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New models of research and analysis, as well as breakthroughs in deciphering Mesoamerican writing, have recently produced a watershed of information on the regional use and importance of cacao, or chocolate as it is commonly called today. McNeil brings together scholars in the fields of archaeology, history, art history, linguistics, epigraphy, botany, chemistry, and cultural anthropology to explore the domestication, preparation, representation, and significance of cacao in ancient and modern communities of the Americas, with a concentration on its use in Mesoamerica.

Cacao was used by many cultures in the pre-Columbian Americas as an important part of rituals associated with birth, coming of age, marriage, and death, and was strongly linked with concepts of power and rulership. While Europeans have for hundreds of years claimed that they introduced "chocolate" as a sauce for foods, evidence from ancient royal tombs indicates cacao was used in a range of foods as well as beverages in ancient times. In addition, the volume's authors present information that supports a greater importance for cacao in pre-Columbian South America, where ancient vessels depicting cacao pods have recently been identified.

From the botanical structure and chemical makeup of *Theobroma cacao* and methods of identifying it in the archaeological record, to the importance of cacao during the Classic period in Mesoamerica, to the impact of European arrival on the production and use of cacao, to contemporary uses in the Americas, this volume provides a richly informed account of the history and cultural significance of chocolate.