



Archeology and Volcanism in Central America: The Zapotitán Valley of El Salvador (Texas Pan American Series)

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Scientists have long speculated on the impact of extreme natural catastrophes on human societies. Archeology and Volcanism in Central America provides dramatic evidence of the effects of several volcanic disasters on a major civilization of the Western Hemisphere, that of the Maya.

During the past 2,000 years, four volcanic eruptions have taken place in the Zapotitán Valley of southern El Salvador. One, the devastating eruption of Ilopango around A.D. 300, forced a major migration, pushing the Mayan people north to the Yucatán Peninsula. Although later eruptions did not have long-range implications for cultural change, one of the subsequent eruptions preserved the Cerén site—a Mesoamerican Pompeii where the bodies of the villagers, the palm-thatched roofs of their houses, the pots of food in their pantries, even the corn plants in their fields were preserved with remarkable fidelity.

Throughout 1978, a multidisciplinary team of anthropologists, archeologists, geologists, biologists, and others sponsored by the University of Colorado's Protohistoric Project researched and excavated the results of volcanism in the Zapotitan Valley—a key Mesoamerican site that contemporary political strife has since rendered inaccessible.

The result is an outstanding contribution to our understanding of the impact of volcanic eruptions on early Mayan civilization. These investigations clearly demonstrate that the Maya inhabited this volcanically hazardous valley in order to reap the short-term benefits that the volcanic ash produced—fertile soil, fine clays, and obsidian deposits.

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