Clever Farming Built Maya Cities

Teacher		**Class**	Year 5
Subject	History	**Topic**	Mayan civilisation
Date		**Room**	
Lesson length	60 minutes	**Country**	United States

Pupils learn how skilful Maya farming fed cities near AD 900. They trade crop cards and explain how extra food built temples.

Curriculum links

- a non-European society that provides contrasts with British history – one study chosen from: early Islamic civilisation, including a study of Baghdad c. AD 900; Mayan civilisation c. AD 900; Benin (West Africa) c. AD 900-1300

Learning objectives

- Students will name Maya crops such as maize, beans and squash.
- Students will explain how extra food helped build Maya cities.
- Students will describe Maya land and time around AD 900.

Success criteria

- I can name two foods Maya farmers grew.
- I can say how extra food helped build cities.
- I can show where and when the Maya lived.

What students already know

Two-minute recall: ask what a farmer does today and what foods need farming. Take two ideas, then ask how a town gets enough food for everyone.

Key words

maize	yellow grain crop grown for food that stores well [7]
civilisation	large organised human society with shared rules and culture [2]
temple	large stepped building made to honour gods [1]
calendar	system for tracking days and seasons for farming and ceremonies [1][7]
trade	swapping food and goods between families and groups [7]

Materials

- Slides 1-7 and 9-12 with whiteboard
- Video clip 4 Learn about the Maya on Slide 6 (0:00-1:31)
- picture cards for maize, beans and squash crops
- baskets or trays for each group
- trading tokens
- mini whiteboards and pens

Before the lesson

- Load slides 1-7 and 9-12 and test Video clip 4 (0:00-1:31) on Slide 6 with sound
- Print enough picture cards for maize, beans and squash, plus trading tokens
- Set out baskets or trays, one per group of four, and tables for trading
- Prepare mini whiteboards and exit slips for plenary

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- exit slips

Lesson outline

0–8 min **Starter** 8 min · Whole class

To hook pupils with feeding a family and recall what farming provides.

YOU DO

1. Show Slide 1 The Marvellous Maya and welcome the class to the Maya world.
2. Say the hook question and show Slide 5 vote choices.
3. Take a quick hands-up vote for maize, beans or squash and ask two pupils why.
4. Link answers to today's job: choosing foods that feed a family all year.

STUDENTS DO

1. Look at Slide 5 choices: Maize for lots of food, Beans for different food, Squash that stores well.
2. Vote and give a reason to a partner, then share ideas with the class.

Say: Your family must eat for the whole year — what will you grow and what will you swap? Look at the three choices. If your family must grow food all year, which two would you pick? Be ready to say why your pick would keep people fed.

Ask: Which two foods would keep a family fed all year, and why? (Maize for lots of food, plus beans for different food or squash that stores well.) · Why is it risky to grow only one food? (If that crop fails there is nothing else to eat.)

Check understanding: Hands-up vote and partner reasons; if unsure, point again to the three Slide 5 labels and repeat what each gives.

Support: Offer picture prompts of the three crops and ask pupils to point to their two picks. **Stretch:** Ask pupils to predict which crop would matter most if rain was poor and why.

Use: Slides 1, 5

8–20 min **Teaching** 12 min · Whole class

To explain when the Maya lived and how extra food built cities.

YOU DO

1. Show Slide 2 objectives and read the two I can statements with the class.
2. Show Slide 3 timeline and talk through 2000 BC, 750 BC, AD 420 to 900 and after 900.
3. Show Slide 4 chain and model the steps from seeds to cities.
4. Show Slide 7 photo and explain the temple link to skilful farming.

STUDENTS DO

1. Follow the timeline and repeat the key dates with actions for long ago and near AD 900.
2. Copy the four-step chain on mini whiteboards using the Slide 4 words.
3. Point to where builders and temples fit in the chain.

Say: The Maya way of life begins around 2000 BC, and the first Maya cities appear around 750 BC. The Maya were strongest between AD 420 and 900, when cities grew big. This temple is a big house for gods. Skilful farming gave builders extra food.

Worked example: Seeds to cities chain, step by step: 1. Grew maize for yellow grains to eat. 2. Extra food fed more families together, so more people could live close by. 3. More people built temples for worship. 4. Big cities needed writing and calendars to organise food, work and worship.

Ask: When were Maya cities at their strongest and biggest? (Between AD 420 and 900, when cities grew big [7].) · How did growing more maize lead to temples? (Extra food fed more families together, so more people could build temples for worship.) · Where did the Maya build their cities? (In the rainforests of Central America, over land that is now five countries [1][4].)

Check understanding: Show whiteboard chains; if steps are out of order, rebuild Slide 4 together before moving on.

Support: Give the four chain sentences jumbled on strips to order with a partner. **Stretch:** Ask pupils to add what else a big city would need once many families live together.

Use: Slides 2-4, 7

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20–30 min **Video visit** 10 min · Whole class

To see Maya land, crops and city buildings together near AD 900.

YOU DO

1. Show Slide 6 and set three spots: where the Maya lived, what farmers grew, temples they built.
2. Play Video clip 4 from 0:00 to 1:31 without pausing.
3. Pause on key images and name the Maya area across five present-day countries.
4. Record class spots on the board under Land, Food and Cities.

STUDENTS DO

1. Watch and listen for land, food and city clues.
2. Call out spots and add one fact to Land, Food or Cities lists.

Say: Spot where the Maya lived. Spot what farmers grew to eat. Spot temples and cities they built. Watch carefully because you will tell me one fact for each heading after the clip.

Ask: Where did the Maya live? (Across southern Mexico and the Yucatan Peninsula, Belize, Guatemala, west Honduras and north El Salvador, in rainforest land [1][4].) · What did farmers grow to eat? (Important foods like maize, beans, squashes and chilli peppers [7].) · What did they build with extra food and workers? (Impressive temples, palaces, monuments and cities, made with great skill [1][7].)

Check understanding: Cold-call for one Land, one Food and one Cities fact; replay last 20 seconds if spots are missed.

Support: Give a tick sheet with three pictures to tick when land, food or temple is seen. **Stretch:** Ask pupils to link a video clue to the seeds-to-cities chain from last stage.

Use: Slide 6, Video clip 4 (0:00–1:31)

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30–50 min **Main activity** 20 min · Groups

To trade crops and explain what fed Maya builders.

YOU DO

1. Show Slide 9 task and set groups of four around a basket and tokens.
2. Model one swap: give 2 tokens, take 1 maize card, place it in the basket.
3. Start timed trading for maize, beans or squash, then stop to agree final two crops.
4. Hear group sentences using: This helped Maya because...

STUDENTS DO

1. Trade tokens for maize, beans or squash cards and place them in the basket.
2. Discuss and agree the final two crops as a group.
3. Practise and share the sentence: This helped Maya because...

Say: Swap tokens for maize, beans or squash. Agree your final two crops as a group. Say: This helped Maya because... Trade tokens for crop cards. Fill a basket to feed your family, then be ready to explain your choice.

Worked example: Worked trade: A group has 6 tokens. 1. They swap 2 tokens for 1 maize card, because maize gives lots of food. 2. They swap 2 tokens for 1 beans card, for different food. 3. They keep 2 tokens, agree their final two are maize and beans, and say: This helped Maya because extra maize and beans fed more families, so more builders could build temples.

Ask: Which two crops did you choose and why? (Maize and beans/squash, to give lots of food, different food and food that stores well.) · How did extra food help build cities? (Extra food fed more families together, so there were more builders for temples and palaces [1][7].)

Check understanding: Each group shows its basket and says its because sentence; if weak, ask what builders would do without extra food.

Support: Limit choices to two cards, maize and beans, with picture prompts and simple word labels. **Stretch:** Pupils must plan for a poor harvest and explain which crop they would still grow first and why.

Use: Slide 9

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50–60 min **Plenary** 10 min · Whole class

To secure the big idea and check what pupils can name and explain.

YOU DO

1. Show Slide 10 and read the big idea together as a class chant.
2. Show Slide 11 mystery and reveal maize as the main crop Maya farmers grew.
3. Show Slide 12 exit ticket and give out slips for two answers plus a question.
4. Collect slips and pick two strong because sentences to read aloud.

STUDENTS DO

1. Join in the big idea and answer the maize mystery with a partner.
2. Write exit answers on their own: two foods, how extra food helped, one question.

Say: Clever farming fed millions and built rainforest cities. Bumpy, yellow and full of grains - what food is this? Maize - the main crop Maya farmers grew. Now write your exit ticket on your own.

Worked example: Model exit answers: 1. Maize and beans. 2. Extra food fed more families together, so more people could build temples and live in cities. My question is: How did they store extra food without shops?

Ask: Name two foods Maya farmers grew. (Maize and beans, also squash.) · How did extra food help build cities? (It fed more families together so cities and temples could be built.)

Check understanding: Read exit slips at the door; if many miss the link, reteach the chain at the start of next lesson.

Support: Give sentence starters: Maya grew... Extra food meant... **Stretch:** Ask pupils to add when this happened, near AD 900 when cities were strongest.

Use: Slides 10-12

Common mistakes

Mistake	How to spot it	How to fix it
Thinking the Maya lived in one present-day country	Map or talk names only Mexico	Show the five parts again: the area spreads over Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, west Honduras and north El Salvador [1].
Thinking the Maya vanished right after AD 900	Pupils say everyone disappeared at once	Explain cities started to become smaller after AD 900 [7], but cities were still thriving in AD 1000 and the civilisation was still in existence in AD 1500 [1], and Maya people still live there today [7].
Thinking extra food only meant more eating	Because sentence stops at full baskets	Rebuild the chain: extra food fed more families together so more people could build temples, palaces and cities [1][7].

Support

- Limit choices to two cards, maize and beans, with picture prompts and simple word labels.
- Provide chain strips, word bank and sentence starters for baskets and exit slips.

Stretch

- Pupils must plan for a poor harvest and explain which crop they would still grow first and why.
- Ask pupils to link farming, temples and timekeeping by explaining why big cities needed calendars.

For the LSE or teaching assistant

Stay with target groups in main trading game to narrow choices and rehearse the because sentence. Scribe key words for exit ticket if needed.

Check for understanding

Question	Answer
Name two foods Maya farmers grew.	Maize and beans, or squash.
How did extra food help build cities?	It fed more families living together, so there were builders for temples and cities.
Where and when were Maya cities big?	In Central American rainforest land, strongest between AD 420 and 900.

Homework

Draw your group's two crops and write one sentence for each saying why it helped.

Sources

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