

## Ritual Places, Pilgrimage, and Religion in Mesoamerica

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*Pilgrimage has been significant for many human societies in Mesoamerica over the last several thousand years. The earliest rock art on cliffs and caves, in addition to the first sites with monumental architecture, in this culture area were created, in part, by and for pilgrims for their ceremonies. In Mesoamerican cultures, pilgrimage to ritual places has been important for communication with spiritual forces. The communication and maintaining of covenants between people and animistic forces have helped humans explain their world, how they live in it, and how they acquire things they need, such as prosperity, health, food, and water. Additionally, pilgrimage and the creation of ritual places, such as cave shrines, temples, and sanctuaries, have been central for the reinforcement of religious beliefs, political structure, and economic success in Mesoamerica. Besides fulfilling the communication with animistic forces, political elites or corporate groups have managed construction and access to shrines and temples. Furthermore, regionally important ritual places attract large numbers of worshipers, with whom trade and economic advancement often follows. Pilgrimage in Mesoamerica can be compared to similar religious traditions, social structures, shrine constructions, and settlements around the world.*

*Durante los últimos miles de años, la peregrinación ha sido importante para muchas sociedades humanas en Mesoamérica. El arte rupestre más antiguo sobre acantilados y cuevas, además de los primeros sitios con arquitectura monumental, fueron creados en esta zona cultural en parte, por y para los peregrinos con el fin de realizar sus ceremonias. En las culturas mesoamericanas, la peregrinación a los lugares donde se realizaban los rituales ha sido de suma importancia para la comunicación con las fuerzas espirituales. La comunicación y el mantenimiento de pactos entre personas y fuerzas animistas han ayudado a los humanos a explicar su mundo, cómo viven en él y cómo adquieren las cosas que necesitan, como prosperidad, salud, alimentos y agua. Así mismo, la peregrinación y la creación de lugares rituales, como ermitas rupestres, templos y santuarios, han sido fundamentales para el fortalecimiento de las creencias religiosas, la estructura política y el éxito económico en Mesoamérica. Además de cumplir con la comunicación con las fuerzas animistas, las élites políticas o grupos corporativos han gestionado la construcción y el acceso a santuarios y templos. Además, los lugares rituales de importancia regional atraen a un gran número de fieles, con quienes a menudo atraen el comercio y consiguiente progreso económico. La peregrinación en Mesoamérica se puede comparar con tradiciones religiosas, estructuras sociales, construcciones de santuarios y asentamientos similares en todo el mundo.*

Pilgrimage has been significant for many human societies in Mesoamerica over the last several thousand years. The earliest rock art on cliffs and caves, in addition to the first sites with monumental architecture, in this culture area were created, in part, by and for pilgrims for their ceremonies. In Mesoamerican societies, pilgrimage to ritual places has been important for communication with spiritual forces, or what people have called “gods,” “spiritual beings,” “invisible persons,” and “animistic forces” with whom they coexisted (see Astor Aguilera, this volume; Balsanelli, 2019; Buchanan and Skousen, 2015). The communication and maintaining of covenants between people and these animistic forces has helped humans explain their world, how they live in it, and how they acquire things they need, such as prosperity, health, food, and water (Astor Aguilera, 2010; Monaghan, 1995; Palka, 2014). Perhaps pilgrimage was associated with similar behaviors in the past. Additionally, pilgrimage and the creation of ritual places, such as cave shrines, temples, and mountain top sanctuaries, have also been central for the reinforcement of religious beliefs, political structure, and economic success in Mesoamerica. Besides fulfilling the communication with animistic forces, political elites have managed construction and access to shrines and temples. Furthermore, regionally important ritual places attract large numbers of worshippers, with whom trade and economic advancement often follows.

Pilgrimage in Mesoamerica can be compared to similar religious traditions and social structures around the world. Communication with animistic forces for explaining the cosmos, people’s place in the world, and for acquiring things people need have been human concerns throughout history. Paleolithic caves with rock paintings, for instance, may mark the earliest ritual places visited by people for ceremonies to communicate with animistic forces who they lived with (Clottes, 2016; Porr and Bell, 2012). Naturalistic

paintings of animals in the Chauvet, Lascaux, and Altamira caves could be the result of ritual communication with animistic forces related to human hunting success and safety. The Neolithic shrines in the Near East and Europe represent some of the earliest evidence for pilgrimage in semi-sedentary and early sedentary cultures (McCorriston, 2011). Collective rituals could possibly be linked to communication with divine forces linked to community identity and solidarity. Early shrines in China also figured in the creation of early cities since the ritual places attracted populations, economic exchange, and elites, who managed labor, trade, conflict, and communication with gods and ancestors (Wheatley, 1971).

For the purpose of this essay, pilgrimage consists of a journey to a significant landscape feature, such as a cave, mountain, spring, or shrine, to leave offerings and communicate with spiritual forces (Reader, 2015). The journey does not have to be far, but it involves visiting a ritual place and not an everyday domestic one. The worshippers return to their homes having obtained sacra from the shrine, blessings from deities, information on other areas, and economic goods (Palka, 2014). Pilgrimages can be organized by elites or religious specialists, but they also can be carried out by non-elites and communities (Turner and Turner, 1978). Likewise, shrines, temples, and ritual places for pilgrimage can be managed either by elites or commoners, depending on the cultural context. Pilgrimage helps construct community identity, but it also can enhance the power and status of elites, religious specialists, and specific social segments who organize and sponsor it (Bauer and Stanish, 2001; Eade and Sallnow, 200; Stone, 2014).

Scholars have recognized the religious, social, and economic importance of pilgrimage in Mesoamerica (Kubler, 1984; Palka, 2014; Patel, 2005; Stone, 2014). Many have described the ritual places that Mesoamerican

pilgrims have visited over time. These authors discussed the religious elements of pilgrimage in this cultural region in addition to extolling the economic, political, and social importance of pilgrimage behavior at important shrines. The investigators have also covered the material culture of pilgrimage, such as the associated shrine architecture, trade goods, iconography, and ritual items. These are important topics for understanding pilgrimage behavior and the maintenance of shrines, temples, and religious centers. However, I will focus on pilgrimage as communication with animistic forces in ritually significant places and its relation to community and polity. While community solidarity follows collective pilgrimage rites, the people involved, including elites, ritual specialists, and ceremonial sponsors, can gain power and prestige. Factionalism is often present in pilgrimage and the management of ritual places. To make my points, I will provide case studies from my research at Mensabak in the Lacandon rainforest of Chiapas, Mexico. Some perspectives and evidence outlined in this essay may be useful in looking at pilgrimage, collective ritual, socio-economic divisions, and shrines in other cultures.

### **Pilgrimage and Ritual Places in Mesoamerica**

Mesoamerica as a culture area stretches from northern Mexico to western Central America (Figure 20.1). The first inhabitants in Mesoamerica, which were small bands of mobile or semi-sedentary hunters and gatherers who created much rock art in northern Mesoamerica, lived in the Archaic or Preceramic period (ca. 8000-1900 BCE). Subsequently, human settlements and civilizations grew across this large geographical area during the Formative or Preclassic period (ca. 1900 BCE to 200 CE). Many of the earliest temples and monumental constructions date to these times. Large cities and populations were found throughout this region in the Classic period (200-900 CE), which are known for advancements in architectural

**Figure 20.1.**

*Map of Mesoamerica and some sites mentioned in the text (courtesy of the author).*



elaboration, writing, and market economies. During later Postclassic times (ca. 900-1520 CE), Mesoamerica saw competing states and large-scale interregional trade. Many aspects of Mesoamerican cultures continued into the Colonial period (ca. 1520-1820 CE), particularly with unconquered peoples on the fringes of Spanish colonies, such as the southern Maya area and the mountains of northwest Mexico. A subdivision of this period is the Protohistoric period (ca. 1400-1700 CE). The ethnographic cultures in Mesoamerica continue from the end of Colonial times to the present.

Spanish documents provide much information on late Postclassic to early Colonial period pilgrimage and ritual places in Mesoamerica. The first major pilgrimage site visited by conquistadores was Cozumel Island located off the east coast of the Yucatan peninsula. Cortés and other Spanish explorers mentioned the large number of shrines on Cozumel and their interregional religious importance (Figure 20.2). Maya elites and religious specialists managed these ritual places for pilgrimage, but they were made and visited by people of different ranks and statuses, including commoners. Animistic forces, or deities, associated with the island include Ix Chel, a Maya goddess

the island. The Spaniards compared the ceremonial and political importance of Cozumel to Rome in the Old World. Archaeologists have pointed out the island's economic draw and regional religious significance (Patel, 2005; Sabloff and Rathje, 1975).

Spanish priests among Aztec populations mentioned the existence of regionally important pilgrimage shrines in Central Mexico (Kubler, 1984; Palka, 2014). For one, Postclassic Aztec rulers and their entourages made periodic pilgrimages to the ancient site of Teotihuacan (Figure 20.3). This site exhibits monumental architecture built in the Formative and Classic periods surrounded

**Figure 20.2.**

*Cave and sink hole (cenote) entrance near a shrine at the San Gervasio site, Cozumel, Mexico (courtesy of the author).*



by large mountains (Sugiyama, this volume). This large site likely was a regional pilgrimage center long before the Aztecs, which may explain the construction of temples over artificial caves, ample plazas that could hold thousands of people, the diverting of a river around a pyramid symbolizing a water mountain, the presence of people from across Mesoamerica at the site, and the framing of the monumental constructions with surrounding ritual mountains. Aztec elites also pilgrimaged to the top of Mount Tlaloc, located just south of Teotihuacan (Townsend, 1992). The ceremonies on Mount Tlaloc helped them communicate with animistic forces linked to rain, water, and the fertility of the earth. Aztecs and other people in Central Mexico viewed the pyramid of Cholula, with the Popocatepetl volcano as a backdrop, as a major place for worship to the deity Quetzalcoatl (Figure 20.4; McCafferty, 2001). Community members labored to build the shrine and they visited it for ceremonies, but this ritual place was managed by elites. The Spaniards recognized the regional religious, political, and economic importance of Cholula, hence, they made it one of their central sites for religious conversion, population aggregation, and a regional market economy. Subsequently, Spanish elites and religious specialists took over the shrine and managed its construction, maintenance, and utilization.

Today, Mesoamericans make pilgrimages to ritual places to communicate with animistic and ancestral forces. Insights from contemporary pilgrimages point to the centrality of visits to shrines for communication with these cosmic forces. Through this communication, people feel they help maintain balance in their world and acquire necessities for themselves and their communities. For instance, Huichol people travel hundreds of miles from Nayarit in west Mexico to the east in the deserts of San Luis Potosi (Myerhoff, 1976). They acquire peyote and communicate with animistic forces in ritual places,



including ancestors, to bring food, water, and community well-being. The pilgrimage also cements ties between people, their communities, and the animistic forces. Huichol people also make pilgrimages to mountains and sources of water near where they live to communicate with animistic forces related to rain, food, and human health (Powell and Grady, 2010). Huichol religious specialists, usually senior men, organize the pilgrimages for community members participate.

### **Mesoamerican Pilgrimage, Animism, and Shrines**

Ethnographic information from Mesoamerica indicates that pilgrimage to ritual places has been important for everyday life over time. Pilgrims visit significant geographical locations, such as cliffs, caves, springs, mountains, and sanctuaries, to perform rituals to communicate with animistic forces with whom they co-exist (Astor Aguilera, 2010; Palka, 2014). The animistic forces are present in the world of people and, although they are unseen, they affect the lives of humans. They can bring disease, good crops, health, conflict, in addition to community well-being. However, they must be placated with offerings, music, and prayers. Religious specialists and select people, usually important men in the community, organize and sponsor the pilgrimages. The ritual places are viewed as homes to deities and ancestors, who impact people's day-to-day lives and provide things they need. These places are typically located outside the domestic realm since they are perceived to be potentially dangerous since they contain spiritual forces who can cause harm. According to Mesoamerican beliefs, people see cliffs, mountains, and caves, but they really are houses for the animate forces that inhabit them that people can not perceive (Balsanelli, 2019). These forces actually view these geographical features as homes, palaces, and temples, which are like those of people. The offerings people

**Figure 20.3.**

*Pyramid of the Moon and shrines at the end of the Way of the Dead at Teotihuacan, Mexico (courtesy of the author).*



**Figure 20.4.**

*Plaza and main pyramid with a Catholic church on the summit at Cholula, Mexico (courtesy of the author).*



make for animistic forces at these places include incense, sacrificed animals, blood, and human food. The forces view and consume these as their meals; people see blood and incense, but the deities see tortillas and other foods.

Maya in the Yucatan peninsula travel to ritual places to contact animistic forces. In caves, springs, and near trees or rocks, people communicate with the forces to acquire

things they need and to maintain the covenants for world balance. In the case of Xokén, Maya people pilgrimage to a village with a large stone roughly shaped like a cross for ceremonies and to provide offerings to animistic forces associated with the forest and rain (Astor Aguilera and Jarvenpa, 2008). The forces converge at this ritual place. Men with ritual knowledge typically manage the rites, shrines, and pilgrimages. The communication with these forces helps with the provision of rain, water, game animals, and things people need. The pilgrimage also is seen as uniting the heavens with the earth and creating world balance and renewal (Astor Aguilera and Jarvenpa, 2008, pp. 490). The group pilgrimage and rituals also

**Figure 20.5.**

*Lacandon Maya man rowing to a mountain shrine at Lake Mensabak, Chiapas, Mexico (courtesy of the author).*



promote community solidarity among the Maya worshipers. The pilgrimage and associated rites also reinforce Maya ethnic identity in multi-cultural Yucatan, in addition to accentuating the power and status of religious specialists and ritual sponsors, typically men with high social and economic standing.

Lacandon Maya have made many pilgrimages to ritual places in Chiapas (Palka 2014; Petryshyn, 2005). Men organize and manage the visits to the ritual landscape, such as Maya ruins, cliffs, caves, and mountain tops (Figure 20.5). The men typically are religious leaders or people of high social status in Lacandon communities. They carry out the pilgrimages to communicate with animistic forces residing in these places to petition health for their families, rain, bountiful harvests, and general well-being and balance in their world. To this end, Lacandon men arrive to ritual places in the landscape away from their settlements since the animistic forces with whom they live on the earth are potentially dangerous. Here the men provide chants and offerings of incense and food in ceramic god pots to placate the animistic forces. Following the rites, they return home with stones from the ritual places to put in their god pots in their temples.

**Maya Pilgrimage and Community at Mensabak**

Archaeology at Mensabak demonstrates the importance of pilgrimage to ritual places for past Maya populations and the comparative information discussed above helps us understand past behavior (Palka, 2014). At Mensabak, a tall pyramidal mountain, the Mirador Mountain, with an exposed cliff and large cave system is found at the edge of a beautiful lake (Figure 20.6). The cliff faces east and is stained red, which is the color associated with this cardinal direction in Mesoamerican cosmology. A large vertical cave entrance rests at the top of the mountain where Maya raised

a small temple in the late Preclassic period (Figure 20.7). This mountain shrine exemplifies the concept of the cleft water mountain in Mesoamerican lore—a hollow mountain filled with water, sustenance, and the soul energies of people, plants, and animals (McCafferty, 2001; Palka, 2014). This water mountain, or *altepētł* in Aztec Nahuatl and *witz* in Mayan languages, symbolizes a place of origin, polity, a significant ritual place, in addition to community. Importantly, the Mirador Mountain at Lake Mensabak is the origin place of the Tulijá River—a waterway of great importance leading to more densely populated areas and trade routes on the Gulf Coast of Tabasco.

Pilgrims followed the Tulijá River or trails to reach the water mountain at Mensabak over the last two millennia. The late Preclassic Maya constructed temples, plazas, and canoe ports at the base of the mountain. They also built thirteen terraces, which reflect the number of levels in the Mesoamerican sky realms, and shrines on the mountain's north side for large numbers of pilgrims to ascend (Figure 20.7). Large numbers of worshipers could gather near temples and in plazas at Mirador Mountain and in some of the shrines further up. However, the temples, small plazas, and the summit's sanctuary had restricted access, likely for elites, religious specialists, and ritual sponsors. Interestingly, the constructions of a late Preclassic site, called Noh Kuh located one kilometer to the south, are oriented to this mountain shrine (Juarez et al., 2019). It is likely that elites managed the construction of the mountain shrine and Noh Kuh, but commoners supported the efforts and provided the labor to maintain rituals for community solidarity. Perhaps economic interaction occurred at this site and in the plazas near Mirador Mountain.

Pilgrims returned to Mensabak in Protohistoric times to visit the various mountain, cliff, and cave shrines and to repopulate the lake. They made offerings at the shrines and buried their dead in caves on Mirador Mountain.

**Figure 20.6.**

*The Mirador Mountain shrine at Lake Mensabak, Chiapas, Mexico. Note the exposed cliff to the east and the area of the terraces on the north (right) side of the mountain (courtesy of the author).*



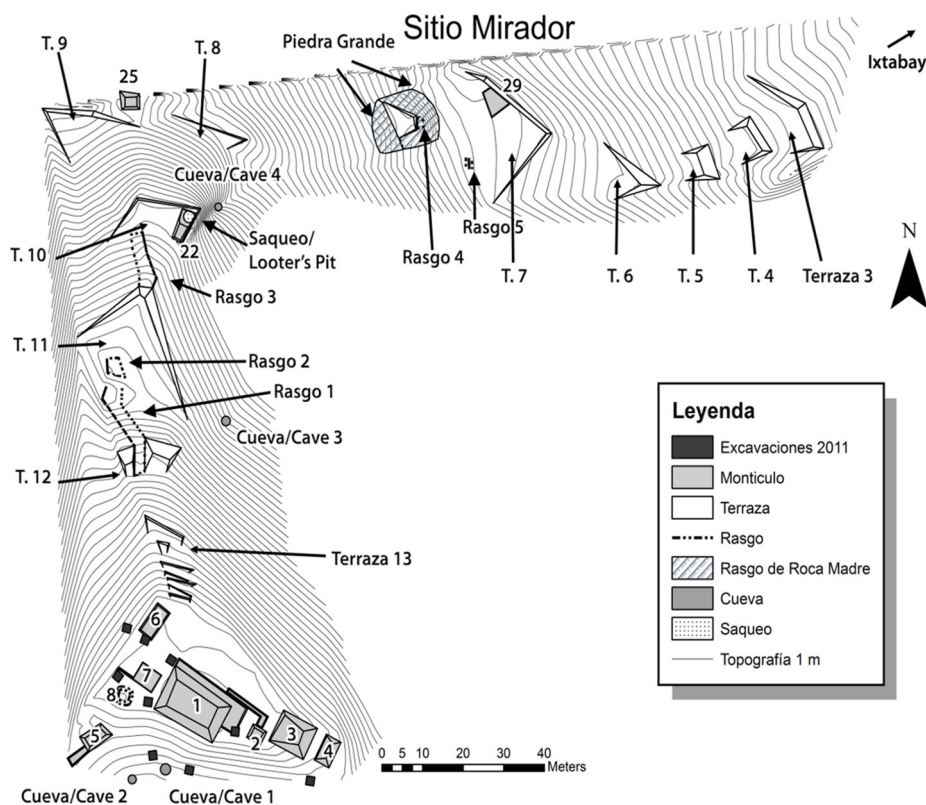
A large number of ceramic stamps at all Postclassic sites may depict Mirador Mountain, much like a toponym glyph, which symbolized this place and people's ritual ties to it. The Protohistoric Maya built a small settlement in a Preclassic plaza at the base of the mountain and constructed their political center, La Punta, on the south end of the island where the mountain rests. The elite buildings at La Punta maintain the same orientations of the shrines on Mirador Mountain.

Therefore, Protohistoric elites organized the constructions at La Punta and likely managed the rituals on the mountain shrines. However, community members participated in the collective rituals and provided labor for the constructions. Artifacts associated with the Protohistoric settlements include Fine Orange ceramics from Tabasco, copper artifacts from Central or West Mexico, green obsidian from Pachuca in Central Mexico, and shell from the Pacific Coast of Chiapas.



**Figure 20.7.**

*Map of the terraces, shrines, and temple complex near a vertical cave entrance on the summit of the Mirador Mountain at Lake Mensabak, Chiapas, Mexico (map by C. Hernandez and J. Palka; courtesy of the author).*



These artifacts point to significant interregional interaction. The high percentage of green Pachuca obsidian compared to other sites in Chiapas points to the presence of, or contact with, Aztec traders or pilgrims from Central Mexico.

Pilgrims to the mountain shrines at Mensabak likely arrived to communicate with animistic forces. The mountain of water and sustenance at this important ritual place was perhaps seen as a place of origin for local Maya. Furthermore, people likely felt that this mountain contained things that people need, such as water, food, and the life forces of people, plants, and animals, according to general Mesoamerican beliefs (Palka, 2014). Significant geographic features, such as this water mountain, were believed to contain animistic forces or having living energy in their own right. People provided offerings and possibly music,

dance, and prayer at the shrines and plazas to communicate with the forces to acquire what they needed and balance in their world. The rituals also provided community solidarity among the pilgrims visiting the mountain and to the Maya communities residing at Mensabak. This sense of collectivity may have included the animistic forces at this place. Elites would have cemented their authority and high status by managing the shrine constructions, rituals, and interregional trade here.

**Discussion and Conclusion: Pilgrimage, Ritual Places, and Society**

In this essay, I outlined the significance of pilgrimage in Mesoamerican societies over time and pointed out its religious underpinnings and social, political, and



economic importance. In this culture area, people undertake pilgrimages to visit ritual places linked to animistic forces to placate them with offerings. These ritual places, which include temples, caves, mountains, and springs, can be viewed as communication places or the dwellings of animistic forces, such as earth lords, ancestors, and invisible non-human entities. In Mesoamerica, people travel to these places to communicate with animistic forces to obtain what they need, such as rain, agricultural abundance, health, and prosperity. Additionally, people maintain balance in their world and in the cosmos by giving food, prayer, and other things desired by the animistic forces.

The Mesoamerican case indicates the religious importance of pilgrimage in people's lives. Pilgrimage in other parts of the world is undertaken for religious reasons as well, including for contacting divine forces, such as gods, spiritual entities, and ancestors. People leave offerings to these divine forces, communicate with them, and receive their blessings. The communication with these spiritual entities in pilgrimage in different cultures is important for people to feel they achieve balance in their world plus explain their place in it. Oftentimes, people take momentos or material blessings from the pilgrimage shrines they visit, including vials of water, earth from the shrine, images of the divine forces, in addition to tokens, images, and flasks. This aspect of pilgrimage behavior has not been adequately explored for Mesoamerica. Perhaps miniature vessels and small clay figurines and unique pot sherds and stones found at Mesoamerican sites could have been brought by pilgrims as momentos and deity blessings. The retrieval of clay, water, and speleothems by pilgrims at cave sites in the region (Borhegyi, 1953; Patel, 2005) and the small stones taken by Lacandon Maya from ritual places are a few examples of these behaviors in Mesoamerica. The types of shrine construction at pilgrimage places, ritual offerings, and specific ceremonial behaviors also require

more analysis in this culture area.

Pilgrimage in many areas of the globe is central to group identity and community solidarity. People travel together or meet at the shrines to join the rituals. They share religious beliefs and ceremonies whether they practice them separately or in crowds at the ritual places, which can, but not always, accommodate large groups. The pilgrimage rites create a sense of community or collective identity for the pilgrims who participate together in the ceremonies for the same cultural reasons. Often the shrines are linked to the origins of a people and are the homes of or places to contact deities important in particular cultures. The shrines are also the residences of tutelary and protective deities for people in specific societies. Pilgrimage and gatherings at significant ritual places call attention to a people's cultural and community roots and social belonging. Markets and economic exchange near the temples and shrines can also benefit society by bringing people together and facilitating important economic activity.

The construction of temples and landscape shrines is related to religious beliefs, ceremonial behavior, and maintaining collective identity in pilgrimage across time and space as presented above. Special groups and religious specialists created ritual places in non-sedentary societies and early hunter and gatherer cultures in different parts of the world, as seen in rock art sites, large earthworks, and monolithic shrines. In many cases, elites, religious specialists, and specific social groups create and maintain shrines and pilgrimage events at ritual places. While community solidarity can be reinforced by pilgrimage, ceremony, and economic exchange at these places, elites and special interest groups benefit as well. They control labor to maintain the shrines, limit access to ritual areas, and regulate trade and taxation among people who visit the sanctuaries. In this manner, pilgrimage reinforces social and economic differences among members of a society

**Figure 20.8.**

*Hilltop temple adjacent to the cliff of a sinkhole, the Blue Cenote (right), at Chinkultic, Chiapas, Mexico (courtesy of the author).*



besides merely creating community solidarity.

In Mesoamerica, pilgrimage to ritual places, ceremonies for community solidarity at culturally significant places, and the involvement of elites, religious specialists, and other social segments help explain the organization and architectural functions at some sites. At Chinkultic, Chiapas, for instance, Preclassic and Classic Maya people constructed temples on a hill overlooking the Cenote Azul, a large sink hole with permanent water (Borhegyi, 1968; Figure 20.8). Several plazas flank the temples and a grant stairway leads to the hilltop sanctuary that could have accommodated pilgrims and people participating in ceremonies. Later, Postclassic shrines and deposits were placed on the hilltop. Elites and religious specialists organized the labor and materials for these constructions and structured the rituals. Large numbers of people participated in the rites going by the size of the constructions, and they likely petitioned animistic forces to acquire things they needed. The ceremonies also helped shape community identity and belonging, as the collective events could

have focused on community origins, world balance, and solidarity like in other parts of Mesoamerica. The economic importance of trade in community well-being would also be important in this regard and the artifacts found here support interregional economic interaction.

It is possible that sites with temples, walkways, and plazas at significant ritual places in other Mesoamerican sites, such as Chalcatzingo, Teotihuacan, and Chichén Itzá, had similar pilgrimage events, collective ritual, economic exchange, and political significance. Chalcatzingo grew around impressive hills and springs (Grove, 1987). The site contains several temples, plazas, and ritual cliffs. Interregional trade is evident in the archaeological record at the site. The Way of the Dead at Teotihuacan, along with its large temples constructed according to a Mesoamerican worldview and the well-developed interregional trade (Headrick, 1999; Heyden, 1975; Manzanilla, 2017; Sugiyama, 1993) also point to its possible importance as a pilgrimage site. The Sacred Cenote, temples, and caves at Chichén Itzá also attracted pilgrims as attested in Colonial period documents and architecture (Wren et al., 2017). Walkways enabled the movement of people to the temples and shrines at sinkholes. Archaeology at this site also has demonstrated the existence of long-distance trade over time.

Similar religious, social, and economic aspects of pilgrimage and its associated ritual places can be viewed cross-culturally. These places have been important for symbolizing a people, polity, and community origins. Mecca, for instance, has a long history of pilgrimages, collective ceremonies, and economic interaction (McCarriston, 2011; Reader, 2015). This important religious site has large constructions, public buildings, and open spaces that facilitate the ritual, social, and economic interaction of Islamic people on a massive scale. Elites and religious specialists organize the events and maintain the

ritual and public places. This shrine has attracted pilgrims, worshippers, settlers, and merchants over the centuries. The sanctuary of the Virgin de Guadalupe in Mexico City provides yet another illustrative example of pilgrimage and its cultural importance (Turner and Turner, 1978). Aztec people chose this ritual place because of a natural spring on a hill. Rites here honored the earth mother, earth deities, and the moon goddess. Later, Spanish priests built a sanctuary related to the Virgin of Guadalupe and attracted large numbers of indigenous and European pilgrims. A sizeable market grew around the shrine where people bought food, clothing, and momentos. Periodic ceremonies and pilgrimage events at this church are undertaken to strengthen cultural and community ties among the participants, in addition to providing economic pursuits. Elites and religious specialists associated with the Catholic church and local governments manage the shrine and the events, reinforcing their social, political, religious, and economic statuses in the community.

Many additional examples of pilgrimage to ritual places, community dynamics, elite participation, and its social and economic importance can be seen across the world over time, reinforcing the near-universal importance of pilgrimage shrines in human societies. Importantly, pilgrimage, rituals at shrines, and interaction discussed in this essay are seen in diverse cultures, from hunters and gatherers to people living in expansionistic empires. People seek communication with divine forces for the benefits they bring, to structure the covenants or agreements for exchange between people and deities, and to build a sense of community belonging. These human behaviors and their material manifestations can be better understood with collaborative archaeological, historical, and ethnographic information. The analysis of human behavior in these cultural and material contexts have united historians, psychologists, geographers, anthropologists, economists,

and archaeologists to examine the importance of pilgrimage to ritual places in people's lives and for the evolution of world civilizations.

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