific achievements of the ancient Maya?**

Throughout the world the Maya are particularly well-known for their development and use of an accurate solar calendar, their vigesimal system of mathematics, hieroglyphic system of writing, their art and monumental architecture.

## **When did the Maya first develop their solar calendar?**

The Maya, and other Mesoamerican cultures, began using their 365 day solar calendar by at least 100B.C. Our calendar, which was developed by Pope Gregory XIII, did not come into use until A.D. 1582, nearly a hundred years after the arrival of Christopher Columbus, and more than 1650 years after the Maya began employing their relatively accurate 365 day calendar.

## **Was their solar calendar similar to ours?**

Yes and no. Like ours, their solar calendar had 365 days, but instead of having 12 months of 28, 29, 30, or 31 days, their calendar used 18 months of 20 days followed by a short “month” of 5 days.

Our calendar records time from a starting point that begins with the birth of Christ. Did the Maya calendar have a starting date and, if so, what was its significance?

The starting point from which the Maya recorded the passage of time was 3114 B.C. They chose this date because it marked the date of the last creation of their universe. Like other cultures, they believed that the world has gone through several great cycles. The present great cycle is expected to end on the 23 December in the year 2012 A.D.

## **What kind of mathematical system did the May use?**

Maya mathematics utilized a vigesimal system that was based on 20 and multiples of 20. It was one of the earliest systems to incorporate the concept of zero. . .

## **What materials did the May use to write on?**

Today most examples of Maya writing are found on carved stone monuments such as stelae and altars. Other mediums included stuccoed decorations, painted murals, wooden lintels, ceramics, jade and bone artifacts, and books.

## **What are the most common themes in Maya art?**

One of the primary purposes of Maya art was to record political events such as the accession, life, exploits and death of rulers. Two other important purposes were the representation of mythological and cosmological concepts (e.g. the water lily jaguar, the myth of the hero twins, or the re-birth of the corn god). Much of their art was also commissioned by the ruling elite and often used to exalt their office and status.

## **What kind of buildings or architecture did the Maya construct?**

Maya architecture is represented by monumental and non-monumental buildings. Monumental structures include temple pyramids, palaces, ballcourts, astronomical buildings, causeways, reservoirs and dams. Non-monumental architecture include homesteads, chultunob (underground storage chambers), and agricultural terraces.

## **Why are the stairs on their temple pyramids so high?**

People often remark that the steps that lead to the top of Maya temples are incredibly high, particularly when one considers that the Maya were relatively short people. In truth, their steps are high but one must understand that their temples were not made for anyone and everyone to climb. These places were sacred; they were used for important rituals and were only accessed by elite rulers, priests and their assistants. The height of the stairs also influenced the way these people climbed these buildings. In other words, people would have to climb them with much dignity and obeisance, possibly on hands and feet, as an expression of respect to the gods they were about to worship.

## **About how many Maya lived in Belize before the arrival of the Spanish?**

Today there are more prehistoric Maya structures in Belize than modern houses. By counting all their buildings and house platforms we estimate that during the Late Classic period (A.D. 600-900) the population of Belize could have been approximately one million people. That is four times the present population of the country.

## **What did the Maya use for money?**

The Maya never really had a monetary system like we do. They relied on a system of barter to acquire and exchange goods. Sometime the value of goods was based on a certain number of cacao seeds or possibly jade beads. . .

## **Did the Maya have schools or formal methods of education?**

The educational system employed by the Maya included both formal and informal methods of learning. Among the common people boys were taught the skills of farming, hunting and tool production by the older male members of the family. Girls received training in domestic responsibilities (cooking, weaving, pottery making) from adult females. Elite male children were taught hieroglyphic writing, calendrics, mathematics, and the art of warfare. At sites like Buena Vista del Cayo, archaeologists suggest that there may have been a palace school that taught students the art of ceramic painting and production.

## **What was the average lifespan of an individual?**

Infant mortality was very high among the Maya. Of those who lived past early childhood, the average age at death was between 35 and 50 years. . .

## **What was the average height of an average Maya individual?**

The average height of a Maya individual was around 5 feet 4 inches. . .

## **What methods of farming were used by the Maya?**

The Maya were, and continue to be, excellent farmers. They were intimately aware of every micro-environment around their community and they applied a variety of farming techniques to suit the quality and type of soils available to them. Along the fertile river valleys they employed intensive systems of farming with very short fallow periods. On less fertile lands they used the milpa or slash and burn system which required long periods of fallow. On land that was seasonally flooded they built a network of canals (also known as raised fields) that helped to drain the soils of excess water while at the same time encouraging aquatic resources. In hilly terrain, such as the Maya Mountains, they constructed miles and miles of agricultural terraces that addressed problems with erosion and increased the area of arable land.

## **What caused the decline of ancient Maya civilization?**

Archeologists believe that the decline of Maya civilization was caused by either external or internal factors. Theories that emphasize external factors suggest the civilization collapsed because foreign invaders moved in from Mexico and, in the end, then destroyed the political and socio-economic systems employed by the Maya. . . The Maya, it can be said, were victims of their own success. Droughts, decreasing productivity of food, conflict, and competition for resources made it difficult to sustain the requirements of such a large population; consequently the system failed and people were forced to emigrate into neighboring regions.

## **What kind of relationship existed between the Maya of Belize and the Spanish?**

The Spanish who came to Belize sought to dominate and colonize the land and people they encountered. Realizing that there were no precious metals (i.e. gold) in the area and given the militant response to their presence by the Maya, the conquistador's interest in Belize quickly waned. . .

## **Did the British encounter any Maya communities when they settled in Belize?**

By the time the British arrived in Belize there were few Maya living in the country. Many had died from the diseases introduced by the Spanish, and many others had escaped to more remote areas. Nevertheless, there are rare British reports of native settlements along several of our river valleys (like the Sibun).

## **Are there presently any place names in Belize that derive from ancient Maya names?**

There are a number of places in Belize that derive from earlier Maya names. The name of the country, for example, is believed to be a misnomer of Behelk'in which means eastern road. The Sibun River and village of Cowpen were called Xibum and Campin respectively by the Maya. The sites of Tip and Lamanai, and the Mopan River, are also linguistically close to their original Maya names. Most other names of Maya sites were coined by archaeologists, or by the people who discovered them.

## **Are the Maya who live in Belize today related to the ancient Maya who lived here before?**

Linguistic and archeological data suggest that during the Classic and early post-conquest period Yucatec and Chol Maya occupied the northern and southern parts of the country. . .

Excerpts from:

### **101 Questions and Answers About The Ancient Maya of Belize**

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