Classic Era Culture and Society in Mesoamerica, 200-900

1. Introduction
   1. Mesoamericans were unified by similarities in material culture, religious beliefs, and social structure
      1. Built off of Olmec and Chavin river-valley civilizations
   2. During the classical era, these civilizations grew in population and wealth thanks to expanding trade routes
      1. New cities grew on top of older cities, increasing their size and importance
      2. They had populations divided into social classes and were dominated by hereditary political and religious elites
   3. Political and cultural innovations did not come from new technologies
      1. Major innovations in agriculture, such as irrigation and terracing, had been done for centuries
      2. Instead, the achievements of the classical era depended on the ability for powerful figures to organize and command large groups of people
2. Teotihuacan
   1. Largest city in the Americas, between 150,000 and 200,000 people
   2. Built temples to worship their gods
      1. The sun, the moon, the storm god, Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent)
      2. Practiced human sacrifice, which was seen as a sacred duty towards the gods
   3. Government forced farmers to move into the city and walk out to their fields
      1. Wanted a labor force close by, allowed them to create more farm land (draining swamps, creating irrigation, building terraces)
   4. Members of the elite class controlled taxes and trade
      1. They lived separately from lower class people and even dressed and ate differently
      2. Did not consolidate power in a single ruler, wealthy aristocracy was in charge
   5. The Teotihuacan civilization eventually fell due to inside and outside factors
      1. Internally, there was conflict among the ruling elite and mismanagement of resources
      2. Externally, it appears that the city was overwhelmed by nearby rivals and nomadic invaders
3. The Maya
   1. Located in modern day Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and Southern Mexico
      1. Shared a single culture but never unified politically (Like: Greek City-States)
   2. Most powerful cities controlled groups of smaller cities
      1. Built temples and created rituals that linked the power of kings to the gods
      2. The center of large cities contained monumental architecture meant to show the wealth and power of the rulers
   3. Mayan kings communicated directly with ancestors and gods through bloodletting rituals and hallucinogenic trances
   4. Warfare was infused with religious meaning and ritual
      1. Mayans fought to secure captives more than acquire land
      2. Elite prisoners were sacrificed, commoners were enslaved
   5. Only two women are believed to have ruled Mayan kingdoms
      1. Women played a major role in public religious ceremonies
      2. Some leaders traced their elite lineage through the mother
      3. Much less is known about common women but scholars believe they played a central role in maintain the household economy
   6. Made improvements to Olmec calendar, mathematics, and writing systems
      1. Elaborate calendar systems came from complex understanding of astronomy
      2. Also developed the concept of zero (separately from Gupta Empire… obviously)
      3. Mayan writing system was more similar to hieroglyphics or cuneiform than other classical languages (Greek, Latin, etc.)
   7. A combination of causes ended the age of the Maya, including warfare, urban decline, environmental degradation, and disease
4. The Moche
   1. Followed the Chavín civilization in the Andes of South America
   2. Not an empire, simply controlled surrounding cities
   3. Used irrigation to grow crops such as maize, beans, quinoa, and sweet potatoes
      1. Canals and aqueducts transported water from as far as 65 miles away
   4. Maintained large herds of alpacas and llamas to transport goods across the difficult terrain
      1. Also used for their wool (clothing) and for food
   5. Class divisions based on wealth
      1. Political elites were priests and military leaders, who dressed differently and lived separately from the common people
      2. Warrior/priests buried with gold and jewelry (Egypt, anyone?)
   6. Creating textiles (clothing, baskets, etc.) was very important, especially for women
      1. Even elite women devoted time to weaving
   7. Civilization experienced several natural disasters
      1. At one point an earthquake triggered a flood
      2. Droughts lead to larger deserts and sand was pushed into irrigation systems
      3. Leaders lost their authority because they could not appease the gods of nature (Mandate of Heaven? Kind of?)