



Maya Civilisation

Background Information

The Maya were a civilisation who lived in Mesoamerica (now Central America) between approximately 2000 BCE and 900CE. They are known for being the first Mesoamericans to develop writing. They also had a sophisticated culture in which they lived in city states. They built spectacular monuments and stepped pyramids – some (e.g. Chichen Itza) have become world tourist destinations in the modern day.

They were also well-known for their advanced maths and calendars. Around 900CE, Maya cities became abandoned. No one knows for sure why this happened.

In this unit children will:

- Discover facts about the Maya Civilisation.
- Look at the characteristics of Maya gods and design their own.
- Look at the Maya number system.
- Find out what Maya people grew and ate.
- Locate the ancient Maya Cities.
- Find out what we know about the Maya from the drawings of Frederick Catherwood.
- Consider what we know about Chichen Itza and use the information to create a leaflet for tourists.

Key places:



Did you know...?

The Mayans believed in three realms – heaven, earth and the underworld.

The Mayan civilisation did not abruptly collapse; it was a slow decline.

At the site of Copan, on the stairway, there are 2,200 individual glyphs representing the major rulers of the Copan dynasty. It is the longest made Mayan hieroglyphic text.

The Mayans created spectacular temples and pyramids without the use of metal tools, wheels and domesticated beasts.

Ceremonial masks were used for many purposes but mainly funerals, to protect noblemen in the afterlife.

The Ancient Maya lived in an area called Mesoamerica, which now covers in part or whole the countries of Mexico (including the Yucatan Peninsula), Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador.



Timeline

2000BC	Small farming villages appear
1000BC	Larger settlements are created
700BC	Maya writing begins developing
400BC	First Maya calendars are carved into stone
400BC	The Mesoamerica area is divided into states
100BC	First pyramids are built
400AD	Many people live in a capital city
900-1200AD	El Castillo (in the ancient city of Chichen Itza) is built
925AD	Chichen Itza becomes the capital city of the Mayan civilisation
1517AD	The Spanish arrive and begin their colonisation of Central America

Vocabulary:

Maya - The collective noun for the Mayan people.

Mesoamerica - The region in which the Maya lived, spanning over Mexico and parts of Southern America.

Pyramid - A 3D man-made structure that is built through large cuboids of rock piled upon one another to form sides of triangular shapes.

Deity - A synonym for god.

Chichen Itza - One of the best-preserved examples of a Mayan city.

Maize Corn – a major resource of food for Mayan people. Part of their religious culture too.

Sacrifice - A slaughtering of an animal or human as an offering to please the gods.

Artefact - An object that is made by a person, such as a tool or a decoration, especially one that is of historical interest.

Civilisation - Human society which is organised.

Dynasty - A series of leaders who are all from the same family, or a period when a country is ruled by them.

Hieroglyphics - A system of writing using pictures not words.

Maize - Also known as corn, is a cereal grain.

Temple - A building used for the worship of a god or gods in some religions.

Tomb - A large stone structure or underground room where, especially an important person, is buried.

Worship – To have or show a strong feeling or respect and admiration for a God or Goddess

Talking points to discuss at home: Why did Ancient Mayan cities (which had been deserted) stay hidden so long? Why do you think the Maya civilisation went into decline? In 1839, an American Explorer called Lloyd Stevens, discovered the Maya 'lost city in the jungle'. People were keen to find out more about this mysterious civilisation. Unfortunately, it was before the establishment of photography so how did people record their findings?

Transferable vocabulary and concepts:

Artefact, object, evidence, discovery, primary source, secondary source, archaeology, museum