

Histories of Maize



The Italian explorer Girolamo Benzoni (c. 1541–55) recorded the steps involved in processing husked corn to make fresh dough. First the kernels were ground with a *mano* and *metate* and then patted into small cakes and finally cooked on a *comal* or griddle (from Girolamo Benzoni, *La historia del mondo nvovo di M. Girolamo Benzoni Milanese*, Venetia, F. Rampazeto. 1565. p. 56, verso). Images such as this woodcut and accounts from various chroniclers who came to the New World emphasized the role of maize as a primary staple, the staff of life, essentially synonymous to Old World wheat and barley. These early descriptions and the later role of maize as one of the world's primary economic staples predisposed many scholars to emphasize and, in some instances, assert that *Zea mays* L. was the catalyst to the development of civilization in this hemisphere. The contributions in this volume demonstrate that its role was more complex and varied than had been previously assumed. These histories of maize show that in some cases its symbolic role to ethnic identity, religion, and elite status may have been as important as its economic role to such developmental processes. (Courtesy of the Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

Histories of Maize

Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Prehistory, Linguistics, Biogeography,
Domestication, and Evolution of Maize

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In memory of Richard S. MacNeish and Donald W. Lathrap for their inspiration, insights, and pioneering research on the origin and culture history of maize.

Contents

PART

I

HISTORIES OF MAIZE: GENETIC, MORPHOLOGICAL, AND MICROBOTANICAL EVIDENCE

1. Differing Approaches and Perceptions in the Study of New and Old World Crops

TERENCE A. BROWN

- Introduction 3
- Different Emphases in New and Old World
Agriculture 4
 - Reasons for the Difference in Emphasis 4
 - Outcomes of the Difference in Emphasis 5
- Different Perceptions of the Role of Science 6

2. Maize in the Americas

BRUCE F. BENZ

- Purpose and Scope of Review 9
- Introduction 10
 - Genetic Evidence of Teosinte Domestication 11
 - Genetic Evidence of Population Manipulation 12
 - Archaeological-Macrobotanical Evidence of Teosinte
Domestication and Maize Agriculture 15
 - Pollen Evidence for Use of *Zea* and Climate Change
and Phytoliths Document Neotropical Plant
Domestication 16
- Juxtaposing the Archaeological and Genetic Evidence for
Early Maize 18

3. Origin of Polystichy in Maize

HUGH H. ILTIS

- Abstract 22
- Introduction: The Origin of Maize 23
- The Maizoid Eve—An Emphatic Restatement 27
 - The Maizoid Eve Concept Is Useful and Should Not Be
Rejected 28
- First for Sugar, Then for Grain: Reflections on Corn
Domestication Chronology 28
- The Cupulate Fruitcase and the Ear Cluster: Adaptive
Marvels of Coordinated Sequential Maturation 32
- The Origin of Polystichy in Maize 33
 - An Abbreviated History 33
 - The “Twisted Cob Hypothesis” of Collins: Its Merits and
Follies 34
 - What Happened After Tga 1 Caused the Maizoid
Revolution? 35
 - Collins’ Figure, With All of Its Faults, Is a Classic
Illustration 35
 - The Origin of Polystichy in Maize: The “Second
Bifurcation”—A Reappraisal 38
- The Shank and Its Husks—The Key to Maize Ear
Polystichy 39
 - Maize Polystichy—With Its Roots in the Shank to Its Glory
in the Ear 39
 - On the Inexcusable Neglect of the Shank and Its Husks 41
 - A Note on Twisting, and the Basic Bilateral Dorsiventrality
of *Zea* 42
 - Edgar Anderson and the Shank—The Story of an
Unconsummated Love Affair 43
 - The Condensation in the Maize Shank and Its Husks and
Preconceived Notions 44
- From Teosinte Distichy to Maizoid Polystichy: Or How to
Study Husk Phyllotaxy in Nine Easy Steps 45
 - Iltis and His Gigantic Footnote 45
- S. G. Stephens and the Shank Condensation Theory
—Sharp-Eyed, Unsung, Uncited, and Unequivocally
Correct 49
- Postscript 50

4. Dating the Initial Spread of *Zea mays*

MICHAEL BLAKE

- Introduction 55
- Temporal Frameworks for *Zea mays*' Early Dispersal 56
- Direct Dating of Maize 57
- A Note on the Indirect Dating of Maize 59
- Dating the Early Distribution of *Zea* Pollen 60
- Dating the Early Distribution of Maize Phytoliths 63
- Dating the Early Distribution of Moderate-to-High Stable Carbon Isotope Ratios 65
- Comparing the Different Lines of Evidence 68
- Discussion of the Social Implications of Maize's Early Spread: Initial Uses of Maize 68

5. El Riego and Early Maize Agricultural Evolution

BRUCE F. BENZ, LI CHENG, STEPHEN W. LEAVITT,
AND CHRIS EASTOE

- Introduction 73
- Domestication and Agriculture 74
- Methods 75
- Results: Calibrating and Averaging AMS Dates 77
- Results: Morphological Trends and Rates 78
- Results: Evolutionary Rates 78
- Results: Stable Isotope Determinations 79
- Discussion and Summary 80

6. Ancient DNA and the Integration of Archaeological and Genetic Approaches to the Study of Maize Domestication

VIVIANE R. JAENICKE-DESPRÉS AND BRUCE D. SMITH

- Introduction 83
- Morphological and Molecular Approaches to Documenting the Early History of Maize 84
- Molecular Level Analysis of Archaeological Maize: A Case Study 85
 - Monitoring for Selection of Preferred Attributes in Ancient Maize 85
 - The Archaeological Maize 87
 - Tb1*: Maize Plant Architecture 4400 Years Ago 87
 - Pbf* and *Su1*: The Development of Starch and Protein Properties 88
 - Population Substructure in the *Sugary-1* Gene 89

- The Timing and Sequence of Selection for Key Attributes in Maize: Combining Morphological and Molecular Evidence 90
 - Loss of Natural Seed Dispersal Mechanisms 91
 - Fewer Larger Seed "Packages" 91
 - Loss of Germination Dormancy 91
 - Terminal Seed Clusters and Uniform Ripening 92
 - Improved Starch and Protein Quality 92
 - Future Directions in Ancient DNA Analysis of Crop Plants 92

7. Ancient Maize in the American Southwest: What Does It Look Like and What Can It Tell Us?

LISA W. HUCKELL

- Introduction 97
- Archaeological Context 98
 - Chronology 98
 - The Sites 98
- Analysis of the Maize: Methods and Materials 99
- Results 101
- Discussion 104
- Conclusions 106

8. Environmental Mosaics, Agricultural Diversity, and the Evolutionary Adoption of Maize in the American Southwest

WILLIAM E. DOOLITTLE AND JONATHAN B. MABRY

- Introduction 109
- The Simplistic Paradigm 110
- Proto-Agriculture 111
- Diversity in Early Water Management 112
- Agricultural Niches in an Environmental Mosaic 115
- Maize Varieties and Crop Complexes 115
- Conclusion 117

9. Toward a Biologically Based Method of Phytolith Classification

GREG LADEN

- Introduction 123
- The Raw Data and Its Presumed Meaning 124
- Exploring Genetic versus Nongenetic Variation 124
- Conclusions 128

P A R T

II

STABLE ISOTOPE ANALYSIS AND HUMAN DIET

10. Isotope Analyses and the Histories of Maize

ROBERT H. TYKOT

- Isotope Definitions 131
- History of Isotope Studies 132
- Sample Preparation and Isotopic Analysis 135
- Interpretation and Significance of Carbon and Nitrogen
Isotope Data 136
- Oxygen and Strontium Isotopes 138
- Isotope Studies in this Volume 139

11. Social Directions in the Isotopic Anthropology of Maize in the Maya Region

CHRISTINE D. WHITE, FRED J. LONGSTAFFE, AND
HENRY P. SCHWARCZ

- A Brief History of Isotopic Anthropology in
Mesoamerica 143
- Ideology 145
- Social Structure 145
 - Rise of Social Differentiation 148
 - Socioeconomic Status 148
- Intraelite Differentiation 150
- Gender 150
- Trade 153
- Identification of the "Other" in Sacrifices 153
- Conclusion 155

12. Diet in Prehistoric Soconusco

BRIAN CHISHOLM AND MICHAEL BLAKE

- Introduction 161
- Sample Selection 162
- Sample Preparation and Analysis 162
- Plant Results 162
- Animal Results 163
- Human Results 165
- Conclusions 167

13. Early to Terminal Classic Maya Diet in the Northern Lowlands of the Yucatán (Mexico)

EUGENIA BROWN MANSELL, ROBERT H. TYKOT,
DAVID A. FREIDEL, BRUCE H. DAHLIN, AND TRACI ARDREN

- Introduction 173
- Methods 174
- Isotopic Studies of the Maya 174
 - Yaxuná 174
 - Chunchucmil 177
- Discussion and Conclusion 180

14. The Importance of Maize in the Initial Period and Early Horizon Peru

ROBERT H. TYKOT, RICHARD L. BURGER,
AND NIKOLAAS J. VAN DER MERWE

- Introduction 187
- Archaeological Sites Tested 188
 - Pacopampa 188
 - The Manchay Culture Sites of the Lurin Valley 189
 - Mina Perdida 190
 - Tablada de Lurin 191
- Stable Isotope Analysis 191
- Results and Discussion 193
 - Pacopampa 193
 - Cardal 194
 - Mina Perdida 194
 - Tablada de Lurin 195
- Conclusion 195

15. Maize on the Frontier: Isotopic and Macrobotanical Data from Central–Western Argentina

ADOLFO F. GIL, ROBERT H. TYKOT, GUSTAVO NEME,
AND NICOLE R. SHELNUIT

- Introduction 199
- Zea mays* on the Frontier: A South American Case 201
- The Study Area 201
- Domesticates: Maize and Other Resources in the Late
Holocene 202
- Isotopic Ecology and Human Diet $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{15}\text{N}$
Information 202
- Late Holocene Human Diet and the Use of Maize 207
- The *Zea mays* Frontier Adoption Model 211
- Final Remarks 212

16. Dietary Variation and Prehistoric Maize Farming in the Middle Ohio Valley

DIANA M. GREENLEE

- Introduction 215
- Late Woodland and Late Prehistoric Subsistence Records 217
- Theory and Method 217
 - Theoretical Framework 217
 - Generating Dietary Data 218
- The Isotope Record of Dietary Change 220
 - Multiple Populations? 221
 - Recent Efforts to Account for Dietary Change 221
- Geographic Variation in Maize-Based Farming Systems 222
 - Recent Efforts to Account for Geographic Variation in Diet 223
 - Evaluation 229
- Conclusions 229
 - Future Directions 231

17. A Hard Row to Hoe: Changing Maize Use in the American Bottom and Surrounding Areas

ELEANORA A. REBER

- Introduction 236
- Models of Maize Adoption in the American Bottom 236
- Types of Analysis Used 237
 - Paleoethnobotany and Stable Carbon Isotope Analysis 237
 - Absorbed Pottery Residue Analysis 238
- Early Emergent Mississippian 239
- Late Emergent Mississippian 241
- The Mississippian Lohmann Phase (CAL AD 1050–1100) 242
- Middle Mississippian Phases (CAL AD 1100–1350) 244
 - Stirling Phase (CAL AD 1100–1200) 244
 - Moorehead Phase (CAL AD 1200–1300) 244
- Discussion 244
- Conclusions 245

18. Evidence for Early Use of Maize in Peninsular Florida

JENNIFER A. KELLY, ROBERT H. TYKOT,
AND JERALD T. MILANICH

- Introduction 249
- The Natural Setting of Peninsular Florida 250
- Historic Evidence for Plant Foods in Florida 251
- Stable Isotope Studies in Florida 251
- Human Skeletal Samples in This Study 252

- Site Background 252
 - Cross Creek and Melton Mound I (Inland Sites) 252
 - Crystal River (An Estuary Environment) 252
 - Dunwoody, Pillsbury, Bay Pines, Horr's Island, Weeden Island, and Bayshore Homes (Coastal Sites) 253
- Processing and Analyzing the Skeletal Material 253
- Stable Isotope Results for All Sites 254
 - Cross Creek and Melton Mound I (Inland Sites) 254
 - Crystal River (Estuarine Site) 256
 - Bay Pines, Dunwoody, Pillsbury, Bayshore Homes, Weeden Island, Horr's Island (Coastal Sites) 256
- Discussion 257
 - Inland Sites 257
 - Crystal River 258
 - Coastal Sites 258
- Conclusion 259

19. Prehistoric Maize in Southern Ontario: Contributions from Stable Isotope Studies

M. ANNE KATZENBERG

- Introduction 263
- Previous Studies 264
- Stable Isotope Analysis of Faunal Remains: Earlier Study and New Data 265
- Refining Estimates of the Introduction of Maize in Southern Ontario from Human Collagen Samples 270
- Conclusions 270

20. The Stable and Radio-Isotope Chemistry of Eastern Basketmaker and Pueblo Groups in the Four Corners Region of the American Southwest: Implications for Anasazi Diets, Origins, and Abandonments in Southwestern Colorado

JOAN BRENNER COLTRAIN, JOEL C. JANETSKI,
AND SHAWN W. CARLYLE

- Introduction 276
- Overview of Basketmaker II Research 276
- Site Descriptions 277
 - Talus Village 277
 - Sites 22 and 23 277
 - Site 22 278
 - Site 23 278
 - Unnamed Sites 278
- Methods 278
 - Stable Carbon Isotope Analysis 278
 - Stable Nitrogen Isotope Analysis 278
 - Laboratory Procedures 278

Results	279
Discussion	283
Talus Village	284
Basketmaker Groups	284
Sites 22/23	284
Pueblo II–III Burials	285
Radiocarbon Chronology	285
Conclusion	285

21. The Agricultural Productivity of Chaco Canyon and the Source(s) of Pre-Hispanic Maize Found in Pueblo Bonito

LARRY BENSON, JOHN STEIN, HOWARD TAYLOR,
RICHARD FRIEDMAN, AND THOMAS C. WINDES

Introduction	290
Agricultural Productivity and Population Densities of the Chaco Canyon Core Area	292
Acres under Cultivation	293
Southwestern American Indian Maize Yields and Rates of Consumption	301
Estimated Population Densities Supported by Chaco Canyon Maize Production	301
Areas from Which Maize May Have Been Imported	301
Archaeological Maize Samples	302
Chemical Tracing of Biological and Archaeobiological Materials	302
Methodological Considerations: Sampling and Laboratory Methods	303
Results and Discussion	307
Summary and Conclusions	311

22. Stable Carbon Isotope Analysis and Human Diet: A Synthesis

HENRY P. SCHWARCZ

Introduction	315
Theoretical Basis of the Use of Isotopes	316
The Significance of Isotopes in Reconstruction of Paleodiet in the Americas	316
Rate of Spread of Maize and Agriculture	317
Isotopic Studies in North America	318
Mesoamerica	319
South America	319
Other Isotopic Methods	320
Conclusions	320

PART

III

HISTORIES OF MAIZE: THE SPREAD OF MAIZE IN CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA

23. Caribbean Maize: First Farmers to Columbus

LEE A. NEWSOM

Introduction	325
Caribbean Biogeography and Physical Geography in Brief	326
Synopsis of the History of Human Settlement and Cultivation Practices	327
The Evidence for Maize: Archaeological Research	329
Archaeobotany	329
Human Bone Chemistry	331
Discussion	331
Why Such a Low Signal?	331
The Development of a Uniquely Caribbean Cuisine	332
Conclusion	333

24. Maize on the Move

J. SCOTT RAYMOND AND WARREN R. DEBOER

Introduction	337
Ethnographic Evidence	339
Discussion	340
Conclusions	341

25. The Gift of the Variation and Dispersion of Maize: Social and Technological Context in Amerindian Societies

RENÉE M. BONZANI AND AUGUSTO OYUELA-CAYCEDO

Introduction	344
The Development of Ceramics: Its Social Setting	345
Ceramics and Maize: Dispersion in South America and the Caribbean	345
Timing of Maturation of Maize	350
Conclusions	351

26. The Maize Revolution: A View from El Salvador

ROBERT A. DULL

- Introduction 357
- Making Sense of Fossil *Zea* Pollen Samples from
El Salvador and Beyond 358
- Prehistoric Maize from Western El Salvador 360
 - The Pacific Coastal Plain 360
 - The Rio Paz Basin 360
 - The Sierra de Apaneca–Llamatepec Highlands 361
- Prehistoric Maize Fields from Central El Salvador 362
 - Valle de las Hamacas (San Salvador) 362
 - The Zapotitán Basin 363
- Conclusions 363

27. Pre-Columbian Maize Agriculture in Costa Rica: Pollen and Other Evidence from Lake and Swamp Sediments

SALLY P. HORN

- Introduction 368
- Maize Pollen Identification and Dispersal and Associated
Paleoecological Evidence 368
- Maize Pollen in Archaeological Regions of
Costa Rica 370
 - The Central Highlands–Atlantic Watershed
Archaeological Region 371
 - The Guanacaste–Nicoya Archaeological Region 375
 - The Diquís Archaeological Region 376
- Conclusion 376

28. Caral–Supe and the North Central Area of Peru: The History of Maize in the Land Where Civilization Came into Being

RUTH SHADY

- Introduction 381
- The Social System of Caral–Supe 382
- The Territory of Caral 383
- The Settlement of Caral 385
- Tools for Farming 387
- Maize from Caral 387
 - Residential Sector A, Subsector A1 387
 - Subsector A5 391
 - Sector I2–Residential Units 391
 - Sector H1: The Gallery Pyramid 392
 - Sector C, Subsector C2 393
 - Residential Sector NN2 395
 - Settlement of Miraya, Subsector C4 396
 - Sector C5 398
- Interpretations 399
- Conclusions 401

29. Prehistoric Maize from Northern Chile: An Evaluation of the Evidence

MARIO A. RIVERA

- Introduction 403
- The Archaeological Evidence 403
 - Tiliviche 404
 - Camarones 404
 - Quiani 406
 - Cáñamo 407
 - Caleta Huelén-43 407
 - Chiu Chiu 407
 - Guatacondo-Ramaditas 407
 - Tulan 408
 - Pichasca, San Pedro Viejo 409
 - El Salto 409
- Discussion of the Evidence 409

30. Early Maize on the Copacabana Peninsula: Implications for the Archaeology of the Lake Titicaca Basin

SERGIO J. CHÁVEZ AND ROBERT G. THOMPSON

- Introduction 415
- Archaeological Background and Paleobotanical Maize
Samples from Copacabana 417
- Opal Phytoliths 419
 - Food Residue Phytolith Assemblages 420
 - Maize Chaff Assemblages 422
 - Blind Tests of Phytolith Assemblage Recognition 423
- Materials and Methods of Phytolith Identification in
Ancient and Modern Samples 424
 - Comparisons of Residues and Modern Maize Varieties 425
- Discussion and Conclusions 426

31. The Movements of Maize into Middle Horizon Tiwanaku, Bolivia

CHRISTINE A. HASTORF, WILLIAM T. WHITEHEAD,
MARIA C. BRUNO, AND MELANIE WRIGHT

- Introduction 429
- Tiwanaku: An Early Highland Polity 430
- The Andes: Ecological Diversity, Maize Diversity 431
- Maize at Tiwanaku 432
 - Hypotheses 432
- Research Goals 433
 - Data 434
 - Methods 435
 - Analysis of the Data 435
 - Results 437
- Discussion 441
- Conclusions 443

32. The Social, Symbolic, and Economic Significance of *Zea mays* L. in the Late Horizon Period

JOHN E. STALLER

- Introduction 449
 The Social and Symbolic Significance of Maize 451
 Social and Symbolic Aspects of Maize to Interaction and Sealing Alliances 455
 An Encounter of Historic Proportions 456
 The Significance and Role of Maize to Andean Economy 462
 Symbolic Aspects of Maize to Inca State Religion 464
 Summary and Conclusions 465

PART

IV

THE HISTORIES OF MAIZE: NORTH AMERICA AND NORTHERN MEXICO

33. Early Agriculture in Chihuahua, Mexico

ROBERT J. HARD, A. C. MACWILLIAMS, JOHN R. RONEY,
KAREN R. ADAMS, AND WILLIAM L. MERRILL

- Introduction 471
 Early Agriculture 471
 The Introduction of Maize 473
 Early Agriculture in Chihuahua 474
 Paleoenvironment 474
 Previous Research in Chihuahua 475
 Northwestern Chihuahua 475
 South-Central Chihuahua 478
 D-Shaped Terrace Sites 478
 Cerros de Trincheras 479
 The Sierra Tarahumara 479
 Discussion 480

34. Protohistoric and Contact Period Salinas Pueblo Maize: Trend or Departure?

KATHARINE D. RAINEY AND KATHERINE A. SPIELMANN

- Introduction to the Salinas Area 487
 Research Questions and Data 489
 Data Sample 490
 Data Analysis Techniques 490

- Maize Consumption 491
 Maize Production 492
 Maize Trait Variation 494
 Conclusions: Trend or Departure? 495

35. Early Maize Agriculture in the Northern Rio Grande Valley, New Mexico

BRADLEY J. VIERRA AND RICHARD I. FORD

- Introduction 497
 A Review of Early Agriculture in the Northern Rio Grande 498
 An Evaluation of Early Maize Morphology and Dates in the Northern Rio Grande 501
 Early Agriculture in the Northern Rio Grande 505
 Conclusion 507

36. Hominy Technology and the Emergence of Mississippian Societies

THOMAS P. MYERS

- Introduction 511
 Hominy Technology 511
 Alternative Methods of Hominy Production 512
 Other Methods of Freeing the Essential Nutrients 514
 Testing the Hypothesis 514
 A New Race of Maize 514
 Cultural Changes 515
 Physical Changes 515
 Origins of the Hominy Revolution 516
 American Bottoms and the Central Mississippi 516
 Lower Mississippi and Arkansas Lowlands 516
 Southeast 517
 Northeast 517
 Conclusions 517

37. The Migrations of Maize into the Southeastern United States

ROBERT LUSTECK

- Introduction 521
 Phytoliths 521
 The Assemblage Approach 522
 Maize History and Varieties 522
 Maize in the Southeastern United States 523
 The Pilot Study 524
 Methods and Materials 524
 Results 524
 Conclusion 524

**38. The Science behind the Three Sisters
Mound System: An Agronomic Assessment
of an Indigenous Agricultural System
in the Northeast**

JANE MT. PLEASANT

- Introduction 529
Mounds 530
 Soil Temperature and Moisture 531
 Soil Organic Matter 532
 Soil Fertility 532
 Soil Erosion and Compaction 532
 Spacing and Plant Population 533
Intercropping 534
An Integrated System 535

**39. The Origin and Spread of Maize
(*Zea mays*) in New England**

ELIZABETH S. CHILTON

- Introduction 539
The Maize Debate and Mobile Farmers 540
 New England's Mobile Farmers 540
The Maize Chronology and the Importance of AMS
 Dating 541
Maize Dating Project 543
Implications of a Chronology for Maize Horticulture in
 New England 545

**40. Pre-Contact Maize from Ontario,
Canada: Context, Chronology, Variation,
and Plant Association**

GARY W. CRAWFORD, DELLA SAUNDERS, AND DAVID G. SMITH

- Introduction 549
Middle Woodland, Late Woodland I, and Late Woodland II
 in Southern Ontario 550
Paleoethnobotany of Middle Woodland, Princess Point,
 and Late Woodland II 551
Maize in the Northeast 552
Princess Point Maize 554
 Contexts 554
 Plant Associations 554
Late Woodland I Maize Morphology 556
Discussion 556

P A R T

V

**THE HISTORIES OF MAIZE:
THE LANGUAGE OF MAIZE**

**41. Siouan Tribal Contacts and Dispersions
Evidenced in the Terminology for Maize and
Other Cultigens**

ROBERT L. RANKIN

- Introduction 564
Glottochronological Dating 564
Impressionistic Dating 565
Improving Dating Techniques 565
 Gourds 566
 Squash (Often Pumpkin) 566
 Maize 567
Other Technology 571
 Beans 571
Summary 572
 The Agricultural and Technological Chronology 574
 The Siouan Family Tree 574
 Further Research 575

**42. Maize in Word and Image in
Southeastern Mesoamerica**

BRIAN STROSS

- Introduction 578
Vocabulary 579
 Basic Maize Words 579
 Maize Growth Stages 581
 Food Preparation 581
 Ritual Names and Maize Deities 583
Narratives 583
Sayings, Metaphors, and Beliefs 586
 Rituals 586
 Numbers 588
 Glyphs 589
 Images 591
 Calendar 593
 Plants 596
Conclusion 597

43. Thipaak and the Origins of Maize in Northern Mesoamerica

JANIS B. ALCORN, BARBARA EDMONSON, AND
CÁNDIDO HERNÁNDEZ VIDALES

- Introduction 600
- Thipaak Maize Histories 600
- Thipaak and Maize in Conversation and Daily Life 604
- Maize Cultivation Rituals 606
- Relation to Other Mesoamerican Traditions 606
- Discussion and Concluding Observations 608

44. The Place of Maize in Indigenous Mesoamerican Folk Taxonomies

NICHOLAS A. HOPKINS

- Introduction 612
- The Ethnobotany of the Amuzgo 612
- Amuzgo Ethnobotany and Folk Taxonomy 613
- Comparative Mesoamerican Plant Categorization 616
 - Tzeltal (Mayan) Ethnobotanical Categories 616
 - Chuj (Mayan) Ethnobotanical Categories 617
 - Itzá (Mayan) Ethnobotanical Categories 618
 - Popolocan (Otomanguean) Ethnobotanical Categories 618
- The Emergence of Mesoamerican Life Forms 618
- Classic Maya Science 619
- Concluding Remarks 620

45. Native Aymara and Quechua Botanical Terminologies of *Zea mays* in the Lake Titicaca and Cuzco Regions

SERGIO J. CHÁVEZ

- Introduction 623
- Historical Background of Quechua and Aymara Languages 624
- Tunqu* (Aymara) and *Sara* (Quechua) Maize Terminologies 625
 - Maize Plant Parts 625
 - Maize Varieties 626
- Chicha*, *K'usa* (Aymara), and *Aqha* (Quechua) Terms 627
- Conclusions 627

46. The Historical Linguistics of Maize Cultivation in Mesoamerica and North America

JANE H. HILL

- Introduction 631
- Historical-Linguistic Methods 632

- Reconstructed Maize Complex Vocabularies in Mesoamerican Languages 633
- Maize Complex Loan Words in Mesoamerican Languages 636
- Maize Vocabularies in the Southwestern United States 640
- Maize Vocabulary in the Eastern United States 642
- Summary and Conclusion 643

47. Glottochronology and the Chronology of Maize in the Americas

CECIL H. BROWN

- Introduction 648
- Glottochronology 649
- Methodology 650
- Theoretical Considerations Concerning Terms for Maize in Ancestral Languages 654
- Chronology of Maize in the Americas 655
- Maize Chronology and Glottochronological Dates 656
- Adjusting Glottochronology 661
- Conclusion 662

48. A Review of the Antiquity, Biogeography, and Culture History of Maize in the Americas

BRUCE F. BENZ AND JOHN E. STALLER

- The Culture History of Maize in the Americas 665
 - Contextual Considerations 665
- Antiquity 666
- Biogeography: Dispersal and Racial Diversification 667
- Culture History—Staple, Variety and Cultural Acceptance 668
- Maize in Language, Myth, and Legend 671
- Extinction 672

Index 675

Color Insert 000

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An Introduction to the Histories of Maize

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The goal of the editors of this volume on maize is to bring together contributions, which would individually incorporate and collectively assemble a comprehensive multidisciplinary set of data, that developed particular lines or types of evidence from specific time periods (and regions) throughout the Pre-Columbian geographic range of maize cultivation.² Another primary goal in organizing this volume was to be holistic, in that the total range of coverage would encompass the entire Western hemisphere and include research from the social, biological, and earth sciences. This volume is organized into five parts dealing with different aspects and regions of research on the origin and spread of maize science. The scope and breadth of the research takes into account recent methodological and technological innovations from the physical, biological, and social sciences. These recently developed technical and methodological approaches provide ever-increasing detail and direct evidence on the antiquity, evolution, and cultural importance of maize in the ancient Americas. We believe that such approaches have essentially transformed our understanding of the roles and importance of maize and other domesticates to sociocultural developments in prehistory, making this publication timely. My colleagues, Robert H. Tykot and Bruce F. Benz, and I hope that the readers of this volume agree that the research presented herein has established this to be the case.

One of our two European contributors observed that such a book could never have been realized had it been organized and published outside of North America (see Chapter 1). Rather it would have been broken up into several books specialized on the respective scientific discipline and spe-

cialization concerned. These volumes would have presumably included research that was specifically geared to the interested specialists in those fields. Archaeological research on the domestication of grains in the Old World has developed within competing models that consider “acculturation” or “waves of advance,” whereas in the Americas they have generally been couched within foraging–farming dichotomies that are specific and distinct to different regions of the hemisphere and their associated time periods [4, 5, 6, 9, 19].

Although the Old World approaches lend themselves well to models used or tested by human geneticists and linguists, they have generally been anathema to North American archaeologists. In the Old World, emphasis has been placed on initial causes or events (as opposed to earliest presence), whereas here in the Americas there has been a clear focus on the developmental or evolutionary, or both, processes associated with plant domestication and maize agriculture. The Old World emphasis on migration and diffusion of plant domestication also takes away from the general focus on the distinctions that important cultigens had to different regions and time periods, whereas in the Americas this has been clearly evident in the methodological approaches to understanding the archaeological record (see Chapters 23 and 36). Despite differences in theoretical and methodological approaches to plant domestication in general and economic plants (mainly grains) in particular, the assumption that maize, like wheat and barley in the Old World, provided the economic basis for the development of civilization has been a central thesis among scholars in the archaeological sciences in both hemispheres. Remarkably, many of the contributions in this volume challenge those basic assumptions.

Although the chapters in this volume appear to support the contention that maize was a major economic staple, some contributions herein indicate that when and where this occurred is dramatically different than had been previously suggested in the literature. Other contributors present evidence to suggest that the way maize affected sociocultural processes is in fact far more complex and varied than had

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²The creation of this volume on the Histories of Maize was inspired in part through collaboration with several colleagues, T. Michael Blake, John P. Hart, and Robert G. Thompson, in putting together a four-part symposium on maize titled *Stories of Maize* for American archaeology that was presented at the 69th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Anthropology in Montreal, Canada, March 31–April 4, 2004.

been originally assumed (see Chapters 8 and 21). One of the primary themes that run through many of these contributions, particularly the paleodietary evidence from stable carbon isotopes, is that maize was not initially the important economic food source that many archaeologists assumed (see Chapters 2, 3, 5, 6, 11–13, 20, and 28). In some cases, it never achieved economic importance in certain regions, although it did seem to play an important role in other aspects of sociocultural development (see Chapters 24, 25, and 30). Another important divergence from previous assumptions brought out by this volume is that maize was only domesticated once. Its ancestor, teosinte (*Zea mays* ssp. *parviglumis*), was domesticated in the Balsas River drainage of central Mexico (Chapters 2 and 3) [14]. This differs from previous hypotheses regarding a tripartite origin of maize promoted by Mangelsdorf [13] and others and by extension the possibility of multiple domestication events in different regions of the Americas [8, 11, 15, 17].

Since the publication of the DNA microsatellite data on extant populations of maize and teosinte in 2002, research on ancient maize has been at a historical crossroads [14]. These important data suggest that like most of the Old World staples, maize was only domesticated once, but rather than focus on the migrations of farming populations or the acceptance of maize agriculture in diverse regions, what the contributions in this volume suggest is that there will be an even greater appreciation for research on maize from the social and particularly the biological sciences. The botanical evidence has historically influenced archaeological interpretation, but the recent evidence from molecular biology suggests that such data may now set the limits for what is possible regarding the ancient origins and early spread of maize in the Americas [7].

The holistic approach we have inherited from the founders of *American Anthropology* is largely responsible for the multidisciplinary organization of this volume [12, 16, 21–24]. They provided Americanist archaeology with the possibility that such multidisciplinary approaches could ever have been brought together as a single reference source on maize science.

Many recent advances to our knowledge come from new scientific techniques and approaches to the direct study of archaeological maize collections and the physical remains of the human populations who consumed it (Chapters 29 and 31). The development of Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) radiocarbon dating has had a profound effect in our understanding of the chronological spread of maize in the Americas and greatly revised our previous assumptions of its antiquity based on indirect dating techniques [2, 3, 18, 20]. The recent techniques involving isotope analysis, including research on phytoliths, have provided detailed information on the antiquity and role of maize to ancient cultures throughout the Americas and are highlighted and referenced throughout the volume (Chapters 9, 17, 30, and 37).

These state-of-the-art scientific approaches and their associated methodologies stand in contrast to the more traditional forms of analyses such as historical linguistics, archaeological analysis of stratigraphy, and the classification and detailed study of artifacts.

The first section of this volume deals with the molecular, biological, and morphological research that has so greatly affected recent research on maize. This section of the volume also includes a detailed analysis of the chronology of its spread in the Americas (see Chapter 4). Recently developed techniques in maize DNA research have also revised our earlier perceptions of the antiquity and spread of maize to different regions of the Americas and provided evidence for the previously unknown presence of undomesticated teosinte genes (Chapter 6). Chapter 2 by Benz, on maize in the Americas, addresses some of these biological and chronological data and the underlying biases in previous research methodologies when maize was still believed to have multiple origins [13]. Several chapters present data derived from the latest advances in the study of maize origins—morphology and microfossil analysis—asking the question: What can such research on ancient maize tell us about the origin, history, and spread of this important cultigen? Chapters presenting evidence on the physical characteristics of archaeological maize remains also include an assessment of methodological approaches on microfossils in carbon residues that appear to provide greater detailed information on the identification and spread of ancient maize lineages (see Chapters 7, 9, 26, 27, 34, and 37). These chapters suggest that the future of maize research will be more heavily influenced by molecular biology, particularly the maize genome project, and botanical research on plant morphology, as scholars will attempt to quantify, identify, and trace those genes, traits, and morphological characteristics related to human as opposed to natural selection.

An economic staple throughout the Western hemisphere at the time of European contact, the evolution and spread of maize (*Zea mays* L.) have been topics of major archaeological research in the Americas for more than a century [1]. The second part of the volume deals with the stable carbon isotope analysis and paleodiet and directly addresses these previous concerns with direct quantitative evidence of its economic importance. Researchers working in areas ranging from as far afield as southern Canada and Argentina discuss the dietary, social, and economic implications of stable carbon isotope analyses from human skeletal remains (see Chapters 15 and 40). Research using strontium isotopes and elemental analyses of biochemistry involving human skeletons, as well as plants and animals, can now be used to determine whether people, plants, or animals were displaced or brought in from other areas or regions than where they were identified archaeologically. Strontium isotopic research is generating data that has facilitated our understanding of how maize was manipulated and used by ancient

societies and challenges our previous assumptions of how maize was dispersed and its role in the ancient economy (see Chapter 21).

In recent years, multidisciplinary research using a variety of new methods and techniques in stable carbon isotope analysis has clarified and provided detailed data on the dietary importance of maize in distinct cultural settings and time periods (see Chapter 10). Isotopic research on ancient human skeletons, particularly in the past decade, has greatly expanded our understanding of human adaptation, and in some cases, required maize specialists from the natural and social sciences to revise long-held theories on the spread and effects of maize on the development of sociocultural complexity. The section on stable carbon isotope analysis provides the most up-to-date results on paleodiet in the Americas. The summary by Henry Schwarcz (see Chapter 22) represents one of the most comprehensive treatments of these data in the published literature. Results from various contributions indicate that maize became a primary staple in the Americas much later than had been previously thought and that its role in sociocultural development is much more complex and varied in some regions of the Neotropics, particularly in the areas adjacent to where it was originally domesticated (see Chapter 13). In other regions of the Americas it became a food staple late in the prehistoric sequence, and in some regions its adoption and role in the ancient economy was highly varied, and it was never a primary staple (see Chapters 15, 16, 18, and 19). These data provide refreshing and informative insights into the spread and economic importance of maize, and in many ways they challenge our previous assumptions of its importance and role in sociocultural development.

The chapters in Parts III to IV are organized chronologically by geographic region going from the earliest evidence for maize domestication to its later spread into other areas of the hemisphere. Considerations of the scientific, theoretical, and methodological approach also influenced the organization of this volume. The geographic and topical divisions are in two parts: Part III: Central and South America and Part IV: North America and Northern Mexico. Many recent scientific advances in our knowledge surrounding the increasing dependence on plant domestication and particularly the role of maize in ancient economies are explored in these chapters. Most of the research is archaeological and many contributions incorporate the most recent multidisciplinary evidence to build consensus on primary issues surrounding maize science that are based on internally consistent lines of evidence. The innovative and original approaches presented in this volume provide a basis for the future of multidisciplinary research on this important New World cultigen.

Part III represents a natural extension of the first parts of the volume in its multidisciplinary research and geographic and chronological breadth and scope and is distinguished to

some extent in that the research primarily concerns the social sciences—the ethnohistory, archaeology, and contextual associations of ancient maize. Numerous ethnohistoric documents and ethnographic accounts are presented to examine the social and symbolic significance of maize to sociocultural development. Ethnohistoric accounts generally emphasized maize as the preeminent grain of the Pre-Hispanic New World, a plant that was critical to sociocultural developments in Mexico and Central and South America at the time of contact. These accounts were largely biased by the importance of cereal grains in the Old World and have long influenced archaeological assumptions regarding the economic role of maize in Native American economies. In exploring little known ethnohistoric accounts of Native Andean speakers one of the contributions has uncovered evidence that suggests that maize also played a major role in cultural perceptions of hierarchy and status and that its role in the economy went far beyond dietary considerations (see Chapter 32).

Recent multidisciplinary lines of evidence have recorded the changing role of maize to sociocultural development in different chronological, geographic, and cultural settings. The ethnographical, ethnohistorical, paleobotanical, and archaeological evidence presented in these chapters has generated even more detailed evidence of complex sets of data regarding the phylogeny, chronology, evolution, and the sociocultural and socioeconomic significance of this important New World cultigen. The different social and symbolic roles maize played are explored in diverse chronological and cultural settings (see Chapters 31, 34, and 35). Other chapters, emphasize the significance of Native American practices regarding maize agriculture. The intercropping of the maize, beans, and squash triad is examined from an agronomic perspective, and the spread of maize lineages is traced through time and space (see Chapters 38–40). Some contributors trace the early movements of maize into the American Southwest and northern Mexico and provide innovative and original insights into its role in sociocultural development and adaptation (see Chapters 33 and 35).

The linguistic section of this volume, Part V, takes the reader back into Americanist anthropological science. The chapters presented here are multidimensional in scope and comprehensive in the regions covered. Some contributors use historical linguistics such as glottochronology to explore the dispersal of this plant among the widely dispersed Siouan language family in North America and the multi-branched language families (Mayan, Mixe–Zoquean, Oto–Manguean, and Uto–Aztec) and language groups of Mesoamerica (see Chapters 41 and 46). Cecil Brown (see Chapter 47) uses linguistic analysis to trace the spread of the terminology surrounding maize by various Native linguistic groups throughout the hemisphere. Moreover, the results from this ambitious contribution indicate that such data are largely consistent with the most current chronological evi-

dence of its spread. These contributions emphasize the importance of historical linguistics and language to our understanding of the antiquity, meaning, and the roles of maize in widely dispersed and economically diverse cultures.

Some linguistic contributors examined the vocabularies surrounding the cultivation and preparation of maize to correlate them with established archaeological dates for their introduction with linguistic developments, whereas others analyzed indigenous folk taxonomies to explore the meaning and uses of maize among ethnographic cultures and by extension their ancient ancestors (see Chapters 44 and 45).

Brian Stross (Chapter 42) analyzes images of maize, depicted in iconography, discussed in narratives, and stylized in glyphs, to gain an understanding of the ideological and mythological significance that this plant had to Mayan civilization. Alcorn, Edmonson, and Hernández Vidales (see Chapter 43) explore the mythological origins and cultural significance of maize as it is expressed in language and revealed in legend and song of the Teenek (Huastec) of San Luis Potosi and Veracruz, who are currently residing in the moist tropical forests and dry forest zones on the eastern side of the Sierra Madre Oriental. In prehistoric times they also lived along the Gulf Coast up through Tamaulipas and into the dry areas west of the mountains—including the area of the cave where teosinte and small maize ears were discovered by Richard MacNeish decades ago.

The ethnographic and linguistic evidence presented in this part of the volume represent an affirmation of American anthropological science, and as Gordon Willey and Philip Phillips [23] once said, “archaeology is anthropology or it is nothing at all” [p. 2]. The linguistic chapters are in this part of the volume to emphasize the anthropological roots of American archaeology and reaffirm what was stated at the beginning of this introduction. It has only been a decade since the last important landmark synthesis on maize science was published, but as these chapters clearly indicate, much has changed and been redefined regarding the spread and significance of maize in that short period of time [10].

In the volume summary, Benz and Staller (see Chapter 48) explore the multidisciplinary research on maize in different regions of the Americas to show how the data presented in this volume are in some cases a natural extension of the previous results, and in other ways a dramatic departure with conclusions and data that directly challenge the conventional wisdom and provide compelling evidence to suggest that many of our current assumptions and preconceptions are no longer tenable. This final statement on the volume and maize science reaffirms the power of integrating multiple lines of internally consistent data in light of the previous claims and assumptions that have been made in the important and often controversial history of research on maize.

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