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Edited by Richard E. W. Adams and Murdo J. MacLeod

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MESOAMERICA SINCE THE SPANISH INVASION: AN OVERVIEW

MURDO J. MACLEOD

The nine chapters in this volume, all by mid-career or younger scholars, are a collective attempt to survey what is known of the history of Native American peoples in Mesoamerica since the Spanish invasion. Obviously, what we know about the various nations, groups, and regions varies widely. Nomadic peoples and those who leave behind little of their material cultures are generally less studied and less understood. The same can be said for peoples who did not write, either before or after the invasions, or about whom others wrote less.

Geographical definitions have been kept deliberately fluid. Mesoamerican frontiers, as classically defined, were extended, especially over what today would be called the Mexican north. Many of these areas, after all, interacted with, or felt influences from, the sedentary centers. Nor did the editor try to impose geographical boundaries – which would have been arbitrary anyway in many cases – among the various essayists. Probably, as independent and idiosyncratic scholars, most would have ignored these admonitions anyway. So there are some overlapping discussions, and some areas that, falling between two stools somewhat, no doubt do not receive their deserved attention. Nor did the editor try to impose thematic unity, which would have been another thankless task, simply asking that certain basic informational themes be covered. Thus each chapter has individual emphases and interpretations, something that should surely be considered not a fault but, rather, a window through which variety and debate can be illuminated.

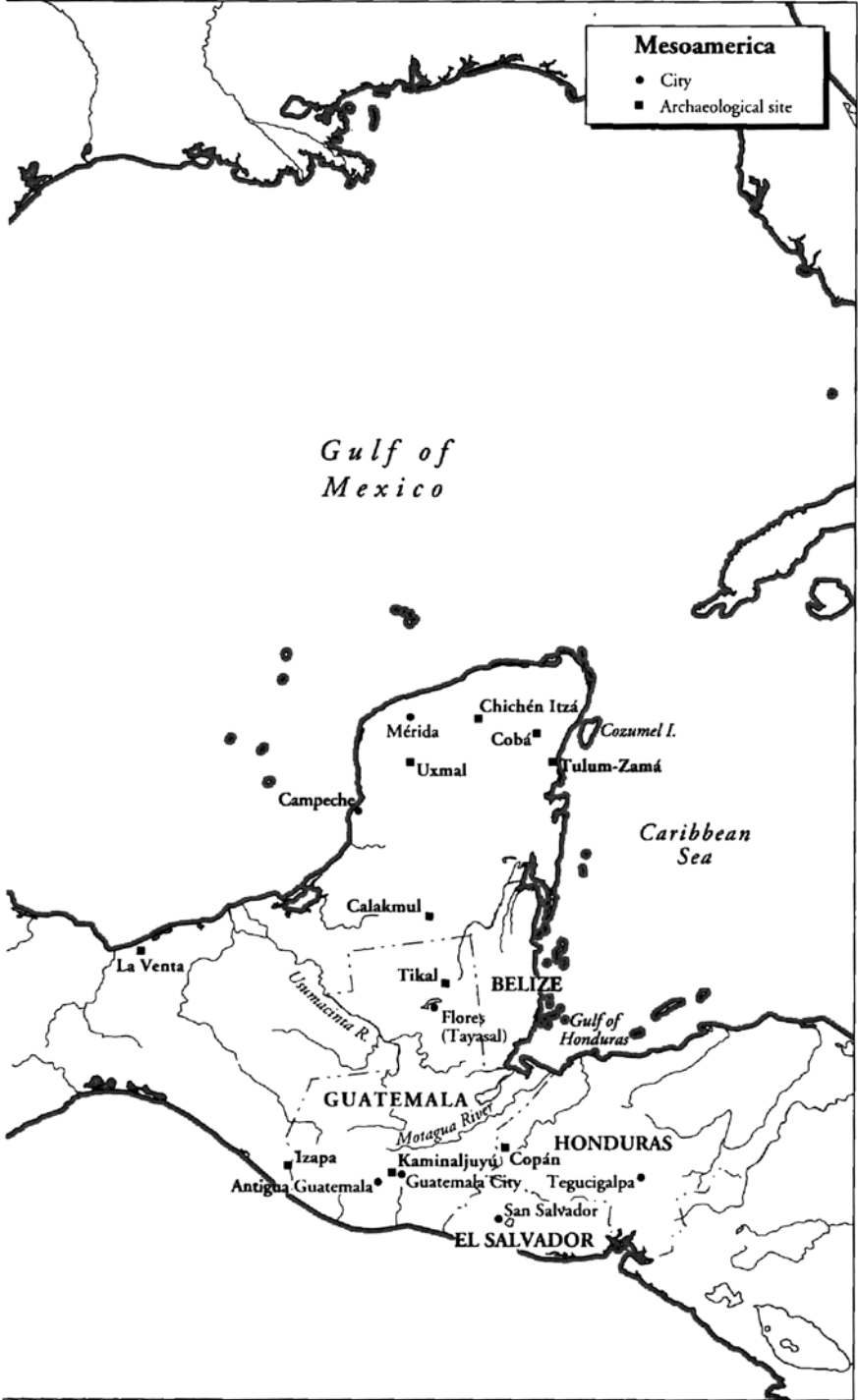
The nine contributors, to the best of the editor's knowledge, include four natives of the United States, two Canadians, two Europeans, and one Mexican. (Attempts to recruit more scholars from the Mesoamerican area were frustrated by one death and three refusals because of previous commitments.) That there are no Native Americans among the contrib-

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Map 12.1

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tors may well say something about the way educational systems have failed to train native peoples. Other factors, such as the relative youth of some historians, or the emphasis on oral history among many of the people who are encouraging the new ethnic consciousness, may also be of importance.

This introductory chapter, greatly compressed, is less an attempt to introduce the following chapters, all of which can more than speak for themselves, than to provide a general introduction to some three centuries of colonial, and about 175 years of national, history. In the national period, the emphasis is on the areas constituting the nation states of Mexico and Guatemala, although other Central American states are mentioned from time to time. What has become ever more apparent during the writing is the extent to which native peoples have been written about by others and how little we have from native peoples about themselves. This situation, fortunately, is already changing, and offers radical and startling prospects for a more equitable history.

The very word *Indian* is representative of the problem for the collective imagination, for the classificatory impulse, which the Europeans' invasion of the Americas created. In post-Renaissance Europe there were few relativists of the genius of Michel de Montaigne. So the problem for the invaders was how to fit all these "discovered" peoples into the Europeans' preconceived notions of the world, including the nature of humankind, the relationship between humans and the supernatural, and the supposed divine order for the structure of the world and beyond.

Naming all the varied peoples of the Americas "Indians," then, was the first classificatory imposition, as imprecise a category as "Asians," so reductionist that it would have been an irrelevant and unimaginable collective label to peoples living in the American continents before Europeans first came ashore in the Antilles.

Once all the native peoples had been lumped together, and the true geographical nature of the so-called New World had emerged (i.e., the Caribbean islands were not Asian outliers), then the real debate over the true nature of this one people, the Indians, could begin. Some, for philosophical or expedient reasons – there was for a short historical moment an alliance of convenience between some thinkers and the conquerors and settlers – found that the quickest and tidiest solution to the classificatory problem was to assign a subhuman or nonhuman status to the American natives, a sort of earthly limbo. As evidence, proponents

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adduced whatever customs and criteria seemed most alien or appropriate in a given region – cannibalism, nomadism, lack of discernable codes of law, polytheism, and so on. The party that argued against the humanity of the American native peoples had a momentary advantage too. To the extent that European monarchs and their court thinkers felt obliged to justify their invasions and conquests – and only the Castilians made much of a fuss over this early on – to that extent the inhumanity of the natives was a temporary convenience.

“All Mankind is One,” proclaimed the great “Protector of the Indians,” Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, and he prevailed, at least among the thinkers and writers of the time, if not often among the exploiters of native labor. While humanists such as Las Casas were, to an extent, ahead of their times, they were also a convenience of another kind to those in power. This *one* people, the Indians, could now be fitted comfortably into previous understandings, especially religious and political ones, of humankind.

Now, then, all natives of the Americas were one, Indians, and part of the human race. Humankind, however, created by God, had left the Garden of Eden in original sin and had been redeemed by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Could the Indians, seemingly cut off from other humankind, have been left out? Were they an unrecorded “lost tribe” or one of the famous lost tribes of Israel? A search for remnants of a previous Christianity continued sporadically. Had Saint Thomas or other disciples visited America? After all, he had converted the Nestorians of Southern India, Saint James had reached Spain, or at least his bones had, and Saint Francis Xavier had reached Japan. (Even today some major religions believe Christ himself preached to the pre-conquest native peoples.)

Spaniards, or at least the minority among them interested in such matters, thus concluded that the Indians were relapsed early Christians or, somewhat differently, theological children once lost and now found, and thus appropriate to be assigned as “free” – i.e., not enslaved – but lowly vassals of the Crown, to be protected by Crown and Church.

Tidy enough, but there were lots of loose ends. Indians had created large and intricate polities, with kings, courtiers, warrior castes, priests, tribute-paying serfs, and slaves. The peoples of central Mexico and elsewhere built cities, wrote law codes and tales of genealogies and great deeds, that is, created histories, all criteria of *vida politica*, of civilization, according to some of the derivations of natural law as understood by Catholic Europe. If the hierarchies involved had emerged according to

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the divine order of things, then Spanish legal minds, reaching for a legitimacy that would satisfy them and their regal patrons, had to accord Native American nobilities a place within that order – thus the *señores naturales* or natural lords, incorporated, with various degrees of enthusiasm, into Mesoamerican elites.

Spaniards on the ground, however, more practical regarding their aims and the need for a rapid subordination of the conquered peoples, took care to kill all the overarching or imperial nobilities that could reunite multiple regions or cities in revolt. In areas of city-states such as Yucatan, some higher ranks were allowed to continue, but in general the Indian colonial nobility that remained was mostly local, or strategically intermarried with the conquerors.

In spite of these legal fictions and realities, law books, royal histories, and creation myths, among other written matter, presented a problem. The most common solution was to pronounce them to be unchristian, the work of the devil, and to destroy them. Bishop Diego de Landa of Yucatan, also a student of his Native American flock, was the most notorious book burner.

Fortunately, three circumstances helped to preserve some native manuscripts. One was the recalcitrance and local pride of some native elites, who early discerned the imperial aims of the invaders and simply hid away these manuscripts, some of which were then rediscovered by more eclectic future generations. A few of these native leaders became writers, and incorporated pre-conquest documents, in whole or in part, within their compositions. The third circumstance, paradoxically, was the Spanish fondness for souvenirs or trophies. Such astonishing and marvelous artifacts as the Dresden Codex and the headdress of Mochtezuma II (or Montezuma) had three important and related roles once in Spanish hands. First, they were of use to impress upon the monarch the importance of the conquered area whence the artifacts came. Next, they were evidence of the heroic nature of the deeds of individual conquerors or groups of conquerors, a kind of unwritten and symbolic proof of “merits and services.” And in some cases they were used to “buy” *ex post facto* approval from the Crown of acts and campaigns of dubious legality. Hernán Cortés, perhaps our main example, was essentially bribing Carlos V to approve his “illegal” conquest of central Mexico from Cuba when he sent him parts of Mochtezuma’s treasure. For these and other reasons, then, native writings were preserved, and some ended up in European and other museums and archives.

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Native American manuscripts are not the only source for trying to reach some general knowledge of the societies of Mesoamerica at the moment of contact with the other continents. There are at least six other categories, each of which presents problems.

Archaeology is the leading origin of data on these peoples but suffers from various deficiencies. The Mesoamerican frontiers, such as present-day El Salvador and Pacific Nicaragua, and especially the northwestern and northeastern regions of Mesoamerica, have drawn relatively few archaeologists and sustained excavation projects. Moreover, contemporary interests have emphasized the great Classic civilizations, and what might be called the very late Postclassic, or the century or so before contact, has been all but ignored. So, too, have the areas where the great Classic era and its building projects never reached, again mainly peripheral regions. Everywhere they work archaeologists are limited by what they find, which means that in general such features as monumentalism, elite artifacts, perdurable materials (stone rather than wood), dry cold climates, and urban concentrations, leave more evidence. Apart from some interesting work on housemound counts and analysis, and on coring for ground cover and pollen count analysis, we have little information, for example, on the peasant agriculturalist of the humid tropical coasts of Caribbean and Gulf Mesoamerica. The native manuscripts just discussed could have told us much, had more survived, but they were also elite in origin and limited to certain topics.

Of equal interest to moderns investigating these societies at or before the Spanish invasion have been the categories of writing that arose in the decades after the Conquest. Indian nobilities, or mestizos descended from nobility and conquerors, taught by friars to write either Spanish or their native language in Roman script, composed accounts of the world they or their parents had just lost, and sometimes their views of the strange new world that was just emerging.

Trapped in an ambivalent status, these authors, few in number but of considerable significance, wished to restore through eyewitness descriptions and commentaries the glories of their ancestors, the magnificence and elaborate nature of their empires, arts, and customs. Yet they were confined by their more or less enthusiastic conversion to the new religion – a religious adherence they could ignore only at their peril, witness the burning at the stake of the *cacique* of Texcoco and perhaps even the execution of the Tarascan Cazonci – and by their having to proclaim that the coming of the divinely supported Spanish monarchy had

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brought not only the true religion and an end to “superstition and idolatry” but also general peace, civilized life, and an end to numerous “barbarous customs.” Given that such limits produced contorted and ambivalent writings – not to speak of the torments the authors themselves must have suffered – they nevertheless remain one of the best sources of evidence as we try to draw a baseline for later study. Such writers as Chimalpahin, Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, Diego Muñoz Camargo, and Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, and the known or anonymous native authors of texts such as the *Código Pérez*, the Books of Chilam Balam, and the Annals of the Cakchiquels, have attracted the attention of modern authors, although none to the extent of the Peruvian Guamán Poma de Ayala, about whom modern scholars have created a veritable industry.

It is a truism that the writings of the winners survive, and that their version prevails. Yet not all the winners saw the Indian world alike. Several observers have noted the almost peculiarly European indifference to newly discovered flora, fauna, and landscapes – or was it, once again, European refusal of relativism and a subconscious determination to fit everything into preexistent and tidy schemes? But Europeans were interested in people, especially the attributes they could understand. Spaniards, especially, with that peculiar sixteenth-century alliance between pragmatists and philosophers, trained their eyes on Native Americans, as a workforce, as providers of wealth and information, and as potential souls for Christ.

In the person of one great scholar these concerns combined with Renaissance humanism and scholasticism to produce a pioneer ethnologist. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún shared the utilitarian urges of his contemporaries. To know the native peoples of central Mexico, to turn them into good Christians and loyal vassals, one had to understand them and where they had been. Even more, however, and perhaps subconsciously, he was possessed by a genuine spirit of inquiry, interested in the life and culture of these new subjects of the crown in a very modern ethnographic way. To describe Sahagún as democratic would be anachronistic, but in his instinctively egalitarian need to understand that which might be swept away, he interviewed and recorded everyone he could, and wrote down his findings in both Nahuatl and Spanish so that they would be available to all, including some of his informants.

Sahagún stands alone, but many other Spaniards wrote extensively about the first generation of peoples they met in the New World. Toribio

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de Benavente (also known as Motolinía), Diego de Landa, and many others in the sixteenth century; Andrés Pérez de Rivas and Ignaz Pfefferkorn during the much later conquests in the north of New Spain, recorded the ceremonies, rites, and daily doings of those they met, even if, as in the case of Pérez de Rivas, what they recorded has to be seen through a screen because they considered that they were describing “the Most Barbarous and Fierce Peoples of the New World.” Where texts were available, many of the sixteenth-century writers, such as Fray Diego Durán, Fray Juan de Torquemada, and the aforementioned Motolinía, depended heavily on native texts.

Even the conquerors can tell us much, some of it inadvertently, as they recount their deeds in a self-justificatory fashion. Such men as Hernán Cortés, Pedro de Alvarado, the “Unknown Conqueror,” and Bernal Díaz del Castillo were concerned with native peoples mainly as opponents and then subjects, but their letters reveal details about states and state structures, native alliances and wars, settlement patterns, and many political and diplomatic matters.

The early chroniclers, too, such as Juan Herrera de Tordesillas and Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, relying as they often did on early conquest accounts, are full of information, some of it interstitial, about native society during or just after the conquest wars. Official recorders such as Juan López de Velasco, writing in the 1570s, used earlier material, such as tribute lists, and can be of help with conquest-era demography.

The Crown and its officials, as soon as they had wrested control of the invaded parts of Mesoamerica from the conquistadors and imposed some order, wanted to know what they possessed, not only in general but with a view to assessing native taxes (the tribute), local products and production possibilities, and potential natural resources. To these ends they counted and requested surveys. Tribute counts, *cuentas de tributos*, or general assessments of population size, began early, and some relied, more or less, on previous native assessments of regional specializations in produce and manufacture. From then on village counts (*padrones*) were made periodically, yielding, in many cases, serial demographic information.

In the 1570s the Crown sent out a standardized questionnaire to local officials demanding qualitative and quantitative answers, which some officials answered incompletely, idiosyncratically, or not at all. Nevertheless, many of these so-called *relaciones geográficas* relied on earlier accounts

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and knowledge, and contain a variety of information on the years immediately before and after the arrival of the first Spaniards. Later *relaciones geográficas* continued to be of value as sources of information on native society throughout the colonial period.

Native American town leaders themselves, in the half century and beyond after the Conquest, described the “times of their gentility” in numerous appeals and petitions directed to higher authorities, even the Crown. As the genre would indicate, these letters to the government had a political motive – what writing does not? Much of their writing was in Nahuatl, which became the indigenous *lingua franca* of large parts of colonial Mesoamerica. Much of it was also in Spanish, and a little of it was in other native languages. It usually had to do with intrusive Spanish or neighbors’ local violations of what the writers claimed were ancient rights, or claims to lands that had, they said, been in their legal possession “since times beyond memory.” Sometimes these petitions were accompanied by confirmatory evidence, such as land title documents, some authentic and some clearly forgeries.

So much for the establishment of a baseline, a sort of general knowledge of Mesoamerican society around 1500 in the areas of high culture and structured politics, and at the moment of the later conquests in the northern and southern peripheries. Is this knowledge of these many and varied societies immediately before and at the moment of invasion sufficient to study complex social change during the early colonial period and later? The quantity of information varies by region and native nation or linguistic entity. On the great centers of the Aztec tributary confederacy, on the Tarascan state, on the petty states of highland Guatemala, and on the so-called city-states of Yucatan, to mention some leading examples, information is relatively plentiful. On the huge Mesoamerican peripheries, especially those invaded and subdued late, knowledge of the preexisting situations can be minimal or less. On this varied and to some fragile base, at any rate, some impressive and elaborate scholarly structures have been built.

All these materials, and many other local writings and reports to Spain, provided fuel for the great debate that followed chronologically upon the one about the true nature of Native American peoples. Were the invading Spaniards, the first generation of conquistadors and settlers, as Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas proclaimed, the cause of the “destruction of the Indies”? From the moment of Spanish arrival native populations declined