

Unit 11: Mayan Civilisation

Non-European Study option

c.900

Period Overview

The Mayan people still exist today and have survived numerous attempts to wipe them out over the course of their history. This unit refers mainly to the classical Mayan period, which stretches from approx. 250-950AD. During this time society became more organised around urban areas and society became more organised. Advances were made in astronomy, maths and language, as well as architecture and agriculture. Links were made with other peoples across the continent. Scholars disagree over why the classical period came to an end, although it has been hypothesised that it was caused by a widespread drought, which ended the growth of society and impoverished the population.

Life in a Mayan settlement

Mayan settlements appear to not have been planned, but a general centre point was the temple. It is thought that the stepped temples were built both as a statement of grandeur and as a route to the heavens above. This is something the Mayans have in common with many other civilisations across the ancient world. Rumours of human sacrifice have seeped into popular culture, but appear to be overblown. Each settlement also had wide-open plazas which served as a meeting point, as well as a ball court where games were held. Cities were generally not organised in an identikit way, but had lots of common features. There does not appear to have been a central point of authority in the Mayan empire, rather society was organised through a number of rulers at local level. This is perhaps the reason the Mayans endured; without a central powerbase that could be decapitated, agreements had to be made with a number of rulers. In a way this is similar to the Indian, or even European, city-states.

Changing Times

During the classical period and after, the Mayan civilisation evolved hugely. The Mayan civilisation cannot be credited with inventing writing or scientific advances but its position traversing Central America meant that the Mayans could assimilate and improve ideas from elsewhere. Their system of writing can be characterised as using hieroglyphs, at any one time anything from 200-500 were used, containing phonetic symbols and logograms. Urbanisation was a characterising trend of the period, centred on cities/towns with strategic geographical importance. Through these urban areas the Mayans traded extensively with the surrounding region and established links throughout the Central American continent. Agriculture was hugely important as it was in many early civilisations, with population growth entirely dependent on the ability of the land to support its people. It is through this lens that the theory about the collapse of the classical Mayan empire being caused by droughts comes from.

National Curriculum suggestions:

- PE – devise/play a version of the ball game: Pok-Ta-Pok
- Art/DT – Pyramid structures
- Science - astronomy
- Geography – compare locations of major world cities in the 1-8th centuries.
- Organisation of society, structure of cities.
- DT – chocolate
- PSCH – Mayan medicine – natural cures.

Key Individuals

The Mayans did not have 'great' historical figures, but each city had important people

- **The Priest** – Held the regular rituals surrounding the temple possibly including sacrifice.
- **The Pharmacist** – provided natural medicines which kept the people very healthy.
- **The Farmer** – irrigated fields and provided food for the city



Panorama atop Caracol¹¹

What did the Mayans ever do for us?

Astronomy – Very accurate charts of the moon
 Sculpture – Mainly of the human form, highly advanced when compared to similar empires.
 Architecture – Stepped temples providing a route into understanding their religion
 Medicine – many natural cures used by the Mayans still in use today
 Number system – developed independent of Arabic system, more advanced and logical.

Big Concepts

Society – how was a settlement put together? What is important to have in a town/city?

Trade – The Mayans were incredibly important for trade and their transactions covered a huge geographical area

Discovery – the Mayans increasingly tried to understand the world around them, with great insight.

Religion – influenced by the elements

Possible trips:

The British Museum has some Mayan artefacts and displays further items which are from either successor or preceding civilisations around Central America.

It seems a shame to teach this out of context, a comparison to an Anglo-settlement (which could be visited) would provide a greater insight into life in that period.

Timeline of Key Events:

All dates are approximate

- c. 2000 BCE** The Mayan civilisation emerges in Central America
- c. 100 BCE** First city states appear
- c. 250 CE** The 'classical' period begins, urbanisation begins and continues
- c. 300 CE** Mayan settlements become centres for trade across the region. Goods such as stone and chocolate are traded with neighbouring city states.
- c. 600 CE** Mayan settlements support an increasing population, growing at a fast rate due to plentiful food supply.
- c. 650 CE** Caracol, one of the main Mayan cities is increasingly populated and expands over a large area becoming an important centre.
- c. 900 CE** Mayan centres become less important, perhaps because of a widespread drought, but no clear reason has yet emerged.

Broader Context

- Rise and spread of Islam (6th C)
- Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in UK (5th - 10th C)
- Yoruba people (Benin) in E. Africa (9th C)
- Visigoth rule Spain ended by Islam (8th C)
- Charlemagne Emperor of France (8th C)
- Vikings spread out of Scandinavia (8th -11th C)
- Byzantine rule in S- Europe (4th-15th C)
- Tang China (7th-10th C)
- Ife and Benin in West Africa (8th-16th C)

Further Information:

British Museum <http://bit.do/bmmayan>

School Run <http://bit.do/srunmayans>

Many Internet sites have information, although be careful to cross check the information as information on sacrifice can be exaggerated.

"The Story of Chocolate" Usborne guided reading book (Y5/6, L4+) has a section on the Mayans.

¹¹ Panorama atop Caracol [<http://bit.do/caracol>] image by Pgbk87is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 License. The licence can be viewed at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>