

America: A.D. 101 to 200
Jack E. Maxfield

MEXICO, CENTRAL AMERICA, AND THE CARIBBEAN

The Teotihuacan people of Mexico increased their city size to an eight square mile area, in the center of which rose the truncated pyramid of the sun - 210 feet high and 750 feet square. It was as large at the base as the great pyramid of Cheops in Egypt. At the height of its prosperity, which was sometime in these early Christian centuries, Teotihuacán had a population of 120,000 with an added network of villages surrounding the main city. Over 5,000 buildings have been examined in this area, including 400 work-shops for making obsidian tools and weapons and some 300 potteries. Irrigation channels were dug for both city and farm water. This center was 30 miles northeast of present day Mexico City.

At Izapa on the Mexico-Guatemala border, there was a distinctive art style resembling the earlier Olmec Culture and it may represent a connecting link between that and the later classic Maya Culture which developed to the east. In approximately this same timeframe, El Tajin, located in the Veracruz area a few miles inland from Santa Louisa, emerged as a major Huastec administrative and religious center. The Huastecs were "cousins" of the Maya and El Tajin, as their major city, soon counted a population in the thousands, with hundreds of buildings, temples, palaces, ball-courts and countless individual dwellings.

On the classical dating scale the Mayan civilization was nearing its peak with many great scale cities in the forests, particularly in Peten and the region of the ceremonial center of Tikal. For the most part they were a peace-loving people who farmed, wove cotton and made paper from the fibers of the fig-tree. They developed a system of writing which was partly phonetic and believed now to have been inherited in great part from the Olmecs. On the new dating systems this peak period of the Mayas may have been about 250 years later. (Please see [America: 300 to 201 B.C.](#))

It is interesting that the prominent British historian, Hugh Thomas, denies that the Maya had significant writing, apparently basing his comments on a single given reference in a 1978 *Scientific American* article. But his reference, in the "Science and the Citizen" department of the May, 1978 *Scientific American* gives me an entirely different concept. Although admitting that much Maya writing had been destroyed by the invading Spanish conquistadors in the mid-16th century, the article lists several sources of remaining Mayan hieroglyphics. There are manuscripts painted on deerskin which are apparently in museums scattered across the world, as they are known as the Dresden, Madrid and Paris codexes; then there are 64 hieroglyphs that were written down in 1566 for the Bishop of Merida by a surviving Maya scribe; and finally there is a long inscription found inside three structures at Palenque (dated 7th to 9th centuries C.E.), consisting of some 600 glyphs, the translation of which is still proceeding under anthropologists and

Source URL: <http://cnx.org/content/m17784/latest/>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/hist101/>

Attributed to: Jack E. Maxfield and Connexions



Saylor.org
Page 1 of 7

epigraphers from Yale University. The part that has been translated describes twelve successive rulers of the past and details of a current 13th ruler with birth, pedigree, accession, military achievements, ritual acts, etc. of all. More inscriptions turn up every year, on pottery, monument stones, buildings, etc. The written language involved at least 600 individual glyphs which could stand alone or be used in combinations of two or more.

This was a major developmental period in Costa Rican history with a dramatic increase in sites and population along with a trend toward social stratification. Many new artifacts appeared including elaborately sculpted metates of volcanic stone, ceremonial stone mace-heads, carved jade, figurines, ocarinas, whistles, stamps and rattles. Panama developed similarly and there were undoubtedly long distance Mesoamerican trade networks.

We have mentioned previously ([3rd century B.C.](#)) that recent excavations near Coba on the Yucatan peninsula have revealed much of the Late Pre-Classic Maya period. The peak of this civilization appears to have been reached in this 3rd century C.E. and the findings have included the Nohosmul pyramid, rising 157 feet out of the jungle, 5.4 square miles of temple buildings, streets and plazas, 187 miles of roads and streets, some 80 feet wide with traffic circles and underpasses. This development apparently **followed** the Guatemala Maya Society, although it is known that by A.D. 250 there was a true urban Mayan zone persisting at Kaminaljuyu at the site of present day Guatemala City. This was the beginning of the greatest era of Maya civilization, with one of the earliest large, ceremonial centers at Tikal, dating to A.D. 292, in what is called the early Classic period. There was a strong central Mexican (Teotihuacán) presence, as that city was continuing development with obsidian mining as a major enterprise.

The Mayas, even for generations after their peak, spoke of two distinct culture heroes, Itzamna and Kukulcan, both bearded, although arriving at different times and from opposite directions, leading the Mayas to Yucatan. Their legends said that the largest and most ancient immigration was from the east through the ocean and led by Itzamna, guide, instructor and civilizer. Kukulcan, a later arrival, was different - arriving with 20 men wearing flowing robes and sandals, with long beards and bare heads, ordering the people to confess and fast. He allegedly founded Mayapan and caused much building at Chichen Itza, and taught "peace". His humanitarian teachings coincide completely with those of Quetzalcoatl, of the later Aztecs. "Kukul" is the Maya word for quetzal bird and "can" is a serpent .

A colored painting from an interior chamber of a pyramid at Chichen Itza, copied by Morris, Charlott and Morris in 1931 (and now destroyed by humidity and tourists) showed a seashore battle involving two racial types, one with white skin and long, flowing yellow hair arriving in boats, and the other type dark-skinned and wearing feathered headdresses and loin cloths. A reed vessel on the pyramid painting recalls

the reed boats used at Luxus in Morocco and the old Egyptian paintings of reed boats of the Nile. Where did these blond men come from? We do know from written accounts of the discovery of the Canary Islands by Europeans a few generations before Columbus, that those islands were inhabited by a mixed population called "guanches" - some small, swarthy and negroid, others tall, white-skinned, blond and bearded, all just like the Maya pyramid at Yucatan. The Berbers of North Africa were similarly mixed and remain so today. Blond and red-haired people are known to have been in the Caucasian plains east of Asia Minor and nowhere on the continent is red hair more common than in Lebanon. So, do we take our pick? As further confirmation of the presence of bearded men in this Central American area, we have Stephens account of his exploration of Copan, Honduras, in the 1830s. He describes finding multiple idols with the males all identified by beards and some with mustaches. The beards were like those on Egyptian statues but the latter did not have mustaches. One of the flat-topped altars described had ornaments suggesting the trunks of elephants! All of the monuments at Copan had sculptures and hieroglyphics.

At this time, the beginning of the Classic Period in Middle America, Teotihuacán had become the largest of the ancient Mexican empires, extending from the Valley of Mexico to Guatemala. In addition a new empire of the Mayas appeared in Yucatan, with paved roads extending throughout the realm. Although the city was ancient, there were now probably 1,000 people living around Cuella, in northern Belize. A twelve foot high platform, spread over more than an acre, has been dated to this 4th century in that place. Increasingly taller pyramids elevated temples as high as 30 feet above the ground. Norman Hammond who has recently excavated many archaeological layers at Cuello, says that he has demonstrated an independent Maya cultural tradition there at least 4,000 years old, and he believes that this area was the mainspring of Maya civilization - not highland Mexico or highland Central America, as some have claimed. The entire Mayan Culture was marked by a distinctive art style, the use of the corbelled vault and advanced mathematical concepts, including the use of zero, a complex calendar and the New World's most advanced writing system. (See also [America: 300 to 201 B.C.](#), [America: 0 to A.D. 100](#) and [America: A.D. 101 to 200](#)). Mayan astronomers calculated the exact length of the solar year, the lunar month, the revolution of planet Venus and were able to predict eclipses. For the latter they used monuments similar in function to Stonehenge in England. Their sister civilization in Peten also continued on a high level and the skilled Huastec builders of El Tajun at Veracruz diverted fresh-water canals to fertile terraces between tidal rivers and brackish estuaries. This civilization flourished for 800 to 900 years.

This may have been the zenith of the Teotihuacan civilization which was the spiritual metropolis of Mexico. Despite a century of modern research no one still is able to say for certain who built this great city, what language they spoke or why they suddenly seemed to vanish. It overlooked a fertile valley with plenty of water and great supplies of obsidian, the raw material for utensils and weapons of great sharpness. Nine-tenths of the city is still buried today.

Source URL: <http://cnx.org/content/m17784/latest/>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/hist101/>

Attributed to: Jack E. Maxfield and Connexions



Saylor.org
Page 3 of 7

There was also continued growth of the Maya centers of Yucatan with extensive trading including the importation of salt, obsidian and other minerals such as hematite, pyrite and jade. Craftsmen, accountants, commercial diplomats and other experts were needed to run this network. According to Principal Epochs of the Ancient History of Yucatan, written in the Maya language from memory by an elderly Indian and translated by the 19th century Don Pio Perez the Mayas thought that they were descendants of the Toltecs of Mexico who had arrived in Yucatan between 144 and 217 of our era, but Bacalar and Chichen Itze were apparently not established until between 360 and 432. A few people continued to live in dispersed settlements around the old center of Cerros until about 450, but this would never again recover its place in the great trade network.

This century marked the end of the Period IV in Costa Rican history and was marked by the prolific jade carvings. The best quality jadeite may have been brought to Costa Rica from the north, indicating more and more contact with other Mesoamerican cultures.

Perhaps ceremonial metates, maceheads and jades were used there by an elite group who held these items as badges of office. Most of the jades take the form of the axe-god in which a forest clearing tool makes up the lower half of a pendant.

Teotihuacán in the Valley of Mexico was at the height of its power and was larger than imperial Rome, some estimating the population at 125,000 with an area of 20 square kilometers. It was a religious and cultural capital and a major economic and political center for Middle America. Its power extended widely with intermingling of tribes and cultures, so that there was a strong Mexican presence even at Kaminaljuyu (now Guatemala City). Even the lowland Maya region, as at Tikal, had Teotihuacan artistic traditions, although Tikal was only one-fifth as large as the Mexican city.

The Maya had a number of languages, all closely related but not mutually intelligible. There were two principal divisions - the lowlands groups, including Yucatec, Chol and Chorti - and the highlands (Guatemalan) which included Mam and Quiche. The educated Maya were profoundly intellectual and we have noted their mathematics ([0 to 100 A.D.](#)) and astronomy ([A.D. 301 to 400](#)) previously. A great renaissance of Mayan Culture now took place in the cities of Yucatan, gradually supplanting the importance of Peten, in the south. (Ref. [177](#), [146,215](#), [163](#)) According to traditions, picture writings and Mexican manuscripts written after the conquest, the Toltecs were banished from their native country northwest of Mexico in 596 and proceeded southward.

This century marks the beginning of Period V of Costa Rican prehistory, with each of three archaeological zones developing independently. In Guanacaste-Nicoya there was the beginning of the famous Nicoya polychrome pottery tradition which resembled Maya ceramics of the Late Classic period of Honduras and El Salvador. The progress in Panama seemed to come more or less to a halt and this country never developed any truly state-centered societies as seen farther north in Central America.

By A.D. 600 Teotihuacán in Mexico had a population of perhaps 150,000 to 200,000 and covered about 8 square miles. The city was laid out in a precise grid pattern with large city buildings and apartments for families, offering a maximum of privacy in a crowded city. There still is considerable confusion as to the people who lived in this community.

As mentioned in a previous chapter, old Indian legend called these people "Toltecs" and this may be accurate, even though current usage reserves this term for the later rejuvenated civilization centered at Tula in the 9th and 10th centuries. By at least 650, Teotihuacán was beginning to show signs of impending collapse and the reason for this is another thing that has not been clarified.

The lowland Maya made a strong comeback in this century, with several centers flourishing. At least 45,000 people lived at or around Tikal and its sprawling pyramids, temples and house mounds covered some 38 square miles in the dense rain forest of northern Peten.

The most elaborate structure was the so-called northern Acropolis, which covered 2112 acres with 100 buildings and at one time 16 temples. At the same time the Yucatan Mayas were also active. The Period V Culture continued in Costa Rica, as noted in the last chapter.

Legend says that the Toltecs built their capital at Tula in A.D. 720. About 750 much of central Teotihuacan was looted and burned. Perhaps developing drought and arid conditions, as well as military pressure from the north, contributed to the down fall of this civilization, which then shrunk to a series of villages over an area of one square kilometer. Its fall had repercussions throughout middle America.

Although it is difficult to keep Fell's chronology sorted out, he seems to imply that it was in this century that Americans from the southwest, perhaps with Libyan influence, explored the Pacific and mapped Hawaii.

The lowland Maya Culture continued strong and the National Geographic Society dates extensive Mayan projects in Tikal, Guatemala, to this century. These included a summit temple 212 feet high. At the height of its power Tikal had 40,000 inhabitants and its nuclear area alone had more than 3,000 separate structures and some 200 stone monuments, not to mention reservoirs, a central acropolis and a square containing a market area, sweat bath and a ball-game court. A great Maya ceremonial center was at Palenque, Mexico, and one of the most beautiful city sites of the Classic Period was at Copan, Honduras. Some buildings, as at Uxmal, Mexico, had cement and rubble cores faced with a veneer of thin, finely carved limestone slabs and elaborately decorated moldings. Three rooms of painted narrative scenes of Maya life were completed at Bonampak, near the Quatemalan border. Henri Stierlin writes that the Mayan Yucatan

civilization was in full bloom in this century and on through the 10th, creating new styles of architecture. Among the Maya, medicine was carried on by two separate groups: Hemenes, priests organized into a medical society; and the lesser, non-priestly hechiceros, who took care of treating wounds, opening abscesses, reducing fractures, controlling bleeding, etc.

In Costa Rica the Nicoya polychrome pottery tradition expanded and diversified, producing the first white-slipped vessels with brilliant red, orange and black painting. These appear to have been made almost exclusively in the northern part of Greater Nicoya, while buff to orange-slipped ceramics were made in centers of Guanacaste.

Various small, non-urban centers of civilization continued in Mexico, with the Toltec period probably just beginning. The Zapotecs had deserted Monte Albans and the Classic Mayan central lowland sites were pretty well abandoned in this century. The northern part of this lowland culture did not decline as rapidly as the southern portion, but one by one the major ceremonial centers were abandoned and their stelae mutilated and calendars discontinued. Although the Yucatan cities lasted into the next century, the Mayan civilization was doomed to collapse as had the Olmec and Teotihuacan before them. Archeological studies give no real evidence of natural calamity, pestilence, massive slaughter or starvation and the real cause still eludes us. Some still feel that there may be some connection to the persistence of endemic, contagious disease, possibly yellow fever, which was called "black vomit" in the Maya pictograms.

Further support to the possibility of disease factors is given indirectly by the works of John L. Stephens, who explored the Yucatan peninsula in the early 19th century. He found that the entire area of the old Maya ruins was unbelievably infested with mosquitoes and severe fevers, undoubtedly both malaria and yellow fever. In addition, the area was made almost unbearable by a small tick-like insect, Garrapatas, which, in addition to the seriousness of their multiple bites, could well have been disease carriers.

Still another possible reason for the disappearance of the civilization is suggested by Stephens's writings, in that the entire area is almost devoid of drinking water for several months each year. In place after place the only source of water which the Indians had was a well hidden away in the depths of a cave, sometimes several miles from the Indian village. For example: the village of Bolonchen, with 7,000 people, had to go down 1,400 feet into a cave to get their water during 4 or 5 months each year. It would seem within the realm of possibility that if two or three drought years occurred together, even such a difficult cave well supply system might have failed and the people would have had to leave.

It must be admitted, however, that most modern writers tend to attach a political and sociological significance to the Maya decline. The theory is that an aristocracy controlled the great temples and religious centers and taxed the surrounding peasants

up to a point where the latter rebelled and destroyed not only the aristocracy but their material effects - the temples and pyramids, etc., as well.

The Yucatec Society, which seems to have sprung from the original, lowland, parent Mayan Society, was generally inferior to the latter but did have considerable metallurgic advancements and extensive geographical locations on the peninsula. As early as 1840 Stephens had uncovered 44 ancient cities, including such as Merido, Mayapan, Uxmal, Tankuche, Xcoch, Kabah, Chack, Skabachtshe, Labna, Kewick, Xampon, Chunhuhu, Hiokowitz, Kuepak, Zekilna, Labphak, Iturbide, Macoba, Bolonchen and Chichen Itza. A few further details about some of these ruins, as Stephens found them, may be of interest.

Mayapan was situated on a great plain, thickly overgrown with vegetation. The circumference of the area of the remnants was about 3 miles. Included was a pyramid 60 feet high, 100 feet square at the base, with 4 grand staircases. This was the original capital of the Maya when the entire peninsula was united under one king. Supposedly Mayapan was destroyed by warring chiefs in 1420, only 270 years after the founding of the city Uxmal had very elaborate hieroglyphics over doorways and great numbers of subterranean cisterns, plaster-lined, apparently for storage of water. Ruins near Tankuche Hacienda had fabulous paintings in red, green, yellow and blue colors. In the remains of the city of Xcoch there was a well of great depth in a cave, with a deep track worn in the rock, made by long continued tread of thousands of people. This cave was known by the local Indians in the 19th century and ascribed to remote people they called "antiguos". In Kabah there were beautifully carved hieroglyphics on lintels, done so finely that it is difficult to know how it was accomplished without metal instruments. At Chack there was another well in a deep, many layered cave as the only water supply over a three mile area. The well was some 1,500 feet down from the cave entrance. Ruined cities were found about every 9 miles, as Stephens trudged through the jungle. At Sachey there was a paved road of pure white stone and the Indians said that it had originally run from Kabah to Uxmal, for couriers carrying letters written on leaves or bark. This was a recurring legend.

The National Geographic calls A.D. 900 the end of the Classic Period of Mesoamerican society. The people of this society shared a common heritage of shared customs, beliefs and artifacts, such as hieroglyphic writing, a ritual ball game played in an I-shaped court, blood offerings in the forms of both self-mutilation and human sacrifices, temples on pyramid platforms, arithmetical systems using a base of 20, use of a calendar of 365 days, with a 200 day ritual calendar besides, and some common gods. About the only point of differentiation between the Yucatan and the Mexican peoples was language. Absent were the keystone arch, plow, alphabetic writing, glass, explosives, the wheel for transport and iron. Copper and gold had appeared only about A.D. 700.

Source URL: <http://cnx.org/content/m17784/latest/>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/hist101/>

Attributed to: Jack E. Maxfield and Connexions



Saylor.org
Page 7 of 7