

The Maya

Learning Objective:

To explore Mayan writing and calendars.

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What are these pictures showing?

Why do you think these artefacts are important archaeological finds?

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These artefacts are important because they all show examples of Mayan writing. It is from Mayan writing that historians have managed to learn about the Maya who lived hundreds of years ago.



Did you know that the Mayan writing system has over 800 glyphs? Glyphs are signs that represent a word or a sound. These could represent animals, humans, gods or abstract designs.

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Can you imagine trying to translate this text?!

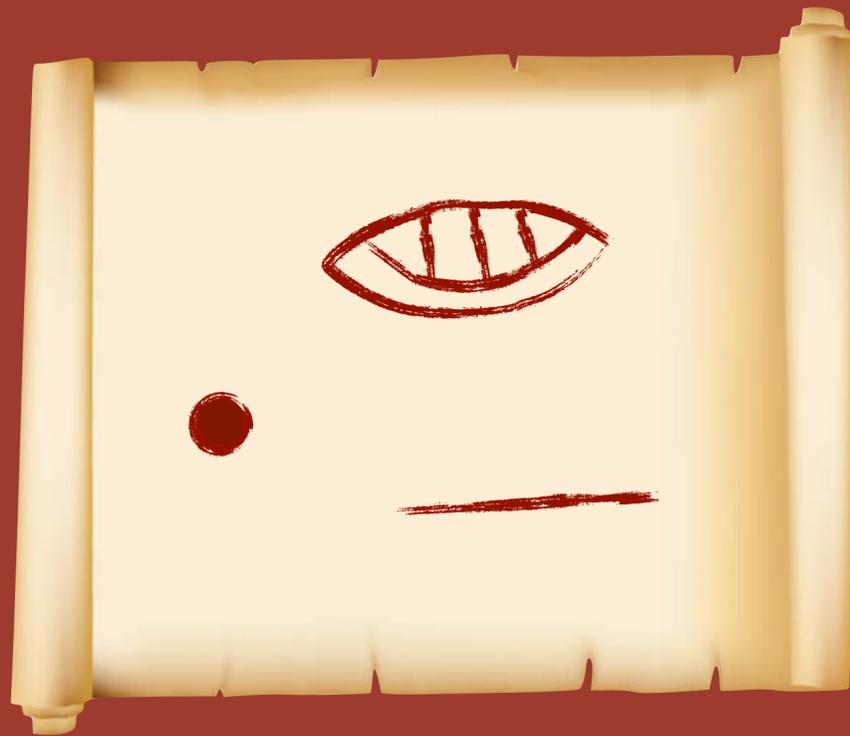
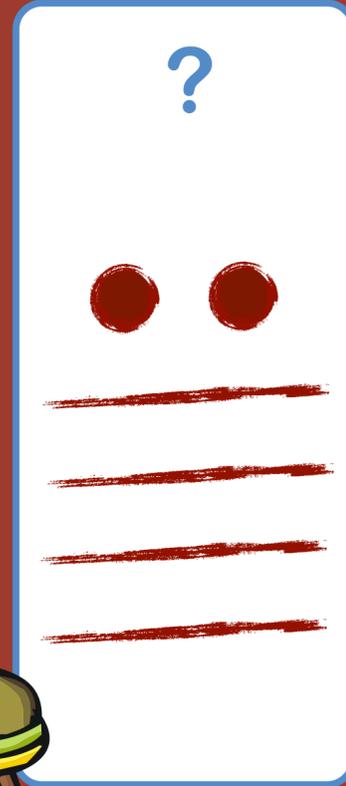
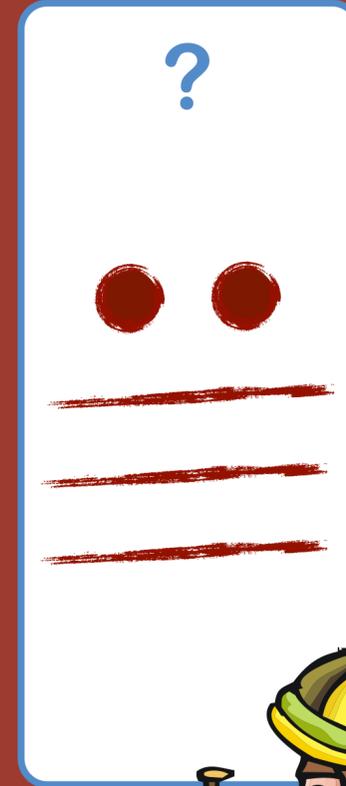
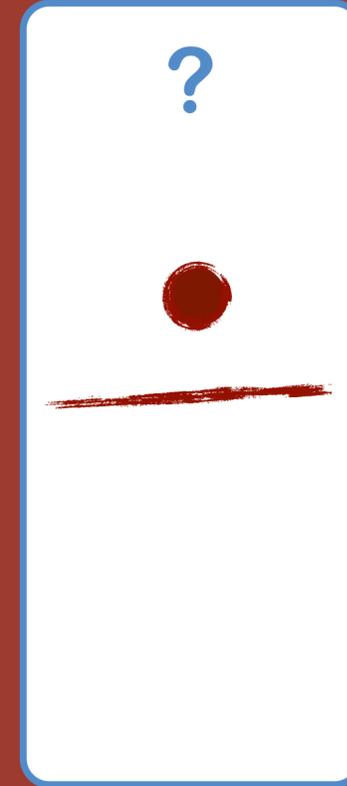
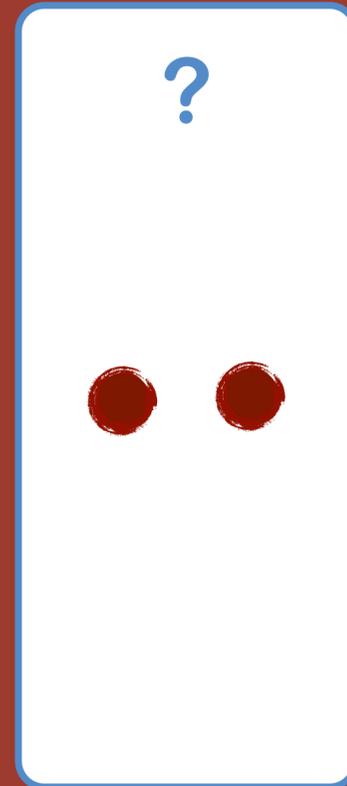


At first, historians didn't think that the signs represented writing at all, or at least not a complete writing system. It wasn't until the 1950s that it was proved to be a language. After that, people were able to start translating the writing the Maya left behind and learn more and more about their society and culture.

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The Maya had a number system too. Any number could be made using only three symbols - a dot for a 1, a line for a 5 and a shell sign for zero. Here are some examples of Mayan numbers. Can you guess how they work?

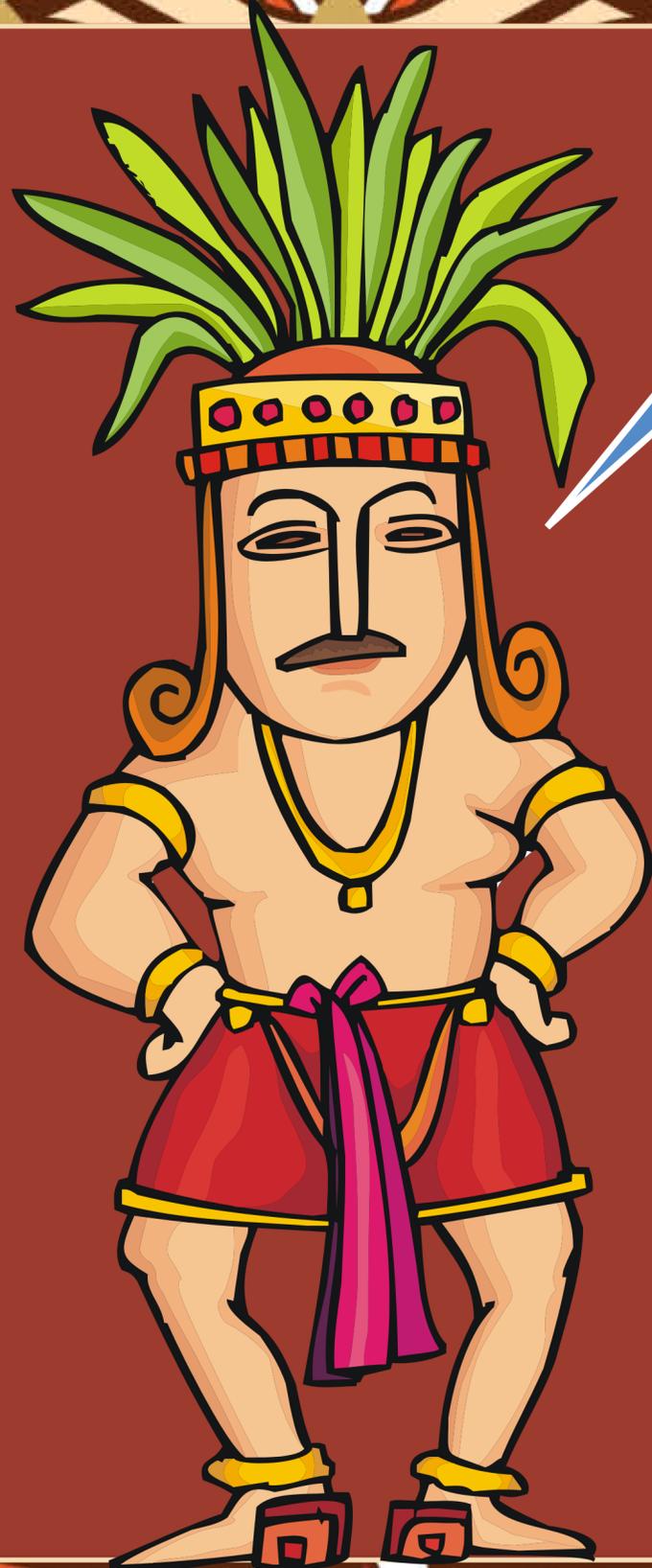


Did you know that the Maya had a symbol for zero before the Europeans did?



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Did you get the numbers right?

2



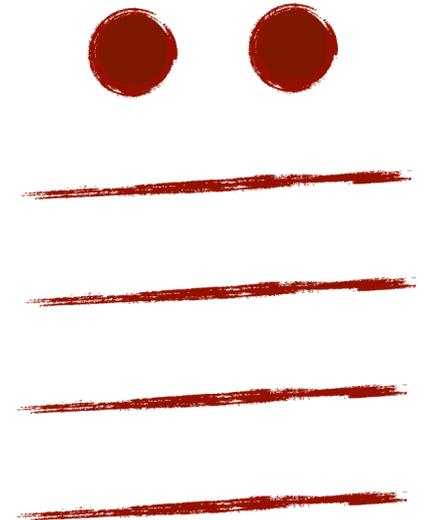
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The Maya wrote on lots of different things, including walls, pottery and stelae (stone pillars), but they also wrote in books made of bark. Today, only four of these books (known as codices) remain.



Why do you think only four codices remain? What could have happened to the hundreds or maybe even thousands that the Maya had originally written?

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This is a photo of a Mayan codex at Chichen Itza.

When Spanish missionaries came to the area in the sixteenth century, they burned each codex they could find. They believed the Maya were pagans and that their religion was against God. They wanted to erase all the evidence of the Mayan religion.



Imagine how much more we might have learnt about the Maya if these manuscripts had not been lost!

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The codices that remain today tell us a lot about the Maya, but especially about their astrological knowledge. They used codices to write down their observations of the Sun, stars and Moon. From this, we know that the Maya had their own calendar that was very important to them.



This photo shows a stone carving of a Mayan calendar.

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Did you know that the Mayan Long Count calendar said the world would end on 21st December 2012?

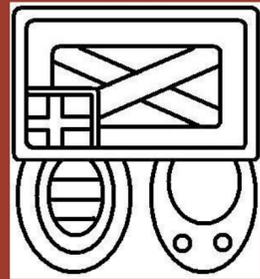


The Maya had three separate calendars. One of these was for the solar year and had a cycle of 365 days. Another had a cycle of 260 days, with twenty periods of thirteen days. The final calendar is the 'Long Count' calendar. This was used to track longer periods of time and each cycle lasted 2,880,000 days. The Maya believed that the universe was destroyed and then created again at the end of each cycle.

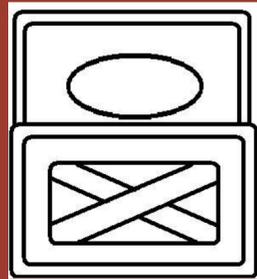
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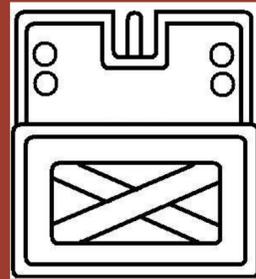
Each month in the solar calendar, called the Haab, had its own name and own glyph.



Pop



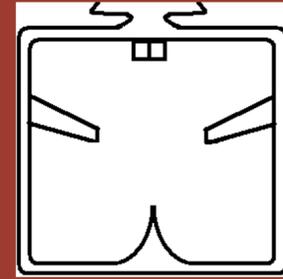
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Sip



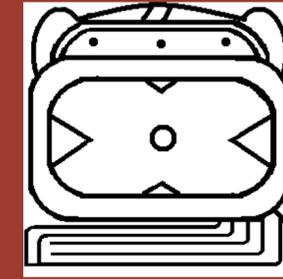
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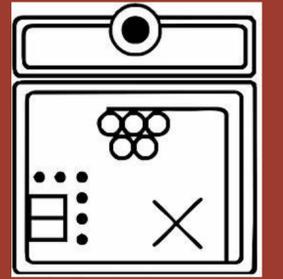
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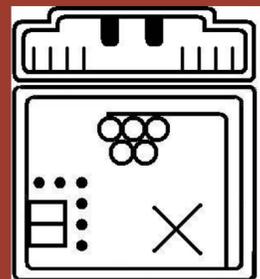
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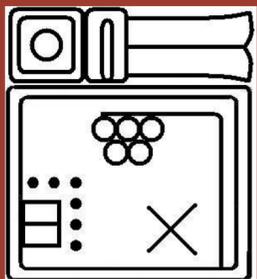
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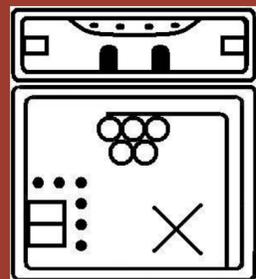
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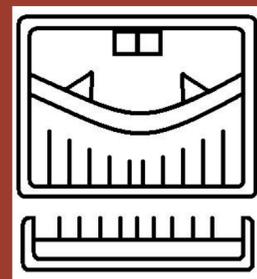
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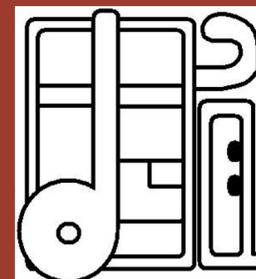
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Keh



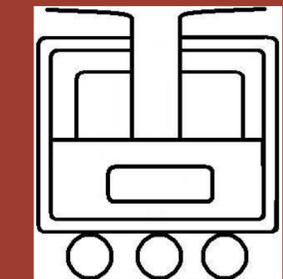
Mak



Kankin



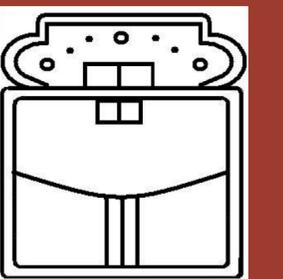
Muan



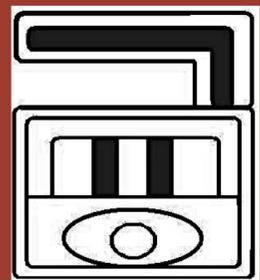
Pax



Kayab



Kumku



Uayeb

One of the months, Uayeb, is only five days long to make up the five extra days. These days were thought to be very unlucky so people avoided doing anything risky during this month!

Imagine the Maya had not developed a writing system...

What do you think we would know about them?



What could we never have found out?

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