

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

Civilization bloomed and crashed in Mesoamerica several times. This pattern gave rise to a one-of-a-kind worldview and some mysteries that still remain.

The geography of the Americas

The Americas are one of the world's four geographical zones. Each zone is a large area of the world. Early human societies developed in these areas separately from each other. The four world zones are the Afro-Eurasian zone, the Americas, the Australasian zone, and the Pacific Islands.

About 245 million years ago, all the continents on Earth were joined as one continent called Pangaea. North and South America were stuck closely together. As Pangaea broke up, North and South America separated. They weren't rejoined again until 3 million years ago. Their reconnection was caused by tectonic activity and volcanoes. It had a huge impact on Earth's climate and changed ocean currents.

Today, North and South America are linked by the Isthmus of Panama. An isthmus is a narrow strip of land connecting two larger land areas, usually with water on either side of it. Most civilizations in Mesoamerica developed just north of the Isthmus.

Early developments in Mesoamerica

People in the Americas grew and ate different foods than people in Mesopotamia. The Americas had different native plants than the Fertile Crescent. The Fertile Crescent had wild grains, goats, and sheep. People in the highlands of Mexico had corn (maize), beans, peppers, tomatoes, and squash as their staple foods. Dogs and turkeys were their only domesticated animals.

The Olmecs



The founding culture of Mesoamerica was the Olmecs ("rubber people"). Their society took root in river valleys along the Gulf of Mexico. They prospered from about 1400 BCE to 100 BCE.

The Olmecs made long-lasting art. Most famous are huge heads carved out of volcanic rock. Some are 10 feet tall and weigh 20 tons.

Monumental sculptures are often evidence of a civilization with powerful leaders. But Olmec culture was more likely a chiefdom than a state with a strong central government.

The last Olmec site declined by about 100 BCE for unknown reasons. Was it because of volcanic eruptions or a shift in the flow of rivers? Scholars believe that the Olmecs may have deliberately destroyed their capital. Was there civil unrest, or class strife between elites and the common people? No one knows.

The Maya

As the Olmecs declined, their neighbors to the east — the Maya — prospered. The Maya lived in an area the size of Great Britain. This part of the Yucatan Peninsula had poor, infertile soil and no large rivers. Not ideal conditions for a successful civilization. Yet its people grew corn, beans, squash, peppers, and cacao (chocolate). The Maya had no horses or oxen. Without animals to carry things, they had portable luxury goods. Feathers, jade, gold, and shells were very valuable to them.

The Maya organized themselves into small city-states instead of one big empire. The largest city-state was Tikal. By 750 CE, it had about 40,000 inhabitants. Tikal's residents had specialized jobs and were ruled by elites. Mayan city-states fought each other frequently, mainly to capture enemies and sacrifice them to the Mayan gods.



We know a lot about the Maya because they had an advanced writing system. Mayan writing included both pictographs and symbols for syllables. Scholars have made great progress in translating the language. Though few books have survived, there are many carved inscriptions.

Mayan priests were known as shamans. They were quite advanced in cosmology and mathematics. They invented three kinds of calendars. A 365-day solar year calendar was used for agricultural cycles. A 260-day ritual calendar was used for daily affairs. A third calendar, called the Long Count calendar, went back to 3114 BCE. It recorded the longer passage of time.

The Maya calculated a solar year as 365.242 days. That number is only 17 seconds shorter than the figures of modern astronomers. They also introduced the idea of zero. In Afro-Eurasia, Hindu scholars first represented zero in the 800s CE.

The Maya believed the world had ended four times already. The thought they were living in the fifth world, or Fifth Sun. They believed its survival depended on the life energy that came from the blood of sacrificed humans.

Human sacrifice was important in Mayan culture. In their creation story, the gods started the Sun burning by sacrificing themselves to it. The only way to keep the Sun going was to offer human blood.

The Maya bled themselves using cactus or bone spines. They would pierce their earlobes, hands, or penises. They also ritually killed and sacrificed humans. Some of these customs may have been passed down from the Olmecs.

A ball game the Maya played was definitely taken from the Olmecs. This game was played with a rubber ball about 8 inches in diameter. The object was to put the ball through high rings. But you couldn't use your hands. It was like basketball, just with no hands! Sometimes the game was played for simple sport. But sometimes, captives were forced to play for their lives. Losers were sacrificed to the gods. Their heads were displayed on racks alongside some ball courts.

Mayan society changed rapidly between 800 and 925 CE. People left the cities and moved back into the countryside. Historians aren't sure why. Perhaps it was earthquakes, erosion, or drought. Or maybe revolts and invasions. Probably some combination of these brought down Mayan civilization. The Maya didn't just disappear. Several million descendants are still alive today.

Teotihuacan

In the center of Mexico at about the same time, another amazing city developed: Teotihuacan (tay-oh-tee-wa-KAHN). It was located in the highlands of Mexico, more than a mile (some 2 kilometers) above sea level. Water flowing from surrounding mountains created several large lakes in this area.



Teotihuacan began as an agricultural village near present-day Mexico City. By 500 CE, it had 100,000 to 200,000 people. It ranked as one of the six largest cities in the world. Not much is understood about its government. Its art shows gods rather than royalty. Its people expanded Olmec graphic symbols. But all its books were destroyed about 750 CE, when it seems that unknown invaders burned the city.

Tenochtitlan and the Aztecs

Mexica people, better known as Aztecs, carried Mesoamerican civilization to its height. They built the city of Tenochtitlan (the-noch-tee-TLAHN), or “place of the cactus fruit.”

The Mexica (me-SHI-ka) came from northern Mexico. They settled on an island in a large lake in the Valley of Mexico in 1325. The group was given the name Aztecs by the German explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt in the early 1800s. In 1428, the Aztecs joined two other neighboring cities to form the Triple Alliance. The Alliance conquered other cities to collect payments that could support its expanding population. The conquests also provided sacrificial victims for their religious rituals.

By the early 1500s, the Aztecs had conquered most of Mesoamerica. They ruled about 11 million to 12 million people. The annual tribute they received in corn alone was 7,000 tons. They also received 2 million cotton cloaks, as well as jewelry, obsidian knives, rubber balls, jaguar skins, parrot feathers, jade, emeralds, seashells, vanilla beans, and chocolate. They had no money. Everyone was paid in food and goods. Their population was at least 200,000 to 300,000 in the capital. This was several times the size of London at the time.

Warriors were honored in Aztec culture. They built their society around a military elite. A council of the most successful warriors chose the ruler. Warriors could wear fine cotton cloth and feathers instead of clothing made from plant fibers. Aztecs believed that warriors who died in battle went straight to the paradise of the Sun God. Priests were also considered among the elite. Most people were commoners who worked the land or were slaves.

The Aztecs adopted traditions that dated back to the Olmecs. They played the same ball game and kept a complex calendar. They believed that the gods had set the world in motion through human sacrifices. Only ritual human sacrifice could prevent destruction of the culture by earthquakes or famine.

The god of war, Huitzilopochli (we-tsee-loh-POCK-tlee), became the most important god in Tenochtitlan. His priests placed more emphasis on human sacrifice than did earlier traditions. Priests laid the victims — mostly captives of war — over a curved stone high on a pyramid. They then cut open the chest with an obsidian blade and flung the still-beating heart into a ceremonial basin. The blood flowed down the pyramid.

The elites supported warfare, but they also devoted themselves to poetry. This, they considered the highest art. One Aztec ruler composed this poem in the early 1400s. It reveals the Aztec sense of the fleeting world:

Truly do we live on earth?

Not forever on earth; only a little while here.

Be it jade, it shatters.

Be it gold, it breaks.

Be it quetzal feathers, it tears apart.

Not forever on earth; only a little while here.

Like a painting, we will be erased.

Like a flower, we will dry up here on earth,

Like plumed vestments of the precious bird,

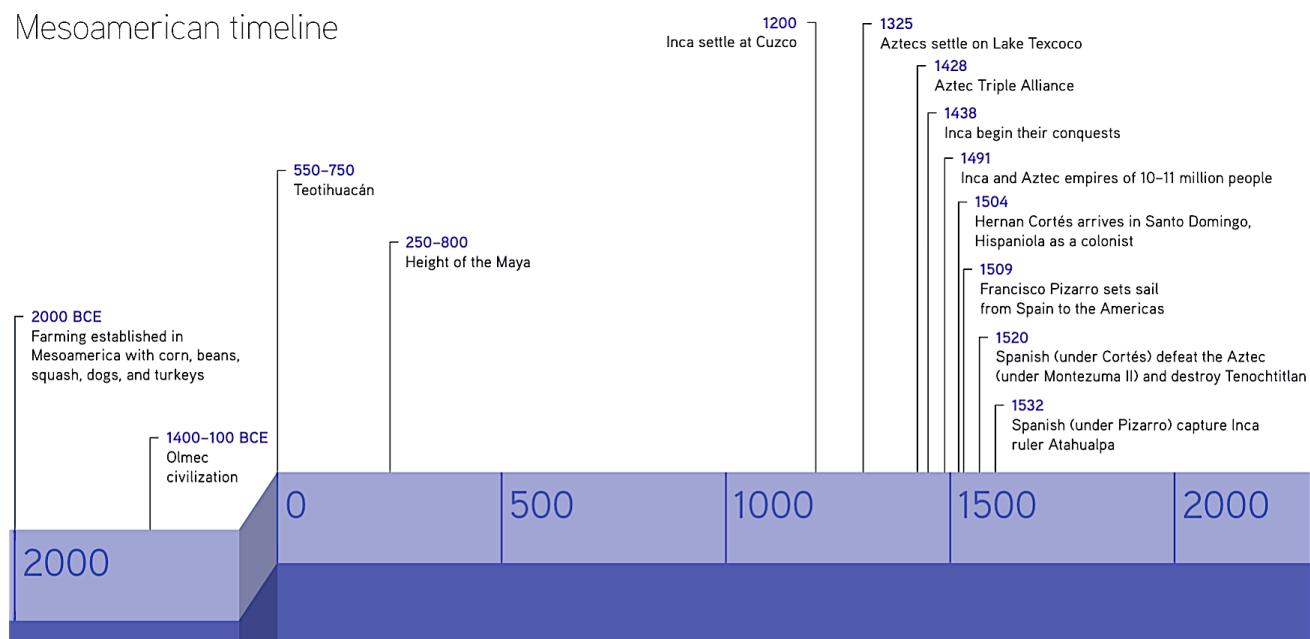
That precious bird with an agile neck,

We will come to an end.

The fall of the Aztecs

The Aztec civilization of the Fifth Sun was destroyed as it reached its peak. In 1520, Spanish conquistadors led by Hernán Cortés used horses, guns, and steel swords to defeat the Aztecs in battle. Eventually, the Spanish surrounded Tenochtitlan and starved its inhabitants.

Many Aztecs died of smallpox. They had no immunity to the disease since it originated in cows. When the Aztecs surrendered, 80 percent of their population was already dead. The Spanish controlled all of Mexico within 10 years, easily defeating the survivors of this new disease.



How do we know this? The Aztecs had a system of writing, though it was not as advanced as the Maya's. The Spanish conquerors destroyed the Aztecs' books in an attempt to wipe out their religious beliefs. Many inscriptions and a few books survive.

But a Franciscan priest, Bernadino de Sahagún, learned the Aztec language. He interviewed many Aztec survivors. He produced a 12-volume encyclopedia of their customs and beliefs. The Aztec language Nahuatl is still used by hundreds of thousands of Mexicans. It has given English words such as chocolate, tomato, coyote, and tamale.

There are some surprising similarities between Tenochtitlan and Uruk in Mesopotamia. Both cities had a social rank, with rulers at the top and slaves at the bottom. War was common in both places. Both cities required others to pay them tribute. Large public structures, powerful

religious rituals, and fantastic art and literature were found in both places. The differences are also striking. Tenochtitlan believed strongly in human sacrifice and was worried about the world coming to an end. It also formed thousands of years later than Uruk.

Comparing the Americas to Afro-Eurasia

To compare the Americas with Afro-Eurasia, let's look around the Americas a bit. We have seen agrarian civilization develop in Mesoamerica. Can we find it anywhere else?

Civilization in South America developed along the western coast. Early states there faced floods, earthquakes and heavy rain. These prevented them from truly developing.

In the fifteenth century, the Incas built a state high in the mountains. Its capital was Cuzco, at 13,000 feet. At its most powerful, the Inca Empire controlled 10 million to 11 million people. It covered lands from present-day Ecuador all the way to Chile. The Incas had no written language. They used knots tied into ropes as a system of writing called quipu.

Smallpox spread to this area even before the Spanish arrived. By 1527, Francisco Pizzaro's soldiers had used their superior technology to conquer the huge Inca civilization already weakened by disease.

Civilization as we have defined it didn't emerge anywhere else in the Americas. Many wonderful cultures and chiefdoms arose. Yet none were able to grow the food necessary for a dense population. Still, cultivation of tobacco and corn spread widely. People farmed, but still needed to hunt and gather.

The Americas did not develop many technologies that arose in Afro-Eurasia. For example, Americans did not use wheels. Well, except the Maya, who only put them on toys! Americans did not melt iron or steel. They used a glassy volcanic rock, called obsidian, for blades. They had no swords, guns or horses.

There wasn't as much long-distance travel in the Americas as in Afro-Eurasia. Afro-Eurasia stretches east to west. People traveling this way stayed in roughly the same latitude and a similar climate. The Americas stretch north to south. This creates huge changes in climate as you travel. It was more difficult to exchange crops, because they would not easily grow in different climates. Americans built large canoes but not sailing ships. They stayed close to the shore and in calm waters.

States and civilizations arose later in the Americas than they did in Afro-Eurasia. Once American civilizations emerged, they were not able to connect with each other. Therefore, they couldn't share their new ideas or learn collectively as much as the peoples of Afro-Eurasia. Still, the civilizations created were similar to those in Afro-Eurasia. These civilizations were still developing. It seems likely that they would have continued to if they had not been destroyed by Europeans.

Most historians believe that differences in disease immunity made the biggest impact when Europeans arrived in 1492. Many common diseases in Afro-Eurasia like smallpox and the flu started in domestic animals and passed to humans.

Afro-Eurasians developed immunity to these diseases. They had lived in close contact with domestic animals like cows and sheep for ages. But the Americans hadn't. When Africans and Europeans brought these "bugs" to the Americas, disease and death overtook the Americans.

History and geography gave Europeans the edge in conquering the people of the Americas, while many Africans were swept into events as slaves. It is a disturbing story, but it is the one that helped create the modern world.