

Introduction

Ancient West Mexicos

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West Mexico in its broadest sense extends from the valley of Toluca westward to include most of the Neo-Volcanic Axis, plus the Sierra Madre Occidental and adjoining coast from the northern end of Sinaloa down to Michoacán (Figure I.1). The region is fully the equal in size to either the Maya region or to non-Maya Mesoamerica, but hosts only a fraction of the archaeologists that have been drawn to those areas. The lacunae in our understanding are vast, and a single well-placed field project can make a major contribution. This volume brings together researchers who are carrying out those field projects to address longstanding gaps in our knowledge of the varied ancient societies of West Mexico. Indeed, “the West” was not a single, monolithic entity; rather, the region was home to a multiplicity of complex societies and cultures that spanned the breadth of Mesoamerican prehistory.

Contributors to this volume present current data and interpretations spanning the Early Formative to Late Postclassic periods, and stretching from Durango to Colima to Michoacán. In doing so, contributors significantly advance our understanding of temporal, spatial, and cultural diversity in this expansive region. Simultaneously, they demonstrate that various societies in the West engaged in the same dynamic cultural processes evident in other Mesoamerican subregions, albeit in distinct contexts. Consequently, this collection presents the full richness of ancient West Mexico on its own terms, rather than considering the region’s pre-Hispanic cultures as singular entities somehow unconnected with either the rest of Mesoamerica or each other, or, alternatively, as unrecognized or “lost” pockets of complex civilization. Thus, the volume not only seeks to contribute to our

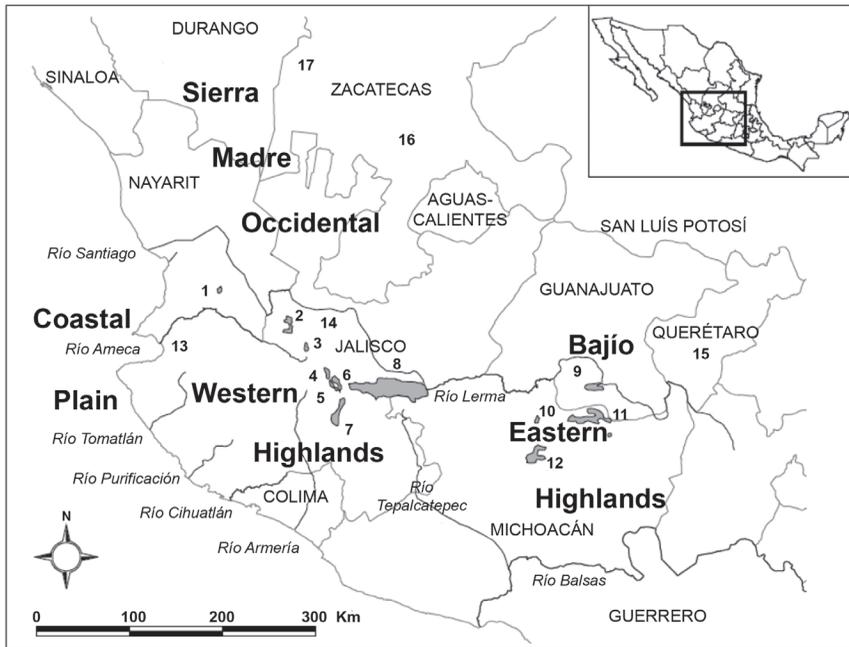


Figure I.1. Map of West Mexico showing important rivers and lakes, modern Mexican states, and cultural subregions. Lake basins: 1, San Pedro; 2, Magdalena; 3, La Vega; 4, Atotonilco; 5, Zacoalco; 6, San Marcos; 7, Sayula; 8, Chapala; 9, San Nicolas; 10, Zacapu; 11, Cuitzeo; 12, Pátzcuaro Basin; 13, Banderas; 14, Tequila; 15, San Juan; 16, Malpaso; and 17, Suchil (after Beekman 2010: 42, fig. 1).

knowledge of the archaeological past in West Mexico, but also to underline the West's long and complex relationship with other parts of Mesoamerica. Finally, this collection strives to highlight the potential value of data from the West in elucidating archaeological explanations of similar dynamics in better-known contexts in other Mesoamerican subregions, and beyond.

A BRIEF AND NECESSARILY SELECTIVE HISTORY OF RESEARCH

There are an increasing number of historiographic analyses of archaeological research in West Mexico (Beekman 2010; Cardona Machado 2016; Gorenstein and Foster 2000; Michelet 1995; Pickering and Beekman 2016; Williams 2004). They have exposed a series of interwoven tropes that have emerged over the years and contributed to the “Othering” of West Mexico. The region has been characterized as non-Mesoamerican, affiliated with South American cultures, its linguistic landscape has been exoticized,

complex cultures have been reduced to a “cult of the dead,” evidence of religious beliefs have been ignored in favor of an all-pervasive shamanism, and most recently the region has been given a new normative regional identity based on the exotic Teuchitlán architectural tradition. All of these entrenched themes promote the impression that West Mexico is something so different from what “traditional” Mesoamericanists study that it can be safely ignored. These problematic tropes will be addressed in detail at a future date, but as they permeate the history of West Mexican archaeology, they must be treated briefly here.

The Spanish conquest of West Mexico followed that of the Aztec empire, beginning shortly after the fall of Tenochtitlán. The comparative lack of resistance by the Tarascan Empire of Michoacán allowed the Spanish conquistadors to push quickly to Guerrero, Colima, and the Pacific coast. Francisco Cortés’s conquests of far west Mexico in the early 1520s were followed by Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán’s brutal murder of the Tarascan ruler and bloody establishment of Nueva Galicia in Jalisco and Nayarit in the 1530s (Altman 2010; Warren 1985). The imposition of political control in some cases took considerably longer. While Michoacán moved more peacefully into the Spanish colonial system, the far western area engaged in more overt resistance. The Mixtón Rebellion of the 1540s was an alliance of nomadic Zacatecos, settled Caxcanes, and older polities from central Jalisco that briefly threatened Spanish control in Nueva Galicia before being put down by Viceroy Mendoza (Weigand and García de Weigand 1996). Native people endured slave raiding, forced labor in the mines of Zacatecas, and the imposition of colonies of Tlaxcallans into their midst, and many fled into the mountains of Nayarit and Jalisco. Two decades after the conquest of the last Maya kingdom, Spanish troops finally conquered the Cora kingdom of eastern Nayarit in 1722 (McCarty and Matson 1975; see particularly Malvido Miranda 2000). Their accounts provide useful information on native religion and political systems that have still not been fully explored by archaeologists.

Manuel Orozco y Berra (1864) appears to have been the first to divide West Mexico into a Purhépecha-speaking Michoacán and a Southern Uto-Aztecan (SUA)–speaking West. Purhépecha remains an isolated language without clear relationships to other language families (Campbell et al. 1986; Foster 1969). This is no doubt due to the replacement of variants during the Tarascan imperial expansion in the final centuries before the conquest. Attempts to link Purhépecha to Zuñi, Quechua, Maya, or Chibcha (Greenberg 1987; Swadesh 1956, 1966) were poorly supported but repeatedly

referenced, and have been selectively cited to support claims for their South American origins (Anawalt 1992; Corona Núñez and Estrada 1994; Furst 1967; Long 1967). Languages for the far western highlands and the Sierra Madre Occidental have been more difficult to recover, complicated by the importation of central Mexicans in the sixteenth century and the use of Nahuatl as the official language for the teaching of Catholic doctrine beginning circa 1550 (Santoscoy 1902: 317, 323). The oft-cited linguistic fragmentation for the far western states is based more on the multiplicity of names rather than linguistic evidence (Anguiano 1992; Yáñez Rosales 2001). Many ethnolinguistic terms are derived from the name of the town where they were spoken, and every language that has been studied for its linguistic affiliations has been assigned to one or another branch of SUA. This becomes more straightforward as one moves up the Sierra Madre Occidental, which Wilcox (1986) called the Tepiman Corridor, the route of closely related SUA languages that connected Mesoamerica with the American Southwest. Detailed studies of the ethnohistoric evidence have long suggested that SUA preceded Purhépecha on the western and southern fringes of the empire (Albiez-Wieck 2011), while Nahuatl or its variants were recorded for Colima (Sauer 1948: 63–64) and down the coast of Guerrero in the twentieth century (Guerrero and del Castillo 1948; Weitlaner 1948), with an isolate at Pochutla, Oaxaca (Boas 1917). Pochutec is believed to have separated from Nahuatl before Nahuatl and Pipil separated (Campbell and Langacker 1978), likely dating its separation to the Epiclassic or earlier.

The proposed separation between SUA and Purhépecha speakers became more pronounced as archaeological data began to emerge. Postclassic remains from Ixcuintla, Nayarit, were the first archaeological images to be published (Retes 1845), and they were quickly related to the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of central Mexico by reference to the well-known migration accounts that put the origins of the Aztec and others in the northwest (Ekholm 1942; Toro 1925). Chavero (1887: 460–463) went so far as to propose Mexcaltitan, Nayarit, as the original Aztlan based on these archaeological and ethnohistoric data. Apart from a brief period in the early twentieth century when the Formative period ceramic effigies from Jalisco and elsewhere were given a Purhépecha association (starting with Lumholtz 1902, II: 313), the figures have usually been assigned a broadly Nahuatl affiliation. Today, the gaps in linguistic data for the far western highlands continue to bedevil studies of its deeper history.

By the mid- to late nineteenth century, archaeological studies had begun to focus in on the most prominent remains in each subregion. Work in