THE GEOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

Vol. XXXI  July, 1941  No. 3

THE PERSONALITY OF MEXICO

Carl O. Sauer
University of California

THE GEOGRAPHIC ART

This is an excursion into the oldest tradition of geography. For, whatever the problems of the day may be which claim the attention of the specialist and which result in more precise methods of inspection and more formal systems of comparison, there remains a form of geographic curiosity that is never contained by systems. It is the art of seeing how land and life have come to differ from one part of the earth to another. This quality of understanding has interested men almost from the beginning of human time and requires restatement and reexamination for each new generation.

Many names have been given to the central and never completed theme of regional interpretation. For this paper a term is borrowed from Sir Cyril Fox's admirable study of the cultural backgrounds of the British Isles. The designation of "personality" applied to a particular part of the earth involves the whole dynamic relation of life and land. It does not deal with land and life as separate things, but with a given land as lived in by a succession of peoples, who have appraised its resources for their time in terms of their capacities and needs, who have spread themselves through it as best suited their ends, and who have filled it with the works that expressed their particular way of life.

ROOTS OF MEXICO IN A LONG PAST

Mexico, like most lands of Latin America, has its main and living roots in a deep, rich past. The continuity with ages long gone is fundamental in this country. An invasion by the modern, Western world is under way, but this conquest will remain partial, as earlier did the ruder assault of the Spanish conquerors upon native ways.


Copyright, 1941, by the American Geographical Society of New York
The American motorcar now does duty in remotest villages, but it is loaded with the immemorial goods and persons native to the land. The automobile is accepted as a better means of transport, as, centuries earlier, the pack and draft animals brought from Castile were accepted. It and the other machines, however, are being adapted to native ways and native needs; they will not dominate or replace native culture.

The two most important things to know about Mexico still are the patterns of life that existed before the coming of the white men and the changes that were introduced during the first generation or two of the Spanish period. Although a third period of transformation is under way, we may yet best delineate the basic traits of this land and its peoples from its prehistoric geography and from its geography of the sixteenth century. Our attention may be confined therefore to formative periods in a distant past that distinguish what are still the dominant traits of the country.

**The Line between North and South**

For unnumbered centuries a narrow frontier has formed the parting line between the North and the South of what is called Mexico today. This is the meeting zone of the high cultures of the South and the ruder cultures of the North. In the east this line reaches the Gulf of Mexico a little north of Tampico. Immediately to the south lies the Huasteca, also called by the Spaniards the Province of Pánuco. Thence the line winds sinuously southward along the eastern escarpments of the tableland to the very margin of the Valley of Mexico. Here it turns westward and then passes more or less along the northern base of the great east-west belt of volcanoes. This northern, aggraded foot slope of the volcanoes is often called the Bajío; and it is extraordinarily fertile, perhaps the best part of Mexico agriculturally. Curiously, at the beginning of historical time the Bajío lands for the most part were held by the Northern barbarians. Near Guadalajara a sharp promontory of Southern high culture reached north-northeastward to include the Cazcán Indians, in the Mixtón or Teúl country, on the borders of modern Jalisco and Zacatecas. The Cazcán land is one of high mesas and rich valleys. West of Guadalajara the dividing line turns sharply northward and descends through the western sierra to the coast plain of Sinaloa, where it ends on the Gulf of California above Culiacán (see Fig. 1).

The ruder cultures of the North occupied the interior tableland as far south as the base of the central volcanic chain. The advanced cultures held two great prongs extending northward in the coastal lowlands and foothills. The eastern prong (Huasteca) failed to reach
the Tropic of Cancer and ended abruptly against the very primitive cultures of Tamaulipas. On the west coast, the extension of high culture (which I had the good fortune to discover a dozen years ago) reached into northern Sinaloa. In the west also, "islands" of intermediate cultures, especially the Ópatería and Pimería Baja of Sonora, formed links to the Pueblo country of our Southwest. In general, the expansive energy of the high cultures was notably greatest in the west, next greatest on the east coast, and least in the center.

In many places the northern limit of high culture archeologically reached scores of miles beyond its historical limit. It seems therefore that the barbarian cultures had been in process of advancing southward.

The Northern Area, the Gran Chichimeca

Climatically, the Northern country is dominantly arid or semiarid, with wide stretches of mesquite and huisache, of creosote bush, sotol, yucca, and cacti. But it contains also some of the finest and largest alluvial valleys and a great deal of good upland, receiving enough rainfall for summer crops. The position of the line was determined by cultural, not environmental, reasons; and it is to be regarded as the meeting of two very different ways of aboriginal life. The Spaniards made the distinction of Indios de policía (polity) to the south and savages, or Chichimecs, to the north. The South was
taken over at once by the Spaniards and became the *tierra de paz* (land of peace), whereas the North remained more or less unquiet, the *tierra de guerra*.

The commonest name for the whole North was Gran Chichimeca, which included a large number of very small tribes of assorted barbarians, many of whom, especially in the east, were roving hunters and gatherers (for example, in the states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Coahuila). However, more Northern tribes than have yet been thus recognized in ethnology were at least part-time farmers, especially on the interior plateau (in the states of Chihuahua, Durango, Zacatecas, for example). In the northwest, farming was dominant; in the Ópateria and Pimería Baja at least, agricultural skill was equal to that of the South. These and the Pueblo peoples were excepted by the Spaniards from the general designation of Chichimec.

**THE SOUTHERN CULTURE HEARTH, WITH EMPHASIS ON THE WEST**

The South belonged to Indians who may, with propriety, be called civilized. Here and there, in rain forests or on excessively rugged mountains, primitive groups (mostly relicts) survived. No large, attractive site in the South, however, remained unappropriated by a population of advanced culture, whereas in the North many attractive and commodious areas were poorly, or not at all, used for agriculture.

The South and Southwest of Mexico constitute one of the great culture hearths of the world, in which was created in part, and developed largely, an economic complex that is one of the great achievements of mankind. Perhaps only in the Orient did men elaborate as ample a base for a diversified civilization. Archeology has given most attention to date to the great monumental cultures, which were mostly on the Atlantic side. Behind the named civilizations of Maya, Toltec, and Aztec lie older and more fundamental attainments in plant domestication and other inventions, of which we know only scattered bits. It is possible that greater knowledge of these more ancient beginnings will attach most importance to the Pacific side.

The Pacific slopes have been least regarded by students, yet there is evidence that they may have been the most active front of cultural origins and growth. A few indications may be submitted.

1. The basic traits of the native domesticated plants point to a source on the Pacific margin rather than the Atlantic. The Pacific areas have in general a shorter rainy season, a smaller total rainfall, and a much more sharply marked dry season. Their soils are rarely acid; most commonly they are somewhat alkaline. All the principal native crops show traits that point to an origin in the drier, western
lands. Perhaps we may seek the earliest farming in western alluvial valleys, probably below an altitude of two thousand meters. All the native crops are warm-starting, that is germinate best in well aerated, only slightly moist soils under the rising temperatures of late spring or early summer. Their vegetative growth is made when warm weather and frequent rains coincide, as is characteristic of the summer thundershower period. Short intervals of dry weather are beneficial. Although none of the crops is truly drought-resistant, they have various means, such as hairy leaf surfaces, of protecting themselves against brief dryness. Ripening takes place during the bright, dry season that follows the rains. Some of the beans need a rainy season of only a month; some of the corns may make use of nearly three months of moisture. These climatic qualities of the common crops of Mexico may indicate an origin in the lower levels of the tierra templada on the Pacific side.

2. On the Pacific side also, from Guatemala north to Sonora, there is an exceptionally large diversity of ecologically fixed crop types and of subspecies or varieties. Of maizes there are in the west not only a great many kinds of the dent variety but many flour, sugar, pop, and flint corns, which have never been collected or classified. What collecting has been done so far has been chiefly in markets of larger cities and has missed the seeds which are important to native economy but which do not enter into commerce. The result is that the economic botanist does not yet know the wealth of maize, beans, chili, squash, upland cotton, amaranth, and tomatoes that marks the hill lands behind the west coast.

3. It is also noteworthy that the wild flora of the west contains numerous close relatives of the cultivated plants (other than corn).

4. The route of dispersal of crops into the Indian agriculture of the United States also argues for the great age of west-coast culture. This route was almost certainly up the west coast into Arizona and New Mexico and thence east from the Pueblo country to the (middle?) Mississippi Valley and the eastern seaboard of the United States. The Florida–West Indies bridge functioned only slightly, if at all; and there is no indication that any domesticated crops were carried from Mexico by way of the Gulf coast.

5. Bit by bit the work of Southwestern archeologists is producing evidence of the early operation of this western corridor in the diffusion of a variety of culture traits from Mexico into Arizona and New Mexico.

In aboriginal agriculture the lands of highest quality, of most intensive use, of main dependability were the valley bottoms. Many of these lands are used today for a succession of crops throughout the year. During the dry season they may still hold enough moisture for cropping and are then called tierras de humedad. In some places
water is applied artificially, though neither a main nor an early role can be ascribed to irrigation in Mexico. The valley lands were carefully tended and improved and determined the site of many of the larger villages. However, the frequent summer showers make possible also the growing of one summer, rain-season, or *temporal* crop on hill and mountain slopes. Growth of population soon forced expansion from the narrow valley bottoms to the far more extensive hill slopes.

To this day southern and western Mexico is lost in a smoke haze during spring, from rubbish burning on thousands of mountain deadenings, or *coamiles*, that are being prepared for planting. Many of them are still prepared and planted without the use of a plow, by means of a digging stick (or crowbar) and hoe. The seeds are punched into the ash-covered soil and left to the rains, without further attention except weeding. As no furrows are drawn nor regular fields laid out, the native farmer picks his planting spot chiefly with an eye to the timber. The bigger the tree growth, the easier the clearing, the larger the increment of wood ashes, and perhaps also the better the cash return from charcoal. Slope matters almost not at all, and soil very little; for the crop is grown primarily on the fertility made available by the woody growth, the *monte*.

This untidy method of farming has given remarkable protection against soil erosion on steep slopes. Many such mountain slopes have gone through thousands of years of alternation of clearing (*desmontar*), planting, and regrowth to monte. The process is really a long-term rotation of crops and trees. Under this management fields and settlements have been able to spread over terrain that plow farmers would find impossible. Villages that have a nucleus of permanent *tierra de humedad* appropriate about themselves as well a wide fringe of hill country for their *coamiles* or *milpas*. Also colonization of later generations of villages takes place in mountain terrain, without permanent (valley floor) fields, and all the subsistence is derived from such shifting mountain clearings. In both cases the village is permanent; wandering villages are absent, or at least extremely rare.

American notions of what constitutes suitable farmland, fertile soil, and limits of rural population cannot be applied to such a land and culture as these. These hill areas appear badly overcrowded to us; yet the more we learn of the records of the Spanish conquest and of the archeologic sites far earlier than that, the more it seems that from time immemorial these western hill lands swarmed with villages, as they do today. Indeed, it seems probable that in many hill areas population was more numerous of old than it is now.

This picture of ancient population growth points to a swarming out from the cradle lands of the rich valleys (which I should like to
postulate as being on the Pacific versant) to the mountain slopes, gradually encountering higher and colder country. This process of uphill migration made necessary the elimination of some of the more exacting crop plants, occasionally a new domestication (pulque agave), and generally the breeding of specialized forms tolerant of less warmth. The process cannot have been rapid; the tierra fría, such as the Valley of Mexico, is not part of the most anciently settled lands. The higher lands are still not very well suited to corn (except a few specialized types); but their agricultural utility has increased with the coming of European crops and domestic animals.

Growth in numbers and in agricultural skills also resulted in spread of the high cultures through the tropical forests of the Atlantic slope. Least of all was the movement northward into the arid lands, except along the west coast, where great and rich valleys invited occupation, even within the desert. Here, on the American side of the international boundary, the Gila and Salt Valleys provide the only known important aboriginal development of irrigation techniques in North America.

In summary, this agricultural civilization seems to have been born of a truly temperate climate with a rich equipment of wild plant materials, suitable for amelioration by breeding. As it acquired more skill in cultivation and plant breeding and more man power, this high Southern (or, as I should prefer to say, western) culture moved up the mountains to the high central volcanic slopes and east across rain forest and savana to the shores of the Gulf, but least of all north into the fringes of the arid country. This statement must be offered as a working hypothesis, not as an established finding.

**Metals in the Southern Culture**

An underestimated element in aboriginal Mexico is the use of metals. In this case also the evidence points strongly westward as well as southward. Gold was one of the most highly prized items throughout the high culture, a main tribute item and a staple of trade, a basic culture trait. The volcanic highlands of the center were barren of gold, which was found chiefly as sand in streams to the south and west in a terrain of older metamorphic and igneous rocks. These outcrop widely south of the central volcanic chain, westward to the Pacific and southward to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, also in the “old lands” of Central America. There were two such great placer areas, one centering about Honduras, the other and larger one extending from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec north to the Balsas graben and west to the foot slopes of the volcano of Colima. In both these areas almost every torrent concentrated its annual increment of gold sand.
Of the other metals we know much less, but there promises to be a good deal to discover about their aboriginal use. It seems that the first Spanish vein mines previously had been Indian mines; Taxco is an example for copper and tin, and probably also for silver. In the process of looting the Aztec treasure the Spaniards soon found that the metallic wealth of the Aztecs had come mostly from non-Aztec lands and especially that the western neighbors, the Tarascans, were the great purveyors of silver, and also of copper and bronze. Archival and field studies have failed to disclose any silver mining within the territory of Tarascan stock; on the contrary, Tarascan imperialism seems to have been motivated to western conquests by the quest for these metals. Not in Michoacán, the homeland of the Tarascans, but in southern Jalisco have we found, we think, the source of the Tarascan silver and tin and of part of their copper. The trail of aboriginal mining and smelting is now partly marked from the Taxco region of the Balsas, through Tamazula of Jalisco, through the coast ranges of Purificación and the Valley of Banderas, as far north as the Culiacán River of Sinaloa.2

Studies under way indicate that in various places in the west smelting skill and alloying practices were rather advanced. We have just begun to explore this subject, which promises to change previous concepts about Indian metal arts. From present evidences we may advance the hypothesis that an Indian metallurgy was developed between Taxco and Culiacán, that it involved the reduction of sulphides as well as of oxides, that hardening, casting, and alloying of copper and silver were practiced, and that the quantity of production of copper and silver suggests the possible beginning of an age of metals, interrupted by the coming of the Spaniards.

AZTEC AND TARASCAN STATES

There were many peoples and languages in this great Southern area of high cultures, but the dominant traits of the civilizations were similar throughout. At the time of the conquest there were only two large political units, the Aztec state of México and the Tarascan state of Michoacán. In geographic design they were similar. Their main areas were at high altitudes, of modest agricultural attraction. The capital of each lay near the northern margin, close to the Chichimeca. On this exposed front both Aztecs and Tarascans were probably no more than holding their own. Both, however, showed a strong expansionist drive into the tierra caliente, absorbing more and more subject lands at intermediate and lower altitudes. These lands provided the master nations on the highlands with metals,

---
2 A report on the Culiacán area by Isabel Kelly, in the Ibero-Americana series of the University of California, is in press.
cotton, cacao, varied foodstuffs, dyes, and gums. Both states depended on the subjugation of civilized but weak neighbors for the continuous enlargement of their own power and wealth. Neither ventured on the colonization of the thinly peopled but very fertile Chichimeca immediately adjacent to the north.

**The Spaniards Follow the Aztec and Tarascan Political Pattern**

Aztec and Tarascan imperialism facilitated Spanish occupation. The Spaniards took over both states and superimposed their own tribute-collecting organization on the native system of tributes. As the Aztecs and Tarascans had been pushing southward and westward, the Spaniards also faced at first in the same directions. In twelve years (1520–1531) they had complete control of the land of high cultures. Millions of native workers exchanged Indian masters for Spanish encomenderos, Indian tribute collectors for the tax collectors of crown and church.

On the whole, the exactions were probably increased; and especially were the Indians required to give more gold. As gold had been brought mostly from the south, from the geologically older and topographically lower lands south of the volcanoes, the Spaniards elaborated a climatic thesis of the origin of gold: This yellow metal has an affinity for the sun and therefore grows in hot lands, in southern lands, in lands of low altitude. The tierra caliente of both coasts was gutted with amazing rapidity. Before 1540 the stream placers, gold sands in terraces, and even concentrations of gold in residual soil had been largely worked out from Vera Cruz to Oaxaca and Colima. Far more serious, the Indian populations of the tierra caliente had melted away to such pitiful remnants that the term “decimation” may be applied literally from Colima to Pánico. Ten years after the fall of Mexico sober and competent men were discussing the inevitable ruin and depopulation of the country, being emptied of its native workers as it had already been emptied of its treasure.

**A New Frontier Formed in the West**

Meanwhile a new economic frontier was taking form insensibly, in the western end of the lands of high culture. In 1523 Cortes quietly appropriated for himself the great Tarascan-held silver district of Tamazula (Jalisco). Taxco became a Spanish mining camp at the same time. Nuño de Guzmán’s men of the far northwest supported themselves by locating silver properties in the mountains east of Culiacán and in the barrancas of Tepic (decade of 1530). Before 1540 the Spaniards were finding small bodies of silver ore all the way from Taxco to Culiacán. These western encomenderos used
their civilized Indians in the service of their mines and engaged also in slave raids into the Chichimec territory beyond. The new silver-bearing West became the scene of furious rivalry between the great captains and officials of New Spain, Cortes, Mendoza, Alvarado, Nuño de Guzmán; and out of this melee grew a frontier government, New Galicia, which really saved New Spain from the fate of the Antillean islands and gave to it its later colonial greatness.

All the earlier silver discoveries were within the area of the civilized Indians. From 1523 into the 1540's a series of now largely forgotten villas and reales (formally constituted mining settlements) were founded between Taxco and Culiacán. Every one of these Spanish establishments had mining, usually silver, as its basis. Thus was founded the first capital of Nueva Galicia, Compostela. Now drowsing around an ancient church that bears the double-headed eagles of Hapsburg, it is remembered by us only because Coronado collected here the idle young gentlemen of New Spain to ride thence to the plains of Kansas.

The trail of silver led inland and upward, not down the floors of the canyons toward the sea, as the quest for gold had done. The great bodies of silver ore are associated with the lower, or earlier, volcanism of the Mesa Central. The Tertiary volcanics, enriched with metallic sulphides, overlie the older rocks, which may carry the free gold, and underlie the cones, malpais, tuff beds, and mudflows of the young volcanoes, generally barren of precious metals. The western and southwestern rim of the Mesa Central has been deeply trenched by great canyons. Here, along the upper slopes of the barrancas, the silver-bearing, lower volcanic beds were accessible to prospectors. Silver came to connote to the Spaniards high country and cold lands; they even thought of it as in some manner associated with the north, as they had related gold to southern latitudes.

Civilized tribes held the coastal districts of the West and extended inland along the warm floors of the barrancas. Barbarian tribes occupied the high mesas and reached seaward along their shredded fringes between the barrancas. The silver country, therefore, in a measure lay between civilized and barbarian habitats, in the meeting zone of the two major cultures. Thus, especially, the barrancas behind Compostela and Guadalajara became passageways for the Spanish prospectors, leading them back toward the central plateau and into the Chichimeca.

By 1540 the Spanish penetration had created tensions in this frontier zone that gave rise to the most formidable Indian outbreak in the history of New Spain—the Mixtón War. The Mixtón country was the knobby promontory of high civilization reaching north from Guadalajara. Here civilized Indians, mainly Cazcán, were neighbors to barbarian tribes, such as Zacatec, Guachichil, and Huichol. The
docile Cazcáns had been badly used by their encomenderos at mining silver in the barrancas. At the same time slave raiding by this group of encomenderos was irritating the nomadic tribes of the highlands. The Mixtón rebellion was the union of desperate civilized Indians with wild hill tribes. The outbreak was suppressed only by the use of the whole military strength of New Spain. In the prosecution of the campaign the Spaniards for the first time broke through this frontier zone and began the occupation of the Chichimeca. Here began the technique of frontier fighting, the establishment of flying squadrons and fortified posts (presidios), that was to mark the occupation of the North for the next two and a half centuries.

To the great good fortune of Spain it so happened that immediately behind the ramparts of the Mixtón country lay the greatest silver country in the world—the land of the Zacatec Indians. Some of these, caught as slaves in the Mixtón War, had been sent down to the mines of Taxco. A number succeeded in escaping and returned home, with some knowledge of silver ores. As Spanish parties from Guadalajara pushed closer to their homes, the Zacatec tried (1546) to gain favor by disclosing the presence of the Veta Grande, at Zacatecas. Soon Zacatecas became the greatest silver producer in the world. In sustained production it has never been equaled by any other silver district.

The Zacatecas strike was followed during the next quarter of a century by the discovery, without parallel in history, of a series of silver districts, first along the western fringe of the Mesa Central, but soon also along its eastern slopes northward through San Luis Potosí. New Galicia, previously a precariously held narrow strip in the northwest, expanded rapidly to absorb the Chichimeca, the unlimited North. The shabby townsmen of Guadalajara and Compostela became the fabulous grandees of northern principalities, built about mines. Guadalajara was the gateway through which miners, merchants, soldiers, ranchers, and missionaries poured northward, carrying in their train docile Southern Indians from Jalisco, Michoacán, and Colima to do the hard work of the new country. Guadalajara became the capital of the North as well as of the West. From this exposed march site—to use the term of Vaughan Cornish—one of the greatest break-throughs of New World history took place, between the fateful date of 1540 and the end of the century. By that time men from the Nueva Galicia march had reached and seized Durango, Chihuahua, New Mexico, Coahuila, and Nuevo León, roughly outlining the present international border. In later years the same breed was to extend its range of operations from Texas to California. The Spanish trails of the American Southwest all lead directly back to the nuclear area of New Galicia.

This land of high steppe and pine-clad mountains has been for four
centuries the primary source of the wealth of New Spain–Mexico. Its mining towns became great and architecturally distinguished. Even at the end of the colonial period they were producing, according to Humboldt’s estimate, more than half the precious metal of the world. Vast stock ranches developed about the mines, to supply the great and constant demand for pack and draft animals, for meat, hides, and fat. South of the mining country, the rich Bajío lands at the foot of the volcanoes were plowed and planted to foodstuffs for the mining districts and gave rise to a large number of profitable haciendas and a class of overopulent landlords. Mexico City, center of government and trade, grew magnificent and effete, as the ultimate beneficiary of the wealth of the North.

As wealth in unheard-of amount flowed south from the silver mines of the former Chichimeca, the native populations of the North were swept out of existence, except in certain mountain retreats, such as the Tarahumara. Many natives were branded and sold south as slaves. Many more were consumed in the work of the mines. Southern Indians were brought in as free laborers in an unending stream. Thus Tlascalan, Tarascan, Otomi, Aztec, and other colonists were strewn over the North, as farming, ranching, and mining labor. The richer mines imported droves of Negro slaves. Many Spaniards of small means or none at all came north to try their hand at mining, merchandising, or transport of goods. In the course of time all these stocks except the upper-class Spanish fused into a new breed, of no one color. Thus was born the mestizo Mexico of today. Here was the frontier of New Spain, on which finally a new nationality was formed.

This design of New Spain was drawn during the sixteenth century and has persisted to the present. Still the Northern march has dominance in part over the Southern hearth. It is still an area of immigration, receiving labor, foodstuffs, and manufactured goods from the central states for its metals, livestock, and cotton. For the most part, men of the North have made the revolutions and wielded the power, men from Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, men born to take risks, to the frontier habit of alternation of hard effort and complete laziness. The South still shows its aboriginal fundament of patient, steady toil done by apt craftsmen, who can create things of remarkable beauty if they have the chance. The old line between the civilized South and the Chichimeca has been blurred somewhat, but it still stands. In that antithesis, which at times means conflict, at others a complementing of qualities, lie the strength and weakness, the tension and harmony that make the personality of Mexico.