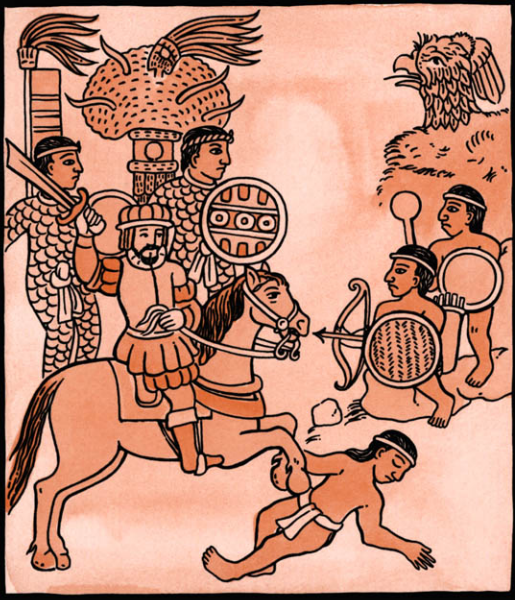
THIRD EDITION

# Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala

## A Historical Geography of the Cuchumatán Highlands, 1500-1821



W. George Lovell

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## A Historical Geography of the Cuchumatán Highlands, 1500–1821

W. GEORGE LOVELL

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The cover illustration by Angelika Bauer shows the "Guerra de Guatimala y sus provincias" as depicted by Diego Muñoz Camargo in the *Historia de Tlaxcala*, a sixteenth-century manuscript housed in the Special Collections Department of Glasgow University Library. Warriors from Tlaxcala are seen assisting a mounted Spaniard, possibly meant to be Pedro de Alvarado, in the conquest of Guatemala.

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For Maureen, editor and muse,
and in fond memory of Victor Perera (1934–2003)

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# Preface

This book, the third edition of a work first published in 1985, is the outcome of events and circumstances dating back to my days as a graduate student thirty years ago. It seems appropriate at the outset, therefore, to say something about how it all began, how it all evolved.

Early on the morning of 25 June 1974 I left the Mexican city of San Cristóbal de las Casas and travelled south, for the first time, towards Guatemala. Having been in Mexico for several weeks to conduct field research for my Master's thesis, I planned to spend only a few days resting up in Guatemala before starting the long overland trip back to Canada. I stayed almost a month, absorbed and captivated by what I experienced.

At the border town of La Mesilla, two casual passport checks allowed me to walk from one country into another. I was struck immediately by the splendour of the scene. Colossal and imposing, the mountains that loomed ahead were lush and green, a pleasant change after the gaunt look of much of central Mexico. Compared especially with the gutted, eroded terrain of the Mixteca Alta – I had spent a good deal of the summer in the highlands of Oaxaca – the earth here was much more inviting. Not at all sure what to expect, I felt myself drawn in.

I bought a soft drink from a roadside vendor and climbed onto a waiting bus, already chock-full of passengers. We took off just as a deafening peal of thunder roared across the heavens. I gaped out the window. The features of landscape assumed an elemental, shifting guise: trees glimpsed, then engulfed by mist; a grape-dark, menacing sky; a torrential downpour of rain; a wan burst of sun; all around, a kaleidoscopic play of shadow and light. Steep patchworks of fields and forests towered above the valley that followed the course of the Río Selegua, its raging waters threatening to flood the road at every hairpin turn. The bus would screech to a halt mile after mile, dropping people off, picking people up, all of them carrying some item or other – a steel *machete*, a basket laden with fruit, a bundle of firewood, an armful of flowers, a chicken or a rooster, even a small pig. They were for the most part Indians – men, women, and children wrapped up

not just in startlingly colourful clothes but in exchanges beyond my ability to comprehend, for their conversations were conducted in an idiom my Spanish could not access. I reached my destination mesmerized.

In Huehuetenango's central plaza, a three-dimensional relief map fifty paces in circumference informed me that the mountains I had passed through were the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, home to dozens of communities identified by the names of Catholic saints painted on tiny metal flags inserted across the surface of the map like candles on a birthday cake. The virtual topography someone had toiled hard to render was littered with broken glass, plastic bags, cigarette ends, and dog shit. But there it was in front of me, a doctoral dissertation topic cast in plaster and cement, framed by the curve of a low iron fence that toddlers ran around and sweethearts cuddled against. As I was about to turn in for the night – a bed at the Hotel Central went for a dollar, fleas included – a thought entrenched itself in my mind: why not write about the Cuchumatán highlands and the Maya peoples who inhabit them? That was the beginning of my relationship with Guatemala.

Three years later, after a period of intensive reading and a more scholarly formulation of ideas, my investigations began. The geography of the Cuchumatán highlands presented numerous challenges, but I opted for the task of reconstructing what happened to the land and the people under Spanish rule. Such an orientation called for me to consult unpublished archival sources, so I spent much of 1977 and 1978 gathering material in the Archivo General de Centroamérica, Guatemala City, and in the Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain. After three lengthy sojourns in these archives, I then set off, by bus and on foot, on a trip through remote parts of the Cuchumatanes I had never visited before, bringing episodes I had read about in the documents back to life in my imagination. Having sacrificed the field for the archive for so long, I found it exhilarating to walk once again over the hills and through the corn.

In December 1979 I defended the study I had written during the previous fifteen months as a doctoral dissertation. Since then I have had the opportunity to continue to work in Guatemalan and Spanish archives and to visit the Cuchumatanes time and again. Although these later forays were undertaken with different research ends in mind, I always kept a close watch for Cuchumatán data I had overlooked or did not know about before. While the material I gathered as a graduate student constitutes the bedrock of the book, the study in its present form has benefitted from my subsequent inquiries and from the work of scholars in related fields. New findings and fresh insight signal innovation and change. Perhaps Engels was correct after all: nothing is eternal but eternal change.

His words certainly apply to developments in Mesoamerican research and in Latin American studies in general.

The historiography of Latin America concentrates spatially on Mexico and Peru, to the detriment of our knowledge about colonial experiences in other Hispanicized regions of the New World. Such a condition, though problematical, can hardly be considered surprising. It reflects the fact that the geographical focus of modern scholarship parallels closely the political and economic realities of colonial times: resource-rich "cores" such as Mexico and Peru were of considerably more importance to imperial Spain than resource-deficient "peripheries" such as Central America. The colonial destiny of the isthmus has been aptly characterized by William Taylor, who refers to Central America, situated "between the great mining centers and Indian populations of the Andes and Mexico," as "a rainbow of Spanish illusions and frenzied activity between the two pots of gold."[1]

In the Mesoamerican context, work is being done to redress the historiographical imbalance between core and periphery, with more and more scholars moving south and east from central Mexico to conduct research in Chiapas, Guatemala, Oaxaca, and Yucatán.[2] What clearly emerges from these investigations is that we can no longer assume that the colonial experience of a Mesoamerican periphery is a simplified variant, retarded in time and marginal in space, of conditions that prevailed in the central Mexican core. This book examines the vicissitudes of life in a region certainly of peripheral status in the Spanish scheme of empire, one that (as at least one scholar suggests) could more precisely be considered a periphery of a periphery.[3] But before dismissing a focus on such an area as being of minimal importance to an understanding of Spain in America, it should be remembered that poor rural backwaters are where most Hispanic Americans, prior to the juggernaut of twentieth-century urbanization, lived, worked, and died. For every Zacatecas or Potosí, for every Lima or Mexico City, there were (and are still) scores if not thousands of Huehuetenangos, modest provincial centres related in myriad functional ways to smaller, less prosperous, more inward-looking communities in the surrounding countryside.

Research upon which the book is based, first and foremost, was made possible by doctoral support from the Killam Program. Postdoctoral funding also from the Killam Program enabled me to rework my dissertation into a series of articles and essays. Fellowships from Plumsock Mesoamerican Studies and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada allowed me to consolidate my endeavours and, in 1985, publish *Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala* with McGill-Queen's University Press. The first edition was followed, in 1992, by a

revised second edition. In this third edition I have left intact the main body of the text, chapters one through ten, but furnished the reader with a new preface and a new epilogue. The latter contains its own bibliography, which highlights pertinent titles published between 1992 and 2003. Chapter 11, "Quincentennial Reflections," is a reprise of the epilogue to the second edition. Little did I imagine on that June evening in Huehuetenango three decades ago that a book would result from my contemplation of that funky relief map. For their belief in that book, given a new lease of life by their encouragement, I thank Don Akenson, Philip Cercone, Joan McGilvray, and their associates at McGill-Queen's University Press.

In both Guatemala City and Seville, the staff of the archives was patient and helpful in guiding me through the customary growing pains of how to locate and request the necessary documents. The paleographic expertise of Carlos Estrada Lemus, Manuel Fuentes Mairena, Wendy Kramer, and Leonel Sarazúa solved many a problem. After my research in the archives, the work of many scholars provided a crucial intellectual framework for interpreting the Cuchumatán data, but it is important to single out the publications of the Berkeley School and the unrivalled contribution of Murdo MacLeod. During the dissertation stage of the study, as a graduate student at the University of Alberta, I profited not only from the flexible supervision of John F. Bergmann but also from the counsel and guidance of Olive Dickason, Ruth Gruhn, Oscar H. Horst, and David C. Johnson.

Looking back to acknowledge my debts, both personal and professional, affords me mixed sentiments, for some of the individuals who influenced my thinking or who shaped who I am have passed on. Anyone I fail to mention by name I trust will forgive the oversight and remember instead the quality of the time we shared.

Bjarne Tokerud, whom I met while enroled in my first seminar in anthropology, talked about Guatemala in a way that made me really want to go there, which I did after I got my Mesoamerican bearings, in situ, in Mexico. Tomislav Milinusic knew first-hand about other parts of Latin America, and his instincts set me straight. After I had ventured alone on a trip to South America, one that Tomislav and I had planned to undertake together, I was better prepared to return to Guatemala and get on with the job I knew by then awaited me.

In Guatemala, bumping into William R. Swezey in Don Pancho's *tienda* in Antigua opened up a universe and created an everlasting bond. Swezey introduced me to Christopher H. Lutz, whose trail I had come across in the archives and whom I was most curious to meet. Chris and Swezey were busy dreaming up the remarkable research institute that became the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica

(CIRMA). The three of us struck up a partnership, which Chris and I invest in still, as board members of CIRMA, as editors (with Armando J. Alfonzo) of *Mesoamérica*, and as co-investigators and co-authors.

I enjoy a similar working relationship with Noble David Cook, one that began when Henry F. Dobyns brought us together at the Newberry Library in Chicago. David and his wife, Sasha, are my Seville soulmates, two aficionados of a city that is now a cherished home base. There, at the Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, the Universidad Pablo de Olavide, and the Universidad de Sevilla, I mix with colleagues and students who constitute a stimulating Spanish equivalent to their counterparts at Queen's University in Canada, where I have taught for twenty-five years. Having been hired at Queen's in 1979 on a one-year, non-renewable contract, things (or so I like to believe) worked out just fine.

Before I embarked on a tenure-track position at Queen's, I spent a term as visiting scholar in the Department of Geography at the University of California at Berkeley. The great Carl Sauer had been dead a decade, but his legacy lived on. Being at Berkeley was inspirational. I relish conversations I had with Woodrow Borah, Bernard Nietschmann, James J. Parsons, Dan Stanislawski, and John H. Rowe, and through them the friendships I forged with Wayne Bernhardson, Susan E. Davis, and María Laura Massolo. Fellow geographers whose interests lie in Latin America, and whose company I enjoy and from whom I learn much, include Elisabeth and Karl W. Butzer, William V. Davidson, William M. Denevan, Bill Doolittle, Peter Herlihy, Linda A. Newson, Marie Price, and David J. Robinson. Among my writer friends, Eduardo Galeano, Tom Pow, Alastair Reid, and Ronald Wright sustain a creative presence, an esteem they share on my part with Mary Ellen Davis, Jan De Vos, José Hernández Palomo, Juan Marchena Fernández, John M. Kirk, José Manuel Peña Girón, and Barbara Potthast. Seldom do I agree with the visceral opinions of Michael Shawcross, but his eagle-eyed inspections of previous editions of this book have allowed me to tidy up the text of it considerably. Mike's assessment of my work is what matters, not (mercifully) what he thinks of me. Florine Asselbergs and Michel Oudijk kindly furnished me with the image from the *Lienzo de Quauhquecholan* that appears in the epilogue. Maureen McCallum Garvie, in Barriefield and beyond, keeps me well and truly grounded. Never did I dream of meeting someone whose passion about life north of Huehuetenango could match my own, but the intrepid Krystyna Deuss proved me wrong. To all those whose lives north of Huehuetenango I write about, Maya Indians especially, I dedicate this re-telling of their struggle for survival, which is not yet over.

I close my record of thanks with a few words about my parents. Like many of her generation, my mother had to leave school early to earn a

wage that would help make family ends meet. She longed for me to get the education she herself was deprived of, and urged me to see the world as she never did. "Enjoy it for both of us, son." Her words are with me always. So, too, are the stories my father told me as a boy, of the years he sailed the Spanish Main – not as a latter-day *conquistador* but as a merchant seaman employed by Royal Dutch Shell, working aboard oil tankers that chugged in and out of Aruba, Cuba, Curaçao, and Venezuela after World War II.

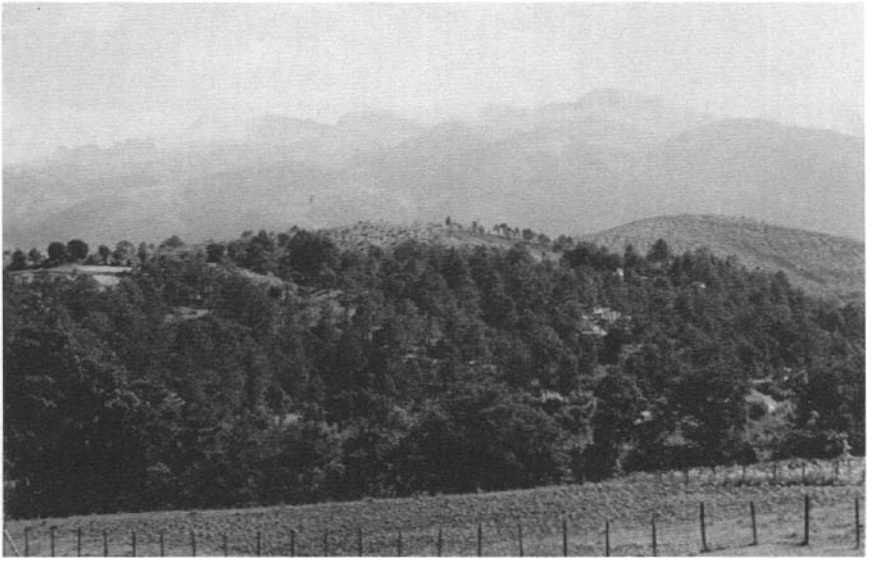
My leaving Scotland to study in Canada, my parents soon realized, was only the beginning of the journey. Glasgow to Guatemala may seem an odd trajectory to some. Not, however, to my mother and my father. And certainly not to me.

W. George Lovell
Barriefield, Ontario
July 2004

And what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all. Either you had no purpose
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
And is altered in fulfilment.

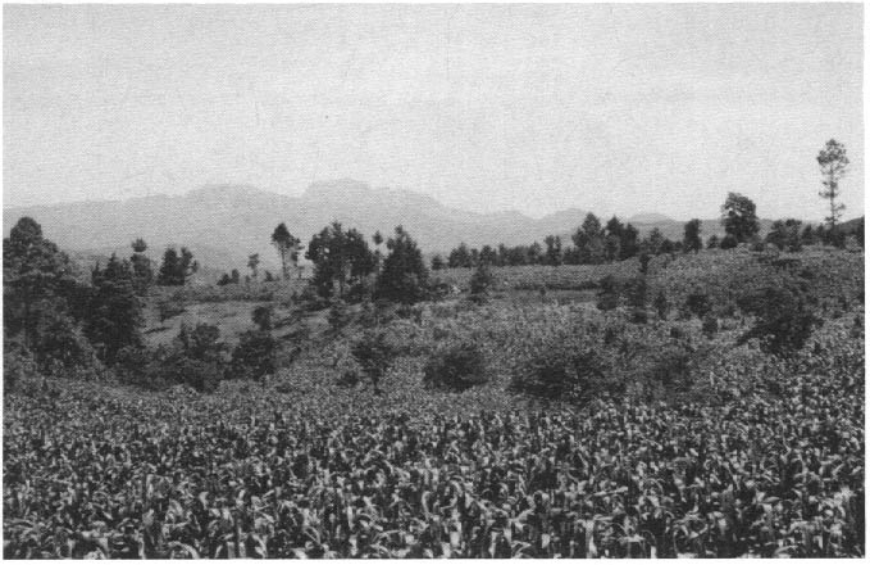
T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*

*Photographs 1–8, 10–14, and 20 were taken by the author while conducting fieldwork in the region between 1975 and 1978.*

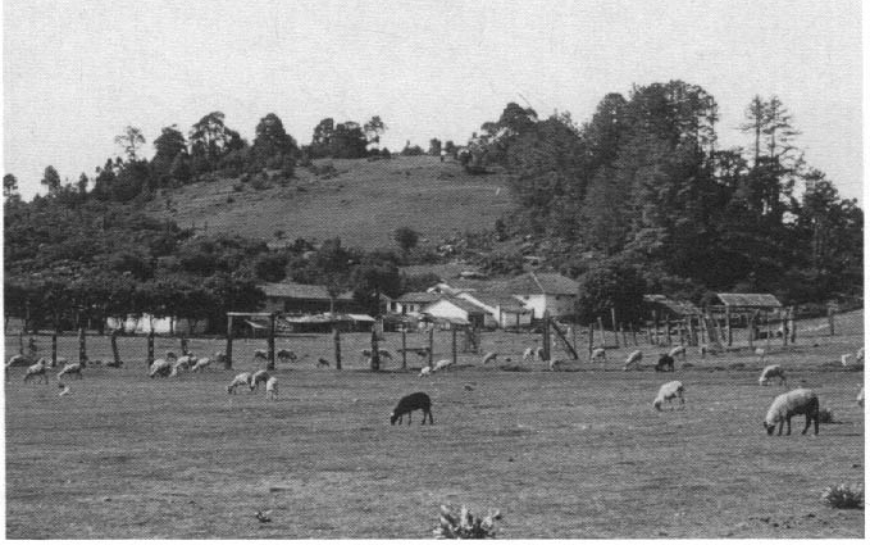


1 Southern edge of the Cuchumatán highlands, viewed from the outskirts of Huehuetenango

2 View of the Cuchumatán *páramo* near Chancol (elevation 3000 m)



3 Corn in the *tierra fría* near Nebaj (elevation 2000 m)



4 View of the *región andina*, looking towards the still-occupied remains of Hacienda Chancol (elevation 3000 m)

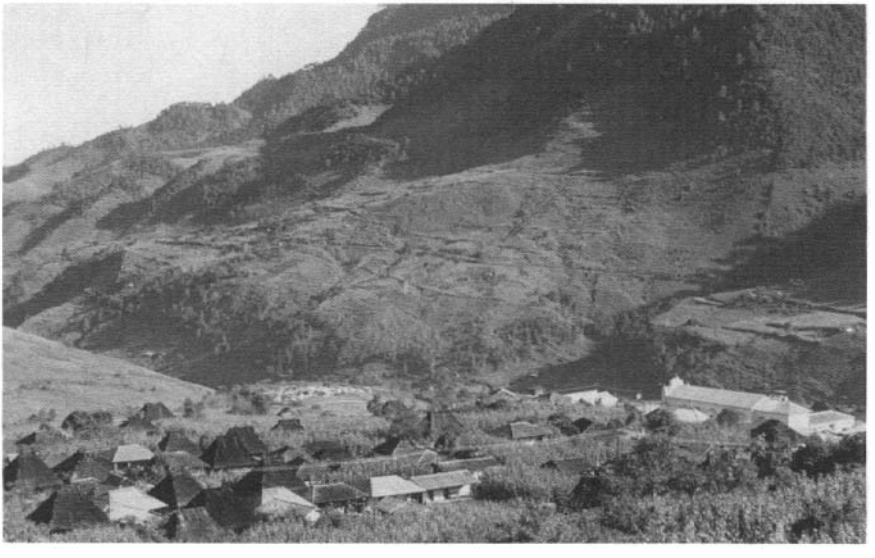
5 Indian boys from the Mam community of Todos Santos Cuchumatán

6 Indian boys from the Chuj community of San Mateo Ixtatán

7 Mother and children, Todos Santos Cuchumatán

8 Girl fetching water, Todos Santos Cuchumatán

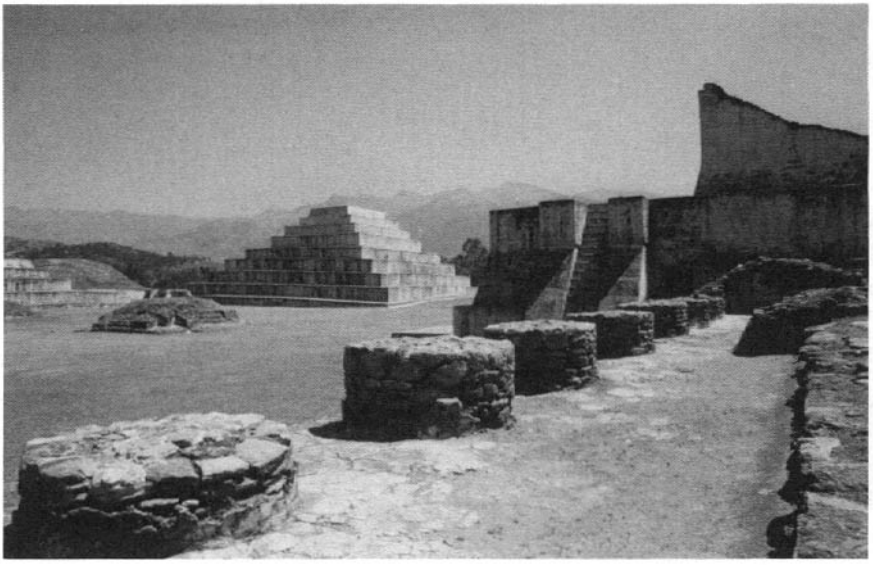
9 The *cabecera* of Santiago Chimaltenango, a "town-nucleus" *municipio* (courtesy of John M. Watanabe)



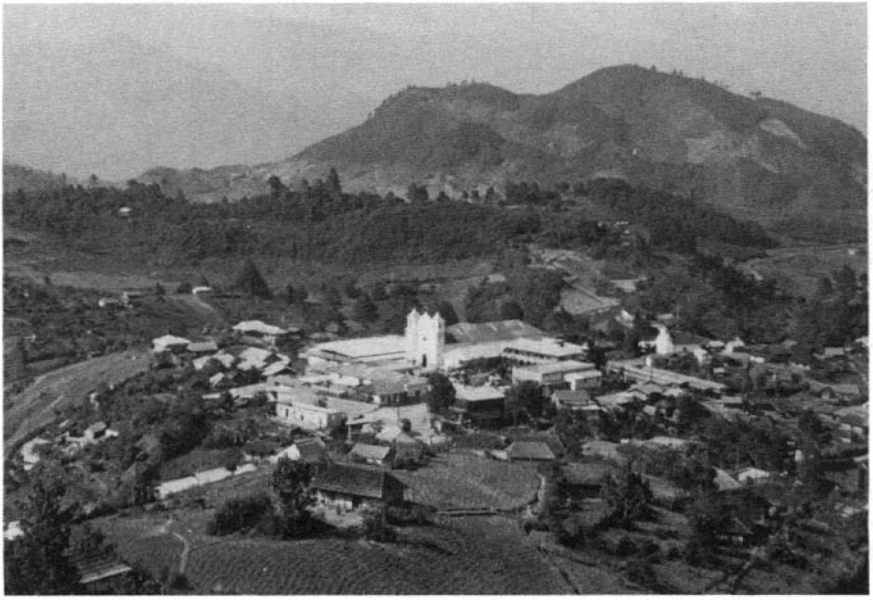
10 The *cabecera* of Todos Santos Cuchumatán, a "vacant-town" *municipio*

11 Salt works on the Río Negro floodplain near Sacapulas

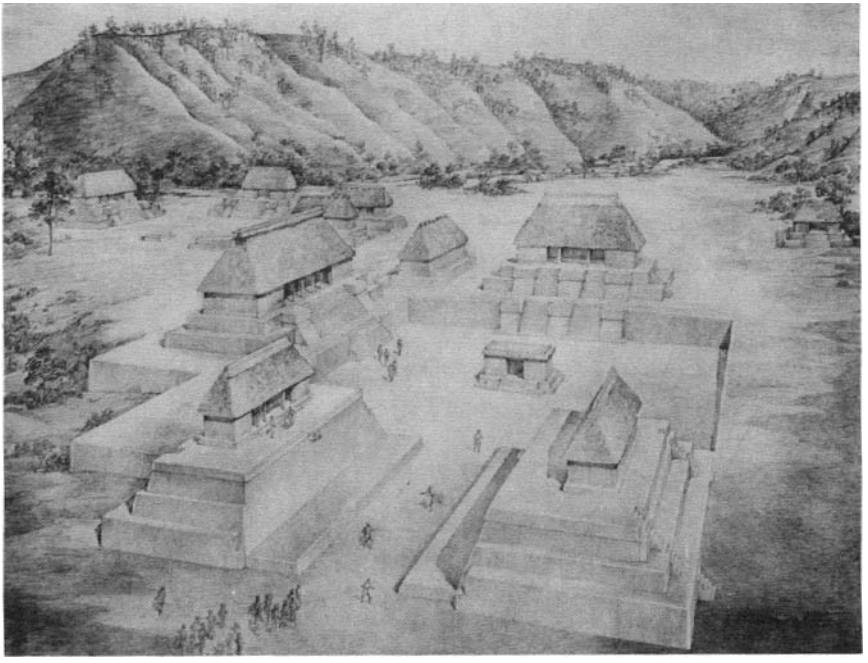
12 One of three salt wells at San Mateo Ixtatán (the crosses in front are the site of Indian *costumbre* activities)



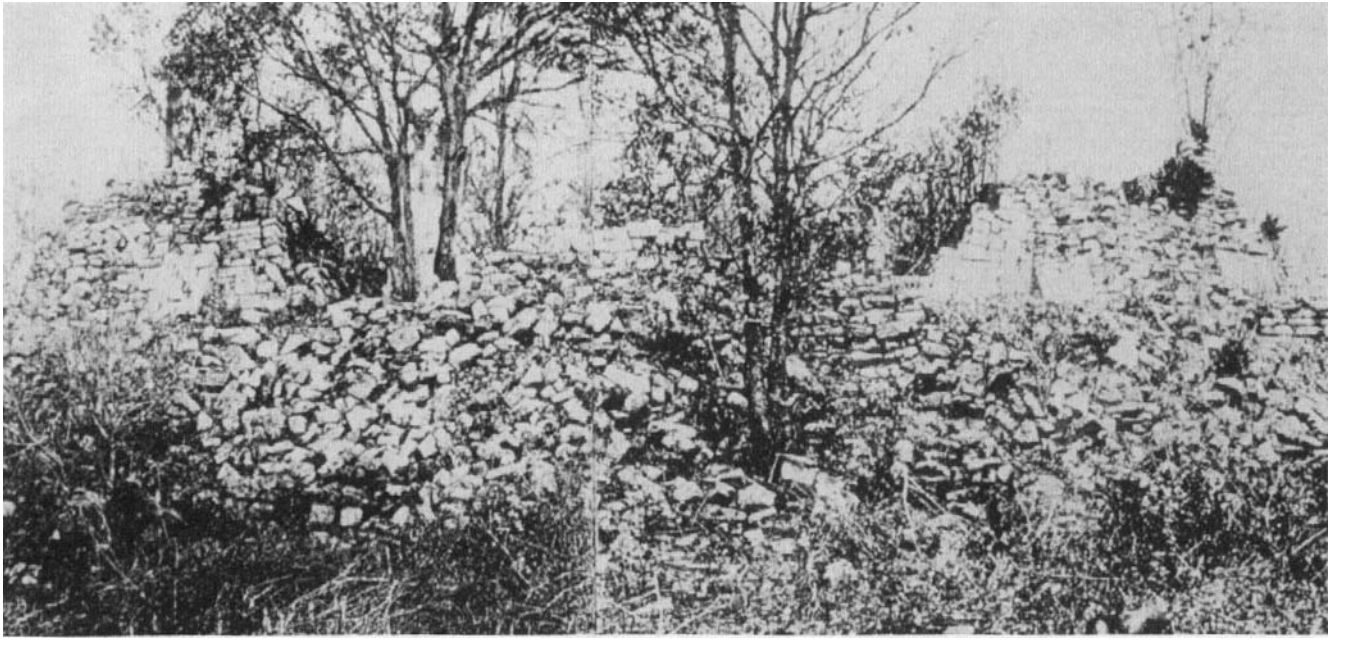
13 The pre-conquest Mam capital of Zaculeu, looking north



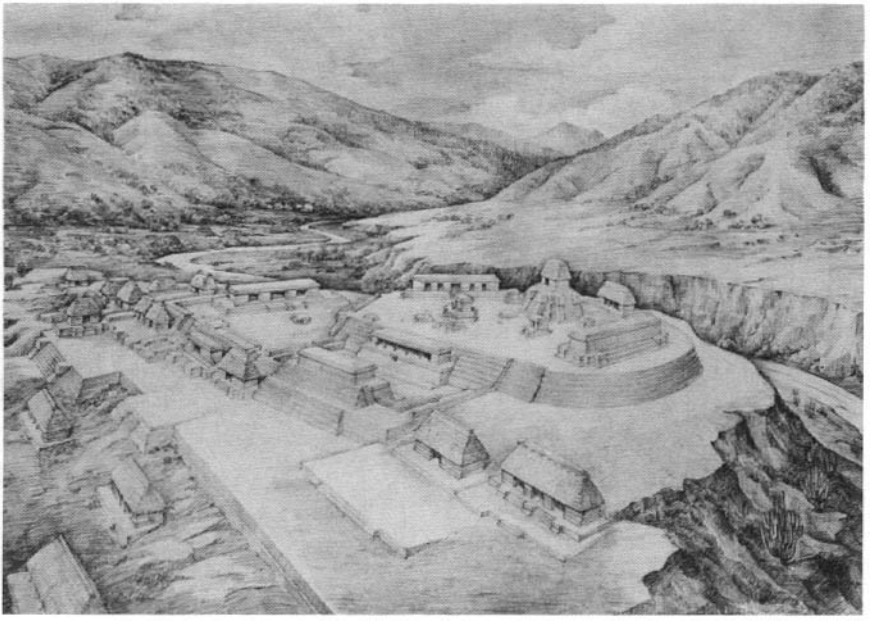
14 The Kanjobal community of Santa Eulalia, situated in the northern reaches of the Cuchumatán highlands



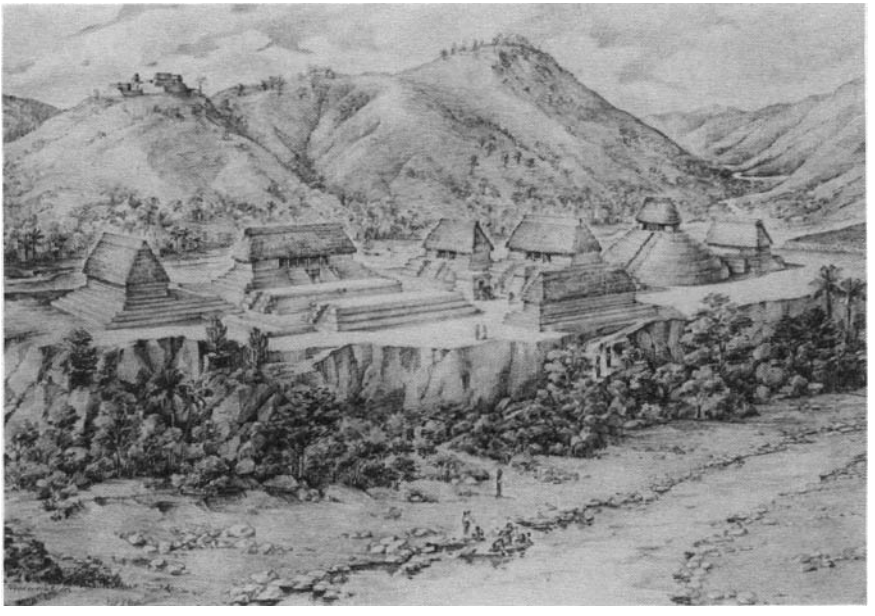
15 Restoration drawing, by Tatiana Proskouriakoff, of Chalchitán, looking south at the ball court group (courtesy of the artist and the Carnegie Institution of Washington)



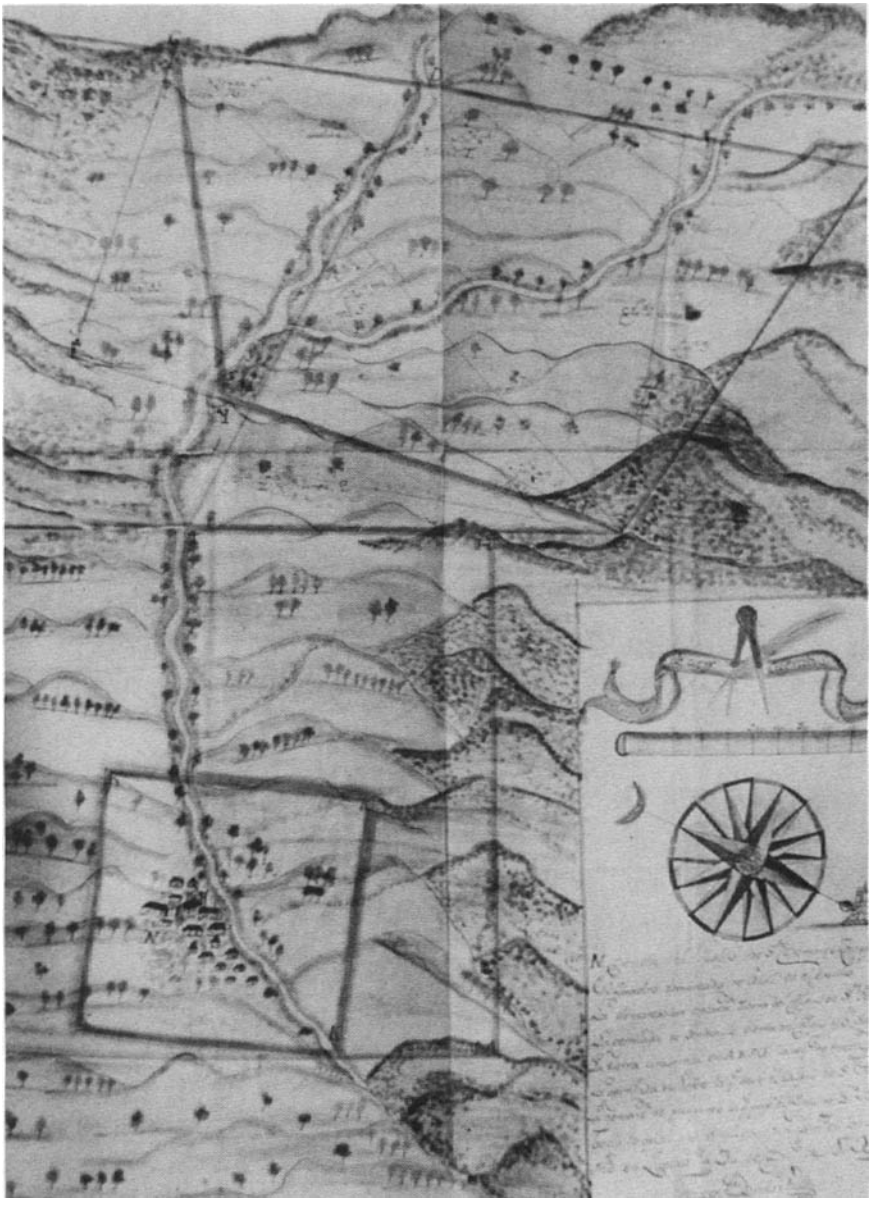
16 Unexcavated temples in the west group at Chaculá. The photograph, probably taken about 1895–7, may be found with others of the same period in E. Seler, *Die alten Ansiedelungen von Chaculá*.



17 Restoration drawing, by Tatiana Proskouriakoff, of Chutixtiox, looking north to the front ranges of the Cuchumatanes (courtesy of the artist and the Carnegie Institution of Washington)

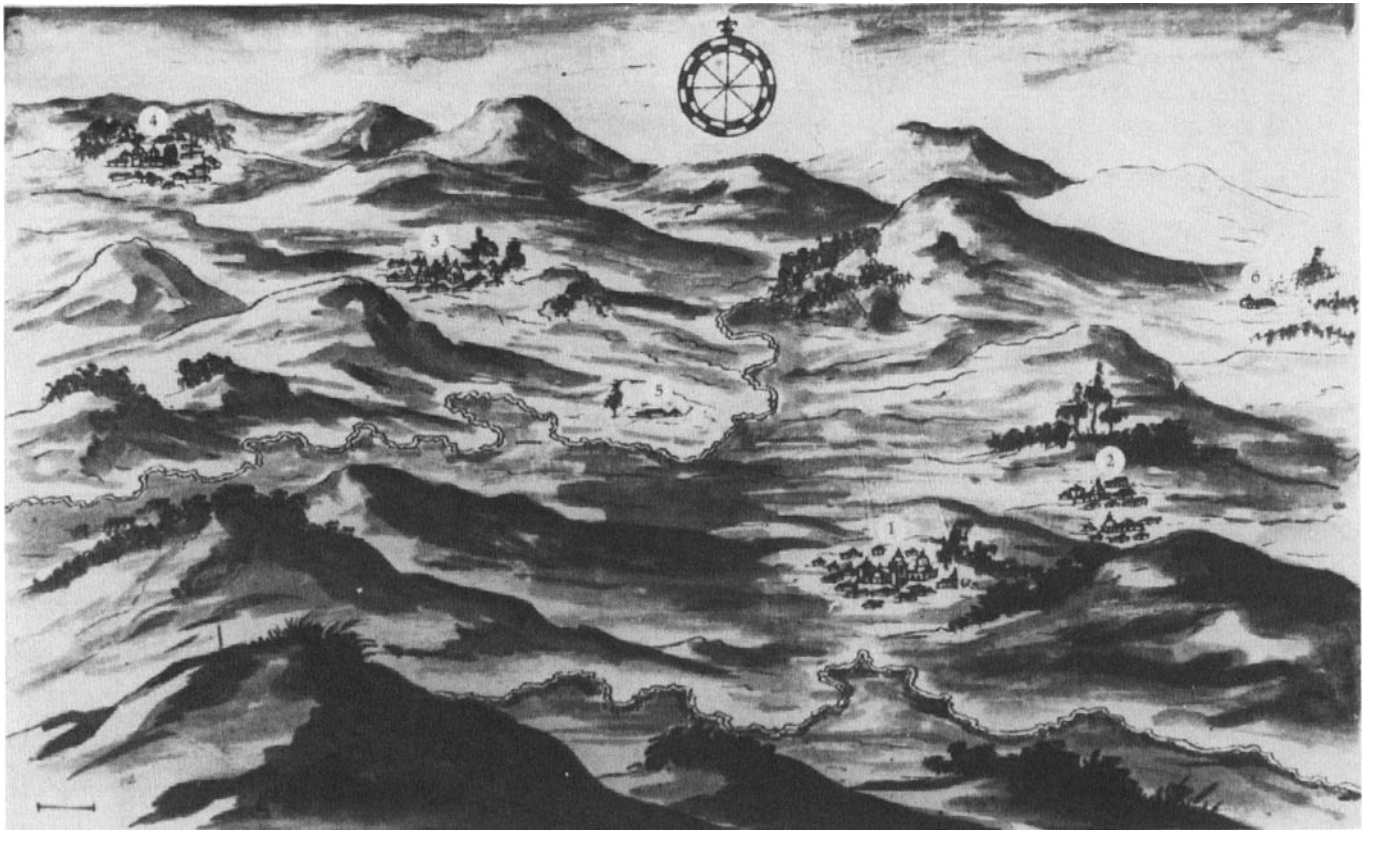


18 Restoration drawing, by Tatiana Proskouriakoff, of Xolchun (Quiché), looking south to the hilltop fortress of Pacot (courtesy of the artist and the Carnegie Institution of Washington)



19 The *congregación* and environs of Sacapulas (for source and explanation, see chapter 6, note 32). Reproduced by kind permission of the Archivo General de Centroamérica

20 Detail from a mural in the parish church at Chiantla, in which a robust-looking Spaniard (possibly meant to be the *encomendero* Juan de Espinar) oversees the labour of Indian miners



21 The parish of Chiantla, showing *haciendas* Chancol and El Rosario and nearby *congregaciones* (for source and explanation, see chapter 8, note 27). Reproduced by kind permission of the Archivo General de Indias