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## CRADLE OF CIVILIZATION: MEXICAN GULF COAST, AND THE MODERN HEIRS THEREOF

One of the six Cradles of Civilization is the Olmec heartland on the central Gulf Coast of Mexico, in what is now Veracruz and Tabasco states, and adjacent areas in southern Mexico.

### **What is a Cradle of Civilization?**

A cradle of civilization is defined as a location and a culture where people created a civilization independent of other civilizations in other locations. The characteristics of civilization are considered to be the existence of cities, a large sedentary population that doesn't move around, monumental architecture, the existence of social classes and inequality, and the creation of a system of written language. All are dependent on agriculture and the creation of an agricultural surplus to support a centralized government. Water is important to sustain an abundant food supply.

Scholars agree on six cradles of civilization: Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, ancient India, ancient China, Mesoamerica, and coastal Peru.

## **Agriculture**

Agriculture appeared in the region during the Archaic period (approximately 8000-2000 BCE). This is when populations settled in villages replacing the previous hunter-gathering lifestyle of the Proto-Indian period (approximately 10,000 to 8000 BCE), when human settlement first appeared in the region. Corn is believed to have been domesticated in what is now southern Mexico around 7000 BCE. [1] Other crop plants, like squash and beans, appear to have been domesticated later. [2][3][4] They were spread throughout North, South and Central America. [5] Avocados were apparently domesticated in what is now Mexico no later than 5000 BCE. [6] Amaranth was domesticated in Mexico around that time and independently in Peru. [7] Cacao was apparently first domesticated in Mesoamerica by the Mokaya people on the Pacific coast of Chiapas state around 1900 BCE, though the cacao tree originated in the Amazon basin. [8] [9] Chile peppers were domesticated around the Mexican Gulf Coast around 4000 BCE. [10] [11] Vanilla was domesticated by the Totonac of coastal Veracruz in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century. [12]

## **Architecture**

During the Preclassic Era, or Formative Period, from 2000 BCE to 250 CE, large-scale ceremonial architecture, writing, cities, and states developed. The building of pyramids began at this time. [13]

The Olmec civilization developed and flourished at such sites as La Venta in Tabasco and San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán in Veracruz, eventually succeeded by the Epi-Olmec culture between 300–250 BCE. [14][19][20][21]

In San Lorenzo, at the top of the plateau, the power of the city's rulers and its divine source was announced to the world by massive thrones, colossal heads, and smaller sculptures of humans, cats, birds, and supernatural monsters. Most of these sculptures were carved from basalt brought from outside the area. [14] [15]

The elites of San Lorenzo lived in large structures raised on low clay platforms amid the sculptures. An elite residence dubbed the "Red Palace" had earthen walls and floors, which were plastered with sand stained red by hematite.

Massive basalt columns 13 feet tall supported the structure's roof, and L-shaped basalt benches are thought to have been used as step coverings. Blocks of bentonite, clay and limestone were found in the debris, and may have been used to build the the walls. Several structures had walls that were made of thick mud

16 inches thick, and lacked post-molds. They were evidently constructed using the technique known as rammed earth, in which damp soil and some sort of stabilizing material like lime or animal blood is compacted into a mold. Other structures were built of masonry, bentonite blocks and mud mortar. Floors were made of gravel or packed earth, or paved with bentonite blocks.[14]

The common people lived on the slopes of the plateau, descending to a level 130 feet below the summit. Their houses had thatched roofs and were of wattle-and-daub construction. A massive amount of labor went into building the terraces at San Lorenzo. One of these terraces was held in place by a 23-foot-high retaining wall. It is unclear if these terraces and houses were ordered to be constructed by rulers, or initiated by a group of commoners.[14]

Modifications to the landscape in the San Lorenzo area also included causeways or dikes. The two largest ones, at Potrero Nuevo and El Azuzul, bordered the courses of ancient rivers. These may have provided some measure of flood control and may also have served as wharves for loading and unloading boats.[14]

Further archaeological study was conducted at the El Bajio section of El Remolino, a site in North San Lorenzo, by American archaeologist Carl J. Wendt of California State University-Fullerton. [16] This, coupled with studies of more central San Lorenzo, revealed quite a bit about how houses were organized. Wendt studied trash scattered throughout the site, using the types and locations of refuse to infer the layout of buildings. Potentially valuable or hazardous trash was studied, and classified according to several stages of disposal: discarded along areas near house walls, then moved to dumps or pits. When people abandon a house, they usually leave behind trash that they're not thinking about: behind large pieces of furniture, in corners, or outside on the edge of the premises. Wendt determined the likely way the site was built using this information. The data suggested that the way the architecture was organized most likely followed what is known as the solar pattern of highland Maya house lots. The solar pattern is unrestricted in space and has separate areas designated for different activities, e.g., a sleeping area, a cooking area (i.e., a kitchen), and so forth, as detached structures, all built around a central patio. [16]

The Zapotec civilization arose in the Valley of Oaxaca [17], and the Teotihuacan civilization arose in the Valley of Mexico. [18] The Maya civilization began to develop in the Mirador Basin (in modern-day Guatemala) and the Epi-Olmec culture in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (in modern-day Chiapas), later expanding into Guatemala and the Yucatan Peninsula.[19][20]

During the Classic Era (250-900), architecture, stuccowork, relief sculpture, ceramics, the painting of murals and lapidary (the cutting, shaping and polishing of gems and other stones into decorative objects) developed and spread in the region of southern Mexico, Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. [14] [17] [18] [19] [20] The city-state of Teotihuacan dominated the Valley of Mexico until the early 8th century, but little is known of the political structure of the region because the Teotihuacanos didn't leave written records. [18] The city-state of Monte Albán dominated the Valley of Oaxaca until the late Classic era, leaving limited records in their script, which is as yet mostly undeciphered. [17]

The Postclassic Era (900-1521) is often viewed as a period of cultural decline. However, it was a time of technological advancement in architecture, engineering, and weaponry. [22] Metallurgy (introduced around 800) came into use for jewelry and some tools, with new alloys and techniques being developed

in a few centuries. [23] The Postclassic was a period of rapid movement and population growth—especially in Central Mexico after 1200—and of experimentation in governance. For instance, in the Yucatan, “joint rulership” apparently replaced the more theocratic governments of Classic times [25], while oligarchic rule by councils operated in much of central Mexico. [26] [27] Likewise, it appears that the wealthy merchant class and military orders became more powerful than was apparently the case in Classic times. This provided some Mesoamericans with a degree of social mobility.[24]

The Aztec Empire arose in the Valley of Mexico in the early 15th century and appeared to be on a path to asserting dominance over the region not seen since Teotihuacan. By the 15th century, the revival of Mayan culture in the Yucatan and southern Guatemala and Aztec imperialism evidently enabled a renaissance of fine arts and science, e.g., the 'Pueblan-Mexica' style in pottery, manuscript illumination, goldwork, Nahuatl poetry, and botanical institutes established by the Aztec elite.[28]

Spain was the first European nation to contact Mesoamerica. Its conquistadores (conquering military leaders), aided by numerous native allies, conquered the Aztecs.

## **Colonial Period**

1521–1821

The **Colonial Period** began with the Spanish conquest (1519–1521), which ended the hegemony of the Aztec Empire and was accomplished through Spaniards' strategic alliances with enemies of the empire. The defeat of the Aztecs marked the dramatic beginning of an inexorable process of conquest in Mesoamerica that Spain completed in the mid-seventeenth century. The indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica did not disappear, although their numbers were greatly reduced in the sixteenth century by new infectious diseases brought by the Spanish invaders; they also suffered high mortality from slave labor. The fall of Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City) marked the beginning of the three-hundred-year colonial period and the imposition of Spanish rule. [29]

The Colonial period saw the introduction of Spanish architecture. In places of dense indigenous settlement, such as in Central Mexico, the mendicant orders (Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians) built churches on the sites of pre-Hispanic temples, in an attempt to blot out the Indigenous religions. In the early



period of the "spiritual conquest", there were so many newly converted Indigenous people who attended Mass that a space within the church complex was walled off to create an enlarged sacred space without great expense of building. Indigenous labor was used in construction; since a community's sacred place was a symbol and embodiment of that community, the labor involved in building churches was not necessarily an unwanted burden. The different mendicant orders had distinct styles of building. Franciscans built large churches to accommodate the new converts, Dominican churches had a lot of ornamentation, while the Augustinian churches were called opulent and sumptuous by the order's critics. [30]

Mission churches were often of simple design. As the mendicant orders were pushed out of central Mexico and as Jesuits also evangelized Indians in northern Mexico, they built mission churches as part of a larger complex, with living quarters and workshops for resident Indigenous people. Unlike central Mexico, where churches were built in existing Indigenous towns, on the frontier where indigenous people did not live in such settlements, the mission complex was created. In Central America, cities were founded by the Spaniards on the sites of existing Indigenous towns and then churches to serve the community were built,

as in the case of Comayagua in Honduras, which is located in a valley that was already densely populated by Indigenous people, like the Valley of Mexico. In the rest of the Americas a similar pattern was followed by the authorities.[30]

The colonial period also saw the wholesale replacement of indigenous crops with exotic crops introduced by the Spaniards, for example, their attempt to eradicate the cultivation of amaranth by the Aztec due to its sacred nature. [31]

## **Postcolonial Period**

### **1821-present**

The postcolonial period in modern-day Mesoamerica began with the 1821 independence of Mexico from Spain (first declared in 1810) and continued with the 1823 independence of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras from Mexico as part of the Federal Republic of Central America (from which they declared their independence in 1824, 1839 and 1838, respectively). Belize became a British colony in 1840 after being fought over by Britain and Spain throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and became independent in 1981; its history and culture and mainly British and therefore its development may be considered separate from the rest of Mesoamerica.

Postcolonial Hispanic Mesoamerica has been marked by turmoil, some (though not all) of it involving foreign military action in Mesoamerican countries and foreign meddling in their affairs, e.g., the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), the First French Intervention aka the Pastry War (1838-1839), the Second French Intervention (1861-1867), the American occupation of Veracruz in 1914, and the Punitive Expedition of 1916-1917, all in Mexico; and the CIA- sponsored 1954 coup in Guatemala that deposed the democratically elected President Jacobo Arbenz (and was supported by the United Fruit Company, the ancestor of Chiquita Brands International) and led to four decades of civil war in Guatemala that included a genocide by its military governments against the modern Maya.

[32][33]

Currently, Hispanic Mesoamerica has a serious problem with poverty, organized crime and violent crime which has driven many in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to seek refuge in the United States.

Belize has also been afflicted with poverty due to the lingering effects of colonialism. [32][33]

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