

Highlights of Mesoamerica



Over thirty-thousand years ago, hunters and gathers from NE Asia crossed the frozen Bering Strait to the New World. Between 6500 and 1500 BC, people in Mesoamerica grew maize, beans, squash, cotton, chilis, guavas, avocados, sweet potatoes and they domesticated turkeys, dogs, ducks and bees. Settlements arose near fresh water sources, social factions emerged, and villages transformed into city-state kingdoms where the people worshipped their ruler as a God on Earth. The king maintained his power by waging war against rival city-state kingdoms or by bartering his royal sisters and daughters in marriage alliances.

In the span of three thousand years at least six major civilizations emerged from the city-state kingdoms and each one eventually disappeared or faded away. At their heights, these civilizations developed religious institutions and settlement centers that surpassed anything else in the New World. They built stone cities with open plazas, terraced pyramids, temples, palaces, shrines, drainage systems, aqueducts, bridges, and underground bottle-shaped chultuns used for water storage and burials.

Mesoamericans also built enormous ball courts, starting with the Olmecs and ending with the Aztecs who padded the severed head of the losing team's leader and used it as a ball. The ball game was an important part of the city-state's religious and social life. Ball players wore protective gear with sacred inscriptions. They were men of strength and skill who possessed courage unto the death. In the ball court two players or two teams battled to keep a hard rubber

ball from touching the ground. Without using their hands they played the ball against the enemy, the sloping walls of the court, and into a stone hoop. The Aztec called their ball courts *tlachco* and the Maya called them *Pok-ta-pok*. The winners became great epic heroes called *Pitzil* ball players and the losers became sacrificial victims.

Early in Mesoamerican history, high priests sacrificed iguanas, crocodiles, turtles, dogs, peccaries, jaguars, and turkeys. They believed a sacrifice to the gods affected the rain, wind, and other natural forces. In time, people believed their gods demanded human blood. Kings and priests included human sacrifice and bloodletting in their religious rites. To nourish the Sun god, warriors fought incessantly to supply the king with sacrificial victims who were probably captives of warfare, slaves, bastards, and criminals. Orphaned children and virgins were especially sought to nourish the gods with innocent blood. Sacrificial techniques included hanging, drowning, beating, mutilation, decapitation, and disembowelment. In an arrow sacrifice, priests tied the naked victim to a stake and dancers armed with bows and arrows, passed in front of the victim and shot him full of arrows. The greatest sacrificial rite took place atop a pyramid temple. On the summit priests stretched the victim over a stone altar. A high priest used a flint knife to cut open the chest and tear out the beating heart. He anointed an idol with the victim's blood then tossed the corpse down the pyramid to priests who flayed the victim's skin for a worship dance to Xipe Toltec the ancient god of spring and new growth, fertility and sacrifice.

The ancient Mesoamericans interwove science with religion and for a millennium, they relentlessly charted the night-sky. They believed a divine force ruled behind what they observed. The Mayas called this force K'uh and the Aztecs called it Teotl. The Aztec word for heart is *Yollotl*, *Ol* in Maya. *Yolteotl* means enlightenment, the mysterious sacredness of everything,

the heart of god. They worshipped gods of thunder, lightning, volcanoes, childbirth, death, and a god of maize. They saw the face of god in the orbiting Sun, Moon, and planets. To them, a comet was the cigar butt of Smoking Star and an omen of a ruler's death. They aligned their stone structures with the solstice, equinox, the tropical zenith sun, the Pleiades, and Capella and they could predict lunar and solar events and the cycle of Venus. They understood Venus was both morning and evening star and they predicted when the morning star rose so priests could deflect its bad luck and the king could wage war against his rivals. Eventually, Maya priests calculated the cycle of Venus so accurately that by today's calculations they were off only one day in 6,000 years.

The Olmecs 1500 BC--300 AD



Mesoamerica's first civilization emerged on the east coast of Mexico in today's Veracruz and Tabasco. At La Venta, San Lorenzo, Tres Zapotes, and Laguna de los Cerros, the Olmecs built large pyramids and platforms and initiated the first formal religion in Mesoamerica, influencing later civilizations. Recent discoveries suggest that the Olmecs developed the first writing system in the Americas. They created the earliest pieces of Mesoamerican art that includes jade figurines and enormous basalt human heads that certainly represented their gods. The Olmecs worshipped the Jaguar as the God of the Rain Forest and of Heaven who brings rain and fertility. As the jungle's fiercest beast, the jaguar represented a powerful spiritual

intermediary between the living and the dead, a nagual to Heaven and Hell. The place of salvation. The place of damnation.

Zapotecs on Monte Alban 500 BC–800 AC



Circa 500 BC, Zapotecs carried water and building stones up Monte Alban in Oaxaca Valley and constructed Mesoamerica's first major metropolis. The city endured for 1200 years with a population of 35,000 at its peak. They created, or developed, the Long Count calendar and a system of writing. Etched on stelae stones around the main pyramid are portraits of conquered and slain rulers. Called the *Danzantes*, these dancing figures show Olmec influence. Capella was a special star for the Zapotecs. They aligned their observatory to Capella's appearance at twilight on the day the tropical sun casts no shadow.

By 1350 AD, the Mixtecs moved into the Oaxaca valley and displaced any remaining Zapotecs. Mixtecs of today are heirs to Oaxaca and Puelba. They survived the Aztec empire and the Spanish Conquest.

Teotihuacan (Aztec Name for City of the Gods) 200 BC-600 AD



People of an undetermined origin founded Teotihuacan, a site near modern Mexico City. As the Olmec civilization declined, the city-state of Teotihuacan became the greatest of all pre-conquest Mesoamerican centers of trade, culture and religion. About 100 AD, when the city had a population of 60,000, they built the Pyramid of the Sun. Teotihuacanos used chinampas, floating gardens, and worshiped the rain and war god Tlaloc and the god of rebirth Xipe-Totec. The Aztec adopted Tlaloc as their rain god. The Maya called their rain god Chaac.

During the reign of Teotihuacan, the Mayans built their first major city Tikal in 500 AD. Teotihuacan had embassies in Tikal and they introduced weapons to the Mayas and ideas about sacrificing captives. The greatness of Teotihuacan faded about 700 AD.

Toltecs 900 AD-1150 AD



The Toltecs inherited much of their culture from the illusive Teotihuacanos. They were most likely Nahuatl-speaking Chichimecs (barbarians) from the north who established Tula as their capital. Eventually, the Toltecs controlled most of central Mexico, parts of Guatemala, and

the Yucatan. In 987 AD, Toltecs invaded Chichen Itza. Some scholars view Chichen Itza as a Toltec city because the warrior order of the jaguar eating a human heart is found in both Tula and on the Temple of Warriors in Chichen Itza. In 1160 AD, invaders from the north destroyed Tula and the Itza Mayas received many Toltec refugees.

Dominating Tula is a four-tiered pyramid. On its flat top are four colossal stone warriors called the Atlantes. They functioned as columns for the roof of a temple. Relief carvings at the base of the pyramid represent the warrior orders of the Jaguar, Coyote, and Eagle, each nagual spiritual guide is eating a human heart.

The Toltecs dedicated their pyramid to the feathered serpent Quetzalcoatl, Venus as the Morning Star. Quetzalcoatl originated with the Olmecs, the Teothiucanos worshiped him, and the Toltecs brought Quetzalcoatl to the Itza of the Yucatan. The Maya called their Venus god, Kukulcan. In Toltec legend, Quetzalcoatl was a creator god of rebirth, knowledge, and civilization. The first Toltec ruler declared Quetzalcoatl as his guardian and patron god who abhorred human sacrifice. But in time the Toltecs believed the sun fought a nightly battle on his journey through Xibalba and he required human blood to re-appear at sunrise. The Toltec kings then adopted a tribal war god called Tez-cat-ili-poca, Smoking Mirrors. The new god forced Quetzalcoatl to leave Tula and the feathered serpent journeyed to the land of the Olmecs. Before disappearing into the Gulf Sea on a giant raft made of serpents, Quetzalcoatl promised to return from the east on the year One Reed.

The Maya Civilization:

Pre-classic: 2500 BC – 250 AD, emerging city-state kingdoms dominated by the Olmec

Classic: 250-900 AD Tikal, Calakmul, Palenque and Copan

Postclassic: 900 AD to Conquest: Itza, Tulum



The Mayas established the greatest and longest lasting civilization in Mesoamerica and is perhaps a second to Egypt in the world based on the monumental structures they built and the many vast ruins hidden in the jungle. The ancient Maya considered themselves the True People, *Halach Winik*. They enhanced the calendar and glyphs of the Olmecs and Zapotecs and developed the most sophisticated writing system in the New World.

The 800 plus known Maya glyphs constitute a complex written language of pictogram syllables, words and phrases, place-names, directions, names of royal dynasties from differing city-states, nouns, verbs, grammatical and metaphorical symbols, gender modifiers, suffixes, clarifiers, and numbers including the zero which is symbolized as a shell (one is a dot, five is a bar). Most glyphs are etched in stone, some survive in books called codices. There are eight known pre-Columbian codices from the Mixtec, Aztec and Maya. On July 12, 1562, a catholic Bishop of the Spanish Inquisition, Diego de Landa Calderon, burned Mayan idols along with a number of their codices. Only three survived with fragments of a fourth. The Dresden Codex is a divinatory almanac with tables of eclipses and the cycles of Venus. It's a guide to predicting lunar eclipses. The Madrid Codex includes prophesies and a horoscope. The Paris Codex includes the zodiac and ceremonies associated with aspects of the Maya calendar. The Grolier Codex is a Venus almanac.

After the conquest, the Spanish chronicled the Maya and their culture. In his 1566 book “*Relacion de las Casas de Yucatan*,” Diego de Landa catalogued some of the glyphs and discussed Maya religion and culture. A missionary found Landa’s manuscript and published it in the 1860s along with the Popol Vuh, the creation story of the Quiche People. The Yucatecan Maya wrote another book after the conquest called the *Books of Chilam Balam, Prophecy of Jaguar Priest*. It’s a series of nine texts containing prophecies, rituals, celestial observations, and histories.

The Maya interlaced three calendars for rituals, farming, and warfare. Each person tied his destiny to his birth date on two of them. The Tzolkin Sacred Round Calendar had 260 days and is still used by modern shaman in Guatemala. The Civil Year Solar Calendar of 365 days, called the Haab, is divided into 18 months of 20 days with 5 extra days at the end of the year, a time of bad luck (like the ancient Egyptian calendar). The Long Count Calendar begins with the creation of the present world in 3114 BC and ended in 2012. In their recordings on stelae and monuments, the Maya used the three calendar dates in the order of Long Count, Tzolkin, and Haab.

Religion permeated every aspect of Maya life. From their science to their ball games in monumental ball courts. To the Maya, the mind was filled with *tonally*, the animated force of the soul. The heart was filled with *teyolia*, that which gives emotion and life, and the liver was filled with *ihiyotl*, bravery, passion, and happiness. In Maya cosmology, a giant tree, the Wacah Chan, grows on earth, its roots plunge deep into the underworld, its branches stretch beyond the Milky Way into the highest heaven. Via the tree, the soul passes through layers of hell and battles demons and monsters before reaching the portal to heaven.

The ancient Maya called their kings, Ajaw Mah K'ina, Great Sun Lords. He was the Wacah Chan at the center of the world who brought the tree into existence wherever he stood, whenever he called upon it, especially at the top of a pyramid where he opened doors to the spiritual world in a Snake Vision. Mah K'ina commonly performed the most sacred rite of the Maya, bloodletting. Blood was the mortar of Mayan life. To communicate with his gods and ancestors, the king pierced his penis with a sting-ray spine and drew blood. The queen passed a thorny cord through a hole in her tongue. Blood from the king's self-inflicted wounds sustained the spirit world, the K'uh, the sacred divine.

A few Maya stelae extol the virtues of Ruling Queens, some depict queen warriors stomping on enemy captives. Most Maya queens reigned as co-regents with a son or an ailing king husband. They ascended to the throne to preserve the dynastic tree, the lineage since the founding king. Maya ruling queens include Lady Shield, Lady of Tikal, Lady Ix Yol La, and Lady Sak Kuk. Lady Ik Skull Evening Star, 704-751 AD was a ruling queen until her son Bird Jaguar IV came of age. Lady Six Sky of Navanjo, 682 – 741 AD, was a trade alliance princess who established a new dynasty and built several monuments.

Aztecs: 1100-1500s AD



According to Aztec lore, about 1300 AD the sun god Huitzilpochtli led seven tribes of Nahuatl speaking Chichimecas--the Acolhua, Chalca, Mexica, Tepaneca, Tlalhuica, Tlaxcalteca and Xochimilca, to a snake-infested swamp in the Valley of Mexico. Huitzilpochtli,

Hummingbird of the South, told the seven tribes to settle where they see an eagle devouring a rattlesnake perched on a prickly pear--the emblem of Mexico's flag. The eagle represents the Aztec sun, Huitzilpochtli, the prickly pear is the island Tenochtitlan. The rattlesnake represents the Aztec worship of the Feathered Serpent Quetzalcotal.

The seven Chichimec tribes are collectively called the Aztecs. They established an oligarchy warrior nation controlled by rulers of three cities--Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, Tlacopan. The rulers of Tenochtitlan reigned supreme and established an empire beyond their city-state. Like the Toltecs and Mayas, the Eagle and Jaguar were Aztec military emblems. They believed violence was the natural order of the world. They thought renewal came through ritual combat. An Aztec warrior expected to be sacrificed if captured. He considered a sacrificial death an honor equal to a warrior's death on the battlefield. Their souls turned to hummingbirds flying straight to the highest heaven.

The Aztecs inherited their religious beliefs, idols, and practices from 3000 years of Mesoamerican cultures, from the Maya, Toltecs, Teotihuacanos, Zapotecs, and Olmecs. They especially revered the Toltecs and claimed them as their ancestors. The Aztec calendar and number system were inferior to what the Maya developed. Their Sun Calendar depicts the suns of four previous worlds, the fifth and present sun is in the center.

Aztecs believed the present earth was on a crocodile floating in the primeval sea of fire. Like their predecessors, the Aztecs believed their sun god, Huitzilopochtli, needed constant nourishment from human blood and hearts in order for the sun to rise on the back of a fiery serpent. They had hundreds of gods with multiple aspects associated with the natural world.

The Aztec creator god was Omoteotl, who is both male and female and dwells in the 13th tier of heaven, the place of dual souls. *Ome* means "two" in Nahuatl. From the essence of

Ometeotl all gods are formed. The Aztecs worshiped gods of the Milpa, the Moon, Stars and Wind and the ancient gods Xipe Totec, Tlaloc, Smoking Mirror, and the mother god Coatlique. They believed that in the year of One Reed the Feathered Serpent would return. Fortuitously, Cortez arrived in Mexico during the year of One Reed, 1519, and the Aztecs called the Spanish *Teotl*, the spirit of God, and the last great civilization of Mesoamerica succumbed to the Conquistadors. King Montezuma gave Cortez a gold calendar disk of the sun and a silver calendar of the moon. Cortez later had the gifts melted into Spanish coins.