

Subject: History

Year 5 Who were the ancient Maya?

NC/PoS:

National Curriculum Links

Pupils should be taught about:

- **A non-European society that provides contrasts with British history** – one study chosen from early Islamic civilization, Mayan civilization c. AD 900, or Benin (West Africa c. AD 900–1300).
- Developing a chronologically secure knowledge of world history.
- Understanding how knowledge of the past is constructed from evidence.
- Addressing and devising historically valid questions.

Prior Learning (what pupils already know and can do)

End Points (What pupils should know by the end of the unit)

By the end of the topic pupils should be able to:

- Explain **who the Ancient Maya were** and where they lived.
- Identify important features of **Maya settlements and cities**.
- Understand how the Maya were **ruled by kings and nobles**.
- Compare Maya leadership with **other civilisations**.
- Describe aspects of Maya **daily life, toys and entertainment**.
- Explain the importance of Maya **writing, maths, farming and architecture**.
- Use historical vocabulary such as **civilisation, hierarchy, glyphs, empire and agriculture**.

Key Vocabulary

Component 1 LO:

Learning Objective

To understand who the Ancient Maya were and where they settled.

Prior Knowledge Evaluation

Ask pupils:

- **What is a civilisation?**
- **What features help a civilisation grow?**
- **Which ancient civilisations have we already studied?**

Record ideas such as farming, rulers, buildings, writing and trade.

Starter

Display a world map. Ask pupils to locate:

- **United Kingdom**
- **Mexico**
- **Guatemala**

Discuss distance and climate differences.

Then reveal that the Maya civilisation developed in Mesoamerica.

Main Activity

Teacher Input:

Explain that the Maya civilisation existed for over 2,000 years and built impressive cities in rainforest and lowland areas.

Introduce key places:

- **Chichén Itzá**
- **Tikal**
- **Palenque**

Discuss why settlements were built near:

- **Water sources**
- **Fertile land**
- **Trade routes**
- **Natural protection**

Children complete a detailed map task:

- **Shade Maya region**
- **Label modern countries**
- **Add key cities**
- **Draw physical features (rainforest, rivers, coast)**

Then complete written response:

Why was this a good place for settlements? Use at least three reasons.

Alternative Activity Ideas

- **Compare Maya lands to Egypt and Greece.**
- **Build a rainforest settlement using blocks or natural materials.**
- **Create a travel brochure for visiting a Maya city.**

Adaptations for SEND

- **Provide pre-labelled maps.**
- **Use enlarged visuals and symbol prompts.**
- **Sentence starters:**
 - **“The Maya settled here because...”**
 - **“One reason is...”**

Key Vocabulary

- **Civilisation**
- **Settlement**
- **Rainforest**
- **Mesoamerica**

Helpful Websites

- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize>
- <https://www.twinkl.co.uk>
- <https://www.natgeokids.com>

Component 2 LO:

To understand how the Maya were ruled and how this compares to other civilisations.

Prior Knowledge Evaluation

Ask:

- What does it mean to rule a country?
- Why do societies need leaders?

Review leadership in Ancient Egypt / Greece if previously studied.

Starter

Show an image of a Maya king seated on a throne with ceremonial clothing.

Ask:

- How can we tell this person is powerful?
- What symbols of power can we see?

Main Activity

Teacher Input:

Explain that the Maya were not one empire ruled by one king. Instead, they lived in **city-states**, each ruled by its own leader.

Introduce hierarchy:

1. King / ruler
2. Nobles
3. Priests
4. Merchants / skilled workers
5. Farmers
6. Slaves

Discuss the role of priests in religion and decision-making.

Children create a **social pyramid** and annotate each level.

Then compare with:

- Ancient Egypt – one pharaoh
- Ancient Greece – city-states with different systems

Children answer:

Which system of leadership might work best and why?

Alternative Activity Ideas

- Role-play a royal court deciding how to use food supplies.
- Debate: Should one person hold all power?

Adaptations for SEND

- Use picture hierarchy cards.
- Reduce written comparison to bullet points.
- Adult-guided group discussion.

Key Vocabulary

- Hierarchy
- Noble
- Priest
- Rule

Helpful Websites

- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize>
- <https://www.twinkl.co.uk>
- <https://www.natgeokids.com>

Component 3: LO:

Ancient Mayan Toys and Entertainment

Learning Objective

To understand what Ancient Maya children played with and how the Maya were entertained.

Prior Knowledge Evaluation

Ask:

- **What games do children enjoy today?**
- **Why is play important?**

Starter

Display mystery object images:

- **Clay whistle**
- **Ball court ring**
- **Carved figurine**
- **Spinning top**

Children infer what each object may have been used for.

Main Activity

Teacher Input:

Explain that although Maya children worked and helped families, they also played games and used handmade toys.

Examples:

- **Clay dolls**
- **Whistles**
- **Balls made from rubber**
- **Animal figurines**
- **Spinning toys**

Introduce the Maya ball game, played in stone courts. Explain that it was both sport and ceremony.

Children rotate through stations:

Station 1: Artefact detective – identify toy objects

Station 2: Design a Maya toy using available materials

Station 3: Write rules for a safe class version of the ball game

Station 4: Compare entertainment then and now

Plenary discussion:

What do toys teach us about people in the past?

Alternative Activity Ideas

- **Make clay whistles or figurines.**
- **Outdoor PE challenge inspired by ball game teamwork.**

Adaptations for SEND

- **Hands-on practical tasks.**
- **Visual instructions at each station.**
- **Adult support for reading cards.**

Key Vocabulary

- **Entertainment**
- **Artefact**
- **Ceremony**
- **Recreation**

Helpful Websites

- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize>
- <https://www.twinkl.co.uk>
- <https://www.natgeokids.com>

Component 4 LO:

Maya Writing, Maths and Calendars

Learning Objective

To understand how the Maya used writing, mathematics and calendars.

Prior Knowledge Evaluation

Ask:

- Why do civilisations need writing?
- What do we use numbers for every day?

Starter

Show Maya glyph symbols beside English letters.

Ask:

- Is this an alphabet?
- How is it different from our writing?

Main Activity

Teacher Input:

Explain that the Maya developed:

- A writing system using glyphs
- Number symbols using dots and bars
- The concept of zero
- Detailed calendars to track time, seasons and ceremonies

Children complete three mini tasks:

Task 1: Glyph Decoder

Match symbols to meanings.

Task 2: Maya Maths

Write numbers 1–20 using dots and bars.

Task 3: Calendar Challenge

Compare Maya calendar uses with today's calendars.

Discuss why these achievements show advanced thinking.

Alternative Activity Ideas

- Write names using glyph-style symbols.
- Create a classroom calendar using symbols.

Adaptations for SEND

- Use matching rather than decoding paragraphs.
- Number mats and symbol prompts.

Key Vocabulary

- Glyph
- Numeral
- Zero
- Calendar

Helpful Websites

- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize>
- <https://www.natgeokids.com>
- <https://www.twinkl.co.uk>

Component 5 LO:

Maya Daily Life, Food and Farming

Learning Objective

To understand how farming and daily life supported the Maya civilisation.

Prior Knowledge Evaluation

Ask:

- What do all cities need to survive?
- Why is farming important?

Starter

Show images of:

- Maize fields
- Terraced farming
- Maya houses
- Market scenes

Ask pupils what these reveal about daily life.

Main Activity

Teacher Input:

Explain that many Maya people were farmers. Crops included:

- Maize
- Beans
- Squash
- Chilli
- Cacao

Discuss homes, clothing, jobs, markets and family life.

Children complete a Day in the Life task choosing one role:

- Farmer
- Merchant
- Noble child
- Craft worker

Write a diary describing:

- Morning jobs
- Food eaten
- Work completed
- Evening activities

Then discuss how farming supported cities and rulers.

Alternative Activity Ideas

- Food comparison with modern diets.
- Build a Maya home model from sticks/card.

Adaptations for SEND

- Diary templates with prompts.
- Role cards with simplified facts.

- **Option to draw comic-strip diary.**

Key Vocabulary

- **Agriculture**
- **Harvest**
- **Merchant**
- **Daily life**

Helpful Websites

- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize>
- <https://www.twinkl.co.uk>
- <https://www.natgeokids.com>

Component 6 LO:

What Have We Learned About the Ancient Maya?

Learning Objective

To understand the key achievements and lasting legacy of the Ancient Maya civilisation.

Prior Knowledge Evaluation

Quick retrieval quiz:

- Where did the Maya live?
- Who ruled Maya cities?
- What were glyphs?
- Name one crop grown by the Maya.

Starter

Display mixed images from the unit:

cities, kings, glyphs, toys, farming, calendars.

Children sort into categories.

Main Activity

Children create a **final enquiry project** answering:

Who Were the Ancient Maya?

Their project must include:

1. Where they lived
2. How they were ruled
3. Daily life and farming
4. Toys and entertainment
5. Writing and maths
6. Why historians still study them

Formats may include:

- Poster
- Booklet
- Presentation
- Museum display
- Fact file

Success Criteria:

- Accurate facts
- Historical vocabulary
- Clear explanation
- Evidence from lessons

Children present work and answer peer questions.

Alternative Activity Ideas

- End-of-unit quiz competition.
- Class museum walkthrough.
- Group documentary script.

Adaptations for SEND

- Structured templates.
- Verbal presentation allowed.
- Reduced written amount with key facts.

Key Vocabulary

- Legacy
- Achievement
- Evidence
- Civilisation

Helpful Websites

- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize>
- <https://www.twinkl.co.uk>
- <https://www.natgeokids.com>

Assessment Opportunities

- Map and settlement explanation
- Social hierarchy comparison
- Toy artefact investigation
- Glyph and maths tasks
- Diary writing
- Final enquiry project

Helpful Lesson Planning & Resource Tools

Chalkie AI (teacher planning tool)

- <https://chalkie.ai>

Other helpful resources:

- <https://www.twinkl.co.uk>
- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach>
- <https://www.natgeokids.com>