



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

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Society

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Society

Overview

We saw earlier that the fragmentation of Mesoamerica into a mosaic of culturally, linguistically, and ecologically diverse areas is striking. The ways for organizing societal relations were correspondingly varied. Almost any rule that one might propose as *the* Mesoamerican way for organizing and managing social matters had many local exceptions. Nevertheless, three general categories of social concern stand out. One is family and kinship, another is community or locality, and the third is social rank or class.

In certain areas of the world, intricate networks of kinship were maintained and complex institutions and labeling systems based on descent resulted. That was not so in Mesoamerica. Kinship factors were relatively straightforward. There were large-scale kin linkages that resulted in lineages or clans (scholars differ in their definitions of such terms in this area), but the mass of people probably did not identify themselves with particular ancestors beyond a few generations. The social elite—leaders—on the other hand, clung to knowledge of their descent lines because their privileges or rights to rule and enjoy benefits depended on their ability to establish connections to the elite of previous generations, that is, to validate their social standing by “blood.”

A second significant aspect of social organization was community. If an ancient Mesoamerican had been asked, “What group do you belong to?” he or she may well have responded with the name of their local land (roughly the equivalent of a county in the United States—after the Spanish Conquest, these local lands are called *municipios* throughout Mexico and Guatemala). At least outside the cities, the people who lived together in one land usually shared similar customs and most knowledge about the world. Similar ecological conditions prevailed within these units. Throughout each, the same tongue or dialect was likely to be spoken, and an integrated pattern of economic activity,



A beautiful wall plaque from a Late Classic site in the mountains of Chiapas displays the power and confidence leaders possessed by virtue of their elite standing.

political governance, and worship usually prevailed. (In urban areas the variations could be much greater.) Such broad, vague concepts as "nation" or "tribe" meant little if anything to commoners. Easily 90% of what was of direct significance in the lives of most persons was referable to close kin and this local scene.

These two social dimensions, kinship bonds and links with the community, played against each other. If several kin groups happened to live in close proximity, the necessity for social cooperation to form livable relationships with nonkin neighbors would push community forward as an integrating mechanism. On the other hand, some settlements consisted of essentially a single extended kin group, so relationships based on ancestry played a greater role in tying the people together.

Above this fundamental fabric of society, there was a superstratum of institutions. Higher-order links tied families, kin units, and communities into the larger entities we call by such terms as *tribe*, *nation*, and *civilization*. These ties included the social class structure, government, shared cults, and associations one chose to join, similar to the guilds of medieval Europe.

Political and economic relationships were key shapers of society on this higher level of integration. There were kingdoms and even empires, of a sort, in Mesoamerica. Sharing the rulership of a particular leader or leading family was an obvious way to stitch together the diverse interests of localities, kin groups, and individuals. But, we shall see later, political institutions as we think of them today were inherently weak in ancient Mesoamerica.

Not surprisingly, economic ties also effectively served to meld local units into networks of mutual dependence. For example, relationships and expectations between buyers and sellers, between craftsmen and patrons, and between merchants and other merchants formed a pattern through which much of life in large-scale social gatherings was ordered. Merchants required the cooperation of political leaders, and those leaders benefited from the enterprise and wealth of the

traders. Merchants everywhere tended to look out for the interests of other merchants, even forming cooperative guilds or secret associations to support one another and facilitate their wealth-gaining activities. Rulers and their relatives in one region made alliances, sometimes through intermarriage, with their equivalents in other regions.

Virtual churches or cults also existed—that is, sets of persons and families who practiced the same rituals and shared certain religious beliefs. We are uncertain what relationships resulted from religious diversity, but there are indications that it could have been a significant issue.⁵⁰ The social significance of differing belief systems was made visible by the priesthood structures. People looked to the priests as leaders in many important matters, especially where tradition and written records were involved, for the priesthood held the important key of full literacy. In turn the religious leaders lived off the offerings contributed via the political leaders by adherents to their beliefs and practices. Priestly power-holders were aligned with political and economic power groups in an establishment that shaped such aspects of culture and society as concerned them. Differences in access to privileges marked the social classes. The upper crust—the political, economic, and religious elite—was small in number compared with the mass of farmers and craftsmen on whose productive backs fell the burden of supporting the whole show.

The presence of a dominant class at the top of the social pyramid had the merit of giving focus and direction to regional culture. Within such a unit, the inevitable disputes that arose between neighbors, localities, communities, or rival kin groups could be mediated or quashed by the exercise of the combined powers of governmental sanctions, religious belief and tradition, and economic interests. Meanwhile, beyond the local area or group, the elites in their interrelationships from area to area and regional culture to regional culture formed a unifying tapestry of power and custom. Their network facilitated handling the issues of peace, war, and trade.

Family and Kin

Kin or quasi-kin relationships were fundamental in Mesoamerican society, as in all other ancient societies. The nuclear family (husband, wife, and immature children) constituted the basic residential unit, but it was at a disadvantage in agrarian society. Only extended kin groups or networks could muster people and wealth on the scale necessary to hope for security in that uncertain world, so the small family's dwelling tended to be adjacent to or near those of kin. Competition was high, as it is among us, but it tended to be between larger family units rather than between individuals or nuclear families as is the case today. Yet even extended families could prove vulnerable. Amid the mix of ethnic and other units that prevailed in Mesoamerica, no kin-based entity could control enough resources to guarantee its continuance. Consequently, extended families hedged their bets by forming bonds with other players in the society—other families linked with them as lineages and tribes, friends, merchant associates, the folks in the neighborhood, a powerful political leader and his supporters—rather than depending entirely on their own family group. Thus the mosaic nature of the Mesoamerican physical scene had its counterpart in social relations, which featured variety and interdependence.

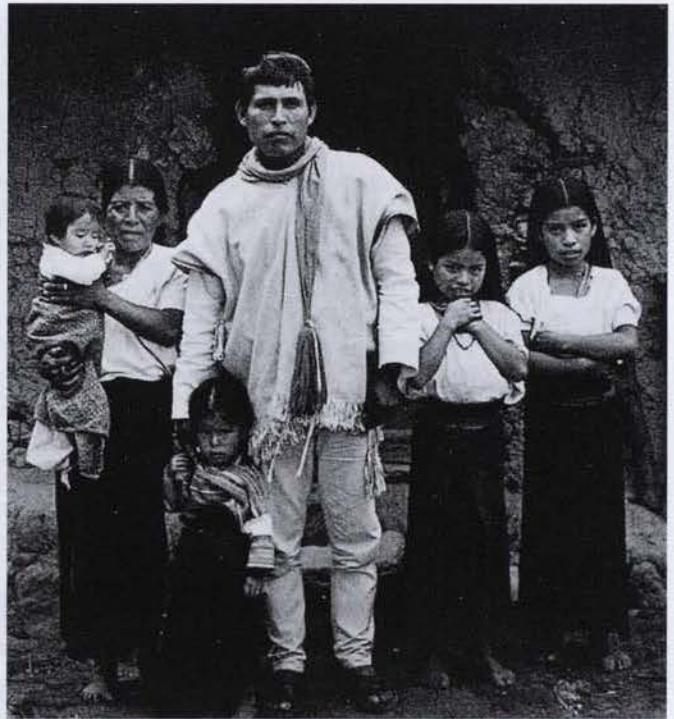
Besides the benign side to kinship, which provided economic, political, social, and emotional support for participants, there was a dark side. In many ways individuals were not free to choose their own course of action because they were bound so tightly to kin.

Where it counted, attention was paid to genealogical descent (records were kept by priests). Lines of ancestry determined membership in the larger kin groups ("lineages," in a generic sense). Among the Maya, for instance, tracing descent "provide[d] an effective basis for individuals to assert claims to one another's protection and hospitality in their movements from one locality to another."⁵¹ Patrilineal (father-to-son) descent was the most common form, although certain rights could also descend through the mother's line, particularly among the



nobility. Yet no one system could serve equally well everywhere when circumstances differed from place to place. In cities it would have been especially difficult to maintain traditional kinship ties and forms, because people settled there from a number of regions and traditions, and urban life by its scale and nature tends to break down the force of kinship bonds.

One man typically married only one wife, although having multiple wives was not uncommon for those able to afford it. The keeping of concubines was also a practice tolerated among some groups, and prostitution was known. Again, in certain groups, divorce and remarriage were not all that difficult to arrange, for men.



Rarely in Mesoamerican society was there much to smile about. More often life was serious, fated, almost desperate, as nature and society combined to make uncertainty the one certainty. These three portraits of figurine groups representing nuclear families (on these pages), plus one of a modern family from highland Chiapas (above right), show a common characteristic—that “aloof dignity that stands for good manners” in Mesoamerican society.³² The bit of playing-with-the-baby in the figurine set shown on the right (unfortunately, it was partly damaged when found) is the rare exception that proves the rule. Relationships between parents and children were seldom warm; distant respect and obedience were the norm. Nor did husbands and wives demonstrate much warmth in their relationships, even in private, judging by surviving descendant cultures and personality types.





VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The Book of Mormon is full of resonating examples of family and kin relations. For instance, when the central structure of Nephite government collapsed, around the Christian era, most arrangements that provided order in Nephite society reverted to a kinship basis. “The people . . . did separate one from another into tribes, every man according to his family and his kindred and friends” (3 Nephi 7:2). “There was no man among them save he had much family and many kindreds and friends” (3 Nephi 7:4). Power and position also depended on networking. Leaders gained and maintained their positions because they mustered the requisite support through extensive kin and friendship networks; the “judges had many friends and kindreds” (3 Nephi 6:27).

The story of Amulek illustrates that an individual’s actions were sometimes constrained due to obligations to his social network. At first Amulek boasted to his fellow citizens in Ammonihah of his prominence and wealth: “I am . . . a man of no small reputation. . . . I have many kindreds and friends, and . . . much riches” (Alma 10:4); and he used that network of relatives to advance the cause of Alma₂, whom he befriended. But when he got mixed up in Alma₂’s politically sensitive church, he was “rejected by those who were once his friends, and also by his father and his kindred” (Alma 15:16) so he ended up driven out of town penniless (see Alma 15:17–9). Similarly, when rebellious Korihor lost his friends and supporters, he became an outcast from Nephite society, being forced to go “about from house to house, begging food for his support” (Alma 30:58).

The tribes and kindreds referred to in the Book of Mormon record, like those known to exist in most Mesoamerican societies, were defined by descent through the male line (see Jacob 1:13; Omni 1:18; Alma 10:1–3; Helaman 1:2; Mormon 1:5). The most senior living descendant of the founding male ancestor spoke for his lineage, the same pattern as in ancient Israel. (Mormon’s being chosen leader of the Nephites while a mere fifteen years of age and with no experience probably reflected his standing as the senior descendant in the Nephi line; see 3 Nephi 5:20 and Mormon 1:5; 2:1.) In order to retain their positions as representatives and

spokesmen for their units, group leaders had to keep a finger on the opinion pulse of their group (note “the minds of the people” in Alma 17:6 and 35:5). A kin-group spokesman made sure by internal discussion and consensus building that the corporate vote he cast in community affairs represented the real feelings of the kin he represented. So if the Nephites followed the general Mesoamerican pattern, when they assembled “to cast in their voices” (Alma 2:6), the political process would not have been a “one man, one vote” referendum but an expression by kin leaders of how their blocs felt about an issue or a candidacy (see Helaman



A Teotihuacan couple and their baby, about A.D. 500.

1:2–5). And when Captain Moroni₁ was building an armed defense coalition for the land, his support “did increase daily because of the assurance of protection that his works” (see Alma 50:12) gave to play-it-safe kindreds who concluded that his policy would be a winner.

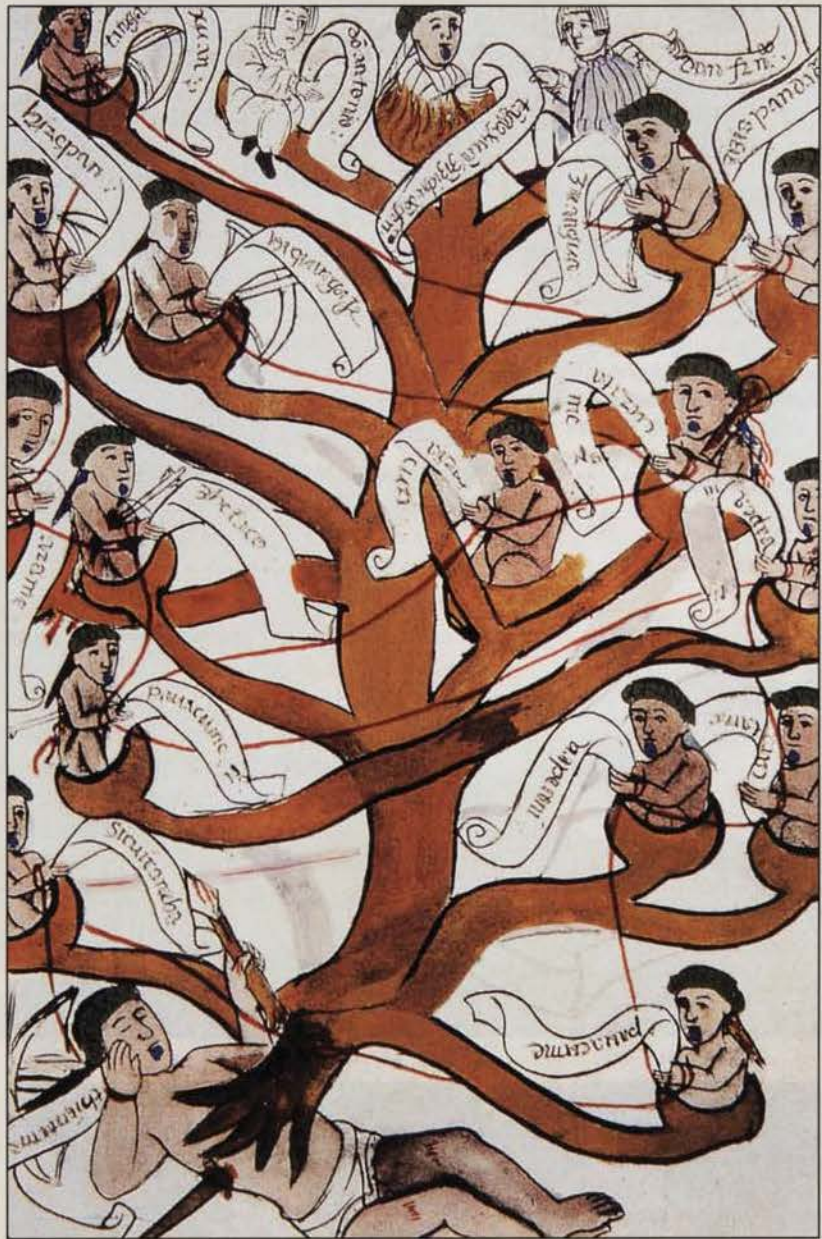
Nephi₁’s brother Jacob₁ rebuked the men of the founding generation of the Nephite colony for their desire to take multiple wives and concubines (see Jacob 2:22–35), but in the long run the practice may have continued among the Nephites, just as it had persisted in ancient Israel (compare Mosiah 11:4; Alma 10:11, “my women”; Helaman 1:4, many sons).

THE IMPORTANCE OF ANCESTORS

Genealogy was crucial to the holders of power and leadership in ancient Mesoamerican societies. It served to validate elite rights. Oral transmission and recitation of genealogy was frequently sufficient in pre-Spanish times. For some of the nobility, among the Classic Maya and the later Mixtec peoples for example, stone monuments or entries in painted books reported and supported specific relationships (such as, ruler A was the son of B), but systematic summaries in chart form have not survived, if they existed in writing.

The European invaders wanted documentary proof of noble ancestry before they would allow some Amerindian rulers to continue their right to impose tribute payments on their subjects. A variety of visual forms for documenting nobility sprang up in the sixteenth century under Spanish literary influence to meet the conquistadors' demand. So while the presentation formats may have come from Spanish mentors, the factual information and the general sense of the importance of descent records were older.

The "Genealogia . . . de Patzcuaro" from Michoacán in west Mexico visualizes one of the metaphors of descent, the tree, which the Tarascans had previously conveyed by oral means. (Note the use of the tree metaphor in the Book of Mormon in Jacob 5 and elsewhere.)²³





Despite their simple living facilities, Mesoamericans were meticulous about personal hygiene. Frequent bathing of both children (shown here from the Florentine Codex) and adults caused admiring comment among some Spanish observers.²⁴

Childhood

A child's first immersion in ritual came soon after birth. Ritual continued to be vital throughout his or her life. In most late Mesoamerican cultures, a belief prevailed that the calendrical position of the day of one's birth determined one's fate, and it is likely that a similar belief was held in earlier times. The parents consulted a priest or diviner to learn whether their infant would have good luck, ill health, or some other defined fate. It was thought that cautionary measures could redirect some of fate's problems and thus allow one to cope without actually negating the destined effects. There may have been exceptional groups or individuals who took this sense of calendar-decreed fate less seriously than the norm, but overall a powerful sense of fatalism was built into an individual's life from his or her earliest days. Still, in general young children were indulged and treated warmly by all around them.

Both boys and girls associated primarily with the mother in the home in the toddler years. Sometimes an older sister was assigned to care for them while the mother performed tasks away from the house. A few toys were sometimes provided, usually miniatures of tools or other artifacts

familiar to their parents, such as tiny dishes or a small bow and arrow. But there was much less elaboration of children's imagination, play, and toys than in cultures of the western European tradition. Life for the young was preparation for their life as adults. They were to learn practical skills, absorb formal and traditional cultural knowledge, and gain the social skills appropriate to the strictly defined roles they would play in years to come. Hence play and training inculcated the emphases on ritual, restraint, and fatalistic acceptance of one's place in society that were so important for adults. Modern individualistic concepts such as having fun or developing the child's potential were completely foreign.

Children were highly valued as projections of the parents into the future. Care was given to provide advantages for them within the circumstances of the family and society.

Male children gained practical knowledge by associating with their fathers in daily activities, but such contact was limited until they had grown big enough (around ten years old) to be somewhat helpful in the field or workshop. Girls, on the other hand, were useful at home from a younger age, at least as caregivers for

The child-rearing practices reported and illustrated in Sahagun's masterful compendium of material on Aztec lifeways were broadly paralleled elsewhere in Mesoamerica. An infant is here shown being put to sleep with a soothing admonition or lullaby, indicated by the scrolls from the mother's mouth, while grandmother supervises.





This Tzotzil Maya child of highland Chiapas has already started learning part of her adult role while "playing."

siblings. Being with their mothers more of the time, they learned about their future responsibilities earlier than males did.

Conscious teaching of moral and cultural standards heavily emphasized admonition. Mesoamerican peoples greatly respected oratorical skills; the formal, poetic manipulation of words was highly valued in general, and it all began with constant repetition of counsel to the young. Even before a child could speak the language, elders and parents told them via standardized exhortations that they ought to follow certain ideals of behavior (see page 77 for an example of a text of admonition).



Midwives presided at childbirth and commonly received a gift or fee for their service. They not only called on their considerable practical knowledge of obstetrics and herbs but also talked the mother through the birth process with a stream of instruction, ritual blessings, and exhortations.



Continuity of social and cultural life was ensured by the transmission of knowledge and values, particularly through women to their children. Alma 43:45–47 recognized that in the case of the “sons of Helaman,” whose faith was molded by their mothers. The importance of this relationship continues today among these people of Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala.

Infants were carried most of the time, in arms or on the hip or tied onto the back with a cloth garment. Since house floors were usually of earth, and the hot, ashy hearth was at floor level, only fully mobile children were turned loose. (Classic, south-central Veracruz)

An Aztec mother warns her children to be especially careful as she sends them outside on a day predicted by the astrological calendar to be unlucky. (Florentine Codex)



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The Book of Mormon discusses the proper training of children so that they might bring joy and credit to their parents. Strong efforts were necessary because, it was believed, men and women become “carnal and devilish” (Mosiah 16:3; see Helaman 12:4) despite the initial innocence of infants (see Moroni 8). The Book of Mormon emphasizes both good and bad examples of adult influence on children. Lehi’s and Sariah’s concern for their children at the beginning of the account sets the tone (see, for example, 1 Nephi 2:8–19 and 18:17–9). Benjamin was immensely concerned that his sons have advantages (see Mosiah 1:2–8). A Nephite man’s care for the welfare of his children was considered to be as important as his support of liberty and of his wife (see Alma 48:10). Teaching children was systematically enjoined as a duty to be pursued with diligence (see, for example, 4 Nephi 1:38). Conversely, the negative examples of Laman and Lemuel, the priests of Noah, and other flawed parents on their descendants are pointed out over and over (see, for example, Mosiah 19:11–2; 20:3; 25:12).

The Nephite record also communicates a fatalistic, melancholy sense that sounds

virtually Mesoamerican. Jacob tells us that “the time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people . . . [and] we did mourn out our days” (Jacob 7:26). Many prophecies carried the sense of an inescapable, decreed fate awaiting the people because of their desire for evil (see 1 Nephi 12:1–5, 15, 19–23; Enos 1:23; Alma 45:9–14; Helaman 13:6–38). Alma counseled his sons, “Be sober” (Alma 37:47; 38:15); Benjamin urged parents to teach their children “to walk in . . . soberness” (Mosiah 4:15). The child Mormon was praised for being “a sober child” (Mormon 1:2). It is no surprise that no humor or lightness is manifested anywhere in the Nephite record.

Exhortation as a teaching method was prevalent among the Nephites. Both the volume of it in the text itself and the general commandment that it should be a routine teaching practice show the emphasis (see 1 Nephi 16:4; Mosiah 2:40; Alma 21:23; Alma 39–42; Helaman 6:4; Moroni 6:9). The frequent observation of ritual was another form of instruction, in a sense, that was engrained in both Mesoamerican and Nephite life.⁵⁵

Youth

From age ten to about twenty, young people were pressed hard by society to fit into the cultural mold of a responsible adult. The hard realities of economic life did not permit any teenage interval of freedom from responsibility such as many of today's young people enjoy, or endure. The aim in Mesoamerican society was to move the immature as quickly as they could qualify to the duties, privileges, and dignity of adulthood. Age, not youth, was considered desirable; shouldering mature responsibilities, not postponing them, was the ideal. Young men could claim no power, had few resources, and drew little respect or privilege. Young women were even less significant socially, except for their potential as mothers.

As soon as youths of either gender were capable of performing chores, they were pressed to carry them out. Most families needed every hand to work. Boys carried water and firewood by age five, and their responsibilities increased until by age thirteen or fourteen they could help clear a field, plant and harvest, or fish alone. Girls gathered herbs, brought water and wood, swept the floor and yard, and tended younger children. An Aztec girl was expected to have mastered the art of making perfect tortillas by age thirteen and of weaving by fourteen. With all these activities there were sacred and social meanings, taboos, and rules to be observed about how, how

not, and why to do everything.

The children tended to model their behavior on their mothers' or fathers' actions; this was also reinforced verbally. Demonstrations and instructions were bracketed with oral urgings, not only regarding the work as such but also on the morality it involved. Other older persons—relatives, teachers, priests—also made a practice of instructing the young. Key values instilled were obedience, respect for one's elders, diligence, and discretion. Stubborn or rebellious youth could be punished harshly by such measures as whipping or forcing them to sleep on hard, wet ground.

Parents who filled special roles in society trained their children in those specialties. Thus the son of a priest started along the way to literacy and participation in that role unless he seemed unfit for the calling, or a girl learned the marketplace sales skills of her mother. By their wealth and position, the social elite obviously had greater resources (for example, teachers hired to help a son learn about the society's books) than commoners to educate their children.

Young men were typically instructed in military matters. In some groups males between sixteen and twenty lived in a village men's house apart from their families, where they were trained in war and other matters.

Centers of substantial population often

A Maya ruler instructs a junior noble regarding texts or books that sit beside the latter, much as Benjamin did his sons nine hundred years before that (see Mosiah 1:2–8). Notice what appears to be a book next to the young man, which reminds us of Benjamin's emphasis to his princes on the importance and significance of mastering the records.

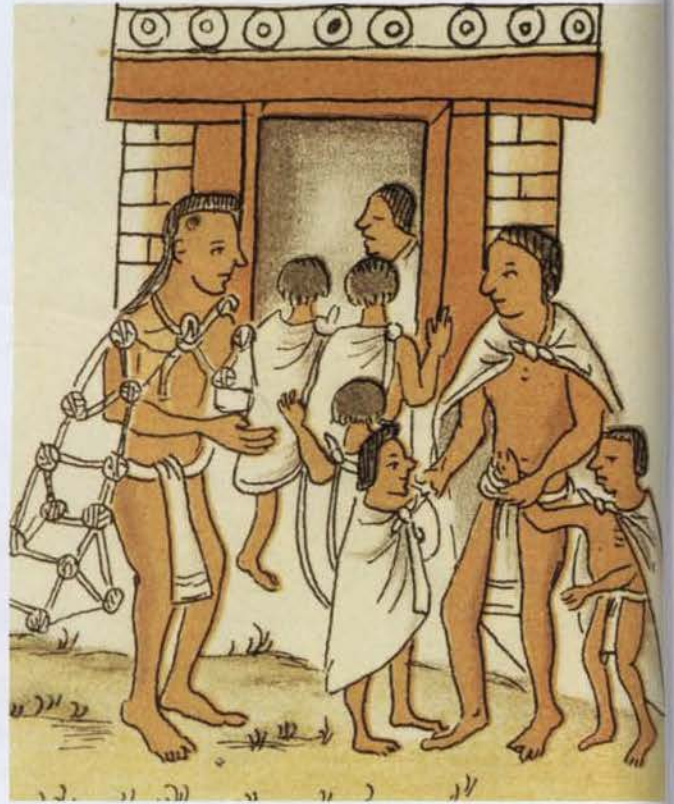


An Aztec mother teaches weaving to her daughter at home. (Codex Mendoza)





A determinedly rebellious Aztec boy was taught in vigorous fashion to conform to the demands of parents and society. One creative mode of discipline was to hold the rebel's head above a fire into which a handful of chili peppers had been thrown (from the Codex Mendoza).



Boys are delivered by their father to the priest in charge of the Aztec community school (from Sahagun).

had schools that were operated by priests in conjunction with a temple. Boys in their early teen years were instructed in serious aspects of the culture, especially the lore, mythology, and speaking skills that a man of influence was expected to master. Both young men and women were likely to get some formal training also in singing and dancing, but the material they learned was always related to sacred, traditional matters; little merely popular music or entertainment existed. After early childhood there was little "fun" for youths of either gender; nevertheless, given human nature, we suppose there were inevitably certain moments of laughter and light talk among the youth.

In smaller communities, greater informality in teaching and learning and even less literacy were the norm. But even farmers had a great body of lore to learn, such as knowledge about plants and cultivation,

techniques for building and repairing devices, and getting along in the forest. Conscientious fathers instructed their sons as far as ability and time permitted, but men in small settlements could only pass on their knowledge orally. It was the priests and specialists who controlled the vast store of botanical, medical, astronomical, and sacred information accumulated at the upper social levels of the cultures.

Marrying and becoming a parent were keys to attaining social standing as a full-fledged man or woman. Military action was also a key qualifier for manhood in the more militant groups. But individual youths could not speed up becoming an adult by precociously going off on their own. There was nowhere to go; nobody could exist on their own, for only within networks of kin and allies could anyone survive in a society where group, not individual, was the key.



In Aztec society a wedding involved a long sermon (or sermons) followed by literally tying the knot. The union was not formalized until the pair had separately completed several days of religious penance following the ceremony.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Nothing in the Book of Mormon suggests the presence of formal schools, although the fact that King Benjamin “caused” that his sons be taught hints that priests or other skilled persons did the instructing (Mosiah 1:2), but then that was in the royal court. Mormon’s childhood also sounds very exceptional; by “about ten years of age” he “began to be learned somewhat after the manner of the learning of my people” (nothing is said of his father’s role), but by age twenty-four he was considered mature (Mormon 1:2; see 1:3). Enos’s pattern of learning from his father personally may have been more the norm (see Enos 1:1).

How long the social category youth lasted is not clear. The case of Alma₂’s sons suggests (as does Mormon’s maturity at age twenty-four) that youth might have extended into a man’s twenties, perhaps until his marriage. Shiblon was considered by his father still to be “in thy youth” (Alma 37:35), yet he was older than, and was

held up as an example to, his brother Corianton, who was mature enough to travel alone on religious business (see Alma 31:37) and had gone by himself to another land in pursuit of a sexual liaison (see Alma 39:10). From the norms of ancient civilized society, just as in Old World Israel, it would be more plausible that the “youth,” Shiblon, was twenty-three and Corianton was twenty-one than that they were each, say, three years younger.

What Alma₂ set as values for his sons sounds characteristic of Mesoamerican values: be diligent, temperate, and humble; bridle your passions; and do not be idle (see Alma 38:10–2). On the opposite hand, values and behaviors condemned by the prophet Samuel, and that would have been taught as negative ideals to the youth, are also what we might expect to find condemned in Mesoamerican culture: great pride, boasting, strifes, persecutions, and envyings (see Helaman 13:22, 27).

AN AZTEC SPEECH URGING A YOUNG MAN TO PREPARE FOR ADULT LIFE

Even though you may long for women, hold back, hold back with your heart until you are a grown man, strong and robust.

Look at the maguey plant.
If it is opened before it has grown
and its liquid is taken out,
it has no substance.
It does not produce liquid; it is useless.
Before it is opened
to withdraw its water,
it should be allowed to grow and attain full size.
Then its sweet water is removed
all in good time.

This is how you must act:
before you know woman
you must grow and be a complete man.
And then you will be ready for marriage;
you will beget children of good stature,
healthy, agile, and comely.^{5b}



Elaborate symbolic headdresses and fancy garb distinguish the standing row of men as high-ranking gentlemen, no doubt nobles by descent. Their captives, from a neighboring city, are probably doomed to bondage, if allowed to live. These appear on a mural at the ruined site of Bonampak, Chiapas, dating around A.D. 800.

Social Rank

In all civilizations until recently, a hierarchy of prestige or rank existed in which one's social position at birth largely determined one's life chances. The ladder of rank typically had a small proportion of greatly privileged people at the top and a large mass of commoners below. Slaves or serfs were still lower. Relatively few were in a situation comparable to the modern world's middle class or had any prospects of moving up to a higher level. That was the case in Mesoamerica.

A hereditary nobility stood at the top. Sometimes exploits in war or other unusual situations might thrust a new leader upward on the heap who was not a noble, but he would as quickly as possible imitate the elite ways in order to wipe out any memory of his humbler origin. He would marry an upper-class woman, try to purge and skew the historical and genealogical records to make himself look better, and

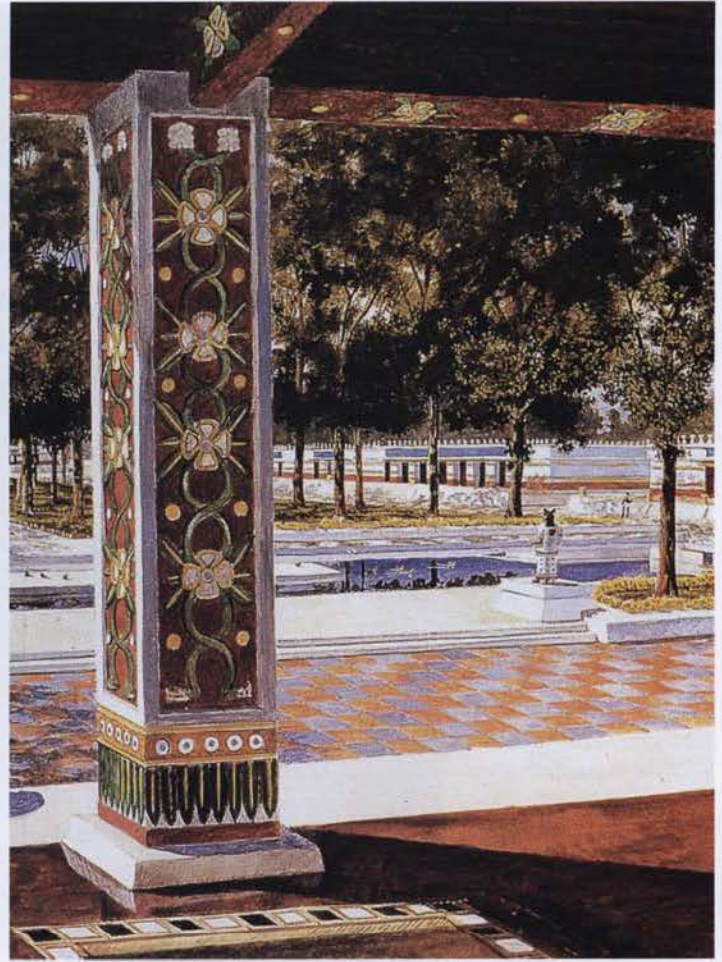
take on manners appropriate to his newly privileged position.

It is important when reading ancient traditions or interpreting ancient art on stone or paper to realize that the record keepers and artists were of the social elite—kings, prominent priests, officials, or their families—or else worked at their direction. Their position in society affected what they represented or wrote about. On the other hand, it is much more difficult to learn how simple people lived. No doubt their lives were mainly concerned with immediate survival—bread-and-butter and life-and-death issues—rather than politics, war, theology, or theory.

Commoners accepted this social arrangement in part because they knew no alternative. There had to be leaders—to organize defense, to glorify community or tribe and build morale, to negotiate with foreigners, and to judge and quell disputes. Those possessing the abilities to carry out those tasks passed on their power to family members where possible;



Rich clothing and adornments on another Maya Late Classic figurine combine with an arrogant facial expression to suggest a person like those who "turn[ed] their backs on the poor" (Helaman 6:39).



The topmost rank in Aztec society, and no doubt in others that preceded it, enjoyed the choicest perquisites and highest prestige that could be provided. This sumptuous palace garden (as reconstructed by an artist on the basis of Spanish descriptions) was in the palace area of the Aztec emperor.

thus a class of favored nobles was maintained. The "taxpayers" were saddled with the responsibility to support not only the ruler himself and his immediate family but also a whole class of minor nobles who were descended from earlier rulers.

Priests or religious teachers as well as staff functionaries, such as officers, clerks, and archivists attached to the royal court, were also inevitable. By and large, all those in positions of any power were recruited from or were closely linked with the nobility. However, being of the nobility was not a guarantee of wealth, for lands or fortunes could be lost because of natural disasters, squandered by foolish living, or dispersed by having to be divided among many descendants. And nonnobles could find ways of their own to accumulate wealth. Being a merchant was one way.

Another avenue for climbing in rank was to become a distinguished military man.

The mass of common people were somewhat protected against the impositions and ambitions of the elite by their kinship organization. Tribes, lineages, or extended family networks had their own standing apart from the government.

Several legal categories of slaves and bond servants were known. A very poor family without adequate lands or supporting kin might enter a bond relationship with a wealthy person in order to maintain themselves in a disastrous economic time. Others could become slaves by virtue of being war captives or refugees. However, given agricultural conditions in Mesoamerica, it rarely made economic sense for a master to utilize slaves en masse to labor in his fields (the equivalent of "picking cotton").



A series of figurines made in the Gulf Coast area of the Mexican state of Campeche and dating to about A.D. 700 shows this "dirty-old-man" theme. The man and woman are thought to represent a particular god and goddess, but the behavior pictured suggests practices open to the top social rank, such as the priests of Noah and their "harlots" (Mosiah 11:14).



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

According to the record, agrees with this Mesoamerican characterization. Overall, not only rank differences but a tendency to fall into a formalized class structure was noted (see Alma 32:2; 3 Nephi 6:12, where "class" would be more accurate than "rank" in today's terminology; 4 Nephi 1:26). Virtually no information is provided in the Nephite account concerning commoners (the freemen of Alma 51, presumably), since the record keepers were of the elite. The Book of Mormon mentions or implies an underclass of bond servants or slaves at some points. King Benjamin forbade slavery, which would have been unnecessary had it not formerly been prevalent (see Mosiah 2:13; 7:15;

Alma 27:8–9; 61:12; etc.), and servants in a socially fixed sense continued through most of Book of Mormon history. For the Lamanites, see Mosiah 24:8–18; and Alma 17:23, 25, 28.

Claims to noble, or at least elite, privileges were a constant problem in Nephite society; "those of high birth" mentioned in Alma 51:8 are an example of the claimants. Their demand to be supported in the manner they desired would have caused a burden for the common folks. Consider several other cases: the frustration of "the poor class of people" expressed in Alma 32:2–3, in conjunction with the picture of the elite in 31:27–8; see also Mosiah 11:2–6 on the cost of supporting Noah's priests; note the implied condemnation of the usual pattern of exploitative support in Alma 1:26 and compare 4 Nephi 1:26; and, finally, at Alma 30:27–8 consider whether the charges by Korihor of priestly economic abuse would have rung true to "many" (Alma 30:18, echoed in Helaman 16:21) if such abuse by the elite were unknown. Notice further how the Amulonites parlayed their priestly and literacy skills into social and political advantages, and ultimately into a "piece of the action" in the commerce they promoted (see Mosiah 23:35–9; 24:1–8; Alma 21:4; compare 3 Nephi 6:11–2).⁵⁷ Moreover, the break-down of central government reported in 3 Nephi 7 can be seen as a revolt by the mass of people against exorbitant demands by the elite (see 3 Nephi 6:10–2, 15).

Military service could enhance one's social and economic position in Nephite society. Apparently because of Gideon's service as defense chief for King Limhi, a land was later named after him, and he would likely have been its local ruler had he lived (see Mosiah 20:17–22 and Alma 1:7–9). Further, Moroni, chief captain of the Nephite armies for many years, enhanced his prestige and power by the success of his management of military affairs. He obviously was from a powerful and wealthy family to start with (note "the place of his inheritance" in Alma 62:42), so we are not surprised at his appointment as military chief at only twenty-five. But by the time he successfully concluded the long war, he retired to "his own house that he might spend the remainder of his days in peace" and, presumably, prosperity while basking in public approval (Alma 62:43; see 62:42; 48:11–7).



Far left: Another drawing in the Florentine Codex accompanies a moralistic warning to feasters during an Aztec festival not to ignore charity to the poor.

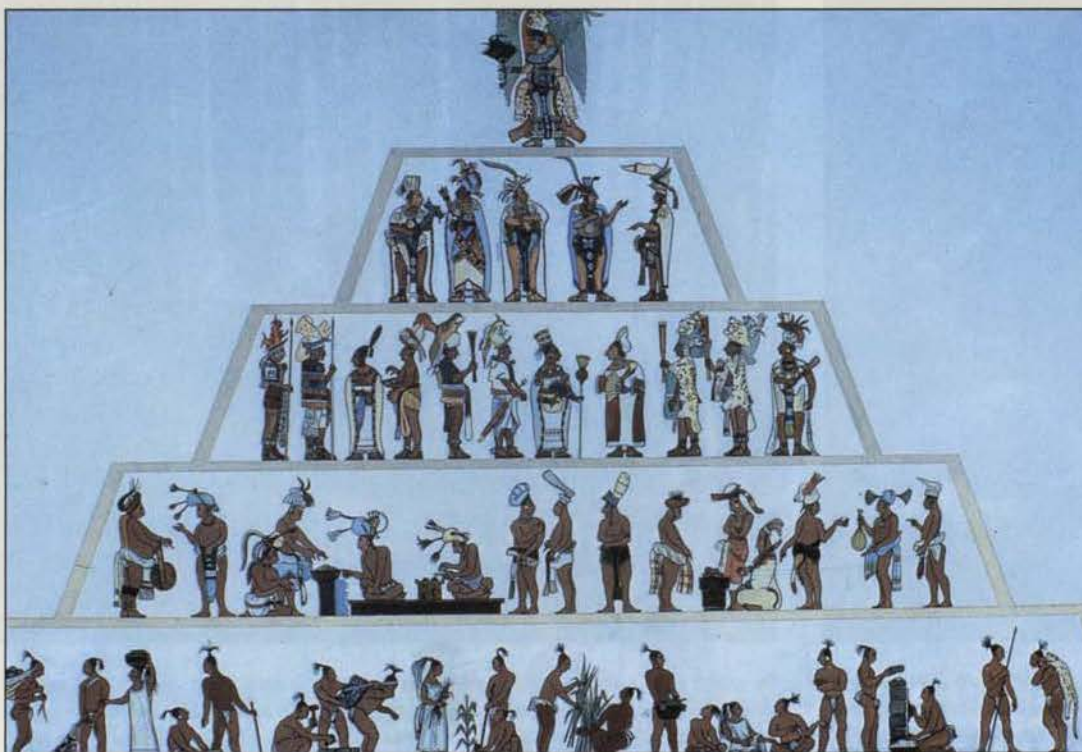
Left: In the Aztec state, slaves such as these, who had had to sell themselves in order to eat during a time of famine, were marked by a collar device that proclaimed their restricted standing, as shown by Father Sahagun.

CLASS STRUCTURE

We have a fairly detailed description of the social structure of the Cuicatecs, a people who lived in the northern highlands of Mexico's Oaxaca state at the time the Spaniards arrived.⁵⁸ Their class structure is representative of the scheme in many other parts of Mesoamerica. The top two levels consisted of categories of persons with different powers and privileges. Royalty included the actual ruler of the state as well as his aides and counselors, who held a measure of quasi-independent administrative power. Below them in rank were army officers, priests, and other noble hangers-on. The mass of the populace were common peasant farmers and craftsmen.

SOCIAL STRATA AMONG THE CUICATECS

ROYALTY	Traditional patrimonial ruler, overlord of the state Counselor or "consultant" to the overlord Administrative staff of elders, kin to the lord
ARISTOCRACY	Minor lords, magistrates, with rights to tax certain settlements Army officers Priests Other "unemployed" members of the aristocracy Administrative assistants to the overlord stationed in local communities
COMMONERS	Female curers or medics, and traders (social status ambiguous) Free commoners—the bulk of the peasantry. Also servants, and army recruits in time of war
SLAVES	Slaves; prisoners of war; sacrificial victims



An artist's display of social strata in Maya society, around A.D. 600–700, uses a pyramid format to show the ranks or classes. Except for details, the social structure of the Cuicatec was about the same.



A young commoner woman is here sculpted in the very early Xochipala style of west-central Mexico (ca. 1500 B.C.).

Women

Everyone knows that women were in a disadvantaged social and economic position in the ancient civilized world. Men always had much more privilege to come and go as they pleased and to make decisions without regard to their spouses. Social standards and cultural patterns severely limited what women were allowed to do, short of their outright defiance. Among other reasons, this differentiation by gender resulted from women's need to care for their children. Furthermore, their living skills usually centered on domestic matters.

When dealing with the world away from home they were heavily dependent on males. On the other hand, as mothers or potential mothers they were given a certain measure of honor. Broadly speaking, Mesoamerican women fell near the world norm in that they received a significant measure of respect yet were unquestionably subordinate to males.

Some public activities were open to women. For example, ritual and herbal

curing and divination were done by females in some cultural situations. They were not expected to participate in warfare, although women and even their children sometimes accompanied warriors on longer expeditions where duties of cooking and foraging for food and shelter, or of course garrison duty, demanded such support.

But in the commercial sphere, women commonly participated in the town market. In some regions, the power and independence females could attain were substantial.

Typically, men and women performed different economic tasks. Cooking and weaving were almost entirely carried out by women. Men did the heavier work, especially in field preparation, although gardens near the residence of the family could be worked by either sex as opportunity allowed.

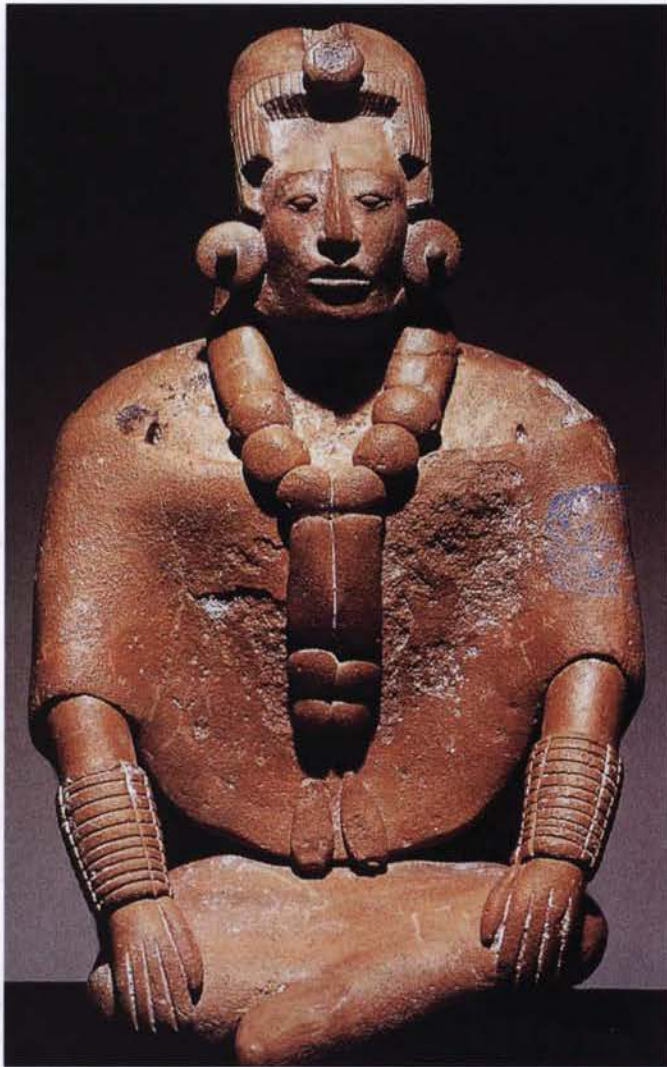
As suggested above, what we know about the personalities of Mesoamerican peoples leads us to believe that typically men and women were relatively unexpressive toward mates or other family members.



Foremost among a woman's concerns was her family. It appears that a wife's relation to her husband was governed strongly by a sense of duty, but her connection to her children was based more on love and hope for their future. This striking Maya Late Classic pair illustrate the latter.



The primary task of a wife and mother was to prepare food, especially maize. Over her lifetime a woman might spend fifty thousand hours grinding corn for, shaping, and cooking up to one million tortillas! At meals she first served older males, then she ate with the children. There were no family meals as such, nor was there much conversation while dining (eating, especially eating corn items, had an atmosphere of sacredness about it).



While they were not visible movers and shakers in public life, certain women were esteemed and had power in their own right. This dowager wife of a Maya lord is modeled in the Jaina style and comes from the state of Campeche around A.D. 650. This illustrates how an upper-class Maya female might have borne herself. Earlier nobility would have maintained a similar demeanor.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The Book of Mormon provides no examples of Nephite women who were powerful in government. (Among the Lamanites, respected queens are twice mentioned, although they did not possess independent power, judging by Alma 19, 22, and 47.) In desperate circumstances females could be armed for battle (for example, see Alma 54:12), but for normal warfare they are not mentioned, so they either stayed home or were camp helpers (note Alma 58:31).

The Nephite ideal saw women in the role of mother (see Alma 56:47–8), where success was considered to consist of bearing and rearing valiant sons. Aside from Lehi's wife, Sariah, or the antiheroine, the daughter of Jared (see Ether 8), daughters or wives are never presented as personalities. They were expected to be good workers in domestic tasks, with emphasis on weaving (see Mosiah 10:5 and Helaman 6:13). Still, alternate roles, such as selling at the market, would have been available to them, judging by conditions among their probable descendants.

The mentions or hints of harlots, concubines, and multiple wives in the scriptural record imply that those lesser social positions existed because of the impositions of men upon the women. Proper females were expected to be chaste, and one man ideally had one wife, although that rule had exceptions.

The Book of Mormon pictures male-female relationships as quite formal; there are only a few points where the text hints that emotions stronger than respect played a part in how mates treated each other. Parent-child relationships too come across as rather stiff.



Young unmarried women normally had clear, if limited, expectations. The fact that most of them stayed in the home to learn directly from their mothers meant that the girls had some time to share with nearby friends, while boys spent more time in the scattered fields or at other work scenes.



Several types of disease are depicted on ancient figurines. This one showing an ulcerous growth on the face dates before 600 B.C., but no doubt the condition continued into later times.

Health

Sickness was a constant problem anciently. Some scholars have mistakenly considered the New World a virtual paradise for its lack of some of the serious Old World diseases. It is true that epidemic diseases were limited in occurrence in America, and certain illnesses introduced by the conquering Europeans did cause sudden, widespread deaths when first introduced. However, recent research has shown that the factors behind these conditions were complicated. Many of the same diseases known in the Old World were already present in pre-Columbian America, but their effects were restrained. In Europe, Asia, and Africa,

Some of the manifestations of illness shown in art have not been definitely identified with clinical diseases known today, although they probably could be with more systematic study. This specimen is from Nayarit in western Mexico, thought to date in the period A.D. 200–800.



cities were breeding places of the most deadly illnesses, and the large numbers of domestic animals kept were reservoirs for various infections. Mesoamerican cities were healthier because they were less crowded and because few animals were kept there. When the Spaniards forced the native people into crowded settlements (to control and Christianize them), their relatively healthy situation tended to weaken.⁵⁹

Illnesses on this side of the ocean tended to be more endemic and probably were connected with nutritional stress in many cases. The basic foods—corn, beans, and squash—provided for most needs when supplemented adequately by a wide array of other items, but those desirable additions came into short supply whenever population density increased enough so that even the basic foods might run short. When the amount of cultivated land per family was reduced due to a growing population, the soil could not stay idle long enough to rejuvenate before necessity demanded that it be cultivated again. The result was not only reduced crop production but also lessened nutritional quality. Furthermore, nonstaple and wild animal foods and plant supplements were more difficult to obtain. For example, when the acreage anciently exploited was compared to indicators of ill health in skeletons of the ninth century A.D., when the city of Copan in Honduras suffered serious decline, a clear correlation was found.⁶⁰

The diet of the elite population on the one hand and of common folk on the other differed, of course. The Aztec king Montezuma daily ate from a huge array of foods, including fresh fish carried more than 150 miles by runners from the Gulf of Mexico. Yet poor people sometimes wondered how they could get anything to eat at all.

There were, of course, periodic famines due to climatic irregularities, yet perhaps more telling on health in general was the shortage of food that occurred annually during the months between exhausting the old maize crop and the ripening of the new supply.

Mesoamericans treated ailments mainly through herbal remedies⁶¹ and ritual healing at the hands of several sorts of curers. One cause of illness was thought to be violating the proper use of foods classified as “hot” or “cold” (without any reference to their actual temperature); imprudent mixing of those categories in the diet was believed to result in specific symptoms. (The Spaniards brought a similar set of notions that was Greek in origin, while the Chinese used still another scheme that was quite similar.)

Among health maintenance practices, the steam bath (resembling the sauna of northern Eurasia) was prominent.

One cure attempted was skull surgery; an opening was cut through the bone in some cases, perhaps releasing pressure resulting from some trauma. Healing of

THE DENTIST

This sketch, copied from a mural showing Tlaloacan (paradise) in the Temple of Agriculture at Teotihuacan, seems to show a dentist doing something with a patient's mouth or teeth employing a stone knife. One dental “beautification” practice among the Maya involved inlaying front teeth with a design in delicately cut semiprecious stone. Perhaps that is what is represented here.



the bone is evidence that sometimes recovery resulted.

Virtually all beliefs about health—causes, diagnoses, treatments, good health—involved sacredness. Illness was never simply something that happened in a mechanically operating world. Astrological luck, breaking of social or religious rules, or bad magic by an enemy were supposed to be at fault. The solutions invariably demanded following certain rituals, even if taking an herbal concoction was also involved.



Famines were recorded in traditions preserved among a number of Mesoamerican peoples. Malnourishment may always have been a health problem, but children and the elderly must have been the hardest hit. (See Alma 62:39, for example.)



This modeled scene from west Mexico seems to show a shaman (spiritual healer) giving a hands-on curing treatment. Shamans, generally like counterparts known particularly well in Siberia, still diagnose and treat patients by relying on guidance from a guardian spirit who is accessed by going into a trance.



Old age (however many years that might have meant) could be considered one of the "illnesses" of the ancients. Most people lived hard, draining lives with few comforts to enjoy. It is doubtful that more than a small proportion survived to enjoy "the golden years," as we now euphemistically refer to advanced age.



he true doctor.
He is a wise man (tlamatini);
he imparts life.

A tried specialist,
he has worked with herbs, stones, trees, and roots.
His remedies have been tested;
he examines, he experiments,
he alleviates sickness.
He massages aches and sets broken bones.
he administers purges and potions;
he bleeds his patients;
he cuts and he sews the wound;
he brings about reactions;
he stanches the bleeding with ashes.
The false physician.
He ridicules and deceives the people

As this characterization shows, the Aztecs had the same problem of distinguishing good from bad practitioners that modern people have.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

In Mormon's record there is no evidence that Book of Mormon peoples suffered from epidemic diseases, but there is mention of less serious illness. Specifically, "there were some who died with fevers" that were very frequent "by the nature of the climate," but the herbal remedies known were said to be generally effective against those maladies (Alma 46:40). Otherwise, reference is made only to "all manner of diseases" (Mosiah 17:16; Alma 9:22).

Warfare likely took a serious toll in death and disablement (see, for example, Alma 28:2-3; 57:25; Moroni 9:16, 19), yet civilian casualties incidental to war, due especially to

malnutrition, must also have been a serious problem. At the time of the final Nephite wars, a grim picture is painted by Mormon of "widows and their daughters" being left "to wander whithersoever they can for food" (Moroni 9:16). The tenuousness of the food situation at a much earlier date is illustrated in the account of an Amlicite/Lamanite attack on Zarahemla. As a result of the Nephite army's pursuit of the aggressors, "many of their fields of grain were destroyed, . . . trodden down by the hosts of men" (Alma 3:2). As a consequence, the following year "the people were . . . greatly afflicted . . . for the loss of their fields of grain" (Alma 4:2).



A favorite health-enhancing practice was the steam bath. Men used these facilities regularly, women only on special occasions (from Sahagun).

Clothing



It may seem strange to consider clothing under the heading of society rather than of daily life, but in fact the primary function of garments in ancient Mesoamerica was to communicate social position. "Dress was identity." "An individual's clothing immediately designated not only cultural affiliation but rank and status as well."⁶² To cover the body against the elements was secondary. These people in the tropics did not need nor want as many garments as, for example, my Scandinavian ancestors in northern Europe.

A set of five or six basic costume elements for each gender was shared throughout Mesoamerica for millennia. (Comparable elements of modern costume are, for example, shirt and pants for men and blouse and skirt for women.) In a particular region of ancient Mexico or Guatemala, some of the normal repertoire of garments were used or avoided in certain local situations according to climatic

conditions and traditions, but all the core garments were familiar and would have been used in some situations everywhere in Mesoamerica.

The wealthy used sumptuous fabrics and inventive decoration to place themselves visually atop a hierarchy of prestige and privilege and to display icons that signaled their social roles. Which men were rulers, warriors, merchants, or priests could be detected at a glance by anybody sophisticated in the culture. Women's positions were correspondingly made visible. Some materials, like the feathers from certain birds, were prohibited to those not socially entitled to them.⁶³

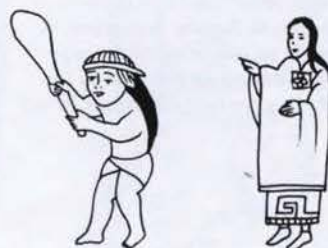
Even the masses observed clothing distinctions. Inhabitants of each local land were marked by wearing its unique variations in garb and ornament. To the practiced eye those details set apart both commoners and higher ranks living in that place from people from all other hometowns.

A famous Mixtec noblewoman of about a thousand years ago, Lady 3 Flint, is pictured in the Codex Zouche-Nuttall dressed in three elaborate costumes appropriate to three events or contexts in her life story.





A mural shows how socially significant costume was around A.D. 800 among the Maya elite at Bonampak, Chiapas. These proud gentlemen all wear the same three garments (except for one fellow whose social role obviously differs), but design details individualize the effect for each one. Headdresses were clearly required, but sandals were optional. (Notice how wearing a long cloak like these men do could have given away the murderer detected by Nephi, according to Helaman 9–10.)





This figurine illustrates what an upper-class Maya woman could have looked like wearing "costly apparel" (Alma 31:28 applies the phrase to the Zoramites. By coincidence, this figurine was made in southern Campeche state, not very distant from where the Zoramites may have dwelt eight centuries earlier.)



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The Book of Mormon is explicit about clothing serving as social insignia. For example, in Alma's day dissonance among "the people of the church" was signaled by their beginning to wear "very costly apparel" (Alma 4:6; see 4:7), and the prophet Samuel condemned the Nephites because they considered "costly apparel" (see Helaman 13:28; see 13:27) a key to a man's status as a prophet. Commoners, on the contrary, relied on "good homely cloth," as well as perhaps possessing a certain amount of "silk and fine-twined linen" (Alma 1:29).

Naturally, style changes occurred in clothing over time. The styles seen by the Spaniards when they conquered the area, or those seen on Classic-era monuments from a millennium earlier, are not exactly what either the Nephites or Lamanites wore during the Book of Mormon period. Yet continuity in the essential elements is evident over thousands of years of the archaeological and artistic record, so that when Book of Mormon people inhabited Mesoamerica, they surely wore some of the basic garment forms characteristic of that area.

At least there is no question that Mesoamerican art shows nothing like the flowing robes of Arabia that some LDS artists have supposed the Book of Mormon peoples wore. Moreover, both Nephites and Lamanites probably left more skin uncovered than Latter-day Saints feel comfortable with today.

This dresslike garment shows off a spectacular design probably made by the batik tie-dye method. It suggests how much social detail we would miss if we had to rely entirely on what archaeologists can dig up, for no such cloth would have been preserved in the earth. This Maya painted vase dating around A.D. 700 was brought to light by modern tomb looters.



Weaving and Textiles



Most garments were not sewn, although certain pieces were. Archaeologists find needles like this one of bone that dates from B.C. times. Mesoamerican garment makers could have tailored their clothes more often than they did in fact, but they preferred the looser fit, perhaps for climatic reasons.

Both plain and elaborate weaving were done in ancient Mesoamerica. Illustrations in native books (codices) combine with some sculptures and modeled ceramic figurines to show tremendous variety and skill in the textile arts.

The Aztecs, for whom we have much information from documents about the period when the Spaniards arrived, made and used huge numbers of garments. Lists of tribute or taxation demanded of certain communities called for large annual shipments of cloth and garments to the capital city. Those objects were given as rewards of privilege to nobles and other upper-level groups in the society or were sold in the markets.

Women were the weavers. For the Aztecs, "The life of a woman from birth to death centered around the production of beautiful, well-made textiles. A newborn baby girl, at her bathing ceremony, was presented all the equipment of women [for weaving]." When a woman died, her weaving implements were destroyed to make them available to her for her journey after death. A woman who wove poorly was held in the lowest regard, being described as lazy, indolent, nonchalant, sullen, and a deceiver.⁶⁴

The highly developed weaving tradition continued among the descendants of the peoples conquered by the Europeans. Today, particularly in highland Guatemala, there is a thriving manifestation of that heritage. Colorful fabrics from there are sold to connoisseurs of fine textiles worldwide.

The thread of choice was cotton. The plants were grown wherever the climate was suitable. Higher elevations were too cool, but the trade and tribute system supplied the needs of people living in those



Only rarely do we get glimpses of actual cloth preserved from the past, like this undated fragment now in the regional museum in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas.



A weaver from thirteen hundred years ago, shown in a Jaina clay sculpture, uses a type of freestanding loom that was no longer used by the time of the Spanish Conquest. (There may well have been other cultural losses too.)

areas. Hand spinning of cotton thread was done by women in many areas as a normal domestic task. On the completed fabrics, elaborate tie-dye techniques were sometimes used, and fancy weaves like brocade and tapestry were produced.

Some vegetable fibers other than cotton were also used, particularly henequen, made from the leaf of the agave plant (the same plant from which the drink pulque was derived). Henequen cloth and other bast (vegetable fiber) threads were woven into fabrics that resembled linen in stiffness. People of rank wore cotton; commoners often made do with the coarser, cheaper fibers. Bark cloth (made from soaked and pounded sheets of bark stripped from the trunks of fig trees) was also used.

Buttons or pin fasteners were not utilized, as far as we know. Sewn or fitted garments were relatively uncommon. A cape was often worn by tying the upper corners into a knot or wrapping a kiltlike piece around the body then tucking in a corner or the end at the belt line.



Turning lint cotton into thread with a hand spindle consumed a great deal of time for those who, like this Guatemalan woman, lived in cotton-producing areas.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The Book of Mormon mentions weaving and textile work in many places. It indicates that considerable skill was involved in their production. For example, Helaman 6:13 reports, "Their women did toil and spin, and did make all manner of cloth, of fine-twined linen and cloth of every kind, to clothe their nakedness." Given the importance of a Mesoamerican woman's weaving in judging her character, the statement in verse 13 may connote, "so the Nephite women were of high character."

A woman weaves on a typical pre-Columbian-style back-strap loom, with Lake Atitlan, Guatemala, in the background.



Ornamentation and Insignia

Mesoamerican peoples were very partial to vivid ornamentation. Nearly all of it had symbolic significance, some social, some political, some religious. We have already noted symbolism exhibited in clothing. Accessories to complete the effect were equally important. Elaborate headdresses often outshone the clothing, and face and body paint added to the effect of one's headdress. Everyday headdresses were often of cloth in the form of a turban wound around the head in various manners. For formal occasions, more elaborate devices were made of intricately worked flowers, feathers, and cloth on a wooden frame. Jewelry added still another dimension to dressing up.

To modern tastes the effect of such exaggerated decor seems garish, but in the Mesoamerican view, at least among some groups, there could never be too much of a good thing. Especially in the later cultures, baroque extravagance was considered superior to modest simplicity or quiet elegance. Farther back in time, cultures such as the Olmec displayed more restraint. That is one of the reasons their art pieces please moderns more than, say, the busy art of the Aztecs.

Rich symbolic elements in the dress-up outfits make it difficult nowadays to distinguish between the concepts of decoration and insignia. Many of the representations or characteristics (such as green stones or green feathers, which betokened "water," hence "life") were there as badges or identifiers of the powers of nature or of the supernatural. They communicated something like, "the bearer is a devotee under the special protection of the supernatural power whose insignia is displayed." Some version of truth, rather than of beauty, was being proclaimed.

Unfortunately, the Spaniards winnowed the supply of ornaments that were preserved. They were interested in native items only for the gold or silver they might incorporate; any decorative materials or costumes that came into their possession had the precious metals stripped from them immediately. Gold and silver objects



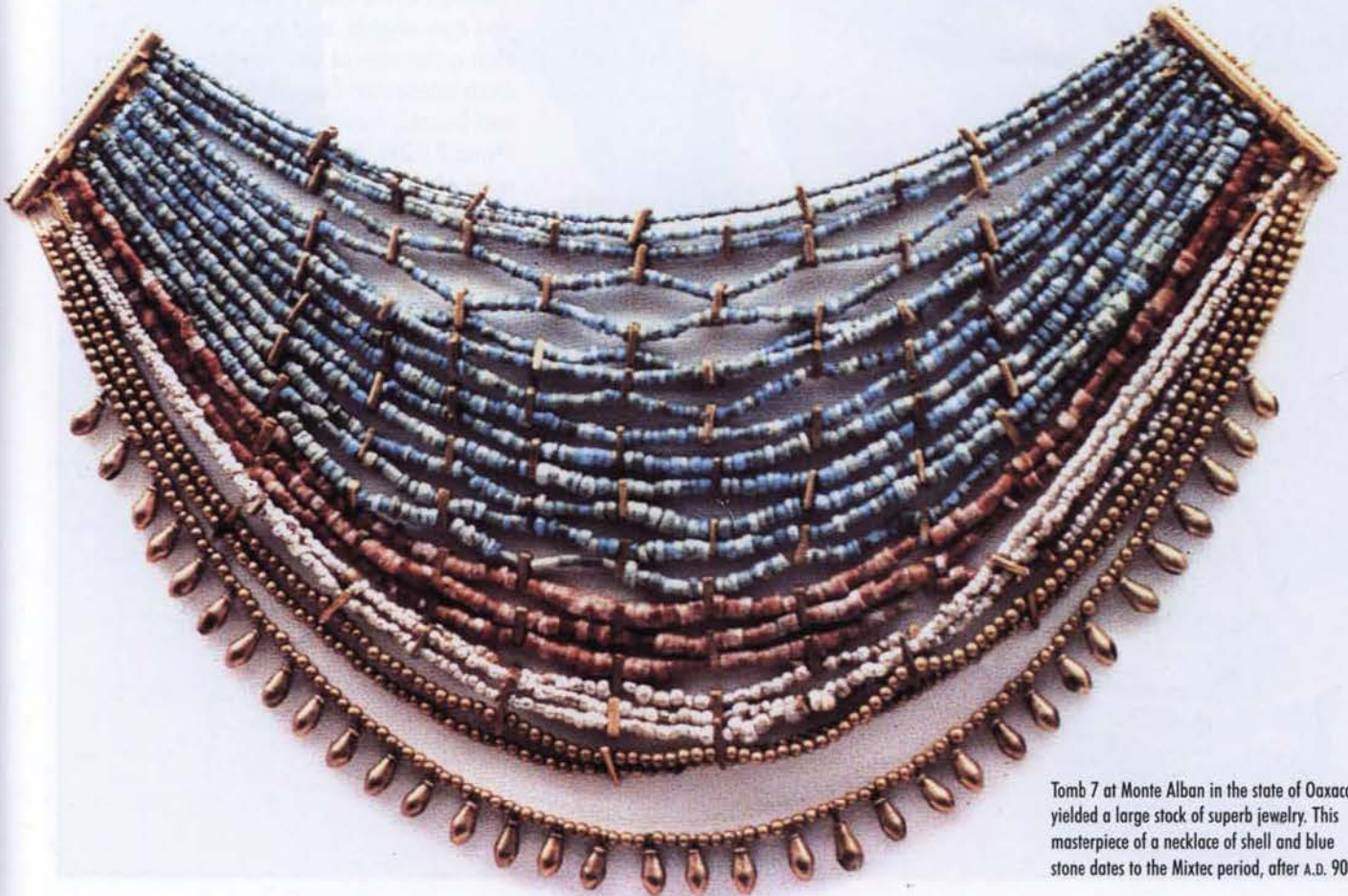
This Jaina-style ceramic figure of a Maya dancer, dating around A.D. 700, shows how ornaments finished a spectacular outfit. Decorative devices inserted in the ear lobes (could this be what the scriptures refer to as ringlets?), the necklace, the fancy breastplate, the bracelets, and an imposing headdress of wicker and cloth are integral to the outfit.



The deep green of jadeite stone was one of the most revered colors. It recalled still waters, the crucial maize plant, and all life-giving vegetation. No wonder beads of the material were put into the mouth of the dead at burial, in token of hoped-for rebirth (this was also done in China). These Olmec-style ear ornaments (inserted through holes in the lobes) date long before 500 B.C., but the popularity of jadeite continued right up to the Spanish Conquest.



Scarring the skin as a form of decoration was not common, but this example shows how far some Mesoamericans went to complete the total effect of a costume. Some tattooing was also done. (Classic Veracruz)



Tomb 7 at Monte Alban in the state of Oaxaca yielded a large stock of superb jewelry. This masterpiece of a necklace of shell and blue stone dates to the Mixtec period, after A.D. 900.



Other lovely materials were also used to decorate the earlobes, like the gold and the varicolored stones in these Maya items (after A.D. 800).

Metals were used primarily for decoration, not for practical objects. A favorite form was the copper or tumbaga (copper-gold alloy) bell like this one. Cast by the lost-wax method, it contained a tinkling stone inside, so that dancing or just walking produced musical accompaniment. Known bells are nearly all dated after A.D. 800, but earlier monuments picture them being worn. (Almost identical bells were made and worn in the Mediterranean area.)

were abundant at the time of the Spanish Conquest, and some of them amazed the Europeans with their technical cleverness or spectacular appearance. But thousands of those objects were melted down by the conquistadors, who were interested only in how many pounds of precious metal they could lay hands on. Some decorative items were sent off to Europe as curiosities, but many of those were lost en route and few were preserved once they got there. Anyway, a large majority of Mesoamerican ornaments were made of perishable materials; not many passed down to descendant peoples, and even fewer were preserved in the ruins to be found by archaeologists. Today we have only a few spectacular pieces to eke out a picture of the ornaments used in pre-Columbian times.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The Book of Mormon says little on this topic. Alma condemned the ornaments worn by the elite among the Zoramite rebels: "Behold, O my God, their costly apparel, and their ringlets, and their bracelets, and their ornaments of gold, and all their precious things that they are ornamented with; and behold, their hearts are set upon them" (Alma 31:28). Precious things are mentioned quite often, but usually in connection with building decoration rather than personal ornamentation. But 4 Nephi 1:24 mentions "all manner of fine pearls" together with "costly apparel" among the features connected to social class distinctions that arose about A.D. 200. If decorative items generally had symbolic significance connected with cult matters, that would agree with the Mesoamerican cultural situation, and it would not surprise us that the strict-minded prophets in the Israelite tradition who kept the Nephite record either condemned or ignored them.

A woman's hairdo was another means for signifying status and enhancing beauty. This striking coiffure is of Olmec age from the Valley of Mexico.





In many communities of modern Mesoamerica, American Indian populations still parade Catholic images from the community's church around town on certain calendared days in the same manner as sacred representations (idols) were treated in pre-Hispanic times. Drinking typically accompanies these celebrations and probably did anciently too.



Routine, nonceremonial drinking was generally frowned upon, but the aged were given more leeway in that regard. This fine ceramic sculpture in Jaina style depicts a drunkard in a manner intended to condemn excessive drinking.

Diversions and Holidays

Entertainment and diversion as we think of them today were concepts of little relevance to ancient Mesoamericans. Life for most people focused on humdrum work and nose kept to the grindstone. Naturally there were occasions to relieve the tedium. The category we think of as religion was so pervasive in Mesoamerican life that we look first to that aspect of culture for clues on what constituted diversions.

A calendar heavy with ceremonial events has deep roots in tradition in this area. When the Spaniards forcibly converted the native peoples to Christianity in the sixteenth century, their local pre-Columbian calendars and events were combined with Spanish saints' days. Images or relics standing for the Catholic saints or the Virgin took on a heavy load of meaning from the native cultures. Processions, feasting, and other worship activities carried on in honor

of the hybrid deities continue still today to follow forms and have meanings once associated with pre-Columbian supernaturals. But those activities also served functions we think of as recreational.

The colonial-era Spaniards lamented how much money and time the Indians "wasted" in their frequent religious holidays. They only partially realized that those activities were tied to the old belief system and to the social system of the community. We now see that the so-called waste provided temporary relief from the harshness of a life that demanded much and gave back little (as was true also of medieval European fairs and saints' days). A common feature of such occasions was the considerable consumption of alcoholic beverages; the periodic release of inhibitions that this drinking triggered apparently helped people cope with the formality and solemnity that characterized everyday relationships and routines.

Mesoamerican market days also provided diversion. Buying or selling in those nominally commercial settings yielded

more than the exchange of goods. The lively market scene allowed locals contact with stimulating strangers in the form of merchants from nearby zones and often even people from enemy lands, under a kind of commercial truce. Participating in the color, bustle, and novelty of the marketplace must have been one of the highlights of an otherwise routine life, especially for children. People might also enjoy watching sleight-of-hand magicians, jugglers, dancers, and musicians.

Strange as it might seem, war too could have served a function of social diversion for men, as did the Crusades for Europeans in the Middle Ages.

We know that certain games were played among the ancient Mesoamericans. Most of our information comes from the elite sector of society. It is uncertain whether commoners played the same games, but at least the young could hardly have been stopped from imitating them in simplified versions.

The best known game was a contest with a rubber ball; the game was called by the Aztecs *tlachtli*. Two opponents faced each other on an elongated court. The ball was struck using only elbows and hips. The object was to drive the ball past the defender into the goal area at the opposite end of the playing space. The movement of the ball was considered symbolic of the sun moving across the heavens and into and out of the underworld, and winning or losing a game was considered a forecast of one's future. For the Aztecs, sacrifices sometimes preceded a game in order to gain approval of and support from the gods. Gambling accompanied the action; at times a player even bet his life on winning a ball game and was sacrificed if he lost. Variant forms of this game are evidenced back to at least 1300 B.C.⁶⁵

Another game, called *patolli* by the Aztecs, was widely played beyond their territory. It too was old, having been around since at least A.D. 500. It was similar to the modern board game Parcheesi (which was adapted from an ancient game of India, *pachisi*). Markers were moved space by space around a cross-shaped board until the winner's piece reached a finish spot. A number of scholars have concluded that the Mesoamerican game was imported anciently directly from Asia because of the startling number of similar-

HUMOR AND WHIMSY

Dr. Munro Edmonson writes of the "brooding religiosity, the aloof dignity that stands for good manners, the formalism that converts games into ceremonies and sports into sacrifices—all the values . . . that set the tone of Middle American cultures."⁶⁷ Yet showing through the grimness of life in Mesoamerica at certain points is what Edmonson refers to as occasional "spontaneous gaiety" and "the normal eventful absurdities" of human life.⁶⁸



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The same would have been true of Book of Mormon peoples. Of course, we expect little lightheartedness to filter through Mormon, the editor of the Nephite account. His entire life was spent in military leadership, and he finally died in the war of his people's extinction.



At the time of the Spanish Conquest, a celebration for the god Kukulcan (equivalent to Quetzalcoatl) in Yucatan involved "clowns" or "comedians." They performed "farces . . . and comedies for the pleasure of the public."⁶⁹ This character, drawn from a scene on a painted Classic Maya pot, reminds us of a clown.



This creation (from the Maya Classic period) stems from some artist's unusual sense of the whimsical side of life.

Related to humor is a sense of keen and innocent observation of nature. This large Aztec-age ceramic sculpture of a spider lightens the heart even today.

ities with the Indian form.⁶⁶ Again sacred elements were crucial, for the four divisions on the Aztec playing board represented the four quarters of the world, and the squares on which the pieces moved represented the days of the calendar.

A few basic toys were made for the use of children, and animal pets were also popular, especially among women and children. Reportedly there was verbal humor, although little or none of that has been preserved (perhaps "you had to be there," culturally, to appreciate it).

CHILDREN'S FUN

Children would have found ways to have pleasant, amusing moments of their own, however solemn the world of the adults around them. Simple games and toys (for example, miniature dishes), play with other children their age, and the comfort of a pet would have been available to children, until their increasing involvement in the adult world crowded out the childhood frivolity.



Figures with movable arms and legs are considered to have been used in ceremonies by shamans or priests, who may have used ventriloquism to make them speak on behalf of spirits. But with the idea around, it is hard to believe that children did not use movable dolls for play. This one is in Teotihuacan style, dated perhaps A.D. 400–500.



This pair seem to be ritually painted and engaged in serious business (the piece, from Veracruz, dates to around A.D. 300–600). But since swings were known, some children surely took advantage of them for sheer pleasure.



A child with a pet acts about the same worldwide. This boy enjoys his tejón, or coatimundi, still a favorite pet among children and women in the Maya area. Rabbits, dogs, and birds were also kept as pets. These little dogs were favorite subjects of the ceramic artists of west Mexico for centuries, starting A.D. 200 or earlier.





Even in small villages the basic ball game was played but under more informal conditions than in cities. This west Mexico ceramic model (about A.D. 200–700) conveys some of the atmosphere—perhaps something like a small town baseball contest in the USA a century ago.



Aztec performers inherited a very old tradition of juggling (Olmec-age figures more than two thousand years earlier show the same thing). Sahagun's Florentine Codex displays this "combo" of Aztec dancer-musicians accompanying a juggler. Perhaps they represent a full-time company of entertainers at work before a group of nobles or in a spot near the marketplace before the public.



Boards for playing the patolli game have been found painted or scratched on ancient floors. It seems to have been a less formally ritualized activity than the ball game, though still sacred in tone.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Under Mosaic law the Israelites assembled frequently to celebrate certain Sabbaths with sacrifices and feasting. The Nephites also observed that law (see Mosiah 2:3 and Alma 30:3), so they too would probably have combined formal ritual events with festivities and a market. Furthermore, there would have been celebrations in connection with political happenings, like the ritually important new year anniversary and coronations. The Lamanite king referred to making "a feast unto my sons

[i.e., subordinate kings], and unto my people" (Alma 20:9); it is likely that there was some calendrical, sacred element in such a feast. All early societies at the same level of civilization as the Nephites and Lamanites participated in similar events. Mesoamerican descendants of Book of Mormon peoples still today follow an entrenched tradition of scheduling ritual holidays that serve several functions simultaneously. Of course we cannot know how many of the Mesoamerican games or other diversions were known to the Nephites.

Cities, Towns, and Villages

Most of Mesoamerica's inhabitants lived in villages ranging in size from fifty to several hundred inhabitants. Village life was considered the ideal pattern.

What we call cities in ancient Mesoamerica were like our cities today in certain ways but very different in others. Experts still quarrel over the definition of a city as well as whether particular sites deserve to be called cities. Yet the fact remains that when the major settlements in Mexico or Central America are compared with those in, say, the Near East, the name *city* clearly deserves to be applied as much to Mesoamerica as to the Old World.

The Hebrew term translated in the Old Testament as "city" (*ir*) was applied to administrative centers over regions regardless of the size of the center. The fundamental meaning of the word may have been "fortress." Even tiny posts for armed garrisons were sometimes called by the term for *cities* in the Bible.⁷⁰ In Mesoamerica the concept was roughly the same. As long as a settlement was constructed according to a plan and was not just a product of slow historical accident, and if it had its own temple structure at its center—a sign of administrative dominance over neighboring places—it probably deserves to be classified as a city.

Some major settlements deserve to



This tiny hamlet on the Pacific coast of Chiapas, Mexico, today illustrates the sort of rural hometown that was the point of reference for many of the common people, whether called Mesoamericans, Nephites, or Lamanites.

be called cities by any standard.

Teotihuacan in central Mexico was one of the most notable (its peak population of probably over one hundred thousand was reached by around A.D. 300), but many others as well, such as tourist attractions Monte Alban, Tikal, and Copan, unquestionably fit in the category of cities by either their sheer size or the intricacy of their plans. In addition, there was an abundance of sites that could well be called towns, judging by their size. Yet even a noted capital city need not be large in population; the historical capitals of the famed Tarascan kingdom on the Aztecs' west side "were not towns of any great consequence"⁷¹ despite the fact that overall the land had a high population density.



A land was usually conceived as a territory bounded by specific physical boundaries—a valley would constitute a land, for example—and governed from a common administrative center. Naturally, a land was also an economic entity; the chief community hosted a regular market that drew buyers from throughout the land and merchants from farther away. Los Trigales, in the Cunen area of Guatemala, shown here, might have qualified as a local land in ancient times.

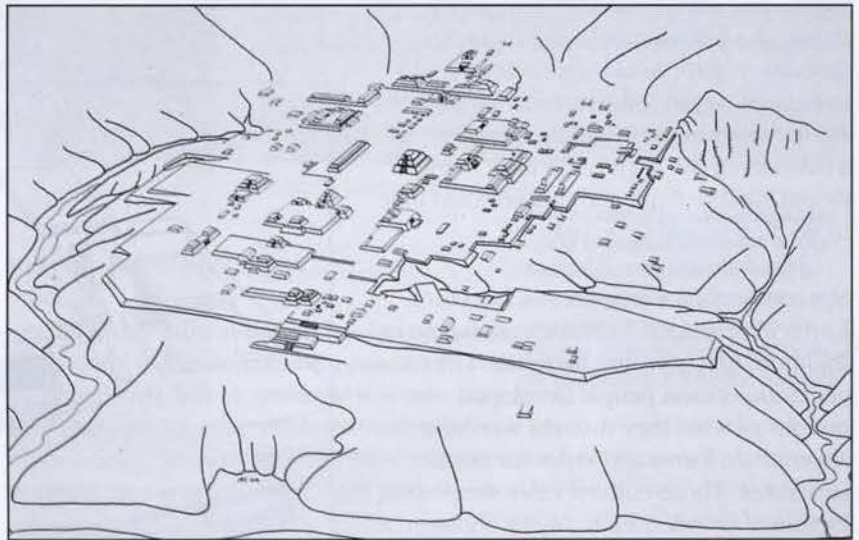


El Mirador, near the northern border of Guatemala, may have been the largest and most spectacular city ever in Mesoamerica. Its peak glory lasted for only a couple of hundred years, in the vicinity of 200 B.C. This artist's reconstruction is based on excavations led by BYU archaeologist Ray T. Matheny.⁷⁴



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The Book of Mormon distinguishes five levels of settlement size: great cities, cities, towns, villages, and small villages.⁷² Book of Mormon cities are often named, but their size clearly varied greatly. Perhaps on the small end of the scale was Helam, built by Alma's people. It was designated a city almost from the moment it was settled—by fewer than five hundred people (see Mosiah 18:35; 23:20). Only four of the more than forty Nephite and Lamanite cities whose names are given in the record are termed “great cities,” although others, unnamed, were conceived as having the same rank (see Helaman 7:22; 3 Nephi 8:14). But we should be cautious about overestimating the actual population size of even the largest of those, for Mormon's record also refers to Jerusalem in Palestine as a “great city” (1 Nephi 1:4) even though its population down to Lehi's time may never have exceeded twenty-five thousand inhabitants (in Solomon's fabled day it had only around three thousand).⁷³



This sketch of the site known as Finca Acapulco in central Chiapas, dating to late Olmec times, shows how a settlement could be placed to take advantage of natural terrain.

Public Architecture

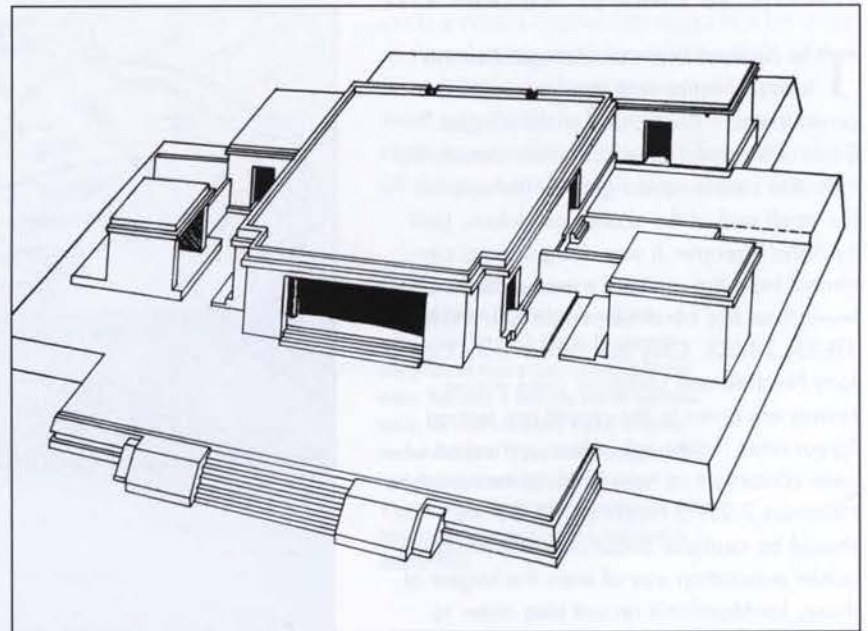
In a civilization so thoroughly infused with sacred matters, the most imposing structures all had religious significance. Archaeologists routinely refer to certain of the ruins today as temples, often without defining very carefully what that term might signify, but we are usually on sound ground in supposing them to have been religious in nature. Not only the size but also the central position and visual dominance of buildings devoted to the divinities were features of all major settlements.

A second component of public architecture was those structures where the rulers resided or carried out their civic functions. However, their activities were in turn so intermingled with religion that it would be arbitrary for us to distinguish neatly residence from temple from civic center. The quarters of the governing, and perhaps the priestly, elite were set apart from the housing for commoners, and they were built on a scale that was correspondingly distinct. Yet the mass of people were used to such differences; perhaps they would have had it no other way, for the impressive appearance of the buildings devoted to the use of their leaders would have been a matter for community pride. Again, however, we should remember that a majority of the population lived in more or less rural settings, and probably had little to do directly with elite persons.

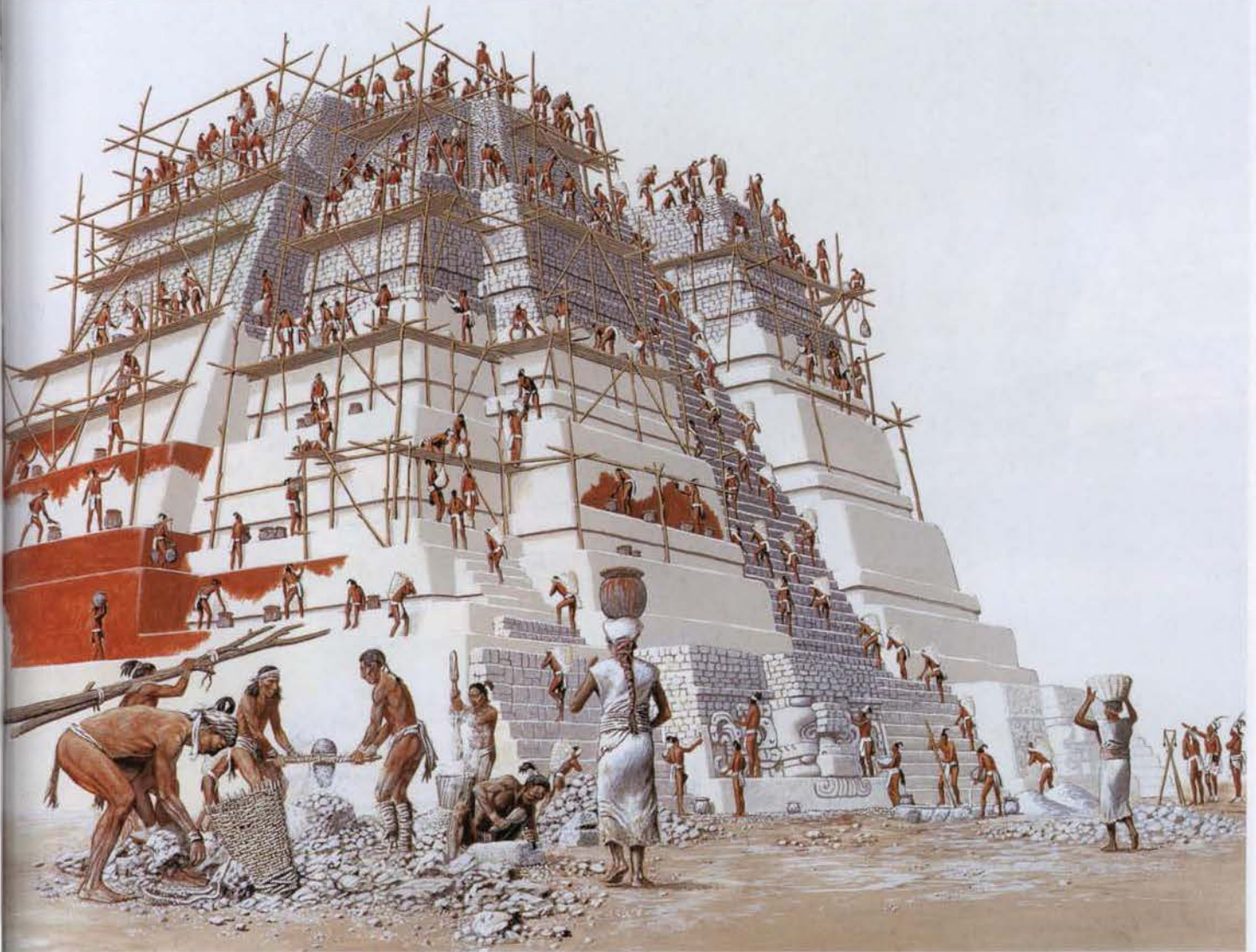
Just as in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, for example, architectural forms were shaped by three influences: tradition, function, and materials. Over generations each people developed notions of what they thought were the appropriate forms and styles for public structures. Those cultural rules were often explained by referring to myths about deities or ancestors. For instance, the basic concept behind a divine center, in Mesoamerica as much as in the Near East, was of a mountain or hill upon which sacred power from heaven descended; contact with the upper, and under, worlds was most likely at that hill, termed the "navel of the earth."⁷⁵ A mound of earth, often covered with a stone sheathing to protect against weathering, was erected there, and atop it the temple proper or



A prominent feature of some of the largest cities was an acropolis or massive platform atop which various public buildings were erected. This famous example at Palenque illustrates the concept.



People in different cultural and ecological areas developed their own architectural styles, although there was wide sharing of concepts throughout Mesoamerica. This flat-roofed style functioned well at the relatively dry site of Chiapa de Corzo on the Grijalva River in the Central Depression, but it would have been unsuitable nearer the Gulf Coast where rainfall might be as much as five times as great. This structure (designated 5-H1 by archaeologists of the BYU New World Archaeological Foundation) is at a site that some Latter-day Saints consider to be the Sidom of the Book of Mormon. It dates to the beginning of the Christian era.



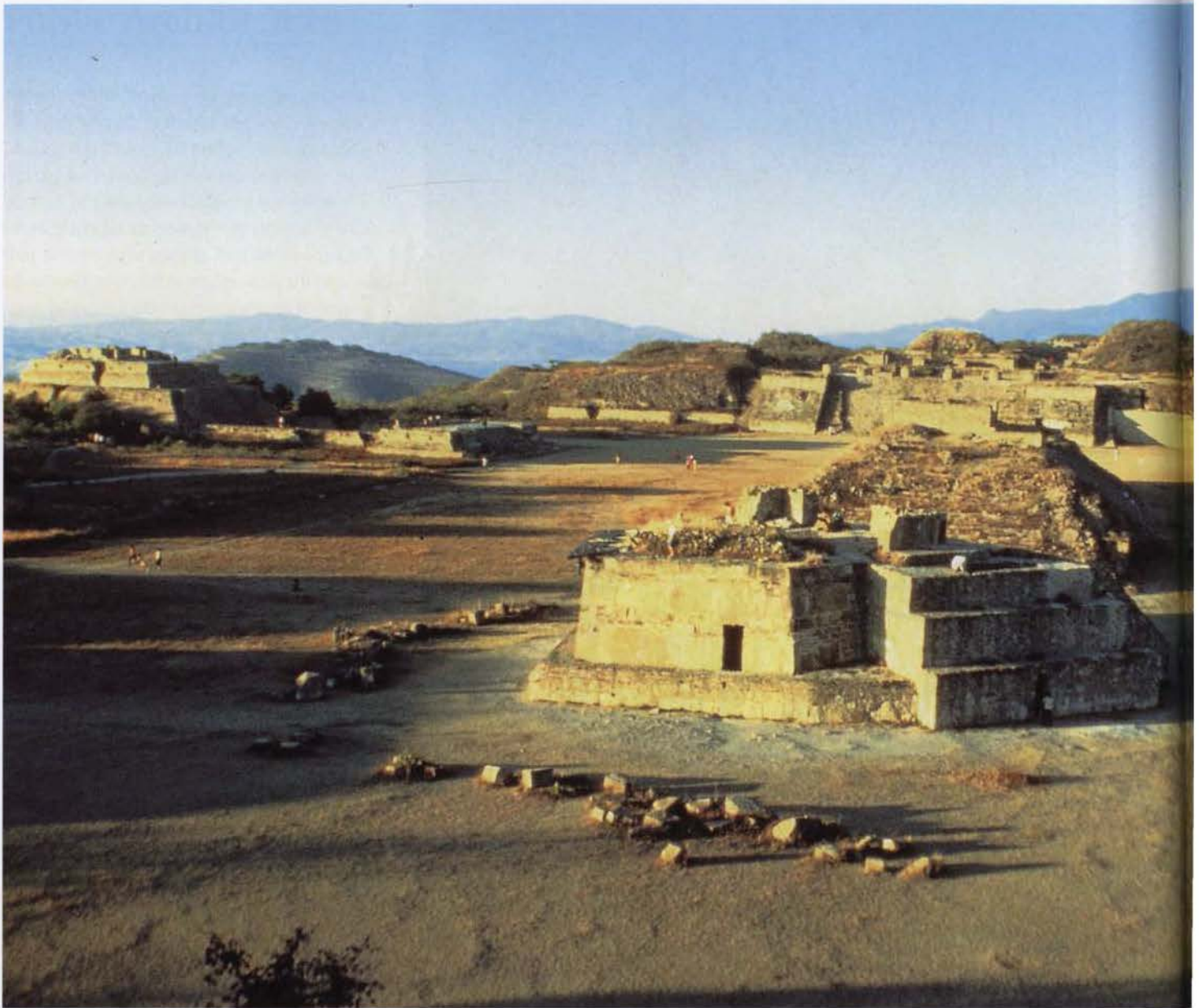
god's house was erected. By extension, a surrounding zone, often walled off from the everyday world, was also thought of as constituting part of the temple.

Variations on the theme of a divine contact point were played out to accommodate various activities. For example, sacrificial altars, spaces for acting out ceremonies, an archive for priestly records, and a place for a market near the sacred mound and plaza were defined according to local emphases and traditions. Moreover, the natural resources accessible in a given spot also affected the architecture. On the central and southern Yucatan peninsula both massive hardwood trees and plenty of limestone for stonework and plaster helped determine how cities were constructed and how they looked. In more arid areas timber was scarce

and convenient building stone hard to procure.

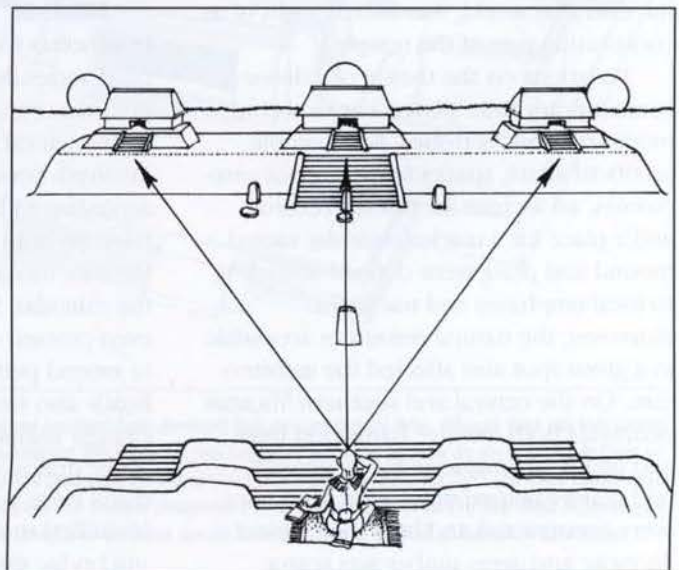
Relatively little attention has been paid by scholars to the engineering practices used anciently, but increasingly it is evident that considerable expertise and some mathematical knowledge must have been involved. Some settlements were placed according to lines of sight to sacred mountaintops or to rising or setting points of the sun, moon, or stars on a certain day in the calendar. Some of these alignments even crossed over intervening hill barriers to extend perhaps hundreds of miles. Roads also were laid out that extended in straight segments for scores of miles. Water drains, dams, canals, and even aqueducts were built. One recent discovery identified the stone abutments for a hanging bridge over a major river.⁷⁶

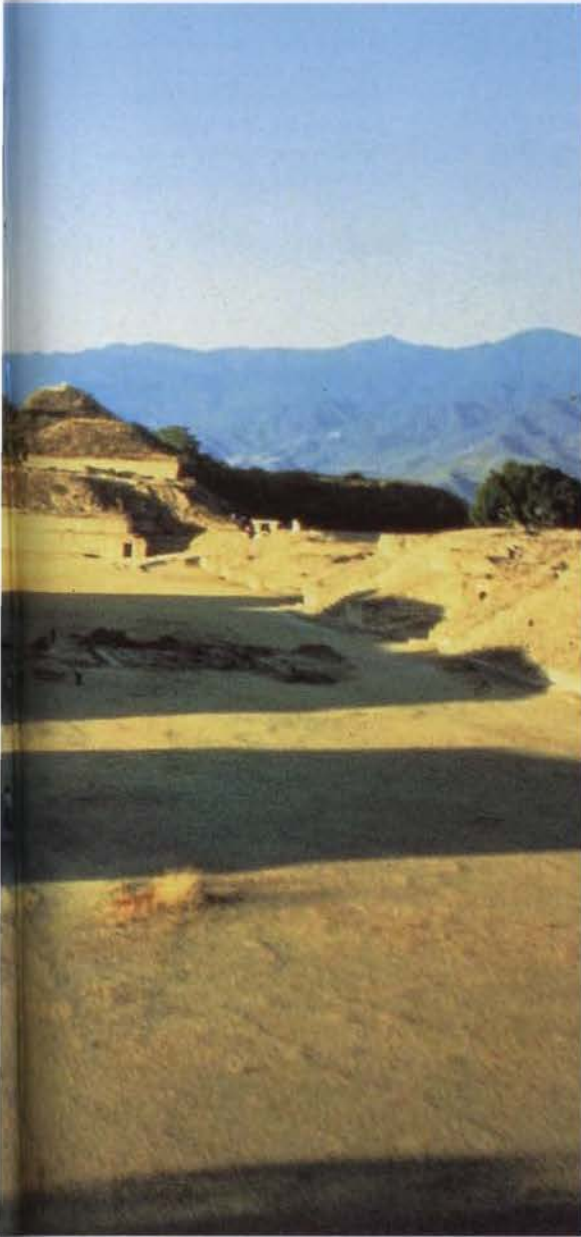
While the essential techniques of construction used by the people of Mesoamerica to make major structures were relatively simple, the plans were grandiose and the completed works were impressive. Here an artist accurately shows the construction methods used for one of the huge structures at El Mirador, Guatemala.



Astronomy was one factor in settlement planning and architectural placement. The structure in the foreground, Mound J at Monte Alban, is generally considered a type of observatory, because angles of view through the holes and doorways are toward key positions of the heavenly bodies.

The subfield of research called archaeoastronomy has developed to deal with the complex relations between ancient astronomy and the symbolic uses to which that knowledge was put in construction. From Uaxactun, lowland Guatemala, this architectural group illustrates one of the first alignments to be recognized by archaeologists. The sight lines to the right and left indicate where the sun was visible at the horizon when it reached its northernmost and southernmost points.





That ancient Mesoamericans possessed significant engineering knowledge is becoming evident as archaeologists look beyond buildings to examine other works of the ancient people. This stone drain was in use at San Lorenzo in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, a site considered by some Latter-day Saints to correspond to the city built by Jaredite King Lib at the narrow neck of land.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

In the Book of Mormon account, frequent mention is made of the construction of towers (meaning artificial mounds), temples, other public buildings, and cities (for example, see Helaman 3:11, 14). Highways were also constructed ("cast up," 3 Nephi 6:8). No more specific engineering or construction activities are mentioned. However, significant knowledge of astronomy was part of Nephite culture (see, for example, Helaman 12:15; 14:5; 3 Nephi 1:21), which implies systematic observations and the possibility of sight-line placements. (Israelite sites sometimes were so aligned in ancient Judah.)