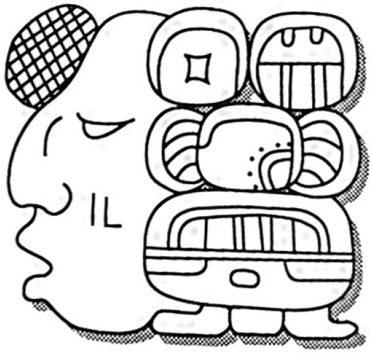
5 • REWRITING HISTORY



This chapter elaborates the point made at the end of chapter 4: Mesoamerican rulers were not attempting to write truthful and objective history, but to communicate official propaganda. Their writings have historic content, but it is a manipulated history in which the facts are altered to meet successive rulers' changing political and ideological needs. Past events were fabricated to suit current policies, conquests were exaggerated, lies were told about genealogical relationships, and secondary centers claimed independence from primary centers even when such control had never been relinquished.

The clearest expression of this historical revisionism can be found in cases where stone monuments were defaced, recarved, or reset, and where hide or paper books were painted over, resurfaced with lime, or rewritten.

We give examples below from the Aztec, Mixtec, and Maya. To make the point that such revisionism was commonplace throughout the ancient world—even after the invention of history as we know it—let us begin with an example from the Old World.

An Egyptian Example

One of the classic examples of rewriting history comes to us from ancient Egypt, and took place during the reigns of five successive pharaohs known to us as Amenhotep III, Akhenaten, Tutankhamun, Ay, and Horemheb (ca. 1450–1300 B.C.). In my brief summary of the sequence, I follow Leslie White (1948) in attributing the events to cultural processes rather than to the "genius" of individual rulers.

Amenhotep III ruled at Thebes and built temples to its patron god Amun ("The Hidden One") and to the old sun god Re. During his reign, however, the priests of Amun

became an increasing threat to his power. Underwritten by taxes, tribute from temple lands, and gold from mines in the Sudan, these priests unified to become a powerful economic force in Egypt.

Amenhotep III's son and successor, Amenhotep IV, hit on a strategy for curtailing the threat of these increasingly powerful priests: he inaugurated, at the state level, the worship of Aten ("The Sun Disc"), a new form of Re. To dramatize the move, he changed his name from Amenhotep ("Amun is Satisfied") to Akhenaten ("Effective for the Sun Disc") and moved his capital from Thebes to a new city which he named Akhetaten ("Horizon of the Sun Disc"). By the sixth year of his reign, ca. 1372 B.C., he had closed the temples of all the other gods, including Amun, taking away the lands and all sources of revenue for the priests who had posed a threat (White 1948, Aldred 1973:11–15; Wilson 1975:207–218):

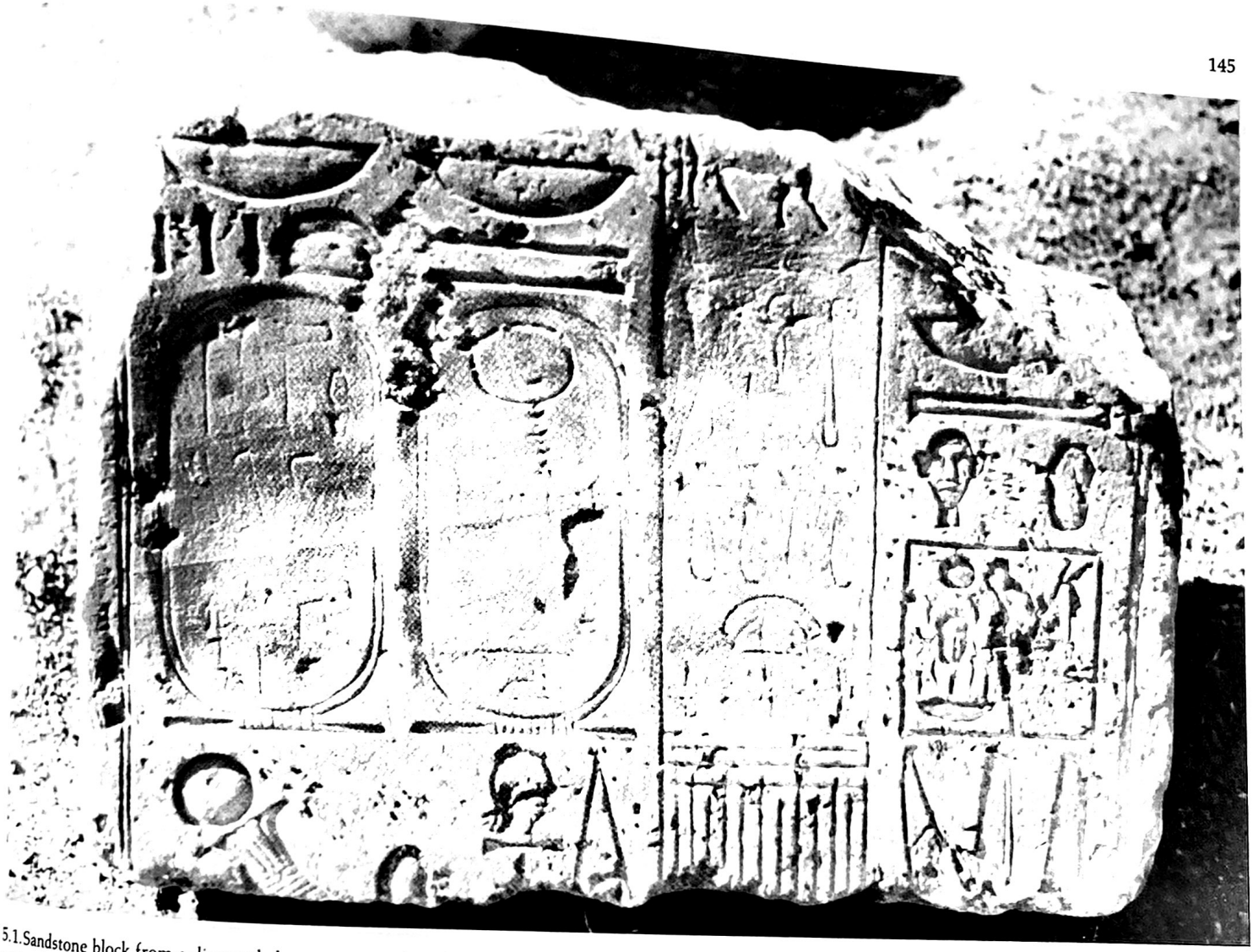
> Everywhere, in temples, tombs, statuary, and casual inscriptions, the hieroglyphs for "Amun" and representations of the god were chiseled out; objects sacred to him were likewise defaced. People who bore names compounded with "Amun" [with Amun comprising part of their name] were obliged to change them. (Redford 1987:176)

Akhenaten instructed workmen to place coats of plaster over his former name and replace it with his new one. They were also instructed to remove the plural word "gods" from all monuments. From now on there would only be one god, Aten, instead of polytheism, and all revenues would be diverted to Akhenaten in the name of the Sun Disc.

Needless to say, the disenfranchised priests smarted under this regime, which ended with Akhenaten's death some seventeen years later. His successor Tutankhaten ("Beloved in Life is Aten") was a mere boy of nine when he ascended the throne, to be confronted instantly by the angry priests of Thebes. Realizing that he needed their support to retain the throne, Tutankhaten changed his name to Tutankhamun ("Beloved in Life is Amun") and moved his capital back to Thebes, ending Egypt's brief phase of solar monotheism. Tutankhamun died nine years later and was succeeded by Ay, a former member of Akhenaten's court. Ay ruled but a short time and was succeeded by a man named Horemheb.

Horemheb, a military man who had served under both Akhenaten and Tutankhamun, was a faithful follower of Amun. He had never left Thebes, nor had he ever converted to the cult of Aten. He thus had the full support of the priests of Amun, who carried out his coronation themselves. Horemheb set about restoring the temples of Amun and returning the temple lands and other sources of revenue to the priests; he destroyed the temple of Aten at Akhetaten and had its building blocks carried 300 miles to Thebes to enlarge the temple of Amun.

Most interestingly, in an effort to erase the heresy of Aten worship, Horemheb tried to have all references to Akhenaten, Tutankhamun, and Ay chiseled out of public monuments. For example, on a sandstone block from a dismantled structure of Tutankhamun's at Karnak, the name of Tutankhamun had been carefully removed (Fig. 5.1). The name



5.1. Sandstone block from a dismantled structure attributed to Tutankhamun, Karnak, Egypt. The double cartouche at left once contained Tutankhamun's name. After his death, those inscriptions were carefully removed and replaced with the name of his successor, Ay. Later, Ay's name was removed almost beyond detection when political power fell into Horemheb's hands. As Redford (1984:206) has noted, such alterations—made on behalf of the reigning pharaoh at the expense of deceased predecessors—were characteristic of ancient Egypt. (Photograph courtesy of Donald Redford.)

of his successor Ay was then carved in those spaces; later that name, too, was almost completely removed when Horemheb came to power and inserted his own name. By so doing Horemheb sought to make it appear that he was the direct successor of Amenhotep III, which of course was not the case. History had been rewritten so that it would appear that there had never been a challenge to Amun, and that three rulers had never existed. Redford (1987:206) has also noted that "such accommodation of the reigning pharaoh at the expense of deceased ancestors on standing monuments is characteristic of ancient Egypt."

The Rewriting of Aztec History

One of our clearest cases of rewriting history comes from the Basin of Mexico and involves two protagonists, Itzcoatl and Tlacaelel. Itzcoatl, the fourth ruler of the Mexica, reigned from ca. A.D. 1428 to 1440. Tlacaelel was a *cihuacoatl* or "snake woman" who served not only Itzcoatl but the later rulers Motecuhzoma I, Axayacatl, and Ahuitzotl. During the reign of Itzcoatl, according to the Códice Matritense de la Real Academia de Historia (Paso y Troncoso 1907, 8:192), there was a massive "book burning" of all previous Aztec history, followed by an equally massive rewriting:

> They preserved their history, but it was burned at the time that Itzcoatl reigned in Mexico. The Aztecs decided it, saying, "It is not wise that all the people should know the paintings. The commoners would be driven to ruin and there would be trouble, because these paintings contain many lies, for many in the pictures have been hailed as gods."

These burned texts, of course, contained the deeds of previous rulers, their genealogies, and their relations with neighboring peoples. To understand why Itzcoatl wanted them burned, we must consider the history of the Mexica people before, during, and after Itzcoatl's reign. Before him, the Mexica were subjects of the Tepaneca; during his reign, they won their independence by force of arms and set about rewriting their origins; after him, they became the dominant force in all of central Mexico.

The story, in brief, is as follows: prior to establishing Tenochtitlán (ca. A.D. 1325–1345), the Mexica were but lowly subjects of the earlier Culhua state. During the reigns of the first three Mexica rulers—Acamapichtli (ca. A.D. 1376–1396), Huitzilihuitl (ca. A.D. 1397–1417), and Chimalpopoca (ca. A.D. 1417–1428)—the Mexica were still not one of the more important ethnic groups within the Basin of Mexico. Other, more powerful groups (especially the Tepaneca, Culhuaque, and the Acolhuaque) had formed alliances and confederations, enabling them to subjugate other peoples in their desire for labor and goods. Three lakeside cities (Azcapotzalco, Coatlinchán, and Culhuacán) may have formed

one of the first temporary triple alliances, with the Tepaneca capital of Azcapotzalco finally taking over the preeminent role.

With Acamapichtli as their leader, the Mexica aided the Tepaneca of Azcapotzalco in their military campaigns against the Xochimilca, Cuitlahuaca, and Mixquica. The territories of these peoples lay to the south and east of Tenochtitlán. Another campaign led them to the north, to destroy the Otomí center of Xaltocán. The Mexica carried out these conquests while under political allegiance to the Tepaneca, and several of the areas needed to be reconquered during the reign of Huitzilihuitl. During the short reign of the Mexica ruler Chimalpopoca, the Azcapotzalco ruler Tezozomoc was able to incorporate much of the Acolhua territory.

The death of Tezozomoc in A.D. 1426 was followed by a crisis for the Tepaneca. The new Tepaneca ruler, Maxtla of Azcapotzalco, had Chimalpopoca murdered, and in anger the Mexica allied themselves with the Acolhua in hopes of overthrowing Azcapotzalco. This alliance with the great Acolhua leader Nezahualcoyotl of Texcoco gave the Mexica new power. Nezahualcoyotl himself was eager for the alliance because he wished to avenge the killing of his father by the Tepaneca in A.D. 1418. Thus there were two main reasons for the Mexica-Acolhua alliance against Azcapotzalco: (1) revenge for the deaths of Chimalpopoca and Nezahualcoyotl's father, and (2) a chance at last for the Mexica to collect tribute, labor, and lands for their own purposes instead of fighting other ethnic groups on behalf of Azcapotzalco.

Itzcoatl became the new ruler of the Mexica in A.D. 1428 with his people still dominated by the Tepaneca, but they were joined in their revolt by the Acolhua. The story of how the Mexica achieved their independence by overthrowing the yoke of Azcapotzalco exists in different versions, each having been recorded by a different ethnic group with different propaganda goals.

Itzcoatl was aided in his campaign by his two nephews, half-brothers named Tlacaelel and Motecuhzoma I. These half-brothers were the offspring of the same father, Huitzilihuitl II, but by different mothers—Tlacaelel's mother was Cacamacihuatzin from Teocalhuiyacan, while Motecuhzoma's was Miyahuaxiuhtzin from Cuernavaca. These half-brothers were both said to have been born not only in the same year in the Aztec calendar (10 Rabbit, or A.D. 1398), but also on the same day; since this coincidence is very unlikely, it may well be another case of the Aztecs' rewriting of past events. In Durán's version, Tlacaelel is given much of the credit for the eventual Mexica victory over Azcapotzalco, and is called "the greatest warrior, the bravest and mightiest, that the Aztec nation has ever had—the most cunning man ever produced by Mexico" (Durán [1581] 1964:52).

Following the defeat of Azcapotzalco, the ruler Itzcoatl, his military commander Tlacaelel, and perhaps other leaders met to discuss the writing of the "official version" of the Mexica victory over the Tepaneca. In addition to recording the defeat of Azcapotzalco, the Mexica needed to create some appropriate ancient history for the period prior to the reigns

of Acamapichtli, Huitzilihuitl, and Chimalpopoca. For this early "history," they turned to officials knowledgeable in oral traditions, and to scribes who had been keeping records.

While the now-defeated Azcapotzalcans had been keeping records of their own, those records naturally had recorded the glories of the Tepaneca state and presented their own view of their defeat at the hands of the Mexica. If only we could turn to those Azcapotzalcan books, we could compare the same events from different points of view; unfortunately, none have survived. One way we *can* obtain a different perspective on the Mexica conquest of Azcapotzalco is to consult Alva Ixtlilxochitl (1952, 1975, 1977), who used Texcocan codices to write the Acolhua version of those events.

In the official Mexica version of the conquest of Azcapotzalco, the Mexica did not acknowledge the substantial aid they had received from their allies, the Acolhua of Texcoco; in fact, they neglected to mention that they had had any help. To legitimize their new prominence, the Mexica also needed to establish that they had had a glorious and worthy heritage; thus, they decided to claim descent from the last great civilization, that of the Toltec. They also decided to elevate their patron deity of war, Huitzilopochtli, to a level above that of the other deities populating the cosmos. Through this device, new acclaim could go both to Huitzilopochtli and to the warriors who had fought on his behalf; it was made to appear that the sacred mission of these warriors had been to procure sacrificial captives who could provide a fresh supply of blood to nourish Tonatiuh, the sun. Thus Huitzilopochtli became closely associated with Tonatiuh, the former taking care of the warriors who procured captives for the latter's sustenance. The Mexica version of this human sacrifice also emphasized the need to procure captives from places not too distant from Tenochtitlán. To feed Huitzilopochtli, Tlacaelel suggested that the Mexica situate their market for captives near the capital:

> This market, say I, Tlacaelel, let it be situated in Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco, Cholula, Atlixco, Tliuhquitepec, and Tecoac. For if we situate it farther away, in such places as Yopitzinco or Michoacan or in the region of the Huaxteca, all of which are already under our domination, their remoteness would be more than our armies could endure. They are too far, and besides, the flesh of those barbaric people is not to the liking of our god. They are like old and stale tortillas, because, as I say, they speak strange languages and are barbarians. For this reason it is more convenient that our fair and markets be in the six cities that I have mentioned. . . . Our god will feed himself with them as though he were eating warm tortillas, warm and tasty, straight out of the oven. . . . And this war should be of such a nature that we do not endeavor to destroy the others totally. War must always continue, so that each time and whenever we wish and our god wishes to eat and feast, we may go there as one who goes to market to buy something to eat . . . organized to obtain victims to offer our god Huitzilopochtli. (Durán [1581] 1967; chapter 28)

The Mexica also created a series of new titles to be awarded to those who had fought against Azcapotzalco, especially those who were cousins, nephews, and other close relatives of Itzcoatl. Apart from giving titles to such heroes, Itzcoatl had stone statues carved of them in order to perpetuate their memory, and he had historians and painters inscribe the events of their lives in books, using fine brushes and bright colors. In this way, their fame "would grow and magnify like the brightness of the sun throughout all the nations" (Durán [1581] 1964:70). Itzcoatl also took on the additional title *colhuatecuhtli*, "Lord of the Colhua."

In addition to creating an official history of the Mexica struggle for independence, assigning a series of new titles for warriors and nobles who had fought, and dispensing parcels of land as a reward for victory, the Mexica changed the rules of succession to the throne (P. Carrasco 1984:74). Prior to the reign of Itzcoatl, the Mexica had practiced father-to-son succession, but the rulers' mothers had tended to be non-Tenochca women. Beginning with the marriage of Itzcoatl's son to the daughter of Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina (A.D. 1440–1469), all rulers of Tenochtitlán, the Mexica capital, had to be sons of Tenochca women. High offices in Tenochtitlán henceforth followed collateral succession, with the Tenochca rulers preferring agnates as wives.

The Mexica also narrowed the recruitment pool of rulers by creating a council of four lords from whom the new *tlatoani* had to be chosen. The titles of these four lords were Tlacochcalcatl ("Head of the House of Darts"), Tlacatecal ("Man-slasher"), Ezhuacatl ("Blood-shedder"), and Tlilancalqui ("Lord of the House of Blackness"). No one, according to Durán ([1581] 1964:72), could be given one of these titles unless he was the son or brother of a ruler. The new *tlatoani* would be chosen from this council, thus ensuring that all future rulers would tend to come from the same small group of royal candidates, while at the same time allowing for selection on the basis of talent.

To summarize: the reign of Itzcoatl was one of rapid and spectacular political change, including the Mexica's rise to prominence as an independent polity and the extensive revision of their system of government. Itzcoatl thought that the Mexica's historical archives were no longer appropriate to their new-found prominence, so he burned them and wrote a new history that was more in line with current needs. Only because we have independent documents from other ethnic groups, such as the Acolhua, can we see the full scope of his revisions.

Mixtec Examples

We have now seen two examples, one from Egypt and one from the Aztec, where the records of earlier rulers' deeds were destroyed by later rulers, either by defacing monuments or burning books. Two alternative approaches, used often by the Mixtec, were (1) to alter the written record when making new copies, or (2) to cover up previous records

with a fresh layer of lime sizing and then repaint the new surface. The second method produces what is called a palimpsest, from the Latin *palimpsestus*, "scraped again." This refers to a document from which earlier writing has been scraped off (usually incompletely) to make room for a new text.

In 1950, Alfonso Caso discovered that the Mixtec document called the Codex Selden contained several palimpsests:

> During a trip to Oxford in June of 1950, we discovered upon examining the back of the Codex Selden, which was covered with a white priming, that vestiges of previous painting could be seen in the small cracks.
>
> . . . [V]estiges of underpainting can clearly be seen on the reverse sides of pages 12 and 14; underpainting can also be noticed on the reverse side of page 11, where, according to Burland, it would be discovered more readily than in other parts, because of the fineness of the white priming covering the whole page. (Caso 1964a:62)

After careful examination it was shown that vestiges of old underpainting appeared on the obverse side as well as the reverse side. It appears that "the painter erased these old paintings as well as he was able before applying the stucco layer on which he was to paint" (Caso 1964a:65).

While it is usually not possible to determine what these Mixtec palimpsests said before they were altered, most authorities believe that later rulers wanted either to erase the sections where earlier rulers were mentioned, or to insert themselves into royal genealogies to which they really did not belong. Direct-line descent was extremely important for Mixtec royal succession (Dahlgren de Jordán 1954; Spores 1967), and the rival lords who competed for a city-state fought not only with weapons but with rewritten genealogies.

At the orders of a Mixtec ruler, scribes could also simply copy a codex, making changes and additions as they did so. Many codices were kept by the priests in order to establish a ruler's territorial rights and genealogical entitlements, but deliberate alterations could be made when an old painted manuscript faded and needed to be copied.

For example, at least two different scribes were responsible for painting the Codex Vindobonensis (Caso 1950, Smith 1973a, Furst 1978, Jansen 1982). The obverse is concerned with the mythological birth of the ruling dynasties at Apoala, and was painted by a careful, sure-handed scribe. The reverse deals with historical and dynastic data concerning the genealogies of Tilantongo; this side was painted by a scribe who was apparently hurried while recopying the historical data from an older book. Thus, the two sides differ in thematic content as well as authorship. The historical side appears to have been completed first, while the mythological and divine origin of the ruling dynasties (called by Caso [1950, 1977, 1979] "the prologue in the sky") was added later by a different scribe, perhaps to provide necessary cosmological-ideological support for the rulers of those dynasties.

Zapotec and Maya Examples

We have looked briefly at the burning or repainting of books by the Aztec and Mixtec. When we move to the Maya and Zapotec, who made great use of stone monuments for political purposes, we see a set of strategies more like those of Akhenaten and Horemheb. Both these southern Mesoamerican peoples buried, sawed, moved, defaced, or covered up monuments whose messages were no longer deemed appropriate. This practice is well documented at Monte Albán in Oaxaca, where the Zapotec reused or plastered over stone monuments in the process of new construction (Caso 1938, 1947, 1965a; Marcus 1974a, 1976c, 1983d, 1983e). Such behavior may have a long history in Mesoamerica; even at Gulf Coast Olmec sites of 1200–900 B.C., M. D. Coe and Diehl (1980) and Grove (1981) have presented evidence for the deliberate defacement of stone monuments. Grove (1981:159), in fact, states that the

> destruction of monuments was not a one-time act. It was, rather, something which apparently took place regularly. With a few exceptions, every portrait monument in the [Olmec] heartland was mutilated. This means that monuments personifying each and every ruler over a long time-span were destroyed.

As for the lowland Maya, we have evidence for widespread burying of earlier stone monuments from Early Classic times onward (for example, see Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:117; Marcus 1987, n.d.b). Satterthwaite (1958:68) documents several cases of stelae (free-standing stone monuments) that were reset, sometimes upside down, after the upper half had been removed. An example would be Stela 4 at Tikal (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:13), which was found standing, but had been reset upside down. Maya monuments could be reused as building material, re-erected in a new location, or reshaped to serve as an altar (e.g., Uaxactún's Stela 10 and Uolantún's Stela 1). The practice may have been analogous to Horemheb's defacing of earlier monuments mentioning Akhenaten. However, as we shall see in chapter 11, the destruction of monuments at one site may correspond to a flurry of monument carving and stelae erection at another, indicating that some of the monumental destruction must be viewed within the context of the entire polity or region, rather than from the narrow perspective of one site, one lineage, or one ruler versus another.

SUMMARY AND RETROSPECT

We have looked briefly in chapter 3 at some of the state personnel who had access to writing, education, and decision making in Mesoamerican society. Some of these individuals were clearly instructed to rewrite history, whether by destroying old records (burning or resurfacing books, fracturing stone monuments, and so forth) or by creating new ones

(carving new stones, painting new books, or inserting new data on still unused surfaces). In addition to writing and rewriting, Mesoamerican scribes probably recited texts like their Near Eastern counterparts, who carved the following text for an Akkadian king of ca. 2290 B.C.: "Let wise scribes read aloud thy stele" (I. Winter 1986:25). Maya history was sung in songs and recited from written texts by nobles (Sánchez de Aguilar [1639] 1900, Thompson 1972).

We now turn to a set of chapters (6–11) that treat specific themes concerned with the political manipulation of history. The themes range from territorial boundaries and indigenous map-making to the naming of nobles, the depiction of royal marriages and ancestors, the taking of office, and military conquest. To evaluate similarities and differences among the four writing systems, each chapter includes examples drawn from the Aztec, Mixtec, Zapotec, and Maya.