

The Maya Glossary



Ahau

The Maya word for "god" and for "high king".

Ah kin

A high priest.

Atl-atl

Spear-throwing device.

Bacab

A class of important gods.

Balam (pl. Balamob)

Jaguar spirit. There are traditionally four of these, which watch to keep evil away from Maya villages and householders, even today. The balamob were benevolent but feared, and acted as guardians of the corn fields.

Balché

A strong wine.

Cenote

A natural waterhole. Cenote is a corruption by the Spanish of the Maya word dzonot, a large circular sink-hole created by the collapse of limestone caves. The water in cenotes is filtered through limestone and constituted one of the primary sources of drinking water for the Maya. Patterns of settlement among the early Maya often followed the location of cenotes.

Chicle

The juice of the sapodilla tree, used in the making of chewing gum.

Chilan

A soothsayer or medium.

Chultun (pl. Chultunob)

A bottle-shaped cistern constructed underground by the Maya. The entrances to these were surrounded by plastered aprons which directed rainwater into the chultunob during the rainy seasons.

Corte

Indian woman's traditional full-length skirt.

Haab

One of the three Maya calendars, and the one which corresponds most closely to ours in length. The haab is also known as the "Vague Year" by archaeologists, since it is 365 days in length, or about a quarter day short of the actual solar year.

Halach Uinic

Literally, "the chief of men" - a leader or king.

Huipel

A traditional Maya wraparound, woven cotton dress, worn leaving the shoulders bare.

Lacandón

A region of rain forest between the Petén and the eastern slopes of the Chiapas highlands. Also refers to the Maya people who inhabit this region.

K'awil

Sustenance or alms, used as an offering to the gods. It could be any precious substance, such as blood, semen, sap, maize, dough, gum from trees, rubber, and so on. The God of Sustenances is called K'awil.

Ladino

A person of mixed Maya-God Of-Spanish race.

Manta

A square of cloth, used as a cloak or blanket; still worn by the Maya today.

Maya

The Maya originated around 2600 B.C. and rose to prominence around A.D. 250 in present-day Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador. Inheriting the inventions and ideas of earlier civilizations, the Maya developed astronomy, calendrical systems, hieroglyphic writing, ceremonial architecture, and masonry without metal tools. Maya civilization started to decline around A.D. 900, although some peripheral centres continued to thrive until the Spanish conquest in the early part of the sixteenth century.

Mayan

The language group of the Maya peoples, composed of 31 mutually unintelligible languages. The term should be reserved for Mayan languages. The word "Maya" should be used for the name of the people, either as a noun or an adjective.)

Mesoamerica

An ethno-geographical area in Central America, which included Guatemala, Belize, the northwestern edges of Honduras and El Salvador, and the Mexican provinces of Yucatán, Quintana Roo, Campeche and part of Tabasco.

Milpa

A cornfield.

Nacom

A Maya military commander.

Olmec

A highly elaborate Mesoamerican culture on the Mexican gulf coast which was at its height from 1200 to 600 B.C. The Olmec influenced the rise and development of the other great civilizations of Mesoamerica, such as the Maya, and were probably the first to develop large religious and ceremonial centres with temple mounds, monumental sculptures, massive altars, and sophisticated systems of drains and lagoons. The Olmec were probably also the first Mesoamericans to devise glyph writing and the 260-day calendar.

Petén

The northern portion of Guatemala. Covered for the most part by rain forest, Petén was the centre of Classic Maya civilization until its collapse, after which the area was largely abandoned.

Pok-a-tok

A Maya ball game.

Pom

The resin of the copal tree, used by the Maya for rubber, chewing gum and incense.

Quetzal

A rare Central American bird. It was prized by the Maya kings for its brilliant blue-green feathers. The male bird has a tail close to 60 cm. long. Today this bird is nearing extinction.

Sacbe

Literally, "white road"; a Maya stone causeway linking Maya buildings and settlements.

Tecomates

Thin-walled neckless jars used by archaeologists to date Maya sites.

Toltec

The Toltecs ruled much of Maya central Mexico from the tenth to twelfth centuries A.D. The Toltecs were the last dominant Mesoamerican culture before the Aztecs, and inherited much from Maya civilization. The Toltec capital was at Tula, 80 kilometres north of Mexico City. The most impressive Toltec ruins, however, are at Chichén Itzá in Yucatán, where a branch of Toltec culture survived beyond the civilization's fall in central Mexico.

Tzolkin

The 260-day Maya calendar, also known as the "Sacred Round".

Uayeb

The five unlucky days in the 365-day haab calendar of the Maya.

Witz

The first mountain in the Maya creation story. Temples are representations of Witz.

Xibalbá

The Maya underworld where people go when they die.

Yucatán

The homeland of the first Maya; from here, they spread to Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, and other provinces of Mexico. Yucatán was called the "Land of Turkey and Deer" by the Maya, because of the abundance of edible wildlife found there.