

The Mayans

Learning Objective:

To find out about how the Mayan civilisation developed over time.

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Do you remember the story of the Spanish conquistadors who found ruined cities deep in the rainforest of Mesoamerica?



In the 16th century, Spanish explorers came across the ruins of mysterious abandoned cities. It wasn't until 150 years later in the 19th century that historians and archaeologists really began to study these remains and understand about the Mayan people who left them behind.

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Do you know what
an archaeologist
does?



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Archaeologists use the objects and buildings that people in the past have left behind to learn about history. When archaeologists started exploring the ruins, they found a wealth of information about the Mayans.

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They were able to find out a lot about how society was organised from looking at the buildings. They knew that the Mayans had temples for worship and palaces for kings.

This is a Mayan temple now known as El Castillo in the Mayan city of Chichen Itza. It was a temple built to worship a god called Kukulkan.



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They discovered many objects and artefacts that tell us about society and how these people lived.



This is the funeral mask of King Pakal of Palenque.



These are Mayan flutes.

They also discovered that the Mayans had their own writing system. This system used hieroglyphs (pictures) to represent words or sounds. People called epigraphers studied the hieroglyphs until they understood what they meant. Studying Mayan writing on walls, stone and other artefacts helps us find out about the Maya.



This stone slab is called a stela. Lots of stelae have been found with Mayan hieroglyphs on.



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Over many years of research, historians have been able to learn a lot about Mayan history. They know that there were lots of different groups of people living in Mesoamerica and that the Mayan people first settled there around the year 5000 BC.



Let's have a look at a timeline of Mayan history...

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5000 BC - 2000 BC	Hunter-gatherers live in the rainforests and volcanic mountains.
2000 BC - 1000 BC	People begin to farm and settle in small villages. People copy the crafts of the Olmec people, including making pottery and carving with jade. Basic trade is developed.
900 BC	Farmers begin to use irrigation systems to help their plants to grow. This means larger settlements can form.
300 BC	The first cities begin to develop and the Mayan population grows rapidly.
292 BC	The first known Mayan writing is produced.
50 BC	The first temple is built in Cerros.
250 AD	The Maya begin their most powerful era. Astronomy, mathematics and architecture are all developing.
300 AD	The Maya adopt the idea of a monarchy and are now ruled by kings.
500 AD - 800 AD	Major cities develop and thrive, such as Tikal, Palenque, Uxmal and Copan. Fine temples and palaces are built and art, culture and religion all reach their peak.
800 - 900 AD	The major cities begin to decline and are eventually abandoned.

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What can we learn about the Maya from this timeline?

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