Chapter 13: Mesoamerica, the Classic Maya, and the Aztec Empire

# Chapter Summary [Copied from Olszewski 2019, Chapter 13]

* The agricultural foundation of Mesoamerica was maize, squash, and beans, all of which were domesticated during the Archaic period.
* Private control or “ownership” of agricultural surpluses appears to be present just after 2000 cal BC.
* Mesoamerica was characterized by several regions where early politically complex entities developed over time. These included the Gulf Coast lowlands, the Valley of Oaxaca, the Basin of Mexico, and the Maya lowlands and highlands. Contact between these regions is seen in their trade and exchange networks.
* Groups known as the Olmec lived in the Gulf Coast lowlands. They built monumental architecture and monumental stone sculptures of elite rulers. No single Olmec city politically controlled the entire region; instead, the pattern was for one city at a time to be the most important center. These included San Lorenzo and La Venta.
* During the Early and Middle Preclassic periods, several Maya cities in the highlands and lowlands gained prominence. Like the Olmec, the Maya cities had monumental architecture and certain cities were centers associated with a hierarchy of smaller centers and rural villages.
* Evidence for elite individuals and families is found at sites in the Valley of Oaxaca. Initially there were several important centers in different parts of the valley. Beginning about 500 cal BC, power shifted to Monte Albán, which consolidated its control over the valley in 30 to 20 cal BC. This became the Zapotec state.
* In the Basin of Mexico, similar processes were underway, with large cities, monumental architecture, and long-distance trade and exchange. One important city was Teotihuacán, which grew in size and reputation beginning in AD 100. Teotihuacán may have played a role in conquering or influencing some Maya ruling dynasties during the Early Classic period.
* During the Late Preclassic period, Maya cities in the highlands and lowlands continued to be important centers. However, the highlands region declined by the Early Classic period. Instead, cities in the lowlands, such as Tikal and Calakmul, emerged as state-level polities. No single city, however, ever controlled the entire Maya region.
* Classic period lowlands Maya cities were primary centers associated with secondary centers and smaller towns, villages, and rural settlements. Each city had monumental architecture including temples, palaces, plazas, causeways, and pyramids.
* The Maya developed a writing system using glyphs. Researchers have been able to decipher this script, which was used to record the lives and exploits of Maya rulers, describe religious stories of the gods and goddesses, and create several types of calendars.
* Like their predecessors and contemporaries, Maya cities were engaged in long-distance trade networks that brought jade, feathers, obsidian, basalt, salt, marine shells, and other resources to craft workshops and markets.
* Maya kings were considered divine and genealogically linked to the gods. As elite members of society, they had access to exotic goods, better and more varied foods, and surpluses that could be used to “fund” monumental constructions, crafts, and the military. Their elite status also can be seen in their burials, which had lavish grave goods. Kings were buried under temples.
* As a society, the Maya were characterized by considerable amounts of warfare and violence. These were efforts to conquer other Maya cities and allies of competing primary centers. War captives were sacrificed, and the stelae recording their rulers’ lives in the conquered cities were destroyed.
* Beginning about AD 900, the Classic Maya “disappear,” as does their writing system, but other cities in the Maya lowlands rose to prominence. These cities, such as Chichén Itzá and Mayapan, were based on the wealth created by trade and exchange networks. They also engaged in warfare with various lowlands cities, including each other.
* Migrants to the Valley of Mexico in the AD 1200s included Aztlan groups, one of which was the Mexica. The Mexica were fierce warriors and soon established alliances with other groups based their facility to win battles.
* After the Mexica’s activities soured their relationships with some of the Valley of Mexico polities, they related to a swampy area where they built what would become their capital, Tenochtitlán.
* In AD 1428, Tenochtitlán allied itself with the city-states of Texcoco and Tlacopan. This became the Triple Alliance and was the foundation for what became the Aztec Empire when Tenochtitlán assumed prominence in the alliance.
* The economic basis of the Aztec Empire was not only its agricultural products but also its extensive market system used both within the empire and with polities outside of the Valley of Mexico. The *pochteca* were high-status merchants who traveled internally and internationally and acted as spies for the empire.
* Aztec society was highly stratified, and, for the most part, there was no upper mobility (you remained in the social class into which you were born). Elites in Aztec society controlled vast wealth accumulated from their estates and from taxes and tribute payments. They oversaw the monumental construction resulting in pyramids, temples, plaza areas, and other architecture in the cities.
* Aztec religion and ritual, like other Mesoamerican polities, had a pantheon of gods and goddesses. Everyone from elites to commoners practiced bloodletting as one ritual. Major rituals involved the sacrifice of humans (often capture warriors).
* The Aztec Empire engaged in many periods of warfare with their neighbors. In some cases, this led to an expansion of the boundaries of the empire. They were not always successful, however, as they were never able to conquer the Tarascans who lived to the west of the empire.
* The ultimate trajectory for the Maya and Aztec polities will never be known because their indigenous development was interrupted by the arrival of the Spanish in AD 1519 to 1524 and the subjugation of these regions by the Spanish between AD 1521 and 1546.

# Key Terms

**Aztec Empire**: The Aztec Empire was a late political entity that was centered in the Basin of Mexico, where today’s Mexico City is built. It was defeated by the Spanish in AD 1521.

**Calakmul**: a Classic period lowlands Maya city that was the main state rival to the state centered at Tikal. Like Tikal, Calakmul had an extensive monumental elite and religious center characterized by palaces, temples, pyramids, and avenues, and its ruling dynasty established a wide network of alliances with other Maya cities. Calakmul and its allies managed to defeat Tikal in AD 562, and the Calakmul state then became the most powerful state in the Maya lowlands until it was, in turn, defeated by Tikal in AD 695.

**Chichén Itzá**: a Terminal Classic period city that was a state-level political entity in the Maya lowlands. Its power was built on commerce, and it had strong ties to the Mexican region. Rather than being ruled by a single king, its political structure appears to have been based on several elites from royal dynasties, the military, merchants, and religious practitioners.

**Cuicuilco**: a Middle to Late Formative period ceremonial center and town in the Basin of Mexico. It went into decline around the same time that Teotihuacán was becoming an important center in this area, and a nearby volcanic eruption eventually covered Cuicuilco under lava.

**El Mirador**: an important center during the Late Preclassic period in the Maya lowlands of Mesoamerica. Its monumental architecture, including El Tigre pyramid, is significantly more massive than at later Maya sites such as Tikal; however, el Mirador went into decline around AD 100 when Tikal and other lowland Maya centers gained in importance.

**Guilá Naquitz Cave**: an Archaic period site in highland Mexico that has yielded the earliest preserved plant remains of domesticated maize and squash, dating to around 4200 cal BC.

**Kaminaljuyú**: a Maya highlands center that began to develop into a politically complex society during the Middle Preclassic period. During the late Preclassic and Classic periods, it became one of the largest urban areas and most important of the Maya highlands sites, although the political importance of the highlands region during the Classic period was much less than that of its contemporaries in the Maya lowlands.

**La Venta**: an Olmec center in the South Gulf lowlands of Mexico in Mesoamerica that was important from 900 to 600 cal BC. It contains large clay platforms thought to be the foundations for elite residences, two large clay pyramids, monumental sculpted Olmec heads, and other ritual evidence suggesting it may have been a pilgrimage center for the Olmec.

**Mayapan**: a Postclassic period city and state in the Maya lowlands. It became powerful after defeating Chichén Itzá and was characterized by its control of lucrative trade.

**Mexica**: an Aztlan group that migrated into the Valley of Mexico in AD 1250. They established the city of Tenochtitlan (the eventual Aztec Empire capital) and became one of the most important groups in the Aztec Empire.

**Monte Albán**: the main center in the Valley of Oaxaca in Mesoamerica after 500 cal BC. It was a population center and large town with a perimeter wall and important ceremonial structures which became the hub of the Zapotec civilization beginning in 30–20 cal BC.

**Nakbe**: a Maya Lowlands center that began during the Middle Preclassic period. It eventually had monumental architecture, including a ballcourt, stone platforms, and a plaza associated with a pyramid and a platform with three structures, as well as stelae and altars.

**Olmec**: the early socially and politically complex societies of the southern Gulf Coast of Mexico. Their main centers include San Lorenzo and La Venta, where elite rulers managed agriculture, construction labor, and trade and exchange networks. These were contemporary with several other Mesoamerican societies such as the Preclassic Maya.

**Pochteca**: an Aztec merchant class that traveled internationally and within the Aztec Empire. They served as spies and traveled armed as warriors through the lands of enemies to set up trade and exchange relationships.

**San José Mogote**: a significant political center in the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico, that developed initially during the same period as the Olmec and Early and Middle Preclassic Maya. San José Mogote was involved in long-distance trade networks with other Mesoamerican regions and had public architecture that included stairways and terraces built of stone and a town divided into different sections with different craft specialties.

**San Lorenzo**: the first major center of the Olmec in the South Gulf Coast region of Mexico in Mesoamerica. It contains a large man-made plateau, plazas, courtyards, and large basalt sculptures of Olmec rulers. Its main period of power was between 1200 to 900 cal BC, after which it was abandoned until a minor resurgence from 600 to 400 cal BC.

**Stela**: a standing carved stone showing important Maya rulers, gods, or goddesses, and often Maya glyphic writing as well.

**Templo Mayor**: the major pyramid in the ceremonial precinct at the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. It had two temples at its top, one to the god Huitzilopochtli and the other to the god Tlaloc.

**Tenochtitlán**: the Aztec Empire capital (now under/in Mexico City) in the Valley of Mexico. It was established in AD 1325 by the Aztlan group known as the Mexica.

**Teotihuacán**: one of the most important centers in the Basin of Mexico after 150 cal BC. At its height during the Early Classic period, Teotihuacán was a large, planned city with a ceremonial precinct (Pyramids of the Sun and Moon, Street of the Dead, elite residences and other temples) and outlying areas of dwellings, temples, plazas, and markets. Teotihuacán had a far-flung interaction network, including the Maya lowlands, where Teotihuacanos appear to have replaced the Tikal dynasty in AD 378.

**Tikal**: a Maya lowlands center that became important during the Late Preclassic period after AD 100. Its ruling dynasty was founded during this period, with motifs such as the “royal crown” that signified a ruler being found in the tomb of Burial 85, who is tentatively identified as the founder of the Tikal dynasty. Like many important centers, Tikal has abundant evidence for monumental construction (the Northern Acropolis, Temple I, the Great Plaza) beginning in the Late Preclassic and continuing into the Classic period, when Tikal became one of the most important of several competing state-like polities.

**Tlatelolco**: the largest market in the Aztec Empire; it was in the twin city to the capital city of Tenochtitlan and was open on a daily basis.

**Tlatilco**: an Early Formative period site in the Basin of Mexico. Archaeological materials include pottery designs and forms that indicate contact with the Olmec region of Mesoamerica, as well as burials that suggest social ranking of people.

**Triple Alliance**: the basis of the Aztec Empire, it consisted of alliances between three citystates (Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan). Eventually the Mexica of Tenochtitlan dominated the alliance.

**Xihuatoxtla Shelter**: an Archaic period site in southwestern Mexico that has phytoliths of early domesticated maize, as well as domesticated squash, about 7000 cal BC.

**Zapotec**: a state-level politically complex society that emerged in the Valley of Oaxaca about 20 cal BC during the Late Formative period. Its capital was the city at Monte Albán.