



The Maya

Who were the Maya?

- The Maya were people who lived in the forests of Central America. They were around from 2000 BC to 250 AD.
- They were experts in architecture and maths, and invented their own calendars, sports, writing system, farming methods and religion.

Early days

- When the Maya arrived in Central America's jungles around 12,000 years ago, they were hunter-gatherers (just like the people you learned about in the Stone Age!)
- They did not live in one place, but travelled around to find food.
- Over time, they learnt how to farm and this allowed them to stay in one place and begin permanent settlements. Some grew into large cities.

Living in a rainforest

Maya territory was in Central America. It was spread across several modern-day countries: Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. The Maya built more than 60 cities, most of which are found in modern-day Mexico and Guatemala. There were lots of difficulties of sustaining a civilisation in a rainforest environment; high levels of rainfall would have made growing crops and irrigation difficult. However, the Maya took advantage of the area's many natural resources, including limestone (for construction), the volcanic rock (for tools and weapons) and salt.



Decline of the Maya

Around AD 900, lots of city states in the south of the Maya region were suddenly abandoned, and people are unsure as to why. Historians have all researched and shared theories but there is no definite answer as to why the Maya began to leave their cities. A common theory is that the population grew too much for the cities to sustain them. There may not have been enough food, and food shortages would have been made worse by Maya farming methods which may have damaged their land. These problems then might have led to conflict between communities.

Vocabulary

civilization	The society, culture and way of life of a particular area
sacrifice	To kill (a person or animal) in a religious ceremony as an offering to please a god
Mayan	An ancient civilisation
archaeologist	A person who studies human history through places and objects left behind
Mexico	A country in Central America
hieroglyphics	A simplified picture of an object meant to stand for a word
temple	Building for religious ceremonies and worship of gods.

Gods and goddesses

Mayas believed in many different gods and goddesses, who were linked to every part of their lives—from weather and war to crops and rainbows. Archaeologists have gained a lot of information about the gods and goddesses by studying pottery, paintings and writing. However, they find it quite confusing! Sometimes the same god was known by different names in different religions or at different times in Maya history. Ideas about what the gods and goddesses looked like varied as well.

The Maya believed that they had to give offerings to the gods to keep them happy. The most extreme way of providing an offering was through human sacrifice—usually of slaves or prisoners.



Sport

The Maya often played a game called Pok-A-Tok. Pok-A-Tok was a game which consisted of 2 teams who had to pass a rubber ball using only their knees, hips, elbows and wrists to get the ball into a hoop on the opposing side.



Communication

One of the great Maya inventions was their writing system. It was a very complex system and historians still don't fully understand it. They used hundreds of symbols called hieroglyphs to write things down. Some hieroglyphs stood for a whole word, sometimes a phrase, sometimes just a letter or sometimes a syllable. By putting hieroglyphs together, the Maya recorded important events and wrote down stories or myths.



What can I do at home?

- Describe the Maya number system
- Research Maya masks and make your own
- Mayas would make their own version of hot chocolate by grinding cacao beans into a paste and flavouring it with spices and chilli. Research exactly how they made this drink and compare it with how we make hot chocolate.
- Research the rainforest and compare it to where you live now. What would make it difficult to live in a rainforest?
- Play a game of Pok-A-Tok with your friends.