

Maya Civilization on the Western Yucatan Peninsula  
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Maya civilization flourished in the western Yucatan Peninsula, an area comprising some 58,000 km<sup>2</sup>, as well as in adjoining territories to the north (Yucatan), east (Quintana Roo and Belize), and south (Tabasco, Chiapas, Guatemala and the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador). In the lands of what is today the state of Campeche, the most ancient vestiges of human hunter-gatherer societies have been discovered in caves, such as Huachabi or Miramar, although there must have been other campsites that have not yet been found. The evidence for the earliest settlements in the region dates to roughly 2000 BC.

Perhaps the earliest occupation of the peninsula was facilitated on the coasts, where gently murmuring waves lap the sand of Campeche beaches, splash in mangrove swamps, and crash loudly against the rocks on the shoreline. This has been the setting since time immemorial, until the Mayas came to give new life to the landscape, as well as new meaning to day and night. They also built cities in rainforest. The passage of people and the resonance of conch shell trumpets overshadowed the fluttering and warbling of birds; the voices and cries of human beings drowned out the bellowing and roaring of howler monkeys and jaguars.

Lacking land vehicles, beasts of burden, and draught animals, the earliest Mayas made use of balsa rafts, dugouts, and canoes to travel up and down the coast, familiarizing themselves with its nuances and eventually settling there. And so the peninsula of Xicalango, the Isla del Carmen, the Champoton zone, the spot today occupied by the city of Campeche, and the island of Jaina were among the areas that became populated. Further inland, early communities chose stretches apt for cultivation as well as elevated lands to avoid floods. Wherever necessary, they tamed the environment and made it inhabitable. In the valley of [Edzna](#), for example, they constructed a hydraulic system to capture rainwater, use it, and dispose of any excess. About 100 km inland from the coast, several groups in the Chenes region established similar communities, such as [Tabasqueno](#), [Santa Rosa Xtampak](#), [Dzibilnocac](#), and [Hochob](#), which participated in Maya civilization, but with specific architectural characteristics and a distinctive polychrome pottery tradition.

The case of Jaina illustrates the organized system of labour in a town that spent years and invested colossal effort in creating a place fit for human occupation, despite the virtual absence of resources other than coastal vegetation. Today we know that the entire island and its constructions were the result of transporting and compacting a million cubic meters of sascab (crumbled limestone gravel resembling coarse sand). We can better understand the dimensions of this endeavour if we bear in mind that the colossal Sun Pyramid at Teotihuacan was built with an average of 1,224,000 cubic meters of material.

Jaina played a key role on the route that traced the west coast of the peninsula in pre-Hispanic times. However, its location, significantly in the west, had primarily religious connotations: in pre-Columbian worldview, the west marked the way to the underworld, the path to the realm of the dead and the ancestors, the place where the Sun descended day after day.

The island concentrated political and religious power, especially from AD 600 to 800, during the reign of the Cimi ("death" in Maya and still used as a family name: Quime or Cime) dynasty. At that time powerful political entities typically had an emblem glyph or a specific name to designate the region under their control. The Jaina emblem glyph meant "sky" (Ka'an) and it ruled over an area of some 1,750 km<sup>2</sup>, which encompassed coastal sites such as Uaymil, Isla Piedras, and El Cuyo, as well as settlements inland such as Xcacab, Xuelen, Orizaba, Tenabo, and Cansache.

Jaina's relations extended beyond this sphere of influence and its emblem glyph has been identified in inscriptions at sites such as Xcalumkin and [Santa Rosa Xtampak](#). Centuries after its abandonment

and the constant pounding of waves, tides, and sporadic hurricanes, Jaina island preserved an area of 42 km<sup>2</sup>. Some 450 m long by 20 m wide, its inner harbour welcomed innumerable canoes and dugouts, carrying merchants and products from all over Mesoamerica.

After the disintegration of the kingdoms that competed for power in the Classic period, the occupation of Jaina in Postclassic times declined and the construction of monumental architecture and the erection of sculpture and stelae came to a halt. The new ports that arose along the coast undermined the hegemonic control it had exerted in the preceding centuries. By the time Europeans arrived in the region, Jaina was already depopulated and the vestiges of its structures merely served as points of reference for passing sailors.

Parallel to the splendour of Jaina, some 50 km away from the coast, pre-Columbian society at [Edzna](#) developed a stable government and organized the work of thousands of individuals to carve out ten massive canals in the northern reaches of a valley. On average, each canal was one km long by fifty m wide and two m deep. They collected rainwater, which was channelled to smaller canals in zones adjoining architectural complexes, always following the natural slope of the valley, from north to south. These hydraulic works facilitated the exploitation and distribution of water through a multi-level system that took advantage of gravity, storage deposits, and dams. The system flowed into another large canal to the south, where the precious liquid was accumulated in a sort of pit and from there another channel drained excess water to the south, in the direction of the Champoton River basin. Some families also made use of chultunes or underground cisterns for rainwater.

This ingenious way of converting water into an ally allowed the ancient inhabitants to drain broad sectors of the valley for human occupation, irrigate fields, and produce surpluses in agricultural production. At the same time it ensured the water supplies necessary for monumental construction and maintenance work, while it also mitigated water shortages in the dry season.

From the early centuries of our era, a centralized government legitimated its power based on a supposed relationship between the political leaders and the gods. Social and economic differences, the blossoming of the arts and diverse trades, a writing and numbering system, along with local and long-distance trade strengthened this theocratic system dominated by a small number of leaders. Then came their relatives and associated specialists, and beneath them, the mass of individuals who produced and contributed raw materials and manpower.

As in other populations in the Maya world, the first constructions at [Edzna](#) were sheathed in massive regularly cut limestone blocks, covered with thick layers of stucco, and almost always painted an intense red colour. Facades were often decorated with faces of gods, mythical animals, and symbols. These motifs were shaped with modelled stucco (a material similar to plaster) and were sometime painted in an array of bright colours. All of these elements were characteristic of architecture in the Peten region, further south in Guatemala.

Dramatic changes reached [Edzna](#) by the seventh century. New ideas sent shock waves through the ancient political structure and new families took over. Some of these changes might have coincided with climate change, such as droughts or floods, and Chantal groups from southwest Campeche might have taken advantage of the resulting upheaval and general discontent. Plates, drinking vessels, pitchers, pots, and a variety of recipients were replaced with new models. Construction systems and architectural forms and spaces changed as well. Peten-style buildings were covered over or partially dismantled and new structures emerged, with better quality masonry, specialized cut stone masonry, and wider spaces. Cities displayed monolithic columns or others built of stacked stone drums, as well as an array of stone blocks (smooth cylinders or carved with ties, crosses, triangles, circles, and the like) to form mosaics or groups of three forming ornate decoration emphasizing facades. Puuc architecture reached [Edzna](#) and flourished there for two or three centuries.

Sculptural canons were also modified. The Classic period image of the powerful ruler accompanied solely by Inscriptions was now depicted in the company of other officials in multiple scenes arranged in registers. In addition, new subject matter arose, including skulls, phalluses, hunchbacks, feathered serpents, and shields. Another shift can be seen in the use of dates, which had formerly been precise and recorded in the Long Count or in a format that could be anchored to a specific date; now they were abbreviated or omitted altogether.

Just as at many other Maya sites during the Late and Terminal Classic periods (AD 600-900-1200), at [Edzna](#) evidence suggests demographic growth and a collateral increase in construction. Perhaps this is when the city housed some 30,000 inhabitants.

To date some thirty-three stelae - some complete and others in fragments - have been found at [Edzna](#). Four stelae were carved between AD 41 and 435. Eleven have dates from 633 to 830, while a few others are from the ninth and tenth centuries. They almost always show rulers with lavish attire performing a key ceremony, such as accession to power, participation in the ritual ballgame, conquest of a region, or an alliance with another political entity. Recent research has identified the reading of two emblem glyphs for [Edzna](#) (one for the city and another for its geopolitical territory) and several names of rulers, including a woman. There is information about at least ten high ranking officials:

Ruler 1, 'Unen(?) K'awiil (around AD 633); Ruler 2, Sihajiiy Cha'n K'awiil (649);

Ruler 3, Kahl Cha'n Chaac (652 to 662);

Ruler 4, 'Ix Pak'ab'uul(?) or 'Ixpolis(?) (649 to 657), a woman;

Ruler 5, Janaahb'Yook K'inich 'Ajan? (672 to 692); Ruler 6, Hui Janaahb' (?) Cha'nek' (692);

Ruler 7 Cha'n ? Chuwaaj? (711 to 731);

Ruler 8 B'ahlam? K'uk"Cha'nek (around 740);

Ruler 9 'Aj Koht? Chowa' (790 to 810);

and Ruler 10? (around 830).

Surely future research will make it possible to add further details to complement this brief list and to add other rulers from the Early Classic and those of the Postclassic periods.

The archaeological record demonstrates that [Edzna](#) had ties with other regions in the Maya world and Mesoamerica as well. Some connections were of a commercial nature, whereas others were political, to forge alliances or to engage in armed conflict. The decipherment of texts from [Edzna](#) record its relations with Xcalumkin to the north (west of Hecelchakan) and Itzirn-te (east of Bolonchen), along Altar de los Reyes and [Calakmul](#) to the south, and even further south with [Tikal](#) and Itzan in the heart of the Peten, and Piedras Negras on the Usumacinta River.

Architecture, ceramics, and marine molluscs also reveal [Edzna's](#) ties to the Puuc region and the central area of the Yucatan Peninsula (Oxkintok, [Uxmal](#), and [Chichen Itza](#)), the Chenes region ([Tabasqueno](#) and [Dzibilnocac](#)), and the coast (Champon and Seybaplaya). Other materials, such as basalt, obsidian, and jadeite indicate [Edzna's](#) intense participation in Mesoamerican trade networks that extended from Michoacan to the Gulf Coast, and from Central Mexico to the Motagua River basin (shared by Guatemala and Honduras).

From AD 1000 to 1200 structures with sloped platforms and multiple doors flanked by columns

(such as the west sector of the Patio of the Ambassadors and Building 512) were constructed, as well as buildings with a round plan (Structure 425), similar to those at [Chichen Itza](#). This similarity speaks of a shared vision of construction that appears to be a prelude to the Late Postclassic period.

Later a gradual disintegration of the political and economic system took place. Major construction activity ceased and buildings fell into disrepair resulting from a lack of maintenance. Skilled sculptors and potters disappeared as well. Surely other more powerful political entities also arose and [Edzna](#) ceased to participate in major trade routes. As hieroglyphic writing fell into oblivion and new settlers moved into the region, the city was probably known up to that time as a centre of the Chantal lineage of the Itza, it may have given rise to the term Ytzna, 'house of the Itzas' which has come down to the present in a Hispanicised form as [Edzna](#).

From AD 1200 to 1400 the population of [Edzna](#) began to move away, strengthening other settlements, or else creating new towns. The city's monumental buildings were occasionally visited to carry out ceremonies and to deposit anthropomorphic censers. Later, the silent city was soon overrun by the jungle and it was forgotten until early in the twentieth century.

Archaeological exploration in various architectural groups and buildings at [Edzna](#) has revealed that the main axis of buildings was oriented in relation to certain astronomical phenomena. This may be explained by the ancient Mayas' strong interest in the path of celestial bodies and their cycles, as well as the religious connotations of these celestial orbs.

The continuous rotation of earth around the Sun creates the image of a circular path on which the Sun seems to pass several points during the year. In this way, the Mayas could observe changes in climate and times of greater or lesser solar illumination and intensity. Some of these phenomena were of special significance at this Maya city, such as the vernal or spring equinox (March 21), the zenith passage 1 (May 3), the summer solstice (June 21), the zenith passage 2 (August 7), the fall equinox (September 23), and the winter solstice (December 22). The cycles of the Moon and the most visible planets, such as Venus and Mars, also formed similar patterns. Experts in archaeo-astronomy have pointed out that a number of the monumental constructions at [Edzna](#) attest to these events, such as the Building of the Five Floors, the House of the Moon, the Nohochna, Structure 501, and the pyramidal platform of the Old Sorceress.

The Maya focus on counting and measurement can also be seen in the use of modules or average measurements by Maya builders, especially multiples of twenty that we identify as 80 and 160 meters. Twenty steps and their multiples generate approximate distances employed to determine where to position corners, stairways, central doorways, and so forth. These practices in designing space and its growth through time were common in the Maya world, but even earlier it was practiced by the Olmecs as well as by other societies in ancient Mexico. A practice reminiscent of this measurement of space has come down to the present in Maya communities on the Yucatan Peninsula, where farmers traditionally lay out the land and cultivate it by staking out plots in mecatres or squares that measure twenty steps on each side.

A number of complex societies arose in the Chenes region, so named for its association with settlements and wells to extract water (chen = well) and where age-old place names echo this purpose (Hopekhen, Dzibakhen, Becanchen, Kornchen, Pakchen, etc.). Today archaeologists are working on clearing the vegetation covering the vestiges of these ancient cities to gain a better understanding of their development and functions.

The Chenes region was contemporary with the coastal activity described for Jaina, the hegemony of [Edzna](#), and the rise of the powerful Serpent (Kan) kingdom with its capital at [Calakmul](#). Archaeological evidence covers a minimum area of 10,000 km<sup>2</sup> where there are buildings in Chenes architectural styles. This includes an area that forms an imaginary quadrangle with corners at [Uxmal](#), [Edzna](#), Chunlimon (southeast of [Hochob](#), Campeche) and Witzinah (near Tzucacab,

Yucatan).

One of the more extensively explored Chenes sites, [Santa Rosa Xtampak](#) houses more than a hundred constructions forming regularly distributed plazas and quadrangular patios. The earliest ceramics indicate that the site was founded one or two centuries before our era. Eight stelae - the earliest dated AD 646 - have been unearthed and of the more than ten painted vault caps that have been recovered, most of them bear images of K'auil or the god of lightning, fertility, and dynastic descent. This deity was represented with a prominent nose and a leg transformed into a serpent; he is often seen as a sceptre carried by rulers, thus intensifying the power of the Maya elite and the productive force of plant and human life.

The most recent date reported at [Santa Rosa Xtampak](#) was found on a vault cap in the Palace that recorded the year AD 948. Pottery fragments indicate a smaller population than that in Postclassic times, until the complete abandonment of the city prior to the arrival of the Europeans in the sixteenth century.

[Tabasqueno](#) was another important settlement in the Chenes region, a few kilometres northwest of Dzibakhen and about 90 km east of Campeche. It has one of the finest examples of a building with a zoomorphic facade. This refers to a doorway rendered as a fantastic entrance to the underworld composed of an enormous face made of finely cut and stuccoed masonry that forms the eyes, nose, and teeth of Itzamna, one of the principal creator deities in the pre-Columbian Maya pantheon.

Represented as an aged deity, Itzamna was linked to the creation and maintenance of society. Sometimes he was envisioned as a crocodile, an earth monster, or as a personified tree, most likely an axis mundi. However, in some regions, for example at [Palenque](#) and [Copan](#), this deity, also known as God D, was conceived as Itzam Ye, the Principal Bird Deity. Represented with a fantastic head bedecked with bands, ear flares, beads, and necklaces, accompanied by elegant plumage, this mythical bird was closely linked to writing, divination, and esoteric knowledge.

Research and work in other regions in the western Yucatan Peninsula is currently underway, as teams of labourers, assistants, and archaeologists explore the rainforest to discover its secrets as the cyclic wheels of new calendar rounds continue to mark the passage of time.

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