

What can a village buried by a volcano tell us about the Maya?

Learning objective

To infer characteristics of a past way of life from archaeological evidence.

Pupils will have:

- Considered how the Maya people of Ceren village might have felt as the nearby volcano erupted in 630 A.D. (CE).
- Categorized foods excavated from Ceren by their familiarity with modern food, by pupils like or dislike of them, and by their potential dietary value.
- Inferred, from archaeological evidence, how Maya people at Ceren may have farmed and traded
- Considered what the Maya people of Ceren village might have been thinking about just before the volcanic eruption (possibly applying their knowledge from the lesson)

Resources

- PowerPoint
- Card sort
- Video clip and image

Starter or Initial Stimulus Activity

Display the artist's impression of the Maya village at Ceren, El Salvador in about 630 A.D. (CE) just prior to its burial by volcanic ash during an eruption. Explain that the artist used their imagination to show what life in the village might have been like (do not reveal its fate at this stage) . <https://youngzine.org/news/history/rediscovering-ancient-mayan-village>

Set up the furniture in the classroom so that it roughly marks out the layout of the scene (e.g. chairs could represent the location of the tree and the loom etc.). Ask volunteers to assume the role of figures within the image, freezing their positions. Ask observing pairs not cast in the freeze-frame to speculate on how people might have been feeling (assuming that the image is accurate). Lead discussion, taking suggestions from pairs. Play the following video which shows a volcanic eruption <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hxbeh-nNZ0> . During it clap your hands to indicate that the characters in the freeze frame should "come to life" and react to the eruption as if it is a short distance from the scene. They will probably panic and run, or the adults may gather some possessions and their children, before running. Lead discussion from pairs not in the scene about how people might have felt or what they might have been thinking. Lastly reveal that people did in fact flee quickly, leaving sleeping mats rolled up on the floor, and everything in the household just abandoned.

Activity One

Explain that the village the artist has painted was actually buried under volcanic ash in 630 A.D. (CE), preserving the shape of ordinary items such as food in the solidified rock (the now-lost food left empty voids behind, which could be filled with plaster to show what it had looked like when it was first covered by ash). Give out copies of Slides Two to Twelve as a card sort (the slides describe the foods that archaeologists found evidenced on the site, along with a comment on how healthy these might be). A variant on this activity could be for pupils to handle and comment on actual examples of food items if they are available.

Give pairs/trios a limited time to read the cards and sort them twice, once for foods they have tasted and not tasted, secondly for foods they think they might like or dislike. Lead discussion, taking suggestions from pairs.

Again to a time limit, ask pairs/trios to place the food cards in order from most to least healthy, reminding or reinforcing pupil knowledge of healthy eating and the components of a balanced diet. Invite different pairs to present their order to the class, allowing them to challenge each other, and correcting any misconceptions around particular terms. The aim is not to arrive at a definitive order, but to reach the realisation that while the foods vary in their nutritional value, they all may make a contribution to a balanced diet. Lastly, explain that while maize, beans and squash formed the basis of the Ceren diet, other foods were eaten less often.

Activity Two

Display the artist's interpretation of a Maya village used in the starter activity. Explain that each thatched household had one area for sleeping in, another area for storage and a third area for cooking, with kitchen gardens outside and fields usually further away. Display slides Seventeen to Twenty Two in turn, explaining the information given about each household. To a time limit, ask pairs/trios to discuss what we can infer from the information about each household. Lead discussion, taking suggestions from different pairs. As before, probe pupil understanding to see what evidence they have used to support their opinion, and allow pupils to challenge each other's conclusions. If possible, agree a class statement about each household. Then display slide Twenty Four, which explains what archaeologists have suggested from the evidence. Lead discussion about the extent to which pupils agree or disagree with the conclusions of the archaeologists.

Activity Four

Display Slides Twenty Five to Twenty Seven in turn. As before, allow a limited time for pairs/trios to discuss what can be inferred from the information about the village as a whole, and take suggestions from pupils. Lastly, reveal what archaeologists have suggested from slide Twenty Eight, and lead discussion about the extent to which pupils agree or disagree with their conclusions.

Plenary or Concluding Activity

Display the artist's interpretation of a Maya village again. As before, assemble volunteer pupils into a freeze-frame of the scene. Ask pairs outside the scene to discuss what particular individuals might have been thinking about before the eruption took place. Ask particular pairs for comments (these may reveal gains in learning made as a result of the lesson, because of the inclusion of relevant specific details from it). Pupils could annotate a paper copy of the interpretation with speech or thought bubbles emanating from individual figures in the picture.