

ancient Maya: GOVERNMENT



CITY-STATES

The ancient Maya people were not ruled by one king. Each Maya city had its own king. The ancient Maya called these kings *halch uinic*, which means “true man.”

Some ancient Maya cities remained small, but others grew and combined to form large city-states. This happened when kings captured enemy kings, or when royal families in different cities were united through marriage. Some city-states had more than 50,000 residents. Copan, Tikal, Naranjo, Calakmul, and Piedras Negras were all Maya cities. Palenque was located in the mountains, while Uxmal, Mayapan, and Chichen Itza were in the lowlands. Maya kings had an ever-changing network of alliances. These agreements were often made through marriage as one king married the daughter of a neighboring king or an important noble in another city.

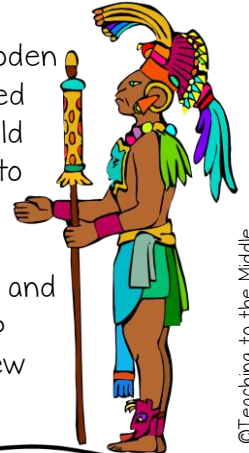
KINGS

The right to rule a city passed from a king to his son. Existing kings did not just hand over the throne to their sons though. The new ruler had to prove himself in war before he could take power. Sometimes a king did not have any sons or a son that was a successful warrior. Another male relative may be given the power. Recent evidence has shown that not all Maya rulers were male. The Maya believed their kings were descendants of the gods. Kings lived a life of privilege but had many responsibilities organizing the lives of their people. They made laws and solved problems. They also performed rituals to speak with the gods for their people. Kings asked the gods for things like rain, good harvests, and protection from their enemies. The king arranged all building projects, including temples, pyramids, and reservoirs. Maya commoners believed in putting their king and city first. Anyone who did not obey and serve the king was enslaved or killed. It was the king's job to bring good fortune to the city. If crops failed, or disease ripped through a city, the Maya believed the gods were punishing them or their kings. This was a good time for rival kings to attack. When a Maya king died, they were buried in majestic tombs with enough clothing, weapons, and enslaved people to serve them in the afterlife. They were adorned in pieces of jadeite jewelry before their bodies were sealed in tombs.

WAR

Kings led military battles. Wars between the city-states were common. Just as there was no one king over all the Maya territories, there was not a single army. Every king had his own army made up of men from his city and the surrounding countryside. Warriors usually attacked rival cities at night. They suddenly announced their presence with a loud horn blare.

Warriors wore tall headdresses and animal pelts. They carried flint-tipped wooden spears and shields woven from palm trees, or animal skins. Their wives traveled with them. War raids lasted several weeks and the most. They were never held when it was time to plant or harvest crops, as this source of food was critical to all of the city-states. A goal of war was to capture prisoners. They were either enslaved or sacrificed. Maya kings feared being captured, tortured, and beheaded by a rival king as part of a blood sacrifice. The Maya fought over land and natural resources that made kings more powerful. Defensive walls were put up around border cities as the Maya population grew. Military service was one of few ways commoners could rise in social ranks.



PRIESTS

Assemblies of priests and nobles served as advisers. Priests had a large influence on how kings ruled. Kings often came to priests for advice on what to do in a crisis or to get predictions of the future. Religion was an important part of Maya life. Priests, who were thought to talk to the gods, were powerful and respected figures in the government. Priests communicated with the gods to make important decisions about when crops should be planted, when women should have babies, and when special religious ceremonies should be held. They based these on the movements of the planets, moons, and stars. Priests climbed the stairs of pyramid temples to perform ceremonies and sacrifices to keep the gods happy. Shaman-priests were skilled doctors who took care of the physical needs of the people. They used magic, sorcery, and medicines from the natural world to heal the sick.



TRADE

Trade networks gave the Maya wealth and strength in their region. Maya city-states traded with one another and outside groups. Merchants from the lowlands traveled to other cities to sell honey, cotton cloth, tobacco, vanilla, cacao beans, and animal skins. Jadeite, obsidian, copal, and quetzal feathers only worn by kings came from the highlands. Merchants from the coastal cities sold dried fish, turtle eggs, shells, pearls, and salt. They preferred to peddle their goods in busy city squares. Merchants traveled west for long distances to trade with their Toltec and Aztec neighbors. They carried goods on their backs, using a tumpline, since they did not have horses or other pack animals. They used large wooden canoes, called chem, to cross rivers and the ocean to reach the Caribbean and Panama. Cacao was so valuable that it became the currency of the Maya.

LAWS

The Maya Empire had the same laws from city to city and were known for being strict. Some crimes, like murder, arson, and acts against the gods, were usually punished with death. Punishments were reduced if the crimes were ruled accidents. Law breakers appeared in court before local leaders or nobles who served as judges. The king served as the judge in more serious cases. Evidence was reviewed and witnesses were heard at trials. Punishments varied based on the crime. They carried out immediately if the person was found guilty. Sometimes the punishment was to cut the criminal's hair very short. Everyone knew they had committed a crime until their hair grew back out. This was very embarrassing. Maya nobles were subject to the same laws and were often punished more severely than commoners.

FATE

The Maya were at the height of their power from around 250 to 900. Sometime around 900, Maya cities were deserted. The Maya left their homes in the jungle and the temples fell to ruin. No one knows exactly why. Scientists have some ideas though. The Maya were very successful, and their population had grown. Scientists think that Mesoamerica had a long drought around this time. The land grew dry, and the crops likely failed. There may not have been enough food for everyone. Maya cities in the far north survived and lasted until the early 1500s. Spanish explorers came to the region and conquered the Maya and other native cultures. The age of Maya rule ended. Over 6 million Maya people still live in Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. Many Maya temples still stand. The ruins of Chichen Izta, Copan, and Caracol attract tourists from all over.

Name _____

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IDENTIFY: Use the word bank to identify each description.

priests	city-states	king	Chichen Izta
war	gods	sacrifices	markets
	1. The Maya government was divided into these		
	2 Ruins of this Maya city can still be visited		
	3. Were thought to talk to the gods		
	4. Ruler of a Maya city-state		
	5. One goal of this was to capture prisoners		
	6. Items were traded at these		
	7. Kings were thought to be descendants of these		
	8. These were performed to keep the gods happy		

SHORT ANSWER: Answer the question.

9. Why were Maya priests powerful?



MULTIPLE CHOICE: Choose the best answer.

10. When did Maya kings serve as judges in court?
 - A. When their family was involved
 - B. When nobles were involved
 - C. When hearing serious cases
 - D. When priests were involved
11. Which is true about Maya kings?
 - A. A king's son automatically became the next king.
 - B. Only men were Maya kings.
 - C. Maya kings ruled over the entire empire.
 - D. Maya kings performed rituals to speak with the gods.
12. What happened to prisoners who were captured in wars?
 - A. They were all enslaved.
 - B. They all were sacrificed.
 - C. They either enslaved or sacrificed.
 - D. They were enslaved for awhile and then freed.
13. What was the main relationship between Maya priests and kings?
 - A. Kings often asked priests for advice and predictions.
 - B. Kings and priests often made the laws together.
 - C. Priests often asked kings for advice and predictions.
 - D. They spoke to the gods together.
14. Which is true about Maya laws?
 - A. Nobles and commoners had different laws.
 - B. People were immediately killed after committing a crime.
 - C. People were still punished even if they accidentally committed a crime.
 - D. Criminals sometimes had their hair cut short to embarrass them.
15. What is the most likely reason the Maya deserted their cities?
 - A. A drought likely caused their crops to fail.
 - B. They wanted to escape Spanish conquest.
 - C. Other natives began attacking them.
 - D. Their buildings were not well built and started to break down.

