

4.3 River Valley Civilization without a River

How can there be a river valley civilization without a river valley? In the Eastern Hemisphere, Afro-Eurasia, the “civilization package” developed in the Nile, Tigris-Euphrates, Indus, and Huang He (Yellow) river valleys. Regular water sources, temperate climate, and agricultural surpluses, made possible the emergence of states, trade, laws, skilled crafts, military, organized religion, record keeping, and literacy. In regions around the world missing one of these vital elements, that were too wet or dry, too warm or cold, the civilization package failed to emerge, except in one case. The Mayan civilization on the Yucatan peninsula of present day Mexico is the only ancient civilization that developed without a river to support agricultural, and expanding population, and civilization package. The water had to come from somewhere. Can you suggest a hypothesis to explain this phenomenon?



In the central and northern ends of the Mayan world (c. 400-800) there were no major rivers or lakes and the climate was arid. (Source: Microsoft Maps)

This image of a deep well in a water-starved region of the Yucatan, was drawn in 1842 by the Englishman Frederick Catherwood. Does it suggest an explanation of where the Mayans got their water and why their civilization eventually collapsed?

Activity (either individual or team): You are a member of a team of archeologists visiting the Mayan ruins at Chichén Itzá.

1. Make of a list of the things you **observe** while looking at these pre-Columbian Mayan ruins.
2. Based on your observations, write a preliminary report describing the tentative **hypotheses** you have made about the culture of the pre-Columbian Mayan people living at Chichén Itzá.
3. Use the Internet to examine other pre-Columbian Mayan ruins and conduct additional **research**.
4. Write a final report on your **conclusions** about life in pre-Columbian Mayan society (Be sure to list all sources).

Pre-Columbian Mayan Civilization: A Photo Essay

Photos: Alan Singer. Information source: Andrew Coe (1998). *Archeological Mexico* (Moon Publications).

Chichén Itzá in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico is the most famous pre-Columbian ruin in North America. It is located on a broad flat plain seventy miles east the modern city of Mérida. Settlement in this area began about 800 AD. The Mayans probably chose this site because there is a cenote, a limestone water collect, that provided drinking water during the dry season. From about 1000 to 1200, Chichén Itzá was the dominant city in the northern Yucatan.



The Castillo at Chichén Itzá is a great square pyramid. Each side is about 60 yards long. There is a stairway to the top from each side. Six-one steps lead to a temple on the upper platform. On the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, the rising and setting sun cast a joint shadow in the shape of a snake, Kukulcan, on one of the sides.



Ornate stone pillars support the temple on the top of the pyramid. The Mayans lacked metal tools so the decorations were carved with stone. The pillars are segmented, similar to pillars in ancient Greek ruins. From the top of the pyramid, viewers can see for miles in every direction.



A view of the forested plains from the temple on top of the Castillo at Chichén Itzá. It is believed that the Mayans could see signal flames from the tops of other distant pyramids.



A number of other buildings are located at Chichén Itzá. There is a “great ballcourt” where participants fought symbolic wars. Because of carvings on the walls, it is believed that defeated players were executed.



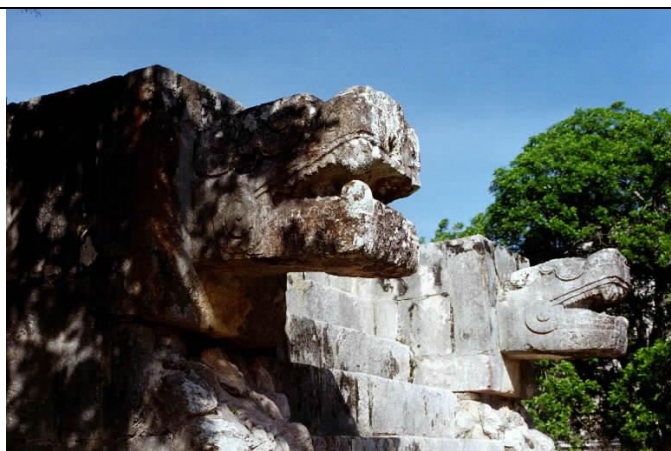
The Castillo at Chichén Itzá and other Mayan pyramids are built very differently from the pyramids of ancient Egypt. Egyptian pyramids are made from gigantic sandstone blocks and they are designed to have secret rooms and passages within. Pharaohs and other important people were buried in these rooms. Mayan pyramids are giant rock piles. Temples are built on top and internal rooms are rare. They look similar to Egyptian pyramids because of their limestone outer walls.



The 200-foot long wall of the “skull” platform at Chichén Itzá. Many human remains are found in the area with their skulls crushed. It is believed that they were defeated warriors or sacrificial victims from subject people who were offered to the Gods in religious ceremonies. Archeologists think that the actual skulls were hung from wooden racks on the platform. By the staircase leading to the platform there are reliefs showing warriors and eagles eating human hearts.



The Chac Mool is known as the reclining God.



Stone serpents guard the ruins.