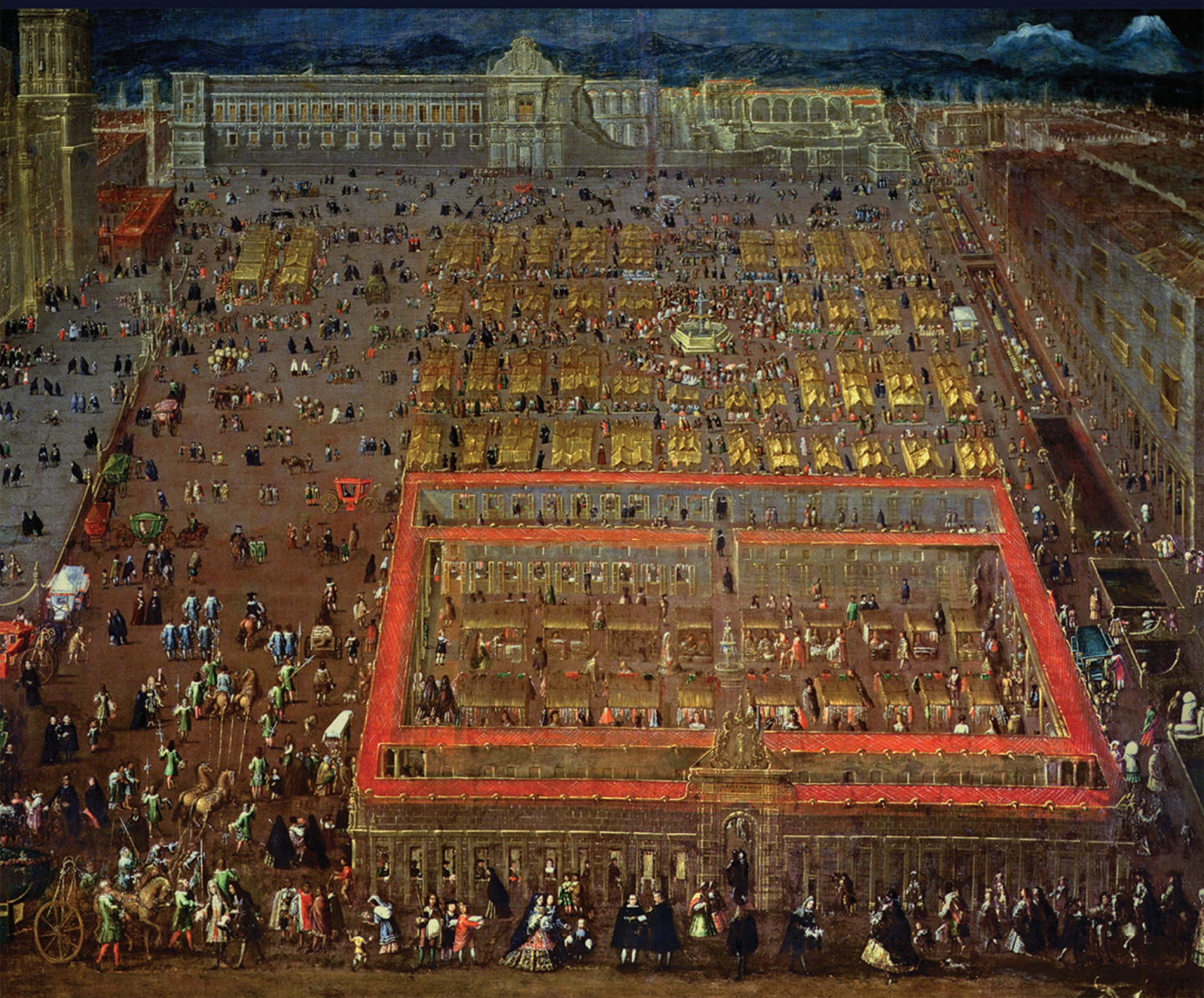
THE COURSE OF MEXICAN HISTORY

ELEVENTH EDITION



SUSAN M. DEEDS
MICHAEL C. MEYER • WILLIAM L. SHERMAN

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NEW TO THIS EDITION

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Revisionist interpretations of Santa Anna and the US-Mexican War

Re-evaluation of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and its aftermath

Expanded coverage of social and cultural history throughout, including discussions of gender history, ethnic groups, local religion, cultural nationalism, environmental change, popular protests, and urban life

Updates on recent political crises and corruption as well as US-Mexico relations

Extended analysis of border issues, including migration and narcotraffic

Reflections and illustrations of Mexico's rich contemporary popular culture, including film, television, music, cuisine, leisure, and sport

PREFACE

In the nearly forty years since the first edition of *The Course of Mexican History* was published in 1979, much has changed in Mexico. Successive editions of the book have noted transformations in the political, economic, social, cultural, and diplomatic history over time. Each addition has also incorporated new and revisionist interpretations of Mexico's past based on the most recent archival research of hundreds of scholars. When the original authors, Michael Meyer and William Sherman, undertook the project of writing a textbook to help college students acquire a deep appreciation of Mexico's past, as well as a nuanced understanding of the present, they could not have anticipated that their collaboration on the subject they themselves found so fascinating would prove so enduring.

Their empathy and appreciation for Mexico's peoples and cultures continue to resonate in the eleventh edition. After the death of Professor Sherman in 1998, Professor Meyer and I collaborated on three more editions of the book. When Michael C. Meyer died in 2007, he left a rich legacy of original scholarship on Mexican history. But perhaps his most lasting contribution is to be found in this fundamental survey text that faithfully maintains his desire to provide sound, up-to-date historical synthesis unencumbered by polemic or theoretical jargon.

For Professor Meyer, the understanding of Mexican history logically began with an understanding of the major political developments that provided a foundation upon which to develop themes of Mexico's socioeconomic and cultural history in the pre-Columbian, colonial, and modern periods. This model has once again served me well for incorporating new materials and perspectives from recent publications to update the basic text. In this edition, I have reorganized the periodization of chapters in the modern era to reflect changes in overall interpretations of the Mexican past. College instructors can supplement our material from the increasingly expansive scholarship that continues to be published on a multiplicity of topics in Mexican history.

The general contours of historical scholarship on Mexico have shifted over the last few decades. Scholars have increasingly called attention to continuities in Mexico's

historical experience over time. Changing emphases have illuminated the roles of the popular classes and of women in shaping Mexican history. New cultural approaches have offered alternative insights to explain nation building and the evolution of Mexican national identity. The focus of much of the new scholarship examines the postrevolutionary periods, questioning the degree to which the revolution of 1910 wrought social and political change.

Mexico's place in the world community continues to be remarkable and unique. Even before Mesoamerica was connected to the rest of the globe, it boasted several of the world's most complex civilizations. Distinguished by its significant presence in the Atlantic and Pacific world economies in the colonial period, Mexico later became the first nation to carry out a social revolution in twentieth century. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Mexico once again commanded attention by ending seventy years of one-party rule and embarking on a more politically pluralistic path. Just twelve years later, the return of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional offered poignant testimony to the enormous difficulties of transforming an entrenched political culture.

An even more intractable problem is the drug war that has engulfed Mexico for more than a decade, producing thousands of deaths and disappearances. Recently, migration has topped the list of dilemmas for Mexico to confront. The ties that connect Mexico to the United States have deep historical roots in the border crossings that have evolved for nearly 200 years since Mexico became an independent nation. In this decade, nearly 34 million Hispanics of Mexican origin live in the United States, making meaningful contributions to US society across the political, economic, social, and cultural spectra. Approximately two-thirds of them were born in the United States, and the other third consists of immigrants. The immigrant population expanded significantly after 1970 and then declined in recent years; one-half are undocumented while legal permanent residents and naturalized US citizens make up the other half. As this book goes to press, undocumented Mexicans face a serious crisis, stemming from the 2016 election of Donald Trump as US president. The protracted stalemate in the US Congress which prevented a resolution of the migrant issue resulted in Trump's nationalist and xenophobic agenda. Threats of mass deportations now loom large.

The lessons of history teach us that Mexico will meet future challenges with characteristic creativity, dynamism, and resilience. And, more than ever, US citizens can benefit from understanding the past of their southern neighbor.

During a long relationship with the fine staff at the Higher Education Division of Oxford University Press, the authors of *The Course of Mexican History* have worked with several editors who offered wise counsel. I would like to thank Charles Cavaliere, my editor on the eleventh edition, and the rest of the editorial staff for their skillful guidance and sound editorial judgment. Above all, I am deeply indebted to Catherine Tracy Goode whose professional and editorial skills were crucial to the writing of this edition. I also thank Ana Ortiz Islas who assisted with the illustrations, Rosalba Gasparrini who proofread many chapters, and the many colleagues who suggested changes. Finally, I would like to acknowledge Ross Hassig, Professor Emeritus, University of Oklahoma; Susan Kellogg, University of Houston;

Cynthia Radding, University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill; John W. Sherman, Wright State University; Donald F. Stevens, Drexel University; and Dana Velasco Murillo, University of California – San Diego who shared invaluable feedback with me.

Mexico City *S. M. D.*
July 2017

THE COURSE OF MEXICAN HISTORY

PART

1

PRE-COLUMBIAN MEXICO

CHAPTER 1

THE FIRST MEXICANS

There is in Mexican society a pervasive awareness of the ancients. The Indian presence intrudes on the national psyche; it suffuses the art, philosophy, and literature. It lies within the marvelous prehistoric ruins among whose haunted piles the Mexicans seek their origins. It has not always been so. Following the Spanish conquest of the sixteenth century, a combination of the conquerors' ethnocentrism and excessive Christian zeal denigrated most things Indian. At the end of the nineteenth century Mexican political elites saw that the grandeur of the Aztec empire could be invoked to validate their own ambitions, but the great push to revive the indigenous past occurred later during the revolution of 1910, as leaders turned it to the service of a unifying national myth that could transcend the contradictions of an ethnically and culturally divided society. In their search for *mexicanidad*—the spirit of an inclusive Mexican cultural identity—revolutionary intellectuals looked to new configurations of stories, places, and heroes from the past. For several decades talented anthropologists, historians, painters, musicians, novelists, and craftsmen extolled native traditions if not their contemporary reality. Then as cultural nationalism gave way to more nuanced representations of ancient cultures, so did the circumstances of contemporary indigenous peoples pose ever more stark contrasts to the depictions of stunning past achievements. The contradictions were startlingly manifested in the Chiapas insurrection of 1994.

PRE-AGRICULTURAL AND PROTO-AGRICULTURAL MEXICO

At what point or how the first Mexicans appeared on the scene is still debated. The most accepted academic theory is that they are descended from the intrepid hunters who crossed from northwest Asia to Alaska. There may have been several waves of migrants, beginning as early as 40,000 years ago, when sea levels were lower and a land bridge over the Bering Strait facilitated the passage. When a melting trend began around 9000 BC, the migrations likely slowed or ceased.

More recent archaeological discoveries posit new hypotheses that support the idea of sea routes from Asia to North America and a coastal migration pattern down the Pacific coastline. Biological evidence from skeletons and mitochondrial DNA also suggests connections with Polynesian, Japanese, and European peoples (who migrated as far as Siberia). Native Americans offer their own explanations and oppose skeletal dating methods on religious grounds. As new archaeological, genetic, and linguistic discoveries are made, changing and competing understandings about these matters will persist. Advances in the decipherment of hieroglyphic writing will also continue to alter how we divide prehispanic Mexico into chronological periods with distinctive cultural characteristics. The chart below provides a general overview, although not all cultures fit within it and dates vary by group and location.

The early human inhabitants of America were hunters, food gatherers, and sometimes fishermen. They were constantly on the move, searching for food and using crude stone tools. For thousands of years, these early hunters led a precarious existence, with little perceptible improvement in technology until about 10,000 BC, when fine pressure-flaked stone points made hunting easier. At this time, the still moist conditions of the late Pleistocene supported lush grasslands and full foliage—ample fodder for animal prey—hairy mammoths, mastodons, giant armadillos, and early ancestors of the bison, camel, and horse. These animals were hunted by men who assailed their prey with missiles—including stone-tipped lances or darts propelled by the *atl-atl*, or "spear thrower." Human remains dating to 13,000 years ago have been discovered in various Mexican sites, most recently in underwater caves near Tulum on the Caribbean coast of the Yucatán Peninsula. These predate the 10,000-year-old "Tepexpan Man" (who, as it turned out, was a woman), discovered in the 1940s just north of Mexico City in the village of Tepexpan. Mammoth bones with stone points lodged in the ribs, lying adjacent to flint knives, dating to more than 20,000 years ago, offer another kind of evidence for human habitation. The earliest hunter-gatherer sites have been unearthed in Puebla and Oaxaca.

Around 7500 BC, a drying-up phase began: rainfall was less frequent, and the rich plant life gradually yielded to sparse vegetation; the lakes shriveled up; and the huge beasts that had provided a plentiful supply of meat eventually became extinct as their sources of food and water disappeared. Ancient Mexicans were again back to eating insects, lizards, snakes, rodents, and anything else remotely edible, to supplement their diet of seeds, roots, nuts, berries, eggs, and shellfish. The audacious killer of mammoths gave way to the hunter of small game.

As meat consumption fell to less than 21 percent of the diet by 4000 BC, collection of plants increased. And over several millennia maize cultivation developed as *teosinte* grass underwent genetic alteration to produce small corn cobs. Maize became the basis of the Mexican diet. We know, for example, that as early as 5000 BC primitive farmers practiced rudimentary agriculture at Tehuacan in the modern state of Puebla, although we have no precise data for the domestication of corn. By at least 2000 BC, maize, along with previously domesticated beans and squash, had become a widespread source of human sustenance in Mesoamerica, or Middle America, as indicated by the presence of grinding stones for the making of meal.

40,000–7000 BC	*Pre-Agricultural:* Nomadic hunters and food gatherers.
7000–1500 BC	Archaic (*Incipient Agricultural*): Slowly evolving domestication of food plants; nascent village life; development of primitive skills.
1500 BC–AD 150	*Formative or Pre-Classic:* Elaboration of farming, villages, and pottery; appearance of chiefdoms, public architecture, solar calendar, and long-distance exchange.
AD 150–900	*Classic:* The florescence of ancient Mexican civilization with state-level societies ruled by kings and priests; elaboration of cities and monumental architecture; intensification of agriculture; increased social stratification; advancement in artistic expression, literacy, and science.
AD 900–1521	*Post-Classic:* Growth of city-states and empires; expansion of commerce; intensification of Late Classic trends in sacrifice and warfare; development of metallurgy; final destruction of Indian states by Spanish conquest.

PERIODS IN PRE-COLUMBIAN MEXICO

The farmer was evolving; but there was great variation in this process throughout Mexico, and hunting and gathering continued to be practiced to differing degrees, even solely by some nomadic groups. But in central and southern Mexico, barring disasters common to all tillers of the soil, a fairly reliable source of food allowed populations to grow and to find leisure time for experimentation, to develop and refine skills and talents. Weavers of baskets and mats began to shape clay, a most important development.

THE FORMATIVE PERIOD

Ancient garbage dumps are to the archaeologist what documents are to the historian. From those piles of refuse scientific investigators patiently assemble pictures of early societies. Much has, of course, long been reduced to dust; and whatever use early inhabitants made of wood, hides, and woven reeds must be left to speculation. But instruments of flint, obsidian, and various kinds of stone survive; and some pottery has left us indelible traces of early cultures.

By 2000 BC the rough outlines of a Mesoamerican identity had begun to form. "Mesoamerican" refers to a loosely defined cultural tradition that characterized much of pre-contact Mexico and Central America. In the Formative period, its fundamental common characteristics were the dependence on maize agriculture and the evolution of an agricultural technology that used a wooden digging stick. Agriculture advanced with the beginning of irrigation, terracing, fertilizers, and raised fields. Implements of stone and wood facilitated cultivation of fields by farmers, who built huts of branches, reeds, and mud nearby. A simple village life with incipient political and social orders evolved. Subsequently, cliques emerged to control both power and wealth. Increased exchange of goods among different societies developed as a result of distinctive products and artisan specialties. In addition, varied climate and geography yielded regional fruits, vegetables, woods, stone, and other items of value, such as shells, jade, cotton, and turquoise. This spreading trade naturally led to cultural exchanges as well.

Artists began to create ceramics that were both esthetically pleasing and functional. Clay figurines, usually of females, were produced in great numbers. Among them were those of Tlatilco, in the Valley of Mexico, where artists rendered charming figurines of the type known as "pretty lady," with delicate and beautiful faces. The eyes are almost slanting and the hairdos sometimes elaborate. The figures have tiny waists and bulging thighs. At the same time, a fascination with the deformed manifested early the Mexican idea of duality, for other small clay figurines represented dwarfs, hunchbacks, and the diseased. Some figurines are of interest for their depiction of everyday life—nursing babies, dancing, playing, and performing acrobatics. Through them we gain some idea of popular pastimes, the use of jewelry, and clothing. Still other pieces were made in the images of animals and gods whose forms suggest ritual purposes related to natural forces and dependence upon the products of the earth.

During the Late Formative period agriculture was further enhanced by the use of terracing and raised fields. One form of the latter was the *chinampa*, the so-called floating garden, rectangular areas constructed by building up layers of mud and aquatic vegetation in a shallow lake.

Although textile manufacturing had evolved, it is likely that, in the more temperate zones anyway, people went about nude, or almost so. Clothing was apparently worn more among the upper classes than the lower, as were sandals, jewelry, and other adornments. Individual expression and vanity were evident in the dyed hair and elaborate coiffures of aristocratic women.

Ceramic figurine of a dancer from Tlatilco, near Mexico City.

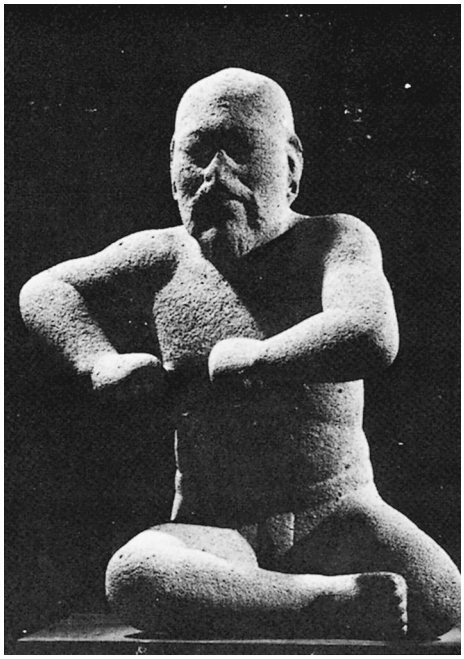
As villages grew in size and society became more complex, serious decisions had to be made by those who were most knowledgeable. Increasing reliance on agriculture made people aware that their security depended upon the blessings of nature. The mysteries of the universe were associated with the supernatural and, as in other ancient cultures, gods of nature came to be worshipped. Vagaries of the elements were equated with capricious gods. When rain failed, for example, supplication was made to the angry deity through a priesthood that acquired a predominant position. This presumed special relationship with the gods, astutely cultivated by the priests, gave them a certain mystique and a hold over the community. In order to pay due reverence to the gods and to ensure their cooperation in providing rain and sunshine, priests ordered the construction of mounds, on top of which offerings were made. As the structures became larger and more elaborate, advanced permanent architecture evolved. By the Middle Formative (1200–400 BC) some impressive sites were already in evidence.

OLMEC CULTURE AND INFLUENCE

For many years, archaeologists exclusively associated the early development of complex society in Mesoamerica with the Olmec culture of the Gulf coast lowlands in southern Veracruz and Tabasco. They believed it to have been the "mother culture" that profoundly influenced later Classic period civilizations. In the past few decades, scholars have learned more about the Olmecs, whose sites of San Lorenzo, Veracruz, and La Venta, Tabasco, offered tantalizing clues for reconstructing their development. From simple village cultures, Olmecs and other simultaneously evolving groups developed societies with distinctive art forms, economic specialization, new forms of religious life, and the building of large platforms and mounds with temples. Although Olmec culture evolved in the propitious natural setting of the coastal villages of the Gulf coast, it was distributed over several phases (dating from about 1500 BC to the Christian era).

Massive public construction seems to have begun at San Lorenzo by 1350 BC, where we find the Olmec "pudgy babies," or dolls, and motifs like the serpent mouth. The site also came to have a drainage system, a ball court, and the colossal stone heads for which the Olmecs are most well known. Some of these spectacular sculptured heads—embellished likenesses of rulers—were over nine feet high and weighed as much as 40 tons. By about 850 BC, San Lorenzo was eclipsed by the island site of La Venta, where elites mobilized labor and directed construction of this city of monumental architecture for over 400 years. Their tombs have furnished many artifacts of Olmec culture including large mosaic masks and elegantly carved jade figurines. Early Olmecs revered the alligator, representing the earth, and the shark, representing the sea. Elites added the serpent as a symbol of rule, along with were-jaguars. One theory holds that these supposed were-jaguars were actually symbols related to women and their healing powers. Olmecs also had a god for precious, life-giving corn.

The Olmec and some contemporary cultures in the highland valleys of Mexico seem to have been the originators of the elite-commoner class divide that came to characterize Mesoamerican societies. Elites commanded resources from commoners, who grew maize. Elites also developed the long-distance trade in obsidian, jade, cacao, and other items that



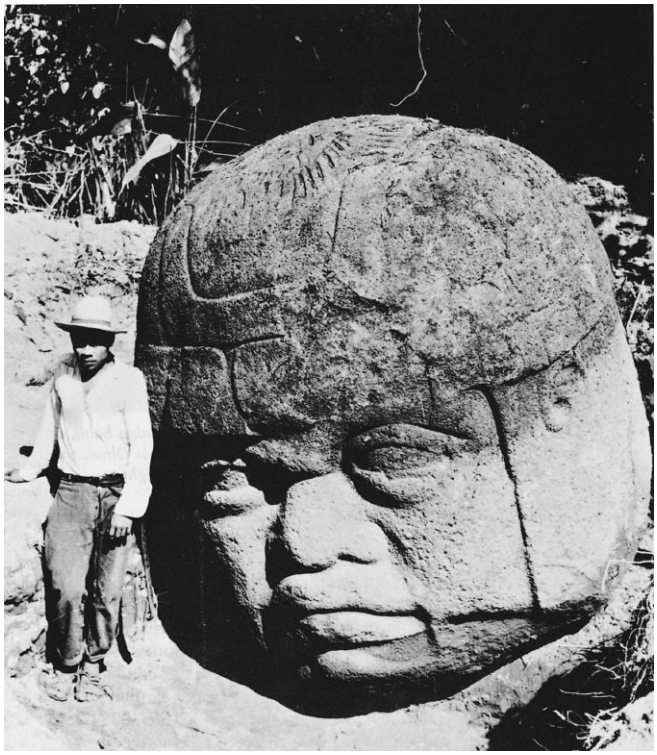
This handsome basalt stone carving from the Gulf coast Olmec culture is known as "The Wrestler."

Genderless "pudgy babies" like this hollow ceramic figurine (13.5 inches in height) may represent Olmec lineages or gods, or perhaps even effigies of infants destined for sacrifice.

helped to spread Olmec influence. Their impact on surrounding and later cultures can also be seen in the advancement of terracing in agriculture and a calendrical system that meshed ritual and solar calendars. Speculation persists about whether Olmecs developed the first writing system, but discoveries since the 1990s have strengthened the hypothesis that they did. These include a cylindrical ceramic stamp and a tablet called the Cascajal block, the latter dated about 900 BC, found in the Veracruz lowlands. Both have incised glyphs that are still being studied.

Other Mesoamerican societies developed sophisticated polities in the Late Formative period that had features in common with the Olmec: the building of public structures, the rapid growth of villages, the development of calendrical and writing systems, craft specialization, and long-distance trade. The nature of the exchanges between them is not well understood, but archaeologists now believe that although Olmec characteristics may have been widespread, they were not singular. "Sister cultures" may have evolved comparable traditions and technologies independently. Similar types of Pre-Classic architecture and ritual symbols have been found in sites throughout central and southern Mexico in the present-day states of Mexico, Morelos, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Chiapas.

New centers with temple-pyramid complexes like that at Cuicuilco, located on the outskirts of present-day Mexico City, and at lowland Maya locations to the south emerged in the Late Formative period (400 BC-AD 200). Some of the new sites would develop into great hubs



Several colossal Olmec stone heads have been discovered. This one, more than eight feet high, is covered with what appears to be a helmet.

of the Classic world in Mexico. On a hilltop in the Valley of Oaxaca, the site of Monte Alban expanded into an urban center administering much of the surrounding countryside. And in the Valley of Mexico, Cuicuilco's destruction by a volcano in the first century AD encouraged rapid urban growth at nearby Teotihuacan. Above an area of natural caves—considered sacred in Mesoamerican religion—its inhabitants constructed huge pyramids dedicated to the moon and the sun. By the end of the Formative period, the civic–religious complex at Teotihuacan had amassed the technology and central authority necessary for the creation of one of the splendors of the world.

RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER STUDY

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CHAPTER 2

MESOAMERICA'S GOLDEN AGE:
The Classic Period

The Mesoamerican culture region flourished over the first millennium AD, most visible in the monumental architecture of cities and the refinement of calendrical and astronomical knowledge. As the Roman empire crumbled in Europe, Mesoamerica was resplendent.

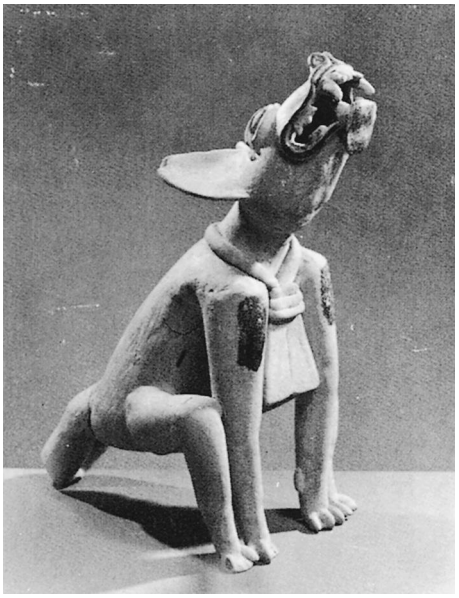
THE FLOWERING OF CITIES

The period from AD 150 to 900 has been viewed as a "golden age" of intellectual and artistic endeavor. Because of the many societies under consideration, the Classic cannot be put into any simple chronological framework.[1] Some sites, such as Teotihuacan and Monte Alban, developed Classic features much earlier. Most Classic cultures declined in the ninth century, but some persisted as late as AD 1000.

One is struck by the grandiose scale of human endeavor in those centuries, most notable in the stunning architecture but also by the excellence of the ceramics, sculpture, and murals. Religion was the cohesive force in an increasingly stratified society, and kings invested with sacred power exacted both labor and tribute from the masses. It was a time of great vigor, with the proliferation of crafts and skills necessary to provide for complex communities. The leadership was dedicated to a sense of order in propitiating the gods, made possible by an apparently strict adherence to regimentation. Pressures to provide sustenance for a burgeoning population led to more careful consideration of planting cycles, which in turn produced exact calculations of the seasons. Even more important was the Mesoamerican belief that all things—gods, people, animals, plants, mountains, even cities—were alive and that their movements could be timed to account for all life events. Consequently, there developed a sophisticated knowledge of astronomy and mathematics, which made possible precise calendrical markings. Mesoamericans devised a highly sophisticated calendar system that included a 365-day solar count as well as a ritual calendar and counts of many other celestial bodies.

1 With only a tiny fraction of the thousands of known archaeological sites in Mexico having been scientifically excavated, the complexities of charting can be appreciated.

Why is this boy laughing? Such unrestrained joy is characteristic of the thousands of ceramic pieces found at the site of Remojadas in the state of Veracruz. Unique for their expressiveness, the figurines have triangular, flattened heads and teeth that are often filed to points.



A howling coyote, another delightful piece from the Remojadas culture, AD 300-900. Indian artists frequently displayed a touch of whimsy in their works.

Farming became scientific; abstract thinking soared. The intellectuals in ancient Mesoamerica apparently arrived at the revolutionary concept of the zero cipher well before its arrival in Europe in 1202 AD, when it was introduced by Arab mathematicians. Despite their advanced understanding of astronomy and math, they made almost no practical use of metals, relying instead upon chipped stone like flint for cutting tools. However, the sharpness of the prismatic blades they crafted from obsidian (volcanic glass) required sophisticated skills virtually unknown today. Although Mesoamericans were aware of the wheel (used in children's toys), the lack of draft animals meant that there was no practical use for wheels in transport.

In some places Mesoamericans were able to raise structures to the height of 230 feet that have stood for some fifteen hundred years. What many have described as their technical limitations was equaled by their ingenuity. In lowland areas, massive blocks of cut stone were most likely transported on river rafts from quarries to distant cities, and logs may have been used in other zones. For lifting the pieces high in the air some clever engineering devices were utilized. Armies of laborers toiled for years on public works projects. An architectural design tradition evolved to take earthquakes into account in the highlands, but technical perfection in construction tended to be subordinated to an irresistible propensity for the esthetic. Though capable of exact measurements, they avoided harsh angles unpleasing to the eye. If the result was agreeable to humans, the purpose, it is clear, was to please the gods.

For many years archaeologists believed that these building complexes were not true cities but only ceremonial centers inhabited by priests, rulers, and their retainers. Today it is universally agreed that Classic centers were true cities and that urbanism is a defining Mesoamerican characteristic. Elites lived in the most luxurious chambers of palace compounds nearest the primary ceremonial complexes or major avenues, which consisted of temple-pyramids, tombs, observatories, and acropolises. Other urban features include ball courts, steam baths, and causeways. Surrounding the city core in a concentric pattern were the apartment complexes of artisans who specialized in craft production as well as those of other middling occupational groups such as petty officials, soldiers, and merchants. Laborers, farmers, and others of the commoner class lived even further out, in modest thatched-roof huts of wattle and daub construction. There they farmed the land, hunted, fished, carried the burdens, and performed all sorts of tasks necessary to support the aristocracy. During festivals, religious in nature, or on market days, masses of people tended to gather in the central precincts.

These Mesoamerican cities functioned first and foremost as administrative and religious centers whose architecture and spatial design attempted to replicate the order of the universe and the hierarchical relationships that linked humans and super naturals. Teotihuacan in central Mexico was truly remarkable for its size and religious importance. The marvelous stone cities of the Classic period were conceived for an impression of grandeur and laid out in breathtaking expanses. The architects were true artists, interposing grand courtyards to offset with horizontal lines the massive vertical projections. As Monte Alban dramatically testifies, they blended their creations with nature and composed with stone and textures that reflected the sunlight.

Although city size, population density, and spatial arrangements varied among Classic centers, there is no question that concentrated populations in so many sites had an incalculable impact on culture. The arts thrive with greatest vigor in an urban milieu, and intellectual growth is enhanced as well. At the same time, the stratification of society is inevitable. So, too, is a central administration to maintain order, promote public works, provide justice, set regulations—to perform, in short, on a more simplified scale, the functions familiar to city administrators of our own times. Great plazas and avenues were paved, buildings were plastered and painted, subterranean tile drainage systems were provided, waste was disposed of, domestic water supplies were channeled, and the staggering problems of food supply were met. Marketplaces were also a feature of cities, although we know less about how exchanges functioned.

Traditionally, scholars viewed the Classic period as having been devoted to moderation and comparative serenity, with order imposed by dominant centers such as Teotihuacan and Monte Alban. These powers, like city-states, carved out spheres of influence that were tolerated by others. We now realize that warfare and human sacrifice were very much a part of the Classic and that conquest explains why certain city-states were able to exercise sway over surrounding territory. Although much of the evidence for the prevalence of sacrificial practices comes from the Maya area, excavations in central Mexico testify to mass executions of warriors and other captives. Classic cities once thought to have lacked fortifications were often built on defensible hilltops. In the art of the Classic, we find images of soldiers, weapons, and slaves. The wide dispersion of a pan-Mesoamerican culture resulted not only from

peaceful exchange but also from forceful impositions. The ruling class consisted not only of powerful priests but also of warriors.

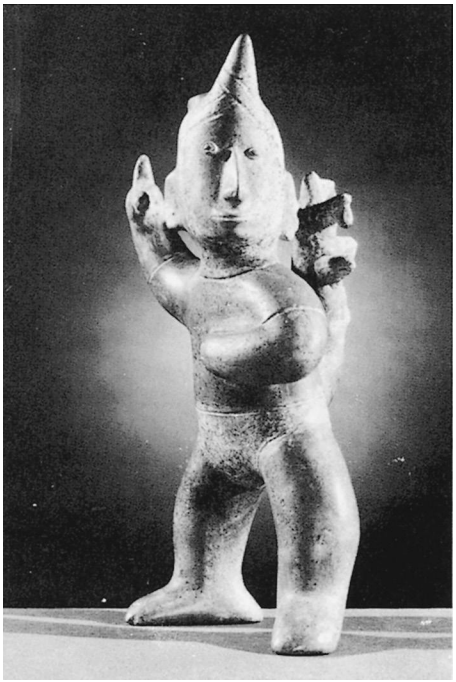
The conventional view of relative tranquility has been most discredited in the case of the Classic Maya. Because of important revelations as a result of improved deciphering of Maya hieroglyphic script, the characteristics of Classic societies have been dramatically reassessed. The Maya genius in art, architecture, and science remains clear; nevertheless, the romanticized version of a society ruled by a benevolent and intellectual priesthood, shunning violence and conquest, now rings hollow. Scholars have revealed that aggressive Maya kings during the Classic period regularly made war on their neighbors for both ritualistic and materialistic motives. The most valued prize was another king, who would be humiliated over a period of time, subjected to exquisite tortures, and finally decapitated. These kings, with a profound sense of history, erected monuments to commemorate their victories and to record their lineage. Maya kingdoms tended to be small in scale, controlling limited territory; but at times regional states were able to subdue larger areas and exercise power over several hundreds of thousands. Various constellations of Maya states formed blocs or were interdependent in terms of trade and defense, but the Maya were not politically unified as a whole.

A unifying element in Classic societies was religion. Shaman-priest kings derived their authority from the gods. Priests were guardians of scientific and genealogical knowledge, and, along with other cultural leaders like scribes and painters, they held high social status and provided guidance to those below. The pantheon of gods included the omnipresent rain god Tlaloc and Quetzalcoatl, the "Feathered Serpent." To the god of the sun and goddess of the moon were added deities to celebrate the beneficence of fire, corn, and the butterfly.

In these polities social cleavage was implicit. There was an order in which everyone had an assigned place. In this respect social stratification was like that in other parts of the world, except that the commoners who supplied tribute in goods and labor may have benefited more from the calendrical knowledge of their rulers, which helped to ensure good harvests. Families thus had their daily needs met, and rulers enjoyed the surpluses. We cannot know how willingly the masses performed their obligatory duties, but as warfare increased, states commanded loyalty as long as they could provide a measure of security.

After a spectacular run of several centuries, the Classic world in Mesoamerica began to deteriorate. Just why the great centers fell is still a mystery, although some theories have wide acceptance; in the case of the Maya, drought has emerged as a main factor. While some of the cities went into gradual decline, others, it appears, met a sudden, violent end. Pressures of various kinds impinged on ordered ways: aggressive nomadic tribes on the peripheries and wars between kingdoms played a role in some cases. Demand for increased food supplies, the result of population pressures, crop failures, and possibly soil exhaustion, was another cause. Perhaps an internal disruption was occasioned by a peasants' revolt against the ruling classes, bred by excessive demands or the priests' inability to mediate successfully with the all-important nature gods. Or were there plagues of some kind? The reasons no doubt vary from place to place, and there may well have been a combination of factors. Scholars lean more and more to explanations that stress overpopulation, environmental destruction, and increasing warfare. In any event, the golden age came apart after a long period of human intellectual and cultural achievement.

Small, hairless *techichi* dogs from Colima were bred for the table and were also used as foot-warmers. Molded in various poses, these ceramic pieces are usually in the form of a vessel.



Poised for action, another Colima figure may represent either a warrior or an athlete.

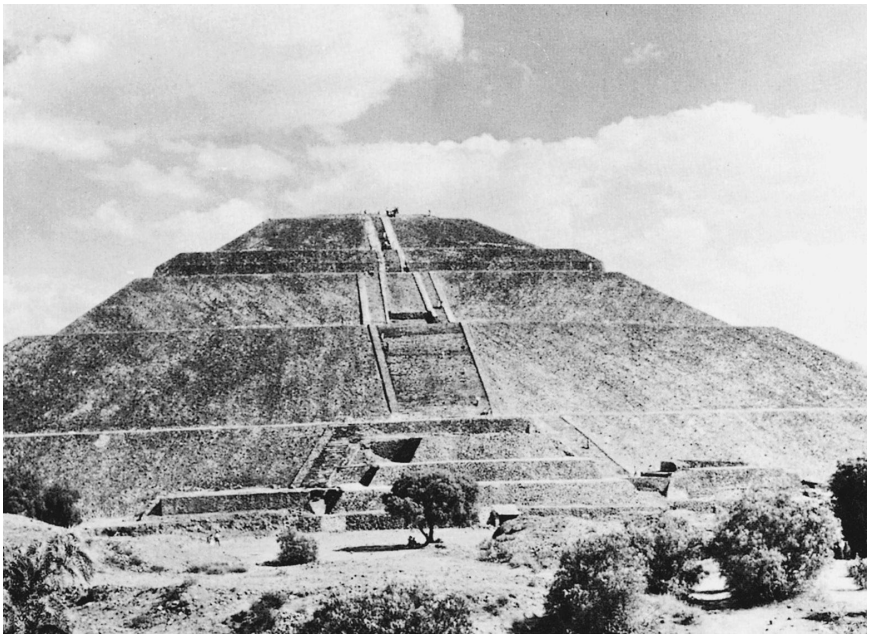
A bearded musician sings and keeps rhythm with rasps. The clay figure, from the state of Nayarit (AD 300-900), is about twenty inches in height.

TEOTIHUACAN AND ITS SUCCESSORS

Classic Mexico had many important centers, but at least three dominant polities exercised great influence over surrounding regions—Teotihuacan, Monte Alban, and some Maya centers. The most important city of its time was the immense urban complex of Teotihuacan, "the Place of the Gods," as the Aztecs were to call it later. The overall expanse measured perhaps twelve square miles, in the core of which was the ceremonial center occupying about two square miles. Surrounding this precinct were the sumptuous quarters of the rulers and their retainers, and on the outer fringes the masses resided in apartments and rude dwellings that have long since disappeared. The population of the city at its height of prosperity remains in dispute, but it may have had as many as 160,000 inhabitants, making it one of the largest cities in the world at the time. Long after its fall the site was held in reverence and awe by succeeding cultures, and owing to the grandiose dimensions of its structures, the Aztecs considered it to have been built by a race of giants.

The origins of the Teotihuacanos are unknown, but the destruction of nearby Cuicuilco in the first century AD coincided with the emergence of Teotihuacan as a powerful kingdom in the central Valley of Mexico. Exceptional urban planning created a colossal city of avenues, a grid system of streets, plazas, markets, temples, palaces, apartment complexes, waterways, and drainage systems. Its main thoroughfare was the Avenue of the Dead, 150 feet wide and stretching over two miles. It connects the Pyramid of the Moon, the Pyramid of the Sun, and the Ciudadela (Citadel), a ceremonial plaza that covers nearly 40 acres. The most striking monument is the splendid Pyramid of the Sun, measuring over 700 feet at the base lines and rising about 215 feet high. The truncated structure covered a sacred cave reminiscent of origin myths and served as a base for the elevation of a temple on top. In Mesoamerica, caves were considered sacred and seen as entrances to an underworld, perhaps a dark, watery void from which humankind emerged. The summit, reached after an ascent of 268 steps, offers the breathless viewer a commanding sweep of the surrounding valley. Even so, what we see today is a pale replica of the former magnificence of the Pyramid of the Sun. Its construction probably occupied 10,000 workers for two decades. Excavations under the smaller Pyramid of the Moon have yielded animal and human skeletal remains, suggesting it functioned as a religious sacrificial space. The Ciudadela was flanked by fifteen low pyramid mounds. Near one end is the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, its incline studded with carved stone projections of the Feathered Serpent and Tlaloc that seem as phantasmic as medieval gargoyles. Linking the Ciudadela and the temple is an underground tunnel (discovered in 2003) that has yielded thousands of artifacts, including statues, jewelry, and obsidian knives.

Teotihuacan must have been a bustling metropolis, teeming with porters carrying goods to the marketplace, laborers erecting temples, artisans busily engaged with their crafts, and here and there the sober presence of the elegant lords. Along the main avenue were various kinds of edifices covered with lime stucco, painted, and polished. Walkways and courts were paved. Of the one hundred palaces, the largest had an estimated three hundred rooms. Some of the salons contained bright frescoes.

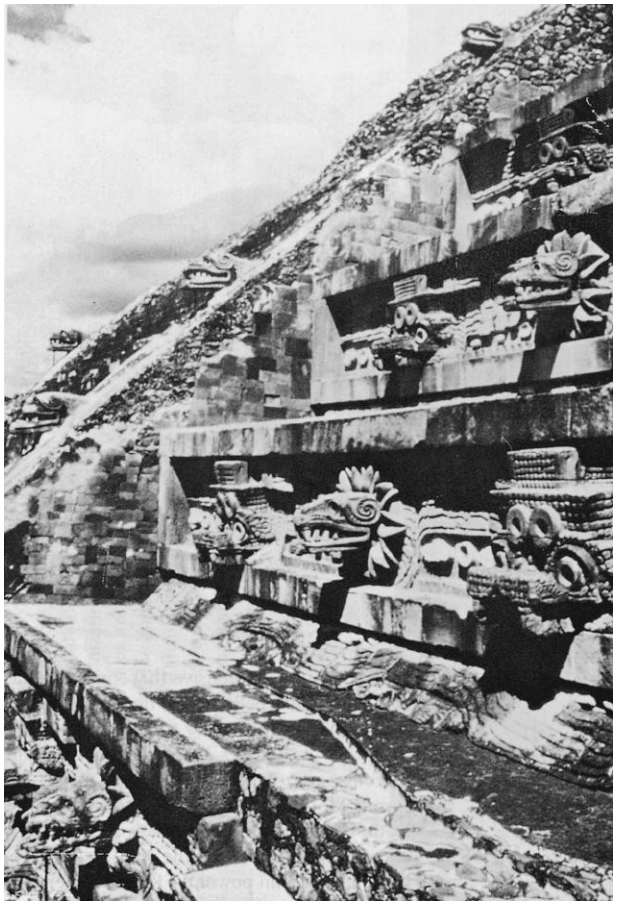


The Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan dominates the extensive ruins of the ancient city.

The dominance of Teotihuacan was so extensive that some scholars have discussed it in terms of an empire, believing its hegemony, based in part on its monopoly of obsidian so necessary to daily life and ritual, to have been as broad as that of the later Aztecs. In any event, its trading network reached from parts of northern Mexico down into Guatemala, and artisans from Monte Alban, Mayan city-states, and other distant places resided there, crafting exotic goods. Foreign ambassadors and trade missions occupied special quarters in the city. Undoubtedly heavily influenced by Teotihuacan, nonetheless Monte Alban and the Maya culture remained independent of this metropolitan power. Within its sphere, the impact of that great city consisted not only of its cultural imperialism with respect to art and architecture but also of its religious significance. Although much of what we know about Teotihuacan was transmitted by later cultures who revered it, religion and warfare were central to its governance. Its pantheon of gods included Quetzalcoatl, representing fertility, as well as deities of warfare, sun, rain, and other aspects of nature. According to the later Aztecs, gods had sacrificed themselves at Teotihuacan to sustain the sun, thus initiating their cosmos—the Fifth Sun—that required continuous blood sacrifice.

For some reason, perhaps related to an agricultural debacle, decline set in, inviting incursions on the northern frontier. About AD 650 a weakened Teotihuacan suffered desecration and partial burning—apparently by its own inhabitants. The fall of the mightiest center was the first casualty in the gradual decay of the Classic world in Mexico.

With the Teotihuacano culture dissipated, central Mexico lost its focus. A number of other states emerged but commanded smaller spheres of influence. Cholula in the modern state of



Carved stone images of the rain god Tlaloc and Quetzalcoatl on the Temple of Quetzalcoatl at Teotihuacan.

Puebla was a holy city and a large center of considerable importance. While tradition has it that 365 Christian chapels were later built over the ruins of "pagan" temples, the actual number is closer to 70. The nature of the city's relationship with Teotihuacan is not entirely clear, but it seems to have been close. The center was dominated by its massive pyramid, the largest single monument in pre-Columbian America, with a total volume greater than that of Egypt's Pyramid of Cheops. It was a sanctuary of Quetzalcoatl, and many of the refugees from Teotihuacan fled to Cholula, which continued to flourish until it fell to invaders about AD 800.

Other successor states like Xochicalco in Morelos and Cacaxtla in Puebla were built on mountaintops and manifest the alarming escalation of militarism that developed in Mexico in the Late Classic period. Striking combinations of Teotihuacan and Maya influences are revealed at these sites, nowhere more graphically than in the beautifully painted murals that have been discovered at Cacaxtla since the 1970s.

El Tajín in Veracruz had extensive influence along the Gulf coast. A dramatic example of its unique architecture is the Pyramid of Niches, of which there is one for each day of the year. The vigorous life at Tajín included bloody rites that anticipated the terror of the

Detail of a plumed serpent head. The eyes at one time held red jewels, long since plucked out by vandals.

Post-Classic period. The ball game *ollama* was an ancient tradition that became an obsession with these lowland peoples. Most of the prominent centers in Mexico had ball courts, and Tajín had no fewer than eleven. Along each side of the court (which could vary considerably in length, according to the culture) was a wall on which a stone ring was fixed. Two teams played, the object being to keep the seven to eight-inch solid rubber ball out of the opponents' possession and, if possible, to hit the ball through one of the rings. Scoring was exceedingly difficult, not only because the ring was small and high but also because the players could not hit the ball with their hands. Often they were allowed to use only their hips, although rules differed according to time and place. The athletes wore padding in vulnerable spots as the flying ball could kill if struck with sufficient force. Contests were played with great enthusiasm, and on some occasions large sums were wagered. Ollama was more than a game, however; it was a sacred ritual in imitation of the movement of celestial bodies and associated with human fate. On occasion, the teams represented political factions. So seriously was the contest taken that the losing captain was sometimes sacrificed, as scenes on the architectural friezes depict. In another variation, the losers became slaves of the victors.

Not as well researched and understood are the peoples who created monumental architecture and exquisite artifacts of ceramic, jade, and stone in the Occident (west Mexico, including Nayarit, Jalisco, and Colima). Sharing characteristics and some gods with other prehispanic Mesoamerican cultures, these groups also created distinctive works, including shaft tombs, circular pyramidal structures and plazas, wetland gardens, and copper tools.

And to the north, the cultures and cities that evolved in Zacatecas (Chalchihuites and La Quemada) likewise had Mesoamerican features related to monument-building and warfare, but scholars disagree about their origins and place in regional networks.

MONTE ALBAN

From its lofty eminence 1,300 feet above the valley floor, Monte Alban, the creation of the Zapotecs, dominated surrounding Oaxaca for centuries. Less grand in scale than its contemporary Teotihuacan, it was nevertheless spacious, literally sculpted out of a mountaintop more than 3,000 feet long and half again as wide. Urban construction was carried out at great cost in human effort because all materials, even water, had to be hauled up the mountainsides. Many temples, platforms, and low pyramids, along with sunken patios, stood adjacent to its great paved plaza. Surrounding the center were many separate *barrios* (neighborhoods) of houses terraced into the hillsides. The early evolution of Zapotec urban society at Monte Alban between 500 and 100 BC reflects Olmec-like features. At the top of the social hierarchy that strictly separated nobles and commoners sat a hereditary king and a hereditary high priest. The king controlled noble administrators who ruled the surrounding towns in Oaxaca. By the fourth century, higher population density and military strength had been created through colonization, conquest, and alliance building to bring more distant provinces into Monte Alban's tribute-paying orbit. Skilled diplomacy enabled the Zapotecs to coexist

The Pyramid of Niches, El Tajín, state of Veracruz.

A ball court at Monte Alban. The ball game of ollama (*tlachtli*) was played in many different cultures, although the rules and courts varied somewhat.

peacefully with Teotihuacan, but between AD 400 and 800 Monte Alban lost its dominant position in Oaxaca as subject towns—especially those in more defensible positions and better agricultural locations—grew in size and asserted their autonomy. In decentralized fashion, through Zapotec marriage alliances with neighboring Mixtecs at Mitla, both groups continued to exercise influence in Oaxaca for many centuries, enduring to the present day.

THE MAYA

Although the Maya in the Pacific coastal plain and highland areas created marketing and ceremonial centers with temple architecture as early as 400 BC, their greatest florescence came later, occurring between AD 250 and 800, primarily in the southern lowlands of present-day Yucatán, Guatemala, and Honduras.

The Classic Maya had many important centers, no one of which completely dominated the others. A number of regional states, each composed of a capital city and subject towns, competed with each other, expanding and contracting over time in response to changing fortunes of war and trade. Defeated kingdoms supplied rulers for sacrifice and tribute in goods and slaves to conquering cities. Trade with Teotihuacan was accompanied by bride

exchanges and the incorporation of art and architectural styles from this northern neighbor. The Petén in northern Guatemala could be said to be the heartland of the Classic Maya, but they also lived in the Mexican states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, and Yucatán, as well as in Quintana Roo. The development of Classic Maya centers reflected an increasing emphasis on the lineage of hereditary kings, supported by a noble class of warriors and intellectuals; below them artisans, skilled laborers, and peasant farmers produced the luxury items enjoyed by the aristocracy as well as the basic staples of maize, beans, and vegetables that sustained the entire society. We know much more about the lifestyles of elites who are depicted through a variety of Maya art forms. Their esthetic sensibilities appear in elaborate ornamentation in dress and jewelry (often fashioned from jade), cranial deformation that flattened and slanted the head both front and back, filed teeth, and extensive body tattooing.

For many years, archaeologists believed the lowland Maya cities to have been primarily ceremonial, reasoning that the surrounding jungle could not have supported large populations with slash-and-burn agriculture. Extensive archaeological excavation demonstrated, however, that these areas were densely populated and that the Maya also used raised fields, terracing, and kitchen gardens to augment the production of corn and other foodstuffs. They also utilized plentiful local limestone for building. Like Teotihuacan and Monte Alban, the Maya had a vigorous ceramic tradition and produced lovely polychrome bowls and cylinders that recorded mundane events. In their murals and bas-reliefs, however, they tended less to the geometric designs of central Mexico and more to the depiction of the human form, often rendered with superb draftsmanship. In 2001, archaeologists discovered in the northern Petén what is thought to be the oldest intact Maya mural. Over 2,000 years old, its red, black, and yellow colors depict the resurrection of the corn god and provide clues to the nature of Maya kinship and society. The great fluidity and exuberance of Maya art give it a baroque quality, whether in stone or stucco. Of the fascinating codices, only four survived the ravages of time, climate, insects, and the fires of Spanish clergymen.[2]

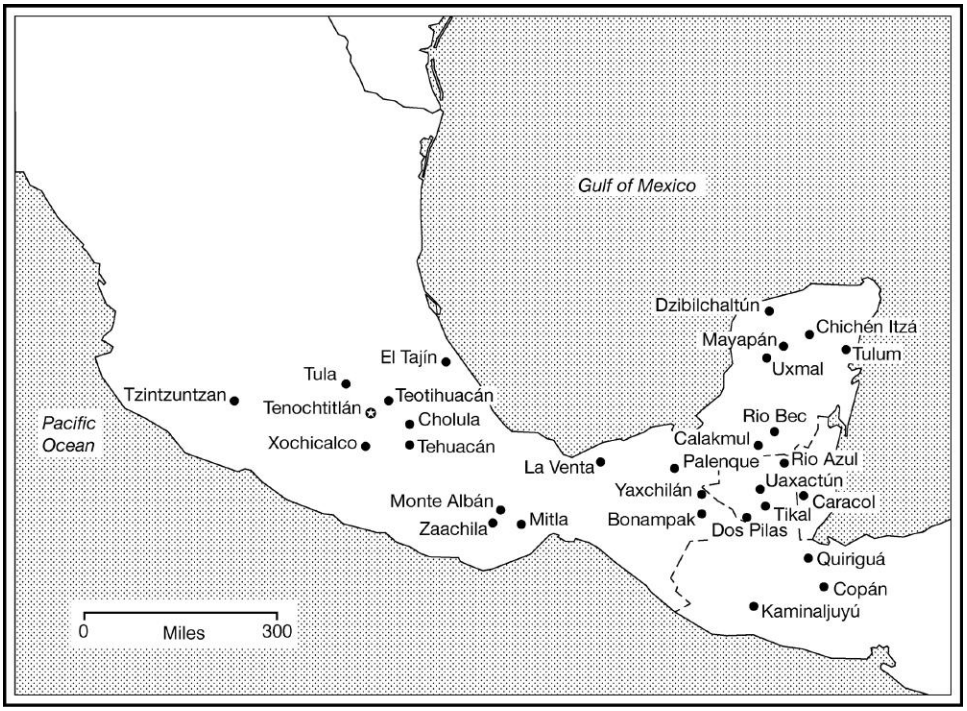
The Maya stand as the premier scientists of ancient America, noted for their independent invention of a positional numeration system based on the mathematical concept for zero. Just as impressive were their achievements in calendars and writing. Like other Mexican calendars, theirs had 365 days; in addition, a ceremonial calendar had 260 days. The two calendars coincided every fifty-two years when the cycle of life was believed to be renewed. In 1996 some Maya scholars found an inscribed plaque in southern Mexico that led to the erroneous interpretation that the Mayas had predicted the world would come to an end on December 21, 2012. Of course the date passed without incident, but it had fueled a frenzy of apocalyptic thinking, despite the fact that scholars had carefully explained the reasons why the inscription had been so misinterpreted.[3] It is true that the Maya accurately observed and recorded the movements of celestial bodies to aid in predicting future phenomena, but they did not prophesy the end

2 Only about two dozen pre-Columbian codices survive; these are screenfolds made of deerskin, cotton cloth, or bark paper featuring illustrations or hieroglyphic text. They variously include calendrical and other scientific data, prophecies, and information on dieties and rulers. Three of the Maya codices are named after the cities where they are housed: Dresden, Madrid, and Paris. The fourth, the Grolier Codex, long believed to be a fake, was authenticated in 2016 and is the earliest, dating from the thirteenth century.

3 See, for example, Matthew Restall and Amara Solari, *2012 and the End of the World: The Western Roots of the Maya Apocalypse* (Lanham, MD, 2011).

An overview of Monte Alban in Oaxaca, showing its platforms and expansive plazas.

Incised on stone slabs, curious figures who seem to be dancing are a feature of Monte Alban. They are called *danzantes* and are believed to represent the bodies of slain enemies.



Principal Archaeological Sites

of the world. Coincidentally in 2012, another archaeological discovery in a remote corner of northeastern Guatemala revealed wall paintings dating from the ninth century that depict the oldest known Mayan calendar and provide more evidence to counter doomsday fears.

The Maya also inscribed hieroglyphic texts on stone pillars (stelae), facades, and stairways. These inscriptions recorded historical events and were intended to highlight the ancestral privilege of Maya kings (and occasionally queens, probably ruling as regents for minor sons) who were also the incarnation of local sacred knowledge. In ceremonies of self-mutilation, Maya rulers ritually shed blood from their own penis, ear, lips, and tongue, symbolically manifesting the life force that also substantiated their lineage and power. They were particularly obsessed with engraving their triumphs in stone. Recent progress in deciphering Maya writing has revealed that highly learned scribes, responsible for recording these histories, ranked at the highest levels of Maya society.

The extensive pantheon of Maya deities included four lords who held the earth and sky apart at the four cardinal directions. Life had emerged from an underworld of darkness and death due to the sun deity's daily travels through a triple-layered cosmos. Many Maya gods, bearing human or animal attributes, have been identified. They regularly embody the dualism common to Mesoamerican cosmology—that a deity may have both male and female, or both benevolent and malevolent, attributes.

The metropolis of the Maya Classic was Tikal, with a population of about fifty thousand. It is one of the earliest sites, settled in the Formative period long before AD 292, the date of its

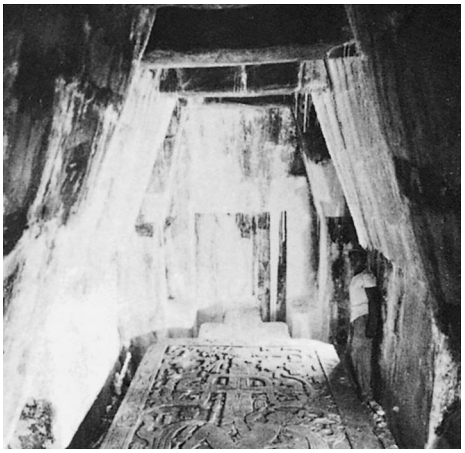
In dark hardwood, this unusual carving known as the Mirror Bearer depicts a dignified Maya worthy. It dates from the sixth century.

earliest inscription. Set in a clearing of Guatemala's Petén jungle, Tikal is dominated by six great pyramids, including the tallest of any in the Maya civilization, towering 230 feet. The inner precinct covers more than a square mile, with other ceremonial edifices surrounding the core for a considerable distance. Aside from the usual temples, palaces, plazas, and ball courts, Tikal had ten reservoirs and was beautified by artificial lakes.

The Maya designed their temple-pyramids architecturally and artistically to proclaim the power of the site and glorify the rulers. Their brilliantly decorated masonry, roof combs, statuary, and interior murals exhibit highly sophisticated craftsmanship. The cultural achievements of the Maya, from astronomy and calendars to architecture, art, and writing, were fruits of their understanding and legitimation of a complex cosmic order.

As the largest of the Classic Maya city-states, Tikal and Calakmul were rivals in dominating large areas of the Maya lowlands in which Dos Pilas played an important role. Recent excavations have also highlighted the importance of the affluent trading center of Cancuen on the Pasión River in Guatemala. Other major Classic era kingdoms included Copan in Honduras and Piedras Negras in Guatemala. Yaxchilan, in the modern state of Chiapas, is known for its great central plaza, a thousand feet long. Palenque (Chiapas), though relatively small, is considered the gem of the Maya cities because of its exquisite sculpture. The bas-relief work there shows the art in its highest form. Although of minor importance in most respects, Bonampak (Chiapas) contains the most illustrious of the Maya murals, brilliantly depicting the aftermath of a battle, captives, and sacrifice.

The Temple of the Sun at Palenque is framed by thick jungle growth.



Although central Mexican pyramids are usually solid, without interior chambers, to the south temple-pyramids of the Maya sometimes contain tombs like the one shown here at Palenque's Temple of the Inscriptions.

A superb stucco head with an elegant headdress found at the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque.

A pot-bellied, seed-filled ceramic rattle from the Maya culture on the small island of Jaina, off the coast of Campeche.

Of the same Maya culture is this whistle, in the form of an embracing couple.

There may have been no one cause for the decline of Classic Maya centers that began around 750 AD, scattered as they were over considerable distances, although drought seems to have been a key factor. One hypothesis posits climate change and suggests that the Mayas' exploitation of seasonal wetlands may have induced drought and rising temperatures. Explanations have tended to highlight demographic and ecological stress resulting from rapidly growing populations and intensification of agriculture. Population densities may have been as high as six hundred per square mile in some places. It is also possible that commoners rose up in rebellion against increasing demands from their overlords as well as food shortages. But there is growing evidence that warfare—which escalated dramatically in the Late Classic along with human sacrifice—played a significant role. Foreign intrusion from other Maya areas probably capitalized on the instability that prevailed after AD 800. By 900 most of the southern lowland cities were abandoned as many Mayas fled north to the Yucatán Peninsula. Others moved back into the surrounding countryside where they and their descendants have continued to farm for centuries and today number some 20 million people. Their "lost" cities were reclaimed by the jungle until archaeologists began to excavate the lichen-mottled ruins nearly 1,000 years later. Thus, the Classic world in Mesoamerica folded, but in its demise loomed alarming portents of what was to follow.

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CHAPTER 3

TIMES OF TROUBLE

Post-Classic Mexico

The order imposed by Teotihuacan's dominance during the Classic period gave way to a fragmentation of power among the transition centers in areas north of the Mayas. Our knowledge of the history of the Valley of Mexico between AD 650 and 900 is imprecise, but a high incidence of movement and migration characterized the waning decades of the Classic period, when aggressive city-states—Cholula, Xochicalco, and El Tajín—vied for control, but none succeeded in bringing about unity and order.

The Post-Classic era began about AD 900 and lasted until the Spanish conquest in the early sixteenth century. New states had significant commercial interests, as evidenced by the expansion of market systems. In fact, a key feature of the Post-Classic was the increase of long-distance exchange and the overall economic integration of Mesoamerica. An example of the first, if not the latter, was the far distant regional center at Paquimé/Casas Grandes in northwest Mexico (with links to the US Southwest), where Mesoamerican features and artifacts were manifest. New technology could be seen in cotton quilted armor and the bow and arrow but, in general, technological innovation slowed. Although metallurgy was introduced, its use was limited. The inhabitants fashioned gold and silver into beautiful jewelry, and used copper in the manufacture of various tools and to cover the tips of arrow shafts.

In an even more striking change during the Post-Classic, the militaristic propensities of the Late Classic continued to grow, enhancing the prestige of warriors and fostering the conquest of tribute-paying subjects. Human sacrifice proliferated as both elites and commoners became convinced that only the offering of massive and sustained quantities of the life force of blood to the gods could prevent cosmic disaster.

Another change occurred in the Post-Classic and proved to be a boon for later historians. For this period we have more written records in which individuals appear with more clarity. But although there are now pegs upon which to drape our historical fabric, accounts are manifestly shot through with myths; thus, some details vary with the telling, and many versions are vague and fragmentary at best.

THE TOLTECS

The great city of Teotihuachan, situated in the northeastern part of the valley of Mexico, had served as a buffer between "civilized" Mexico and the nomadic peoples of the north. With the fall of that stronghold, however, vigorous warriors from the arid lands beyond breached the frontier. The northern tribes, consisting of many diverse groups, were known by the generic term *Chichimecs*, a designation that later came to be construed by Spaniards as peoples lacking the culture of settled society and thus "barbaric." Some of these groups were hunter-gathers, but according to legend the more agricultural Tolteca-Chichimeca from southern Zacatecas swept into the central valley at the beginning of the tenth century led by Mixcoatl (Cloud Serpent), a skilled warrior who swiftly scattered his demoralized opponents. After establishing his capital at Culhuacan and successfully extending his power, the resourceful Mixcoatl was assassinated by his brother, who seized leadership for himself. Mixcoatl's pregnant wife fled into exile, where she died upon giving birth to a son. The boy received the name Ce Acatl Topiltzin (Ce Acatl meaning "One Reed," the year of his birth, perhaps AD 947), and he would become the cultural hero of foremost proportions in ancient Mexico. He became a devotee of the ancient god Quetzalcoatl and later, as a high priest of the cult, he assumed the name of his deity.

It is important to note, however, that our knowledge of Toltec history derives primarily from Aztec post-conquest accounts in which Tula figures prominently in their origin myths. The legend of Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl comes from these sources and includes the idea that this priest-god was of fair complexion and bearded, that he abhorred human sacrifice, and that he had left cross-like signs along his journey of exile. Many scholars question the reliability of these stories recorded after the conquest by Aztec elites, working with Spanish priests. Their interpretations served to explain the conquest as preordained by a Christian god.

The legend asserts that upon reaching manhood, Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl killed in single combat his uncle, Mixcoatl's assassin, and made himself lord of the Toltecs. Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl eventually removed his capital some fifty miles northwest of the present Mexico City to an area of obsidian deposits. There, around AD 968, he founded the splendid city of Tula (Tollan), the most important urban center in the long interim between the fall of Teotihuacan and the later rise of Aztec Tenochtitlan. The Toltecs continued to incorporate northern nomads and gradually absorbed more urban Mesoamerican characteristics. From their new capital they played a key role in the obsidian trade, used for making blades and other tools, and asserted power over the surrounding area. Although their limited hegemony lasted only about two centuries, their prestige was such that the name "Toltec" pervaded the consciousness of the land for five hundred years.

Less extensive in area and population (40–60,000) than Teotihuacan, Tula was certainly more grandiose than its ruins today indicate. The brilliant plumage of exotic birds decked palace interiors, sheets of gold, jewels, and rare seashells lined various salons. Residents' ears were soothed by the sweet singing of pet birds. This version of paradise on earth was embellished in the retelling over the centuries; it accounts, in part, for the curiously persistent Toltec mystique.

The honeyed tradition notwithstanding, all was not peace and light at Tula. Two religious traditions evolved in the period of Toltec rule, emblematic of conflict in Mesoamerican society. The ancestral supreme deity of the Toltecs was the fearsome and unpredictable

Tezcatlipoca or Smoking Mirror because of his association with obsidian, as well as the night sky and fate. His adherents resented the exaltation of the foreign god Quetzalcoatl (associated with knowledge and creativity) introduced by Topiltzin. The deity-impersonator priests of Tezcatlipoca bided their time, conspiring against the heresy.

They sought by various deceits to discredit the high priest of Quetzalcoatl. According to one account, Tezcatlipoca, in disguise, gained entrance to the house of Topiltzin, who was ill. At first the ruler refused an offer of "medicine," which was, in fact, the strong drink of pulque, made from undistilled cactus juice. Finally persuaded to take a sip, the innocent Topiltzin found it pleasing and asked for more. At length inebriated by five cupfuls, the lord of Tula awoke the next morning on a mat beside his sister. Having broken his priestly vows and disgraced himself by the sins of drunkenness and incest, he prepared to go into exile after almost twenty years of enlightened rule.

The reign of Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl at Tula thus came to a close, but he does not disappear from history. He and his followers dispersed to the south, some remaining in the holy city of Cholula and others continuing on to Maya areas around 987. One legend relates that Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl coasted down a river to the sea in a raft of serpents, after which he flashed into the heavens to become the morning star.

Another account had more serious, actually ominous, implications. When Topiltzin and his partisans left Tula for their long odyssey, they marked their way by shooting arrows through saplings, leaving signs that resembled crosses. Later he sent word that he would return from where the sun rose to take back his rightful throne in the year Ce Acatl, which recurred cyclically. By some accounts, he was of fair complexion and bearded. All of this would be of immense significance when, five centuries later, the Spaniards appeared on the eastern horizon. The year was 1519—and Ce Acatl.

Meanwhile, with the success of the militant Tezcatlipoca faction at Tula, a new order of things evolved. While the reputation of the Toltecs as great architects was secure (the Aztecs

The ingenuous Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl is deceived by the crafty Tezcatlipoca.

Giant stone warriors at Tula were manifestations of the militaristic spirit that came to dominate the Toltecs.

named them Toltecs, meaning "Artificers"), a new and grotesque image of them was revealed in later works. Themes of death and destruction are evident in the Chacmools—reclining human figures with basins on their stomachs to receive human hearts—and a "serpent wall" that shows rattlesnakes devouring human skeletons. Towering statues of impassive warrior figures, sixteen to eighteen feet tall, appeared on top of temples, and friezes symbolized the military orders of the jaguar and eagle, the latter shown devouring human hearts. Tula nourished two traditions that persisted until the coming of the Spaniards—an excess of human sacrifice and the forceful conquest of other states. Yet many questions persist about the size and nature of the alleged Toltec "empire."

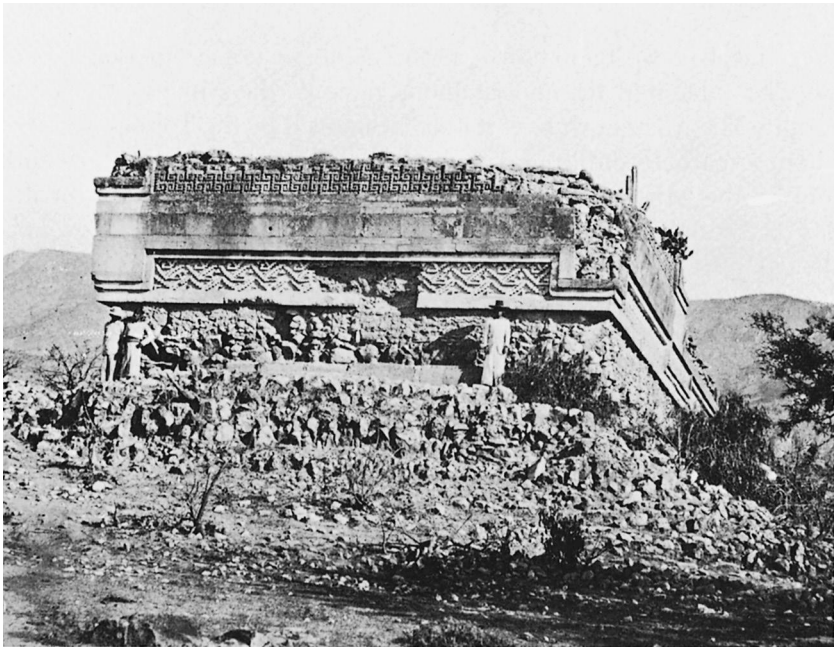
From the late eleventh century to 1156, drought and famine struck the Toltecs. Wars and internal social conflict further weakened the state until, in desperation, the people even turned to the worship of their enemies' alien deities. Evidence of fire throughout the site may explain the onset of the Toltec diaspora, with people spreading in many directions. The collapse of Tula was significant for Mexico: once again the northern buffer zone between the sedentary peoples of the valley and the northern semi-nomads remained unguarded. Not long after, new groups descended upon this wonder of the Post-Classic world and subjected Tula to brutal desecration.

THE ZAPOTECS AND MIXTECS

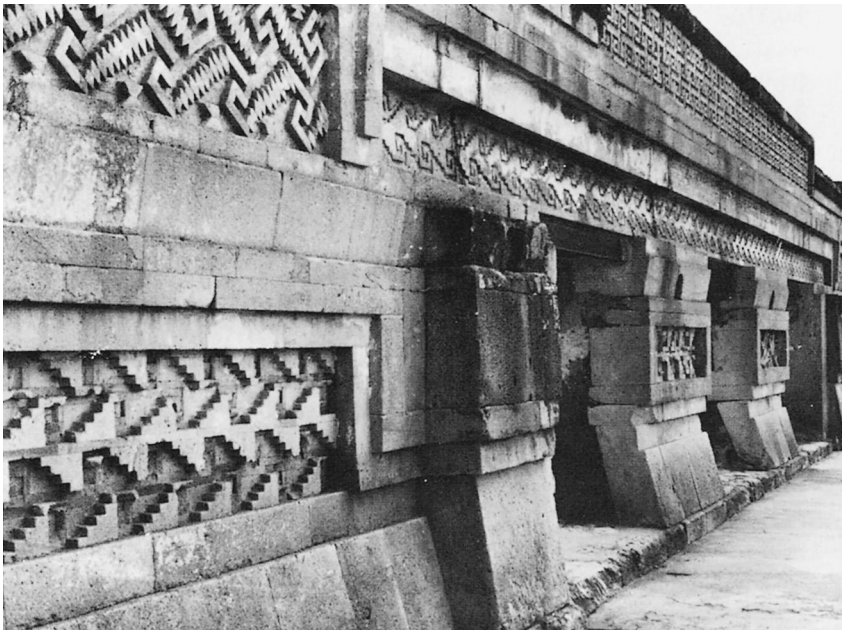
To the south, following the abandonment of Monte Alban in Oaxaca, the Zapotecs remained a vigorous culture with many important centers including their capital at Zaachila. Mitla, built at roughly the same time as Tula, was a comparatively small religious and military base. What one sees there, however, is a jewel of Mexican architecture. Surrounding a modest courtyard are white temples with walls of marvelous design—thousands of small pieces of cut stone, fitted together with a precision requiring no mortar, form mosaics of dazzling geometric patterns. Opening off the patios are subterranean passages leading to crypts. Although the site occupies an exposed area, set apart some distance is the hill fortress, a grim reminder of the intense warfare that had overtaken Post-Classic Mexico.

To the areas west and north of the Zapotecs were a remarkable people who inhabited the mountainous regions, the Mixtecs, or "Cloud People." The Mixtecs were certainly influenced by the Toltecs, some of whom apparently infiltrated after the fall of Tula. By the thirteenth century the Mixtecs penetrated eastward into Zapotec territories, and, primarily by marrying into the Zapotec royalty, they eventually came to dominate their neighbors. At times they occupied many of the Zapotec sites, including Monte Alban and Mitla.

Mixtec artistic achievements are extraordinary in the exquisite decoration of their temple complexes. Among the treasures they gave us is the richest collection extant of picture *códices*, for example the Selden Codex. These pictographic books are executed in brilliant colors on deerskin (the books of the Maya and others were made of both deer skin and vegetable fiber). They offer valuable historical sources that chronicle centuries of conquering dynasties, genealogies, and warfare. Following the appearance of metallurgy around AD 1000, the Mixtecs became, in addition, the foremost jewelers in Mexico, fashioning delicate pieces in gold and silver.



A palace at Mitla.



Detail of the palace showing the intricate geometric designs formed by precision stone cutting.

THE POST-CLASSIC MAYA

Coincident with the final disintegration of the Maya Classic period by around AD 900, a rising Maya cultural phenomenon appeared on the peninsula of Yucatán. That peninsula is a limestone shelf, flat with some rolling, brush-covered hills, a land without surface rivers. With its thin soil and dependence for water on the *cenotes*, the sinkholes created by the collapse of underground caverns, it seems an unlikely location for an agricultural people. Maya groups had inhabited Yucatán for many centuries BC, but their achievements had not matched those of the southern Maya who flourished during the Classic era.

Beginning in the tenth century, the ancestral Yucatec Maya culture was transformed by outside influences of peoples stigmatized as "foreigners." Some of the newcomers were undoubtedly refugees from the deserted Classic areas. The invigorating force that gave impulse to the new hybrid style in Yucatán appears to have been Toltec, but the nature of the relationship between Tula and the dominant early Post-Classic center of Chichen Itza is still disputed. One explanation holds that the banished Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl and his followers actually made it to Chichen Itza in 987 and imposed Toltec rule. Others believe that the northern attributes may have been brought earlier by coastal Putun and Chontal Maya invaders who had been heavily influenced by non-Maya cultures of the Gulf coast and central Mexico.

This unusual ceramic vessel, created in the Classic Period, is in the form of a stylized monkey wearing a startled expression.

A Mixtec vase from Zaachila. Representations of death were and still are common and are often treated lightly.

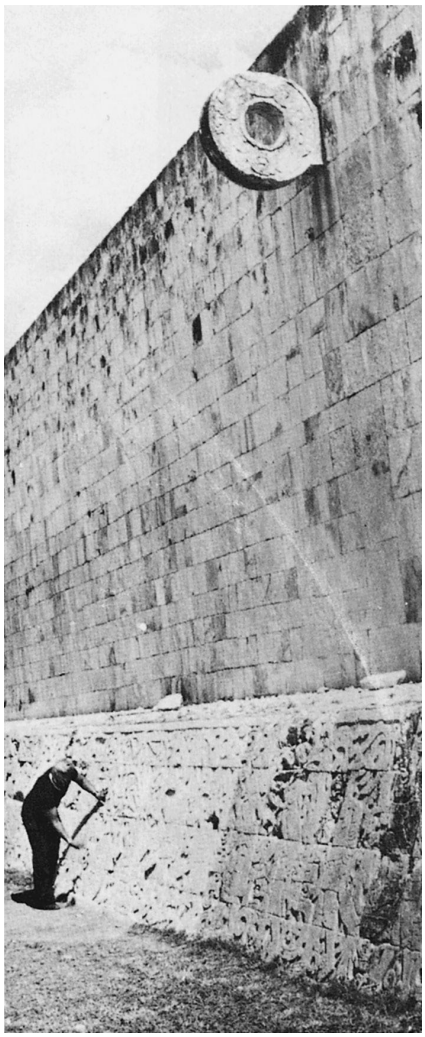
Zapotec bat god (Dios Murciélago).

From about 900 to 1150, Chichen Itza allied with the cities of Mayapan and Uxmal, although it dominated the alliance as a result of its successes in trade and military exploits. Warfare and human sacrifice were common, but whether they actually increased as a result of central Mexican influence is unknown. Certainly these practices were already widespread among the Yucatecan Mayas' neighbors to the south in the Late Classic. The art and architecture of Chichen Itza evoke the militant spirit of Tula with warrior motifs, images of the Feathered Serpent, the forest of columns, and Chacmools. Among the monuments of Post-Classic Maya centers, those of Chichen Itza are the most widely known. Like the sculptures, they are esthetically less pleasing than works of the Classic Maya. Uxmal, however, has structures of great beauty. Many consider its Palace of the Governor to be the most elegant of prehispanic architecture.

During the period of Toltec influence, curious Chacmool figures appeared at Chichen Itza.

Mesoamerican influence promoted the inclusion of Quetzalcoatl (called "Kukulcan" by the Maya) in the pantheon of local deities. Among the most important were the fire god Itzamna, the rain god Chac, and the gods of corn and the sun. Into the great Sacred Cenote, a well measuring some two hundred feet across at the mouth, victims (although infrequently the virgins so dear to modern tradition) were cast, along with jewels and other valuables, to appease the rain god. Although ritual practices remained strong, religious elites began to lose political and cultural influence to rising merchants engaging in a wider variety of commodity trading.

By the end of the eleventh century, Chichen Itza fell from dominance, due in part to environmental factors. Eventually in the twelfth century, Mayapan, in the interior north of the Yucatán peninsula, rose to fill the void. A mercantile emphasis characterized this shift, overshadowing esthetic endeavors undertaken in earlier Mayan cities. A new area of burgeoning trade (e.g. salt, cacao, cotton) in Caribbean and Gulf coast areas commenced and persisted until the arrival of the Spaniards. Mayapan fell around 1450, after suffering drought, plagues, and hurricanes. Over time, environmental factors and warfare compromised agrarian



A great ball court in the Maya style at Chichen Itza. Scores were seldom made by knocking the ball through the high ring. This city had six ball courts, one of which, the largest in Mesoamerica, measures 480 by 120 feet.

sustainability and political stability in the absence of new technologies, but changes varied across time and region from Yucatán to the south.

Elsewhere, in the highland Maya areas of Guatemala, other groups had established kingdoms. Their Quiche and Cakchiquel warriors would pose a formidable challenge to conquering Spaniards in the sixteenth century. The newest interlopers in Maya areas might well have been seen as the latest variation on an older, cyclical pattern of conquest. At any rate, arriving Spaniards found few vestiges of former Maya grandeur, but rather decentralized polities and villages in which merchants still traded and commoners continued their familiar traditions of maize cultivation, family rituals, and community life. When we refer to the collapse of Maya "civilization," we must remember that Mayas number some 7 million people today.