

# 1 Introduction: Mesoamerica and Its Pre-Hispanic Civilization

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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 priesthoods, 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



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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		Late Cruz	
	Rosario Phase		
700			Middle Formative
	Guadalupe Phase		
900		Middle Cruz	
	San José Phase		
1100			Early Formative
1300	Tierras Largas Phase	Early Cruz	

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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