

## MESOAMERICAN CIVILIZATION: PATTERN AND PROCESS

**A.K. Balkansky**

*Department of Anthropology, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, USA*

**Keywords:** Ancient civilizations, archaeology, Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, prehispanic Mesoamerica, settlement patterns, social evolution, states, urbanism

### Contents

1. Introduction
  2. Culture Area, Symbiotic Region, and World System
  3. Culture Historical Overview
    - 3.1. History of Mesoamerican Archaeology
    - 3.2. Environment and Early Occupation
    - 3.3. Archaic Foraging and the Origins of Agriculture
    - 3.4. The Early Mesoamerican Village
    - 3.5. The Mesoamerican Urban Tradition
    - 3.6. Classic Period Collapses
    - 3.7. Postclassic City-States
  4. Mesoamerican Patterns and Processes
- Glossary  
Bibliography  
Biographical Sketch

### Summary

This chapter is concerned with Mesoamerican civilization: its origins, varied manifestations, major cultural traits, environmental adaptations, and patterns and processes of change. The cumulative results described in this chapter show how complex societies evolved in prehispanic Mesoamerica. One of the continuous features of the prehispanic world was interdependence among the myriad regional-scale societies despite wide environmental and ethno-linguistic divergence. The large-scale connectedness of prehispanic societies was in contrast to their varied regional manifestations, yet both patterns of connectedness and variation are fundamental to understanding Mesoamerica, especially during episodes of transition in the prehispanic past. This chapter emphasizes those transitional periods from first sedentism to the rise and fall of states, ending with the Aztec Empire and arrival of Spanish conquerors. There is also a more diffuse but persistent effort to convey the most salient features of Mesoamerican civilization: urbanism and its varied forms; the distinct writing systems that emerged; and a sense of the prehispanic worldview that differs fundamentally from Western preconceptions. One common trend in recent theoretical work is the study of interaction on the Mesoamerican scale in spite of the recognized regional differences. After a brief introduction, the second section of this chapter reviews the major theoretical approaches to understanding Mesoamerica as a whole, each having its own limitations and all still in use. The culture historical overview follows which focuses on major developmental patterns and processes of change. There are several case studies

embedded within the overview intended to show the kinds of evidence Mesoamerican archaeologists use to understand the past and to illustrate more general processes. This chapter ends with a brief summary statement and look toward the future.

## **1. Introduction**

Spanish eyewitnesses from the conquest period of the 1520s described “enchanted visions” and “dreams” upon encountering Mesoamericans for the first time. After reaching the island city of Tenochtitlan, the conquistadors simply could not believe what they were seeing—a city among the largest in the world that seemed to float on water, causeways radiating out to the shoreline, a massively urbanized central precinct and commercial district of scale and variety unknown in Europe. What was Mesoamerican civilization? How did it come into being? Archaeologists continue to investigate these questions and have been filling gaps in the historical record as well as accumulating knowledge of times long before the conquest. We know today that the human record in the lands from Mexico to Central America stretches back at least 15 000 years with a continuous sequence of change leading to urbanism and states. This continuity in development makes Mesoamerica one of the most important world areas for understanding remote prehistory and the causes of long-term culture change.

This account of the development of Mesoamerican civilization follows alternating themes of pattern and process: the description of long-term trends or patterns, followed by brief explanations of the processes of change. The themes of political centralization and social differentiation, culminating in stratified societies, urbanism and the state, are prominent in most overviews of prehispanic Mesoamerica. The broad outlines of these developments, their timing and varied manifestations from region to region, find broad consensus among specialists. Explaining the processes of change is another story. Archaeologists are divided among the humanists and the scientists, the excavators and the epigraphers, the single site and the regional specialists. That is why this chapter takes a conjunctive (or multiple lines of evidence) and multi-scalar approach. The best case studies integrate ethno-historical and archaeological perspectives, material studies and human biology, past environments and technologies, and have data points ranging from house to region and macroregion. Explanations tempered by several sources of information usually prove to be the more enduring. Some of the more enduring explanatory frameworks for understanding Mesoamerica as a whole are sketched below.

## **2. Culture Area, Symbiotic Region, and World System**

Mesoamerica is understood as a culture area, best-described in Paul Kirchoff’s trait-based description from the 1940s. Culture areas and the culture area approach are means to classify diversity and are used throughout world archaeology. Areas so defined are multi-cultural and contain numerous independent states with shared histories, political structures, belief systems and technologies. These broad zones or “macroregions” in our current parlance are bound via diffused ideas and a shared material culture recognizable to archaeologists. But there are limitations to this approach, and ever since the 1960s Mesoamerican archaeologists have generated a series of new approaches for dealing with those limitations. What behavioral processes linked regions and cultures within the culture area? What about these systemic linkages caused culture changes over the long

term? For Kirchoff and others of his generation, diffusion of ideas and people led to culture change. Today, archaeological study of the culture area or macroregion and its causal properties is predicated on analysis of nested social structures extending from the house through regional, macroregional, and continental scales of analysis. This multi-scalar approach continues to be the most productive research strategy in Mesoamerican archaeology and is featured in the case studies below.

Current approaches share a specific intellectual lineage traceable from William Sanders's survey of the Teotihuacan Valley and concept of the "Central Mexican Symbiotic Region." Symbiosis, according to Sanders, arose from diversity in the Mesoamerican physical environment and this microgeographic zonation selected for economic specialization on the local level. In terms of culture change, the idea was that areas in constant contact were primary forces in the further development of local cultural traditions. Central Mexico was one of the primary exporters of culture change over a broad area owing to the presence of intensive agriculture and dense populations across the entire symbiotic region, giving successive rise to Teotihuacan, Tula, and Tenochtitlan as super-centers integrating wide areas of Mesoamerica. But the essential limitation of this theoretical approach is demarcating the bounds of Mesoamerica's several symbiotic regions as closed systems. Sanders's formulation of local-level economic specialization (and local-level developmental variation) nonetheless continues to resonate.

Study of Mesoamerica as a world system composed of competing cores and their peripheries is the most common theoretical approach used today for understanding Mesoamerica as a whole. World system models are designed to transcend the region or individual culture as the unit of analysis, and are ultimately derived from Wallerstein's historical explanation for the origins of capitalism albeit with modifications for prehistoric cases. The world system, according to Wallerstein, is an economic zone of core and peripheral societies that extends beyond a single region in which an exchange differential benefits the core (the most economically differentiated, technologically advanced, and politically complex part of the world system). The core region has thus become the *de facto* cause of changes occurring over wider areas.

The recurrent criticism is that peripheral societies are more active in structuring their exchange relations, and their economic organizations are more variable, than the world system model allows. Archaeologists working within this framework emphasize the modifications of Wallerstein used for prehistoric cases, most notably the importance of prestige goods exchange (rather than bulk commodities) in structuring macroregional linkages (a point first noted by Kirchoff). And although exploitative relationships between cores and peripheries are fundamental to the capitalist world system, there is disagreement over whether this was the case in prehistoric times.

The problem for world system theorists is that data from many outlying regions suggests they were not peripheral at all. Mesoamerica was composed of too many cores (with socioeconomic differentiation rather than core domination distinguishing them) for world system models to continue to operate unaltered. For now, however, no current theory exists to replace the world system on the macroregional scale.

### 3. Culture Historical Overview

The following sections are encapsulated overviews of the major turning points in Mesoamerican prehistory, from early occupations to first sedentism, from early agriculture to urban states, and from the late prehispanic Aztec Empire to the Spanish Conquest. The author has integrated more detailed case studies from his own work, showing a continuous developmental sequence in one small region of Mesoamerica that is illustrative of the broader developmental pattern.

#### 3.1. History of Mesoamerican Archaeology

Prehispanic Mesoamerica was vast and complex with considerable internal variation, making it an ideal case for comparative study as an area that saw the growth of primary civilizations in the remote past. How scholars came to realize Mesoamerica's significance, and recognize cultural variation in time and space beyond what was known about the Aztec from Spanish accounts of the conquest of Mexico, was a process coincident with the development of archaeology as a scientific discipline during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This period of development is roughly divisible into early and late, corresponding to (1) increasingly more sophisticated travelers' accounts in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (notably John L. Stephens' classic volume on the Maya area), and (2) ending with the first large-scale and recognizably scientific excavations at Mayan, Central Mexican, and Oaxacan archaeological sites. These early excavations included efforts sponsored by Harvard University's Peabody Museum, the Carnegie Institution of Washington, D.C., and the American Museum of Natural History.

Key innovations and discoveries from early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century included the decipherment of the Maya calendar that allowed scholars to fix the Classic Period in time from 300 to 900, and link sites such as Teotihuacan in Central Mexico to developments in the Maya area. Manuel Gamio's Central Mexican excavations using stratigraphic methods was an important methodological innovation that is fundamental to modern archaeology. Finally, the discovery of cultural horizons pre-dating the Classic Period was perhaps the most significant development from today's perspective; this discovery set in motion numerous long-term projects charting the course of individual civilizations that continue to the present. George Vaillant's discovery of an "archaic" or Preclassic Period in the Valley of Mexico, along with excavations at La Venta that brought the Gulf Coast Olmec to light were signal moments in the recognition of early cultures.

Years	Period	Major Sites	Cultural Characteristics
1520 to 1820	Spanish Colonial	Mexico City, Merida, Puebla, Guadalajara	Conquest and its aftermath; cultural syncretism; Colonial documents
1200 to 1520	Late Postclassic	Tenochtitlan, Tzintzuntzan, Tlaxcala, Yatepec, Otumba, Mayapan, Tulum Mitla, Zaachila, Cuilapan,	Aztec and Tarascan Empires City-States or Cacicazgos

		Achiutla, Teposcolula	Codex-based writing systems
900 to 1200	Early Postclassic	Tula Grande, Chichen Itza, Cholula, Tilantongo, Tututepec	Toltecs, Topiltzin-uetzalcoatl
500 to 900	Late Classic	Dzibilchaltun, Xunantunich, Xochicalco, Cacaxtla, Cantona, Caracol, Dos Pilas, El Tajin, Ceren	Teotihuacan, Maya collapses; “Epiclasic” city-states
300 to 500	Early Classic	Teotihuacan, Teuchitlan, Monte Alban, Jalieza, Tikal, Copan, Calakmul, Cerro de las Mesas, Maticapan	Teotihuacan expansion Maya and Zapotec writing West Mexican cultural fluorescence
300 BCE to 300	Late Preclassic or Formative	Cuicuilco, Teotihuacan, Monte Alban, Tilcayete, Huamelulpan, Monte Negro, Chiapa de Corzo, Tres Zapotes, Kaminaljuyu, El Mirador, Tikal, Dos Pilas	Urbanization; pristine state formation
900 to 300 BCE	Middle Preclassic or Formative	San Jose Mogote, Tayata Abaj Takalik, Chalcatzingo, La Venta, La Blanca, Cuello, Monte Alban	Competing chiefdoms; earliest writing
2000 to 900 BCE	Early Preclassic or Formative	San Lorenzo, San Jose Mogote, Tayata, Cuello, Paso de la Amada, Tlapacoya, Tlatilco	Early villages; “Olmec Horizon”
8000 to 2000 BCE	Archaic	Coxcatlan, Guila Naquitz, Gheo-Shih	Foraging, incipient cultivation; earliest ceramics
15 000 to 8000 BCE	Paleoindian	Iztapan	Hunting and gathering

Table 1. The Mesoamerican chronological sequence and select major sites.

### 3.2. Environment and Early Occupation

One of the foundational questions in the study of early civilizations is to what degree does the environment shape the course of cultural evolution? In anthropology, the early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century were characterized by “possibilism,” or the idea advanced by Franz Boas, Alfred Kroeber and their students that the environment was not deterministic and that common histories were the most significant factors in cultural evolution. By mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, more balanced views championed by Julian Steward were in play, and the cultural ecological approach that integrated environmental and cultural variables dominated synthetic discussions of ancient

Mesoamerica into the 1960s and 1970s, including work by Pedro Armillas, Kent Flannery, Angel Palerm, William Sanders, and Eric Wolf. Karl Wittfogel's arguments for "hydraulic civilizations" were especially influential in stimulating comparative works on early civilizations including Mesoamerica. Today, however, most specialists agree that the extensive irrigation systems described by Wittfogel, if present at all, post-date the rise of urban states and that many early civilizations, notably the ancient Maya, developed outside the alluvial floodplains of great rivers. In a return to a more possibilistic orientation, study of long-term sequences such as the Valley of Mexico show a succession of cultural climaxes that owe much to historical continuities seen in the sequential rises of Teotihuacan, Tula, and Tenochtitlan.

Historical perspectives are needed to help understand what unified ancient Mesoamerican cultures, given the broad variation in Mesoamerican environments. Major environmental regions include the deserts of Northern Mexico (although this area is generally grouped with the American Southwest); the semi-arid highlands of Central and Southern Mexico including the regions around modern Mexico City, Puebla and Oaxaca; the coastal lowlands of Veracruz and Chiapas, where some of the earliest complex societies arose; and the tropical forests of the lowland Maya. The Maya area itself is divisible into three major environmental sub-regions: the drier northern lowlands of the Yucatan Peninsula, including modern-day Merida; the humid tropical forests of the Peten region in Guatemala, including the ancient sites of El Mirador and Tikal; and the more varied temperate and cold regions of the Guatemalan Highlands, including modern-day Antigua and numerous active volcanoes. Climatic conditions are as varied as the geographic zonation (with further sub-divisions existing within the major zones just described), although all of Mesoamerica is characterized by the contrast between wet and dry seasons, an annual change that is strongly tied to the agricultural cycle and other cultural practices. Altitudinal zonation is another common feature of most Mesoamerican environments, with landscapes divisible into hot, temperate, and cold regions. Thus, even though most of Mesoamerica is located south of the Tropic of Cancer, temperature and humidity is conditioned by elevation, giving each region its own "vertical ecology." It is oftentimes true that only short distances must be traversed to cross from hot to temperate to cold zones and this fact has proven significant for patterns of political expansion and exchange just as for Andean South America.

Mesoamerica also contains persistent environmental hazards that have shaped early cultures and civilizations. Drought and consequent famine might have been factors in the Maya collapse, and are reported to have affected political events in chronicles of the Aztec Empire. More generally, settlement and economic patterns have been shown in many instances to conform to evaluations of drought risk. Other more limited but oftentimes historically significant environmental hazards are earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. This persistent theme figures in the title to Eric Wolf's classic synthesis, *Sons of the Shaking Earth*, and most every archaeologist working in Mexico has had the experience. This theme also figures in the deep-seated Mesoamerican religious duality of Sky and Earth. In its angry form, Earth is manifest as an earthquake, and was often depicted as such on Formative Period pottery vessels. Sometimes, however, the angry earth is a boon to archaeology, as with the ash fall that destroyed but preserved archaeologically the 7<sup>th</sup>-century village of Ceren in El Salvador.

Into this environmental backdrop entered Mesoamerica's first inhabitants. The dates for the Paleoindian Period are approximate (ca. 14 000 to 8000 BCE) and the data limited (there being more intensive study of this period in other parts of the New World). However, enough is known for a general sketch of ways of life during the late Pleistocene and early part of the Holocene. This period prior to the earliest domestication of plants, and many thousands of years before sedentary agricultural villages, was characterized initially by small groups of late Ice Age hunters and later (as the climate changed and large mammal species became extinct) of mobile forager-collectors.

There are ambiguous or poorly dated sites in Central Mexico that could be significantly older than ca. 14 000 BCE, but these remain controversial. Of the more recent late Ice Age sites, the most famous is the Iztapan kill site in the Valley of Mexico, where the remains of imperial mammoth (*Mammuthus imperator*) were found trapped in boggy conditions on an ancient lake margin along with projectile points and other stone tools. Other early sites appear to have been base camps, or areas of temporary habitation from which hunting and foraging expeditions would begin. Early levels of Coxcatlan Cave in the Tehuacan Valley that date 12 000 to 9000 BCE also pertain to the Paleoindian Period, but show the transition to or perhaps reliance on smaller game coupled with intensive foraging. Animal bones found in the cave included extinct horse, rabbit, tortoise, antelope, fox and various birds among other small-game species. Coxcatlan and other sites excavated by Richard MacNeish contain evidence for a wide range of subsistence activities, suggesting that mammoth and other big-game kill sites, although spectacular, were likely the exception. Evidence from Kent Flannery's excavations in Oaxacan cave sites suggests that the Coxcatlan way of life was widespread and included plant species that were exploited intensively during the subsequent Archaic Period.

-  
-  
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE 31PAGES OF THIS CHAPTER,  
Visit: <http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx>

### **Bibliography**

Adams R.E.W and MacLeod M.J. (eds.) (2000). *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas*, Vol. II, *Mesoamerica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [This edited volume is an authoritative treatment of prehispanic Mesoamerican civilizations].

Balkansky A.K. (1998). Origin and collapse of complex societies in Oaxaca (Mexico): Evaluating the era from 1965 to the present. *Journal of World Prehistory* **12**, 451—493. [This article summarizes current knowledge of the Mixtec and Zapotec civilizations in comparative perspective].

Berdan F.F. Blanton R.E. Boone E.H. Hodge M.G. Smith M.E. and Umberger E. (1996). *Aztec Imperial Strategies*. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks. [This edited volume updates our knowledge of the Aztec Empire and its relationships with conquered territories].

- Blanton R.E. Feinman G.M. Kowalewski S.A. and Nicholas L.M. (1999). *Ancient Oaxaca: The Monte Albán State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [This book offers a regional settlement perspective on the rise of Zapotec civilization].
- Braswell G.E. (ed.) (2003). *The Maya and Teotihuacan: Reinterpreting Early Classic Interaction*. Austin: University of Texas Press. [This edited volume covers the data and debates over the nature of Teotihuacan interaction with the Maya lowlands].
- Cowgill G.L. (2007). The urban organization of Teotihuacan, Mexico. *Settlement and Society: Essays Dedicated to Robert McCormick Adams* (ed. E.C. Stone), pp. 261—295. Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, Los Angeles. [This article summarizes recent research at Teotihuacan].
- Demarest A.A. Rice P.R. and Rice D.S. (eds.) (2004). *The Terminal Classic in the Maya Lowlands: Collapse, Transition, and Transformation*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado. [This edited volume revisits the topic of the collapse of Classic Maya civilization].
- Diehl R.A. (2004). *The Olmecs: America's First Civilization*. London: Thames and Hudson. [This book is an updated account of the Olmec and the debates over their significance in early Mesoamerica].
- Grove D.C. (1997). Olmec archaeology: A half century of research and its accomplishments. *Journal of World Prehistory* **11**, 51—101. [This article summarizes recent archaeological research in the Gulf Coast region of Mesoamerica].
- Hirth K. (2000). *Ancient Urbanism at Xochicalco: The Evolution and Organization of a Pre-Hispanic Society*. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press. [This book is the first of two volumes on the origins and characteristics of an Epiclassic city-state].
- Lucero L.J. (1999). Classic lowland Maya political organization: A review. *Journal of World Prehistory* **13**, 211—263. [This article summarizes recent studies of Maya civilization].
- Marcus J. (1992). *Mesoamerican Writing Systems: Propaganda, Myth, and History in Four Ancient Civilizations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [This book compares the major native writing systems of prehispanic Mesoamerica].
- Marcus J. (2003). Recent advances in Maya archaeology. *Journal of Archaeological Research* **11**, 71—148. [This article summarizes recent studies of Maya civilization].
- Marcus J. and Flannery K.V. (1996). *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley*. London: Thames and Hudson. [This book follows the evolution of the Zapotec civilization from earliest occupants to urbanism at Monte Alban].
- Mastache A.G. Cobean R.H. and Healan D.M. (2002). *Ancient Tollan: Tula and the Toltec Heartland*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado. [This book summarizes knowledge about the Toltec and the site of Tula in central Mexico].
- Pollard H.P. (1997). Recent research in West Mexican archaeology. *Journal of Archaeological Research* **5**, 345—384. [This article summarizes recent research in West Mexico, including the Tarascan and earlier civilizations].
- Sharer R.J. and Traxler L.P. (2005). *The Ancient Maya*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition. Stanford: Stanford University Press. [This book is a comprehensive and encyclopedic treatment of the ancient Maya].
- Smith M.E. (2003). *The Aztecs*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford: Blackwell. [This book covers the Aztec civilization including the archaeology of minor city-states and aspects of daily life].
- Smith M.E. and Berdan F.F. (eds.) (2003). *The Postclassic Mesoamerican World*. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press. [This edited volume synthesizes recent ethnohistorical and archaeological perspectives on Postclassic Mesoamerica from a world-systems perspective].
- Spencer C.S. and Redmond E.M. (2004). Primary state formation in Mesoamerica. *Annual Review of Anthropology* **33**, 173—199. [This article is a synthetic and comparative treatment of early Mesoamerican states].

### **Biographical Sketch**

**Andrew K. Balkansky**, born in Waukesha, Wisconsin, USA in 1967, studied anthropology and archaeology at University of Wisconsin, Madison, obtaining the degrees of BA (1990), MA (1992) and PhD (1997). He was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the American Museum of Natural History, New York, in 1998. His major field of study is Mesoamerican archaeology, with interests in settlement patterns and cultural evolution.

He is Associate Professor of Anthropology, Southern Illinois University Carbondale. His books include *The Sola Valley and the Monte Alban State: A Study of Zapotec Imperial Expansion* (Ann Arbor: Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan, 2002) and (with Stephen A. Kowalewski and others) *Origins of the Ñuu: Archaeology in the Mixteca Alta, Mexico* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2007). His current field research is the excavation of the Formative Period center at Tayata, Mexico, as part of an ongoing study of political evolution in the ancient Mixteca Alta.