

# The Maya

Aimed at Key Stage 2

circa **750BC**

Beginning of the Maya cities



## National Curriculum subject links

*A non-European society that provides contrasts with British history*  
 – Maya civilisation c. AD 900

## Coverage and links

The Maya civilisation is one that, compared to the civilisations of the Mediterranean, is more alien to us in Britain today. Whilst we've inherited so much from Ancient Greece and Rome, that's simply not the case with the Maya, barring a few notable foodstuffs. This sequence of lessons takes that remoteness to its heart, and asks if we can identify and clearly describe the key features of the Maya civilisations. Whilst 'describing' has sometimes been regarded as a lower-level objective, the ability to refine thinking, making descriptions both precise and engaging, is an important skill of the historian.

The enquiry will take pupils through several aspects of Maya life and culture, looking at Maya cities with their impressive buildings, their agriculture and diet, their home lives and religious beliefs that include the somewhat gory accounts of human sacrifice. The sequence ends by looking at what the Maya knew about the world around them by studying their number systems, hieroglyphics and their calendars.

The sequence would certainly make an interesting contrast to history units on other ancient civilisations. Indeed, one might review with pupils all of these studies at the end of key stage 2, and draw some comparisons and contrasts. There would also be lots of opportunities for some cross-curricular work with this unit. The first lesson will use maps to locate the Maya in Central America and this could be extended to look at the geography of Central and South America. It might also be interesting to conduct a brief study of the Maya people in that part of the world today.

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## Suggested learning outcomes

*By the end of these lessons, pupils will be able to...*

- Locate the Maya civilisation on a map and on a timeline.
- Give a range of examples of key features of the Maya civilisation, their cities, homes and the way they saw the world.
- Describe with some precision these key features, defining what it meant to be Maya.

## Pre-lesson homework

One idea might be to set a shopping and research homework to prepare. Give pupils a choice to find out where either chocolate or tortillas were first made and eaten.

## Lesson 1 – The Maya Civilisation

Films to use

- **Who were the Maya?**
- **Maya cities**
- **Building techniques**
- **Farming**

Start with a picture of a **Maya pyramid**, like the one at [fig. 2]

- **What can they see?**
- Where have they seen something like this before?
- **What might this building be used for?**
- What might they think if they were exploring the jungle and then came across this building in the middle of nowhere?

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## Lesson 1 – The Maya Civilisation ...continued

**Then reveal** that this was built by the Maya people more than 1500 years ago, before it was deserted.

**Then show Who were the Maya?** In which an explorer talks about the Maya civilisation, mentioning that there are still Maya people living in Central America today. At the end of the film, ask your class what was most interesting or surprising in the film. The important thing here is to get them talking about the Maya and to build up a sense of interest and excitement about them.

**At this stage**, set up the enquiry question: What did it mean to be Maya? Explain that over the next few lessons they are going to learn lots about the Maya, about how they lived, what they ate, what they believed, even how they counted things. Then they are going to use all of this to produce really interesting descriptions of the Maya people and culture. Now pupils need to learn about where the Maya civilisation was, and when. Start by looking at a world map – Google maps are a great way of zooming in from the earth down to continents and then to countries and regions. The Maya existed in southern Mexico and down into Guatemala – Map 1 shows the area, though without present-day national borders. In small groups, pupils should then look at atlases to find out something about the geographical features of the Maya region. Challenge the class to find three geographical features of the area.

**Then pupils** will need to find out about when the Maya civilisation existed. They should mark the dates on a timeline, either a whole class timeline or, even better, their own timelines that they are developing across their history studies. The first Maya cities were built in around 750BC and the last Maya were conquered by the Spanish in 1697. However, within that huge timescale, the 'Classic' period ran from about AD250–900. The culture we see in this set of films is that seen in this period. During the time-lining activity, whether you do it as a whole-class activity or individually, talk about the dates a lot, ask questions about the passage of time, remind pupils of the differences between BC and AD; you could watch the film BC & AD if there is time. You might even tell them that these years would be meaningless to the Maya who used their own unique calendar – more on that later in the unit.

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**1517AD**  
The Spanish  
arrive



### Lesson 1 The Maya Civilisation ...continued

**Now** we need to get to grips with how the Maya lived within that area, so show **Maya Cities**. Here a Maya man describes the city of Chichen Itza, one of their most important. As they watch, ask pupils to imagine what it all must have looked like, because at the end they are going to do a very quick sketch of the city, or at least a part of it. As they draw, ask pupils to think about the grand pyramid in the middle, surrounded by an open space with palaces, temples and houses for the priests around that. At the end, ask pupils to come up with adjectives to describe the city. **Building Techniques** could be shown during this task so that pupils get a better sense of how all these amazing buildings were put up, or at the end to help come up with the adjectives.

**Now** take pupils outside the city to the countryside by showing **Farming**. Here the farmer talks about all the problems he faces, firstly in growing crops in such difficult terrain, and then in providing enough for all the people who live in the cities and thus don't contribute to the food supply. Again, at the end of the film, pupils should write a sentence or two that describes the work of the farmer.

**To end the lesson**, have a discussion with your class comparing Maya cities with modern-day towns and cities. What do they have in common? What are the differences?

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**1517**

## Lesson 2 – Life in the Maya civilisation

Films to use

- **Food**
- **Family life – part 1**
- **Family life – part 2**
- **Maya religion – gods**
- **Maya religion – sacrifice**
- **Sport – the ball court**

**At the start** of the lesson, ask pupils to try to remember what the farmer said he grew. What foods did the Maya eat? This could lead to some food tasting in class, using some corn tortillas, a bar of very dark chocolate and a bowl of guacamole. During this activity, show **Food**, in which a Maya woman talks about what they eat, their staples and their luxuries. At the end, you might discuss why their food is one of the only elements of Maya culture that has survived and spread.

**Now explain** to the class that this lesson is aimed at learning about the day-to-day life of the Maya, about their families, their religious beliefs and their sport. At the end of the lesson, they will write just three brilliant sentences that describe aspects of the life of the Maya.

The first section is all about family life, so show the two Family life films – **Family life – part 1 & Family life – part 2**. In the first, the Maya woman talks about her home and family, and in the second, she describes cooking and other household work. In both films she talks about Maya children; the rich are educated, whilst those of ordinary families work from about the age of five.

**As this activity comes to an end**, tell pupils that so far we've only seen the more positive sides of Maya culture, but now we're going to look at something more troubling. Show **Maya Religion – gods**, being careful to stop it as the man in the film says that 'You can only go to heaven if you've been sacrificed or died in childbirth'. Ask the class what that word means; sacrifice? Why might the Maya sacrifice someone? Then show the rest of the film as he explains who might get sacrificed.

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## Lesson 2 – Life in the Maya civilisation ...continued

**Now ask** whether this has changed anyone's mind about the Maya? How might they describe their culture now? Finally here show **Maya Religion – sacrifice** which gives us the full gory details of how it happened. Use discretion with your class here and make sure you watch this film first.

**The final film** to show is **Sport – the ballcourt**. The game that the man describes has some similarities with sports that your pupils will know. There are two teams and it is played on a court. There is a ball and hoops, like netball and basketball. Then there are the differences; no hands can be used and the losers are sometimes sacrificed at the end. It might be useful to show a video of the game being played and there are lots of examples on YouTube.

After showing these sets of films, give pupils a choice of tasks. There is one for each of the areas of daily life we have just covered.

- **Write 'A Day in the Life of a Maya Child'.**
- Make a set of Top Trumps cards about the different Maya gods.
- **Write the rules of the Maya ball game (sometimes called Pelota). Include diagrams.**

End the lesson with those three sentences you talked about earlier. Pupils need to write one really good sentence to describe each of the following:

- **family life and the home**
- the Maya religion
- **Maya sport.**

Don't let this be a quick exercise but instead try to craft the sentences. Do lots of sharing around the class. Challenge the use of better words – having dictionaries and thesauruses available would be great for this task.

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## Lesson 3 – What did the Maya know?

Films to use

- **Maya Hieroglyphics**
- **Maya Mathematics**
- **The Maya Calendar**
- **Maya Medicine**
- **What Happened to the Ancient Maya?**

**For this lesson**, it would be useful for pupils to be able to watch the films in small groups, perhaps on tablets or other computers. They will work together to produce a short presentation on one aspect of Maya learning, so if this is not possible, then the transcripts could be given to each group and they can show the film as part of their presentation at the end.

**Start the lesson** by going back over the work in the last two. Ask your class to offer ideas about what kind of people the Maya were. How much like people in other ancient cultures were they? Did they have anything in common with the Greeks or Romans, for example? Now we know that they lived in quite a small area; how does that compare to those other ancient civilisations? What about the Egyptians?

**Now** explain to your class that in this lesson they are going to learn about what educated Maya thought about the world, how they wrote and how they counted. This last one should rouse some murmurs; how could anyone count differently? We'll find out! They will work together in small groups to research an area of Maya knowledge and expertise and present that back to their class later.

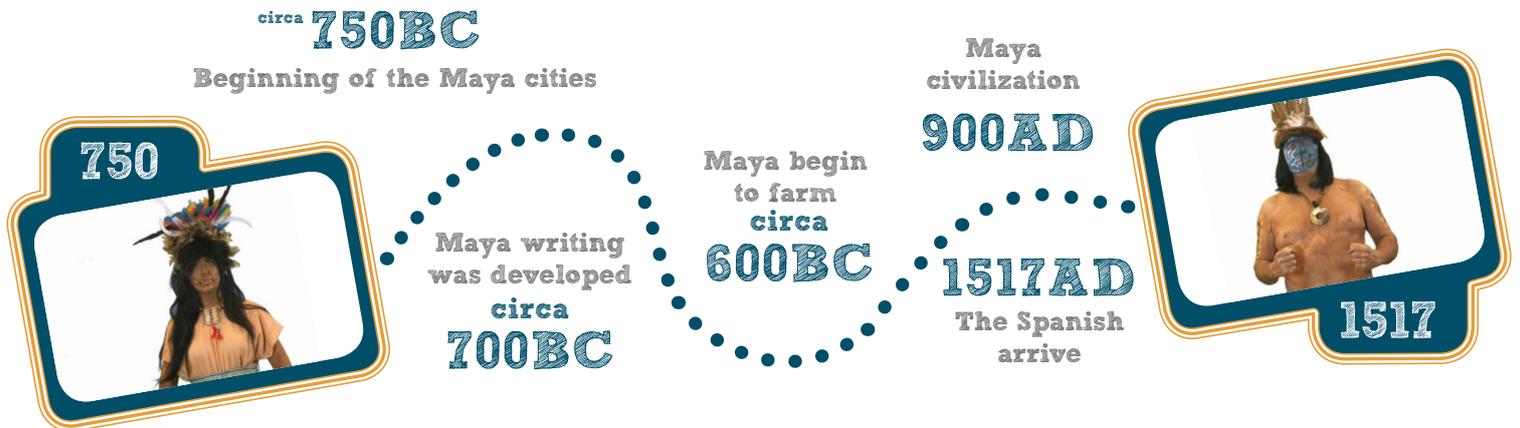
There are four areas to look at: **See fig 1**

It would be fine to give some topics to two different groups. Presentations at the end could then be done to half the class each.

**After all the groups** have presented to the class, then pupils need to do a final task that addresses the enquiry question. By now pupils should have a set of sentences and words that they have used to describe the Maya civilisation, so they need to put all this together to write one or two paragraphs: What did it mean to be Maya? Some pupils might benefit from having some sentence starters to help here.

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## Differentiation, assessment and reflection

### Extension

There are opportunities in each lesson to extend pupils thinking.

- In the first lesson, some pupils might look at other Mesoamerican cultures to see how they overlapped with the Maya.
- The Maya ballgame could form the basis for some higher level questioning, especially around the modern versions played today. You might ask, for example, why the players today dress like their ancestors to play the game.
- The Maya mathematics system provides rich soil for extending those who need it in maths. They might attempt some calculations of bigger numbers, indeed anything over 19.

### Scaffolding

- Make sure that key words and new vocabulary go up on display. This is especially true of the language of description – lots of great adjectives.
- The top trump cards could be prepared with blank sections to fill in.
- In lesson three some students could be given sentence starters for the final written task.

### Formative assessment opportunities

- As pupils make their timelines in lesson 1, use the opportunity to check pupils' knowledge and understanding of the time period of the Maya, and what this means in terms of years and centuries.
- It will be crucial to check that pupils have grasped the necessary detail in lesson two before embarking on their written task. You could do a short-answer quiz just before starting.
- In the final lesson, you could do a quick question and answer session after each presentation – perhaps even targeting one or two pupils with key questions.

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## Differentiation, assessment and reflection

### Reflection

At the end of the sequence, ask pupils to ask themselves one or two questions about the Maya people that haven't been answered in this enquiry. Their work is to find answers to these questions to share next time.

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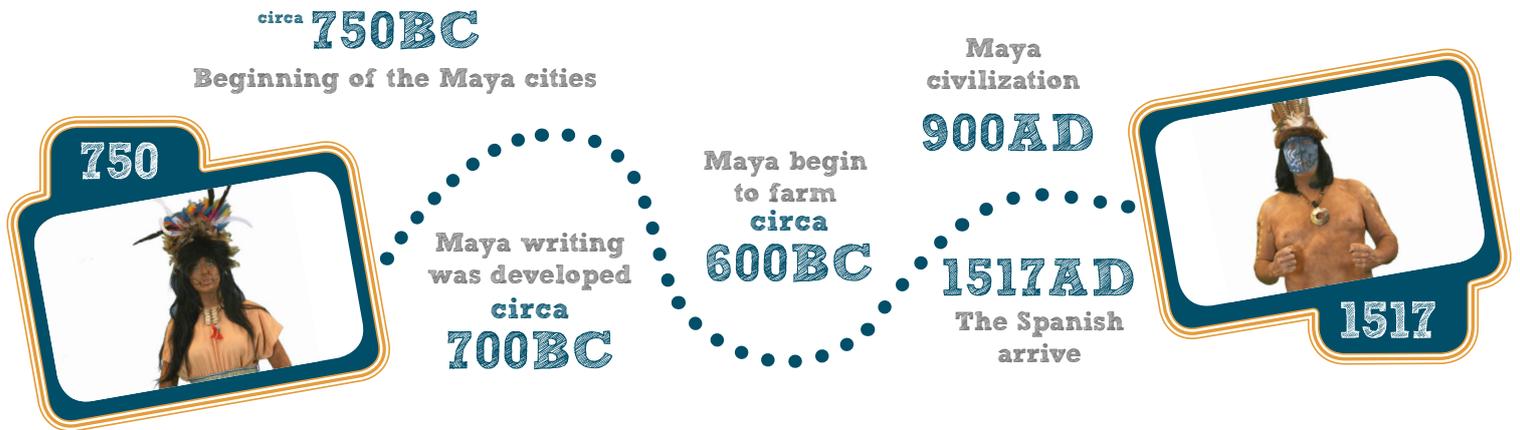


Fig. 1 Lesson 3 – What did the Maya know?

## Topic 1 – Writing

Films to watch

- **Maya Hieroglyphics**

Things to think about

- What sort of writing did the Maya have?
- What did the writing look like?
- What did they write down?
- What does Maya writing have in common with other writing systems?

## Topic 2 – Maths

Films to watch

- **Maya Mathematics**

Things to think about

- How was Maya counting different to our own?
- How did they write down their numbers?
- How did they do calculations?

## Topic 3 – Dates and years

Films to watch

- **Maya Calendar**

Things to think about

- Why did the Maya have two calendars?
- What did the calendars do?
- What did the calendars look like?

## Topic 4 – Medicine

Films to watch

- **Maya Medicine**

Things to think about

- Who were the Maya medical experts?
- What sorts of medicines did they have?
- Would any of them have been effective?

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Fig 2: Temple at Tikal



Image from **Wikipedia**  
Author: Raymond Ostertag

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Map 1: The Maya area within Mesoamerica



Image from Wikipedia  
Author: Kmusser