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**The Maya**

6th Grade (Western Hemisphere - Era 3)

***Political Structures***

A typical Classic Maya polity was a small hierarchical state (ajawil, ajawlel, or ajawlil) headed by

a hereditary ruler known as an ajaw (later k’uhul ajaw).[14] Such kingdoms were usually no more

than a capital city with its neighborhood and several lesser towns, although there were greater kingdoms, which controlled larger territories and extended patronage over smaller polities.

Each kingdom had a name that did not necessarily correspond to any locality within its territory.

Its identity was that of a political unit associated with a particular ruling dynasty. For instance, the

archaeological site of Naranjo was the capital of the kingdom of Saal. The land (chan ch’e’n) of the

kingdom and its capital were called Wakab’nal or Maxam and were part of a larger geographical

entity known as Huk Tsuk. Interestingly, despite constant warfare and eventual shifts in regional

power, most kingdoms never disappeared from the political landscape until the collapse of the

whole system in the 9th century CE. In this respect, Classic Maya kingdoms are highly similar to

late Post Classic polities encountered by the Spaniards in Yucatán and Central Mexico: some polities

could be subordinated to hegemonic rulers through conquests or dynastic unions and yet even

then they persisted as distinct entities.

Mayanists have been increasingly accepting a "court paradigm" of Classic Maya societies which

puts the emphasis on the centrality of the royal household and especially the person of the king.

This approach focuses on Maya monumental spaces as the embodiment of the diverse activities of

the royal household. It considers the role of places and spaces (including dwellings of royalty and

nobles, throne rooms, temples, halls and plazas for public ceremonies) in establishing power and

social hierarchy, and also in projecting aesthetic and moral values to define the wider social realm.

Spanish sources invariably describe even the largest Maya settlements as dispersed collections of

dwellings grouped around the temples and palaces of the ruling dynasty and lesser nobles. None

of the Classic Maya cities shows evidence of economic specialization and commerce of the scale

of Mexican Tenochtitlan. Instead, Maya cities could be seen as enormous royal households, the

locales of the administrative and ritual activities of the royal court. They were the places where

privileged nobles could approach the holy ruler, where aesthetic values of the high culture were

formulated and disseminated, where aesthetic items were consumed. They were the self-proclaimed

centers and the sources of social, moral, and cosmic order. The fall of a royal court as in the well documented cases of Piedras Negras or Copan would cause the inevitable "death" of the associated settlement.

**Maya p.2**

***Trade***

Trade was a crucial factor in maintaining cities. Although the economy was fairly loose, and based

mostly on food and other basic necessities, there was a large need for trade in order to bring such

basic goods together. The types of trade varied greatly, from long-distance trading spanning the

length of the region, to small trading between farm families.

Because of the readily available resources in most of the Maya territory, small towns did not need

to take part in long-distance trading and limited trade to local bartering and exchange. Despite the

fact that the area was rich in resources, even the most self-sufficient farm families, which were the

vast majority of the population, still had to participate in exchanges in order to obtain the necessities

(the necessities would generally include some pottery, stone tools, and salt). The craftsmen

in the small cities who specialized in the cities began to grow, so did the need for increased trade.

Cities such as Tikal and El Mirador are two such examples. Tikal, specifically, had a population

somewhere in the range of 60,000–120,000 people, which means it would have needed to get food

and other goods from up to 100 km away. Because of the size of these cities, they would have also

needed a larger amount of control from the Rulers to oversee it. Eventually the increased trade, and

growing cities gave the Rulers more power over their territory and their subjects.

However, not only the central cities in the empire grew. Because of the increased amount of traffic through the smaller cities along trade roots, these once isolated cities grew too, creating a fairly

consistent amount of growth throughout the Post-Classic period.

Evidence discovered in the past few decades seems to prove that trade was widespread among the Maya. Artifacts collected under grants from the National Science Foundation, the National Geographic Society, and Howard University, show that hard stones and many other goods were moved

great distances (despite the inefficiency of moving goods without so-called 'beasts of burden').

Modern chemical tests have taken these artifacts and confirmed that they originated in locations

great distances away. There is also documented trade of goods ranging from honey to quetzal feathers

throughout the Maya region.

The goods, which were moved and traded around the empire, include: Salt, hard stone, Maize,

Honey, Cocoa, and Pottery. And for the elites, such goods as: Quetzal Feathers, Fine Ceramics,

Jade, and Pyrite. Textiles were often traded for as well because they were easily transported.

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**Maya p.3**

***Commodities***

As trade grew in the Postclassic period, so did the demand for commodities. Many of these were

produced in specialized workshops around the empire, and then transported elsewhere. Some of

these commodities included, fine ceramics, stone tools, jade, pyrite, quetzal feathers, cocoa beans,

obsidian, and salt.

Mostly the main population used the more basic commodities, such as stone tools, salt, cocoa

beans, and pottery. But some of the other commodities like jade, pyrite, fine ceramics, and quetzal

feathers were goods that elite rulers used to show off their power.

Arguably the most important of these commodities was salt. Salt was not only an important part of the Mayan’s diet, but it also was critical in the preservation of food. By covering meat and other

food items in salt the Maya were able to dehydrate is so that it would not rot. Salt, for the most part,

was produced near the oceans by drying out large flats of seawater. After the flats were dry, the salt

could be collected and moved throughout the empire.

Chocolate was used throughout the Maya region to make sauces, and for drinks. It was grown

mostly in the lowlands, so it was often transported to the highlands.

Ceramics were produced in specialized workshops, before being traded **for other** goods. Often the work produced by a particular artist, was heavily sought after by the elite classes of Maya society.

Ceramics were also circulated through kingdoms, and local areas as gifts from one ruler to another.

This was usually the case because of the strong symbol of power and wealth the fine arts provided.

The ceramics produced were mainly plates, vases, and cylindrical glasses. When painted, these pots

were usually painted red, with some orange and black.

Rare stones such as jade and pyrite were also very important to the Maya elite. These stones were relatively hard to acquire, so having such treasures helped them to solidify their positions in the society. Many of the stones were collected in the highland of the empire, so when long-distance trade

developed, the Maya were able to move more of these precious stones to the lowland cities.

Other stones, such as obsidian, were more common, but were also a crucial part of Maya society.

Obsidian was a strong volcanic glass, also from the highlands, which could be chipped and shaped

into strong sharp tools in order to be used for cutting. In the later years of the Empire obsidian was

moved extensively via long-distance trade routes.

During the early periods of the Maya, much of these commodities were only available to the regions in which they could be produced, or were naturally available. However, economic restructuring

during the transition from the Classic to the Postclassic periods, as well as the beginning of

trade over water allowed for larger volumes of long-distance trade to occur, and therefore the commodities were able to reach throughout the entire Maya region.

http://www.ccds.charlotte.nc.us/History/Americas/05/rizzo/index.html

<http://regentsprep.org/Regents/global/themes/economic/mes.cfm>

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**The Maya p.4**

**Summary**

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Directions: Write a 25 word summary on culture. Try to include as many of the KEY/IMPORTANT words from the text rendering notes.

25 WORD SUMMARY – The Maya

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