
**Preclassic Mesoamerican Iconography
from the Perspective of the Postclassic:
Problems in Interpretational Analysis**

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Among the most vigorous recent trends in Mesoamerican studies is a determined attempt to extract specific meanings from pre-Postclassic pictorial and sculptural representations, over and above purely formal esthetic-stylistic analyses. This is the essence of *iconography* as defined, for example, by the prominent European art historian, Erwin Panofsky (e.g., 1955:26). In cultures with fully developed phonetic writing systems, iconographic interpretations of this type are often greatly aided by directly associated or otherwise relevant texts. In Mesoamerica this situation only pertains to the period of the Conquest, for which a relatively abundant ethnohistorical documentation is available in certain areas. For earlier periods, above all the Lowland Maya region during the Classic, many representations display associated hieroglyphic texts. Although this system of writing is only partly deciphered, considerable progress, sparked especially by Proskouriakoff's "dynastic hypothesis," has recently been made in relating these texts to their juxtaposed scenes. As we move back into the Preclassic, however, text-associated representations become more and more rare, and, at the same time, our understanding of the scripts involved is much less satisfactory.

How, then, can accurate meanings be assigned to very ancient Mesoamerican scenes and symbols? Various methods have been employed. The commonest is a version of what in New World archaeology and ethnohistory has been called "upstreaming" (Fenton 1949:236, 1952:334-335) and/or the "direct historical approach," which "involves the elementary logic of working from the known to the unknown" (Steward 1942:337)—or, to put it another way, from the living to the dead: utilizing knowledge of the culture flourishing in the area at the time of European Contact to interpret archaeological finds in that same area. Thus defined, the direct historical approach can be viewed as one type of interpretation of ancient remains by "ethnological" or "ethnographic analogy." This strategy has been much discussed in the recent literature on archaeological methodology. A

concise statement by Willey (1973:155) probably comes close to presenting a consensus view:

archaeologists operate with two kinds of analogical material: general comparative and specific historical. . . . The first allows inferences that are drawn from general life situations about people, without restrictions as to space and time; the second permits inferences only within a geographically circumscribed and historically defined context. This specific historic kind of analogy is usually referred to as "ethnographic analogy" and has particular pertinence for the New World, where archaeological cultures are frequently interpreted with the aid of ethnographic or ethnohistoric accounts that relate to Indian cultures believed to be in direct line of descent from these archaeological cultures.

Another method can be designated "intrinsic configurational iconographic analysis," which relies on detailed internal contextual examination of entire symbol systems (e.g., Kubler 1967, 1972*a*, 1973:165)—and, when relevant, comparisons with other iconographic systems in the same area co-tradition. This paper is devoted to a concise discussion of the problems connected with the direct historical approach, focusing on the Pre-classic.

The validity and success of the direct historical approach in interpreting Late Postclassic Mesoamerican iconography has been repeatedly confirmed. Eduard Seler was the first modern master of this method. Although various of his specific interpretations can today be challenged, he achieved landmark results, above all when directing his attention to native tradition pictorials and archaeological remains from the Basin of Mexico and adjacent territory which clearly date from the Late Postclassic. When he attempted the same kinds of iconographic analyses of similar data further removed in time and space from Late Postclassic central Mexico he achieved significantly less success, principally because much more pertinent ethnographic information is available for Contact central Mexico than for any other area of Mesoamerica.

But the key issue in relation to the theme of this symposium is: granted its success when concerned

with archaeological materials dating from the Late Postclassic, can the direct historical approach also be successfully utilized to interpret *pre*-Late Postclassic iconography? Here we enter a somewhat controversial area. Intersecting with and underlying this issue is the more fundamental problem: to what degree was there basic continuity and overall cultural unity in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica? How the student approaches this question naturally conditions his willingness to employ the direct historical approach to interpret the earlier iconographic systems. Today some leading Mesoamericanists (e.g., Bernal 1960, 1969:7, 187-188, 1971:30; Willey 1973) adhere quite explicitly to a fundamentally "unitary" view of Mesoamerican civilization, from putative Olmec genesis to Cortés. Predisposed by this orientation, for example, Michael Coe (1968:111-115, 1972, 1973)—and latterly his pupil, David Joralemon (1971, article this volume)—has boldly attempted to interpret Olmec iconography freely utilizing Contact central Mexican ethnographic data. Many years ago, Hermann Beyer (1922) urged considerable caution in employing this method (specifically, in relation with the interpretation of Teotihuacán materials), and recently a major art historian, George Kubler (1967:11-12, 1970:140-144, 1972*a*, 1973), has strongly argued against the validity of the application of the direct historical approach in pre-Late Postclassic iconographic analysis.

Kubler (1967:11) warns that "we must beware of disjunctive situations where form and meaning separate and rejoin in different combinations." He invokes Panofsky's (1960:84-106) "principle" or "law of disjunction," which the latter derived from the separation of form and significance in late medieval European art, that is, the reinterpretation of borrowed forms of classical antiquity with Christian meaning and the presentation of classical themes in contemporary, Christian forms. Kubler (1970:143-144) generalizes this principle thus:

Disjunction, which is a mode of renovation, may be said to happen whenever the members of a successor civilization refashion their inheritance by gearing the predecessor's forms to new meanings, and by clothing in new forms those old meanings which remain acceptable. Continuous form does not predicate continuous meaning, nor does continuity of form or of meaning necessarily imply continuity of culture. On the contrary, prolonged continuities of form or meaning, on the order

of a thousand years, may mask . . . a cultural discontinuity deeper than that between classical antiquity and the middle ages. . . . We may not use Aztec ritual descriptions as compiled by Sahagún about 1550 to explain murals painted at Teotihuacán a thousand years earlier, for the same reason that we would not easily get agreement in interpreting the Hellenistic images of Palmyra by using Arabic texts on Islamic ritual. The idea of disjunction . . . makes every ethnological analogy questionable by insisting on discontinuity rather than its opposite whenever long durations are under discussion.

Kubler (1973:166-167) further contends that "analogizing also leads to misleading fragmentations, by pinning or imposing whole clusters of late ethnohistorical detail upon isolated fragments of very ancient symbolic behavior, as when the mythological and ritual meanings of the cult of Quetzalcoatl are identified as present in Olmec culture because a feathered form appears there." This he would regard "as like arguing that the Good Shepherd of modern Sunday School imagery, shown caring for a lost animal in his flock, explains as Jesus a similar figuration of the youth bearing an animal on his shoulders in Greek archaic sculpture before 500 B.C." Kubler (1970:141-142) objects that "Seler's method of historico-ethnological analogy still governs Mexican and Maya studies in all departments of archaeological and ethnographical research," and he complains that "few people resist its invitation to explain the remote past by the tribal present," going on to affirm roundly that "to use Sahagún to explain the oldest Mexican urban societies is as unprofitable as to try to explain ancient Egypt by the Muslim historians." As a corollary of his application to Mesoamerican culture history of Panofsky's disjunction principle, Kubler (1972*a*, 1973:163-164) also seriously challenges the unitary interpretation of Mesoamerican civilization, the notion of a "single huge cultural system" for this area co-tradition, contending that "the supporting evidence for such a unitary view is . . . so thin that both the thesis and the antithesis are still beyond proof."

Kubler's vigorous negative position on this issue highlights its importance. How much continuity in religious concepts and ritual was there in Mesoamerica from Preclassic to Conquest times? If there was very little, then Contact period ethnographic data will obviously be of little aid in interpreting Preclassic iconography. If Mesoamerican civilization, however, was essentially a single

overall unified co-tradition beginning with the Olmec efflorescence, then many fundamental religious-ritual continuities must have characterized it. Actually, in my opinion both views can be supported with various arguments and data, depending on what aspects of Mesoamerican culture history one selects and emphasizes in support of one's position. There were undoubtedly many partial or complete iconographic-conceptual disjunctions between Olmec and Aztec, but, at the same time, evidence can be adduced that there were probably many continuities as well. In short, I suspect that we are dealing with a very mixed bag. If so, detailed analyses of specific instances are obviously going to prove to be more effective in attacking this problem than sweeping pronouncements pro or con.

Before citing some concrete cases, however, the point should be made that the legitimacy of applying Panofsky's "disjunction principle" to areas whose culture histories have been quite different from that of Western Europe is perhaps debatable. The culture histories of certain other Old World regions would appear to provide some rather striking examples of long term iconographic-conceptual *continuities*, notably Egypt, India, and China. Certainly, for instance, identical meanings were not attached to New Kingdom and Greco-Roman representations of Osiris, Isis, and Horus, but the basic connotations do seem to have been quite similar, in spite of a temporal span of well over 1500 years. This is because one fundamental religious ideology persisted, from Early Dynastic times on, with remarkable tenacity in the Valley of the Nile. After Christianization and subsequent Islamization, of course, the situation changed radically, for the imposition and acceptance of these quite different foreign ideological systems resulted in profound iconographic disjunctions—as occurred, owing to similar causes, elsewhere in the Near and Far East and Europe.

Certainly Panofsky (1944, 1960:84-113) himself applied his principle only to Western Europe and went to some pains to analyze the particular series of culture-historical events that eventuated in that divorce between form and meaning in Classical images utilized during the "proto-Renaissance" and "proto-Humanistic" renaissances of the High Middle Ages. Although he later stressed what he considered to have been the medieval tendency to "compartmentalize" and the inability to make

"historical distinctions," in his original article Panofsky (1944:226) succinctly expressed his basic explanation for this phenomenon thus:

The high-mediaeval attitude toward classical Antiquity . . . is characterized by an ambivalence which we, having gone through the Italian "rinascimento" find very hard to reexperience. . . . there was, on the one hand, a sense of unbroken connection or even continuity with classical Antiquity, linking the mediaeval German Empire to Julius Caesar, mediaeval music to Pythagoras, mediaeval philosophy to Plato and Aristotle, mediaeval grammar to Donatus—and, on the other, the consciousness of an insurmountable gap that separated the Christian present from the pagan past. . . . To the mature mediaeval mind Jason and Medea were acceptable as long as they were represented as a knight and damsel playing chess in a Gothic chamber, and a classical goddess was acceptable as long as she did service as a Virgin Mary. But a classical Thisbe waiting by a classical mausoleum would have been an archaeological reconstruction incompatible with the sense of continuity; and a Venus classical in form as well as content would have been a diabolical idol anathematized by the aversion to paganism.

In short, in his view the Classical-Late Medieval form-meaning disjunction was caused, above all, by the comparatively sharp break between two successive religious ideological systems, Classical paganism and Christianity. When Classical images were employed during the Late Middle Ages they perforce had to be divested of their pagan connotations and reinvested with a "correct" *interpretatio Christiana*. Obviously, only a very special set of historical circumstances could have led to such a result.

In Mesoamerica there is certainly no evidence for any comparable historical development. No Mexica viewing a Teotihuacan cultic image could have exhibited the same attitude of ambivalence and trepidation that a twelfth-century European might well have felt on beholding the statue of a pagan deity. Archaeological data evidence some significant changes in religious-ritual systems over time but hardly any replacement as drastic as that of Classical paganism by Christianity. Violent political shifts must not have been infrequent—and were probably accompanied by some ideological changes such as the rise of deity cults and associated rituals favored by and in certain cases actually imposed by politically successful groups—but there do not seem to have been any

sweeping supersedures of whole religious ideological systems comparable to those that followed the rise of Judaeo-Christianity and Islam. All that is known about indigenous Mesoamerican religious-ritual-systems would point precisely to the contrary. Far from being militantly exclusivist they seem to have been characteristically rather eclectic, generally tolerant of other systems, and receptive to the incorporation of compatible foreign religious concepts and rituals. Under these conditions changes in the religious sphere of the culture normally tend to be more gradual and, especially, accretive, frequently exhibiting a tenacious conservatism in the retention of fundamental concepts.

No one would seriously argue that the successive religious-ritual systems of Teotihuacán, Xochicalco, Tollan, Colhuacan, Azcapotzalco, and Mexico Tenochtitlan, for example, were identical. Undeniably there seems to have been a rather sharp break in the continuity of historical record-keeping during the Classic-Postclassic transition (Nicholson 1974), as well as some very significant cultural changes—although it is also becoming increasingly evident that archaeologically the break between the Classic and Postclassic in Central Mexico was less drastic than some had previously supposed (e.g., Hicks and Nicholson 1964; Dumond and Müller 1973). But all this archaeological evidence for substantial Classic-Postclassic Central Mexican culture change notwithstanding, in the religious-ritual sphere, with its recognized tendency to conservatism, the degree of basic continuity was probably quite high, even in some specific deity concepts.

In support of his application to Mesoamerica of Panofsky's disjunction principle, Kubler lays particular stress on the length of time involved between the "fall" of Teotihuacán and the rise of Tenochtitlan, admittedly a substantial block of time (ca. 7 centuries?). It seems unlikely, however, that degree of form-meaning disjunction is very closely tied to mere temporal duration. It probably depends much more on other, specifically historical factors of the kind so incisively analyzed for Western Europe by Panofsky. Aside from emphasizing the temporal aspect, Kubler (1973: 166), in his most explicit attempt to explain disjunction at least in central Mexico—after expressing his view that spatially and temporally the Mediterranean basin and Mesoamerican urban civilizations were about equivalent—suggests that

"Islam is a divergent successor state to the Roman Empire in much the same way as the Aztec confederacy was a divergent successor to the civilization of Teotihuacán some 800 years earlier. Both the Moslems and the Chichimec ancestors of the Aztecs were frontier peoples of nomadic origin who broke in upon the decayed cities of a prior state, bringing different beliefs and rituals that replaced or paralleled those of the older peoples." Earlier, Kubler (1972b:38) had presented a basically similar reconstruction: "the Toltec and Aztec peoples . . . brought about a new era of political expansion, using old symbolic forms for the worship of new gods brought into the Valley of Mexico by wandering tribes from the north who came as hunters and nomads after the collapse of the polity and faith represented by Teotihuacán."

I would agree with Willey (1973:160) that "Kubler's parallel of Hellenistic Palmyra and Arabic texts, on the one hand, and Teotihuacán and Aztec ritual, on the other, is not an apt one." The "Chichimec" ancestors of the Mexica cannot be fitly compared to the galloping desert warriors of the Prophet who in the seventh and eighth centuries overran and spread throughout much of the Near East, North Africa, and Iberia a new religious ideology quite distinct from those that had previously flourished in these regions. The intricate fabric of the complex religious-ritual system centered on the Basin of Mexico at Contact (Nicholson 1971b) almost certainly was woven from earlier, indigenous Mesoamerican systems of which that of Teotihuacán must have been a major strand—although its most immediate major source appears to have been Toltec. The post-Toltec "Chichimec" contribution was probably not too substantial. As noted, a considerable cultural shift seems to have occurred between the eclipse of Teotihuacán and the rise of Tollan, but hardly one comparable to the Hellenistic-Roman to Islamic transition in the Near East—and it is interesting that Kubler (1972b) himself has particularly stressed the Teotihuacán-to-Tollan continuity of one important icon, the "jaguar-serpent-bird," although, characteristically, he argues that the significance changed.

Whether all major Mesoamerican groups participated in an essentially similar religious-ritual system or not—an issue that has been the subject of much recent discussion (e.g., Caso 1971; Jiménez Moreno 1971)—it seems clear that at least a core of interrelated basic concepts was widely



Fig. 1. La Venta Monument 19, from Joralemon 1971: Fig. 4.

shared. Granted many political disruptions and power shifts such as must have accompanied the abandonments of the important centers represented by the archaeological sites of San Lorenzo, La Venta, Cuicuilco, Teotihuacán, Monte Albán, Xochicalco, Tajín, and Tula; granted various influxes of more barbaric frontier peoples introducing somewhat differently oriented ideologies; granted a certain amount of constant change and flux in all Mesoamerican religions—it can still be argued that once the fundamental structure of the overall Mesoamerican religious system had crystallized, probably no later than the end of the Preclassic, it steadily evolved without major breaks or broad scale “disjunctions” until Cortés. In any case, the whole question of Mesoamerican Preclassic-Classical-Postclassic continuities in reli-

gious iconography requires a much more thorough, comprehensive analysis than it has yet received. Until this is accomplished, an attitude of some reserve toward sweeping generalizations such as Kubler’s invocation of Panofsky’s “law of disjunction” would appear to represent the most prudent position.

Assuming for the moment that there was some degree of Pre- to Postclassic continuity in Mesoamerican religious iconography, how is this continuity to be determined? Here we undeniably face challenging problems of archaeological inference. I assume that it would be generally agreed that iconographic continuity can be best established by careful determination of similarity of images through time. And a single motif, it would probably be further agreed, would normally have less value than a consistently associated *cluster* of iconographic elements, the more complex the better. Since few absolute Olmec-to-Aztec iconographic similarities could be expected, the working out of developmental series through what has been called “similiary seriation” (Rowe 1961)—that is, arranging representations in a sequential series on the basis of their degrees of similarity, wherein “like fits on to like”—is crucial. There is obviously great danger of artificiality and procrustean bed forcing here, but, to establish valid iconographic continuities, I see no escape from the necessity of at least attempting to establish these developmental-sequential chains.

To concretize the discussion, some specific examples should be cited. The first to be considered is a single element, the footprint(s). Seemingly its earliest appearance is on La Venta Monument 13 (Fig. 1), of Middle Preclassic date. It



Fig. 2. Teotihuacán, Tetitla, Room 12, Mural 8, from von Winning 1968: Abb. 2.

is positioned behind a stalking, "turbaned" male figure who holds what appears to be a banner. Fronting this personage is a vertical row of three probable hieroglyphs. It has been plausibly suggested (e.g., Coe 1968:115) that, as it certainly did later, the footprint constitutes here an ideogram connoting movement or travel and that the figure represents "one who has traveled," perhaps a foreign emissary or representative who is identified by the three hieroglyphs with his name(s) and/or title(s). In the Late Postclassic Mixteca-Puebla/Aztec system, a series of footprints was usually employed to indicate this concept—but occasionally a single one only. The possible continuity in the use of this simple ideogram between Olmec and Aztec (Fig. 4) is provided by Teotihuacán (Fig. 2) and Xochicalco (Fig. 3) instances (Toltec so far seems unrepresented, but I suspect this may be owing to accidents of preservation rather than a genuine gap in its use in Early

Postclassic central Mexico). Although we are admittedly dealing here with a relatively minor element, the likelihood of long-range iconographic-conceptual continuity in this case suggests that other Preclassic-to-Postclassic iconographic continuities might well also be expected.

Another single element case is instructive because it effectively illustrates some of the difficulties faced by the investigator attempting analyses of this kind. The element involved is the vertical line or band running through or very close to the eye(s) on representations that are certainly or putatively supernatural personages. The presence of this feature is precisely the basis for the identification as Xipe Totec, the macabre "Flayed God" well known both iconographically and conceptually from ethnohistorical sources (Nicholson 1972), of a group of Olmec representations which Joralemon (1971:79-81, 90)—following up suggestions by Michael Coe—labeled "God VI."



Fig. 3. Xochicalco, "Piedra del Palacio," from Caso 1962:Fig. 1.

Many depictions of certain or possible deities from different areas within Mesoamerica, dating to different periods, display this feature—and a reasonably spaced out sequential series can be established, from Middle Preclassic to the Conquest. Selected examples from this series are illustrated: Olmec (Figs. 5-6), Monte Albán (Figs. 7-9), Teotihuacán (Figs. 10-11), Postclassic Lowland Maya (Fig. 12), Toltec style of Early Postclassic El Salvador (Fig. 13), Codex Borgia group pictorials (Late Postclassic South Puebla-Central Veracruz-Northwest Oaxaca?; Figs. 14-15), and Late Postclassic central Mexico or "Aztec" (Fig. 16). When other iconographic indicia of Xipe Totec are present, connecting early images with his cult may well be justified, for its widespread distribution at Contact evidences for it a considerable antiquity (Nicholson 1972). When the only feature that provides a link with this deity is the line through the eye(s), however, the identification is hazardous since various other Mixteca-Puebla tradition Late Postclassic deities—for example,



Fig. 4. Codex Mendoza, fol. 66r: Mexica ambassadors whose movement as travelers is indicated by footprints; cf. Fig. 1.

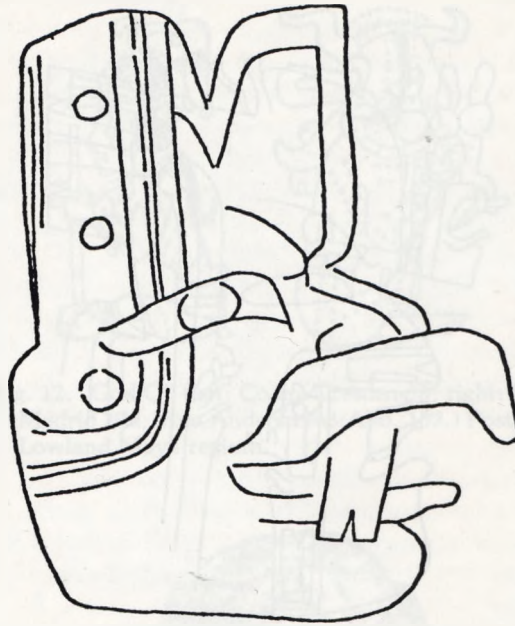


Fig. 5. "Profile A" incised on right shoulder of Las Limas, Veracruz, seated Olmec stone figure, from Joralemon 1971:Fig. 232—identified by Coe (1968: 111-114) and Joralemon ("God VI") as Xipe Totec.

Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl (Fig. 17), the Mixteca solar deity "1. Death" (Fig. 18), and the young maize deity, Centeotl (Figs. 19, 25; cf. Fig. 23 for similar feature on Codex Dresden "God E")—prominently display this element in one form or another. The Coe-Joralemon hypothesis identifying "God VI" as a proto-Xipe Totec, therefore, as I (Nicholson 1971a:17) have previously pointed out, hardly seems compelling. It should be viewed, rather, as an interesting hypothesis that future discoveries may or may not tend to support. It would be greatly strengthened, of course, if other known identificatory insignia of the Postclassic deity were to be eventually discerned on indubitable Olmec pieces.

Another interesting and pertinent case is that of Olmec "God II," which Joralemon (1971:59-66, 90) suggests was a maize deity because a plant motif, which he identifies as maize, usually issues from the cleft in the top of the head. Although Joralemon did not cite or illustrate any cases in his comprehensive catalog, this feature is also encountered with his "God IV" (Fig. 20), whom he (Joralemon 1971:90) identifies with the rain god,

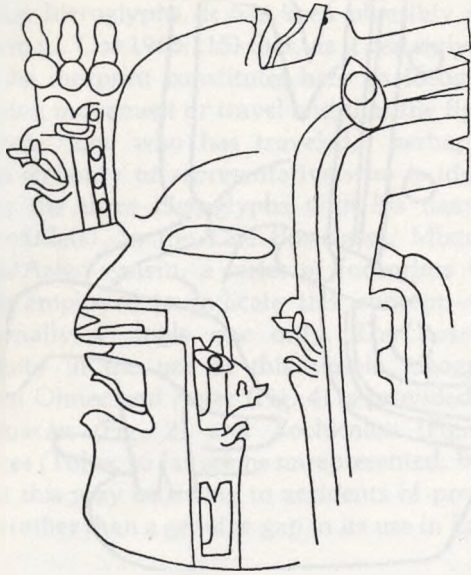


Fig. 6. Profile head incised on greenstone plaque (Museo Nacional de Antropología), of unknown provenience, decorated with subsidiary profiles belonging to Joralemon's "God VI" category (cf. Fig. 5), from Joralemon 1971:Fig. 233.

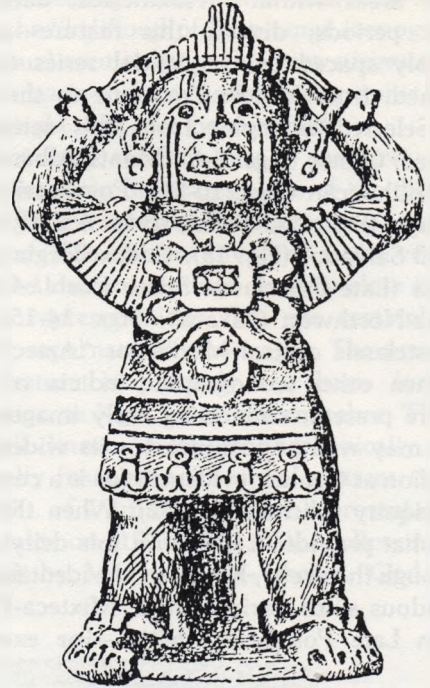


Fig. 8. Funerary urn, Tomb 51, Monte Albán, from Séjourné 1957:Fig. 60.



Fig. 7. "Glyph P" (Caso system), Mound J, Monte Albán, Lápida 13, from Caso 1947:Fig. 67.

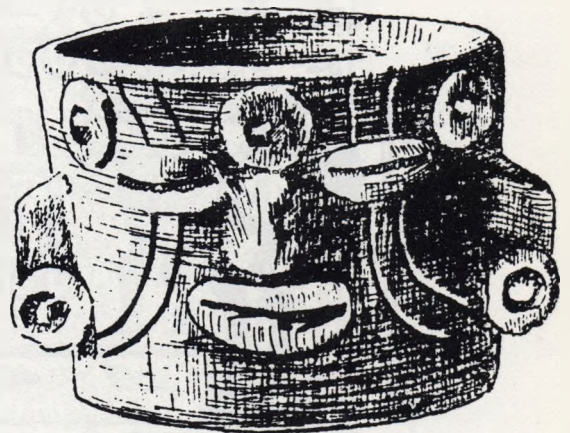


Fig. 9. Ceramic vessel, Monte Albán, West Platform, surface, from Caso and Bernal 1952:Fig. 410c.

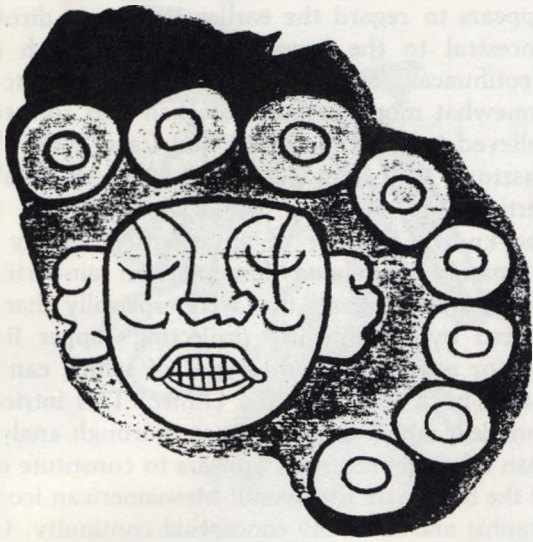


Fig. 10. Teotihuacán, Zacuala, "conjunto noreste (Q)," fragment of wall painting, from Séjourné 1959: Fig. 6.

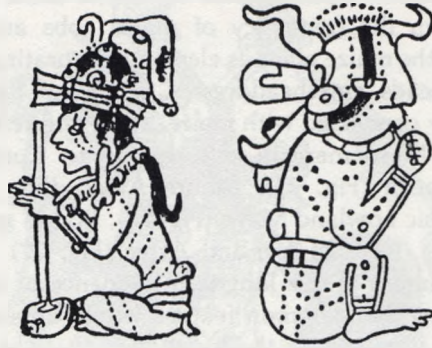


Fig. 12. "God Q" (left: Codex Dresden 6*b*; right: Codex Madrid 27*d*; from Anders 1963:Abb. 137.) Postclassic Lowland Maya region.



Fig. 13. Head of Toltec style ceramic figure representing Xipe Totec, Chalchuapa, El Salvador, from Boggs 1944:Fig. 2*e*.

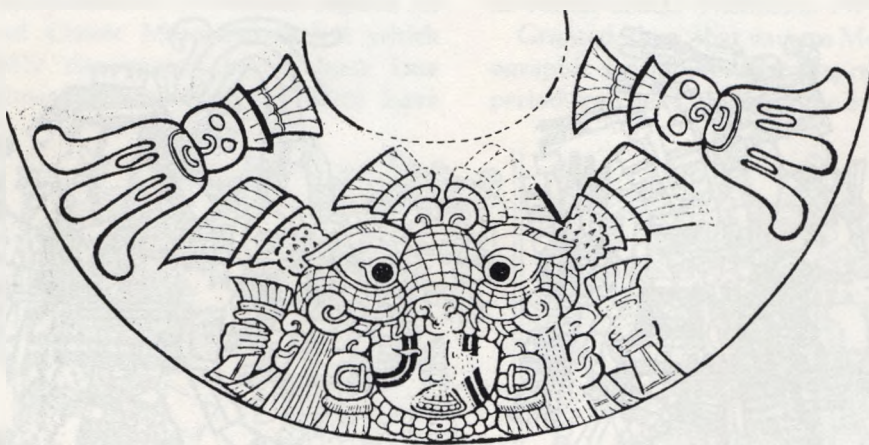


Fig. 11. Head of probable Teotihuacán deity, flanked by trilobal signs, on painted and stuccoed ceramic vessel, Tikal, Burial 10 (ca. A.D. 450), from W. Coe 1967:102.

"always depicted as an infant or dwarf." His interpretation would appear to receive some support from the frequency of maize cobs and/or parts of the maize plant as elements decorating the upper heads and headdresses of deities almost certainly connected with maize, rain, and fertility in later Mesoamerican cultures, up to Contact: Teotihuacn (Fig. 21), Monte Albn (Fig. 22), Postclassic Lowland Maya (Fig. 23), Borgia group pictorials (Figs. 24-26), and Aztec (Fig. 27). The establishment of this long-term sequence of icons displaying this common feature would appear to buttress significantly the hypothesis that the Olmec images of "Gods II and IV" which display vegetal motifs emerging from occipital clefts are indeed probably directly ancestral to the later Mesoamerican maize-rain-fertility deities.

Another example, too familiar to merit detailed illustration, involves a small iconographic cluster. At Contact the most fundamental rain-fertility deity, Tlaloc, was characterized by a striking array of iconographic features; standing out most prominently were rings surrounding the eyes and a thick, voluted upper labial band from which depended large fangs. He was also frequently depicted holding the lightning, often zoomorphized as an undulating serpent. This cluster unquestionably went back through Toltec and Xochicalco at least to Teotihuacn (Fig. 21) and possibly earlier in central Mexico. It clearly constitutes one of the most generally accepted cases of long term iconographic continuity in

pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. Nearly every student appears to regard the earlier images as directly ancestral to the historic Tlaloc, although the Teotihuacn "Tlaloc complex" is turning out to be somewhat more complicated than was formerly believed (cf. Armillas 1945 and Caso 1966 with Pasztory 1972 and C. Millon 1973). It is also pertinent to mention that Tlaloc is only the best-known member of an extensive family of intimately interrelated Mesoamerican rain-fertility deities and "dragons" that were especially characterized by prominently projecting "upper lips" and/or snouts, the prototypes of which can be traced back to Izapan and Olmec. This intricate complex, which deserves more thorough analysis than it has yet received, appears to constitute one of the best cases for overall Mesoamerican iconographic and probably conceptual continuity. Covarrubias (1946:Lm. 4), in a famous chart, was the first to publish a "family tree" for the major Mesoamerican rain-fertility deities, although he stressed the *en face* mouth configuration, commencing with the Olmec "baby/were-jaguar face," more than the projecting upper lip-snout feature as the key element linking together various earlier and later forms.

Many more examples of obvious iconographic continuities, involving both individual motifs as well as clusters, between Olmec or at least Early Classic Teotihuacn and the early sixteenth century could be illustrated and analyzed, but spatial limitations preclude much more

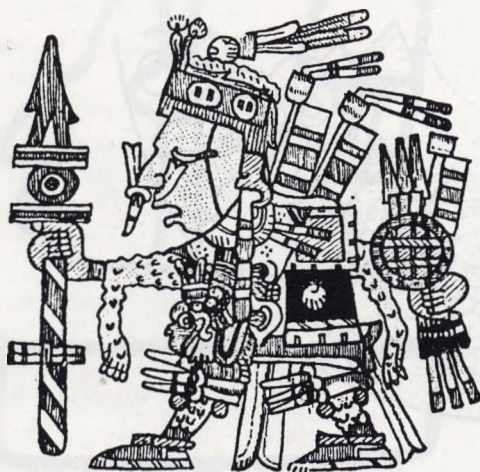


Fig. 14. Xipe Totec, Codex Borgia 25, from Seler 1904-1909, I, Reproduction:25.



Fig. 15. Xipe Totec, Codex Vaticanus B 19, from Seler 1904-1909, II:Abb. 112.



Fig. 16. Place sign (head of Xipe Totec) of Chipetlan, Guerrero, Matricula de Tributos 10r, from Beyer 1919:Fig. 5.

discussion. Joralemon, in his article in this volume, has demonstrated considerable iconographic continuity in Mesoamerican "dragon" representations. Another interesting case has recently been described and discussed by Stocker and Spence (1973): the trilobal dripping liquid (water-blood) symbol, closely similar forms of which can readily be traced from Olmec via Teotihuacán, Monte Albán, and Xochicalco up through Toltec, following which it fades out. A somewhat similar case is that of the so-called "Fat God," a frequent and important representation in various regions of Preclassic and Classic Mesoamerica but which had apparently disappeared by at least Late Postclassic times. I (Nicholson 1971a:16) have



Fig. 17. Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, Codex Magliabechiano 61r, from Seler 1902-1923, IV:Abb. 78b.

suggested—in agreement with José Luis Franco, who has made the most thorough and comprehensive study of the occurrences of this deity image—that many of his conceptual connotations appear to have survived in the Centeotl-Xochipilli deity complex (Nicholson 1971b:416-419), but the iconographic "disjunction" here, as with the trilobal liquid sign, appears to be undeniable. A few ostensible Classic to Preclassic iconographic continuities between Classic Veracruz and Postclassic central Mexico, in contrast, have been discussed in an earlier article (Nicholson 1971a).

Granted, then, that various Mesoamerican iconographic continuities spanning relatively long time periods can be established, the much more difficult

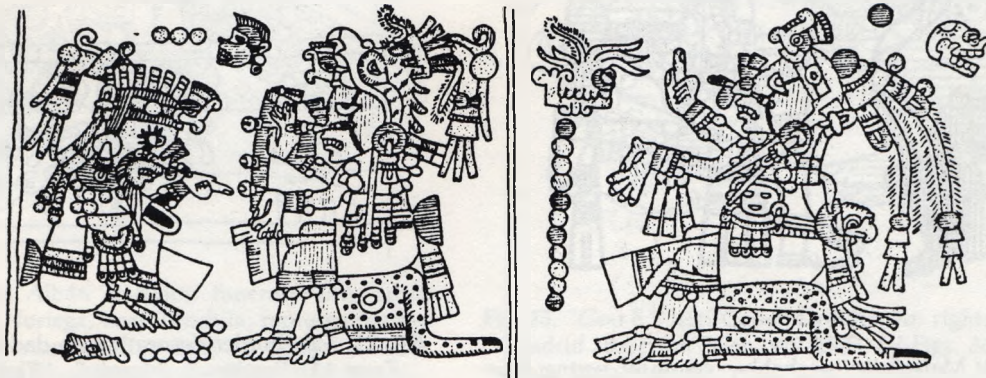


Fig. 18. Two versions of the solar deity "1. Death," Codex Zouche-Nuttall 79, from Caso 1959:Fig. 7.

question remains: to what extent did their conceptual connotations hold constant during these long evolutionary sequences? This returns us, of course, to the principal issue raised by Kubler. As we have seen, he vigorously attacks the notion of any significant amount of Classic-to-Postclassic iconographic-conceptual continuity, which implies the likelihood of even less continuity when dealing with material dating from the Preclassic. Kubler (1970:143-144, 1972a:19-20) argues that even when the icons themselves are retained over long temporal spans, owing to a "principle of least effort," this by no means guarantees their conceptual equivalency. Quite the contrary, he suggests that it is rather the norm for these connotations to shift whenever a substantial period of time is involved.

Without the aid of coeval or otherwise relevant texts it is undeniably very difficult to determine whether representations and symbols formally similar but temporally widely separated actually did convey basically similar meanings. Methodologically, perhaps the most promising technique is to analyze carefully all relevant iconographic



Fig. 19. Male deity, probably version of young solar-maize god, Codex Fejérváry-Mayer 24, from Seler 1904-1909, I:Abb. 427.

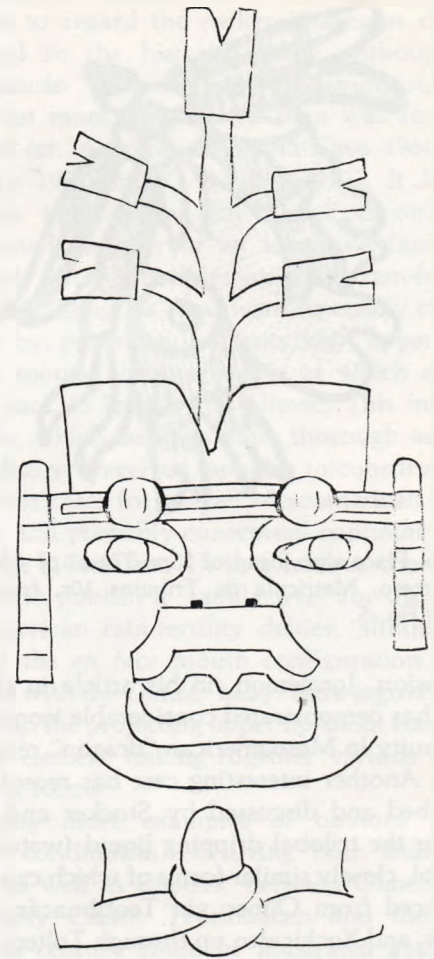


Fig. 20. Engraving on Olmec celt: Joralemon's "God IV" with plant motif emerging from left on top of head. Reportedly from "Arroyo Pesquero," Veracruz, drawing by José Luis Franco.

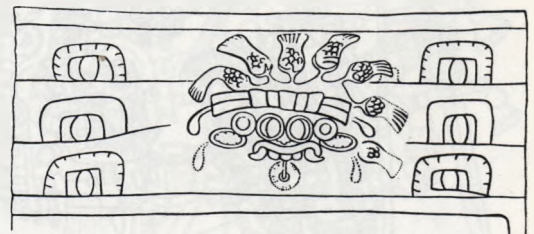


Fig. 21. Side border decoration on dado, Teotihuacán, Zone 11, Portico 5, Mural 5: "Tlaloc" head with maize cobs in headdress (oriented 90° differently on original); from Miller 1973:Fig. 152.

contexts, searching out any consistently associated clusters of individual elements. The essential fertility connotation of the Rain God or Tlaloc cluster, for example, is rather clearly expressed by various associated elements (vegetal and aquatic motifs, brandishing of the "lightning serpent," etc.), which, whenever encountered and whatever the degree of temporal separation, must forcibly suggest a basically similar significance. Likewise, when rows of footprints are directly associated with moving figures and/or are delineated on strips that, from their contexts, are obviously roads or paths, the interpretation of a similar "travel or movement" connotation is virtually demanded—whatever the temporal gap between their occurrences. In contrast, with the "line(s) through the eye(s) argument" in an attempt to establish conceptual connections between deity representations much separated in time considerable caution must be exercised since, as we have seen, various Mesoamerican deities displayed this characteristic. Focusing on Xipe Totec to the exclusion of the others may be justified, but, unless other elements of his recognized insignia are

present, these identifications do not appear too convincing.

It is largely through discerning significant *associations*, then, that reasonable explanatory hypotheses concerning the significance of iconographic elements can be achieved on whatever time level. The application of the direct historical approach often provides solid points of departure from which to work back, again, as Steward originally expressed it, merely applying the elementary logic of proceeding from the known to the unknown. And, as I (Nicholson 1973:72) have recently argued, while recognizing the basic cogency of some of Kubler's warnings, particularly the exaggerated or overly naive utilization of Conquest period ethnohistorical data to interpret archaeological remains dating from much earlier epochs, "the 'direct historical approach,' the thrust of which is simply working back from the living to the dead in order to more fully reconstruct and understand the past . . . if pursued with critical restraint and disciplined imagination, can yield positive results of great value." If the elements themselves are similar and occur in similar clusters then the likelihood of retention of similar meanings over time seems greatly increased. Even when the iconographic elements are isolated, the application of this approach at least makes possible the advancing of cogent hypothesis to elucidate their meanings, to be tested against further data as they become available.

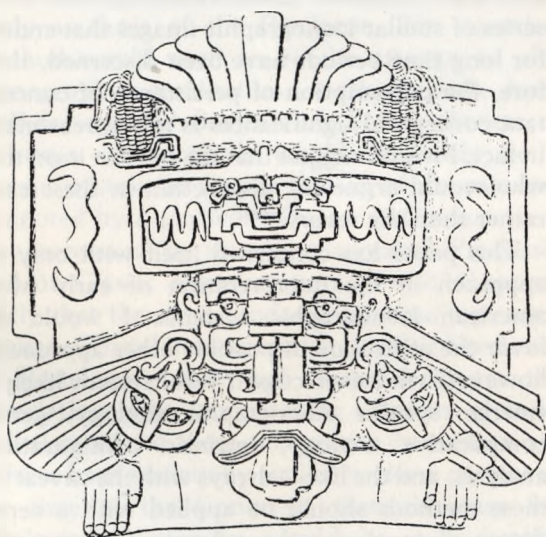


Fig. 22. Monte Albán tradition funerary urn, from Hacienda de Noriega, near Zaachila, representing the fundamental rain-fertility deity ("Cocijo"), with maize cobs in headdress, from Seler 1890:Fig. 11. Maize cobs decorating the headdress are more commonly a feature of the "God of Glyph L."



Fig. 23. "God E," left: Codex Dresden 9a; right: Codex Madrid 28d; from Seler 1902-1923, IV:Figs. 364, 365. Note lines through eyes, comparable to Mixteca-Puebla representations of the maize deity (Figs. 19, 25).



Fig. 24. Maize deity, Codex Fejérváry-Mayer 3, from Selser 1904-1909, I:Abb. 397.

Religious iconographic devices in all cultures undoubtedly undergo some shift in meaning over long time spans, but when the ideological systems whose concepts they graphically express do not undergo radical modification it seems likely that most of them tend to retain their essential original meanings more or less indefinitely. Certainly the core array of Christian symbols persisted without sharp semantic shifts for many centuries, not to speak of the iconographic systems of ancient Egypt, India, and the Far East. Kubler's own logic of the "principle of least effort" was probably operative here. If a symbol is traditional and has connoted the same fundamental meaning for centuries, apparently only under very strong pressures would its significance sharply alter—as in those cases in Mesoamerican culture history where some religious ideological changes occurred owing to such events as local political power shifts, foreign conquests, and long-range migrations. It would be expected that the replacement of one religious system by another over a relatively brief period of time, as in the cases of the Christianization of the Roman Empire and the later spread of Islam, would naturally result in rather profound disjunctions. As I have argued above, however, there seems to be no evidence that any ideological shifts on the order of this



Fig. 25. Maize deity, Codex Borgia 14, from Beyer 1910:Abb. 6.

magnitude ever occurred in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica between the Late Preclassic-Early Classic and the Conquest. Once relatively continuous series of similar iconographic images that endured for long time periods have been discerned, therefore, the presumption of persistence of concomitant conceptual significances is not unreasonable. In fact, I would suggest that the burden is on those who would argue for disjunction in these cases, rather than the reverse.

This paper has concerned itself with only one approach in the interpretation of early Mesoamerican iconographic systems. I would also favor the utilization of possible other approaches, however, whenever cogent results seem likely to emerge: specific ethnographic analogy, general comparative analogy, intrinsic configurational analysis, and the like—always with the caveat that these methods should be applied with a certain degree of caution and prudence, if for no other reason than to provide a necessary counterweight to the extravagant fantasies of romantics, mystics, and downright crackpots which have infested this field from the beginning. In other words, a comprehensive, synthetic approach to the problems of the interpretation of early Mesoamerican iconographic systems will probably eventually yield the most successful results (cf. Pasztory 1973:150).



Fig. 26. Head of maize deity (4th of 9 Lords), Codex Cospi 4, from Beyer 1920:Fig. 13.

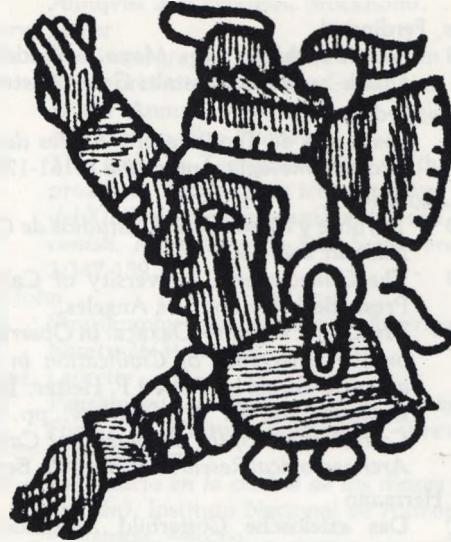


Fig. 27. Maize deity (4th of 9 Lords), Codex Borbonicus 6, from Beyer 1910:Abb. 5.

To summarize and conclude, I suggest that the direct historical approach can be profitably employed in Mesoamerican research to interpret even the iconographic systems of cultural traditions as early as those of the Preclassic. The soundest method would seem to be the attempt to plot iconographic continuities, working back from well-documented elements or, better, clusters of elements. Although it would obviously be a serious mistake to assume that all of the concepts connoted by a particular image at Contact were also conveyed by the same ancestral Preclassic and/or Classic representation, it would appear likely that the most fundamental meanings were similar. Crucial in determining possible Preclassic to Postclassic conceptual equivalences are the associations, the iconographic contexts of individual motifs. If these clusters can be ascertained to have been essentially similar to those current at the time of the Conquest, then the case for ideological continuity would be considerably strengthened—and one apparent example (Tlaloc cluster) was discussed above.

Although general comparative analogy would seem to be a much less promising approach, I feel that even it can be legitimately employed to a certain extent. When available, it is certainly preferable to utilize ethnographic and/or ethno-historical data concerning groups residing in the

same general area as that in which the archaeological remains were found. Cautiously roving further afield may in some cases be justified, however, especially when the local indigenous population has either physically disappeared or culturally profoundly altered through transculturative processes.

Panofsky's "principle of disjunction" has probably been frequently operative in Mesoamerican culture history, but I should think somewhat less so than in Western Europe and the Near East. We are probably treading on firmer ground, therefore, in attempting to interpret Preclassic Mesoamerican iconography employing ethnographic information of relatively recent date than would the European or Near Eastern culture historian interpreting very ancient representations in his area if he had no texts to aid him. The most basic religious-ritual patterns were probably widely shared throughout Mesoamerica from Late Preclassic or at the latest Early Classic times on. This probability, in my view, provides us with exceptional opportunities to interpret the more ancient Mesoamerican iconographic systems through a sensible, critical application of the direct historical approach—whereby we move, cautiously but systematically, back from the living of the sixteenth century to the remote dead of the end of the second millennium before Christ.

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INDEX

- Abaj Takalik, 81, 144
 Acanceh, 98, 99, 100
 Acosta, Jorge R., 143, 149
 Akkadian culture, 102
 Anderson, Arthur J.O., 61
 Andrews, E. Wyllys, 89, 92, 93
 Archaeology, excavational, 3
 Armillas, Pedro, 147, 168
 Arroyo Pesquero, 40, 47, 52
 Arroyo Sonso Jaguar, 20
 Art Institute of Chicago, 120
 Atlhuayan Figure, 47
 Aztecs, 125, 128, 129, 130, 144, 147, 148, 150, 152, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 168; beliefs, 40, 65; culture, 9; dragons, 59; iconography, 33; Sun Stone, 40; writing, 110, 112, 114, 127
- Baktun, 7, 112
 Batres, Leopoldo, 125, 143, 148
 Belmar, 125
 Bennyhoff, James A., 143, 147
 Berlin, Heinrich, 111, 128
 Bernal, Ignacio, 91, 93, 143, 149
 Beyer, Hermann, 160
 Bilbao Monument, 42, 79, 81, 84
 Bradomín, José María, 130
 Brainerd, George W., 93
 British Museum, 112
 Buddhism, 4
 Burgoa, Fray Francisco de, 130
 Bushnell, Geoffrey, 4
- Calendar (calendrics), 6, 99, 100, 109-113, 118, 120, 135, 152-154
 Calendar Round, 110, 112, 121
 Campeche, 96, 97
 Caso, Alfonso, 125, 128, 129, 130, 134
 Castañeda (artist), 125
 Centeotl-Xochipilli deity complex, 165, 169
 Central Highlands, 9, 20, 24, 61, 121
 Ceramics, 3, 10, 24, 47, 89, 91-93, 96, 98, 100, 111, 125, 136, 137, 143, 144, 147-154
 Cerro Chiconautla, 146
 Cerro de las Mesas, 20, 24, 113
 Cerro Gordo, 146, 150
 Cervantes, María Antonieta, 5, 7-25
 Chalcatzingo, 40
 Chenes, 82, 93
- Chiapa de Corzo Bone 1, 78, 81, 83, 84
 Chiapa de Corzo Bone 3, 83
 Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas, 112
 Chiapas-Guatemala Highland region, 5, 20, 24, 77, 112, 117, 121. *See also* Izapan
 Chicanel period, 100
 Chichimec, 162
 Chiconautla phase, 154
 Childe, V. Gordon, 3
 Chimalhuacan, 147, 148
 Chinese writing, 108
 Christians and Christianity, 4, 160-162, 172, 173
 Chupícuaro tradition, 147
 Cipactli, 65
 Classic Maya, 75; art, 76; culture, 103; system of writing, 110, 111, 114, 115
 Classic Lowland Maya period, 5, 6, 112, 159
 Classic Monte Albán, 6
 Classic period, 6, 9, 75, 82, 91, 109, 111, 143, 146, 147, 150, 162, 163, 169, 172, 173
 Cocijo (thunder-rain god), 127
 Codex Borgia Group, 110, 112, 114, 165, 168
 Codex Dresden, 165
 Codex Mendoza, 128, 130
 Coe, Michael D., 6, 9, 10, 29, 33, 40, 96, 102, 107-122, 125, 126, 152, 154, 160, 164, 165
 Colima, 20
 Colombo, 114
 Conquest period, 5, 6, 159, 160, 165, 171-173
 Contact, 5, 160, 162, 165, 168, 173
 Córdova, Fray Juan de, 127
 Cortés, Hernán, 160, 163
 Costa Rica, 120
 Cotzumalhuapa, 110
 Covarrubias, Miguel, 9, 29, 58, 89, 151, 153, 168
 Coyolapan, 128, 130
 Cruz, Wilfrido C., 131
 Cuadros, 96
 Cuicatec, 132
 Cuicatlan, 130, 136
 Cuiculco, 147, 148, 151-155, 163
 Cultural ecology, 3, 4, 6
 Culture versus style, 24
- Danzantes*, 125, 126, 127, 131, 136
 Dávalos Hurtado, Eusebio, 126
 Dumbarton Oaks, 33, 52, 114, 115, 120, 150
 Dupaix, Guillermo, 125

- Drucker, Philip, 9, 10, 29, 40, 52, 76
 Dzibalchen, 93, 95
 Dzibilchaltun, 89, 91, 92, 93, 96, 98
- Early Classic period, 75, 76, 84, 91, 100, 111, 112, 118, 120, 172, 173
 Early Classic Teotihuacán, 75
 Early Formative period, 96, 111, 125, 136
 Early Tlamimilolpa phase, 146
 Ecological approach, materialism of, 4
 Ecological system as primary matrix of change, 4
 El Baúl, 82, 83, 84, 113, 114
 El Salvador, 87; early Postclassic, 165
 El Sitio, Guatemala, 117
 Etlá arm, 125, 129
 Extension wing (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico), 9
 European cultural beginnings, 3. *See also* Old World
- Figurine M-720-5, 93, 94, 95
 Flannery, Kent V., 9
 Footprints, 163, 164
 Formative (or Preclassic period), 9, 75, 89, 91, 92, 93, 96, 99, 111, 125
 Franco, José Luis, 169
 Furst, Peter, 52, 126
- Gamio, Manuel, 149
 García, José María, 125
 Garibay, Angel M., 4
 Glyphs, 110-115, 117-120, 128, 134, 135, 137
 God I (Olmec Dragon), 27-71
 God II (Maize God), 33, 47, 52, 83, 95, 153, 165, 168
 God III (Olmec Bird-Monster), 33, 37, 52, 58
 God IV (Rain God), 33, 95, 165, 168
 God V, 33
 God VI, 33, 152, 153, 164, 165
 God VII, 33
 God VIII, 33, 153
 God IX, 33
 God X, 33
 God B (Maya rain deity), 85
 Grijalva Depression, 112. *See also* Chiapas
 Grove, David C., 9
 Guadalupe phase, 125, 136
 Guatemala, 93, 96, 110, 113, 115, 117
 Guerrero, 20, 153
 Gulf Coast, 5, 9, 10, 20, 24, 92, 96, 98, 125, 136, 146
 Gutiérrez, Esteban, 129
- Harpy eagle (*Harpia harpyja*), 40, 52
 Hatzcap Ceel, British Honduras, 115
 Hauberg, John, 120
 Heizer, Robert F., 9, 89, 95, 147
 Hieroglyphics, 6, 107-122
 Historical approach in Mesoamerican research on iconography, 157-175
 Historical or Postclassic period, 9
 Holmes, William H., 125
 Horus, 40
 Huajuapán (Ñuiñe) script, 110
 Huastec, 9, 96
Huaquerismo, 4
 Huehuetéol (Old Fire God), 151, 152, 154
 Hueyapan, Colossal Head of, 29
 Humboldt Celt, 11, 117
- Iconographic systems of Egypt, Europe, Far East and India as perspective, 157-172
Iconography of the Teotihuacán Tlaloc, 150
 Indians, Mesoamerican, 109; Plains, 111
 Initial Series, 112, 113, 117, 118, 119
 Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), 143, 144, 149
 Islam, 4
 Itzam Na (Iguana House), 61
 Itzamná, 117
 Izapan, 4, 5, 6, 99, 100, 102, 103, 113, 114, 115, 120, 136, 168; Olmec-Maya art, 73-86
- Jakeman, M. Wells, 111
 Jiménez Moreno, Wigberto, 96
 Joesink-Mandeville, L. R., 6, 87-105
 Joralemon, Peter David, 5, 27-71, 75, 83, 95, 111, 152, 153, 160, 164, 165, 169
- Kabah, 93, 94
 Kaminaljuyu, 75, 77, 79, 81, 82, 83, 84, 110, 115
 Kidder, A. V., 75, 84, 95
 Kingsborough, Lord (Edward King), 125
 Kinich Ahau (Maya Sun God), 61
 Knorosov, Yuri V., 109, 110, 111, 117
 Kubler, George, 153, 154, 160, 162, 163, 169, 171, 172
- Lagarto*, 61
 Laguna de los Cerros, Veracruz, 24
 Landa, Fray Diego de, 109
 Lange, Frederick W., 97
 Las Bocas, 20, 37, 52
 Las Limas, Veracruz, 29, 33
 Las Limas Hypothesis, 33, 58
 Late Formative period, 89, 98, 113, 114, 118, 121, 127
 Lathrap, Donald, 37, 40, 52
 La Venta, Tabasco, 9, 10, 20, 24, 40, 47, 76, 83, 89, 92, 93, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 102, 111, 112, 125, 163
 Leiden Plate, 81, 83, 119, 120
 León-Portilla, Miguel, 4, 61, 65
 Loltun Cave, Yucatan, 100, 102, 118
 Long Count dating system, 110, 112, 113, 121
 Lord Two (Double God), 65
 Lounsbury, Floyd G., 109
 Lowe, Gareth, 9, 24
 Lowland Maya period, 5, 6, 118, 165

- Maler, Teobert, 93
 Malinalli, 114
 Mani Cenote, 93, 96
 Manichaeism, 4
 Marcus, Joyce, 6, 123-139
 Marquina, Ignacio, 150
 Martin, A.B., Collection, 120
 Marxist-materialist oriented archaeologists, 3, 4
 Masks, 98, 99, 110; jaguar, 76, 77, 98, 150, 152; serpent, 98; were-jaguar, 89, 93, 98
 Matrícula de Tributos, 128
 Maya, 9, 40, 59, 61, 65, 96, 126, 128, 160; art, 76-86; Classic, 112, 118, 119, 120; Dragon, 61; Olmec relationships, 87-105; writing, 112-121, 125, 143
Maya History and Religion, 4
 Mayapan, 93, 94
 Medellín, Veracruz, 79, 82
 Melgar, José M., 29
 Meluzin, Sylvia, 6, 87-105
 Mérida, 93
 Mesoamerican: archaeology, 5; architecture, 148, 149; art, 75, 91, 92, 93, 113; civilization and culture, 3, 4, 5, 6, 40, 103, 127, 137, 160, 161, 162, 168; ethno-history, 5; genesis 4; Preclassic iconography, 4, 5, 157-175; prehistory, 6; religious ideological patterns, 5, 58, 148, 154, 163; traditions, 5
Mesoamerica: The Evolution of a Civilization, 3
 Mesopotamia, 102, 103
 Mexico, 4, 37; Basin of, 141-156, 159, 162; beliefs, 33, 40; Central Highlands, 75, 143, 150, 151, 159, 160, 162, 164, 165, 168, 169; Central Highlands transition from Preclassic to Classic, 143; divinatory cycle, 47, 65; Far West Mexican traditions, 4, 5; Gulf of, 97; religious history, 58, 59, 65
 Miahuatlan, 130
 Miccaotli phase, 146, 147, 149
 Middle Formative period, 89, 92, 94, 96, 97, 111, 125
 Middle-late period, 6
 Militarism, iconography of, 123-139
 Millon, René, 143, 147
 Mixtec, 110, 131, 132, 163, 165
 Moll, García and Romano, 9
 Monte Albán, 4, 150, 153, 163, 165, 168, 169; iconography of militarism, 123-139; script, 110, 111, 113, 114, 121
 Monument 12, 93, 94
 Monument 13, 111, 163
 Morley, Sylvanus, 109, 111
 Mounds, 99, 100, 125-131, 136
 Müller, Florencia, 143
 Museo Nacional de Antropología, 143
 Nacaste phase, 10
 Nahua, 4, 65
 Nahuatl, 129-132
 Navarrete, Carlos, 9, 117, 118
 Near Eastern culture, 3, 160, 161, 162
 Nebanche, 89, 91, 92, 93, 95, 96, 100
 "Neolithic Revolution," 3
 New World, 98; archaeologists, 4; high culture and civilization, 5, 6, 59; pre-Columbian people of, 109
 Nicholson, Henry B., 3-6, 61, 157-175
 Noguera, Eduardo, 144, 148, 149
 Northern culture, 9
 Ñuiñe, 4, 110
 Oaxaca, 9, 20, 24, 84, 110, 125, 128, 129, 153, 165
 Old World cultural and political history, 4, 160, 161, 162
 Olmec, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 20, 24, 29; art, 73-86, 153; bird-monster, 37, 52, 58; culture and civilization, 33, 47, 58, 59 89-105, 111, 112, 160, 161, 164, 165, 168, 169; dragon, 27-71; iconography, 33, 37, 40, 47, 52, 58, 152, 163; iconography of militarism, 125-139; religion, 33, 37, 40, 47, 58; royalty, 40; symbolism, 29; writing, 107-121, 125, 150, 154, 155
 Olmec-Maya relationships, 87-105
 Ometeotl, Lord of Duality, 65
 Origins period, 6
 Osiris, 40
 Oxtotitlan, 40, 47
 Oztotyahualco, 149, 154
 Pacific Coast, 97
 Pacific slope, 77, 113
 Paddock, John, 126
 Panofsky, Erwin, 161
 Panofsky "disjunction principle," 6, 154, 160, 161, 162, 163, 173
 Pasztory, Esther, 150
 Patlachique Range, 146
 Pennsylvania State University, 143
 Periods I and II, 127, 128, 129, 131, 133, 135, 136
 Period III, 131, 133, 134, 135
 Period IV, 135
 Peten, the, 96, 98
 Peto, 95
 Piña Chán, Beatriz Barba de, 151
 Piña Chán, Román, 9
 Plancarte, Bishop, 150
 Playa de los Muertos, 93
 Pomona, British Honduras, 120
 Postclassic Codex Selden, 79
 Postclassic codices, 109
 Postclassic Lowland Maya period, 168
 Postclassic period, 9, 29, 75, 97, 160, 162-165, 169, 173
 Postclassic period, Early, 163, 164
 Postclassic period, Late, 159, 160, 165, 169
 Post-Formative period, 96
 Potrero Nuevo, 29
 Preclassic period, 5, 6, 9, 75, 77, 159, 160, 164, 169, 173

- Preclassic period, Late, 141-156, 172, 173
 Preclassic period, Middle, 165
 Preclassic period, Terminal, 141-156
 Preclassic Teotihuacán, emergence of, 141-156
 Pre-Columbian America, 143; art, 75; iconography, 27-71
 Pre-Conquest period, 61
 Pre-European New World civilization, 3
 Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, 3, 4, 9, 110, 160, 168, 172
 Pre-Late Postclassic period, 160
 Price, Barbara, 3, 4
 Proskouriakoff, Tatiana, 111
 Protoclassic period, 6, 113
 Pyramids, 143, 144, 147, 148, 149, 150, 153. *See also* Mounds
- Quetzalcoatl, 33, 65, 153, 160, 165
 Quintana Roo, 114
 Quirarte, Jacinto, 5, 73-86
- Regional Museum, Teotihuacán, 144
 Religion, 4; Teotihuacán, 150-153
 Religious ideology of Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico, 3, 4, 5
 Reyes Etna, 129
 Rich, Barbara, 118
 Río Chiquito, 29
 Rojas, Basilio, 129
 Rosario phase, 125, 136
- Sáenz Collection, 120
 Sahagún, 148, 160
 Saint Andrews Cross, 95, 102, 125, 130
 San Andrés Tuxtla, 117
 Sanders, William, 3, 4, 143, 147
 San Isidro, 24
 San José Mogote, 125, 129, 137
 San José phase, 125, 136, 137
 San Lorenzo, Veracruz, 9, 10, 24, 37, 47, 52, 96, 97, 111, 125, 163
 San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan, 125, 128
 Santa Inés Yatzeche Monument, 135-136
 Santa Rosa Xtampak, 96
 Satterthwaite, Linton, 111
 Saville, Marshall H., 29
 Sayil, 93
 Seler, Eduard, 3, 5, 125, 159, 160
 Selerian period, 3
 Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología, 144
 Soconusco region, 93
 Sologuren, 125
 Spanish conquest, 59; influence on New World, 98
 Spence, Michael, 169
 Spinden, Herbert J., 111
 Stelae, 24, 75-79, 81-84, 110, 112-115, 118, 119, 120, 125, 127, 131, 136
- Steward, Julian, 3
 Stirling, Matthew, 9, 10, 29, 76, 112
 Stocker, Terrance, 169
Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology, 150
 Sullivan, Thelma, 150
 Sumerian culture, 102
 Supplementary Series, 120
 Survivals wing, National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico, 9
 Swadesh, Morris, 96
- Tabasco, 10, 20, 52, 111. *See also* La Venta
 Tajín culture, 9; writing, 110, 163
 Tehuacan, 137
 Tehuantepec, 137
 Telantunich, 93
 Tenango head, 9
 Tenochtitlan, 162
 Teotihuacán, 5, 79, 91, 160, 161-165, 168, 169; architecture, 148-150; art, 153-155; chronology of, 144-146; emergence of 141-156; environment and climate, 146-147
 Teotihuacán Mapping Project, 143
 Teotihuacán Valley Project, 143, 148
 Texcoco, Lake, 146, 148
 Tezcatlipoca, 152
 Tezoyuca phase, 146
 Thompson, J. Eric S., 4, 61, 96, 111, 112, 115, 120
 Ticoman, 148, 151
 Tikal, 75-77, 83, 84, 98, 99, 100, 118, 119
 Tlaloc, 143, 150, 151, 152, 154, 168, 171, 173
 Tlapacoya, 20, 37, 151
 Tlatilco, 20, 52, 93, 151, 154
 Tobriner, Stephen, 150
 Tollan, 162
 Toltecs, 65, 75, 96, 110, 162, 165, 168, 169
 Tonacatecuhli, Lord of Our Flesh and Sustenance, 65
 Tres Zapotes, Veracruz, 24, 78, 79, 84, 112
 Tula, 163
 Turner, Allen, 118
 Tututepec, 137
 Tuxtla, 97
 Tuxtla Statuette, 26, 78, 99, 117, 118
 Tylor, E. B., 109, 110
 Tzacualli phase, 147-154
 Tzakol phase, 103
- Uaxactun, Stela 18, 120
 Uaxactun Structure E-VII, 82, 98, 99
 UCLA Conference on Origins of Religious Art and Iconography in Preclassic Mesoamerica, 5
 University of Pennsylvania, 75
 University of Rochester, 143, 149
 Uo (Jaguar god of the Underworld), 113
 "Urban Revolution," 3

- Vague Year, 110
Valley of Mexico, 110, 147, 148, 152, 162
Valley of Oaxaca, 6; iconography of militarism in, 123-139
Veracruz, 10, 110-113, 117, 121, 165. *See also* San Lorenzo
Veracruz, Classic, 4, 169
Vikings, 98
Villagra, Agustín, 125, 126
von Winning, Hasso, 6, 141-156
- Waterman, T. T., 114
Wenner-Gren Conference, 4
Were-Jaguar, 89, 93, 98, 102, 114, 115, 118
Western culture, 9
White, Leslie, 4
- Willey, Gordon R., 4, 159, 162
Writing, Maya, 107-121
- XI Mesa Redonda Conference, 144
Xipe, 152, 154
Xipe Totec, Fire Serpent, 33; "Flayed God," 164, 165, 171
Xitle Volcano, 148, 152
Xihcoatl (Fire Serpent), 40; (Turquoise Serpent) 61
Xiuhtecuhtli (Fire god), 61, 65
Xochicalco, 5, 110, 162-164, 168, 169
- Yucatan, 6, 75; Olmec influence in, 87-105
Yucatecs, 96, 98
- Zapotecs, 125-139
Zegache vase, 84