Mayan Civilization Essay, Research Paper

INTRODUCTION

The Mayan Civilization was an Ancient Native American civilization that grew to be one of the most advanced civilizations in the Americas. The people known as the Maya lived in the region that is now eastern and southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and western Honduras. The Maya built massive stone pyramids, temples, and sculpture and accomplished complex achievements in mathematics and astronomy, which were recorded in hieroglyphs.

After 900 the Maya mysteriously disappeared from the southern lowlands of Guatemala. They later reappeared in the north on the Yucat n Peninsula and continued to dominate the area until the Spanish conquest. Descendants of the Maya still form a large part of the population of the region. Although many have acquired Spanish ways, a significant number of modern Maya maintain ancient ethnic customs.

PRE-CLASSIC PERIOD

The Pre-classic period is the span of time in which the foundation of the more modern Mayan civilization was formed. The people went through huge developments in society and built up strength.

Early Mayans were farmers and helped the community in keeping up the fields. They first used sticks to punch holes in the ground, but later, assumed more advanced farming techniques. Their main crops included maize (corn), beans, squash, avocados, chili peppers, pineapples, papayas, and cacao, which was made into a chocolate drink with water and hot chilies. Hunting and fishing were also a source of food for the early Mayans. They often hunted rabbits, deer, and turkeys, which were made into stews. When they were not hunting, fishing, or working in the fields, Mayan men and women took part in crafting useful items, such as stone tools, clay figurines, jade carvings, ropes, baskets, and mats. Women specialized in making clothing, such as ponchos, loincloths, and skirts.

Like other ancient farming peoples, the early Maya worshipped agricultural gods, such as the rain god and, later, the corn god. Eventually they developed the belief that gods controlled events in each day, month, and year, and that they had to make offerings to win the gods favor. Maya astronomers observed the movements of the sun, moon, and planets, made astronomical calculations, and devised almanacs. The astronomers observations were used to divine auspicious moments for many different kinds of activity, from farming to warfare.

Rulers and nobles directed the commoners in building major settlements. Pyramid-shaped mounds of rubble topped with altars or thatched temples sat in the center of these settlements, and priests performed sacrifices to the gods on them. As the Pre-classic period progressed, the Maya increasingly used stone in building. Both nobles and commoners lived in extended family compounds.

During the Pre-classic period the basic patterns of ancient Maya life were established. However, the period was not simply a rehearsal for the Classic period but a time of spectacular achievements.

CLASSIC PERIOD

Classic Maya civilization became more complex as the population increased and centers in the highlands and the lowlands engaged in both cooperation and competition with each other. Trade and warfare were very important to cultural growth and development. Societies became more complex, with distinct social classes developing.

Under the direction of their kings, who also performed as priests, the centers of the lowland Maya became densely populated jungle cities with vast stone and masonry temple and palace complexes. During the Classic period, warfare was conducted on a fairly limited, primarily ceremonial scale. Maya rulers, who were often depicted on carved stone monuments, carrying weapons, attempted to capture and sacrifice one another for ritual and political purposes. The rulers often destroyed parts of some cities, but the destruction was directed mostly at temples in the ceremonial precincts; it had little or no impact on the economy or population of a city as a whole. Some city-states did occasionally conquer others, but this was not a common occurrence until very late in the Classic period when lowland civilization had begun to disintegrate. Until that time, the most common pattern of Maya warfare seems to have consisted of raids employing rapid attacks and retreats by relatively small numbers of warriors, most of who were probably nobles.

Lowland Maya centers were true cities with large resident populations of commoners who sustained the ruling elites through payments of tribute in goods and labor. They built temples, palaces, courtyards, water reservoirs, and causeways. Sculptors carved stelae, which recorded information about the rulers, their family and political histories, and often included exaggerated

statements about their conquests of other city-states.

RELIGION

Mayan religion consisted of a wide range of diverse and varied supernatural beings or deities. They considered Hunab Ku to be the chief god and creator of the world, followed by other varied gods, including Itzamna, the lord of the heavens; Yum Kaax, the god of maize; and the four Chacs, the cardinal rain gods. They also worshipped Ix Chel, the rainbow goddess associated with mothers; and Ixtab, the goddess of suicide.

The Maya performed many rituals and ceremonies to communicate with their deities. At pre-arranged events, such as the Maya New Year in July, or in emergencies such as famine, epidemics, or a great drought the people gathered in ritual plazas to honor the gods. People would dress in elaborate costumes and dance, take hallucinogenic drugs, take ritual steam baths, and play ritual games. Sacrifices in the form of killing or burning would be made to the gods, such as corn, blood, piercing, children, slaves, or prisoners of war.

SCIENCE AND WRITING

Although the Mayans were blessed with being mechanically skilled, most of their major achievements were in the department of abstract mathematics and astronomy. One of their greatest intellectual achievements was a pair of interlocking calendars, which was used for such purposes as the scheduling of ceremonies.

Maya astronomers could make difficult calculations, such as finding the day of the week of a particular calendar date many thousands of years in the past or in the future. They also used the concept of zero, an extremely advanced mathematical concept. Although they had neither decimals nor fractions, they made accurate astronomical measurements by dropping or adding days to their calendar.

The Maya developed a complex system of hieroglyphic writing to record not only astronomical observations and calendrical calculations, but also historical and genealogical information. Scribes carved hieroglyphs on stone stelae, altars, wooden lintels, and roof beams, or painted them on ceramic vessels and in books made of bark paper.

COLLAPSE OF A CIVILIZATION

From about AD 790 to 889, Classic Maya civilization in the lowlands collapsed. Construction of temples and palaces ceased, and monuments were no longer erected. The Maya abandoned the great lowland cities, and population levels declined drastically, especially in the southern and central lowlands. Scholars debate the causes of the collapse, but they are in general agreement that it was a gradual process of disintegration rather than a sudden dramatic event.

A number of factors were almost certainly involved, and the precise causes were different for each city-state in each region of the lowlands. Among the factors that have been suggested are natural disasters, disease, soil exhaustion and other agricultural problems, peasant revolts, internal warfare, and foreign invasions. Whatever factors led to the collapse, their net result was a weakening of lowland Maya social, economic, and political systems to the point where they could no longer support large populations. Another result was the loss of inestimable amounts of knowledge relating to Maya religion and ritual.