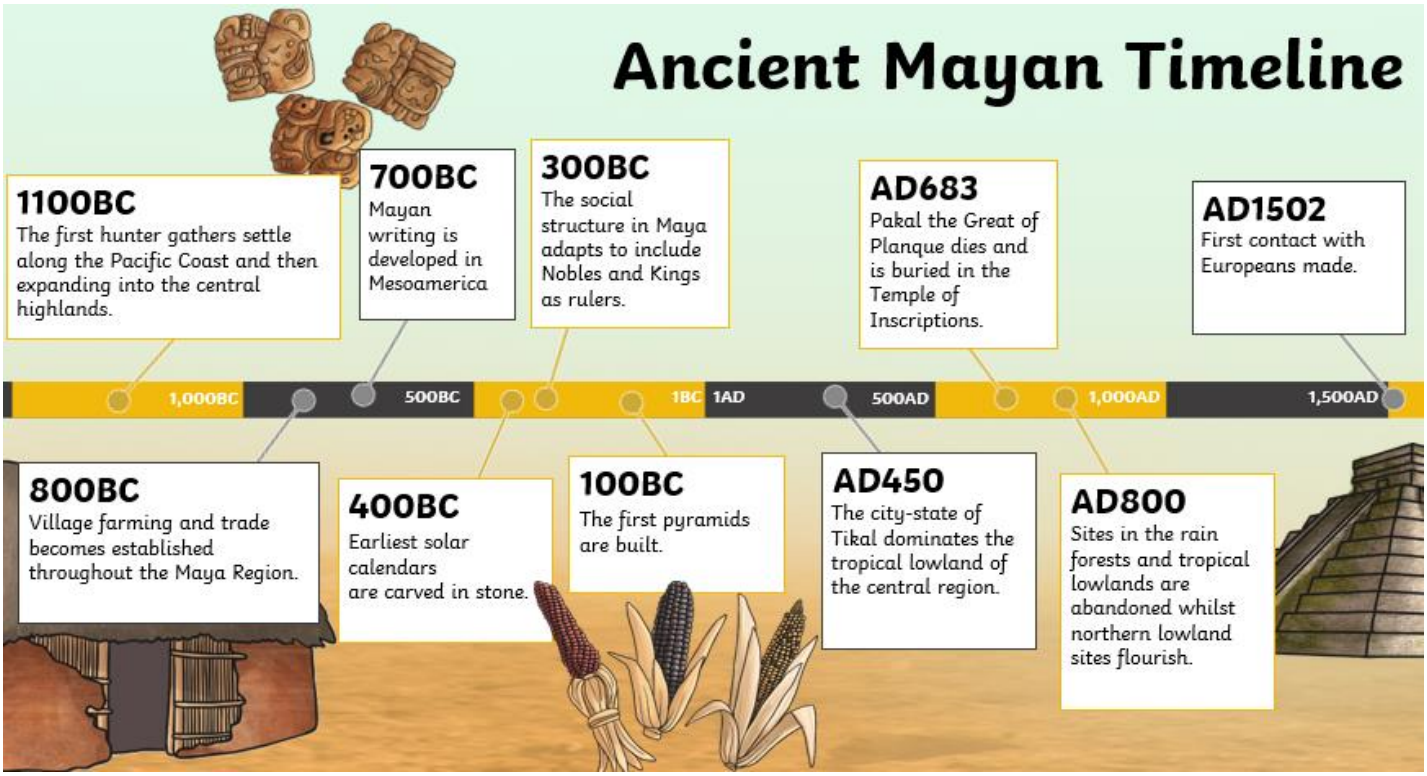
Coley Primary School – Knowledge Organiser

SUBJECT FOCUS:	Ancient Mayans	YEAR 6	SUMMER TERM



Key Knowledge

The ancient Maya were a civilisation that lived between 2000BCE to around 1500AD. They lived in Mesoamerica which is now known as Southern Mexico and Central America.



Mesoamerica was made up of mountains, coasts and rainforest. The lowlands were near the sea and the highlands were in the mountains. It was not until 250BCE that the Mayans began to settle around the lowlands more. Famous Mayan cities include Planeque and Chichen Itza, which are found in Mexico.

They were an extremely successful civilisation and were highly advanced in writing, art and science for a people living back then. Temples and pyramids can still be seen today in the jungles of Central America.

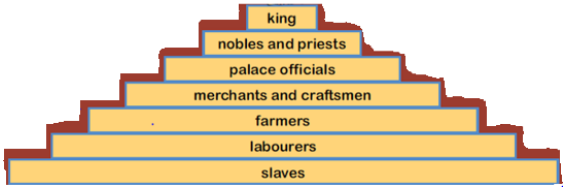


Key Knowledge

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

Mayan Society

Mayan society was organised into city states. Each city had its own king who was in complete control over his subjects. The king had nobles to help him control and run the city state. This type of society is known as an absolute monarchy. Mayan society was structured a bit like a pyramid. The higher up the pyramid you were, the more important you were.



Mayan Religion and Beliefs



Mayans were polytheists, believing in many nature gods or deities who ruled people's lives and decisions such as the god of maize, Hun Ixim, since maize was their main crop. Mayan gods could change themselves into human or animal shapes. Priests performed ceremonies (including sacrifices) to keep the gods happy. Kings were thought to turn into gods after they died. The Mayans thought the world was divided into three parts, the Heavens, the Earth and the Underworld, all linked together by a giant world tree.

Key Knowledge

Everyday Life

Clothing – The commoners and slaves wore loincloths, made from cotton, that they grew, but the elite added feathers, animal skins or gems. Noblemen covered their lower half with a colourful garment and wore large, elaborate headdresses. Women wore skirts and tunics. Footwear was simple, usually barefoot or sandals.

Food and Drink – The Mayans ate simple food. Maize or corn was the staple food in their diet, along with vegetables such as beans and squashes. Corn was consumed in different ways; it was ground into flat breads which have become today's tortillas. The Maya also farmed cacao beans. They were a precious crop, prized for their chocolatey flavour and used in drinks for the rich and noble. Sometimes they would spice it up with chillies. Those living by the sea, would sources things such as fish, turtle shells and salt. Salt was also used for trading. Although they did not eat a lot of meat, the Mayans used bows and arrows to hunt deer, dogs, agouti, turkeys and peccaries.

Trade - Merchants drove their human caravans along roads, down rivers and around coasts to trade with fellow Mayans and other Mesoamericans. The geography was so varied that they relied on trade to get the things they needed off each other, from maize, fish and salt to stingray spines (used for bloodletting) and valuable stones such as jade and obsidian.

Mayan Calendar

The Mayans had their own calendar that was very important to them. The Mayan had three separate calendars. One of these was for the solar year and had a cycle of 365 days. Another had a cycle of 260 days, with twenty periods of thirteen days. The final calendar is the 'Long Count' calendar. This was used to track longer periods of time and each cycle lasted 2,880,000 days. The Mayan believed that the universe was destroyed and then created again at the end of each cycle.



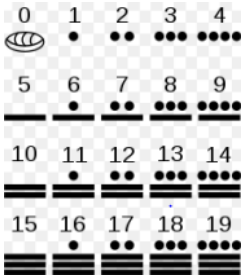
Mayan Hieroglyphs

The Mayas writing system had over 800 glyphs. Glyphs are signs that represent a word or a sound. These could represent animals, humans, gods or abstract designs. It is from Mayan writing that historians have managed to learn about the Maya who lived hundreds of years ago. At first, historians didn't think that the signs represented writing at all, or at least not a complete writing system. It wasn't until the 1950s that it was proved to be a language.



Mayan Number System

The Maya had a number system too. Any number could be made using only three symbols - a dot for a 1, a line for a 5 and a shell sign for zero.



Key Knowledge

What happened to the Mayans?

Around 900AD, many cities in the southern lowlands were abandoned but states in the uplands of the Yucatan peninsula continued to flourish until the arrival of the Spanish in 1502. One belief is that the Toltecs and the Aztecs took over with their own empires but later, when the Spanish arrived, they brought disease and forced them to give up their gods and become Christians. Another belief is that their demise came about because of a mixture of deforestation, erosion and drought.

Key Vocabulary

Archaeologist – someone who studies the past be exploring old remains
Architecture – the art of planning, designing and constructing buildings
Chronology – the order of events in time
Civilisation – a human society with its own social organisation and culture
Climate – the general weather conditions that are typical of a place
Culture – activities such as the arts and philosophy, which are considered to be important for the development of civilisation
Deforestation – if an area is deforested, all the trees there are cut down
Deities – a god or goddess
Demise – something or someone is their end or death
Drought – a long period of time during which no rain falls
Hierarchy – a system of organising people into different ranks or levels of importance, e.g. society
Hieroglyphs – about 800 symbols to create writing
Mayan – of, relating to or characteristic of the Maya or any of their languages
Merchant – a person who buys or sells goods in large quantities
Mesoamerica – Central America – the countries of Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Belize
Plaza – an open square in a city
Pyramids – built with a temple at the top to give sacrifices to the gods, others were built for the gods themselves
Polytheists – the worship or belief in more than one god
Sacrifice – humans and animals were used as a blood offering to gods, mostly war prisoners by decapitation or heart removal
Society – people in general, thought of as a large organised group
Stelae – stone monuments glorifying Kings and record his deeds,
Trade – the activity of buying, selling, or exchanging good and services.
Vigesimal – number system based on 20s used by the Mayans

Possible experiences

- Examine a variety of sources and use these to make inferences about the past – in particular about Mayan economy, culture, religion and society
- Examine the timeline of the Mayan civilisation and considerer where there was a rapid change and where there was very little change. Explain why this may be the case.
- Describe how the Mayan civilisation has had an impact on modern society – make comparisons with modern Britain