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## The growth of Mesoamerican archaeology and ethnohistory

Our commission in this volume is a dual one: to investigate both cultural evolution itself and the civilization that was ancient Mesoamerica. Our method will be to use Mesoamerica's past to learn more about cultural evolution in general, and to deploy as much as is known about cultural evolution in an effort to understand Mesoamerica better. In this first chapter we describe the field and array the main concepts in preparation for the ensuing attack. First we briefly review how Mesoamerica has been studied, then we inspect several strategies that have been devised for explaining the development of civilization. In the rest of the chapter we present the plan that we think will be most effective, and define its theoretical capabilities and date requirements.

### **Pioneering research**

The advancement of archaeological and ethnohistorical methods for learning about Mesoamerica's past has always been a reflection of the state of knowledge in those fields in general, but Mesoamerican specialists have contributed at least their share to progress in general method and theory. Early Mesoamerican archaeology had its decades of exploration, by brave men of character – and some real characters – whose wonderful and often wonky reports of ruins in the rain forests drew the attention of the public and inspired others to begin serious, scholarly investigation. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, anthropology was being established as a recognized discipline by persons such as Frederic Ward Putnam and John Wesley Powell in the United States, and by Manuel Gamio (in the second decade of this century) in Mexico. Formal, scientific expeditions were sent to Middle America by foreign institutions, including the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Carnegie Institution of Washington. These enterprises usually produced lengthy, descriptive monographs, many of which are still very useful (see Fig. 1.1). Sylvanus G. Morley, for example, recorded and published five volumes of Maya inscriptions. The objectives of these early studies were frankly observational and descriptive. The work of Manuel Gamio, however, had a broad theoretical conception more in line with the multidisciplinary, regional projects of modern anthropology. Gamio believed that any improvements in the social conditions of Mexico could come only with a thorough understanding of the historical trajectories and peculiarities of the country's distinctive geographical and ethnic regions, each of which was to be studied on its own. His major work traced the prehistorical and historical antecedents as well as the contemporary

condition of the population of the Teotihuacan Valley, drawing on the resources of archaeology, ethnohistoric documents, ethnography, census data, physical anthropology, and the environmental sciences.

A significant result of the investigations in Mesoamerica prior to the 1950s was the discovery of “culture areas.” These are broad areas with a readily identifiable flavor and a distinct sequence of historical development, like the Maya lowlands the Valley of Oaxaca, the Mixteca, the Huasteca, and the Basin of Mexico. The archaeologists of the first half of the twentieth century established chronologies for the major culture areas of Mesoamerica using the methods of stratigraphic excavation, seriation of pottery types, and cross-dating. But more than anything else, these investigators contributed a realization of the temporal and spatial dimensions, and the nearly overwhelming vastness and complexity, of Mesoamerica’s pre-Columbian archaeological record. Mesoamerica was thus coming to be recognized by archaeologists as a nucleus for the development of civilizations of considerable time depth. Though all across the area the general similarities set Mesoamerica apart from other centers of high culture, it was not all of one piece. Mesoamerica consisted of dissimilar regional components.

### **Ethnohistory**

At the same time, historians were trying to make sense out of the traditions and ethnohistoric documents describing the predecessors – mythical or factual – of the sixteenth-century Mesoamericans. Gradually, ethnohistorians learned that the existing documents could shed considerable light on the last two or three centuries before the Spanish conquest. For example, Tollan, the capital of the Toltecs of legend, was identified by the historian Wigberto Jiménez Moreno as a real place: Tula, in the state of Hidalgo. The huge site of Teotihuacan, on the other hand, was recognized as representing an earlier, “classic” stage of Mesoamerican civilization. The decipherment of the Maya calendar, which in one respect allowed archaeologists to date to the year the cities of the Maya lowlands “old Empire,” also helped fix the Mesoamerica-wide Classic time span at A.D. 300–900. This enabled the relative chronologies from different regions to be tied together and to an absolute time scale even before radiocarbon came into use in the 1950s.

### **The discovery of early culture horizons**

Stratigraphic excavations by George C. Vaillant at Ticoman and Zacatenco in the 1920s uncovered remains of an “Archaic” stage prior to the Classic in the Valley of Mexico. A few years before 1862, while clearing a milpa (the traditional maize field) on the slopes of the Cerro de San Martín, near San Andres Tuxtla, Veracruz, a peasant uncovered the first known colossal stone head. Many more of these twenty-ton basalt monuments were found later. By the 1950s, these were recognized to be part of the “Olmec” art style contemporary with part of Vaillant’s Archaic, and dated by radiocarbon to around 1000 B.C. This was Mesoamerica’s earliest “Great Tradition.” Simpler societies that existed prior to settled villages became better known in the 1950s and 1960s, especially through the work of Richard S.

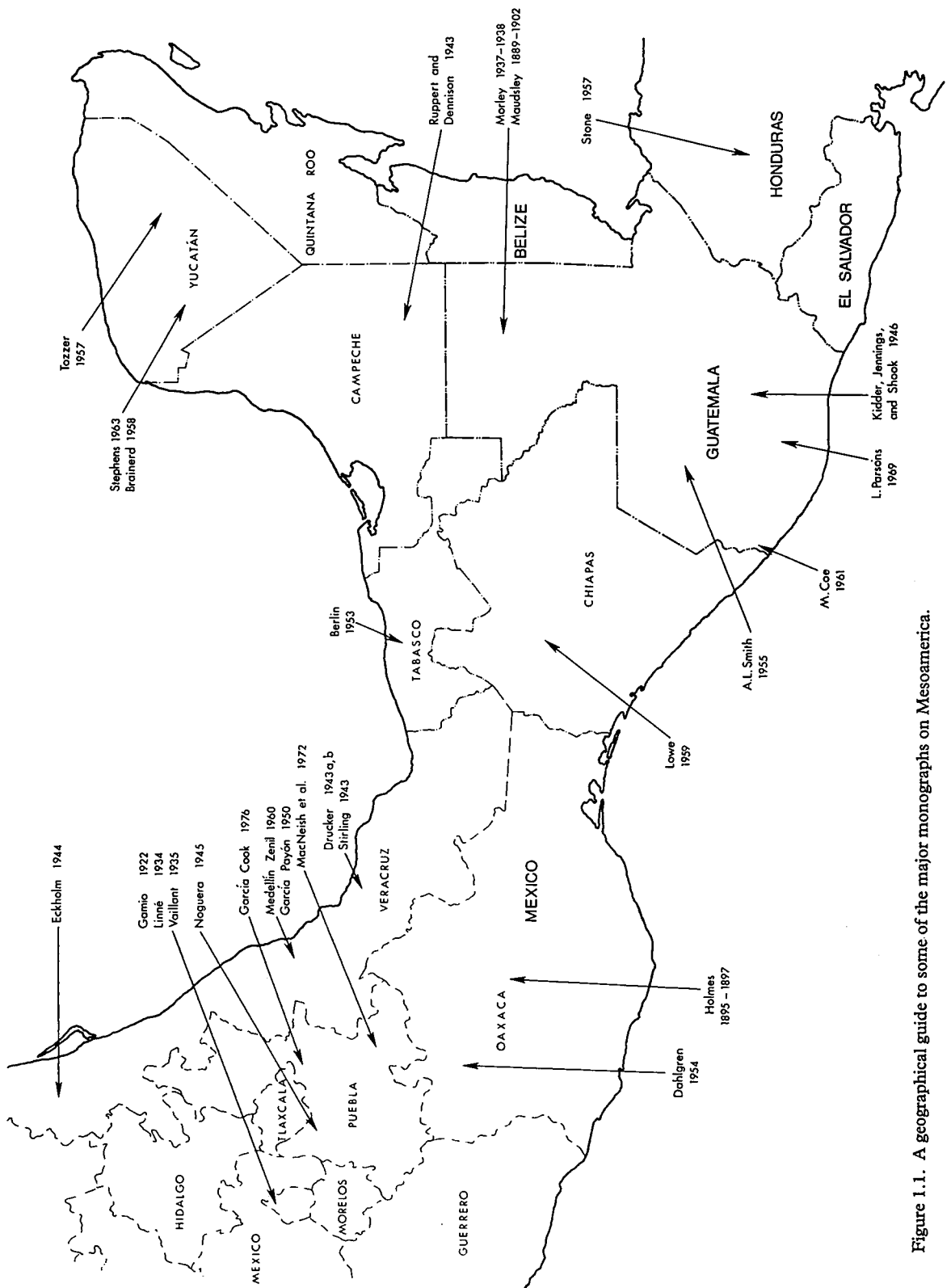


Figure 1.1. A geographical guide to some of the major monographs on Mesoamerica.

MacNeish, whose band of botanists, zoologists, geomorphologists, and archaeologists recorded the origins and development of agriculture from its nomadic hunting-and-collecting beginnings in the dry but archaeologically favorable caves of the Tehuacán Valley.

### **Settlement patterns**

In Mesoamerica, as in other ancient civilizations, the grandest and the most spectacular ruined cities, the most aesthetically pleasing art objects, and, at times, the romantic, the bizarre, and the sensational have lured the attention of the public and archaeologists alike. Since the 1950s, however, some professionals, recognizing the importance of a broader sociological base, have initiated “settlement pattern” studies designed to discover the full layout of large cities (that is, the residential areas as well as the downtown, “ceremonial” precincts) and the distribution of the towns, villages, farmsteads, and special places that were the various centers of activity of the whole society, not just the ancient elite. In Mesoamerica, where natural and archaeological conditions permit, walking surveys could map the sizes and dispositions of nearly all human settlements for each prehistoric time period over large areas. The goal of these large-scale projects was to integrate the data from excavations and surveys of whole regions in order to describe and account for change from the beginning of human occupation to the present. Because the anthropological objective was to explain the evolution of societies, studying only a few communities was not sufficient – societies were much larger.

### **The Valley of Mexico**

These aims are easier stated than accomplished. In the 1950s, for example, Pedro Armillas, Angel Palerm, and Eric Wolf published papers on irrigation agriculture in the Valley of Mexico and its possible relation to social evolution. Excavations, mainly at Teotihuacan, had been carried out by Jorge Acosta, Roman Piña Chan, and others. At a 1960 conference of Valley of Mexico specialists, the major step of deciding on priorities and coordinating research efforts was taken. Mapping the urban center of Teotihuacan was to be the responsibility of René Millon; William T. Sanders was to direct the survey of the valley, beginning in its northeastern corner. Almost twenty years of persistent, difficult, and costly study have been invested since the plan to map the Valley of Mexico was initiated – an indication that the serious investigation of Mesoamerican civilization is indeed not a casual undertaking. Was the effort worth it? Might not some short cuts have been taken to save valuable time and expense? Probably not, for as we are finding at every turn, what is needed is more, not less. The Valley of Mexico scholars were right in the first place: There is no substitute for the mapping of every site over very broad areas.

### **The Valley of Oaxaca**

In this book we draw on data from the Valley of Oaxaca and the lowlands of eastern Mesoamerica in addition to information from the Valley of Mexico (Fig. 1.2). The

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Excerpt

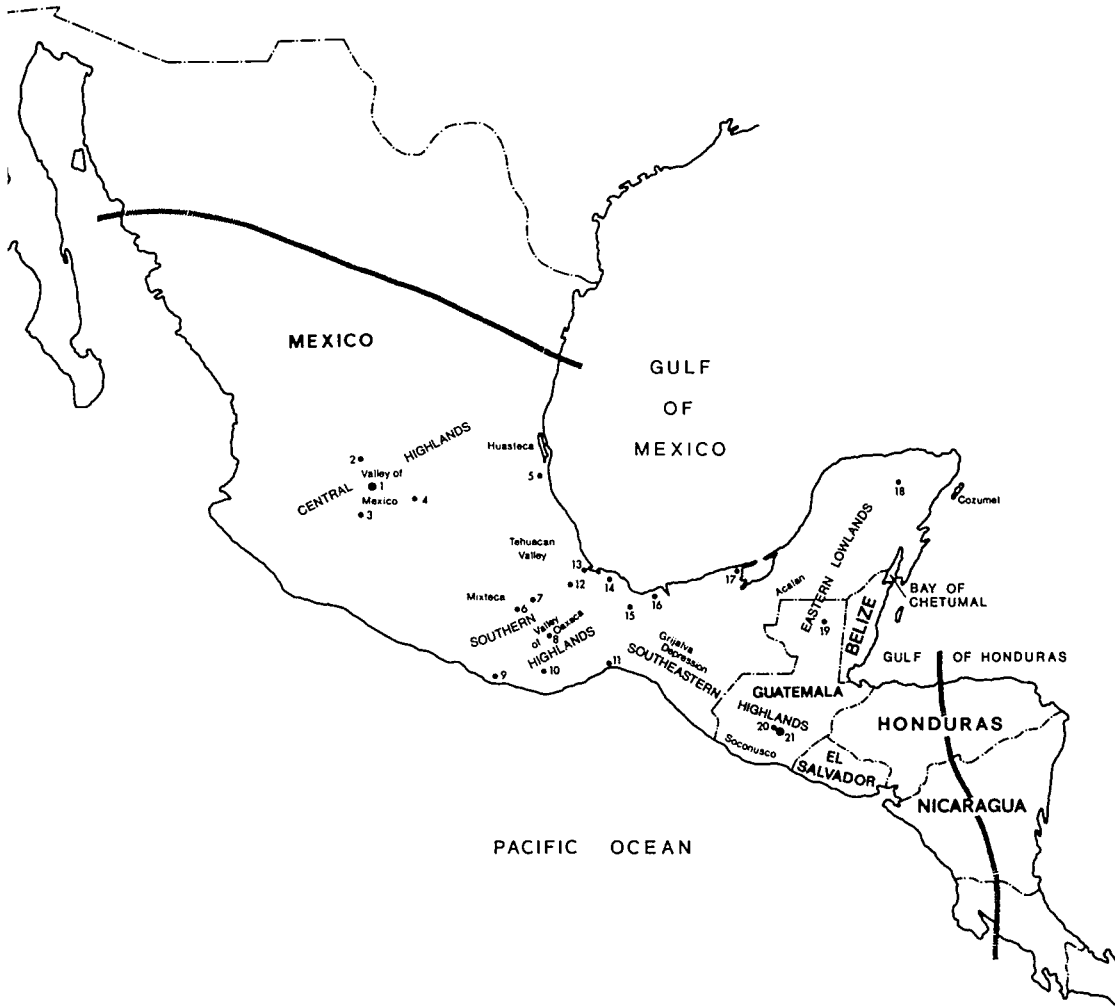
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Figure 1.2. Map of Mesoamerica showing modern political boundaries and places mentioned in the text. Mexico City (1), Tula (2), Xochicalco (3), Cholula (4), El Tajín (5), Coixtlahuaca (6), Cuicatlán (7), Oaxaca (8), Tututepec (9), Míahuatlán (10), Tehuantepec (11), Tuxtepec (12), Cerro de las Mesas (13), Matapan (14), San Lorenzo (15), La Venta (16), Xicalango (17), Chichén Itzá (18), Tikal (19), Kam'inaljuyú (20), Guatemala City (21).

Valley of Oaxaca, like the Valley of Mexico, has been the scene of coordinated, regionally oriented research efforts; the eastern lowlands have not. The differences in research results are instructive. The Valley of Oaxaca had its share of archaeological explorers and pioneers, like Leopoldo Batres and Adolphe Francis Alphonse Bandelier, who described the famous hilltop city of Monte Albán and the excellently preserved palaces of Mitla. But it was the nearly fifty-year career of Alfonso Caso that established Oaxaca's ancient Zapotecs as one of Mesoamerica's key

societies. By the 1950s Caso had cleared and reconstructed Monte Albán's Main Plaza, established the master ceramic chronology, excavated over 100 tombs, including one of Mesoamerica's richest, published the first systematic study of ancient Zapotec writing and calendrics, and founded the *indigenista* movement for the protection of native peoples in Mexico. Caso trained Ignacio Bernal, who, with his student John Paddock, carried out stratigraphic excavations at important valley sites away from Monte Albán. In 1966, Kent Flannery, himself a scion of this Oaxacan anthropological lineage, founded the Human Ecology Project, a long-term multidisciplinary group patterned after MacNeish's Tehuacán Project and Robert Braidwood's study of the origins of plant and animal domestication in the Near East. Flannery's associates have concentrated on paleoenvironmental research and the excavation of the early living floors critical for documenting the transitions from nomadic hunting and gathering to sedentary agriculture and the rise of ranked society. In cooperation with the Human Ecology Project, Richard E. Blanton took charge of the surface survey and the mapping of all sites in the valley. The regional survey is now complete, and the results are described in Chapter 3.

### **The eastern lowlands**

The regionally oriented research designs that have been so rewarding in the valleys of Mexico and Oaxaca have not been implemented in the lowlands of eastern Mesoamerica. Partly because of the dense vegetation, the standard practice among Maya archaeologists has been to map only the "ceremonial" precincts of centers; but Mayapán, central Tikal, and Dzibilchaltún have been mapped so that every visible structure is now located and drawn. In the 1950s William Bullard, by following mule trails through the rain forest of the Department of Petén, in Guatemala, found many sites of varying internal complexity and size away from the main centers. He suggested a functional hierarchy (major center, secondary center, zone, and hamlet) that is still useful in spite of the hit-or-miss search method that he had to employ.

The basic problem with these eastern lowlands settlement pattern studies, and with research in the eastern lowlands as a whole, has been that for the most part studies are "site centered." Archaeologists mapped sites already known to them or to their local informants, or they did unsystematic reconnaissance, mapping "sites" as they chanced to run (literally, at times) into them. The drawback with this method is that it results in a sample of settlements that is neither complete nor representative. So far the best resolution of this problem has been provided by Dennis E. Puleston, who began systematically covering whole blocks of *area*. This technique allows one to learn about all of the settlements in a defined study area (the areas with sites as well as the demonstrably vacant areas), from the smallest to the major centers: their relative spacing, density, and relationship to the land. Unfortunately this kind of survey is slow and difficult, and so far very little area in the eastern lowlands has been systematically surveyed. Of course complete wide-area settlement pattern studies would not be a panacea, here or anywhere else. What is clearly needed, on the other hand, is a coordinated effort to define research goals on at least a regional scale. Some method of studying settlement patterns would be essen-



tial, but just as important would be more detailed work at sites selected with some foreknowledge of their role in regional behavioral networks.

### **Progress in Mesoamerican research**

Overall, from our present perspective, major progress has been made on the quality and quantity of knowledge about Mesoamerica. Four main factors have been behind the improvement over the years in the gathering of the basic data on Mesoamerica's past. First, better theories have allowed archaeologists to go for the right *kinds* of information. For example, the theoretical concern with population and human ecology led to the systematic settlement pattern surveys, which have located thousands of sites. We discuss this point about the relationship between theoretical questions and data more specifically toward the end of this chapter.

A second way data collection has improved is that in many cases dedicated researchers have labored in the same areas of study for a decade or more. E. Willys Andrews IV, for one, worked for thirty-seven years in the northern Yucatan; Ronald Spore's continuing archaeological, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic research on the Mixteca Alta began over twenty-five years ago. This kind of sustained effort is apparently almost necessary for a person to make sense of a civilization's potentially overwhelming amount of information. To understand what we mean by "potentially overwhelming," consider the following example: Lambityeco, an Early Post-classic site of only moderate size in the Valley of Oaxaca, has over *60 million* potsherds on the surface of the ground alone. Think of the difficulty in trying to find out the important facts; imagine the possibilities of being enticed away from the main goal and becoming mired forever in a myriad of minutiae.

This brings us to the third facet of the explanation for the advancement of knowledge about Mesoamerica. With a few exceptions, Mesoamericanists have generally avoided entangling themselves in sterile, purely methodological exercises. Indeed, Mesoamerican archaeologists and ethnohistorians have been instrumental in introducing new techniques and methods to their disciplines. But they have usually done so without making it seem as though the way in which knowledge was gained were more important to them than the knowledge itself. Mesoamericanists have directed their energies instead to learning as much as possible about past human behavior. Their subject is people, not archaeology or its practitioners.

Finally, since about 1960 more money has been made available for archaeology in Mesoamerica, a worldly fact that incontrovertibly makes a difference. Jorge Acosta, in three field seasons of excavation and reconstruction of major public buildings at Tula in the mid-1950s, had a total budget of less than \$7,500 – an impossibly small sum even in those days. Nowadays even a surface survey in which a shovel never breaks the ground may cost fifteen times as much. The increase in funds has supported more projects and provided for the enlistment of many more trained specialists for field and laboratory tasks. Gone are the projects in which one archaeologist tried to supervise fifty or a hundred workmen. The result is an improvement in the amount and quality of information. Pride in new theories is permitted, but it always helps to have the material support.

Our discussion in succeeding chapters constitutes only an attempt to struggle with the archaeological information. The data are so rich that a whole variety of analyses can be done. We are sure that many more satisfying hypotheses can be formed and tested than we are able to offer. Nevertheless, consonant with the vastly improved quality of the archaeological data that have come to light in recent years, we try here to develop better ways of thinking about how to interpret the information. A better understanding of the factors at work in the growth of civilization should be the result. But before developing our approach to the problem, it will be valuable to have a retrospective view of how other investigators thought about the growth of civilization.

### **Thinking about Mesoamerican civilization**

Anthropology's goal is to understand similarities, differences, and changes in human societies, wherever and whenever people lived. As anthropologists our contribution to the world will be measured by the extent to which we can bring meaning to both the greatly variable and the broadly universal ways of human life. No matter what else an anthropologist does well – digging holes in the ground, questioning an informant, editing a native document – explaining cultural variability is the real and perhaps only worthwhile goal.

In the history of the social sciences several fundamentally conflicting approaches have been advocated by one or another of the scholars who have studied Mesoamerica. Some of the ideas proved quite useful for a time, but today they are unsatisfactory. In our opinion the search for a good theory about the dynamics of civilization will sometime meet with success, meaning that in the future people will probably be satisfied that they know the essential workings of human systems well enough to predict the outcomes they consider consequential. Because civilization is readily enough understood in many of its pieces, we reason that it can eventually be understood scientifically as a whole. However, that kind of predictive comprehension of civilization is not available in any past or current approach, and although we offer some specific directions for concrete research in this book, we make no claim that we have a fully explanatory theory. Other social scientists have made such claims, but that is probably why their approaches are so easily shown to be too simple, too general, or just wrong. The next few pages review three broad classes of previous ideas about the dynamics of civilization.

### *Diffusion*

The idea that Mesoamerican civilization did not develop on its own, but was transplanted from somewhere else, has been a persistent but always a minority view. Several Spaniards of the seventeenth century, for example, believed on the most tenuous of evidence that the builders of the large Yucatecan sites of Uxmal and Chichén Itzá were Phoenicians, Carthaginians, or Asians. More recently it has been suggested that the Olmec art style of around 1000–800 B.C. was developed under the auspices of Shang Chinese influence. Once enough knowledge is acquired about



the local prehistory, however, gaps that previously could be explained only by foreign contact can usually be filled in with indigenous developments. Experience thus shows that diffusionist theories thrive for areas that are poorly understood, but with adequate archaeology each area is usually shown to have had its own in situ evolution.

How should we comprehend “contact” between societies, the basic diffusionist question? The people of a region use or are used by outside contacts according to their own and more global needs. For instance, in a sense Spanish culture diffused to Mesoamerica with the conquest in the sixteenth century. But this is rather abstract. It would be of far greater relevance to ask how the Indian use of the Spanish fit the needs of the Indian systems, and how the Spanish use of the Indians fit into a system that had evolved the capacity to exploit on a transoceanic scale. Such questions, or better, questions that have been framed even more precisely, seem to go more directly toward the essential aspects of human systems, whereas diffusionism appears to be satisfied with studying more secondary phenomena, such as the spread of traits. Diffusionism has the additional drawback of not addressing the absolutely essential questions of survival and making a living. Diffusionism, in short, has not proven itself a very satisfactory approach.

#### *Culture history*

Much of what is known today about ancient Mesoamerica has been contributed by scholars who subscribed to a culture historical paradigm. This is the study of the traditions, beliefs, and customs believed to be distinctive to and held in common by a group of people, and of how these “cultures” fare over time when they come in and out of contact with other cultures. Just as one might trace genealogical roots into the past, this approach digs for the genealogies of particular cultures. The actions of people, according to culture history, are governed by the values of their culture. For the culture history approach, the question, Who were those people – were they Toltecs, Putun Maya, Pipil, Zapotecs, Olmecs? is of great concern, for the answer is believed to be an important fact in itself, and it is held to have explanatory power. In archaeology, the culture historian pays a great deal of attention to defining material culture complexes assumed to be the reflections of commonly held recipes for doing things.

Being able to identify a past culture and to trace it through time is thus the main endeavor of culture history. At one time it was a viewpoint that had a certain attractiveness, because it held out the promise that we would be studying real people and their ways of life. Anthropologists wanted to study the particular histories of traditional lifeways instead of formulating general laws applicable anywhere and anytime. This was a promise never fulfilled. Instead of focusing on people and what they actually did, culture history created a whole new jargon of abstractions. In addition to the troublesome notion of “a culture,” one is faced with the idea of cultures influencing one another, being in contact, imploding, efflorescing, blending. Culture’s material products, especially ceramics, are said to do the same kinds of

things – that is, influence and contact each other, evolve one from another, and become related to one another. As the culture history approach developed, its theory and practice became more arcane and scholastic instead of more precise. Its concepts rarely had real-world referents and were seldom defined so that they could mean only one thing and no other. In reply to a short article about the culture history of a Guatemalan archaeological site, a reviewer noted that the word “influence” appeared at least twenty times in the article, in each case with a variety of potential meanings. A fatal flaw of culture history is that it does not ask, If people behave according to their values, why do they have those values in the first place? To reply that values come from parents through socialization only begs the question.

In anthropology’s past, cultural or ethnic affiliation and the question Who were those people? may have been important as a way of carving up and labeling the world’s population, suddenly and so recently known to the West. Perhaps too often anthropologists uncritically assumed that cultures recognized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had a perdurable reality in the precolonial world. Today, however, this concept of culture may be anachronistic. In most recent studies of societal dynamics, Who were those people? and What culture was that? are unasked, irrelevant questions, because the answers tell us very little about why people and their social systems behave the way they do.

#### *Cultural evolution*

Many contemporary anthropologists agree that some kind of evolutionary approach offers the best available prospect for a general theory for understanding socio-cultural variability and change. Our discipline is still far from having a completely satisfactory evolutionary theory, but the main directions taken by evolutionary theorists, emphasizing such basic processes as human–environmental interactions, production, energy and material flows, and political organization, are good foundations upon which to build explanations.

Evolution implies change through time. For cultural systems, unfortunately, just what kinds of units – populations, individuals, societies, institutions – should be considered as changing or staying the same or combining in different ways over time are not yet clear. Studying an object whose parts have the important adaptive habits of moving, breaking down, recombining, becoming something else, and still surviving is both challenging and disconcerting (but see the next part of this chapter).

By saying that an evolutionary approach seems like the best direction for anthropology, we mean something other than the construction of general sequences of progressive stages. It should be possible to do more than conduct the speculative enterprise of defining evolutionary stages and the processual sequences between them from existing social types. The aim, after all, is to understand variability and change, not to declare at the outset that all systems are alike. It seems very unlikely that the aim of comprehending variability could be satisfied without actual cases, preferably quite a lot of them. This implies use of not only the ethnographic record but also the techniques of archaeology and history. Static, cross-cultural comparison is not adequate.