Mayan Class Structure

During the Classic period, the Maya lived in independent city-states, like Tikal. Within each state, Mayan society was structured like a pyramid. The ruler of each city-state was at the top of the social pyramid. The rest of Mayan society was organized in a series of layers below him.

The Ruler
The highest authority in the state was the halach uinic, a Mayan word that means “true man.” He ruled the state with the help of his advisors. He decided when and where to go to war. The Mayan ruler was considered a god-king. During religious ceremonies, he wore a headdress that was as tall as a person. When he died, a son or other close male relative succeeded him. Mayan rulers were almost always men, but scholars believe that women had considerable influence, probably through family relationships.

Nobles and Priests
The next layer in the social pyramid was made up of nobles and priests. They were the only members of Mayan society who knew how to read and write. The nobles served as officials, and oversaw the administration of the states. They gathered taxes, supplies, and labor for projects like the construction of temples. Nobles led peasant armies in times of war. During battles, they wore elaborate costumes, including gold jewelry and animal robes made from the skin of jaguars. Priests were important because they maintained favor with the gods. Like nobles, they inherited their position from their fathers. Priests led rituals, offered sacrifices, and foretold the future. They were consulted to determine the best days for going into battle. In addition to their religious duties, priests were often mathematicians, astronomers, and healers.

Merchants and Artisans
Although the Mayan economy was based mostly on farming, trade and crafts were also important. These functions were carried out by merchants and artisans. The Maya were accomplished traders. They traveled by sea, river, and well-constructed roads to trade with other city-states. Merchants in the lowlands imported valuable products from the highlands. These products included stones such as obsidian and jade; copal, a tree sap that the Maya used as incense during religious ceremonies; and quetzals, birds with shiny green feathers used in headdresses. Mayan artisans made a wide variety of objects, many of them designed to pay tribute to the gods. They painted books on paper made from the bark of fig trees. Artists painted murals, or wall paintings, of Mayan life and important battles. They created sculptures for temples and decorative designs on palace walls. The Maya were also skilled weavers and potters.

Peasants
The peasants were the backbone of Mayan society. They worked hard on the land, growing maize, squash, beans, and other crops to feed the population. During the growing season, men spent most of the day in the fields, farming with wooden hoes. Women usually stayed closer to home, preparing food, weaving, and sewing. When they were not working on the land, peasants spent time building pyramids and temples. In exchange for their work, they sometimes attended royal weddings and religious events. Peasants also served as soldiers during wars.
Slaves
At the bottom of the social pyramid were the slaves. Slaves performed manual labor for their owners. Some were born into slavery, but free people sometimes became slaves. Some children became slaves when their parents sold them for money to feed the rest of the family. War prisoners of humble origin were made slaves. (Those of higher rank were sacrificed to the gods.) And some people were made slaves as a punishment for serious crimes.
In general, slaves were not treated badly. Sometimes they actually had easier lives than peasants, depending on what job they did and where their masters lived. But slaves were not free to come and go as they pleased. Often they were sacrificed when their masters died.

Questions
For each class, list at least three interesting or important details about that group’s duties, work or lifestyle (use the “Class Structure Outline”):
• ruler
• nobles and priests
• merchants and artisans
• peasants
• slaves