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Mayan Glyphs

The Maya had the most advanced system of written language of all the native American groups. They used a complex form of picture writing, or hieroglyphics, in which symbols represented objects, actions, ideas, or syllables. In this way, they could write complete sentences. Scribes carved glyphs in limestone or on shells or jade. They also created books, called *codices* (singular: *codex*).

Although there were probably hundreds of codices about ceremonies, calendars, customs, literature, and science, only three have survived. An early Spanish missionary, Diego de Landa, tried to understand the Maya and sought to translate Maya writings. When the Maya refused to give up their beliefs, Landa became angry and ordered the manuscripts burned.

Fortunately, the Maya left a record of their civilization in the many glyphs carved on the steps of pyramids and other buildings and painted on murals. The Hieroglyphic Stairway at Copan contains over two thousand stones, each carved with a glyph. Stone monuments called *stelae* recorded important events in the lives of leaders. Many of these amazing monuments were hidden by the fast growing rain forest.

Archaeologists began exploring the Maya ruins in the 1800s, but it has taken over 100 years to begin to decode the Maya glyphs. As these glyphs are decoded, they reveal details of pre-Columbian life, culture, and history.

One key to understanding Maya inscriptions is the use of certain symbols to name important people, gods, and cities. Below are some examples of Maya glyphs. What glyph would you use for yourself? Choose one, or design your own symbol to tell others about yourself. Write several sentences to explain why this glyph represents you, and then make a glyph pendant.



Glyph Pendant

Materials: self hardening clay, craft sticks, dull pencils, paint

Directions:

1. Pat or roll a small amount of clay into a 2" x 5" rectangle (5 cm x 12.5 cm), 1/4 inch (.63 cm) thick.
2. Use dull pencils and/or craft sticks to trace your glyph pattern into the clay. Make a hole at the top for threading the pendant on a cord.
3. Paint the clay after it has been allowed to dry. String it on a piece of string or yarn and wear it for good luck.

Aztec Calendar Stone

In 1790, workers in Mexico City unearthed relics of the Aztec religion. The first was a statue that was 8 feet, 5 inches (2.5 m) long. The Spanish viceroy of Mexico City became interested in this find and ordered that it be taken to the university for study. By doing this, he reversed the policy of the conquistadors and their descendants who, for almost three centuries, had destroyed all signs of the conquered Indians.

The next major discovery was a carved stone 4 feet (1.2 m) thick and 12 feet (3.7 m) in diameter which weighed 24 tons (21.7 metric tons). Covered with carved geometric symbols, the center features a human-like face with a knife blade for the tongue. This piece became known as the *Stone of the Sun*, because it resembles a sundial. It has also been called the

Aztec Calendar Stone because the outer carvings are the Aztec glyphs for the 20-day calendar.

Archaeologists have determined that this piece expresses the Aztecs' belief that there had been four suns (ages) and that they were living in the fifth sun. This fifth sun is represented by the face of *Tonatiuh* (the sun in the sky) in the stone's center. He is surrounded by symbols of the destruction (by jaguars, winds [hurricanes], fires [volcanoes], and rains) of the four previous worlds. The stone also foretells the end of the fifth sun on the date "4 Movement."



Make a Sun God Mosaic

Materials: pictures of the Aztec calendar (See page 45, *Aztecs: The Fall of the Aztec Capital.*); tagboard, old file folders, or paper plates; variety of paper scraps (construction paper or magazine pages); glue and scissors

Directions:

1. Cut a large circle from the tagboard.
2. Draw a simple design on the tagboard. Start in the middle with a picture of a sun god and then continue to create patterns in rings around the center.
3. Cut your paper scraps into different square and rectangular shapes. Keep your colors in separate stacks.
4. Glue individual squares within your pencil design until you have completed the circle.
5. Variations: Use different types of mosaic materials such as dyed eggshells, seeds and beans, macaroni, material scraps, and foils.

Critical Thinking

The Maya and Aztecs knew and used the discus shape for their calendars. Why did they not apply it in their everyday life as a wheel?