

1 Introduction: Mesoamerica and Its Pre-Hispanic Civilization

Some 2,500 years ago in the Valley of Oaxaca, in what is now southern Mexico, a profound social and cultural transformation resulted in the region's first large aggregation of people (thousands) in a hilltop location. This aggregation, at Monte Albán, was accompanied by new institutions and forms of government that were different than any that had developed in the region before. These new, more hierarchical forms of organization developed in a primary or endogenous context (i.e., without the direct influence of peoples or polities from outside the region). The new institutions were political, religious, and economic in nature, and they underpinned practices and demographic processes that endured for centuries. Our aim here is to explore how and why these fundamentally new kinds of institutions developed. Such questions have a long intellectual history, and the origins of more hierarchical forms of governance and new modes of economic transfer remain key research foci for contemporary anthropological archaeology and other historical social sciences.

In founding a new, large, hilltop settlement, the pre-Hispanic ancestors of today's inhabitants of the Valley of Oaxaca fashioned a cooperative arrangement that eventually stretched to encompass the entire Valley of Oaxaca (and even regions well beyond). In scale and complexity, it equaled other early polities in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and North China, as well as elsewhere in Mesoamerica such as the Maya. Mesoamerica, which includes southern Mexico and adjacent parts of western Central America, was the setting for one of two native urban civilizations in the Americas – the other was centered in the Andes, a geographic area inhabited by the Inca and their predecessors.

Through their developments of new governing and economic institutions, the early inhabitants of the Valley of Oaxaca made a significant contribution to the growth of ancient Mesoamerican civilization. The importance of this contribution should be recognized. But it is not our intention to promote the greatness of one particular society or people. To promote one society or culture always carries the implication that its neighbors were less than great, that they achieved less, that we have less

to admire about them, or that we can learn less from them. We study these cultural changes in Oaxaca not because they are entirely unique, but because in some ways they resemble human experiences in other places and in other times. Greater knowledge about the development of Monte Albán helps us understand the causes and consequences of major social transformations in general. Likewise, it is important to situate the emergence of Monte Albán in the networks of interactions and interregional relations that occurred across the highlands of what is now the state of Oaxaca in Mexico. By taking this wider spatial vantage, we can better understand both what made Monte Albán so distinctive and more fully grasp those factors and conditions that contributed to its formation and those that did not.

Some people think that the truly great transformation in human society occurred rather recently – the change from a traditional to a “modern” way of life. The simple dichotomies they employ – traditional/modern, primitive/modern, illiterate/literate, preindustrial/industrial, primitive/civilized – suggest that there have really been only two kinds of cultures or mentalities (Berreman 1978; Service 1975:3). We argue, in contrast, that transformations with tremendous social and cultural consequences for the ways in which people thought and lived occurred many times in the past. Rather than as a singular episode in human cultural evolution, the modern world is better seen as the product of a complex sequence of transformations in many places over thousands of years. Sometimes these episodes of transformation moved in opposing directions; history is neither linear nor directed. Because contemporary societies have incorporated features from diverse cultural streams and time periods, the social and cultural transformations that occurred in pre-Hispanic Mexico are of considerable interest for the study of cultural evolution and the origins of the modern world.

The transformation that is our focus occurred between 550 and 100 BC. This transition involved a broad suite of changes, which are listed in Table 1. A prominent aspect of this transformation was the rise of the region’s earliest state (see Box 1). This book explains how we determined that these changes occurred, how and why they occurred, and what they tell us about similar episodes of change at other times and in other places.

The transitions that took place over some 400 years had a major impact on most aspects of people’s lives, from the everyday habits of domestic life and residence, to the amount and kinds of social interaction that occurred in the region and between regions, to symbolic systems, artistic expression, and public ritual. The major element of social change that precipitated this broad reorganization was the

Table 1 Changes in the Valley of Oaxaca, 600–150 BC

600 BC	150 BC
Population about 2,000	Population more than 50,000
Largest community San José Mogote, population 1,200	Largest community Monte Albán, population 17,000
Some 80 other settlements, mostly tiny hamlets	Some 643 other settlements, including towns of more than 1,000
Regional hierarchy of centers with two levels	Regional hierarchy of civic-ceremonial centers with at least four levels
Nearly universal access to farmland with reliable water	Many dependent on rainfall agriculture alone (greater risk)
Settlements confined to the valley itself	Settlements spread into the surrounding mountains
Most of the valley covered with trees	Significant deforestation and erosion around settlements
Several polities in the region, possibly in conflict with each other	Strong regional political organization; military outposts indicating greater concern with managing the region's boundaries
The financing of governance was limited, symbolic, personalized	Fiscal financing in labor and goods necessary to support Monte Albán's populace and governance
Status and wealth inequality but no sharp social class differences; social ranking by inherited status	Possible social stratification, greater status differences between rulers and the ruled
Beginnings of a warfare human-sacrifice complex	Raiding and violence commemorated in monuments; Monte Albán fortified
Ancestor veneration	State religion of lightning-clouds-rain-fertility
No evidence of canal irrigation	More intensive agriculture, including canal irrigation
Household storage of produce (houses associated with bell-shaped pits)	Some goods likely acquired through markets (no bell-shaped pits)
Maize cooked by steaming or boiling	Maize cooked as tortillas using comals
Few craft specialists, mostly elite adornments	More craft specialists who produced basic goods for everyday use
Most houses wattle and daub, a few mud brick	Houses of mud brick

development of a multisettlement regional polity that was centered on a newly founded political capital at Monte Albán. The theoretical lenses that we employ to examine this transformation are outlined in Chapter 2. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 we discuss the archaeological

Box 1 How Archaeologists Recognize a State

Early in the history of Monte Albán, new institutions and forms of governance were established. Most researchers who have studied this era in the Valley of Oaxaca agree that within the first centuries following the foundation of the hilltop settlement, these forms of governance constituted what social scientists call a “state.” Archaeologists and other social scientists define states as specialized and hierarchically organized political institutions that govern the people in a particular territory or region. Chiefdoms, also territorial systems of governance, generally have fewer levels or tiers of hierarchical governance (e.g., Earle 1997; Service 1975:15–16). Although sources such as Service (1975; contra Claessen and Skalník 1978) provide archaeologists with a substantial body of comparative ethnographic and historical data on early states, it is often difficult to use this information as a basis for securely identifying a state on the basis of archaeological data alone. For example, states are often defined as governing institutions that make use of civil law and hold a monopoly of power (i.e., only the state can legitimately make use of violent force to wage war or punish wrongdoers) (Service 1975:14). But these features cannot serve as criteria for recognizing a state where written records are inadequate or absent.

One of the most fruitful methods for archaeological research is one that studies the system of governing places (centers) in a region. Henry Wright and Gregory Johnson (Johnson 1973, 1987; Wright 1969; Wright and Johnson 1975) have argued, on the basis of comparative studies, that states typically have three or more hierarchical levels of centers of governance above villages and hamlets. For example, a large number of low-level governing centers will be found distributed widely across the landscape, each linking a small population of adjacent villages and hamlets to higher levels of government. Groups of these low-level centers will in turn be under the jurisdiction of a smaller number of more important middle-level centers. The major governing center (level three in the regional hierarchy) is the regional capital. Chiefdoms will have only one or two hierarchical levels of centers above small hamlets.

A further complicating factor is that not all chiefdoms or states distribute power or practice governance in precisely the same way. In some hierarchically organized polities, power is more distributed, so that multimember councils or different institutions may share diverse elements or functions of governance. Alternatively, in others, power may be highly concentrated and personalized. The

Box 1 (Cont.)

comparative study of governance, both through time and across historical contexts, requires a multidimensional lens that examines both the vertical complexity of political formations as well as the variable ways in which power and resources are channeled between governing institutions and principals as well as between the general population and its leaders.

research in the Valley of Oaxaca and adjacent regions in the state of Oaxaca that has provided the information that underpins our efforts to outline and interpret the key multiscale and macroregional shifts that characterize this time of great change. We also describe the environmental setting, population history, and early architecture of Monte Albán and probe the circumstances that resulted in the founding of this hilltop center. In Chapter 6 we synthesize the key dimensions of change empirically presented in the three prior chapters, while in Chapter 7 we offer broader comparisons and parallels to draw out theoretical implications from this key episode of change.

The Valley of Oaxaca was not alone in experiencing profound social and cultural transformation between 550 and 100 BC. Several contemporaneous societies of Mesoamerica underwent key transitions as well, and what happened in the Valley of Oaxaca cannot be understood apart from this larger domain. Therefore, before we discuss Oaxaca in more detail, we need to place it in the context of the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican world as a whole. We begin by discussing the nature of worlds, civilizations, and other spheres of interaction more generally.

The Nature of Civilizations

By “world,” we mean a large, macroregional, geographic space or landscape, a social system not coterminous with any specific ethnic group or language; worlds are larger, more inclusive, and culturally diverse. From this perspective, and for most of human history, “worlds” do not refer to the entire globe but to systems or networks that constituted “known worlds” of which the people within them were aware (Braudel 1984; Wallerstein 1991). In some cases, a world may be dominated or strongly influenced by a particular cultural group or polity; for example, Han Chinese language and culture were central to the development of the traditional Chinese world. Yet many elements

of cultural and linguistic diversity persisted (and continue to the present day) within China (Blunden and Elvin 1983). Even the comparatively homogeneous ancient Egyptian world, which expanded out from the Gerzean tradition of fourth millennium BC Upper Egypt, integrated elements from the somewhat culturally distinct Lower Egypt and incorporated populations of Nubians and Libyans (Kemp 1989: chapter 1). These examples illustrate that a premodern world is not a uniform culture, population, people, or generally even polity, but a large, multicultural, politico-economic network or system. For the most part, the volume of people movements, goods transfers, and information exchanges within worlds exceeded the extent of transactions with external arenas.

The interactions among the diverse cultural groups that participate in a known world are not simply happenstance or random events. Instead, long-distance interactions are essential to the development and maintenance of each local political and economic entity and institution (Abu-Lughod 1989; Adams 1974; Curtin 1984; Helms 1988; Schortman and Urban 1992; Wallerstein 1974; Wolf 1982) (see Box 2). There are regular movements of people, goods, and information across local political and cultural boundaries. The regularity and intensity of these interactions require specific social

Box 2 World-systems Theory

Traditionally, anthropologists focused their research primarily on local social groups such as households, neighborhoods, communities, ethnic groups, and polities. Several social scientists writing since the middle of the last century have argued that the local cannot be understood apart from a consideration of its place within larger, interactive networks or systems (Wolf 1982). The economist A. Gunder Frank (1969) and the historian Fernand Braudel (1972) were early voices in this movement, but Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) deserves the most credit for stimulating a flood of research and writing aimed at the development of a more global social science. Whereas Wallerstein studied the growth of the modern (capitalist) world system, others have modified his concepts and ideas to make them more directly applicable to noncapitalist situations. As a result, this literature is of interest to archaeologists who study the evolution of early complex societies such as those of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1989; Blanton and Fargher 2012a; Blanton and Feinman 1984; Blanton, Peregrine, Winslow, and Hall 1997; Chase-Dunn and Hall 1991a, 1991b, 1997; Peregrine and Feinman 1996; Schneider 1977; Schortman and Urban 1992).

institutions (e.g., long-distance traders' associations) and technologies (e.g., domesticated animals or other systems for interregional transport) to make distant interactions feasible and predictable. At the same time, long-distance intercultural interaction is made possible by the sharing of computational and communicated knowledge, belief systems, and ritual practices. Although each polity may not share or necessarily adopt the exact same elements of this suite of information, we refer to these broadly shared ideas about the world and its associated practices as a civilizational tradition. This phenomenon can be illustrated, for example, by the concept of the Oikumene, an area that the ancient Greeks recognized as being occupied by various "civilized" peoples (Kroeber 1952).

In a world that shares a civilizational tradition, many distinctive local systems are linked together into a larger, integrated social and cultural whole. The institutional, cosmological, and behavioral elements of a civilizational tradition are shared (to variable degrees) by the local groups who participate in the encompassing civilization. A civilizational tradition is not simply a combination of the elements of all the local cultures that participate in the larger system or the culture of one dominant group. Because it develops out of intercultural interaction, it has many distinctive and new elements. A civilizational tradition to a considerable extent is transcendent, not simply the local writ large. Elements of transcendent culture often include shared ideas about the makeup of the cosmos, a lingua franca, conventions of diplomacy, a common system of weights and measures, a calendar, and a widely recognized "international style" of artistic expression.

A single governmental system rarely covers the whole extent of the larger interactive system of a world or civilizational tradition. Where it does, as happened in some periods of Chinese civilization, we call it a "world empire." More commonly, a civilization is made up of multiple interacting independent polities (an "interstate system" [Chase-Dunn and Hall 1991a]). In these cases, an economic division of labor between the various local cultural groups – a world economy – is the primary basis for long-distance social interactions.

Interaction Spheres and World Systems

Exchanges of goods across ethnic and political boundaries and a shared, transcendent culture that links disparate local groups are central components of known worlds and the spatial parameters of a civilizational tradition. Migration between regions is another such component. In

another kind of large-scale interactive social system, an “interaction sphere” (Yoffee 1993), goods are regularly exchanged, and other social transactions take place across local group boundaries. Each local group participates in the larger interactive network on a nearly equal footing, economically and politically. The South Pacific kula exchange system of the Trobriand Islands, originally described in Bronislaw Malinowski’s (1922) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, is an example.

By contrast, in premodern worlds, as well as in the modern world economy, the patterns of intergroup interaction often are hierarchically structured (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1991a). This hierarchical relationship is most evident in differences between cores and peripheral regions. In civilizations powerful core zones extend their influence or domination into peripheral zones in several possible ways. First, populations of the cores develop hierarchical political institutions – states. Only states have the power to extend core-zone hegemony and economic influence into peripheral areas. Second, the urbanized and comparatively affluent population of core regions, with their powerful ruling groups, state bureaucracies, wealthy merchants, and important temple priesthods, increasingly strive to import materials not locally available, including high-value, socially significant prestige and ritual goods. In many cases, these goods are imported from peripheries. As peripheral populations are increasingly drawn into this growing multicultural world economy, they become more involved in exchanging their goods or labor for core-zone goods and services (e.g., manufactured items) not locally available to them (Hall 1986). The changes that took place among the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Plains Indians are a well-documented example of the incorporation of a periphery, in this case into the early modern European world economy (e.g., Kardulias 1990), on the basis of an exchange of furs for European manufactured goods. Cores and peripheries generally develop in tandem through their mutually reinforcing interactions. The hierarchically structured core–periphery systems of the early civilizations became engines of social, cultural, and technological change as the flows of goods, people, and information across cultural boundaries intensified.

Premodern worlds that were centered on empires and large urban states did not suddenly spring up fully formed. Each has a lengthy history of development (e.g., Frank and Gills [1993] and Gills and Frank [1991] trace the origins of the modern world system back 5,000 years). To introduce the central features of change in the evolution of Mesoamerican civilization, we first briefly describe it just prior to the advent of extensive European influence (which began with the Spanish conquest), and in subsequent chapters we contrast its form with the situation some 2,500 years earlier, when some of Mesoamerica’s

distinctive features were just beginning to appear. The development of urban Monte Albán in the Valley of Oaxaca was one of the transformations that set the foundation for the Mesoamerican civilization of AD 1521.

Mesoamerican Civilization in the Late Postclassic

The last pre-Hispanic era of the Mesoamerican sequence prior to the invasion of the Spanish was the Late Postclassic (Table 2). By the final century prior to Spanish conquest, the Mesoamerican civilizational tradition had extended into parts of what are now Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua and all of Belize and Guatemala (Figure 1.1). At that time, this premodern world (Smith and Berdan 2003) of approximately 1 million square kilometers (larger than the area of the US eastern-seaboard states from Maine through Georgia) was inhabited by an estimated 35 million people. This vast and populous world economy was environmentally diverse and decidedly

Table 2 Timeline for Mesoamerica and the Valley of Oaxaca

	Valley of Oaxaca	Mixteca Alta	Mesoamerica
1500			
1300	Late Monte Albán V	Late Natividad	Late Postclassic
1100	Early Monte Albán V	Early Natividad	Early Postclassic
900			
700	Monte Albán IIIB-IV	Late Las Flores	Late Classic
500	Monte Albán IIIA	Early Las Flores	Early Classic
300			
100 (AD)	Monte Albán II	Late Ramos	Terminal Formative
100 (BC)	Monte Albán Late I	Early Ramos	Late Formative
300	Monte Albán Early I		
500	Rosario Phase	Late Cruz	
700	Guadalupe Phase		Middle Formative
900	San José Phase	Middle Cruz	
1100			Early Formative
1300	Tierras Largas Phase	Early Cruz	

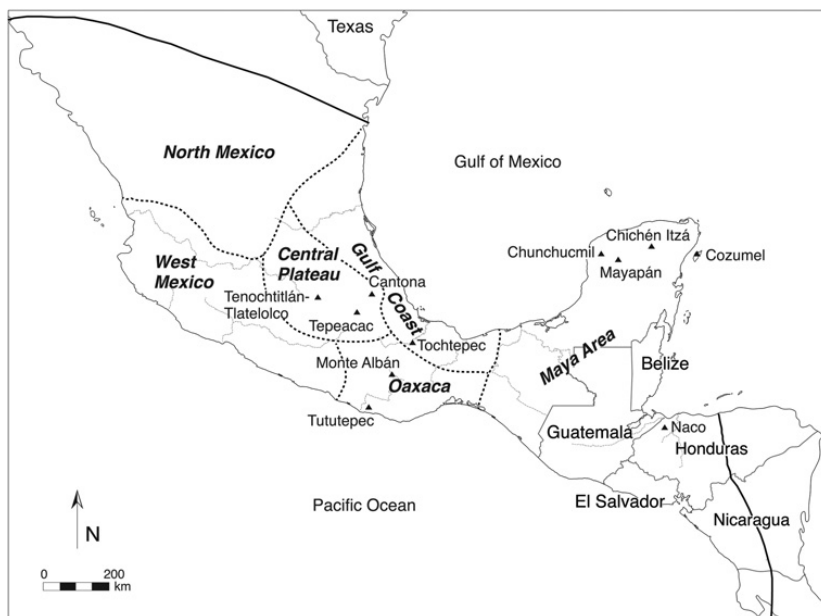


Figure 1.1: Mesoamerica, showing major cultural regions, modern nation-states, and sites mentioned in the text.

multicultural. Its environments ranged from the low-lying wet tropical forest extending from Central America to Gulf coastal Mexico to the rugged mountains of Guatemala and western Mexico; a drier, dissected coastal zone predominated along the Pacific Rim. As an indicator of Mesoamerica's cultural diversity, we need only point to its large number of languages, many of them still in use today. It is estimated that over 200 distinct languages were spoken in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, representing some fifteen major language groups (Suárez 1983).

The frequency of intercultural interaction across Mesoamerica was not uniform; by the end of the pre-Hispanic sequence, three major subregions can be detected. Many social interactions, including exchanges of goods, occurred across the fuzzy boundaries of these subregions, and certain key ideas were shared across all of Mesoamerica. Western Mesoamerica was largely dominated by the Tarascan empire (Pollard 1993). In central Mexico the Aztec empire, governed by the rulers of the Basin of Mexico capital Tenochtitlán-Tlatelolco (Berdan et al. 1996) (see Figure 1.1), extended from the central plateau to both coasts. To the east was the politically more decentralized, culturally and physiographically

distinctive Maya zone (Traxler and Sharer 2016). In spite of this partial subdivision and internal variability, Mesoamerica was still a civilization distinct from the societies to the north (including the foraging Chichimecs, considered barbarians by the Mesoamerican peoples) and to the south and east, where there were chiefdoms that lacked many of the distinctive sociocultural features of Mesoamerican civilization.

Material exchanges, migration, institutional arrangements, and transcendent cultural traditions linked together the linguistically and ethnically diverse peoples of Mesoamerica. The most salient aspects and institutions of this world's social and cultural makeup on the eve of Spanish conquest were urbanism, social stratification, diverse forms of hierarchical political organization, production for use and exchange (including agriculture), markets, long-distance exchange and interaction, and a civilizational tradition with key widely shared beliefs and practices.

Urbanism

Mesoamerica was heavily urbanized. In the core zones a high proportion of the population lived in cities (in fact, a higher proportion than in England at the same time) (e.g., Berdan et al. 1996:109). In the sixteenth century, scores of cities in the range of 10,000–25,000 inhabitants formed networks in a complex economic and cultural landscape. The Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán-Tlatelolco, with 200,000 persons, was the largest city in AD 1521 (Calnek 1976). The growth of core-zone governments, the intensification of commerce in the market plazas, and craft production all combined to stimulate the growth of cities, and these activities were at their most intense in central urban precincts. Mesoamerican cities often centered on broad civic-ceremonial plazas lined by numerous temples, palaces, and other stone buildings that were erected on top of pyramid-platforms (Marquina 1964) (Figure 1.2).

Social Stratification

Everywhere in Mesoamerica, a distinction was made between nobility and commoners. Members of the nobility, who inherited their status, rarely were required to do any productive labor; they often, however, held important administrative or military offices or served in the temple priest-hoods. Noble status was evident in their more elaborate housing, attendance of special schools, and consumption of goods such as cotton cloth, sandals, and costly, often exotic items of personal adornment (for central Mexico, see Smith 1996a: chapter 6). Commoners were more restricted in the goods they were allowed to have and were obligated to transfer

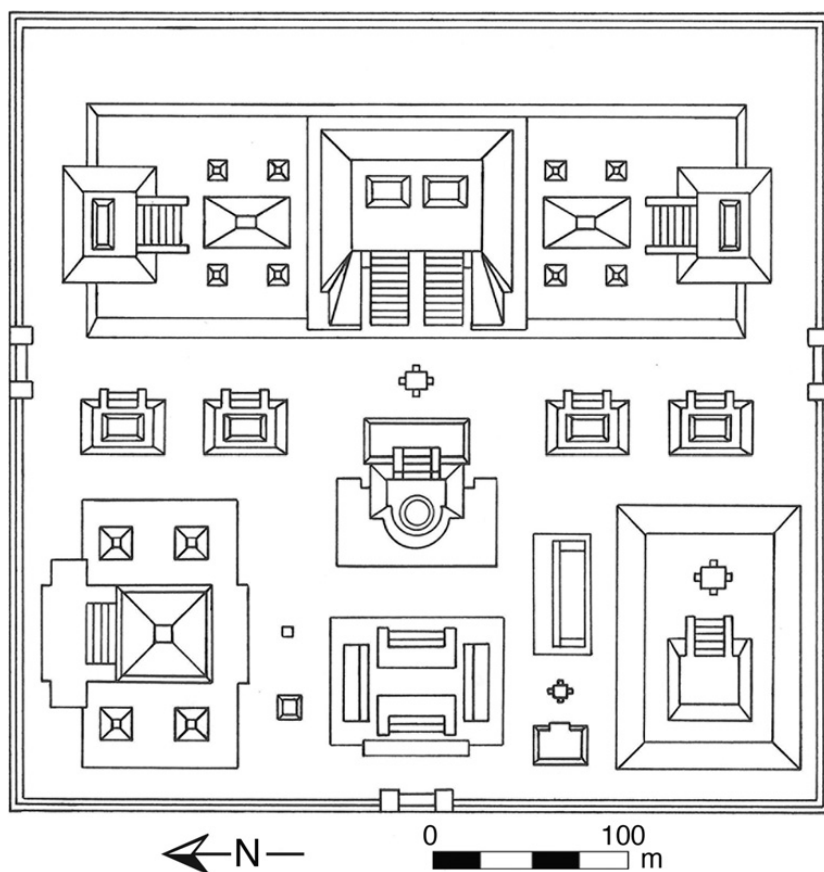


Figure 1.2: Plan view of the central civic-ceremonial plaza of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital. Modified from Marquina (1964: plate 45).

a portion of what they produced or earned as tribute to the state and to noble landlords. They also were subject to labor obligations enforced by the governing authorities (e.g., Berdan 1982: chapter 3). Nevertheless, at the core of the Aztec empire, paths allowing for social mobility did exist, both through military exploits and through elite schools that were open to commoners of rare abilities (Rossi 2018).

Political Organization

Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican governance was diverse, both in the scales of hegemony and in the distributions of power. Over the three millennia before the Spanish invasion, Mesoamerica was home to empires, states, and smaller political units, including city-states and chiefdoms. Compared to premodern Eurasia, distributed power arrangements were generally more common in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica (Feinman and Carballo 2018). Nevertheless, governmental leadership was carried out for the most part by individuals of high status. Particularly in more peripheral areas, local polities often were small (in many cases as few as 10,000–12,000 persons); here each polity was governed by a local noble family (*tlatoani*, in parts of central Mexico) (e.g., Berdan et al. 1996:109; Kowalewski 2020), with only minimal development of an administrative hierarchy or bureaucracy. Hundreds of these tiny social formations, variously called city-states, petty kingdoms, or patrimonial domains, dotted the landscape (Gerhard 1972). Powerful empires developed, however, in the major core zones; the two most prominent ones at the end of the pre-Hispanic sequence were the Tarascan and the Aztec. The lowland Maya area had seen centralized states develop during the centuries just prior to the Spanish conquest at the sites of Chichén Itzá and Mayapán, but these had weakened by the end of the pre-Hispanic sequence, leaving in their wake many small localized polities (Andrews 1965; Marcus 1993).

Core states such as the Aztec were governed by renowned rulers (*tecuhli* in the Nahuatl terminology of central Mexico) who headed expansive domains. The largest of these, the Aztec empire, extending from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean, had grown to include an estimated 9 million persons (Berdan et al. 1996). These rulers governed vast state administrative systems with the aid of a chief advisor (*cihuacoatl*) and a supreme council that, in turn, oversaw administrative bureaus for taxation and tribute, commerce, religion, courts, and the military (e.g., Florescano 2017:102; Hodge 1996).

Production

Mesoamerican economies were heavily agricultural, with maize, beans, and squash as the major cultigens. These domesticated crops were supplemented by the tending of dry-environment plants, such as cacti, and succulents, like maguey, which were sources of fiber, alcohol, and food. Farming in the major core zones was labor intensive and included various forms of irrigation, terracing, garden creation, and lake reclamation

(*chinampas*) (see, e.g., Sanders, Parsons, and Santley 1979). In the Aztec heartland, governments often organized or implemented the construction and maintenance of irrigation and lake reclamation projects. Yet, for the most part, much Mesoamerican agrarian production was situated in domestic units. Various resources and products, in addition to the basic food crops, were produced in regions distant from the Aztec capital. These precious goods included cacao (chocolate), cotton, vegetable dyes, rubber, incense, marine shells, jaguar skins, colorful bird feathers, metal implements, and valued stones such as jade. Such goods as these were more than just fancy consumer items. All over Mesoamerica special things from afar played key symbolic roles in distinguishing nobility from commoners, in displaying accomplishment or military success, in social exchanges with political implications, and as consumables in religious ritual (Berdan 1975; Blanton and Feinman 1984; Brumfiel 1987) (Figure 1.3). These goods were exchanged through tribute and commerce (Smith and Berdan 2003).

In addition to agricultural products, Mesoamericans made ceramic vessels, tools, toys, and ritual items such as figurines. Their pottery exhibited a wide range of forms, colors, and techniques; costly pottery of the Mixteca-Puebla international style was renowned for its beauty and was exchanged over long distances (Smith and Heath-Smith 1980)

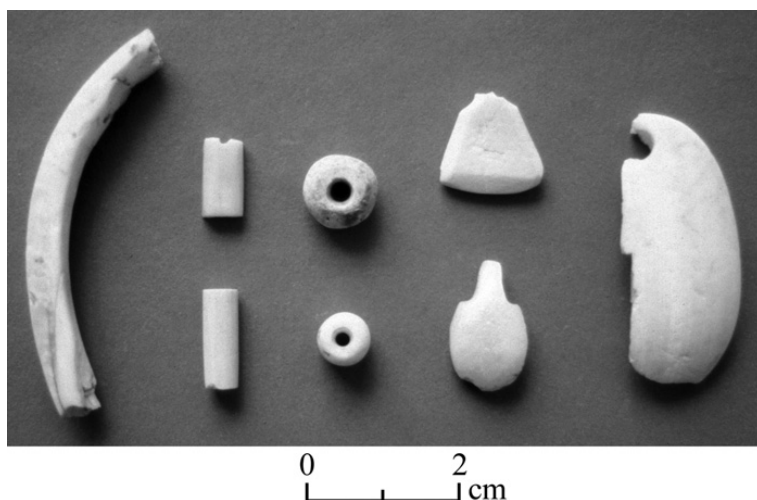


Figure 1.3: Prestige goods manufactured from shell: beads, pendants, and a bracelet from Oaxaca.



Figure 1.4: Pottery in the Mixteca-Puebla style, representative of the cosmopolitan culture of Mesoamerican civilization of AD 1500. Redrawn from Bernal and Gamio (1974: lámina 17).

(Figure 1.4). Stone working involved technologies such as tunnel mining, heavy quarrying, masonry, sculpture, flintknapping, and delicate lapidary work. Obsidian – volcanic glass – was widely used in tool production and was exchanged all over Mesoamerica (Golitzko and Feinman 2015), primarily from a few major mines (see, e.g., Spence and Parsons 1972). The products of cotton weaving, the lapidary arts (including jade working), and other exotic crafts involving paper, shell, bronze, gold, and silver, among many others, were sought after and widely exchanged, some destined for ritual and political use, others gaining more common usage. Some utilitarian use was beginning to be made of copper and bronze, particularly in western and central Mexico (e.g., Smith 2003:89), and copper axes were used as a form of money in commercial transactions (Freidel, Masson, and Rich 2017), but most metallurgy in Mesoamerica was put to symbolic use (Hosler 1988; Smith and Heath-Smith 1994:359).

Specialization, Markets, and Exchange

Most Mesoamerican households engaged in agricultural production, which itself could be highly specialized. Some households pursued other

occupations, including craft production, commercial transactions, transportation, temple service, military service, government administration, and a host of other specializations. But almost all production was situated in residential settings (Feinman 1999), and much of the product of those activities was earmarked for exchange. Marketplace exchange was a key pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican institution (see Box 3). Commercial transactions took place in regional systems of periodic markets. These markets offered diverse economic choices to ordinary households but at the same

Box 3 Periodic Market Systems

Mesoamerica is well known for its present-day periodic market systems, which we know from colonial-period documents and archaeology have pre-Hispanic origins (e.g., Hirth and Pillsbury 2013; Kowalewski 2019). The earliest descriptions of marketplaces came from Spanish conquistadors who arrived in Mexico in the early 1500s. The Spaniards were awed by the size, complexity, and orderliness of the marketplaces and the wide variety of goods available for sale, some from distant regions. They also observed large numbers of participants – one estimated that the major marketplace in the Aztec capital was attended by 25,000 persons daily and 40,000 on market days, as well as many other smaller-scale marketplaces in the city and region. Although aboriginal market systems varied somewhat across Mesoamerican regions, cultures, and time periods, all can be fitted within the category economic anthropologists refer to as “regional market systems,” “peasant markets,” “plaza systems,” “traditional markets,” or “periodic markets” (we prefer the latter term).

Periodic markets, of which there are many functioning today in various world areas, are sites of commercial transactions in which commodity prices vary depending on supply and demand. However, they differ from present-day markets in significant ways (although today’s “farmer’s markets” share features with periodic markets). (1) In periodic markets, participants, including sellers, buyers, and vendors, are households. There is nothing comparable to today’s highly capitalized firms. (2) A periodic marketplace system, aboriginally, as in the present, consists of a series of interlinked marketplaces that serve the population of a region (e.g., the Basin of Mexico market system, the Valley of Oaxaca market system), while contemporary markets are typically national or international in scale, and the sites of buying and selling are more often in stores or online. (3) Commercial transactions take place in a region’s marketplaces on scheduled market days; an

Box 3 (Cont.)

important market may have daily trading, but then a major market day, which determines the length of what is locally thought of as a week. For example, for pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, the typical market periodicity (and week) was five days, while for the traditional markets of the historic Mediterranean it was seven days (which we still use to mark a week). Marketplace schedules in a region are staggered so that vendors can travel from marketplace to marketplace during a week. (4) On a market day, crowds of buyers and sellers converge into a large, often open space. The marketplace then becomes an information-rich environment where supply and demand variables can be readily assessed by buyers and vendors. Comparison shopping is facilitated by grouping like commodities together. (5) Periodic marketplaces come close to being what economists call “perfect markets,” because no particular market participant is able to substantially influence supply, demand, or price. This is unlike today’s commercial economies populated with oligopolists and monopolists who are able to distort prices to make what economists refer to as “unearned” profits.

time were of value to political institutions for the tax revenues they produced. The most complex network of periodic markets had developed over the course of many centuries in populous core zones such as the Basin of Mexico (Blanton 1996; Nichols 2017). Markets specializing in long-distance exchange and “ports of trade” (i.e., market enclaves governed by specialist long-distance merchants) served as nodes in the trade of precious goods across the Mesoamerican world (Berdan 1985). In central Mexico, specialist long-distance traders called *pochteca* and *oztomeca* formed guildlike organizations. Much of the long-distance trade in exotic finery was carried out by these merchant institutions (Berdan 1988). In the Late Postclassic period, networks of market exchange were thoroughly intertwined with tribute and local exchange networks. Although there was no one state-sanctioned currency, many goods, such as bolts of woven cloth, cacao seeds, and copper axes, served as currencies with widely shared values.

Long-distance Interactions

The long-distance movement of people, materials, and information was of considerable importance to core-zone populations and their powerful

governments, commercial sectors, and temple priesthoods. The organization of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, for example, allowed for the integration of immigrants – some from distant regions – into the population (Calnek 1978:317). In fact, the immigration of desired craft specialists was encouraged. Several kinds of interregional institutions made possible the regulation of other categories of long-distance interaction. For example, the city of Tepeacac was conquered by the Aztecs and required to develop a new market in which long-distance traders could buy and sell the precious goods that were the cream of long-distance Mesoamerican commerce (Berdan 1980). The resources and finished products available here and in similar interregional markets included fine cotton cloth, semiprecious stones, tropical bird feathers, gold, silver, jaguar and ocelot skins, and cacao, among other goods. Long-distance trade required roads, institutions to ensure safe and secure passage, and human porters (*tameme* in Nahuatl). The Aztecs established garrisons to guard their borders and to control routes crucial to both military movement and commercial transactions (Smith 1996b). Additional outposts in conquered provinces served as sites of imperial tribute and tax collection.

The Civilizational Tradition

Although there were numerous local variations in religious belief and ritual, Mesoamerican peoples shared many fundamental concepts and practices of religion, cosmology, and ritual. Everywhere the cosmos was viewed as multilayered, with upper and lower worlds between which humans and supernatural beings moved; at death most persons traveled through the levels of the underworld. The lines of the cardinal directions were an additional dimension of cosmic spatial structure; their intersection formed four quadrants that had color and other symbolic significance. The center point, the pivot of the four quarters, or *axis mundi*, was a particularly sensitive location linking supernatural forces to the actions of humans. The directional orientations of public buildings, palaces, and even whole city plans (e.g., that of Tenochtitlán) reflected the importance of quadrilateral directionality and pivotal points in approaching and controlling supernatural forces.

Change, metamorphosis, renewal, duality, and the repetitive cycles of time also informed Mesoamerican belief systems. Conflict between deities reflecting the opposing principles represented by warriors and priests was seen as having resulted in the creation and destruction of a succession of worlds. The current world was considered the fifth; four prior cycles had ended in cataclysm, as in time would the current one. The movement of the heavenly bodies, especially the sun, the moon, and

Venus, reflected the periodic renewal of the world. In particular, the sun's daily movement across the sky manifested the constant struggle between the forces of renewal and destruction. Religious ritual, including blood-letting, offerings, and human sacrifice, was important in ensuring renewal. Rulers both sponsored and participated in these ritual cycles, elevating themselves into the dynamic processes of the cosmos and thereby legitimating the social esteem accorded to them and their worldly control of material resources and politics. The cycles of maize, from kernel to ear, often were juxtaposed metaphorically with the daily renewal of the cosmos and, at times, cycles of governance and rule.

Mesoamerican peoples used two interrelated calendars to trace the passage of time and to structure their ritual cycles (e.g., Aveni 2012). The 260-day sacred calendar resulted from the series of twenty named days with thirteen number permutations for each. Every day had directional, color, and other symbolic associations, including favorable and unfavorable prognostications. Monthly ceremonies were dictated by the symbolic associations of the segments of the sacred calendar. The sacred calendar meshed with a solar-year calendar of 365 days, made up of eighteen named months of twenty days each (plus an unlucky five-day period at the end when it was best to stay at home). Given the differing lengths of the two calendars, the first day and first month of each would occur together on the same day only once every fifty-two years; this period and its double, 104 years, were significant blocks of time (analogous in some ways to our centuries) and required ritual at their beginning points to ensure that the world would be renewed for another round. As a means of planning and scheduling, the shared calendar was significant in facilitating movement and interaction among Mesoamerica's different regional and linguistic groups. This calendric system was one of the most broadly shared elements of the Mesoamerican civilizational tradition, as widespread as maize.

Dozens of prominent supernatural entities and many more minor ones embodied the various principles of the religious and cosmic system, including sun, moon, femaleness, maleness, youth, old age, priesthoods, political power, warriors, maize, water, lightning, fertility, and dead ancestors. Many of these served as patron gods of cities, temples, or organized groups such as the merchants' guilds. Deities could appear as humans, as animals, or as humans in animal disguise. Priests were responsible for rituals of celestial and earthly renewal and for communicating with the deities and deceased ancestors but could also perform ritual "magic" (including divining, curing, and even witchcraft), while passing between different celestial domains and being transformed alternately into animal and human forms.

The Importance of History, Governance, and Networks

Many of the characteristic features of the Late Postclassic Mesoamerican world had their origins and roots by 1000 BC or even earlier. As we will see in forthcoming chapters, urban settlements, states, and markets had not yet developed by that early date, but there were spheres of long-distance interaction in which goods, people, and information were transmitted. Despite high mountains and the lack of any beasts of burden, the social networks in which pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican peoples participated were never spatially constrained. The natural and technological limits were indeed impediments when it came to moving great armies or supply caravans across the rugged landscapes of this world, but such features did not stop individual movements. Nevertheless, as recounted in the chapters to come, it was the rise of large communities and the formation of states, especially those characterized by highly distributed power arrangements like Monte Albán, that were instrumental in the great transformations that set the Valley of Oaxaca, and Mesoamerica, on its historical path. The rise of cities was linked intrinsically to the intensification of agricultural production, the growth of market systems, the elaboration of craft specialization, urbanization, and an increase in the long-distance movement of goods and regional specialization in exports stimulated by tax/tribute flows and commerce.

The growth of cities, and the economies of scale and new forms of governance that arose with them, was a crucial factor in the evolution of Mesoamerican civilization. Three regions, in particular, are known to have been sites of state formation after 1000 BC: the Basin of Mexico, probably around 150 BC (Cowgill 1992), the lowland Maya area, beginning between the first century BC and the third century AD (Traxler and Sharer 2016), and the Valley of Oaxaca, not long after 500 BC. If we are to comprehend the evolution of Mesoamerican civilization and the early roots of the Aztec empire, we must examine how regions where cities and complex forms of governance were established changed during this historical process and how these local developments in politics, the economy, and other institutional relations brought challenges, shifts, and responses by people in regions beyond as well. It is through careful investigation and analysis of these processes that we can understand how Mesoamerica as a known, interconnected world came to be, as well as the underpinnings of the Aztec empire and the nature of the institutions and networks that linked the 35 million inhabitants of the Late Postclassic Mesoamerican world.