This bibliography provides a selected list of current English language literature on the prehistory of Mesoamerica, South America, and the Caribbean Culture Area (the Caribbean Islands and Central America east of the Maya). Leads for further research can be found in Section I and in the bibliographies of the books in this reading list.

Publications listed are not available from the Smithsonian Institution. Copies may be seen in larger libraries or obtained through interlibrary loan.

** Denotes items suitable for secondary school students.
Section I: Handbooks and Bibliographic Guides


A 16 volume set covering in detail all aspects of Mesoamerican anthropology, including archaeology.

vol. 1. Natural Environmental and Early Cultures, Robert L. West, editor.
vol. 3. Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica, part II. Gordon R. Willey, editor.
vol. 5. Linguistics. Norman A. McQuown, editor.
vol. 10. Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica, part I. Gordon F. Ekholm and Ignacio Bernal, editors.
vol. 11. Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica, part II. Gordon F. Ekholm and Ignacio Bernal, editors.


Supplement vol. 3. Literatures. Munro S. Edmonson, editor, with Patricia A. Andrews, asst. editor.


Summary of all aspects of South American anthropology, including archaeology, with good illustrations and bibliography. Sections now out of date.

vol. I. The Marginal Tribes. 1946.
vol. II. The Andean Civilization. 1946.
vol. III. The Tropical Forest Tribes. 1948.
vol. IV. The Circum-Caribbean Tribes. 1948.
vol. VII. Index (to the 6 volumes), 1959.
Section II: General Works

A comprehensive look at the roles of women in everyday life in Pre-Columbian Central and South America. Includes bibliography and timeline. Entire second half of the book is dedicated to photographs of artifacts, many in color.

This essay seeks to compare the Aztec and Inca, two great contemporaneous civilizations, showing their similarities and differences. A bibliography and a chart of comparable traits about each nation are included.

This cultural atlas covers North, South, and Mesoamerica and the Caribbean. Includes many color maps and photographs, and a “Living Heritage” section of Native American cultures present today.

Fascinating look at Pre-Columbian Latin America’s culinary history. Extensive bibliography, but no recipes.

A basic overview of the mythologies, legends, folktales, and major present-day religions from all over the world. Includes an A to Z macropedia, in which major figures are touched upon, followed by a micropedia with many more, minor figures, also A to Z. Also has sections throughout the macropedia comparing common themes found in ancient and modern religions and folktales from around the world. Only useful as a secondary reference material, however.

Picks up where *Great Journey* (see below) left off, covering the history of several American cultures before Columbus. Explores the prehistoric settlers of the Americas, followed by several great cultures of Mesoamerica, South America, and North America. Replete with photos and a list of books for further reading.

Covers the prehistory of humanity, starting with its genesis in Africa and its spread to all parts of the world, including the Americas. A comprehensive list of books for further reading and several illustrations and photographs also included.

A balanced appraisal of evidence for Pre-Columbian transoceanic contacts eminating from Europe, Africa, and Asia.

An introduction to the lands of these ancient people is followed by a detailed discussion of their various art forms. Contains more than 200 pictures.
An extensive technical investigation of the plant that allowed the rise and development of many
New World cultures. Emphasis on man’s role in the changing genetic nature of corn.

General introduction to the prehistoric cultures of North and South America from an ecological
perspective, utilizing the culture area approach. Includes basic maps and bibliography. Good
introduction for the non-specialist.

and Brenda Zollman Collection of Precolumbian Art*, foreward by Michael D. Coe; photographs by Justin
Book features photographs of Mesoamerican and (to a lesser extent) Andean artifacts, all in full
color. Each photograph has an extensive note accompanying it.

Prescott, William H. *The History of the Conquest of Mexico and the History of the Conquest of Peru*. Cooper
Classic account of the Spanish conquests by a 19th century historian detailing military maneuvers
and battles. Historically very interesting.

Rarenhult, Göran, general editor, and David Hurst Thomas, U.S. editor. *New World and Pacific Civilizations:
Thick book, filled with many color photographs and illustrations, looks at the cultures of the
Americas (North, Middle, and South), the Pacific Islands, and Japan from their distinct origins at
least 10 to 12,000 yr to the time of European contact. Also has bibliography and chapter-by-
chapter timelines.

A good, thorough introduction to the many cultures of North, Meso-, and South America and the
Caribbean before the Conquest. Also included are a bibliography and many color photographs
and pictures.

Excellent overview of the prehistory and anthropology of the human race from the very
beginnings of life on earth to the end of the 15th century AD. Puts the events of the Pre-
Columbian Americas into context with the events that were taking place all over the world at the
same time. Many photographs and illustrations, all in vivid color.

This book focuses on Aztec, Maya, and Incan children from the womb to adolescence. It discusses
toys & games, childhood diseases, children’s role in human sacrifice, and Aztec fathers’ advice to
their sons and daughters. Several pictures and an extensive bibliography.

Stuart, Gene S. *America’s Ancient Cities*. National Geographic Society, 1995.**
Looks at the ancient cities of North and Mesoamerica, including Chaco Canyon in Southwestern
U.S., the mounds east of the Mississippi, and various Maya sites in the Yucatán.
Section III: The Caribbean Culture Area

Covers the cultures of the Bahamas—the Tainos, or more appropriately the Lucayan, from 2100 BC to AD 1520. Discusses prehistoric climate, colonization, sociopolitical structures, and life at the time of European contact. Maps, illustrations, and a 40-page bibliography.


Lange, Fred W., and Doris Z. Stone. *The Archaeology of Lower Central America*. Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1984.**
Various authors give an in-depth look into the archaeology of present-day Nicaragua, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Panama, and extreme northeastern Colombia. An extensive bibliography and photographs, black & white and color.

The author uses all the information available to him to give as detailed a history as possible of the Tainos, the first Native American culture to come into contact with the Europeans (they were, literally, the people who greeted Columbus). The book goes from 4000 BC to the years following Columbus’ legendary voyage. Bibliography and glossary.

Stevens-Arroyo, Antonio M. *Cave of the Jagua: The Mythological World of the Tainos*. Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1988.**
A study of Taino religion and its interrelationship with religions from around the world. He makes every effort to be reader-friendly. Bibliography included.

Taylor, S. Lyman. *Two Worlds: The Indian Encounter with the European 1492-1509*. Univ. of Utah Press, 1988.**
The author masses together many first-hand accounts of the first contact between Spaniard and Taino, followed by what happened in the years that followed. Documents included are Las Casas’ *Relación*, Columbus’ journal, Queen Isabela’s will, among others, all weaved together by the author’s own narratives.


Section IV: South America

A thorough look at the tombs of this ancient Moche site in Peru, starting with a basic overview of Moche civilization, followed by in-depth looks at archaeological excavations of several tombs in the Sipán, Peru area. Using the evidence from these tombs, Moche burial practices and aspects of culture are investigated. Many full-color photographs and illustrations.

Collection of essays about the conquest of the Andes and the cultures of Spain and the Andes of the day. Essays included are by James Lockhart, R. Tom Zuidema, and the editors, among several others. Pictures and bibliography.
Interdisciplinary perspectives on the Andean past under colonial rule. Covers the colonial socioeconomic order, religious conversion, resistance, rebellion, and consciousness.

Description of artificial mummification practiced by inhabitants of the north coast of Chile, beginning 8000 BC.

General overview of mural painting in Pre-Columbian Peru, from the “Initial” period at Kotosh to the Conquest of the Incas. Includes many photographs, diagrams and tables, and an extensive bibliography.

Relates the history of the Inca people in the final days of the empire, looking at many aspects of their society. Includes illustrations and maps.

Describes the earliest complex culture of South America and its dispersal throughout the Central Andes. Included are many photographs and diagrams, a chronological chart, and an extensive bibliography.

Together, these books offer a full recounting of Inca history, society, religion and custom by a Jesuit priest who lived a century after the fact. Each book has maps and glossary of native words.

The son of an Inca princess and a Spanish conqueror relates a fascinating history of the Inca people—their governments, laws, and life patterns—based on his personal experiences and research carried out with older informants and native documents.

Looks at the Nazca lines and many facts and controversial opinions regarding their significance—astronomical, religious, or extraterrestrial, for instance. Includes an extensive bibliography, photographs, drawings, and maps.

Little known in English-speaking countries, this first-hand account of contact between a group of Huguenots, among them the Burgundian author, sent to Brazil as missionaries and colonists, and the indigenous Tupinamba of Brazil, is a classic of French literature relating to the Conquest. This translation is based on Léry’s 1580 2nd edition. Extensive notes and bibliography containing works both contemporary with Léry’s (in several languages) and modern.

A large book containing photographs of many artifacts from all over South America, including sections on the various time periods in Pre-Columbian Peru, as well as Ecuador, Colombia,
Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil. Short historical passages come before each section. Many notes, maps, and a chronological chart.


Good overview of Ecuadorian prehistory from the pre-ceramic periods through the Inca conquests. Special emphasis paid to technical refinements in pottery.

Good overview of the known history of the Inca (or Inka) empire, starting about 12,000 years before the present and finishing with the Conquest.


Explores the history of the Indians of Colombia up to 1600 AD. Many full-color photographs, maps, a glossary, and a bibliography.

Explores the state of Venezuelan archeology as of 1963, tracing the developments of the various prehistoric cultures to the Indo-Hispanic era. Many illustrations.


A Spanish adventurer’s interesting account of the Inca. The work is divided into two chronicles, the first describing the geography of Inca land, its roads and villages, the second focusing on Inca institutions and customs.


Section V: Mesoamerica


Berdan, Frances F., and Patricia Reiff Anawalt. *The Codex Mendoza*. Four volumes. Univ. of California, 1992. This mammoth undertaking is the definitive scholarly version of the Aztec manuscript known as the Codex Mendoza. In the first volume, various authors give their own interpretations of the codex. In the second volume, the codex is put into context with other recorded history of the time. Volume three is a full color facsimile of the actual codex and volume four is a page-by-page translation of the codex, with identifications of the pictoglyphs.

Bernal, Ignacio. *A History of Mexican Archaeology*, translated from the Spanish by Ruth Malet. Thames & Hudson, 1983. Starting with the Conquest, this book thoroughly examines each era of archaeology in Mexico, up to the time of printing. Includes several photographs and an extensive bibliography of books in Spanish, French, English and German.


Berrin, Kathleen, and Esther Pasztory, editors. *Teotihuacán: Art From the City of the Gods*. Thames & Hudson, 1994. A broad range of topics are discussed, from art and architecture to life in the city and its relations with other cultures. Includes color illustrations of Teotihuacán objects, and a bibliography.

Bierhorst, John. *Codex Chimalpopoca: The Text in Nahuatl with Glossary and Grammatical Notes, and History and Mythology of the Aztecs: Codex Chimalpopoca*, Translated from the Nahuatl by John Bierhorst. Univ. of Arizona Press, 1992. Two companion volumes of the Codex Chimalpopoca, which, in two sections, gives a lengthy account of the history of the Aztec people through both history and legend, and mythology.

Bierhorst, John, ed. *The Hungry Woman: Myths and Legends of the Aztecs*. 1st Quill ed., 1993. A collection of the myths, fables, and legends of the Aztec people, covering the creation of the world, the fall of Tula, the rise and fall of the Aztecs, and Our Lady of Guadalupe. Illustrations by Aztec artists of the conquest period. Also includes glossary, bibliography, and Nahuatl pronunciation guide.

Boone, Elizabeth Hill. *The Aztec World*. (Exploring The Ancient World Ser.) Jeremy Sabloff, gen. ed. Smithsonian Institution, 1994. Good introductory book to the world of the Aztec empire examining the archaeology and what is known of this culture based on the latest research. Includes chapter-by-chapter bibliography and many photographs and illustrations, all but a few in color.


   The story of eight Maya archaeologists—del Río, Dupaix, Galindo, Waldeck, Stephens, Brasseur de Bourbourg, Le Plongeon, and Edward H. Thompson—their important discoveries and theories.

   Explores Mesoamerican civilization as known to Moctezuma (or Montezuma), with essays by Carrasco, Matos, Anthony Aveni, and Elizabeth Hill Boone. Includes a bibliography, glossary of Nahuatl words, and many photographs, most in color.

   This text, with superb illustrations by Miguel Covarrubias, examines the Aztec religion, its importance to everyday life, and the Aztec view of history. Includes many descriptions of the gods’ dress and its symbolism.

   A general look at Aztec culture before and during the Conquest—the city of Tenochtitlán, the various roles of the Aztec citizens (including gender roles), the role of religion, and the invasion of Cortés and its impact. Also includes lists of holidays and gods and twenty pages of photographs.

   A well-written, illustrated summary of the Mexican high cultures north of the Maya area, from the earliest Archaic period to the Spanish conquest. Good discussion of the domestication of corn and other plants vital to the growth of many New World civilizations.

   Detailed look at the decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphics, one of the great sagas in the history of archaeology, by one of the leading experts in the field. Includes thorough bibliography, many diagrams and tables, especially of the Mayan script itself, and glossary, plus sixteen plates of photographs, most of them of the major figures in the Maya decipherment saga.

   An excellent summary of the rise of Mayan civilization from its early roots. Emphasizing the classic aspects of Mayan life and philosophy. Well illustrated.

   Good introductory book to the world of the ancient Maya examining the archaeology and what is known of this culture based on the latest research. Includes chapter-by-chapter bibliography and many photographs and illustrations, all but a few in color.

   Series of essays on the most up-to-date discoveries and theories on the ancient Maya. Includes essays by George Stuart, Jeremy Sabloff and Gair Tourtellot, Stephen D. Houston, Barbara and Dennis Tedlock, and the editors, among others.
Davies, Nigel. Toltecs, Until the Fall of Tula, Repr. Ed., 1987; Toltec Heritage: From the Fall of Tula to the Rise of Tenochtitlán, 1980; and The Aztec Empire: The Toltec Resurgence, 1987. Univ. of Oklahoma Press. The “trilogy” of the history of civilization in the Valley of Mexico from the dawn of the Toltecs (Toltecs) through the fall of Tula and the dawn of the Aztecs (Toltec Heritage) to the Conquest (Aztec Empire).

Díaz, Gisele, and Alan Rodgers. The Codex Borgia: A Full Color Restoration of the Ancient Mexican Manuscript, with new introduction and commentary by Bruce E. Byland. Dover Publications, 1993.** A full-color restoration of the Aztec codex, with full notes referring to each page of the codex.


Freidel, David, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker. Maya Cosmos. William Morrow & Co., 1993. The authors use translations of the ancient Mayan hieroglyphs to tell the history of the Maya. Includes extensive endnotes, thorough bibliography, and many illustrations, including several plates of color photographs.


Hassig, Ross. War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica. Univ. of California Press, 1992. This book examines warfare in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and how it shaped the history of the region. Included are sixteen plates of photographs and an extensive bibliography.


Houston, S. D. *Reading the Past: Maya Glyphs*. Univ. of California Press, 1990.**

Touches on the history of decipherment. Most of the book is dedicated to actual glyphs with a sample text, some grammatical rules, and a list of sites and museums that have glyphs.


This oversize book contains a complete color facsimile of the Aztec codex in question, plus extensive notes and background information on the history and meanings of the codex. It is in English, but has forwards in French and Spanish, as well as English translations of all words written in Nahuatl and Spanish on the codex. Bibliography, guide to pictoglyphs, and various other tables included.


This particular translation is an excellent one of this vital work by Fray Diego; this is the complete text of the relation of the Yucatec Maya at the time of the conquest. Other, more recent translations are also available from other publishing companies.


Broad discussion of Aztec cosmology, education, philosophy, and religion based on the translation of native records.


Looking at what the Aztecs wrote and what is known about their self-image, the author delves into Aztec history, tradition, and nationalism (in the eyes of the Aztecs themselves) at the height of their empire. Introduction investigates the fascination we have with the Aztecs and the history of Aztec studies from the 1970s. Extensive list of references.


Sixteenth century accounts of the Conquest of the Aztec people by the Spanish. Given in both Spanish and Nahuatl, all translated into English.


An examination of Olmec jaguar and serpentine symbolism to reveal the beliefs and religious  
practices of this early Mesoamerican high culture.

A Priest’s account of his people’s suffering and enslavement at the hands of the Spanish. Contains  
references to the religious ceremonies, prophecies, and history of the Maya people, with  
Makemson’s commentary emphasizing Maya cosmology and concept of time.

Princeton Univ. Press, 1993. **  
Explores writing in four major Pre-Columbian societies: Aztec, Mixtec, Zapotec, and Maya, and  
how it used to depict many different events. Includes many tables and photographs and an  
extensive bibliography.


Martin, Simon, and Nikolai Grube. *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens: Deciphering the Dynasties of the  

McAnany, Patricia A. *Living with the Ancestors: Kinship and Kingship in Ancient Maya Society*. Univ. of Texas  

Fascinating history of Tikal and its various rulers, based primarily on translations of its stelae.

An illustrated dictionary of the gods and symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya.

Covers what we know of Teotihuacan’s society, art, and architecture. Includes section on recent  
archaeological projects at the site, diagrams, many photographs, several of which are in color, and  
a bibliography (*note*: most of its books are in Spanish).


Nuttall, Zelia, translator and editor. *The Book of the Life of the Ancient Mexicans*. Univ. of California Press,  
Reproduction of 1903 printing.  
Facsimile of the anonymous “Hispano-Mexican” manuscript details the “rites and superstitions”  
of the Aztecs. Facsimile text is all in 16th century Spanish, but there are colorful pictures with the  
text that provide a fascinating look at pre- and post-conquest Aztec codices and drawings.  
Companion volume is Boone’s Codex Magliabecchiano, listed above.
Investigates the various aspects of Olmec culture, using any and all information available. Includes many pictures, color and black/white and a bibliography.

This work, posthumously edited and published, focuses on the history of the ancient Maya as can be told solely through examination of the stone hieroglyphs and sites, their spread throughout the region, and what they say. Gives dates in Julian years and Maya long count. Includes many detailed illustrations, extensive bibliography, and a biographical sketch of the author, written in her memory.

This book of Maya architecture illustrates what some of the more famous Maya structures may have looked like in their heyday, with drawings of what they look like now, and biographical pieces about each illustrated ruin.

Most chapters originated at a session organized for the 1997 meeting of the American Society for Ethnohistory held in Mexico City.


Investigates possible answers to the questions of what the ancient cities of Mexico, from the Olmecs through the Aztecs, were like and how we could know these things, with write-ups of possible “slices-of-life” from various Pre-Columbian cities. Includes diagrams, many photographs, and extensive site-by-site bibliography.

What is known about the ancient Maya, including the latest Maya research, is put into the context of new methods and methodology being used by modern archaeologists. Many color photographs and illustrations, and extensive chapter-by-chapter bibliography.

This is the actual document by Sahagún, the noted Spanish friar who carefully recorded many otherwise-lost aspects of Aztec daily public and private life. Several introductions by the translators followed by Sahagún’s introduction. Parallel columns of English and Spanish/Nahuatl. Few illustrations, though all are taken from Sahagún’s text.

An extremely detailed look at the known history of the Maya, using the information gleaned from hieroglyphics, among other sources. Includes a lengthy bibliography and many diagrams, maps, and photographs, including several color plates. One particular highlight is a timeline of Maya history given in Julian years and Maya long count.

Intensively explores eight themes in Maya art, among them being royalty, bloodletting, and other aspects of religion. Includes sections on the Maya calendar and hieroglyphics. Well-illustrated with many photographs, and a list of suggested books for further reading.


An in-depth look into the Mixtec civilization of Oaxaca up to the Colonial period. Has many maps and illustrations, and a bibliography.


A fascinating look at the extant codices of the Aztec and Maya, with lots of illustrations, some in color. All books in bibliography are in Spanish.

A classic work on travel and archaeology by one of the first modern explorers of the Mayan area. Many important illustrations by Frederick Catherwood.


Taube, Karl. *Aztec and Maya Myths.* 2nd ed. Univ. of Texas Press, 1995.** 
Very good, general look at the myths of the Aztec and Maya, looking at the main aspects of each, and going into a comparison of similar points that may have had common origins. Also includes many illustrations and photographs, many in color.

Translated from the Quiché Mayan, this edition of the Mayan holy book is complete with the full text, in English only, extensive annotations, pronunciation guide to Quiché words, and several relevant photographs and illustrations, plus a history of the *Popol Vuh*.


A good look at the Aztec empire, first as the Spanish found it, then as it started out a few centuries before. This book explores the Toltec roots of Aztec culture and the conquering by the Aztecs of their neighbors. Also covers Aztec public and private life. Includes thorough bibliography, list of annual Aztec ceremonies, and 143 black-&-white illustrations.


An introductory text emphasizing important cultural changes rather than the chronological sequence of events. Includes a glossary, list of major deities and an extensive bibliography.


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