



ELSEVIER

Journal of Historical Geography 30 (2004) 173–178

JOURNAL OF
HISTORICAL
GEOGRAPHY

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Review article

A Measure of Maturity: Advances and Achievements in Mesoamerican Studies

David Carrasco (Ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America*, 3 Volumes; Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, xix + 451 pages, 458 pages, 476 pages, hardback (£250)

Thirty-years ago, starting out in graduate school and hoping for the best, I remember the exhilaration I experienced when, engaged in a routine course assignment, I read and was inspired by Eric Wolf's classic account of Mesoamerican life, *Sons of the Shaking Earth*.¹ Wolf begins his masterpiece with lines penned by Nezahualcōyotl (1402–1472), poet and ruler of the Central Mexican kingdom of Tetzcoac–Acolhuacan.² The poignant words of 'Hungry Coyote' serve also as a fitting epigraph for the monumental labours that went into creating *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*:

All the earth is a grave and nothing escapes it;
Nothing is so perfect that it does not descend to its tomb....
Filled are the bowels of the earth with pestilential dust
Once flesh and bone, once animate bodies of men
Who sat upon thrones, decided cases, presided in council,
Commanded armies, conquered provinces, possessed treasure, destroyed temples,
Exulted in their pride, majesty, fortune, praise and power.
Vanished are these glories....
Nothing recalls them but the written page.³

Between the publication of *Sons of the Shaking Earth* and the appearance of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, the field of study that both works engage has gone through tremendous changes, indeed has been revolutionized. Had Wolf lived long enough to browse through *The Oxford Encyclopedia*—the great anthropologist died in 1999—he surely would have marvelled at the intellectual development it documents, for the advances and achievements of the past four decades are considerable and substantial. What glories of scholarship are recalled by the written page?

The collective enterprise

As Editor-in-chief, David Carrasco orients the reader at the outset with a Preface (vol. 1, ix–xviii) that explains how the collective enterprise came to be, spelling out why such a vast undertaking was deemed necessary and worthy. Mesoamerica, defined geographically as (vol. 1, ix) 'the southern

two-thirds of mainland Mexico' in addition to Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, and the western parts of Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, is considered 'the site of two major cultural transformations in Western Hemisphere history'. The first transformation entailed 'the complex evolution from the social world of the village to urbanized cultures', Mesoamerica being one of only seven regions across space and through time to have triggered 'primary urban generation', the others being China, the Indus Valley, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Nigeria, and Peru. A second transformation, the legacies of which linger and simmer still, involved 'the encounter between Europe and the Americas', one that 'fundamentally changed the course of human history'. In summarizing 'the complex social process known as 'colonialism'', Carrasco opts to emphasize that 'natives, European settlers, and slaves from sub-Saharan Africa formed distinctive...social, religious, and political relationships' that resulted in 'new ways of being and of constructing culture'. Not for Carrasco, even in the wake of the soul-searching that accompanied the Columbus Quincentenary, the need to invoke the 'dark obverse' that Carl O. Sauer acknowledged and addressed more than 60 years ago.⁴ Carrasco does concede, however, that 'colonial patterns are also periodically brought back to our contemporary consciousness, as demonstrated in the attention given to the recent Zapatista insurrection in Chiapas, Mexico'.

If Carrasco downplays and glosses over the destructive, in certain areas the obliterating consequences of European intrusion, he is more pro-active in identifying the three key developments behind his decision to orchestrate 'a major reference work that organizes and interprets new knowledge concerning Mesoamerica cultures'. Carrasco draws our attention to (1) 'major archaeological excavations'; (2) a (vol. 1, x) 'substantial advance' in 'linguistic studies' and in 'the decipherment of the Maya hieroglyphic writing system'; and (3) 'significant advances in the study of colonial and modern Mesoamerica', a trend attributed to the unearthing of 'inventories and descriptions...that were written by Indians, mestizos, and Euro-Americans'. These records complement or counter 'conquest narratives' articulated and consecrated by European protagonists, imperial bureaucracy, and traditional historiographical perspectives. Carrasco insists, most importantly, that 'Mesoamerica is not to be understood only in pre-Hispanic terms', the temporal preference of such influential researchers as William T. Sanders and Barbara J. Price.⁵

Critical discussions of historiography are scattered throughout the three-volume work, with Carrasco leading by example. He points out how *The Oxford Encyclopedia* differs from, but builds upon, the *Handbook of Middle American Indians* (hereafter *HMAI*), which appeared in sixteen volumes between 1964 and 1976 and for which Robert Wauchope served as general editor.⁶ Six supplementary volumes of the *HMAI* were published later on, under the general editorship of Victoria R. Bricker.⁷ Bricker's *HMAI* volumes, in which archaeology, epigraphy, ethnohistory, linguistics, and native texts figure prominently, help off-set the decidedly 'anthropological perspective' (vol. 1, xi) of their predecessors, though four volumes edited by Howard F. Cline (*HMAI*, vols. 12–15) serve admirably as a *Guide to Ethnohistorical Sources*.⁸

It is in matters pertaining to ethnohistory that Carrasco sees *The Oxford Encyclopedia* differing most from the *HMAI*. The latter, he maintains, functions as an inventory of a (vol. 1, xii) 'substantial body of written materials'; the former, on the other hand, reports on the research findings of investigations devoted to 'politics and states, religion and symbolism, social history and economic institutions, and missionaries and lay societies', in addition to studies of 'the impacts of the slave trade and Africans on Mesoamerican cultural formation'. What Carrasco calls 'new disciplinary orientations' receive a special mention, among them 'archaeoastronomy, gender studies, ethnobotany, comparative philosophy, semiotics, poetics, and performance studies'. These more recent innovations, as well as several others, are

discussed in detail under such entries as ‘Acculturation’ (vol. 1, 1–3), ‘Cosmovision’ (vol. 1, 268–274), ‘Cultural Interaction’ (vol. 1, 295–300), ‘Epigraphy’ (vol. 1, 381–388), ‘Ethnicity’ (vol. 1, 388–392), ‘Historiography’ (vol. 2, 8–13), ‘Institutions, Projects, and Meetings’ (vol. 2, 49–54.), ‘Mestizaje’ (vol. 2, 291–296), ‘Museums and Exhibitions’ (vol. 2, 351–356), ‘Recordkeeping’ (vol. 3, 59–62), and ‘Writing Systems’ (vol. 3, 338–350).

Carrasco, who worked with a team of 10 editors and 16 advisers, informs us that more than 300 scholars are responsible for the grand total of 617 entries, each of which ends with an annotated bibliography referring readers to landmark contributions and indispensable sources. I remember feeling, after reading *Sons of the Shaking Earth*, that I’d been exposed not only to a dazzling mind but also that I’d consumed the contents of an entire library. Having the three volumes of *The Oxford Encyclopedia* on your book shelves is more like being in a library. The pleasure of combing through its pages, furthermore, offers a sense of satisfaction no search engine or web-site can approximate. At £250 a shot, though, *The Oxford Encyclopedia* is more likely to be consulted when one is actually in a library, for it is an expensive item only a few flush or diehard enthusiasts are likely to purchase. University libraries, however, should make *The Oxford Encyclopedia* a priority acquisition.

Pearls of wisdom

From Acatec to Zumárraga—the former is one of Guatemala’s twenty-odd Mayan languages, the latter a Franciscan friar and the first bishop and subsequently archbishop of Mexico—what pearls of wisdom can the reader expect to find in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerica Cultures*? A very useful ‘Synoptic Outline of Contents’ (vol. 3, 399–405) singles out ten ‘conceptual categories’ that help frame the project. These are ‘Geography and History’; ‘Mesoamerican Studies’; ‘Written and Oral Sources’; ‘Economy and Subsistence’; ‘Social, Political, and Religious Organization’; ‘Cultural Interaction’ and ‘Processes of Social Change’; ‘Cosmovision and Ritual Performance’; ‘Creative Expressions and Material Forms’; ‘Mesoamerican Sites, Cities, and Ceremonial Centers’; and ‘Biographies’. Each of these ‘conceptual categories’ contains dozens if not scores of entries, some compact and concise bulletins, others running pages in length and constituting discursive, synthetic essays.

There is much to peruse and ponder, as well as many felicitous meetings of subject matter and contributor expertise. Michael D. Coe, for instance, delivers the goods on ‘Cacao’ (vol. 1, 113) and ‘Maya Epigraphy’ (vol. 1, 381–384) but excels when he writes about the Mexican artist and archaeologist, Miguel Covarrubias (vol. 1, 277–278) and his kindred ‘Olmec’ spirit, ‘Matthew W. Stirling’ (vol. 3, 168–169), an overlooked figure whom Coe considers ‘pivotal’ to Mesoamerican archaeology. Editorial acumen occasionally combines with quirks of the alphabet to throw together unusual adjacent entries, like ‘Turquoise’ (vol. 3, 276–277) preceding ‘Turtles’ (vol. 3, 277–278), ‘Oceans’ (vol. 2, 400–401) following ‘Obsidian’ (vol. 2, 399–400), or ‘Alexander von Humboldt’ (vol. 2, 25–26) coming right before ‘Hummingbirds’ (vol. 2, 26–27). The same dynamic is also responsible for some intriguing juxtapositions, like ‘Hallucinogens’ (vol. 2, 2–3) pre-empting ‘Heaven and Hell’ (vol. 2, 4–5) or ‘Paul Kirchhoff’ (vol. 2, 89–91), the German-born anthropologist who first coined the term ‘Mesoamerica’, appearing alongside ‘George Kubler’ (vol. 2, 91–92), a formidable thinker whose impressive body of work reflects almost as many ‘paradigm shifts’ as the field of Mesoamerican studies itself. Breadth of vision in most entries matches depth of insight, with savvy editorial hands ensuring that younger scholars (for example, Víctor Montejo, Barbara E. Mundy,

and Matthew Restall) are consulted along with well-established ones (for example, Karen Dakin, Alan R. Sandstrom, and Ronald Spores). A reasonable balance is struck between hearing from noted Mexican scholars (for example, Alfredo López Austin and María de los Angeles Romero Frizzi) as well as their distinguished American counterparts (for example, Rolena Adorno and William B. Taylor). No doubt French academics will find much to moan about, as they did in a scathing critique of the three-volume *Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas* (1996–2000),⁹ for *The Oxford Encyclopedia* is very much a ‘New World’ artifact; ‘Old Europe’—who could ever have imagined that an uttering of Donald Rumsfeld would come in handy?—at best makes only a cameo appearance in the Directory of Contributors.

Quibbles and queries

If French scholarship is slighted, Spanish too for that matter, what of the perpetual problem of Mesoamerican historiography being dominated by literature on Mexico, to the detriment of Central America? This thorny issue is unlikely ever to be resolved, given the abundance of Mexican research possibilities (and research materials) at hand. And Mexico remains, events in Chiapas notwithstanding, a more stable place to work, with considerably more options for research funding than Central America. But while discoveries pertaining to Maya historiography have diminished somewhat the dominance of the Central Mexican core over more peripheral regions of Mesoamerica, the fact remains that lands and peoples south and east of Guatemala, comparatively speaking, receive little attention.¹⁰

Infelicities such as Edward Seler being labelled first a philologist (vol. 1, 21) then a botanist (vol. 1, 55), or calling Karl Sapper (vol. 1, 21) an ethnographer and not a geographer, are of little consequence. Very few typographical errors have gone undetected, and translations from Spanish to English, many if not most the admirable work of assistant editor Scott Sessions, read and flow smoothly.

Perhaps the most serious criticism that may be levelled at *The Oxford Encyclopedia* is in regard to the role played by Old World diseases in shaping the nature of the colonial experience throughout Mesoamerica, especially in influencing crucial outcomes early on in the 16th century, when Spanish intrusion was resisted vigorously. Joyce Marcus and John E. Kicza, when discussing ‘Conquests’, and Robert M. Hill II, while writing about the ‘Maya Highlands’, make reference to devastating outbreaks of smallpox and the debilitating impact they had on native societies. Two other contributors (Jesús Gómez Fregoso on ‘Jesuits’ and H.B. Nicholson on ‘Bernardino de Sahagún’) mention measles and typhus epidemics as having had similar disastrous effects. No separate entry, let alone a substantive one, is dedicated to highlighting and contextualizing the importance of Old World disease outbreaks. History has few neat turning points, but the Spanish conquest of Mexico happens to be one of them. Having been driven out of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, the Spaniards returned to capture and sack it only after smallpox had wrought horrendous destruction and weakened Indian resistance irrevocably. Sahagún’s native informants told him:

At about the time that the Spaniards had fled from Mexico, before they had once again risen against us, there came a great sickness, a pestilence, the smallpox. It started in the month of Tepeilhuitl and spread over the people with great destruction of men.

It caused great misery. Some people it covered with pustules, everywhere—the face, the head, the breast. Many indeed perished from it. They could not walk; they could only lie at home in their beds, unable to move, to raise themselves, to stretch out on their sides, or lie face down, or upon their backs. If they stirred they cried out with great pain. Like a covering over them were the pustules. Indeed many people died of them. But many just died of hunger. There were so many deaths that there was often no one to care for the sick; they could not be attended...

The pestilence lasted through sixty day signs before it diminished. When it was realized that it was beginning to end, it was going toward Chalco. The pestilence became prevalent in the month of Teotleco; it was diminishing in Panquetzaliztli. The brave Mexican warriors were indeed weakened by it.

It was after all this had happened that the Spaniards came back.¹¹

The fall of Tenochtitlán signalled the end of the world as Mesoamericans then knew it. A haunting Aztec poem captures not just the demise of one city but that of an entire way of life:

Our spears lie broken in the streets.
We have torn our hair in our grief.
Gone are the roofs of our houses
Their walls red with blood.

Worms crawl across the streets and squares.
The walls are splattered with gore.
Red are the waters lurid as tan bark,
And when we drink the water tastes of brine.

Against the adobe walls
We have pounded our hands in despair,
For our city is no more.
The shields of our warriors were its defense,
But not even they could save it.¹²

Minimal engagement of the disease factor, however, should not deter avid students of Mesoamerica from putting *The Oxford Encyclopedia* high on their reading list. It affords contemplation of how an exciting field of study has matured and is evolving. If, on the other hand, considerations of time and money make this impossible, Eric Wolf's *Sons of the Shaking Earth*, though now no substitute, will still ensure a handsome return on investment.

Notes

1. E. Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth*, 3, Chicago 1959, 335. In his entry on Wolf in *The Oxford Encyclopedia* (vol. 3, 335), John K. Chance declares *Sons of the Shaking Earth* to be 'arguably the most successful attempt, to date, to join the histories of pre-Hispanic and Hispanic Mesoamerica into a unified account'.
2. The entry for Nezahualcōyotl in *The Oxford Encyclopedia* (Vol. 2, 368–369), is written by one of Mexico's most distinguished men of letters, Miguel León-Portilla, who describes Nezahualcōyotl as 'deeply concerned with questions

such as the possibility of saying true words on earth, the evanescence of what exists on earth, the mystery of the beyond, and the meaning of friendship and love’.

3. As rendered by Wolf in *Sons of the Shaking Earth*, ix.
4. In his essay, Theme of plant and animal destruction in economic history, *Journal of Farm Economics* 20 (1938) 765–775, Carl O. Sauer writes: “[W]e know of scarcely any record of destructive exploitation in all the span of human existence until we enter the period of modern history, when transatlantic expansion of European commerce, peoples, and governments takes place. Then begins what may well be the tragic rather than the great age of man. We have glorified this period in terms of a romantic view of colonization and of the frontier. There is a dark obverse to the picture, which we have regarded scarcely at all”. The literature surrounding the Columbus Quincentenary is enormous. I undertook to review an inkling of it ten years ago; see W. George Lovell, Ninety-two not out: Eduardo Galeano and the Columbus quincentenary, *Journal of Historical Geography* 19 (1993) 196–204. The most comprehensive survey of the literature pertaining to Geography may be found in K.W. Butzer (Ed.), *The Americas before and after 1492: Current Geographical Research*, a special issue of the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82 (1992).
5. W.T. Sanders and B.J. Price, *Mesoamerica: The Evolution of a Civilization*, New York, 1968.
6. R. Wauchope (Ed.), *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, 16 vols, Austin, 1964–1976.
7. V.R. Bricker (Ed.), *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, 6 vols, Austin, 1981–1992.
8. H.F. Cline (Ed.), *Handbook of Middle American Indians: Guide to Ethnohistorical Sources*, 4 vols, Austin, 1972–1975.
9. See S. Gruzinski, *Histoires indiennes: Avancées et lacunes d’une approche éclatée*, *Annales* 57 (2002) 1311–1321. which addresses specifically R.E.W. Adams and M.J. MacLeod (Eds), *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas*, vol. 2, *Mesoamerica*, New York, 2000; The North America and South America volumes of *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas* (1996, 1999) are subjected to similar scrutiny in the same issue of the *Annales* by Deny Delâge, Carmen Bernard, and Luiz Felipe de Alencastro.
10. Central America receives extended discussion in its entirety in E. Torres-Rivas (Ed.), *Historia General de Centroamérica*, 6 vols, San José, 1994; The region’s complex and little understood development, from ancient times to the present, is superbly showcased in C. Hall and H. Pérez-Brignoli, *Historical Atlas of Central America*, Norman, 2003.
11. A.J.O. Anderson and C.E. Dibble (Eds), *The War of Conquest: How It was Waged Here in Mexico*, 1978, Salt Lake City, 64. For further discussion of the theme, see N.D. Cook and W.G. Lovell (Eds), *‘Secret Judgments of God’: Old World Disease in Colonial Spanish America*, revised ed., Norman, 2001 [1992].
12. As rendered by W.G. Lovell, ‘Heavy shadows and black night’: disease and depopulation in colonial Spanish America, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82 (1992) 429.

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