

SACRED SPACES (II)

ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF MESOAMERICA



U.S.A.

MEXICO

Gulf of Mexico

NORTH PACIFIC OCEAN

Mexicali

SONORA

CHIHUAHUA

COAHUILA

SINALOA

DURANGO

Monterrey

NUEVO LEON

La Paz

Culiacan

ZACATECAS

Ciudad Victoria

Zacatecas

SAN LUIS POTOSI

TAMAULIPAS

ISLAS TRES MARIAS

AGUASCALIENTES

San Luis Potosi

NAYARIT

Guanajuato

Queretaro

Merida

YUCATAN

Guadalajara

Mexico City

Pachuca

Campeche

Colima

Morelia

Toluca

TLAXCALA

Bahia de Campeche

Chetumal

COLIMA

MICHOACAN

Cuernavaca

PUEBLA

VERACRUZ

TABASCO

CAMPECHE

GUERRERO

Chilpancingo

Oaxaca

OAXACA

Villahermosa

Tuxtla

Gutierrez

CHIAPAS

GUATEMALA

BELIZE

HONDURAS

EL SALVADOR

NIC.

32

112

104

96

88

32

24

24

16

104

96

88

CULTURES OF MESOAMERICA

Mesoamerica: Regions which today includes central and south Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador



Map showing extent of Mesoamerican civilisations

TIMELINE OF MESOAMERICA

Preclassical period

Classical period

Postclassical period

Colonial period

2000 BCE

250 CE

900 CE

1519 CE

1821 CE

Olmec Civilization

Mayan Civilization

Aztec Civilization

Toltec Civilization

Spanish Conquest
ends the Aztec Empire

- ▶ Large cities with ceremonial centres were built

- ▶ Regional differences between cultures grew
- ▶ The city of Teotihuacan dominated

- ▶ Period of cultural decline- ceremonial city centre burned down
- ▶ Political instability and warfare

- ▶ 300 period of Spanish colonial rule
- ▶ Population of indigenous people decreased by the 16th century: infectious diseases and slave labor

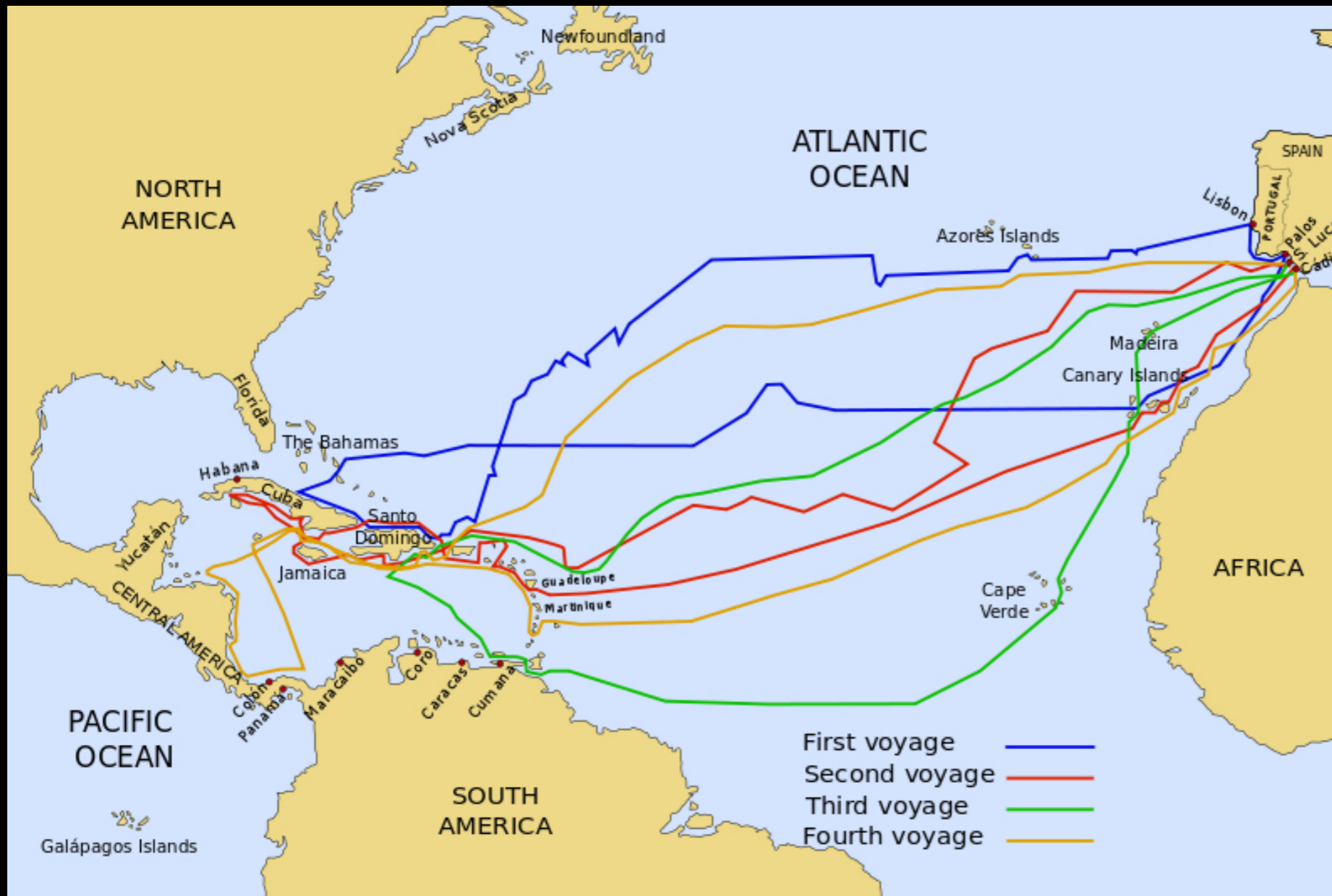
Pre-Columbian History



The 'First homage to Columbus (12 October 1492)' by José Garnelo y Alda, 1892

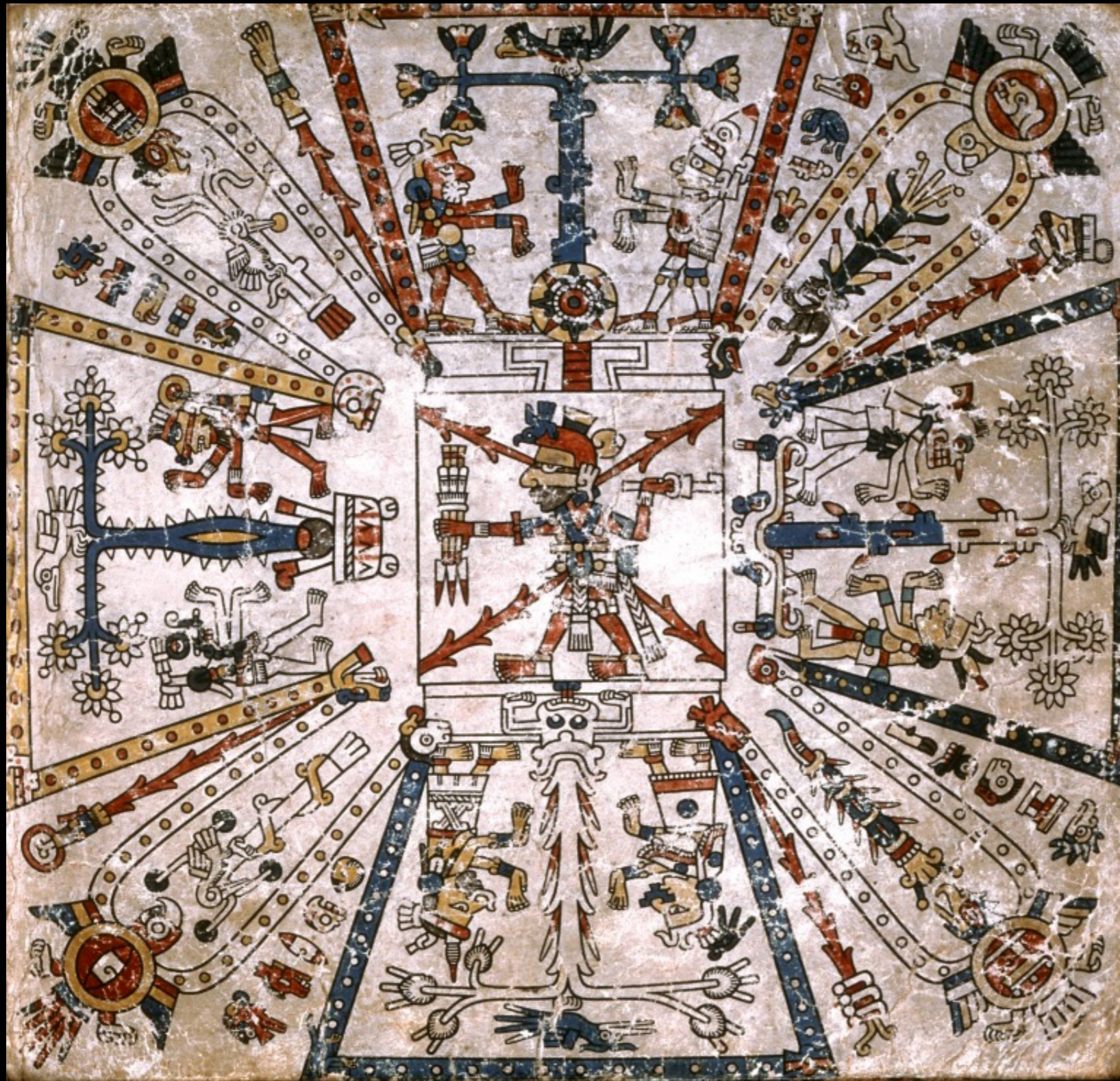
Pre-Columbian History

- Refers to the period in the Americas before the arrival of Columbus
- In 1492, Christopher Columbus arrived at Cuba and present day Haiti and the Dominican Republic, thinking he had reached Asia.
- Incorrectly referring to the native inhabitants of this region as “Indians” (under the assumption that he had landed in India), Columbus established the first Spanish colony of the Americas.



The routes of the four Voyages of Christopher Columbus, to the Caribbean Islands and the coast of Central America

Mesoamerican religion and the pantheon of gods



Axis mundi: Latin term that refers to the concept of a central pole or axis that connects heaven and earth.

Codex Féjervary-Mayer, 15th century



Chaac (Storm or rain god)
Mayan culture



Quetzalcóatl (Feathered serpent deity)
Late post-Classical period (1350-1521 d.C.)
Aztec culture

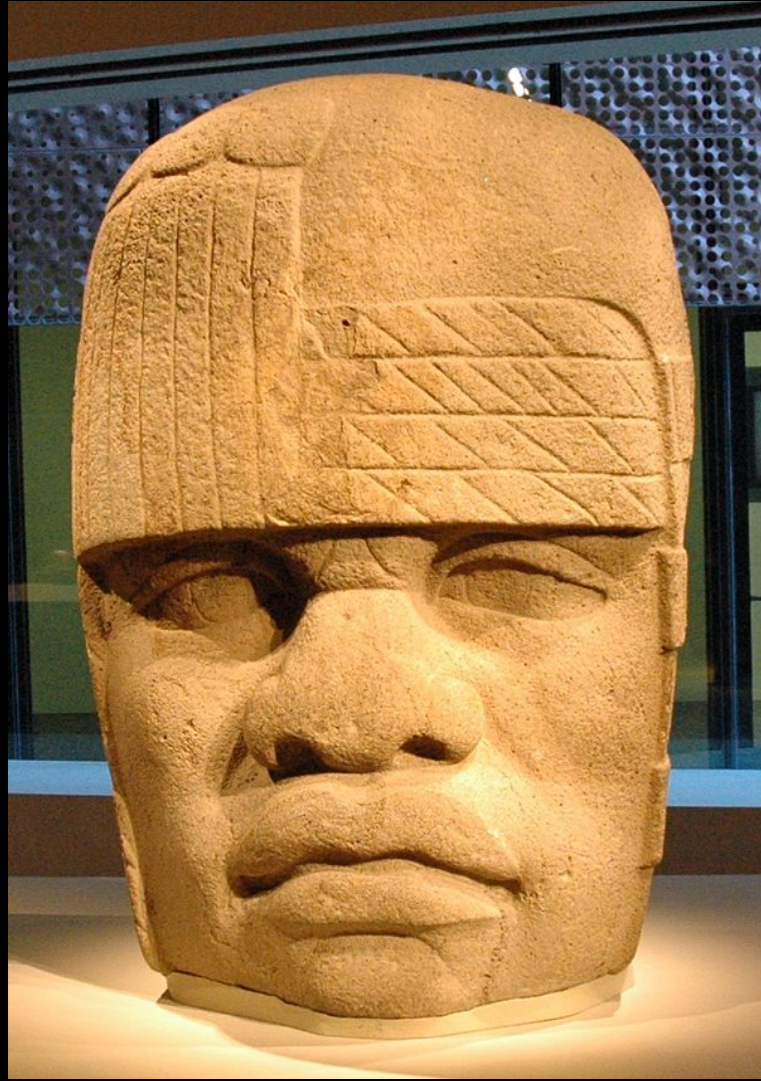
Preclassical period (2000 BCE-200 CE)

- ▶ Rise of agriculture- farming of corn becomes important
- ▶ Corn, beans and squash are the staple- leads to the need for ceramic vessels to store them
- ▶ Also saw rise of urban civilization- people start to settle down (think back to the Neolithic period)
- ▶ With urban growth comes social hierarchies- clear elite class who become patron of the arts (discovered a palace with an attached sculpture workshop, making clear the relationship between the elite and the emerging class of artists)

OLMEC CIVILIZATION



Olmec Colossal Heads



San Lorenzo Colossal Head 4



San Lorenzo Colossal Head 3



San Lorenzo Colossal Head 6
in the Museo Nacional de
Antropología



La Venta Monument 1
c. 1500-400 BCE
Basalt
Mesoamerica



Discovery of an Olmec Head
Photograph from the Smithsonian Museum Archive

Olmec Jades

Anthropomorphic: having human characteristics or in a human form



Olmec Mask
900-400 B.C.



Mayan Deity Figure
3rd-6th century

Classical period (200 CE-900 CE)

- ▶ Easier to define because they were building upon structures established during preclassical period
- ▶ Cities continue to grow- more elaborate rituals- more construction of temples, palaces, monuments
- ▶ Rulers commissioning large buildings and monuments to communicate their power

MAYAN CIVILIZATION



Avenue of the Dead

Ceremonial center of the city of Teotihuacan, Mexico

Teotihuacan

c. 350-650 CE

THE CITY OF TEOTIHUACAN



Avenue of the Dead

Ceremonial center of the city of Teotihuacan, Mexico

Teotihuacan

c. 350-650 CE

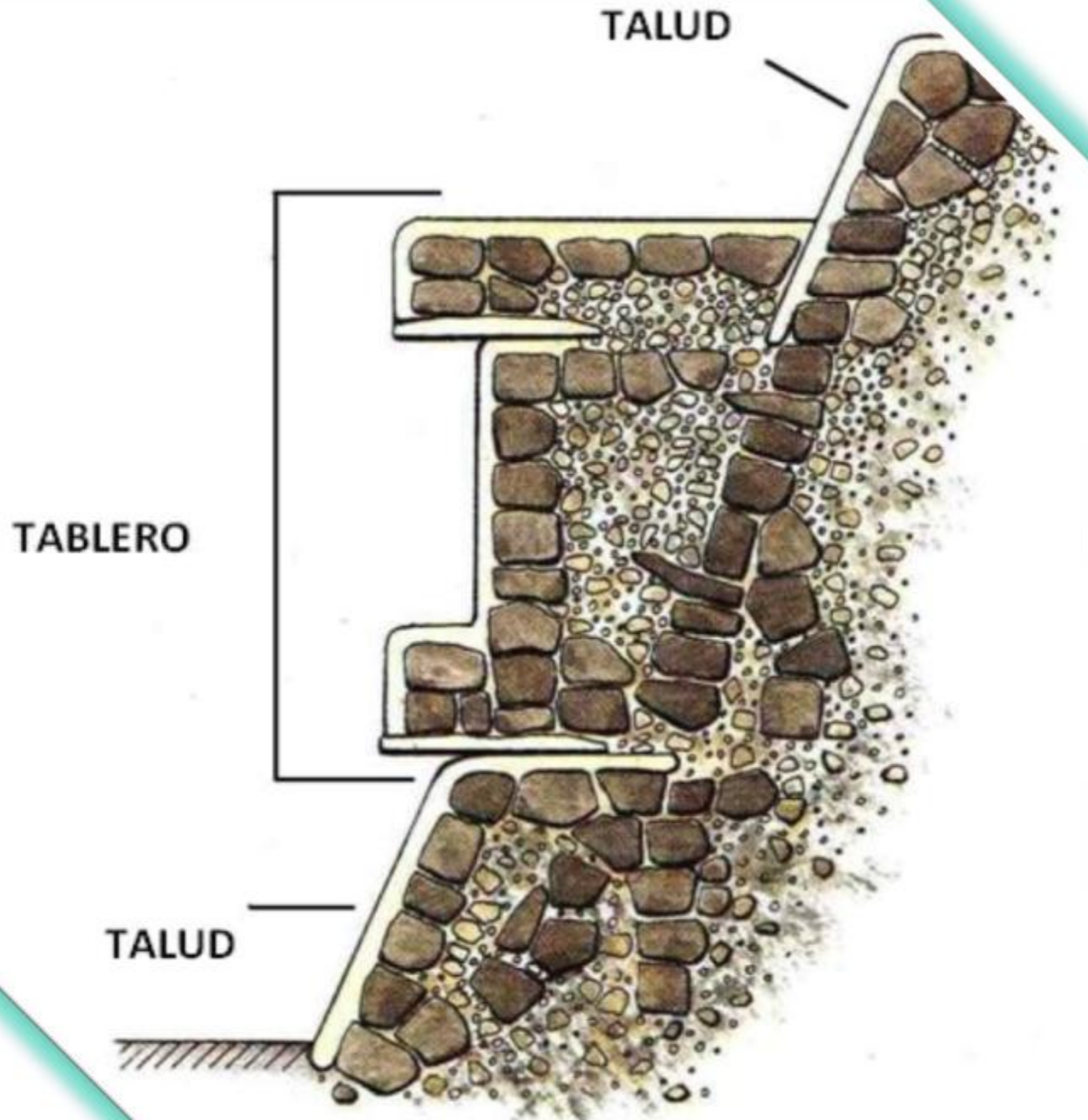
- ▶ Located about 30 miles northeast of Mexico City
- ▶ First urbanized center in all of the Americas.
- ▶ Largest city in the Americas at the time and the sixth-largest in the world
- ▶ Main monuments are pyramid of the sun, pyramid of the moon and the city center- which consisted of the temple of the feathered serpent-all part of a large complex known as the Avenue of the Dead

Pyramids of the Sun and Moon, Teotihuacan



Pyramid of the Sun, Teotihuacan, c. 150-225 CE

Talud-tablero: an architectural style commonly associated with Mesoamerican consisting of a sloping base and vertical platform



Temple of the Feathered Serpent, Teotihuacan



The people of Teotihuacan worshipped deities that were recognizably similar to those worshipped later by the Aztecs

Feathered Serpent:

Known to the Maya as Kukulcan

Known to the Aztec as Quetzalcoatl



Post-Classical period (900 CE-1521 CE)

- ▶ Mid 7th century- Teotihuacan ceremonial center burns down, and the city went into decline
- ▶ By the time of the Spanish conquest, Mayan civilisation was in decline and Aztecs controlled much of Mexico
- ▶ Rise of Aztecs was quick- were able to transform Teotihuacan in a few centuries

AZTEC CIVILIZATION



Cihuateotl
15th-early 16th century
Aztec

- ▶ Culmination of a long tradition of stone carving in Mesoamerica
- ▶ The most accomplished sculptors in the Aztec empire carved impressive images of the gods, often of large size, for display in temples and public spaces in Tenochtitlan's Sacred Precinct
- ▶ The sculptures were meant to communicate the concepts of Aztec religion and were part of complex rituals
- ▶ Historic monuments were elevated to the realm of the divine and ceremony by the addition of religious symbols.
- ▶ The subjects portrayed were many, but images of gods and goddesses were by far the most numerous.



Seated Deity (Macuilcoatli)
15th-early 16th century
Aztec



Kneeling Female Figure
15th-early 16th century
Aztec



Water Deity (Chalchiuhtlicue)
15th-early 16th century
Aztec

male figures are often sitting with their knees drawn up and their arms crossed upon them

females are frequently kneeling, their hands resting on their knees



Generic, ageless faces

Frontal, symmetrical postures



open mouths

simplistic carving and ornamentation



inlaid eyes

Seated Deity (Macuilcoatl)
15th-early 16th century
Aztec

Kneeling Female Figure
15th-early 16th century
Aztec

Water Deity (Chalchiuhtlicue)
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Aztec

The Naturalism vs Abstraction Debate



Mayan Seated Female Figure
6th-9th century



Greek Terracotta statuette of Aphrodite and Eros
3rd century B.C.

Assumed linear progression of style

Abstraction

Realism



Simple, crude, easy forms

Sophisticated, detailed, difficult forms

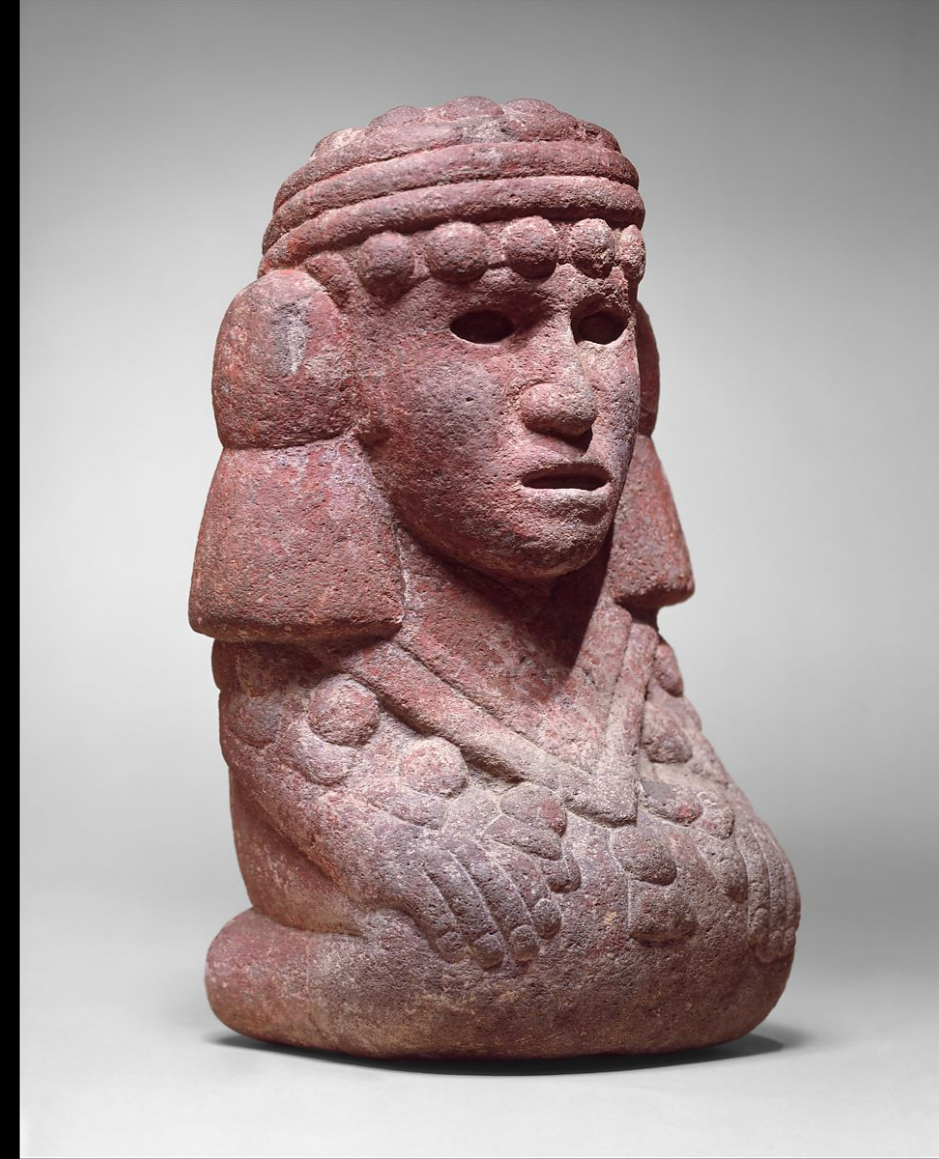
The Naturalism vs Abstraction Debate



San Lorenzo Colossal Head 6
in the Museo Nacional de
Antropología



Mayan Seated Female Figure
6th-9th century



Aztec Water Deity (Chalchiuhtlicue)
15th-early 16th century

What does it mean to apply Western standards of aesthetics to other cultures?

What do we think we might be misinterpreting when doing that?

What were the reasons for their stylistic choices?



San Lorenzo Colossal Head 6
in the Museo Nacional de
Antropología



Mayan Seated Female Figure
6th-9th century



Aztec Water Deity (Chalchiuhtlicue)
15th-early 16th century

TOLTEC CIVILIZATION

- ▶ Atlantean figures created in the city known as Tula (capital of Toltec people)
- ▶ Massive statues of Toltec warriors depicted wearing breastplates, shields, carry spears
- ▶ Carved of limestone or volcanic rock- time consuming and massive (15 ft tall), hence very important to the culture



Colossal Atlantids
Tula, Mexico
900-1150 CE

Colonial period (1519-1821)

- ▶ Spaniards arrive in Mesoamerica in 1519 and change things drastically over the next 300 years
- ▶ Though Aztecs had superior numbers their weapons were inferior and the Spaniards were able to gain control over the Aztec cities
- ▶ European diseases like smallpox, mumps and measles also led to great decline (By 1520, smallpox had reduced the population of Tenochtitlan by 40% in just one year.)
- ▶ After his victory, Cortes razed Tenochtitla and built Mexico City on its ruins

The Mesoamerican Ritual Ball Game



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYJxng6i4NQ>



El Tajín Ball Court, c. 800 - 1200 C.E



Seated Ballplayer

1st century B.C.-A.D. 3rd century



Standing Ballplayer

1st century B.C.-A.D. 3rd century

Comparative Analysis

What do you think the significance of naturalistic versus abstracted form is?
What kind of visual impact does it have on a viewer?



San Lorenzo Colossal Head 3
Olmec civilization



Marble bust of a man
75-50 BC
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Discussion questions

In comparison to the other cultures we have seen, how did the Mesoamericans use art as a way of communicating messages without a reliance on script?

Question of scale- what kind of experience would the large scale of the sculptures have allowed? Why was the scale important?