

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 in Mesoamerica blossomed and crashed repeatedly, creating a unique worldview and some mysteries that remain today.

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.

During the eras of hunting and gathering and of early agriculture, societies in these zones developed almost entirely 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 into one continent called Pangaea. North and South America were closely stuck together. As Pangaea broke up, North and South America were 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 because it changed ocean currents. The Atlantic current could no longer flow into the Pacific Ocean so it turned north up the coast of North America and over to Europe, carrying warm water from the Caribbean. This raised temperatures in Europe.

Today North and South America are joined by a small strip of land called the Isthmus of Panama. It's only 40 miles wide and 400 miles long. An isthmus is a narrow strip of land connecting two larger land areas, usually with water on either side. In Mesoamerica, civilization developed in Mexico and neighboring parts of Central America, all just north of the Isthmus of Panama.

Early developments in Mesoamerica

People in the Americas grew and ate different foods than people in Mesopotamia. The Americas had different indigenous 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.

The ancestor of modern corn, "teosinte," has cobs about the size of a human thumb. It took people about 5,000 years to domesticate teosinte and breed corncobs large enough to support city life. They also cultivated peanuts and cotton. Dogs and turkeys were the only domesticated animals early Americans had.

The Olmecs



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

The Olmecs made epic and long-lasting art. Huge heads carved out of volcanic rock are their most famous productions. Some of the heads 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, Tres Zapotes, declined by about 100 BCE for unknown reasons. Was it volcanic eruptions? A shift in the flow of rivers? Scholars believe that the Olmecs may have deliberately destroyed their capital. Was there civil unrest? Class strife? 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 Colorado or 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 built terraces to trap silt from the small rivers. They grew corn, beans, squash, peppers, cassava, and cacao (chocolate). With no beasts of burden (horses, oxen), their luxury goods were portable — feathers, jade, gold, and shells.

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



We know a lot about the Mayans because they developed a sophisticated writing system. It was the most advanced in Mesoamerica. Mayan writing included both pictographs and symbols for syllables. Scholars have made great progress in translating the language. Though few books have survived, we have many carved inscriptions.

Maya shamans (priests) 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 large-scale passage of time.

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

The Maya believed the world had ended four times already and that the Maya were living in the fifth world — the Fifth Sun. The survival of this world depended on the life energy of sacrificial blood.

In the Mayan creation story, the *Popol Vuh*, the gods created people out of their own genius and sacrifice, nothing else. The Maya believed that the gods set the Sun burning by sacrificing themselves to start it. The only way to keep the Sun going was to offer human blood. The Maya practiced ritual blood-letting using cactus or bone spines to pierce their earlobes, hands, or penises. They also carried out some ritual sacrifice of humans. The Maya may have inherited their calendar and sacrificial rituals from the Olmecs.

The Olmecs definitely invented a ball game that the Maya adopted. This game was played with a rubber ball about 8 inches in diameter. The object was to put the ball through a high ring without using one's hands. It's like basketball, but with no hands! Sometimes the game was played for simple sport. But sometimes, captives were forced to play for their lives. The losers were sacrificed to the gods. Their heads were displayed on racks alongside some ball courts.

Mayan society experienced a rapid transition between 800 and 925 CE. The world of cities ended as populations moved back into the countryside. Historians debate the possible causes of the change — civil revolts, invasions, erosion, earthquakes, disease, drought. Likely some combination of these brought down a once-vibrant 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 an estimated 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 looking for a place to settle. All the desirable places were already inhabited, except an island in a large lake in the Valley of Mexico. They settled there in 1325. The group was given the name Aztecs by the German explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt in the early 1800s.

The Mexica/Aztecs built up their food production by creating floating islands of soil held together by willow trees. Their men hired themselves out as paid soldiers to other towns until they became strong enough to conquer others on their own.

In 1428, they joined with two other neighboring cities to form the Triple Alliance. The Alliance set out to conquer other cities to collect tribute 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 coins or 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. This also applied to women who died in childbirth with their first child. Priests were also considered among the elite. Most people were commoners who worked the land or slaves who were domestic servants.

The Aztecs adopted traditions that dated back to the Olmecs. They played the same ball game and kept a complex calendar. They adopted traditional religious beliefs, believing that the gods had set the world in motion through sacrifice. Priests practiced bloodletting on themselves and believed that ritual sacrifice of humans was essential to prevent the destruction of the Fifth Sun by earthquakes or famine.

The god of war, Huitzilopochli (we-tsee-loh-POCK-tee), 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 and cut open the chest with an obsidian blade to fling the still-beating heart into a ceremonial basin. The desired blood flowed down the pyramid.

The elites supported warfare, but they also devoted themselves to poetry, which 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,

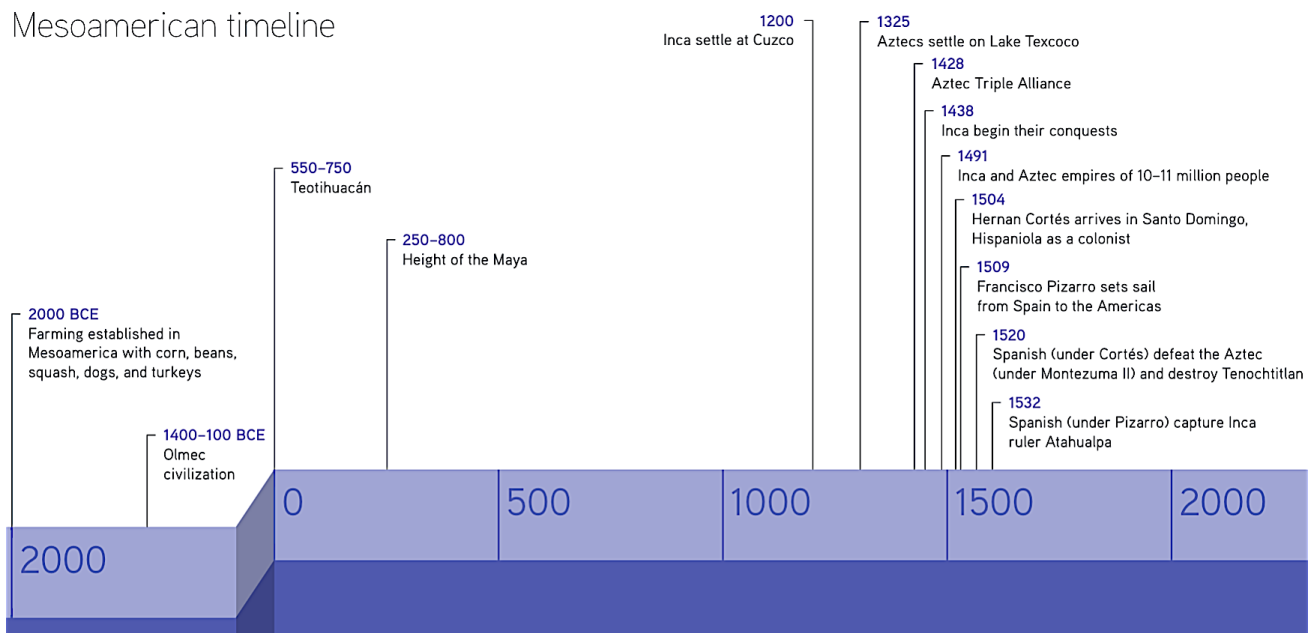
*Like plumed vestments of the precious bird,
That precious bird with an agile neck,
We will come to an end.*

The fall of the Aztecs

The Aztec civilization of the Fifth Sun was destroyed just as it was thriving. 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 had died. The Spanish controlled all of Mexico within 10 years, easily overwhelming the survivors of this new disease.

Mesoamerican timeline



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 (1499-1590), learned the Aztec language, Nahuatl, and interviewed many Aztec survivors. He produced a 12-volume encyclopedia of their customs and beliefs. Nahuatl is still a living language for hundreds of thousands of Mexicans. It has given English such important words as chocolate, tomato, coyote, and tamale.

There are some remarkable similarities between Tenochtitlan and Uruk in Mesopotamia. Both cities had hierarchies with elite rulers, slaves, lots of warfare, mandatory tribute, monumental buildings, powerful religious rituals, and fantastic art and literature. The differences are also striking: Tenochtitlan's emphasis on human sacrifice, its anxiety about the world coming to an end, and its emergence 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?

In South America, civilization developed along the long coastline on the western side of the continent. Early states there could not overcome frequent floods, earthquakes, and torrential rains to develop and increase their populations.

Finally, 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 Quito, Ecuador, all the way to Santiago, Chile. This civilization had no written language. It used knots tied into ropes as a system of writing called quipu. But smallpox spread to this area even before Spanish soldiers arrived. By 1527, Spanish conquistadors under Francisco Pizarro had used their superior technology to conquer a vast Inca civilization weakened by disease.

Civilization as we have defined it didn't emerge anywhere else in the Americas. Many wonderful cultures and chiefdoms arose, but none were able to grow the food necessary for a highly dense population. Still, cultivation of tobacco and corn spread widely. Even the basin of the Amazon River may have been more densely populated than previously thought. People farmed, but supplemented their agriculture with hunting and gathering.

The Americas did not develop many of the technological innovations present in Afro-Eurasia. For example, Americans did not use wheels. Well, except the Maya, who put them on toys! Perhaps Americans didn't use wheels because they had no large domestic animals to pull wheeled devices. 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 the same latitude and a similar climate. The Americas stretch north to south, creating huge changes in climate. This made it more difficult to exchange crops, because they would not easily grow at different latitudes. Americans built large canoes but not sailing vessels. They stayed close to the shore and in calm waters. They made some north-south connections, but these were less frequent than the east-west connections of Afro-Eurasia.

As a result of these factors, 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, share their innovations, or learn collectively as much as their counterparts in Afro-Eurasia. The civilizations created were similar to those in Afro-Eurasia. It seems likely that they would have continued their development if they had not been destroyed by Europeans.

Most historians believe that differences in immunity to disease made the biggest impact when the people of the two hemispheres connected in 1492. Many common diseases in Afro-Eurasia — measles, smallpox, influenza, and bubonic plague — originated in domestic animals and then passed to humans. Since Afro-Eurasians had frequent contact with domestic animals, they developed some immunity to the diseases by being exposed to the dangerous microorganisms. Disease exchanges along the Silk Roads spread these immunities. This could not happen in the Americas without domestic animals. When Africans and Europeans brought these “bugs” to the Americas, disease and death overtook the Americans.

Historical and geographical factors 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.