

# PREHISTORIC MESOAMERICA

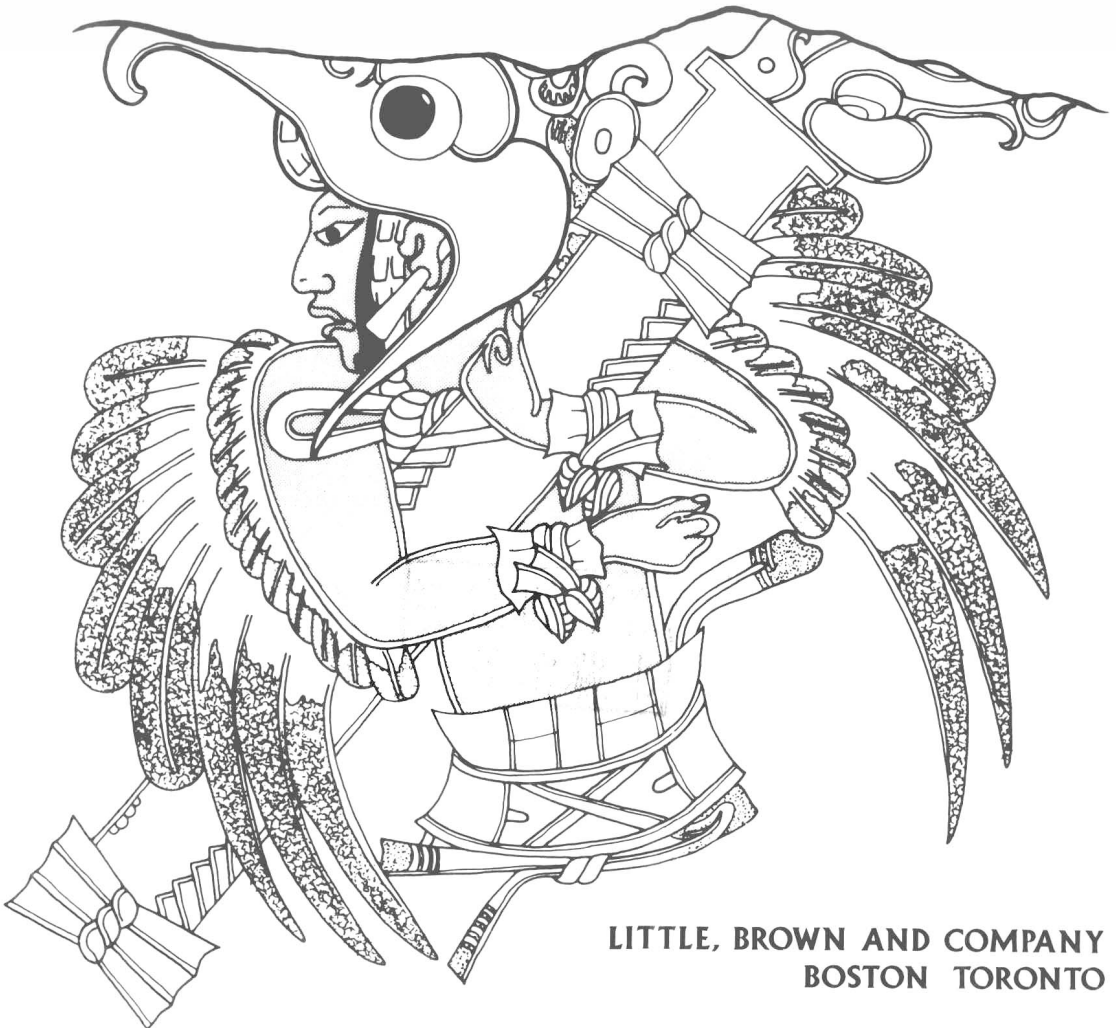
Richard E.W. Adams



# PREHISTORIC MESOAMERICA

**Richard E.W. Adams**

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT SAN ANTONIO



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# For Joey 1966-1975

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# **PREHISTORIC MESOAMERICA**



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# Preface

**I**N EACH AGE MAN TRIES TO UNDERSTAND HIS past. In our own, as we accept the universality of man's cultural experience, we must also attempt to understand the past of cultures other than ours. This book is a synthesis of archaeological findings from Mexico and Guatemala and an interpretation of them. It is built on the work of predecessors who worked in the prehistoric past, 16th century chroniclers, and several generations of more contemporary scholars. It is up to the reader to judge how well I have succeeded in bringing together the findings of the past, and the success of my interpretation of these findings. My colleagues and predecessors have my gratitude, but I accept responsibility for any shortcomings of this book.

Thanks are due to Donald Brockington, Ronald Spores, David Grove, K. V. Flannery, Wigberto Jimenez-Moreno, Jacinto Quirarte, and all my colleagues not mentioned in the seminars on the origins and collapse of Maya civilization, sponsored by the School of American Research. I am deeply grateful to Douglas Schwartz, director of the School of American Research, for the exciting opportunities afforded to examine these questions. An intellectual debt is owed to G. R. Willey and W. T. Sanders, and the exchange of ideas with John Ingham benefited me greatly.

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new information that should be added. If, at times, I have not taken their advice, the decision has not been lightly made. I am most grateful to them all. John Paddock carefully read Chapter 9 and wrote a detailed commentary on it. David Kelley performed the same valuable service for Chapter 10, and I thank them both. Of course, all the above share in any credit this book may receive.

Robert Heizer furnished badly needed photographs, Joseph Campbell kindly aided with the pronunciation guide, Clemency Coggins with a problem in hieroglyphs, and Frank Saul with a problem in physical anthropology. I thank them all. Special thanks go to Nancy Reid and Olivia Rodriguez, who prepared the finely drawn art, and to my excellent typist, Elizabeth Branch. Franklin Graham most generously provided many slides, and I am grateful.

As with any such book, this is the expression of an intellectual adventure. For me, the adventure has spanned thirty years, and perhaps will continue for as long again. Dr. Eduardo Noguera introduced me to field work in Mesoamerican archaeology, and to him I tender fond thanks. To E. M. Shook, Linton Satterthwaite, and W. R. Coe, who gave me my first Maya field experience, I am deeply obliged. E. A. Hoebel, R. S. Spencer, and Eldon Johnson at the University of Minnesota encouraged me in the beginning stages of this project, and I hope that the result does not disappoint them.

Finally, my wife and children sustained me in this, as in much else.

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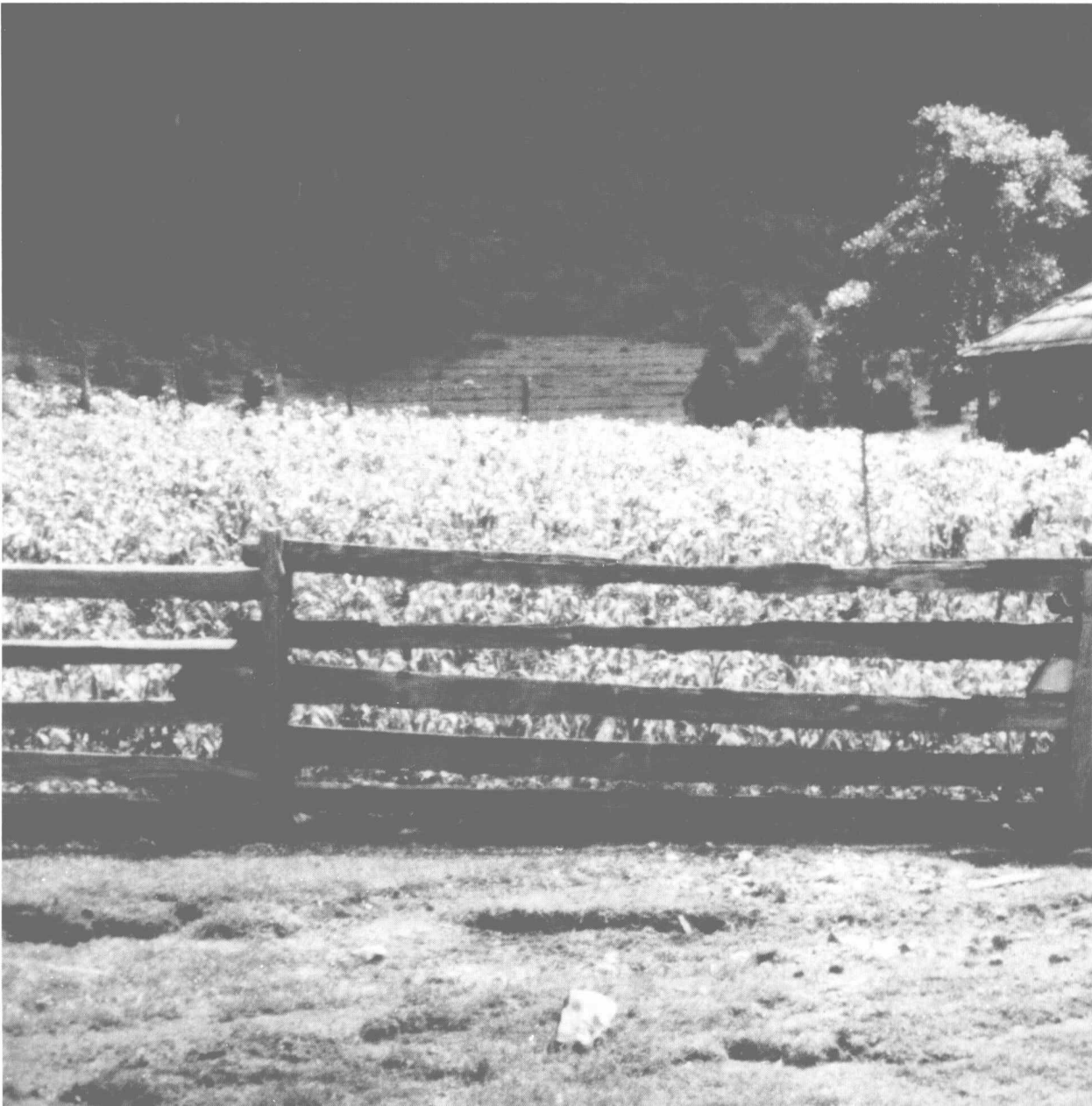
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# **PREHISTORIC MESOAMERICA**



# CHAPTER 1



# INTRODUCTION



*There were writers from each branch of knowledge. Some composed the historical annals, setting in order the events that took place every year, stating the day, month, and hour. Others recorded the genealogies and descendants of the kings, lords, and personages of high lineage; they would make note of those who were born and cancel the dead. Others painted the limits, boundaries and border stones of the cities, provinces and villages, and of the fields and plantations, indicating their owners. Yet others made records of the laws, and the rites and ceremonies performed in pagan times. The priests made records regarding the temples of the idols, of their idolatrous doctrines and the feasts of*

*their false gods and their calendars. And finally, there were philosophers and wise men among them who recorded in picture writing the sciences they were versed in.*

—Ixtlilxochitl in Bernal, 1964: xxv.

*These writings would have enlightened us considerably had not ignorant zeal destroyed them. Ignorant men ordered them burned, believing them idols, while actually they were history books worthy of being preserved instead of being buried in oblivion as was to occur.*

—Duran, 1971: 396.

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TEOPISCA ZONE, Maya house, Teopisca Zone, Chiapas; a Tzeltal Maya house, with cornfield in the foreground. The traveller driv-

ing in Southern Mexico and Guatemala can observe farming practices that resemble those of a thousand years ago.

**T**HIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN TO FILL THE VOID created by the unfortunate loss of native records, but it also deals with matters that presumably were never thought of by native historians and philosophers of Mesoamerica. The goal is simple: to present an up-to-date, interpretative synthesis of Mesoamerican prehistory. It is intended for the student as well as for the curious person who has somehow become intrigued with the past native civilizations of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador.

This book has been organized to aid the reader in understanding those alien and destroyed cultures which form part of the New World's heritage. The people of the Valley of Mexico, usually and inaccurately grouped together as the Aztecs, were the Mesoamericans who claimed the attention of the Spaniards most forcefully. We shall thus begin with the Aztecs (or properly, the Mexica) to present a native civilization as it was seen in full tide and also to introduce in this more familiar context some of the archaeological and anthropological concepts on which presentation of the later material depends. In Chapter 3 we shall revert to more standard procedure and begin a sequential survey of development from earliest times up through the time of the Aztecs. The presentation is aimed not just at dusting off the ancient pots and pans, but at reconstructing ways of life and making functional interpretations based on archaeology. The reader should thus have an impression of the earlier cultures which will be akin to that given for the Aztecs, even if lacking in the wealth of historical events and personality.

This book, then, is an interpretation of the technical archaeological data. It is an interpretation which can be documented, however; it is not made of whole cloth. When there are theoretical alternatives, these will usually be indicated and discussed.

An appendix deals with technical matters of

chronology, spatial divisions within Mesoamerica, and definitions of sociopolitical organization. These matters have been placed in a separate section in order not to disturb the flow of the book, but the student and professional will probably want to know, for example, the bases on which I have categorized the Early Classic Maya and the Preclassic Olmec as "pristine states."

Several themes run through the book: (1) The native civilizations of Mesoamerica are worth knowing about not just because they are exotic examples of human behavior, but because their historical and cultural experiences are worth considering. They faced universal problems of human existence and either solved them or failed. We can learn from their successes and failures, if we will. (2) Mesoamerica was a sphere of cultural interaction. Part of what made civilization possible was the interaction among the diverse cultures that flourished there. The varieties of culture and their interrelationships through time and space are fascinating, and involve not only economics and militarism, but also religion and ideology; interaction took place along all of these lines. Occasionally personality and character break through the flow of historical process, especially where we can read some of the texts left us in native writing systems. (3) Civilization, in the sense of complexity and sophistication of development, was in the main an elite-class phenomenon. (4) There are continuities between the deep past and the Indian cultures of the colonial and modern worlds. Much that we see in Mexico and Guatemala today is related to the historic past, although the ties are usually unrecognized. The richness and diversity of the native cultures of Mesoamerica are attractive to us of the West, if only because they document the endless variety of forms in which man's behavior, society, and artifacts occur. I hope that the reader can gain an understand-