



Canal Irrigation in Prehistoric Mexico: The Sequence of Technological Change

William E. Doolittle

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Prehistoric farmers in Mexico invented irrigation, developed it into a science, and used it widely. Indeed, many of the canal systems still in use in Mexico today were originally begun well before the discovery of the New World. In this comprehensive study, William E. Doolittle synthesizes and extensively analyzes all that is currently known about the development and use of irrigation technology in prehistoric Mexico from about 1200 B.C. until the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century A.D.

Unlike authors of previous studies who have focused on the political, economic, and social implications of irrigation, Doolittle considers it in a developmental context. He examines virtually all the known systems, from small canals that diverted runoff from ephemeral mountain streams to elaborate networks that involved numerous large canals to irrigate broad valley floors with water from perennial rivers. Throughout the discussion, he gives special emphasis to the technological elaborations that distinguish each system from its predecessors. He also traces the spread of canal technology into and through different ecological settings.

This research substantially clarifies the relationship between irrigation technology in Mexico and the American Southwest and argues persuasively that much of the technology that has been attributed to the Spaniards was actually developed in Mexico by indigenous people. These findings will be important not only for archaeologists working in this area but also for geographers, historians, and engineers interested in agriculture, technology, and arid lands.

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