

The Maya: Architects of the Rainforest

Learning objective: To understand the achievements and societal structure of the ancient Maya civilisation.

Read the text carefully with Ellie the elephant and answer the questions below. Use your historical knowledge to provide detailed explanations for your answers.

Deep within the dense, emerald rainforests of Mesoamerica, the Maya civilisation flourished for over a thousand years. Unlike a single unified kingdom, the Maya lived in powerful city-states, each ruled by a supreme leader. These cities were marvels of engineering, featuring towering stepped pyramids that reached towards the clouds, designed to honour their gods and track the movements of the stars. The Maya were exceptional mathematicians and astronomers; they developed a complex calendar and were one of the first societies to use the concept of zero. Their writing system, composed of intricate hieroglyphs, allowed them to record history on stone stelae and painted books. Daily life revolved around agriculture, with farmers harvesting maize, beans, and squash to feed the bustling populations. Water was precious, so they carved underground cisterns, known as chultuns, to collect rainfall during dry seasons. While they traded obsidian and jade across vast distances, they also engaged in ritualistic ball games that held deep religious significance. Today, the enduring stone ruins of cities like Tikal stand as a testament to their remarkable ingenuity and sophisticated understanding of the natural world.

Word bank: civilisation · astronomy · hieroglyphs · stepped pyramids · chultun · tribute · obsidian

1. Identify two specific crops that were essential to the Maya diet and explain how the Maya managed water supplies during dry periods. (2 marks) (2 marks)

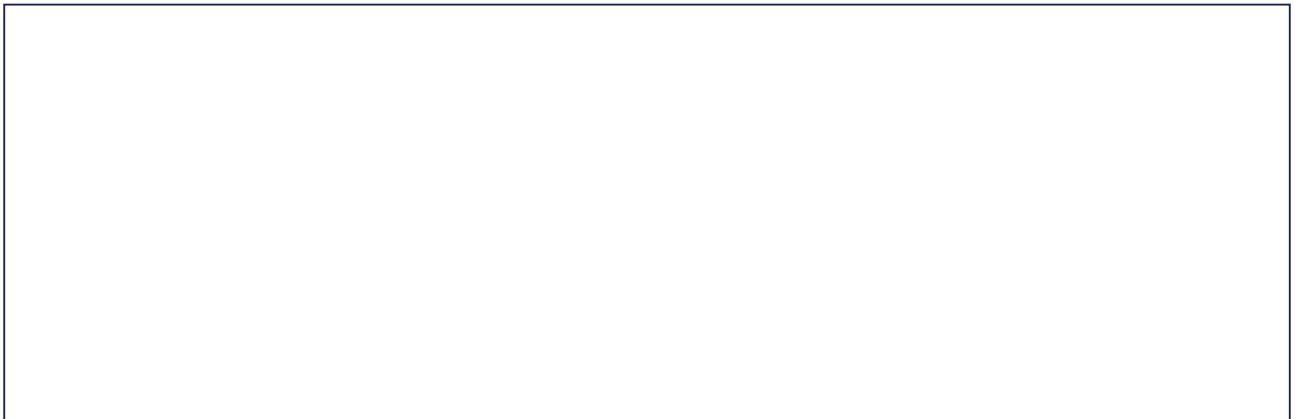
2. According to the text, what were the two main purposes for the construction of the Maya stepped pyramids? (2 marks) (2 marks)

3. Explain why the invention of the concept of zero suggests that the Maya had a highly advanced society. (2 marks) (2 marks)

4. What might happen if a Maya city-state experienced a prolonged drought that lasted for several years? Use evidence from the text to support your prediction. (3 marks) (3 marks)

5. Justify your answer: Which achievement of the Maya civilisation do you believe had the greatest impact on their ability to thrive in a rainforest environment? (3 marks) (3 marks)

Draw: Draw a bustling Maya city-state scene. Include a tall stepped pyramid in the background, a farmer tending to maize crops in the foreground, and stone stelae carved with intricate symbols.



Extension challenge: Imagine you are an archaeologist discovering a new Maya site. Write a short journal entry (100 words) describing the artefacts you have found and what they reveal about the daily lives of the people who once lived there. Compare the Maya city structure to a modern city; what are the similarities and differences?