MAYA
A JOURNEY THROUGH THE MAYA WORLD

Maya Maths

The Maya used a very different number system compared to the one we use today. Instead of 10 digits, the Maya only used three, represented by a dot, a bar and a shell.

 = zero

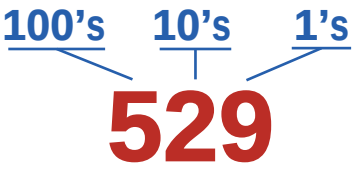
 = one

 = five (the same as five dots)

Did you know?

The Maya were one of only two cultures who came up with the concept of zero.

The Maya used these three digits to make all their numbers. They used the vigesimal system, which meant they counted in 20's. We are more used to counting in 10's.



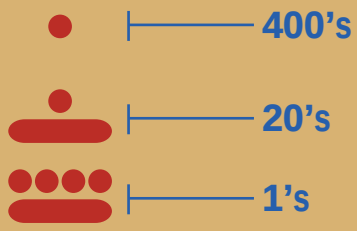
How did they count?

With our modern number system we read numbers from right to left. We start with the ones, then the tens, then the hundreds, and so on.

The Maya read numbers from the bottom up, starting with the ones, then the twenties, then four hundreds, and so on!

A dot represents one of that unit, a bar represents 5 of that unit, and a shell represents zero of that unit.

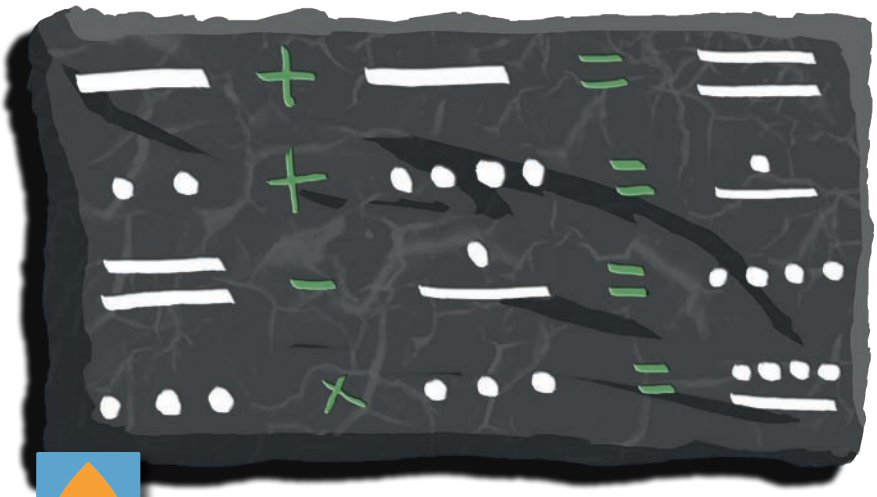
To make the final number, add together the different units. In the example above you need to add together 1 lot of 400, 6 lots of 20, and 9 lots of 1!



Can you work out what number this is?

Using this system the Maya were able to calculate extremely large numbers. This is because they had the concept of zero and place-values.

Their numerical system allowed the Maya to make precise astronomical predictions. This meant they could predict the movement of the stars and even predict when a solar eclipse would happen.



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Point your device at this image to see the Maya numbers converted into normal numbers.