



Chapter 1

Introductory Concepts and Early Preclassic Developments 1500–900/800 BC

Stranger than Fiction

History often reads more like fiction than a mere list of events. Indeed, the events in Mesoamerica over the past three millennia read more like a novel than a historical account. And each scene of this narrative can be deepened by a musical accompaniment, reflecting the mood as the society advances.

Over the course of the book a sonic landscape develops. Introduced by tenuous violins that explore the range of the theme, it builds with the deep voices of the cellos and intensifies with the volume and driving rhythms of percussion. Finally attaining a resounding climax, it soon dissolves into the concluding coda where silent moments are lost in the distant past.

The intention of this book is to record for the reader a narrative through time, as a journey in which one is transported through cultural evolution, observing it as a film passing scenes on a screen. The themes pass before one's eyes, continuing from one century to the next, weaving together the threads of archaeological evidence of long-ago connections between the Central Highlands and South Coast of Guatemala, from the beginning of human settlement in the region until the Spanish Conquest in 1524–1541. In this territory, the pace of cultural development is uneven and parts of the narrative remain rough and unfinished, still to be investigated by the archaeologist. Nonetheless, it is an appropriate time to present new data that can be integrated into a comprehensive picture of the sequence of events. Close alliances alternate with intervals of discord in the process of growth, new patterns rise and fall as the human endeavor proceeds within the narrative. The developments of the two regions, one coastal and the other highland, are closely related and cannot be understood

separately from one another, yet at the same time each must be observed within its own independent history (Figure 1.1). This introductory chapter offers the basic foundations to understanding the cultural evolution of these developments.

As the narrative begins and the landscape is animated with initial precolumbian cultures, it will be seen that demographic growth is a constant thread in the text, the common denominator within the development of simple to complex society. Within this process, it is necessary to understand what was occurring and why and how it all came about. Assuredly, some prime movers acted upon events and other mechanisms triggered many changes in the course of time. Cultural evolution is a many-faceted phenomenon. Similarly, the geographic background of the region was also as complex and varied between two extremes, from altitudes where cold mists blew and descended from the slopes of terrain to evaporate on the hot, humid edge of the sea.

The South Coast of Guatemala includes what today are the coast and piedmont zone of the departments of San Marcos, Retalhuleu, Suchitepequez, Escuintla, Santa Rosa, and Jutiapa. These departments encompass both the relatively level coastal plain with its lush tropical forest, then extend to the rolling foothills that form the base of the volcanic chain that rises up to the cool and clouded high altitude zones. Geographically and culturally, the South Coast covers the area from the Upper Grijalva River Basin in Chiapas, Mexico, continuing south and east through the Comitan Valley to the Suchiate River, terminating at the Pacific Ocean and forming the Mexican border with Guatemala. From this river, the coast becomes a narrow strip of land with a piedmont zone that runs parallel to the Pacific Ocean and continues in a west-east direction to the Paz River. The river serves as the boundary between Guatemala and neighboring El Salvador, which was somewhat culturally distinct through time. The width of the lower coastal strip in Guatemala varies from about 20 km at the Guatemala-El Salvador border, to about 60 km just south of Lake Atitlan. The Guatemalan coastal region has a notably stratified ecology that begins at sea level along the beach and extends up to meet the volcanoes

and crests of the mountains. It can be divided into three eco-zones: from 0 to 1000 m, where temperatures exceed 23°C; from 1000 to 1900 m, where temperatures are moderate (17°–23°C) and rainfall is heavy; and above 1900 m, which is a very cool zone where temperatures average below 23°C (Shook 1965:180) (Figure 1.2).

Vegetation and temperatures vary markedly between these zones. The entire region is partitioned by numerous rivers that drain the waters from the steep slopes of the mountainous highlands, descending in rushing torrents carrying boulders and eroded sediments to be deposited on the coastal plain before reaching the Pacific Ocean. These fertile and constantly renewed alluvial soils are productive for agriculture and through time have provided rich habitats for flora and fauna.

Moving up from the Pacific Coast and crossing the volcanic chain, one enters the northwestern highlands that consist of what today are the northern parts of San Marcos and Quetzaltenango as well as the departments Solola, Totonicapan, Huehuetenango, and Quiche. Penetrating further into the

interior, the Central Highlands present the departments of Chimaltenango, Sacatepequezace., Guatemala, and the southern part of Baja Verapaz. This highland region is characterized by average annual temperatures around 17°C (Dengo 1999:56) and the soils are deep, of volcanic origin, and fertile. Forests consist of thickly clustered oak and other broad-leaved species at the lower altitudes, succeeded by the dark green conifers (cypress and pine) above the clouds in the higher zones. A large part of these forests have now been converted to agriculture and urbanization.

In this discussion, it will be necessary from time to time to include other developments that were taking place beyond the immediate borders of Guatemala, specifically in nearby Chiapas (Mexico) and El Salvador. The area of Chiapas that is of primary relevance can be divided into four topographic regions: (1) the Pacific coastal plain, (2) the Sierra Madre of Chiapas, (3) the Central Depression or Upper Grijalva Basin, and (4) the Central Plateau (Lowe and Mason 1965:195). These subdivisions are essentially long strips of terrain that extend in a northwest to southeast direction from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to Guatemala. The outer fringe forms

the Pacific coastal plain, extending from Oaxaca through Chiapas to Guatemala (Figure 1.3).

During precolumbian times, it constituted the principal routes of foot travel often carrying merchandise between Mexico and Central America. Included in this region were the ancient province of Soconusco and its rich cacao groves, where traders transported the bundles of cacao between regions to exchange goods, unwittingly disseminating their ideas, styles, and other influences to other populations. The adjacent and parallel strip of mountains forming the Sierra Madre was difficult to cross on the way into the fertile valleys of the Central Depression of Chiapas, for traversing it was dependent upon narrow and restricted mountain passes. Further eastward and parallel to the Central Depression, one enters the Chiapas Plateau or Mesa Central, a varied upland region that separates the Grijalva and Usumacinta river drainage systems. For convenience, the Chiapas Plateau can be subdivided into a western plateau margin, the Central Highlands, and the Comitan plain. Beyond this area, access into the eastern highlands of Chiapas was impeded in precolumbian times because of impenetrable dense forest cover.

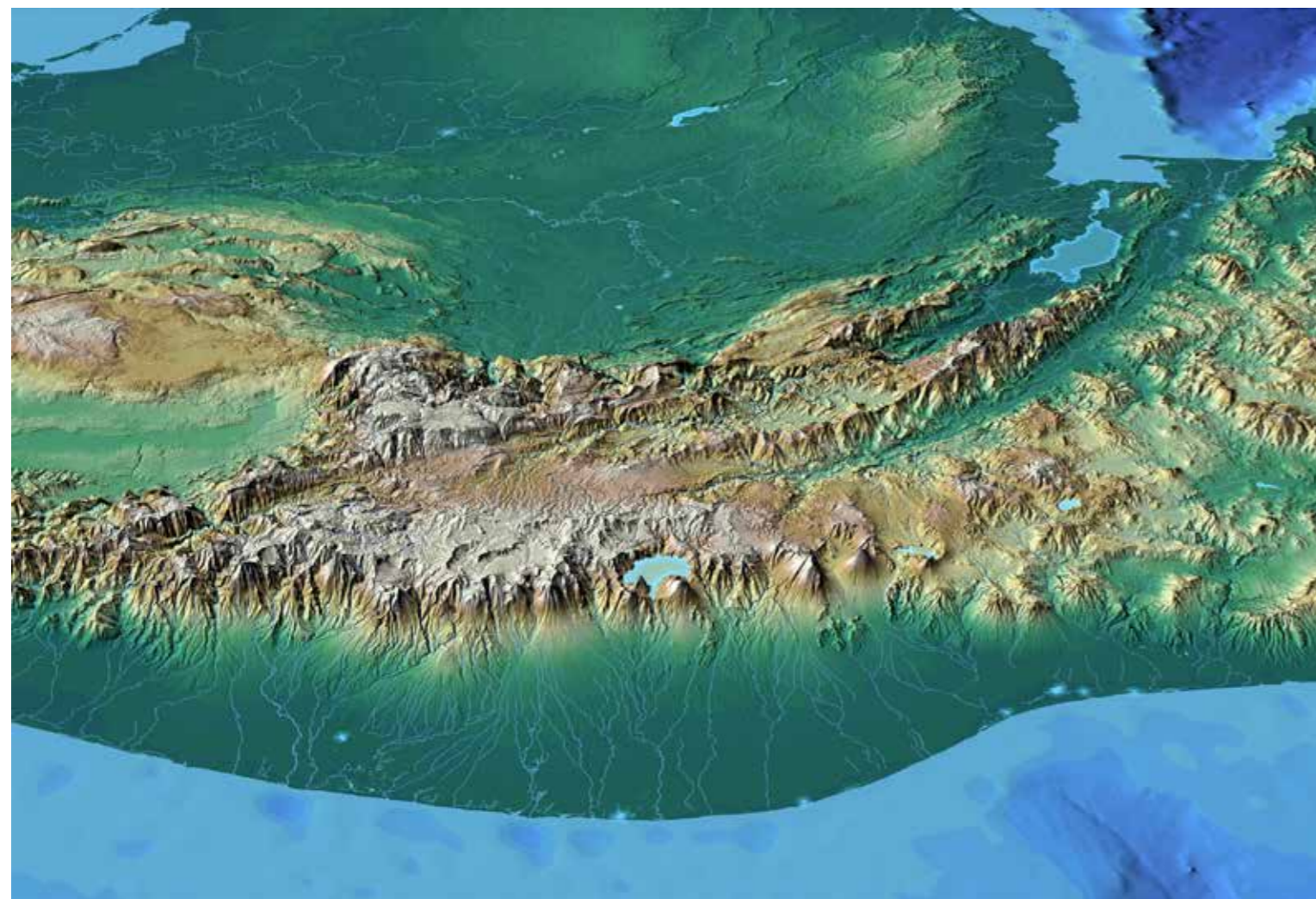


Figure 1.1 Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM)-based Digital Elevation Model of the southern portion of the Mayan region (Image by Marcello Canuto)

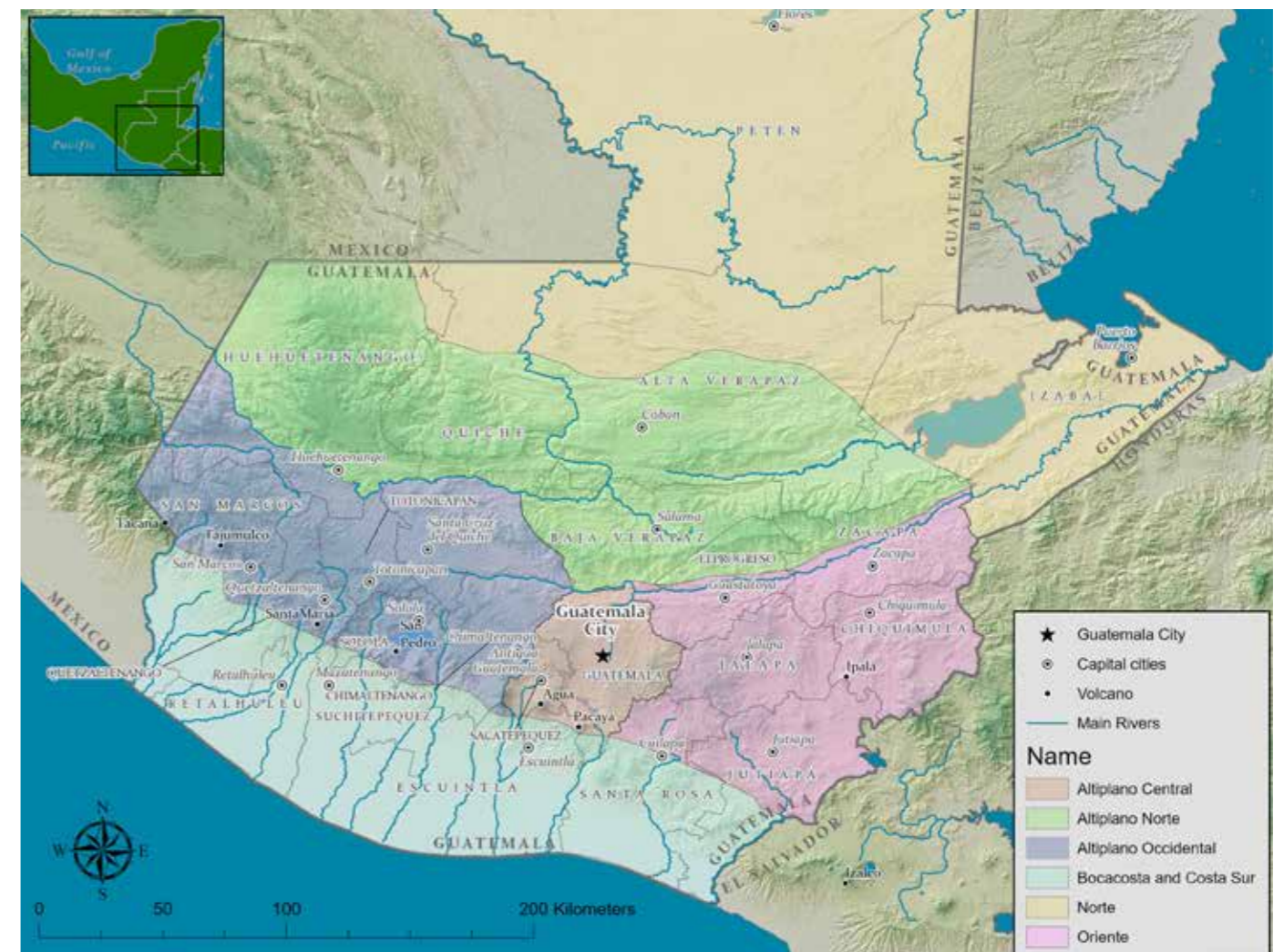


Figure 1.2 Map of southern Guatemala showing archaeological regions and political divisions (departments and their capital cities) (Image by Rodrigo Guzmán)

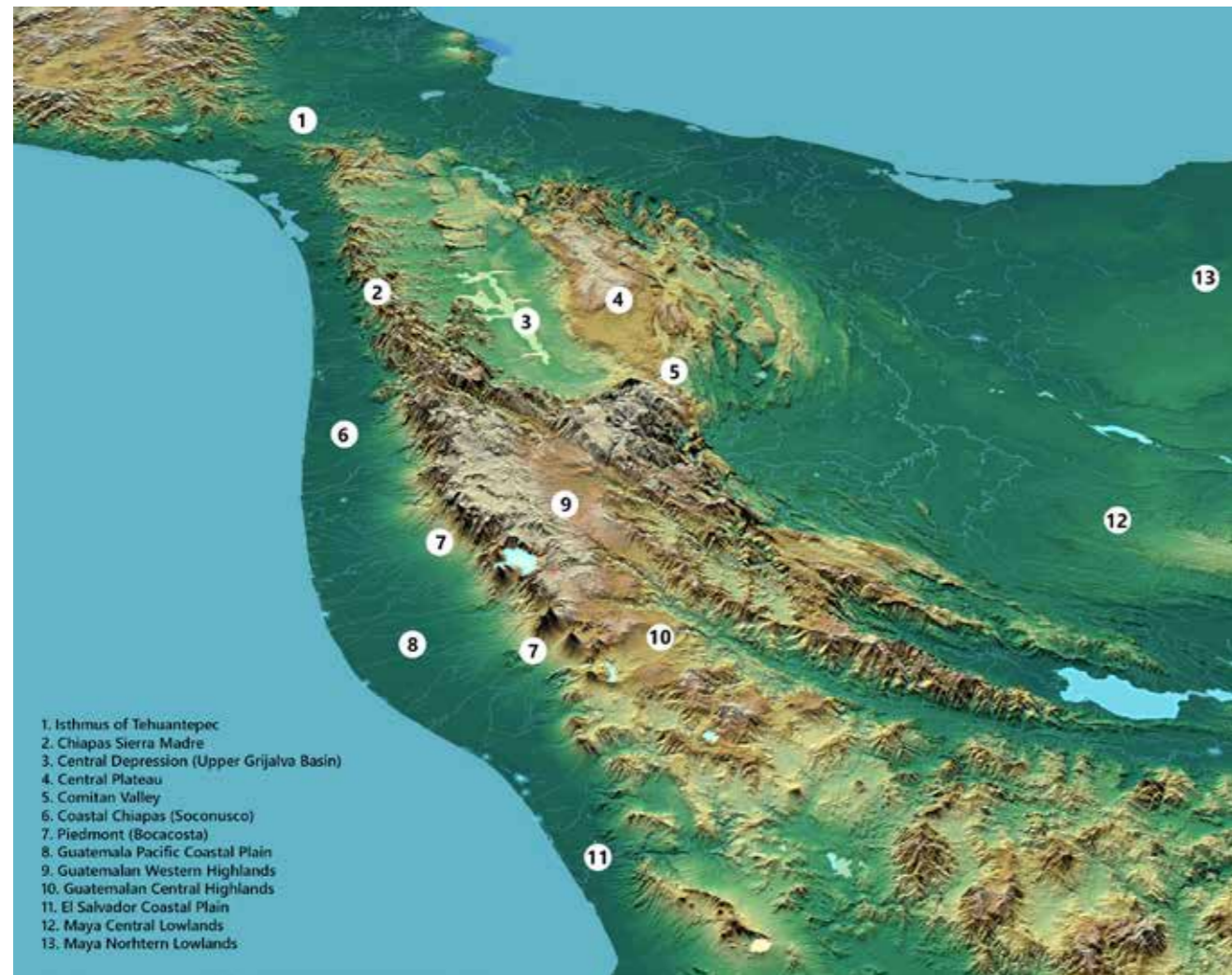


Figure 1.3 SRTM-based Digital Elevation Model of southern Mesoamerica, showing main geographic regions (Image by Tomás Barrientos and Marcello Canuto)

The western part of El Salvador has topography somewhat similar to that of Guatemala with its mountain ranges and a volcanic chain that continues the length of the country, parallel to the coastal plain with its fertile alluvial soils. The maximum width of the coastal plain is 25 km, narrowing considerably where the mountains slope directly into the Pacific Ocean (Sheets 1983:3). The Lempa River divides the country into an eastern and a western section, forming an effective barrier between the two regions (Longyear 1966:132). Archaeologically, the western section is very closely related to the Guatemala Highlands and Pacific Coast, whereas the cultures east of the Lempa River are more like those of the rest of Central America.

Early Occupation and the Archaic Period 4000–2000 BC

In contrast to Mexico, very little information is available in Guatemala regarding hunters and gatherers. This may be due to the lack of dry caves that could preserve artifacts and organic materials, or perhaps early sites have not yet been

found. However, some traces of hunters and gatherers have been found in highland Guatemala and this indicates that they must have passed through the region. A few early projectile points of basalt and obsidian were recovered by Ruth Gruhn and Alan Bryan (1976) in the highland Department of Quiché and these finds were associated with radiocarbon dates between 11,000 and 7,000 years ago. Further studies of early Archaic sites were conducted in the Quiché Basin by Kenneth Brown (1980:322), based mainly on the identification of scattered stone tools. In this area, he found various early stone tools, including projectile points, disc scrapers, and heavy scrapers, which he believes date to the late Paleoindian and early Archaic time periods.

As populations moved around and made contact with different peoples, long-distance exchange developed between regions. The redistribution of products and raw materials must have been an incentive from the very beginning for organizing trade and communication networks. Evidence from this period for both the Guatemala Highlands and South Coast remains scant because clues about the early occupation in the region lie hidden below the surface. The archaeological record goes back to what is known as

the Archaic period (4000–2000 BC) in the entire region, probably exploited by people collecting edible wild plants, hunting small animals with traps and nets, and inhabiting temporary shelters. Society was probably organized into small groups of extended families moving from one place to another according to the seasonal availability of foods. When appropriate, the groups must have convened into larger communities when harvest was abundant, allowing for the exchange of goods, opportunities for marriage partners, and sharing of ideas. Moving through this panorama, one can imagine small groups of people settling into special environmental niches, experimenting with selected seeds and propagation, preparing and storing foods, counting days between harvests, producing textile and basket weaving, employing simple house construction techniques, and using clay to model figurines. It must have been a time of interaction between groups and individuals, stimulating innovative thought with free use of resources in the forested, well-watered mountain slopes, the environment still vibrant and alive with abundant wildlife. In the process, nature itself was also at work selecting for the adaptation, reproduction and survival of fauna, flora, and humanity.

By about 3000 BC, nomadic groups of hunters and gatherers were beginning to settle along the Pacific Coast of Chiapas and Guatemala, occupying lands that provided enough food to permit temporary occupation for at least part of the year. By 2000 BC, populations were increasing in numbers, adjusting to the most habitable niches and beginning to identify themselves with their chosen territories. However, such adaptation provides only temporary stability, for as populations grow and the food supply becomes insufficient, modifications are required. To increase its food supply, a population would need to seek more space, learn how to cultivate plants (agriculture), and trade with more distant neighbors.

The earliest occupations recovered so far in southern Mesoamerica date to the Archaic period. These were found on the Pacific Coast of Chiapas by Barbara Voorhies (1976, 2004) at sites such as Chantuto, Tlacuachero, and Cerro de las Conchas on the coast of Chiapas. The occupants of these sites had been exploiting the estuary and shoreline resources (Figure 1.4).

The dates for these occupations range from about 4000 BC to ca. 1800 BC (Blake et al. 1995:165; Voorhies 2004:14; Voorhies and Kennett 2011:27–46). Food being exploited at the sites consisted mainly of clams, but there is also evidence of shrimp, fish, and mollusks and, especially toward the end of the Archaic, reptiles, turtles, and birds. In the early phase, fire-cracked stones were used presumably for boiling shellfish in gourds, and scraping tools fashioned from shell have also been found. In the later part of the period, flake tools begin to appear, as well as cobbles for grinding and pounding and flat stone slabs probably for use as anvils. It is evident that the Chantuto people were also collecting and processing plant foods, probably including wild forms of maize, as well as hunting and fishing. They obtained obsidian from the El Chayal and Tajumulco sources in Guatemala, which indicates that some interregional exchange

was in practice. No pottery was found from this period, and Voorhies (2004:412) reports that the most impressive fact regarding artifact types in the shell mound sites was the low frequency and low diversity (Figure 1.5).

In the late Chantuto sequence, there is evidence of two large oval temporary structures. Another residential base for the Chantuto people was discovered at the Late Archaic site of Vuelta Limón, somewhat inland from the site of Chantuto (Voorhies and Kennett 2011:28). Tools now included a few stone artifacts such as hammerstones and grinding stones made from river cobbles, and a few obsidian tools and flakes. It is obvious that the inhabitants had made the important shift to semi-permanent occupation and had begun to trade resources, or at least to exchange obsidian. Most of the obsidian came from the Tajumulco source and may have been obtained by the Chantuto people themselves. However, some of the obsidian came from El Chayal, which implies that the Chantuto people were engaged in some sort of economic exchange with other, more distant groups (Voorhies 2004:370). Estuary regions where there was a diverse and abundant food supply encouraged permanent residence (Voorhies 1976:99). There is also some evidence of ritual activity during these times, and the presence of phytoliths from domesticated maize indicates that the Chantuto people had begun to cultivate maize locally and in the nearby upland zones. By the Early Preclassic period, villages that were continuously occupied and which practiced agriculture were a way of life in coastal Chiapas and Guatemala (Blake and Neff 2011:54–63; Voorhies and Kennett 2011:29).

If we ask why and how agriculture initiated in any area, we must first question why people began to settle down in one location, for agriculture requires sedentary life to tend to the crops. Environments that have a permanent abundance of food to enable sedentary life, such as a location near a water source bounded by forests that provides year-round sustenance with fish, mammals, birds, and varying plant



Figure 1.4 Estuary in mangrove forest on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala (Photograph courtesy of Andrea Navas)



Chapter 2

The Middle Preclassic Part 1: The Olmec Period 900/800–700/600 BC

Stability Unraveled

The Olmec groups were thriving and rising to power, organizing their world. They had to deal, however, with the growing resistance and independence of Kaminaljuyu.

No longer does the shadowed forest hum with swaying trees and birdsong. Replaced by the rhythms of human life, the soundscape becomes the laughter of children in thatch-roofed huts, conversations along winding lanes, the footfall of women carrying water jars on sun-scattered paths. And in the distance, the staccato echoes of chopping wood resound. Crossing the centuries to the sonic sensitivities of today, perhaps it's a lighthearted minuet we hear in the background, where sonorous notes of soft violin duets are accompanied by horns lending texture, harmony, and color. These human musics come from the heart and remain eternal.

In Middle Preclassic times, the populations of the Guatemala Highlands and South Coast had now organized into formal villages and towns. These were nucleated settlements arranged around a civic/administrative precinct where management of the society could be handled by a dominant leader or council of elders. The administrative center typically consisted of at least one large platform where the governing group assembled, and around it were one or several elongated plazas suitable for the public to congregate on special occasions and ceremonies. The residential units were laid out along paths that led outward from the center, witnessing a constant flow of foot traffic of people coming to exchange goods and visit with others. The more important individuals in the community probably resided close to the central zone and the residences of the rest of the society spread outward. Usually, the areas adjacent to the villages were dedicated to farming and resource procurement and, scattered at greater distances, were smaller clusters of rural hamlets that were economically dependent on the major center.

Sites were usually oriented northeast, perhaps aligned to some mountain peak in the distance or, perhaps, a constel-

lation in the night sky. Very possibly, the houses were designed to receive the warming sun in the morning and, later, the cooling shade in the afternoon. The area of Kaminaljuyu, with its narrow plateaus between the deep ravines, almost demanded that the structures be grouped according to the topography. The platforms were constructed on narrow plateaus, oriented parallel to the deep gorges. During this period, sites in both the Highlands and South Coast of Guatemala were located in open and undefended valleys and plateaus, implying that hostile attacks were not a serious threat. The public architecture consisted of raised platforms constructed of tamped clay, puddled adobe, or talpetate blocks that supported perishable thatch-roofed structures reached by steep, open stairways constructed with or without the use of stone. Such structures functioned as temples, shrines, or other administrative purposes. Some of the platforms were quite large, such as Mound 1 at La Blanca in the Department of San Marcos on the South Coast, which measured more than 25 m in height (Love 2002a:42) (Figure 2.1). Residences and temples throughout the region were probably simple pole-and-thatch structures erected on slightly elevated surfaces.



Figure 1.5 Map with sites that were occupied during the Archaic period in Mexico and Guatemala (Image by Rodrigo Guzmán)

species, do not encourage agriculture. When there is insufficient food, or whenever space is no longer available to exploit resources, the society is impelled to produce what is needed or to trade for it. A less desirable response is the use of force to obtain resources from societies other than the local one. All three solutions have succeeded, but almost all societies have chosen to guarantee the survival of the group by producing food on a permanent basis. In the initial stages of agriculture, the society is semi-permanently in residence in order to experiment with cultivation, select and plant the seeds, tend the young growth, and wait for the harvest. When the system is in progress, sedentarism not only allows more permanence but also attracts more members, encouraging demographic increase locally or attracting members from the exterior. A larger population in turn requires a higher level of technology to increase production of food. More food leads to population growth and more intensive production, a process that has continued into modern times.

The origins of maize, the basis of agriculture in Mesoamerica, are not known. Maize in its wild state has not yet been

found anywhere in the New World and its possible progenitors can only be reconstructed by its botanical characteristics (Bonavia 2013:23). Two candidates, *Tripsacum*, have been proposed as ancestors of early maize based on maize samples found in the most ancient levels at the Tehuacan Valley in Puebla, Mexico. Nevertheless, it has been concluded that neither of these species was the ancestor of maize and, until a form of wild maize is discovered, the origins will remain uncertain. Nevertheless, most scholars tend to favor the idea that the origins of maize and its domestication were in the highlands of Mesoamerica and that, from there, it spread northward and south to South America (Bonavia 2013:281).

It is not known when the earliest experimentations in agriculture were carried out in southern Mesoamerica, but investigations in the Tehuacan Valley (MacNeish 1964) indicate that by 5000 BC, squash, chiles, and avocados had been domesticated, and it is possible that wild corn and cotton were also collected. Sometime between 5000 and 3000 BC, maize cultivation began in the Tehuacan Valley, although this was probably not its place of origin. The dates are similar for the