**Student Reading: Achievements of the Maya**

The Maya were an American Indian people who developed a magnificent civilization in Central America and south Mexico. The Maya lived in an area of about 120,000 square miles (311,000 square kilometers). Today, their territory is divided among Mexico and several Central American countries. One of the largest known cities of the Classic Period, Tikal, probably had a population of about 60,000 at its peak. Another 30,000 people lived in the surrounding area. People from the countryside gathered in the Maya cities for markets, religious festivals, and other important events.

**Agriculture and Trade**

Maya farmers raised chiefly beans, corn, and squash. Corn was the principal food of the Maya, and the women prepared it in a variety of ways. They filled corn dough with meat, making what are today called tamales, and made corn flatbread, which today are called tortillas. The Maya also used corn to make an alcoholic drink called balche, which they sweetened with honey and spiced with bark. The Maya also raised avocados,cacao (chocolate), cashews, cassava, chili peppers, guava, jicama, and sweet potatoes.

Maya farmers became skilled at making the best use of natural resources. They dug canals in swampy lowlands to drain the soil and used the unearthed soil to build raised fields in which they grew crops. On sloping land, farmers built terraces to hold the soil in place and walls to control water flow. With such methods, the Maya grew enough food to feed a large population.

The Maya kept domestic dogs for use in hunting and for food and raised turkeys and honey bees on farms. The Maya hunted armadillos, deer, rabbits, piglike animals called peccaries, and other wild animals. They fished and collected shellfish from the rivers and sea. They also gathered fruits and vegetables from the countryside.

The Maya took part in a trade network that linked a number of groups in Central America. The people of the Maya lowlands exported many items, including handicrafts, forest and sea products, and jaguar pelts. They imported jade, obsidian (volcanic glass), and the feathers of a bird called the quetzal from Maya in the highlands of Guatemala.

The Maya of Yucatán sent salt and finely decorated cottons to Honduras. In return, they received cacao beans, which they used in making chocolate. The Maya also transported goods as far as the Valley of Oaxaca in Mexico and the city of Teotihuacan, near what is now Mexico City. They carried most goods on their backs or on rivers in dugout canoes. They did not use the wheel or any beasts of burden, such as horses or oxen.

**Arts and Architecture**

The Maya produced exceptional architecture, painting, pottery, and sculpture. Highly skilled architects built tall pyramids of limestone, with small temples on top. The Maya also built large, low buildings where rulers and other nobles lived. Many buildings had flat ornaments called roof combs, which extended from the high point of the roof. The combs gave buildings the appearance of great height.

Maya artists decorated walls with brightly colored murals that featured lifelike figures taking part in battles and festivals. The artists outlined the figures and then filled in the color. They rarely shaded the colors.

The Maya made small sculptures of clay and carved huge ones from stone. Most of the small sculptures were figures of men and women. The large sculptures, some standing over 30 feet (9 meters) high, were carved with portraits of rulers.

**Language and Writing**

The Maya developed an advanced form of writing that consisted of many symbols. These symbols represented combinations of sounds or entire ideas and formed a kind of hieroglyphic writing (see [Hieroglyphics](http://www.worldbookonline.com/student/article?id=ar256100#tab=homepage)).

The Maya kept records on large stone monuments called stelae, as well as on some buildings and household utensils. They used the stelae to record important dates and to take note of great events in the lives of their rulers and the rulers' families. The Maya also made books of paper made from fig tree bark. Only a few books, dating from the 1100’s to the early 1500’s, have survived. They contain astronomical tables, information about religious ceremonies, and calendars that show lucky days for such activities as farming and hunting.

Source: Adapted from Hageman, Jon B. "Maya." World Book Student. World Book, 2016. Web. 22 Nov. 2016.

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