

The Long Count

As the Calendar Round took roughly a lifetime to complete (52 years), the Maya needed another way of recording history. They developed a third way of calculating time: the Long Count or the Great Cycle.

The Long Count recorded the days that had passed since the date of the Maya Creation: 11th August 3114 BC.

One whole cycle of the Long Count would be 1,872,000 days! (About 5125 years.)

Just like our calendar is divided into days, months and years, the Mayan calendar was made up of different units:

- one day – kin
- 20 days – uinal
- 360 days – tun
- 7,200 days – katun (20 tuns)
- 144,000 days – baktun (20 katuns)

The Long Count consisted of 13 baktuns. Each day has five numbers in the calendar. For example, 1st January 2000 would be written as: 12.19.6.15.2.

This would mean that 12 baktuns, 19 katuns, 6 tuns, 15 uinals and 2 kins had passed since the Maya Creation day.

Since the Long Count was very accurate, stelae and other stonework would often be inscribed with precise dates – like the date a king ascended the throne, or when he conquered a neighbouring polity.

End of the world?

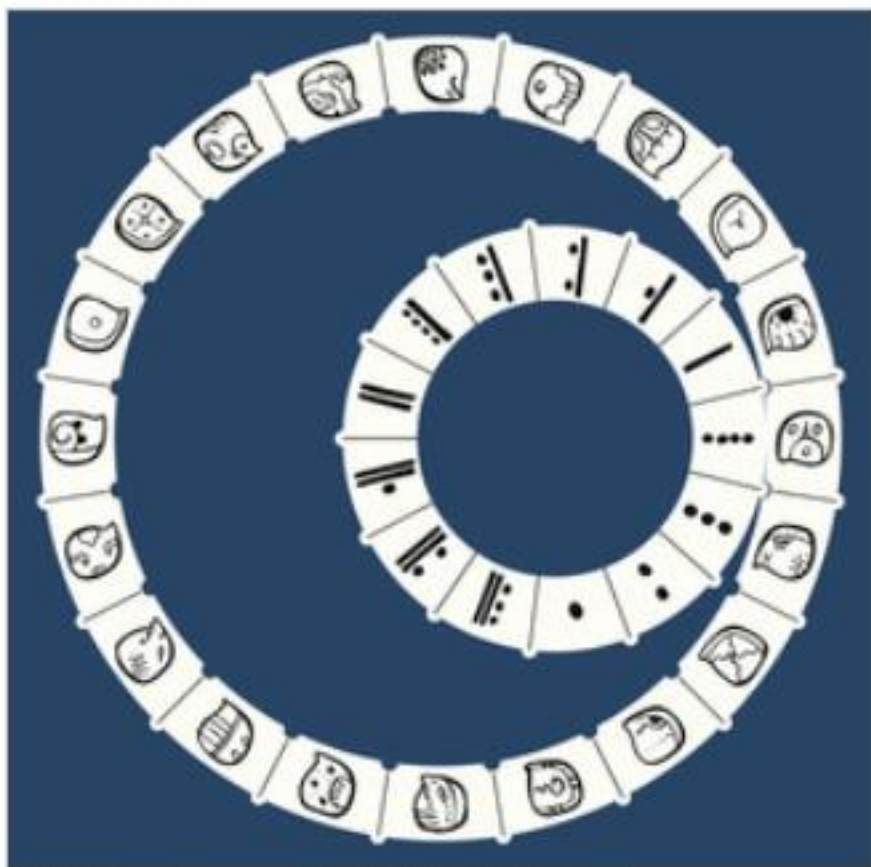
Because the last day of the Long Count calendar would fall on 21st December 2012, some people believed the Maya had predicted the world would come to an end on this day.

In fact, the Maya considered time to be cyclical; 21st December 2012 was simply the end of one cycle of the Long Count and the beginning of the next phase.

Three calendars

The Maya wanted to calculate the passage of time. They studied constellations and believed that, by deciphering the movements of celestial beings, they could predict the gods' intentions. Therefore, tracking time became very important to the Maya.

They followed three different calendars: the Tzolkin, the Haab and the Long Count.



[Enlarge image](#) The Tzolkin© Thinkstock

This is the wheel of the Tzolkin placed together with numbers 1–13.

In this example, we can see the fourth day was **4 Ahau**.

Working backwards, the third day was **3 Cauac**, the second day was **2 Etznab** and the first day was **1 Caban**.

After 13, the numbers would go back to one, but the days would keep counting to 20. This means that it took 260 days for the cycle to be complete ($13 \times 20 = 260$) and return to 1 Caban.

The Haab

The Haab was a solar calendar used to plan daily life.

It had 18 months of 20 days, plus a short month of five 'unlucky' or 'bad' days. This made a total of 365 days ($18 \times 20 + 5 = 365$).



[+ Enlarge image](#) The Haab© Thinkstock

The Calendar Round

The Tzolkin and the Haab spun together in the calendar wheel, like two cog wheels.

The entire cycle took 52 years to complete! Each new day was named by its position on both calendars.