

The greater part of the area in which the Old Empire culture developed is, but for the plains of Tabasco and the lowlands of Petén, a mountain region. The landscape is broken by limestone ranges, intersected by broad valleys. The general trend of the mountains is from northwest to southeast, following the line of the main geological fault. When studying the maps of the region one will see that in Tabasco, Chiapas, and the highlands of Guatemala there are many rivers. In the Petén, on the other hand, rivers are scarce, the ancient cities generally being located beside aguadas, or water holes.

Geologically, the State of Tabasco is quaternary, but as soon as the mountain ranges are reached, one gets into tertiary limestone which continues until the Sierra Madre is reached, close to the Pacific coast.

In the New Empire region, i. e., on the peninsula of Yucatan, conditions are different. The limestone underlying this area is young (quaternary) and very porous, so we do not find any rivers. The vegetation is chiefly of bush character. The ancient settlers were forced to build their cities by water holes or caves containing water, as, for example, the Cenotes at Chichén Itzá, or the caves of Bolonchén.

Up to the present day, the inhabitants of the whole of this area speak languages of Maya stock, as already stated.

In most archaeological fields one is able to follow the development of culture from a very primitive stage. The deeper one digs, the more primitive are the objects found. This is called archaeological stratification. By a careful study of such stratification the archaeologist is able to follow the gradual development of the ancient inhabitants of one particular place, and to estimate the approximate age of the objects found. Such stratifications are well known, for example, in Egypt and in the Mexican Valley. But no such stratification has as yet been found in the Maya country. In most parts of the area bed rock is reached after a few feet of digging; only objects from the fully developed culture period, but hardly any primitive objects have been found. The question arises: Where did the Maya race come from?

By the way of answer, a multitude of theories have been launched, most of them based on superficial resemblances between Maya objects and the products of cultures from other parts of the world.

Some maintain that the Mayas came from Egypt, or even are descendents of African races; some place the cradle of the Mayas on the lost continent of Atlantis; and others say that they arrived from Asia on elephants with their culture fully developed.