MEXICO

FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE SPANISH CONQUEST

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2002

Printed in the United States

Typeface New Aster 10/13.5 pt. *System* LaTeX 2$_\varepsilon$ [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Knight, Alan, 1946–
Mexico. From the beginning to the Spanish Conquest / Alan Knight.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-521-81474-X – ISBN 0-521-89195-7 (pb.)
1. Mexico – History – To 1519. I. Title.
F1228.98 .K65 2002
972′.01 – dc21 2001052633

ISBN 0 521 81474 X hardback
ISBN 0 521 89195 7 paperback

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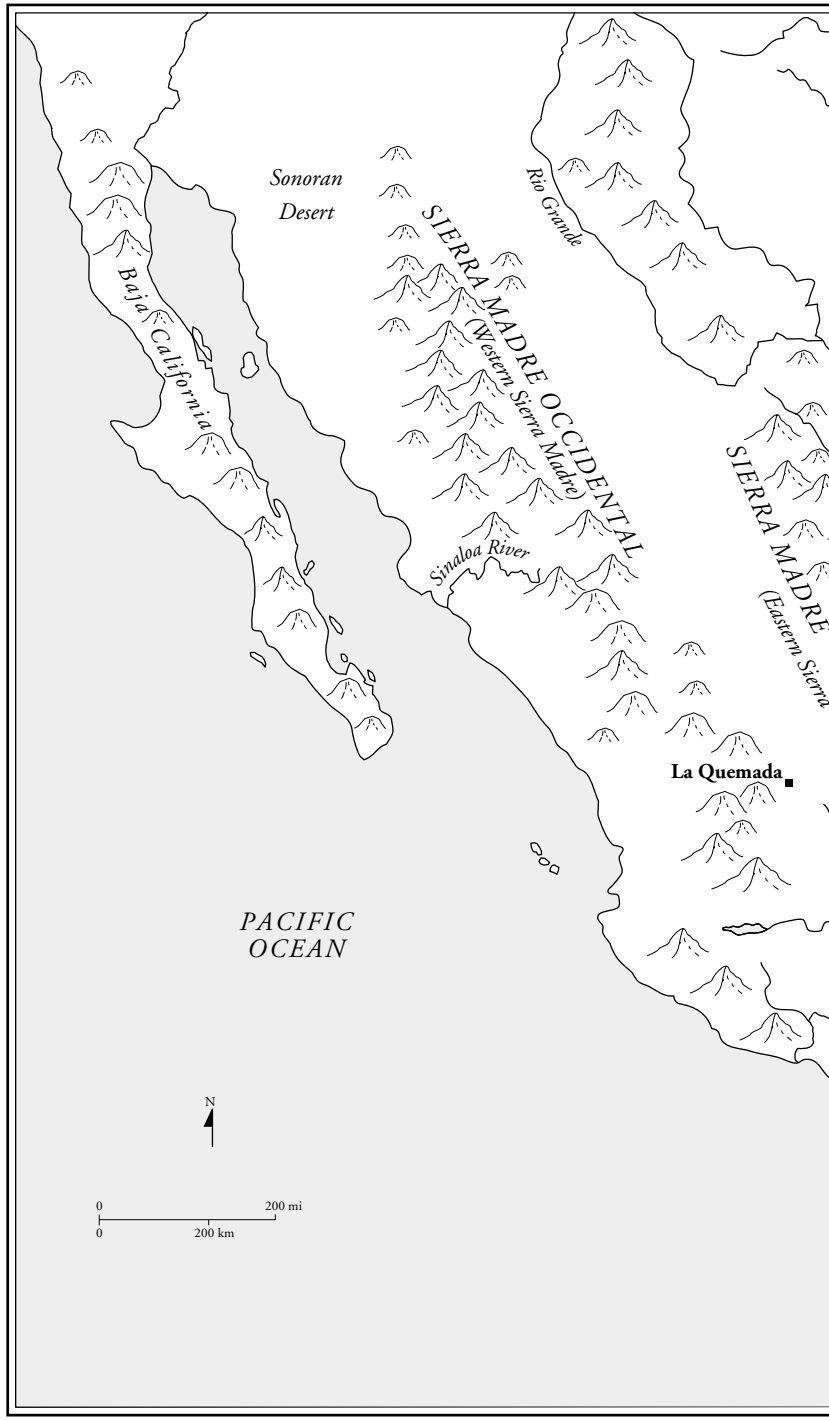
ONE. Mesoamerican Origins

In the year 1518 a report reached the Aztec emperor Moctezuma of a portentous sight: 'a small mountain, floating in the midst of the water' off the Mexican Gulf coast. Moctezuma was troubled. Portents had come thick and fast in recent months. A comet blazed in the heavens; on a calm day the waters of Lake Texcoco boiled; voices wailed in the night, and hunters caught prodigious beasts. Nor was this accumulation of portents altogether surprising (although their failure to explain them cost Moctezuma's astrologers their lives) since, according to Aztec calendrical lore, the impending year 1519 (*Ce Acatl*, One Reed) was one of special significance, associated with both the birth and the death/transfiguration of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent.[1]

The floating mountain was in fact a caravel of the expedition of Juan de Grijalva which had put out from Cuba, made landfall on the Caribbean coast of Yucatán, and then plied up the Gulf as far as the Pánuco River. Grijalva's expedition was not the first to touch the territory of present-day Mexico. In 1517, Francisco Hernández de Córdoba had been routed when he led his men ashore in Campeche; a few shipwrecked Spaniards had already acquainted themselves with the people and terrain of the Yucatán peninsula.[2] Thus when, in

[1] Miguel León-Portilla, *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston, 1990, first pubd. 1962), pp. 3–11, 16; Nigel Davies, *The Aztecs: A History* (London, 1977), pp. 237, 259; Hugh Thomas, *The Conquest of Mexico* (London, 1993), pp. 46–51.

[2] Inga Clendínnen, *Ambivalent Conquest: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán, 1517–1570* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 4–8.


Sonoran
Desert
Rio Grande
SIERRA MADRE OCCIDENTAL
(Western Sierra Madre)
SIERRA MADRE
(Eastern Sierra
Baja California
Sinaloa River
La Quemada
PACIFIC
OCEAN
N
0
200 mi
0
200 km

Map 1

Map 1 (continued)

the year One Reed, Hernán Cortés sailed from Cuba with a fleet of eleven ships and, following the now established route, made landfall in Yucatán before beating his way up the Gulf coast, his arrival was no sudden revelation; indeed, Aztec intelligence was swift and efficient, and Moctezuma's envoys soon made contact with the newcomers. But if Moctezuma and his generals, priests and soothsayers were apprised of Cortés's approach, they could not have been aware of the threat it posed. Nor did Cortés and the Spaniards, with their vague but seductive notions of a rich empire lying inland from the Gulf, anticipate the sheer scale, wealth and complexity of the Mesoamerican civilization they were about to plunder. Thus two great empires, mutually ignorant, confronted one another. They were empires, too, which displayed a strange historical kinship. Both were of recent creation: Ferdinand and Isabella, displaying statecraft which Machiavelli applauded, had united Aragon and Castile in 1469, thus converting two minor kingdoms into the core of an empire. Their grandson, Charles of Ghent, succeeded to an enlarged inheritance, to which he added his own Burgundian possessions (1517); and, in the year of Cortés's expedition, he was elected Holy Roman Emperor with the title Charles V. The Aztecs likewise had risen from the status of a minor, mercenary people in the late fourteenth century to create what has been called – with only a degree of hyperbole – 'the greatest empire of all times on the North American Continent'.[3]

Both empires were possessed of a certain missionary zeal and martial self-confidence, the product, for the Spaniards, of the Reconquista and, for the Aztecs, of their brisk expansion from the Valley of Mexico east to the Gulf and west to the Pacific. To contemporary Europeans the Spaniards seemed a particularly fortunate and dynamic people; the Aztecs, too, conceived of themselves as a kind of chosen people – and, like other chosen peoples, they rewrote their history to prove it. Yet both empires also faced internal schisms and conflicts, the results of too rapid recent expansion. In Spain, the Comunero revolt was brewing as Cortés set sail; in Mexico, the Aztecs enjoyed only partial control of Oaxaca (where a bloody campaign had been fought in 1511), they faced resolute neighbouring

[3] Jerome Offner, *Law and Politics in Aztec Texcoco* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 46. Offner overlooks the 'Imperial Republic' of the United States.

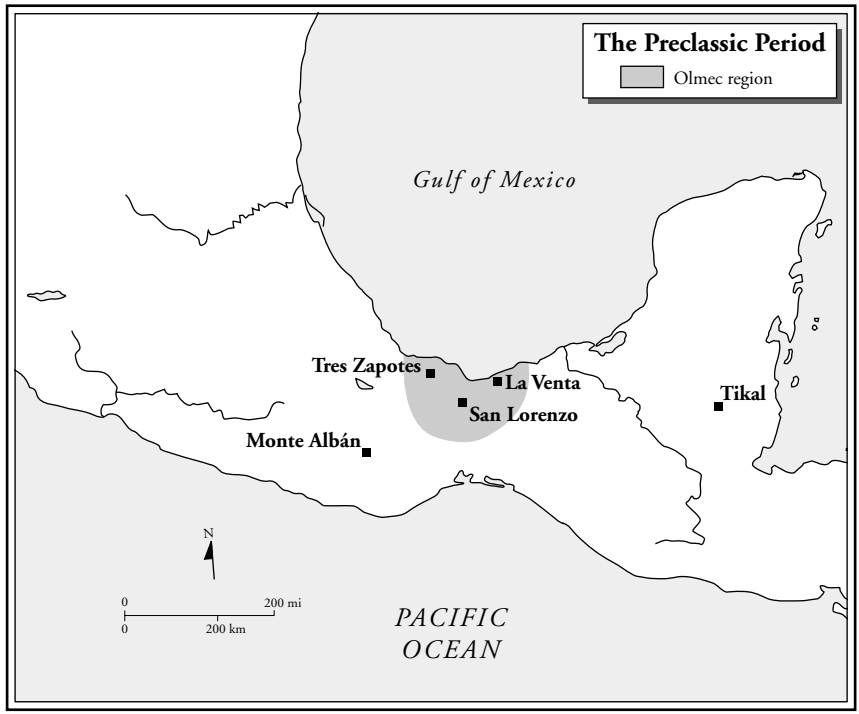
enemies in the Tarascans and Tlaxcalans (most recent campaign 1518), and many formally subdued peoples remained unreconciled to Aztec rule. Since the impending conflict with the Spanish invaders was to be fought on Aztec territory, however, it was the fissiparous tendencies of the Aztec empire which would prove decisive to the outcome.

But the confrontation was more than one of rival empires. It also pitted civilization against civilization, culture against culture, in an historically unique clash of faiths, societies and regimes which had hitherto lived hermetically sealed one from another. Christians and Moslems had fought, traded and polemicized for centuries. Sino-European contacts, though more tenuous (and necessarily peaceful), had a long history. Trade routes spanned the Sahara long before Portuguese ships rounded the Cape. Africa and Eurasia were therefore accustomed to exchanging goods, blows, ideas and diseases. And, when the Spaniards crossed the Atlantic, they first encountered – and conquered – not civilized states, but the primitive chiefdoms of the Antilles. Now, in Middle America, rival civilizations confronted each other, in a moment of unique historical discovery. Two branches of the human race, sundered some twenty millennia earlier, were suddenly, traumatically, reunited. The world was made whole.

I. The First Mesoamericans

For the real 'discovery' of America, of course, preceded all this by as much as forty thousand years. Columbus merely rediscovered it, using a different route. The first discoverers came from the east, crossing the broad land bridge which linked Siberia and Alaska during periods when, because of glacial advance, the sea level was lower. Such periods existed between 70,000 and 40,000 B.C. and again between 25,000 and 10,000 B.C. (the possibility that people also crossed outside these periods, by means of boat or sheet ice, seems unlikely).[4]

[4] H. H. Lamb, *Climate, History and the Modern World* (London, 1982), p. 105; Mark Nathan Cohen, *La crisis alimentaria de la prehistoria* (Madrid, 1984), pp. 170–2; Brian Fagen, *The Great Journey* (London, 1987), pp. 101–18, which forms part of a good general introduction to early New World settlement. The date of that settlement is a matter of continued controversy: the current consensus seems to favour a 'late' crossing (c. 15,000 B.C.), in the face of tenuous evidence, which I mention, of earlier peopling of the Americas: see Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13,000 Years* (London, 1997), pp. 44–50.



Map 2

Radiocarbon dating of finds in North America suggest – but scarcely prove – the existence of humans between 40,000 and 30,000 B.C., which implies an early crossing by Paleolithic people, (relatively) recently equipped with the more sophisticated hunting weaponry and cold-resistant fur garments which their Neanderthal counterparts had lacked. Weaponry expanded the scope of the hunt (traps became less necessary), and fur garments made possible the arduous migration through eastern Siberia (Beringia), then, probably, down the ice-free corridor east of the Rocky Mountains, whence the migrants debouched on to the game-rich Great Plains. For these Asian migrants were hunters and gatherers, whose crossing of the so-called land bridge represented a simple and gradual extension of their Siberian existence, probably stimulated by their constant quest for prey which, in the shape of mammoth, bison, horse and camel, had long preceded man in this eastbound odyssey.

Thereafter, human progress south through the New World was rapid, more rapid than it had been in the Old. The inexorable pressures which acted upon such hunting people, as their numbers grew, did not abate; while in the New World they encountered an animal population unprepared for the onslaught of hunters who had honed their skills for millennia in Eurasia. The result was the rapid spread of people and the progressive elimination – sometimes accelerated by climatic factors – of entire species, including mammoth and mastodon, and of species, such as the horse and camel, which in the Old World managed to survive. In consequence, the New World lacked the domesticated animals of the Old: its only unique asset was the giant sloth. The absence of sheep, cattle, camels and horses was particularly crucial for American social development. There could be no widespread transhumance of flocks and herds, hence no nomadic societies possessed of swift mobility and military capacity: no Scythians, Tartars, Mongols. The Old World battles between pastoral and arable peoples would not be replicated in the New. There would also be no resistance to certain animal-related diseases, and there would be no functional wheel. If no wheel then, it has been suggested, no pulleys, gears, cogs and screws: the technological advances achieved in the Old World were premised upon animal resources which the New World lacked. The hunting to death of Pleistocene big game ultimately explains 'why it was that Columbus "discovered" America and Powhatan did not "discover" Europe, that Cortés conquered Moctezuma rather than the other way around'.[5] The argument is arresting, if exaggerated. Certainly, of the great triad of prehistoric societies – hunter-gatherers, pastoralists

[5] Marvin Harris, *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures* (New York, 1978), p. 42. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, ch. 3, discusses a variant on this theme: 'why the Inca Emperor Atahuallpa did not capture King Charles I of Spain'. It is not clear why Diamond chooses to focus on the second of these European-Amerindian encounters [Pizarro and Atahuallpa] rather than the first [Cortés and Moctezuma]; nor is it clear why he qualifies it as 'the most dramatic moment in . . . European-Native American relations' since 1492, thus overlooking certain previous, pretty dramatic events in Mexico. This is something of a quibble; Diamond's general analysis of the encounter, stressing a kind of epochal, ecological causality, is highly suggestive and largely convincing. However, such analysis is much better at explaining *how* the Spaniards conquered the Amerindians than *why*; that is, it explains *capabilities* better than it explains *motives*. Analysis of the latter requires a shorter-term perspective, which I try to develop in the following pages.

and sedentary farmers – only the first and third developed in Mexico. Both depended entirely on human motive power. Thus, when the Spaniards came, the native Mesoamericans faced two novel threats: that of armed cavalry and (less spectacular, but more significant) that of sheep and cattle, which would ravage their fields and population.[6]

As skilled hunters met vulnerable prey, human numbers grew and spread over the face of the continent. People reached the stormy tip of Tierra del Fuego around 9000 B.C. Meanwhile, population growth began to prompt fundamental changes in human society. These changes have often been summarized under the title of the 'Neolithic revolution', alias the dawn of civilization. Since Mesoamerica was to become one of the first great cradles of civilization (one of the 'seven regions of primary urban generation') in the world, and since this early development stamped Mexican society in an indelible fashion, it is important – though not easy – to explain how this 'revolution' came about.[7] It is, in a sense, the first crucial question facing the historian of Mexico.

The Neolithic revolution embraced two related elements: the establishment of sedentary farming communities and the birth of cities. The first fed the second, and the second engaged in 'civilized' activities: political, religious, aesthetic, architectural. The relationship involved some necessary social stratification and political subordination. In the Mesoamerican case a large maize- and maniocproducing peasantry supported a non-agricultural population which devoted itself to art, artisanry, statecraft, religion and war. We will consider these aspects of Mesoamerican civilization shortly. But we should first ponder their origins. We should, in other words, disaggregate the catch-all 'Neolithic revolution'.

[6] Forms of pastoralism developed in highland South America, thanks to the llama; but the llama, for obvious reasons, could not perform the military or socioeconomic role of the Eurasian horse, and even Genghis Khan could not have built an empire on sheepback. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, pp. 92, 195–7, 212–13 further argues that it was exposure to animals that generated Eurasian 'crowd diseases' – smallpox, influenza, measles, plague. Hence, in the animal-deficient New World, such diseases were absent; their advent after 1492 brought a terrible mortality among the Native Americans.

[7] Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History* (Harmondsworth, 1982, first pubd. 1942), pp. 30, 55; Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters. A Preliminary Inquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Edinburgh, 1971), pp. 225–6, 234–5, 273ff.

Such an exercise is of more than antiquarian interest; it is not a question of the historian – chiefly interested in the later, luxuriant foliage – digging up roots 'because they are there' and because historians of nations are, like Beatrix Potter's Tommy Brock, driven by some inner compulsion to go around 'digging things up'. On the contrary, the issue may be as lively and contentious as any to be found in contemporary history. It relates to the fundamental origins of class society and of the state; and it raises questions concerning social conflict and cohesion which are central to any broad historical inquiry. It is also very relevant to an understanding of Mesoamerican *history*, as opposed to *pre*history. Sedentary agriculture and states developed early in central and southern Mesoamerica; thence they were exported to the north. In social science jargon, Mesoamerica produced 'pristine' states, which in turn encouraged state-formation elsewhere. But the Neolithic revolution was never complete and enveloping. Down to the Spanish conquest – and beyond – the settled civilizations of central Mexico confronted a population to the north which retained many of the characteristics of the original hunting and gathering peoples. Conversely, they (often loosely and collectively termed the Chichimecs) lacked the attributes of civilization: classes, states, hieratic religion. They had never been 'revolutionized' (in Neolithic terms); or, in some suggestive cases which we will touch upon, they had been 'revolutionized' and then relapsed. It was from the barbarian north, too, that migrants – and invaders – regularly entered central Mesoamerica, the most famous being the Aztecs themselves.

One scholar has attributed the supposed Aztec character – belligerent, messianic, obsessed with the need to placate a relentlessly hostile environment – to the Aztecs' harsh hunting-and-gathering prehistory.[8] But this interpretation (like a good deal written about the Aztecs) is fanciful and based upon a crude, mistaken, evolutionary view of human development; a view which took root in the nineteenth century and which accorded well with 'Western' notions of hard work, civilization and progress. It is now clear that the hunting-and-gathering bands which first populated America were, like similar bands in other times and places, viable, successful social entities; indeed, for some 90 per cent of their existence on earth

[8] Christian Duverger, *La fleur létale: Economie du sacrifice aztèque* (Paris, 1978).

humans have lived in such bands. Hunters and gatherers did not chronically hover on the brink of subsistence: their diet, health and life-style were often superior to those of more 'advanced' agricultural peoples. They worked less, ate well, suffered less endemic disease and were quite likely bigger.[9] The Stone Age, it has been said, produced 'the original affluent society'.[10] Fit and well-fed, Stone Age man also reproduced with vigour; and here lay the problem. The curse upon this prehistoric Cain was the injunction to go forth and multiply; having complied, Cain had to forsake the garden and its hanging fruits in favour of a life of arable toil: 'in the sweat of thy face thou shalt eat bread' – or, in this case, maize-cakes. Prehistoric societies grew slowly, not least because growth conferred few collective benefits (hunting-and-gathering bands usually number fewer than fifty members) and because their members engaged in practices which limited population growth: abortion, prolonged lactation, warfare and infanticide, especially female infanticide. The latter 'lurks in the background of prehistory as an ugly blight in what otherwise might be mistaken for a Garden of Eden'.[11] The affluent society depended upon the regular culling of female infants – by neglect, abandonment or outright murder – and of young males by recurrent inter-band skirmishing.

Nevertheless, population inched up, perhaps at the rate of 0.1 per cent per year during the Neolithic period.[12] Thus, by around 9000 B.C., all the Americas were populated, albeit at the low population densities characteristic of hunters and gatherers. Now the transition to sedentary agriculture began: not as a sudden technological breakthrough, nor as a joyful conquest of 'civilization', but as a necessary, even reluctant, response to inexorable demographic pressure acting upon nomadic bands whose sustenance required broad tracts of land and abundant game. Given the gradual nature of this pressure – and its mitigation by the culling methods just mentioned – the transition

[9] Harris, *Cannibals, and Kings*, pp. 11–14, 19; Tony Dingle, *Aboriginal Economy: Patterns of Experience* (Melbourne, 1988), pp. 4–5ff. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, pp. 20–2, even argues that, given natural selection and life-style, hunters and gatherers may be more intelligent than the population of high–mass-consumption 'Western' society.

[10] Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London, 1974), ch. 1.

[11] Harris, *Cannibals and Kings*, pp. 22–5; Dingle, *Aboriginal Economy*, pp. 23–6; Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, p. 89.

[12] Cohen, *La crisis alimentaria*, p. 65.

was slow, patchy and selective. The idea of a 'Neolithic revolution' – if that implies a rapid shift from one mode to another – is misleading. A revolution it was, in terms of sociohistorical significance; but the sheer longevity of the transition makes talk of 'revolution' (with its connotations of rapidity) inappropriate. For, just as the origins of the industrial revolution are now discerned in preceding, pre-industrial centuries, so the roots of the Neolithic revolution must be traced back through millennia. Hunters and gatherers, it is clear, made necessary incremental adjustments in their quest for subsistence: they exploited new plants (again, as necessity demanded rather than as discovery permitted: we must assume that their knowledge of available plants was compendious, their use thereof selective); they began to accumulate stocks, to plant and to harvest, and to control plant reproduction to their own advantage, capitalizing on random mutations. It was a long process, spanning millennia, perhaps seven millennia in the New World. During this long transition, hunting and gathering coexisted with incipient agriculture. Diet became more diverse, as the proportion of big-game meat declined (it may never have been that large: 'they probably found one mammoth in a lifetime and never got over talking about it'), and as the consumption of small game, fish, shellfish, grubs and insects increased.[13] Major prey died out, regionally, continentally, even globally; the more thorough extinction of species in the Americas may have partly reflected climatic factors (glacial retreat signalled a warming trend about 13,000 years ago), but it also attested to the success of American hunters, prompting them to diversify and assure their threatened means of subsistence.

The demographic pressure making for this gradual move towards plant consumption and cultivation did not imply a general Malthusian crisis. Pressure was selective, by region and season, inducing a 'slow shift in subsistence strategies', which forestalled any Malthusian crisis.[14] Agriculture thus developed partly as a form of insurance, before the 'carrying capacity' of a region – its ability to support a human population – was subjected to chronic strain. But

[13] MacNeish, quoted in Barbara Stark, 'The Rise of Sedentary Life', in Jeremy Sabloff, ed., *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians* (Austin, 1981), p. 349.

[14] Stark, 'Rise of Sedentary Life', p. 365; note also Dingle, *Aboriginal Economy*, p. 8.

the pressure was necessarily greatest in regions such as the arid highlands of Middle America, where fauna were rarer, and, conversely, weaker in game-rich regions like the Great Plains to the north. Roughly, therefore, the New World Neolithic revolution occurred in zones which were suitable for agriculture but (no less important) unsuitable for continued hunting and gathering – zones which, in somewhat Toynbeean fashion, faced subsistence challenges but were capable of creative responses. And it was particularly evident in regions – river valleys or lacustrine basins – where the newly sedentary population began to cluster within defined ecological boundaries. Here, nucleation (the concentration of settled population) made possible – though it did not require – the development of early civilization: in the Valley of Mexico, as in the valleys of the Indus, Nile, and Yellow Rivers, or of coastal Peru. Yet, if this 'revolution' was compelled rather than chosen, it was also reversible. In appropriate circumstances – demographic, climatic, even political – agricultural peoples returned to hunting and gathering: ostensible regressions which, for the people themselves, were no regressions at all, but relaxations induced by new, less exigent circumstances. For some, the expulsion from Eden was temporary.[15]

If change was neither uniform nor unilinear, nevertheless the trend over millennia was towards sedentary agriculture. In Mesoamerica the trend can be plotted over a wide area (in other words, there was no single centre from which agriculture diffused). Evidence of human habitation dates back some twenty thousand years. But for over half this time hunting and gathering prevailed, with a marked emphasis on hunting: meat formed between one-half and two-thirds of the diet in both Tamaulipas (in northeastern Mexico) and Tehuacan (in the central highlands) around 7000 B.C., and these were probably typical examples. But with the growth of population and the diminution of supply – more pronounced in Middle than in North America – meat consumption fell, such that it afforded only 10–20 per cent of diet by 4000 B.C. The shortfall was met primarily by collected,

[15] Richard A. Diehl, 'Prehispanic Relationships between the Basin of Mexico and North and West-Mexico', in Eric R. Wolf, ed., *The Valley of Mexico: Studies in Preshispanic Ecology and Society* (Albuquerque, 1976), pp. 269, 273. For comparable cases of 'regression', see Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, pp. 55–6, 109.

not cultivated, plants: nuts, fruit, maguey, wild beans and grains.[16] Gradually, some of these wild plants came under human control: the process is evident as early as 5000 B.C., and, by 4000–2000 B.C., cultivated crops provided half of total consumption. The most important of these early cultigens – maize, beans and, in the warm lowlands, squash – were selected less because of their innate desirability or convenience (maize, the staff of life and basis of agrarian civilization in highland Mesoamerica, requires labour-intensive preparation before it can be eaten) than because of their familiarity, their suitablity for storage and their genetic flexibility. Necessity, rather than choice, determined a maize-based civilization. And the transition was a long one: the first maize cobs, grown five millennia before Christ, measured less than one centimetre; during the fourth and third millennia B.C., as maize became established as a staple, the cob quadrupled in size; by 1000 A.D., it had attained ten centimetres.[17]

Thus, we need posit no great conceptual leap, no 'forgotten genius' who made 'an epoch-making discovery when he learned that by dropping back into the soil some of the seeds he had gathered to eat he could make a plant grow'.[18] Since need was the spur (people became farmers because they had to, not because farming beckoned with its easy bounty), agriculture developed fastest in regions, like central Mesoamerica, where hunting and gathering faced diminishing returns. If hunting had originally spread from the northern Great Plains to the mountains and valleys of Mexico, maize cultivation now followed a reverse path. Settled agriculture flourished in parts of Mesoamerica as early as the fifth millennium B.C., while its appearance in the American southwest (with the Mogollon and related traditions) awaited the period 500 B.C.–A.D. 500.[19]

With settled agriculture came a range of social changes which culminated – in some cases – in fully fledged states and cities: the 'urban revolution', made possible by the prior Neolithic revolution. But the

[16] The pioneering work was done by R. S. MacNeish and others in the Tehuacan Valley: for a useful resumé, see Stuart J. Fiedel, *Prehistory of the Americas* (Cambridge, 2nd ed., 1992), pp. 171–86.

[17] Joyce Marcus, 'The Size of the Early Mesoamerican Village', in Kent V. Flannery, ed., *The Early Mesoamerican Village* (New York, 1976), p. 93.

[18] Nigel Davies, *The Ancient Kingdoms of Mexico* (Harmondsworth, 1983), p. 16; cf. Fiedel, *Prehistory of the Americas*, p. 168.

[19] Thomas D. Hall, *Social Change in the Southwest, 1350–1880* (Lawrence, Kans., 1989), p. 41.

causal sequence was neither straightforward nor inevitable. Like any evolutionary scheme, this one embodied elements which, for very good reasons, declined to evolve, or which evolved only partially. Some groups remained hunters and gatherers, spurning agriculture; some established settled yet egalitarian farming societies, lacking states and social classes; some acquired the full panoply of cities, dynasties and empires. However 'civilization' is defined – and wherever on this continuum from band to empire it is deemed to have arrived – it is clear that sedentary agriculture was a necessary prerequisite. All the world's examples of pristine state-formation are to be found in areas of early agricultural settlement: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Northern China, the Indus Valley, coastal Peru, Mesoamerica. But there were also agricultural populations which remained happily unacquainted with kings and cities. Agriculture made civilization possible but not inevitable.[20] A key task, therefore, is to try to explain the process of state-formation in Mesoamerica.

We must first return to the variable which has so far been stressed, that of population. Population growth offers the best general explanation of the slow transition from hunting and gathering to settled agriculture (it can explain the remarkable worldwide regularities in this process in a way that neither diffusionist theories nor appeals to human nature – the 'assumption that human beings naturally want to "settle down"' – possibly can).[21] But, even under conditions of nomadism, population growth was not an independent variable: it was subject to indirect vicissitudes (climatic change, disease) as well as to direct human control (war, abortion, infanticide). With settlement and farming, new conditions and pressures came into play. Agriculture demanded a greater input of labour per unit of area (hunting and gathering, in contrast, was land- rather than labour-intensive). Effort now had to compensate for reduced living space. The difference – and an important one when considering the human implications of social 'progress' – is well captured by Richard Diehl: 'new demands on time for agricultural activities and construction must have caused

20 Ronald Cohen, 'State Origins: A Reappraisal', in Henri J. Claessen and Peter Skalnik, *The Early State* (The Hague, 1978), pp. 38, 41. For a vigorous rebuttal of economic and ecological explanations of state-formation, see Pierre Clastres, *Society against the State* (New York, 1989), pp. 201–2.

21 Harris, *Cannibals and Kings*, p. 15.

more than one old-timer to look back wistfully to the days when a man could go up into the mountains to collect wild millet whenever he pleased'.[22]

With the development of agriculture, larger, denser populations could be supported. In addition, larger population was often functional to agricultural success, for both household and community. Parents saw advantages in increasing family size; no doubt they also welcomed some relaxation of the old constraints – the need to abort and kill their offspring – which nomadism had imposed. Communities also derived benefit from numbers: first, for defence, and second, by mobilizing collective labour, for example, for forest clearance or irrigation works. Over and above these benefits, however, important social repercussions followed. In simple terms, larger populations made division of labour and social stratification feasible; and – even if population growth was not the sole or even the primary cause of social stratification (that we will address shortly) – social stratification, once under way, tended to reinforce population growth, since the power and prestige of emergent elites were directly related to the size of the population they dominated. If population encouraged agriculture, agriculture in turn encouraged population growth.

Within this sequence, however, there is an obvious and crucial gap, both causal and chronological. Between the development of agriculture and the onset of civilization (social classes, states, cities) a range of historical factors came into play, determining whether the sequence was to advance, halt or regress. For regression was common, the birth of civilization rare.[23] Some analysts interpret such sequences in terms of a demographic and ecological determinism; their approach is favoured by the 'strong materialist bias' of archaeology, which relies heavily on the analysis of material remains.[24] Others stress either political processes ('it is the political break . . . that is decisive, not the economic transformation') or cultural and ideological factors ('the environment does not determine man's culture;

[22] Diehl, 'Prehispanic Relationships', pp. 268–9.

[23] Charles S. Spencer, 'Rethinking the Chiefdom', in Robert D. Drennan and Carlos A. Uribe, eds., *Chiefdoms in the Americas* (Lanham, Md., 1987), p. 378; Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. 1, *A History of Power from the Beginning to 1760 AD* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 63–9.

[24] Kenneth G. Hirth, 'The Analysis of Prehistoric Economic Systems: A Look to the Future', in Kenneth G. Hirth, ed., *Trade and Exchange in Early Mesoamerica* (Albuquerque, 1984), pp. 282–3.

it merely sets the outer limits and, at the same time, offers opportunities').[25] It is hardly possible for an inexpert historian to adjudicate between these grand theories; all that can be done is to review the evidence and – as far as is possible – to tell it like it was, in particular cases. The analysis of those cases will inevitably be influenced by the use of theories which seem to be fruitful and appropriate (here, a certain eclecticism may be permitted); but the purpose of the analysis is to illuminate the cases, not to pronounce upon the general theories, which belong to a higher ontological realm.

According to a well-known and elegant schema, derived from extensive ethnohistorical and anthropological research, the path to civilization involves four progressive steps, each bringing enhanced social complexity and integration: the band, the tribe, the chiefdom and the state.[26] This typology, as one of its principal exponents points out, may be inferred, but cannot be proven, for prehistoric societies.[27] The presumed progressions are not easily established archaeologically, hence there can be considerable disagreement as to the status within the schema of a particular society. Were the Olmecs and Maya of Mesoamerica constituted in chiefdoms or states? 'Chiefdom' would imply smaller units ('states' connote populations roughly in excess of 10,000), more fissile communities prone to dispersion, and social ranking without clear class stratification. 'Chiefs' lack the enduring, centralized, coercive powers of states.[28] These distinctions,

25 Clastres, *Society against the State*, p. 202; Peter Farb, *Man's Rise to Civilization as Shown by the Indians of North America from Primeval Times to the Coming of the Industrial State* (New York, 1968), p. 38; note also Olivier de Montmollin, *The Archaeology of Political Structure: Settlement Analysis in a Classic Maya Polity* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 8–9ff. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, p. 277, offers a schematic review of four mechanisms which have been advanced to explain the rise of 'kleptocrats' (roughly, privileged, power-holding elites): top-down coercion; material redistribution; the maintenance of peace and order; the construction of a persuasive 'ideology or religion'.

26 Ellman R. Service, *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective* (New York, 2nd ed., 1971); William T. Sanders and Barbara J. Price, *Mesoamerica: The Evolution of a Civilization* (New York, 1968), pp. 37–44; Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, pp. 267ff.

27 Ellman R. Service, *Origins of the State and Civilization: The Process of Cultural Evolution* (New York, 1975), pp. 303–4.

28 Clastres, *Society against the State*, ch. 2, makes the point forcefully; Drennan and Uribe, *Chiefdoms in the Americas*, offer several contrasting perspectives; note also Robert L. Carneiro, 'The Chiefdom: Precursor of the State', in Grant D. Jones and Robert R. Kautz, eds., *The Transition to Statehood in the New World* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 37–79. In contrast to Clastres, Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, pp. 273–4, depicts quasi-Weberian chiefs enjoying a 'monopoly on the right to use force [and]... on critical information', making 'all critical decisions', and enacting them by means of 'one or two levels of bureaucrats'. I suspect that these discrepancies are