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MESOAMERICA BEFORE 1519

The first chapters of a history of Latin America belong to its inhabitants before their first contact with Europeans. This is especially true in Mesoamerica.¹ Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and, to a lesser degree, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, like Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia in the Central Andes, have roots deeply embedded in the subsoil of their pre-Columbian civilizations. The aims of this chapter are, first, to outline briefly the development of the peoples and high cultures of Mesoamerica before the settlement of the Mexicas (Aztecs) in the Valley of Mexico (c. 1325); secondly, to examine the main features of political and socio-economic organization and artistic and intellectual achievement during the period of Mexica (Aztec) pre-eminence (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries); and, thirdly, to present an overview of the prevailing situation in Mesoamerica on the eve of the European invasion (1519).

Situated between the solid continental land masses of North and South America, Mesoamerica (an area of 350,000 square miles) has a distinctly isthmian character with several conspicuous geographical

¹ Some German scholars, in particular Eduard Seler (1849–1922), introduced more than 70 years ago the expression *Mittel Amerika* to connote the area where indigenous high culture flourished in central and southern Mexico and the adjacent territory of the northern Central American nations. Many years later, in 1943, Paul Kirchhoff in his 'Mesoamérica: sus límites geográficos, composición étnica y caracteres culturales', *Acta Antropológica*, 1 (Escuela Nacional de Antropología, México, 1943), 92–107, focused attention on the geographical limits of what he called Mesoamerica. Mesoamerica is more than a geographical term. It relates also to the area where indigenous high cultures and civilizations developed and spread in various forms at different periods. At the time of the European invasion in 1519 its northern frontiers were the Río Sinaloa to the north-west and the Panuco to the north-east, while in the north-central part it did not extend beyond the basin of the Río Lerma. Its southern limits were the Río Motagua that empties into the Gulf of Honduras in the Caribbean, the southern shores of Nicaragua lake and the Nicoya peninsula in Costa Rica.

features like the gulfs of Tehuantepec and Fonseca on the Pacific side, and the Yucatan peninsula and the gulf of Honduras on the Caribbean side. This area, where the high cultures developed, probably exhibits greater geographical and ecological diversity than any other region of similar size in the world. The region has a complex geological history. In particular, recent mountain building and volcanic activity, including the formation of two volcanic axes (one running east–west along the southern limits of the Valley of Mexico and the other following a north–west, south–east orientation through Mexico and Central America), have played important roles in the formation of distinct natural regions. Although Mesoamerica is situated within the tropics, the complexity of its reliefs and the variety of its landforms, soils and drainage systems, combined with the effects of ocean streams and winds, result in a diversity of climates, vegetation and animal life. This diversity is very marked in the river basins, such as the Panuco, Coatzacoalcos, Grijalva, Usumacinta, Hondo, Motagua, Lerma–Santiago and Balsas, and in the lake areas of the Valley of Mexico or Patzcuaro in Michoacán, and it is not without significance that the most important cultural changes in Mesoamerica occurred in these regions. The truly tropical sub-regions of Mesoamerica comprise the well-watered lowlands of Veracruz and Tabasco; the scrub-covered Yucatan peninsula; the Caribbean rain forest area of Central America; the Pacific coastal plains of southern and central Mexico (Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Michoacán, Colima) and of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, together with the Nicoya peninsula and the Huanacazte province in Costa Rica. The principal highland sub-regions – the Sierras (the Central American highlands, the southern Sierra Madre, as well as portions of the western and eastern Sierra Madre, and the transverse volcanic axis) and the two large southern and central mesas or plateaux – although falling within the tropics, are temperate in terms of the climate and vegetation. The vast region to the north of Mesoamerica, between the central plateau and the present Mexican–U.S. border, is ecologically very different and in many respects similar to the great North American deserts. The vegetation is generally limited to a variety of cacti and some clusters of shrubs, yuccas or palmillas and, near intermittent streams, mesquite trees. At times Mesoamerican high culture diffused in an attenuated form into some sub-regions of the northern plateau (as in La Quemada and Calchihuites in Zacatecas). However, in general the arid north remained the permanent home of the fiery Chichimecs who several times threatened the existence of the northern Mesoamerican settlements.

THE EARLY CIVILIZATIONS OF MESOAMERICA

Remote prehistory, in the case of the Americas, begins around 35,000 B.C., when apparently man first entered the continent through the Bering Strait. There is some evidence to indicate a probable presence of man in what is today Mexico around 20,000 B.C. Nonetheless, the oldest human remains, discovered at the site of Tepexpan, about 25 miles to the north-east of Mexico City, have been dated as no earlier than 9,000 B.C. Over a long period, only bands of food-gatherers and hunters inhabited the land. Three or perhaps four millennia still had to pass before man in Mesoamerica initiated, around 5,000 B.C., the process that ended up as agriculture. Discoveries in various caves within the Sierra of Tamaulipas and in Cozcatlán, Puebla, show how, little by little, the former gatherers began the domestication of squash, chili, beans and corn. The production of pottery started considerably later, around 2,300 B.C. In various parts of central and southern Mexico and in Central America, villages of agriculturists and pottery makers began to proliferate. Some of these villages, probably those established in better environments, such as on the banks of a stream or close to the sea, experienced an early growth in population. The inhabitants of villages scattered over such a vast territory often differed ethnically and linguistically. From among them, one group in particular was soon to stand out. Archaeological evidence shows that a series of extraordinary changes began to appear, commencing around 1,300 B.C. in an area close to the Gulf of Mexico, in southern Veracruz and the neighbouring state of Tabasco. That area has been known since pre-Columbian days as 'The Rubber Land', *Olmán*, land of the Olmecs.

Excavations made in Olmec centres such as Tres Zapotes, La Venta, San Lorenzo and others have revealed great cultural transformations. La Venta, the largest centre, was built on a small island, a few feet above sea level, in a swampy area near the Rio Tonalá, ten miles before it empties into the Gulf of Mexico. Although available stone is more than forty miles away, a number of colossal stone sculptures (some of them ten feet high) and other monuments have been unearthed there.

In La Venta, as in some other Olmec sites, a sort of proto-urbanism began to develop. The agriculturist villagers who settled in the vicinity of La Venta had probably experienced, together with population growth, various stimuli to stir them from their old ways of subsistence. What they achieved also presupposes changes in their socio-economic, political and religious organization.

As far as we know, the Olmecs were, within Mesoamerica, the first to erect large complexes of buildings, mainly for religious purposes. Thus, the centre of La Venta, skilfully planned, included mud-plastered pyramids, long and circular mounds, stone-carved altars, large stone boxes, rows of basalt columns, tombs, sarcophagi, stelae, colossal heads of basalt and other smaller sculptures. The existence of large plazas seems to indicate that religious ceremonies were performed in the open air. Jaguar masks, formed of green mosaics, conceived probably as offerings, and therefore covered up with clay and adobe, have been found below the floor, as a sort of ancient pavement, in some of the open spaces in front of the religious buildings. What we will call artistic creations also included many pieces made of jade, figurines, necklaces and other objects in carved and polished quartz, obsidian, rock crystal and serpentine. A division of labour can be inferred. While many individuals continued with agriculture and other subsistence activities, others specialized in different arts and crafts, in providing defence for the group, in commercial enterprises, in the cult of the gods and in government, which was probably in the hands of the religious leaders.

Olmecs worshipped an omnipresent jaguar god. Elements attached to the symbolism of what later became the Mesoamerican rain god probably derived from the jaguar god's mask. Stelae and other monuments show various representations of fantastic birds, often in association with jaguars, serpents or human beings. The offerings found in burials are evidence of a cult of the dead with a belief in an afterlife. The beginnings of Mesoamerican calendar and writing ought probably to be linked to the Olmecs who lived along the Gulf coast, although it is Oaxaca (at places influenced by the Olmecs) where the earliest vestiges of these achievements have been brought to light.

All this, and the fact of the early diffusion of Olmec elements in different places, some far from the centres of origin, seem to confirm the character of a mother high culture. Olmec influence – probably through commerce and perhaps also by a sort of 'missionary' religious impulse – is manifest in many sites in the area close to the Gulf of Mexico and also in the Central Plateau, in Oaxaca, in the land of the Mayas and in western Mexico (Guerrero and Michoacán). Here were the antecedents of the Classic Period in Mesoamerica.

The extraordinary cultural innovations of the Olmecs did not mean the disappearance of some notorious limitations that continued to affect the development of the various peoples of Mesoamerica. These included,

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first, the permanent absence of any utilitarian application of the wheel, with its many consequences, as for instance, in transportation and pottery-making; secondly, the absence (until around A.D. 950) of even an elementary kind of metallurgy, and that was derived from the Andean area via Central America; finally, the absence of animals capable of domestication: no horses or cattle existed and, apart from turkeys (for eating), only the hairless Mexican dogs were the companions of man in his daily life – and in his after-life, since they were sacrificed to accompany their owners to the Land of the Dead.

However, these and other limitations were not insurmountable obstacles to further development in Mesoamerican groups. The influence of Olmec culture began to be felt around 600 B.C. in sites such as Tlatilco, Zacatenco and others in the vicinity of what centuries later became Mexico City. Parallel processes developed in other regions of central and southern Mesoamerica. Agriculture expanded and diversified; among other things cotton was cultivated successfully. Villages grew and larger centres arose.

Teotihuacan, the ‘metropolis of the gods’, is the best example of the culmination of Classic civilization in the central plateau. There recent archaeological research has revealed not only a large ceremonial centre, but everything implied by the idea of a city. It did not grow overnight. It took several centuries for generations of priests and architects to plan and realize, modify, enlarge and enrich what was perhaps originally conceived as an entity to exist forever. Besides the two great pyramids and the Temple of Quetzalcóatl, other enclosures, palaces, schools and different kinds of buildings have been discovered. Large suburbs, where members of the community had their homes, surrounded the more compact religious and administrative centre. Avenues and streets were paved and there was also a well-planned drainage system. Pyramids, temples, palaces and most of the houses of the rulers or members of the nobility were decorated with murals in which gods, fantastic birds, serpents, jaguars and various plants were represented.

The metropolis of Teotihuacan which, at its zenith, around the fifth or sixth century A.D., extended for around twenty square kilometres, had a population of at least 50,000 inhabitants. Differences of status related to divisions of labour, an efficient army, extensive agriculture, and well-organized commerce with merchants going to distant places, are some of the features that can probably be inferred as attributes of the socio-economic structure of the Teotihuacan state. The many

vestiges of its influence in various remote sites, in Oaxaca, Chiapas and even in the Guatemalan highlands, seem to indicate that Teotihuacan was the centre of a large kingdom or of a confederacy of different peoples. Many of the members of the ruling class probably spoke the Nahuatl language, an archaic form of the Nahuatl which was to be, centuries later, the official language of the Aztecs.

Teotihuacans worshipped several gods that were later invoked by other Nahua-speaking peoples: Tlaloc and Chalchiuhtlicue, Lord and Lady of the Waters; Quetzalcóatl, the Feathered Serpent; Xiuhtecutli, Lord of Fire; Xochipilli, Prince of the Flowers. As in the case of other institutions, the art that flourished in Teotihuacan was to influence, in various forms, other Mesoamerican peoples.

Parallel to the development of Teotihuacan, civilization appeared in other sub-areas of Mesoamerica. One very early instance is offered by the site of Monte Albán in Central Oaxaca whose beginnings can be traced back to around A.D. 600. There, besides the religious centre built on top of a hill, numerous structures visible on the slopes suggest the existence of a rather large urban settlement. More complex forms of writing, with dates, place-names and other hieroglyphs appearing in various inscriptions are also evidence of the high cultural level attained by the Zapotecs who had built Monte Albán and ruled over many other groups in what is today Oaxaca.

The Mayas were inhabitants of the Yucatan peninsula and of the lowlands and highlands of the Mexican states of Tabasco and Chiapas, and of Guatemala, Belize and parts of El Salvador and Honduras. Thanks to archaeology, we know about more than 50 Maya centres of considerable importance which were occupied throughout the Classic Period. Some of the most famous are Tikal, Uaxactún, Piedras Negras and Ouiriguá in Guatemala; Copán in Honduras; Nakum in Belize; Yaxchilán, Palenque and Bonampak in Chiapas; Dzibilchaltún, Cobá, Labná, Kabah and the early phases of Uxmal and Chichén-Itzá in the Yucatan peninsula.

Arguments have been put forward both for and against the urban nature of the Maya centres. Today it is generally recognized that settlements built on the banks of rivers, such as those close to the Usumacinta or, in general, within a dense tropical forest area, encompassed not only sanctuaries for the gods and palaces for religious leaders, but also residential quarters for the people.

From a political point of view it appears that some of these urban

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centres were associated in various kinds of ‘confederations’ or ‘kingdoms’. In Classical Maya society two clearly different social strata co-existed: the ordinary people or commoners (devoted for the most part to agriculture and to the performance of various personal services) and the dominant group composed of the rulers, priests and high ranking warriors. To the priests and sages one has to attribute the extraordinary creations in the arts. Architecture, which featured the corbeled vault, sculpture, in particular the bas-reliefs, and mural paintings such as the famous ones of Bonampak in Chiapas, are all noteworthy. Thousands of hieroglyphic texts, inscribed on stone stelae, stairways, lintels, paintings, ceramics and books or codices confirm that the Maya priests and sages were in possession of an extremely sophisticated high culture. We also know that the Classic Mayas had various calendars of extreme precision. They also had a concept and symbol for zero, perhaps inherited from the Olmecs, several hundred years before the Hindus had developed the idea. Whoever succeeds in completely deciphering Maya writing will discover a universe of ideas and symbols, the core of the Maya cosmos. For the moment we can at least assert that civilization in Classic Mesoamerica, from which all further development derived, reached its peak with the Mayas.

Explanations of what happened to the Mayas, the Zapotecs, the Teotihuacans and, in general, to those who gave birth to and fostered civilization during the Classic Period are as yet mere hypotheses. The decline and final abandonment of the splendid ancient metropolises between the seventh and the tenth centuries probably took various forms. Archaeological evidence seems to indicate a sudden collapse in the case of Teotihuacan. Was the city put to fire, as some extant remains of walls, beams and other pieces of wood suggest? Or was destruction wrought by outside forces, who, perhaps realizing that decline had already set in, decided to take possession of the fertile lands of the Valley? Or was the ruin of the city a consequence of an internal political or religious struggle? Or, more simply, as some authors have insisted, was the abandonment of the metropolis an effect of climatic changes related to deforestation and the drying-up of the lakes, the consequence of natural processes or perhaps of man’s own actions?

While it appears that Teotihuacan came to a sudden end around A.D. 650, we know that the Zapotec city built on Monte Albán entered a period of prolonged decline before it, too, was finally abandoned. In

the case of the Maya centres it seems as if an irrevocable moment came when the priests raised no more stelae. Then, perhaps over a period, the old cities began gradually to be deserted. No traces of attacks from outside or of destruction by fire have appeared. The centres were just abandoned, their inhabitants seeking other sites to settle. And it would be difficult to prove that this was caused by a general violent climatic change, agricultural collapse or universal epidemics.

Conjecture apart, the fact remains that the period between A.D. 650 and 950 saw the downfall of the Classic civilizations in Mesoamerica. However, desolation did not mean the death of high culture in this part of the New World. We know now that other peoples inherited and developed many of the Classic achievements, and some deserve mention since they were to influence the following cultural evolution of those inhabiting Mesoamerica. Not a few survived the Spanish conquest and are still ingredients in the culture of many people in Mexico and Central America.

One of the main features of the Classic legacy was urbanism. No town, for instance, could be built without a close-knit religious–political core. Temples and palaces were surrounded by open spaces. Tradition and formal learning being a concern of the religious leaders, communal schools had to be erected in the various quarters of the town. Another important institution was the market-place. It was a place not only to trade but also to meet people. Dwellings for the ordinary people, which were very scattered, formed extensive suburbs around the central part of the town. Most of the inhabitants owned, besides their single storey house, a small piece of land where they grew some vegetables. Mesoamericans were in love with plants of all kinds. Thus, many of their towns, seen from a distance, looked like a combination of small forests and gardens with thatched roofs visible here and there and painted temples and palaces rising amidst the surrounding greenery. This form of urbanism remained typical of Mesoamerica. An extraordinary example greeted the *conquistadores* in the Aztec metropolis, México-Tenochtitlan.

As with patterns of urban life so in the artistic sphere we find later the strong influence of the Classic Period and the same is true of basic beliefs and forms of worship. A satisfactory explanation of the similar, at times identical, myths, rites and gods of different groups living in the Post-Classic Period (A.D. 950–1519) may be derived from a probable common origin, part of the Classic legacy. Other cultural elements

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belonging to the same heritage were the calendar, hieroglyphic writing, astronomical and astrological knowledge, a world view, basic forms of socio-economic, political and religious organization, the institution of the market and a commerce that stretched far afield.

Among the peoples who profited from this cultural legacy, some exercised considerable power until the arrival of the Spaniards. There were also the many groups in the north beyond the territories which submitted to Teotihuacan. Some already practised agriculture to a limited degree, like the present-day Coras, Huichols, Tepehuans, Cahitas and Pimas of north-western Mexico. Beyond the area inhabited by them were more groups, some particularly primitive, like the ones belonging to the Hokan linguistic family, but others who had reached more advanced levels, like the so-called Pueblo Indians of present-day New Mexico and parts of Arizona.

Archaeology has shown that the Teotihuacans had exerted, at least indirectly, some influence upon some of these groups. This appears to be particularly true in the case of the Pueblo Indians, the most advanced in the vast territories north of Mexico. Evidence also exists of the presence of some groups culturally, and perhaps also politically, related to Teotihuacan, who had settled in the north, as advanced outposts, to protect the frontier from incursions of those generically called Chichimecs, barbarian semi-nomads, gatherers and hunters.

Those later called Toltecs should be included among the settlers in the advanced outposts. When the collapse of Teotihuacan became known to them, they apparently decided to 'come back', as the native texts put it, to the land of their cultural origin, that is, Central Mexico. Various accounts tell of their wanderings before they reached small towns still inhabited by people of Teotihuacan origin. The Toltecs finally settled in Tula, a place about 50 miles to the north of present-day Mexico City. *Tula* or *Tollan* actually means metropolis; and that was precisely what the Toltecs were about to build.

A central figure in Toltec history is the famous Quetzalcóatl, a sort of culture hero who derived his name from that of a god (the Feathered Serpent) who had been worshipped since the days of Teotihuacan. Numerous native books and texts in Nahuatl tell of his portentous birth, life and deeds. It is said that while Quetzalcóatl was still young, he retired to Huapalcalco, a former settlement of the Teotihuacans, to devote himself to meditation. There he was taken by the Toltecs to act as their ruler and high priest. Palaces and temples were built and many

towns and peoples accepted the rule of Quetzalcóatl (the god and his priest). What caused the end of the golden age of the Toltecs and the final collapse of Tula around 1150 is not wholly clear. However, the ruin of the Toltecs meant a diffusion of their culture and their penetration among various distant peoples. The presence of the Toltecs is recorded in annals such as those of the Mixtecs of Oaxaca and the Mayas of Yucatan and Guatemala.

The Mixtecs succeeded the Zapotecs in the Valley of Oaxaca after the latter's cultural and political decline. We can attribute to them the founding of new towns, such as those of Tilantongo and Teozacualco, as well as the partial rebuilding of famous Zapotec cities and strongholds. They also excelled in the arts, particularly as goldsmiths. Metal-work, gold, silver, copper and to some extent, tin, was introduced in Mesoamerica around A.D. 950. The Mixtecs are also well known for their books of historical content – a few have reached us with records that take us back as far as A.D. 692.²

The Mayas had not regained their former splendour. Nevertheless a few small kingdoms – Quiché and Cakchiquel in the highlands of Guatemala, Uxmal and Chichén-Itzá, Mayapán and Tulum in the Yucatec peninsula – showed some signs of prosperity. The arrival of groups of Toltec origin to Yucatan and Guatemala contributed to this revival. Those who entered Guatemala came as followers of Gucumatz, the Quiché and Cakchiquel translation of the name of Quetzalcóatl. In Yucatan the invaders' guide was called Kukulcán, a word with an identical connotation. These new Quetzalcóatls were more militarily than religiously inclined. In Guatemala – according to the Sacred Book of the Quichés – Gucumatz and his followers imposed themselves upon the Mayas. Thus, a new mixture of peoples and cultures occurred. The Guatemalans became, to various degrees, *Toltecized*. In Yucatan much the same thing took place. A so-called League of Mayapan was created, which comprised that town and Chichén-Itzá and Uxmal. Toltec influence was so strong there that in Post-Classic Chichén-Itzá pyramids and other temples and palaces were built imitating those of the metropolis of Tula. However, neither the new blood nor the cultural elements that had arrived from the central plateau of Mexico brought about a renaissance in the Maya world. Its destiny was to survive, but

² In a posthumous publication by the Mexican scholar, Alfonso Caso, an analysis is offered of the contents of several Mixtec native books containing biographies of a good number of rulers and noblemen from A.D. 692 to A.D. 1515. *Reyes y reinos de la Mixteca*, 2 vols. (Mexico, 1977–8), II.