Mystery of the Mayan Medallion
General Content Guide

Entry Area
Briefing Video
- A quick introduction to the story and learn about the Archaeology team and what they were doing here.

Where Are We? (Timeline)
- The ancient Maya lived in Mesoamerica, which included southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. Palenque is located in the rainforest of Chiapas, Mexico.
- The Maya built a sophisticated civilization, with a complicated writing system, an elegant number system, and an amazingly accurate knowledge of astronomy.
- Important natural resources included obsidian, used for tools and weapons, and sodium (salt), a bodily need. But their most prized resources were jade, quetzal feathers, and marine shells.
- The ancient Mayan civilization existed for roughly 2500 years—ca.1000 BC to 1530 AD, when the Maya were conquered by the Spanish. The height of the civilization was approximately 250-900 AD.
- The Maya people survived. Today around 6 million live in Mexico and Central America, and probably more than 1 million have settled in the United States. They continue the traditions and beliefs of their Mayan ancestors.

Investigation Board
- Introduction to the site and directions on what to look for. Meet the team on the other side an learn what their specialties are.

Archaeology Field Station
Piecing It Together
- Archaeologists study reconstructed vessels to learn more about a culture and its customs.
- The glyphs around the rim of a Mayan vessel tell the type of vessel, what it was used for, and the name of the owner.
- The Maya cultivated cacao, which was a staple in their diet.
- The chocolate Maya made from cacao was bitter and spicy.
- Cacao was considered the food of the gods and was the preferred beverage of the royal courts.
- Cacao was so highly valued, the Maya used it for money. There was even a cacao god.
- Cacao vessels, filled with the cacao drink, were buried with Mayan kings to provide sustenance in the afterlife. Archaeologists have found vessels that still contain the dried remains of the drink.

Archaeologist’s Desk/Decoding the Glyphs
- The ancient Maya developed a complex writing system.
- Mayan glyphs stand for words or ideas.
- Experts studied for many years before they were able to decipher the glyphs.
- You can learn what some of the glyphs mean.
- Epigraphers study ancient writings.

Play Ball
- Ball courts were central to many Mayan cities.
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- The game was played with a heavy rubber ball, which players had to keep in the air without using their hands. (The Maya were the first people to make rubber balls.)
- Maya played the game for fun but also as part of a mythic ritual, in which it became a game of life and death.
- Kings were frequently master ball players.
- The ballgame story appears in the *Popol Vuh*, which is like a Mayan “bible.”
- You can find some clues to how the game was played by examining a Mayan figurine.

What is It?
- Conch shell was imported by inland Maya, such as those at Palenque.
- The Maya made trumpets for the king from conch shell.
- Incisions on the shell generally tell who owned the trumpet.
- We know how it was used from representations of its use in Mayan artwork.

Biology Field Station
Is It Fatal?
- Entomologists and herpetologists may accompany an archaeology team.
- A variety of insects, spiders, and reptiles live in the Mexican rainforest.
- Some are poisonous; others are not.
- Certain of these animals, such as the turtle, had special meaning to the Maya.

Whose Skull?
- A variety of larger animals live in the rainforest.
- Some of these animals, such as the jaguar, had special meaning to the Maya.
- The characteristics of the skull help you identify the animal it belonged to.

Beans and Seeds
- Ethnobotanists, who study the meaning of plants to a culture, may accompany an archaeology team.
- The Maya cultivated a variety of fruits and vegetables.
- Cacao, the main ingredient in chocolate, and maize, or corn, were two of the most important.
- Maize was the staple food of the Mayans.

Astromathematics Field Station
Here Comes the Sun
- The Maya had an extraordinary knowledge of astronomy and painstaking ways of tracking the movements of planets and stars.
- Each day astronomers marked down the positions of the sun, moon, stars, and planets in relation to a building or marker on the ground.
- From these records, they were able to put together calendars and almanacs.
- At Palenque and elsewhere, the Maya created buildings that aligned with the sun at specific times of year, such as equinoxes and solstices, to help them monitor movements.
Counting in Mayan
- The Maya invented an ingenious and efficient number system, based on multiples of 20.
- They came up with the idea of zero, one of the few ancient civilizations to do this.
- They used only three symbols: a dot for one, a bar for five, and a shell shape for zero.
- Numbers could be written horizontally or vertically.
- They used a vertical system of place notation.
- Once you know the system, you can recognize and determine the value of Mayan numbers.

Circles of Time
- The Maya had two main circles of time—a 260-day sacred calendar and a 360-day solar calendar, which interrelated.
- Once every 52 years the first day of each calendar coincided. This cycle was called the Calendar Round.
- The Maya also invented an enormous cycle of 1,872,000 days, called the Long Count. The current Long Count will end in 2012. Some people think the Maya believed the world would end on this date.
- The Maya used five time periods to record the passing of time: k’in, winal, tun, k’atun, bak’tun.
- The Maya recorded lots of dates, which appear in many places—stelae, ceramic objects, murals, and books called codices.

Tomb Area
Examine the Bones
- Archaeologists learn about the physical characteristics of past peoples by studying skeletal remains.
- You can determine a person’s gender from the shape of the pelvis and height by measuring leg or arm bones.
- You can sometimes determine cause of death from skeletal damage.
- The largest arm bone is called the humerus, and the largest leg bone is the femur.
- The shorter of the two forearm bones is called the radius, and the longer is the ulna.
- The larger of the two lower leg bones is called the tibia, and the thinner one is the fibula.

Sarcophagus Rubbing
- Glyphs and other images on a sarcophagus are clues to who’s buried in it.

Battle Mural
- The planet Venus was associated with war, and Mayan kings often planned battles to coincide with the appearance of Venus in the western sky. Archaeologists call these “star wars.”
- Kings proved how powerful they were by capturing rival kings and gaining control of valuable resources.
- Much of what we know about how the Maya fought wars comes from interpreting the artwork archaeologists have found.
- Warriors strapped small shields on their wrists, put on padded cotton armor, and wore special helmets decorated with jaguars and other fierce creatures. They believed the animals gave them power.
- Battles were introduced by the loud sounds of drums, whistles, and conch-shell trumpets.
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Spider Bite
- For your own safety in the rainforest, you need to be on the lookout for animals, big and small.
- If you are bitten by an unfamiliar animal, you need to find out if its bite can harm you.

Treasure Revealed
- Looting doesn’t pay!

Observatory
Your Mayan Name
- Archaeologists think that the names of Mayan rulers were royal names, adopted when they took power.
- These names were often combinations of several glyphs, including a title glyph.
- Archaeologists sometimes create names for these rulers based on the meanings of the individual glyphs. (For instance, a Palenque king is known as “Snake Jaguar” because his name glyph is a combination of the glyph for snake and one for jaguar.)

Meet the Mayan Gods
- The ancient Maya worshipped many gods.
- One way we know about these gods is from Mayan artwork that archaeologists have found.
- Four important Maya gods are:
  - K’inich Ajaw, the Sun God. He can be recognized by his hooked nose and the curly marks on his cheeks. Sometimes he has jaguar markings on his face because at night he becomes the Jaguar God of the Underworld.
  - Chaak, the Rain God. According to Mayan myth, he provided the first maize plant by cracking open a rock with lightning. He has a long, down-turned nose, big fangs, and curling spirals coming out of his mouth.
  - Ix Chel, an old and powerful goddess. She is often shown with claws, fangs, and a serpent headdress. She is the goddess of childbirth and weaving, but also causes floods.
  - The Maize God, the most important Mayan god. Always shown as young and vibrant, he represents the Mayan ideal of beauty. He is usually shown with a corncob headdress and corn silk hair. He represents the cycle of life—birth, death, rebirth.

In the Stars
- The Maya had an extraordinary knowledge of astronomy.
- They used this knowledge to predict such events as eclipses and full moons.
- They associated the planet Venus with war and could predict when it would be visible as a morning or evening star. Mayan kings may have used this knowledge to decide when to wage wars (dubbed “star wars” by those who studied them).
- They recognized constellations, such as Gemini, which they saw as a pig, and the Pleiades, which they saw as the tail of a snake. The Milky Way was of great importance to the Maya.

What’s the Story?/Lintel Casting
- We interpret the art of ancient cultures to learn about their customs.
- Mayan stelae tell stories in images and glyphs.
- Mayan kings dressed as the Maize God for ceremonies.
- He wore jade ornaments that were green like corn leaves, symbolizing fertility and wealth.
- Corn was the main food of the Maya. The depictions of corn in the king’s headdress showed his ability to ensure an abundance of corn for his people.