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978-0-521-44606-8 - Ancient Mesoamerica: A Comparison of Change in Three Regions, Second Edition

Richard E. Blanton, Stephen A. Kowalewski, Gary M. Feinman and Laura M. Finsten

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Mesoamerica – southeastern Mexico and western Central America – has become one of the world's most important areas for research into the emergence of complex human societies. In the last two decades, a number of ambitious research efforts have contributed a voluminous body of new data on culture change, data that make it possible to evaluate cultural evolutionary theories with a much greater degree of sophistication than before. In this substantially revised second edition of a book first published in 1981, the authors synthesize the major contributions of this recent research and place these discoveries in an original framework for explaining change.

The book treats Mesoamerica's first inhabitants more than 10,000 years ago, but focuses on the time period from the earliest agricultural villages to the Spanish conquest. Included in this span were changes that are among the most significant in the evolution of human societies, such as the emergence of agriculture and of sedentary villages, the growth of centralized governments (chiefdoms and states), and the rise of market systems, cities, and highly stratified social systems. The authors add to our understanding of cultural evolution in a general sense by assessing similarities and differences in the evolutionary sequences of three of prehispanic Mesoamerica's most important nuclear zones, the valleys of Oaxaca and Mexico and the eastern Mesoamerican Maya lowlands. In addition to drawing on their own extensive fieldwork experiences in various parts of Mesoamerica, the authors utilize the abundant literature on Mesoamerica and other areas of early civilizations, including the recently reported results of new research.

No prior knowledge of Mesoamerican archaeology or cultural evolution is assumed in this volume. The findings should be of value to all who are interested in prehispanic Mesoamerica and in the rise of complex human societies.

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A comparison of change in three regions

SECOND EDITION

RICHARD E. BLANTON

STEPHEN A. KOWALEWSKI

GARY M. FEINMAN

LAURA M. FINSTEN



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PREFACE

The historian Will Durant argued that the best way to understand the nature of our species is to observe human behavior as it has manifested itself over the sixty centuries of history. Only with a long historical perspective is it possible to identify those aspects of culture and society that undergo significant evolutionary change, and to distinguish the dynamic and changeable features from the more perdurable. In this book our goal is similar to Durant's. We want to contribute to a better understanding of human behavior and cultural evolution by interpreting some aspects of change and continuity in the prehispanic societies of Mesoamerica over roughly ten thousand years. To offer a full scholarly study and interpretation of Mesoamerica's rich record of sociocultural evolution – from its nomadic bands to the settled communities of chiefdoms, states, and empires – would be an undertaking of greater scope than we attempt here, but we hope we have made some real advances toward that objective. Our first effort to realize this goal was the first edition of this book, published in 1981. Since the pace of research on the prehispanic societies of Mesoamerica has been so rapid over the past ten years, we felt that the book required an updating. This revised edition takes into consideration developments in our field since 1981, including important new findings relevant to understanding Teotihuacan and the nature of its connections to the rest of Mesoamerica, research on Aztec society and culture and the Aztec empire, the completion of the regional survey of the Valley of Oaxaca, and new research that helps us better comprehend the enigmatic Maya region. This edition also adds to the scope of the first by including a chapter on those archaeological periods predating the rise of agricultural villages, from the first human occupation of Mesoamerica through those periods during which Mesoamericans first domesticated the suite of plants that later became the energetic basis for the rise of complex society. Laura Finsten, who has worked with us for many years in the Valley of Oaxaca, brings her expertise to this edition.

If our arguments do turn out to represent an important contribution to the theoretical understanding of human behavior and sociocultural evolution, most of the credit is due to those individuals who stimulated our thinking and those institutions who provided resources for field research. We acknowledge especially the help provided by the National Science Foundation of the United States, which financially supported not only the bulk of our own research and analyses, but also that of many of the other researchers whose work we discuss. We are also thankful for funding provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. We are appreciative of the permits and aid of various sorts given by Mexico's Instituto

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Nacional de Antropología e Historia, both from its offices in Mexico City and from its regional center in Oaxaca. We thank especially those individuals who directed the Oaxaca regional center during the years we worked there, Manuel Esparza, Maria de la Luz Topete V., and Ernesto Gonzalez Licon. Several universities have provided support, including Rice University, Hunter College of the City University of New York, Purdue University, the University of Georgia, the University of Wisconsin, McMaster University, and Arizona State University.

The last few decades have seen many new developments in the study of sociocultural dynamics. Many people working in diverse regions and disciplines have made valuable contributions. We would like to acknowledge especially the intellectual stimulation and help provided to us by Kent Flannery, whose efforts were instrumental in getting us started on the archaeological survey of the Valley of Oaxaca. A list of other scholars whose writings have been of exceptional value to us would include Gregory Johnson, Joyce Marcus, Roy Rappaport, G. William Skinner, Carol Smith, Immanuel Wallerstein, Eric Wolf, and Henry Wright.

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