

Highland Mesoamerica

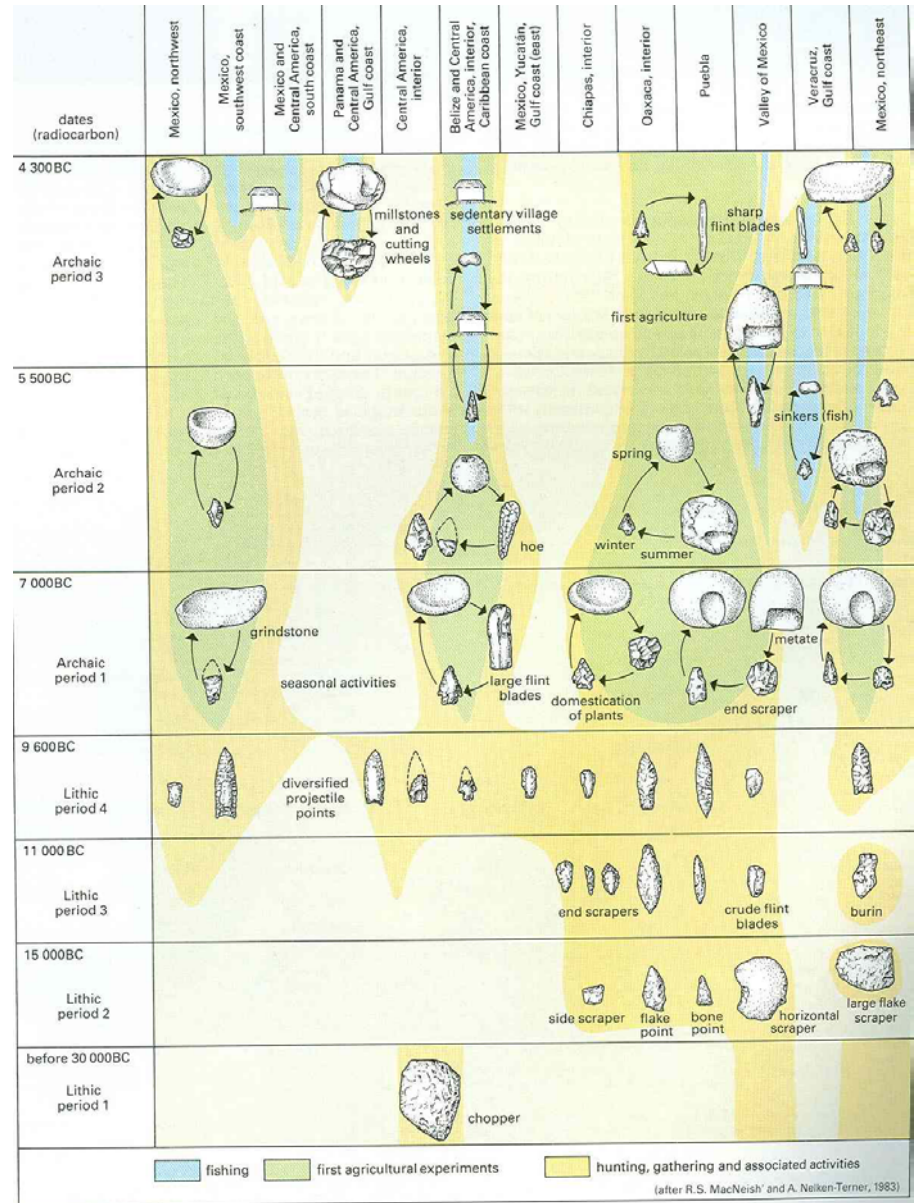
Feathered Serpents and Floating
Gardens

Mesoamerican Geography



Timeline

- Earliest hunter-gatherers (ca. 20,000 BP)
- Village Farmers (ca. 9000-4000BP)
- Preclassic: the Olmec (3500-2500BP)
- Preclassic Maya (pre-3000 BP – AD 200)



Mesoamerican Agriculture

- Maize agriculture: experiments with wild teosinte, Valley of Mexico, 7500-6000BP
- Long, slow process, combined with continued hunting and gathering
- Guila Naquitz, Tehuacan Valley as type sites: Highland Mesoamerica, not Lowland
- Took a much longer time to transition to full sedentism here; at least partial domestication preceded fully sedentary village life.
- Very early cross-ecosystem trade in foodstuffs

The Olmec

- 3500-2500 BP
- Only one (and most archaeologically studied) of many small chiefdoms of the period
- Marked prestige with trade in exotics combined with production, trade of distinctive “art” objects
- “lattice of interaction” pattern, rather than true territorial conquest and dominance: classic “complex chiefdom” pattern
- Homeland was the Mexican Gulf coast, but materials spread all across Mesoamerica.
- San Lorenzo, La Venta as type sites.
- Not “cities”, per se, but ceremonial centers with monumental structures: mounds, plazas, and sculpture
- “legacy of art, architecture, and ideology”: enduring symbols borrowed by successor elites

Highland Mesoamerica Timeline

- Transition from village farming towards urbanism: 4000-2500 BP
 - Zapotecs (Monte Alban) 900 BCE – AD 750
 - Teotihuacan 200 BCE – AD 750
 - Toltecs (Tula) AD 650 – 1200
 - Aztecs (Tenochtitlan) AD 1200-1519

Oaxaca: Evolution of Highland Mesoamerican Village Life

- Small-scale irrigation of fertile valley floors by 4000 BP
- Increasingly complex long-distance trade
- Role of stone as commodity, especially obsidian, magnetite
- Connection to Lowlands by 3150 BP
- Increasingly elaborate ritual life
- Largest site from period: San José Mogote

Monte Alban (Zapotecs): 900 BCE – AD 750

- Contemporary with Classic Maya
- Had calendar, hieroglyphic writing
- Evidence of Olmec influence in early period
- Rival of Teotihuacan after 200BC

Teotihuacan: 200BCE – AD 750

- Population began to expand rapidly after destruction of rival Cuicuilco
- Extensively planned city with socially and occupationally segregated “barrios”
- Elaborate, continuously rebuilt ceremonial complex at center of city
- Massive population: more than 150,000 people ca. 700AD

Tula (Toltecs): AD 650 - 1200

- Nahuatl-speakers who rose to military prominence in region after collapse of Teotihuacan
- Tula laid out on grid pattern (centralized planning)
- Evidence for extensive tool manufacture, trade

Tenochtitlan (Aztec): 1200-1519

- Supported by massive development of *chinampa* floating field system
- Tribute-based, territorially expansive military state
- Claimed descentance from Teotihuacan
- Highly formalized and strictly enforced social hierarchy, built on kin-based *calpulli* system

Tenochtitlan/Tlatelolco

Documentation on the Trade: Columbus, 1502

“...by good fortune there arrived at that time a canoe long as a galley and eight feet wide, made of a single tree trunk like the other Indian canoes; it was freighted with merchandise from the western regions around New Spain. Amidships it had a palm-leaf awning like that on Venetian gondolas; this gave complete protection against the rain and waves. Underneath were women and children, and all the baggage and merchandise. There were twenty-five paddlers aboard,...”[carrying] “cotton mantles and sleeveless shirts embroidered and painted in different designs and colors”; [long wooden swords edged with] “flint knives that cut like steel” [perhaps obsidian]; copper hatchets and bells; and a crucible for melting copper.” [Notably, they also had:]“...many of the almonds [cacao beans] which the Indians of New Spain use as currency; and these the Indians in the canoe valued greatly, for I noticed that when they were brought aboard with the other goods, and some fell to the floor, all the Indians stooped to pick them up as if they had lost something of great value...”(excerpt from Columbus’ diaries, trans. Colón 1959)

Conquest: Collapse, or Continuation?

- Use of disgruntled subject states/elites as allies
- Continuation of existing tribute system, especially for agricultural production
- Occupation and rebuilding of existing sites/monuments