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## Mesoamerican Civilization

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### *Cultures and Civilization*

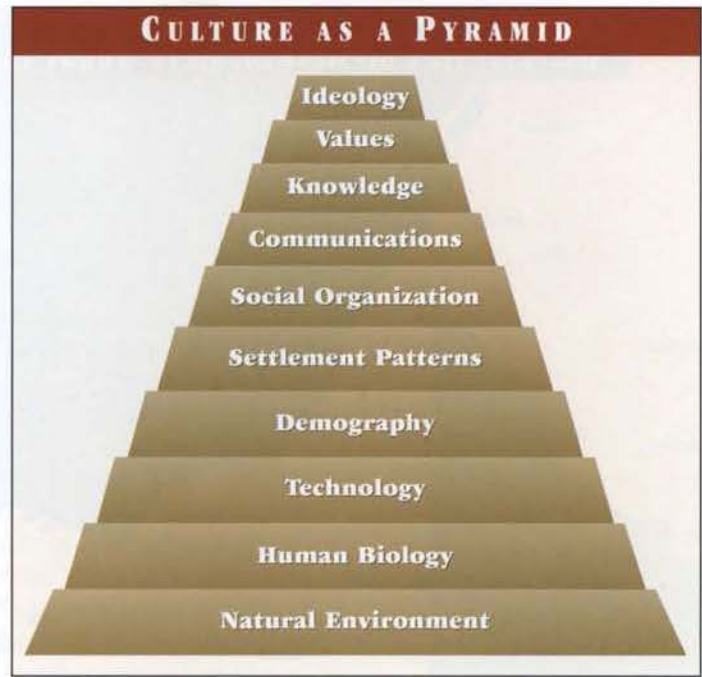
Over a century ago people began speaking of the set of customs or ways of behaving that characterize each people as a *culture*. At first the term was only applied to the lifeways of tribal groups—"uncivilized" peoples with relatively simpler technologies and societies. In the nineteenth century, European and American explorers had busily penetrated every portion of the earth not previously directly examined by their countrymen. In the process they encountered hundreds of cultures; many of them were puzzling to European minds. The challenge of making intellectual sense out of this mishmash fell to an emerging group of scholars called anthropologists. Their core question became, "What is the range of possibilities—biological, cultural, and linguistic—for being a human being, and how can we explain the differences and similarities that have been discovered?" The development of methods for doing archaeology added the possibility of asking, "How did peoples differ in the past?"

Studies of living and extinct groups have demonstrated that tens of thousands of cultures have existed on the earth throughout history, each of them distinguished from all other groups in particular ways. Each culture can be thought of as constituting a set of rules for getting along in life; each is based on a different elaborated theory about the nature of humans and the world. Children, for instance, require years of experience and instruction to master the ins and outs of the culture in which they are reared, so that they can respond to situations unthinkingly, "naturally." Rules become second nature to them to guide them through such problems as when, if, how, and whom to fight or to embrace, how and whom to marry or divorce, and what to believe or to doubt.

Each ancient people in Mesoamerica followed its distinct cultural pattern. But as the descriptions of those patterns have multiplied at the hands of modern scholars, the notion of many separate cultures has increasingly clashed with an older

concept—*civilization*. Historians, to whom the concept of civilization is old hat, are not very comfortable dealing with the idea of hundreds of cultures in an area. After all, the integrative concept of "Roman civilization" seems more useful than mere "Roman culture," used to refer to the unique ways of the early settlers of the city of Rome. Both terms, *civilization* and *culture*, have value but both can be confusing.

In this book, Mesoamerican civilization is considered the veneer or overlay of cultural patterns that were shared by the local cultures in the area. For example, an ancient Maya traveler who visited peoples beyond the boundaries of his own region would have noted that certain of their rituals, gods, social customs, foods, and taboos were enough like those of his home territory that he sensed an essential similarity. When the Spaniards arrived, even they could detect some cultural equivalents; they could see that a certain political role, a tradition, a ceremony, or a piece of art in one place was basically like what they had discovered elsewhere. Modern anthropologists and archaeologists are trying to reconstruct, clarify, and interpret what it was that the different Mesoamerican tribes or peoples had in common as well as how they differed, from each other and the rest of the world.



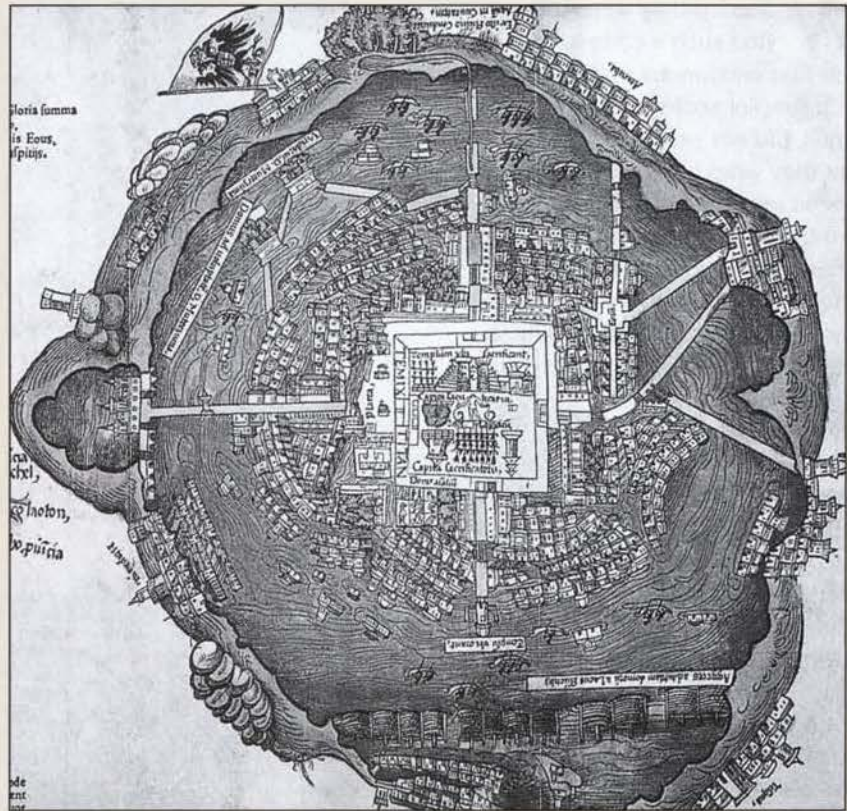
One convenient way to represent a culture is as a set of factors and conceptual rules that can be sorted into levels somewhat like a Mesoamerican pyramid structure. Aspects of a people's life situation at a lower level are more fundamental and harder to change than those higher up. Yet each "cultural pyramid" has solidified over its history to become an integrated whole. In the actual lives of people the categories are not like layers of a cake that can still be separated.<sup>28</sup>

## CULTURE AS DISTILLED HISTORY

Clifford Geertz, a noted anthropologist, has used a different image to represent culture.<sup>29</sup> A culture is something like an old city, he suggests. In part it contains old concepts and behavior patterns, symbolized by the quaint streets and courtyards in the plan of the city that still mark what once were cow paths and scattered hamlets. But cutting through those markers of the historical past may now be modern boulevards or even freeways. The cultural equivalent of those would be features like blue jeans, cola drinks, and computers which are superimposed atop hundreds of traditional cultures from Mozambique to Mongolia. Finding one's way around effectively in either an aged city or a mature culture can best be done on the basis of experience, not merely by consulting a guide book, Geertz thinks.

The lower sketch map shows Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. Its unique combination of Israelite, Greek, and Roman features symbolizes the historically unique mix of cultural patterns that ordered the lives of its inhabitants.

The Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, shown in the upper map, displays another one-of-a-kind settlement and culture. This map was prepared in 1524 by one of Cortez's party to send to the Spanish king.



Map of Aztec Tenochtitlan in 1524



Sketch of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus

## Level of Civilization

When the Spaniards arrived in Mexico they were surprised to find such a complex way of life. Their first encounters in America, with much simpler societies in the Caribbean islands, did not prepare their minds for what they would find on the mainland. They were taken aback by the Aztecs, who were the dominant political and cultural force in the area at the time of the Conquest. Shockingly barbaric in their massive human sacrifices, they nevertheless lived in large cities and employed highly effective technology and an intricate social system. Yet there is good evidence that thousands of years earlier there were cultures that were at a similar level of sophistication. Mesoamerican society in those times was at the same general level of development as the archaic civilizations of the Old World—Babylonia, Egypt, Greece, China, and India.

Cortez, the original Spanish conquistador in Mexico, wrote to his king about Mexico's capital city, Tenochtitlan, the seat of the Aztec empire, in this way:

In the service and manners of its people their fashion of living was almost the same as in Spain, with just as much harmony and order; and considering that these people were barbarous, so cut off from the knowledge of God, and other civilised peoples, it is admirable to see to what they attained in every respect.<sup>30</sup>

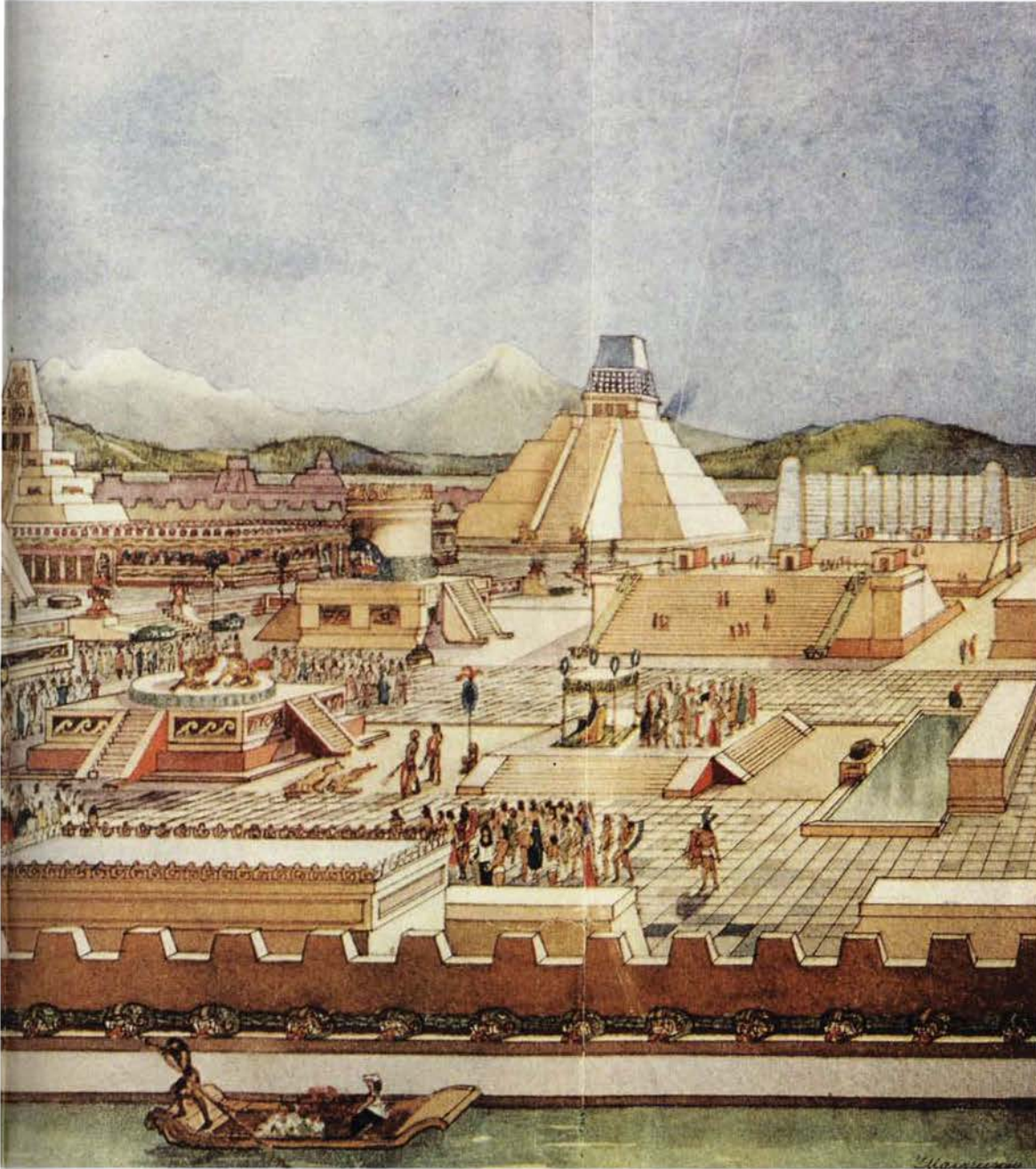
About Cholula, a city in what is now the state of Puebla, Cortez noted that it consisted of perhaps twenty thousand houses in the body of the city and as many more around the outskirts. He commented:

The city seen from the outside is more beautiful than the cities of Spain, because it is very level, and contains many towers . . . I counted from a mosque [sacred pyramid tower] four hundred and odd towers in the city, and all belonged to mosques.<sup>31</sup>



The Spaniard lamely summed up his awestruck impression in this report to his king:

I know . . . (I) will hardly be believed, because even we, who see [these sights] here with our own eyes, are unable to comprehend their reality.<sup>32</sup>



This is the sacred precinct at the urban core of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan. The artist's reconstruction was made on the basis of Spanish eyewitness accounts and archaeological findings.

Not only was the scale of the civilization impressive, so were the qualitative aspects of it. Spanish craftsmen who arrived later were amazed by the sophisticated skills, ingenuity, and taste that Mesoamerican workers displayed. The Spanish military force, with the use of guns and horses that the Amerindians lacked, was barely able to eke out victory over its brave and resourceful opponents. (Had it not been for the new diseases the invaders brought with them, which quickly devastated the native peoples, the Europeans might have been driven off, which would have resulted in a very different scenario for subsequent history.)

The invaders were struck, as modern archaeologists are, by the simplicity of the tools and techniques employed by the ancient Mesoamericans. For example, the superb sculptures in green jadeite stone that so fascinate art aficionados today were made by a slow process of grinding, using nothing more than simple wooden drill bits. (The tool was rotated by wrapping the string of a bow around the bit and moving the bow back and forth; quartz sand beneath the bit was the actual cutting medium.) With plenty of manpower and thousands of years of craftsmanship to draw upon, Mesoamerican artisans made giant stone statues and erecting vast cities using what seems to our modern age to have been primitive methods.

Beyond technology, the Mesoamericans also possessed immense bodies of systematized lore in astronomy, mathematics, engineering, medicine, botany, literature, art, philosophy, cosmology, and other fields of knowledge and creativity. For years language barriers, combined with the subtlety of much of the source material, hid its depth and quality from scholars and scientists brought up in the very different western European tradition. But in the last few decades a corps of investigators, mainly from Mexico, has been able to probe these sources. The result has been a stream of studies on esoteric matters that is, if anything, more impressive than the better-known work by archaeologists who have been showing through material evidence that a complex civilization existed in ancient Mesoamerica.



## VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Book of Mormon writers describe for both the Nephites and the earlier Jaredites (and to some extent for the Lamanites) what they consider to have been elements of elaborate cultures. They report on successful agriculture, many arts and crafts (such as weaving), great cities, political states, class distinctions, populations in the millions, extensive records, widespread commerce, massive armies, and organized systems of religion, as well as “precious things of every kind and art” (Helaman 12:2) and “curious workmanship” (Ether 10:27; see Helaman 6:11; and, more broadly, Helaman 6:7–13 and Ether 10:5–6, 12, 22–7). The original leaders of the LDS Church as well as subsequent generations of members have held that study of this civilization would be valuable. In the 1842 words of Joseph Smith Jr. or a close associate, upon reading the account of explorations in Central America by John Lloyd Stephens, “It will not be a bad plan to compare Mr. Stephens’ ruined cities with those in the Book of Mormon.”<sup>33</sup>

Eerily beautiful artifacts called eccentric flints were chipped, ever so carefully, from common obsidian by the hands, brains, and eyes of master craftsmen. Such oddities exemplify how Mesoamericans imposed their unique ideas on materials that would have been handled only in utilitarian ways in other places in the world. No one knows for sure what eccentric flints signified, but surely they carried a heavy freight of sacred meaning.

