

Introduction:

The Maya civilisation began long ago in a place called '**Mesoamerica**'. This huge area is made up of Mexico and part of Central America.

The Mayas built amazing cities like **Tikal** (which they called 'Yax Mutal') and **Palenque**. Even though they lived in different cities, ruled by different kings and queens, the Mayas shared a lot of common beliefs and traditions.



They were experts at reading the stars and even built their cities as a map of the sky! They were also inspired by the creatures of the forest and shared many legends about animals, plants and nature spirits.

What was life like for the Ancient Maya?

In ancient Maya times, children had very different lives to today. They dressed differently and their homes were much smaller.

Families lived in great cities like **Yax Mutal** and **Palenque**, and also in surrounding farmland.

Adults worked as **farmers, warriors, hunters, builders, teachers** and many other things. Children from noble families could learn maths, science, writing and astronomy, but poorer children were only taught their parents' jobs.



What did the Ancient Maya believe in?

The Mayas believed in many gods, each representing a different aspect of life. Communities made regular offerings to them, in the form of animal (and sometimes human) sacrifices.

They believed the Earth had the form of a giant turtle that floated on an endless ocean and that the sky was held up by four mighty gods called Bacabs.

The sky was made up of 13 levels. Those who were sacrificed or who died in battle went to one of the top levels. Those who died of natural causes went to Xibalba, the shadowy underworld, which had nine levels.



Why was farming so important to the Mayas?

Farming was really important to the Mayas. Most people grew their own crops in small fields.

Despite their size, these fields were used to grow many kinds of crops at the same time, such as maize, beans, squash and chilli. If farmers grew more than they could eat, they traded the leftovers in markets.

One reason the Mayas were so successful at farming was because they studied the stars and the weather. This meant they were able to create very detailed calendars which told them what time of year to plant crops and when they should harvest them.

Three types of Maya farming

Raised field

The Mayas used this method to farm areas of land that otherwise would have been too wet to use. Small canals were created by digging out soil from beneath the water and piling up to create small islands. Maya farmers could then grow crops on these islands while they harvested the fish that swam in the canals.

Terrace farming

This is where walls are built to make small flat fields one on top of the other. It was useful for increasing the amount of farmland in mountain areas. Most terraces were small, but in some parts of the Maya lowlands, they dramatically transformed entire regions!

Slash and burn

Also known as 'shifting', this is when jungle areas are chopped down and burnt. The ash is high in nutrients, so it was perfect for growing crops. However, within a few years, the nutrients would be used up and the farmers would have to move elsewhere to let the forest



Raised field (top), Terrace (left), Slash and burn (right)

What remains of the Ancient Maya?

Farming was at the centre of ancient Maya life. But these people are also remembered for other amazing creations, like their spectacular buildings and beautiful objects made from jade, a rare and valuable material.

The ancient Mayas also invented groundbreaking ideas which have helped shape the way we live our lives today.

For example, it's thought that they invented the concept of **'zero'**. This meant that they were able to do complex calculations, which allowed them to create very detailed and accurate calendars. They used these calendars for farming – perhaps that's why they were so good at it!



What games did the Maya play?

One of the many things the ancient Mayas are remembered for is their ball game, which they called pitz.

Nowadays, many people consider themselves die-hard sports fans. Well, the ancient Mayas took this to a whole different level. So much so that at the end of a game, the captain of the losing team could be **sacrificed to the gods!** In fact, the ball game was not played for enjoyment. The main reason was to keep the gods happy. It's also believed that the game was played instead of going to war.

The ball games we play today are much less deadly, but there are still some similarities. For example, the Maya players had to work together as a team. They built large ball courts and often played in front of crowds.

BALL GAME RULES

- There are always two teams.
- Each team has between two and six players
- The ball can only be hit using your hip, knee right elbow.
- The ball must not touch the ground.
- The aim of the game it to make the other side drop the ball.

