

Ancient West Mexico in the Mesoamerican Ecumene

Eduardo Williams



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Cover: the Petámuti (high priest) addressing the nobles at Tzintzuntzan, the Tarascan capital (after Relación de Michoacán, ca. 1540; Alcalá 2008).

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This book may look like a story about ruins and pyramids; about palaces, monuments, stelae, and sculpture... It isn't. It is about ordinary people like you or me, and what they did, what they achieved, and what they believed...

Jaime Litvak King
Ancient Mexico: An Overview

The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there...

L. P. Hartley
The Go-Between

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Preface

This book presents a long-overdue synthesis and update of West Mexican archaeology aimed at scholars, students and the general public. Books published in English on West Mexican archaeology are few and far between. The most notable ones we can mention would include: Volume 11 of the *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, edited by Robert Wauchoppe, Gordon Ekholm and Ignacio Bernal (1971); *The Archaeology of West Mexico*, edited by Betty Bell (1974); *The Archaeology of West and Northwest Mesoamerica*, edited by Michael S. Foster and Phil C. Weigand (1985); *Ancient West Mexico: Art and Archaeology of the Unknown Past*, edited by Richard F. Townsend (1998); *The Archaeology of West and Northwest Mexico*, edited by Michael S. Foster and Shirley Gorenstein (2000); *Shaft Tombs and Figures in West Mexican Society: A Reassessment*, edited by Christopher Beekman and Robert Pickering (2016); and *Cultural Dynamics and Production Activities in Ancient West Mexico*, edited by Eduardo Williams and Blanca Maldonado (2016). Upon comparing this list to the, literally, *hundreds* of books published on central and southern –i.e. ‘nuclear’– Mesoamerica, the reader will understand the importance of adding the present volume to the archaeological literature.

All the books mentioned above are edited volumes containing the works of many authors; thus, *Ancient West Mexico in the Mesoamerican Ecumene* is the first book about West Mexican archaeology written by a single author. It is also a unique volume because it is written from the perspective of the Mesoamerican ecumene; that is to say, the universe of interaction that coalesced into one of the major civilizations in the ancient world. This book is also the first time that a scholar combines perspectives from archaeology, socio-cultural anthropology, ethnohistory and ethnoarchaeology to shed light on the western cultural sub-area of Mesoamerica in ancient times.

Many books and articles edited by Phil Weigand and myself, and published by the *Colegio de Michoacán* over the course of the last two-and-a-half decades, bear testament to our shared interest in anthropological archaeology and our commitment to publishing original research that does not follow the ‘normative’ approach that is so prevalent in West Mexican archaeology. Many of these books, originally published in Spanish and long out of print, have been used in shaping the present volume. This includes my own articles, book chapters and papers, as well as works by many colleagues, students and other scholars from Mexico and abroad. I thank all of them for their contributions. The list of publications is too long to cite here, so I ask the reader to refer to the References Cited section at the end of the book.

Thanks are due to the following colleagues who read various chapters and gave me their comments, or provided information (including books, articles, theses, illustrations, etc.): Ericka Blanco, Blas Castellón, Susan T. Evans, Sergio Gómez Chávez, David Grove, Dan Healan, Peter Jiménez, Blanca Maldonado, Linda Manzanilla, Randall McGuire, Joseph Mountjoy, Edgar Nebot, Agustín Ortiz Buitrón, Jeffrey Parsons, Bob Pickering, Helen Pollard, José Luis Punzo, Paul Schmidt, Carlos Viramontes, David Wright, and Gabriela Zepeda. However, I am solely responsible for the ideas expressed herein.

Eduardo Williams
Jacona, Michoacán,
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Chapter I

Introduction

This introductory essay consists of three parts. In the first, I discuss the main debates and perspectives that have evolved in Mesoamerican studies over time, from the earliest scholars in the 19th century to the latest contributions, and how different authors have shaped our current perceptions about the culture area we know as Mesoamerica. The second part is concerned with the Mesoamerican ecumene;¹ that is, the universe of cultural and social interactions that coalesced into one of the major cultural areas of the ancient world. In the last section, I explore the unique role that West Mexico played in shaping that Mesoamerican ecumene.

Mesoamerica: Debates and Perspectives over Time

Before embarking on this narrative, it is important to consider a few basic notions about our subject of interest. In her discussion of Mesoamerican civilization, Susan T. Evans (2004a) explains that the physical environment where our story takes place is called Middle America: 'A geographical zone encompassing the region from the Isthmus of Panama in the south through the Sonoran and Chihuahua deserts of northern Mexico and the US Southwest'. As a culture area, Mesoamerica is defined by 'shared features of indigenous cultural adaptation... Mesoamerica only extends over part of Middle America, covering that contiguous area where cultivation of maize... brought reliable harvests'. Mesoamerica's cultural borders thus shifted through time, 'with changes in climate that determined whether or not maize cultivation was possible in the borderlands' (p. 19).

Mesoamerica was one of the few regions of the ancient world where a primary or pristine civilization emerged; that is to say, with no significant influence from any other culture, in particular from the Old World. Indeed, the Mesoamerican ecumene can be regarded as an independent universe of interaction with a shared history and culture² in which all participants engaged

in equal measure (Figure 1). The term Mesoamerica was coined by Paul Kirchhoff (1943), and its use has persisted to the present, though its meaning has changed somewhat over time, as our knowledge has evolved thanks to new research from the perspectives of archaeology, ethnohistory, linguistics, and socio-cultural anthropology. What follows, then, is a discussion of the concept of Mesoamerica in a diachronic vision that emphasizes changes and persistence through the years. Later in this chapter, I will explore the role played by West Mexico as part of the Mesoamerican ecumene.

Interest in cultures from the past—in this case the Mesoamerican ecumene—is not new. From the time of first contact between the original inhabitants of Mesoamerica and the Spanish invaders in the 16th century, various personages devoted their efforts to acquiring information about those indigenous peoples who were undergoing a process of transformation and disintegration.³ Topics of interest included their existing beliefs and customs, and those of their ancestors (Bernal 1980). Later, however, during the 17th and 18th centuries, the Spanish rarely allowed 'foreigners' to enter their New World possessions, while a prevailing conservative attitude did not encourage curiosity about the cultures of the past. With the passing of time, learned people and philosophers began to show great interest in other world cultures. After Mexico's independence (in the early 19th century), scholars from Mexico, Central America, Europe, and North America had greater freedom to travel around the country and record and study the remains of the Mesoamerican past. At the same time, archaeology was evolving: from a mere antiquarian interest, it became a serious activity devoted to the systematic study of past cultures (Evans 2004a:43).

The consolidation of the systematic study of prehistory, unlike the approach of antiquarians of earlier times, began early in the 19th century, such that by the 1850s prehistoric archaeology was emerging as an important component of the study of human development through material culture (Trigger 2006:121). At the beginning of the 20th century, the central theme of

¹ The word ecumene has been defined as: (a) 'the permanently inhabited portion of the Earth as distinguished from the uninhabited or temporarily inhabited area'; (b) 'the nuclear area or center of maximum activity of a state having the densest population and the closest network of transportation routes'; and (c) 'a nuclear area of high culture to which neighboring regions stand in a relation of cultural backwardness or dependence' (synonymous with civilization). (Merriam-Webster Dictionary: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecumene>).

² The culture concept as understood by anthropologists has been difficult to reconcile with an archaeological perspective. In this book, I follow Patty J. Watson's definition of culture (based on the writings of Robert Redfield), as 'an organized body of conventional

understandings manifest in art and artifacts which, persisting through tradition, characterizes a human group' (Watson 1995:683).

³ The main reason for the collapse of native societies in the 16th century was the introduction by the Spanish of Old World diseases in Mesoamerica, which decimated the population. The introduction of new species such as sheep and cattle radically changed the ecosystem, to the detriment of native populations (Melville 1994).

ANCIENT WEST MEXICO IN THE MESOAMERICAN ECUMENE

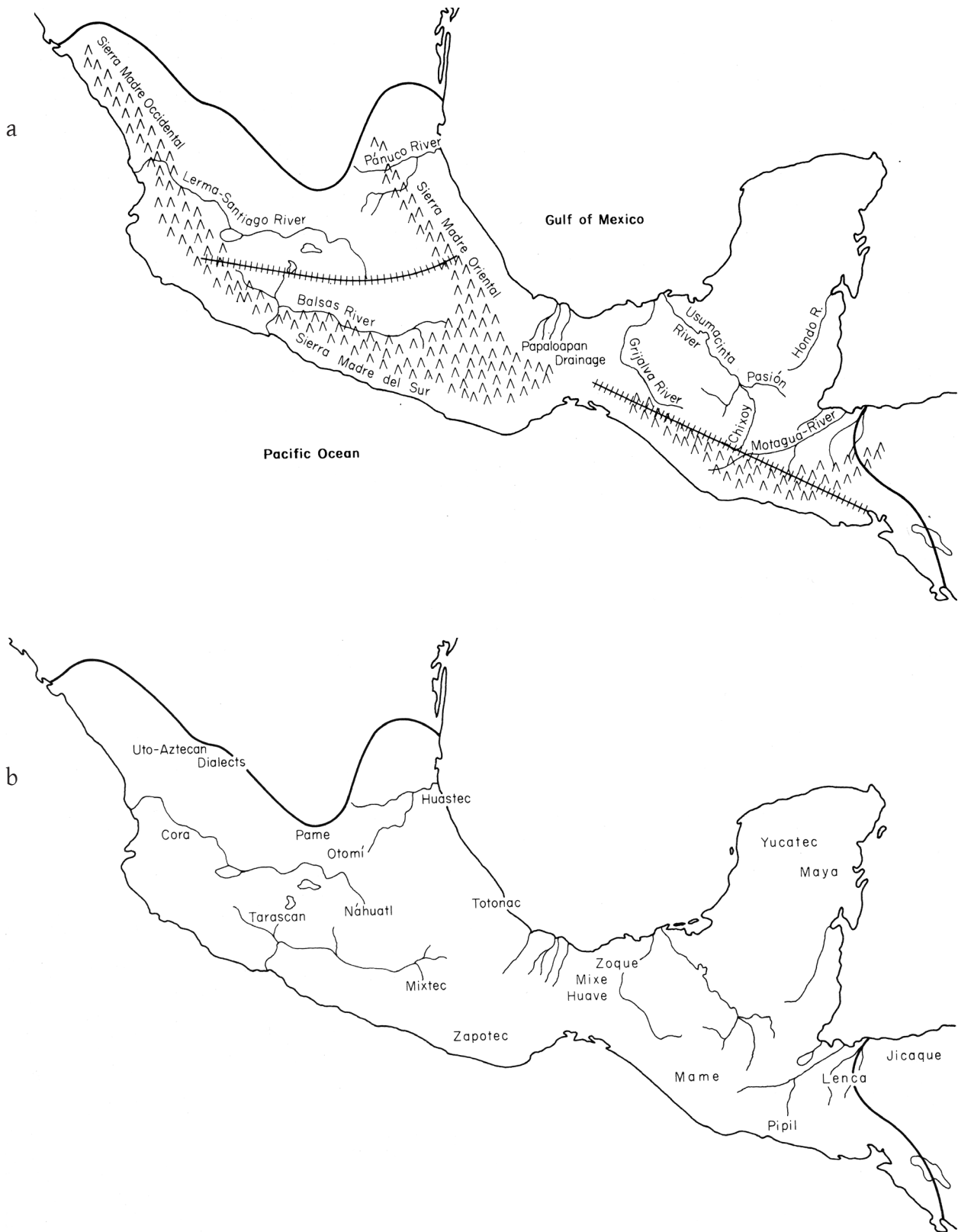


Figure 1. Map of Mesoamerica, indicating the territory occupied by the ecumene at the time of the Spanish invasion in the 16th century: (a) major physiographic forms and rivers; (b) native linguistic groups at contact period (adapted from Porter Weaver 1972: Map 1).

American archaeology was a concern with chronology, but after 1940 other issues received more attention (Willey and Sabloff 1980), as in addition to conducting classifications of artifacts, archaeologists also began to classify ancient cultures. The main goal during the period between 1914 and 1940 was to produce a synthesis of the cultural history of the New World (p. 83).

Among these initial efforts we can mention the 'archaic hypothesis' proposed by Herbert J. Spinden in 1917, which was based on the observation that throughout Mesoamerica there were similar objects and figurines made of clay and other materials, suggesting that the civilizations of this cultural area –the Teotihuacans, Mayas, Zapotecs, and others– represented specialized developments that had emerged from a common base of agricultural villages, which Spinden called the 'Archaic period'. It was during this time (now called the Formative, or Preclassic; ca. 1500 BC-AD 250) that many of the basic ideas and inventions, including agriculture and pottery, that would later become essential components of civilizations had their origins. Spinden illustrated these ideas on a map that may well be the first depiction of the area that would come to be known as Mesoamerica (Willey and Sabloff 1980:118, and Figure 88).

A contemporary of Spinden, the German scholar Eduard Seler, has been characterized by Henry B. Nicholson as one of the most influential and productive of all Americanists. Seler's many interests and talents allowed him to make fundamental contributions to such fields as indigenous linguistics, archaeology, native history, and the ethnography of Mesoamerica. One area of Seler's monumental contributions can be characterized as ethnohistory. According to Nicholson, it could be argued that Seler's disciplined analytical methodology constituted a major contribution to Mesoamerican studies, for after Seler the ethnohistory and archaeology of the Mesoamerican ecumene would never be the same (Nicholson 1973:348, 361, 362).

Richard E. W. Adams (1977:12) mentions another German scholar who contributed ideas from both library research and fieldwork to the definition of Mesoamerica: Walter Lehmann, one of Seler's students. William Werner (2010) tells us that Lehmann (1878-1939) 'was an eminent specialist in the ethnology and archaeology of Mesoamerica during the height of Germany's power as a global empire' (p. 1) and 'a talented linguist, who synthesized his extensive philological knowledge with archaeological research to reconstruct the culture histories of peoples in Mexico and Central America in pre-Hispanic times.' Lehmann made a 'two-year journey from Panama to Mexico beginning in October 1907. The vocabularies that he assembled during this expedition set the benchmark

for linguistic studies in Central America for decades, and his photographic and archaeological collections continue to yield new insights to Central American scholars today' (p. 3). Lehmann was able to acquire a plethora of artifacts that he shipped back to Berlin because many landowners invited him 'to carry out his own excavations on their estates in the nearby coffee-growing regions of the central valley of Costa Rica... During these visits, indigenous plantation workers provided Lehmann with vocabularies for his linguistic research, labor for his archaeological excavations, and models for anthropological measurements' (p. 3).

Lehmann's archaeological and ethnographic research in Central America 'reinforced the concept of cultural identities as entities that create distinct boundaries between individuals inhabiting an otherwise multinational landscape. This notion was consistent with his culture-historical research' (p. 3).

Another scholar who made a pioneering contribution to the definition of Mesoamerica was Miguel Otón de Mendizábal (1928). Although Mendizábal's research that concerns us here had a very specific purpose –to locate the salt sources exploited in ancient times in Mexico– Alfred Kroeber (1939) thought that his work was important because it was based on the lifeways and mode of subsistence of Mesoamerican indigenous peoples. The map that illustrates Mendizábal's findings shows the distribution of agricultural societies (that needed salt for their subsistence) and of the hunter-gatherers of the northern deserts (who could live without it) (Kroeber 1939), but what we really see on the map published by Mendizábal (1928) is the spatial distribution of all the cultures that became part of the Mesoamerican ecumene.

By the 1940s, fieldwork, primarily excavation, had become the basis for understanding cultural development in Mesoamerica. The Basin of Mexico was an outstanding stage for archaeological research thanks to scholars like Manuel Gamio, who had conducted digs there since the 1920s. Gamio excavated a deep pit at Cuanalán, and studied a mound at San Miguel Amantla (Bernal 1980:164). He called his research endeavors 'the first and only excavation conducted with a scientific method in the Valley of Mexico' (Gamio 1928). It was in this area of the Basin of Mexico that Gamio found the Archaic-Teotihuacan-Aztec archaeological sequence, but at that time it was impossible to extend it to the rest of the Basin, much less to areas outside it (Bernal 1980:164).

George Vaillant (1940) also conducted outstanding archaeological investigations in the Basin of Mexico during the first half of the 20th century. He was one of the first authors to suggest a sequence of cultural evolution for the Mesoamerican ecumene based on

his observations that throughout southern and central Mexico there were many examples of sedentary populations that depended on agriculture and had a fully-functional and adequate tool kit consisting of clay objects, baskets, gourds, and many other artifacts. Vaillant proposed six major cultural stages in Middle America: (1) a period of basic distribution of groups of hunter-gatherers; (2) a long phase of domestication and incipient cultivation of food crops; (3) a long phase for the development of permanent villages, the distribution of basic material equipment, and the creation of local populations; (4) a phase overlying the previous one, in which it is likely that migrations of people with highland techniques dispersed throughout the lightly-populated forested country; (5) the spread of the idea of a ceremonial center and variations of ritual, social, and material developments characteristic of Middle America; and finally (6) that 'peculiar upheaval' which brought the cultural and governmental hegemony of the Mixteca-Puebla culture (pp. 295-305).

As stated above, it was Paul Kirchhoff who coined the word Mesoamerica and defined the ecumene's geographical limits, ethnic composition, and cultural characteristics at the moment of contact with the Spanish *Conquistadores* in the 16th century. In his discussion of the Mesoamerican ecumene, Kirchhoff (1943) saw the area as a region whose inhabitants, both early immigrants and later arrivals, were united by a common history that confronted them as a group with other tribes from the American continent such that their migratory movements were confined to its geographic limits, once they had entered the Mesoamerican sphere (pp. 95-96). He based his study primarily on the distribution of cultural elements that he divided into three groups: (1) those exclusive to, or typical of, Mesoamerica; (2) those shared by Mesoamerica and other cultural areas in the Americas; and (3) those that were absent in Mesoamerica (pp. 98-99).

Kirchhoff's scheme is really a 'snapshot' that presents a static vision of Mesoamerican indigenous reality on the eve of first contact with the European invaders. His ideas were later elaborated and augmented by Alfred Kroeber (1948), who recognized six major cultural areas in North America and four in South America, the richest and most advanced ones being Mesoamerica and the Andes, which together formed the climax, or core, area for the entire hemisphere in ancient times (pp. 787, 793). According to Kroeber, the presence of a ritual calendar, as well as the invention of positional numerals (including the concept of zero) and an incipient script, could be used as criteria for defining the extension of a 'high-culture area'. He further mentioned a 'sub-nuclear area', which included an agricultural zone that undoubtedly had functioned as a corridor with the Southwestern portion of the present-day United States (pp. 787, 793).

In Jaime Litvak's opinion, Kroeber's groundbreaking study is important because he reached the conclusion that Mesoamerica was made up of several parts that functioned as definable regions. It is important to note, as well, that in Kroeber's original proposal, the relationship between culture and environment is conceived as 'the action that determines the whole scheme of development, and assumes that the interaction between those regions is what defines the whole area' (Litvak 1992:14).

Ten years after Kroeber's work, Wigberto Jiménez Moreno set out to trace the cultural development of ancient Mexico from the earliest evidence of ceramics (ca. 1500 BC) to the flowering of the 'Toltec Empire' (ca. AD 1000). Jiménez Moreno presents two maps of Mesoamerica showing the most important developments during the Formative period (the expansion of Olmec culture), and the transition to the Classic period, in an attempt to give time depth to the proposals that up to that moment had been static, and ignored the cultural diversity present in Mesoamerica (Jiménez Moreno 1959). Litvak (1975) commented the following about this study: 'The model by Jiménez Moreno gathers proposals that... produce a theoretical explanation of considerable force, whose possibilities must be taken into account as a structure [that is] strongly backed and brilliantly reasoned. [This model] explains Mesoamerica as a relationship between two general material environments, the coasts and the highlands' (p. 177). Litvak thought that the model created by Jiménez Moreno included 'other interesting characteristics, such as the... integration of information derived from ethnography, linguistics, and ethnohistory, used as factual data for its elaboration' (p. 178).

Gordon Willey (1962) carried on these attempts to give time depth to the static classificatory schemes that had been used to define the limits of the Mesoamerican ecumene. In the early 1960s, he proposed a division of human history in Mesoamerica into three main eras, according to the prevailing subsistence technology: (1) early hunters (from an unknown date to ca. 7000 BC), who exploited several species of (now extinct) Pleistocene fauna; (2) food gatherers and incipient farmers (ca. 7000-1500 BC), who subsisted by gathering wild seeds and plants, as well as growing food crops, and hunting or trapping small-sized fauna; and (3) the agricultural era (ca. 1500 BC-AD 1520), when food production by means of agriculture gradually increased in importance for subsistence (p. 49). Willey's ideas were among the contributions that served as the basis for the current scheme of cultural evolution in the Mesoamerican ecumene (Table 1).

According to Willey, it was with the development of farming around 1500 BC that Mesoamerica achieved unity as a cultural area, a unity expressed through a basic agricultural complex consisting of maize, beans,

Table 1. Cultural periods in the Mesoamerican ecumene, with dates and main characteristics.*

Period	Dates (Approximate)	Comments
Paleo-Indian	20000-7000 BC	First human inhabitants; 'Paleolithic' level of culture oriented toward hunting, fishing, and gathering wild resources.
Archaic	7000-1500 BC	Transition from hunting/gathering to a farming lifeway; first villages with incipient agriculture; settled communities evolved gradually.
Early Formative	1500-900 BC	Development of most of the early complex societies in Mesoamerica; the first complex artistic styles (<i>i.e.</i> Olmec, early Maya, etc.) show their earliest florescence (appearing at the beginning of this period and covering an extensive territory).
Middle Formative	900-500 BC	Regional polities emerge throughout Mesoamerica with towns and complex political systems, elaborate religion and iconography.
Late Formative	500 BC-AD 300	Most of the defining features of Mesoamerican civilization exist by the end of this period.
Classic	AD 300-900	Increased populations and development of complex social organization with urbanism, elaborate art forms and writing in some areas.
Early Postclassic	AD 900-1200	Reformulation of regional cultures after the collapse of most Classic societies; first states with overarching imperial ambitions.
Late Postclassic	AD 1200-1520	Widespread empires like the Aztecs and Tarascans; first historical and native documents, as well as eyewitness accounts of indigenous life and customs.
Protohistoric	AD 1450-1530	The Aztec Empire was established in the Basin of Mexico and central-southern Mesoamerica. The Tarascan Empire flourished in Michoacán and adjoining areas of West Mexico from the mid-15th century to the first decades after the Spanish conquest.

* Adapted from Adams (1977:13), and Evans (2004a).

pumpkins, and chili peppers (among other cultigens), and complemented by other edible plants that were domesticated, such as cacao, agave, and numerous tubers, fruits and vegetables (p. 56). Willey also mentions the following cultural traits that defined the incipient Mesoamerican tradition: public ceremonial structures of great size, including platform-mounds for temples and palaces arranged around plazas or rectangular patios. Certain religious themes or deities were characteristic of the Mesoamerican cultural area as well, such as Tlaloc and Quetzalcoatl, the lords of rain and cultural attainment, respectively. Inextricably linked with religion were astronomical knowledge, the calendar, mathematics and writing (p. 56).

Willey *et al.* (1964) argued that the most distinctive cultures of the Mesoamerican ecumene developed after the establishment of the first sedentary farming communities, though they also perceived distinctions among various types of Mesoamerican agriculture, each one adapted to a distinct ecological environment. In some areas, the earth was sufficiently fertile to allow the annual rotation of crops, alternating between two or more plots of land (the *barbecho* or fallow method), whereas in others, such as lowland tropical forests, farmers could till a plot for only one or two years before having to let it rest for five years or so (the 'slash-and-burn' method).

In other ecological settings, such as highland valleys, intensive agriculture was possible thanks to such

cultivation techniques as terraces, irrigation canals, dams, and raised fields (like the *chinampas* of the Aztecs). At the moment of contact with the Spanish invaders, Mesoamerica had a Neolithic level of technology, since metals were used only scarcely except for ornamental purposes and ritual display (though there were some tools made of copper or bronze). As for domesticated animals, the dog and turkey were virtually the only species used for food in Mesoamerica (pp. 447-448). It is noteworthy, indeed, that Mesoamerica was the only civilization in world history that lacked any kind of large domesticated animals, such as cattle, sheep, or pigs. For this reason, the Mesoamerican diet was based primarily on domesticated plants (Diamond 1999; Williams 2014a, 2014b).

From the time of the first farming communities in Mesoamerica (around the second millennium before Christ), the most common form of settlement was the village. Willey (1966) has stated that the structure of society rested on the foundations of the household, which consisted of a nuclear or extended family, with several families coming together to form villages. These settlements, in turn, came to be organized into larger territorial units under a leadership focused on ceremonial centers or political-religious capitals. This is a very old pattern and one characteristic of the whole of Mesoamerica. Ceremonial centers or headtowns would develop until they formed real cities with platforms made of earth, adobe, or stone topped with

temples or palaces splendidly adorned with sculptures and paintings. These towns and cities were the seat of political power wielded by hereditary rulers and priests, whose influence often extended over broad territorial states or empires (pp. 86, 460).

In the first half of the 20th century in Mexico and the United States, several scholars adopted a viewpoint that regarded civilization and state-level societies in Mesoamerica as phenomena that originated from the need to develop a centralized government, or political control, that regulated production systems, especially irrigation for agriculture. Pedro Armillas (1991 [1948]), for example, proposed that the development of religious symbolism, the construction of great pyramids, and the growth of ceremonial centers in Mesoamerica, could all be explained as the result of the introduction of intensive farming techniques, such as *chinampas* (lakeshore cultivation plots), terraces and irrigation canals. All these features made it possible to produce a surplus that might have been applied to sustain expensive ritual practices, and would have created a social base for the development of such practices. Armillas thought that it would be difficult to support any other explanation (p. 146).

Following Armillas' perspective, Angel Palerm (1955) regarded the Basin of Mexico as the best place to study ancient irrigation techniques, because 'the flowering of civilization in this arid valley... was a true product of human effort' (p. 110). Palerm highlighted the implications of this process for the evolution of complex social formations in the following words: 'In conclusion, we see the development of irrigation in the Valley of Mexico not so much as the result of many small-scale initiatives undertaken by small groups, but rather... as an enterprise on a grand scale, with proper planning in which a huge number of people took part... under a centralized and authoritarian leadership' (p. 112).

Another contribution to this argument comes from Eric Wolf (1959), who wrote that 'some scholars believe that irrigation farming created the need for more efficient organization and coordination in the construction and maintenance of dams, dikes, and canals, and in the supervision of workers who built and repaired these waterworks. Irrigation farming also produced the agricultural surpluses that fed both the laborers and the new organizers of production'. However, Wolf also states that 'other scholars favor the opposite view and hold that the new patterns of organization came first and made the new productive enterprises possible' (p. 74).

In order to explain the origins of civilization in Mesoamerica, William Sanders (1962) observed that each type of environment presents its human occupants with distinct challenges, so different sets of cultural responses should be expected from human groups, which tend to follow the path of greatest

efficiency in their exploitation of their ecological setting, for instance irrigation farming (p. 34). At the end of the 1960s, agriculture with artificial irrigation was still regarded as a basic factor for the development of complex societies and, eventually, of states. Sanders and Barbara Price (1968), for instance, point out that the canals used to channel irrigation water to the fields had to be cleaned periodically by a communal work force; work that required planning and organization. Tasks of this nature would be carried out more effectively when performed under a state-level political structure. Furthermore, in cases where intensive farming had to be performed in conditions of scarce land and water, disputes would inevitably arise over the appropriation and use of such resources. Clearly, conflict resolution would be more efficient if formal patterns of authority, like those associated with the state, existed (p. 176).

Sanders and Price's ideas, summarized above, followed those of Palerm who, in turn, based his proposals concerning the 'Asiatic mode of production' in Mesoamerica on the earlier writings of Karl Wittfogel (1957). This well-known author regarded irrigation as one of the main (if not the only) movers behind social evolution, which culminated with the advent of the state. According to Wittfogel, the efficient management of waterworks required a network of organization that included the entire population of a country, or at least its dynamic core. Therefore, whoever exerted control over the network of hydraulic features would be able to exercise supreme political power (p. 26).

Palerm (1980) summed up the basic characteristics of the 'Asiatic mode of production' in these terms: (1) This mode of production was determined by the level of development of the productive forces. The economy had to have evolved beyond the primitive subsistence level by means of agriculture. There also had to be social production and surpluses of both production and labor. (2) The natural environment was characterized by scarcity (or overabundance) of water for farming. Agriculture had been developed in geographic settings that demanded technical skills for irrigation or drainage, resulting in a constant need for organized and coordinated work throughout society. (3) This special kind of agriculture required a monumental scale in its geographic and technical aspects, which resulted in the large-scale physical manifestations we see today in many parts of the world, including Mesoamerica (pp. 57-58).

In the 1980s, some authors continued to invoke the concept of the Asiatic mode of production to explain the development of complex societies in Mesoamerica, even defining this concept as 'the greatest contribution to our knowledge of pre-Hispanic Mexico in the last forty years' (Boehm de Lameiras 1985:258).⁴

⁴ The basic ideas behind the Asiatic mode of production, however,

In the 1960s, renewed interest emerged in the relationship between the environment and socio-cultural evolution. This was particularly evident among the few archaeologists who had begun to search for the causes of cultural change (Willey and Sabloff 1980). A good example of this concern is the book *Mesoamerica: The Evolution of a Civilization*, by Sanders and Price (1968), which discusses the ecological features that set the stage for cultural evolution in this ecumene. Those authors state that ‘one striking, salient characteristic of the [Mesoamerican] area as a whole is its extraordinary diversity. The tight micro-geographical zoning results in a corresponding diversity and highly-localized distribution of raw materials’ (p. 188). They further believed that ‘Mesoamerica may be divided into a series of regions for which the term “Symbiotic Region” is useful. Each consists of zones of contrasting environments, and each has a highland and a lowland component... The interrelationships of the components of these regions are complex and overlapping’ (p. 189). These observations apply equally to West Mexico and all other areas of Mesoamerica, as we shall see in subsequent chapters. Sanders and Price close their argument by stating that ‘the implication of the concept of economic symbiosis is that when areas were in close historical contact, such contacts were a primary force in the enrichment of local cultural traditions’ (p. 190).

Litvak (1992) saw in the aforementioned attempts to define Mesoamerica, that this cultural area involved ‘the factors causing and defining civilization as a state of higher development of mankind’s culture. The... [Mesoamerican] area is comparable to other regions, and so it allows for the construction of general models of archaeological theory’ (p. 10). One of these models was proposed by Litvak himself, who defined Mesoamerica as ‘a spatial system of normal exchange, where each constituent region, apart from its own inner dynamics, has relations with all other regions, with variations through time and with ever-changing states of equilibrium’ (p. 183). Litvak’s definition of Mesoamerica was based on the interaction among zones characterized both ecologically and as the component parts of a network. He thought that Mesoamerica was constituted through a process that could be discerned in the distribution of archaeological materials that originated in one of the participating regions but

have not lacked critics, including Gary Feinman (2006), who pointed out that in the Oaxaca Valley, as in other areas of the Mesoamerican highlands, it is not possible to argue that large-scale irrigation played an important role in the origin and development of the state. In fact, Feinman holds that the most powerful states could have been based on quite simple farming techniques. These ideas have been corroborated in the Andes, both in the Bolivian highlands (Stanish 1994) and on the coast of Peru (Billman 2002). Beyond the New World, Karl Marx considered the island of Bali, Indonesia, as the best example of the Asiatic mode of production. However, it has not been possible to find a direct link between irrigation and social evolution there (Lansing 1987).

appeared as normal finds in the other regions that made up the Mesoamerican ecumene. When translated into purely archaeological terms, Litvak’s model has the advantage that it is subject to empirical verification (pp. 183, 185).

Meanwhile, the ideas expressed by Blanton *et al.* (1981) concur with Litvak’s viewpoints discussed above. For Blanton and his colleagues, the Mesoamerican ecumene ‘came into being as a real, historical entity, self-defined by the patterned behavior of its people. Mesoamerica was a social system. It was, to borrow from Immanuel Wallerstein, a world-system, meaning that its destiny was largely self-defined, and to its participants it represented all the world they wished to care about’ (p. 245). According to these authors, Mesoamerica ‘was neither a world-empire nor a world-economy. The relationships holding it together were neither those of a single empire nor those of separate economic institutions... What made Mesoamerica an encompassing social system was its structure of elite prestige’ (p. 246). In discussing cultural change over time, Blanton *et al.* suggest that ‘from the chiefdoms of the Preclassic to the states and empires of later times, regional societies in Mesoamerica were composed of two strata: the rulers and the ruled... The elite... of each regional society... had much in common with their counterparts in neighboring and even far-flung regions’ (p. 246). In their opinion, an elite usually ‘had more in common with other elites... than it did with its own commoners. These elite activities were the interregional contacts that made the Mesoamerican world what it was to its participants and what it is to us as... archaeologists’ (p. 246).

Mesoamerica was not all that different from other areas of high culture in antiquity in the sense that there was a series of historical-cultural traditions within the ecumene that interacted intensely through ideological nexuses, economic contacts, and political rivalries. However, each sub-area of Mesoamerica was quite different from the others: from West Mexico at one extreme to the Maya area at the other, we can see striking social and cultural contrasts, although there was a degree of congruency and, to some extent, continuity. In many cases, interaction within the ecumene was sufficiently intense to become symbiotic in nature. Trade was the main structure (though not the only one) that kept Mesoamerica together, complemented by exchange and tribute of scarce resources, including both basic and luxury goods. The character and intensity of these relationships are the defining factors of an ecumene, rather than the specific aspects of social organization or culture. Although the latter are indispensable for understanding each component of an ecumene, the ecumene itself is defined by the interwoven structure that gives cohesion to the different elements.

Therefore, the socio-cultural differences among the constituent parts should not limit our grasp of the macro-economic considerations that forged one single entity out of many parts (Williams and Weigand 2004; see also Weigand 1982, 1993a).

Mesoamerica had great ecological and geographic diversity, which fostered trade and exchange between regions from earliest times. Virtually no region of Mesoamerica had all the elements that were necessary for subsistence. The most important ecological contrasts were between the cold highlands and the hot lowlands and coastal areas (Blanton *et al.* 1981; Sanders and Price 1968). The imposition of tribute by military means, together with trade, served from antiquity as mechanisms for the exchange of people, information, and goods between regions in conditions of dynamic and poorly-defined borders between different social systems (Blanton *et al.* 1981:60).

Recent decades have seen increasing interest in research on Mesoamerican cultures of the Postclassic period (*ca.* AD 900-1521), conducted by archaeologists, ethnohistorians, specialists in art history, epigraphers, and other scholars. One example of this holistic approach is the book *The Postclassic Mesoamerican World*, edited by Michael Smith and Frances Berdan (2003). This volume presents a collection of studies that attempt to synthesize and analyze all the new information under the concept of the 'Mesoamerican world system'. Information from archaeology and ethnohistory shows that during the Postclassic, the Mesoamerican economy was more highly-commercialized than during previous times, and had distribution systems based on competitive market exchange (Smith and Berdan 2003). The list of 'key commodities' is quite extensive, including the following products: cacao, copper axes that functioned as money, copper and bronze bells, feathers and feathered ornaments, gold and silver jewelry, greenstone jewels (turquoise, jade, and others), obsidian (in raw form and as artifacts), painted manuscripts, simple and decorated textiles, polychrome ceramics, raw cotton, salt, and slaves, among many other goods and materials. It is rarely easy to define the monetary value of commodities in historical or archaeological contexts, but we know that the Mesoamerican commercial economy included different kinds of exchange units (copper axes, cotton mantles, and gold dust, among others), so it is probable that people measured the value of goods in terms of price (Smith and Berdan 2003).

In Smith and Berdan's view, the basic elements for the spatial constitution of the Mesoamerican world system during the Postclassic were individual polities; that is, the small city-states that appeared in this period and thrived as foci of development, including

production and international trade centers, and zones for procuring strategic resources. The relationships established among these states differed in scale and nature: economic, political, social, and religious, and it was the nature of these relationships that gave the Mesoamerican ecumene its characteristic texture.

In conclusion, Mesoamerica should not be seen as a monolithic construct but, rather, as a cultural universe with several overlapping spheres of interaction: political, cultural, religious, ideological, and commercial. Mesoamerica was a stage upon which several human groups fulfilled their historical destiny according to a shared worldview or cosmovision. One especially important argument in this regard was offered by William Fowler and Stephen Houston (1990) in the following passage:

Since Seler, and more formally since Kirchhoff's day, scholars have viewed Mesoamerica as a region that is culturally diverse, yet at the same time integrated by bonds of history, economy, and religious belief. Here is perhaps one instance in which a term has proved more useful than its authors ever imagined; most of us were trained as *Mesoamericanists*, not Belizean Mayanists or Tabasqueño olmequistas... The large and growing number of Mesoamerican specialists suggests that many feel the same way... But... in recent years... it has become increasingly acceptable to lose sight of Seler and Kirchhoff's vision and to focus on a small corner of Mesoamerica, even a particular valley or shoreline, missing entirely the panoramic sweep of Mesoamerican antiquity. This seems to us a sad thing and, worse yet, a prelude to intellectual triviality and inadequate scholarship (p. 1).

The main ideas of this message are echoed by Kowalewski *et al.* (1992), who believe that in addition to the partial and particularistic viewpoint criticized by Fowler and Houston, another problem that has hindered archaeological and ethnohistorical research in Mesoamerica is the existence of a 'normative' viewpoint,⁵ as seen in the cultural-historical approach that dominated Mesoamerican archaeology until the 1960s, and still boasts many followers today. Kowalewski *et al.* are critical of 'the all-too-frequent Mesoamericanist infatuation with personages, diffusing traits and influences, and undifferentiated, mentalist conceptions of past cultures' (p. 260).

⁵ The normative model of culture (in archaeology, anthropology and history) defines culture as a set of shared ideas, or norms. The normative model was the dominant perspective in archaeology up to the rise of processual archaeology in the 1960s (Binford 1983).

The Mesoamerican Ecumene

The ancient Greeks used the word *Oikoumene*, meaning 'the place inhabited by humankind' to define those parts of the world known to them where 'civilized' peoples lived. Arnold Toynbee (1976) tells us that 'the Oikoumene is a Greek term which became current in the Hellenic Age... after the Hellenic Greek World had expanded... Its literal meaning is "the inhabited part of the world"... but in practice the Greek inventors and users of the term restricted its application to the fraction of the inhabited part of the world that was occupied by so-called "civilized" societies'. In the ancient Greek worldview, the Oikoumene was limited to 'the domains of the civilizations with which the Greeks themselves had become familiar' (p. 27). The concepts of ecumene (a variant of *oikoumene*) and the more-or-less equivalent 'world system' both refer to sociopolitical and economic entities that, by definition, encompass not just extensive territories, but also a series of social systems that interact with each other and collectively constitute civilizations (Smith and Berdan 2003; Wallerstein 1974; Weigand 2000; Williams 2004a; Williams and Weigand 2004, 2011).

Toynbee (1976) tells us that 'the civilizations of Mesoamerica and Peru had blossomed into their "classic" full flower perhaps as early as the beginning of the Christian Era, while the antecedent "formative" period of these American higher cultures may have begun... as early as the beginning of any of the Old World civilizations except the Sumero-Akkadian and the Pharaonic Egyptian' (p. 28). In the Old World, the time of the advent of 'the oldest civilizations... was ca. 3000 BC, and, at that date, those pre-Columbian American cultures that eventually blossomed into civilizations... had perhaps already taken the first steps toward the domestication of maize, which was to become their staple cultivated food' (p. 49). Almost at the same time, by the 15th century, 'The Mesoamerican and Andean societies were each one encapsulated politically in an empire that embraced the greater part of the society's domain. In each case the empire-building was done by a community that had arrived relatively recently in the location from which it subsequently expanded its political dominion'. Toynbee pointed out that '... so far as we know, the Aztecs were the first conquerors in the Mesoamerican world to create an empire that came near to being all-embracing' (p. 517). Meanwhile, in the Andean area, 'the Inca Empire dwarfed the Aztec Empire in area, though it may not have surpassed it to the same degree in the size of its population, considering how much of its territory was uninhabitable. In area, the Inca Empire was comparable to the First Persian, the Chinese, and the Roman Empires' (p. 521).

Regarding the human Oikoumene from a global perspective, Toynbee made the following

observations: 'In the course of the century and a half ca. 1400-1550, mankind's traditional mental picture of [the human] habitat, and of its place in the Universe, was transformed... the size of the Oikoumene now suddenly expanded' (p. 524) after the first formal contacts between Europe and the rest of the world (America, Asia, Africa). 'The period that spanned the 15th and 16th centuries was the age in which the global Oikoumene coalesced'. This process 'was sudden, and it brought with it sudden changes of fortune... to the previously segregated sections of the human race. It was an unmitigated catastrophe for the Aztecs and the Incas and for West Africans within reach of Western Christian slave-traders. Some of the Aztec's and the Inca's subjects welcomed their release from the regional empire-builders' recently imposed domination, only to discover that they had not been liberated but had merely undergone a change of masters' (p. 526).

In order to understand the role played by West Mexico in the Mesoamerican ecumene, I will discuss the concept of ecumene as it has been applied to Mesoamerican studies by several authors, primarily Phil C. Weigand (1982, 1993a, 2000; see also Williams and Weigand 2004, 2011). According to Weigand (2000), all early civilizations depended on the production of food for their existence, primarily by means of agriculture. While the details behind the evolution of this situation are still being investigated and are still subject to debate, this general statement is widely accepted, and needs no discussion here. However, food production is multi-faceted, in most cases implying regional specializations of one kind or another that are always closely-linked to the availability of resources and cultural definitions of what was ultimately regarded as a food resource. With only one exception, the global experience of the evolution of early civilizations shows entities that depend on the systematic development of a basic triad of domesticated resources: plants, animals, and the human beings that depended on them for sustenance.

Compared to Mesoamerica, the Old World, and to some extent the Andean area, reveal distinct emphases on animals and plants in this triadic relationship. One example of this situation comes from the extremely hot alluvial terrain of Mesopotamia, which did not lend itself to extensive cattle-raising. There, a symbiotic relationship developed with the inhabitants of the nearby slopes of the Zagros Mountains, where grains and other agricultural produce were exchanged for cattle or its products in a mutually-beneficial arrangement. The relationship between the highlands and coastal valleys in the Andean area had a similar structure, while the environments of other areas, such as the Nile Valley and Syria-Palestine, lent themselves to a mixed regime of cattle-raising and farming (Weigand 2000).

In all these cases, animals and plants constituted the basis of a symbiotic triad that relied on domestication and generated a particular social order (Weigand 1982, 1993a). The only exception to this pattern in the world was Mesoamerica, where the ecumene relied on a dyadic relationship that involved only domesticated plants and humans. The first Europeans to arrive in Mesoamerica reported that no domesticated animals existed there, except for dogs and turkeys, so the role of animal domestication in the native Mesoamerican economy was indeed quite limited, yet it still supported an urban lifestyle with all the trappings of civilization. Weigand (2000) holds that archaeologists, socio-cultural anthropologists, historians and other social scientists should try to understand why the Mesoamerican ecumene became such a unique example of specialized plant domestication, to the extent that it excluded any attempt to develop systematic animal husbandry, beyond the minor species just mentioned (but complemented by hunting, fishing, and gathering, where these activities were viable).

Weigand (2000) further points out that in the Andean area several species of the Camelidae family, notably the llama (*Lama glama*), were in the process of being tamed, if not fully domesticated, during the period of early food production and domestication. Later, the llama became fully domesticated, and was widely-used for transportation, food and as a source of skins. Though llamas are not as strong as horses, it is a species obviously well-adapted to the Andean terrain, with its geographic and climatic extremes. Mesoamerica, on the other hand, had to rely on human porters and water transport to move goods and people from one point to another.

Another of Weigand's (2000) areas of interest was why this specialized Mesoamerican economy emerged in the first place. His explanation underscores the scarcity of cases in world history of early civilizations that had such a rich variety of useful plants as Mesoamerica where, in addition to plants such as maize, beans, cucurbits, chili peppers, and a vast list of other cultigens (see the list published by Mangelsdorf *et al.* 1964), Mesoamericans had at their disposal many other sources of protein, vitamins, and minerals, including insects, insect eggs, fish, frogs, reptiles, rodents, and birds, etcetera (Castelló 1987; Diamond 1999; Parsons 2010, 2011; Rojas 1988, 1998). While Old World diets relied on a long list of domesticated animal species, notably cattle, Mesoamericans lacked major sources of animal protein, as well as essential minerals such as sodium chloride. In fact, salt had to be added to the diet and thus became a strategic resource of primary importance (Williams 2003, 2015). In conclusion, Weigand (2000) thought that Mesoamerican peoples simply did not perceive any need to add domesticated animal food products in order to achieve a protein-rich diet.

In addition to diet, transportation in Mesoamerica was also affected by the lack of large domesticated animals. Among the Aztecs, for instance, porters –known as *tlamemes*– carried all kinds of commodities from one end of the empire to the other. We do not know exactly how much each load weighed, but on the basis of ethnohistorical sources Ross Hassig (1985) suggests that a *tlameme* typically carried a load weighing two *arrobas* (around 23 kg) over a distance of five leagues (roughly 21-28 km) before being relieved (pp. 28-32). These figures, however, must be taken only as estimates, because the loads and distances covered could vary according to the terrain (e.g. mountains, jungle, forest, desert, and so on), while climatic conditions and other factors could also affect the circulation of goods on the backs of those bearers (p. 33).

Water transport was also important throughout the ecumene. In the case of West Mexico, the Lerma River and its many tributaries, as well as the numerous lakes in the region, were indispensable for moving all kinds of trade goods and commodities, while along the Pacific coast, navigation between coastal communities was also a vital aspect of commercial activities and cultural contact (Biar and Favila 2016). Thus, aquatic transportation and, in fact, an entire aquatic lifeway (characterized by fishing, hunting, gathering and manufacture) were essential to the livelihoods of many Mesoamerican peoples, as discussed below.

The Aquatic Lifeway in Mesoamerica

I have mentioned repeatedly that Mesoamerica was the only civilization in history that was bereft of any kind of domesticated livestock, but despite this condition Mesoamerican foodways were among the most complete in ancient times (Williams 2009a, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Most large, and potentially-domesticable, animal species in the New World became extinct some 12,000-17,000 years ago; that is, right around the time that humans began to appear on the continent (indeed, it has been suggested that early humans contributed to the extinction of Pleistocene fauna) (Diamond 1999).⁶

The domestication of cattle, horses, pigs, sheep or other animals in the Neolithic (*ca.* 7000-2000 BC) in the Old World allowed human populations to considerably broaden the range of exploitation of their environment,

⁶ Originally, there were many species of large fauna in the New World, which became extinct. These mass extinctions occurred around 11,000 years ago, when the hunters of the 'Clovis culture' arrived in the New World. When they moved south, these hunters found many large mammals that they eventually killed off. Another theory suggests that these extinctions were due to climate change, which has also been recorded for *ca.* 11,000 years ago. Regardless of which theory is correct, most species of great size, which might have been domesticated by early Americans, were totally wiped out during this time frame (Diamond 1999:46-47).

since the anatomical adaptation of ungulates (primarily ruminants such as cattle, sheep, goats, and camels, among others) to a diet high in cellulose and low in proteins gave humans an indirect way of exploiting cellulose-rich plants, especially grasses and the boughs and leaves of bushes (Harris 1977:220). This complex of domesticated animals (that in addition to meat provided wool, milk and energy for field labors) never emerged in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. While this fact certainly had far-reaching implications for technology and culture, its primary impact was on the diet of ancient Mesoamericans. According to Jeffrey Parsons, the lack of domesticated herbivores obliged the ancient inhabitants of Mesoamerica to look for alternative foodways. And this meant exploiting non-agricultural resources, such as the aquatic animal and plant species that complemented basic agricultural products thanks to their high levels of proteins and nutrients (Parsons 2011).

Parsons has developed an analytical perspective to illustrate the dependence of Mesoamerican peoples on a wide range of natural resources of aquatic origin (apart from agriculture) for their daily sustenance. He holds that non-agricultural resources from many lakes in Mesoamerica, particularly salt and edible insects (and perhaps algae as well), were so energetically- and economically-important as to attract large numbers of people to engage full-time in their extraction, processing, and distribution. Such an attraction would necessarily have been significant in sociopolitical terms. In Parsons' opinion, the beds and swampy shores of lakes should be considered in much the same way as agricultural land when we attempt to evaluate pre-Hispanic productive potentials and carrying capacities (Parsons 1996:442).

Teresa Rojas provides another important point of view for this discussion, for she believes that few regions in the Americas had non-agricultural food resources as abundant as those of the Basin of Mexico, where fishing, bird-hunting, salt production, and the capture of turtles, frogs, salamanders, small crustaceans, mollusks and diverse insects and their larvae, as well as algae and other aquatic plants, all contributed to enriching the diet and subsistence of inhabitants from very early times. Each one of these activities has its own character and history, which can be reconstructed in part thanks to archaeological, historical, and zoological studies. The knowledge and remembrances of present-day inhabitants are also an invaluable source of information on local flora and fauna (Rojas 1998).

These abundant aquatic species represented a great natural wealth that had consequences for the sociopolitical organization of such Mesoamerican states as the Aztecs and Tarascans, who lived in an ecological context characterized by numerous large

lakes, marshes, and other bodies of water. Because they had no domesticated cattle, Mesoamericans developed subsistence strategies that produced an aquatic lifeway that was unique in the ancient world (Diamond 1999). According to Sugiura *et al.* (1998), this 'aquatic mode of subsistence' may be defined as a system that articulates all activities linked to processes established between human groups and their means of production. Thus, it is a specific response and interrelationship between people and their bio-physical surroundings that develops to ensure their survival and reproduction as a group. The aquatic mode of subsistence is part of a broader system that consists of an ecotonal lakeside zone where two structurally-distinct ecosystems –one aquatic, the other terrestrial– interact to produce an abundance of natural species.

The exploitation of this lakeside zone did not require complex technology; rather, it was based on the appropriate management of empirical knowledge related to exploitable resources, and of a set of basic tools or artifacts. The inhabitants of lakeside areas were not limited to exploiting the aquatic environment, for they widened their sphere of action to include the surrounding alluvial soils, indispensable for agriculture, and the forests beyond them (Sugiura *et al.* 1998).

In some areas of Mesoamerica, such as the Basin of Mexico, several elements of indigenous life, particularly those related to the sphere of material culture associated with an aquatic lifeway (*i.e.*, fishing, hunting, and gathering), were not greatly-modified by Spanish influence after the Conquest. In fact, most of the techniques, tools, and artifacts survived into the early decades of the 20th century (García Sánchez 2004). On the basis of historical and ethnographic sources, an aquatic lifeway can be characterized by the three basic subsistence activities that we have discussed in this section: (a) fishing, including not only fish but many other edible aquatic species; (b) hunting, which includes semi-aquatic species such as birds and reptiles, among others, as well as land animals that dwell in the lakeside area and the nearby forests and hills; and (c) gathering, which includes aquatic species (both edible ones and others used for manufacture, such as reeds) and land species, and thus encompasses a wide variety of wild resources (animal, vegetable, and mineral) (García Sánchez 2004). To these three activities we must add the manufacture of all kinds of artifacts and elements that are indispensable for the subsistence and reproduction of human social groups.

There is a great similarity worldwide in the nature of the tools, implements, and procedures used to obtain and process aquatic resources. In order to carry out these activities, a whole range of artifacts exists for cutting, scraping, perforating, grinding, gouging, boiling, and storing. These implements would have to

be manufactured or procured, and then maintained or curated, repaired, and replaced when broken or worn out. Likewise, other artifacts were needed to manufacture or repair such infrastructure elements as fishnets, traps, ropes, baskets, bags, boats, shelters, and vessels (Parsons 2006; Williams 2014a).

West Mexico in the Mesoamerican Ecumene

West Mexico is probably the sub-area of Mesoamerica for which we have the least amount of information about pre-Hispanic culture history (Williams 1994). This lack of archaeological data derives in part from the relative paucity of research in the region, since most fieldwork in Mesoamerica has been conducted in areas with monumental remains of ancient civilizations, such as Teotihuacan, Monte Albán, and the Maya area. Because they lack huge urban sites, western and northern areas of Mesoamerica have been relegated to a secondary status. However, recent research has revealed that West Mexico was actually a very important player in Mesoamerica's cultural milieu, though its role is only now beginning to be fully-defined and understood (see Chapter II).

For purposes of the present discussion, West Mexico includes the present-day states of Michoacán, Jalisco, Colima, Nayarit, and Sinaloa, roughly the region between the Fuerte and Balsas Rivers (**Figure 1**). The state of Guerrero, though virtually unknown in terms of archaeology, seems not to be closely-linked to the western sub-area as it is conceived here (Meighan 1974:1254). West Mexico is the largest of the areas that make up the Mesoamerican ecumene, and also the most diverse in terms of its natural environments. However, it does not form a single geographical unit or cultural area, especially if we consider the great ecological and cultural variety that characterized this extensive region in pre-Hispanic times.

West Mexico thus extends over several natural environments, including different ecological niches: portions of the Mesa Central (central plateau), the Neo-Volcanic Axis, the Mesa del Norte (northern plateau), the western Sierra Madre, and the Pacific Lowlands (West 1964). According to Meighan and Nicholson (1970), the states of Nayarit, Jalisco, and Colima do not constitute a geographic unit because in addition to the fact that they contain numerous microenvironments, they are also divided into two basic regions: highlands at altitudes that average 5000 feet, and a relatively narrow coastal plain of tropical lowlands. The vegetation that covers most of West Mexico varies from savannahs and grasslands in the northern plains, to tropical forests in the coastal area, and to pine and oak woodlands in the plains and valleys. To the south of the Jalisco-Colima-Nayarit area, the state of Michoacán –one of the most diverse microcosms in all of Mesoamerica– has been divided into five areas: (1) the valleys, lakes, and marshlands of the

north; (2) the central sierra; (3) the *tierra caliente* or 'hot lands' (the Tepalcatepec River Basin); (4) the southern Sierra Madre; and (5) the Pacific coast (Guevara 1989:10).

In such a geographic framework as the one just outlined, one would expect to find considerable cultural heterogeneity and, in fact, no fewer than 29 'cultural sub-areas' have been suggested for pre-Hispanic West Mexico (Schondube 1980: Map 6). This cultural diversity is underscored by the numerous linguistic groups that the 16th-century Spanish *Conquistadores* found there. The linguistic map of the western area of Mesoamerica contains 26 languages and dialects, many of them now extinct (Longacre 1967: Figure 15; Ramírez Flores 1980). According to Schondube (1980:124), two factors stand out among the many elements that combined to shape West Mexico's cultural profile: first, the difficulty of communications in the area, because of physiographic barriers such as mountains, rivers and deep ravines; and, second, the fact that many cultural sub-areas were self-sufficient because they contained several, mutually-complementary microenvironments. These two factors help explain the degree of cultural heterogeneity and the lack of unity in the west, especially in the Jalisco-Colima-Nayarit area, during most of the pre-Hispanic period.

Since the days of the first European invaders and explorers in West Mexico, it has been clear that the area lacked, for the most part, several of the major features of nuclear Mesoamerica, such as large urban or ceremonial centers, monumental artworks, hieroglyphic writing, and calendrical notations. These facts have combined to create an image of simple or backward societies living in a marginal area. However, a new viewpoint is currently gaining wide acceptance. It argues that West Mexico interacted with its neighbors and contributed to enriching the Mesoamerican ecumene. Clement Meighan (1974) has voiced this idea in his discussion of two distinct cultural traditions: on the one hand, the Mesoamerican tradition, with its long history of continuity in art, religion, iconography and worldview, and, on the other, the tradition that has been considered typical of the west, characterized by the 'shaft-tomb complex'. Meighan (1974) points out that several authors place West Mexico outside the core Mesoamerican cultural sphere, but this idea is more relevant for some periods than others, and applies in all its force to only the shaft-tomb tradition. In Meighan's view, during the millennium before the arrival of the Spaniards, West Mexico was a regional variant of the Mesoamerican world. In fact, Meighan and Nicholson (1970) hold that from the beginning of the Christian era, West Mexico seems to have shared with the rest of Mesoamerica a general pattern of farming villages, but during the time of greatest flowering of the Classic-period cultures, such as Teotihuacan and Monte Albán, the west saw the prevalence of a distinctive type of community and art

styles. Therefore, West Mexico, in particular the Colima-Jalisco-Nayarit area, is distinguished from the rest of Mesoamerica in that its communities were smaller and lacked complex urban centers with monumental architecture and urban manifestations.

The western area of Mesoamerica was certainly important as a corridor for cultural contact between the peoples of the ecumene and the Southwest United States (Kelley 1974; Riley 2005), and perhaps also the northwestern coasts of South America (Meighan 1969). Another important role played by West Mexico was as a nuclear area where important innovations were introduced, such as metallurgy, around the eighth century AD (Hosler 1994a).

Mesoamerica's northern frontier shifted over time, so part of Mexico's northwest was outside of the ecumene during certain periods; for example, the Postclassic (Braniff 1974, 2001; Cordell 2001). Beginning around the 10th century AD, and especially from the 13th century to the time of the Spanish invasion (early 16th century), groups of Chichimecs (nomadic hunters from the north) expanded southwards, taking over territories that had been Mesoamerican. This southward expansion had to do with a process of progressive desertification, which precluded agriculture in the extensive region of northwestern Mexico (Braniff 1989). But another process was at play in the northern reaches of the ecumene as well. We know that by the eighth century, if not before, West Mexico was fully-integrated into the Mesoamerican cultural sphere through commercial links involving luxury goods such as turquoise. In many sites in West Mexico, such as Guasave (Sinaloa), Las Cuevas and Zacoalco (Jalisco), and the Ixtlán del Río area (Nayarit), archaeologists have found turquoise identical to that produced in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. This process of structural integration within the Mesoamerican commercial system became more intense over time, until the Tarascan Empire began to control trade in turquoise and other precious materials that came from the north (**Figure 2**) (Harbottle and Weigand 1992; Weigand 1995a).

Discussion and Conclusions

We have seen in this chapter that the study of Mesoamerican culture and civilization has attracted the attention of many scholars from numerous countries over an extended period of time. Several perspectives developed as time passed, but the concept of the ecumene is one of the most useful and productive. Regarding the basic features of Mesoamerican civilization, John Staller (2010) has pointed out that 'food and cuisine in Mesoamerica... are inseparable from a worldview largely molded on the life cycle of plants, particularly that of maize... [as well as] directionality, agricultural practices, and systems of reciprocity' (p. 3). In linguistic, ethnic

and cultural terms, Mesoamerica was diverse. However, 'nearly all Mesoamerican societies had a 260-day Ritual Calendar, shared similar cosmologies and religious practices, and relied on maize as a staple food crop... Thus, from Central Mexico to western Honduras we find peoples who possessed basic cosmological assumptions, religious practices, similar material cultures, artistic conventions, political structures, and foodways' (p. 4). According to Staller, in spite of 'the great diversity found throughout this region... in order to understand Mesoamerican peoples it is important to acknowledge a shared cultural and social history' (p. 4).

Echoing the concept of the ecumene as applied to our own modern world (and by implication to Mesoamerica), Litvak (1985) has written that 'the size of [the human] world is measured by what supports [our] life. If we take a look at what we wear, what we eat, what we use, we will see the size of our world... Through travel we live in the whole world and our world is, indeed, the whole globe' (p. 15-16). Then he asks: 'What was the world for a farmer in central or southern Mexico in the year 2000 BC? For one thing, it was known. People had settled many places in very early times, and towns had risen' (p. 16). To men and women 'this part of the world must have been home, since [their] kin had been living in these towns for a long time. Settled, farmer populations had existed in... the Valley of Mexico by 4000 BC, and the possible ancestors of the Maya had been in Belize about that long' (p. 16). Back then, the human world was quite small by our modern standards.

Litvak presents a reconstruction of the growth of the Mesoamerican ecumene over time by means of maps that show the communication routes along which influences spread, and the maximum size of the area covered by 'civilized' peoples in each time period. During the Early Formative (ca. 1500-900 BC), for instance, the map (**Figure 3a**) shows 'the general line of Olmec influence that, by transporting goods produced in one area to other places, was probably the critical factor in the establishment of the Mesoamerican culture area' (p. 17) In this map, West Mexico is represented by only two sites, one in Colima and one in Michoacán, which appear as isolated outposts.

After roughly one thousand years, the Mesoamerican map of the Classic period (ca. AD 0-800) (**Figure 3b**) shows 'the line of Teotihuacan influence that, stemming from Teotihuacan's control of the obsidian trade, came to dominate the exchange network throughout the area. Teotihuacan's rule was unchallenged until the Late Classic' (p. 42). During the Classic period in West Mexico, one arrow points from central Mexico (where the city of Teotihuacan was located) to the west, and another to the far north, where two outposts (in the modern state of Zacatecas) evidence the spread of the Mesoamerican ecumene into the northern borderlands.

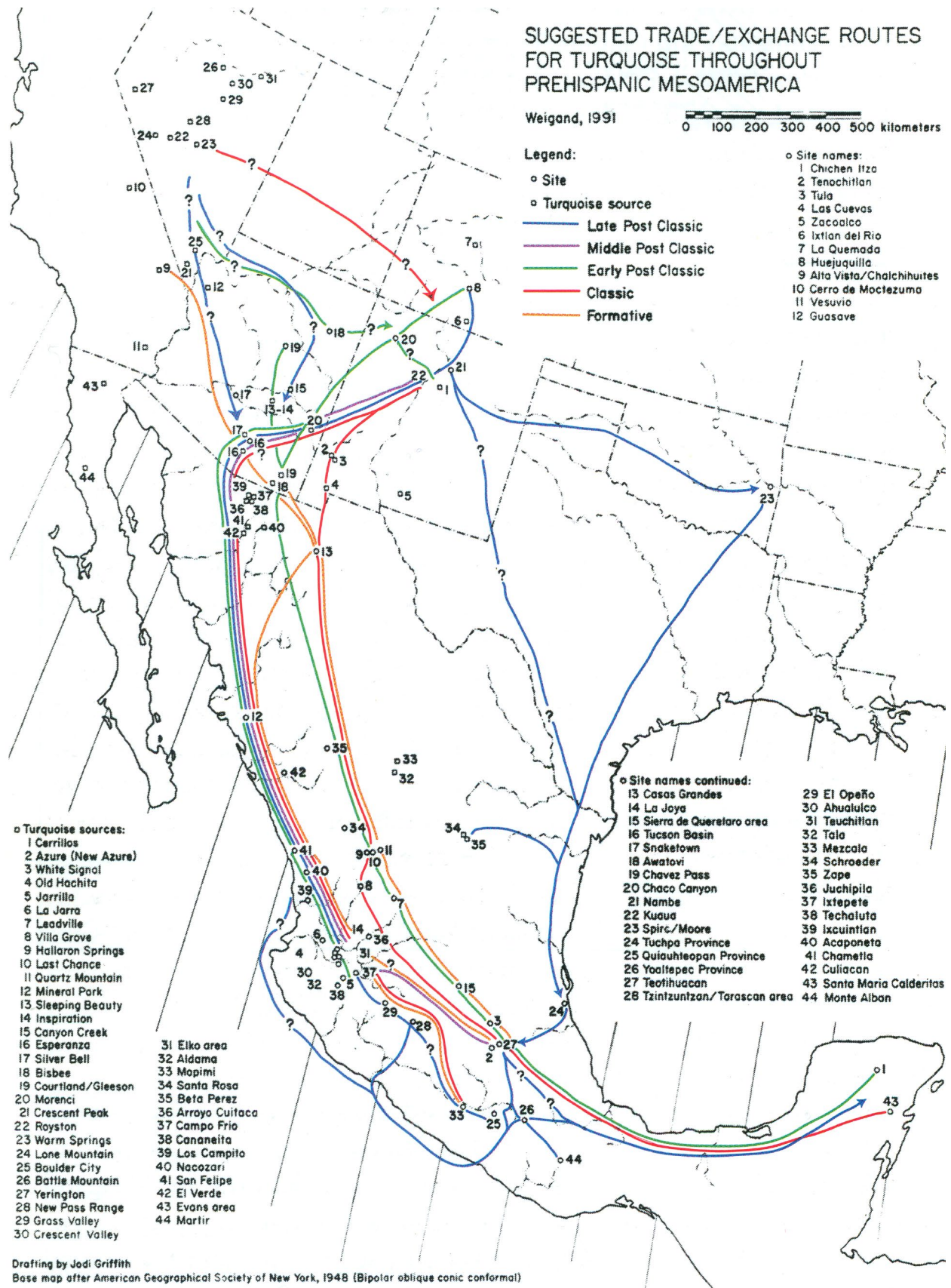


Figure 2. West Mexico was integrated into the Mesoamerican ecumene in part because of the extensive trade routes that crossed the western areas, linking central and southern Mesoamerica to the northern frontier and the U.S. Southwest. Many trade goods were exchanged between the areas of the ecumene and the northern periphery, such as turquoise (courtesy of Phil Weigand).

On the third map (Figure 3c), which pertains to the Postclassic period, several arrows point to the location of one of many major centers in the west; namely, Tzintzuntzan, the capital of the Tarascan Empire. The zigzag and broken arrows indicate 'the distribution of two types of pottery that were widely traded', namely Plumbate and Fine Orange (p. 62). This map illustrates the spread of the Mesoamerican way of life throughout the ecumene in the latest phase of the pre-Conquest sequence. Eventually the Aztec Empire came to control most of central and southern Mesoamerica, but Aztec expansion toward the northwest was cut short by the Tarascans. By the Late Postclassic period, if not before, West Mexico had been fully-incorporated into the Mesoamerican ecumene.

Content and Structure of this Book

This book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter I is the introduction to the general subject of the book: *West Mexico in the Mesoamerican Ecumene*. This chapter consists of three parts. In the first part I discuss the main debates and perspectives that have evolved in Mesoamerican studies over time, from the earliest scholars in the 19th century to the latest contributions, and how different authors have shaped our current perceptions about the culture area we know as Mesoamerica. The second part of the introduction is concerned with the

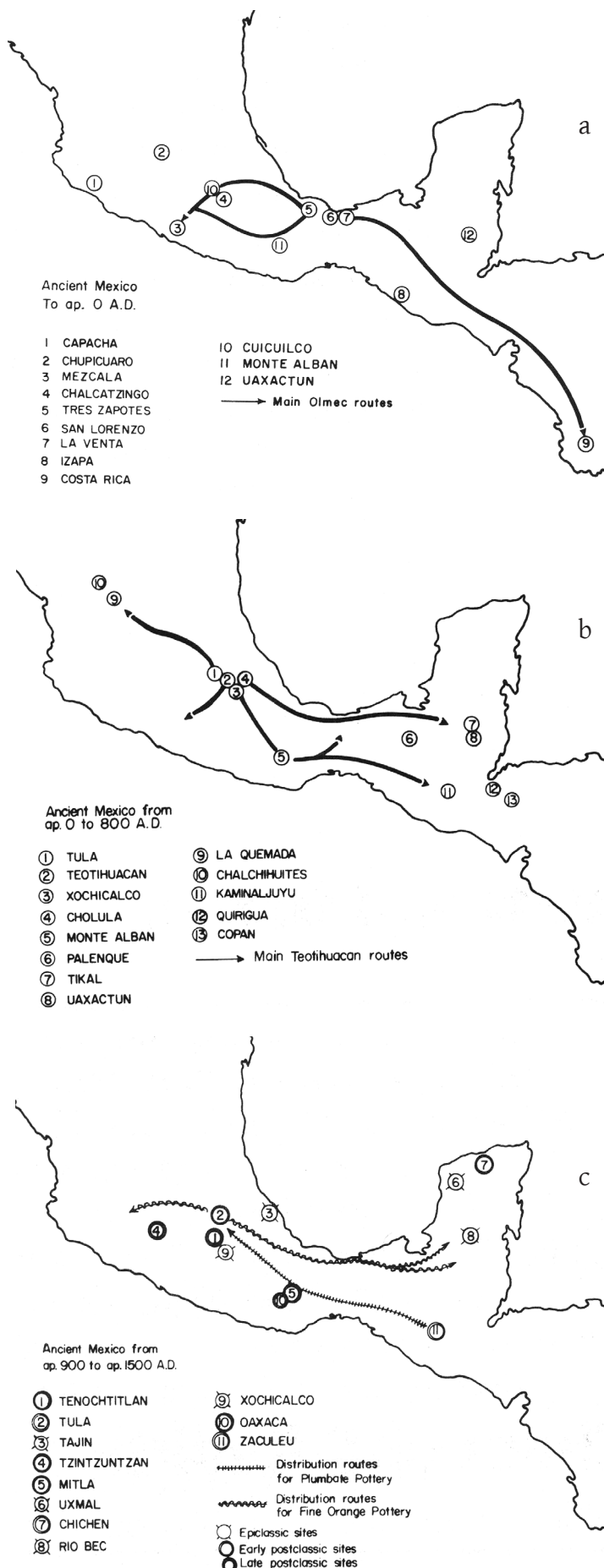


Figure 3. West Mexico in the Mesoamerican ecumene: (a) territorial expansion during the Preclassic period; arrows show the general line of Olmec trade routes. Olmec cultural influence was one of the critical factors in the establishment of the Mesoamerican ecumene, though West Mexico was virtually devoid of contact with the Olmec; (b) in the Classic period, arrows show the line of Teotihuacan influence that came to dominate the exchange network throughout the area. At least part of West Mexico became involved in this trade structure; (c) Postclassic Mesoamerica: arrows indicate the distribution of two types of pottery (Plumbate and Fine Orange) that were traded widely in the ecumene. The Aztecs dominated most of central and southern Mexico, but were cut off to the west by the Tarascan Empire. By the Late Postclassic period, if not before, West Mexico had been fully-incorporated into the Mesoamerican ecumene (adapted from Litvak 1985: Figures 3, 10, and 22).

Mesoamerican ecumene, that is to say the universe of cultural and social interactions that coalesced into one of the major cultural areas of the ancient world. In the third section of Chapter I, I explore the unique role played by West Mexico in shaping the Mesoamerican ecumene as we understand it today.

In Chapter II, I present a history of archaeological research in West Mexico, from the first explorers in the 19th century to the early 1990s. I divide this discussion in two geographic-cultural areas: the first one pertains to the state of Michoacán, cradle of the Tarascan Empire, and the neighboring lowlands of the Bajío in the state of Guanajuato and environs. The second area runs along the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Pacific coastal plains, and includes the modern states of Jalisco, Colima, Nayarit and Sinaloa. In this chapter, however, I did not attempt to produce an exhaustive assessment of all archaeological research endeavors through time, since this would be too long for a work of this scope. In order to better understand the development of archaeology in West Mexico through time, I have established several periods somewhat arbitrarily. These periods are linked to archaeology's development in Mexico as a whole, and to historical, cultural and political processes in the country.

Chapter III deals with the beginnings of culture in ancient West Mexico, from the time of the first human occupants of the Paleoindian period in Middle America (ca. 15,000 BC) to the first examples of agriculture and settled villages in the Archaic period (ca. 7000-1500 BC). First I present a brief discussion of West Mexico's geographic and cultural background. Secondly, I discuss the earliest known examples of human occupation in the area under discussion; this is followed by a review of the first examples of sedentary life in West Mexico and other areas of Mesoamerica and beyond.

During the Formative⁷ period (ca. 1500 BC-AD 300) the Mesoamerican ecumene, including West Mexico, underwent a process of crystallization, as I discuss in Chapter IV. At the start of the Formative we find small autonomous agricultural villages established in certain privileged ecological areas of central and southern Mesoamerica. In this chapter I present a short synopsis of the major cultural-historical processes in the Mesoamerican ecumene in the Formative period, so the reader will understand the broad cultural and historical context where our story takes place. After

this, I deal with the major cultural developments in Michoacán, Jalisco, Colima and Nayarit.

Until recently, there was very little knowledge about the Classic period (ca. AD 300-900) in West Mexico, compared to central and southern Mesoamerica. We see in Chapter V how recent research is slowly shedding more light on cultural developments in West Mexico during the period in question. In this chapter I present a summary of the Classic period as it has been described for several areas of the western ecumene, including a general discussion of the level of interaction between West Mexico and the cultures of central Mexico and points south. This topic has received more attention in recent years than ever before, and this is reflected in Chapter V.

In the Early Postclassic period (ca. AD 900-1200), West Mexico became intimately involved in the cultural and historical processes of the ecumene. In Chapter VI, I discuss the role played by the Toltecs as 'world shapers', and how they touched most of the Mesoamerican peoples, including West Mexico. This chapter is divided into two parts: first, a discussion of urban life and various aspects of culture in Postclassic central Mexico (Tula and Cholula) and southern Mesoamerica (the Mixtec area of Oaxaca). This discussion explores the cultural and economic bases that enabled the Toltecs and the Mixteca-Puebla peoples to travel to West Mexico and eventually to foster strong cultural (and religious) ties with our region. In the second part I present an analysis of the patterns of interaction between West Mexican cultures and their neighbors from central Mexico and southern Mesoamerica during the Postclassic period.

In Chapter VII the reader will find a discussion of the Tarascan Empire in the Protohistoric period (ca. AD 1450-1530), including three main topics: (1) The Tarascan culture and its main cultural, political, religious and economic aspects, as revealed by archaeology and ethnohistory (including analogy with the Aztec Empire); (2) the Lake Cuitzeo Basin as a key economic area of the Tarascan Empire; and, (3) trade, tribute and transportation of strategic resources within the Tarascan Empire.

In Chapter VIII the reader will find the general conclusions to which I arrived after writing this book. I also highlight here the priority areas for future research, and the lessons that this book may hold for archaeologists, for other social scientists and for the general public.

⁷ The terms Formative, Classic, Postclassic, and others are used solely to mark different periods of Mesoamerican culture history, with no implications of social or political complexity.