

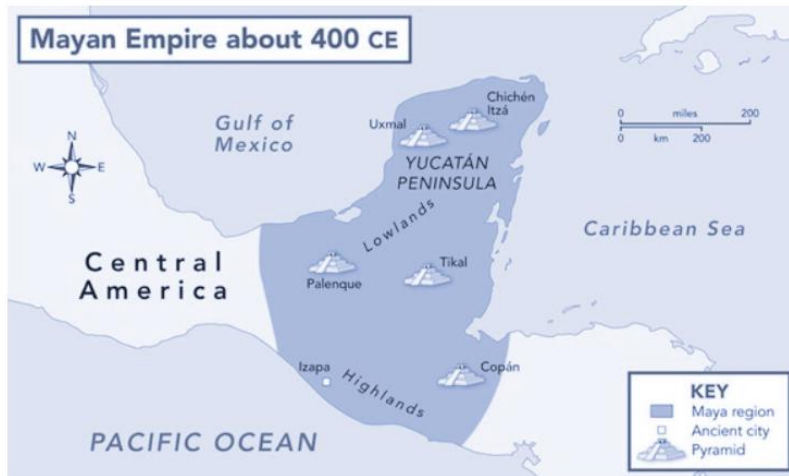
The Maya



The Maya are native Americans of Central America, who built a great civilisation in the tropical rainforest that lasted for over 2000 years. The earliest Maya settlements were built in about 1800 BCE. The golden age of the Maya was between 250 and 900 CE. At its peak, the civilisation was made up of 40 great cities and almost 2 million people. The Maya people became expert mathematicians and were skilful astronomers and architects. Suddenly, in around 900, many of these significant Maya settlements were abandoned. No one is quite sure why, but it is possible that changes in the climate or overpopulation made the cities uninhabitable. The Maya still live in the same areas of Central America today, continuing many of their historical traditions.



Location



Settlements

By 200 CE the Maya had moved from their smaller villages into larger cities. Each city was designed with characteristic features including large temples, stone pyramids, palaces and ball courts. A large population of farmers growing corn, maize and squash surrounded Maya cities. The Maya created farmland by cutting away the trees and vines of the surrounding rainforest. The Maya people also used more advanced farming methods, such as irrigation and terracing, to help produce food.



Settlements

Each city-state was ruled by an Ajaw (king) and became a centre for trade, religious worship and entertainment. The population in Maya's largest settlements was about 60,000, making them some of the most populated places in the world at the time. While the average Maya lived in small stone or thatched homes, the palaces and temples in the cities were decorated with beautiful murals and sculptures. The Maya people built sewer systems and there was even running water in the wealthiest people's homes.



Artefacts

Many Maya artefacts and clues have been lost because of the regrowth of rainforest but also because of the deliberate destruction of writings and artworks by Spanish conquistadors and priests in the 16th century. The Spanish wanted to spread Christianity across the continent and looked upon Maya codices (books) with suspicion. Only four codices survived, but they give a fascinating glimpse into life in Maya times.



Food and farming

The Maya had to overcome the challenge of growing food in the rainforest to feed the growing populations of their urban centres. They used a slash-and-burn method of farming, which meant cutting down trees and plants to make room for their crops. The soil they farmed was not very fertile, so the Maya used ash for fertiliser and rotated their crops. Crop rotation allows the soil time to recover before replanting and helps increase yields. Another characteristic feature of Maya agriculture was terracing. Built to increase the amount of land that can be farmed, terracing involves levelling out hilly and mountainous areas by building walls.



Vocabulary

- abandoned:** left for a long time
- overpopulation:** too many people
- uninhabitable:** cannot be lived in
- traditions:** customs that have existed for a long time
- irrigation:** supplying land with water
- terracing:** steps built into sloping land
- anthropologists:** people who study societies and cultures
- innovations:** new ways of doing something
- codices:** plural of codex (an ancient type of book written by hand)
- conquistadors:** Spanish conquerors