The Mesoamerican cultures (1200 BC - AD 1519)

Central America before the arrival of Europeans

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Who were the Mesoamericans?

- There were many different cultures between 1200BC and AD 1519, but they share some important characteristics

- Who were these groups?
  - Olmec (1200-400BC)- Gulf Coast of Mexico
  - Teotihuacan (AD1- 800)- Central Mexican Plateau
  - Maya (300BC- AD1521)- southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Yucatan Mexico
  - Toltec (AD 900-1200) Central Mexican Plateau
  - Aztec (AD 1358-1521) Central Mexican Plateau
What traits did they share?

- **Agriculture** - corn, beans, squash, chiles
  - Corn first domesticated c. 6000BC
  - All these foods provide complete nutrition
  - Little meat (turkeys, guinea pigs, etc.)
  - Also cotton and cacao

Methods of farming will differ depending on geography and climate

- **City planning**
  - Pyramids/temples, palaces, ball courts, markets arranged around a central courtyard
Religion

- Gods of nature, world of the 5th Sun
  - Gods kept the world in order and maintained the agricultural cycle in exchange for honors and sacrifices
- *Popol Vuh*- Mayan creation myth- gods had created human beings out of maize and water
- Water (Tlaloc), Sky and Earth (Quetzalcoatl), War (Tezcatlipoca/ Huitzilopochtli)
Calendar and Writing

- Basic calendar - two kinds of years
  - solar year of 365 days (agricultural cycle)
  - ritual year of 260 days (20 mos. of 13 days)
- Writing system - evolved over time to include both ideas and sounds
  - Used to write works of history, poetry, and myth and keep genealogical, administrative, and astronomical records
  - Most writing has been destroyed by time or the Spanish
Trade networks

- Trade networks from Colorado to Colombia
  US SW (turquoise), Mesoamerica (feathers, jade, cacao, obsidian), and S. America (gold)
- Everyday goods - from diverse ecological zones - mountains, coast, rainforest, plateaus
- Luxury goods (status symbols) - rare animal skins, cacao beans, quetzal feathers, gold and silver
- Cacao used as money
The Olmec (1200 – 400 B.C.E.)

- Three small city centers near Gulf Coast (San Lorenzo, La Venta, Tres Zapotes)- only one occupied at a time
- Abundant rain- little irrigation needed but flood drainage ditches
- Built pyramids around plazas, surrounded by huge basalt (stone) heads- purpose unknown
- Why did it end? Maybe civil war or doubts about the ruling classes
Olmec Head at La Venta

Pyramid of La Venta
High Plateau of Central Mexico (25m NE of Mexico City)
Suddenly around 1 C.E. a major ceremonial center was planned and constructed- by whom? Why? How (unprecedented)?
At its height- 11.5 sqm, 150,000 pop.
NOT an empire- only one city
- Pol. alliance with many other areas- marriage with Maya princess (Kaminaljuyu)
Trade and crafts- clear trade links from Colorado to Colombia; barrios of foreign artisans within the city
One strange item: no clear writing system has been found
Pyramid of the Sun
Avenue of the Dead
Pyramid of the Moon
Quetzalcoatl
Why did Teotihuacan end?

- About C.E. 650 the Avenue of the Dead and major buildings were burned - why?
  - Climate change led to malnutrition, civil unrest, warfare
- People continued to live in the residential area for 200 years
- The Toltecs and Aztecs visited and mythologized Teotihuacan as the “City of the Gods”
Tikal- Central Plaza and pyramid (view from palace)
The Maya (300 B.C.E. – 1521 C.E.)

- Southern and Yucatan Mexico to Honduras/ El Salvador
  - Different regions over time; many ecological zones
  - Many food and natural resources -> trade goods
  - Soil in lowlands was thin, led to use of low terraces to prevent erosion
- Hundreds of independent city states
  - Unlike earlier cultures, they had multiple cities simultaneously
  - Linked by marriage, trade, warfare
Maya religion

- Closely linked to astronomy (Sun, Moon, and Venus) written in codices (folding books)
- Played out in ball game
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKvQjgC9sIY
- Practiced a lot of blood sacrifice- kings/queens, POWs, volunteers- gods needed blood as food- to ensure the rising of the sun

Maya queen holds a bowl filled with strips of paper used to collect blood.
Maya writing

- Hieroglyphics - very complex - symbols represent concepts, sounds, objects all at once
  - also number system (lines, dots and shells)
- Found in books (only 4 left), on buildings and pillars (stele), painted on pots
- Information: astronomy, genealogy, history, mythology
The End of the Maya?

- Around 900 C.E. the lowland centers were abandoned due to climate change, civil unrest, warfare, disease, etc.
- New cities arose in the Yucatan, influenced by Central Mexico and lasted until the Spanish in 1520s.
- Some smaller centers remained in the highlands of Guatemala—the last community wasn’t conquered until 1697.
- Maya are now a modern ethnic group within modern nations, still keep some ancient culture.
The Toltecs (900 C.E.–1200)

- Main city- Tula (central Mexican Plateau); also connected with Chichen Itza of the Maya (Yucatan)
- Combination of people from Teotihuacan and Gulf Coast
- Best known through Aztec mythology- home of two gods, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca who battle for supremacy- legend will play a role in the Spanish conquest of the Aztec