TSM | A Teaching Guide

MAYA CIVILISATION

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Ages 7–11 | 8 Episodes

Curriculum focus

History · Geography · Religious Education · Creative Writing · Art · Ethics

Contents and Context Map

Ep.	Title	Main function	Key resources	Student record or outcome
1	The Story Begins	Establish the fictional context; enter the story as explorers in Belize	Exercise books; Slides; Handout 1	Expedition notes; equipment list with illustrations; illustrated journey map
2	The Cave Entrance	Investigate the Jaws of the Underworld; enter the cave; reach the abyss	Expedition notebooks; Slides	Drawing of the Jaws; cave entrance sketch; descent plan; diary entry
3	Down into the Cave	Descend into the cave; discover the Spanish logbook; investigate the round chamber	Expedition notebooks; Slides; Logbook (print and cut – see Appendix)	Logbook sequence; recorded events; written questions
4	The Ceremony	Explore the ceremonial chamber; enact a Maya ceremony	Expedition notebooks; Slides; Handouts: 'Offerings to the Gods', 'The Ceremony'	Notes on chamber and gods; written description of ceremony with illustration
5	The Warrior	Discover the chamber of Balam; investigate artefacts and skeleton	Expedition notebooks; Slides; A5 paper; topic books; Google Image	Drawn artefacts with written backs; story of the warrior; cave map
6	The Lost City	Emerge into a lost Maya city; layout a city plan; draw individual plans	Expedition notebooks; Slides; Handout: 'Maya Cities' (print and cut); paper strips	Collaborative floor city plan (photograph); individual labelled city plan
7	Lady Evenstar	Discover the mural; research Lady Six Sky; create group writing and still-images	Expedition notebooks; Handout: 'Lady Six Sky'	Group extract of Lady Evenstar; individual story of Lady Evenstar in notebook
8	A Dilemma	Debate the discovery; teacher-in-role as museum director; write story conclusion	Expedition notebooks; Slides; paper for webpage (Further Activities)	Written story ending and decision; Further Activities: webpage for the museum

Keys column: no TSM Keys are specified in this context plan. If keys apply, please add them to this table.

Context Overview

Narrative

A team of explorers uncovers evidence of religious practices and human sacrifice while exploring an ancient Maya cave system. As they continue their exploration, they discover a long-lost Maya city. This discovery reveals much about ancient Maya culture and society. The Belizean Heritage Museum commissions the explorers to create a webpage on their website to share their findings and educate visitors about Maya civilisation.

Learning overview

Timeline, geographical location, Maya cities, hierarchy of Maya society, daily life, diet, clothing, homes, major gods, rituals, concept of the afterlife, Maya creation story, Maya glyphs, pyramids, temples, palaces, and caves, art, pottery, sculptures, and murals, the decline of Maya civilisation.

Inquiry questions

Who were the Maya?
How was Maya society structured?
What was the religion of the Maya?
What was the Maya culture?
What role did caves play in Maya culture?
What role did cities play in Maya culture?
What happened to Maya civilisation?

Resources

Slides: Maya Civilisation
Exercise book for notes, drawings, and maps
Topic books

Episodes

Episode 1 – The Story Begins
Episode 2 – The Cave Entrance
Episode 3 – Down into the Cave
Episode 4 – The Ceremony
Episode 5 – The Warrior
Episode 6 – The Lost City
Episode 7 – Lady Evenstar
Episode 8 – A Dilemma

EPISODE 1

The Story Begins

LIVE TEACHING GUIDE

Duration	Areas of study
1–2 lessons (teacher's discretion)	Asking, answering, and recording questions. Location of Central America and Belize and an introduction to the geography of the region. Making a list of equipment with illustrations. Creating a map of their journey.
Resources to prepare	**Main student record or outcome**
• Exercise books and pens • Slides • Handout 1 (see Appendix: Episode 1 – Equipment Handout)	• Expedition notes on initial questions • Equipment list with illustrations • Illustrated map of team's journey

	Teaching route	Resource
1	Open exercise books. Introduce the story.	
2	Narrate: jungle arrival, guide's departure.	
3	Discussion: "What do you make of that?" Students ask and record questions.	
4	Answer questions; students make notes. [Information: explorers, Belize jungle, rainforest, Maya markings]	Slides 3–5
5	Task: Equipment list with illustrations.	Slide 6, Handout 1
6	Task: Illustrated map of journey from coast to jungle camp.	Slide 7

Keep in view

- Have Slides 3–7 loaded and ready before the lesson.
- Handout 1 (Equipment) needed for Part 2 – see Appendix: Episode 1.
- Prompt students to write "Expedition Notes" at the top of the page before note-taking begins.
- Answer student questions in as much or as little detail as suits your class.
- The map task works well on a double-page spread in the exercise book.

The Story Begins

Summary

In this episode, the students hear the start of a story involving a team of explorers discovering the entrance to a hidden cave. Thinking as explorers, they make a list of the equipment they would take with them and draw a map of their journey into the jungle.

Areas of Study

Asking, answering, and recording questions. Location of Central America and Belize and an introduction to the geography of the region. Making a list of equipment with illustrations. Creating a map of their journey.

Resources

Exercise books and pens.
Slides
Handout 1

Steps

Part 1

Ask the students to open their writing books.

Say "This is the first part of a story..."

Narrate

"The journey through the jungle had been arduous. Led by their local guide, the team finally arrived at their destination. After setting up camp, they first noticed the strangely carved rocks as the sun dipped low in the sky. Local rumours spoke of these rocks marking the way to the entrance. Upon seeing the markings, the local guide hastily made his exit, muttering under his breath, 'This is as far as I am willing to take you. I will go no further. The rest is up to you. I wish you luck.' With a shudder, he turned and disappeared into the shadows."

Ask "What do you make of that?" Discussion.

> **Task** "If you have any questions write them down in your notebook and I'll do my best to answer them."
>
> **Task** "You will want to make notes as I answer the questions."

Say "Please write at the top of the page: 'Expedition Notes'."

Answer the students' questions, giving them time to make notes as you go along.
Share the following information, using the slides to illustrate your answers.

Information you can share at this stage

The team are a team of explorers.
They are deep in the Belize jungle in central America. **[Slide 3]**
This is thick moist tropical rain forest. One of the densest in the world. **[Slide 4]**
They are looking for an entrance to a cave.
There are rumours that terrible things might have happened in the cave many, many years ago.
The explorers recognise the markings as Maya and translate the symbol as meaning 'The Jaws of the Underworld'.

Give the students time to make notes in their books and sketch the ‘Jaws’.

Part 2

After answering their questions, give the students two tasks.

Say "If you were part of this expedition, what equipment would you take with you for a week in the jungle and for exploring a hidden cave?"

Task: "Make a list in your book, along with some illustrations. **[Slide 5]**, take a look at this additional list of equipment. [Handout 1 – see Appendix: Episode 1 – Equipment Handout]"

Discuss.

Say “You’ll want to keep a record of your journey to this place.”

Task: Draw an illustrated map of your team's journey from the coast to your current location in the jungle. Include forms of transport and geographical features. **[Slide 6]**

EPISODE 2

The Cave Entrance

LIVE TEACHING GUIDE

Duration	Areas of study
1–2 lessons (teacher's discretion)	The significance of the Jaws of the Underworld and the underworld kingdom of Xibalba. The importance of caves, rituals, and sacrifice in the cultural and religious lives of the Maya.
Resources to prepare	**Main student record or outcome**
• Expedition notebooks and pens • Slides	• Drawing of the Jaws of the Underworld • Cave entrance and drop sketch • Descent plan • Diary entry

	Teaching route	Resource
1	Open expedition notebooks. Show the Jaws of the Underworld.	Slide 9
2	Discussion: "What do you make of it?"	
3	Share information on Xibalba, Earth Monster, ritual and sacrifice.	Slide 9
4	Task: Draw the Jaws of the Underworld in notebooks.	Slide 9
5	Narrate: Journey to cave entrance.	Slide 10
6	Discussion: Questions; information about the cave.	
7	Narrate: Entering the cave; reaching the abyss.	
8	Tasks: Draw cave entrance and drop; write descent plan; write diary entry.	

Keep in view

- Have Slides 9 and 10 ready before the lesson.
- This episode explores the Maya underworld, ritual, and sacrifice. Hold this material with confident matter-of-fact authority. Remind the class that the cave is not a horror story.
- The "[Edit as required]" note before the information section indicates you may select which points to share.
- Five aspects of diary writing and a model diary entry are in the Appendix: Ep. 2.

- Further Study (Maya timeline) may extend over additional sessions.

The Cave Entrance

Summary

In this episode the students study the image of the 'Jaws of the Underworld' and learn about its significance. The explorers enter the cave and find the path disappears into an abyss. The students draw the cave entrance, write a diary entry, and plan to descend into the lower parts of the cave.

Areas of Study

The significance of the 'The Jaws of the Underworld' and the underworld kingdom of Xibalba. The importance of caves, rituals, and sacrifice in the cultural and religious lives of the Maya.

Resources

'Expedition notebooks' and pens.
Slides

Steps

Part 1

Ask the students to open their 'Expedition notebooks'.
Say, "Let's take a closer look together at that carving in the rock. You remember it's called 'The Jaws of the Underworld'." **[Slide 8]**

Task: "Before we start, you'll want to make a drawing in your notebooks."

After the students have finished their drawings:

Ask "What do you make of it?" Discussion.

Task Once the students have discussed their ideas and what they've noticed, say, "I don't know everything about this symbol, but I do know a few things. As I talk, **please make some notes** in your book."

[Edit as required]

The "**Jaws of the Underworld**" are often depicted as the gaping mouth of a monstrous creature or deity, symbolizing the entrance to the underworld.

This imagery is closely associated with caves, which the Maya believed were portals to **Xibalba**.

Xibalba was the Maya underworld, a place of darkness, death, and the afterlife, ruled by gods associated with death and disease. Entering the "Jaws of the Underworld" was symbolic of entering Xibalba, where the souls of the dead would face trials and challenges.

The mouth of the cave is likened to the open jaws of a fearsome being, representing the dangerous and mysterious journey into the afterlife.

Earth Monster: The "Jaws of the Underworld" are sometimes portrayed as part of a larger "Earth Monster" or "Cave Monster" figure in Maya iconography. This creature is often shown with sharp teeth and a wide-open mouth, signifying the threshold between the world of the living and the underworld.

Ritual and Sacrifice: The Maya performed rituals and sacrifices in caves, believing they were appeasing the gods of the underworld. The imagery of the "Jaws of the Underworld" reinforced the idea that these caves were not just physical locations but also spiritual gateways.

Part 2

[Slide 9]

Narrate

"The explorers packed up their equipment and set off in search of the cave entrance. It was heavy going, and they had to cut their way through thick foliage and vines that seemed to grasp at their arms and legs. Eventually, towards the end of the morning, they found what looked like the remains of an ancient stone pathway leading into the deepest, darkest part of the forest. The ground was easier now, but the air felt thicker, as if it were sucking the oxygen out of their lungs. Each step became more difficult than the last. They might have given up, but just at that moment, they turned a corner, and there, in front of them, was the gaping entrance to the hidden cave."

[Slide 10]

Ask "Have you got any questions?" Discussion.

Information [ask the team to make notes]

The cave is not haunted, this is not a horror story.

There is a tunnel on the other side of the cave, heading downwards.

The jungle is full of animal noises, but nothing more.

Carved into the rock around the cave's entrance are various glyphs and symbols.

These can be translated by the explorers. They say: "The entrance to Xibalba, the Underworld kingdom of Cizin, God of Death." [See Appendix: Episode 2 – Three Maya Gods]

Task: “You’ll want to make a drawing of the entrance.”

Once the finish,

Ask, "What should we do? We've come all this way; we can't turn back now! Shall we leave our camping equipment here and explore the entrance to the cave?"

Discussion.

Note: Don't worry if you get a difference of opinion. Tell those who don't want to enter the cave at this moment that they can watch what happens via the team's GoPro cameras.

[Slide 11]

Narrate

"The entrance to the cave was slippery and, after only a few steps, so dark the team had to turn on their helmet-lamps. They edged forward, the sound of dripping water all around them. To start with, the stone floor descended gently, and then suddenly, without warning, it plunged into darkness."

Ask "What should we do now?" Discussion.

Information [make notes]

The drop below is perilously deep.

If they decide to throw a stone, it takes three seconds to reach the bottom, with a splash.

There is some maths: the explorers calculate the distance to the bottom is 44.15m. [For a video explaining the calculation, search YouTube: "free fall distance calculation"]

Task Draw a picture of the drop.

Task Draw and write a plan on how to reach the bottom safely.

Task Write a diary entry in the notebook about the journey from the first campsite to the discovery of the abyss, and the end of the day. [See Appendix: Episode 2 – Five aspects of diary writing and Example of a diary entry]

Further Study

Create a Maya timeline and see how it compares with other civilisations across the world. [See Appendix: Episode 2 – Timeline of Maya Civilisation. See also 'World History Timeline super-jumbo poster' and 'Timelines of World History: 1'.]

EPISODE 3

Down into the Cave

LIVE TEACHING GUIDE

Duration	Areas of study
1–2 lessons (teacher's discretion)	The Spanish exploration of the Yucatan Peninsula, reading the logbook.
Resources to prepare	**Main student record or outcome**
• Expedition notebooks and pens • Slides • Logbook of Captain Rodrigo Velázquez de Toledo (print and cut from Appendix: Episode 3 – enough sets for group work)	• Logbook entries sequenced and read • Recorded events in notebooks • Written list of questions

	Teaching route	Resource
1	Narrate: Descend into darkness; reach the tunnel.	Slide 13
2	Narrate: Round chamber; three carved figures; old leather-bound book.	Slide 14
3	Task: Groups sequence and read the logbook entries.	
4	Gods carved into the walls	Slide 15
5	Task: Record events in notebooks; write list of questions.	
6	Task: Look at the logbook	Slide 16

Keep in view

- Print and cut the logbook entries from the Appendix before the lesson – one set per group.
- Note: the logbook is labelled under "Episode 2" in the Appendix but is used in this episode.
- Slides 13, 14, 15, 16 needed.
- The carved figures on the chamber walls are Itzamana, Cizin, and Kinich Ahau – see Appendix: Episode 3 – Three Maya Gods.
- Further Study on Spanish exploration and the Maya timeline may extend across additional sessions.

Down into the Cave

Summary

In this episode the students discover a Spanish logbook, 'The Cave of Blood', and learn about the Spanish exploration of the Yucatan Peninsula.

Areas of Study

The Spanish exploration of the Yucatan Peninsula, reading the logbook.

Resources

'Expedition notebooks' and pens.
Slides
Print and cut out the entries for the 'Logbook of Captain Rodrigo Velázquez de Toledo' in the Appendix. Enough for the students to work in groups.

Steps

Narrate
"The next morning, the explorers carried out their plan and descended into the darkness of the cave. It seemed to take forever, and as they went down, they saw signs carved into the walls that suggested there might have once been a wooden ladder attached to the wall."

[Slide 13]

[Maya sometimes built wooden ladders, or 'staircases', that led down to the bottom of caves. – this is an artist's impression of a Maya wooden staircase found in the cave of Bolonchen leading down to a well.]

Narrate
"Eventually, they reached the bottom and found themselves in a long narrow tunnel that sloped gently further underground. The walls were smooth and dark, dripping with water."

Ask "Shall we carry on?"

Narrate

"Unperturbed, the explorers continued along the tunnel until they reached a small chamber opening up in front of them. The walls branched out on either side and then converged again, creating a gap of perhaps twenty feet. In between was the floor of a round open space, scattered with ancient stones that had long ago fallen from the roof. Somewhere ahead, they could hear the sound of flowing water."

[Slide 14]

Ask "What should we do?"

[Slide 15]

Ask "What do you make of this?"

Things they can discover

The carved figures are Maya gods. [See Appendix: Three Maya Gods]
The first is Itzamana, the Creator.
The second is Cizin, the God of Death.
The third is Kinich Ahau, the Sun God.

Discuss.

When they search the room they find amongst the fallen rocks are the remains of an ancient fire and an old, tattered, leather-bound book.

Say: “Let’s have a look at this, it might be interesting.”

> **Task:** The students work in groups looking at the entries for the 'Logbook of Captain Rodrigo Velázquez de Toledo '[Appendix: Episode 3]. The first task is to put them in order and then to read what happened.

Come back together and discuss. Show the students **[Slide 16]**

> **Task** Record events in their notebooks.

> **Task** Ask the students to write a list of questions they would like to know the answers to.

Further Study

Find out about the Spanish exploration of Central and South America. [See Appendix: Episode 3 – The Spanish Exploration of the Yucatan Peninsula]

See how it fits in with the Maya timeline. [See Appendix: Episode 3 – The Decline of Maya Civilisation. Note: in this unit, a Maya city existed in isolation deep within the jungle, long after the rest of the empire largely declined over the previous two centuries.]

EPISODE 4

The Ceremony

LIVE TEACHING GUIDE

Duration	Areas of study
2 lessons (teacher's discretion)	History, religious education, cultural studies, drama, art, creative writing, and social studies.
Resources to prepare	**Main student record or outcome**
• Expedition notebooks and pens • Slides • Handout: Offerings to the Gods (print – see Appendix: Episode 4) • Handout: The Ceremony (print – see Appendix: Episode 4)	• Notes on the chamber and the gods • Written description of the ceremony incorporating dramatic imagination • Illustration to accompany writing

	Teaching route	Resource
1	Narrate: Leave round chamber; enter Hall of Cizin.	
2	Task: Investigate chamber; make notes on chamber and gods.	Slides 18, 19, 20
3	Discussion: "What do you think happened here?"	
4	Task: Pass around and discuss handouts.	
5	Task: Rearrange classroom; enact the ceremony.	
6	Narrate: Sacred ritual narration.	
7	Discussion: How should the ceremony progress? Enact.	
8	Task: Write description of ceremony; illustrate.	

Keep in view

- Print handouts "Offerings to the Gods" and "The Ceremony" from the Appendix before the lesson.
- Slides 18, 19, 20 as needed.
- Share information on the Chacmool and Three Maya Gods from the Appendix before or during the investigation step.
- Part 2 requires furniture to be moved – plan the classroom transition in advance.
- The ceremony enactment is an active, imaginative activity. No props are required.

The Ceremony

Summary

In this episode, the students are guided through a detailed exploration of an ancient Maya chamber, where they encounter carved symbols, stone reliefs, and a Chacmool sculpture. After investigating the chamber and making notes on the Maya gods, they engage in discussions about what might have occurred there. The lesson progresses to an enactment of a Maya ceremony, with students rearranging the classroom to recreate the scene. They discuss potential offerings to various gods and imagine their roles in the ceremony. The activity culminates in a narrated ritual, followed by a writing task where students describe the ceremony using elements of dramatic imagination, and then illustrate their descriptions.

Areas of Study

History, religious education, cultural studies, drama, art, creative writing, and social studies.

Resources

'Expedition notebooks' and pens.

Slides

Print out handouts – 'Offerings to the Gods' and 'The Ceremony' [see Appendix: Episode 4].

Steps

Part 1

Narrate

"The explorers leave the round chamber and continue along the tunnel. After a while, they notice the floor beginning to slope upwards and the walls becoming smoother, as if carved by human hands. Eventually, they reach the foot of a small flight of stone steps, with symbols carved across the ceiling. The explorers recognize the symbols as Mayan and translate them as 'The entrance to the hall of Cizin.'"

"As they reach the top of the steps, the walls on either side and the ceiling above disappear into darkness, leaving them with the sensation that they are in a large, enclosed space." **[Slide 18]**

Ask "What should we do?" Discuss.

After investigating the chamber they find

The space is a rectangular stone chamber, approximately 30 metres long and 15 metres wide. The ceiling is high, disappearing into the shadows above, making it impossible to see its full extent.

The walls are lined with intricately carved stone reliefs, depicting scenes of sacrifice and figures in ritual poses. The carvings seem to tell a story, one that the explorers cannot fully decipher.

The Team side a small doorway.

Through a small door at the side of the chamber lies a stone altar, stained dark by the passage of time. It is clear that this place was used for ancient rituals.

Beside the altar is a carved figure, reclining and holding a stone bowl in their hands. **[Slide 19]** The explorers recognise the figure as a Chacmool sculpture. [See Appendix: Episode 4 – Chacmool Sculpture]

At the far end of the chamber, they notice a small, narrow passage leading further into the darkness.

On one wall are carved the images of three Maya Gods - the same three gods they saw in the previous chamber. [See Appendix: Episode 4 – Three Maya Gods] The Team sketch the Gods in their notebooks. **[Slide 20]**

> **Task** "Make notes in your notebooks about the chamber and the Gods".

Share with students the information in the Appendix about the Chacmool and the three Maya Gods.

Ask "What do you think happened here?"

> **Task** Pass around the handouts 'Offerings to the Gods' and 'The Ceremony'. [See Appendix: Episode 4]

Discussion

Part 2

Return to [Slide 18]

> **Task** To enact the ceremony performed in the chamber, incorporating the students' ideas and the information they have learned from the handouts.

Say "Please get to your feet and gather here at the front."

Say "I wonder what it was like, back in the time of the Maya, on the occasion of one of these ceremonies. Let's move the classroom around and recreate what we think it might have been like."

Task: the students move the classroom furniture. Place a table at the front on its own.

Gather the students back together around the table.

Say "Let's imagine this is the altar. It's made of stone and is the place where religious rituals, offerings, or sacrifices were made to the Gods. You can still see them today in religious buildings like churches, temples, and shrines."

Say "The Maya made offerings to appease the gods, to secure blessings for crops, health, and prosperity, and to prevent disasters. These offerings ranged from food, and goods, and in some cases, human sacrifices."

Say "Let's start with Itzamna, the creator. What offerings might be made to Itzamna and why?" Discussion.

Say "And Kinich Ahau, the sun God?"

Say "And, what about Cizin, the God of death and earthquakes?"

Say "Could I ask you to imagine you are someone who has come to this ceremony and you have something you want to achieve. Perhaps you have a sick child who needs help to regain health, or you are seeking protection for your family from future illness. Maybe you've come to ask for a bountiful harvest to feed your community, or you're hoping to gain guidance in making an important life decision. You could be here to seek forgiveness for a past mistake, or perhaps you wish to honour the gods for blessings you've already received. Whatever your reason, your presence here reflects your deep connection to the divine and your belief in the power of this ceremony to influence the forces that shape your life."

Say "Please find yourself somewhere in the chamber."

Narrate

"We are here, gathered in this hallowed space, to perform our sacred duties and present our offerings to the gods. As we stand before the divine, let our rituals affirm our faith and strengthen the bonds between our world and the celestial realm. In unity and reverence, we uphold the traditions that guide us."

Ask "How should the ceremony progress?" Discuss.

Task: Enact the ceremony, incorporating the students' ideas.

Guidance:

This part of the lesson is designed to help students think from inside the world of the Maya, not to perform a scene for an audience. Keep the tone calm, serious, and thoughtful. The aim is to explore what the ceremony might have meant to the people taking part, using the evidence from the chamber, the handouts, and the students' own ideas.

Before moving the furniture, make clear that the class are not recreating a real ceremony exactly. They are building a careful interpretation from the evidence available. This gives students permission to think imaginatively while still treating the culture and beliefs with respect.

Use the table as the altar because it gives the class a clear centre of attention. Avoid adding too many props. The focus should be on stillness, movement, sound, silence, light, darkness, and the choices people might make in such a place. Encourage students to decide why they have come to the ceremony, what they hope for, and what offering they might bring.

Handle the references to sacrifice with care. Present it as part of Maya religious belief and ritual practice, not as horror or spectacle. Keep the emphasis on belief, duty, fear, hope, protection, harvest, illness, danger, and the relationship between people and the gods.

As the ceremony develops, invite suggestions from the students, but shape them into a simple sequence. For example:

1. The people enter the chamber quietly.
2. Offerings are brought forward.
3. A priest or elder calls on one of the gods.
4. The people respond through gesture, silence, or spoken words.
5. The offering is placed on the altar.
6. The ceremony ends with the people leaving the chamber changed in some way.

Do not worry if students have different interpretations. This is useful. The discussion should help them see that the evidence can suggest possibilities without giving definite answers.

After the enactment, give students a moment to come out of the fiction before writing. Ask them to recall what they noticed: the light, the darkness, the sounds, the silence, the movement, the stillness, the reasons people came, and the feelings in the chamber. These details will support the written description that follows.

> **Task** Write a description of the ceremony in their notebooks, incorporating the six elements of dramatic imagination – light/darkness, movement/stillness, sound/silence to evoke the occasion.

> **Task** Illustrate their writing.

EPISODE 5

The Warrior

LIVE TEACHING GUIDE

Duration	Areas of study
1–2 lessons (teacher's discretion)	History, art, geography, mythology, archaeology, creative writing, cultural studies, religious studies, anthropology, and literature.
Resources to prepare	**Main student record or outcome**
• Expedition notebooks and pens • Slides • A5 paper and pencils • Topic books • Access to Google Image	• Drawn and annotated artefacts • Story of the warrior written in notebook • Map of the cave from entrance to exit

	Teaching route	Resource
1	Narrate: Enter chamber with the Balam statue.	Slide 22
2	Discussion: Investigate; find artefacts, weapons, skeleton.	Slide 23
3	Task: Draw artefacts on A5 paper; write who brought them and why.	
4	Task: Draw outline of skeleton on floor.	
5	Gather round with artefacts. Narrate: funeral eulogy for Balam.	
6	Activity: Lay down objects; say remembrance.	
7	Tasks: Write story of warrior; draw cave map.	

Keep in view

- Have the slides ready before the lesson.
- A5 paper and pencils needed before the artefact drawing task.
- Topic books and Google Image access needed for artefact research.
- A list of artefacts found in the cave is in the Appendix: Episode 5.
- The funeral eulogy narration (step 5) is a significant moment – pause before it and hold the stillness.

The Warrior

Summary

In this episode, the explorers enter a chamber with a four-faced statue of the mythical Maya warrior Balam. They find weapons, artifacts, and a skeleton with burial items. Students draw the artifacts, discuss their significance, and create a story about the warrior. Finally, they draw a map of the cave, documenting the journey from the entrance to the exit behind the statue.

Areas of Study

History, art, geography, mythology, archaeology, creative writing, cultural studies, religious studies, anthropology, and literature.

Resources

- 'Expedition notebooks' and pens.
- Slides
- Topic books
- Access to Google Image

Steps

Narrate

"The explorers left the ceremonial chamber and entered another tunnel that continued to ascend. After a few minutes, they arrived in a smaller chamber, this one dominated by an imposing figure carved from rock, with a face looking in four directions. On the far side of the chamber was a flight of stairs, with what appeared to be daylight seeping in from above."

[Slide 22]

Ask "What do you make of this?" Discuss.

Notes

The 'imposing figure' with four faces is a mythical Maya warrior called **Balam**, which means "Jaguar" in Maya. While Balam is not a specific individual, the term was often used as a title or name for warriors or leaders who embodied the fierce qualities of the jaguar, an animal deeply revered in Maya culture. The jaguar was seen as a symbol of strength, power, and leadership, and many Maya warriors took on this name or title to reflect their prowess in battle.

In various alcoves of the chamber the team find weapons and other artefacts, such as clay pots, masks, and other items.

Say, “In a corner of the room is a small alcove.”

A skeleton, buried with a spear, a wooden club, a shield, and a small carved clay figurine of a Maya warrior with facial scarification. **[Slide 23]**

Task: Hand out pieces of A5 paper and ask the students to draw the artefacts found in the alcoves. [See Appendix: Episode 5 – Artefacts found in the cave.] Use topic books and Google Image. **[Slide 24]**

> **Task** Write on the back: who brought this object and why.

> **Task:** Draw the outline of the skeleton on the floor or on a large sheet of paper.

Gather round as if they are holding artefacts in a burial ceremony.

Narrate

"We gather here to lay to rest the best of us. We called him Balam because he was as fierce and protective as the jaguar, guardian of our people and our land. Like the Balam of our ancestors, he embodied strength, wisdom, and courage, always standing watch over us, guiding us through the darkest of times. Today, as we bid him farewell, we honour his spirit, knowing that his legacy will live on in our hearts and in the stories we tell."

Say "As you lay down your gifts, you may wish to say why you remember the warrior. You might say, 'I remember when he guided me home after I got lost in the jungle.' Or 'I will always cherish how he taught me to be brave and stand tall in the face of fear.' Or 'I remember how he fought on the wall when our enemies were all around us.'"

> **Task** Copy the artefact into the explorers' notebook and write a story about the warrior to go beside the picture.

> **Task** Draw a map of the cave in the notebook, from the entrance to the exit up the flight of steps behind the statue of the warrior.

Further Study

Find out about Maya warriors and the role in Maya civilisation. [See Appendix: Episode 5 – Maya Warriors]

Research the decline of Maya civilisation. [See Appendix: Episode 5 – The Decline of Maya Civilisation]

Further possible activities

Design and craft a Maya mask or headdress using traditional patterns and materials.

Paint a mural depicting the exploits of the 'Balam' warrior, incorporating Maya symbols and imagery.

Build a diorama of the cave scene, including the statue, stairs, and artifacts.

EPISODE 6

The Lost City

LIVE TEACHING GUIDE

Duration	Areas of study
2 lessons (teacher's discretion)	History, human geography, map making.
Resources to prepare	**Main student record or outcome**
• Expedition notebooks and pens • Slides • Topic books • Handout: Maya Cities (print and cut – see Appendix: Episode 6) • Strips of white paper: 29cm x 5cm and 5cm squares	• Collaborative floor city plan (photograph before clearing) • Individual labelled plan of the Maya city

	Teaching route	Resource
1	Narrate: Exit cave; discover the lost city.	Slides 26-30
2	Task: Groups read Maya Cities handout.	
3	Task: Layout city plan on classroom floor using paper strips.	
4	Discussion: Review the city plan.	
5	Photograph the city plan.	
6	Task: Draw individual labelled city plan.	

Keep in view

- Print and cut the Maya Cities handout from the Appendix before the lesson.
- Prepare paper strips (29cm x 5cm) and 5cm squares in advance.
- Have Slides ready.
- Furniture will need to be moved to create floor space for the city plan – plan for this.
- Ask a student to photograph the completed city plan before it is cleared away.

The Lost City

Summary

In this episode, the explorers discover a lost Maya city. The students study the areas of a Maya city, create a plan together, and then draw their own plans.

Areas of Study

History, human geography, map making.

Resources

'Expedition notebooks' and pens.
Slides
Topic books
Print and cut out handout 'Maya Cities' in the Appendix.
Cut out strips of white paper into various lengths. Including 29cm x 5cm, and 5cm squares.

Steps

Narrate
"At the back of the chamber of the warrior is a long flight of worn stone steps leading up to what looks like daylight. The team begins to climb the steps and soon find the way blocked by tree roots and thick vines."

Ask "What should we do?" Discussion.

Narrate the students' ideas. For example, "The team examines the roots and vines. They agree that their only option is to cut their way through, and they set to work. It's hard going, but eventually, they see the top of the steps and the way out of the cave."

Narrate
"After another hour's hard labour, the team breaks through the last of the obstructions and steps out into clear blue sunlight. All around them is the most amazing sight any of them has ever seen: an ancient city covered in foliage. Everywhere, roots, vines, and leaves grasp and grab at the buildings like a suffocating green net."

[Slide 26]

Say “What do you make of that?” Discuss.

Narrate

"The team make their way down from the cave entrance until they reach what appears to have once been a grand open plaza. **[Slide 27]** There are a number of statues and standing stones in various guises, clad in green leaves and vines that seem to be trying to drag them down into the underworld. On three sides of the plaza are rows of single storey buildings, their doors broken open by the invading foliage, their roofs bent and broken by the weight of the jungle's trees. On the fourth side is a great stone pyramid, reaching up to the sky with a thousand or more steps. Only the topmost are free of the vegetation intent everywhere else on smothering the city."

Task: Organise the students into groups and pass around copies of the handout 'Maya Cities' cut out into sections. Give the students time to read. Show **[Slide 28]**.

Task: Hand out the strips and squares of paper to each group.

Say "Let's take a look at this lost city! Working together, can I ask you to lay out the city on the classroom floor. We will need to move the tables and chairs back to give us space. You can draw on the pieces of paper if there are details you want to include. Please label the different parts of the city."

As the students work, encourage them to look at the parts of the city in the handout and to use other resources, such as topic books and the internet, to research Maya cities and their architecture.

Look at **[Slides 29 and 30]** for images of Maya stelae, the standing stones found in Maya cities.

Once the plan of the city is completed, discuss the students' ideas and what they think happened in various places.

Take a photograph of the plan before tidying it away.

Task Using the photograph, ask the students to draw their own plan of the city, labelling the different parts. This can be done in their notebook or separately on graph paper, and then attached to their notebooks afterwards.

Further Studies

Research the **Mesoamerican Ball Game:** Many Maya cities featured ball courts where the Mesoamerican ball game, known as pok-ta-pok or pitz, was played. This game had deep religious and political significance and was often linked to the ruling elite.

Research more about Maya cities and their role in Maya culture and history. [See website – 'The Maya Archaeologist' and YouTube: search 'maya cities youtube'.]

Investigate various aspects of Maya daily life, including social structure, occupations, and family roles. Focus on the roles of farmers, artisans, warriors, and priests, and how they contributed to the functioning of the city.

Further Activities

Create a Mural Depicting Daily Life in the Maya City: Students work together to paint a large mural that shows various aspects of daily life in the Maya city, such as markets, religious ceremonies, and construction. They use research to accurately depict the clothing, architecture, and activities of the Maya people.

EPISODE 7

Lady Evenstar

LIVE TEACHING GUIDE

Duration	Areas of study
2 lessons (teacher's discretion)	History, social studies, literature, art, cultural studies, creative writing, group collaboration, critical thinking, and research skills.
Resources to prepare	**Main student record or outcome**
• Expedition notebooks and pens • Handout: Lady Six Sky (print – see Appendix: Episode 7)	• Group extract of the life of Lady Evenstar • Still-image representing a section of the mural • Individual story of Lady Evenstar written in notebook

	Teaching route	Resource
1	Narrate: Discovery of the mural; introduce Lady Evenstar.	Slide 32
2	Task: Read Lady Six Sky handout; underline key passages.	
3	Task: Groups form around shared interest; write extract of Lady Evenstar.	
4	Task: Create still-image representing group's section of the mural.	
5	Activity: Groups present extract and hold still-image for class discussion.	
6	Discussion: Compare group interpretations.	
7	Task: Write story of Lady Evenstar in notebook.	

Keep in view

- Print the Lady Six Sky handout from the Appendix before the lesson. No slides are specified for this episode.
- Allow time for groups to form organically around the parts of the text they find most interesting.
- Support each group individually as they develop their still-images.
- When each group presents, ask the class to hold discussion until after the image is held.

- Further Activities on Maya rulers, society hierarchy, and the mural display are in the Appendix: Episode 7.

Lady Evenstar

Summary

In this episode, the explorers uncover a mural depicting the life of a great female ruler of the city called 'Lady Evenstar'. The students read about a real historical female ruler, Lady Six Sky, and then create moments from the life of the fictional Lady Evenstar. They represent these moments in the mural and write about her story in their notebooks.

Areas of Study

History, social studies, literature, art, cultural studies, creative writing, group collaboration, critical thinking, and research skills.

Resources

'Expedition notebooks' and pens.

Print a handout of the story of 'Lady Six Sky'. [See Appendix: Episode 7 – Lady Six Sky]

Steps

Narrate

"Among the many things the explorers discovered was a spectacular mural painted along one of the walls of the pyramid temple. It depicted the life of a great ruler of the city called Lady Evenstar (Ix Chik'in Ek), a female ruler who had taken charge during a time of chaos and saved her people." **Slide 32**

Task Handout the story 'Lady Six Sky' and ask the students to read and underline any parts of the text they found particularly interesting.

Ask the students to get into small groups with other students interested in the same part of the text.

Task In their groups, ask the students to write an extract of the life of Lady Evenstar that might reflect the life of Lady Six Sky's. For example, "When she was sixteen, Lady Evenstar arrived at the city to marry the old king. At that time the city was in a long period of decline and the people of the city feared disease and starvation. The arrival of Lady Evenstar and her marriage to the king coincided with the end of the drought and a bountiful harvest." Or "The birth of

her firstborn was greeted by a great red moon that signified both the strength of her lineage and the powerful life force that would guide her child's destiny, but also hinted at the potential for conflict and challenges that lay ahead."

Task: Once the students have written their extracts, ask them to create a still-image representing a part of the mural that corresponds to their text.

Allow them time to work, providing support to those who need it.

Task: When they are ready, ask each group, one at a time, to read their extract and then depict their part of the mural as a still-image.

Ask the group to hold the still-image for a few seconds while the rest of the class discusses what has been created and what it reveals about Lady Evenstar, her life, her qualities, and the things she cared about.

Task: After all groups have presented their extracts and still-images, engage the class in a discussion to compare the different interpretations of Lady Evenstar's life. Encourage students to think about how different parts of the mural might connect to form a larger narrative.

Task: Ask the students to write in their notebooks the story (or an extract) of Lady Evenstar's life and what it meant to the people of the city.

Further Study

Research the role of rulers in Maya society. [See Appendix: Episode 7 – Maya Rulers]

Research the social hierarchy in Maya society. [See Appendix: Episode 7 – Maya Society]

Further Activities

Create a class display: Paint the still-images and write out the extracts from each group to create a collective mural display in the classroom.

Ask students to draw a Maya society 'pyramid' in their notebooks with each strata of society recorded and illustrated.

EPISODE 8

A Dilemma

LIVE TEACHING GUIDE

Duration	Areas of study
1–2 lessons (teacher's discretion)	History, ethics, social studies, creative writing, art, critical thinking, collaboration.
Resources to prepare	**Main student record or outcome**
• Expedition notebooks and pens • Slides • Paper for making the webpage (Further Activities)	• Written story ending and statement of how the explorers should act and why • Further Activities: written perspective pieces; group discussion; webpage draft for the museum

	Teaching route	Resource
1	Narrate: Campfire; the question of what to do next.	
2	Discussion: A Dilemma - different points of view	Slide 35
3	Teacher-in-role: Museum director (keep-secret scenario).	
4	Discussion: Implications and difficulty of keeping the secret.	
5	Task: Write an end to the story; how should the explorers act and why.	

Keep in view

- Slide 35 (other points of view) ready before the lesson.
- Place an empty chair at the front of the class before the TIR begins.
- Step out of role if students need support during the TIR – see note in steps below.
- Museum email for the Further Activities webpage commission is in the Appendix: Episode 8.
- The final writing task draws on everything the students have learned across all eight episodes.

A Dilemma

Summary

In this episode, the explorers debate whether to keep the discovery of the lost city a secret or to tell the world. They consider different points of view and meet with the director of the museum. The story concludes with the students writing how they believe the explorers should act and why. In further activities, the students debate the dilemma from other perspectives and create a webpage for the museum about the discovery and Maya civilization.

Areas of Study

History, ethics, social studies, creative writing, art, critical thinking, collaboration.

Resources

'Expedition notebooks' and pens.
Slides.
Paper for making the webpage.

Steps

Narrate

"That evening, the explorers sit around a campfire and discuss their amazing discovery – a Maya lost city, hidden in the jungle for hundreds of years. The question on everyone's lips is what to do next. Should they leave the city as it is, swallowed by the jungle, or should they tell the world about their discovery?"

Discussion

Ask them to consider other points of view. For example:

[Slide 35]

Local Indigenous Communities – They may have ancestral connections to the site and a strong interest in how it is handled and preserved.
Archaeologists and Historians – Professionals who would be eager to study the site to uncover more about Maya history and civilization.
Government Officials – Representatives from the national or regional government who might see the site as a cultural heritage asset or a potential tourist attraction.
Environmental Conservationists – Individuals concerned with the impact of revealing and potentially disturbing the jungle ecosystem surrounding the site.

Cultural Heritage Organizations – Groups focused on preserving historical sites and ensuring that any discoveries are managed responsibly and ethically.

Say "Let's hear what the director of the museum might say."

Gather the students together at the front of the class sitting on chairs.

Place an empty chair at the front.

Say "When I sit on this chair, I'm going to represent the director of the museum. Let's see how the conversation goes if the team decides to keep the city a secret."

Teacher-in-role: the museum director (keep-secret scenario)

"It's good to see you all back, looking healthy and well. I understand you had a few challenges along the way but found nothing of note, is that correct?"

"Why were you gone so long?"

"As the organisation that paid for the expedition, it only seems right that we should have a full and honest account. Don't you think?"

If the students have trouble answering the questions or start to giggle, step out of character, and offer them some support. For example, you might say, "I can understand why you're finding this difficult – lying can be hard. Is it worth it, do you think? Does anyone have an answer that might work in this situation?"

Discuss the implications and the difficulty of keeping it secret.

Task In their notebooks ask the students to write an end to the story and how they think the explorers should act and why.

Further Activities

Different points of view:

- Select one of the points of view in step 3 and write a paragraph on that person's perspective. Do they think the city should remain a secret?
- Gather the students together and ask them to sit in groups with people who wrote from the same point of view.
- Ask each group to read out their writing and discuss.

Use the email from the director of the museum [see Appendix: Episode 8 – The email from the museum] to commission the explorers to create a webpage for the museum about their discovery. The students can draft the webpage on paper. Working in groups, provide the students with various sizes of paper: A3, A5, and strips of paper for the navigation bars.

Appendix

All appendix material is reproduced below in full. The table below shows each section, its episode reference, and its purpose so you can find what you need quickly.

Note: The logbook of Captain Rodrigo Velazquez de Toledo is labelled "Episode 2" in the original context plan but is used in Episode 3. The index reflects its correct teaching use.

Episode	Section	Purpose
General	Cities of the Maya	Teacher background reading
General	Maya Caves	Teacher background reading
Ep. 1	Equipment Handout 1	Print and cut
Ep. 2	Jaws of the Underworld	Teacher background reading
Ep. 2	Five aspects of diary writing	Student handout
Ep. 2	Example of a diary entry	Writing model
Ep. 3	Logbook of Captain Rodrigo Velazquez de Toledo	Print and cut
Ep. 2	Timeline of Maya Civilisation	Teacher background reading
Ep. 3	The Decline of Maya Civilisation	Teacher background reading
Ep. 3	The Spanish Exploration of the Yucatan Peninsula	Teacher background reading
Ep. 4	Chacmool Sculpture	Teacher background reading
Ep. 4	Three Maya Gods	Teacher background reading
Ep. 4	Offerings to the Gods	Student handout
Ep. 4	The Ceremony	Student handout
Ep. 5	Artefacts found in the Cave	Teacher background reading
Ep. 5	Maya Warriors	Teacher background reading
Ep. 5	The Decline of Maya Civilisation	Teacher background reading
Ep. 6	Maya Cities	Print and cut
Ep. 6	Lady Six Sky	Student handout

Ep. 7	Maya Rulers	Teacher background reading
Ep. 7	Maya Society	Teacher background reading
Ep. 8	The email from the museum	Student handout

Purpose key

Teacher background reading – read in advance of the relevant episode; not for distribution to students

Student handout – to be printed and given to students

Print and cut – to be printed, cut into sections, and distributed to groups

Writing model – example writing to share with or read to students

Cities of the Maya

Teacher background reading

The Maya civilization, which flourished in parts of present-day Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador, is known for its impressive cities, many of which were abandoned long before Europeans arrived in the Americas. These "lost cities" were hidden in the dense jungles of Central America and have only been rediscovered through modern archaeological efforts.

1. Tikal (Guatemala)

Overview: Tikal was one of the most powerful and influential city-states of the Maya civilization – a major centre of politics, economy, and culture.

Key Features: The city is famous for its towering pyramids, temples, and palaces. The Temple of the Great Jaguar (Temple I) and the Temple of the Masks (Temple II) are among its most iconic structures.

Discovery: Tikal was rediscovered in the 1840s, buried deep within the Guatemalan rainforest. Its ruins reveal the grandeur of a city that was once home to tens of thousands of people.

2. Palenque (Mexico)

Overview: Located in the Mexican state of Chiapas, Palenque is renowned for its architectural and artistic achievements. It was a smaller city compared to others but held significant cultural and historical importance.

Key Features: The Temple of the Inscriptions, which contains the tomb of the great ruler Pakal the Great, is one of Palenque's most famous structures. The city also features intricately carved stone reliefs and sculptures.

Discovery: Palenque was rediscovered in the late 18th century, and excavations have revealed a city rich in history and culture, with many of its buildings still standing today.

3. Copan (Honduras)

Overview: Copan was a major Maya city known for its advancements in astronomy, mathematics, and art. It was a cultural hub of the southern Maya region.

Key Features: The city is famous for its detailed stone carvings, stelae (upright stone slabs), and altars that depict rulers and gods. The Hieroglyphic Stairway, with over 1,200 glyphs, is one of the longest known texts of the ancient Maya.

Discovery: Copan was rediscovered in the 16th century, and further exploration in the 19th and 20th centuries revealed its extensive ruins and rich history.

4. Chichen Itza (Mexico)

Overview: One of the most famous Maya cities, Chichen Itza is located in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. It was a major regional capital in the northern Maya lowlands.

Key Features: The city is home to the iconic El Castillo (Temple of Kukulcan), a step pyramid that was an important ceremonial centre. The Great Ball Court and the Temple of the Warriors are other notable structures.

Discovery: Chichen Itza was never fully lost, but was largely abandoned by the time the Spanish arrived. It has since been extensively studied and restored.

5. El Mirador (Guatemala)

Overview: El Mirador is one of the oldest and largest Maya cities, located in the northern part of the Peten Basin in Guatemala. It is considered the cradle of Maya civilization.

Key Features: The city is famous for its massive pyramids, including La Danta, one of the largest pyramids in the world by volume.

Discovery: El Mirador was rediscovered in the 1920s. Ongoing excavations have revealed the city's immense scale and importance.

6. Uxmal (Mexico)

Overview: Uxmal is a major Maya city located in the Yucatan Peninsula, known for its elaborate and ornate architecture.

Key Features: The Pyramid of the Magician and the Nunnery Quadrangle are two of Uxmal's most famous structures. The city is noted for its intricate stone carvings and unique Puuc architectural style.

7. Calakmul (Mexico)

Overview: Calakmul, located in the Mexican state of Campeche, was one of the largest and most powerful Maya cities, often rivalling Tikal.

Key Features: The city features two massive pyramids, known as Structure I and Structure II, and many stelae that document the city's history.

Discovery: Calakmul was rediscovered in the 1930s, hidden deep within the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, a dense jungle region.

Maya Caves

Teacher background reading

The Maya civilization had a deep and profound connection with caves, which they considered sacred spaces. Caves were integral to Maya religion, mythology, and daily life.

1. Religious Significance

Portals to the Underworld: The Maya believed that caves were entrances to Xibalba, the underworld. They considered caves as places where the physical world connected with the spiritual world.

Places of Worship: Caves were used as sites for religious ceremonies and rituals. These rituals often involved offerings to the gods, such as pottery, food, jade, and even human sacrifices.

Home of the Rain God: Many Maya believed that Chaac, the rain god, resided in caves. Since agriculture was central to Maya life, and rain was vital for their crops, caves were often revered and used in rituals aimed at ensuring sufficient rainfall.

2. Cave Art and Inscriptions

Glyphs and Paintings: The Maya often decorated cave walls with glyphs, paintings, and carvings depicting religious scenes, deities, or narratives connected to their beliefs about the underworld.

Petroglyphs: Carved symbols and images in caves were sometimes created as part of religious rituals, serving as permanent records of the rituals performed.

3. Burials and Funerary Practices

Cave Burials: In some cases, the Maya used caves as burial sites, believing them suitable places for the dead to transition into the afterlife.

4. Water Sources

Cenotes and Caves: In the Yucatan Peninsula, where surface water was scarce, the Maya relied on cenotes (natural sinkholes) and caves for water. Some cenotes were sacred and used in religious rituals.

5. Notable Caves

Some well-known caves used by the Maya include the Actun Tunichil Muknal (ATM) cave in Belize, which contains remains of sacrificial victims and various artefacts, and the caves of Loltun in Mexico, which feature ancient paintings and carvings.

Episode 1 – Equipment Handout 1

Print and cut

This is a comprehensive list which you can edit as required.

Personal Gear

Backpack: Durable, waterproof, with sufficient capacity (40–60 litres) for carrying essentials.

Clothing:

- Lightweight, moisture-wicking clothing: Long-sleeve shirts and pants for protection against insects and vegetation.
- Rain gear: Waterproof jacket and pants.
- Hat and bandana: For sun protection.
- Thermal layers: In case of cooler temperatures at night.
- Sturdy hiking boots: Waterproof and with good ankle support.
- Gaiters: To protect against insects and small debris entering boots.
- Socks: Quick-drying and anti-blister.

Personal Protection:

- Insect repellent: Preferably with DEET.
- Sunscreen: High SPF, water-resistant.
- First-aid kit: Including bandages, antiseptics, tweezers, blister treatment, and any personal medications.
- Survival blanket: Compact and lightweight.

Navigation and Communication:

- Computer: In travelling case.
- Drone: For aerial views and seeing ahead.
- Go-pro cameras: compact, rugged, waterproof action cameras.
- GPS device: For navigation in dense jungle.
- Topographic maps and compass: Backup navigation tools.
- Satellite phone or two-way radios: For communication in remote areas.
- Whistle: For emergency signalling.

Camping Equipment

Tent: Lightweight, waterproof, and with mosquito netting.

Sleeping bag: Lightweight and suitable for the climate.

Sleeping pad: Compact and insulating for comfort.

Cooking stove: Compact and fuel-efficient, with sufficient fuel for a week.

Cooking pot and utensils: Lightweight, preferably titanium or aluminium.

Water purification system: Filters, tablets, or a UV purifier.

Hydration system: Water bottles or hydration bladder with a capacity of 2–3 litres.

Food supplies: High-calorie, non-perishable food items, such as energy bars, dehydrated meals, and trail mix.

Multi-tool or knife: For various tasks.

Rope and paracord: For setting up camp, securing gear, or emergency use.

Exploration and Caving Gear

Headlamp with extra batteries: Hands-free lighting essential for cave exploration.

Helmet with mount for light: For head protection and attaching lights.

Gloves: Durable, for protection during caving.

Climbing gear: Harness, carabiners, ropes, belay devices, and ascenders if vertical exploration is required.

Caving suit: Durable and resistant to abrasion, moisture, and mud.

Waterproof storage bags: For protecting electronics and documents.

Chalk and markers: For marking paths or important points within the cave.

Camera with waterproof casing: For documenting discoveries.

Emergency and Survival Gear

Emergency beacon (PLB or SPOT device): For alerting authorities in case of a severe emergency.

Fire-starting kit: Waterproof matches, lighter, and fire-starter.

Signal mirror and flare: For emergency signalling.

Extra food rations: In case of an extended stay.

Waterproof dry bags: For keeping critical items dry.

Health and Safety

Antivenom kit: If exploring areas known for venomous snakes or insects.

Waterproof medical kit: Including basic first aid, painkillers, anti-inflammatory drugs, and any necessary prescription medications.

Definitions

Moisture-wicking: A fabric's ability to draw moisture (usually sweat) away from the skin to the surface, where it can evaporate more easily.

DEET: (N,N-Diethyl-meta-toluamide) A chemical compound commonly used in insect repellents, highly effective at repelling mosquitoes, ticks, and other biting insects.

SPF: Sun Protection Factor – a measure of how well a sunscreen will protect skin from UVB rays.

Paracord: A lightweight nylon rope originally used in the suspension lines of parachutes, known for its strength, durability, and versatility.

PLB: A small handheld device that transmits a distress signal via satellite to emergency responders, providing your exact location in case of an emergency.

Episode 2 – Jaws of the Underworld

Teacher background reading

The "Jaws of the Underworld" is a concept deeply rooted in Maya mythology and cosmology, representing the entrance to Xibalba, the Maya underworld. This imagery is symbolic and appears frequently in Maya art, architecture, and religious practices.

1. Symbolic Representation

Cave Entrances: The "Jaws of the Underworld" are often depicted as the gaping mouth of a monstrous creature or deity, symbolizing the entrance to the underworld. This imagery is closely associated with caves, which the Maya believed were portals to Xibalba. The mouth of the cave is likened to the open jaws of a fearsome being, representing the dangerous and mysterious journey into the afterlife.

Earth Monster: The "Jaws of the Underworld" are sometimes portrayed as part of a larger "Earth Monster" or "Cave Monster" figure in Maya iconography. This creature is often shown with sharp teeth and a wide-open mouth, signifying the threshold between the world of the living and the underworld.

2. Religious and Mythological Significance

Xibalba – The Underworld: Xibalba was the Maya underworld, a place of darkness, death, and the afterlife, ruled by gods associated with death and disease. Entering the "Jaws of the Underworld" was symbolic of entering Xibalba, where the souls of the dead would face trials and challenges.

Ritual and Sacrifice: The Maya performed rituals and sacrifices in caves, believing they were appeasing the gods of the underworld. The imagery of the "Jaws of the Underworld" reinforced the idea that these caves were not just physical locations but also spiritual gateways.

Episode 2 – Five aspects of diary writing

Student handout

1. Date and Personal Voice

Start each entry with the date and use their own voice, making the writing sound personal and true to their feelings.

2. Feelings and Emotions

Express how they feel about the day's events. This helps make their writing more engaging and reflective.

3. Descriptive Language

Use descriptive words to paint a vivid picture of what they experienced. This makes their entries more interesting.

4. Events and Reflection

Describe what happened during the day and reflect on what they learned or how they felt about it.

5. Creativity

Encourage creativity in their entries, allowing them to add drawings and questions.

Episode 2 – Example of a diary entry	Writing model

Diary Entry – August 15, 2024

Today was one of the most challenging days of our expedition yet. We set off early from our first campsite, the air still cool and heavy with the morning mist. The jungle around us was alive with sounds – the distant calls of birds, the rustling of leaves, and the occasional grunt of a monkey. We packed up our gear quickly, eager to make progress towards the cave we've heard so much about.

The journey was tough. The jungle grew denser with each step, and the path ahead seemed almost impenetrable. We had to cut our way through thick vines and foliage that clawed at our arms and legs, making every step a struggle. The ground was uneven and slippery, with hidden roots and rocks waiting to trip us up. The sun climbed higher, and the air became thick and oppressive, making it hard to breathe.

By late morning, we stumbled upon something remarkable – what appeared to be the remains of an ancient stone pathway, barely visible beneath layers of moss and overgrowth. It was as if the jungle itself was trying to hide it from us. We decided to follow the path, hoping it would lead us closer to the cave.

Just when it felt like we might have to turn back, we rounded a corner and there it was – the entrance to the cave. It was a dark, gaping hole in the earth, partially hidden by thick vines and overhanging branches. The sight of it sent a shiver down my spine.

When we entered the cave we discovered the floor disappeared into an abyss. Tomorrow, we'll gather our courage and climb down. Tonight, as I write this by the light of our campfire, I can't shake the feeling that we're on the brink of something extraordinary – and perhaps a little dangerous.

Until tomorrow...

Episode 3 – Logbook of Captain Rodrigo Velazquez de Toledo

Print and cut

Print one set per group. Cut along the lines so each entry is a separate card. Ask students to sequence the entries and then read what happened.

Entry 1: January 5, 1590

We have arrived at the coast of this untamed land, sent by His Majesty, King Philip II, to explore and claim these territories in the name of Spain. The journey was long, but the sea was merciful. My men are eager, full of hope, and ready to carry out the King's mission. We have anchored off the coast, and the land ahead seems thick with jungle. Tomorrow, we will disembark and begin our exploration.

Entry 2: January 10, 1590

We have ventured inland for several days now, hacking our way through the dense jungle. The local people we have encountered seem wary but not hostile. However, the jungle feels oppressive, as if it harbours secrets we are not meant to uncover. My men are growing uneasy, but we push forward, driven by our duty.

Entry 3: January 15, 1590

Today, we encountered a great city, hidden within the jungle – a city of the Maya. The people here are unlike any we have seen before, and their king, a fierce and commanding figure, has received us with both curiosity and caution. We have attempted to communicate our intentions, but the language barrier is great. I sense an underlying tension, as if they do not trust us. We must tread carefully.

Entry 4: January 20, 1590

Disaster has struck. The Maya king, whom I believed we could negotiate with, has turned on us. My men were ambushed, slaughtered before my eyes. The jungle is stained with their blood. I managed to escape in the chaos, fleeing into the wilderness with nothing but the clothes on my back and this logbook. The king's warriors are relentless, hunting me down. I have taken refuge in a cave, but I fear it will not keep me safe for long.

Entry 5: January 22, 1590

I am trapped in this cursed cave. The Maya have surrounded it, their warriors standing guard at every possible exit. I have named this place the "Cave of Blood," for within its depths, I have witnessed horrors beyond imagination. The walls are stained with the remnants of sacrifices – human sacrifices. The stench of death lingers in the air, and the silence is broken only by the distant echoes of their drums.

Entry 6: January 24, 1590

My supplies are dwindling. I have no food, no water, and no means of escape. The darkness of the cave is suffocating, and the fear gnaws at my mind. The Maya warriors outside are patient, as if they know I will eventually have to emerge. I cannot bear the thought of dying in this forsaken place, yet I see no other end.

Entry 7: January 26, 1590

The nights are filled with the sounds of their rituals. The chanting, the drumming – it reverberates through the cave, shaking me to my core. I know they are preparing for something, perhaps another sacrifice. Perhaps I am to be the next offering to their gods. I have tried to dig my way out through the cave walls, but the stone is too hard. My strength is failing.

Entry 8: January 28, 1590

I have found a small pool of water deep within the cave, likely rainwater that has seeped through the rocks. It is tainted, but it is all I have. I drink sparingly, knowing it may not last. My thoughts are growing more disjointed, the line between reality and nightmare blurring. I see shadows on the walls that are not there and hear whispers in the dark that do not belong to any living soul.

Entry 9: January 30, 1590

I fear my time is near. The Maya are closing in; I can feel their presence. They taunt me with their drums, louder and more insistent with each passing hour. My body is weak, my mind fraying at the edges. I write now in the hope that someone, someday, will find this logbook and know of the treachery that befell me and my men.

Entry 10: February 1, 1590

This may be my final entry. The Maya are near – I hear their footsteps, soft but purposeful, coming closer. I have no strength left to fight. I clutch my sword, though I know it will do me no good. If anyone finds this logbook, tell the King of Spain that his loyal servant, Captain Rodrigo Velazquez de Toledo, died in the service of his country, betrayed by the very people we sought to enlighten. The "Cave of Blood" will be my tomb. God have mercy on my soul.

Episode 2 – Timeline of Maya Civilisation

Teacher background reading

Preclassic Period (2000 BCE – 250 CE)

2000 BCE: Earliest evidence of Maya civilization – small farming villages; cultivation of maize, beans, and squash.

1000 BCE: Formation of early Maya settlements, evidence of simple ceremonial architecture and social stratification.

800–400 BCE: Olmec influence apparent; adoption of ceremonial centres and possibly the calendar system.

400 BCE: First Maya cities, such as Nakbe and El Mirador, emerge in the Peten region of Guatemala.

100 BCE – 100 CE: Rise of large urban centres like Tikal; long-distance trade networks expand.

Classic Period (250 CE – 900 CE)

250–600 CE: Early Classic – emergence of powerful city-states; development of advanced mathematics, astronomy, and hieroglyphic writing.

378 CE: Arrival of Siyaj K'ak' from Teotihuacan in Tikal marks a significant political shift.

600–800 CE: Late Classic – peak of Maya civilization. Cities like Palenque, Calakmul, and Copan reach their zenith.

800–900 CE: Maya civilization begins to decline in the southern lowlands. Many major cities are abandoned.

Postclassic Period (900 CE – 1500s CE)

900–1100 CE: Northern Yucatan sees rise of new Maya centres, such as Chichen Itza and Uxmal.

1200–1450 CE: City of Mayapan dominates the Yucatan Peninsula; declines by the mid-15th century.

1450–1500 CE: Maya civilization fragments into smaller polities. Spanish arrive in the early 16th century.

Colonial Period (1500s CE – 1700s CE)

1511 CE: First contact between Spanish and Maya – a Spanish shipwreck leaves survivors stranded in the Yucatan.

1527–1546 CE: Spanish conquest of Yucatan begins. Fierce Maya resistance prolongs the campaign.

1697 CE: Spanish conquer the last independent Maya city, Tayasal – the official end of Maya independence.

Modern Period

19th Century: Explorers and archaeologists begin to document the ruins of ancient Maya cities.

Present Day: Maya people continue to live in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras, preserving their culture, language, and traditions.

Episode 3 – The Decline of Maya Civilisation

Teacher background reading

The decline of the Maya Civilisation is a complex process that occurred over several centuries. The "end" of the Maya civilization typically refers to the collapse of the Classic Maya civilization, between the 8th and 9th centuries CE.

Classic Period Collapse (circa 800–900 CE)

Many great southern lowland cities – Tikal, Copan, Palenque – were abandoned.

Causes included environmental degradation, prolonged droughts, increased warfare between city-states, and social upheaval.

Postclassic Period (900–1500s CE)

Maya people continued to thrive in the northern Yucatan. Cities like Chichen Itza, Uxmal, and Mayapan rose to prominence.

The Spanish conquest in the 16th century dealt the final blow to independent Maya city-states. The last independent city, Tayasal, fell in 1697.

Summary

The Classic Maya civilization experienced a significant decline between 800 and 900 CE.

The Maya civilization did not entirely end until the Spanish conquest in the 16th century.

Maya culture and people have persisted to this day, with millions of Maya descendants still living in the region.

Episode 3 – The Spanish Exploration of the Yucatan Peninsula

Teacher background reading

The Spanish exploration of the Yucatan Peninsula was a crucial chapter in the broader story of the Spanish conquest of the Americas.

Early Encounters (1511–1517)

The Shipwreck of 1511: First contact between Spanish and Maya occurred by accident. Survivors Geronimo de Aguilar and Gonzalo Guerrero were captured by the Maya. Aguilar later joined Hernan Cortes as a translator.

Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba (1517): First deliberate Spanish expedition to the Yucatan. Initial contact was peaceful but escalated to violent clashes.

Juan de Grijalva (1518)

Grijalva explored the coastline more extensively, confirming the presence of wealthy cities and establishing the Yucatan as an area of interest.

Hernan Cortes (1519)

Cortes passed through the Yucatan Peninsula before reaching the Aztec Empire, rescuing Aguilar who became an invaluable translator.

Francisco de Montejo and the Conquest (1527–1546)

Montejo's campaigns faced fierce resistance from the Maya. The jungle terrain and lack of centralised Maya authority made conquest extremely difficult.

Montejo's son founded the city of Merida in 1542, establishing a Spanish foothold.

Final subjugation was not completed until 1697, when Tayasal fell – one of the longest and most difficult conquests in the Americas.

Impact

Cultural and Religious Changes: The Spanish imposed their culture, language, and religion. Traditional Maya practices and hieroglyphic writing were suppressed.

Demographic Decline: Introduction of European diseases, combined with warfare, led to a dramatic decline in the Maya population.

Episode 4 – Chacmool Sculpture

Teacher background reading

A chacmool is a stone sculpture depicting a reclining figure with its head facing 90 degrees from the front, supporting itself on its elbows and supporting a bowl or a disk upon its stomach. These figures possibly symbolised slain warriors carrying offerings to the gods; the bowl upon the chest was used to hold sacrificial offerings, including food, tobacco, turkeys, feathers, incense, and sacrificed human hearts.

Episode 4 – Three Maya Gods

Teacher background reading

Itzamna

Itzamna was one of the most important gods for the Maya: he was the creator, and ruler of day and night. Believed to be largely kind and protective towards humans, he was the one who taught men to grow maize and how to use calendars, as well as being a god of medicine. His general benevolence and wisdom meant he was often portrayed as an old man with a toothless smile. Other popular representations often involve Itzamna as a bird deity.

Cizin

Cizin is a Maya god of death and earthquakes. He is the most important Maya Death God in the Maya culture. Ruler of the subterranean land of the dead. Frequently depicted with the god of war in scenes of human sacrifice. Sometimes seen uprooting or destroying trees planted by Chac, the rain god. Cizin is often depicted in the form of a dancing skeleton, holding a smoking cigarette. He is also known by his death collar, the most prominent feature of which consists of disembodied eyes dangling by their nerve cords.

Kinich Ahau

Kinich Ahau, the Maya sun god, was one of the most revered deities in Maya mythology, embodying the life-giving power of the sun. Known as the "Sun Lord," he was believed to travel across the sky during the day, bringing light and warmth, and journeying through the underworld at night. Depicted with distinctive square eyes and sometimes an aged face, Kinich Ahau symbolized endurance and divine rulership. Maya kings often associated themselves with him, reinforcing their divine right to rule.

Episode 4 – Offerings to the Gods

Student handout

Itzamna

Itzamna, the Maya creator god, was associated with wisdom, creation, and the heavens. Offerings to Itzamna might include:

Food and Maize: Maize was a staple crop and central to Maya life, symbolizing sustenance and creation.

Cacao: Highly valued by the Maya, offered to gods as a luxury item representing wealth and prosperity.

Incense: Copal incense burned as an offering, symbolizing purification and communication between earthly and divine realms.

Jade: Precious jade offered in ceremonies, symbolizing wealth, life, and the eternal.

Kinich Ahau

Kinich Ahau, the Maya sun god, was associated with sunlight, heat, and life. Offerings to him might include:

Flowers: Bright, vibrant flowers symbolizing the sun's energy and life-giving power.

Cacao: Symbolizing luxury, prosperity, and nourishment from the sun's rays.

Incense: Burning copal incense to honour the sun god, symbolizing the ascent of prayers and gratitude for sunlight and warmth.

Gold: Items made of gold, representing the sun's brilliance and value.

Cizin

Cizin, the Maya god of death and earthquakes, was associated with the underworld and the forces of destruction. Offerings to Cizin might include:

Bones or Skulls: Symbolizing death and the afterlife, offered to honour Cizin's domain over the deceased.

Blood: Blood sacrifices, whether animal or human, could be made to appease Cizin.

Obsidian: Sharp obsidian blades or tools, often associated with sacrifice and death.

Dark Foods: Foods such as black beans or dark cacao, representing the darkness of the underworld.

Episode 4 – The Ceremony

Student handout

The cave is dimly lit, with flickering torchlight casting shadows on the ancient, stalactite-covered walls. The air is thick with the scent of copal incense, rising in swirling smoke as offerings are prepared. The cave, representing the entrance to the underworld (Xibalba), is revered as a place where the earthly and divine realms meet.

The Participants

A group of Maya priests, adorned in elaborate ritual attire, leads the ceremony. They wear feathered headdresses, jade ornaments, and intricate embroidered robes. Their faces are painted with sacred symbols, and they carry ritual objects, including obsidian blades, incense burners, and offerings.

The Offerings

At the heart of the ceremony, the priests present offerings to the gods. These might include:

Copal Incense: The priests burn copal resin in ceremonial burners, sending fragrant smoke up toward the cave's ceiling. The rising smoke symbolizes prayers ascending to the gods and purifies the sacred space.

Blood Sacrifice: In a symbolic act of devotion, one of the priests may pierce his own skin, allowing drops of blood to fall onto the altar. The blood is a powerful offering, believed to nourish the gods and maintain cosmic balance.

Food and Maize: The priests place offerings of maize, cacao, and other sacred foods on a stone altar.

Obsidian and Jade: Precious items like obsidian blades and jade ornaments are laid on the altar, representing wealth, power, and the connection between the Maya people and the gods.

The Ritual

The priests chant prayers in the ancient Maya language, calling upon the gods to accept their offerings and grant their blessings. The echoes of their voices reverberate through the cave, creating an otherworldly atmosphere. The leader of the priests invokes specific gods, such as Itzamna, the creator; Kinich Ahau, the sun god; and Cizin, the god of death.

The Sacrificial Act

If the ceremony is of great importance, a small animal, like a bird, might be sacrificed. The blood is collected in a sacred vessel and offered to the gods, symbolizing life given to maintain the cosmic order.

Conclusion

The ceremony ends with a final prayer for protection, prosperity, and balance. The offerings are left on the Chacmool as a symbol of the people's devotion, and the priests slowly exit the cave, leaving the sacred space undisturbed. The cave remains a silent witness to the ritual, a place where the Maya have connected with their gods for centuries, seeking guidance, favour, and the balance of life and death.

Episode 5 – Artefacts found in the Cave

Teacher background reading

Ceremonial Masks: Often made of jade, wood, or other materials, these masks were used in rituals and might depict gods or ancestors.

Obsidian Blades: Sharp tools or weapons made from volcanic glass, used in sacrifices or for cutting purposes.

Pottery: Intricately decorated vessels, bowls, and jars used for storing offerings, food, or liquids.

Jade Ornaments: Precious jade items, such as necklaces, bracelets, or pendants, symbolizing wealth and status.

Censer (Incense Burner): Used for burning copal or other incense during rituals to communicate with the gods.

Spears and Atlatls: Weapons used for hunting or warfare, often left as offerings to the gods of war or the underworld.

Stelae Fragments: Pieces of carved stone monuments that recorded important events, dates, or rulers.

Human Remains: Bones or skulls, possibly from sacrifices, left as part of religious rituals.

Shell Ornaments: Items made from marine shells, often used in trade or as offerings.

Painted Codices: Fragments of bark-paper books with glyphs and illustrations, possibly left as records or religious texts.

Ceremonial Axes: Stone or jade axes used in rituals, often symbolizing authority or divine power.

Sculptures: Small stone or clay figures representing gods, animals, or important individuals.

Bone Flutes: Musical instruments made from animal bones, used in ceremonies.

Copper Bells: Used in rituals to create sound, often symbolizing communication with the divine.

Bloodletting Tools: Instruments used in self-sacrifice rituals, such as stingray spines or sharp bones.

Episode 5 – Maya Warriors

Teacher background reading

Maya warriors were an integral part of the ancient Maya civilization, playing crucial roles in both defence and expansion of their city-states.

Roles and Functions

Defenders of the City-States: Maya warriors were primarily responsible for defending their city-states from rival factions. The Maya civilization was made up of numerous independent city-states, and conflicts between them were common.

Expansion and Raiding: Warriors also participated in campaigns aimed at expanding their city-state's influence, capturing territory, and raiding for resources.

Capturing Prisoners: One of the most important roles of a Maya warrior was to capture prisoners during battle. Captured enemies were often sacrificed to the gods, which was considered an honourable act that brought prestige to the warrior and his family.

Training and Equipment

Training: Young men were trained as warriors from an early age. They were taught the use of weapons, battle tactics, and the discipline required for warfare. Elite warriors often underwent rigorous training and were sometimes members of special military orders.

Weapons: Maya warriors were equipped with a variety of weapons:

- Atlatl (Spear-Thrower): A tool used to throw spears or darts with greater force and distance.
- Obsidian Blades: Sharp weapons made from volcanic glass, used for cutting and slashing.
- Macuahuitl: A wooden club embedded with sharp obsidian blades, used in close combat.

- Bows and Arrows: Although less common, some Maya warriors also used bows and arrows in battle.
- Shields: Warriors carried shields made of wood, leather, or reeds, often decorated with symbols and colours representing their city-state or rank.

Warrior Classes

Ajaw (Kings and Nobles): The highest-ranking warriors were often kings or nobles who led their armies in battle. They wore elaborate headdresses, armour, and carried ornate weapons that signified their status.

Common Warriors: Commoners who proved their skill and bravery could rise through the ranks to become respected warriors.

Elite Warriors: Some warriors were part of elite military orders, such as the "Jaguar" or "Eagle" warriors, distinguished by jaguar pelts or eagle feathers, symbolizing their strength and prowess.

Religious Significance

Connection to the Gods: Warfare was deeply connected to Maya religion. Victories in battle were seen as a sign of divine favour, and warriors believed they were carrying out the will of the gods. Human sacrifices, often involving captured warriors, were made to appease the gods, particularly the gods of war, sun, and rain.

Rituals and Ceremonies: Before and after battles, warriors participated in rituals to seek the favour of the gods and to honour those who had died in combat. These ceremonies often involved bloodletting, sacrifices, and offerings to the gods.

Episode 5 – The Decline of Maya Civilisation

Teacher background reading

The decline of the Maya civilization is a complex and multifaceted process that occurred over several centuries, roughly between 800 and 900 AD, during the Late Classic period. This decline is often referred to as the "Classic Maya Collapse," and it primarily affected the southern lowland regions of the Maya civilization, where many of the major cities were located. It is important to note that while many cities were abandoned, the Maya civilization did not disappear entirely; it continued in other regions, particularly in the northern Yucatan Peninsula.

Key Factors Contributing to the Decline

Environmental Degradation:

- Deforestation and Soil Depletion: The expansion of agriculture to support growing populations led to deforestation and soil exhaustion. The overuse of land likely reduced agricultural productivity, making it difficult to sustain large urban populations.
- Climate Change: Evidence from sediment cores and other sources suggests that the Maya region experienced prolonged droughts during the period of decline. These droughts would have significantly impacted water supply and agriculture, contributing to food shortages and social unrest.

Political Instability and Warfare:

- Increased Warfare: The Late Classic period saw a rise in inter-city warfare. Rival city-states often engaged in conflicts over resources, territory, and political dominance. This warfare weakened many cities, disrupted trade, and contributed to the abandonment of urban centres.
- Political Fragmentation: The political structure of the Maya civilization was highly decentralized, with city-states operating independently. As warfare increased and central authority weakened, many cities became more isolated and vulnerable to collapse.

Social and Economic Disruptions:

- Trade Disruption: The Maya civilization relied on extensive trade networks for the exchange of goods like obsidian, jade, and cacao. As cities declined and warfare intensified, these trade networks likely became disrupted, leading to economic decline.
- Population Pressure: The population in some regions may have exceeded the carrying capacity of the environment, leading to stress on resources and contributing to social unrest and migration.

Cultural and Religious Factors:

- Loss of Faith in Leadership: Maya rulers were considered divine or semi-divine figures who were responsible for maintaining the favour of the gods. The inability of rulers to prevent environmental disasters, such as droughts, may have led to a loss of confidence in their leadership, contributing to political instability and the abandonment of cities.

Regional Differences

Southern Lowlands: The collapse was most severe in the southern lowlands, where many of the great cities like Tikal, Copan, and Palenque were abandoned. These cities experienced a dramatic decline in population, and many of their monumental structures were left unfinished or fell into disrepair.

Northern Lowlands: In contrast, the northern regions, including the Yucatan Peninsula, saw continued development in cities like Chichen Itza, Uxmal, and others. These areas remained influential even after the decline of the southern lowlands.

Post-Classic Period

The Maya civilization did not completely disappear after the collapse of the southern cities. The Post-Classic period (900–1500 AD) saw the rise of new centres of power in the northern Yucatan, such as Chichen Itza and later Mayapan. These cities continued to thrive and maintain cultural and economic activity until the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century.

Conclusion

The decline of the Maya civilization was not caused by a single factor but by a combination of environmental, political, social, and cultural issues. The process was gradual and varied across different regions, leading to the abandonment of many major cities in the southern lowlands but continued Maya presence and development in other areas. The legacy of the Maya civilization persisted through the Post-Classic period and continues to influence the region today.

Episode 6 – Maya Cities

Print and cut

Print and cut into sections for group work. Each section describes a different area of a Maya city.

Maya cities were complex and well-organized, reflecting the sophisticated social, political, and religious structures of the Maya civilization. Unlike some other ancient civilizations that developed along rivers or in open plains, the Maya built their cities in diverse environments, including dense jungles, highlands, and coastal areas.

1. Central Plaza

Heart of the City: The central plaza was the focal point of any Maya city, serving as the hub for political, religious, and social activities.

Ceremonial Space: It often contained large open spaces used for ceremonies, markets, and gatherings. The plaza was typically surrounded by the most important structures.

2. Pyramids and Temples

Pyramids: Large step pyramids were a common feature in Maya cities. These pyramids often had temples on top and were dedicated to gods, ancestors, or important rulers. They were used for religious rituals, including sacrifices and offerings.

Temples: In addition to pyramids, smaller temples were scattered throughout the city, usually dedicated to specific gods or used for various ceremonial purposes.

3. Palaces

Royal Residences: Palaces were the residences of the ruling elite, including kings (known as ajaws) and their families. These structures were often large, multi-room complexes that demonstrated the wealth and power of the ruling class.

Administrative Centres: Palaces also served as administrative hubs where rulers conducted state business, held court, and met with other officials.

4. Ball Courts

Mesoamerican Ball Game: Many Maya cities featured ball courts where the Mesoamerican ball game, known as pok-ta-pok or pitz, was played. This game had deep religious and political significance and was often linked to the ruling elite.

Design: Ball courts were typically long, narrow spaces with sloped sides, often placed near the central plaza.

5. Residential Areas

Housing: The general population lived in residential areas surrounding the central core of the city. Housing varied from simple thatched-roof huts to more complex stone structures, depending on the occupants' social status.

Layout: Residential areas were often organized into clusters or compounds, with multiple families sharing communal spaces.

6. Sacbeob (Causeways)

Raised Roads: Sacbeob (singular: sacbe) were raised stone causeways that connected different parts of the city and linked the city to other nearby settlements. They were used for both ceremonial processions and practical transportation.

Significance: Sacbeob often had religious or symbolic meanings, and some extended for many miles, connecting major city-states.

7. Water Management Systems

Reservoirs and Aqueducts: Given the seasonal climate and lack of rivers in many Maya regions, cities had advanced water management systems, including reservoirs, cisterns (called chultuns), and aqueducts to store and distribute water.

Agricultural Terraces: In hilly or mountainous areas, the Maya built terraces to cultivate crops, which were often integrated into the city's layout.

8. E-Groups

Astronomical Observatories: E-Groups were special architectural complexes aligned with the sun's movements, particularly the solstices and equinoxes. These structures played a crucial role in Maya astronomy and calendar-making.

Components: An E-Group typically consisted of a pyramid on the west side of the plaza and a long, low structure on the east side. The sun would rise over the eastern structure at specific times of the year, aligning with the pyramid.

9. Stelae and Altars

Monuments: Stelae were tall, carved stone slabs often placed in the central plaza or near temples. They were used to commemorate important events, rulers, or deities.

Altars: Often found in front of stelae or within temples, altars were used for offerings and sacrifices.

10. Defence Structures

Walls and Moats: Some Maya cities, especially those in conflict-prone areas, were fortified with walls, moats, and other defensive structures to protect against invasions.

11. Outlying Structures

Farmland and Villages: Beyond the city's core, there were farmlands and smaller villages. These areas were crucial for providing food and resources to support the urban population.

Outlying Temples: Smaller temples and shrines were often located in these peripheral areas, serving local religious needs.

Episode 6 – Lady Six Sky

Student handout

Lady Six Sky, also known as Ix Wak Chan Ajaw, was one of the most powerful and influential female rulers in Maya history. She lived during the Late Classic period and was born around 667 AD. Lady Six Sky was the daughter of the ruler of Dos Pilas, a

prominent Maya city in the Peten Basin of what is now Guatemala. Her father was B'alaj Chan K'awiil, a powerful king with ambitions of expanding his influence across the region.

Rise to Power

Lady Six Sky was sent to the city of Naranjo, likely around 682 AD, to marry and establish a new ruling dynasty. This was part of her father's strategy to extend his family's power. Shortly after she arrived she had a child and then her husband died. Naranjo had suffered from previous military defeats and political instability. Although she was likely young at the time, possibly in her teens, Lady Six Sky quickly assumed a leadership role.

Initially, she may have served as a regent for her young son, K'ak' Tiliw Chan Chaak, who was too young to rule. However, evidence suggests that Lady Six Sky held significant power in her own right and was not merely a placeholder until her son came of age. She conducted numerous rituals and ceremonies traditionally reserved for kings, emphasizing her authority.

Military and Political Achievements

Lady Six Sky is particularly noted for revitalizing Naranjo and restoring its former glory. Under her leadership, Naranjo engaged in successful military campaigns against neighbouring cities, which helped to re-establish its dominance in the region. Her reign is marked by several victories, as recorded in the hieroglyphic texts at Naranjo. These texts highlight her role in these campaigns, often depicting her as the central figure in ceremonies celebrating these victories.

One of the most famous events of her reign was the defeat of the rival city-state of Yaxha in 693 AD. This victory was a significant achievement that bolstered Naranjo's power and prestige.

Cultural and Religious Influence

Lady Six Sky was also a key religious figure in Naranjo. She is often depicted in Maya art performing important rituals, such as bloodletting ceremonies, which were believed to communicate with the gods and ancestors. These depictions emphasize her role as both a political and spiritual leader.

Legacy

Her son, K'ak' Tiliw Chan Chaak, eventually took full control, continuing the work his mother had started. However, Lady Six Sky's impact on Naranjo and the Maya region as a whole is remembered as one of the most remarkable examples of female leadership in the ancient Americas.

Episode 7 – Maya Rulers

Teacher background reading

In Maya society, rulers played a central and multifaceted role, combining political, religious, military, and social responsibilities.

1. Political Leadership

Maya rulers, often referred to as ajaw or k'uhul ajaw (holy lord), were the supreme political leaders of their city-states. They were responsible for governance, making

key decisions related to the administration, diplomacy, and the overall welfare of their people. Their authority was typically hereditary, passed down through royal lineages.

2. Religious Authority

Maya rulers were also seen as divine or semi-divine figures, believed to be the intermediaries between the gods and the people. They performed essential religious ceremonies, including bloodletting rituals, sacrifices, and other offerings, to maintain cosmic order and ensure the favour of the gods. These rituals were crucial for the prosperity and survival of their city-state, as they were believed to directly influence agriculture, weather, and other natural forces.

3. Military Leadership

As military leaders, rulers were expected to lead their armies into battle and expand or defend their territory. Success in warfare was not only a matter of survival but also of prestige. Victorious rulers could capture enemies for sacrifice, expand their influence, and enhance their city-state's wealth and power. Military success was often commemorated in stelae, monuments, and other forms of art.

4. Cultural Patronage

Maya rulers were patrons of the arts, architecture, and scholarship. They commissioned the construction of grand temples, palaces, and pyramids, as well as the creation of intricate carvings, murals, and codices. These cultural achievements were meant to glorify their reign and the gods they worshipped. Rulers often depicted themselves in these works, reinforcing their divine right to rule.

5. Social and Economic Regulation

Rulers played a key role in the regulation of the economy, including trade, agriculture, and labour. They oversaw the collection of tribute from their subjects and managed the distribution of resources within the city-state. By controlling these resources, rulers maintained the social hierarchy and ensured the loyalty of the nobility and commoners alike.

6. Dynastic Continuity

Maintaining and extending their dynasty was a crucial responsibility for Maya rulers. They were expected to secure their lineage through marriage alliances, typically with other noble families, and to produce heirs who would continue their legacy. Dynastic continuity was vital for the stability and prosperity of the city-state.

In summary, Maya rulers were the focal point of their society, embodying political power, religious authority, military strength, cultural patronage, and economic control. Their role was essential to the functioning and identity of their city-states, and their actions were believed to have direct consequences on the well-being of their people.

Episode 7 – Maya Society

Teacher background reading

Maya society was highly stratified, with a complex social hierarchy that structured every aspect of life, from political power to religious practices and economic roles. The hierarchy was largely hereditary, with one's social status often determined by birth.

1. The Ruler (Ajaw)

At the top of the social hierarchy was the ruler, known as the **Ajaw** (lord or king), or sometimes **K'uhul Ajaw** (holy lord) in the case of particularly powerful rulers. The ajaw was seen as a semi-divine figure with both political and religious authority. Their role was to lead the city-state, conduct religious ceremonies, and serve as the primary intermediary between the gods and the people. The ruler was often depicted in art and inscriptions, emphasizing their central role in society.

2. Nobility (Almehenob)

Below the ruler were the **nobility** or **Almehenob**, a class of elites who held significant power and wealth. This group included:

- Scribes and Priests: Responsible for religious ceremonies, astronomical observations, and the recording of history through glyphs. Priests, in particular, played a crucial role in maintaining the religious and spiritual order.
- Warriors: Elite warriors were often part of the nobility, serving the ruler in military campaigns and holding high-ranking positions in the army.
- Administrators: Nobles often managed various aspects of the city-state's affairs, including tribute collection, trade, and law enforcement.

Nobles lived in larger, more elaborate homes and had access to luxury goods, such as jade, feathers, and elaborate clothing.

3. Merchants and Artisans

Merchants and artisans formed the middle class of Maya society. While not as powerful as the nobility, they played a vital role in the economy and culture:

- Merchants: Responsible for trade, both within the city-state and with other regions. They traded goods like cacao, jade, obsidian, textiles, and more. Successful merchants could accumulate wealth and status.
- Artisans: Skilled workers who created goods for both practical use and luxury items. This group included potters, weavers, sculptors, and painters, who often produced items for the nobility and the temples.

4. Commoners (Ah Chembal Uinicoob)

The majority of the Maya population were **commoners**. They were typically farmers, labourers, and low-level artisans. Commoners were responsible for the production of food, particularly maize, which was central to the Maya diet, as well as other crops. They also provided labour for the construction of temples, pyramids, and other public works. Commoners lived in modest homes, usually made of perishable materials like wood and thatch. Despite their lower status, commoners were essential to the functioning of Maya society.

5. Slaves (Ppentacob)

At the bottom of the social hierarchy were **slaves**. Slaves were typically prisoners of war, criminals, or people who had fallen into debt. They had few rights and were often used for labour-intensive tasks, such as working in the fields or serving in the households of the nobility. Some slaves were also used in religious rituals, including sacrifices.

6. Gender Roles and Social Mobility

While the Maya society was patriarchal, women could hold significant power, particularly within the nobility. Noblewomen could become rulers, regents, and priestesses. Marriage was often a tool for securing political alliances, and royal women played a key role in maintaining dynastic continuity.

Social mobility was limited but not impossible. A commoner who gained favour through exceptional skill, bravery in battle, or service to a noble could sometimes rise in status. However, most people remained within the class they were born into.

7. Religious Specialists

Although they were part of the nobility, religious specialists had a distinct role within the social hierarchy. High priests and shamans held significant power, as they were believed to have the ability to communicate with the gods and ancestors. They guided religious rituals, advised the ruler, and were deeply involved in decision-making processes.

Episode 8 – The email from the museum

Student handout

Belize Maya Heritage Museum
123 Heritage Avenue, Belize City, Belize
August 23, 2024

Dear Esteemed Exploration Team,

I hope this letter finds you well. It is with great excitement that I write to you following the remarkable discovery of the lost Maya city that your team has uncovered. The significance of this finding cannot be overstated, as it offers an invaluable window into the rich and complex history of the Maya civilization.

As the Director of the Belize Maya Heritage Museum, I am tasked with preserving and promoting the legacy of the Maya people. Your discovery presents a unique opportunity to deepen public understanding and appreciation of this ancient civilization. To this end, I would like to formally commission your team to create a comprehensive webpage detailing your discovery.

This webpage will serve as an educational resource for scholars, students, and enthusiasts alike. It should include the following elements:

An Overview of the Discovery: A detailed account of how your team uncovered the lost city, including the challenges faced and the steps taken to document the site.

Historical Context: Background information about the Maya civilization, including key aspects of their society, culture, religion, and achievements. This section should highlight the importance of the discovered city within the broader Maya world.

Visual Documentation: High-quality images, sketches, or maps of the site, including the mural depicting Lady Evenstar, which we understand to be a significant find. Any artefacts or structures uncovered should be visually represented.

Interpretation of Findings: An explanation of what the discovery reveals about Maya history and culture. This could include interpretations of the

mural, the architectural style of the city, and any inscriptions or artefacts found.

Conservation Efforts: Information about the steps being taken to preserve the site and how the public can support these efforts.

Future Research and Exploration: A section discussing the potential for further exploration of the site and what new discoveries might yet be made.

The Belize Maya Heritage Museum will fully support your efforts in this endeavour, providing any additional resources or expertise required. This webpage will be hosted on our museum's official site, and we aim to make it a cornerstone of our online educational outreach.

I am confident that with your first-hand experience and deep understanding of the discovery, the webpage you create will be an invaluable resource for all who seek to learn more about the Maya civilization. We are honoured to collaborate with you on this project and look forward to your creative input and expert knowledge.

Please feel free to contact me directly at +501-223-4567 or director@belizemayaheritage.org to discuss this project further or to arrange a meeting.

Thank you for your dedication and contribution to the preservation and dissemination of Maya heritage.

Yours sincerely,

Jonathan Ramirez

Director, Belize Maya Heritage Museum

+501-223-4567

director@belizemayaheritage.org