

ANTH S-134. Mesoamerican Civilizations (CRN: 31607)

William L. Fash PhD, Bowditch Professor of Central American and Mexican Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University

Mesoamerica is one of the great culture areas of the ancient and modern worlds. The peoples of the region, inhabiting what is today Mexico and upper Central America, include the Maya, the Zapotec, and the Aztec, who long ago developed their own unique brand of civilization, with cities, states, empires, and written histories. Their modern descendants, only a few centuries after being "conquered," now struggle to adapt their own identities to the contemporary world. But due to their resiliency in the face of immense pressures to change, many of their traditional practices still thrive, some intact, others in a highly transformed state. Prodigious scholarship sheds light on the origins and evolution of ancient Mesoamerican traditions and how they can sometimes shape present social and political realities. Today, Maya intellectual and political activists offer their own interpretations of the past and the present movements for cultural nationalism. We begin the course by examining the ideas that drove PreColumbian religion, art, and political economy, analyzing the ways in which power and social identity were constructed through myth, ritual, and official history. We will encounter numerous customs and achievements of Mesoamericans, and discover the legacies of several great orators, warriors, and statesmen such as Nezahualcoyotl, 8 Deer Jaguar Claw, and Yax Kuk Mo. We then pursue the continuities and changes in those traditions brought about by the Spanish conquest, colonial rule, and subsequent global change in the twentieth century. This broad historical sweep allows us a deeper understanding of how the Mesoamerican past continues to shape the present there, and conversely, how living cultures and behaviors help illuminate processes, events, and worldviews in the archaeological past. This course allows students to appreciate the breadth and depth of Mesoamerican civilizations through lectures; films; icons; manuscripts, and artifacts in the collections of the Peabody Museum; readings on PreColumbian, colonial, and modern-day cultures; and publications by prominent Maya scholars involved in social movements to promote self determination in the twenty-first century.