

### 5.3 Ancient Mexico and Mesoamerica :: Pyramids & Sacrifice

#### 1) **Olmec**

- **Olmec** - Mysterious, ancient Mother Culture of the mesoamerican cultures. The ancient “Rubber People” that these other groups are linked to culturally. Lots of cultural knowledge came down to the subsequent cultures, such as **radial pyramids, ball courts, aqueducts**. Olmec were principally at San Lorenzo and later La Venta.
- Ancient **Olmecs** of San Lorenzo flourished from about **1400 BCE - 900 BCE**, then the center of power shifted to La Venta. The Olmec of La Venta ultimately died off about **400 BCE**.
- They came up with the rubber by mixing sap from the rubber tree with another sap, causing it to set up into a rubbery compound.
- Famous for their giant carved heads. Great artists. Left no written language. Did not have the wheel.
- The Cosmic Ball Court was a mysterious game and it is not known whether it had religious or political meaning. The ball was launched by the hips through a ring. Sounds similar to lacrosse. Unfortunately, losers were sacrificed or executed.
- **Olmec** culture disappeared perhaps due to an environmental disaster or cultural warfare.
- **Olmec** culture led to these other cultures down the span of time:

- > **Zapotecs** (Monte Albán)
- > **Teotihuacáños** (Teotihuacán)
- > **Mayans** (Tikal, Palenque, Chichén Itzá, Uxmal)

#### 2) **Zapotec**

- Olmec's San Lorenzo disappeared about 1200BCE most likely due to some sort of violent catastrophic occurrence, as something similar occurred in Europe.
- **Monte Albán** (*Zapotecs*) in the valley region of Oaxaca (wah-HAH-cah) from **700 BCE - 700 CE** — ruins on mountaintop showing stepped radial pyramid, ball courts, celestial arrangements
- A cultural headed by a high priest of some sort based on ritual, sacrifice, hierarchy, renewal. Religion and gaming led to violence and sacrifice.

#### 3) **Teotihuacáños**

- City of the Gods
- **Teotihuacán** - city that spans **200 BCE - 535 CE**. The biggest and most powerful and most primal of their cities. Theocratic, hierarchical, sacrificial, violent. Ultimately gone by 535 CE. Possibly an environmental extreme event.
- **axis mundi** - long wide N-S avenue called the **Avenue of the Dead** (Miccaotli)
- **Pyramid of the Moon** - one end of the axis (most important pyramid)
- **Pyramid of the Sun** - cross axis (**although larger pyramid oriented to sunset on the Summer Solstice**). Pyramid of the Sun built over a massive cavern (origin of the earth) and oriented to the sun. Larger in base than Khufu's Pyramid but half the height.
- **Demonstrates a basic understanding of the Teotihuacáno understanding of place in the universe**. The Axis Mundi connecting the nether world with the sky realm.

#### 4) Building techniques of stepped pyramids of Mesoamerica

- **Talud-Tablero** (study diagrams posted). Flat stones lock in the next course. *Talud* is the battered portion. *Tablero* is the platform portion that's locked-in with rubble and a type of concrete.
- **Talud-Tablero** led to the strong, sharp, stepped look of the pyramids, sometimes decorated and sometimes crowned with a fancy piece on top.

#### 5) **Mayans**

- Petén Region (Guatemala) - Major cities that fought each other: **Tikal** and **Calakmul**
- About 100 BCE **Mayans** develop hydraulics, irrigation, canals, irrigation, terraces
- Mayans have a sophisticated system of written communication similar to hieroglyphs. This all was burned by Spanish conquerers around 1520.
- Mayan population less dense than other Olmec cultures
- Major rebuilding of Tikal in 695 CE due to defeat of Calakmul
- Tikal's pyramids tall, layered in stacks, *thought of as metaphorical mountains*  
Top ornamental temple-like piece called the **roofcomb**
- **Palenque** (pal-EN-que) king Pakal demurs to Tikal for political reasons  
Palenque's palace and Pakal's tomb demonstrated corbeled vaults, and corbeled groin vaults, as well as carved **orthostats** telling narratives of their culture
- **Petén Region** declines about 900 CE

#### 6) **Mayans (continued)**

- Last **Mayans** shift to **Uxmal** and **Chichén Itzá** (**chi-CHEN-it-TZA**) out on the Yucatan Peninsula (Mexico)
- Ultimately last Mayan city abandoned **950 CE**
- **Most accurate pre-modern calendar**
- At Chichén Itzá :: tall *radial pyramid*, sophisticated *observatory*, *Temple of Warriors* (Group of 1000 columns)
- Observatory called the **Caracol**. Aligned toward the northernmost extreme position of Venus

- Cosmic Ballgame using the rubber ball the court and using the hips. Losers may have been sacrificed
- On the equinoxes, the shadow of the stepped staircase is cast on the parapet of the stair making a serpent-shaped shadow that connects to the serpent's head at the bottom of the staircase