



Thousands of years ago, not a single human being lived in all of North or South America. Then, around 23,000 B.C., the first people arrived from Asia. Slowly, they roamed south, and some settled in parts of Mexico, Central America, and South America. Later, they became known as the Maya.

From these humble beginnings, the Maya created one of the most splendid civilizations of all time. They erected magnificent palaces, developed an elaborate system of writing and an accurate calendar, and were able to predict eclipses.

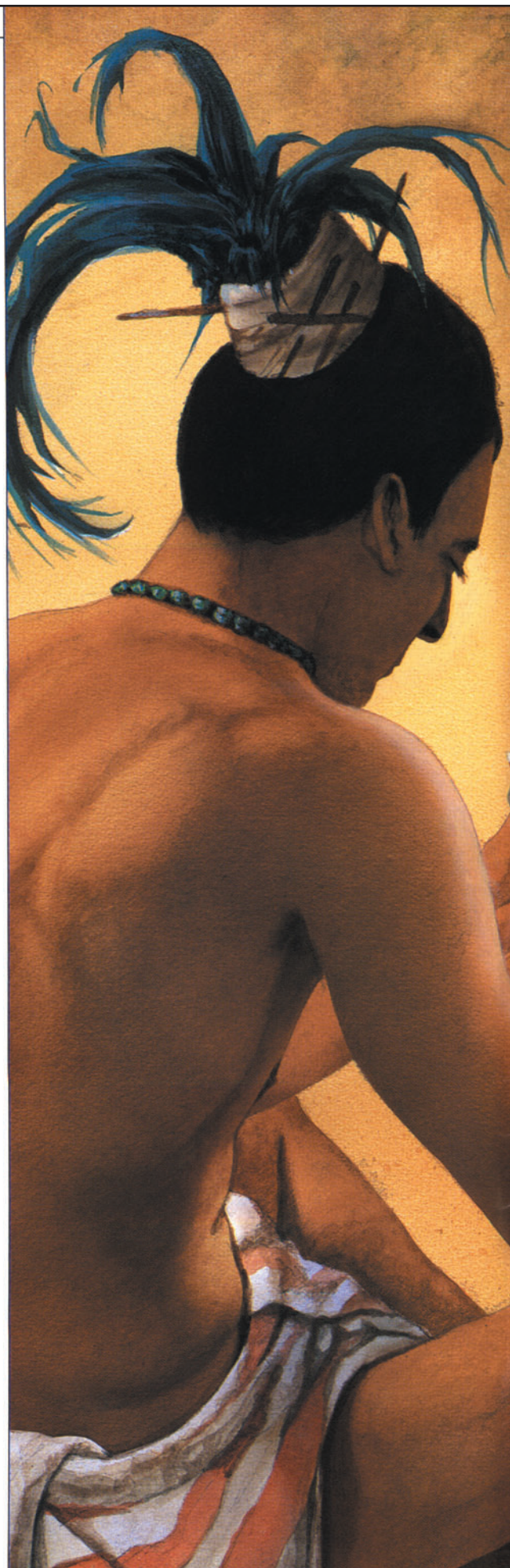
Then, around A.D. 800, something terrible must have occurred. During the next century, many Maya cities became deserted. In time, the jungle once again claimed this Maya land.

Who were the Maya? What did they achieve? Journey back in time and witness one of the most fascinating—and puzzling—civilizations of all times.

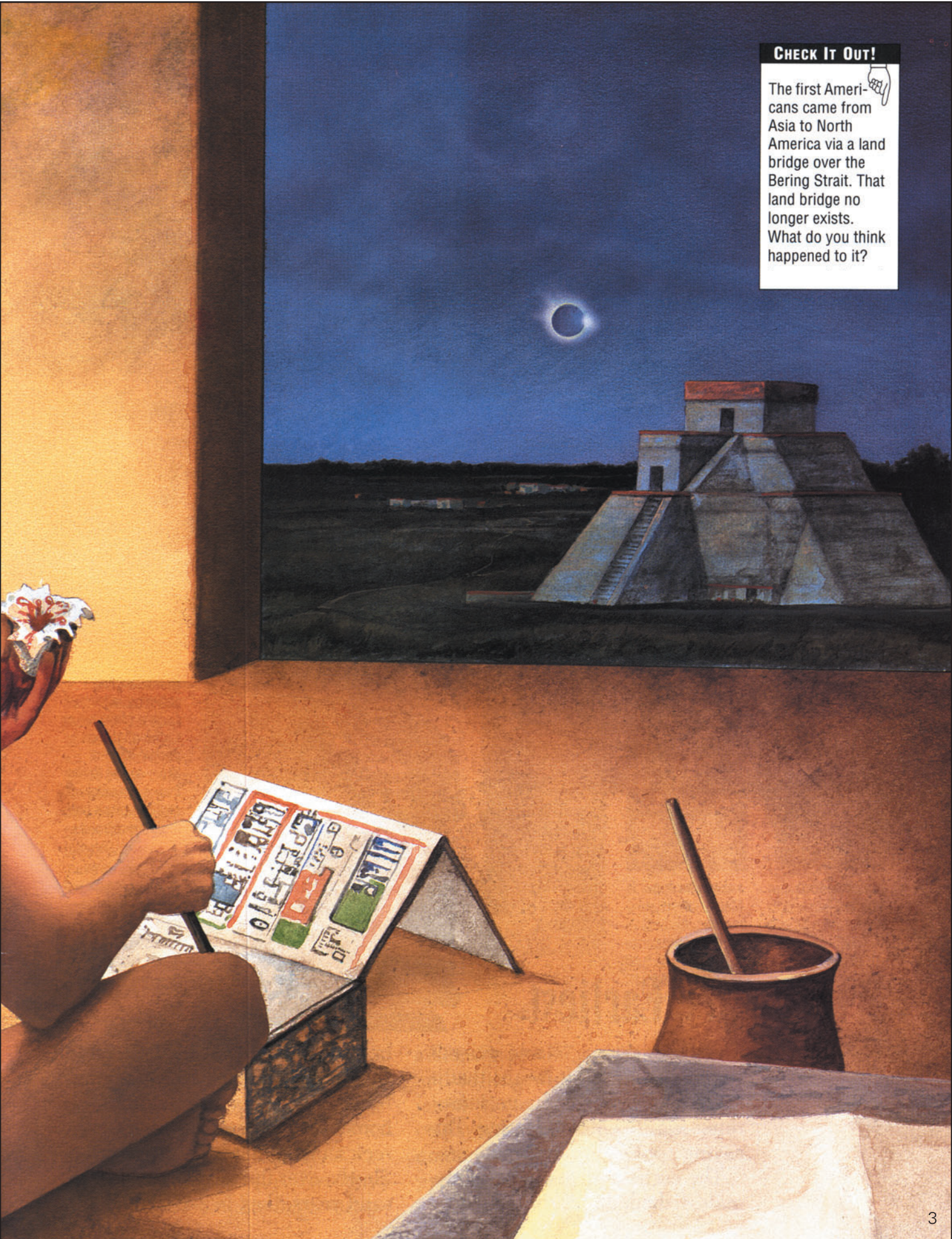
A THE MAYA lived in an area of about 120,000 square miles. The heart of their civilization was the tropical rain forests in what are now the lowlands of northern Guatemala.



A BLACK HOWLER monkeys were considered sacred by the Maya. They served as gods of writing.



CHECK IT OUT!
The first Americans came from Asia to North America via a land bridge over the Bering Strait. That land bridge no longer exists. What do you think happened to it?



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Preclassic Period

2000 B.C. to A.D. 250
Many Maya lived in settled communities.

ARCHAEOLOGISTS (experts who study the remains of past cultures) often divide time into periods to make it easier to discuss history. Maya history is divided into three periods.

Archaic Period

7000 B.C. to 2000 B.C.
Most Maya lived a hunting-and-gathering existence.



▲ **THE EARLIEST MAYA** lived in densely inhabited villages of high-pitched, thatched-roof houses.



WILD ANIMALS, ▲ such as deer, peccaries, tapirs, and monkeys, were hunted for food. Maize, beans, manioc, and squash, along with other crops, were cultivated outside the village. There were plenty of nuts, seeds, and wild fruits for the taking.



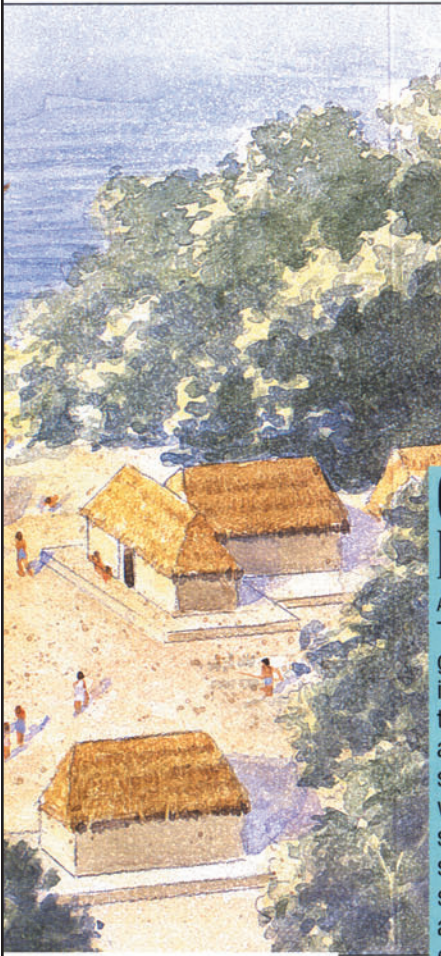
◀ **STATUES AND** carvings in many classic Maya cities show what the people looked like—or the looks they admired: straight black hair, high cheekbones, Oriental eyes, aquiline noses, and elongated skulls.

Early, Earlier, Earliest

There's a saying: "Rome was not built in one day." It means that it takes a long time to create something significant and lasting. This saying applies to the Maya.

The earliest Maya hunted animals, fished, and gathered wild

berries, nuts, and seeds for food. By around 7000 B.C., these roving bands of Maya began making homes for themselves—in caves, rock shelters, and open camps. Slowly, over the next several thousand years, they began living a



Classic Period

A.D. 250 to 900
The Maya reached great heights in intellectual, artistic, and cultural areas. A class system existed, in which there were some rich and some poor people, some craftspeople and some farmers, and some religious leaders and some political leaders.

► **TWELVE-YEAR-OLD** Pacal came to the throne in the town of Palenque in A.D. 615. He reigned for 68 years. During his time the city became large and powerful. When Lord Pacal died, he had a royal burial in the Temple of the Inscriptions. The sarcophagus (coffin) lid shows Lord Pacal resting on a throne.



► **THE TALLEST STELA** (stone slab) in the Maya area—more than 30 feet high—is Stela F at Quiriguá, Guatemala. On it is a portrait of Cauac Sky, an important ruler in A.D. 724. Stelae were erected to honor the important events in leaders' lives.



▲ **IMPORTANT PEOPLE** were buried in a seated position, along with pottery and other items. Platforms enclosed the tomb. Later



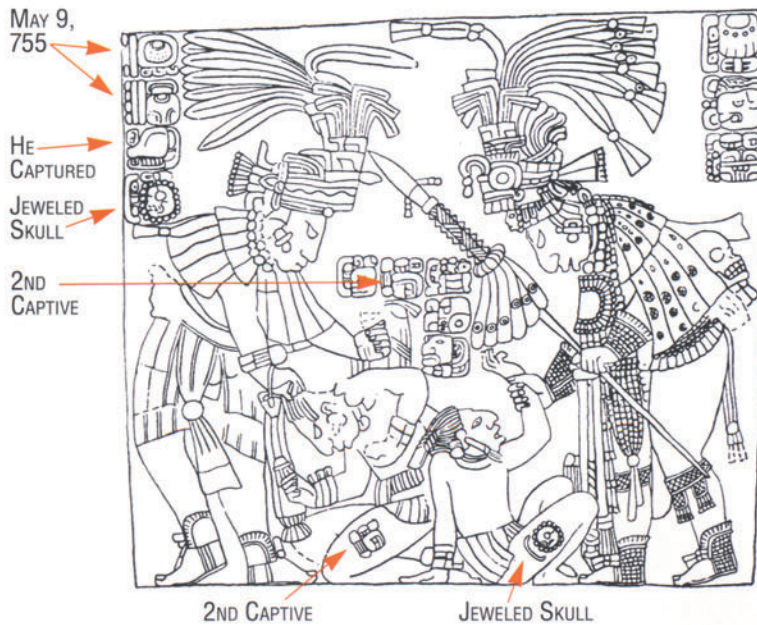
burials and their platforms were placed over previous ones. This jade mask, found in a tomb, depicted a nobleman.

more settled village life. They wore animal-skin clothing and used flint-tipped spears.

As time went on, cities appeared, some containing as many as 75,000 people. The Maya reached great heights in the arts,

scientific learning, architecture, and writing. Their economy flourished. Huge palaces, plazas, courtyards, and ball courts were erected. Towering temple-pyramids dotted the area.

THE INVENTIVE MAYA



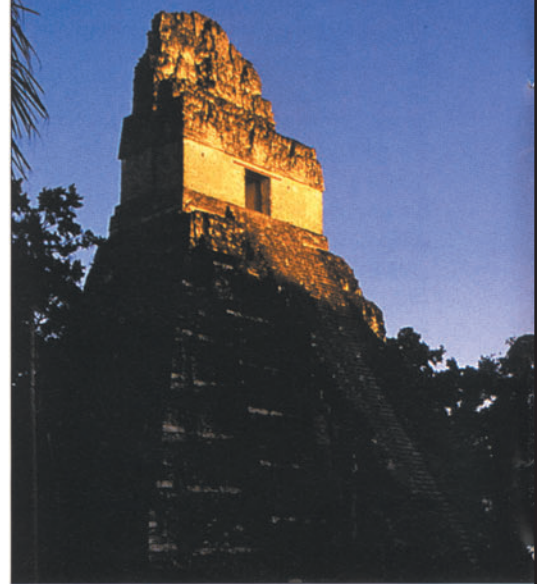
Ancient Astronomy

► **THE MAYA'S** knowledge of astronomy was very advanced. The Maya plotted the movements of the sun, moon, and Venus, and calculated the revolution of Venus around the sun as seen from the Earth to be 584 days. After many centuries of study, it has been determined that it is 583.92! This observatory is at Chichén Itzá.



▲ **THE MAYA LEFT** permanent records about their lives in hieroglyphs—pictures or symbols used to represent words, syllables, or sounds. Glyphs in books, on pots, carved in stone, and painted in murals show many aspects of Maya life, although most focus on important events in rulers' lives. Above is a record with the date of A.D. 755 on it, showing Bird Jaguar and a companion capturing Jeweled Skull and another enemy. Of all the people in the pre-Columbian Americas, only the Maya could write down anything they chose to in their own language.

▼ **THE MAYA PAINTED** and adorned their buildings with carved friezes, facades, and roof combs (extensions to make a building taller). Colorful murals adorned many interior walls. This structure is in Tikal, the largest of all classic sites.



▲ **THE MOST REMARKABLE ASPECT OF** the carvings is that they were done with stone tools—no metal was used in classic Maya times.



▲ **A FAVORITE ACTIVITY** for kids was *pok-ol-pok*. This ball game was both a competitive sport and a sacred ceremony. The players tried to knock a solid rubber ball through a stone ring. The ball had to be bounced off the hips, shoulders, and forearms. The winners were entitled to the clothing and jewelry of the losing team!



▲ **THE LONGEST** single inscription in the Maya area is contained on the risers of these steps in the Hieroglyphic Stairway at Copán. More than 2,500 stones were used in constructing the risers, which tell the history of the ruling family.



MAYA MATH MASTERY

Dad, I'll *never* understand how to count!

It's not *that* tough, son. Just listen closely. We Maya were among the first to invent a way to count into really big numbers. We can count as high as we want because we know how important **nothing** is.

Nothing!?! Zero, son. Only three peoples in all of history discovered it. Zero allows us to count until the iguana come home.

How, Dad?

The first thing you need to understand is that we use just three symbols for our numbers — a **shell** for zero, a **dot** for one, and a **bar** for five.

0 1 5

We can count all the way to **nineteen** with those same symbols.

0	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19

That makes sense.

Now, we Maya count in **steps**, as if walking down a stairway. On the lowest step are the numbers **1** through **19**. To show numbers from **20** to **399**, we go to the next step. A number on that step is **20** times what you think it is.

• = 120
 ●●●● = 14
 134

We add the two steps to get the number and read the number from **top** to **bottom**, right?

•• = 800
 ● = 120
 ●●●● = 14
 934

You're a chip off the old block! Now, we stay on this step until we get as high as the number **399**. Then we have to step up again. The same process works for this step, except that you must figure **20** times **20** times the number, or **400** times the number you see.

I get it! Just keep stepping!

Step on! This step is good until you get to **7,999**.

So why is the **zero** so important, Dad?

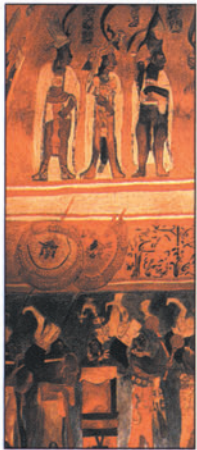
Sometimes, son, it's important that there be nothing on a step. How could we write the number **403** without a zero?

• = 400
 ◯ = 0
 ●●● = 3
 403



▲ **MAYA BOOKS**, called codices, were long strips of paper made from the bark of the wild fig tree. The strips of bark were then folded back to back, forming the pages, which may have been enclosed in covers of jaguar skin or wood.

▼ **THE LONG COUNT** is the Maya system of recording time. It is considered the most accurate calendar of the ancient world. Long Count calculations appear on most stelae from the classic period, helping archaeologists know when they were erected. One sign of Maya genius was their calculation of the true length of the year as 365.2420 days. The figure used today, after over 1,000 years of study, is 365.2422 days!



▲ **BONAMPAK** IN Chiapas, Mexico, was discovered in 1946. It contains many murals with scenes of 1,100 years ago. One room celebrates an heir to the throne. Glyphic captions explain the event and identify the people. Dancers in feather robes are moving to musicians' music. The second room shows war and a beheaded victim.





AFTER HERNANDO Cortés destroyed the Aztec realm in 1519, he and others went on to conquer the Maya. The Maya fought courageously but were finally subdued in the 1800s. The Spanish conquistadors, marching beneath the banner of "God, Glory, and Gold," accomplished their goal of subduing and wiping out the Maya and other cultures. Everyone was forced to take instruction in the Catholic faith. If anyone rebelled, the consequences were terrible.



A THE SPANISH made slaves of many of the Indian peoples. They introduced such European diseases as smallpox,

measles, and influenza to the Maya, who had no natural defenses against them. Entire towns were wiped out. Some estimate that up to

ninety percent of the Maya died in the century immediately following the Spanish conquest.

LONG BEFORE THE Spanish arrived, Maya civilization was in decline. Civil unrest, social upheaval, and warfare were common. Few creative endeavors were pursued. In time, Mexican influence prevailed. Chichén Itzá is the place that best shows this. El Castillo, the Temple of the Jaguars and its Ball Court, and the Temple of the Warriors (right) incorporate elements that are totally different from Maya architecture: colonnades, rooms divided by columns, interior courts, and square platforms. It may be that the Toltec peoples of Mexico conquered the city.



The Spanish Conquest and the Decline of the Maya

Maya civilization flourished for many centuries. But then, from about A.D. 800 to 900, nearly all Maya cities in the southern lowlands were abandoned. Many theories have been proposed to explain this phenomenon: conquering armies of Mexicans, climatic changes, earthquakes, epidemics, economic failure, social disintegration, overpopula-

tion and starvation, uprisings among the masses, or a combination of all these factors. A good guess is that a combination of outside pressures and internal tensions led to the collapse of the Maya.

Although the southern lowlands were nearly deserted, Maya splendor did continue in the Yucatán peninsula. When Spanish explor-



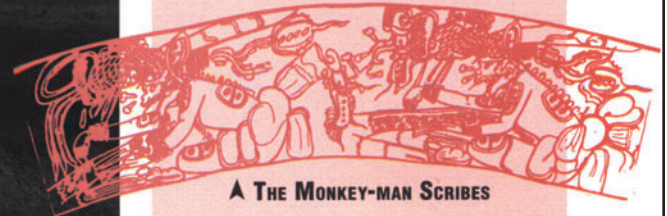
◀ **IN THE 16TH** century, Diego de Landa, a Franciscan friar from Spain, arrived in Yucatán, where Maya thrived after the lowland cities were abandoned. De Landa tried to change the ways of the Maya, but they refused to

give up their beliefs. Angered, he had all their manuscripts burned, robbing future generations of valuable information about the Maya. In one terrible moment, de Landa wiped out the literature of an entire culture!

▼ **THE TOLTEC** Temple of the Warriors at Chichén Itzá, which is copied from a Mexican pyramid, clearly shows Toltec influence and ascendancy over the Yucatán.

Scribes Were Big Deals

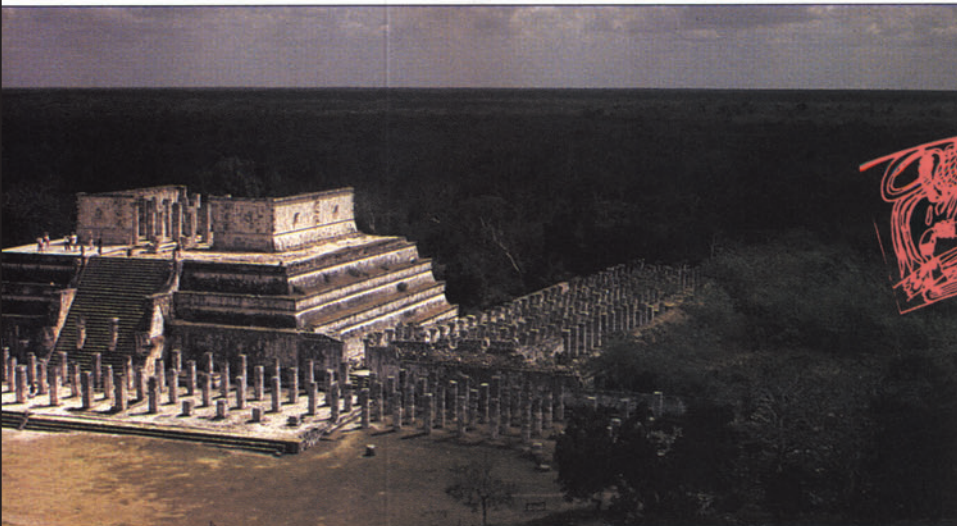
SCRIBES RECORDED DETAILS ABOUT MAYA life on accordion-folded books. The pages of bark were strengthened by a natural gum substance and coated with white stucco. On these pages, scribes drew figures and made hieroglyphic symbols, coloring them with mineral and vegetable paints. Scribes, held in high esteem, also carved limestone, inscribed shells, and engraved jade.



▲ **THE MONKEY-MAN SCRIBES**



▲ **RABBIT GOD WRITING A CODEX**



ers set foot there in the early part of the 16th century, they found cities thronged with people, highly decorated palaces, temples raised on terraced pyramids, paved stone roads, and bustling marketplaces. They met leaders who wore jade and gold jewelry, intricate head-dresses, jaguar-skin skirts, and brightly colored feathered capes. They also found warriors with

bows, arrows, and clubs.

For years, the Spanish had been searching for the legendary El Dorado, where great riches were supposed to be found. The cities of the Maya could have been it. But the desire of the Spanish to convert others to their religion led ultimately to the destruction of the most brilliant civilization in pre-Columbian America.

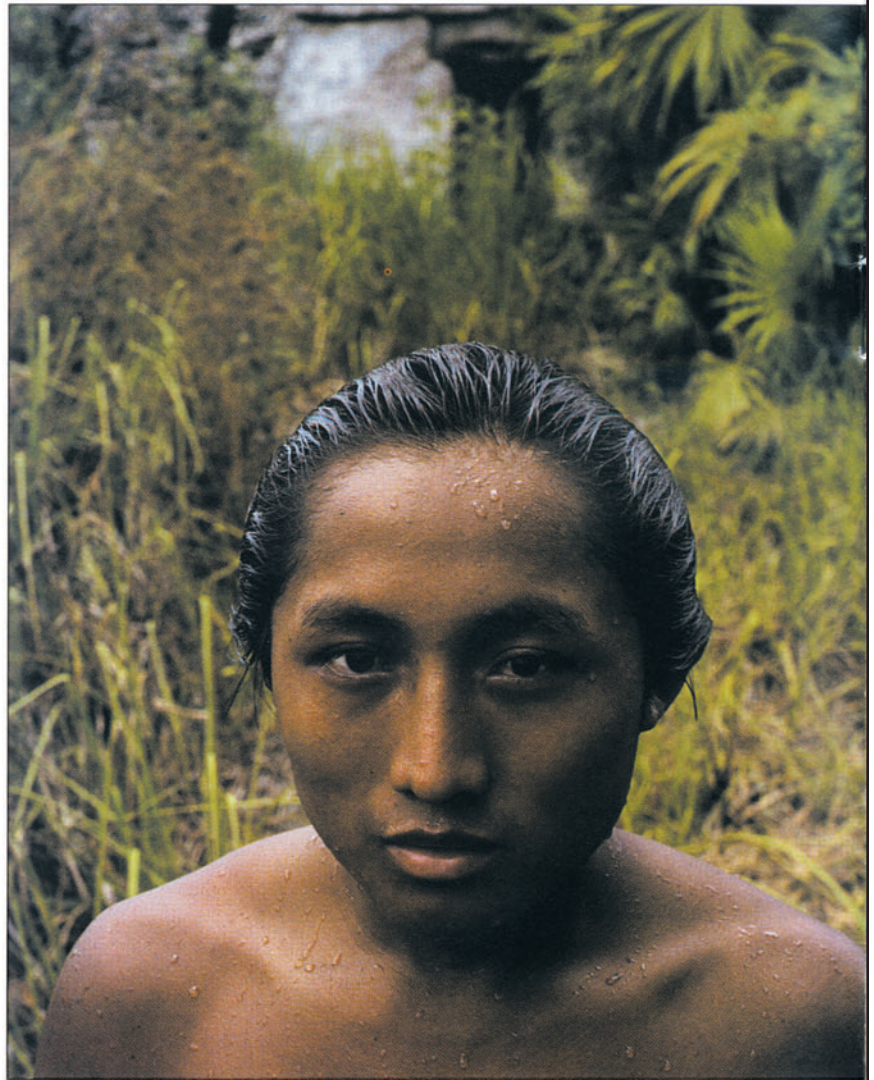


Maya Today

Most of the more than six million modern Maya live in rural areas of Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize—areas where their ancestors lived. Their culture is a mixture of pre-Columbian Indian, European, and modern elements—not purely one or another.

The Maya today are not very well off economically. In the 1970s, the Guatemalan government began a systematic campaign to destroy Maya culture, killing thousands of highland Indians and forcing tens of thousands of others to flee across the border into Mexico. Entire villages have been razed to the ground and new ones built where the natives are forced to abandon their language, native dress, and local village organizations.

Will the Maya survive this latest onslaught or not? This remains to be seen.



▲ IN REMOTE AND isolated villages, houses are the same thatched-roof dwellings with lime-plas-

tered stone or earthen walls that were used in classic times.



▲ IN MANY PLACES, traditional dress is common, but Maya also enjoy wearing colorful clothing from other cultures.



▲ MAYA AUTHORITY Linda Schele teaches modern Maya the writing of their ancestors.

► MAYA LIFE TODAY reflects the long history of outside influences. Nearly every town has a Catholic church, a public school, and municipal buildings. Some towns even have a movie theater, a tavern, and a gas station. Many Maya houses have radios and electric lights. On roads there are trucks, cars, and buses. Yet in spite of the inroads of other cultures, the Maya have clung to some original traditions.





◀ **MANY MAYA** today resist attempts to make them part of the mainstream of Mexican and Guatemalan life. They don't want to be an oppressed minority. They cherish their own culture and values.



◀ **POTTERY IS STILL** made by ancient methods. Traditional backstrap looms are used to make splendid fabrics.

▲ **AS IN PRE-**Columbian times, adjacent structures serve as cooking or storage units, and the houses are grouped in compounds.



◀ **COLORFUL TEXTILES** and ancient techniques of textile making survive in Guatemala and Chiapas. In Guatemala, the ancient calendar is still used to mark the annual ceremonial cycle.

▲ **MANY FESTIVALS** and religious celebrations include such pre-Columbian activities as the burning of copal incense, fasting, and offerings.



▲ **RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ**, a spokesperson for native peoples, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.

