Recent studies in the ancient and colonial history of the native population of northern Mexico have called into question longstanding suppositions about the division between civilized center and barbarian north quite dominant in research of the area. Although such a change in perspective still does not appear, for example, in the organization of the exhibition rooms of the Museo Nacional de Antropología, nowadays it is more and more common to conceive of Ancient Mexico as a complex world of interacting civilizations, an ecumene.

Ongoing research makes it increasingly evident that the civilizations of the northeast were an integral part of the construction and conservation of a Mesoamerican world system. Even in the areas of the north where environmental pressures existed to limit the development of a sedentary lifestyle, we should be open to evidence of contact and exchange, and concerned to identify exactly when the histories of nomads become inseparable from those of the surrounding complex societies. Similarly, with regards to colonial history we should sustain the vision of contact, exchange, interrelation, and transformation while also exploring the alteration of these processes with the advent of European expansion and the formation of colonial states.

Two important aspects of this problematic are treated in the Thematic Section of this issue. These are, first, the question of the nature of the ancient societies of the zone of Coahuila, Nuevo León and Texas, especially in relation to their extensive, monumental and thematically complex production of rock art; and, second, the need to question the histories and reports about culturally and historically isolated and homogeneous “barbarians”, and reexamine the panorama of relations and transformations operating during the colony among the native groups of the area.

We begin this issue with a central problem in the documentation of the historical evolution of societies: how to establish a general and archaeologically provable sequence for the development of complex societies. Solveig Turpin addresses this question by applying a theoretical model developed by Richard Schaedel to two prehistoric hunter and gatherer populations that occupied distinct ecological zones in north-
eastern Mexico. Schaedel’s model postulates a phase of “cyclic nucleation” in which typically disperse groups begin to congregate during certain cycles in periods when specific sites in their territory provide the necessary conditions, both material (food, water, defense from hostile forces) and, probably, magical-religious (landscapes that are in some way exceptional). Turpin argues that in the two cases under study the environmental conditions did not permit a development beyond that of “cyclic nucleation”. This would mean that the northeastern Mexican material provides one of the few archaeological registers of a process the evidence of which would typically be erased by subsequent phases in the development of complex societies. The author places special attention on the relation between “cyclic nucleation” and those sacred spaces represented by rock art. In one case, Turpin examines the extensive petroglyphs of the mountain range and river basin of Nueva Leon and Coahuila and, in the other, the monumental pictographs present on both sides of the río Bravo in Coahuila and Texas, especially around the mouth of the Pecos River. The archaeological documentation establishes periods of apogee for the ritual activity of rock art correlated with sites evidencing concentrated and aggregated domestic life (the last of which dates to 1000 a.d.) but with no evidence of development beyond that postulated by the phase of “cyclic nucleation” in the schaedelian model.

The theme of the relation between magical-religious representation and social organization in the ancient history of northeast Mexico is continued and complemented in Herbert H. Eling Jr.’s study of mobilar art (portable pebble art). Eling reviews recent discoveries of mobilar art in two subareas (Coconos and Loma San Pedro) of Boca de Potrerillos, Coahuila, as well as descriptions of samples from Pelilal in Nueva Leon. He describes the information on the dating of the materials (5000 years b.p.) and on the stylistic analysis of the motifs inscribed in the pieces. This analysis also permits the exploration of the relations between mobilar art and the petroglyphs in the area. The author reports on two stylistic periods established for the area of Boca de Potrerillos and Pelilal, and offers an original interpretation of the motifs represented in the pebbles. These results from the contextualization, analysis, and interpretation of the mobilar art in the area are then compared with information on discoveries of mobilar art around the lower Pecos River in Texas and in the North American Great Basin. In addition, Eling offers an interpretive argument in which the butterfly motif is postulated as a root metaphor of great antiquity and coherence in magical-religious representations of metamorphosis and regeneration.

The historiography of North Mexico has also suffered from taxonomic elaborations of a supposed chichimeca reality. Such practices frequently have taken the place of documenting the northern populations and their concrete groupings in historical time and social space. Cecilia Sheridan examines this problem in relation to the native identities in the colonial northeast. She describes how in the best of cases the colonial historiography of territories and native groups has tended to revolve around the Catholic Misiones with the curious result of locating and labeling native groups in accordance with the official institutions whose mission was precisely that of settling and labeling such groups. Obviously, historical reality is much more complex. The deterritorialization of the native population possibly began even before the first direct contact with the Europeans, given that the changes in the conquered agrarian states to the south could have provoked the emergence of new territorialities in the north. The changes during the colonialization of the north were striking as, according to the author, ninety percent of the native groups lost their original territory. Sheridan gives us an impressive example of this process and its complexity by reviewing the changes in space, identities and interethnic relations of the Mescal or Mescalero Indians between 1688 and 1799.

The study of commerce constitutes another critical approach to stereotyped relations between the native population and Europeans during the colonial period. Martín González examines the case of New Mexico in the eighteenth century to show that the argument about commerce as a means of pacification of the native population is a self-interested simplification of historically complex processes. He documents the economic importance of commerce between pueblo Indians, Indian nomads and Europeans. The author then reviews the development and consolidation of commerce with emphasis on commercial fairs, as well as the intensity of commerce and local changes in production and consumption among different groups. He closes his study with the inter-
eastern Mexico. Schaedel’s model postulates a phase of “cyclic nucleation” in which typically disperse groups begin to congregate during certain cycles in periods when specific sites in their territory provide the necessary conditions, both material (food, water, defense from hostile forces) and, probably, magical-religious (landscapes that are in some way exceptional). Turpin argues that in the two cases under study the environmental conditions did not permit a development beyond that of “cyclic nucleation”. This would mean that the northeastern Mexican material provides one of the few archaeological registers of a process the evidence of which would typically be erased by subsequent phases in the development of complex societies. The author places special attention on the relation between “cyclic nucleation” and those sacred spaces represented by rock art. In one case, Turpin examines the extensive petroglyphs of the mountain range and river basin of Nueva Leon and Coahuila and, in the other, the monumental pictographs present on both sides of the rio Bravo in Coahuila and Texas, especially around the mouth of the Pecos River. The archaeological documentation establishes periods of apogee for the ritual activity of rock art correlated with sites evidencing concentrated and aggregated domestic life (the last of which dates to 1000 a.d.) but with no evidence of development beyond that postulated by the phase of “cyclic nucleation” in the schaedelian model.

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testing problem of the decline of the commercial fairs in New Mexico and their possible international context.

The historical complexity of the relations between Europeans, Mestizos and native nomads in the north is also present in the documents published in this issue. Luis López Elizondo and Franklin W. Daugherty have documented an argument about the genealogy and life of Alzate, the leader of the Apache of Los Chisos and a direct descendant of the Muzquis, a founding family in the colonization of Coahuila and Texas. With this documentation, introduced by an argument about the kinship of Alzate and the trajectory of his life, Elizondo and Daugherty illustrate the complex theme of the mix of real and imagined identities and affiliations in the conformation of a presidium culture in the north of Mexico.

The studies in our General Section change geographical focus (towards Southern Mexico) and return to questions of uneven development and changes in social relations and representations dealt with in recent issues. The section begins with a work by Othon Baños Ramírez concerned with rural development and its effects on Mayan agrarian life ways. Rural development is conceived in terms of a new rurality in development through changes in the balance of forces existing between the traditional and the modern. In terms of unequal development, this disequilibrium is not new; however, it no longer permits a separate cultural continuity for Mayan agrarian life as a sphere apart from Mexican modernity. One indicator of this new imbalance is the transformation of the Mayan habitat (dwelling and living space). By documenting the changes in the Mayan rural habitat, Baños argues that the new rurality means the end of a prior coexistence between tradition and modernity as two poles of cultural coherence. Hence, the Mayan agrarian life ways are losing their coherence.

The theme of change in the cultural coherence of a group is also a central problem in the article by Jorge Magaña Ochoa. In San Cristóbal de las Casas, members of different generations of immigrants from native villages construct practices concerned with health, sickness and medical attention in ways that reflect changes of place and social space. The author uses the testimonies from three cases of immigrant families in order to illustrate his own reflections about the loss of coherence in cultural referents to health, sickness and effective treatment. The discourse of his informants supports the efforts of the author to conceive the organization and representation of medical alternatives through Bourdieu’s concept of “field” and Lomnitz-Adler’s concepts (intimate culture, cultural coherence and mestizaje) developed for the analysis of regional culture.

We close this issue with an important contribution on colonial water measurements and their metric equivalents. Jacinta Palerm Viqueira and Carlos Chairez Araiza review the basic corpus of colonial texts in which the norms and specifications for water measurements (surco, paja, buje, real, dedo, naranja) are described. They document the variation in these earlier measures and review the problem of calculating the velocity of water flow through different orifices. This introduces the more general problem of the conversion of colonial measures to the metric decimal system and also permits comparison with measures and processes of standardization and conversion in Chile and Guatemala.
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