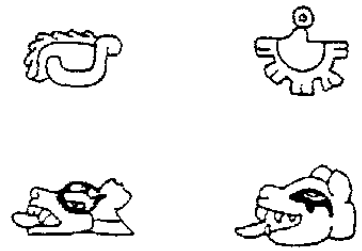


Information Networks in Postclassic Mesoamerica



Michael E. Smith

During Postclassic times several distinctive styles and numerous symbols became prominent throughout Mesoamerica. Many of these elements have long been viewed as having an origin in, or at least a strong connection to, central Mexico. Indeed, the term *Mexicanization* is commonly used to describe the occurrence of such styles and symbols outside of central Mexico (e.g., Coe 1999: 187–188; Fox 1978:3; Miller 1982:65–74; Navarrete 1996; Thompson 1945:13; Sharer 1994:424–431; Sidrys 1983:404–406). Earlier scholars proposed a number of mechanisms to account for the spread of these elements from central Mexico to the distant corners of Mesoamerica, including mass migrations of peoples (Vaillant 1940:300; Ekholm 1942:128); travels by religious specialists carrying codices (Robertson 1970; von Winning 1977) or textiles (Lothrop 1966:189); the deliberate promotion of traits by the Aztecs in preparation for imperial conquest (Miller 1982:74; Navarrete 1976, 1996); and the diffusion of vague “waves of influence” (Nicholson 1960).

Today the term *Mexicanization* is used less frequently, and few scholars find the old explanations satisfactory (for discussion, see Smith and Heath-Smith 1980; Chase and Chase 1988; Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1994b). Nevertheless, the presence of innumerable “central-Mexican-looking” elements throughout Postclassic Mesoamerica cannot be denied. Many of these traits and symbols were first identified in central Mexico, but that is not an argument in favor of a historical origin there. Some are more abundant in central Mexico simply because more codices have survived from the Aztec heartland than from other areas. The authors of this volume suggest that many of these elements were truly international in scope, meaning that they were widely distributed and did not necessarily originate in central Mexico.

The distribution and use of these styles and symbols

were crucial components of the Postclassic Mesoamerican world system. As outlined in the chapters in part 1, our approach to world-systems analysis includes processes of information exchange alongside processes of economic exchange. The spread of styles and symbols was not just a by-product of economic exchanges: the peoples of Postclassic Mesoamerica—particularly elites—deliberately chose to use specific iconographic symbols and stylistic elements as crucial parts of their strategies of social and political interaction (e.g., Ringle et al. 1998). These pictorial elements communicated information, and as pointed out by Chase-Dunn and Hall (1997:52), information networks were important components of past world systems. We feel that our world-systems approach to styles and symbols provides a new and more convincing account of their occurrence and distribution than offered by past explanations. A historical review of the Mixteca-Puebla concept provides a background for our new concepts and units.

HISTORY OF THE MIXTECA-PUEBLA CONCEPT

George Vaillant (1938, 1940) coined the term “Mixteca-Puebla” to account for the pictorial styles of codices and ceramics of southern Puebla/northern Oaxaca (the Mixteca-Puebla region) and manifestations of that style in more-distant areas of Mesoamerica. He viewed Mixteca-Puebla alternatively as a culture and a “culture complex,” and credited its spread from its Puebla/Oaxaca heartland to migrations and direct processes of diffusion. Perhaps because of Vaillant’s broad and imprecise definition, other scholars soon began using the Mixteca-Puebla concept in a variety of ways (e.g., Ekholm 1942; Robertson 1959; Jiménez Moreno 1970).

In 1960, H. B. Nicholson (1960) reexamined the concept and tried to formalize and standardize its usage. He

provided a clear definition of the Mixteca-Puebla style that emphasized its geometric precision, the standardization and conventionalization of symbols, and the use of color. Nicholson defined several "regional and temporal variants" of the Mixteca-Puebla style, including the Toltec, Aztec, and Mixtec. He accounted for the appearance of this style in distant areas of Mesoamerica through "waves of Mixteca-Puebla stylistic influence" that spread outward from the Mixteca-Puebla area (see also Meighan 1974). His ideas were developed further in several later papers (Nicholson 1982, 1996). Robertson (1959) defined and discussed the "Mixtec Pre-conquest manuscript style," which was quite similar to definitions of the Mixteca-Puebla style (e.g., Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1994b).

Smith and Heath-Smith (1980) published a critique of Nicholson's model, arguing that he had lumped together three temporally and regionally distinct styles under the Mixteca-Puebla label. They pointed out that the earliest of these—which they labeled the "Postclassic Religious Style"—was widespread in coastal Mesoamerica, from Sinaloa in the north to Costa Rica in the south, during the Epiclassic and Early Postclassic periods. These occurrences predated the appearance of the Mixteca-Puebla style in its putative central Mexican heartland, and thus the "waves of influence" model cannot be appropriate. In a brief response to the Smith and Heath-Smith paper, Nicholson and Quiñones Keber (1994a) point out that those authors had confused style and iconography, an appropriate criticism (see discussion of these concepts in chapter 24). Here we refer to the standardized widespread Epiclassic/Early Postclassic symbols as the Early Postclassic international symbol set, a term that replaces the poorly named "Postclassic Religious Style."

Smith and Heath-Smith (1980) proposed calling the Middle and Late Postclassic manifestations of the Mixteca-Puebla style the "Mixtec Codex Style." They included the Mixteca and Borgia Group codices, the elaborate codex-style polychrome ceramics of Puebla and Oaxaca, and a series of Late Postclassic murals in central Mexico, Oaxaca, and Yucatán. It is now clear that there are really two distinct phenomena here: the Mixteca-Puebla style proper, and the more general international style (and symbols) of the mural paintings. Most scholars now use "Mixteca-Puebla style" to refer to the Middle and Late Postclassic codices, ceramics, and murals of the Mixteca-Puebla area (e.g., Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1994b; Smith 2001b), a usage that we follow here. In our terminology, the Mixteca-Puebla style is a sub-style of the more inclusive Postclassic international style (see below). Late Postclassic mural paintings from central Mexico to Yucatán share several key stylistic elements, a situation addressed by Robertson (1970), who grouped them as the "International Style of the Late Post-Classic." Smith and Heath-Smith (1980) also suggested a third

category—the "Mixteca-Puebla Regional Ceramic Style"—to describe local ceramic complexes in this area. Today this concept appears unnecessary: each region had its own history of changing ceramic complexes (corresponding to local ceramic phases), and these are different sorts of phenomena from the pictorial styles and symbols discussed above.

NEW UNITS AND CONCEPTS

With more information and new approaches to research on Postclassic Mesoamerica, we are now in a better position to identify the various chronological and spatial manifestations that were previously lumped together under the Mixteca-Puebla label, and to distinguish styles from iconographies in order to arrive at a better understanding of Postclassic Mesoamerican art and its social and cultural significance. Boone and Smith (chapter 24) discuss the issue of style versus iconography, a basic distinction for art historians that has become garbled when used by archaeologists, accounting for some of the confusion over the Mixteca-Puebla concept. They formally define the new concepts with illustrations, but it will be helpful to give a brief preview of them here.

The authors of this volume suggest the term *Postclassic international style* for a broad grouping of regional painting styles that exhibit similar use of form, line, color, spatial arrangement, and human figural conventions (chapter 24). We follow the lead of Donald Robertson (1970), who first proposed this concept for the Tulum and Santa Rita murals. At present, we can identify four regional styles within the general framework of the Postclassic international style (figure 23.1). We use the label *Mixteca-Puebla style* in its strict form as described above: to refer to the distinctive painting style found on codices, murals, and ceramics in the Mixteca-Puebla region of southern Puebla and Oaxaca (chapter 24; see also Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1994a). The Aztec painting style is found primarily in pictorial codices, with some examples in mural paintings (chapter 27; see also Boone 1982a, 1990, 2000; Robertson 1959, 1963).

The *coastal Maya mural style* is our designation for the style of the mural paintings of Tulum, Santa Rita, Mayapán (newly discovered by Carlos Peraza), and other Postclassic coastal Maya sites (chapter 25; see also Miller 1982; Quirarte 1982; Robertson 1970). We suggest the name *southwest Maya style* for the mural paintings at Utatlan, Iximché, and other southwestern Maya sites. Only a few fragmentary examples have survived, and it is difficult to define this style with any precision (see discussion in chapter 24; see also Carmack and Larmer 1971; Guillemín 1965; Schele and Mathews 1998: figures 8.9, 8.10). It may be possible to define other regional polychrome painting styles within the Postclassic international style as more examples are brought to light. For

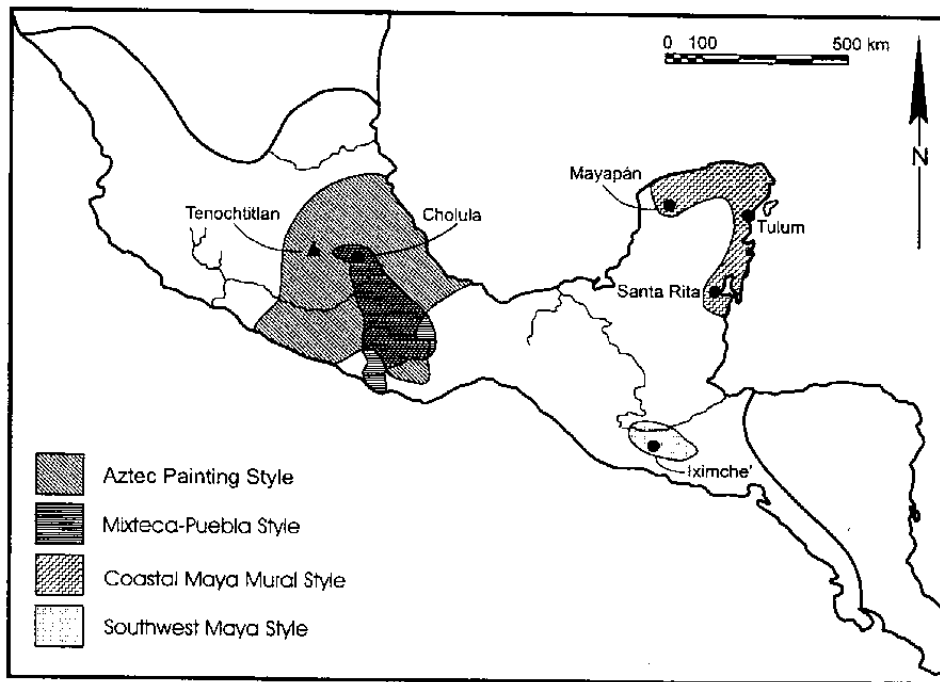


Figure 23.1 Map of regional style variants of the Late Postclassic international style. (Produced by Pamela Headrick, from base maps compiled by Timothy S. Hare.)

example, some west Mexican ceramics may qualify (chapter 24), and Postclassic murals and carved shells from the Huastec area might be considered another regional style (see Beyer 1934; Du Solier 1946).

Turning now from style to iconography, we propose the concept of an international symbol set to designate groups of related pictorial elements that are often found together in widely separated Postclassic representational contexts. As suggested above, the term *international* is important because it suggests the cosmopolitan nature of these elements and their lack of clear origin in, or strong association with, any particularly area. The Early Postclassic international symbol set includes iconographic elements from the Epiclassic and Early Postclassic periods originally labeled the Postclassic religious style by Smith and Heath-Smith (1980). These symbols—elements such as step-frets and serpents—were painted on polychrome ceramics along all of the coasts of Mesoamerica. Some or all of the symbols originated in Late Classic Maya iconography (Taube 2000:284). Their spread along coastal trade routes may have been associated with the spread of the feathered serpent cult throughout Mesoamerica at this time (Ringle et al. 1998).

These symbols of the Early Postclassic international symbol set preceded the development of the Postclassic international style and the related Late Postclassic international symbol set; in fact, they contributed strongly to the development of those later phenomena (Smith and Heath-Smith 1980; Day 1994). The elements of the Late Postclassic international symbol set were particularly widespread in Mesoamerica, and it is their distribution

that drew the attention of the early scholars who proposed the concept of Mexicanization. A closer look at this concept helps set the scene for the chapters that follow in this section.

BEYOND MEXICANIZATION

As noted above, the various early explanations for the spread of so-called central Mexican symbols and traits in Late Postclassic times all posited the origin of such traits in central Mexico, followed by their transmission to the distant reaches of Mesoamerica. In place of these notions, we suggest that many of the symbols, styles, and traits originated in other parts of Mesoamerica and then became incorporated into the active networks of commercial trade and information exchange that made up the Postclassic world system. Our approach to world-system dynamics suggests that the movement of ideas and symbols throughout the area is better viewed as a network with nodes than as a pattern of outward flow from a small number of centers (for similar models, see Ringle et al. 1998; Kepecs et al. 1994).

The advantages of our world-systems view over older, nuclear models of Mexicanization can be illustrated by a consideration of Carlos Navarrete's 1976 article "Algunas influencias mexicanas en el área Maya meridional durante el postclásico tardío" (Navarrete 1976; reprinted in 1996 with minor changes as "Elementos arqueológicos de mexicanización en las tierras altas mayas"). This paper is one of the most explicit and extensive treatments of the Mexicanization model. Navarrete lists more than

20 traits—organized into 12 categories of material objects—that he argues are central Mexican traits deliberately brought to the Guatemala highlands in preparation for Aztec conquest of the area. An examination of Navarrete's list, however, casts doubt on the central Mexican origin of many or most of the traits. Some are material objects that clearly originated in other parts of Mesoamerica (not central Mexico) such as copper/bronze items (from west Mexico; see chapter 21) and turquoise (from the Southwest; see chapter 18). Other items were imports from Aztec central Mexico (e.g., Aztec III Black-on-orange ceramics) whose presence outside of central Mexico resulted from commercial exchange that did not entail any necessary cultural or political affiliation with the Aztecs (Smith 1990). Still other items on Navarrete's list were general Postclassic traits widely distributed in Mesoamerica without any necessary priority or special affiliation with central Mexico. These include circular structures (Pollock 1936), mural paintings (Miller 1982; Pohl 1998a, 1999; Robertson 1970; Sisson and Lilly 1994a, 1994b), and human sacrifice (Massey and Steele 1997; Pijoan and Mansilla 1997; Ramírez and Acosta 1997; Welsh 1988), none of which had any temporal or cultural priority in central Mexico.

Even a trait like the double temple—often associated with the Aztecs because of the Templo Mayor—is suspect as an example of Mexicanization. There were many more double temples in the Maya area (Navarrete mentions 20; see also Smith 1955) than in Aztec central Mexico, where only five examples (Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, Tenayuca, Santa Cecilia, and Teopanzolco) are known (Pareyon Moreno 1972). Furthermore, the double temples in the two areas do not at all resemble one another in size, architectural style, or construction details. In short, most of Navarrete's traits were like the other international styles and symbols described above: they were distributed throughout Postclassic Mesoamerica along channels of commercial exchange and stylistic interaction. Local elites and others were in contact with people in distant regions, and they selected specific goods, symbols, and elements of style for their own reasons.

In the following chapter, Boone and Smith (chapter 24) discuss the concepts of style and iconography, and review the various international styles and symbols that characterized Middle and Late Postclassic Mesoamerica. That chapter is followed by three case studies that highlight the diversity of ways in which local elites deliberately selected and adopted specific elements or components of these styles and symbols for their own purposes. Masson (chapter 25) considers the well-known polychrome murals of the coastal Maya mural style at Tulum and Santa Rita, identifying the local and international elements in these paintings. She argues that coastal Maya elites adopted these symbols and styles in order to endow depictions of local rituals and scenes (with local mean-

ings) with an international flavor that contributed to their own political power and legitimacy (see also Chase and Chase 1988).

Pohl (chapter 26) looks at international styles and symbols on a smaller scale in his discussion of the social uses of polychrome ceramics in the Mixteca-Puebla region. Continuing the thread of his discussion of political alliances (chapter 10) and the linkages between religion and trade in this area (chapter 22), chapter 26 shows some of the ways in which the elaborate polychrome ceramics of the Mixteca-Puebla style contributed to regional political dynamics and interaction. The common occurrence of this style among the Eastern Nahua, Mixtec, and Zapotec peoples, albeit with distinctive local variations, shows how processes of interaction in the Postclassic world system served to dampen the importance of ethnicity as a force in regional political and social dynamics.

Boone (chapter 27) takes another important medium of the Postclassic international style—Aztec codices—and examines their role in forging a common religious and political ideology among widely dispersed local elites. This network of elite interaction, actively promoted by both the imperial rulers and local dynasts, was particularly strong within the expanding Aztec empire (Berdan et al. 1996), but it also crossed political borders and incorporated elites from all over Mesoamerica. The three media treated in chapters 25 through 27—murals, polychrome ceramics, and codices—provided the stylistic backbone for the networks of information exchange that helped create the distinctive nature of the Postclassic world system.

One point of disagreement among the authors of this book concerns the reasons why local elites chose to adopt international styles and symbols. Boone (chapter 27) emphasizes the political power of the Aztec empire and suggests that distant elites adopted these elements to ally themselves with the empire, presumably for the political and economic benefits that ensued. Masson (chapter 25) and Kepecs (chapter 33), on the other hand, argue that Maya elites chose to use central Mexican and other international symbols in order to consolidate their own political power and to manipulate commerce and production within their territories. Emulation of central Mexican styles is not a factor in their explanations for the coastal Maya murals. These two views can be seen as having different emphases rather than being opposing interpretations. Boone focuses more on the Aztec empire and on Tenochtitlan's relations within and beyond the empire, whereas Masson and Kepecs deal with the lowland Maya area, which had quite limited direct contacts with central Mexico. These scholars all agree that stylistic interaction and the exchange of information were two-way processes that easily crossed political borders in Postclassic Mesoamerica, and that old models of Mexi-

canization are not up to the task of accounting for the explosion of internationalization in the Postclassic world system.

CENTRAL MEXICAN TRAITS IN THE MAYA AREA

The network approach to information exchange in Late Postclassic Mesoamerica advocated in this book—which downplays central Mexico as the origin of traits—should not blind us to a number of cases where particular institutions or complexes of traits from central Mexico do appear in distant regions of Mesoamerica. For example, the Maya codices contain several passages that incorporate Aztec ritual concepts within the otherwise Maya religious content of the documents. There is a central Mexican-style almanac within the Madrid Codex, and several Aztec deity names are portrayed in the Dresden Codex (chapter 27; see also Whittaker 1986).

The sculpted skull platform provides an archaeological example of a Postclassic central Mexican feature found in southern Mesoamerica. Unlike the vague and unconvincing architectural similarities discussed by Navarrete (1996), the sculpted skull platform is a highly distinctive feature whose form and context in highland Guatemala duplicate examples in central Mexico. Klein (2000) first identified the sculpted skull platform as an architectural feature present in Aztec ritual codices (the codices Borbonicus and Tudela) and at archaeological sites (including Tula, Tenayuca, Tenochtitlan, and Cholula), and she differentiated these features from skull racks (*tzompantlis*), platforms used to display severed heads from sacrificial victims.

Sculpted skull platforms are low stone platforms, decorated with skulls and crossed bones in low relief, found attached to the fronts of large temple pyramids. Some have been classified previously as skull racks (e.g., Miller 1999), but the consistent iconography, low height, and spatial context of sculpted skull platforms suggest a distinctive significance and function. Stone effigy skull racks at Chichén Itzá and Tenochtitlan, on the other hand, are larger and have numerous repeating skull images without the crossed bones; these probably had different functions from the sculpted skull platforms. Klein (2000) shows that sculpted skull platforms have a symbolic association with the *tzitzimime* deities (celestial monsters) and with themes of health, fertility, and curing (see chapter 26 and Pohl 1998a). They were probably used in some kind of public curing ceremony or rites propitiating the *tzitzimime*.

The only known examples of a sculpted skull platform outside of central Mexico are two platforms at Iximche' described by Guillemín (1965, 1977).¹ The first, Structure 72, is attached to the front of Temple 2, a large pyramid in Plaza A. Excavation of the platform revealed polychrome paintings of skulls and crossed bones

(Guillemín 1965:16). A second likely example, Structure 104, is a low platform attached to the front of another large pyramid, Temple 4 in Plaza C. This platform has not been excavated, and it is not known whether it was decorated with paintings or sculptures. Deposits of decapitated skulls were excavated in front of both platforms (Whittington and Reed 1994). The very specific iconographic and contextual similarities between the Iximche' platforms and the central Mexican skull platforms discussed by Klein (2000) point strongly to a central Mexican origin for these highland Maya features.

Traditional accounts of Mexicanization would interpret the skull platforms at Iximche' as either an Aztec trait brought deliberately to the highland Maya city by Aztec agents (e.g., Navarrete 1976, 1996), or as a Toltec trait brought earlier by migrating Toltec warriors (e.g., Fox 1978:3, 1989). It is hard to imagine, however, why these central Mexican polities would want to impose a specific nonpolitical architectural form on the inhabitants of Iximche'. Braswell (chapter 6; see also Braswell 2001b), on the other hand, proposes a more likely explanation for this kind of Mexican feature at highland Maya sites. He suggests that Maya elites deliberately emulated specific central Mexican styles and symbols (e.g., the skull and crossed bones motif, and certain polychrome ceramic vessels) and adopted specific exotic luxury goods (e.g., gold jewelry) as part of their own system of status rivalry and social legitimation. Although we cannot yet identify the specific processes by which these concepts and goods reached Iximche' from central Mexico, it is clear that they were components of the information exchange networks that characterized Late Postclassic Mesoamerica.

These examples—Aztec deities and rituals in the Maya codices, and sculpted skull platforms at Iximche'—show that the adoption of Postclassic central Mexican concepts and elements in the Maya area went, in some cases, beyond the incorporation of individual symbols and styles into local artistic media to include the replication of entire complexes of traits. However, these examples are in the minority and provide no justification for claiming that the Mayas or other distant peoples became Mexicanized through their adoption of foreign ideas and traits. More likely, local elites deliberately chose to use or display such ideas and traits for their own purposes. It makes no more sense to claim that the use of such traits Mexicanized the Maya peoples than to claim the use of Chinese porcelain in Europe and North America resulted in Sinicized local populations. Styles and symbols provide material evidence for the exchange of information in Postclassic Mesoamerica, and these networks of information exchange were crucial components of the Postclassic world system. The chapters that follow explore the nature of these processes of information exchange in Postclassic Mesoamerica.