

# Archaeology 250 Aztecs, Mayas, and their Predecessors: Archaeology of Mesoamerica



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Class Times: TR 3:30 to 4:45pm  
Office Hours: T/R 2:00-3:15 & appointment

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## Course Description

When Europeans first arrived to what is today Mexico and Central America, they encountered indigenous cities and bustling markets that rivaled or surpassed in size those of Europe at the time. This course provides a broad overview of the builders of these civilizations—the peoples of Mesoamerica—focusing on cultures such as the Aztec and Maya, as well as their predecessors and their contemporary descendants. It is designed to provide students with a deeper understanding and appreciation of indigenous cultures of Pre-Columbian and colonial period Mesoamerica. Topics include the diversity of Mesoamerican peoples and ethnolinguistic groups; origin of food production and foodways; the rise of cities and urbanism; cosmovision and

religious traditions; how individuals of these diverse cultures were nested into groups defined by gender, lifecycle, ethnicity, city-state, and empire; the resilience of Native lifeways through the Conquest and Colonial periods; and the deep entanglements between the US and Mesoamerica, historically and in the present.

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### **Credits and Prerequisites**

There are no prerequisites for the course, which is worth 4 credits and fulfills an area requirement for the major and minor in Archaeology. The course fulfills one distribution credit for Global Citizenship and Intercultural Literacy and one distribution credit for Individual in Community for the BU Hub.

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### **Course Objectives**

Topics progress chronologically (first migrants, early farmers, urbanization, empires, contact and colonialism, contemporary communities and historical memory) as well as comparatively, so that students can better appreciate the similarities, differences, and interrelations between varied Mesoamerican peoples and regions. At the conclusion of this course, students will have developed a foundational understanding of Mesoamerican culture history including its geographic and cultural diversity, the similarities and differences in lifeways of native groups, how past and present indigenous communities define themselves, and the native legacies that shaped, and continue to shape, the character of our neighbors to the south as well as Latino communities in the US.

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By the end of this course you should be able to:

- Describe the diversity over time and space of Mesoamerican cultures.
- Distinguish individual and group identities within ancient and contemporary Mesoamerican societies, including distinctions based on the human lifecycle, gender, class, ethnic group, and political affiliations.
- Evaluate objectively the reliability of information on Mesoamerican archaeology you encounter in print, on the web, or on TV, including sensationalist and racially prejudiced claims.
- Be capable of articulating the conflicting motivations of individuals and social groups, both Native and Spanish, during the conquest and early colonial period.
- Identify descendent communities and contemporary stakeholders in archaeological heritage and historical memory of Mesoamerica.

### **Learning Outcomes**

#### *Individual in Community*

Students will articulate in discussion and in writing how individuals in Aztec society were embedded in different groups and communities based on stage of the lifecycle, gender, class,

ethnicity, and polities--including Precolumbian ethnic states and imperial formations of that era and under Spanish colonialism--and how this is similar or different to their own experiences. Specific topics of analysis include the organization of Aztec city-states, their organization into households, neighborhoods, and corporate-kin groups, and the micro-patriotism that created Spanish-native alliances in the conquest period.

Students will articulate in discussion and in writing how contemporary and historical Native peoples of Mesoamerica (Nahuas, Mayas, Zapotecs and others) form descendant communities in Mexico, Central America, and the United States, including the multi-ethnic nature of migration to our country.

#### *Global Citizenship and Intercultural Literacy*

Students will articulate in discussion and writing the comparative similarities and differences in Mesoamerican cultures, such as the Aztecs and Mayas, over space and through time. Specific topics include comparative foodways, constructions of gender, household organization, and political formations--including city-states vs. empires and variance in institutions of rulership. They will draw comparisons between Precolumbian patterns and the transformations following the Spanish invasion and introduction of European patterns of gender relations, religion, and colonialism.

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#### **Course Structure and Expectations**

The course combines lectures and discussion sessions structured around particular topics of debate and comparison in Americanist archaeology.

- You will prepare short (2 page) response papers prior to five of these discussion sessions. Important themes are listed in the schedule, on the corresponding due date, and are elaborated on the final page of the syllabus. A grading rubric is posted on the course webpage.
- You will submit Thoughts and Questions (TQs) via BU Learn (Blackboard) for the five discussion sessions not associated with a response paper by noon on the day before the discussion. You should submit a minimum of one TQ and respond to a minimum of one TQ written by a classmate. TQs can include things that you did not understand or would like clarification on from the readings or lectures for the week, or reflections you have of the issues under discussion (e.g., what you found interesting; how something might relate to something else you are familiar with or we have covered earlier in class). To earn full points on TQs, it is necessary that they be turned in on time and that you demonstrate your knowledge of course material. For instance, do not simply write you “didn’t get” part of a lecture or reading; rather, explain what you do understand about the topic, what specific facet is confusing to you, and why.
- You are expected to actively participate in all discussion sessions and to lead a discussion session during the semester.

- Exams contain short-answer identifications and a map, and are based on lectures, discussions, and course readings. The terms and concepts listed on the first slide of each lecture and highlighted in the assigned readings should guide your studying, as exams will be built around them.
- If you know you will be unable to make an exam you must contact Professor Collins at least a week prior with a valid excuse to reschedule.

### **Grading**

Final grades will follow the distribution and designations listed below:

Exams	40% (20% each)
Response Papers	40% (13.33% each)
Participation	20% (includes TQs and discussion leader)
Extra Credit Assignments	

### **Academic Integrity**

Academic integrity is expected of all students. Please familiarize yourself with the University's policies for academic integrity and academic misconduct: <http://www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code/>.

### **Students with Disabilities**

If you are registered with the Office of Disability Services, please make an appointment as soon as possible to discuss any course accommodations that may be necessary. If you have a disability but have not contacted the Office of Disability Services, please call 353-3658 or visit the office on 19 Deerfield Street to register for services.

### **Required textbooks**

Carrasco, David

1998 *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth*. Greenwood Press, Westport, CT.

\*Available in Documents Folder in course webpage

Evans, Susan Toby

2013 *Ancient Mexico and Central America: Archaeology and Culture History*. Third Edition.

Thames and Hudson, London. \*Available for purchase at BU Bookstore

### **Other readings** (available in Documents Folder in course webpage)

De Lucia, Kristen

2010 A Child's House: Social Memory, Identity, and the Construction of Childhood in Early Postclassic Mexican Households. *American Anthropologist* 112(4): 607-624.

Carballo, David M.

2012 Households in Ancient Mesoamerica: Domestic Social Organization, Status, Economies, and Rituals. In *The Oxford Handbook of Mesoamerican Archaeology*, edited by Deborah Nichols and Christopher Pool. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Joyce, Rosemary A.

2000 Girling the Girl and Boying the Boy: The Production of Adulthood in Ancient Mesoamerica. *World Archaeology* 31(3): 473-483.

Magnoni, Aline, Traci Ardren, and Scott Hutson

2008 Tourism in the Mundo Maya: Inventions and (Mis)Representations of Maya Identities and Heritage. *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 2007:353-383

Mattice, Shannan L. and Patricia Fortuny Loret de Mola

2015 Yucatec Maya Organizations in San Francisco California: Ethnic Identity Formation across Migrant Generations. *Latin American Research Review* 50(2):201-2

Morehart, Christopher T.

2012 What if the Aztec Empire Never Existed? The Prerequisites of Empire and the Politics of Plausible Alternative Histories. *American Anthropologist* 112(2): 267-281.

Robin, Cynthia

2006 Gender, Farming, and Long-Term Change: Maya Historical and Archaeological Perspectives. *Current Anthropology* 47(3): 409-433.

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**Week: Class Topic/Assignments:**

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1. **(9/3-9/5)** Introduction to the peoples of Mesoamerica, Environments and early settlers  
Evans Ch. 1-2; Carrasco Ch. 1 (pp. 1-26)
2. **(9/10-9/12)** Origins of agriculture; household and village organization  
**TQ:** Evans Ch. 3; Robin 2006
3. **(9/17-9/19)** Comparative foodways and households; the Olmecs  
Carballo 2012; Evans Ch. 5-6  
**PAPER/DISCUSSION:** Foodways and households in comparative perspective
4. **(9/24-9/26)** Formative cultures in the Mexican highlands; Zapotec state formation  
Evans Ch. 7-9 (up to p. 257)
5. **(10/1-10/3)** Teotihuacan: City of the Gods  
Evans Ch. 9 (only pp. 257-264), and Ch. 10
6. **(10/8-10/10)** The Early Classic Maya: Urbanism, Teotihuacan, and the Hiatus  
**TQ:** Evans Ch. 11-12

- 7 **(10/17) PAPER/DISCUSSION:** Early urbanism, neighborhoods, and economies  
**EXAM 1** (in class, regular time and place)
- 8 **(10/22-10/24)** The Late Classic Maya: Literacy, Politics, and Collapse
- 9 **(10/29-10/31)** Epiclassic Mexico, “International Style”, and the Toltec  
**TQ:** Evans Ch. 13-15 (up to p. 427)
- 10 **(11/5-11/7)** Early and Late Postclassic Maya
- 11 **(11/12)** Leaving the Archaeological Record (The Olmec to the Aztec)  
**TQ:** Exploration of Objects in the MFA  
Evans Ch. 15 (pp. 427-432), Ch. 16 (pp. 447-456)
- (11/14)** Guest Lecture: David M. Carballo on Aztec Origins and Daily Life
- 12 **(11/19)** Growing up Aztec: community, Gender, Class and Identity  
Carrasco Ch. 3-5
- (11/21)** Guest Lecture: Dra. María Olvido Moreno on Aztec Feather-work
- 13 **(11/26)** Spanish conquest and colonialism through 1540: The Aztec  
Evans Ch. 20; Morehart 2012
- 14 **(12/3)** Spanish conquest and colonialism through 1697: The Maya
- (12/5)** Native syncretism and resistance/Contemporary Identity and Memory  
Carrasco Ch. 8-9
- 15 **(12/10)** Indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica today and US multiculturalism  
Magnoni et al. 2007, Mattice and Loret de Mola 2015

**Final PAPER/DISCUSSION Choose ONE of the Following THREE:**

1. US-Mesoamerican entanglements **(DUE: 12/19)**
2. Individuals within Aztec communities **(DUE: 12/19)**
3. Native conquistadors and individual agency **(Due 12/19)**

**FINAL EXAM 2 (12/18) 3 to 5pm**

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## RESPONSE PAPER TOPICS

### 1. Foodways and households in comparative perspective

Outline the diet and household organization of early Mesoamericans and compare these with those of your own family. Are there any similarities? Aside from those resulting from the temporal divide between our contemporary industrialized/globalized economies and Prehispanic Mesoamerica, what are some major cultural differences?

### 2. Early urbanism, neighborhoods, and economies

Compare and contrast early cities and urban economies within Mesoamerica through the first millennium CE. What are major axes of variability and how do these relate to comparing modern cities?

### 3. Individuals within Aztec communities

Provide an overview of how Aztec communities were organized including the life-cycle, social roles based on age and gender, and distinctions based on ethnicity and social class. Compare and contrast one of these categories with how you identify yourself and how this intersects with the communities you are a part of.

### 4. Native conquistadors and individual agency

What roles did various Native Mesoamerican communities play in what is traditionally termed the Spanish “conquest” and early colonial period? In what ways were particular individuals or communities able to resist or significantly influence the development of colonial New Spain? How would your own community or culture respond to an invasion?

### 5. US-Mesoamerican entanglements

Following the readings by Magnoni, Mattice, and Fox, explain how the Mesoamerican past is present in today’s Mexico and US in terms of historical memory and descendent communities. How does Native identity frame identity at Xaltocan and among emigrant communities in the US?