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History

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Maya to Aztec: Ancient Mesoamerica Revealed

Course Guidebook

Professor Edwin Barnhart
Maya Exploration Center



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Professor Edwin Barnhart is Director of the Maya Exploration Center. He received his Ph.D. in Anthropology with a focus on Archaeology from The University of Texas at Austin in 2001; his dissertation was entitled *The Palenque Mapping Project: Settlement Patterns and Urbanism in an Ancient Maya City*. Professor

Barnhart has more than 20 years of experience as an archaeologist, explorer, and instructor in North, Central, and South America and has published more than a dozen papers and given presentations at eight international conferences.

Professor Barnhart's involvement in Maya studies began in 1990 as an archaeological intern in the ruins of Copan, Honduras. In January of 1996, he was invited to return to Copan and help a team from the University of Pennsylvania excavate the early acropolis and the tomb of the city's lineage founder. From 1992 to 1995, Professor Barnhart studied New World art, iconography, and epigraphy (hieroglyphic translation) under the late Dr. Linda Schele at The University of Texas at Austin. During that time, he intensively studied the Andean culture, writing a number of papers about Moche shamanism as seen through art and iconography.

In 1994, Professor Barnhart began working as a surveyor and University of Texas field school instructor in the jungles of northwestern Belize. After finding numerous small villages, he discovered the ancient city of Maax Na ("Spider-Monkey House"), a major center of the Classic Maya period. Professor Barnhart mapped more than 600 structures at Maax Na between 1995 and 1997 before moving his research focus to Chiapas, Mexico. He received his master's degree in Latin American Studies in May of 1996 and began teaching anthropology classes at what is now Texas State University the following September. He taught archaeology and anthropology classes there until 1998, when he was invited by the Mexican government to direct

the Palenque Mapping Project, a three-year effort to survey and map the unknown sections of Palenque's ruins. More than 1,100 new structures were documented, bringing the site total to almost 1,500. The resultant map has been celebrated as one of the most detailed and accurate ever made of a Maya ruin.

In 2003, Professor Barnhart became Director of the Maya Exploration Center, an institution dedicated to the study of ancient Maya civilization. He has led dozens of student groups on journeys through Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, and Bolivia.

Over the last 10 years, Professor Barnhart has appeared multiple times on the History Channel; the Discovery Channel; and NHK, a Japanese public television network. In addition, he is a Fellow of the Explorers Club and teaches University of Texas travel courses for college professors on ancient Andean and Mesoamerican astronomy, mathematics, and culture. For The Great Courses, he has also taught *Lost Worlds of South America*. ■

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Maya to Aztec: Ancient Mesoamerica Revealed

Scope:

This course is a tale of two great cultures, and many of others in between—often great in their own right—that helped make them possible. The Maya and the Aztecs occupied a land that’s collectively called Mesoamerica. Mesoamerica encompasses all of Mexico from coast to coast, from the Sonoran Desert, just south of the Pueblo cultures of the American Southwest, down through Guatemala and Belize and partway into Honduras and El Salvador, bordered by the Lenca culture of eastern Honduras. The territory is delineated not so much by its varied geography—from deserts to rainforests—but by the presence of a certain set of mutually held traits that allow us to call these cultures *empires*. Those traits include shared use of plants, a commonly held calendar, a pattern of organizing themselves into city-states (even in the dominant-capital model governing the tribute empire of the Aztecs), ancestor worship, and the infamous penchant for human sacrifice.

The Maya have been around for millennia, while the Aztecs appeared late and lasted only a few centuries. Preceding both were thousands of years of transition from nomadic to sedentary life, after which the peoples of Mesoamerica went through three major periods of cultural development. Maya archaeology calls these the Preclassic, Classic, and Post-Classic periods. The lines between these periods are marked by major changes in the trajectory of Mesoamerican civilizations. The Preclassic (2000 B.C.–200 A.D.) is typified by the rise of Mesoamerica’s first great civilization—the Olmec. Rising from the agriculturally rich lowlands of Tabasco around 1700 B.C., these people built massive earthen pyramids and multi-ton stone effigies of their leaders. Their ideas were transmitted along trade networks far and wide, and ideas from abroad came back to the Olmec through the same channels. The exchange between the Olmec and their neighbors set the foundations of a cultural pattern that would persist until the Spanish arrived some 3,000 years later.

One by one, the Olmec cities we call San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes faded away by around 500 B.C., but Olmec ideas of urban living and divine kingship continued to flower. More and more cities were built across Mesoamerica, growing in size and number for centuries. In particular, the Maya built such cities as El Mirador and made interconnected advances in mathematics, calendar making, and astronomy, which influenced their buildings, their art, and even their creation story, the *Popul Vuh*.

The opening of the Classic period around 200 A.D. is marked by the emergence of notably larger cities that absorbed smaller ones around them into city-states. In the Peten rainforest in and around northern Guatemala, a collection of Maya cities, such as Tikal, Palenque (in the west), Copan (southeast), and Calakmul (north), established regional power through a complex system of alliances, intermarriages, and wars. Farther to the west, in Oaxaca, was the Zapotecs' hilltop city of Monte Alban. But the biggest force of the Classic period sprang from a single great capital even farther west, the northern city of Teotihuacan. Growing steadily from 250 B.C. in a valley just north of modern-day Mexico City, by 300 A.D., Teotihuacan was ready and willing to push outward. Its military-backed influence spread south and east across Mesoamerica, pushing through Oaxaca into the Maya world and, ultimately, as far as modern-day Honduras.

The extent and nature of Teotihuacan's control over Mesoamerica remains shrouded in mystery, but its influence is evidenced everywhere by a clear escalation of violence and warfare. However, as we know, those who live by the sword die by the sword: Teotihuacan's end came when the city was burned to the ground around 650 A.D. The demise of the city left a power vacuum that was felt everywhere. Some city-states struggled on longer than others, but one by one, the great cities of the Classic period were abandoned. By 850 A.D., virtually every city that had started in the Early Classic period was crumbling and growing moss.

No chain of historical events is as neat as archaeologists would like to make it appear, and those in Mesoamerica are no exception. Not every region was on the decline as the Classic cities failed. New cities emerged after the fall of Teotihuacan, especially in Central Mexico. The exchange of cultural ideas and trade goods actually increased at that time. We see Maya people adopting

ideas from Central Mexico and peoples of Central Mexico adopting Maya ideas. In the middle, the long rule of the Valley of Oaxaca by the Zapotecs of Monte Alban came to an end, and the Mixtec people rose to fill the void.

The Post-Classic period, starting roughly at 900 A.D., began with exchange between newer Mesoamerican city-states, with no clearly dominant culture. The strength of cultural exchange during the Early Post-Classic, and our continued weak understanding of its mechanisms, is typified by the “twin cities” of Chichen Itza and Tula, located more than 800 miles apart at nearly opposite ends of the Mesoamerican world. Archaeologists still debate which city influenced which. One southeast in the heart of Maya Yucatan and the other the Toltec capital (later idealized by the Aztecs) northwest of the Valley of Mexico, they shared a nearly identical program of art and architecture, and they did so until the end, when both cities were abandoned in the early 1200s.

The pattern of independent city-states continued until the Aztecs from the northern deserts came to settle on the shores of Lake Texcoco in the Valley of Mexico. They began as mercenaries for hire and interlopers but slowly gained the favor and respect of local lords. They put themselves in the service of the valley’s most powerful group, the Tepenacs, in exchange for the right to build their own city on manmade islands in the lake. Then in the early 1400s, the Aztecs led a rebellion against the Tepenacs, assuming power as part of a partnership called the Triple Alliance. Together with their new partners, they dominated all of Central Mexico, creating a super-state over all of the once-independent city-states. Military dominance, demand of tribute, and frequent human sacrifices were the hallmarks of this new empire. Though they were in an alliance with their neighbors, the Aztecs maneuvered their capital city, Tenochtitlan, to be the nexus for all deliveries of tribute. By controlling the wealth, they controlled the empire.

The Aztecs ruled with an obsidian fist, controlling their ever-expanding empire through fear. City-states either obeyed and paid their excessive tribute or faced the wrath of the Aztec army. By the time the Spanish arrived, the Aztecs had expanded to the border of the Maya world and an assault was in process. Rumors of strange, hairy men in oddly built boats had been circulating for years, and one fateful day in the spring of 1519, Hernan

Cortes and his conquistadors landed on the shore of modern-day Veracruz. Mounted on four-legged beasts, they marched into the Aztec capital. For a time, a friendship was beginning, but then a Spanish attack on unarmed citizens resulted in the deaths of hundreds of conquistadors. Those who survived escaped and regrouped back in Veracruz.

Over the next year, allied with tens of thousands of native peoples who hated the Aztecs, Captain Cortes and his army attacked the Aztec capital. On August 13, 1521, the Aztec empire officially surrendered, and the Spanish proceeded to build a colonial empire of their own, using the cities, labor, and resources they had conquered. The Aztecs' name for themselves (the Mexica) was revived in the 19th century with the founding of the nation of Mexico, which has retained interesting aspects of its former Mesoamerican heritage down to today.

During the decades immediately following the conquest, a combination of infectious diseases and Spanish military campaigns subdued most of Mesoamerica. The Maya of Yucatan and the northern jungles of Guatemala were a notable exception, resisting and rebelling against Spanish domination well into the 19th century.

Today, 500 years later, only fragments of once-vibrant cultural traditions remain, but archaeologists continue to find new cities, discover new treasures, and glean surprising new insights. Whether concealed by remote rain forests or modern-day cities (such as ancient Kaminaljuyu under Guatemala City or Tenochtitlan beneath present-day Mexico City), what does remain is important to our global patrimony and worthy of both preservation and celebration. ■