

economy, and the frustrations of reservation governance. Yet this is hardly an indispensable book.

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Background

Prehistory of the Americas. 2d edition. By STUART J. FIEDEL. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Plates. Illustrations. Maps. Chronologies. Bibliography. Index. xix, 400 pp. Cloth, \$59.95. Paper, \$19.95.

Over the last decades, archaeological knowledge of precontact Native American life has expanded dramatically. The roughly 10 to 15 millennia that separate the peopling of this variegated land mass from the arrival of Columbus are recognized as an era of population spread, technological innovation, and cultural diversification. In some regions, these centuries are marked by the origins of agriculture and the rise of urban states. Yet the indigenous peoples of the Americas also included sedentary coastal foragers, mobile people who sowed the seeds of domesticated maize, and migratory hunting bands, as well as shamans, slaves, royalty, traders, farmers, artisans, and scribes.

To catalogue the spatial and temporal diversity of the ancient Americans in a single volume is no simple feat. The task may be sufficiently daunting that few syntheses of comparable scope have been completed. In the preface to the first edition of this volume, the author even hints that his research experience as an Old World archaeologist may have been an advantage: it enabled him to approach this expansive subject with a degree of distance and perspective. Nevertheless, Stuart J. Fiedel has delivered a timely and theoretically balanced book that should prove particularly valuable for archaeological neophytes and scholars outside the discipline.

The volume is organized into seven chapters. In the first two, Fiedel provides a brief theoretical introduction to American archaeology and then tackles the controversial issue of human entrance into the Americas. Perhaps reflecting his Old World roots, the author seems particularly comfortable and up-to-date in this latter section, as well as in chapter 3, devoted to the early Paleo-Indian occupation of the hemisphere. Though brief, the concluding chapter, which draws comparisons between the course and processes of history in the Old and New worlds, is intellectually provocative.

The work's core is chapters 4 to 6, which cover, respectively, post-Pleistocene foragers, the origins of agriculture and village life, and the emergence of complex societies. In these chapters, coverage is organized and subdivided along temporal and spatial lines (reflecting somewhat schizophrenic theoretical underpinnings in both the traditional cultural history and the neoevolutionary framework). The focus thereby shifts frequently from one region to another. As a consequence, the

volume has the feel of a primer and does not inadequately transmit an appreciation for the grand sweep of history. Although this is not a fatal flaw, it does diminish the presentation of archaeology's most important attribute, the description and explanation of human behaviors over great time spans. Nevertheless, on balance, the second edition of the *Prehistory of the Americas* meets its difficult challenge, and should be considered seriously by those looking for an elementary discussion of the diverse pre-Columbian roots of the Native American peoples.

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The Aztecs. By RICHARD F. TOWNSEND. London: Thames and Hudson, 1992. Photographs. Plates. Illustrations. Maps. Notes. Bibliography. Index. 224 pp. Cloth. \$29.95.

As the quincentennial anniversary years of the Age of Discovery continue, the Aztecs of Mexico will be increasingly in the news, and we will be treated to mass-media stories focusing on the exotic and bizarre aspects of Aztec culture. Human sacrifice in particular is always a surefire way to titillate popular sensibilities. The alien aspects of this first-contacted New World civilization continue to fascinate; and yet Aztec history holds many parallels with European history. The Aztecs' bloody policies of political domination and religious piety were not so different from those of Cortés' Spain.

To convey at once the drama of the clash of cultures, the deeply alien nature of Aztec culture as perceived by Europeans of that time, and the economic and social organizational patterns that render Aztec culture familiar is a challenging task. Richard Townsend meets the challenge with this book, a good general introduction to Aztec history and belief systems with a focus on the best-known Aztec group, the Mexica of Tenochtitlan. Townsend draws the reader quickly into the world of early sixteenth-century Mexico by recounting the story of the conquest of Tenochtitlan by Cortés. He presents the Spanish perceptions of the New World as well as the Mexican perspective on the European intrusion.

Understanding Aztec history requires a grasp of Aztec religion, since the belief system so strongly influenced the form, if not the motivation, for so many events. Both these subjects—Aztec history and belief system—are complex and difficult for nonspecialists to grasp; both benefit from Townsend's sure handling. For the sequence of events that led to Tenochtitlan's establishment and florescence, the author relies heavily on ethnohistorical accounts, sometimes interpreting them with selected pieces of archaeological research at some of the better-known sites. He conveys the political circumstances of the Mexica rise to supremacy against their Tepanec overlords with a vivid sense of the power games of conniving rival dynasties, abundant historical detail, and lively presentation of the important political personalities. The Aztecs emerge into the light of the shared human history