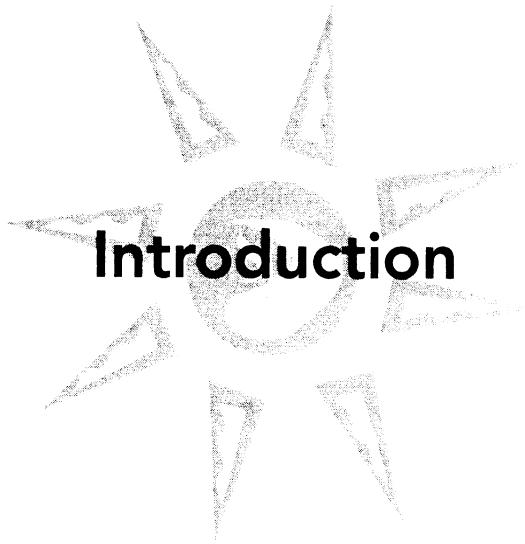

# Introduction

The Spanish explorers and conquistadors who first made contact with the Mesoamerican world were surprised by its complexity and grandeur, for they had become accustomed to the simpler ways of the previously subjugated natives of the Caribbean Islands. Their testimony constitutes an informative beginning place for our study of the Mesoamerican world, whose origins, conditions at European contact, and transformations resulting from colonization and (more recently) modernization are the subject of this text.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF MESOAMERICA BY THE SPANIARDS

As we will now see, the Spaniards were extremely impressed with the level of cultural development achieved by the Mesoamerican peoples. In reviewing the Spaniards' first impressions, the reader should take particular note of the complexity and diversity of Mesoamerica. We begin with Columbus and his fourth voyage to the New World.

### Columbus Meets the Mayas during His Fourth Voyage

The first Europeans to make contact with Mesoamerican peoples were Christopher Columbus and his men during their fourth voyage to the New World. Columbus began the voyage in 1502. Departing from Spain, he touched down on the island of Española (present-day Haiti and Dominican Republic), and then sailed directly to the Bay Islands located off the coast of Honduras. While at harbor in one of the islands, a large canoe of "Indians" arrived, bearing merchandise brought from areas to the west. Many years later, Columbus's son Fernando described the canoe and its people as follows:

> [The canoe was as] long as a galley and eight feet wide, made of a single tree trunk. . . . Amidship it had a palm-leaf awning like that which the Venetian gondolas carry; this gave

> complete protection against the rain and waves. Under this awning were the children and women and all the baggage and merchandise. There were twenty-five paddlers. . . . [The Admiral] took aboard the costliest and handsomest things in that cargo: cotton mantles and sleeveless shirts embroidered and painted in different designs and colors; breechclouts of the same design and cloth as the shawls worn by the women in the canoe, being like the shawls worn by the Moorish women of Granada; long wooden swords with a groove on each side where the edge should be, in which were fastened with cord and pitch, flint knives that cut like steel; hatchets resembling the stone hatchets used by the other Indians, but made of good copper; and hawk's bells of copper, and crucibles to melt it. For provisions they had such roots and grains as the Indians of Española eat, also a wine made of maize that tasted like English beer. They had as well many of the almonds [cacao beans] which the Indians of New Spain use as currency. . . .(Keen 1959:231–232)

Columbus was impressed by the cultural refinement of the natives in the canoe, for he had not seen a people like them before in the New World. He seized the leader of the boat, an old man named Yumbe, who became translator for Columbus with the peoples they later met along the coast of Honduras. Yumbe is a Yucatec Mayan name, which suggests that Columbus had stumbled on a group of Mayan long-distance traders from the Mesoamerican world.

Columbus apparently did not fully understand the significance of the Mayan traders nor the complex world from which they came, and as a result he sailed east toward lower Central America in search of the hoped-for passageway to the Orient. Farther south he encountered indigenous peoples culturally similar to the natives already known to him in Española and the other Caribbean islands. His decision to explore lower Central America established a pattern followed by subsequent explorers, who during the next two decades initiated the first permanent Spanish settlements in the area of southern Central America known today as Panama.

## The Spaniards Make Contact with the Powerful Kingdoms of Mesoamerica

Exploration of the Mesoamerican region by the Spaniards began between 1517 and 1519 (for details, see Chapter 4), as first Hernández de Córdova, then Juan de Grijalva, and finally Hernán Cortés sailed around the Yucatán Peninsula and northward along the Gulf Coast of Mexico. In 1519, while Cortés and his men were camped with the Totonac Indians of Veracruz, they witnessed the arrival of a group of Aztec tax collectors. The Spaniards were astonished by the extreme deference with which the Totonac peoples received the Aztecs, and the Spaniards began to understand—perhaps for the first time—just how politically complex and culturally diverse the newly discovered world of native peoples really was. The point was driven home even more forcefully to the Spaniards as they began their history-making journey from the Veracruz coast to the Central Basin of Mexico. At each step along the way, they encountered economically richer, culturally more sophisticated, and politically more powerful peoples.

Beyond Totonac country, the Spaniards felt that they were entering "a different sort of country," one in which the gleaming plastered stone buildings of the towns and fortresses reminded them of Spain itself. In places like Tlaxcala, Cholula, and

Huejotzinco, the Spaniards were surprised to find cosmopolitan and highly politicized peoples. Their robust kingdoms were populated by over 100,000 subjects each, and they vied with one another for power by employing elaborate forms of diplomacy, intrigue, and warfare. Territories were defended with high walls and fortifications. Warriors numbering in the tens of thousands were organized into diverse ranks and squadrons, each with its own insignia and dress code. Cities as large as those in Spain bustled with people engaged in daily trade, administrative affairs, and religious ritual. The native societies were deeply stratified, not only between noble and commoner, but also between rich and poor, freeman and slave.

Cortés, perhaps exaggerating a bit in order to impress the Crown, nevertheless captured the cosmopolitan nature of these societies with the following description of Tlaxcala:

> The city is indeed so great and marvelous that though I abstain from describing many things about it, yet the little that I shall recount is, I think, almost incredible. It is much larger than Granada, and much better fortified. Its houses are as fine and its inhabitants far more numerous than those of Granada when that city was captured. Its provisions and food are likewise very superior—including such things as bread, fowl, game, fish and other excellent vegetables and produce which they eat. There is a market in this city in which more than thirty thousand people daily are occupied in buying and selling, and this in addition to other similar shops which there are in all parts of the city. Nothing is lacking in this market of what they are wont to use, whether utensils, garments, footwear or the like. There is gold, silver and precious stones, and jewelers' shops selling other ornaments made of feathers, as well arranged as in any market in the world. There is earthenware of many kinds and excellent quality, as fine as any in Spain. Wood, charcoal, medicinal and sweet smelling herbs are sold in large quantities. There are booths for washing your hair and barbers to shave you; there are also public baths. Finally, good order and an efficient police system are maintained among them, and they behave as people of sense and reason: the foremost city of Africa cannot rival them. (Cortés 1962:50–51)

The Tlaxcalas, Cholutecas, and other peoples of the area were able to describe for Cortés what the Aztec heartland was like. Nevertheless, the Spaniards were unprepared for what they saw when in November of 1519 they finally reached the Basin of Mexico and entered the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. Cortés later wrote glowingly of the Aztec capital (Figure A.1):

> The great city of Tenochtitlan is built in the midst of this salt lake, and it is two leagues from the heart of the city to any point on the mainland. Four causeways lead to it, all made by hand and some twelve feet wide. The city itself is as large as Seville or Córdova. The principal streets are very broad and straight, the majority of them being of beaten earth, but a few and at least half the smaller thoroughfares are waterways along which they pass in their canoes. (Cortés 1962:86)

Cortés, a boastful but astute observer, attempted to place the Aztec capital in the wider context of Mesoamerica as a whole and even of the Old World. He described in great detail the pomp and ceremony surrounding Motecuhzoma, the ruler of the Aztec empire, who, he said, rivaled "the sultans themselves or other eastern potentates." Cortés recounted how Motecuhzoma was attended by literally thousands

**Figure A.1** The island city of Tenochtitlan at the time of Spanish contact. From a painting by Miguel Covarrubias in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City.

of retainers, who were not permitted to wear sandals in his presence nor to see his face. The Aztec ruler changed attire four times a day, never wearing the same clothing more than once. Wherever he went he was carried on jewel-studded litters by men of the highest noble rank. Hundreds of young men and women served his meals, which included up to three hundred different dishes. Motecuhzoma conducted imperial business in the royal palace, amusing himself during breaks by strolling through the surrounding gardens and parks stocked with every variety of plant and animal known to the native world.

Motecuhzoma's wealth in gold and other metal pieces; precious stone jewelry; exquisite feather, stone, wood, and bone crafted items; beautiful cloths; and innumerable other objects so impressed Cortés that he was "doubtful whether any of all the known princes of the world possesses such treasures in such quantity." Cortés estimated the city's main market to be twice as large as the one in Salamanca. The quality of Aztec maize, in both grain size and taste, was said to be superior to that of "all the other islands or the mainland." The multicolored cotton cloth was as good as any in Spain, and on a par with the silks of Granada. Cortés also marveled at the number of commercial goods being exchanged in Tenochtitlan, brought there by thousands of canoes bound for the city from every direction along the network of canals. All goods that entered the city were taxed. In the marketplaces themselves, every conceivable item and service were available, from barbering to prostitution, and large numbers of skilled and unskilled laborers gathered there "waiting to be hired by the day."

In an attempt to put Aztec society (and his own exploits) into broader perspective, Cortés summarized his observations about the Aztec city as follows:

> Finally, to avoid prolixity in telling all the wonders of this city, I will simply say that the manner of living among the people is very similar to that in Spain, and considering that this is a barbarous nation shut off from a knowledge of the true God or communication with enlightened nations, one may well marvel at the orderliness and good government which is everywhere maintained. (Cortés 1962:93–94)

The Spaniards quickly determined that the Aztec empire was vast, extending for hundreds of miles in all directions, and that, as Cortés exaggeratedly claimed, "Motecuhzoma was feared by all both present and distant more than any other monarch in the world." Still, the Spaniards were well aware that they had seen only a small part of the Mesoamerican world, and that many other kingdoms, large and small, were yet to be explored and subdued.

With the fall of Tenochtitlan to the Spaniards in 1521 (see Chapter 4), Cortés began to send his captains on military expeditions from the Basin of Mexico to contact and, if necessary, conquer the diverse peoples and kingdoms of Mesoamerica. For example, expeditions were sent to the great province called Michoacan in the west and farther north from there to the province of Cihuatan, "which it is affirmed had an island inhabited solely by women"; and to the rebellious province of Huaxteca in the northeast. Other expeditions were dispatched to the southern regions of Mesoamerica, such as Oaxaca, Chiapas, and "the very rich lands" of Higueras (Honduras). One of the most important expeditions was entrusted to Cortés's courageous but ruthless captain, Pedro de Alvarado, who was sent to the "rich and splendid lands inhabited by new and different races" in the kingdoms of Utatlan and Guatemala.

## DEFINING "MESOAMERICA" AND OTHER IMPORTANT TERMS

We have referred to the world encountered by Cortés and his band as "Mesoamerica." What do we mean by this term? And, to what will the term refer in the chapters to follow? In answering these questions, we should begin by noting that the term *Mesoamerica* has varied widely in meaning, even among scholars. In fact, perhaps no term is more debated in Mesoamerican studies than Mesoamerica itself. We do not propose to settle the debate, but rather to define terms as we use them in this text, and to try to employ them in clear and consistent fashion. We are aware that the native Mesoamericans themselves are sensitive about how such terms are employed, and in the chapters to follow we have tried to keep their interests in mind.

Literally, the term *Mesoamerica* means "Middle America," and it was at one time widely used to refer exclusively to the aboriginal cultures of the region, whether in their pristine pre-Hispanic or acculturated modern forms. That is to say, Mesoamerica had a geographic reference: the region where the ancient Mesoamerican peoples flourished prior to the coming of the Spaniards. This usage was problematic for mestizo, European, and even indigenous peoples who had little or nothing to do with the

so-called Mesoamerican world but have resided in the region for centuries. Therefore, in this text for the most part, we avoid using the term strictly as a geographic region or culture area.

A more flexible and useful definition of Mesoamerica, we think, is to define it as a particular historical tradition of aboriginal cultures, and thus a "civilization." It is understood that this cultural tradition was constantly undergoing transformation prior to the coming of the Spaniards, and it has continued to experience even more radical change and adaptation since Spanish contact. The creators of this rich historical tradition—both in its original, pre-Hispanic version and in its post-Hispanic, modified versions—may properly be termed "Mesoamericans" (or "native" Mesoamericans).

From our perspective, Mesoamerica, whether past or present, cannot be adequately defined by a list of essential traits or ideas; rather, we need to examine the relationship through time between these cultural features and the social and material processes involved in their creation. Both the cultural traditions and the processes by which Mesoamerica has changed are worth tracing because they have profoundly influenced the participating peoples of Mexico and Central America, whether they be natives, mestizos, Africans, or Europeans.

It must be emphasized that Mesoamerica, as we employ the term, does not refer to a fixed or static cultural tradition. From at least 1000 B.C. onward, the Mesoamerican cultural tradition has consisted of a complex mix of regional and local cultures, and it has been in a state of continual flux. This was even more the case after Spanish culture—and later other European and North American cultures—were imposed on the Mesoamerican peoples and further fragmented the Mesoamerican cultures. Nevertheless, the legacy of the Mesoamerican cultural tradition has been sufficiently cohesive, unique, and influential in the history of the region to warrant its identification with a special term: "Mesoamerica."

Despite the overall unity of the Mesoamerican cultural tradition, the Mesoamericans have perhaps never seen themselves as a single people sharing a common culture. During pre-Hispanic times, the widest identifying social units for most Mesoamericans were the polities to which they were subject, whether empires, kingdoms, city-states, or chiefdoms. Furthermore, most Mesoamericans have been locally oriented; and collective identities based on ethnic group, community, and lineage were probably stronger than those based on political affiliation. For millions of native Mesoamericans in the region, this trend continues to be true today, as their collective identity comes more from the village, hamlet, region, or language group to which they belong than from the nation-state in whose territory they reside. In most contexts and time periods, then, Mesoamericans have tended to see themselves mainly as first, members of a lineage; second, participants in a community; third, speakers of a common language; and finally, if at all, as Mexicans, Central Americans, or Indians.

Like the term Mesoamerica, *Indian* is another controversial term debated within Mesoamerican studies. As is well known, this term was incorrectly applied to the native peoples of Mesoamerica and elsewhere in the New World by Columbus and later Spanish explorers. The Spaniards continued to refer to the Mesoamericans during the colonial period as Indians (in the Spanish form, "Indios"), and its usage persisted

within the nation-states of Mexico and Central America after independence. Therein lies the controversy, for many Mesoamericans today resent being called "Indians." The term, they say, is not only a misnomer but worse, a device employed by the ruling classes to keep the native peoples in a subordinate ("neocolonial") social position.

Various alternate labels have been suggested by scholars and Mesoamericans alike to replace the term "Indian," such as "aborigine," "indigene," "natural," "native," and "Native American." Some Mesoamericans prefer to be identified by either generic ethnic designations—such as "Mayas," "Nahuas," "Otomis," "Pipils"—or local community eponyms: for example, "San Juaneros" or "Ixtahuacanos" (people from the community of San Juan, or the community of Ixtahuacán). Given the controversy, the term "Indian" should be used with care and an effort made to determine how it has been manipulated to further the political and economic interests of both the Mesoamericans and their external oppressors.

An additional controversial term, especially for the Mesoamericans themselves, is "conquest." The Mesoamericans accept that they were invaded by Spaniards and defeated in wars against them, but insist that they were never "conquered" by the Spaniards nor anyone else. They argue that they did not willingly submit to domination by outsiders and that they have continued to struggle against the aggressors down to the present time. Considerable evidence will be presented in this text to support their claim, although, as the reader will discover, we nevertheless employ the term "conquest" in certain places to refer to the bloody clashes that took place during the sixteenth century between the Spaniards and Mesoamericans.

Although we are sympathetic to arguments made by Mesoamericans about the importance of terminology, terms like "Indian" and "conquest" are universally employed in North American scholarly discourse, and it seems to us that it would be overly pedantic to excise them completely from our account. Ironically, some native Mesoamericans insist on being called "Indians" in order to dramatize the oppression to which they have been subjected since initial contact with the Europeans. The word "conquest" is universally applied in the social sciences to refer to unequal military clashes like the ones that took place in Mesoamerica during the sixteenth century. We hasten to add, however, that "Indian," as we use the term, carries no connotation of racial or cultural inferiority, and that "conquest" does not mean that the native Mesoamericans have ceased to resist all means to subjugate them. We trust that it will be obvious to the reader of the pages to follow that our respect and admiration for the Mesoamerican Indians and their cultures are genuine and are grounded in a clear understanding of their history.

Finally, we wish to mention other, less controversial terminological problems. The most important of these, perhaps, has to do with orthography: how to spell or represent native terms and expressions. Linguists, of course, have a universal phonetic alphabet by which they record and analyze the diverse languages of the world, including those spoken by Mesoamericans. Other scholars, such as ethnologists, archaeologists, geographers, and historians have developed orthographies that do not always correspond perfectly with the linguists' phonetic system. In part this is a practical matter of being able to write native terms in the everyday alphabets of the scholars' home countries (English, Spanish, French, German, etc.). The countries of the

Mesoamerican region, especially Mexico and Guatemala, have stressed the importance of developing alphabets for the native languages that are easily adapted to Spanish. Recently, Mesoamerican Indians themselves have taken a renewed interest in developing their own ways of writing the native languages that are, after all, part of their own cultural heritage. Fortunately, a growing number of native scholars are being trained in the science of linguistics and consequently now express more of an interest in finding a universal graphic system to transcribe the Mesoamerican languages than in developing a unique "native" alphabet for each language.

In this text we attempt to follow linguistic usages adapted to Anglo-American forms in representing native terms and expressions, for example, by adding -s to pluralize the names of native peoples (Aztec-s or Maya-s) and -n when they are used in adjectival form (Maya-n). For the most part we avoid providing accent marks when native-language terms are used (for example, Tenochtitlan rather than Tenochtitlán). In general, Nahuatl (Aztec) words receive stress on the penultimate syllabus, whereas Mayan words receive stress on the final syllabus. We render Spanish terms and expressions—which have been incorporated into the Mesoamerican tradition in large numbers—with English glosses when first used. We also employ accent marks for words that are clearly Spanish rather than Mesoamerican, in part to help the reader pronounce the words correctly.

## THE PHYSICAL SETTING OF ABORIGINAL MESOAMERICA

Having seen how the Spaniards viewed the Mesoamericans, and having defined "Mesoamerica" and other terms, let us now turn to the physical setting in which the Mesoamericans developed their elaborate cultural tradition. In this section, we begin with a brief examination of the broad geographic conditions within which the Mesoamericans created their distinctive civilization, after which a series of special "natural areas" will be delineated. We will also briefly attempt to characterize the Mesoamericans in biological terms, arguing in the process that their physical features represent adaptations to the environmental conditions of the region.

### The Highland and Lowland Division

Few regions in the world of equivalent size vary as much as the Mesoamerican region in its landforms, climate, flora and fauna, soils, and vegetation. Indeed, this geographic diversity is thought to be closely related to the origin of agriculture and evolution of the state within the region. The "natural areas" into which the region is subdivided provide widely divergent adaptive challenges to the inhabitants, whether aboriginal Mesoamericans or the modern mixed populations of Whites, mestizos, and Indians in Mexico and Central America. We are particularly interested in the responses to these environmental challenges through time by the native Mesoamericans, and the way that these responses help explain the social history and cultural features that will be reviewed in the chapters to follow. It is likely, too, that adaptations

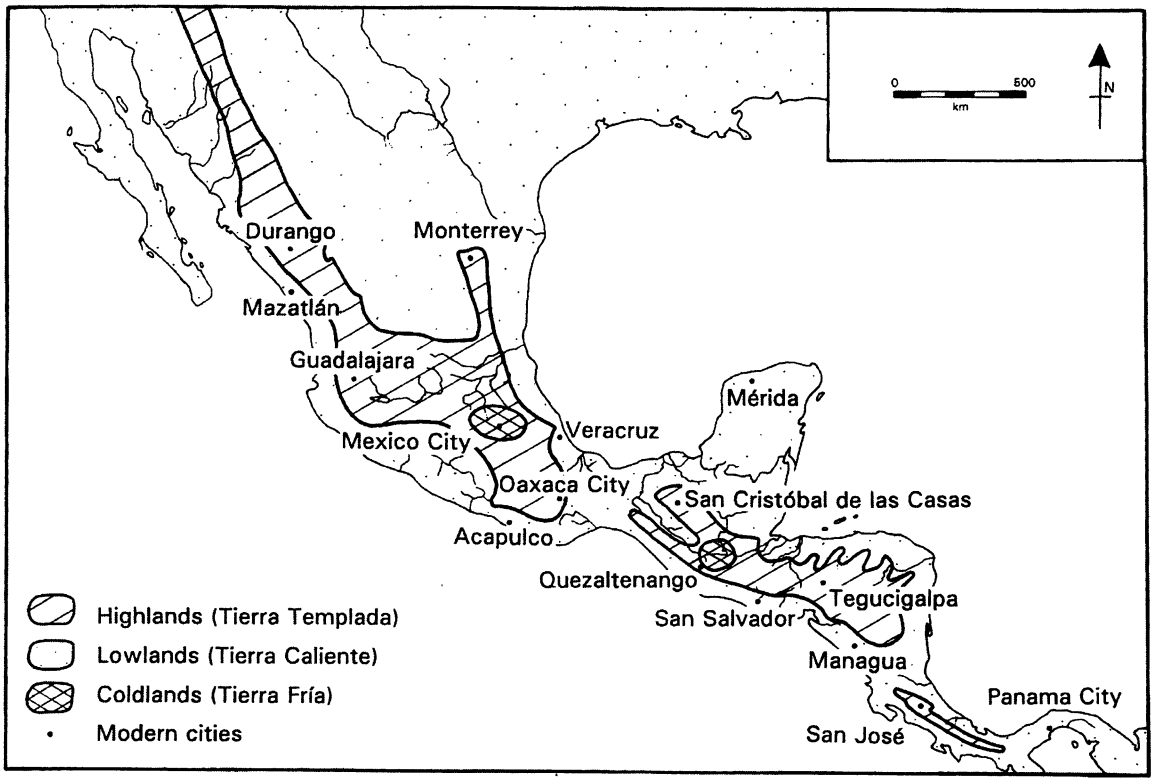


**Figure A.2** Map showing the three major geographic zones of Mesoamerica. After Robert C. West, "The Natural Regions of Middle America," *The Handbook of Middle American Indians, Volume I: Natural Environment and Early Cultures*, volume editor Robert C. West, general editor Robert Wauchope. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1964, p. 365.

to the more general features of the region's geography have provided the ecological basis for the many shared cultural features that gave the peoples of the Middle American region a common identity and set them apart from other native peoples in North and South America.

One useful scheme divides the region into three distinct geographic zones, as described in Box A.1 (see also Figure A.2). Generally speaking, the Mesoamerican peoples have adapted to the highland/lowland divide by means of two major adaptive or ecological regimes, defined in terms of their respective agricultural, demographic, and settlement patterns.

### ***Box A.1*** Three Geographic Zones of Middle America

Broad contrasts in elevation divide the region into the following three distinct geographic zones (Sanders and Price 1968:101–105) (see also Figure A.2):

*Tierra Fría* zone ("cold lands"), 2,000 to 2,800 meters in elevation.
*Tierra Templada* zone ("temperate lands"), 1,000 to 2,000 meters in elevation.
*Tierra Caliente* zone ("hot lands"), 0 to 1,000 meters in elevation.

(*continued*)

(*continued*)

These three zones can be further subdivided into geographically diverse subzones on the basis of variations in land elevation and the relative amount of rainfall received. The resulting zones and subzones define conditions that have greatly affected the production of the main cultivated plants in Mesoamerica, and thus played an important role in the history of the region. For example, the way maize (corn) is grown will vary considerably depending upon the subzones; in arid subzones, it usually will not grow at all unless irrigated. Similarly, cacao does not do well in Tierra Templada zones and requires irrigation in subhumid subzones or arid Tierra Caliente subzones. Cotton grows well only in arid and subhumid Tierra Caliente subzones.

It is customary to simplify the geography of the region by referring to both the Tierra Fría and the Tierra Templada zones as "highlands," and to the Tierra Caliente zone as "lowlands." This broad highland/lowland division is thought to have been historically the region's most fundamental geographic division.

***Highlands.*** The Mesoamericans associated with the highland ecological system have been concentrated mainly in the Central Plateau of Mexico, the mountainous areas of Oaxaca, and the intermontaine basins of Chiapas and Guatemala. The most fertile soils of the region are found in the highlands, especially within the larger basins, valleys, and plateaus. The soil fertility of the highlands is primarily the result of sedimentation in extinct lakes and of volcanic action. Periodic volcanic eruptions have carried ash and cinder into the numerous large valleys and basins of the highlands. Maize, beans, squash, amaranth, maguey, and other crops were produced in the highlands, by employing an intensive agricultural technology. In aboriginal times technological intensification took the form of terracing, irrigation, and short-term fallowing (dry farming).

Highland populations in the region have always been concentrated in the valleys and basins, at densities of 100 persons per square kilometer (km2) or more during the aboriginal period. They also have tended to be nucleated in urban centers, both "towns," with thousands of persons, and "cities," with tens of thousands of inhabitants. Population densities in the highland urban centers during aboriginal times were invariably greater than 2,000 persons per square kilometer (km2). Overall, the total population of the highland peoples of contact-period Mesoamerica may have numbered over 20 million persons, the vast majority of them residing in the highlands of Mexico.

Most of the minerals of importance to the aboriginal peoples of Mesoamerica occurred naturally in the highlands. Among these were metals (gold, silver, copper), obsidian, jadeite and other serpentine stones, amber, and volcanic stone for grinding tools. Salt, a necessary element in the diet of all peoples, came mostly from the lowlands, although there were a few briny sinks in the highlands from which salt could be extracted.

***Lowlands.*** The Mesoamerican peoples living in lowland ecological settings have been concentrated mainly along the eastern (Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean) and western (Pacific) coasts of the region. Soil fertility varies widely in the coastal lowland zones. Along the eastern coast, particularly in the Yucatán Peninsula, the limestone

soils are generally thin and relatively infertile. The soils in the western lowlands tend to be more fertile as a result of volcanic deposition, especially in the piedmont areas. In general, the most fertile lowland soils consist of alluvial deposits formed by rivers flowing from the volcanic highlands down through the lowlands on their way to the two oceans.

The aboriginal inhabitants residing in lowland settings have usually adopted the slash-and-burn (swidden) system of horticulture. This system is based on an extensive technology in which the natural vegetation is cut and burned, after which maize, beans, and squash seeds are planted in holes punched by a simple digging stick. The Mesoamerican "trilogy" (maize, beans, and squash) is complemented in the lowlands by chiles, root crops (yucca, camote, sweet potatoes), and fruit trees (zapote, papaya, breadnut, cacao).

Lowland populations have tended to be more evenly scattered across the landscape than in the highlands, with overall densities in prehispanic times typically ranging from five to thirty persons per km2. The characteristic settlement pattern in the lowlands, even today, consists of a ceremonial-type center surrounded by dependent rural hamlets. Some urbanization has always existed in the lowlands, but generally in the form of towns rather than cities. At Spanish contact, the population of the lowlands together numbered around six million persons, roughly 20 percent of the total Mesoamerican population at that time.

The lowlands provided many exotic items of importance to the Mesoamericans. For example, bright feathers from tropical birds and pelts of the ocelot and other cats were obtained in large numbers. Hardwoods were available for construction and canoe making. From other trees rubber, copal incense, and dyes were extracted, whereas paper was manufactured from the bark of a large fig tree and an aromatic medicine was extracted from the balsam tree. There were many other dye plants in this area, including indigo, annatto, and genipap. Tobacco was cultivated and made into "rolled cigars," whereas the narcotic plant coca was grown in the far southern part of the lowland area.

It must be emphasized that the ecological zones of Mesoamerica, both past and present, were far more diverse than the general highland/lowland types just described. For example, research has shown that considerable intensification of agriculture—including terracing and "raised field" gardening—existed in some tropical lowland zones long before Spanish contact. Furthermore, within the highlands important ecological differences have always existed between temperate (Tierra Templada) and cold (Tierra Fría) zones. For example, in the cold highlands located at elevations above 2,000 meters, the maize growing season is shortened, whereas the pulque-producing maguey plant grows well. It is undoubtedly significant that the most powerful polities in the region, both past and present, have been located in the cold highlands.

Other important ecological differences result from the contrast between arid rather than humid lowland subzones. In the arid lowlands aboriginal Mesoamericans had to irrigate in order to obtain dependable maize production, whereas cacao could not be effectively grown even with irrigation. In contrast, cotton flourished in

arid lowland zones. These and other ecological considerations help explain why some of the most powerful lowland polities of Mesoamerica were located in dry lowland subzones.

## Natural Areas

With the basic highland/lowland division in mind, we will now briefly describe Mesoamerica's "natural areas," that is to say, subregional geographic divisions that define the critically important natural conditions for the inhabitants of the region. For the purposes of this study, five main natural areas warrant consideration (West 1964): (1) Northern Highlands, (2) Southern Highlands, (3) Gulf Coast Lowlands, (4) Pacific Coast Lowlands, and (5) Northern Mexico Dry Lands (Figure A.3). The geographic conditions of these five areas differ markedly from one another, and the peoples of the Mesoamerican region have had to adapt to them in fundamentally different ways.

***Northern Highlands.*** The Northern Highland area is composed of Mexico's Mesa Central, or Central Plateau, and the highlands of Oaxaca and Guerrero (Figure A.4). The Central Plateau has been a major focus of human activity within the Mesoamerican region for several thousand years. This remains true today: Mexico City is not

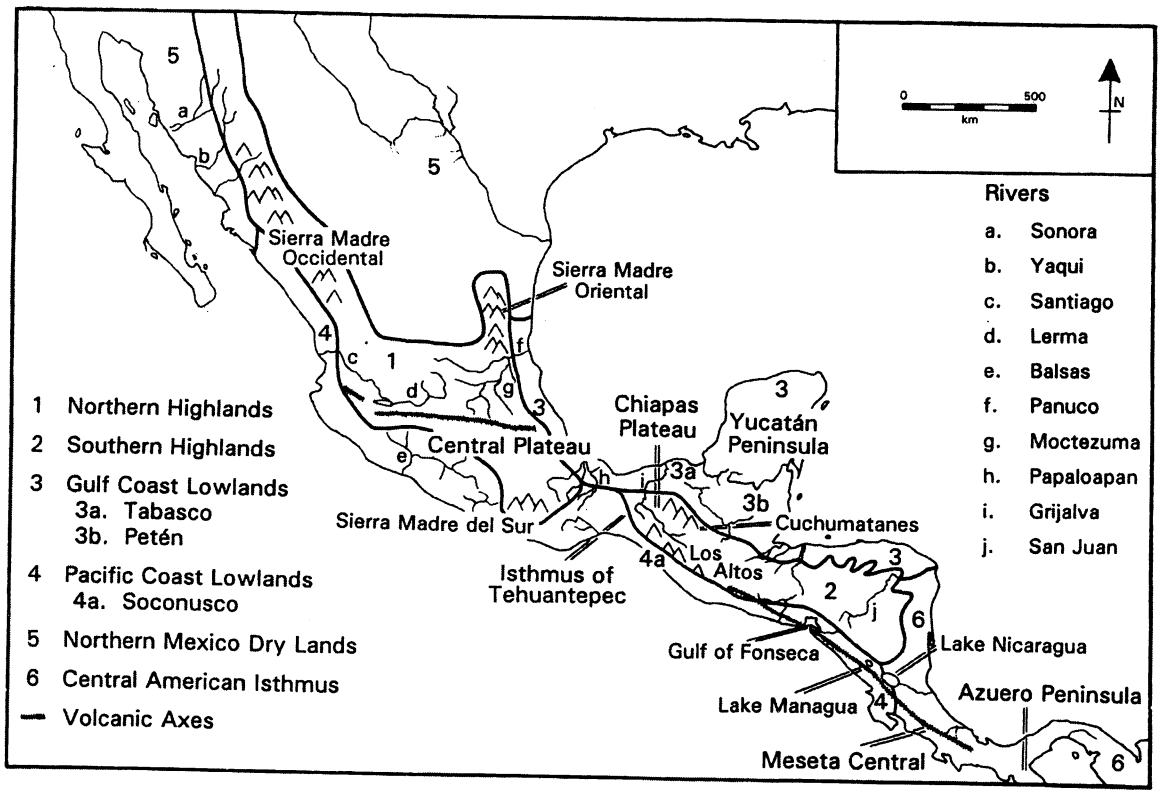


**Figure A.3** The natural areas of Mesoamerica. After Robert C. West, "The Natural Regions of Middle America," *The Handbook of Middle American Indians, Volume I: Natural Environment and Early Cultures,* volume editor Robert C. West, general editor Robert Wauchope. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1964, p. 368.

**Figure A.4** Highland valley in Central Mexico. Photograph by the authors of the text.

only the largest and most important city of Mexico but is also now the second largest city in the world (only Tokyo is larger).

The Central Plateau is marked by volcanic features and unique hydrological patterns. A line of high volcanos, some of them still active, forms the southern rim; on the eastern flank is the Sierra Madre Oriental, whereas the Sierra Madre Occidental forms the western escarpment.

The plateau itself is pitted by both large, flat basins, many of which once contained lakes, and eroded volcanic peaks. Among the largest basins are Mexico, Puebla, Toluca, Guadalajara, and a series of linked basins that form the Bajío of Guanajuato. Many of the lakes no longer exist, some of them because of sedimentation and desiccation, and others—such as the five lakes in the Valley of Mexico—because of artificial draining. A few lakes, such as Lake Pátzcuaro in Michoacán, are still viable.

Much of the plateau itself lies in Tierra Templada, although the higher basins and surrounding mountains are Tierra Fría zones. Several of the volcanic peaks—such as Orizaba, Popocatepetl, Iztaccihuatl—are snow-covered year-round, and ice has been obtained from these peaks for centuries.

The Central Plateau is drained by three major river systems. With its headwaters in the Toluca Basin just west of Mexico City, the Lerma River flows west to the Pacific, forming the longest river system in the region. Tributaries of the Balsas River flow from basins in the southeastern portion of the plateau and drain into the Pacific Ocean. The Panuco River and its tributary, the Moctezuma River, form one of the largest drainage systems of Mexico's Atlantic watershed. Both rivers have their headwaters in the northeastern part of the Central Plateau.

The volcanic range that forms the southern boundary of the Central Plateau, overlooking the Balsas Depression formed by the Balsas River, defines the second

highland zone of this area, composed of the Sierra Madre del Sur in Guerrero and the Mesa del Sur in Oaxaca. In contrast to the Central Plateau, there are few large, flat basins in this zone, which is instead covered by rugged mountain peaks and small, deep valleys. The Valley of Oaxaca, the largest basin, supported dense populations in the past and continues to do so today.

Much of the Central Plateau has been denuded of vegetation as a result of human activities. Once the area was covered with evergreen and deciduous oak forests. At higher elevations the mixed pine-oak forests gave way to stands of pines, firs, and junipers. At lower elevations grasses, scrub oak, cactus, acacia, and pirul (introduced from Peru in the sixteenth century) now dominate. The southern part of the Northern Highlands, like the Central Plateau, once supported cloud-forest vegetation, and in lower-lying arid valleys xerophytes (acacia and cacti) still predominate.

Neotropical (South American) fauna long ago invaded the Northern Highlands, including small numbers of such mammals as the peccary, tapir, spider monkey, jaguar, anteater, and armadillo. The Nearctic (North American) mammals native to the highlands include white-tailed deer, rabbits, squirrels, cougars, and pumas. The deer and peccary may have been the main mammals hunted and eaten in fairly large numbers in aboriginal times by Mesoamericans living in the Northern Highlands. Migratory birds (ducks, geese, teals), amphibians (frogs, salamanders), and small fish inhabited the many lakes of the Northern Highlands in times past, and were an important food source for aboriginal Mesoamericans.

***Southern Highlands.*** South of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Figure A.5) is a complex highland area framed by two mountain chains, a geologically older northern chain and a younger southern chain. The northern chain begins with the Chiapas plateau and continues southeast as the Cuchumatanes and Alta Verapaz mountains of

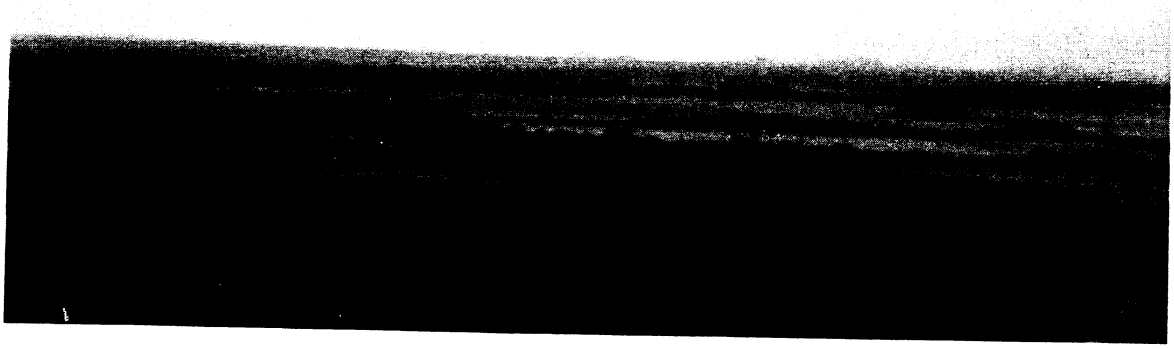

**Figure A.5** Isthmus of Tehuantepec depression. Photograh by the authors of the text.

Guatemala. The intermontaine basins and plateaus formed by the northern chain—for instance, San Cristobal (Chiapas), Sacapulas (Guatemala)—are few in number and small (Figure A.6). The southern chain, volcanic in origin, begins with the Sierra Madre of Chiapas, continues southeastward as the Los Altos of Guatemala and the mountains of eastern Guatemala, Honduras, and northern Nicaragua. This southern chain provides the structural framework for numerous basins, valleys, and plateaus such as in Quezaltenango, Quiché, Guatemala, and Comayagua (the first three in Guatemala, the last in Honduras). In El Salvador and Nicaragua the southern volcanic chain is located in a transisthmian depression, and as a result the basins and valleys there are either low (for instance, Zapotitlán and San Salvador in El Salvador) or occupied by freshwater lakes (lakes Managua and Nicaragua in Nicaragua).

Most of the Southern Highlands fall into the Tierra Templada zone, although there is a small zone of Tierra Fría in Chiapas and western Guatemala. The highlands subzones are mostly subhumid, with fringes of humid pockets and a few arid river valleys (Grijalva in Chiapas, Motagua in Guatemala, and Catacamas in Honduras). In the western parts of the Southern Highlands, there is a distinct dry period (December through April), whereas in eastern parts rainfall tends to occur year-round.

Natural vegetation in the Southern Highlands mainly consists of mountain forest, typically made up of oaks and pines. Nearctic animals are less common in this area than in the Northern Highlands, whereas neotropical animals (tapirs, monkeys, etc.) are more common. Some bright-feathered trogan birds are found exclusively in the Southern Highlands, notably the quetzal.

**Figure A.6** Highland mountains and valleys in Guatemala. Photograph by the authors of the text.

***Gulf Coast Lowlands.*** This lowland area is part of a coastal plain that runs along the Gulf Coast of Mexico all the way to South America. The broad central zone is made up of the Tabasco Plains, the Petén Lowlands, and the Yucatán Peninsula. Narrower coasts are found to the north in Tamaulipas and Veracruz (Mexico) and south in Guatemala and northern Honduras. In the past the area was covered with dense evergreen rain forest, broken in places by savanna grasslands (as in eastern Tabasco, northern Yucatán, southern Petén).

In many places the coastal plains are cut by rivers flowing from the adjacent highlands, forming deltas and levees as the rivers slow down on their course to the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea (especially in Tamaulipas, Tabasco, Belize, and the Gulf coasts of Guatemala and Honduras). Long stretches of the northern shoreline have "barrier beaches" that enclose lagoons and tidal swamps, whereas offshore sand bars and reefs are common, especially off the west coast of Yucatán and the coast of Belize.

The Gulf Coast Lowlands form part of the Tierra Caliente hot zone. Temperatures are high year-round, and rainfall is heavy. Most of the area is humid, and rain falls during all months of the year. Although humid, some zones such as the Petén, are drier during the first two or three months of the year. Northern Yucatán consists of a subhumid subzone to the east and an arid subzone to the west.

The natural vegetation of most of the Gulf Coast Lowlands is tropical forest. A canopy is formed by giant mahogany, ceiba, and wild fig trees, whereas below are found smaller but useful trees such as the palm, ramón (breadnut), rubber, mamey, sapodilla, and logwood. The patches of savanna are covered with grass and pines, except in northwestern Yucatán, where the vegetation is xerophytic scrub.

The fauna of the Gulf Coast area consists largely of neotropical animals. Most of the mammals and marsupials are arboreal—monkeys, sloths, opossums, coatis—but there are also ground dwellers such as tapirs, peccaries, brocket deer, and pacas. The main predators are jaguars, ocelots, and jaguarundis. Bright-feathered birds are numerous (some 500 species), including macaws, parrots, toucans, and trogons. Game birds, such as tinamous and cassarows, and numerous migratory waterfowl are common. Several varieties of poisonous snakes inhabit the area, whereas other reptiles like the iguana and marine turtle (five species) are good sources of food. The waters off the coast of the northern lowlands (especially off the coast of Tabasco, the west coast of Yucatán, and the coast of Belize) are rich in fish (for instance, mullets, grey snappers), crabs, shrimp, oysters, and manatee sea mammals.

***Pacific Coast Lowlands.*** The Pacific coastal lowlands, starting in the north at Sinaloa and extending southward to the Nicoya Peninsula, form a second Mesoamerican lowland area. This natural area consists of plains, hills, and volcanic slopes, which in some zones, such as Soconusco and Guatemala, is divided into distinct piedmont and plains areas. The Pacific Coast Lowland area is generally traversed by relatively short, fast-flowing rivers that lay down smaller levee and delta depositions than in the Caribbean lowlands. The largest of these rivers are the Lerma-Santiago and Balsas of central Mexico. The coastline has many tidal swamp zones, the most

extensive existing in El Salvador (Gulf of Fonseca, Jilquilisco Lagoon), Guatemala, and Soconusco. Some of the tidal areas form natural canals that were probably used as aquatic transportation routes in aboriginal times. High winds offshore make ocean travel very dangerous on the Pacific side, but the winds also stir up the coastal waters and enhance the availability of marine life.

The Pacific Coast Lowlands fall into the Tierra Caliente zone, but they receive less annual rainfall than the Caribbean lowlands and have a distinct dry season. Most of the area is subhumid, although the piedmont is largely humid and the coastal plain may vary from subhumid to arid. The rainfall pattern results in a natural deciduous forest cover of palm, broadleaf, fig, and dyewood trees. Savannas along the Pacific Coast are small and scattered, and may be artificial creations caused by human activities. In the piedmont and river floodplains, the natural vegetation has the appearance of rain forest, with giant guanacaste, ceiba, mahogany, and cedar trees. The natural vegetation of the coastal plains is deciduous forest, or thorny scrub in arid areas. The tidal swamp zones are covered by mangrove forests. The fauna of the Pacific Coast Lowlands is predominantly neotropical, similar to the animals of the Gulf Coast Lowlands already described.

***Northern Mexico Dry Lands.*** This area was the largest arid zone of the entire region, and stretched across the northern part of present-day Mexico on the eastern and western sides of the Sierra Madre Occidental. This area always served as a corridor between the Mesoamericans and the village farmers of the southwestern United States (for instance, the Pueblo peoples), although travel has never been easy in this desert country (Figure A.7).

The part of the Northern Dry Lands on the eastern side of the Sierra Madre Occidental is an extension of the Central Plateau, and topographically it consists of a long series of high desert basins. Some of the basins were once covered with lakes; but by the time of Spanish contact, most were dry, and many were caked with salt at their lowest points. Daytime temperatures tend to be very high in this zone, but nighttime temperatures often drop below freezing during winter. These temperature extremes, combined with very low precipitation, result in an extremely harsh environment. In the sections immediately adjacent to the Sierra Madre Occidental, the natural setting is more favorable, since daytime temperatures are lower, rainfall is higher, and numerous streams flowing from the foothills leave fertile alluvial deposits along the margins of the basins.

On the western side of the Sierra Madre Occidental, in the present-day Mexican states of Sonora and Sinaloa, is found a much lower extension of the Northern Mexico Dry Lands. Temperatures in this zone are higher than anywhere else in the entire region, even though winter frosts sometimes occur; and rainfall is even scarcer than in the higher zone on the eastern side of the mountains. The harsh environment is ameliorated somewhat by large rivers that flow westward across this desert zone from the Sierra Madre Occidental. The main rivers, the Sinaloa, Fuerte, Yaqui, and Sonora, create narrow valleys in which rich alluvial soils are deposited two times each year.

Vegetation on the eastern side of the Sierra Madre Occidental is xerophytic, made up largely of low, widely dispersed plants such as yucca, agaves, and cacti (including

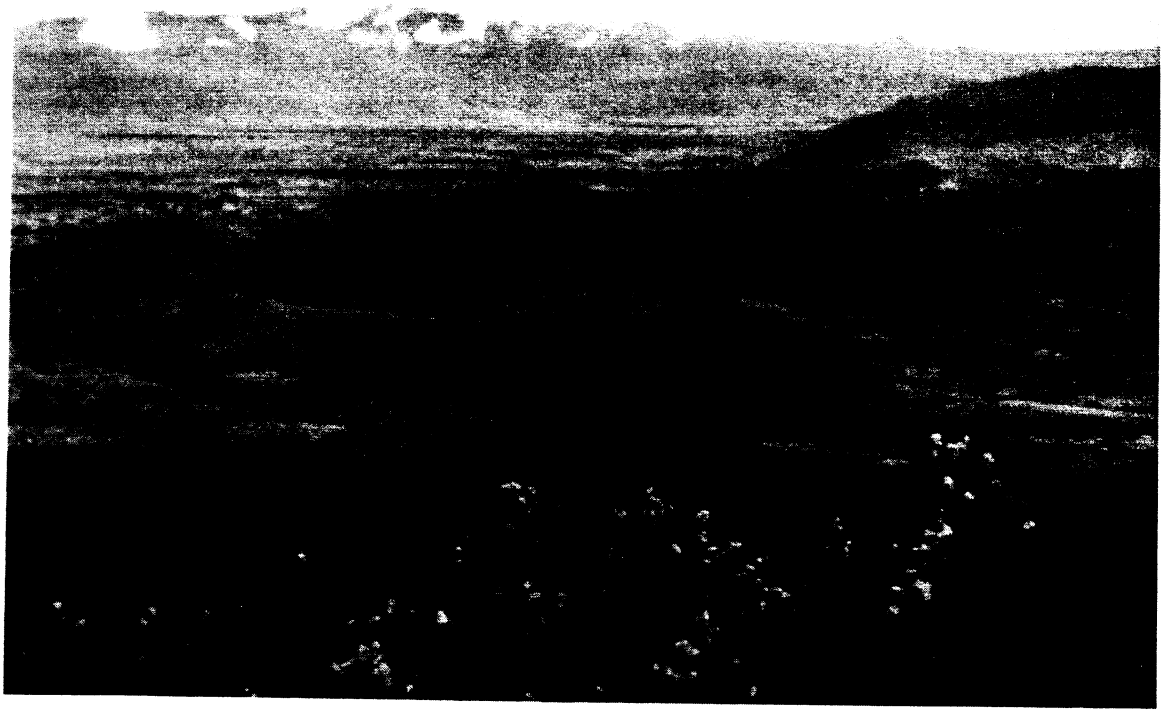

**Figure A.7** High plateau country of Northern Mexico. Photograph by the authors of the text.

the edible prickly-pear cactus). Clumps of mesquite (whose pods are edible) and yucca trees can be found in places with alluvial deposits. Peyote grows naturally in the zone. Adjacent to the mountains, the streams are lined with cypress, cottonwood, mesquite, and willow trees. In the low desert zone west of the Sierra Madre Occidental, the vegetation is more lush and arboreal. Furthermore, the rich river valleys there have been cultivated in maize, beans, and other crops since before Spanish contact. Nearctic animals such as deer and rabbits were once abundant in the more lush parts of the area, and they provided an important component of the inhabitants' diet in aboriginal times. A few neotropical animals were also present, such as the jaguar, peccary, and armadillo.

A sixth natural area, which largely falls outside the region occupied by the Mesoamericans but nevertheless has been important to them, is the Central American Isthmus. Its geographic features are described in Box A.2.

## Biological Characteristics of the Mesoamericans

It needs to be stated from the outset that biological differences did not provide an important basis for social distinctions in the Mesoamerican world prior to the coming of the Spaniards. In general, the Mesoamericans themselves gave little social importance to skin color or biological features. Nor did the Spanish conquistadors observe major physical differences between the various Mesoamerican peoples,

### *Box A.2* The Central American Isthmus

The narrow territory of present-day Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama forms a "bridge" that connects Middle America with South America, and this natural area has played an important role in the history of the Mesoamerican peoples. The Central American Isthmus is constituted by a central highland zone, which is formed by a continuation of the Southern Highland volcanic axis, flanked by Caribbean and Pacific lowlands that are structurally part of the Pacific Coast and Gulf Coast Lowlands already described. The most distinguishing natural feature of the area is its narrowness; it is less than 100 kilometers wide in many places. The highland strip occupies a relatively reduced part of the Isthmus area, and except for the Meseta Central of Costa Rica, the highland basins are relatively small and low in elevation. Furthermore, the Isthmus highlands are broken in several places, making coast-to-coast travel in the area relatively easy. The coastal lowlands on both sides of the Isthmus are more mountainous than in their northern extensions, and in many places the mountain cliffs drop off into the sea. These coastlines are also very irregular, with numerous peninsulas, gulfs, lagoons, cays, and reefs.

The Isthmus is predominantly a Tierra Caliente humid subzone, in both the highlands (except for the Tierra Templada zone of the Meseta Central in Costa Rica) and the two coastal lowlands. Some areas of the Caribbean and Pacific lowlands are the wettest in the entire region. Rain falls throughout the year in most of the Isthmus, although in southern Nicaragua, Guanacaste, the Meseta Central of Costa Rica, and the Pacific Coast east of Azuero in Panama there is a distinct dry period resulting in subhumid conditions.

It is not surprising that the natural vegetation of most of the Isthmus is tropical rain forest, the strip of highland mountain forest again being the major exception. Two important savanna zones are Guanacaste in northwestern Costa Rica and Panama's "interior," stretching west of the Canal zone and north of the Azuero peninsula. As might be expected, the Isthmus fauna is predominantly neotropical.

The Central American Isthmus area is endowed with important exotic natural resources that have long been of interest to the Mesoamerican peoples. Perhaps the most important of these in aboriginal times was gold, substantial veins of which exist in the Guanacaste, Osa, and the Chiriquí mountains. Other isthmian resources were typical of lowland areas: hardwoods, animal pelts, bright plumage, sea shells (including the murex shell from which a purple dye was extracted), salt, cacao, cotton, and special medicinal and narcotic plants (including coca).

certainly none comparable to the rather dramatic contrasts found in the Old World between Europeans, Africans, and Asians.

The Spaniards described the Mesoamerican peoples as being racially similar one group to another, made up of relatively small, brown-skinned peoples. For example, in one report by the first explorers of Yucatán, the Mayas were described as of "middle height and well proportioned," whereas the Emperor Motecuhzoma was portrayed by one of Cortés's soldiers as "of good height and well proportioned, slender and spare of flesh, not very swarthy, but of the natural colour and shade of an Indian." Both Spanish and native sources agree, however, that artificial alteration of physical appearance was of the utmost social importance in the Mesoamerican world. Social status was marked by facial painting; body scarification; hair styling; and pierced noses, ears, and lips, into which adornments were inserted.

Modern biological studies reveal that the Mesoamericans share important genetic features with Asian peoples. Nevertheless, the aboriginal Mesoamericans also had external physical features that differentiated them genetically from the Asians, as, for example, high frequencies of the convex nose type, absence of the mongoloid eye fold, and presence of wavy hair. Studies of genetically linked blood types have revealed that the aboriginal Mesoamericans lacked the Blood Type B found among Asians, and perhaps they were universally Blood Type O. This finding suggests that the Mesoamericans had long been separated from their distant relatives in Asia and that they were biologically rather homogeneous.

In aboriginal times, there must have been considerable genetic contact between populations within the Mesoamerican region but limited contacts outside of it. One modest biological variation that existed within the Mesoamerican region took the form of populations in the northern part being larger and stockier than those in the southern part. This difference may have been primarily due to the fact that on average, northern peoples inhabited highland settings, whereas their southern counterparts were widely distributed across lowland zones.

The arrival of the Spaniards to the region in the sixteenth century initiated a complex process of biological and demographic change in the native Mesoamerican populations. The indigenous populations were subjected to Old World diseases, against which they lacked strong natural immunities. At the same time, miscegenation (interbreeding) began to take place, creating new biological types with mixed genetic ancestry.

For the native populations of the Americas, including the Mesoamericans, contact with the Europeans and the African slaves resulted in demographic disaster. In many areas of the Mesoamerican region, 90 percent or more of the indigenous population died during the first decades of Spanish rule, leaving survivors with profoundly disrupted social worlds. Whereas in some areas the native populations began to recover by late in the sixteenth century, in other areas the recovery did not begin until the eighteenth century, and in still other places the Indian populations eventually disappeared altogether. The arrival of Spaniards and Africans, most of whom were men, led to unions with the native Mesoamericans throughout the region. This outcome resulted in postcontact populations made up not only of Spaniards and Indians, but also of a host of biologically mixed peoples ("mestizos") who did not fit neatly into either Spanish or Indian racial types. In time this process of miscegenation became even more complex, as new immigrants came to the region from other parts of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

The population of the Mesoamerican region today is a reflection of its demographic history. In many areas the population has remained predominantly Indian, and in certain cases the native Mesoamericans have expanded beyond their pre-Hispanic demographic levels. Thus, some 500 years after the demographic disaster initiated during the sixteenth century, the Indians of the Mesoamerican region appear to have finally surpassed their aboriginal population numbers (see Figure A.8).

The immigrant population as well as the mixed (mestizo) populations have grown at an even more rapid pace than the native Mesoamericans in the region,

| YEAR | 1520 | 1800 | 1900 | 1950 | 2000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mexico | 21 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 30 |
| Central America | 6 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 8 |
| Totals | 27 | 5 | 3 | 7 | 38 |

Note: All figures are approximations, especially for the pre-Hispanic period. For the 2000 figures, see *The World Almanac and Book of Facts,* 2005.

**Figure A.8** Changes in native population size in the Mesoamerican Region (in millions of native persons).

especially in the urban centers, where a glance at a crowded street in Mexico or Central America reveals the complex biological makeup of much of its modern populations. The so-called mestizos and Whites now form the ethnic majority in these countries, rapidly approaching 100 million persons in total numbers.

## PAST STUDIES OF MESOAMERICA

The summary of Mesoamerican history and culture to follow in this text builds on the labor of numerous scholars who have gone before us. Because the legacy of past studies is not one of information alone but is also of particular interpretations of that information, we have chosen to organize the following historical sketch according to the diverse approaches to Mesoamerica that have been taken through time. We warn the reader that space does not permit us to do justice to the full history of Mesoamerican studies and that the account here is meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Let us begin the review with the "Romanticists," writers who approached the study of Mesoamerica with preconceived notions, usually based on strong religious or philosophical views. Next we discuss the "Scientific Precursors," students of Mesoamerica who employed a more systematic and objective approach. They became particularly influential toward the end of the nineteenth century, and they began to replace religious ideas with scientific theories. A modern scientific approach emerged gradually during the twentieth century, carried forward at first by the "Culture Historians," and after 1950 by the "Cultural Evolutionists." The historical and evolutionary approaches continue to be influential in Mesoamerican studies today, and we will argue in the final section of this introduction that our own approach in general terms might be seen in part to be a synthesis of these two approaches.

### Romanticists

From the time of Columbus to the present day, an unending stream of Western writers has concocted fanciful explanations for the origin and cultural achievements of the Mesoamerican Indians. We refer to them as Romanticists because their ideas have been highly speculative and for the most part have been based on preconceived religious notions about how they would like the world to be rather than how it actually

is. Almost all these explanations are ethnocentric, rooted in the belief that cultural sophistication could be achieved only by Europeans, and therefore that Mesoamerica's cultural developments ultimately must have derived from ideas originating outside the region. The romantic explanations of Mesoamerica have not stood the test of time, but they continue to be proposed and to have ardent defenders even today.

Sundry priests, scholars, and dilettantes at one time or another have proposed nearly every conceivable place in the Old World as the original homeland of the Mesoamericans: Phoenicia, Egypt, Israel, India, China, Africa, Ireland, Germany, and even Rome. It is not surprising that most of the first Spanish priests who administered in the Mesoamerican region were of the opinion that the Indians were derived from biblical peoples. The most common view was that the Indians had descended from wandering Hebrews, and in particular the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel. This view was not universally accepted, however, as illustrated by the case of the erudite Franciscan priest Juan de Torquemada (A.D. 1564–1624). Torquemada (1943:I:25), who labored for many years in Mexico, rejected the claim that the Indians were descended from the Hebrews, noting that "if these Indians were Jews, why only in the Indies have they forgotten their language, their law, their ceremonies, their Messiah and finally their Judaism?" Nevertheless, Torquemada's own explanation of the Mesoamericans was both biblical and racist: As a dark-skinned people, they must have descended from Noah's son, Ham.

In more recent times, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormons) teach as part of their official doctrine that certain descendants of Noah, Judah, and Joseph emigrated from the Middle East to the New World many centuries before Christ, laying the foundation for ancient Mesoamerican cultures of Mexico and Central America. The doctrine retains racist features, in claiming that the less righteous immigrants failed to prosper and became dark-skinned (the Lamanites), whereas the righteous prospered and remained light-skinned (the Nephites).

Quetzalcoatl, the Mesoamerican priestly ruler and feathered serpent deity, has been a particularly appealing figure for the Romanticists working within the biblical tradition. Some of the early Spanish and native documents describe Quetzalcoatl as a light-skinned, bearded, holy man. Catholic scholars have often identified him with St. Thomas or St. Bartholomew, who, according to tradition, traveled to India and beyond to the Americas to do missionary work. Mormon scholars find in Quetzalcoatl evidence for their belief that Jesus Christ visited the Americas in ancient times, citing as evidence the Mesoamerican tradition that Quetzalcoatl was a holy man whose symbol was the serpent (the Bible associates Jesus Christ with the serpent lifted up by Moses).

Almost as popular as the biblical tradition among Romanticists has been the idea that the Mesoamerican Indians came from continents that long ago sank to the bottom of the sea. It is noteworthy that the Lost Continent advocates share with the biblical Romanticists the belief that the Mesoamericans could not have independently developed their elaborate civilization. The most common version of the Lost Continent tradition held that a large continent known as Atlantis once existed in the ocean west of Europe, inhabited by an energetic people who created an advanced civilization (Figure A.9). Massive earthquakes and floods caused Atlantis to sink to the bot-

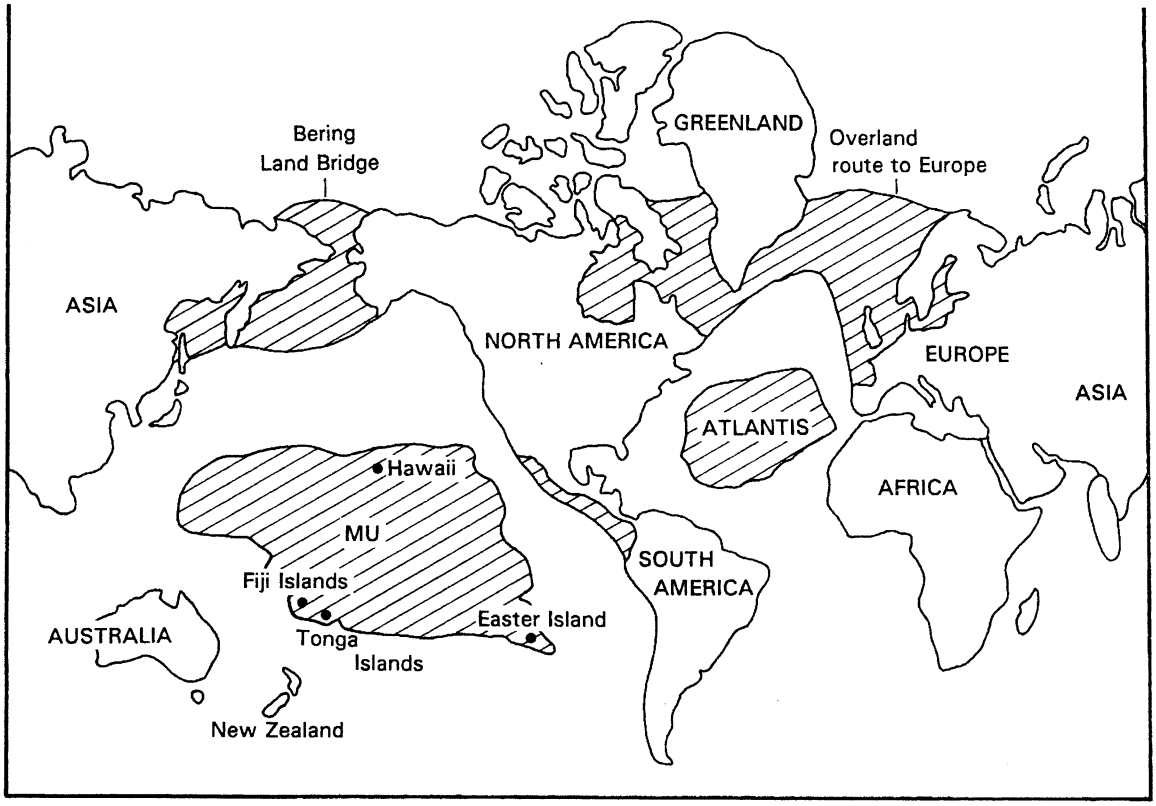


**Figure A.9** Hypothetical map of ancient lost continents. After Robert Wauchope, *Lost Tribes and Sunken Continents: Myth and Method in the Study of American Indians.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962, p. 37.

tom of the ocean, but not before its inhabitants escaped to America and other continents and then gave rise to the major civilizations of the ancient world. The story of Atlantis was an old one going back to Plato, who wrote that it had been told to Solon by Egyptian priests many years before. With the "discovery" of America by Columbus, interest in Atlantis was revived, some Spaniards claiming that America was the remains of the sunken continent mentioned by Plato. Box A.3 discusses some of the more interesting theories about the Lost Continent origin of the Mesoamerican peoples.

### ***Box A.3*** Lost-Continent Romanticists

The idea that the Mesoamerican and other advanced civilizations originated in Atlantis was popularized by a series of remarkably romantic figures. One of these was Ignatius T. T. Donnelly, a U.S. Congressman who in his 1880 book, *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* argued that Plato's Atlantis was not only real but also was the original Garden of Eden and the place from which Mexico and all the continents were populated. By 1949, Donnelly's book had already undergone fifty printings!

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An even more remarkable proponent of the Atlantis tale was the French physician and adventurer Augustus Le Plongeon. During visits to Yucatán, Mexico, Le Plongeon became interested in the Mayan culture. An erroneous reading of one of the Mayan codices (scroll books) led Le Plongeon to believe that he had found a lost history of Atlantis. The history allegedly described how Atlantis was split by civil war, the losing faction fleeing the continent and going on to found the Egyptian and Mayan civilizations. In contrast to other Romanticists, Le Plongeon argued that the Mesoamericans colonized Egypt rather than the reverse!

A few of the Atlantis advocates, such as the Scottish mythologist Lewis Spence (1925), attempted to square the tale with scientific findings. But most of the believers in Atlantis were hopelessly speculative. This was the case with Helena Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophy religion, who claimed that one of the seven "Root Races" of humanity came from Atlantis. Upon fleeing the sinking continent, she said, the Atlantis race gave rise to various groups of people, among them Cro-Magnons, Semites, and the "handsome 8-feet tall" Toltecs of ancient Mexico!

The most outrageous of the Lost Continent Romanticists, however, was James Churchward, who created a continent in the Pacific Ocean out of whole cloth. "Colonel" Churchward's so-called "Continent of Mu" was said to measure 5,000 miles long and 3,000 miles wide. About 80,000 years ago its inhabitants began to emigrate in waves, headed for the utmost bounds of the world. One of these migratory groups, the so-called "Quetzals," was made up of "stalwart, young adventurers with milk-white skins, blue eyes, and light flaxen hair." They settled in Yucatán and gave rise to the great Mayan civilization.

The romantic tradition lives on today, most strikingly in the preposterous writings of Erich von Daniken. Von Daniken has achieved a large following by proposing that ancient astronauts from faraway galaxies visited the ancient Mesoamericans and introduced them to many technological and ideological innovations. A principal piece of evidence for von Daniken's theory is an image portrayed on the lid of a tomb at the Mayan site of Palenque, Mexico (Figure A.10). Von Daniken argues that this image can be none other than an ancient astronaut sitting at the controls, ready for takeoff! Like so many Romanticists before him, von Daniken seems to assume that the Mayas and other Mesoamerican peoples were incapable of creating complex cultures on their own, and so needed enlightenment from faraway places.

The old Romantic notion that ancient Mesoamerica was deeply influenced by peoples from Africa has resurfaced in a somewhat repackaged form. This may be seen as part of an effort to better understand the rich cultural heritage of Africa and to recognize the many contributions that Africans have made to Western civilization. For some zealous proponents of African culture, the effort has evolved into a form of Afrocentrism. They have speculated that the Mesoamerican cultures were influenced by Africans who came to the Americas before Spanish contact, introducing important elements of the African cultures to the Mesoamerican peoples. According to one claim, the main African influence occurred during the time of the Olmecs (ca. 900–400 B.C.), as suggested by the reputed African-like facial features of large stone heads carved by Olmec artists.

Like many other Romantic notions, the idea of an African origin for the Mesoamerican civilization stems more from ideological agenda than from scientific evidence. To date there is no credible evidence to support the claim that Africans somehow influenced the Olmecs or any other pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican peoples.

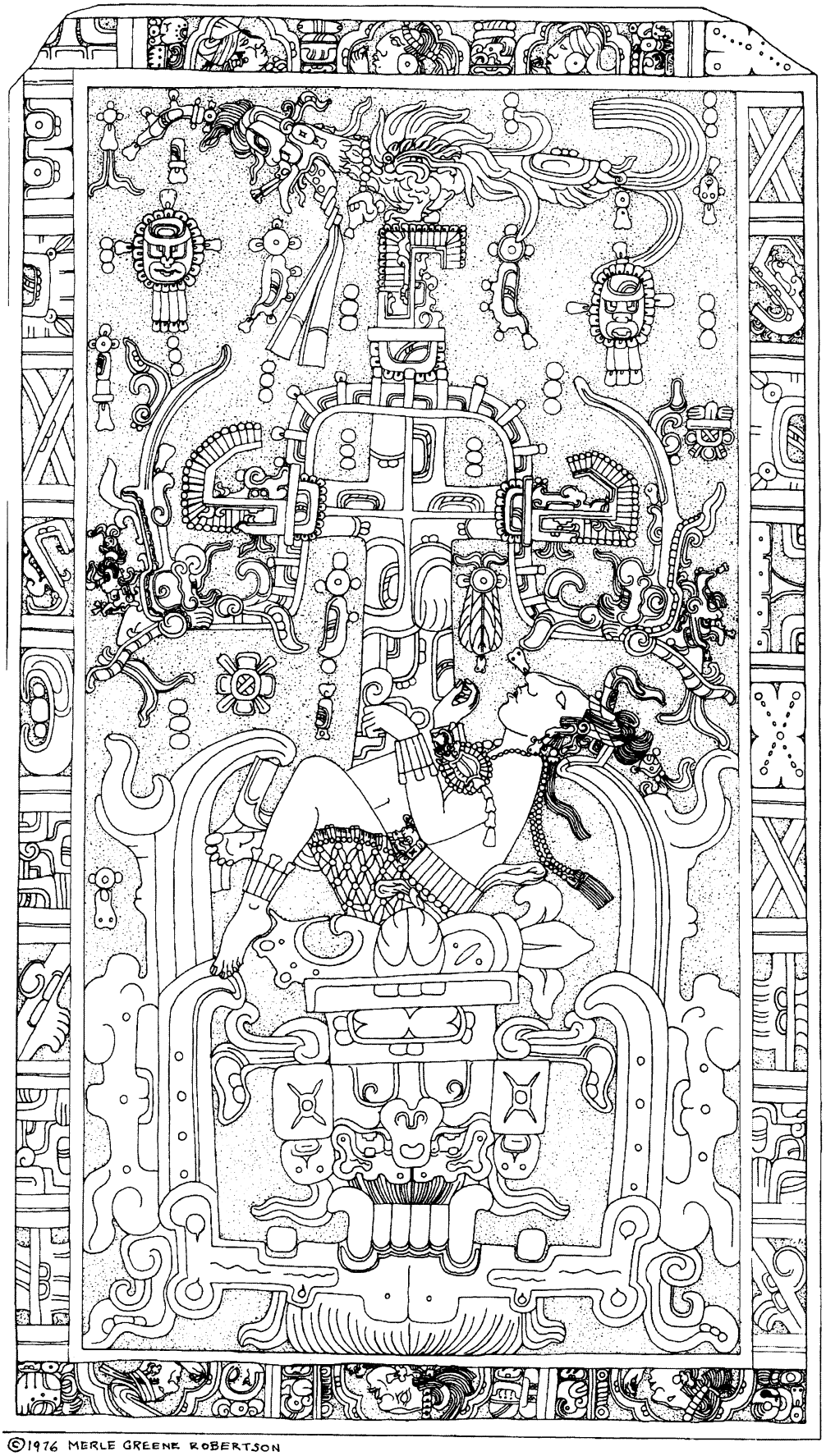


**Figure A.10** Sarcophagus lid from the Classic-period Maya site of Palenque, Mexico. According to von Daniken, this carving portrays an ancient astronaut. Courtesy of Merle Greene Robertson, Copyright © 1973.

## Scientific Precursors

Not all the early writers on the Mesoamerican Indians were Romanticists. For example, the famous sixteenth-century Dominican missionary Bartolomé de Las Casas (1958:105:69–72), rejected the Romantic notion that the Indians were descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel on the grounds that the languages and cultures of Mesoamerica were unlike those of the ancient Hebrews. He argued instead that the New World was an extension of the posterior part of Oriental India and that the Indians were thus "natural" to the American continent (Figure A.11). Another Spanish priest, the Jesuit José de Acosta (A.D. 1540–1600), also denied any connection between the American Indians and biblical peoples. Like Las Casas, Acosta (1987) concluded on rational grounds that the New World must have been connected to the

**Figure A.11** Painting of the defender of the Indians, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas. James A. Magner, *Men of Mexico*, 2nd ed. Salem, NH: Books for Libraries, Ayer Company Publishers, 1968.

Old World and that its first inhabitants immigrated there "by land, which might be done without consideration in changing little by little their lands and habitations."

Objective thinkers like Las Casas and Acosta, of course, were the exceptions until the nineteenth century, when more "positivist" scholars gradually began to push aside the highly fanciful and religious interpretations of Mesoamerica being put forward by the Romanticists. In growing numbers, the Scientific Precursors began to argue that the Mesoamerican peoples had developed their civilization independently from the peoples of the Old World or Lost Continents. Nevertheless, a truly scientific orientation came slowly, at first consisting mainly of applying somewhat more secular and systematic techniques to the study of Mesoamerica.

The forerunners to the scholars who would later produce modern accounts of Mesoamerica were people (and with few exceptions they were all males) like Alexander von Humboldt, John Lloyd Stephens, and Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, to name a few. These men kept the study of Mesoamerican history and culture alive and provided new perspectives on the topic, although it is doubtful that they much advanced our knowledge beyond where the Spaniards had left it in previous centuries.

Humboldt, the son of a Prussian major, was perhaps the most renowned scientist of his time. He traveled throughout the Americas during the first years of the nineteenth century, making observations on geological and other physical phenomena of the two continents. In Mexico he studied firsthand numerous archaeological remains and native codices, which he correctly interpreted as "fragments of history." In Humboldt's (1814) account of his studies in Mexico, he concluded that the evidence failed to support the claim that the Mesoamericans had descended from biblical peoples. Rather, in physical appearance and culture they were closest to the Asians. He particularly called attention to the similarity between the ancient Mexican calendar cycle of fifty-two years and the Asian calendrical cycle of sixty years. In addition, six of the Mexican day signs corresponded to the Zodiac signs of Asia, namely, tiger, rabbit, serpent, monkey, dog, and bird. Humboldt's scientific credentials and objective methods of studying ancient Mesoamerica inspired all subsequent Scientific Precursors.

Another influential precursor was the North American lawyer John Lloyd Stephens. Traveling throughout southern Mexico and Central America between 1839 and 1841, Stephens and his artist colleague Frederick Catherwood made systematic observations, drawings, and maps of many of the most important archaeological sites in the southern Mesoamerican region (Stephens 1841). The drawings and descriptions provided new information on ancient Mayan architecture, settlement patterns, religious symbols, calendrics, and hieroglyphic writing. Although Stephens erroneously thought that most of the remains dated from the period of Spanish contact, he correctly concluded that the original sites were built by the ancestors of the natives who still inhabited the area in the nineteenth century. This conclusion motivated Stephens to record some customs of these native peoples—for example, their making ritual offerings inside caves—which in turn inspired subsequent students of Mesoamerica to search for persisting native customs as a way to reconstruct the aboriginal past.

Box A.4 recounts the contributions made by one of the key transitional figures between the Romanticists and the Precursors, the French scholar and priest Brasseur de Bourbourg.

### *Box A.4* Brasseur de Bourbourg, a Scientific Precursor

Brasseur de Bourbourg served as parish priest in Guatemala for many years in the mid–nineteenth century, during which time he also traveled extensively in Mexico. He obtained copies of numerous native documents important for studying the aboriginal Mesoamerican cultures. Brasseur was erudite, and he probably had access to more documentary and archaeological information on Mesoamerica than anyone else of his time. Unfortunately, many of his interpretations of history lacked objectivity and in some cases were downright speculative. For example, in Brasseur's (1857–1859) writings, petty Mesoamerican kingdoms were transformed into powerful empires, small towns into huge cities, minor priests into mighty prophets, and princely revolts into bourgeois revolutions. Nevertheless, Brasseur's general summary of events taking place in Mexico and Central America before the conquest was profoundly secular in orientation, and possibly constituted the most exhaustive historical treatise on the subject ever attempted up to that time. Unfortunately, during the last years of his life, Brasseur yielded to the lure of the Lost Continent of Atlantis tale in order to explain the origins of the Mesoamerican civilization. He died a broken man, his new "theories" rejected by the emerging scientific community in Europe and the United States.

The final decades of the nineteenth century and beginning decades of the twentieth century laid the groundwork for the development of a truly modern approach to Mesoamerican studies. The number of scholars engaged in this study rapidly expanded, and the methods of research became increasingly specialized. In particular, formal excavations of archaeological sites helped create a Mesoamerican "archaeology," while expertise in documentary texts and written native languages helped give rise to a Mesoamerican "ethnohistory." Most studies of aboriginal Mesoamerica have been carried forward in recent years by archaeologists and ethnohistorians, although other specialists such as linguists, epigraphers, geographers, historians, and ethnographers have also made major contributions. As already noted, many of these early scientific scholars at first applied a culture history model in their studies of ancient Mesoamerica.

## Culture Historians

The approach to Mesoamerica taken by the Culture Historians represented an important advance over that of the Romanticists and Scientific Precursors, who tended to explain the aboriginal cultures as transplants (diffusions) from somewhere else, usually Asia, Europe, or a Lost Continent. Most Culture Historians, in contrast, accepted the indigenous source of the Mesoamerican cultures and concentrated on determining the origins and changes of cultures within the Mesoamerican region. Mesoamerica was viewed as a unified geographic area in which the diverse peoples shared distinctive customs or cultural traits. These traits set them apart from the peoples of other "culture areas." Culture areas were thought to have common historical

traditions, the study of which would provide a way to explain the particular combination of traits that characterized each area.

The Mexican scholar Paul Kirchhoff (1943) provided the best-known application of the culture historical approach to the pre-Spanish natives of Mesoamerica. Kirchhoff placed most of the peoples of Mexico and Central America within the "Mesoamerican" culture area, and he defined the area by the languages spoken and the presence of a long list of cultural traits. Essential or diagnostic traits of the Mesoamerican culture area for Kirchhoff included the lake gardens (*chinampas*), cacao, bark paper, obsidian-edged swords, stepped pyramids, writing, solar calendars, ritualized human sacrifice, and long-distance trade. The native peoples in the northern part of Mexico, on the one hand, and the southeastern part of Central America, on the other, were said to have spoken different languages and to have exhibited distinct cultural traits. Thus, they constituted separate culture areas from Mesoamerica: namely, the "Southwest" culture area to the north, and the "Chibcha" culture area to the south (Figure A.12).

Much of the research on Mesoamerica by the Culture Historians centered on the so-called Olmec culture, initially reconstructed through excavations at the archaeological site of La Venta in Tabasco, Mexico. The Olmec culture provided the Culture Historians with a key to the origin of the Mesoamerican civilization. Olmec

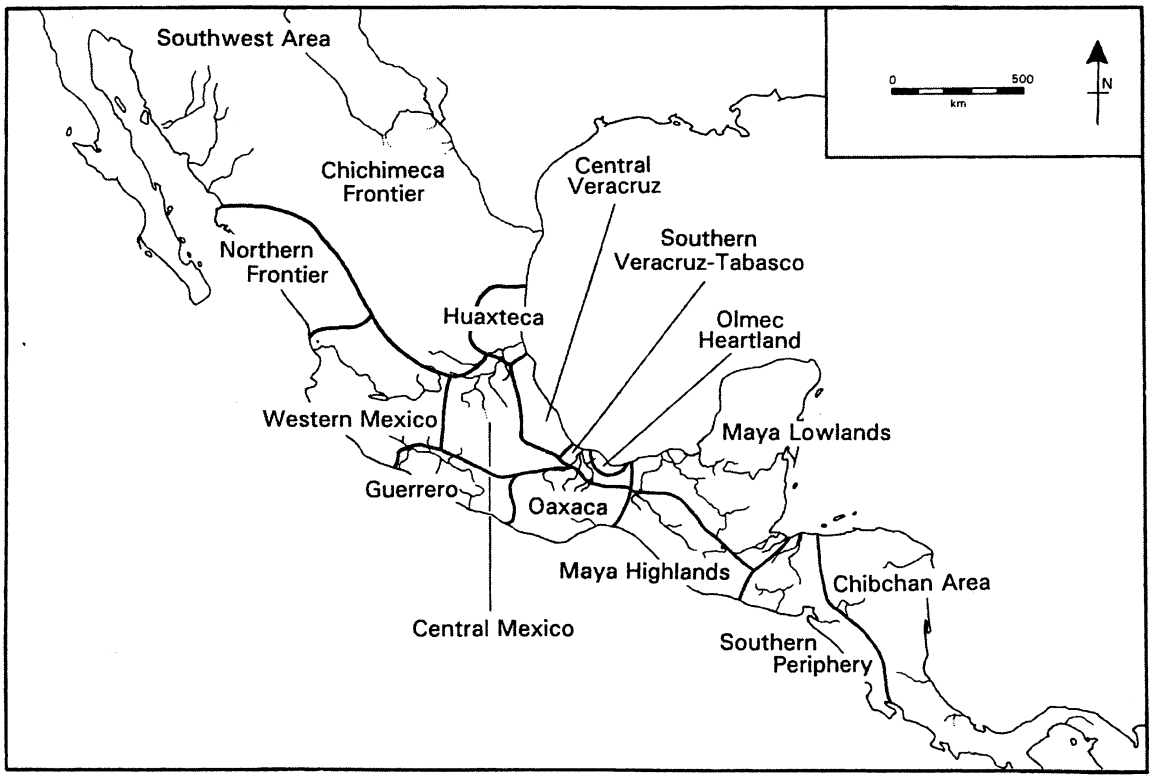


**Figure A.12** Mesoamerican culture area and its main subareas. After Gordon R. Willey, et al., "The Patterns of Farming Life and Civilizations," in *The Handbook of Middle Americans, Volume I: National Environment and Early Cultures*, volume editor Robert C. West, general editor Robert Wauchope. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1964, p. 461.

culture was known to be very old (it was thought to have appeared around 900 B.C.), yet it already exhibited most of the essential traits of the Mesoamerican culture area, for example, pyramids, carved monuments, sacred calendars, exquisite jade pieces, and pottery craft items. Quite understandably, the Culture Historians concluded that the Olmec culture was the "mother culture" from which all other Mesoamerican cultures descended.

For several decades a focal point of Mesoamerican studies consisted of tracing the historical connections between the Olmec culture and other cultures appearing through time within the region. For example, the Mexican archaeologist-artist Miguel Covarrubias (1957) was able to demonstrate that the various Mesoamerican rain deities were derived from an original Olmec were-jaguar deity (Figure A.13). Other scholars found historical links between the Olmec calendrical system and those of the Mayas and Zapotecs. Special attention was given to Olmec religious, artistic, and intellectual expressions rather than to the material conditions that might have influenced the development of those cultural expressions. As one Culture Historian put it, "The most uniquely distinctive Mesoamerican features are not so much material as they are ideological, and it was this ideological realm—a kind of Mesoamerican world view" that was developed early on by the Olmecs and gave Mesoamerica its traditional unity (Willey 1966:108).

Another focus for the Culture Historians was the traditional Indian community of contemporary Mexico and Central America. Numerous "ethnographic" studies of individual Indian communities revealed that many of the Mesoamerican cultural traits had persisted into modern times. In an important summary of community studies, Sol Tax (1952) argued that the Mesoamerican culture area had remained largely intact despite modifications resulting from contacts with modern forces from the outside. In the 1960s and 1970s, a more general summary of over half a century of culture historical studies on Mesoamerica appeared in the twelve-volume *Handbook of Middle American Indians*. The *Handbook* essays dealt with both aboriginal and contemporary culture areas of Mesoamerica.

In retrospect, it is clear that the Culture Historians tended to see culture as primarily consisting of values and ideas, and thus their primary concern was with the *essential* features rather than the *material* determinants of the Mesoamerican cultures. For this reason the culture historical approach has been widely criticized as "idealist." Another tendency was to study contemporary Indian communities as isolated, self-contained units in which traditional cultural traits only gradually changed through contact with outside peoples, a process known as "acculturation." Eventually, it was recognized that the focus on isolated communities resulted in a perspective that was too static and thus insufficiently historical.

## Cultural Evolutionists

By mid–twentieth century, a general turning away from culture history was taking place in Mesoamerican studies, partly because that earlier approach focused so much on ideas rather than behavior, and partly because it described cultural differences between peoples and areas without providing an explanation of these differences. There

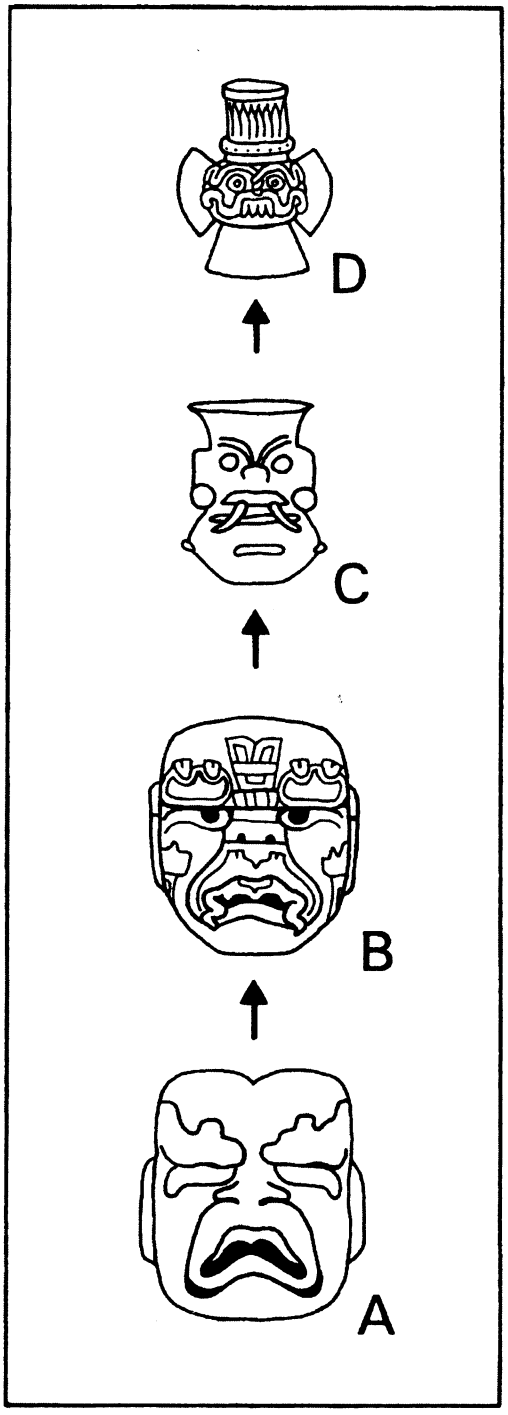


**Figure A.13** Sequence (steps A–D) by which the Olmec were-jaguar motif was transformed into later religious motifs of Mesoamerica. Adapted from Miguel Covarrubias, *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957, p. 62.

emerged in the social sciences a strong theoretical movement that focused attention more on behavior than on ideas, specifically, the behaviors by which human groups exploit their material environment. Cultures, according to this perspective, are best seen as adaptive mechanisms by which human populations conform to ever-changing environmental conditions. The adaptive changes engaged in by groups of people constitute cultural evolution, and they result in either divergence or convergence

between cultures. Studies of particular cultural divergences are referred to as "specific evolution," whereas examples of cultural convergence—demonstrated by comparing different cases of adaptation around the world—are termed "general evolution."

An important early application of the cultural evolutionary approach to aboriginal Mesoamerica was carried out by the American anthropologist Julian Steward (1949). Steward presented an evolutionary sequence for Mesoamerica consisting of the following developmental stages:

*Hunting and Gathering.* Simple food-gathering technology gives rise to bands of hunters and gatherers.

*Incipient Agriculture.* Domestication of plants lays the foundation for settled village life.

*Formative.* Increasingly intense farming provides the basis for the growth of villages into towns.

*Regional Florescence.* Complex irrigation works promote population growth, cities, and highly stratified society.

*Cyclical Conquests.* The use of metals and an increase in trade lead to conditions that promote endemic warfare between societies.

Steward compared the specific Mayan and Central Mexican evolutionary sequences in Mesoamerica with similar sequences in other regions of the world where ancient civilizations had developed, and he argued for their convergent evolution. He found the explanation for evolutionary convergences in the development of similar irrigation and other advanced subsistence technologies within similar ecological conditions. In particular, he applied his theory to the semiarid river valleys of Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, Peru, and Mexico. The Mesoamerican civilization, then, was defined not in terms of shared cultural traits but rather as a series of evolving evolutionary stages resulting from adaptive responses to a particular environmental setting.

Following Steward's lead, the evolutionary approach has been widely adopted in the study of Mesoamerican cultures. For example, whereas the Culture Historians had defined the aboriginal lowland Mayas as virtually unique in their cultural patterns and historical development, Cultural Evolutionists like William Sanders and Barbara Price (1968) argued that far from being unique, the Mayan advances were actually based on ecological adaptations common to Mesoamerica as a whole. Specifically, populations in Central Mexico had adapted to the semiarid conditions of the Teotihuacan Valley by constructing an elaborate irrigation system, and upon this material foundation the powerful, urban Teotihuacan civilization was constructed. Evolutionarily advanced Teotihuacán then became the material base for the development of advanced cultural features by the interconnected lowland Mayas located far to the south. The subsequent collapse of the Teotihuacan civilization around A.D. 700, followed by a transition to a new evolutionary stage in Central Mexico, was again used to explain the dramatic Mayan cultural collapse 200 years later in the southern lowlands. Sanders and Price concluded that without the evolutionary developments of Teotihuacan, Mayan cultural evolution would have remained at a chiefdom stage, which is precisely what happened to many of the peoples falling outside the Mesoamerican regional sphere.

The Cultural Evolutionists brought the Mesoamericans down to earth, so to speak, and forced scholars to see the region's cultures as rooted in material factors and as being generically similar to cultures throughout the world. Rather than cultural ideas and cosmologies determining behavior, behavior oriented to the production of food determines, or at least conditions, culture. The Cultural Evolutionists also shifted the focus of Mesoamerican studies away from isolated Indian communities to macrosocial units, such as ecologically diverse regions and nation states.

One manifestation of this shift was the adoption of "dependency" theory to explain the evolution of contemporary Indian cultures. Indian communities in certain regions of Mexico and Guatemala, for example, were now seen as being dependent on nation-state economic and political forces, which in turn were dependent upon world powers like the United States and Europe. From this perspective, Mesoamerican culture is perceived as an adaptive response to external political and economic forces rather than as primarily the legacy of ideas, rules, and values from the past.

## THE THEORETICAL APPROACH TAKEN IN THIS TEXT

A few comments about the approach to Mesoamerica taken in this text need to be made. As should be obvious from the preceding review of past studies, romantic notions of Lost Tribes or Lost Continents to explain developments in Mesoamerica are eschewed. Nor is there a general adherence to strictly culture historical or cultural evolutionary arguments, although like most modern students of Mesoamerica, we have been influenced by those arguments. Broadly speaking, we have been guided by more recent theoretical perspectives that have emerged in the social sciences in general and Mesoamerican studies in particular.

The anthropologist Norman Schwartz (1983), in an insightful summary of Mesoamerican studies, notes the split mentioned earlier between studies that focus on the essential ideas of culture and those with a focus on the material determinants of culture. For the idealist students of Mesoamerica, the culture history model has evolved into the use of more sophisticated approaches of culture such as structuralism, semiotics, phenomenology, and more recently, discourse analysis. These scholars stress that Mesoamerican cultures, in both their pre-Hispanic and contemporary manifestations, are conceptual systems that cannot be explained as mere responses to underlying material or political conditions. As sets of integrated symbols and meanings, the Mesoamerican cultures have "inner logics" that fundamentally affect how they both persist and change.

The cultural evolutionary approach continues to be influential in Mesoamerican studies, but it also has undergone considerable modification. For example, neo-Marxists stress the importance of material production, but also the "superstructural" nature of Mesoamerican cultures. Similarly, ecologists, who derive their ideas from biology, treat Mesoamerican cultures as special behavioral responses to energy exchanges and demographic challenges. Dependency theory has largely given way to world-systems theory, according to which pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica is viewed as an interacting network of strong and weak societies, a "world" in its own right (for more

on world-systems theory, see Chapter 3). Postconquest native Mesoamericans become participants in a worldwide class of exploited peasants and proletariats created by global capitalism. Even more so than the Cultural Evolutionists who preceded them, recent Materialists have tended to portray the Mesoamerican cultures as secondary derivations from behaviors oriented toward physical and political survival.

World-systems studies make it clear that we can no longer study the Mesoamerican cultures as isolated communities, nor can we ignore the impact of external powers on local Indian groups. Social classes based on the unequal distribution of economic means have always played an important role in determining the characteristics of the Mesoamerican cultures, both ancient and contemporary. As Schwartz (1983:355) points out:

> Identity, tradition, and culture become tactics in a game of power rather than primary irreducible determinants of change and continuity. [The Mesoamerican] tradition is no longer a manifestation of a particular world view but rather an expression of sectarian interests, a labile adaptation to an environment, and a dependent variable.

Nevertheless, cultures are not merely responses to material and political forces; they have their own internal logics and histories. Good theories should take into account both material and ideological factors, as well as microsocial and macrosocial settings. For Mesoamerica, as elsewhere, the "patterns of behavior and choices between alternatives are . . . the result of a complex interplay between ideas, rules, psychological and material resources, and situation circumstances" (Schwartz 1983:353; see also Gossen 1986). (Box A.5 provides a discussion of recent theoretical approaches to the study of native Mesoamericans in Guatemala.)

### ***Box A.5*** Recent Approaches to the Study of Mayan Peoples in Guatemala

The anthropologist John Watanabe (2000) has described the basic changes in theoretical approaches to Mayan community studies since the 1960s. He refers to three dominant "themes" or directions taken by scholars in more recent Mayan studies, although clearly these three directions are interrelated and form part of a more general movement away from the study of cultural continuities toward the study of cultural reconstruction: "Rather than objectifying culture as consisting of essential traits that endure or are lost, anthropologists have come to treat Maya cultures in Guatemala as strategic self-expressions of Maya identity, motivated . . . by Maya propensities and possibilities in the present rather than by pre-Hispanic primordialism" (p. 4). The basic fault line ("sea change"), then, is between studies that objectified Mayan cultures and traits, seeing them as enduring, versus studies that focus on the strategic reconstruction of Mayan identity in the context of the wider, more dynamic political economy in which Mayas find themselves.

One important direction or approach in Mayan studies since the 1960s is the move away from the idea of persisting Mayan cultures, in favor of studying the changing social contexts in which they are created, along with the active processes by which Mayas reconstitute their ethnic identities despite these changes. A closely related theme or direction in Mayan studies emphasizes the transforming capacity of political economic forces (especially associated with capitalism). For example, in some accounts, Mayan culture and identity are seen as expressions of determinant class relationships. A sophisticated version of this approach calls for study not only of the impact

(*continued*)

of capitalism on Mayan communities but also of the counterreactions by Mayas in the form of market and labor systems that work against the outside domination. In some cases, such counterreactions have changed the nature of capitalism in the country as a whole. The result for the Mayas is "a world neither always as they imagined nor as others fully intended."

An additional directional change in Mayan studies consists of an attempt to interpret even the most traditional Mayan cultural patterns (ancestor worship, calendars, earth lord myths, milpa practices, etc.) as ". . . self-vindicating ideologies of ethnic continuity, autonomy, and resistance" (p.8). This emphasis shifts the approach from material factors to the ideological nature of Mayan cultures and identities, interpreting them as forms of political opposition to modernizing, exploitative institutions of conquest, colonialism, evangelization, capitalism, racism, violence, and war.

An important methodological modification associated with these more thematic and theoretical changes in Mayan studies is the application of a global dimension to the community approach taken in past studies. The community approach generally has focused on symbolism and on the "persistence of local patterns of meaning." In contrast, the global approach tends to focus on political economy, "rendering Maya cultural understandings as increasingly *ersatz* [fabricated] formulations."

In a final history-oriented statement, Watanabe claims that "understanding contemporary cultural formulations . . . necessarily entails knowing, not merely how they have changed over time, but, more precisely, how successive pasts have continued to inform succeeding presents, and how ongoing presents have repeatedly appropriated their pasts" (p. 27). This statement seems to offer a more dynamic approach than the scientific and the prescientific approaches of the past, or even the contemporary "constructivist" scholars who may deny the important weight that the past can have on the present.

Consistent with recent trends in theory, then, we attempt in this text to present the Mesoamerican cultures in terms of both the symbols and the meanings by which these cultures are constituted, and the material and behavioral contexts within which such ideas are created and transformed. We are interested both in *how* the Mesoamerican cultures have been created and in *what* they are like. We accept the important role of creative initiative on the part of the Mesoamericans, and where possible, we specify which individuals and groups created the social and cultural features under study and the reasons they did so. Our approach is therefore patently historical: We study the Mesoamerican cultures from their beginnings to their most recent manifestations. Finally, in taking account of world-systems perspectives, we also consciously relate local developments of Mesoamerican culture to regional, national, and global forces. Such approaches are in the best tradition of broadly defined recent theory, and therefore of Mesoamerican studies as now practiced.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT

As already mentioned, the focus of this text is on native Mesoamericans and on the cultural traditions (civilizations) that they created and reconstituted through time. The reader will also find in the chapters to follow information on the non-Indian inhabitants of the Mexican and Central American region. Nevertheless, our emphasis is on the native Mesoamericans, their social institutions and cultural patterns, and the changing relations with each other and with the peoples surrounding them.

This emphasis on native Mesoamericans is by design, and it should not be interpreted as disinterest in the many millions of mestizos, Blacks, Whites, and diverse ethnic groups who now make up the majority of the regional Mexican and Central American peoples. We trust that the text will make clear that many of these non-Indian peoples have exercised controlling power over the native Mesoamericans for almost 500 years. This historical fact, of course, is well known, and has been stressed again and again in publications on Mexico and Central America.

This book carries the additional message that there existed a dynamic, highly developed Mesoamerican civilization before the coming of the Europeans; that the Mesoamericans resisted conquest from the beginning and have continued to resist assimilation of their cultures ever since; and that the peoples of the region, both Indian and non-Indian, continue to be profoundly influenced by the legacy of that civilization.

As pointed out in the new Preface to this text, this revised edition is primarily aimed at updating information on Mesoamerican culture and history. We have reorganized the chapters into four units, updated all the chapters from the first edition, and added two new chapters (chapters 3 and 10). The four units cover first, the pre-Hispanic period; second, the colonial and neocolonial period; third, the modern period; and fourth, accounts on key issues raised by the Mesoamerican civilization through its long history.

The three chapters of Unit I of this revised text provide an overview of the pre-Hispanic Mesoamericans, from their beginnings to the invasion of their territory by Spaniards. Unit II consists of four chapters that describe the impact of colonization and neocolonization (by "neocolonization" we refer to the continuing domination of the native Mesoamericans by Whites and mestizos all the way through the nineteenth century and into the first decades of the twentieth century). One of the chapters of this unit describes the nature of Mesoamerican literature produced during the darkness of the colonial period.

Unit III is constituted by three chapters that provide a historical overview of the native Mesoamerican peoples during the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first century (beginning with the Mexican revolution). The final chapter of this unit updates the situation of native Mesoamericans up to the present day through a detailed account of the Zapatista movement in Mexico and of its significance for the Indians of the region as a whole.

For each of the first three units, we describe the cultural characteristics of Mesoamerica, as well as the historical processes by which these characteristics were created and transformed through time.

The four chapters of Unit IV also take historical developments into consideration, but the primary focus is on a series of topics of current interest and special importance in Mesoamerican studies. In the chapters of this final unit, greater attention is paid to symbolic features of the Mesoamerican tradition than in the preceding units, particularly in the chapters on language, religion, and oral literature. Nevertheless, in each of these final chapters, attention is also given to the social and material forces that condition the cultural features under study.

We have dispensed with the Epilogue on the Zapatista movement found in the first edition, since an entire chapter devoted to that movement is included in Unit III on Modern Mesoamerica.

One of our main goals in writing this text is to ensure that the Mesoamericans' own perspectives on their history and world are represented throughout. Another goal is to summarize as fully as possible important scholarship available on Mesoamerica from the international scholarly community. We are also determined to integrate the scholarly findings on Mesoamerica into a useful text that is both cohesive and readable.

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# The Legacy of Mesoamerica

## History and Culture of a Native American Civilization

Second Edition


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