

FOREWORD

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Scholars who dig in the ground for source materials and those who dig around in archives have traditionally lived in different intellectual worlds. Born as a formal discipline before archaeology, history long ago divided the human past into periods when people left written records (history) and earlier non-literate periods (prehistory). Archaeologists were consigned to (or claimed) prehistory; because they uncovered information that was different in nature from the written materials of historians, archaeologists were obliged to develop different models and methods. Because much of archaeology focused on “prehistory,” it seldom overlapped with the work of historians. With respect to Mesoamerica, this emphasis on the difference between history and archaeology meant the development of two completely separate arenas of scholarship: archaeologists, trained and teaching in anthropology departments, studied ancient Mesoamerica (a term they invented); historians, trained and teaching in history departments, studied colonial Mexico and colonial Guatemala (or New Spain, a term borrowed from the colonists). In other words, a Great Wall was built, cutting more or less through the year 1520. This wall persisted, despite the fact that the two groups studied the same peoples and (arguably) the same civilization, that they sometimes poached each other’s sources and analysis (albeit taking them out of context), and that both groups had colleagues who studied modern-day Mesoamericans.

Most readers of this book will already know this story and know why I have written it in the past tense. For although the Great Wall still stands, it is now full of holes, increasingly battered and breached in recent

decades. Scholars of all disciplines today take time not only to visit the other side of the wall, but also to try and understand the sources and methods found there. With every passing year, there are fewer active scholars who would take serious issue with the assertion that archaeology is crucial to understanding in detail the material underpinnings of historical conditions and processes—and that history is essential to the interpretation of archaeological material, when the archaeologist is working in periods for which written records exist. Scholars making or moving through holes in the wall no longer tend to poach or borrow decontextualized pieces of each other’s work; they are more likely to appraise primary written sources or archaeological data within the context of their production. Three or four decades ago the historical field of colonial Mesoamerica barely existed; at best it was the sum of a series of formative works on the sixteenth century by anthropologists and historians. The seminal nature of these works, however, was not yet clear. Colonial Mesoamerica is now a developing multidisciplinary field, stretching from the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries. The field’s disciplinary dimensions include history, art history, and anthropology—with close links to the rapidly growing archaeological subfield of historical archaeology.

Nevertheless, the wall still exists, and there is an immense amount of work to be done before it becomes, as they say, history. To date, the present volume is the single most significant intellectual assault on the Great Wall that has divided the “Postclassic Mesoamerica” of archaeologists and the “colonial Mexico” of historians. Susan Kepecs and Rani Alexander have focused the

whole volume on the transition from one period to the other, rather than creating a divided volume of essays from one side or other of the wall. They have not settled for a focus on one region (as useful as such a focus is, and as much as Mesoamerica is in need of microregional multidisciplinary projects); rather, they have sought to give Mesoamerican historical archaeology a firmer foundation by adopting a macroregional focus.

This is not a book, then, that anatomizes the moment of Spanish contact; instead, it places that moment in the historical context of the Postclassic centuries before 1520 and the conquest/colonial centuries after that date. The transition from one to the other is an *historical* process colored by cultural diversity, culture clash, and a variety of responses. The essays in the volume examine the *archaeological* manifestations of that historical process. Working from the premise—once controversial, now widely accepted—that Mesoamerican civilization was transformed in the Colonial period, not “obliterated,” the contributors offer case studies that illuminate the transformation in ways that written sources alone cannot do.

We now know that there has survived a wealth of sources written alphabetically in Mesoamerican languages. The recent study of these sources has greatly enriched our understanding of native responses to Spanish invasion and colonization. But these sources, by definition, do not predate the arrival of Spaniards, and are thus limited in their ability to shed light on the transition period. For example, a native-language *título* that recounts a community’s historical memory

of Postclassic events lacks the direct connection to an historical moment that is reflected in, say, a corpus of native-language wills or land records or town council minutes from the late sixteenth century. However, the material evidence examined by archaeologists can provide a direct connection both to the Postclassic and the late sixteenth century. The directness of that connection is not only one of contemporaneity (data derived from the archaeological record left by those who lived during the very decades under study); it is also one of doing history from the ground up (literally, by digging up information about non-elite Mesoamericans).

Furthermore, archaeological evidence provides a connection between the two periods, helping to demolish the Spanish arrival as a starting point and replace it with a Postclassic starting point from which to approach the conquest-era transition. Despite the brutal realities of the Spanish invasion, the resulting processes of culture contact were interactive; put another way, colonization was a dialectical development. To understand the Mesoamerican contribution to that interaction, it is essential to have a prequest starting point that is as multifaceted as possible.

Archaeological evidence thus complements and potentially corrects conclusions based on historical sources. In short, history and archaeology need each other. This is nowhere more clear than in the study of Mesoamerica and seldom better demonstrated than by this important new collection of essays.