number of religious innovations appear to crystallize in Maya society between 200 CE and 900 CE, a period designated as the Classic Maya. Among the major elements of the Maya achievement were the mathematically ingenious calendar; lavishly decorated ceremonial centers; a heightened conception of the royal person; writing; and a complex mythology of the underworld and cosmic regeneration. It is also amazing that these city-states and achievements developed in the forests and jungle environments, where civilizations have usually had a difficult time taking hold. Called the "Mysterious Maya" for generations, they were once believed to have been a peace-loving civilization of stargazing priests whose theological vision should be imitated by modern people. Recent studies have revealed a more typical civilization motivated by warfare, the desire to dominate, hierarchies, elaborate ceremonies associated with lineage and ancestors and complex esoteric religious ideas. One of the greatest mysteries about the Classic Mayas is the **Maya collapse:** the rapid and near total collapse of many of their ceremonial centers during the short period of 830 CE to 930 CE. It appears that a pervasive series of crises shattered the Maya world, stimulated by interlocking collapses in the agricultural, ceremonial, and political systems that held the society together.

The character of the Classic Maya world is well represented in a small jade plaque discovered in 1864 by workmen digging a canal in eastern Guatemala. Called the Leiden Plate because eventually it was taken to Leiden, Holland, this 8½-inch object contains two typical images of Maya life. On one side we find a long count calendar date corresponding to 320 CE, while on the other side we see an extravagantly dressed Maya lord stepping on a midget-sized captive cowering underneath him. This combination of sacred time, warfare, and social hierarchy carved in fine jade illustrates the integration of vital elements of the Maya achievement.

One of the most creative religious achievements of the Classic Maya was the long count calendar. Although this calendric system had earlier origins based on intense astronomical observations, it was the Maya who elaborated the cosmological conviction that human life would be most favorable if it mirrored the mathematically expressible cycles of the heavens. As a means of recording important human events and attuning human order to the celestial order, the Maya developed a calendar system with many different counts

This painted wall depicts the arraignment of prisoners by a victorious procession of elites and warriors. The prisoners are being tortured by having their fingernails plucked before their final sacrifice. Structure 1, Room 2, Bonampak, Chiapas, Mexico, 8th century CE. (Photograph courtesy of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Photograph by F. P. Orchard.)

including the Tzolkin (260-day count related to human gestation), the Haab (365-day count related to solar cycle), the Long Count (related to ancestor worship and lineages), the calendar round (a 52-year cycle), the Lords of the Night (nine-day interval), and the lunar cycle. The largest count in this system was the Long Count, which measured each day from the beginning date of the present cosmic era in 3114 BCE and prophesied its end on December 23, 2012. Each day was measured by a system of five subunits and enabled the priest to compute dates in colossal cycles going back to at least nine million years BCE as marked on inscriptions in several ceremonial centers.[6] Mathematicians have pointed out that an understanding of the concept zero is necessary for such computations. The Maya marked these days so they could be in conscious contact with the sacred forces appearing in the terrestrial world at carefully determined intervals. Unfortunately this calendar system largely faded from use, excerpt in scattered parts of Yucatan, after the Classic Maya society collapsed.