

ANCIENT MAYA READING CHALLENGE

Read carefully. You can answer on the question sheet or in your Home Learning book.

The Ancient Maya built one of the most remarkable civilisations in the ancient Americas. Their civilisation developed over many centuries in an area we now call Mesoamerica, including parts of modern-day Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador.

Cities in the rainforest

The Maya did not have one single king ruling a huge empire. Instead, they lived in many city-states. Each city-state had its own ruler and controlled the surrounding towns, villages and farmland. Famous Maya cities included Tikal, Palenque and Chichen Itza. Many cities had tall stone temples and stepped pyramids, large plazas for gatherings and courts for playing the Maya ball game.

Food, farming and trade

Most Maya people depended on farming. Maize (corn) was especially important, alongside beans, squash and chillies. People also grew cacao, which could be made into a bitter chocolate drink. Busy markets allowed people to trade food, pottery, cloth, tools, salt and other goods. Traders sometimes travelled long distances between settlements.

Writing, numbers and knowledge

The Maya developed a complex writing system using signs called glyphs. Scribes recorded important events, rulers and religious ideas on stone monuments and in books. Maya mathematicians used a number system based on groups of twenty and included a symbol for zero. Maya astronomers carefully observed the Sun, Moon, planets and stars. Their observations helped them create detailed calendars.

Religion and daily life

Religion was an important part of Maya life. People believed in many gods connected to things such as rain, maize and the Sun. Ceremonies were held in temples and plazas. However, daily life was not the same for everyone. Farmers, craftspeople, traders, nobles, priests and rulers had different jobs and responsibilities, and children's lives depended on their family and where they lived.

What happened to the Maya?

Between about AD 800 and 900, many large cities in the southern lowlands became less powerful or were abandoned. Historians think there were several causes, including warfare, drought, pressure on food supplies and political problems. The Maya people did not disappear. Maya communities continued to live across the region, and millions of Maya people and many Maya languages remain today.

Glossary

civilisation: an organised society with its own culture and way of life

city-state: a city and the surrounding area ruled as its own state

scribe: a person trained to read and write important records

More useful words

glyph: a written sign or symbol

astronomer: someone who studies objects in space

abandoned: left behind and no longer lived in

ANCIENT MAYA READING CHALLENGE

Questions - use the text to help you prove your answers.

Helpful Hint

For retrieval questions, underline or point to the part of the text that gives you the answer.

For questions that ask you to explain, use because in your answer and include evidence from the text.

1. Name two modern countries where the Maya civilisation developed.

2. What is a city-state?

3. Give two features you might have seen in a large Maya city.

4. Why was maize important to many Maya people?

5. What were Maya glyphs used for?

6. Find and copy one word that means “left behind and no longer lived in”.

7. Why do you think markets were important to Maya communities? Use information from the text.

8. The text says daily life “was not the same for everyone”. Give two examples that support this idea.

Go Further

9. Why is it incorrect to say that the Maya people “disappeared” around AD 900?

10. Which Maya achievement do you think was most impressive: writing, maths, astronomy or building? Explain your choice using evidence from the text.