

All about the Maya

1. Introduction

The Mayan civilisation began in central America almost 4000 years ago. The period for which it is best known is from approximately AD 250 to 900. The Mayan people (sometimes known as 'Maya') are renowned for their advances in writing, maths and astronomy at this time, as well as their religious beliefs and architecture. Historians have been able to explore many of these aspects of the Mayan civilisation through studying the remains of their buildings.

2. Where in the world

The Maya lived in central America, in an area which today forms part of Mexico, Guatemala and Belize. In fact, there are still some Maya living here. The region is known as the Yucatan peninsula and it is a large area of protruding land on the south-eastern coast, separating the Gulf of Mexico from the Caribbean Sea. There is a high risk of hurricanes in the area at certain times of year. Although it is hot all year round, being such a vast region, the climate varies between hot and dry towards the northern coast, to hot humid jungles towards the south. The Mayan civilisation consisted of lots of separate cities, with many built around a central temple. It is the remains of many of these temples which survive. However, archaeologists have discovered that their cities were all different, rather than constructed in an identical fashion, suggesting they were all governed by different rulers. The Maya utilised the rich resources of the region in the form of limestone for buildings and the volcanic rock obsidian for tools and weapons.

3. Food and crops

The Maya were good farmers and grew a variety of crops, using various farming methods depending on the climate and landscape of their particular area. These crops included cocoa, maize (corn), chilli, beans, squash, avocado, potatoes, tomatoes and a grain called quinoa (pronounced keenwa). Although the Maya drank hot chocolate, it was not the sweet drink we know today, but a spicy drink which they called 'The drink of the gods'. They believed cocoa beans were sacred. Maize was a staple food and it is believed they invented the corn tortilla. As well as the fruit and vegetables they grew, the Maya hunted for wild animals including turkey, deer, duck, quail and monkeys. They also kept bees, using the honey as a sweetener.

4. Mayan beliefs

The Maya had strong religious beliefs, with many gods linked to natural events and objects which affected the people. Examples include Chac, the god of rain and Kukulcan, the feathered serpent. They built elaborate temples and pyramids to their gods, and made sacrifices to them. Many of their buildings were covered in stone carvings of the gods. One of the most famous and well-preserved is the pyramid at Chichen Itza, with the four sides containing 365 steps: one for each day of the year.

5. Mayan maths and writing

The Maya developed a complex system of writing using hundreds of symbols, known as hieroglyphs. Historians have been able to decipher some of these by studying the ones carved on stone in the ruins of temples and other buildings. They also made paper from tree bark and used long strips to form books, mainly written on and read by the priests. Maths was an important part of Mayan life and they used a sophisticated number system. It consisted of a series of dots, lines and oval shapes with dots representing one, a line representing every five and an oval shell shape representing zero. Instead of a system based on 10, as we do today, their system was based on 20. These symbols may have been used because they could be made easily using seeds, sticks and shells.