Origins of Chocolate in Mayan Culture

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Introduction

Key Points

Cacao was an important crop and cultural influence in the Mayan culture

The Mayan culture began cultivating cocoa over 2,500 years ago

Chocolate became a major force in Mayan society

In the heyday of Mayan society cacao beans were an important commodity

Cacao was an important crop and cultural influence in the Mayan culture, a Central American society with a rich heritage of early written language, art, architecture, and astronomical systems. This culture is thought to have peaked between 250 AD and 900 AD. Its demise was largely brought about by the arrival of Spanish explorers in the seventeenth century.

Cacao’s popularity followed this timeline:

Traces of chocolate found in Mayan pots dating from 600 BC.

Cacao and hot water brewed by Mayans and Aztecs in Pre-Columbian era.

Cortez brings hot chocolate back to Spain in 1527.

European courts develop passion for chocolate drinks in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

1825 Van Houten of Holland discovers how to degrease chocolate, spreading its popularity.

Cacao Varieties

The Mayan culture began cultivating cocoa over 2,500 years ago. Criollo cacao came from Central America, and evolved separately from the cacao in the Amazon River basin that belongs to the Forastero variety. Criollo cacao trees are still found in the Lacadonia rainforest.

Criollo cacao is a wild variety that is genetically distinct from the other varieties of cacao found throughout Central and South America.

Chocolate through History

One of the Mayan myths of creation tells of a woman who stroked a head impaled on a cacao tree and then magically became impregnated. She escaped to earth to avoid her father’s wrath and gave birth to twins, the ancestors of the Mayan culture.

Chocolate was a major force in Mayan society. Pottery cups unearthed in the nineteenth century are called *chocolateros* by local Indians and were possibly used in ceremonial events. These cups include hollow handles, which were used to blow into a chocolate drink to create foam, a practice especially associated with the Mayans (see Figure 1.1).



Figure 1.1

Traces of chocolate drinks found on Mayan pottery were analyzed and the contents suggest that Mayans also added honey and pepper to their drinks.

Chocolate and the Mayan Economy

In the heyday of Mayan society, cacao beans were an important commodity used in trade among the Mayans and with other societies. For example, a record from 1530 notes the purchase of a rabbit and some turkey eggs for 10 cacao beans. However, the value of cacao declined over the years, according to the Museum of San Cristobal. In 1535, 200 beans were worth one real (a unit of currency). By 1720, one real would be worth only 15 beans.

The Chocolate Museum