

Samabaj

Underwater | Lake Atitlan, Guatemala | about 100 BCE-250 CE | Grades 6-8

Name _____ Date _____

Samabaj was a Maya island town that the rising waters of Lake Atitlan swallowed, and it was found by a diver in 1996.

Read the story

Lake Atitlan sits in a giant volcanic crater in the highlands of Guatemala. About 2,000 years ago, during the Maya Preclassic period, the lake was lower. A small island near its southern shore held a town called Samabaj.

The town had houses, a ceremonial area, stone monuments called stelae, and altars. It may have been a place of pilgrimage. Pottery found here dates mostly to around 100 BCE to 250 CE.

Then the lake rose. Lake Atitlan has no river flowing out of it, so its level goes up and down with rain and underground drainage. As the water climbed, the people left, and Samabaj sank beneath the surface.

How it ended

The lake level rose, perhaps over a short time, and covered the island. People left before it was swallowed. The ruins have been underwater ever since.

Key words

- crater: a large bowl-shaped hole, here left by an old volcano
- Preclassic: an early period of Maya history, before the great Classic cities
- underwater archaeology: the study of past human life found underwater

Wow facts

- The ruins lie about 15 meters or more below the lake's surface.
- A local diver named Roberto Samayoa found the site in 1996, and the name Samabaj comes partly from his name.
- The lake has no river outlet, so its level can change a lot.

Talk about it

1. Why might rising water force people to move, both long ago and today?

2. Why do archaeologists sometimes keep sites closed to visitors?

Try this

Draw a map of Samabaj as it looked at its busiest. Label three things people did there.

Quick quiz

Circle the best answer.

1. Where is Samabaj?

- A. Under Lake Atitlan in Guatemala
- B. In the desert of Egypt
- C. On a mountain in Peru
- D. Under the Arctic ice

2. Why did Samabaj sink?

- A. The lake rose
- B. An earthquake pushed it into the sea
- C. A meteor hit it
- D. A dam broke

3. Who found Samabaj in 1996?

- A. A local diver
- B. An astronaut
- C. A king
- D. A fisherman's cat

Go further

Open ruinscape.live/samabaj/ for photos, the Then and Now picture where there is one, and links to museum collections and research. On the globe, Lyra Kael can fly the class there and answer questions.

Answer key (for teachers)

1. A. Samabaj is beneath Lake Atitlan.
2. A. Rising lake water covered the island.
3. A. Diver Roberto Samayoa found it.