During the same period of urban expansion in Han Dynasty China and the Roman Empire, several cities in ancient Mexico rivaled their complexity and formal order. Ancient societies in the Western Hemisphere produced grid patterns, as well as pyramids and axial streets.

Mesoamerica: a historical region and cultural area in North and Central America. It extends from approximately central Mexico through Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and northern Costa Rica, and within this region pre-Columbian societies flourished before the Spanish colonization of the Americas. (wikipedia)

In the Americas, by 7000 BCE a huge assortment of plants had come into being that required little more than rudimentary plant tending to harvest. Among these were the potato, peanuts, cacao, beans, manioc, squash and avocado. Nowhere else in the world did such a wide variety of plants appear in such close geographical proximity… Corn was the product of hundreds of years of genetic development. It seems that this took place in the area that straddles the El Salvador-Guatemala border....It is clear that corn was not merely a plant – it was a god, which mean that planting corn was not only an agricultural process but a theological one. (Wiley)

Dates:
• farming begins in Mesoamerica between 7000-6000 BCE, and by 3000-2000 villages were widespread.
• Formative or Pre-classic Period: 1500 BCE-250 CE (Stokstad)
• Classic Period 200-1000 CE (Moffett)

Note:
• After the Olmec came the Toltec and then the Maya followed by the Aztecs. (Fletcher)
• Mexico will pick up again in Chapter 7 with the Maya.
Cities such as Monte Albán and Teotihuacan produced towering pyramids and carefully composed platform enclosures. Three areas of ancient Mexico attained high architectural expression during the period from 200 BCE -300 CE:

- the Teotihuacanos in the Valley of Mexico;
- the Zapotec culture centered at Monte Albán in the Valley of Oaxaca;
- the early Mayan culture in the Guatemalan rain forests. (OUP)
People of Mesoamerica developed writing, astronomy, a calendar, mathematics.

*Olmec* lived on the Gulf side of southern Mexico.

All of these cultures, the *Teotihuacanos in the Valley of Mexico*, the *Zapotec culture centered at Monte Albán in the Valley of Oaxaca*, the *early Mayan culture in the Guatemalan rain forests*, despite their differing languages, honored their ritual and artistic origins from the earlier culture of the Olmec. The first surviving monumental Olmec center, now called San Lorenzo, dates to around 1500 BCE with a gigantic earthwork: an artificial one km/.5 mi. long plateau built of clay and rubble. (OUP)

*Maya* are at Palenque and Chichen Itzá (in the Yucatán); for a later lecture. (Stokstad)

It was the Olmecs who set in play the corn centric worldview that would become the marker of civilization in the Americas. They also had a trade in salt, and had bitumen to use for waterproofing. (Wiley)
The first surviving monumental Olmec center, now called San Lorenzo, dates to around 1500 BCE with a gigantic earthwork: an artificial one km/.5 mi. long plateau built of clay and rubble. (OUP)
Olmec sites: San Lorenzo went into decline as La Venta arose. (Wiley)
Title: Olmec Head, San Lorenzo

Artist: Olmec       Date: c. 1500-1200 BCE

Source/ Museum:
https://i.pinimg.com/originals/29/02/58/290258b501c53a7b0199d4275fcb184.jpg/ Museo Comunitario de San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán

Medium: basalt stone weighing up to 25 tons

Size: one km/.5 mi. long plateau

earthwork: a mounded tumulus of earth for monumental effect

Note:

• San Lorenzo was the first surviving monumental Olmec center with a gigantic earthwork: an artificial plateau built of clay and rubble. This platform served as a ceremonial center for the dozens of neighboring towns and villages subjected to the Olmec kings.

• Giant carved heads lined the pathway to the seat of dynastic authority.

• San Lorenzo ended in violent destruction. (OUP)

• The colossal heads may represent heads used in a cosmic ballgame, or heroic ballplayers…or portraits of rulers (Stokstad)

• The nearest basalt source, the Tuxtla Mountains is 60 mi. of swampland. (Gardner)

• San Lorenzo was the only place along the river where the sunset aligned with the volcano Cerro Zempoaltepec at the winter solstice. (Wiley)
Title: Colossal Head

Artist: Olmec culture

Date: c. 1200–900 BCE

Museum: Werner Forman Archive/ Anthropology Museum, Veracruz University, Jalapa

Medium: Basalt

Size: height 7' 5"/ 2.26 m

Note:

• It is unknown why San Lorenzo went into decline. Many of the great colossal heads that had been so laboriously brought to the site were rolled down into the ravines that divide the edges of the terrace and were carefully covered up, though it is unclear why this was done. (Wiley)

• The Olmec were given their name – in Nahuatl, the Aztec language. It means the “rubber people”. (Gardner)
LA VENTA, OLMEC CULTURE

Title: La Venta, main ceremonial complex
Architect: Olmec  Date: founded 1300 BCE, grew to prominence ca. 900-400 BCE
Source: OUP  Medium: plan drawing  Size: see scale, pyramid 100’ tall

celt: a smooth oblong stone or metal objects shaped like an axe-head  (Stokstad)

Note:
• This platform served as a ceremonial center for the dozens of neighboring towns and villages subjected to the Olmec kings. La Venta, 90 km (55 mi.) east of San Lorenzo, grew to prominence around 900 BCE as a second ritual city ruled by Olmec kings. The major artifacts fit a clear geometric pattern, dominated by a radially composed pyramid, which sat on a square base. (OUP)
• La Venta includes buried offerings of serpentine rock in 20’ deep pits with layers of colored clay, and at the top layer formed a mosaic design that signified the sacred female earth surface covered by an array of celts. As at San Lorenzo, the La Venta Olmec built earthen mounds and set over 100 monumental sculptures in their plazas. Unlike San Lorenzo, the mounds and enclosed courtyards were designed to symmetrically flank the site’s central axis which pointed south towards the nearest mountain on the horizon. (Stokstad)
• At regular intervals the whole community convened for ritual observances at the religious civic centers of towns such as San Lorenzo and La Venta. (Gardner)
• The earthen pyramid is the oldest known in America. It served as the terminus for an axis defined by an orthogonal arrangement of earthen platforms surrounding a ceremonial plaza lined with basalt columns. The basic elements of the composition would be repeated throughout the region, as would the alignment of buildings with astronomical events. (Moffett)
• Ball playing was an important part of Olmec ritual. It seems that ball players also wore mirrors giving us some indication of the magical nature of the games. La Venta appears to be oriented to the summer solstice sunset over the volcano San Martin. (Wiley)
• La Venta fell to invaders ~ 400 BCE.
LA VENTA, OLMEC CULTURE

Title: La Venta
Architect: Olmec     Date: 700 BCE
Source: http://inside.sfuhs.org/dept/history/Mexicoreader/Chapter1/Olmecs.htm

Medium: earthen pyramid
Size: 30 m./100’ tall, 150’ dia. one of the largest in Mexico at the time

Note:
• La Venta, 90 km. (55 mi.) east of San Lorenzo, grew to prominence around 900 BCE as a second ritual city [presumably after San Lorenzo] ruled by Olmec kings. The major artifacts fit a clear geometric pattern, dominated by a radially composed pyramid, which sat on a square base. (Stokstad)
• The religious life of the Olmecs centered on sacred caves, springs, and volcanoes. The volcano...was associated with the world being born from below but was also viewed as the home of the storm clouds, lightning and rain. It was depicted as a dragon with a gaping mouth representing the portal to the underworld. The sky was ruled by a bird monster or sun god whose energy powered the cosmos and made the plants grow. Underneath the dragon, the Olmecs visualized a watery void out of which the world was formed. The main deity in their mythology was the rain god depicted as a dragon (Wiley)
Title: La Venta

Architect: Olmec

Date: c. 800–400 BCE

Source: http://inside.sfuhs.org/dept/history/Mexicoreader/Chapter1/Olmecs.htm

Medium: serpentine blocks

Size: n/a

Note:

- “1950s research provided the first radiocarbon dates from an Olmec site, c. 800–400 BCE, and those helped to clarify the Olmec's position in Mesoamerican prehistory, but the discoveries contained scant information on the nature of Olmec society or of its antecedents.” (source site above, fr. Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures

- Over the offering of the blocks the builders placed sand of different colors, phallic celts, and stone figurines. (Wiley)
MONTE ALBÁN, ZAPOTEC CULTURE

Title: Monte Albán, Oaxaca

Architect: Zapotec culture, begun 1500 BCE

Date: c. 500 BCE-500 CE

Source: https://www.sciencesource.com/archive/Monte-Alban-Mexico-SS2135515.html

Medium: aerial view of the acropolis, an escarpment in the valley

Size: 200 x 300 m., by 500 BCE the entire valley had about 25,000 people

Note:
- The Zapotecs, about 300 km./180 miles to the south at Monte Albán, elaborated the Olmec system of order, framing a grand elevated plaza with stepped platforms. Zapotec designers created monumental terraces and elaborate tombs beginning in the 5th century BCE. Their culture continued for nearly a millennium. (OUP)
- The Zapotecs had irrigation and artificially terraced hillsides watered by canals. Only the acropolis at Monte Albán remains. (Wiley)
Note:

- All of the temples focused on an immense internal plaza, a near perfect rectangle. These monumental buildings embodied the cyclical nature of political power. Rather than constantly rebuilding their structures as the Chinese did, they added successive layers over them. The cities of Mesoamerica used the altars and the ball courts as places of tribute to display a hierarchical authority based on military and cultural primacy. (OUP)

- The Zapotecs rose in prominence after the decline of the Olmecs. Here they leveled the top of a mountain and arranged their pyramids around the perimeter of the site. (Moffett)

- palace enclosures are on either end. The northern platform has two sunken patios, each with steps and platforms on axis. (Wiley)
Title: Monte Albán  
Architect: Zapotec culture  
Date: circa 500 BCE – 500 CE  
Source: wikipedia  
Medium: plan diagram  
Size: n/a  

Note: the map is reversed from the one previous.
• north platform in foreground below (compare with notch at A); the ball court is in the “I” shape at center right, just below the A (not in photo)
• They believed the universe was divined into four quarters each associated a color – red, black, yellow or white, with a center of blue-green. The Zapotecs were animists; living things had a vital force that made things move, such as clouds, and also a supreme being with whom no human came in contact and was never represented. They did come in contact with forces such as Cociyo (lightning) and Xoó (earthquake), the angry faces of the sky and the earth, two of the four quadrants. Time was alive and cyclical and the Zapotecs had two calendars, one solar and one ritual. (Wiley)
• Ball courts are typically “I” or “T” shaped in plan, flanked by two parallel sloping or straight walls. Sometimes the walls were wide enough to support small structures on top; at others small temples stood at either end. Some have stone rings high off the ground. Balls were of solid rubber. The game may be a metaphor for the cycle of life, death and regeneration. (Gardner)
Title: Teotihuacan, Mexico
Architect: Teotihuacan culture (ethnicity unknown)
Date: c. 100–650 CE; height c. 600 CE

Source: Located 30 mi. NE of Mexico City. Photo: Robert Harding World Imagery/Corbis
Medium: overall view as seen from the Pyramid of the Moon (pyramid of the Sun at left)
Size: ~ 30 sq km (18 sq miles); central axis: 50 m./160 ft. wide; over 6 km./3.5 mi. long

Note:

- City of the Gods: Teotihuacan was the largest ancient city in Mexico and its prime ritual center. Located in the high, semi-arid Valley of Mexico, it became the region’s pilgrimage center, and premier market town. From about 100 BCE to 200 CE Teotihuacan produced its two great pyramids, hundreds of platform temples, and 2,000 palaces. The city’s grid spread, exceeding both Rome and Chang’an in area. The central axis of Teotihuacan is a sunken avenue, now called Miccaotli, or “Avenue of the Dead”; it surpassed the axial thoroughfares of all other preindustrial cultures. The Teotihuacanos planned the great axis to connect the temple district of the two pyramids, which dated from the 1st cent. BCE, to the crossroad. The Great Compound at the crossroad served as a marketplace and administrative center, where pilgrims from areas such as Monte Albán and the Mayan country came to trade. (OUP)
TEOTIHUACAN CULTURE

Title: Teotihuacán, Mexico

Architect: Teotihuacan culture (ethnicity unknown)

Date: c. 100–650 CE; height c. 600 CE


Medium: overall view, facing toward the pyramid of the moon, and the volcanic mountain behind it.

Size: an urban core of 20 sq. kilometers

Note:

• Meaning “place of the gods,” Teotihuacan was the largest religious, military, and trading city in the Americas between A.D. 200 and 650, and it was inhabited by over one hundred thousand people at its peak. Designed with colossal pyramids and ritual plazas, the metropolis was built on a cosmologically oriented grid plan that embraced residential and manufacturing districts. (Art Institute of Chicago)

• The city’s hieroglyphs are largely undeciphered, and linguists do not know what language was spoken. The monument names are Aztec. (Gardner)

• The later Aztecs called this place Teotihuacán “the place where men become gods” but the original name is unknown. The Maya called it Puch “place of the reeds”. At its height it was contemporary with Mayan cities to the south, but there is minor evidence of interaction. (Wiley) But both places had pyramids.
**Title:** Teotihuacan, Mexico

**Architect:** Teotihuacan culture

**Date:** photo 1905

**Source:** https://www.ancient-code.com/10-extremely-rare-ancient-images-of-teotihuacan/

**Medium:** overall view taken from the top of the Pyramid of the Moon

**Size:** n/a

**Note:**
- The name was given by the later Aztecs, meaning “place of divinity” in Nahuatl, and was a pilgrimage place for the Aztecs. Teotihuacan at its height had a population of 125,000-200,000 (the largest city of its time in the Americas), was organized on a grid, and covered 9 sq. miles. The Pyramid of the Sun rises in steps to a flat platform. People lived in apartments. Later Aztecs revered this site, and named it in Nahuatl. (Stokstad)
Teotihuacán, by 200 CE emerged as Mesoamerica’s first truly urban settlement, a center of commerce and manufacturing, which at its height covered 9 square miles and had a population of at least 125,000, the largest in the Americas and one of the largest in the world. Residents lived in apartment compounds and the city was organized on a grid, oriented to the calendar and the landscape. The grid was established by 100 CE, with a North South axis. Palaces of the elite with as many as 45 rooms and 7 patios were nearest to the ceremonial center. (Stokstad)

- the grid layout with a NS and EW axis dividing the city in quarters is unusual before the Aztecs. The Avenue of the Dead is broken up by stairs (Gardner)
- The Pyramid of the Sun was built over a sacred cave. (Wiley)
TEOTIHUACAN

Title: Teotihuacán
Architect: Teotihuacano culture
Date: undated photo
Source: https://www.goldenageproject.org.uk/159teotihuacan.php
Medium: urban plan  Size: n/a

barrios: Spanish for district or quarter of a town

Note:
- The central “Avenue of the Dead” aligns with an extinct volcano - springs from which supply the city’s water. Stairs provide entry from the Avenue to the temples. The central crossroad divided Teotihuacan into four distinct quarters. These were then broken into what the Spanish later called barrios, or neighborhoods, each specializing in a dominant craft or activity. Platform temples covered both sides of the procession route. The pilgrims walking along the gently rising processional avenue encountered a series of six mysterious “locks,” stepped barriers. The final “lock” corresponded to the city’s oldest and largest monument, the Pyramid of the Sun. (OUP)
In 1889 Leopoldo Batres included this drawing of the overgrown Pyramid of the Sun in his first publication about Teotihuacán. Source: Newberry Library.
Title: Sun Pyramid, Teotihuacán
Architect: Teotihuacano
Date: Preclassic pd.: 1st cent. CE
Source: Britannica

Medium: View to the Sun Pyramid, four horizontal layers over a cave or a spring, clad in rough stone/brick, covered in plaster and painted red (Wiley)

Size: the largest monument at Teotihuacán; 200’ high and 720’ each side at the base.

Note:
• The sun pyramid is oriented to the setting sun on the solstice, and influenced the rest of the city’s orientation. The scale and position of the two great pyramids conveyed the religious primacy of Teotihuacan.

• Begun in the 2nd cent. BCE, it covered a cave that extends 100 meters under its mass - a natural phenomenon revered as the origin of the world.
• The pyramid faced 15 degrees north of west, coinciding with the setting sun on June 21, the day of its zenith passage. Its coordinates informed the orientation of the rest of the city’s orthogonal blocks. The builders of the Pyramid of the Sun used construction techniques similar to those of the ziggurats in Mesopotamia. They stacked it in four stages with horizontal layers of clay. They clad it with rough-hewn stones. (OUP)
• A small temple once stood at the top of the flat platform. A monumental stair led from level to level up the front of the pyramid, (unlike Djoser’s stepped pyramid in Egypt.) Skeletons have been found, possible evidence of child sacrifice. (Gardner)
• The outer stones were stuccoed and painted. Built over a tunnel which had several burials and offering caches. (Stokstad)
• The profile today is misleading and a product of the imagination of its 20th cent. reconstructors who were eager to make it pyramid like. (Wiley)
PYRAMID OF THE MOON, TEOTIHUACAN

Note:
- For the Moon Pyramid at the end of the axis, they employed a new technique of construction, building a core with vertical tufa piers, the shafts between them filled with rubble. They buttressed this core with fin walls, which determined the slope of the main terraces. The ceremonial landscape of Teotihuacan climaxed at the base of the Moon Pyramid. The powerful members of the priesthoods made their sacrifices here in a linked series of platform temples enclosing a square plaza with the same dimensions as the base of the Moon Pyramid (OUP)
- It was enlarged several times, each enlargement completely enclosed the previous structure and was accompanied by sacrificial offerings and caches including stone figurines. (Stokstad)
At the south end of the Avenue of the Dead. The great quadrangle encloses a smaller pyramidal shrine, the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, whom the Aztecs called Quetzalcoatl. Beneath the temple is a tomb, looted in antiquity, with the remains of at least 100 warriors. (Gardner)
Title: Ciudadela, Teotihuacán

Architect: Teotihuacán culture

Date: early 3rd cent. CE

Source: photo by jschmeling

Medium: aerial view

Size: n/a

Note:

• the adosada platform is directly in front of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent (Quetzalcoatl). It is unclear how the platform is used. The temple is flanked by two apartment compounds as well as 15 smaller stepped pyramids. (Wiley)

• The initial construction of this temple seems to have been marked by several mass burials of human sacrifices. The temple also may be the first use of the distinctive Teotihuacán architectural profile known as the talud-tablero, in which the tablero, a rectangular panel, sits atop the talud, a sloping panel. (Wiley)
Title: Temple of the Plumed/ Feathered Serpent, The Ciudadela, (fortified city center), Teotihuacan

Architect: Teotihuacan culture  
Date: circa 200 CE

Source: The Art Archive/ Gianni Dagli Orti

Medium: stone reliefs, talud-tablero: slope and panel

Size: see in relation to staircase in image above.

Note:
- The later Aztecs believed that Teotihuacan was the place where the gods created the sun and the moon. The Temple of the Feathered Serpent is a 7-tiered structure. The reliefs are of undulating feathered serpents in a watery space along with shells, using a flat abstract style, but there are also protruding fanged serpents in a higher relief. (Stokstad)
Title: Talud-tablero

Architect: Teotihuacano culture  
Date: circa 100–650 CE

spall: (from Italian) to reduce, as irregular blocks of stone, to an approximately level surface by hammering. (wiktionary)

tablero: the horizontal casement/ frieze that was filled either with reliefs or murals. (OUP)/ (Moffett) a deeply framed frieze. (Fletcher)
talud: an inclined plane supporting a cantilevered box, used on building facades - see the inclined plane at lower part of section
talud-tablero: a slope and panel system. The tablero is an entablature. (Stokstad)

Note: n/a

Source: OUP

Medium: cutaway and section

Size: n/a
The use of this technique at later sites is evidence of Teotihuacan influence. (Gardner)
Title: Pyramid of Plumed/Feathered Serpent, Teotihuacán

Architect: Teotihuacano culture

Date: c. 100 CE

Source: https://asunow.asu.edu/20160826-discoveries-asu-teotihuacan-research-lab-mexico

Medium: stone, photo Ken Fagan/ASU

Size: n/a

Note:
- this pyramid may have been used as a dynastic tomb.
- The Pyramids marked the axis mundi, the cosmic center of a community’s known world.
Title: Pyramid of Plumed/ Feathered Serpent, Teotihuacán

Architect: Teotihuacano culture

Date: circa 100 CE

Source: wikimedia

Medium: stone

Size: n/a

Note:
- The temple’s sculpted panels feature projecting stone heads of the feathered serpent alternating with heads of a long-snouted scale creature with rings on its forehead, whose identity is unclear. Linking the heads are low relief carvings of serpents and seaachells. (Gardner)
The blocks of Teotihuacan were organized as self-contained enclosures. They resembled palaces but contained apartments for as many as 100 inhabitants per block. Both the commoners and the wealthy classes lived in these apartment blocks, single-story structures built with stone posts, wooden beams, and mud-brick walls. The more than 2,000 apartment blocks in Teotihuacan ranged in size from 400 to 7,000 sq m (approx. 1300 to 22,000 sq ft). This exceptional collective dwelling type had no precedent outside of Mesoamerica. Many scholars assume it served a communitarian social order run by a theocratic priesthood. (OUP)
Title: Teotihuacan residential compound
Architect: Teotihuacano culture
Date: 200 BCE-300 CE
Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/A-Teotihuacan-residential-compound-and-its-activity-areas_fig1_231843937
Medium: floor plan
Size: see scale
Note:
• unclear who this is for; includes cult rooms etc.
Title: Teotihuacan residential compound

Architect: Teotihuacano culture

Date: 200 BCE-300 CE

Source: https://asunow.asu.edu/20160826-discoveries-asu-teotihuacan-research-lab-mexico

Medium: stone courtyard, photo by Ken Fagan/ ASU

Size: n/a

Note:
- An elaborate miniature temple sits in the middle of a Teotihuacan apartment complex named Atetelco, “on the stone wall next to the water.” (ASU)
- Around 750 CE the city was burned to the ground, possibly torched by invaders. (Wiley)
Title: Feathered Serpent and Flowering Trees, originally found in Techninantila compound of Teotihuacán, Mexico

Architect: Teotihuacan culture

Date: c. 650-750 CE

Toponym: place name (Stokstad)

Museum: The De Young Museum, Fine Arts Museums of S.F.

Medium: Mural fragment: volcanic ash, lime, mineral pigment and mud backing; fresco technique, polished afterwards

Size: n/a

Note:
- the style is flat and abstract. The trees are shown in elevation view with their roots showing below ground. Above each of the grey root systems sits a place glyph that forms a base for the trunk of the tree. This place name and tree configuration forms a toponym in the Teotihuacan system of writing and the visible roots of the trees implies attachment to each particular place. (Stokstad)
- brightly painted stucco once covered Teotihuacan's buildings. The murals chiefly feature deities and ritual activities such as bloodletting. (Gardner)
painted on the interior walls of an aristocratic palace. It shows a rain priest walking or dancing in profile, wearing an elaborate headdress and costume. His speech-scroll, adorned with seashells and plants, indicates that he is praying for water and agricultural prosperity, highly valued in his society. This richly symbolic fragment from a Teotihuacan wall fresco depicts a ceremony that took place once every fifty-two years, a “century” in the ancient Mexican calendar system. A priest stands before a tied bundle of reeds representing the completion of a cycle of time. The bundle is impaled by the spiny points of maguey cactus leaves, with which the priestly protagonist of the scene has pricked himself to provide a blood offering. Water symbols in the form of shells and flowers are depicted within the speech-scroll curling from the priest’s mouth. Additional flowers and water are sprinkled from one of the priest’s hands, while in the other he holds an incense bag. Corresponding to the chants of a religious litany, this complex image was repeated with others on the walls of a chamber as a prayer of thanksgiving and for the renewal of agricultural fertility. (Art Institute of Chicago)
End of Chapter 5