



Y3 – Maya Civilisation

Key vocabulary

Civilisation	An organised society with its own culture and way of life, existing in a particular area over a particular period of time.
drought	A long period of time with very little rain.
ritual	A ceremony, often religious, with set actions performed in a set order.
scribes	People paid to write things either as an official record or for someone else who cannot write.
codices	Ancient handwritten texts. Maya codices unfolded like a concertina. One text is called a codex.
maize	Another word for sweetcorn or corn on the cob. It can be made into a dough and baked into tortillas.
Maya	The collective noun for the Mayan people.
Cacao beans	Cacao trees sprout pods directly from their trunks. When they are ripe the pods can be broken open to reveal the beans, which can then be dried, roasted and ground.
sacrifice	The killing of an animal or human as an offering to please the Gods.
astronomy	Is the study of the sun, moon, stars, planets, comets, gas, galaxies etc.

Writing

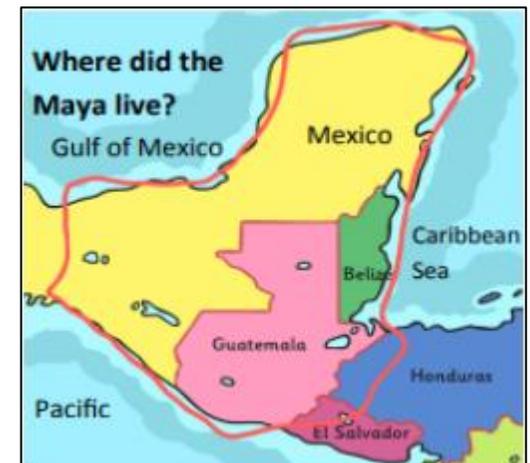
The Maya writing system, used to write several different Maya languages, was made up of over 800 symbols called glyphs. Some glyphs were logograms, representing a whole word and some were syllabograms, representing units of sound. They were carved onto stone buildings and monuments and painted onto pottery. Maya scribes also wrote books called codices, made from the bark of fig trees. Only priests and nobleman would know the whole written language.

Maya Numbers

The Maya developed a complex number and counting system that was advanced for their time. They were one of only two cultures in the world to develop the concept of zero. They used just 3 symbols in their number system; these are thought to represent items that they may have used to count with such as pebbles, sticks and shells.

The Maya used a base 20 number system, so after number 19 multiples of 20 were written above the bottom number.

The Mayan Number System				
0	1	2	3	4
	•	••	•••	••••
5	6	7	8	9
—	•	••	•••	••••
10	11	12	13	14
— —	•	••	•••	••••
15	16	17	18	19
— — —	•	••	•••	••••



How did they tell time?

While Europeans were living through a period often called the dark ages, the Maya were making huge innovations in mathematics, engineering, astronomy and writing. The Maya were expert mathematicians and astronomers, they used this expertise to create calendars. This told them when to plant crops, when to harvest and even when to make a sacrifice to the gods. Temples and other public buildings were built in a way that sunlight would hit parts at certain times of the year, often in time for religious ceremony.



The temple at Chichen Itza



The Long Count Calendar

What did Maya believe?

The Maya believed in and worshipped a number of different Gods. They believed that the Gods had a good side and a bad side and that the Gods could help or hurt them. The Maya would dance, sing and sometimes make offerings of blood to the Gods.

Priests were very important in Maya society as it was believed that they could communicate directly with the Gods. They would perform different rituals during festivals or special ceremonies in order to appeal to the Gods.

The Upperworld and the Underworld

The Maya people believed that the earth, which they called the Middleworld, was large and flat and resting on the back of a creature, such as a turtle or a crocodile.

On the Middleworld grew a tree whose branches reached up into the heavens (the Upperworld) and whose roots grew down into Xibalba (the Underworld), which was guarded by Gods of death who looked like jaguars.

Ordinary Maya people believed that, after they died, their souls would travel through a series of caves and tunnels to Xibalba. Rulers and noblemen believed that they had a chance of getting to the Upperworld.

2000BC

Farming Villages begin to form across the Maya region

700BC

Maya writing first starts to develop

400 BC

The first Maya calendars are carved into stone

100 BC

Maya builds its first pyramids

Maya Civilisation

1000 BC

The Maya begin to form larger settlements

600BC

The Maya begin to farm. This enables their society to support larger populations and the cities begin to grow in size

300 BC

The Maya adopt the idea of monarchy for their government. They are now ruled by Kings

800AD – 1,502AD

Maya civilisation begins to decline and vanish.