THE OXFORD HISTORY OF MEXICO

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TABLE I

General Chronology of Mesoamerican Culture Epochs

Classification		
Archaic		c. 1500 B.C.
Preclassic, or Formative	c. 1500 B.C.	c. A.D. 100
Classic		
Central Mexico	c. A.D. 1	c. A.D. 900
Maya	c. A.D. 250	c. A.D. 900–1000
Postclassic		
Central Mexico	c. A.D. 900	c. A.D. 1521
Maya	c. A.D. 900–1000	c. A.D. 1540

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The Mexico That Spain Encountered

SUSAN SCHROEDER

Imagine the pleasure experienced by the Spaniards reconnoitering the waters between Honduras and the Yucatan (Yucatán) Peninsula in 1502 upon finally sighting a Maya trading vessel loaded with cargo. The vessel, called a *canoa*, or canoe (a term borrowed by the Spaniards from Caribbean Island Arawak natives), was transporting finely woven cloth, pottery, metalware, weapons, cacao, and probably female slaves for sale or exchange with coastal Yucatan populations. Such canoes, sometimes 40 feet in length and capable of accommodating huge loads and many passengers, were a primary means of transportation for numerous native peoples in the Americas and provided but one clue for the Spaniards as to indigenous technology. Even more impressive, however, was the handsomely outfitted Maya official at the helm and a number of slaves, bound together with cord around their necks, who manned the paddles that propelled the boat. Other Mayas along the shore gathered to watch and try to make sense of the strange Spanish ships. Later they would furnish the newcomers with food; water; fodder for the horses, pigs, and chickens the Spaniards had on board; and other items that the Spaniards demanded, at least for a while. However, this initial encounter with the Mayas was indicative enough of both the wealth and the sophistication of local societies to warrant further Spanish exploration and penetration of the mainland.

The Spaniards' later reports of their early experiences with the Mayas of Yucatan were encouraging, for most often they were desperate for the natives' hospitality while dazzled by the coastal Mayas' "towers," or stone-hewn temples and palaces at places such as Tulum, a major trade entrepôt (trading outpost) at the time. They had little way of determining for certain, however, the existence of additional highly advanced societies located farther inland or the extraordinary terrain that they inhabited.

The Yucatan Peninsula is a flat limestone shelf extending into the Caribbean Sea. With shallow topsoil, insubstantial vegetation, and little in the way of reliable freshwater sources, the peninsula is a stark contrast to its base, which projects into extensive rain forest and wetlands. Here potentially rich soils have their nutrients continuously leached out by heavy rainfall. Beyond this region, in the highlands of what is today Guatemala, the land is distinguished by high and often active volcanoes, large lakes, and fertile but rugged alluvial plains created where runoff water has deposited soil from the mountainsides. Occupied for centuries by linguistically diverse Maya populations whose territory encompassed approximately 400,000 square kilometers (155,000 square miles) extending from the southeastern state of Tabasco to western El Salvador, this challenging topography was nonetheless conducive to the development of one of the most extraordinary civilizations in all the Americas.

Indeed, Mexico's spectacular landscape (as claimed for the Spanish Crown) extended as far north as the upper reaches of California and New Mexico and south to Costa Rica's borders. Millions of indigenous people had either traversed or settled in prime regions of this vast territory since their first migrations from Eurasia perhaps 40,000 years before. These earliest natives, representing only five linguistic phyla, diversified and settled as distinct culture groups in thousands of different locations. Just one example of the complexity of local social and environmental adaptations is California, where abundant marine, forest, and river-plain resources resulted in indigenous culture enclaves representing some 120 divergent languages.

For present purposes, though, we are concerned with the natives who lived within or near the boundaries of modern Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. Most familiar are the extraordinary accomplishments of the classic Mayas (about A.D. 250 to 900 or 1000) in tropical and highland Guatemala and the Aztecs (about A.D. 1428–1521) in central Mexico. Both civilizations developed and flourished, for the most part, in close proximity to fertile volcanic alluvial soils, woodlands, and large dependable lakes and rivers, with food supplies augmented by raised-field agriculture in wetlands areas. The Aztecs were especially well known for what may have been a similar form of raised-field agriculture, called *chinampa*, which is discussed below. It is in these regions that dietary basics such as corn, beans, squashes, and chiles grew in profusion. With only the turkey, the bee, and small dogs as domesticated animals, the natural flora and fauna, as hunted and gathered, supplemented nutritional and other domestic needs. Deer, mountain lions, peccaries, hares, fowl, iguanas and other reptiles, and insects abounded, along with a full spectrum of edible fruits and vegetables. Even lake scum was harvested, cooked, and eaten for its nourishment.

Although marked by sharp ethnic differences as well as differences in their sociopolitical organization, both zones supported densely populated settlements with, by proportion, increasingly thinning populations the greater the distance from the two centers. In Mexico, with fewer lakes and rivers in the north and south, the terrain becomes progressively rugged and arid. Broad flatlands of cactus,

scrub, and scant grasses are cut by stark sierras. Rainfall in the northern reaches is seasonal at best. Correspondingly, the native populations tended to be sparse and, with the exception of the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico and Arizona, only semi-sedentary in nature. Seasonal hunting and gathering typically supplied the necessary food. A notable exception was the Zapotec- and Mixtec-speaking peoples in south-central Mexico who, like the Aztecs and Mayas, established impressive political centers in the valleys of their own seemingly limitless mountain ranges. Nevertheless, in spite of great geographic, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, most indigenous societies shared many common cultural characteristics in terms of diet and intellectual and technological achievements. To distinguish these remarkable peoples from other native groups in North America, anthropologist Paul Kirchhoff proposed in the early 1940s that the region as well as the societies and cultures within it be designated "Mesoamerica" (see Table 1, page 76, for a general chronology of Mesoamerican culture epochs).

Yet all the reliable evidence indicates that each of these major centers, their linguistic and ethnic differences notwithstanding, could likely trace many key characteristics of their societies to a common cultural ancestor and locale along the wet, lowland Gulf Coast region of Veracruz. Known today as the Olmec (in Nahuatl, the Aztecs' language: "people of the place with rubber [*olli*]") heartland, its inhabitants warrant recognition for establishing what traditionally has been described as the mother civilization of Mesoamerica.

In addition to having a sociopolitical system that channeled at least part of its energies into developments such as monumental architecture, fine art, and esoteric religious concepts, the Olmecs contributed a practice of profound importance to later generations—the practice of employing graphic symbolic forms to convey a unified construct of their worldview, aesthetics, and concept of kingship. Subsequently, over the centuries historical writing expressed by means of pictographs, hieroglyphs, and portraiture in books, stone, bone, wood, and ceramics was institutionalized by Maya, Zapotec, and Aztec rulers to exalt and validate royal authority.

Settled around 1500 ~~A.D.~~ B.C., probably by speakers of the ancestral Mixe-Zoquean linguistic group, the two best-known sites where the Olmecs flourished were San Lorenzo (about 1200–900 B.C.) and La Venta (about 900–400 B.C.), which functioned as political, religious, and economic centers. There earthen pyramids and numerous platform mounds and altars were built as part of administrative and ceremonial complexes, with stelae, large stone pillars, carved in low relief to commemorate what are believed to be authoritative individuals and their activities. However, there was far more to Olmec culure than a few ceremonial centers, for strategic regional settlements played key roles in territorial integration and overall development. Ongoing archaeological excavations indicate greater diversity as well as sophistication among the various Olmec people than heretofore thought.

Rubber, a natural resource in the Veracruz area, had many uses, one of the most important being the manufacture of rubber balls. Such balls trace back at

least to 1200 B.C. at El Manatí, Veracruz, where they were included in out-of-the-way caches as ritual offerings. Later the Olmecs exported them by the thousands. At distant Olmec-influenced Izapa, south toward the Pacific coast of the state of Chiapas, there is evidence of the earliest Mesoamerican ball game. But the sport was soon ubiquitous. Subsequently, rules, equipment, and the architectural playing fields for ball games varied according to the indigenous peoples who played them. Archaeological evidence for the existence of ball courts is found throughout Mesoamerica and beyond, in Puerto Rico as well as in Arizona.

The ball courts were large and impressive, with daunting stone walls. Typically, they were built adjacent to civic or religious facilities and were used by rulers on occasions of high ceremony. At least three different kinds of ball games were played. From oral histories it is certain that wagers could be costly and contests brutal, with defeated players suffering harsh penalties, some possibly even losing their lives.

Little is known of the Olmecs' place of origin, but their influence, as with the ball game, was widespread. Their trade routes for coveted jade and obsidian extended north and west to the region of Teotihuacan (Teotihuacán) and south to Oaxaca and Guatemala. Considering that there were no beasts of burden in North America, only human carriers, either destination was a considerable trek, to say nothing of making such a journey with a burden of heavy stone.

The more immediate indigenous native art and architecture styles of the Olmecs, who were by no means the only native group that settled in Central Mexico, spread to numerous locales, where Olmecoid ceramic, shell, and stone vessels and figurines appear. Their products in wood, paper, and cloth have since perished from the archaeological record for the most part. Of the numerous Olmec artistic motifs, the jaguar faces on otherwise human and animal representations is the most common. Additional distinguishing features of Olmec ware are deliberately deformed skulls with a cleft in the forehead, a warrior-type figure with a helmet or cap, and tripod rattle-footed (hollow, except for a bead rattling inside each of the supporting legs) vessels. Whether these were brought in as trade items or were of Olmec-influenced local manufacture has yet to be determined.

Among the most distinctive of all Olmec survivals found in what are believed to be their original settings are the huge basalt heads found throughout southern Veracruz. Quarried at a considerable distance and transported to the coast by raft or canoe, these blocks of basalt had distinctive faces and headdresses carved on them and were positioned at important locales. The sculptured heads could stand as tall as a human being. They may have been portraits and thus emblematic of Olmec kingship, but their purpose is otherwise not known. Some scholars believe that the stones were originally altars or thrones, then were refashioned to commemorate the likeness of a recently deceased ruler. Upon the collapse of Olmec civilization around 400 B.C., the stone heads were defaced and toppled from their imposing perches. Researchers continue to speculate whether the Olmecs' decline can be attributed to internal upheaval or invasion by outsiders.

Yet there is little evidence of large-scale warfare or even substantial sustained long-distance trade on the part of the Olmecs. The difficulty of crossing long stretches of countryside by foot without dependable food supplies limited all such activity—until the invention of the tortilla. The appearance, finally, at late-Olmec sites such as Tlaxcallan (Tlaxcala) and Chalcatzingo, of the *comal*, a ceramic or stone griddle for grilling tortillas and the manufacture of portable comestibles, did not, however, revolutionize Olmec life, for the Olmecs' dominance of the region began to wane shortly thereafter. It remained for their successors to take full advantage of this handy artifact for empire building.