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The reader who turns to the anthropology and archaeology of ancient tropical America quickly comes to realize the need for acquiring a new geographical and temporal vocabulary. Terms such as “the Fertile Crescent” and “Upper and Lower Egypt” have no relevance for the geography of the New World. The dynastic sequences that anchor the history of the ancient Middle East are unrelated to the prehistory of North America. Instead, the high civilizations of Ancient North America developed in a cultural and geographical unit known as Mesoamerica.

Mesoamerica stretches from north central Mexico to the western half of El Salvador (*figure 1*). Within this diverse geographic area, the climate varies from the freezing slopes of volcanic mountain ranges that border the temperate valleys of the interior to the hot and moist Gulf coast and the somewhat dryer Pacific coast. The cultures that developed within this varied geography shared a series of common traits. Foremost among these traits was an agricultural system based on a staple triad of maize, beans, and squash. All Mesoamerican cultures measured time in an interlocking calendric system based on a 260-day ritual calendar and a 365-day solar (or agricultural) calendar. Calendric notations as well as astronomical information and historical records were recorded by Mesoamericans on bark-paper or leather books with hieroglyphic writing systems of varying degrees of complexity.

Ancient Mesoamericans played a ball game in a court with a solid rubber ball. They practiced a religion based on the worship of personified forces of nature and of their own ancestors. One of the major rites associated with this highly complex religious system was blood-letting. The act of bloodletting took place either through the ritual execution of prisoners captured in war or through autosacrifice. Almost all Mesoamerican cultures produced architectural works of distinction and almost all had population centers somewhat akin to the western concept of cities. Within these cities could be found large and highly organized markets which were supplied through extensive trading networks.

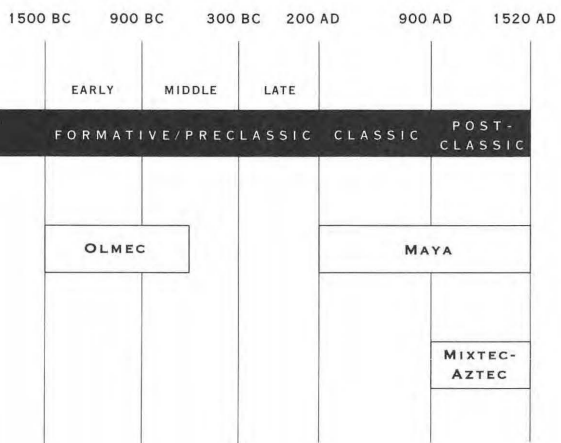
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The time frame for Mesoamerica can be divided into four periods. The Archaic Period (6,000–1500 B.C.) saw the development of settled village farming life. The Formative or Preclassic Period (1500 B.C.–A.D. 200) was highlighted by the development of Mesoamerica's earliest civilization and its first great art style: the Olmec. The Late Formative Period also saw the beginnings of those cultures that would dominate the succeeding Classic Period (A.D. 200–900). The Classic Period saw the flourishing of lowland Maya culture, which produced the most complex writing system in the New World. The Classic Period also witnessed the fruition and demise of the great urban center of Teotihuacan in the central Mexican highlands, as well as the apogee of Zapotec civilization in the Oaxaca valley city of Monte Alban. The Classic Period ended for the Maya with a mysterious collapse, the cause of which is still the subject of much scholarly debate. The Postclassic Period (A.D. 900–1520) saw the rise of Mixtec culture and was a time of increased militarism, dominated first by the Toltecs and finally by the better-known Aztecs. It was the conquest of the Aztecs by Spanish invaders in the sixteenth century that marked the end of the long-flourishing, purely indigenous Mesoamerican civilizations.

6000 BC

ARCHAIC



A dazzling variety of mutually unintelligible languages characterizes Mesoamerica; more than seventy of them are still spoken. Most belong to one of four families of related tongues. The Uto-Aztecan family includes Nahuatl (the language of the Aztecs) and Hui-chol as well as Tarahumara. Languages in this family are relative newcomers to Mesoamerica, visitors from the north (the United States) came late and stayed for the duration. Ancestors of the Aztecs, for example, did not reach central Mexico until Postclassic times.

Mixe, Popoluca and Zoque speakers, today located in and on the edges of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Mexico, constitute a family of Mixe-Zoquean languages having Olmec ancestry. Many languages in Mesoamerica have borrowed words from Mixe-Zoquean languages.

A far more diversified family, with roots extending much farther back in Mesoamerica than Mixe-Zoquean, is that of the Oto-Manguean languages. This family, including numerous tone languages, can be said to focus on the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, and includes Zapotec, Mixtec and Otomi.

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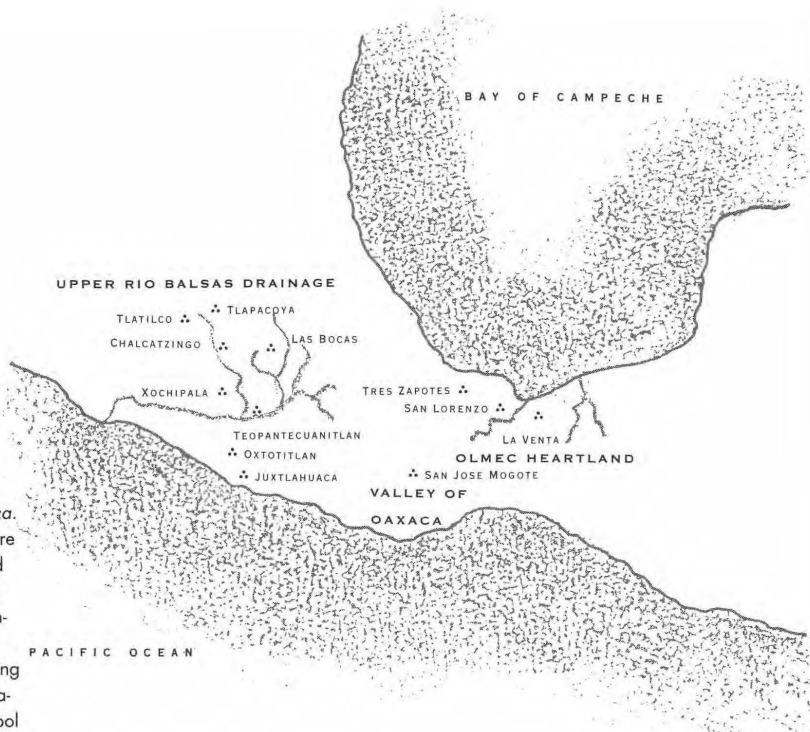
TIME PERIOD	LANGUAGE/ PEOPLE	SCRIPT	ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE
FORMATIVE	OLMEC	ISTHMIAN	LA MOJARRA
CLASSIC	MAYA	MAYAN	KAMINALJUYU
POSTCLASSIC	OTOMI	MIXTEC	TIKAL
ARCHAIC	MIXE	OAXACA	MONTE ALBAN
PRECLASSIC		IZAPAN	

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Approximately thirty Mayan languages exist, spoken in southeastern Mexico and Guatemala. These include Chol (which is directly descended from the language in which most of the Classic Maya inscriptions were written) and Yucatec (the language of the Postclassic Maya codices). Quiche is a highland Mayan language of Guatemala in which a very important Colonial Period text known as the *Popol Vuh* was written. This text, which might be called the "Bible" of the Quiche, documents the creation of the world as well as Quiche history and has played a prominent role in our interpretation of Classic Maya writings and iconography.

The river of time has witnessed in Mesoamerica the flowering of many cultures, the continuing diversification of many languages, and a great deal of interaction among the many peoples, their languages and their cultures. Symbol systems manifesting the ideologies of peoples in Mesoamerica through history have traveled individual paths, and our own glimpses of portions of these paths, including where they have led to today, allow us to reconstruct fascinating scenarios that with every new bit of evidence are more clearly delineated, more closely focused, more carefully refined.

Such is the framework of ancient Mesoamerica. The cultures that rose and fell over a three-thousand-year period were all products of Mesoamerican civilization. The material remains and art styles of these American cultures can hold their own with similar civilizations in the Old World. Although we are just now deciphering the writing and symbol systems of these ancient peoples, it daily becomes more apparent that the study of their history is as rewarding and intriguing as any other chapter documenting the human condition.

**FIGURE 1**

*Map of central Mesoamerica.* Olmec archaeological culture was centered in a heartland which was dominated by a riverine and coastal environment. Portable objects and monumental sculpture bearing themes, motifs and iconography of the Olmec-style symbol system are found not only in the Olmec heartland but in such other areas of Mesoamerica as the Upper Balsas River drainage, the Valley of Mexico, the Valley of Oaxaca and the Pacific coast. The wide geographic distribution of these portable objects and monumental sculpture indicates the presence of a Formative Period ceremonial complex the most concentrated expression of which was in the Olmec heartland.

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