

Mesoamerica before 1492

Population patterns and growth in the Americas:

•40,000 and 25,000 BC: A series of migrations from Asia into across the Bering Strait and into America took place. Over thousands of years, the immigrants spread out over North and South America. The archeological evidence available suggests that Mesoamerica and the high valleys of the Andes have been occupied since 10,000 BC, while the Caribbean islands and the plains of the Southern Cone of Latin America had been populated for about 2000 years when the Spanish arrived.

•by 1492: what we now call Latin America was home to over 350 major tribal groups, 15 different cultural centers and more than 160 linguistic groups. All of these societies tended to fall in one of three categories:

1. nomadic hunting and gathering societies
2. sedentary or semi-sedentary agriculture based societies
3. densely populated, socially stratified complex civilizations, found in Mesoamerica and the Andean regions

Cultures of Mesoamerica:

•until 8000-7000 BC: The peoples of Mesoamerica lived in small, nomadic or semi-sedentary groups. Over the next 5000 or 6000 years, they gradually developed into sedentary village cultures.

•2000 BC to 200 AD: This was the Preclassic or Formative period, which marked the highest point in the development of the sedentary village cultures. The latter part of this period saw the formation of emerging complex civilizations in four distinct regions, which nevertheless shared similar social and mythological traditions and similar patterns of development.

Patterns of development of complex civilizations: Archaeologists describe the development of Mesoamerican civilizations using the following categories:

- the Preclassic period: initial development
- Classic period: maturation ending in a period of upheaval
- Postclassic period: emergence of new societies

Archaeologists originally believed that the Classic civilizations were much more peaceful and less warlike than those of the Postclassic period; now, however, it is thought that the two sets of societies were actually more similar than originally believed.

The mysterious influence of the Olmec culture: The Olmec culture arose no later than 1400 BC in what is today Veracruz, Mexico, and seems to have disappeared by 400 BC. Very little is known about the Olmec culture due to a scarcity of data. It does seem, however, that it had a profound impact on all other later Mesoamerican cultures. Mesoamerican scholars now believe that village cultures already developing the characteristics of a more advanced society came into contact with the more complex Olmec society, probably through trade, and the Olmecs subsequently acted as a type of catalyst that allowed these cultures to "make the leap to urban civilization."

Patterns of development in the four regions of Mesoamerica (see map):

1. the Zapotec, in the valley of Oaxaca:

- 550 BC: the mountaintop urban center of Mount Alban was constructed and dominated the region for more than a thousand years
- about 1250 AD: Zapotecs, in decline, were eclipsed by the Mixtec culture

2. the Tenochtitlan, in the basin of Mexico (present day Mexico City):

- 0 AD: construction of the Pyramid of the Sun began in the city of Teotihuacan, which was an important economic, political, cultural and religious center; its religion and mythology heavily influenced the later Toltec and Aztec civilizations
- 750: Tenochtitlan destroyed by fire, fell to ruin. In the vacuum created by its absence, several new urban centers developed, including Cholula, Tula, Cacaxtla, Xochicalco and El Tajin (many

of these names will reappear in Cortés letter); out of these, the Toltecs of Tula rose to ascendancy; however, their power declined around 1150 or 1200 AD

- 1325: the Mexica, a subgroup of the Aztecs, arrived from somewhere in the north and settled on the island of Tenochtitlan

- about 1425: Mexica had come to dominate the basin area through alliances and military strength

- 1519: when Cortés and his men arrived, the Mexica effectively controlled, either through economic dominance or military force, a large portion of Mesoamerica

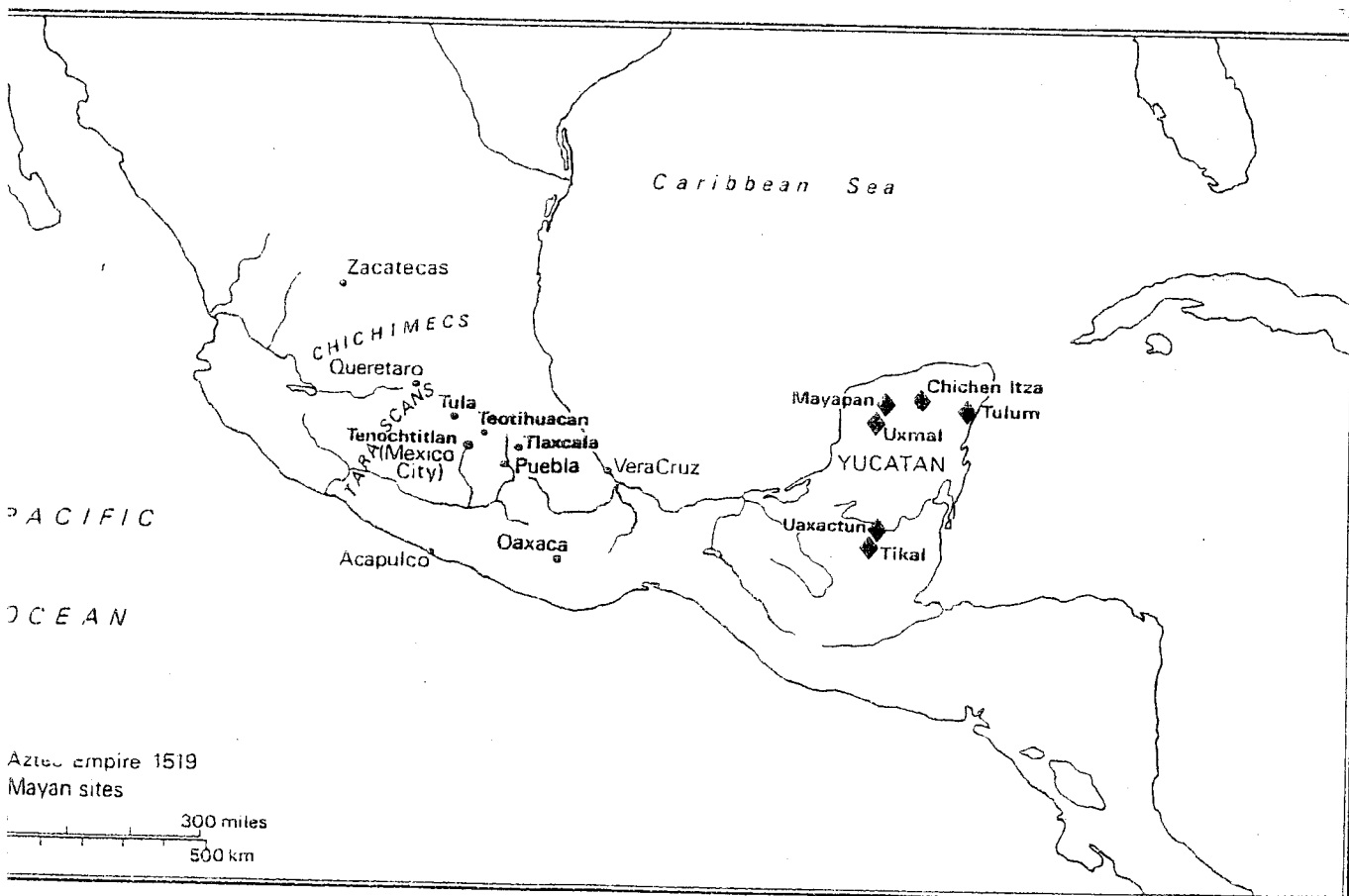
3. The Maya , east of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec

- 250 A.D: The Mayan Classic Period began. The Mayans developed their own distinct culture that has often been compared to Greek culture, while cultures of the Basin of Mexico have been compared to Rome. This is because Maya civilization consisted of a series of city-states that were often at war with each other, but also linked through marriages and other alliances. None of these city-states was dominant. Mayan mythology is similar to that of other areas of Mesoamerica, but the images it used to express that mythology were very different. Also unique to Mayan culture was its cult of the ruling dynasty and its complex calendrical science.

- 900: The Mayan Classic Period ended and dominance shifted to the Yucatan peninsula.

- 1100: the Post Classic Period began

4. **The Gulf coast:** the least understood region of the four, it is thought that the Olmec influence was gradually transformed into the Classic period culture of El Tajin, their urban center; it is known that El Tajin's ball courts were host to an important ritual game; in the Postclassic period, developments in the Gulf Coast seem to have been dominated by Aztec might.



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THE DIVERSITY OF THE AMERINDIAN WORLD BEFORE THE EUROPEAN INVASIONS

