During the Classic period, the Maya lived in independent city-states, like Tikal. Within each state, Mayan society was structured like a pyramid. The ruler of each city-state was at the top of the social pyramid. The rest of Mayan society was organized in a series of layers below him.

The Ruler  The highest authority in the state was the halach uinic, a Mayan word that means “true man.” He ruled the state with the help of his advisors. He decided when and where to go to war. The Mayan ruler was considered a god-king. During religious ceremonies, he wore a headdress that was as tall as a person. When he died, a son or other close male relative succeeded him. Mayan rulers were almost always men, but scholars believe that women had considerable influence, probably through family relationships.

Nobles and Priests  The next layer in the social pyramid was made up of nobles and priests. They were the only members of Mayan society who knew how to read and write. The nobles served as officials, and oversaw the administration of the states. They gathered taxes, supplies, and labor for projects like construction of temples. Nobles led peasant armies in times of war. During battles, they wore elaborate costumes, including gold jewelry and animal robes made from the skin of jaguars.

Priests were important because they maintained favor with the gods. Like nobles, they inherited their position from their fathers. Priests led rituals, offered sacrifices, and foretold the future. They were consulted to determine the best days for going into battle. In addition to their religious duties, priests were often mathematicians, astronomers, and healers.
Merchants and Artisans  Although the Mayan economy was based mostly on farming, trade and crafts were also important. These functions were carried out by merchants and artisans.

The Maya were accomplished traders. They traveled by sea, river, and well-constructed roads to trade with other city-states. Merchants in the lowlands imported valuable products from the highlands. These products included stones such as obsidian and jade; copal, a tree sap that the Maya used as incense during religious ceremonies; and quetzals, birds with shiny green feathers used in headdresses.

Mayan artisans made a wide variety of objects, many of them designed to pay tribute to the gods. They painted books on paper made from the bark of fig trees. Artists painted murals, or wall paintings, of Mayan life and important battles. They created sculptures for temples and decorative designs on palace walls. The Maya were also skilled weavers and potters.

Peasants  The peasants were the backbone of Mayan society. They worked hard on the land, growing maize, squash, beans, and other crops to feed the population. During the growing season, men spent most of the day in the fields, farming with wooden hoes. Women usually stayed closer to home, preparing food, weaving and sewing.

When they were not working on the land, peasants spent time building pyramids and temples. In exchange for their work, they sometimes attended royal weddings and religious events. Peasants also served as soldiers during wars.

Slaves  At the bottom of the social pyramid were the slaves. Slaves performed manual labor for their owners. Some were born into slavery, but free people sometimes became slaves. Some children became slaves when their parents sold them for money to feed the rest of the family. War prisoners of humble origin were made slaves. (Those of higher rank were sacrificed to the gods.) And some people were made slaves as a punishment for serious crimes.

In general, slaves were not treated badly. Sometimes they actually had easier lives than peasants, depending on what job they did and where their masters lived. But slaves were not free to come and go as they pleased. Often they were sacrificed when their masters died.
Mayan families had many daily tasks, including weaving, cooking, washing clothes, fishing, and working the land.

23.4 Family life

In city-states like Copan (in present-day Honduras), Mayan peasants lived in one-room huts built of interwoven poles covered with dried mud. Several family houses were often grouped around a courtyard. A house containing the kitchen was often placed directly behind the main house. Peasant families worked hard, but ceremonies and rituals provided a break from work and a chance to honor important events.

Duties of Family Members

Life for Mayan peasant families was not easy. Mayan women rose before dawn to get the fire burning in the fireplace. With the help of her daughters, a Mayan woman cleaned the corn that had been boiled and left to soak and soften overnight. Then she set to work at the grinding stone, pounding the corn into meal. She patted the meal into tortillas (a Spanish word meaning “little breads”) or tamales and cooked them over the fire. These might serve as the morning meal, or they might be saved for dinner. On special days, they might also have hot chocolate, a drink the Maya made from cacao beans.

During the day, women and older girls cared for small children and for the family’s few animals, like ducks and turkeys. They swept their homes, and they gathered, spun, and wove cotton into cloth.

Mayan fathers and sons ate their morning meal quickly before leaving to work the fields. When they weren’t busy with the crops, men and boys hunted and trapped animals. They also helped construct large buildings such as palaces and temples. In times of war, peasant men served as soldiers.
Special Occasions Although Mayan families worked hard, they also took time to celebrate the important events in their lives. The birth of a child was a time of rejoicing. As soon as possible after the birth, the family called in a priest to perform a ceremony much like baptism. The priest forecast the baby’s future and gave advice to help guide the parents in raising the child.

At three months of age, girls went through another ceremony. The number 3 was special to Mayan women because it represented the three stones of the fireplace. In the three-month ceremony, the baby girl was introduced to the tools she would use throughout her life. Small items were placed in the baby’s hands, such as tools for spinning and weaving, carrying water and cooking, and soaking and grinding maize.

A similar ceremony was held for boys at four months of age. The number 4 was special to Mayan men. It represented the four sides of the plot of land where a boy would spend his life. The baby boy was given farmer’s tools, such as axes and planting sticks, and the spears, knives, and traps of a hunter.

Another important ceremony in every Mayan child’s life was the coming-of-age ceremony. Girls went through this ceremony at the age of 12, boys at 14. The long ceremony involved confessions, cleansing with water, and reciting the rules of behavior. Finally, the priest cut a white bead from the boy’s hair and removed a string of red shells from around the girls’ waists. Boys and girls had worn these symbols of innocence since they were quite young.

Marriage Customs The next big event for a Mayan youth was marriage. Men usually married around the age of 20. Girls married when they were as young as 14.

The bride and groom did not choose each other. Instead, marriages were negotiated by the village atanzahab, or matchmaker. These negotiations were not simple. Families had to agree on how much food and clothing would be given to the bride’s family. They also had to agree on the number of years a young man would work for his new wife’s family.

Once the details of a marriage were worked out, the villages built a hut for the couple behind the home of the bride’s parents. When the home was ready, the bride and groom put on clothing woven for the occasion. After a priest blessed the marriage, the villages celebrated. Clearly rituals and ceremonies were an important part of daily life to the Maya.

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Coming-of-age ceremony

A ceremony that celebrates the end of childhood and the acceptance into the adult community.

The marriage ceremony was an important event in the life of a young Mayan man or woman.