

1 Comparing Ancient Societies: Prehispanic Mesoamerica and the Nilotic World

When we think about historical comparisons between ancient societies across millennia, Mesoamerica and Egypt are rarely brought together. The geographical and temporal distance that separates them is perhaps the most obvious reason why this is seldom done, not to mention that they belonged to two completely different cultural and socioeconomic spheres that had no contact before the mid-second millennium AD. Yet, both terms, “Mesoamerica” and “Egypt,” conceal a less obvious but nevertheless crucial feature in their respective configurations of power and economic connectivity that may justify comparing them. Mesoamerica and Egypt designate broad cultural regions, each of them not necessarily unified into a single political entity, even less so limited to a single cultural tradition. In fact, both of these large macroregions encompassed a diversity of regions and numerous cultural identities, to the point that the politico-economic networks and interactions that characterized these broader domains were a key dynamic in change over the long term. At times, in both the Nile Valley and Mesoamerica, political realms were large, encompassing wide swaths of the macroregion, while at other times, local domains were more autonomous.

Our comparative investigation is undertaken at various analytical scales, from the political and economic interests of local actors, to larger institutions and networks that helped define norms and values across these worlds. Such values served to legitimize proper leadership, the right exercise of power, the implementation of justice, and acceptable forms of appropriation and distribution of wealth. In neither region were they fixed or consistent across time or space. Such values were continuously reinterpreted, adapted and used selectively through a dense web of cultural and economic exchanges, negotiations and political interventions that helped shape idiosyncratic identities and build authority. In this vein, the scope of the economic and political interests and interactions of regional actors and institutions led historically to the emergence of diverse political solutions across Mesoamerica and in Egypt, ranging from city-states to regional kingdoms, territorial states and “empires.” The discussions in this Element examine long-term changes in local regions and polities as well as the connectivities between them.

Pharaonic Egypt is often interpreted as the earliest territorial state in history, but political division, regional diversity and the emergence of local powers that claimed kingship and fought among themselves for supremacy were also constitutive of its long history. Even in periods of political unity under a single ruler (or pharaoh), some regions and their leaders preserved significant

degrees of autonomy and succeeded in limiting the fiscal and political room for central authorities to maneuver (Moreno García 2017, 2018). A comparable but rather more complex pattern emerged in Mesoamerica (Blanton *et al.* 1993:1–13), a vast area encompassing numerous cultural regions (e.g., Maya, Zapotec, Central Highlands, Gulf Coast), each one organized into polities ranging from city-states to local kingdoms (Figure 1). Only during Aztec times, late in the prehispanic era, was a significant sector of Mesoamerica integrated politically.

Given this variability in governance, regions such as Middle Egypt, in the Nile Valley (the area between Memphis and Abydos) (Figure 2), and diverse areas in Mesoamerica may provide fertile ground for comparing how regional leadership emerged and organized itself, what limits were imposed on supra-regional rulership, what role trade and control over exchange networks played in the crystallization of such nodes of authority, and what political and economic interests guided the relations of these local powers with their peers as well as with supraregional authorities. Such authorities and the configurations of power that they inspired left their mark on the territories under their control. It may be possible then to discern distinctive patterns of settlement, monumental landscapes, the facilities through which wealth circulated, was accumulated and transformed, and finally, the transformations of the landscape imposed by the fiscal and productive requirements of such authorities. Such marks also expressed the ideological values and actions of rulers (and their critical acceptance or adaptation by common people), the distribution of symbolic goods and power between rulers, whether regional or supraregional (from hierarchical to inter-peer channels), and the forms that this distribution imposed on the dispersal of wealth at local and wider scales. Placed at the crossroads of crucial trade networks in Mesoamerica and the Nile Valley, regions such as the Valley of Oaxaca, the Basin of Mexico, the Usumacinta River corridor (all in Mesoamerica) and Middle Egypt offer a lens that can reveal the challenges, opportunities and limits faced by the historical configurations of power in early polities. This is why we think that pharaonic Middle Egypt and pre-Columbian Mesoamerica represent fruitful arenas for discerning particularities and common features of the organization of power in these premodern societies, particularly when we consider that, in the case of Middle Egypt, this region emerged in some periods as a surprisingly active political player, as its elites provided crucial support to the monarchy against potential rivals based in other areas of Egypt. Actually, it was a recurrent fact in Egyptian history that, in periods of political division, the country was divided into two kingdoms: one usually based in Thebes (Upper Egypt); and the other in Lower Egypt and the immediately adjacent areas. While it is impossible to address these questions in detail within this small volume, such comparison may be productive by

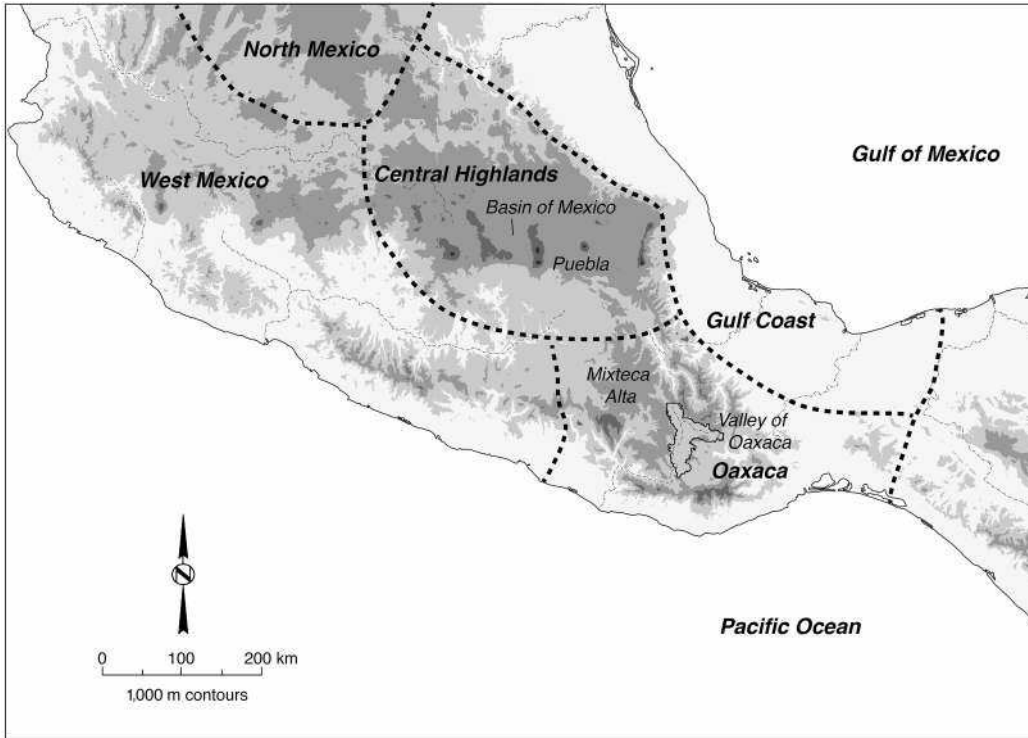


Figure 1 Prehispanic Mesoamerican regions



Figure 2 Map of Egypt

focusing our study on broad comparative dimensions of political economy and the rise and organization of authority from technological and economic bases. Our analytical lens is not pointed toward specifically cultural matters.

The study of ancient states is gaining momentum and inspiring more sophisticated analysis. Technological innovations are enhancing the examination and our knowledge of exchange, dating and human landscape usage, as well as population movements. Furthermore, the study of historical states is finally moving beyond the false historical dichotomy that was drawn between the Occidental “West” and the global “rest.” Archaeologists and historians are now questioning and abandoning the conceptual frames that have for too long drawn strong demarcations between European history and that of the rest of the globe. Rational social actors did not solely inhabit the West but were universal. That means that researchers cannot merely presume how and why humans cooperate and aggregate at large scales; the basis for these political and economic affiliations must be explained, and the differences over time and space accounted for. Although this is not a simple endeavor, archaeologists and ancient historians have an advantage, relevant to the present. In studying the past, we cannot only flesh out socioeconomic mechanisms and relationships between different institutions but we can examine the outcomes from different organizational parameters, something less viable for present cases.

Far from considering ancient tributary (or, simply, non-Western) states as autocracies subject to the arbitrary power and tax demands of their rulers, recent research is increasingly focused on the changing infrastructural organization and the balance of power between different actors that made the very existence of such political entities possible and viable. Not by chance, ancient China and ancient Rome have received considerable attention in comparative historical studies. On the one hand, Rome represents a divergent path that led ultimately to the rise of modern capitalism and the modern state in the “West.” On the other hand, China’s millennial state organization is producing a distinctive path toward industrialization and capitalism. Other studies are increasingly aware of the limits of earlier explanations about the “origins” of the state. One can think, for instance, of the model elaborated and popularized by Gordon Childe (1950), in which urbanization, craft specialization, division of labor, writing and social hierarchy, among other elements, went hand in hand. Alternative views, based on the exponential accumulation of archaeological data, on more refined methods in the analysis of textual data, and on the increasing integration of theories and methods from social sciences, make it possible to compare the historical trajectories of ancient states and, in doing so, to discern structural elements underlying the emergence, dynamics and organization of power in

early polities (Scheidel 2015; Ando and Richardson 2017; Brooke, Strauss and Anderson 2018; Yoffee 2019; Graeber and Wengrow 2021).

No longer can we presume that historical states simply formed when homogenous, neighboring peoples coalesced out of interest for the good of the group as a whole. Likewise, we can no longer suppose that the boundaries of states and other early polities were fixed, closed and immutable over time. Ancient worlds were composed of networks, social, political and economic, and sometimes overlapping. Central questions that we must ask are: How was political power funded? How did differences in the fiscal foundations of different states affect the nature of leadership? What factors enhanced or limited the scope of rulership and power?

Contrary to rather common stereotypes about pharaonic Egypt as a homogeneous society that survived for three millennia almost unaltered, under (apparently) a single political form (a monarchy headed by a king), increasing evidence has been marshalled to illustrate that under the cover of tradition and royal continuity, the very foundations of kingship and of the state underwent intense changes over three millennia (Baines and Yoffee 1998; Moreno García 2018, 2019a). Even the very existence of Egypt as a single kingdom for most of its history was neither an inevitable nor “the natural” condition that power took in the northern section of the Nile Valley, extending from Aswan to the Mediterranean. Other possibilities were also available, and it is quite possible that the political landscape of Lower Egypt (the Delta region), for instance, shared more characteristics with the southern Levant than with Upper Egypt. Extensive trade contacts with foreign territories, political fragmentation, extensive herding and fluctuating urbanism punctuated by periods of abandonment of settlements recall similar conditions that prevailed in neighboring areas in Southwest Asia, like Syria and Canaan. As a hub between, precisely, Upper Egypt and the Delta, Middle Egypt was essential in any project to (re)build a single authority over the country. So, far from the impression of massive autocratic power and centralization of resources suggested by the pyramids of Giza or the huge temples of Thebes, it was the historical combinations of regional powers that finally resulted (or not) in the emergence of a single state. Finally, the accumulation of fresh archaeological data reveal that Nubia, another political actor in the Nilotic world, was a major power in northeast Africa, capable of intervening in Egyptian affairs and influencing the Egyptian political map in some periods. Far from being a backward region, only prone to Egyptian expansionism in search for precious goods, Nubian polities represented a formidable rival for pharaonic interest, capable of interfering in the internal affairs of Egypt (for instance in Middle Egypt), providing support to some Egyptian factions and polities against others, controlling its

own exchange networks toward the Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa, and conquering Egypt if necessary (Smith 2013).

Although the Nilotic world was less politically unified and centralized than often presumed, it still was far more so than ancient Mesoamerica. Even the metropolis of Teotihuacan at its height during the first millennium AD was politically dominant over a relatively small sector of Mesoamerica, not that much beyond the Basin of Mexico (Hirth *et al.* 2020). Monte Albán (Blanton 1978), the dominant early center in the Valley of Oaxaca, also controlled a small territory, which appears to have shrunk during its lengthy political hegemony. The Classic Maya cities, which featured principles of divine, kingly leadership that parallel Egypt in certain ways, had mostly small political realms that tended to be relatively short-lived, no more than a few centuries. Only the later Aztec politically dominated a larger segment of Mesoamerica, but much of that world was still beyond its dominance when the Spanish arrived. Although there are notable exceptions, political leadership in Mesoamerica tended to have less concentrated power and individual aggrandizement than that found in Egypt. We endeavor to understand these differences in terms of resources and how economies were institutionally organized/controlled.

The remainder of this Element is divided into seven additional sections. We begin by defining the two macroregions and their subdivisions, and then proceed to the conceptual frames and multiscale perspectives that we bring to this comparative work. In the remaining sections, we discuss elements of time/space variation across these two historical realms, drawing points of contrast and parallel between them.

2 Regional Background

The preindustrial Mesoamerican and Egyptian worlds were roughly comparable in areal size, both just over 1,000,000 square kilometers (including the deserts surrounding the Nile Valley; however, the habitable space in Egypt and the oases was roughly about 25,000 square kilometers). But geographically, they were highly diverse. The Nilotic world was centered on the longest river in the world, which flows from south to north. In contrast, Mesoamerica is highly diverse both topographically and vegetationally, including high mountain ranges, highland valleys, and both wet and dry lowland zones (Blanton *et al.* 1993:4–7).

2.1 Landscape and Natural Environment in Middle Egypt

At Egypt's north was the Nile Delta or Lower Egypt (Figure 2). South of the Delta is Middle Egypt (roughly, from Lake Fayum to the city of Akhmim),

which divides the low-lying waterlogged north from the narrower stretches of the Nile Valley, known as Upper Egypt. For much of its early history, Middle Egypt had a core political and economic role in the Nilotic world (Moreno García 2017). Even from a geographical and physical point of view, Middle Egypt exhibits some distinctive features that set it apart from the rest of the Nile Valley and that may help explain its influence in the political history of pharaonic Egypt (Moreno García 2021). Middle Egypt is crossed both by the Nile and the Bahr Yussef, the canal that connects the river with the Fayum and runs parallel to the Nile for about 220 kilometers from Dairut to Fayum. Middle Egypt was a region rich in pastureland and marshes. It was also the point of arrival of several desert routes that connected the Nile Valley to northern Nubia as well as to the string of oases of the Western (or Libyan) Desert, situated around 200–400 kilometers west of the Nile. This array of water sources provided an alternative way of communication and exchange to the Nile. Not by chance, peoples living in the Western Desert and in Nubia arrived and frequented Middle Egypt. Occasionally, they were represented in the tombs of the elites that ruled this area and, judging from the written record, they also played an important political role, at least during certain periods of the pharaonic past. Another particular feature of this region is that, contrary to the relatively broad strip of the valley west of the river (the area between the Bahr Yussef and the Nile), the Eastern Desert drops abruptly down to the Nile for most of Middle Egypt. Hence, cultivable land is reduced to a minimum along the east bank between the area immediately north of Asyut/Deir el-Gebrawy and the Fayum, a problem exacerbated by the historical move of the Nile to the east in this region. This may explain the strategic importance of Asyut (its name literally means “sentinel”) as the key entrance point or “doorway” into Middle Egypt from the south.

Recent research also reveals that various additional branches of the Nile and hydrological arteries existed in Middle Egypt between the Nile and the Bahr Yussef. Furthermore, due to the profile of the floodplain, only a relatively small part of the flood water could drain back into the Nile after the flood season because it remained trapped between the levees of the Nile and the Bahr Yussef. Therefore, an irregular system of waterways existed in the area between Bersheh and the entrance to the Fayum, while large accumulations of water remained there long after the end of the flood season. So, the existence of a vast wet zone between the Nile and the Bahr Yussef south of the Fayum made most of this area unsuitable for the cultivation of cereals as much as for habitation, to the point that even in the eighteenth century AD it was still thinly populated (Willems *et al.* 2017). Things were not much different south of Bersheh (Gillam 2010). Distinctive crop marks in fields to the south and to the north of El-Qusiya

suggest a hydrological origin. They also occurred in high concentrations in a band along the western edge of the valley in the vicinity of Meir. Elongated plots of land sometimes associated with these features can be identified as filled-in canals. Both of these features have also been found elsewhere and have been interpreted as a network of braided channels, representing the waterways and swamps that tended to pool in the low-lying edges of the convex alluvial floodplain (Trampier 2005/2006). Another feature is the existence of abandoned levees between two and four kilometers from the present location of the Nile bed near El-Qusiya. So, in premodern times, the western bank of the Nile in many areas of Middle Egypt appears to have been a complex landscape of waterways, canals and abandoned levees with a strong presence of marshes. Finally, silt and sediments carried by the annual flood of the Nile created islands, usually close to the western bank of the Nile, that became gradually covered by vegetation. Probably not by chance, officials in charge of the administration and cultivation of “new islands” and “new localities” are particularly well documented in Middle Egypt, as this region happened to be a sort of “colonization front,” an ideal area to expand agriculture, but susceptible to return to a flooded condition if drainage and terracing works were not regularly kept. As time passed on, siltation filled the channels that separated these islands from the mainland and contributed to expand the floodplain and to displace the Nile further to the East (Moreno García 2013a).

Finally, the “moving landscape” resulting from these particular ecological and environmental conditions may explain why Middle Egypt presents a rather differentiated organization in terms of settlement density and structure, as well as of productive activities, with its core situated between Asyut in the south and Bersheh in the north (Bunbury 2019). North of Bersheh, the density of human occupation seems to fall dramatically, at least until the Ramesside period (1292–1077 BC). In fact, human occupation in this relatively vast area was quite unequal, and the presence of the crown and its local agents was based, in many periods of Egyptian history, on a patchy network of small urban sites and royal administrative/economic centers, scattered over a large area and separated by bushy and marshy areas as well as pastures (Antoine 2017; Moreno García 2020). This means that one of the most persistent myths about ancient Egypt, that the central power organized irrigation at a large scale and promoted hydraulic works in order to monitor the seasonal flood of the Nile and divert water from the river to the fields, should be disregarded. Traces of any centralized control of the flood or irrigation system are absent for the period considered. In fact, agriculture and irrigation were managed at a very local level and the interventions of the state, if any, were reduced to a minimum. Even irrigation canals and dikes are quite rare in the administrative and

archaeological record (Moreno García 2019a:53). So, when Nekhebu, an official who lived around 2300 BC, claimed in the inscriptions of his tomb that “his majesty sent me to lay out a canal in the (area of) Akhbit of Horus and to excavate it. I excavated it in a period of three months, so that when I came back to the Residence it was already full of water” and “his majesty sent me to Kis to excavate his canal (?) for (goddess) Hathor-in-Kis. I acted and excavated it so that his majesty favored me for it” (Strudwick 2005:265–266), the purpose of such hydraulic works remains ambiguous: irrigation, navigation, drainage or supply of fresh water?

As a consequence, land irrigation mostly depended on the flood, with minimal arrangement of the natural basins in the floodplain, while natural wells and ponds contributed to the cultivation of small gardens and plots of land in the immediate surroundings of settlements. The resulting agricultural landscape was thus not a continuous succession of cultivated fields in a homogeneously laid out floodplain crossed by artificial dikes, channels, sluices and roads. It was a more “natural” environment instead, a patchwork of fields and villages created where the natural conditions of the river permitted (circulation of the flood, presence of levees, good draining conditions, etc.). The determinant factor in the agricultural cycle was the annual inundation of the Nile. Depending on the height of the flood, the resulting landscape, the extent of the irrigated areas and the volume of the harvest experienced important variations from one year to the next. Given the crucial importance of the flood, it provided the basis for the Egyptian calendar with its three seasons: *akhet*, “the flooding” (mid-July to mid-November), when the inundation covered the fertile riverbanks (the actual flood took place from mid-July to October) and canals could be opened to water higher land; *peret*, “the coming forth” (mid-November to mid-March), when plowing, sowing and germination took place; and *shemu*, “harvest” (mid-March to mid-July), when the harvest was gathered (Moreno García 2020).

2.2 The Emergence of Social Complexity in Middle Egypt

Overall, Middle Egypt was a microcosm that encompassed some of the most distinctive characteristics of the Nile Valley: an abundance of potential agricultural land but also of pasture and marsh areas susceptible (at least in part) to cultivation; a crossroads of river and land routes; easy connections with the neighboring desert areas; and, finally, an eventful history made of changes in the patterns of occupation of the territory, in the emergence of new types of settlement, in the foundation of agricultural estates and of “colonies” of foreigners, and in the oscillation between the expansion of agricultural areas (often under the initiative of the crown) and their subsequent contraction followed by