

## Key Commodities

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Commodities are the building blocks of any commercialized economy, and they were the focus of the institutions and trade centers discussed in chapters 16 and 17. A commodity is “any thing intended for exchange” (Appadurai 1986:9). The anthropological analysis of commodities usually begins by contrasting them with gifts. In the framework of Chris A. Gregory (1982), the commodity/gift relationship can be summarized by the following dichotomies: alienable/inalienable; socially independent/socially dependent; value based on quantity/value based on quality; value marked by price/value marked by rank (see also Hart 1982). Later analyses go beyond the commodity/gift dichotomy by interpreting commodities within the framework of consumption, thereby adding greater social complexity to the concept (e.g., Appadurai 1986; Thomas 1991; Miller 1995). These newer approaches provide a social framework for the analysis of Postclassic exchange systems in Mesoamerica.

Appadurai (1986) points out that the functions and social significance of objects typically change during their life histories, and the status of “commodity” can be viewed as a phase in the life of an object. For example, a piece of fine gold jewelry may have begun life as a commodity sold by its maker to a noble. Later its commodity phase ended, and it became a gift when the noble presented it to another noble at a feast. If the recipient (or anyone else) were later to sell the jewelry, it would again become a commodity. Archaeological and ethnohistorical analyses can rarely approach the level of detail needed to follow the different phases in the life of an object, however, and in this book we are concerned with goods that served as commodities during some interval of their existence.

In less highly commercialized economies, most goods circulate through noncommercial channels such as gift

exchange, trade partnerships, tribute payments, and patron-client interactions. This does not mean that commodities (goods produced for exchange) are absent from uncommercialized economies. Thomas (1991), for example, shows that even among the tribal-level, precapitalist societies of the southwestern Pacific that are known for their reliance on gift exchange, some goods served as commodities during parts of their existence. In commercialized economies, however, many or most goods are commodities at some stage of their life and circulate through market systems or similar institutions. This was particularly true of Postclassic Mesoamerica, where the number and variety of commodities were quite impressive.

William Roseberry (1989) argues that a fruitful approach to the anthropological analysis of the modern world system is to focus on key commodities. By following the production, distribution, and consumption of individual commodities, ethnographers can link their micro-scale research to the macro-scale processes of the modern world system. This approach is also useful for the archaeological and historical study of past world systems, where the linking of micro and macro scales is a crucial task. A further reason for the importance of commodities in the analysis of Postclassic Mesoamerica lies in the nature of the available data. Tracing the production and exchange of goods is one of the strengths of archaeology, and the ethnohistoric record also contains numerous lists of commodities that were available in marketplaces, carried by merchants, and paid in tribute.

### CHARACTERIZATION OF COMMODITIES

The ethnohistoric record for Postclassic Mesoamerica contains information on several hundred goods that were exchanged and can thus be called commodities (e.g.,

Table 18.1  
Key commodities in Postclassic Mesoamerica

	Mentioned for Maritime Trade
Cacao (as money and beverage)	x
Copper axe-money	x
Copper/bronze bells	x
Feathers and feather ornaments	
Gold jewelry	
Greenstone jewelry	
Obsidian and obsidian tools	x
Painted manuscripts	
Plain and decorated textiles	x
Polychrome pottery	? <sup>a</sup>
Raw cotton	
Salt	x
Slaves	x <sup>b</sup>
Turquoise jewelry	

Notes: Commodities marked as "mentioned in maritime trade" are those included in early written descriptions of maritime traders (Edwards 1978:205–207).

<sup>a</sup>Polychrome ceramics are not specifically mentioned, but one description includes utensils "marvelously made out of clay" (Edwards 1978:201).

<sup>b</sup>Slaves are not mentioned as commodities in these sources, but several sources do note that the paddlers were slaves (Edwards 1978).

Berdan and Anawalt 1992; Brand 1943; Feldman 1985; Landa 1941; Roys 1972; Sahagún 1950–1982; Scholes and Roys 1968). Many of these are also documented archaeologically, but this information has not been synthesized or summarized. The authors of this book drew up a list of about 50 commodities that were highly significant in Postclassic times; these are referred to here as "important commodities." From this list, we then highlighted 18 of these as "key commodities" whose production and exchange were particularly important for the functioning of the Postclassic world system. These are listed in table 18.1, which shows that many of these were included in early Spanish descriptions of maritime traders (Edwards 1978:205–207). Edwards also includes maize in his list, but that probably represented food for the merchants and their crew rather than a commodity for exchange. Four of the entries in table 18.1 are composite categories that are further broken down in the discussion and tables below (e.g., feathers and feather ornaments are considered separately below).

Important and key commodities had patterns of production, exchange, and/or consumption that had widespread influence within Postclassic society and economy. For example, commodities whose production required specialized technology or highly trained artisans were

often more important than those easily obtained or produced. Commodities exchanged in large volumes or those exchanged over great distances were obviously important to the overall economy. And commodities with a high information content and whose use was restricted to elites had important social roles. These and other factors went into our categorization of important and key commodities. In this section I discuss the ways in which such commodities differed from others not included in our lists. An important point is that the key commodities in Postclassic Mesoamerica do not fit a single profile. Some were important because they were necessities with widespread demand, and others were important because they were luxuries involved in elite political dynamics.

#### FUNCTIONAL CLASSIFICATION

One of the most natural and useful ways to classify commodities or other goods is in terms of their uses or functions within society. Table 18.2 is our list of important commodities arranged by functional category. Key commodities are marked with an X. As the table shows, key commodities are found within every functional class. Table 18.2 also lists two other methods of characterization of commodities: their use-class and economic value. These alternative classifications are in fact more useful for our analysis than is the functional classification of commodities.

#### ECONOMIC VALUE

The economic value of commodities in archaeological and historical settings is usually very difficult to establish. The commercial economies of Postclassic Mesoamerica used several forms of money, and thus people probably measured the value of goods by their prices. Although some price equivalents have survived in documents (e.g., Anderson et al. 1976; Rojas 1998), there is not sufficient information to adequately assess the value of most commodities. There are two very different approaches to measuring or determining economic value: the labor approach and the scarcity approach. Leaving aside theoretical debates about the nature of value in various types of economies, it is likely that both the amount of labor involved in obtaining and/or producing a commodity and the relative scarcity of the good played roles in determining its value in precapitalist commercialized economies. I have argued that for archaeologists, labor input provides a more useful way to measure value of ancient goods than does scarcity (Smith 1987b:321), and this approach has been applied to Mesoamerican data by Abrams (1994), Feinman (1985), and others.

In order to approach the question of the labor value of Postclassic commodities, I have applied a rough measure to the commodities listed in table 18.2. This measure consists of the sum of the number of attributes present for six categories of labor investment.

Table 18.2  
Important commodities listed by functional category

			Production/Exchange Attributes					
	Use-class	Value	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Food</b>								
x	salt	1	4	x	x		x	x
x	fine salt	5	4	x	x		x	x
x	cacao	5	2	x				x
	fruits	1	0					
	grain	1	0					
	honey	2	0					
<b>Domestic Tools and Materials</b>								
x	obsidian tools	1	4	x	x			x
	ceramic vessels	1	1				x	
	ground-stone tools	1	1	x				
	chert tools	2	0					
<b>Industrial Tools</b>								
	copper/bronze needles	3	6	x	x	x	x	x
	bronze axes and awls	3	6	x	x	x	x	x
x	obsidian tools	2	4	x	x			x
	bark beaters	4	1	x				
	spinning tools	2	0					
	bone needles	4	0					
<b>Raw Materials</b>								
x	obsidian	4	3	x	x			x
x	raw cotton	2	2	x				x
x	feathers	4	2	x				x
	volcanic ash	3	2	x	x			
	paints and pigments	4	1					x
<b>Clothing</b>								
x	decorated clothing	5	4	x			x	x
	plain clothing	2	3	x			x	x
<b>Serving Ware</b>								
x	codex-style pottery	5	3				x	x
x	polychrome pottery	2	2				x	x
	other pottery	2	1				x	
	fine stone vessels	5	1	x				
	gourd bowls	2	0					
<b>Jewelry/Display Items</b>								
	copper/bronze jewelry	5	6	x	x	x	x	x
x	gold jewelry	5	6	x	x	x	x	x
x	greenstone jewelry	5	5	x	x		x	x
x	turquoise jewelry	5	5	x	x		x	x
x	obsidian jewelry	5	5	x	x		x	x

Table 18.2 continued  
 Important commodities listed by functional category

		Production/Exchange Attributes:							
	Use-class	Value	1	2	3	4	5	6	
<b>Jewelry/Display Items continued</b>									
x	feather ornaments	5	4	x			x	x	x
	silver jewelry	5	6	x	x	x	x	x	x
	rock crystal jewelry	5	4	x			x	x	x
	shell jewelry	5	3	x				x	x
	amber jewelry	5	2					x	x
<b>Money</b>									
x	textiles	2	3	x			x		x
x	cacao	2	2	x					x
x	copper axe-money	3	6	x	x	x	x	x	x
<b>Ritual</b>									
x	copper/bronze bells	5	6	x	x	x	x	x	x
x	bloodletting knives	5	4	x	x			x	x
	rubber	5	4	x		x	x		x
	figurines	2	2				x		x
	drugs	5	2	x					x
	bark paper	5	2				x		x
	tobacco	2	2	x					x
	censers	2	1				x		
	copal	2	2	x					x
	stingray spines	2	1	x					
	flowers	2	0						
<b>Special</b>									
x	painted manuscripts	5	3				x	x	x
x	slaves	3	1						x

**KEY:**

x	Key commodity
Use-Class:	1 Necessity
	2 Widely used goods
	3 Regionally limited
	4 Goods with specialized utilitarian uses
	5 Luxuries
Value:	This is the total number of attributes present.
Prod./Exch. Attributes:	1 Raw material limited to certain major environmental zones
	2 Raw material limited to a small number of locations
	3 Complex technology required
	4 Lengthy and/or complex production process
	5 Highly skilled craftworkers required
	6 High value in relation to weight

1. *Raw materials limited to certain major environmental zones.* This category is marked as present for goods whose raw materials were distributed differentially with respect to large environmental zones such as highlands versus lowlands, or coast versus inland. It contributes to

economic value because such commodities, or their material constituents, were not available in many regions and had to be obtained through exchange. Thus cotton textiles were more valuable in the highlands since cotton can only be grown in lowland settings, whereas maize was

Table 18.3  
Important commodities listed by use-class

	Functional Class	Value		Functional Class	Value		
<b>1. Necessities</b>			<b>4. Goods with Specialized Utilitarian Uses</b>				
x	salt	food	4	x	obsidian	raw materials	3
x	obsidian tools	domestic tools	4	x	feathers	raw materials	2
	ceramic vessels	domestic tools	1	x	slaves	special	1
	ground-stone tools	domestic tools	1		bark beaters	industrial tools	1
	fruits	food	0		paints and pigments	raw materials	1
	grain	food	0		bone needles	industrial tools	0
<b>2. Widely Used Goods</b>			<b>5. Luxuries</b>				
x	copper axe-money	money	6	x	copper/bronze bells	ritual	6
x	obsidian tools	industrial tools	4	x	gold jewelry	jewelry/display	6
x	textiles	money	3	x	greenstone jewelry	jewelry/display	5
x	raw cotton	raw materials	2	x	turquoise jewelry	jewelry/display	5
x	polychrome pottery	serving ware	2	x	feather ornaments	jewelry/display	4
x	cacao	money	2	x	decorated clothing	clothing	4
	plain clothing	clothing	3	x	fine salt	food	4
	figurines	ritual	2	x	codex-style pottery	serving ware	3
	copal	ritual	2	x	painted manuscripts	special	3
	tobacco	ritual	2	x	cacao	food	2
	other pottery	serving ware	1		copper/bronze jewelry	jewelry/display	6
	censers	ritual	1		silver jewelry	jewelry/display	6
	honey	food	0		obsidian jewelry	jewelry/display	5
	chert tools	domestic tools	0		rock crystal jewelry	jewelry/display	4
	spinning tools	industrial tools	0		bloodletting knives	ritual	4
	gourd bowls	serving ware	0		rubber	ritual	4
	flowers	ritual	0		shell jewelry	jewelry/display	3
					amber jewelry	jewelry/display	2
					drugs	ritual	2
					bark paper	ritual	2
					fine stone vessels	serving ware	1
<b>3. Regionally Limited Goods</b>							
	copper/bronze needles	industrial tools	6				
	bronze axes and awls	industrial tools	6				
	volcanic ash	raw materials	2				

Note: Key commodities are marked with an x. For an explanation of each commodity's value, please see chapter discussion.

ess valuable since it can be grown in most environmental zones of Mesoamerica.

2. *Raw materials limited to a small number of locations.* This category marks goods whose raw materials were found only in a few discrete locations, regardless of how they occurred with respect to major environmental zones. Obsidian was found only in several discrete locations, as opposed to pottery clay, which was widely available in most areas.

3. *Complex technology required.* Most technological processes in ancient Mesoamerica were not highly com-

plex in terms of their use of special tools and facilities, and highly technical or specialized knowledge. Some important commodities produced through metallurgy and rubber processing are characterized as requiring complex technology, giving these products higher economic value.

4. *Lengthy and/or complex production process.* This category includes commodities whose production process required many separate and distinct steps. For example, the manufacture of ceramic vessels required mining clay and temper, mixing the clay, forming the vessels, drying and finishing them, and firing the vessels. The manufacture

of obsidian blades, although dependent on several steps, was a shorter process requiring fewer distinct tools and activities than ceramic production. Many Postclassic luxuries, such as featherwork, turquoise mosaics, and painted manuscripts, required lengthy and complex processes of production with many diverse activities.

5. *Highly skilled craftworkers required.* Commodities that required highly skilled producers had a higher value than those more easily produced. The production of tools and other items from obsidian and bronze required highly skilled workers, as did the weaving of highly decorated textiles and the painting of manuscripts or highly decorated ceramics.

6. *High value in relation to weight.* This category is a simple assessment of whether a commodity was easily transported for exchange, with the assumption that other things being equal, goods that were less bulky and less heavy were more valuable as exchange items.

The value measure in table 18.2 is the sum of the scores of each commodity for these six categories. This is a very rough measure, and no claims are made that the value scores reflect the actual economic values (or prices) of these commodities in Postclassic Mesoamerica. Nevertheless, these scores do correlate with our impressions commodity values, and they provide some insight into the nature of Postclassic commodities and the reasons that some were more important for the world system than others. Many, but not all, of the key commodities have high scores on the economic value scale. Another indication of the high value of some of these key commodities is their inclusion in early written descriptions of goods carried by maritime traders, including the Columbus description that opens chapter 1 (Edwards 1978:205–207; see table 18.1).

#### LUXURIES AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

The third approach to the classification of commodities involves the social context of their use. I have used a five-category classification of use-class into necessities, widely used goods, regionally limited goods, goods with specialized utilitarian uses, and luxuries (table 18.3). Because of the social and economic importance of luxury goods, it is worthwhile to discuss this concept in some detail. Douglas and Isherwood (1979:97) start with the definitions of luxuries and necessities used in classical economics: necessities are goods bought in the same quantities regardless of changes in prices or incomes, and luxuries are goods on which individuals will quickly cut down in response to a drop in income. They go on to suggest more-anthropologically useful definitions: necessities are items used in low-esteem, high-frequency events, whereas luxuries are goods used in low-frequency events that are highly esteemed (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:116).

Appadurai (1986) provides a more complete discussion of luxuries that is worth quoting in full:

I propose that we regard luxury goods not so much in contrast to necessities (a contrast filled with problems), but as goods whose principal use is *rhetorical* and *social*, goods that are simply *incarnated signs*. The necessity to which *they* respond is fundamentally political. Better still, since most luxury goods are used (though in special ways at a special cost), it might make more sense to regard luxury as a special “register” of consumption (by analogy to the linguistic model) than to regard them as a special class of thing. The signs of this register, in relation to commodities, are some or all of the following attributes: (1) restriction, either by price or by law, to elites; (2) complexity of acquisition, which may or may not be a function of real “scarcity”; (3) semiotic virtuosity, that is, the capacity to signal fairly complex social messages (as do pepper in cuisine, silk in dress, jewels in adornment, and relics in worship); (4) specialized knowledge as a prerequisite for their “appropriate” consumption, that is, regulation by fashion; and (5) a high degree of linkage of their consumption to body, person, and personality. (Appadurai 1986:38; emphases in original)

The five categories of goods, based on their social context, are as follows.

1. *Necessities.* Commodities classified as necessities are those that were required by most or all households for their normal functioning. These include food and certain basic domestic tools found in most Postclassic households. Two key commodities are considered necessities based on their importance in domestic consumption and their prominence in long-distance exchanges: salt and obsidian tools used in normal domestic tasks.

2. *Widely used goods.* This category includes goods that were in widespread use but less *essential* for basic survival than were necessities. This distinction is of course subjective, and some examples are open to argument. For instance, were items such as figurines and censers—used in household ritual—necessities or not? I have included them under widely used goods, but they could fit with either group. Key commodities in this category include industrial tools of obsidian (i.e., obsidian tools used to manufacture other products), textiles used as money and tribute goods, raw cotton, polychrome pottery, and cacao in its use as money.

3. *Regionally limited goods.* These are commodities that were widely used within some regions of Postclassic Mesoamerica, but rarely used in others. Bronze needles and awls, for example, were abundant in the Tarascan zone (where they were produced) and in Morelos (chapter 32), but rare in most parts of Mesoamerica; similarly, volcanic ash for pottery temper was a common product

in Yucatán but was not used widely in other areas. Although these goods were of great importance within their zones of use (see chapters 21 and 32 on bronze tools in Morelos), their limited occurrence or lowered importance in other areas prevents them from being considered key commodities.

4. *Goods with specialized utilitarian uses.* This category includes raw materials used in specific important craft industries, and slaves; the latter are included since they often contributed to the production of textiles and other products. The key commodities within this category are slaves and unworked (or only partially worked) obsidian and feathers.

5. *Luxuries.* These are goods that fit Appadurai's (1986) discussion quoted above. Although most have high values, it is the social and political contexts of their use that distinguish luxuries from other kinds of goods. These commodities had a high information content, and many of them required specialized knowledge for their appropriate consumption. Luxuries comprise the largest number of key commodities. Most of these were costly objects of personal adornment typically associated with elites: fancy decorated clothing and jewelry of gold, turquoise, and other precious materials. Key commodities among the luxury goods also included objects with high information content (painted manuscripts and the fanciest polychrome ceramics) and high-value imported foodstuffs (particularly fine salt and cacao).

In the commercialized Postclassic economy, only a few luxuries were restricted by law to elites. Commoners could purchase bronze bells, jade beads, or fancy feather ornaments if they could afford them, just as no one prohibited them from consuming cacao or fine salt. But since elites could better afford to purchase luxury goods in the markets, they tended to have many more of these goods than did commoners. This situation (Smith 1999) distinguishes commercialized economies like that of Postclassic Mesoamerica from the uncommercialized economies of tribes, chiefdoms, and centralized redistributive states. The widespread consumption of luxuries in Postclassic Mesoamerica highlights the very different systemic roles of luxury goods in commercialized economies from their roles in the prestige-goods systems that characterized these other types of societies. In prestige-goods systems, the production and exchange of valuable luxuries are controlled by elites, who are the only ones permitted to consume such goods. It is often suggested that the control of these goods is an important component of elite power in such systems (e.g., Clark and Blake 1994; Earle 1997; Friedman and Rowlands 1977; Frankenstein and Rowlands 1978; Schortman and Urban 1996). We prefer to use the term "luxury goods" in place of "prestige goods" to emphasize their role as commercial commodities and to distin-

guish the Postclassic world system from the prestige-goods systems mentioned above.

Susan Kepecs (2000; chapter 33) has suggested the phrase "bulk luxuries" for a subset of Postclassic luxuries that were traded in particularly large quantities; these included cacao, fine salt, and decorated clothing and textiles. Brumfiel (1987a, 1987b) describes the social and political dynamics of elite gifts of luxury commodities—particularly items of dress and personal adornment—among the Aztecs.

## POSTCLASSIC COMMODITIES

This section provides brief discussions of the important commodities listed in tables 18.2 and 18.3, organized by the five categories of social context discussed above. Those commodities singled out (somewhat subjectively) as key commodities are indicated with an asterisk.

### NECESSITIES

#### \*Salt

As a basic physiological necessity, salt was an important trade good throughout Mesoamerica. We have separated the finest white sea salt as another commodity, a luxury. Kepecs discusses salt in chapter 19.

#### \*Obsidian Tools

The widespread exchange of obsidian tools in Postclassic Mesoamerica qualifies them as key commodities. As domestic tools these were necessities, and as industrial tools used in the production of other goods, obsidian implements fall under the category of widely used goods. Braswell discusses obsidian in chapter 20.

#### Other Important Commodities

During most time periods in Mesoamerica, ceramic vessels were exchanged locally and regionally, with only limited long-distance trade (Drennan 1984b). In the Postclassic period, however, several varieties of central Mexican ceramics were widely traded over great distances (Smith 1990; Smith et al. 1999). The most elaborately decorated of these are singled out as luxury goods and discussed below.

### WIDELY USED GOODS

#### \*Copper Axe-Money

These distinctive T-shaped copper/bronze "axes" are classified as a key commodity because of their widespread use as currency in most parts of Mesoamerica (chapter 21). They were very thin sheets of copper or bronze, and a number of archaeological finds indicate that many individual items were typically bound into standardized packets.

*\*Obsidian Tools*

See discussion above and in chapter 20 by Braswell.

*\*Textiles and Raw Cotton*

The high labor investment in spinning and weaving cotton textiles, coupled with their low weight, made them ideal commodities for a commercialized economy. They were exchanged through markets as a commodity and a form of currency, and through political channels as the predominant type of tribute at all levels (Anawalt 1981b; Berdan 1987a; Hicks 1994a). The distribution of spindle whorls for spinning cotton thread expanded throughout all of Mesoamerica in Postclassic times, and the use of small bowls for controlling the spindle was a technological innovation related to increasing demand for textiles (García Cook and Merino Carrión 1974; Smith and Hirth 1988; Stark et al. 1998). A trade in raw cotton is documented both in ethnohistoric sources and in the presence of spindle whorls for cotton in areas like the Basin of Mexico where cotton does not grow. Cotton textiles are discussed at greater length in chapter 16.

*\*Polychrome Pottery*

Ceramic vessels painted with geometric designs and simple symbols were widespread in Postclassic Mesoamerica (Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1994a; Noguera 1975), and many of these were quite widely traded (chapters 26, 32). Elaborate codex-style polychrome pottery is listed separately below as a luxury good.

*\*Cacao as Currency*

Cacao was a key commodity because of its double use as money and food (Coe and Coe 1996; Bergmann 1969; Gasco 1996b; Rojas 1998). As a form of currency cacao is included here as a widely used good; cacao as a drink is discussed below under luxuries.

**REGIONALLY LIMITED GOODS**

Although no regionally limited goods are classified as key commodities for the whole Postclassic world system, their production and exchange were very important within certain areas. Bronze needles, awls, and axes, for example, were common in Morelos domestic contexts (chapter 32), and provide some of the best evidence for trade across the Aztec/Tarascan border (chapter 14).

**GOODS WITH SPECIALIZED UTILITARIAN USES***\*Obsidian*

Unworked, or more commonly, partially worked obsidian was certainly a key commodity that was exchanged extensively within local regions (chapter 20).

*\*Feathers*

Ethnohistoric sources reveal a heavy trade in tropical feathers. In many Aztec highland provinces, people had to trade with lowland areas for these feathers in order to meet their tribute obligations (Berdan and Anawalt 1992), and Aztec featherworkers must have obtained many of their materials through the markets as well as through tribute (Berdan 1987b).

*\*Slaves*

Because slaves were bought and sold, they can be considered a special form of commodity. Although most were used as household servants, many slaves made important economic contributions through craft production, particularly textile production by female slaves (Shadow and Rodríguez V. 1995).

*Other Important Commodities*

Bark beaters and paints such as hematite, limonite, and graphite were important commodities because of their use in the production of codices. Other pigments such as cochineal and purpura were exchanged for use as textile dyes (Dahlgren 1990a; Turok et al. 1988; Turok 1996).

**LUXURIES***\*Bronze Bells*

Small bells made of various kinds of copper alloys were the most extensively traded metal objects in Postclassic Mesoamerica; these are discussed by Hosler in chapter 21.

*\*Gold Jewelry*

Ornaments made of gold were among the most highly valuable and most intricate objects in Postclassic Mesoamerica (Bray 1989; Saville 1920), but their production and exchange are not yet well understood (chapters 21, 22).

*\*Greenstone Jewelry*

Beads, pendants, and other objects of jewelry and display carved from jadeite and other jadelike stones were important luxury goods in Mesoamerica in all time periods, and the Postclassic is no exception (Graham et al. 1998; Lange 1993; Thouvenot 1982).

*\*Turquoise Jewelry*

The importation of turquoise from the American Southwest was an important innovation in Postclassic Mesoamerica (Weigand et al. 1977; Harbottle and Weigand 1992; Weigand and Harbottle 1993), and this stone was quickly put to use in a large variety of mosaics, jewelry, and other fine objects (Carmichael 1970; Saville 1922). Turquoise jewelry was particularly important in the



Mixteca-Puebla area (chapter 22). Most reconstructions suggest that turquoise from the Southwest was traded through west Mexico, entering central Mexico through the Tarascan realm and entering the Mixteca-Puebla region through Tututepec in Oaxaca (Harbottle and Weigand 1992). This trade was the primary economic connection between Mesoamerica and the Southwest in Postclassic times (chapter 3).

*\*Feather Ornaments*

Elaborate feathered ornaments (such as headdresses, fans, and capes) and warrior costumes and shields required complex production procedures with exotic materials. Their high value contributed to their uses as elite status markers and as signals of warriors' achievements (Berdan 1987b; Berdan and Anawalt 1992).

*Decorated Clothing*

This category denotes fancy decorated textiles, including both clothing and other items. These commodities were more important in the world system than plain clothing because of their higher value (and low weight), and because of their social roles in signaling status and other social characteristics (Anawalt 1981b; Berdan 1987a; Hicks 1994a).

*\*Fine Salt*

The fine white salt of northern Yucatán was particularly highly valued by elites in many parts of Mesoamerica,

and it was thus more extensively traded than was salt from other sources (chapter 19).

*\*Codex-Style Pottery*

This category consists of the elaborate polychromes of the Mixteca-Puebla style, which were widely exchanged and highly prized, and which contained a high information content (chapters 22, 24, and 26).

*\*Painted Manuscripts*

Painted manuscripts or codices were luxuries of only moderate economic value (table 18.2); their main significance was in the ideological realm, where they were a major part of Postclassic information networks (chapters 24, 27).

*\*Cacao as a Drink*

Cacao in beverage form was a luxury good because of its high value and because of its social importance in elite feasts and rituals (Coe and Coe 1996).

#### DISCUSSIONS OF SELECTED KEY COMMODITIES

The descriptions given above are by necessity quite brief, and the reader is referred to the works cited for more information. Out of this list of key Postclassic commodities, three are singled out for in-depth treatment in the chapters that follow: salt (chapter 19), obsidian (chapter 20), and metals (chapter 21).

## Postclassic International Styles and Symbol Sets

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The similarities seen in art forms throughout much of Postclassic Mesoamerica have been attributed to the existence of a widespread artistic phenomenon that has been variously called the Mixteca-Puebla tradition or Mixteca-Puebla horizon style (Nicholson 1960, 1982; Paddock 1982), the Mixtec style (Robertson 1959:12–24; Ramsey 1975, 1982; Brockington 1982), the “International Style of the Late Post-Classic” (Robertson 1966, 1970), the codex style (critiqued by Quiñones Keber 1994), as well as the Postclassic religious style and the Mixtec codex style (Smith and Heath-Smith 1980). Most of these terms and characterizations embrace both the formal style of the relevant artworks and their iconography in attempting to explain how and why murals from eastern Quintana Roo, for example, look so similar to polychrome pottery from Cholula. Few scholars are fully content with these terms, however, which may explain the proliferation in nomenclature. One problem is that the term *style* has been differentially defined, and the so-called style’s characteristics have been variously described as composing both formal (i.e., pertaining to form) style and iconography.

In this chapter we examine painting traditions from Postclassic Mesoamerica—distinguishing style and iconography—to examine the nature of the widespread “international” (Robertson 1970) styles and symbols that were so prominent at this time. We introduce several new concepts that help organize past research on this subject: the Postclassic international style, the Early Postclassic international symbol set, and the Late Postclassic international symbol set. The temporal and spatial distributions of these styles and symbols suggest some of the ways in which communication, ideology, and artistic production were integrated in the Postclassic Mesoamerican world system.

### STYLE AND ICONOGRAPHY

Donald Robertson, as an art historian trained in the study of the formal styles of European art, was careful to limit his 1970 discussion of the Postclassic Maya murals at Tulum to the style in which the murals were painted (Robertson 1970). Being predisposed to separate style from iconography, he eschewed iconographic questions about the Tulum murals to focus solely on the manner in which forms were rendered and organized, noting that the murals are similar in formal style to central Mexican paintings but are iconographically Maya. This distinction between formal style and iconography is an important one, because the iconography and the style of a work may belong to different traditions, as is the case at Tulum.

Style, although a much debated and variously employed concept even within the realm of art history (e.g., Sauerländer 1983; Kubler 1979; Elkins 1996), is generally recognized to pertain to the manner in which forms are rendered and how they and larger compositions are structured. Ernst Gombrich (1968:352b) defined style as “any distinctive . . . way in which an act is performed”; Jules Prown (1980:197) characterized it as “a distinctive manner or mode” (as quoted in Elkins 1996:876). A more concrete definition is given in Meyer Shapiro’s classic discussion of style written for *Anthropology Today*, where Shapiro (1959:289) defined style as referring to “three aspects of art: form elements or motives [motifs], form relationships, and qualities (including an all-over quality which we may call the ‘expression’).” Style thus refers to how forms are rendered, how they are organized and structured into coherent compositions, and such other expressive characteristics as the hardness or softness of line, the quality of light and color, and so on

(Shapiro 1959:289–290). Style is “the objective *vehicle* of the subject matter” (Shapiro 1959:304, emphasis added), rather than the units that compose the subject.<sup>1</sup>

The units that form the subject matter itself belong to the realm of iconography: representational forms, abstractions, icons, and symbols read by the viewer as animate and inanimate objects, places, actions, times, and concepts. When these units are structured into significant relationships with other units, and are thereby organized as an iconographic system, they convey specific meaning, a message disseminated by the artwork or artifact. Style is the vehicle that carries the message; the images and symbols are the components that make up that message.

Although a broadly defined art style can be marked by a preference for certain subjects and units of meaning, style and iconography usually should be analyzed separately. They provide different kinds of data. Iconography can yield the intended meanings of a work, whether these are expressed directly, indirectly, or metaphorically. Style qualifies these meanings and offers clues about the artists’ training, and the cultural preferences and expectations of artist and audience. Both iconography and style can be used to document the movement of people, goods, and ideas.

#### THE POSTCLASSIC INTERNATIONAL STYLE

The Postclassic international style is distinct from earlier Classic styles (e.g., at Teotihuacan, Monte Albán, or among the Maya) and the Epiclassic and Postclassic Maya styles of the Chichén Itzá murals and the Maya codices. Its stiff lines and stocky proportions, for example, are somewhat reminiscent of Teotihuacan frescoes, but its figures are more naturalistic, less iconic, and therefore more easily read than those of Teotihuacan. Its lines and forms are quite distinct from the expressive contour lines or organic forms of Maya painting. H. B. Nicholson (1960, 1982) and Donald Robertson (1959:16–24), among others, have noted the style’s characteristics, and the description below draws on their perceptions. Although Robertson’s more-extensive discussion described the style of the Codex Zouche-Nuttall, which he used to define the preconquest style of Mexican manuscript painting, many of the attributes pertain to the international style as well.

The Postclassic international style is characterized by its rendering of form, the quality of line and color, its figural proportions and positions, and its employment of images in shallow space (figure 24.1). Forms are flat, precise, and almost geometric in their shape. As Robertson (1959:17) pointed out, “human forms . . . are not visually unified” but “can be divided into separable, component parts,” such that “the figure is a totality created from the addition of the various appendages and the head to the

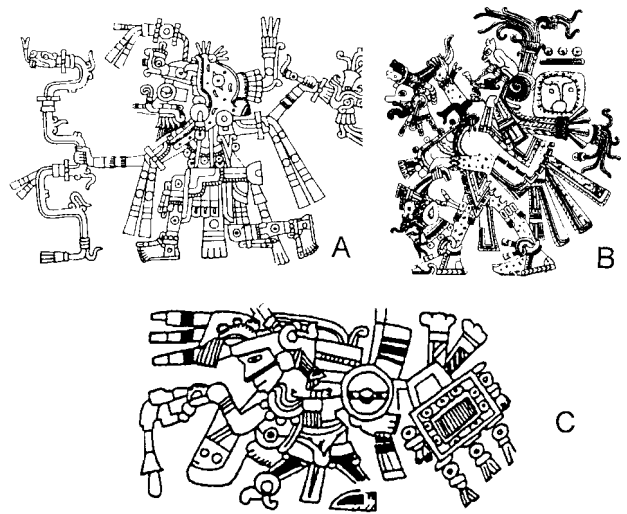


Figure 24.1 Human and deity figures as depicted in the Postclassic international style: (A) Codex Laud 2 (Anders and Jansen 1994:256); (B) Santa Rita mural, Mound 1, west wall (Gann 1900); (C) Tizatlan, painted Altar A, front (Marquina 1964:237.)

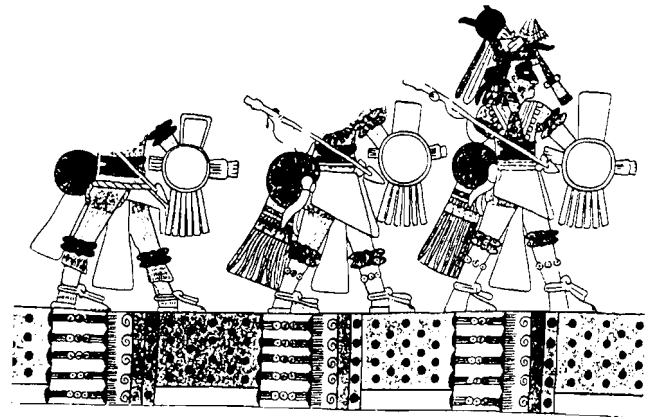


Figure 24.2 Example of the Aztec painting style: mural from Structure 1 at Malinalco. (García Payón 1946: opposite p. 20.)

torso.” The forms are bordered by even, controlled, black outlines, which further flatten the forms and give a crisp edge. Robertson (1959:16) noted that “the treatment of line [which he called a ‘frame line’] . . . is one of its distinctive traits. . . . It is without purposeful variation of width or intensity, and its primary role is to enclose areas of color, to act as frames to flat color washes.” This contrasts with the calligraphic or contour line preferred by the Classic and Postclassic Maya (e.g., Bonampak murals, Codex Dresden).

Colors are generally bright and fully intense, without any modeling or shading to suggest volume (figure 24.1). Proportions tend to be squat, with the most important elements (e.g., the heads of humans and animals) enlarged, and figures are usually posed in a way that exposes their

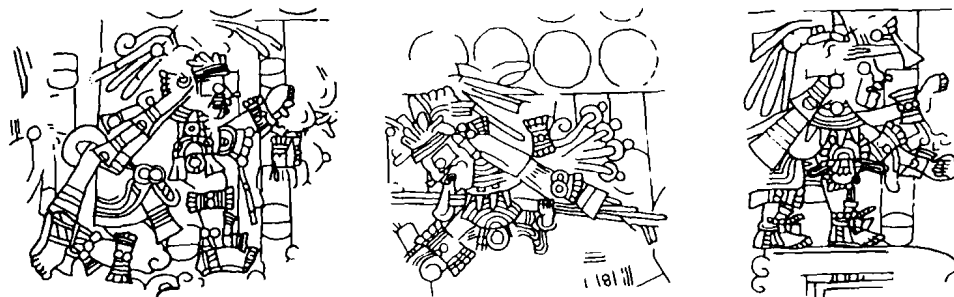


Figure 24.3 Example of the Southwest Maya style, a substyle of the Postclassic international style: mural paintings from different parts of Structure 2 at Iximche'. (Schele and Mathews 1998:303.)

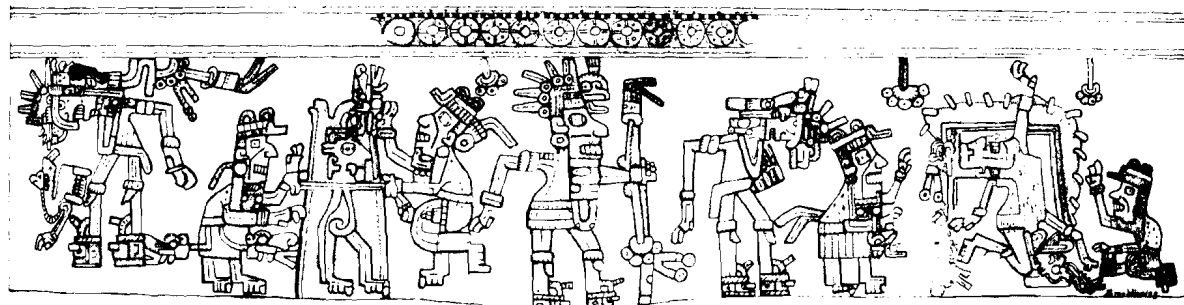


Figure 24.4 Example of a possible west Mexican variant of the Postclassic international style: a ritual scene from a polychrome ceramic vase from Amapa, Nayarit. (From von Winning 1977:131.)

features in the fullest or most revealing way. For example, upper torsos may be presented frontally, whereas the hips, heads, and limbs are almost always in profile, as are feet and hands; plants are usually rendered with their roots exposed. Space tends to be ambiguous and shallow, and backgrounds are rare. Figures usually fill most of the two-dimensional space available to them, and often are rendered floating in space or tied to a ground line or register. Robertson (1970:80) called this feature “register space,” and noted that many works contain more than one horizontal register filled with figures.

The most elaborate and extensive artworks painted in the Postclassic international style are the preconquest Mixtec and Borgia Group codices. The thousands of figures and pictorial symbols in these codices, and in the native-style Aztec pictorials, make up the greatest corpus of international-style images, which is the principal reason the style has been so closely linked to pictorial codices. Polychrome pottery from Oaxaca, Puebla, Tlaxcala, and the area in and around the Valley of Mexico comprises another large corpus, as do the relatively few extant murals in the same regions.

Although this international style appeared from the northern Gulf Coast to Guatemala, and from Guerrero to Quintana Roo, several regional substyles can be distinguished. A specifically Mixteca-Puebla substyle has been described by Robertson (1959:17–24). Like the international style, it is represented by the Mixtec and Borgia Group codices, especially the Zouche-Nuttall and Borgia

codices, and by the ceramics and murals from northwestern Oaxaca, Puebla, and Tlaxcala. This substyle has also been variously subdivided into Mixtec, Cholula, Borgia Group, Codex Borgia, and Codices Laud and Fejérváry-Mayer (Robertson 1959:17–24, 1963, 1966; Nicholson 1960, 1982; Nowotny 1961:13–16; Ramsey 1975, 1982; Smith and Heath-Smith 1980; Boone 1990, 2000; Sisson and Lilly 1994a, 1994b; Lind 1994). Examples are provided in figure 24.1 and in the illustrations in chapters 25 and 26.

A well-defined Aztec painting style is characterized by more naturalism in the rendering of form, by longer and leaner proportions, and by characteristic ways of rendering certain symbols (Boone 1982a; see figure 24.2). The Tulum and Santa Rita murals (figure 24.1B), also characterized by longer and leaner proportions, may represent another substyle (Quirarte 1975, 1982), and a southwest Maya substyle has been suggested for murals at the cities of Iximche' and Utatlan (Guillemín 1965; Carmack 1981; Carmack and Larmer 1971; see figure 24.3). Still other regional styles may emerge with more study. For example, Late Postclassic polychrome ceramics from Nayarit depict human or deity figures in a manner that exhibits most of the characteristics of the Postclassic international style (von Winning 1977; figure 24.4). Individual manuscripts, and indeed individual painters within the manuscripts, will have their own painting styles. Despite the detection of regional and codical variations, however, they all participate in the Postclassic in-











