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## Introduction

*Sacred Spaces as Subject and Study in the Mesoamerican Landscape*

KEITH M. PRUFER

It can't be that we just clear the land, that we just cultivate the earth, that we just dig and scrape. That can't be how it is. Rather, it must be as in the story in my opinion, as far back as I can sell. Because the earth is alive. The earth also has virtue. The earth is also just earth, but it has awareness. Therefore, it has remained like this. Back when the first man asked for work it was given to him. But the earth requested our bodies in return. That's how I have heard it. I haven't invented or dreamed it up.

JILOTEPEQUEÑO POQOMAM  
TEXT (SMITH-STARK 1976: 86)

### POPULATING SACRED PLACES

Sacred spaces are human constructions. They do not merely exist to be discovered. They are places in nature or in the built environment that are made sacred by the actions of people. For archaeologists and art historians sacred spaces are found or reflected in architectural configurations, iconographic representations, and as modifications to and activity residues from significant landmarks such as caves, grottos, rockshelters, and mountaintops.

In the simplest of terms, sacred places emerge as one of many ways people know their world. As humans map their lives onto the terrain of their landscapes they are constantly creating and re-creating senses of place: domestic place, human place,

wild place, death place, sacred place. This is a crude model, in that such categories are never static or bounded; within the life cycles of individuals and the generational cycles of societies, senses of place can and do shift or change. It still stands as valid, though, in that “cultural landscape[s] are] fashioned from the natural landscape by a cultural group” with culture as the “agent,” the natural area or space as the “medium,” and the “cultural landscape” as the product (Sauer 1963: 343).

As prominent locations within cultural landscapes, sacred spaces are imbued by people with notions of both power and history. Sacred spaces are conservative, in that they generally change slowly and are considered places for conserving cosmological information that is socially encoded. The perception that they are symbolically charged with supernatural forces gives them the potential to guide socially transformative processes, including those linked to a range of life-cycle events (birth, death, social personhood) and a broad range of political and prestige interactions and other behaviors.

Sacred spaces are also one of the best windows into pre-Hispanic cosmologies. Cosmologies are literally “sciences of nature,” from the physics of Aristotle and Newton to the mythical cosmograms of Tibet. A *cosmology* is any composition or cultural construct relating to the structure and process of systems of creation. Included are the origins of physical elements of earthly or astronomical spheres, the genesis of the material world, and the order and function of the observable universe, including the planets, the solar system, and celestial bodies. Quite simply, a cosmology is any cultural belief related to the creative forces responsible for the composition of the universe.

Cosmologies are reflected in the patterning of material constructions and in iconographic representations of sacred space, but for people who consider those spaces sacred, the links between cosmology and place are usually actualized through ritual. The archaeologically detectable uses of the sacred places by pre-Columbian people, as well as our interpretations of material evidence of Mesoamerican religions, center on the remains of ritual activities. In contexts considered sacred, rituals are forums for the expression of religious ideas and events where shared cultural ideas are given meaning by participants (Lawson 1993: 185). Simply, ritual “imposes an order, accounts for the origin and nature of that order, and shapes people’s disposition to experience that order in the world around them” (Bell 1997: 21). Societies have rich and varied types of rituals reflecting the milieux of religious and secular traditions. Anthropologists worldwide have studied the multivocal ways rituals enter into peoples’ construction of identity on a number of different levels—personal, domestic, political, and religious (Bastian 1978; Hill 1988; Williams and Boyd 1993). For archaeologists the task of identifying and categorizing ritual behaviors is difficult, since they deal largely with the material remains of activities that occurred in the

distant past, sometimes with the benefit of analogous behaviors that must be carefully evaluated through the filters of historical change.

The discussion of pre-Columbian religion almost always refers to some type of specialized activity, and therefore, in all likelihood, to the actions of ritual specialists. While specialists need not mediate or conduct rituals, they often do, and as discussed below, most rituals associated with the sacred places involve religious practitioners who specialize in mediating with cosmological forces. Anthropologists have frequently gauged the importance of rituals based on the presence of specialists (Bell 1992: 130). Mary Douglas (1966), in a survey of ritual events, found a higher propensity for religious specialists in societies that are more highly stratified. Max Weber's entire premise of the evolutionary development of religion through rationalization had at its core three types of authority—the magician, the priest, and the charismatic prophet—with only the priest and the prophet falling into the realm of his definition of religious specialist. In a view that has found favor in sociology and religious studies, priests are seen as influencing gods “as part of the functioning of a regularly organized and permanent enterprise” that is distinct from the activities of individuals or magicians (Weber 1963, 28). Prophets, on the other hand, have a personal calling from which they derive their power, and this power is manifested in terms of a “charisma” that is distinctly individual.

In the anthropological literature, the distinction between the priest and the prophet has been less instrumental than the distinction between priests and another form of inspirational practitioner: the shaman. In part this may be due to anthropology's emphasis on comparative studies of competing statuses in religious systems in nonindustrial societies (Turner 1968: 438). Priests and shamans may be found in the same religion, or they may not. The main distinction between the two appears to be that shamans claim a direct communicative relationship with the supernatural forces they mediate, while this is not a necessary criterion for the priest (Lessa and Vogt 1958: 410). However, the roles are not static, and there may be many exceptions. Turner, a proponent of the distinction, clearly notes that “we sometimes find the two functions of the priest and the shaman combined in the same individual” and that priest can sometimes take the role of innovators or dramatists (Turner 1968: 439). These points are important in that most ethnohistoric and ethnographic discussions of sacred space and sacred places involve the actions of individuals who, anthropologically, would be considered shamans.

### STUDYING SACRED PLACES

The concept of sacred space is as old as human belief systems. In the earliest Sumarian epic, which dates to at least 3000 BCE, the heroic figure Gilgamesh refers to a

sacred grove of cedar trees (Swan 1990: 33). Geographers have generalized several ways in which sacred places can be categorized. James Swan (1990: 35–36) proposes three groupings:

1. As human constructed structures that are situated at or near a natural feature that possesses a strong religious significance. This can include churches, shrines, and temples.
2. “Archetypal-symbolic” places, where a larger model or “whole has become condensed into a limited space, maintaining a sense of order and displaying a harmonious relationship between human life and the Cosmos.” This includes mandalic cities in India, as well as the sacred layout of many Maya communities.
3. Places in nature that possess no special construction. This category includes sacred mountains, caves, grottos, and other natural features, such as the Ganges River.

Natural places by themselves do not constitute monuments, since they are not constructed (Bradley 2000: 34), but this does not mean that they cannot contain monuments, have monuments around them, or be modified as monuments. It is obvious that these categories are not immutable: some locations may combine two or more of the abovementioned, such as the Temple at Parvati, India (465 CE), where the outside walls are decorated with images of piles of rocks and wild animals in a grotto, the interior of the building being a metaphoric cave (Humphrey and Vitebsky 1997: 23). The Indian geographer Rana Singh (1993: 161, citing Lane 1988: 15) identified four maxims that can be used to define how humans relate to sacred spaces:

1. A sacred space is not chosen, it chooses.
2. A sacred space is an ordinary space, ritually made extraordinary.
3. A sacred space can be tread upon without being entered.
4. The impulse of a sacred space is both centripetal and centrifugal, local and universal.

Although these maxims are useful for their understanding of emic perspectives on sacred space, some are not very helpful for analyzing those spaces. This is not to say that emic (analogical or ethnoarchaeological) perspectives and data are unhelpful for prehistorians. To the contrary they have been integral to most understandings of sacred spaces, and are discussed below. For archaeologists, the study of sacred spaces needs to be framed somewhat differently than in geography. An emic perspective might insist, for example, that sacred places exist in nature outside of the actions of humans, and that humans merely recognize or are drawn to that sacredness. For anthropologists, archaeologists, and art historians, the understanding of sacred places needs to begin with the notion that humans create those locations from their own conceptions of lived, built, and natural spaces, assigning particular qualities of the sacred to particular locations, replicating those concepts

in the built environment, communicating the models of sacredness through image and text, and incorporating those symbols into structures that are reproduced across generations.

Archaeologists and other prehistorians have found three fruitful avenues of inquiry for their studies of sacred places: studies of sacred spaces in the built environment (architecture and architectural arrangements); studies of sacred landscapes (sacred places in the natural world); and studies of iconographic representations of the sacred (on various media, including, in Mesoamerica, ceramics, codices, mural monumental sculptures, portable objects, and cave paintings and petroglyphs). In many cases these categories overlap; in general, concepts of sacrality and the natural world are inseparable in Mesoamerica. For example, paintings are commonly found both on architecture, such as the famous murals of Teotihuacan, Bonampak, and San Bartolo, or inside caves, such as Naj Tunich (Stone 1995), and sacred architectural arrangements are found both in cities and as landscape modifications as in hilltop shrines and in caves and rockshelters (Moyes and Pruffer 2013; Brady and Pruffer 2005). Given these overlaps between categories, many prehistorians prefer to think of sacred spaces as parts of a broader category of sacred landscapes, minimizing or even erasing the distinctions between the urban environment and natural environments.

The larger reason for this categorical blending has to do with Mesoamerican groups and even other Amerindian people's orientation toward the earth as a sacred and animate entity that is fundamentally different from most European cultures (Brady and Pruffer 1999). For many Mesoamerican people, religious symbolism has an important terrestrial component, with mountains and caves being the natural features they consider the most sacred (Stuart 1997; Vogt 1969, 1997). This is not to imply that celestial phenomena are unimportant in Mesoamerican thought, for they clearly are significant (Aveni 2001; Bricker et al. 2001). More to the point, though, the distinction between celestial and terrestrial may be less important than in Western thought. It has been proposed that Mesoamerican cities were built as a reflection of the natural world that surrounds them: temples represent sacred mountains, and tombs are man-made caves that are links to the underworld homes of deities and ancestors (Benson 1983: 184). Ethnohistorians have documented the links between terrain and cosmology, to the extent that settlement choices by communities may have been as much guided by cosmological considerations as they were by ecological ones, according to García Zambrano (1994: 217–218), who says:

Mesoamerican migrants searched for an environment with specific characteristics that comprised several symbolic levels. . . . Such a place had to recall the mythical moment when the earth was created: an aquatic universe framed by four mountains

with a fifth elevation protruding in the middle of the water. . . . A setting like this duplicated, and forever would freeze, the primordial scene when the waters and the sky separated and the earth sprang upwards.

Similarly, Rincón Mautner's (1997: 135) analysis of the Coixtlahuacan codices indicates that place-making is guided by references to the earth's creation, and that prominent landforms symbolic of those events are repeated over and over in the mapping the foundations of Chocho villages in the Coixtlahuaca Basin.

### LANDSCAPES AS SACRED SPACES

Landscapes are a means to attribute the ways that local people view their cultural and physical surroundings (Hirsch 1995: 1). As a spatial category, landscapes are intertwined with time, in that they are not static or abstract entities but a part of social practices (Gosden and Head 1994: 113; Gregory 1994: 315). Space and time are related in that they represent a relationship between objects and actions. The production of social space results in the creating of history (Soja 1985: 91).

Landscapes are integral to any cosmology, though not all cosmologies emphasize that landscapes are sacred. *Landscape* is a powerful term with considerable utility for describing and giving context to cultural beliefs and worldview regarding the natural world in which people live. Hence, it is important in the context of cosmology. People live in landscapes, but landscapes are more than social space. Long the domain of geographers who fashioned "landscapes" from "spatial-scientific" or "structural" geographical theory, broader understandings of non-Western cosmologies have brought deeper comprehension of landscape and its relationship to cultures (Thomas 1998: 23).

Anthropologists have long recognized that many indigenous people view and map landscapes differently than is done in the West (Bender 1999) and that often conceptions of land and landscape are permeated with notions of the sacred. Among the Andeanque of the Colombian Amazon, the land is conceptualized as specific features both within and outside their territory. These features include mountains, hills, flat savannahs, and rocks. Each feature has been purposely named by a religious specialist, is "owned" by a specific supernatural force, and is identified socially by specific mythic events that occurred there. This landscape extends well beyond the actual territory of the community. This conception of the world is not fixed or permanent. Shamanic intervention in the form of specialist communication with specific landscape features results in symbolic remodeling of both the landscape and the ceremonial ways people interact with and are influenced by it (Espinosa Arango and Andoque 1999: 240–241).



Specifics about the sacred landscapes are learned: as people grow up and physically moved through the land, they become aware of the relationships between the land and their ancestors, as well as of their social responsibilities (Bastian 1978). There are dramatic indications of links between memory, ancestral power, and the land. Recently residents of northern Australia, visiting southeastern parts of the continent, identified features in the natural environment as part of their ancestral landscape. This is particularly relevant in that the individuals in question had never been to southeastern Australia before, and little was known about the mythology of the area or the original inhabitants, who had been forcibly removed in the nineteenth century (Morphy 1995: 204). This knowledge is part of an ancestral grid learned through interaction with and observation of highly ritualized activities, and then experienced by traveling to different places. Each place is connected in this chainlike grid that reflects an individual's current kinship group as well as ancestral validation of links to the land (Morphy 1995: 199). The landscape is seen as composed of segments that reveal ancestral ties to specific areas of the land. "Because ancestral beings not only created the landscape, but also placed people in a particular relationship to it as perpetrators of the ancestral inheritance, the landscape is viewed simultaneously as a set of spaces for people to occupy" (192). Even in land disputes, such as when a group moves into a new land and takes over, they view this as the land taking over the people, thus preserving the "continuity between people, place, and ancestral past." When previously unoccupied land (or that for which direct links are no longer articulated) is settled, there exist "mechanisms for creating or recreating the linkages" (186).

Temporality has been an important concept in anthropological studies of sacred landscapes. Landscapes are perpetuated through and imbedded in memory, which makes them more processes than objects (Inglis 1977: 489). Landscape is a crucial element in enculturation, defining the limits of social space in ways that are both transmitted between people and fluid through time.

Time can be a dynamic historical marker of place. In Fijian notions of landscape, place is both a location and a temporal identifier. Historical time is marked by the locations occupied in the past; each is named for an apical ancestor and is communicated as a "succession of places where they had made their villages" (Toren 1993: 363). Giddens (1984) notes that social forms have ways of extending into time and space, which creates forms of time and space that are socially conditioned. For the Wakuénai and other indigenous people of the Upper Río Negro of Venezuela and Colombia, space and time can be transcended in powerful ways. Playing sacred musical instruments in different places can resituate centers of social power present in indigenous mythohistorical accounts (Hill 2002). The relationship between landscape and temporality has been the subject of numerous specific studies (e.g., Pinney 1995; Nogué i Font 1993), most of which utilize phenomenological

interpretations. These studies focus on the way landscape has a synergy among its parts that make the whole “which is greater, but less visible than its material parts and their sum” (Coates and Seamon 1984: 7).

Sacred landscapes are often associated with political interests, especially in cases in which ritual space becomes a location where human agency is integrated with divine activity. Ritual mapping of territory through naming is done in Northwestern Amazonia, where political Wakuénai mythic narratives and ritual performances continue to emphasize the ethnopolitical centrality of this headwater area as both sacred and political space for Arawak-speaking peoples who live north of the Amazon River (Hill 2002). This is a complex issue that articulates itself differently in different places. In India sacred space is often separate from political centers. In historical context, natural sacred spaces are often the focus of political interests, not the locus: political capitals may change location (even within a territory) while sacred locations maintain stability over time (Baker 1992).

#### HISTORICAL MESOAMERICAN CONCEPTS OF THE SACRED LANDSCAPE

Contemporary and historical accounts from across Mesoamerica clearly illustrate how concepts of sacred space articulate with broader cultural and natural landscapes. However, inferring analogical significance of past human behaviors (including interpretations of sacred spaces) from modern and historical accounts is not always easy, and the veracity of such comparisons needs to be scrutinized carefully. *Analogy* is “the mode of inference by which residues of human behavior are translated into the original terms of that behavior” (Willey and Sabloff 1993: 246). Analogies have two variables: a source, or analog, and a subject, or that material that is compared to the source for comparative fit. Analogical inference consists of the “selective transposition of information from source to subject on the basis of a comparison that, fully developed, specifies how the ‘terms’ compared are similar, different, or of unknown likeness,” which provide the positive, negative, or neutral mechanisms of an analogy (Wylie 1985: 93). Relevance is then based on the presence of specific similarities between the subject and the source. The strength of an analogy as an explanatory device is based not only on the number of similarities between source and subject, but also on a consideration of the differences between them, which must be weighed against the overall similarities. Further, analogies can be strengthened when a correlation “between known and inferred similarities . . . holds consistently across a wide range of source contexts despite variability,” which “expands the bases of comparison” (Wylie 1985: 95–98).

Here, rather than presenting specific examples for interpreting the past, I want only to give a range of examples of how sacredness and sacred landscapes imbue

the lives of people across Mesoamerica. As such, this is an examination of the ways Mesoamerican peoples view and interact with their sacred landscape. Like many nonindustrial people, the Maya conceive of their world in ways that are fundamentally different from the West. The land is viewed primarily as a living entity that provides all the resources needed for subsistence and social life. All action is in some way linked to the concept of the earth as a provider. Mesoamerican religion is dominated by terrestrial images that are critical to any discussion of how the landscape was conceived of and used in the past.

The Tzotzil of Chamula, Chiapas, Mexico believe that earthlords control and provide rain, as well as clouds, lightning, and thunder, and that they alone inhabit the interior of the earth (Gossen 1974: 21). In one account the Tzotzil of Zinacantán call the earth deity *Totilme'iletik*, who is the guardian of the nagual (*canuletik*) of the people. His "seat" is described differently by different individuals, and may indicate that there is more than one *Totilme'iletik*. At one mountain he keeps his corral where the *canuletik* reside. This is not a place where curing shamans operate, except in cases of extreme gravity. It is at a promontory on a small knoll that curing ceremonies are held to appeal to the *Totilme'iletik* (Silver 1966: 213–217). In another account from Zinacantán, the most important deities are the ancestral gods (ancestors), who live inside the mountains where they observe the activities of their descendants and are sustained by offerings of black chickens, candles, incense, and liquor (Vogt 1976: 16–17). The term for the ancestral gods *tolilme'il* literally means "Sir Father, Madame Mother" and the two are always linked as a unitary concept relating to ancestors. They can reside in most any type of natural promontory, including rises, hills, and volcanic peaks. Cross-shrines at the bases and tops of the natural features mark the homes of these primordial reproductive couples (Vogt 1992: 63–64).

The ancestral gods are followed in importance by the actual Earth Lord, *Yahval Balamnil* (jaguar), who manifests himself at caves, sinkholes, waterholes, and other openings into the earth. He is the owner of waterholes, the sources of rain (lightning and thunder), and all earth products (mud, limestone, trees). He is a dangerous god, treated with respect and ambivalence (Vogt 1976: 16–17). There is an element of fear in dealing with the Earth God, as he can capture the souls of men and force them to do his bidding. Also, sorcerers can sell the soul of a person to the cave-dwelling deities. The victims of this sorcery must work for the deity until they wear out a pair of steel shoes he makes them wear (Vogt 1969: 303). The Earth Lord is currently portrayed as a greedy Mexican landlord who hoards large amounts of money and domestic animals (Vogt 1992: 64).

The spatiality of the universe in many Mesoamerican ideologies revolves around four cardinal directions, often rotated 90 degrees with zenith and nadir serving as

north and south (Hofling 1993, though see Hanks 1990: 305, figure 7.3, for shamanic depiction of zenith and nadir as east and west), colors designations for each direction (Aveni 2001: 148–152), and a concept of the center. When the Tzotzil Maya make maps, they depict east rather than north at the top of the map (Vogt 1992: 62), indicating variation. Yucatecan representations of the universe often present it as a multilayered sphere with the earth depicted as a horizontal plane equidistant between the zenith and the nadir (Hanks 1990: 304–306; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934: 205, also see Gossen 1974 for Tzotzil, Greenberg 1981: 83 for Chantimo, and Sandstrom 1991: 238 for Nahua). These models of the universe in relation to the earth are complex and the center is considered a fifth cardinal direction. When Yucatec Maya specialists recite directions, the center is mentioned last even though it is the most powerful (Hanks 1990: 299).

In their Highland Guatemala study of the Q'eqchi' of Alta Verapaz Carlson and Eachus note that

to the Kekchi (Q'eqchi'), there is only one deity with which he must be vitally concerned: *Cu:l Taq'a* (*Tzuultaq'a*), the "Earth God." While the Kekchi does acknowledge the existence of other deities, he nevertheless feels that their effect on earth-dwellers is marginal or nil. This attitude very probably stems from the bifurcation of the universe by the Kekchi into two jurisdictional areas: *coša* "sky" and *rucic'oc* "earth." The vast distance which separates the deities of the sky from the physical world of earthlings effectively weakens any possible influence of Qawa' Saq'e "Our Lord Sun," Qana' Po "Our Mother Moon," and Kaq Cahim "Red Star" (Venus) [Carlson and Eachus 1977: 38].

The lowland Q'eqchi' of southern Belize address the *Tzuultaq'a* as part of community-centered ceremonies. *Tzuultaq'a* translates as "hill-valley," though its meaning has much more significance than just indicating a feature of geography. While it represents a distinction between celestial and terrestrial divinity, it also refers to specific deities that inhabit specific hills. Thus, the Q'eqchi' believe that each hill on earth has its own indwelling spirit. In this sense, "the number of *Tzuultaq'a* is as great as the number of hills in the world. The *Tzuultaq'a* are the supernatural owners of the hills in which they dwell, of all the surrounding lands and forests, and of all the animals that belong there" (Schackt 1984: 19).

The K'iche' residents of Chimaltenango build shrines to the guardians of the mountains, and each mountain is said to have its own guardian or owner. The most important local guardians are those of three prominent peaks near the village, though volcanic peaks located far from the village are considered to have more dangerous owners (Wagley 1949: 55, 59). Tedlock (1992: 262, note 12) notes that the Momostenengo K'iche' earth deity *Juyubtak'aj* is the same as the Q'eqchi' deity

*Tzuultaq'a*, in that both terms translate as “Mountain-Valley” (also see La Farge and Byers 1931: 224). Public shrines are equated with both water and mountains (*uj'al*: “water place, or a low shrine”; *ujybal*: “mountain place, or mountain shrine”).

Mountains and other natural places figure prominently in Mesoamerican conceptions of centrality. For the K'iche' of Momosteango, the center of the world is a hilltop shrine located in the town center. It contains four hearths and is linked to four “inner-hills” located cardinally within 3 km of the town. These in turn are linked to four mountains in a concentric universe that expands outward from the center (Tedlock 1992: 71).

In the Valley of Mexico, among the Otomí, dwarf-size male and female deities called *enanitos* or “los aires” dwell in caves in the hills and mountains where they store rain, lightning, and thunder in large barrels. Each mountain has its own *enanito*, who is named. The *enanitos* create rain and storms, and often compete with each other to see who can make the most rain. At times, when the *enanito* of one mountain is making rain, the *enanitos* of other mountains and hills will be at rest (Madsen 1955: 51; Parsons 1936: 212, 334). In general, Mesoamerican mountains are referred to by the specific names of their guardians or owners, who also represent specific personages (Monaghan 2000: 45, note 2).

Among K'iche' speakers the term *Wuqub' Tz'ek*, meaning Seven Caves, refers to the Eastern City, their mythic place of origin. However, the place of origin is also referred to in one epithet as *Wuqub' S'at'um* or Seven Canyons, but with a different directional symbol (Tedlock 1985: 314). Resolution of this discrepancy, and the role of geographic features in the spatial organization of a community, may be found in the term *siwan tinamit*, which conflates the words for “canyon” and “citadel,” the former referring to the lower districts of a town juxtaposed with the latter, which refers to the “high place where the lords would dwell” (Tedlock 1985: 314).

Much of the K'iche' book of counsel, the *Popol Vuh*, takes place in the underworld (Tedlock 1993; Edmonson 1971). After the death of One and Seven Death at the hands of Xbalanque and Hunapu, it is declared that offerings to the underworld will consist of burning copal, a frequent practice documented in both the ethnographic and archaeological records (Tedlock 1985: 45–46). The Jicaque of Honduras do not divide the universe into the earth and heaven but instead into east and west; there is an east universe, and a west universe. The man of the mountain, or *Tomam Pjine*, lives in the east and is benevolent. The *Tomam Cikway* lives in the west and creates danger by throwing thunder (Oltrogge and Neuenswander 1977: 210–211). Among the Chantino of Oaxaca, house and mountain are equated and, just as the center of the house is considered to be the “heart,” meaning that it has a soul (Greenberg 1981: 84), in Mixtec religious ideology the center of a mountain, where rain originates, can be called the Heart of the Earth. That the

heart is presented in relation to the earth is particularly significant, in that the heart “governs all that is animate” and the Mixtec conception of Earth Heart is referred to with the term *maa* (“opening to the center of the earth”); whose forces control and provide for human existence (Barnard 1988: 172, 179, 205). Activities of sacrifice are actions that partially “create the context for the next” (Barnard 1988: 203). The most appropriate places for sacrifice include canyons, caves, lakes, springs, and “innumerable minor earth navels” (Barnard 1988: 183).

Other terrestrial deities across central Mexico include, for the Sierra Nāhñū of Central Mexico, the goddess of fresh water, Maka Xumpo, who resides in the local lake; and pilgrimages are regularly made to her (Dow 2001: 73). Among the Nahuatl, the bride of the rain god *Tlaloc*, known as Chalchiuhtlicue, is also a goddess of the lake and the patron of canoe-builders (Broda 1991: 96–97). The principal earth deity of the Nahuatl shares the earth with a female terrestrial deity called Tonatsij, who resides in a cave and is responsible for crop fertility. She is the mother of three additional spirits, one of whom is associated with the underworld, another with the sea and rain, and the third with construction of ritual architecture. From her cave atop a mountain, Tonatsij rules the spirits of seeds; one spirit for each crop grown (Sandstrom 1991: 243–244). The most powerful god in the Nahuatl pantheon is the sun god, who created the universe and continues to animate it. Worshipping the sun is done from shrines atop mountains. The moon is a benign and ambivalent spirit, though it is associated with a terrifying underworld spirit called *Tlahuelilo* (wrathful one). However, like other groups in Mesoamerica, the celestial pantheon is considered less important than terrestrial deities, who have a clear impact on daily life (Sandstrom 1991: 247–248).

Finally, Nahuatl groups combine the creation myth with a mythical homeland known as Chicomoztli. Several sixteenth-century accounts refer to the “Place of the Seven Caves.” One pictorial guide, the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* (Aguilar, Jahn, and Brady 2005; Garibay 1965: 36–39) refers to an island in a lake named Axtilan (“Place of Whiteness, or of the Herons”). On the island a mountain named Colhuacatepec, or Colhuacan (“Twisted Hill”), was home of the Seven Caves and the birthplace of the Nahuatl speakers. Mountains and caves are both distinct and inseparable as constituent features in origin mythology. These belief systems are also reflected in community organization, as can be found in examples from central Mexico and Highland Guatemala.

## CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing comments and accounts are intended to frame the specific discussions of sacrality and sacred spaces contained in this volume. The sacred places in

Mesoamerica are important to study insofar as they move meaningful discussions away from belief systems and toward an understanding of the social, political, and historical contexts in which sacred places are created, appropriated, contested, and abandoned.

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