

Interviewer: So you study the Maya civilization. Who were they?

Francisco: They were the inhabitants of what is now Southern Mexico, Guatemala and parts of Honduras. Their civilization dates back to around 2000 BCE. But I'm most interested in what is called the Preclassic Maya, which was from 1000 BCE to 250 CE. It's a period when Maya civilization really started developing fast. By the fall of the civilization, many of the now famous historic sites like Tikal had been built.

Interviewer: So what fascinates you most about the Maya?

Francisco: One really interesting thing is that they left very little writing. So there is still a lot of uncertainty about how they lived and so on. And we learn most from studying the ruins of the cities they left, but also everyday objects, like jewellery.

Interviewer: So tell us, were their lives very different from ours?

Francisco: In some ways, yes, the lives of ordinary people were very different from ours. For example, their way of life was much more sustainable than today's. Their diet was dominated by corn, beans and other vegetables grown in their household plots, so no industrial food and no plastic trash!

Interviewer: That's fascinating. It sounds like we've got a lot to learn from them!

Francisco: Absolutely! I think one of the lessons we're now learning from the Maya is that they lived a well-balanced life, with a very keen knowledge of their environment and how to get the best of it while maintaining harmony with its parts, especially in terms of clean water and rich soil.

Interviewer: And in what ways were their lives similar to ours?

Francisco: For example, much like today, family was very important and formed the base of Maya society. People that were related to one another tended to live together, forming large family groups. They also had similar occupations. In rural areas, they would be farmers; in the cities, writers or merchants, all based on their family relations. And they were ruled by powerful kings – and who became king was all down to being born in a certain family. Another similarity is that they moved a lot for work, just as many of us have to do now. For example, they might move to the city

and settle down to find better job opportunities. There were also those who travelled across the Maya territory buying and selling rare products, like minerals, salt, precious stones, textiles and, importantly, chocolate.

Finally, one of the favourite pastimes of the ancient Maya were board games. Chess-like patterns known as patolli have been found etched in the floors of houses and temples suggesting that as a board game it may have served as family entertainment. Just like how many of us enjoy board games with family and friends in the present day.