

Mesoamerica and the Southwest: A New History for an Ancient Land

Project Rationale

The Community College Humanities Association (CCHA) has received funding to support an NEH Summer Institute for twenty-four faculty participants from community and four-year colleges to be held from June 19 through August 3, 2004, on the topic “Mesoamerica and the Southwest: A New History for an Ancient Land,” whose subtitle we gratefully borrow from Stephen Lekson’s essay on “Landscape and Polity/ the Interplay of Land, History and Power in the Ancient Southwest” (in Road to Aztlan, 2001). This six-week Institute, held on-site in locations in Mexico and the U.S. Southwest, will enable faculty participants to explore the rapidly accumulating new collaborative scholarship which has been featured at a series of major recent conferences and symposia on the intersections of Mesoamerican and Southwestern studies, and whose results are now appearing in a spate of new publications and museum exhibits (see Bibliographical Endnote to this section).

One effective summation of much of the recent scholarship was provided by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art 2001 exhibition, “The Road to Aztlan/ Art from a Mythic Homeland,” and its scholarly catalog. The exhibit and the catalog put equal emphasis on the pre-Columbian and Native American cultural materials on the one hand, and on the Spanish colonial, Mexican mestizo and Mexican-American/Chicano cultural materials on the other. As the curators of the exhibit explained, “In terms of museum practices, the exhibition breaks new ground in looking at the southwestern United States and northern Mexico not as two culturally distinct regions, but as a heterogeneous yet unified cultural area in which deep-rooted regional traditions are linked by common belief systems” (Fields and Zamudio-Taylor, 75). The exhibit and the accompanying catalog and related conferences provide an ideal template for our Institute. Several key contributors to the conferences and the catalog have agreed to serve as visiting scholars for our proposed Institute, including Karl Taube (UC Riverside), Ramón Gutiérrez (UC San Diego), J.J. Brody (University of New Mexico), Polly Schaafsma (Museum of New Mexico), Amalia Mesa-Bains (California State University), and Rina Swentzell (author, Santa Clara Pueblo).

At the heart of this new interdisciplinary scholarship is a fundamental restructuring of a major area of American Studies, bringing together for study under one roof the cultural histories of Mesoamerica and the Southwest, in pre-Columbian, colonial, and modern contexts. As Fields and Zamudio-Taylor, again, have summarized: “The theme of Aztlan... provides an ideal opportunity to investigate the relationship between myth and history as expressed in the art and material culture of the various peoples of the Southwest and Mexico over time, as well as the continuity and evolution of cultural practices throughout the pre-Columbian, colonial, and contemporary eras” (40). The

Institute will engage selected cultural materials for study from all three of these broad time periods. The term Mesoamerica, traditionally used to refer to an archeological and cultural zone of the “classic” Pre-Columbian civilizations from central Mexico through portions of Central America, has now been opened for re-definition both in geographic and temporal terms. Scholars at archaeological conferences now can be heard discussing the ancient Hohokam ball-courts in Arizona or even the Mississippian Indian mounds at Cahokia, Illinois, as “Mesoamerican” phenomena. And ethnographic scholarship now often uses “Mesoamerican” to refer to indigenous and even mestizo culture well beyond the period of first European contact, as is done, for instance, in the new Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures (2001), edited by Institute scholar David Carrasco (Harvard University and Harvard Divinity School).

Current collaborative Mesoamerican/ Southwestern scholarship explores and analyzes both the profound cultural similarities and differences among the various pre-Columbian cultures of Mexico (Olmec, Zapotec, Teotihuacano, Toltec, Mixtec and Aztec) and of the Southwest (Hohokam, Mogollon, Mimbres, and Anasazi or ancient Pueblo) -- as well as among the contemporary indigenous people of northern Mexico and the Southwest (such as the Nahua, Yaqui, Pima, Navajo, and Hopi, Zuni, and other present Pueblo populations). A similar acknowledgment of cultural continuity with difference pervades current study of Spanish colonial culture in New Spain, from its metropolitan center in Mexico City to its northern provincial capital of Santa Fe. With reference to modern times, a conscious sense of recovery or reclamation of cross-border cultural identity has pervaded much contemporary Mexican and Mexican-American art, music, and literature for three generations, especially since the promulgation of the Chicano manifesto “*El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*” in 1969. Here Aztlán refers to that northern mythic homeland claimed by the Aztecs as their place of origin, and which is understood in Chicano/a cultural reclamation to refer to the American Southwest as ancestral home to indigenous and mestizo peoples.

The Archaeological Component

Why this new collaborative scholarship represents such a breakthrough, especially in archaeology, is that until very recently, Mesoamericanists and Southwesternists worked in virtual isolation from each other, employed in different academic departments, attending different conferences, and publishing in different journals. This artificial academic separatism requires a bit of background explanation, for what might seem, even to the eyes of a lay person or a tourist, to be obvious intersections between Mesoamerican and Southwestern indigenous cultures, had in fact long been obscured by the academic discrediting of nineteenth-century diffusionist theories. Diffusionists had tended to seek out the origins of indigenous cultural forms from outside, from what were assumed to be more “advanced” core cultures. For instance, 19th century American archaeologists such as Adolph Bandelier viewed the ancient Pueblos of the Southwest and the Mound cultures of the Mississippi as peripheral extensions of a “Greater Mesoamerica” (which

incidentally explains such confusing place names in the Southwest as Aztec Ruins). In reaction to this, from the 1920's through the 1970's, Americanists developed their own methodologies and periodizations for Southwestern studies, independently of Mesoamerican studies. Henceforward, with some important exceptions, scholars in these two "fields" worked quite independently of one another, until some ground-breaking research and conferences began to challenge that separatist status quo.

Much of the recent "action" has swirled around the immense but previously little-studied pre-Columbian site of Paquimé at Casas Grandes in northern Mexico. At first, because of its Pueblo-like architecture, Paquimé had been regarded as a sort of southern extension of the ancient Pueblo world. But Charles Di Peso's excavations in the 1950's raised a "storm of controversy," pyramid platforms mounds, ball-courts, and macaw breeding pens, leading him to conclude that what he had found was a major Mesoamerican "Gateway City," a 14th century urban trading center from whence Mesoamerican prestige items (macaw feathers, marine shells, copper bells) were exported to the American Southwest, bringing "higher" Mesoamerican culture with them. Ever since, archaeologists have continued to debate whether enigmatic Paquimé is essentially a southern Pueblo or a northern Mesoamerican city.

The landmark publication, The Casas Grandes World (1999), edited by Carroll Riley and Curtis Schaafsma (our Institute scholar at Casas Grandes), systematically reviews the scholarship and re-examines the commonalities of settlement patterns, urban/ceremonial center design, and architecture in regional terms. Casas Grandes, which is now a World Heritage Site, will be an important focal point for our Institute, with a site visit aptly coming in between our periods of residence in Mexico City and Santa Fe. These site visits will enable participants to evaluate for themselves at first hand the similarities and differences between Paquimé and such Mesoamerican sites as Teotihuacan, Tula and Tenochtitlan, and such Southwestern sites as Chaco and Aztec Ruins -- in terms of commonalities and differences in architecture, site design, iconography, and hypothesized worldviews and religious and ceremonial systems.

Collaborative Mesoamerican/Southwestern Studies

As another of our Institute scholars, Karl Taube, has recently said, "it has become increasingly apparent that ancient Mesoamerica and the American Southwest were by no means isolated entities but were in direct and sustained contact for millenia. There is abundant material evidence of ancient contact between the two areas, but perhaps more striking is the degree of similarity in religious beliefs and practices" (Road to Aztlan, 102). This renewed perception of cultural contiguity, has sparked new interest in more collaborative and cross-border work between scholars in different academic fields and departments and from different countries. As Mexican scholar Miguel León-Portilla, and other contributors to the Road to Aztlan catalog have laid it out before us, the shared pre-Columbian cultural heritage of Mesoamerica and the Southwest includes

such fundamental macroeconomic factors as: maize and cotton cultivation; similar town-planning and design of ceremonial centers, including pyramid or mound platforms, plazas, ball-courts, sweat houses and observatories; long-distance trade items such as turquoise, copper, marine shells, and macaw feathers; and such common iconographic motifs as color-coded cardinal direction symbolism (in codices and sand-paintings), culture-bearing hero twins, feline and eagle warriors, plumed and horned serpents, and goggle-eyed rain deities.

Institute scholars Karl Taube, Polly Schaafsma and J. J. Brody have each explored such iconographic motifs in rock art and mural and pottery painting in both Mesoamerican and Southwestern cultural contexts, suggesting, for instance, the kinship of representations of the Mesoamerican feathered serpent Quetzalcoatl with the Hopi *Paalölöqangw* or the Zuni *Pautewa*. Similarly, the costumed ritual impersonators (*teixiptlas*) of the Aztec rain god Tlaloc, as described and illustrated in 16th century Mexican sources, have been viewed by such scholars as Randall McGuire, Karl Taube, and Curtis and Polly Schaafsma as the prototypes of the Hopi and Zuni kachina rain-bringing spirits. Taube has even suggested a comparison between the round temples of Ehecatl, the Mesoamerican wind-deity, and the round kivas of the Southwestern Pueblos, as comparable architectural representations of the place of emergence.

Economic trade was perhaps only one aspect of the cultural cross-fertilization that occurred between these Mesoamerican and Southwestern peoples. Cultural brokering, self-conscious sharing and adoption of cultural material and ceremonial systems was surely another. In the Southwest, the Hopi traced their cultural identity to the “ancient ones,” whom the Navajo called the Anasazi (“ancestors of enemies”); the Navajo, in turn, adopted Zuni traditions of sand painting -- while the Zuni adopted Navajo dance traditions. Meanwhile, the Aztecs, we know, modeled their cultural identity on their predecessors the Toltecs and Teotihuacanos, as can be seen in instances of archaizing architecture and sculpture at the Aztec Templo Mayor in Mexico City, as well as in their tradition of migration out of Chicomoztoc, a cave of origins in the mythic land of Aztlán to the north. The Aztec narrative of origin out of Aztlán was well known to the Spaniards of the contact era (we can still see the sixteenth-century documentation in such manuscripts as the *Boturini Codex* and the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*), and so the *entradas* of the Spanish and their Nahua allies into the present-day New Mexico already bore some of the “mythic homeland” associations for indigenous and mestizo personages that the region has today for Chicano/a writers and artists.

“Palimpsest” serves as a useful term for this ongoing process of the construction of cultural identity through layerings of partial erasures and of partial superimpositions upon previous cultural realities (we are pleased to borrow the metaphor from Daniel Cooper Alarcón, a participant in one of our previous NEH Institutes, and author of [The Aztec Palimpsest](#) [1997], a study of representations of Mexican cultural identities). In fact, partial erasure and partial superimposition was already the age-old story of pre-Columbian ceremonial architecture, as pyramid mounds were

built on top of one another in successive layerings in an ongoing reconstruction and rewriting of dynastic history. And the on-going writing and rewriting of Southwestern cultural history occurs not only in popular and academic literature, but in religious processions, in murals and street festivals, in kiva ceremonials, in sweat-lodge story-telling, and in border-crossing ballads or *corridos*,

Taken together, from pre-Columbian architecture to Chicana lithographs, layer by layer, interdisciplinary scholarship is undertaking “a new history for an ancient land.” Interdisciplinary perspectives enables us to work toward the more collaborative study project of Mesoamerica and the Southwest envisioned by the curators and editors of *The Road to Aztlan*, and by the 2001 Dumbarton Oaks conference devoted precisely to the theme, “A Pre-Columbian World: Searching for a Unitary Vision of Ancient America.” If an acceptable common discourse can be found by academics and by the cultural communities involved, we might even begin to talk about a Greater Mesoamerica or a Greater Southwest without confusion, and about Mesoamerica as a contemporary and not just a pre-Columbian cultural designation. But that is getting ahead of the game.

In the meantime, the Institute seminars, discussions and on-site visits with thirteen renowned specialist scholars in Mexico and in the Southwest will provide a compelling format for the selected group of college teacher participants directly to engage in the “new (and collaborative) history for an ancient land.” Throughout the project, participants will be encouraged collectively to rethink course content and curricular design, to collaborate in the production of classroom materials and community resources (slide lectures, web sites, listserves), as well as to pursue individual research interests.

Bibliographical Endnote and Maps

Please Note: These references provide background only for the narrative above. Texts and Reading Assignments for Institute participants appear in the Daily Schedule.

Older archaeological studies referred to in the narrative include: Adolph Bandolier, "The Ruins of Casas Grandes," Nation 51 (1890): 185-87; and Charles C. Di Peso, Casas Grandes/ A Fallen Trading Center of the Gran Chichimeca, 3 vols. (Flagstaff: The Amerind Foundation/ Northland Press, 1974); an excellent summation on "Diffusionism" occurs as chapter 14 of Marvin Harris, The Rise of Anthropological Theory (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1968).

The subsequent polarities between ardent diffusionists and ardent isolationists finally began to yield to a series of productive interdisciplinary conferences. One was a symposium on Mesoamerican/Southwestern interaction organized at the meeting of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) in Pittsburgh in 1983, leading to the publication of Ripples in the Chichimec Sea/ New Considerations of Southwestern-Mesoamerican Interactions, edited by Frances Mathien and Randall McGuire (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986). Another symposium at the SAA meeting in Toronto in 1986 eventuated in the publication of The American Southwest and Mesoamerica/ Systems of Prehistoric Exchange, ed. Jonathon Ericson and Timothy Baugh (New York: Plenum Press, 1993). The Casas Grandes Regional Survey Project, funded by NSF and INAH (1989-95), focused entirely on that understudied "in-between" world of northern Mexico, and resulted in the publication Casas Grandes and Its Hinterland, by Michael Whalen and Paul Minnis (2001). Finally, the Durango Conference of 1995 featured an extended symposium examining the commonalities of settlement patterns, urban/ceremonial center design, and architecture in pre-Columbian Mexico and the Southwest, focussing on Casas Grandes, and led to the ground-breaking publication, The Casas Grandes World, edited by Carroll Riley and Curtis Schaafsma (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1999). An important contribution focusing on northern Mexico is Greater Mesoamerica/ The Archaeology of West and Northwest Mexico, ed. by Michael S. Foster and Shirley Gorenstein (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2000).

Pre-Columbian, colonial and contemporary materials are covered in The Road to Aztlan/ Art from a Mythic Homeland, edited by Virginia M. Fields and Victor Zamudio-Taylor (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2001), including essays by Institute scholars Karl Taube, Polly Schaafsma, J. J. Brody, Ramón Gutiérrez, Rina Swentzell, and Amalia Mesa-Bains. Theaters of Conversion/ Religious Architecture and Indian Artisans in Colonial Mexico, by Samuel Egerton (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), offers a comparative study of religious architecture throughout New Spain. Daniel Cooper Alarcón, The Aztec Palimpsest/ Mexico in the Modern Imagination (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1997) focuses on issues of representation.

Studies focusing on the theme of Aztlán in Chicano/o art and literature include Aztlan/ Essays on the Chicano Homeland, edited by Rudolfo Anaya and Francisco Lomeli (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989; 1991); Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez, Border Visions/ Mexican Cultures of the Southwest United States (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996); Chicano Art/ Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985, edited by Richard Griswold Del Castillo, Teresa McKenna and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano (Wright Art Gallery/ UCLA, 1991); Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Chicano Art: Inside/Outside the Master's House (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); and the journal Aztlan/ A Journal of Chicano Studies, passim.