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Mark Alan Wright

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Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica was populated by scores of distinctive cultural groups. Such groups are identified archaeologically by their stylistically unique material cultures, from small, portable ceramic objects to large-scale monumental architecture, as well as through distinctive artistic, religious, and linguistic evidence. Significant interaction took place between these distinctive peoples and cultures, and some major metropolitan areas were home to different ethnic groups. This paper offers a brief glimpse at some of the cultures that inhabited the major geographical regions of Mesoamerica throughout its three-thousand-year history and explores the cultural diversity that existed within and between regions.
THE CULTURAL TAPESTRY OF MESOAMERICA

MARK ALAN WRIGHT

The Mesoamerican landscape was home to countless cultures throughout its pre-Columbian history. As anthropologist Vernon Scarborough noted, it is "one of the most diverse cultural and geographical areas of the world." Some of these cultures are well known, such as the Olmec, Maya, and Aztecs, but the majority of these ancient societies remain obscure. The major cultural zones in Mesoamerica include the Central Highlands, Oaxaca, Maya Highlands, Northern Maya Lowlands, Southern Maya Lowlands, Gulf Coast, North Central Mexico, Northwest Mexico, Northeastern Mexico, Western Mexico, and Southeastern Mesoamerica. There was a great deal of interaction within and between these zones over the centuries and millennia. Space does not permit even a cursory overview of all these areas, but I will briefly explore some of the more significant regions and the attributes that made their cultures unique. My purpose here is to stimulate a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the great diversity of cultures that inhabited pre-Columbian Mesoamerica.


FROM THE EDITOR:
With this article, Mark Wright dispels some common assumptions about Mesoamerican history, language, and culture. In my own youthful naivete, I grew up thinking that the Maya and the Aztecs made up the sum of Mesoamerican life. Mark paints a compelling and much more nuanced tapestry of this part of the "promised land." No monolithic societies here.
**Chronology**

Mesoamerican prehistory is sometimes very roughly lumped into three categories—the Preclassic (2000 BC–AD 250), Classic (AD 250–900), and Postclassic (AD 900–1519) periods, but it is far more complicated than that. To get a complete picture of Mesoamerica, we must also take into account the Paleo-Indian and Archaic periods and subdivide all later periods into even smaller units (see table 1). Somewhat confusingly, the Preclassic is also known as the Formative period, which is often subdivided into Early, Middle, and Late Formative periods. These periods are followed by the Early Classic, Late Classic, Epi-Classic (which primarily affected the Central Mexican area), Terminal Classic, Early Postclassic, and Late Postclassic periods (see table 1).

As we shall see, a myriad of cultures expanded and contracted across the landscape within and between these periods, some with widespread and enduring influence, others being more ephemeral.

**Defining Mesoamerica**

The term *Mesoamerica* ("Middle America") was first coined in 1943 by the German-Mexican anthropologist Paul Kirchhoff. The area is not defined by strict geographic boundaries but rather refers to dozens of distinctive cultures (that nevertheless shared certain traits) that inhabited large portions of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and to a lesser degree extended down into El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Archaeologists and anthropologists debate exactly how far the boundaries stretched north and south, as frontier zones are typically complex mixtures of multiple cultures that defy easy classification. The diagnostic traits that Kirchhoff identified as markers of Mesoamerican culture include the production of ceramic goods, advanced agricultural techniques (with heavy reliance on corn, beans, and squash), obsidian tools and weaponry, developed writing systems, bark paper, time reckoning according to the solar calendar, ritual human sacrifice, stepped pyramids, a game played with a rubber ball on I-shaped courts, and long-distance trade networks (which were used not only for the exchange of goods but also for the spread of ideology).

Because of the extraordinarily diverse cultural landscape and the challenges of interpreting the archaeological record, scholars debate the precise chronologies, spheres of influence, and cultural boundaries of Mesoamerica. Literally thousands of archaeological sites dot the Mesoamerican landscape, the vast majority of which we know virtually nothing about, other than their locations. In the Maya area alone are approximately six thousand known sites, of which fewer than fifty have undergone systematic archaeological excavation. Classic period sites have traditionally been the focus of excavations, while Preclassic/Formative sites have largely been ignored by archaeologists and looters alike since the artifacts tend to be less valuable or exciting. Likewise, archaeologists have always had a bias toward excavating large capital cities that are known to have large temples, palaces, tombs, and monumental inscriptions while neglecting small or even medium-sized settlements. Archaeologists estimate that less than 1 percent of ancient Mesoamerican ruins have been uncovered and studied, leaving much yet to learn.

**Identifying Cultures**

We do not know the ancient names of the vast majority of ancient Mesoamerican cities. We have deciphered the original names of a handful of the great Classic-period Maya cities, but precious few monuments with legible inscriptions that would enable us to determine the original names of the sites survive. We know that Palenque, for example,
was anciently called Lakamha' ("Great Waters"), and Tikal was known as Mutal. The vast majority of site names are modern designations, however, often relying on Spanish or local indigenous languages to describe an attribute of the site. Kaminaljuyu, for example, was named in 1936 by the early Guatemalan archaeologist J. Antonio Villacorta; he based the name on the K'iche' Mayan term meaning "Mounds of the Dead." Assigning names to nameless ruins is not a modern innovation, however. The great city Teotihuacan was actually named by the Aztecs nearly a millennium after it had been abandoned, and the name has been variously translated as "place of the gods," "the place where gods are born," or "the place where men become gods." Likewise, the names we attribute to entire cultures are not the names by which they knew themselves. The Olmec did not refer to themselves as the Olmec, the Maya did not call themselves the Maya, and the Aztecs did not identify themselves as the Aztecs. For that matter, the thousands of separate ancient cities that we label as "Maya" never conceptualized themselves as being part of a single culture (incidentally, even the origin of the word Maya is uncertain). They were never unified under a single ruler, as the Egyptians were under their Pharaohs. Rather, each polity was a nation unto itself, ruled by its own holy king, and the polities went to great lengths to differentiate themselves from their closest neighbors. The ancient Maya world has been described as "a mosaic of interrelated but diverse regions and traditions," and the same is true for the dozens of other cultures that dot the Mesoamerican landscape.

To identify distinct ancient cultures, we must rely primarily on archaeologically recoverable materials, everything from small potsherds to massive pyramidal structures. In this paper, I will take a brief glimpse at the distinctive ceramic complexes, architectural styles, iconographic conventions, and linguistic and epigraphic information that are used to distinguish Mesoamerican cultures.

Ceramics

Mesoamerican cultures are often distinguished by the types of pottery and ceramics they used. Fortunately for archaeologists, fired ceramic, as a material, is nearly indestructible, and artifacts such as potsherds and figurines are abundant in the

This map outlines the general cultural areas of Mesoamerica. Each of these regions was populated by a diverse range of peoples and cultures. © 2013. Walter R. T. Witschey and Clifford T. Brown, The Electronic Atlas of Ancient Maya Sites.
archaeological record. Since they are made of clays, which contain organic materials, they can be dated through radiocarbon analysis. Qualities such as size, shape, color, texture, and decoration are used to determine when and where a particular piece was created. This is useful in retracing ancient trade routes, as ceramics crafted in one region are often discovered hundreds of miles away from their place of origin, suggesting that they were transported there for either trade or tribute.

Ceramics made their debut in Mesoamerica rather suddenly. Rather than demonstrating a slow progression in the craft over generations, the earliest surviving ceramic evidence demonstrates considerable skill and refinement. This suggests the technology spread from another area, likely from South America where ceramic traditions had been developing for centuries. One of the earliest ceramic-making groups in Mesoamerica has been dubbed the Barra culture. The Barra date to the Early Formative period (ca. 1850–1650 BC) and were quite precocious, often credited with being the innovators of agriculture, settled village life, and long-distance trade, as well as hard-fired and painted ceramics. They primarily lived along the Pacific coast but also inhabited water-rich environments such as river deltas and mangrove swamps from Chiapas, Mexico, throughout Guatemala, and down to El Salvador. The Ocos pottery tradition arose after the Barra phase went into decline. Ocos ceramics were produced primarily along the Pacific coast in Chiapas and Guatemala, but they have been discovered all over Mesoamerica. Around 900 BC, a number of distinctive ceramic styles began to crop up in Mesoamerica. In the Maya area alone, we find the Swasey complex in northern Belize, the Cunil complex in west-central Belize, the Eb complex in the Peten region of Guatemala, and the Xe complex in the Usumacinta region. By the Early Postclassic period, the Maya near the Pacific coast of Guatemala had developed the technology to create glazed ceramics known as Plumbate pottery. The wide variety of ceramic traditions gives us but a glimpse into the cultural diversity of the region.

Architecture

Like ceramics, architectural conventions also serve as diagnostic features in identifying distinct cultures. The different regions and subregions of Mesoamerica each have their own unique style, and stylistic conventions within a single region changed through time as well. Formative period structures from the Gulf Coast region tended to be made of adobe or clay and stood atop low platforms. By the Middle Formative, regional styles began to be more pronounced—for example, very distinctive styles began cropping up in the Central Highlands of Mexico, West Mexico, Oaxaca, Veracruz, and among the Highland and Lowland Maya areas.

Architectural complexes known as E-Groups were a diagnostic feature of the Late Formative Lowland Maya area, for example. An E-Group was composed of a radial pyramid (typically with four stairways) that faced a long building a short distance to the east. As viewed from the radial pyramid, the north and south corners of the long building in the east were markers of the solstices, and on the equinoxes the sun would rise over its center point, indicating that E-Groups functioned as rudimentary solar observatories. E-Groups all but disappeared in the Classic period, and the corbeled vault (sometimes called the Maya arch) became one of the primary diagnostic architectural features of this time and region.

Architectural styles from Teotihuacan in Central Mexico permeated down into the Maya area during the Early Classic period. The most easily identifiable of these is the talud-tablero platform façade. Talud-tablero–style step pyramids are essentially composed of alternating rectangular terraces (tableros) that rest on trapezoidal layers (taluds); the
Tableros jut out over the upper edges of the taluds, both of which taper in size with each successive layer to create an overall pyramidal shape (although this style was used even for low platforms with a single talud topped by a tablero). Teotihuacan-style talud-tablero façades eventually came to be found all over the Maya area, from Dzibilchaltun in the northeastern Yucatan in Mexico, Copan in Honduras, in the Lowlands of Guatemala at Tikal, and in the Guatemalan Highlands at Kaminaljuyu, to name but a few.

Each of the Maya regions had its own distinct architectural style. The Southern style included sites such as Copan in Honduras and Quirigua in Guatemala. This style is characterized by skilled sculptural work that adorns the building façades, including sculpture in the round (which is virtually unknown anywhere else among the Maya). The Central or Peten style, represented by sites like Tikal in Guatemala or Xunantunich in Belize, is noteworthy for the steep and towering pyramids that dominate the landscape. The temples of this style are often adorned with tall, solid stone roof combs, whose primary function was to maximize the height of the building. The structures are constructed from meticulously squared limestone blocks and held together by high-quality limestone mortar. The Western style is typified by Palenque, which was unmatched in its use of stucco to adorn building façades and to create intricate bas-relief panels with beautiful art and finely rendered hieroglyphic writing. Similar to the Central or Peten style, their temples were also generally adorned with roof combs, but they used a perforated pattern rather than a solid surface, giving them a light and graceful appearance.

The corbeled vault, or Maya arch, was a common feature in Classic period Maya structures. Courtesy of Brian Hoffsis, bfhstudios.com.
Other distinct regional styles include the Usumacinta, Rio Bec, Chenes, and Puuc. Mayanist Richard Leventhal commented, “These regional styles force us to utilize a broad definition of Maya culture rather than a narrow one” and argued that “Maya culture is actually a broad façade that ties together and covers local regional cultures.”

Central Mexican architecture is stylistically quite different from those of the Maya subregions. Where Maya buildings tend to be squared, those of Central Mexico are generally rounded. Central Mexican buildings often incorporated columns (both structural and decorative), and the sides of staircases were lined with balustrade-like features known as alfardas, which are virtually absent among the Maya. In Late Postclassic Central Mexican cities, large pyramidal bases were topped by two temples, each dedicated to a different god. At the top of the grandiose Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan, for example, were two separate temples: one dedicated to the Aztec god of war, Huitzilopochtli, and the other to Tlaloc, the god of rain. Ritual human sacrifices— which consisted of victims getting their hearts ripped out by a priest and subsequently having their bodies rolled down the precariously steep frontal staircase— were performed at the top of these pyramids. The bodies tumbled down nearly 200 feet before their broken corpses reached the base of the pyramid.

Language

Language is perhaps one of the more obvious markers of cultural identity in the ancient world, but it is also one of the more difficult aspects of Mesoamerican research to conduct with confidence because of the paucity of ancient linguistic data. Fourteen pre-Columbian scripts are currently known, but most of them have resisted decipherment. Exciting recent advancements have allowed us to understand Aztec writing for the first time, although the majority of their writing is simply composed of the names of individuals or cities. The most fully developed script—and the one that can...
be read with the greatest confidence—is that of the Classic period Maya (although 10–20 percent of their glyphs are still undeciphered). 18

Linguists hypothetically reconstruct ancient languages using lexicostatistical glottochronology, which essentially attempts to trace related living languages back to common roots by analyzing elements such as syntax and cognate words. Linguists do not agree as to exactly how many languages were spoken anciently in Mesoamerica, but even conservative estimates suggest there were scores of them by the beginning of the Classic period. By AD 100, some of the major language groups were Nahuatl, Huastecan, Mixean, Mixe-Zoquean, and Mamean, to name but a few. Each of these families would have had several distinct languages belonging to it. For example, just within the Mayan language family were likely at least nineteen distinct languages being spoken by AD 500. 19 Today thirty-one distinct Mayan languages are spoken by approximately four million Maya people.

A number of smaller language families and even some isolates, which are languages unrelated to any other known language, have been identified. Historically known but now extinct isolate languages include Cuitlatec from Guerrero, Mexico; Xinca from Guatemala; and Lenca from southwest Honduras and El Salvador. Some isolate languages still survive in Mexico, however, such as P’urhepecha in Michoacan and Huave in Oaxaca.

Localized Diversity

Cultural diversity in Mesoamerica is evident even at the local level. It is not uncommon to find evidence for different ethnic groups residing in different barrios within a single city. At Teotihuacan in Central Mexico, for example, there is confirmation that particular quadrants were each occupied by diverse groups such as the Maya, Zapotec, and Gulf Coast cultures. 20 A similar situation is found in the Southeastern Maya area. The diversity of material culture unearthed at Copan, Honduras, indicates that the kings ruled over a multiethnic population, a melting pot of cultures from the Maya heartland in the west to Central American cultures in the east. 21

We also find cultural diversity at the same settlement with the passage of time. For example, in examining the ceramic wares from the Belize Valley that were used around 950–500 BC, archaeologists Joseph Ball and Jennifer Taschek caution that to ascribe certain ceramic assemblages from this region within this timeframe “to a single producer community, economy, or even ethnic group or culture is neither justified nor correct.” 22 Some sites were occupied for extraordinarily long sequences, and shifting cultural traits can be detected through time. Chiapa de Corzo in Chiapas, Mexico, for example, was likely originally occupied by Mixe-Zoquean peoples in the Formative period, but throughout the history of this area we see influence from the Olmec in the Gulf Coast of Mexico.

This map shows the great diversity of languages spoken throughout Mesoamerica. © 2005 J. Kathryn Josserand and Nicholas A. Hopkins. Drafting by Brenda Green.
and the Maya from the Lowlands of Guatemala; later the people appear to have been conquered by the Chiapenec from Central Mexico during the Postclassic period.

An illustrative example of cultural diversity comes from the southeast periphery of the Maya area. Copan in Honduras and Quirigua in Guatemala are about twenty miles apart, and the route between the two sites passes directly through the Paraiso Valley. Within this valley are two contemporaneous sites that nicely demonstrate the cultural heterogeneity that was possible within even a very limited area. Around the seventh century AD, the cities of El Paraiso and El Cafetal stood on opposite banks of the Ocote River, a little over one mile apart. Based on its architecture and ceramics, El Paraiso is very clearly a Maya site, perhaps even an outpost established by Copan. El Cafetal, in contrast, is just as clearly a non-Maya site, with drastically different material culture. Yet nothing indicates any conflict between these sites; they appear to have maintained a peaceful coexistence. Curiously, despite being large centers that lay directly on the route between Copan and Quirigua, neither El Cafetal nor El Paraiso is ever mentioned in the texts of Copan or Quirigua, even though Copan and Quirigua regularly mention each other in their monumental inscriptions. It may seem odd that a large foreign culture could exist in the midst of the Maya area with no mention of its existence, but such is clearly the case with El Cafetal.

A nearly identical example is found along the Chamelcon River at the contemporaneous sites of El Abra and El Puente, which are separated by less than one mile. El Abra is easily identifiable as a Classic Maya polity based on its site-planning principles, architectural styles, and material remains, whereas El Puente appears to have been established and inhabited by the Lenca culture of Honduras. Like El Cafetal and El Paraiso, it appears that they coexisted peacefully, despite being different cultures that practiced different religions and spoke different languages. The archaeologist Samuel K. Lothrop noted that in this region of Honduras “Mayan and non-Mayan finds are intermingled over a strip of territory at least fifty miles wide.” Such intermingling is not limited to the southeastern periphery during the Classic period. For example, evidence confirms that multiethnic cultures date back to the Middle to Late Preclassic in areas such as Belize.

**Gulf Coast**

The Gulf Coast was home to the Olmec, arguably the earliest (1200–500 BC) and most influential of all Mesoamerica civilizations. The name Olmec is a modern corruption of the Nahuatl word Olmeca, which the Aztec used to refer to inhabitants of Olman (“Land of Rubber”). The Aztecs, who existed nearly two millennia after the Olmec, dubbed them such in honor of their innovation of latex rubber, most famously used in the production of large balls that were used to play a still poorly understood game. We do not know what the Olmec called themselves, and we are not certain what language the Olmec spoke. The only example of what may be Olmec writing comes from the Cascajal Block (thought to date to ca. 900 BC), though some scholars question whether it is a legitimate artifact or a modern hoax.

The Olmec are often regarded as the first complex society in Mesoamerica, meaning social stratification was present between elites and commoners. Their monumental architecture and elaborate artwork indicate the existence of craft specialists. In other words, not everyone was a farmer whose life was consumed...
Although Olmec influence permeated throughout Mesoamerica, the colossal basalt heads they created remained unique to their culture. Photo by Jorge Pérez de Lara ©.

by the demands of producing just enough food to live on day by day. To the contrary, farmers must have produced enough surplus to enable them to provide sustenance to those engaged in other occupations.

The Olmec are perhaps most famous for the colossal basalt heads they sculpted. Ranging in size from six to forty tons, these massive stones were transported to the Gulf Coast from the Sierra de los Tuxtlas Mountains of Veracruz, which would have required the efforts of an estimated 1,500 individuals spanning three to four months. These massive heads were likely portraits of Olmec rulers. Each sculpture is unique, and the distinctive headbands they wear serve as identifiers and may even contain clues as to the names of these individuals.

Olmec cultural traits and material culture spread broadly throughout Mesoamerica. Archaeologists have been able to determine, based on the type of clay that was used, that some early ceramics found widely dispersed across Mesoamerica were created at the Olmec site of San Lorenzo. In some areas, it appears the Olmec may have acted as colonizers, whereas in other areas their ideology appears to have been adopted and modified by existing cultures by choice rather than by force.

The Olmec flourished from around 1200 through 400 BC in southern Veracruz and northwestern Tabasco, but other Gulf Coast cultures rose and fell throughout the centuries. Between the first and tenth centuries AD, numerous cultures in central Veracruz flourished. From the ninth through thirteenth centuries, El Tajin was the most dominant city in the region. The Huastec culture of southern Tamaulipas and northern Veracruz and Totonac cultures arose in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and were in full swing when the Spanish arrived in the early sixteenth century. A number of smaller groups lived between the Huastecs and Totonacs, such as the Tephua, Nahua, and Otomi.

Izapa

The southern Mexican site of Izapa appears to be a critical link in the chain that connects the earlier Olmec civilization with that of the later Maya. Although the site was established at least as early as the Middle Formative period, its florescence did not occur until the Late Formative (ca. 300–50 BC). The site is perhaps most well known for its elaborately carved stelae, but it deserves recognition for its large temples, plazas, and ball courts as well. It was a major center for its time, with 160 structures within a fairly compact site core occupying less than one square mile.

Although Izapan art incorporated some elements of Olmec iconography, compositionally it was completely innovative. Olmec art tends to be static and uncluttered, often featuring a single individual with...
a minimal amount of regalia. Izapan art, in contrast, is characterized by scenes crowded with all manner of figures—gods, humans, and animals—holding or otherwise interacting with a wide variety of objects and assuming poses that are intended to tell a story. Many of the scenes appear to depict narratives from the K’iche’ epic known as the Popol Vuh, which was recorded nearly two millennia after the Izapan art was created. Other scenes, however, depict narratives that have been lost to history, and we can only speculate as to their meaning.

Maya Highlands

Contemporary with Izapa was Kaminaljuyu in the Maya Highlands of Guatemala. Kaminaljuyu has been described by archaeologists as “the greatest highland Maya center in all of Maya history,” and for good reason. Guatemala City is built directly on top of this ancient capital city, which covered over five square miles at its peak in the first and second centuries AD. Its influence was widespread and can be detected as far south as El Salvador and up to the Guatemalan-Mexican border. It was a fairly cosmopolitan center, with evidence of inhabitants from Teotihuacan from Central Mexico and others from the Maya Lowlands. Over two hundred temples, palaces, and other structures composed its urban core by 200 BC–AD 100. Their artisans created hundreds of carved monuments with elaborate scenes and even nascent writing. They engaged in long-distance trade of prestige goods such as obsidian, jade, and seashells. Although it remained occupied throughout the Classic period, Kaminaljuyu’s power waxed and waned through the centuries and was ultimately abandoned beginning around AD 800.

In the Late Postclassic period, the Maya Highlands were occupied by a large number of different linguistic and cultural groups, including the Cakchikel, Ixil, Jacaltec, Kekchi, Mam, Pocomchi, and Tzotzil, to name but a few. The Highland Maya did not build great city-states but rather were characterized by weakly organized territorial groups led by aristocratic families. The great Maya cities are instead found in the Southern Lowlands.

Southern Maya Lowlands

The Southern Lowlands are home to the vast majority of Classic period Maya cities. Many of the great Classic period cities have their roots deep in the Preclassic, however. For example, Calakmul, the great enemy of Tikal throughout the Classic period, already had large and elaborately decorated temples by 350 BC. Curiously, however, as Maya archaeologists Arlen and Diane Chase note,

No solid archaeological evidence has yet been encountered for in situ developmental precedents for these village groups, causing some researchers to argue for an influx of other Mesoamerican populations, such as the Mixe-Zoque from Veracruz and Chiapas, into the Maya area at this early date (Ball and Taschek 2003). Whatever the case, a series of diverse village communities dotted the landscape of the Maya southern lowlands in the first half of the first millennium BC. Sometime after 600 BC, the cultural remains associated with these communities became more standardized, especially in terms of ceramics and architecture, becoming readily identifiable as “Maya.”

Several massive cities dotted the Maya Lowlands during the Preclassic period, such as El Mirador, Tintal, Wakna, Uaxactun, Cival, Cerros, and Becan. These sites were typically oriented according to an east-west axis (which may indicate migrations from the highlands of Chiapas, where such orientation was used earlier). Architecturally they are typified by Triadic-Group architecture and the presence of E-Groups, both of which served ritual purposes.

Many of these Preclassic Lowland Maya centers were linked together by a system of roads or causeways. Enhanced satellite imagery has revealed that El Mirador served as a central hub, with roads leading to other cities like spokes. The roads were elevated and enabled easy travel over difficult terrain, including extensive wetland areas. Although they varied in height and width, their construction was generally composed of rubble lined with large stones at the edges and large cobblestones in the interior, progressively getting smaller from bottom to top, finally grading to fine gravel near the surface and topped with fine powdered limestone (called sascab), which was pressed smooth with stone rollers. Remains of these roads can still be found connecting El Mirador to Nakbe (7.5 miles to the southeast) and to Tintal (11 miles to the south), as well as to other cities to the west and northwest that are yet unknown archeologically. There even appears to have been a lengthy road connecting El Mirador to Calakmul, 25 miles to the north.
Unlike El Mirador, which was abandoned in the early centuries AD, Calakmul became a major force in the Classic period, along with Tikal, its rival to the south. Other major Lowland Maya cities of the Classic period, such as Naranjo, Caracol, Yaxchilan, Piedras Negras, Tonina, and Copan swore allegiance to either Tikal or Calakmul, and the history of the Lowlands is defined primarily by the conflicts between these kingdoms.39

Each major Lowland polity was ruled by a divine king during the Classic period. Upon accession to the throne, each king would receive the title K’uhul Ajaw, which literally means “Holy Lord” or “God-like Lord” (the root word k’uh means “god”). These rulers were believed to have a special connection to the divine realm and were tasked with performing rituals on behalf of their people that would incur the favor of the gods and keep the cosmos in order. Most Classic period cities had lengthy dynasties that spanned centuries, and rulership typically passed from father to firstborn son. In a very literal sense, rulers were larger-than-life individuals. The stone monuments that dot each city typically carry portraits of the king, and these effectively multiplied his presence as they were believed to be living, breathing objects.40 The cultural identity of a given polity, then, was often intricately tied to the person of the king or his lineage.

Cultural identity was fundamentally important to these different Lowland Maya polities. They went to great lengths to distinguish themselves from other cities in the region, though to modern eyes the differences may seem minor. For example, the accession ritual and regalia employed at Piedras Negras in Guatemala is distinct from that of Yaxchilan, Mexico, their neighbor and rival along the banks of the Usumacinta River.41 Their kings hearkened unto different gods to validate their authority (as did the rulers of all Maya cities), and worshipped locally specific pantheons. As discussed earlier, architectural features and site-planning principles were also employed to set themselves apart from other Maya cities. Whereas modern observers may see a fairly homogenous region populated by the Maya, to the ancient inhabitants the Lowlands was an extraordinarily heterogeneous landscape.

Central Mexico

The region of Central Mexico is significant because it contains some of the earliest evidence for agriculture and ceramics in Mesoamerica. Amaranth, chili peppers, squash, and a predecessor to the maize plant were all domesticated in this area, and by 3000 BC a significant portion of their food was coming from such cultivated crops. With agriculture comes sedentism, and by 2500 BC settled communities began to appear in Central Mexico. They did not subsist exclusively upon their crops; they continued to hunt, fish, and gather from nondomesticated plants. Sedentism typically led to the development of pottery,42 and by 2300 BC crudely made pottery began to appear in the Tehuacan Valley of Central Mexico.

Small sedentary communities gradually grew larger, and by 2500 BC large villages such as Zohapilco became established in the Basin of Mexico. Increasing population sizes stimulated the need for political organization. Although the evidence is sparse that the Olmec established colonies in Central Mexico, their influence was felt and perhaps evidenced in the social stratification that was adopted in this region throughout the Formative period.

By the Middle Formative period, large regional centers such as Cuicuilco and Chalcatzingo became established in Central Mexico. By the Late Formative, Teotihuacan began to assert its dominance in this region. At its zenith, Teotihuacan covered over twenty square miles and had a population upwards of 200,000. Rather than growing slowly from village
to city to metropolis, it was a master-planned city from its inception. Features included multistory apartment complexes; ethnic barrios for foreigners from Oaxaca, the Maya area, and elsewhere; as well as massive pyramidal structures that bookended the main north-south axis.

Teotihuacan stands out from other Mesoamerican cultures in a number of ways. Perhaps most strikingly, we know very little about their hierarchical organization because they did not memorialize their rulers in their art or writing as was typical of other societies in Mesoamerica. The details concerning the most well-known ruler of Teotihuacan actually come from the Maya site of Tikal, approximately 600 miles to the east in Guatemala. In AD 378, a military leader named Siyaj K’ahk’ left Teotihuacan and cut a swath across Mesoamerica. He arrived at Tikal and promptly dispatched their king, Chak Tok Ich’aak. Acting under the auspices of Spearthrower Owl (the emperor of Teotihuacan), Siyaj K’ahk’ installed a puppet king named Yax Nuun Ayiin to replace the murdered Chak Tok Ich’aak.43

From that point forward, many Classic period Maya rulers began to hark back to Teotihuacan in an effort to legitimize their authority. Some even claimed to make pilgrimages there as part of their enthronement process. For example, Yax K’uk’ Mo’ of Copan (a capital city at the southeastern extreme of the Maya area) journeyed there in AD 426, according to the inscription on the top of Altar Q from Copan.44 Through ritual action at Teotihuacan, the royal theonym K’inich (lit. “sun-eyed”) was bestowed upon him, and he became K’inich Yax K’uk’ Mo’ and returned to Copan to establish a dynasty that would last for centuries. K’inich is the name of the Maya sun god, and rulers using that title effectively claimed to be possessed of divine “heat” or spiritual energy, far above and beyond that of commoners.45

Teotihuacan fell into decline approximately AD 600, and its collapse initiated the Epi-Classic period in Central Mexico. This created a power vacuum across the Mesoamerican landscape, which was subsequently filled by the Lowland Maya cultures. The great resurgence of Central Mexican states would not occur until centuries later with the establishment of the Aztec Empire.

The Aztecs were the dominant culture in Central Mexico during the Late Postclassic and were likely just hitting their stride when the Spaniards appeared on the scene in the early 1500s. Unlike their Maya neighbors to the south, the Aztecs were truly a political and economic empire, establishing colonies as far away as Panama and trading goods into the American Southwest. The empire had a centralized government, headquartered at their capital city of Tenochtitlan, which ruled over a wide array of territories and ethnicities.

The Aztec were not always a mighty empire, however. They claimed to be descendants of the Chichimecs, a fabled northern Mexican tribe of hunter-gatherers memorialized in pictorial codices as skin-clad wanderers who were famed for their skill with the bow and arrow. However, several other groups that migrated to the Valley of Mexico in the thirteenth century were instrumental in the genesis of the empire. The Tepanecs, the Alcolhua, and the Mexica, all from different regions and different cultural backgrounds, migrated to the Valley of Mexico during this period. The rapid urbanization of the area created a dynamic environment in which the different groups needed to compete for resources, which led to jockeying for regional domination.

North Central Mexico

North Central Mexico is generally considered the northern extremity of Mesoamerica and the frontier region between Mesoamerican cultures and those of the American Southwest. The region was occupied by a wide range of cultures, from nomadic hunter-gatherers to settled agriculturalists. Despite its cultural diversity, North Central Mexico appears to have been a generally peaceful region characterized by sociopolitical stability. Four primary cultures can
be identified from this region based on their distinct architectural and ceramic styles, but the archaeological record tells us virtually nothing concerning their languages, origins, or fate. Even their names are lost to history.

Although the four different subregions in North Central Mexico are distinguishable, their ceramics exhibit some level of uniformity. Pottery was typically red-on-buff and decorated with geometric designs, similar to the Hohokam of the American Southwest; both were likely influenced by the Chupicuaro culture from Western Mexico.

The Zapotec

While the Olmec are generally credited with being the first complex civilization in Mesoamerica, they appear to have been organized according to chiefdoms rather than functioning as state-level civilizations. The Zapotec, in contrast, clearly were a state-level civilization, likely the first to achieve such a status in Mesoamerica. The term Zapotec refers to speakers of the Otomanguean language family, although the distinct languages within this family were mutually unintelligible (analogous to the Romance language family that includes Spanish, French, Romanian, etc.). The Zapotec developed one of the earliest known hieroglyphic writing systems in Mesoamerica, dating around the seventh century BC.

The Zapotec heartland was in the fertile Oaxaca Valley, but the empire extended to the Pacific Ocean and into the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. They were one of the most enduring of all Mesoamerican civilizations, lasting for approximately two and a half millennia.

During the Formative village stage (1600–500 BC), the Zapotec site of San Jose Mogote was one of the earliest settlements in the Oaxaca Valley and grew to be the largest in the area. Situated adjacent to the Atoyac River, it was built on a low rise that kept it just above the flood zone; these conditions made it an ideal location for farming. The inhabitants of San José Mogote were relatively advanced technologically for their time. They were skilled agriculturalists, constructed subsurface pits for grain storage, used grinding stones to process dried corn kernels, and produced ceramics that were used in storing, cooking, and serving their foodstuffs.

Architecturally, they innovated what would later become the standard Zapotec residential floor plan, in which multiple rooms surrounded a central patio area. By about 1200 BC, a group of buildings was elaborately constructed that appears to be a residential
compound for high-status people, indicating they had a socially stratified society. The village likely served as a central gathering place where occupants of other settlements in the valley would come for markets and ceremonial purposes. Between about 700-500 BC a temple was built on an elevated stone platform that was accessible by a stairway.

Another Zapotec site, Monte Albán, was the first major urban center in the Oaxaca Valley. Founded around 500 BC, it was built on a hilltop 350 meters above the valley floor. Astonishingly, the hilltop was artificially leveled prior to the construction of the city, which would have been a massive undertaking in the absence of draft animals or advanced technology. The city is strategically located at the convergence of three branches of the Valley of Oaxaca, an ideal location for controlling trade routes between Central Mexican cities such as Teotihuacan to the west and the Maya area to the east. Artistically, Monte Albán is most well known for a series of bas-relief carvings of human figures known collectively as the Dancers (“Los Danzantes”). Although they were initially believed to be images of dancing individuals, advances in iconographic interpretation have led to the realization that these were likely war captives and sacrificial victims whose bodies had suffered mutilation prior to (or in the process of) death.

The final Zapotec capital city was Zaachila, whose ruins lie about ten miles south of the modern city of Oaxaca. It appears to have been founded sometime after the fall of Monte Albán but was ultimately conquered by the Mixtec, who occupied it until the time of the Conquest. The Mixtec subsequently occupied the site and repurposed buildings and even tombs according to their own stylistic conventions.

The Mixtec

Like the Zapotec, the Mixtec are also part of the Otomanguean language family. The three main languages in the Mixtecan branch (Cuicatec, Trique, and Mixtec) are further subdivided into many distinctive dialects. The various dialects arose because of the rugged terrain of Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Puebla, which makes interaction between settlements difficult. Because of their prominence in the Late Postclassic period, some presume that the Mixtec were relative latecomers on the Mesoamerican landscape, but they actually trace their origins back to the Late Formative period. By 100 BC, the cities of Tilantongo and Monte Negro were established in the Mixteca Alta region of western Oaxaca. Tilantongo’s population waxed and waned throughout the centuries, likely because of warfare and shifting power relations among contemporaneous Mesoamerican cultures. The city remained primarily a Mixtec ritual and political center until the time of the Conquest.

West Mexico

The coastal region of West Mexico has evidence of occupation dating back to the Paleoindian period, but the early inhabitants were primarily nomadic and subsisted on maritime resources, supplemented by hunting and gathering. In the Formative they began to cultivate crops and establish more permanent settlements. This region is best known for its Late Formative and Early Classic cultures of Colima, Nayarit, and Jalisco. These sites are characterized by the shaft and chamber tombs they constructed for

Intricately modeled figurines are playing or watching a ceremonial ball game [200 BC–AD 500], Nayarit, Mexico. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
their dead, which not only indicate a deep reverence for their ancestors but also validate their territorial claims.49

The West Mexican cultures are perhaps most well known for their distinctive ceramic styles. Their figurines tend to have a natural, even playful style and give glimpses into everyday life that are rarely found elsewhere. Nayarit is known for its complex ceramic models that feature several different individuals engaged in group activities. Some depict exciting ball games that convey a surprising sense of movement and energy, complete with spectators in the stands. But they also made somber models of burial processions that include such details as pallbearers conveying the dead to a burial tomb beneath a residential compound. The artisans at Colima had an affinity for creating animal figurines, especially dogs, which are portrayed in all manner of activities, such as sleeping, grooming themselves, fighting, or simply standing. Colima dog figurines are virtually always depicted as being fat, indicating their value as a food source, although they were also used in hunting deer and were ritually sacrificed for burials.50 The ceramic figurines in Jalisco, in contrast, tend to feature humans with elongated heads and large, almond-shaped eyes. Jalisco is more well known for its use of shells in creating jewelry and art. Small shells were intricately threaded together to create unique garb, such as a burial skullcap made from thousands of small, freshwater snail shells. Larger shells were carved, drilled, and painted with a variety of geometric motifs.

Like most other Mesoamerican cultures, West Mexico was influenced by the Olmec during the Formative period and later by Teotihuacan in the Early Classic period. By theLate Classic the Teuchitlan tradition had made an incursion, and West Mexico was ultimately inhabited by Tarascans in the Late Postclassic. Interestingly, West Mexico engaged in long-distance trade relations with the cultures of northern South America, almost certainly by way of boat. These distantly separated areas show remarkable similarities in their burials, pottery styles, manufacturing techniques, and even in the use of metals and alloys.51

Conclusion

This overview was necessarily brief and admittedly incomplete. We could virtually go through the alphabet naming peoples, cultures, and places that were not discussed in this short treatment, from Acanceh, Balamku, and Chalcatzingo through Xochicalco, Yaxuna, and Zempoala. While many of these groups are generally lumped by modern scholars into categories such as “Maya” or “Huastec,” we must bear in mind that individual cities did not view themselves as a part of a larger whole; each of the thousands of different cities across the Mesoamerican landscape viewed themselves as a unique people and culture and often went to great lengths to differentiate themselves from even their closest neighbors.52 Thanks to
advances in satellite imaging, we have been able to identify over 6,000 sites in the Maya area alone, each composed of dozens, if not hundreds, of buildings. Of these thousands of known sites, each is unique in one way or another. From those polities whose artistic programs and hieroglyphic inscriptions have survived the ravages of time, we have discovered that each city worshipped its own unique pantheon of gods, typically a blending of pancultural deities with locally significant patron gods.

The title of this article pays homage to the many traditional Mesoamerican communities that continue to practice the ancient art of weaving. The beautiful textiles they produce are used for artistic, ceremonial, and commercial purposes. Each thread is critical, contributing color and texture to the elaborate and beautiful patterns that emerge as each is interlaced into the fabric. Such is the case with the thousands of distinct peoples and cultures of ancient Mesoamerica. Though each was unique in its own way, they can all be woven together to create a beautiful tapestry of culture that continues to adorn the landscape today.

Mark Alan Wright is an assistant professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University. He earned his bachelor’s degree from UCLA and his master’s and PhD from UC Riverside, all in anthropology with a subfield of specialization in Mesoamerican archaeology. His research focuses on Classic period Maya ritual and religion, as well as on issues concerning the historicity of the Book of Mormon.

NOTES

5. George Stuart, personal communication, 16 April 2011, Davidson, North Carolina.
6. Although we can phonetically read the ancient name for Tikal (Mutal/Mutual), it is unclear what the name actually means. It is often represented as a logogram that appears to represent a bundle of hair known as a top knot as viewed from behind.
8. The first known recorded occurrence seems to be from the journal of Christopher Columbus’s son Bartolomeo (Brinton 1882:10 [the Maya Chronicles]), in which he describes an indigenous ship loaded with trade goods that they encountered near the Bay Islands of Honduras: In questo loco pigliorono una Nave loro carica di mercantia et merce la quale dicevano veniva da una certa provintia chiamata Maiam vel Luncatam con molte veste di bambasio de le quale ne erono il foro di sede di diversi colori. (In this place they [the Spanish] seized a ship of theirs [the natives] loaded with merchandise and wares which they say comes from a certain province called Maiam or Luncatam with many garments of cotton-wool which some mistake for . . . silk of diverse colors.)
14. Arlen Chase and Diane Chase, “Complex Societies in the Southern Maya Lowlands: Their Development and Florecence in the Archaeological Record,” in The Oxford Handbook of Mesoamerican Archaeol-
30. Pool, Olmec Archaeology, 103-5.
32. The Popol Vuh narrative itself is undated, but the extant written version was likely completed between 1554 and 1558; Allen J. Christensen, The Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 37.
36. Estrada-Belli, First Maya Civilization, 67.
38. Estrada-Belli, First Maya Civilization, 50.
45. Upon accession, many rulers would receive both the theonym K’inich and the royal title K’uhul Ajaw. For example, Yax K’uk’ Mo’ became K’inich Yax K’uk’ Mo’ and was referred to as the K’uhul Ajaw of Copan.
48. Scholars debate when Zaachila was first established. Some put it as early as AD 1100; others argue it was as late as 1399.
52. Wright, “Study of Classic Maya Rulership.”