



12-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

Wirth, Diane E. (2013) "Revisiting the Seven Lineages of the Book of Mormon and the Seven Tribes of Mesoamerica," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 52 : Iss. 4 , Article 4.

Available at: <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol52/iss4/4>

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Revisiting the Seven Lineages of the Book of Mormon and the Seven Tribes of Mesoamerica

Diane E. Wirth

The number seven had several connotations to the pre-Columbian communities of Mesoamerica. Considered a sacred number, it represented the seven directions in the universe—four cardinal directions plus the zenith or sky, center, and nadir or underworld. According to Raphael Girard, the Chorti Maya likened God-Seven to the God of Fertility, “under whose patronage the year begins.”¹ The West Building at Uxmal, Yucatan, has seven exterior doorways. In relation to these doorways, Michael Coe explains, “7 is the mystic number of the earth’s surface.”² A manuscript composed in 1629 called *Treatise* gives native incantations, curing practices, and myths in the Nahuatl language of Central Mexico. Seven caves are mentioned among the curing spells, which, in this case, represent the seven openings or internal areas of the human body.³

1. Raphael Girard, *People of the Chan*, trans. Bennett Preble (Chino Valley, Ariz.: Continuum Foundation, 1995), 20. The jaguar as the nighttime sun is patron of the number seven. See Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 104. The jaguar, especially what is known as the “Water Lily Jaguar,” is associated with fire and lineage. See Karl Andreas Taube, *The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan*, vol. 32 of *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1992), 54.

2. Michael D. Coe, *The Maya*, 6th ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 157.

3. Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, *Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions and Customs That Today Live among the Indians Native to This New Spain, 1629*,

A pan-Mesoamerica legend tells of a core people descended from seven tribes, which may coincide with seven lineages mentioned several times in the Book of Mormon. There is no verifiable evidence the two accounts refer to the same group of people. However, in the Book of Mormon the names of the seven lineages are stated three times (Jacob 1:13, c. 544–421 BC; 4 Ne. 1:37–38, c. AD 231; Morm. 1:8, c. AD 322) and for this reason alone warrant further investigation. Approximately thirty years after leaving the land of Jerusalem and arriving in the land of promise via a transoceanic voyage, the prophet Lehi spoke to his sons, to the sons of Ishmael, and to Zoram, warning about the consequences of their wrath against their brother Nephi (2 Ne. 1:23–31). For the most part of their history, four tribes opposed the remaining three, or more succinctly, the Lamanites opposed the Nephites, with the Zoramites alternating their allegiance. From the beginning, Zoram and his descendants sided with the Nephites. In 74 BC, they chose to be with the Lamanites (Alma 30:59; 31:2; 35:10–11) but eventually returned to the Nephite nation (4 Ne. 1:37–38).⁴ This division of lineages was recorded over a span of 865 years and was therefore acknowledged throughout Nephite and Lamanite history.⁵

The importance of these tribal affiliations cannot be diminished—they are also mentioned in Doctrine and Covenants 3:17–18 in a revelation given to Joseph Smith in July 1828. The lineages are listed precisely in the same order as they appear in the Book of Mormon: “And to the Nephites, and the Jacobites, and the Josephites, and the Zoramites, through the testimony of their fathers—And this testimony shall come to the knowledge of the Lamanites, and the Lemuelites, and the Ishmaelites, who dwindled in unbelief because of the iniquity of their fathers.”

Although he did not elaborate on the subject, John L. Sorenson commented regarding the Book of Mormon’s cultural tribal status: “These seven branches remind us of the famous ‘seven caves’ or lineages from which, traditions claim, the inhabitants of Mesoamerica were supposed to have sprung.”⁶

The historicity of the seven lineages was equally important to tribal affiliations in Mesoamerica as they were to Book of Mormon peoples.

trans. and ed. J. Richard Andrews and Ross Hassig (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 21. See also Index for “seven-caves place.”

4. Other groups in Mesoamerica, including the people of Zarahemla who descended from Mulek and his party, may have joined either the Nephite or Lamanite polity.

5. The first division or split is recorded in 2 Nephi 5:6, circa 588–570 BC.

6. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1985), 313.

Therefore, we will examine numerous depictions of the seven tribes in Mesoamerican art contained in their *lienzos* (pieces of fabric with historical drawings or maps), illustrated books called codices, and post-conquest documents that were fortuitously shown to and translated for Spanish clergy, who made a record of the various accounts.⁷ Therefore, these stories are told pictorially and in prose.

Seven Caves, Seven Tribes

The seven tribes were often depicted as seven caves by Nahuatl-speaking peoples of central Mexico. Their codices contain historical lore claiming to reveal the origins of the inhabitants of the land. The Mesoamerican community, even today, understands the long-held symbolism of caves.

In Mesoamerica, caves are usually found in mountains, are dark, are sometimes damp, and may provide shelter. Caves were and are considered the place where ancestors live. To these cultures, a cave may be symbolic of a mother's womb due to its protective enclosure. A monster's mouth was symbolic of a cave's entrance from which the first humans or particular tribes emerged. The Codex Durán gives a fine example of this concept (fig. 1).⁸



FIGURE 1. Warrior Emerges from Cave (drawn after Codex Durán). All illustrations drawn by the author.

7. A previous comparison on this subject has been done by the following: Ross T. Christenson, "The Seven Lineages of Lehi," *New Era* 5 (1975): 50–51; Diane E. Wirth, "The Seven Primordial Tribes of Ancient America," 28th Annual Symposium, Society for Early Historic Archaeology, December 8, 1979, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; Diane E. Wirth, "The Seven Primordial Tribes: A Mesoamerican Tradition," in *Ancient America Foundation Newsletter* 8 (July 1996): 1–9; Diane E. Wirth, *Decoding Ancient America: A Guide to the Archaeology of the Book of Mormon* (Springville, Utah: Horizon/Cedar Fort, 2007), 16–19; Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 310–13; John L. Sorenson, "Seven Tribes: An Aspect of Lehi's Legacy," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 93–95.

8. The Codex Durán was written by Friar Diego Durán (c. 1537–1588) when he recounted the history of the Aztec based on a Nahuatl source. See *The History of the Indies of New Spain* (1581). Diego Durán lived in Mexico most of his life. The Codex Durán is considered one of the earliest Western books on the history and culture of the Aztecs. The codex was illustrated by native artists.

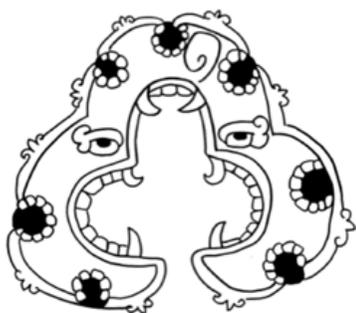


FIGURE 2. Mouth of Cave with Seven Apertures (drawn after Lienzo Tlapiltepec).

An exquisite portrayal of the seven caves in Mesoamerica is in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (fig. 3).¹⁰ Chicomoztoc, or Place of the Seven Caves, is the name of the place of origin. Each petal of the flower-shaped design contains an ancestral tribe. Note the scalloped or crenulated edge on the inside of each cave, which represented to the natives flesh, and in this case, the flesh of a mother's womb—the flesh of the living cave. At the top of the mountain design are plants and rocks and, in the middle of the top, a twisted hill or curl symbol

The Lienzo of Tlapiltepec in Oaxaca, Mexico, is of particular interest with regard to the myth of the seven caves (fig. 2). The caves are portrayed on the periphery of the earth monster-mouth hill,⁹ which to the natives was considered a living thing.

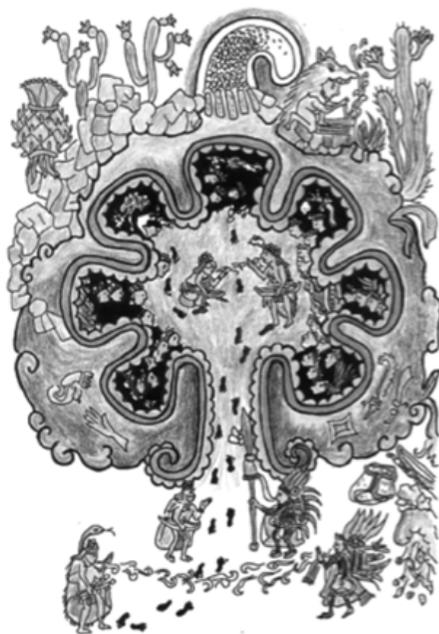


FIGURE 3. Chicomoztoc (drawn after *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*).

9. Ross Parmenter, *Four Lienzos of the Coixlahuaca Valley* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 20. Estimated date: 1540. The regional classification is Coixtlahuaca, Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca. The lienzo is housed at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

10. Paul Kirchhoff, Lina Odena Güemes, and Luis Reyes García, trans. and eds., *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (Mexico City: INAH, 1976, 1989). The *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* dates to between AD 1545 and 1565 and is in the Nahuatl language. It concerns the history of over four hundred years of Cuauhtinchan in Puebla, Mexico. The manuscript is housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

denoting Colhuacan. Chicomoztoc and Colhuacan are synonymous with the place of origin. Colhuacan means “the place of those who have Ancestors,” and with that implication, Colhuacan “is a city that stands for ancient traditions.”¹¹ At the top right in figure 3, a man wears a coyote skin and performs a new fire ceremony. In Mesoamerica, every New Year was celebrated by making a new fire. Thus, leaving their seven-cave/womb abode was a metaphor for the act of creation and new beginnings symbolized by the New Fire Ceremony. At the bottom of the seven-cave structure are bearded men to the right (the Toltec) and men without beards to the left (the Chichimec). The men are conversing, indicated by the wavy lines between them.

A similar design called the Map of Cuauhtinchan (MC2), made in the sixteenth century, depicts seven caves with their attendants, but also men equipped with war implements as they leave their homeland to go to battle (fig. 4). This lavish bark-paper map has a pictorial history going back to the early twelfth century. Figure 4 shows only the upper left-hand portion of this map. The complete map has over seven hundred pictograms and is truly a vocabulary of symbols. The design was meant to replicate their history (today the Mexican village of Oxtotipan), with the ancestral cave of Chicomoztoc.¹²



FIGURE 4. Chicomoztoc (drawn after Map of Cuauhtinchan MC2).

11. Nigel Davies, *The Toltec Heritage: From the Fall of Tula to the Rise of Tenochtitlán* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 23.

12. Tom Gidwitz, *Land and Legend: The Map of Cuauhtinchan Number 2*, available at <http://www.tomgidwitz.com/main/cuauhtinchan.htm>. See also Tom Gidwitz, “Map Quest: Follow a Pre-Hispanic Manuscript into the World of the Chichimecs,” *Archaeology* 62 (March/April 2009): 26–29. Created in the sixteenth century, this map tells a story that is estimated to span about four hundred years, between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries. It was purchased by a banking heiress and founder of the Amparo Museum in Puebla, Mexico.



FIGURE 5. Hill of Origin with Flowers/Tribes (drawn after *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*).

of Guatemala).¹⁴ The placenta, of course, lines the womb. These flowers represent the seven tribes who emerged from their individual lineage heads. The frog/toad gazing from the top of the mountain also has significance—in Mesoamerican symbolism, it oftentimes represented birth.¹⁵



FIGURE 6. Seven Caves/Seven Tribes (drawn after Codex Durán).

Also illustrated from the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* is a mountain topped by a frog or toad with six neatly set flowers in a circle with a seventh at the center (see fig. 5). The flowers are reminiscent of the flower-shaped caves in the Chicomoztoc design in figures 3 and 4. It is important to note that among Mesoamericans the human soul was considered a flower,¹³ and some areas refer to the placenta as a flower (*kotz'i'j* among the Quiché Maya

Another fine example of the seven tribes within the seven caves comes from the Codex Durán (fig. 6).¹⁶ In Durán's illustration, the seven caves contain men and women—the progenitors of the

13. Kelley Hays-Gilpin and Jane H. Hill, "The Flower World in Material Culture: An Iconographic Complex in the Southwest and Mesoamerica," in *Journal of Anthropological Research* 55, no. 1 (1999): 2.

14. Allen Christenson to Diane Wirth, October 24, 2012.

15. David Freidel and Charles Suhler, "The Path of Life: Toward a Functional Analysis of Ancient Maya Architecture," in *Mesoamerican Architecture as a Cultural Symbol*, ed. Jeff Karl Kowalski (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 261.

16. Diego Durán (c. 1537–1588) was a Dominican friar from Spain. After arriving in Mexico, he became fluent in the natives' Nahuatl language, consulted them on their history and stories, and composed *The History of the Indies of New Spain*. This document is also known commonly as the *Durán Codex*. See also figure 1.

seven tribes. The caves are set in two rows, four on the top and three on the bottom row.

Also from the Codex Durán, with a similar but different design, are two rows of four over three (fig. 7). There are up to five individuals within each cave. Do these particular drawings address a division of four lineages separated from the other three? This will be addressed below.

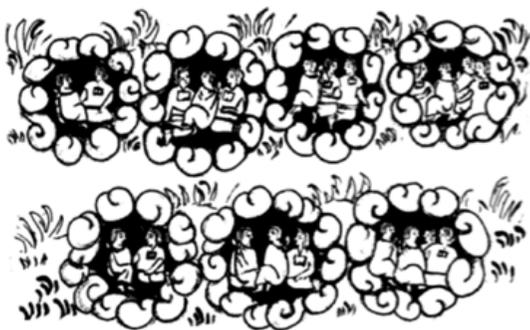


FIGURE 7. Seven Caves/Seven Tribes (drawn after Codex Durán).

There are two other noteworthy drawings that depict the Nahuatl origin myth—one with seven men emerging from an umbilical, tubelike cave opening in the Lienzo de Jucutácato from Michoacan, Mexico (fig. 8).¹⁷

Another, from the Codex Vaticanus A/Ríos 66v, depicts seven men, each standing in leafy caves.¹⁸



FIGURE 8. The Seven Tribes Emerge from Cave (drawn after Lienzo de Jucutácato, Michoacan, Mexico).

17. At the upper left of the emergence scene on this lienzo is written the word *Chalchiuihtlahpazco*. The Aztec goddess Chalchiutlicue is a goddess of water, fertility, and birth. Estimated date: 1565. It was created at Xiuhquilan, Michoacan, Mexico. Now at the Mexican Society of Geography and Statistics.

18. Elizabeth Hill Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 218–19. This image is viewable online at http://www.famsi.org/research/graz/vaticanus3738/img_page066v.html. This codex is partially attributed to Pedro de los Ríos, a Dominican friar working in Oaxaca and Puebla, Mexico, between 1547 and 1562. It is housed at the Vatican Library.

History and Myth

Most scholars of Mesoamerican studies prefer to consider Chicomoztoc a mythical place of origin, but then we must ask, why the repeated mention of seven tribes throughout their history from west to east? Although the legend of the seven caves comes primarily from Mexican Nahuatl-speaking peoples, there was a widespread adoption of this myth among other peoples, as is evidenced by the Quiché Maya. Tulan Zuyua, or *vukub pek, vukub zivan* (seven caves, seven canyons), is referred to in the *Popol Vuh*.¹⁹

It is difficult to date the first mythological example of the seven caves or tribes, but perhaps it is in central Mexico. Several cave systems have been found under some pyramids in Mexico. The most notable is under the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan, where a man-made stairway leads to a cave in the shape of a six-petaloid flower—the long chamber leading to them plausibly considered the seventh.²⁰ This suggests the concept of Chicomoztoc as the place of origin. If it does, the mythology goes back to Book of Mormon times. The Pyramid of the Sun is dated to AD 100 for the first stage built over the cave.

If we consider the cave system under the Pyramid of the Sun to be the earliest physical cave representing the place of emergence for the seven tribes, the later man-made caves from central Mexico and the Maya Highlands of Central America leave no doubt as to the importance of the myth of the seven caves and tribes.²¹

A manuscript giving a detailed account of origins was made during the last part of the sixteenth century—the “Annals of the Cakchiquels.”²² This historical document is important in understanding a post-Classic Maya civilization in the highlands of Guatemala. The Cakchiquels were originally part of the Quiché nation, and this manuscript corroborates theories of creation in the *Popol Vuh*. The Cakchiquels often

19. Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*, rev. ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 355.

20. Doris Heyden, “An Interpretation of the Cave Underneath the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan, Mexico,” in *American Antiquity* 40 (April 1975): 131–47.

21. Holley Moyes and James E. Brady, “The Heart of Creation, the Heart of Darkness: Sacred Caves in Mesoamerica,” *Expedition* 47 (Winter 2005): 34.

22. Adrián Recinos and Delia Goetz, *The Annals of the Cakchiquels* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953).

spoke of thirteen clans of the seven tribes. The Quiché were the first of these seven tribes to arrive at Tulán, their place of origin, and the Cakchiquels the last.²³ The Cakchiquels came across a body of water to a place called the City of the Seven Ravines, the *Tulán Ziván* of the Quiché, which is the same as the Chicomoztoc of the Aztecs.²⁴

Bernardo de Sahagun, a missionary in Mexico who was born in Spain in 1499, learned that the natives equated cave symbolism of the seven tribes with boats and suggested that these tribes crossed the waters in search of a terrestrial paradise. He wrote, “Concerning the origin of these peoples, the report that old men [of central Mexico] give is that they came by sea . . . in some wooden boats. . . . But it is conjectured by a report found among all these natives that they came from seven caves, and that these seven caves are the seven ships or galleys in which the first settlers of this land came.”²⁵

It is interesting to note that the classifier for cave in the Mayan Yucatec language is *ak*, which forms part of the word *aktun*, or “cave.” The classifier *ak* is also used for words such as canoe, boat, house, and containers.²⁶ Thus, it is not presumptuous to relate a womb, cave, or boat to similar agendas.

The “Annals of the Cakchiquels” identifies the seven tribes as Zotzils, Cakchiquels, Tukuchés, Akahals, Quichés, Rabinals, and Zutuhils.²⁷ The Tukuchés eventually became “completely annihilated,” then the Zutuhils.²⁸ Some tribes survived; some did not. It is interesting to note that these tribes often had disputes and divisions, usually a group of four against three. This pattern is quite reminiscent of the Nephite and Lamanite nations, when the Zoramites switched their allegiance from one faction to the other, as was mentioned earlier.

23. Recinos and Goetz, *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, 50–51.

24. Recinos and Goetz, *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, 16.

25. Bernardino de Sahagun, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva Espana*, Introduccion al Primer Libro, Mexico, 1946, cited in Milton R. Hunter, *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 44.

26. Andrea J. Stone, *Images from the Underworld: Naj Tunich and the Tradition of Maya Cave Painting* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 35.

27. Recinos and Goetz, *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, 80. Another set of these seven tribes in Mexico, named in both the Codex Vaticanus A and the Codex Mexicanus, is: Olmeca-Xicalanca, Huastec, Totonac, Coahuixca, Chichimec, Nonoalca, and the inhabitants of Michoacan.

28. Recinos and Goetz, *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, 108, 110.

Various writings of this event “narrate and illustrate a different story of the exodus from Chicomoztoc.”²⁹ As time passed, Mesoamerican cultures that were well advised of their origins attempted to preserve this belief by recreating Chicomoztoc in their villages by taking advantage of natural caves or by making new ones to accommodate the story handed down to them through oral traditions. For example, Acatzingo Viejo, in the state of Puebla in Central Mexico, has a ceremonial plaza with seven chambers carved in the walls of a circular rock outcropping. A road was built later through part of it, taking out the seventh chamber and leaving only six.³⁰

Dennis Tedlock wrote of this phenomenon: “The Quiché lords went so far as to have an artificial cave constructed directly beneath Rotten Cane [English for Kumarkaaajon or Uatatlán in the Guatemalan Highlands], a cave whose main shaft and side chambers add up to seven. Not content with honoring the memory of the eastern city, they brought the Seven Caves of Teotihuacan, the greatest of all the ancient cities, to the time and place of their own greatest glory.”³¹ Symbolism was of great concern to ancient cultures, and in these cases, caves may be compared to the womb from which the various peoples emerged, as has been noted.

The legend of the seven caves traveled to the North American Indians of the Southwest. Maya merchants journeyed far and wide, as is evidenced by the Parrot Clan of the Hopi. Parrots of the macaw variety cannot survive in the desert but only in the wild, humid lands of eastern Mesoamerica. Frank Waters acknowledged that the “Hopis first lived in seven puevivi, or caves.” From there they migrated northward, establishing their people and villages in accordance with the names of the “caves or womb-caverns.”³² The Seven Hills of Emergence of the Navajo were depicted in sand paintings (fig. 9).³³ These mythical events may refer to the Late Classic Period in Mesoamerica or sometime after when many

29. Manuel Aguilar, Miguel Medina Jaen, Tim M. Tucker, and James E. Brady, “Constructing Mythic Space: The Significance of a Chicomoztoc Complex at Acatzingo Viejo,” in *In the Maw of the Earth Monster*, ed. James E. Brady and Keith M. Prufer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 80.

30. Aguilar, Jaen, Tucker, and Brady, “Constructing Mythic Space,” 77.

31. Tedlock, *Popol Vuh*, 54.

32. Frank Waters, *Mexico Mystique* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), 168–70.

33. Gordon Brotherston, *Image of the New World: The American Continent Portrayed in Native Texts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 196 fig. 13. This

people were on the move as war, disease, and famine plagued much of Mesoamerica. But by the same token, the myth may be coupled with earlier times, with events going back to myths of arrivals in the New World from across the sea.

Mesoamerican cultures had a tradition to repeat history—bringing the past into the present. They believed time was circular, not linear as in Western thought. In this light, we may comprehend why several pre-Columbian groups claimed descent from the original seven tribes, whether it was literal or not. Using this ideology would legitimize the right to their lands, to social position, and to political rule.

Lineages in Mesoamerica claiming seven in number vary with their individual identifying names—they differ from east to west. Yet there are always seven, not six, eight, or an arbitrary number. It is proposed that the number seven was used due to the number of tribes that originally came across the waters. Do these accounts of origin from seven tribes or caves refer to the concept of seven lineages in the Book of Mormon? What we do know is that after Book of Mormon times (approximately AD 385), this legend was part of an oral tradition among natives of Mesoamerica for many, many years, even after the Spanish Conquest.

Another interesting concept held by some Mesoamerican cultures that parallels traditions of Lehi's party of the Book of Mormon is the idea of a chosen people (Hel. 15:3) directed by their god to the land of promise (1 Ne. 7:1). Michel Graulich verifies this notion when he writes, "Like many other Mesoamerican people, particularly the Mexica, the Quiché claim to be a chosen people who are on their way to a land promised by their god."³⁴

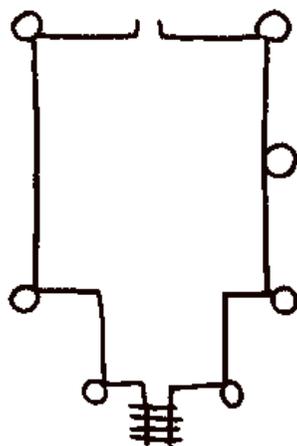


FIGURE 9. Seven Tribes, Navajo sandpainting.

cave system has been replaced with the kiva (*sipapu*), where the natives of the U.S. Southwest believe they emerged.

34. Michel Graulich, *Myths of Ancient Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 159.

The Cakchiquels wrote in their *Annals*, “The glory of the birth of our early fathers was never extinguished.”³⁵ It is for this reason they recounted the story of their origins. Bernardino de Sahagún wrote of the natives’ writings in 1576, “They knew and had records of the things their ancestors had done and had left in their annals more than a thousand years ago.”³⁶ If this is true, these cultural and mythic elements would reach back almost to Book of Mormon times.

Diane E. Wirth is an independent researcher specializing in Mesoamerican art history and iconography, the latter interpreting symbols in art and antiquities. Her primary works include *Decoding Ancient America: A Guide to the Archaeology of the Book of Mormon* (2007); *Parallels: Mesoamerican and Ancient Middle Eastern Traditions* (2003); and *A Challenge to the Critics: Scholarly Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (1986). A graduate of Brigham Young University, she has given presentations at symposiums and conferences, including The Atlantic Conference, St. Mary’s University, Halifax, Nova Scotia (2008); Book of Mormon Archaeological Form, Utah (2003, 2004, 2005, 2008, 2012); The Aesthetics of Enchantment sponsored by the American Society of Phenomenology, Aesthetics & Fine Arts, Harvard Divinity School (1998); The Ancient American Western Conference, Utah (1997); New England Antiquities Research Association, Massachusetts and New Hampshire (1992, 1993); Society of Early Historic Archaeology, Brigham Young University (1977, 1979, 1987, 1990).

35. Recinos and Goetz, *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, 75.

36. Bernardo de Sahagún, bk. 10, ch. 27, cited in *History and Mythology of the Aztecs: The Codex Chimalpopoca*, trans. John Bierhorst (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 5.