When the Spanish stepped onto the American mainland, they encountered a complex cultural tapestry. Some indigenous cultures were thriving, some retained vigorous traditions, and others were in decline, but each had its own rich and unique features. Some twenty million people inhabited the Mesoamerican area, concentrated in large interdependent urban centers with outlying clusters of agricultural settlements.

The cities had differentiated themselves from the countryside in the Classic period, between 200 and 900 A.D. Although the numerous agricultural settlements were small, people tended to group themselves into villages with strong internal social distinctions. The rural areas were dependent and subordinate to the city-states, which were inhabited by elite social strata. Political, administrative, religious, and artisanal activities were concentrated in the cities, and services could be obtained there. The urban elites had developed the capacity to organize and direct complex labor relations.

The growing population and the sophisticated social organization stimulated the development of new technologies, such as improved seed stock and agricultural irrigation in the countryside. The evolution of urban planning led to new construction technologies and the building of plumbing infrastructure in the cities. Stone conduits carried water to both the cities and the fields. In the Mayan area, canals were fed from cenotes, naturally occurring spring-fed limestone sinkholes. On the large lakes of the Valley of Mexico, fresh water was fed to chinampas, artificial earthen islands like those still seen in Xochimilco, to the south of Mexico.
City, that were anchored by live *huejote* trees and fertilized with lichen, aquatic vegetation, and mud from the lake bed. Elsewhere, water was supplied to terraced fields carved into mountainsides. Water reserves, intended to produce high agricultural yields, were stored in enormous earthenware vessels, in small dammed ponds, and in *cenotes*. A system of internal roads provided transportation within large urban areas. These are still observable in pre-Hispanic archeological sites. Another road system linked together the far-flung urban centers. These innovations and natural resources served the daily needs of villages and of the cities that began to expand around 200 A.D., a development that stimulated productivity through the employment of more intensive and extensive sowing and harvesting methods, and satisfied both cultural and religious needs through the widespread exchange of goods.

The use of animal power and of the wheel were unknown to indigenous society when the Spanish arrived. In their place was a complex organization of labor that spread throughout the villages and cities and produced marked social differentiation. Political organization also became more complex as nobles came to govern large areas and developed the means to dominate rural society. Soon they were able to establish kinship relations and form alliances with the nobles of different ethnicities in distant regions.

Wars between nobles’ domains, minor kingdoms, and ruling dynasties were constant, but complex military institutions did not develop because the politico-religious aspects of conflict predominated over the strictly military. Shifting alliances and matrimonial pacts, rather than warfare itself, were instrumental in the rise and fall of ruling families and capital cities.

Long-distance trade relations were another fundamental characteristic of pre-Hispanic society. Complex religious, political, and family networks were organized in order to develop and maintain these relations, facilitating a certain degree of population mobility.

The Ancestors

Archeological evidence tells us that there were human settlements twenty thousand years ago in present-day Mexico and part of Central America. In this sense, the history of Mexico began several millennia ago, if by *history* we mean the story that began the moment humans were first able to transform their physical environment to sustain and reproduce families,
engage in art and religion, and develop social relations among family lines.

The first population groups spent most of their time and energy gathering wild fruits and vegetables and hunting for meat. They organized themselves into bands of twenty to thirty families under the authority of a chief, to whom they attributed superior, and perhaps religious, qualities. These bands moved within wide areas, since a family of five required nearly four-tenths of a square mile in order to maintain and reproduce itself. The bands’ mobility can also be explained by the need to defend themselves against other humans who entered their territory. These hunter-gatherers also spent time in the manufacture of wooden domestic utensils and weapons such as bows, arrows, and blowpipes. Group activities were accompanied by religious rites and ceremonial meals.

Archeological finds indicate that human settlements were dynamic and multiplied over time, presumably due to population growth and the increasing size of the bands. It was probably at this “macroband” stage that the social and political authority of the chief began to be differentiated from the politico-religious function of magical healers who were responsible for the well-being of the group.

About seven thousand years ago, during the fifth millennium B.C., the Indians of Mexico began to cultivate the plants that they had up until then gathered in the wild. These plants formed the basis of the Mesoamerican diet. Most of them, like corn, beans, onions, squash, chilies, avocados, and tomatillos, would by colonial times enrich the human diet worldwide, along with the Andean potato.

Like the conversion to the socially more complex macrobands, the switch from hunting and gathering to agriculture was gradual. It was not a simple transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. It was the outcome of complex processes involving the selection of plant species, their genetic mutation, and the ability to remember and predict weather patterns and their implications for the availability of plant and animal food.

The transition from nomadic to seminomadic life took several millennia, from 5000 to 2500 B.C. During this time, members of macrobands developed the agricultural skills necessary for intermittent farming and, subsequently, the additional sophisticated skills that could support permanent cultivation and settlement. Hunters still ventured from these settlements seasonally in order to bring back meat and products obtained in trade with other bands. The macrobands diversified their activities and
eventually became tribes with elaborate social hierarchies, living in villages and building wattle-and-daub structures.

The development of agriculture stimulated important inventions, such as farming tools and other objects carved from stone, and earthenware containers for the storage and preservation of seeds and produce. It has been said that the Indigenous women of Mexico invented fired clay and transformed wild corn into domestic varieties. The illustrious botanist George Wells Beadle indicated that in breeding corn from a native species of grass called *teosinte*, the Indigenous people of the region produced the greatest morphological change in any cultivated plant and extended its range over a wider area than any other staple crop.\(^1\) Another significant contribution of the Mesoamerican Indians was the domestication of cotton and the production of textiles from its spun fiber, replacing the use of maguey. By 1300 a.d., Mesoamericans were cultivating a variety of crops sufficient to provide a balanced diet of vegetable proteins and fatty oils: corn, beans, squash, and avocados.

Over time, the population became primarily sedentary and a common Mesoamerican religion spread, characterized by ceremonial burials and abundant figurines—lucid expressions of the Mesoamerican imagination and the construction of a symbolic world.

The Birth of Mesoamerica

Almost five thousand years ago, between 3000 and 2500 B.C., the cultures living on the stretch of land between Guatemala and the American Southwest began to divide into two cultural areas. Sedentary agriculture became well established in the Mesoamerican cultures from southern Guatemala to northern San Luis Potosí, while hunting and gathering persisted in what we call the Arid American cultures, which were located from Tamaulipas, Mexico, above the twenty-first parallel north to the Californias, Utah, Colorado, and Texas.

The cultural differences among the peoples of these large areas did not create conflict among them. On the contrary, goods, knowledge, and cultural practices flowed across their extensive and permeable frontiers, as they do across the political boundaries today. Ethnic and cultural recom-

---

Combination produced new multiethnic and multicultural communities. This permeability of the cultural boundary was due in part to the fact that it was never fixed but rather fluctuated in accordance with climatic cycles. In dry times, the people of the border region took up nomadism, while in temperate and humid times, they settled down and practiced agriculture.

Arid America was an ecological mosaic. Deserts alternated with fertile plains in areas contiguous to Mesoamerica. Its people traveled long distances. For example, hunters of the North American plains and fishermen of the Pacific Northwest moved throughout the Californias.

Map 1.1 suggests the possibilities for economic and cultural exchange between Mesoamerica and Arid America, a characteristic shared by the U.S.–Mexican border today. Responding to the demographic pressure produced by their own expansion, about 2000 B.C. sedentary agricultur- alists began to extend the leading edge of Mesoamerican culture to the northern states of Mexico and the U.S. states of Arizona, New Mexico, and California. At this time, new settlements sprang up, and pockets of oasis agriculture prospered along the rivers in valleys and on plains in the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico. 2

In the twenty-seven centuries between 2500 B.C. and 200 A.D., Mesoamerican villages evolved into complex organizations. Agricultural villages began the period as settlements of twenty or so huts, living from agriculture based on seasonal rains and the silt deposited by rivers. They engaged in trade with other villages, but trading was still precarious at this stage. The existence of a symbolic world was underscored by protective deities. Agricultural and hydroengineering techniques for the construction of terraces, dams, and canals spread in the eight hundred years between 1200 and 400 B.C., what we call the Middle Preclassic period, making truly permanent and socially differentiated settlements possible. Agricultural cycles were regularized and additional plants were domesticated. The combined effect of new domestic plant species, regular harvests, and greater productivity stimulated both local and long-distance trade, and the acquisition of prestige goods became possible. Economic specialization and social differentiation appeared, along with political and religious hierarchies that organized and channeled the population’s activities and energies. A partial writing system and the initial calendar registers were invented, and the first great ceremonial centers were built. To-

CHAPTER 1


Together these developments produced the first pan-Mesoamerican culture, the Olmec.

Map 1.2 illustrates the original areas of Olmec culture in the region around Veracruz and Tabasco on the Gulf Coast. Olmec influence soon crossed the Valley of Mexico, Oaxaca, and Chiapas to reach the Pacific, ranging as far north as the border of Jalisco and as far south as Costa Rica. It was spread by long-distance trade in obsidian, jade, the basalt used for
monuments, and the iron used for mirrors—all of them new, highly valued, and prestigious materials for many peoples.

Olmec art reflects a culture dominated by its religion and its powerful nobility, most famously through a large number of colossal stone heads. Recent finds indicate the existence of a great many divinities with similar attributes. In Las Limas, Veracruz, for example, a figure that dates from 800 to 400 B.C. portrays the accession to the throne of a young man represented as a jaguar in the arms of a noble, indicating his royal status. Four totemic divinities representing God the Creator are sculpted on the back and the knees of the jaguar-boy. The direct descendants of the royal line were obliged to perpetuate the memory of this God the Creator and to fulfill his commitments to the people. This kind of sculpture is a key to understanding Olmec iconography.

Olmec beliefs permeated other cultures. Its concept of a hierarchical society and government dominated by an elite group dedicated to a cult of gods and ancestors spread to various Mesoamerican regions, first by conquest and trade, and later through missionary zeal. The hierarchical conception of political life took particularly strong root in the Zapotec and Mayan civilizations. Without a doubt, the Olmec culture stimulated significant cultural changes, beginning around 1200 B.C., producing the relative cultural homogeneity in Mesoamerica that astonished the first Spanish invaders.

The Classic Period in Mesoamerica

Between 200 B.C. and 900 A.D., various aspects of Mesoamerican civilization matured. The population grew as production and regional trade increased. Outlying villages were integrated into the hierarchical systems of large urban centers. This process reached its apogee in the first few centuries A.D., most notably in the organization of territories surrounding architecturally monumental cities such as Teotihuacán, Monte Albán, and the Mayan cities of Uxmal, Copán, and Palenque.

Many reasons have been offered for the flowering of these great Mesoamerican cultures—most prominently, that there was an expansion of production sufficient to sustain larger numbers of people within the polity. We know of no new technologies that were comparable in impact to those of the Preclassic; however, during this period, trade, conquest, and cultural mimesis spread variations of existing technologies over the entire Mesoamerican region.
Recent studies of Mayan culture have suggested that the great ceremonial cities did not have continuous control over their surrounding areas. It seems that outlying areas would affiliate with whichever city offered them the greatest advantages at a given time. Thus urban elites had to constantly maintain positive relations with secondary settlements, lest village-level nobles incite rebellion against the authority of the capital.

The power of the calendar was crucial to political, governmental, cultural, and religious domination in every Mesoamerican culture. An understanding of meteorology, and of time and its calendrical expression, along with theocratic control of this knowledge comprised a major technocultural achievement of the extended historical period. Religion and calendrical calculation were combined in divinatory practices that drove fundamental changes in social and political organization. They gave rise to complex and hierarchical societies based on lineage and territorial rights. Kings were surrounded by nobles, priests, and sorcerers. The nobles, or pipiltin, were hereditary leaders who ruled over separate communities of macehualtin, or commoners. Both cosmic and worldly qualities were attributed to those who governed. Priests interpreted the religious calendar, the oracles, and divination cycles, while kings and nobles explained the significance of the agricultural calendar, supervised the functioning of the community, and administered its territory. Soldiers and merchants, in addition to their primary activities, performed diplomatic duties in the areas where they traveled. The strategy of sending members of the royal family to live permanently in other kingdoms may have begun at this time as a way to guarantee alliances. It was also an adaptation of the rule that royals could marry only other royals.

There were also local particularities during the thousand years of Classical Mesoamerican culture. In terms of the calendar, there were two major systems, that of Teotihuacán and that of the Maya. Teotihuacán maintained a relatively simple system that combined a 365-day religious-agricultural cycle with a 260-day sacred almanac, a divinatory calendar. The Maya, however, calculated the sequences and correspondences of their own two calendars much more precisely and elaborately. The two traditions were also distinguished by what Alfredo López Austin and Leonardo López Luján call “the symbolization of mental representations” in the case of Teotihuacán, and “the symbolization of verbal expressions” in the case of the Maya.³ Put another way, Teotihuacán

³ López Austin and López Luján, Mexico’s Indigenous Past; for the Mayan calendar, see pp. 150–53; for central Mexico, pp. 240–41.
ideograms, or figurative symbols, were used to represent ideas, while Mayan logograms represented words, which in turn represented ideas.

The Classic was undoubtedly a period of fundamental and qualitative change. The impact of its religion and its social, cultural, and political organization lasted until the conquest. Map 1.3 illustrates the diffusion of Classic cultures in the center of Mexico. Teotihuacán culture was the most dynamic and was best situated for geographic diffusion, while the Monte Albán and Gulf Coast cultures were more geographically isolated.

Teotihuacán, in the Valley of Mexico, was a large metropolis of 170,000 to 200,000 people living in an area of less than eight square miles. It was the largest city in the Americas, powerful by virtue of its control over deposits of obsidian, an enormously valuable commercial commodity, as well as its ceramic and obsidian manufactures and long-distance trade. The population was fed through high-yield agriculture carried out on chinampas, artificial islands constructed in swampy areas.

Unlike the Mayan cities, Teotihuacán was multiethnic, divided into ethnically based residential neighborhoods that preserved individual languages and cultural practices. The presence of multiple ethnicities may explain the city’s ability to spread its influence throughout the territories seen in map 1.3. A series of transportation corridors led to Jalisco, the Gulf and Pacific coastal regions, and southeast to Oaxaca and Chiapas. We do not know if one ethnic group governed the others or if noble succession was along family lines. We know only that there was a governing elite.

The city of Monte Albán, in the Oaxaca cultural area, had a longer life and greater continuity than Teotihuacán. It began to develop in 400 B.C. and reached its highest cultural development in 600 A.D. It had an intricate and complex culture, with a calendar similar to that of Teotihuacán and a rich and elaborate religious symbolism. The capital city dominated the entire Valley of Oaxaca through a well-structured political system, also exercising indirect control over Mixtec kingdoms in the nearby mountains. Monte Albán was divided into fifteen large districts based on lineages and occupational groups. Each district organized its own economic activities. The writing system was linear, pointing to the importance of syntax in the language. Stone inscriptions chronicle the exploits and conquests of Monte Albán’s nobles and their alliances with other noble families.

Let us consider the features that fostered the movement and expansion so characteristic of Mesoamerican cultures. Map 1.4 illustrates the prominence of the Mayan city-states, large urban centers that dominated their surrounding territories, and shows their layout in relation to one another and the local and regional roads that connected them. However, there
MAP 1.3. Mesoamerican cultures in the Classic period. (Source: Michael Coe, Dean Snow, and Elizabeth Benson, Atlas of Ancient America, op. cit., p. 105.)
were also commercial routes by land and sea that linked the Mayan area with the center of Mexico. The fact that both of these large cultural areas developed quickly during this period strongly suggests that there was constant exchange between them.

Despite certain cultural commonalities with the rest of Mesoamerica, Classical Mayan civilization had its own particularities, developed over the five hundred years beginning about 400 A.D. Most city-states maintained links with each other through the intermarriage of royalty, with no one city dominating the others. Even Tikal, the major city of the Petén region, never imposed its will on the others. This explains how there came to be some twenty city-states, each with an urban center for its capital and each dominating its own territory, in the Mayan area around the first century A.D.

Like people in other indigenous cultural areas, by the first century A.D. the Maya had a high population growth rate. This spurred urban centers such as Tikal to develop new technologies and to transition from strictly seasonal to full-time, intensive, and diversified agriculture. Likewise, Mesoamericans in the Valley of Mexico began to terrace the land, reclaim marshland, and channel and store water for agricultural and urban consumption.

The political systems of Classic Mesoamerica grew ever more complex. Not only were royals distinguished from commoners, but there were hierarchical relations among different noble families operating according to strict rules of succession. Priests and warriors were also ranked. Lords were considered quasi-divine; the legitimacy of their power was totemic, deriving from the relationship between a divinity and a human group via the sacred link represented by the sovereign.

By the eighth century A.D., the Mayan territory contained a population of several million. Fifty thousand people lived in Tikal, an area of not much more than six square miles. The average noble family controlled an urban center of ten to fifteen thousand people. A king of kings, or chuhlabau, presided over ahauobo, secondary kings of various ranks who governed in interdependent kingdoms of greater or lesser importance. Every smaller kingdom and lesser domain had a presence in the confederation, and its authority was represented in a major governing city. The lesser kings, established in a central city, delegated authority within their own jurisdiction to others of their lineage or to lesser nobles called cahal, but never to commoners. The unity and cohesion of the kingdoms, of which there must have been somewhere between twelve and sixty in the eighth century, were maintained by means of a complex web of noble families, all of them socially, economically, and culturally interrelated.
The main transportation route between the plateau and the Mayan lowlands was at first by river and along the coasts in wooden boats. Later, short- and long-distance trade roads were developed. Drought and floods were managed by means of complex reservoir and canal systems that ran under the cities, capturing rainwater and water from underground springs. The Maya also learned to utilize the huge limestone sinkholes called *cenotes* that collected underground spring water. Cultivated areas alongside rivers and marshes were elevated and heaped with rich swamp mud. The Maya grew lichen and raised fish in irrigation ditches running between the raised beds, using the lichen and fish excrement as fertilizers. The extensive organization of labor power implicit in these methods was rewarded with two or three harvests per year. These agricultural practices were so culturally salient that the kings adopted the water lily, typically found alongside the raised beds, as their symbol.

The jurisdictional boundaries between kingdoms were determined by wars fought exclusively in the dry season between January and May. At other times, people concentrated on agriculture, religious rituals, and other daily tasks. The Mayan calendar organized the cycle of life, which was said to last fifty-two years and was essential to the performance of rituals; the utilization of space; and strategies for trade, war, and marriage, as well as for the frequent conflicts of succession between ruling families. All things of importance were scheduled at auspicious times as determined by the stars and by omens. The Mesoamerican cultures had a cyclical and nonevolutionary rather than linear concept of time, reflecting their teleological worldview; that is, they believed that human events were divinely predetermined.

Deities were believed to sanctify the ritual spaces in cities and urban centers and to exalt them with their powers. At the conclusion of a cycle of life, intricate rituals were performed. Stelae were destroyed; houses and huts demolished; plates broken; and lilies, irises, and other flowers buried in natural caves. These rituals invoked the presence of the divinities and sanctified the sites where new cities would be built. They were intended to stimulate the emergence of a new ruling family, which would then be responsible for further renewal ceremonies and the planning of the future city. Similar ceremonies accompanied the spiritual burial of the deceased ruler. The earth’s surface was perforated in order to renew human ties with the underworld. This was believed to enhance the grandeur of the new noble household. Likewise, ceremonies would be performed on elevated sites in order to facilitate the transmutation of the king and his shamanic passage across the three levels of the world.
The Decline of the Ancient World

Unlike previous periods, the Mesoamerican Postclassic, the period of the decline of the Indigenous cultures, produced an extensive written record. Thus we can date conquests and migrations, identify rulers by name, and even quantify tributes. The period is further distinguished by the introduction of metallurgy based on gold and copper, which seems to have arrived from South America about 800 A.D. This significant technological event led to the availability and use of new tools such as the ax, the chisel, the scalpel, the hoe, and the machetelike coa.

For reasons that are not yet clear, the great capital cities of central and southeastern Mexico fell or collapsed in the Postclassic period between 900 and 1500 A.D. The fate of two cities, one in the Mayan area and the other in the center, exemplify the events of the new period. The Toltec capital of Tula in central Mexico fell in 1150 to warriors from the north. In the southeast, the Mayan capital of Chichén Itzá fell to the Mexicas in 1250. The Mexicas and the warrior groups would dominate large areas of Mesoamerica until the arrival of the Spanish. This long period was characterized by increased social and geographic mobility, which explains the appearance of multiethnic power centers, and by political instability, intensified trade through expanded trading networks, and reconfigured interrelationships of religion, culture, and politics.

An appreciation of Postclassic society and its circumstances is essential to understanding the Indigenous reaction to the Spanish invasion. Cultural change intensified after 1000 A.D, when climatic changes drove seminomadic northern agriculturalists southward to central Mexico. Hunter-gatherers joined this migratory stream along the way. They belonged to many groups but were known collectively as chichimecas, or barbarians. As the migrants moved south in successive streams, they acquired much of the complex knowledge and adopted many of the technologies and practices that they encountered. They also stimulated increased militarism in the societies that they passed through or conquered.

The wave of northern peoples made a significant impact on political organization. They established new, highly organized power centers and focused more than ever on the political domination and subjugation of surrounding territories, accomplished by the establishment of subordinate kingdoms and the exaction of tribute. These new conditions explain the proliferation of conflict and rivalry leading to war in the Postclassic period. Subjugated peoples resisted domination by other ethnicities and