



Stories of the Ancient World

Gods Helping Humans





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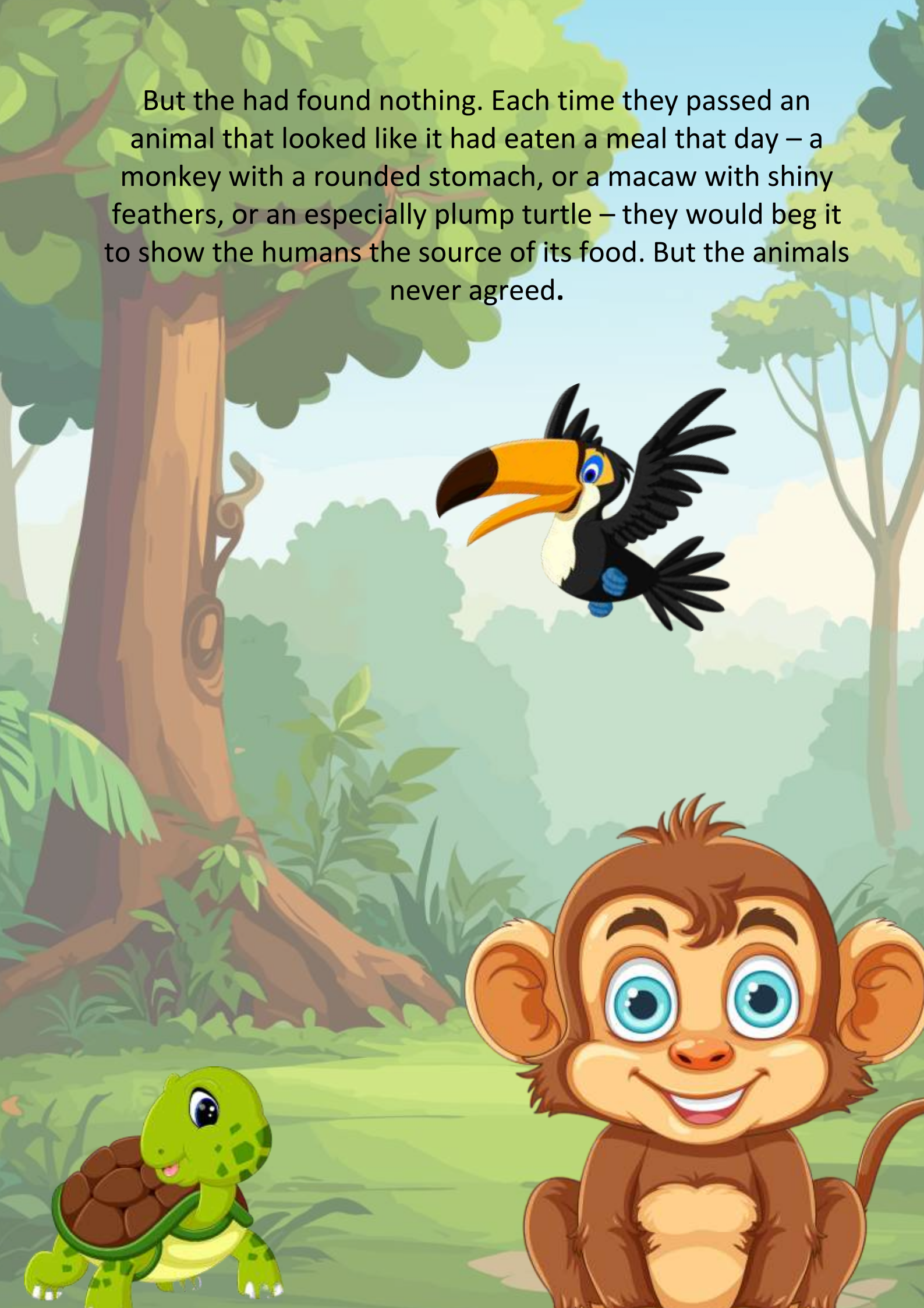
Humans have always needed help to survive in the world. In the modern world, it is technology that helps us to go beyond what humans are naturally able to do. We can communicate with each other over long distances or travel much more quickly than we could ever walk. In the ancient world, it was the gods and goddesses that humans looked for to help with these things. But, in stories, the help of a god could often come at a price – gods and goddesses could be dangerous as often as they were helpful.

Chahk Opens up The Maize Mountain

The Maya people were so hungry that their stomachs roared instead of rumbled and they could barely walk more than a few steps. They had searched all through their lands for something more than a small handful of berries and leaves.



But they had found nothing. Each time they passed an animal that looked like it had eaten a meal that day – a monkey with a rounded stomach, or a macaw with shiny feathers, or an especially plump turtle – they would beg it to show the humans the source of its food. But the animals never agreed.



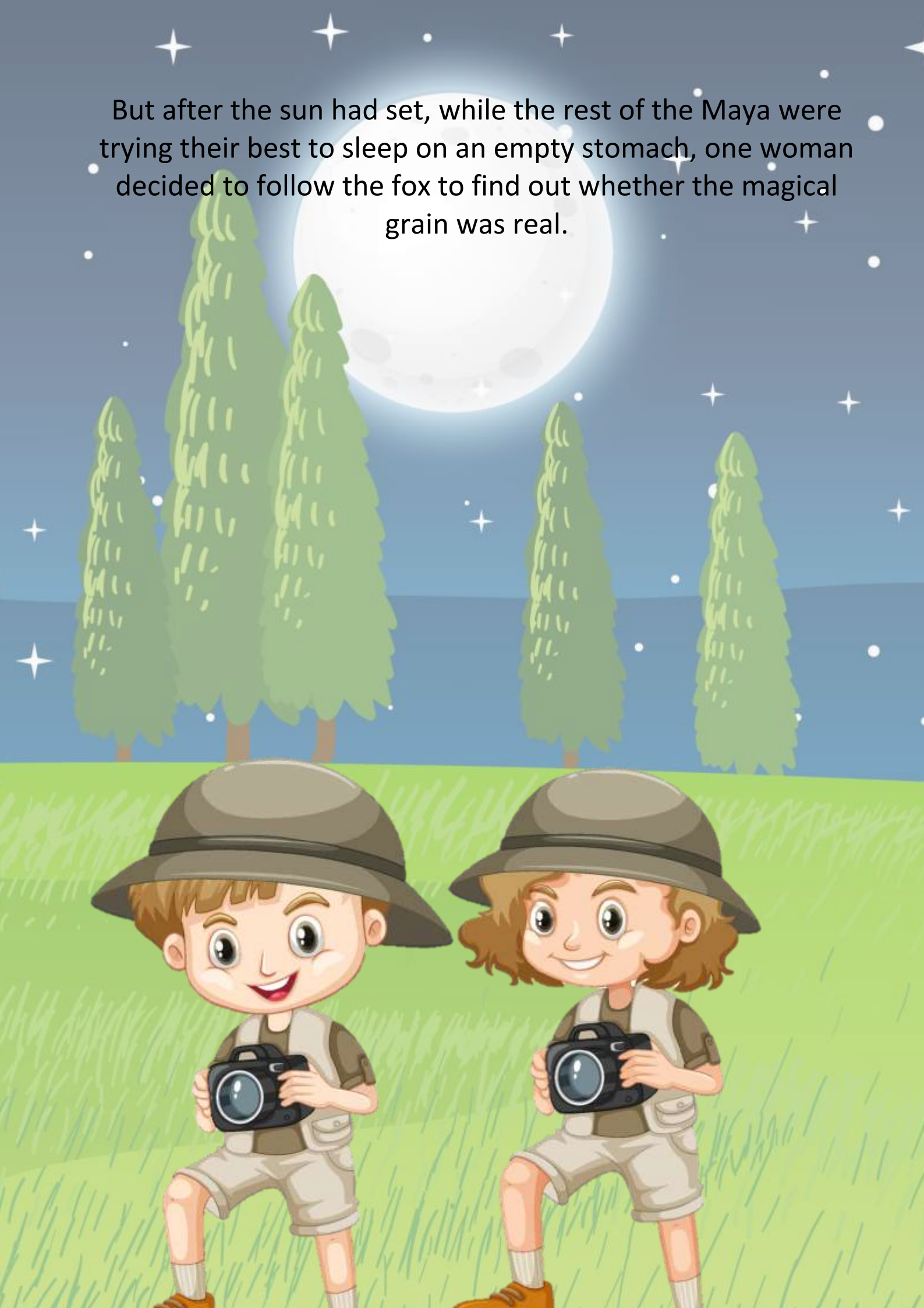
One of these animals was a grey fox, which made a point of stopping and licking her lips whenever she came across a group of hungry humans. When they asked what she had eaten, she told them about a grain called maize that had filled her up and kept her going all day.



The humans would shake their heads and groan because they had never heard of this magical crop and they were sure that the grey fox must be lying to them, as she often did.



But after the sun had set, while the rest of the Maya were trying their best to sleep on an empty stomach, one woman decided to follow the fox to find out whether the magical grain was real.



With only the stars to light her way, she put on a cloak over her clothes, twisted her hair into a long plait to keep it out of her eyes, and headed into the darkness. It did not take her long to find the fox, which took the same route past the same rock at the same time every morning and every evening.



The woman followed the fox out town and towards the mountains. Whenever the fox stopped and looked around, the woman hid behind one of the branches of a ceiba tree.



Eventually, the fox came to the largest mountain and stopped. The woman crouched behind a boulder and watched as the fox flicked her tongue out of her mouth and back in again. She did it again and again, and the woman could see that the fox was eating something, although she could not see what it was. She stayed there until the night was at its darkest, and the fox went back home the way she had come.



Then the woman slipped out from behind the boulder and walked to the bottom of the mountain. At the base of the mountain there was a small crack in the rock, and she could see two lines of ants going in and out. The ones coming out were carrying ... something. But the woman did not know what it was.



Each ant carried something golden yellow, and roughly the size and shape of a human tooth. She picked one up. She was so hungry that she did not even stop to think that it might be dangerous to eat it – which luckily, it wasn't, as she discovered when she put it in her mouth and chewed it. She plucked more and more of the magical grains from the ants that were carrying them and she began – for the first time in her life – to feel full.



But, as she got fuller, the woman got angry. All the animals had kept this magical grain a secret, while the humans were starving. She grabbed one of the ants and held him up. 'How dare you,' she said, 'keep this grain to yourself, while children starve?' The ant was terrified, and he couldn't even catch his breath enough to answer her question because she was squeezing the middle of his body tightly with her two fingers.



When the woman realised that the ant could not answer, she set him back on the ground and as he was scuttling away, he called out: 'The crack in the rock is far too small. There is no way even the smallest human would fit through the gap into the maize mountain.'



As she said this, the ant breathed a sigh of relief – he had survived his encounter with the humans on this occasion, but his body would never be the same. For the rest of time the bodies of ants would be separated in two, as if someone had squeezed them tightly in the middle with their fingers.



The woman looked at the tiny gap that the ants were easily passing through and she had to admit that the ant was right. She called to the gods. She apologised for how cruel she had been to the ant and for the fact that she had not trusted the fox – and she begged the gods to open up the gap in the maize mountain so that the hungry humans could go inside.



Chahk, the god of the rain, was the first to hear the woman's prayer. He believed that the woman really meant her apology and would be kinder to the animals in future. He decided to help the humans.



He raised one of his arms and lifted up a lightning bolt above his head. It hit the mountain's summit with a crash that was unlike anything the woman had heard before.



The mountain split in half, revealing mounds of maize and seeds for new plants at its centre. The woman ran back to the town to bring the good news. She hugged the other humans and told them that none of the would need to be hungry ever again.



Statue, 14th or 15th Century

This head of the rain and god Chahk (or Tlaloc to the Aztecs), is carved from stone that formed after a volcanic eruption.



The Maya People

The Maya are a people who live in southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador and western Honduras. They started building cities and ceremonial centres around 500 BCE and made many impressive advances in art, architecture, mathematics and astronomy. Since the 16th century, when they began to be colonised by Spanish settlers, they have struggled to maintain their culture and way of life.



Gods and Goddesses

We know the names of around 250 Maya gods and goddesses. Ixchel is the goddess of medicine and Yum Kaax is the god of the wild animals. The Maya had gods to take care of the things most important to them. Many of these gods are related to farming, because the people's main source of food was what they could grow on the land. This statue is the god of chocolate! You can see a cocoa pod attached to his belt.




Calendar

The Maya used a calendar that was said to have been brought to the Maya people by the god Itzamna. The calendar was made up of three interlocking cycles. One was a 365-day solar year, similar to the year we use to mark time today. Unlike the calendar we use today though, the Maya people slit these 365 days into eighteen months of twenty days, and five remaining 'unlucky' days.



Numbers and Writing

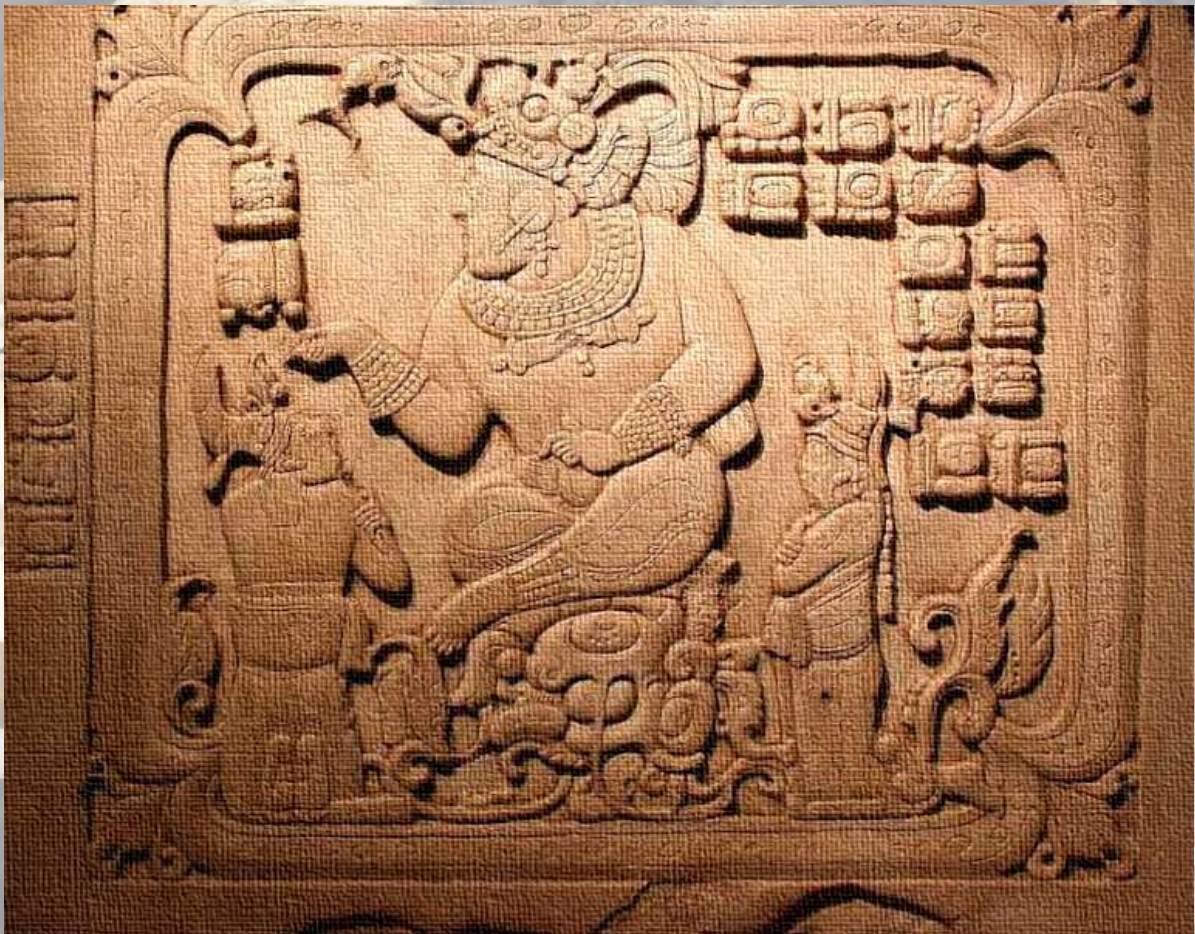
The Maya system of numbers is based on very simple symbols but could be used to calculate large numbers very accurately. The ancient Maya only used three symbols to make up all the numbers: a dot which represented 1, a line which represented 5 and a picture of a shell that stood for zero.

0	1	2	3	4
	•	••	•••	••••
5	6	7	8	9
—	—•	—••	—•••	—••••
10	11	12	13	14
==	==•	==••	==•••	==••••
15	16	17	18	19
===	===•	===••	===•••	===••••

Divine Kings

Maya territory was often fought over by rulers called themselves “divine” or god-like. In this image, the king is sitting on a throne. He is wearing a feathered headdress, which shows he was rich and powerful. The Maya loved feathers so much they had a feathered god, called Kukulcan.

The carving is made of jadeite, a valuable gemstone. Its colour symbolised nature to the Maya people. They put beads made of jade into the mouths of people who died.



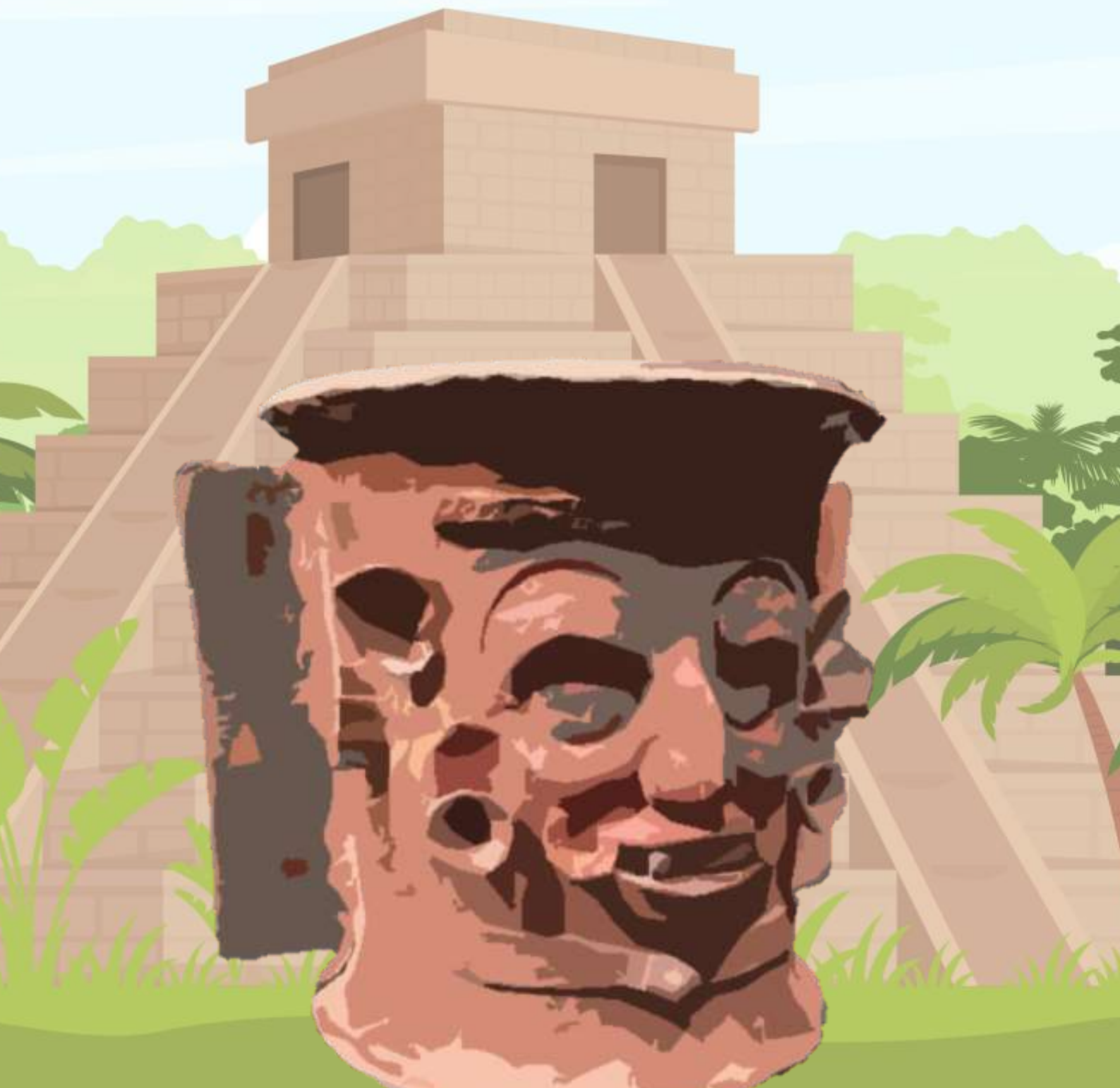
Maya Queen

The woman in this object is probably royal – we can tell this by looking at the big necklace around her neck and her elaborate headband. The inside of this carved statuette is hollow and filled with ceramic balls so it could be played as a musical instrument, like a rattle.



Incense

Maya people burned incense during their religious ceremonies and rituals. This object – called an ‘incensario’ – was used to produce billowing clouds of smoke.



Pyramids

The Maya people built huge pyramid structures, like those of the ancient Egyptians but with a flat top. Many different ancient South American cultures built impressive temples.

The Colima people of ancient Mexico left models of their temples behind so we can get a sense of what they looked like before they crumbled due to time, weather and destruction by invaders.





THINK

DIGITAL ACADEMY

