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The Time Perspective in Ancient Mexico and Central America

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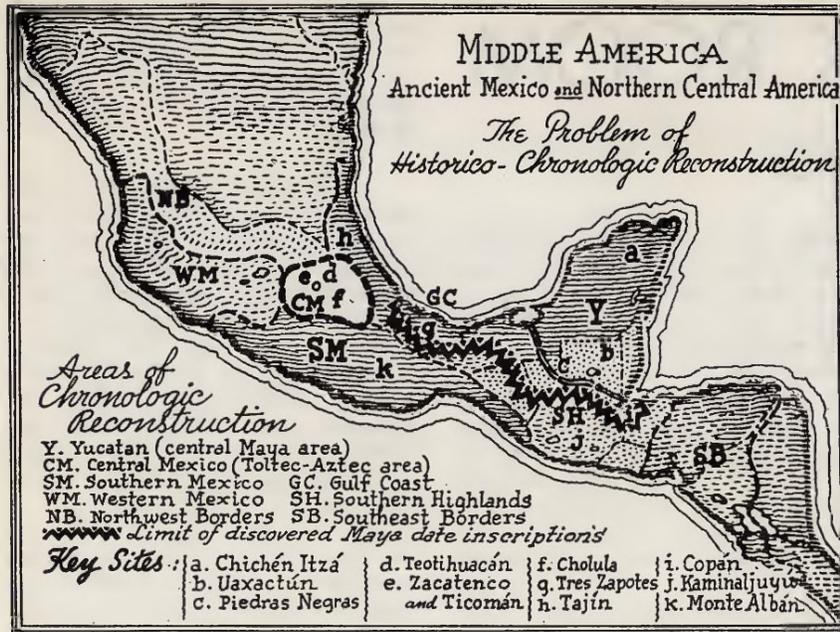
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Abstract: This article claims that in the study of ancient civilizations in Mexico and Central America two facets should be considered—important geographical locations and the chronological factor. This article is interested in the latter concern, discussing the sequential relationship of civilizations in a given area, and the “absolute chronology” as measured by the Western calendar.

THE *Time*



IT is a well-known fact that there once flourished, in the middle region of the Americas now called Mexico and Central America, a number of mighty pre-Columbian civilizations (Maya, Toltec, Aztec, etc.), which in some respects surpassed even the ancient civilizations of the Old World. The question of the origins, history, and final downfall of these early New World civilizations is a problem of utmost scientific importance.¹

In the attempted solution of this great problem of the ancient Middle American civilizations, two basic inquiries are involved. One is that of *geography*, or the problem of the particular areas of development of these civilizations, and their relationships in the horizontal aspect of space. The other is that of *chronology*, or the problem of the particular periods of their development, and their relationships in the vertical aspect of time. Many years of archaeological investigation in the grouping and distribution of the material remains of these various cultures have resulted in a considerable exact knowledge of the geographic aspect, at least as to the main areas of development and diffusion. On the other hand, it has been only within the last two decades of Middle American research that any comparable progress has been made in the reconstruction of the equally important chronologic aspect. In this article we shall briefly summarize the latest stage of scientific reconstruction of this fundamental time per-

¹Since these civilizations seem to have developed in almost complete independence of the great culture-complex of the Old World, the story of their rise and fall should reveal significant parallels for solving the general problem of the rise and fall of nations, and the nature and operation of the laws of human progress.

spective of the ancient Middle American civilization.²

This basic problem of chronology may be considered twofold. First, there is the question of relative chronology, or the placement of the civilizations in their proper time sequence or relationships to each other.

Second, there is the question of absolute chronology, or their placement in the standard time-scale of the European Christian era, i.e., as dating in a particular period of years before or after the birth of Christ, which will make possible their integration with general world history.

²The great importance of establishing a correct chronology in ancient America becomes evident when we consider the fact that dating is the essential factor in the reconstruction of the cause-and-effect sequences of history, and in the solution of the many problems of origin.

THE first of these general questions of Middle American historical chronology has been already answered for most of the ancient civilizations. The sequential evidence in the archaeological and documentary records has been usually sufficient for their exact placement in the relative time sequence.

The second question has been much more difficult of solution.

For the establishment of an absolute dating, according to the standard European Christian era, five main sources of evidence are available:

1. Contemporary hieroglyphic inscriptions in the native calendars or chronologic eras (Maya, Zapotec, Aztec), which provide exact datings of the associated archaeological remains of these civilizations
2. Contemporary and non-contemporary hieroglyphic manuscripts (Maya, Zapotec, Mixtec, Aztec), containing historical dates in the native chronologic eras
3. Non-contemporary sixteenth-century writings in the native and Spanish languages, containing historical dates in the



—Photo by Compania Mexicana Aero-foto, S. A.—Courtesy Dr. Charles E. Dibble

AMONG THE KEY SITES ENABLING CHRONOLOGIC RECONSTRUCTION OF ANCIENT CIVILIZATION IN MIDDLE AMERICA IS MONTE ALBAN, SEEN HERE FROM THE AIR, WITH THE CITY OF OAXACA IN THE BACKGROUND

native chronologic eras or equivalents thereof in the European Christian era

4. Archaeological indications of the durations of successive culture-periods, in a downward reconstruction from the fixed date of the European invasion

5. Correlations of developments in different areas, providing evidence for cross-dating; i.e., either direct correlations of un-

Perspective

IN ANCIENT MEXICO

and

CENTRAL AMERICA

By M. WELLS
JAKEMAN, Ph.D.

The Itzan Society

dated with dated developments, or indirect, through a third development ("triangulation"), especially through the archaeological evidence of style-changes in pottery, sculpture, and architecture

In the last few years there has also appeared a systematic plan of investigation of these various lines of evidence for absolute dating, involving the following three steps of research and chronological reconstruction:

1. The construction of an absolute chronology in Yucatan, the central Maya area (see accompanying map), the only area in Middle America (or the New World, for that matter) where a substantial amount of contemporary documentary evidence has been discovered for absolute dating, in the form of the Maya date inscriptions

2. The construction of an absolute chronology in the Toltec-Aztec area of Central Mexico (see accompanying map), an area second in importance only to Yucatan in the amount of available contemporary data

3. The mutual check and correlation of the chronologies of the central Maya and Toltec-Aztec areas, and the utilization of these confirmed chronologies as standard reference scales for the construction of absolute chronologies in the other areas of Middle America, through the method of cross-dating

The completion of these three steps of chronologic reconstruction

ANOTHER KEY SITE (SEE ACCOMPANYING MAP) IS SAN JUAN TEOTIHUAÇAN WITH ITS PYRAMIDS, CLEARLY DISTINGUISHABLE IN THIS AERIAL PHOTO

—Photo by *Compania Mexicana Aerofoto, S. A.*—Courtesy Dr. Charles E. Dibble



has been greatly accelerated by the results of the recent and present researches, especially in the key Maya and Toltec-Aztec areas. The most important of these findings bear on the problem of correlation of the native Maya calendar and chronologic eras with the European calendar and Christian era, whereby the contemporary date inscriptions of the Maya area may be translated into equivalent dates in the European Christian system used by historians as the standard for world historical chronology. As the result of the recent work on this basic Maya calendar correlation problem, one of the proposed alternative correlations has now become generally accepted as almost certainly the correct synchronization, namely the 11.16.0.0.0 correlation of Goodman, Thompson, and Martinez Hernandez. This has

consequently raised the scheme of dating in the Maya area based on this particular calendrical correlation to at least the status of strong historical probability.

Of almost equal importance, particularly for the construction of an absolute chronology in the Toltec-Aztec area of Central Mexico, are the sensational discoveries of the past few months at the archaeological site of Tula, near the northern edge of the Valley of Mexico. These discoveries establish the identification of this site by the native historian Ixtlilxochitl as the early capital *Tulan* or *Tula* of the Toltecs in Central Mexico, which in turn confirms Ixtlilxochitl's version of Toltec history, including his earlier dating of the Toltecs. One important result of this earlier Toltec dating is the establishment of a much closer synchronization of developments in the Toltec and central Maya areas. Another is the required downward revision of the dating of the pre-Toltec "Archaic" cultures in Central Mexico.

Thirdly, there is the series of discoveries of the past four archaeological seasons in the Gulf Coast region, between the central Maya and Toltec-Aztec areas, consisting principally of the finding of a very early Maya date inscription, and of the associated remains of a highly advanced civilization, hitherto unknown to archaeological history. The fact that this early "Olmec" or Gulf Coast civilization has been found to have been connected, on the one hand, with an archaic phase of the Maya civilization in Yucatan, and on the other with a pre-Toltec "Middle

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"Even by Study and also by Faith"

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mind sufficiently, the Lord will give you power, and even add to your store of ideas as you speak.

7. Do not apologize for your speech. If it is the best you can do, go ahead with it and do better next time.

We cannot agree with the individual who declared that it was unnecessary for members of the Church to prepare to speak, because whether we fill our mental reservoirs with knowledge and then call upon the Lord to direct us in selecting the subject to be preached, or whether we carefully organize a speech for a definite occasion, asking the help of the Lord in planning, it all calls for preparation.

As members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints we should remember that "the simple honest heart is of more avail with the Lord than all the pomp, pride, splendor, and eloquence produced by men,"⁸ and at the same time we should strive constantly to perfect our understanding of things praiseworthy and of good report—"even by study and also by faith."

⁸Widtsoe, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

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OLIVER COWDERY

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statement this man, who knew nothing of Mormon history, said Oliver Cowdery mentioned something he wanted me to explain; that the angel took back a part that was not translated. We know this and that part of the golden plates then withheld will be revealed at some future time.

"Since I heard Oliver Cowdery speak," continued my host, "I have not had peace for these many years. I want to know more about your people. I felt when I listened to Oliver Cowdery talking in the courtroom he was more than an ordinary man. If you can show us that you have what Oliver Cowdery testified to, we shall all be glad to receive it." He and his whole

family embraced the gospel and came to Utah.

In November 1848, Oliver Cowdery, before a high council at Council Bluffs, called for the purpose of considering his case, said: "Brethren, for a number of years I have been separated from you. I now desire to come back, I wish to come humbly and to be one in your midst. I seek no station. I only wish to be identified with you. I am out of the Church. I am not a member of the Church, but I wish to become a member of it. I wish to come in at the door. I know the door. I have not come here to seek precedence. I come humbly, and throw myself upon the decisions of this body, knowing, as I do, that its decisions are right, and should be obeyed."

TIME PERSPECTIVE IN ANCIENT AMERICA

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Archaic" development in Central Mexico, establishes still another correlation of the chronologies of these key areas, and additional proof of the general correctness of our chronologic reconstruction. And this in turn, finally, has increased the reliability of the Maya and Central Mexican chronologies as basic reference scales for the cross-dating of developments in other areas of Middle America, and for the downward extension of the historico-chronologic reconstruction to include even the dating of the discovered phases of the "Early Archaic" culture, the most ancient of the pre-Columbian civilizations of Middle America.

A SUMMARY OF THE ANCIENT HISTORY OF MIDDLE AMERICA

ACCORDING TO THE LATEST STAGE OF CHRONOLOGIC RECONSTRUCTION⁸

THE HUNTING HORIZONS

THE PRIMITIVE HUNTING CULTURES (ice-age and post-glacial, some 10,000 years?)

THE PRE-ARCHAIC HUNTING CULTURES (late pre-agricultural, some 5,000 years?)

Both hypothetical, based on the discovery of human artifacts of these periods in North and South America, or regions on either side of Middle America, and the present general distribution of nomadic hunting tribes.

THE AGRICULTURAL HORIZONS

(Early Pre-Columbian Archaic)

THE EARLY ARCHAIC CIVILIZATION (?? —1000?—c.311?B.C. in the main area of Central and Southern Mexico, some 2,500 years?)

⁸Based on a detailed investigation by the writer recently completed for publication under the title *The Eras of the Mayas; a Study in Ancient Maya Chronology and the Early Historical Dating of Mexico and Central America* (Itzan Society, Pub. No. 5).

Rise and diffusion of the first agricultural civilization of Middle America (probably mainly highland): permanent settlements of farmers and artisans (= the *Quinametzin* or "Mighty Men" of the sixteenth-century sources?): cultivation of maize, squash, and cotton; textile clothing and oriental-like turbans; pottery and clay figurines; buildings of wood and adobe bricks (hypothetic); rudimentary hieroglyphic writing (probable); and a comparatively pure religion.

Pre-Zacatenco phases undiscovered.

Zacatenco phases discovered so far only in Central Mexico.

Transitional Period I (c. 500—50 B.C., about 450 years)

General destruction or disappearance of the Early Archaic civilization in Central and Southern Mexico and the Gulf Coast, and the beginnings of the advanced Olmec-Maya civilization in the Gulf Coast and of the archaic Miraflores culture in the Southern Highlands.

THE ADVANCED OLMEC-MAYA CIVILIZATION (c. 200? B.C.—A.D. 400, about 600 years)

Rise and diffusion of the second agricultural civilization (mainly lowland): establishment of many towns and temple-cities in the southeastern Gulf Coast region and later in other parts of Middle America, under bearded priest-rulers of the royal *Chan* or "Serpent" lineage; domestication of new agricultural plants, such as beans, cacao and rubber; stone and brick masonry; temple-pyramids; hieroglyphic writing and paper books; astronomy, calendar and date inscriptions; and a highly advanced religion, centering around the worship of the Rain-god of the Gulf Coast (i.e., the famed Fair God of Life and Light, called *Itzam-na* in the later Maya, writings of Yucatan and *Quetzalcoatl* (original) in the later Toltec-Aztec writings of Central Mexico).

Discovered aspects: Classical Olmec in the southeastern and central Gulf Coast, Archaic Maya, in southern Yucatan and "Middle Archaic" in Central Mexico.

Transitional Period II (c. A.D. 323?—750, about 427 years)

Fall of the advanced Olmec-Maya civilization, ascendancy of the barbarian

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA

Time Perspective in Ancient America

tribes of the Miraflores-Late Archaic culture, and beginning of recovery of remnants of the Olmec-Maya civilization in southern Yucatan (Maya) and Central Mexico (Toltec).

(Later Pre-Columbian)

THE CLASSICAL CEREMONIAL CIVILIZATIONS (c. A.D. 435—1100, about 665 years)

Ascendancy of the Maya and Toltec remnants of the Olmec-Maya civilization: second regime of the Itzamna-Quetzalcoatl priests: theocratic states, featuring a flamboyant development of religious ceremonialism, art and architecture.

Classical Maya or "Old Empire" in the Maya area, theocratic temple-states of the *Itzas* or priests and people of Itzamna.

Classical Toltec or "Teotihuacan" in Central Mexico, theocracy of the priest-kings of the Toltecs or people of Tulan, also called the "children of Quetzalcoatl."

Classical Zapotec, in Southern Mexico, a development largely from Maya and Toltec influence.

Classical Totonac, in the Gulf Coast, a development largely from Toltec influence.

Transitional Period III (c. A.D. 800—1350, about 550 years)

Resurgence of the barbarian Mayan tribes in Central America, final dispersion of the Toltecs (especially under their last priest-king, the famous Topiltzin Nacxit Quetzalcoatl) to Tabasco and Yucatan (= Maya *Kukulcan*), last phases of the classical ceremonial civilizations, and invasions of new tribes of *Chichimecs* or Barbarians (especially the Nahuas, including the Aztecs, from the north).

THE LATE MILITARY STATES (c. A.D. 1200—1545, about 345 years)

Age of the war gods: complete supremacy of the militarism and pagan cults of the Barbarians: wars for conquest, tributes and captives for human sacrifice, and a general decline in the arts and sciences of civilization.

Mixtec-Puebla and the Aztec empire in Central and Southern Mexico and the Gulf Coast.

"Tyranny of Mayapan" and the "Independent Maya States" in the central Maya area.

Quiche empire and other late developments in the Southern Highlands.

Late Zapotec kingdom of Lachia in Southern Mexico.

Tarascan kingdom of Michoacan in Western Mexico.

Aztatlan, etc., in the Northwest Borders.

Late Chorotegan, etc., in the Southeast Borders.

Transitional Period IV (A.D. 1517—1545 (mean date), about 28 years)

Spanish invasion and conquest.

(Post-Columbian)

THE SPANISH REGIME AND MODERN REPUBLICS (A.D. 1519—Present, 424 years)

Age of conflict and partial amalgamation of the remnantal "Indian" and intrusive European Spanish cultures.

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