

The Mighty and Mysterious Maya

Year 5

Core Knowledge

- Archaeologists believe the Maya **civilisation** started between 2000BC and 1500BC.
- The **Ancient** Mayan **civilisation** was one of the first civilisations of the world. Others include: the Aztecs (who lived in central America as well), the Incas, Ancient Islamic Empire, Ancient Rome, Ancient Benin, Ancient Egyptian, Ancient Sumer, Ancient Greece, Indus Valley and Shang Dynasty.
- The Maya people built great cities across Mesoamerica – an area that today consists of parts of Mexico and Central America. The four main Maya cities were Chicken Itza, Copan, Tikal and Palenque.
- The Maya people discovered important mathematical ideas and had their own number system called vigesimal. Mayan **hieroglyphic** writing is made up of both syllables and logographs (word pictures).
- Using the bark from fig trees, the Maya people created books called **codices**. A few of these still remain today, and are primary sources of evidence which tell us about the Ancient Mayans. However, most were burned by Christian missionaries in the 16th Century, who wanted to get rid of the Maya religion.
- Other primary sources which can tell us about Mayan life include calendar stones, masks and fragments of pots. The Maya calendar stones were created through their study of **astronomy**. Their calendar is considered almost as accurate as the one we use today.
- The Ancient Maya people had many **deities** that they believed took on many different forms. Some of the Ancient Mayan gods included: Itzamna, one of the creator gods; Ix Chel, who was goddess of childbirth, healing, weaving and the moon; Chac, the rain god; and Ah Puch, the death god.
- While historians are not sure why the Maya Empire collapsed, the Maya society began to shrink in the 10th century and split into separate groups. They may have suffered from overpopulation and the effects of drought.
- Today there are over seven million Maya people, most of whom live in Central America and southern Mexico. The Maya people have continued to hold onto their unique way of life. They still worship the old gods as well as Christianity, they farm in the same way and weave clothing in a similar way.

Maya Legacy



A Maya codex showing some hieroglyphs.



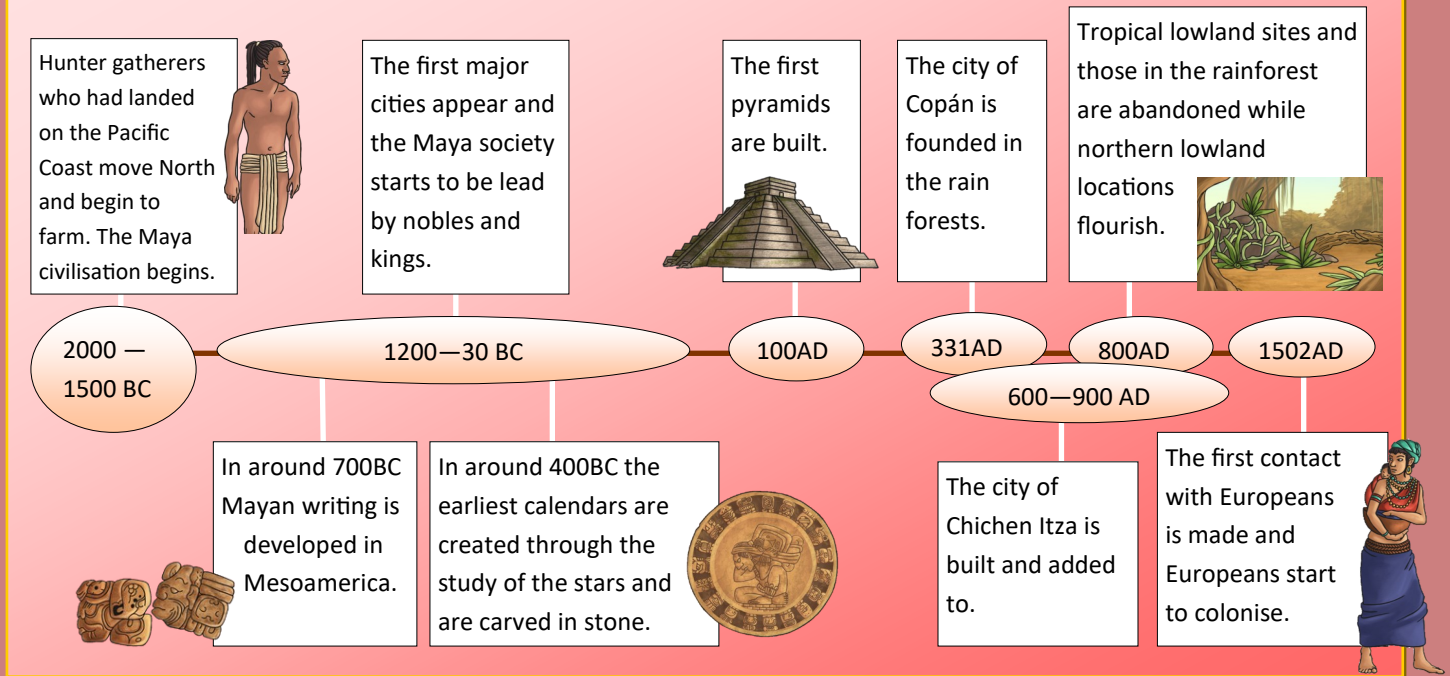
A step pyramid at the Chichén Itzá site.

Chichén Itzá is an ancient Maya city, built in approximately 400 CE, located in the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. In 2007, Chichén Itzá was named one of the seven wonders of the modern world.

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Timeline of key events



Geography Core Knowledge

- The physical geography of the Maya area, which includes many mountain ranges, volcanoes, beaches, large lakes, and land which has many earthquakes, affect how the people there live.
- Crops of coffee, corn, squash, bananas and beans grow in the fertile valleys in Central America, so these natural resources are important exports for the people there.
- By contrast, the UK exports include machinery, cars, electronic equipment (including computers), chemicals and oil. Services, particularly financial services, are another major export for Britain.
- The population of the UK is 67.22 million, while the population of Mexico is 130 million.
- The UK is less densely populated than Mexico. This means that the people in Mexico live much closer together than people in the UK do.
- Mexico has a tropical climate, which means there is a rainy and dry season, but the temperature fluctuation stays hot all year round. However, it rains a lot and is very humid. Much of Central America and Mexico is covered in rainforest. In contrast, the UK has a temperate climate, which means there are hot times of the year and cold times of the year.



The Spanish Colonisation of the Maya

The Spanish **colonisation** of the Maya officially began in 1521 when Francisco de Montejo petitioned the King of Spain for the right to conquer the Yucatan. It took the Spanish 170 years and a number of expeditions to finally control the Maya peoples—much longer than their campaigns against the Aztecs and Incas.

- **1517** The Spanish first arrive on the shores of Yucatán under Hernandez de Cordoba, who later dies of wounds received in battle against the Maya. The arrival of the Spanish brought in 'Old World' diseases that hadn't been around in the Maya, including smallpox, influenza and measles. Within a century, 90 per cent of Mesoamerica's native populations will be killed off.
- **1528** The Spanish under Francisco de Montejo begin their conquest of the northern Maya. The Maya fight back, keeping the Spanish at bay for several years.
- **1541** The Spanish are finally able to subdue the Maya and put an end to Maya resistance. However, revolt continues to plague the Spaniards off and on for the rest of the century.
- **1542** The Spanish establish a capital city at Mérida in Yucatán.
- **1712** The Maya of the Chiapas highlands rise against the Mexican government. They will continue to do so off and on until the 1990s.
- **1724** The Spanish Crown abolishes the system of *encomienda*, which had given Spanish land barons the right to forced Maya labour, as long as they agreed to convert the Maya to Christianity.
- **1821** Mexico becomes independent from Spain. In general, life becomes more tolerable for the Maya than it had been under Spanish rule.



Even though the Spanish conquest resulted in centuries of cruelty towards the Maya people, causing their population to decline, many Maya people still maintain some of their traditions. In fact, there are currently 31 different Mayan languages being spoken today. However, these languages are becoming endangered because of discrimination. Sometimes people won't even be offered jobs if they speak a Mayan language. Many people write literature in Mayan languages as well as Spanish in an effort to keep these languages alive so that their culture will not die out forever.

Key Vocabulary

civilisation—a society, or group of people, with similar religious beliefs, customs, language, and form of government



ancient—belonging to the very distant past and no longer in existence



hieroglyph—a picture or symbol representing an idea, an object, a syllable, or a sound



astronomy—the study of the stars, planets, and other features of outer space



deity—a god or goddess



exports—goods or services that are sent to another country for sale.



colonisation—the process of settling among, and establishing control over, the indigenous people of an area.

