

# THE LEGACY OF MESOAMERICA

History and Culture of a  
Native American Civilization



Robert M. Carmack • Janine Gasco • Gary H. Gossen

EXPLORING CULTURES: A PRENTICE HALL SERIES IN ANTHROPOLOGY



The Legacy  
of Mesoamerica  
History and Culture  
of a Native American Civilization

**ROBERT M. CARMACK**

*University at Albany – State University of New York*

**JANINE GASCO**

*Institute for Mesoamerican Studies*

**GARY H. GOSSEN**

*University at Albany – State University of New York*

with contributions from

George A. Broadwell, Louise M. Burkhart, Liliana R. Goldin,  
John S. Justeson, Brenda Rosenbaum, Michael E. Smith



PRENTICE HALL, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

The legacy of Mesoamerica: history and culture of a Native American civilization/[edited by] Robert M. Carmack, Janine Gasco, Gary H. Gossen.

p. cm.—(Exploring cultures)

Includes bibliographical references (p. 481) and index.

ISBN 0-13-337445-9

1. Indians of Mexico—History. 2. Indians of Central America—History. 3. Indians of Mexico. 4. Indians of Central America.

5. Mexico—Civilization. 6. Central America—Civilization.

I. Carmack, Robert M. II. Gasco, Janine. III. Gossen,

Gary H. IV. Series.

F1219.L44 1995

972'.00497—dc20

94-31722

CIP

Acquisitions Editor: Nancy Roberts

Copyeditor: Eleanor Walter

Buyer: Mary Ann Gloriande

Editorial Assistant: Pat Naturale

Editorial/Production Supervision

and Interior Design: Mary Kathryn Bsales/Rob DeGeorge



©1996 by Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, University at Albany  
Simon & Schuster/A Viacom Company  
Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, in any form or by any means, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5

**ISBN 0-13-337445-9**

PRENTICE-HALL INTERNATIONAL (UK) LIMITED, *London*

PRENTICE-HALL OF AUSTRALIA PTY. LIMITED, *Sydney*

PRENTICE-HALL CANADA INC., *Toronto*

PRENTICE-HALL HISPANOAMERICANA, S.A., *Mexico*

PRENTICE-HALL OF INDIA PRIVATE LIMITED, *New Delhi*

PRENTICE-HALL OF JAPAN, INC., *Tokyo*

SIMON & SCHUSTER ASIA PTE. LTD., *Singapore*

EDITORA PRENTICE-HALL DO BRASIL, LTDA., *Rio de Janeiro*



We invite our readers to share the urgency and passion that we feel toward the content of this volume. We offer here a broad appreciation of why the native peoples of Mexico and Central America have attracted the attention of scholars, chroniclers, and travelers for centuries, and why in our time this interest shows no signs of abating.

#### **MESOAMERICA IN WESTERN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY**

The encounter of the old and new worlds, which commenced in a sustained fashion in 1492, can be said to have fundamentally changed the course of human history. This encounter not only provided the opportunity for the ascendancy of Spain and Portugal to the role of being the first truly global powers, but also, in a real sense, initiated the globalization of humanity under European hegemony—a pattern that, for better or worse, remains with us to this day. Although the Caribbean Basin was the stage for the early and cataclysmic period of initial contact—which resulted in nothing less than the virtual annihilation of hundreds of thousands of Caribbean Indians, essentially the entire population, by 1550—the institutionalization of Spain’s New World enterprise took root only with the conquest of Mesoamerica and the creation of New Spain, and subsequently the parallel enterprise in Peru. By 1600, fundamental Western ideas and practices concerning modernity, social progress, “tutelage” of the vanquished, bureaucratic rationalism, and economic and political dependency under the global system we know as colonialism were firmly in place—complete with all of that system’s atrocities and social asymmetries. Indeed, Mesoamerica’s radically truncated and transformed Indian communities, forced to live under Spain’s “missionary state,” became what might be called prototypes of colonized peoples, a social condition that would eventually characterize much of Asia, Africa, North and South America, and the Pacific in the ensuing centuries.

Aside from the particulars of this period, which will be discussed elsewhere in this text, it should be remembered that the sixteenth-century theological and philosophical debates regarding the “moral status” of the Amerindians were in large part focused on data that came from New Spain (Mexico). These discussions, which came to influence not only Crown and Church policy in America but also the very foundations of Western ideas about human nature, carried in their wake nothing less than the dawn of modern social science—that is, the attempt to understand human variation in what was the beginning of a truly global comparative perspective (Klor de Alva, 1988).

Sixteenth-century Mesoamerican data provided the first major, modern ethnographic reports, perhaps best exemplified by Bernardino de Sahagún’s enormous corpus, in which we have a comprehensive and objective description of the customs, social organization, economy, and arts of the Nahuatl world, all of it set down in the native language with Spanish translation. This is not distant from the goals of modern ethnography. It was thus set down for all to see (but few saw the work since it was suppressed) that Spain had in fact encountered and destroyed a high civilization, comparable in some ways to Europe itself. Not only did Sahagún and others achieve a certain detachment of their descriptions from their missionary and political agenda; some also came to appraise the moral status of the colonial enterprise itself. Father Bartolomé de las Casas, who had witnessed firsthand Spain’s atrocities of the early Contact period in the Caribbean and later in what is now southern Mexico and Guatemala, wrote one of the most influential political treatises of sixteenth-century Europe (*A Brief Description of the Destruction of the Indies*) as a critique of his own country’s systematic destruction and cruel exploitation of Amerindians in the Caribbean and in Mesoamerica. In this work, as in many other theological and political works of the period, we are able to discern a clear pattern of cultural critique and relativism, a distancing of the observer from his own culture. Needless to say, these were exceptional individuals and their ideas were unpopular at the time; however, it is important to note that these contemporary-sounding reports and reflections about human nature, the human condition, and human variation came from sixteenth-century Spaniards who were writing of Mesoamerica. Thus, in addition to the vast material wealth and enormously important food, fiber, and medicinal plant cultigens that flowed from the New World to the Old World, there also came from America the challenge to reflect upon the origins, interrelations, givenness, mutability, internal coherence, and moral value of myriad human social forms that were unfamiliar to the Old World.

To this brief sketch of what we believe to be important contributions of Mesoamerica to the formative period of modern Western intellectual history must be added the major contributions by colonial Spanish scholars to the lexicography, transcription, translation, and grammatical analysis of Mesoamerican and other Native American languages. This is noteworthy because it was a Spaniard, Father Nebrija, who in 1492 wrote the first grammar of Castilian; this was also the first grammar of any vulgate Latin language. Hence, Spain’s influential Renaissance scholarship in philology and descriptive linguistics continued with major works on the languages of the New World, establishing—largely with Mesoamerican data—a remarkable corpus of written testimonies in native languages with sophisticated translations. If one also considers that the ancient Mesoamericans themselves possessed several forms of pictographic, ideographic, and phonetic writing systems that date to at least the beginning of the Christian era, it becomes clear that, in terms of both native written testimony and early Contact period textual and linguistic materials, Mesoamerica has what are by far the oldest and most comprehensive written records of any region of the New World. It is therefore not surprising that scholars with an interest in problems of evolution and continuity of Native American civilization and of America’s place in the whole flow of human history have found in Mesoamerica an

extremely fruitful focus for such research. The singular power of the region to elicit our scholarly and general human interest stems not only from the great diversity and temporal depth of its cultural forms, but also from the fact that Mesoamericans themselves have spoken eloquently and often of their own world. This testimony begins with the glyphic texts and calendrical notations that date from the Late Formative period (400 B.C. to A.D. 200) and continues vigorously into the present. This constitutes a written record, rendered in several different media and writing systems, that spans over 2,000 years.

If one also considers the massive contribution of modern archaeologists, epigraphers, ethnologists, linguists, and ethnohistorians to the construction of the cultural history of the region, it becomes clear that Mesoamerica ranks as the best-known and best-documented cultural tradition of the New World. This uniquely rich documentation confers upon the region the quality of a “benchmark” that makes it possible, using data from Mesoamerica, to mount credible comparisons on innumerable topics both within the Americas and with the Old World.

## MESOAMERICA IN THE HISTORY OF CULTURAL STUDIES

Because of Mesoamerica’s centrality in Western scholarly reflection and romantic imagination, it will come as no surprise to the reader to find that the region has played an important role in the history of cultural studies themselves. We use the phrase “cultural studies” in its broad sense, which includes both humanistic and scientific studies of human variation in time and space.

We have already observed that systematic ethnographic reporting can, without forcing the issue, be traced back to Sahagún’s pioneering work in the mid-sixteenth century. The comprehensiveness of his Mexican corpus and his commentaries on its meaning, together with his consistent attention to the importance of testimonies and texts written in Nahuatl, give his work a precocious modernity.

The ancient civilizations of Mexico and Central America figured prominently as themes in the work of European and U.S. antiquarians, natural historians, philologists, and folklorists, beginning as early as the late eighteenth century. Such scholars as the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt and Spanish archaeologists Diego García de Palacios and Antonio del Río traveled extensively in the region and were among the first modern observers to take the region’s “antiquities” seriously as subjects of scientific interest. Indeed, one can attribute to these scholars a central role in the beginning of systematic scientific collection and classification as these activities are understood in the modern era.

The middle and late nineteenth century saw the study of native Mexican and Central American culture blossom with the work of such scholars as the Frenchman Brousseau de Bourbourg (rediscoverer and translator of the famous Quiché Maya *Popol Vuh*), Americans John Stephens (*Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*) and Daniel Brinton (*Aboriginal American Authors and Their Productions; Especially Those in Native Languages: A Chapter in the History of Literature*), the British scholar Lord Kingsborough (*Antiquities of Mexico, Comprising Facsimiles of Ancient Mexican Paintings and Hieroglyphs*), and the great German ethnologist Eduard Seler (*Collected Works in Mesoamerican Linguistics and Archaeology*). With the advent of the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth century, Mexico began to turn its own scholarly energies to the rediscovery of its past, most notably represented, perhaps, by the work of Manuel Gamio (*La población del valle de Teotihuacan, Mexico*), who is recognized as the founder of modern Mexican anthropology. This brief recital of major precursors to modern Mesoamerican studies is meant to provide a perspective from which to appreciate the continuity and vitality of scholarly interest in the region’s culture history—an enterprise that has, of course, exploded in the twentieth century (for more on this topic, see Chap-

ter 1). This century of research in the area has produced some major discoveries and insights that are recognized as core themes not only in Mesoamerican studies but also within cultural studies as a whole.

What are these major ideas and approaches that owe their formulation and systematization to the peculiarly rich cultural traditions of Mesoamerica?

The first theme that bears a distinctive Mesoamerican pedigree concerns the *methodology of culture history*. Beginning with Sahagún's efforts to elicit testimony from contemporary Nahuatl speakers for the purpose of reconstructing the recent and ancient past, Mesoamerican studies have a long tradition of using written and oral testimony from living culture bearers, together with ethnographic analogies drawn from contemporary observation and other complementary strategies, for the purpose of synthesizing an account of historical lifestyles that are no longer extant. The modern manifestation of this multifaceted culture historical approach—the combined use of archaeology, ethnohistoric documents, oral history, art history, ethnography, historical linguistics, and biological anthropology—is attributed to the German-born American ethnologist, Franz Boas, who with his students (among them Mexico's own Manuel Gamio) made this an emblematic "Americanist" approach. Although Boas forged this methodology in the early twentieth century as a pragmatic strategy for reconstructing culture histories for all of the societies of the aboriginal New World that did not have written historical accounts of their own past, it has without doubt been used with singular success in Mesoamerica. This has been the case in large part because all of the desirable primary data sources abound in the region: omnipresent archaeological remains of millennia of human occupation; written testimonies from some groups, dating back as early as the time of Christ; abundant ethnohistoric sources dating from the earliest years of European contact; and millions of contemporary native people who, even today, speak more than 80 different languages belonging to several macrofamilies and live in thousands of distinctive communities. In short, the region has all of the elements necessary for providing scholars with the opportunity to learn a great deal about an enormously diverse and ancient center of high civilization whose innovations (particularly plant cultigens) influenced much of the aboriginal New World and, subsequently, the Old World as well. Readers may be their own judge as to the degree of success that has been achieved toward this scholarly goal, but surely no other region of the Americas has such potential for bringing together diverse strategies of historical inquiry for the pursuit of a common enterprise.

A second achievement of Mesoamerican studies with respect to the whole of cultural studies has been a major contribution to the *theory of the evolution of state-level societies and empires*—their rise, decline, and transformation—in long historical perspective. Although the issue of cultural evolution has been of interest to social theorists and philosophers for several centuries, it can be said without exaggeration that Mesoamerica and the Andes, together with the Middle East—all of which possess comparably deep and rich archaeological sequences that span social forms from pre-agricultural communities to multiethnic empires—have provided the best empirical foundation for a general theoretical understanding of major evolutionary trends in human history. Much of this important body of research has focused on Mesoamerican data. Many of the major contributors have been archaeologists, who have for the most part worked within the cultural evolutionist framework.

A third equally important contribution to Mesoamerican studies and to cultural studies as a whole is the *theory of peasantry*. Just who are those tens of millions who have lived (and continue to live today) at the social, economic, political, and ideological peripheries of states? How are their communities, economies, customs, and identities linked to the macro-polities under whose shadow they live? Are they autonomous and benignly marginalized or

are they benighted pawns of elite centers? Perhaps the most influential debates on this issue within twentieth-century anthropology have focused on Mesoamerican data and have involved such major figures as Robert Redfield, Oscar Lewis, Eric Wolf, and Rodolfo Stavenhagen.

The evolution, dynamics, and heterogeneous composition of states are closely linked to a fourth contribution of Mesoamerican studies to anthropological and historical literature: *the study of colonialism, ethnicity, syncretism, and social change*. How did native peoples cope with their new status as colonized subjects of a European nation? What changed and to what extent when Spain destroyed the symbolic capital and the political and economic power of the native states of Mesoamerica? Did this affect the elite groups differently than the peasants? men differently than women? urban centers differently than small villages? What new social and biological forms emerged in the course of the encounter? How was resistance to the new masters orchestrated? What happened to the supernatural world of the vanquished? What, in fact, distinguishes "Indian identity" from "national identity"? How are these identities related to each other?

These questions mattered a great deal to colonial authorities and missionaries, just as they are of concern to government officials in the region today. Since Mesoamerica was an early and prototypical case of a modern state system that attempted to absorb hundreds of ethnically diverse communities, studies of that system have contributed much to our knowledge of the dynamics of culture change.

A fifth contribution to general cultural and social research that has a particularly strong tie to Mesoamerica concerns the *uses of social science in the formation and implementation of public policy of European-modeled states toward their ethnic minorities*. Specifically, the body of policy legislation and applied practice that is known as *indigenismo* has since the early twentieth century evolved in Mexico and, to a lesser extent, in Peru and Guatemala as a guiding agenda for Indian policy. As a corollary of *indigenista* ideology, social research becomes the servant of the national interest and an instrument for social change, nation-building, and community development. Perhaps nowhere in the world has this policy role of social research been more thoroughly articulated and successfully practiced than in Mexico. Many nations of the developing world of the late twentieth century look to Mexico as a source of ideas for deploying the scarce resources that are available for research in such a way that practical benefits for the nation and its people will be forthcoming.

A sixth major contribution of Mesoamerican studies to cultural studies as a whole lies in the fields of *linguistics, epigraphy, and art history*. The extraordinary recent discoveries of the linguists and epigraphers who study texts written in the hand of ancient Mesoamericans have extended the testimony of these peoples back to the beginning of the Christian era. Through such texts, now credibly rendered in translation, the Mesoamericans themselves tell us in their own writing systems what their world signified to them.

## MESOAMERICA AND THE STRUGGLE FOR PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL SURVIVAL

It is evident from what we have considered above that Mesoamerica has contributed a great deal to the wealth and political ascendancy of the West and to the development of Western thought in general and the social sciences in particular. But when we acknowledge the region's gifts to us in the form of wealth, labor, plant cultigens, and ideas, we must also recognize what they have cost: Native Mesoamericans have endured more than four centuries of various forms of oppression and exploitation in the course of their encounter with the outside world. In this asymmetrical contact situation, they have seldom acted as passive victims.



From their first contact with European peoples in the sixteenth century to the Zapatista Movement that Maya Indians launched in January 1994, large numbers of the cultural and biological descendants of the prehispanic Mesoamerican peoples have struggled to preserve their cultural identity. In stating this we do not mean to imply the romantic notion of some mystical persistence of the Mesoamerican peoples and their cultural traditions. In the chapters to follow, we will document their struggles to survive and maintain a dignified identity in the face of hundreds of years of oppression. The Mesoamerican cultural tradition is a living, vibrant social phenomenon and has survived in a diversity of expressions only as a result of the unrelenting resistance—in many instances, violent resistance—to outside imperialists by the Mesoamericans themselves.

The physical and social survival of the Mesoamerican Indians is sufficiently noteworthy to serve as both inspiration and model for other native peoples around the world who have suffered the ravages of colonization and “modernization.” We are not arguing that the Mesoamerican tradition has survived intact, or that the Mesoamericans have always played a key role in every social development in Mexico and Central America. Nevertheless, the Mesoamericans’ ability to adapt their cultural traditions to the dramatically changing social milieu in which they live and, when necessary, to attempt actively to transform that milieu, has rightfully captured the attention of the world community.

With respect to the physical survival of the Mesoamerican Indians within Mexico and Central America, we should note first that the absolute numbers of Indians has substantially increased through time since the catastrophic losses following first Spanish contact. The accompanying table summarizes the changes in absolute numbers of Indians in the region for the close of the prehispanic era (A.D. 1520), the time of independence from Spain (1800), the eve of the Mexican Revolution (1900), the beginning of the modern development phase (1950), and the present (1990).

As the table indicates, in Mexico almost 10 million people now identify themselves as Indians, and they make up 11 percent of that country’s total population. In Central America, almost 6 million people identify themselves as Indians, amounting to approximately 24 percent of its population (most of them in Guatemala). Remarkably, despite the massive population losses associated with the conquest and colonization of the region, the survivors of the Mesoamerican world now represent more than one-half the total aboriginal population from the time of Spanish contact. This demographic recovery constitutes a survival record perhaps unsurpassed by any other group of peoples suffering cataclysmic population losses in the annals of modern history.

The Mesoamericans’ record for social survival is as impressive as their record of

Changing Native Population in the Mesoamerican Region  
(in millions of Indians)

<i>Year</i>	<i>1520</i>	<i>1800</i>	<i>1900</i>	<i>1950</i>	<i>1990</i>
Mexico	21.4	3.7	2.1	2.9	9.5
Central America	5.7	0.6	1.3	3.8	5.9
Totals	27.1	4.3	3.4	6.7	15.4

*Note:* None of these population figures is highly reliable and should be considered only approximations. This is especially true for the prehispanic period (1520), for which some scholars would lower Mexico’s 21 million figure to 10 million or less. But even the more recent figures are best seen as estimates since they reflect the varying definitions of what constitutes Indian identity through time and from country to country.

physical survival. Many of the forms of social resistance that the Mesoamericans have practiced during the past 500 years are comparable to those of other native peoples around the world: closing off communities to outside influence, passive obedience or active disobedience to the mandates of outside powers, subtle syncretization of alien cultural forms with native cultures, rebellious nativistic movements, and many others. Large numbers of aboriginal peoples have actively participated in twentieth-century revolutionary movements in places like Russia, China, and Vietnam, but none more effectively or in greater numbers than the Mesoamericans. The first revolution of the twentieth century took place not in Russia but in Mexico, and as we will see, the native Mesoamericans played a crucial role in that social upheaval. Similarly, the most recent twentieth-century revolutions have been occurring in the Central American countries of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, where native Mesoamericans once again have been major players.

Undeniably, the revolutions that have shaken the world during the twentieth century constitute some of the most important events in modern world history. Given this historical fact, we think it is time that the Mesoamericans are given recognition for their significant revolutionary activities in Mexico and Central America. In this regard, it is worth noting that the Maya Zapatista Movement currently in progress in southern Mexico promises to force the democratization of Mexico's entire political process (for the Zapatista Movement, see the Epilogue).

## MESOAMERICA AND MODERN NORTH AMERICA

We conclude this preface by commenting briefly on why we, as scholars and citizens of the New World, should care about the cultural and social history of Mesoamerica as a segment of general knowledge that may be relevant to our everyday lives, now and in the future. We wish to move beyond academic and intellectual concerns to observe that the region has already profoundly influenced the world we live in. Indeed, some of the most familiar tastes and sights that make up our everyday lives derive from Native Mesoamerican and Mexican origins. For example, some of the staple ingredients in a McDonald's fast food lunch—french fries, ketchup, and chocolate shakes—come from plants that were domesticated by Native Americans—potatoes, tomatoes, and cacao. Chocolate (cacao) and tomatoes were native Mesoamerican cultigens, and potatoes were originally domesticated in Andean South America. Furthermore, the cattle that provide the beef to make the hamburgers are fed on maize (corn), the dietary staple of the ancient and modern peoples of Mesoamerica.

The social and economic history of maize, a Mesoamerican plant domesticate, is extraordinary in itself. It has become the principal food crop of many nations of Africa and Asia. In our own culture it appears in many forms, from tacos and tortilla chips (taken from Mexican cuisine) and cornbread (adapted from North American Indians) to the corn syrup that is ubiquitous in our processed foods. Maize and products derived from it make a multimillion-dollar contribution to the annual U.S. export economy.

Our homes, too, have been influenced by Mesoamerican traditions. The “ranch-style” houses so common in our modern suburbs developed from the modest one-story ranch houses of northern Mexico, which in turn were derived from Spanish house styles, modified during the Colonial period by the use of Mesoamerican building materials. Both Spanish and ancient Mesoamerican architectural styles included public and private outdoor living spaces. We have borrowed the names and concepts of “plaza” and “patio” and made them our own in the form of shopping plazas and backyard patios.

And around the world, what image is more associated with the United States than the western cowboy? Time and again our athletes choose to march into the Olympic

Games wearing the familiar cowboy hat. Yet the mythical “cowboy culture” that we celebrate as our own in literature, movies, and the arts bears the indelible imprint of its origins in northern Mexican cattle culture. The traditional cowboy outfit—broad-brimmed hat, kerchief, chaps, spurs, “cowboy” boots, and “western” saddle—is of Mexican origin. And so are dozens of words, borrowed from Spanish, that are associated with cowboy life and culture: ranch (*rancho*); corral (*corral*); buckaroo (from *vaquero*, meaning “cowboy”); bronco (from *bronco*, meaning “hoarse,” “resistant,” “untamed”); and rodeo (*rodeo*). To this list we must add “chili,” the quintessential dish of Southwestern U.S. cuisine and mainstay of cattle drivers. This dish is nothing less than a slightly altered adaptation of a generic bean, chili, tomato, and meat stew that existed in Mesoamerica long before Spain invaded Mexico.

We could go on to enumerate the influences of our southern neighbors on U.S. music, art, and other areas of our daily lives; however, suffice it to say that many regions of our country have a long history of interaction with the peoples of Mesoamerica. This began with the ancient trade networks between Mesoamerican and North American native groups and continued with the shared experience of exploration and efforts at colonization by Spain (large areas of our South and West were first explored by Spain between 1540 and 1570, decades before the founding of Jamestown). The pattern of close association continues with the current influx into our cities of millions of Mexican and Central American immigrants and refugees.

The United States shares a highly permeable 2,000-mile border with Mexico, and the flow of people, goods, and ideas across it has had a powerful impact on our society. This is reflected in a simple but startling demographic fact: East Los Angeles ranks second only to Mexico City itself among Mexican urban populations. Mexican Americans make up the majority of what is the largest non-English-speaking population of the United States. Indeed, the United States is the sixth-ranking Spanish-speaking nation in the world. Furthermore, the Mexican Spanish-speaking segment of U.S. society is growing faster than any other minority or immigrant group in this country. All of this leads to the obvious conclusion that ancient and modern Mesoamericans have long been a significant presence in U.S. culture and society, a pattern that shows no signs of abating in the near or distant future. Mesoamericans are thus, literally and figuratively, our fellow Americans. We have every reason to become well acquainted with them.

Canada, Mexico, and the United States have recently formalized the North American Free Trade Agreement. Modern Mesoamericans will now join us as members of one of the three major economic and trading blocs in the world: North America, Europe, and Asia. This suggests that the twenty-first century will inevitably bring Mexico, our “distant neighbor,” into our very midst with a shared set of economic interests and opportunities. As English-speaking North Americans, we will obviously have much to gain in appreciating and understanding the ancient and modern legacy of Mesoamerican civilization.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to extend their gratitude to all the members of the Institute for Mesoamerican Studies (IMS) who contributed their time and talents to the creation of this book. We also wish to give very special acknowledgment to Cynthia Heath-Smith, former Research Director of IMS, who labored tirelessly and efficiently to coordinate the assembling of the text itself, the obtainment of permissions for many of the illustrations, and the initial editing of the manuscript on the campus of the University at Albany–SUNY.

The contributors below provided illustrations from their personal collections, as indicated by figure numbers listed:

Louise Burkhart: Figures 2.6, 2.13, 5.3, 5.4, 5.6, 5.12.

Robert Carmack: Figures 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.13, 6.8, 7.4, 8.5.

Alfredo Rosenbaum: Figures 9.6, 9.7.

Brenda Rosenbaum: Figure 9.9.

Michael Smith: Figures 1.1, 1.4, 2.2, 2.11, 2.14, 2.18, 2.19, 7.11, 8.4.

Ellen Cesarski prepared artwork specifically for the following figures of the book: Figures 1.2, 1.3, 1.8, 1.11, 1.12, 2.3 (map), 2.5 (map), 2.7, 2.9 (map), 2.17 (map), 4.1 (map), 5.1 (map), 6.1 (map), 7.1 (map), 7.7 (map), 8.1, 8.6, 11.1, 11.3, 12.7.

The individuals and institutions below went out of their way to assist and provide us with illustrative materials, in many cases waiving or drastically reducing their regular fees:

Frances F. Berdan

E. Bradford Burns

Susan Danforth, The John Carter Brown Library, Brown University

Enrique Florescano

Jeffrey Jay Foxx

David A. Freidel

Ian Graham

Merle Green Robertson

Gillett G. Griffin

Debra Nagao

Alex Ross

Linda Schele

Finally, we would like to thank the following reviewers for their helpful suggestions and useful insights: Robert R. Alvarez, Arizona State University; Robert V. Kemper, Southern Methodist University; Karl H. Schwerin, University of New Mexico; Albert Wahrhaftig, Sonoma State University; and Alaka Wali, University of Maryland.



# Contents

<b>PREFACE</b>	ix
<b>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</b>	1
Spanish First Impressions of Mesoamerica, 1	
Defining “Mesoamerica” and Other Important Terms, 5	
The Physical Setting of Aboriginal Mesoamerica, 8	
Past Studies of Mesoamerica, 21	
The Approach Taken in This Text, 34	
Organization of the Text, 36	
Suggested Readings, 37	
<b>UNIT I AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE MESOAMERICAN PEOPLES</b>	39
<b>CHAPTER 2 ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF MESOAMERICAN CIVILIZATION</b>	40
<i>(Janine Gasco and Michael E. Smith)</i>	
Early Inhabitants of Mesoamerica, 42	
Mesoamerica Defines Itself: The Formative Period, 48	
The Classic Civilizations, 57	
Postclassic City-States, 71	
Ancient Mesoamerica, 79	
Suggested Readings, 79	

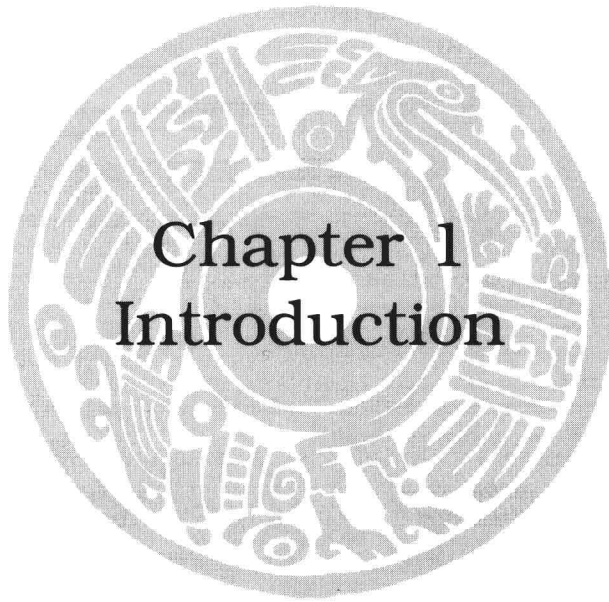
<b>CHAPTER 3 MESOAMERICA AT SPANISH CONTACT</b>	<b>80</b>
<i>(Robert M. Carmack)</i>	
Complexity of the Mesoamerican World, 81	
Mesoamerica as a World System, 83	
Mesoamerican Core, 86	
The Mesoamerican Semi-Periphery, 95	
The Mesoamerican Periphery, 101	
Case Study: The Aztecs of Central Mexico, 110	
Reflections on Mesoamerica as a World System, 119	
Suggested Readings, 121	
 <b>CHAPTER 4 MESOAMERICA AND SPAIN: THE CONQUEST</b>	 <b>122</b>
<i>(Louise M. Burkhart and Janine Gasco)</i>	
The Origins of Spanish Imperialism, 123	
Spain's Colonial Enterprise Begins, 126	
The Debate over Indian Rights, 132	
The Campaign against the Aztecs, 136	
The Conquest of Michoacán, 147	
The Maya Area, 148	
Suggested Readings, 152	
 <b>CHAPTER 5 THE COLONIAL PERIOD IN MESOAMERICA</b>	 <b>154</b>
<i>(Louise M. Burkhart and Janine Gasco)</i>	
The Colonial Regime, 154	
Civil-Religious Institutions Affecting the Native Population, 158	
Evangelization: Issues and Implications, 162	
Colonial Society, 172	
Life in the Corporate Community, 175	
Native Rebellions, 194	
Suggested Readings, 195	
 <b>CHAPTER 6 MESOAMERICANS IN THE ERA OF LIBERAL REFORMS</b>	 <b>196</b>
<i>(Robert M. Carmack and Gary H. Gossen)</i>	
Nineteenth-Century Social History: From Independence to Dictatorship, 197	
Mesoamericans and the Independence Movements, 207	
Mesoamerican Indians under Liberal Rule, 215	
Nativistic Movements in the Mesoamerican Region, 224	
Growing U.S. Influence in the Region, 251	
Suggested Readings, 236	
 <b>CHAPTER 7 MESOAMERICANS IN THE MODERN ERA</b>	 <b>238</b>
<i>(Robert M. Carmack)</i>	
Summary of Twentieth-Century Social History, 239	
Participation in the Twentieth-Century Revolutions by Mesoamerican Indians, 253	

Consequences for the Mesoamerican Indians of Development Programs in Mexico and Central America, 266	
Mesoamerican Contributions to National Ethos, 270	
The Social Differentiation of Contemporary Mesoamerican Indians, 274	
Suggested Readings, 288	

<b>UNIT II SELECTED TOPICS IN MESOAMERICAN STUDIES</b>	<b>289</b>
<b>CHAPTER 8 THE RELIGIONS OF MESOAMERICA</b> <i>(Gary H. Gossen)</i>	<b>290</b>
The Ancient World, 290	
The Mesoamerican Spiritual World Meets the West, 301	
Into the Modern Era, 308	
Is There a Common Core of Mesoamerican Spirituality? 312	
Suggested Readings, 319	
<b>CHAPTER 9 WOMEN AND GENDER IN MESOAMERICA</b> <i>(Brenda Rosenbaum)</i>	<b>321</b>
Historical Development of the Gender System, 323	
Current Issues in the Study of Women and Gender, 339	
Suggested Readings, 352	
<b>CHAPTER 10 THE POLITICAL AND CULTURAL ECONOMY OF MESOAMERICA</b> <i>(Liliana R. Goldin)</i>	<b>353</b>
A Brief Historical Review of Production Forms and Use of Labor, 354	
Land and Labor, 356	
Production, 361	
Distribution, 368	
Economy and Change, 370	
Mesoamerica in the World System, 372	
Suggested Readings, 378	
<b>CHAPTER 11 LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGES IN MESOAMERICA</b> <i>(John S. Justeson and George A. Broadwell)</i>	<b>379</b>
What Are the Languages of Mesoamerica? 379	
What Are Mesoamerican Languages Like? 383	
Language Variation and Change, 390	
Writing in Ancient Mesoamerica, 397	
Language and History, 401	
Conclusion, 405	
Suggested Readings, 406	

<b>CHAPTER 12 INDIGENOUS LITERATURE IN PRECONQUEST AND COLONIAL MESOAMERICA</b>	<b>407</b>
<i>(Louise M. Burkhart)</i>	
PreColumbian Literature, 407	
Native Literature of the Colonial Period, 418	
Suggested Readings, 441	
<b>CHAPTER 13 THE INDIAN VOICE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY MESOAMERICAN LITERATURE</b>	<b>442</b>
<i>(Gary H. Gossen)</i>	
The Nineteenth-Century Hiatus, 442	
The Representation of Indian Voices in Twentieth-Century Mesoamerican Art and Literature, 443	
The Native Voice in National Written Literatures of Mesoamerica, 447	
Traditional Indian Verbal Arts in the Twentieth Century, 455	
New Indian Writing in Mesoamerica, 467	
Suggested Readings, 471	
<b>EPILOGUE</b>	<b>472</b>
<b>GLOSSARY</b>	<b>476</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>481</b>
<b>INDEX</b>	<b>485</b>





# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The Spanish explorers and conquistadors who first made contact with the Mesoamerican world were surprised by its complexity and grandeur, for they had become accustomed to the simpler ways of the previously subjugated natives of the Caribbean islands. Their testimony constitutes an informative beginning place for our study of the Mesoamerican world, whose origins, condition at European contact, and transformations resulting from colonization and (more recently) modernization are the subject of this text.

### **SPANISH FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF MESOAMERICA**

The Spaniards were extremely impressed with the level of cultural development achieved by the Mesoamerican peoples, and in reviewing their first impressions the reader should take particular note of the complexity and diversity of Mesoamerica. Let us begin with Columbus and his fourth voyage to the New World.

#### **Columbus Meets the Maya during His Fourth Voyage**

The first Europeans to make contact with Mesoamerican peoples were Christopher Columbus and his men during their fourth voyage to the New World. Columbus began the voyage in 1502. Departing from Spain, he touched down on