



Maya Recovery from Volcanic Disasters Ilopango and Cerén

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By the third century after Christ the highlands of El Salvador were squarely part of the southeastern Maya culture which had developed a complex, fairly sophisticated society based on dryland and irrigated farming. The tropical, volcanic countryside was fertile and the landscape was dotted with agricultural villages and towns. Here and there a larger town with a stratified class system dominated a valley or basin. Chalchuapa, for example, had become a dynamic city comprised of farmers, craft specialists, traders and chief priests. Its urban center consisted of a two kilometer-long ritual zone of tall pyramids, temples and plazas; the residences of the elite surrounded this zone and the artisans and farmers who formed the bulk of the population lived somewhat farther out from the center. Trade was conducted with other societies as far away as central and northern Guatemala and

Belize. Commodities varied and included large quantities of obsidian and jade.

But El Salvador is a country dominated by volcanoes; a central chain of them runs the length of the land from northeast to southwest. They have been anything but quiescent during the past two millennia and during the third century disaster suddenly struck. In two separate stages, the volcano at Ilopango erupted with such violence that whole forests were uprooted and carbonized in an instant. Trees flew like matchsticks in the fierce, hot wind which caught up immense amounts of ash in its turbulence. By the time the eruption was over, thousands of people were dead and land within a radius of 100 kilometers had been rendered uninhabitable. In the area immediately surrounding the eruption, volcanic materials ejected through the air called "tephra" lay as much as 50 meters deep.