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 state. This polity, centered at Monte Albán, represented a form of government far more complex than any that had developed in the region before. Like only a few other states in the world, it developed in a primary or indigenous context (i.e., without the influence of a preexisting state). Our aim here is to explore how and why this fundamentally new kind of institution developed. Such questions have a long intellectual history, and the origins of primary states remain a key problem for contemporary anthropological archaeology (e.g., Sanders and Price 1968; Service 1975; Wright 1986).

In developing this early state, the pre-Hispanic ancestors of today's inhabitants of the Valley of Oaxaca fashioned an institution that eventually equaled the scale and complexity of other early states in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and North China, as well as other Mesoamerican states such as those of the Aztec and 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 being the Andean civilization of the Inca and their predecessors.

Through their development of the state as a governing institution, 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. Knowing more about the development of the Monte Albán state helps us understand the causes and consequences of major social transformations in general.

Table 1 *Changes in the Valley of Oaxaca, 600–150 B.C.*

600 B.C.	150 B.C.
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 over 1,000
Regional hierarchy of centers with two levels	Regional hierarchy of civic-ceremonial centers with at least four levels, politically organized as a state
Nearly universal access to farmland with reliable water	Many dependent on rainfall agriculture alone
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 at war with each other	Strong panregional political organization; military outposts suggesting concern with managing the region's boundaries
Tribute minor, symbolic	Tribute in labor and goods required to support state and capital
Status and wealth inequality but no sharp social class difference; possibly social ranking by inherited status	Possibly social stratification, rulers and the ruled
Beginnings of a warfare human-sacrifice complex	Raiding and violence commemorated in monuments; Monte Albán fortified
Ancestor cults	State cult of lightning-clouds-rain
No evidence of canal irrigation	Intensive agriculture, including canal irrigation
Household storage of produce	Some goods possibly acquired through markets
Maize cooked by steaming or boiling	Maize cooked as tortillas using *comales*
Few craft specialists	More craft specialists for basic goods in everyday use
Most houses wattle-and-daub, a few mud-brick	Houses of mud-brick

Many people think that the only 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

Box 1 *How archaeologists recognize a state*

Archaeologists and other social scientists define a state as a specialized and hierarchically organized political system that governs society within a particular territory or region. Chiefdoms, also territorial systems of governance, are less hierarchical and less complex (e.g., Service 1975:15–16). Although sources such as Service (1975; cf. 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.

modern world is better seen as the product of a complex sequence of transformations in many places over thousands of years. 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 we are concerned with here occurred between 550 and 100 B.C. This transition involved many changes, which are listed in Table 1. A prominent aspect of this transformation was the rise of the 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 within 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 development of an integrated regional polity centered on a newly founded political capital at Monte Albán. In chapters 2 and 3 we discuss the Valley of Oaxaca region

and the archaeological research that has provided the information we use, describe Monte Albán's environmental setting, population history, and early architecture, and look at the circumstances that may have resulted in its founding. In chapter 4 we look in detail at the many social and cultural consequences of the new political order, and in chapter 5 we consider it in comparative and theoretical perspectives.

The Valley of Oaxaca was not alone in experiencing profound social and cultural transformation between 550 and 100 B.C. 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 Mesoamerican civilization as a whole. We begin by discussing the nature of civilizations in general.

The nature of civilizations

In the modern anthropological use of the term (e.g., McNeill 1991; Sanderson 1995), a "civilization" is a large, multicultural society, a type of social system not coterminous with any specific ethnic group or language; civilizations are larger, more inclusive, and culturally diverse. In some cases, a civilization may be dominated or strongly influenced by a particular cultural group; for example, Han Chinese language and culture were central to the development of traditional Chinese civilization. Yet many elements of cultural and linguistic diversity persisted (and continue to the present day) within Chinese civilization (Blunden and Elvin 1983). Even the comparatively homogeneous ancient Egyptian civilization, which grew out of the Gerzean culture of fourth millennium B.C. Upper Egypt, integrated elements from the somewhat culturally distinct Lower Egypt and incorporated populations of Nubians and Libyans (Kemp 1989:ch. 1). These examples illustrate that a civilization is not a particular culture, population, or people, but a large, multicultural system.

The interactions among the diverse cultural groups that participate in a civilizational system are not simply happenstance or random events. Instead, long-distance interactions are essential to the development and maintenance of each local culture (Abu-Lughod 1989; Adams 1974; Curtin 1984; Helms 1988; Schortman and Urban 1992; Wallerstein 1974; Wolf 1982) (see box 2). In civilizations there are regular movements of people, goods, and information across local cultural boundaries. The regularity and intensity of these interactions require specific social institutions (e.g., long-distance traders' associations) and technologies (e.g., domesticated animals or other systems for interregional transport)

Box 2 *World-systems theory*

Traditionally, anthropologists focused their research primarily on local social groups such as neighborhoods, communities, and cultures. Several social scientists writing since the middle of this century have argued that the local cannot be understood apart from a consideration of its place within larger, interactive 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 most of the 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 ideas to make them more directly applicable to noncapitalist situations. As a result, this literature is of interest to archaeologists studying the evolution of early complex societies such as those of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1989; Blanton and Feinman 1984; Blanton, Peregrine, Winslow, and Hall 1997; Chase-Dunn and Hall 1991b; 1997; Peregrine and Feinman 1996; Schneider 1977; Schortman and Urban 1992).

to make distant interactions feasible and predictable. At the same time, long-distance intercultural interaction is made possible by the sharing of a cultural system or civilizational tradition. This phenomenon can be seen, for example, in the concept of the Oikumene, an area that the ancient Greeks recognized as being occupied by various "civilized" peoples (Kroeber 1952).

In a civilization, many distinctive local cultural systems are systematically linked together into a larger, integrated social and cultural whole – a civilizational tradition that is shared by all 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 participating 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 civilization. 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 cultural boundaries and a shared, transcendent culture that links disparate local groups are central components of a civilization. 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 system 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 early civilizations, as well as in the modern world economy, the patterns of intergroup interaction 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 core develop a comparatively centralized political institution – a state. Only states have the power to extend core-zone hegemony and economic influence into peripheral areas. Secondly, the urbanized and comparatively affluent population of a core region, with its powerful ruling groups, state bureaucracy, wealthy merchants, and important temple priesthoods, increasingly finds it necessary to import materials not locally available, including high-value, socially significant prestige and ritual goods. In many cases, these goods are imported from the periphery. As periphery 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 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.

Civilizations do not suddenly spring up fully formed. Each has a lengthy history of development (for example, 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

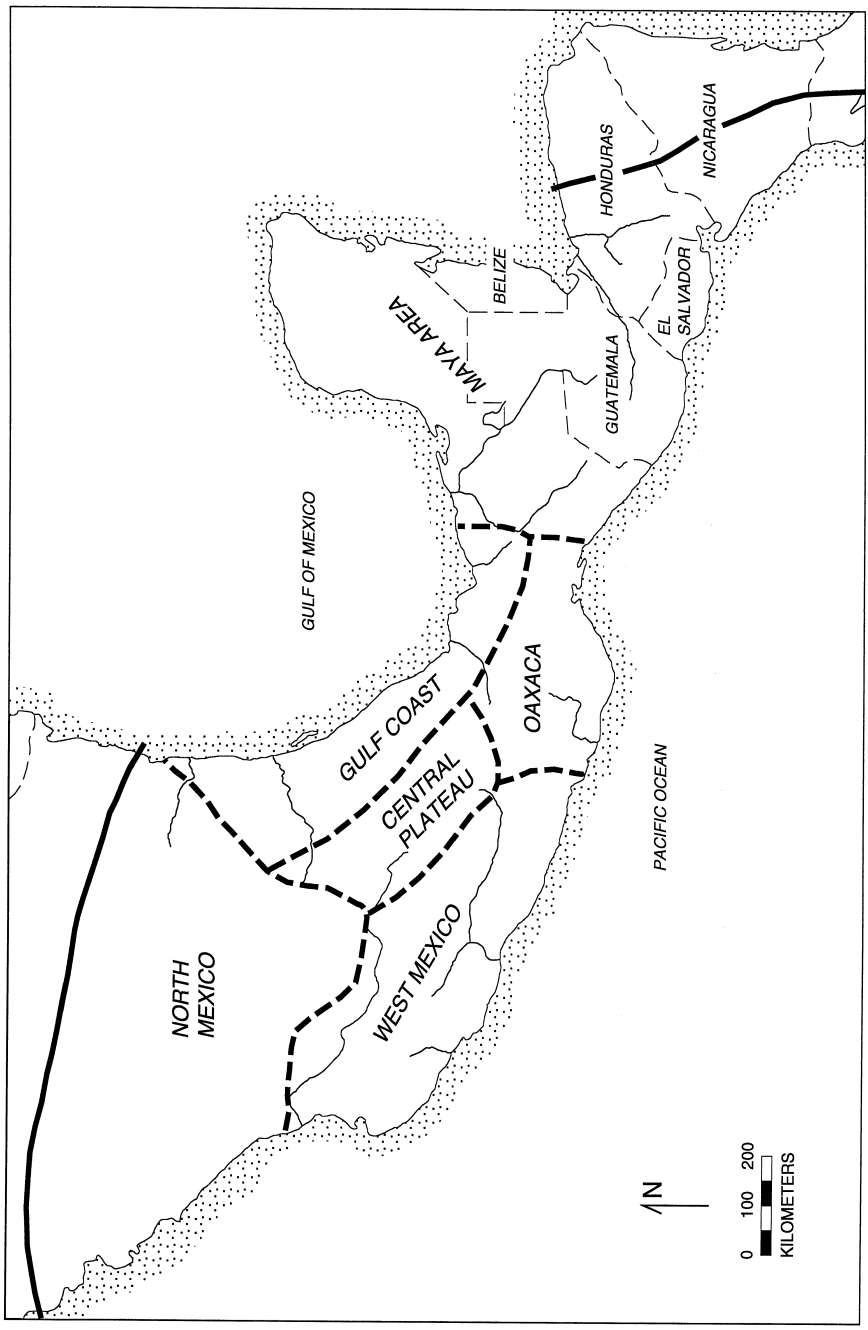
Table 2 *Time line for Mesoamerica and the Valley of Oaxaca*

	Valley of Oaxaca periods and phases	Mesoamerican periods
1500		
		Late Postclassic
	Monte Albán V	
1100		
		Early Postclassic
	Monte Albán IV	
700		
	Monte Albán IIIB	Late Classic
500		
	Monte Albán IIIA	Early Classic
300		
A.D.	Monte Albán II	
B.C.		Late Formative
100		
	Monte Albán Late I	
300		
	Monte Albán Early I	
500		
	Rosario Phase	Middle Formative
700		
	Guadalupe Phase	
900		
	San José Phase	
1100		Early Formative
1300	Tierras Largas Phase	

of Mesoamerican civilization, we first briefly describe it just prior to the advent of extensive European influence (which began with the Spanish conquest) and 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 the state in the Valley of Oaxaca was one of the transformations that provided a foundation for the Mesoamerican civilization of A.D. 1521 (for summaries see Berdan 1982; Blanton Kowalewski, Feinman, and Finsten 1993; Coe 1994; Weaver 1993; Sharer and Grove 1989; Smith 1996a; and Wolf 1959).

Mesoamerican civilization in the Late Postclassic

The final pre-Hispanic period of the Mesoamerican archaeological sequence was the Late Postclassic (table 2). The civilization of the latter part of that period, covering the century or so prior to Spanish conquest,



1.1 Mesoamerica, showing major cultural regions and modern nation-states.

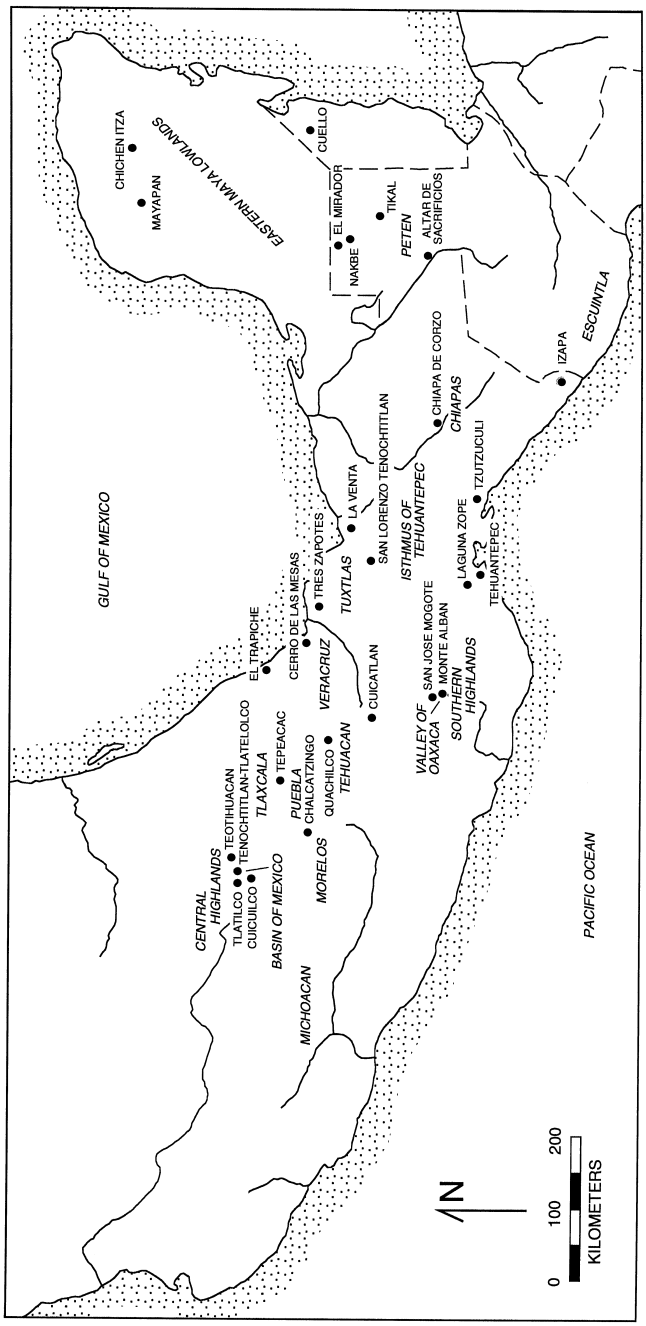
extended southward and eastward from central and western Mexico into parts of what are now Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua and all of Belize and Guatemala (fig. 1.1). Within this area of approximately 1 million square kilometers (larger than the area of the U.S. eastern-seaboard states from Maine through Georgia) resided an estimated 35 million people. This vast and populous world economy was environmentally diverse and decidedly 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 the area's cultural diversity we need only point to its large number of languages, many of them still spoken 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. To the west was an empire dominated largely by the Tarascan state (Pollard 1993). In central Mexico the Aztec empire, governed by the rulers of the Basin of Mexico capital Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco (Berdan et al. 1996)(fig. 1.2), extended from the central plateau to both coasts. To the east was the less centrally organized, culturally and physiographically distinctive Maya zone (Sharer 1994). 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 culture linked together the culturally diverse peoples of Mesoamerica. The most salient aspects of this civilization's social and cultural makeup on the eve of Spanish conquest were urbanism, social stratification, political organization, production (including agriculture), specialization and exchange, long-distance interaction, and a civilizational tradition.

Urbanism

Mesoamerica was heavily urbanized. In the core zones a high proportion of population lived in cities (in fact, a higher proportion than in England



1.2 Mesoamerica, showing places and regions mentioned in the text.