

Ancient History: Turquoise Class – A non-European society that provides contrasts with British History.

Who were the Mayans and what can we learn from them?

Key Vocabulary	
Archaeologist	someone who digs up remains of old societies
Empire	A group of states or countries ruled by one monarch or leader.
Conquer	Overcome and take control of (a place or people) by military force.
Civilization	an advanced state of human society, in which a high level of culture, science, industry, and government has been reached.
Peninsula	a piece of land almost surrounded by water or projecting out into a body of water.
Hieroglyphs	writing that is made of pictures
Agriculture	the science or practice of farming
Urbanisation	the process of making an area more urban
Drought	a prolonged period of abnormally low rainfall, leading to a shortage of water.
Maize	a Central American cereal plant that yields large grains (corn or sweetcorn) set in rows on a cob



Key People

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

Key Places

Mesoamerica (a historical region and cultural area in North America)
 Yucatan Peninsula
 Honduras
 Belize
 Guatemala
 Central Mexico

Key Dates

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



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Key Knowledge

The Mayan people still exist today and have survived numerous attempts to wipe them out over the course of their history. The classical Mayan period 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.

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.

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.

Key Knowledge

During the classical period and after, the Mayan civilisation evolved hugely. Their system of writing can be characterised as using hieroglyphs. 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.

