



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

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Life's Routine

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Life's Routine

The Seasonal and Daily Round

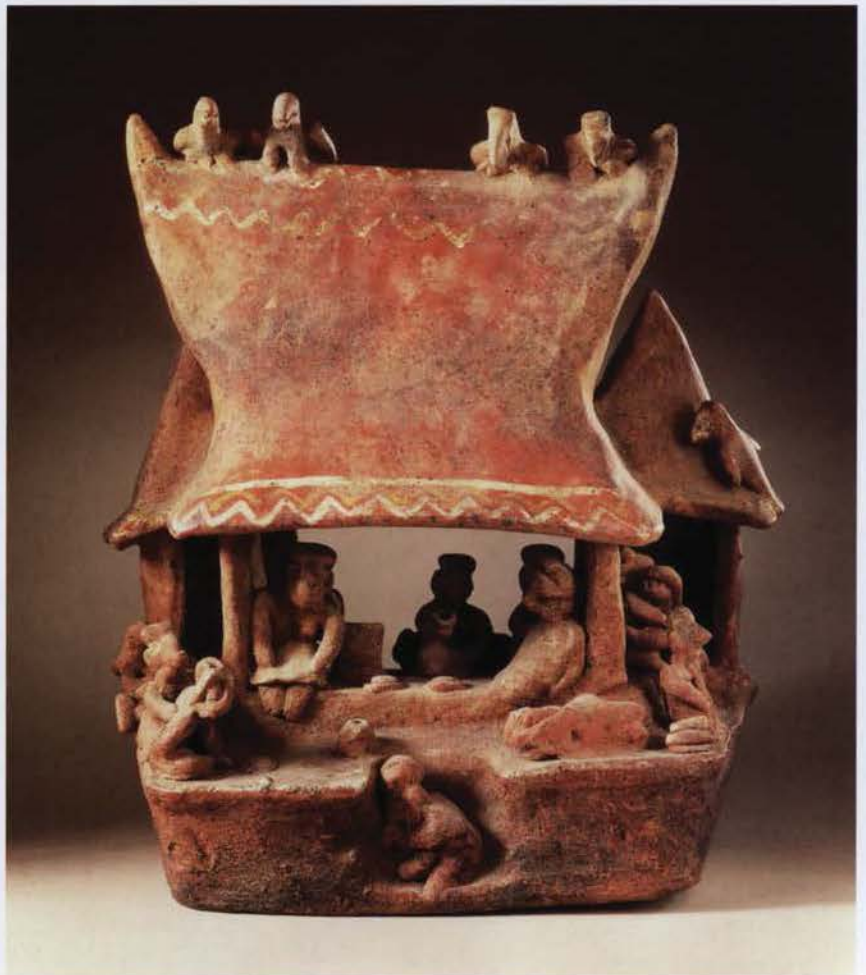
A large majority of the inhabitants of Mesoamerica did not live in cities but in villages and hamlets. They had to be near their fields, for agricultural work was central to the activities of most households. The crucial crop was maize (corn). If enough maize could be provided, the remainder of life's necessities could be eked out by drawing upon a variety of other resources for additional food and for clothing and other essentials.

Land was prepared for planting strictly by men's hands. No animal power was employed in agriculture or in any other work. Clearing a field involved hand-cutting trees and bushes and then burning the debris when it had dried out. The intensity of the heat generated by burning the dry trash killed off the smaller plants and grass. About when the rains were predicted to begin, the unplowed, unlevelled plot was planted (the thick ash served as fertilizer). Several kernels of seed corn were dropped into each hole poked in the earth with a sharp stick. The seeds were covered by a push of the sower's foot. Sometimes beans and squash would be planted in the same plot with corn; the different crops matured at different rates, so they did not interfere with each other. Fruit and seed trees as well as special garden crops were also carefully tended, usually close to the family's residence.

Timing was vital in this type of cultivation. The vegetation had to be cleared during the dry season to ensure a proper burn, yet the seeds needed rain soon after being planted if they were to germinate properly and keep growing. (The timing problem is thought to help explain the intense concern with the calendar in Mesoamerica; astrological predictions were made to try to anticipate when or whether the sacred powers would send moisture in timely fashion.) Where special soil and climatic settings prevailed, two or occasionally even three corn crops per year might be obtained. Where that was possible, a heavier population could be supported. However, there was never



An artist's sketch reconstructs aspects of daily activity in a community on the northern Yucatan peninsula. The scene is based on archaeological findings at the Komchen site that date to the middle of the first millennium B.C. The basic pattern of life shown was broadly similar elsewhere in Mesoamerica and would stay much the same for the next two thousand years. Even when cities arose, people preferred to live as near as possible to the style of life of villagers.



Families dwelt around, rather than in, their houses, preferring to spend time out in the light and fresh air. This west Mexican ceramic model (probably dating A.D. 100–600) illustrates the pattern. To be cramped up in a small dwelling, which was usually filled with smoke (there were no stoves or chimneys), was acceptable mainly at night or during unpleasant weather.

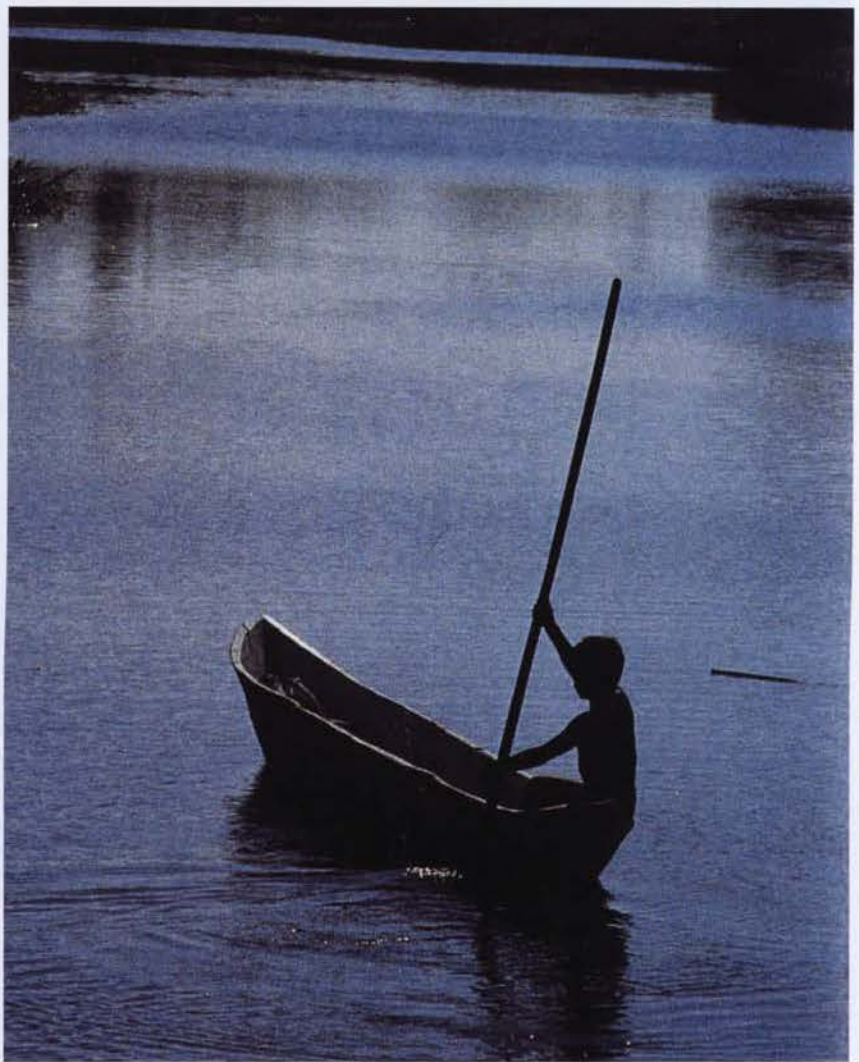
enough good farmland for long. The growing population exerted pressure on the system of cultivation, aggravating social disputes and reducing the adequacy of the diet.

From the settlements men and women spread over the countryside to catch or collect a wide variety of useful wild products—from fish, game animals, and edible insects to honey, dyes, minerals, and wood. Prized products were exchanged in markets and some were carried to other localities by traders. Only rarely was the transport of bulk foods or goods outside a local area feasible, since virtually all was carried on human backs.

Men's work revolved around the crops. That activity made heavy demands on their time only at certain seasons, yet those needs were so vital that they set the schedule for everything else in the year. During slack periods wars were fought, trading journeys were undertaken, and houses were built or repaired, for instance.

For women, turning corn and other staples into food was the most determining labor. In most cases, every single day of her adult life a woman could expect to rise before light and hand-grind fresh cornmeal using a stone roller atop a hard, flat stone. From this grist she made the day's food in some form of bread—chiefly in the form of tortillas (toasted on a griddle), or tamales (wrapped in a leaf and boiled), or as a wet ball of cooked dough that could be diluted with water and drunk during the day like modern instant breakfast. Basic food preparation had to be done early in the day because custom decreed that the first meal be the most substantial one. Men set off to work very early (they might have to travel several miles to their fields) to avoid the midday heat, so women's toil began even earlier. For women, too, there were routine tasks like weaving cloth and making garments, gathering firewood, toting water, caring for children, manufacturing or repairing household equipment, and so on.

When darkness came, so did sleep for all. Leisure was not a daily but an occasional thing, usually in connection with the frequent religious events.



Fish and other aquatic products were valued as sources of protein, which was scarce in the usual diet. A majority of settled areas did not have bodies of water nearby that yielded many of those products, but in a coastal area like this part of Tabasco state, fishing was routine.



Wherever fishing was possible, it received regular attention, as in the Valley of Mexico with its major lake. This scene from the Codex Mendoza says that an Aztec youth was expected to know how to fish effectively by age fifteen.



The most common spot for the hearth was on the floor. The tortilla-making housewife squatted or knelt next to it. No conveniences were thought necessary in these rudimentary kitchens.



Kitchen gardens were planted near dwellings where women could do the occasional tending they required and also have convenient access to the produce.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

In a record like the Book of Mormon that was devoted mainly to sacred matters, it is no surprise that little is said about the people's daily activities. The comments are general: "they did raise grain in abundance" and kept "many flocks and herds" (Helaman 6:12). Ammon helped tend his master's flocks and drive them to water (see Alma 17:25-6); "their women did toil and spin, and did make all manner of cloth" (Helaman 6:13). About such mundane tasks as cooking, getting wood and water, making pots, or repairing roofs, no statements are made. We are left to infer such routine, obvious matters.

CULTIVATION OF CORN

Typically the best land to plant was what had been in forest for a number of years. Shade would have killed out grass and weeds. Once the tall plant cover had been cut and burned off, grass would start to return. After two or three years in corn, a plot would have to be abandoned because of competition from the thickening grass. That plot would be abandoned to let trees and brush come back and again shade out the problem plants. After a dozen years or so of forest regrowth, the cycle could be repeated. However, in some areas with comparatively rich soil, a corn field could be cultivated almost continuously with the help of vigorous weeding.

Mature corn cobs were bent downward so that rain would not get in them and cause mildew. Sometimes the dry cobs were picked and taken straight to the kitchen as needed; in other situations storage bins were built. Loss of grain to birds and vermin was often high.

Four scenes from Sahagun's Florentine Codex display the sequence of Aztec maize cultivation and harvest.



When the dried vegetation on the corn plots that are being prepared is set ablaze, typically in March or April, the atmosphere over wide regions is obscured by smoke. If this manner of burning was widely carried out in Jaredite times, it may have been a cause of the lack of timber noted by their successors (see Helaman 3:5–6). This scene is in southern Chiapas.



Hand-planting of the seed required no laborious plowing or other soil preparation, just time and patience.



Grass and other weeds had to be curtailed by hand labor during the early stages of the crop's growth, but the competition invariably won out in the long run.



The harvest began after the rainy season had ceased, and went on for some time.



A variety of storage bins were used; shown here is an Aztec version.

Foods

Griddle-toasted tortillas were the staff of life anciently in central Mexico and areas influenced from there. Raised bread like ours was unknown. In southern Mesoamerica the tamale (ground cornmeal wrapped in a leaf and cooked in hot water) was the preferred form for corn cookery. The only ovens were stone-lined underground pits, and there was no frying (fats were scarce and metal was not used for cooking utensils). Boiled beans were typically mashed into a paste. Squash of several sorts was roasted or toasted. Many varieties of chilis were used to season all staple foods. A number of other grains, especially amaranth, were extensively used, as far as they could be grown in particular localities.

Different kinds of root vegetables—manioc, sweet potatoes, jicama—were also in use, although they were not preferred at the level of the beloved, even worshipped, maize. Tree fruits, such as the guava and a type of cherry, were also enjoyed, though only during the seasons when they matured, for techniques for preserving them were unknown.

Fish were consumed where it was convenient to obtain them. Especially because of the need for protein, a great variety of other strange foods gathered from nature

were also utilized, including varieties of insects and fungi. In fact, virtually every edible substance was consumed by some part of the population, including many things that we now consider inedible.

The commoners' cuisine consisted mainly of the fundamental food triad—corn, beans, and squash³⁴—but there were hundreds of regional and community variations in recipes and supplementary dishes. The whole array was far too varied according to regional tastes, products, and customs to be lumped together accurately as though there had been just one pattern. (The invading Spaniards were told that the Aztec emperor Montezuma dined from a choice of two thousand dishes that his cooks were capable of preparing.)

Mesoamerican and Andean farmers between them had domesticated a large number of American plants before 1492. These were welcomed and adopted in most parts of the Old World where they were carried by European travelers after Columbus. Nowadays those foods help feed our teeming world on every continent, and cultivators in places like China and tropical Africa have no historical recollection of when and from where they received their borrowed-from-America crops. Among the most useful food gifts to the world were corn (including popcorn), potatoes, chili peppers, peanuts, avocados, and tomatoes.



These carved fish were found in excavations in the Aztec Great Temple beneath present-day Mexico City.

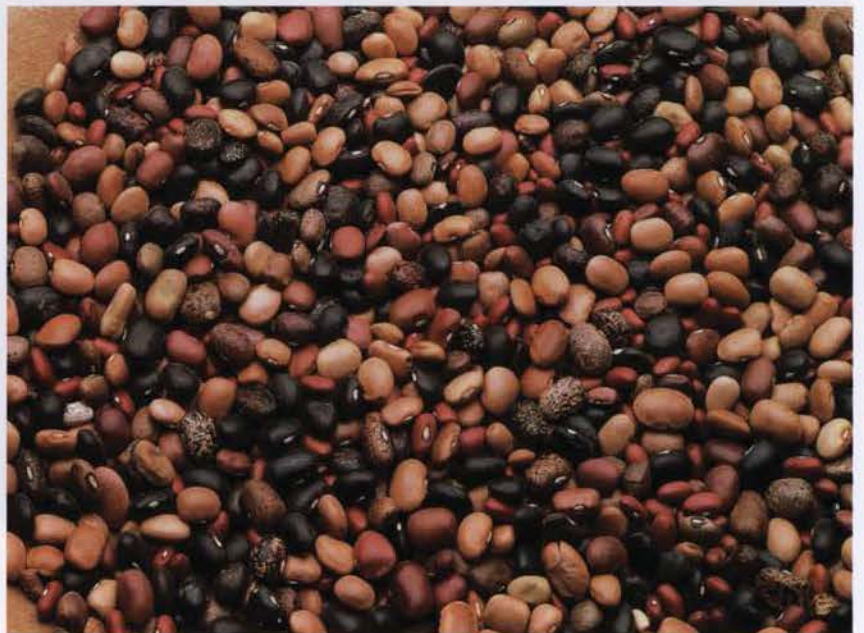


Several major races (a term used by botanists) of corn, encompassing hundreds of varieties, were grown and eaten.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The Book of Mormon speaks only in general about food (see, for example, Mosiah 4:17), as we might expect in a preponderantly religious text. The most comprehensive list of Nephite crops emphasizes grains (see Mosiah 9:9). Corn is there implied to be a, if not the, mainstay (compare Mosiah 7:22 and 9:9). The term *bread* referred to a cereal food that was functionally equivalent to modern bread (see, for instance, Alma 8:21–2). That could be the tortilla, since nowhere in the text is there a hint that the leavening process was known. Fruit too was grown and consumed routinely, the book tells us (see Enos 1:21 and Mosiah 10:4). Meat is also mentioned as part of the diet.



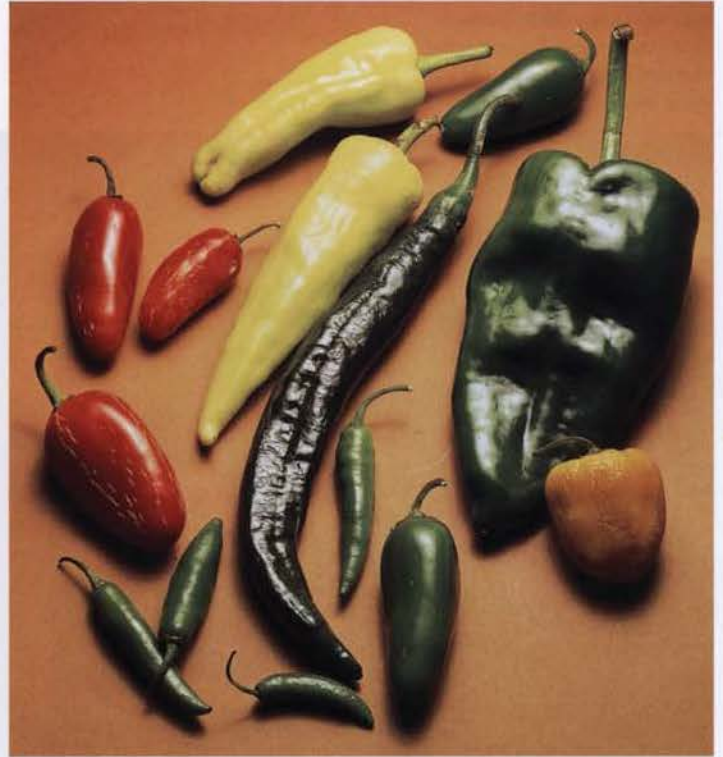
Various kinds of beans were grown in nearly every zone.



Many varieties of mushrooms were gathered and eaten. A few types were used by some groups for their hallucinogenic effects.



A variety of ancient Mesoamerican foods.



Chilis put spice in an otherwise bland diet, and they were vitamin rich.

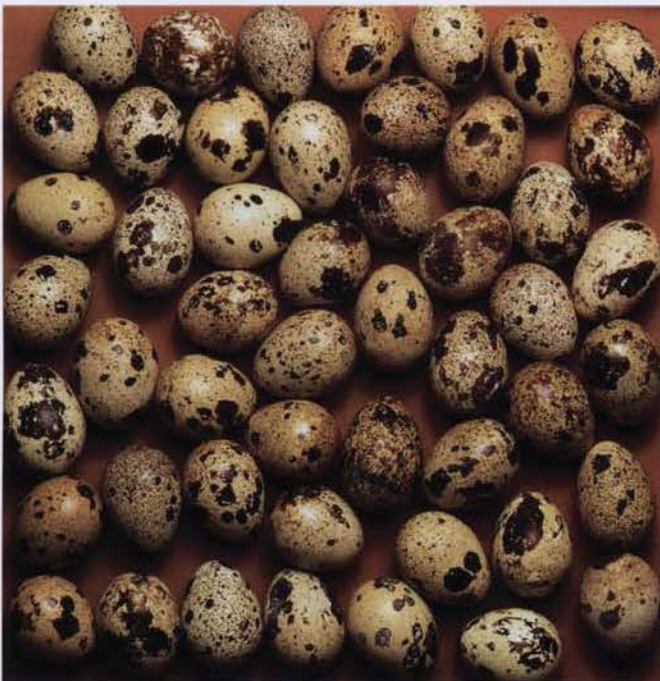


A variety of squashes had been staples in the Mesoamerican diet for thousands of years by the time this Aztec stone sculpture was made in the fifteenth century.

Avocados provided a nutritional rarity in the diet—fat—comparable to the olive in Mediterranean cuisine. Mexican tomatoes were small but tasty garnishes to go with plainer food.



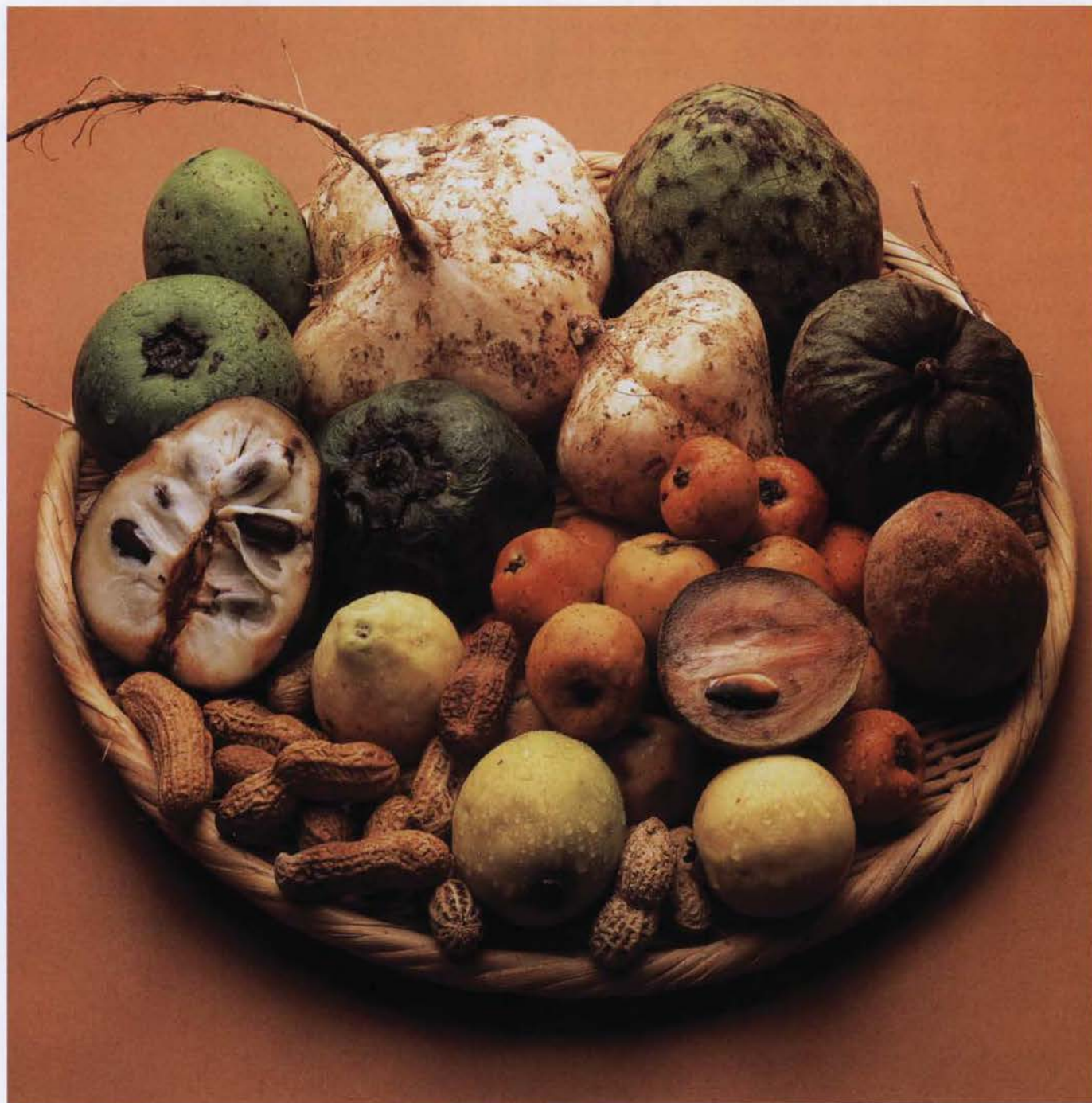
One of the most popular ways of cooking maize was in the form of a tortilla, the hand-flattened, unleavened cake now familiar worldwide.



The eggs of quail and other fowl, wild and kept, were occasional supplements to the diet. Cortez mentioned eggs, and cakes made using them, being sold in the great market in the Aztec capital.



Vegetables were not staples but provided variety. All the foods shown on these pages are consumed by some Mexicans still today.



Roots (such as the sweet potato), tubers, and fruits were important in the diet in some areas.

Luxury Consumption

There were luxury foods too, of course. The most valued was the cacao bean from which the chocolate or cocoa drink was made (our word *chocolate* comes from the Nahuatl word *chocolatl*). Since the cacao bean was also used as a form of currency, consumption of chocolate was mainly limited to people of wealth. The tree grew mainly in a few moist, foothill zones, especially in southern Chiapas and near the Gulf Coast in Tabasco. Honey was gathered from the wild, but stingless bees were also domesticated and kept in log hives. Sweetened popcorn in the form of balls or squares was also enjoyed. Sugar was made from the agave plant, with some difficulty and expense; its use was not common.

Fermented alcoholic drinks made from various plants were in wide use. The Spaniards labeled these beverages wine (technically they were closer to beer). There seems to have been no knowledge of distilled (hard) liquors anywhere in the Americas until the Europeans conferred that dubious gift on the Native Americans. Most of the consumption of these wines took place in connection with religious celebrations (of which there were many!). Certain moral restrictions on drinking restrained people's consumption at other times. The aged were seldom restricted from drinking as much and as often as they wished.

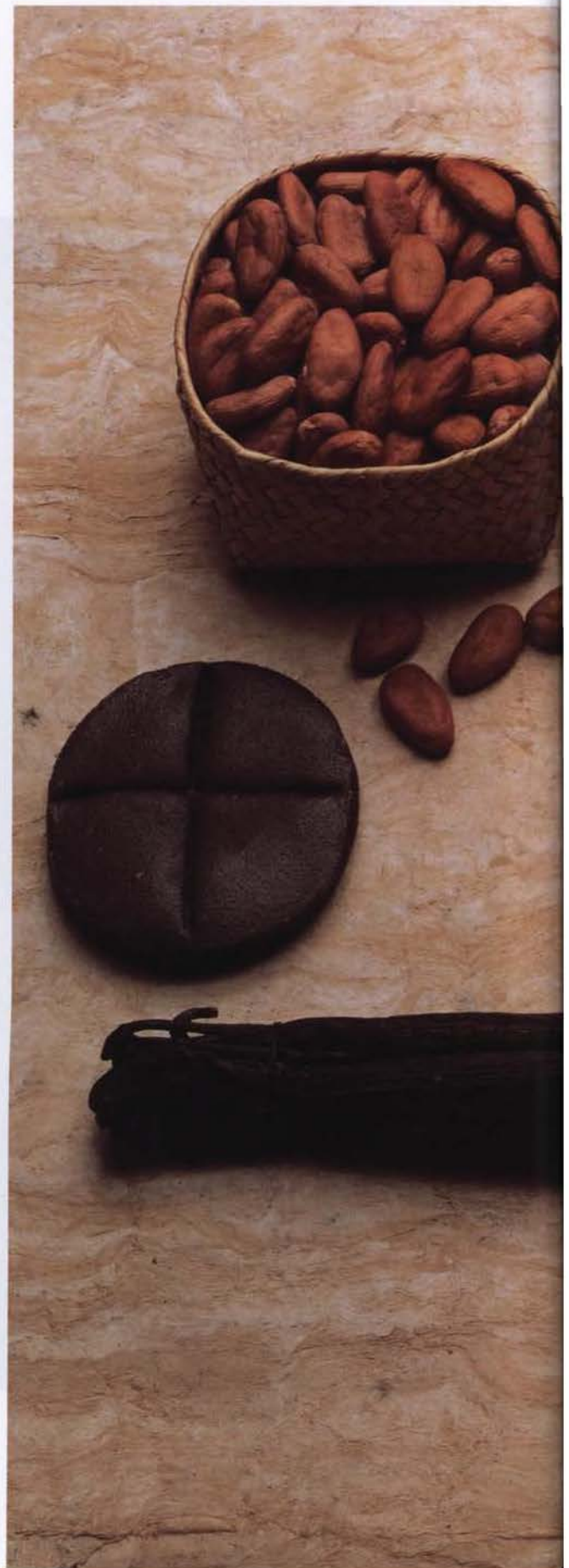


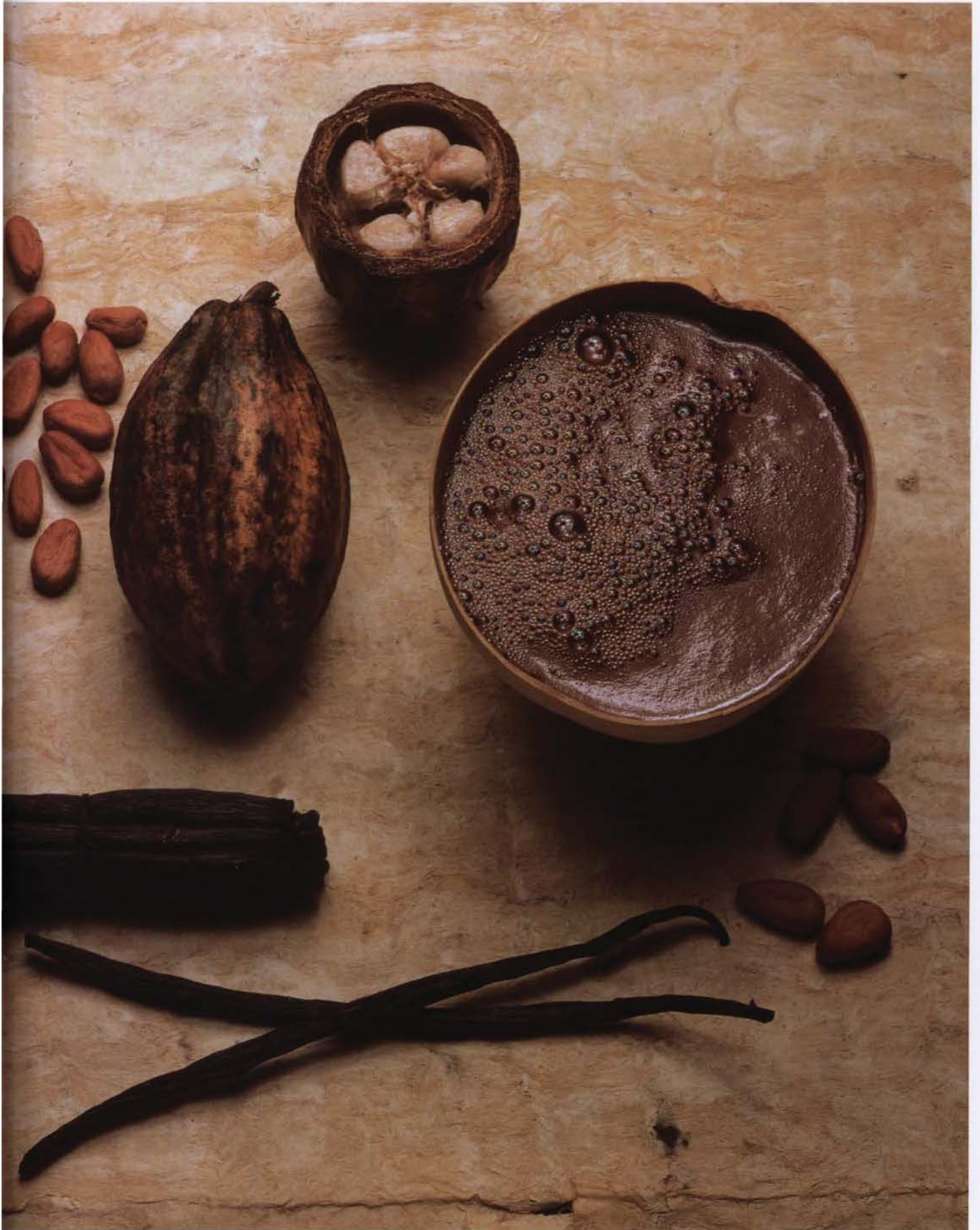
VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Wine is mentioned quite often in the Book of Mormon from Jaredite times on. It was used both routinely and to excess (see Mosiah 22:7; Ether 15:22; Alma 55:31; and 3 Nephi 18:2). Apparently they made more than one type (see Alma 55:32). The only other beverage mentioned is water (see Alma 5:34).

The Jaredites kept bees, though nothing is said about honey. Nothing is said in the Nephite record of sweets or treats, but we may suppose from comparison with other peoples of the world that they must have made and enjoyed some kinds despite the fact that the mass of people would have had little chance to consume such relatively expensive products on a routine basis.

Chocolate came from seeds of the cacao fruit that were ground to powder. The seeds are shown at the top. The beverage made from ground chocolate was whipped to produce thick foam on the top. At the bottom of the photograph is vanilla, a valued condiment that was sometimes added to the drink.



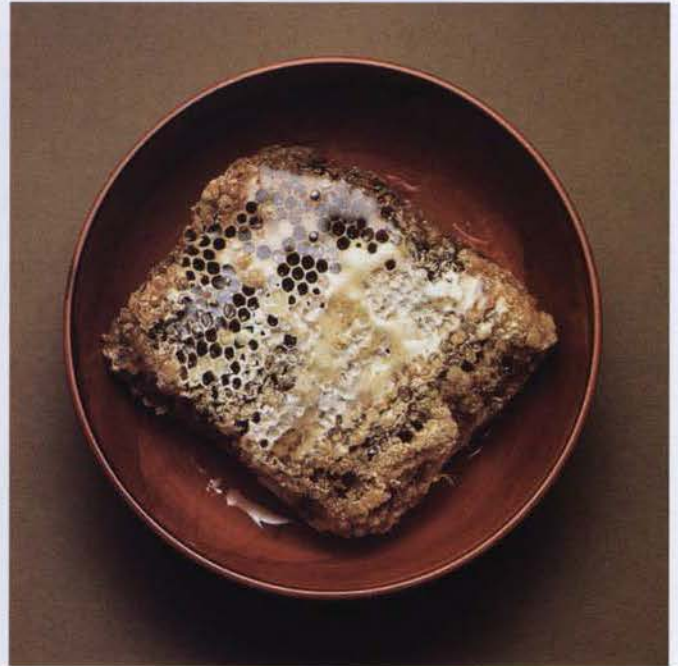




This elaborately carved container in Izapan style dates to around the middle of the Nephite period; the style is diagnostic of the area and period that the main narrative of the Book of Mormon covers. One can imagine drinkers of the higher social class (such as are described among Noah's people) taking their wine from such a beautiful vessel, while commoners settled for a plain gourd or shell container.



The most popular fermented drink in modern times is pulque, made from juice of the agave plant. In central Mexico its use was very ancient, although other wines were also made. Incidentally, the Spaniards spoke of the plantings of the agave cactus as vineyards (recalling *Mosiah 11:15*).³⁵



The lack of a source for making abundant sugar, combined with the relative difficulty of getting honey, meant that, at least in some areas, a majority were too poor to indulge a sweet tooth very often.



Peanuts, amaranth seeds, or popped corn were combined with honey to make these delicacies—peanut brittle or popcorn treats—for special occasions.

Animal Use

The practical uses of animals in Mesoamerica were somewhat limited. The number of potentially valuable species was fairly small, and then for unknown reasons the people failed to show much interest in their utility. A few species were kept for food (domesticated, or at least tamed). Flocks of turkeys were common, and occasionally quail, doves, one kind of duck, a kind of pheasant, and grouse were maintained in flocks. A small hairless dog was fattened and eaten; the Spaniards referred to these dogs as being kept in herds.³⁶ Certain other animals were kept somewhat incidentally without their meat ever more than lightly supplementing the vital vegetable foods. Several types of wild fowl were hunted and their eggs were gathered to be eaten. Game animals, particularly deer, were hunted regularly, but of course whenever the human population increased and cultivated areas became extensive, it disrupted wild habitats, so the yield from hunting near population centers declined.

Among certain groups, attention to animal husbandry was common enough to show that overall, Mesoamericans could have done more had they chosen to. Animals occasionally tamed included the tapir, the peccary (wild pig), the guinea pig, the paca (a large rodent), rabbits, and deer; they even kept some of these in penned enclosures. Yet these societies chose to make a point about not exploiting nature practically. This reluctance was somewhat like their determined refusal to use complex technology, as noted earlier; they managed well enough without going to the trouble of elaborating their tools or doing much with the fauna.

"Impractical" uses of animals were numerous. For instance, a wide variety of fowls were kept tied or penned so that their feathers, which were valued decoratively and ceremonially and were widely traded, could be collected. Many animal species—coatimundi, deer, and pigs, for instance—were kept as pets, especially by women and children, and pets were not eaten. Animals were also important in ritual and myth. All the common species were considered sacred in some context or other, which may have been a reason that

they were infrequently exploited as mere meat. Several types were sacrificed. An Asiatic type of chicken was present that was used only in divination ceremonies. Furthermore, there was curiosity about animals; the Aztec emperor had a large zoo, aviary, and aquarium adjacent to his palace, where three hundred men worked full-time caring for the caged birds alone; others tended jaguars and other wild felines, deer, wolves, foxes, and even a buffalo.³⁷

There was an incidental benefit of great significance in the fact that these people did not dwell amidst large numbers of animals, as was the case in many Old World communities. Scholars concerned with medical history in America now believe that this lack of animal hosts for diseases was an important reason for the relative lack of epidemic disease here as compared with the central Old World.³⁸



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The flocks and herds of the Nephites (only sheep are mentioned for the Lamanites) presumably included several sorts of fowls. Turkeys are native to the New World, and flocks of them would have been valuable possessions. The Book of Mormon account refers to people who "tend," "raise," and "have" useful animals, but the words *domesticated* or *tame* are not used (see Enos 1:21; Mosiah 10:21; Helaman 6:12; Ether 9:17–9). Some of the names applied by the Nephite record keepers to the native beasts they found on the land when they arrived (they brought none themselves) probably were applied to broadly similar species, just as the Spaniards did when they arrived (for example, the Spaniards called the bison or buffalo a cow). Deer were the most numerous large mammals in Mesoamerica. Artists depicted deer in sacred scenes and even being ridden. The failure of the Book of Mormon to mention deer may mean that it was one of the animals for which the record in English uses a name of what we consider some domestic beast, perhaps the Nephite "horse." All told, the record of the Nephites is notable for its emphasis on crop agriculture rather than animal husbandry as central to their culture, considering that their tradition originated in Palestine where animals had been so vital.³⁹



This is one of dozens of types of kept birds from which prized feathers were plucked.



Quail were taken from the wild and sometimes kept in semidomesticated flocks. They were sacrificial as well as practical objects.



Several kinds of ducks are represented in the work of Mesoamerican artists, such as in this fine modeled pair from Colima, west Mexico, dating to the period A.D. 200–600. At least one species, the Muscovy duck, was domesticated.



American gobblers had been kept in flocks for many centuries before the Spaniards came, as shown by this ceramic effigy (dated before 500 B.C.) Their flesh, eggs, and feathers served obvious ends, but the whole fowl was also often sacrificed.



The peccary is a close relative of the Old World pig. It usually ran wild in the forests, but in a few places in America it was tamed.



Barkless dogs were fattened and eaten, as some people do with rabbits today. The Spanish conquerors considered them good eating when fed them by the Aztecs.



The tapir was one of the largest animals in the area (up to 650 pounds), although it generally shied away from settled areas.



The tepeixcuintli, this pig-sized rodent, has tasty flesh, although it has not been demonstrated to tolerate very well living in the vicinity of humans.

Crafts and Tools

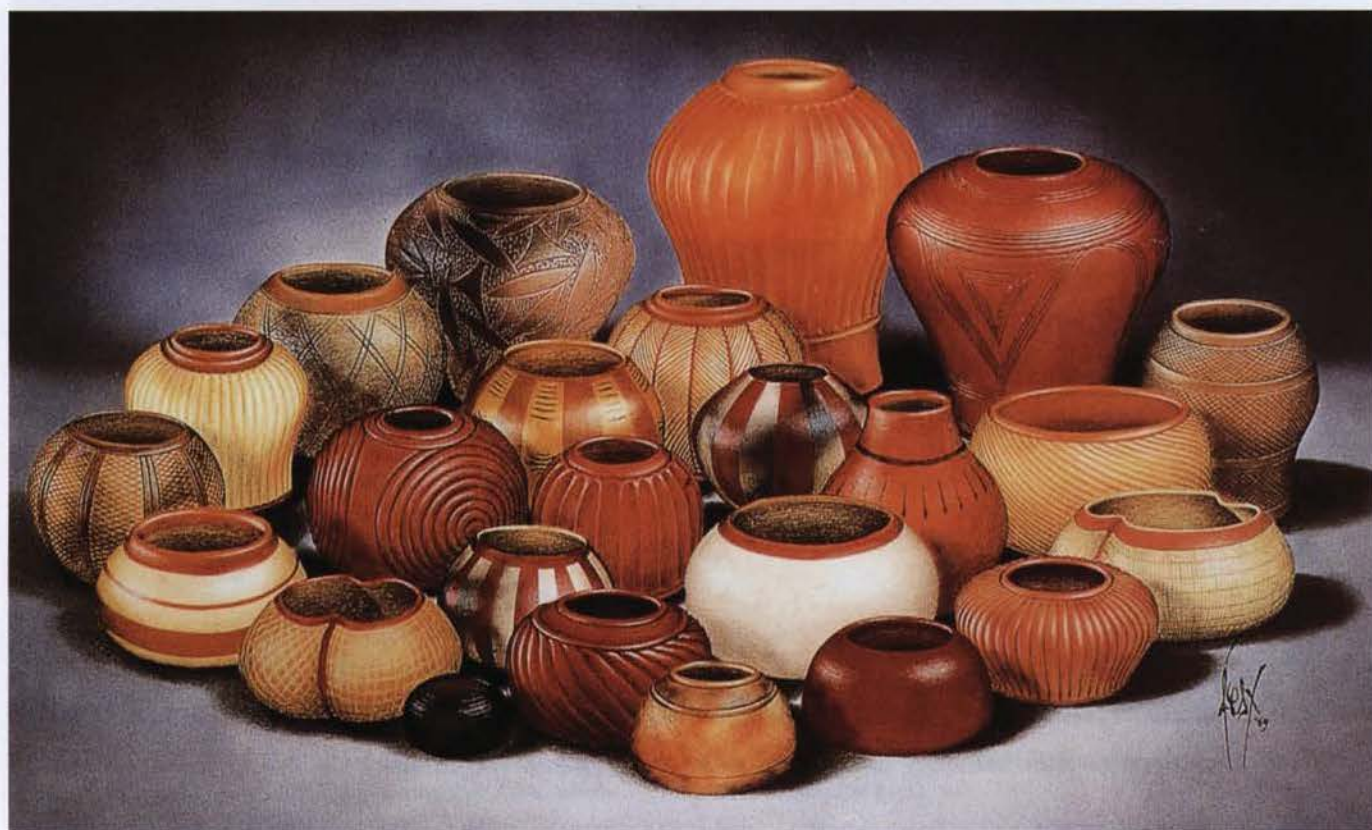
One of the key craft activities in ancient Mesoamerica was making ceramic pots. Archaeologists are fascinated by these ancient vessels because fragments of them are so abundantly preserved at many archaeological sites. Millions of the vessels were used anciently, but after a fairly short time, those in use would shatter or crack. When replacements were made, small changes in style would be inevitable, hence a continuous series of variant fashions over time can be identified if we have a sufficiently large sample of potsherds in hand. The sequence of style details in each region has been worked out with considerable exactitude, so the variations become a guide to chronology. Looking at any pot, or a major fragment from one, a well-informed archaeologist can tell within a century or so (and sometimes less) when it was made.

Almost as common as pots for carrying or storing supplies were perishable containers: baskets, gourd shells, and vessels carved from wood. Unfortunately, few such items have survived decay in the damp soil of the tropics for archaeologists to recover.

A subtle decorative design is evident on this pot. It is from Cuicuilco in the Valley of Mexico in late B.C. times.



This vessel in the Usulután style features wavy, "combed" lines that were produced by the use of wax to protect certain areas in the decorating process (like batik dyeing of cloth). Usulután was popular on vessels from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Chiapas in the final centuries B.C. It may prove to be something of a marker of the early presence of Nephites and Lamanites.



We are even more impressed by the sight of an entire set of ceramic vessels that a culture's potters produced than by any single specimen. Here is an artist's reconstruction of the entire suite of pieces by craftsmen of the Barra phase on the Pacific coast of Chiapas around 1400 B.C. Since this, the earliest pottery known in the area, is already very sophisticated decoratively and technologically, the craft had obviously had a long history already.



Knowledge about minerals was extensive, but smelted metal was not of as much concern to them as it was to Europeans or Asians. A majority of the metal products that have survived are decorative, not practical. Relatively few practical implements of metal have been discovered in the ruins, and probably few were used.

Obsidian was crucial in Mesoamerican technology. Extremely hard (though brittle), the edge on a fragment of this volcanic glass is sharper than most metal knives. This substance was the fundamental raw material from which cutting tools were manufactured. Weapons, knives, points, woodworking tools, razors, and other implements were all made of it. Trade in obsidian was carried on through networks of merchants that extended up to a thousand miles. That trade was as vital to the Mesoamericans as oil commerce is to the modern world.

Equivalents of our hammers, saws, chisels, and axes were made from obsidian or from polished stone. Some stones were

fastened by glue or wrappings to wooden handles. In certain ancient sites archaeologists have found workshops where artisans specialized in producing particular implement forms. The waste products are still found lying about. Finished products were traded to other places.

Wood also served for making certain implements, such as digging sticks for planting and paddles for boats. Bone, antler, and leather were other materials turned into utensils—needles, awls, scrapers, straps, and the like.



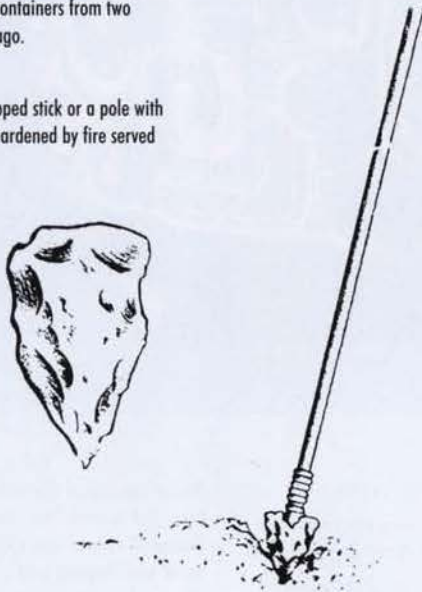
The intricate Izapan style, exemplified by this stone bowl from the Pacific coast near the Guatemala-Chiapas border, characterized the period when Nephites lived in or influenced the area, around 1 b.c. "The city . . . in the borders by the seashore" likely was in this area (Alma 56:31; see 56:32).

Wide-edged bowls like this one clearly mark the last two centuries b.c. in highland Guatemala. This specific type contained gifts of food or incense placed with the dead in a tomb (compare the "sepulchre" in Alma 19:1, 5) and dated about 100 b.c.

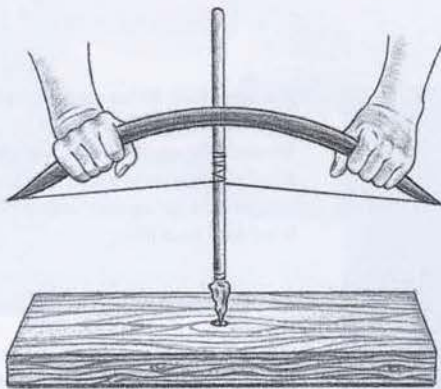


These examples of everyday baskets from the state of Tabasco are similar in style and function to containers from two thousand years ago.

Either a stone-tipped stick or a pole with its wooden end hardened by fire served for digging.



One type of drill was rotated by the back-and-forth motion of a bowstring



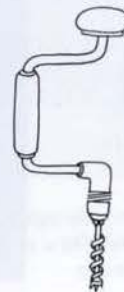
The practical quality of metal tools like these, mainly of copper, left much to be desired. They did not retain a good cutting edge for long. A stone axe was cheaper and about as effective as one with a metal head.⁴⁶



Custom-finished obsidian tools were sometimes made from large, semiprepared chunks of the raw material at or near markets, where customer needs could be matched more easily than at the obsidian source.

Skilled men used an antler tip or a bone point to press at key points on chunks of the volcanic glass, splitting off thin fragments one after another.

Ancient tools and their modern equivalents are shown paired.





Examples of superb ancient wood carving have been preserved on only a few specimens, like this Aztec drum from the period of first Spanish contact. There must have been many such masterpieces.



Sahagun's Florentine Codex pictures an Aztec metalworker plying his craft with a very simple but effective apparatus. Molten copper pours from the crucible into a mold to form an axe head.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

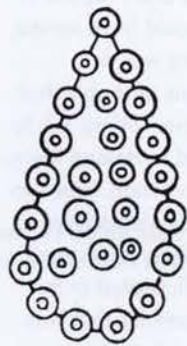
Most practical objects were too workaday to be mentioned in the sacred Book of Mormon. Tools are mentioned in general (see, for example, Jarom 1:8 and Helaman 13:34), but nothing more specific is said about equipment that the Nephites and others must have had, like pots, baskets, or hoes. Cups (see 3 Nephi 18:8) and cords (see 1 Nephi 7:16) do happen to be mentioned.

Weapons, of course, were often reported. They include the axe, which could have served for everyday tasks as well as for war. In a Mesoamerican context, it seems probable that "Onidah, . . . the place of arms," (Alma 47:5) to which certain Lamanites fled to defend themselves against their ruler's oppression, refers to an obsidian outcrop where they would have at hand all the crude weaponry they could want.

The ceramic containers illustrated in this section are among a wide repertoire that was characteristic for Mesoamerica during the main period of Nephite history. The Nephites might have used similar pots for preparing or serving food or conveying "the last tribute of wine" (Mosiah 22:7) to the Lamanite guards. Not shown are plain, grubby, undecorated vessels that were used to carry or heat water and store raw foods. Only minor changes ever took place in their forms.



A scene from the Florentine Codex signifies that the Aztec merchant, like those before him for thousands of years, was considered to live a hard, dangerous life on the road. Yet the prospect of wealth made the profession attractive to some types of men.



Above: The Aztec glyph sign for marketplace uses footprints to convey the idea of a bustling crowd. Below: The constellation known to us as the Pleiades was called the Marketplace by the Aztecs. The reason for this is obvious from a comparison of the two signs.

Markets and Commerce

Trade was a vital process in Mesoamerican civilization. For thousands of years both long- and short-range commerce was carried on, archaeological studies demonstrate. Variation in terrain, soils, and climates meant that people in any one area needed or wanted products they could not obtain except from somewhere else. For instance, cotton was the preferred fiber for clothing everywhere, but the plant only grew at the lower, hotter elevations. For highlanders to obtain a supply, they had to exchange products they had available. Outcrops of good obsidian occurred only in a few localities, while the demand was universal, and salt, an essential in the diet, was rarely available except on the coast. So specialization in the production of food, fiber, animal products, and minerals tended to develop from place to place.

The control of crucial resources was probably key in the development and maintenance of early governments. Only rulers were in a position to control the wealth that was required to outfit an expedition headed off to seek distant products and negotiate trade with local rulers or merchants. In some periods a special class of full-time merchants existed who were given unusual privileges. Among the Aztecs the merchants also acted as spies for the military.

Every administrative center (town or city) of any consequence had a regular

market, usually held at a plaza adjacent to a key temple or other religious installation. Visitors usually combined trade with worship. At such "downtown" scenes, important social interaction and news sharing took place. No doubt the market experience provided many with relief from the relative boredom of rural life.

Native markets continue today in parts of Mexico and Guatemala that still convey the color and excitement that characterized such places anciently. The best description of an elaborate pre-Columbian-style market comes from Cortez's first visit to the Aztec capital. He was told that over twenty thousand people daily visited the plaza in the Tlatelolco portion of the metropolis. (There were smaller markets—"shopping centers," as it were—in other parts of the city.) He wrote:

There are all sorts of vegetables, and . . . many kinds of fruits, amongst others cherries, and prunes, like the Spanish ones . . . , honey made of a plant called maguey . . . ; from these same plants they make sugar and wine. . . . They also sell skeins of different kinds of spun cotton, in all colors, so that it seems quite like one of the silk markets of Granada [Spain], although it is on a greater scale [here]. . . . They sell maize, both in the grain and made into bread, which is very superior . . . ; pies [tamales] of birds, and fish, also much fish, fresh, salted, cooked and raw; eggs of hens [turkeys], and geese, and other birds in great quantity, and cakes made of eggs.

Finally . . . they sell in the city markets everything . . . which is found in the whole country. . . . Each kind of merchandise is sold in its respective street, and they do not mix their kinds of merchandise . . . thus they preserve perfect order.⁴¹

The occupation of merchant could bring big rewards, although it was a hard life. The most profitable trips were long and often dangerous. Even if a party of servants helped carry goods (no animals were used to haul loads), the total cargo borne had to be small, so high-value goods were the ones sought—feathers, jewelry, cocoa beans, cloth, obsidian, and salt. Natural hazards on the trail, like storms, wild beasts, and snakes, combined with the threat of



bandits. Moreover, the people at the far end of the journey might be enemies of the merchant's tribe, so diplomacy or even disguises might be needed. Yet the commerce that merchants carried on was so vital to all concerned that the travelers normally went about without much political hassle.

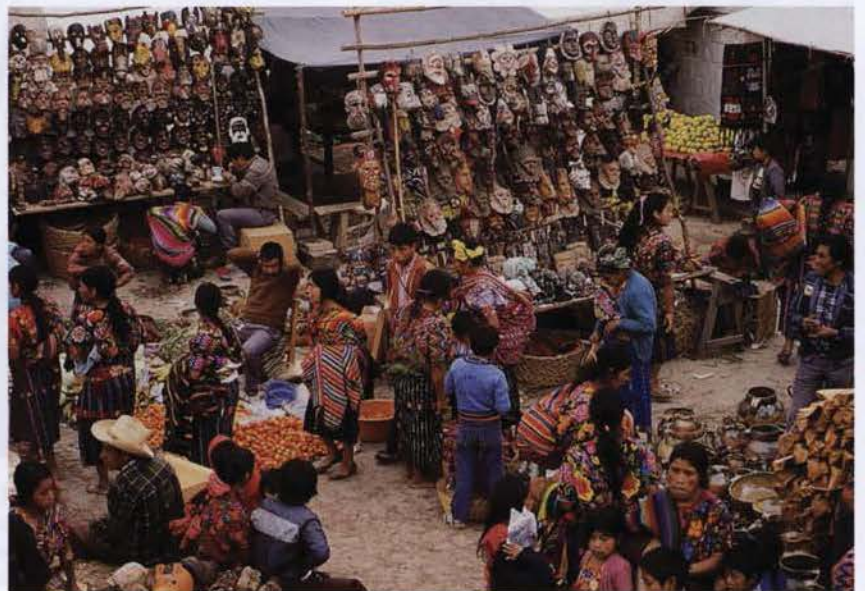
Some of the color and liveliness of the huge marketplace that Cortez described is caught in this museum reconstruction of that scene.

This market at Chichicastenango, Guatemala, has changed from its pre-Spanish status mainly in some of the merchandise, the use of coins, and the costumes of the participants. The basic social and economic functions are unchanged, as are the color and bustle.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The Book of Mormon emphasizes the significance of trade to the prosperity of the people it tells about some nineteen centuries ago. "The Nephites did go into whatsoever part of the land they would, whether among the Nephites or the Lamanites. And . . . thus they did have free intercourse one with another, to buy and to sell, and to get gain, according to their desire. And . . . they became exceedingly rich" (Helaman 6:7-9). Note the link between trade and literacy on the one hand and wealth on the other in the rise of civilization among the Lamanites, as reported in Mosiah 24:6-7.



Transport

Most goods were moved on human backs. The rest went by boat. For over four hundred years after the Spaniards made large animals available—actually until only decades ago in some regions—carriage of merchandise by men was typical. It was simply more efficient for humans to do the work. Modern experience has shown that it takes longer and costs more to move goods using animals because of the time and trouble it takes to care for and rest them. In any case, the ancient Mesoamericans had a poor selection of beasts available that might have carried a load.

Where a network of waterways allowed, fleets of canoes swarmed, carrying all kinds of goods as well as people. Most were simple dugouts that went only a short distance before the load was moved to another vessel, yet the size of some boats ranged upward to sea-going vessels. One reported during a voyage by Columbus near Yucatan was eight feet wide (“as large as a galley,” the report said)⁴² and carried over fifty people plus cargo.

Along the Pacific Coast, large, navigable log rafts (of the type built by Thor Heyerdahl), and sizable boats also, traveled from

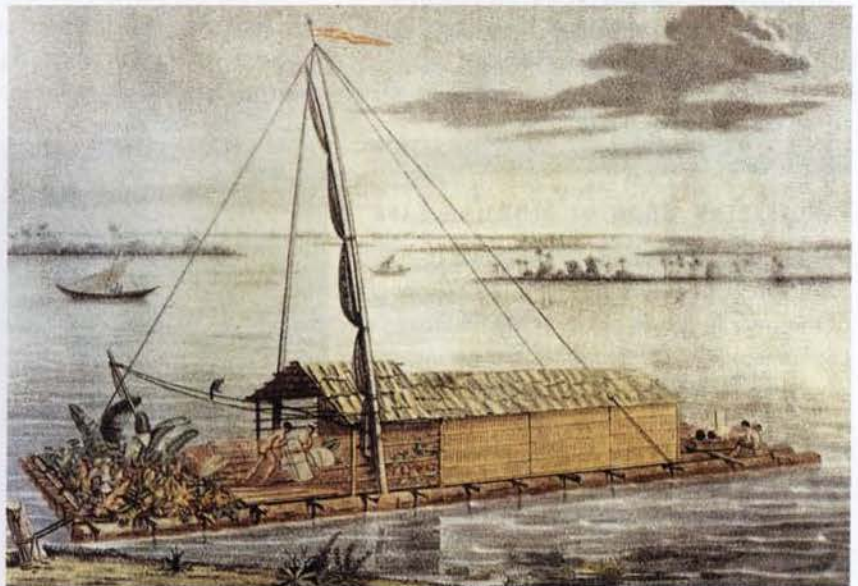


Ecuador via Panama to as far as west Mexico. The prime attraction for this trade was to acquire the Spondylus shell (used as a sacred trumpet), which certain Ecuadorian groups valued highly. Such trips were apparently made periodically for thousands of years, right up to the time of the Spanish Conquest.⁴³ But Mesoamericans did limited sea voyaging themselves, in part because there were few good harbors along their coasts and in part because the most populous areas were usually located some distance inland.

In recent years, hundreds of miles of roads have been found radiating outward from major population centers throughout much of Mesoamerica. Built-up roads (the Mayan language term was *sacbe*, “white road”) like this remnant at the site of Labna in Yucatan were not primarily for travelers but were routes for ceremonial processions, although they were used for routine transport where they were available. Mostly, however, well-worn trails served the surefooted human burden bearers.



Human bearers routinely carried from sixty to one hundred pounds of all sorts of goods on their bent backs. The load was held in place by a band across the forehead. They often traveled at a near trot and for up to ten hours a day.



This 1820s drawing shows the type of raft from Ecuador that sailed along the coast as far as Mexico. Notice the kitchen garden growing at one end of the raft and cooking facilities at the other. Almost identical rafts were used in southern China and Vietnam for thousands of years. Some Europeans who saw these craft thought them primitive, but we now know they were actually highly developed, steerable, safe ships.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Practically nothing is said in the Book of Mormon about modes of routine travel. All cases of overland movement that are mentioned are phrased consistent with the idea that human carriers were utilized. We read specifically of Alma and his people under their Lamanite and Amulonite masters who “put heavy burdens upon their backs” (Mosiah 21:3). It seems noteworthy that the emphasis in this statement is the heaviness of the loads. Lighter loads probably would have been seen as routine rather than harsh treatment.

In only one very brief period throughout

the millennium of Nephite history (and never among the Jaredites or Lamanites) do we hear of their use of ships. The first were built by the inventive Hagoth (see Alma 63:5–8 and compare Helaman 3:10). But only one route is indicated, northward up the Pacific coast from the “narrow neck of land” (Ether 10:20), apparently Tehuantepec, and even then the risk or cost involved seems to have discouraged further maritime ventures, for after the master builder disappeared on a voyage, most migrants to the land northward went by land, as they had done before (see Alma 63:4, 9; Helaman 3:3–5, 8, 12).

An artist has reconstructed what a visit by Maya traders to Tulum, on the east coast of the Yucatan peninsula, would have looked like around A.D. 1500. Tulum is the spectacularly situated site on the coast near Cancun that has been visited by millions of tourists. Significant commercial travel in boats like these was a feature of life in the peninsula area.



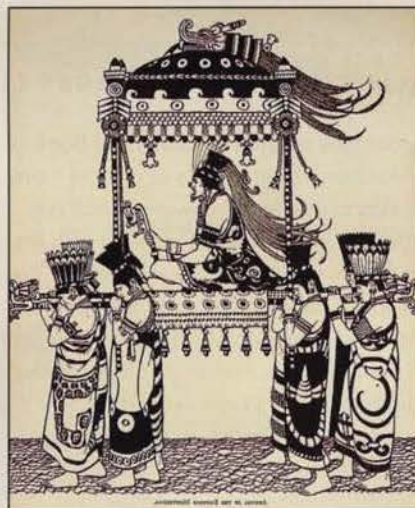
Lacandon Maya of eastern Chiapas make and use a traditional dugout canoe. Thousands of these were once used to fish, to cross streams, or to be poled along waterways to destinations no great distance away. Some merchants also used them on legs of longer journeys.

THE LITTER

Cultural preference throughout Mesoamerica called for a person of social prestige to be transported by litter. The system was sensible enough in practical terms—in whatever remote spot a group of travelers might stop, fresh carriers could be found so long as carriage depended on human muscles. Furthermore prestige entered in; this form of transport was reserved for nobility and others of the upper social levels. To have used any other mode would have been to give up privilege and demean oneself. Privileged and sacred leaders were similarly carried in the stretch of the Old World from the eastern Mediterranean through South-east Asia in earlier times.



This drawing from a Maya painted vase from around A.D. 750 shows a priest or dignitary being borne in a litter. Bishop Landa reported from Yucatan that dogs bearing spots that resembled a cacao bean, like the one shown here, were seasonally sacrificed amidst the cacao trees to implore the deities to bless the yield of seeds from which prized chocolate was made. Maybe this hound would not have been wagging his tail if he had known what awaited him.

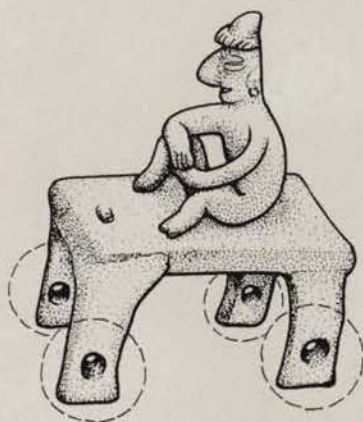


The higher the prestige of the person being carried, the fancier the litter. This is an artist's representation of the Aztec ruler's plush "vehicle."

THE WHEEL

It once was supposed that ancient American peoples did not even know the principle of the wheel, but discoveries by archaeologists of many small, wheeled “toys” has changed that view. The “toys” are now understood to have been miniature ceremonial objects connected with ideas about death, burial, and, probably, the sun. Mexican specimens date from as early as the first century A.D. In the Near East similar wheeled models were in use from before 3000 B.C. into medieval times, having spread as far as western Europe and China.⁴⁴

The usual interpretation of these objects by Mesoamericanist scholars is that while the prehistoric peoples obviously knew the principle of the wheel, for unknown reasons they never translated the idea into practical vehicles. Yet these same scholars celebrate the inventive capabilities of the early Americans. Would they have been familiar with these miniatures for at least fifteen hundred years without trying to make a practical vehicle? In fact, the vehicle concept was known. When the Spaniards invaded Guatemala, they reported that the Quiché Indians used “military machines” consisting of wooden platforms mounted on “little rollers” to haul weapons around one battlefield to resupply their soldiers.⁴⁵ But on the broken terrain so common



This object in a private collection probably was looted from a tomb in west Mexico.⁴⁴ That the craftsmen who constructed the device knew what a vehicle was is beyond question. Perhaps a wheeled platform like this was used ritually in a funeral procession.

throughout Mesoamerica, wheeled vehicles may rarely have seemed worth the trouble. (One interesting suggestion is that Mesoamericans lacked lubricants that would have made full-sized wheels practical.)

Archaeologists have not found direct evidence of any useful wheeled vehicle. This lack in Mesoamerica is made less surprising when we learn that no fragment of a chariot has ever been uncovered in the Holy Land, despite the fact that thousands of them are reported by the Bible to have been used.⁴⁶



Some of the so-called toys had wheels attached to an axle running directly through the feet of a modeled animal. Most often these were dogs or deer, both of which had a mythical connection to death. But this example from Veracruz, of unknown meaning but probably from between A.D. 600 and 800, is unmistakably constructed on the principle of a wheeled vehicle. A monkey (or perhaps only a monkey skin) is draped over a wagonlike platform.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

In two situations reported in the Book of Mormon, a word is used that might be supposed to refer to wheeled vehicles, once among the Lamanites and once among the Nephites. Yet what is said is so brief that we are left unclear about the nature of their “chariots.”

In the story of Ammon in the land of King Lamoni, “horses and chariots” were made ready to “conduct” the king to the land of Middoni (Alma 18:9; see 18:10, 12; 20:6). Because nothing is said or hinted about mounting, riding, or dismounting from a vehicle, we cannot confidently conclude that vehicles were used to carry people, although this may have happened. Later, according to 3 Nephi 3:22, the Nephites who gathered at a refuge zone where robbers would besiege them had “taken their horses, and their chariots.” Yet in 3 Nephi 4:4 the “horses” are considered along with “cattle” as “provisions.” So it remains a mystery what “chariot” means in these texts. The word might have been used in a nonliteral sense. Nonliteral language abounds in the record. For instance, the Savior speaking to the Nephites applied the words of Isaiah to a future day when Israel was to be gathered, prophesying, “I will destroy thy chariots” (3 Nephi 21:14) as well as modern “graven images” (3 Nephi 21:17) and “groves” (3 Nephi 21:18), whatever they might be. Clearly some analogy, not literality, was intended in these cases.

The text of the Bible also leaves the word ambiguous. Hebrew roots translated to English as “chariot” include the dictionary meaning of “wagon or chariot” but also “litter, portable couch” or human-borne “sedan” chair (in the Talmud the same expression even meant nuptial bed).⁴⁷

“Chariots” aside, nothing else in the Book of Mormon indicates that the people it describes used vehicles.

Houses and Furnishings

People in ancient Mesoamerica generally spent as much time outdoors as they could (most inhabitants of the tropics do the same). Socially prominent families in towns and cities constructed substantial houses, sometimes of adobe bricks or more rarely of stone blocks. Typically, however, walls were of small, straight sticks (or even reeds or cornstalks) aligned vertically and tied to the house frame. The spaces between the sticks might be left open, allowing smoke from the cooking fire to disperse, but if cold temperatures or frequent storminess called for better protection in a particular locality, mud would be smoothed over the sticks and then the wall would be white-washed. Most roofs were of thatch.

Dwellings most often stood apart from other buildings. Multistory structures were very rare. In some large cities, side-by-side "apartments" were constructed. Houses for related groups of nuclear families were sometimes arranged around a courtyard where there was a shared shrine. Except in the most densely populated cities, fruit trees and a kitchen garden often sat near the house complex; wealthy homes might have more elaborate, even decorative gardens.

Furniture familiar to us was virtually absent. Meals were eaten seated or squatting on a mat on the floor. There were no



tables, although a workbench in some houses held the hearth, a flat stone for grinding maize, and a clay griddle. Beds normally consisted of mats placed on the floor for the night, although a hammock or a mat-covered pole platform was sometimes used. No nighttime bedcover was used except one's own garment, such as a cloak. The possessions of a common family were so few that a shelf or a few baskets would provide enough storage space. Chairs were unknown, although stools, or in fancy houses a stuccoed platform built against a wall, could serve as seats for senior males. Window coverings and fitted doors are other features familiar to us that the ancients did without.

Thatched-roof huts are still the norm in Mexico and Central America. With the exception of the extension built on this house, which has been constructed of sawed boards, this hut near Izapa, Chiapas, would be nearly identical to a commoner's house two millennia or more ago.

Multiplying the size or number of rooms, as in the case of this set of connected buildings in the state of Tabasco, anciently could have turned a village headman's residence into a public building as a community grew.





VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Nothing is said directly in the Book of Mormon about the houses of the Nephites, but a few inferences shed some light. That the city of Zarahemla “did take fire” (3 Nephi 8:8) from lightning (see 3 Nephi 8:7) confirms their perishable nature, especially of the roofs, no doubt made of thatch.⁴⁹ Most people would have had houses only large enough to contain their immediate family (consider “the poor” in Mosiah 4:24, Alma 5:55, etc.) But upper-class people must have had larger units into which guests could be received. Amulek, a man of means (see Alma 10:4), had a sizable household; his establishment included “my women, and my children,” and, perhaps in the same household, “my father and my kinsfolk” (Alma 10:11). The hospitality he offered Alma₂ was returned to him when, destitute and exiled from his home community (see Alma 15:16), Amulek was taken into Alma₂’s own house (see Alma 15:18). But of course his host was the high priest and former chief judge over the Nephites, so no doubt he dwelt in a substantial house that could accommodate guests, including at a later time the princely sons of Mosiah₂ (see Alma 27:20). The text is also appropriate in reporting that Nephi₂, another upper-class person and former chief judge, had a house and garden with a tower in it for worship involving, probably, his extended family (see Helaman 7:10).

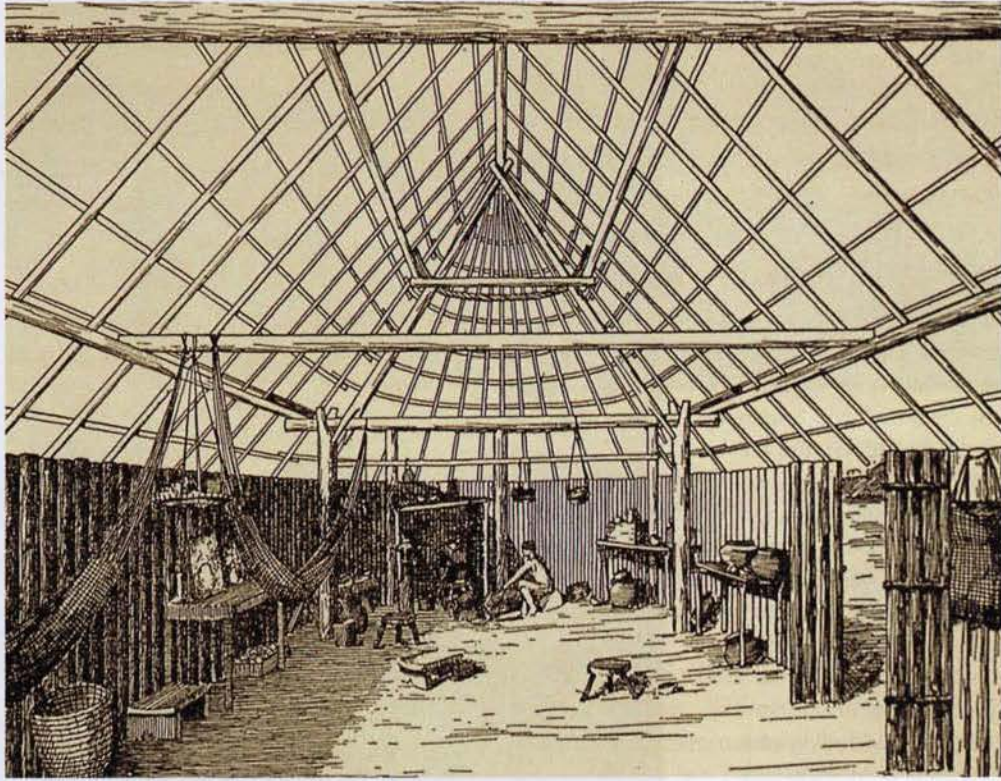


Archaeologists find remnants of simple pole-frame houses from earliest times. This sculpted representation of such a house is on a stone arch at the Maya site of Labna, dating almost fourteen hundred years ago. It shows what the prototype temple structure looked like—little more than a common house.



Three structures under construction in the Maya area display the steps still followed in constructing rural housing. The biggest investment consists of labor, which was shared among kin or neighbors.

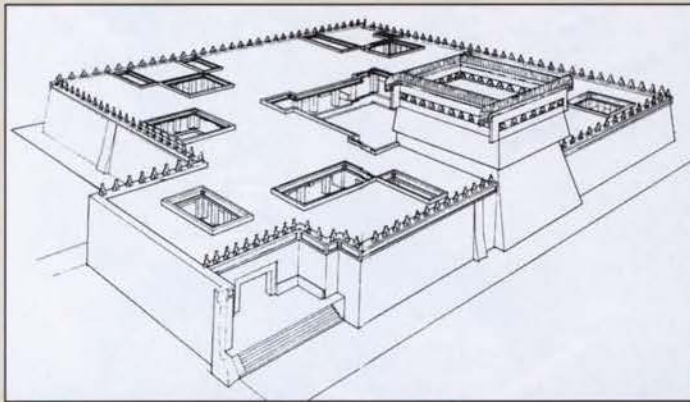
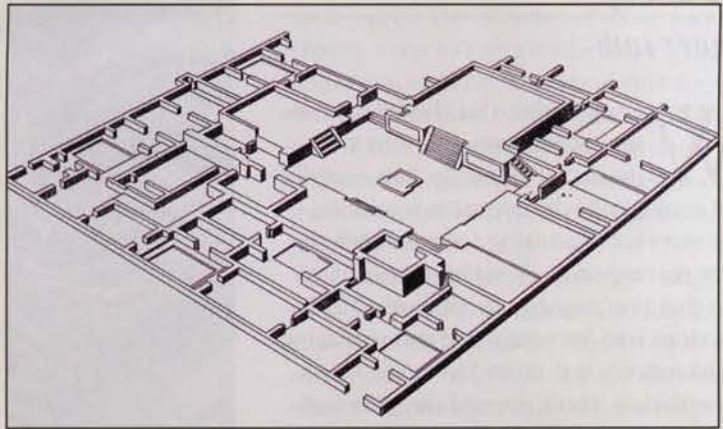
A sketch of a house built in Yucatan sixty years ago shows the inside, with the roof omitted by the artist for the sake of visibility. It also demonstrates that the ancient custom of using little furniture has persisted even through centuries of Spanish influence.



Hundreds of miles northward, in a much cooler spot (Tlaxcala state), the same basic house form was also used. Materials are a little different, but the basic form varies only slightly throughout Mesoamerica.

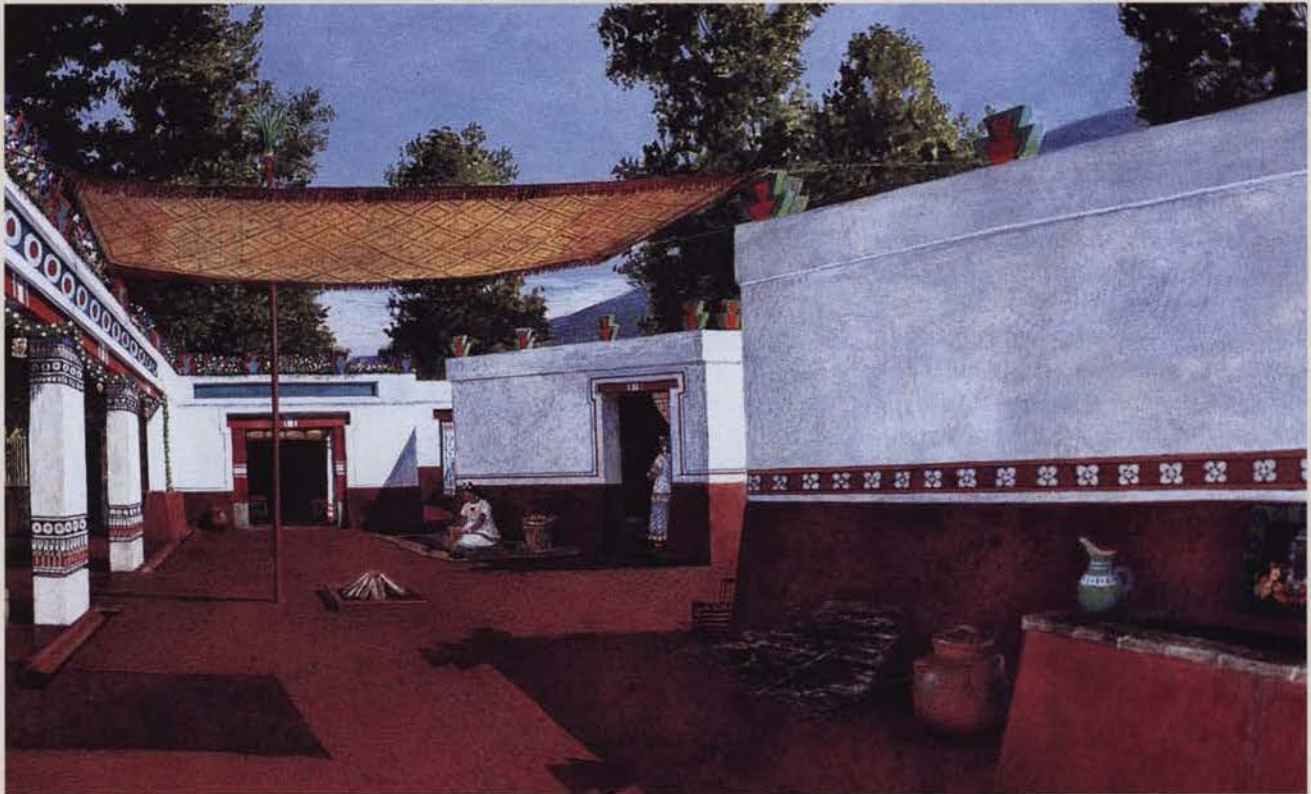
URBAN HOUSING

The desire to have green nature close at hand was strong. Only under extreme political and economic conditions did people crowd their housing together side by side. Even then the desire for family autonomy favored isolating complexes from one another behind walls, each group building around a courtyard with the dwellings of close relatives adjacent.



In relatively dry central Mexico, flat-roofed apartment-style units were utilized. Adobe brick and cement were common materials in an area with limited forests. This housing form was developed in response to what seems to have been a political plan to resettle people in as small a space as possible; the reason for this plan is not clear. This complex at Teotihuacan dates to about A.D. 500.

An architect's reconstruction of an excavated palace (?) at Teotihuacan shows how these urban units were roofed. Notice the openings at various points to let in light and allow smoke to escape.



In A.D. 1500 the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, utilized housing units somewhat like those from nearby Teotihuacan a thousand years earlier. This artist's reconstruction is said to show a "middle-class" Aztec house, but that may be an overstatement in terms of today's connotation. A typical home probably was less consciously decorated and somewhat more shopworn.