

OLMECS, TOLTECS, AND ZAPOTECES

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THE OLMEC WORLD. By IGNACIO BERNAL. Translated by Doris Heyden and Fernando Horcasitas. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976. Pp. 273. \$7.95.)

THE TOLTECS: UNTIL THE FALL OF TULA. By NIGEL DAVIES. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977. Pp. 533. \$14.95.)

THE ZAPOTECES: PRINCES, PRIESTS, AND PEASANTS. By JOSEPH W. WHITECOTTON. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977. Pp. 338. \$14.95.)

These three books epitomize traditional approaches to Mesoamerica. Bernal, Davies, and Whitecotton attempt to reconstruct the history and society of three Mesoamerican peoples and to assess their place in the Mesoamerican cultural tradition. None of the three is primarily concerned with isolating historical processes and their causal factors. All share the implicit notion that detailed descriptive syntheses of aspects of Mesoamerican culture history make important contributions to our understanding of the area and its peoples.

The Olmec World, a consideration of Mesoamerica's first civilization, relies exclusively on archaeological evidence. Olmec culture is defined mainly in terms of an art style, secondarily in terms of pottery and other items of material culture. In this sense, the Olmec are not really comparable to the Toltec and Zapotec, for there is no direct evidence of the linguistic and ethnic composition of Olmec society. The position of Olmec civilization in Mesoamerican culture history is not quite so obscure, for Maya civilization has a definite Olmec ancestry traceable through a series of related cultures loosely labeled Izapan civilization. The details of the historical connections and the extent of Olmec contributions to the Maya cultural tradition are unknown.

The Olmec World is a paperback reissue. The original Spanish version was published in 1968, and the hard-cover English translation appeared the following year. It is a very good synthesis of Olmec civilization as of the late 1960s, but Olmec research has been active in the subsequent decade. Bernal's treatment of the Olmec is still sound in its basic outlines, but in most details it is seriously out of date. New work in the

Valley of Mexico, Morelos, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chiapas, and other areas outside the Gulf coast Olmec heartland makes it clear that there were two distinct periods of Olmec history. Between 1200 and 900 B.C., San Lorenzo was the dominant Gulf coast Olmec center and the hub of an economic network that embraced much of Mesoamerica. After 900 B.C., La Venta rose to prominence and Gulf coast Olmecs established enclaves in many areas to secure access to valuable raw materials and manufactured luxury goods. These outposts, marked by monumental Olmec art and architecture, made La Venta the focus of a much more closely integrated economic sphere than that dominated by San Lorenzo. Olmec styles of portable art and crafts were widely adopted. With the collapse of La Venta, the Olmec world dissolved into a series of regional cultural traditions each following a different developmental path. Bernal's synthesis actually foreshadows this understanding of Olmec history and society in many ways, but he did not have the data to set it forth in detail. The linguistic identity of the Olmec is still an open question. New analyses suggest that the heartland Olmec may have spoken proto-Zoquean, not proto-Mayan as Bernal believed, but it is likely that the Olmec world embraced speakers of both language stocks, and others as well.

Davies' treatment of the Toltecs, the only full-scale synthesis, is much more current, and his interpretations suggest major changes in traditional views. The Toltecs were pivotal in later Mesoamerican history: they were inheritors of many of the patterns of highland Mexican civilization established at Teotihuacán in the first millennium A.D. and they were the most prominent ancestors of the Aztecs. The Toltecs stand at the threshold of Mesoamerican history. Conquest period historical traditions, mainly Aztec, reflect events and conditions of the Toltec period, albeit in garbled form. Davies emphasizes the need to allow for Aztec distortions in trying to cull genuine kernels of historical information from the mass of mythical and legendary material. This in itself is an important contribution, for Mesoamericanists until very recently have been prone to treat Aztec versions of Toltec history much too literally. Aztec history was a subtle blend of fact and myth, a great allegory to illustrate the Aztec interpretation of the past. Davies includes an excellent discussion of the problem of sorting out reality from abstraction in Toltec history. The term Toltec itself came to mean any sophisticated, urbane, skilled people. Tula, or Tollan, could refer to the Toltec capital, to several other specific places of the same name, or to a semimythical place of origin and greatness. Quetzalcoatl ("quetzal-snake," the "feathered serpent") was the name of a god as well as a title borne by several leading figures of central Mexican history. Archaeological data play a secondary role in reconstructing Toltec history, though Davies makes

use of available information whenever possible. Integrating archaeology and legendary history is not easy, and much of the book is difficult reading.

Davies traces Toltec culture to three sources: a Teotihuacán heritage, a northwestern Mexican component, and a Gulf coast element. These were not discrete facets of Toltec ancestry though, and the process of formation of Toltec culture involved the interaction of diverse groups each with a complex heritage of its own. Tollan itself, the Toltec capital in what is now the state of Hidalgo, was settled at least by the eighth century, but it did not become a great power for some time. Even during the eleventh century peak of Toltec power, Davies suggests that Tollan did not rule a centralized empire, but headed an alliance of semi-independent political units—a forerunner of the pattern of Aztec rule. In the same vein, he suggests that the well-known relation between Tollan and Chichén Itzá involved considerable Maya impact on the Toltecs, not simply a Toltec colony in Yucatán. He rightly points to the crucial role of the eastern Gulf coast region as intermediary in this relationship. This frontier zone was the home of the Nonoalca, who were involved in the formation of Toltec society, as well as of the Itzá and other Mexican peoples who transmitted Mexican influence to the Maya world. Davies also emphasizes the likelihood that the undoubted Toltec impact on highland Maya peoples resulted as much from interaction with the Gulf coast and northern Yucatán as from direct connections with Tollan. He makes a good case that Chichén Itzá came to be considered a secondary or surrogate Tollan.

The end of Toltec power came in a complex political upheaval late in the twelfth century. Davies shows that the famous epic of Topiltzin/Quetzalcoatl and his expulsion from Tollan refers primarily to this late period, *not* to the foundation of Tollan. This is an important revision of the traditional view of Toltec history, and it has implications for Maya history as well. The Kukulcán (Maya equivalent of Quetzalcoatl) who came to Yucatán with a group of Toltecs and Itzás late in the tenth century cannot have been the same Topiltzin/Quetzalcoatl.

In a few instances Davies' emphases are debatable. He draws the contrast between Classic period Mesoamerican societies and their more militaristic Postclassic descendants rather too sharply. His insistence on the importance of irrigation at Tollan and his characterization of Toltec culture as a hydraulic civilization finds little support in the archaeological evidence. He is a bit too ready to envision rapid, purposeful migrations of peoples. Specialists in central Mexican history may want to dispute some specific points of interpretation. A more straightforward summary of archaeological data to provide a framework for the very complex historical arguments might have made the reader's task a bit easier. These are quibbles. Davies' treatment of the Toltecs stands as a

fine piece of historical scholarship and an illustration of the progress Mesoamericanists have made in combining archaeological and historical data in reconstructing pre-Hispanic societies.

Whitecotton's discussion of Zapotec history and culture does not really break new ground, but it is the only full-length synthesis and it will bring a fascinating case study in historical anthropology to a wider audience. Zapotecs survive today as an identifiable linguistic group in Oaxaca, so Whitecotton is able to add modern ethnographic information to his archaeological and historical sources. His is the most ambitious of the three syntheses chronologically, for he begins his discussion of Oaxacan culture history with the earliest traces of human occupation. As he points out, most specialists agree that a recognizable Zapotec tradition can be traced back nearly to the time of Christ, notably at Monte Albán, the great civic center in the Valley of Oaxaca. A strong case could be made that much earlier occupations there should be attributed to Zapotecs as well; Whitecotton suggests this identification but does not actually make the argument in detail.

Whitecotton begins with an overview of the Oaxacan setting, focusing on the Valley of Oaxaca, his major concern. He provides a fairly brief, straightforward summary of the region's archaeological record before A.D. 900 concentrating, as the data dictate, on the sequence at Monte Albán itself.

The collapse of Monte Albán, by the beginning of the tenth century, marks the end of Zapotec dominance in the Valley of Oaxaca and the beginning of a long, confusing period of conflict, alliance, and interaction among Zapotec, Mixtec, and eventually Aztec groups. Conquest period documents and pre-Columbian pictorial histories reflect events and conditions of the Postclassic period in Oaxaca, but they deal most fully with the activities and concerns of Mixtec aristocrats. Whitecotton cannot distill from them a clear picture of Late Zapotec society and history. The same is true, to a lesser extent, of the entire Colonial period. Whitecotton consequently has a good deal to say about Mixtecs, before and after the conquest. The focus necessarily shifts from Zapotecs to the Valley of Oaxaca and all its inhabitants, and a more explicit acknowledgement of this change in orientation might have made for a more coherent presentation. The confusion cannot all be laid at Whitecotton's door, though, for the Valley was a complex mosaic of multiethnic communities with shifting alliances. Whitecotton's difficulty in making sense of this complexity illustrates a dilemma facing Mesoamericanists more and more frequently. We now have sufficient data to discuss individual peoples in some detail, but fuller information reveals the importance of interactions among peoples and the true complexity of their cultural systems more and more clearly, so that it becomes increasingly more difficult to focus on a single group without distorting cultural reality.

Whitecotton's discussion of the Zapotecs and the Valley of Oaxaca in the Colonial and modern periods is fullest and most interesting. He traces the decline of Zapotec aristocracies and the emergence of an "Indian" peasantry identifying primarily with local communities, not with a distinctively Zapotec tradition. Here too Whitecotton is more synthetic than original, but his discussion of continuity and change is stimulating, particularly his contention that Zapotec adaptations to European domination undermined their cultural distinctiveness.