

The Magnificent Maya: Explorers of the Rainforest

Learning objective: To analyse the social structure, agricultural techniques, and geographical location of the Maya civilisation.

Use your knowledge of the Maya to answer the following questions. Provide detailed explanations where required to demonstrate your understanding of this ancient society.

Ellie the elephant has been reading ancient scrolls about the Maya people. She discovered that they lived in the tropical rainforests of Central America over a thousand years ago. Unlike a single country, they lived in independent city-states, each ruled by a powerful king. They were master builders who used limestone to create towering pyramids and were expert astronomers who tracked the movements of the stars. To feed their large population, they developed clever farming methods to grow crops like maize and beans in the dense jungle.

Word bank: Chichen Itza · maize · city-state · obsidian · terrace farming · hieroglyphics · astronomy · limestone

1. The Maya did not live in one single empire. Explain why living in independent city-states might have made it difficult for the Maya to defend themselves against rivals. (2 marks)

2. Compare and contrast the farming techniques used by the Maya (such as terrace farming) with the methods farmers use in the UK today. What is the main difference? (2 marks)

3. Justify why the discovery of obsidian tools suggests that the Maya were skilled traders with other regions. (2 marks)

4. The Maya were brilliant astronomers. Why was understanding the stars and planets so important for a society that relied heavily on agriculture? (2 marks)

5. If you were a Maya architect, why would limestone be the most practical material to build your pyramids compared to wood or clay? (2 marks)

Draw: Draw a scene of a Maya city-state featuring a stepped pyramid, a bustling marketplace with traders, and the surrounding rainforest environment.



Extension challenge: Imagine you are an archaeologist who has just discovered a new, hidden Maya city. Write a journal entry describing the most impressive building you see and explain what you think it was used for. Use at least four words from the word bank in your writing.