

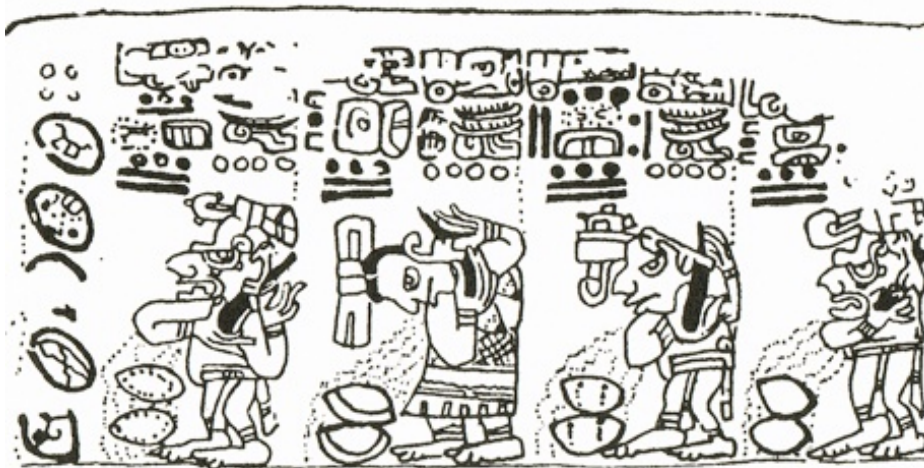
Mayas

The Mayan civilisation

The oldest finds from the Mayas date back to the time of around 2000 BC. At that time they already had a highly developed culture. In their heyday, about AD 250–900, when London and Paris were still villages, they were already living in cities of more than 10,000 people. They built step pyramids up to 65m in height, massive palaces, observatories and ballcourts. Their culture began to decline in around AD 900. It is still not certain today whether this was due to the environment, war or religion.

Proof that the Mayas did indeed consume chocolate came from their grave goods. Depictions on receptacles show gods with cacao pods and bowls full of cocoa beans. Archaeologists have also found special receptacles for chocolate. "Chacau haa" was what the Mayas called their chocolate, the same name for hot water – hence the supposition that the Mayas preferred to drink their chocolate hot. The foam on the hot chocolate was especially popular; it was spiced with vanilla and orejuela. As sugar had not yet arrived in South America, the chocolate drink must have been relatively bitter.

To the Mayas, however, cocoa was not a staple product, but a drink reserved for the nobility. Ethnographic reports suggest that chocolate was widely enjoyed at special events such as engagement parties or wedding celebrations across all classes of society, for example in the form of the symbolic exchange of cocoa beans during courtship. The most obvious sign of how valuable cocoa was for the Mayas is that cocoa beans were even used as a means of payment.



Old Maya drawing

Furthermore, chocolate had a mystical meaning for the Mayas. Various inscriptions which have been preserved contain passages about cocoa, often describing deities who pierce their own ears with daggers and shed streams of precious blood over cacao pods. For both the Mayas and the Aztecs there was a symbolic association between chocolate and human blood, comparable, for example, with the ritual of the Last Supper in the Christian faith.