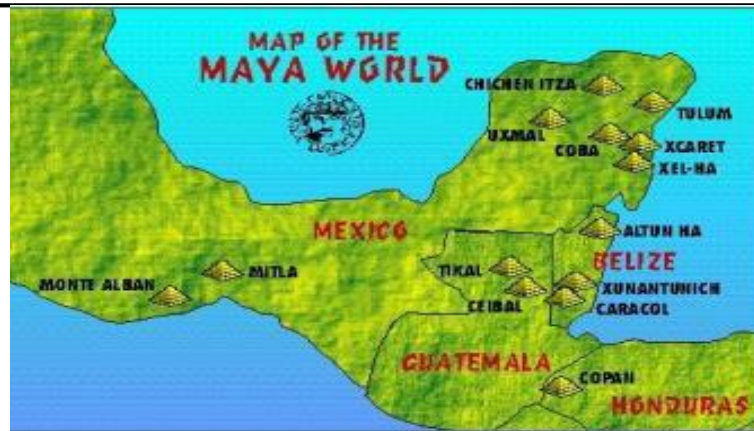


Who were the Maya?

The ancient Maya people were quite a sophisticated bunch! They developed a writing and number system; studied and charted the stars and planets; invented three complex calendars to keep track of time; built impressive temples, palaces, monuments and cities; skillfully farmed the land and established a complex political system.

The ancient Maya were a clever, deeply religious people who valued intelligence and learning. This helps to explain how and why they were able to develop a complex, thriving **civilisation** which began over 2000 years.

ago.



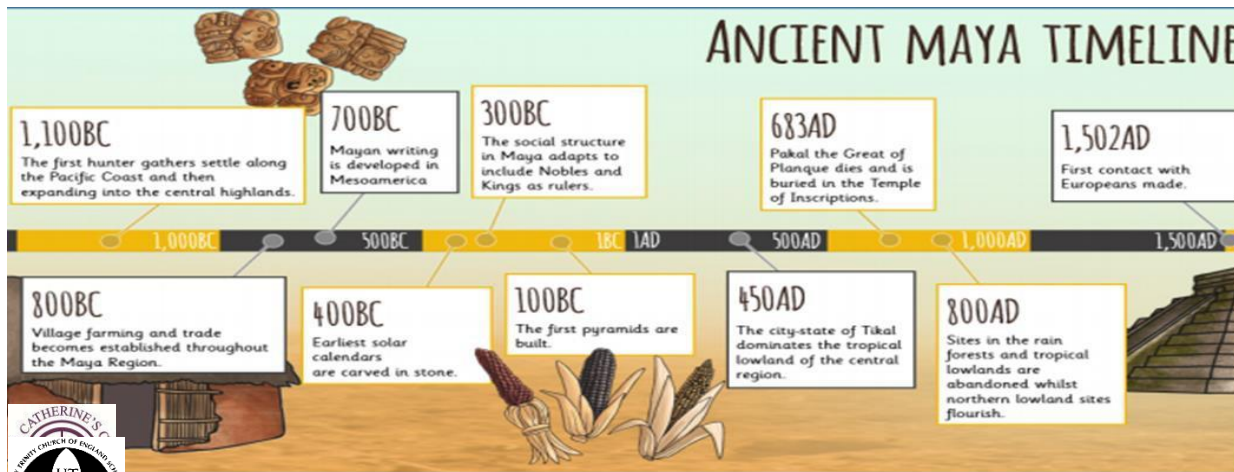
Levels of Society

The king, the link between his people and the gods was at the top of Maya **society**. Then came top generals, scribes and priests. Then came merchants and warriors. Then the farmers and labourers. Right at the bottom were the slaves.



Key Vocab

Chronology	The arrangement of dates or events in the order in which they occurred.
BC	Before Christ. A way of dating years before the birth of Jesus. The bigger the number BC, the longer ago in history it was.
AD	In the year of the Lord (from the Latin <i>anno domini</i>) AD is used to show dates after the birth of Jesus.
Civilisation	A place which has laws, culture, a regular way of getting food and protecting the people.
Society	A community or group of people having common traditions and interests.
Archaeologist	A person who studies the buildings, graves, tools and other objects that belonged to people who lived in the past, in order to learn about their culture and society.
Historical evidence	Anything left over from the past is a source of evidence.
Primary source	A primary source of evidence is one that was created by someone who witnessed first-hand or was part of the historical events that are being described. The most common primary sources are journal entries or letters.
Theory	An explanation for why things work or how things happen.
Warfare	Military fighting between enemies.
Invasion	An act or instance of entering as an enemy, especially by an army.



Maya Beliefs

Religion was an important part of the ancient Maya culture. The Maya believed in and worshipped a number of different gods. They believed that the gods had a good side and a bad side and that they could help or hurt them.

The Maya had complicated rituals involving prayer, singing, dancing and sacrifices. These sacrifices (mainly of slaves) which involved letting blood were held to honour the rise of a husband to ruler, a major victory in battle or the birth of the heir to the throne.

Priests were very important in Maya **society** as it was believed that they could communicate directly with the gods. The priests were responsible for leading rituals of worship and sacrifice and telling the people what the gods wanted them to do.

They would tell the people when to plant crops, who to marry and what sacrifices they should make. The people did all these things because they believed that the priest was speaking the wishes of the gods.



An animal being sacrificed

Blood Letting

Stone carvings show rulers and nobles giving blood sacrifices. These **primary sources** help **archaeologists** understand what the Maya believed.



This lintel shows Shield Jaguar, the warrior king of Yaxchilan, standing over his wife, Lady Xook, holding an enormous flaming torch. Lady Xook is pulling a thorn-studded rope through her tongue in an act of blood letting to honour the gods.

The end of the Maya

In the ninth century, the Maya world was turned upside down. Many of the great centres like Tikal were deserted and abandoned. Stone masons stopped making stelae (monuments).

The sacred temples and palaces briefly became home to a few squatters, who left household rubbish in the once beautiful buildings. When they left, Tikal was abandoned forever, and the Maya **civilisation** never recovered.

For decades, **archaeologists** have been searching for an explanation of the Maya collapse. Many **theories** have been put forward, ranging from **warfare** and **invasion** to **migration**, disease and over-farming.

Tikal, one of the last Mayan cities

