



# Early Civilizations: The Maya

Pottery with cacao beans



## Reader

Maya children today



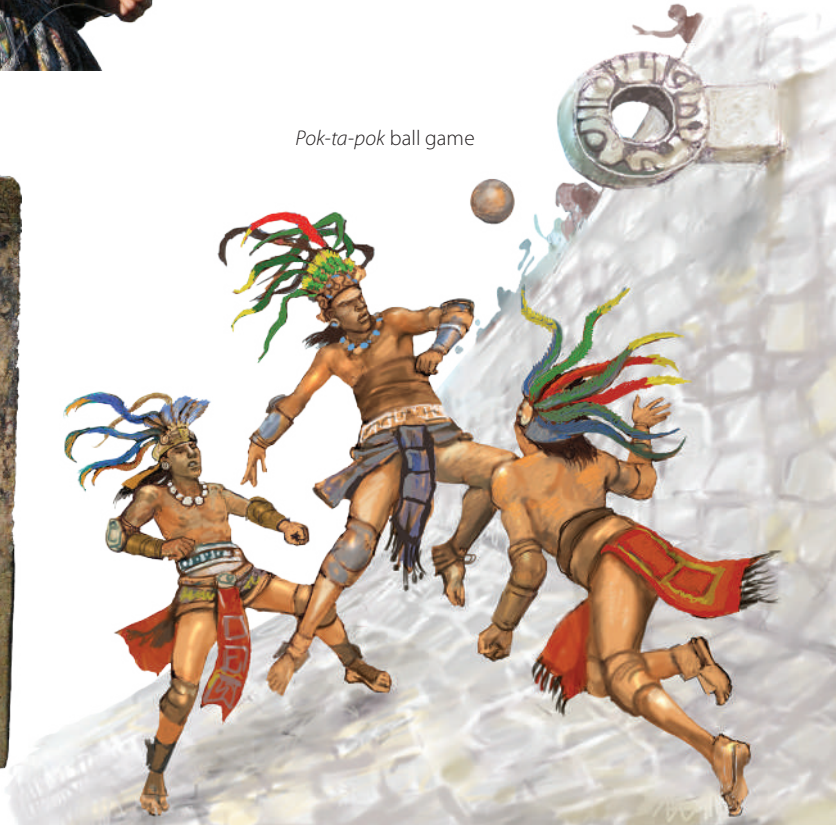
Pyramid



Hieroglyphs



Pok-ta-pok ball game



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# Early Civilizations: The Maya

Reader



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# Early Civilizations: The Maya

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# Chapter 1

## The Maya

**The Mysterious Civilization** Do you like mysteries? Try this one: More than a thousand years ago, a great civilization built cities across Mesoamerica—an area that is today made up of parts of Mexico and Central America. They built stone **temples** and pyramids that rose far above the forest treetops. Then, after hundreds of years of accomplishments, most people abandoned their once-thriving cities. No one knows exactly why.

### Vocabulary

**temple**, n. a building with a religious use or meaning

### The Framing Question

What characterized the early Maya civilization?



Maya pyramids are grand monuments that reach toward the sky.

This may sound like the plot of a science fiction movie, but it isn't. In fact, it is a short history of the Maya, one of the first great civilizations of the Americas, which flourished between 200 and 900 CE. The cities were abandoned, but the people did not disappear. Ancient Maya culture still influences our world today. Millions of descendants of the ancient Maya live throughout Mesoamerica and beyond.

## Geographic Challenges

The Maya civilization developed on the Yucatán Peninsula in what is today southeastern Mexico and the countries of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Belize. The varied geography of this area affected the growth and perhaps even the decline of the Maya.

### Ancient Maya Civilization



In the centuries before Europeans came to the Americas, the great Maya civilization thrived in present-day Mexico and Central America.



Some of the terrain was highland. There was not much flat farmland there because of the mountains. Lowland areas had more flat areas for farming, but the lands ranged from dense tropical forest to arid landscapes. Water was difficult to access in much of the region.

## Agricultural Solutions

In response to these geographical challenges, the Maya created technology to ensure a steady supply of food and water for their growing population. For example, they developed raised garden beds and a terrace system to improve farming in the highlands. The Maya also developed irrigation, water wells, and ways to catch and store rainwater.

Most Maya people made their living as farmers. They lived in one-room structures made out of mud and grass that often were grouped around an open patio. Their main crop was corn. One of their main foods was something you may have eaten—a flat bread called a *tortilla* (/tor\*tee\*uh/). Farmers also grew beans, squash, tomatoes, and pumpkins.

As the Maya developed more productive farming techniques, they were able to easily feed



Maya farmers raised food for the people of their large cities. In the lowland areas, farmers created waterways to redirect and save water.

their growing population and even store surplus food. This steady food supply, especially of corn, enabled Maya people to specialize in certain types of work. Some people who worked in agriculture may also have specialized in beekeeping or fishing. Some crafted pottery and tools. Others became engineers and construction workers.

## A Network of City-States

**Archaeologists** believe that Maya civilization reached its greatest extent between about 200 and 900 CE. At its peak, as many as two million Maya people lived in city-states. They built more than forty of these city-states using stone and earth. Each had a population between five thousand and fifty thousand inhabitants.



The cacao beans on this pottery indicate the importance of cacao to the Maya.

The Maya city-states experienced times of war and peace with one another. They traded goods with one another frequently. Jade, feathers, cacao, honey, salt, cloth, and many other goods were exchanged. Despite their connections and similar cultures, each city-state had an independent government. Rulers of these city-states were considered to be godlike, which gave them the authority to rule.

Maya cities were constructed in a variety of layouts. Some had defensive features such as moats and earthworks, but many did not.

### Vocabulary

**archaeologist**, n. an expert in the study of material remains of people from the past

Maya **architects** designed buildings such as palaces, temples, public spaces, and homes. The largest buildings in Maya cities were pyramids that also served as temples. These structures served religious purposes.

### Vocabulary

**architect**, n. a person who designs buildings

## Service to the Gods

From the size of the pyramids, it is clear that religion was a key part of Maya life. Maya pyramids rose high above the surrounding treetops. Some were made from blocks of limestone that had been cut by hand and moved into place by skilled workers. Maya pyramids were some of the tallest structures in the Americas until the early twentieth century.

Daily life for the Maya revolved around family, farming, and service to the gods. No person or group took any important action without consulting the gods. **Priests** decided which days were best for planting a field, starting a war, or building a hut. The Maya believed the gods were much wiser than humans.

### Vocabulary

**priest**, n. a person who has the training or authority to carry out religious ceremonies or rituals

The Maya saw the world as having three distinct but linked parts: the sky, the earth, and the underworld. They believed that the earth was created by the god of the sky and the wind, named Huracán. This god brought the earth and the sky together. However, because the two were so closely joined, there was no room for anything to grow and live. The tree of life was planted in the underworld, which the Maya called Xibalba. The tree grew and stretched, creating room for plants and animals to thrive.



The massive pyramid at Chichén Itzá was built based on precise knowledge of the movements of the sun and stars.

The gods wanted to be worshipped, so they created humans. It took the gods several attempts to make humans properly. They tried making humans out of mud, but these people had no heart and could not honor the gods. They made new humans out of wood, but a flood washed them away. At last, the gods made humans out of corn, also known as maize. The people of maize were well suited to honoring the gods by building temples and holding religious rituals.

## **The *Popol Vuh***

The *Popol Vuh* is a collection of Maya religious stories. It was created in the 1500s CE by Maya people living in Guatemala. The Spanish had begun destroying Maya texts, but the *Popol Vuh* was produced in a region where the Spanish attitude toward Maya texts was not so destructive. The authors likely hoped their book

would preserve their stories and beliefs for later generations. Although it was created in the 1500s, the *Popol Vuh* tells a story that had probably been told for centuries.

According to Maya legend, the first people could see everything. The creator gods decided that this gave people too much power. So the gods decided to limit human sight and power. The *Popol Vuh* explains that the gods purposely clouded human understanding. As a result, a human's view of the world is unclear. The *Popol Vuh* explains that human understanding is "like breath on a mirror."

## Serious Play

A specific kind of ball court can be found in many Maya cities. Archaeologists were puzzled about these courts, which varied in size. Some were the size of volleyball courts. Others were larger than football fields.

Archaeologists now think the Maya played a game called *pok-ta-pok* on these courts. They believe the goal of *pok-ta-pok* was to drive a solid rubber ball to a specific place on the opponents' side of the court. The balls were heavy. Also, players were not allowed to use their hands or feet! Experts think players may have had to use hips, elbows, knees, or other body parts to score a goal.

The court at the Maya site of Chichén Itzá (/chee\*chen/eet\*sah/) is still visible today. This court had stone rings, and a team could win the game by driving the hard rubber ball through the ring on the other team's side of the court. If you use your imagination, you can picture what a *pok-ta-pok* game might have looked like.

Imagine big, strong *pok-ta-pok* players stepping out onto the court. They wear leather helmets and pads to protect themselves. You can also see that they are worried. They know that the stakes are high. *Pok-ta-pok* is a game with religious meaning. The Maya think



Nearly every Maya city had at least one ball court.

of it as a battle between good and evil. The only way to find out who's good and who's evil is to see who wins the game.

Hundreds of spectators have gathered. They see the game as meaningful for their world and as a way of honoring the gods.

When the game begins, the sound of the bouncing ball is added to the cheers. *Pok, pok, pok!* goes the hard rubber ball as it hits the ground and bounces off the walls of the court.



This photo shows a ring at the Great Ball Court in Chichén Itzá.

One player begins driving the ball up the court with his elbows, knees, and chest. Then, *whack!* Another player slams into him and knocks him to the ground. There is no whistle for a foul. In fact,

there are very few rules in *pok-ta-pok*! The game continues until someone finally scores. The side that scores wins the game.

The winners of *pok-ta-pok* games were considered to be the “good” ones. Sometimes they were rewarded with clothing and jewelry. But what do you think happened to the losers? Experts believe that at least in certain situations, some of them were offered as **sacrifices** to the gods.

### Vocabulary

**sacrifice**, n.  
something or someone given or killed for a religious purpose

Human sacrifice was a part of the Maya religion. Maya priests sought to please the gods by offering sacrifices atop or in front of the pyramids. No wonder the *pok-ta-pok* players looked worried as they walked onto the court!

## Wisdom in the Sky

We know the Maya believed that their gods gave them an unclear view of the world that was “like breath on a mirror.” But we also know that the Maya understood some things very well.

Their knowledge of astronomy, for example, was impressive. The Maya, of course, did not have telescopes, computers, or satellites. They didn’t even have technology like the wheel. All they had were their own eyes, yet they were able to make very precise observations of the sky. The Maya looked to the sky for **omens** and to get information about the best times to plant and harvest crops.

### Vocabulary

**omen**, n. an occurrence or event believed to be a sign of the future



The Maya observed the night sky long before there were telescopes.

We can see the results of Maya astronomy in the placement of their temples and pyramids. These structures were built so the sun would shine directly on key areas on certain days. In Chichén Itzá, for example, the sun of the spring and fall **equinoxes** casts the shadow of a serpent statue onto the pyramid steps. As the sun rises, the shadow slithers down the stairs.

Modern people understand that there are 365 days in a year, plus an extra day every fourth year, or **leap year**. This extra day accounts for the fact that a year is slightly longer than 365 days but not as long as 366 days. These numbers are the result of years of study of the sun and the seasons. The Maya, working without scientific tools, calculated that there were 365.2420 days in a year.

### Vocabulary

**equinox**, n. a day in which daytime and nighttime are about the same length, which happens twice every year

**leap year**, n. a year that has 366 days, or one more than a typical year, and occurs every four years



Present-day astronomers used today's technology to measure the year at 365.2422 days!

The Maya created a solar calendar, or calendar based on the movement of the sun. This solar calendar is similar to our calendar, but there are some differences. We divide our year into twelve months. The Maya divided their year into eighteen months, which had names like Pop and Zip. A special five-day "month" completed the 365-day year.

Besides their 365-day solar calendar, Maya astronomers created another calendar called the Sacred Round. This calendar was 260 days long and was used to keep track of religious holidays and other important events.

Because the Maya had two calendars, each day had two names. One name came from the Sacred Round and the other from the solar calendar. This also meant that all Maya people had two birthdays.



The Maya observed the sun, moon, planets, and stars from El Caracol, an observatory in Chichén Itzá.

## Words and Numbers

The Maya had a sophisticated writing system. It had more than eight hundred symbols! These symbols could be combined to give them multiple meanings. People who were scribes were considered to have a high status in Maya society.

Archaeologists have found **hieroglyphs** carved into the ruins of Maya cities and in buildings, such as temples. Much of the Mayan writing that we know about today tells about the lives of ancient rulers, astronomy, the Maya calendar, and descriptions of events that occurred.

### Vocabulary

**hieroglyph**, n. a picture or symbol representing an idea, object, syllable, or sound

The Temple of the Hieroglyphic Stairway stands in Copán (/koh\*pahn/). A climb up this staircase is a journey back in time. Each of the sixty-three steps has a story to tell.

Carved symbols called *glyphs* name all of the rulers of Copán. The glyphs also explain their military victories. Other examples of Mayan

### Vocabulary

**vessel**, n. a container

writing can be seen on monuments, stone statues, sculptures, books, and ceramic **vessels**.

The Maya were also skilled at mathematics. They developed a system of number symbols.



Mayan writing was often carved into stone.

A dot stood for one. A bar stood for five. A shell stood for zero.

We all know that zero can stand for “nothing.” But when it comes to a system of numbers, zero means a lot! Think, for example, of the difference between the numbers twenty and two hundred. The Maya symbol for zero worked the same way ours does. In fact, the Maya were among the first people in the world to develop the concept of zero.

## Coming of Age

Families lived in walled areas that had several huts. Men and boys did the farming. Women and girls took care of the house, cooked, and made clothing and pottery.

Before age five, Maya children were cared for by parents and other relatives. At age five, they took on new responsibilities, such as helping with farming and household chores. A boy had a white bead braided to his hair. A girl had a string tied to her waist with a red shell attached. These symbols remained in place until the children reached the age of fourteen. At this point, an **initiation ceremony** was performed to mark their passage to adulthood.

A priest would pick a day when the stars were favorable. Then the priest would cut the bead from the boy’s hair, or the girl’s mother would cut the string from the girl’s waist. Then the parents would have a celebration with family members and neighbors.

### Vocabulary

**initiation ceremony**, n. a special event to mark a person’s entry into a certain group or status

After these ceremonies, boys moved into a house for unmarried men. There they would remain until they got married. Marriages were arranged. In the hard life of Maya farmers, marriages were not romantic affairs. They were more like business deals between families.

As with the initiation ceremonies, priests picked marriage dates. They consulted the stars and the gods to find a day that would bring good fortune. However, no Maya couple expected married life to bring only good fortune. The Maya believed that every aspect of life was controlled by the gods. Because some gods were good and some were bad, they expected life to include both joy and sorrow.

## **What Is Beauty?**

Every culture has practices that seem odd to other people. The Maya did two things that may seem a little strange to you. They considered crossed eyes to be beautiful. So mothers would hang something in front of a baby's nose to help the baby develop crossed eyes. The Maya also viewed a flat head as a symbol of beauty. They would strap a long board to the back of a newborn baby. As the baby's head rested against the board, the board gradually flattened the back of the baby's soft skull.

## **Decline in Power**

Despite their thriving culture and advancements, the power of Maya cities began to decline. It's not clear exactly what happened. You will read about some theories in the next chapter.

## PRIMARY SOURCE: EXCERPT FROM THE *POPOL VUH*

Long ago, there was only darkness, and the world was quiet. But then, two powerful gods named Tepew and Q'uk'umatz created a place between the sea and the sky. They shouted out the name "Earth," and suddenly, Earth appeared! Mountains rose up, and plains spread out, dotted with trees and plants of all kinds.

However, Earth was still quiet, and the gods realized that it was incomplete without living creatures. So they filled the land with many different kinds of animals, such as jaguars, pumas, snakes, deer, and antelopes. They also filled the oceans with all sorts of creatures, from tiny fish to enormous whales.

Yet the gods still felt that Earth was missing something essential. Before long, the gods realized that they needed people. First, they created beautiful clay people, but they were unable to move. They also could not tolerate the heat of the sun, which melted them. Next, the gods created wooden people. They were stronger in the heat of the sun, but they lacked intelligence.

Finally, the gods sought help from the animals, who showed them a perfect place to create humans. In this place, yellow and white corn grew, and the gods used this corn to create the first humans. These humans were special because they could hear, see, and think. They were grateful to the gods and built great temples to honor them. The gods were pleased because these humans were just what they had hoped for, and the world was no longer silent.

# Chapter 2

## Where Did the Maya Go?

**Ruins in the Rainforest** In 1839, two explorers heard stories of mysterious ruins in the rainforests of Central America. Curious, they set out to see for themselves. Their names were John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood. The two men first explored the remains of the city of Copán, in the present-day country of Honduras. From the architecture, it was clear the ruins had been left by an ancient and advanced civilization.

### The Framing Question

What factors may have led the Maya to abandon their cities?

The two Americans continued their journey, exploring many other ruins. Then they returned to the United States and wrote a best-selling book about their findings. Their tales and drawings inspired worldwide interest in the history of the Maya.

Archaeologists and other experts have continued to study the remarkable Maya people since the mid-1800s. Recent breakthroughs



Explorer Frederick Catherwood created this lithograph, called *Gateway of the Great Teocallis, Uxmal*.

in research have revealed much about the Maya civilization, language, and culture. Let's take a closer look at what we know about them and what still remains a mystery.



Archaeologists still study the remarkable Maya civilization.

## Mysterious Writing

Reading the stories and records of a culture is a great way to learn about their civilization.

However, almost all Maya texts were likely destroyed by the

Spanish in the 1500s CE. Bishop Diego de Landa was a Catholic missionary from Spain who studied the Mayan language as well as Maya culture and religion. As a Catholic, de Landa disagreed with the Maya religion and ordered many of their books and images to be destroyed because he thought they were full of **superstition** and lies. Only four ancient Maya texts survive, all written after 950 CE.

### Vocabulary

**superstition**, n. a false belief in the power of magic, luck, or unseen forces

However, we can still study Mayan hieroglyphs on statues, pottery, and the buildings that remain. That is what John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood studied when they made their trip to Central America in 1839, almost three hundred years after de Landa destroyed most of the Maya texts. Stephens and Catherwood marveled over the Maya carvings they saw. The two



men could not, however, figure out what the symbols meant. For a long time, neither could any other experts. The Maya messages remained a mystery for another hundred years.

Hieroglyphs are like a code. You must crack the code to read the messages. Mayan hieroglyphs are complicated, and many people tried to **decipher** them. In fact, the person responsible for burning all those texts, Bishop Diego de Landa, actually wrote a book about the Maya in 1566 CE that may have slowed the process down even more.

### Vocabulary

**decipher**, v. to break a code or uncover the meaning of a message

The bishop's book is a firsthand account of the Maya people, with whom he spent much time. It tells us much of what we know about their civilization in the period following the Spanish invasion, including their religious beliefs and language. Some of his ideas about how to translate the glyphs were incorrect. However, researchers would not realize this for about four hundred years!

It wasn't until the 1960s that archaeologists finally began to crack the code with the help of early computers. The Mayan writing system was not deciphered by one person or one machine. Instead, many people around the world made small breakthroughs on their own. Each discovery was inspired by and



Glyphs tell a story or communicate information, but you must decipher the code before you can understand the message.

built upon a previous researcher's findings. As a result of this painstaking work by dedicated researchers, over the last few decades, we have learned a great deal about decoding the Mayan writing system.

## Where Did Everybody Go?

The ancient Maya were a sophisticated people who built a great civilization. That fact alone is a reason to find them interesting. But one of the most fascinating questions about ancient Maya civilization (200–900 CE) is what happened to cause it to end.

Archaeologists believe that the Maya left their cities sometime between 800 and 900 CE. It's possible this event happened over a century or so. Until the 900s, the Maya kept careful historical records. They used their hieroglyphs to carve names and dates on pyramids and temples. Then in the 900s, the writing mysteriously stopped. The temples and pyramids began to fall into disrepair.

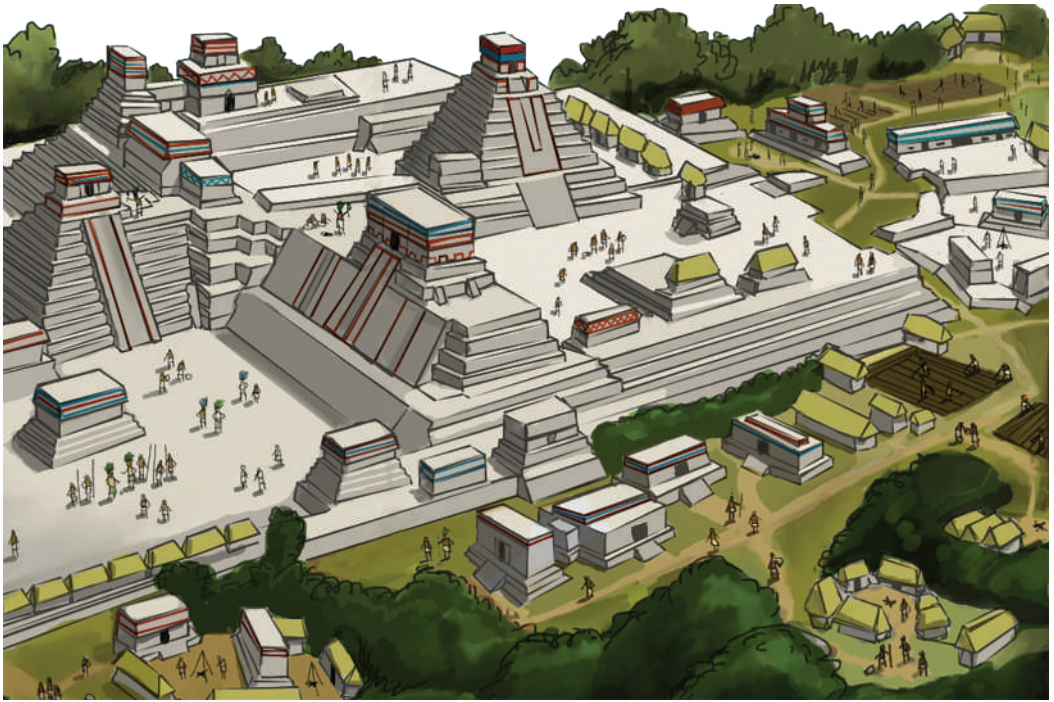
So what happened? Archaeologists have **theories**, but they can't find clear proof for any one of them.

### Vocabulary

**theory**, n. an idea or belief about something that has not been proven

One theory is that farmers rose up against the priests and nobles. But this raises another question: What happened to the farmers? There is no evidence of a new group of people replacing the previous people in power.

Some have guessed that disease greatly reduced the Maya population. But no mass burial grounds have been found.



The Maya built great cities. No one knows for sure why they were abandoned.

Archaeologists have found signs that some people in this area did die from diseases. However, the greatest number of deaths seem to have occurred after 1500 CE, when the Spanish brought new diseases to the Americas. The early Maya cities were mostly vacant for years before that.

Perhaps the Maya suffered famine as a result of heavy rainfall or **drought**. Some researchers report that they have found scientific evidence of multiple droughts in the area around the time many Maya cities were abandoned. They wonder if clearing the trees to create more land for farming may have led to a decrease in rainfall and a rise in temperatures, worsening the drought. Other researchers disagree.

### Vocabulary

**drought**, n. a long dry period without rain

Did disaster strike the Maya? Was there an earthquake? Could invaders have toppled the civilization? Did shifting trade routes affect the lowland Maya rulers and their settlements? It is possible that overland trade routes gave way to more sea-based trade routes. This may have occurred because it was more efficient to move goods by sea. Many Maya may have elected to move closer to the sea to escape the drought or to escape growing conflict between the city-states.

No one knows for sure why the once-great Maya cities were abandoned and swallowed up by the rainforest. It could be a combination of the reasons researchers have posed.

### Maya People Today



Today, many Maya still live in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Belize, and southern Mexico.

We know that many centuries ago, the Maya left their cities behind. But the people themselves did not disappear. They relocated to new settlements, often closer to the coast. Today, millions still speak languages related to ancient Mayan. These descendants of the pyramid builders have lived in villages, towns, and cities in southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras for centuries. Some carry on the traditions and lifestyle of their ancestors, while others live a modern lifestyle. Many Maya blend traditional and modern ways of life.



At least six million Maya people still live in Central America today.

# Glossary

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## A

**archaeologist, n.** an expert in the study of material remains of people from the past (6)

**architect, n.** a person who designs buildings (7)

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## D

**decipher, v.** to break a code or uncover the meaning of a message (21)

**drought, n.** a long dry period without rain (23)

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**equinox, n.** a day in which daytime and nighttime are about the same length, which happens twice every year (12)

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## T

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## V

**vessel, n.** a container (14)

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