

History

For a concise but pretty complete account of the ancient cultures of southern Mexico and Guatemala, read *The Maya*, by Michael D Coe.

In the Yucatán, history is never kept in the past. It ebbs and flows through every aspect of modern life, like a thousand-limbed juggernaut hell-bent on its own preservation. From the beginning, it's been a tale of inequality, predation and subjugation; intellectual and spiritual triumph; independence, fame and famine. And, of course, like just about everywhere else in the world, it's mostly been a tale of greed.

While Europe was sliding into the Dark Ages, the people of the Yucatán had already reached what is arguably the pinnacle of New World civilization. The conquest and eventual subjugation of the Maya created vast riches for the landed elite as the region continued to develop independently from the rest of Mexico – though it could not help but be influenced by its powerful neighbor. More recently it has faced a different sort of cultural revolution with mass tourism taking deep root along the coast. Still, beyond Cancún's glitzy façade beats the syncopated pulse of an ancient culture charting its delicate course through the tendriled pathways of history.

EARLY AMERICANS

Conventional wisdom holds that humans arrived in the Americas from Siberia around 40,000 years ago, via a land bridge across the Bering Strait that connected present-day Alaska with Asia. Recent evidence dates human presence in Mexico's central plateau to roughly 13,000 years ago, and the Yucatán was probably populated a few millennia later. By 5700 BC people were planting maize (corn) in the Tehuacán valley in what is now Puebla state.

By 2000 BC many Mesoamericans (peoples between present-day central Mexico and Nicaragua) were cultivating corn, squash, avocados and beans, and raising chickens, turkeys and dogs. They continued to hunt and fish as they had for generations, but they became dependent upon crops.

Mexico's ancestral civilization arose near the Gulf Coast, in the humid lowlands of southern Veracruz and neighboring Tabasco. These were the Olmecs, who invented a hieroglyphic writing system and erected ceremonial centers for the practice of religious rituals. Best known for the colossal heads they carved from basalt slabs, the Olmecs developed an artistic style, highlighted by jaguar motifs.

Even after their demise, aspects of Olmec culture lived on among their neighbors, paving the way for the later accomplishments of Maya art, architecture and science. Borrowing significantly from the Olmecs, the Zapotec culture arose in the highlands of Oaxaca at Monte Albán, and subsequent civilizations at Teotihuacán (near current-day Mexico City) and at El Tajín in northern Veracruz also show Olmec influence.

The jaguar motifs first used by the Olmecs were adopted by successive civilizations throughout Mesoamerica.

TIMELINE

up to 10,000 BC

The first humans arrive in the Yucatán region. The numbers of grassland animals dwindle as temperatures significantly increase over the next 2000 years, leading indigenous populations to begin larger-scale agriculture.

3114 BC

Our current universe is created – at least according to Maya mythology. Archaeologists have even been able to pin down a specific date for the creation: August 13, 3114 BC.

2400 BC

Maya-speaking farmers arrive in the Yucatán Peninsula, while elsewhere in Mexico more developed 'civilization' is beginning to take root. The Olmec culture creates a system of writing. Olmec culture later influences the Zapotec culture.

YUCATÁN'S DINOSAUR-KILLING METEORITE

For the past two decades there has been growing scientific agreement that a meteorite slammed into the Yucatán 65 million years ago, kicking up enough debris to block out the sun for a decade, which either triggered a global freeze or made the air so unbreathable that two-thirds of the earth's species became extinct.

In 1980 scientists theorized that the extinction of the dinosaurs had been caused by an 'impact event,' such as a meteor crash. Using seismic monitoring equipment, scientists found evidence for the existence of such an enormous crater off the northern coast of Yucatán near the port of Chicxulub.

ENTER THE MAYA

Archaeologists believe Maya-speaking people first appeared in the highlands of Guatemala as early as 2500 BC, and in the following century groups of Maya relocated to the lowlands of the Yucatán Peninsula.

Agriculture played an increasingly important role in Maya life. Watching the skies and noting the movements of the planets and stars, the Maya were able to correlate their astronomical observations with the rains and agricultural cycles. As the Maya improved their agricultural skills, their society stratified into various classes and occupations. Villages sprang up beneath the jungle canopy and temples were constructed from the abundant limestone. An easily carved substance, limestone allowed the builders to demonstrate a high degree of artistic expression. The material could also be made into plaster, upon which artists painted murals to chronicle events.

Local potentates were buried beneath these elaborate temples. As each successive leader had to have a bigger temple, larger platforms were placed upon earlier ones, forming gigantic step pyramids with a thatched shelter on top. Often these temple-pyramids were decorated with huge stylized masks. More and more pyramids were built around large plazas, much as the common people clustered their thatched houses facing a common open space. This heralded the flourishing of the Classic Maya civilization.

The Golden Age

Over the six centuries of the Classic Maya period (AD 250 to 925), the Maya made spectacular intellectual and artistic strides, a legacy that can still be admired today throughout the peninsula. The great ceremonial centers at Copán, Tikal, Yaxchilán (p241), Palenque (p236), and especially Kaminaljuyú (near present-day Guatemala City), flourished during the early phase of this period. Around AD 400 armies from Teotihuacán invaded the Maya highlands, imposing their rule and their culture for a time, though they were finally absorbed into the daily life of the Maya, a marriage that engendered the so-called Esperanza culture.

Mundo Maya online (www.mayadiscovery.com) features articles on Maya cosmology, navigation and agriculture, among other aspects of this incredible ancient civilization.

The elite of the Classic Maya often received enemies of a sweet mead name *balché*. They also thought being cross-eyed was particularly beautiful.

1000 BC–AD 250

The pre-Classic period. The earliest Maya villages begin to form in Yucatán, Chiapas and Guatemala. The Maya have become adept farmers and astronomers. The Izapan civilization creates a calendar and writing system, and massive pyramids are built.

AD 250–925

The Classic period. It's a time of high society, marked by the invasion of the Teotihuacán, the rise of the Puuc, and the eventual collapse of the Classic Maya and the ascendancy of the Toltec.

925–1530

The post-Classic period. The bellicose Toltecs of central Mexico establish their domain at Chichén Itzá, then the Itzáes form the League of Mayapán, which dominates politics in northern Yucatán for a couple hundred years.