

YEAR 6 UNIT 1 – THE MAYA CIVILISATION: Why should we remember the Maya?

Related units:

Year 3 Unit 1: The Stone Age and Year 4 Unit 1: The Ancient Egyptians

Unit overview

In this unit, the children will explore the world of the Maya, and debate whether they should continue to be remembered today as a significant culture. The children will begin by learning about the lives of the Maya today, before focusing on ancient Maya architectural achievements, their religion and surviving writings. They will also study the possible reasons why the Maya city states declined after 900 AD, looking at conspiracy theories and considering whether everything they read online is reliable. They will consider the issues faced when studying a culture where only limited types of evidence are available, predominantly archaeological evidence. While studying the unit, it is important to check the news for information about any new finds about the culture. Throughout the unit, the children will make links to other societies they have studied, including those covered in Year 3 Unit 1: The Stone Age and Year 4 Unit 1: The Ancient Egyptians.

The Big Finish provides the children with the opportunity to utilise and celebrate their knowledge and communicate it through a creative activity, by making a Maya-style codex. The completed codices can then be displayed so they can be shared with the rest of the school, parents and families.

Key vocabulary

Religious, social, economic, cultural, political, civilisation, pyramid, temple, conclusion, evidence, reconstruction, archaeology, city state, sacrifice, Meso-America, nobles, creation, hierarchy, sacrifice, bloodletting, conquistadors, technology, culture, glyphs, agriculture, astronomy, calendar, trade, interpretations, theory, climate change, conquer, decline, codex/codices, pagan, scribe, significance.

Knowledge, skills and concepts

In this unit, the children will:

- establish clear narratives within and across periods they study
- regularly address historically valid questions about similarity and difference and significance
- construct informed responses that involve thoughtful selection and organisation of relevant historical information
- understand how our knowledge of the past is constructed from a range of sources
- note connections, contrasts and trends over time
- develop the appropriate use of historical terms
- address and devise historically valid questions about change, cause and significance.

Cross-curricular links

- **Art:** making pots in the style of the Maya
- **DT:** how were the pyramids made?
- **English:** creative writing about lost cities
- **Geography:** impact of changes to the climate on a society
- **Maths:** doing calculations in different types of number systems
- **Music:** percussion and wind instrument music in the style of the Maya
- **RE:** exploring different aspects of what people believed in, comparing creation stories
- **Science:** exploring the impact of technology on other societies

Related books for wider reading

- *The Chocolate Tree (A Mayan Folktale)* by Linda Lowery and Richard Keep
- *The Maya Civilisation* by Clare Hibbert (The History Detective Investigates)

Places to visit

- Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford (runs a workshop on the Maya)
- British Museum, London (significant collection of Maya artefacts)
- Opportunities for learning outside the classroom are fairly limited for this unit. Instead, you may decide to invite an archaeologist specialising in the area into your classroom.

Assessment

Opportunities for assessment for learning are built in throughout the unit through questioning and activities. The children can both self and peer assess as appropriate using approaches familiar to them. The quiz is intended to be used during week 6, and will review knowledge, skills and concepts acquired during the unit. The Rising Stars Progression Framework assessment focuses on: constructing the past; establish clear narratives within and across the periods they study; note connections, contrasts and trends over time. **The assessment should be undertaken in week 6. Detailed information on the task can be found on the key assessment opportunity sheet.**

Subject knowledge and teaching guidance

The Maya were a Stone Age society in Central America. This area now comprises mainly parts of Guatemala and Mexico. It is an area of tropical rainforest. The Maya first appeared around 2000 BC, but their main period is from around 0 AD to around 1300 AD. They formed a society of city states. There was a big change in the civilisation around 900 AD, when many Maya cities were deserted, and around 90% of the population disappeared. Historians disagree about why this happened.

Many historians think the Maya were the most advanced society in Meso-America during this period, even though they did not use wheels, had no metal and no major roads. They succeeded in building up a huge trading empire, and some of their cities grew to contain around 50,000 people. They used the rainforest effectively, mainly growing maize and grinding it into flour to make tortilla-type bread. They gave the world chocolate, which they drank flavoured with chillies. They also used cocoa beans as a form of currency. The Maya developed a complex calendar, and had a writing system based on hieroglyphs. They make a perfect contrast with Stone Age Britain (there are lots of similarities, but also many differences), Ancient Egypt (pyramids and hieroglyphs) or Shang China (jade and obsidian). There are still around 5 million Maya living in the region today, and they provide us with many insights into their ancestors.

There are many opportunities for enriching activities and making cross-curricular links within this unit, for example making music using percussion and wind instruments in the style of the Maya. You could introduce the children to the types of food eaten by the Maya, many of which are still very popular around the world today. The discussion about the discovery of lost cities in the region could act as a stimulus for creative writing. If you use any fiction texts, check them carefully as they may not focus on the Maya but other Meso-American cultures.

Within this topic, opportunities for visits are very limited. If you would like to enrich the unit further, you may consider inviting a visitor into school, enabling you to explore the Maya culture in greater depth. Obtaining genuine artefacts from the period for use in school will be challenging but you could enrich activities by introducing replica artefacts into your sessions.

In the Big Finish, the children will work in groups to make a Maya-style codex, with each child making a page. If time is available, you could extend the activity to enable the children to make their own full codex.