Chapter 3
The Mesoamerican World at Spanish Contact

The Mesoamerican world that confronted the Spanish conquistadors at the beginning of the sixteenth century was extremely complex, the result of a long development as outlined in the two preceding chapters. In this chapter we consider the extent to which Mesoamerica formed an interconnected world where events taking place in one social unit affected those in another, however distant they might have been from one to the other. Such an approach will help simplify for us the complexity of Mesoamerica, while also casting into relief the underlying cohesiveness and unity that has allowed the peoples of the region to resist cultural destruction during the centuries following Spanish contact. We will begin our discussion of Mesoamerica at Spanish contact with a brief description of its social and cultural complexity, and then turn to an analysis of Late Postclassic Mesoamerica as a world system.

The reconstruction of contact-period Mesoamerica to follow is based primarily on archaeological and ethnohistoric (documentary) studies. These two approaches often yield quite different information, but together they make possible a more rounded and complete view of the Mesoamerican peoples. They also provide a meaningful connection between the preceding Chapters 1 and 2, and this chapter. Many of the archaeological studies upon which the account is based—especially those dealing with the remains of Mesoamerican settlements that flourished at the time of Spanish contact—are cited and discussed in Chapter 2.

The two most important types of documentary sources employed in this chapter consist of Spanish accounts, provided by the first explorers, conquerors, and colonizers of the region; and written accounts left to us by the Mesoamericans themselves (see Chapter 6 for a full discussion of these latter documents). Useful supplementary information comes from studies of linguistic and cultural features that the descendants of those original Mesoamericans successfully preserved through five difficult centuries of "colonization." Based on these various sources of information, we attempt to answer the question of what the Mesoamerican world was like on the eve of contact with the Spaniards.

SOCIOCULTURAL COMPLEXITY OF THE MESOAMERICAN WORLD

Let us begin our account with a brief review of the social and cultural diversity that characterized the contact (Late Postclassic) period Mesoamerican world. At this point, our goal is to portray the complexity of Mesoamerica in extremely broad terms, building upon the description of various regions, archaeological sites, and peoples discussed in Chapter 2.

City-States and Empires

Most scholars argue that the fundamental building blocks of the Mesoamerican world at contact were towns or cities and their dependent rural communities. The rural communities were made up of kinship groups, often patrilineal in descent, which together formed a commoner class of peasants. The elite ruling class and its attendants resided in the politically dominant urban centers where they exercised authority over the rural commoners. Scholars have long debated whether these units in Mesoamerica constituted chiefdoms or states. It now seems clear, however, that chiefdoms and states are best understood as models we use in an attempt to understand a continuum of ancient Mesoamerican political groups, and that no specific feature can demarcate one polity as chiefdom or another as state. Any given political unit in Mesoamerica, then, might fall toward either the chiefdom or the state end of the continuum, depending upon the degree to which the ruling group's authority was accepted as superior to all other forms of internal authority.

Many political units in Mesoamerica at the time of contact fell on the chiefdom end of the continuum where kinship relations (especially lineage relations) were dominant; but the majority of them—numbering perhaps several hundred—fell on the state end where military and recognized central authority relations prevailed. The latter are usually referred to by scholars as "city-states." Each city-state had a ruler or joint rulers, appointed by the "royal" lineages to act as the supreme authority over the political center and dependent rural communities. For example, at least fifty city-states existed in the Valley of Mexico alone, each supreme ruler being identified by the title *tlatoani* ("he who speaks"; plural, *tlatoque*). In the case of highland Guatemala, to give another example, some thirty city-states flourished, each maximum ruler bearing the title of *ajpop* ("he of the mat," "councilman").

Mesoamerica, however, did not consist simply of a large number of equal and autonomous city-states. Throughout the region powerful imperial states (empires) used conquest along with other means to subjugate formerly independent chiefdoms, city-states, and even empires. The Mexica or Aztec empire is the best-known imperial state, but there were perhaps another ten to twenty notable examples in Mesoamerica from the contact period. Many of these empires were modeled on the legendary Toltec empire of Central Mexico, which had collapsed 300 years before the coming of the Spaniards (for details on the Toltec empire, see Chapter 1). Several successor states became "epigonal" Toltec city-states and empires, employing conquest and tribute collection as part of a mission to civilize Mesoamerica in the name of great

Toltec rulers of the past such as the priest-ruler Quetzalcoatl ("Feathered Serpent"). At least some of the imperial rulers claiming Toltec connections were actually usurpers who had ruled over small city-states or even chiefdoms located on the margins of Mesoamerica. Driven at first to expand in order to survive, these upstart rulers later created elaborate militaristic political visions, synthesizing ideas derived from both their own marginal political units and the more "civilized" Mesoamerican political tradition.

Imperial states like the Aztec empire were influential throughout Mesoamerica, and they were able to affect in significant ways the political units falling outside their direct control. A form of dependency relationship was created by the aggressive actions of such entities, and the resulting unequal relationships became a defining characteristic of Mesoamerica at the time of Spanish contact (see the discussion on the Mesoamerican world-system that follows).

Ethnic Groups

Mesoamerica is often described as a single "culture area," defined by a long list of cultural "traits" supposedly shared by the peoples of the area. Indeed, broad cultural patterns were common to the peoples of Mesoamerica, but it must also be emphasized that there was much cultural diversity within the region as well (additional social and linguistic diversity is discussed in Chapter 11).

A great part of the cultural diversity of Mesoamerica was an expression of an incredibly complex ethnic mosaic found throughout the region. Mesoamerican ethnic groups—often referred to in the account to follow as "peoples"—were often defined on linguistic grounds. Nevertheless, other important criteria were used to define ethnicity in Mesoamerica, such as occupation (for instance, groups of merchants or artisans), style of life (rustic vs. civilized), relations of descent (different lineage affiliations), religious cult (shared patron deities), and historical origins (such as emigration from a common sacred homeland). Ethnic "peoples" existed by the thousands throughout Mesoamerica, and they influenced all aspects of social life there.

Many of the Mesoamerican city-states had their origins in ethnic groups, and each group's particular language, deity, and general vision of the world continued to be influential long after political relations had become dominant over ethnic ties. For example, in Central Mexico most of the city-states were organized by "Chichimec" groups, the term *chichimec* being an ethnic designation that meant something like "nomadic peoples from the north." The Aztecs and several other Chichimec groups spoke Nahuatl, but some ethnic Chichimecs spoke other languages such as Otomí and Tarascan. In contrast, the ethnic groups that formed the Mayan city-states of highland Guatemala were usually referred to as *amaq'*, their defining criterion being emigration from a common homeland in the "East." The Mayan Amaq' groups spoke diverse languages, but they shared a common identity through affiliation in lineage systems that united them into kin groups of variable size.

Most city-states and all imperial states of Mesoamerica were multiethnic, thus raising the question of the extent to which state religion and ideology superseded inter-

nal ethnic cultural differences. Scholars have pointed out that Mesoamerican states such as the Aztec empire did not actively seek to impose their own gods and particular cultural practices on other peoples. Recent research indicates, however, that the ruling ethnic groups tended to reformulate their particular patron deity cults to promote religious ideologies that supported broader imperial interests. Ideologies stressing war and human sacrifice were widely promoted by states throughout Mesoamerica, although the particular features of each ideology varied considerably. We also know that ethnic ideas and symbols within the core areas of the larger states were often assimilated to the dominant imperial culture, whereas in the marginal areas, ethnic groups usually remained segregated as culturally distinct peoples.

Regional Networks

Beyond the cultural variation in Mesoamerica based on ethnic and political organization, broader sociocultural differences were of regional importance; the regional networks gave rise to expanded cultural expressions that are sometimes referred to in the literature as "civilizations." Archaeologists in particular have called attention to this regional diversity and have shown that it existed in Mesoamerica long before Spanish contact. Each regional network was characterized by distinctive language and cultural features promoted by highly influential polities that dominated the regional network. A prototypical case would be the Zapotec peoples who built the Monte Albán city and later nearby towns in the Valley of Oaxaca, in the process promoting a regional sociocultural network inherited by the peoples of the Oaxaca region at the time of Spanish contact.

The most important regional networks and corresponding cultures of Mesoamerica, according to one prominent scheme, were associated with the following geographic regions of Mesoamerica: highland Guatemala, lowland Yucatan, lower Central America, southern Veracruz-Tabasco, Oaxaca, Central Mexico, central Veracruz, northeastern Mexico, Guerrero, western Mexico, and northernwestern Mexico (see the section on ecology in the introductory chapter for the geographic characteristics of these regions). Some of the specific sociocultural features of these regions will be described next in conjunction with the positions that their peoples occupied within the wider Mesoamerican world-system.

In summary, Mesoamerica at the time of Spanish contact was composed of highly diverse component parts: numerous city-states, empires, ethnic groups, and regional networks.

MESOAMERICA AS A WORLD-SYSTEM

In this section we attempt to describe the unity of Mesoamerica despite the sociocultural diversity just outlined. One way that scholars attempt to simplify and make sense out of sociocultural diversity and complexity is to apply a world-system perspective to it. This perspective, as originally elaborated by Immanuel Wallerstein (1976) in order to explain historical developments in Europe, posits that for several thousand years the societies of the Old World were embedded in large intersocietal

networks known as "world-systems." Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was in the process of being formed into a "modern" world-system, the consequences of which have been felt ever since in all regions of the globe. The coming of the Europeans to Mesoamerica truly initiated a clash of "worlds," because, as we shall now see, Mesoamerica also had formed its own world-system at the time it was "discovered" by the Europeans.

A first step in seeing Mesoamerica as a world-system at the time of contact with Europe is to recognize that some of its component societies were dominant over others, and that as a result its diverse social units formed an integrated but stratified world. A second step is to understand that the Mesoamerican region was not under the political control of any single state, but instead it was an arena of competing political and economic (social) units. The most powerful Mesoamerican state at the time of Spanish contact was the Aztec empire, yet it controlled less than half of the territory in the Mesoamerican world. Furthermore, as already noted, other powerful, independent empires coexisted with the Aztecs. Mesoamerica at contact was tied together in important ways through economic bonds and thus constituted a "world economy" rather than a "world empire," despite occasional claims by the Aztecs that they were rulers over the entire "civilized" world known to them.

Students of Mesoamerica recognize that Central Mexico was the most influential area, or in world-system terms, the dominant core. As we have seen, however, the Mesoamerican world had other *core zones* in West Mexico, Oaxaca, Yucatan, and Guatemala. Adjacent to the core zones were located the socially dominated *peripheral zones* of Mesoamerica, in such regions as northwestern Mexico, northeastern Mexico, and southeastern Central America. The main *semiperipheral zones* of the Mesoamerican world-system can be identified primarily with zones specialized in trade and other commercial activities. These so-called semiperipheral zones functioned to bind the Mesoamerican world into a common economic system, largely by mediating between the unequal core and peripheral units. The most important semiperipheral unit in Mesoamerica at contact was probably Xicalanco on the Gulf Coast of southern Mexico, but other key semiperipheral units existed in northwest Mexico and along the Caribbean and Pacific coasts of Central America (Figure 3.1).

Relationships between core, periphery, and semiperiphery in the Mesoamerican world-system were determined to an important extent by the flow of luxury goods such as cotton garments, jade pieces, cacao beans, animal skins, rare tropical bird feathers, and gold ornaments. These "preciosities" were the lifeblood of the core states, for they were used to legitimize the authority of the rulers and reward the loyal cadres of warriors and state officials who dominated the intersocietal networks. The peripheral peoples were pressed by the core societies to yield their precious resources. The mechanisms employed in this unequal exchange process included ceremonial gift-giving and mediated trade within semiperipheral zones, as well as military threat, outright conquest, and tributary demands.

The exchange of goods between core and periphery societies, which underwrote the stratified relations of the Mesoamerican world-system, has been summarized as follows:

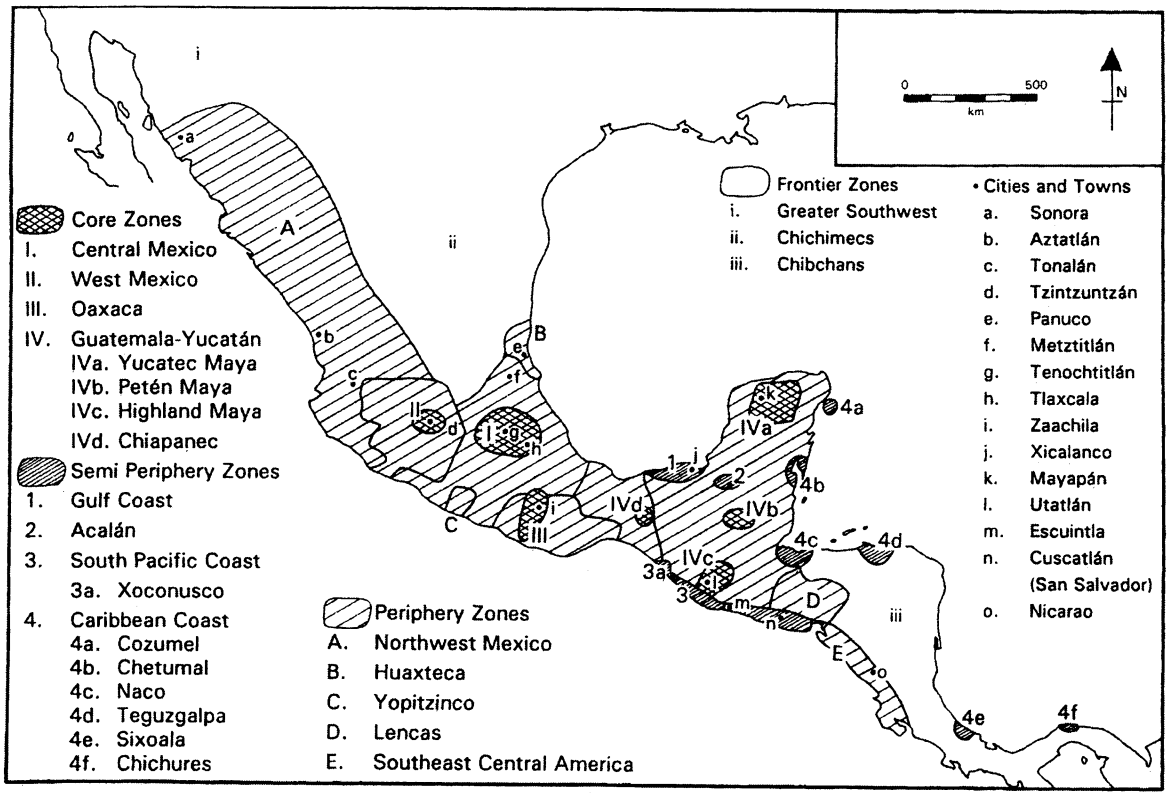

Figure 3.1 Core, semiperiphery, and periphery zones of the Mesoamerican world-system.

> . . . a consequence of the growth of powerful core states in ancient Mesoamerica was a widespread stimulation of trade, a reorientating of priorities in many places toward production and exchange in the world-system arena . . . [A]s powerful core states develop they must stimulate increased production of the luxury goods used to reward cadre. These heightened demands ripple outward, beyond territories conquered by the emergent cores, influencing production strategies over a broad area and thus incorporating more and more local groups into [the periphery of] a Mesoamerican world economy. (Blanton and Feinman 1984:678)

The core states of Mesoamerica expropriated not only the preciosities of the peripheral peoples but also their labor. In the core zones, most subject commoners were required to specialize in the production of bulk goods, especially "grains" such as maize, beans, and amaranth. In the peripheral zones, the demand for preciosities forced the peoples there to expand production of these precious items or of other items that could then be traded down the line for the desired goods. In particular, the prodigious demand for cotton garments by the core societies—it is estimated that over 3 million articles of cotton cloth flowed into Central Mexico alone each year—meant that much of the labor-intensive cultivation of cotton, spinning of it into thread, and weaving of the thread into cloth were shifted away from the core to the periphery.

It is likely that at the time of Spanish contact all societies located within the territorial boundaries created by the Mesoamerican world-system, however small or undeveloped, had been incorporated into the exchange network either as core, periphery, or semiperiphery. Outside the boundaries of Mesoamerica were found *frontier* peoples, divided into hundreds, perhaps thousands, of smaller, less complex social networks. Although few, if any, of the frontier societies were so small or isolated as to qualify as simple bands ("minisystems," in world-system terms), many of them were organized on a tribal level of development (including chiefdoms in some cases) and were politically weak. In general, the frontier peoples were of limited economic or political interest to the Mesoamericans, in part, no doubt, because they controlled few luxury items and in part because their fragmented social networks would have made it difficult to subdue and incorporate them into the Mesoamerican world-system.

Nevertheless, the frontier peoples to the north and south of Mesoamerica were influenced by, and in turn exercised some influence on, the Mesoamerican world, although their relationships with Mesoamerican peoples were neither systematic nor definitive. To the north of Mesoamerica, the frontier consisted largely of peoples speaking languages of the Uto-Aztecan family (Cora, Huichol, Piman, Mayo) and were widely known to the Mesoamericans as Chichimec peoples. To the south, the frontier peoples mainly spoke Chibchan languages (Paya, Sumu, Huetar, Talamanca, Boruca, Guaymi). It is not known whether the Mesoamericans had a special term by which they referred to these Chibchan peoples, but they were undoubtedly considered culturally foreign and socially backward.

The world-system view of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica just presented represents a highly simplified version of that framework, and other scholars have suggested more elaborate versions. For example, Smith and Berdan (2003) argue that the major world-system zones can be subdivided into a more complex set of sociocultural units than the simplistic core, semiperiphery, and periphery units. For example, they point to such additional world-system units as "Affluent Production Zones," "Resource-Extraction Zones," "Exchange Circuits," "Style Zones," and "Unspecialized and Contact Peripheral Zones." Nevertheless, for the purposes of this introduction to the Mesoamerican world-system, we will confine our discussion to the three main structural units: core, semiperiphery, and periphery. We begin with the core states.

Mesoamerican Cores

Although the Aztec empire was clearly the most powerful and influential core unit within the Mesoamerican world-system at the time of Spanish contact, there were other core states that competed with the Aztecs for military, economic, and cultural dominance. Like the Aztecs, these polities were organized into states with imperial tendencies and thus were able to fend off adjacent strong states while exploiting (peripheralizing) the hundreds of less-powerful city-states and chiefdoms that dotted the landscape throughout the Mesoamerican region.

Competition among core states was intense and resulted in the most complex intersocietal networks, localized in four special geographic subregions of Mesoamer-

ica, which we shall refer to as "core zones." The strongest of the four, Central Mexico, was built upon the foundation of the ecologically rich Basin of Mexico, the Mesoamerican zone most agriculturally fertile and free of physical barriers to communication. The Nahuatl (Aztec) language was spoken by the majority of inhabitants in the zone, and this practice facilitated intercommunication between the many states making up this interacting network.

Although the other three core zones were less ecologically propitious than Central Mexico, they were also areas with favorable ecological conditions. The West Mexico core zone had a strong ecological base in the "symbiotic" relationships established between the highland Lake Pátzcuaro basin and the lowland Balsas river system. The Tarascan language (also known as Purépecha) was spoken throughout most of the subregion, and this practice facilitated the thorough domination of the zone by the Tarascan empire. The Oaxaca core zone was also ecologically diversified and was founded on the economic integration of a highland area (Mixteca Alta), a large highland river valley (Valley of Oaxaca), and two important lowland plains (Oaxaca Pacific Coast and Isthmus of Tehuantepec). The Mixtec and Zapotec languages were widely spoken in Oaxaca, and their historical connection, while somewhat distant, provided at least a minimal basis for intercommunication throughout the zone at the time of contact.

The Mayan core zone was located in the northern region of Central America, stretching from Guatemala to Yucatán. It too was an ecologically diversified subregion made up of southern highland river basins (Highland Guatemala and Chiapas), a central area of lakes and tropical lowlands (the Peten), and northern lowland plains (Yucatan, Campeche, Quintana Roo). Virtually all the peoples of this zone spoke languages belonging to the Mayan family; moreover, these languages, despite many differences, shared enough common features to permit limited but crucial intercommunication between the numerous states of the Mayan core zone.

We will now examine more closely each of the four main core zones of Mesoamerica (see the map in Figure 3.1).

Central Mexico Core Zone. The Central Mexico core zone was dominated by a confederated empire composed of the allied Mexican, Texcocan, and Tlacopan states (see Chapters 1 and 2) (see Figure 3.1). The Mexican state achieved dominance over its two confederated states, and its city of Tenochtitlán, inhabited by approximately 200,000 persons, became the capital of the empire. The Aztec empire ruled over some fifty city-states (*altepetl*) within the Basin itself. The subordinate city-states (for example, Culhuacan, Huexotla, Azcapotzalco) shared many of the institutions, benefits, and liabilities of the empire, and even though they had tribute obligations, they are properly seen as core units within the Central Mexico zone. At the time of contact with Spaniards, most of the peoples in the Basin spoke Nahuatl, the language of the empire.

The Aztec empire ruled over some 250 additional city-states located outside the Basin, which were administered as thirty-eight tribute-paying provinces (Hodge and Smith 1994). Most of the provinces were close to the Basin of Mexico, but a few of

them, such as Yoaltepec (Guerrero coast), Coixtlahuacan (Oaxaca highlands), and Xoconusco (Chiapas coast), were far removed from the imperial heartland. The lingua franca of the provinces was Nahuatl, but the majority of the peoples there spoke other Mesoamerican languages such as Otomí, Mazatec, Matlazinca, Totonac, Mixtec, and Zapotec. Roughly 100 additional city-states located outside the Central Basin were subject to Aztec political and military controls as "client states," and they were probably in the process of being organized into provinces. Some client states paid tributes to the empire, but their main imperial role was to serve as buffers against the empire's chief military competitors. The peoples of the client states were as linguistically diverse as those in the provinces. Both the formal provinces and the client states can be seen as peripheral units in terms of their relations with the Aztec empire and the Central Mexico core zone as a whole.

There was considerable competition among the states that made up the Aztec empire, and this was manifested in the form of wars from time to time. But the sharpest conflicts within the Central Mexico core zone took place between the Aztec empire and a series of politically independent states located adjacent to the Basin. The most important competitors to the Aztec empire were Tlaxcala, Huejotzinco, and Metztitlán. These states shared basic imperial and cultural features with the Aztecs (for example, they had similar origin myths, deities, and calendar systems), but nevertheless they were engaged in protracted military struggles with the Aztec empire and with each other. They also participated in ritual warfare ("flower wars") with one another, staging battles designed to provide captives for sacrifice to their respective patron deities. The rulers of the hostile states in the Central Mexico core zone attended each other's important ceremonies, at which times they exchanged elite gifts and other prestations. They also intermarried, although most elite marriages probably took place within the imperial domains.

Huejotzinco, Tlaxcala, and Metztitlán were located in mountainous areas quite close to the center of the Aztec empire. Although relatively poor in natural resources, they stood in the way of the empire's access to the resources of the rich coastal lowlands to the east. Tlaxcala had traditionally been active in trade with the Gulf Coast peoples, and the Aztecs were apparently determined to take control of their trading routes.

The Aztec armies attacked these three states on numerous occasions, sometimes in alliance with one or the other of the confederacy, but were never able to militarily dominate them (Huejotzinco apparently fell to the Aztecs shortly before Spanish contact). In part this failure was as a result of the defensive nature of these states' mountain strongholds, but it was also related to the fact that internally they were profoundly militarized, unified, and determined to maintain political independence. All three states had within their ranks fierce mercenary warriors, especially from Otomí and Chalca ethnic groups, who had previously been driven from their homelands by the Aztec warriors. The peoples of Huejotzinco and Tlaxcala spoke Nahuatl, the Aztec language, whereas Otomí appears to have been the primary language of the people of Metztitlán.

There is some indication that the Aztecs may have considered all-out war against these hostile states to have been more costly than the limited tributes they would gain in return. The Aztecs' strategy appears to have been increasingly one of isolat-

ing the three states by conquering their weaker neighbors, while engaging the states themselves in a kind of low-intensity, highly ritualized warfare. Nevertheless, relations between these states and the Aztec empire were profoundly competitive, and they set a tone that pervaded the entire Mesoamerican world-system.

West Mexico Core Zone. Like Central Mexico, West Mexico was dominated by a single empire, which we will refer to as the Tarascan empire. The West Mexico core zone, however, was unique in that its empire had no serious competitor states. The boundaries of the Tarascan empire corresponded roughly with the modern Mexican state of Michoacán, a vast territory of mountains, plateaus, river basins, and coastal plains enclosed by the Balsas and Lerma-Santiago river systems. The capital of the empire was Tzintzuntzan, a city of only some 35,000 inhabitants located in the highland Lake Patzcuaro Basin.

The Tarascan empire was originally formed through the political and military unification of some eight city-states located within the Patzcuaro Basin. Later, it expanded by conquering an additional seven city-states adjacent to the Basin and eventually took control of many other political groups located in more distant areas. The Tarascan empire was more centralized and unified than the Aztec empire, and its subjugated city-states retained little autonomy. Administration of the empire was divided into four regions, with its authorities ruling directly over the local units rather than through a provincial organization. Nevertheless, several client states located along the frontiers of the empire, especially the eastern borders, were allowed to retain their own authorities. They were considered by the empire to be allies rather than subjects, and their tributary obligations took the form of military service and provision of captive slaves and sacrificial victims. Together, the tribute-paying units of the four regions, along with the client states, made up an important part of the periphery of the West Mexico core zone.

The Tarascan language and culture were dominant in the Patzcuaro and surrounding basins, and were being assimilated by most of the peoples of the empire. The strong ethnic character of the empire is thought to have been a response by the imperial heartland to the relatively limited ecological base of the Patzcuaro Basin and, therefore, the need to ensure access to resources over a much wider area through cultural assimilation. Nevertheless, some ethnic "segregation" existed within the empire. A few foreign enclaves (for example, Cuitlatecs and Nahuatls) within the core zone provided special services in the form of artisanry, trade, and spying. Along the imperial frontiers the client states tended to be multiethnic, made up mainly of Otomi, Mazahuan, Matlazincan, and Nahua groups.

Competition and conflict within the West Mexico zone was muted, especially when compared with the Central Mexico zone. The Tarascan empire had no major rivals in the region, and its highly centralized political system kept internal conflict at a minimum. There were no powerful states north or east of the empire, although smaller city-states such as the Nahua-speaking Coca, Tecuexe, Cazcan, and Zacaluta (in the present-day Mexican states of Jalisco, Colima, and Guerrero) were able to contain Tarascan advances in these areas.

The principal rivals of the Tarascans were the Aztecs, and this intense *external* rivalry undoubtedly helps explain the relative *internal* cohesiveness of the West Mexico core zone: A unified empire was necessary if the Tarascans were to compete successfully with the powerfull, more numerous Aztecs. The Tarascans became one of the most militarized states of all Mesoamerica, and they more than held their own in many wars fought against the Aztecs. To the south and west, where the Tarascan empire abutted Aztec provinces and client states, fortifications were constructed and client states organized to defend against Aztec incursions. Even though Tarascan rulers at times attended Aztec ceremonies in Tenochtitlán, and presumably vice versa, nonmilitary contacts between the two great powers were minimal. As far as we know, there was no intermarriage between the respective royal families, and direct trade was virtually nonexistent (nevertheless, considerable trade through intermediaries flourished). Long-distance merchants from the two empires could not cross each other's imperial boundaries, and even ambassadors under royal escort entered the other's territory at great risk to their personal safety.

The West Mexico core zone, then, was a special case within the Mesoamerican world-system. Its imperial state was militarily powerful but was more inward-looking than its Aztec rivals. Beyond the Aztecs and other close neighbors, the Tarascans appear to have shown limited interest in the rest of Mesoamerica. They were not renowned as traders, although they produced superb metal objects that may have been traded over great distances within Mesoamerica (in part, perhaps, by sea along the Pacific Coast). Tarascan culture shared many of the characteristics of the Mesoamerican "world" culture, but it was also parochial compared with other imperial states. Many of the Tarascan religious beliefs and art forms differed significantly from the rest of Mesoamerica and, surprisingly, the Tarascans had no established writing system.

Oaxaca Core Zone. The core zone in what is today the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, contrasted dramatically with the Central and West Mexican core zones in that there was no dominant imperial state. Rather, the zone was divided into some fifty small kingdoms or city-states, whose territorial boundaries and political alliances were constantly shifting. These states were concentrated in roughly equal numbers in the Mixtec highlands and the Valley of Oaxaca. The highland city-states were made up primarily of Mixtec speakers, whereas the peoples of the Valley of Oaxaca mostly spoke Zapotec (however, an important minority of the Valley inhabitants spoke Mixtec). The Mixtecs also controlled or were confederated with additional city-states in the eastern and coastal lowlands, as were the Zapotecs with polities in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec lowlands. Other ethnic peoples residing in the zone spoke languages that were neither Mixtec nor Zapotec: Chocho, Chinantec, Mixe, Zoque, Chatino, and Amuzgo. For the most part, these peoples remained outside the direct control of the core states, forming a periphery to the Oaxaca Mixtec and Zapotec city-states of the core zone.

Within the Mixtec highlands the ruling lines of city-states such as Tilontongo, Yanhuitlan, and Jaltepec were considered to be ancient and particularly prestigious; moreover, the rulers of many of the other states in the area traced royal genealogy

from them. The Mixtec codices make special reference to a ruler, 8 Deer "Tiger Claw," who seized the Tilantongo throne, conquered many towns and peoples in the region, and established the important kingdom of Tututepec on the coast. He was later killed by a lineage rival named 9 House. The sharing of a common royal lineage and similar funerary rites (centered on past mummified rulers) provided the Mixtec states with considerable cultural unity, a unity reinforced by extensive intermarriage between the diverse ruling families. Despite such bonds, warfare between the Mixtec states was widespread.

In the Oaxaca Valley many of the Zapotec states recognized Zaachila as the most revered and powerful of the allied city-states there. The Zaachila rulers collected tributes from several polities in the valley, and in a few areas they established provinces by appointing regional authorities to govern over the local peoples. As in the case of Tilontongo in the Mixtec area, Zaachila's prominance appears to have been limited and was based more on cultural respect than military domination. Both the Zaachila state and other Zapotec city-states were probably heirs to the historic Monte Albán Zapotec political system, and as such they were characterized by an especially close blending of politics and religion.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the highland Mixtec states were able to dominate and perhaps peripheralize many of the Valley Zapotec peoples (see Chapters 1 and 2). For example, members of the royal family from the Mixtec kingdom of Yanhuitlan gained a measure of control over the Zaachila state through marriage into its dynastic line, whereas other Zapotec city-states were conquered and either ruled over or confederated with Mixtecs states from the mountainous highlands. Mixtec ceramics, metalwork, carvings, and painted figures have been found at many sites in the Valley of Oaxaca, most notably at Monte Albán (Tomb 7) and Zaachila. It is likely that relations between the highland Mixtecs and valley Zapotecs were a complex mix of military threat and political confederation. The result was a creative synthesis of the Mixtec and Zapotec cultures in this core zone.

The Oaxaca zone developed a network of relationships with states in the other core zones of the Mesoamerican world-system. The Mixtec kings claimed descent from the Toltec ruling line and maintained political ties with rulers of city-states in Central Mexico who were making similar claims. The Aztec warriors conquered many Mixtec and Zapotec states, organizing them into the tribute-paying provinces of Coixtlahuaca and Coyolapan. The Aztecs set up a garrison at Guaxacac (from which derives the name Oaxaca) in the Valley, intermarried with the ruling families of important Mixtec and Zapotec kingdoms, and made Nahuatl the lingua franca for the zone's ruling classes. Nevertheless, control over the zone by the Aztec empire was weak, and rebellion against Aztec rule—carried out by the Mixtec and Zapotec city-states, often in alliance with one another—was widespread at the time of Spanish contact.

The Oaxaca core zone was famous for its artisans, who, working within the so-called "international" Mesoamerican art tradition, produced some of the most exquisite and widely distributed preciosities of the Mesoamerican world (see Figure 2.3). Various cities of the Central Mexico core zone had wards of resident Mixtec artisans, who not only manufactured crafts but also taught their skills to Aztec artisans.

In addition, Oaxaca polychrome ceramics, gold pieces, bone carvings, and other objects circulated widely throughout the larger Mesoamerican world-system.

Mayan Core Zone. This southernmost core zone comprised diverse city-states and empires occupying the areas of present-day Guatemala and the Yucatán Peninsula. Like the Central Mexico zone, the Mayan states exercised powerful influence over a large area of Mesoamerica (in the Mayan case, the northern part of the Central American region). One of the Mayan zone's main characteristics was that its constituent peoples, in both the core and the periphery, were overwhelmingly Mayan in language and culture. Another defining characteristic was the relative weakness of ties between its highland and lowland core states, although important political and economic exchanges between them did take place.

Broadly speaking, the Mayan core states were distributed in three geographic areas: the southern highlands (present-day Chiapas and Guatemala), the central lake and tropical lowlands (Petén and Belize), and the northern lowlands (Campeche, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo). More than thirty distinct Mayan languages were spoken in these three areas, the majority of them in the southern highlands (for example, Tzotzil, Jakaltec, Mam, Ixil, K'iche', Kaqchikel, and Poqomam). The languages of the central lake area and northern lowlands were fewer in number and more similar to one another (Lacandon, Chol, Mopan, Itza, Chontal, and Yucatec). Most of the core states incorporated speakers of diverse Mayan languages and, in some cases, non-Mayan speakers as well.

The political organization of the Mayan core states in the southern highlands has been the subject of considerable dispute. Some scholars have seen them as alliances between lineages and larger factions, and thus not centralized states. However, a detailed study of the K'iche' polity (Carmack 1981), historically the most imortant polity in the zone, indicates that it was similar in organization to the city-states and empires of Central Mexico and the other core areas of Mesoamerica.

The K'iche' Mayan state was centered on its capital of Q'umarkaaj (also known as Utatlan), an urban center of perhaps 10,000 to 15,000 residents. Through conquest the K'iche' imperialized most surrounding Mayan and non-Mayan city-states, organizing them into approximately thirty tribute-paying provinces. The K'iche' empire also competed in military and economic terms with other Mayan core states of the southern highlands, such as the Kaqchikel and Tzutujil states.

The highland Mayan imperial states were able to peripheralize numerous less powerful city-states and chiefdoms through warfare, trade, and aggressive diplomacy. Most of these peripheral peoples were also Mayan speakers: Tzotzils, Tzeltals, and Mams to the west; Ixils and Poqomams to the north and east. To the south the peripheral peoples mainly consisted of non-Mayan-speaking Pipils (Nahua) and Xinkas. The Mangue-speaking Chiapanecs formed perhaps the only non-Mayan imperial state within this core zone. The Chiapanecs, from their capital city near Chiapa de Corzo, dominated Zoque-speaking peoples on their western flank and applied military pressures against the Tzotzil Mayas to the east.

Core states were not as numerous in the central lake and northern lowland areas as in the southern highlands, and many of the Mayan peoples there occupied peripheral and semiperipheral positions within the larger zone. Perhaps the only core state within the central area was that of the Itza-Mayas, whose capital of Taj Itza was built on an island within Lake Peten. The Itza rulers collected tribute from dispersed farming groups residing on the mainland surrounding the lake. The Itza language was very similar to Yucatec-Mayan, and these two language groups engaged in extensive trade (using the Mopan Mayas of Belize as intermediaries). Less powerful Mayan peoples who spoke Chol and Lacandon languages were located in the territory surrounding the Itza state. They were apparently peripheralized by the Itza through threats of war and actual military encounters.

In the northern lowlands of Yucatan, most of the peoples at one time had been subject to the powerful Mayapan "empire," centered on a small city of some 11,000 inhabitants in the northwestern part of the peninsula. By the time of the Spanish conquest, however, the Mayapan state had fragmented into smaller political units. Some sixteen of the independent units (for example, Mani, Sotuta, Chanpoton) were able to organize small core states that competed with one another for power and tribute goods. They probably peripheralized other, more simply organized political groups in the Chakan, Chikinchel, and Uaymil "provinces."

Most interaction between the southern highland and northern lowland Mayan core states primarily took the form of trade, especially long-distance trade carried out by specialized merchants who moved merchandise both by land and by sea. Jade, obsidian, grinding stones, metals, and quetzal feathers from the highlands were exchanged for textiles, pottery, slaves, honey, and cacao from the lowlands. Relations between the highland and lowland areas were difficult to maintain, in part because travel through the dense tropical jungle of the Petén and surrounding environs was so arduous. The Itza were perhaps reluctant mediators between the southern highland and northern lowland sections of the Mayan core zone. Nevertheless, some direct contacts existed, for rulers of the highland core states claimed genealogical ties with "Mayan-Toltec" rulers in the Tabasco and Yucatan areas, and they periodically sent ambassadors to those places in order to bolster their own authority.

Both the southern highland and northern lowland Mayan states traded extensively with the Oaxaca and Central Mexico core zones, mostly through the mediation of outside long-distance merchants. Mayan and Aztec merchants traveled to special markets on the coasts of Guatemala and Tabasco, where they exchanged goods under highly formal conditions. The Aztecs and K'iche's probably engaged in military skirmishes, as when they struggled for control over the Xoconusco area. As a result, considerable military tension existed between the Aztec and K'iché empires, and marriages between their royal families may have been arranged in order to help ease the tensions. Trade between the Mayan core states and the peripheral peoples southeast of the Guatemala-Yucatan zone involved direct exchanges carried out under the auspices of Mayan merchants. Apparently, the Mayan states were also able to apply considerable military and political pressure on the peoples of the southeastern periphery.

Mesoamerican Semiperipheries

Societies that help mediate unequal relations between core and periphery form the semiperiphery. According to world-system theory, semiperipheral units tend to be innovative in the development of social institutions, in part because they assimilate cultural patterns from both core and peripheral peoples. Within the Mesoamerican world-system, the societies that specialized in arranging and promoting trade between foreign peoples can be seen as the key semiperipheral units. Zones where open trade takes place are often referred to as "ports of trade," although "international trade centers" have been suggested as more appropriate terms (Smith and Berdan 2003:12). In the Mesoamerican trading centers, exotic religious cults often flourished and served to attract pilgrims from near and far. Trade and religion went together especially well in the Mesoamerican semiperiphery.

Most of the Mesoamerican semiperipheral zones were located away from the core centers, in some cases on the borders between different core zones and in most cases adjacent to large peripheral areas. Thus, for example, the famous international trade center in the southern Gulf Coast of Mexico was situated near the boundaries of the Aztec empire to the west and the Mayan core states to the east. In contrast, the Casas Grandes trading center (destroyed around A.D. 1350) was located far to the north of the Mesoamerican core zones but near important peripheral peoples of that area. The monumental architecture of Casas Grandes included workshops, warehouses, a large marketplace, apartment buildings, and a ball court. Local products such as painted ceramics, copper ornaments, and exotic feathers attracted traders from afar, who in turn brought to Casas Grandes luxury items such as turquoise and other rare stones desired in the Mesoamerican core zones. A cult dedicated to the Quetzalcoatl deity apparently existed at Casas Grandes, perhaps making it a "holy city."

A few semiperipheral societies may have existed within the core zones themselves, although surrounded by powerful core states it was no doubt difficult for them to maintain political independence. Most of them, in fact, were incorporated into empires and thus lost or radically altered their ability to mediate relations between core and periphery. For example, Tlatelolco, a merchant city-state that maintained considerable independence even within the Aztec empire, eventually was subjected to the full weight of Aztec rule (in A.D. 1473).

We turn now to the main semiperipheral zones of Mesoamerica and their individual trade centers (see the map in Figure 3.1).

Gulf Coast. The area of the present-day Mexican state of Tabasco was the setting for the largest and most important semiperipheral zone in Mesoamerica. This international trade zone was situated on a major transportation route where the Grijalva, Usumacinta, and Candelaria rivers and numerous lagoons made travel by canoe highly efficient. A series of small city-states in the area functioned as trade centers, beginning with Coatzacoalco to the west and extending eastward to Xicalanco and beyond that to Champoton (Campeche). Foreign merchants visited these trade centers from all directions: Aztecs from Central Mexico, Tzotzil

and K'iche' Mayas from highland Chiapas and Guatemala, Chontal Mayas from Acalan, and Yucatecan Mayas from the Peninsula. Gulf Coast merchants have been referred to as "Putuns," a name probably taken from the people of Putunchan, one of the important ports of trade located in the central part of the zone near Xicalanco.

Much of the trade within the Gulf Coast consisted of formal exchanges between merchants representing the interests of hostile core states, mediated by the ruling officials of the trade centers. Trade of this kind usually involved exchanging manufactured goods (cloth, pottery, gold ornaments, precious-stone jewelry) for valuable raw materials (feathers, jade, skins, salt, slaves). There were regular marketplaces in the zone as well, where considerable trade of a more "open" exchange took place. The local peoples produced large quantities of cacao beans, which allowed them to profit handsomely from the trade zone. They also traveled long distances by canoe to exchange merchandise in trade centers elsewhere, especially in Yucatan and along the Caribbean coast.

The international trade centers were politically independent and were oriented toward trade rather than war and conquest. The governing class was made up of merchants organized into political councils. Women could reach high positions of authority, although male relatives are said to have exercised their administrative duties. Foreign merchants formed residential wards in the trade towns and no doubt exercised influence in political matters. This was especially true of the Aztec merchants residing in Xicalanco, who apparently served on the governing councils and had the backing of fellow warriors stationed in the area. Nevertheless, political neutrality was an important characteristic of the trade centers, for without it the trade between merchants from powerful competing states would not have been possible.

The Chontal Mayan language was spoken by most peoples in the Gulf Coast, and it also served as one of the commercial languages employed by the merchants and officials doing business in the zone. Nevertheless, Nahuatl was also spoken by most members of the merchant class, and native Nahuatl and Pipil speakers resided in the trade center. In eight of these towns (the largest was Cimatan), native Nahuatl speakers made up the majority of the residents.

The peoples of the Gulf Coast zone were considered by their neighbors to be particularly wealthy, cosmopolitan, and friendly toward outsiders. The merchant class surrounded itself with fine works of art, such as painted codices, pottery, jewelry, murals, and statues, all executed in the current Mesoamerican "international" art style. We know little about their religion, except that it bore many similarities to the religion of the Yucatecan Mayas.

Box 3.1 describes the semi-peripheral trading zone of Acalan, similar in many ways to Xicalanco.

South Pacific Coast. The Pacific Coast from Xoconusco southward formed a long strip of land in which a string of trading centers were located. Unfortunately, we know little about this zone at the time of contact, and some scholars question

Box 3.1 The Trading Center of Acalan

Acalan ("the place of canoes") was an independent city-state that specialized in trade and was located along the tributaries of the River Candelaria in what is today Campeche, Mexico. The capital of Acalan, Itzamkanac, was a merchant town of perhaps 10,000 inhabitants. This town was too far inland to have been a true seaport, but its merchants were Putuns, middlemen who traveled far and wide to link up with vital trading routes. The Acalan merchants regularly moved by canoe to the Gulf Coast area in order to engage in trading, and perhaps from there around the Yucatan Peninsula to still more distant international trade centers. They also trekked overland to trade with Yucatecan-Mayan peoples to the north, and to the south at least as far as the small Nito trading center on the Caribbean coast. At Nito the Acalans had their own permanent commercial agents and residential ward.

The Acalan city-state was governed by an independent merchant class. The paramount ruler was also the leading merchant, and he was subject to the will of merchant councils representing the interests of the four wards into which the capital was divided. The merchant class oversaw the production of portable trade goods, such as cacao, cotton cloth, dyes, body paint, and pine resin.

The native tongue of the Acalan people was Chontal Maya, but many members of the ruling class had Nahuatl names and could speak the Nahuatl language. The Spaniards claimed that the Acalans were better proportioned and more refined than their neighbors. The patron deity of the ruler of Itzamkanac was Kukulchan (the Chontal equivalent of Quetzalcoatl). Patron deities of the town's four quarters were also prominent in the Acalan pantheon: Ikchaua, patron of cacao and merchants; Ix Chel, patroness of weaving, childbirth, and women; Tabay, patron of hunters; and Cabtanilcab, of unknown identity. The goddess Ix Chel was of special importance, and the Acalans sacrificed maidens especially raised for that purpose in her honor.

the presence there of true international trade centers. Xoconusco itself (Soconusco, the coastal part of Chiapas, Mexico) had been a neutral trade zone where merchants from the mutually hostile Aztec and K'iche' Mayan empires could engage in administered trade. About fifty years before the coming of the Spaniards, the K'iche's and Aztecs began to vie for political control over the Xoconusco area. The K'iche' conquered some of the eastern towns (Ayutla, Tapachula, Mazatan), but shortly thereafter the Aztecs gained control over the entire Xoconusco area. Aztec historical sources indicate that the latter conquests were carried out by long-distance merchants from the Tlatelolco city-state who had previously been attacked by the native peoples of Xoconusco.

Even though Xoconusco became a tributary province of the Aztec empire, apparently it continued to function as a trading zone. Aztec merchants traded there and, despite Aztec political control, so did merchants from Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Guatemala. The Aztec merchants also used the zone as a base for launching trading expeditions farther south along the Pacific Coast.

The Xoconuscan peoples themselves produced large quantities of cacao and were actively engaged in trade. Archaeological remains in the area suggest that Xoconuscan society was less stratified or politically centralized than the societies of the core zones. They may have been organized as chiefdoms rather than states. Most of

the inhabitants of the zone spoke Mixe-Zoquean languages, although Mangue- and Pipil-speaking minorities were also present. At Spanish contact, Nahuatl was the lingua franca of the Xoconusco zone.

Suchitepequez on the western coast of Guatemala, like Xoconusco, was an area of cacao production and trade. Aztec merchants traveled there not only to trade their wares but also to spy for the empire. The special trading centers that existed in Suchitepequez were necessary because Aztec merchants were not welcome in the highland capitals of the Mayan core states to the north. The situation may have been the reverse of that in Xoconusco: In Suchitepequez, the coastal trading centers were subject to K'iche' political authority, but Aztec and other foreign merchants were permitted to visit for purposes of trade. The K'iche's established colonies of Nahua speakers in the area, no doubt to better exploit the trade networks that had long operated there.

Documentary sources indicate that both Aztec and Mayan long-distance traders passed through Escuintla in the central part of the Guatemalan coast on their way to points farther south. Additional trade centers existed along the Pacific Coast of eastern Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Unfortunately, our historical sources do not provide details on the locations of most of these centers nor on their forms of political organization.

Caribbean Coast. A series of trading centers were located along the Caribbean coast of the Yucatan Peninsula and the Central American Isthmus, and together they made up still another important Mesoamerican semiperipheral zone. The Caribbean trading centers were established in strategic locations so as to exploit local resources and link up the core zones of Mesoamerica with the large southeastern periphery and, beyond that, the lower Central American frontier. Gold was one of the main precious items that moved through this network, circulating all the way from Panama to Yucatan and from there to the rest of Mesoamerica.

The island of Cozumel just off the Caribbean coastline of the Yucatan Peninsula was organized as a small trade center at the time of Spanish contact. Special platforms were built at various locations on the island so as to be out of reach of the floodwaters and thus to provide safe storage for trade goods. In addition, causeways extended from the water's edge to the central town, where it is thought that the formal trading activities took place. This central town was probably the site of the famous Ix Chel goddess's shrine, to which religious pilgrimages were directed.

Archaeologists excavating at the island sites argue that the inhabitants of Cozumel were a pragmatic people. They invested in warehouses, stone streets, and modest residences rather than in massive temples, shrines, or palaces. Even the Ix Chel cult had a practical dimension, for its "speaking" idol was thought to issue flexible instructions to meet the changing needs of the trade-oriented Cozumel inhabitants. As might be expected of an international trade center, the people of Cozumel for the most part received the first Spanish visitors in a friendly manner and tried to trade with them. They even requested "letters of recommendation," which they hoped would bring commercial benefits from subsequent Spanish visits!

Located farther south along the Caribbean coastline were two other well-known trade centers, Chetumal and Nito. Both were strategically placed for receiving goods from the interior by way of major river systems and for providing easy access to the Caribbean Sea. They were also cacao-producing areas. Murals found at the Chetumal site were painted in a local version of the Mesoamerican international art style; and Ikchaua, the merchant god, was among the deities prominently portrayed in the mural scenes (see Figure 2.6). As noted in Box 3.1, the Nito trading center had resident merchants and agents from Acalan and elsewhere.

The largest and most important of the international trade zones along the Central American coast was found in the Ulua river valley of present-day Honduras. Ulua was similar in many ways to the Gulf Coast zone, in that travel was mostly by canoe and abundant cacao was produced in the environs. One of the most important trade centers in the zone was located at Naco in the Chamelecon Valley just south of the Ulua delta. Naco apparently served as a crossroads for merchants from Yucatan to the north, highland Guatemala to the west, and traders from Central American trade centers farther to the south. As an inland port, Naco received goods such as obsidian, gold, jade, cacao beans, and feathers from both overland and sea routes. The commoner population of Naco most likely spoke Chol or Chorti Maya, both languages being close relatives of the Chontal-Mayan language spoken in the Gulf Coast and Acalan. Archaeologists working at Naco have suggested that an enclave of Nahuatl speakers or Nahuatl-influenced Mayas governed this trading town (Figure 3.2).

Other trading centers were located south of the Ulua zone along the Caribbean coast of Central America. One possible trade center in the Teguzgalpa area of eastern Honduras the zone was Papayeca, established near the Agalta Valley gold deposits. The rulers of Papayeca spoke a language similar to the Aztec language (Pipil),

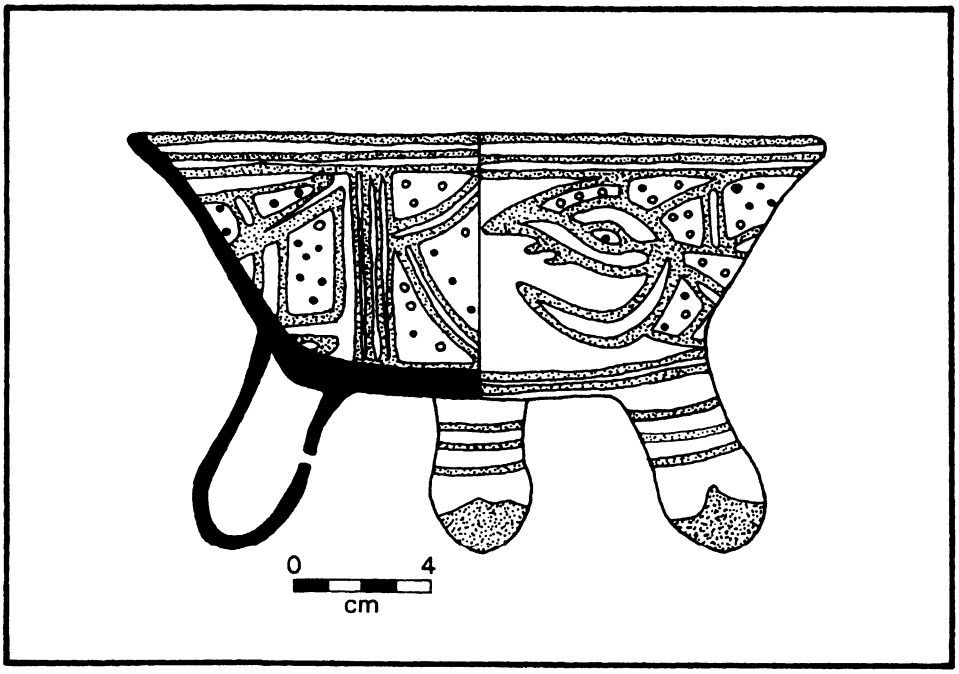

Figure 3.2 Painted ceramic vessel from Naco, Honduras, in the northern part of the Central American periphery. After Anthony Wonderley, "Imagery in Household Pottery from 'La Gran Provincia de Naco,'" in *Interaction on the Southeast Mesoamerican Frontier*, ed. E. Robinson, BAR International Series, 327. Oxford, England: BAR, 1987, p. 310.

and they apparently exchanged "gold and other valuables" directly with Aztec merchants. Still farther south along the Caribbean coast in the Sixoala Valley of present-day Costa Rica was another trade center of Nahuatl speakers, known to the Chibchan-speaking peoples of the area as Siguas ("foreigners"). The ruler of the Siguas bore the Aztec name of Iztolin and was said to be a "Mexica-Chichimeca." The Siguas moved gold taken from the Sixoala riverbeds to the Aztecs, either directly by means of Aztec merchants or indirectly through Putun seaborne merchants.

Finally, we have tantalizing evidence of a group of people living near Nombre de Diós (the place where the Panama Canal now flows into the Caribbean Sea) who, according to the Spanish conquistadors, in precontact times had traveled in canoes from the Honduras area to colonize the center. They spoke a different language from the other natives of Panama and were called "Chuchures." The Chuchures were probably traders, most likely Chontal or Nahuatl speakers. If so, they must have formed the southernmost outpost of semiperipheral peoples operating within the Mesoamerican world-system.

Mesoamerican Peripheries

Mesoamerican peripheral peoples actively participated in the economic, political, and cultural life of the Mesoamerican world, but from a weak, subordinate position. Whether through military conquest or threat of conquest, forced political alliances, or unequal ceremonial and market exchanges, the peripheral peoples were subservient to the core states of Mesoamerica. The powerful empires and kingdoms that so impressed the Spaniards could not have continued to function without the many peripheral peoples who provided the labor, raw materials, and sacrificial victims that sustained the complex Mesoamerican core zones.

Many peripheral peoples, as we have already seen, were incorporated into the imperial states as subject provinces. In these cases, they were exploited and peripheralized in a direct manner in the form of tributary obligations. Other peoples of Mesoamerica retained varying degrees of political independence, yet were subject to indirect and more subtle forms of domination. Most of them confronted unrelenting military pressure from the core states, as well as exploitation through economic exchanges. The "meddling" by the core states kept the peripheral peoples, whether administered provinces or dependent societies, politically weak, economically exploited, and by Mesoamerican standards, culturally "backward".

As already noted, the Mesoamerican periphery should be distinguished from the so-called frontier areas, which were made up of peoples outside the Mesoamerican world-system located primarily in northern Mexico and southern Central America. The frontier peoples were politically and economically influenced but not structurally transformed by the Mesoamerican world. Frontier peoples, however, could affect developments in Mesoamerica, not only by making war on its peripheral peoples but also by exposing them to new ideas and practices. The Aztecs originally were a frontier people who were later integrated into the Northwest Mexico periphery; subsequently migrated to Central Mexico, where they became a core state and finally organized the dominant imperial state of the Mesoamerican core (see Chapters 1 and 2).

We will now briefly examine a sample of the most important peripheral zones of the Mesoamerican world-system, beginning with Northwest Mexico (see the map in Figure 3.1).

Northwest Mexico Periphery. Northwest Mexico was an area rich in resources of interest to the Mesoamerican core peoples, especially its copper, gold, and silver; turquoise and other precious stones; cotton; seashells; aquatic birds; salt; peyote; and other desert flora and fauna. These valuable raw materials were extracted and processed by peripheral peoples in the Northwest and were exchanged for manufactured goods coming from the core zones of Mesoamerica. The raw materials were concentrated in two main areas of the Northwest: one along the Pacific Coast, the other along the eastern flanks of the Sierra Madre mountains.

At the time of Spanish contact, the peoples who extracted and processed the raw materials were concentrated in greater numbers along the coast than on the eastern side of the mountains. They were generally organized as polities that were transitional between chiefdoms and city-states, and shared many Mesoamerican cultural features. Their closest ties to a core zone were probably with West Mexico and the Tarascan empire. Trade with the Aztec empire and other Central Mexico core states may have been partly impeded along the coast by the Tarascans, but it continued to operate fully along the Sierra Madre route.

The most powerful city-states of the Northwest area were in the southern part, in what are today the Mexican states of Jalisco, Colima, and Nayarit. Most of the peoples there spoke languages related to Nahuatl. City-states like Tonalan (Guadalajara) and Cazcan were relatively large and highly militaristic. They could take to the battlefield with several thousand warriors and may have built urbanlike towns occupied by up to 10,000 inhabitants. They shared several "advanced" Mesoamerican features such as copper hoes, obsidian-blade swords, markets, and public buildings and houses constructed of stone. Their religious pantheons featured familiar Mesoamerican deities, and human sacrifice and cannibalism were part of the ritual system.

The city-states under discussion received strong military and economic pressure from the Tarascan empire just to the south, and many of the previously mentioned Mesoamerican features may have been responses to Tarascan meddling. The Tarascans no doubt found ways to drain off the scarce goods produced in the area, especially cotton, metals (gold, silver, copper), salt, honey, and cacao. The southern part of the Northwest periphery, then, was rather directly dominated by the Tarascan core state.

City-states farther to the north, such as Chametla, Aztatlan, and Culiacan, were made up of peoples speaking Cora and Cahita languages, both close relatives of the Nahuatl language. These peoples probably had limited direct contact with the Tarascans, and therefore they were perhaps more influenced by indirect means from other Mesoamerican core zones. Apparently, they traded with the core societies of Central Mexico, as suggested by the polychrome ceramics and copper and gold ornaments fashioned within the Central Mexico art style found at archaeological sites in the area. Although these polities were smaller than the ones southward, some of the mil-

itary units may have numbered a few thousand warriors. Political rulers in the area were carried about on litters and enjoyed high (noble) status.

In general, the peripheral peoples in the northern part of the zone supplied the Mesoamerican world with similar products to those yielded by their neighbors in the southern part. In return they received manufactured goods, and in the process they assimilated Mesoamerican cultural features. Their craft goods, rendered in the late Mesoamerican international art style, and complex religious ideas about deities and human sacrifice were typically Mesoamerican (Figure 3.3). It is noteworthy, however, that the northern peoples failed to produce stone architecture or to sculpt monuments.

Scholars once thought that the line between Northwest Mesoamerica and the non-Mesoamerican frontier was located along the Rio Fuerte in Sinaloa. Recent historical and archaeological evidence indicates, however, that the Mesoamerican periphery extended into the main river valleys of present-day Sonora. The Opata-speaking inhabitants of Sonora were organized as transitional chiefdoms and city-states similar to the other polities of the northern periphery. They must have

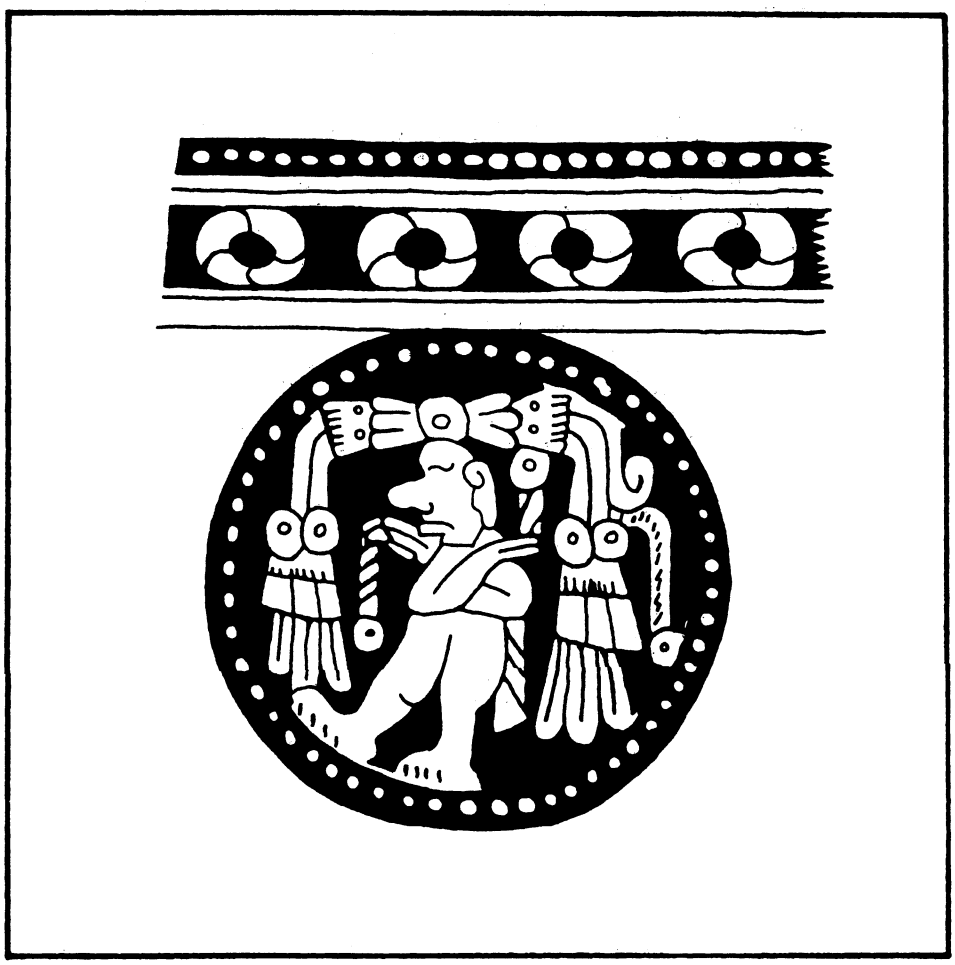

Figure 3.3 Figure painted on a pottery vessel from Sinaloa, Mexico, in typical Mesoamerican style. After Charles J. Kelley, "The Mobile Merchants of Molino," in *Ripples in the Chichimec Sea*, eds. Frances Joan Mathien and Randall McGuire. Carbondale, IL: Illinois University Press, 1986, p. 87.

provided an important connecting link between the Northwest Mesoamerican periphery and the frontier peoples of what is today the southwestern United States.

Some archaeologists argue that the Northwest periphery at one time extended all the way to the southwestern United States, from where socially complex peoples such as the Hohokam and Anasazi exported turquoise and cotton cloth to Mesoamerica. In the process these southwestern peoples took on selected Mesoamerican features, and according to some scholars, became peripheral units of that world-system. Trade between the Northwest periphery that we have been describing and the Greater Southwest area remained intact at the time of Spanish contact, but it had been reduced to sporadic exchanges best characterized from a Mesoamerican perspective as frontier relations.

Huaxteca. The peoples of the Huaxteca formed a special periphery in the northeastern part of Mesoamerica. Although Nahua speakers inhabited the northern and southern parts of the Huaxteca, most inhabitants of the area spoke Huaxtec, a distant linguistic relative of the Mayan family. It is surprising to find Mayan speakers so far removed from their sister languages to the south, but some scholars think that the Huaxtecs at one time inhabited the entire east coast of Mexico and had been geographically contiguous with the Mayan zone to the south.

The Huaxtecs seem to exhibit certain "archaic" cultural features, suggesting that their entry into the Mesoamerican world-system may have happened relatively late. Core peoples like the Aztecs considered the Huaxtecs to be exotic. The Huaxtecs were distinguished by such characteristics as painting their hair different colors, filing their teeth, wearing a kind of conical head cover, and revering shamanistic and other magical practices (Figure 3.4).

Furthermore, well-known Mesoamerican gods were conceptualized by the Huaxtecs in anachronistic ways. For example, Tlazolteotl, the Aztec goddess of sensuality, was for the Huaxtecs a primeval mother fertility goddess. The Huaxtecs are mentioned in an ancient Mesoamerican myth that describes the settling of Mexico by peoples who came from across the sea and landed at the Huaxtec port of Panuco. Whether or not there was any historical basis to the myth, it suggests that in the minds of Mesoamericans the Huaxtecs were a remnant of their civilization's ancient past.

From the perspective of Mesoamerica as a world-system, the Huaxtecs were rather typical peripheral peoples. They inhabited a somewhat isolated area and were in close contact with frontier Chichimec peoples falling outside the civilized world. Nevertheless, the area was rich in exotic materials of interest to the core societies, especially rubber, bark cloth, turtle shells, animal skins, feathers, and shells. The Huaxtecs were politically weak, being fragmented into numerous small chiefdoms rather than consolidated into centralized states. Nevertheless, larger polities existed on the borders with Metztitlán, a core state with which the Huaxtecs were at times allied. Huaxtec public architecture mirrored the political situation: It was relatively small and unimpressive except for a few larger, well-fortified sites along the southern border in the Metztitlán area. As far as we know, the Huaxtecs had no writing system.

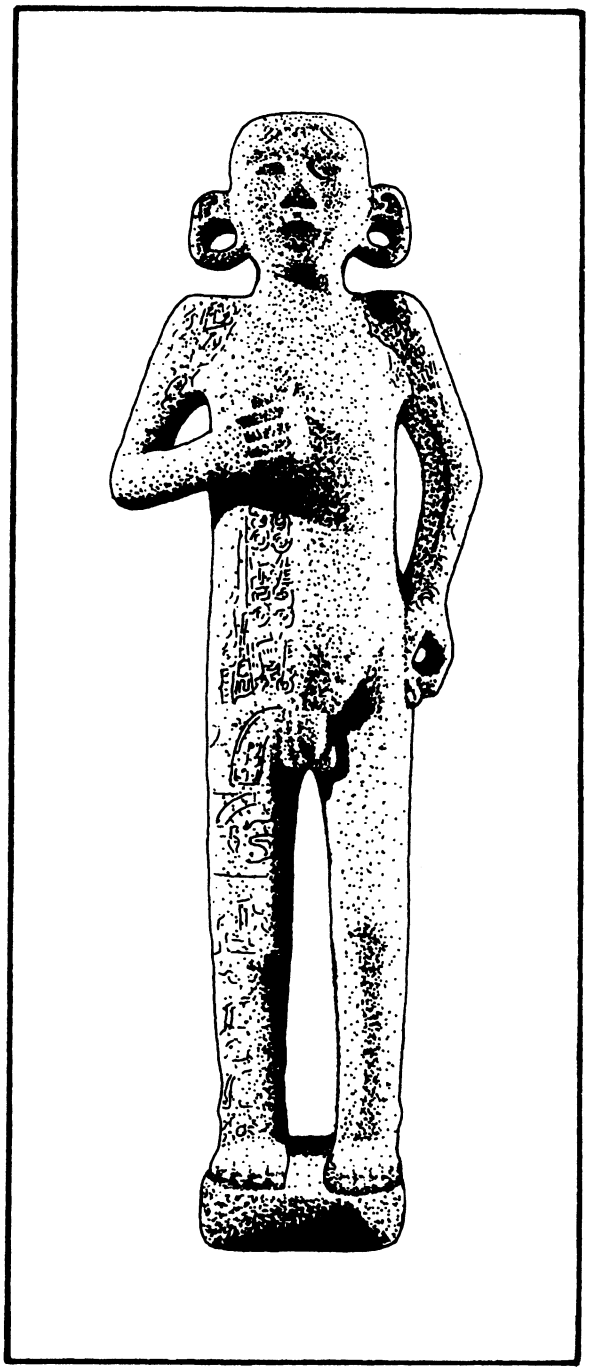

Figure 3.4 Huaxtec carved statue of an unclothed man with tatoos on one side of his body. Drawing by Ellen Cesarski.

Even prior to the emergence of the Aztec empire, there was considerable direct exploitation of the Huaxtecs by the Central Mexican city-states. The Aztecs themselves are said to have first attacked the Huaxtecs during the reign of Motecuhzoma I (A.D. 1440–1468), in retaliation for the Huaxtecs' having killed merchants trading in the area. The Huaxtecs apparently relied heavily on magical rites to win this battle; they were defeated, however, and many men, women, and children were killed by the victorious Aztec warriors. Only when the Huaxtec chiefs agreed to pay handsome

tributes to the empire did the killing stop. Wars between the Huaxtecs and Aztecs continued, in part because many Huaxtec political groups remained independent and in part because others rebelled against imperial rule. The wars were opportunities for the Aztecs to carry off booty, slaves, and sacrificial victims. Like other peripheral peoples, the Huaxtecs were subjected to degrading stereotypes: The Aztecs referred to them as disgusting drunkards and sodomists.

The Yopes and Lencas, described in Boxes 3.2 and 3.3, are best seen as peripheral peoples similar in their relations with the core centers to the Huaxtecs and Northwest peoples described above.

Box 3.2 Yopitzinco

Yopitzinco, an isolated mountainous zone located in what is today the state of Guerrero, was similar in some ways to the Huaxteca peripheral zone described in the text. Guerrero, which was perhaps the region of greatest linguistic diversity in all Mesoamerica, included peoples speaking Nahua, Tarascan, Tlapanec, Cuitlatec, and other languages now extinct. The Yopes, inhabitants of Yopitzinco, spoke the Tlapanec language. Most of Yopitzinco's neighbors, including other Tlapanec speakers, were conquered by either the Aztecs or the Tarascans. Some of these peoples paid regular imperial tributes, whereas others were required to man military garrisons established on the borders between the two hostile empires. The Aztecs also colonized one of Guerrero's northern provinces with 9,000 families from Central Mexico.

In Mesoamerican terms, the inhabitants of Yopitzinco were a rather unsophisticated people. As a mountain folk, they were famous for their hunting prowess and use of the bow and arrow. Until marriage neither men nor women wore clothing. They were known to be fierce warriors who beheaded and flayed the skins of captives. Politically, the Yopes were organized into loose chiefdoms or "tribes" rather than centralized states, and they totally lacked urban centers. The Yope were identified as the people of Xipe Totec, the red god of the Eastern sun and vegetative renewal. In Xipe's honor gladiatorial rituals were performed, during which sacrificial animals and humans were flayed and their skins donned by red-painted ritual specialists. Xipe Totec was an important deity throughout Mesoamerica at the time of Spanish contact and was especially revered by the Aztec emperors. The Yopes were given special religious status because of their close association with the Xipe deity.

The Yopitzinco area was poor in the kinds of raw materials that interested the Mesoamerican core peoples, although jaguar, lion, and wolf pelts extracted from the area circulated in the wider exchange network. The Yopes were only weakly incorporated into the periphery of the Mesoamerican world-system, in part, no doubt, because of the dearth of resources in the area. Culturally, they lacked many of the features common to other peoples of Mesoamerica. Nevertheless, as noted, they were the source of important religious ideas and practices that apparently were taken over and used for imperial purposes by the core states. Yopitzinco was also a source of slaves and sacrificial victims for the more powerful societies of Central and West Mexico.

Strategically located along the border between the Aztecs and the Tarascans, the Yopes were subject to political manipulation by these two imperial powers. The Aztecs, in particular, regularly invited the Yope chiefs to witness their bloodiest and most impressive sacrificial celebrations in Tenochtitlán, at which times they would shower their rustic guests with expensive gifts. The underlying political message must have been clear to the visitors: It would be useless to oppose the Aztecs, and therefore they should hold the line against the Tarascans. As with other peripheral peoples, the Aztecs employed ethnic stereotyping to keep the Yopes in place, referring to them as untrained barbarians: "just like the Otomí only worse"!

Box 3.3 The Lencas

Scholars have long debated the position relative to Mesoamerica of the Lencan peoples of southwestern Honduras and eastern El Salvador. Some scholars think that they were part of the Mesoamerican world, others a buffer or frontier to Mesoamerica, and still others part of an entirely different cultural world. Although the Lencan language shares some features with the major language families of Mesoamerica, it appears not to have demonstrable genetic ties with any of them. Nevertheless, the Lencas had a long history of interaction with Mayan peoples from the Guatemala-Yucatan core zone of Mesoamerica, and at Spanish contact they shared important cultural features with the Mesoamerican world (for example, city-states, the 365-day solar calendar with its eighteen "months," high temple mounds). From a world-system perspective the Lencas are best seen as forming a relatively independent peripheral zone of Mesoamerica, similar in important ways to the Huaxtecs and Yopes.

Politically, the Lencas were organized as chiefdoms and small city-states, each political unit exercising authority over a single river valley. The political ruler, high priest, chief justice, and other officials formed a Lencan ruling class that was internally united by bonds of kinship and marriage. Nevertheless, the various polities engaged one another in warfare, in never-ending struggles to increase territorial holdings, tribute goods, and slaves. Still, in some areas certain periods were set aside during which warfare was banned. In many cases the Lencan political divisions were correlated with language dialects, each dialect providing a degree of ethnic homogeneity. At the time of Spanish contact, for example, the Care dialect was spoken around Gracias a Diós, the Colo dialect in the Agaltec Valley, and the Poton dialect in eastern El Salvador and northern Nicaragua. These and other "languages" mentioned in the documentary sources were apparently variants of the same Lencan language.

The Lencas shared features typically associated with peripheral peoples throughout Mesoamerica. They were politically fragmented, limited in power, and transitional between chiefdom and state levels of development. Archaeologists have shown that Lencan monumental public structures were relatively small and few in number, except for military fortifications, and most construction was of adobe rather than stone. Many Lencan peoples inhabited isolated mountain zones adjacent to non-Mesoamerican tribal peoples such as the Jicaques, Peches, and Sumus.

Lencan territory was relatively poor in resources of interest to the Mesoamerican world, although it yielded some honey and cacao. Because the Lencas were numerous—they may have numbered over 500,000 persons at the time of Spanish contact—they may have been an important source of slaves for neighboring Mayan and Pipil core states. In the northeastern part of Honduras, the Lencas occupied strategic territories with important gold and other mineral deposits.

Unfortunately, we have little information about the processes by which the Lencas were integrated as periphery into the Mesoamerican world-system. They apparently fought wars on unequal terms against the neighboring Mayan and Pipil city-states. No doubt the Lencas also engaged in trade with semiperipheral peoples in the ports of trade at centers like Naco and the Pacific Coast. In order to have commodities to trade for the salt and manufactured goods they desired, the Lencas must have intensified the labor that went into the production of larger quantities of honey, animal skins, and woven cloth. A more direct form of exploitation of the Lencas occurred in the Olancho and Agalta mining areas, where under the authority of Nahua-speaking overlords they labored to extract gold and other precious metals.

Southeastern Central America Periphery. The southeastern periphery of Mesoamerica comprised a string of chiefdoms and city-states occupying the Pacific Coast zone from the eastern part of Guatemala down to the Nicoya Peninsula of Costa Rica. The northern section of this zone, what are today Guatemala and El Salvador, was occupied mainly by groups speaking Pipil, a language closely related to Nahuatl. The southern section, along the coasts of Nicaragua and Nicoya, was inhabited by groups speaking the Chorotega and Subtiaba languages as well as additional groups of Pipil speakers (the Nicarao). The closest linguistic relatives of these three languages (Chorotega, Subtiaba, and Pipil) lived far to the north within the Mesoamerican core zones.

There has been much confusion over the relationship between the southeastern peoples and Mesoamerica. They have been variously referred to as "buffer," "frontier," or "intermediate" peoples relative to Mesoamerica. The evidence suggests, however, that those residing along the Pacific Coast as far south as the Nicoya Peninsula were integrated into the Mesoamerican world-system as peripheral peoples. They were subject to political and economic pressures from the Mesoamerican core states, and they shared many typical Mesoamerican characteristics. In particular, they were under pressure to provide the Mesoamerican world with raw materials and unprocessed goods such as cotton, cacao, feathers, animal skins, dyes, and gold.

Politically, most peoples of the southeastern periphery were organized as city-states and advanced chiefdoms. These polities engaged in continual struggles with one another over power and position relative to the more powerful core states. The largest city-states were found among the Pipils in such places as Escuintla, Mita, Izalco, and Cuzcatlan. The Pipil city-states interacted more directly with the neighboring Mayan core states than did the other peoples of the southeastern periphery, and correspondingly they assimilated more corelike features. South of these Pipils the polities were smaller, often described by scholars as chiefdoms, exemplified by the Chorotegas and Nicaraos located along the Pacific Coast of Nicaragua and the Peninsula of Nicoya, Costa Rica.

In most cases, the southeastern polities were governed by a ruler of noble status, who was subject to advice and consent from political councils made up of older men chosen for set periods of time. Together, the rulers and councils selected war chiefs to lead the people in times of war. This somewhat decentralized form of government differed from the generally more centrally organized core states of Mesoamerica. The southeastern town centers were also smaller and less nucleated than their counterparts in the core zones. Architectural differences existed too, as exemplified by the fact that most of the public buildings in the Southeast were constructed of earth rather than stone.

Some scholars have argued that the Nicaraos and Chorotegas engaged in external relations primarily with non-Mesoamerican peoples to the south rather than with the Mesoamerican peoples to the north. This theory has been particularly suggested for the Chorotegas, who were politically weaker than the Nicaraos and were considered by the Spaniards to be "crude . . . and subject to (the rule of) their women" (Chapman 1960:86). Nevertheless, the cultural ideas and practices of the Chorotegas appear to be fully Mesoamerican, and their peoples actively engaged

other Mesoamerican peoples in trade, political alliance, and warfare. In short, they formed part of the southeastern periphery of Mesoamerica.

The Nicaraos were clearly tied into the Mesoamerican world-system. Many of their cultural features—such as the 260-day calendar system, elaborate pantheon of deities, and ritual human sacrifices—were virtually identical to their Aztec counterparts. Cultural similarities of this kind with the rest of Mesoamerica would not have been possible without continuing interaction between the Nicaraos and the core units of the larger Mesoamerican world. This conclusion is confirmed by maps shown to the Spanish conquistadors that portrayed routes used by Aztec and Putun merchants who traveled all the way down to "Nicaragua" in order to engage in trade. Indeed, the Nicaraos had well-developed markets, where the most important Mesoamerican preciosities circulated, including cacao money. The Nicaraos traded with merchants from the Mesoamerican core states, most likely in international trade centers located along the Pacific Coast.

As noted before, the Nicarao and Chorotega societies were politically weaker than the Pipil city-states farther to the north. Nevertheless, whether organized as chiefdoms or states (or more likely, transitional forms between the two), both the Nicaraos and Chorotegas had well-established tributary systems and standing warrior units. Furthermore, as with the core states, noble status was required for holding the highest public offices.

On the Caribbean side of lower Central America (Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama), to the east of the Pipil, Chorotega and Nicarao polities, were located peoples who fell outside the Mesoamerican world-system. From the perspective of Mesoamerica, they constituted its southeastern frontier. Most of these peoples spoke Chibchan languages and were linked together into small social networks of their own. Generally, their political organizations took the form of tribes or chiefdoms, organized largely through kinship (lineage) ties. Their elite leaders traveled throughout the area exchanging gold and other valuable objects with one another. As frontier peoples to Mesoamerica, they exercised some influence on that world. For example, the Nicarao custom of chewing coca was probably borrowed from the Chibchan frontier peoples. Nevertheless, cultural influence came mostly from Mesoamerica to the peoples making up the Chibchan worlds of the Central American Isthmus, rather than vice versa.

REFLECTIONS ON THE MESOAMERICAN WORLD

We began the chapter by defining the sociocultural diversity that characterized the contact period expression of the Mesoamerican world. Next, we adopted a world-systems perspective in an attempt to demonstrate that the Mesoamerican world during its final phase had formed a political-economic network that both unified its component parts and provided the network for its broadly shared culture (civilization).

It seems reasonable to conclude from the preceding account that, despite the great sociocultural diversity (or perhaps in part because of it), the Mesoamerican peoples indeed had established an integrated world-system at the time of Spanish contact. Accordingly, we defined the Mesoamerican (1) core zones in which powerful

states exploited weaker polities and interacted with one another in highly competitive ways; (2) peripheries, made up of peoples subject to exploitation, whether directly under imperial rule or indirectly through diverse forms of domination; and (3) semiperipheries of trading zones where hostile core states as well as core and peripheral peoples could actively engage one another in economic exchanges. Despite the broad hegemonic power of the Aztec empire, there were many independent states in the Mesoamerican world-system, including other powerful empires.

The Mesoamerican world-system then, was more a "world economy" than a "world empire," to use Wallerstein's terms. Its relationships of widest scope were the economic ones of trade, gift exchange, forced production, and market control. As we noted, however, political relations also extended outward, binding together the diverse peoples of the Mesoamerican region. The city-states and empires exercised influence on one another through never-ending struggles for power and relative economic advantage. Cultural patterns corresponding to the individual city-states (as well as to core, periphery, and semiperipheral units) existed, although the extent to which a Mesoamerican-wide culture ("civilization") emerged is more difficult to determine than the economic and political dimensions of that world-system.

Having argued that the Mesoamerican case conforms reasonably well to the world-system model, certain caveats are in order. It is particularly important to keep in mind that we are employing extremely broad world-system categories. Concepts such as "core," for example, allow us to discuss together highly disparate political groups, from the huge Aztec empire to the rather small Mixtec city-states of highland Oaxaca. There is much to be gained from viewing these societies together as components of a larger regional network that defined much of social life in ancient Mesoamerica. It cannot be denied, however, that the differences between the individual societies were also important for understanding social life in ancient Mesoamerica, and some of these differences are discussed in the specific profiles of three Mesoamerican peoples in Chapter 2. The "periphery" is an even broader concept, for we have applied the term to peoples of vastly different political organization (from tribes and chiefdoms to city-states), and with highly diverse connections to Mesoamerica as a whole (from imperial provinces to largely independent peoples such as the Lencas in Central America).

It can be argued that our account of Mesoamerica unduly stresses economic and political relations over cultural features. Nevertheless, our approach clearly does not leave out culture; and, in fact, a focus on political and economic relations provides an essential context for the analysis of Mesoamerica's diverse cultures. Furthermore, even at the broadest level of the Mesoamerican world-system, we would expect to find cultural expressions that could be understood only in their widest world-system context.

The Aztec case is particularly relevant to the issue of a pan-Mesoamerican culture or civilization, since it suggests the possibility that certain Aztec intellectuals (and probably their counterparts in other Mesoamerican core societies) had generated the idea of highly abstract, invisible powers transcending the complex pantheons of deities that characterized Mesoamerica's diverse religions. By taking this first step in the creation of universal sacred symbols, the Mesoamericans were perhaps engag-

ing in a kind of cultural "rationalization" that must have been inspired in part by the quite rational economic and political relationships binding Mesoamerica into a unified world-system.

The issue of cultural rationalization leads to questions about where the Mesoamerican world was headed at the time it so violently collided with the emerging modern world-system of which Europe was the core. In the history of the Old World, ancient world economies similar in type to the Mesoamerica one were often transformed into world empires, as powerful states managed to dominate all others in key regions and thereby gain political control over the entire regional network. The rulers of the Aztec empire certainly were aware of the possibility of gaining hegemonic control over the larger Mesoamerican world, and they boasted at times of already having accomplished just that.

As we have seen, however, the Aztecs failed in their attempts to create a universal empire, and there is good evidence that they were far from ever doing so. After all, even close neighboring states in Central Mexico were able to maintain political independence from the Aztec empire, and more distant imperial powers such as the K'iche' Mayas of Guatemala were probably more than equal to the task of preventing Aztec domination of the highland Mayan core zone. Even political groups already incorporated into the provincial structure of the Aztec empire—for example, city-states in the Oaxaca area—were a constant threat to regain political independence through military means. There is some evidence, too, that the Aztecs had come to realize that subjugation of the semiperipheral trading zones might have been profoundly crippling to the larger economy. Perhaps their military takeover of the Xoconusco port of trade zone taught them that valuable lesson.

It seems likely, then, that Mesoamerica was destined to remain a world economy for many years to come, politically and socially divided by its numerous ethnic identities, city-states and regional networks. Of course, inevitably changes would take place in the relative position of the individual polities and regional networks within the Mesoamerican world-system. New core states would emerge, old ones would drop down to peripheral or semiperipheral positions, and former frontier peoples would be incorporated into the periphery. Unfortunately, we shall never know the transformations that might have taken place, and instead we are left to ponder the legacy of an incredibly vibrant world that has reverberated down through the corridors of time in Mexico and the countries of Central America.

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