

1

Food of the Gods

First Encounters with Cacao

The first encounter of the Old World with New World cacao was made during Columbus's fourth voyage. He had set sail from Spain on 9 May 1502 and, forbidden from landing on Hispaniola, he headed for Jamaica. He missed Jamaica and eventually ended up at the island of Guanaja, some 70 km off the coast of Honduras. According to the account written by Columbus's second son Ferdinand, two large dugout canoes appeared, carrying not just people, but also cargo consisting of cotton garments, war clubs, small axes, and bells of cast copper (Coe and Coe 2013, 108–109). Among this cargo were provisions of roots and grains, as well as small items the Spaniards called “almonds.” These were clearly of importance to the natives, since they always picked them up if any were dropped accidentally. Columbus had no way of knowing that these “almonds” were actually cacao beans.

It seems likely that the natives Columbus encountered that day belonged to the Putún or Chontal Maya, who by this time controlled a coastal trade network stretching from the Yucatán Peninsula to the Gulf of Honduras. Cacao beans were important to the Putún not least because they used them as money. But the history of cacao stretches considerably further back than 1502, and the beans were used not only as currency, but also as a beverage.



Figure 1.1. Map showing the location of the island of Guanaja, in the Caribbean Sea, off the coast of Honduras.

Cacao before Columbus

The first civilization of the Americas, the Olmecs, flourished from 1500 to 400 BC and was centered on the humid lowlands of the Mexican Gulf coast. The Olmecs spoke an ancestral form of the Mixe-Zoquean family of languages, some of which is still spoken in the lands they once occupied. “Cacao” appears to be a word from that language, originally pronounced *kakawa* (Coe and Coe 2013, 18). It seems possible that the Olmecs were the first to domesticate the cacao plant and to use the beans to make a drink. Evidence to support this suggestion came from the use of modern analytical techniques by chemists at Hershey Foods in the United States. Cacao contains three alkaloids, the most important of which are theobromine and caffeine. In Mesoamerica, cacao is the only plant to contain both alkaloids. When samples were scraped from the inner surfaces of ceramic vessels from the Maya archaeological site at Colha in northern Belize, dated to around 600 BC, the chemists at Hershey found that both theobromine and caffeine were present (Hurst et al. 2002, 289–290). It

seemed that people inhabiting Mesoamerica 2,600 years ago were using cacao, probably as a drink.

Two and a half millennia is a long time, but we need to go even further back in time to find the beginnings of chocolate drinking. The Soconusco region, which includes the Pacific coastal plain of Chiapas in southeast Mexico and adjacent Guatemala, is now thought to be where sedentary village culture started in Mesoamerica. Excavations in this area have revealed a culture dating back to 1800–1400 BC. Astonishingly, ceramic drinking jars from these excavations tested positive for the presence of theobromine (Coe and Coe 2013, 36), which suggests that people were drinking chocolate more than 3,800 years ago. That was the state-of-play in late 2017 when I was writing this chapter. Then, a year later, when I was finishing the final chapter, I came across an article published in the journal *Nature*, in which researchers provided evidence for the use of cacao in southeast Ecuador between 5,450 and 5,300 years ago (Zarillo et al. 2018). This is the first directly dated archaeological evidence for the use of cacao in South America and ties in with studies showing that this region was the center of domestication of the cacao tree (see chapter 3). The use of chocolate as a beverage has a much longer history than I had imagined.

Cacao was very important in Mayan culture. So much so that during the Classic period (AD 200–900), one of the last rulers at the ancient city of Tikal in Guatemala (in the Petén region) was called Lord Cacao (Young 2007, 21). Chocolate drinks were used in Mayan betrothal and marriage ceremonies, especially among the rich. At such festivities, people would drink chocolate together—known in K'iche' Maya as *chokola'j*, which is the possible source for the Spanish and English word “chocolate” (Coe and Coe 2013, 61). The Lacandón Maya once ruled a vast domain in the eastern Chiapas, and today just a few hundred survive. They have retained many of their cultural traditions, including the making and use of chocolate drinks for human consumption and as an offering to their gods. To make the drink for their own use, they toasted and ground together fermented and dried cacao beans with toasted corn and then mixed with water containing a foaming agent—a section of a vine called *suqir*. This mixture was then whipped with a wooden spoon until foam was produced. The foam, apparently the most desirable part, was consumed, after which the remaining liquid was placed on top of the corn and cacao gruel and eaten. The cacao pathologist Harry Evans, whom we will come across later in the book, says that he had this drink in the states of Chiapas and Tabasco in the south of Mexico, where it is called *pozol*.



Figure 1.2. God L with merchant's pack and cacao tree. Mural detail. Late Classic period. Red Temple, Cacaxtla, Mexico. God L is one of the twin sons of the Maize God, and by causing the death of the Maize God he took possession of the Maize Tree and so came to own cacao and all the wealth it represented. By permission of Simon Martin.

It was known initially as *pochotl*, from the Nahuatl *pozolli* (sparkling), but following the arrival of the Spanish in the early sixteenth century, it became known as *pozol*.

Cacao and chocolate were also important in Aztec culture. They called the cacao tree *cacvaqualhitl*, the pods *cacvacentli*, the beans *cachoatl*, and, apparently, the drink made from the beans was known as *chocolatl* (Coe and Coe, 2013, 61). For the Aztecs, as with the Mayans, chocolate was the preserve of the elite: the royal house, lords and nobility, although warriors were also allowed it, usually supplied in pellet or wafer form. Apparently, a chocolate drink was not taken during a meal, but at the end, much as we might drink port or brandy at the end of a special meal today. As with the Mayans, flavorings were often added to the chocolate drinks. These included vanilla and chili. Chocolate

drinks were taken unsweetened, quite unlike the way many of us would drink chocolate today.

Although most books and articles state that the word “chocolate” is derived from the Nahuatl word *chocolatl*, there is no mention of this word in any early source on the Nahuatl language or Aztec culture. In these sources, the word for the chocolate drink is *cacahuatl* or “cacao water.” Nevertheless, by the second half of the sixteenth century, the Spaniards were using the word *chocolatl*. This was a drink made up of equal parts cacao beans and ground seeds of the ceiba tree, frothed up with a wooden stick known as a molinillo. It seems that *chocolatl* was transformed into “chocolate” by the Spanish and used by them to describe drinks made from cacao (Coe and Coe 2013, 61).

Cacao beans were used as tributes to powerful rulers in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. At the time of the Spanish conquest, Aztecs demanded tributes of cacao beans from conquered regions. The tributes often had to be carried great distances to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, which was situated on an island near the western shores of Lake Texcoco in Central Mexico. Cacao was so valuable to the Aztecs that their ruler, Montezuma, had huge storehouses of cacao beans. These beans were treasure and were not used for consumption. In fact, only old and worn cacao beans were used to make their chocolate drink, *chocolatl*.

We know that cacao beans were used as currency, although little information is available on the value of this cacao currency prior to the Spanish conquest. What is available is the purchasing power of cacao beans shortly after the conquest. For example, in Nicaragua, a porter’s daily wage was 100 beans. In 1545, he might have purchased a turkey or a rabbit for 100 beans, a turkey egg or an avocado for 3 beans, and a tomato for 1 bean (Coe and Coe 2013, 99–100). As Sophie and Michael Coe say in their excellent book *The True History of Chocolate*, every time an Aztec took a drink of chocolate, he was literally drinking money.

Columbus had no idea of the importance of the cacao beans they acquired from the native canoe in 1502, and it took some time for the Spanish to appreciate the monetary value of cacao. Although they eventually did come to grasp its value to the native peoples as a currency, they found the drink made from the beans not to their liking. It was too bitter. Sugar cane was already being grown in Spain’s new territories, having been taken from the Canary Islands to the New World by Columbus in 1493. It wasn’t long before cane sugar was being used to sweeten the chocolate drink, making it more palatable to the sweet-toothed Spanish settlers.