

CHAPTER 1

Not Just Pyramids, Explorers, and Heroes

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Interpret the evolution of Mesoamerican civilizations via a timeline through their Preclassical and Postclassical periods.
- Show the movement of the different Indian societies/civilizations in the context of the spread of corn.
- Explain the evolution of agricultural innovations, urban centers, architecture, calendars, and mathematical and literary achievements.
- Trace the changes in the development of classes and gender differences as the populations grew from villages to chiefdoms, to urban centers, and trace the evolving modes of production.
- Analyze and contextualize the world system, placing the disparate Mesoamerican civilizations within this model.

The primary culture of Mexico and the Americas is Indian. Because this fact challenges the legitimacy of the conquest, many Western scholars minimize this truism and they disrespect or slight the histories of the Indians. Mesoamerican and Andean civilizations did not need the Europeans to give them civilization; they are two of the world's cradles of civilization rivaling other great civilizations in China, the Indus Valley, the Middle East, and Africa. The Mesoamerican and Andean civilizations shared with them similar features. All of the cradles of civilization had a stable food source—this provided the people with an adequate supply of food to fuel a population explosion. In the Eastern Hemisphere, the *basic grains* were wheat, rice, rye, oats, millet, and barley. In North America, corn was developed at least 9,000 years ago in what is today central Mexico, spreading to what is now North America and the Andean region of South America. Corn was essential to the evolution of indigenous cultures, so much so that indigenous peoples worshipped maize. Corn made possible the changes in modes of production and helped mobilize labor to meet the challenges of population growth and cope with environmental change. Corn, like the pyramids, was a product of human labor and ingenuity.

40,000 BC

8000 BC

2000 BC

AD 200

AD 900

AD 1519

Stages of Development

40,000 BC–8000 BC	<i>Paleoindian</i>	<i>Hunting and Gathering.</i> Characterized by bands of hunters and by seed and fruit gatherers.
8000 BC–2000 BC	<i>Archaic</i>	Incipient agriculture. Domestication of maize and other plants. Earliest corn grown in Tehuacán circa 5000 BC.
2000 BC–AD 200	<i>Formative Preclassic</i>	Intensification of farming and growth of villages. Olmeca chiefdom stands out. Reliance on maize and the spread of a religious tradition that focuses on the earth and fertility. Organizational evolution, 1200–400 BC: numerous chiefdoms evolve through Mesoamerica. The Maya appear during this period. Monte Albán is established circa 400 BC–AD 200. Rapid population growth, a market system, and agricultural intensification occur. Development of the solar calendar. Villages grow into centers.
AD 200–900	<i>Classic</i>	<i>The Golden Age of Mesoamerica.</i> The evolution of state-level societies. The emergence of kings. Priests become more important. Complex irrigation, population growth, and highly stratified society. Excellent ceramics, sculpture, and murals. Building of huge pyramids. Teotihuacán had more than 150,000 people, the largest city outside China.
AD 900–1519	<i>Postclassic</i>	<i>Growth of City-States and Empires.</i> Civil, market, and commercial elements become more important. The Azteca and Tarascan empires emerge as dominant powers. Cyclical conquests. Use of metals, increased trade, and warfare.

Sources: Robert M. Carmack, Janine Gasco, and Gary H. Gossen, *The Legacy of Mesoamerica: History and Culture of a Native American Civilization* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 48–49; also see Michael C. Meyer, William L. Sherman, and Susan M. Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

The Cradles of Civilizations

Worldwide people began settling in sedentary societies around 8000 BC as agriculture became more common. Populaces formed laws based on mores and folkways. Slowly six cradles of civilization formed: China, the Indus Valley, Mesopotamia, the Nile, the Andean region of South America, and Mesoamerica.¹ Food surpluses made possible “specialization of labor” and the development of complex social institutions such as organized religion and education. Trade and a writing system facilitated the cross-fertilization of cultures. The interactive map and timeline at the following website shows the formation of such civilizations.

Time is very important in understanding history. It determines the questions we ask. Time represents the knowledge a people have accumulated. To gain more understanding of the science of time, go to the end of the book and read “Creating a Timeline.” Correlate this discussion with the online maps (cited in the text and in The Map Room at the end of the book) and with the timeline above, which shows the stages of cultural evolution in Mesoamerica.

The Corn People: An Overview

When the first modern humans migrated to what are called the Americas is not known precisely but is estimated to be about 20,000–30,000 years ago. Their migration into Western Europe began about 30,000 years ago. By some accounts, the New World was inhabited by about 15,000 BC. However, these are theories

and some linguists have raised the notion that language spread from south to north instead of from north to south.² There is the probability that some of these early people may well have migrated back to Asia from the Americas, with the last migrations ceasing when the Bering Strait's ice bridge melted around 9000 BC.

The earliest known villages in the Americas appeared along the coasts as early as 12,500 years ago.³ But it was not until around 7000 BC, when the hunters and fruit gatherers began to farm, that they began to alter or control their environment. In the Valley of Mexico, the climate changed, and water sources, game, and flora became scarce. As the population grew, the people were forced to turn to agriculture or perish. The evolution of this civilization was made possible by the cultivation of maize (corn). The origin appears to be the central valley of Mexico as early as 9,000 years ago. Corn became the primary dietary staple throughout Mesoamerica and then spread northward and southward.⁴ Native Americans commonly planted maize, beans, and squash, which formed the basis of their diet.

Maize unified Native American cultures. Recent studies show that people traveled with the seed to various places in the Americas. Archaeologists discovered the remains of the largest human settlement in the American Southwest dating from 760 BC to 200 BC, which included evidence of maize farming. The completeness of the maize culture supports the theory that Mesoamerican farmers brought corn into the Southwest.⁵ Corn spread a culture that extended along what today is U.S. Interstate Highway 10 into the eastern half of the United States, eventually becoming a staple throughout much of North America.⁶ The symbolic significance of maize and its role can be found in ceremony and ritual throughout Mesoamerica and the Southwest. The presence of maize was also found in modern-day Peru as early as AD 450.⁷

The European invasion put the corn cultures in danger of extinction. This threat continues today in places like the remote mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico, where traces of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are invading the native corn. Mexico, which banned the commercial planting of transgenic corn in 1998, imports about 6.2 million tons of corn a year, mostly from the United States. About a quarter of the U.S. commercial corn crop contains GMOs, and after harvest it is mixed with conventional corn. As a result, much of the Mexican corn is now considered to contain low levels of “background” GMOs. This concerns Mexicans since GMO foods and seed are an environmental threat to wild plants and species such as the monarch butterfly.⁸

The Olmeca 1500 BC–500 BC

Around 3000 BC, a qualitative change took place in the life of the corn people. The agriculture surpluses and concentration of population encouraged specialization of labor. Shamans became more important in society. Tools became more sophisticated and pottery more crafted. History shows the development of civilization occurring at about the same time as in North Africa and Asia, where the “cradle of civilization” is traditionally believed to have been located. Mesoamerican identity had already begun to form, marked by a dependence on maize agriculture and a growing population.⁹

Because the Olmeca civilization was so advanced, some people speculate that the Olmeca suddenly arrived from Africa—or even from outer space! Most scholars, however, agree that Olmeca, known as the mother culture of Mexico, was the product of the cross-fertilization of indigenous cultures that included other Mesoamerican civilizations.¹⁰ The Olmeca “built the first kingdoms and established a template of world view and political symbolism the Maya would inherit.”¹¹

One of a few known primary civilizations in the world—that is, state-like organizations that evolved without ideas taken from other systems—the Olmeca culture is one of the world's first tropical lowland civilizations, an antecedent to later Mayan “Classic” culture. The Olmeca settled villages and cities in the Gulf Coast lowlands, mostly in present-day southeastern Veracruz and Tabasco, and in northern Central America.

Around 2000 BC, the production of maize and other domesticated crops became sufficient to support whole villages. A second breakthrough occurred with the introduction of pottery throughout the region. The earliest pottery came from the Oco, who populated the Pacific coast of Chiapas and Guatemala. Although not much is known about the Oco, their pottery is found from Veracruz to El Salvador and Honduras. The development of pottery allowed the storage of food surpluses, encouraging the Olmeca and other Mesoamerican people to form small villages. Little evidence of social ranking and craft specialization has been found in the early villages, which evolved from an egalitarian community into a hierarchical agrarian

society of toolmakers, potters, and sculptors. As they evolved, the Olmeca became more patriarchal, and they probably excluded women from production outside the home.

The Olmeca began to build villages on the Gulf Coast as early as 1500 BC. By 1150 BC the Olmeca civilization formed settlements of thousands of people; constructed large formal temples built on earthen mounds; and carved colossal nine-foot-high stone heads. San Lorenzo was one such settlement, an urban center with public buildings, a drainage system, and a ball court.

La Venta (population 18,000), a major ceremonial site in Tabasco, eclipsed San Lorenzo (2,500) as the center of the Olmeca civilization in about 900 BC.¹² Tres Zapotes (3,000) would eventually overtake La Venta. By the Middle Formative period, other chiefdoms emerged throughout Mesoamerica. Trade networks linked the Olmeca with contemporaries in Oaxaca and Central Mexico. In the Valley of Oaxaca, San José Mogote functioned as a primary center, as did Chalcatzingo in the present-day state of Morelos. Priestly elite dominated the primary Olmeca settlements. As time marched on, the shaman class played an ever-increasing role in the lives of the people. From these centers, they ruled dispersed populations of farmers, who periodically assembled at the ceremonial and trade sites to meet labor obligations, attend ceremonies, and use the marketplace. The elite had greater access to valuable trade goods and occupied larger homes than the common people. The elite were even buried in larger tombs.

The Olmeca left behind archaeological evidence of their hieroglyphic script and the foundations for the complex Mayan and Zapotecan calendars. The Olmeca developed three calendars: a ritual calendar with a 260-day cycle that was used for religious purposes; a solar calendar with 18 months of 20 days, plus 5 days tacked on (corresponding to our 365-day calendar); and a combination of the two calendars in which religious days determined tasks such as the naming of a newborn infant. In any case, the Olmeca used a more accurate calendar before the time of Christ than the West uses today.¹³

The development of the calendar required a sophisticated knowledge of mathematics. There is considerable difference of opinion about whether the Olmeca or the Maya discovered the concept of the number *zero* circa 200 BC.¹⁴ (The Hindus discovered the zero in the fifth century AD, and not until AD 1202 did Arab mathematicians export the concept to Europe.) Pre-Columbian astronomy, too, was far ahead of Europe's. The writing system of the Olmeca is still being deciphered. These hieroglyphic texts represent more than a history; they also constitute literature.¹⁵ Other Olmeca legacies are the ball game and the feathered-serpent cult of Quetzalcoatl that they shared with most Mesoamerican cultures.

The growth of agricultural surpluses increased trade, which gave the Olmeca the luxury of developing advanced art forms. Although they are best known for the massive carved full-rounded heads, they also crafted smaller figurines of polished jade. Religion and the natural world inspired the subject matter for Olmeca art.

The Olmeca culture passed its organizational forms, religion, and art to the Maya, Teotihuacán, and later Azteca societies. About 300 BC, Olmeca civilization supposedly mysteriously vanished. In truth, it continued to exist from 150 BC to AD 450, in what some scholars call the Epi-Olmec period.¹⁶

The Maya

Mayan agricultural villages appeared about 1800 BC. The Maya formed a trade network that interacted with other chiefdoms in the Gulf Coast, Oaxaca, and Central Mexico. Merchants from Teotihuacán lived in Maya centers such as Tikal from at least the first century AD.¹⁷ The Maya experimented with advanced forms of agriculture, dug irrigation canals, and reclaimed wetlands by constructing raised fields. As their population increased, they built larger ceremonial centers. At this point, as in the case of other Mesoamerican societies, rulers took control of religious rituals and the belief system.

From AD 250 to 900, the Maya lived in an area roughly half the size of Texas (today the Mexican states of Yucatán, Campeche, Quintana Roo, part of Chiapas, Tabasco, as well as Guatemala, Belize, western Honduras, and El Salvador). The divine *ahauob*, the “divine lord,” ruled millions of farmers, craftsmen, merchants, warriors, and nobles and presided over capitals studded with pyramids, temples, palaces, and vast open plazas serviced by urban populations numbering in the tens of thousands.¹⁸ Agriculture and trade produced prosperity and gave the Maya the ability to build temple-pyramids, monuments, and palaces of

limestone masonry in dozens of states. They also used their astronomy skills to link earthly events to those of the heavens. Their calendars were a product of time science.¹⁹

In the ninth century AD, the Maya Classic culture began to decline, probably because of revolts, warfare, disease, and/or crop failure. Overpopulation explains the internal strife and dissatisfaction with their leadership and is a possible explanation for their decline. But the Maya left many examples of their accomplishments. In a limestone cavern in northern Guatemala, through narrow tunnels frequented 12 centuries ago, there are black carbon images of a sacred ball game, musicians, dwarfs contemplating shells, homosexual lovers locked in embrace, and columns of intricately entwined hieroglyphs.

The decipherment of the glyphs raises many questions. For example, little doubt exists about the presence of homosexuality; the question is how society formed attitudes toward homosexuality.²⁰ Research in this area is just beginning and, like past literature on the subject, it comes from highly biased sources. One of the most interesting accounts is by Richard Trexler, who argues that Spaniards would often feminize their enemies in warfare, calling them sodomites and pederasts. Trexler says that European notions form much of what we know about homosexuality. In the case of the invasion and subjugation of the Mesoamericans, the Spaniards' homophobia suggested to them their own moral supremacy. Sodomy "was seen as either a sign of insufficient civilization or a sign of moral decay."²¹

Maya Hieroglyphic Writing

The decipherment of hieroglyphic writing is leading to a greater understanding of the Maya culture, including the identification of dynasties of rulers and an understanding of how the various people interacted.²² Direct evidence from bones of the ancient Maya suggests that the common people seldom lived beyond the age of 40—many died in infancy and early childhood. Men and women in the ruling class were physically larger than others—as much as four inches taller. Furthermore, evidence from bones and inscriptions shows that the ruling class sometimes lived remarkably long lives. One of the greatest rulers of the ancient city of Yaxchilán, Shield Jaguar, lived almost 100 years.

Maya glyphs suggest that a ball game, played throughout Mesoamerica, served as a means to communicate with the gods. It also enhanced social and economic organization and was a substitute for war.²³ Revered by both the Maya and the Aztecs, the game possessed deep religious significance. The object of the game, which was played by small groups in an outdoor stone court, was to pass a large rubber ball through a stone ring at opposite ends of the court.²⁴

The Maya based their numerical system on counting on the fingers and toes; for example, in Quiché, a branch of Maya culture, the word for the number 20 symbolized "a whole person." This method of counting is also reflected in the decimal divisions. The Maya used a system based on the number 20, with only three symbols: a bar for *five*, a dot for *one*, and a stylized shell for *zero*. As we have discussed above, the Maya, if not the Olmecs, were probably the first people to develop the mathematical concept for zero.²⁵

Their knowledge of mathematics allowed the Maya to develop an advanced calendar. The astronomy of the Maya was not limited to observation of the stars and approximate predictions of the movements of the heavenly bodies. Using sophisticated numerical systems and various tabular calculations in conjunction with the hieroglyphic script, Maya astronomers calculated figures running into the millions.²⁶

At the time of the Spanish conquest, the Maya still wrote glyphs—not only on stone slate but in hand-made books. In 1566 in the Yucatán, Friar Diego de Landa read a great number of Maya books. According to him, because the books were about the indigenous antiquities and sciences, which he believed were based on nothing but superstitions and falsehoods of the devil, he burned them. However, not all of the Maya books were burned; some were sent to Europe as part of the booty seized by Cortés from the Native Americans. The Spaniards could not decipher them, and over the years, most crumbled into dust or were thrown out as trash.

Maya Society

Like other Mesoamerican societies, the Maya lived within the matrix of the community. They organized themselves into extended families in which there was a patrilineal descent. Multiple generations of a clan

that had a common ancestor resided in one household compound. The inheritor of supreme authority was established through primogeniture, which resulted in the rule of clan elders. Kings also based their legitimacy on their membership in a clan. The kings erected monuments to commemorate their victories and to record their lineage.²⁷

During the Late Classic period, Tikal, a kingdom of around 500,000 people, was the largest known Maya center. It covered about 14 square miles and included more than 3,000 structures. It made alliances with other city-states but also often used force to expand its territory.²⁸

The glyphs on a prominent Tikal building reveal the names of notable women such as Bird Claw, Jaguar Seat, Twelve Macaw, and the Woman of Tikal.²⁹ These women, although buried in honored places, were present only through a relationship with an important male. The differences between males and females changed with time. Scholars suggest that there was more equality before AD 25 than after. As in most advanced civilizations, class differences existed and over time, one's position in society became hereditary. Therefore, a distinct divide between high-ranking members of Tikal society and the poor existed, and this widened over time.

The glyphs reveal few actual women rulers among the Maya. In Palenque during the sixth and seventh centuries, there were only two women rulers, Lady Kanal-Ikal and Lady Zac-Kuk. Both were the descendants of kings and thus legitimate rulers. They inherited the throne and passed it on to their children. Lady Zac-Kuk was the granddaughter of Lady Kanal-Ikal and was the mother of the Great Pacal, who built grand buildings as testimony to her greatness. Indeed, Pacal got his legitimacy through his mother's line of ancestry. She enjoyed great prestige because she lived for 25 years into his rule. Pacal died in his nineties.³⁰

The Decline of Mayan Civilization

After AD 909 the Maya built few new temples, and even fewer cities, except in the northern Yucatán at sites such as Chichén Itzá and Tulum. Chichén Itzá was first founded about AD 400 and was governed by priests. The architecture reflects this religious dominance and there are many representations of the god Chaac, the Maya rain god, on the buildings. With the arrival of the Itzá from Central Mexico about AD 850, the city was rebuilt and images of the god Kukulcán, the plumed serpent, became numerous. The Itzá were politically and commercially aggressive rulers.³¹ Chichén Itzá, the dominant Maya center in the Yucatán Peninsula during the early Postclassic period, was closely linked to the Tula people in the north, and was greatly influenced by that culture. The importance of the center declined after the late twelfth century, when a rival Maya group sacked it. Tulum and other coastal cities were important centers for sea-based commerce.³²

Glyphs may someday answer many questions about the Maya, who built their civilization in a hostile and fragile rain forest. How did 6 million Maya coexist in this difficult environment? For a time, these civilizations met the challenge, and they developed a sophisticated knowledge of astronomy and mathematics that allowed them to increase production of food and other necessities. They constructed a mosaic of sunken gardens, fruit trees, and terraces—a system that used the rainfall, fertile soil, and shade of the jungle to their advantage without permanently harming it. Maya farmers dug canals and built raised fields in the swamps for intensive agriculture.³³ Until recently, archaeologists assumed the Maya used a slash-and-burn method in which farmers cut and burned the jungle-planted crops for a few years and then moved on when nutrients were depleted.³⁴ A true slash-and-burn method would have supported only about 65 people per square mile. However, the Maya population density had already reached about 125 people per square mile by AD 600.

We can speculate that engineering projects like canals, reservoirs, and the terraced fields came about at the cost of human labor. After hundreds of years of relative prosperity and power, the urban infrastructure of many Maya cities broke down. The drop in the food supply increased between the lower and the elite classes and between city-states. Today, Mesoamerican scholars generally agree that no single factor caused this fall. But, by the Late Classic period, populations suffered from malnutrition and other chronic diseases. The environment simply could not support the large population indefinitely.³⁵

Surely, class oppression and war played a role in the decline. The common person labored in the fields, maintaining a complex agricultural network, while priests resided in empty ceremonial centers. The nobles plainly oppressed the commoner—the warrior, temple builder, and farmer. The Maya organized construction crews of *corvee*, or unpaid labor, and the growth of this system magnified class hostilities over

time. In addition, evidence shows a sharp decrease in rainfall between the years AD 800 and 1000—one of the most severe climate changes in 10,000 years—at roughly the time of the Maya decline in the ninth century. The drought caused tensions: the result was that cities, villages, and fields were burned and wars increased.³⁶

Although the cities of the Maya lowlands shared a common culture, they were not politically unified. Each region had a capital city and numerous smaller subject cities, towns, and villages. Furthermore, increased trade and competition led to warfare. The Maya civilization, however, endured for more than 1,000 years during what is known as the “golden age of Mesoamerica.” In the Postclassical period, the Maya experienced a gradual breakdown of their social structures, marked by a decline of the priest class and the growing political and cultural influences of a rising merchant class.³⁷

Until recently, scholars described the Maya society as peaceful. Decoded glyphs, however, suggest another view of the Maya, revealing the practice of human sacrifice and bloodletting.³⁸ The Maya believed that the gods controlled the natural elements, and that the gods demanded bloodletting. Human sacrifice was mostly limited to prisoners, slaves, and orphaned or illegitimate children purchased for the occasion. Generally, it was more common to sacrifice animals. This bloodletting and human sacrifice placated the gods and assured the Maya that their crops would grow and their children would be born healthy. As drought and the resulting drop in the food supply took its toll, there was a corresponding increase in both human sacrifice to appease the gods and warfare. (An analogy can be made between human sacrifice and war.)

Teotihuacán

Teotihuacán, the “city of the gods,” located in the Valley of Teotihuacán in a pocket-like extension of the Valley of Mexico, became the primary center of Mesoamerican civilization around 200 BC. Like the other city-states, by the end of the Formative Preclassic period, it concentrated sufficient authority and technology to make a quantitative and qualitative leap from a loose collection of settlements to a unified empire.³⁹ The civic-religious complex laid the foundation for this development. At its height, at the end of the sixth century AD, Teotihuacán covered about eight square miles. It may have housed more than 150,000 inhabitants, making it the largest city in the world outside China.⁴⁰

In the Early Classic period, the people of Teotihuacán lived in apartment compounds, with some larger than others. There were more than 2,000 separate residential structures within the city. Built by the rural peasants, the outlying villages were linked to the core city by commerce. As with peasants of other societies, these workers contributed labor, food, and other products for urban elites and state institutions. A strong central government gave administrators control over peasants in the city and countryside; they often treated the peasants like subjects. The ruling elite forcibly moved the rural peasants into the city during the Early Classic period, leaving some scattered villages. Teotihuacanos, aided by a highly centralized state, conquered an empire that covered most of the central Mexican highlands.

Urbanism and Trade

Teotihuacán was a major manufacturing center in the Early Classic period. The products of its craft workers spread over much of Mesoamerica, as far south as Honduras. The pottery, especially, represents Teotihuacán’s highest achievement as a city and empire. Its hallmark feature is the cylindrical vessel with three slab legs and a cover. Vessels shaped like modern flower vases and cream pitchers graced the city. Artifacts from other civilizations were also present, adding to the city’s splendor. So fabled was Teotihuacán that Azteca royalty annually made pilgrimages to the city.⁴¹

Teotihuacán civilization was contemporary with the Maya Classic period and acted as the hub of trade networks from Central America to today’s southwestern United States. Without trade, the Maya culture would have remained at the chiefdom stage instead of evolving into a sophisticated world system that stressed material production and common ideas. It grew to a population of 100,000–200,000.

Teotihuacán suffered from internal civil strife in the seventh century, and again at the beginning of the tenth century. In about AD 600–650, unknown invaders burned the civic ceremonial center of the city, marking

a turning point in its history. From Teotihuacán emanated a network of societies such as in the city of Xochicalco, later associated with the Tolteca people. It also remained a center of long-distance trade, continuing its history of robust mercantile contact with other regions.⁴² Even after its decline, Teotihuacán continued to be a great city of 30,000 inhabitants until about AD 950. However, without its authority, Mesoamerican societies were less centralized, breaking up into dozens of city-states, which competed for trade and influence.

The Tolteca

The Postclassic period is characterized by a secularization of Mesoamerica. Although religion remained important to the Mesoamerican peoples, the civil and commercial sectors of society became more important, and their rise led to the expansion of market systems and long-distance exchange. The Tolteca emerged in what is today central Mexico in about the tenth century AD.

The Tolteca were a dominant force during this period (from about AD 900 to 1150). A subgroup of the Chichimeca, a Nahuatl-speaking people from the northern desert, the Tolteca controlled the Valley of Mexico.⁴³ Their capital was Tula (Tollan), about 40 miles north of present-day Mexico City. Founded in the ninth century, Tula incorporated part of the heritage of Teotihuacán, although it is generally associated with Tolteca culture. After Teotihuacán's fall in AD 700, Tolteca refugees migrated there from northern Teotihuacán and adopted many of its cultural features. Topiltzin Ce Acatl Quetzalcoatl (Our Prince One-Reed Feathered Serpent) ruled Tula from AD 923 to 947. Ce Acatl is often confused with the Azteca deity Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent who for 1,000 years was part of Mesoamerican mythology.

The Tolteca developed a system of cosmology, practiced religious rites, including human sacrifice, and built grand temples to their gods. In the courtyards of Tula, supporting the roof of the great Temple of Quetzalcóatl, stood 15-foot columns in the form of stylized human figures, specifically, enormous statues of warriors standing stiffly under the weight of their weapons and wearing rigid crowns of eagle feathers. Processions or military marches, and eagles and jaguars devouring human hearts are portrayed. The Plumed Serpent, formerly interpreted in Teotihuacán as the benevolent divinity of agricultural plenty, in Tula became a god of the Morning Star, the archer-god with fearsome arrows.

Little evidence exists that the Tolteca built an empire. Tula, for instance, was not at the crossroads of the international trade networks of the time. In the mid-1100s, the Tolteca collapsed, perhaps under attack by nomadic tribes, and Tula was abandoned. By that time the Tolteca had extended their sphere of influence into what is now Central America. This culture was transposed to Yucatán, where it was superimposed on Maya tradition, evolving and becoming more flexible and elegant. A hybrid art form of dazzling brilliance developed and lasted for two centuries. The Tolteca influence can be seen in a cross-cultural fusion of deities depicted in Mayan glyphs, frescos, and designs.

Tula was the axis of the Tolteca civilization. It controlled most of central Mexico, the Yucatán Peninsula, and the Gulf Coast, and it is speculated that its interests extended to Chiapas and the Pacific coast. The Tolteca also expanded trade with people as far away as Zacatecas, Veracruz, and Puebla; New Mexico and Arizona; and Costa Rica and Guatemala. They assimilated with many of the peoples that they cultivated ties with. An example is the important Mayan ceremonial center of Chichén-Itzá. By the end of the ninth and the beginning of the tenth century, the Mayan culture was in decline. The Itzá stepped into the void and began to substitute their gods and architectural styles. The Toltecas added the Observatory, Kukulcán's Pyramid, the Temple of the Warriors, the Ball Court, and the Group of the Thousand Columns. Judging by the architecture and artifacts, there was considerable cross-fertilization between the two cultural areas.⁴⁴

Other Corn Civilizations

The Zapoteca were the original occupants of the Valley of Oaxaca. About 4,000 years ago, Oaxaca's people settled in agricultural villages. Interaction with common ancestors played an important role in integrating autonomous villages. Between 500 BC and 100 BC, a highly centralized, urbanized state emerged with Monte Albán as its principal center.⁴⁵ Great plazas, pyramids, a ball court, and underground passageways graced

the city. Some evidence exists that the Zapoteca and the Olmeca engaged in long-distance trading that dates to the time of San Lorenzo, and that the Zapoteca later enjoyed good relations with the city of Teotihuacán.

As with the Maya, Zapoteca society was religious; it held that a supreme being created everything, although not by himself, and there was no beginning and no end of the universe. Like other Mesoamerican societies, the Zapoteca wrote in hieroglyphics and were obsessed with astronomical observation. Their 365- and 260-day calendars set a rhythm for their lives, with the latter serving as a religious guide and marking the birthdays of its adherents.

After AD 650, Monte Albán began to decline as other strong city-states emerged in the valley. Mitla, in the eastern part of the Oaxacan valley, took on greater importance.⁴⁶ Mitla is the best-known Postclassic site, continuously occupied since the Early Formative period, and is thought to have been a Zapoteca religious center. Despite the growth of other societies, the Zapoteca remained a major player in the region.

Meanwhile, in the highlands, the Mixteca increased their influence, and by the eleventh century they interacted with the Zapoteca-speaking people of the valley. There was a high degree of assimilation and intermarriage between the Mixteca and the Zapoteca nobility. The Mixteca, like the Azteca, are known to have engaged in a highly ritualized form of warfare and they were known for military prowess. Despite their influence, the Mixteca, like the Zapoteca before them, were not a dominant imperial power. They established the kingdom of Tututepec on the coast, which was important enough to garner tribute from other kingdoms. The Mixteca expanded their power by establishing strong bonds with other city-states through extensive intermarriage and war.⁴⁷

The Mixteca developed their own art style, influenced by the Zapoteca, and the two cultures created a synthesis. The creations of their goldsmiths and their manuscript illuminations are exceptional. Mixteca manuscripts or codices constitute an illustrated encyclopedia, reflecting religious beliefs and rites and the history of the aboriginal dynasties and national heroes. The style and color range of the illustrations, as well as the symbols linked to the ritual calendar, are also found in their murals.⁴⁸ The history depicted in the codices is a holy history, showing an abundance of deities and rituals. The Mixteca also excelled in ceramics, which became the most highly prized ware in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Mexico.

The Tarasco

By the twelfth century, the Tarasco people, also known as the Purépecha, ruled a vast territory in west Mexico, centered in present-day Michoacán. Their exact origin is unknown. Most probably, they were part of the Chichimeca migration. The Chichimeca were supposedly uncivilized natives from the north that the Tolteca were once part of. Nomadic groups along the northern frontier of civilization migrated to what is today central Mexico. The Azteca were part of the later wave of Chichimeca. They, along with the Tarascans, formed the Nahuas. The Tarascan civilization was originally formed through political unification of some eight city-states located within the Párcuaro basin. The Tarasco occupied the region for more than 1,600 years (150 BC–AD 1530). Their development resembled that of other Mesoamerican cultures. Ceramic artifacts link the Tarasco to the old traditions of Chupicuaro (present-day Guanajuato). Their pottery and metalwork styles are unique, although they borrowed heavily from surrounding societies. This borrowing was common. For example, ceramics found in the present-day northern Mexican states of Zacatecas and Durango bear resemblance to the Hohokam ceramic found in what is today Arizona.

The capital city of the Tarasco was Tzintzuntán, built on the shores of Lake Pátzcuaro and dominated by a huge platform that supported five round temples. The Tarasco raised a well-trained army and from Tzintzuntán forged an empire. However, Tarasco military prowess did not tell the whole story. Their language and culture almost totally dominated the region, with many of the surrounding villages assimilating into it. They were excellent craftspeople, and they invaded other peoples for honey, cotton, feathers, copal, and deposits of salt, gold, and copper. Tarasco lords were placed in conquered lands and collected tributes in goods.

Unlike other Mesoamericans, the Tarasco were not well-known traders. Nevertheless, it is speculated that they did engage in some long-distance trading, even by sea, reaching South America. Tarasco society was socially stratified, with nobility, commoners, and slaves. The capital city dominated the area, although most people lived in rural settlements.

The Tarasco had many deities who, among other things, were associated with animals and calendrical days. Ceremonial dances affirmed their connection with ancestral gods. Enemies of the Aztecs, the Tarascans flourished from AD 1100 to 1530. The Azteca attempted to conquer the Tarasco but failed. In AD 1478, 24,000 Azteca retreated in the face of a Tarasco army of 40,000 warriors. But because the Tarasco did not leave a written language, scholars know relatively little about them.

The Azteca

Between AD 1325 and 1345, the Azteca founded their capital of Tenochtitlán on an island in Lake Texcoco (later drained to build Mexico City). The Azteca confederation of city-states reached a population of more than 350,000. Part of the Chichimeca⁴⁹ arrived from the north, they were from a legendary place today called Aztlán.⁵⁰ (Some Chicanos say that it was in what is today the southwestern United States; others, in northern Mexico, in the area of Zacatecas.) A network of trade routes linked the high plateau of central Mexico with Maya territories, reaching as far as the most remote northern districts of the empire, in what is now the southwestern United States.⁵¹

The Azteca farm surpluses underwrote a highly advanced craft-manufacturing economy. The Azteca excelled in the building arts and supplied food for large cities. The growth of market systems gave the Azteca more opportunities to exchange their goods as well as access to other people. The society was stratified, with the elites extracting tribute and the commoners paying it. The peasants seem to have fared better under the Azteca than in Teotihuacán. They lived in small adobe houses with stone roofs and had more access to material goods.

The Azteca benefited from their highly productive agricultural infrastructure. They farmed on raised fields, or *chinampas*, fashioned by piling earth over the natural growing surface, as a way of reclaiming swampland for cultivation.⁵² They stacked flat mounds of fertile river sediment and then deepened the ditches or canals around them to create a waffle-like pattern. The advantage of raised fields was that they could be cultivated year-round, even during the dry season, because swamp water percolated up into the nutrient-rich soil. Five hundred acres of fields could have fed up to 5,200 people.⁵³

The Azteca assimilated the cultural experiences of generations of native peoples. For example, Mixteca art played an important role in Azteca artistic skill development. Azteca sculpture displayed technical perfection and powerful symbolism. The Azteca knew and appreciated the masterpieces of the civilizations that preceded them and those of contemporaries such as in Monte Albán. They had a well-defined literature, some of which has been preserved through oral testimony. Much of this tradition was conserved in codices, which consist of a combination of pictographs and ideographs. Religious and cosmological themes dominate the manuscripts.

They also had two kinds of schools—one for commoners, the other for nobility. In both, boys and girls were taught rhetoric, history, ritual dancing, and singing; in the Calmecac School for future leaders, the curriculum included law, architecture, arithmetic, astronomy, and agriculture. The poets were frequently kings or military captains from satellite principalities.⁵⁴

Although a lot is known about the work performed by women, relatively little is known about cultural attitudes toward them. Some scholars assume that Azteca society was rigidly patriarchal, and it became increasingly so with the militarization of society. Another viewpoint is that the “prehispanic Azteca gender system appears to have combined gender parallelism (where men and women played different but parallel and equivalent roles) with gender hierarchy. Gender parallelism was rooted in the kinship structures and in religious and secular ideology. Men and women were genealogically and structurally equivalent.”⁵⁵

The lower classes, as in most societies, bore the burden of class oppression. Lower-class women did embroidering, which they often sold in the *mercado* (marketplace). Generally, a woman’s caste determined her occupation, and she was schooled to play that role. Women could enter the priesthood, and although there were female goddesses, women could not become the musicians or poets who honored goddesses in public. Furthermore, they could not engage in violent activities or participate directly in mercantile caravans. Women had few options, and circumstances often forced them into prostitution. The woman who worked outside the sphere of male control was suspect. According to Irene Silverblatt, “class and social standing critically shaped the social experiences of Mexica men and women.”⁵⁶

Anthropologist June Nash's "The Aztecs and the Ideology of Male Dominance"⁵⁷ describes the transformation of the Azteca society from a kinship-based society to a class-structured empire, claiming that there was a diminution of the power of women beginning in AD 830 and continuing to the fifteenth century. Despite this, women enjoyed equal rights under the law and could participate in the economy. According to Nash, women were active producers as well as vendors. They could hold property—but whether they did and how much depended on social class.

The Azteca were the beneficiary of Tolteca culture, and many Azteca males took Tolteca wives, which quickened the assimilation process. According to Nash, polygamy "weakened the role of women in royal families since their sons were not guaranteed succession as in the past." "[The] division of labor by sex had been well established by the late fifteenth century. The codices show men teaching boys to fish, cultivate, and work metal and women teaching girls to weave, tend babies, and cook." According to Nash, sacrificial ceremonies glorified the cult of male dominance.⁵⁸

While Azteca society may have ignored forms of male homosexuality, lesbians were disdained as lower than prostitutes. Contradictorily, there were male transvestite performers, who are said to have been bisexual, and they enjoyed access to male privileges.⁵⁹ In short, Azteca culture appears to have been highly puritanical, militaristic, and male-centered. Among men, power came with age, which brought privileges.

As with other Mesoamerican civilizations, human sacrifice and war were interwoven into Azteca religious practice. The Azteca justification for human sacrifice was a cosmic view that encompassed the demands of their god Huitzilopochtli, lord of the sun and god of war. The Azteca placed their faith in their priests, who revealed that the sun and the earth had been destroyed four times; the present era was known as *el quinto sol*, "the fifth sun," the final destruction of which was imminent. Only special intervention through Huitzilopochtli would save them.⁶⁰

The religious system legitimized the authority and the tributary rights of its leaders. Blood sacrifice was necessary to preserve the sun, and the whole structure of the universe, from the threat of cosmic destruction. The logic was that the sacrifices appeased the Sun: it was based on the cyclical belief that the sun provided food and the sacrifices fed the sun. The need for sacrifices was made even more imperative after the drought of 1450 ravaged central Mexico. The Azteca and others believed that too few victims having been offered to the gods caused the calamities of 1450. The Azteca rationalized war, which was the result of politics and trade, in much the same way as the Christians, Jews, and Muslims rationalized their holy wars.

Every aspect of Azteca life, from the birth of a young warrior to a woman's continuous sweeping of dust from the house, symbolized the intricacy of war as well as their advanced society. Azteca society was well-ordered and highly moralistic, treating commoners with "consideration, compassion, and mercy,"⁶¹ while also demanding from them moral conformity. Medical treatment was on a par with Europe's, and life was less harsh than it was in Europe at the time of the arrival of the Spaniards.

Los Nortesños

Mesoamerican culture spread beyond what is considered its traditional boundaries; defining these boundaries is arbitrary. Its influence spread from what is today Central America in the south to what are today northern Mexico and the U.S. Southwest.⁶² Corn is bound to the rise of Mesoamerica and sustained the northern people. Mexico's north had varied societies, most of which lacked sufficient water to sustain large populations. Nevertheless, the Southwest outside of Mesoamerica and northern Mexico has the longest continuous history of habitation. The indigenous populations of the Southwest shared an agricultural tradition revolving around corn and the use of ceramics. Unlike Mesoamerica, most of the Southwest is believed to have lacked state-level societies and urban centers.

People arrived in what is now the Southwest between 23,000 BC and 10,000 BC.⁶³ About 4,000 years ago, corn was brought to the region by Mesoamericans. Similar to what is present-day northern Mexico, many formed homes in villages or *rancherías* or remained hunters. Agriculture transformed the lives of the people and by 500 BC corn, squash, and beans were grown and pottery was crafted. The cultivation of corn is estimated to have occurred from 1100 BC to 500 BC.⁶⁴ This led to complex social and economic systems among the northern peoples, namely the Hohokam, the Mogollon, and the Anasazi. *Ranchería* populations

comprised of Opata and Pima Altos lived in northern Sonora. Band tribes such as the Apache also struggled in proximity to these populations.

Carlos Vélaz-Ibáñez writes, “A triad of complex agriculturally based societies that included the Hohokam of Southern Arizona and Sonora, perhaps the Mogollon of Casas Grandes, Chihuahua, Mexico, and to a lesser extent the Anasazi of Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde who inhabited the Four Corners area of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado, lived in the region.” One of the most successful civilizations was the Hohokam beginning with their transformation about 300 BC, although, as with the Mesoamerican civilizations, the process began hundreds of years before this date. According to anthropologist Vélaz-Ibáñez, the Hohokam were probably migrants from Mesoamerica.⁶⁵ For nearly 1,700 years, they flourished along the Desert Rivers before vanishing in the fifteenth century AD.

During the Formative period, the Hohokam lived mainly in flask-shaped huts set in shallow pits, plastered with mud over a framework of poles and woven twigs. Early villages were loose clusters of houses separated by stretches of packed clay.⁶⁶ After about AD 1000 Hohokam villages took on a more urban aspect. Each contained several “great houses,” typically three or four stories high, and numerous smaller dwellings similar to the early pit houses. One city stretched for a mile and included at least 25 compounds of buildings. A vast irrigation network consisting of more than a thousand miles of canals crisscrossed an area of some 10,000 square miles.⁶⁷

Archaeologists estimate that at least 100,000 and possibly a million people lived in these ancient cities. They subsisted on the barren desert, making the desert productive through irrigation and by breeding a variety of drought-tolerant corn that would grow from planting to harvest on a single watering. In addition, they cultivated squash, beans, tobacco, and cotton. Acid-etched shells suggest that the Hohokam traded with tribes a thousand miles to the east.

By 1450, Hohokam civilization vanished. Legend has it that raiders from the east swept down on the Hohokam, destroying homes and fields. The invaders killed or enslaved the inhabitants of the great cities. Some Hohokam escaped, but upon returning they never rebuilt the cities or canals. Some archaeological authorities believe the demise of the Hohokam came after a gradual transition. They theorized that the Hohokam never left, but abandoned most of their villages in the Salt and Gila River valleys, around AD 1450. The theory is that Hohokam society collapsed because of internal conflicts brought about by environmental pressures and they taxed the land’s capacity to feed the people. The floods during the late fourteenth century most probably damaged the Hohokam canal systems. These disasters weakened the control and authority of the secular or theocratic elite. This did not happen overnight but was a process that lasted several generations. Another theory is that the Salado, a mixture of Anasazi and Mogollon cultures, simply migrated in and took over, blending with the Hohokam and diffusing them out of existence. Further evidence suggests that the long-term effects of irrigation contributed to the Hohokam demise. River water carries dissolved minerals. As this water evaporates from irrigated fields, it leaves behind mineral residues—usually alkali salts that gradually make the soil unfit for plants.

The Anasazi (meaning “ancient ones” in the Navajo language), who neighbored the Hohokam, settled in the Four Corners region in about AD 100–1300. Ancestors of Pueblo Indians now living in New Mexico and Arizona, the Anasazi farmed and produced fine baskets, pottery, cloth, ornaments, and tools. Villages evolved in caves that consisted of an array of semi-subterranean houses. Houses in the open also consisted of chambers below and above ground. Pit houses, known as *kivas*, served ceremonial purposes; these were community structures with up to a thousand rooms. Multistoried pueblos like Chaco Canyon and cliff dwellings like Betakin and Mesa Verde are examples. The Anasazi abandoned the cliff houses in the late thirteenth century, possibly because of a severe drought between AD 1276 and 1299, and because of pressure from the Navajo and the Apaches. The Anasazi were the ancestors of today’s Hopis, Zunis, and Rio Grande Pueblo peoples.⁶⁸

The Mogollon lived in the southeastern mountains of Arizona and southwestern New Mexico between 200 BC and AD 1200. In all probability, the Mogollon made the first pottery in the Southwest. They depended on rain and stream diversions for their farming, a technique that influenced the Anasazi or Pueblan culture. From about AD 700 on, the Mogollon in New Mexico were greatly influenced by the neighboring Anasazi.

According to Vélaz-Ibáñez, Casas Grandes in Chihuahua was a Mogollon city.⁶⁹ Also called Paquime, it was a major trading and manufacturing center on the northern frontier within the Mesoamerican world system, from which Mesoamerican culture was dispersed. A link is made between Casas Grandes and the Mimbres culture of southwestern New Mexico, a branch of the Mogollon peoples, who produced painted

pottery between AD 800 and 1150 similar to that found in the Casas Grandes area. Other scholars call Paquime an outpost for Mesoamerican traders controlling trade between the Southwest and Mesoamerica, while still others link it with the Anasazi.

Present-day Casas Grandes is set within a vast network of ancient ruins that was once the heart of one of the Southwest's largest trading centers. The area is still being excavated, and much remains unknown about this center. Small villages surrounded the city of Paquime, which evolved into a sophisticated center with an irrigation system that included dams, reservoirs, and *trincheras* (stone ditches). It had warehouses, ball courts, ceremonial structures, plazas, and steam rooms. By the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, the area began to stagnate. Climatic change, environmental degradation, sociopolitical conflict, and shifting trade patterns all took their toll on the Mogollon people.⁷⁰

By this point in the chapter, hundreds of tribes with different cultures and linguistic dialects in northern Mexico and the Southwest have been omitted because of the lack of space. For example, Texas natives lived in camps perhaps as early as 37,000 years ago.⁷¹ They went through the evolutionary cycle as with other Indian tribes, at first surviving primarily on wild game and then turning to agriculture. In fertile East Texas, the tribes built permanent villages and had well-developed farms and political and religious systems. These tribes formed a loose federation, known as the Caddo confederacies, to preserve the peace and provide mutual protection. This ancient culture originally occupied the Red River area in what is now Louisiana and Arkansas. Semi-sedentary agricultural people, these tribes grouped around ceremonial mounds that resembled temples. Some scholars speculate that these skillful potters and basket makers were linked to the Mesoamerican cultures of the South.⁷²

Thousands of miles to the west, present-day Alta California had one of the largest concentrations of native peoples by the latter part of the eighteenth century, in the range of 300,000 to 500,000 indigenous folk. Dozens of tribes adapted to its varied climate and topography. Mostly California had a mild climate and an abundance of food. Like Hawaii, it had an abundance of game, wild fruits and plants, and fish, and most tribes did not have to farm. They supplemented these by trade with the native people to the east and among themselves. Their habitation of central California began between 12,000 and 10,000 BC, and their evolutionary cycles resembled those of other native peoples. They left their artifacts, traditions, and their descendants.

Edward H. Spicer's book *Cycles of Conquest* is one of the most important studies of the native peoples in northern Mexico who at one point were part of the Mesoamerican sphere of influence.⁷³ The Pima, Opatá, and the Tohono O'odham did not have a border marking Mexico and the Southwest. They used the resources of the land to their fullest, building *rancherías* and in some cases small villages. Notable among the tribes were the Cáhita, who spanned northern Sinaloa to central Sonora. Among the Cáhita were the Yaquí: they had a strong sense of identity with the Yaquí River, one of the great waterways of North America.⁷⁴ Unlike other people of the desert, they had use of a fast-flowing river that allowed them to form villages of up to 3,000 villagers. Their lives differed from the Tarahumara (Raramuri) and the Conchos, who lived on the eastern slopes and to the east of the Sierra Madre. Although these tribes numbered in the tens of thousands, they traveled in bands of 30 or fewer people, farming, hunting, and gathering to survive. When the sun got blistering hot, they migrated to the headwaters of the sierras to farm; in the harsh winters they migrated to lower altitudes to hunt and gather.

The indigenous people to the north did not build great cities, but like other peoples, they were bound together by corn and they traded intensely. They endured frequent droughts, often warred with each other, and they endured.

Conclusion: The World System in 1519

Mesoamerica was an interconnected world that was integrated and in which events taking place in one social unit affected those in another over an extended region. It was composed of large towns and their dependent rural communities. The rural communities consisted mostly of patrilineal kinship groups; the nobles and other elites lived in the large centers, exercising authority over the commoners. The forms of government varied from chiefdoms to fully developed states. In the Valley of Mexico, there were about 50 city-states with rulers or joint rulers appointed by the "royal" lineage as the supreme authority. They called the supreme ruler

a *tlatoani*, “he who speaks,” or in the case of joint rulers, *tlatoque*. In the highlands of Guatemala, the Maya called the ruler *ajpop*, “he of the mat.” The Azteca Empire was a loose coalition of subject city-states that paid tribute to an imperial center.

Scholars are split on whether or not the Azteca attempted to impose their culture on their subject peoples. One thing is certain: There was considerable ethnic diversity among the people of Mesoamerica. The dominant cultures influenced some, while others remained segregated as distinct cultures. Mesoamerica, although influenced by the dominant world systems of the Maya, Tolteca, and other cultures, was not under the political control of a single power.

The Core Zones

Mesoamerica, meaning “Middle America,”—located between North and South America—was divided into multiple core zones, of which Central Mexico was the most prominent. The exchanges between the core, periphery, and semi-periphery were important in determining the flow of luxury goods—cotton garments, jade, cacao beans, hides, feathers, and gold ornaments. The core—through conquest, tributary demands, or trade activities—often obtained the goods that in great part were a product of its demands.⁷⁵

We have identified the core zones as Central Mexico, West Mexico, Oaxaca, and the Maya zone. Tenochtitlán was the capital of the Central Mexico zone, inhabited by some 200,000 persons. The Azteca Empire ruled over approximately 300 city-states and over another 100 or so client states throughout the Central Mexico core zone. The Azteca appointed administrators to oversee the states and in other instances cemented alliances through marriage between Azteca and other elites. Considerable cultural and linguistic diversity existed within this core.

The Tarasco held sway over the West Mexico core zone. The Tarasco zone, more centralized and militaristic than the Azteca, held a tighter grip over its city-states. But the Tarasco did not have the same impact that the Azteca did on Mesoamerica.

The Oaxaca core zone was less integrated than the previous two zones. This zone consisted of 50 small kingdoms in which the dominant languages were Zapoteca and Mixteca. However, as in the other zones, multiple languages coexisted with the dominant languages. At the time of the Spanish invasion, the Mixteca states enjoyed considerable unity, forged by intermarriage between the ruling families. Trade took place within and outside the core. Intermarriage also occurred between the Mixteca and Azteca, who had significant cultural exchange.

The Maya core zone structurally resembled that of Central Mexico. Maya language and culture dominated the zone, although there was little unity between the highland and the lowland core states. Moreover, Maya had multiple dialects and non-Maya speakers also lived within the zone. The city-states competed with one another and some, like Quiché, incorporated approximately 30 tribute-paying provinces. The smaller zones within the main core zone were densely populated, and trade and warfare existed between them. Tensions also existed between many Maya and the Azteca cores.

The Semi-Peripheral Zones

The semi-peripheral zones, regions that mediated between the core and the periphery, were important to the exchange network, especially when dealing among competing core states. They assimilated much of the trade and the religion of the core and the periphery. Casas Grandes, in what is now the state of Chihuahua, was one such semi-peripheral region (although it did not exist at the time the Spaniards arrived). The Mexican state of Tabasco on the Gulf Coast was also an important semi-peripheral zone. Many of these regions were port-of-trade societies, and centers such as Xicalanco were quite cosmopolitan. They organized the governing classes, comprised of merchants, into political councils, in which women could reach high positions of authority. The south Pacific coast region is less well known. The Azteca and Quiché Maya vied for control of the Xoconusco area, which ultimately became a tributary province of the Azteca. The Caribbean coast, including the Yucatán Peninsula and the Central American isthmus, was another important semi-peripheral zone. Among the most important of these semi-peripheral centers was the island of Cozumel,

which was run by merchants who invested in massive temples, shrines, and palaces. These port towns bordered the Caribbean all the way to Panama.

The Mesoamerican Periphery

The zones of the Mesoamerican periphery actively participated in the economic, political, and cultural life of the Mesoamerican world. However, the people in the periphery played a subordinate role. They were unequal, and often subject provinces. The periphery should not be confused with frontier zones, from which the Azteca originally came. The periphery extended to Mexico's northwest, from Colima to Culiacán and well into Sonora. In the northeastern part of what is now Mexico, the Huasteca played a peripheral role. Its people had no writing system, and tension existed between them and the Azteca. Southeastern Central America was also a peripheral zone, occupied mainly by people speaking Pipil, which is closely related to Nahuatl. The Lenca language was also spoken in this peripheral zone. This peripheral zone was especially rich with diverse peoples, who interacted with the Maya and were organized into simple city-states or chiefdoms.

It is important to reiterate that contact also existed with what is now the U.S. Southwest. This contact varied, but was most intense with the descendants of the Hohokam and other sedentary populations. Distance played a role in how much influence the core had. Frontier people such as the Azteca were eventually integrated into the core. The main point is that the diverse peoples of Mesoamerica were unified under a vast, well-defined world system, in many ways more distinct than the European world system.

Although there has to be more research, it is highly probable that a trade structure existed that integrated the disparate regions. Exotic commodities from Mesoamerica have been found, and it is probable that they were circulated through local native trade networks.⁷⁶ Turquoise was an important trade item, and long-distance trade between the Zuni and Sonora existed. There was also a high use of turquoise in Mesoamerica. Trade contributed to the evolution of the division of labor; it led to the evolution of state systems in Mexico proper, and it was a mechanism of economic integration. The population of what is today Mexico and Central American had reached 25–38 million by the arrival of the Spanish and because of the population explosion in what is the Mesoamerican region, it is probable that contact with the Spanish would have increased the quest for water.

Notes

1. Scholars have presumed that agriculture is essential for the development of village life and the evolution of civilizations. The following article describes the building of a massive worship center 11,000 years ago, centuries before intensive farming. This discovery upends the conventional theory that agriculture was necessary before labor could be organized in this fashion. Andrew Curry, "Gobekli Tepe: The World's First Temple?" *Smithsonian*, November 2008, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/gobekli-tepe.html>.
2. "The First Americans," *The Economist* (February 21, 1998): 79. See also Virginia Morell, "Genes May Link Ancient Eurasians, Native Americans," *Science* 280, no. 5363 (April 24, 1998): 520. Ruben Bareiro Saguier, "The Indian Languages of Latin America," *UNESCO Courier* (July 1983): 12. "First Americans Arrived as Two Separate Migrations, According to New Genetic Evidence," *Science Daily*, January 21, 2009, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/01/090108121618.htm>. Some experts say that humans were in the Americas at least 40,000 years ago. See Patricia McBroom, "Incredible Journeys of Our Native Tongues," *Berkeleyan* (March 11, 1998), <http://www.berkeley.edu/news/berkeleyan/1998/0311/linguistics.html>, "Bering Strait Theory," <http://www.native-languages.org/bering.htm>.
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8. Claire Hope Cummings, "Risking Corn, Risking Culture," *World Watch* 15, no. 6 (November–December 2002): 8–18ff. Elizabeth Fitting, "Importing Corn, Exporting Labor: The Neoliberal Corn Regime, GMOs, and the Erosion of Mexican Biodiversity," *Agriculture and Human Values* 23 (2006): 15–26.
9. Sharer, *The Ancient Mayan*, 58. Michael C. Meyer, William L. Sherman, and Susan M. Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6–7. Karl Cole, "Colossal Head." *School Arts* Sept. 1999: 29.
10. Some African American scholars say that there was African contact. They point to the massive Olmeca stone heads as proof of this. However, this is not a view held by most Mesoamerican scholars. Robert M. Carmack, Janine Gasco, and Gary H. Gossen, *The Legacy of Mesoamerica: History and Culture of a Native American Civilization* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 26. William F. Rust and Robert J. Sharer, "Olmec Settlement Data from La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico," *Science* 242, no. 4875 (October 7, 1988): 102–03. Claims that the Olmeca were from Africa are mostly based on the facial characteristics of the artifacts, especially the Olmeca stone heads. See The Olmec—Ancient Mexico, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKo9mUelueM>. There is no scientific evidence that the Olmeca are not part of the Amerindian family.
11. Linda Schele and David Freidel, *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Mayan* (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1990), 56. Carmack et al., *The Legacy*, 52.
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14. Anna Blume, "Maya Concepts of Zero," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 155, no. 1 (March 2011): 51–88.
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 39. Pirámides de Teotihuacan, México. 1 de 5, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mP5TYm1uQKI> Pyramids of Teotihuacan, Outside Mexico City, Mexico, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zV-sBJaQo-Q>. Teotihuacan, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7nbKa5__XM.
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