

MESO-AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

ANTHROPOLOGY 3312

Prof. Brigitte Kovacevich

Southern Methodist University, Spring 2014

TTh 11:00am-12:20pm FOSC 155



Xipe Totec (Our Lord the Flayed One)-Aztec god of life, death, rebirth, and agricultural fertility, wears the flayed skin of a sacrificial victim symbolizing fertility, rebirth, and regeneration

Course Perspective:

For nearly two million years human societies consisted of small nomadic bands who relied on hunting, fishing, and foraging wild plants. Between 10,000 and 5,000 years ago, after the end of the last Ice Age, some of these societies began to change dramatically. Small bands in several places around the world settled into agricultural villages and towns, and eventually into bustling cities. For the first time life was characterized by great differences in wealth and power, large urban populations, long-distance trade, large-scale warfare, and corporate art styles—some of the characteristics which, for better or worse, comprise "civilization."

In this course we will examine the processes that fostered the rise and fall of Meso-American civilizations, such as the Olmec, Maya, Zapotec, Toltec, and Aztec. We will ask- and attempt to answer- why ancient civilizations experienced repeated cycles of rise, expansion, and collapse. We will consider the role of specific elements in the rise and collapse of these civilizations, not only material elements such as ecology, farming, trade, and exotic goods, but also ideological elements like religious beliefs, cosmology, and worldview.

Throughout the course, we will also examine certain ancient practices and attempt to make sense of them in the context of their specific culture and worldview. For example: Why did Maya nobles pierce their tongues and genitals to draw their own blood? Why did the Aztecs perform massive human sacrifices that sometimes numbered in the thousands? What were the cultural reasons behind the practice of cannibalism? These "bizarre" practices will be addressed as scientific questions, and as we move along we'll discuss some of the various methods archaeologists use- deciphering past writing systems, interpreting art, examining indigenous landscapes, reading primary conquest accounts, and of course, archaeological excavation itself. We will seek insights into the process of cultural evolution and the meaning of human difference. Finally, we will cast a critical eye on how the Meso-American past is reconstructed, how it has been exoticized and how these popular perceptions impact the indigenous people of today.

Historical Context, Level 2 and Individuals, Institutions and Culture, Level 2.
Human Diversity and Information Literacy Proficiencies and Experiences.