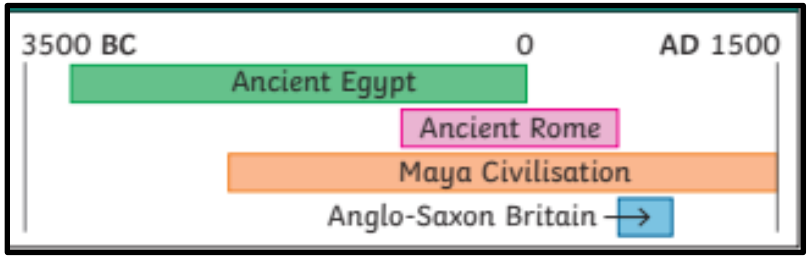
Locating the Maya

The Maya were a civilisation who lived in Mesoamerica (now Central America) between approximately 2000 BC and 900AD.

The area covered southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and northern regions of Honduras and El Salvador.

Codex	The Maya book.
Hieroglyphs	The Maya script used pictures as their writing system.
Sacrifice	A religious activity that involved the killing of animals or members of the community, held by priests to keep the gods happy.
Class society	A social position based on economic, political or cultural characteristics.
El Castillo, Chichen Itza	An ancient Maya temple. Each of the four sides of the pyramid has 91 steps. With the step on the top platform, that makes a total of 365 steps. Equal to the number of days in a year.
Creation story	Is a Maya traditional story that describes the earliest beginnings of the present world.
Civilisation	The society, culture and way of life of the Maya cities.
Empire	An extensive group of city states ruled over by a single monarch.
Chocolatl	A spicy drink made using beans from the wild cocoa trees - this was created by the Maya.
Currency	They used the cocoa beans as a form of currency, trading the beans for things like cloth, jade and food.
Rituals	The tasks performed by the Maya to satisfy the gods and guarantee some order to the world.

2000 BC	The Maya civilisation comes into being in Central America.
300 BC	Cities, such as El Mirador, become large and powerful.
AD 900	Cities in the rainforest are abandoned due to an extensive drought. People move north to the highlands of Guatemala and the Yucatán.
AD 1000	Cities like Chichén Itzá (which has two temple pyramids) are still thriving.
AD 1500s	The Spanish arrive in South America and set out to destroy the remaining elements of Maya civilisation as part of their conquest.
AD 1839	American explorer and writer, John Lloyd Stephens, and British artist, Frederick Catherwood explore Copán and extensively document what they find, reigniting interest in the Maya civilisation. They go on to document other Maya cities, including Chichén Itzá.
AD 2014	The cities of Lagunita and Tamchén are rediscovered.



Religion

The Maya believed in and worshipped a number of different gods. They believed that the gods had a good side and a bad side and that the gods could help or hurt them. The Maya would dance, sing and sometimes make offerings of blood to the gods.

Priests were very important in Maya society as it was believed that they could communicate directly with the gods. They would perform different rituals during festivals or special ceremonies in order to appeal to the gods.

Writing

The Maya writing system, used to write several different Maya languages, was made up of over 800 symbols called glyphs. Some glyphs were logograms, representing a whole word, and some were syllabograms, representing units of sound. They were carved onto stone buildings and monuments and painted onto pottery. Maya scribes also wrote books, called codices, made from the bark of fig trees. Only priests and noblemen would know the whole written language.

Chichen Itza

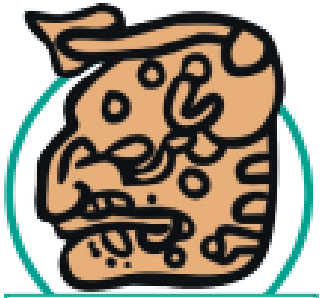
Chichen Itza was built by the Ancient Maya in the Northern Lowlands. It was one of the largest cities and in the centre is the Temple of Kukulcan.

Food

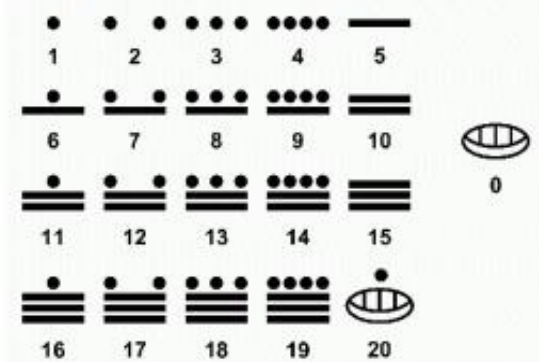
Maize was a very important crop that formed up to 80% of the Maya people's diets. They believed that the first humans were made from maize dough by the gods.

The Maya made a bitter chocolatey drink from cacao beans that was enjoyed by the rich and used for medicines and in ceremonies.

The beans were highly valued and even used as a form of money.

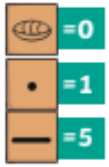


The Maya logogram for b'alam – jaguar



Maya Numbers

The Maya developed a complex number and counting system that was advanced for their time. They were one of only two cultures in the world to develop the concept of zero.



The Maya people used just three symbols in their number system. These are thought to represent items that the Maya people might have first used to count with, such as pebbles, sticks and shells.

The Maya used a base 20 number system, so after number 19, multiples of 20 were written above the bottom number.