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opinions and perspectives can we hope to save this wonderfully complex and threatened environment.

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HUGH CROSS

MESOAMERICAN CHRONOLOGY. [This entry comprises seven articles:

- Periodization
- Early Development and the Archaic Period (before 2600 BCE)
- Formative (Preclassic) Period (2000 BCE–250 CE)
- Classic Period (250–900)
- Postclassic Period (900–1521)
- Colonial Period (1521–1821)
- Postcolonial Period (1821–present)

The introductory article provides a critical discussion of the periodization of Mesoamerican development; the companion articles focus on the major developments, sites, and social processes occurring in each of the aforementioned periods. For related discussions, see Mesoamerica and Mesoamerican Studies.]

Periodization

Shortly after the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire in 1521, a group of Franciscan clerics and Native American

scribes, led by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, initiated the collection of native accounts, ancient codices, and related documents that pertained to the cultural and political histories of the conquered Mesoamerican peoples. In each of these many accounts, native peoples recorded their respective origins, cultural affinities, and ancestral traditions in grand detail, and in a variety of media. Throughout Mesoamerica, both precontact and Colonial-era native scribes recorded the ancestral genealogies and historical traditions of living and long-dead dynasties and elites by way of a variety of precontact calendrical systems. During the Colonial era, both native and European scribes recorded Mesoamerican histories using Christian calendar correlations that allowed European conquerors and scholars alike to gauge the depth and breadth of Mesoamerican cultural history. As a result of these many and varied accounts, and the anthropological and ethnohistorical investigations that followed, investigators into the culture history of this vast region were forced to come to terms with the cultural and linguistic diversity, multiple origins, migrations, pre-Hispanic histories, and time-depth represented by the whole of Mesoamerica and its peoples. The daunting task of interpreting these many accounts in terms of the archaeology, regional histories, and the ethnohistorical and ethnographic realities of the region has occupied investigators for almost five centuries.

Chronology in Perspective. The origins of Mesoamerican chronology-building and periodization is discussed here in terms of ethnohistoric accounts, culture history and its interpretation, and archaeological methods and findings. In addition, it should be noted that while Greater Mesoamerica comprises that land mass that includes Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, and portions of Nicaragua and Costa Rica, here the historical portion of the chronology centers on Mexican, as opposed to any broader Mesoamerican, history.

Where ethnohistorical accounts are concerned, such works as the *Codex Zuchi-Nuttall* (Mixtec), the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (Toltec), the *Chilam Balam de Chumayel* (Quiché Maya), *Florentine Codex* (Mexica-Aztec), and related works by Diego de Landa, F. Alvarado Tezozómoc, Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, and many others constituted primary resources for the initial description, periodization, and chronological frameworks published for Mesoamerica (see Willey and Sabloff 1993; Bernal 1980). Where culture history is concerned, the works of Hubert H. Bancroft, Eduard Seler, Herbert Spinden, Eduardo Noguera, Wigberto Jimenez Moreno, Paul Kirchhoff, H. B. Nicholson, Doris Heyden, Gordon Willey, and Angel García Cook are representative of the scope and diversity of contributions to the interpretation of the culture history of the region (see Lyman, O'Brien, and Dunnell, 1997).

Where archaeological methods and findings are concerned, the development of a variety of scientific methods for the interpretation of natural and cultural deposits and stratigraphy, as well as ceramic typology and classification, radiocarbon dating, obsidian-hydration analysis, thermoluminescence, and other absolute and relative chronometric methods—all helped establish chronology and interpretations (see Sabloff 1990).

From the outset, the immense task of assigning dates and working toward the periodization of Mesoamerican cultures was conceived in terms of vertical and horizontal scales of measurement, as well as cultural description that sought to characterize Mesoamerica in terms of a series of cultural and temporal registers—with time and space the means by which to categorize the cultures and peoples under study. In each case, the attempt by investigators to characterize the cultural histories of specific regions and peoples resulted in the initial development of timelines or chronologies, culture areas, and regional designations that were an attempt to simplify the complexities and inherent diversity of interpreting cultures once thought by researchers to have been built in the absence of written historical traditions. In many cases, entire civilizations—such as that of Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico—were largely unknown, since they had risen and fallen hundreds and thousands of years before the rise of the contact-period Mexica-Aztec state. With this critical contact-period link as a guide to the many earlier civilizations, archaeologists and ethnohistorians expanded the scope of their investigations to build new chronologies and “culture area” models for the rise and fall of civilization in Mesoamerica. By the mid to late nineteenth century, and through the early years of the twentieth century, researchers opened many new avenues to the interpretation of Mesoamerican cultural history. Each new discovery necessitated the identification of cultural associations and timelines for the building of culture histories.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the archaeologists initiated the task of building Mesoamerican culture histories using ceramic typologies and distinctive artistic traditions. Manuel Gamio's early-twentieth-century excavations and studies from the Valley of Mexico were among the first to make use of archaeological stratigraphy (cultural and geological soil strata), with associated ceramics and related artifacts, in an effort to discern the antiquity of cultures in that region (Bernal 1980). Alfred Kroeber (1939) worked to distinguish and define culture areas—discrete and culturally distinctive regions—for the peoples and cultures of native North America. The essential characteristics of Mesoamerica as a culture area were then defined by Paul Kirchhoff (1943); his formulation served as the primary basis for defining the primary

cultural characteristics of the region as a whole. Since that time, archaeologists and ethnohistorians have worked on ethnic and cultural descriptions, as well as the chronology, of much of Mesoamerica.

Chronology and Its Periodization. From the outset, historians seeking to define the periods and stages of Mesoamerican culture history employed major social and political events and transformations—particularly, conquest events—as the historical benchmarks by which they were defined. This approach was in sharp contrast to the methods employed by archaeologists and ethnohistorians to subdivide and date the major pre-Hispanic periods. While the whole of the pre-Hispanic world was initially identified as the pre-Columbian era, the fall of the Aztec Empire in 1521 was defined as the benchmark for the beginnings of the Colonial period. The 1821 defeat of the Spanish viceroyalty at the hands of Mexican insurgents, which caused the collapse of the Spanish Empire in the Americas, was identified with the end of the Colonial period. The Mexican Republic followed. It was in turn transformed by the Revolution of 1910 to 1920. Post-Revolutionary, or modern, Mexico spans the period from 1920 to the present day, and it too has been subdivided into periods and phases, based on dramatic episodes of political turmoil, cultural and social transformation, revolution, and other change.

To interpret, describe, and compare the evolution of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, archaeologists have sought to build on the work of ethnohistorians whose studies centered on contact and precontact chronicles and codices; they did this by the study of form, space, and time (Lyman, O'Brien, and Dunnell 1997). While drawing on the growing body of information pertaining to the differences and similarities among regions and cultures, their reliance on ceramic typologies left open the question of temporal placement for various cultures and civilizations. Although contact-period chronicles concerned with migrations, ethnic origins, and genealogies identified peoples who predated the Mexica-Aztec civilization (e.g., Toltec, Mixtec, Tlaxcaltec, Zapotec, and Maya peoples), the decipherment of the Maya calendrical system and the use of radiocarbon dating in the 1950s and 1960s led to radical revisions in the periodization and dating of pre-Hispanic cultures and civilizations.

The traditional framework for the periodization of Maya civilization centered on the architecture and ceramic styles of that culture area. As noted by Sabloff (1990), the apex of refinement inherent in Maya art, architecture, ceramics, and glyph systems was identified with the Classic period (300–900 CE). Modest villages and the simplest of material cultures were seen to anticipate the Classic, and this constellation of features was in turn identified with the Formative (Preclassic) period (800

TABLE 1. General Summary of Periods and Phases That Comprise the Chronology of Greater Mesoamerica

DATE	PERIOD OR PHASE
9500–7000 BCE	<i>Paleoindian period</i> (Late Pleistocene/Early Holocene “big-game” and hunter-gatherer tradition; i.e., “Ajuereado phase” in Tehuacan Valley)
7000–2500 BCE	<i>Archaic period</i> (Early Holocene transition from hunter-gatherer lifestyle to village sedentarism and agricultural lifeway; see MacNeish [1981] for phase designations)
2500–900 BCE	<i>Early Preclassic period</i> (also known as Early Formative)
900–300 BCE	<i>Middle Preclassic period</i> (also known as the Middle Formative)
300 BCE–300 CE	<i>Late Preclassic period</i> (also known as the Terminal Preclassic, Late Formative, or Protoclassic)
250/300–600 CE	<i>Early Classic period</i> (see Middle Classic usage and overlap with this period)
400–700 CE	<i>Middle Classic period</i> (see Pasztor [1978] for discussion centered on the Gulf Coast “horizon” that led to its identification, in contradistinction to the standard usage of Early Classic)
600–900 CE	<i>Late Classic period</i> (also known as Terminal Classic or Epiclassic, for the pattern of militarization that dominated this period)
900–1250 CE	<i>Early Postclassic period</i>
1492 CE	<i>Contact period</i> (the pre-Hispanic era constitutes the timeline before 1492, whereas the Contact period is that era identified with Spanish colonial ventures and exploration in Mesoamerica, as well as in North and South America)
1250–1520 CE	<i>Late Postclassic period</i> (some use 1520 or 1521 as the dividing line for distinguishing pre-Hispanic from the Colonial period in Mexico, particularly as the Mexica-Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan was not fully conquered until 1521, to be replaced by the capital of New Spain)
1520–1821 CE	<i>Colonial period</i> (in Mexico)
1821–1910 CE	<i>Post-Colonial period</i> (Early Mexican Republic period)
1910–1920 CE	<i>Mexican Revolution</i> (If the subsequent Cristero Rebellion is included in this equation, then the revolution can be extended another ten years beyond 1920)
1920–present	<i>Modern period</i> (especially in Mexico, but see also Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica for other regional histories and periods in Greater Mesoamerican social and cultural history)

BCE designates “Before Common Era” and CE designates “Common Era.” Each period and phase designation may vary from region to region, per scholarly use. For example, the formal terminology used to identify those periods or horizons commonly known as Preclassic (as opposed to Formative) or Protoclassic, Middle Classic, and Epiclassic, often varies in use from region to region or even from scholar to scholar.

BCE–300 CE), whereas the decline in art, architecture, and ceramics was identified with the period following the Classic, thereby termed the Postclassic (900–1520 CE). While this basic framework of periodization was based on observations and studies of the material culture, art, and architecture, from the outset it was not anchored to an absolute chronology, a pattern of verifiable dates; it was instead based on the relative associations of cultural materials that had presumed or even known age. Dating for the Classic period was sought in the evidence from the Maya Long Count calendar’s correlations with the Western calendar and the glyptic evidence from a host of ancient Maya archaeological sites and monuments (Coe 1992). The earliest Long Count date ascribed to the Maya Lowlands was identified with a monument dated to about

298 CE, and the final dates identified with the Lowlands were clustered about 900 CE. Epigraphers determined that the heights of Maya civilization occurred during the six-hundred-year period from 300 to 900 CE, which then became the centerpiece for Maya chronology and periodization. Therefore, that evidence for Maya culture and civilization that preceded the Classic was identified as the Preclassic period; the cultural tradition that persisted beyond the end of the Classic was identified as the Postclassic period.

Then—despite regional variation in the cultural evolution of Mesoamerican civilizations—the periodization labels of Maya civilization were adopted, during the first half of the twentieth century, for the whole of Mesoamerica. As a result of those breakthroughs, the periodization

essentially consisted of (1) the Preclassic, Classic, and Postclassic framework, which initially spanned pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica and the Maya from 800 BCE to 1520 CE, (2) the Colonial period from 1520 to 1821 in Mexico, (3) the period of the early Mexican Republic from 1821 to 1910, (4) the period of the Mexican Revolution from 1910 to 1920, and (5) from 1920 through the present for modern Mexico. This framework for the historical chronology constituted the initial general chronology of Greater Mesoamerica. (See Table 1.)

The later elaboration and expansion of the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican chronology was made possible by research into the Olmec and pre-Olmec peoples. The works of Phillip Drucker (1943), Miguel Covarrubias (1946), and Drucker, Heizer, and Squier (1959) for the Olmec sites of La Venta and Tres Zapotes served to redefine the nature and extent of the Formative (Preclassic) period; whereas the work of Richard MacNeish (1958; 1981) in the Sierra de Tamaulipas and in the Tehuacán Valley of Puebla resulted in the many sites and data that helped establish the Paleoindian and Archaic periods, respectively—the earliest Mesoamerican traditions. These seminal studies led to major breakthroughs in the interpretation of the time depth of Mesoamerican cultures. MacNeish also extended the range of dates associated with early human hunters in Mesoamerica to about 12,000 years BP (before present). Known as the Paleoindian or “big game hunting” tradition in much of the Americas, MacNeish (1958; 1981) defined Mesoamerican cultural developments that spanned 10,000 BCE to 7,600 BCE as the Ajuereado phase, which was characterized by nomadic hunters and plant collectors. By the beginnings of his El Riego phase in the Tehuacan Valley (7000–5000 BCE), the earlier lifestyle began to give way to early domesticated plants and animals. By his Coxcatlan phase (5000–3400 BCE), archaeological evidence indicates that agriculture had advanced significantly and that maize cultivation was relatively common. His Abejas phase (3400–2300 BCE) marked the transition to a fully sedentary village lifeway in Mesoamerica. The period from 2500 to 300 BCE then came to constitute the Early and Middle Formative (Preclassic) periods—during which the Olmec flourished, and they then spread their distinctive style of early civilization through the whole of Mesoamerica.

Subdivisions of the Preclassic through Postclassic. As archaeologists, ethnohistorians, and other researchers continue to probe the nature, extent, and interrelationships of Mesoamerican cultures, each new aspect of interpretive framework and evolutionary development will have some bearing on the nature and the format of the existing chronology and its periodization. Reappraisals of Mesoamerican culture history have served as the basis for

refinements in the Preclassic-Classical-Postclassic framework, providing subdivisions during which specific cultural patterns, called “horizons,” existed throughout large regions of Mesoamerica. What was once construed as the Late Preclassic (c.300 BCE–300 CE) has since been redefined as Terminal Preclassic or Protoclassic, with each of these terms serving to signify the extent to which a particular cultural complex or ethnically distinct complex of features transitioned into a more Classical cultural pattern (e.g., El Mirador in Guatemala at 200 BCE). Then, too, the Classical Maya variant of the civilization that flourished at Chichén Itzá from 700 to 1200 CE has led Sabloff (1990) and Weaver (1993) to conclude that the Classical period did not come to an end at 900 CE but persisted until 1200 CE. A reinterpretation of the Classical period has identified 250 to 400 CE as the Early Classical, 400 to 700 CE as the Middle Classical (Pasztory 1978), and 700 to 900 CE as the Late Classical, Terminal Classical, or Epiclassic (Diehl and Berlo 1989). The use of the term Epiclassic has become synonymous with the period of the warring states of the Central Highlands, Oaxaca, and the Maya Lowlands as well as the Mexicanized Maya and the Mayoid influences seen at such sites as Cacaxtla, Tlaxcala, and Cholula (Mendoza 1992). The Postclassic period has been subdivided into Early Postclassic (900–1250 CE) and Late Postclassic (1250–1520 CE); the Early Postclassic is identified with the Toltec-Chichimec expansion and ascendancy, and the Late Postclassic is largely identified with both the Mayapan confederacy and the later Mexica-Aztec imperial expansion.

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Early Development and the Archaic Period (before 2600 BCE)

The Archaic period falls after the Paleoamerican period at the end of the Pleistocene epoch (radiocarbon dated at 8650 BCE) and before the Formative period, starting about 2600 BCE. Often the Archaic is divided into three subperiods or stages: First Forager, from 8650 to 5700 BCE ± 1000; Incipient Agriculture, from 5700 to 3800 BCE ± 800; and Semi-sedentary, from 3800 to 2600 BCE ± 500.

The Archaic period was characterized by a basic foraging subsistence system that included a series of hunting, trapping, and plant-collecting activities, seasonally and ecologically scheduled. Throughout the period, these activities were increasingly supplemented by incipient

agriculture that made enlarging groups more and more sedentary. Hunting was practiced, often with seasonal emphasis; the tools of the trade were the atlatl and composite darts—a wood, stone, or bone point or tip in a foreshaft that was inserted in or attached to a mainshaft, which was anchored by a notched and often feathered basal shaft. Projectile points for these darts were often relatively large and had a wide variety of notched, stemmed, and specially chipped bases. The emphasis in the Paleoamerican period had been on mass kills; in the Archaic, it shifted to individual stalking of smaller animals (because the Pleistocene megafauna were gone), along with use of various kinds of traps and snares. Chipped stone tools, such as crude blades, scraper planes, and choppers, were used to prepare the prey for both meat and hides. The scheduled seasonal plant gathering, an equally important activity, required the use of a wide variety of baskets (in Mesoamerica, usually coiled), nets, and carrying loops, as well as specific tools for preparing the gathered foods, such as mortars and pestles, mullers and milling stones, and crude manos and metates. Textiles and cordage were handwoven (not made on a loom or with a spindle whorl, as they would be in the Formative), and sandals were often worn. Habitations were in caves or in flimsy shelters; only near the end of the Archaic did pit houses come into use. Unlike Archaic traditions outside Mesoamerica, group burials, severed heads, and other evidence hint at a rich ceremonial life and a well-established set of religious beliefs.

This article considers about ten Mesoamerican regional chronologies. On the basis of stylistic, typological, and functional variations, the regional chronological phases have been combined into a series of basic cultural traditions that not only increase through time but also develop into a highland/lowland dichotomy that characterizes the later periods in Mesoamerica.

The highland regional sequences that have enough reliable data for consideration are (1) Sierra Madre of southwest Tamaulipas, (2) Sierra de Tamaulipas, (3) Valley of Mexico, (4) Puebla and the Tehuacán Valley, (5) Oaxaca, (6) highland Chiapas, and (7) the highlands of Guatemala and Honduras. The lowland sequences are (8) the Gulf Coast, (9) Belize and the Yucatán, and (10) the Mesoamerican Pacific Coast. It must be emphasized that putting the Archaic into an areal framework has its problems. In the earlier part of the period, the northern traditions cannot really be differentiated from those of the U.S. Southwest, Coahuila, or Texas, while to the south, the traditions characteristic of Belize drift as far south as Costa Rica. Beginning in the middle Archaic, however, the regional traditions become more coincident with the boundaries of Mesoamerica: a northern border roughly from Zacatecas to the Río de las Palmas in Ta-