13.13: The Preclassic Period of the Maya

Learning Objective

- Describe life in the Preclassic period

Key Points

- The Preclassic period itself is further divided into four periods: Early Preclassic, Middle Preclassic, Late Preclassic, and Terminal Preclassic.
- The Early Preclassic period (2000–1000 BCE) was when the Maya transitioned into an agrarian society.
- In the Middle Preclassic period (1000–400 BCE), the Mayans built more established cities and expanded through war.
- Two powerful states emerged in the Late Preclassic period (400 BCE–100 CE).
- The Mayan civilization collapsed and left the major Preclassic capitals behind at the end of the Terminal Preclassic period (100–250 CE) for unknown reasons.

Terms

kakaw

An Olmec word for the cacao plant. This word was borrowed and incorporated into the Mayan language, illustrating the relationship between these two cultures.
Southern Maya Area

The geographic region in which Mayan civilization first emerged.

Kaminaljuyu

The ruling city-state of the Middle Preclassic era. Evidence of stone monuments and complex canals illustrate the power this early capital retained for centuries.

The Preclassic period is the first of three periods in Mayan history, coming before the Classic and Postclassic periods. It extended from the emergence of the first settlements sometime between 2000 and 1500 BCE until 250 CE. The Preclassic period saw the rise of large-scale ceremonial architecture, writing, cities, and states. Many of the distinctive elements of Mesoamerican civilization can be traced back to this period, including the dominance of corn, the building of pyramids, human sacrifice, jaguar worship, the complex calendar, and many of the gods.

Mayan language speakers most likely originated in the Chiapas-Guatemalan Highlands and dispersed from there. By around 2500–2000 BCE researchers can begin to trace the arc of Mayan-language settlements and culture in what is now southeastern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. The Preclassic period itself is divided into four periods: Early Preclassic, Middle Preclassic, Late Preclassic, and Terminal Preclassic

Agricultural Shift: Early Preclassic (2000 BCE–1000 BCE)

Though the exact starting date of Mayan civilization is unclear, there were Mayan language speakers in the Southern Maya Area by 2000 BCE. It appears that around this time the Maya people began to transition from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to a culture based around agricultural villages. The process appears to have been a gradual one. Analysis of bones from early Maya grave sites indicates that, although maize had already become a major component of the diet by this time, fish, meat from game animals, and other hunted or gathered foods still made up a major component of the diet. Along with the gradual development of agriculture, basic forms of pottery began to appear, with simple designs and some slipped vessels.

Around this time, the Olmec culture began to emerge in nearby Tabasco, granting the early Maya an important trading partner and beginning a period of prolonged contact that would have profound effects on Maya society and artistic production.
Southern Maya Area. By 2000 BCE, there were speakers of Mayan languages in the Southern Maya Area.

Complex Cities: Middle Preclassic (1000 BCE–400 BCE)

By around the year 1000 BCE, centuries of agricultural village life had begun to form the beginnings of a complex society, with an elite class, entrenched religious practices, and a military presence. Other developments of this era include the following:

- Prestige goods, such as obsidian mirrors and jade mosaics, began to appear, increasing the demand for more extensive trade with other language groups, including the Olmecs.
- Canals and irrigation schemes demanding coordinated human effort began to appear with increasing complexity and scale.
- Villages began to include central plazas and earthen mounds, occasionally enhanced by masonry. For instance, the site of La Blanca featured a central mound more than seventy-five feet tall. It contained a masonry fragment strongly resembling a head in the distinctive Olmec style. These plazas also suggest a developing religious and hierarchical social structure.
- Carved stone stele also began to appear during this period, adorned with portraits of rulers but still devoid of writing.
- Warfare appears to have intensified during this period, as evidenced by advanced weaponry, rulers beginning to be portrayed as warriors, and the appearance of mass graves and decapitated skeletons.

Beginning around 900 BCE, the Pacific coastal region fell under the dominance of the La Blanca statelet, which collapsed around 600 BCE, to be replaced by a polity centered around the El Ujuxte site. Another early statelet was probably based at the site of Chalchuapa, a town with extensive earthen mounds arranged around several plazas. However, it was likely ruled by the first true Mayan city-state, Kaminaljuyu.
Excavation site at Kaminaljuyu. Complex temples, stairways, and friezes illustrate the acme of this Preclassic city’s power and influence.

Lying within modern-day Guatemala City on the shores of Lake Miraflorres, Kaminaljuyu developed a powerful government structure that organized massive irrigation campaigns and built numerous intricately carved stone monuments to its rulers. These monuments clearly depict war captives and often show the rulers holding weapons. These images indicate the Kaminaljuyu polity engaged in active warfare and dominated the Guatemalan highlands for centuries.

Nakbe Palace. The ruins of a Middle Preclassic palace at Nakbe.

During this period, the Olmec culture reached its zenith, centered around the capital of La Venta in modern-day Tabasco near the early Maya centers. Speakers of a Mixe–Zoquean language, the Olmec are generally recognized as the first true civilization in the Americas. Their capital city of La Venta contains extensive earthworks and stone monuments, including several of the distinctive Olmec stone heads. The Olmec share several features with later Maya culture, including extensive jaguar worship, a diet dominated by maize, and the use of the cacao plant. Several words entered Mayan from a Mixe–Zoquean language, presumably due to Olmec influence. These words include the words “ajaw,” meaning “lord,” and “kakaw,” which has become the English words “cacao” and “chocolate.” Most of these borrowings relate to prestige concepts and high culture, indicating that the Middle Preclassic Maya were deeply impressed and...
Art and Language: Late Preclassic (400 BCE–100 CE)

Some of the earliest remaining examples of the complex writing system of the Maya appear from the 3rd century BCE. The glyph-based system represents complex concepts and often reflects the religious beliefs of the Maya, including jaguar worship, elites practicing blood letting rituals, and offerings to deities. The Maya also developed the concept of the number zero during this era. The appearance of an explicit number zero in their written records might be the first example of it worldwide. The appearance of this number also helped Mayan architects and priests make exact calculations of the stars and buildings for religious and social purposes.

The Late Preclassic also saw the rise of two powerful states that rival later Classic Mayan city-states for scale and monumental architecture—Kaminaljuyu in the highlands and El Mirador in the lowlands. Both cities display the continued refinement in stonework, artistic friezes, and architecture during this era.

City Collapse: Terminal Preclassic (100 CE–250 CE)

The Late or Terminal Preclassic murals found in San Bartolo reflect the profound relationship between the Olmec and Maya civilizations over hundreds of years, due to the striking artistic similarities. These murals also provide a window into the Terminal Preclassic sacrificial and inauguration rituals, such as bloodletting, that were practiced around 100 BCE. Elites were expected to perform these painful rituals in reverence to powerful deities.
Painted mural at San Bartolo from around 100 BCE. This colorful mural depicts a king practicing bloodletting, probably for an inauguration or other sacrificial purpose.

The collapse of the Preclassic Maya civilization remains a mystery, and little is known as to why the major cities were abandoned around 250 CE. However, there were actually two collapses, one at the end of the Preclassic and a more famous one at the end of the Classic. The Preclassic collapse refers to the systematic decline and abandoning of the major Preclassic cities, such as Kaminaljuyu and El Mirador around 100 CE. In fact, the Maya remained an essential part of the region. A number of theories have been proposed, but there is as little consensus as there is for the causes of the more famous collapse between the Classic and Postclassic periods.

Sources

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