

MesoAmerica



Mesoamerica is a historical region and cultural area in North America. It extends from approximately central Mexico through Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and northern Costa Rica, and within this region pre-Columbian societies flourished before the Spanish colonization of the Americas.

The term **Mesoamerica** is derived from the Greek and means "Middle America." It refers to a geographical and cultural area which extends from central Mexico down through Central America, including the territory which is now made up of the countries of Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador

Some of the most well-known **Mesoamerican** cultures are the Olmec, Maya, Zapotec, Teotihuacan, Mixtec, and Mexico (or Aztec). The geography of **Mesoamerica** is incredibly diverse—it includes humid tropical areas, dry deserts, high mountainous terrain, and low coastal plains.

The term Mesoamerica may occasionally refer to the contemporary region comprising the nine southeastern states of Mexico (Campeche, Chiapas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Puebla, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Veracruz, and Yucatán) and the countries of **Central America** (including Panama).

Mesoamerica- An Introduction

Avocado, tomato, and chocolate. You are likely familiar with at least some of these food items. Did you know that they all originally come from Mexico, and are all based on Nahuatl words (*ahuacatl*, *tomatl*, and *chocolatl*) that were eventually adopted by the English language? Nahuatl is the language spoken by the Nahua ethnic group that is found today in Mexico, but with deep historical roots. You might know one Nahua group: the Aztecs, more accurately called the Mexica. The Mexica were one of many Mesoamerican cultural groups that flourished in Mexico prior to the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century.



Map of Mesoamerica, with the borders of modern countries
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Where was Mesoamerica?

Mesoamerica refers to the diverse civilizations that shared similar cultural characteristics in the geographic areas comprising the modern-day countries of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Some of the shared cultural traits among Mesoamerican peoples included a complex pantheon of deities, architectural features, a ballgame, the 260-day calendar, trade, food (especially a reliance on maize, beans, and squash), dress, and accoutrements (additional items that are worn or used by a person, such as earspools). Some of the most well-known Mesoamerican cultures are the Olmec, Maya, Zapotec, Teotihuacan, Mixtec, and Mexica (or Aztec). The geography of Mesoamerica is incredibly diverse—it includes humid tropical areas, dry deserts, high mountainous terrain, and low coastal plains. An anthropologist named Paul Kirchhoff first used the term “Mesoamerica” (*meso* is Greek for “middle” or “intermediate”) in 1943 to designate these geographical areas as having shared cultural traits prior to the invasion of Europeans, and the term has remained. Typically when we discuss Mesoamerican art we are referring to art made by peoples in Mexico and much of Central America. When people mention Native North American art, they are usually referring to indigenous peoples in the U.S. and Canada, even though these countries are

technically all part of North America. More recently, archaeologists and art historians have considered connections between the Southwestern and Southeastern U.S. and Mesoamerica, an area sometimes called either the Greater Southwest or Greater Mesoamerica. Focusing on these connections demonstrates how people were in contact with one another through trade, shared beliefs, migration, or conflict. Ball courts, for instance, are found in Arizona sites such as the Pueblo Grande of the Hohokam. It is important to remember that modern-day geographic terms—like Mesoamerica or the Southwestern U.S.—are recent designations. This essay generalizes about Mesoamerican cultures, but keep in mind that each possessed unique qualities and cultural differences. Mesoamerica was not homogenous.

When was Mesoamerica?

Art historians and archaeologists divide Mesoamerican history into distinct periods and some of these periods are then further divided into the sub-periods—early, middle, and late.

Period	Dates	Cultures
Archaic Period	c. 3500—1500 B.C.E.	
Pre-Classic Period (or Formative Period)	c. 1800 B.C.E.—250 C.E.	Olmec, Teotihuacan, <u>Tlatilco</u> , Maya, <u>Zapotec</u>
Classic Period	c. 150—650 C.E.	Teotihuacan, Maya
<u>Epiclassic</u> Period	c. 650—900 C.E.	Maya, Toltec
<u>Postclassic</u> Period	c. 900—1519 C.E.	Toltec, Aztec (Mexico), Mixtec, Maya

The date for the end of the Postclassic period is somewhat contested as it presumes that Mesoamerican culture largely ended with the arrival of Spaniards into the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan in 1519, though Mesoamerican culture continued under Spanish control, albeit significantly transformed.

You might also encounter the term Pre-Columbian, which is a term designating indigenous cultures prior to the arrival of Columbus. It includes those in Mesoamerica, as well as in South America and the Caribbean.

What language did people speak?

There was no single language that united the peoples of Mesoamerica. Linguists believe that Mesoamericans spoke more than 125 different languages. For instance, Maya peoples did not speak “Mayan”, but could have spoken Yucatec Maya, K’iche, or Tzotzil among many others. The Mexica belonged to the bigger Nahua ethnic group, and therefore spoke Nahuatl.

Indigenous languages in Mexico currently spoken by more than 100,000 people
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 To students learning about Mesoamerica for the first time, the incredible diversity of people, languages, and even deities can be overwhelming. I recall my first Mesoamerican art history class vividly. I was intimidated by my lack of familiarity with different Mesoamerican words, languages, and cultural groups. By the end of the semester I was proud that I could differentiate

between the Zapotec and Mixtec, and could spell Tlaloc. It took me a few more years to be able to spell and pronounce words like Tlacaxipehualiztli (Tla-cawsh-ee-pay-wal-eeezt-li) or Huitzilopochtli (Wheat-zil-oh-poach-lee).

Writing

Mesoamerican writing systems vary by culture. Rebus writing (writing with images) was common among many groups, like the Nahua and Mixtec. Imagine drawing an eye, a heart, and an apple. You've just used rebus writing to communicate "I love apples" to anyone familiar with these symbols. Many visual writing systems in Mesoamerica functioned similarly—although the previous example was simplified for the sake of clarity. You might encounter the phrases "writing without words" or "writing with signs" used to describe many writing systems in Mesoamerica. It is also called pictographic, ideographic, or picture writing.

The 260-day ritual calendar vs. the 365-day calendar

Other shared features among Mesoamerican peoples were the 260-day and 365-day calendars. The 260-day calendar was a ritual calendar, with 20 months of 13 days. Based on the sun, the 365-day calendar had 18 months of 20 days, with five "extra" nameless days at the end. It was the count of time used for agriculture.

Imagine both of these calendars as interlocking wheels. Every 52 years they completed a full cycle, and during this time special rituals commemorated the cycle. For example, the Mexica celebrated the New Fire Ceremony as a period of renewal. These cycles were understood as life cycles, and so reflect creation, death, and rebirth. The Maya (especially during the Classic period), also used a Long Count calendar in addition to the two already mentioned (rather than a cyclical calendar, the Long Count marked time as if along an extended line that does not repeat).

Religion and pantheon of gods

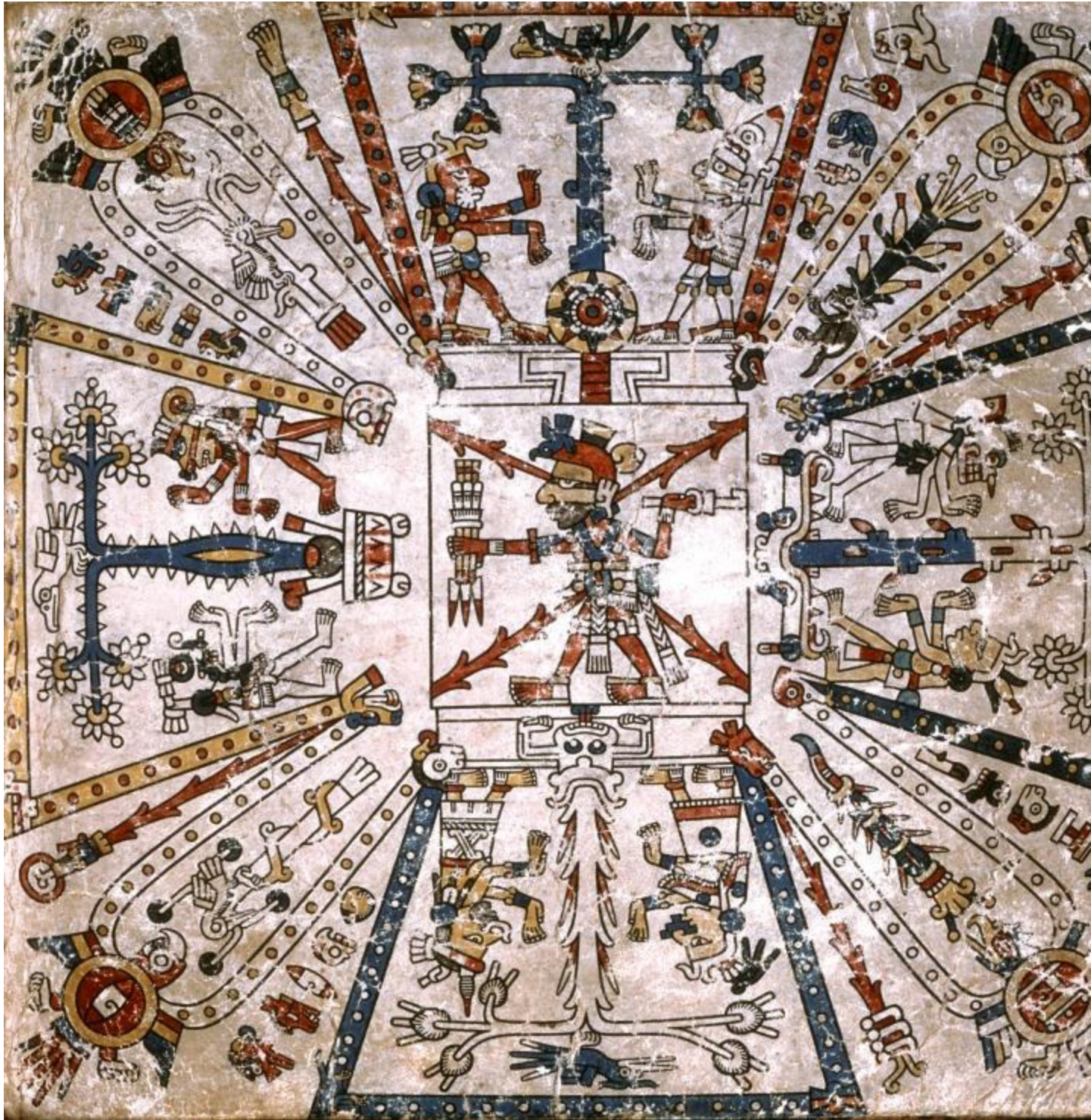
A complex pantheon of gods existed within each Mesoamerican culture. Many groups shared similar deities, although there was a great deal of variation. Deities that had important roles across Mesoamerica included a storm/rain god and a feathered serpent deity. Among the Mexica, this storm/rain god was known as [Tlaloc](#), and the feathered serpent deity was known as Quetzalcoatl. The Maya referred to their storm/rain deity as Chaac (there are multiple spellings). The equivalent of Quetzalcoatl among different Maya groups included Kukulcan (Yucatec Maya) and Q'ujumatz (K'iche Maya). Cocijó is the Zapotec equivalent of the storm/rain god. Many artworks exist that show these two deities with similar features. The storm/rain deity often has goggle eyes and an upturned mouth/snout. Feathered serpent deities typically showed serpent features paired with feathers.



Quetzalcoatl (Feathered Serpent), c. 1321-1521, 210 x 440 cm (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico)

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It is difficult to generalize about Mesoamerican religious beliefs and cosmological ideas because they were so complex. Throughout Mesoamerica, there was a general belief in the universe's division along two axes: one vertical, the other horizontal. At the center, where these two axes meet, is the *axis mundi*, or the center (or navel) of the universe. On the horizontal plane, four directions branch off from the *axis mundi*. Think of the four cardinal directions (north, south, east, and west). On the vertical plane, we generally find the world split into three major realms: the celestial, terrestrial, and underworld.



Codex Féjervary-Mayer, 15th century, f. 1 (World Museum, Liverpool)

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One Mexica example helps to clarify this complex cosmological system. An image in the Codex Féjervary-Mayer displays the cosmos's horizontal axis. In the center is the deity Xiuhtecuhtli (a fire god), standing in the place of the axis mundi. Four nodes (what look almost like trapezoidal petals) branch off from his position, creating a shape called a Maltese Cross. East (top) is

associated with red, south (right) with green, west (bottom) with blue, and north (left) with yellow. A specific plant and bird accompany each world direction: blue tree and quetzal (a colorful bird native to Mexico and the southern U.S., east), cacao and parrot (south), maize and blue-painted bird (west), and cactus and eagle (north). Two figures flank the plant in each arm of the cross. Together, these figures and Xiuhtecuhtli represent the Nine Lords of the Night. This cosmogram describes how the Mexica conceived of the universe.

The ballgame

Peoples across Mesoamerica, beginning with the Olmecs, played a ritual sport known as the ballgame. Ballcourts were often located in a city's sacred precinct, emphasizing the importance of the game. Solid rubber balls were passed between players (no hands allowed!), with the goal of hitting them through markers. Players wore padded garments to protect their bodies from the hard ball.

The meanings of the ballgame were many and varied. It could symbolize a range of larger cosmological ideas, including the movement of the sun through the underworld every night. War captives also played the game against members of a winning city or group, with the game symbolizing their defeat in war. Sometimes a game was even played instead of going to war.



Ball Court Model, Mexico, Nayarit, c. 200 B.C.E.–500 C.E., ceramic with slip and other pigments, 15.24 x 21.59 x 34.29 cm (Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

Ball Court Model, Mexico, Nayarit, c. 200 B.C.E.–500 C.E., ceramic with slip and other pigments, 15.24 x 21.59 x 34.29 cm ([Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#))

Numerous objects display aspects of the ballgame, attesting to its significant role across Mesoamerica. We have examples of clay sculptures of ballgames occurring on courts. Ballplayers are also frequent subjects in Maya painted ceramic vessels and sculptures. Stone reliefs at El Tajin and Chichen Itza depict different moments of a ballgame culminating in ritual sacrifice. Painted pictorial codices, such as the Codex Borgia (above), display I-shaped ballcourts, and stone depictions of ballgame clothing have been found. Today, people in Mexico still play a version of the ballgame.

Mesoamerican societies continue to impress us with their sophistication and accomplishments, notably their artistic achievements. Our understanding continues to expand with ongoing

research and archaeological excavations. Recent excavations in Mexico City, for instance, uncovered a new monumental Mexica sculpture buried with some of the most unique objects we've ever seen in Mexica art. With these discoveries, our understanding of the Mexica will no doubt grow and change.

Pre Columbian Era

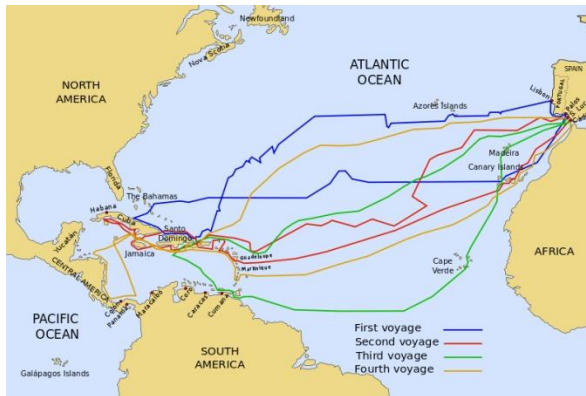
The pre-Columbian era incorporates all period subdivisions in the history of the Americas before the appearance of significant European influences on the American continent, spanning the time of the original settlement in the Upper Paleolithic period to European colonization during the Early Modern period.

While the phrase "pre-Columbian era" literally refers only to the time preceding Christopher Columbus's voyages of 1492, in practice the phrase is usually used to denote the entire history of indigenous American cultures until those cultures were extinguished, diminished, or extensively altered by Europeans, even if this happened long after Columbus. The alternative terms precontact, precolonial, or prehistoric Americas are also used; in Latin America, the usual term is pre-Hispanic.

Many pre-Columbian civilizations were marked by permanent settlements, cities, agriculture, civic and monumental architecture, major earthworks, and complex societal hierarchies. Some of these civilizations had long faded by the time of the first permanent European colonies and the arrival of enslaved Africans (c. late 16th–early 17th centuries),^[1] and are known only through archaeological investigations and oral history. Other civilizations were contemporary with the colonial period and were described in European historical accounts of the time. A few, such as the Maya civilization, had their own written records. Because many Christian Europeans of the time viewed such texts as pagan, men like Diego de Landa burned them, even while seeking to preserve native histories. Only a few hidden documents have survived in their original languages, while others were transcribed or dictated into Spanish, giving modern historians glimpses of ancient culture and knowledge.

Many indigenous peoples in the Americas continue traditional practices while evolving and adapting to the modern world.

What do “Pre-Columbian” and “Mesoamerica” mean?



The routes of the four Voyages of Christopher Columbus, 1492-1504 to the Caribbean Islands and the coast of Central America (image: CC BY-SA 3.0)

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The original inhabitants of the Americas traveled across what is now known as the [Bering Strait](#), a passage that connected the westernmost point of North America with the easternmost point of Asia. The Western hemisphere was disconnected from Asia at the end of the last Ice Age, around 10,000 B.C.E.

In 1492, the Genoese explorer Christopher Columbus arrived at the islands of Cuba and Hispaniola (today Haiti and the Dominican Republic), mistakenly thinking he had reached Asia. Columbus' miscalculation marked the first step in the colonization of the Americas, or what was then seen as a "New World." Incorrectly referring to the native inhabitants of Hispaniola as "Indians" (under the assumption that he had landed in India), Columbus established the first Spanish colony of the Americas. "Pre-Columbian" thus refers to the period in the Americas before the arrival of Columbus.

Pyramid of the Sun, Teōtihuacān. Teōtihuacān reached its peak from the 1st to the mid-6th century C.E. The main structures include the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon, Avenue of the Dead, and the Temple of Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent). Teotihuacan was home to as many as 125,000 people. The name Teōtihuacān was given by the Aztecs long after the city had been abandoned in c. 550 C.E. The original name is lost.

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The Spanish conquistadores (conquerors) found that the "New World" was in fact not new at all, and that the indigenous people of Mesoamerica had established advanced civilizations with densely

populated cities and towering architectural monuments such as at Teōtihuacān, as well as advanced writing systems.

The term pre-Columbian is complicated however. For one thing, although it refers to the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the phrase does not directly reference any of the many sophisticated cultures that flourished in the Americas (think of the Aztec, Inka, or Maya, to name only a few) and instead invokes a European explorer. For this reason and because indigenous peoples flourished before and after the arrival of the Europeans, the term is often seen as flawed. Other terms such as pre-Hispanic, pre-Cortesian, or more simply, ancient Americas, are sometimes used.

What does “Mesoamerica” mean?

The region of Mesoamerica—which today includes central and south Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador—consists of a diverse geographic landscape of highlands, jungles, valleys, and coastlines. Mesoamericans did not exploit technological innovations such as the wheel—though they were used in toys— and did not develop metal tools or metalworking techniques until at least until 900 C.E. Instead, Mesoamerican artists are known for producing megalithic (large stone) sculpture and extremely sharp weapons from obsidian (volcanic glass). Featherwork and stonework in basalt, turquoise, and jade dominated Mesoamerican artistic production, while exceptional textiles and metallurgy flourished further south, among pre-Columbian Andean and Central American cultures, respectively.

Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures shared certain characteristics such as the ritual ballgame,* pyramid building, human sacrifice, maize as an agricultural staple, and deities dedicated to natural forces (i.e. rain, storm, fire). Additionally, some Mesoamerican societies developed sophisticated systems of writing, as well as an advanced understanding of astronomy (which allowed for the development of accurate and complex calendar systems, including the 260-day sacred calendar and the 365-day agricultural calendar). As a result, cities like La Venta and Chichen Itza were aligned in relation to cardinal directions and had a sacred center. The fact that many of these cultural trademarks persisted for more than 2,000 years across civilizations as distinct as the Olmec (c. 1200–400 B.C.E.) and the Aztec (c. 1345 to 1521 C.E.), demonstrates the strong cultural bond of Mesoamerican cultures.