

The Maya Civilisation: Cities of Stone and Stars

Learning objective: To analyse the societal structure, architectural achievements, and scientific advancements of the ancient Maya civilisation.

Read each question carefully. Use your knowledge of the Maya to provide detailed, reasoned explanations. For questions requiring calculations or comparisons, show your working out or justify your reasoning clearly.

Ellie the elephant has been exploring the dense rainforests of Mesoamerica, uncovering the secrets of the ancient Maya. Unlike a single empire, the Maya lived in independent city-states, each ruled by powerful kings. They were master builders, constructing massive stone pyramids that reached towards the stars. Beyond their architecture, they developed a complex writing system, an advanced understanding of mathematics using a base-20 system, and an incredibly accurate calendar based on the movement of the sun and planets.

Word bank: Hieroglyphics · Chichen Itza · Astronomy · Maize · Stepped pyramid · City-state · Mathematics · Calendar

1. The Maya civilisation was organised into independent city-states rather than one unified empire. Explain why this structure might have made it difficult for a single ruler to control the entire region. (3 marks)

2. Maya farmers traded their surplus crops, such as maize, for items like jade or obsidian. If a farmer had 150 ears of maize and traded 45, how many would they have left? If each ear was worth £0.20, what is the total value of the maize they have remaining? (3 marks)

3. Compare and contrast the importance of the stars to the Maya people with the importance of the stars to Nova the barn owl. Why were celestial observations vital for Maya agriculture? (3 marks)

4. Justify your answer: Which Maya achievement—the invention of the concept of zero or the construction of stepped pyramids—do you believe had a greater impact on their society? Give two reasons. (4 marks)

5. What might happen if the Maya had not developed a written language of hieroglyphics? How would this affect our historical understanding of their kings and daily lives today? (3 marks)

Draw: Draw a cross-section of a Maya city-state. Include a stepped pyramid, an area for growing maize, and a stone monument featuring intricate hieroglyphics.



Extension challenge: Research the Maya 'Long Count' calendar. Create a short poem in the style of Leo the Lion that describes the passing of time and the importance of the seasons to the Maya people.