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A Reader's Library

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Title A Reader's Library

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Abstract Martin Raish suggests that although there are only two dictionaries of Mesoamerican archaeology and culture, both are quite good and can be augmented with some excellent travel guides and wall maps. Together they help readers better understand the terminology of art history and archaeology, become more conversant with the names of sites and cultures, and feel more confident about the general outlines of history in likely Book of Mormon lands. The author specifically recommends two dictionaries, a volume on Mesoamerican religions, an atlas, some traveler's guides, and some National Geographic Society maps.



A READER'S LIBRARY

Martin Raish

In the first essay in this series we looked at Bible dictionaries and atlases, where we had to choose a very few from among dozens of candidates. As we turn our attention to the New World we encounter the opposite situation: there simply are not that many of these sorts of materials available. The task becomes one of finding ready-reference resources on the art, archaeology, and cultures of ancient Mesoamerica, and hoping they will be suitable.

Although there are only two dictionaries of Mesoamerican archaeology and culture both are quite good. We can augment them with some excellent travel guides and round out our collection with some wall maps. Together these should help us better understand the terminology of art history and archaeology, become more conversant with the names of sites and cultures, and feel as confident about the general outlines of history in the likely Book of Mormon lands as we are with their biblical counterparts.

The first book is the *Encyclopedia of Ancient Mesoamerica*, by Margaret R. Bunson and Stephen M. Bunson (New York: Facts on File, 1996). This 300-page volume contains entries for archaeological sites, zones, and regions; physical features such as rivers and volcanoes; names of Mesoamerican deities, plants, animals; and a few

individuals (e.g., 8-Deer, Nezahualcoyotl, Pacal). Most entries are brief but adequate, while those that treat major cultural groups are extensive. Large sections are devoted to the Aztec, Huastec, Maya, Mixtec, Olmec, Toltec, and Zapotec cultures, including (as appropriate) sections on their agriculture, architecture, archaeological sites (listing the major ones alphabetically), art, astronomy, calendrics, ceramics, codices, cosmology, dress and appearance, gods, government, hieroglyphics, languages, personalities, priests, religion, society, trade, and warfare.

Many pages contain large black-and-white illustrations, but most are drawings (rather than photographs) of well-known objects and are not terribly useful. On the other hand, the several charts of caves, lakes, rivers, volcanoes, archaeological sites, cultural developments, and ceramic phases are quite handy.

The book has an appendix of Mesoamerican deities, bringing those from the various cultures into one nice alphabetical list, a similar appendix for the cultural groups themselves, a short glossary of archaeological terms, and a bibliographical essay. It also has an excellent sixteen-page index to help find terms that might be hidden in unexpected places.

The book's major weakness is

that it has no maps. These would be a great help, but I will recommend a solution below. Also, it has an inadequate general chronological table.

The second dictionary, *Facts and Artifacts of Ancient Middle America: A Glossary of Terms and Words Used in the Archaeology and Art History of Pre-Columbian Mexico and Central America*, by Curt Muser (New York: Dutton, 1978), covers the same territory but is stronger in archaeological and art historical technical terms. For example, neither "gadrooning," "gingerbread," nor "gloss" are in the Bunson book, but all are explained here. Unfortunately this book is no longer in print, but if you can find an inexpensive copy it would be worth acquiring. I found about a dozen copies on the web, ranging in price from \$9.95 to \$38. Try Bibliofind (www.bibliofind.com) or Alibris (www.alibris.com).

If you would like more information on the religions of Mesoamerica, a good choice would be *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion*, by Mary Miller and Karl Taube (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993). It has nearly 300 entries (most of which include helpful cross-references) accompanied by almost as many (small) photographs and

drawings, as well as an excellent introductory essay, subject guide, and bibliography. Note that the 1997 paperback edition of this book has a slightly different title: *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya*.

As for atlases of Mesoamerica, there are none that offer the level of coverage I would like. *The Atlas of Ancient America*, by M. Coe, D. Snow, and E. Benson (New York: Facts on File, 1986) is excellent for what it does, but it covers all of North, Central, and South America so it can treat only a few of the best-known Mesoamerican sites. To fill in the gap I recommend two excellent travel guides and some maps.

First is an outstanding new book by Andrew Coe, *Archaeological Mexico: A Traveler's Guide to Ancient Cities and Sacred Sites* (Chico, Calif.: Moon Publications, 1998). For each location the author provides an introduction, a history of the site in ancient times, an overview of the archaeological record, a map, and tips for touring the area. His information is up-to-date, he provides enough material without getting bogged down in boring detail, and his writing style is comfortable.

He also offers a good general introduction to the land and cultures, an overview of the history of archaeological work, and a list of important Mesoamericanists. Scattered throughout the book are useful and interesting sidebars on topics such as Aztec child-rearing, the ball game, calendars, and archaeoastronomy. His index is excellent and includes separate listings of archaeological sites and areas, sites grouped by culture, and sites arranged by era.

The only shortcoming of Coe's book is that it includes only fifty-two sites, the "largest and most spectacular" ones. For information on others you should turn to a trilogy of books by Joyce Kelly. In 1982 she wrote *The Complete Visitor's Guide to Mesoamerican Ruins* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982) and it remains among the best of its type. In 1993 she issued the first revision of a portion of this under the title *An Archaeological Guide to Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula*, then followed it in 1996 with *An Archaeological Guide to Northern Central America: Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador* (both Norman: University of Oklahoma Press). The final volume, covering northern, western, and central Mexico (I assume; I could not verify this by press time), should appear later this year.

Together these will not only greatly expand the number of sites covered, but also bring the information about them up-to-date, especially in important areas such as the advances in the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic writing and the revised dating of some sites and structures. As in Kelly's earlier work, the two volumes so far published provide area maps and numerous photographs (including a few in color), and even guidance in pronouncing the names of the ruins.

My final recommendation to round out your collection of reference works is to get some maps from the National Geographic Society. For years I had on my wall the map from the October 1968 issue of their magazine, "Archaeological Map of Middle America: Land of the Feathered Serpent." As it became increasingly out of date, I was happy to

find newer NGS maps, such as those for the Mexica ("Visitor's Guide to the Aztec World," December 1980) and the Maya ("Land of the Maya: A Traveler's Guide," October 1989), but I had to wait until "Great Peoples of the Past: The Mesoamericans" appeared in December 1997 to see an entirely new map. It not only pinpoints the locations of hundreds of major and minor sites, but also, in typical NGS fashion, provides excellent capsule summaries of the major time periods and cultural relationships. This has now taken its place on my wall, although I still keep all the others as well. (And as a wonderful bonus, the back of this map presents a beautiful reconstruction of the city of Palenque, as well as a brief, but handy, timeline of Mesoamerican civilization.)

Only the last of these four maps is still available from the National Geographic Society (\$8.95), but the others can often be found in library book sales, flea markets, or secondhand bookshops. And all are available on CD-ROM from NGS, "National Geographic Maps 2000 CDROM," for \$49.95.

The next essays in this series will look at reference works that deal specifically with the Book of Mormon—background studies of its setting and its peoples, internal maps, lists of cultural elements, and so forth—and those works about the Book of Mormon that are seminal, essential reading. I have my personal list of such items, but it is biased toward my interests and is far from complete. I welcome your suggestions and recommendations. You can contact me via e-mail at jbms@byu.edu. □