Exploring the Maya Civilisation

Learning objective: To understand the social structure, daily life, and achievements of the Maya Civilisation.

Use your knowledge of the Maya Civilisation to answer the following questions. Provide detailed explanations where required.

Ellie the elephant has been studying the ancient Maya. She knows that they lived in independent city-states across Mesoamerica, built impressive stone pyramids, and developed a complex system of writing. Think carefully about their farming, their kings, and their discoveries to complete these tasks.

Word bank: Hieroglyphs · City-states · Chichen Itza · Maize · Astronomy · Social hierarchy · Tikal

1. The Maya lived in independent city-states rather than a single unified empire. Explain what this meant for how individual cities like Tikal or Palenque were governed. (2 marks)

2. Maize was the most important crop for the Maya. Describe how the Maya used their environment to ensure they had enough food to support large populations. (2 marks)

3. Maya society was organized into a strict hierarchy. If you were a commoner, what might your daily life look like compared to the life of a Maya noble? (2 marks)

4. The Maya were expert astronomers. Identify one reason why observing the movement of the stars and planets was vital to their civilisation. (1 mark)

5. Choose two major achievements of the Maya (e.g., writing, mathematics, architecture) and explain how these inventions helped their society function. (4 marks)

Draw: Draw a scene of a Maya city-state. Include a step-pyramid temple, some tropical trees, and a marketplace where people are trading goods like maize or cacao beans.

Extension challenge: Research how the Maya used a base-20 number system. If you were a Maya merchant selling jade, how might you have recorded the cost of your goods using dots and bars?