

The Maya Civilisation

Gods, Religion and Beliefs



Creation According the Ancient Maya

The gods made animals, but the animals didn't speak to them.

The gods tried to make humans out of clay but they were limp, and melted in the rains.

They made humans out of wood but the rains drowned them.

Eventually they made humans from zucan (maize dough) and this was a success.



The Universe According to the Ancient Maya

The earth (Middleworld) is square and flat.

The earth rests on the back of a huge creature (like a turtle or crocodile)

A giant tree grows at the centre of the earth (Middleworld), its roots reach down to the underworld and its branches reach to the Upperworld.

The four compass directions are all linked with a colour:

North = WHITE - associated with ancestors who have died

East = RED - where the sun rises

South = YELLOW - the right hand of the sun

West = BLACK - death and the underworld

The Underworld

The underworld was called Xibalba, which means 'place of fear'.

It was reached through caves and tunnels.

Maya gods of death, who looked like jaguars, lived in the underworld.

The Maya believed that when they died their souls travelled to the underworld.



The Gods

The Ancient Maya had many, many gods (over 150!), only a few of which are mentioned by the same name in different sources.

Many of them had overlapping roles and names.

Some had human form, some took the form of an animal, others were a phenomena of nature.



Itzamna

One of the creator gods.

Inventor of writing.

Patron of learning.

Portrayed in human form as an old man with no teeth and a large nose.



Kukulcan

Supreme god.

God of the four elements with the following items associated with each one:

- maize-ear (earth)
- a fish (water)
- lizard (fire)
- vulture (air)

One of the creator gods.

God of resurrection and reincarnation .

His name means 'feathered serpent'.



Ix Chel

Wife of Itzamnaaj.

Goddess of childbirth, healing,
weaving and the moon.

Portrayed in human form wearing a
headdress of snakes entangled in her
hair, and toes and fingers that looked
like jaguar claws.

Capable of causing floods and
destruction.

The mother of many other gods.



Hun Ixim- Maize God

From his head sprouted an ear of
maize.

Was important because the diet of
the Maya was 80% maize and they
relied on the harvest being
successful.

Also important because humans were
created from maize dough by the
gods.



Chac - Rain God

Brought the rain needed to make
crops grow.

Created storms, thunder and
lightning.

Caused wars and human sacrifice

Portrayed as a human with a curling
snout and reptile fangs.



Kinich Ahau - Sun God

Travelled across the sky during the
day.

Sunk below the earth and entered
the underworld every night, where he
became a jaguar god.



Ah Puch

Death god.

Portrayed as a human with a skeletal nose, jaw and spine and a body covered in hideous spots.



God Fact File

Choose two of the Gods you have just read about.

Can you create a fact file about them?

- What were they called?
- What were they the God of?
- What was special about them?

Religious Rituals

The ancient Maya would perform rituals to gain favour with the gods.

Public festivals related to special dates on the Maya calendar or occasions to plead for a healthy harvest, the health of a ruler, or to win a war.

Before a ritual or festival, people would go without certain food or pierce their tongues, lips, cheeks or ears to offer a sacrifice of human blood.

The festivals were colourful and noisy with processions, banners, drums and trumpets.



Human Sacrifice

One of the main purposes for fighting battles was to take captives that could then be sacrificed.

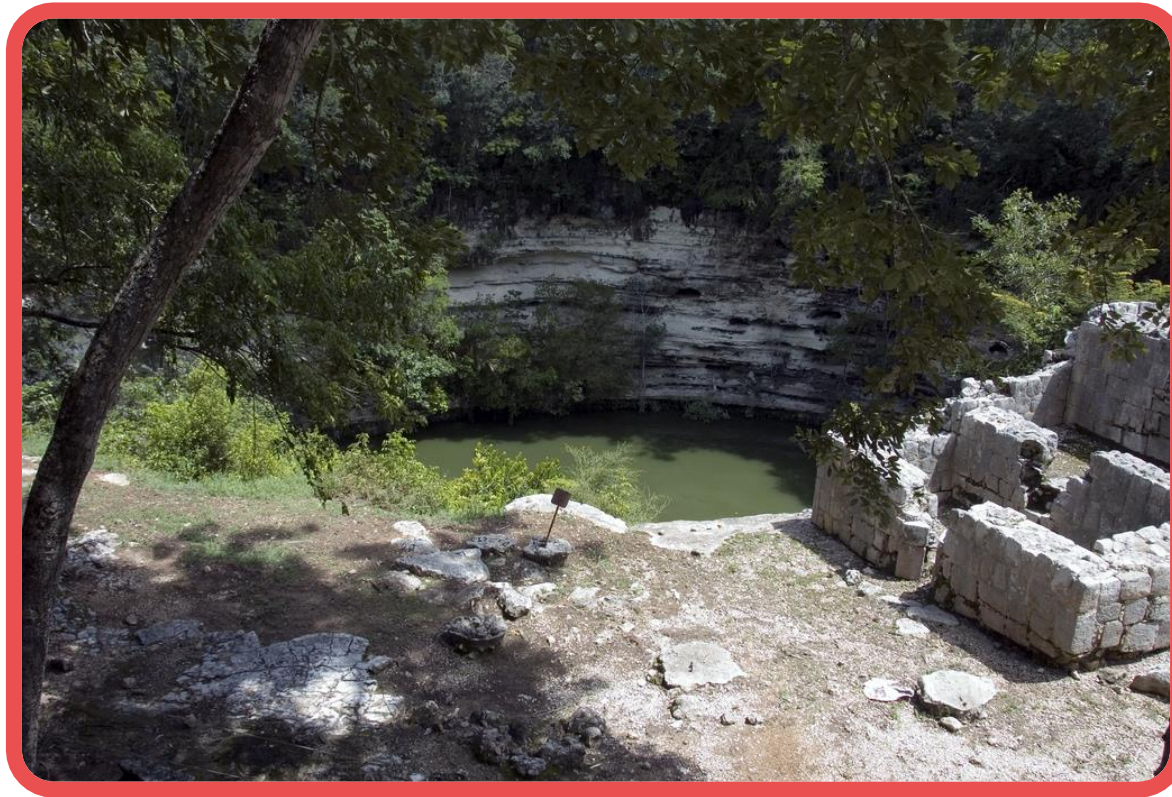
According to a writer in the 1500s, the Maya would paint the body of the victim blue, lay him on a stone platform at the top of a temple, and four men would hold him by his arms and legs.

The executioner would cut between the victim's ribs and rip out his heart with his hand.

The heart would be placed, still beating, on a plate and given to a priest.

The priest would smear blood from the heart on the faces of stone idols.

There is plenty of evidence of these practises at Chichen Itza.



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Victims could be thrown into the 'Well of Sacrifice'
(but not all that often).

Stone carvings of jaguars and eagles eating hearts of victims.



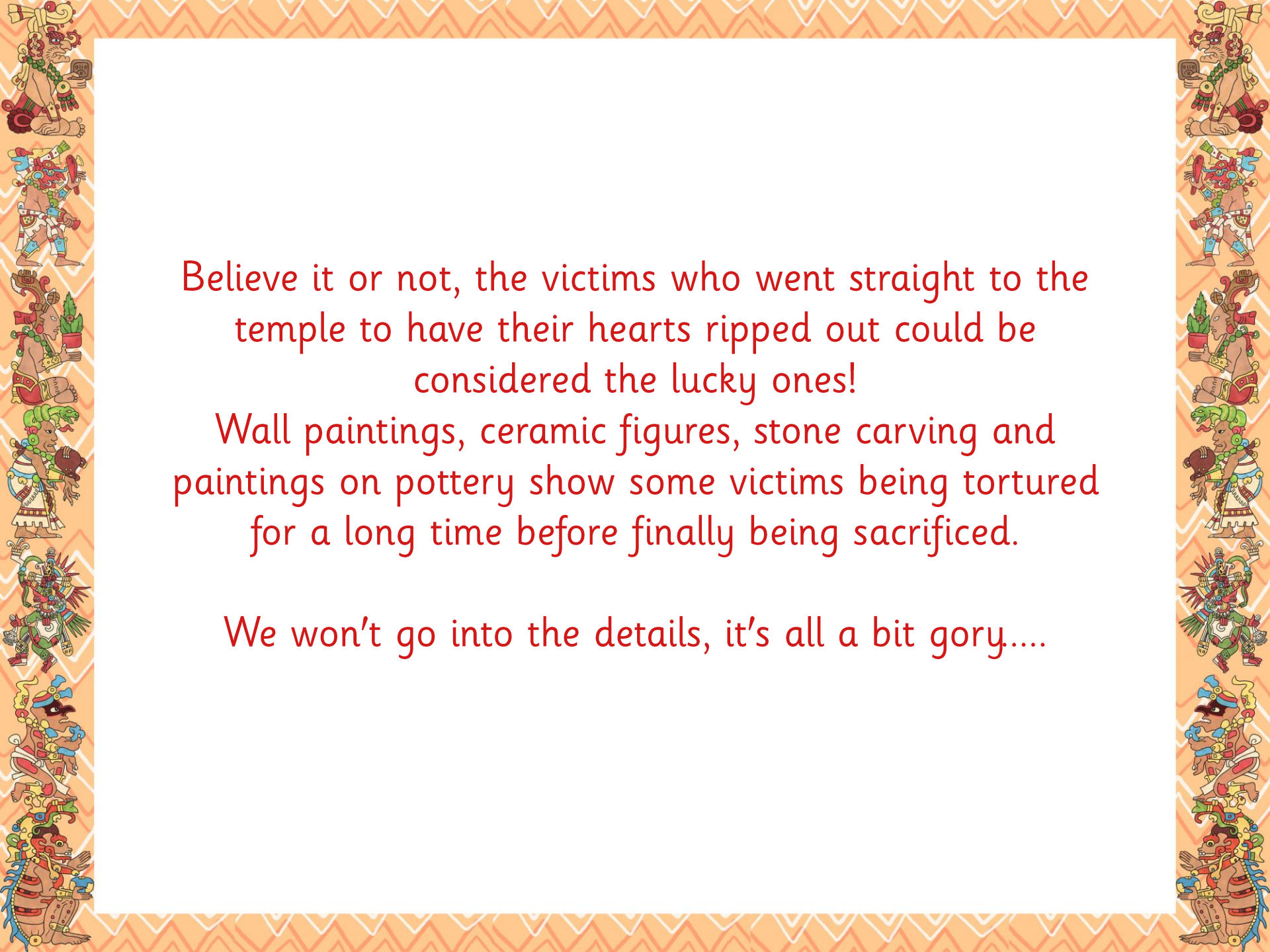
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The Wall of Skulls



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Believe it or not, the victims who went straight to the temple to have their hearts ripped out could be considered the lucky ones!

Wall paintings, ceramic figures, stone carving and paintings on pottery show some victims being tortured for a long time before finally being sacrificed.

We won't go into the details, it's all a bit gory....

Something to think about.....

Many cultures and religions believe in an afterlife, somewhere you go after you die.

The ancient Maya believed their souls went to a 'place of fear'.

Only the rulers and nobles believed there was a chance of them getting to the Upperworld. Why do you think this was?

How do the beliefs of the ancient Maya compare with different religious beliefs today?
Can you find any similarities?

What do you think about their understanding of the world?
Why might they have thought this?

Why do you think the ancient Maya had so many different gods?

Where does a lot of the evidence for what we know today come from? How open are these sources to interpretation?

Would you like to be alive in the 1st millennium and living with the ancient Maya? What would be the pros and cons?

Design your own god!

What would this god be responsible for?

What attributes would they have? (e.g. something they carry)

What does your god look like?

What is their name?

What does their name mean?

What sacrifices have to be made to this god?

Extension:

What myth might this god be at the centre of?

What event could be explained by their actions?

THE END

