Pre-Columbian Empires of Mesoamerica

Background
- Started with agriculture revolution c. 8000 B.C.E.
  - Beans, Chili Peppers, Squash, avocados
  - c. 4000 B.C.E. began cultivation of Maize
    - Tomatoes followed a millennium later
  - Domesticated animals
    - Turkeys, small barkless dogs
    - No draft animals

Olmecs
- “rubber people”
  - Named after rubber trees that grew in area
    - Actual names unknown
- Equivalent to river valley civilizations of Asia and Africa
  - “Mother Culture” of Mexico
    - Developed in modern state of Veracruz
  - Arose around 1200 B.C.E.
- High Culture
  - Jade
    - Had to be imported
  - Drainage
    - No need for irrigation
  - Calendars
  - Temple pyramids
  - Ball Games
  - Olmec Heads
    - 10 ft tall
    - Possibly leaders with Jaguar lips
- Disappeared around 400 B.C.E.
  - Statues defaced and buried
- Dark Age followed
  - Around 100 B.C.E. Societies reorganized
    - Cities
    - Writing
    - Trade Networks

Maya
- Developed around 300 C.E.
  - Areas of Southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador
  - Around city of Teotihuacan
    - 300 – 900 C.E. built around 80 large ceremonial centers
      - Temples, pyramids, Temples
      - Some developed into cities
        - Tikal
          - Developed around Temple of the Giant Jaguar
            - 154 feet tall
          - Large Plazas
          - 40,000 + inhabitants
          - Controlled surrounding population of 500,000
        - Collection of City-States developed
          - Rivalries and wars between them
- Agriculture
  - Poor soil
  - Terrace Agriculture
    - Designed to trap silt
  - Maize, Cotton, Cacao
    - Cacao doubled as currency
- Religion
  - Jaguar Central
    - Dangerous Predator
- Society
  - Authoritarian Kings
  - Priests
    - Maintained Calendars, writing, astronomy, mathematics
      - Elaborate Calendar
        - Solar and Ceremonial calendars
        - Plotted Planetary movements
        - Could predict eclipses
        - Calculated length of year to within 17 seconds
      - Large scale Mathematics
        - Developed concept of 0
    - Writing
      - Idiographic
        - Similar to Chinese system
      - Symbols
        - Syllables
      - Wrote history, mythology, poems
      - Kept records
      - Wrote books
        - Made of paper
          - Popil Vuh
      - Performed Religious ceremonies
    - Bloodletting
      - Centered on war captives
      - Done in exchange for rain
      - Cut off fingers or body lacerations
  - Nobility
    - Hereditary
    - Land owners
    - Organized military forces
  - Merchants
    - Also acted as ambassadors
    - Traded luxury goods
  - Craftsmen
    - Architects
    - Artisans
  - Peasants
    - Farmers and laborers
  - Inter-tribal wars
    - Captives for war trophies
      - Used as slaves or sacrifices
        - High ranking captives especially suffered
      - Took over ceremonial centers
Ball Game
- Inherited from Olmecs
  - Ball made of heavy baked rubber
  - 2-8 players
  - Played by professionals
    - Spectators placed bets
- Ceremonial
  - Marked treaties
  - Captives forced to play for their lives

Chichén Itzá
- Tried to create political unity
  - 800s C.E.
- Incorporated captives into society
- Built Empire
  - 9th to 11th Century

Decline
- People abandoned cities
- Civil War
- Foreign Invasion
- Diminished crops
- Cities re-claimed by Jungles

Toltec
- Filled power vacuum left by Mayans
- Established city of Tula at 968 C.E.
  - Survived until around 1150 C.E.
- Militaristic
  - Cult of sacrifice and war
  - Expended from Central Mexico to Guatemala
    - Overthrew old Mayan areas
- Topiltzin
  - Removed from power and exiled to Yucatan
- Traders
  - Turquoise
  - Traded with American Southwest
    - May have traded with Mississippians
      - Similar traditions and crafts found
- Overthrown by nomadic raiders
  - Center of population shifted to coasts

Aztecs
- Called themselves the Mexica
  - Originally from central Mexico
    - Exiled North to city of Aztlan
      - Myth
    - Could have just been another nomadic people
      - Took advantage of Toltec political instability
      - Re-wrote history to meet needs
  - Migrated to area of Lake Texcoco
    - c. 1325
    - only about 10,000 strong
    - Area inhabited by Chichimec and other Toltec ancestors
      - Organized into feudal city-states
All spoke Nahuatl
  - Including Aztec
Aztec wandered area in search of area to settle
  - Snake and serpent mythology
    - Led by Huitzilopochtli
    - Hummingbird god
  - Militant
    - Reputation for fierce warriors
      - Fanatical devotion to gods
        - Offering human sacrifices
    - Built up out of strong base
      - Systems of alliances and tributes
    - Sole power by 1434 C.E.

- Social Contract
  - Conquered
    - Pay tribute
      - Levels assigned according to means of surrender
      - Forced to pay food, slaves, sacrificial victims
    - Surrender land
    - Render military service
  - People’s role to serve the gods
    - Military central to supplying war captives
      - For sacrifices
      - “Flower wars”
    - King’s role
      - Civil power
      - The gods’ representative
  - Religion
    - Uniting factor
    - At least 128 deities
      - Sun, rain, sky, fire, corn, etc...
    - Patronage
      - Like Greeks
        - Occupations, cities, etc...
    - Ceremonies
      - Yearly festivals
      - Three major themes/cults
        - Fertility/agricultural cycle
        - Creators
        - Warfare
      - Sacrifices
        - Gods sacrificed for humans
          - Needed nourishment
            - Form of hearts and blood

- Agriculture/Economy
  - Chinampas
    - Artificial islands built on lake
    - More than 20,000 acres constructed
    - Could support 4 crops of corn a year
  - Semi-Feudalistic
    - Apportioned land for nobles or had private estates
  - Markets
- Social Stratification
  - The Great Speaker
    - Emperor
    - Selected from sons of royal family
  - Prime Minister
    - Close relative
    - Tremendous power
  - Advisory council
    - Rulers of other cities in Alliance
      - Stayed in place and collected tribute for emperor
      - Left alone if they paid
    - In theory had say in government
  - Military
    - Political and religious role
  - Nobles
    - Mostly chosen from *calpulli*
      - Ancient building blocks of Aztec society