

# The History of Mayapan

**Mayapan** Pre-Columbian [Maya](#) site a couple of kilometers south of the town of [Telchaquillo](#) in the [Municipality of Tecoh](#), approximately 40 km south-east of [Mérida](#) and 100 km west of [Chichen Itza](#); in the state of [Yucatán, Mexico](#). Mayapan was the political and cultural capital of the Maya in the Yucatán Peninsula during the Late Post-Classic period from the 1220s until the 1440s. Estimates of the total city population are 15,000–17,000 people, and the site has more than 4,000 structures within the city walls, and additional dwellings outside.



The site has been professionally surveyed and excavated by archeological teams, beginning in 1939; five years of work was done by a team in the 1950s, and additional studies were done in the 1990s. Since 2000, a collaborative Mexican-United States team has been conducting excavations and recovery at the site, which continue.

Mayapan is 4.2 square kilometers (about 1.6 square miles) and has over 4000 structures, most of them residences, packed into this compound within the city walls. Built-up areas extend a half kilometer beyond the city walls in all directions. The stone perimeter wall has twelve gates, including seven major gates with vaulted entrances. The wall is 9.1 km (about 5.65 miles) long and is roughly ovate with a pointed northeast corner.

The ceremonial center of the site is located in Square Q of the city's grid in the center of the wider western half of the walled enclosure. The ceremonial center has a tightly packed cluster of temples, colonnaded halls, oratories, shrines, sanctuaries, altars, and platforms (for oration, dancing, or stela display). A.L. Smith, an archeologist with the [Carnegie Institute](#), estimated 10–12,000 people lived within the walled city.

According to Dr. Gregory Simons survey outside the city walls, there were numerous additional dwellings and he revised the total population estimate to between 15,000–17,000 people. His survey results are posted online at [www.mayapanperiphery.net](#). People living outside of the city wall engaged in agriculture, animal-raising, and specialized activities such as lime production. Russell also found a colonnaded hall outside the city wall, revealing much is still to be discovered regarding the complexity of this urban landscape.

The Temple of [Kukulcan](#), a large pyramid also known as the Castillo, is the main temple in Mayapan. It is located immediately to the east of the Cenote Ch'en Mul, which has caves radiating from it. In form, the Temple of Kukulcan (Structure Q-162 on the site map) is a radial four-staircase temple with nine terraces; it is generally similar to the Temple of Kukulcan at the earlier site of [Chichen Itza](#). However, the Mayapan temple appears to be an inferior imitation of the one at Chichen Itza, and the city's buildings in general are not constructed as well as those in other Mayan cities. For example, most or all of the vaulted roofs in Mayapan have collapsed, while many of the better-built buildings at Chichen Itza remain intact. Other major temples in the ceremonial center include three round ones, which are unusual for the Maya area and are also linked to the deity Kukulcan/Quetzalcoatl in his wind god (Ehecatl) aspect. Unlike Chichen Itza, the Mayapan site has no [ballcourts](#).

The extensive residential zones of the site are composed of dwellings and ancillary domestic structures, with those around the ceremonial district larger and of higher quality and those toward the fringes being generally poorer. The houses are often arranged in small patio groups surrounding small courtyards. Houses were built haphazardly without organized streets. Lanes wind among the residences and walls. The residential areas of the site contain many cenotes, perhaps as many as 40. Settlement was the most dense in the southwestern part of the city where cenotes are more numerous.

The ethnohistorical sources – such as Diego de Landa's *Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatan*, compiled from native sources in the 16th century – recount that the site was founded by Kukulcan (the Mayan name of [Quetzalcoatl](#), the [Toltec](#) king, culture hero, and demigod) after the fall of Chichen Itza. He convened the lords of the region, who agreed to found a new capital at Mayapan. The lords divided the towns of Yucatán among them, and chose the chief of the [Cocom](#) family as their leader.

The ethnohistorical sources recount multiple different histories of the rise and fall of Mayapan (Roys 1962). These histories are often confusing, chronologically implausible, and difficult to reconcile. For example, some sources say that the Maya revolted in 1221 against the Maya-Toltec lords of Chichen Itza. After a short civil war, the lords of various powerful cities and families met to restore a central government to Yucatán. They decided to build a new capital city near

the town of Telchaquillo, hometown of [Hunac Ceel](#), the general who defeated the rulers of Chichen Itza. The new city was built within a [defensive wall](#) and named *Mayapan*, meaning "Standard of the Maya people".

The chief of the Cocom family, a rich and ancient lineage that had taken part in the revolt against Chichen, was chosen to be king, and all the other noble families and regional lords were to send members of their families to Mayapan to play parts in the government (and perhaps act as hostages for the good behavior of the subsidiary cities). Mexican mercenaries from Tabasco were also employed to keep order and maintain power. Another family, the Xiu, may have been living in the Mayapan area prior to the arrival of the Cocom; the Xiu claim to be a part of the lineage from [Uxmal](#). This arrangement lasted for over 200 years. (An alternative account is given in a Maya chronicle from the Colonial era, claiming that Mayapan was contemporary with Chichen Itza and [Uxmal](#) and allied with those cities, but archeological evidence shows this version to be less likely.)

Mayapan became the primary city in a group of allies that included much of the northern Yucatán, and trade partners that extended directly to [Honduras](#), [Belize](#), and the Caribbean island of [Cozumel](#), and indirectly to Mexico. Though Mayapan was ruled by a council, the *Jalach winik* and the *aj k'in* (the highest ruler, and the high priest) dominated the political sphere. Below the two primary officials were many other officials with varying responsibilities. The range of classes went from the nobility, down to slaves, with intermediary classes in between. The social climate of Mayapan was made complicated by the antagonistic relationship between the factions of nobles, which were often arranged by kinship (Pugh 2009; Milbrath 2003). In 1441, [Ah Xupan](#) of the powerful noble family of Xiu became resentful of the political machinations of the Cocom rulers and organized a revolt. As a result, all of the Cocom family, except one who was away in Honduras conducting trade, were killed, Mayapan was sacked, burned, and abandoned, all the larger cities went into decline, and Yucatán devolved into warring city-states.

Archaeological evidence indicates that at least the ceremonial center was burned at the end of the occupation. Excavation has revealed burnt roof beams in several of the major buildings in the site center.



Maya Ruins in Mayapan



The Templo Redondo with a Mayan carving in the foreground.



This picture was taken on the highest pyramid of the site.