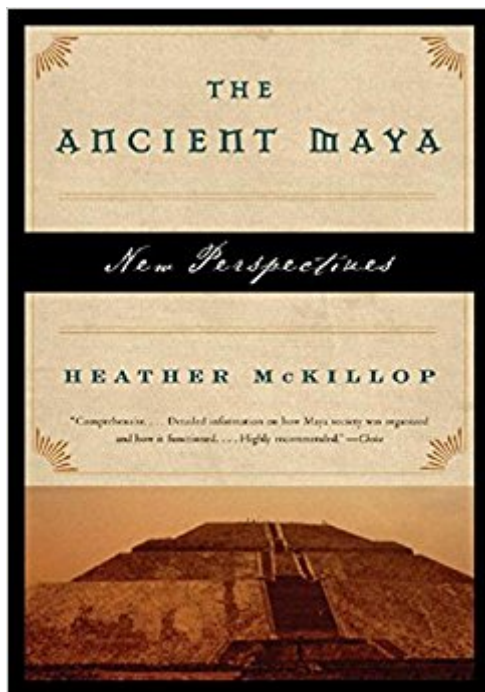


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# The Ancient Maya: New Perspectives



## Synopsis

"Comprehensive" "clearly written" "Highly recommended." "Choice Temples lost in the rainforest. Strange inscriptions and ritual bloodletting. Such are the images popularly associated with the ancient Maya of Central America. But who really were the people of this lost civilization? How and why did their culture achieve regional dominance? Could such pressing contemporary problems as climate change and environmental degradation hold the key to the collapse of Maya civilization? Of interest to scholars and general readers alike, *The Ancient Maya* brings the controversies that have divided experts on the ancient Maya to a wider audience. Heather McKillop examines the debates concerning Mayan hieroglyphs, the Maya economy, and the conflicting theories behind the enigmatic collapse of the Maya civilization. The most readable and accessible work in the field, this book brings the general reader up to date with the latest archaeological evidence.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A one-stop reference book that clearly stands on its own." - Chuck Hamsa, Reviewers Consortium

Heather McKillop is the William G. Haag Professor of Archaeology at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge and the author of *In Search of Maya Sea Traders*. She lives in Louisiana.

[The Ancient Maya](#) by Heather McKillop is a comprehensive and thoroughly researched overview

of this Central American civilization, complete with maps, diagrams, photographs, and many pages of references. Organized like a textbook (and I understand it is used as such in some college courses), it is divided into eleven chapters. The first chapter is a general introduction, the author noting some of the evolution in scholarly understanding of the Maya, due to a huge growth in the amount of fieldwork and critical breakthroughs in decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphics, particularly thanks to the efforts of such scholars as Yuri Knorozov (who pointed out that the hieroglyphs were phonetic and not logographs or based on picture writing) and Tatiana Proskouriakoff (who discovered that hieroglyphs on carved stone monuments or stelae recorded historical information and the exploits of Classic Maya royalty, not priestly writings on astronomy and mathematics). McKillop introduced three competing theories that attempted to explain the collapse of the classic Maya civilization in the ninth century, something that she would revisit several times (briefly, they were ecological disaster resulting from overpopulation and overuse of the land, escalating endemic warfare between the various Maya city-states, and catastrophic environmental change brought about by climatic shifts). Chapter two looked at where the ancient Maya civilization existed, dividing the Maya area into three regions; the northern Maya lowlands (the Yucatan peninsula), the southern Maya lowlands (Belize, the Peten area of Guatemala, the Chiapas area of Mexico, and part of Honduras), and the southern Maya highlands (southern Guatemala). She noted the rock types used by the ancient Maya - chert (which she said is erroneously referred to as flint), limestone, obsidian, basalt - and their sources and issues in studying existing plant and animal communities in the region (ramon trees, which produce an edible nut, are prolific around Maya ruin sites but were not a major component of the Classic Maya diet; these trees love the lime-rich soil found around deteriorating limestone buildings). Chapter three looked at the history of the archaeology of the Maya. She noted how far study has advanced, from destructive digging ("Gann holes" are still found in the center of some stone mounds, the legacy of enthusiastic explorer Thomas Gann) and forgeries (the famous crystal skull found in 1927) to sophisticated modern techniques (including studies of debitage - flakes left over from making stone tools - and obsidian hydration, which can pinpoint the source of obsidian used for tools and help trace Maya trade routes). Chapter four is on the origins, growth, and decline of Maya civilization. An important chapter, she provided a good definition of the Classic period (approximately A.D. 300 to 900, when Maya kings and queens had stone monuments erected with historical information and dates in the Maya long count and the peak of the civilization in terms of population, architecture, and the arts). She provided an overview of the great importance in studying Maya pottery, an overview of Maya architecture, and a discussion of Postclassic Maya civilization. Chapter five was devoted to economic matters, which is divided by scholars into the

prestige economy (production and distribution of goods for the royal Maya) and the subsistence economy (goods for the daily use of all classes of Maya society). There is still considerable debate over the degree of elite control and centralization of the ancient Maya economy as well as how specialized the means of production was; was there mass production or cottage industries? Chapter six covered Maya society. It was interesting to learn that there was a Maya middle class and even "garden cities" or suburbs in some of the 80 Maya polities that existed. She covered the evolution in understanding of Maya population (from concepts of Maya cities as largely empty ceremonial centers to instead that of teeming metropolises) and the different social levels of Maya society; there were two classes of elites (ahau and cahal), while the remaining 98 percent of Maya society was made up two classes of commoners and perhaps slaves (it is debated). Chapter seven looked at Maya politics. There is debate over whether the Maya city-states were fairly autonomous and operated independently (the segmentary model) or whether there was more centralization and various regional superpowers rose and fell. Other debates center over the nature of warfare; was it related to expansionistic empire-building by Maya royalty, or was it to obtain captives for sacrifice? She covered the development of defensive walls in Maya cities, noting that some cities apparently hastily built defensive walls and moats using the stone from buildings, causeways, and paths of their own city. Chapter eight looked at Maya religion and ideology, with lots of coverage of the ball game and of Maya deities. Chapter nine looked at the material culture, with much discussion of the types of items found and how they are studied. Interesting facts; chert was sometimes used to make complex renditions of Maya rulers and their method of manufacture "defies modern replication," Maya painters showed frame-by-frame action, something not shown in Western art until the late 19th century, and pumice was used to make fishing floats. Chapter ten looked at the intellectual accomplishments of the Maya, notably their mathematics, calendars, writing, and astronomy. Though books were apparently once common in the Classic period, only four Postclassic books survive. They were made of fig bark paper whose surface was coated with a white coating of plaster or gesso (a calcium sulphate), written on with either a sharp quill pen or a brush pen, and were fan-folded with text and images on both sides. Maya glyphs were quite variable, reflecting the decentralized nature of the Classic Maya political landscape. The final chapter summarized future issues for Mayanists, notably discussions of the Classic collapse (an issue complicated by the fact that the collapse took 150 years to happen and some areas in northern Belize, the coast, and the northern Maya lowlands actually climaxed after the collapse), the nature of Mayan politics, food, and issues of illegal trade in Maya antiquities.

I may be a bit biased considering I know Dr. Heather McKillop, but this book is an absolute necessity for anyone with an interest in the ancient Maya. McKillop provides information with a plethora of resources to back it up, including her own archaeological work in Belize! Buy it!!!

This book is just great. The author of the book claims that she teaches both advanced undergraduate and graduate classes using this book as her main text - I believe her. The book is structured like a textbook and is more than an inch thick. She includes a wealth of information presented with pictures and maps. I use this book for casual reading and for reference with the index. I study the Ancient Maya as a special interest, and have been doing so for many years. I have read several books on the Ancient Maya, and have watched even more documentaries. This book is the best source of knowledge, aside from the internet, that I have found on the subject. In my experience, this is the best book for the best price - period.

A thoroughly and professionally researched book on the Mayan civilization. A little dry and aimed to educate more than entertain, yet this comment isn't meant to denigrate this work in any way, only to give a prospective reader an idea what the book is like.

Great book summarizing current ideas on Maya culture, history, and society.

I purchased this book to prepare for a trip which included visits to several Mayan sites in the Yucatan. Generally, some historical reading adds to my enjoyment of the sites we visit. Unfortunately (and this is a purely personal judgment) I found this book exceedingly dry. It was very hard to read and I would put it down after just a few pages. I did not get all the way through the book before our trip. It seemed to have a plethora of useful information, but just presented in a very mundane way. It may be your cup of tea, but I'll look for something different next time!

I read the other book reviews before ordering the book and expected a somewhat dry read. I thought I wouldn't mind an academic approach and scholarly discussions, but in this case the entire book seems to be written specifically for an academic audience of experts in the field. Overall, the author shows a phenomenal amount of research, backs up all claims and gives abundant credit to individual experts and their work. While it certainly is valuable to have at least one section of research history to learn about the experts in Mayan culture, I find it highly unsatisfying to read a mere collection of findings from different people without apparent organization and without any

added comment from the author. The individual chapters are not very organized and streamlined. The same information is regurgitated numerous times throughout the book without additional insight. The content of the book feels more like a research review rather than an informative presentation and discussion of the subject at hand. The style is very dry and awkward formulations lessen readability of the text even further. I plowed through the entire book, but didn't really feel that I had a much better grasp on Mayan culture after I finished. This may be a good book for scholars as it provides extensive sources and information about the field work, but it is not very suitable as a first familiarization with Mayan culture.

Well, I haven't bought this book, but please it is about the Mayan civilization, but it shows in the front cover a picture of the Temple of the Sun which was built by the Toltecs!!!

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