

# SACRED SPACES (II)

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## ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF MESOAMERICA

# CULTURES OF MESOAMERICA

**Mesoamerica:** Regions which today includes central and south Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador



Map showing extent of Mesoamerican civilisations

# TIMELINE OF MESOAMERICA

Preclassical period

Classical period

Postclassical period

Colonial period

2000 BCE

250 CE

900 CE

1519 CE

1821 CE

Olmec Civilization

Mayan Civilization

Aztec Civilization

Toltec Civilization

Spanish Conquest  
ends the Aztec Empire

- ▶ Large cities with ceremonial centres were built

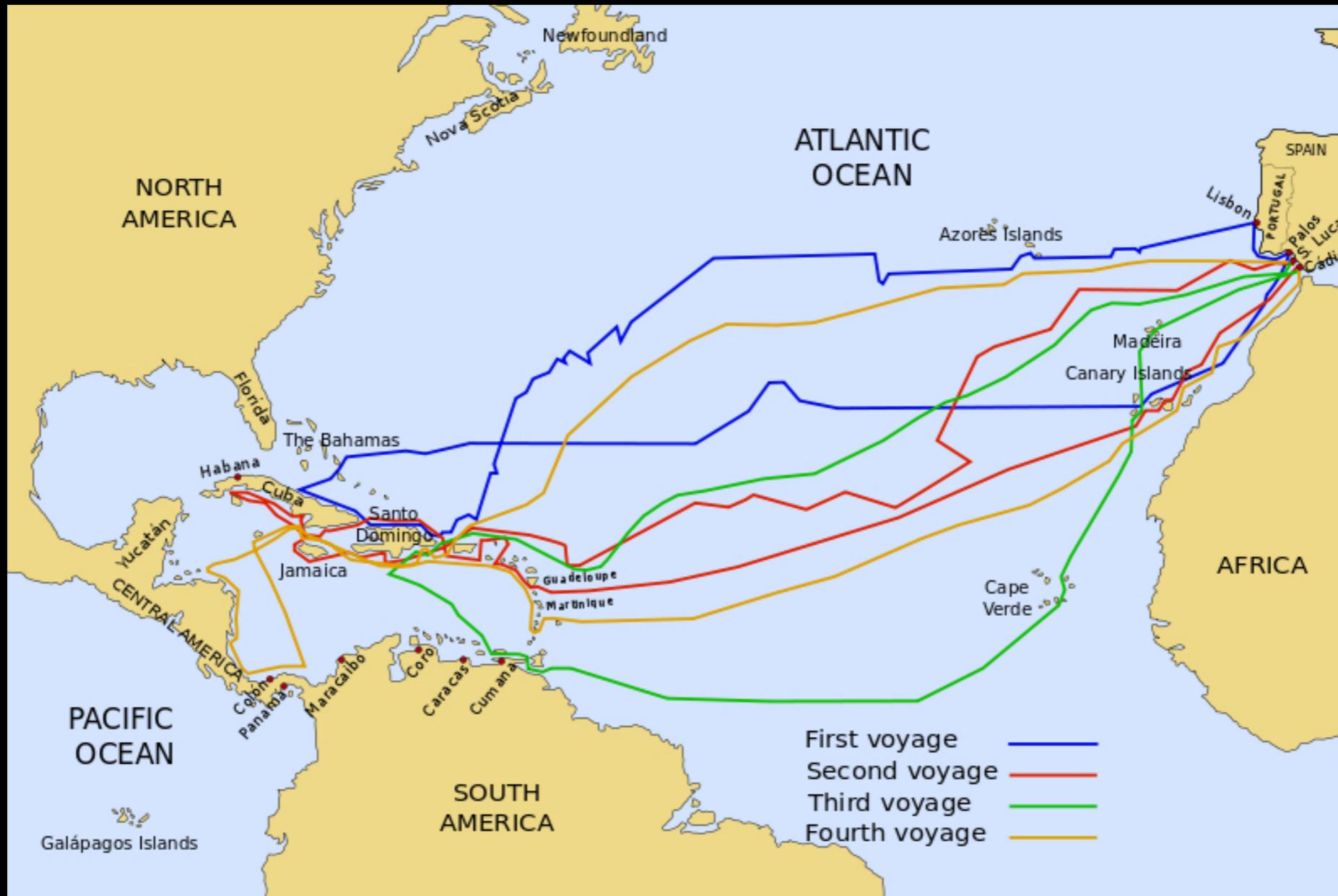
- ▶ Regional differences between cultures grew
- ▶ The city of Teotihuacan dominated

- ▶ Period of cultural decline- ceremonial city centre burned down
- ▶ Political instability and warfare

- ▶ 300 period of Spanish colonial rule
- ▶ Population of indigenous people decreased by the 16th century: infectious diseases and slave labor

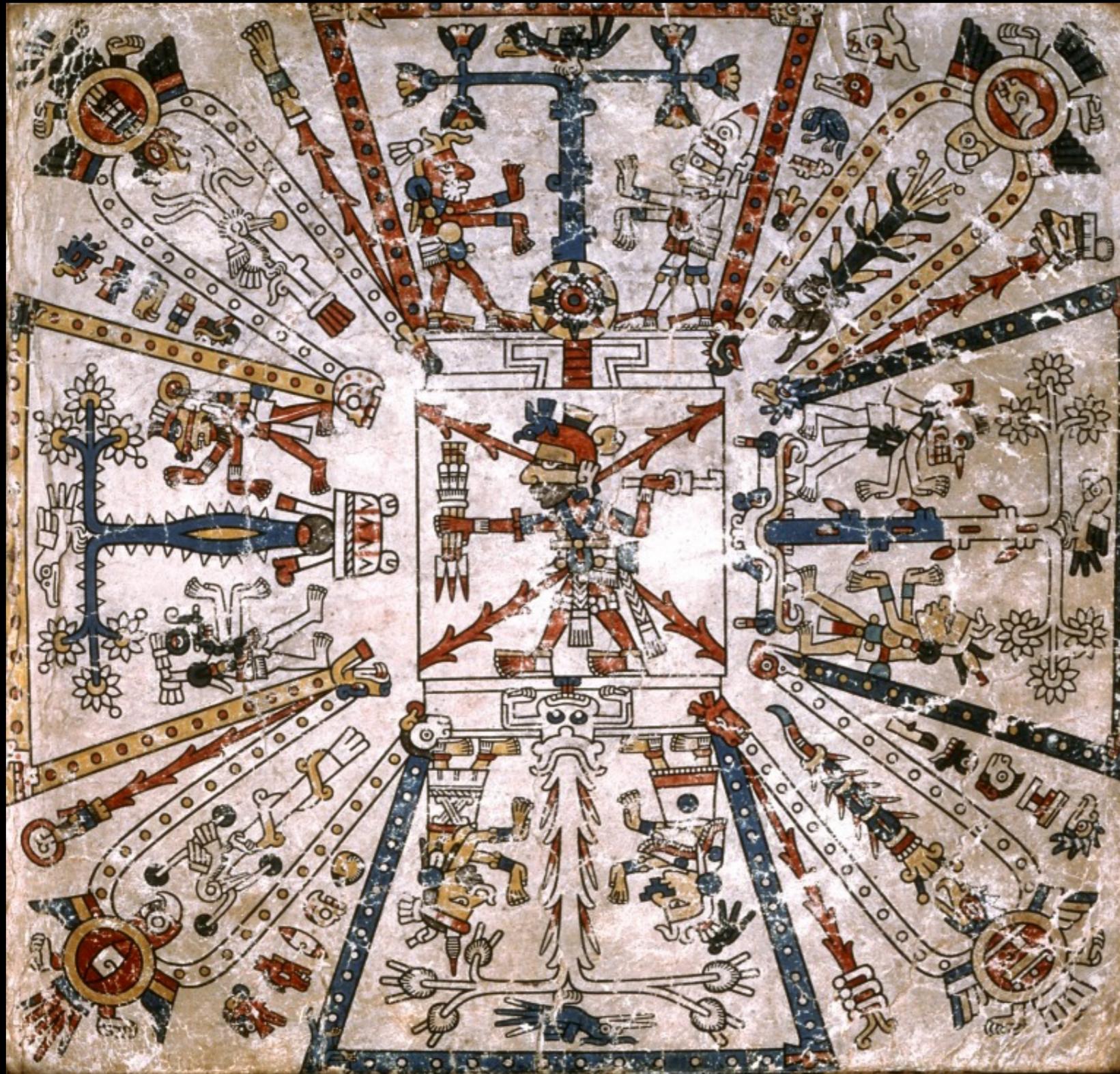
# Pre-Columbian

- ▶ Refers to the period in the Americas before the arrival of Columbus
- ▶ In 1492, Christopher Columbus arrived at Cuba and present day Haiti and the Dominican Republic, thinking he had reached Asia.
- ▶ Incorrectly referring to the native inhabitants of this region as “Indians” (under the assumption that he had landed in India), Columbus established the first Spanish colony of the Americas.



The routes of the four Voyages of Christopher Columbus, to the Caribbean Islands and the coast of Central America

# Mesoamerican religion and pantheon of gods



**Axis mundi:** Latin term that refers to the concept of a central pole or axis that connects heaven and earth.

Codex Féjervary-Mayer, 15th century



Chaac  
Storm or rain god  
Mayan culture



Quetzalcóatl  
Late post-Classical period (1350-1521 d.C.)  
Aztec, Mexico

## Preclassical period (2000 BCE-200 CE)

- ▶ Rise of agriculture- farming of corn becomes important
- ▶ Corn, beans and squash are the staple- leads to the need for ceramic vessels to store them
- ▶ Also saw rise of urban civilization- people start to settle down (think back to the Neolithic period)
- ▶ With urban growth comes social hierarchies- clear elite class who become patron of the arts (discovered a palace with an attached sculpture workshop, making clear the relationship between the elite and the emerging class of artists)

# OLMEC CIVILIZATION

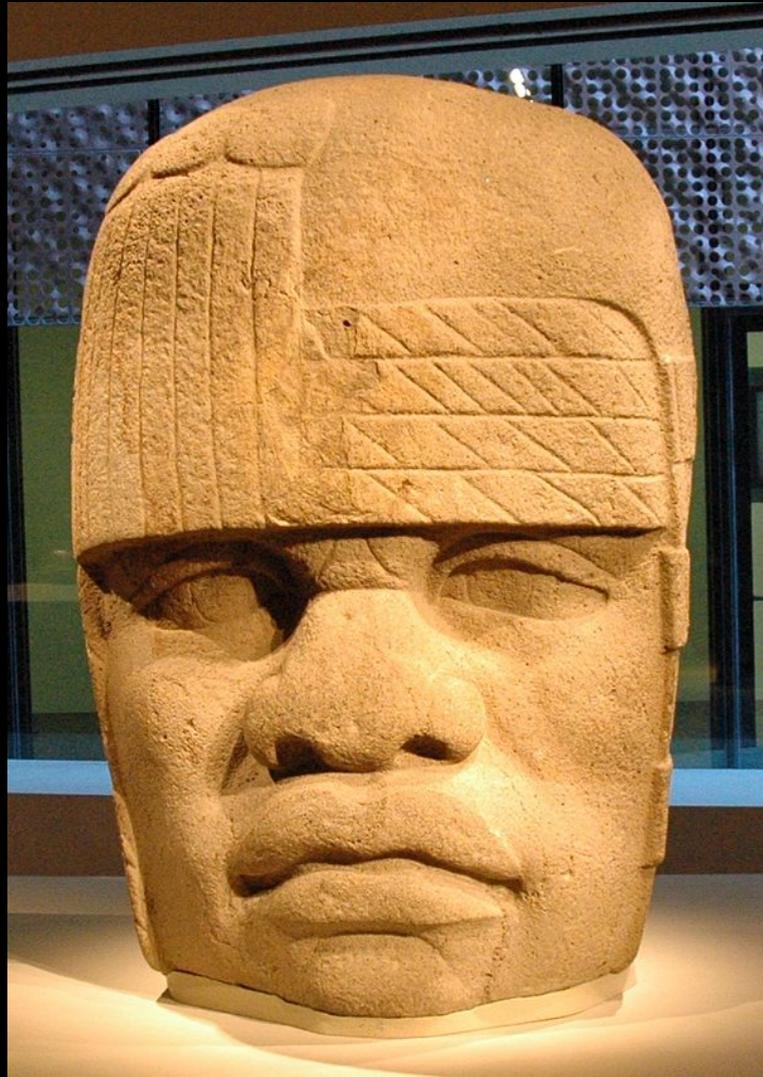


La Venta Monument 1  
c. 1500-400 BCE  
Basalt  
Mesoamerica



Discovery of an Olmec Head  
Photograph from the Smithsonian Museum Archive

# Olmec Colossal Heads



San Lorenzo Colossal Head 4



San Lorenzo Colossal Head 3



San Lorenzo Colossal Head 6  
in the Museo Nacional de  
Antropología

# Olmec Jades

**Anthropomorphic:** having human characteristics or in a human form



Olmec Mask  
900-400 B.C.



Mayan Deity Figure  
3rd-6th century

## Classical period (200 CE-900 CE)

- ▶ Easier to define because they were building upon structures established during preclassical period
- ▶ Cities continue to grow- more elaborate rituals- more construction of temples, palaces, monuments
- ▶ Rulers commissioning large buildings and monuments to communicate their power

# MAYAN CIVILIZATION

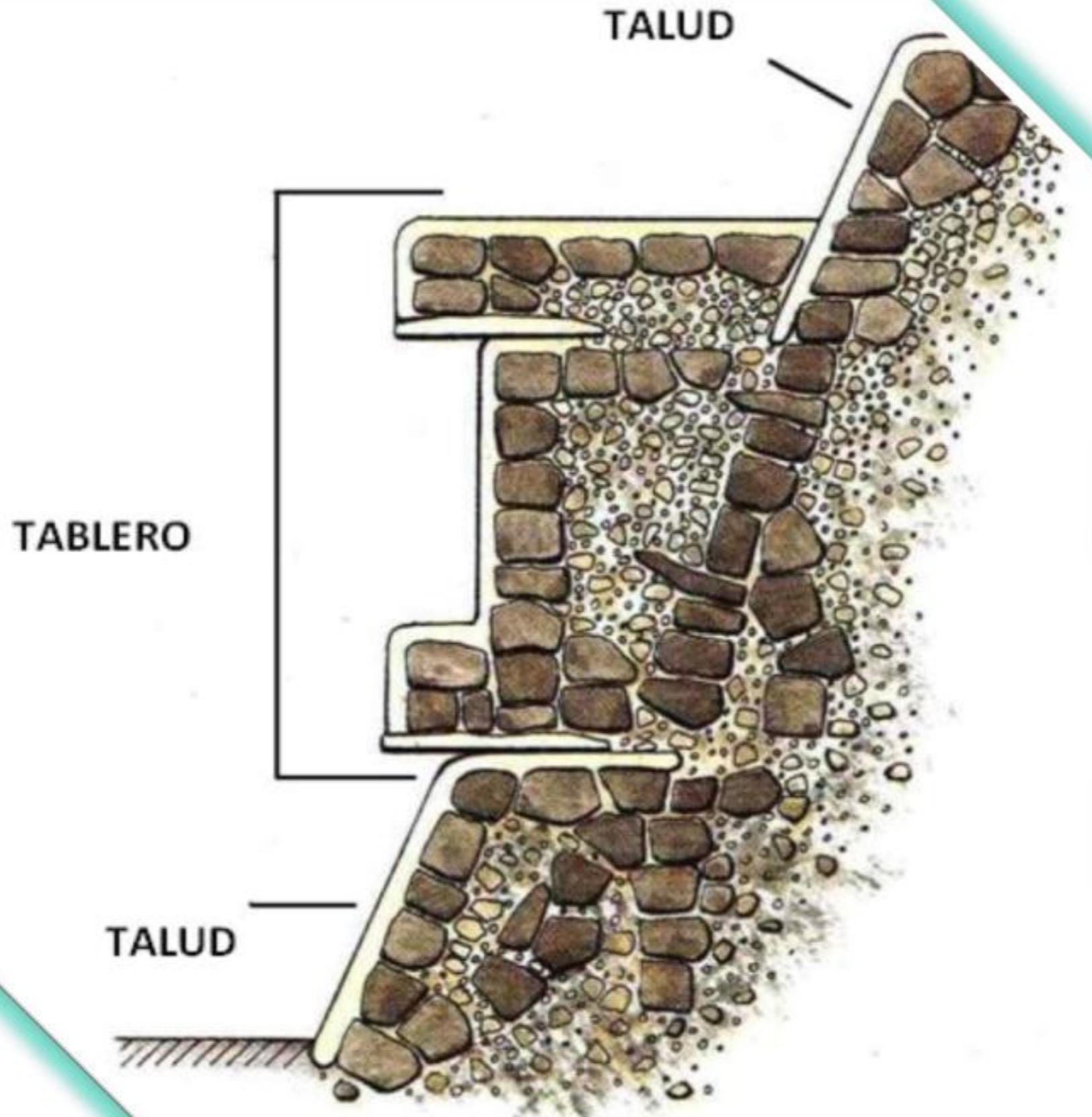


Avenue of the Dead  
Ceremonial center of the city of Teotihuacan, Mexico  
Teotihuacan  
c. 350-650 CE

# Pyramids of the Sun and Moon, Teotihuacan



**Talud-tablero:** an architectural style commonly associated with Mesoamerican consisting of a sloping base and vertical platform



# Temple of the Feathered Serpent, Teotihuacan



The people of Teotihuacan worshipped deities that were recognizably similar to those worshipped later by the Aztecs

## **Feathered Serpent:**

Known to the Maya as Kukulcan

Known to the Aztec as Quetzalcoatl



## Post-Classical period (900 CE-1521 CE)

- ▶ Mid 7th century- Teotihuacan ceremonial center burns down, and the city went into decline
- ▶ By the time of the Spanish conquest, Mayan civilisation was in decline and Aztecs controlled much of Mexico
- ▶ Rise of Aztecs was quick- were able to transform Teotihuacan in a few centuries

# AZTEC CIVILIZATION



Seated Deity (Macuilcoatl)  
15th-early 16th century  
Aztec



Cihuateotl  
15th-early 16th century  
Aztec

# The Naturalism vs Abstraction Debate



Mayan Seated Female Figure  
6th-9th century



Greek Terracotta statuette of Aphrodite and Eros  
3rd century B.C.

# The Naturalism vs Abstraction Debate



Mayan Seated Female Figure  
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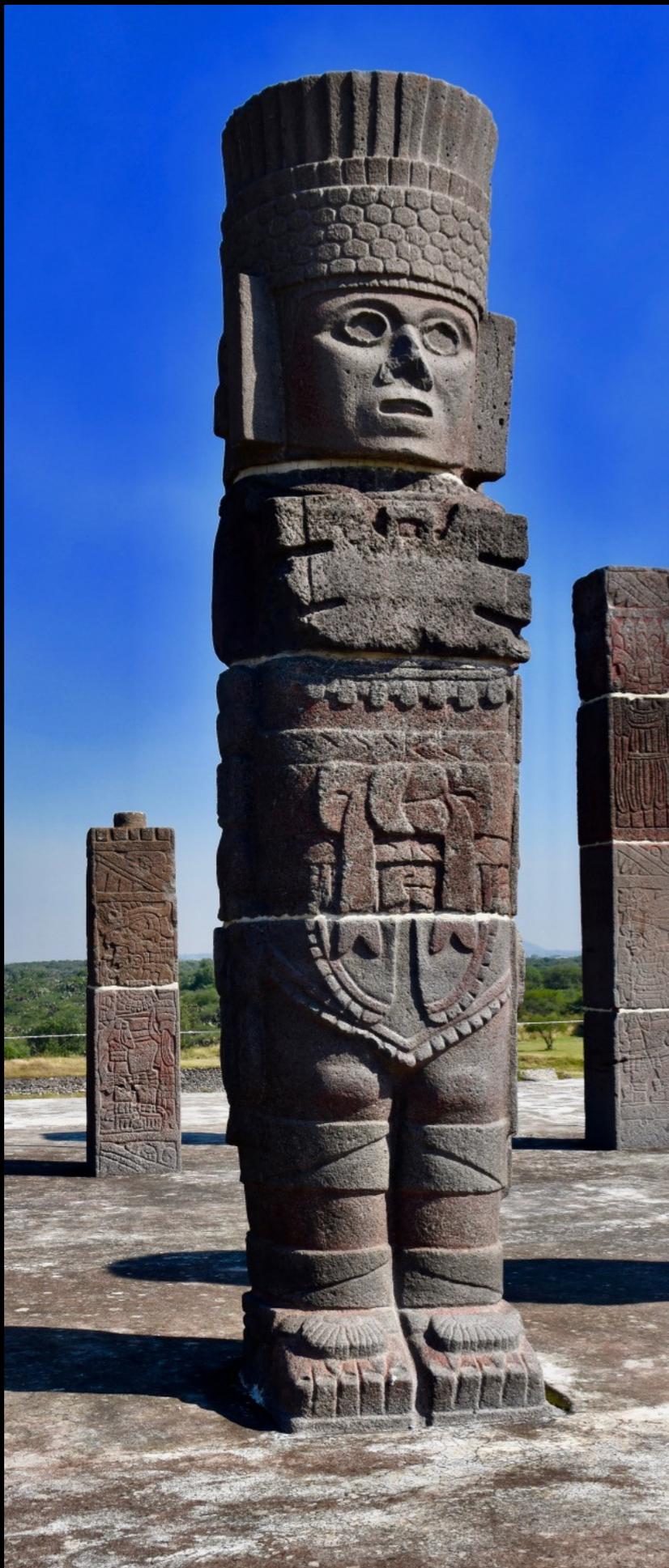


Aztec Water Deity (Chalchiuhtlicue)  
15th-early 16th century

## Colonial period (1519-1821)

- ▶ Spaniards arrive in Mesoamerica in 1519 and change things drastically over the next 300 years
- ▶ Though Aztecs had superior numbers their weapons were inferior and the Spaniards were able to gain control over the Aztec cities
- ▶ European diseases like smallpox, mumps and measles also led to great decline (By 1520, smallpox had reduced the population of Tenochtitlan by 40% in just one year.)
- ▶ After his victory, Cortes razed Tenochtitla and built Mexico City on its ruins

# TOLTEC CIVILIZATION



Colossal Atlantids  
Tula, Mexico  
900-1150 CE

# The Mesoamerican Ritual Ball Game



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYJxng6i4NQ>



El Tajín Ball Court, c. 800 - 1200 C.E



Seated Ballplayer

1st century B.C.-A.D. 3rd century



Standing Ballplayer

1st century B.C.-A.D. 3rd century