

Anthropologist's Journal

This journal belongs to

Maya Kings and Queens: Rituals and Responsibilities

**SAN DIEGO MUSEUM OF MAN
LANGUAGE ARTS AND ANTHROPOLOGY
A LITERACY PROGRAM FUNDED BY THE DE FALCO FOUNDATION**

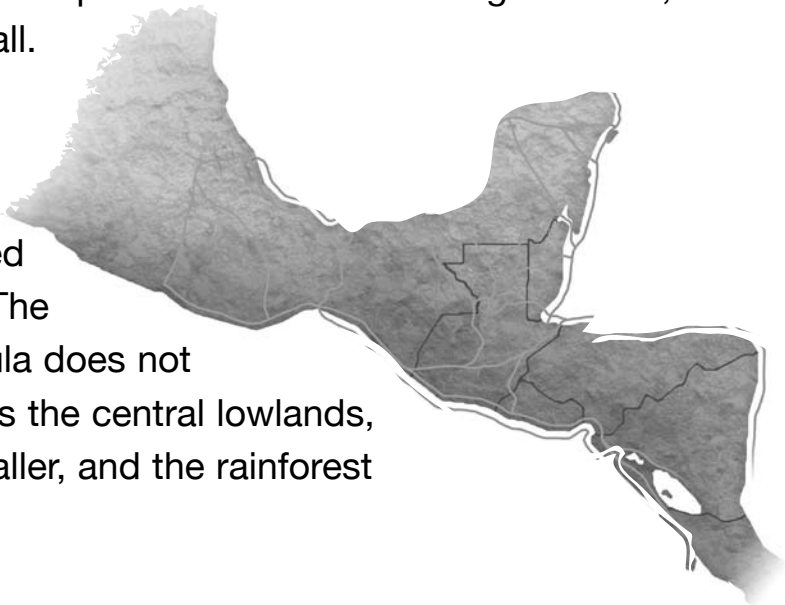
Introduction

The Land of the Ancient Maya

There were many ancient civilizations that developed in North and South America, including the Aztecs of Mexico, the Maya of southern Mexico and parts of Central America, and the Inca of South America. Of these three civilizations, the Maya are the oldest—the beginnings of their civilization go back more than two thousand years. The ruins of many ancient Maya cities can be found in southern Mexico and countries in Central America such as Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Some of these cities were large enough to be home to tens of thousands of people.

There are many different types of environments in the region where the ancient Maya lived. In the southern part of the Maya area, close to the Pacific Ocean, there are high mountains, including some active volcanoes. Moving north, the elevation drops and you enter an area known as the central lowlands. This area receives a lot of rainfall each year, and is covered with a tropical rainforest containing tall trees, some of which stand 150 feet tall.

The northernmost area is known as the Yucatan Peninsula—a peninsula is an area of land surrounded by water on three sides. The northern Yucatan Peninsula does not receive as much rainfall as the central lowlands, so the trees there are smaller, and the rainforest is not as extensive.



Initial Questions

Locate Central America on a map. What are the bodies of water that surround the Yucatan Peninsula called?

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Find examples of other places in the world that are peninsulas. What American state is also a peninsula?

Reading Selection 1

Royal Dress

The ancient Maya were never fully united under one ruler. This differs from a civilization like ancient Egypt, which was ruled by the pharaoh. Instead, the ruler of each Maya city ruled only the surrounding territory, with some rulers being more powerful than others. We call these rulers kings and queens because the right to rule was inherited or passed down from the rulers to their children. Usually the right to rule was passed from the father to the first-born son (although once in a while, women became the rulers of certain cities).

In the Maya language, the rulers were called *ahaw*, which means lord, and could be easily identified by their special costumes. A costume is not just something you wear during Halloween, when you're pretending to be someone else. The word costume can also mean the special clothing that people wore during various historical periods, or the types of clothing people in different cultures wear for special reasons. For Maya rulers, the clothing and decorations they wore (their costumes) were an important part of showing that they were the legitimate leaders of their communities.



Activity 1

Vocabulary

Write the word, used in the previous passage, next to the sentence that describes its meaning.

_____ : The area surrounding a Maya city under the control of its ruler.

_____ : When the right to rule is passed down from a ruler to his or her child.

_____ : The Maya word for lord.

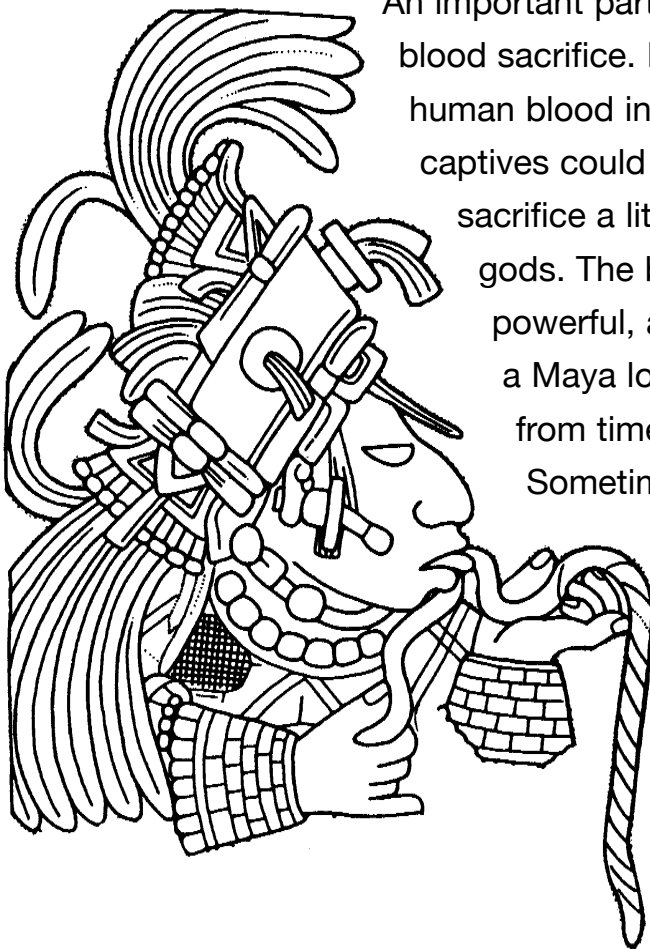
_____ : Clothing worn during special occasions or in different historical periods.



Reading Selection 2

Leaders in Religion

Maya rulers claimed to be direct descendants from the gods and were the chief priests in the Maya religion. They performed many rituals that were believed to benefit the Maya people. Rulers would often dress up in different costumes that represented various gods in order to perform sacred rituals. For each ceremony, a different costume would be used that covered the entire body and included a mask and headdress. Headdresses might be made from jaguar skin and decorated with quetzal feathers. The jaguar was a symbol of royal power and the bluish-green feathers of the quetzal bird were considered sacred. The headdresses were so elaborate and tall, the Maya rulers had to wear wooden back-supports to hold everything up.



An important part of Maya religious beliefs included blood sacrifice. It was believed that the gods needed human blood in order to be satisfied. Human captives could be sacrificed, or individuals could sacrifice a little of their own blood to nourish the gods. The blood of the rulers was the most powerful, and so, an important part of being a Maya lord was to sacrifice your own blood from time to time to appease the gods.

Sometimes, individuals would pierce their tongues and string cords through the holes. The blood coming forth would be offered as their sacrifice to the gods.

Activity 2

Fill-in-the-blank

Maya rulers were chief _____ in the Maya religion. They were responsible for performing numerous _____ on behalf of the Maya people. When performing ceremonies, the rulers would dress in costumes that represented different _____. A _____ made from _____ skins, decorated with _____ feathers, and held up by a wooden _____ might be worn. _____ sacrifice was also an important part of the Maya religion.

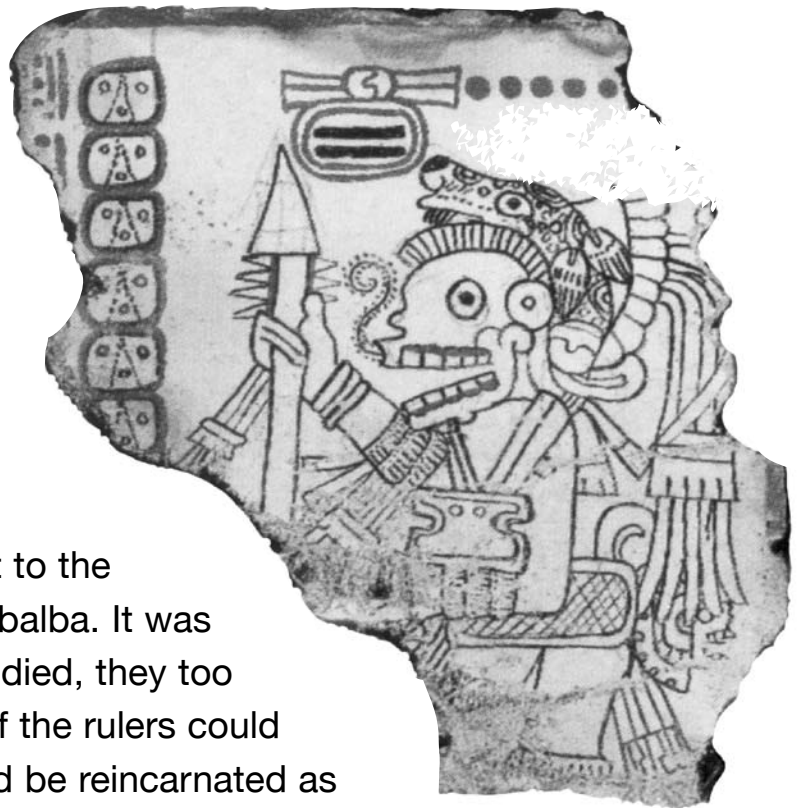
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Now, go back and review *Reading Selection 1. Royal Dress*. Write a short summary of that section in the space below using the words you wrote in *Activity 1. Vocabulary*.

Reading Selection 3 Leaders in Warfare

Many pictures or carvings of Maya rulers show them dressed as military leaders, holding shields or other warrior equipment. Much warfare among the ancient Maya was ceremonial in nature. When a ceremony required a human sacrifice, it was up to the rulers to raid a nearby city for suitable captives. Rulers also had to defend against rival rulers who would try to invade their cities to take their subjects captive.

Maya rulers were also accomplished astronomers, and they would use the stars and planets to tell them when it was time to go to war. One planet they paid close attention to was the planet Venus, which can be seen for most of the year just above the horizon. Every so often, Venus disappears from the sky, and reappears after a certain number of days. When it disappeared, it was believed that Venus went to the underworld, also known as Xibalba. It was also believed that after rulers died, they too would travel to Xibalba. But, if the rulers could escape from there, they would be reincarnated as Venus when it rises again.



Activity 3

Short answer

Using the information provided in the previous reading, answer the following questions in complete sentences. Be sure to include the words listed in parentheses in your answer.

Why did Maya rulers sometimes raid nearby cities? (captives, sacrifice)

Describe what happened to Maya rulers after they died. (Xibalba, Venus)

Other Activities

Imagine you are a Maya ruler who is keeping a diary. Write a journal entry for one day during your reign. What are some of the things you did that day? What were you thinking or feeling?

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