

Document 23: The Mayan Social Structure

Maya society was rigidly divided between nobles, commoners, serfs, and slaves. The noble class was complex and specialized. Noble status and the occupation in which a noble served were passed on through elite family lineages. Nobles served as rulers, government officials, tribute collectors, military leaders, high priests, local administrators, cacao plantation managers, and trade expedition leaders. Nobles were literate and wealthy, and typically lived in the central areas of Maya cities.

Commoners worked as farmers, laborers, and servants. It is believed that some commoners became quite wealthy through their work as artisans and merchants, and that upward mobility was allowed between classes through service in the military. Regardless, commoners were forbidden from wearing the clothes and symbols of nobility, and could not purchase or use luxury and exotic items. Commoners generally lived outside the central areas of towns and cities and worked individual and communal plots of land.

The Maya had a system of serfdom and slavery. Serfs typically worked lands that belonged to the ruler or local town leader. There was an active slave trade in the Maya region, and commoners and elites were both permitted to own slaves. Individuals were enslaved as a form of punishment for certain crimes and for failing to pay back their debts. Prisoners of war who were not sacrificed would become slaves, and impoverished individuals sometimes sold themselves or family members into slavery. Slavery status was not passed on to the children of slaves. However, unwanted orphan children became slaves and were sometimes sacrificed during religious rituals. Slaves were usually sacrificed when their owners died so that they could continue in their service after death. If a man married a slave woman, he became a slave of the woman's owner. This was also the case for women who married male slaves.