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978-1-108-06374-6 - Mexican Archaeology: An Introduction to the Archaeology of the Mexican and Mayan Civilizations of Pre-Spanish America

Thomas Athol Joyce

Excerpt

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Mexican Archæology

INTRODUCTION

ANCIENT Mexico, the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan, built upon an island situated in a great highland lake, the scene of the almost incredible exploits of Cortés, has long been familiar as a name to the western world, chiefly owing to the wonderful account compiled by Prescott. The story of the fall of Aztec civilization before the Spanish invaders has deservedly won a great hold upon popular imagination, for every page is redolent of romance, and indeed few, if any, writers of fiction have conceived a tale so full of incident, or have brought their heroes to victory in the face of greater odds. Moreover, the existence of Aztec civilization, an organized empire with cities built of stone and rich in gold and gems, burst upon the Old World as a thing almost beyond belief.

The purpose of the present work is to afford some connected account of this pre-Spanish culture, and to correlate the accounts of eyewitnesses and early visitors with the material remains which the investigations of later times have revealed. But in order to obtain a proper view of Mexican culture it is necessary to transcend the limits of Mexico itself. In the country to the south and east, in Guatemala and northern Honduras, are the remains of ruined buildings which are, both architecturally and artistically, superior to those of Mexico proper, and

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which had been deserted before the coming of the Spaniards. These were the work of the Maya, a people whose name is far less familiar to the general public than that of the Aztec, but who, as I hope to show, evolved a culture of their own when the Aztec were yet primitive nomadic hunters, and who furnished the latter people with the materials for that civilization which so astonished the followers of Cortés.

The actual area with which this book deals is, roughly, that portion of Mexico which lies between the tropic of Cancer and the northern strip of Honduras. It is divided naturally into two portions, a northern and western, and a southern and eastern, by the depression which cuts across the isthmus of Tehuantepec. The natural division corresponds very conveniently with the archæological; to the north and west lies the seat of Mexican culture, to the south and east, of the Mayan; but it must be remembered that the Maya-speaking people extended at the conquest practically throughout Vera Cruz, though they had by that time fallen under Aztec influence. I propose therefore to divide this book into two corresponding sections, dealing first with the "Mexican" area, and later with the "Mayan." Both from the chronological and cultural points of view the Mayan area should come first, but, as will appear later, we are dependent to so great an extent upon our knowledge of Mexican civilization for our interpretation of Mayan archæology, that it will be more convenient to give the Mexican priority.

The main geographical features of the Maya country are given at the commencement of the section dealing with its archæology. The region immediately under consideration is shaped rather like an inverted pear, and consists in the main of a plateau bordered by two converging chains of lofty mountains, which are skirted exteriorly by a strip of low-lying coast. The uniformity of the plateau is broken in many places by

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steep ravines, or *barrancas*, formed by the slow action of rivers, and by occasional highland lakes, such as Chapala, Pazcuaro and Mexico. Much of the ground is volcanic, and the names of the volcanoes Popocatepetl and Iztacciuatl in Mexico province, and of Orizaba on the Puebla-Vera Cruz border, are familiar to everyone. The Mexican valley forms the apex of the triangular plateau, and the natural route thence to the south lies *via* Tehuacan and Teotitlan del Camino, a fact which should be kept in mind in studying the tribal migrations. The height of the mountain-chains and their proximity to the coast explain the fact that there are but few important rivers in Mexico; most of the streams on the plateau drain into land-locked basins, and practically the only rivers which pierce the mountain barrier are the Panuco on the east, and the Lerma and Rio de las Balsas on the west. Climate and vegetation are dependent upon elevation; the coast is tropical, but the elevation is so abrupt that the traveller passes with remarkable rapidity from palms, bananas, coconuts and rubber, according to locality, to slopes clad with fir and oak and plains of wheat and maize. In the same way, table-lands rise in successive terraces from Tehuantepec through Oaxaca and Puebla to Mexico which has an elevation of nearly 7500 feet above the sea-level, and enjoys a more temperate climate than New York or Chicago fourteen to sixteen hundred miles further north. The country is conveniently divided into three zones, according to its elevation; the so-called "tierra caliente" (hot country) runs from the sea-level to 3000 feet, the "tierra templada" (temperate country) from 3000 to 6000 feet, and the "tierra fria" (cold country) thence to the 9000 foot level. The most important vegetable product from the economic point of view was maize, which constituted the chief food of the natives. The varieties and development of the maize-plant as we know it imply centuries of settled

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life and patient cultivation, and it is an interesting fact that for years the identity of the wild plant from which it was produced remained a mystery. Other plants of economic importance were cacao, vanilla, tobacco and cotton, grown in the hot regions, and the agave or Mexican aloe which flourishes also in the higher country. The fauna includes jaguar ("tiger"), puma ("lion"), ocelot, deer, peccary, alligator, rattle-snake, turkey, humming-bird and the quetzal, the beautiful plumes of the latter being one of the most highly-prized articles of adornment. The distribution of these animals is not however constant throughout the whole area, but many of them are confined to the warmer countries. Little more need be said, for the purposes of this book, of the physical nature of the country, save that the rain-fall is not excessive, being heaviest upon the Atlantic slope; and that, while the land appears to be rising gradually on the Pacific side, much has been lost to the Atlantic on the east. With these few words of introduction an attempt will now be made to describe the inhabitants of the country and the culture which they built up before they came in contact with the Old World at the beginning of the sixteenth century.¹

¹ A word of explanation should be said concerning the Mexican language. Like other American tongues its structure is such that long compound words and names are built up of significant elements, many of them being thus equivalent to a whole sentence. The practice is not unknown in this country, for is not "Obadiah Bind-their-kings-in-chains-and-their-nobles-in-links-of-iron" familiar to every reader of Macaulay? At the same time it adds considerable difficulty to the study of Mexican archæology. As regards pronunciation, the chief points to be noted are as follows: X is always pronounced as SH and J as H; C is always hard except before E and I; CH is sounded as the CH in CHILD; Z as in ZEBRA.

In Maya we find a happy tendency to monosyllables. X again is pronounced as SH; but C is always hard.

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CHAPTER I—MEXICO : TRIBAL HISTORY

AT the time of the conquest by the Spaniards of the province of Mexico, the dominant people was the Aztec population of Tenochtitlan (Mexico city), inhabiting a town built on an island in the lake of Tezcoco, or rather that portion of it known as the lake of Mexico. The Aztec were confessedly immigrants, who had wandered south less than five hundred years before the conquest ; by their superiority as fighting-men they had won the hegemony over the kindred tribes which they found settled in the valley of Mexico, and had extended their power to both oceans and as far at least as the isthmus of Tehuantepec. Both they and their immediate predecessors spoke the same language, called Nahua (strictly, *Nahuatl*), and they appear to be a branch of the great Shoshonean family which reaches as far north as the state of Montana. Beyond this, their ethnography and language would seem to connect them rather with the coastal tribes of the far north-west than with those to the east of the Rockies, but on this point little can be said at present. Immediately to the north and north-west of the settled peoples of the valley, the steppe country was inhabited by tribes who lived mainly by hunting, called Chichimec and Otomi, the former being almost purely nomadic, the latter to some extent settled. The Chichimec spoke for the most part a language which was essentially Nahua, but the name itself possessed for the Mexicans rather a cultural than a linguistic significance, and meant little more than “ nomadic hunters.” The Otomi tongue was different, and extended down

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to the valley of Toluca, through the people known as Mazaua to the Matlatzinca. South of the last, among the Tlalhuica around Cuernavaca, Nahuatl again prevailed. In the hilly volcanic country around lakes Pácuaro and Chapala, a third speech was found, the Tarascan, of which the exact affinities are still doubtful. The Rio de las Balsas appears to be about the southern limit of the Tarascan tongue, but its northern is less certain; it extends into Jalisco, and may at one time have reached up into Zacatecas where remains in Tarascan style have been discovered (at La Quemada). Roughly south of the Rio de las Balsas and a line drawn thence to Teotitlan is the Mixtec-Zapotec group of tongues; the Mixtec extending from Acatlan to Tototepec, and the Zapotec to the east, from the Nahuatl-speaking Teotitlan to Tehuantepec, the Mazatec occupying the northern portion of this strip. The Mixtec-Zapotec language bears many structural analogies to the Otomi group mentioned above. Along the east coast, from the Panuco valley southward, were two peoples, speaking dialects of yet another language, the Maya tongue. In the north were the Huastec, primitive Maya, extending as far south as Tuxpan, where they were in touch with the linguistically related Totonac. To the north they stretched beyond the Panuco, but the remains of this region are practically unknown. There is evidence too that they once extended far further west than they did at the conquest, but the expansion of the Nahuatl had penned them up in the narrow strip of coast, and an Aztec fortress was established as far east as Meztitlan to keep the border. The Totonac, inhabiting Vera Cruz to the south, had suffered similarly from Mexican encroachment, and the river Nautla formed a strip of Aztec territory which almost severed their country in two. At the time of the conquest their principal centres were Papantla and Zacapoaxtla. East of them,

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in Coatzacoalcos and Tabasco, were the peoples known to the Mexicans as Olmec, Xicalanca and Nonoualca, who, according to legend, were once settled in the neighbourhood of Tlaxcala, but were driven thence by the historical Tlaxcalans when they immigrated into the country.

The early history of these tribes is very difficult to elucidate from the tangled mass of migration myths, often contradictory, which have survived. What may be termed the historical period starts only with the election of the first Aztec king, some years after the settlement of the tribe at Tenochtitlan, and this takes us back only to about 1376, or not much more than a century before the Spanish conquest. The Aztec, when they arrived, found a number of Nahuatl-speaking "Chichimec" in occupation of the valley, and these "Chichimec" had themselves found the remains of a culture far above their own, to which they gave the name of Toltec. Now the "Toltec question" has been hotly debated from early times; to the Mexicans the Toltec were the people of a golden age, and their state was the prototype of peaceful civilization. Some writers have gone so far as to deny them actual existence at all, regarding them as a purely mythical people to whom the Mexicans conveniently attributed the invention of all useful arts of which they could not readily explain the evolution otherwise. Others have exalted their culture to a pitch far above, one might almost say, the human, and have credited them with a knowledge transcending that of latter-day civilization. I do not propose to plunge into the welter of controversial theories, but to regard the matter from a strictly practical point of view, which seems to me to be as follows. The Aztec and their immediate fore-runners the "Chichimec" were merely nomadic hunters when they settled in the valley, and their knowledge of arts and crafts, which need a settled life for development, had not advanced beyond a very

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primitive stage. They found the remains of a people who had for years been living as settled agriculturists, and ruined cities which their untutored minds regarded as something bordering on the marvellous. The agricultural population whom they subdued, more cultured but less warlike than they, told them stories of a powerful empire, stories which no doubt lost nothing in the telling. To this empire they gave the name of Toltec, from the city of Tulan (or Tollan) which was its reputed centre. Modern research has proved conclusively the existence, at those very localities especially associated with the Toltec, of pre-Aztec ruins, and of a relatively high culture which prevailed throughout the valley (and beyond) for a period considerably longer than that which elapsed between the Aztec immigration and the Spanish conquest. As a mere matter of evidence I cannot see that any name can be given to this pre-Aztec culture other than that of Toltec, and, further, that it is possible to deny at least a foundation in fact to the myths connected with this people. However, even so, the difficulties connected with the question are not entirely solved; Sahagun states definitely that the Toltec spoke Nahua, and relates a migration myth which brings them into contact with the Nahua peoples before their settlement in Tulan. Another legend makes the founder of their state a Chichimec, one Mixcoamazatzin, whose name bears a strong resemblance to that of the Chichimec hunting-god, Mixcoatl, compounded with the native word for the miraculous deer, mazatl, with which he was associated. Further, excavation has proved that before the "Toltec" culture, another of lower grade existed in the valley. This culture, at present the earliest of which traces can be found, strongly resembles that of the Tarascan, and it rather merges into that of the Toltec, while the latter is separated from that of the later Nahua by a definite line of demarcation. As far

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as the evidence goes at present, it is fair to draw the conclusion that the first settled agriculturists in the Mexican valley were of the same stock as the agricultural people around lake Pazcuaro ; that upon them descended a Nahuatl tribe from the north, coming in sufficient strength to impose their language, who built up a culture which surprised the subsequent immigrants of similar race when, at a considerably later period, they followed in their footsteps. The tendency of rude hunting tribes to rapid development when they adopt settled life has not yet been fully recognized. There is no finer training for the human faculties than the pursuit of hunting ; it hardens the body, sharpens the observation, and engenders a perpetual readiness to meet sudden emergencies. Agriculture on the other hand, while promoting the development of the useful arts to a certain pitch, is apt to result in stagnation. Students of African ethnography are well aware that nearly all the great kingdoms which have bloomed from time to time in Central Africa have had their origin in the descent of a nomadic tribe upon an agricultural, the former becoming sedentary and developing the arts which they received from the latter far beyond their previous limits. This point however is rather by way of illustration, for it does not wholly suffice to account for the Toltec civilization, though it helps to explain the rapidity with which the Aztec assimilated and developed the remains of it. The Toltec culture bears a definite relation to remains which occur at many sites in Oaxaca and Yucatan, these again are closely connected with the magnificent remains of the early Maya of Chiapas, Guatemala and Honduras. The exact relationship existing between the Maya and the Toltec can only be discussed after the archæology of the former has been considered, but it may be stated in anticipation that, as far as we can say at present, the finest Maya remains appear to antedate those of the Toltec, and

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therefore that the development of Toltec culture is in part due to Mayan inspiration filtered, I believe, through the early inhabitants of the Zapotec country.

The consideration of what may be called the mythical period of Mexican history is rendered all the more difficult by the fact that all the legends have been collected among later immigrants who wished as far as possible to trace some connection between themselves and the earlier settlers. Toltec descent, if it could be established, raised a family at once to a patrician status, and most of the immigrant tribes sought their rulers among the descendants of a Toltec house. There is therefore the danger of fictitious genealogies, such as exist among so many Sudanese tribes desirous of proving "Arab" descent; but apart from this we are confronted at the outset with a difficulty which is not easy of solution. Sahagun states that the first inhabitants, the Toltec, the other Nahua, the Olmec and the Michoacans, arrived at the Panuco valley and worked down the east coast before turning inland. Ixtlilxochitl represents the Toltec as coasting down lower California and Jalisco. Of the two writers Sahagun is by far the more trustworthy, but at the same time it is difficult to see what Ixtlilxochitl had to gain by deliberately transferring the scene of the migration from one coast to the other. The story of Sahagun is, in brief, as follows. The migrants penetrated as far as Guatemala, and then settled for a time at a place called Tamoanchan, mention of which occurs in nearly all migration legends. Here the wise men who led them departed, taking the god under whose guidance they travelled and the picture-writings which contained their lore, and sailing eastward over the sea. The rest remained behind, under the governance of certain lesser sages, of whom the chief were Oxomoco and Cipactonal, "awaiting the dawn for the administration of society." The Olmec also split from the main stem at this point. From here the others went to