

# Mesoamerica: Where Civilizations Flourished, and Crashed, Repeatedly

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TOP: The Market of Tlatelolco from *The Great Tenochtitlan* by Diego Rivera. MIDDLE: Relief depicting Mayan king Bird-Jaguar. BOTTOM: Detail of *The Market of Tlatelolco* from *The Great Tenochtitlan* by Diego Rivera. Images: Big History Project

In Mesoamerica, civilization rose and fell several times. This pattern shaped how people living there viewed the world. It also led to some mysteries still unsolved today.

## The geography of the Americas

The Americas are one of the world's four big geographical areas. The others are the Afro-Eurasian zone, the Australasian zone, and the Pacific Islands. Early human societies developed in these areas apart from each other.

About 245 million years ago, the Earth's continents were all joined together. This supercontinent was called Pangaea. As Pangaea broke up, North and South America separated. They were not rejoined until 3 million years ago.



Today, North and South America are connected by a narrow strip of land. This piece of land is known as the Isthmus of Panama. Most societies in Mesoamerica developed just north of the Isthmus of Panama.

## The Olmecs



The founding society of Mesoamerica was the Olmecs. Their society emerged in river valleys along the Gulf of Mexico more than 3,000 years ago.

The Olmecs made art that is still around today. The most famous are huge heads carved out of volcanic rock. Some are more than 10 feet tall.

The last Olmec city declined about 2,000 years ago. Historians are not sure what led to the decline. Was it volcanic eruptions? A shift in the flow of rivers? Fighting between the rich and poor? No one knows.

## The Maya

As the Olmecs declined, their neighbors to the east thrived. The Maya lived in an area called the Yucatan Peninsula. It had poor soil and no large rivers. Yet people there grew corn, beans, squash, peppers, and cacao, or chocolate.



The Maya did not live in one big kingdom. Instead, they organized themselves into several small city-states. The largest was Tikal, which had about 40,000 people living in it by 750 CE. The people were ruled by leaders and had special jobs. Sometimes the city-states fought with each other.





The Maya had an advanced writing system that used symbols. They also invented three kinds of calendars. One calendar was used to keep track of farming cycles. Another was used for daily activities. The third calendar was called the Long Count calendar. It went back to 3114 BCE and was used to record the longer passing of time. The Maya believed that the world had ended four times already and that they were living in the fifth world.

Mayan society changed rapidly between 800 and 925 CE. People left the cities and moved back to the countryside. Historians are not sure why. It may have been because of earthquakes, drought, or enemy attacks. But the Maya did not just disappear. Several million are still alive today, and in parts of Mexico they still speak the Mayan language.

## Teotihuacan

In the center of Mexico, at about the same time, another amazing city developed called Teotihuacan (tay-oh-tee-wa-KAHN). It began as an agricultural village near present-day Mexico City. Teotihuacan was located in the highlands of Mexico, more than a mile above sea level. Water flowing from surrounding mountains created several large lakes in this area. By 500 CE, it had more than 100,000 people. It was one of the six largest cities in the world.



## Tenochtitlan and the Aztecs

Mesoamerican civilization reached its height with the Aztecs. They built the great city of Tenochtitlan (the-noch-tee-TLAHN), which means “place of the cactus fruit.”

The Aztecs came from northern Mexico. By the 1500s, they had conquered most of Mesoamerica. They ruled more than 10 million people, who had to pay them tribute every year. The tribute was made up of food and goods, including jewelry, animal skins, and seashells.

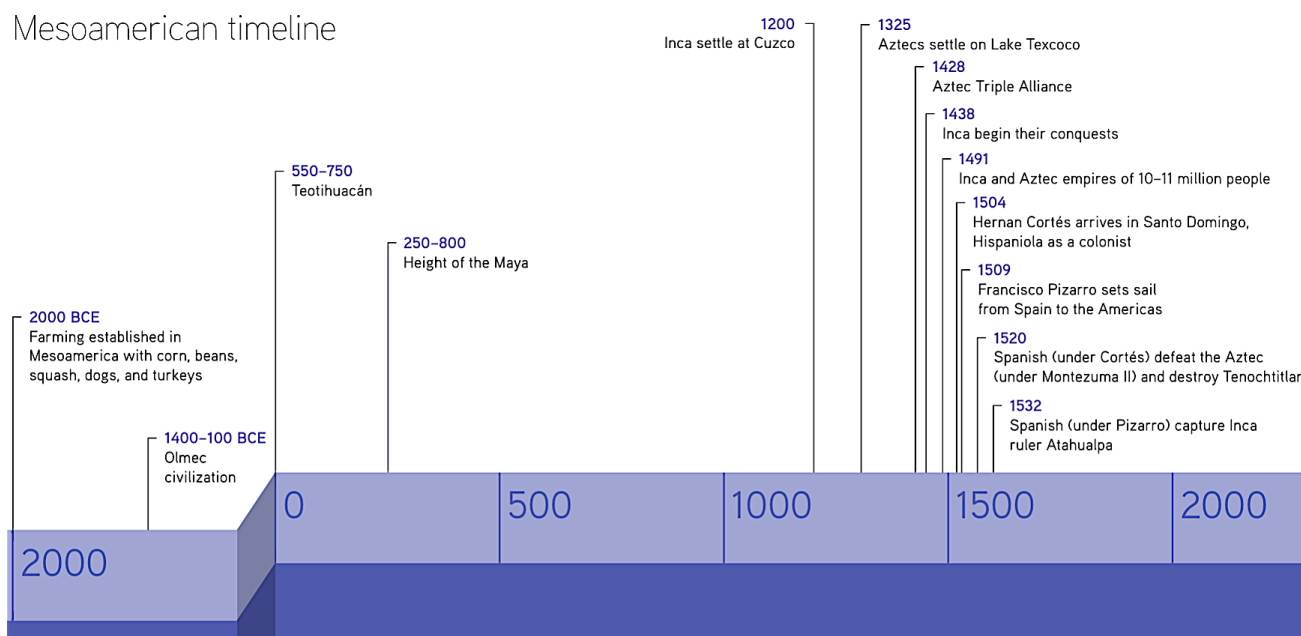
Aztec society was organized around military leaders, and warriors were highly honored. They wore fine cloth and feathers. The common people wore clothes made from plant materials. They worked the land or served as slaves.

Like the Olmecs, the Aztecs used a complicated calendar system. Priests also performed ceremonies to honor the gods. The Aztecs believed these ceremonies would stop earthquakes and other disasters.

## The fall of the Aztecs

In 1520, Spanish fighters led by Hernán Cortés invaded Mexico. They used horses, guns, and swords to defeat the Aztecs in battle.

Mesoamerican timeline



The Spanish brought with them a disease called smallpox. The Aztecs had no immunity to it to save themselves from getting sick. The disease killed many of them, forcing the rest to surrender. Soon the Spanish controlled all of Mexico.

## Comparing the Americas to Afro-Eurasia

The Americas did not develop many of the technologies used in Afro-Eurasia. For example, early Americans did not use wheels or melt iron and steel. For blades they used a rock from volcanoes called obsidian. They had no swords, guns, or horses.

In the Americas, people did not travel the long distances that they did in Afro-Eurasia. Afro-Eurasia stretches east to west. People traveling through it stayed in similar climates. The Americas stretch north to south. This creates huge changes in climate for travelers. It was more difficult for people to trade crops, because the plants would not easily grow in different climates.

States and societies began later in the Americas than they did in Afro-Eurasia. Still, they were similar in many ways. It is likely that the American societies would have continued if they had not been destroyed by the Europeans.

History and geography allowed the Europeans to conquer the people of the Americas. The Europeans also took many Africans as slaves to work in the Americas. What followed is a disturbing story, but one that helped make the modern world.