Nation Building in Mexico

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Faculty Introduction

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The Sam Houston State University History Department has sponsored a study-abroad trip to Mexico during each of the previous three years. Our intrepid leader, Professor Charles Heath, has worked with local experts and professional colleagues to deliver an outstanding introduction to the pre-Columbian history of the region. Heather Howsmon, a student on our 2018 trip, made the most of her study-abroad experience. She proved to be a careful student of the thirty-plus Maya, Zapotec, and Aztec sites that we encountered along our journey. In addition, Howsmon linked the archaeological sites to the nation-building process that was carried out during the presidency of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911). In her essay for my public history course, Howsmon drew on work by historian Christina Bueno to show how Díaz and his allies converted the ancient ruins throughout Mexico into a cultural patrimony that served as the basis for a post-colonial national identity free of Spanish or Western influence.

Abstract

In 2018, I traveled across Mexico with the History Department’s study abroad program. We visited countless archaeological sites, including Tulum, Cobá, Uxmal, Palenque, Calakmul, Monte Albán, Puebla, and Mexico City. Each site has been shaped by the historic peoples who lived there. In fact, I learned in Dr. Littlejohn’s Public History class that the awe-inspiring temples, advanced cities, and masterful artisan pieces left behind by the Maya, Zapotec, and Aztec cultures were used by Mexico’s President Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911) to create a post-colonial national narrative that was distinct from the Spanish colonial influence. Díaz restored and displayed Mesoamerican achievements to instill a sense of Mexican national pride and independence.
During the summer of 2018, I participated in a month-long study-abroad experience in Mexico. My group from Sam Houston State University traveled more than 1,500 miles from Cancún and Mérida, to Palenque and Oaxaca, and on to Puebla and Mexico City. Our class stopped at thirty locations, toured dozens of archaeological sites, dined on local cuisines (including street tacos and *chapulines* [toasted or fried grasshoppers]), and swam in a natural limestone cenote [a sinkhole that forms when the roof of a cavern collapses]. As we explored Mexico, I learned about the historic peoples and cultures of the region, such as the Maya, Zapotec, and Mexica (Aztec). Each group had its own unique history, which proved fascinating and sometimes disturbing. After three centuries of Spanish colonial rule, nineteenth-century nation builders, such as Porfirio Díaz, turned the archaeological remains that we visited into a vibrant national patrimony, which formed the essence of a new and “genuine” Mexican culture that was distinct from the history of Spanish colonialism and Western values.

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Nation states have generally been built by those in power: politicians, financiers, and the elite members of society. To create a national identity, those in power shape a narrative to bond people, states, and tribes with a common goal or purpose. As historian Christina Bueno argued in her book, *The Pursuit of Ruins*, “nations are not some sort of ‘natural’ production of history. Instead, they have been actively created, a process referred to…as nation building.” ¹ Nation building was crucial, especially in former colonial states like Mexico, to replace colonial rule. With the heterogeneous mixture of divergent factions in Mexico, each deeply devoted to its community and way of life, it took leadership, money, and sometimes force to forge a post-colonial national identity. In turn, this new common culture helped to diminish divisions. A common identity “forges a sense of belonging…[and] unity,” which is generated through “things like maps, museums, and censuses, that allow a government to imagine its domain.” ² People who share the same views and values will

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be more likely to comply with orders, submit to authority, and conform to national laws. A sense of pride in their national identity will ensure that people will remain fiercely loyal to their respective nation.

Under the leadership of president Porfirio Díaz (1877-1911), government officials in Mexico began to modernize the state and forge a national identity that was distinct from that established by Spanish colonial rulers between 1492 and 1810. Instead of building the nation on a European model, Díaz created a nation out of a variety of regional histories. To fully understand nation building in Mexico under the direction of Díaz, one must understand the man himself. He served in the country’s three-year civil conflict, known as the Reform War (1858-1860), before rising to the rank of general during the French intervention in Mexico (1862-1867). During that later crisis, Díaz helped lead republican forces against the French-imposed Emperor, Maximilian I of Mexico. Elected in 1877, Díaz served as president of Mexico from 1877 to 1880, and then again from 1884 to 1911. The period from 1877 to 1911 is referred to by historians as the Porfiriato.

As president of Mexico, Díaz preserved order in a nation torn by political factions. At times, Díaz employed unjust and brutal totalitarian measures while attempting to restore order and advance his nation. For instance, members of the indigenous population murdered what appeared to be prospectors surveying their lands. The prospectors actually worked for Díaz, so he deployed a “regiment into the mountains. [The regiment] captured, bound and shot, without a trial, nearly 1,500 Indians, practically all the adult males of the tribe.” Even with all of the in-fighting, many viewed the Porfiri period as the “golden era in the history of Mexico.” As he established and “encouraged the building of railroads and telegraphs, the development of mines and plantations, water works, sanitation,” he also “beautified and extended the capital city, built opera houses, and above all else, established a system of free public education and put the public on a sound financial basis.” Díaz was responsible for not only creating the national narrative through his

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5 “In Memoriam,” 701.

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While traveling across Mexico, I observed the uniquely woven tale between the narrative spun by the Díaz regime and the history shared by the native population of each town we encountered. Díaz was able to forge a single nation out of the disparate groups of people that had once warred against each other. Our journey began at the archaeological site of Tulum, in the state of present day Quintana Roo, one of the country’s most-visited tourist destinations. Situated on the Caribbean coastline of Mexico’s Yucatán Península, Tulum functioned as a Mayan seaport from roughly 1200 to 1450 CE. The city, surrounded by three large stone walls and a small beach with a large coral reef, provided a natural barrier of protection against foreign invaders. The society of Tulum consisted of a class system. The trade system was controlled by the elite; the trade goods included: “salt, honey, wax, skins, precious feathers, tobacco, vanilla, rubber, shells, flints, obsidian, jadeite, quartz, turquoise, amber, pottery, fish and dried meats.”

The people of Tulum were known to trade with distant places such as Costa Rica, Panamá, and the centralized Mexico region. As a result, the Mayans developed a coastal marking system to “aid navigation by providing facilities for embarking and disembarking places. The system included different markers placed along the coast to indicate sources of fresh water, the natural passes through reefs, or the presence of populations. Many of the temples and shrines built on the coast… [were] references for sailors. In addition, there was a system of signals made with smoke and flags to help navigation.” Archeological evidence suggests that the inhabitants of Tulum died from Spanish diseases, not by the actual hands of the Spaniards. Work began in the early 1900’s to excavate the site and open the beach for public use.

7 Martos, Archaeological Mexico, 35.
8 Martos, Archaeological Mexico, 35-36.
Cobá, an older Mayan metropolis, is located deep within the jungles of Mexico. This site is closer to nature, away from most tourists, which gave it a level of authenticity that allowed it to transport us back in time. The Mayan occupancy at Cobá spanned from the first to the fifteenth century, although the city was at its height between 300 and 900 CE. Cobá appeared to be a village or town for the average Mayan citizen, unlike Tulum, which was designed for the Mayan elite. This once mighty city held “more than 6,500 structures” and was filled with striking imagery: many pyramids, ball courts, and “more than 45 stelae [stone slabs that often serve as gravestones].” Cobá “…was the largest and most important city in the northeast of the Yucatán Peninsula…Its system of sacbeob [roads] is one of the most impressive in the Maya world, since it is made up of 43 roads…The most important [road] is Sacbé 1, 62 miles long, which joins Cobá and Yaxuná, very close to Chichén Itzá.” Mendez stated that “despite [Cobá’s] importance, the city is less beautiful than Uxmal and less imposing than Chichén, because styles were not so well developed at this early date.” The first pyramid that we climbed was Nonoch Mul at Cobá, with its awe-inspiring view of the expansive Mayan kingdom (see fig. 1). Being fully immersed in the natural surroundings of this Mayan metropolis helped me gain a deeper appreciation of the ancient Mayan way of life, while also gaining newfound awareness of the modern-day Maya’s continuing plight to preserve their heritage and way of life.

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10 Martos, Archaeological Mexico, 121.
11 Martos, Archaeological Mexico, 121
12 Martos, Archaeological Mexico, 121.
After spending the night in the Spanish colonial town of Valladolid, we visited the Mayan settlement of Chichén Itzá, which was developed and cultivated from around 435 to 1200 CE. Present day Chichén Itzá has a very lively Maya market, with vendors on both sides of the walkway, leading up to the Pyramid of Kukulcán. Tables were full of brightly colored artwork, crafts, and clothing, all made by the local Maya population. This sprawling site was made up of many different complexes, such as the Platform of Venus, the Temple of the Warriors, the Ball Court, the Sacred Cenote, the Temazcal (steam bath), the Plaza of the Thousand Columns, and the Observatory. “From [the Observatory], the Maya studied the cosmos and predicted the movements of the stars, planets, moon and sun. At the equinoxes, it is still possible to observe the alignment of the stars in the windows of this masterfully conceived scientific building.” There are many captivating stories surrounding Chichén Itzá’s history—most notably, a victory for the Maya against the Spanish at Chichén Itzá. “The conquistadors had briefly occupied the site in 1533 in an attempt to make it their capital...In a large show of force, however, Maya warriors defeated the Spanish in a fierce battle on a plain outside the ruin...It was one of the worst defeats suffered by the conquistadors and set back the Spanish conquest of Yucatán by years.” However, many years later, in 1894, Edward Herbert Thompson was able to purchase Chichén Itzá for a small sum and sent artifacts back to Harvard’s Peabody Museum.

Thompson plundered this once majestic Mayan region and destroyed portions of the site with help from Díaz’s own subinspector of the Yucatán, Santiago Bolio. According to Bueno, “Bolio helped Thompson search for antiquities, breaking into tomb after tomb and gathering stones at one site to use in the remodeling of Thompson’s hacienda. At Chichén Itzá, the subinspector destroyed some murals Thompson had studied in order to prevent anyone from carrying out any further research, making Thompson the sole expert on the images.” Shortly after Porfirio Díaz’s rule, the Mexican government seized Thompson’s...
hacienda and the archaeological site in 1926, claiming that he had illegally removed hundreds of artifacts from Mexico. Although the Mexican Supreme Court eventually ruled in Thompson’s favor, later archeological work would require that artifacts stay in Mexico.

From the Yucatán Peninsula, we traveled inland to Palenque, a political power center, which seemed more formal and stately than the other Mayan settlements we visited. One of my first observations upon our arrival into the complex was an aqueduct channel. I was intrigued by this level of advancement. During the Classic Maya period (200-600 CE), Palenque proved itself unique compared to other Maya cities with the implementation of its aqueducts system17 (see fig. 2). The Maya, skilled at adapting to their environment, “met the challenge of simultaneously controlling flooding, reducing erosion, and bridging divided civic space; the Maya of Palenque covered portions of the existing streams by constructing elaborate subterranean aqueducts that guided the water beneath plaza floors.”18 The immense wealth and innovation at Palenque gave the Mexican “nation a sense of timelessness along with prestigious, ancient roots.”19 The king of Palenque, Pakal, commissioned several building projects, one example being the Temple of Inscriptions, which would later house his sarcophagus. Pakal was buried in a fashion similar to Egyptian Pharaohs, “a veritable Tutankhamun of the New World, his is the most elaborate Maya tomb yet discovered.” Within his

Fig. 2: The aqueduct at Palenque

sarcophagus lay the body itself, “bathed in bright red cinnabar (a toxic compound of mercury) and bedecked in copious amounts of jade jewelry... His face was covered by a jade mosaic mask, his mouth framed by an ornament of red-painted pyrites.” Accompanying the remains were, “900 pieces of jadeite, shell, pearl and obsidian... Jadeite had a profound significance for the ancient Mayas, since it represented the vital fluids (such as water and blood) and the regeneration of the plant world.” Pakal and his son brought power, innovation, and excellence to the region. According to Bueno, “For the wealthy and educated elites, the very act of studying and controlling the past gave Mexico the coveted aura of a scientific, cosmopolitan, and modern nation.” Palenque, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is prestigious, masterfully designed, aesthetically pleasing, and rich with ancient Mayan history.

From Palenque, we traveled to the neighboring state of Oaxaca, the home state of Porfirio Díaz. Oaxaca was one of my favorite cities. There, we explored museums, strolled through the cobblestone streets, enjoyed the local market, and dined on local cuisine. We also visited Monte Albán, once home to the mighty Zapotec empire. Built on a high mountain plateau, Monte Albán has often been referred to as the “Olympus of Oaxaca.” At the top of the site, there was an all-encompassing view of the valley and the city below (see fig. 3). This ceremonial center was created to honor their gods and noble class. The building of such an elaborate city center was also a way to display their power, status, and wealth. In 1931, Alfonso Caso discovered Tomb 7 at Monte Albán, “one of the richest and most famous archaeological discoveries ever made in the New World... An extraordinary assortment of over 500 exotic grave goods includes objects of gold, silver, copper, jade, turquoise, rock crystal, obsidian, and pearls.” The Oaxaca valley was a diverse agricultural community. This region “included some of Mesoamerica’s earliest evidence for domesticated plants. Squash which goes back to 9000 BCE making it one of the planets oldest cultivars.” The increase in agriculture production gave rise to the Zapotec city-states which began around 400 CE. Monte Albán was the Zapotec ceremonial

23 Recording of Dr. Heath.

78 The Measure
capitol “with the earliest hieroglyphic inscriptions in Mesoamerica.”

Scholars believe that Monte Albán fell into disrepair due to lack of care and internal power struggles between the upper and lower class. Although the Zapotec hieroglyphics have yet to be deciphered, there is still enough archeological evidence to reveal the inner workings of their civilization and religious practices.

After driving through the Paso de Cortés between the Popocatépetl and Ixtaccíhuatl volcanoes in central México, we traveled northward to Teotihuacán (100 BCE-550 CE). This extraordinary archaeological site is located roughly thirty miles northeast of Mexico City. At its height, around 300 CE, “Teotihuacán hosted a patchwork of cultures including the Maya, Mixtec, and Zapotec.”

In the Aztec language, Nahuatl, the word Teotihuacán means “place of the gods.” Upon entering the complex, I was completely captivated by the sheer magnitude of the Pyramid of the Sun (see fig. 4). The Pyramid of the Sun was the most important site to Porfirio Díaz’s nation-building régime. When the government first decided to excavate the site, it was “estimated [that the local population] had carpeted the ruins with over 250 plots, full of crops, pirú trees, and maguey [agave plant]. If Teotihuacán were to evoke a mythical past, it had to become an empty ceremonial center, unhindered by competing interpretations of the ruins; it had to be free

26 Fernando Carrizosa Montfort, Great Temple of Tenochtitlán (Mexico: Monclen Ediciones, 2005), 4.
of residents.”27 Originally, the government wanted to seize the land from the locals without compensation.28 However, the government finally paid 100 pesos for the Pyramid of the Sun.29 “In April 1906…President Díaz paid a visit and gave his wholehearted approval. He arrived to the sound of ‘cheering Indians’ and tolling church bells.” As President Díaz made his way to the top of the pyramid, the “newspapers marveled at the president’s ‘virile stamina’ during the climb; they praised him as the first leader to have ‘made the effort’ to unearth Mexico’s ruin, ‘monuments that are clear proof of a civilization comparable to that of Egypt.’”30 Teotihuacán became the exemplary standard of Mexican history, power, and advancement while also serving as a national treasure and a UNESCO world heritage site.

Fig. 4: Standing atop the Pyramid of the Moon facing the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacán. Photo Credit: Mary Littlejohn

Our final region to explore was the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlán (1325-1521 A.D.), which is under present-day Mexico City. The island city of Tenochtitlán, situated in the middle of Lake Texcoco, was full of canals and causeways developed by the Aztec (see fig. 5). It was described by the Spaniards as the “Venice of the New World.”31 The Aztec used the canals to transport supplies and building materials. They also came up with a unique way to cultivate their crops by building chinampas, or

ancient gardens, “created by digging ditches and piling mud on both sides...After the Aztec dredged soil and dead plants from the lake bed, they used sticks, rocks and branches to hold the piled-up earth in place. This created island garden beds in the middle of those lakes.”32 This was an ingenious way to sustain their ever-growing populations which ultimately peaked at around 200,000 residents.33

![A model of the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan.](image)

As I explored the city, I had a hard time imagining that the remnants of the mighty Aztec empire were actually underneath the bustling city of present day Mexico City. The Templo Mayor was the first stop on our excursion. Once the heart of Aztec society, all that was visible while walking towards the once colossal temple, was the expansive Spanish cathedral complex. Situated behind the church, almost as if it was tucked away in a corner, were the remnants of the Templo Mayor, beaten down and withered away. It looked as if someone had peeled the concrete back to view the varying layers of this once impressive temple. We were viewing a collision of the past and present. Many of the Spanish buildings were made from the remains of the decimated Aztec temples. During its peak of power, the Aztec empire engulfed nearly 40 to 50 smaller city-states.34 Many methods were employed to gain control of

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33 Montfорт, *Great Temple of Tenochtitlan*, 10.
34 Christopher Arratay, "Aztec Teotihuacan: Political Processes at a Postclassic and Early Colonial City-State in the Basin of Mexico," *Latin American Antiquity* 17, no. 4 (December 2006), 363.
the region, such as the use of “marriage alliances and other strategies involving war, the Aztec gradually gained political power...they achieved their objectives: first growth, independence and exemption from tribute, then expansion and conquest.”

The Aztec empire’s centralized base of power was Tenochtitlán. The surrounding subjugated city-states were displeased with the Aztec stronghold and forced taxation. So, when the conquistadors arrived, the indigenous population eagerly formed an alliance with them. According to Atwood, “The Spaniards were joined by thousands of indigenous people who were enemies of the Aztec...because they were sick of paying tribute. They saw Cortés as their salvation.” As the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán held much of the pre-Columbian history in archives and libraries. “The civilizations of Mesoamerica, going back to the Olmecs, wrote documents in picture glyphs, or a hieroglyphic system. Writers kept these documents on scrolls or screen-fold books on a form of paper that they made from deerskin or the bark of fig trees.” Once firmly implanted in the “New World” the “Spanish invaders and Catholic clergy who accompanied them destroyed many of the documents and archives of the civilizations that preceded them. They carried out this destruction often for military reasons (to demoralize the indigenous fighters opposing them), or, in other cases, on religious grounds (to battle what they regarded as false faith of the native peoples).” Portions of the indigenous population, alongside of the conquistadors, participated in the destruction of the Aztec civilization. “The Spanish also massacred most of the Aztec priests, many of whom were scholars who had preserved invaluable oral and written histories.” Many temples/pyramids in Mesoamerica were decimated by the Spanish, and Christian churches erected atop of the ruined remains (see fig. 6). In Merida, under the direction of Montejo, “The temples atop the pyramids were ordered razed—using the labor of the descendants of the ancient Maya who

35 Montfort, Great Temple of Tenochtitlán, 7.

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had built them centuries before—leaving only raised platforms and an abundant supply of cut stone to construct new [Spanish] buildings.”

![Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios](image)

Fig. 6: The Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios. Photo Credit: Dr. Littlejohn

The desecration and destruction of Mesoamerica and its population is immeasurable. Díaz, however flawed, was able to salvage and restore portions of the nation’s history.

Studying abroad in Mexico was an incredible experience. We were fully immersed in a culture for almost a month with the best resources and locations to study. On our last day in Mexico City, we visited the suspected spot where Cortés originally met Montezuma, which was a rather fitting end to our journey. Nation building is a deeply complex, and at times, volatile process. The Mexican national story is one of resilience, with the loss of their heritage, land, and many lives, yet the people continue to rebuild and carry on. No matter what presiding forces inhabit their nation, the heart and spirit of the Mexican people will always be the driving force creating their story.

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Bibliography


**Student Biography**

Heather Howsmon is a senior at Sam Houston State University. She is involved with Phi Alpha Theta National History Honor Society and enjoys traveling. Heather participated in the studied abroad program with Dr. Charles Heath and Dr. Jeffrey Littlejohn in Mexico during the summer of 2018. While in Mexico, she gathered information to develop her research paper about nation-building and presented her research at the Undergraduate Research Symposium in the spring of 2019. Heather has been actively involved with the Lynching in Texas project under the direction of Dr. Jeffrey Littlejohn. She will graduate in the fall of 2019 with a B.A. in History and a minor in American Studies. She plans on pursuing her Master’s at Sam Houston State University.