

Ancient Mexico and Central America: Archaeology and Culture History. SUSAN TOBY EVANS. Thames and Hudson, London. 2004. 502 pp., bib. \$70.00 (cloth), \$50.00 (paper).

Reviewed by Barbara Voorhies, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Susan Toby Evans has produced a long-awaited book on the prehistory of Mesoamerica that will fill the vacuum that occurred when previous textbooks on this subject became woefully out of date and out of print. The author is superbly qualified to undertake such an ambitious project, as she is both a professional writer and a card-carrying archaeologist. Instructors who teach this subject matter will applaud the author's choice of material and evenhanded coverage, while students are likely to rejoice in the lively writing style and the abundant and excellent illustrations. Evans's express goal is to "tell the culture-historical story so that it will be clear to those with little or no knowledge of the ancient past of these regions—the general reader seeking a good introduction, the college student taking course in the subject—as well as interesting to those who are already knowledgeable, such as avocational historians, and scholars in this field" (p.12). That the author has succeeded admirably in realizing her goal is attested by the fact that the book is the winner of the 2005 Society for American Archaeology Book Award.

Like most overviews of the prehistory of a culture area, this book is organized chronologically. The first two chapters are dedicated principally to the introduction of the region as a geographical, ecological, and cultural entity. The remaining 18 chapters, however, cover the prehistory of the region from the time of its first peopling (possibly 20,000 years ago) through the immediate aftermath of European conquest (early sixteenth century A.D.). The book chapters are grouped into five parts: Mesoamerica, Middle America and Its Peoples (4 chapters); Complex Societies of the Formative (5 chapters); Cultures of the Early Classic (2 chapters); Late Classic, Classic Collapse and Epiclassic (4 chapters); and The Postclassic and the Rise of the Aztecs (5 chapters). Evans has consciously minimized the use of phase names and technical descriptions of material culture that are dear to practitioners in the field but anathema to beginning students

and other novices. Instead, she emphasizes the processes of cultural historical changes and she explains the archaeologically observed changes in human lifeways by using a cultural evolutionary framework.

Moreover, most chapters are graced by special features, set off in boxes, that address various topics such as the practice of sculpting colossal human heads (in a chapter on the Olmec people), calculations of construction costs (in a chapter on the Southern Lowland Maya people), and child-raising practices (in a chapter on the Aztecs). These special features contribute to the overall accessibility and appeal of this book.

The author addresses the prehistory of all subregions of Mesoamerica without succumbing to the temptation to overly emphasize the data from the more intensely investigated areas, such as the Maya lowlands or the central highlands. This balanced approach to the subject matter means that even professionals in the field will find the book a useful resource for areas and times outside of their own range of expertise. Of course, this approach must necessarily guarantee that some topics have been omitted or are given superficial treatment, but Evans' decision to provide relatively uniform coverage of the entire culture area is certainly apt and felicitous.

The book's layout is superb with its well-chosen and well-designed illustrations, a signature of the publisher Thames and Hudson. In fact, there are 459 illustrations, of which 80 are in color. Twenty-one reference maps are placed after the text and these are beautifully designed, easy to read, and cross-referenced with the text. It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of this visual material as an accompaniment to the fine text produced by the author.

Finally, I would like to praise the author's narrative style. Evans writes in a clear, lively manner that makes reading the text pleasurable as well as informative. Although the text is long, the narrative flows so beautifully that the book would be a suitable text even for classes in the relatively short terms of the quarter-system. Students may find the price tag steep for the cloth edition, but there is a paperback edition available at a lower price.

If you are looking for a book that summarizes the most recent insights into pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, is sumptuously illustrated, and written with verve and clarity, this is it.

"A must buy for all those interested in the pre-Columbian world's most dynamic and complex societies, from the ancient Olmec until the Spanish Conquest."

– MICHAEL D. COE, Yale University

"This is the best single-volume treatment of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica in existence. It is the standard by which such works will be measured for many years to come. Susan Evans does a marvelous job of weaving culture history, evolution, and cultural process into a well-told, seamless history." – RICHARD A. DIEHL, University of Alabama

"The most comprehensive, up-to-date overview of ancient Mesoamerica available today. . . . [It] will be widely consulted by those seeking an introduction to the long and rich history of prehispanic Mesoamerica and by scholars seeking a synthesis of current research and discoveries." – DEBORAH NICHOLS, Dartmouth College

"This book is superb, a highly innovative and remarkable introduction to the study of ancient Mesoamerica. . . . It's a new perspective and reflects the level of maturity pre-Columbian studies have achieved in terms of understanding civilizational development in the western hemisphere." – JOHN M. D. POHL, Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA

"In the rapidly changing field of Mesoamerican archaeology, Susan Evans's new book is the best, most up-to-date introduction to this exciting area."

– JEREMY SABLOFF, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

Susan Toby Evans is Professor of Anthropology at Pennsylvania State University and senior editor (with David Webster) of *Archaeology of Ancient Mexico and Central America: An Encyclopedia*.

With 459 illustrations, 80 in color

On the cover: Jade mosaic burial mask
from Calakmul, Mexico, one of the
most important Classic-period Maya sites.
Photo Michel Zabé.

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