

West, R.C., ed., *Natural Environment and Early Culture* s. Vol. 1 of Handbook of Middle American Indians (General Ed., Wauchope, R.), University of Texas Press, 1964, 570 pages.

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Volume 12, Number 26, 1968

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/020820ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/020820ar>

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Publisher(s)

Département de géographie de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0007-9766 (print)

1708-8968 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Watts, D. (1968). Review of [West, R.C., ed., *Natural Environment and Early Culture* s. Vol. 1 of Handbook of Middle American Indians (General Ed., Wauchope, R.), University of Texas Press, 1964, 570 pages.] *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 12(26), 337–337. <https://doi.org/10.7202/020820ar>

NOTICES SIGNALÉTIQUES

GÉOGRAPHIE HISTORIQUE

WEST, R. C., ed., **Natural Environment and Early Cultures.** Vol. 1 of Handbook of Middle American Indians (General Ed., WAUCHOPE, R.), University of Texas Press, 1964, 570 pages.

Ever since the earliest days of Spanish settlement in the New World, Middle America has been readily distinguished, culturally and geographically, as a separate entity from the neighbouring continental areas of North and South America. If the origins of this tripartite division of the Americas, and their retention into this century, are at times a little hard to define or to justify logically, there is nevertheless no question in the minds of contemporary devotees of Middle American geography that this area, characterised by an immense diversity of landscapes and cultures, does qualify as a real geographic unit, unified by the links of history and culture in, and on the margins of the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico.

Despite the existence of such books as Oscar Schneider's *Länderkunde Mitteleamerikas*, published originally in 1934, the region has long lacked a definitive treatment of its geographic environment. This long-awaited first volume of the Handbook of Middle American Indians, edited by R. V. West, and written by several authoritative contributors, goes a long way towards providing such a treatment, although even it makes no claim to be completely comprehensive either in subject matter or areal analysis. There is, for instance, a strong emphasis on the Mexican environment, at the expense particularly of that of the West Indies, but this may merely reflect the greater amount of research which has been completed in the former area.

The basic format of the volume consists of a series of articles, fourteen in number. The first ten of these summarise different aspects of the physical environment, and the last four deal with the development of early cultures. Physical environment is analysed under the separate headings of geohistory and paleogeography; surface configuration and biology; hydrography; oceanography; the American Mediterranean; weather and climate; natural vegetation; soils; fauna; and a summarial account of the natural regions, five of which are delimited (the extratropical dry lands, the cool tropical highlands, the warm tropical lowlands, the extra-tropical highlands and the sub-humid extra-tropical lowlands).

Chapters on the early cultures begin by noting the details of cultural development in sequence from the first primitive hunters to those collectors and gatherers who developed incipient agriculture. A section on the origins of agriculture, and the domestication and diffusion of certain crops in Middle America, leads to a final chapter on the slow growth of village life following domestication, which in time formed the basis of the later-established complex pre-Columbian states.

All contributions are characterized by an impressive amount of information, much of which has only recently been amassed by researchers, and will therefore not be available elsewhere under one cover. Most writers stress the diversity of land and life in Middle America, and indicate some of the interactions which have taken place between man and his physical environment. Throughout, illustrations, maps, tables and photographs are used with discretion, and add to the general picture of the environment and culture which emerges from the text.

This up to date and detailed Handbook must be regarded as basic reading for all who are interested in the geographic environment and early cultures of Middle America. Its encyclopædic yet balanced discussions, its summaries of past studies, its extensive bibliography, and its generally clear presentation all ensure that it will be a major reference source for many years to come.

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