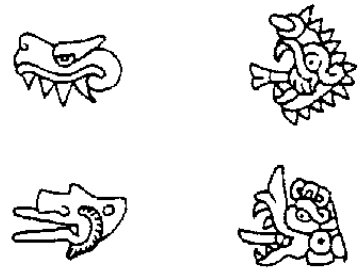


# Postclassic Mesoamerica



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The first meeting between European and Mesoamerican peoples occurred during Christopher Columbus's fourth voyage to the New World, when he came upon a trading expedition of Maya merchants paddling a large dugout canoe off the Bay Islands. These merchants were carrying goods from all over Mesoamerica, including obsidian knives and swords from a highland source; cacao beans from the tropical lowlands; bronze axes and bells most likely from the Tarascan realm of west Mexico; crucibles for smelting copper; and fancy cotton textiles (Columbus 1959; see also Blom 1932:533-34; Edwards 1978; Sauer 1966:128).<sup>1</sup> The diversity of products carried by these merchants exemplifies the fact that during the final pre-conquest period, the entire area of Mesoamerica, from the Aztec highlands to the Maya lowlands and beyond, constituted a single economic and cultural zone integrated by commercial exchange and a variety of other types of social interaction.

The high degree of long-distance integration shown by the Maya trade canoe is one of the remarkable features of Mesoamerica during this Late Postclassic time period. Although trade and interaction over long distances had characterized Mesoamerican societies for millennia, these processes reached new heights of intensity and importance in the centuries prior to the Spanish conquest in the early sixteenth century. The volume of exchange expanded greatly during this interval, and economic networks became increasingly commercialized with the widespread use of money, marketplaces, and merchants. Stylistic interaction—the spread of graphic styles and the standardization of iconography and symbolism across broad areas—also reached new levels of intensity in the Late Postclassic period. These processes of economic and stylistic interaction had major impacts on Mesoamerican societies. As people throughout this large area were drawn into macroregional exchange networks, the eco-

nomie and social lives of households and communities were transformed in myriad ways.

Although long-distance trade and stylistic interaction both have long histories of research in Mesoamerica, only recently have scholars begun to appreciate the magnitude of macroregional networks and their effects on peoples throughout Mesoamerica in Postclassic times. Scholars in the early twentieth century, lacking firm archaeological data, invoked migrations of peoples and vague processes of long-distance "diffusion" to explain the course of cultural development in different regions (Bernal 1979; Willey and Sabloff 1993). By the 1960s archaeologists had begun to accumulate large bodies of reliable information about early Mesoamerican societies. Many of these scholars applied an ecological perspective (linked to the "new archaeology" approach) that sought the causes of social changes in the local environment, not in the vague long-distance influences of the diffusionists (e.g., Sanders and Price 1968). Although trade was a topic of analysis by these and later archaeologists (e.g., Parsons and Price 1971; Tourtellot and Sabloff 1972), the predominant focus of Mesoamericanists on local areas and environmental adaptations prevented scholars from appreciating the full extent and significance of long-distance exchange and interaction (Feinman and Nicholas 1991; see discussion below).

It is only recently that empirical and theoretical advances have revealed the nature of Postclassic innovations in long-distance trade and stylistic interaction, and the extent to which these processes permeated life in societies from western Mexico to Yucatán. Empirical advances include new results from the chemical sourcing of ceramic, obsidian, and metal artifacts; expanded regional surveys and household excavations; new analyses of texts and documents; and more-systematic studies of Postclassic art and iconography. The new data resulting from

these advances can best be interpreted within the broad theoretical approach called “the world-systems perspective.” Postclassic Mesoamerica is an example of a pre-capitalist world system in that it was a large-scale zone of economic and social interactions that tied together independent polities, and these interactions had significant impacts on the participating societies (see chapter 2).

The authors of this book use a modified world-systems approach to describe and interpret new evidence—archaeological, ethnohistoric, and art historical—on Postclassic Mesoamerica. Regions traditionally conceived as relatively separate units are treated here as part and parcel of a larger, integrated world system and as sharing in common historical and cultural processes. This perspective helps in the identification of the factors that generated the distinctive characteristics of Postclassic Mesoamerica. In chapter 2 Kepecs and Kohl review archaeological approaches to world-systems theory and set the theoretical context for this book. Then, in chapter 3, Smith and Berdan detail the modifications of the world-systems approach that this group of authors has found helpful for understanding Postclassic Mesoamerica.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE POSTCLASSIC WORLD SYSTEM

Our consideration of the Postclassic Mesoamerican world system begins in the aftermath of the collapse of the major Classic-period civilizations. The centuries between these events and the Spanish conquest of the early 1500s saw two broad cycles of expansion and diversification of long-distance trade and communication that engulfed the entire area of Mesoamerica. The destruction of the central district of Teotihuacan during the seventh century A.D. (Millon 1988) was followed by the first economic cycle, a major reorientation of long-distance trade and communication throughout much of Mesoamerica.

The Epiclassic period—as the seventh through tenth centuries A.D. are called in most of Mesoamerica outside the Maya area—saw new patterns of connections among regions. Unlike long-distance trade during the Classic period, which focused primarily on large centers such as Teotihuacan, Monte Albán, and the major Maya capitals, Epiclassic trade was more decentralized, flourishing in coastal and peripheral zones (Pollard 1997; Smith and Heath-Smith 1980; Webb 1978). A set of common symbols painted and incised on ceramics (including geometric designs such as the step-fret and stylized serpents) spread along the coastal trade routes at this time. Sometimes inappropriately labeled as the Mixteca-Puebla style (see Smith and Heath-Smith 1980), we refer to these symbols as the Early Postclassic international symbol set (see chapters 3, 23, and 24). The iconography of these symbols has recently been interpreted as marking the spread

of a new international religion focusing on Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent (Ringle et al. 1998). Whether or not one accepts that argument, it is clear that many parts of Mesoamerica were drawn into close economic and symbolic contact during the Epiclassic period.

These processes of trade and communication continued in the Early Postclassic period (ca. A.D. 950–1150) after the ninth-century collapse of the southern lowland Maya cities. Much of west Mexico was drawn into the Mesoamerican economic and religious orbit at this time. Major cities with considerable international influence arose at Tula in central Mexico and Chichén Itzá in Yucatán (Andrews 1990b; Diehl 1983, 1993; Healan 1989; Tozzer 1957). These two cities were clearly in contact with one another, but the nature of their interactions has remained unclear.

The collapse of Tula and Chichén Itzá in the twelfth century signaled the start of the second great cycle of Postclassic change. All over Mesoamerica, local populations grew and regional systems of city-states arose. The small size and limited political power of these polities were particularly conducive to an expansion of both commercial exchange and stylistic communication. This second cycle of Postclassic development is our primary focus in this book. Although the dynamic economies of the Epiclassic and Early Postclassic periods can be analyzed usefully from a world-systems perspective (e.g., Kepecs et al. 1994), it is more difficult to provide a comprehensive, Mesoamerica-wide framework for that time period, due to the smaller number of excavated sites and some serious gaps in archaeological knowledge. The available information on the second Postclassic cycle—archaeological, ethnohistorical, and art historical—is much richer, and we focus most of our attention on events in the final three to four centuries of the Prehispanic epoch, encompassing the Middle and Late Postclassic periods.

#### POSTCLASSIC CHRONOLOGY

In most regions of Mesoamerica, archaeologists have neglected the Postclassic period in favor of earlier epochs. They have preferred to work on the first agricultural societies of the Early Formative period, the Olmec and other early complex societies of the Middle and Late Formative periods, or the spectacular civilizations of the Classic period. One result of the neglect of Postclassic archaeology is that the chronological control in many regions is much rougher than for earlier periods. The most striking example of this phenomenon is the Valley of Oaxaca, where a refined sequence of century-long Formative ceramic phases contrasts with a single, massive Postclassic period (Monte Albán V) six centuries in length (Flannery and Marcus 1983). Needless to say, it is difficult if not impossible to study change within the Postclassic epoch with such a rough chronological sequence.

Table 1.1  
Postclassic chronologies

Year (A.D.)	Periods	Lake Pátzcuaro Basin	Basin of Mexico	Morelos	Cholula	Mixteca	Valley of Oaxaca	Yucatán	Highland Guatemala
1500				Late Postclassic, B	Late Cholollan				
1450	Late Postclassic	Tariacuri	Late Aztec						
1400				Late Postclassic, A					
1350								Late Postclassic	Late Postclassic
1300					Early Cholollan				
1250	Middle Postclassic		Early Aztec	Middle Postclassic					
1200							Monte Albán V		
1150		Late Urichu			Late Tlachihualtepetl			Early Postclassic	
1100									
1050	Early Postclassic		Toltec (Mazapan)	Early Postclassic					
1000									
950		Early Urichu			Middle Tlachihualtepetl				
900	Epiclassic		Coyotlatelco	Epiclassic			Monte Albán IV		
850		Lupe							
		Pollard 1997	Sanders et al. 1979	Smith 2002	McCafferty 1996b	Lind 1987	Flannery and Marcus 1983	Masson 2000a	Fox 1987

Although most areas of Mesoamerica have Postclassic archaeological chronologies more refined than that for the Valley of Oaxaca, the degree of temporal refinement varies considerably from region to region. Table 1.1 presents Postclassic archaeological chronologies for some of the better-known areas of Mesoamerica. In most areas, the interval between A.D. 900 and the Spanish conquest is divided into either three periods (labeled Early, Middle, and Late Postclassic) or two (labeled Early and Late Postclassic); in a few areas—parts of the state of Morelos and the site of Cholula—there are four periods (on Postclassic regional chronologies, see the sources cited in table 1.1, and also Fowler 1996; MacNeish et al. 1970; Masson 2000a; Pollard 1997; Smith 1992b, 2003). In spite of these regional differences in chronological refinement nearly all areas have transitions between phases during or at the end of the twelfth century. Furthermore, this twelfth-century transition was a time of major social, political, and economic change in almost all regions, setting off the second Postclassic cycle of change mentioned above. These processes and their continuing dynamics are the major foci of this book, although of necessity earlier time periods must be considered to document the twelfth-century changes and to understand changing sociocultural dynamics over the entire Postclassic epoch.

#### POSTCLASSIC CHANGES

By the twelfth century a significant constellation of processes was underway in Mesoamerica that distinguishes this period from earlier ones. These processes include an unprecedented population growth, a proliferation of small polities, an increased volume of long-distance exchange, an increase in the diversity of trade goods, commercialization of the economy, new forms of writing and iconography, and new patterns of stylistic interaction. Together, these processes stimulated the integration of the diverse regions of Mesoamerica into a single world system.

#### POPULATION GROWTH

In several parts of Mesoamerica, the Postclassic period was a time of major population growth. In highland central Mexico, where demographic patterns are well documented from settlement-pattern research, the Middle and Late Postclassic periods witnessed a dramatic growth of population (Hare et al. n.d.; Sanders et al. 1979). It is probably not coincidental that this occurred during a time of increased highland rainfall that ended a period of drought that had lasted from the sixth through eleventh centuries (e.g., Metcalfe et al. 1989; O'Hara and Metcalfe 1997; O'Hara et al. 1994). This episode of population growth was accompanied by massive investments in intensive agriculture, including irrigation systems, *chi-*

*nampas* (raised fields), and terracing (Sanders et al. 1979; Smith and Price 1994). Similarly, in the Tarascan core area around Lake Pátzcuaro, Late Postclassic population growth coupled with rising lake levels led to population pressure and the need to import food from outside of the Pátzcuaro Basin (chapter 29).

We see these data as supporting Netting's (1993) Boserupian model in which population pressure leads to household-level agricultural intensification, but we reject the extension of Boserup's model by Sanders and others in which population pressure and intensification in turn necessarily cause political centralization and cultural evolution generally. Recent quantitative reconstructions in the Basin of Mexico suggest that agricultural intensification may not have kept up with population growth, leading to periodic famines and food shortages (Whitmore and Williams 1998).

#### PROLIFERATION OF SMALL POLITIES

The larger regional populations of Postclassic Mesoamerica were carved up into numerous relatively small political units. Generally called city-states or sometimes kingdoms (by us), they went by various names in the native world (e.g., *altepetl* among the Nahuas, *sina yya* among the Mixtecs). These city-states combined hereditary political rule, territorial control, specific flamboyant rituals, and specialized economic interests. They were the basic building blocks of political organization throughout the Late Postclassic period. Prominence could be based on military might, hereditary claims, or symbolic stature. Some city-states developed recognized specializations or particularly noteworthy qualities: Texcoco was a center for law, the arts, and learning in general; Cholula was a pilgrimage destination; Acalan was known for its cacao resources. These centers and their characteristics were not only known locally, but also renowned throughout the broader area. There were additional complexities. In some areas (such as in present-day Morelos and Oaxaca) regional conquest states engulfed nearby city-states, while in others vast empires spread a stratified veneer over these long-standing city-state entities. These polities—whether regional conquest states, a hegemonic empire (Aztec), or a more centralized empire (Tarascan)—were hierarchical in demanding services and surpluses from their conquered polities.

The prevalence of small polities at the time of Spanish conquest, and the widespread development of these polities around the twelfth century, are two of the remarkable features of the Postclassic Mesoamerican world system. The chapters in part 2 explore the similarities and differences among these small polities, and the innovations and continuities of the powerful Tarascan and Aztec empires that also developed in Late Postclassic times.

#### INCREASED VOLUME OF LONG-DISTANCE EXCHANGE

Long-distance exchange was important to all of the ancient cultures of Mesoamerica, from the first inhabitants up through the Spanish conquest (Smith 2001a). The Postclassic period, however, witnessed the largest numbers and greatest diversity of trade goods, the greatest volumes of exchange, and the greatest access to imported goods by communities of all sizes in all areas (chapter 16). The nature and dynamics of small polities of Postclassic Mesoamerica were conducive to the expansion of commercial exchange (Blanton et al. 1993: 208–217; Mann 1986:7–10). The archaeological record reveals higher quantities of imported goods in Postclassic contexts than in earlier ones (see part 3), and ethnohistoric accounts describe marketplaces, professional merchants, and the use of money throughout Mesoamerica at the time of Spanish conquest (chapter 16).

#### GREATER DIVERSITY OF TRADE GOODS

An important key to Postclassic Mesoamerica is provided by the role of commodities, or goods intended for exchange. The number of different commodities in circulation appears to have been higher in Postclassic times than in earlier eras. This is a difficult hypothesis to prove because our information is clearly biased by the documentary lists of hundreds of trade goods available for the Late Postclassic period (which include many perishable items that cannot be identified archaeologically for earlier periods). Nevertheless, several informal comparisons suggest that there was greater diversity of imports at many Postclassic sites compared to equivalent Classic or Formative sites. In the Yauhtepec Valley of Morelos, for example, Late Postclassic sites yield imported ceramics from a larger number of areas than Formative or Classic sites, and Late Postclassic sites have obsidian from a larger number of sources than Classic sites (Smith, unpublished data). Also, there seem to be imported goods from a larger number of areas at the Aztec Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan than at comparable deposits at Teotihuacan or Tikal.

One of the interesting processes in the Postclassic world system was the conversion of former prestige goods into commercial luxury goods. Whereas the production and exchange of high-value goods—such as feathers and exotic jewelry of greenstone and other materials—had previously been under the control or direction of elites, in Postclassic times these goods became commodities available for sale in the marketplace. Although they were still used more heavily by elites, commoners who could afford such goods often purchased them in markets (see chapters 16, 32, and 34). Bulk luxuries such as fine salt (chapter 19), cacao, and decorated textiles (chapter 18) played particularly important roles in the Postclassic economy. The production and exchange of

obsidian reached new heights in the Postclassic period. Shaft mines were used at a number of extraction zones, and the amount of obsidian in circulation increased greatly (chapter 20). New research on copper-bronze metallurgy helps document technological and exchange processes, and highlights the importance of west Mexico (Michoacán and Jalisco) within the overall world system (chapter 21).

#### COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE ECONOMY

The Postclassic economy was more highly commercialized than earlier Mesoamerican economic systems. Carol Smith (1976c) divides economies into three categories, and we find these distinctions useful here: (1) *uncommercialized*, where distribution systems are based on direct or nonmarket exchange; (2) *partially commercialized*, where distribution systems are based on noncompetitive or controlled market exchange (solar and dendritic market systems); and (3) *fully commercialized*, where distribution systems are based on broadly articulated competitive market exchange (complex interlocking market systems). These three levels are differentiated not only by amount of commercial integration or division of labor, but by the spatial range of the economic system and the degree to which a price-making market allocates commodities and the factors of production (Smith 1976c: 314; see also Neale 1971 on commercialization).

A number of authors have proposed that commercial exchange based in marketplaces was pervasive in Late Postclassic Mesoamerica (e.g., Blanton et al. 1993), whereas others do not agree. Fernández Tejedó (1996), for example, argues that there were few markets in Postclassic Maya settlements and that most long-distance exchange was noncommercial in nature. We believe that the archaeological and ethnohistoric data from most areas of Mesoamerica support the arguments of Blanton et al. (1993) for a high level of commercialization of the Postclassic economy (e.g., Freidel 1981b; Piña Chán 1978; Rathje 1975; Sabloff and Rathje 1975a, 1975b; Smith 1999). Mesoamericanists have been slow to adopt this model partly because of their traditional reliance upon the substantivist economic anthropology of Karl Polanyi (Polanyi et al. 1957; Chapman 1957), in which the very existence of precapitalist markets and market systems is denied (see discussion below). Blanton (1983:52) points out some of the problems created by the application of Polanyi's "anti-market mentality" to the archaeological record.

#### NEW FORMS OF WRITING AND ICONOGRAPHY

In contrast to earlier phonetic Mesoamerican writing systems—Epi-Olmec, Classic Maya, and Zapotec—the Mixtec and Aztec systems of writing that developed in Postclassic times contained far fewer phonetic glyphs

(Justeson and Broadwell 1996; Marcus 1992a). Although this had the disadvantage of severely limiting the range of ideas that could be communicated, it did have the benefit of uncoupling written texts from particular languages. Postclassic pictorial texts could thus be “read” or interpreted by speakers of diverse languages (Boone 1994; Pohl 1994b; Jansen 1988), and the distinction between “writing” and iconography was reduced. These new “international” systems of pictorial representations made ample use of color, and they flourished in a variety of media in Postclassic times—codices, polychrome ceramics, and mural paintings (see the chapters in part 4). The portability of codices and ceramics was a particularly important feature, allowing written texts and iconography to be exchanged over great distances.

The best-known example of the new Postclassic iconography/writing systems is the Mixteca-Puebla style (Nicholson 1960; Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1994a). This representational art style was widely adopted in central and southern Mexico during the Middle Postclassic period. It was composed of highly conventionalized symbols painted in vivid, colorful imagery. As discussed in part 4, the Mixteca-Puebla style became a crucial component in the systems of regional and long-distance communication and exchange among diverse polities and languages in Mesoamerica.

#### NEW PATTERNS OF STYLISTIC INTERACTION

When the codices and painted ceramics containing new forms of writing and iconography entered the expanding commercial networks of the Postclassic period, the result was an unprecedented spread of graphic styles and symbols throughout Mesoamerica. Several pictorial art styles achieved distributions over large areas; these include the Aztec style, the Mixteca-Puebla style, the coastal Maya mural style, and the highland Maya style. These styles shared many formal traits that link them together under the banner of what has been called the Postclassic international style (Robertson 1970). These art styles can be distinguished from a set of standardized religious motifs—an iconography—we call the Late Postclassic international symbol set. These symbols had their origin in an Early Postclassic symbol set that spread over much of Mesoamerica in the Epiclassic and Early Postclassic periods (chapters 23 and 24).

The relationship between the spread of these symbols and styles on one hand, and commercial exchange networks on the other, was complex and mutually reinforcing. Whereas active commercial networks contributed to the spread of the styles and symbols, the meaning and social significance of the pictorial art were in turn important in stimulating trade and communication. These representations had significance to elites, priests, and other individuals in diverse parts of Mesoamerica (see

chapters 22, 26, and 27), and they helped forge long-distance social bonds that provided a basis for continuing trade and other forms of interaction.

A number of authors have suggested that the cultural unity of Mesoamerica reached its greatest height in the Postclassic period. Borhegyi (1980), for example, contrasts the greater uniformity of the ballgame and ball courts in Postclassic times with the greater regional differences in the Classic period. Ringle et al. (1998) posit the spread of the Quetzalcoatl cult throughout Mesoamerica in the Epiclassic period, another example of greater religious integration of Mesoamerica in Postclassic times relative to earlier periods. These and other examples of increased cultural integration and uniformity in the Postclassic period were the products of the new patterns of stylistic interaction described above.

#### TYPES OF MACROREGIONAL LINKAGES

In their comprehensive treatment of preindustrial world systems, Chase-Dunn and Hall (1997:28) define world systems as “intersocietal networks in which the interactions (e.g., trade, warfare, intermarriage, information) are important for the reproduction of the internal structures of the composite units and importantly affect changes that occur in these local structures” (see chapter 2). The sorts of interactions at play in world systems, therefore, are not superficial but rather have substantive effects on the internal workings of the system’s components. These same authors (1997:52) identify four basic types of networks that we find useful: the bulk-goods, prestige-goods, political/military, and information networks. Each serves to bound the constituent units of the system differently. A world system, then, can be viewed as composed of all these networks working at the same time but in different ways to integrate the system as a whole. This also means that the system’s various constituent units may not have easily defined boundaries. While we may readily identify a city-state’s political boundary, it may encompass quite different economic boundaries (for bulk and prestige goods), a different military sphere of influence, and a yet different information network.

Chase-Dunn and Hall’s (1997) concept of the *bulk-goods network* refers to the area in which most exchanges of foodstuffs and other heavy, bulky goods take place. In ancient societies with rudimentary transport the bulk-goods network is typically localized, and it is usually the smallest of the world-systems networks. Bulk goods in Mesoamerica moved from producers to consumers along lines of tribute and through long-distance and regional commerce, and local exchange. The *political/military network* describes the area in which regularized political and military interactions take place. For the

city-states of Postclassic Mesoamerica, the political/military network sometimes coincided with the bulk-goods network, whereas larger, expansionistic polities produced networks that included more than one bulk-goods network. An interesting feature of the Postclassic world system was the permeability of political borders to trade, even heavily fortified military borders such as that between the Aztec and Tarascan empires (see chapter 14).

Chase-Dunn and Hall (1997) use the concept of a *prestige-goods network* to describe the long-distance exchange of luxury goods that characterized ancient civilizations. As discussed in the next chapter, an explicit appreciation of the systemic importance of luxury goods sets current archaeological world-systems approaches (e.g., Blanton and Feinman 1984) apart from Wallerstein's (1974) initial formulation. Among the major luxury goods traded over long distances in Mesoamerica were textiles, metal, jade, turquoise, feathers, and codices (see chapter 18). This notion of a prestige-goods network must be distinguished from the concept of a prestige-goods "economy." In the latter model, elites control the production, exchange, and consumption of luxuries, and they derive much of their power and status from such goods (see chapter 18). Although the prestige-goods economy model has been applied to Mesoamerican states (e.g., Blanton and Feinman 1984; Schortman and Urban 1996), it is in fact more applicable to chiefdoms than to states. As noted above, the commercialization of the Postclassic economy turned prestige goods into commercial luxuries available to the most humble peasant as well as the highest lord (see chapter 16). It is possible to acknowledge the economic and social importance of luxury goods without invoking the prestige-goods economy model. Many luxury goods carried significant symbolic information, and they were important mechanisms for the construction and maintenance of the information network.

The *information network* was particularly important in the operation of the Postclassic Mesoamerican world system. Much of the information that was exchanged was esoteric religious knowledge that was the purview of elites: calendrical information, rituals, myths, accounts of dynastic history, and the iconography that encompassed these themes. Three media played crucial roles in the establishment and maintenance of the Postclassic Mesoamerican information network: codices, mural paintings, and polychrome ceramics. The information network pertained mostly to elites because the information exchanged tended to be esoteric knowledge (often religious) that required literacy in codex-reading. This network is especially important since it linked high-status persons from various polities and regions, and was probably accompanied by increased bilingualism, marriage alliances, and luxury gift exchanges between elites. Many

analyses of past world systems focus almost exclusively on economic and political processes, and our inclusion of art-historical perspectives on information exchange is one of this study's innovative features. It is simply not possible to understand the complex dynamics of Postclassic Mesoamerica without emphasizing both the commercial and information networks.

#### CHANGING VIEWS OF POSTCLASSIC MESOAMERICA

The very label "Postclassic" suggests negative value judgments about the quality or condition of the cultures of this time period compared to the "Classic" cultures that preceded them. These terms were proposed by Willey and Phillips (1955, 1958), who used them to represent stages of cultural development. For them, "the Postclassic stage in the New World is defined by the features of, or tendencies toward, urbanism, secularism, and militarism" (1955:784). Rowe (1962) pointed out several problems that arise from using cultural stages to compare regions, and argued strongly for the superiority of chronological periods over stages. Because periods lack the developmental implications of stages, comparisons among regions can be more empirical and direct. Today, Mesoamericanists still use the terms "Classic" and "Postclassic," but they are almost universally interpreted as periods, not stages.

Nevertheless, remnants of the original negative connotations of "Postclassic" as a cultural stage continued in print by recognized scholars until quite recently (e.g., Andrews 1968). More important to Postclassic scholarship today than this antiquated bias has been variation in the theoretical orientations of scholars toward the Postclassic economy. Two broad views can be identified: one emphasizing state control of the economy, and another emphasizing the importance of commercial exchange. The study of Postclassic Mesoamerica has long been dominated by the former view, which in our opinion has slowed acceptance of the archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence for the pervasive role of market systems and long-distance exchange. This section briefly reviews the historical development of ideas about Postclassic Mesoamerica in reference to these themes of decadent decay and state versus market.

#### THE POSTCLASSIC MAYA:

##### DECADENT SURVIVORS OR DYNAMIC ENTREPRENEURS?

The use of denigrating labels for Postclassic cultures has been more common in the Maya area than in other parts of Mesoamerica. Ever since Stephens and Catherwood first revealed the splendors of Classic Maya cities to a European audience in the 1830s, the cities of the Postclassic period have been deemed of lower quality, as pale reflections or poor imitations of the great achievements of the

Classic period. The changes between the Classic and Postclassic periods were discussed in terms of decline and decay, and a series of dichotomies was developed to contrast the Classic and Postclassic Maya, including dynamic/decadent, peaceful/warlike, and religious/secular.

This negative view of the Postclassic Maya as decadent survivors was expressed quite explicitly by the archaeologists associated with the Carnegie Institution of Washington who excavated at Mayapán in the 1950s (Pollock et al. 1962). For example, A. Ledyard Smith (1962:269) described the architecture of Mayapán in these terms: "There seems to have been little striving for permanence, just window dressing and false fronts." In 1968, E. Wyllys Andrews IV (1968:46) stated, "The era of Mayapán was a decadent one in all of its arts except perhaps those of politics and war." As late as the 1980s, the term "Decadent Period" was regularly used to denote the Postclassic period in eastern Yucatán (Freidel and Sabloff 1984). Some writers continue to use terms such as "decline" and "decadence" for the Postclassic Maya (Solís 2001: 21, 24).

Challenges to the "decadent survivors" view of the Postclassic Maya came from several directions. Charles Erasmus (1968), in a critique of Sabloff and Willey (1967), suggested that by overemphasizing the severity of the Classic Maya collapse, these and other archaeologists were reinforcing the inappropriate decadent view of the Postclassic Maya. Instead, Erasmus noted, archaeologists should recognize Postclassic Maya society as different than, but not lesser than, Classic society. He suggested that the Postclassic Maya may have been more highly stratified than the Classic Maya, and were just as religious and not any more warlike. This theme was later taken up by Richard Leventhal (1983), who showed that the old contrast between a powerful state religion in the Classic period and a secularized, household-based religion in the Postclassic period was based on preconceptions deriving from the types of structures excavated by early archaeologists: huge urban pyramids at Classic sites, and small domestic shrines at Mayapán.

The most significant challenge to the decadent view of the Postclassic Maya was mounted by William Rathje, Jeremy Sabloff, and David Freidel, who developed a "mercantile model" for the Postclassic period in the 1970s and 1980s (Freidel 1981b; Freidel and Sabloff 1984; Rathje 1975; Sabloff and Rathje 1975a, 1975b).<sup>2</sup> In the most explicit statement of this model and its contrasts with the prior view, Sabloff and Rathje ask, "Can a period of history that witnesses the rise of a merchant class, the development of a new ethic and a substantial increase in economic complexity (including such events as the introduction of mass manufacture and an improvement in the general standard of living) be fairly considered the decadent last gasp of a dying civilization?" (Sabloff and Rathje 1975a:82).

Although some details of their model have been modified or discarded (see chapter 16), the period since 1975 has seen an unprecedented level of research demonstrating that trade and exchange were indeed important and extensive among Postclassic Maya polities (e.g., Andrews 1983, 1990a; Andrews et al. 1989; Kepecs 1999; MacKinnon 1989; McKillop and Healy 1989; Masson 2000a; Schortman et al. 1986; Sidrys 1977b). The chapters in this book, especially chapters 5, 33 and 34, continue this tradition and help provide a broader theoretical framework for Postclassic Maya society through our application of a world-systems approach.

#### THE AZTEC ECONOMY:

##### STATE CONTROL OR INDEPENDENT MARKETS?

In central Mexico, the "decadence" of Postclassic cultures was never as prominent an issue as it had been in Yucatán. The many achievements of Aztec civilization were well known from early historical sources, and their Classic-period ancestors at Teotihuacan were only recognized as such relatively recently, in the mid-twentieth century (Bernal 1979). Nevertheless, the same dichotomies applied to Classic and Postclassic cultures in the Maya area (dynamic/decadent, peaceful/warlike, religious/secular) occasionally turn up in descriptions of central Mexico. The more important issue for our overall understanding of Postclassic central Mexico, however, has been the characterization of the Aztec economy.

A useful framework for approaching the diversity of views on the Aztec economy is provided by Brumfiel and Earle's (1987) classification of three theoretical positions, which they term adaptationist, political, and commercial. Although originally proposed for the domain of craft specialization, this scheme is more widely applicable to theoretical orientations on ancient political economy in general.

##### *The Adaptationist Approach*

In this approach, elites manage craft production for the benefit of society. This functionalist viewpoint has been applied to the Postclassic economy by William Sanders and some of his associates and students (Evans 1980; Sanders 1956; Sanders and Nichols 1988; Sanders et al. 1979; Sanders and Price 1968; Sanders and Santley 1983). In this approach, the state is assumed to control both production and exchange, and marketplace trade is seen as limited to small local areas (except for the huge market in Tlatelolco, whose size is attributed to the effects of imperial expansion).

##### *The Political Approach*

This approach resembles the adaptationist approach in positing strong state control over the economy, but differs in emphasizing the exploitative nature of that control. Elites are seen as selfish agents who exert control to



benefit themselves at the expense of commoners, rather than altruistic representatives who assume the burden of control to benefit the entire society. Two varieties of the political approach have been influential in Aztec studies. The first, represented by Pedro Carrasco and others (including Angel Palerm and Pedro Armillas), classifies the Aztec state as an example of Marx's "Asiatic Mode of Production" type. Based in part on Wittfogel's (1957) classification of the Aztecs as a "hydraulic civilization," scholars viewed the Aztec state as a dominant and exploitative institution that strove to control all of the economy, from agriculture to craft production to markets (P. Carrasco 1978, 1981, 1996a, 1999; see also Bartra 1975; Boehm de Lameiras 1986). In the most extreme statement of this view, Carrasco (1982) suggested that the Aztec state was similar to the Inca state, one of the most strongly centralized redistributive economies of the ancient world. We find it hard to imagine two ancient political economies more different than the Aztec and Inca empires, and it is difficult to take Carrasco's comparison seriously. (For criticisms of Carrasco and other applications of the Asiatic Mode of Production model to Postclassic Mesoamerica, see Gándara V. 1986; Isaac 1993a; and Offner 1981.)

The second variety of the political approach, less extreme than Carrasco's statist views, is exemplified by the work of Elizabeth Brumfiel (1980, 1983, 1987a, 1987b, 1991, 1996a). Although Brumfiel does not deny the existence of market systems as institutions that operated independently of the state, she accords them only a minor significance in the economy and chooses instead to focus on state exploitation of commoners through the institution of tribute. Thus when archaeological data reveal an increase in domestic textile production concurrent with the expansion of the Aztec empire, Brumfiel (1996a) simply assumes that this must relate to tribute demands without considering the possibility that textile production may have increased because of greater marketplace involvement (textiles served as media of exchange in Aztec markets; see chapter 16). Similarly, in his analysis of the Late Postclassic obsidian industry at Pachuca, Alejandro Pastrana (1998) simply asserts that mining, tool production, and exchange were controlled by the Aztec state without considering the role of market systems. Pastrana can provide no concrete archaeological or documentary evidence for the supposed state control of obsidian, a view that runs counter to most analyses of the industry (see chapter 19).<sup>3</sup>

#### *The Commercial Approach*

In this approach, craft specialization (and, by extension, other sectors of the economy) is viewed as organized commercially, and changes must be explained by the actions of markets and merchants, not the controlling hand of the state. Scholars who have applied this approach to

the Aztec economy include Frances Berdan (1977, 1985, 1988), Richard Blanton (1982, 1985), Blanton and Feinman (1984), and Michael Smith (1979, 1980, 1987a, 1996a, 2001c). This book can be classified under Brumfiel and Earle's (1987) commercial approach, although we do not neglect the often overwhelming role of the state and elites in controlling some sectors of the economy (e.g., land tenure, labor arrangements, and the tribute system). To introduce our approach more fully, it will help to place it within the context of archaeological applications of economic anthropology.

#### *ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE POSTCLASSIC WORLD SYSTEM*

The substantivist model in economic anthropology—associated with the work of Karl Polanyi—has exerted a powerful influence on views of ancient Mesoamerica (chapter 2). The scholars mentioned above under both the adaptationist and political approaches have all been influenced to some degree by Polanyi, either directly (Polanyi et al. 1957; Polanyi 1977) or indirectly through Anne Chapman's (1957) application of Polanyi's model to Mesoamerica. Although Polanyi made many valuable contributions to economic anthropology, we feel that reliance upon his model has held back progress in understanding the dynamic nature of the Postclassic economy.

#### *The Influence of Karl Polanyi*

Polanyi never acknowledged the existence of precapitalist commercial economies (such as that of Postclassic Mesoamerica), nor did he understand peasant marketing systems that are only weakly connected to modern capitalist national economies. Such noncapitalist commercialized economies, whether rural or urban, find no place in Polanyi's famous trilogy of exchange types: reciprocity, redistribution, and exchange. This scheme jumps directly from preindustrial redistribution to modern capitalism. In order to force ancient commercial economies, from Assyria to Rome, into his framework, Polanyi distorted historical evidence and made numerous inappropriate and artificial interpretations. For example, he claimed that there were no true "prices" in the ancient world (that is, exchange values that rose and fell in response to changes in supply and demand), but rather "equivalencies" that allowed disparate goods to be exchanged. These equivalencies, according to Polanyi, were set by the king and did not change except by royal decree. Subsequent scholarship showed that this was a serious distortion of the evidence, and that prices were indeed present in many ancient economies (e.g., Harris 1993; Snell 1997).

Polanyi's concept of equivalencies was just one of many errors of scholarship that have been pointed out by more than a generation of scholars of the ancient world. For the Near East, Adams (1974) and Larsen (1976)

showed that the merchants of Ashur in the Isin-Larsa period engaged in what is clearly highly commercialized exchange with agents in Kanesh (in Anatolia). Subsequent studies (e.g., Dandamayev 1996; Gledhill and Larsen 1982; Kuhrt 1998; Snell 1997) have pointed out numerous problems with Polanyi's interpretations of Assyrian and other ancient Near Eastern economies.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, scholars have also criticized Polanyi's use of sources and his interpretations of the Greek (Figueira 1984) and Roman economies (Harris 1993; Storey 1999) as well as the economies of India and precapitalist Europe (Subrahmanyam 1990). Even Polanyi's analysis of early capitalism (Polanyi 1957), generally acknowledged as his major contribution to economic history, has been heavily criticized by subsequent scholars (Swaney 2002).

Polanyi's famous "port of trade" model (Polanyi et al. 1957; Polanyi 1963) is particularly problematic for ancient commercial economies. In this model, applied by Chapman (1957) to Mesoamerica in an influential paper, all merchants are portrayed as sponsored by the state, prices are said to be set by the king rather than responding to supply and demand, and long-distance trade is seen as divorced from local and regional exchange systems (see chapter 2). In line with criticisms of the model's use in the Old World (e.g., Figueira 1984; Pearson 1991:73–74), Kepecs and Kohl (chapter 2) and Gasco and Berdan (chapter 17) show the limitations of this model for Postclassic Mesoamerica. The latter authors describe an alternative concept—the international trade center—that better fits the Mesoamerican data. The authors of the chapters in part 3 show that the Postclassic economy was far more open and commercialized than posited by the Polanyi/Chapman model (or by the adaptationist and political approaches).

### *Our Approach*

The world-systems approach followed in this book is described in chapters 2 and 3. At this point, however, we should relate our views of the Postclassic economy to the various models described above. The degree of state control over the economy clearly varied both by region and by the sector of the economy. The Tarascan empire, for example, maintained tighter control over production and exchange than did the Aztec empire (chapters 11, 13, 29, and 30); similarly, craft production and trade were more closely linked to the state among the polities of the Mixteca-Puebla region than among their counterparts in Yucatán (chapters 5, 10, 31, 33, and 24).

Perhaps more fundamental than this regional variation, however, was variation by economic sector. In all Mesoamerican states, rulers and other elites maintained strict control over land, labor, and tribute, the primary bases of political power. As discussed above, however, one of the greatest innovations of the Postclassic period was the development of commercial exchange systems

only loosely linked to state institutions. The archaeological and documentary evidence for the pervasive role and influence of merchants, markets, and money in all parts of Postclassic Mesoamerica is incontrovertible (chapter 16). We see no contradiction in suggesting that the state control of land, labor, and tribute coexisted with an autonomous commercialized exchange system; in fact, this general pattern characterized many past agrarian states, from China to Rome to precapitalist Europe to the Islamic world (Abu-Lughod 1989; Braudel 1982, 1984; Elvin 1973; Garnsey and Saller 1987; Hosseini 1995).

When we turn to the realm of craft production and specialization, however, there was great variation in the extent to which elites and states exerted influence. Some craft industries, particularly those producing luxury goods in Tenochtitlan and in the city-states of the Mixteca-Puebla area, were closely supervised by elites; in the latter area, nobles may even have been the artisans (chapter 22). Other crafts were produced by part-time and full-time artisans working independently for the market. Brumfiel's paper (1987b) describing two contrasting forms of craft production in the Aztec economy—rural, part-time artisans producing utilitarian goods for the market, and urban, full-time specialists producing luxury goods for elite patrons—is particularly important in describing this variation in elite control over economic activity.

One of the reasons we have adopted a world-systems perspective for Postclassic Mesoamerica is that it is one of the few approaches capable of encompassing an area as large as Mesoamerica while accommodating a wide range of variation in the economic and political organization of the constituent societies. Although commercialized trade and information exchange were two of the major forces in Postclassic Mesoamerica, they are not the whole story. The chapters that follow will reveal the true complexity and dynamics of Postclassic Mesoamerica, free from biases about decadent survivors and free from the restricting influence of Polanyi's substantivist economic anthropology.

## A NEW APPROACH TO THE POSTCLASSIC MESOAMERICAN WORLD

With this conceptual framework in mind, the contributors to this book examine and unravel the nature and extent of long-distance and regional interactions in Postclassic Mesoamerica. With a dozen contributors and a multitude of topics involved, the 38 chapters are necessarily focused and concise. More extensive information on these topics is available in the works listed in the composite bibliography.

We have divided the chapters into six parts. Part 1 (of which this is the initial chapter) presents the theoretical and conceptual framework on which the remaining chap-

ters hang. In the following chapter Kepecs and Kohl present a review of world-systems theory and its applicability to Postclassic Mesoamerica. The final chapter of part 1, by Smith and Berdan, analyzes the spatial components of the Postclassic Mesoamerican world system, explicating our customized version of a world-systems perspective.

Part 2 examines the essential political building blocks of this world system. The eleven chapters in this section begin with a general overview that highlights the importance of city-states and other small polities in Postclassic Mesoamerica. Case studies of small polities from highland Guatemala to west Mexico reveal a variety of forms and processes, which are contrasted to the two extensive empires that developed in the final century before Spanish conquest, the Tarascan and Aztec.

Economic networks are treated in part 3 in eight chapters. A general framework of Postclassic economic institutions is provided in chapter 16, followed by more-specific chapters on international trade centers and key commodities. Then follow chapters on three of the most important commodities in the Postclassic world system: salt, obsidian, and metal. A final chapter examines the political and religious dimensions of commerce in the Mixteca-Puebla area.

Part 4 highlights information networks as significant components of the Postclassic Mesoamerican world sys-

tem. Key concepts here are international styles—pictorial art styles found over large areas and not clearly linked to a single point of origin—and international symbol sets—iconographic elements that similarly covered large parts of Postclassic Mesoamerica. Three chapters cover the crucial material bearers of these styles and symbols: murals, codices, and polychrome ceramics.

While parts 1–4 address the Postclassic Mesoamerican world system conceptually and topically, the case studies in part 5 take a regional perspective. Although not every part of Mesoamerica is covered here, we do include case studies from many of the areas where there is sufficient evidence to evaluate world-systems processes at Postclassic communities. Part 6, the final section of the book, offers, predictably, a set of conclusions. Non-Mesoamericanists Kohl and Chernykh revealingly compare and contrast this world system with that of Bronze Age west Asia as a stimulus for further worldwide comparisons of such systems, and the final chapter closes the book with a synthesis of our most important results.

Overall, this book, in content and scope, is designed to direct the reader's attention to Mesoamerica not as a collection of separate regional cultures and polities, but as a complex integrated network—a world system—featuring intricate and dynamic linkages of political, economic, and symbolic processes.