The Mayan civilization was the oldest of the three largest civilizations in South and Central America. The empire lasted from about 300 A.D. to 900 A.D. While Europeans were in the midst of the Dark Ages, Mayans never stopped learning. They tried out new farming methods. They rotated their crops so the soil would last longer. They only farmed crops on the same field once every three years or so. Turkey and ducks were tamed and kept on Mayan farms. That way, Mayans wouldn't have to worry about hunting or trapping food.

The Mayans also learned to make paper out of the bark of the fig tree. They had an advanced writing system. In their system, word-pictures stood for different syllables and ideas. Mayan writing did much more than just record dates and information. The writing told stories about life. The Mayans were also good mathematicians. They came up with the principle of “0” as a number. They also studied the stars and had very advanced calendars. The Mayan farming calendar was based on the movement of the sun and the stars. It had 365 days just like ours!

The Mayan civilization was very organized. Each city had a king and everyone had his position, from stonecutter to nobleman. You were born into your position in life. If your father was a stonecutter, you would cut stone, too. Nobles lived in beautiful houses. Their architecture was splendid. White limestone covered the walls and the floors. The inside walls were painted with murals.

Most Mayans were peasant\(^1\) farmers. They had to give more than half of their crops to the nobles and their king. They farmed corn and beans. Mayans also grew cacao, the basis of chocolate. The first hot chocolate actually came from the Mayans! They made their hot chocolate by mixing water, cacao (same as cocoa), and chili peppers. The Spanish people who later conquered the

\(^1\) peasant – a person who owns or works on a small farm
Yucatan peninsula\textsuperscript{2} learned of chocolate from the descendants of the Maya. The Spanish took chocolate back to Europe. In the Mayan empire, chocolate wasn’t just a food or drink. Cacao beans were used as currency, or money. People would trade their goods for cacao beans!

No one knows exactly why the Mayan civilization came to an end. By the time Europeans arrived in the New World, the civilization had already crumbled. One idea is that the kings started fighting against each other until all of the peace and wealth ended. Another thought is that the Mayan farms could no longer make enough food for everyone. In a time of extreme drought,\textsuperscript{3} peasants might have refused to give the little food that they had to the nobles. Whatever happened, the Mayan empire was long past its peak by the time Europeans arrived. In its height, the empire was active and full of the spirit of learning that many countries in Europe experienced hundreds of years later.

\textsuperscript{2} peninsula – a piece of land that is surrounded by water on 3 sides

\textsuperscript{3} drought – a period of time when there is little or no rain
1. The Mayans discovered or invented all of the following except:
   a. chocolate.
   b. rotating crops.
   c. the wheel.
   d. the use of the number “0”.

2. This passage mostly describes the Mayans in terms of
   a. their arts and festivals.
   b. why their civilization ended.
   c. how they assigned jobs.
   d. what they did and accomplished.

3. Which of these Mayan accomplishments probably had the biggest impact on building their civilization?
   a. farming and raising animals
   b. making chocolate
   c. writing with word-pictures
   d. painting murals

4. Read the following sentences: “Nobles lived in beautiful houses. Their architecture was splendid.”
   The word splendid means
   a. wonderful, magnificent
   b. expensive, costly
   c. simple, basic
   d. terrible, ugly

5. The main idea of this passage is that
   a. the Mayans lived exactly like Europeans did at the time.
   b. the Mayans were an advanced civilization for their time.
   c. the Mayans were unaware of modern science and technology.
   d. the Mayans disappeared and left no history behind.
6. What did the Mayans use as a guide while creating their complex calendars?

________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________

7. Explain two ways that Mayan civilization was "very organized."

________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

Mayans often tried new farming methods, _____________ rotating crops, in order to preserve their soil and make it fertile longer.

   a. however
   b. such as
   c. as long as
   d. finally

9. Answer the following question based on the sentence below.

While Europe was in the Dark Ages, the Mayans invented many new things because they never stopped learning.

1. Who? the Mayans

2. What did the Mayans do? ________________________________

3. Why? ________________________________________________

4. When? ________________________________________________
10. **Vocabulary Word:** drought: a period of time when there is little or no rain.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: ________________________________
Teacher Guide and Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 730

Featured Text Structure: Descriptive – the writer explains, defines or illustrates a concept or topic

Passage Summary: The Mayan civilization was one of the three largest and most advanced civilizations in South and Central America.

1. The Mayans discovered or invented all of the following except:
   a. chocolate.
   b. rotating crops.
   c. the wheel.
   d. the use of the number “0”.

2. This passage mostly describes the Mayans in terms of
   a. their arts and festivals.
   b. why their civilization ended.
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3. Which of these Mayan accomplishments probably had the biggest impact on building their civilization?
   a. farming and raising animals
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The word splendid means
   a. wonderful, magnificent
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   d. terrible, ugly
5. The main idea of this passage is that
   a. the Mayans lived exactly like Europeans did at the time.
   b. **the Mayans were an advanced civilization for their time.**
   c. the Mayans were unaware of modern science and technology.
   d. the Mayans disappeared and left no history behind.

6. What did the Mayans use as a guide while creating their complex calendars?
   
   **Suggested answer:** In order to create their advanced calendars, which consisted of 365 days, the Mayans used the movement of the sun and the stars.

7. Explain two ways that Mayan civilization was “very organized.”
   
   **Suggested answer:** Answers will vary, but can include the system of assigning jobs to people, the system of peasants giving crops to the nobles, the use of mathematics and writing, and the use of an advanced calendar.

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

   Mayans often tried new farming methods, _____________ rotating crops, in order to preserve their soil and make it fertile longer.
   
   a. however
   b. **such as**
   c. as long as
   d. finally

9. Answer the following question based on the sentence below.

   **While Europe was in the Dark Ages, the Mayans invented many new things because they never stopped learning.**
   
   1. Who? the Mayans
   2. What did the Mayans do? **invented many new things**
   3. Why? **because they never stopped learning**
4. When? **while Europe was in the Dark Ages**

10. **Vocabulary Word**: drought: a period of time when there is little or no rain.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: answers may vary.