If you could travel back in a time machine almost 3,000 years to the lush forests of Central America, you would find yourself in the first settlements of the great Mayan civilisation. That civilisation would go on to dominate the region for almost two millennia.

Around 800 BCE, the Maya spread out from the mountains of the Pacific coast, where they had lived for thousands of years. The search for better farmland to grow crops drew them to the central lowlands of Guatemala and southern Mexico, where they would live until their disappearance 1,700 years later.

The thatched houses in the earliest Mayan villages would not look too different from the houses that many of the Maya’s descendants still live in today. Gradually, these isolated villages became permanent settlements. Around 300 BCE, the Maya began to build the first temples and pyramids that would dominate their growing cities.

Slash and Burn
The Maya were farmers, living on a diet of maize, beans and chilli peppers. To grow these crops they had to clear areas of the dense jungle using simple stone axes and burning the undergrowth. The ash from this ‘slash and burn’ process enriched the soil so that they could grow crops.

The fields would only be fertile for a few years before the farmers had to clear a new area of jungle. But despite this exhausting and time-consuming work, over hundreds of years they began to build an advanced and cultured civilisation.