Ancient Maya Essay, Research Paper

Maya

The ancient Maya were a group of American Indian peoples who lived in Southern Mexico. Their descendants, the modern Maya,live in the same regions today.

Agriculture was the basis of the economy of the Mayan and corn was the principal food.(Voorhies 324) Other crops included avocados, tomatoes, and chili peppers. They cultivated an enormous variety of plants.(Foley 20)

In hieroglyphic writing, astronomy, and mathematics, the Mayan Indians were far ahead of any other people in the New World.(Foley 20) The Mayan invented a solar ?civil? calendar including three hundred sixty- five days.(Ivanoff 86) The accuracy of the Mayan calculations is all the more extraordinary in view of the fact that they had no knowledge of glass or metals. They had no precision instruments available to them. Their tools were polished stones that very closely resembled tool from our Neolithic Age.(Ivanoff 86)

Mayan cities served as centers for the surrounding countryside. The people gathered in the centers for important events such as markets and religious festivals. The Maya had no schools. The children learned by observing adults and helping them.(Voorhies 323)

Maya farmers lived in rural homesteads for small villages near their fields. They built their houses from poles all tied together. The man could have two or even three wives. Each one would tend to her own fire and cook for her own children.(Price 91) Entire Maya families, including parents, children, and grandparents lived together. Everyone in the household helped with the work.

Very little is known about the government of the Maya. Each Maya city governed itself and the area around it, and larger cities may have had control over several smaller cities. The rulers of the government probably consisted of both chiefs and priests. The Maya never united to form a central governmental unit(Voorhies 325).

As population rose, the nobles of the independent city states both intermarried and made war on one another. Ultimately, the system of rule that had served the Maya for centuries had failed. Faced with famine, foreign invasion, chronic warfare, and perhaps disease, an era ended what is generally called the Classic Maya collapse.

Although writing in the New World did not originate among the Maya, they gave writing its greatest refinements.(Miller) What Mayan writing seems to represent is a sacred language used only by the elite, initiated, and known only by them. The language of the Mayan was identical with that of the Yucatan Indians, given the fact that writing was identical. The Maya kept records on large stone monuments called stelae. They used the Steele to record important dates and to take note of great events in the lives of their rulers.(Price 91)They also used the stelae to recount the positions of the ?heavenly bodies?\_ particularly the Moon, Venus, and Jupiter.(Miller)

The men and the older boys did most of the farm work. They also did most of the hunting and fishing. The women and older girls made family clothes and prepare the meals.

The Maya made small sculptures of clay and carved huge ones from stone. Some of the large sculptures stood over thirty feet high.( Voorhies 326) Early Classic stone sculpture usually features a single Maya ruler celebrating his reign.Many fine carvings on small jades, shells, and bones were warn and used by nobles. Maya artists decorated walls with brightly colored murals that featured life like figures. The Maya also built large, low buildings where chiefs and priests probably lived before important ceremonies. Maya architectural forms were derived from domestic architecture.The shrine and platform of the pyramid grew from the house form, and the Maya corbel arch, often called a ?false? arch, preserves the hip roof in the stone. Highly skilled architects built tall pyramids of limestone, with small temples on top… The Maya produced exceptional architecture,painting, pottery and sculpture. Most of what is known of Mayan art forms comes from archeological discoveries of ancient artifacts. Musical instruments included drums, pipes, and a high-pitched whistle.(Foley 92)

The Maya worshiped many gods and goddesses. One Maya manuscript mentions more that one hundred and sixty of them.(Voorhies 326) Religion played a central part in the daily life of the Maya. Each day in the Maya year had a special religious importance and religious festivals in honor of particular gods took place throughout the year. The Maya regarded their gods as both helpful and harmful. To obtain the help of the gods, the Maya fasted, prayed, offered sacrifices, and held many other religious ceremonies.

Archaeologists have recently shown that the Maya began to develop intensive agriculture and sophisticated water management during the Middle Preclassic.(Miller)

The early Maya gave great gifts to the people who followed. Some four million or so Maya speak one of the thirty or more Mayan languages and retain traditional customs, diet, dress, or housing.(Miller)For most of the 20th Century, only the extensive calendrical data of the Maya could be read, and as a result, Maya scholars hypothesized that then inscriptions were pure calendrical records. Because little evidence of warfare had been recognized archaeologically, the Classic Maya were thought of as peaceful timekeepers and sky watchers. Their cities, it was thought, were ceremonial centers for ascetic priests, and their artwork anonymous, without concern for specific individuals(Miller)

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