



# FIERY POOL

## THE MAYA AND THE MYTHIC SEA

# MATERIALS PACKET

We are very excited that you and your class will soon be visiting the Peabody Essex Museum and our new exhibition, *Fiery Pool: The Maya and the Mythic Sea*. This download was created to help you and your class prepare for your visit. These suggested activities are designed to connect directly to the Massachusetts State Curriculum Frameworks for History & Social Studies and English Language Arts for grades 4 and 5, but can certainly be used for either younger or older students. Please feel free to tailor any of these suggested activities to help support your classroom instruction and class goals.

*Fiery Pool: The Maya and the Mythic Sea* is the first exhibition to explore the profound influence of water on the ancient Maya civilization. To the Maya, water, primarily embodied by the sea, influenced as well as enveloped their world. Many of the objects in the exhibition relate and are direct references to the myths and religious stories of the Maya. This lush exhibition allows any class to create connections between the geography of the Maya and their religion, agriculture and day-to-day lifestyle.

**These topics directly relate to the  
Massachusetts History & Social Studies frameworks**  
(grade 5, standard 5.2; grade 4, standards 4.24 & 25)

**Massachusetts English Language Arts frameworks**  
(standards 16.4, .7, .8, .9 & .10)

*Fiery Pool* has been organized by Daniel Finamore, The Russell W. Knight Curator of Maritime Art and History at PEM, and Stephen D. Houston, The Dupee Family Professor of Social Science and Professor of Archaeology at Brown University.

The exhibition travels to the Kimbell Art Museum, in Fort Worth, Texas, and the Saint Louis Art Museum. | This exhibition was made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities: Because democracy demands wisdom. Additional support provided by ECHO (Education through Cultural and Historical Organizations). Exhibition supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Incense burner with a deity with aquatic elements (detail), 700–750, Palenque, Mexico. Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes—Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Museo de Sitio de la Zona Arqueológica de Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico. Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum. Photo © 2009 Jorge Pérez de Lara.



**PEM** Peabody  
Essex  
Museum

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### VOCABULARY



As you prepare your class for their trip to *Fiery Pool*, it is a good idea to explain and make use of the following vocabulary. Encourage use of the vocabulary in conjunction with activities 1 and 2.

**MYTH(OLOGY)** A traditional story, especially one about the early history of a group of people, that explains social or natural phenomenon. Myths typically involve supernatural events and characters.

**ANCESTORS** People from whom a group of people descend. Great-great-great-grandparents, for example.

**CYCLE** A series of events that repeat in the same order over a period of time.

**PENINSULA** A piece of land projecting into, and almost fully surrounded by, a body of water.

**GULF OF MEXICO** A deep inlet of the Atlantic Ocean surrounded by North and Central America and Cuba.

**CIVILIZATION** The society, culture and way of life of a particular area or people.

**ANCIENT MAYA** A civilization living between 2000 B.C.E and the 15th century (1400s). The civilization flourished in and around what is now known as the Yucatan Peninsula.

**JADE** Green stone used in jewelry and adornments, found in and around the Motagua River Valley, Guatemala.

**MAIZE** Corn. Derived from the Taino *Mahiz* and the Spanish *Maiz*.

**FIGURINE** A small statue made from clay, stone or other materials to represent a human, god or animal.

**VESSEL** A container made to hold something. Some common vessels are bowls, cups and vases.

**CERAMIC** Ceramic is the material made by molding clay and then firing or heating it until it becomes hardened and smooth.

**MURAL** A very large painting applied directly onto a wall.

**EFFIGY** A representation of a person or deity.

Carving of a frog, 700–800, Topoxte, Guatemala. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes—Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City. Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum. Photo © 2009 Jorge Pérez de Lara.

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### ACTIVITY ONE

*Fiery Pool* is a new exhibition that takes a close look at the Maya connection with the bodies of water that surround their land. With your class, take a look at a map of where the Maya lived, on present-day Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula and the Central American countries of Guatemala, Belize and Honduras. (There is one included in this packet!) Discuss major cities where the Maya lived and what it meant to be surrounded by water.

- What were the benefits of living close to a large body of water? In what ways was living close to water more important before present-day conveniences such as plumbing and irrigation?
- What are some of the challenges of living close to a large body of water?
- What other ancient civilizations relied heavily on water sources?
- Keeping in mind that the sea is salty, what uses could the sea have served?
- What are some myths/stories that focus on rain, water or the water cycle?
- Do you think the relationship of the people of the Yucatan Peninsula with the Gulf of Mexico was the same as or different from the relationship of the people of Massachusetts with the Atlantic Ocean? Did each body of water provide similar things for each group of people? What are some differences?

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### ACTIVITY TWO

Read the story of *Chac, The Rain God* (included in this packet) with your class. Discuss the story with your class. Use the following questions to get started.

- Do you know of any other stories about the rain or weather?
- What are some similarities and/or differences between the story of Chac and other weather myths you have read?

Now it's time to tell your side of the story! Pretend that you are either Chac or the little boy from the story you just read. Readers everywhere want to know what really happened up there in the sky and why such a huge and terrible storm came down upon the earth. How would you tell the story from either Chac's or the boy's point of view? Do you think the story was fair? What pieces were left out from how you remember it? Be sure to use descriptive language, dialogue and other literary devices! Show the reader how the story unfolded for you!

#### Massachusetts History Standards

7.9, 7.10, 8.13, 9.4, 9.5, 11.1, 11.2, 12.5, 15.2, 15.4, 15.6, 16.4, 16.5, 16.10, 19.5, 19.9, 19.14, 23.6

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## THE MAYA AND THE MYTHIC SEA

### KEY PLAYERS

Here is a list of some of the creatures and gods you will see when you come to the Peabody Essex Museum to visit *Fiery Pool: The Maya and the Mythic Sea*. The Maya had many gods and respected many sea creatures, but these are a few of the top ranked!

**CHAHK (ALSO CHAC)** Chahk, the god of rain and storms, brought the waters essential for daily life. He sometimes appears in Maya art as benevolent, but his menacing demeanor is more common. The enormous axe he usually brandishes is symbolic of the destructive lightening storms he unleashes from the sky.

**CONCH SHELLS** The Maya viewed conch shells as embodiments of ancestors. Their spiral form evokes breath and wind, essential life forces. Conch shells were decorated and worn as pendants, sometimes depicting the heads of ancestors.

**SPINY OYSTER SHELLS (A.K.A. SPONDYLUS)** *Spondylus*, or spiny oyster, shells played a significant role in Maya culture. Symbolically, they were linked to blood because of their color, and they were believed to house ancestors. *Spondylus* shells figured strongly in Maya royal ritual, presented before kings as prized objects of wealth and tribute.

**TURTLES (WORLD-TURTLE)** The Maya likened the terrestrial surface of the world to the shell of a turtle. In their worldview, the Yucatan Peninsula floated like a turtle on the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea.

**FROGS & TOADS** The Maya believed that frogs and toads signified rain and yearly renewal. They were viewed as linked to the movement of water — from sea to sky to land — which mirrored the creatures' aquatic metamorphosis from egg to tadpole to adult.

**CROCODILES** The Maya conceived of the creation of the world as the slaying of a primordial ocean crocodile that turned the sea blood-red. The floating crocodile, like the turtle, recalled the terrestrial surface of the world.

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### KEY PLAYERS

**MAIZE GOD** The Maize God, whose birth, death and rebirth constitute the planting cycle that sustains humans, was an important deity to the Maya and integrally tied to water. His watery passage and reemergence was an important agricultural myth and the central metaphor of Maya life.

**GOD L** God L, whose ancient name is not yet known, was a god of trade and commerce. He is also linked to the watery Underworld and wealth.

**SUN GOD** The Sun God was a deity connected to the sea in its daily movement from east to west. He would rise from and descend into the sea, displaying aquatic features such as a shark tooth and *Spondylus* shell earflares.

**JAGUAR GOD OF THE UNDERWORLD** The Jaguar God of the Underworld was a nocturnal aspect of the Sun God, relating closely to darkness and the watery Underworld.

**SHARKS** The Maya viewed sharks as great mythic creatures and often substituted them for crocodiles in their portrayals of the creation of the world.

**STINGRAY SPINES** The Maya prized stingrays for their venomous spines, which they used as instruments for ritual bloodletting.

**WATER BIRDS** Maya artists painted water birds to suggest aquatic abundance in pleasurable locales.

**FISH** Maya artists portrayed fish as both generic and fantastical creatures, reflecting notions of the spiritual importance of the sea.

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### CHAC

**CHAC**, the rain god, stole a boy and took him into the sky to be his servant. One day he said to the boy, "Go pull up yams, but be careful not to look underneath the root."

The boy went out and started to dig. After a while he began to wonder what would happen if he looked beneath the root. He pulled up a yam and looked into the hole. Far below he could see the earth. His home lay directly under him, and he could see his older brother.

Thinking he could return easily, he made a long rope, and tying one end to a tree and the other around his waist, he began to let himself down. But the rope, long as it was, did not come anywhere near the earth, and the boy found himself unable to climb back up. Then the wind blew, and he swayed back and forth. He was terrified.

When Chac noticed that his servant had not returned, he went out to look for him. Finding him hanging at the end of the rope, he hauled him up and scolded him.

Another day Chac sent the boy to get plantains, telling him to cut down only the smallest trees. But when he looked at the small trees, he said to himself, "The fruit is not big enough," and he proceeded to cut down the largest plantain tree he could find. Instead of falling in the opposite direction, the tree came toward him, increasing in size as it fell, and the boy was unable to escape. Hours later, Chac found him trapped under the fallen tree and again scolded him.

Chac had told the boy to ask the grindstone if he wanted



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### CHAC

any tortillas but under no circumstances to ask for more than one. So as soon as the boy was hungry, he called out to the grindstone, "I want many tortillas!" Enormous tortillas rained down, completely burying him. Chac pulled him out and again scolded him.

One day Chac told him to straighten up the house and clean the table and benches, because he was going to hold a feast and was expecting guests. The boy cleaned the house thoroughly, but returning later, he found many frogs seated on the benches. Annoyed that they had come in to dirty the place after he had cleaned it, he drove them out with his broom. Later Chac asked if the guests and the musicians had arrived, since it was past time for the feast.

"No, no guests have arrived yet," said the boy. "Nothing but a crowd of frogs that came into the house just after I got it all clean."

"Well," said Chac, "those were my guests and musicians."

One day the boy decided he would play at being Chac, so he watched how Chac dressed himself when he went out to do his work. At night, when Chac was asleep, the boy took his clothes, his windbag, his water gourd, his ax, and his drum. As he opened the bag, the winds went screeching off. He could not shut them up again because he was not as strong as Chac, and a terrific storm rushed down on the world.

Then he took the gourd to make rain. But unlike Chac, who

could cause a heavy rain by pouring out four fingers of water, the boy spilled the whole gourd, and torrents poured down on the earth. Next he beat on the drum to make thunder, but when he tried to stop it he could not. While trying to control the thunder, the rain and the winds, the boy fell into the sea.

When Chac woke up, his clothes and his instruments were nowhere to be seen. His servant had disappeared too. He went to one of the other Chacs and borrowed clothes and a windbag and went out to stop the rain and thunder and bag the winds. Not until he had controlled the storm did he begin looking for the boy. At last he found him, broken into many pieces. The black wind, the biggest of all the winds, had smashed him to bits. Nine times Chac made passes over the boy's body, and in this way he revived him. When they returned to Chac's house, he told the boy he could not keep him any longer, because he was always getting into trouble. Then he took him back to earth.

When the boy arrived at his home, he asked his older brother if the storm had done much damage. "Oh yes!" said the brother. Then the boy began to laugh and said, "I was the one who caused the storm. Wasn't it fun?"

*Yucatec*

Bierhorst, John.

*The Monkey's Haircut.*

*William Morrow and Company, 1986, pp. 66–69 ("Chac")*



# MAP OF MESOAMERICA & YUCATAN PENINSULA



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## FURTHER READING

Here are some books that may help you and your class learn more about the Maya.

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- Jolley, Dan, and David Witt. *Graphic Myths and Legends: The Hero Twins Against the Lords of Death — A Mayan Myth*. Graphic Universe, 2009. Print.
- Lowery, Linda, Richard Keep, and Janice Lee Porter. *The Chocolate Tree — A Mayan Folktale*. Millbrook, 2009. Print.
- Morris, Neil. *Everyday Life of the Aztecs, Incas & Maya*. North Mankato, Minn.: Smart Apple Media, 2003. Print.
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