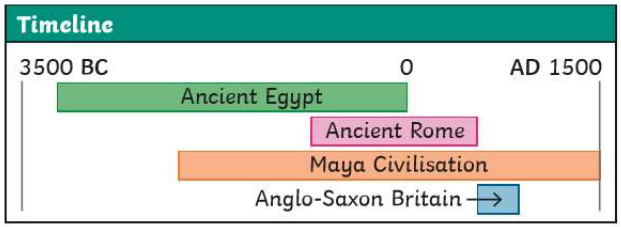
Timeline



Key Vocabulary

civilisation	An organised society with its own culture and way of life, existing in a particular area over a particular period of time.
drought	A long period with very little rain.
ritual	A ceremony, often religious, with set actions performed in a set order.
jaguar	A big cat, heavier than a leopard, with yellowish fur and black spots.
scribes	People paid to write things down, either as an official record or for someone else unable to write.
codices	Ancient handwritten texts. Maya codices could be unfolded like a concertina. One text is called a codex.
maize	Another word for sweetcorn or corn on the cob. It can be made into a dough and baked into tortillas.
cacao beans	Cacao trees sprout pods directly from their trunks. When they are ripe, the pods can be broken open to reveal the beans, which can then be dried, roasted and ground.

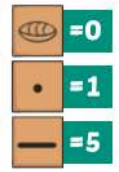
Key Events

2000 BC	The Maya civilisation comes into being in Central America.
300 BC	Cities, such as El Mirador, become large and powerful.
AD 900	Cities in the rainforest are abandoned due to an extensive drought. People move north to the highlands of Guatemala and the Yucatán.
AD 1000	Cities like Chichén Itzá (which has two temple pyramids) are still thriving.
AD 1500s	The Spanish arrive in South America and set out to destroy the remaining elements of Maya civilisation as part of their conquest.
AD 1839	American explorer and writer, John Lloyd Stephens, and British artist, Frederick Catherwood explore Copán and extensively document what they find, reigniting interest in the Maya civilisation. They go on to document other Maya cities, including Chichén Itzá.
AD 2014	The cities of Lagunita and Tamchén are rediscovered.

The Maya logogram for b'alam – jaguar

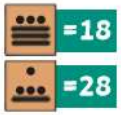
Maya Numbers

The Maya developed a complex number and counting system that was advanced for their time. They were one of only two cultures in the world to develop the concept of zero.



The Maya people used just three symbols in their number system. These are thought to represent items that the Maya people might have first used to count with, such as pebbles, sticks and shells.

The Maya used a base 20 number system, so after number 19, multiples of 20 were written above the bottom number.



Writing

The Maya writing system, used to write several different Maya languages, was made up of over 800 symbols called glyphs. Some glyphs were logograms, representing a whole word, and some were syllabograms, representing units of sound. They were carved onto stone buildings and monuments and painted onto pottery. Maya scribes also wrote books, called codices, made from the bark of fig trees. Only priests and noblemen would know the whole written language.

Food

Maize was a very important crop that formed up to 80% of the Maya people's diets. They believed that the first humans were made from maize dough by the gods.

The Maya made a bitter chocolatey drink from cacao beans that was enjoyed by the rich and used for medicines and in ceremonies.

The beans were highly valued and even used as a form of money.